

Assistance to Ships and Cargo Handling in the Early Modern Port of Genoa

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Introduction

Each port is confronted with different operational problems, posed by its harbour, traffic features, economic policies established by the government with jurisdiction over the port, or by other structural factors that are likely to change with time. During the early modern age, following the commercial revolution that had taken place two centuries earlier and the subsequent changes in maritime transport, as well as in the circulation of goods and capital, wide swaths of Western Europe underwent sweeping economic and social changes. The population was growing, albeit slowly, and becoming increasingly concentrated in urban areas. At the same time, the volume and variety of traded products were growing, while the network of maritime traffic was expanding to include the New World. Some scholars have described this new scenario as the first globalization age (Flynn and Giraldez 2004, 81–108). In this context, the Mediterranean, while lying far from the new transoceanic routes, actually managed not to become a peripheral sea. Rather, it became a dynamic region, where each port was an integral part of a more extensive merchant network, with Atlantic ports playing the leading role. Mediterranean port cities, with their vitality and dense network of economic relations, became network hubs with significant traffic flows reaching out from the sea into the mainland.

The port of Genoa – examined here from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the years immediately following the fall of the Republic and the advent of the Savoy rule – is the perfect case in point. When the glorious days of the Maritime Republics were over and their Black Sea colonies lost at the beginning of the modern age, Genoese mer-

chants progressively shifted their economic interests towards the western Mediterranean. At the same time, they began getting involved in both trade and financial businesses, establishing close relations with the Spanish Crown and becoming its main financiers. In this new phase of its history, Genoa regained the leading role it had previously lost, although it had always been one of the wealthiest cities in Europe. The port, whose facilities had been revamped in the late Middle Ages, became the centre of a wider economic system capable of efficiently handling increasing traffic volumes. This work aims to examine the organization of the port of Genoa, with particular focus on its workforce, identifying any relevant rearrangements that had to be made over time in order to cope with concurrent traffic increase and changes.

From a methodological point of view, this investigation follows a quite recent historiographical approach suggesting a new key for port history interpretation: in other words, ports are no longer considered as independent entities, exclusively influenced by government policies, but rather as components of a commercial network (Caracausi and Jeggle 2014, 1–12), which greatly affects them with its peculiar features and density of links. According to this approach, ports can also be classified based on their function as network hubs. It is thus possible to see how this function changes over time and what are the implications for their structure and operational organisation. In this regard, the classification provided by Wim Blockmans, Mikhail Krom, and Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz in the collective volume published in 2017 on European maritime trade between the late Middle Ages and the early modern age is key to putting the Genoese case into context.

European ports are generally grouped into four categories, depending on the type of traffic that characterizes them. However, at the same time, there might be some overlap: ports linking local/regional production of certain goods and overseas outlet markets; ports of transit along the main traffic routes; ports linking intercontinental merchant networks and the European market; and large ports/commercial hubs, as centres for importing and redistributing a wide variety of goods (Blockmans, Krom, and Wubs-Mrozewicz 2017, 8–9). More specifically, the latter category is made up of large port cities and their respective ports. Their primary function is to import and redistribute colonial products, food, and raw materials designed to meet the needs of their population, local pro-

duction, and the hinterland, as well as to foster highly profitable re-export flows.

The port of Genoa, examined in this analysis, belongs to the latter category, together with Venice, Marseille, and Barcelona in the Mediterranean area, and Bruges, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Gdansk in Northern Europe. These cities were hubs of extensive traffic networks that would increasingly expand in the modern age, due to the above-mentioned population growth and the opening of new oceanic routes. Together with the consolidation of the large nation states and the subsequent implementation of mercantilist policies, these factors significantly impacted European maritime trade, with its main routes shifting towards the Atlantic coast. However, even if the Mediterranean was losing centrality, this process did not lead to the decline of its ports, which would partly change their role within the continental merchant network. More generally, despite lower traffic volumes than northern European ports, they still benefitted from an overall traffic increase. In order to cope with such changes, these large ports dealt with and handled traffic volumes that kept growing during the modern age by progressively building new infrastructures and storage areas. In many instances, this process had a significant impact on urban planning. Conversely, in others, the areas used for port activities – piers, quays, shipyards, storage warehouses, light towers, and signal lights – would develop independently of the city. In other words, the development of a port, and specifically of a large port/commercial hub, did not always generate a proper port city, i.e. it did not always bring about far-reaching changes in the urban fabric. In this case in particular, it would be more suitable to speak about a ‘city with a port’ rather than a port city (Poleggi 1989, 7–9; Piccinno 2017, 159–60). Further, from a population and employment point of view, large ports attracted not only merchants and businessmen looking for business opportunities, but also skilled and unskilled workers – captains, sailors, shipwrights, and porters. All these trends were independent of any immigration-promoting policies that might have been implemented by the respective governments (Piccinno and Zanini 2019, 283).

Throughout the above-described process, some unique features can be observed in the Genoese case. From a city planning point of view, its harbour, with its piers and quays, warehouses and ship repair facilities is bordered by the *Ripa*, a long line of buildings and palaces all along its perimeter, forming a barrier to the inhabited centre behind it. Although

deeply linked from an economic point of view, for a long time the port and the city had developed independently of each other. With the traffic expansion between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, triggered by the creation of the *Porto franco* – the Free Trade Area, first established for grains in 1590 and extended to include all kinds of goods in 1623 – more and more space within the city walls was taken up by the growing demand for storage areas. For example, in the 1720s, ten new neighbourhoods were built from scratch in an area of 13,000 square meters previously occupied by communal ovens to store cargoes kept in the free trade area (Piccinno 2006, 773–94). However, the new Free Port in Genoa, unlike the one in Livorno, for example, failed to trigger any significant population increase in the city. Actually, this measure was designed to increase the volume of incoming goods, attracted by customs duties due only when the goods would be sold again, rather than by real demographic policies aimed at encouraging stable immigration. Indeed, the Republic of Genoa never implemented any specific policies to attract foreigners, except in some unique circumstances, such as after the 1656–57 plague. Free Port measures, essentially aimed at attracting ships, would also follow the same approach (Massa Piergiovanni 1995, 44). This does not detract from Genoa being a cosmopolitan city, open to foreigners and tolerant towards religious minorities. It was thus the destination of mostly temporary or seasonal migration flows, closely linked to traffic trends and functional to the needs of port operations.

The role of the Genoese port in the European maritime trade network

In order to assess the importance and role of a port within Europe's vast and dense merchant shipping network, six key competitive factors must be taken into account in order to determine the type and intensity of a port's traffic. These factors are: location, hinterland, density of connections with other ports, political/institutional context, degree of openness to foreigners, and efficiency in the management and settlement of commercial disputes (Blockmans, Krom, and Wubs-Mrozewicz 2017, 1).

The first two elements are obviously linked to the very geography of the region where the port is located. Apart from determining whether a port is strategically positioned with respect to the main traffic routes, the following conditions must be checked: Is it a natural harbour? Are appropriate infrastructures needed to protect the quays? Is it located along the

coast or inside a river or a lagoon and, consequently, are there any accessibility problems due to a shallow draft? Finally, the quality of connections between the port in question and its hinterland should be assessed. The economy of a port hinterland is also important: are goods manufactured there exclusively for the supply of the port city, or also for export? A hinterland with scarce resources and/or difficult to reach due to natural obstacles does not necessarily affect port traffic. Quite the contrary, it might be a strong driver to resorting to maritime routes, looking for produce the land cannot supply, thus favouring strong trading relations with other ports in order to obtain the goods necessary for the subsistence of the local population.

The density of connections with other ports impacts the volume of traffic handled within each port and positively influences its positioning within a hypothetical hierarchy based on this parameter. However, using this approach, the importance of trade and long-haul connections should not be overestimated over local traffic and shipping. The latter are often more difficult to quantify, nevertheless they are equally important. Further, other crucial elements for port operations must be taken into account, such as: the political-institutional context of the country and/or city in which a port is located; its relations with other countries; and the level of managerial independence from the central authority, as well as any implemented strategies to attract traffic. Cases in point could be, for example, the granting of Free Port rights, trade agreements with other countries, policies for the supply of goods to the local population, or, more generally, tax and customs policies. Other elements to be reckoned with are the social fabric, the presence of a dynamic business environment and of a local merchant class, and the degree of openness to foreigners. Last but not least, the local administration, and the efficiency and degree of autonomy of the judicial system on maritime-port issues, especially in terms of speed of conflict resolution – disputes between merchants, insurance issues, general average claims, etc. – are all elements affecting port efficiency and, consequently, its competitiveness.

By applying this analysis model to the Genoese case, a series of useful elements can be identified to better understand the importance and role of Genoa's port in the Mediterranean. As a hub of a merchant network, throughout the modern age it would expand and change its structure with respect to new scenarios following the increase in traffic and the emergence of new ports located in strategic positions. As far as its

location is concerned, the port of Genoa, despite its favourable position in the centre of the Mediterranean, was definitely not a necessary transit point on the maritime routes crossing the Tyrrhenian Sea. Actually, it held a relatively back-seat position, in the most northern part of the Ligurian Gulf. Also, from a geomorphological point of view, it cannot be considered to be a natural port, since breakwater dams are necessary to protect it from the winds – especially a south-western wind called the *libeccio* – and continuous dredging is required due to its shallow draft. This latter problem is caused by debris brought by rivers and streams running through the city from the Apennines behind it, and flowing into the harbour. This mountain range dividing Liguria from the Po Valley, while, on the one hand, a natural protection against possible enemy invasions, on the other hand slowed down communication with the hinterland. Indeed, only winding paths crossed the Apennines, along which goods were transported exclusively on pack animals with great difficulty, especially in winter.

Apart from difficult communication with the hinterland, resources for the sustenance of the population were scarce, due to the almost total lack of farming land. As is well known, in the modern age the extent of a city's subsistence area was closely linked to its size and number of inhabitants. In the case of Genoa, which at the time had about 50–60,000 inhabitants, it included the whole of the Genoa Republic territory. In this regard, the following two factors must be taken into account: trade between the city and the *Riviere* (its Eastern and Western coasts) was conducted exclusively by sea, and locally produced resources were not sufficient. Because of their modest land yields, Genoese hinterland peasants never tried intensive farming, but tilled the land only for their own consumption. Therefore, for its survival, Genoa had to resort to maritime trade and, in particular, to the import of food and raw materials for local manufacturers (Massa Piergiovanni 1995, 71–88).

At the same time, however, the above situation was also both a driver and an opportunity to develop thriving trade, re-exporting these products as well as selling local, made-in-Liguria goods abroad. For example, the production of silk velvets and damasks would employ raw silk from Sicily, Spain, and the East; metalworking was based on iron ore imported from the Elba Island; while for paper production, rags had to be imported from all over the Italian peninsula and from abroad. The high cost of raw materials was a common feature of all these industries, whose products

were then sold internationally and, in some cases – such as for paper – even in the New World (Massa Piergiovanni 1995, 43–69). From a quantitative point of view, grain imports were crucial to the survival of the population and were the most important commodity unloaded in the port of Genoa. The Black Sea markets, the Kingdom of Naples and Provence had for long not only been the main grain suppliers but also important trade centres on behalf of third parties, a business that had always characterized the merchant navy of the Republic of Genoa. Since the end of the sixteenth century, ships carrying grains would arrive from northern Europe, thus contributing to radically changing the merchant routes of the Genoese port. The prevalence of grain transport over other commodities reached its peak in the 1620s, when this type of cargo would account for up to 43% of all the ships calling in Genoa. In the following decades, it would decrease to around 25–30% (Grendi 1971, 24; Grendi 1973, 170–1). Between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, similar traffic trends were recorded. Most of the goods handled in the port were imported products, still mainly timber and food. At the same time, packaged goods increased considerably, reaching up to 10,000 tons per year (Doria 1988, 137–40). Only as late as the 1770s was a significant growth in overall trade recorded. However, this positive trend was not prompted by any significant increase in domestic demand, but rather by the increment in foreign demand resulting from re-established peace in Europe, as well as by trade with the Levant picking up (Doria 1988, 162–5).

The last three competitive factors to be taken into account (political/institutional context, degree of openness towards foreigners, and efficiency in conflict management and resolution) are closely interconnected and therefore can be examined together. Commercial relations were undoubtedly favoured by Genoa's political-institutional context and its neutrality policies. Also, the state government was firmly in the hands of the city's aristocracy, i.e. the same people who were managing a vast network of both financial and mercantile businesses stretching out to the rest of Europe. This is also the reason why public and private interests would perfectly coincide when economic policies had to be formulated. Because of this very situation, the port could be managed with great autonomy and efficiency. Two main *Magistrature* (authorities) – *Padri del Comune* and *Conservatori del Mare* – were in charge of the port, with well-defined responsibilities. Financially, the port was partially supported by *Casa di San*

Giorgio (Piccinno 2000, 67–109). Shipping /maritime litigations and commercial disputes were referred to the Conservatori del Mare and the Civil Rota, respectively. In any case, mediation and out-of-court settlements would prevail over recourse to the aforementioned bodies of justice (Piergiovanni 1988, 17–25). Finally, the policies of the Republic of Genoa towards foreign businessmen were constantly tolerant and substantially open, and also to religious minorities. This in spite of the fact that no actual demographic policies had ever been implemented aimed at favouring an increase in the city population. Genoa was, therefore, a cosmopolitan city, where Huguenot, Jewish, French, Catalan, and Flemish merchants, while not really numerous, would play a significant role by successfully contributing to port traffic growth (Piccinno and Zanini 2019, 285–96).

Port operations organization and workforce specialization

As previously pointed out, in the modern age, the port of Genoa was not only key to receiving the supplies needed to sustain the local population, but also to exporting the products manufactured in several major Po Valley centres, thus attracting traffic of imported raw materials and exported finished goods. In order to fulfil this important role as a leading Mediterranean commercial hub, a pretty complex organization was required, with government bodies, businesses, and workforce operating in a highly synergistic manner. As to the latter category, all types of work were carried out under the control of about two dozen craft associations. They were structured as guilds, each with its own independence and different levels of specialization, professionalism, and social status of its members. They were subject to the authority of the Padri del Comune, which was the body responsible for the management of the port and of shore facilities, and the Conservatori del Mare, in charge of all the issues related to navigation.

Whenever the keeper of the *Lanterna* - Lighthouse - would signal the approach of a ship to the port by hanging the appropriate signal (called *coffino*) on its top, pilots were the first to be alerted. This optional service was generally requested by captains who, when arriving at the port for the first time, preferred to put their ship in more expert hands in order to manoeuvre her into the port (Piccinno 2000, 123–4). Actually, unlike the lagoon port of Venice, entering into the port of Genoa when the weather was good was not particularly difficult, at least for the more experienced captains or for those who used to call at Genoa more regularly.

Despite this, especially during strong *libeccio* winds, every now and then accidents would occur within the harbour that at times even caused shipwrecks (Iodice and Piccinno 2021, 96–7).

As soon as vessels entered the roadstead, numerous port services for both navigation and cargo handling were made available to them. The *Arte dei Linguisti*, the Interpreters' Guild, would be called on to help foreign seafarers carry out all formalities related to anchorage, health checks, and payment of duties. Moreover, interpreters would offer assistance when an average claim had to be submitted to the magistracy in charge, namely the Conservatori del Mare. The so-called *fruttaroli* and *minolli* were in charge of ship supplies like food and ballast, respectively. The *barcaioli*, the boatmen, transshipped cargoes from one ship to another on board different types of smaller boats and carried the cargo ashore for the ships that had to stay in the roadstead, carried passengers into the port, and aided ships in distress.

As far as shore services were concerned, porters were divided into different guilds depending on the type of product they had to handle and the quay they were serving: they were in charge of loading and unloading, and would manually carry the goods to and from the quays to various destinations in the city. Both bulk and packaged goods were handled by different types of skilled workers – from those in charge of weighing grain and oil (*misuratori*), to those packing the goods (called *ligaballe*), as well as those (*barilai* and *bottari*) handling watertight containers such as barrels and drums for the transport of wine and oil. Finally, the Guilds of *calafati* – caulkers, *maestri d'ascia* – shipwrights, and *stoppieri da pece* – in charge of waterproofing ship timber with pitch and tar, were involved in ship building and repair, which were carried out in the *Darsena* – dry dock, and in the arsenal, as well as in private shipyards. In Genoa, the majority of shipyards were not stable establishments. Mostly, freely available areas near the sea were used where wooden shacks were built for temporary storage of materials and tools used for shipbuilding and hull repair.

Overall, the labour force working in the port of Genoa between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is estimated to number around 1000–1300 workers, or about 2% of the city population (which had about 55,000 inhabitants on average). By the end of the eighteenth century, however, this figure had practically doubled, accounting for about 3–3.5% of the entire population and over 10% of the city's male workforce (Doria

1988, 141–2; Piccinno 2000, 122). In order to better understand causes and processes underlying this trend, all collected information – obtained from official workers’ lists, charters, and regulations – has been pooled together, and each guild classified by the type of operations conducted within the port organization. Since available data are not homogeneous in time, they have been classified by centuries, to better highlight long term trends. Also, quite significantly, in particular for certain jobs, such as portage and the transport of cargo by boatmen within the harbour – even if, to a lesser extent, this was also the case for other jobs – the number of those who were not officially working, and therefore were outside the guild system, was particularly high; in some cases there were as many unregistered workers as guild members. Evidence of this can be found in the numerous petitions and complaints submitted by guild members to the authorities concerned. However, due to its illegal nature, it is quite difficult to exactly quantify the actual number of informal workers (Piccinno 2000, 7, 140–2).

Table 2.1: Guilds working in the port of Genoa

Guilds and related industry		Average number of guilds members			
		XVI c.	XVII c.	XVIII c.	1797–1820
Shipbuilding	Calafati (Caulkers)	55	?	108	?
	Maestri d’ascia (Shipwrights) (*)	21	?	55	36
	Stoppieri da pece	12	12	15	?
Sea Services	Barcaioli (Boatmen)	65	65	210	500
	Cadrai and Rumentari (waste disposal) (**)	-	-	8	?
	Linguisti (Interpreters) (**)	-	-	40	?
	Piloti (Pilots) (**)	-	-	20	24
	Minolli	?	24	35	45
	Compagnia soccorsi marittimi (Rescue services Company)	-	-	-	100

Guilds and related industry	Average number of guilds members			
	XVI c.	XVII c.	XVIII c.	1797–1820
Porters				
Caravana Portofranco	40	55	110	220
Grassini	12	12	40	40
Oil	13	13	18	19
Wine	171	171	180	360
Grains	-	-	500	780
Coal (Ponte Spinola)	-	-	130	350
Ponte Mercanzia	-	-	48	180
Lesser Companies	-	-	210	250
Measurers				
Grains	18	18	30	30
Oil	8	?	?	?
Coal	-	-	-	34
Ligaballe	15	40	124	?
Barilai	?	23	35	?
Bottai	15	14	14	?

(*) Around 1818, 37 children of masters were reported as awaiting registration, while 54 masters were working the trade without being properly enrolled (ASG, CM, 464, doc. 23 August 1818).

(**) These guilds were an integral part of the Boatmen Guild until the mid-eighteenth century.

From an initial examination of reported data, it can be observed that some guilds (i.e. *stoppierei da pece* and barrel makers) had a relatively limited number of members (between 10 and 50) which would remain more or less constant over time. Others, conversely, especially between the end of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century, would increase significantly in the number of registered members. This trend was particularly relevant in sectors employing less skilled labour, such as in manual carriage and packaging (*ligaballe*) of goods. There are several explanations for this situation. In the first case, authorities had allowed mass hiring in order to give jobs to the many war veterans, especially after the Napoleonic wars and under the Savoy rule. In the latter case, it was due to a strong increase in traffic volumes of packed rather than bulk goods, for which more workers were needed to handle them. These cargoes mostly featured textile raw materials, metals, spices, various manufactured goods, hides, soda, pitch, saltpetre, alum, and some foodstuffs – sugar, dry fish, dried fruit and nuts, etc. (Doria 1988 140–1). Porters were certainly the most numerous group of port workers, accounting for

about 80% of the entire workforce. The Boatmen Guild was also quite important in terms of number of members (during the eighteenth century there were 210 registered members on average) and activities carried out: they were the only ones authorized to move freely with their boats within the harbour and the only ones entitled to carry goods and people (Dondero 1996, 36–152; Piccinno 2000, 134–64).

The portage system inside the port deserves to be looked at in greater detail, because of its quite unique features and complex and different problems it had to confront. Its work environment was characterized by contradictions and contrasting elements, which would vary over time. In the Genoese port, since the fifteenth century, porters did not simply carry cargoes to and from ships and port warehouses, but they also transported them over a much wider geographic area. Since wagons were not allowed to enter the city, in order to avoid excessive traffic, it was up to these porters to carry the goods to retailers' warehouses and to the shops, as well as to the *stationes* from where they would be carried farther by pack animals across the Apennine passes (Grossi Bianchi and Poleggi 1980, 97–100). This transport service was provided by several guilds. Their work was governed by strict internal rules (so-called *Statuti*), as well as by regulations enforced by the magistracy of the *Padri del Comune*. However, because of this complex and articulated system, guilds' business scopes would often overlap, with frequent fighting over the right to transport cargoes arriving at the port. This work fragmentation did not really match the level of skills and professionalism of the porters, who would often look for better job opportunities by changing employer and moving from one guild to another. The strongest and most evident contrasts were reported between three guilds entirely made up of foreigners – the Caravana of Bergamo, the Swiss porters in charge of transporting oil, and the *grassini* coming from Domodossola and transporting cured meat, cheese, butter and candles – and those, which were the majority, of the so-called national porters, who were carrying wine, wheat, and coal: the porters of Ponte Mercanzia, etc. Basically, frictions were mostly caused by the privileges enjoyed by foreign guilds: they were better paid, enjoyed more advanced forms of social security, and had stronger barriers against the admission of new members. This last condition in particular ensured a higher volume of work and more secure income to registered members. Indeed, as can be seen from the data reported in Table 2, during the difficult period between the fall of the Republic,

in 1797, the annexation to the Napoleonic Empire, and the subsequent Savoy rule, foreign Porters' Guilds did not record the same exceptional increase in the number of members as the national guilds.

Table 2.2: Porter Guilds working in the port: number of members from 1797 to 1815

Guilds	1797	1808	1814	1815
Caravana Portofranco	220	220	190	220
Oil	18	18	18	19
Grassini	12	12	12	12
Wine (Darsena)	225	310	310	440
Ponte Reale	115	24	40	74
Mercanzia	80	110	110	210
Coal (Ponte Spinola)	130	104	160	370
Ponte Legna	20	30	33	38
Grains	550	450	450	681
Marinetta	24	28	36	73
San Lazzaro	22	24	22	26
Lanterna	21	21	21	19
San Lazzaro Dogana	16	16	16	16
Total	1453	1367	1418	2918

Source: ASCG, ADGP, 488, 12, Leggi e regolamenti relativi al facchinaggio

Further elements of confrontation and social conflict can also be found in the showdowns between the oldest guilds and the more recent ones established in the eighteenth century. The former, with their strong traditions, could rely on well-established operational areas and monopoly positions, while the latter had to fight every day against poorly defined transport rights and limited scopes of operations. In particular, this was the case for the smaller guilds, such as those working at the quays Reale, Mercanzia, Legna, Marinetta, Passo Nuovo della Lanterna, and San Lazzaro. Among the guilds with the oldest traditions were the three guilds made up of foreigners and the wine porters, all established between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Among the more recently established guilds, apart from the highly numerous Grain Porters Guild, and those assigned to the various quays where general cargo was unloaded, there was also the Coal Porters Guild. The latter association in particular was most probably established around the mid-eighteenth century (its first certain record dates back to 1770) following the growing

importance of this fuel handled in the port of Genoa. For the same reason, in the period in question, the number of its registered members recorded the highest growth: from 130 in 1797 to 370 in 1815. It should also be pointed out that, even if the guilds were progressively abolished in the 1830s following a liberalization drive of port activities, in 1851 there were still 396 regularly registered porters with the Coal Porters Guild, who were still working under a monopoly regime (Piccinno 2000, 310–17).

A rigid system controlled by guilds: with what consequences?

While, on the one hand, the guild system ensured a high degree of professionalism and offered an effective way to control its members' activities, on the other hand, as a closed system, it was not flexible in terms of job supply. This would often clash with the fluctuating demand for some port services – from pilotage to transport by barge or manually of both incoming or outgoing cargoes – which was dependent on external variables beyond any control, such as, for example, traffic trends, in turn linked to natural events like plague and famine, or political events like wars, etc. In this regard, the Boatmen Guild is a good case in point: for a long time, it would agree to unregistered workers being allowed to work the trade with impunity, in order to meet the needs of the port in periods of strong traffic growth, provided the number of registered workers did not increase (ASCG, PC, 627, 21 October 1730). This unusual approach could be explained by the many privileges enjoyed by guild members: dowries for the masters' daughters, social security systems for sick members or members with economic difficulties, and financial aid for widows and orphans. Therefore, in order to face changing market needs, they were ready to accept even clear limitations to their monopoly conditions, provided they could avoid admitting new members.

Differences between the various guilds working in the port are another important feature, both in terms of their more or less remote origins and, as seen above, in the number of registered members and their level of specialization. The result was a system that was quite difficult for city authorities to manage, especially at times of employment slumps following decreases in traffic. The registered members of the oldest guilds were generally better skilled, with incomes enabling them to enjoy higher living standards. Controls by the authorities of these guilds were relatively limited and mainly aimed at protecting government tax interests.

With regard to the efficiency of the overall services offered by the Genoese port's workforce, from pilotage to cargo handling both within harbour waters and on shore, the strong guild system of port labour organization, while ensuring high quality standards, would often lead to artificial increases in transport costs that had to be borne by the carriers operating in the port of Genoa. Service prices were not the result of free bargaining, nor did they follow the laws of supply and demand. They were set by the guilds themselves, enjoying consolidated monopoly positions, and approved by the relevant city authorities: *Padri del Comune* and *Conservatori del Mare*. This arrangement became a real problem in the nineteenth century, when the, albeit slow, economic growth began to clash with the traditional port labour system stifled by the stiff guild organization and bound by ancient customs. Porterage services, in particular, were a source of concern for the Savoy government. They knew too well that excessively high transport costs demanded by these workers could discourage shippers from using the Genoese port, which served as the sea outlet for the Savoy kingdom. The most evident consequence of such a situation was, over time, some loss of competitiveness of the Ligurian port in favour of other Mediterranean ports, where accessory costs to the transport of goods by sea were, in certain periods, cheaper. However, its excessively high labour costs were certainly not the only problem facing the port of Genoa, which was also beset by low draft, chronic dearth of mooring areas, and lack of spaces for the storage of goods on shore.

Only around the mid-nineteenth century, under the strong liberalist drive launched by the Savoy government, did the Genoese Chamber of Commerce – the body then in charge of the Free Port and responsible for several other port matters – begin to challenge the system and to definitively liberalize port services, thus getting rid of what still remained of the, by then, obsolete guilds. Its organization and infrastructure had clearly been exhausted by the exponential increase in traffic due to the acquisition of the hinterland Liguria had always lacked, the development of a railway network, and industrialization slowly rolling in. New investments and, above all, new operational specializations were necessary. A crystallized situation is evident in an 1851 report (ASG, CC, 10, Note) on the state of port labour: nothing had yet been done to adjust the system to changed port needs, and the guilds of boatmen, caulkers, shipwrights, and porters could still impose their rules, with all subsequent

problems. However, while recognizing the need to enforce radical changes in order to restore port competitiveness, which was to include full port labour liberalization, the authorities concerned soon realized how difficult the whole operation was. It was indeed necessary to revamp a system which, despite innumerable difficulties, had allowed the Genoese port to successfully operate for almost five centuries and to become a fundamental reference point for Mediterranean traffic.

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