

## Introduction

“Happy are the people who did not receive almost anything from nature because indigence generated hard work and wits.”

Raynal

The memorandum of a meeting of the Genoese Chamber of Commerce in July 1834 opens with these words, which Guillaume-Thomas Raynal had used to celebrate the history of the Phoenician mercantile civilization in his 1770 work *L'Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*.<sup>1</sup> In the same volume, the French abbey had made explicit references to the centuries-old splendor of the Republic of Genoa, which, during the Middle Ages, handled more trade “than the whole of Europe.”<sup>2</sup> The Ligurian traders’ choice of quoting the dedication to the Phoenician people instead of that referring to their own country may appear odd, but it was perfectly comprehensible at the time. At the onset of the nineteenth century, the Genoese had no concrete reason to recall the period in which they were the first commercial power in Europe, but they could still be proud of their qualities – hard work and wits – that, like the Phoenicians, had allowed them to prosper at sea for centuries. Despite the strictures of inhabiting a small coastal region with limited natural resources, the Genoese had not only thrived in the Mediterranean, but also well beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The end of the Genoese golden age in the seventeenth century was followed by a period of progressive decline, but increasing international competition of greater European naval powers, and even the disappearance of the republic of Genoa after the Napoleonic invasion and subsequent annexation to the Sardinian kingdom, had not interrupted that mercantile and maritime

tradition. My aim is to shed light on this continuity by showing that the optimism the Genoese expressed in 1834 was largely related to the Atlantic economy and especially to growing relations with Argentina, where they had established regular contacts through trade and migration since the previous century. This chapter of Atlantic history, in which there is a gap of silence in the historiography, is intimately related to the manifold bonds that linked the Genoese to the Spanish empire until its very collapse. If Genoese appear today almost irrelevant in eighteenth-century global trade, it results from the way they attached themselves to the Spanish monarchy, fulfilling mercantile needs in the Atlantic world as Spain was forced to contend with powerful enemies and competitors that sought to siphon off its riches. By undertaking a host of economic activities, Genoese traders and migrants established themselves in the main ports of the empire, most notably in Cadiz and then in Buenos Aires. This book tells the story of the strategies that enabled this politically marginal group to keep prospering amidst the growth of powerful empires and resulted in the building of a substantial Genoese settlement in the Río de la Plata's coasts.

Works about modern Italian migrations to Argentina often start by underlining an interesting but underestimated fact: most Italians who immigrated to Buenos Aires at the beginning of the nineteenth century came from modern Liguria, that is, the former Republic of Genoa. Scholars have paid little attention to the reasons behind the precocity and the region-specific provenance of the first Italian settlers. This paucity of attention can be ascribed both to the greater importance given to the subsequent mass Italian migratory flows and to the ideological approaches that have influenced the historiography over the years.

The first important works on the history of Italian immigration to America date to the Fascist era and provide short and perfunctory accounts of the early decades of Argentinian independence. Even in detailed and informative works,<sup>3</sup> the overall descriptive approach, which sought to celebrate the greatness of Italian immigrants, fails to explain the reasons for the prevalence of Ligurians among Italian settlers in the Río de la Plata region.

Since the end of World War II, the valorization of liberal ideas inherited from the Italian Risorgimento has stimulated a new strand of research into Italian political emigration to South America following the Carbonari's failed 1821 and 1834 uprisings in the Kingdom of Sardinia. Mazzinian republicanism in Southern America and Garibaldi – its most well-known protagonist – have sparked the interest of many historians.<sup>4</sup>

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Overlooked is that Garibaldi chose to head for the Río de la Plata precisely because of the strength of the Italian migration that preceded him.

In 1836, there were about 5,000 Genoese migrants in Buenos Aires. The community possessed a widespread distrust of the consuls of the Kingdom of Sardinia and little interest in the agenda of Mazzinian republicanism. Garibaldi's ambitions to proselytize the Río de la Plata immigrants, including his hope to unify Italy, had little meaning for the expatriates; their main preoccupation was to prosper in their businesses, mostly related to trade and navigation, under the protection of local authorities and far from any interferences by their country of origin's political representatives.<sup>5</sup>

Literature searches for antecedents and specific traits of the Ligurian settlement in colonial Río de la Plata reveal a persisting tendency to treat this matter within the framework of the history of Italian emigration to South America, which began in the sixteenth century with the pioneering expeditions of explorers and clerics; this tendency derives from a long-held "national" historiographical focus that has been slow to highlight local and regional traits, which, in turn, have been studied only with reference to post-unification migratory chains.<sup>6</sup> The smallness of the Italian settlement in the censuses of late colonial Buenos Aires further complicates matters. Although some sources – especially the 1804 census – point to a Genoese prevalence over other Italian groups, for a long time the geographical provenance of these first immigrants has been overshadowed by the notion of the "Italian presence"<sup>7</sup> and by highlighting the episodic nature of the phenomenon,<sup>8</sup> which slowly developed owing to the creation of the viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata and to the development of international trade but, still, was too limited a matter to warrant specific research or connection to the subsequent migratory flows.

In recent years, historians have paid more attention to the history of Ligurian emigration to Argentina,<sup>9</sup> but scarce demographic evidence of the Genoese settlement in the Río de la Plata until the 1830s has continued to discourage research into possible precedents in the colonial past. Fernando Devoto, to whom we owe the most significant studies on this topic, considers the first, small Ligurian settlements in the "remote Southern American lands" to be the result of the "great mobility" inherited from their ancestors, but does not attribute any particular meaning to the phenomenon. In fact, he interprets it as a variant of the wider centuries-old European migrations. Devoto's remarks helpfully highlight the greater visibility of Genoese immigrants over other Italians, which becomes clearly apparent during the eighteenth century in cities along

the Western Mediterranean and Spanish Atlantic coasts and thus implicitly calls for further and more careful research into these contexts. On the contrary, the Ligurian presence along the Río de la Plata between the creation of the viceroyalty (1776) and the first post-independence decades appears to be almost unimportant due to the smallness of numbers and to the lack of any clear expression of Genoese cultural identity.<sup>10</sup>

How could a population, which apparently lacked a strong cultural identity and was ostensibly unfamiliar with the Río de la Plata context, privilege such a destination and within a short time create a demographically large and economically successful settlement? In other words, what were the assumptions and the modalities behind the Ligurian “migratory plebiscite” toward the Río de la Plata coasts during the first post-independence decades? To answer these questions, we must consult the institutional documentary sources and notarial deeds to identify the Genoese presence in the late colonial Buenos Aires and then reconstruct their settlement strategies with potential ties to the subsequent migratory flows. We should also more clearly emphasize the intermediary role played by European ports trading with the Americas. Thus, this study begins by analyzing the Genoese presence in the port of Cadiz throughout the eighteenth century. As the main emporium of the Spanish trade with the *Indias*, the port housed a large Genoese community, many of which, in the wake of the colonial empire’s decline, left to sail to South America.<sup>11</sup>

Not only did Cadiz represent a bridge between the two sides of the Atlantic but it is also a vantage point to understand how Ligurians settled in the Spanish monarchy’s territories, providing a foundation for assessing the subsequent migratory experience to Buenos Aires. The presence of many Ligurian immigrants in eighteenth-century Cadiz suggests that, although the Republic of Genoa had long been marginalized from mainstream maritime international trade by other European powers, the Genoese maintained active interests in the Spanish Atlantic through commerce. This issue has been largely neglected by scholars who, conversely, have focused on the businessmen who dominated international finance between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, and believed that the Genoese permanently faded from importance in the Atlantic economy. I will show that this was not the case: the Genoese attached themselves to the Spanish Bourbon monarchy, as they had earlier done with the Spanish Habsburgs. When the colonial system collapsed they made themselves indispensable to independent Argentina, and highly profited from it.

The coming story follows the connections that linked the Ligurian settlements in Cadiz and their counterparts in the Río de la Plata region,

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identifying elements of continuity and rupture between the late colonial age and the transitional stage that followed Argentinian independence. The timeframe roughly starts with the War of the Spanish Succession, after which Cadiz officially succeeded Seville as the privileged port for Atlantic trade with the Americas, and ends with the rise to power of *caudillo* Rosas in independent Buenos Aires, after which the Genoese consolidated their permanent and prosperous place in the new host society.

## A MARITIME NATION IN DIASPORA

Surrounded by the Maritime Alps and by the Apennine Mountains from east to west, the territory of the republic of Genoa comprised a narrow strip of coast along the Mediterranean Sea. Given the scarcity of fertile soil, Ligurians always turned to the sea to survive. This inescapable choice gave rise to a mercantile civilization that constantly looked beyond borders, modified its course on several occasions, and always embraced change. The Genoese capitalistic drive, aptly labeled as “dramatic” by Fernand Braudel,<sup>12</sup> explains the fortune of the maritime republic in the Middle Ages, when Genoa experienced its golden age by creating extensive trade links to the Aegean, the Levante, the Black Sea, the Western Mediterranean, the European Atlantic coasts, and the North Sea.<sup>13</sup>

The 1453 Fall of Constantinople represented a turning point for Genoese commerce, which progressively withdrew from the marketplaces that fell under the sphere of influence of the Ottomans and became gateways for the Western commercial routes. Commercial penetration into the Iberian Peninsula opened the road to Genoa’s growing role as a key financial protagonist: ties with the Spanish Crown and other European countries enabled Genoese bankers to create a veritable “International Republic of money.”<sup>14</sup> In the mid-seventeenth century, the Monarchy’s repeated bankruptcies caused Genoa to abandon the Spanish orbit and downsize its financial power but did not wipe out its commercial relations with Iberian ports.

Little is known about how the Genoese adapted to the new crisis but it is a worthy subject for research: first, because it indicates the survival strategies of a mercantile community lacking any significant political and military weight and, therefore, seemingly unable to react to the challenges posed by the modern maritime competition; second, because it sheds light on the economic relations between the Mediterranean and the Ocean sea beyond the power struggles between the leading maritime nations

through a “bottom-up” analysis of the mechanisms by which men and goods traveled across the Spanish Atlantic in the eighteenth century.

Genoa’s centuries-old mercantile expansion did not generate a single and unambiguous “colonization” model, but several settlements and normative strategies that changed in time and space according to the trade interests of those involved, their ties with local authorities, and their homeland’s political influence.<sup>15</sup> The extreme juridical and institutional variability of what has been called “a sea empire”<sup>16</sup> is visible in the fourteenth-century emporiums located in Byzantium and in the Black Sea, where there were several different types of “colonial enterprises”: (1) territories, such as Chios, more or less directly placed under the homeland’s dominion and governed by private citizens (the *Maone*) who were licensed by the Republic of Genoa; (2) the Genoese colonies along the coasts of Crimea, Bulgaria, and Romania: these extended to the surrounding countryside, which – in order to guarantee the supply of wheat to the homeland – the Genoese controlled by building fortresses; (3) settlements almost completely independent from local law such as Pera, which was one of Constantinople’s most significant business districts, had its own town mayor, and hosted such a large and stable Genoese settlement that it became largely autonomous from its homeland; (4) a number of ports where the Genoese failed to acquire any political power and limited themselves to establishing their quarters and warehouses.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Genoese mercantile civilization cannot fit into a single mold, in essence it had a mainly maritime character relying on the private initiative of merchants pursuing an economy without frontiers. As Gabriella Araldi argues,

the core privatistic orientation and the early idea of the city as a marketplace and not as a production center placed at the heart of the Genoese life – and, therefore, of its outward projection – the concept of “investment,” which differentiated the colonial system by blending its contents and led the Genoese to create a reticular model which included many centers that were equally important in their own right and acted as parts of a system of which Genoa – the hub where goods and capitals were distributed – was the heart, not the mind.<sup>18</sup>

These characteristics led historians to shift from the descriptive term of “colony”<sup>19</sup> to that of “emporium” to describe a trade gateway geared toward economic exploitation regardless of territorial control and statutory differentiations.<sup>20</sup>

Genoese penetration into the Iberian peninsula, which relied on the establishment of *fondaci* (residential and work compounds which included houses, warehouses, and shops), the management of monopolies, and the

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offer of capital and technical skills to local sovereigns,<sup>21</sup> markedly mirrored the privatistic nature of mercantile enterprise, the vocation to settle in cities typically linked to maritime economy, the absence of a politically expansionist agenda, and the tendency to complement the hosting society's requirements. The opportunities that arose in Spain and Portugal generated an early and consistent migratory flow of merchants, bankers, small retailers, artisans, seafarers, soldiers, servants, and farm laborers. Vicens Vives has estimated that at the start of the sixteenth century more than 10,000 Genoese resided in the Kingdom of Castile and a similar number in the Kingdom of Aragon.<sup>22</sup> Many individuals, who differed in social standing and occupation, contributed to the durability and success of the Genoese "empire on the sea." By following the routes opened by merchants, they created heterogeneous and spatially dispersed communities in myriad ports and marketplaces. In other words, the Genoese were a "nation" in diaspora, rooted in sundry territories where they did not politically rule.<sup>23</sup>

Since the Middle Ages, the term "nation" has referred to the different communities of foreign merchants settled in the ports and in the main European and Mediterranean marketplaces. Each community, whose members shared the same birthplace (*natio*), benefited from special privileges and a certain degree of self-regulating freedom granted by law.<sup>24</sup> Between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, the Genoese settled in the Spanish Monarchy's territories were among the most prominent mercantile nations trading between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic.<sup>25</sup> The term "nation," however, fails to fully portray the complexity of the Genoese mercantile system, especially in the timespan considered here. During the eighteenth century, following the progressive growth of nation-states, Genoese merchants seeking success in the Atlantic trade could uphold very few "national" privileges. Moreover, having been occupied by the French and then annexed to the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Republic of Genoa *de facto* ceased to exist between 1797 and 1815. To assess how these trade circuits survived and adapted to the radical changes of this crucial period before reaching the Río de la Plata in the wake of the implosion of the Spanish empire, one needs to look beyond the borders of the Genoese mercantile "nation."

In 1971, anthropologist Abner Cohen coined the term "trade diaspora" as "a nation of socially interdependent but spatially dispersed communities."<sup>26</sup> In the mid-1980s, Philip Curtin expanded this expression to include the networks of trading groups operating outside their homeland to promote long-distance trade.<sup>27</sup> Curtin used the term as a synonym for trade network and highlighted the role played by these

groups as cross-cultural brokers between their host societies and their own. These networks were not necessarily built on the basis of formal relationships and often resulted from initiatives undertaken by the merchants who had settled in a foreign city. By learning the language, customs, and mercantile strategies of the host society, these merchants fostered trade exchange with their fellow countrymen moving along the trade routes, ultimately leading to the creation of new settlements that loosely relied on a common cultural provenance. Sometimes this phenomenon led to social marginalization (as experienced by the Jewish communities of Medieval Europe), to politically neutral forms of self-government (like the Jahaanke tribe in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western Africa), or to the creation of European trade enclaves backed by coercive military power (forerunners of the Dutch and British empires in Asia).

Curtin's observations on the evolution of long-distance trade challenged the notion of the "expansion" of the European maritime nations in early modern world trade. By observing the articulation of the Asiatic trade networks, he highlighted that, to a large extent, the Portuguese commercial posts in the Indian Ocean were independent from Crown control and held stronger ties with Asiatic merchants than with the metropolis. Furthermore, Curtin emphasized the limits of the initiatives carried out by select British and Dutch East India Companies to monopolize Asian trade circuits: for example, through the trade diasporas of the Gujaratis, the Jinas, and the Armenians, Indian commerce experienced a veritable golden age in the seventeenth century.

A reconsideration of the European enterprises' ability to control the Asian market does not diminish the role played by Western powers, which, in Curtin's view, were able to thrive from the trade diasporas, whose facilitating function resulted in their very extinction. The growing integration of trade circuits made these cross-cultural brokers redundant, to the advantage of local intermediates. During the eighteenth century, these processes, along with the technological advancement made by European maritime and industrial powers, signaled the end of trade diasporas and the birth from their ashes of colonial or informal empires, transforming Western trade culture into a shared global trading culture.

By building on Curtin's conclusions, not only have scholars widened the discussion of trade diasporas,<sup>28</sup> but they have partly argued against his hypotheses on their "decline," highlighting in some cases their survival and adaptive strategies against the progressive advancement of European maritime powers in the world trade scene. As for the Asian commercial



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routes, recent studies have shown that, under British rule, the Parsee, Indian, Muslim, and Sephardic trade diasporas enjoyed a new period of prosperity.<sup>29</sup> From the end of the seventeenth century, merchants from Syria and Southern Arabia massively entered the South-East Asia trade: at first they devoted themselves to pedlary and retail businesses, but, whenever possible, they extended their interests to wholesale. A similar strategy allowed the Syrians to reach a prominent position in the Manila trade at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup>

British rule in Asia enabled the Jewish diaspora to react to the progressive decline of the Ottoman empire where, since the sixteenth century, the Sephardi Jews had been successful trade brokers between Europe and Asia.<sup>31</sup> From 1840, their interests turned to the opium trade and, by the beginning of the twentieth century, they also were involved in smuggling narcotics to California. Despite the manifold contacts established with the British enterprises, the Sephardi economic strategies remained unchanged: up to the third, firmly anglicized, generation, those who had settled in Shanghai maintained brokerage-based family businesses and never ventured into sophisticated commercial operations.<sup>32</sup>

Trade diasporas also survived in Europe. For instance, the Greek diaspora was not weakened by the progressive consolidation of the European maritime powers in the Mediterranean. From the end of the sixteenth century, when Ottoman expansion inflicted a severe blow to Venice's maritime supremacy, Greek trade and shipping magnates settled in Venice and played a crucial role in maintaining trade exchanges between the East and Northern Europe (especially London). In the long run, cooperation between the Greeks and the Venetians facilitated British penetration into the Western Mediterranean and transformed the Greek diaspora by forcing it to specialize in the ship-owning sector.<sup>33</sup>

The British later encouraged Aegean people to settle in Minorca and Gibraltar – the dominions that they had acquired in the wake of the War of the Spanish Succession – so that they could rely on a non-Catholic and non-Spanish maritime business community. Austria promoted Greek settlement in the free port of Trieste to ensure safe maritime communications with the Levante, and so did Russia in 1792, when it founded the port of Odessa as an anti-Turkish measure. The French Revolution also represented an extraordinary opportunity for Greek ship-owners: by taking advantage of the Ottoman flag – which remained neutral until Napoleon's campaign in Egypt – they gained a central role in bringing Black Sea wheat to European markets and maintained their position throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

As far as the Jewish diaspora, Francesca Trivellato's recent work highlighted how the Sephardi Jews of Livorno in the eighteenth century profitably operated in the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and Asian trade by establishing strong cooperation-based networks with non-Jewish intermediaries, the Genoese being among their main partners.<sup>35</sup> Finally, the Maltese's case deserves a special mention; as a "border" between Islam and Christianity and owing to the respect held by the Brothers Hospitalers of Saint John of God in European marketplaces, they played an unprecedented role in Mediterranean commerce from the sixteenth century, notably in shipping and in the cotton trade. Alongside their mainly illicit exchanges with Levante corsairs, the Maltese also established strong commercial ties with the southern ports of France and Spain (especially the port of Cadiz). This state of affairs was further consolidated during the eighteenth century and gave life to a stable migratory pattern between the island and the destination markets, whereby merchants returned to the homeland at least every two years to stock up on goods and visit their families.<sup>36</sup> Over time, the Maltese community maintained a strong communitarian cohesion, which was guaranteed by a strict endogamy, a strong respect for consular authorities, and by the creation of confraternities in the busiest marketplaces to maintain a highly specialized mercantile circuit. If, on the one hand, British occupation deprived the Maltese of their traditional markets, on the other hand, it injected a new lease of life into the diaspora with the offering of a flag that guaranteed safe shipping and fostered trade with Barbary corsairs.<sup>37</sup> Thus, not all trade diasporas ceased with the advent of modern maritime and industrial powers. Many succeeded in keeping abreast of the times and benefited from the new profit-making opportunities generated by trade expansion.

Generally, scholars tend to dismiss the possibility of likening the European mercantile networks to the category of diasporas. This tendency lies upon the fact that, unlike diasporas, European business enterprises primarily sought to serve the interests of their respective political and territorial groups, by operating on the grounds of impersonal contract negotiations promoted by state policies and institutions.<sup>38</sup>

In his studies of late medieval Genoa, historian Avner Greif argues that the Republic's traders in the thirteenth century developed an innovative "individual legal responsibility system" based on limited liability partnerships that enabled them to legally enforce property rights and establish cooperative ties even with non-Genoese agents. This system allowed them to operate more efficiently in long-distance trade and overcome the limits deriving from the communitarian organization of trade in traditional