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**Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies**

**Title**

Trade, Trust, and Networks: Commercial Culture in Late Medieval Italy (review)

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7fr8v76x>

**Journal**

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 31(1)

**ISSN**

0069-6412

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**Publication Date**

2000-10-01

Peer reviewed

## REVIEWS

Gunnar Dahl, *Trade, Trust, and Networks: Commercial Culture in Late Medieval Italy* (Sweden: Nordic Academic Press 1998) 355 pp.

In *Trade, Trust, and Networks*, Gunnar Dahl attempts an ambitious examination of commercial culture in late medieval Italy (1300–1500). A seasoned businessman himself, the author describes his work as an attempt to understand how long distance trade was conducted in an age so different from his own. Armed with a keen appreciation for the everyday aspects of commerce, Dahl examines those factors that enabled the shrewdest of merchants to succeed despite immense obstacles. In the process, Dahl reveals “the patterns of perception, cognition, and practice” that constituted the commercial culture of the late medieval merchant (16).

Dahl’s study is based upon a significant amount of primary source material; eleven diaries, eleven merchant’s manuals and over 850 business letters and contracts are considered. Although many secondary sources are also employed, the influences of Le Goff, Gurevich, and Lopez and Raymond are pronounced. Dahl’s work may be considered a synthesis of the above authors, for he combines an anthropological examination of merchant culture (Le Goff and Gurevich) with the presentation of a rich and varied assortment of primary source documents (Lopez and Raymond). While to some such a synthesis may prove useful, there is little that is new in the work, and many of the points made will prove familiar to those acquainted with the topic.

In chapter 1, Dahl provides the historical context for his study. He examines several salient factors—such as the growth of the banking industry and the desire of both secular and religious leaders for luxury goods—that contributed to the formation of trade centers and routes throughout Europe. Dahl next turns his attention to those tools that assisted the merchant in exploiting the new possibilities open to him. Various innovations that occurred before 1300 (bills of exchange, double entry bookkeeping, insurance) are addressed in terms of their relative usefulness. A history of medieval Italian guilds, beginning with an analysis of the *collegium* of ancient Rome, is also provided (48).

The literature and historiography of medieval Italy is addressed in chapter 2. Here Dahl is at his finest when offering a synthesis of the diverse views presented in the secondary sources regarding the practical and moral conflicts faced by the merchant. As the reader learns, the reconciliation of ideals glorified by the medieval world of priest, peasant and warrior with the dictates of business often proved difficult. Especially problematic for the merchant were the church’s economic policies, for the prohibition of usury, if respected, would drive a stake into the heart of entrepreneurial activity. According to Dahl, the business community increasingly dealt with the church’s prohibition by simply breaking the rules (74). Interest charges were often hidden in the price or rate of exchange, and thus no one save the buyer and seller were aware that interest had been charged (74).

In chapter 3, the reader is familiarized with various business letters, including those of Francesco Datini, Giovanni Maringhi and A. Grunzweig, among others. Especially interesting in this section are the correspondences conducted by two Florentine noblewomen, Alessandra Strozzi and Lucrezia

Tuornabuoni—the only female writers included in Dahl’s work. Chapter 4 addresses diaries kept by merchants; those of Greorio Dati and Giovanni Morelli are highlighted. Also provided are examinations of famous architect Leon Battista Alberti’s work, *I libri della famiglia*, and the advice manual created by the merchant Giovanni Rucellai entitled *Il mio Zibaldone*. Chapter 5, which is too brief to be a chapter in its own right (6 pp.), covers familiar ground in its examination of Giovanni Boccaccio’s portrayal of merchants in *The Decameron*. The eleven commercial handbooks studied by Dahl are considered in chapter 6, and the last four chapters of his work provide an analysis and synthesis of the documents studied.

After reading the various excerpts presented by Dahl, one is sufficiently convinced of Dahl’s claim that persistent “commercial values and attitudes” permeate the various works. Consistently, the successful merchant is found wielding his pen as an instrument of protection in order to defend himself against the most common causes of ruin: war, piracy, shipwreck and theft. Dahl correctly asserts that the importance of the written document cannot be emphasized enough, for it provided a principal the means to exert a degree of control over transactions that occurred in distant lands. Through correspondence, a principal could transmit instructions to agents and employees. The letters received in return provided critical information that guided decisions and determined the success of the venture. The most prosperous merchants the reader encountered maintained exhaustive correspondences with their contacts. The successful Francesco Datini is a prime example; his archive, which was discovered in the nineteenth century, contained over 125,000 business letters. Datini’s success proved the validity of his methods, and of his belief that “profit lies in the pen” (167).

Whom one could trust was another critical issue consistently addressed by those merchants studied by Dahl. In response to this dilemma, the creation of a network of reliable associates was essential. To become a player in an established network, the merchant Giovanni Rucellai insists that one must be “good, just, and honest,” in all dealings (212). An excellent reputation was necessary, and Dahl’s sources consistently list honor, virtue, dignity, wealth and a good family name as essential qualities a potential business liaison must possess (200). Yet, we find that the most important network in late medieval Italy remained the family. Dahl’s sources insist that family ties must be nurtured, and priority given to relatives when hiring.

Although Dahl’s scope is ambitious and covers a fair amount of ground, the problems with his study are numerous. Most serious, perhaps is Dahl’s methodology. While it may be true that most medieval merchants considered communication, the formation of networks, and the nurturing of family ties important components of good business, Dahl pushes the issue by calling the primary source documents he utilizes, which include various genres and span several centuries, “a quite homogenous body of material” (263). Dahl’s attempt to establish thematic coherence is troublesome as his search for links between the various works leads him to ignore the particular bias individual writers may have had. Unfortunately, he also fails to examine how those concepts he considers essential to the world of the merchant, such as honor, may have changed over time. Nor does he address the effect important temporal events, such as

the plague, had upon commercial culture. His particular methodology thus leads him to depict a turbulent period of history, and a wide and diverse body of material, as static or “homogenous.”

A host of lesser difficulties cause frustration, and at times, confusion. Although Dahl’s prose is generally good, a more thorough proofreading would have eliminated the grammatical errors that are peppered throughout the text. An index would also prove useful, as would a more diligent approach to the creation of footnotes and bibliographies (a number of the texts mentioned in footnotes fail to appear in the bibliography).

In conclusion, Dahl’s leap across the chasm of time into the world of the late medieval merchant is interesting, if at times problematic. The work’s greatest strength—that it attempts to synthesize so much primary and secondary source material—might also be considered its greatest weakness, depending upon the experience and expectations of the reader. The survey-style presentation of material in *Trade, Trust, and Networks* fails to provide the focused analysis sought after by the more advanced student. For the less advanced student, however, it will provide a useful introduction to the challenges faced by the medieval Italian merchant, as well as to the writings of the most notorious merchants themselves.

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