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BEYOND BUSINESS: BARCELONA AS A HUB OF KNOWLEDGE, COMMERCE, AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE (c. 1380-1412) – INSIGHTS FROM DATINI'S NETWORK

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with an introduction by
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Beyond Business: Barcelona as a Hub of Knowledge, Commerce, and Cultural Exchange (c. 1380-1412) – Insights from Datini's Network

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ABSTRACT

Questo studio nasce nell'ambito del progetto MSCA "TOSCA", finanziato dall'Unione Europea, e prende le mosse dai principali studi dedicati al commercio tardomedievale e ai sistemi attraverso cui le grandi compagnie toscane organizzarono i propri traffici su scala mediterranea (Melis, 1962; Saporì, 1972; Del Treppo, 1989). Allo stesso tempo, tiene conto delle recenti riflessioni sui rapporti di fiducia e reciprocità che rendevano possibile il funzionamento di imprese geograficamente estese ma fondate su legami personali e familiari (Poloni, 2024). Muovendo da queste premesse, il contributo analizza una selezione di testi tratti dalla corrispondenza mercantile conservata presso l'Archivio Datini di Prato, relativa alle relazioni tra Toscana e Corona d'Aragona. L'indagine si sviluppa lungo due direttrici. Da un lato, ricostruisce l'immagine di Barcellona restituita dai mercanti italiani, delineando un profilo dello spazio urbano quale ambiente relazionale, sociale e cognitivo, osservato attraverso diverse sensibilità e prospettive. Dall'altro, il caso della committenza di quattro mappamondi da parte di Baldassarre degli Embriachi (attivo ca. 1400) permette di esaminare il contributo delle reti mercantili all'elaborazione e alla diffusione di saperi, nonché alla formazione della cultura preumanistica nel Mediterraneo occidentale, in quanto infrastrutture di mediazione tra cultura mercantile e cultura cortese, tra valori estetici e conoscenze geografiche e nautiche.

Building on landmark studies of late medieval trade and merchant networks (Melis, 1962; Saporì, 1972; Del Treppo, 1989) and contemporary reflections on their systems of cooperation, connectivity, and trust (Poloni, 2024), this paper revisits selected traces of mercantile memory preserved in the Datini Archive (Prato, Italy). Rather than treating these sources as mere evidence for economic history, it explores their potential for investigating broader social, cultural, and cognitive phenomena. Focusing on the connections between Tuscany and the Crown of Aragon, the study pursues two interconnected objectives within the EU-funded MSCA "TOSCA" project. First, it examines Barcelona as a relational and cognitive urban space, reconstructing how merchants and other actors experienced and represented the city. Second, it investigates the relationship between mercantile culture and visual culture, as well as cartographic production, through Baldassarre degli Embriachi's (active c. 1400) commission of luxury mappamondi in Barcelona. Together, these sources reveal how merchant communities functioned as both infrastructures and laboratories of cultural mediation, bringing together artists, craftsmen, political authorities, and other intermediaries. From this perspective, cartographic artefacts, artistic practices, and geographical and navigational expertise appear closely connected to the social environments that nurtured the earliest forms of pre-humanist culture across the western Mediterranean.

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Keywords: Merchant Networks; Cartography; Knowledge Transfer; Material Culture; Mediterranean

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Author's note

This paper originated as a contribution to Panel 32 (*Urban Histories in Motion. Cartographic, Artistic, and Historiographical Representations of the City within Early Modern Intellectual Networks*) of the European Association for Urban History conference, devoted to the following theme: *Beyond Business: Barcelona as a Cultural Node in the 15th Century – Insights from Datini's Network*. This contribution combines exploratory and more developed lines of enquiry within the TOSCA project. While some sections identify and test research trajectories that will be pursued further in subsequent phases of the project, others present case studies grounded in more substantial documentary and historiographical evidence. As such, the essay is conceived as a pilot study: it introduces the project's broader analytical framework while illustrating, through examples at different stages of development, the sources, questions, and methodologies that inform its research agenda. The author wishes to express her sincere gratitude to Prof. María Morrás for kindly contributing the *Introduction* to this essay and for the valuable discussions that accompanied the conference presentation from which the present contribution originated¹.

1. Introduction: Barcelona as a Crossroads and a Hub

Located in the north-east of the Iberian Peninsula, an active trading port since the twelfth century, Barcelona had, by the fourteenth century, become a crossroads of cultural, economic, and political influences between its neighbors: France, beyond the Pyrenees, and Italy, on the other side of the Mediterranean. Catalan presence in Southern France until 1659, and dynastic links between the Royal House of Barcelona and the French monarchy, heavily influenced Catalan culture and politics, transformed the territory and its language, and made it a gateway to European currents. However, soon the Crown of Aragon directed its expansion towards the Mediterranean, developing intense commercial, political, and cultural ties with Italy. Barcelona mercantile elite and the expansion of the Crown of Aragon fostered a constant flow of merchants, ambassadors, and goods between Catalonia and Italian republics and kingdoms such as Florence, Naples, Sicily, and Tuscany. The arrival of both French and Italian influences made Barcelona a cosmopolitan city, a place where Castilians and Aragonese could gain access to news and artefacts beyond the Iberian Peninsula: the latest novelties in fashion, visual art, music, and, of course, books became available in Barcelona's effervescent market.

It is not by chance that a member of the Castilian chancellery, Juan Alfonso de Zamora, went in the decade of 1410 to Barcelona in search of a complete copy of Valerius Maximus, translated into Catalan by Antoni Canals (1395), and found it in the archive of the Consell de Cent—the institution that governed the city. It is worth highlighting that he asked not a Catalan colleague, but the archdeacon and chaplain of the Castilian Monarchs, Fernando Díaz de Toledo, to revise it due to his excellent knowledge of the language; and also, that both have met several times in Barcelona to negotiate financial aspects related to the marriage of María, sister of King Juan II of Castile, to her cousin, Alfonso V, king of Aragon and conquer of Naples (Avenzoa). Indeed, political and cultural contacts increased after 1412, when a member of the Castilian Trastámara lineage, Fernando de Antequera, brother of Enrique III of Castile, succeeded to the Aragonese crown. Texts in Italian, Latin, and French were then translated into Castilian (Riera I Sans, Pujol, Cabré et al., Cifuentes et al.) to the point that it is taken as a premise that Catalan Humanism predated and conditioned the reception of the new movement into Castile.

The picture, however, is more complex (Lloret). Merchants and notaries – and not only nobles and members of the court—had a prior and important role in transforming Barcelona into a burgeoning hub for the exchange of art, texts, and commodities (Coulon). The evidence obtained from pre-modern libraries points to an extensive network of contacts with Italy through mendicant orders (Casas i Nadal), and an avid interest in novelties among notaries, merchants, and members of the emergent bourgeois class (Iglesias-Fonseca) transforming Barcelona in a flourishing book market in the Mediterranean (Maillad-Álvarez and Cachero). How these channels worked in the exchange of artefacts and the introduction of intellectual novelties remains to be explored in detail. The preservation and digitization of one of the most important archives of the exchanges between Barcelona and Prato, the

¹ This contribution is submitted to the present working-paper series as research in progress. The text has not undergone professional language editing.

Datini Archive, offer an extraordinary opportunity to carry out this endeavor for the first decades of the fifteenth century.

2. Rethinking Archival Sources as Laboratories of Mediterranean Connectivity: The “TOSCA” Approach

The present contribution builds on the framework developed within the ‘TOSCA’ project (*The bOok aS CompAss* [...]), funded by the European Union through a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship (GA No. 101281999)².

The project examines the role of transnational merchant communities in the cultural exchanges that shaped the late medieval Mediterranean. Particular attention is given to the emergence and transmission of visual motifs between the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Adopting the metaphor of the “book as compass”, the project treats manuscripts, account books, correspondence, inventories and other portable artefacts as items that circulated along commercial and maritime routes, as well as through mercantile and book-trading networks. These materials connected different linguistic, artistic and cultural environments. By tracing their trajectories, the project explores the relationships between Italian urban centres and the Crown of Aragon, examining the impact of mercantile networks on the development of shared cultural horizons.

From this perspective, such networks emerge not merely as commercial structures, but as *relational infrastructures* through which information, expertise and material culture travelled alongside people, goods and capital. The *TOSCA* project is based on three case studies investigating women’s agency and patronage networks (*From Silence to Agency*), the circulation of texts and vernacular literacy within mercantile communities (*Tracing Textual Flows*), and the movement of objects, artistic models, and visual culture across the Mediterranean (*Tracing Material Culture*). The project combines approaches from cultural history, art history, and network analysis. One objective of the third line of enquiry is to identify traces of artistic production preserved within commercial documentation. For example, documents in the Datini Archive (“Annotazioni contabili riguardanti Arrigo di Niccolò”, 1404-1408, in Guasti 1880, II, pp. 411-412) record the purchase of ultramarine and cinnabar for paintings commissioned by Datini and his associates. This demonstrates how mercantile sources can shed light on the circulation of artistic materials, as well as the technical knowledge, commercial contacts and procurement practices associated with their acquisition and use.

Although the patronage of artworks by Francesco di Marco Datini (c. 1335-1410), particularly in relation to the Palazzo Datini and the wider Tuscan context, has been the subject of extensive study, and recent scholarship has also begun to investigate the commissioning, ownership and circulation of illuminated manuscripts associated with his milieu³, these approaches have only been sporadically applied to the foreign branches of the Datini network. This is particularly evident in the Crown of Aragon, where the cultural environments, artistic practices, and forms of visual production documented by the network are far less well known than those in Tuscany⁴.

² This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon Europe programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Grant Agreement No. 101281999 (*TOSCA – The bOok aS CompAss*). The project is supervised by Prof. Maria Morás (Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona). Further information is available through the European Commission’s CORDIS database: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101281999>. Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, the European Research Executive Agency (REA), or the European Commission. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

³ A recent example of this approach is provided by the *Seminari di Paleografia e Codicologia* coordinated by Prof. Irene Ceccherini (SAGAS, University of Florence). In this context, Cristiano Lorenzi Biondi (CNR-OVI) examined manuscripts associated with Francesco Datini through a combination of documentary, textual, and codicological analysis (*Libri [in volgare], copisti e possessori tra tradizione dei testi e ambienti di appartenenza: prospettive di studio per alcuni casi fiorentini di fine Trecento*, 21 April 2026). Building on similar concerns, the *TOSCA* project complements these approaches by integrating Italian and Catalan archival evidence and exploring the wider social and cultural environments in which such manuscripts were produced, circulated, collected, and used.

⁴ See R. Piattoli, *Un mercante del Trecento e gli artisti del tempo suo*, «Rivista d’Arte», 11 (1929), pp. 221-253, 396-437, 537-579; 12 (1930), pp. 97-150; R. Brun, *Notes sur le commerce des objets d’art en France et principalement à Avignon à la fin du XIV^e siècle*, «Bibliothèque de l’École des chartes», 95 (1934), pp. 327-346. For Datini’s broader cultural interests and patterns of consumption, see also S. Brambilla, *Libri e letture in casa Datini*, in J. Hayez, D. Toccafondi, M.R. De Gramatica (eds.), *Palazzo Datini a Prato*, Firenze, 2012, pp. 257-259. Datini’s acquisition of the Villa del Palco has often been interpreted as an early expression of mercantile investment in suburban residences, foreshadowing trends that became widespread in fifteenth-century Tuscany (Vestri-Bardazzi 1983, pp. 19-20).

The methodology adopted here combines evidence from the Datini Archive (*Archivio di Stato di Prato*, Italy) – described as “unique in its genre and in the world”⁵ – with material from local civic and notarial archives in Catalonia. This approach reconnects long-distance networks with their urban contexts. The analysis is based on the idea that the medieval city should be considered not only as a physical or institutional setting, but also as a *relational space* shaped by social interactions and connectivity at various levels. Following initial observations by Melis (1962) and Saporì (1972), Del Treppo (1989) famously described the Datini enterprise as a “*sistema di aziende*”, a constellation of legally autonomous yet closely interconnected firms located in strategically chosen commercial centres. Unlike traditional merchant companies organised around subordinate branches, the Datini system relied on distinct corporate entities coordinated through common financial interests and strategic direction. This arrangement combined organisational flexibility with risk diversification, which helped to explain the enterprise’s resilience and its ability to operate across multiple urban environments⁶. As Poloni (2024, pp. 19-20) recently observed, this effectiveness depended less on the number of branches than on the ability to establish and maintain extensive relationships between a relatively small number of commercial centres in the western Mediterranean and beyond. Rather than being a form of “corporate gigantism”, the Datini system relied on correspondence, agency, partnerships and commission-based trade to create durable connections between distant individuals, companies and cities.

Within this broader framework, this study examines a selection of cases drawn from correspondence addressed to or concerning the “*Barzalona*” *fondaco*. This was one of the main hubs of the Datini network in the Crown of Aragon between c. 1382 and 1412.

As acknowledged in Livi’s studies (1911, p. 204), the significance of the Datini Archive extends well beyond economic history and the study of commercial practices. Livi regarded the archive’s extensive correspondence as its greatest treasure, while also drawing attention to the documentation produced by the company’s Mediterranean branches, including those in the Crown of Aragon. While account books and commercial records are invaluable for reconstructing economic activity and the socio-cultural dynamics that shaped late medieval society, the letters often provide further insights into “political, social, spiritual, cultural, artistic, geographical and technological matters” (Cecchi Aste, 2004, p. 10).

Commercial documentation provides a valuable point of entry into the study of the people, practices, and environments of late medieval Barcelona. Yet the social and cultural implications of this documentary corpus remain only partially explored. As Morrás notes in her introduction to this study, late medieval Barcelona occupied a distinctive position within the cultural geography of the western Mediterranean. Its strategic location connected the Italian peninsula with the Iberian kingdoms, North Africa and northern Europe, establishing the city as a major hub for the movement of people, goods, texts and technical expertise. Merchants, bankers, political agents, and other intermediaries had access to commercial opportunities and influential social networks, civic institutions, and cultural exchanges.

Alongside accounts, commercial reports and practical instructions, the Datini correspondence occasionally preserves vivid and almost spontaneous observations of people, places and events recorded by merchants writing from within the urban environments they inhabited. These fragments, which can

⁵ Francesco di Marco Datini (c. 1335–1410) left behind one of the most extensive mercantile archives of the late Middle Ages. This archive is now preserved at the *Archivio di Stato di Prato*. For a biographical overview, see Gradi (1968, pp. 11, 19). Since the pioneering studies of Melis, the Datini Archive has been regarded as one of the principal sources for the study of late medieval commerce, merchant culture, and Mediterranean exchange; see Melis (1962); Saporì (1972); Del Treppo (1989, pp. 179-233). For the archive’s wider historical significance, see Livi (1911, pp. 203-209) and D. Toccafondi’s introduction to E. Cecchi Aste (ed.), *L’Archivio di Francesco di Marco Datini. Fondaco di Avignone. Inventario*, Roma, 2004, p. XXV. For contemporary mercantile culture and commercial practices, refer to M. Gual Camarena, *Un manual catalan de mercaderia (1455)*, *Anuario de Estudios Medievales*, 1, 1964, pp. 431-450. Despite extensive scholarship on Catalan merchant communities in Tuscany, especially in Pisa and Siena, the connections between Prato and the Crown of Aragon remain comparatively less explored. For the former topic, as well as for the agreements established between Tuscan cities and the Aragonese Crown in the late thirteenth century, see Soldani (2015, pp. 283-315).

⁶ Melis’s *Aspetti della vita economica medievale* (1962) represents a key starting point for subsequent studies of the Datini Archive and for socio-economic research informed by the methodological approaches of twentieth-century economic history. See also Saporì, A., *La mercatura medievale* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1972), especially chapters 3 (*Il mercante italiano*) and 4 (*La figura del mercante*), where the author emphasises the distinctive organisational features of Datini’s enterprise and its divergence from earlier models of merchant companies. The edition consulted for the present study is the digital version made available through the RM Didattica (Florence University Press) website: <<https://www.rm.unina.it/didattica/strumenti/saporì/saggi/sez3/cap3.htm>> (accessed 24 April 2026).

be viewed as textual sketches of the city and its cultural life, provide valuable insights into urban perception, sociability and Mediterranean connectivity. The examples discussed below do not aim to provide an exhaustive survey of this material; rather, they demonstrate how commercial correspondence can shed light on forms of interaction, knowledge exchange and spatial experience that are not always immediately apparent in accounting records alone.

From this perspective, the Datini Archive can be viewed as a privileged laboratory for observing and reconstructing forms of Mediterranean connectivity.

2.1. Case Study 1. Perceiving Barcelona Through Merchant Correspondence

The Tuscan presence in late medieval Barcelona was the result of a long history of commercial relations between the Italian peninsula and the territories of the Crown of Aragon. From the twelfth century onwards, Genoese and Pisan merchants traded in the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, followed by companies from Lucca, Piacenza, and, increasingly, Florence. Throughout much of the fourteenth century, Majorca was the main centre for Italian commercial activity in the western Mediterranean. However, from the 1380s onwards, Barcelona also emerged as a strategic hub, gradually assuming functions previously associated with the Balearic island (Soldani 2012, pp. 116-117; 2014). By the early fifteenth century, Barcelona was home to a sizeable Tuscan mercantile community of around fifty families, operating through some forty companies that were connected to the main Mediterranean trading networks. Their presence extended beyond commerce, making them active participants in the city's social and political life (Soldani, 2012, pp. 120-121). Based in the Ribera district and its commercial and institutional centres, they were active members of the *universitas mercatorum et nautarum*, whose main landmarks were the *loggia* and the church of Santa Maria del Mar⁷.

When studying the Tuscan mercantile community in Barcelona, quantitative data alone are insufficient. The available documentation does not allow us to determine how long individuals remained in the city, how commercial enterprises were organised, or the extent to which merchants conducted business directly rather than through agents and correspondents (Soldani, 2010). In this respect, the Datini correspondence is particularly valuable, as the exchanged letters reveal “patterns of movement and interaction” that are difficult to capture through quantitative evidence alone. Merchants, factors and correspondents continuously circulated between commercial centres while maintaining connections through correspondence across changing geographical settings⁸. The archive therefore provides evidence of economic activity, while also offering insight into the practical realities of maintaining a mercantile presence in the late medieval Mediterranean.

This dimension of the correspondence forms the basis of the analysis that follows. By focusing on passages that transcend strictly commercial concerns, the letters discussed below offer rare insights into how Barcelona was perceived, experienced, and interpreted by contemporaries. While the first two documents illuminate distinct aspects of urban life, contributing to a multifaceted picture of Barcelona as a social, political, and cultural environment, the third adopts a broader perspective by highlighting the role of mercantile correspondence in connecting distant regions through the exchange of information⁹.

⁷ Although the city experienced intense maritime traffic and maintained extensive commercial links across the Mediterranean, a permanent harbour was not authorised until 1438 by Alfonso V of Aragon. Until then, maritime activities relied largely on temporary and mobile infrastructure (Putelli 2018, p. 256). Nevertheless, the Ribera district constituted Barcelona's principal commercial hub, where merchants, notaries, money-changers, and maritime professionals interacted daily. Florentine, Pisan, and Luccan merchants were integrated into the wider mercantile and social fabric of the city. They lived around the loggia, along the shoreline, and throughout the principal streets of the Ribera, such as Plaça del Born, Canvis Vells, Canvis Nous, Carrer Ample, Carrer de Flassaders and Carrer de Mirallers (Soldani 2010, pp. 140, 148).

⁸ The fluidity and continuous reconfiguration of these commercial geographies are particularly evident in Frangioni's analysis of the Milanese correspondence preserved in the Datini Archive, which challenges any notion of a stable or fixed mercantile presence; see Luciana Frangioni, *Milano fine Trecento: il carteggio milanese dell'Archivio Datini di Prato. I. Testo e bibliografia* (Firenze: Olschki, 1994).

⁹ The merchants discussed here were involved in commercial networks that connected Tuscany, Provence, and the Crown of Aragon. These merchants include Geri di Giovanni Bellincioni, a Florentine based in Barcelona; Andrea di Bartolomeo di Ghino, a Siennese *fattore* of the Datini company in Avignon; and Tieri di Benci da Settignano, one of the most experienced collaborators of the Avignon branch. For a detailed reconstruction of Andrea di Bartolomeo's role within the Avignon network, see Hayez (2005, pp. 203-397).

- Geri di Giovanni Bellincioni to Andrea di Bartolomeo di Ghino (Barcelona-Avignon, 10 January 1386; ASPo, Archivio Datini, no. 181, doc. 317016)¹⁰. A vivid picture of Barcelona emerges from a letter sent by Geri di Giovanni Bellincioni to Andrea di Bartolomeo di Ghino in Avignon and preserved in the Datini correspondence. Reporting the arrival of the King and Queen – most likely Peter IV of Aragon (1319-1387) and Sibila de Fortià (c. 1350-1406) – Geri notes: “*Il signiore re è venuto qui chola reina ed ècisi fato grande festa. Ècisi giostrato più di XV volte p(er) amore di lei*” (“The king has come here with the queen and great festivities have been held. More than fifteen jousts were organised in her honour”), and adds the striking personal observation that she was “*ch’ela è bene bella più non si dicie*” (“she is truly beautiful, and no higher praise could be given”). As well as conveying political information, the passage offers a glimpse of Barcelona as a lived urban environment, brought to life by public celebrations, courtly rituals, and collective participation. Here, political authority is presented not as an abstract institution, but as a visible and tangible presence realised through ceremony and performance. The festivities can reasonably be linked to the celebrations organised to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Peter IV’s accession to the throne. According to the royal chronicle, at the start of 1386, the king gathered ecclesiastics, nobles, and representatives of towns and cities from across his realm in Barcelona to celebrate the event. Public rituals of this kind linked the monarchy, urban elites, and mercantile communities through shared forms of political representation and collective participation¹¹. At a time when the Crown was becoming increasingly dependent on urban resources, fiscal negotiations, and collaboration with civic institutions, such ceremonies were integral to broader processes of political communication and consensus building.

While these aspects cannot be fully reconstructed from a single document, letters of this kind offer art historians important clues for investigating ephemeral commissions, ceremonial decorations, and the craftsmen involved in major civic events. Furthermore, they point towards broader questions concerning artistic production, circulation, and material culture that deserve further attention. The same letter also sheds light on the Tuscan mercantile community that was established in the city. Conveying greetings from the merchant Antonio Parigiliada, resident in Barcelona, Geri reports that he had recently changed residence: “*Egli è venuto a stare ne la chasa di quello vedova che sta dirimpeto a Bernardo Aldobrandi*” (“He has moved into the house of the widow who lives opposite Bernardo Aldobrandi”). Thus, urban space is described through relations of acquaintance and shared points of reference rather than formal topographical coordinates. Rather than providing a conventional description of the city, the correspondent reconstructs Barcelona through people, events, and social interactions, thereby transforming lived experience into communicable knowledge. At the same time, the festivities described in the letter provide a valuable point of observation for ceremonial and symbolic practices that would subsequently be developed and reconfigured under the Trastámara dynasty.

- Tieri di Benci da Settignano to Francesco di Marco Datini (Milan-Florence, 7 March 1386; ASPo, Archivio Datini, no. 669/24, doc. no. 602480). A different perception of Barcelona emerges from a letter sent by Tieri di Benci from Milan to Francesco Datini. Referring to the city, he remarked: “*Ora voi sapete Barzalona è buona terra e farasi buono intendere co l’amico di là e andavi alcuna volta; però ch’io sento assai di qui che n’ano messo di molta magla per parecchi migliaia fiorini, sì che i più modi è pure di bisogno venici*” (“Now you know that Barcelona is a good place, and it would be worthwhile to maintain good relations with our associate there and to visit him from time to time, for I often hear that large quantities of textiles

¹⁰ In the *GattoWeb*™ database (Iorio-Fili and Boccillari, OVI-CNR), the letters cited here are identified with the abbreviation “ASPr” (*Archivio di Stato di Prato*). For consistency with current archival practice, this contribution adopts the form “ASPo”. The change affects only the institutional abbreviation and not the archival identifiers themselves.

¹¹ According to the *Crónica del Rey de Aragón D. Pedro IV el Ceremonioso, ó del Punyalet* (also known in Catalan historiography as *Pere III of Catalonia*), at the beginning of 1386 the king summoned ecclesiastics, nobles and town representatives from throughout his territories to Barcelona to commemorate the occasion (Pedro IV, 1850, p. 402). The broader political and diplomatic relations between the Crown of Aragon and the Italian peninsula have been discussed by D’Arienzo (1970). For further discussion of royal ritual, dynastic celebrations, and the formation of political consensus within the Crown of Aragon, see Corrao (1994, pp. 133-156). It is also worth noting that *GattoWeb*™ disambiguates the occurrence “*reina*” in the present document as an anthroponym associated with *Sibilla*.

worth several thousand florins have been sent there. For this reason, it is indeed necessary for us to have a presence there”). To a merchant operating within the Datini milieu, Barcelona appears not simply as a prosperous market, but as a strategic node within wider commercial networks¹². The emphasis placed on information circulating between distant markets is particularly revealing, as Barcelona’s attractiveness is assessed through reports, commercial intelligence, and expectations shared among merchants. The chronology of the letter is also significant. Historians have identified the period from 1381 to 1383 as a turning point in the organisation of Barcelona’s financial sector, following the collapse of several major private banking houses (Soldani, 2010, pp. 112-113).

Writing only a few years after the crisis, Trieri described Barcelona as a “*buona terra*” and emphasised the volume of trade directed towards the city. His remarks suggest that Barcelona retained a strong commercial reputation among contemporary merchants despite recent economic difficulties. As Livi later observed, the Datini company’s connections with the Crown of Aragon predated the establishment of its permanent branches in Valencia (1393), Barcelona (1394), and Majorca (1395). Trieri’s assessment therefore reflects his familiarity with Catalan markets, already firmly integrated into the wider mercantile network.

- Bettino (physician) to Francesco di Marco Datini (Prato-Florence, 6 January [s.a.]; ASPo, Archivio Datini, no. 1091, doc. 6300013). A different dimension of the Datini network emerges from a letter sent by Bettino, a physician active in learned circles and engaged in the translation of miracle accounts into Latin. Having translated the miracles associated with the Pieve of Prato and the Compagnia dei Bianchi, he sought Datini’s assistance in gathering additional material for a collection devoted to the “*più alti miracoli e i più rilevati e notabili*” (“the greatest and most remarkable miracles”) occurring in “*città e terre famose*” (“famous cities and lands”). To this end, he turned directly to Datini and to the network of *fondachi* and correspondents associated with his companies. Particularly revealing is Bettino’s explanation that, through written reports, “*noi sappiamo delle cose, le quali noi non sapremo*” (“we come to know things that otherwise we would not know”). The passage presents mercantile correspondence as a channel for the circulation of information extending well beyond the sphere of commerce. Significantly, it shows a member of the learned community explicitly relying on merchant communications to obtain knowledge unavailable through local channels. By addressing Datini as a “*savio e discreto mercatante*” (“wise and discerning merchant”), Bettino recognised the merchant network as a trusted source of knowledge and a reliable means of accessing information circulating across distant regions.

Trieri’s observations contribute to broader reflections on the “Mediterranean trade city” and on urban centrality understood in terms of relational space. Bettino’s letter broadens this perspective by shifting attention from the city itself to the networks that connected distant places and people. His request suggests that merchants were regarded as privileged observers of distant places, capable of providing knowledge not only about markets and political events, but also about local traditions, religious practices, and extraordinary occurrences. Most significantly, the letter presents Francesco di Marco Datini as a figure whose authority rested not only on commercial expertise, but also on access to information originating beyond local horizons. Without collapsing the distinction between the two spheres, the document offers a glimpse of the environments in which merchants and men of letters increasingly interacted.

Recent discussions in urban history have emphasised the importance of connectivity, communication, and proximity in shaping forms of exchange that extend beyond the economic sphere. The broader relevance of the Datini Archive for exploring these dynamics was particularly evident at the 2026 *European Association for Urban History* conference, where several contributions, including the present

¹² This interpretation is further supported by the quantitative findings presented by Angela Orlandi at the same conference. Barcelona, Valencia, and Palma de Mallorca appeared 261 times in the Datini correspondence between 1390 and 1411 as points of departure or arrival along routes connecting the western Mediterranean with central and northern Italy. While not all trade necessarily passed through the ports of the Crown of Aragon, the evidence suggests the ongoing strategic importance of the Catalan-Aragonese region within broader European trading networks.

paper, drew on the same documentary corpus to analyse different urban environments and patterns of interaction. Among them, Angela Orlandi's contribution on Bruges and its western Mediterranean connections (2026) offered a complementary perspective on the role of urban networks, merchant mobility, and social presence within wider systems of exchange¹³. Taken together, studies ranging from Barcelona to Bruges highlight the extraordinary potential of the Datini Archive for reconstructing the interconnected character of late medieval European cities. The case of Barcelona presented here suggests that such dynamics also fostered forms of knowledge transfer only partially visible in commercial documentation, yet recoverable through traces preserved in merchant correspondence.

2.2. Case Study 2. Visual Culture and Knowledge Transfer: Merchants and Mapmakers in Late Medieval Barcelona

The forms of knowledge exchange discussed above also invite consideration of the material artefacts through which information, expertise, and cultural practices were produced, displayed, and transmitted. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that cartographic items and material culture can be examined as interconnected manifestations of commercial and civic life in major maritime centres such as Genoa, Pisa and Venice (Mathews, 2022). In these environments, portolan charts and *mappae mundi*¹⁴ embodied not only geographical knowledge, but also cultural prestige and political authority. In this context, Giovanni Livi, a pioneering scholar of the Datini Archive, referred to letters centred on Baldassarre degli Embriachi (active c. 1400), also known as “Baltazaris Ubriachi, mercatoris florentini”, whom he described as a “*genialissimo artefice fiorentino*”. A banker, sculptor, entrepreneur, and political agent, Embriachi was closely associated with Simone d'Andrea Bellandi, Datini's representative (*fattore*) in Barcelona. Sources identify Bellandi as a “*mercatore de Prato in Florencia*”. During his time in the Catalan city, Embriachi commissioned several *mappae mundi*. These commissions soon attracted scholarly interest, securing a distinctive place for the episode in the historiography of late medieval cartography. Significantly, the records discussed by Livi and associated with the Cresques family reveal the close links between cartography, astronomy, and royal service. This emphasises the status of cartographic expertise as an integral part of courtly culture within the Crown of Aragon¹⁵.

Such a reputation persisted well beyond the fourteenth century, becoming one of the defining features of Barcelona's cultural and artisanal milieu. When introducing the episode of Baldassarre and his interest in Catalan mapmaking into her account of Francesco Datini's life, Iris Origo (1988) observed that “*Barcelona aveva, tra le altre specialità, anche quella della cartografia*” (“among its many specialities, Barcelona also possessed that of cartography”). This remark becomes particularly suggestive when considered alongside documentary evidence pointing to the continued prominence of cartographic activity in the city. As noted by Delgado (2002) in his systematic survey of fifteenth-century Barcelona notarial records, one of the earliest references relating to the production and commercial circulation of cartographic imagery appears in a document dated 1 January 1461. According to this record, Joan Oliver, a Breton mercer, guaranteed the repayment of a debt by pledging a copper matrix intended for printing a *papamundi* (a term in the vernacular referring to a world map or *map-*

¹³ Angela Orlandi, Bruges and the Mediterranean (14th-15th Centuries), paper presented in Session 9, Slot I. Urban Consumption and Urban Networks: Italy and the Southern Low Countries (13th-16th Centuries), EAUH 2026 Conference. City Networks in Europe and Beyond, Barcelona, 2-5 September 2026 (conference paper, not publicly available at the time of writing). Drawing on the Datini correspondence, the paper examined the connections between Bruges and the western Mediterranean through the lens of polycentric urban networks. Particular attention was devoted to the strategic role of the Catalan-Aragonese area within wider systems of exchange and communication linking Mediterranean and Atlantic routes, as well as to the social, residential, and professional relationships established by merchants within the urban environments in which they operated.

¹⁴ Described in the sources as *mapamundi* (Catalan singular), *mapamundis* (Catalan plural), *mappamondo/mappamondi* (Italian singular and plural), and *mappa mundi* (Latin), these artefacts should be understood within the conceptual framework of medieval geographical culture rather than through modern cartographic categories. The term *mappa mundi* could refer to either a visual representation (*pictura*) or a written description (*scriptura*) of the world, reflecting the close relationship between image and text in medieval conceptions of space and knowledge; on this, see Hoogvliet (2007, pp. 23-29). For portolan charts and their role within late medieval maritime culture, see Campbell (1987, pp. 371-462).

¹⁵ Among the documents discussed by Livi, Document CCGXXII (Tarragona, 5 November 1381) details the transfer of a *mapa mundi* intended for the King of France, emphasising the importance of having the map explained either by Cresques himself or by experienced sailors. Document GCCLXXXVI (Barcelona, 1 July 1387) refers to a *mapa mundi* completed by Jafudà Cresques based on a design by his father, Abraham. This map was intended for the royal chamber and was valued at sixty Majorcan lire. Document CCCXVIII mentions “*Maestro Cresques, que era strolech de casa nostra*”, highlighting the close connections between cartography, astronomy, and royal service within the Crown of Aragon.

pamondo), together with three hundred dozen printed sheets bearing the same image¹⁶. Delgado also reports Madurell's (1967) interpretation of the document, which associates it to the art of illumination and regards it as "an antecedent of the developments that preceded the introduction of printing in Barcelona". Beyond its significance for the history of printing, this observation highlights the close connections between cartographic production, artistic expertise, and the circulation of geographical representations¹⁷. Taken together, these testimonies suggest that the cartographic initiatives associated with Embriachi were not isolated episodes, but rather developed within an urban environment in which mapmaking was a recognised and valued part of Barcelona's economic, artisanal, and cultural life. The episode reconstructed below, and the historiographical tradition surrounding it, provide evidence that such interests were already firmly established well before the 1461 document, offering an early testimony to the vitality of Barcelona's cartographic culture.

Building on the work of Livi and Mitjà (1962), Skelton (1968) linked Embriachi's travels through the Crown of Aragon, Bordeaux, England, and Ireland in 1399 to the circumstances surrounding the creation of the maps. Soldani (2014) then refined this reconstruction further using evidence from the Datini correspondence, account books, and Barcelonese notarial records, situating the episode within the flourishing Majorcan cartographic tradition that emerged after the introduction of Genoese chart models by Angelino Dulceti (active in the mid-fourteenth century). More recently, Houssaye Michienzi and Vagnon (2019) emphasised the importance of the Datini Archive for the study of cartographic practice and the circulation of nautical charts. Drawing primarily on documentation from the Majorcan branch of the company, they reconstructed commissions entrusted to leading cartographers. This demonstrates how merchants such as Antonio delle Vecchie, Luca del Biondo and Filipozzo Soldani were directly involved in the circulation of cartographic artefacts across Mediterranean and northern European networks.

The value of a systematic examination of the Barcelona correspondence is further illustrated by a letter identified in the course of the present research. Sent by Andrea di Bartolomeo di Ghino from Avignon on 9 September 1385 (ASPo, Archivio Datini, no. 621, doc. 9306), the letter discusses company organisation and personnel management, as well as the qualities expected of young apprentices destined for mercantile service. Reflecting on his experience, Andrea remarked that "*io non ò cerchato tanto il profitto quanto l'onore*" ("I have sought not so much profit as honour"), adding that "*a giornate apprendo huomo*" ("a man learns day by day") and that "*l'opare facino l'uomo*" ("a man's deeds make the man"). Such observations provide a glimpse into the moral and social values that informed mercantile life beyond strictly commercial concerns. In the case of Filipozzo, the same letter records conversations held in Barcelona with "*Giovanni Iacopi che là è per li Soldani*" ("Giovanni Iacopi, who is there as an agent of the Soldani"), situating the company within the everyday networks linking Barcelona, Tuscany, and Avignon. Before appearing in the documentary record as commissioners and consumers of cartographic artefacts, members of the Soldani network are presented here as active participants in the wider social and commercial relationships through which information, expertise, and opportunities circulated across the western Mediterranean.

Houssaye Michienzi and Vagnon (2019) likewise returned to the documentary dossier concerning Baldassarre degli Embriachi's commission of the four large-format luxury *mappae mundi*, re-examining the evidence relating to the episode¹⁸. The surviving documents identify the cartographers in-

¹⁶ In fifteenth-century Catalan contractual practice, the payment of rents and annuities arising from *censals morts* and *violaris* contracts was commonly secured through the pledge of movable or immovable property. The legal framework governing such guarantees has been examined in detail by Delgado (2002) and is also discussed by D'Arienzo (1970) in the notes accompanying her edition of royal chancery drafts relating primarily to the Sardinian domains of the Crown of Aragon.

¹⁷ See Origo (1988, p. 128), Delgado (2002, p. 276, n. 78 and doc. 124, p. 427), and Campbell (1987, p. 437).

¹⁸ Gabriel Llompart's studies have made significant contributions to the understanding of Majorcan cartography and the Cresques workshop. While the surviving correspondence places Baldassarre degli Embriachi at the centre of the commissions, Llompart emphasised the role of the Datini company and the wider mercantile networks through which these objects were commissioned, exchanged, and circulated. As Skelton (1968, p. 109) observed, the surviving documentation suggests a situation more complex than that implied by a single commission. By July 1399, Ubriachi had already deposited two or more *mappamondi*, described as *legati*, with Simone Bellandi, while further charts were still being produced. The sources therefore point to the simultaneous production, movement, and use of multiple cartographic artefacts within the same commercial and diplomatic environment. For recent developments in the study of Majorcan cartography and the Cresques workshop, see *The Cresques Project*: <<https://www.cresquesproject.net/home>>.

volved as Giacomo Ribes (c. 1375-1400), a converted Jew from a prominent Majorcan family of cartographers, and Francesco Beccari, a Genoese master chartmaker¹⁹. The commission was entrusted to Beccari through Simone d'Andrea Bellandi in June 1399. Having arrived in Barcelona earlier that year, Francesco Beccari of Genoa, described in the sources as “*dipintore di charte da navichare*”, was engaged to execute the commission on the basis of a design provided by the converso Jaume Ribes, the Christian name adopted by Jafudà Cresques²⁰. Active in royal service and at the head of one of the most important cartographic workshops in Majorca, Ribes was particularly well positioned to undertake commissions for elite patrons.

The production of these precious gifts was shrouded in secrecy. Livi (1911, p. 207) was the first to draw attention to the precautions surrounding the commission, noting that Embriachi repeatedly instructed his associate not to show the maps to anyone – “not even the king” – and requested that all correspondence addressed to him be kept safe. He also asked that his expected return date remain undisclosed. While the reasons for these precautions are unclear, Livi saw them as evidence of the high value placed on cartographic knowledge and specialised expertise. In his view, the maps may have incorporated privileged information, technical innovations, or particularly refined workmanship – qualities that would have made them highly desirable among elite patrons. More broadly, these remarks underscore the prestige of cartographic production in late medieval Barcelona, a city whose Catalan mapmakers were already widely renowned, and suggest that competitive conditions encouraged the protection of specialised expertise for commercial and cultural reasons. Although Livi's suggestions remain speculative, they acquire greater significance in light of subsequent scholarship on late medieval cartography. As Campbell (1987, pp. 427, 437) has shown, some of the most important innovations introduced into portolan cartography around the turn of the fifteenth century resulted from sustained exchanges between chartmakers and maritime practitioners. In the explanatory text accompanying his chart of 1403, Francesco Beccari explicitly stated that alterations he made to Atlantic distances and the positioning of Sardinia derived from information gathered from shipowners, masters, skippers, pilots, and sailors who had repeatedly navigated those routes. Whether or not Embriachi's commission was connected to innovations of this kind, the episode unfolded within an environment in which geographical representations were continually reworked in response to information generated by trade, travel, and maritime experience.

Correspondence sent by Baldassarre to Bellandi from Zaragoza in July and August 1399 reveals the urgency with which the four *mappae mundi* were being prepared in Barcelona before he departed northwards. He reported having obtained a royal safe-conduct from the King of Navarre, enabling him to travel to England and Ireland with his possessions, where he planned to attend important court ceremonial events. Payments totalling over one hundred gold florins, as recorded in the Barcelona *fondaco*, attest to their considerable value. Further evidence comes from an entry in a *Quaderno di ricordanze*, recording the delivery on 13 August 1400 of two *mappamondi*, one packed in a chest and another left unbound, and three compasses produced by “*maestro Franciescho genovese*” (ASPo, Datini 825, *Quaderno di ricordanze E*, Barcelona, 13 August 1400, fol. 18v). Apparently, only two of the four commissioned maps, the smaller examples, were ultimately completed and delivered; the fate of the other two remains unknown, and none have been securely identified among surviving cartographic artefacts (Skelton 1968).

¹⁹ Francesco Beccari, a Genoese cartographer active between the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, is known through a small number of surviving works, including three charts preserved in later copies in the *Cornaro Atlas* (British Library, MS Egerton 73). Recognised by his contemporaries as a *magister chartarum navigandi*, he is considered one of the most important innovators in late medieval cartography, particularly for his revisions of Atlantic coastlines and the addition of coastal toponyms, as seen in his 1403 chart (Campbell 1987; Revelli 1951, p. 165; Houssaye Michienzi and Vagnon 2019). For a high-resolution digital reproduction of this chart, see the MEDEA database: <<https://medea.fc.ul.pt/view/chart/81/viewer>>.

²⁰ Jaume Ribes, the son of Abraham Cresques, collaborated in the production of the Catalan Atlas for Charles V of France (1375-1377). Ribes combined technical expertise with direct experience of courtly patronage. Following his conversion after the anti-Jewish attacks of 1391, he appears in the Datini records as a cristiano novello and maestro di charte da navichare. Apart from records relating to this commission, Ribes is absent from the surviving Barcelona notarial records between June and October 1399 and again in May 1400. The contract was executed by Francesco Beccari on 7 June 1399 and countersigned by Simone Bellandi on 7 October (Arxiu Històric de Protocols Notarials de Barcelona, Not. Tomàs de Bellmunt, Reg. 30 April 1399–28 November 1399). Although Ribes is not mentioned in the deed, his involvement was reconstructed from Embriachi's correspondence with Bellandi and from payments recorded in the Datini account books between June 1399 and April 1400.

The documentation discussed above highlights the value of the Datini Archive for investigating the commissioning, circulation, and patronage of portolan charts. While much of this evidence has been used to study cartographic production and innovation (Pujades i Bataller 2007), Lepore *et al.* (2012) and Soldani (2014) have drawn attention to the visual, material, and symbolic dimensions of these artefacts. The rich decoration, iconography, and luxury character of many surviving examples suggest that they were valued not only as navigational tools, but also as prestigious objects of display and consumption.

While art historians have primarily examined the work of the Embriachi family in relation to their workshop and the circulation of luxury objects (Caffi 1873; Sant’Ambrogio 1896; Semper 1896; Schlosser 1899; Gengaro 1960), scholarship based on the Datini documentation has focused largely on the commissioning, exchange, and diplomatic uses of cartographic artefacts, while gradually expanding beyond the technical aspects of their production to draw attention to the visual, symbolic, and even aesthetic dimensions of these objects, as well as to questions of patronage, representation, and cultural consumption. Nevertheless, despite the relative scarcity of information concerning the Embriachi family, these perspectives have remained comparatively unexplored within the art-historical literature concerning Baldassarre, particularly with regard to his activities as a patron and commissioner. The limited dialogue between these two strands of scholarship has often obscured the broader role of merchants and intermediaries in connecting artistic practice, commercial exchange, political representation, and geographical knowledge. Meanwhile, Livi’s broader call for a more systematic use of Datini documentation from the Iberian *fondaci* to shed light on the cultural history of the late medieval Mediterranean has only been partially realised²¹.

The Embriachi case could serve as a model for shifting the discussion of mapmaking from its technical and functional aspects to the urban, artistic, and intellectual environments in which cartographic works were commissioned and circulated. In this respect, Schlosser’s (1899) interpretation is particularly influential. He characterised Embriachi production as “*höfische Kunst des ausgehenden Mittelalters*” (“courtly art of the Late Middle Ages”), emphasising its close relationship with the culture and representational practices of late medieval courts (Schlosser 1899, p. 22)²².

As Skelton observed, the sources distinguish between Ribes, described as a “*maestro di carte da navigare*”, and Beccari, identified as a “*dipintore di carte da navigare*”, suggesting a degree of specialisation in the making of cartographic artefacts. Campbell (1987, p. 393) similarly noted that the decorative components of charts and maps could be entrusted to specialist artists, recalling the collaboration between Francesco Beccari and Jafudà Cresques in the production of world maps commissioned for a Florentine merchant in 1399. The correspondence relating to Embriachi’s commission points in the same direction. The decorative programme of the *mappamondi*, referred to as “*le forme*”, constituted a substantial component of their value. Charges were calculated for hundreds of pictorial elements, including figures, animals, ships, fish, heraldic devices, flags, and trees, revealing the remarkable visual richness of these works. As Campbell (1987, p. 401) observed, features of this kind cannot be explained solely in functional terms. Rather, they point to the representational ambitions

²¹ Studies of Renaissance patronage and trading networks have largely focused on tracing Florentine trading communities to Central and Northern Europe (e.g. Flanders: Warburg, 1902, pp. 247-266; Salvini, 1984; Nuttall, 2004; Prajda, 2022, pp. 279-308). By contrast, relatively little research has been conducted on southern trajectories. Accordingly, studies based on the Datini archive have predominantly focused on the Avignon branch, maintaining an emphasis on the textile and wool trades, a trend reflected in the extensive scholarship devoted to the Avignon *fondaco* and its documentary records (Brun, 1923, pp. 103-114; Brun, 1934, pp. 327-346; Brun, 1935, pp. 216-233; Cecchi Aste, 2004; Hayez, 2005; Hayez, 2006; Hayez and Toccafondi, 2012). Recent research continues to demonstrate the vitality of these approaches. This geographical orientation remains evident in recent doctoral research, including Elena Ferrazzi’s dissertation (2026), which presents an annotated edition and linguistic study of Francesco Datini’s private correspondence during his Avignon years (1370-1382). At the same time, renewed attention has been devoted to the relationship between the Low Countries and the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, considerable scope remains for further investigation of southern and western Mediterranean urban networks. Already anticipated by Livi (1911), this perspective is also reflected in Angela Orlandi’s recent conference paper on Bruges and the western Mediterranean (see n13). For a comprehensive and regularly updated overview of scholarship based on the Datini Archive, see the *Datini Bibliography* maintained by the Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica “F. Datini”.

²² Building on Sant’Ambrogio’s study, Schlosser portrayed Baldassarre not merely as a craftsman but as the head of a significant artistic enterprise whose luxury goods were traded among aristocratic and princely patrons across Europe. Gengaro (1960, pp. 221-225) subsequently identified him as the leading figure of the family workshop, active between Florence and Venice and associated with major commissions such as the Certosa di Pavia (1400-1409). She further emphasised the individuality of his style, characterised by a Giottesque framework, linear design, and a marked attention to physiognomy, which combined Gothic traditions with increasingly naturalistic forms.

associated with such objects and to their role within courtly and elite cultures. In this sense, the maps emerged from the convergence of cartographic expertise, specialised workmanship, and practices of social and political representation.

The Embriachi commissions are particularly revealing when examined within an analytical framework that integrates the *histories* of art, cartography, and commerce. The Datini documentation suggests that these artefacts appealed to a much wider audience than just professional navigators. Acquired as prestigious objects to aid memory and learning, they circulated among socially and culturally sophisticated groups, while merchants acted as key intermediaries in the transmission of geographical knowledge and information across the Mediterranean. Like the artefacts themselves, the merchants involved in their production and circulation operated within the same urban and courtly milieus in which such objects were valued and exchanged, participating directly in the cultural interactions they helped sustain. Building on Llompart's analysis of this episode (2011; see n18), the undertaking may be understood not simply as the expression of an individual patron, but as the outcome of a *relational infrastructure* connecting courts, urban centres, workshops, merchants, and specialists across the Mediterranean.

3. Barcelona as a Mercantile and Cognitive Hub: Concluding Remarks

As the correspondence discussed above demonstrates, late medieval Barcelona functioned not merely as a commercial centre, but as a complex urban environment in which economic activity, political authority, and specialised knowledge converged. The city functioned as a diplomatic and institutional centre, a strategic marketplace, and a hub of technical and intellectual production, all embedded within wider Mediterranean networks. These overlapping dimensions reveal Barcelona as a space in which social relationships, information, and expertise were continuously negotiated and exchanged at a transnational level. The observations preserved in the Datini correspondence enable us to reconstruct these interconnected environments and the ways in which they were experienced and interpreted by members of the mercantile community. The present study therefore advances three closely related arguments:

1. **Barcelona as a node of knowledge.** Rather than functioning solely as a trading hub, the city emerged as a *cognitive hub*, a relational space in which merchants, artisans, political authorities, and cultural figures interacted within transnational networks of exchange. The traces preserved in the correspondence not only reveal how knowledge circulated within that world, but also allow us to reconstruct and better understand the social and cultural mechanisms that shaped it, offering a historical perspective on mechanisms of connectivity whose relevance extends beyond the late medieval world.
2. **Merchants as knowledge brokers.** The cases examined here demonstrate that mercantile connections facilitated not only trade, but also the circulation of information, expertise, cultural practices, and forms of knowledge that contributed to the development of early humanist culture across the western Mediterranean. They also suggest the existence of a broader social expectation that mercantile communities should contribute to the production and transmission of new knowledge, a function made possible by the density of their networks and the geographical reach of their commercial activities.
3. **Knowledge as a social and material process.** Whether transmitted through correspondence or embodied in cartographic artefacts, knowledge circulated through networks of patronage, communication, and exchange linked to dynamic merchant communities.

Barcelona's role as a cognitive hub was inseparable from the communicative infrastructures that sustained late medieval commerce. Through them, information, expertise, and trust connected the city to a wider Mediterranean world, allowing local experiences and specialised forms of knowledge to travel far beyond their immediate urban boundaries. The Embriachi case illustrates this dynamic particularly well. Entrepreneurs such as Baldassarre, who owned workshops, were able to mobilise their mercantile connections to gain access to international markets, as well as to courtly and institutional

contexts that would otherwise have been difficult to reach. These connections operated not only as mechanisms of economic exchange, but also as channels through which technical expertise, artistic practices, and opportunities for patronage were fostered.

If urban, commercial, and social spaces have long occupied a central place in the history of late medieval merchant networks, the Datini correspondence invites us to consider a different form of *spatiality*, one produced through communication rather than physical proximity. As observed, the strength of late medieval commercial organisations derived less from corporate expansion than from their capacity to generate and sustain complex cooperative networks. Beyond the physical geography of cities, roads, ports, and marketplaces, the continuous exchange of letters generated an *epistolary city-space*, a relational environment shaped through communication itself. Neither territorial nor institutional in the conventional sense, this epistolary environment rested upon a *paper-based infrastructure* that linked otherwise distant actors within a common communicative horizon. Through it, knowledge travelled, trust was negotiated, reputations were built, and commercial strategies coordinated, making correspondence one of the most sophisticated mechanisms for organising long-distance interaction before the advent of modern telecommunications.

Preserved only in exceptional cases, documentary corpora such as the Datini collection reveal this remarkable degree of coordination achieved by late medieval commercial networks and their organisational capacity²³. It is in this sense that Francesco di Marco Datini may be understood as “not yet a Renaissance figure, but no longer a man of the Middle Ages” (Vestri-Bardazzi 1983), a characterisation that aptly captures the transitional world reflected in his archive²⁴.

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²³ On the networked organisation of late medieval commerce, see A. Poloni, *Francesco Datini e Hildebrand Veckinchusen: il commercio internazionale dopo la peste del Trecento*, «Storicamente», 17 (2021); *ead.* (2024, pp. 9-46); *ead.*, *Prima dei Salvati. L’Archivio Datini e la ricerca sui network mercantili della seconda metà del Trecento*, lecture delivered at the Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa, 21 May 2026. Scholarship has generally emphasised the capacity of these networks to organise long-distance trade, manage capital, and develop increasingly sophisticated commercial structures, often interpreted as precursors of modern capitalist systems, echoing De Maddalena’s notion of an “international Republic of Money” (discussed in Del Treppo 1989, p. 182). The present contribution, however, focuses on their role as environments of cultural exchange, mediation, and knowledge production.

²⁴ At least in part, Piattoli interpreted these developments in relation to the institutional framework of the *Arte della Lana* in Prato (Vestri-Bardazzi 1983, p. 17).

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