

Weaving the first Global Age. The Ruiz, a network of textile merchants (1566-1600)

Research report sponsored by the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking

Gabriele Galli

Università degli Studi di Verona & Universidad de Valladolid

ggalli13@hotmail.com

The research project aims at exploring the commercial strategies performed by an international network of wholesale merchants of fabric: the Ruiz family. They were based in the heart of *Castilla*, the centre of the intercontinental Hapsburg Empire, in the second half of the 16th century – the so-called “Spanish Golden Century” (*Siglo de Oro*). Three brothers and one cousin from Medina del Campo (the town of the fairs), Burgos (Commerce Consulate’s location) and Nantes (textile harbour) weaved an impressive network of correspondence, money and fabrics: in a few decades they dramatically increased their prestige and economic capacities, from small fabric transactions to prestigious loans of money to the king Philip II.

The Ruiz archive, similar to the ones of Datini and Fugger, has more than 56.000 letters, a hundred of accounting books and several thousands of other commercial documents, issued and received during the socio-economic ascending and expanding trajectory of the family. Some important scholars took advantage of the fund: from Hamilton, on the *price revolution*, to Braudel, who referred to Simón Ruiz as “sly old fox” in *Civilisation matérielle*. The French historian also promoted both the edition of seven volumes of Ruiz’s letters (EPHH, series *Affaires et gens d'affaires*) and Lapeyre’s research (*Une famille de merchants*, the masterpiece on the Ruiz and a broad analysis on the trade between Castile and Britain, work that was directed by Labrousse).

Among the works published in the last years, a relevant publication was presented by the *DynCoopNet* research group: a study of the commercial *cooperation* through the case of Simon Ruiz and the bills of exchange of its archive to show the flows of money, and trust, in visual maps.

Another research worth-mentioning gives an extensive overview of the commercial letters exchanged between the Ruiz and both the Iberian and Italian peninsulas (*Más que negocios*, dir. J.I. Pulido). In line with the aforementioned research works, G. Galli’s *Mercaderes de lienzos vestidos de seda* analyses the textile consumption of the Ruiz (“linen merchants dressed in silk”), the multiform relationship between the family members, the textiles and clothes through several retail transactions and post-mortem inventories.

Nevertheless, no research has ever focused on the textile business, which emerges in the bibliography just as one of the family trades, although it was the first and more important business of

the Ruiz, who successfully practiced it for some 30 years. Indeed, the textile branch played a key role for the whole Early Modernity and in particular for the Castilian area: from the fairs in Medina to the production of *merino* wool and its export to the North, to the import of elaborated textiles (and the trade of *nouvelle draperie*), the local production of textiles (also of high quality although in small quantity), the dress, the appearance and the distinction (social, economic, ethnical...). Furthermore, the research on the Ruiz has always been focussing on single trade connections (e.g. Nantes-Medina-Nantes), yet it has never examined the complexity and multi-polarity of the Ruiz network (e.g. Nantes-Medina-Seville-America) in the textile declination with a crossed, compared, and transnational analytical perspective.

Those research approaches –and their intertwining, specific sources and methodologies– have been explored for the first time in this sponsored research, and will be weaved and developed in a review article.

The immense Ruiz archive was stored in the *Archivo Histórico Provincial de Valladolid*, while since 2016 a digitalisation process has been conducted (in the *Archivo de la Real Chancillería de Valladolid*) and the conserved material has been progressively transferred to the *Archivo de Medina del Campo (Museo de las Ferias – Fondos históricos)*. My research work was therefore conducted part in Valladolid and part in Medina del Campo.

I analysed a selection of “private” business correspondence (from Spain, France, Flanders, Italy, and South America) and of “public” commercial documents (contracts, agreements, accounting records, insurances...). These sources both reflect and build the family textile business: import and export of raw and elaborated fabrics, golden filaments, passamenterie, colorant products, and a commission of 2.500 dresses for the Royal house. The agency of the network has been analysed focussing on both the commercial firms (the *Compañía de Nantes y Castilla* and the company of Seville, oriented to America) and different associations with merchants in Anvers and Italy (Milan, Florence and Venice).

For instance, a commercial letter written to Simón Ruiz by Francisco de Mariaca from Seville (18/12/1566) indicates a wide variety of information, such as: the trade key actors (Simon’s brother Andrés from Nantes, the bankers Maluenda, the Spanish partners), commercial cities, towns and areas (Bilbao, Nantes, Rouen, Tierra Firme and Nueva España), price trends (“abía subido la lencería” – “the linen’s price increased”), kinds of fabrics (*angeos, telas crudas, cáñamos, fardos finos...*), market movements and pulses. Francisco writes, in the letter, “aquí lo bueno tiene más demanda y mejor salida”: in Seville, the door to Americas, the good quality fabric is highly requested, more than the cheap one, and it can be sold with ease.

In the second part of the research, in the archives in Paris and Nantes (*Bibliothèque Nacional* and *Archives Communales*), I analysed the documents of the French branch of the family putting the research focus on the textile business, and I found both commercial and genealogical documents. The lineage represents a typology of limited interest for the “textile core” of the research, however it is useful to confirm the overlapping and intertwining of business and family networks (e.g. the marriages between two Ruiz and their main French business partners, the Rocaz).

The commercial sources are both quantitative and qualitative, such as the accounting books and a collection of business papers. The accountability is represented by “Libros” and “Cuadernos”, mostly regarding the family textile export to Spain, a relevant example being the “Quaderno de las mercaderias que con la gracia de Dios se enbian a España en que Nuestro Señor aya parte en todo” (1556-58 and 1558-1561). There is also a general accounting book for the years 1565 and 1566 (“Cuentas de Andrés Ruiz”) and a specific business register of trades between the Breton harbour and Thiers (“Libro de las mercaderias que se rreciven y enbian de los de Tiarte”, 1548-64).

In the collection of commercial papers (“Commerce avec l’Espagne”) I found both general sources about the trade between France and Spain in the 16th Century (as the royal edicts of the kings Charles and Louis) and specific sources about the Ruiz family’s trades (as a textile consignment from Nantes to Seville, or an insurance agreement signed by Andres).