

Ezio Claudio Pia

Interactions between regional and international markets: Asti, credit, and fairs between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age

1 Outward: “per vias asperas et planas”

The enduring vitality of the urban settlement of Asti is rooted in its central position in an articulated system of communication routes linking the Po Valley, the Ligurian coast—and thus some of the main Mediterranean ports—and the Alpine area, a centrality dating back to the Roman times.¹ Two long-lasting features of Asti’s history are linked to its peculiar position at a crossroads, with an inclination towards trade and financing on a European scale on the one hand, and pervasive political-territorial planning, which allowed Asti to gain control over a wide stretch of central-southern Piedmont from the eleventh to the twelfth century on the other. The markedly experimental political resources that established Asti’s decisive role in communal Italy were thus combined with its recurrent participation in the markets of Liguria and beyond the Alps, as well as, from the late Middle Ages, with the widespread banking activities transacted by the so-called ‘Lombards’ on the main European markets.²

1 In addition to the landmark work of Renato Bordone. *Città e territorio nell’alto medioevo. La società astigiana dal dominio dei Franchi all’affermazione comunale*. Turin: Deputazione subalpina di Storia Patria, 1980, overviews of the city’s history include Gian Giacomo Fissore. *Autonomia notarile e organizzazione cancelleresca del comune di Asti. I modi e le forme dell’intervento notarile nella costituzione del documento comunale*. Spoleto: Cisam, 1977; Luisa Castellani. *Gli uomini d’affari astigiani. Politica e denaro tra Piemonte ed Europa*. Turin: Paravia Scriptorium, 1998; and Ezio Claudio Pia. *Asti*. Spoleto: Cisam, 2017.

2 With regard to the enduring history of the Lombards, new and decisive historiographical perspectives have been provided by Renato Bordone (ed.). *L’uomo del banco dei pegni. “Lombardi” e mercato del denaro nell’Europa medievale*. Turin: Paravia Scriptorium, 1994; Renato Bordone. *I Lombardi in Europa: uno sguardo d’insieme*. In *Lombardi in Europa nel Medioevo*. Renato Bordone,

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The sources provide evidence of early mercantile activities: while the *negucians* documented in the purchase and sale of a meadow taken from the Versa in 788 can only be assumed to have come from Asti, we can be sure of the local origin of the *asinarius* Theutprand, whose profession reflects this area's role as a crossroads and trading centre (and who in 812 purchased land near the city); the noun *asinarius* in fact is likely connected to the activity of transporting goods by means of donkeys.³

Related to more extensive mercantile relations is the 992 charter granted by Otto III to Petrus, the Bishop of Asti, which states that “negociatores [. . .] civitatis ubicumque velint habeant licentiam negociandi sine contradictione alicuius hominis.”⁴ This is evidence of a substantial interaction between the bishop's authority and the needs of the merchant class in Asti, a relationship confirmed in 1037 by the concession obtained by Obertus, the Bishop of Asti, from Emperor Conrad II, in which the merchants of Asti were guaranteed free passage “per vallem seu-ciensem [the Susa Valley] et per omnes valles et per omnia montana et per vias asperas et planas”: a concession designed to ensure enduring relations with France and Burgundy.⁵

Sixty years later, in 1098, with the emergence of the commune of Asti—a political process in which urban economic forces played a leading role—a draft agreement with the Count of Moriana established the people of Asti's exemption from tolls and other charges on the road that he controlled and would continue to control in the future “et ultra montes et ex hac parte montium.”⁶

The management of trade within the city also required certain measures, confirming the pervasiveness of the economic interests that underpinned community relations. In 1197, following a dispute over the ox market, the *podestà* established that this should take place for six months “a volta Gardinorum supra,” and for the

Franco Spinelli (eds.). Milan: Franco Angeli, 2005, 9–39; and Renato Bordone. Una Lobby finanziaria internazionale?. In *Dal banco di pegno all'alta finanza. Lombardi e mercanti-banchieri fra Paesi Bassi e Inghilterra nel Trecento*. Renato Bordone (ed.). Asti: Centro studi sui lombardi, sul credito e sulla banca, 2007, 9–25. More recently, see also Ezio Claudio Pia. “Multam pecuniam, multa mala.” I “Lombardi” astigiani e il mercato del credito nel Basso Medioevo. *Nuova Rivista Storica* 105: 1 (2021): 33–61.

³ Ferdinando Gabotto (ed.). *Le più antiche carte dell'Archivio capitolare di Asti*. Pinerolo: Chiantore-Mascarelli, 1904, 2–3, doc. 2; 5–6, doc. 4.

⁴ Monumenta Germaniae Historica. *Diplomata regum et imperatorum Germaniae*, vol. II. Hannover: Impensis Bibliopolii Hahniani, 1893, 510, doc. 99.

⁵ Bordone, *Città*, 237.

⁶ See Matilde Travaglini. La donazione sabauda del 1098 al comune di Asti. *Bollettino storico-bibliografico subalpino* 69 (1971): 544–551; Fissore, *Autonomia*, 18–20; and Bordone, *Città*, 296, n. 143.

remaining six months “a volta Gardinorum infra.” The reference here is to a partition of the urban topography based on an architectural structure known as the *volta dei Gardini* (the Gardini family’s vault), which stood near what is now Piazza Roma, in an area of the city still characterised by an obvious difference in height between the area surrounding the cathedral and the site of Piazza San Secondo below, which are identified respectively by the indications *supra* and *infra* in the *podestà*’s ruling.⁷ Interestingly, this agreement converges with the statutory provision on fairs, which states that these are to be held “bis in anno”: one eight days before and one eight days after the feast of Saint Secundus (29 or 30 March) “a volta Gardinorum infra,” the other at the kalends of November for a duration of fifteen days “a volta Gardinorum super.” The location corresponds to that indicated for livestock markets in 1197 and suggests an overlap between the two attestations, therefore allowing us to hypothesise an early date for the fairs.⁸ Evidence of the spread of commercial activities—not necessarily fairs—comes from an insight that Renato Bordone draws from Adolf Schaube’s *Handelsgeschichte der romanischen Völker des Mittelmeergebiets bis zum Ende der Kreuzzüge*, in which he recalls that a tenth century Arab source mentions a “peculiar way of organising the fixed price system in Asti, which [. . .] [the Arab narrator] calls Escht in the land of the Franks.”⁹ The merchants of Asti were undoubtedly present at international fairs beyond the Alps early on—at the Lendit fair from the eleventh century and in Champagne from the late twelfth century.¹⁰ It was precisely the banking and commercial skills which they acquired through their participation in such fairs that enabled them to undertake the kind of financial ventures that would ensure the Lombards’ unique position at the top of the European economy between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The sources thus highlight a dual economic vocation for Asti and the surrounding area. On the one hand, what emerges is a long-lasting expansion into external markets, as evidenced at the commercial level by the concessions granted by Otto III in 992 and Conrad II in 1037—and subsequently by the presence of Asti merchants at French fairs between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—and at the financial level by the sustained activity of ‘Lombard’ financiers

7 Quintino Sella, Pietro Vayra (eds.). *Codex Astensis qui de Malabayla communiter nuncupatur*. Rome: Salviucci, 1880, II, 616, doc. 596.

8 *Rubricae Statutorum civitatis Ast per ordinem alphabeti*. Asti: Franciscum Garonum de Liburno, 1534, coll. IX, cap. 16.

9 Adolf Schaube. *Storia del commercio dei popoli latini del Mediterraneo sino alla fine delle Crociate*, Pietro Bonfante (trans.). Turin: Unione tipografico-editrice torinese, 1915, 95, cited in Bordone, *Città*, 289. My translation from the Italian.

10 Bordone, *Città*, 289, 295–296.

between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries. No less important, however, was the city's involvement in regional and supra-regional trade networks, as shown by the early evidence of livestock markets from the late twelfth century and, a little later, of fairs with lively dynamics, which marked the area's commercial development between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age.

2 Within: “quolibet anno fiant nundine sive ferie”

These long-term processes reveal commercial and financial dynamics that combine trade centred on the city's markets with the wider role played by the people of Asti in European markets. From this complex chronological and spatial picture, the Piedmontese city emerges as a node in a web of commercial relations, functioning not just as a point of conversion, but also as a starting point for an international network.

The skills of Asti's businessmen are therefore not only linked to their presence in continental Europe's primary markets, but also to the dynamic trade in their home town, which is clearly revealed by the statutory chapters referring to fairs and the *Statuta revarum* concerning goods and duties.¹¹ The statutory rubric outlines a supra-local network, as the *podestà* is expected to “mandare litteras ad omnes civitates et loca que et quas cives et habitantes in eis verisimile est posse venire [. . .] ut [. . .] veniant salve et secure nonstantibus aliquibus cartis cambiorum [. . .] et ibi salvi sint et securi in eundo stando et redeundo,” fifteen days before the two fairs. However, the local trade network continued to be the focus of attention, as during the fair favourable conditions were reserved for the citizens of Asti and the *posse*—that is, the part of the countryside that was dependent on the commune—who were authorised to display and sell their goods anywhere in the city and the surrounding villages.

Between the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, this lively context was enriched by the economic prospects offered to Asti and central-southern Piedmont by their incorporation into the polity governed by

¹¹ See *Rubrice*, coll. IX, capp. 16–17. The *Statuta revarum* have been published in *Rubrice*. See also Elio Arleri (ed.), *Gabelle e dazi in Asti nel medioevo: versione degli Statuta Revarum Civitatis Ast.* Asti: Della Rovere, 2008; Anna Maria Nada Patrone, *Glosse latine e francesi nel ms. astigiano K.K. 1415 degli Statuta revarum Ast.* In *Miscellanea di studi romanzi offerta a Giuliano Gasca Queirazza per il suo 65° compleanno*, vol. II. Anna Cornagliotti, Lucia Fontanella, Marco Piccat, Alda Rossebastiano, Alessandro Vitale-Brovarone (eds.). Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1988, 744–768.

the French House of Orléans.¹² The objectives of the people of Asti and those of the French princes converged precisely in the exploitation of the economic-productive potential of the territory, centring on the city which for over a century was a veritable French capital on Italian soil. This is demonstrated by the plan, which was shared by the city's ruling class and the Orléans, to strengthen the local economy by building a canal to supply factories and mills. This operation was financed in 1397 by a company with mixed Asti and French capital that was known as the *Società del Moleggio*, and the shares of which were veritable bonds redeemed by Asti investors in 1416.¹³

Some seventy years later, Duchess Marie of Clèves, the widow of Charles of Orléans, gave an equally significant boost to the local economy, as evidenced by the privilege for two annual fairs granted in 1468, one to be held in mid-Lent—so as to include the feast of the patron Saint Secundus—and the other to begin on 18 October, the feast of Saint Luke. This was essentially a revival of the earliest initiatives with an adjustment of the dates (“bina vice quolibet anno fiant nundine sive ferie [. . .] une fiant in media Quadragesima et alie die decima octava mensis octobris”).¹⁴ These events were part of the supra-regional trade networks that, in 1495, were brought together in a “fair” district near the central Troya Tower by order of Louis XII.¹⁵

Marie of Clèves is known for her cultural and especially literary interests, which she shared with her consort Charles, as well as for her religious sensitivity. She proved to be a far-sighted and authoritative princess for the people of Asti.¹⁶

12 Ezio Claudio Pia. Asti tra “dominazione straniera” e autonomia negoziata (secoli XIV–XVI). *Bollettino storico-bibliografico subalpino* 115:1 (2017): 125–142.

13 Franca Garesio Pelissero. La società del moleggio in Asti durante il dominio orleanese. *Bollettino storico-bibliografico subalpino* 91:2 (1993): 477–545; 92:1 (1994): 47–79. In addition to solidarity with the ruling authorities, the project highlights the newfound internal cohesion of the city's power relations, as attested in 1397 by the coexistence of the Guelph (Solaro, Ricci, Gardini, Malabaila), Ghibelline (Catena, Roero, Layolo, Buneo, Asinari, Pallidi), and popular (de Curia and Sala) families, and confirmed in 1416 by the participation in the acquisition of the former Orléans shares of the nobles de Regibus, Pelletta, Garetti, Scarampi, Cacherano, and Montafia, as well as the *popolari* Follo and Damiano.

14 See the text corresponding to note 8 above. The privilege issued by Marie of Clèves is preserved at the *Archivio Storico del Comune di Asti* (hereafter ASCA), Casa d'Orléans, perg. 10. See Renato Bordone. “La forest de longue actente”. Maria di Clèves, Duchessa d'Orléans e Signora di Asti. *Il Platano* 33 (2008): 216–217. Some brief references can also be found in Gianluigi Bera. *Asti. Edifici e palazzi nel Medioevo*. Savigliano: Gribaudo, 2004, 208–217.

15 Bera, *Asti*, 212.

16 Bordone, “La forest,” 201–223; Patrizio Tucci. Morire di sete vicino alla fontana. Charles d'Orléans e la polifonia poetica alla corte di Blois. In *L'autorialità plurima. Scritture collettive, testi a più mani, opere a firma multipla*. Atti del XLII Convegno Interuniversitario di Bressanone,

From 1465, after the death of Charles of Orléans, she ruled the county of Asti in the place of his youngest son, the future King of France, Louis XII.¹⁷ The Dukes of Orléans regained control of this area of central Piedmont after a long hiatus, which lasted from the 1410s to the 1440s as a result of succession disputes that were further complicated by international tensions. Charles himself, who had been held prisoner by the English for a quarter of a century following the defeat at Agincourt, managed to assert his claim to Asti after his release and made a glorious entry into the city in 1447.¹⁸ The long break with the years of Valentina Visconti and her husband Louis of Orléans probably led to the need to redefine relations with the political body centred on Asti. This was done on an experimental basis, by reconciling local needs with those of the princes beyond the Alps. Political power was largely shared: the governor and his lieutenants were French, while the members of the Privy Council were chosen from among the courtiers of Asti. This supreme governing body of French origin, which was also typical of the Visconti administration, included the treasurer, the ducal secretary, and the castellans of Bra and Cherasco, the lynchpins of the territorial and military organisation that made the county a valuable French base on Italian soil. Finally, the city's *podestà* could be either French or a native of Asti.¹⁹ This political arrangement ensured the Piedmontese subjects' enduring loyalty to the French dynasty: a bond emphasised by the contemporary writer Giovanni Andrea Saluzzo di Castellar, who in his diary recalls the fact that, at the time of the Italian wars and France's darkest moments, the "gentlemen of Asti [. . .] were good Frenchmen and preferred to lose what was theirs than to disavow their king."²⁰ While French politi-

10–13 luglio 2014. Alvaro Barbieri, Elisa Gregari (eds.). Padua: Esedra, 2015, 379–403; Marco Robecchi. Le ms. 125 de la Burgerbibliothek de Berne: de Charles d'Orléans à Jacques Bongars (en passant par Marie de Clèves). *Medioevi. Rivista di letterature e culture medievali* 3 (2017): 157–192. <http://www.medioevi.it/index.php/medioevi/article/view/49/66> (14 November 2023); Paola Corti. Mécénat et culture dévote chez Marie de Clèves, duchesse d'Orléans (1426–1487). In *Les femmes, la culture et les arts en Europe entre Moyen Âge et Renaissance/Women, art and culture in medieval and early Renaissance Europe*, Cynthia J. Brown, Anne-Marie Legaré (eds.). Turnhout: Brepols, 2016, 13–32.

17 Bordone, "La forest," 205–215.

18 Vanda Forghieri. Asti e la politica francese in Lombardia. *Rivista di storia, arte e archeologia per la provincia di Alessandria* 45 (1936): 5–77; Renato Bordone. La dominazione francese di Asti: istituzioni e società tra Medioevo ed età moderna. In *Gandolfino da Roreto e il Rinascimento nel Piemonte meridionale*, Giovanni Romano (ed.). Turin: Fondazione CRT, Banca CRT, 1998, 19–30.

19 Bordone, *La dominazione*, 27–29. See also Francesca Maria Vaglianti. "Fidelissimi servitori di Consiglio suo segreto". Struttura e organizzazione del Consiglio segreto nei primi anni del ducato di Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1466–1469). *Nuova Rivista Storica* 76 (1992): 645–708.

20 Vincenzo Promis (ed.). *Memoriale di Gio. Andrea Saluzzo di Castellar dal 1482 al 1528*. Turin: Stamperia Reale, 1869, 509.

cal measures in the land of Asti proved efficient during the almost twenty years of Charles' rule, Marie's leadership was no less successful, strengthening local social and economic structures in close agreement with the local authorities. The decrees issued by Marie highlight the centrality of the local magistracies and the role of guarantor that the Duchess played towards her subjects in Asti. This role was confirmed the year after Charles' death with the restoration of the right to exercise control over the work of the *podestà*, the deputies, and their officials, a procedure which gave new importance to the city's administrative mechanisms and their proper functioning.²¹ In the decade that followed, the formation of a veritable local elite was fostered, made up of members of prestigious, established families who held civil, military, and ecclesiastical offices according to the principle of direct interaction between the citizens and the House of Orléans.²² Within this complex framework—a kind of triangulation between traditional civic autonomy, ducal authority, and bureaucracies, both French and local—measures were taken to restore the fairs. This project reflects the stabilisation of the Orléans administration as it had developed in the twenty years following Charles' arrival, according to a form of dynastic continuity readily accepted by the people of Asti. This stability was the result of an efficient negotiation between the centre and the periphery, which tended to make the most of the subalpine county's geopolitical features, located at the crossroads of various political entities and favoured by its consolidated presence along communication routes.

The compelling remarks that have been made about the “strategic” potential of another larger mercantile and agricultural city in northern Italy—Verona—also seem to apply to the Asti area. The analysis in question has noted the convergence of a series of favourable circumstances, ensured by a considerable agricultural and entrepreneurial development as well as the presence of the Adige river, described as “a gateway to Germany [. . .] through which any number of people and goods can be transported to and from in a few hours.”²³ These elements can be extended to several other cities and apply to the case of Asti in terms of the robustness of its primary sector, the positive influence of the local milling industry on artisanal activities—through the agreement between local elites and the French dynasty—and, finally, the advantages offered by the course of the Tanaro

²¹ Bordone, “La forest,” 208; *Rubrice*, coll. II, cap. 3.

²² Bordone, “La forest,” 208, 211–214.

²³ Edoardo Demo. “Una compagnia per attendere al traffico di Bolgiano, Vienna et altre fiere solite”. I Cerminati dalla Luna, mercanti veronesi nell'Europa centro-orientale del secondo Cinquecento. *Studi Storici Luigi Simeoni* 59 (2009): 38.

river which, unlike the Adige, did not lead to continental Europe in a few hours, but rather opened the city to the Po Valley and the western Alps.²⁴

The presence of the Montferrat domains to the south and east and those of the Savoy to the north and west—as well as the Milanese territories bordering the Tanaro river's eastern sector—created a kind of belt around the district of Asti, which historians have called the Calais of Italy.²⁵ This interweaving of borders did not isolate the city, but strengthened its tendency to act as a trading hub that was able to reduce the pressure of competing forces, as is demonstrated by the compromise on the organisation of the fairs reached by the Duchess with the Marquis of Montferrat, whose domain was suffering from commercial competition with Asti.²⁶

Marie of Clèves' 1468 decree on the two fairs thus seems to be the result of a strategic vision of the Asti market's potential within a wider system of relations. It should be recalled that the timing of the fair in mid-Lent reinforced the economic impact of the city's festivities dedicated to its patron saint Secundus, which took place at the same time, while the fair that began on Saint Luke's Day was linked to similar transalpine initiatives, such as the All Saints' Day Fair in Lyon.²⁷ Both lasted fifteen days, during which the merchants had free access to the city, where they were obliged to stay for at least three days, displaying their goods—exempt from taxation—in designated places.

The careful planning that inspired the project is demonstrated not only by the creation of the aforementioned fair district, but also by the establishment of a dedicated bureaucratic structure as early as 1468: Marie's decree provided that the city council annually elect four "conservators and judges" who were responsible for managing the fairs and settling any disputes in accordance with the most common ways of managing similar events.²⁸

24 Pia, *Asti*, VII, 35.

25 Forghieri, *Asti*, 25.

26 See the text corresponding to footnote 35 below.

27 On the fairs in Lyon, see Michele Cassandro. *Le fiere di Lione e gli uomini d'affari italiani nel Cinquecento*. Florence: Baccini & Chiappi, 1979; Jean-Louis Gaulin, Susanne Rau. *Rétablissement de deux foires à Lyon (mai 1487)*. In *Lyon, entre empire et royaume, 843–1601. Textes et documents*. Alexis Charansonnet, Jean-Louis Gaulin, Pascale Mounier, Susanne Rau (eds.). Parigi: Classiques Garnier, 2015, 523–528. A compelling overview of medieval fairs can be found in Alberto Grohmann. *Fiere e mercati nell'Europa occidentale*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2011.

28 The attestation of four conservators responsible for settling any disputes suggests a link between the fairs of Asti and those of Lyon, as evidenced by the letters patent of 1463 in which Louis XI established four annual fairs for the benefit of the latter city, including the figure of the "conservateur et gardien des foires." For a documentary overview, see Romain Benoit. *Tribunal de la Conservation des privilèges des foires de Lyon 8B 1-8B5269. 1438–1820*, Archives du départe-

The 1468 privilege confirms Orléans' tendency to grant the Asti authorities broad powers in the political-economic field: the fair was entrusted to the local council, which was responsible for its organisation and for settling any disputes. These in turn were referred to the *podesta*—usually someone from Asti—or to the governor, if the case involved a sum exceeding 500 gold ducats.²⁹ Other disputes, even protracted ones, remained in the hands of the local judges, with the possible assistance of a jurist; the records would then be “received” by citizen appointees, a notary, or a clerk of the curia.³⁰ The privilege was intended to ensure that cases would be settled swiftly, and it is clear that entrusting them to the local government was a way of achieving this. Moreover, as Guido Castelnuovo has rightly noted,³¹ it was precisely through this internal bureaucratic management that cities were able to preserve or affirm an objective degree of autonomy within the framework of the supra-local polities that emerged in the fifteenth century. This recognised autonomy constitutes a leitmotif of Orléans' rule and is reflected in the minute statutory regulation of ordinary trade during fairs in order to avoid any overlap between the two trade circuits or irregularities that would damage the city's economy. The usual rhetoric regarding the protection of their subjects' interests by the authorities confirms, in the concreteness of these relations, the attempt to reconcile the government's demands with local ones, formally framed as the Duchess' response to the “supplicationibus et requisitionibus comunitatis [. . .] civitatis Ast.”³²

The demand for fairs can be viewed within the context of a weakening of the Asti merchants' international presence, albeit to varying degrees depending on the area in which they had settled, leading to a renewed commercial commitment in their home city.³³ This causal relationship must nonetheless be traced back to a more complex political and economic framework. Firstly, the Lombards of Asti continued to operate profitably in Europe, while ceding some positions to other businessmen.³⁴ In all likelihood, the financial and commercial experience that the Asti merchants had acquired on the international stage led them to make the

ment du Rhône et de la métropole de Lyon. <https://archives.rhone.fr/media/140adefe-857e-49b1-ba44-d966ea48139c.pdf> (6 March 2024); Gaulin, Rau (eds.), *Rétablissement*.

²⁹ *Rubrice*, f. 108v.

³⁰ *Rubrice*, f. 108v.

³¹ Guido Castelnuovo. Principi e città negli stati sabaudi. In *Principi e città alla fine del medioevo*, Sergio Gensini (ed.). Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1996, 91–93.

³² *Rubrice*, f. 107r. and v.

³³ Donatella Gnetti, Giulia Scarcia. Splendore e declino dei lombardi. In *Lombardi in Europa*, 76–97.

³⁴ Bordone, *I Lombardi*, 21, 22.

most of the opportunities offered by the pacification of their home region and the shared political management practices that had characterised Orléans' presence since the time of the *Società del Moleggio*. This process highlights the Asti area's centrality, not only due to its entry into European markets, but also due to the equally significant 'centripetal' attraction that it exercised on neighbouring regions in terms of medium-range trade.

The two fairs must have found a place in the 'calendar' of fairs, starting with those that involved neighbouring territories. As mentioned above, the Marquis of Montferrat immediately began negotiations to avoid competing with the Casale fair. As a result, the Asti fair was postponed to the middle of March, before being set for mid-Lent, a decision that risked jeopardising the participation of merchants from Venice, Genoa, and Florence, who were busy with the fairs in Lyon and Geneva. Negotiations continued until 1474, and it is plausible that a settlement concerning the Asti events was reached in the mid-1470s.³⁵

In the following decades, however, the political uncertainty that characterised central Piedmont at the beginning of the sixteenth century, during the Italian wars, probably reduced the frequency of fairs in Asti. In the 1520s, the *referendario* Gerolamo Malabaila reported "nil actum fuit" in documents verifying the local treasury's accounts³⁶—a sign of an interruption in political and fiscal operations due to the occupation by either the Duke of Milan or the imperial troops as a result of the conflict. An indirect clue to the likely slackening of fair activities may derive from the oldest notarial register kept in the Asti State Archives, which was attributed to the notary Stefano Perrone (1511–1527). Upon a cursory investigation, this volume actually appears to be a factitious collection of deeds dating back to the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, probably assembled as a model for the drafting of similar documents.³⁷ Among the deeds collected in this practical formulary, there are none relating to fairs—a peculiarity that could be attributed to the nature of the activity exercised by the notary himself (if this were an actual register of the notary, Perrone) but which, given the probable 'exemplary' nature of the collection, seems to indicate a lower incidence of fair trading in the first decades of the sixteenth century.

The situation must have changed in the following period: the fact that the Asti fair was an attractive event for commercial networks and generated a signifi-

³⁵ On this complex negotiation, see Ferdinando Gabotto. *La vita in Asti al tempo di Giovan Giorgio Alione*. Asti: Bianchi, 1899, 22–23; Nicola Gabiani. *Notizie sulla Ferrazza o politica della città d'Asti dal XIV al XVIII secolo: ricerche storiche*. Turin: Roux & C., 1892, 220–268. See also Fondo documenti antichi, 1474. In ASCA, 13.16.

³⁶ Conti Orleanesi. In *Archivio di Stato di Asti* (hereafter ASA), f. 53 v.

³⁷ Notaio Stefano Perrone, 1511–1527. In ASA, Archivio notarile.

cant volume of business is demonstrated by the ‘cavalier’ behaviour of the Duke of Savoy, Charles Emmanuel I at the end of the sixteenth century. During the plague of 1599, he deliberately concealed the seriousness of the sanitary conditions in order to obtain tax revenues from the merchants attending the Asti fair.

On 21 April 1599, the Venetian resident Simeone Contarini stated unequivocally that the Duke had concealed the danger:

[. . .] so that the Asti fair, which had already begun, could take place, by ordering, or rather forcing, the merchants of Turin to bring all their merchandise to the fair, so that he could obtain from them the amount of money that he is now accustomed to obtaining by various means, without leaving them the excuse of not having any because they were unable to trade.³⁸

Indeed, between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, several dozen deeds for the sale of goods with deferred payments at successive fairs specify the origin of the merchants who were present at the Asti fairs. These documents reveal a medium-range circulation that involved the sub-Alpine area (the Canavese, Turin, the Aosta Valley, the Vercelli area, and Milan), the Alpine valleys of Provence (Draguignan and Barcelonnette), and the Tarentaise Valley (the area crossed by the Isère, in Savoy), as well as the Dauphiné and Lyon.³⁹ This complex trade network included representatives of the company owned by the merchants Enrico and Sebastiano Splinder and Gaspar Scherer, described as “German” by the Asti notaries, but based in Turin. A notarial deed of 1582 attests that these merchants were holding a ten-year lease, whose start date is unknown, concerning a house and warehouse belonging to the noble lords of Ferrere located on the town’s main street.⁴⁰ This proof of the city’s continuing economic role suggests that we should at least partly reconsider the idea of a steady decline following Asti’s absorption into the Savoy domains after 1529.⁴¹ The relevant role of the “German” merchants Splinder and Scherer—who were Swiss merchants from St. Gallen—is consistent with the long-standing and robust trade relations between central and northern Italy and the German-speaking area. In the case of

³⁸ Fabio Mutinelli (ed.). *Storia arcana ed aneddotica d’Italia raccontata dai veneti ambasciatori*, vol. II, sec. XVI. Venice: Naratovich, 1856, 299–300.

³⁹ Notaio Cesare Vinea, 1566–1591. In ASA, Archivio notarile. Deeds of 15, 20, 21 March, 2, 3, 5, 9 November 1581, 14 March 1582.

⁴⁰ Notaio Cesare Vinea, 1566–1591. In ASA, Archivio notarile. Deed of 20 March 1582.

⁴¹ For an assessment, see Ezio Claudio Pia. “Riposare sotto lo scettro sabaudo”? Autonomia contrattata e rappresentazione della città in Asti nel Cinquecento. In *Francesco Panigarola. Predicazione, filosofia e teologia nel secondo Cinquecento*, Francesco Ghia, Fabrizio Merol (eds.). Florence: Olschki, 2013, 163–174.

the Asti merchants, these relations were mainly linked to banking activities, but in the case of merchants of other origins, they were based on systematic exchanges within the German trade fair networks.⁴² The Splinder & Scherer company bears witness to the stability of this trade, since members of these families—sometimes referred to as the heirs of Enrico and Sebastiano, whose company operated in Asti in the 1580s—were among the leading merchants handling letters of exchange at Milan’s major market until the central decades of the seventeenth century. At that time, they were not just managing large sums of money, but also formed part of an extensive system of relations that involved, among other places, the trading centres of Frankfurt, Cologne, St. Gallen, Lyon, Nuremberg, Lille, Turin, and Genoa, to name but a few.⁴³

3 “The convenient location of the site”: a versatile mercantile vocation

In the following decades, the fairs did not lose their relevance despite the military conflicts and epidemics that affected the territory, especially during the reigns of Charles Emmanuel I and Victor Amadeus I. While the municipal documents of

⁴² Winfried Reichert. *Lombarden in der Germania-Romania. Atlas und Dokumentation*, 2. 1,2,3. Trier: Porta Alba, 2003; Kurt Weissen. I mercanti toscani alle fiere tedesche nel tardo medioevo. In *Fiere e mercati nella integrazione delle economie europee. Secc. XIII–XVIII*, Simonetta Cavaciocchi (ed.). Florence: Le Monnier, 2001, 887–908; Wilhelm Tobler-Meyer. Das Junker-Geschlecht der Scherer aus der Stadt St. Gallen, sein Erlöschen und seine Erbschaft. *Schweizer Archiv für Heraldik* 16 (1902): 13–27.

⁴³ Giovanna Tonelli. “Mercanti che hanno negotio grosso” fra Milano e i Paesi riformati nel primo Seicento. In *Mercanti, eresia e Inquisizione nell’Italia moderna*, Germano Maifreda (ed.). *Storia economica* 17:1 (2014): 104, 123, 127, 129, 136. A useful overview of the extensive circulation of merchants—with evidence relating to Asti, its surroundings (Villafranca d’Asti, Nizza Monferrato), and neighbouring areas (Fossano, Pontestura, Revello, Casale Monferrato, Saluzzo, Alessandria, Ivrea, Valenza, Pinerolo, Bra, Vercelli, Racconigi, Fossano, Chieri, Carignano, Moncalvo, Felizzano, Poirino, Moncalieri, Torino, Mondovi, Cuneo, and Rivoli, among the main places)—is provided by Théodore Turquet de Mayerne’s *Description*. See Ulf Christian Ewert. Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München Digitalisierungszentrum, Théodore Turquet de Mayerne, *Description de la France, Allemagne, Italie & Espagne. Avec la Guide des chemins pour aller & venir par les provinces, & et aux villes plus renommées de ces quatre régions. A quoy est adiousté en recueil des foires plus celebres presque de toute l’Europe. Et un traicté des monnoyes & leur valeur esdits pays, provinces & villes* (COL0024). In *Configurations of European Fairs: Merchants, Objects, Routes (ca. 1350–1600)*. Jean-Louis Gaulin, Susanne Rau (dir.). <https://fairs-in-history.huma-num.fr/collection/COL0024> (6 March 2024).

1637 complain about the damage done to the structures set up to host the fair by the troops billeted there, in the medium-term, the negotiations between the city and the Savoys focused precisely on the organisation of the fairs, with an increasing interest in lucrative “cattle fairs.”⁴⁴ These long-standing events—which can be traced back to 1197, when the *podestà* decided to rotate the location of the oxen market on a six-monthly basis—are linked to the specific features of the area: high agricultural productivity, which both favoured and benefited from livestock farming, and proximity to the main road junctions of north-west Italy, which required the efficient transportation of goods using animal traction. Indeed, between the late Middle Ages and the modern age, livestock-related mercantile activities were of considerable importance and constituted a profitable investment for areas with adequate structural resources as well as technical and economic know-how, such as central-southern Piedmont. The impression we gain is that the rather uncertain political situation in the central decades of the seventeenth century led to a redefinition of the economic potential of the city and its territory. It should not be overlooked that a dynamic view open to possible changes in the market was present in Maria’s charter of 1468 which stipulates that, should the concession regarding the fairs be revoked for “reasonable cause,” the events must nonetheless continue for the following two years—a provision that takes account of possible market adjustments, while at the same time seeking to safeguard this kind of events benefiting the city and the State.⁴⁵ The centrality of the livestock market is also reflected in the priorities set out in the privilege of 1468, which lists a series of exceptions in favour of the local meat trade, mainly to ensure that the incentives provided for the fairs would not lead to negotiations, buying and selling, or slaughtering in opposition to the rules.⁴⁶

The supply of livestock, which was essential for a significant part of the food chain, was a structural necessity that helped to connect distant and very different markets, resulting in quite extensive and profitable investments. While nomadic livestock farming generated a considerable volume of business until the sixteenth century, the subsequent period witnessed the beginning of sedentary animal husbandry, supplemented by large-scale purchases of animals from abroad. This is documented by recent studies of negotiations in the 1660s for the purchase of several thousand head of Moldovian cattle by the Venetians and Florentines, Venice being an especially large market.⁴⁷ Supplies in the seventeenth century, especially

⁴⁴ Gabiani, *Ferrazza*, 239.

⁴⁵ The expression used is “propter [. . .] iustas et rationabiles causas.” See *Rubrice*, f. 109r.

⁴⁶ *Rubrice*, f. 107v.

⁴⁷ Giorgio Dell’Oro. Carne rossa, carne bianca: allevamenti e consumi in Italia settentrionale in età moderna. In *Le vie del cibo Italia settentrionale (secc. XVI–XX)*. Marina Cavallera, Silvia

in the central decades, became more complex due to the constant warfare in Europe, and the Savoy lands benefited from the easing of interest in the cattle sector in Lombardy. Moreover, the Savoy supported the cattle trade both by identifying dedicated routes in the Vercelli area—that is, not far from Milan—and by supporting the establishment of trading hubs, such as the fairs in Asti.⁴⁸ As early as 1545, Emmanuel Philibert granted the people of Asti the right to host, in addition to the two “general” fairs of October and March, “two livestock fairs without any toll or tax, one on the feast of the Holy Cross in the month of May, the other after that of Saint Lawrence in the month of August, each lasting six days.” This must have been a rather experimental venture, as is suggested by the city’s request for “permission to advertise and announce these fairs and markets: and to advertise them in all the territories of Your Excellency’s jurisdiction,” since “perhaps our neighbours and people from other lands may not have heard of these fairs”.⁴⁹

This experimental venture (although based on local tradition) was destined to enjoy considerable success, since livestock fairs were held constantly during the first decades of the seventeenth century, even increasing to five a year. This is evidenced by the concessions granted by Charles Emmanuel I, who between 1613 and 1621 reinforced the city’s presence on this market:

Aware of the privilege we granted to our city, Asti, on 12 August 1613 to hold four livestock fairs a year in the usual places of the city, as ratified by our Chamber of Audit on this side of the mountains [i.e. the official body with authority over the Savoy territories on the Italian side of the Alps] on 26 May 1614, it is hereby decreed that from now on there shall be five fairs a year and a weekly livestock market, in addition to the other fairs and markets usually held for other kinds of trade and merchandise. Such livestock fairs and markets are to be held not on the days set down in the said privilege, but as follows, i.e. the first will begin on the coming 9 February, the second on the following 25 March, the third on 10 June, the fourth on 15 August, and the fifth on 8 September, and the market will be held each week on Thursday, and the fairs will last three days each.⁵⁰

This consolidation of the fairs was linked to the city’s long-standing vocation for this type of trade and was a contingent response to the economic uncertainties

A. Conca Messina, Blythe Alice Raviola (eds.). Rome: Carocci 2019, 251–264; Cristian Luca. Un tentativo d’importazione dalla Moldavia di bovini destinati mercato fiorentino all’epoca di Cosimo I de’ Medici. In *Italia ed Europa centro-orientale tra Medioevo ed Età moderna: economia, società, cultura*, Andrea Fara (ed.). Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2022, 303–322.

⁴⁸ Dell’Oro, *Carne rossa*, 253; Gabiani, *Ferrazza*, 239. See also Andrea Fara. Il commercio di bestiame ungherese verso la Penisola italiana tra tardo Medioevo e prima Età moderna (XIV–XVI secolo). *Mélanges de l’École française de Rome—Moyen Âge* 127:2 (2015). <https://journals.openedition.org/mefrm/2709> (14 November 2023).

⁴⁹ Gabiani, *Ferrazza*, 239–240.

⁵⁰ Gabiani, *Ferrazza*, 241–242.

caused by the military situation: the decree of 1621 was justified by the fact that the previous measures had “not been applied on account of the past wars.” At the same time, a strategic vision for the area was outlined, since the concession referred not only to the “beloved peoples” of the Duchy of Savoy, but also to the fact that, thanks to “such trade and commerce, the peoples will be able to enjoy countless comforts, which, due to the convenient location of the site, will also be enjoyed by foreign states, as it seems that many desire them.”⁵¹ As mentioned, in the following decades, the Savoy projects in this sphere would prove more effective than the Lombard measures: this is shown by the limited impact of the Milanese fairs, which were negatively affected by competing initiatives—Asti being one example—and above all by the commercial incentives granted by the Savoys. A record from the Valsesia community dating back to 1656 highlights the fact that the Piedmontese fairs’ success was due to the fact that “foreign merchants lead their livestock across the borders of Piedmont, France, and Savoy [. . .] with much less expense in terms of pastures and taxes, and with greater comfort and shorter journeys.”⁵²

The case of Asti shows once again how the Savoy measures not only integrated the specific features of the various territories, but also aimed to ensure the overall stability of the economy, which had been put to the test by the military conflicts. This is revealed by the continued support for the “general” fairs, which was reaffirmed precisely in the years of great political uncertainty between 1633 and 1634, when Victor Amadeus I not only extended the duration of the livestock fairs to eight days, but also relaunched the October and March fairs of communal and Orléans origin.⁵³

Over the course of the century, the Asti area’s position on the border led to two recurring situations: on the one hand, the state of war affected commercial enterprise, but on the other, the resumption of such projects was encouraged, precisely because of the area’s strategic location, as shown by the patents issued by Charles Emmanuel II in 1672 which provided for exemptions or reductions in customs duties:

[T]he goods and wares which will be brought into this fair from abroad in the future until the end of the year 1674, and which will be sold at the time of the fair (with the sole excep-

51 Gabiani, *Ferrazza*, 242. An analysis of the development of fairs between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is provided by Donatella Calabi, Paola Lanaro. *Lo spazio delle fiere e dei mercati nella città italiana di età moderna*. In *Fiore e mercati*, Cavaciocchi (ed.), 109–141.

52 Dell’Oro, *Carne rossa*, 253–254.

53 Gabiani, *Ferrazza*, 245.

tion of those from France and from across the mountains, as well as all spices, drugs, waxes, and dyes) must be exempted from the usual customs duty by a full quarter.⁵⁴

Between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, fairs thus marked the beginning of the enduring international presence of Asti businessmen, whose participation in French fairs paved the way for the financial role they were to play in Europe for centuries to come. At the same time, fairs also brought together the networks of economic and commercial relations in Piedmont, adapting to their home area the 'Lombard' propensity for connecting local and supra-regional markets. What emerges is a dynamic system in which the credit networks of businessmen who were operating in Europe and their inclusion in trade relations on this side of the Alps paint a dynamic picture of the Asti's financiers' pervasive economic and commercial planning.

It is therefore the perspective of market integration that highlights the enduring and versatile interaction between regional and international trade axes. This long-term process can be reconstructed by examining the connections between regional and international trade axes, thus enabling us to identify the areas which served as European crossroads on both sides of the Alps.

Asti's long-standing commercial and financial vocation has thus been more clearly articulated. The international expansion of its merchants (linked to early imperial concessions made to local bishops in the tenth and eleventh centuries) and the widespread presence of 'Lombard' bankers (which have been investigated in a relatively recent historiography) outline a set of relations within which Asti played an important role, not only for its financial activity on the main European markets, but also as a centre for the organisation of trade on a supra-regional level. A survey of published documents and historical studies has made it possible to establish links between political-institutional events and fairs in the late Middle Ages and the early modern period which were promoted by the local ruling class as well as the princes of Orléans, and then further consolidated in the Savoy era. The analysis of notarial and municipal documents from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has instead brought to light extensive commercial relations centred on the two annual 'general' fairs and the livestock fairs granted by the Savoy dynasty on several occasions. There are certain breaks in this historical trajectory, marked by scarce documentation and possibly reflecting moments of political uncertainty, as evidenced by the frequent measures taken by the Savoy to 'compensate' for the crises affecting the city and its surrounding territory following the wars at the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries.

⁵⁴ Gabiani, *Ferrazza*, 249.

Besides, the CoMOR project has lent concreteness to the interactions between places and markets, viewing cities and larger geographical areas in relation to the financial and commercial dynamics that affected vast sectors of continental Europe.⁵⁵ Through the use of hitherto rather neglected sources, this concreteness extends to the actors within this system of relations: despite the documentation's relative discontinuity, when it comes to fairs, a link emerges not only in relation to specific possibilities in terms of road communication, production, and trade, but also in terms of the constant political fluctuations. The interactions involving the Asti area are not unrelated to the progressive settlement of the city and its surrounding area within the Orléans and later the Savoy polities. Emanuele Tesauro's "official" interpretation describes the return of Asti to the Savoy household in 1615, after the war against Monferrato, as the overcoming of "various misfortunes,"⁵⁶ foreshadowing an expected period of rest "under the shadow of the Royal House of Savoy." As far as fairs are concerned, the impression we get is that they represented a choice shared by the centre and the periphery, and that they were partly aimed at compensating Asti via financial and commercial support for its role as a military outpost during the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is a sign that, far from being based on "impersonal" dynamics, the markets were rather the result of a close negotiation between the central and municipal authorities—a negotiation that the sources, however, trace back to a more articulated perspective than the authority-based relationship between the sovereign and the city, given that the territory's potential was the result of its inclusion in a tried and tested network of social and economic relations. The fairs testify to the effectiveness of a careful negotiation process in which the Savoy government's planning and local forces found a meeting point. The result was a pragmatic plan—subject to constant revision—that harmonised the territory's commercial characteristics with the wider community's needs, delineating inward and outward flows of goods and money and establishing services that were sometimes complementary and sometimes competitive with respect to other state entities. The circulation of products and the itineraries attested by notarial sources, the projects and claims of the centre and the periphery testified to in municipal documentation, as well as its participants' "point of view"—partly identifiable through the analysis carried out on a European scale by the CoMOR project⁵⁷—help shed

⁵⁵ See <https://fairs-in-history.huma-num.fr/about> (6 March 2024).

⁵⁶ Maria Luisa Doglio. Un'inedita storia di Asti di Emanuele Tesauro. In *Civiltà del Piemonte. Studi in onore di Renzo Gandolfo nel suo settantacinquesimo compleanno*, Gianrenzo Clivio, Riccardo Massano (eds.). Turin: Centro di studi piemontesi, 1975, 165. See also Pia, "Riposare sotto lo scettro sabauda," 163–174.

⁵⁷ See footnote 43.

light on the articulation of economic relations, permanence and change, and political influences, identifying centres and networks in a medium- and long-term economic system which linked regional and wider markets.

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