

2 Berardi and Vespucci in Seville (1490-1496)

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2.1 The Medici/Berardi Commercial House in Seville

The Medici/Berardi commercial house in Seville, reorganised after Tommaso Capponi was dismissed, was active in three areas: shipbuilding and repair, the slave trade and finance, the latter administered independently of the other two but which managed the profits they made, something much appreciated by the sovereigns who provided careful protection. Giannotto Berardi, who had dealt mainly with the slave trade in Portugal, preferred this activity on which he had built most of his personal fortune.

It is a little known but certain fact that the slave trade in the Iberian Peninsula between the 15th century and the early decades of the 16th century was completely in the hands of Florentine families.¹ The Marchionni family held the monopoly in Lisbon, while in Andalusia the Medici/Berardi acquired such 'merchandise' from the coast of Guinea and had most of it sent to Valencia where the Barzi family, also Florentine, then sent it on to the rest of Europe.

At the end of the medieval period, this commerce had not yet assumed the atrocious characteristics it acquired from the mid-16th century onwards, when the extermination of the Indios in their lands caused a progressive lack of labourers. The black slaves from Guinea and the Guanches from the Canary Islands were used in wealthy households as servants while prisoners of war became galley slaves. In this period, Lisbon is described as crawling with slaves who also compensated for the country's demographic crisis. The Iberian ships searched the so-called Slave Coast, which extended from Mauritania to Sierra Leone, and their administrative officer, the *maestre*,

1 See Guidi Bruscoli, *Bartolomeo Marchionni*.



Figure 2.1 Copper engraving of the *abbey* of Ognissanti in Florence, of which Amerigo Vespucci always held fond memories, after Giuseppe Zocchi's painting (published in Florence in 1760). Vespucci would call after it the locality of All Saints' Abbey (Baía de Todos os Santos)

bought slaves from Arab traders or tribal chieftains and even from families in the poorest villages. Sometimes they acquired slaves through skirmishes and raids into the interior, albeit not without cost. Purchase was preferable to capture as the individuals most suitable to the European market could be chosen. It sometimes happened that the *maestre*, or those charged with this type of work, betrayed the ship owners and sold the slaves during the voyage to less expert or less fortunate colleagues, or to accomplices, making the sale appear as an escape or death during transport and pocketing the profits.

2.2 Vespucci's Apprenticeship

All scholars who have studied Amerigo's endeavours have found it difficult to understand how this 'landlubber' at over forty years of age acquired the necessary skill to undertake daring seafaring ventures crowned with success. Amerigo certainly acquired great experience of ship's maintenance, repair and construction during his time in the Berardi shipyard, particularly after the owner's death. Moreover, in the shipyard he instructed clients in the use of the instruments that completed a ship's furnishings: various types of compass from Holland and Genoa, quadrants and sextants necessary for establishing latitude (some made in Egypt), hourglasses and portable sundials.

Amerigo was also very interested in the slave trade, to which he was introduced by Giannotto Berardi. He was often employed by Berardi as *maestre*, a position of trust, which led him to travel to the Canary Islands and along the coast of Guinea. Amerigo wrote of these voyages in a letter known as the “Ridolfi Fragment”: “I have navigated across all the parallels from Morocco to the ends of Ethiopia [Black Africa] and past the parallel of 32° [52°] to the south. I have been to many parts of Africa and Ethiopia: to Cape Catim, Cape Anghila, to Zanaga, to Cape Verde, to Rio Grande, to Sierra Leone lying at 7° above the Equator, and I have seen and talked to countless people, and all are black, but even more so in one place than in another”.

In addition to 52° South and Sierra Leone, which he reached during his third voyage, he notes the places where he dropped anchor for the slave trade. Indeed, he describes those places with the words of one who has seen them with his own eyes: “All the land of Ethiopia is sparsely populated, there is a lack of fresh water, it rains very little, and the soil is very sandy and scorched by the heat of the sun. There are endless sandy deserts and very few forests or woods, and the prevailing winds in these parts are the levanter and sirocco, which are hot”.² Amerigo wrote this to a somewhat arrogant geographer without fear of refutation and showing his wide knowledge of the Dark Continent also through comparison of the African fauna with that of the New World, which he was the first to describe.

Sailing as a *maestre* was hardly the best apprenticeship for becoming a great navigator. However, it allowed him to gain first-hand knowledge of the risks of navigation, to observe the handling of the sails, to memorise the orders given to the crew, to understand why in certain circumstances a certain action had to be taken and in others a different one.

One year after his arrival in Seville, Amerigo was already used to the lively city and enjoying his new job at the Berardi Company.

2.3 The Year 1492

The year 1492 was unlike any other. Many events occurred and many decisions were taken that changed not only the historical prospects of Tuscany but those of Spain, Europe and the entire world.

Lorenzo, son of Piero de’ Medici, known as ‘the Magnificent’ for his patronage of great artists and men of letters, for his writings and for the splendid buildings he commissioned, died in Florence. He was succeeded by his son Piero, nicknamed ‘the Fatuous’ because he was an ineffectual and vain man. The cousins Lorenzo and Giovanni di Pierfrancesco, who could not stand him, were exiled from Florence after beating him up during an encounter.

In Spain, Queen Isabella and her husband Ferdinand had decided to reconquer the last Iberian territory occupied by the Arabs, the caliphate of Granada. During the siege, the King and the Queen lived in a great encampment set up at Santa Fe outside the city; Granada fell in January 1492. As the surrender had been previously arranged, there was not much bloodshed, but immediately afterwards the ‘most Catholic’ sovereigns treated the vanquished very harshly forcing them to convert or leave the city. The caliph of Egypt protested strongly about this infraction of the agreed terms

² “Frammento Ridolfi” in Formisano, *Amerigo Vespucci lettere di viaggio*, 30-1.

of the surrender which provided the promise of civil treatment for the Muslim citizens. His threat of reprisals caused alarm, and Queen Isabella had to try to remedy the situation by sending a delegation led by her secretary Peter Martyr d'Anghiera.

In March 1492, the Spanish sovereigns signed the Alhambra Decree, drawn up by the implacable inquisitor the Dominican friar Tomás de Torquemada, which made it obligatory for Jews to convert to Catholicism or be expelled from the kingdom. This edict provoked the exodus of a large number of cultured and competent citizens towards the Maghreb, the Ottoman Empire and southern Europe. It is estimated that Portugal, which at the time was not controlled by the Inquisition, accepted about 120,000 of them. Immediately after Grenada's surrender, Ferdinand and Isabella signed the *Capitulación de Santa Fe*, the agreement that allowed Columbus to reach the fabulous markets of Asia by crossing the ocean towards the west. If he succeeded, the navigator was to be rewarded with noble titles, feudal powers and economic advantages. This contract, stipulated amid the euphoria of the conquest of Granada, presented anomalies even for that time: the Genoese navigator undertook to find and secure for the Spanish Crown unknown lands and to identify the routes across the ocean that would have allowed him to complete this endeavour. In exchange, the royals granted him permission to attempt this venture (something that was not of their exclusive competence and that cost them nothing), they granted him hereditary noble titles (which also cost them nothing), gave a modest contribution towards the cost of the voyage, but above all granted feudal rights over any lands discovered and conquered beyond the ocean. In the case of failure, Columbus would lose everything: the money he contributed to the successful outcome of the venture and perhaps even his life. In the case of success, he would gain enormous economic benefits, which perhaps he would not have obtained from a less wealthy patron.

In this period, in order to gain more power, princes and republics stipulated contracts of this type with 'captains of adventure' who headed bands of mercenaries, and did the same with the best navigators. In Columbus' case, the negotiations lasted five years.

King Ferdinand disapproved but limited himself in this phase to forbidding his subjects to take part in Columbus's venture.

Having decided the outcome of Columbus's venture, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon decided to complete the conquest of the Canary Islands by taking La Palma. This island was still in the hands of the Guanches, a proud indigenous population of Berber descent whose way of life was still very primitive; indeed, their only weapons were clubs and stones. For this endeavour, the sovereigns chose Don Alonso Fernández de Lugo, who had distinguished himself during the conquest of Gran Canaria Island. He was made an inviting proposal: if he conquered La Palma within a year, he would become its governor, he would have the right to a percentage of the prisoners to sell as slaves and, lastly, he would be given the sum of 700,000 *maravedís*, a conspicuous sum but not astronomical. This type of contract appealed to King Ferdinand: a clear agreement that allowed him to keep the contracting party under control until he fulfilled his obligations. Also in 1492, the Spanish sovereigns decided to arrange two marriages in order to strengthen ties with the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, who had made a substantial contribution of soldiers and arms for the conquest of Granada. His children, Philip the Handsome and Margaret of Austria (then twelve years old), were

to marry respectively two of Isabella and Ferdinand's children: the princess Joanna and her brother John, hereditary prince to the whole of Spain. Both marriages were short-lived and ended in the most wretched ways.

Another occurrence in 1492 of great importance for the events discussed here was the death of Pope Innocent VIII, who was succeeded by Pope Alexander VI, a member of the noble Borgia family from Aragon.

Other more modest but none the less significant events occurring that year were the creation of a terrestrial globe about 50 cm in diameter with a metal stand by Martin Behaim of Nuremberg and the opening of the first printing shop in Seville.

2.4 Giannotto Berardi Separates from the Group of Florentines

Giannotto Berardi had followed the development of Columbus' project with great attention and was drawn by the Genoese navigator's personality, seeing him at the forefront of a new season of exploration. When he discovered that Columbus was looking for a financial backer for his venture, Berardi proposed himself without involving the Medici bank and at the same time took the opportunity to also finance Alonso Fernández de Lugo, suggesting they form a company together with Francesco Rivarolo, a Genoese businessman. Through this financing, he hoped to be able to gain an advantage in the trade of valuable goods from the Canary Islands, in particular cochineal.³

With these private agreements, Berardi ended his association with Lorenzo and Giovanni di Pierfrancesco de' Medici, who continued to manage the bank through Donato Niccolini and Piero Rondinelli. Together with Girolamo Ruffaldi and Amerigo, who had become his right-hand man, Berardi continued to run the shipyard, which received important contracts for Christopher Columbus' voyages.

Unfortunately, Alonso de Lugo caused his partners a great deal of trouble: having conquered the island of La Palma in May 1493, within the agreed terms, he sold the 140 slaves he had captured for his own profit. He kept his part of the 700,000 *maravedís* received from the Queen, which he should have shared with his partners, and returned the rest to the Spanish Crown. Through these actions, he hoped to ensure for himself the contract for the conquest of Tenerife where the natives were still holding out. The conquest of the last of the Canary Islands ended in disaster. The Spanish captain, at the head of an army of two thousand men, was surprised and beaten in an ambush by the native chieftain Bencomo, and de Lugo himself was hit full in the face by a stone that smashed many of his teeth. By then without means, he had to take refuge on Gran Canaria. Two years later, having been granted an extension of 10 months by the Queen and received substantial help from the Duke of Medina Sidonia, de Lugo managed to take Tenerife in July 1495. He became governor of La Palma and Tenerife. Later, he had important military successes in North Africa and received further rewards.

³ The cochineal is an insect from which is derived a red dye for textiles and also for beverages.

2.5 The Company Dissolves and Amerigo Begins a New Life

Seeing their shares vanish along with any hope of being favoured in commerce with the Canaries, de Lugo's partners began a court case against him. In the meantime, in February 1495 Niccolini sent Giannotto Berardi a protest for non-payment of a debt he had contracted with the Medici bank.

Furthermore, Queen Isabella forbade that her subjects in the new far-off islands be enslaved and ordered that those who had already been transported to Spain be returned immediately. It was more profitable for the sovereigns to have large numbers of subjects who produced goods and paid taxes, rather than numerous slaves enriching private citizens.

Feeling overwhelmed by these events, Giannotto Berardi became gravely ill and wrote this in his will:

In the very noble and faithful city of Seville, Tuesday the fifteenth of the month of December in the year [...] 1495 [...] present a notary, witnesses for me that I Giannotto Berardi, Florentine merchant, resident in this city being infirm of body but sound in mind [...] say and confess, to tell the truth to God and to protect the salvation of my soul, that the gentleman Admiral Don Christopher Columbus owes me and is obliged to give me and pay me one hundred and eighty thousand *maravedís*, a little more, a little less, as will be seen from my registers, and for the service and work I have carried out for three years, with dedication and goodwill for his lordship and for his brothers and children and business; and to serve him I left my business and my house, and lost and ruined the company belonging to myself and my friends, and even my body, if our Lord takes me away from the pains of this world, for the work and toils I have taken upon myself in serving his lordship, travelling, as I have travelled, many roads and suffering many anxieties.⁴

Giannotto Berardi died a few days after writing his will, which named Amerigo Vespucci and Girolamo Ruffaldi as his executors. Amerigo stayed on to manage the shipyard, now in financial difficulty, but he had several credit repayments due and a contract for twelve ships to be fulfilled in lots of four. But he had no luck: the first four ships were fitted-out late due to the transferral of the shipyard and, before being consigned, were dragged away by a storm and smashed against the coast between Cadiz, Rota and Tarifa, near Gibraltar. It was February 1496. Nearly all the crew members were saved, but the economic damage was irreparable. Powerless, Amerigo witnessed the destruction of the ships and decided to leave commerce and dedicate himself to voyages of exploration.

⁴ This quote is taken from Formisano et al., *Amerigo Vespucci. La vita e i viaggi*, 105.