

Introduction

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Luigi Einaudi and Giovanni Gronchi, then taking turns in the highest offices of the Italian State, came to Prato in May 1955 to inaugurate the international exhibition at the Datini Archives of that year. The event led to new attention being paid to the Archives both by the public and in academic circles. Only then did many of the inhabitants of Prato realise that the Francesco Datini they knew only as the great benefactor of the poor to whom the town had erected its statue in the centre of the Piazza del Comune was something more than the “merchant of cats” of children’s fairy stories who had gained his wealth by freeing of mice the palace of a Far Eastern king. It was rumoured that this extraordinary archive contained a great many bills of exchange and it was thus only natural that the people of Prato, then struggling with the difficult task of post war reconstruction, should have attributed the invention of the bill of exchange to Francesco Datini. Promissory notes and bank drafts were then the main instruments of the short term credit which was the basis of the rebirth taking place in those years in the small and medium scale textile sector.

The academic and educational value of the exhibition organised by Federico Melis was responsible for its extraordinary success but it was also a high point in the debates then raging in Italian historical circles on questions of methodology and the interpretation of the tendencies of the European economies of the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The historiography of the day had been strongly influenced by Benedetto Croce’s idealism and his denial of the importance which the nineteenth century had attached to archival sources - which Croce saw as purely philological and scholarly in value - in favour of a philosophical interpretation of history viewed as a broad sweep of actions and institutions determined by human thought and moral and political impulses. The validity of this approach was then being questioned.

Scholars such as Roberto Cessi, Bernardino Barbadoro, Gino Luzzatto, Armando Sapori and Luigi Einaudi himself, in economic circles, had long been pushing for a return to archival research and legal and economic analysis. This new awareness of material things was then making important methodological and interdisciplinary contributions by means of quantitative studies such as those on prices carried out by Giuseppe Parenti, Amintore Fanfani, Aldo De Maddalena and Gino Barbieri.

Alongside debates on heuristic or methodological issues, the question of the economic crisis of the first half of the fourteenth century was coming to the fore in medievalist circles. In his *An Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*, Henri Pirenne was one of the first to enquire into the hiatus in European economic development marked by a halt in agricultural expansion, the decline of the Champagne fair, the bankruptcy of the Tuscan merchant bankers and the demographic decline brought about by the black plague. Taken up in the in-depth studies of eminent historians such as Delatouche, Hilton and Postan, this approach won general consensus in Italy too where, with the important exception of Carlo Maria Cipolla, most scholars based their interpretations on Roberto Sabatino Lopez's conclusion that the Florentine and Italian economic crises had been exacerbated by the movement of capital towards models of luxury consumption.

Armando Sapori proposed a clear distinction between the period of artistic and literary Renaissance and its economic counterpart. Major thirteenth century development had been followed by decline in the second half of the fourteenth century, a decline which was initially qualitative – nothing new happened in the economic sphere – but then led inexorably to the total exclusion of the sixteenth century Florentine economy from large scale international trade. Basing his analysis on a systematic and comparative study of quantitative data and accounting, legal and contractual sources as well as on clear ideological precepts, Armando Sapori argued that the crisis had been characterised by regressive elements which particularly affected the ethical and civic sense of the businessmen of the day, their concept of freedom, of the predominance of private over personal interests and so on. As Mario Del Treppo has observed, this “organic” vision “of historical periods presented as possessing a soul which pervades every part of them meant that his approach to the decay of the Italian Renaissance essentially retraced that of De Sanctis not only in its content but even in its methodological approach”¹.

Federigo Melis's central role in this debate consisted in his insistence that, the dramatic events caused by the plague notwithstanding, sufficient historical evidence for this presumed crisis - or rather complete standstill in qualitative or quantitative development - had still not been produced for the very simple reason that much of Italian economic and social history had not yet been studied: “only the surface of our many and well stocked archives has been touched”². For Melis the use of the sources had to be re-

inforced and, above all, new attention had to be given to the central core of these economic phenomena – the companies and the men who ran them. The scholar who had published his *History of Accountancy*, in 1950 with the eloquent subtitle *A Contribution to the Knowledge and Interpretation of the Most Significant Sources of Economic History*, felt that the time was ripe for new research directions and methodologies. Not only would systematic studies of company sources, he believed, lead to a substantially revised historical approach but it would also oblige historians to use vitally important but hitherto practically unused techniques of quantitative analysis in economic studies.

Between June 1954 – the fifth centenary of Amerigo Vespucci's birth – and the 10th International Conference in Historical Studies of September 1955 Melis demonstrated the initial results of his studies in a range of archives and in the Datini Archives in particular and forcefully restated his belief that once the terrible plague epidemics had died down in the second half of the fourteenth century a significant recovery had taken place in the Tuscan economy and a clear economic map of Europe had begun to emerge. Florence had carved out for itself an even greater role in international trade networks characterised by important innovations in transport, commerce, insurance and finance. Based as it was on an analysis of the Prato material, the international exhibition at the Datini Archives demonstrated the complexity and wealth of the company sources and the important role they could play in a reconstruction of quantitative and qualitative economic phenomena.

In 1957, in the parallel context of simultaneous academic debate aimed at establishing economic history's scientific credentials and the diffusion of popular myths based on rumour and the oral tradition, Iris Origo's *The Merchant of Prato*, a work which made Francesco Datini's little known life history accessible to the wider public for the first time, was published. The book's originality lay in the way in which Datini's life story and that of his family was told, in the unusual analysis in it of his personal wealth, attitudes and culture and its use of a wealth of documentation whose fascination and believability was not marred by certain inaccuracies attributable to the author's amateur status.

The decidedly negative opinion of Francesco Datini's human and moral qualities that emerges from the book attracted the immediate attention of historians and struck a chord with those who held that Tuscan society lacked moral stature and economic progress. The popular style of the book did not warrant the academic debate it provoked. But its contents supported Saponi's approach at the most intense moment of his clash with Federigo Melis who somewhat ingenuously devoted excessive attention to Origo's book. Luigi Einaudi's preface contributed to the central role played by the book within this debate by exalting the results of archival research. The positive reviews received by the book and the debate reported immediately

by the review *Economia e Storia* and later, in 1966, by the *Nuova Rivista Storica* show, the issue of the crisis notwithstanding, the extent of continuing resistance to the introduction of unaccustomed techniques of economic analysis. Still uncertain about these new and unusual methodological approaches many economic historians wavered between a widespread fear of an excessively technical approach and a dawning awareness that quantitative analysis was the best way of avoiding arbitrary generalisations.

It is now clear that Origo's book cannot claim to be an economic history not only because it touches only superficially on the more legalistic aspects of Datini's managerial activities but also because, necessarily given the historical debate raging at the time, it fails to grasp the unequivocal nature of Datini's human and economic activities. The need to express a moral judgement, without a corresponding analysis of the company and socio-economic context in which Datini lived, gave the book a doctrinal character which has impeded understanding of the transitional elements in the movement from medieval to modern man in the economic context.

Melis felt such accusations against Datini to be unjust and based on a mistaken interpretation of the sources. For him Datini represented the archetype of a new player on the economic stage. The studies that he continued to produce show how innovative his methods of enquiry were with their very different approach to economic behaviour. No longer the godlike merchant figures so dear to Saporì the merchants of the day were presented as the quintessence of their time, men for whom the urge to earn was not purely a desire for personal wealth but also a product of the company model that they themselves had set up.

Indefatigable in the archives and ever present at historical debates Melis kept up fertile working contacts in the European historical community. Encouraged by the general consensus his work was receiving Melis proposed the creation of a study centre to the town of Prato and the historical community which was to be a stimulus to historical research based on archives such as the Datini Archives. Fernand Braudel worked enthusiastically alongside him in the task of winning support from the most important socio-economic historians of the day and in 1968 the Datini Institute, destined to become a vital point of reference in the study of the economic history of the pre-industrial age, was set up.

To mark the six hundredth anniversary of Francesco Datini's death the Institute named after him has decided to publish an up-to-date analysis of his human qualities and economic role.

The historians involved in this task are individuals who have devoted their energies to research in the Prato Archives for some time. The volume constitutes an attempt to bring together and sum up the various aspects of Francesco Datini's life and activities and the socio-economic context in which he lived and worked. It has been a group effort within which the personal approaches of the authors have emerged but nonetheless carried out

within the context of a shared approach developed on the basis of the main tendencies in economic history research of the last few decades.

This volume is dedicated to Francesco Datini and his home town but also to the academic community which has worked so closely with the Datini Institute and to those historians who, before their deaths, gave so much to the study of history.

Notes

- ¹ M. DEL TREPPO, *Federigo Melis, storico*, in *Studi in memoria di Federigo Melis*, I-V, Naples 1978, I, pp. 1-87, 46.
- ² F. MELIS, in *Atti del X Congresso internazionale. Roma, 4-11 September 1955*, edited by GIUNTA CENTRALE PER GLI STUDI STORICI, Rome 1957 (Comitato Internazionale di Scienze Storiche), p. 407.