British Merchants and Goods in Palermo 1797-1816

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One of the aims of the present research is to gain a more precise understanding of the gradual introduction of British, and more generally, foreign merchants into the economic structure of the city.

Though the project is still under way, I will present the results of preliminary research based on previously unexamined documentary material: the registers of the Regia Dogana of Palermo (the so-called Secrezia). The complete series of registers, housed in the State Archives of Palermo, covers the years from 1583 to 1824. These registers, called “Responsali,” were compiled by the master “Secreto” or his delegate, who recorded the salient information regarding exports, boat transshipments and imports. The data for these registers was obtained from a document also called “responsale,” which was issued at the embarkation point of the goods shipped to Palermo.

This phase of the analysis was based on data from 5 of the 14 registers corresponding to the years 1797-1816, a period in which the English presence in Sicily was most evident. The analysis of the “Responsali” not only reveals precise information about the presence of British merchants in Palermo in that period but also about other equally active foreign and local merchants.

The range and importance of this information, for the history of Sicilian commerce, facilitate the chronological reappraisal of other sources available (notary records, the Commercial Court, the Ingham-Whitaker Archives, the Real Segreteria). This permits the comparisons necessary to identify the exact dates of arrival of all the principal actors and the beginning of activity for the foreign commercial houses. The data also helps to redesign the network of relationships with local merchants, in part already known, and among merchants of different cities.

The annotations contained in the “Responsali” have the advantage of being relatively well-organized because of the need to regulate the collection of import and export duties on goods at the port of Palermo. This necessitated, among other things, the detailed description of these goods.

Along general lines, the structure of the “Responsali” is based on a temporal sequence of entries regarding four possible activities: besides “Estrazioni” and “Immissioni” which correspond to exports and imports, one finds operations called “Imballo”
(packaged goods) and “Travazzo” (transshipments). The “Imballo,” on one hand, was considered an exportation category for items previously imported from “Fuori Regno” (outside the Kingdom) by the same or different merchants. This involved, in large part, wholesalers who redistributed these goods to the merchants of the Island. The “Travazzo,” on the other hand, consisted of the transfer of cargo from one anchored ship to another. In other words, these were products in transit, not destined for the local market, but for which customs duties were still paid.

The following data for each of these four activities was transcribed by the official of the “Secrezia.”

- For the “Immissioni”: the origin of the ship; the name of the captain or owner of the ship; the date of the “responsale” document was issued at the departure from one of the ports of the Kingdom of Naples and Sicily; the type and quantity of the imported goods; the date of record of the operation in the customs register of Palermo.

- For the “Estrazioni”: the name of the exporter and the captain or owner of the ship; the goods embarked and their respective quantity; the destination, “per Fuori” or “per Infra Regno,” sometimes with the precise indication of the city; the date of record in the registers of the Secrezia.

The information recorded for the “Imballi” and the “Travazzi” was essentially analogous. The names of merchants, regardless of the type of operation recorded, were sometimes accompanied by place of origin or, in the case of foreigners, by nationality. Besides the usual material errors, it was not uncommon to detect misleading attributions in which the same merchant (importer or exporter) was considered either English or German, without distinction, based on the nationality of the name of the foreign company. I will leave aside considerations regarding quantitative data of the arriving or departing goods which, it should be noted, present numerous difficulties; for instance, the information available is not always complete, legible and homogeneous, especially regarding the importation of fabric. I will limit myself to observations about commercial relations and contacts, the identity of the merchants, and some aspects of the goods. As we can see in Table 1, 4202 operations have been examined and divided by typology. The numerical sequence of the registers and the respective dates not only demonstrate the archival lacunae for the period Sept 1798 - August 1800, but also show the reutilization of an earlier register (n.1757) for a large number of entries that should have been recorded in register n.1758.
Even if the number of entries for “Imballi” and “Travazzi” seem more or less equal, the respective trend for the two, at the end of the 20 year period, is divergent: the former decrease and the latter grow markedly, until the disappearance of both from the registers after 1814. In any case, as has already been stated, the nature of the two operations is different; the “Imballi” were exports from Palermo “via sea” toward other island ports or “via land” toward the inland cities, and were, nonetheless, subject to customs duties. The origin of these goods was almost exclusively “Fuori Regno.” At the end of the 18th century, “Imballi” in the port of Palermo were handled in large part by the merchants from Positano, rather than locals, and the percentage of the operations traceable to foreigners did not exceed 7%, with a clear prevalence of French merchants (specifically, the commercial house of Bouge & Caillol). Among the English present were Abraham Gibbs, Carlo Maud and James Tough. There was also an essential similarity regarding the typology of the packaged goods recorded: raw and finished fabric, plush, German and English wools, coypu fur from France and Germany to be used in Holland, cashmere, and printed, dyed or embroidered muslin. Out of a total of 267 operations only six dealt with Spanish sugar and ground or rappee tobacco.

The “Travazzi,” which concerned products boarded on Sicilian or foreign ships that were not destined for the Palermo market, furnish an account quite unlike the “Imballi.” In general, the figure of the ship captains (especially Dalmatian, Danish and American), who handled this particular activity for themselves or for others (the difference is not always clear), emerged. Furthermore, the presence of foreigners – representing about 18% of the total activity – appeared noteworthy and differentiated: the English (Gibbs, Maud, Paterson, Tough, Vallin, Woodhouse), the Maltese (Attardi, Gatt and Mattei), Austrians (Betz, Novatsky and Palme, Langer & Co.), the Danish (Rap), the Portuguese (Gropia and Casale), and the Savoyards (Gurliè). As opposed to the “Imballi,” there was no French presence in the “Travazzi” entries and the different types of the goods noted were quite varied: sumac, manna, leather and dried skins, tobacco, sugar, spices, fabrics and clothing, wood, iron, copper, porcelain, etc.…

Regarding the countries and cities of origin, the information is not sufficiently exhaustive because the percentage of ships which lack provenience in the “Travazzi” is 62%; for each of the identified ships (the remaining 38%) that came from other Sicilian ports, however, there were about 10 ships arriving from outside the kingdom. The identity of the port of destination of the ships leaving Palermo with transshipped goods is more precise; 86% of the ships were headed toward coastal cities of the island, while
only 6% went to other foreign ports or the peninsula. For the remaining 8%, no port of destination was specified.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the registered operations in the period under examination had to do with imports (75.4% of the total), and even when reflecting lower levels, the imports predominated when compared to the activities described above. Table 2 records, in decreasing order, the cities of origin of the imported goods and the number of operations per locality. Nevertheless, apart from the examination of data for each city, a comparison by area is also useful (cf. Tab. 3). For the sake of convenience, the material has been divided into “Intendenze,” the administrative subdivision adopted by the Bourbon government in 1817, rather than the ancient tripartite division of Sicily, the “Valle.” Such an aggregation makes the importance of the agro-industrial areas of Messina and Trapani, the principal suppliers of consumer goods to the capital, immediately visible.

Thus, for example, numerous shipments of wine destined for the Palermo market departed from Castellammare del Golfo (TP) or from the nearby Partinico (PA), traditionally strong wine-growing areas. Marsala wine, however, was shipped outside the kingdom directly from the port of Trapani. Similarly, bales of raw and refined silk reached Palermo from towns in the Messina area, Brolo, Patti, Sant’Agata, San Fratello, and San Marco. The overall supremacy of Messina in imports was nothing new, considering that the “free port” status, reintroduced in 1784, had attracted numerous merchants and foreign commercial houses and relaunched the city (after the earthquake of 1783) as the most important Sicilian marketplace. An analysis of the trends in imports from Messina shows some particularly interesting aspects. In the years 1797-98, the 39 “Immissioni” from Messina appear to be modest and fall almost entirely into the sphere of commercial activity run by local operators. This activity included refined silk imported by don Matteo Gulì and iron in sheaves or rods from Northern Europe. The only operation traceable to foreigners was on behalf of a Swiss house of Federico Meuricoffre and his Neapolitan partner Sorvillo for whom the Palermitan don Bartolomeo Impallomeni e Giuliana imported wool and coypu furs from Germany. Two years later – as is clear from Table 2 – imports from Messina had almost doubled: 357 operations compared to 197 from Naples which, until that moment, had maintained supremacy in commercial activity with Palermo. This activity was now cut back because of the political-military situation in Europe. Besides local raw and refined silk, products from German and Dutch textile industries, English fabric and muslins,
Bohemian crystal, nails, iron and glass sheets, cacao, spices, tobacco, and lumber from Calabria also arrived from Messina. About 21% of these imports were now run by foreign residents of Palermo: these included the very active French merchants, Bouge and Caillol, who operated through their agent Stefano Campo, the widow of Francesco Phillip and Dursarques La Valle; the Germans, Palme, Langer & C. and the Peratoner brothers; the Portuguese, Claudio Rocques; and the Savoyards, Gurliè. The only English importer who appeared with frequency in the customs registers of that period was the previously cited Abraham Gibbs, partner in the Anglo-Swiss company Falconnet, Gibbs & C., with offices in Naples.

In any case – as discussed by Michela D’Angelo (Mercanti inglesi in Sicilia 1806-1815, Milano, 1998) - only from 1806 do we begin to see an increase in the presence of English merchants in Palermo. By 1811 a nucleus of 16 commercial houses had been established, against the 33 active in Messina at the time.

Regarding exports (cf. Tab. 4), it is possible to see the decreasing trend and their definitive decline in 1814, as well as the complete cessation of this activity by 1815. The analysis of the commercial flows leaving Palermo confirm the prevalence of the “Infra-Regno” traffic (never inferior to 70.6% of the total, with peaks of 80.9%) especially toward Messina, which is proof of the subordinate position of the Palermo market. But there is another very significant fact which needs explaining (cf. Tab. 4); among the entries for exports from Palermo, the “Responsali” show the large amounts of cash transfers from one marketplace to another that French merchants like Bouge & Caillol or the Maltese, Calcedonio Gatt, were capable of. This also indicates how much liquidity was available, before the British occupation, for the imports from Messina and their respective payments. The strong contraction of cash transfers that was already noted in 1800 may be explained by the reduction of activity of foreign and local merchants who had maintained, until that moment, control over the Palermo market. This change may also be understood as a consequence of the introduction of new means for the regulation of transactions, and of more secure financial instruments such as letters of exchange, whose marked development is can be seen in notary minutes. In any case, the simultaneous presence in the principal Sicilian marketplaces of an increasing number of consuls, vice-consuls, and British merchants notably increased the margins of reciprocal financial “trust” and long-range compensation. For the sake of brevity, further clarification regarding the registers currently under examination will appear in future publications.