Proposal for the 3rd MMHN Conference

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From Venice to Malta: timber trade between XVI-XVII centuries

Starting from an analysis of the trade relations between the Trentino-Tyrolean Alps and the Venetian lowlands in the first centuries of the Ancien Régime my studies focus on the lumber trade (timber for construction and firewood) and for its reconstruction makes use of official documents from the central government offices of the county of Tyrol as well as a number of notary records kept in Archives of the Republic of Venice.

The area was a so-called “supra-regional unity” whose development was formed by the integration of the alpine region and the town markets. Rivers and streams facilitated the exchange of merchandise between the north and the south by riverine navigation. Over the course of the centuries, a net of commercial and personal relationships developed and grew strong along the rivers channels (Adige, Brenta, and Piave) between the mountainous regions and the plains, where countless water-powered lumber mills had been built. Thanks to these waterways, which directly and cheaply connected the southern and the eastern parts of Tyrol with the Republic of Venice, this area remained an important reserve of raw materials.

Going south much of the trade consisted in lumber, metal, and minerals, whereas in the opposite direction grain, oil, and cloth—just to name a few of the most important products—were steered through the alpine valleys. The economy of these alpine regions was exploited by the municipal trading system. The commercial utilization of lumber as the most important source of energy of the period (and it was to remain such throughout the entire 18th century)—furthermore used in all lines of industry—was a source of revenue of the highest order.

Towards the end of the 16th century, the customs revenue derived from the lumber trade of the Oberösterreichische Kammer in charge of Altirol amounted to 43.29 % of the total revenue from customs duties and totted up 14.4 % of the total annual budget of the Tyrolean Chamber.

The most important place of transshipment of southeastern alpine lumber was Venice, which needed wood for public (arsenal) and private shipbuilding, and was also the site of productive industrial arts (furnaces, blacksmith’s workshops, the glass blowing trade, and the minting industry). The town was an important domestic market and also a major out of the country transshipment point and played a crucial role in the Mediterranean trade in coniferous lumber. The markets who imported lumber from venetian merchants were the Kingdom of Naples, Apulia, Sardinia, Greece, Alessandria in Egypt, where, in the Middle Age arrived one of the biggest commercial flows of timber for construction and Malta. This trade was still active in the 19th century, as attested a Tyrolean sholar.
It is very difficult to estimate the extent of these trades between Venice and those countries. Thanks to around 100 contracts stipulated in front a notary of Venice between 1597-1618 I have reconstructed the purchases from different stocks of timber for construction and for shipbuilding by the “ricevitore nel priorato di Venezia della sacra religione hierosolimitana” of Malta and merchants and patricians of Venice, that sold also paper, copper, iron, sugar, silver, white lead, red lead, turpentine, wax, in a period when Venice was still one of most important markets of the Mediterranean. This research gives informations about the identity of the “ricevitore”, of the merchants of Venice and the mainland and of the patricians, the kind of timber, their prices, the customs duties, the freight charges, the cost for ship hire, the name of the ships and the captains.
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