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*Northern Europe and the Mediterranean System in the Long XVII Century*

The actual historiography is reevaluating the oceans and the lands around them: the Atlantic, the Pacific area, etc.

The Mediterranean sea, the so-called “inland sea”, has been considered only as an accessory of the Atlantic. There is a reevaluation of the Mediterranean area going on at present, above all in the period which can be called the “long seventeenth century”, going from about the middle of the XVII to the middle of the XVIII century.

It is my aim to stress this actual trend and prove that in the “long seventeenth century” the conquest of the Mediterranean area was a necessary step for the Northern European Powers, above all for England, then Britain from the beginning of the eighteenth century, to form from the 1750s onwards the commercial network around the globe, which was the basis of the British Empire and the Industrial Revolution.

The most relevant characteristic of medieval and early modern Europe was her bipolarism; that is Europe had two centres of economic growth: the North and the South, the North Sea and the Mediterranean, the industrial and the commercial pole.

These two worlds were different and complementary at the same time; they were linked by sea by the Genoese at the end of the XIII century and by the Venetians at the beginning of the XIV century.

Until about 1600 the Mediterranean area dominated the Northern one with his boats, which usually were different following the cargoes they transported: the Venetian and Florentine *galere*, smaller, expensive, but more secure, had on board spices and luxury goods; the Genoese *cocche*, and later the *caravelle*, carried the Mediterranean raw materials used above all in manufacturing the Northern textiles. A large variety

of goods was landed by the southern ships on their voyage north, which contrasted with the simplicity of their cargoes back. This characteristic was kept also by the northern ships until about 1660, when the northern cargoes were integrated by the re-exportation of goods coming from the New World and Asia.

From the qualities of the cargoes it can be assumed the advanced technology of the Southern area, while the Northern European area shows a growing culture and richness. The merchants were Mediterranean, coming prevalently from the north and centre of the Italian peninsula.

After the turn of the century the balance changed and slowly became favourable to the powers lying around the Northern Sea, in particular to England.

Between 1590 and 1593, years during which the whole Mediterranean area suffered a serious grain shortage, only in the northern ports of the Italian peninsula, such as Genoa, Leghorn and Venice, landed cargoes of cereals almost 600 northern European ships. These arrivals at the end of the XVI century, managed mostly by Ferdinand I Medici, Great Duke of Tuscany as well as great merchant and middleman, emphasise the entrance of the Northern Powers in the Mediterranean, especially of the Dutch.

The English, which had ploughed the Mediterranean waters since the beginning of the XV century, seemed to have a minor role compared with the Dutch in the carrying of cereals at the following century, though they controlled the Channel and the sea routes from the North Sea to the “Inland Sea”. Their main aim had always been to reach the oriental shores of the Mediterranean, in order to break the Italian Sea Republics monopoly, above all that of Genoa and Venice, that imported and distributed spices and luxury goods, as well as industrial raw materials, and to get the large profits deriving from these trades. In fact the Levant Company got a charter from Queen Elisabeth in 1581 and part of the members of that Company formed also the East India Company, founded in 1600.

After a very favourable period in the first half of the XVI century, from 1550 until 1573 there was a long interruption, due to various causes; among them we can

remember the growing importance of Antwerp, the competition by the Mediterranean ships and by the land routes, which did not make the voyages towards south profitable, besides there were various home problems. In June 1573 the English ships re-entered definitively the Mediterranean, when the *Swallow*, John Scott master, landed in Leghorn from Southampton and London, with a cargo of woollen clothes, among which there were some kerseys, raw wool, tin and bells.

English and Dutch ships never left the Mediterranean waters after the end of the XVI century; the English boats were “defensible ships”, that is strong merchant vessels which were able to defend themselves and their cargoes. The defence of the northern European merchantmen was important in an area that was infested by pirates and where there was a continuous competition among the various powers. So the Venetian vessels were ousted from their carrying trade by the rising insurance costs, due to piratical attacks, shipwrecks, etc., and by the competition of the Northern European ships, which not only were able to defend successfully their cargoes, but which offered a service also during the winter months when the Mediterranean boats did not dare to navigate the rough waves of the “inland sea”.

In the second half the XVII century the Dutch organised a convoy of warships to accompany their merchantmen and so to defend them and their cargoes from all possible attacks and improve their intra-Mediterranean carrying trade.

In the same period the English, through various navy fleets and agreements with the Barbary Powers (Mediterranean passes), created a protected area, where also their smaller ships could navigate, thus improving not only their security, but also their distribution and collecting power.

Apart from the carrying trade from one port to another, the so-called the “trade of foreigners”, the goods the Northern European ships, and above all the English ships, imported from the Mediterranean area were above all the Asian spices, probably because there was a large profit to be earned on them, carried in the Levantine ports

by the caravans. Between the end of the XVII and the beginning of the XVIII century the Northern European boats of the East India Companies imported normally pepper, cinnamon, cloves, etc. directly from their sites of production. This was considered by the economist and merchant Thomas Mun, who traded in the Italian peninsula at the beginning of the XVII century, a “revolution of trade”. In fact pepper and other Asian spices, which until the turn of the century were distributed by the Venetian merchants on the European markets, were sold in the Mediterranean area by the Dutch and English trading firms, causing, in this way a profound change in the commercial fluxes.

During the “long” XVII century the Northern European powers, apart from the spices, usually exchanged their woollen cloth with the Persian raw silk, kept inside the Mediterranean by the Armenian mercantile communities, which together with the Italian thrown silk, stimulated in the North of the European continent the silk industry from the last decades of the “Seicento” onwards.

The Mediterranean luxury goods, the “fine goods”, carried by the Northern ships, were not only the foundation of new industries, but also the sign of a growing wealth among the ruling classes, the formation of an English “middling sort” or a Dutch “brede middenstand”, and often spread down on the lower and rural social classes.

The outward cargoes were less varied, as it has been already stressed, composed mainly by woollen cloths of various kind, preserved fish, tin and lead. From the second half of the XVII century the spices from Asia and the colonial goods from the New World began to be added, slowly changing the unfavourable balance of trade between the two poles, which only in the middle decades of the XVIII century turned irreversibly in favour of the English.

The English merchants had a great capacity to adapt to the circumstances they came across for the goods they were bringing to the Mediterranean markets, but also in the organisation of their trade. In fact they operated under the monopoly of the Levant company in the eastern part, which had been managed for a long time by the

Venetian Republic, and through short partnerships in the western part, which saw the alternation of many rulers.

The central part of the Mediterranean area was occupied by the Italian peninsula, which for them was important because it was the birthplace of the Roman and of the Renaissance culture and their artifacts, of authors like Baldassarre Castiglione, whose *Cortegiano* had been translated in 1561 by Sir Thomas Hoby, and Niccolò Machiavelli, it was also the reference point of the Catholic religion and of the Holy Roman Empire.

In the middle years of the XVIII century the trading competition with the Dutch had been won, the new enemies were the French that ended to be a great colonial power after the Seven Years War and the Revolution, the Mediterranean had been definitely conquered and had been an arena where the English, now British, had practised their abilities to master the world as the greatest colonial empire and the first industrial nation.

The Mediterranean area retained partly its commercial importance, and this is certainly a topic to be enquired further in the future; certainly it was the main cultural inspiration of the Northern European ruling classes, who sent their children on the Grand Tour there.

But this is another story!