Migration and Membership Regimes in Global and Historical Perspective

An Introduction

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FAVOURING FOREIGN TRADERS? THE VENETIAN REPUBLIC
AND THE ACCOMMODATION OF NETHERLANDISH MERCHANTS
IN THE LATE 16TH AND 17TH CENTURIES

Maartje van Gelder

At the end of the 15th century, the French ambassador Philippe de Commynes remarked of the Venetians that “most of their people are foreigners”.¹ Depicting early modern Venice² as a cosmopolitan society was, and still is, a persistent trope. The Venetian banker and patrician Girolamo Priuli made a similar observation not long after De Commynes: “With the exception of the patricians and some *cittadini* (citizens), all the rest are foreigners and very few are Venetians”.³ With a population that around 1607 approached 190,000 inhabitants, Venice was one of the largest early modern European cities, while more than two million people lived in its subject territories on the Italian mainland and in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Venice's population, as in all other early modern cities, was subject to high infant mortality and raging epidemics, and could only be sustained by heavy immigration. Yet Venice's attitude to immigration was dictated by the city-state's specific political make-up and economic orientation. In fact, De Commynes' observation was not intended as a description or celebration of Venice's social and cultural diversity, but as part of his account of its political system, in which he contrasted the powerful political elite with the multitude of subaltern foreigners.

In a period when centralized monarchies became the European norm, Venice stood out as an oligarchic republic, with a nobility—or patriciate—that set the political agenda.⁴ Venice's role as commercial intermediary between Europe and Asia was the foundation of the city-state's prosperity between the 13th and 16th centuries. Consequently, the main source of the nobility's wealth during this period was international commerce. Most patricians at one time or another during their career were merchants or

¹ Commynes 1969: 493.

² ‘Venice’ refers to the republican city-state and, unless stated specifically, does not include the Venetian subject territories on mainland Italy and in the Eastern Mediterranean.

³ Priuli 1938: 101.

⁴ Lane 1973: 333.

Map 1. Venice and its territories in the sixteenth century. (©Maartje van Gelder)

captains of the state galleys, occupations that in Venice were considered fitting for a nobleman, unlike in many other early modern societies. Venice's position depended on dominance of the Levantine (Eastern Mediterranean) trade routes. Hence, the political elite not only used the navy to defend these routes, but also created a substantial and intricate body of protective legislation. These laws made maritime trade between Venice and the Levant the exclusive privilege of Venetian patricians and *cittadini*, the members of the citizen class one level below the patriciate. In line with this economic agenda, the polity controlled the settlement of foreign traders and restricted their participation in international trade from or through Venice.⁵ This arrangement had been the basis of Venetian economic prosperity for centuries, yet by the start of the 17th century, significant shifts in the global economy meant that the Venetian elite had to adapt its strict policies regarding trade and immigration.

By 1600, the Mediterranean was no longer the crucial commercial link between East and West. Trading centres in Northern Europe were taking over, with Amsterdam rapidly becoming the most important commercial hub. Within the Venetian domain, it became increasingly obvious that the city-state's own mercantile community was no longer able to provide certain goods and services, and foreign merchants with ties to Amsterdam were more and more taking their place. By 1602, the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia*, the five patricians forming the Venetian Board of Trade, lamented that foreigners and outsiders had become masters of all commercial shipping in Venice.⁶ Five years later the patricians were much more specific when they reported to the Venetian Senate (the council responsible for economic, diplomatic and naval matters) that the "Netherlandish nation nowadays does [the] greatest amount of trade and one could say, that [this nation] more than all the others makes commerce blossom in this city".⁷ Obviously, the increasing importance of these foreign traders was putting a strain on Venice's traditional protectionist policies.

⁵ Arbel 1995: 1–2.

⁶ *Archivio di Stato di Venezia* (ASV), Senato Mar [hereafter: SM], reg. 141, 15 July 1602. The Venetian calendar began the year on 1 March. Dates in the text have been converted to the Roman calendar, but dates in the footnotes have been left in the Venetian style to facilitate locating the documents in Venetian archives. To avoid confusion, any dates between 1 January and 1 March shown in the Venetian calendar are followed by (m.v.) or *more veneto*.

⁷ ASV, Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia [hereafter: CSM], Risposte, reg. 141, 16 January 1606 (m.v.): 192r–192v. For a discussion of the social and economic characteristics of this merchant community and their relations with the Venetian Republic, see Van Gelder 2009b.

The Netherlands were relative newcomers to the Mediterranean. 'Netherlandish' refers to people from the conglomerate of provinces that constituted the Netherlands or Low Countries, before they became divided during the Dutch Revolt (1568 to 1648 CE). The war resulted in the foundation of the Dutch Republic in the North and the Spanish or Habsburg Netherlands in the South. The adjective 'Netherlandish' most accurately describes the identity of the merchants trading with and in Venice: the majority were born in the Spanish Netherlands and traded in Antwerp. Once the war started to destroy the economy of the South, they and their families emigrated and settled in other commercial centres, including Frankfurt, Cologne, London and Amsterdam. The 'Antwerp diaspora', as their dispersal has been named, thus constituted a supranational network that linked those who had stayed behind in Antwerp to relatives and friends in all the major trading centres of early modern Europe.⁸

What attracted the Netherlandish traders to Venice was the city's location at the crossroads of overland and maritime trade routes, linking the North with the South and the East with the West. They sought to profit from this strategic position, which would have allowed them to distribute commodities from the Amsterdam market to the Mediterranean region and vice versa. To attain their goal, they needed to circumvent or influence the Venetian legislation that excluded them from Venetian-Levantine trade. Whilst examples of smuggling by the Netherlands abound, this chapter will not focus on the illegal option, but rather on the ways in which this particular group of immigrant merchants tried to affect Venetian policies and thus re-shape the polity's agenda. By looking at the relationships between the Venetian state and the Netherlandish merchants at a moment of economic transition, the interplay between polity and immigrants comes into focus. The examination of the ways in which the traders collectively sought to influence Venetian legislation raises new questions about the relationship between rigid and repressive states and subaltern immigrant traders.⁹

After first describing the manner in which the Venetian Republic organized politics and trade, I will discuss the growing importance of the Netherlandish merchants in Venice during the 1590s. In the last part of the chapter, I will look at the Netherlands' practice of submitting petitions, questioning what their main targets were and what strategies they

⁸ Still fundamental is Brulez 1960.

⁹ Cfr. Cowan 2000.

adopted, and examining how the Venetian authorities responded. In this way, I will show that petitioning became a valuable tool for the Netherlanders to influence Venetian economic policies. At the same time, even though members of the political elite grumbled, the Venetian polity opted for a gradual adaption of its intricate system of laws and regulations, offering a high level of economic accommodation to these immigrants.

The Venetian Republic

In the early 1620s, Venice's official historian, the patrician Nicolò Contarini, unambiguously expressed his concerns regarding the arrival of a specific group of merchants during the preceding years. In his unpublished *Historie Venetiane*, he stated that traders from the Netherlands were "especially favoured in Venice" and—much to his dismay—even enticed to trade in Venice with extensive public benefactions (*donativi dal pubblico*). He complained that ever since the Netherlanders had arrived at the end of the 16th century, the Republic had become far too permissive, thus hoping to attract their trade, but without taking into account the long-term negative effects of this leniency on Venetian commerce.¹⁰ Contarini's comments show that by the beginning of the 17th century the Venetian polity was starting to loosen its grip, even going as far as to extend significant commercial privileges to immigrant traders. His comments also show the profound unease of those patricians who continued to consider strict control over international trade an integral part of the Venetian state's identity, and thus an intrinsic part of their own patrician agenda.

Contemporaries often described the Venetian Republic as the 'ideal state' and these accounts have become the basis of what is termed 'the myth of Venice'.¹¹ An important element supporting this myth was the idea that the organization of Venetian society into a hierarchy of three legally defined orders (two of which had very specific privileges) prevented outbreaks of internal discord. At the top of the hierarchy stood the patricians, the Venetian ruling class that made up around four to five per cent of the total population. The families that were considered noble had been

¹⁰ Cozzi 1958: 363: "...erano in ogni luogo e particolarmente a Venetia, favoriti, perché non prevedendosi dove fusse per arrivare questa nuova navigazione, che pur all'hora apportava qualche beneficio alla città, non solo erano in generale (...) favoriti, ma di più ancora con donativi dal pubblico accarezzati, accioché sollecitamente frequentassero il negotio".

¹¹ For a succinct description, see Martin and Romano 2000.

Figure 1. City of Venice from: Reinier Ottens, *Atlas maior cum generales omnium totius orbis regnorum* (Amsterdam 1719–1725), Universiteitsbibliotheek Amsterdam.

determined at the *Serrata* (closing) in 1297, the implementation of a law which equated membership in the Great Council with nobility.¹² From that moment onwards, noble status became hereditary and was transferred through the male lineage. Only adult male nobles of legitimate birth could enter the Great Council and participate in Venetian political life.

Immediately below the patriciate came the class of the *cittadini originari*, or 'citizens by birth'. Members of this social group had access to jobs in the Venetian bureaucracy, where they formed the stable administrative backbone for the ever-changing noble councils. Being a *cittadino originario* also offered specific commercial privileges, allowing access to the guilds and the right to trade between Venice and the Levant, a right restricted to Venetian nobles and citizen merchants.¹³ Membership in the citizenry was ill-defined until the second half of the 16th century, when the criteria became increasingly selective. A *cittadino* had to be native-born and he, his father and his grandfather had to have been of legitimate birth and not involved in manual work. In this secondary elite, comprising about seven per cent of the Venetian population, the citizens mirrored the patricians' preoccupation with status and birth.¹⁴

With no specific political or professional privileges, the *popolani* class included the great majority of Venetian inhabitants and hence was the most diverse, encompassing poor day-labourers, shopkeepers (who in wealth could outstrip many a patrician) and immigrants.¹⁵ As the capital of an extensive state and an economic and cultural centre, Venice attracted international merchants, artisans, unskilled workers and artists. Many came from the Venetian territories on the Italian mainland Terraferma or in the Eastern Mediterranean. Others came from other Italian states, the rest of Europe and the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶ Although immigrants in general faced no restrictions, the Venetian state developed regulations aimed at individual foreigners and at specific groups of immigrants.

¹² The reform of 1297 formed the basis for the establishment of a distinct ruling class in Venice, but research has shown that noble status continuously evolved and was redefined, both before and after the *Serrata*. For further, see Chojnacki 2000.

¹³ Grubb 2000: 341.

¹⁴ Brown 1996.

¹⁵ In practice, these three social groups were not as rigidly separated as Venetian legal definitions would suggest: patronage networks could extend well beyond the borders of legal status, and intermarriage between male patricians and girls from wealthy non-patrician families did occur, Martin and Romano 2000: 19.

¹⁶ Fedalto 1984 and Fedalto 1978 give an overview of immigrants in Venice.

To individual non-Venetians of impeccable reputation, the state offered the possibility to obtain a customized version of Venetian citizenship, defined as a set of economic privileges. For foreigners engaged in international trade, the *cittadinanza de intus et extra* (citizenship inside and outside Venice) allowed them to participate in international trade under the same terms and conditions as native Venetians, thus allowing access to Venetian-Levantine commerce. The official requirements entailed 25 years of residence in Venice and full payment of taxes.¹⁷ These forms of citizenship were only conferred after an investigation into an applicant's background, their periods of residence in Venice, their financial position and their reputation and that of the two previous generations.¹⁸ The regulations included that these newly-made citizens *de intus et extra* "must present themselves as Venetian citizens in every part of the world where they trade".¹⁹ Granting citizenship thus was a form of controlled admission for those non-Venetians considered an asset to the polity.

Economic and religious motives, or a combination of both, determined the Venetian attitude to certain groups of foreigners or strangers. The German traders were an example of controlled settlement for economic reasons. To prevent them engaging directly in Levantine trade, the Republic compelled the Germans to reside in the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*, the collegial exchange house first constructed in 1228. The *Fondaco*, as a means to regulate the transactions of merchants from a specific region, was modelled on the *funduq*, an institution that combined the functions of warehouse, customs office, market, and inn for Christian traders in the Muslim world.²⁰ All trade had to be conducted in the *Fondaco* through official brokers (*sensali*) and under the supervision of Venetian officials.²¹ At around 1580, it housed roughly a hundred Germans and a similar number of servants and officials.²²

Religious concerns shaped the settlement regulation of Jews in Venice. They had only been allowed to live in the city after 1509, but the Venetians

¹⁷ In other European cities the requirement of consecutive residence was also usually connected to forms of citizenship-by-privilege, as opposed to citizenship-by-birth, but nowhere were the required periods as long as in Venice. For example, in Paris, citizenship could be obtained after a residence of one year and one day, Bellavitis 2001: 1.

¹⁸ Bellavitis 1995.

¹⁹ Chambers and Pullan 1992: 227.

²⁰ On the Venetian *fondaci* and their prototypes in the Islamic world, see Constable 2003: 315–328.

²¹ Lupprian 1978.

²² Chambers and Pullan 1992: 330.

maintained a strong ambivalence concerning their permanent residence.²³ From 1516 the Jews, themselves a multi-ethnic community of German, Italian, Iberian and Levantine origins, had to live in the ghetto, a segregated residential area separated from the neighbouring houses of Christian inhabitants by high walls and surrounded by a canal. The entrance gate was guarded, and isolated the Jewish residents from the rest of the city between sunset and sunrise. Rules and regulations pertaining to their settlement, economic activities and religious practices were recorded in special collective charters, called *condotte*. These charters had to be renegotiated every five or ten years and specified in minute detail the terms under which Jews were allowed to settle in Venice.²⁴ Jewish families lived in the ghetto for generations, and hence cannot be considered immigrants. However, as non-Christians they remained outsiders, in the sense expressed by the sociologist Georg Simmel: “an element of the group itself and yet their position was determined by the fact that they did not belong to it from the beginning”.²⁵

At the height of its commercial power, the Venetian trading network extended from Acre and Alexandria in the Levant to Bruges and London in Western Europe.²⁶ The *entrepôt* trade was the foundation of Venice's prosperity and its intermediary position was based on its geographic location, a sizeable harbour, and sophisticated commercial and financial institutions. Because Venice's position as an intermediary depended on its domination of the Levantine trade routes, its political elite had striven to protect its position with a substantial and intricate body of legislation.

With the expansion of the Ottoman Empire, Venice's control of the trade routes to the Near East started to crumble during the 16th century. Increasing competition in the Mediterranean region from the French further complicated matters. They developed their own trade relations with the Ottoman Empire following a commercial treaty between King Francis I and Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in 1536.²⁷ The harbour of Marseille therefore became an important competitor to Venice in the trade of exports from the Levant to Europe. During the second half of the 16th century, the English also entered into Levantine trade and seized a

²³ The literature on the Jews in early-modern Venice is extremely extensive. Recent contributions can be found in Ravid 2002.

²⁴ Ravid 2002.

²⁵ Simmel 1950: 402.

²⁶ Sella 1961: 34–35; Pullan 1968: 1; Lane 1973: 66–85.

²⁷ Sella 1968: 90–91.

large part of the Ottoman market, while the Dutch Republic soon followed. Their ships were faster and safer than the Venetian vessels, while cheaper northern European cloth met Ottoman demands.²⁸ Consequently, Venice had lost a large part of its main markets by 1600.

Changes outside the Mediterranean region also greatly influenced Venetian trade. The increasingly intensive exploitation of ocean routes by the English and especially the Dutch East India Company effectively rerouted the spice trade. Not only did oriental commodities reach the northern harbours directly, but pepper and spices started to arrive in Venice from Western Europe.²⁹ All these setbacks did not mean the end of Venice as an economic centre and the Venetian port still handled a significant amount of trade and shipping. Yet even though the annual revenues from anchorage tax rose from 1591 onwards, this was the result of a rise in the number of non-Venetian ships in the lagoon.³⁰ The growing proportion of foreign ships frequenting the Venetian harbour was a telling sign of the changing position of the city.

The institution of the magistracy of the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia* itself at the start of the 16th century had been a response to increasing difficulties faced by Venetian trade. The *Cinque Savi* (five wise men) were charged with the task of advising the Senate on all matters concerning commerce and shipping.³¹ This magistracy consisted of five members of the Senate, who could provide a business perspective, either from their own experience or from the experience of a family member active in trade. As Venice became more and more dependent on foreign ships and merchants, the tasks of the *Cinque Savi* were extended to include all matters involving immigrant traders. The institution therefore became an important intermediary in the relations between the Venetian polity and the Netherlandish merchants.

With the reduction of Venice's commercial scope, the international network of Venetian merchants also declined, in turn leading to a decrease in contacts and access to commercial information. In the mid-16th century, Venetian merchants were present in all the important commercial centres of the Levant and Western Europe. By the 17th century, the number of Venetian merchants in the Levant had started to dwindle, while their

²⁸ Sella 1961: 26–34.

²⁹ Van Gelder 2009a: 34; Luzzatto 1954: 174–175.

³⁰ Lane 1966: 150–153.

³¹ Borgherini-Scarabellin 1925.

presence in the ports of Western Europe had declined even more sharply.³² In 1610, the *Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia* had to conclude that there were no longer any Venetian merchants trading with Western Europe and only a limited number with the Levant.³³ This in turn would lead to a revision of the traditional commercial policies and had implications for the Venetian state's identity: the patrician merchant involved in international maritime trade, once the symbol of the intertwinement of politics and commerce became increasingly rare in the 17th century.

The Settlement of Netherlandish Merchants in Venice

The settlement of the Netherlanders was a result of political upheaval in the Netherlands and climatic conditions in the Mediterranean. Before the 1590s, a small number of merchants from the Netherlands traded with Venice. After the Venetian galley route to Bruges and Antwerp fell into disuse at the start of the 16th century, commerce between Venice and the Netherlands was primarily conducted by Antwerp merchants, using Antwerp-Venetian trading routes via Germany.³⁴

By the 1580s, a few Antwerp merchants had started to experiment with maritime trade to the Mediterranean region. However, this new route for commerce did not make enough profit and was quickly abandoned, mainly because the war against Spain severely damaged Antwerp's trade in the final decades of the 16th century.³⁵ Large numbers of merchants and artisans fled Antwerp during the subsequent revolt, seeking greater safety, the freedom to practise their Protestant religion and better commercial opportunities. Many migrated to Amsterdam, bringing their business contacts and experience, and thereby contributing to the city's rapid commercial growth in subsequent decades. As the commercial balance in the Netherlands shifted to the advantage of Amsterdam, Venice faced a set of problems that would fundamentally change its commercial position.

Harvests in the Mediterranean region were generally unpredictable and yields were relatively low, but in the 1590s the whole area suffered a spell of extremely bad weather, resulting in rising food prices and the threat of civil unrest. Consequently, during these years concern about the city's

³² Dursteler 2006: 24; Subacchi 1995.

³³ ASV, CSM, Risposte, r. 142, 5 July 1610.

³⁴ Stabel 2003.

³⁵ Brulez 1960: 125–136.

Map 2. Overland trade routes connecting Venice with Northern Europe.
(©Maartje van Gelder)

food supply dominated Venetian politics. Venice was forced to import grain from outside the Mediterranean area and looked to the Baltic region for emergency supplies. However, Venice's own trading network proved insufficient to organize large-scale commercial ventures with Northern Europe and the city-state had to turn to foreign suppliers. From the 15th century, there had been instances of the mitigation of protectionist legislation in order to stimulate the trade of Levantine and Ponentine Jews, but the grain crisis compelled the Venetian authorities to give unprecedented commercial privileges to foreign traders.³⁶

Firstly, the city's Grain Office entered directly into contracts with individual merchants who were able to provide foreign cereals, guaranteeing a minimum price and extending a loan covering all costs except freight. Secondly, at the start of 1591, the Senate issued special privileges to all foreign ships carrying cereals, exempting them from the harbour tax usually levied on non-Venetian vessels.³⁷ These measures greatly reduced costs and risks, as did the ruling giving merchants the option to sell the grain in Terraferma cities if demand in Venice was satisfied.³⁸

The final decade of the 16th century proved to be pivotal for relations between the Venetian polity and the immigrant merchants from the Low Countries. Netherlandish merchants who had previously been engaged in overland trade now saw a golden opportunity: they had the necessary experience to deal with Venetian institutions, while their contacts in northern harbours through their widely scattered family members and colleagues, gave them access to grain and transport for it.³⁹ In addition, the extensive state-granted privileges greatly reduced entrepreneurial risk. In April 1591, when the shortage of bread was becoming ever more acute in the city, the first shipments of grain organized by Netherlandish merchants arrived from Danzig. According to one chronicler, so much grain was sold in the following days that it seemed as if there had been a sudden spring harvest. Grain prices fell to a third within 20 days of the arrival of the ships.⁴⁰ Gauging the opportunity for profit, the Netherlandish merchants began sending large fleets carrying cereals through the Strait of Gibraltar to supply the Italian cities in the years of food shortages. In the

³⁶ Arbel 2001: 73–96.

³⁷ Lane 1966: 160.

³⁸ See Van Gelder 2004.

³⁹ Van Gelder 2004: 50–54.

⁴⁰ Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Mss. It., VII, 755 (8235), c. 198.

first 15 years after 1590, nearly 400 ships sailed from Amsterdam to Italy.⁴¹ Once this maritime trade had begun, others arrived to take advantage of the newly established trade routes and consequently the number of Netherlandish traders in Venice increased in the 1590s.⁴²

They formed a relatively small community in the Italian metropolis, ranging between 20 and 50 merchant families. Shared origins, kinship ties and commercial contacts reinforced the bonds among the merchants in Venice, while also linking them to similar communities of Netherlanders in a wide variety of European trade centres.⁴³ This allowed them the use of multiple trade routes and gave them access to different markets. Although their origins and business interests were relatively homogeneous, the merchants' religious affiliations were not. Both Catholic and Protestant Netherlanders settled in Venice. Reformed services were condoned, and as long as no native Venetians were present or in danger of conversion, these heterodox traders suffered no hindrance from the Venetian authorities. The religious heterogeneity, however, posed no obstacle to a strong internal cohesion among the Netherlanders, and both Catholic and Protestant traders formed part of the *nazione fiamminga*, as the Netherlandish merchant community was known locally.

In the years after 1590, the commercial scope of the Netherlanders expanded. Once the *Straatvaart*—Netherlandish maritime commerce (*vaart*) beyond the Straits (*Straat*) of Gibraltar—had begun, ships from the Northern Netherlands continued to arrive in the port of Venice, bringing a wide variety of goods such as fish, timber, lead, and textiles, and exporting Venetian and Levantine commodities. The Netherlandish merchants initiated direct trade between Venice and Muscovy, importing hemp, leather and caviar. For the supply of crucial and strategic goods, such as grain in times of famine, the Venetian polity resorted to state contracts with individual Netherlanders. In times of war during the 17th century, the Venetian Republic also engaged Netherlandish traders to deliver war supplies. The Antwerp merchant Pietro Pellicorno (born Pieter Pellecoorn) provided great quantities of gunpowder and ammunition to Venice in 1606, the year of the Interdict, when tensions between the Republic and the Pope reached a climax.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Van Royen 1990: 87.

⁴² Van Gelder 2009b: 99–106.

⁴³ Van Gelder 2009b: 110–130.

⁴⁴ ASV, CRD, b. 13, 24 October 1614; National Archive, The Hague, States General, 1.01.08, Loketkas Italy, 12578.2.2, 29 September 1606.

Figure 2. A late sixteenth-century trader from the Netherlands, depicted by the Venetian-based artist Cesare Vecellio in his costumebook, which documented historical and contemporary fashion. From C. Vecellio, *Habiti antichi, overo Racolta di figure [...] conforme alle nationi del mondo* (Venice 1664; first edition 1598), Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

By 1607, the *Cinque Savi* had to admit that the Netherlands contributed the most to trade and shipping: they connected Venice with the commercial centres of Amsterdam, Russia, Danzig and England, while also being involved actively in the export of all types of Levantine goods.⁴⁵ More than anything else, the shipments of spices that had been arriving from Amsterdam since at least 1605 underlined the Venetian loss of control over international trade.⁴⁶ The Dutch East India Company had been founded three years previously and was becoming the dominant player in the spice trade. When the *Cinque Savi* decided to revise import taxes in 1625, tariff lists had to be adjusted to better reflect the reality of the marketplace: spices, including pepper, as well as cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg, were now reclassified as commodities from the *Ponente* (Western Europe) and no longer from the Levant.⁴⁷ The Netherlands had become the link between Mediterranean and Atlantic commerce.

The changes to the scope and character of their trade also gave the Netherlands an advantage over other immigrant merchants in Venice. They were unique in being able to export Levantine commodities and Venetian textiles by both land and sea. Combining both continental and maritime commerce enabled the Netherlands merchants to substitute one route for the other if risks became excessive, giving them much needed versatility at a time when war frequently threatened trade. While the maritime route was used when transport via German lands became too dangerous because of the Thirty Years' War, the situation was reversed during the first Anglo-Dutch War (1652 to 1654), when merchants preferred to send their goods to Italy by land.⁴⁸ The broad range of commodities and trade routes provided the Netherlands merchants with a strong position in the Venetian marketplace, a position they blatantly used to gain specific concessions from the authorities, who had to acknowledge that Venice had come to rely heavily on these traders for the viability of its *piazza*.

⁴⁵ ASV, CSM, Risposte, reg. 141, 16 January 1606 (m.v.), c. 192r–192v.

⁴⁶ ASV, Avogaria di Comun, Miscellanea penale, b. 34/8, c. 8r–15v (1605). Cf. Israel 1986: 89.

⁴⁷ ASV, CSM, Risposte, reg. 147, c. 11v, 13 May 1626.

⁴⁸ Heeringa 1910: 151.

Opting for Petitions

Venice dealt with different groups of non-Venetian traders in different ways. Some communities of strangers, such as the Germans for example, were legally recognized, which meant that they received communal rights regulated by statute. However, this also entailed collective restrictions and a high level of government control. These regulations could relate to the immigrants' economic activities, places of residence or religious practices. No distinct communal regulations or charters were laid down in Venetian jurisprudence for traders from the Netherlands,⁴⁹ yet this was not a drawback, but a strength. They were not subject to specific restrictions and this allowed them a greater flexibility when dealing with the Venetian government. Theirs was a less visible and less structured trading nation, based primarily on internal social and economic interrelations, which could nevertheless muster a united front when needed while retaining a flexibility not possible for more rigidly organized groups of foreign merchants.

The Netherlandish traders countered the protectionist policies of the Venetian state in various ways. Smuggling was an option, and one that the Netherlanders seem to have resorted to quite frequently. Applying for citizenship was another option (and legal), but only for those merchants who had spent a significant number of years in Venice. Ten Netherlandish traders successfully attained citizenship, although not all met the necessary criteria.⁵⁰ Because of the decline in Venetian trade and the lack of native traders, the Venetian authorities showed great leniency towards the Netherlanders requesting this privilege. However, even though the economic advantages were significant, citizenship status was by no means indispensable, especially for those who traded between Venice and Western Europe. As a result, not every Netherlandish merchant who had lived in Venice for sufficient time applied for citizenship. Collective efforts by the traders offered an alternative to those who were unable or unwilling to request citizenship.

Over the years, the Netherlandish collective submitted a significant number of *suppliche* (supplications or petitions) to the Venetian authorities. Petitions were an important means of communication between subjects and rulers in the early-modern era. By submitting a petition, supplicants could ask the government for favours or voice complaints, while

⁴⁹ Van Gelder 2009b: 139–153.

⁵⁰ Van Gelder 2009b: 131–139.

the letters offered the state an insight into the concerns of the population and a channel through which to dispense grace and justice.⁵¹ Individual Netherlandish merchants might make *ad hoc* requests, for example asking for Venetian passes to safeguard their ships sailing to Iberian harbours in times of war between Spain and the Dutch Republic, or appealing for intervention in conflicts with Venetian magistrates, usually tax officers.⁵² Although the Netherlandish merchants were often competitors in Venetian-Ponentine trade, this rivalry was obviously outweighed by the potential benefits from joining together in dealing with the Venetian authorities. When submitting petitions collectively, they targeted larger issues in the interests of the whole group, such as tax exemptions for certain goods or specific trade routes. Between 1589 and 1651, the Netherlanders submitted at least 33 collective petitions to the *Collegio*, the council that reviewed matters before they were discussed in the Senate.⁵³ In response to a Netherlandish petition, the *Cinque Savi* were often asked to draw up a report, evidencing how the polity sought to negotiate with these outsiders.

There are no sources, such as records of the Netherlandish merchants' meetings, which provide information on the manner in which these petitions were drafted. However, it is possible to partially reconstruct this practice. First, who participated in the collective petitions? Petitioners seldom signed their requests, because they had to identify themselves in the first part of their petition. The collective petitions of the Netherlanders, therefore, always refer to '*la nazione fiamminga*' and sometimes to the '*università*', indicating that, although not legally recognized, there was a collective organization of Netherlandish merchants in Venice. Second, how were the petitions actually presented to the Venetian authorities? One report by the *Cinque Savi* indicates that at times representatives or leaders of the nation presented a collective request: in 1651 three Netherlandish traders acting as '*capi della nazione*' submitted a petition on behalf of the nation.⁵⁴ The traders also sought to convince members of the *Cinque Savi* personally, as becomes clear from a report by the Venetian Board of Trade in 1618: "having understood more than once that what they [the Netherlanders] have wanted to communicate to us by word of mouth, and then also in writing".⁵⁵ The nation, or its most important members,

⁵¹ See Nubola 2001 regarding the practice of petitioning in early-modern Italy.

⁵² For example ASV, CRD, b. 10, 3 August 1628.

⁵³ These petitions are found in the series Collegio, Risposte di dentro.

⁵⁴ ASV, CSM, Risposte, reg. 154, c. 165v, 4 April 1651.

⁵⁵ ASV, CSM, Risposte, reg. 144, c. 163r–71r, 31 March 1618.

obviously attempted to promote their interests by lobbying influential Venetian patricians.

It is telling that the Netherlanders in Venice never used ambassadors or consuls from the Dutch Republic to intercede on their behalf with the Venetian authorities. The merchants were actively involved in the reception of new Dutch diplomats, accompanying them when they presented their credentials to the Venetian government, organizing dinner parties in their honour and assisting them with practicalities. However, at no time was a request for commercial privileges voiced by a Dutch envoy. Further, when a new consul arrived in 1615, the merchant community used all their influence with both the Venetian Senate and the Dutch state to curtail his powers. They succeeded in limiting the consul's jurisdiction to matters relating only to Dutch sailors and shipmasters.⁵⁶ In later years, the States General—the Dutch government—even explicitly stressed in their instructions that diplomats and consuls should not interfere in commercial matters. Clearly, the traders preferred to negotiate directly with the Venetian polity, considering petitioning a more successful and direct way of obtaining privileges than using diplomatic channels. Delegating the negotiation of their business interests to foreign envoys would not only have meant relinquishing control, but inevitably would have triggered reactions from representatives of the enemies of the Dutch Republic, such as Spain and the Pope. In their dealings with Venice, the traders may also have wanted to avoid being associated too closely with the Dutch state, which would only have put more emphasis on their position as outsiders.

Obtaining Commercial Privileges

The Netherlanders used different strategies when petitioning for more trading rights and privileges. Great care went into convincingly phrasing their requests. Besides standard qualifications such as “we, devoted servants to the Venetian Republic”, they often accentuated the important role their trade activities played in countering the decline of the Venetian marketplace, especially by calling attention to their trade in western commodities. A petition presented in 1634 is a case in point:

How devotedly we Netherlandish merchants seek to attract the Ponentine ships, laden with the richest cargoes, to this city, [is something] Your

⁵⁶ Van Gelder 2009b: 158–165.

Serenity can establish by looking at the continuous influx of arriving vessels, and even if the *piazza* has such disadvantages as are well-known, our desire and interest are that all the commerce of the world would be here in Venice.⁵⁷

Well aware that the *Cinque Savi* would assess their requests and that one of the main concerns of this agency was the deteriorating position of Venice in international trade, the merchants were alluding to rival Mediterranean ports when they mentioned the disadvantages of the Venetian *piazza*.

On other occasions, the Netherlands sought to evoke their special and reciprocal alliance with the host state, based on their civic duties, long-term settlement and backed by the just and benevolent treatment they had already received from the Venetian government. This line of argument was explicitly taken in a petition submitted to the authorities in 1620, wherein the nation claims that it:

... has always been favoured by Your Serenity, and [treated] ... as equal to Your native and true subjects, and [that our nation] has always looked to Your interests, and has defended and supported these with special care. Infinite is the evidence that we all—who for a long time have lived in this most Christian city with all our families, just as our fathers and forefathers have done—can give of the infinite and innumerable graces and favours, that we have received through the singular and incredible generosity of Your Serenity.⁵⁸

The reference to three generations of faithful service echoes the requirements for citizenship. It is an attempt to position the collective of Netherlandish merchants on a par with individual traders worthy of controlled admittance to the ranks of the *cittadini*.

This rhetoric of inclusion, however, was then quickly abandoned in the next part of their petition, when they started to explain their actual request. The merchants wanted an end to the harassment of Netherlandish shipmasters by Venetian pilots, who were claiming pilotage dues and fines for non-compliance with a 15th-century law, requiring all Venetian ships to take a pilot on board on the Istrian coast. The Netherlands adjusted their initial claim of being Venetians by choice and privilege in their attempt to be excluded from this particular part of Venetian legislation, insisting instead on their foreignness. The merchants explained that

⁵⁷ ASV, CRD, b. 26, 13 March 1634.

⁵⁸ ASV, CRD, b. 15, 19 July 1620.

the ships concerned were owned by Netherlanders and not Venetians, and did not carry any cargo belonging to Venetian citizens, “but only and exclusively merchandise of our Netherlandish nation”. These examples show the flexibility with which—as an unofficial trading nation—these merchants could present themselves.

When presenting requests for extensive privileges that might encounter significant resistance, the Netherlanders even made use of Venetian ‘straw men’. In the 1620s they aimed at getting customs duties lowered on all merchandise imported from Western Europe. The initial plan was put forward by a Venetian *cittadino* spice merchant, but from the ensuing discussion of the plan it becomes clear that he was acting for the Netherlandish collective.⁵⁹ Following his proposal, the *Cinque Savi* formulated a series of recommendations intended to help restore Venetian trade and agreed to lower the customs duties on merchandise being imported into Venice from western ports for a period of four years. The tax reduction included commodities such as salted fish, but also pepper, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and indigo, signalling that by this time Venice had become completely dependent on others for the supply of spices. In this enterprise, which targeted goods that had once formed the backbone of Venetian commerce, the immigrant merchants successfully enlisted the help of an insider, a member of the secondary Venetian elite.

The rate of success of the collective Netherlandish petitions was quite high. The *Cinque Savi* often grumbled at the northerners’ supplications and sometimes refused part of the submitted requests, but most of the commercial privileges were granted or renewed. In contrast, petitions submitted by Greek traders always ended up being dismissed by the Senate.⁶⁰ Only twice did the Netherlandish merchants encounter an outright refusal. The first occasion shows that the limits of accommodation by the Venetian polity were not determined by economic motives, but by religious and political ones. Encountering these limits made the traders scale down their objectives. The second time a petition was refused, however, they only put more weight behind the effort, resorting to a form of economic blackmail.

The first time the Netherlandish merchants encountered a dismissal was in 1610, when the Senate discussed a proposal aimed at giving extensive

⁵⁹ Discussions of Pellizuoli’s proposal are found in ASV, CSM, Risposte, reg. 147, c. 1vff, 13 May 1626. See also Sella 1961: 77, 92–93.

⁶⁰ Fusaro 2005: 63.

commercial privileges to all immigrant merchants in Venice. The proposal was to open up Levantine trade to non-Venetians and give them the same trading rights as native Venetians. This would have enticed wealthy and enterprising immigrant traders, enabling Venice to once again compete with rival ports such as Amsterdam. To make this drastic proposal more palatable to the Venetian magistrates, the same strategy was used as in the 1620s: the proposal was presented by a Venetian *cittadino* and government secretary.⁶¹ Obviously, the main beneficiaries of the plan would have been those foreign merchants already residing in Venice, who were eager to expand their commercial relations with the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the driving force behind the whole scheme were the 25 merchants forming the Netherlandish trading nation, who stressed that this project would be the solution to the difficulties confronting Venetian commerce.⁶²

Even though the plan targeted an economic issue, the background for the subsequent discussion was formed by the clash between two opposing currents in Venetian politics. For the more conservative members of the nobility, granting all non-native traders *de facto* rights connected to Venetian economic citizenship represented too drastic a departure from traditional Venetian policies. Although four of the *Cinque Savi* had reacted positively to the proposal, the fifth was firmly set against it.⁶³ He wrote a passionate report to the Senate, in which he not only warned of possible negative economic effects, but also sketched the religious dangers that the inclusion of heretic foreigners would entail, thus implying that all Netherlandish traders were Protestants. They would “marry Venetian daughters and female citizens and set a bad example to their Venetian servants by not fasting during Lent and other religious feasts”.⁶⁴ This was the only time that religious as well as economic concerns were voiced by a member of the patriciate, something that was stimulated by the papal ambassador.⁶⁵

As it turned out, the opponents to the scheme triumphed. The inclusion of a large group of wealthy, and possibly heterodox, foreigners into Venetian society with a simple stroke of the pen would have fundamentally changed and destabilized not just economic, but also religious and

⁶¹ Van Gelder 2009b: 149–151. For a discussion of the 1610 proposal, see also Cozzi 1958: 139–146; Sella 1961: 38–40.

⁶² ASV, SM, f. 187, undated document.

⁶³ ASV, CSM, Risposte, reg. 142, c. 186r–8r, 5 July 1610; reg. 143, c. 1v–2v, 2 August 1610.

⁶⁴ ASV, CSM, reg. 143, c. 2r.

⁶⁵ Van Gelder 2009b: 119–120; Poelhekke 1956: 212.

social relationships.⁶⁶ In the end, the Senate accepted a watered-down version of the initial plan, deciding that foreigners would be allowed access to the Levant only when they used Venetian ships. Given the crisis in Venetian shipping, this adaptation made the change to the legislation virtually meaningless, as the Netherlandish merchants were quick to point out. The Venetian government, they said in a letter to the Senate, was holding them captive by forcing them to use Venetian vessels, which were slower and more vulnerable than their own ships, adding that they humbly wished to communicate to the Senate that the granted privilege was now worthless.⁶⁷ Having learned from this episode, in subsequent years the Netherlanders took a more gradual approach, targeting smaller, but better-defined commercial privileges.

The second time the Netherlanders met with a refusal was when they petitioned in March 1640 for the renewal of the privilege to export silk. This time they prevailed, after threatening to boycott the Terraferma textile industries. They stated that the rejection of their earlier petition had caused them to cancel all orders from the silk mills of Vicenza, Verona and Bassano, since the export of silken fabrics by land with the prevailing high risks made no sense at all.⁶⁸ This strategy proved effective. The following month the *Cinque Savi* changed their minds, informing the Senate that, all things considered, duty-free exports of silk fabrics by sea would be advantageous.⁶⁹ This was one of the few instances where the Netherlandish nation had to adopt a more aggressive tone. Three years later, they reverted to a softer approach when they asked for a complete renewal of the silk privileges. They stated that a positive decision would be a token of recognition by the Venetian government that notwithstanding “the difficulties of the present times”, the Netherlandish merchants had tried their best to maintain a prosperous commerce (*negotio assai florido*) in Venice, and had even attempted to expand it. A renewed privilege would only increase their desire to continue to do so.⁷⁰ Needless to say, the *Cinque Savi* were particularly sensitive to this argument and, after having informed themselves that the previously conceded privilege had indeed had positive effects on the *piazza*, they advised its prolongation, echoing in their report the wording of the Netherlandish petition when

⁶⁶ Cozzi 1958: 147.

⁶⁷ ASV, SM, f. 187, undated document.

⁶⁸ ASV, CRD, b. 31, 7 May 1640.

⁶⁹ ASV, CSM, Risposte, reg. 151, c. 101r–101v, 23 June 1640.

⁷⁰ ASV, CRD, b. 35, 15 December 1643.

they expressed the hope that the Netherlands would continue to endeavour to let trade prosper (*più floridi negoti*).⁷¹

Conclusion

The relationship between the Netherlandish traders and the Venetian state was one of continual negotiation, with the polity's membership regime being just the starting point. Venice's loss of commercial power at the end of the 16th century meant that the state was no longer in a position to uphold its protectionist measures against foreign merchants. Although the Netherlands were relative newcomers to Mediterranean trade, they succeeded in establishing themselves as a mercantile force in Venice. The traders first became indispensable during the last decade of the 16th century, when the looming danger of food shortages and civil unrest confronted the Venetian authorities with problems they could not solve within their own commercial framework. They were forced to issue state contracts and loans to foreign traders, actions that ran counter to traditional Venetian policies. It is important to note, however, that within Venice different forms of the accommodation of immigrant merchants or strangers existed contemporaneously. The level of control exerted by the polity depended on the moment of arrival of the immigrants, their religion and the political relationship with their home state. Hence, the Germans, arriving at a time when Venice was still in commercial control, resided in a *fondaco*, Jewish Venetians were segregated in the ghetto and Islamic merchants from the Ottoman Empire, a potential enemy state, were ordered by law to reside in a heavily guarded *fondaco* as late as 1612.⁷²

The Netherlands, by contrast, moved much more freely and succeeded in exploiting their commercial power to influence Venetian policies. Their diaspora was not voluntary, but caused by war. Yet it provided a good basis for building a trading network, which was further strengthened through marriage ties and commercial reciprocity. This international network and the strong trade relations with Amsterdam, the new European commercial centre, became their main asset. A climatic and agricultural crisis opened the door to Mediterranean trade, but the merchants themselves also influenced structural changes in international commerce. Once the Netherlands started to combine overland and maritime trade

⁷¹ ASV, CSM, Risposte, reg. 153, c. 104r, 30 January 1643 (m.v.).

⁷² Chambers and Pullan 1992: 325–352.

with Venice, they became the link between the old commercial centre of Venice and the new commercial centres of the Atlantic world.

Although the traders presented themselves as a collective, they were not organized in a formal manner with rules set down by the polity. There was a more fluid and informal organization, which gave them an advantage because of its flexibility. Through targeted collective actions, the Netherlandish merchants found ways to mitigate the inequalities imposed by the Venetian government on immigrant traders and to obtain significant communal trading privileges. These immigrant traders avoided being represented by envoys from their home state, steering clear of becoming entangled in diplomatic affairs. Instead, they preferred and were able to negotiate directly with the host polity, at times even using Venetian insiders to present their plans. However, the Netherlanders did not seek complete assimilation in Venetian society. Their commercial advantage was the ability to connect different commercial (and cultural) worlds. Maintaining a foot in both worlds was a sound choice for these commercial go-betweens.

In this sense they were similar to the diaspora of Portuguese (Jewish) merchants, who at the same time had formed a supranational network, independent of state support. In the Middle Ages the Hanseatic League, the Northern European trading organization, had operated on a much higher level of formalized organization. Backed by their home state, and with specific privileges granted by their host polities, the hanseatic merchants could operate successfully in a period when commerce was affected by a much higher level of insecurity.⁷³ In early modern Venice, both immigrant and native merchants had access to a well-developed system of commercial institutions, guaranteeing commercial security. For immigrants, there was no need for the backing of a home state.

The interaction between the Netherlandish merchant community and the Venetian Republic shows that the polity and the supranational mercantile networks were not opposing entities. The significant privileges granted by the Venetians can be seen as a way of partially incorporating immigrant merchants, in order to profit from their expertise and commercial contacts. On the other hand, the interaction with the Venetian authorities through state contracts and petitions not only provided the traders with commercial opportunities, but also gave form to their mercantile organization. Acting as a collective lobby group further strengthened

⁷³ Burkhardt 2010: 62–63.

their internal cohesiveness. Nicolò Contarini's grudging comments on the favours the Netherlands succeeded in obtaining effectively capture the attitude of the Venetian authorities toward these immigrant merchants. On the one hand, the *Cinque Savi*'s reports show how Venetian patricians continually struggled with the weight of their own glorious commercial past when dealing with the Netherlands' presence. On the other hand, the *Savi* were acutely aware of on-going changes and realized that the existing protectionist policies had to be adjusted if their city was not to lose out to rival ports such as Livorno and Marseille. This relationship was not always easy for the Venetian Republic, but favouring traders who had contacts in Western Europe was the best option in order to maintain a viable level of trade and wealth.