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Merchants' attitudes to work in the Barcelona of the later Middle Ages: organisation of working space, distribution of time and scope of investments

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Abstract

The debate concerning the attitude to work of medieval and renaissance merchants has been one of the most intense in twentieth-century historiography. Arising from the publication of the classic works of the sociologist Max Weber, the debate entered the field of historiography proper after the appearance of articles by Werner Sombart and Henri Pirenne. In the 1950s and 1960s, the works of Yves Renouard and Armando Sapori centred discussion on the development of a specifically mercantile culture in the Italy of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In this historiographic context, the article below is an attempt to approach, through original sources, the figure of the merchant in late medieval Barcelona. These sources are inventories, wills, and marriage contracts, through which is offered a three-dimensional analysis of the professional culture of such a merchant; the concept of professional space; the organisation of time; and the bearings of his commercial and patrimonial investments. The result of this analysis is an attempt to reinterpret the decadence of Barcelona at the end of the fifteenth century through the notion of work entertained by those involved in commerce, attempting by this means to merge the consideration of economic and cultural matters. It is also a proposal for a model of analysis of professional categories, which on so many occasions have been left to one side because of the preponderance of more traditional questions such as those concerning society, economics or politics. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Spain; Barcelona; Merchants; Work; Time

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Analysing the culture and the attitudes to work of the merchants in the later Middle Ages has become a classic exercise in European historiography. This has been the direct result of the debate which opened up regarding the reception of capitalism by European men of business of the later Middle Ages. The theses put forward by Max Weber and Werner Sombart¹ at the beginning of the century were further elaborated on by the pioneering works of Henri Pirenne² and Roberto S. Lopez³ and the monographs by Armando Sapori⁴ and Yves Renouard.⁵ These historians constitute the main steps in the debate which began by studying the recovery of the commercial pulse in medieval Europe and ended with those detailed analyses of the Italian merchants in the later Middle Ages, of their forms of life, and of their social and working constraints.

The influence of these contributions has been determined in the creation of the historiographic type of the medieval merchant as someone brave and enterprising, drawn almost spontaneously to the assimilation of capitalist tenets, the protagonist of a breathtaking cultural and financial ascension come true in the Renaissance. This model, with any necessary adjustments, could become the suitable framework for the evolution of the merchant community in the Northern Italian republics and in the Low Countries, but it could hardly portray with any accuracy different constraints in other spheres within the complex universe of other urban centres in the West during the later Middle Ages.

All in all, European historiography, as a result of the spreading and assimilation of these excellent models, has continued to approach the figure of the medieval merchant from different vantage points: from his mobility and his association with the seas;⁶ from his demeanour in the face of crisis;⁷ from his culture and his introduction into the world of letters;⁸ and, more recently, from that of the school of the history of mentalities and of its methodology.⁹

The analysis of the expansion and the financial and commercial decline of medieval Barcelona, where merchants doubtless played a remarkable role, has been forged

¹ It would be necessary to go back to some works of the 1920s and 1930s to grasp this historiographical debate in all its depth: R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the rise of capitalism* (London, 1926), H.M. Robertson, *Aspects of the rise of economic individualism* (Cambridge, 1933), and A. Fanfani, *Cattolicesimo e Protestantismo nella formazione storica del capitalismo* (Milan, 1934).

² H. Pirenne, 'La instruction des marchands au moyen age', *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 1 (1929), 13–28.

³ R.S. Lopez, 'Le marchand génois. Un profil collectif', *Annales, économies, sociétés, civilisations (ESC)*, 13 (1958), 501–515.

⁴ A. Sapori, *Le marchand italien au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1952) and 'La cultura del mercante medievale italiano', *Studi di storia economica, secoli XIII–XIV–XV* (Florence, 1955), 53–93.

⁵ Y. Renouard, *Les hommes d'affaires italiens du moyen age* (Paris, 1968).

⁶ E.M. Carus-Wilson, *Medieval merchant venturers* (London, 1954).

⁷ B.Z. Kedar, *Merchants in crisis. Genoese and Venetian men of affairs in the fourteenth-century depression* (New York, 1976).

⁸ C. Bec, *Les marchands écrivains, affaires et humanisme à Florence, 1375–1434* (Paris—The Hague, 1967).

⁹ J. Aurell, *Els mercaders catalans al Quatre-Cents* (Lleida, 1996) and J.I. Kermode, *Medieval merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1998).

in this historiographical context. One can indeed affirm that the historical interpretation of medieval Barcelona, ‘Head and Hearth of Catalonia’ (catalan, ‘*Cap i Casal de Catalunya*’), and, by extension, of the crown of Aragon on the one hand¹⁰ and, on the other, of the role played by the merchant class, has often been conditioned by two reductionisms, which have impaired a rigorous reading of its identity. On the one hand, an artificial transliteration of the historical conditions of Italian republics into Barcelona, the city of the Counts;¹¹ and then, the adoption of Catalan Romanticism as an ideological point of reference and as an epistemological base for the historical interpretation of medieval Barcelona.¹² The first misunderstanding is in fact based on the spreading and generalisation of the historiographical paradigm with which we began and it is also based on specialised works already published on the principal Italian mercantile centres of the later Middle Ages: specifically, works by Gino Luzzato on the Venetian patriciate,¹³ of Roberto S. Lopez on Genoese capitalism,¹⁴ of Alberto Tenenti on Medici Florence¹⁵ and a list of authors which would take us a long time to detail. The second misunderstanding is based on the influence of nationalist currents, which has made an impact on Catalan historiography ever since the close of the nineteenth century, in close association with Romanticism, both as regards method and knowledge.

These *a priori* attitudes, namely the *Italianisation* of medieval Barcelona and the *Catalanisation* of contemporary historiography, are, however, very easy to understand: it should be underlined here how difficult it was to approach the study of a city which had been enjoying such an extraordinary momentum during the centuries of medieval plenitude. Barcelona became the rival of the Italian republics for the dominion of the western Mediterranean through an aggressive policy of territorial and commercial expansion, only to end up in the chasm of complaisance and dullness so typical of the Barcelona of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁶ Furthermore, the passion felt by Catalan romantic and nationalistic historiography has paradoxically brought about a notable interest in the study of medieval Barcelona and in the analysis of Catalan expansion across the Mediterranean. This has doubtless contributed towards an enrichment of the historiographical debate.

Once these foundations have been clearly laid down, one should underline that one of the most interesting characteristics of the Barcelona of the later Middle Ages

¹⁰ F. Carreras i Candi, *Geografia general de Catalunya. La ciutat de Barcelona* (Barcelona, 1916), 330, refers to this expression.

¹¹ S.P. Bensch is of the same opinion, as can be seen in the substantial introduction to his monographic work, *Barcelona and its rulers, 1096–1291* (Cambridge, 1996), 6–12.

¹² I have gone into greater detail on this in J. Aurell, ‘La interpretació històrica de la Catalunya del segle XV: historiografia, acció política i compromís nacional’, *L’Avenç*, 228 (1998), 6–10.

¹³ G. Luzzato, ‘Les activités économiques du patriciat vénitien’, *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* (1937), 25–57.

¹⁴ R.S. Lopez, ‘Aux origines du capitalisme génois’, *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* (1937), 429–454.

¹⁵ A. Tenenti, *Florence à l’époque des Médicis* (Paris, 1968).

¹⁶ Barcelona society of the time is brilliantly portrayed in J. Amelang, *Honored citizens of Barcelona* (Princeton, 1986).

is the need to combine its role as the metropolis of a wide territorial and commercial empire with the reality of a hinterland offering a very different performance as regards financial activities. This is obviously one of the greatest paradoxes in the history of Barcelona during the latter part of the Middle Ages. It also constitutes a key factor for the understanding of the extraordinary complexity of social, economic, and political processes which can be ascertained in the evolution of the city. Moreover, despite this presumed complexity, the problem lies in the fact that often the angle from which medieval Barcelona is being studied has been reduced to the analysis of political and economic aspects. This assigns to a few factors the aspect of a whole, when at best they constitute *a part of the whole*. These factors should then be included with the rest. It therefore comes as no surprise that some of the aspects which have concerned historiography most up to this moment have been the role of the monarchy,¹⁷ the cyclical advents of financial crises and supply crises,¹⁸ the radicalisation of political tenets as a consequence of the political dualism theoretically brought about by an opposition of the classes,¹⁹ or the influence of the Treaty of Casp, the famous '*Compromís de Casp*' of 1412,²⁰ which stays in the collective imagination of Catalans as being one of terrible consequences, as it allowed for the accession to the throne of a foreign royal house.²¹

In this context, it is important to open up new leads which will allow for research which encompasses many other angles, a research more akin to recent methodological approaches. A study of the culture, in its most comprehensive sense, of the Barcelona merchant at the end of the Middle Ages can be extremely helpful in solving some of the central problems of the agitated evolution of fifteenth-century Barcelona, a city deeply involved in the transition to the Renaissance.²² Indeed, the end of the process which culminates in the exhausting Catalan civil war (1462–1472) is so violent, so complex, and so dramatic that it can hardly be interpreted by means of a univocal analysis, as has often been attempted.

With a view to shedding greater light on this intense period in Catalan history, I will attempt to analyse some specific aspects of the morality of labour and the culture of work of the Barcelona merchant: the physical sphere in which he carried out his

¹⁷ Always according to the standard tenets of romantic historiography. Among its principal exponents, one can find Víctor Balaguer or Pròsper de Bofarull or Antoni Rovira i Virgili some time later (see J. Fontana, 'Els historiadors romàntics', *L'Avenç*, 200 (1996), 10–11).

¹⁸ P. Vilar, 'Le declin catalan du bas Moyen Age: hypothèses sur sa chronologie', *Estudios de historia moderna*, 6 (1956), 1–68.

¹⁹ C. Batlle, *La crisis social y económica de Barcelona a mediados del siglo XV* (Barcelona, 1973).

²⁰ F. Soldevila, *El Compromís de Casp* (Barcelona, 1965).

²¹ One should also refer in this necessarily very schematic review to other important studies of undoubted value, whether from the point of view of research of sources (C. Carrère, *Barcelone, centre économique a l'époque des difficultés, 1380–1462*, Paris—The Hague, 1967), of interpretation (M. del Treppo, *I mercanti catalani e l'espansione de la Corona d'Aragona nel secolo XV*, Napoli, 1972) and of epistemology (J.E. Ruiz-Doménec, 'La crisis económica de la Corona de Aragón, ¿realidad o ficción historiográfica?', *Cuadernos de historia. Anexos de la Revista Hispania*, 8 (1977), 71–117).

²² We have attempted a development of this position from different disciplines in J. Aurell and A. Puigarnau, *La cultura del mercader en la Barcelona del siglo XV* (Barcelona, 1998).

work—his idea of *mercantile space*; the specific activities related to his work; the development of *mercantile time*; the direction of his investments; and his *attitude towards his work*. All this is attempted here by a thorough analysis of notarial documents, which, following the methodological approach applied to the history of mentalities,²³ has become a valuable means for the analysis of the culture of a specific social group from multiple angles. Indeed, through the application of the new methodological tenets, the analysis of some factors which traditionally had been considered to be *marginal* (intellectual education, reading, material culture, religious convictions, precedence of different residences) can now shed abundant light on the interpretation of some historical processes apparently dominated by political or financial motives. Notarial documents (inventories, last wills and testaments, marriage contracts) constitute, in this respect, a privileged witness to the understanding of culture and the ways of life of medieval society.²⁴

1. A new conception of the space reserved for working at home: the function of the merchant's study-room

From the thirteenth century, Barcelona's urban structure in the later Middle Ages had started to evolve towards a much more individualistic conception and was dominated by the commercial and enterprising spirit of its inhabitants. At the same time, the process of jurisdictional autonomy of the city was gaining ground, thanks largely to their commitment to the monarchy. In this urban context, some family houses gradually began to be transformed into domestic workshops or domestic business premises,²⁵ while at the same time there was a greater identification of the different social and labour categories with specific quarters within Barcelona's city walls.²⁶ The sea front, huddling around the church of Santa Maria del Mar (Our Lady of the Seas), a quarter popularly known as La Ribera (The Seashore), gradually consolidated as the centre of all commercial activity in the city, in opposition to the aristocratic and residential centre, located in the area formerly constituting the ancient Roman city, where the Cathedral was situated.

Much along the lines of this evolution in urban formation, a change was also

²³ The best exemplar of this new orientation is probably the collective effort co-ordinated by *Histoire de la vie privée*, ed. G. Duby and P. Ariés (Paris, 1985).

²⁴ A few reflections regarding methodology and epistemology in the documentary treatment given to *post mortem* inventories will be found in J. Aurell, 'Els inventaris *post mortem* i la cultura dels mercaders medievals', *Medievalia*, 11 (1994), 107–121.

²⁵ M.C. Garbert, 'Le genre de vie urbaine', in: B. Bennassar, *Histoire des espagnols, siècles VI–XVII* (Paris, 1985), 232–239.

²⁶ There are not many studies on medieval Barcelona which bring together geographical and sociological aspects. There are some important works by J. Garcia Espuche and M. Guàrdia, *Espai i societat a la Barcelona preindustrial* (Barcelona, 1986) and 'Consolidació d'una estructura urbana: 1300–1516', in: *Història de Barcelona*, ed. J. Sobrequés (1992), vol. 3, 46 ff. We have referred to this subject in J. Aurell, 'Assetto urbano e gerarchizzazione sociale nella Barcellona del Quattrocento', *Medioevo. Saggi e rassegne* (1998), 61–98.

experienced in the domestic sphere: merchants began to create spaces at home reserved exclusively for their work. Indeed, in the houses of the merchants of this period in Barcelona there are spaces dedicated exclusively to domestic functions—what we might call the *spaces for privacy*. Similarly there began to emerge the existence of other rooms, the main function of which was to provide shelter for activities related to work. We should bear in mind that the clear distinction drawn by us today between ‘working hours’ and ‘leisure hours’ was not so marked in the merchant cities of the later Middle Ages. Consequently, the flourishing of these new working spaces among merchants meant an innovation. Just as there existed no clear distinction then between leisure and work, it was felt that there was no need either to distinguish in any radical way the space of home from that of work.²⁷ Thus, the opposition between domestic space and work space is now further enriched by this other: time for leisure and time for work.

The spread of the existence of a *study* (catalan, *escriptori*) in the houses of Barcelona merchants of the later Middle Ages, as attested by abundant notarial documents, is a clear manifestation of this shift in the mentality regarding work. This space devoted to work can be singled out by its representativity, dynamism, and functional specificity. Indeed, the distribution and functionality of other spaces traditionally devoted to work and commerce, such as shops, porches, and stores, had remained unaltered for a long time. Studies, on the contrary, show a great functional dynamism, which can be perceived in time and in space. In time, studies at home become general from the fourteenth century onwards, given the increase in the merchant’s organisational tasks and the progressive sedentariness of his work. These rooms have nothing to do, from the formal and functional point of view, with those studies in the Barcelona of the previous centuries. It can be perceived in space too as merchants’ studies at home served very different functions from those of the classical country studies, which were spaces eminently private and had nothing to do with work activities.

His study gives a touch of distinction to the merchant: having a specific space devoted to the development of organisational aspects of the commercial activity is a ‘bourgeois’ need and shows a high degree of specialised work. In Barcelona during the later Middle Ages, the most honourable merchants, those with the greatest buying power and with the greatest volume of business transactions, sought to adopt the more aristocratic traditions while at the same time trying to preserve the commercial nature of their work. In addition to that, their houses preserve the imprint of the owner’s working activities. In this respect, the role of the study is essential, as it finds itself halfway between the conditions of commercial work and the aristocratic flair.

Post mortem inventories usually describe in detail those studies or *escriptoris*. Merchants spent long hours there looking after the managerial aspects of their com-

²⁷ The new conception of time by the merchant of the later Middle Ages was brilliantly and originally described by J. le Goff, ‘Au moyen âge: temps de l’Église et temps du marchand’, *Annales E.S.C.*, 1960, 417–433, and ‘Le temps du travail dans la crise du XIVe siècle: du temps médiéval au temps moderne’, *Le moyen âge* 69 (1963), 597–613. With respect to the conception of time by the Barcelona merchant of the end of the Middle Ages, see J. Aurell, *Els mercaders catalans*, 92–98.

mercial affairs. These studies bear an evident resemblance to the *studia* found in the merchants' houses in Tuscany during the later Middle Ages.²⁸ Studies have no fixed location in the house of the merchant. They can be found next to the shop or next to the dining-room or to the hall,²⁹ but they are always on the ground floor. In any case, they will always be found away from the visits of outsiders, thus becoming an essential space in the private life of the merchant, where at the same time valuable family and patrimonial documents are kept, together with numerous literary and leisure books, which the merchant would read during his spare time.

The origin of study-rooms as spaces given a managerial dimension among Barcelona merchants is already attested in the thirteenth century, although in most cases the word refers more to just one piece of furniture in the house (*escriptori* meaning bureau) than to a specific room (*escriptori* meaning study).³⁰ The difference is paramount. The situation changed radically in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This is undoubtedly clear evidence of the financial and commercial development of the city. Indeed, an increase in the number of premises available after the epidemic diseases during the fourteenth century and the building of residential palaces by some bourgeois families in the same period made it possible to extend some rooms into the second floor. Some merchants then decided to take up the small space left between the two floors in order to improve the conditions of their study at home. A clear example of this is the large study built by the merchant Pere Gircós,³¹ even though it is true that some merchants still preferred an intermediate solution, as reflected by the elegant pieces of furniture that Jaume Boteller³² and Ferrer Despuig³³ devoted to this function, or by the large folding table of Jaume Soler, on which he kept some articles related to the discharge of mercantile work.³⁴

Details afforded us by *post mortem* inventories allow us to establish an initial list of those articles most often used in the merchants' *bureaux*, such as: ink-pots for writing pens; mercantile documents; pieces of parchment or blank quires; account books of a lower quality paper than that of reading books; work books, books on

²⁸ C. de la Roncière, 'La vie privée des notables toscans au seuil de la Renaissance', *Histoire de la vie privée* (Paris, 1985), vol. 2, 163–310.

²⁹ Inventory of merchant Guillem de Trilla, where one reads about a 'study in the above mentioned house to be found near the entrance' (*scriptori del dit alberch, lo qual era prop la entrada*) (Arxiu Històric de la Ciutat de Barcelona (henceforward, AHCB), *Arxiu Notarial*, I, 4, inventory of 1415, fol. 6v).

³⁰ C. Carrère, who knew well the houses of Barcelona merchants of the fifteenth century, points out that 'l'aménagement d'un 'scriptori' confortable est doté de grandes possibilités de rangement (on sent que le marchand se tient fréquemment dans cette pièce) et le gout nouveau pour un éclairage abondant' (C. Carrère, 'La vie privée du marchand barcelonais dans la première moitié du XVe siècle', *Anuario de estudios medievales*, 3 (1966), 277).

³¹ '(. . .) a study located half way up the stairway of the above mentioned house (. . .)': un *scriptori* qui es quasi a mig scala del dit alberch. In Arxiu Capitular de Barcelona (henceforward, ACB), vol. 517, inventory of 1437, fol. 2r.

³² Arxiu Històric de Protocols de Barcelona (henceforward, AHPB), Bartomeu Costa, major, *Pliego de inventarios, 1441–1450*, inventory of 26 August 1449, fol. 187r.

³³ AHCB, *Arxiu Notarial*, I, 2, inventory of 1400, fol. 13r.

³⁴ AHPB, Simon Carner, *Secundus liber inventariorum et encantum, 1415–1429*, inventory of 1420, fols 166r–166v. We find a box with different documents, some account books and an ink-pot.

literature, law or leisure; pitchers with their corresponding drinking cups; needles, drawing pins or long nails to pin papers, etc. The abundant presence of ink-pots is illustrative of the type of work carried out by these merchants, a work closely linked with sedentary managerial tasks, and they tell of the high degree of culture attained by them at this stage.

A good example of these listings is that of the study of the Barcelona merchant, Francesc Maldà.³⁵ In it one will find his private library—the volumes of which are largely of a religious nature—two mirrors (one of them from the Low Countries), a little box containing precious objects of gold and silver, a pair of dividers, some cheap flasks, a barrel, four diamonds and a few tin rings, a bag containing some gold, fifteen collars, one of which was specially valuable, and some other objects related to his job as a merchant. In this list, the luxury items should be specially singled out. In addition, this merchant kept in his study a print of the Passion of Our Lord (*paper de la passió*) and a print with an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary (*paper qui és la image de la Verge Maria*). These two pictorial representations are very common among merchants in their homes: they are meant to aid them in keeping a spiritual presence amid the concerns of their work, yet another proof of how deeply spiritual affairs blended into their ordinary lives.

A detailed analysis allows us to investigate the work mentality of these merchants: to assign a part of the house to a study takes for granted the need to avail oneself of a specific space to develop the organisational dimension of the mercantile profession. Dedication to tasks of management of the business becomes more necessary all the time, as new conditions become generalised in the mercantile universe of Europe: a need for a demanding intellectual training; an increase in competitiveness; the development of public accountability; the administration of landed property, with which the merchant becomes more familiar all the time; and the gradual amassing of debt titles, which had to be overseen. The merchant sits at his bureau in order to write his commercial correspondence; he sends out written orders; he notifies his associates of any interesting news; he writes up relevant reports; he keeps his commercial accounts in great detail; he devises plans for the future; he writes to friends and colleagues. Written output begins to overtake oral output. Hence, the actual forwarding of commands and legal fixation becomes more faithful. In summary, the merchant sees the need to fall back on a ‘work study’ from which he can manage the business through written orders and detailed accounts.

Merchants’ studies are also characterised by the generous presence of libraries for work and leisure which come as a complement to those volumes to be found in the lounges or in the private rooms.³⁶ This is one of the most characteristic signs of

³⁵ AHPB, Bartomeu Costa, major, *Pliego de inventarios, 1455–1467*, inventory of 10 November 1457, fols 129r–129v.

³⁶ As can be ascertained from the house of Guillem Pujol, detailed in AHPB, Bartomeu Costa, major, *Pliego de inventarios, 1441–1450*, inventory of 2 April 1449, fols 148v–152r. Inventories normally record each of the books in the different rooms of the merchant’s home. This constitutes a first class testimony for the historian of mentalities: as an example of this, the *Book of hours* which merchants usually have on their bedside tables is highly illustrative of its use and of the depth of their spiritual convictions.

identity of merchants' inventories when compared with those from other social or working professions in the city. In the inventory of Guillem de Trilla one reads about many account books and invoices.³⁷ Apart from the books of accounts typical of his work, Guillem de Cabanelles held in his library quite a number of books on varied subjects (they range from books on spirituality to books on literature for leisure or history; among them, we could single out *La conquesta del Sant Gresal* or the *Conquestes del rey en Pere*).³⁸ A similar case is that of the library of the merchant Eloi de Navel, a wealthy aristocrat. In his inventory there appears a formidable library of forty volumes all perfectly listed.³⁹

How can one explain the growth of libraries dealing in subjects at times profane, at other times spiritual, in the study-rooms of the Barcelona merchants of this period?⁴⁰ This interest in reading means, on the one hand, that there was time for leisure, which was made possible thanks to a greater delegating of the mercantile work, as commercial techniques began to improve and the number of non-presential transactions began to increase; on the other hand, the increase in private libraries among merchants is a sign of a growing aristocratisation of the mercantile culture of the Barcelona merchants in the later Middle Ages. This, in turn, had an influence upon the historical evolution of Barcelona itself.

In this new context of the conception of domestic and working spaces in the houses of the merchants, delegating work and an increase in sedentarisation would represent two sides of the same coin to the more affluent merchants. The merchant of that time achieved a greater balance in his work mobility: sedentariness becomes more and more compatible with the need for commercial trips to distant lands, a tendency which will become more consolidated during the Renaissance.⁴¹ The man of business sets up a centre of mercantile operations located at his own home. This enables him to open himself out as he searches for better markets. The security afforded him by the stability of his home and family allows him to set out to conquer those new fields of action and set up a sufficiently consolidated commercial structure to allow him to delegate some aspects of his work. This secures the continuity of business during his absence. To this new conception of domestic and working space one should add, therefore, a new perception of the specific activities associated with his work.

³⁷ AHCB, *Arxiu Notarial*, I, 4, inventory of 1415, fols 6v–7r.

³⁸ AHCB, *Arxiu Notarial*, I, 5, inventory of 1423, fols 10r–13r.

³⁹ AHCB, *Arxiu Notarial*, I, 10, inventory of 1455, fols 27v–30r.

⁴⁰ The reading of medieval merchants constitutes an excellent vantage point from which to study their culture, their mentality, and their spirituality: from a methodological point of view, the monographs by J.N. Hillgarth, *Readers and books in Majorca, 1229–1550* (Paris, 1991), C. Bec, *Les livres des florentins, 1413–1608* (Florence, 1984), and H. Bresc, *Livre et société en Sicile, 1299–1499* (Palermo, 1971) are especially valuable.

⁴¹ See P. Jeannin, *Les marchands au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1957), and specially the chapter 'De l'aventure au mécénat', 127–148.

2. A new conception of the time devoted to work: novel priorities in the activities of the merchant

We have all in a way inherited an image in which the merchant plays a leading role in a new and spectacular phenomenon: the growth of the medieval city and of capitalist financial activity. In it, the merchant becomes an immediate precedent of the intrepid traveller, the daring businessman and the wealthy banker of the Renaissance.⁴² In this working environment, the merchant's basic activity at the end of medieval times would largely consist of travelling, making commercial transactions in the same place where goods were being exchanged and even being ready to solve on the spot any problems that may come his way, often having to adopt cavalier attitudes which lay very far from his true personality. This stereotype may have a certain basis when thinking of the first medieval centuries still dominated by feudal ideology, but have little to do with the real fourteenth- and fifteenth-century merchant. By this time, urban expansion had finally consolidated and technical and legal conditions had become very different.

There certainly exists a quite close association between the merchant and the sea, between the evolution of his work and the increase in his journeying around the Mediterranean and the Atlantic seas.⁴³ Commercial transactions of greater import, which had the added disadvantage of relying on very poor technical means, demanded an important dose of valour and hardiness on the part of the merchant. The name of *merchant venturer* or *merchant adventurer* given by some historians to the men of commerce at the end of the Middle Ages would not be altogether irrelevant to this specific reality.⁴⁴ These more or less isolated instances, however, cannot be generalised, given the great variety of financial and social conditions affecting the Barcelona merchant class of the later Middle Ages and the other European merchant cities of this period.⁴⁵

The organisational and managerial scope of the work of the merchant was becoming more and more habitual in the context of the main urban centres of the later Middle Ages. This involved taking in the new commercial methods that were becoming

⁴² We have referred to this stereotype of the medieval merchant in J. Aurell and J.P. Rubiés, 'Els mercaders catalans i la cultura, de l'edat mitjana al Renaixement', *Anuario de estudios medievales*, 23 (1993), 221–255, and J. Aurell, 'La imagen del mercader medieval', *Boletín de la Real Academia de Buenas Letras de Barcelona*, 46 (1997–1998), 23–44.

⁴³ A good example of this close relationship between the merchant and the sea is found in J. Bernard, *Navires et gens de mer a Bordeaux, vers 1440–1550* (Paris, 1968). The author refers to the fifteenth-century merchant as *mercator et nauta*, which is a contrast with the *capitalist merchants* of the following centuries. This type, which admits nuances, as do most generalisations of this kind, is useful if only to frame the subject we are dealing with in the text.

⁴⁴ 'The epithet *merchant venturer* or *merchant adventurer* came into use only towards the end of the fifteenth century' (E.M. Carus-Wilson, *Medieval merchant venturers*, XI–XII).

⁴⁵ A. Saponi, *La mercatura medievale* (Florence, 1972), 30 ff., in the section Grande e piccolo mercante.

ing customary;⁴⁶ the need for a greater intellectual preparation—which was becoming more and more indispensable all the time, given the considerable increase in competitiveness; the correct administration of real property, as is well attested in inventories; and the generalisation of public debt titles (the *censals* and the *violaris*), which were increasing all the time due to the tendency among some merchants to invest in public debt and non-productive goods.⁴⁷ In fact, this change towards sedentariness among Barcelona merchants is not an isolated process, as it can be ascertained in most ‘men of affairs’ of the later Middle Ages throughout the West.⁴⁸ This tendency is linked to a series of social and financial factors, as Yves Renouard has pointed out, such as some technical advancements (the new insurance systems, or the new methods of accountancy and payment, etc.); factors such as social evolution (as seen in urban development, in the exuberance of demographic growth until the moment when havoc began to be played by the Black Death, and in the expansion of the merchant class); factors such as political development (including the entry into management of political affairs by some merchants who up to that moment had always been denied access to politics). All these factors encouraged the tendency towards sedentariness by the merchant of the later Middle Ages.⁴⁹

It is important to underline here that this greater tendency of the merchant towards sedentary, managerial tasks did not stop improvements in storage techniques nor in techniques related to transport of goods, nor in the merchant’s great mobility: the Barcelona merchant kept on travelling with relative assiduity. It was indeed the better management of his work which allowed the merchant on the one hand the possibility of delegating some aspects of the management of his business without incurring great risks; on the other hand, it also allowed him to achieve greater profitability in his commercial business. Rational criteria would increase progressively in business while improvisation would, on the contrary, decrease. And it is thanks to this greater degree of management and rationalisation of his mercantile work that it was possible for him to embark on very ambitious journeys, while conscious that his business would keep functioning, whether at the hands of his wife or through delegation to

⁴⁶ A.-E. Sayous, ‘Les transformations des méthodes commerciales dans l’Italie médiévale’, *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* (1929), 161–176, which focuses principally on the commercial evolution of Venice, Genoa, and Florence. For Barcelona, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, see A.-E. Sayous, *Els mètodes comercials a la Barcelona medieval* (Barcelona, 1975), which is a reprint of some texts written in the 1930s by this author. Regarding the importance of commercial techniques for economic development, see the admirable pioneering article by R. de Roover, ‘Aux origines d’une technique intellectuelle: la formation et expansion de la comptabilité à partie double’, *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale* (1937), 171–193 and 270–298.

⁴⁷ Notarial documents of the time make a distinction between ‘censal’ (perpetual rent) and ‘violari’ (life rent).

⁴⁸ A good way of measuring the sedentariness of the later Middle Ages merchant is to compare the parameters of his mobility with those of merchants from previous times: S. Lebecq, *Marchands et navigateurs du haut moyen âge* (Lille, 1983). In this sense Y. Renouard is also quite conclusive: ‘Les hommes d’affaires de la période des Croisades sont, avant tout, des voyageurs’ (*Les hommes d’affaires*, 98).

⁴⁹ *Les hommes d’affaires*, 220 ff.

any close aide who may be felt to be competent and reliable enough. The presence of such aides is attested in notarial documents.⁵⁰

This more sedentary side of mercantile business is therefore attested by the presence of study-rooms and by the possibility of delegating some aspects of the merchant's work. This sedentary dimension, however, was also combined with the mercantile tradition of medieval Barcelona. Indeed, this city had for many years been famous for the great activity among members of its merchant class. This had ordinarily meant plenty of commercial journeys around the Mediterranean basin.⁵¹ From a very early age, Barcelona merchants were quite used to leaving their home to set out on journeys in order to become more proficient in their trade, or to search for fortune, or to complement their family business, or to develop a new one.

Barcelona's fifteenth-century merchants filled their homes with some goods which indeed betray their geographic mobility. It is largely thanks to inventories that we come across many material proofs of this. Merchant Miquel Soler, for example, kept in his study clothes from Germany and Ireland, and some French cups.⁵² In the inventory of merchant Macià Català, drawn up in 1445, there is a list of a number of goods related to wool which came from Aragon, Majorca, England, Florence, Sicily, and Nice.⁵³ Examples could be multiplied endlessly, as is widely attested by notarial documents of the time.

But the evidence borne out in testaments is still more illustrative. First, because of the expression often used by merchants to describe the destination of their journeys: 'overseas' (catalan, *ultramar*). This concept is often found in documents, and it refers to a more or less vague zone which included the whole of the Mediterranean, as is clear in the expression used by merchant Francesc Despuig.⁵⁴ Indeed, some merchants did encounter death on those journeys, either as a result of the inherent risks in maritime transport of the time, which had the limitations of little technical expertise⁵⁵ and the dangers posed by piracy⁵⁶ or simply while on business in other Mediterranean kingdoms. News of these demises would deal heavy blows to the feelings of merchants' relatives. An impressive example of how this sort of news was received can be found in the testament of merchant Pere Saelles, who wrote a moving farewell

⁵⁰ The inventory of merchant Pere Terrassa refers to the labourers employed by him (AHPB, Bartomeu Costa, major, *Pliego de inventarios, 1455–1467*, inventory of 1458, fol. 210v).

⁵¹ Some thoughts on journeys by thirteenth-century Barcelona merchants in C. Batlle, 'La vida y las actividades de los mercaderes de Barcelona dedicados al comercio marítimo (siglo XIII)', *La genti del mare Mediterraneo* (Nápoles, 1981), vol. 1, 333–338.

⁵² AHCB, *Arxiu Notarial*, I, 4, inventory of 1419, fols 1r–2v.

⁵³ AHCB, *Arxiu Notarial*, I, 8, inventory of 1445, fol. 3v.

⁵⁴ AHPB, Arnau Lledó, *Manual de testaments, 1398–1404*, last will dated 8 June 1404, fol. 36v.

⁵⁵ The more important technical advancements settled in Europe precisely in the fifteenth century, but they did not become generalised in Catalonia until after the discovery of America (see A. Garcia Sanz, *Història de la marina catalana* (Barcelona, 1977), 17–118 and 289–314)

⁵⁶ A. Unali, *Mariners, pirates i corsaris catalans a l'època medieval* (Barcelona, 1986).

passage addressed to his son-in-law, Antoni Luna, whom he considered to be his own son and who had died as a result of a shipwreck.⁵⁷

But there are merchants who had their goods inventoried in distant lands—a clear demonstration of the extent of their adaptation there. This is the case, for instance, of merchants Arnau Salavert and Andreu Figuerosa.⁵⁸ These examples lead one to think that Barcelona merchants were not only very used to travelling a great deal, but that this often led them to have a second home in those places where they had established greater commercial links. In this respect, it is easy to understand why a number of testaments comment on the uncertainty of dying in Barcelona. All this goes to show that merchants would spend long periods of time away from Barcelona. An example of this can be found well into the fourteenth century: merchant Mateu Desvall laid down in his testament his desire to be buried in the monastery of the Black Friars of Barcelona, in the event of dying in Barcelona.⁵⁹ Thus, merchant donations are often heavily conditioned by the merchant's mobility, as is clear, for example, from the testament of Barcelona merchant, Francesc Asbert,⁶⁰ or of Jofre Sirvent, well into the fifteenth century.⁶¹

On the other hand, the dangers of sea travel are clearly shown in documents of the time. Merchant Jofre Sirvent embarked on frequent journeys all through his life, in one of which he headed an expedition to Alexandria in Rhodes which was shipwrecked; there he lost his brother Lluís, as he himself recalls while opening his brother's testament two years after his death, at which moment he found himself going through the pain of that unfortunate event anew.⁶² The dramatic account shows us the extent to which such uncertainties loomed large over the daily lives of the families of the merchants, struck every now and then by events of this nature. In the case just referred to, the surviving brother had preserved ever since that moment very fresh memories of that shipwreck. It is probably largely due to events such as this that we begin to observe a progressive sedentariness in the merchant of the time. They will often prefer the safety of a fixed income which will spare them the risk inherent in commerce and the possibility of financial bankruptcy.

Respect and fear for maritime journeys is clearly reflected in some testaments in which it is explicitly affirmed that the motivation for the drawing up of the document

⁵⁷ AHPB, Francesc Barau, *Primus liber ultimarum voluntatum, 1416–1433*, last will of 15 April 1423, fol. 44r.

⁵⁸ AHPB, Anonym, *Inventario por orden alfabético de los bienes relictos del difunto Arnaldo Salavert, de Palermo, 1436*, and AHPB, Bernat Pi, *Primus liber testamentorum, 1408–1430*, last will of 19 October 1417, fol. 144v.

⁵⁹ '(. .) if it were laid down for me to die in the city of Barcelona (. .)': si mi covindrà morir en la ciutat de Barchinona (AHC, *Arxiu Notarial*, III, 1, last will of 5 March 1378, fol. 1r).

⁶⁰ '(. .) Eligo autem corpori meo sepulturam si obiero in Barchinona in cimiterio Sedis Barchinone (. .)' (AHPB, Pere Ullastrell, *Manual de testaments, 1382–1387*, last will of 23 August 1384, fol. 39r).

⁶¹ '(. .) Sepulturam vero corporis mei, casu quo decedam in civitate Barchinone, fieri volo et ordino in cimiterio fratrum minorum Barchinone (. .)' (AHPB, Antoni Brocard, *Liber testamentorum secundus, 1415–1445*, last will of 1 May 1426, fol. 69v).

⁶² AHPB, Antoni Brocard, *Liber testamentorum secundus, 1415–1445*, last will of 1 August 1443, fol. 63v.

is an imminent departure on a commercial expedition around the Mediterranean. The opening sentence of the main part of the testament, ‘naught as sure as death; naught as unsure as the time of death’ (catalan, *res més cert que la mort i res més incert que l’hora de la mort*) comes as a clear expression of the feelings before setting out on an expedition of that type. Thus, merchant Miquel Batlle explicitly affirms that despite excellent health both of soul and body (*sanus per Dei gratiam mente et corpore*), he desires to write his testament because he is leaving soon on a journey to Eastern lands and he is afraid of the dangers of navigation.⁶³ This comment is again a good illustration of the risks inherent in mercantile work. What is more, according to what we read in the testament of the merchant above, he died only four years after having drawn it up, while still a young person (Agnès, his maternal grandmother, was in fact still alive). This could indeed be a sign that his fears in the end accomplished themselves.

Thus we have seen the type of merchant who relied on the frequency of his commercial journeys around the Mediterranean for his gains.⁶⁴ Then, on the other hand, we have also discovered a progressive increase in the managerial tasks, tasks involving a greater sedentariness, as is shown by the proliferation of bureaux and study-rooms in the houses of merchants of that time. Following on from this, we should next analyse which orientation was given to the merchant’s business, so as to arrive at a more definitive conclusion about the mentality regarding work among Barcelona merchants of the time.

3. Merchant investment: an aristocratising outlook

Contemporaries of medieval Barcelona merchants developed a growing appreciation of mercantile work. It was an evolution that went from the low moral regard for commercial activities seen during the first medieval centuries to an evident understanding of the function and the place of merchants in medieval society. The Catalan merchant of the later Middle Ages was well known for his work and, equally, was highly regarded for the ways with which he developed it. In this respect, the words of that remarkable extant work, *Merchant’s Manual* (catalan, *Manual de mercaderia*), written in Barcelona towards the end of the fourteenth century, are highly illustrative of this.⁶⁵ What is being asked of the Catalan merchant in this

⁶³ (. . .) quia de proxima viagium facere debeo, Deo volente, cum navi venerabilis Francisci Spital, ville Sancti Felicis Guixellenti (Sant Feliu de Guíxols) versus partes de Lavant, timens imminens periculum navis (. . .) (AHPB, Esteve Mir, *Manual de testaments, 1442–1457*, last will of 16 May 1450, fol. 34r).

⁶⁴ This idea is further backed by the overall study by M. del Treppo: *Els mercaders catalans*. According to this, there never existed a commercial crisis in structural terms, until the Civil War (1462–1472), a time of a true collapse and of the beginning of a long period of low activity in merchant journeys around the Mediterranean.

⁶⁵ This manual, bearing similar characteristics to Italian merchant manuals of the later Middle Ages, was first published by M. Gual Camarena, *El primer manual hispánico de mercadería, siglo XIV* (Barcelona, 1981). For comments and quotations, we follow this edition. Even though the document is dated 1455, M. Gual comes to the conclusion that it had been written in the second half of the fourteenth century, probably in 1385.

Manual? How well does it reflect the *concept* which late medieval society had of the merchant?

The *Manual* attempts a description of an ideal merchant, and this is precisely why this treatise is such an invaluable source for detecting the *image* and the *model* of the medieval merchant or, what it was indeed that society expected of the merchant. The merchant is being asked to dedicate himself to that which is proper to him: 'He is a merchant who comes and goes over different parts of the world, selling different goods, some of which may be of his own production. The name merchant comes from market, or, in other words, from those who go around fairs and marketplaces. He may buy or sell or simply market that which he has bought. By market we understand selling and buying and generating profits for his goods while being sold by others, or making profits by buying goods from others.'⁶⁶ There are three basic concepts here which are central to the idea of a merchant: exchange, travel, and profit. They all lie at the base of the dedication of any tradesman to his work. According to these ideas, the merchant should not be happy just with other complementary activities such as financial transactions and investments on fixed income, which could divert him from the specific purpose of his job.

This was also the time of the Franciscan Friar, Francesc Eiximenis, and his enthusiastic praise of merchants. In the middle of the fourteenth century he showed the growing respect and understanding of Catalan society for the work carried out by tradesmen. The words of the famous medieval cleric are unequivocal and show to what extent the work of merchants was beginning to be highly regarded. Eiximenis is lost for words when attempting a description of the contribution of merchants to the common weal. Merchants, according to the Grey Friar, 'constitute the soul of the republic; they are the life of the land in which they live; they constitute the treasure of the republic; without merchants, communities fall, princes become tyrants, the youth go astray, the poor can only cry; God our Lord has special mercy on them in their lifetime and after their death by their enormous contribution to the republic due to the great labours they undertake both on land and at sea, and to the great losses they often incur; the whole of the republic ought to offer constant and special prayers on behalf of merchants'.⁶⁷ And further down, the friar states openly that living off one's patrimony is not a very good thing to do, as, among other things,

⁶⁶ (. . .) Mercader voll dir aytant com hom anant he viendant per diverses parts del món, en diverses e sues mercaderies; aquest nom se pren de mercat, ço és a dir aquells qui van per les fires e per los mercats, e compra he ven e fa mercat de ço que compra; mercat vol dir aytant com vendra, e comprar e donar gua(ny) a les sues cosses ha altri venent, e pendra guany a les cosses d'atra compra (. . .) (M. Gual, *El primer manual*, 58).

⁶⁷ (. . .) són la vida de la cosa pública; són la vida de la terra on són; són tresor de la cosa pública; sens mercaders les comunitats caen, los prínceps tornen tirans, los jóvens se perden, los pobres, se'n ploren; Nostre Senyor Déu los fa misericòrdia especial, en mort, e en vida, per lo gran profit que fan a la cosa pública, e per los grans treballs que sofiren en mar e en terra, e per les gran pèrdues que sofiren sovint; tota cosa pública deuria fer oració tostemps especial per los mercaders (. . .) (F. Eiximenis, *Regiment de la cosa pública*, edited by D. de Molins de Rei (Barcelona, 1927), 167).

it makes people uncharitable: ‘knights and citizens living off their patrimony care not for good alms’.⁶⁸

Thus, the Catalan merchant is being asked to be faithful to his job and to invest all his energies and resources into this activity. To what extent did he fulfil the expectations that society had placed on his work, on his task? A careful review of notarial documents (especially inventories) confirms that investments made by Barcelona merchants in the later Middle Ages were branching out in various ways. Investments of a strictly mercantile and commercial nature diminished. Instead, public rent was taken up, and rural exploitation and land speculation too. This economic conduct shows that their concept of mercantile practice and, consequently, their moral approach to work kept much closer to tradition: it was seen necessary to combine their commercial investments with the security of short- and long-term rents which doubtless did nothing but increase their conformity and block their enterprising spirit.

In a context where institutions were incurring progressive debts, merchants found an excellent field to complement their commercial investments and diversify their risks through the purchase of public debt which became for them a safe business and often provided rich pickings.⁶⁹ During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the monarchy developed an increasing desire for territory and for courtly pomp, with the consequent increase in expenditure and tax pressure for the payers.⁷⁰ Medieval Catalan expansion had depended upon a precarious but effective balance among the principal political and financial formations—what others have classed as compromise (catalan, *pactisme*).⁷¹ Now, however, the political and military conquests instigated by the monarchs, and the defence, at whatever price, of Catalan possessions in the western Mediterranean, had an ever-increasing cost, regardless of the profits for commerce, not only in economic resources but also in vital energies. Moreover, monarchs in the later Middle Ages threw themselves into a policy of building monuments. Among monuments built, we should single out those projects undertaken in Barcelona by Pere *el Cerimoniós* (‘the lover of ceremony’): the royal docks (catalan, *drasanes reials*), the Tinell hall, and the new city walls. Administrative work became complex and resources to sustain the structures created began to be urgently needed. The monarchy inevitably had to have recourse to the cities, with which it had signed an implicit pact ever since allowing their progressive juridical autonomy, a process which had begun to occur in the thirteenth century, during the reign of Jaume I.⁷²

⁶⁸ Cavallers ne ciutadans que viuen de rendes no curen de gran almoines (Eiximenis, 168).

⁶⁹ The chronic debt incurred by Barcelona in the later Middle Ages was first studied thoroughly by Y. Roustit, ‘La consolidation de la dette publique à Barcelona au milieu du XIVe siècle’, *Estudios de historia moderna*, 4 (1954), 13–156.

⁷⁰ M. Sánchez, *El naixement de la fiscalitat d’Estat a Catalunya: segles XII–XIV* (Vic, 1995).

⁷¹ It is not possible to analyse with any precision here themes related to this compromise in the Catalonia of the Middle Ages (J. Vicens Vives referred to it brilliantly in *Notícia de Catalunya*, Barcelona, 1960), or the sense of Catalan expansion (J.N. Hillgarth, ‘The problem of a Catalan Mediterranean empire, 1229–1327’, *English Historical Review*, supplement 8 (1975), 1–54).

⁷² Some thoughts on the compromising spirit of Barcelona merchants, in J. Aurell and A. Puigarnau, *La cultura del mercader*, 88–100.

As a consequence of this policy, during the later Middle Ages Barcelona had to face up to a remarkable and disproportionate tax pressure, so much so that the threat of public debt and subsequent municipal bankruptcy constantly hovered over the city. The city council had to seek urgent solutions for new financial needs: one of the resources most often used consisted of issuing public debt through titles which could be bought out by citizens. Merchants opted for this type of investment on a massive scale. We have detailed elsewhere the list of merchants who chose an economic policy based on open stockholding through the acquisition of public debt titles. Among them, we could single out Jaume Botaller, Berenguer Massanet—whose fortune as a rentier was extraordinary—Antoni Cases, Jaume Setantí—who earned in excess of 500 pounds a year—Feliu d'Olm, Gerald Gener, Pere Saclosa, Guillem Ferrer, Pere Rovira, Miquel d'Alòs, Joan de Muntrós, and Pere Salelles.⁷³

Another procedure used by merchants to become richer in a safer way, despite smaller profit margins, was the purchase of urban property for renting or selling purposes, together with the acquisition of country estates.⁷⁴ Even though they represented different ways of becoming richer involving minimal risk, this type of investment had an impact on the work mentality of the merchant: it forced him to lead a type of life with an attitude more akin to that of a rentier than to that of a man of business. After all, the idea of these measures was the diversification of risks and the attainment of a stable income which would allow merchants to devote themselves to activities other than commerce. In this respect, it is significant that through these investments the Barcelona merchant of the fifteenth century was able to take part in a decisive way in the lively political events which led the city and the principality to the civil war of 1462–1472, and this not only because of the availability of time and resources, but also because of an increase in social and political influence as opposed to the increase of his patrimony.

One can argue that the Barcelona merchant, traditionally, had always kept close links with the urban and rural aristocracy, which would account for this tendency towards the purchasing of public debt and the acquisition of country estates.⁷⁵ This traditional connection with the rural world is the reason why, even through the most inspired moments of the Catalan expansion over the Mediterranean, the merchant never ceased to have recourse to alternative investments to the purchase of land. Nevertheless, what was becoming true for merchant investments in fifteenth-century Barcelona had no relationship with that of previous centuries, for the simple reason that it was not now a matter of *complementing* his commercial investments with

⁷³ For a detailed study of investments by Barcelona merchants and location of documents dwelling on this subject, see J. Aurell, *Els mercaders catalans*, 333–339.

⁷⁴ Commerce with, and exchange of, urban property in the Barcelona of the later Middle Ages is a subject which has not been studied much, despite its undoubted interest. Some documentary notations can be found in J. Günsberg Moll 'Primeros arrendamientos de fincas en la Barcelona medieval', *Miscel·lània de Textos Medievals*, 7 (1994), 1–33.

⁷⁵ But, unlike many Mediterranean towns, Barcelona never fell under the sway of an urban aristocracy, as has been brilliantly analysed by S.P. Bensch in his monograph on the Barcelona of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, *Barcelona and its rulers*.

speculative or financial ones (as had been the case in times past), but rather of letting the latter become the principal source of income and business.

Marc Seyol's inventory⁷⁶ allows us to note a highly illustrative circumstance regarding the investment policy being followed by these merchants: on 24 October, 1424, this merchant bought from notary Arnau Lledó a vineyard plantation which, in a very short space of time, was turned from fallow land (catalan, *terra campà*) into cultivated land (catalan, *vinya plantada*). The time lapse between the date of purchase and the listing of the inventory is no greater than thirteen years. One may deduce from this the enormous interest of merchants in getting these lands to yield. Indeed, this is not an isolated operation, but rather a specific interest in a purchasing policy which followed a uniform pattern: 1390 (purchase of a vineyard), 1405 (purchase of a house), 1412 (purchase of a vineyard), 1424 (purchase of a plot of land where vines will be planted), 1425 (purchase of two houses and a vineyard). Feliu d'Olm followed a similar land purchasing policy: his first purchase dates from 1399, shortly followed by others in 1409, 1412, 1413, 1421, and 1425.⁷⁷ Merchant Bernat de Muntmany constitutes one of the most characteristic examples of the diversification of investments through the purchase of cultivated land.⁷⁸

This connection with the rural world contributed in a very decisive way towards strengthening the relations between some merchants and the landed aristocratic families. The natural prestige bestowed by the possession of land⁷⁹ and the possibility of leading the life of a rentier would doubtless be one of the motivations which attracted merchants most. In this respect, it is not surprising that some historians have come to the conclusion that Catalan society at the end of the Middle Ages was the result of an evolution from a society of business dealers into a society of rentiers.⁸⁰ Even though one would have to test this statement somewhat through a comparative study, it is nevertheless true that the Barcelona merchant had all through the Middle Ages become progressively *bourgeois*, by preferring non-commercial investments, financial operations, and the increase of his patrimony. After the centuries of medieval growth, the appearance on the scene of those difficulties so typical of the fifteenth century, encouraged merchants to choose a type of life which was more suited to aristocratic traditions. The whole process had an influence on the progressive metamorphosis of the merchant's attitudes to work and, consequently, of his vision of life and the way he related to society.

The Barcelona merchant of the end of the Middle Ages would appear to be more concerned with the acquisition of real estate and investing in simple interest than with the quest for the wide and copious profits that used to go with the job of the

⁷⁶ AHPB, Simon Carner, *Tercius liber inventariorum, 1430–1458*, inventory of 2 March 1437, fols 384v–385r.

⁷⁷ AHPB, Pere de Folgueres, menor, *Pliego de inventarios sueltos, 1404–1430*, inventory of 16 August 1429, fols 7r–10r.

⁷⁸ ACB, vol. 342, inventory of 5 January 1406, fol. 22r.

⁷⁹ E. Barber, *La estratificación social* (México, 1964), 371 ff.

⁸⁰ P. Vilar, 'Le declin catalan du bas moyen âge: hypothèses sur sa chronologie', *Estudios de historia moderna*, 6 (1956), 1–68.

merchant. This profit margin, however, meant a risk that the merchant did not or could not in the end accept. It was what economic theoreticians would define as the loss of the enterprising spirit. Indeed, it was the lack of this enterprising spirit which largely accounted for the delay in the cultural and economic evolution of Barcelona during this period, when compared with other European mercantile cities, some of which achieved some remarkable results which manifested themselves in the expansion of Renaissance values and in the adoption of capitalism as an economic practice.

In this respect, the contrast between the moral attitudes to work of the Barcelona merchant of the time compared with those of Italian merchants is quite marked. In Italy, the values of the new commercial capitalism were deeply rooted, but not so in Catalonia.⁸¹ From the cultural point of view, this passive conception of the mercantile profession is deeply felt too. As Yves Renouard observed, while the Italian merchant was capable of generating the resources of a cultural movement of such great impact as the Renaissance (a movement which created simultaneously an intellectual and a moral climate favouring the more enterprising businessmen), the Catalan merchant did not feel equal to the task. Indeed, he isolated himself in his provincial culture, which never managed to overcome the achievements of the Gothic age and the traditional view of the mercantile profession;⁸² alternatively, as pointed out by Jacques Heers, Barcelona was unable to generate a ‘capitalist’ form of viewing the economy, through the incorporation and generalisation of the most modern commercial techniques, when this had indeed been already achieved by Genoa, the Ligurian capital city.⁸³

Merchants at this time searched for the security of non-commercial investments, which tended to put them on the defensive, as if attempting to preserve some acquired rights. This attitude towards work began to have immediate consequences on their relations and on the way they focused on the social and political problems which were then in evolution. This attitude, which had been forged during the controversial political events of the Barcelona of the fifteenth century, was consolidated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸⁴ This converted Barcelona into a tranquil corner of the Mediterranean, distant from the power and the liveliness shown in the preceding centuries. Thus it should hardly be surprising that merchants adopted a position of social rigidity, which led them to defend, even at times resorting to violence, their social rights and privileges. The bourgeois merchant of the fifteenth century reinforced the criteria of social hierarchy and took his social rigidity to the

⁸¹ I have analysed possible reasons for this delay of pre-modern Barcelona in J. Aurell, ‘L’esperit capitalista a la Catalunya premoderna’, *Pedralbes*, 16 (1996), 165–185. These reasons bear hardly any resemblance to the model applied by Max Weber when studying the implantation of capitalism in the lands which had embraced Protestantism.

⁸² Y. Renouard, *Affaires et culture à Florence in Il Quattrocento* (Florence, 1954).

⁸³ J. Heers, *Gênes au XVe siècle. Activité économique et problèmes sociaux* (Paris, 1961), 191–192. See also R.S. López, ‘Aux origines du capitalisme génois’, *Annales d’histoire économique et sociale*, 9 (1937), 429–454.

⁸⁴ J.L. Palos, *Catalunya a l’imperi dels Àustria. La pràctica de govern, segles XVI i XVII* (Lleida, 1994).

extremes of creating urban riots.⁸⁵ From social rigidity to downright monopoly there is but a step: the drawing up of the *roll of merchants* (catalan, *matrícula de mercaders*) at the end of the fifteenth century is a clear confirmation of this process.⁸⁶

4. Conclusion

For all his peculiarities, the Catalan merchant of the expansion years (twelfth to the fourteenth centuries) would fully identify himself with the ideal of the merchant forged in the Italy of the later Middle Ages, feeling able to transform his mentality in accordance with the evolution of commercial techniques,⁸⁷ to relate humanistic culture to the capitalistic spirit,⁸⁸ to take in the new parameters for measuring time according to the late medieval mentality,⁸⁹ or to assimilate the sedentary processes of mercantile work.⁹⁰ In contrast to this, the merchant of Barcelona at the end of the Middle Ages did not, or could not, take on all these values, and remained trapped in the mediocrity of one who attempts to preserve his rights at all costs, even to the point of losing all chance of economic advancement. He furthermore remained unable to imbue himself with all the cultural currents which were springing up in the surrounding countries, such as the Renaissance and humanism.

The barren moral attitudes to work of the Barcelona merchant became apparent in his mean and inhumane stand in the face of the political and economic difficulties of the Barcelona of the time. A careful analysis of this may help towards a much better interpretation of many of the difficult circumstances which the city had to face during the years before the civil war of 1462. The struggle between the two parties which were vying with one another for the government of the city, namely *la Busca* and *la Biga*, should not be seen as a social conflict emerging from an economic crisis, but rather as the inability on the part of the patriciate, artisans, and merchants to achieve a minimum of collective harmony, perhaps by giving in on some of their rights for the benefit of the common good. The conflicts assailing Barcelona in the fifteenth century, which acquire an unusually dramatic tinge, find at their base the

⁸⁵ For a study of the social and political situation of fifteenth-century Barcelona, see C. Batlle, *La crisis social y económica de Barcelona a mediados del siglo XV* (Barcelona, 1973). Within a wider context, these instances of urban violence should be linked with those occurring in other western medieval cities, where similar reactions were recorded: *Violence and civil disorder in Italian cities, 1200–1500*, ed. L. Martines (London—Berkeley, 1972).

⁸⁶ J. Cabestany, 'Nómina de la *Matrícula de mercaderes* de Barcelona (1479–1699)', *Documentos y estudios*, 13 (1964), 167–184.

⁸⁷ We should at this point refer again to F. Rörig's classical article of great methodological interest, 'Les raisons intellectuelles d'une suprématie commerciale: la Hanse', *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, 2 (1930), 481–494, as well as those by A.E. Sayous and R. de Roover, quoted in 46 above.

⁸⁸ Cf some Italian cities of the time: C. Bec, *Les marchands écrivains a Florence. Affaires et humanisme à Florence, 1375–1434* (Paris, 1967) and Y. Renouard, *Affaires et culture à Florence in Il Quattrocento* (Florence, 1954).

⁸⁹ This is the context in which we should place the highly suggestive works by J. le Goff on the conception of medieval time, quoted in 27 above.

⁹⁰ Y. Renouard, *Les hommes d'affaires*, 220 ff.

quest by patricians and merchants alike for the consolidation at whatever cost of the privileges gained after centuries of control of urban institutions—a clear contrast to the authoritarian attitude of the crown, much closer to the political theory and practice then in vogue all over Europe.

Merchants clung to their past much as a shipwrecked person clings to a board, while totally adrift.⁹¹ Their work morals were heavily conditioned by their unrestrained quest for the present security in direct contradiction to any risk-laden investment in the future. Consequently they fell back upon themselves, both in their personal lives and as a social group, retreating into the shells of their acquired privileges and the safety of unproductive investments.

One of the first consequences of this self-imposed seclusion was the break-up of the social group of the merchants, a situation brought about by a crisis in the collective and professional values which had managed to consolidate the merchant class in Barcelona during the centuries of medieval expansion. Thus, among Barcelona merchants of the later Middle Ages, there prevailed the practice of investing in public debt, much above any considerations related to strictly commercial business. Moreover, the political balance which had been painstakingly achieved during several centuries through the implementation of agreement policies among the rest of the social and political groups of Barcelona (the monarchy, the *honoured citizens* – catalan, *ciutadans honrats*—and the counsellors—catalan, *consellers*) now began to break up; in addition, the role and relevance of the merchant quarter, La Ribera, now began to decline; furthermore, one sees in the merchant a boundless desire to acquire the aristocratic way of life, as well as a very telling predominance of exogamy over endogamy in marriages among the children of merchants, as a result of the diminished social consistency of merchant status.⁹²

The society of the later Middle Ages began truly to value mercantile work from the time when it took cognisance of the economic and cultural profits which were generated by commercial activities. This lies at the root of the importance of the conception of work in medieval Barcelona, and the importance of the achievement of a professional morality in accordance with the function and the place of merchants in this society. In this context, it was only through the loss of their professional identity that merchants could lose the trust society had put in them.

One of the foundations of the exhausting civil war between the principality of Catalonia and King Joan II (1462–1472), and of the subsequent dullness of the city, now turned into a second-class enclave in the European context of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, must needs be found in the forsaking of the sense of risk and the sense of enterprise among merchants and the financial patriciate. Perhaps the time has come for historiography to focus on these aspects, which would appear to make more sense than the factors traditionally pointed out as the principal causes of Catalan decadence, namely the influence of the economic crisis which affected

⁹¹ This is a happy expression coined by J.E. Ruiz-Doménec in his 'Iluminaciones sobre el pasado de Barcelona', in: *En la costas del Mediterráneo Occidental*, ed. D. Abulafia and B. Garí, 92.

⁹² I have analysed each of these characteristics of the world of the fifteenth-century merchant in J. Aurell, *Els mercaders catalans*.

Catalonia during the fourteenth century, or the supposedly perverse influence of Castile, shown by the clumsy management of the Trastamara dynasty, from the time of its enthronement in 1412.

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