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Saffron for Germany

Continuity and discontinuity of medieval and early modern commodity procurement structures

No other spice was used in the Middle Ages in so many different areas as saffron, *crocus sativus*. In the German-speaking world it is first mentioned as *caferân* in a pharmacopoeia written around 1150,¹ and until modern times it was used by doctors as a sedative, to relieve coughs, as an analgesic and digestive aid.² A second field of application opened up with the development of mass production of textiles, whereby large quantities were used in the dyeing of wool, linen and silk, as the crocin and crocetin in its flower scars were suitable as direct dyes without staining.³ Many painters and writers also used it as a colour, as its tone is very close to gold. In cosmetics it was used as face make-up and hair tint.⁴

¹ Luise Bardenhewer, *Der Safranhandel im Mittelalter*. Dissertation, Bonn 1914, p. 9. Walafrid Strabon does not mention saffron in his comprehensive botanical-pharmacological work "Hortolus" in the 9th century. See Antonio Petino, *Lo zafferano nell'economia del Medioevo*, in: *Studi di economia e statistica* (Pubblicazioni della Facoltà di Economia e Commercio dell' Università di Catania ser. I, 1), Catania 1950/1, pp. 155-250, here: p. 165. In France it was already used by doctors in the 11th century to relieve stomach aches. Cf. Petino (as note 1), pp. 170-171.

² Zu den Anwendungsbereichen des Safrans in der Medizin cf. Petino (as note. 1), pp. 167–168; Paola Pierucci, *The saffron trade between Middle Ages and Modern Era in the district of L'Aquila*, in: *Journal of commodity science* 40 (2001), pp. 125–164.

³ Petino (as note 1), p. 177; Manfred Lautenschlager (ed.), *Der "Liber illuministarum" aus Kloster Tegernsee*. Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentar der kunsttechnologischen Rezepte (Veröffentlichung des Instituts für Kunsttechnik und Konservierung im Germanischen Nationalmuseum; 8), Stuttgart 2005, p. 721.

⁴ Petino (as note 1), p. 177.

But it was also a stimulating drug and aphrodisiac.⁵ Finally, cooks loved it, as it made coloured and spiced food and drinks very pleasing to the eye and palate of the people of the late Middle Ages.

The wide panorama of fields of application led to a great demand, which was matched only by a limited supply, as the effort involved in harvesting and processing was very high. The coveted fabric is only contained in the three grain legs, so that these have to be plucked and dried by hand immediately after harvesting with great effort. Approximately 10 to 30 kg of saffron can be obtained from one hectare of cultivated land, whereby at least 120,000 flowers must be harvested for each kilogram.⁶ An experienced picker can manage a maximum of 80 grams per day. This great input of soil and labour resulted in the high price of saffron, which could be several times the price of pepper.⁷ A pound of saffron is said to have cost more than a horse.⁸

Saffron had a special status in the Middle Ages because of its value, which is expressed in the comparatively small quantity sold and the fact that many customs regulations had a special tariff for it.⁹ No other spice was so often deteriorated or even completely falsified by the addition of other substances, so that considerable effort had to be put into quality control.¹⁰ It is therefore not surprising that in many places, especially in the south of the empire, the Krämerzunft is also called the Safranzunft, as is the case in Basel, Zurich and Lucerne.

In great contradiction to the importance of the saffron trade in Germany in the late Middle Ages and early modern period is the limited importance that has been accorded to it in historical scholarship up to now, because here the spices imported from the Orient obviously fascinated far more. For the German-speaking world, Luise Bardenhewer's dissertation from 1914 is still the only

⁵ Wolfgang von Stromer, *Oberdeutsche Unternehmen im Handel mit der Iberischen Halbinsel im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, in: Hermann Kellenbenz (ed.), *Fremde Kaufleute auf der Iberischen Halbinsel (Kölner Kolloquien zur internationalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte; 1)*, Cologne 1970, pp. 156-175, here: p. 157.

⁶ Bardenhewer (as note 1), p. 8.

⁷ Petino (as note 1), p. 175.

⁸ Theodor Gustav Werner, *Die Repräsentanten der Augsburger Fugger und Nürnberger Imhoff als Urheber der wichtigsten Handschriften des Paumgartner-Archivs über Welthandelsbräuche im Spätmittelalter und am Beginn der Neuzeit*, in: *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 52 (1965), pp. 1-41.

⁹ Bardenhewer (as note 1), p. 63.

¹⁰ Bardenhewer (as note 1), p. 64.

representation with a more comprehensive claim.¹¹ She based her work on transcriptions of documents from the Great Ravensburg Society, which were made available to her by her teacher Aloys Schulte. As she did not carry out any other archival research of her own, the importance of this commercial company is overemphasized, especially on the Italian market. This one-sidedness of perspective was further reinforced when Schulte published the results of his Ravensburg research in three volumes in 1923.¹² After all, he was now able to give L'Aquila considerably more space than in his *History of Medieval Trade*, published in 1900, where he allowed him a full twelve lines.¹³ While there is not a single individual study of the Germans' involvement in the Italian saffron markets, for Spain there are essays by Ammann, Kellenbenz, Stromer, Jaspert and most recently Rothmann.¹⁴

Important contemporary information on the saffron trade was made accessible through the *World Trade Customs* published by Müller, which were written in the 16th century by servants of the Paumgartners, Welser and Imhoff.¹⁵ Other editions of sources include the German customs books of Barcelona¹⁶ and the notarial acts of Seville and Cadiz¹⁷. All further facts have to be gathered from individual representations of German trading companies.

In parallel with German research, that of the major exporting countries also dealt with the saffron trade. In Spain, however, I could not find a single study on

¹¹ Bardenhewer (as in note 1).

¹² Aloys Schulte, *Geschichte der großen Ravensburger Handelsgesellschaft 1380-1530*, (*Deutsche Handelsakten des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit*; 3), Stuttgart 1923.

¹³ Aloys Schulte, *Geschichte des mittelalterlichen Handels und Verkehrs zwischen Westdeutschland und Italien mit Ausschluss von Venedig*, Leipzig 1900, pp. 599-600.

¹⁴ Hector Ammann, *Deutsch-spanische Wirtschaftsbeziehungen bis zum Ende des 15. Jahrhunderts*, in: Hermann Kellenbenz (Ed.), *Fremde Kaufleute auf der Iberischen Halbinsel (Kölner Kolloquien zur internationalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte; 1)*, Cologne 1970, pp. 132-155. Hermann Kellenbenz, *Nürnberger Safranhändler in Spanien*, in: Hermann Kellenbenz (eds.), *Fremde Kaufleute auf der Iberischen Halbinsel (Kölner Kolloquien zur internationalen Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte; 1)*, Cologne 1970, pp. 197-225; von Stromer (as note 5); Nikolas Jaspert, *Ein Leben in der Fremde. Deutsche Handwerker und Kaufleute im Barcelona des 15. Jahrhunderts*, in: Franz J. Felten, Stephanie Irrgang, Kurt Wesoly (eds.), *Ein gefüllter Willkomm. Festschrift für Knut Schulz zum 65. Geburtstag*, Aachen 2002, pp. 435-462; Michael Rothmann, *Märkte und Messen als wirtschaftliche und kulturelle Begegnungsstätten*, in: Klaus Herbers (ed.), *"Das kommt mir spanisch vor". Eigenes und Fremdes in den deutsch-spanischen Beziehungen des späten Mittelalters (Geschichte und Kultur der iberischen Welt; 1)*, Münster 2004, pp. 607-630.

¹⁵ Karl Otto Müller, *Welthandelsbräuche (1480-1540)*, (*Deutsche Handelsakten des Mittelalters und der Neuzeit*; 5), Stuttgart 1934. Werner (see note 8).

¹⁶ Konrad Haebler, *Das Zollbuch der Deutschen in Barcelona (1425-1440) und der deutsche Handel mit Katalonien bis zum Ausgang des 16. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Württembergische Vierteljahrshefte für Landesgeschichte*, NF 10 (1901), pp. 111-160, 331-363. Konrad Haebler, *Das Zollbuch der Deutschen in Barcelona (1425-1440) und der deutsche Handel mit Katalonien bis zum Ausgang des 16. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Württembergische Vierteljahrshefte für Landesgeschichte*, NF 11 (1902), pp. 1-35; 352-417.

¹⁷ Hermann Kellenbenz, Rolf Walter (ed.), *Oberdeutsche Kaufleute in Sevilla und Cadiz. Eine Edition von Notariatsakten aus den dortigen Archiven*, Stuttgart 2001.

German buyers in Barcelona or Zaragoza;¹⁸ in Italy the research situation is somewhat better. Here, Mussoni already in 1906 wrote an overall representation of the market in the Abruzzo city of L'Aquila, the German eagle.¹⁹ In 1951 Petino wrote an overview of the importance of saffron in the medieval economy, which was based on Bardenhewer, Schulte, Müller and Mussoni, without opening up new source material.²⁰ However, neither Mussoni nor Petino were taken note of in Germany, so that their work and that of a number of younger historians on the economy in Abruzzo and southern Italy had no impact on German historiography.²¹

Of course, what is missed cannot be made up for in a short essay. For this reason, this article only attempts to show the development of the basic structures of the German saffron trade in the 15th and 16th centuries and, above all, finally to review the Italian literature with reference to the German saffron

¹⁸ We are more interested in the Spanish history of the German cities of Valencia and Seville. e.g. Hermann Josef Hüffer, *Las relaciones hispanogermanas durante mil doscientos años (un resumen)*, in: *Revista de Estudios Políticos* 56 (1951), p. 43-75; Juan Manuel Bello León, *Mercaderes extranjeros en Sevilla en tiempos de los Reyes Católicos*, in: *Historia, instituciones, documentos* 20 (1993), pp. 47-84.; Enrique Otte, Antonio Miguel Bernal, *Sevilla y sus mercaderes a fines de la Edad Media*, Sevilla 1996; José Ramón Hinojosa Montalvo, *Mercaderes alemanes en la Valencia del siglo XV. La "Gran Compañía" de Ravensburg*, in: *Anuario de estudios medievales* 17 (1987), pp. 455-468.; Enrique Cruselles Gómez, *Los mercaderes de Valencia en la edad media (1380 - 1450)*, (Colección Hispania; 13), Lleida 2001.; Máximo Diago Hernando, *Los mercaderes alemanes en los Reinos Hispanos durante los siglos bajomedievales. Activity of the great Companies in the Crown of Aragon*, in: Julio Valdeón (Hg.), *Spain and the "Sacro Imperio". Processes of changes, influences and reciprocal actions in the time of "Europeanization" (11th - 13th centuries)*. [Conference Spain and the Holy Empire: Exchanges, Influences and Reciprocal Actions in the Age of Europeanization (11th-13th centuries, during the 13th, 14th and 15th of October 1999 in Valladolid) (*Historia y sociedad*; 97), Valladolid 2002, pp. 299-328. In Germany, the Italians were fighting against the use of contraceptives in Saragossa. Vgl. María Teresa Saucó Alvarez, Susana Lozano Gracia, Germán Navarro Espinach, *Italiano en Zaragoza (siglos XV-XVI)*, in: *Historia, instituciones, documentos* 30 (2003), pp. 301-398.; María Teresa Saucó Alvarez, Susana Lozano Gracia, *Mercaderes florentinos en la Zaragoza del siglo XV*, in: *Aragón en la Edad Media* 17 (2003), pp. 213-262.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Mussoni, *Il commercio dello zafferano nell'Aquila nel '500/'700 e gli statuti che lo regolavano*, L'Aquila 1906.

²⁰ Petino (see note 1).

²¹ Alessandro Clementi, *La produzione ed il commercio dello saffano nel contesto della fioritura mercantile del basso Medioevo all'Aquila*, in: *Rivista di Storia dell'Agricoltura* 34 (1994), pp. 15-34.; Raffaele Colapietra, *Il commercio dello zafferano in area di L'Aquila between XIV and XVII century*, in: *Proposte e ricerche* 28 (1992), pp. 111-117.; Emanuela Di Stefano, *Produzione e commercio dello zafferano marchigiano nel basso Medioevo*, in: *Proposte e ricerche* 59 (2007), pp. 126-141.; P Gasparinetti, *La "Via degli Abruzzi" e l'attività commerciale di Aquila e Sulmona nei secoli XIII-XV*, in: *Bulletin of the Deputazione Abruzzese di Storia Patria* 54-56 (1964-1966), pp. 5-103; Orazio Olivieri, *Lo zafferano di San Gimignano*, Rome 2007; Pierucci (wie Anm. 2). Zu beachten ist auch Alfonso Leone (Hg.), *Il giornale del banco Strozzi di Napoli (1473) (Fonti e documenti per la storia del Mezzogiorno d'Italia; 7)*, Napoli 1981, who on p. 570 mentions a number of German merchants in the Kingdom of Naples, however without citing the source: Enrico Brunellini, Giorgio Besset (Georg Besserer) in Sulmona, Arrigo Dax, Bulfardo Camerer. Cf. Banco Strozzi (1981), p. 570, unfortunately without indication of sources. - Strangely enough, Mario del Treppo, in his work on Foreign Merchants in the Kingdom of Naples, is silent about a German presence: Mario Del Treppo, *Stranieri nel regno di Napoli. Le élites finanziarie e la strutturazione dello spazio economico e politico*, in: Gabriella Rossetti (Hg.), *Inside the city. Stranieri e realtà urbane nell'Europa dei secoli XII-XVI (Europa mediterranea. Quaderni; 2)*, Napoli 1989, pp. 179-233.

trade in Abruzzo and southern Italy. The following explanations will therefore focus more on L'Aquila than on Zaragoza.²²

Trade in the markets on the periphery of the German economic area

The Florentine Buonaccorso Pitti reports in his *Cronica* that in 1376 he accompanied a friend to Buda who was able to sell saffron bought there in Venice at a profit of 100%²³. Despite this remarkable profit margin, the saffron consumed in Germany was only imported to a small extent by merchants from the country of production and was offered for sale at trade fairs in Frankfurt. The *romanici* and the *germanici* met far more frequently at the large international fairs and markets on the borders of the empire. Saffron was already being offered at the champagne fairs in the 13th century by companies from Tuscany and their customers certainly included Germans.²⁴

Far greater sales of saffron were made in Venice from the 14th century onwards,²⁵ through this market important shares of the saffron harvests in Tuscany, Abruzzo, Puglia, Lombardy and Marche came to Germany, but also in smaller quantities in southern France and Spain. Venice held a clear supremacy for the import of this spice across the Alps. But also on the other big international trading places Bruges, Barcelona, Genoa and Casalmaggiore in Lombardy, later also Geneva and Lyon Germans appeared to buy saffron.

The spice was brought to these markets and fairs by middlemen who had purchased it in the production area and sold it in small sales units to the merchants who had arrived from Germany. Many of these shops can be found in

²² Unfortunately, it was not possible for this article to present the first results of research in the State Archives of L'Aquila, because the earthquake of 6 April 2009 made a stay in the Abruzzo city impossible. Should this take place in the hopefully not too distant future and could be supplemented by work in the archives of Zaragoza, perhaps it will finally be possible to present a history of the saffron trade that does justice to the historical importance of this business. A description of the archival holdings on the saffron trade in L'Aquila contains indications that research into German saffron traders could well be profitable. See Vincenzina Celli, Giovanna Lippi, *Repertorio di fonti archivistiche aquilane relative alla produzione e al commercio dello zafferano*, in: Paola Carucci (eds.), *Gli archivi per la storia dell'alimentazione. Atti del convegno. Potenza - Matera, 5-8 settembre 1988* [Pubblicazioni degli archivi di stato. Saggi; 34], Roma 1995, pp. 894-926; further references are provided by Maria Rita Berardi, *I monti d'oro. Identità urbana e conflitti territoriali nella storia dell'Aquila medievale*, (Mezzogiorno medievale e moderno; 5) . 1. ed. italiana, Napoli 2005, pp. 175-176, where she lists a number of notarial acts in which Germans appear. - The extent and quality of the information to be expected in the archives of Zaragoza is shown in an essay by Spanish historians who have searched for evidence relating to Italian merchants in the notarial files. See Saucó Alvarez, Lozano Gracia, Navarro Espinach (see note 18); Saucó Alvarez, Lozano Gracia (see note 18).

²³ Buonaccorso Pitti, *Cronica*, Bologna 1905, p. 38.

²⁴ Bardenhewer (as note 1), p. 14.

²⁵ The first evidence of the purchase of saffron by a German in Venice dates back to 1301, see Petino (as note 1), p. 186.

the *libri mastri* of Antonio della Casa and Ruggiero Guadagni in Geneva. In a few cases from 1460 to 1464, the whole journey from L'Aquila to Geneva can even be traced, since the Florentines had sold the saffron on commission from their compatriot Tomaso di Luigi Ridolfi, who in turn had bought it in L'Aquila and Pisa from Florentines living there. Since Ridolfi wanted to be informed in detail by della Casa about the success of the sale, he was also informed about the buyers. The biggest buyer can be identified as Hans Ortolf from Nuremberg, who is called *Ans Artolfo* in the Italian text; in *Fris Cres* Fritz Kress can also easily be identified, but who *Piero Rodet* and *Sam Potiet* were, has yet to be unravelled.²⁶

Direct trade in the production zone

Before the Germans were able to bring the spice to their homeland, three Florentine middlemen had already earned money from it. This process made the goods considerably more expensive and slowed down the business considerably. It must therefore have seemed profitable for small trading companies to look for ways to buy directly in the growing areas and to eliminate the middlemen. With the hope of making a large profit, Nuremberg, Basel, Augsburg and merchants from many other large cities travelled to southern France, Saragossa, L'Aquila or Apulia. Sometimes they only came for a few weeks when the new saffron came onto the market in November; some of them also settled for longer periods of time in the distance.

Two different forms of organisation are to be distinguished among these Germans seeking direct trade. Merchants with a small investment capital and few shareholders limited themselves to activities in a single city or region; they were thus active in either Zaragoza or L'Aquila. In Saragossa, this type of trading company includes the Mötteli and Ankenreute, which were²⁷ split off from the Ravensburg company in 1479, or the Weyer from Augsburg in 1555.²⁸ The first Germans who appeared in L'Aquila shortly around the middle of the 15th century probably also belonged to this group of merchants specialized in one place.²⁹

²⁶ Pierucci (see note 2), pp. 134-135; see ASFi, Carte Strozziene, Series V, No 1746, c. 134r, 135r, 142v and 146v.

²⁷ Bardenhewer (as note 1), p. 42.

²⁸ Mark Häberlein, Brüder, Freunde und Betrüger. Soziale Beziehungen, Normen und Konflikte in der Augsburger Kaufmannschaft um die Mitte des 16. Jahrhunderts, (Colloquia Augustana; 9), Berlin 1998, p. 90.

²⁹ Mussoni (as note 19), p. 16, gives the year 1455 as the cut-off date for the appearance of the first Germans. However, this is hardly likely to be correct if a 30-year-old society between Nuremberg and

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In addition to the shops in Bruges and Venice, the Grosse Ravensburger Gesellschaft also limited its saffron trade at the beginning of the 15th century to direct purchases in Spain. It is not clear from when on it relied on a permanent representation of its own. At least during the most important trading weeks, however, a German representative of the company seems to have been present in Catalonia.³⁰ In Saragossa, the Ravensburger can be found from 1430, where they maintained a *factorei* until 1526.³¹ But this concentration on an important market was forced by them, when in the year 1461, a civil war broke out in Catalonia, under which the saffron production suffered a high degree.³² In the years 1468, 1472, 1473 and 1477-1480, there were no saffron exports from Barcelona.³³ Under this pressure, the Ravensburgers decided to cover their demand for saffron for the German market directly in L'Aquila, where, from 1478, their representative Thomas im Steinhaus is documented as a buyer of large quantities of saffron³⁴. The branch in Venice thus lost its importance and was gradually abandoned completely.³⁵

This decision by the Ravensburgers reveals two important developments:

- 1) Venice had lost its dominant position in the trade of Italian saffron in favour of L'Aquila. The Serenissima tried in vain to limit the damage by granting a series of financial privileges and by removing trade barriers. As early as 1479 it allowed the merchants to transit saffron bought in the south in exchange for a customs duty, thus abandoning the centuries-old principle of Venetian trade policy, according to which any goods imported into Venice had to change hands here.³⁶
- 2) Its presence on all the main European saffron markets had created a new type of market player, which was soon followed by other companies. This move to Italy had opened up new strategic options for the Ravensburg-based company. From then on, they were no longer dependent on the Spanish market, but were

Aquilanians was dissolved in 1471. Cf. Schulte (as note 13), I, p. 599; Celli, Lippi (as note 22), pp. 896-897.

³⁰ Bardenhewer (as note 1), pp. 33-34.

³¹ Schulte (see note 12), I, p. 316; Schulte (see note 12), I, p. 334.

³² Schulte (as note 12), I, p. 329.

³³ Pierucci (see note 2), p. 128.

³⁴ Petino (as note 1), pp. 199-200.

³⁵ Schulte (as note 12), I, p. 238.

³⁶ Petino (as note 1), pp. 187-188.

able to take advantage of different crop yields and price developments in widely differing cultivation zones for speculative purposes. A prerequisite for the speculative success was the extremely efficient news system through which information about crop prospects, price fluctuations and the behaviour of the competition could be exchanged.³⁷ As quickly as possible, the company replanned and decided on the qualities and quantities to be purchased on the respective markets based on information about important developments.³⁸ If speculation on an expected price at one location failed to materialise, it was now possible to minimise the loss through an offsetting transaction at the other location or even to convert it into a profit.

Speculative transactions were also made on future harvests. In L'Aquila, for example, sales contracts were concluded with producers when the harvest had not yet been brought in. The farmer received a credit in the amount of the agreed purchase sum and then had to deliver the ordered goods on the due date under these conditions. In principle, therefore, nothing more than a commodity futures transaction. However, the Aquilan authorities cancelled such agreements when they learned of them and qualified them as "grandissimo peccato".³⁹

The Vöhlin-Welser were the first to set up a network of branches on all the important saffron markets in Europe, following the example of the Ravensburgers. In 1461 Lucas Welser was among the German customers who bought saffron from the della Casa saffron factory in L'Aquila in Geneva. In 1478, five bales of saffron were temporarily taken from him in Bologna, which had been bought safely in L'Aquila. Letters written between 1481 and 1482 show an experienced saffron merchant who bought the spice in Casalmaggiore, L'Aquila and Puglia⁴⁰. Certainly connected with the saffron markets in L'Aquila and Puglia was the bill of exchange that the Strozzi bank in Naples paid to the welservediener Heinrich Dachs in 1487.⁴¹ For many years the Welsers were the most important

³⁷ Bardenhewer (as note 1), p. 47: 'Lorenz Meder advises German merchants to be careful when buying saffron in Puglia to pay attention to the shops of Imhof and Welser there, who received daily news from all the saffron markets in Puglia. Also, if you want to take saffron from there to Venice, you should, if possible, use the ships that carry goods of the Welsers and Imhof, as they are reliable.

³⁸ Kellenbenz (as note 14), p. 200 impressively describes a disposition of the Welser from the year 1543.

³⁹ Petino (as note 1), pp. 199-200.

⁴⁰ Peter Geffcken, *Die Welser und ihr Handel 1246-1496*, in: Mark Häberlein, Johannes Burkhardt (Ed.), *Die Welser. Neue Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur des oberdeutschen Handelshauses (Colloquia Augustana; 16)*, Berlin 2002, pp. 27-167, here: pp. 135-136.

⁴¹ Florence. State Archives. Strozzi Papers. Series V. Nr. 46 (Giornale Filippo Strozzi & Gioachino Guasconi Napoli. 1486-1487) f. 23r. See Geffcken (wie Anm. 40), pp. 134-135.

saffron trading house in Italy and, according to the customs books of L'Aquila, always paid the largest duty from 1581 to 1588. In⁴² addition to the Italian branches, the position in Lyon and Spain was also expanded. From 1503 at the latest, they were active in the saffron trade in Zaragoza and probably had their own branch there from 1509. As early as 1515 they were also the most important market participants here.⁴³

The same path from Germany to Italy and then to Spain was followed by the Imhoff in the first decades of the 16th century. Apart from the Catfish, they soon became the most active German company in L'Aquila and Bari, where they appear in the books as Incuria. In addition to these locations, their business network also included branches in the important saffron trading places of Lyon and, from 1537, in Zaragoza.⁴⁴ Imhoff and Welser are said to have been called *Safraneros* in Spain at this time.⁴⁵

The Tuchers, on the other hand, first developed a strong trading position in Geneva and Lyon in the second half of the 15th century, and in 1495 a member of the Saffron family from Zaragoza exported for the first time. At⁴⁶ about the same time as this expansion into Spain, their first representatives appeared in Italy, where they opened a branch in Bari in 1510 and, by 1514 at the latest, had their first buyer in L'Aquila.⁴⁷

As the only major German trading houses of the 15th and 16th centuries, the Fuggers did not concern themselves much with saffron. Their name therefore appears neither in Saragossa nor in L'Aquila. In the Italian trading town they at least had saffron bought through the company of Sebastian Neithardt in Augsburg.⁴⁸

⁴² Pierucci (as note 2), p. 150, does not recognise that the Belzeri mentioned in the customs books refer to the Welser, but translates as Belzer.

⁴³ Konrad Haebler, *Die überseeischen Unternehmungen der Welser und ihre Gesellschafter*, Leipzig 1903, pp. 37-38; Bardenhewer (as note 1), pp. 45-47; Häberlein (as note 28), pp. 89-90; Wolfgang Reinhard, Mark Häberlein (eds.), *Augsburger Eliten des 16. Jahrhunderts. Prosopographie wirtschaftler und politischer Führungsgruppen 1500-1620*, Berlin 1996, p. 935.

⁴⁴ Bardenhewer (as note 1), p. 47.

⁴⁵ Werner (as note 8), p. 28.

⁴⁶ Johannes Müller, *Der Umfang und die Haupttrouten des Nürnberger Handelsgebietes im Mittelalter*, in: *Vierteljahrschrift für Social- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 6 (1908), pp. 1-38; Ludwig Grote, *Die Tucher. Bildnis einer Patrizierfamilie*, (Bibliothek des Germanischen Nationalmuseums Nürnberg; 15/16), Munich 1961, p. 95.

⁴⁷ Werner (as note 8), p. 29.

⁴⁸ Werner (as note 8), p. 29.

life abroad

The success of a merchant who wants to do business in a foreign country depends not only on his capital, but largely on the skill of his market action. He had to overcome the language problem, become familiar with local customs and build up a network of partners with whom he could work together. Michael Rothmann has published many important insights into the behaviour of Germans in Spain,⁴⁹ but very little is known about their presence in Aquila, which is why I will focus on this trading place in the following remarks.

There are hardly any traces of German community life in the foreign Italian town in the hills of Abruzzo in the town's archives. Pierucci also found very few Germans in the accounts of the Florentine Pasquale di Santuccio and Matteo di Simone Gondi, who worked as saffron buyers in l'Aquila between 1470 and 1482. Mistakenly, she concluded that the German presence had been greatly overestimated. She did not realize that the Germans naturally did not do business with Florentine middlemen, which is why they had come to Abruzzo. Although it is⁵⁰ not possible to draw up precise statistics, the customs books and various individual documents suggest that between four and ten German companies had permanent branches here. Already in 1462 the number of Germans living in Abruzzo for a longer period of time must have been considerable, because there is no other explanation for the fact that Cardinal Agnifili gave them a chapel dedicated to Saint Barbara in the Augustinian church⁵¹. Already before 1478 they had organized themselves in a colony with *consoli*.⁵²

The battle for market dominance

The expense of travel, living and transport costs, as well as the increased risks to life and limb, which direct purchasing entailed, only made sense if the profit achieved in this way was significantly higher than the less costly forms of trading. To achieve this, the saffron traders had to be careful to obtain the best possible conditions when purchasing the goods.

⁴⁹ Rothmann (see note 14).

⁵⁰ Pierucci (see note 2), p. 136.

⁵¹ Colapietra (see note 21), p. 112.

⁵² Petino (as note 1), pp. 188-189.

A first attempt to gain an advantage through the concentration of capital in direct purchase can be seen in the safari cartel of the Basler Halbisen-Gesellschaft, which after 1420 achieved in Barcelona that it was to be reserved for export to Frankfurt, Nuremberg and the other transshipment centres in Germany, while Flanders and England were to be supplied by a Barcelona company.⁵³ In this case it was an attempt to eliminate the German competition in order to be able to exercise a monopoly on the domestic markets. This approach was unlikely to have brought any significant advantage for purchasing in Spain. Even in the 16th century, purchasing consortia were formed several times, but their effects on the local and domestic markets have not yet been investigated. The "Spanish Saffron Company", a purchasing cartel for saffron of the Welser, Tucher, Imhoff and Zollikofen from St. Gallen⁵⁴ and the Welser-Imhoff cartel of 1545 should be mentioned.⁵⁵ The smaller merchants then usually had no choice but to take what the larger ones left them or to try to forestall them by skilful action.⁵⁶

In Italy too, Germans joined forces for joint purchasing. A representative of Imhoff from Apulia reports: "Item anno 1509, [when] I first saw the something, a good recholta of safran was, namely 28 in 30, all lined with pulsating saffron. I bought 15 pawns, but Welser and Grandder also tailed it and made ain pundtnus an eagle. Since 15 pales correspond to about 7 ½ seams, this group had bought about a quarter of the Apulian annual harvest this year."⁵⁷ This cartel of Imhoff, Welser and Grandder got competition when the Tucher from Nuremberg, the Manlich from Augsburg and the Ingolt from Strasbourg joined forces in 1514.⁵⁸ However, the Welser-Imhoff cartel was always superior to its competitors in the following decades.

Table: Saffron duty in l'Aquila 1548-1551 (lb.)⁵⁹

	1548	1549	1550	1551	Total
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⁵³ Bardenhewer (as note 1), pp. 43-44; Johannes Apelbaum, Basler Handelsgesellschaft im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Formen, (Beiträge zur schweizerischen Wirtschaftskunde; H. 5), Basel 1915, pp. 18-26; Schulte (as note 12), I, pp. 322-324.

⁵⁴ Kellenbenz (see note 17), p. 30, note 107.

⁵⁵ Werner (see note 8), pp. 27-28; Reinhard, Häberlein (see note 43), p. 935.

⁵⁶ Bardenhewer (as note 1), pp. 47-50.

⁵⁷ Petino (as note 1), p. 195.

⁵⁸ Werner (as note 8), pp. 29-30.

⁵⁹ Pierucci (as note 2), p. 148 Since Pierucci obviously confused the figures in the column with the totals when compiling her table, the correct table is reprinted here. The exporters, who were only registered with their first name and the addition "Todesco" (German), could not be identified so far. It also remains unclear who is meant by Ofliche and Ortero (Gartner?). The Belzari are certainly Welser, the Incuria Imhoff, the Malich Manlich and Rico Reich.

Francesco Todisco		1'172	5'012		6'184
Bastiano Todisco		1'695	1'481	1'550	4'726
Cristofano Todisco	666	1'201			1'867
Bernardo Todisco	882				882
Narciso Ofriche & Giovanni Ortero		716	3'126	4'444	8'286
Giacomo Belzari	715	5'054	1'849	5'003	12'621
Giorgio Belzari			6'770	3'138	9'908
Robiano Incuria		6'480	2'890	5'516	14'886
Andrea Incuria	9'372	2'240	2'939		18'813
Geronimo Incuria		675			675
Antonio Malich	519	406			925
Ludovico Malich					0
Giorgio Rico			1'463		1'463
	12'154	19'639	25'530	19'651	81'236

An impression of the dimensions of the volume of business can be gained from the customs registers, which Pierucci analysed for the years 1547 to 1551. During this period, 81,286 lb. of saffron were purchased by thirteen German companies. If one takes the three Imhoff companies together, they achieved a share of more than 42 %, the two Welser companies came to almost 28 %, and just over 10 % was accounted for by the partnership of a Narciso Ofriche & Giovanni Ortero. The remaining seven companies were divided into the remaining 20 %.⁶⁰

However, the saffroneros were not content to be guests at the markets to buy as cheaply as possible; they wanted to dominate the business. In L'Aquila they succeeded in gaining the right of *fare la voce* as early as the 15th century. This was the privilege of being able to set each year the obligatory price that the farmers were to receive. In doing so, they did not always seem to have taken sufficient account of the interests of the peasants and the town, as in 1524 the Camerlengo had a minimum price of 19 carlini.⁶¹ The Germans protested successfully against this restrictive measure to the royal captain.⁶²

The strong dominance of the Germans in the saffron markets was also attempted in monopolies. However, there was fierce resistance against these monopolies in the Empire and the Reichstag's farewell to Trier-Cologne in 1512 demanded a tough action by the Imperial Chamber Court against "such harmful

⁶⁰ Pierucci (see note 2), p. 148.

⁶¹ Petino (as note 1), pp. 199-200.

⁶² Celli, Lippi (see note 22), p. 895.

manipulation", so that the merchant "was not obliged to bring the goods into one hand and to put a defence against the same goods according to his will and liking". However, when in 1522/23 the Imperial Treasury Caspar Marth brought charges against Imhoff, Fugger, Grander, Herwart, Höchstetter, Welser, Rem and their associates and summoned them to court, Emperor Charles V personally ensured that no proceedings were brought.⁶³

The saffron traders therefore did not see themselves hindered in their efforts to achieve a monopoly, and in 1529 the Imhoffs in L'Aquila were actually able to achieve a temporary monopoly for the saffron trade in this city by a rather brazen move.⁶⁴ The Duke of Orange, Viceroy of Naples, had imposed a penalty tax of 120.00 scudi on the city, which could not be found in the city treasury. Franz Imhoff and another German called *Angelo Sauro*, who had been doing business in Rome for many years, offered to advance the required sum. In return, they demanded that the saffron harvest of that year be sold to them alone at a price they themselves had set. What is remarkable about this transaction is that *Angelo Sauro* is certainly Engelhard Schauer, the factor of the Fugger Bank in Rome. Imhoff and Fugger had thus come together in this case to exploit a favourable situation for a profit. The city had to accept this offer. It then discovered, however, that the two Germans had set such a low price for the purchase of the spice that only a small part of the amount owed was paid.⁶⁵ Despite this certainly very unpopular action by Imhoff, the Welser company, which was a friend of theirs, was entrusted by the city council two years later with the lease of the saffron, grain and wine duty.⁶⁶

In Spain, the plans of the Welsers even went a step further, as they were in close contact with the Germans Albert Kuhn (Alberto Cuon) and Heinrich Ehinger, who had settled here and who were granted the privilege by Charles V on 27 March 1535 to plant and trade saffron in America.⁶⁷ Had this enterprise been

⁶³ Götz von Pölnitz, Jakob Fugger. Quellen und Erläuterungen, Tübingen 1951, p. 505; Werner (see note 8), p. 28; Roman Piotrowski, Cartels and trusts. Their origin and historical development from the economic and legal aspects, London 1933; Fritz Blauch, Die Reichsmonopolgesetzgebung im Zeitalter Karls V. ihre ordnungspolitische Problematik, (Schriften zum Vergleich von Wirtschaftsordnungen; H. 8), Stuttgart 1967.

⁶⁴ Colapietra (see note 21), p. 112.

⁶⁵ Mussoni (see note 19), pp. 19-20; Gasparinetti (see note 21), p. 58.

⁶⁶ Celli, Lippi (see note 22), p. 904.

⁶⁷ Kellenbenz, Walter (see note 17), p. 36, note 122; on the two German merchants in Spain, see Hermann Kellenbenz, Las relaciones económicas y culturales entre España y Alemania meridional alrededor de 1500, in: Anuario de estudios medievales 10 (1988), pp. 545-554; Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften (eds.), Neue deutsche Biographie. Vol. 4, Berlin 1959, pp. 344-345; Hermann Kellenbenz, Alberto Cuon:

successful, they would have been able to control the chain of goods for this precious commodity from sowing to sale to the middlemen in Germany.

Difficulties

The presence of the large companies in L'Aquila and Zaragoza over many decades shows that this business must have been profitable, even if we cannot substantiate and quantify these profits with facts from the business documentation. But it was also an activity that posed special challenges.

Large sums of money had to be liquid in Spain and Italy to pay for the spice loads purchased.

The easiest way would have been to sell your own goods at the places where saffron was traded. The Germans were only able to export a very small amount of goods to Zaragoza; there are⁶⁸ no known deliveries of goods to L'Aquila. This is not surprising, as there was no market for these products here and would not have made sense, given the high transport costs.

The Germans therefore sold their well-known goods such as silver, copper, metal goods and textiles in the large trading centres such as Valencia, Venice and Bruges, if possible in such a way that they had the money from these transactions available at the end of October when the saffron harvest was completed. From these sales points the profit made had to be transferred to the saffron markets. Cash played an important role in this, as bills of exchange to Zaragoza, L'Aquila and the trading places in the south of Italy were often difficult to find. For the Ravensburgers, the transfer to Zaragoza was the rule in this form.⁶⁹ In the 16th century, the Fuggers helped the saffron merchants at this place, because they had large cash holdings that they wanted to export from Spain. So they offered loans to the Welsers, Imhoff and Bayer for their purchases, which had to be paid after the goods had been sold in Germany.⁷⁰

Auf den Spuren eines Nürnberger Kaufmanns in Valladolid, in: Friedrich Bock (ed.), *Norica. Beiträge zur Nürnberger Geschichte. Friedrich Bock zu seinem 75. Geburtstag die Stadt Nürnberg* (Veröffentlichungen der Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg; 4), Nuremberg 1961, pp. 21-27. Between 1420 and 1438 there was an attempt to cultivate saffron in Basel and Colmar. However, no direct connection can be found between this failed project and the business of the Halbisen-Gesellschaft. See Traugott Geering, *Handel und Industrie der Stadt Basel. Zunftwesen und Wirtschaftsgeschichte bis zum Ende des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. 2nd ed., Basel 1886, p. 237; Bardenhewer (as note 1), pp. 55-62.

⁶⁸ Bardenhewer (as note 1), p. 41.

⁶⁹ Schulte (as note 12), I, p. 313.

⁷⁰ Bardenhewer (as note 1), pp. 47-50.

The use of bills of exchange can only be proven in very few cases. Unique are the records of bill of exchange transactions, which the Imhoff branch in L'Aquila operated with compatriots working there around 1530.⁷¹ However, there is little evidence of cooperation between the large internationally active Italian banks and German saffron traders. In 1487 the Strozzi in Naples honoured a representative of the Wels family with a bill of exchange that may have been connected with saffron transactions.⁷² At the same time there were also business relations between the bank of Carlo Martelli & Antonio Corsi of Florence and the Welsers.⁷³ The next bill of exchange transaction is not documented until a hundred years later, when Johann Baptist Müller, the factor of Markus Rehlinger, in L'Aquila one of Cristofaro Cristell and Nicolò Perner (Christoph I Christel & Nikolaus Perner)⁷⁴

(see Elites p. 86 no. 146 and p. 615, no. 929)

) protested.⁷⁵ Presumably, however, there must have been many more such transactions, because the notarial records of L'Aquila often contain the names of the big banking houses: Spinelli, Cambini, Bardi, Strozzi, Medici and Spannocchi. However, the files are still waiting to be studied by German historians.⁷⁶

An even greater problem was the protection of the saffron sent to Germany with a seal of the city of L'Aquila. As early as 1498, a series of letters from the Council of Nuremberg to that of L'Aquila began, in which the Germans protested vehemently against the poor quality of the saffron delivered and because of impurities⁷⁷. In the middle of the 16th century, the complaints from the north continued to increase, but all the promises and promises of L'Aquila did not bring any improvement in the situation.⁷⁸

The earnings situation of the Germans was further worsened by steadily increasing customs duties, which had risen by 350% between 1531 and 1589,⁷⁹ and the resurgence of Italian middlemen. These offered the farmers more money

⁷¹ Werner (like note 8), p. 27-28. His source: (City Archive Nuremberg, Cons. 31, p. 179).

⁷² Geffcken (see note 40), p. 136.

⁷³ Geffcken (like note 40), pp. 134-135.

⁷⁴ I would like to thank Peter Geffcken for identifying these merchants.

⁷⁵ C. Marciani, *Il commercio dello zafferano a Lanciano nel 1500*, in: *Archivio Storico per le province napoletane* 81 (1963), pp. 139-161.

⁷⁶ Berardi (as note 22), pp. 175-176.

⁷⁷ Gasparinetti (see note 21), p. 58.

⁷⁸ Mussoni (see note 19).

⁷⁹ Celli, Lippi (see note 22), p. 895.

for the saffron than had been agreed upon in the *fare la voce*, and in order for them to make a profit, they contaminated the goods before offering them to the Germans. It thus became increasingly difficult to find flawless saffron and to make a worthwhile profit. Finally, on August 1, 1585, the Augsburg merchant Markus Rehlinger turned to the Council, also on behalf of his colleagues Johann Welser and Johann de la Palla.⁸⁰ Again they demanded an improvement of the control of goods and the fight against the middlemen. Should these demands not be implemented, he openly threatened the withdrawal of the Germans to Lanciano: "⁸¹Significatum mihi fuit a factoribus meis se nullam aliam ob causam Lancianum petere quam ut ibi melius et praestantius crocum mercarentur"⁸². When the Council did not react to this in the desired form, as it was powerless against the strong Italian middlemen, many Germans made good on their threat; from 1586 Rehlinger, Welser, Imhoff and Usmer bought saffron at the markets of Lanciano. This was⁸³ followed by a small war between Lanciano, l'Aquila and Nuremberg, which was fought by letter, in which all parties accused each other of fraud and saffron forgery.⁸⁴ When the Council of Aquila realized that they had lost the old profitable business forever, they were disappointed to find out in 1593: "Quis Argus, quis Lynceus posset in tantis tenebris non offendere? O scelestissimos homines, ab omni humanitate alienissimos!"⁸⁵ 1628 is the last time an Imhoff is in the city;⁸⁶ from 1630 on there are no Germans at all.⁸⁷

However, the decline in the saffron trade was not the only problem of l'Aquila, as the expensive spice had lost much of its former esteem. Sales declined throughout Europe. Simultaneously with the decline of the old saffron rulers, the economic power and importance of the Welser, Imhoff and Tucher who had become rich in it also declined.

⁸⁰ Mussoni (see note 19), p. 92.

⁸¹ Celli, Lippi (see note 22), p. 922.

⁸² Colapietra (see note 21), p. 117.

⁸³ Petino (as note 1), p. 237.

⁸⁴ Marciani (see note 74), p. 143; Clementi (see note 21), p. 31.

⁸⁵ Colapietra (see note 21), p. 117.

⁸⁶ Pierucci (see note 2), p. 143.

⁸⁷ Pierucci (see note 2), p. 152.