



*Minorities and Grain Trade in Early Modern Europe*

Special Issue – Business History

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In recent years, the economic and social role played by ethnic-religious minorities in early modern Europe, especially in the Mediterranean (Baghdiantz and al. 2005; Harlaftis 2011; Christ and al. 2015; Do Paço 2015; Monge and Muchnik 2019), is at the center of growing historiographical reinterpretation. Looking especially at the role Jews, and starting with the work of Israel (1985), their economic role has been analyzed by many researchers (Penslar 2001; Karp 2008, 2009; Trivellato 2009; Levine 2010; Reuveni 2011; Hilaire-Pérez, Oliel-Grausz 2013, 2014; Kobrin, Teller 2015; Romani 2017), who stress especially the importance of networks and family ties, their involvement in the credit market and their functions in other fields of commerce. Besides Jews, other minorities (such as Armenians or Greeks) have also played a fundamental role as economic intermediaries in international trade (Grenet 2012; 2016; Fusaro 2012; Aslanian 2014; Trivellato, Halevi, Antunes 2014).

Their enterprises often operated by sea – the best commercial route in early modern times – with private fleets that were sometimes very considerable. Seaports were the areas where Armenians, Greeks and Jewish communities flourished; just think, for the Italian case, of Venice (Davis-Ravid 2001), Trieste (Dubin 1999; Gatti 2008), Livorno (Frattarelli Fischer 2008, Trivellato 2009, Fettah 2017, Tazzara 2017), and Ancona and the other ports of the Papal State (Bonazzoli 1998, Andreoni 2019). What is moreover, products unloaded from the ships on the seaside moved to the inland cities through navigable rivers and then spread in the inland territories. Remaining in the Italian peninsula, this was in part the role played by the Jewish communities – on the Po River – of Mantua and Ferrara (Graziani Secchieri 2014), again with families with private fleets aiming to connect the Adriatic Sea and the inland areas. Finally, we should not forget that the movement of products and goods often followed the opposite path, from the productive centers (in terms both of agricultural production and manufacturing one) of the mainland to the seaports, ready to be sent around Europe and the world.

Even if the economic role played by Armenian, Greek or Jewish communities and enterprises has been examined by many researchers, their importance in the commerce of cereals (wheat, but also rye, oat, barley or maize) has not. Historians interested in Jewish, Greek or Armenian history have not been the only ones to neglect this topic almost entirely; the same is true for research on the grain markets: even if the scholars involved sometimes refer to the presence of Jewish merchants, they do not go deeply into this topic (Bateman 2011; Campbell-Ó Gráda 2011; Dobado-González, García-Hiernaux, Guerrero 2012). However, the grain market seems to have been – and new archival researches seem to confirm this, especially with regard to Jewish merchants – a central field of activity for many enterprises owned and operated by ethnic-religious minorities: the grain trade, after all, formed an international market, connecting areas in Europe quite distant from each other, requiring huge amounts of capital, networks in order to gather intelligence on prices all around Europe, and, finally, ships able to transport substantial amounts of grains. Furthermore, looking specifically at Jewish merchants, it is important to remember that links between Jewish them and and

the grain trade were not restricted to large-scale, long-distance trade and to large Jewish commercial companies. In fact, some research at the local level demonstrate that the grain trade was extremely widespread even among small- and medium-size Jewish moneylenders. The case of Avignon and Contado Venassino (a territory controlled by the Pope, but in French territory, in early modern times), is an example (Moulinas 1981). In this case, we have considerable evidence attesting to the fact that Christian debtors paid back their small loans with wheat. In this way, Jews collected large quantities of the grain, contravening all Papal bulls on the matter.

The grain market in the Early Modern period is a perfect field of research for observing and analyzing particular types of merchants and enterprises (such as the “minority” ones): it was a multi-level market, which also featured a high degree of international integration already in the Early Modern period. Some scholars have even proposed that there was an “Early Globalization” before the one that followed the Industrial Revolution (Persson 1999; Bateman 2011, 2012). Moreover, it involved what was perhaps the most important field of economic and business activity in the pre-industrial market, that is food. In fact, in terms both of economic relevance and social-political significance, commerce in grains was characterized by the presence of large amounts of products, capital and intervention and control by public institutions. Finally, it connected important productive areas (such as Southern Italy, the Ottoman Empire, Central-Eastern Europe) and consumption centers (especially the most populous and manufacturing cities from the Po Valley to Northern Europe). Therefore, operating in this field required capital, international commercial networks, means of transport, storage facilities and political connections, and therefore formed a fertile field for the development of “big business”. Because of this characterization of the grain market, merchants from ethnic and religious minorities formed key links between territories and states. Moreover, they were often particularly suitable for operating in it. Research presented in international conferences (for instance in meeting of the European Business History Association Conference held in Ancona in 2018), testifies to this. However, we actually still do not know how these enterprises were organized and operated, which were their commercial networks and geographical development.

The aim of the special issue is to present and discuss recent and innovative research on Jewish, Greek, Armenian and other “minority” enterprises involved in grain trade in the period between ca 1400 and 1850, something that may also be done comparatively. The geographical scope of the Issue will be Europe: from the Ottoman Empire to the Italian Peninsula and Spain, from Eastern Europe (especially Poland) to the Baltic area (Low Countries, England, for example). Topics that might be discussed could include:

- The characters and the organization of the enterprises, also in a comparative way, involved in grain trade;
- The degree of specialization of merchants who operated in the grain market, paying particular attention to the minorities like, for instance, Jewish, Armenians, Greeks;
- The role of the Jewish, Greek, Armenian or other minorities grain trade by sea as connection between European (but also non-European) areas;
- The identification of trade routes and commercial points related to this market;
- State legislation and, broadly, the role played by institutions in the regulation and control of the grain trade by the ethnic-religious minorities;
- The relationship between the merchants belonging to the minorities involved in grain trade and the Early Modern State authorities: conflict, collaboration, public recognition in a context of discrimination
- The change in the enterprises according to the changes in public economy in the Early Modern period (especially in relation to the gradual liberalization of the grain market between eighteenth and nineteenth centuries).

**Papers proposals should be sent to the guest editors Giulio Ongaro ([giulio.ongaro@unimib.it](mailto:giulio.ongaro@unimib.it)), Luca Mocarrelli ([luca.mocarrelli@unimib.it](mailto:luca.mocarrelli@unimib.it)), Luca Andreoni ([luca.andreoni20@gmail.com](mailto:luca.andreoni20@gmail.com)) and David Do Paço ([david.dopaco@sciencespo.fr](mailto:david.dopaco@sciencespo.fr)) before April 30<sup>th</sup> 2020.**

**Contributions should be submitted to *Business History* via the journal's ScholarOne system. The system is available under the URL <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/fbsh20/current>. Select the Submit an Article button, and be sure to then select this special issue in the dropdown box. Contributions should be no more than 8,000 words, inclusive of citations and bibliography. The deadline for submissions is October 31<sup>st</sup> 2020.**

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