

# *A Donatello for Rome, a Memling for Florence. The maritime transports of the Sermattei of Florence*☆

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the course of the Middle Ages, the Italian City-States Amalfi, Pisa, Venice and Genoa established nautical trading connections that, for contemporary conditions, may be described as global routes of trade and exchange. Since the thirteenth century, regular ship-convoys commuted between their Mediterranean havens and the ports of Flanders and England.<sup>1</sup> Although Florentine merchants such as the Peruzzi played a substantial part in trade with northern Europe, they did not at first participate in this maritime commerce with ships of their own.<sup>2</sup> This changed, however, when Florence conquered Pisa in 1406 and integrated it, together with its important harbour Porto Pisano which they bought together with Livorno from the Genoese in 1421, into their territorial state. Thereafter, we also see Florentine ships plying the seas with shipments of wool, cloth, canvas, alum and goods of all different kinds – including larger and smaller objects of art.

Scholarship has revealed the importance of this outwardly orientated economy for Florence, traditionally focusing on themes like trade connections, shipping routes, merchant colonies and marine insurance. Michael Mallett has shown in his seminal study on the Florentine Galleys that shipping was largely a business handled by the Florentine state, mostly on behalf of the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. Lopez, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World* (New York: Columbia University Press 1955); Doris Stöckly, *Le système de l'incanto des galées du marché à Venise (fin XIII–milieu XV siècle)* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 153–8; Giovanna Petti Balbi, *Mercanti e nazioni nelle Fiandre: i genovesi in età bassomedievale* (Pisa: GISEM 1996); Enrico Basso, 'Gli equipaggi e le navi. Fondi documentarie liguri sulla navigazione tardomedievale', in R. Salicrú Lluç (ed.), *Tripulacions i vaixells a la Mediterrània medieval: fonts i perspectives comparades des de la Corona d'Aragó* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2019), 15–34.

<sup>2</sup> Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), here 23–30 and 126–36; Ignazio Del Punta, 'Italian Firms in Late Medieval England and their Bankruptcy: Re-reading an Old History of Financial Crisis', in H. Fulton, M. Campopiano (eds.), *Anglo-Italian cultural relations* (York: York Medieval Press, 2018), 67–86.

Medici.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the sector of art transports has been the object of studies prevalently addressing the better documented later period and other economic capitals of the early modern world on a global scale.<sup>4</sup> However, with very few personalized sources, the ship patrons, and their crews are often little more than just names.<sup>5</sup> Only in rare cases has it been demonstrated in detail that ship's captains could actually make impressive careers; for instance Bongianni, son of a secondary branch of the Gianfigliuzzi, started as a ship's captain and became an important member of the Medici faction.<sup>6</sup> In Florence, this was apparently possible given that one was on good terms with the Medici and that economic conditions were favourable. Recent scholarship has also asked what impact factors like bankruptcy and exile could have on such families.<sup>7</sup>

This article focuses on one better-documented Florentine merchant family, the Sermattei. The story of the Sermattei illustrates what the exile and return of the Medici meant for this hitherto barely known Italian merchant family and its businesses, and how it was possible for them to overcome a business failure *via mare* transporting a specialized assortment of goods and artworks for the Medici, not only the better-known luxury cloth. On the basis of previously unknown archival source material, we address these questions and shed some new light on the Florentine merchant navy and maritime trade connections in the Renaissance.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Mallett, *The Florentine Galleys in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967); Giovanni Ciccaglioni, 'Il mare a Firenze. Interazioni tra mutamenti geografici, cambiamenti istituzionali e trasformazioni economiche nella Toscana fiorentina del '400', *Archivio storico italiano*, 167 (2009), 91–125; Sergio Tognetti, 'Galeras estatales y veleros privados en la República florentina del quattrocento: la praxis mercantili', in R. González Arévalo (ed.), *Navegación institucional y navegación privada en el Mediterráneo medieval* (Granada: Alhulia, 2016), 105–55; Raúl González Arévalo, 'Navegación y vida en la marina mercante de una ciudad sin mar: las galeras estatales de Florencia en las fuentes cronísticas y narrativas del siglo XV', in L. Badía, L. Cifuentes, R. Salicrú Lluçh (eds.), *La vida marítima a la Mediterrània medieval: fonts històriques i literàries* (Barcelona: Diputació Provincial de Barcelona, Museu Marítim de Barcelona 2019), 193–211; Sergio Tognetti (ed.), *Firenze e Pisa dopo il 1406. La creazione di un nuovo spazio regionale, Atti del convegno di studi, Firenze, 27–28 settembre 2008* (Florence: Olschki, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Il Rinascimento italiano e l'Europa, Vol. 4: Commercio e cultura mercantile, ed. Franco Franceschi, Richard A. Goldthwaite, Reinhold C. Mueller (Costabissara: Angelo Colla Editore, 2007); Federica Veratelli, *À la mode italienne. Commerce du luxe et diplomatie dans les Pays-Bas méridionaux, 1477–1530. Édition critique de documents de la Chambre des comptes de Lille* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Septentrion, 2013); Maria Fusaro et al., 'Entrepreneurs at sea: Trading practices, legal opportunities and early modern globalization', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 28 (2016), 774–86.

<sup>5</sup> Florence Edler de Roover, 'Early Examples of Marine Insurance', *Journal of Economic History*, 5 (1945), 172–200; Mallett, *Galleys*. On the voyage of the 'galea Ferrandina' from Porto Pisano to Messina, Chios, Constantinople and back in the years 1476–77 under the patron Piero da Rabatta, see the accounts written by the 'scrivano di Maona' Bernardo Peruzzi: Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa (hereafter: SNSP), Archivio Salvati (hereafter: AS), I, 32 and 33. Cf. Marco Spallanzani, *Oriental Rugs in Renaissance Florence* (Florence: S.P.E.S., 2007), 106, doc. 28.

<sup>6</sup> Luciano Piffanelli, *Il 'Libro rosso seghreto' di Bongianni Gianfigliuzzi: famiglia, affari e politica a Firenze nel Quattrocento* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e letteratura, 2014); Goldthwaite, *The Economy*, 96–7.

<sup>7</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy*, 453–7 and 514–16; *The History of Bankruptcy. Economic, Social and Cultural Implications in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Thomas M. Safely (London: Routledge, 2013).

## I. THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SERMATTEI

The Sermattei are not among the well-known Florentine merchant banking families of the Renaissance, but for a short period of time they had far-reaching mercantile and financial connections.<sup>8</sup> Their arms are to be seen, together with those of the family Cresci, in an altarpiece of 1421 by Mariotto di Nardo, today in the church of Sant'Eufrosino near Panzano in Chianti.<sup>9</sup> In Florence, Giovanni di ser Matteo had five sons who were born in the last quarter of the fourteenth century: Giuliano, Guido, Bernardo, Michele, Leonardo and Antonio.<sup>10</sup> Giuliano became a manager and partner of the Medici-bank in the years 1401–9,<sup>11</sup> while his brothers were merchants operating in Venice, Apulia and Poland. Michele, who married Francesca di Sandro Altoviti, became an agent of the Tornaquinci in Venice and took over the family-company after Giuliano's death. Michele's brother Bernardo was involved in trade in Apulia where, since the fourteenth century, a number of Florentine merchants had established themselves in the lucrative grain-market.<sup>12</sup> In 1418 the brothers, who became Venetian citizens, stipulated a division of their family estate.<sup>13</sup>

While working together with the Medici and the Cambini,<sup>14</sup> the Sermattei also established a relationship with their biggest competitors, the Albizzi, during the Visconti-wars (1423–33).<sup>15</sup> In the following years, however, the Sermattei's entrepreneurial fortunes in Poland turned, and only the brothers Bernardo and Michele remained. In 1434–5, their close connections with Rinaldo degli Albizzi were their downfall, as Cosimo de' Medici's return from exile in Venice ushered in a wave of political proscriptions against supporters of the Albizzi regime at this same time (September 1434).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Sermattei* is a contracted form of *Ser Matteo* or *di ser Matteo*. See the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter ASF), Catasto, 1021: 1480, San Giovanni, Chiavi: 'di ser Matteo ovvero Sermattei'. On their early history: Francesco Bettarini, 'The new frontier: Letters and merchants between Florence and Poland in the fifteenth century', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Moyen Âge*, 127-2 (2015), <https://journals.openedition.org/mefim/2648>; and Kurt Weissen, *Die Medici-Bank in Deutschland. Marktstrategien und Handelspraxis der florentinischen Kurienbanken (1417–1475)* (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Press, *in print*) on a connection to the Ricchi.

<sup>9</sup> Susanne Mädger, *Florentiner Predellen von 1400 bis 1540. Form, Inhalt und Funktion* (Ph.D. thesis, in 2 vols., Bonn 2007), Vol. 2, 11.

<sup>10</sup> ASF, Catasto 80 (1427), fol. 217r, cf. Bettarini, *The new frontier*.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond De Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank, 1397–1494* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 44-5, 225, 377, 452; cf. Goldthwaite, *The Economy*, 86-7; Archivio di Stato di Prato, Fondo Datini, busta 646, insert 6, codice 507875, Andrea Bellincioni to Giuliano di Giovanni di Ser Matteo in Florence, Bologna, 9 November 1400, cf. Arnold Esch, 'Bankiers der Kirche im großen Schisma', *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, 46 (1966), 277–98: 305.

<sup>12</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy*, 136–42; Amedeo Feniello, 'Un capitalismo mediterraneo. I Medici e il commercio del grano in Puglia nel tardo Quattrocento', *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 172 (2014), 435–512.

<sup>13</sup> Bettarini, *The new frontier*.

<sup>14</sup> See a bill of exchange, 3 March 1413: Beinecke Library (hereafter: BL), Spinelli Archive (hereafter: SA), Vagante 4, filza 267, no. 4975, fol. 60r–v.

<sup>15</sup> *Commissioni di Rinaldo Degli Albizzi per il Comune di Firenze*, 3 vols., Florence 1867–73. Michele: Vol. 1, 394; Vol. 2, 56–7, 61–4, 195, 262, 566, 571, 573, 579, 585, 593, 599, Vol. 3, 17, 31, 41, 53, 125, 128, 130, 147. Bernardo: Vol. 2, 162. Guido: Vol. 3, 129, 151.

<sup>16</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Dale V. Kent, 'I Medici in esilio: una vittoria di famiglia ed una disfatta personale', *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 132 (1974), 3–63.

We learn of further calamities in the diplomatic correspondence of the Florentine *Signoria* with Queen Joanna II of Naples. Writing to the queen on 2 October 1434, the *Signori* informed her that ‘our beloved citizen, Bernardo di Giovanni Sermattei’, a merchant in her realm, had been accused under false pretensions and thrown into jail in Barletta in Apulia. The *Signori* assured Joanna II that Bernardo had been a merchant from childhood on and, knowing him well, they were certain that he could not have committed the crimes of which he was accused.<sup>17</sup> Michele’s merchant house seated in Venice had gone bankrupt and owed money to the Cambini and Giachinotti, while the other, based in Barletta and trading under the names of both Bernardo and Michele di Giovanni Sermattei owed money to a Florentine merchant in Venice named Angelo di Zanobi Gaddi. According to the will of the Florentine *Signori*, the case should not come to trial in Venice but rather in Florence, since all of the parties involved were Florentine citizens, despite the fact that Michele had been banished from the city of Florence.<sup>18</sup> A year later, Michele was arrested, brought to Florence, examined under torture, and beheaded in front of the Merchant’s Court on 30 July 1436, some weeks after Pope Eugenius IV had consecrated the Duomo Santa Maria del Fiore.<sup>19</sup>

## II. A DONATELLO FOR ROME: LUDOVICO SERMATTEI

On 7 April 1445, the customs registers of the Roman port record the arrival of a papal ship (‘navigium domini nostri’) bearing grain, fir planks, nails, oil and wine for the Roman branch of the Medici-bank; spices for the Pazzi; used canvas belonging to the papal household; dining tables, and other freight, including a bronze grave plate. Anchoring at the *Ripa*, the Roman harbour in front of the Aventine Hill, the ship’s patron, Lodovico di Ser Mattei, presented his policy (*apodissa*) to the customs officer, a document that he had received at the castle of Ostia at the mouth of the Tiber, declaring 26 items, one of which was a ‘lapidem brunçi pro sepultura domini pape Martini’.<sup>20</sup>

This object was no other than the bronze grave plate of Pope Martin V, currently to be seen in front of the *Confessio* of the Basilica St. Giovanni in

<sup>17</sup> ASF, Signori, Missive, 1° Cancelleria (hereafter: SMIC), 34, fol. 95r-v (‘civis noster dilectus Bernardus Iohannis ser Mathei [...] ab ipsa pueritia mercator [...] fuit’), to Queen Joanna II (cf. Nunzio Federigo Faraglia, *Storia della Regina Giovanna II d’Angiò* (Lanciano: R. Barabba, 1904), 416). See also a letter to Bari written on the same day (*Ibid.*, fol. 95v-96r).

<sup>18</sup> ASF, SMIC, 34, fols. 112v-113v; *Ibid.*, fol. 117r-v (17 March 1435). On the Gaddi: Reinhold C. Mueller, *The Venetian Money Market. Banks, Panics, and the Public Debt, 1200-1550* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Daniele Giusti, *I Gaddi da pittori a uomini di governo. Ascesa di una famiglia nella Firenze dei Medici* (Florence: Olschki, 2019). On the Cambini: Sergio Tognetti, *Il banco Cambini: affari e mercati di una compagnia mercantile-bancaria nella Firenze del XV secolo* (Florence: Olschki, 1999), 36, 125-44.

<sup>19</sup> *Istorie Fiorentine scritte da Giovanni Calvacanti* (Florence: Tipografia all’insegna di Dante, 1838), 627-8 (‘fu loro tagliata la testa’); *Ricordi storici di Filippo di Cino Rinuccini dal 1289 al 1460 colla continuazione di Alamanno e Neri suoi figli fino al 1506* (Florence: Stamperia Piatti, 1840), LXXI-XII, cf. Bettarini, *The new frontier*.

<sup>20</sup> Archivio di Stato Roma (hereafter ASR), Camerale I, Camera Urbis, *Introitus [et exitus] dohane Ripe et Ripete*, 131, fol. 17r, cf. 122, fol. 5r.

Laterano.<sup>21</sup> It was thus obviously not cast in Rome by Donatello's brother Simone in 1433, as Vasari claims and many still believe, but brought there by Florentine merchants in 1445.<sup>22</sup> Today, experts concur in attributing the sculpture, or *gisant*, of the grave plate to Donatello himself; one of the first art historians to suggest this in a private discussion was Richard Krautheimer, who spontaneously rejected its attribution to Ghiberti.

The occurrence of a Florentine merchant with apparently close connections to the Curia captaining a papal ship to Rome fits well into the political context of these years and, not surprisingly, we find Ludovico doing so again three months later.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Pope Eugenius IV himself resided in Florence for a number of years (1434–36, 1439–43), having fled thence from Rome by ship.<sup>24</sup> Fortunately, the circumstances also allow us to confidently conjecture who commissioned the funerary monument – in such cases it was usually a nephew (*nepos*) of the deceased – and how it was financed. Cardinal Prospero Colonna, Pope Martin V's most influential nephew and a connoisseur of fine art, resided at the Papal Curia in Florence after having left the Council of Basle in 1435.<sup>25</sup> He was, thus, in the city on the Arno where the grave plate was produced. The cardinal was also in a good position to finance the piece of art, as has already been shown elsewhere; because thanks to Martin V's long sojourn in Florence, the Colonna enjoyed Florentine citizenship and were entitled to invest in the *Monte*, a privilege of which they made extensive use.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the Colonna were on good terms with Cosimo de' Medici, who himself had recently commissioned Donatello with the funerary monument for Pope John XXIII/Baldassarre Cossa *olim papa* (†1419) in the Baptistery of Florence.

<sup>21</sup> Arnold and Doris Esch, 'Die Grabplatte Martins V. und andere Importstücke in den römischen Zollregistern der Frührenaissance', *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, 17 (1978), 211–7; Arnold Esch, *Economia, cultura materiale ed arte nella Roma del Rinascimento. Studi sui registri doganali romani 1445–1485* (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2007), 327–46.

<sup>22</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori scritte da Giorgio Vasari*, ed. G. Milanesi, C. Milanesi, V. Marchese, C. Pini, in 9 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1846–57), Vol. 2, 419 and 458–9.

<sup>23</sup> ASR, Camerale I, Camera Urbis, *Introitus [et exitus] dohane Ripe et Ripecte*, 122, fol. 58r and 131, fol. 76v.

<sup>24</sup> Eleonora Plebani, 'Una fuga programmata. Eugenio IV e Firenze (1433–1434)', *Archivio storico italiano*, 170 (2012), 285–310; Tobias Daniels, 'Popes and Pirates. Vatican Sources regarding Violence at Sea (12th to 15th Centuries)', in G. Rohmann, T. Heeboll-Holm, P. Höhn (eds.), *Merchants, Pirates, and Smugglers. Criminalization, Economics, and the Transformation of the Maritime World (1200–1600)* (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus, 2019), 75–105: 81–2.

<sup>25</sup> Concetta Bianca, 'I cardinali al Concilio di Firenze', in P. Viti (ed.), *Firenze e il Concilio del 1439. Convegno di studi Firenze 1989* (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 147–73 (Prospero's presence can be detected precisely in the *Obligaciones et Solutiones*); Andreas Rehberg, "'Etsi prudens paterfamilias...pro pace suorum sapienter providet". Le ripercussioni del nepotismo di Martino V a Roma e nel Lazio', in M. Chiabò et al. (eds.), *Alle origini della nuova Roma. Martino V (1417–1431). Atti del Convegno Roma 1992* (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il medioevo, 1992), 225–82; Luca Boschetto, *Società e cultura a Firenze al tempo del Concilio. Eugenio IV tra curiali mercanti e umanisti (1434–1443)* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2012).

<sup>26</sup> Julius Kirshner, 'Papa Eugenio IV e il Monte comune. Documenti su investimento e speculazione nel debito pubblico di Firenze', *Archivio storico italiano*, 127 (1969), 339–82; Esch, *Economia*, 340–3.

Besides the grave plate, the customs records of the Roman harbour reveal that Ludovico Sermattei also traded with another species of artwork: he imported Hispano-Moresque Maiolica to Rome. This highly precious ceramic, which was famous for its peculiar glimmer, was produced in the region of Valencia and exported via Mallorca (hence the name Maiolica) to European courts and other elite customers who could afford to buy the precious bowls, plates and wine coolers (*scodelle, piatti, rinfrescatoï*).<sup>27</sup> In the refined city of Florence, such objects were in high demand, and, as Marco Spallanzani has shown, orders could even be personalized by sending commissions to the Catalonian artisans with a drawing of the family crest or the family name.<sup>28</sup> As an indication of the popularity and prestige of this ware, Filippino Lippi, Domenico Ghirlandaio and other Florentine artists regularly depicted their Madonnas with a beautiful Maiolica ceramic in the background.

In the Quattrocento, whatever was fashionable in Florence was also in vogue in Rome. Florentines commanded the papal finances, ruled the chancery, dominated artistic commissions, and dictated fashion.<sup>29</sup> As Catalonians ascended the throne of St. Peter in the persons of Calixtus III and Alexander VI and consequently catalanized the Roman Curia, the demand for Maiolica must have risen still higher.<sup>30</sup> In its turn, curial taste set the lead for the rest of Roman society, as is evidenced by Roman estates listing, for example '11 pieces of Maiolica, big and small' ('XI pezi de maiolicha fra grandi et piccoli'). There was, thus, great demand for the products that Ludovico Sermattei was shipping.

In July 1445, his *navigium* docked again in the Roman Tiber-harbour. According to his customs declaration, he imported on this occasion '9 rinfrescatoï', two of which had already been sold, fetching the exorbitant price of 2 ducats (!) ('pro duobus renfrescatoribus [ex dictis IX renfr.] vendutis duc. II'): evidently these were splendid coolers! Besides these, his freight also included one large container full of Maiolica works ('giara piena di lavoro di Maiolicha'), which sold for 30 *carlini*, and furthermore one crate full of bowls of Maiolica ('cassa piena di scodelle di Maiolicha').<sup>31</sup> Normally, Catalonian Maiolica destined for Rome was first transported by ship to Gaeta or Pisa, where local Italian partners took charge.<sup>32</sup> Ludovico Sermattei's goods will have come via Pisa. Two years previously, in 1443, he had attempted to move up the marketing chain by leasing one of the state galleys of Flanders which regularly stopped en route in Valencia.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Marco Spallanzani, *Maioliche ispano-moresche a Firenze nel Rinascimento* (Florence: S.P.E.S., 2006).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 47–9 and 169–223, with reproductions.

<sup>29</sup> Arnold Esch, *Rom. Vom Mittelalter zur Renaissance, 1378–1484* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2016), 62–4.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold and Doris Esch, 'L'importazione di maioliche ispano-moresche nella Roma del primo Rinascimento nei registri doganali 1444–1483', *Faenza. Bollettino del Museo internazionale delle ceramiche in Faenza* (2014), 9–27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> Mallett, *Galleys*, 45.

The regular Italian shipping connection to the most important economic capital of northern Europe, Bruges, brought a surprising quantity of Flemish products to Rome, as the customs registers show. Besides hats of Bruges, knives, etc., this freight also included various paintings and sculptures: 'paintings of Our Lady, images of Our Lady and Saints, painted canvases, gypsum busts' ('tavolete de nostra donna, immagine de nostra donna e de santi, tele pente, tele depinte, teste de gesso').<sup>34</sup> In June 1478, a certain 'Jacobo fiamengo' paid 45 *bolognini* for the import of a tome (or perhaps rather a bundle) of paintings on canvas ('per condure uno volume de imagine dipente in tela'), the sum value of which was estimated at 12½ ducats. As is well known, Flemish painting was even appreciated in Florence, and this opened the door to the Roman art market.<sup>35</sup> Such objects of art were certainly transported from Flanders to Italy by ship. The fact that they appear not in the records of the Roman harbour customs, but rather in those of the land customs (*dogana di terra*) indicates that they were probably first shipped to Pisa and then brought to Rome via Florence by land. Since Rome had no seaport where ocean-going ships could dock, harbour cities such as Pisa, Livorno, Civitavecchia, and Gaeta were important reloading stations. In 1427, for instance, we hear of a Portuguese prior who, on embarking in Pisa, precisely designated and priced artworks loaded onto the ship: a porphyry altar stone, crosses, lamps, and paintings – among them a *Madonna lactans* with St Jerome and St Catherine.<sup>36</sup>

Conversely, our source material generally does not allow us to trace the import of Flemish art works through merchant shipmen like the Sermattei – Memling's triptych, which we will be studying shortly, is a special case. Likewise, wares imported by the papal curia or high-ranking members thereof also do not appear in the customs books of the *dogana di terra*, since these persons enjoyed tax exemption. This rather large blind spot may, however, be partially filled in using Florentine records that document how merchant houses cooperated exporting goods such as Maiolica ceramics to Rome. Ware that was transported from Valencia by the Cambini was distributed to Roman customers through the director of their Roman branch Michele da Rabatta; likewise imported the Della Luna goods from Valencia to Rome through their local agent Giovanni Amici and the Salviati through Benedetto Tornaquinci.<sup>37</sup> Thus, although the Sermattei themselves rarely appear in the Roman customs

<sup>34</sup> Esch, *Economia*, 229–66 (esp. 237–47), 267–82, 369–412.

<sup>35</sup> See Joachim Poeschke (ed.), *Italienische Frührenaissance und nordewopäisches Mittelalter* (Munich: Hirmer, 1993); Michael Rohlmann, 'Arte da lontano: pittura fiamminga nella Firenze rinascimentale', in M. Fantoni et al. (ed.), *The Art Market in Italy, XVth–XVIIth Centuries / Il mercato dell'arte in Italia sec. XV–XVII* (Modena: Franco Cosimo Panini, 2003), 401–12.

<sup>36</sup> *A Portuguese Abbot in Renaissance Florence. The Letter Collection of Gomes Eanes*, ed. Rita Costa-Gomes (Florence: Olschki, 2017), n. 17, 163–4 (João de Santa Maria to Álvaro Dias, Pisa [June 1427]).

<sup>37</sup> Spallanzani, *Maioliche*, 89–103; docs. no. 251c, 453; 263, 461; 308, 473–4; 377, 497–8.

registers, it may well be that they imported more goods to Rome than this documentation indicates.

A characteristic feature of the above-mentioned art imports to Rome is that they were destined for a particular customer. Moreover, they often included a number of pieces of the same sort. A single shipment could comprise, for example, 30 'nostre donne de tele depinte', 60 'tele pente' (painted canvases, probably from Flanders, with an estimated value of 1 duc. each, not to be confused with *tele tinte!*), 15 'mappamondi' (world maps) on 50 folios, or 'imagini de gesso' (gypsum figures) with an estimated value of 10 duc. Such bulk quantities were certainly not for individual use, but rather for resale on the Roman art market. By contrast, the Sermattei seem to have specialized in transporting highly valuable individual items on personal order, such as the grave plate commissioned by Cardinal Prospero Colonna for use in San Giovanni in Laterano, or Memling's triptych ordered by Angelo Tani for the Badia of Fiesole. Correspondingly, the Maiolica wares in Lodovico's shipments may also have been personalized orders. Furthermore, it seems that the Sermattei did not transport artworks on a regular basis, as did a number of Tuscan merchants such as Giovanni Valori, Filippo da Rovezzano, and Filippo da Verazzano, but rather that they were trusted partners for special transports. Possibly they were recommended for this by the Medici, since the shipment of the grave plate from Florence in 1445 will not have been done without their approbation. A final aspect of Renaissance art export/import is the role of the artists themselves who sometimes shipped their own products, as did a certain 'Lionardo dipintore da Firenze' who, in October 1477, personally paid the Roman import taxes on 'doi imagine de nostra donna dipinte'. It is tantalizing to conjecture that this may have been Leonardo da Vinci himself who at that time had just completed his first Madonnas (*Benois Madonna*, S. Petersburg, *Madonna of the Carnation*, Munich).<sup>38</sup>

### III. PISA: A SAFE HAVEN

Who was Lodovico Sermattei and how can we explain that after the blows of bankruptcy, banishment and death, a Sermattei transported such precious freight? Obviously, the severe setback obliged the remaining Sermattei to re-orientate their business. Generally, exile in Renaissance Italy was not designed to last forever; rather, ostracised persons had the choice of seeking revenge or atonement: the Sermattei seem to have chosen the latter.<sup>39</sup> After its conquest in 1406, Pisa and its harbour Porto Pisano offered a haven for

<sup>38</sup> Esch, *Economia*, chap. IV and *Id.*, 'Roman Customs Registers 1470–1480: Items of Interest to Historians of Art and Material Culture', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 58 (1995), 72–87, here 75–9 (*Lionardo*, 77).

<sup>39</sup> Alison Brown, 'Insiders and Outsiders. The Changing Boundaries of Exile', in: W. J. Connell (ed.), *Society and individual in Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002), 337–383.



Florentine merchants whose businesses had failed. Many such emigres became clients of the Medici and worked for them in order to clear their debts and consolidate their finances with the aim of someday returning to Florence.<sup>40</sup> Hitherto seldom studied sources shed more light on the question of how exactly the Sermattei managed to do this.

Well-preserved beginning in the second half of the fifteenth century, the Pisan customs registers offer a serial documentation of import goods arriving by ship in Porto Pisano.<sup>41</sup> There we encounter 'Lodovicho Sermattei' (1467),<sup>42</sup> 'Isdraello Sermattei' (1468)<sup>43</sup> and 'Francesco Sermattei' (1468–9)<sup>44</sup> paying import taxes on paper, wool, canvas, cloth, berets, and wine (Ludovico on paper, Isdraello on canvas and paper, Francesco on paper, wool, cloth, canvas, berets and wine). These goods were mostly bound for distribution in the city of Florence and its *contado*.

A further source of information on the Sermattei and their social connections are the records of the Florentine-Pisan fraternity *Santa Maria Incoronata delle Grazie e di San Guglielmo*. This fraternity, in which Florentines and Pisans were equally represented, was active in Pisa, at the latest, since 1424 and,

<sup>40</sup> See Michael Mallett, 'Pisa and Florence in the fifteenth century: aspect of the period of the first Florentine domination', in N. Rubinstein (ed.), *Florentine studies. Politics and society in Renaissance Florence* (London: Faber 1968), 403–41; Marcello Berti, 'Le aziende da Colle: una finestra sulle relazioni commerciali tra la Toscana e il Portogallo a metà del Quattrocento', in *Toscana e Portogallo. Miscellanea storica nel 650° anniversario dello Studio Generale di Pisa* (Pisa: ETS 1994), 57–106; Lorenz Bönninger, 'Francesco Cambini (1432–1499): doganiere, commissario ed imprenditore fiorentino nella "Pisa Laurenziana"', *Bollettino Storico Pisano*, 67 (1998), 21–56; Sergio Tognetti, 'Firenze, Pisa e il mare (metà XIV–fine XV sec.)', in *Firenze e Pisa dopo il 1406*, 151–75; Elisabetta Scarton, *Giovanni Lanfredini: uomo d'affari e diplomatico nell'Italia del Quattrocento* (Florence: Olschki, 2007).

<sup>41</sup> See Bruno Casini, 'Brevi note sui mercanti forestieri operanti a Pisa nel settore delle importazioni e delle esportazioni nel semestre ottobre 1468–aprile 1469', *Le Apuane*, 15 (1995), 38–53, 76–96; 16 (1996), 81–95; José Bordes García, Maria Elisa Soldani, 'Il commercio della lana di "San Mateo" nella Toscana del Quattrocento: le dogane di Pisa', *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 165 (2007), 635–64.

<sup>42</sup> Archivio di Stato di Pisa (hereafter ASPi), Comune di Pisa (hereafter CdP), B, 39, fol. 71r, 26 January 1467: 'lisime 24 di carte'.

<sup>43</sup> ASPi, CdP, B, 40, fol. 73v, 16 March 1468: '3 tapeti'; no. 41, fol. 30v, 12 December 1468: '72 lisime di charte e altro'. On paper trade in Florence: Carmen Bambach, 'The Purchases of Cartoon Paper for Leonardo's Battle of Anghiari and Michelangelo's Battle of Cascina', *Villa I Tatti Studies, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, Florence*, 8 (1999–2000), 105–33.

<sup>44</sup> ASPi, CdP, B, 41, fol. 30v, 12 December 1468: '3 frdl (=fardelli) di Brunella e altro [...] per Firenze' (on the *carta brunella*. Ezio Ornato, Paola Busonero, Palao F. Munafò, M. Speranza Storace, *La carta occidentale nel tardo medioevo*, in 2 vols. (Rome: Istituto Centrale per la Patologia del libro, 2001), Vol. 1, 346); *ibid.*, 42, fol. 86r, 11 October 1469: 'per lb 342 di sc[udi] di bonetti miße per sa[n] Marcho per navichare' (the Porta San Marco in Pisa) (on the *bonetti*, see Esch, 2007, 403); *ibid.*, 47, fol. 25v, 1 June 1478: 'per contado di Firenze tre turchesche di cianbeloto' (on the *lana turchesca*, see Hidetoshi Hoshino, *L'Arte della lana in Firenze nel basso Medioevo: il commercio della lana e il mercato di panni fiorentini nei secoli XIII–XV* (Florence: Olschki, 1980), 241, 276, 299–322); *ibid.*, fol. 45r, 1 July 1478: 'per contado di Firenze uno sacho di lana turchescha'; fol. 51r, 16 July 1478: '[...] per contado di Firenze lati 1½ di vino di Malvasia' (cf. Daniele Lombardi, *Dalla dogana alla taverna. Il vino a Roma alla fine del Medioevo* (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2018), 263); fol. 68v, 16 August 1478: 'lb 23 di suantone e altro'. (*suantone* = *soventone*, mostly cheap but fairly good cloth, often imported from England: Hoshino, *L'Arte*, 236).

according to Vasari, had the distinction of engaging the services of Benozzo Gozzoli, the artist who painted the famous Chapel of the Magi in the Florentine Medici-Palace, to decorate its rooms.<sup>45</sup> On 6 January 1466, three Florentine and three Pisan citizens appeared before the public notary Piero di Lupo Lupi<sup>46</sup> to ratify the statutes of the brotherhood: Representing the Pisan members were Guasparre di ser Guglielmo de Franchi, Antonio di Lionardo Boni da Rasignano and Germano di Nanni de Germani, while, for the Florentines, a certain Francesco di Bernardo Sermattei co-signed the document together with Niccolò d'Antonio Martelli and Francesco di Giovanni Arrighi.<sup>47</sup> Francesco Sermattei is indeed recorded as a founding member of the fraternity who actively participated in its sessions until 1468<sup>48</sup> and in 1469 occurs in the lists of the fraternity's 'debitori e creditori' where he is recorded as having given alms in 1469.<sup>49</sup>

Another scion of this family, 'Lodovicho ser Mathei sensale cittadino fiorentino habitante a Pisa' – a Florentine mercantile broker in Pisa –, is recorded in the *partiti* as having been elected chamberlain of the fraternity on 12 January 1467.<sup>50</sup> Under the name 'Lodovicho di ser Ruberto ser Mattei', he also appears as a member of the 'governatori' of the 'sei di Misericordia'<sup>51</sup> in the fraternity's administrative records for 1464.

It is highly probable that this same Ludovico Sermattei, the son of Roberto Sermattei and an important functionary in the Florentine-Pisan fraternity, is identical with the merchant who conducted papal ships from Pisa to Rome in the mid-1440s. The other family member named in the customs registers, Isdraello, was Ludovico's son, as evidenced by a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici, dated Pisa, 17 October 1477. Recommending himself to Lorenzo, 'Isdraello di Lodovicho di ser Ruberto di Giovanni Sermattei' not only alluded to the shining examples of his patron's ancestors Cosimo and Piero di Cosimo de' Medici, but also reminded his addressee that he himself had served the Pisan Medici-Bank since his childhood under the shareholders Matteo and Ludovico Masi.<sup>52</sup> On this evidence, it is possible to assume that Isdraello's father

<sup>45</sup> See Rosalia Amico, 'Le processioni Pisane di S. Giovanni e la compagnia dello Spirito Santo', *Bollettino storico Pisano*, 72 (2002), 137–63: 145, note 25; Luigi Lazzerini, 'Benozzo Gozzoli e la Fraternita dei fiorentini di Pisa', *Predella. Journal of visual arts* 39/40 (2016), 231–49 and CXVII–XXI.

<sup>46</sup> His *filze* for the years 1414–66 are in: ASF, Notarile antecosimiano, 12351–74 (= 23 *pezzi*).

<sup>47</sup> ASF, Compagnie religiose soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, Diocesi di Pisa, Fraternita, 2548, Statuti (1466) (cf. Lazzerini, *Benozzo*), and ASF, Capitoli delle compagnie religiose soppresse, 881. Germano was a tanner and leather merchant of Pisa: see Sergio Tognetti, 'Aspetti del commercio internazionale del cuoio nel XV secolo: il mercato pisano nella documentazione del banco Cambini di Firenze', in S. Gensini (ed.), *Il cuoio e le pelli in Toscana: produzione e mercato nel tardo Medioevo e nell'Età Moderna, Incontro di studio del Centro di studi sulla civiltà del tardo Medioevo (San Miniato, 21-22.II.1998)* (Pisa: Pacini, 1999), 17–50: 44.

<sup>48</sup> ASPI, Pia Casa della Misericordia (hereafter PCM), 2 (*Provisioni e deliberazioni* 1466–78), fols. 1r, 2r, 79r.

<sup>49</sup> ASPI, PCM, 149, fol. 97r. Before this, he is recorded as 'cittadino et merchante fiorentino et al presente in Firenze habitatore' (fol. 96v, 31 December 1469).

<sup>50</sup> ASPI, PCM, 2, fol. 12r–v (signed by Simone di Piero Lupi, who was member of the confraternity).

<sup>51</sup> ASPI, PCM, 148, fols. 35v–39r.

<sup>52</sup> ASF, MAP, 23: 690, 17 October 1477. On Matteo see De Roover, *The Rise*, 62, 67–8, 129; on Ludovico, *ibid.*, 17, 129, 238–9, 368. He was also a member of the fraternity: ASPI, PCM, 149, fols. 34v–35r; 48v–49r; 51v–52r, 82v–95v.

Ludovico had not only conducted papal ships, but had also worked for the Medici-bank in Pisa. This was obviously a crucial step towards the rehabilitation which Francesco di Bernardo di Giovanni Sermattei later achieved.

#### IV. BETWEEN BRUGES AND FLORENCE: FRANCESCO DI BERNARDO SERMATTEI

Francesco was born in the year 1430 in Apulia, spending his early years in Barletta together with his brothers Giuliano, Clemente, Giovanni, Bernardo and his sister Alessandra.<sup>53</sup> Some weeks before their uncle Michele was beheaded, his nephew Giuliano is recorded as a pupil of an abacus-school in Florence.<sup>54</sup> Thereafter, there is no more evidence of Bernardo's sons.

Francesco must have made a certain career in Pisa, possibly profiting from Ludovico's contacts with the Medici Bank. If we are correct in assuming that Isdraello Sermattei was the son of Ludovico di Roberto di Giovanni Sermattei, then Francesco may have been Ludovico's somewhat younger cousin and Isdraello's uncle, if he was not member of a further family-branch.<sup>55</sup> Within the Pisan-Florentine fraternity Francesco was particularly well connected to the Martelli, with whom, as we shall see, he retained relations into the 1480s. Besides being staunch supporters of the Medici and generous patrons of the arts (they had also commissioned works from Donatello), the Martelli were highly influential members of the Pisan economic elite and were repeatedly elected to the office of the Sea Consuls.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, they were key figures in economic and mercantile relations between papal Rome and Medicean Florence. Roberto Martelli, for example, was head of the Roman branch of the Medici bank from 1439 to 1464 and appears regularly in Curial financial records – at times he even held the office of *depositarius* of the Apostolic Camera, the highest position in the papal finance bureaucracy. In this function, he was responsible for international financial transactions, for example, between Rome and Germany, remitting large sums of money from German prelates to Rome and, conversely, from the Curia to papal nuncios and legates *in partibus* such as Nikolaus of Kues.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> ASF, Tratte, 86, 263r: 'Chiavi. Franciscus Bernardi Iohannis Sermattei, natus die 20 Octobris 1430. Aprobatus die 26 Novembris 1485'. Cf. David Herlihy, R. Burr Litchfield, Anthony Molho, Roberto Barducci, *Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online Tratte of Office Holders, 1282–1532*. Machine readable data file. Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, PR, R. L., 2002, and Catasto 478 (1433), fol. 444r: 'Bernardo di Giovanni di ser Matteo...il quale si truova e abita al presente in Puglia a Barletta chon tutta la sua famiglia'.

<sup>54</sup> See Robert Black, *Education and Society in Florentine Tuscany: Teachers, Pupils and Schools, c. 1250–1500*, Vol. I (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 726 (9 April 1436).

<sup>55</sup> In the catasto of 1427, however, no 'Roberto/Ruberto' son of Giovanni di ser Matteo is indicated.

<sup>56</sup> Fulvio Pezzarossa, 'La "ragione di Pisa" nelle "Ricordanze" di Ugolino Martelli', *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 138 (1980), 527–76: 567 with note 119; Mallett, *Galley*.

<sup>57</sup> Arnold Esch, 'Überweisungen an die Apostolische Kammer aus den Diözesen des Reiches unter Einschaltung italienischer und deutscher Kaufleute und Bankiers. Regesten der Vatikanischen Archivalien 1431–1475', *Quellen und Forschungen aus italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, 78 (1998), 262–387: 282, 297, 305.

Francesco Sermattei seems to have gotten his start as a merchant tradesman through this connection, for Antonio di Niccolò Martelli was the leaseholder of one of the Florentine galleys on which Francesco first worked. This ship was one of two galleys doing the Flanders run under the command of captain Giorgio di Niccolò Ridolfi which, departing from Marseilles, set sail for Valencia, Almeria, Cadiz, Sluys and Southampton, and returned to Pisa on 10 September 1468.<sup>58</sup> Account books of the Pisan Salviati bank reveal that Francesco was engaged as a scribe ('scrivano') on one of these ships. In September 1468, Francesco's ship transported a large quantity of English wool to Pisa, some of which was destined for the Pazzi in Florence.<sup>59</sup>

In the late 1460s and 1470s, we encounter Francesco now as patron of one of the two Florentine galleys referred to as *galee di Borgogna*, also doing the Flanders run. These ships were so named for the reason that they had been built in Pisa in 1464 for Philipp the Good of Burgundy as part of his contribution to the planned crusade of Pope Pius II. Later, Philipp's heir Charles the Bold rented them to the Medici-bank in Bruges under its director Tommaso Portinari, and finally the Medici ended up owning them.<sup>60</sup> By then Francesco lived again in Florence, in the city-quarter San Giovanni (*Gonfalone Chiavi*) in the direct neighbourhood of the Medici.<sup>61</sup>

Their first voyage led the galleys to Flanders and England in the Winter 1468/69. They reached London in January 1469 and returned via Tunis and Sicily, arriving in Porto Pisano on 31 May 1469.<sup>62</sup> On 17 October 1469, the galleys loaded a shipment of alum in Civitavecchia destined for Flanders. Sailing via Port-de-Bouc, they arrived in Sluys at the beginning of 1470, thence heading on to Southampton.<sup>63</sup> There we find the merchants Cornelio Altoviti and Giovanni Portinari sealing a contract dated to 27 February 1470. According to this document, a shipment of English wool and a quantity of cloth and lead from Nola in Campania was to be transported to Porto Pisano by Francesco Sermattei, patron of one of the two Burgundian galleys, and Francesco Tedaldi, who also witnessed the contract.<sup>64</sup> Portinari also reached an agreement with John Crosby, the Alderman of London and himself a

<sup>58</sup> Mallett, *Galleys*, 170.

<sup>59</sup> SNSP, AS, Serie I, 282, fols. 184r and 185r, cf. Antonio Carlomagno, *Il banco Salviati di Pisa: commercio e finanza di una compagnia fiorentina tra il 1438 e il 1489*, 2 vols. (Tesi di dottorato di ricerca: Università di Pisa, 2009), Vol. 1, 291–3.

<sup>60</sup> Mallett, *Galleys*, 99–103.

<sup>61</sup> ASF, Catasto, 927, fol. 589r, 1469–70.

<sup>62</sup> Mallett, *Galleys*, 99–100.

<sup>63</sup> Mallett, *Galleys*, 100; Alwyn Amy Ruddock, *Italian merchants and shipping in Southampton 1270-1600* (Southampton: University College, 1951).

<sup>64</sup> ASF, Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova (hereafter: OSNM), 1267, fol. 30r. On Cornelio Altoviti, who married Dianora di Tommaso Portinari in 1498, see Francesco Guidi Bruscoli, 'Mercanti-banchieri fiorentini tra Londra e Bruges nel XV secolo', in L. Tanzini, S. Tognetti (eds.), *'Mercatura è arte'. Uomini d'affari toscani in Europa e nel Mediterraneo tardomedioevale*, (Rome: Viella, 2012), 11–44: 32.

merchant and diplomat, providing that the said cargo was to be brought from London to Southampton between January and March 1470 and there loaded onto the 'galee di Borghongnia'.<sup>65</sup> A merchant of London named John Neve had entrusted a shipment of wool worth 200 Pounds to a certain 'Franceys de Sir Matthew patron of a galey of Florence' with the charge of delivering it to the Martelli in Florence ('Christofer, Ambrose and Frannces Martele'). The money generated through this sale was in turn to be used to buy more alum and ship it to Southampton. However, the deal ended in a wrangle over procedure leaving the London merchants John Warde and Robert Blewet (mayor of Southampton in 1471) demanding monetary satisfaction. In their support, Neve asked the Archbishop of York and Lord Chancellor of England, George Neville (†1476), to intervene.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, 'Francis de Sirmathewe' himself was also appealing to the archbishop in a legal quarrel with a merchant of Lucca, now based in Southampton, named Nicolao di Gherardo Galganetti. At the heart of their dispute was a freight of onions and garlic ('oygenes and garlek'), which Galganetti's factor had delivered from Zeeland to Southampton.<sup>67</sup>

It seems that the two galleys finally returned to Pisa at the beginning of 1471, from whence they again set sail in August under the command of Paolo Machiavelli for the eastern Mediterranean, passing via Rhodes and Chios on their way to Alexandria and returning to Porto Pisano via Naples in late summer 1472.<sup>68</sup>

The galleys' fourth and last journey is exceptionally well documented by a series of letters that Francesco Sermattei personally wrote to a number of people including Lorenzo de' Medici. In two short notes, written in Pisa at the beginning of 1472, he informed Lorenzo that he had delivered his letter to the ship's patron, Antonio Popoleschi, and reported on his own preparations for the voyage.<sup>69</sup> Francesco's duties encompassed not only the loading of the ship, but also communication with the authorities of the ports they planned to visit. At this time, he also exchanged letters with envoys of the margrave of Finale Ligure, Galeotto del Carretto, who had best connections to Milan, and

<sup>65</sup> ASF, OSMN, 1267, fol. 31r. On Crosby: Pamela Nightingale, 'Crosby, Sir John (d. 1476)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/6785>).

<sup>66</sup> National Archives, London (hereafter NAL), C/1/31/80. Cf. Helen Bradley, 'Southampton's trading partners: London', in M. Hicks (ed.), *English Inland Trade 1430–1540: Southampton and its Region* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2015), 65–80: 67 with note 28; Ruddock, *Southampton*, 198; George Holmes, 'Lorenzo de' Medici's London branch', in R. H. Britnell, J. Hatcher (eds.), *Progress and Problems in Medieval England. Essays in Honour of Edward Miller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 273–85.

<sup>67</sup> NAL, C/1/31/448. On Galganetti, see: Ruddock, *Southampton*, 129; L. A. Burgess (ed.), *The Southampton Terrier of 1454* (Southampton: Her Majesty's Stat. Off., 1976), 56. His family in Venice maintained contacts to London: Luca Molà, *La comunità dei Lucchesi a Venezia: immigrazione e industria della seta nel tardo Medioevo* (Venice: Stamperia Editrice, 1994), 60; Laura Galoppini, *Mercanti Toscani e Bruges nel tardo Medioevo* (Pisa: Plus, 2014), 106; Bart Lambert, 'Nostri Fratelli da Londra. The Lucchese Community in Late Medieval England', in Fulton, *Campopiano, Anglo-Italian cultural relations*, 87–102.

<sup>68</sup> Mallett, *Galleys*, 101.

<sup>69</sup> ASF, MAP, 28: 346 (Pisa, 2 August 1472), *ibid.*, no. 356.

who in turn later wrote to Lorenzo de' Medici entreating him to satisfy the requests of 'Francisco Ser Matey' and his crew, who were complaining about outstanding payments.<sup>70</sup> Engaged in such business, Francesco and his ship were still in Porto Pisano on 8 September 1472, as he wrote to Lorenzo informing him that it would be impossible to transport the whole quantity of Malmsey wine and the 1100 sacks of alum that had been loaded in Naples, because the cargo exceeded the ship's transport capacity.<sup>71</sup> As a solution, he reported that he had negotiated with another Florentine merchant family, the Cambini, to transport some of the freight. Since the Cambini disposed of no ships of their own, Francesco probably meant one of their Portuguese associates who were operating between Lisbon and Porto Pisano with ships bearing the trademark of the Cambini.<sup>72</sup> In the event, Francesco's ship was obliged to leave behind a further load of alum in Cadiz which was then shipped by a Portuguese ship.<sup>73</sup> In the same letter, Francesco requested that Lorenzo communicate his situation to the directors of the Medici bank in Bruges and London, Tommaso Portinari and Gherardo Canigiani.<sup>74</sup> Apparently, he himself had already informed Francesco Sasseti, the general director of the Medici-bank in Florence.<sup>75</sup> Finally, at the end of September, the heavily laden ship weighed anchor from Porto Pisano.<sup>76</sup>

It was, however, not on the outward run, but rather on the return trip in 1473 that calamity struck. Gasparre di Nicodemo Spinelli, who was insuring some of the freight being transported on the return journey for Giuliano and Pierfrancesco de' Medici, wrote in his notebook that there was much anxiety in Florence that the two Burgundian galleys might be captured by a pirate named Columbus. He was relieved to relate that the ship he was covering had managed to escape.<sup>77</sup> This was the San Giorgio, the ship under the command of Antonio Popoleschi. The other vessel, however, the San Matteo under the command of Francesco Sermattei, had no such luck: It fell prey to Paul Beneke

<sup>70</sup> ASF, MAP: 356; *ibid.*, 29: 1071 (Galeotto del Carretto to Lorenzo de' Medici, Finale Ligure, 28 November 1473); *ibid.*, 30: 273 (14 April 1474). Cf. Roberto Ricciardi, 'Del Carretto, Galeotto', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 51 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1988), 415–9.

<sup>71</sup> ASF, MAP, 28: 498.

<sup>72</sup> ASF, MAP, 28: 498. Cf. Sergio Tognetti, 'Aspetti del commercio internazionale del cuoio nel XV secolo: il mercato pisano nella documentazione del banco Cambini di Firenze', in S. Gensini (ed.), *Il cuoio e le pelli in Toscana: produzione e mercato nel tardo Medioevo e nell'Età Moderna; incontro di studio, San Miniato 21–22 febbraio 1998* (Pisa: Pacini Editore, 1999), 17–50; Tognetti, *Galeras*.

<sup>73</sup> Mallett, *Galleys*, 101.

<sup>74</sup> ASF, MAP, 28: 498. Cf. George Holmes, 'Canigiani [Caniziani], Gherardo (1424–1484)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/52162>).

<sup>75</sup> ASF, MAP, 28: 498. Cf. Francesco Guidi Bruscoli, 'Sasseti, Francesco', *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 90 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2017), 691–3.

<sup>76</sup> BL, SA, box 55, no. 1182, fol. 13r.

<sup>77</sup> BL, SA, box 55, no. 1182, fol. 25v. Cf. Benedetto Dei, *La Cronica dall'anno 1400 all'anno 1500*, ed. Roberto Barducci (Florence: Papafava, 1985), 97; Mallett, *Galleys*, 101, and a letter written by Cristofano di Giovanni Spini to Lorenzo de' Medici, Bruges, 15 October 1473 (ASF, MAP, 26: 132).

of Gdansk, a pirate (or corsair) with connections to the Hanseatic League.<sup>78</sup> This act of North Sea piracy became particularly famous because, while anchoring in Sluys, Francesco had not just loaded cloth and alum worth 30,000 fl., but also the triptych *The Last Judgement* by Hans Memling. The work had been commissioned by Angelo di Jacopo Tani, director of the Medici bank in Bruges, probably before 1471 and was intended to decorate his funeral chapel in the Badia of Fiesole, which had been already completed before 1466. A reminder of this original purpose are the heraldic arms of Tani and his wife Caterina Tanagli in the painting.<sup>79</sup>

Tani was but one of an impressive list of thirty-four Florentine citizens or family-based trading companies who had engaged Francesco Sermattei's ship to transport goods on the return trip. As his correspondence shows, Tani later attempted to get compensation from the Medici for his investment in cloth (*drappi*) lost on that occasion.<sup>80</sup> Together with the other booty from the ship, Paul Beneke brought Memling's *Last Judgement* to Gdansk, where it is today to be admired. However, the case was not thereby put to rest, but rather escalated into an international affair, as historians have only recently discovered, with the Florentines taking German hostages in order to extort the restoration of their stolen property, and the conflict parties appealing to Pope Sixtus IV, Emperor Frederick III, and the king of Poland. Last but not least, the act of piracy and its consequences became arguments used in the context of the famous Pazzi conspiracy.<sup>81</sup>

While much attention has focused on these developments, the fate of the ship itself and its patron, Francesco Sermattei, have thus far remained obscure.<sup>82</sup> The latter seems at any rate to have made it back to Italy. As mentioned above, the margrave of Finale Ligure wrote to Lorenzo de' Medici in late 1473 and again early 1474, exhorting him to pay Francesco and his men their outstanding wages. In 1473, Lorenzo himself wrote a letter addressed to the *Podestà* of Pisa (Antonio Taddei) that was to be handed on to Francesco Sermattei.<sup>83</sup> And the Pisan port customs registers indicate that Francesco eventually returned to Pisa to resume his shipping business. In 1478, i.e. one year after the last Florentine Flanders galley had gone to England, he was no longer transporting valuable artworks, but rather wine and cloth, some of

<sup>78</sup> Alfred von Reumont, 'Di alcune relazioni dei Fiorentini colla città di Danzica', *Archivio Storico Italiano*, N.S., XIII, 1 (1861), 37–47; Beata Mozejko, *Peter von Danzig: The Story of a Great Caravel, 1462–1475* (Leiden: Brill, 2020) (with bibliography).

<sup>79</sup> Till-Holger Borchert (ed.), *Memling. Rinascimento fiorentino* (Milan: Skira, 2014), cat. 1, 80–1.

<sup>80</sup> ASF, Notarile antecosimiano 21063, fols. 221r–224v, 6 January 1477. On Tani's actions, see MAP, 82: 114 (fol. 328v), and Holmes, *London branch*, 281 with note 42.

<sup>81</sup> Lorenz Böninger, 'Lorenzo de' Medici and Foreigners. Recommendations and Reprisals', in R. D. Black, J. E. Law (eds.), *The Medici. Citizens and Masters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 155–69; Daniels, *Popes and Pirates*.

<sup>82</sup> Mallett, *Galleys*, 101–2.

<sup>83</sup> Marcello Del Piazzo (ed.), *Protocolli del carteggio di Lorenzo il Magnifico per gli anni 1473–1474, 1477–1492* (Florence: Olschki, 1956), 503.

which was imported from England. Fate seems to have been kind to him, for we find him being assessed in the Florentine *catasto* of 1480.<sup>84</sup> It is perhaps an indicator of his prosperity that Benedetto Dei counted him, together with Girolamo Martelli, among his greatest enemies.<sup>85</sup> Between 1480 and 1483, Francesco resided in Milan at the hub of an important Florentine merchant colony (including the Portinari), which remained vital even after the closing of the local Medici bank.<sup>86</sup> He seems to have remained in contact with the Medici, for Lorenzo de' Medici sent him a letter through his agent in Rome, Antonio del Palagio.<sup>87</sup>

In 1485, we find Francesco back in Florence, issuing in 1489 an arbitration sentence (*lodo*) in a legal battle between Niccolò di Ugolino Martelli and his son Giovanni.<sup>88</sup> The principle object of this protracted quarrel, which had been going on since 1485, was the dowry of Niccolò's wife Angela, daughter of the well-known humanist and papal secretary Pietro da Noceto (died 1467 in Lucca).<sup>89</sup> Additionally at stake were business transactions between Niccolò Martelli and a number of Florentine merchants at the Curia (including the Ricasoli and the Capponi). Apparently, Niccolò and Piero de' Ricasoli were partners in a trading venture and owed money to the Roman patrician Battista di Cola Tomarozzi.<sup>90</sup> Arbitrating in this conflict as a 'civis mercator Florentinus' in his own house situated in 'in populo Sancti Laurentii de Florentia', Francesco had obviously followed Ludovico Sermattei in withdrawing himself from the ship's deck to the city in his older age. He seems by then to have attained considerable social esteem, for such arbitrations were entrusted only to respectable merchant bankers, such as Lorenzo de' Medici himself.

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What does the story of the Sermattei teach us about Italian merchant families and art transports in the Renaissance? In a broad sense, it provides new insights into social aspects of the art trade in Renaissance Italy, shifting the focus from artists and people who commissioned artworks to the people who transported them, and their relationships to important patrons of the arts, such as the Medici.

The Sermattei were adventurous Renaissance entrepreneurs who, not always favoured by fate, nevertheless were successful in the long run. After

<sup>84</sup> ASF, Catasto, 1021 (1480, San Giovanni, Chiavi), fol. 87r.

<sup>85</sup> Benedetto Dei, ed. Barducci, 137–8.

<sup>86</sup> See Lorenz Böniger, 'Leonardo da Vinci und Benedetto Dei in Mailand (1483)', *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Instituts in Florenz*, 29 (1985), 385–8: 386.

<sup>87</sup> Del Piazzo, *Protocolli*, 210, 31 October 1482 'per Francesco Sermattei'.

<sup>88</sup> For 1485, cf. note 52. For the arbitration, cf. ASF, MAP, 129, fols. 242–62.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Ugolino di Niccolò Martelli, *Ricordanze dal 1433 al 1483*, ed. Fulvio Pezzarossa (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1989), 24, note 54, Pietro da Noceto's daughter 'Ginevra' married Niccolò.

<sup>90</sup> On Tomarozzi, see Anna Modigliani, *I Porcari. Storia di una famiglia romana tra Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 1994), 173, 265 and 272.



establishing a business enterprise between Venice, Apulia and Poland, they were disfavoured by the regime Cosimo de' Medici established in Florence, struck by bankruptcy, exiled and murdered. In order to overcome this existential crisis and to re-establish the bonds with the Medici, they moved from Florence to Pisa and established themselves there as merchant shipmen transporting a wide range of goods, from standard ware such as wine, cloth, wool, nails, paper, and tables to luxury items including Maiolica, valuable paintings, and even a papal grave plate. They chartered and lost ships, worked for the Medici, sailed for the Pope, were captured by pirates, and were drawn into international conflicts. Sometimes they were successful, sometimes not: Ludovico managed to bring his precious cargo safely to its destination, Francesco wasn't so lucky.

What qualified the Sermattei for this specific type of high-quality-art transports? As has been shown above, their family history may have been an important factor: They were experts in long-distance maritime trade with Europe's economic and artistic capitals, additionally, they were driven by the will to re-integrate, succeed in business, and re-climb the social ladder, and they may thus have been considered especially loyal. For both Ludovico and Francesco, although differently favoured by fortune, the shipping business turned out to be profitable. They not only safely navigated the seas with their precious freight, but in the end also succeeded in conducting their family back into the secure haven of Florence, which they had once been forced to leave. In contrast to other families who remained outsiders seeking revenge until the Medici themselves were forced to go into Exile in 1494,<sup>91</sup> the Sermattei made it back by arranging themselves with the Medici. In this respect, their story is an example of how setbacks in Medicean Florence could be mastered and overcome.

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<sup>91</sup> See: Götz-Rüdiger Tewes, *Kampf um Florenz – Die Medici im Exil (1494–1512)* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2011).