

## Gold and faith: The Genoese between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

*Gabriella Airdi*

It is not known how acquainted Bernardo Strozzi was with the ancient, solid and customary relations between the Genoese ruling class and Spain. Like many other artists of the same period— including Rubens — Strozzi certainly did not ignore the fact that the magnificence of the “siglo de los Genoeses” was made possible by the huge quantities of gold and silver that, according to the poet Quevedo “was born in the Indies, died in Seville and was buried in Genoa”. As little as he knew, however, working right in Luigi Centurione’s palace in Strada Nuova might have given him a clearer picture, considering that his patron was enjoying at that time some of the richest proceeds from Spain, where 88% of all loans granted to the crown were in the hands of the Genoese. In fact, the wealth of the Centurione family, like that of other great Genoese families, drew for the most part on the Spanish empire. A great empire on which “the sun never set”, where European and Italian lands played an important role, and Spain was at the heart of it all. For hundreds of years the Centuriones were everywhere, in and out of the imperial framework. And yet even their history, just like the world’s history, had its crucial moment. Spain had brought with it America as well. Columbus’ travels marked a point of no return and made the Centurione family even richer. So, if Luigi Centurione was to be celebrated, America had to be celebrated with him. The topic was not easy to deal with, but Capuchin succeeded in a brilliant fashion, with a synthesis that satisfied, at least in this particular case, the wishes of his patron. An unquestionable “American” atmosphere provides the background for the central theme of the fresco; a “Roman-Christian” theme whose elaborate and multipurpose semantic brings to mind the famous motto of the Centurione: “Sola

fides sufficit”.

Strozzi, then, got himself out of trouble with great skill, creating a synthesis that betrayed neither the family’s history nor the history of Genoa. Aside from the specific topic, the obvious reference to the “crusade and mission” theme was another *topos* (Greek word meaning place, or in this case topic) in the Genoese identity. The Roman Church had also been a powerful element in the Centurione’s success. Whoever gazes today upon the fresco does not lose anything of its present nor of its past, but, if they are the least familiar with the story — and most importantly with the story of the Centurione “residence” — they naturally look for the important connection that joins and harmonizes the elements making up the fresco. This connection is vital, otherwise there would be no explanation for the “American” projection and consequently for the “imperial”, and not just Spanish or European, wealth of the Centurione family. This connection does exist and has an important and noteworthy name: Christopher Columbus. A man who the Centurione family knew well since the very beginning of his sea-faring activities, a man who the Centuriones definitely supported until the end of his days and even beyond. The Centurione family was also well acquainted with Columbus’ son Diego, who carried on the American story. A man without which the Spanish crown would not have conquered the American lands nor those treasures that gave Spain the power to dominate the European scenario. A man without which the great Genoese families — and the Centuriones in the first place — would not have perfected their capillary process of financial settlements in the Hispanic region and world-wide<sup>1</sup>.

We find the first event connecting the Centurione name with Christopher Columbus in the famous “Assereto document”. On August 25, 1479 in a dispute between Di Negro and Centurione concerning a shipment of sugar coming from Madera, Christopher Columbus, who at the time traveled back and forth from Lisbon, declared his age and residency in the city of Genoa. As we all know, these pieces of information helped to perfect Columbus’ biography. But what’s more important in terms of our discussion, in looking at the operative triangle Genoa, Lisbon and Madera and at the human component that intertwining it, we can discern a system in which, once again, the Genoese give proof of being at the forefront in the process of discovering and colonizing the Atlantic. Bound to the Portuguese in the dynamics that led them to occupy the African coast and archipelagos, right when Columbus was traveling to Portugal, the Portuguese and Castilian ambassadors signed the Treaty of Alcaçobas (September 4, 1479) according to which, in the first partitioning of the world’s territories, the Canary Islands became part of the Castilian Crown. From that moment on the conquest of the islands will be accomplished by a combination of forces that, once again, put the Genoese people at the forefront. In fact, we find the Genoese Francisco Riberol and Francesco Pinelli, constantly and profoundly tied to Columbus, engaged with the Galician Lugos. The islands are as important to the Genoese projects as they are to the realization of Columbus’ travels. Porto Santo is crucial for Columbus, just like Cape Verde is important for Antonio da Noli and Terceira for Luca Cassana, the latter being always interested in new Atlantic discoveries.

It’s not a coincidence, then, that the Centuriones, in constant ascent since the second half of the fourteenth century, when they established their powerful “residence house”, opened up right away to the West, proceeding in harmony with the expansion - as it was customary with those dealing in business and finance. Eastern opportunities having been cut off by now, with the exception of Chio and its mastic in the hands of the extremely powerful Justinians’ “Maona” (organization founded for loan-granting purposes), the Genoese strengthened their economic, maritime and financial activities throughout Western Europe. Powerful merchants and bankers in Genoa, but also operative ship-owners with the Basques and the Galicians, related to all the most important families, the Centuriones represented, in the middle of the fifteenth century, one of the main links in the political-commercial network that the Genoese had begun to operate world-wide. We find them everywhere: from Bruges to London, from Toledo to Cadi-

ce, from Seville to Majorca to Sousse to Marseille and again to Rouen, at the very heart of Europe, in the western Mediterranean region, in all the most important ports and at major financial and exchange shows, now in Medina del Campo and then in Geneva and in Piacenza. But during this phase, and specifically in the Castilian area, the Genoese further increased and perfected their presence according to local needs: “asientistas” of ships and capitals; “war lords”; monopolists of sugar, alum and archil. Administrators of prominent aristocratic families, whose credit they supported in abundance. Merchants of fabrics. The Centuriones had access to contracts for major supplies, taxes and neighborhoods in the most important cities. In Seville – which experienced tremendous growth in the fifteenth century– the Centuriones were the most influential bankers and the most powerful merchants of gold and silver coins. In fact, in 1447 they financed Antonio Malfante’s expedition to the oasis of Tuat in search of gold. They also operated in the area of the Aragonese crown in Valenza, where their interests intertwined with those of the Pinelli and of other Genoese families, for the most part always related to each other through matrimonial alliances. The Centuriones worked alongside Luís de Santángel, a converted Jew, “escribano de ración” to King Fernando. Santángel and Francesco Pinelli, who shared with him the treasury of the Santa Hermandad, were crucial elements in the accomplishment of Columbus’ first journey <sup>2</sup>.

Present in the Islamic area– in Granada and in the very important port of Malaga, from where they exported cereals, silks, oil, water and dried fruit– the Centuriones, just like the Cattaneos, the Dorias, the Spinolas, the Vivaldis, the Grimaldis and the Di Negros, had a strong and long-standing bond with Andalusia. So it is not surprising that, when faced with the new Castilian aggressiveness and the problems within Granada’s reign, Luca Centurione expressed “great sadness” in May of 1455, even if this did not keep him or other influential Genoese families, from carrying on simultaneous dealing on both fronts.

And finally, the Centuriones’ already conspicuous wealth, which in the meantime had swelled with the addition of the mercury mines in Almadén, became even vaster in 1478 with the alum mines in Tolfa, which since 1462 replaced the lost Focea. Entrusted first to the Medicis and then to the Pazzi family, the mines were finally transferred to the Centuriones, who exercised a global monopoly. The presence of another Genoese, Sisto IV from Savona, on the papal throne also played an important role, considering that the following year Sisto IV engaged in a powerful financial operation, the “cru-

zada”, for the conquest of Granada, the imposing collection of funds for military operations on the anti-Islamic front, which joined the existing “cruzada” against the Turks. From that moment on the Centuriones became the “depositories” for the area of Castilian and León. Their relatives, the Pinellis, in fact exercised a proxy over these territories; while for the regions of Aragon and Sicily, the choice fell on Luís de Santángel. But it wasn’t only a matter of mere economic issues. In 1483 the Centurione family also carried out an important political and diplomatic role. Faced with the Castilian offensive and the domestic struggles that were tearing Granada’s reign to pieces, while the young Boabdil negotiated with the “Grand Captain” Consalvo Fernández de Cordoba the surrender to Castilia, Domenico Centurione supported the suggestions made by the king’s father, whose intentions were to protect the *status quo* of the Islamic reign.

The ascent to the papacy of a Genoese Pope – Innocent VIII Cibo – strengthened even further the role of the Centurione family, also owing to his clear nepotistic policy towards the Pinelli family. Francesco Pinelli, the royal “jurado” and “fiel ejecutor” of Seville, a financier looking to conquer the Canary Islands, at the first and probably at the second journey made by Columbus, bound by marriage to the important de Caballaria family, grew to be even more powerful, to the point that he was assigned to be the first director of the Casa de Contratación in Seville which, in 1503, controlled the trade with America. What’s more, the Pope’s nepotistic policy did not stop there. Another Genoese, Gerardo Usodimare, husband of Teodorina, the Pope’s daughter, was the general depository of the apostolic Chamber. After her first marriage with a member of the Del Carretto family, the daughter of Gerardo and Teodorina, Peretta Usodimare, remarried Andrea Doria. Many years before, Antoniotto Usodimare had sailed up the Gambia river always looking for that gold so important for the Centurione and the Columbus families<sup>3</sup>.

Granada’s war lasted a whole ten years. And Columbus had to bide his time for another seven years before he found the financial backing necessary for his journey. It was one of those missions that, like all the other expeditions undertaken in those days, attracted and at the same time worried the international financial world, of which the Genoese were an important part. In a more or less overt manner, however, the Genoese did carry out some interventions. But the clearest and most decisive of all was when the Centuriones – together with the Italianos – acted as financial backers for the third journey. It was an important experience in the life of Columbus, who at that time was going through a deep crisis. During this

trip, Columbus reached the mouth of the Orinoco river, and as he gazed upon the enormous mass of water in front of him, he seemed to finally give in to his stubbornness and let himself go, declaring, albeit through some wanted obscurity, that he had discovered an “otro mundo”, another world.

Columbus did not forget his long-time Genoese friends, the heirs of the Centurione and Di Negro families, and in the end he remembered them in his will in 1506 too. Columbus does not provide additional information. However, we do know more about them.

In the same year they financed his trip, the Centurione family simultaneously granted a very substantial loan to the “Grand Captain”, thus facilitating his military operations intended to put the Italian lands under the Spanish aegis. Other very eminent families did not behave any differently when it came to the war in Flanders. In the meantime, the discovery and conquest of America continued, and the Genoese – warriors, merchants and bankers alike – kept on distinguishing themselves. The Centuriones, a fixed presence at the Spanish court by now, were at the head of the Genoese presences, as proved by the fact that twenty-one of the twenty-eight Genoese “residence houses” are represented in Seville. The Centuriones represented above all themselves, but also several thousands of Genoese who, following the example of the great families, operated throughout the imperial area: so much so that, perhaps with a twinge of envy, a Venetian ambassador declared that at least a third of the Genoese residents were living in Spain.

It is not surprising then, to find them in Santo Domingo trading in grain, fabrics, wine and slaves. Nor to find them involved, albeit indirectly, in the complex financial network that in 1519 led some Genoese bankers to support, together with the Germans, the imperial election of Charles V. Soon after that, thanks, on one hand, to the happy political union between the admiral Andrea Doria and Charles V, and on the other the family union between the same Andrea Doria and Adamo Centurione, the greatest banker of his epoch, the “century of the Genoese” would begin. A golden century, of which Luigi and his painter only catch the last glimmers.

<sup>1</sup> In the ample bibliography on the subject, we refer only to AA.VV., *La repubblica internazionale del denaro tra XV e XVII secolo*, Bologna 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. In addition to P.E. Taviani’s studies, also J. Heers, *Gènes au XVe siècle*, Paris 1960 e id., *Christophe Colomb*, Paris 1983 (ed. it. 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. R. Pike, *Enterprise and Adventure*, Ithaca 1966; R. Carande, *Carlos V y sus banqueros*, Barcelona 1977; G. Doria, *Nobiltà e investimenti a Genova in Età moderna*, Genoa 1995; J.E Ruiz Doménech, *El Gran Capitán*, Barcelona 2002; G. Airaldi, *Guerrieri e mercanti*, Turin 2004.