Alien merchant colonies in sixteenth-century England: community organisation and social mores

M. E. BRATCHEL

I. Merchant Colonies

The organisation of communities of medieval merchants into 'nations' under some form of consular jurisdiction is a theme well-worked by historians. These formations provide much of the introductory material for Goris' magisterial study of southerners in Antwerp. In the English context, German historians long ago produced exhaustive descriptions of the purely jurisdictional and administrative aspects of Hanseatic community life. And for the Italians, in England as elsewhere, extant examples of the statutes that governed overseas colonies are available in printed form.

Though the formal organisation of a particular colony obviously depended on the continuing existence of a significant merchant community, a degree of self-government has come to be regarded as a normal aspiration of the medieval merchant. It is true that the French and south Germans in Antwerp were not regulated under consular government; and that in England the list must be extended to include merchants from the Low Countries and Iberia. But these have been treated as exceptions, requiring explanations, which have been found in local and specific political and geographical conditions.

The present article is not directly concerned with the statutory organisation and regulation of alien merchants in Tudor England. Rather, these colonies, with certain qualifications, have been taken as...
microcosms of the societies from which they issued. It is contended that, properly understood and comparatively analysed, the merchant communities concentrated in the great commercial centres of northern Europe offer a useful corrective to some of the more ambitious interpretative models currently being developed by medieval scholars.

II. Community Organisation: The Imperative

The establishment in western Europe of privileged and quasi-autonomous alien communities has traditionally been traced to a somewhat disparate conjunction of needs and circumstances. At one level, the western colonies appear as a shadowy projection of early merchant settlements in the more insecure frontier regions of the Baltic and the eastern Mediterranean. More directly, explanations have been sought in the mentality of the merchants themselves; in the policies and fiscal requirements of governments in the host societies; and in the diplomatic convenience and jealous attentions of the states from which the merchants hailed. There is no doubt that the alien merchant communities in England during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries exemplify each of these specific impulses.

From the late twelfth century there is evidence of an organised Hanseatic community in Novgorod, centred on the church of St. Peter. The early history of privileged Italian mercantile quarters seems to begin with the Venetian colony in eleventh-century Constantinople, and with Italian settlements in the Levant established before and during the First Crusade. These developments were intimately connected with the needs of merchants operating in potentially hostile surroundings, as witnessed by the defensive towers of the Italians in the Levant and by the role of the Hansa church in Novgorod as a place of refuge at times of attack. In both arenas, community organisation appears to have been closely connected with the spiritual needs of Latin Christians settled in an alien religious environment, whilst the early history of Italian colonisation in particular is largely associated

with the processes of conquest. These eastern settlements, which merge imperceptibly into the genuine colonial ventures around the Black Sea and in Livonia, invite contrast with the more closely regulated mercantile communities of the West. Clearly important differences separate the two regions, in terms both of organisation and of jurisdiction. And yet, whether in the fortified frontage that the Steelyard of the German merchants in London presented northward towards Thames Street, or in the detailed shape and structure assumed by the relatively small Italian colonies in the medieval West, it is tempting to infer at least some translocation of forms and mentalities.

The influence of distant models notwithstanding, in England the organisation of alien merchants into colonies must also be explained by more immediate concerns. These concerns, abundantly illustrated in the English records, are perhaps best articulated in the preamble to the statutes proposed by the Lucchese merchant community resident in neighbouring Antwerp in the middle years of the sixteenth century. For these merchants the advantages of a well-ordered colony were symbolically represented by the beautiful chapel maintained by the Lucchese in Bruges, the former centre of their business activities; the disintegration of consular organisation was manifested in an inability to raise funds to support the community's honour and reputation, and by growing tensions and discord within the community itself. Mindful of an idealised past, and of present realities, the Lucchese merchants petitioned for the renewal of the consulate and for the establishment of some suitable place where the nation could come together in unity to worship God and to offer reverence to the Lucchese cult of the Volto Santo. The emphasis is upon corporate religious observance, but upon a religious observance closely entwined with the honouring of the home Republic and with the ordering of harmonious relationships within the expatriate community.

The aspirations of the Lucchese merchants in Antwerp are clearly reflected in the organised life of merchant colonies in Tudor London. Community life found its most visual expression in religious ceremonial. This is true for the Hanseatics, whose enthusiastic participation in the religious life of pre-Reformation London culminated in the Corpus Christi festivities; for the divers Italian nations a similar pattern emerges in statutes governing the observance by the Florentines of the

7. Lazzareschi, pp. 283–84.
feast of St. John the Baptist, by the Venetians of St. Mark, and in the devotions of Lucchese merchants centred on the London church of St. Thomas of Acon, where the Volto Santo was venerated. The Sunday mass testifies to the spontaneous corporate life of the merchant communities, but at the same time gave rise to many of the regulating ordinances that in themselves established corporate identity. The issues involved were financial and disciplinary. In English cities the alien colonies did not possess churches of their own, but this did not preclude regular payments to parish clergy and parish clerks of the local churches frequented by aliens. Moreover, expenses were incurred through the endowment of chapels and special masses and the presentation of gifts. For example, merchants of the Steelyard attending the London church of All Hallows the Great presented that church not only with stained-glass windows but also with elaborately carved stalls reserved to their own use. In the English records there are some fleeting references to what is called the chapel of the Holy Cross in the church of St. Thomas of Acon which bear witness to the Lucchese cult, and the kind of running expenses incurred by the maintenance of such a chapel are clearly detailed in the surviving Libro della comunità dei mercanti lucchesi in Bruges. The formal organisation of merchant colonies was a necessary prerequisite for the collection of dues, and the object of the dues was in large measure the seemly conduct of religious observances. The collection and administration of dues, which the merchants were ever reluctant to pay, served constantly to reaffirm consular authority, as did the ordinances insisting on the personal as

10. Calendar of State Papers (CSP) Venetian, I, 335.
11. Almerigo Guerra, Storia del Volto Santo (Lucca, 1881). Some Lucchese merchants expressed the wish to be buried in the church of St. Thomas, though it was in the much-favoured house of the Austin Friars that the sepulchres of some of the most prominent members of the Lucchese community were to be found: London Guildhall MS. 9171/3, London Commissary Court, Reg. More, fo. 176r; MS. 9171/9, Reg. Bennet, fo. 147v; MS. 9171/5, Reg. Sharp, fos. 376Av–377r; Archivio Notarile Distrettuale Lucca (ANL), Testamenti ser Benedetto Franciotti, II, fos. 220r–225r.
well as the financial participation of the merchants in corporate acts of worship. 17

From the regulation of religious life to the channelling of social activities was but a short step. Indeed, Ugo Tucci has rightly depicted the mass itself as being, for the expatriate communities, "a social occasion of high significance." 18 More overtly, the blending of social and religious life may be illustrated in the feasting arranged annually on 4 December by the Steelyard community for the merchants and their distinguished guests to mark St. Barbara's Day; or in the regulations that sought to curb excessive expenditure by the Italian consulates on similar occasions; 19 or in the maintenance by the Italian communities of a general meeting place, in a room known as 'Lumbardeshall,' within the London house of the Austin Friars. 20 In all these instances consular government appears as the coordinator of community life, and its role in this regard assumes an especial intensity because of the significance of social occasions for the community's image and for its relations with surrounding society. These latter points are plainly observed if we move from religious to secular and civic pageantry. A royal visit or a coronation procession offered opportunity for the design of elaborate pageant series; and extant descriptions, particularly those relating to the coronation of Mary Tudor in 1553, show the intensity of rivalry between the nations of merchant strangers, and with the local authorities, in the erection and refinement of pageants. 21

If the Lucchese merchants in sixteenth-century Antwerp petitioned for a revitalized consular organisation because of a concern for the community's religious life and local reputation, equal attention was

17. All members of the Florentine nation in London, for example, were obliged to attend the mass instituted on the first Sunday of every month at the expense of the consulate: Masi, pp. 183-84.
19. The Venetian factory, for example, in 1456 was forbidden to pay for banquets held, or to spend more than £2 on the celebration of St. Mark's festival: CSP Venetian, I, 335.
paid to the need to avert internal conflicts. The issues involved here can again be best placed in focus through reference to the unique living record left by the Lucchese community of medieval Bruges. Time and again the Lucchese community define the spirit pervading their statutes in terms of the preservation of “pace et concordia et unione.” Consular jurisdiction was instituted for the good and quiet of the community and to avoid scandal. These rhetorical ambitions were buttressed by the obvious convenience for the community at large that complex commercial and financial disputes be settled internally by arbitrators well-acquainted with Lucchese statutes and current business practices. And the advantages of a machinery for self-discipline were further enhanced in a world where the ill-doings of the individual merchant might result in reprisals against the nation as a whole.

The English records are less revealing, but there is plentiful evidence to show measures taken by the merchant colonies to exclude local courts and local authorities from internal disputes and lawsuits. The sixteenth-century statutes under which the Florentine nation in England was governed granted to the consul and his advisors all jurisdiction over disputes and civil cases between Florentines. The consul, on request, might refer the matter to arbitration, but appeals to the English authorities were strictly forbidden. Similar restrictions were placed on Venetian litigiousness, in 1446 a fine of 500 golden ducats being decreed for any Venetian citizen resident in London or Bruges who resorted to the local courts for settlement of disputes involving fellow Venetians. Even more impressive are the claims to self-government advanced by the Steelyard community. Not only were all visiting merchants obliged to submit to the jurisdiction of the alderman and a committee of twelve, but the Hanseatic merchants were even able to claim exemption from the jurisdiction of certain English courts and possessed a peculiar mediator in disputes involving Englishmen in the

22. Lazzareschi, pp. 283ff.
23. Ibid. xvi and passim.
24. This point assumes a particular significance, given the diverse commercial disciplines that distinguished even neighbouring Italian city-states.
26. CSP Venetian I, 284.
person of a second alderman drawn from the ranks of the citizens of London. 28 No doubt fuller records would reveal that consular jurisdiction in London was as precariously superimposed upon recalcitrant mercantile communities as was clearly the case elsewhere. Certainly, evidence for the exclusion of local powers from domestic frays comes much more frequently from the breach than the observance. 29 But the statutes and the protests and the lawsuits together give a very clear image of what consular government was designed to achieve.

The formal organisation of alien merchant colonies in western Europe represents a belief in the virtues and convenience of self-help. And this theme takes us far beyond its purely jurisdictional implications. At one level, the election of recognised officials provided the community with the machinery for a wide range of services. It was, for example, the alderman and masters of the Steelyard who arranged for the sale of Hanseatic merchandise when the merchant to whom the goods were consigned was absent from London. 30 It was the secretaries of the Steelyard who fulfilled the office of translators on behalf of Hanseatic sailors appearing to testify before English courts. 31 And in the case of the Italians, the consuls played an important role in facilitating the visits and loading of the Venetian and Florentine galleys. More generally, it was the officially constituted governing committees that represented the merchants in a never-ending series of petitions and deputations directed towards the local or national authorities in defence of privileges or in pursuit of grievances. 32 The advantages of a recognised form of representation are clear. No doubt this is an important factor in explaining not only community organisation itself, but also the strongly held conviction that those merchants who did

not pay their dues or obey the statutes should not enjoy the support of the nation, and the very real animus against individual merchants who prejudiced the interests of the community through their private agreements with the local inhabitants.

Finally, in listing the specific influences that favoured the emergence of organised communities, it is well to remember that the convenience of the merchants was by no means incompatible with that of outside political forces. For a variety of reasons alien merchants often enjoyed detailed and valuable privileges before the tax collector and the custom-house. English governments found in the elected representatives of the respective colonies reasonably cooperative allies in determining those eligible for privileges and exemptions. The privileges often involved reciprocal obligations: the Hanseatic merchants in London, for example, were responsible for the maintenance of Bishopsgate. Some form of organisation was a sine qua non for the implementation of obligations of this nature, whilst at a more general level the various 'nations' presented vulnerable and concrete targets at times of local displeasure. It was against the commons of Genoa resident in London that legal action was commenced for the recovery of English wool captured by the Genoese. Nor are we concerned only with the convenience of the host society. Relations between the merchant colonies and the political authorities at home were often fractious, but this did not weaken the parental solicitude felt by the latter for their distant citizens. In the absence of resident ambassadors, consuls often assumed the role of accredited diplomatic representatives in negotiations that were often of considerable importance to the merchants themselves. Italian city-states were interested in the intimate affairs of the overseas colonies—a fact perhaps not unconnected with the traditional reputa-

33. For negotiations between the English government and the Steelyard on this matter, and their outcome, see: LP III i 979; H.M.C.R. Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Marquis of Salisbury, XIII, 43-48; LP I i 696; P.R.O. S.P. 1, Vol. 229, fo. 22; E101/129/3 & 9.


35. Archivio di Stato di Genova (ASG), Diversorum Communis Januae (Archivio Segreto), reg. 672, fos. 109-12; Literarum Archivio Segreto, 1829, fos. 36-37; Literarum Archivio Segreto, 1833, fo. 72; P.R.O. Cr/584(41).

36. As early as 1356 letters were being sent from Venice to the English king (Edward III) through the Venetian consul in Bruges: CSP Venetian, I, 29. For the role of the Venetian consul in London as representative in both political and commercial negotiations—a duty which the same man might continue to perform after his term of office had come to an end—see: CSP Venetian, I, 183, 422, 501, 622, 627, 675-76, 686-89, 704, 707, 727, 735, 751, 798, 832, 856-37, 841, 918-20, 922, 929-31.
tion of the colonies as havens for political and, later, religious refugees. And reminders of past interest and protection were not infrequent preludes to appeals for assistance sent to the colonies in times of political or economic danger. Regular and effective consular administration was a matter of very real concern for the home authorities. Any doubts on this score may be countered by the occasional decision by Italian states, distrustful of the judgement of their distant subjects, that consuls henceforth should be appointed in Italy.

III. Community Organisation: The Disincentive

There is no difficulty in proffering an impressive list of exogenous causes as an explanation of the organisation of alien merchants into 'nations' during the medieval centuries. The problem of why, in a particular commercial centre, the practice was not universally adopted can be tackled methodologically after the same fashion.

In sixteenth-century London, French merchants were not organised under their own consuls; neither were the High Germans, nor merchants from the Low Countries, Spain, and Portugal. Some of these communities were of considerable size and importance. The failure to organise can be explained, partially and negatively, by the fact that these latter communities developed alternative mechanisms for their protection and representation.

For most purposes, the functions of consular organisation might be performed *ex officio* by a resident ambassador. When the Lowlander merchant Jacobus van der Hoven found himself in difficulties during a London lawsuit, it was to the Emperor's ambassador that he turned for assistance, visiting the ambassador himself on a number of occasions and pestering the ambassador's secretary. More general grievances were frequently taken up by resident French and Imperial ambassadors: from the 1530s Eustace Chapuys and, later, Francis van der

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Delft appear as particularly diligent advocates of mercantile interests. Further, the merchants themselves, eschewing the backing of either consul or ambassador, might take the initiative and combine together to fight on a specific issue. In this way, in 1502/3, the merchants of Antwerp, or a number of them, appealed to Chancery against the mayor and sheriffs of London over the vexed issue of scavage. And behind both private and official petitions lay the coercive power of foreign courts. Time and again the individual and group interests and grievances of the merchant communities were the subject of letters directed to the English government by distant princes: from Francis I and his ministers, from the Emperor, and from any number of others. Insofar as community organisation was linked to self-protection and self-representation, the diplomatic correspondence is so full of merchants' affairs that it is difficult to see what additional advantages might have accrued to the resident French, Spanish, or Dutch communities from formal consular administration.

If the lack of formal organisation on the part of the French and others may in part be explained away in terms of superfluity, several more concrete reasons have been advanced to account for divergent behaviour. Obviously one might invoke the force of numbers. The High Germans, Spaniards, and Portuguese in England were perhaps never sufficiently numerous to make organisation worthwhile. Patterns of residence and of trade may be significant. It has been argued that Spanish and Portuguese consulates in England were rendered unnecessary by the dominant role played by the governments of the much larger Iberian communities in the Low Countries. French historians, characteristically, have approached the problem through geography. Ingenuity suggests a host of ways in which geographical

41. P.R.O. Ct/272 (35). Scavage was a tax paid by non-citizens on merchandise imported from overseas. Specific charges for scavage were set for the various kinds of merchandise: N. S. B. Gras, The Early English Customs System (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), pp. 33ff.
42. LP III i 659-60, 712-13, 1014; IV i 1827, ii 4630.
43. LP III ii 1668; IV i 735, ii 3519; XVIII i 346(67).
44. Notably, the king of Scotland: LP IV i 845, 851, ii 4671, 5059; Ferdinand of Aragon: LP I ii 1459; CSP Spanish I 37; Henry of Navarre: LP IV ii 3823, 4382; Margaret of Savoy: LP IV i 1022, 1454; the king of Portugal: LP IV ii 3408, 4769-70; Desant, Acts of the Privy Council, I, 383; and King Maximilian: P.R.O. H.C.A. 13/7 fo. 440.
46. Coornaert, I, 132.
proximity might weaken the urge towards a statutory self-discipline. No doubt all of these suggestions possess an enticing theoretical validity. To this writer, at least, the traditional explanations have come increasingly to appear superficial and unconvincing.

IV. Towards a Wider Perspective: The Italians

When Gino Masi edited the statutes of Florentine colonies all'estero, he was drawn by the self-defining nature of his task to treat exclusively those Florentine merchant colonies scattered beyond Italy around the littoral regions of the Mediterranean and in northern Europe. Realities are more perfectly reflected in the preface through which Masi introduces the collection. Here, in listing Florentine consulates fuori patria, Masi speaks, and in this order, of Rome, Naples, Ancona, Venice, Palermo, Lyon, Antwerp, and London. By the middle of the sixteenth century the Florentine Tribunale della Mercanzia was sending letters and instructions to the consuls of Florentine communities. Certainly by the late 1540s these records are dominated by the activities of the consulates in Venice, Ancona, Rome, Pesaro, and Naples. Nor were the Florentines atypical. Jacques Heers bears fleeting witness to the Genoese consulates in southern Italy and provides some details of the organised Milanese merchant colony in fifteenth-century Genoa itself. The examples are random. There can be no doubt that the consulates of the city-republics clustered thickly in the commercial and administrative centres of northern Italy and in the economically dependent south.

This fact, in some ways, should require little commentary. It is hardly strange that the earliest recorded references to Florentine consulates, dating from the thirteenth century, should relate to Florentine communities in the neighbouring cities of Genoa and Bologna. By the thirteenth century, Italy was a politically fragmented peninsula with developed and developing traditions of communal loyalties and hatreds. Everywhere bodies of strangers are to be found organising themselves into groupings of highly regional provenance. This is true of student life at medieval Italian universities and may be illustrated

47. Masi, p. xx.
locally by such picturesque bodies as the università of bricklayers from Como and Ticino that enjoyed a distinctive but jealously regulated life in sixteenth-century Lucca. Yet the fierce regional loyalties and parochial barriers coexisted in Italy with an intensive interrelationship served by merchants, lawyers, and clerics and by a muted (and relative) common tradition of language, customs, and institutions. The vision of merchant colonies organised under comparable statutes throughout Italy warns against explaining the northern pattern too enthusiastically in terms of alien surroundings and the vulnerabilities of distance.

Further, it is clear that the general phenomenon itself is not to be rigidly associated with specifically alien enclaves of whatever character. Present interests of Italian historians have focused attention on the powerful Ripafratta family clan or consorterioria established in Pisa and along the banks of the Serchio to the north. Certainly in the thirteenth century it was fully recognised, even by the commune of Pisa, that the nobles of Ripafratta and their dependents were subject to the jurisdiction of a consul nobilium de Ripafratta eorumque fidelium. By oath it was established that any disputes arising between members of the consorterioria, or their homines or fideles, must be settled before the consuls of the consorterioria. The details of organisation are entirely familiar. Consuls were elected annually, and their actions were syndicated at the end of their period in office. The consul was to be assisted by a group of councillors, and the affairs of the community were served by the appointment or ad hoc election of camerlengos, notaries, arbitrators, and commissioners. Disputes within the community were to be settled internally. A limit was placed on the amount of money that might be spent by the consul on his own authority without the approval of the councillors. Community organisation is explained and defended in terms of the honour of God and of the native commune.

The self-ordering of noble clans like the Ripafratta is but one indication of what Italian historians have called “lo spirito associativo” that characterised Italian political, social, and economic life during the medieval centuries. Obviously some caution is indicated before

52. This theme has been discussed most recently by John Larner, Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch 1216–1380 (London, 1980), pp. 1–15. See also D. Hay, The Italian Renaissance in Its Historical Background, 2d ed. (Cambridge, 1977), ch. 3.
Bratchel • Merchant colonies in England

comparing the experience of the Ripafratta with the dynamics of Italian merchant colonies in sixteenth-century England. Italian historians have traditionally argued that from the end of the fourteenth century the power of the great corporations in Italy withered before the growing assertiveness of the state. 

Recently this theme has been adopted and developed by the distinguished American historian Marvin Becker, who, in the context of late trecento Florence, writes of the gradual acceptance of the coercive power of the republic. And there can be no doubt that communal governments did act to restrict the independent political life of rival associations within the state. But it has now become abundantly clear that this communal offensive was imperfectly sustained and unevenly effective.

It has long been recognised that Italian merchant colonies were in some measure modelled on the governments of the communes from which they came. Jacques Heers has suggested that Italian merchants settled abroad transferred also familiar living arrangements. They recreated traditional neighbourhood links and associations, coming to dominate compact blocks of territory within the cities where they established themselves. There can be little question that first and foremost the Italian merchant colonies organised in Tudor London were a reflection of a mentality—the same mentality that produced within medieval Italian cities themselves the spontaneous organisation of neighbourhoods, guilds, families, and confraternities designed to govern internal affairs and to settle internal disputes. The reflection never constituted a perfect likeness. Local realities too often intervened. Though the houses of the Italians in Tudor London clustered in the traditional quarter around Lombard Street, or in the case of the Venetians further east in the parish of St. Olave, Hart Street, we do not in London find the tightly organised neighbourhood groupings

54. The point is made, for example, as a presentation of conventional wisdom by Guido Bonolis, La giurisdizione della Mercanzia in Firenze nel secolo XIV (Florence, 1901), pp. 128ff.
56. For part of the Lucchese experience, see, for example, Salvatore Bongi, ed., Inventario del R. Archivio di Stato in Lucca, II (Lucca, 1876), 233–35.
for which Heers has prepared us. Italian merchants in sixteenth-century London can be found scattered throughout the city: in the wards of Cripplegate, Bishopsgate, Aldgate, Broad Street, Lime Street, Candlewick Street, Tower Street, Billingsgate, and Bridge. This is hardly surprising. Wealthy Italian merchants, themselves often the scions of proud patrician families, were constrained to rent suitable houses in the city wherever and whenever these became available. But however much the life of the expatriate communities was forced to accommodate such obstacles, the Italian merchant colonies assume forms which in no way appear strange or distinctive to the student of corporate, collective life and of the structure of social groupings in the Italian commune during the Middle Ages. At one level this wider perspective serves to place the traditional explanations for the appearance and organisation of merchant colonies in context. It highlights the significance and meaning embedded in a list of isolated ‘causes.’ At another level, it removes the need for any explanation, or at least transfers the burden of explanation to another and broader arena.

In postscript the question arises: To what extent is this approach helpful also for an understanding of the North Germans of the Steelyard? The analogy cannot be presented without significant qualification. The Steelyard community is rendered distinctive by its position as the subordinate agency of an association of towns. Certainly by the fifteenth century the Hansa in England was less a spontaneous mer-

61. Giovanni Battista Boroni had a house in Barbican Street in the parish of S. Giles without Cripplegate: P.R.O. H.C.A. 13/8 fo. 37ff. It is true, however, that Baroni also possessed business premises situated more centrally in Abchurch Lane—see, for example, H.C.A. 13/8 fos. 94–95.

62. A number of very prominent Italians lived in Bishopsgate Ward, including Antonio Buonvisi, Domenico Lomellini and Lorenzo da Ponte: P.R.O. C1/202 (8–11); Kirk and Kirk, I, pp. 38–39, 86, 129, 188; P.R.O. PROB. 11/34, 19 Bucke, fos. 145v–146r. The parish of St. Ellen in this ward was clearly a subsidiary Italian centre.


64. P.R.O. C1/256(2), 261 (17), 974 (16); LP V 1028; Kirk and Kirk, I, 14, 39–40, 73, 88, 132, 163; III, 299.


68. Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), Canc. Inferiore, atti notarili, busta 6620, no. 4, shows a number of Venetian merchants resident in Botolph Lane in the parish of St. George. See also P.R.O. C1/475 (18); Kirk and Kirk, I, 16, 61, 85, 162; III, 300.

69. Kirk and Kirk, I, 55, 73, 87, 135, 160. Since most of the above evidence relates to the middle years of the sixteenth century, the geographical dissemination is not explained by shifting concentrations in time.
chant organisation than an instrument in the defensive struggle conducted by the North German towns in protection of economic controls, privileges, and monopolies. Further, the organisation of the London Kontor, at least in structural terms, was determined by its peculiar situation as meeting point for merchants from very different political and economic regions. This fact alone mutes any direct comparison with the Italian experience as rooted in the intimate associations and relationships of the individual city-state. And yet, due allowance made for these obvious differences, the Hansa had its birth as one of the sworn associations that characterised early urban political life in northern Germany; and no doubt the great Kontore, as legal corporations, continued to draw strength from the familiarity of their institutions as faithful reflections of active merchant corporate life within the Hansa towns. German scholarship has devoted a great deal of attention to urban institutions and social structure. Cologne has been particularly favourited by historians, and here clearly the whole fabric of urban life was dominated both territorially by the parish and neighbourhood associations, and also personally by a complicated nexus of institutionalised associations based in some measure on family, status, occupation, and religious observance. Nor is the vitality of private associational ties a phenomenon within the confederation of Hansa towns distinctive to Cologne. It would appear that in the case of the Germans as for the Italians, community organisation in medieval and early modern England should be explained primarily by the dynamics of life at home rather than by the specific and localised needs of distinctively alien merchant enclaves.

V. The Non-Italians Revisited

If the above conclusions are valid, it is suggested that the failure of some communities to regulate themselves formally under consular jurisdiction might be attributed to the dissimilar nature of the communities themselves rather than to the accidentals that historians have tended previously to invoke. In a pioneering study, Sylvia Thrupp

70. There are many useful indications in a collection recently edited by Hugo Stehkämper, Köln, das Reich und Europa: Abhandlungen über weiträumige Verflechtungen der Stadt Köln in Politik, Recht und Wirtschaft im Mittelalter (Cologne, 1971), in which see particularly Edith Ennen, 'Europäische Züge der mittelalterlichen Kölner Stadtgeschichte,' pp. 1-47. For a pertinent English study of Cologne's early history, see Paul Strait, Cologne in the 12th Century (Gainesville, Fla., 1974).

71. I am thinking here of associations as diverse as the charitable brotherhoods and Bergenhaver of Lübeck, and the Artushof of Danzig.
depicted part of the difference when she wrote of the "more easy relationships" which Lowlander merchants—in specific contrast to the Italians—established with both English citizens and immigrant communities. In sixteenth-century London French and Lowlander merchants formed significant communities. Neither these nor the smaller band of Portuguese merchants showed marked exclusionist or corporatist inclinations in either their social or their economic relationships. They submitted to the jurisdiction of English courts in frequent disputes with fellow countrymen. The rare examples from the sixteenth century of alien merchants entering the London liveried companies relate almost entirely to Frenchmen and Lowlanders. Jehan Combos, sometime broker and a merchant of Toulouse, was closely connected in his business transactions with a number of Englishmen. His business associates also included Jacobus van der Hoven, a merchant of Bruges, who himself acted on occasion in partnership with English merchants. And these examples might be multiplied at will from the English court records.

Contrasting patterns of behaviour need to be defined more rigorously. There is no reason to deny that in Tudor England the more permanently resident French and Lowlander communities developed a certain esprit de corps. This is reflected in residential arrangements: in London, French merchants were concentrated in Lombard Street and to the south from St. Lawrence Pountney in the west to St. Dunstan-in-the-East; merchants from the Low Countries were largely focused around Limestreet and along the southeast margin of the city, particularly in Billingsgate Ward. There is abundant evidence to

72. Thrupp, p. 263.
75. Men like Thomas Martocke, mercer, a Frenchman long resident in England; or Bartholomew Sommerce, a native of Zeeland, described as a haberdasher in 1509; W. Page, ed., *Denizations and Naturalizations of Aliens in England*, Publications of the Huguenot Society of London, 8 (1893), 164; LP I i. 438 (i) m. 10.
78. Kirk and Kirk, I, 46; P.R.O. H.C.A. 13/4 fos. 21, 181, 296; 13/7 fos. 36, 197, 277, 384; 3/3 fo. 125.
79. P.R.O. H.C.A. 13/8 fos. 85, 110; 13/11 fos. 122, 137. Apparently Netherlanders were to become increasingly concentrated in the parish of St. Botolph. According to Stow, writing in 1598, the influx was of quite recent origins since little more than thirty years earlier there were not more than three Netherlanders in the whole of
show that these communities were engaged in a good deal of informal self-help. Established residents acted as sureties and provided lodgings and translation services for their more itinerant compatriots. Doche immigrants participated in several London fraternities whose membership was drawn largely or exclusively from their ranks. And on at least one occasion, in 1502/3, the merchants of Antwerp combined to petition against dues imposed on them by the London authorities. This proclivity to live together, to act together, is a very natural characteristic of any expatriate community. The sentiments involved seem to me of an entirely different order to the spirit of intense corporate identity that vitalised the neighbouring consulates of the Italian 'nations.'

The most obvious way of explaining this difference is through emphasis on the dissimilar social and political standing of the merchants themselves. Many of the Italians were young patricians at the beginning of their economic and political careers. Just as their involvement in the overseas branch provided a business education, so their participation in the life of the consulate was a reflection of, and in many cases a preparation for, the active political role that they might be expected to play at home in Italy. By contrast, of the French a fifteenth-century Florentine merchant remarked, "You French merchants are nothing but retailers and shopkeepers." In December 1540 Marillac, the French ambassador in England, claimed that there were only eight or ten poor French merchants in London, all of whom were the agents of other merchants resident in France. The contrast is enticing. No doubt it captures a partial truth. Yet the French and Lowlander communities possessed their own aristocracies of prominent
men who might have anticipated a leading role in domestic urban politics. And it is by no means clear that associative yearnings in Italy were the prerogative of a sociopolitical elite.

Comparative jurisprudence might appear to offer a more helpful approach. In a study of the origins of municipal consular government in the towns of southern France, André Gouron has shown how the incidence of consular forms coincided, both temporally and geographically, with the spread of Roman law concepts and of a Roman law vocabulary.¹⁶ Nineteenth-century historians of university institutions clearly recognised that the organisation of medieval students into corporate national groupings assumed a peculiar vitality in the jurist universities of Italy and southern France.⁸⁷ By contrast, the nations of northern, arts universities appear artificial and imitative.⁸⁸ It might not be entirely fanciful to view Italian organisational structures, at least partially, in terms of a practical implementation of Italian jurisprudential thought. This approach is vulnerable from a number of directions. At the simplest level, the blurred social and geographical boundaries of Roman-law influence only imperfectly coincide with divergent behavioural patterns as outlined above. More generally, there seems to me every reason to be suspicious at least of the degree to which legal forms, themselves an expression of habits of thought and action, can shape society or condition perceptions. And the work of Julius Kirshner,⁸⁹ amongst others, has shown how far a legal terminology—even static legal terminology—can mask infinite living and social mutations.

A more convincing explanation is suggested by contrasting patterns of political development. It has been generally recognised that the northern and central Italian scene, and to some extent that of northern Germany too, were the product of a very special set of historical circumstances. With some regional qualifications, the Italian peninsula in the Middle Ages was subject to the theoretical overlordship of the

¹⁶. André Gouron, 'Diffusion des consulats méridionaux et expansion du droit romain aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles,' Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Chartes, 121 (1963), 26–76.
⁸⁷. This message appears to me implicitly present throughout Rashdall's monumental study.
⁸⁸. See particularly: Heinrich Denifle, Die Entstehung der Universitäten des Mit­telalters bis 1400 (Graz, 1958), pp. 84–106; Georg Kaufmann, Geschichte der deutschen Universitäten, 2 vols. (Graz, 1958), II, 59–68. I am, of course, aware that in specific instances the contrast may be explained in terms of geographical factors and of changing circumstances over time.
⁸⁹. Julius Kirshner, 'Some Problems in the Interpretation of Legal Texts re: the Italian City-States,' Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte, 19 (1975), 16–27. I am grateful to Professor Kirshner for sending me an offprint of his article.
Emperor or of the Pope. By the thirteenth century, it is true, the real power of the Emperor to intervene in Italian affairs in a practical or sustained way was very limited indeed. In many areas the same may be said of the temporal power of the Pope. In practice we may talk of the emergence of communes which usurped many of the attributes of autonomous political societies, and which over the course of time developed into quasi-independent territorial states. But these communities were not sovereign states in the way in which late medieval England or late medieval France may be regarded, with some technical reservations, as sovereign states, effectively and for most practical purposes. These antecedents produced wide-ranging consequences. There was no outside power with the capacity to intervene regularly and effectively in Italy. But, with the qualified exception of Venice and with due recognition of developments in the world of political ideas in Florence right at the end of the fifteenth century, neither the Italian city-republics nor the later despotisms ever developed a self-image as truly independent political communities possessed of powers that might be defined as sovereign within the ideological constructs of the medieval world. The city-state developed as a combination of quasi-independent groups and institutions. The state was one grouping—one quasi-independent authority amongst many, one centre of loyalty. But just one. In summary, the Italian city-states began as composite political structures, the result of a spontaneous development taking place in the absence or behind the back of their papal or imperial overlord. And these origins coloured Italian political life throughout the period that we are considering. It is this political life, these political realities, that I see clearly reflected in the organisation and form of the Italian 'nations' represented in late medieval England. And I would extend the analysis to the North Germans. I do not believe that genuine city-states after the Italian model developed on the shores of the Baltic. But clearly many of the historical ingredients are common to the political and social developments of both regions.

92. It should be stressed that the above schema is not presented as a novel interpretation of Italian political life. In outline it will have been long familiar to the English reader in the form of P. J. Jones, 'Communes and Despots: The City State in Late-Medieval Italy,' Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th ser., 15 (1965), 71-96.
If the Italian and Hanseatic colonies are to be explained in terms of corporate life and institutions at home, the implication must be that French and Lowlander merchants were the product of a perceptibly different sociopolitical environment. Obviously this raises difficulties. At both central and local levels, and throughout medieval Europe, administrative bodies possessed a wide range of judicial functions. The historiographical tradition that the medieval world was characterised by a pervasive spirit of association clearly is not of narrowly Italian provenance. In recent decades many of the most stimulating expositions of the corporate structure of the early modern state have been the work of students of French history. In short, there can be no gainsaying that throughout medieval Europe authority was exercised, and affairs pursued, within a complex web of local, regional, and personal associations and corporations. These were important centres of loyalty; they possessed important, often inconvenient, rights and privileges vis-à-vis central government and centralising tendencies. But over the greater part of Europe, certainly by the later Middle Ages, these associations did not supersede the wider territorial power; they never precluded a sense either of loyalty or of subjection to an acknowledged and potentially dynamic central authority. The distinction is not as sharp as it might be. It may be elucidated by comparing the political life of medieval Lyons with parallel developments in northern Italy. There are striking superficial similarities of form, but these appearances hardly conceal that, far from exemplifying a fracturing of political authority, the city of Lyons merely enjoyed valuable urban privileges exercised under ecclesiastical or royal overlordship through a patrician oligarchy that often combined its municipal duties with careers in the wider political and military service of the French monarchy.


95. Such conclusions might be drawn, for example, from the substance if not always from the thesis of Guy de Valous, *Le Patriciat lyonnais aux XIIIe et XIVe siècle* (Paris, 1973).
It is against this background that diverging patterns of alien community organisation should be understood. The records of the Italian consulates in London, and particularly in the Low Countries, give an overwhelming impression of men who in a very vital sense thought of themselves as members of their respective 'nations,' however much this sentiment might coexist with loyalty to the home republic or to the family or to widely dispersed business associates. By contrast, French merchants in England always wrote of themselves and clearly thought of themselves primarily either as subjects of the French king living in England or as Frenchmen living under the jurisdiction of the king of England. It is not claimed that the lines of division were immutable. The Flemings had their own Hansa in London during the twelfth century, which thus significantly predates the establishment and consolidation of Burgundian power. But due regard given to a process of change over time, the argument that community organisation was reflective of contrasting and deep-rooted political traditions finds support in a most revealing coincidence. The southern half of the Italian peninsula constituted what may be most conveniently termed the Kingdom of Naples, a state much more reminiscent of political forms north of the Alps than the city-republics of central and northern Italy. Casual references in wills and other records indicate that there were always a number of Neapolitan merchants in fifteenth-century England. I know of no record of a Neapolitan consulate.

The above synthesis must confront one very important objection. It may reasonably be argued that universal causes might be expected to produce universal results. Yet whatever the experience in London, the fact remains that the Flemings possessed a hôtel des consuls in sixteenth-century Cadiz; the French had appointed a consul in Danzig, as elsewhere, by the end of the sixteenth century; and English mer-

96. This becomes particularly clear in the individual and group petitions of French merchants living in England during the difficult second half of Henry VIII's reign, as calendared in the later volumes of LP cited above.
97. The same may be said of contemporary Bruges: V. Vazquez de Prada, Lettres marchandes d'Anvers, 4 vols. (Paris, n.d.), I, 156. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged, the contrast between the city-states of northern Italy and certain mercantile centres of the south has often been overdrawn. Merchants from the southern cities often used the facilities provided by other Italian nations, and of course possessed consulates of their own, particularly within Italy itself. See, for example, Carmelo Trasselli, Mediterraneo e Sicilia all'inizio dell'epoca moderna (Cosenza, 1977), pp. 310, 318-19.
chants were organised in Antwerp, and later in Germany. The explanation, as Coornaert clearly perceived, is that terms such as 'nation' or 'consul' have been used to cover a wide range of organisational arrangements. The French consuls of the sixteenth century appear to have been officials appointed by the French crown to look after the interests of French subjects resident abroad. This might be evidence for a developing bureaucratic state; it is really a rather different and arguably more modern phenomenon to the one that has concerned us here. The English Merchant Adventurers were organised in Antwerp under a governor and a court of twenty-four assistants. This association was much concerned with the exclusionist and monopolist ambitions of a group of London merchants vis-à-vis their compatriots and rivals, and with matters of royal finance and diplomacy. The spirit and origins of the English Fellowship seem to me quite different from that of the Italian nations in late medieval England, however many parallels may be provided at the level of community life. The case of Iberian merchants is more ambiguous. Certainly early Catalan organisation bears marked resemblance to contemporary Italian developments. But by the late fifteenth century the history of the Portuguese and Spanish nations in the Low Countries suggests that earlier traditions were becoming intertwined with the politics of the Spanish wool staple and with the attempt by the Portuguese king to control the European spice trade.

In conclusion, it must be emphasised, there has been no attempt here to posit a sharp dichotomy between the Italians and other European merchants. I have shown elsewhere that significant differences existed among the Italian nations themselves. Similarities between the Italians and the North Germans should be presented with due stress on the obvious distinctions. The guild merchant was an association of European incidence; and it was trade associations, united and refined, that developed into the English nation as organised in the Netherlands. But these points made, the dynamic forces that spontaneously produced an extraordinarily dense pattern of Italian merchant colonies throughout the business centres of the Mediterranean and of northern Europe are of a perceptibly different order to the variable conjunction of cir-

99. Coornaert, supra n. 4, I, 132-34.
100. A. MacKay, Spain in the Middle Ages: From Frontier to Empire, 1000-1500 (New York, 1977), pp. 163-64; Stanley S. Jados, ed., Consulate of the Sea and Related Documents (University, Ala., 1975); Wendy Childs, Anglo-Castilian Trade in the Later Middle Ages (Manchester, 1978), pp. 202-4; Goris, pp. 37-70.
cumstances that sometimes resulted in the establishment of French, English, or even of united Spanish nations. In simple terms, the former were a reflection of a vigorous self-help mentality which was less a consequence of a weak political authority than of fragmented loyalties. By contrast, Emile Coornaert has written of French mercantile arrangements in the sixteenth century "il annonce l'état futur de tous les marchands travaillant hors de chez eux, soumis directement à l'autorité et à la protection de leur gouvernement,—les ambassadeurs supplantant désormais les 'consuls' des 'nations.'"\(^\text{102}\) It is the contention of this article that in essence Coornaert's conclusion is valid well beyond the bounds of its specifically French and sixteenth-century context.

VI. Reflections and Conclusions

An insistence that the Italians were somehow different might appear to add little to conventional wisdom. "Italy," as John Mundy recently remarked, "always has to be 'apart' in the northern European imagination."\(^\text{103}\) But this no longer is entirely true. Particularly in the last few years a group of historians have been attempting, implicitly or explicitly, to apply to general European history concepts that have proved useful in explaining political processes in medieval Italy. A leading figure in this regard has been Jacques Heers, who, although fully cognisant of the distinctive features of Italian development, has nevertheless raised the possibility that the difference might, in part, be one artificially created by the survival of sources.\(^\text{104}\) There can be no doubt that such work promises to contribute an important new dimension to a more traditional European historiography that has long been concerned with factionalism, private jurisdictions, and the vitality of corporate life.

The attraction of this approach is manifest. Social history in general, and an anatomy of basic sociopolitical organisms in particular, have encouraged historians to find unity where earlier political history saw only diversity. The 'social interpretation' has eased the task of the synthesiser in a world of bewildering historical output. Further, an

\(^{102}\) Coornaert, I, 134.

\(^{103}\) J. Mundy, 'Henry Pirenne: A European Historian,' *Journal of European Economic History*, 6 (1977), 478.

\(^{104}\) Heers, *Le clan familial*, concludes with the words: "Il est vraisemblable que des recherches particulières, conduites en ce sens, mettraient en évidence, pour ces villes du Nord-Ouest européen, différents aspects, notables, du maintien des solidarités familiales à l'intérieur de vastes clans urbains."
exploration of the role of family and community has offered a stimulating alternative to the potential constraints of Marxist categorisation. And there is no reason to deny that in every sphere of European history much recent work on local loyalties, local grievances, and the importance of corporate privileges and identities has greatly contributed to our understanding of crisis situations. Yet historians have continued to register protests against an automatic appeal to factional and group rivalries, and to insist on the possibility of loyal and unselfish service to a prince whose sovereign powers were firmly buttressed by a very long tradition of politico-religious theory. The latter emphasis should not be dismissed as naïve. Neither an instinctive reaction against nineteenth-century invocations of 'national characteristics' nor the comforting certitudes that accompany interpretations founded on the immediate interests of the most basic units of human society should blind us to the possibility of regional diversity in the way in which men thought about themselves and their relation to authority.

A study of alien merchant colonies in sixteenth-century England must find its ultimate justification in terms of its merits as a case study. It has been argued here that contrasting behavioural patterns were not the result of accidental or incidental details; rather an explanation has been sought in the fact that the merchants were products of a number of very different societies and represented different traditions and different needs. This conviction has determined the form of the present article and has raised issues far removed from the daily preoccupations of the alien trader. The conclusions dictate that this article should be presented not only as a contribution towards a history of merchant organisation in the late medieval and early modern period, but as a reaction to the incautious application to European history of models of community organisation that have proved valuable for an understanding of sociopolitical relationships and tensions south of the Alps.

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106. I am entirely aware that group and 'national' loyalties can never be regarded as mutually exclusive in a given historical situation. But the habit of looking beyond the group to a wider political authority (as indeed the habit of looking beyond the group to wider socio-economic cleavages) seems to me a variable determined by a number of factors, including political traditions as discussed above.