

Research in Dialogue
Dialogue in Research: The Italians and the Beginnings of the
Iberian Colonization
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Dieser Beitrag ist hervorgegangen aus der Initiative von Doktoranden des Seminars für ‚History and Civilization‘ (HEC) am Europäischen Hochschulinstitut in Florenz. Ihr Projekt ‚Research in Dialogue – Dialogue in Research‘ wird herausgegeben von Tilmann Kulke, Dorit Brixius, Ievgen Khvalkov, Florian Wagner und James White. geschichte.transnational veröffentlicht in loser Folge Interviews, Literaturberichte und Forschungsergebnisse aus dem Bereich transnationaler und globaler Studien.

The Italians and the Beginnings of the Iberian Colonization: Participation, Contribution, Influence

The connection between the Italians and the first steps of the Iberian colonization is a topic that was being long discussed in historiography. Different aspects of the Italians' contribution to the development of Portuguese and Spanish colonial expansion were addressed in a number of studies in the course of the last century. Among the works raising problems connected to the studies of these connections, one should recall first a paper „Italian Influence in Iberian Colonization“ by Charles Verlinden, who addressed the issue of penetration of the Italians to the Iberian Peninsula and the role they played in the integration of Spain and Portugal into the network of the international trade. Further, Verlinden wrote in 1953 that the problem of the Italian influence on the Iberian colonization had not yet been sufficiently studied; according to him „many questions arise about it and are crying for the solution.“¹ I must add now, in 2015, that the questions still keep crying. Aside of a number of studies dedicated to the participation of the Genoese and other Italians in the Iberian colonization, not so

¹Charles Verlinden, Italian Influence in Iberian Colonization, in: The Hispanic American Historical Review 33 (1953) 2, pp. 199 – 200.

much is written on the influence of the Italian colonial experience to the Spanish and the Portuguese ones. Separate individuals who contributed to the colonization of the Atlantic islands, West Africa, and Americas, are not completely disregarded; however, the transmission of patterns and frameworks of the colonial experience was not really thoroughly studied.

It must be noted that Verlinden himself just stated the problem of the role of the Italian *influence* to the Iberian colonization, and did not go beyond showing some *contribution* of the Italians into the making of the first steps of the Spanish and Portuguese colonial expansion, mainly in the spheres like seafare, financing, and on the level of particular people involved. It is very obvious that the Italian experience in navigation, map making and ship design greatly influenced the Iberian seafarers.² To say more, Domenico Giofrè underlined the role of the Genoese in the beginnings of all Atlantic geographical discoveries.³ Many scholars also noted the special role of the Genoese in the Mexican commerce, as well as their role in the colonial Spanish trade.⁴ The interconnection, however, might have been deeper. I am tempted to treat the *contribution* (or participation) and the *influence* as two separate phenomena, and though I will treat both of them here (maybe the first one more extensively), I daresay that it is the problem of the influence that deserves deeper research.

The colonial patterns that the Spanish and the Portuguese used on the Atlantic islands, in the Western Africa, and in the New World can be strongly connected with the patterns established before and deriving from the Italian colonial experience. It can be useful to look at the Spanish and Portuguese colonial expansion in the regions specified

²Malyn Newitt (ed.) The Portuguese in West Africa, 1415-1670. A documentary history, Cambridge 2010, p. 6; James Lockhart / Stuart Schwartz, Early Latin America. A history of colonial Spanish America and Brazil, Cambridge 1999, p. 23.

³Domenico Giofrè, Le relazioni fra Genova e Madera nel I decennio del secolo XVI, in: Studi Colombiani, vol. 3. Genoa, 1954, pp. 435 - 438.

⁴W. Brulez, Marchands italiens dans le commerce américain au XVIe siècle, in: Bulletin de l'Institut historique belge de Rome, fascicule XLIV. Miscellanea, Bruxelles 1974, pp. 88-89, 91.

above in the context of the Italians' participation in it, and to reveal some similarities between the Italian and the Iberian colonization. I will not try to answer the question whether these similarities can be explained by some kind of influence, direct or indirect borrowing, etc. However, some general conclusions on the interconnection of these two processes will be possible.

Italian influence in Iberian colonization starts in the fourteenth century.⁵ It was connected to the development of the mechanisms of capitalism and the transmission of the commercial experience by the Italian merchants. A large number of Italians in Seville and Lisbon in and before the times of Henry the Navigator, Columbus and Vasco da Gama, are well known.⁶ The Italian communities in Seville and Lisbon played an important role in the first attempts of the Iberian expansion southwards. It is believed that the Italian merchant community in Lisbon may have been the decisive factor in transforming the early forays of fishing and plunder along the African coast into organized expeditions of trade.⁷ Genoese sailed to the Northern Africa themselves, and even established there permanent settlements. Therefore, there is no surprise that among the Europeans they were the most familiar with the local trade, geography, and culture.

Besides their commercial experience and early penetration to Maghreb, the Italians began to participate in the first Iberian naval expeditions, often holding the highest positions in the Castilian and Portuguese navy. For instance, Lanzarotto Malocello, who discovered Canary Islands between 1325 and 1339, was a Genoese, and a Venetian Ca' de Mosto became one of the most important collaborators of Henry the Navigator. The Genoese were involved in the settlement of Madeira; Antonio de Noli was the first captain of Santiago in the Cape Verde Islands; Alvise da Cadamosto, not only traded to Senegambia but wrote his first detailed account of the island settlements and the

⁵Verlinden, Italian Influence, p. 203.

⁶Lockhart et al., Early Latin America, p. 22; Verlinden, Italian Influence, pp. 199 - 200.

⁷Leslie Bethell (ed.), Colonial Brazil, Cambridge 1987, p. 2.

trading activities on the African coast, giving a vivid picture of Europe's first encounters with sub-Saharan Africa.⁸ Italians settled as captains-*donatarios* on the Portuguese islands of the Atlantic. The most celebrated among them was Perestrello, the father-in-law of Columbus, who was born in Piacenza and settled in Porto Santo, one of the Madeira Islands. Other Italians were found as far as the Gulf of Guinea.⁹ Thus, they accompanied the Spanish and the Portuguese almost everywhere where the later penetrated themselves.

The Azores archipelago was supposedly (re)discovered in the fourteenth century; some Genovese maps depicted them as early as the 1351 and the existence of the islands is reflected in the fourteenth century chronicles as well. Based on the oral tradition it is believed that the sailors visited the islands long before the age of Henry the Navigator. According to the less „optimistic“ versions, the Azores were discovered either in 1427 by Diogo de Silves, or in 1431 by Gonçalo Cabral. Madeira was also most likely known before the official „discovery date,“ and it was reflected on maps dating back to 1339. But again, the formal date is considered to be 1418, when a storm brought the expedition headed by João Gonçalves Zarco and Tristão Vaz Teixeira to an island which they called Porto Santo, and which next year became itself the destination of an expedition under the same captains. Notably, after the Portuguese formally took possession of Madeira, it was a Genoese Bartolomeu Perestrello who took possession of Madeira on behalf of the Portuguese king. Same was true for the Azores. The islands were distributed as „captaincies,“ a form of feudal overlordship that promoted the entrepreneurial settlements of the islands, while preserving the essential rights of the Crown.¹⁰

Italian entrepreneurs were involved in the island settlements on the Azores and Madeira from its earliest steps. They participated in different types of business engagement; thus in the 1456 the Portuguese king founded a company for growing and selling cork, of which the

⁸Newitt, The Portuguese in West Africa, p. 7.

⁹Verlinden, Italian Influence, p. 204.

¹⁰Newitt, The Portuguese in West Africa, p. 6.

Genoese Domenico Scotto and Marco Lomellini were members. Colonial companies appeared with a mesa or board of directors, a general assembly and a specialized management. The Portuguese largely relied on the Italians' institutional frameworks of the entrepreneurship – „the Genoese *mahone* have, to some extent, been the pattern for the Portuguese achievements.“¹¹ The Genoese influence was in general important in the spheres of commerce and navigation, where they obviously were more experienced. However, their role cannot be reduced to trade, and soon spread to the production. The Genoese were the first to appreciate the suitability of the islands for sugar-growing, and to run this profitable business. Sugar was introduced into the Canary Islands and Madeira from Sicily¹², and it was Genoese sugar-growers looking for new land who became involved in the settlement of Madeira and the Azores and setting up the first sugar industry in the islands¹³, the industry, which became a symbol of the islands for centuries.¹⁴ According to Cadamosto, whose account dates back to 1468, the amounts of sugar produced on Madeira equalled 400 *cantara* (5520 litres), and the island also became a place of cultivation for grapes, e.g. malvoisie vine from Crete, and production of wine, wax, and honey.¹⁵ By the 1490s, Madeira superseded Cyprus with regards of the amount of the produced sugar.

The Canary Islands were reached many times in the fourteenth century, because Portugal, Castile and Aragon were all interested in the Canary archipelago. With all these events, Italians were always concerned.¹⁶ In 1402, the Castilian conquest of the islands began. Jean de Béthencourt and Gadifer de la Salle, French, but subjects of Henry III of Castile conquered Fuerteventura in 1405. Though the former

¹¹Verlinden, Italian Influence, p. 205.

¹²Felipe Fernández-Armesto, The Canary Islands after the conquest. The making of a colonial society in the early sixteenth century, Oxford 1982, p. 19.

¹³Fernández-Armesto, The Canary Islands, p. 14; Newitt, The Portuguese in West Africa, p. 7.

¹⁴Lockhart et al., Early Latin America, p. 27.

¹⁵Newitt, The Portuguese in West Africa, p. 57.

¹⁶Verlinden, Italian Influence, pp. 203 - 204.

was given the title „King of the Canary Islands,“ he recognized the Castilian king as his sovereign. It was made a rule to promise feudal concessions to those who intended to discover and take possession of a new territory. The same practice had long been a habit in Italian colonial procedure, especially among the Genoese. Cadamosto (1469) reported on the Canary Islands that as for 1468 four were inhabited by Christian Guanche converts, three by the pagan Guanche, and three others uninhabited; further, he made an account of the aborigines being involved in the slave trade with Europe.¹⁷ This was a common scheme of getting slaves that existed long ago; as soon as there was a demand in the metropolis and the newcomers were ready to buy slaves, the local controversies gave a generous supply to the slave market. The Genoese quickly occupied a new niche. Pedro Fernandez Cabron, with whom a contract was concluded by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1480 with a view to the occupation and cultivation of some of the Canary Islands, was a Genoese.¹⁸ The conqueror and first governor of the islands of Tenerife and La Palma, was accused of favouring Genoese and Portuguese above native Castilians in his appointments of land and water.¹⁹ This fact can witness that the governor behaved so bad towards his compatriots either because it was obvious that the Genoese and Portuguese management proved to be more efficient than the Castilian one, or that they had stronger personal networks and tools of persuasion, or both.

As it was highlighted above, the colonization pattern extensively used the mechanisms of feudalism, and the role of slavery was considerable. „In 1496, Alonso de Lugo, with royal Castilian consent and Italian financial participation, founded a company for the conquest and exploration of the island of La Palma. The Italian capitalists were awarded territorial concessions, among which some were operated by companies, a feature to be found also in the Levant possessions of the Italian republics. Manpower was partly supplied by trade in black and

¹⁷Newitt, The Portuguese in West Africa, p. 59.

¹⁸Verlinden, Italian Influence, p. 204.

¹⁹Fernández-Armesto, The Canary Islands, p. 13.

Guanche slaves in which Spaniards as well as Italians were busy. One Italian gave land away by subinfeudation, just as it so often occurred in the Levant.²⁰ Sugar production, however profitable it is, required large initial investments. It cost the Genoese entrepreneur, Batista or Bautista de Riberol, half a million *maravedis* to set his canes in the soil and build a mill at Galdar in Gran Canaria in about 1501, and the expense incurred by his countryman, Mateo Vigna, in turning the wastes of Garachico on Tenerife over to sugar became almost proverbial.²¹ Thus, the engagement of the Genoese in the sugar production and trade on the Atlantic islands turn these territories to the highly profitable colonies.

As with the Atlantic islands, the Italians accompanied the process of the Portuguese colonization of Africa. However, in several instances, the Genoese were present in Northern Africa before the Portuguese.²² At the same time, the Venetians were not that much present in the process of the Iberian expansion in Africa, because in opposition to what occurred for the other Italian colonies (e.g. Genoese Gazaria), those which Venice owned in the Levant remained in her possession until far into the seventeenth century. As the Genoese colonies in the Eastern Mediterranean were waning, the Ligurians became increasingly interested in the growing Iberian imperium in Africa. „It looks as though Genoese colonization, after the loss of the Levant, was going on in the West, but now under foreign sovereignty.“²³ The Italian entrepreneurs' trade with North Africa and Northern Europe was expanding since the twelfth – thirteenth centuries, as the Italian quarters appeared in Lisbon and in the coastal area of the North Africa.²⁴ The examples of early penetration of Italians to the Northern Africa are uncountable. When the Portuguese conquered Ceuta in 1415, they found there a Genoese *fondaco*. In Algiers, in 1437, in Fez in the fol-

lowing year, they met Genoese moneychangers. In Sale lived Genoese and Venetians, among whom several had business connections with north-western Europe.²⁵ Others operated in the mountain villages of the Atlas, buying there leather and was and sending it to Portugal or Genoa. Genoese were present even in the Southern Morocco, selling the weapons to the Moroccans.²⁶

A prominent Russian scholar and liberal-democrat politician Maksim M. Kowalewski argued based on the sources that the Orthodox slaves were supplied to Spain from the Black Sea region.²⁷ The Black Sea area was a major supplier of slaves to the Iberian Peninsula in the late middle ages. However, the crisis events of the fourteenth century following the Black Death seriously damaged the safety of long-distance trade, and therefore the supply of slaves from the Black Sea area temporarily decreased. It is probable that this was the pushing reason for the Iberians to look for a source of slaves on the Canaries, off the coast of Morocco, and in Africa. The Portuguese obtained slaves from Muslim North Africa and, in the fourteenth century, took part in raids on the Canary Islands to capture slaves from among the native Guanches.²⁸ In the fifteenth century, Portuguese expeditions to the African coast raided for slaves; one of such raids in Africa was describes by Alvaro de Noronha – that was a raid of the Portuguese of Azamour in 1519.²⁹ However, it was as early as in the 1440s that trade replaced raid, and the Portuguese becoming buyers in a market that was supplied by African rulers and slave agents. The situation with the Black Sea slightly improved in the 1420s – 1440s. However, a new African direction of slave trade was already created, and appeared to be both profitable and efficient. It paralleled the slave supply from the

²⁵Verlinden, Italian Influence, pp. 205-206.

²⁶Bethell, Colonial Brazil, p. 5.

²⁷Maxim O. Kowalewskij, ? ?????? ? ?????? ?????????????? ????? ? ?????? [About the Russian and other Orthodox slaves in Spain], in Juridicheskij vestnik 2 (1886), pp. 238-254.

²⁸Newitt, The Portuguese in West Africa, p. 3.

²⁹Letter of Dom Alvaro de Noronha to Dom Manuel I, 15 December 1519, in: Newitt, The Portuguese in West Africa, pp. 40-42.

²⁰Verlinden, Italian Influence, p. 209.

²¹Fernández-Armesto, The Canary Islands, p. 14.

²²Verlinden, Italian Influence, p. 205.

²³Verlinden, Italian Influence, pp. 207-210.

²⁴Newitt, The Portuguese in West Africa, p. 6; Bethell, Colonial Brazil, p. 2.

Black Sea area and soon completely substituted it. Further, as with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 the connection with the Black Sea was becoming more and more difficult, Africa had to occupy the niche of the slave supply entirely. It has been estimated that in the whole history of the Atlantic slave trade, a third of all slaves exported from Africa were carried by the Portuguese to their colonies, principally to Brazil. More than any other factor, it was the slave trade that turned the south Atlantic into a Portuguese lake.³⁰ However, the Castilian colonies also imported manpower. Not surprisingly, we find in the transatlantic slave trade the same nation which was involved in it in the Black Sea. The Genoese, earlier being among the main suppliers of the slaves from the West, actively engaged in the slave trade with its new directions. On the Caribbean all of the Genoese residents were in the sixteenth century some way or another connected with the slave trade.³¹

Briefly summarizing, I should underline that the role of the Italian (and particularly Genoese) contribution and influence in both Spanish and Portuguese colonial expansion was great. Many features, characteristic of the economic and colonial activity of the Iberian nations, can only be understood when their connection and resemblance with Italian precedents is kept in mind.³² The colonial experience acquired by the Italians in their overseas colonies allowed them to play an «educative» role for Spain and Portugal.³³ Though the Castilian colonialism

³⁰Newitt, *The Portuguese in West Africa*, pp. 21-23.

³¹Ruth Pike, *Enterprise and adventure. The Genoese in Seville and the opening of the New World*, Ithaca, N.Y. 1966, p. 130.

³²Verlinden, *Italian Influence*, p. 199.

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Brulez, *Marchands italiens*, p. 87.

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Enrique Otte, *Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo y los genoveses. El primer registro de*

was a new phenomenon resulted from the clash and further coexistence of two societies of strikingly different levels of development, this experience was neither absolutely independent of (for its starting point were still the Genoese and Portugal patterns), nor completely dissimilar from the previous Italian experience of colonization. The colonial patterns and frameworks they imposed over the controlled territories had a lot of similarities in their essence.

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