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MERCHANTS, CORSAIRS, AND PIRATES.  
MERCANTILE RESILIENCE TO PIRACY  
IN LATE MEDIEVAL VENICE

*Introduction*

The effects of the Commercial Revolution<sup>1</sup>, such as the rise of long-distance trading and the development of nautical technologies<sup>2</sup>, prompted Christian and Muslim maritime powers to start adopting piracy as a state policy between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries<sup>3</sup>. Through piracy, states such as the Republics of Venice and Genoa, the Crown of Aragon, the Kingdom of France, Granada, and the Muslim powers of North Africa aimed to weaken their rivals and competitors militarily and economically<sup>4</sup>. The sponsorship of piracy by maritime

<sup>1</sup> This research is part of the project Back to the Future that has received funding from the European Research Council ERC under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 851053).

<sup>2</sup> Concerning the Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, see F.C. LANE, *Venetian Shipping during the Commercial Revolution*, in ID., *Venice and History*, Baltimore 1966, pp. 3-24; R. DE ROOVER, *The Commercial Revolution of the 13th Century*, in *Social and Economic Foundations of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. A. Molho, New York 1969, pp. 23-26; R.S. LÓPEZ, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages 950-1350*, Cambridge 1971; A. GREIF, *Institutions and International Trade: Lessons from the Commercial Revolution*, «The American Economic Review», 82 (1992), II, pp. 128-33; A.E. LAIOU, *Byzantium and the Commercial Revolution*, in *Europa medievale e mondo bizantino*, eds. G. Arnaldi - G. Cavallo, Roma 1997, pp. 239-253; F. TRIVELLATO, *Renaissance Florence and the Origins of Capitalism: A Business History Perspective*, «Business History Review», 94 (2020), I, pp. 229-251.

<sup>3</sup> G. STEFANI, *L'assicurazione a Venezia dalle origini alla fine della Serenissima*. I, Trieste 1956, pp. 61-65; LANE, *Venetian Shipping during the Commercial Revolution*; R.I. BURNS, *Piracy as an Islamic-Christian Interface in the Thirteenth Century*, «Viator», 11 (January 1980), pp. 166-67; J.A. RODRIGUEZ, *Captives and Their Saviors in the Medieval Crown of Aragon*, Washington DC 2007, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> A. TENENTI, *Venezia e la pirateria nel Levante: 1300 c. - 1460 c.*, in *Venezia e il Levante fino al secolo XV*. I, ed. A. Pertusi, Venezia 1973, pp. 705-772; BURNS, *Piracy as an Islamic-Christian Interface*; M.T. FERRER I MALLOL, *La frontera amb l'Islam en el segle XIV: cristians*

powers marked the beginning of large-scale privateering on the routes between Northern Europe and the Middle East. This phenomenon caused a skyrocketing in piracy activities all over the main routes of the international long-distance trading between the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century, resulting in an exceptional period of piracy risk in terms of intensity and occurrence<sup>5</sup>.

Research has widely studied the resilience of commercial communities to the frequent and human-made risk deriving from piracy, showing how merchant groups created and developed practices to mitigate the effects of this threat on their investments and possessions<sup>6</sup>. Practices were customary and collective reactions to risks, standardised by repetitive and successful application of actions by individuals of the same community<sup>7</sup>. Historians have shown how the increased occurrence of piracy contributed to the success of insurance as a commercial practice for seafaring business<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, it has been highlighted how city governments began to organise and develop seafaring businesses, making routes safer by organising armed convoys<sup>9</sup>, conquering areas hosting pirates, such as the coasts of Corsica, Sicily, and Crete, and installing fortresses on the main checkpoints of the maritime routes<sup>10</sup>.

*i sarraïns al País Valencià*, Barcelona 1988; RODRIGUEZ, *Captives and Their Saviors*, pp. 5–6; G. CHRIST, *Transkulturelle Pirateriebekämpfung? Venezianisch- Mamlukische Kooperation und Gefangenenerbefreiung im Östlichen Mittelmeerraum im Spätmittelalter*, in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum. Piraterie, Korsarentum und Maritime Gewalt von der Antike bis zur Neuzeit*, eds. N. Jaspert - S. Kolditz, Leiden 2013, pp. 363–375; N. FIEREMANS, *Forum Shopping Pirates? Litigation Strategies to Address Maritime Plunder in Late Medieval Flanders*, «International Journal of Maritime History», 35 (2023), I, pp. 3–23.

<sup>5</sup> F. MELIS, *Origini e sviluppi delle assicurazioni in Italia (Secoli XIV-XVI)*. I. Roma 1975, pp. 55–58.

<sup>6</sup> E.S. TAI, *Restitution and the Definition of a Pirate: The Case of Sologrus de Nigro*, «Mediterranean Historical Review», 19 (2004), II, pp. 34–70; T. HEEBØLL-HOLM, *Ports, Piracy and Maritime War: Piracy in the English Channel and the Atlantic, c. 1280-c. 1330*, Leiden 2013; FIEREMANS, *Forum Shopping Pirates?*

<sup>7</sup> N. ZENNARO, *1400: A Fortunoso Anno. Future Thinking and Risk in Late Medieval Venice* (University of Antwerp, 2025), pp. 33–34.

<sup>8</sup> E. Bensa, *Il contratto di assicurazione nel Medio Evo. Studi e ricerche*, Genova 1884; F. MELIS, *Origini e sviluppi*; G. CECCARELLI, *Un mercato del rischio: assicurare e farsi assicurare nella Firenze rinascimentale*, Venezia 2012; C.A. ZWIERLEIN, *Prometheus Tamed: Fire, Security, and Modernities, 1400 to 1900*, Leiden 2021.

<sup>9</sup> LANE, *Venetian Shipping*; B. DOUMERC, *La crise structurelle de la marine vénitienne au XVe siècle: la problème du retard des mude*, «Annales», 40 (1985), pp. 605–23; D. STÖCKLY, *Le système de l'Incanto des galées du marché à Venise (fin XIIIe-milieu XVe siècle)*, Leiden 1995.

<sup>10</sup> M. DAL BORGIO, *Strutture militari veneziane: le città murate dello Stato da Terra e le città fortificate dello Stato da Mar*, «Mediterranean World. Mediterranean Studies», 21 (2012),

These governments also created institutions for identifying and bringing pirates to court, as well as procedures, enabling the punishment of these criminals and the restitution of the goods they robbed<sup>11</sup>.

Individuals and communities could employ all these practices to mitigate risks in their business and personal lives, supported by cities' institutions. Economic actors could obtain the know-how on their correct application through education and training. This point of view on mercantile resilience to piracy is firmly based on research on institutional sources, which examined the interactions between businessmen and institutions. Despite showing essential aspects of premodern communities' risk management, this perspective appears limited by the nature of the sources used. Indeed, institutional documentation shows only situations in which merchants decided to ask institutions to support their reaction to piracy, and it overlooks how and why individuals chose certain practices, and how they employed them without referring to institutions<sup>12</sup>. In sum, historians neglect to analyse individuals' perceptions and reactions to piracy.

This article seeks to fill this historiographical gap by analysing how individuals within a given mercantile community perceived piracy and how they employed the risk practices to avoid, cope with, and overcome the damage deriving from it. To do so, I mainly focus on analysing the knowledge and the personal perspectives of economic actors in the face of piracy. For this reason, my research will analyse the ideal sources to show the individual perspective of merchants facing dangers: the commercial letters. The correspondence written by Bindo di Gherardo Piaciti and Antonio di Marino Contarini, two key nodes in Francesco di Marco Datini's holding company in Venice, takes, therefore, central

pp. 149–64; E. BASSO, *Pirateria, politica, ceti dirigenti. Alcuni esempi genovesi del Tardo Medioevo*, in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, eds. N. Jaspert - S. Kolditz.

<sup>11</sup> TAI, *Restitution and the Definition of a Pirate*; HEEBØLL-HOLM, *Ports, Piracy and Maritime War*; ID., *Towards a Criminalisation of Piracy in Late Medieval England*, in *Conflict Management in the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, 1000-1800*, eds. L.H.J. Sicking - A. Wijffels, Leiden 2020, pp. 165-186; P. PRÉTOU, *L'émergence du pirate atlantique dans le Royaume de France à la fin du Moyen Âge*, *ivi*, pp. 187-197; D. VALÉRIAN, *Lutte contre la piraterie et construction de normes partagées entre chrétiens et musulmans en Méditerranée médiévale*, *ivi*, pp. 147-164; FIEREMANS, *Forum Shopping Pirates?*

<sup>12</sup> D.J. HARRELD, *The Individual Merchant and the Trading Nation in Sixteenth-Century Antwerp*, in *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity: Individual and Community in the Early Modern World*, eds. C.H. Parker - J.H. Bentley, Lanham 2007, pp. 271-284; T.M. SAFLEY, *Institutions and Their Discontents*, «TSEG - The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History», 11 (2014), IV, pp. 61-74; A. POPP, *Histories of Business and the Everyday*, «Enterprise & Society», 21 (2020), III, pp. 622–37.

stage in this argument. This port city was essential in connecting the long-distance trade between the North Sea and the Middle East. Furthermore, the *Commune Veneciarum* has often been considered central in the fight against piracy, but also one of the most prominent supporters of privateering<sup>13</sup>. In light of this, Venice appears as an ideal case study for the focus of this analysis.

I will compare the points of view offered by the letters with the practices mentioned and discussed by other documentation from the Datini archive, such as other letters, account books, insurances, and more sources produced by merchants offering introspective aspects of Italian mercantile culture's practices against piracy, such as merchant manuals, diaries, memoirs, *ricordanze*, and letters. This article aims to demonstrate how historical research can benefit from adopting a new perspective on premodern risk perception by analysing individual resilience to it. In the first part of this article, I will examine sources produced by the Italian commercial community to illustrate how merchants perceived and described pirates and corsairs who threatened their businesses and lives in the late Middle Ages. Then, I will introduce my two case studies, namely the Florentine Bindo Piaciti and the Venetian Antonio Contarini. The third part will be based on the overview of the references to piracy provided by these two correspondences, which will be analysed in-depth in the fourth part, to gain a better understanding of individuals' resilience to piracy. This research will attempt to identify the practices employed by individual merchants and examine how they were utilised to react to the dangers posed by piracy in the late medieval period.

### *A portrait of pirates through mercantile sources*

The analysis of individual merchants' point of view on piracy allows us to draft a portrait of the pirates, who used to threaten the routes between the Mediterranean Sea and the North Sea between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. According to historians, two different types of people could have done so, both in the Middle Ages and later periods: pirates and corsairs. On the one hand, pirates, or «*pirati*», were considered brigands who attacked people and villages on the coasts to plunder and obtain profit. On the other hand, corsairs or privateers,

<sup>13</sup> TENENTI, *Venezia e la pirateria nel Levante*.

named «*corsari*» in Italian, did the same as pirates. Still, their state legally authorised them to weaken political enemies' power and economy. Mercantile sources do not clearly distinguish between these two types of piracy. Florentines used the terms «*chorsalo-ro/chorsali-ri*» (corsair/corsairs), and Venetians used «*chorsere/chorseri*» (corsair/corsairs), namely the same term but in Venetian. We do not find the Italian «*pirata/pirati*» in the correspondences from the Datini archive, or in merchants' manuals, memoirs, and account books. We see «*pirata/pirates*» in documents written in Latin, or «*pirata/pirati*» in vernacular literary works written by authors influenced by their knowledge of Latin<sup>14</sup>.

One can hypothesise that the broader use of «*chorsalo/chorsere*» was due to Italian merchants dealing more often with corsairs than pirates. However, we cannot prove or disprove this assumption with the data available. Still, it is interesting to highlight how merchants used these two terms as synonyms, although they meant two different things from a legal point of view. A clear example of using such terms as synonyms can be found in Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313-1375) work. In his commentary on the *Divina Commedia*, Boccaccio explained how the term «*pirata*» derived from Pirro, son of Achilles, considered the first pirate ever, stating how «*corsairs*» (corsari) were and still are named pirates since him (Pirro) onwards<sup>15</sup>. The reason behind using these two terms as synonyms can result from victims of piracy's lack of interest in defining the agency behind piracy. The effects of pirates' and corsairs' actions were relevant to them. Authorised or not, pirates and corsairs similarly affected merchants' lives and businesses<sup>16</sup>. In light of this, terminology does not help us understand how these people saw pirates and privateers in this period.

To understand how merchants perceive these two types of piracy differently, we need to examine the contents of mercantile sources. Apparently, Europeans described as pirates only Muslim brigands assaulting Christian ships or coastal areas. Urban institutions organised expeditions, often using their corsairs or city galleys' captains, to sink fleets and to destroy fortresses held by pirates. We read about a situation

<sup>14</sup> For example, see G. BOCCACCIO, *Il commento alla Divina Commedia e gli altri scritti intorno a Dante*, ed. D. Guerri, III, Roma 1918; M. VILLANI - F. VILLANI, *Cronica di Matteo Villani con la continuazione di Filippo Villani*, Parma 1995.

<sup>15</sup> «E da lui furono, e ancor sono, i corsari dinominati "pirrate"». See BOCCACCIO, *Il commento alla Divina Commedia*, p. 116.

<sup>16</sup> S. BONO, *Pirateria, guerra e schiavitù nella storia del Mediterraneo*, in *Seeraub im Mittelmeerraum*, eds. N. Jaspert - S. Kolditz, p. 41.

like this in a letter written on 24 July 1395 by Ambrogio Rocchi di Siena, who informed the Datini company in Barcelona about the King of Aragon's choice of appointing a Spanish galley captain to defend the Spanish maritime area:

As I have told you, I have heard that Sir King [of Aragon] wants to put the galley of Gherao di Sguaneches to guard these seas: it will be an excellent thing to protect them from the ships of the Moors and other people. May God grant that this decision be taken!<sup>17</sup>

Whenever a Muslim ship or fleet was detected, Christian maritime communities would have organised an assault to destroy them, sometimes looking for temporary alliances with competitors or other cities. An agent of the Datini company in Genoa reported about an action conducted by a Genoese galley allied with a brigantine of people from Briançon against a Muslim fleet:

A Moorish galley and galleot were spotted in the seas off Marseille. One of the three galleys belonging to the Genoese found it and attacked it with a brigantine from Briançon. They captured the galleot with fifty men. (The Christians) sank the galley and captured some of the men. Some of them were tied up, and two renegade Catalans who were among them were hanged. The galley, also belonging to the Moors, escaped and, unfortunately, succeeded because the Genoese galley had a broken sail and could not pursue it. Had God wanted that the Christians had also captured this one, they would have punished those Saracen dogs as they deserved!<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> «Chome io v'ò detto, io sento che il signor Re vuole mettere la ghalea di Gherao di Sguaneches alla ghuardia di questi mari: sarà hottima chosa per fuste di mori et d'altra gente: volgli Idio la chosa vada inanzi», ARCHIVIO DI STATO DI PRATO [hereinafter ASPO], Fondo Datini [hereinafter Datini], busta 886, inserto 12, codice 113466, 24 July 1395. See G. NIGRO, *Mercanti in Maiorca. II. Carteggio Datiniano dall'isola (1387 - 1396)*, 1, Firenze 2003, p. 150, my translation.

<sup>18</sup> «Ne' mari di Marsilia è suto una galea e una galeotta de' mori. Di che una delle III galee di costoro la trovò, e insieme con un brigantino di Brianzone l'asaltarono, e presono la galeotta chon da L uomini. La galeotta missono in fondo e gl'uomini presono e parte allegarono, e II chatelani v'erano su rineghati anpiccharono. La ghalea, cioè de' mori, si fugì, e per fortuna era e simile perché la galea di costoro rupe l'apoggio della vela, per modo no lla poteron seguire. Volese Idio che anche l'avesono presa, acciò gl'avesono ghashighati come meritavano que' chani saraini», ASPO, *Datini*, busta 341, inserto 5, codice 5681, 23 May 1393. See R. PIATTOLI, *Lettere di Piero Benintendi mercante del Trecento (1392-1409)*, «Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria», 1 (1932), LX, p. 130, my translation.

In the eyes of European maritime powers, fighting Muslim pirates, defined as «*Mori*» (Moors) or «*Saraini*» (Saracens), was comparable to fighting a Crusade<sup>19</sup>. This is also explicitly stated by Benedetto Cotrugli in his *De Navigatione*, namely a manual on seafaring to be used by sailors and merchants. Here, Cotrugli affirms how states often tolerated corsairs' actions because they were disturbing or destroying Muslim pirates who were plundering Christian territories, like in the case of the Crown of Aragon<sup>20</sup>.

The context is also fundamental to recognising when merchants dealt with corsairs and when not. Merchants often seem to recognise corsairs' nationality, probably for two reasons. Firstly, specific ships' elements displayed the nationality of their crew, which was not mentioned in the letters. Cotrugli's *De Navigatione* refers to the possibility of recognising seafarers' geographical origin from the type of ship they used: «The Genoese use large ships, the Venetians use large merchant galleys, and the Catalans use slender corsair galleys<sup>21</sup>». Here, Cotrugli explicitly stated that Catalans were corsairs, and he did so also in his *The Book of the Art of Trade*. Here, the author described piracy as the job undertaken by Catalans and Genoese merchants who went bankrupt («when the Genoese become poor because they are disgraced by Fortune, or the Catalans, most of them become pirates<sup>22</sup>»). The Datini network's correspondences confirm Cotrugli's assumption, reporting news mostly on Catalan and Genoese storming the waters between Spain and Italy. Still, these letters also show the presence of Provençal corsairs, mainly near Marseille and Corsica. The second possible reason behind the capability of merchants to recognise corsairs' origins was the information exchange with ports or places nearby, where corsairs were organising

<sup>19</sup> Concerning the link between piracy and crusading, see also TENENTI, *Venezia e la pirateria nel Levante*; BURNS, *Piracy as an Islamic-Christian Interface*; CHRIST, *Transkulturelle Pirateriebekämpfung*?

<sup>20</sup> «Sonno simili modo da essere excusati li patroni de le galee, li quali lo vulgo chiama corsari, li quali non havendo questa pratica, non dubito che le fuste deli Mori al continuo depredariano la costa de Catalogna, le insule Baleare et lo regame de utraque Sicilia, donde senza fallo lo fructo che fanno comporta l'abusione deli homini per forsa», P. FALCHETTA, *Il Trattato De Navigatione di Benedetto Cotrugli (1464-1465). Edizione commentata del Ms. Schoenberg 473 con il testo del Ms. 557 di Yale*, «Studi Veneziani», 57 (2009), p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> «I Genovesi impiegano navi grosse, i Veneziani le galeazze grosse da mercanzia, i Catalani le galee sottili da corsa», FALCHETTA, *Il Trattato De Navigatione*, p. 288.

<sup>22</sup> «[...] lo Gienovese diventa povero per essere disgratiato da la fortuna, o Catallani, ut plurimum diventano corsari», B. COTRUGLI, *Libro de l'arte de la mercatura*, ed. V. Ribaudo, Venezia 2020, p. 72, my translation.



their raids or waiting for the passage of ships to assault. We find an example of this in a letter sent by Domenico Pazzi from Avignon to Pisa:

There is no news here, except that Salan di Negro arrived a few days ago near the islands close to Marseille and captured a ship coming from Seville loaded with merchandise. [This corsair ship] can cause a great deal of damage. May God protect all our friends from his hands and protect you<sup>23</sup>!

This reference shows us how merchants not only know the corsairs' nationality, but sometimes even the name of their captains. In this case, we can see the mention of Sologrus de Nigro, a Genoese corsair who appears in several archival documents from Italy, France, and Spain, including other correspondences preserved in the Datini archive<sup>24</sup>. Despite being certain of the identity of the corsairs, merchants and governments were not always sure that a corsair captain or fleet was really working under the order of a given city or by their own will. It happened that maritime powers sent ambassadors to cities suspected of supporting corsairs to confirm or dispel their doubts<sup>25</sup>.

In light of the evidence discussed in this section, we can establish how pirates and corsairs were differentiated by merchants, but not by their own terminology. We find differences in how businessmen discussed them in their writings, mainly based on the religious and cultural identity of the people committing piracy. Indeed, Muslims were considered pirates, while Christians were corsairs. This difference is explicitly stated in the references we considered above, showing how «*Mori*» and «*Saraini*» were considered and treated differently from Catalans and Genoese. This section has demonstrated how comparing the documentation produced by merchant knowledge with the collections of letters from the Datini archive can provide new insights into piracy risk in the Middle Ages. Furthermore, this comparison has enabled us to obtain the basic elements to understand better how medieval Italian merchants perceived piracy, and will allow us to move to a more in-

<sup>23</sup> «Qui no n'à di nuove se non che'Ssalan di Negro venne più di fa a l'isole di Marselia e prese una nave venia di Sibilia carica di merchatantia e pure e si possa far dano assai. Che Dio ne vogli ghuardare ogni amicho dalle sue mani e voi ghuardi», ASPo, *Datini*, busta 430, inserto 16, codice 103113, 15 December 1399.

<sup>24</sup> Concerning Sologrus de Nigro and its activities, see TAI, *Restitution and the Definition of a Pirate*.

<sup>25</sup> For example, see ASPo, *Datini*, busta 341, inserto 5, codice 5681, 23 May 1393. See PIATTOLI, *Lettere di Piero Benintendi*, p.129.



depth analysis of this risk from the perspective of two economic actors trading in Venice between the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries. To do so, we will begin with an introduction to the two case studies examined in this study.

### *One risk, two merchants*

This article examines the correspondence written by the Florentine Bindo di Gherardo Piaciti and the Venetian patrician Antonio di Marino Contarini. These two businessmen are to be considered, respectively, the main Tuscan partner and the most important Venetian partner of Francesco Datini in the Rialto Market. By studying these two important merchants, I will be able to show how the main actors of Datini's network perceived and reacted to piracy, and to highlight the differences and similarities in the reactions of local and foreign merchants to this risk.

Antonio di Marino Contarini will be our first case study to understand how Venetian merchants dealt with piracy risk. Antonio was a patrician politician and merchant, and apparently one of the wealthiest men of Venice<sup>26</sup>. His business in wool from San Matteo (Spain) and Flanders, as well as his interest in money exchange in Barcelona and Bruges, led Antonio to become a partner of Francesco Datini in 1397. Contarini was introduced to Datini by Zanobi di Taddeo Gaddi, a Florentine merchant who obtained Venetian citizenship in 1384. Due to his double-citizenship, Gaddi monopolised the transactions between Tuscans and Venetians in the lagoon. The correspondence written by Antonio Contarini, consisting of 209 letters from Venice to Italy and Spain, is the most extensive Venetian collection preserved in the Datini Archive of Prato. It is probably an unicum as a source for organicity and the number of documents to study Venetian merchants between the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries<sup>27</sup>.

The Florentine merchant we will consider is Bindo di Gherardo Pi-

<sup>26</sup> ASPO, *Datini*, busta 1088, inserto 4, codice 9300024, 14 January 1401. See also R.C. MUELLER, *The Venetian Money Market. Banks, Panics, and the Public Debt, 1200-1500*, Baltimore 1997, p. 271.

<sup>27</sup> For more information on Antonio di Marino Contarini, see also MUELLER, *The Venetian Money Market*; R.J. GOY, *The House of Gold: Building a Palace in Medieval Venice*, Cambridge 1992; A. MOZZATO, *Una preziosa materia prima. La lana spagnola a Venezia tra Tre e Quattrocento*, «Archivio Veneto», 5, 170 (2008), pp. 25–58; ZENNARO, *1400: A Fortunoso Anno*.

aciti. Bindo was one of the main Florentine merchants in the Rialto market. Piaciti was related to Datini because his father, Gherardo di Bindo Piaciti, married Caterina di Domenico Bandini, an aunt of Datini's wife, Margherita di Domenico Bandini. Bindo had four brothers, all partners in Datini's business: Tommaso, Niccolò, Francesco, and Domenico<sup>28</sup>. Bindo Piaciti started his business in Venice as a manager for the Venetian branch of his family company, the Piaciti of Florence, since at least 1392<sup>29</sup>. Since 1404, this merchant traded through his own company, which he established with Bartolo di Amerigo Zati, his brother-in-law<sup>30</sup>. His correspondence consists of 819 letters, written by Piaciti and his business partner Bartolo di Amerigo Zati Piaciti between 1389 and 1411<sup>31</sup>. These letters show the activities of Bindo's company in Venice, based on his collaboration with the Datini company, and describe the supply and demand of the Rialto market from a Tuscan perspective in the same period covered by Contarini's letters<sup>32</sup>.

These two case studies are ideal for juxtaposing merchants supported by institutions and those acting without their support. Antonio Contarini was a *civis originarius*, namely a citizen of Venice. Due to this status, he could have easier access to Venetian international trading and the maritime institutions and practices displayed by the Venetian government against seafaring risks, such as the galleys' *mude*. On the other hand, Bindo Piaciti was a foreigner without citizenship. Therefore, he had to rely on the intermediary action of citizens to be supported by institutions in his reaction to dangers threatening his business.

<sup>28</sup> See the *Digital Sepoltuario* by the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities IATH, University of Virginia. Retrieved 24 November 2020, Piaciti, Gherardo di Bindo PEO00003512. <http://sepoltuario.iath.virginia.edu/tombs/people/PEO00003512/public>

<sup>29</sup> ZENNARO, *1400: A Fortunoso Anno*; ID., *Born Under Mercury. God's Influence on the Future Perspective of the Medieval Italian Merchant*, in *Cultures of Exchange*, eds. S. Barsella - W. Caferro; - G. Maifreda, Toronto 2025 (forthcoming).

<sup>30</sup> This happened around 31 May 1404, when Bindo and his collaborators started to use the signature «Bindo Piaciti e Chompangnia in Vinegia» (ASPO, *Datini*, busta 715, inserto 18, codice 507767, 31 May 1404). See ZENNARO, *1400: A Fortunoso Anno*.

<sup>31</sup> Concerning Bindo Piaciti's correspondence, 737 letters of 819 are written from Venice, 12 from Florence, 67 from Valencia, one from Padua, one from Bologna, and one from Barcelona. All these letters discussed matters related to the Rialto Market. In light of this, I will analyse all of them in this article.

<sup>32</sup> For more information concerning Bindo di Gherardo Piaciti, see also P. GONNELLI, *Momenti e aspetti dell'economia veneziana, rivissuti attraverso la corrispondenza Venezia-Firenze dell'azienda fiorentina di Bindo Piaciti, 1394-1407* (University of Florence, 1971); MUELLER, *The Venetian Money Market*; ZENNARO, *1400: A Fortunoso Anno*; ID., *Born Under Mercury*.

By analysing the similarities and differences in the reactions of these two merchants to piracy, we will gain new insights into the resilience of Italian merchants to this human-made risk. To do so, we will reconstruct an overview of these merchants' references to piracy and then proceed to an in-depth analysis of these businessmen's perceptions and reactions to piracy.

*The references to piracy in the letters of Piaciti and Contarini*

The correspondences provide us with 13 references to piracy out of 1028 letters covering the period 1389-1411, namely six by Bindo Piaciti and seven by Antonio Contarini. By looking at the number of mentions per year, we can gain insight into Piaciti's and Contarini's risk perception. Bindo Piaciti reported on piracy once per year, in 1398 and 1401, while he referred to this danger twice in 1402 and 1403. Piaciti's letters reveal a constant preoccupation with corsairs' actions between 1401 and 1403. However, Bindo Piaciti does not refer to piracy in 1399, 1400, and 1404. Antonio Contarini mentioned piracy once in 1400 and 1401. The year 1404 shows Contarini's strong interest in writing about it, with five references in one year. The Venetian merchant did not mention piracy in 1398, 1399, 1402, and 1403. Comparing the data emerging from these two correspondences, we can see how piracy was discussed by both merchants only in 1401. The only year without references is 1399.

It is essential to point out how Piaciti and Contarini wrote about piracy in their letters between 1398 and 1404. There are no references to this human-made risk in the other years covered by their correspondences. Furthermore, examining the number of references per month, we can see that piracy was a constant risk throughout the year, apart from January, February, and August. Probably pirates and corsairs considered it risky to sail during the two coldest months of the year. Still, it is unclear why August provides no references to this risk. The highest number of references can be found in June (3), July (2), and October (1). Summer appears to be the most dangerous period for seafaring from Piaciti's letters, while Contarini's peak of references is in October.

Returning to examine the 'piracy period' of 1398-1404, we can state that these disruptive years correspond to the decline in diplomatic relations between Catalans and Italians. This period, indeed, was characterised by a series of embargoes established by the Crown of Aragon, under pressure from their local mercantile communities, to weaken

the Italian monopoly in the main Spanish ports, namely Barcelona, Valencia, and Majorca<sup>33</sup>. One of the tools used to undermine Italian businesses was the use of corsairs, who sank and robbed Italian ships. These economic attacks initially aimed to damage the entire Italian community trading in the Catalan area, but they were later limited to the Genoese and Tuscan communities. Indeed, King Martin the Humane lifted these restrictions on Venetian merchants in 1404, the year with the most references to piracy by Contarini<sup>34</sup>. In light of this political act, Catalan piracy no longer posed a threat to the Venetians. So, why do we have a peak of Contarini's references this year? The reason behind this high number is that Antonio Contarini, like other Venetian merchants, began to assist his Florentine partners in the Rialto Market in dealing with corsairs by leveraging his status as a Venetian citizen. Among these foreigners benefiting from the Venetians' help was Bindo Piaciti, as well as most of Datini's network in the lagoon, which might explain the lack of mentions on his part for this year. We will explore this in more detail later, examining how Venetians supported foreign merchants in their fight against piracy.

Here, it is relevant to state how these two correspondences can help us explore the individual perspectives on mercantile resilience against piracy and to better understand the political dynamics behind this human-made risk during the considered period. We can state that the pirate attacks described or discussed by Piaciti and Contarini were likely carried out by Catalan corsairs, rather than Muslim pirates, as seen in other correspondence preserved in the Datini archive. In light of this situation, we will examine this type of economic war between mercantile communities, which is often conducted with the support of their governments. Indeed, corsairs and practices against them were managed mainly by maritime powers that sought to advantage their mercantile communities and damage the economies of competitors. In the following section, we will deeply investigate the references to piracy in Bindo's and Antonio's letters to define, describe, and analyse the

<sup>33</sup> M.T. FERRER I MALLOL, *Els italians a terres catalanes (Segles XII-XV)*, «Anuario de Estudios Medievales», 10 (1980), pp. 393–467; C. CUADRADA MAJÓ; - A. ORLANDI, *Ports, tràfics, vaixells, productes: Italians i Catalans a la Mediterrània baixmedieval*, «Anuario de Estudios Medievales», 24 (1994), pp. 3–48; E.A. CONGDON, *Venetian Mercantile Presence in the Western Mediterranean: 1398-1405* (University of Cambridge, 1997); ID, *Venetian and Aragonese/Catalan Relations: Protectionist Legislation in 1398-1404*, «Medieval Encounters», 2003, pp. 214–235.

<sup>34</sup> CONGDON, *Venetian and Aragonese/Catalan Relations*, ivi, pp. 229–30.

practices used by these merchants to avoid, deal with, and overcome risks to their business, arising from the activities of Catalan corsairs. To do so, I will compare what emerges from their letters with references from other documents preserved in the Datini archive, such as correspondences, account books, and insurances, as well as with other products of mercantile knowledge, such as merchant manuals, memoirs, and *ricordanze*. By doing so, we will be able to determine whether Bindo Piaciti, Bartolo Zati, and Antonio Contarini shared a common set of practices against piracy and if they applied them in the same way.

### *Individual mercantile practices and piracy in late medieval Venice*

Bindo di Gherardo Piaciti reports the earliest reference to piracy detectable in the two correspondences. In a letter sent by Bindo to Francesco Datini's company in Florence on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1398 he wrote:

As we told you in another letter, we are sending you our pearls on Niccolò de Verzoni's ship, worth approximately £.80 *di grossi*. We have not insured them and will only do so if we suspect there are corsairs (*chorsali*). For this reason, we ask you to let us know if you hear any suspicion of corsairs (*chorsali*) in those seas, and to give us your opinion in the first letter you send<sup>35</sup>.

Piaciti's first mention of piracy immediately introduces two fundamental practices against this human-made risk. The first is insurance, the risk practice par excellence against seafaring dangers, generally defined as «*fortunae maris*» or «*fortunali*» in these types of documents, depending on the language used by their authors<sup>36</sup>. Piracy has been an endemic danger in the Mediterranean Sea since ancient times<sup>37</sup>. Never-

<sup>35</sup> «Noi mandamo per la nave di Niccholò de Verzoni nostre perlle, come per altra v'abian detto, per circha di £. 80 di grossi. E non v'abiano preso siquità né pigliereno, se no per dubito di chorsari. E pertanto vi piaccia avisarci se in que' mari sentite che sia da dubitare di chorsari e ditecene vostro parere per la prima», ASPo, *Datini*, busta 712, inserto 17, codice 507739, 14 June 1398.

<sup>36</sup> H.R. PATCH, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature*, Cambridge MA 1927; W. BURKHARDT, *Fortuna's Sea Change: Renaissance Poetics of Contingency*, in *Fortuna's Sea Change: Renaissance Poetics of Contingency*, eda. A. Bredecke - P. Vogt, Berlin 2017, pp. 47-62; G. MANZELLI, *Fortuna del Veneziano Fortuna "Fortunale" nel Mediterraneo e oltre*, in *Miscellanea di studi in onore di Diego Poli*, ed. F. Chiusaroli, II, Roma 2021, pp. 913-936.

<sup>37</sup> P. DE SOUZA, *Piracy in Classical Antiquity*, in *Persistent Piracy: Maritime Violence and State-Formation in Global Historical Perspective*, eds. S.E. Amirell - L. Müller, London 2014,

theless, even if insurance policies and *clausulae* existed already in this period, piracy appeared explicitly mentioned in insurance documents only starting from the fourteenth century onwards<sup>38</sup>. The first mention of piracy is to be traced in a formula from «the oldest notarial deed on insurance», dated to 15 March 1350<sup>39</sup>. This formula states how the insurance drawn up by the Genoese Leonardo Cattaneo and the Messinian Benedetto di Protonotaro covered the voyage of a ship against risk, danger, God's fortune of sea and men (*risicum periculum et fortunam Dei maris et gentium*).

Using this formula became a standard practice for drafting insurance contracts, showing how economic actors considered piracy a common risk for their investments in ships, together with storms and shipwrecks<sup>40</sup>. Still, we can see how insurance illustrates piracy as a risk not dependent on God's will, like the natural disasters, but on human action. Piaciti did not insure the pearls he sent to Francesco Datini, worth 80 lire di grossi, a sum equivalent to approximately 551 days of a master builder's or master carpenter's wage in Venice in 1398<sup>41</sup>. Piaciti's choice was not dictated by his inexperience as a merchant, but probably by the Venetian mercantile community's shared trust in the city government's efficient organisation of the galleys' convoys. This can be stated in light of what emerges from the Datini archive, where we see how merchants, mostly Venetians, did not always draft insurances when they were organising the departure of their cargoes from the city of St. Mark. Venetian galleys were considered the safest among the ships sailing between the Middle East and the North Sea, and merchants from the Datini network often aimed to charge their goods on them, rather than on the ships of competitors such as Catalans, Genoese, or Pisans<sup>42</sup>. We have an

pp. 24-50; M. ARSLAN, *Piracy: The Pre-Existing Security Problem at Antiquity*, «Akdeniz İnsani Bilimler Dergisi», 11 (June 2021), pp. 17-30; J. TONER, *Risk in the Roman World*, Cambridge 2023.

<sup>38</sup> K. NEHLSSEN-VON STRYK, *L'assicurazione marittima veneziana nel Quattrocento*, Roma 1988, p. 16. Before then, people used the term *fortuna maris* to point out sea risks in insurance contracts' clauses since at least the twelfth century.

<sup>39</sup> MELIS, *Origini e sviluppi*, p. 185.

<sup>40</sup> Insurances can use two different formulae: «risico et fortuna Dei, maris et gentis» (risk and God's fortune, the sea and men) and in the Italian version «ogni rischio e pericolo e fortuna di Dio e di mare e di gente, e d'ogni chaso e disastro e fortuna che potrebbe intervenire per niuno modo o chagione» (every risk, peril, God's fortune, sea, man, and every chance, disaster and fortune that might come in any way or for any reason).

<sup>41</sup> Calculation based on the data reported in MUELLER, *The Venetian Money Market*, p. 661.

<sup>42</sup> For example, see the correspondences from Bruges preserved in the Datini archive.

example concerning Venetian ships' good reputation from Piaciti's letters, where we read how this merchant felt safer knowing that his goods would have been charged in a Venetian ship: «We will arrange for a ship to sail in mid-May. This ship will be Venetian, and a good warship<sup>43</sup>».

According to letters written by Florentine businessmen in Rialto, the only Venetian merchant who appeared obsessed with insuring his goods was precisely Antonio di Marino Contarini. Indeed, Contarini is described as a sort of eccentric Venetian and as a possible source of profit opportunities in the eyes of brokers such as Talerano di Paolo Mattei, an agent of the Datini company working in Venice, who wrote that: «Messer Antonio insures his cargo much more than any other Venetian. Please recommend me to him so that he will make me profit<sup>44</sup>».

Contarini's correspondence itself shows how he was risk-averse when dealing with maritime risks. When he advanced requests to agents of the Datini company, Antonio Contarini used to explicitly ask for his goods to be charged only on insured ships<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, Contarini's risk aversion is further demonstrated by comparing the number of references emerging from his letters and those written by Piaciti. Antonio Contarini discussed insurance approximately four times more than Piaciti. We can find insurances 26 times in 209 letters, while Bindo Piaciti provides 28 references in 819 letters. Despite the higher number of mentions for insurance, Contarini never explicitly discussed taking insurance while dealing with pirates. The reason behind the silence on insurance in these cases can be justified by Contarini reporting on corsairs when he was dealing in silver, a type of good that was strictly defended and controlled by the Venetian State's galleys since the 1340s<sup>46</sup>. Silver could have been shipped only on specific ships, which extra military galleys would have defended

See also E. A. CONGDON, *Datini and Venice: News from the Mediterranean Trade Network*, in *Across the Mediterranean Frontiers*, eds. D.A. Agius - I.R. Netton, Turnhout 1997; A. ORLANDI, *Between the Mediterranean and the North Sea: Networks of Men and Ports (14th-15th Centuries)*, in *Reti marittime come fattori dell'integrazione europea*, ed. G. Nigro, Firenze 2019, pp. 49-69.

<sup>43</sup> «[...] la nave si piglierà e manderassi a 1/1 maggio. E sarà viniziana e buona nave di guerra», ASPO, *Datini*, busta 714, inserto 29, codice 507620, 24 March 1403.

<sup>44</sup> «[...] messer Antonio fa assai sichurta piu che veniziano che ci sia prieghovi megli rachomandiatte mi voglia dare guadagnho», ASPO, *Datini*, busta 721, inserto 11, codice 423638, 19 July 1400.

<sup>45</sup> For example, see ASPO, *Datini*, busta 928, inserto 3, codice 515115, 10 February 1403. Here, Antonio Contarini explicitly asked and pressed Datini's agents to have his goods sent in insured ships three times in a single folio.

<sup>46</sup> See F.C. LANE, *The Venetian Galleys to Alexandria, 1344*, in ID., *Studies in Venetian Social and Economic History*, eds. B.G. Kohl - R.C. Mueller, London 1987, pp. 431-440.



from Venice to the place of arrival. Probably due to the high protection deriving from the support of these ships, Contarini did not perceive it as necessary to invest money in insurance for his cargo.

The second practice detectable in Piaciti's first report on piracy is the most important practice for merchants dealing with risk and aiming to maximise their profits: the information exchange. Merchants spent most of their efforts and time gathering news on dangers or economic opportunities by interacting with their social network or the city market. Certain or uncertain information could have been essential for medieval businessmen to create expectations to try to forecast possible dangers threatening their trading and to face them<sup>47</sup>. In the case of piracy, merchants asked for any information possible concerning the movement of pirates in specific areas, mostly the ones between Corsica and Flanders, and on damages suffered by mercantile ships from them. We can see this type of information exchange in all the correspondences from the Datini archive. We read in a letter dated 6 December 1394, written by Nofri di Bonaccorso di Tano da Prato, sent from Majorca to the Datini branch in Barcelona:

I would like to inform you that nine days ago, a French ship armed in Normandy arrived here and set sail to engage in piracy. It engaged with a ship that had left Valencia and was heading for Flanders<sup>48</sup>.

The relevance of information on piracy for people with investments in seafaring trades was also highlighted by the merchant manual, *The Book of the Art of Trade*, written by Benedetto Cotrugli (1416-1469). Here, Cotrugli stated how insurers had to know:

Concerning insurers, they must keep their eyes open for all news from the seas: they must be constantly enquiring and asking about pirates or other ill-intentioned people, about wars, truces and reprisals, and all the things that can threaten a sea voyage<sup>49</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> Concerning mercantile expectations on the Venetian market, see P. SARDELLA, *Nouvelles et spéculations à Venise au début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, «Cahiers des Annales», I, 1948, pp. 5-84; U. TUCCI, *Alle origini dello spirito capitalistico a Venezia: la previsione economica*, in *Studi in onore di Amintore Fanfani*, III, Milano 1962, pp. 545-547; ZENNARO, 1400: *A Fortunoso Anno*.

<sup>48</sup> «V'avisò che VIII dì fa arivò qui una barcia di francieschi armata in Normandia e va in chorso; e trovò una barcia partita da Valenza che andava in Fiandra», ASPO, *Datini*, busta 886, inserto 9, codice 114647, 6 December 1394. See NIGRO, *Mercanti in Maiorca*, II, p. 15, my translation.

<sup>49</sup> «Et per dire de li assicuratori, li ricordamo che li è di bisogno havere et aprire multo

All references to piracy clearly contain valuable information for merchants to understand how to deal with corsairs. Still, some mentions are more focused on their informational function than others. Bindo Piaciti's and Antonio Contarini's letters have one reference each of this kind. In a letter sent to the Datini company in Barcelona on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1401, Contarini reported second-hand information he had obtained concerning the presence of three corsair ships near Ibiza, the port used by Italian mercantile ships to deal with the Spanish market, avoiding the effects of the embargo<sup>50</sup>:

You say that three pirate ships were waiting for our ships in the port of Ibiza. God knows how sad this makes me. It looks like a situation of great danger to me<sup>51</sup>.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of June of the same year, Piaciti also reported second-hand news about corsairs awaiting to assault Italian ships near Ibiza:

A few days ago, we received news from your people in Barcelona that Ser Marco Bianco and the Concianave were in Ibiza. We were very pleased to hear this, because we were afraid of the two pirate ships that we heard were in Ibiza<sup>52</sup>.

In both cases, we can see how the information source on piracy was the Datini network in Barcelona. The information exchange enabled Contarini and Bindo to learn about the possibility of a piracy attack that could have affected their businesses and to adjust their investments in response to this danger. Knowledge is fundamental to these merchants' resilience, and the more a businessman knows, the more efficient his resilience against piracy will be. This is evident by the

l'ochio a le novelle del mare, e a lo continuo dimandare et inquidere de corsari, de mala gente, guere, tregue, ripresaglie et tute quelle cose che possano perturbare lo mare», COTRUGLI, *Libro de l'arte de la mercatura*, p. 87. For this translation, see C. CARRARO – G. FAVERO (eds.), *Benedetto Cotrugli. The Book of the Art of Trade*, London 2017, p. 75.

<sup>50</sup> F. MELIS, *Mercaderes italianos en España, siglos XIV-XVI*, 1, Sevilla 1976; CONGDON, *Venetian and Aragonese/Catalan Relations*.

<sup>51</sup> «E dissé che 3 choche de chorseri yera in lo dito porto de Ieviza e aspetava le nosstre nave. Che dio el sa quanta melychonio io de ò. E parme chossa de gran perillo», ASPo, *Datini*, busta 927, inserto 5, codice 514902, 30 April 1401.

<sup>52</sup> «Da vostri di Barzalona avemo più dì fa ser Marcho Bianco e 'l Choncianave furono a Ieviza, che gran piacere n'abiamo auto, però che con gran sospetto ne stavamo per le due navi di chorso sentevamo erano a Ieviza», ASPo, *Datini*, busta 1083, inserto 32, codice 119508, 18 June 1401.

types of information one can find in these correspondences, not only concerning piracy, but also the possible means merchants could employ to deal with it.

Part of the references to pirates describe the quality and preparedness against the seafaring risks of ships. Piaciti and Contarini describe the ideal ship with which to sail or in which to charge their goods as “*bona nave/buona nave*” (“good ship”). Piaciti used this expression four times and defined “*buona nave*” as a 500-barrel capacity ship owned by a “*buon padrone*” (“good patron”)<sup>53</sup>. Contarini provides us with 12 references to “*bona nave*”, and saw as a “good ship” the one owned and commanded by “a good man” (“*un bon homo*”), like the cog owned by ser Marco Bocheta and captained by ser Antonio d’Elia<sup>54</sup>. We find little data concerning the structural characteristics of a “good ship” in these correspondences, and all from Piaciti’s letters. In light of these references, we can only see how the ideal ship to sail safely and counter piracy was a large ship in the eyes of the Florentine merchant: «If we want to send them there (Catalonia), we have to charge my goods on a large ship that can be defended, due to the fear of the corsairs<sup>55</sup>».

These merchants do not explicitly state a good ship’s technical elements. Still, they show clearly how patrons (*paron/patronol/padrone*) and captains (*chapitano/chapetanio*) were fundamental for transporting their goods safely and soundly. The most discussed of the two roles is the patron. Contarini mentioned 271 times the patrons of galleys in his letters, and Piaciti 65 times. The number of references to the term «captain» is way smaller. We can find four mentions in the Venetian correspondence and 10 in the Florentine one. Merchants preferred mentioning ships’ patrons rather than captains. We often read the names of the *patroni* Antonio Concianave, Marco and Nicolò Verzoni, Antonio d’Elia, and Felice del Pace<sup>56</sup>. They did so probably because knowing who the *patrono* was would have allowed businessmen to know how

<sup>53</sup> «[...] la nave di ser Marcho bianco ch’è di portata di 500 boti o più ed è una buona nave e buono padrone», ASPo, *Datini*, busta 1083, inserto 32, codice 119504, 20 January 1401.

<sup>54</sup> «[...] la nostra nave paron ser Marcho Bocheta che ser Antuonio d’Elya se susso la qual vien de Flandra deveria eser zonta a Yeviza avanti che vuy abie questa letera. Ve avviso che la’ssé bona nave, e’l paron ser bon homo», ASPo, *Datini*, busta 927, inserto 5, codice 514903, 4 June 1401.

<sup>55</sup> «[...] mandando di qui vorebe essere buono navilio grande per rispetto de’ chorsali, che si potesse difendere», ASPo, *Datini*, busta 714, inserto 26, codice 308575, 9 December 1402.

<sup>56</sup> See also, MELIS, *Origini e sviluppi*, p. 63; G. CECCARELLI, *Un mercato del rischio*, p. 117.

the arrangements of a ship would have been managed. Still, we can learn more about the captains' profiles and skills rather than the issues concerning the ships' patrons from the descriptions in Piaciti's and Contarini's letters.

The captains came from all the Italian ports, but the best seem to have come from the traditional maritime powers, namely Genoa and Venice. These individuals had to be experts not only in sailing practices, but also in diplomatic and war practices. Captains could have been ambassadors or part of embassies to port cities or involved in the defence of routes and ships against pirates. We read about a captain's combat skills in the letter written by Bartolo Zati in the name of Bindo Piaciti on 9 September 1402. Zati described how the captain of the ship owned by Antonio Concianave resisted and defeated a 123-man corsair ship in four different battles with only 26 men near the island of Sardinia<sup>57</sup>. This result could only have been achieved by a well-armed ship and a crew so well-trained that the pirates' numerical advantage was of no relevance.

The association with trusted captains, such as the one from Concianave's ship, seems crucial in the correspondence. The various nodes of Datini's network exchanged captains' names to understand how much to invest and how much to insure the goods they loaded on their ships. Entrusting cargo to an untrustworthy captain increased the insurance premium to as much as 6% of the total<sup>58</sup>. Federigo Melis reported how an untrustworthy captain could have negatively affected merchants' investment, looking at the «unfortunate» Giovanni Rosello. According to the letters written by the Orlandini company in Bruges, Rosello was «always seized» by corsairs, and merchants started to doubt if he was associated with them. As a result, the insurance premium for goods loaded on Rosello's ship was 14%, compared with the usual 8% for goods from Bruges to Barcelona<sup>59</sup>.

A practice often overlooked by historians interested in merchants' resilience is the use of mercantile prayers. Merchants employed prayers to ask for God's help in managing uncertainty and risk, showing how religion and business were strongly interconnected in the eyes of medieval merchants. These prayers are not formulae like those contained in

<sup>57</sup> ASPO, *Datini*, busta 714, inserto 26, codice 308562, 9 September 1402.

<sup>58</sup> G. CECCARELLI, *Stime senza probabilità. Assicurazione a rischio nella Firenze rinascimentale*, «Quaderni Storici», 45 (2010), p. 678.

<sup>59</sup> MELIS, *Origini e Sviluppo*, p. 63.

any commercial letter from this period, such as «May God guard you». They are specific, personal, and sometimes lengthy sections of letters, used to ask for divine intervention in the face of dangers or disasters. We have only one reference to a mercantile prayer in the correspondences analysed here. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1402, Piaciti asked God to defend his company's cargo from piracy assault, writing: «May God guard [the cargo] to defend everything in there!<sup>60</sup>». Letters written by other merchants contained way more references to mercantile prayers, which were sometimes used not to ask for God's protection, but as curses against pirates. The already mentioned Orlandini company in Bruges wrote on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April 1400: «We see that the corsairs are too strong, as you said. Let us know when you hear news about them. May God sink them<sup>61</sup>!».

Despite all the previous references to more common practices against piracy, the most mentioned tool in Piaciti's and Contarini's letters is definitely fraud<sup>62</sup>. These correspondences provide us with seven references to two fraudulent practices: the falsification of the logbook and of the *signum mercatoris*. Once Antonio Contarini recorded his goods in a ship's logbook under the name of Ser Antonio di Bartolomeo Gherardini, a Florentine merchant trading in Venice<sup>63</sup>. Furthermore, Contarini suggested five times to the Datini company's agents that they record their goods in the ships' logbook to Spain under his name, and twice to have the Contarini company's mark on their packages<sup>64</sup>. In

<sup>60</sup> «Idio ghuardi a difendere tutto!», ASPo, *Datini*, busta 714, inserto 26, codice 308575, 9 December 1402.

<sup>61</sup> «Abian visto quando dite de corsali che tropo sono forti. Avisate quando sentite di nuovo. Che Dio gli profondi!», ASPo, *Datini*, busta 1060, inserto 25, codice 1102082, 30 April 1400.

<sup>62</sup> Concerning fraud as a premodern mercantile practice, see also K. L. REYERSON, *Commercial Fraud in the Middle Ages: The Case of the Dissembling Pepperer*, «Journal of Medieval History», 8 (1982), I, pp. 63–72; M. CRANE – R. RAISWELL – M. REEVES (eds.), *Shell Games: Studies in Scams, Frauds and Deceits (1300–1650)*, Toronto 2004; Z. EDWARDS, *Identity Theft in Later Medieval London*, in *The Fifteenth Century XVI: Examining Identity*, ed. L. Clark, Martlesham 2018, pp. 137–154; F. BOLDRINI, *All That Glitters Is Not Gold: False Jewellery and Its Juridical Regulation in Italy between the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*, in *Faking It! The Performance of Forgery in Late Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, eds. P. Lavender – M. Amundsen Bergström, Leiden 2022.

<sup>63</sup> ASPo, *Datini*, busta 929, inserto 2, codice 515086, 4 October 1404.

<sup>64</sup> ASPo, *Datini*, busta 927, inserto 5, codice 9293029, 20 March 1400; ASPo, *Datini*, busta 929, inserto 2, codice 515074, 23 May 1404; ASPo, *Datini*, busta 929, inserto 2, codice 515079, 29 June 1404; ASPo, *Datini*, busta 929, inserto 2, codice 515086, 4 October 1404; ASPo, *Datini*, busta 715, inserto 4, codice 40764116, 20 October 1404; ASPo, *Datini*, busta 929, inserto 2, codice 515087, 16 November 1404.

this way, Catalan corsairs aiming to rob Venetian or Florentine cargoes, depending on the agreement of the period, would not have harmed them. We have two references for Piaciti's use of fraudulent practices. The first one shows Bindo referring to the possibility of the Datini partners' using the Contarini mark in a letter dated 9 December 1402. The second reference, already mentioned above to discuss the role of captains in the mercantile resilience against corsairs, is fundamental for understanding how merchants employed fraud to counter piracy.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1402, Bartolo Zati stated that a cog owned by Antonio Concianave had arrived in Venice six days before. The members of its crew told the people in the Rialto market that a corsair ship with a 123-man crew approached their cog near Sardinia, demanding that they give up the Florentine and Genoese goods from their cargo. The 26 men of Concianave's crew refused and engaged in four battles that resulted in heavy casualties and a large number of wounded «good men» («*buoni homeni*»). In the end, the two sides managed to negotiate an agreement, which consisted of the assaulted cog having to show its logbook, and to give up anything that was charged in the name of Florentines and Genoese. Zati continued, writing that the ship's scribe showed the corsairs a fake logbook («*lo scrivano andò chon uno quaderno chontrafatto*») stating that all the goods charged in that cog were owned by Venetian merchants. A Genoese corsair was suspicious of what was written in the book, since he had seen oil being transported on that ship coming from a certain Florentine warehouse in Marseille. To dispel doubts, the scribe told the Genoese corsair that he was right in saying that the oil was in a warehouse owned by a Florentine. However, the scribe lied to the privateer who spied on them at the port, saying that the oil did not belong to a Florentine but to Antonio Contarini's son and that they had put it there to avoid the risk of breaking the oil jars during the loading of the cargo. The corsairs were convinced by the scribe's lie («*la schusa*») and left with a bribe, consisting of biscuits, wine, vinegar, a crossbow, and two oil jars, namely one belonging to Contarini and one to Datini. In light of this damage, Zati stated that Francesco Datini should have been satisfied with having lost only an oil jar worth 40 florins, which Contarini would have refunded him, instead of the entire ship's cargo, amounting to 10.000 florins<sup>65</sup>.

This detailed reference shows us several interesting aspects concerning how commercial ships and merchants dealt with piracy. First of all,

<sup>65</sup> ASPo, *Datini*, busta 714, inserto 26, codice 308562, 9 September 1402.

we can see how the ships' scribes covered a fundamental role in the mercantile resilience to piracy, as did the patrons and captains. Apparently, ships' scribes could prepare fake logbooks to be used at the right moment to avoid corsairs' actions against cargoes or part of them owned by nations against which the piracy was aimed. We do not have traces of surviving exemplars of such books, but it would be possible that archives are preserving fake logbooks that we are unaware of. Still, due to this situation, we cannot establish how these books could be made or how they differed from their originals. Concerning the interactions between the cog's crew and the corsairs, we can see how there was a sort of procedure to be respected. The privateers did not immediately assault Concianave's ship, but they first demanded its cargo, trying to avoid the fight. After the four battles, the two sides could get in touch again and discuss an agreement that both could have accepted. These aspects reveal that diplomacy could have been an option for corsairs, clearly advantaged in their interactions by their military power and their victims' fear of losing the entire cargo, as well as their lives. A 'diplomatic' aspect concerning piracy in this period, and overlooked by the letters and the references we analysed, is the ransom of stolen goods. Merchants could have recovered what was taken from them by paying an increased price for each product to corsairs. This practice is proven again by the Datini archive, which preserves account books dedicated to ransoming goods from Catalan privateers<sup>66</sup>. Finally, returning to Zati's story, it is interesting to note how the reaction of the Genoese corsair mentioned in the story highlights the use of information by corsairs, more precisely, espionage. Apparently, corsairs had an information network that allowed them to follow the movements of goods and ships in the ports where they were active to identify possible profitable targets already before they set sail. In light of this, we can state how information was fundamental not only for merchants but also for the corsairs who threatened their businesses and lives. It would be interesting to establish if this corsair network was rooted in a single port or linked to an international information system, but our sources do not allow us to do so.

<sup>66</sup> ASPo, *Datini*, unità 1131, sottounità 4; ASPo, *Datini*, unità 1131, sottounità 5.



## Conclusion

By analysing what emerges from the letters preserved in the Datini archive of Prato, this article has shown how adopting an individual perspective on risk can help us better understand mercantile resilience to piracy in the Middle Ages. Commercial letters written by Bindo Piaciti, Bartolo Zati, and Antonio Contarini highlight a set of shared practices among Florentine and Venetian merchants trading in the Rialto market, proving the existence of an Italian mercantile culture and knowledge between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

Florentines and Venetians shared a similar perception of pirates and corsairs, as evident in the analysis of the aforementioned terminology. Identity and religion were fundamental in defining who was a pirate and who a corsair. Pirates were recognised as Muslim brigands, with whom violence and not dialogue appeared to be the best option. Corsairs were considered brigands acting under the supervision of specific maritime powers, aiming to weaken their economic and political competitors. These were mainly Catalans, Genoese, and Provençals. Merchants could deal with corsairs through a system of practices and institutions that allowed them to mitigate risks and damages coming from privateering. Furthermore, corsairs were not always damaging to merchants. We saw how, depending on the period and the international politics, these people assaulted ships or robbed cargoes only of specific nations which were competitors of their State. By studying local and foreign merchants in Venice, we could see how Florentines and Venetians had different access to the support provided by the city's institutions, such as the galley system, which primarily advantaged and benefited merchants from the lagoon. However, commercial bridges could bring Venetians to support their partners, allowing them to indirectly benefit from their citizenship status.

It is interesting to note that the number of explicit references to piracy is low compared to the number of letters written by Piaciti, Zati, and Contarini. Indeed, we have 13 references for 1028 letters. This result does not indicate that Florentines and Venetians did not perceive piracy as a threat to their trading in the Rialto market. Rather, it shows that piracy was a frequent risk that all references to sailing, shipping, and cargoes implicitly referred to. This is evident from the analysis of what merchants perceived as a “buona nave”, and the characteristic that made a ship safe in the eyes of merchants, such as the fact that a ship was owned, manoeuvred, and defended by *«boni homeni»*.

Examining individual resilience to piracy risk through these two

correspondences has given us more details concerning the employment of commercial practices already explored mainly by historians, such as insurance and the Venetian galleys' system, but has also revealed neglected practices, such as the use of fraud. This research, despite being based on a large number of letters, can be seen as a starting point for further research on how individual merchants perceived and reacted to piracy in the Middle Ages. It would be interesting to consider more marketplaces and mercantile cultures from Europe and the Middle East to establish similarities and differences, proving or disproving the existence of a shared risk culture and knowledge among the economic actors in the long-distance trading of the Middle Ages.

### *Riassunto*

Il presente articolo studia in che modo i mercanti percepissero la pirateria e reagissero a essa nel mercato di Rialto tra il quattordicesimo e il quindicesimo secolo. Per fare ciò, si sono analizzati i riferimenti al rischio piratesco riscontrabili nelle corrispondenze del mercante fiorentino Bindo di Gherardo Piaciti e del patrizio veneziano Antonio di Marino Contarini, conservate presso il Fondo Datini di Prato. Studiando il punto di vista individuale sui traffici e sul rischio di questi due mercanti, è possibile comprendere in che modo i mercanti italiani riconoscessero e descrivessero l'identità di pirati e corsari, e come applicassero precise pratiche mercantili per mitigare il rischio derivante dall'azione di questi. Questo studio si basa su un'analisi dei riferimenti alle modalità di resilienza della società mercantile veneziana, e sulla comparazione delle pratiche del rischio di attori economici autoctoni e stranieri attivi nel mercato veneziano tra il 1389 e il 1411. Tale ricerca rappresenta un punto di partenza ideale per comprendere in che modo l'adozione del punto di vista individuale sulla percezione del rischio possa espandere le possibilità della storiografia interessata allo studio del rischio nei mercati premoderni.

### *Abstract*

This article investigates how merchants perceived piracy and reacted to it in the Rialto market between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. To do so, this work analysed references to the risk of piracy found in the correspondence written by the Florentine merchant Bindo di

Gherardo Piaciti and the Venetian patrician Antonio di Marino Contarini, preserved in the Datini archive in Prato. By studying the individual perspectives on trade and risk offered by these two merchants, we can understand how Italian merchants recognised and described the identity of pirates and privateers, and how they employed specific commercial practices to mitigate the risk posed by piracy. This study is based on the analysis of references to the resilience of the Venetian merchant society and a comparison of the practices of local and foreign economic actors. This work is an ideal starting point for understanding how adopting an individual perspective on medieval merchants' risk perception can expand the possibilities of historiography interested in pre-modern risk.

*Parole chiave*

Pirateria, mercanti, rischio, Venezia medievale

*Keywords*

Piracy, Merchants, Risk, Medieval Venice

