

GENOA: AN EXAMPLE
OF MEDITERRANEAN TOWNS
IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The great imperial or royal cities of the medieval Mediterranean world were, by their nature, active centres of commerce; in them all the different cultures of the maritime countries, and, often, of those from the ultramontane regions, or of countries beyond the deserts, met face to face. Thus, for example, flourished Cordova, Constantinople, and Palermo.

In Genoa, the consequences of the meetings of the different cultures were not dependent on political power, nor on the extent of empire, nor on the personality or vagaries of any particular sovereign. The town was not a great administrative centre, nor was it a centre of intellectual or religious activity. Although a beautiful town, well built in solid stone, and endowed with imposing palaces, Genoa was not even the centre of a particularly active artistic life. The cultures met because of the very nature of

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the city, its essential functions. Genoa is a merchants' city, open to distant cultures uniquely by virtue of trade.

It is quite unique in the strictly medieval character of its destiny. The town had no great Roman past. Even in the latter centuries of the Empire it was no more than a sort of township, a little port of call perched on a hostile mountain, badly-served by roads built very late on, and still very precarious. The Roman past is not visible in the town landscape, nor in the lifestyle of the town. There is only a corner of the town that is reminiscent of the original square plan with its perpendicular streets; and this plan had been altered by numerous adjustments to the buildings, and adaptation to new mercantile activities. This urban landscape was the fruit of very long maturation; it certainly is medieval, that is to say, anarchic, the result of multiple initiative. The town no longer has a forum, (or a large public place), no market place, or meeting place for the crowds; there are many markets, but they occupy the quadrangles of widened roads, and one big market street—the *platea longa*, a veritable "souk"—runs right across the centre of the city. Social life is found in a fragmented form, in many little cells around the great houses or the tiny church piazzas. Each of these cells, often a family unit, has its own commercial buildings its *loggia*, which is at once a meeting centre and an administrative seat, even a tribunal. It has its own particular cult, with priests, its own games, its own bath-house.

The weakness of Roman traditions is decisively revealed through the dealings, or rather the absence of dealings, between the commercial capital and the surrounding countryside. Unlike the principal cities of the Occident, of Tuscany, or even of Lombardy itself, Genoa could not extend her influence over the surrounding regions. Politically, no real State had been created, no "seigniory"; Genoa had inherited no administrative power over the country regions from the Roman city. Genoa, unlike Venice, had not conquered a *Terra ferma*. This sailors' city, which controlled great areas overseas, as far as distant Asia, saw its dominion at home end very near the doors of its precinct. The aristocracy of the mountains, who ruled great fiefs and had castles built in the turnings of difficult routes, were hostile to Genoa; she could never impose her will on them.

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Equally, the merchants appear to have had little or no economic ascendancy over the rural district. The citizens of Florence, of Pisa, of Lucca, and Milan, bought up quantities of rural estates and even pieces of land dispersed over numerous distant areas, but the Genoese merchant scorned investments of this sort. He might own a beautiful country house with a vineyard, an olive-grove and an orange orchard in the immediate vicinity of the town; but this would serve as a second residence which permitted him to escape the populous city during the summer months. Apart from this narrow ring of green suburb, the Genoese did not attempt to hold lands; they had no farmers, and no tenant landholders.

Again, the drapers of Florence or of Prato distributed work to peasant families, to the women in the summer, and the men in the winter; they lived in many villages high up in the mountains, sometimes quite far away from the centre of the enterprise. Between each operation of the wool or fibre, the cloth or drapery would be brought back to the town or taken to other villages; thus the smallest roads in the district were in constant use by mules laden with bales belonging to the merchants; the whole mountain would be penetrated, irrigated, by the activity. There was nothing of the kind at Genoa, where all the complex operations for working the wool and silk were done in the town itself, or in its suburbs, around the city wall. The city did not entrust work to the outside; it was content to welcome a crowd of immigrants, coming from distant mountain villages, more or less "*déclassé*," cut off from their family background and habitual parish to be slowly assimilated into the town. It is easy to see the consequences of such a limitation. The two economies, two societies, the urban merchant one and the rural peasant one, are estranged; basically they knew nothing of each other. In this respect, Genoa was quite outside the Roman urban tradition, of being the centre and market of a vast rural area. Genoa did not control or orient the life of the surrounding people in a political sense, nor in an economic, social or religious sense. The cathedral, for example, is essentially urban; it did not welcome crowds of peasants eager to attend the great feasts, collective cults, liturgical ceremonies, or even the parades and pageants, as in all western cities. Thus its life seemed artificial, superimposed upon an alien and often hostile land.

This may surely explain why Genoa was more amenable to, and more interested in, distant cultures; why it was more open to contacts overseas. This was of course related to the importance of the great streams of international traffic. The Genoese merchant is remembered for his enterprise and adventure, constant audacity, and he overran all the Asian routes, in search of Chinese silk at the beginning of the XIVth century; later he launched vast ships on the great Atlantic Ocean as far as Flanders.

But Genoa which is not a city with a court, does not figure as a centre of consumers on account of this great traffic. It was above all a transition centre, in fact a great caravan city. A large part of the products unloaded in the port reached the ultramontane countries by mule transport. This was a considerable undertaking, which engaged tens of thousands of mules every year, and which was beset by all sorts of physical, fiscal, and political obstacles. Thus it was a very big caravan centre, which in another climate and with a different style would recall the great Oriental cities which were enriched by desert traffic: to the Genoese merchant, the Ligurian Apennines, ill cared for, are no better than a desert. This function of transit is clearly visible in the urban landscape. The function of stopping-place implied a particular organisation of the traffic within the town itself: roads, the warehousing and reception. To the foreign traveller, Genoa, in fact, presents two clearly distinct towns, of different types, and this contrast testifies both to the volume and to the intensity of its trade. On the one hand, the port, with its stone breakwaters and its lanterns, its stalls laid out under the arcades—the “*Ripas*” where the sailors came to stock up on sailcloths and rope, or to sell their private cargo brought back from far-off lands; there also were ovens for the baking of ships’ bread and ships’ biscuit, its customs-house, become that of San Giorgio, the symbol of a strong administration; with its fish markets, grain markets, even wood markets, their merchandise bequeathed by the sea; and, nearby, the little Piazza Banchi where the insurance brokers and money changers had their tables. Then, behind the port, in the streets of the town, in and out of the town walls, and perched on the first steep slopes of the mountain, the narrow

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lanes, or *carrubi*, paved, built for the mules, between the compact block of the tall houses; these urban paths of stone and brick were elongations of the mountain dirt tracks. The caravansera town also had its stables, its warehouses, and its *fondouks*, apparently very numerous, owned by the principal families, who welcomed their relatives there, as well as their friends and clients. These *fondouks*, caravanserais, had lodgings for merchants, cellars for their wares and luggage, set around a well paved in marble, and stables for their mules.

Apart from the urban landscape, the importance and variety of commercial traffic certainly explains why the town was amenable to overseas products and customs; and why it willingly adopted certain artistic movements, certain religious attitudes, devotions and heresies, not only from the Far East, but also from the North. The role of the merchants in the diffusion of the Waldensian heresy, for example, was certainly not negligible.

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But the cultural exchanges owe more, without doubt, to the diversity and frequency of the human contacts themselves. The town harboured a considerable number of strangers, whether organised colonies or isolated individuals left to themselves, committed to a more rapid and certain assimilation, and thus more likely to give birth to new trends. These strangers came from diverse countries. It would be hopeless to set up a list. But it is interesting to define what forms this foreign presence took, and to note certain absences.

The commercial colonies strictly speaking, whether merchants or financiers, came from the Occident; there were no longer any merchants from the East in the town. This is clearly explained by the fact that, at the end of the Middle Ages, almost all the trade from abroad was in the hands of Westerners, but another factor would be the difficulty for a Muslim or an Oriental Christian of settling in an Italian city. Economic superiority, and the refusal to accept a non-catholic colony, caused Catalan, Castilian, Portuguese, Lombard and German merchants to form the majority, with their consuls, houses, and their own activities. The Germans were probably more numerous and influential there

than in any other Italian town. Let us note that the rather sordid practice of usury was here found entirely in the hands of the "Lombards," that is, the men of Asti, and of Chieri, who had established several profitable shops in the town. I find no trace of Jewish usury in the city during the XVth century, and I do not believe that there was any Jewish community living there. This is a fact of great importance, which may be due to certain particular features of the economy, or to a traditional attitude in the community, but the explanation is not easy to see.

Thus we see that the merchant colonies brought only Western culture to Genoa. The links with the East were forged by a human fact which has much richer consequences: slavery. It is certain that historical summaries all too easily overlook the importance of slavery in the medieval Mediterranean world. Even erudite works do not allow of a clear *exposé* of the facts, often complex, of medieval slavery. Although much work has been done on the legal aspect, or the economic facts, we are still too much in the dark about the human and social side of this phenomenon.

It can seem a part of the Roman heritage: some would be tempted to see it as a proof of the influence of the customs of Muslim countries, which were after all quite near and well known. In fact, the phenomenon seems to be quite original. In the Christian Western world at the end of the Middle Ages, the societies that permitted slavery were those of Iberia and Italy. In every Italian town, not only at the ports but in the cities of the interior, there were slaves sold to families of varied social standing. In these towns, the slaves seem to have been numerous and not only the property of a few noblemen or patricians; it was really a social fact which was spread through all active and non-pauper social classes, even among artisans. Towns in the south of France did not practice slavery in the same way. In Marseilles it was the Genoese merchants who bought them; they are not found in other towns in Provence, nor in Languedoc. In Montpellier and Perpignan slavery was maintained by the Catalan population.

In spite of certain analogies its independence of the Muslim world seems to me apparent. For one thing, these slaves seem to be always also house-servants, while the Muslims imported men

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for their armies, for farm labour, like the sugar-cane work in Egypt and the Near East, or for work in the salt-mines of the Sahara; Italian towns only bought women for housework. This necessarily implies a lesser number of people uprooted from their natural surroundings, and also, a closer cohabitation with them. The Italians did not buy negroes. The considerable extent of traffic of negro slaves to the Muslim countries across the Sahara or the sea routes of West Africa is already known. It is also known that in the second half of the XVth century, the people of Seville and Lisbon had already got negro slaves brought back from the west coast of Africa. The Italians and the Genoese did not take Moors or negroes, except in very rare cases. At Maghreb the prisoners were very quickly exchanged for Christian captives.

Here lies another singular feature of the slavery which is not readily explicable since it does not depend only upon economic contingencies or a desire to keep the oriental market open. It is probably necessary to look to traditions, to collective attitudes, for the explanation, without losing sight of the particular position of slaves in Italian urban society. At all events, all the slaves in Genoa were white, and came from the orient. They were bought in the many markets of the Black Sea, brought by the tribes themselves, or more frequently, by intermediaries who made it their business or who carried off the slaves by force. These women were, supposedly, Russian, Tartar, Caucasian, Georgian, Mingrelian, and later, Wallachian, Serbian, or Turkish. In fact, the Genoese merchants also bought men whom they almost always resold in Alexandria in Egypt.

These women, when in the Italian towns, and particularly in Genoa, lived in their master's house, and were occupied in housework, also looking after children; they would be the only house-servant; they had a room of their own at the top of the house. However, they were not wet-nurses, these came from the mountains. This strictly domestic slavery had very few exceptions; if it happened that a master hired his slave to another, it was only for a short time, or for minor work. But one cannot call them simple house-servants, even if their living conditions do not seem different from those of northern European town servants of this period or later, from a material or moral point of view. They were, after all, human beings who had been

uprooted, often violently from their natural family background, who had been transported, in terrible conditions, far from home, and who had been afterwards several times sold.

The human, ethnic, social and cultural consequences of the presence of numbers of young women, introduced into every merchant's or artisan's family, deserves greater and more detailed study. The women were probably not regularly the master's concubines and it would be quite unfair to speak of polygamy. The slaves were generally enfranchised by their master's testament, even if they had no children. But it is still probable that the number of bastard children was very high, and that those whom the Florentine matrons termed the "domestic enemies" had a strong effect on the families they lived with. One can say that this slavery caused a renewal, or at least a modification in the ethnic stock, probably not a spectacular one since the women were white, and so one could not trace the half-breeding, as one could in Lisbon at the same time, or in Brazil a little later. We must not forget that the son of a slave took the name of the master's family, and that the structure of that family allowed of everyone's living in contact with the masters, as it was a very large group of several dozen people. Finally, from the cultural point of view, these oriental women, even if they were baptised, were not easily assimilated: they retained the memory of their native home, and they showed certain non-acceptances in the face of their masters' culture, and thus introduced certain customs, certain mental and religious attitudes, even certain particular artistic expressions.

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Finally, Genoese culture was enriched by contact with cultures from overseas more particularly by virtue of maritime and colonial enterprise. The colonial empire of the Italians, particularly the Genoese and the Venetians, extended, at the time of the great Oriental Crusades, over vast areas of land wrested from the Muslim states or the Byzantine empire. But for Genoa in particular, it was not merely a matter of a political enterprise, of a simple domination exerted from afar by the metropolis and by a narrow class of administrators, Genoese colonisation did not

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limit itself to the occupation and defence of a few commercial outposts either, nor of relays, strategic points, or ports situated at the end of the great caravan routes. On the contrary, Genoese colonisation involved a great deal of human participation, on all social levels, and a close involvement in the life of the occupied country.

Even abroad, where the banner of Saint George could no longer directly protect them, the enterprising Genoese plied all sorts of trades in Africa and in the Orient. The merchants clustered to the *fondouks*, the soldier-adventurers served in the Byzantine armies, or the Mongolian. Genoese mariners sailed over all the seas in the East, and we know that Genoese ships made possible the navigation of the Caspian Sea in the heyday of the famous Mongolian silk route.

In the political and commercial colonies, this implantation was certainly affirmed. It was more varied and more intense. The Genoese colony could never be more than a castle held by some scion of a noble family: a fortress placed daringly on the edge of Palestine, or, still more dangerous, on the coast of the Black Sea, on the Wallachian littoral or else in the very valleys of the Caucasus, sometimes well into the interior. The real merchant colonies commanded a whole little nation of administrators, lawyers, and scribes, of customs-officials, accountants and salesmen, of judges, interpreters; every year numbers of young men in search of small posts, but dreaming of making their fortunes, left Genoa or the small towns round about for the Orient, for Pera, or for the more distant outposts of Caffa or La Tana. It is easy to imagine how these trading posts, placed at the meeting of several maritime or land routes, and, in the XIVth century the Persian and Chinese routes, brought together men from all countries, speaking the most diverse languages, using different currencies, impregnated with very different cultures. In Caffa, south of the Crimea, the Graeco-Mediterranean world met that of the steppes of Eastern Europe, and Asia.

Thus these colonial enterprises contributed powerfully to the introduction into Genoa of manifestations of all kinds of Oriental culture, and the effect was often deep. It reached different layers of the Genoese population, even the lowest.

A whole district of the town, right in the business centre,

very close to the port and the Piazza Banchi, was dominated by the Giustiniani clan—a huge and highly complex family group, whose neighbourly ties were reinforced by the fact that, as the only influential members of the colonial company that owned the island of Chios, they controlled its administration and commercial exploitation. The big Genoese families of the Giustiniani clan all had one of their leaders living on the island; they had many people in their employ there. Thus very close links were forged between the Giustiniani area of the town, and the isle of the Orient, the gateway to Asia Minor, and principal stopping-place on all the Genoese maritime routes to the Levant. It was also a base for colonisation, and peasants and artisans of all descriptions settled there.

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Thus, as maritime relaying town, caravan town, mercantile metropolis wide-open to all foreign comers, and certainly a main center of emigration to far-away lands, Genoa must have known and embraced all sorts of cultures. The town's civilisation benefited from all these enriching contacts; from a material point of view, Genoa displays a great diversity. A study of costume and fashions shows the weight of Oriental influence, whether Christian or Muslim. The influence is even clearer and easier to see in the domain of architecture in the town. The houses are often constructed around a very high room which reaches the roof, the facades are striated with different colours, wide strips of white or black, there are certain decorative elements, and a particular arrangement of storeys.

More generally, the rejection of the "Italian Renaissance" in Genoa may be explained by the preoccupation with foreign culture. At least the taste for the imitation of Roman art was not prevalent. In this matter Genoa and the towns of Liguria did not model themselves on those of Tuscany or Rome. There are very few borrowings from the "Renaissance." Here, the more medieval, more open nature of artistic expression is as clear as it was in Venice, a town which also remained "Gothic" for a very long time. But Genoa received more from the North, particularly Germany, than from the Orient.

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Finally, another trait underlines the cosmopolitan character of the Genoese culture, which is closely linked with the mercantile function of the town. Such an active metropolis must have sent its merchants, and then its agents, into almost all the known countries. Thus it became necessary to teach its businessmen foreign languages. Lawyers frequently mention interpreters, whether at Genoa or one of its trading outposts, who could read and write Arabic, Greek and Armenian. We also know that a strange monument was composed: a Genoese lexicon of business in Latin, Greek, and Kuman. But the Genoese desire to be understood everywhere was particularly manifested in the obstinate preservation of an international business language which allowed its merchants to be understood almost everywhere in the Mediterranean. Genoa was the only town in Italy at the end of the Middle Ages to employ only Latin for all administrative and commercial documents. All the registers of the Council of the Elders, all the tax registers, legal acts, and even all the commercial correspondence, without exception, were written in simplified Latin. It was probably abhorrent to a purist or grammarian, full of necessary neologisms, and childish inventions, warped by convenient transformations, with a very free syntax, but it had the great advantage of being an international jargon, spoken easily by everyone. The attachment to business Latin, which other towns had long abandoned, continued in Genoa to the end of the XVth century. And in the enormous registers of the *Casa San Giorgio* always kept in an exemplary fashion, Latin was used until the end of the XVIIIth century.