

The guilds reappraised: Italy in the Early Modern period

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My contribution will focus on Italy mainly in order to appraise the collaborative research that led to the setting up of a database of Italian guilds between the 13th and 19th centuries. However, I will also mention some significant aspects in a comparison with Spain, the other important Mediterranean country where guilds were of considerable importance

It is well-known that since the beginning of the last century, due to their wide-spread distribution and the way they were founded and functioned, guilds have roused the interest of numerous historians. For a long time scholars wavered between two opposing views. The first, based on juridical premises, held that guilds acted as an essential intermediary. Their purpose was to represent and mediate in the interests in a period, the pre-industrial era, where the norm was the bargaining of a collective service in exchange for a collective privilege. The second, which can broadly be defined as "laissez faire", viewed the guilds as an institution with monopolistic tendencies, which was inflexible and ill-suited to economic development and acted as a brake, on any innovation.¹

Obviously these two highly ideological positions were often purely theoretical, idealistic and anti-historical and failed to take into consideration the real economic impact of the guilds. Despite this, until recently these views constituted mainstream scholarship, when growing dissatisfaction on the part of various scholars inaugurated a new phase of studies on a European scale. So, at last, the complexity of the guild system has been reappraised and its links with economic cycles have been re-evaluated and the limits inherent to a purely internal study have been overcome. Convictions which were deeply rooted, but not necessarily firmly grounded, have been discredited.²

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¹ An excellent synthesis is to be found in P. MINARD, *Le Corporazioni e il mondo del lavoro*, in *Storia dell'economia mondiale*, vol. II, *Dalle scoperte geografiche alla crescita degli scambi*, edited by V. CASTRONOVO, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1997, pp. 399-411

² An example of this new approach to guilds is *Guilds, economy and society*, editors S.R. EPSTEIN, H.G. HAUPT, C. PONI, H. SOLY, Madrid, Fundacion Fomento de la historia economica, 1998 which contains the acts of Session B1 of the XIIth World Congress of Economic History. Among the most recent works the following should be mentioned: J. FARR, *Artisans in Europe 1300-1914*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000; S.L. KAPLAN, *La fin des corporations*, Paris, Fayard, 2001; H.G. HAUPT, *Das Ende des Zunftes. Ein europäischer Vergleich*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2002; S. FAROQHI-R. DELGUILHEM, *Crafts and craftsmen of the Middle East. Fashioning the individual in the Muslim Mediterranean*, London, J.B. Tauris, 2005

This research on Italian guilds was carried out between 1997 and 2002. It was encouraged not only by the current debate in international circles, but also by the desire to reconsider Cipolla's views critically. He identified guilds as one of the most important reasons for the decline of the Italian economy during the 17th century.³ The Italian research group decided to lend support to specific research on the situation in individual towns by setting up a database. This has made it possible to substantiate many of the convictions that were emerging concerning the function and history of the guilds.

The work involved forty or so scholars who set up a database that now covers 50 Italian cities and 1,385 guilds. The cities that were taken into consideration were those which in Malanima's database on the urban population of Italy had a population which exceeded or was around 10,000 inhabitants in three, at least, of the six dates studied: 1300, 1400, 1500, 1600, 1700 and 1800⁴ (Table 1).

Table 1. Cities and guilds included in the database.

Cities	Guilds	Cities	G.	Cities	G.	Cities	G.
Alessandria	4	Treviso	27	Piacenza	39	<i>Cava dei Tirreni</i>	2
Asti	1	Udine	17	Reggio Emilia	16	<i>Napoli</i>	126
Torino	38	Venezia	192	Firenze	26	<i>Catanzaro</i>	3
Bergamo	7	Verona	61	Lucca	11	<i>Catania</i>	2
Brescia	41	Vicenza	15	Pisa	15	<i>Messina</i>	5
Como	11	Genova	97	Siena	24	<i>Modica</i>	6
Cremona	31	Savona	47	Perugia	27	<i>Palermo</i>	28
Lodi	17	Bologna	37	Ancona	3	<i>Siracusa</i>	8
Mantova	49	Faenza	5	Ascoli Piceno	2	<i>Trapani</i>	11
Milano	69	Ferrara	33	Roma	76	<i>Cagliari</i>	12
Pavia	5	Forlì	1	Viterbo	11	<i>Sassari</i>	10
Chioggia	12	Modena	17	L'aquila	4		
Padova	46	Parma	36	<i>Aversa</i>	2	Totale	1.385

In normal type, cities in the North (971 guilds)

In bold, cities in Central Italy (199 guilds)

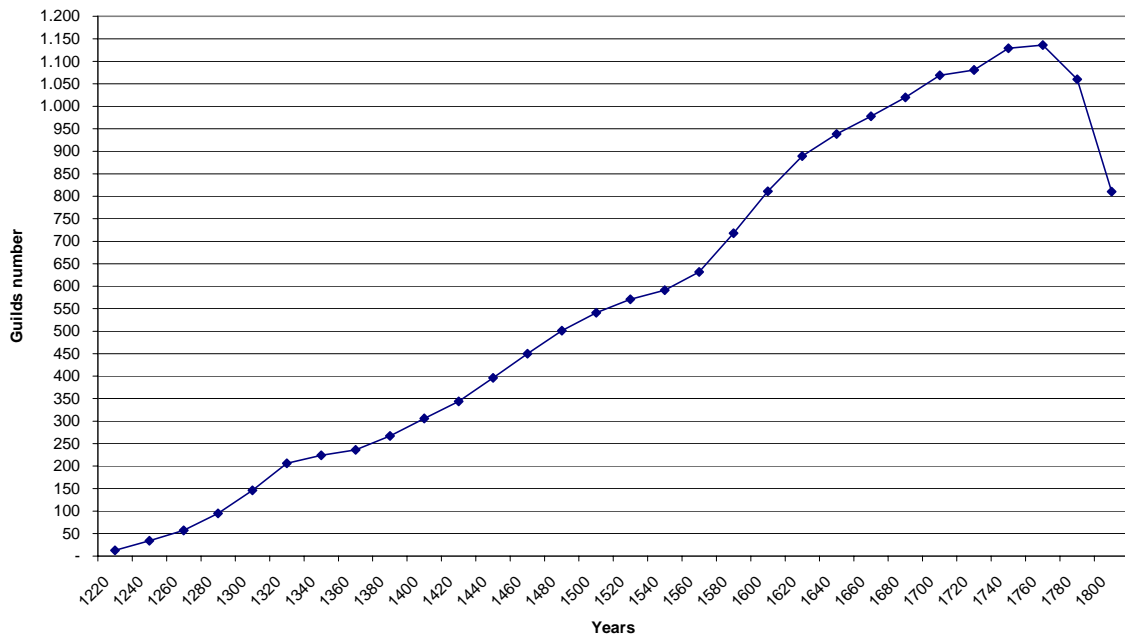
In italics, cities in the South and the Islands (215 guilds)

We will now look at the main results obtained from the work carried out up to now. The first thing to note concerns the trend among guilds in the period under study. This shows continual growth until the 1760s when the first effects of the movement to suppress them became apparent. (graph 1) If a logarithmic scale is used it is possible to see the greatest growth in the first period and before 1360 (graph 2). Such high rates in the initial period are obviously due to the fact that the numbers at the outset were very low. In fact, in 1220 when our database begins there were only 13 known guilds in Italy.

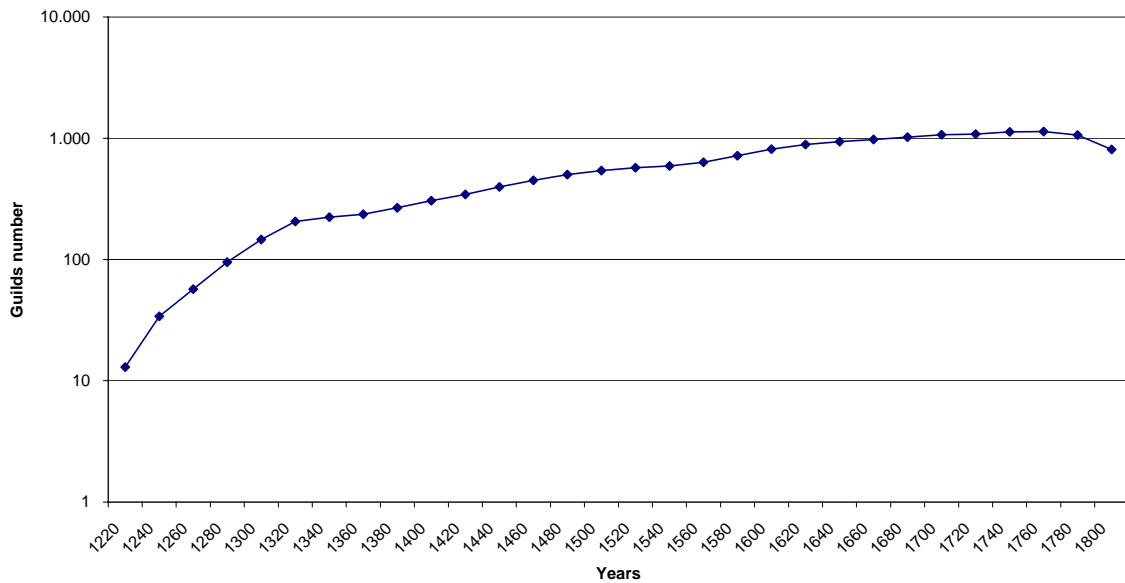
³ The work that has been carried out has produced two important collaborative volumes *Corporazioni e gruppi professionali nell'Italia moderna*, edited by A. GUENZI, P. MASSA, A. MOIOLI, Milano, Angeli, 1999 (English edition *Guilds, Markets and Work Regulations in Italy 16th-19th Centuries*, London, Ashgate, 1998) and *Dalla corporazione al mutuo soccorso. Organizzazione e tutela del lavoro tra XVI and XX century*, edited by P. MASSA, A. MOIOLI, Milano, Angeli, 2004

⁴ See P. MALANIMA, *Italian Cities 1300-1800. A quantitative approach*, in "Rivista di storia economica" XIV (1998), pp. 91-126

Graph 1: The trend among guilds in the database for the whole of Italy



Graph 2: The trend among guilds present in the database for the whole of Italy (on a logarithmic scale)



If we consider one of the most significant indicators in the distribution of guilds, that is their number in relation to the number of inhabitants, which has been defined as “guilds density”, we can observe that the lowest density is actually at the initial stage (table 2).

Table 2: The relationship between inhabitants and guilds in the main Italian towns

Areas	1300	1400	1500	1600	1700
North (Torino, Milano, Mantova, Brescia, Cremona, Bergamo, Venezia, Verona, Vicenza, Padova, Genova, Savona, Parma, Bologna, Modena)	667,000 inh. 98 guilds 1/6,806	452,000 223 1/2,026	595,000 418 1/1,423	711,000 609 1/1,167	671,000 744 1/901
Central Italy (Firenze, Roma, Perugia, Siena)	215,000 46 1/4,673	106,000 62 1/1,709	148,000 80 1/1,850	212,000 92 1/2,304	240,000 127 1/1,889
South (Napoli, Palermo, Trapani)	98,000 0	59,000 10 1/5,900	213,000 25 1/8,520	402,000 66 1/6,090	347,000 127 1/2,732
Total	980,000 144 1/6,805	617,000 295 1/2,091	956,000 523 1/1,827	1,325,000 767 1/1,727	1,258,000 998 1/1,260

In 1300 in the main Italian cities there was a guild for every 6,805 inhabitants, most of which were in Central Italy (1/4,673), followed at a certain distance by the North, while no data was collected for guilds in the South.

From then onwards a constant and considerable increase in the density of guilds can be observed. When in 1500, once the consequences of the disastrous plague of 1348 had been overcome and the population of the main Italian towns had once again reached the levels of 1300, the density of the guilds almost quadrupled: 1/1,827. Furthermore, as can be seen from the table, the North was now the area where most of the guilds were concentrated.

There was to be no let up in the spread of guilds. In 1600, at the end of a century of considerable demographic growth, the density of the guilds reached 1/1,727, to become more marked in the following century: in 1700 it was 1/1,260. This time, however, it was also as a result of the decrease in the urban population due to the 17th century plague epidemics. At the beginning of the 18th century in the North of Italy the ratio was below 1/1000, while the South registered considerable progress, reducing the gap with Central Italy where the growth of the guilds was almost exclusively due to their marked increase in Rome.

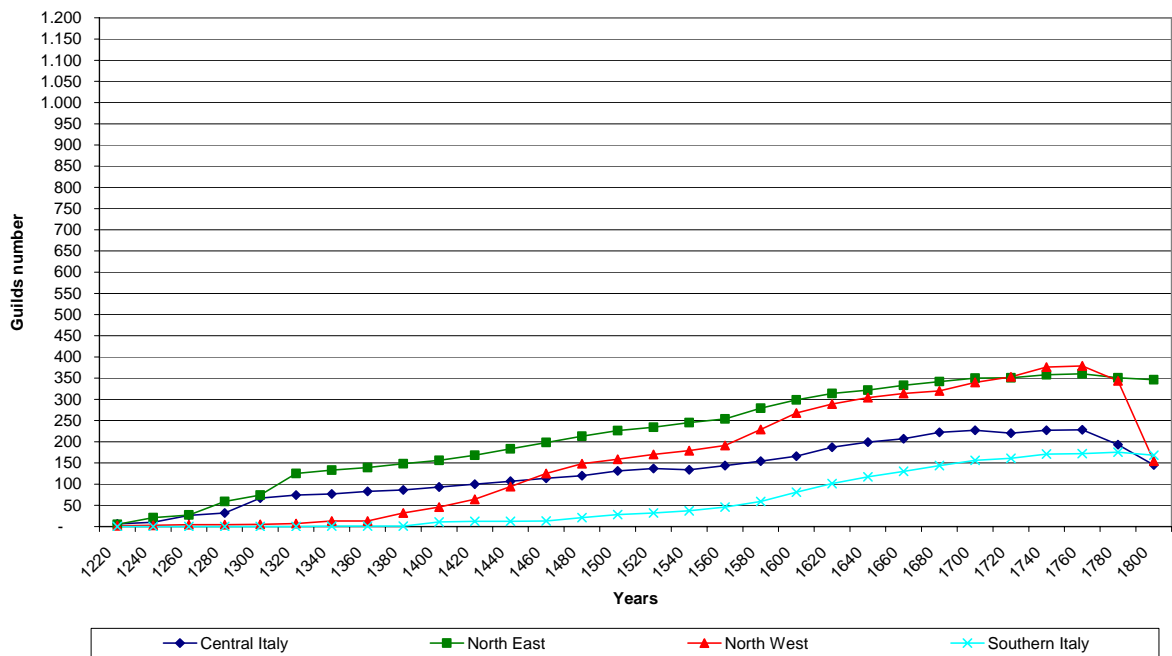
However, it is not enough to mention the noticeable increase in the number of guilds and their growing density, the data also needs to be interpreted. In particular, it is important to understand whether a relationship existed between the growth of the guilds and economic conditions.

In the medieval period the establishment of guilds seems to have coincided with the most economically prosperous areas which were those that were most densely populated. The guilds initially were concentrated in Central Italy, but this area was soon to be followed by North-Eastern Italy, led by Venice, which in 1400 already had 72 guilds, and the North-West.

Two centuries later from a geographical point of view, the guilds continued to follow the changes in the geography of economic leadership. In fact in 1600 we find the North of Italy firmly at the top of the table: it had become the most dynamic region of Italy. It was there that the three principal commercial centres, Venice, Milan and Genoa, were to be found with 306 of the 567 guilds surveyed.

Especially between 1560 and the plague of 1630, there was a real flowering of guilds in this area, together with a notable phase of economic expansion. This growth is above all to be attributed to the newly established guilds. Moreover, it did not take place in marginal sectors but was in the cornerstones of the urban economies involved, in the manufacture of textiles and clothing, for example. Central Italy was, however, losing ground, while the South was still way behind. (graph 3).

Graph 3 The trend among guilds in the database for geographical areas



In the 17th and 18th centuries the North of Italy strengthened its position while the situation in the South gradually approached that of Central Italy. However, this phase, and in particular the 17th century, poses some difficult questions of interpretation. The 17th century was problematic for manufacturing towns in Italy. This is confirmed by the fact that the growth

cycle of guilds slowed down considerably. Between 1500 and 1600 its growth reached 46% while between 1600 and 1700 this decreased to 29%.

Besides, in this growth it would seem that an important factor was the division of pre-existing guilds (55 of the 170 divisions recorded in the database are to be found in the period 1620-1700). This could be an indicator of a defence strategy to obtain market quotas within an urban context that was in difficulty.

At the same time many new guilds that came into being in this phase touched economically marginal sectors. Also worth mentioning is that the considerable growth of guilds in the South is to be attributed almost exclusively to Naples, a city with one of the largest populations in Europe. In other words it would seem that from the fourth decade of the 17th century the way guilds grew reflected the faded brilliance of the Italian economy.

Moreover, at the beginning of the 18th century the guild system in Italy seems to have reached its point of saturation. So much so that between 1700 and 1760 when the process of suppression was just beginning, the number of guilds in Italy remained substantially unchanged, registering a mere 7% growth.

The fact that the phases of the growth cycle of guilds coincided with periods of economic expansion (the database has highlighted the vigour of the period between 1560-1620, as well as the well-known expansion of medieval guilds) together with an increase in the density of the guilds prompts us to move from a quantitative to a more qualitative evaluation in order to understand the reasons for their success. The experience of the guilds lasted centuries and in the Italian states usually came to an end for political rather than for economic reasons.

The first important point to underline is the flexibility of the guild system. From this point of view the case of Milan in the second half of the 16th century is particularly interesting. Milan was a city where guilds were to appear late on the scene (in 1400 there were still only 13 and they were mostly, for reasons of public order, in the food sector) and where considerable growth can be seen from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards.

Between 1568 and 1627 the productive urban guilds increased from 26 to 44 which was greater than the dynamic development of the guilds championed by the Sforzas in the second half of the fifteenth century. An interesting feature is that these newly-established guilds were not in new specializations but were an extension of the guilds' activity and covered an already well-defined and recognised professional identity.

In six cases, as has correctly been established, the key operators were merchant entrepreneurs. In this way they assembled in legally dependent organizations the manpower employed in the various phases of the production under their control, while in the other 12

cases concerning craftsmen's activities, the creation of guilds was due to a small group of master craftsmen who were able to control weaker and less autonomous colleagues.⁵

Whether they were merchants or master craftsmen, their common objective was to exercise and to legalize the control by a small group at the top over a wider base. The different types of control, whether it was the legal recognition of a dependency between the workforce and merchants or the creation of a formal hierarchy among workers from the same sector, can be attributed to the dissimilar complexity of production processes and the diversity in market openings.

They are the statutes of these new guilds which demonstrate that they came into being with the main purpose of keeping control and discipline. Unlike the Visconti and Sforza guilds which paid attention to the quality requirements of the goods and to technical regulations, these newly-established guilds were extremely vague about technical-productive rules. However, they paid considerable attention to deontic norms: enrolment obligations, respect for customers' orders and work discipline, as well as to the power structure: rules governing elections, the length of terms of office, the recognition of the dependence on or the autonomy from other institutions.

So, within the same formal and institutional framework of the guild, organizations were created which were quite different from their medieval counterparts. Milan is certainly no exception. The fact that guilds were extremely flexible organizations able to adapt to changes in the economy can, for example, be observed from Spanish guilds.

The considerable growth in 16th century Spain also saw the consolidation of powerful merchants, especially in the field of textiles where production was intended for wider markets. It has been said that the great Spanish *Verleger*, i señores de los panos, "controlled the guilds of each of the wool trades, subcontracting out all stages of manufacture....Consequently the work of the craftsmen in theory independent was in fact dependent on and subordinate to the capital of the verleger while still maintaining the structures of the guilds".⁶

Also in this case, within the guild system a situation was created where a small group controlled a much wider base. In fact "there were different guilds and within them a few master-craftsmen who controlled the production of all the craftsmen", acting like entrepreneur of workforce. The evolution of Spanish manufactured goods for export, which was very much like that recorded in Milan, confirms how the guilds were organizations which were by no means homogenous and egalitarian and were also in practice anything but static.

The considerable flexibility of the guilds obviously cannot be separated from those functional aspects which, in different ways, rendered these institutions extremely efficient, thus guaranteeing their survival over a period of several centuries. The structure of the guild

⁵ See G. DE LUCA, *Mercanti imprenditori, élite artigiane e organizzazioni produttive: la definizione del sistema corporativo milanese (1568-1627)*, in *Corporazioni e gruppi professionali nell'Italia Moderna*, cit., pp. 79-116

⁶ See H. CASADO ALFONSO, *Guilds, Technical Progress and Economic Development in Preindustrial Spain*, in *Dalla corporazione al mutuo soccorso. Organizzazione e tutela del lavoro tra XVI e XX secolo.*, cit., p. 317

made it possible, for example, to carry out the function of delegated monitoring in an efficient way, also reducing costs. In fact, "merchants engaged in long-distance trade neither bought products on anonymous markets nor struck bargains with individual producers, but concluded contracts with guilds that specified prices and qualities and sometimes provided for advance funding by merchants. By assuming quality control and the administration of advance payments they effectively acted as an agent for delegated monitoring".⁷

At the same time the regulations and the guild structure made it possible to co-ordinate the activity of a large number of small and scattered productive units which dealt with different phases of the production process. This guaranteed that the work was carried out according to certain criteria and reduced transaction costs.

However, insofar as functional aspects are concerned, I would like here to examine in more detail the relationship between guilds and technical progress. These highlight two important variables which can be monitored with the database: apprenticeship and technical regulations. The issue is of considerable importance for this reason. For many years guilds were thought to be organizations that opposed technical progress but since the nineteen nineties there has been a more positive reading which has re-evaluated the role guilds played in spreading knowledge and technical progress.⁸ However, this later view is now receiving criticism from some quarters.

I refer in particular to an article by S. Ogilvie which strongly criticizes the rehabilitation of guilds in many of the most recent studies. Her contribution however appears to be conditioned by the fact that she adopts a very restricted view. She takes as his yardstick the guilds of Wurtemberg, which were special, not only on account of their rural character, but above all because they did not produce high quality goods.⁹

It is not by chance that her article lacks any reference to Italy, the chosen land of urban guilds and of the manufacture of luxury goods. Undoubtedly it is in this manufacturing context that apprenticeship and technical norms played a key role. Let us see then what we can find out from the database, beginning with the technical rules laid down in the statutes.

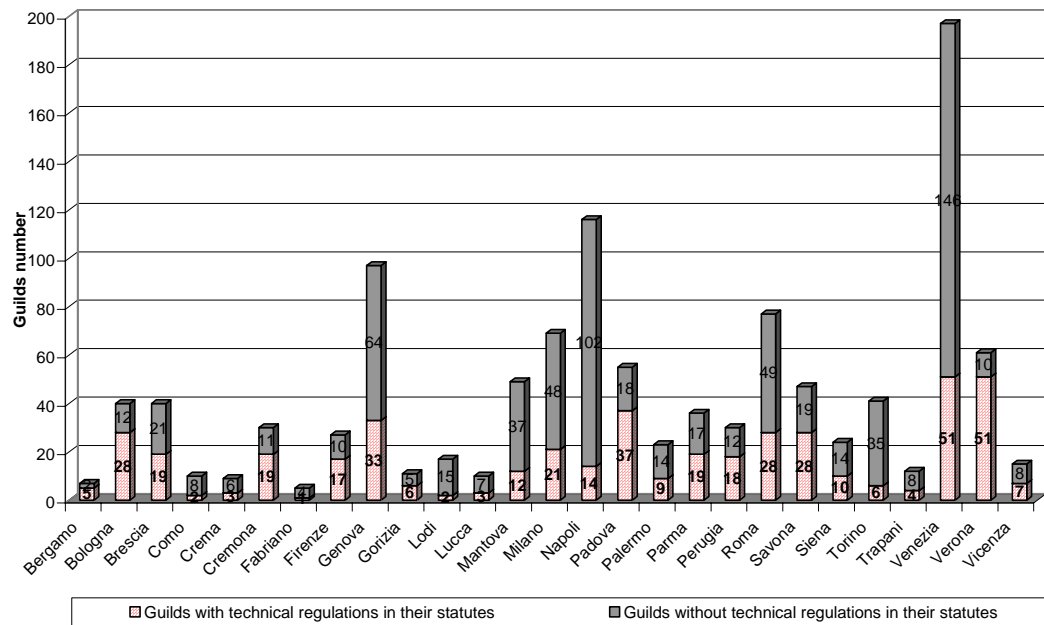
Graph 4 refers to those guilds where it has been possible to find information about the presence of technical regulations. It clearly shows that most of the guilds, 702 out of 1,155 make no mention of technical regulations in their statutes.

⁷ See U. PFISTER, *Craft guilds and industrial development in early modern Europe*, in *Dalla corporazione al mutuo soccorso. Organizzazione e tutela del lavoro tra XVI e XX secolo*, cit., p. 294

⁸ See in particular the appraisal of guilds in S.R. EPSTEIN, *Craft guilds, apprenticeship and technological change in preindustrial Europe*, in "Journal of Economic History", LVIII (1998), pp. 684-713

⁹ See S. Ogilvie, *Guilds, efficiency and social capital: evidence from German proto-industry*, in "Economic History Review" LVII (2004), pp. 286-333

Graph 4. Guilds with Technical Regulations in various cities in Italy in the Early Modern Period



It would be wrong, however, to deduce straight away that technical regulations were of little importance and to belittle their significance not only in maintaining quality standards, but also for the transmission of technical knowledge and know-how. Actually, guilds in Italy, but not only in Italy, were extremely varied and distinct and in the course of time they covered sectors and activities that did not require technical regulations or that had limited economic importance.

It becomes important, therefore, to verify which guilds had official technical regulations. From the database it is possible to verify that within the 453 guilds with technical regulations, it is the textile sector that has the highest number (94), closely followed by the food sector. These were the key sectors in Italian manufacturing cities and sectors with great social and public relevance. If we take into consideration the 198 guilds of the textile sector, we can see that the technical regulations were concentrated in those branches that produced higher quality goods: the wool mills and above all silk manufacturing. With the exception of Milan, all the important silk centres (Florence, Genoa, Turin, Venice, Lucca, Bologna, Naples) had extremely detailed technical regulations covering with weaving, spinning and the dyeing of silk.

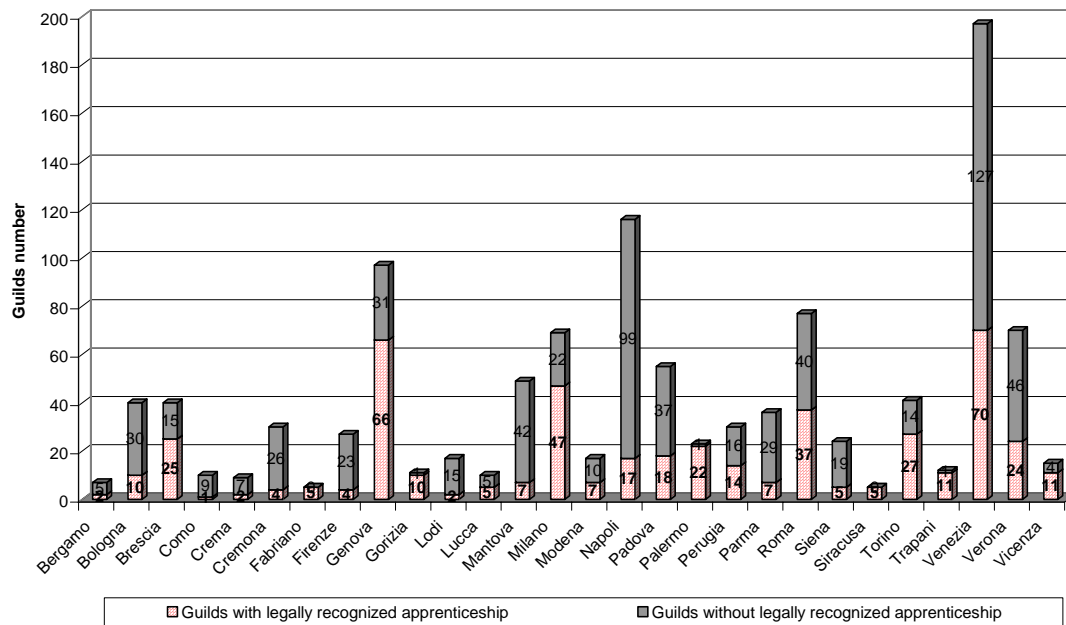
Where the work was complicated and where a high level of skills was required, technical regulations retained their considerable importance. Other manufacturing sectors confirm the fact that other internationally successful products were manufactured in the same way.

This applied to metal working, where technical regulations concerned 52 associations out of 125, and in leather work, where 50 out of 105 guilds were involved.

We should also point out that alongside the technical regulations there was another organization which was vital for maintaining standards of a high quality and for passing on knowledge: the apprenticeship system. Many of the processes were labour-intensive and required the survival of certain skills dependent on the transmission of adequate technical knowledge. This could only be guaranteed by the training of apprenticeship.¹⁰

Graph 5 shows the 1,132 guilds where it has been possible to reconstruct the presence of apprenticeship.

Graph 5. The presence of legally recognized apprenticeship in various cities in Italy in the Early Modern Period



Also in this case it is possible to see that in most of the guilds recorded (677) apprenticeships were not officially recognised. However, that does not necessarily mean they were non-existent. In various cases, in fact, it has been possible to discover that increasingly a private contract between the parties was adopted. A contract was signed between the master craftsman and the parents of the young person who wished to learn the craft.

It is worthwhile noting that in the 445 cases in which an official recognition of apprenticeship is to be found, most were in the key manufacturing centres of Italy (Venice,

¹⁰ Gottardi's comments are extremely interesting in G. GOTTARDI, *Le corporazioni premoderne come fonti di cultura tecnologica*, in *Leadership e tecnologia. La matrice organizzativa delle grandi innovazioni industriali*, edited by G. Petroni, Milano, Angeli, 2000, pp. 12-18

Milan Turin and Genoa alone accounted for almost half). It should also be emphasised that the practice of apprenticeship, and this, for quite long periods, was the norm in high quality production with an elevated value added, such as the manufacture of silk.

Rules which regulated the work of apprentices in this sector were to be found in Bologna, Brescia, Genoa, Gorizia, Lucca, Mantua, Milan, Turin, Venice, Verona and Vicenza, that is in all those centres where silk manufacturing was of prime importance. A period of apprenticeship could last anything between 4 and 7 years. To this was added a period as a worker. In Venice, for example, 12-13 years of training were required to become a fully-fledged worker.

It is therefore possible to claim that above all in sectors where production was of a high quality, the technical regulations and the course of the apprenticeship guaranteed by the guilds played an important role in the transmission of knowledge and know-how. Some scholars, however, assert that guilds fought a reactionary battle defending skills and products which were out-moded.

If this may occasionally have happened, as has been shown in the case of Spain,¹¹ it is not possible to ignore how in Italy silk throwing developed within the guild system. During the Modern Age it was a sector in which Italy achieved a position of leadership on account of its ability to innovate. Between the Middle Ages and the 19th century it was in Lucca, Bologna and Turin, the three centres which followed each other at the vanguard of throwing technology, that the guilds with their regulations guaranteed production.

The guilds in Turin were created very late, at the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries, by the express wishes of the government, with the precise aims of guaranteeing quality control in thrown silk, much in demand on the international market because of its exceptional quality, and the training and protection of the human capital able to produce it.¹²

Evidence of the continuing operative capacity of the guild system in the pre-industrial economy can be deduced by referring to the problems caused by their suppression, which I will briefly illustrate with reference to the case of Milan at the conclusion of this paper. The reason for this suppression, which in Milan was finalized in 1787, was exclusively of a political-institutional nature. In a new political context where distinctions were denied, because the state had established itself as the all-embracing counterpart of the society it

¹¹ H. CASADO ALFONSO, *Guilds, Technical Progress and Economic*, cit., p. 323-325 comments that "the guilds resistance to technical change should be studied case by case" concluding on the basis of the experience in Spain that "the reason why many initiatives to introduce technical improvements failed, does in some cases lie with the opposition of the guilds, however, in other cases it depends upon the lack of sufficient capital to carry through the innovations, with the weakness of the internal market and, especially, with the lack of a strong commercial network able to channel the sale of the produce".

¹² See G. Caligaris, *Arti, manifatture e privilegio economico nel regno di Sardegna durante il XVIII secolo*, in *Corporazioni e gruppi professionali nell'Italia moderna*, cit., pp. 171-176

was an anachronism to speak of relationships or hierarchies between guilds, or of the privileges of those who were members of guilds in contrast with those who were not.

From an economic point of view, the disappearance of the guilds and their substitution by the Chamber of Commerce created numerous problems on account of the important role these institutions continued to play. I shall mention just a few here. The fact that there were recognised regulations, such as guilds statutes, made it possible to ensure rapid justice in mercantile questions; agreed rules fixed by statutes guaranteed the safety of buyers and the keeping of contracts reduced uncertainty; the apprenticeship system played an essential part in technical instruction; the governing bodies of the guilds settled differences between workers and merchants, solving conflicts within the system. In fact in the years following their suppression, the Chamber of Commerce was submerged by lawsuits, 5,260 between 1788 and 1796.¹³

The guilds were, therefore, a still efficient organization on various fronts: they protected customers, they acted as stabilizers on the urban market; they cut the transaction and organization costs. It is possible therefore to maintain that in Lombardy, but not only, the guilds were eliminated hastily, before the government could implement structural transformations in the manufacturing sector and valid substitutes such as factory system.

¹³ I dealt with these aspects in L. MOCARELLI, *Le attività manifatturiere a Milano tra continuità dell'apparato corporativo e il suo superamento (1713-1787)* in *Corporazioni e gruppi professionali nell'Italia Moderna*, cit. pp.160-170