

“Nobile fratello carissimo” and “Avertendo sempre al ben fidar:”
The language and tactics of trust in the commercial correspondence of the Brignole and Sale families, 1562-1584.

Strong bonds of kinship or matrimony were not crucial to long-distance trade in the sixteenth-century. Genoese merchants active in the western Mediterranean Sea conducted trade with a relatively large but closed number of merchants, probably several hundred in number and certainly too many to know intimately. Merchants warn each other that in times of civil strife, each set of interacting merchants should trade in networks of traders similar in faction and party, *“fazione e colore,”* as well as complementary in activity. Under normal conditions this did not seem to be a concern. There is a counter-intuitive characteristic to these networks: no merchant could be assured repeated exchanges with any specific trader. This was far from a weakness of their networks and was deliberately preserved. Each trader could rely on future exchanges with some members of the greater group. There was no formal or informal institution that had the ability to transmit effectively the reputation of any given trader to the whole group. Every season Genoese merchants and agents entered into joint ventures with a different subset of members of the larger group, determined by market realities, without knowing any specific information about a trader beyond their limited personal experience, and did so without a guarantee of future repeated exchanges, which were long assumed necessary to the preservation of trust.

An extensive system of correspondence--bills of lading, exchange notes, insurance policies, purchase orders, and above all, letters between partners would eventually expose any obvious fraud. Fraud prevention was simple enough. Beyond fraud prevention, traders used their correspondence to encourage vigorous effort and thus promote trust

which allowed partners to communicate mutual obligations and a willingness to reciprocate trust and to what degree. The merchant environment of the second half of the sixteenth century allowed traders to pool capital, to spread risk, and to enjoy the services of agents in distant locations without having to invest heavily in most of their relationships. Their enterprises were more flexible and their transaction costs were greatly reduced from those of the contracts of *comenda*, traveling agents, and resident agents typical of the first half of the century.

The ability to communicate a willingness to reciprocate explains why these ethnically homogeneous trading coalitions were so successful. Such culturally defined networks do much more than punish defectors. Their ability to rely on reciprocal interactions allowed all traders to enjoy cheap, reliable, short-term relationships, to concentrate their trust costs, and to maintain flexibility. All of the foreign agents examined here, with the exception of two shipping agents in Tuscany, were Genoese living abroad. In this environment a seemingly irrational reciprocity was stable, and it was utilized as public good in the real world. Perhaps all ethnically or culturally homogeneous coalitions owe their success to more than kinship and at least in part to the ability to communicate efficiently a propensity to reciprocate. Likewise, the inability to communicate the same propensity outside the specific cultural milieu represents not only a strong barrier to entry but also a strong barrier to defection.

By 1562 Giovanni Brignole had built a network of resident agents in port cities around the western basin of the Mediterranean as a by-product of his program of marriage alliances and as a side activity to supply his velvet manufacturing. Giovanni's eldest son Antonio had been in Antwerp selling his father's velvet; one son-in-law, Gio Battista

Rapallo, was in Messina buying raw silk and grain to supply the cloth mill or *Volta* and its artisans; several cousins were in Palermo selling velvet and buying grain and pieces of eight; another was in Granada dealing in wool; his banker uncles and cousins were in Antwerp, Leiden, and Besançon ferrying money from sales to purchases and home to Genoa. Giovanni also entered into a small number of formal, notarized arrangements with non-kin merchants to sell his velvet in Germany. Although his activities were increasingly international, they were nonetheless directly connected with the manufacture and sale of velvet. Contrary to his best judgment, clearly stated in a 1556 will, he had become a merchant in spite of himself. “The *Volta* has given all that we have,” he warned, “and it will continue to give if we stay close to it.”¹

The Brignole’s network was overwhelmingly in the hands of family members. In the 1540s Giovanni gave his daughters’ dowries in the form of accounts receivable in the hands of foreign agents. Giving their new husbands more than just cash to invest, he gave them connections and positions in the company’s network and access to his trust investments. His family enterprise grew, but so too did his involvement with non-kin merchants. Even while diverting some of his activities from other merchants and agents to his kin, shoring up his family alliances, and supplying his business, Giovanni entered into more joint ventures. As an added benefit, kinship meant that he could conduct flexible informal arrangements without notarized contracts. His joint ventures slowly began to resemble the dealings he had with his kin, until the 1550s when they too were informal, un-notarized, and flexible. Giovanni’s first joint venture, the ‘*Società*’ had four partners, each with a set number of shares in the business; their obligations and rights were

¹ Fondo Brignole-Sale (scattola B) Testamento [1556] del M. Giovanni Cicala Brignole q. Martino q.

explicitly spelled out in the notarized preamble. The *Società* was recorded in its own ledger, a practice that legally separated it from the bulk of Giovanni's business. At the other end of the evolution of his ventures, each partner's shares were barely acknowledged in the entries of individual sales; they were entered in the same book and were indistinguishable from business with kin. The *Volta* was a family enterprise, and the family was its focus, but the new partnerships were growing in importance. This change would accelerate, even before his eldest son inherited its direction.

The outgoing letter registers from 1572 to 1604 survive in a nearly complete series. A lacuna in the 1580s is filled by a series belonging to the Sale family with whom the Brignole were connected by marriage. Their commercial correspondence reveals the language and tactics that they employed managing their ventures. The immediately preceding period 1562-1567 was host to changes in how the Brignole business evolved from a manufacturing concern to a merchant concern. In 1560 Antonio and his brother Francesco attended three quarterly exchange fairs in Besançon² (in the territories of the Duke of Savoy), to move funds from Antwerp to Genoa without having to pay the *provigione*, or commission on the transfer. At the Easter fair of 1561³ Antonio was apprenticed to his father's first cousins, Antonio and Benedetto Baliani. In the five fairs he attended in 1561 and 1562⁴ the volume of his activities grew many fold and extended well beyond the circle of family associates.

There are good reasons to believe that what we find in sixteenth-century Genoa is more than an isolated case. In 1980 the political scientist Robert Axelrod engaged a

Giovanni.

² Bs 281-83.

³ Bs 283.

number of game-theory experts in a round-robin tournament. In each match two experts competed against one another in a sequence of prisoners' dilemmas. At the start of a match each expert adopted a fixed strategy, which was programmed into a computer. A “nice” strategy was defined as one in which a player always cooperated with a cooperative adversary. If a player's opponent did not cooperate during one play, most strategies prescribed non-cooperation on the next play, but a player with a “forgiving” strategy reverted rapidly back to cooperation once his opponent started cooperating again. The result of this experiment was that every nice strategy outperformed every strategy that was not nice. Furthermore, of the nice strategies, the forgiving ones performed best.⁵

A general hypothesis can be derived from the Brignole family correspondence: In finite, non-zero sum, cooperative games with imperfect information, parties will probably cheat each other if, and only if, the number of games is fixed *a priori*. The number of games is probably finite with any one party, but potentially infinite within a set of parties. If the number of games is unknown and every player has the expectation to participate in some game with someone in the future, *mutatis mutandis*, each participant is far more likely to cooperate.⁶ When neither player knows when the sequence will end, the cooperative strategy will succeed. Axelrod made a similar analysis in simple laboratory studies in a cultural vacuum where the only choice was to cheat or not to cheat, but seems to withstand empirical scrutiny. The propensity to cooperate beyond the rational certainty

⁴ Bs 283-87.

⁵ Axelrod, Robert M., *The evolution of cooperation*, New York, 1984.

⁶ Rationally this should not work. Game theory states that there is no rational reason to cooperate unless an infinite series of future exchanges with a specific partner can be assured. James Andreoni confirms the behavior of Genoese merchants experimentally in, “Why Free Ride? Strategies and Learning in Public Goods Experiments,” *Journal of Public Economics*, 37, 1988, pp. 291-304, by finding that when participants exchange with randomly selected subset of members of a larger group they are *more likely* to

that one's partner will act similarly has been well documented in other theoretical environments.⁷ The effect increases when the number of games is potentially infinite and when the participants discuss the possible positive outcomes of cooperation. How much more are participants likely to cooperate in such games in which the overt expectation is reciprocity? The Brignole--and all of their associates both close and incidental--were aware that they could take advantage of this propensity. Further, within such a cultural context cooperation is not irrational; not cooperating is irrational. This study shows how the propensity of cooperation was communicated between parties who place themselves in such a schema.

The Brignole placed themselves in just such a framework of relationships, at first incidentally to their manufacturing, and then purposefully with their dealings in commodities. Antonio Brignole started a small venture in Flanders in 1554, the year of his majority at the age of twenty. The venture was independent and disconnected from the

reciprocate. Notwithstanding its game-theoretical irrationality, the cooperative strategy observed is even more robust when trading with "strangers."

⁷Andreoni, J., Op. Cit.; Axelrod, R., Op. Cit.; Bergstrom, T., Blume, L., Varian, H., "On the Private Provision of Public Goods," *Journal of Public Economics*, 29, 1986, pp. 25-49; Elster, J., "The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory," in, *Foundations of Social Choice Theory*, Cambridge, 1986, pp.103-32; Frank, R., "If *Homo Economicus* Could Choose His Own Utility Function, Would He Want One With a Conscience?" *American Economic Review*, 77, 1987, pp. 593-605; Hirshleifer, J., "The Expanding Domain of Economics," *American Economic Review*, 75, 1985, pp.53-70; Isaac, R., McCue, K., Plott., C., "Public Goods Provision in an Experimental Environment," *Journal of Public Economics*, 26, 1985, pp. 51-74; Isaac, R., Walker, M., Thomas, S., "Divergent Evidence on Free Riding: An Experimental Examination of Possible Explanations," *Public Choice*, 43, 1984, pp. 113-49; Kim, O., Walker, M., "The Free Rider Problem: Experimental Evidence," *Public Choice*, 43, 1984, pp. 2-24; Kramer, R., Brawer, M., "Social Group Identity and the Emergence of Cooperation in Resource Conservation Dilemmas," in, *Psychology of Decision and Conflict*, Frankfurt, 1986, pp. 205-30; Thaler, R., "Cooperation," in, *The Winner's Curse*, New York, 1992, pp. 6-20. Adam Smith observed this phenomenon and tried to explain it in, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759. He opens, "How selfish so ever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it." Neither Smith--nor any of the contemporary authors--however, pondered the utility of one relying on the interest in the fortune of others, and conversely, of their interest in your fortune. There are limits to reciprocity as Marwell and Ames found randomly selected students strongly

family enterprise to shield the rest of the family business from the risks of an untried agent. During his son's permanence in Antwerp, Giovanni did not have to pay for his son's upkeep. To the contrary, Giovanni was able to compel his other partners to utilize his sons' agency services in Antwerp and thus finance his son's foreign education. Even though he was not legally responsible for his son's actions, Giovanni lent his son his prestige, and therefore, took responsibility, as he would have for any other agent. The activities of Antonio's business adolescence were folded back into the larger family endeavor six years later when his foreign education was deemed complete. Antonio's accounts receivable were transferred to their deposit banker in Antwerp, whereby the banker became a Brignole debtor and agent. Precisely because he was no longer green, Antonio's activities were registered in the master ledger together with the *Volta* and all the rest of their assets and liabilities.

Antonio's presence is evident everywhere in the first ledger after his return to Genoa from the Low Countries. Antonio's exchange business was immediately expanded beyond their tried and true cousins while the possibilities of trusting other acquaintances at the depth of close kin began to pervade their commerce. By 1567 Antonio had built a network of his own, built on the foundation of the joint ventures with which Giovanni had supplied his *Volta*. The difference between Antonio's network and his father's was that Antonio's was focused entirely on the commodities trade. Antonio's brother Francesco had taken over the day-to-day running of the *Volta* while Antonio concerned himself with sales, supplies, and went abroad to the quarterly exchange fair. Antonio's network was so completely focused on commodities traders that when his brother died suddenly in 1567,

reciprocated but economics students did not, prompting them to ask: "Economists Free Ride, Does

Antonio abruptly stopped delivering raw silk to the artisans; he stopped paying rent on the buildings where their looms had been housed and sold the looms themselves. In a matter of a few days the work of over five decades was reduced to some minor debts and a small amount of leftover velvet to sell. A half-century of effort came to a sudden end when the *Volta* simply ceased to exist.

Despite the violent changes in their activity the Brignole took great pains to preserve continuity, to demonstrate to all of their associates, from kin to the most distant acquaintance that their series of exchanges would continue as before. Continuity was an important element of communicating a willingness to cooperate. The Brignole took steps to avoid the problem of cheating in finite series of exchanges. Cheating was always a danger when a trader's last transaction is known since there are no adverse consequences for the cheater. If a merchant were going to retire, he might as well cheat all of his associates on the last exchange. He might do this by committing outright fraud, but more likely he would not observe his obligations, would act slothfully or would refuse to make his assets available to his associates after they had done so for him. If a merchant were close to retirement, or if he were making arrangements to scale down his business, his associates might cheat him preemptively. They may not know for sure when the last exchange would come, but they would know that they involved in a finite series. Finite series of exchanges destroy confidence since everyone can be expected to cheat on the last exchange, the penultimate transaction then becomes in effect the last one, and therefore everyone will cheat or be cheated. This continues to the third to last to the fourth to last, etc., in an infinite regression until no trades are possible. Without outside enforcement,

trust collapses as soon as the total number of future transactions is known to be finite even when the exact number of future trades is unknown. Even though this discussion is highly schematic, the Brignole seem to have been vividly aware of it and took steps to preserve the relationships that they had built over fifty years.

The tactics the Brignole employed to preserve trust among their partners and associates confirms empirically that trust is transferable and that in the right environment cooperation is rational. In order to preserve continuity, twice the Brignole used tool called an *avallo*, which roughly translates to “guarantee.” The *avallo* was an important and publicly declared bridge that transformed a finite series into an infinite series by transferring ownership of accounts receivable and responsibility for accounts payable between two individuals. The Brignole Company was not legally a “*compagnia*,” or a partnership; it was a sole proprietorship, or the sum of Giovanni Brignole’s assets and liabilities. It would come to an end when Giovanni died or shortly thereafter. A convenient fiction employed occasionally by merchants allowed for the renaming of an account from “Giacomo Rossi” to “the heirs of Giacomo Rossi”. Giovanni’s ledger-books were the legal expression of Giovanni himself. They were proof of his activities: debits, credits, property, and responsibilities. Legally a merchant’s ledger-book was much more than a merchant’s notebook. They were so universally respected they could be entered as evidence in a civil trial on an equal footing with notarial documents. By definition these books were not transferable. Giovanni Brignole employed the *avallo*’s accounting gymnastics to preserve and cultivate continuity.

Their first *avallo* transferred the accounts of Antonio business adolescence in Antwerp to his deposit banker, Geronimo Lomellino Chiavari. Antonio left Antwerp in

1560 to begin following his uncles as an apprentice to their international exchange banking business. After four years as a resident of Antwerp, he needed to declare publicly the continuity of his accounts before leaving the city.⁸ In one account Giovanni transferred the net value of his sons accounts into his own account book as a debit account owed by Geronimo. The individual accounts receivable and payable were entered in the clearing account “*avallo*” in place of an exit balance sheet and were from there linked to new accounts in Geronimo’s ledger. In the aggregate no money had changed hands, but relationships certainly had. With an accounting sleight-of-hand Antonio had transferred his ownership and his responsibilities to Geronimo. Since his accounts had been backed by their connection with the Brignole, not only did Geronimo acquire a ready-made activity, he also enjoyed a transfer of Antonio and his father Giovanni’s considerable reputations. After four years setting up his first venture, the twenty-six year-old Antonio could concentrate on other activities, letting his first entrepreneurial offspring run itself.

The second and far more substantial *avallo* transferred the bulk of Giovanni’s activities to his remaining sons Antonio and Teramo in 1573, just one year before his death at 91. Antonio, with his younger brother, had been in command of the day-to-day functions of the family firm since 1567 and since that year he had effected major changes in the direction of their enterprise. When they were at the quarterly exchange fair, they did business under the name “Antonio and Teramo Cicala Brignole of Besanzone”; in

⁸ Archivio Storico Comunale Di Genova, Fondo Brignole-Sale, hereafter: Bs. Volume 9b, *Avallo*, or transfer balance sheet p. 192. There is reason to believe that for an agent to leave town he had to reconcile his accounts. When Antonio’s younger brother Teramo left Seville to return home to Genoa in 1572 he had to send a barrage of letters to declare that the company “Teramo Cicala Brignole and Antonio Pallavicino Coronata of Seville” would hereafter be known as “Antonio Pallavicino Coronata of Seville” and that all assets and liabilities were to be transferred from one entity to the other. That particular *avallo* does not survive. (Bs 102, ff.1-20)

limited activities they were “Antonio and Teramo Cicala Brignole of Genoa”; and when they ran the family business, they did so under the name of “Giovanni Cicala Brignole of Genoa.” In every practical sense, the prestige and reputation of “Giovanni Cicala Brignole of Genoa” was already synonymous with “Antonio and Teramo Cicala Brignole of Genoa.” Antonio had already changed the direction of their family enterprise. The *avallo* had set those changes in stone and merged the various “Antonio Brignoles” into one.

When Antonio returned to Genoa in 1562, after six years abroad, his formative experience had a profound influence on the how the Brignole would manage their enterprise in the future. He wrote letters to his close associates as his father had to manage his affairs abroad, but Antonio would use the elements of those letters to promote trust in a more subtle way and with a wider range of different traders. The rhetoric of his letters was an important element in his strategy to expand his activity beyond his kin. Like any of his contemporaries, every out-going letter he wrote was copied in his letter register. Copying was mandatory and was conducted in an overt way. Generally, the opening of each letter tells the addressee when the letter was sent, by what means, to which letter it is a response, and how many of the addressee’s letters were received, when, and by what route, since the last letter sent out. The common phrase, “*confirmando il scrittovi,*” reassured the addressee that while writing his response Antonio had his letter register opened to the most recent information sent to that correspondent. There was a premium placed on maintaining clarity and consistency in multiple business letters. Even the rigorous use of the second person plural, *voi* and *vostri* was not merely an archaic formality. It served to prevent confusion by eliminating the ambiguity between the formal second person singular, *suoi*, and the third person singular, *suoi*. The meticulous

communication of exactly when information was received helped to mitigate a slow postal system and conditions that could change quickly. Of even greater importance, were any changes to report.

+1572 22 di aprile/-per nostri teramo e antonio de sibia
*Nobili fratelli carissimi/ scrittovi a 18 di questo con un corriere e alli 14 con le Galere per mano de Nicolo Usodimare imbarcato con esse per passar a granata per quale harete visto come approvavamo la resolutione fatta di non andar piu appresso a quel negotio per il che staremo aspettando con desiderio de altre vostre piu fresche per intender...*⁹

In this letter Antonio Brignole writes to his brother Teramo, who had been sent to Seville with Antonio Coronata, the younger brother of Antonio's close associate Bartolomeo Coronata. Antonio was not responding to specific letters in the past, for as he says in the letter, they were all too old and he was awaiting [lettere] *più fresche*. A letter sent with the *corriere*, or the regular post, was quick but it might never arrive. The letter sent with their cousin Nicolò would arrive more slowly, but barring some misfortune, it would definitely arrive. The more important the letter the more likely it would be sent twice or three times in as many different ways. On April 28 Antonio was still waiting and he sent a third letter, *mancando tuttavia de vostre basta affimar il scritto soggiogendo che aspettaremos saper...*¹⁰ Antonio repeated his approval of Teramo's decision to suspend their current wool venture in Seville but is being kept waiting as to the latest details and conditions.

⁹April 22, 1572, to our Teramo and Antonio in Seville.

Dearest noble brothers, written on the eighteenth of this month by way of post and on the fourteenth of this month by way of the galley in the hand of Nicolò Usodimare Maggiolo embarked to sail to Granada in which you will have seen how we approve of your resolution to not continue in that activity and for which we are waiting desirous of newer letter from you in order to understand... Bs 102, f. 3.

¹⁰ Still we are without your letters, it will suffice to affirm that which we have written to you adding that we still are waiting to know...

*+Al primo de aprile [1573]...si troviamo doe carissime vostre de 31 di genaro con gionta de 6 de febraio e l'altra de 14 detto gia havute come in copia con gionta primo de marzo in risposta da quale carissime diremo haver inteso gia era seguito sino all hora in granata in la commissione de lana data all'Usodimare a noi spettante per la a/2...*¹¹

At first glance, the letter of April first seems in response to a letter from an agent who said, I have received your order and I have carried it out. When considered with the letter above, however, Antonio Brignole was communicating something more complex. He was also doing more than confirm that he had received letters from his Seville agent, Antonio Coronata (his brother Teramo had long since returned to Genoa). He was confirming that he had received word that his associate had made a decision on his behalf and when he knew. He continued the letter with further instructions in accordance with the decision to buy wool. Antonio was telling his agent, "I know that you have made changes on January 31 and February 14, I learned this on February 6 and March 1, I confirm this along with further instructions on April 1. By the time you learn of these instructions conditions may have changed as render everything I have instructed you to do irrelevant and incorrect, you decide." Delay was a constant.

The reality of delay was ever-present in the minds of all traders. Acknowledgment of the delay between any two points was a constant feature of every letter. The letters cited above moved very quickly -- one took only six days arrive. Depending on the weather, war, on a thousand other obstacles, letters between Seville and Genoa could have taken six or seven weeks each way. Frequently, several letters in which desperate pleas not to enter into a certain venture are followed by one letter in which the writer claims that

¹¹ The first of April, we find two of your dear letters of the 31 of January arrived on the sixth of February and the other on the fourteenth and after those a copy arrived on the first of March, in response to which

God's will must have prevented the warnings from arriving on time--*come piace a Dio*-- and in which he resolved to make due--*pigliar in grado*. Delay proclaimed at the top of every letter that the writer was separated from the decisions he would make and the information he would analyze. The addressees of both of the above letters were expected and trusted to act on the writer's behalf. Antonio confirmed this in the first letter: *approvavamo la resolutione fatta*. Teramo had acted autonomously from his brother; he was not just following orders. Delay, delineated in every letter, reinforced the space of autonomous action. It is not too hard to imagine that Teramo might have acted on his own; he was after all Antonio's brother. Similarly, Antonio Coronata was neither a family member nor employee, but he was still described in the letter headings as *nostro*. *Nostro* meant our man and *Nobile fratello carissimo* at the top of the first letter signaled a relationship with either a brother, a cousin, or someone like a brother, by definition someone with whom trust was secure. However, the autonomous space necessitated by delay had a similar effect on all correspondents. We may read the limits described in the fabric of the letters' rhetoric of the autonomous space allowed even an short-term trader.

The younger Brignole had inherited a network from their father based on brothers and near brothers (cousins, uncles, and various other kin by marriage; sons and nephews of his father's close partners). Giovanni had built his network on his cloth mill and by building family associations. Antonio would reform it to trade, as a result the frequently used moniker *nostri* would refer to an increasing number of non-family. Antonio addressed these close partners as *fratello carissimo*, dearest brother. The term of affection was reserved for those partners with whom a relationship of trust was beyond

we say that we have understood that the commission for wool has already been given to Usodimare for

reproach, and from whom autonomous action was expected. The autonomous space that delay afforded to the *nobili honorandi* Nazelli and Ferrero in Naples was more constricted, but nonetheless present. *Nobile honorando*, honored noble, was the default form of address reserved for traders who were not allied, and who were of equal or inferior status; unallied superiors were referred to as *Magnifico honorando*. Nazelli and Ferrero were Genoese merchants who ran a firm of their own based in Naples. While they were independent, they required relationships with firms like the Brignole to operate effectively. Nazelli and Ferrero bought southern oil, raw silk, and sold light cloth and northern manufactured goods. They needed assistance from larger concerns to move their wealth to where it was needed. By living abroad, Nazelli and Ferrero were investing heavily in trust in Naples. As a result they did not have to invest heavily in transient partners like the Brignole with whom they conducted piecemeal, tit-for-tat, and unsupervised exchanges. In exchange for the transfers of funds that a larger concern could efficiently make for them, they rented out the trust investments they had with their own debtors and rent the ability to collect on those accounts receivable to whoever needed them.

Nazelli and Ferrero had to be able to assure their transient partners that they had invested in trust in their locale. In practice this meant that when it came time to transfer funds or to deliver commodities, Nazelli and Ferrero guaranteed their debtors would pay. The Brignole were always fearful that transactions with secondary and tertiary agents would fall through since they had nothing to do with the original contract that established the debt to be collected, and since they often had no information beyond how much they

could collect, where they could collect it, and when. When entering into ventures with transient partners as well as with *fratelli* that necessitated the use of secondary agents, the Brignole insisted that their agent research local people -- who were the buyers of Brignole wool, velvet, or light cloth, or from whom the Brignole would take delivery of cash, raw silk, or grain--to assure that cash would be on hand or that there would not be any delay in the shipment of commodities. *Avertendo, come sempre, al ben fidar*, went the refrain: “Reminding you, as always, to trust well,” that is, outside the circle of *fratelli*.

The first surviving letter to Nazelli and Ferrero begins as would any letter to an agent.

*+ihus 1572 a 4 de aprile/ per nazelli e ferrero de napolis
Nobili honorandi/ si troviamo la cara vostra de 21 del passato in risposta de quale
diremo haver visto la causa per quale non podeste caricar li dolete sopra le
galere...bisogna pigliar in grado...¹²*

When selling commodities Nazelli and Ferrero were similar to any of the Brignole’s close associates. The letter continues:

*...havemo alsì visto come vi provedeste di quanto vi mancava per le tratte de montelione
E come di novo vi era stato tratto ¶300 e voi remessoline ¶500 che tutto aproviemo
aspetando di ogni cosa il modo di farne scrittura/ E perche detto simone ci fa di continuo
Istanza che li sienno in detto loco de montelione remesse denari havendovene alsì a voi
fatto Istanza harete procurato o procurarete ne segua in ogni modo l’effetto e quando
sarete a segno che li habiate fra remessi E tratte provisto de ¶10,000 In circa prima che
li provediate Il resto del credito fattoli saperete da lui di quanto aponto hara bisogna e
tanti li provederete afinche non li habbino puoi a restar la denari Indisposti... a piaceri
vostri siamo Adio¹³*

¹² April 4, 1572 to Nazelli and Ferrero in Naples

Honored nobles, we find your dear letter of the 21 of the last month, in response to which we say that the reason for which you were not able to load the dolette on the galley...we must make due...

¹³We have also seen how you have arranged your deficit in the remittance to Montelione and how again three hundred ducats were contracted to you and you have remitted five hundred ducats all of which we approve, awaiting [confirmation] so that we may issue a note. And because said Simone insists that that money be remitted to Montelione having insisted also to you, you have procured or will procure the effect and when you have, between contracts and remittances the provided 10,000 ducats circa, you will procure the rest on credit, you will know from him how much he needs and procuring for him until they do not have money indisposed...Adieu Bs 102, f. 130.

Antonio Brignole wrote as he awaited confirmation of two remittances, for three hundred five hundred ducats, before making funds available in Genoa. Apparently, Antonio's brother-in-law's insistence was not enough to get Nazelli and Ferrero moving. Antonio had asked that Simone be given money whenever and wherever needed up to around 10,000 ducats, and beyond that amount to secure loans. Antonio would make a similar sum available elsewhere in Europe after each payment. In other words, Antonio was willing to move 10,000 ducats for Nazelli and Ferrero in exchange for services extended to him and his kin. Nazelli and Ferrero would pressure their own debtors to pay in cash or in the commodities that Simone had purchased. As long as Nazelli and Ferrero heeded the reminder "to trust well," *avertendo al ben fidar*, they could maintain a cool relationship with the Brignole and their debtors had no need to invest in trust with the transient Simone Lomellini to sell their wares.

Everyone benefited from the exchange. Simone got a roaming credit-line; Nazelli and Ferrero got their capital moved out of their closed marketplace, in this case Naples; Antonio was able to import commodities from people with whom he had absolutely no relationship, brokered by someone in whom he needed to make only small piecemeal trust-investments; costs were greatly reduced since in-coming and out-going transfer commissions canceled each other out. Antonio had already built a limited relationship with Nazelli and Ferrero buying and selling commodities and merchandise. The fruits of that relationship were much more than light cloth, grain, oil, or raw silk. Neither party maintained a continuous relationship with the other and yet, continued to trust each other. One day they were selling commercial paper (*tratte*) to the Brignole, the next day they

sold to some Giustiniani or Biacciadonna. If Nazelli and Ferrero had cheated their clients, they would have lost their ability to move their own capital abroad; had their clients cheated them, Nazelli and Ferrero's local capital, contacts, relationships, and knowledge of the region would have been unavailable to them or exceedingly expensive. The result would have been the same if either party entered into agreements on the local level with people who could not pay when their debts came due. They had to trust well outside of the sequence of partners. They were reminded repeatedly, sometimes three times in the same letter, of their responsibility to trust well: *Avertendo sempre al ben fidar.*

Nazelli and Ferrero were neither family nor allies, but they were essential to filling in the gaps between family and ally. On April 28 Antonio asked that 300 ducats be sent wherever Simone Lomellini was at the time the letter was received.

*...la remessa per Simone nostro manderette in Montelione diretta a Gieronimo Naschetto con ordine la mandi a lui in Messina caso che non fussi...*¹⁴

The Brignole Company was in the *Mezzogiorno* to buy. The little that they made selling Dutch cloth and finished velvet was no comparison to the amounts they spent on raw silk and grain. In order to do business in the South Antonio needed partners with complimentary activities. Even a rough fit would work.

*...havemo visto come non havendo havuto commodita di remettere denari in Montelione teneste la via de Cosenza de ¶1400 remessi a Luiggi Ferrero che sta bene poi che crediamo lo habiate fatto como scrivete sopra l'ordine di detto Simone dal quale sin qui non havemo aviso alcuno e cosi essendo si dara bono ordine per il compimento della tratta fatta in Apparizione di quale ne harete poi detto il modo di farne scrittura...*¹⁵

¹⁴ ...send the remittance directed to Geronimo Naschetto for our Simone to Montelione with an order that it be sent to him in Messina in the case that he is [no longer in Montelione] Bs 102, f. 131.

¹⁵ We have seen how it was not convenient for you to remit money in Montelione. That you can send the 1,400 ducats via Cosenza remitted to Luigi Ferrero is fine. We believe that you have done as you write in regards to the order from Simone, from whom we have not had any news, an order will be given for the completion of the commission in the [fair of the] Annunciation for which you should tell us how to issue the note.

Nazelli and Ferrero could not engineer their debtors to make payment in Montelione.

Antonio suspected that his *cognato* might go on to Cosenza and instructed Nazelli and Ferrero to look into the possibilities of capital there. In Naples there were other opportunities.

*...per li bisogni della guerra contra turchi intendiamo che costi si vano facendo qualche negotii q vita e perpetui molto cauti di honesto utile e con satisfacione e consenso de sua santita e perche noi desidereriamo haverne parte ne sara caro non vi sii fatica darne aviso di quelli si tratterano per giornata...*¹⁶

While they relied on each other, neither the Brignole nor Nazelli and Ferrero were inclined to deepen their association. Both needed the flexibility to decline a commission or to request a remittance to a far-off city, while “*pregandovi dar il solito bon recato alle alegande*” as needed.¹⁷ Still, there existed an implied mutual obligation to deal with each other when their requirements were in sync. When Antonio had to carve out some space for his in-law and take business away from his usual Messina agent he had to stress that notwithstanding the temporary change, he still felt obliged to him. Alessandro Lercaro had the same kind of interactions with the Brignole in Messina as did Nazelli and Ferrero.

+1572 a 2 de maggio/ per Alessandro Lercaro di Messina /

Nobile honorato/ per risposta della cara vostra de 14 del passato diremo non potervi per questo anno per ancora compiacervi di darvi comissione di sete havendo noi Il medesimo suggietto che havette voi di cercarle per il nostro Simon Lomellino quale crediamo dovessi partir de costi fornito che fussi l’Impieta passata ma essendosi Intertenuto per altri negotii nostri particolari siamo astretti dalla parentella far con lui E non con altri/ vi dichiamo bene che sempre che noi non haremo costi persona propria non mancheremo de farvi parte di quanto occorira conforme alla promessa fattavi di

¹⁶ ...for the needs of the war with the Turks we understand that there, there are opportunities for life and perpetual annuities, that are very safe and give a good revenue sanctioned by his holiness. Since we desire to take part it would be appreciated, if it does not burden you, to advise us on what is available day by day... Bs 102, f. 131.

¹⁷ ...asking that you give the usual attention to the attached...Bs 102, f. 133.

*quale non vi mancheremo quando si agiusti simile occasione/ siamo a piaceri vostri
adio*¹⁸

Antonio was not obliged to conduct trades in Naples or Messina, but he was moved to explain why he was doing business whenever he engaged anyone other than his usual agent. Antonio was loath to lose his ability to maneuver in Sicily and understood that Alessandro Lercaro would not take the loss of a conduit for his capital sitting down. Alessandro Lercaro and Antonio Brignole were not allied traders, nor were they members of a common coalition. Antonio was explicit that the Brignole do not have their own man in Messina: *“vi dichiarmo bene che sempre che noi non haremo costi persona propria.”* They were not Alessandro Lercaro’s only clients and he was certainly not the only agent in town, but when the Brignole needed something done in Messina they were expected to engage him. If Messina silk were low quality, if there were an over-abundance of specie driving prices up, or if there were advantageous conditions elsewhere, they were free to buy in another city. Their relationship was only as strong as their seasonal dealings required.

Nazelli and Ferrero traded their associations with the Brignole at a low cost. Neither risked heavily in their relationship, their dealings were tit-for-tat, but the little they had invested was very useful. Both could have easily defected to another agent or client with no other consequence asside from the loss of that trader’s services in the future. This

¹⁸ ...in response to your dearest letter of the 14 of the last, we shall say that we are not for now able to please you this year by giving you commissions for raw silk having the same reason as you to search for them, on behalf of our Simone Lomellino (married to Antonio Brignole’s sister Minetta) ...would that the deal be already concluded but since he is there for other particular business of ours, we are constrained by kinship to deal with him and not with others. We tell you definitely that when we do not have our own person there and we shall not neglect to give you a part...conforming to the promise made to you which we will not neglect you, when a similar occasion fixes itself, we are at your pleasure. Adieu¹⁸
Bs 102 f. 152.

was the moral hazard that concerned them most, against which no one had even theoretical legal recourse. Their aversion to burning their bridges would have prevented them from ever trying to damage the other's reputation for any such a defection. However, because their own association had a history, and because of a mutually perceived obligation, their weak relationship was nonetheless stable. Antonio could even lend his association with Nazelli and Ferrero to a third party. That is to say that he could lend out his own ability to borrow Nazelli and Ferrero's trust investments. The chain of associations could be stretched further.

+9 de settembre/ Il portator di questa e Gio Battista Usodimare nostro quale se ne passa con questa gallera in Palermo alla cura de suoi negotii e perche potria essersi risolvessi far costi qualche impieta per palermo o che havessi altri bisogni quando da lui siate rechiesti de pagarli sino a ¶1000 celi pagherette facendone debitori Cibo e Usodimare di Palermo valervine secondo l'ordine vi sara dato a bocca da detto Gio Battista perche in ogni loco li sara dato il debito recatto/ e vi siamo adio/¹⁹

Antonio was able to set up his cousin, Gio Battista Usodimare Maggiolo, and his sister's husband, Giulio Cibo Sale (whose wool dealings are described below), with an efficient agent in Naples. Nazelli and Ferrero were willing to execute an order, not from Antonio, but from two unknowns, because Antonio was willing to informally guarantee it “*perche in ogni loco li sara dato il debito recatto*” and because it represented a new conduit for capital and effort to Palermo, Leghorn, Florence, and other useful points north. Relationships were expressed in currency and commodities, but there is little doubt what was really being traded. Trust was transferable and rentable. It flowed easily between acquaintances and allowed complete strangers to associate and interact. This

¹⁹The carrier of this letter is our Gio Battista Usodimare Maggiolo who passes by on this galley on route to Palermo on his own business and since he might be able to conduct some business there for Palermo or might have other needs when he requests it you will pay him up to 1,000 ducats making the debt out to

type of relationship was unknown to Giovanni Brignole, who had relinquished the day-to-day operations of the family business just five years earlier. The reason is simple: Giovanni had never gone on the search for deals abroad; he was only interested in supporting his velvet mill. His agents had all been kin or well supervised by kin.

No one, not even the Brignole and their allies with their growing success, influence, and wealth, could conduct mercantile activity alone. Genoese commerce was conducted within a community of merchants constantly searching for temporary complements and synergies. That community was far more loose than previously assumed. Trust could be maintained on a commission by commission basis. Genoese merchants did not jump into unmediated high-value exchanges with strangers. Unlike the Venetians they did not have government subsidized trust in the form of state run insurance and state run convoys of ships that allowed for extremely tenuous connections between traders. They did not, on the other hand, try to incorporate all of their agents into their coalitions. We are lead to this conclusion when we assume the necessity of strong, complete enforcement. Nazelli and Ferrero and the Brignole were not in the same coalition, nor were their interactions continuous and yet they could conduct exchanges very successfully.

Alongside their traffic in raw silk, oil, and light cloth, Nazelli and Ferrero specialized in connections to credits throughout Calabria and Sicily that could be brought to bear for purchases that traders like the Brignole wanted to effect. One needed only pay them in Genoa and they would sell their own credits, moving their own capital northward. They rented their efforts, associations, and trust-investments in exchange for transfers of

funds. Some of their associations in Naples and the *Mezzogiorno* were the short-term and weak connections they had with their own customers; others were strong relationships they had within their own coalition. They solicited their own debtors and exploited their own trust relationships on behalf of the Brignole and other merchants. Within limits, traders like the Brignole and Nazelli and Ferrero could shift between traders and agents without fear of retribution or moral hazard. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Spanish wool business.

At first glance the Brignole and their allies the Sale seem to have had a rather large group of employee/agents doing their bidding in Spain. Their agents are, however, independent and had relationships with the Brignole similar to that of Nazelli and Ferrero. The scale of their operations in Spain dwarfed that of Naples both in numbers of agents and in volume of business done, but this did not mean that the relationships had to be any more complex. The Brignole went from commission to commission with their agents in Spain. Typically, there were two different types of arrangements -- occasional commissions and joint ventures -- signaled by the phrases *impietate il procevuto in...* (employ the proceeds in...) and *...spettante a/2 a noi* (half of the interest in the deal belonging to us).

Impietate il procevuto in...: In the occasional commission an agent bought a commodity, copper implements, velvet, coral, etc., from the Brignole. The agent then sold the commodity in the local Spanish market and takes on local debtors. When the debt came due, occasionally they collected cash but more often they connected their debtors with credits located where the Brignole wanted to buy other commodities, principally

wool. When it came time to invest the *utile* in wool the agent took a commission on the exchange, netting 3 2/3% on the transaction. For their 3 2/3% the Brignole were able to access local buyers and sellers without having to invest in trust with any of them and without having to invest heavily in trust with their casual agent. Omnipresent in their dispatches, the Brignole remind agents and partners of all stripes to trust well, *avertendo al ben fidar*. When the Brignole wrote to their agents to remind the agent that his debtors owed him money, between the lines, they wrote to stress that the agent owed an effort debt to the Brignole. The agent was asked to extend the service for which he had already been paid.

+a 18 de aprile/ per fornari de toledo

Nobile honorando si troviamo la carissima vostra de 8 del passato in risposta di quale diremo star aspetando habiate poi fatto servir a nostri de sibillia quanto harete scosso cosi per conto nostro come del nostro Messer Gio e de nostri Antonio e Bartolomeo poiche havevate manduto person a posta per la essatione e il simile farete di quanto anderette scodendo faciendo sollicitar li debitori per meterli a fine quanto prima facendo li tutto per venir in detti nostri de sibillia giusta l'ordine datovi e cosi il retrato della nostra parte...non manchino da canto vostro d'esserne sollicitati²⁰

Fornari owed an effort debt to the Brignole. He had already made use of Brignole commodities, had sold them, and perhaps collected enough of the resulting debts to have realized a profit for his labors. He still owed the Brignole. His debt, incurred in Toledo, was more than a debt in goods (although the purchase of commodities was the ultimate goal). It was to be paid in some form, most likely wool, in Seville or wherever *giusta*

²⁰April 18 to Fornari of Toledo,

Honored noble, we find your dear letter of the 8 of the past month in response to which we say that we await for you to give service to our people in Seville when you have collected for our account as well as for our Mr. Giovanni and our Antonio [Brignole] and Bartolomeo [Coronata] since you sent someone specifically for the extinction [of the debt] and similarly for as much as you will collect pressuring the debtors to put an end to [the commissions] as soon as possible doing everything you can to follow the orders of our people in Seville according to the orders given to you as well as [to collect] our share...they will not go unsolicited on your end. Bs 102, ff. 135-36.

l'ordine datovi. Fornari owed the Brignole an amount wherever they were ordered to pay. The Brignole relied on the connections that enabled them to have capital where it was needed, and they were willing to risk a finite amount of that capital for this service. In this case if Fornari had taken his profits by paying the debt, in the form of a remittance to the Brignole through the exchange fair, against Brignole orders, he would not have been doing his job and it would have constituted a defection on his part.

The Brignole often had to cajole their short-term collaborators. “*per lomellini de Granata...a suo loco mandaretti il conto saldo solicitando li debitori maturi e che vanno maturando facendo il tutto per venir in li nostri de sibillia conforme all'ordine già datovi avisando il successo.*”²¹ All of the short-term collaborators ‘employing the proceeds’ were asked to coordinate their debtors payments with the needs of *nostri de sibillia*, Teramo Brignole and Antonio Coronata of Seville.

+18 de aprile per Boggio e Pinello de sibillia
...*aspetando habiate poi satisfato a nostri de costi li ms. 36,020 che a modo vostro ne restate debitori che quando non sii seguito alla havuta di questa vi piacerà far che segua quanto prima per poter annullar conti se ne saremo d'accordio e poi che la nave non era mai gionta in Cadesse non si manca già qui di starne con qualche ansietà che dio piaccia liberarcene presto e per l'interesse nostro in caso sinistro che dio vogli vi stara amemoria mandar li recati per poter scoder le sigurta/adio.*²²

The Brignole had to encourage their agents to concentrate on the family business when it was successful and especially when it was not. Pestering, cajoling, and leaning, collectively called *solicitar li debitori*, kept short-term agents on the jobs for which they had already been paid. Again, Antonio Brignole leaned on Fornari in Toledo:

+*adi primo di Giugno*

²¹ To Lomellini of Granada...in its own time send the completed account soliciting the mature debtors and those who are maturing doing everything to forward [funds] to our people in Seville according to the order already given advising of your success. Ibid, f. 136.

²² Ibid.

*...per conto de Messer Gio nostro ms. 4,305 che gia tanto tempo restavano in voi de conca per il che bisogna dir che l'homo per voi mandato in Baezza non habbi fatto frutto alcuno in la essatione de debitori che in vero molto ci dispiace perche essendo causati sino l'anno de '568 e fatto le sopra 3 lavaderi dubitiamo che tirandovi tanto in longa si possi sperarne poco senza li uzaretti la solita diligenza per venirne alla imborzo e simile dichiario per il sacco di calatrana che resta in Alliantia e perche desideriamo metter a fine/ simil pendentie vi preghiamo procuriate il fatto ultimar facendo servir quanto imborzerette adetti nostri di sibillia o che ne farete remessa in la piu prossima...*²³

And Lomellini in Granada:

*...non havendo havuto il conto dei agnini per voi comprati e rivenduti per conto nostro...havete finito di vendere li terzari del anno passato far sollicitar tutti li debitori...*²⁴

Debts were not left alone to build up because they represented more than cash owed. Effort, service, and diligence, or the lack thereof, were signaled in the balance of an agents account. *Marvedis*. 'x,' "*che in voi resta...non habbi fatto frutto alcuno in la essatione de debitori che in vero molto ci dispiace...*" In most cases, there was no cash to be had from any debtor; payment was typically made in other commodities. An outstanding debt was a blockage, pointing to a blockage in the system. The agent would have to be motivated to keep the firm's purchases, and therefore its capital, moving and circulating. Managing a commercial network was a great departure from Giovanni's earlier activities, limited to selling cloth and to remitting funds home. It was akin to a commercial perpetual-motion machine or to a game of commercial hot potato.

²³ ...in the account of our Mr. Giovanni there are 4,305 marvedis that for a long time now remained in the account of your agent in Conca for which it needs to be said that [the efforts of] the man that you sent to Baezza have not borne any fruit at all in the extinction of the debts which distresses us because since they were incurred in 1568 and in regards to the [wool] laundry things have been left for so long that we doubt that it is little hope without your usual diligence given to its collection and we believe similarly in regards to the sack of Calatrana [wool] that remains in Alcante, for which we desire an end. For similar pending ventures we beg you to procure an end, making the proceeds of what ever you collect available to our people in Seville or remitting them in the next [fair]... Bs 102, ff. 136-37.

²⁴ ...not having received the [completed] account for the shearlings purchased and resold by you on our account...since you have finished selling the third [quality wool] from last year, solicit all of the debtors...Bs 102, f. 137.

The second typical arrangement the Brignole conducted in Spain was a joint venture, characterized by the phrase “*spettante a/2 a noi.*” This type of contract derived directly from similar ventures that Giovanni Brignole directed selling velvet in Flanders. In this type of arrangement the agent usually supplies half (occasionally another fractional part) of the capital and is responsible for his share of the expenses, tariffs, and insurance for a venture. In return for foregoing the 3 2/3% commission the agent gained access to markets that are far beyond their local reach and enjoyed sellers, shipping, and banking services without paying the commission called the *provigione*. The joint venture was still a casual business relationship; it could be suspended and restarted when conditions dictated, as seen above in the transaction with Alessandro Lercaro of Messina, and the risk of defection was the same.

The lower costs, and therefore higher profits possible for all parties, served as robust incentive to cooperation, both to partners in a joint venture to give high effort to maintain those joint ventures season after season, as well as to commissioned agents who sought to demonstrate that they were trustworthy and merited the increased risk involved in moving from one type of venture to the other. The joint venture partner was obligated to collect from debtors to fund his clients' capital needs just as the commissioned agent was. In addition, he also needed to supply his own capital for half of the venture. The joint venture meant that all of the parties -- buyer, shipper, seller, and banker -- were all working for themselves as they worked for their partners. Past experience with less complex and risky, and therefore less remunerative ventures allowed each partner to gauge each others' proclivity to reciprocate and cooperate, and to assess whether a

prospective partner had the cash, connections, and savvy to be worth the increased risk, always in the presence of incomplete enforcement.

+a 23 di aprile copia mandata quando sopra/ [per Antonio Pallavicino [Coronata] di Sibillia] si troviamo la carissima vostra de 19 del passato in risposta di quale affermando il scritto circa le pregiudizii trovati in lo conto di lane resta dire che il discarricco che vi dette di ferruffino circa il tristo assortimento di dette lane poco li serve a giuditio nostro perche ancora che esse lane per esser state comprate tante fussero di mala sorte non per questo dovea advertirle nel modo che ha fatto ma dubitiamo che facessi dessigno di dover benissimo comprare quelle restorno che se cosi e si e benissimo reuscita e dovera darne conto a iddio e perche in quelle di quest anno non possa intervenirne si medesimo quando ha lui habiate dato cura del lavadero che non gia vorriamo fussi seguito sara bene non vi [] far spesa di mandarli altra persona fidata che possi haver cura alle interesse nostre soliciando quanto piu potrete la spedizione di detto lavadero facendo mandare alle marine cosi le basse como le prime sorte scrivendo da firenze che sono in pretii da cavare piu construtto delle basse qui in Italia che in revenderle costi/

Traders did try to pass off inferior goods; the marketplace was far from a utopia. The error committed by Antonio Coronata Pallavicino did not result in his termination as agent. Antonio wrote that Ferruffino should be informed of their dissatisfaction, but that he doubted that Ferruffino would buy back the wool; even if he did low prices would have meant selling at a loss. What remained was to remove the incompetent Ferruffino from running the Brignole's *lavadero*, where the wool was given a first wash, and ship the wool on to Florence, where a small profit was still possible.

havendo havuto tutti molta satisfatione che pensaste di farle lavare in loco commodo cosi per mandarle in allicantia como in cadice che quando li habiate posto ad effetto ne pare le faciate mandare in ogni modo in allicantia essendo di piu satisfatione di ogniuno che haverle ha navigare di detto loco di cadice e se ben per detti vostri di qui e stato nollegiato vassello di salme 1300 incluse per venire a levare la maggior parte in cadexe quando non possino stornarne esso nollegio non mancherà che li potrete far dare il nollito senza dar noi suggietto a nostre lane che puo importare grosso danno alla impieta tutta volta per la parte nostra vi affermiamo in tutto e per tutto como della vostra/

The most striking property of the joint-venture agent was his autonomy.

Notwithstanding the intermittent quality of this type of association, the agent acted on his own, even while acting in concert with his other partners, in this case in Alcante, Genoa, and Florence. In the paragraph cited above Antonio Brignole acknowledged Antonio Coronata's decisions to wash the partner's wool near to where it was sheared and to send it cleaned to Cadiz and Alcante. News of a lease of space onboard a galleon stopping in Cadiz, and a suggestion to send the remainder of their wool there, was sent with a reminder to address the wool as coming from a 'foreigner' and not by name for tax purposes. These are suggestions and not orders. When merchants give orders, as Antonio had given to Nazelli and Ferrero in Naples, they were always explicit.

delle granate non occorre altro dirne salvo stare per giornata aspettando la soma a ponto che lo usodimare ne hara incapparruto che le habbi tutte ricevute dato ha darette ordine che non havendo in contrario da noi le habbi a navigare per qui como gia se vi e scritto avisandovi che noi con questo medesimo correri scriviamo a detto Imperiale nele mandi qui con primi vascelli securi a giuditio suo purché non sieno ulche e di non minor portata di salme 2000 e che reparti il risico saldo di altra anno capitando dette lane e quando hara occasione di passaggio che il simile potrette scriverli voi e circa la navigatione delle serene quando risolviate mandarle in allicantia doverette dar ordine a cui le farete mandare perche sienno navigate quanto prima per ligorno conforme all'ordine delle cibo a voi dato quando dettero la commissione/

Antonio Coronata was an agent as well as a joint partner. He executed simple orders: to reinvest insurance claims paid the previous year, to lease space on ships, to gather and report information on futures purchased. He had collected his 3 2/3% commission on these simple tasks when money changed hands. Ultimately, the joint venture was the desired return for his constant investment in trust, paid in installments of savvy and perseverance.

per il venuto anno de '74 da nostri nicolo e giulio cibo vi e stata datta commissione de rube²⁵ 10,000 di lane che hanno a spettare a/2 a voi e vostri amici e l'altra a/2 a loro e a noi per a/2 talche a noi toccare di detta [] per a/4 per dover le mandar tutte in firenze a essi cibo per tanto quando di agiusti e che possiate essa commissione compire si contentiamo per detta a/4 parte restarli interessati che in tutto serviate l'ordine di detti cibo non vi maravigliando della bassa limitacione perche anticipandosi diminuando non voriano costar piu darette di ogni successo aviso per giornata/ adio²⁶

His payoff for diligently following shipping orders, channeling communiqués between agents, and pressuring debtors was participation in a joint venture involving eight to nine tons of wool. More casual agents invested the proceeds of goods sent to them for sale or from Brignole debtors with the “*solita diligenza*” in return for 3 2/3% commissions. They were always looking to build their relationships from humble beginnings to participate with a number of merchants in far off cities in mutually beneficial and complementary ventures.

Antonio Coronata bought 10,000 *rube* of wool futures by placing a deposit on flocks -- *incapperando* -- which he or his associate would inspect in the fields reserving the right to buy the wool when sheared. This was a difficult and time-consuming job. Although the distinction is lost on the modern reader, joint partners stressed the differences in wool from various regions. Granada, Toledo, Serene, and Conca rose and fell in esteem along with the weather, the condition of pasturage, and with the local money supply. One year futures in Serene would be dumped in favor for Conca; another year Toledo would be dropped for Serene. Futures could be sold or the traders might take delivery only to sell in Alcante when profits might evaporate due to low quality or over-supply of either wool or money. The ability to have more casual relationships--to suspend them, to restart them at will--was a fundamental feature of the wool business. The volume

²⁵ Italian measure of weight fluctuating between eight and nine kilograms.

of the wool trade (and generally the commodities trade over the western basin of the Mediterranean) meant that the flexibility required by the Spanish market could not be supported by networks of kin or members of coalitions alone. No single coalition had the resources to station an employee or to buy futures in all of the places that shifting conditions would demand. No joint-venture could honor its offers of commissions when profits from a certain region dried up. The range of relationships, from the most casual to those consecrated by marriage, were chosen in this context, and traders were ever mindful of these eventualities. *...non vi meravigliando della bassa limitazione perche anticipandosi diminuando li prezzi...*

The wool eventually sent would go by galleon to Leghorn or Pisa to the Brignole's shipping agent Salvator Quaratesi. From there it would travel overland to Florence where it was cleaned a second time and sold by Antonio Brignole's brother-in-law Giulio Cibo Sale. Giulio's role in Florence was similar to Antonio Coronata's; he maintained casual relationships with brokers and consumers of raw wool. Antonio Coronata traded his connections, effort, and savvy for Giulio Sale and Antonio Brignole's. Ideally, as in the case cited above, as the agent in Spain was reserving the right to buy the next year's fleece, the current year's bales were leaving port for Tuscany, and the proceeds of the last year's sales were returning to Spain in the form of merchandise and remittances.

There are two other registers belonging to Giulio Cibo Sale that made their way by marriage into the Brignole collection. The letters and entries in them were recorded and sent in Florence. From the point of view of the Brignole ledgers and the volume of their joint activities, one might assume that Antonio Brignole and Giulio Sale Giulio were

²⁶ Bs 102, ff. 24-25.

part of the same tight group of symbiotically connected traders. Giulio had had long-standing dealings with the Brignole, but the picture painted by his records shows that Giulio was not a member of the Brignole company. He (and previously his father Nicolò) had a thriving business centered in Florence, of which a week's letters are cited here. The activities they held in common represent the intersecting space between two coalitions. Together, Antonio and Giulio imported large quantities of Spanish wool into Florence.

While Giulio was Antonio's exclusive seller in Florence and Antonio's nephew and employee Luca Ayrolo was Giulio's exclusive representative at the exchange fairs (*procuratore*) in certain kinds of transactions, Giulio moved many merchants' wool, Antonio moved many merchants' paper. This reciprocal obligation did not mean, however, that Antonio was required to employ Giulio's agents in Spain or vice versa. The same can be said of their agents in Spain and elsewhere: Gio Battista Gentile and Bartolomeo Cigala, Giulio's agents in Seville, sold wool to many agents. While Giulio was under no obligation to buy in Seville, if he did and especially if he bought from another agent, he bought something from Gentile and Cigala. It is evident that Antonio and Giulio held a privileged place in their respective businesses, from the detail and care that went into the commercial intelligence and the frank friendship far beyond those of other correspondents that comes across in their letters. They could overlap their activities, wool, silk, and finished cloth, when it suited them and they could refrain from doing so whenever it was not in their best interest. Willingness to reciprocate coupled with flexibility was at work in all facets of Western Mediterranean trade. No agent threw in his lot with only one representative. The essence of a successful agent, buyer, seller, or banker was his willingness to forego business for a year or a season and his ability to pick

it up again when it again became mutually convenient. This meant that to be able to reciprocate, Gentile and Cigala demanded fidelity from Giulio Sale in Seville while never offering an exclusive. The prerequisite for flexible reciprocity was a critical volume of participants.

Genova + 5 di novembre per Pietro Gentile

Magnifico honorando trovomi la carissima vostra di 28 passato per risposta alla quale diró che hoggi, o, il prossimo giorno doverà capitare buona parte delle lane di Serena nelle quali dite partecipare e spero che delli reffini ne resterà venduto buona parte a scudi 29 per lo tempo...E se le troveranno di quella finezza che dite si doveanno per giornata andar tutte smaltendo. E voi se harete altro aviso di Sibia della loro spettazione lo dicete poi, che dalli Gentile e Cigala non fu se non che osservasse l'ordine vostra..., quanto la sia...parechie balla tarda assai a capitare, nostra Signore la [nave] mandi presto salva, Addio.²⁷

Giulio did not know how much wool would arrive or of what quality. He worked with his collaborators knowing that if their product was not what they had claimed, he could adjust his accounts with no ill will from his partners. “I hope that most of the finest will be sold for 29 écus on credit...and if indeed they are of the fineness you claim, they should sell out just as fast as they arrive.” Without rigid external enforcement the traders in this example were able to leave off defining the specifics of their joint venture until its conclusion and final reckoning. When problems arose, and they did, each trader was able to communicate both their obligations and entitlements without recrimination.

Genova +5 di novembre per Ambrogio D'oria

...questa mattina sono capitate balle 40 di lane di più sorte lane di Pisa...il prossimo giorno aspetto dell'altre. ...di quelle di Serena ne ho venduta di parecchie balle a scuti

²⁷ Bs 110, f. 1.

Genoa, November 5, to Pietro Gentile,

I find your dear [letter] of October 28, in response to which I say that today or the next day should arrive most of the Serena [wool] in which you are a participant and I hope most of the finest will be sold at 29 écus credit. If one finds the fineness that you say, I should be able to sell it as it arrives. If you have new messages from Seville regarding their portion tell me how much it is, Gentile and Cigala could not but have followed your order. At our stage many bales are quite late to arrive, Lord, send them soon and safe, Adieu. Bs 110, f. 1.

29 il tempo...e spero che se saranno trovate della qualità che si è dato loro ad intendere si doveranno andare per giornata vendendo tutte...ne havea havuto parecchie balle da altri venditori che sono tenute lane dal medesimo paese [dal quale la importiamo noi], ma più lavate e più allegre...spero che non dobbiamo molto tardare a farne fine...In tanto dovera anche capitare lettere di Sibia e di Granata o le fatture di dette commissioni [per] intendersi apunto la spettatione di ogniuno...²⁸

By raising the problem of the lower quality of the wool that Giulio had already received, he was defining his responsibility relative to the Doria buyers with whom he had arranged a series of joint ventures. "...if the quality [of the wool yet to arrive] is found to be what they have lead us to understand, it should sell out as fast as it can arrive." If not, Giulio bears less responsibility to sell at a high price, and perhaps if this state of affairs continued, he might have been tempted to buy wool from other vendors. The amount of effort each trader was willing to invest in the next transaction fluctuated constantly, and as it changed those changes were announced in correspondence. Since suspending purchases from any one agent for a year was to be expected from time to time, when buying in Seville was less convenient than buying elsewhere, the Doria could never know if Giulio Sale would ever buy from them again. It would be in their best interest to correct the problem and in turn raise to Giulio's responsibility towards them to get the highest price for their wool.

²⁸ Genoa November 5, to Ambrogio Doria

...this morning forty bales of various sorts of wool arrived from Pisa...tomorrow I expect more to arrive...I have sold a great deal of the Serena wool at 29 écus credit...and I hope that if the quality [of the wool yet to arrive] is found to be what they have lead us to understand it should sell out as fast as it can arrive...there were many bales sold by other vendors who had wool from the same town [from which we import] but more washed and lighter...I hope that we will not delay too much in moving them. Soon letters or invoices should also arrive from Seville and Granada for these commissions [from which] one may understand [how much, and how many] shares belong to each [trader]...Bs 110, f.2-3.

Fredrick Lane explored how state owned fleets and state administered insurance enabled traders to enter freely into non-repetitive joint ventures.²⁹ The Genoese who had neither the state subsidized convoys nor the insurance issued by the *Serenissima*, nevertheless had an institution upon which they too could conduct joint ventures that were always potentially non-repetitive. Genoese business relationships were not as nearly anonymous as their Venetian counterparts, nor could they enter into agreements knowing as little as Venetians did about their partners, but neither were their ventures guaranteed between kin or coalition. Before Venetians entered into a venture, the parameters of their business were spelled out explicitly. State involvement allowed them to do this; the costs of enforcement were borne by the state and financed through customs fees. In no way could Giulio Sale be as explicit. Even after receiving a large portion of the wool sent to him, he still did not know how much was coming, and who owned what. “Soon letters or invoices should also arrive from Seville and Granada for these commissions [from which] one may understand [how much, and how many] shares belong to each [trader]...” Giulio Sale bore the costs of his own relationships, subtly and constantly adjusting the caliber of his partnerships. Having invested in his partners, having risked his capital with them, Giulio Sale could do what no Venetian could: he could wait for the details of his joint venture to condense in their own time. He could also exploit these flexible arrangements when needed. Giulio could shift his capital, and therefore his risk investments, between five or six regular joint ventures, some in the same cities. He could easily beg-off one partner in favor of another without burning his bridges, claiming that prices were too high in Spain, too low in Florence, that money supply and inflation were too high, that he owed

²⁹ “Family Partnerships and Joint Ventures in the Venetian Republic,” *Journal of Economic History* 4:2

preference to a kinsman, or he could continue dealing with a partner restricting his purchases to low quality, high volume wool. While Giulio asked Garbarino (below), for low quality wool in Seville, he was also asking Veneroso and Spinola for high quality wool in Granada.

*Genova +5 novembre per Agostino Imperiale Garbarino
...questa mattina hanno finito di venire le balle 17 di lane a/2 con mio fratello [Antonio Brignole] e delle 5 balle di reffini che sono in practica per farne vendita e spero arrivarne a scuti 28...forsi vantaggiare del tempo con tutte che le nostre siano come ha venduto mio fratello...quando l'havera le circostanze, che qui vogliono, alla quale si mira più delle altri sorti più basse non si dovera mancare di uscirne della rata, perciò risolvetevi insieme con mio fratello a darne nuova commessione che se saranno compre e trattate con quelli vantaggi che si richiede, se li altri guadagnerano noi non doveremo perdere...³⁰*

Most wool purchases followed the formula set out in top of the letter to Agostino Imperiale Garbarino. Futures on a certain quantity of wool were purchased. Six months later, the purchasing agent bought the wool and sent it on to port where it was either accepted by the shareholders and shipped, or rejected in response to market difficulties or problems with the commodity and resold on site, thereby dissolving the partnership. However much wool was sent -- and as Giulio's letters illustrate, this was often unknown until it was nearly all sold -- it was sold on three or six month credit terms or bartered for other merchandise that in turn would have to be sold in a third city. At the end of the credit term there was always a reckoning of accounts, and expenses and profits were divided strictly according to shares. Profits were remitted where the partners needed

(1944).

³⁰ Genoa November 5 to Agostino Imperiale Garbarino

...this morning arrived the 17 bales of wool at one half with my brother [and me, the other half you and your associates] and the 5 bales of extra fine that are pending sale and I hope to arrive at 28 écus...maybe profiting also on the credit terms as much on ours as did my brother...when the opportunity presents itself, as the demand here is, you should aim to send [wool] of lower quality which could not but cover

them, and the venture was then dissolved. Often, however, a new venture had already been formed to buy the next year's shear, often but not always. There were times, as when Giulio wrote to Agostino above, in which opportunities arose to resell wool purchased the secondary market without a long preparation, but this happened only sporadically.

When we speak of information, especially market information, we often assume that market conditions could be kept secret long enough that one may get the jump on other merchants and thereby profit. While there were the occasional opportunities communicated privately, like the one to sell cheaper, lower quality wool, as in the commission to do so offered above by Giulio Sale to Agostino Imperiale Garbarino, most market information was offered freely. Prices, exchange rates, harvest intelligence, and the fate of ships at sea were generally announced in port as ships came in from foreign ports. The propensity to communicate that information was inseparable from the offers of commissions and the offers to share risk. Shared risk was always accompanied by shared information on the specifics of each joint venture from wherever that capital was employed. Traders could tolerate temporary lacks of information since they were always assured that the invoices, manifests, bills of lading, insurance policies, and exchange contracts would eventually come together to be reconciled among the concerned parties. Tolerance had its limits; clear and timely information was an integral part of reciprocity and transparency.

*Granata +10 di novembre per Gio Veneroso e Meliaduce Spinola
Magnifici honorandi trovomi la gratissima vostra del primo del passato con le 4 copie di
carico delle lane...[gia] ricevute. Harei desiderio havere le fatture de esse lane di tutte*

expenses, for which you should resolve with my brother to offer a new commission, purchased and brokered with the requisite profit, if others profit than we cannot lose... Bs 110, ff.3-4.

le altre che havete a mandare e voglio oredere che le dobbiate haver mandate e non dobbiano tardare essendo molta necessità nella vendia loro per sapersi risolvere alli prezzi secondo le sorti. Si e fermato vendità di quelle di Andalosia di 8 fili a Ruccellai e Giuliani...a scuti 25 d'oro il credito in due paghe...e che avanzassero delle capitate spero saranno similmente vendute alle sorti inferiori non dovera similmente mancar loro ventura a pregio honesto...e se haveste fatto un sortimento di 9 fili come ne viene accennato d'Alicante per le di carico, sarebbe più utile del negotio, ma sin'hora non mene posso accertare. Di quelle di montiel le balle 8 di 8 fili resteranno vendute a scuti 26 d'oro per lo tempo...2 di 9 fili che sono più fini si ne dovera avere alla rata o per lo meno si procurera havendone più d'una pratica. Delle quali lane dite che spettano a mio fratello a Messer Ambrogio Doria e a vostri di Genova non dite per che parte e cosi l'altra incetta che pare accenniate a voi spettare per a/8 e da vostri di Genova ci [dicono] spettare tutte a loro e al D'oria per a/2 e a mio fratello la restante, pero doverete dire con prime più chiara detta spettatione...³¹

The commissions for wool and other commodities were never settled until they were nearly concluded. The details of the commissions were a constantly changing landscape, and from his vantage point Giulio was at a loss to predict their outcome. In part, the vagaries of the above commissions were due to the lag and laxity of Veneroso and Spinola's dispatches, but they were also attributable to the market climate. As conditions at every stage shifted, so too did arrangements. Giulio subtly announced a change or potential change in his choice of words and phrases in each of the letters above; on no uncertain terms he called on Veneroso and Spinola to remember their obligations to

³¹ Granada + November 10, to Gio Veneroso and Meliaduce Spinola

Sirs: I find your gracious letter of the first of last month with the four copies of the [bills of lading of the] shipment of wool...[already] received. I would like to have the invoices for this wool and all the other that you have sent and would like to hear that they must have been sent and that they must not be delayed their sale being greatly needed to reconcile the prices according to quality. The sale of the eight strand (per a certain weight like a grain; logically the more strands per unit of weight the finer each strand and the finer the potential cloth) wool from Andalousia was completed to Ruccellai and Giuliani at 25 écus gold on credit in two payments...if any of the wool hitherto arrived remains it will be similarly sold, in regards to the inferior grades they similarly should go without a good price soon...and if you have sent a shipment of nine strand as was announced in Alicanta by your shipper they would be more profitable than the [above] business, but I have not been able to confirm it. The eight bales of eight strand from Montiel were sold for 26 écus gold on credit ...the two bales of nine strand, of higher quality, should sell for the going rate or at least I will see that they are sold to more than one buyer. In regards to the wool in which you say you have in interest with my brother, Messer Ambrogio Doria, and your partners in Genoa you do not say what part you have and likewise with the other it seems that you have a 1/8 interest, your partners

him and to their other partners. Giulio Sale's and Antonio Brignole's obligation towards their partners was to assure that the jointly held wares sold at the highest profit. This demanded quite a bit of creativity at times. If cash was unavailable (and it nearly always was) then they sold on credit. If the market was flooded with the commodity in question or with an over abundance of cash driving down the price, goods were bartered. This required Giulio or his brother-in-law to bring to bear another, completely different series of relationships (with the same vageries) in the service of the joint venture. Spanish wool, for example could be sold in Florence in return for light finished silk cloth and remittances payable in Sicily or Naples with which they could buy grain, sugar, and raw silk for later sale in Florence or Genoa. They might then be forced to barter those goods and the next until eventually, the joint venture could be liquidated and dissolved. The joint venture was dissolved only to start all over again, if it had not already. If it had not restarted with Giulio Sale, then it had restarted with his brother-in-law; if not with him, then with some other trader. Exporters wanted to sell to Giulio Sale because as he pressured buyers in Spain for quality wool, and wool buyers in Florence to pay in a timely fashion, he could also divert capital through his brother-in-law to the *Mezzogiorno* when business was difficult in the North. His clients knew that the diligence he showed towards them would be reflected in the diligence exerted in their service.

Palermo + 12 novembre per Bartolomeo Guissano

...mi sono capitate tre vostre molto vecchie, la più fresca di 30 del passato...non haró che aggiungere salvo a farvi istanza per la fine delle panine vi restano...quanto prima. In compra de panine si andra adagio, sino che non si intender migliore speditioni. Procurate imborsarli maggior somma...e se per tutto questo mese non viene provigione ordinerò, che non li sia pagato altro, dicendo gli siciliani belle parole ma denari non sene cava loro. Li Giustiniani di Roma han rimesso danari a buon conto del riscosso dal

in Genoa tell us that they and the Doria have ½ interest and my brother has the rest, but you must clearly delineate the interests with the next letters. Bs 110, f. 6.

Rampini, si ne é havuta accettatione si ne procurera il pagamento e a suo loco ne harete la parte vostra.

Scrivendo questa ho poi ricevuto la vostra de 7 con gionta di 14 per risposta alla quale diro avere ricevuto il conto delle balle 3 di panine vendute a Messina che si revedra di spatio. Stando bene se ne fara scrittura mi piace la vendita fatta alla...rascia denotata, ne ho fatto nota e Dio voglia che la gionta della nave Ineglia non habbia sturbato la vendia delle restante pero bisognera haver pazienza. Me duole la larghezza della moneta che havete costi e li stravaganti prezzi de frumenti da potersene pocho strare, quando interdeste la somma che ne sono a caricatori da poter navigare lo intendo volentieri.³²

Giulio Sale, his brother-in-law Antonio Brignole, Ambrogio Doria, Bartolomeo Guissano, Veneroso and Spinola, and Pietro Gentile all had to depend on each other to conduct their wool, silk, grain, and cloth businesses. With the exception of Giulio and Antonio none of these traders could be described as members of a common coalition. This is true for nearly all of the scores of traders in the pages of Giulio's register. Each partner in a joint venture worked for himself and for the group at the same time. Giulio Sale could not distinguish what wool was in his share and what was his partner's share; most of the time he had little idea of how much would pass through his hands. It was impossible for a trader to work tirelessly for his own share while neglecting his partner's

³² Palermo + November 12, to Bartolomeo Guissano

I have received three very old letters from you, the youngest from the thirtieth of last month...I have nothing to add save to insist on the conclusion of the light cloth sent to you as soon as possible. Cloth sales [here] are going slowly, at least until I find better shipments. Endeavor to collect more...and if for all of this month there is no ordinary payments coming it is because nothing has been paid, Sicilians, saying lovely words, never hand over the cash. The Giustiniani in Rome have remitted money to a good account with the Rampini, if it has been accepted resolve to procure the payment and in good time you will have your share [of a past venture].

Writing this letter I then received your letter of the seventh arrived on the fourteenth, in response I have received the account of the three bales of light cloth sold at Messina that will be reconciled in due time. It is good that you sent the purchase order and I like the sale of the satin outlined, I have made note of it and God wants that the arrival of the ship Ineglia not to have disturbed the sale of the remainder, but one must have patience. It pains me the over-abundance of coin there and the extravagant grain prices such that one is able only to scrape little [from their sale], when you know the amount that the shippers have to send, tell me. I am anxious to know. Bs 110, ff.4-5.

share. While the joint venture's capital was in the hands of a certain agent, that trader bore responsibility for the profitability of its investment.

Traders could and did signal to their partners that prices were inconvenient, or that they lacked buyers or sellers, but in general, those statements were either true, or used to back-off of a difficult relationship without burning bridges. Since copies of the bills of lading, insurance policies, purchase orders, and exchange notes would be circulated among the partners of a joint venture, there was very little risk that one partner would defraud another by manipulating a venture already in motion. Were Giulio to tell his partners in Spain that the nine-strand wool that they sent him was so dirty, it fetched just 26 écus instead of the usual 29, while pocketing the difference, eventually word would have gotten back to them when the exchange note came due. The same can be said for the purchase orders confirming the purchase price, bills of lading on the shipped quantity, and duties and insurance on the movement of the commodity. Each shipment had a paper trail that followed it, delayed by a few months. Each trader, however, retained an obligation to his partners when the commodity passed through his hands or when that partner diverted the venture's capital to another city when prices or monetary conditions proved difficult.

This is exactly what happened when conditions made wool sales in Florence nearly impossible. Giulio Sale bartered the wool entrusted to him for light cloth sent to Palermo to trade for grain, in demand in the North. When his agent proved less than competent, Giulio was obliged to demonstrate the validity of the investment in trust that his partners had made in him, by paying out of his own funds the amount owed by his agent in Sicily. He had received the invoice but not the purchase order, so he knew that the Rizzo of Messina had taken possession of the cloth and sold it. He did not know, however to

whom it had been sold, which made it impossible to collect on the debt or to do anything with the capital. He had to keep the capital moving. Before he had chastised his partners in Spain, and assigned responsibility for the dark and dirty wool, this time he bought grain with his own funds and through other agents, “*che dicono non havere mai havuto il saldo della compera*” politely pressuring his agent afterward, “*il quale se voi non glielo harete mandato ditelo.*”³³ Giulio accepted the responsibility for his stage of the venture, just as he had expected his partners to do for theirs.

The single year of letters contained by the small register reveals repeated but non-sequential joint ventures with a wide range of partners. Due to the vague agreements between them, that often did not become clear until the venture was reconciled and dissolved, it is hard to see how anyone could sue if they thought they had been defrauded. There were so many traders, there was the danger that no trader could be assured a repeated venture with the same players. From the general pool Giulio mixed and matched partners whenever convenient. Since no trader could be assured of a repeated relationship, the threat of loss of future gains could not have been a significant barrier to fraud. Nor was the threat of damage to a trader’s reputation a significant barrier. In the hundreds of letters in the Brignole-Sale archive, Antonio Brignole and Giulio Sale only write to complain to those who could directly influence a positive outcome, and in those cases they did so gingerly. I have not come across a single letter in which one trader dissuades another from a potential joint venture.

The reassurances that made trust possible in sixteenth-century Mediterranean trade were far weaker than generally assumed. While strong bonds of kinship or matrimony

³³ ...who complain that they never received the account payable from the sale -- which if you did not send

were useful to long-distance trade in the sixteenth century, by the second half of the century they were no longer central. In any given season, Genoese merchants active in the western basin of the Mediterranean conducted trade with a subset of the total number of active Genoese merchants. Since no trader could be assured contracts from year to year and since there was no institutional enforcement available, traders relied on a loose system of joint ventures and on a system of shared documentation to foster trust. Each interacting merchant sought partners who had complementary activities to fill holes in their organizations. Contrary to common perceptions, merchants did not always seek to upgrade relationships and make them ever more intimate and allied. Connections were often maintained at weak levels. This useful characteristic of Genoese commercial networks was deliberately preserved to allow for maximum flexibility. No trader could rely on repeated exchanges with another specific coalition of traders, but he could always rely on future exchanges with a subset of active merchants. The weaker arrangement could do things that strong family ties could not. If it were not convenient to continue in a relationship in any given year, the merchant could decline to give contracts until it became convenient again. The merchant could then call upon the investment in trust that he had made with the agent. He did not have to start over from scratch. This characteristic of the network meant that there was no formal or informal institution that effectively transmitted the reputation of each trader to the whole group. Each trader had to manage his own joint ventures and the levels of trust within each venture. Ironically, weaker relationships helped them to do just that. They enabled traders to enter into joint ventures without knowing any specific information about any trader beyond their own

it to him [you must] say so...Bs 110, ff. 5-6.

limited personal experience and without a guarantee of future repeated exchanges, long assumed to be necessary to the preservation of trust.