Reassessing Civil Conflicts in Genoa, 1160-1220

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Short Abstract

This thesis examines the phenomenon of civil violence in Genoa (1160-1220). Genoese civil conflicts in the period are victim to a historiographical paradox. While their importance for the survival of communal institutions has been frequently underlined; they have often been misrepresented in the historiography. Our current understanding of civil conflicts in Genoa is in need of a reassessment if we want to deepen our comprehension of the history of a city that is considered a key center and fundamental building bloc in the rise of the European continent to economic prominence.

This thesis studies civil violence from a perspective that takes into account the shifting form of Genoese conflicts and their protagonists. The civil conflicts in Genoa saw constant development in their intricacy, nature and participants (Chapter one). I distance myself from the issue of motives and causation, a pursuit which has mislead scholars. Instead I focus my attention on the underlying patterns that made conflicts in Genoa possible -- the web of relationships among the families of the Genoese elite – in order to study how the individuals and families that were involved in civil violence made their decisions (Chapter two). The understanding of these links and of the development of conflict in Genoa is an important thread to follow in order to reassess several aspects of the political history of the city between the twelfth and the thirteenth century (Chapter three). In light of my findings, the institutional transition of the city from a commune led by consuls to one led by a foreign podestà (Chapter four) and the Genoese involvement in the Mediterranean scenario (Conclusion), appear shaped by the maturing phenomenon of civil violence. This thesis aims to fill the current gap in academic studies on civil conflict in Genoa and to turn the phenomenon from a footnote to the current historiography into a rich vein of historical understanding of the fundamental dynamics of the city and its development.
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Long Abstract

This thesis examines the phenomenon of civil violence in Genoa between twelfth and thirteenth century (1160-1220) – a time and place often considered crucial for the development of modern economy. In the communal context the episodes of internal violence between families of the city elite have often been represented as mere disrupting ground noise that the city inherited from its undocumented pre-communal past. As such these episodes were dismissed as inexplicable; although their importance and the danger they posed for the survival of communal institutions was frequently underlined. Recently Avner Greif, a social scientist concerned with the importance played by institutions as drivers of economic growth, saw the Genoese conflicts of the central Middle Ages as a fundamental tool in bringing about the commerce enhancing institutional developments he sought to explain. The issues that undermine Greif’s work have shown that the time is ripe to reassess the current understanding of civil conflicts in Genoa, if we want to deepen our comprehension of the history of a city that is considered a fundamental building bloc behind the rise of the European continent to economic prominence. The survival in Genoa of a large corpus of contemporary historical evidence makes this city an exceptional case study through which to understand the practice and structure of internal violence in a period all too often overlooked by the available scholarship.

This thesis proposes studying civil violence not in the traditional context of immemorial and well defined lineages opposing each other, but from a perspective which takes into account the shifting form of Genoese conflicts and their participants. In fact, The civil conflicts in Genoa saw a constant development in the individuals that took part in them and in their very nature. In order to deepen our understanding of this phenomenon I distance myself from the issue of motives and causation, a pursuit which has - all too often - made scholars either
despair and give up, in the face of the complexity of the events in Genoa, or excessively simplify the city’s reality. Instead I focus my attention on the structures that made conflicts in Genoa possible, that is the web of relationships among the families of the Genoese elite (such as marriage agreements and joint economic operations), and study how the individuals and families who were involved in civil violence took their decisions (such as joining a faction or choosing not to fight). These patterns were affected by the developing phenomenon of conflict and, at the same time, shaped the development of the conflicts. The new understanding of the development of conflict in Genoa is an important thread to follow in order to reassess several aspects of the political and economic history of the city between the twelfth and the thirteenth century. In light of my findings, the institutional transition of the city from a commune led by consuls to one led by a foreign podestà and the Genoese involvement in the Mediterranean scenario, appear shaped by the developing phenomenon of civil violence.

Part One: An analytical narrative of the Genoese civil conflicts

In the first part of this thesis I focus on the events that took place in Genoa during the period under consideration and on their protagonists. Chapter one (Internal peace and war in a Mediterranean city) analyses the accounts of the contemporary Genoese chroniclers to build a complete factual account of the civil conflicts that took place in the city during the period. First the intensity, typologies and contemporary perceptions of the violent events are considered. The authors of the chronicles confront a phenomenon that escalates from initial isolated discordia and dissensiones between individuals and families to odia and bella between groups of families and, at the height of its intensity, to open warfare between well defined factions. At the same time the authors’ perception of the legitimacy of the violent episodes also changes and is characterized by increasingly stronger condemnations formulated alongside the narration. The Annales of Genoa give the impression of clearly developing internal violence in the city. Secondly, the source contains the names of a number
of the individuals and families who were involved in episodes of civil violence. As such it is possible to use it to build a dataset of the protagonists of civil conflicts in Genoa in the period considered. While the authors of the Annales rarely discuss on which side the individuals involved fought, a brief overview of the contemporary evidence surviving allows an understanding of the possible affiliations of the individuals involved. This procedure offers a remarkably ordered image of civil conflicts in Genoa during the period analysed. These initial findings shows on one hand that Genoese civil conflicts were relatively ordered and therefore can be studied in a rational way, and on the other hand that the available documentation contains more information on the subject than has been realized so far. Finally, the analyses of chapter one shows that the factional structuring of the conflicts came after a relatively long incubation, stressing the need to avoid assuming that the picture that emerged at the end of the period considered, had already been crystallized at the beginning of the period and confirming that in order to deepen our understanding of the Genoese conflicts we must start from a careful analysis of the structures formed by the connections between the individuals and families that were involved in these episodes – about which we can potentially know a lot – rather than starting from the motives behind the violence – about which we know so little that any speculation not grounded in the structures of conflict is often fruitless.

Chapter two (The structure of Genoese violence and factionalism), building on these initial findings, explores in depth the structure of the connections between all the individuals and families that were involved in violent episodes in any way. The chapter is built as a comparative analysis of five successive periods in which the conflicts studied can be divided according to the narrative of chapter one. Decade after decade, thanks to the vast notarial records surviving in the city, the chapter draws the profiles of the economic activities and of the personal connections between the families involved in the episodes of civil conflict, and tracks their development. These records, long considered fundamental for the economic historian of Genoa, have never been used previously so extensively to uncover the web of
connections running through the families of the Genoese elite. The analysis of the rising complexity of the links connecting the families of the Genoese elite - studied also through their representation as cluster networks – deepens the current understanding of civil violence in Genoa. The Genoese conflicts appear to have broken off inside a relatively cohesive elite, and not along lines of immemorial hatred between opposing lineages. As such the violence often forced Genoese families to take difficult decisions regarding which side to fight on. Chapter two demonstrates that conflicts cut across marriage ties and, in that case, the families decided which side to support based on the relative strength of their shared economic interests. The study of the connections among the Genoese that took part in violent episodes shows how one cataclysmic event in the 1160s started the long lasting series of violent confrontations that were to shape the history of Genoa, and how the development of these confrontations largely depended on the relative strengths of the connections between the families involved. In this light also the eventual conclusion of the factional violence assumes a dimension completely different from the one traditionally understood. It has been claimed that the factions involved agreed – or were forced to agree – to a power sharing compromise that saw the appointment in Genoa of a podestà and the suspension of factional violence. This conclusion was essentially supported by the fact that the mentions of factional violence – not of all internal violence – disappear from the later narrative of the chronicles. However analysing the development of the connections among the families that formed the cores of the fighting factions, a different hypothesis can be formulated. It appears that one of the factions had, towards the end of the period considered, lost all of the cohesiveness between its members. This finding, together from the absence of any mention of factionalism in the contemporary chronicles, suggests that the Genoese conflicts ended not because of a successfully negotiated power sharing agreement between factions, but because one of the faction emerged as the winner from factional warfare.
Part Two: The institutional structures, public officials and external actions of the commune and how they were affected by conflict.

Although the historiography available on the subject has often misrepresented the phenomenon of internal conflict in Genoa by taking it, more often than not, for granted rather than giving it the necessary consideration, the state of tension generated by internal violence has long been considered an important driver behind the development of the history of the commune. Obviously therefore the current misrepresentation of Genoese conflicts risks undermining our understanding of the history of this communal society in general. In the second part of this thesis on one hand, I further expand our understanding of the phenomenon of civil violence in twelfth and thirteenth Genoa by grounding the events and families studied in the first part of this thesis in the wider economic, political and social reality of the city; and on the other hand I use this renewed image of Genoese civil conflicts as a lens to analyse the developments occurring in Genoa at the time.

In Chapter three (The consular commune and its officials, 1160-1190), the economic profiles and affiliations of all the Genoese families that saw their members elected as consuls of the commune between 1160 and 1190 are reconstructed. The analysis of the connections of the consular families with the families involved in episodes of civil violence (who were in most cases also consular families) evidences how the phenomenon of civil conflict described in the Genoese chronicles was essentially all internal to the Genoese consular elite – making its current misrepresentation even more problematic. The analysis of the composition of the Genoese consular lists year after year shows the growing impact of conflict on the Genoese public sphere. In the 1160s there is hardly any hint of factional competition over the consular seats. In the 1170s following the development of factional structures old and powerful Genoese families that did not take part into the civil violence became protagonists of the communal governments; this might have been due to the fact that these families attempted to prop up the legitimacy of an institution that was been undermined by the infightings among
the Genoese consular elite, or it might have reflected a disinterest of factional families for the communal government. Finally, in 1180s, it is evident that the consular appointments had become yet another field of conflict competition for the two factions, one of which controlled most of the seats available. Chapter three therefore shows that the internal political structure of the commune reflected the development of conflict. Furthermore the findings also illustrate another effect of factional conflicts on the internal balance of the commune. Chapter three shows the increasing presence of families with commercial interests among the consular elite. While this was certainly part of a more general enrichment and political rise of a commercial elite in Genoa, it was also due to the fact that these families had the most solid links to the faction that was coming to dominate the Genoese political spectrum. In this light, factional conflicts played a role in the increasing political importance of families with vast commercial interests. By the time that the Genoese commune begun its transition from a commune governed by consuls to one ruled by a foreign podestà in 1190 the influence of civil conflicts on the political structure was undeniable. Chapter four (From the commune of the consuls to the commune of the podestà, 1191-1216) discusses how every aspect behind the decision to appoint a podestà to govern the city depended on factional logic. The chapter disproves the hypothesis that the podestà was a tool to enhance power sharing between factions and illustrates instead how the podestà appointments were weapons in factional warfare more often than not. In order to uncover the power struggle behind the appointments of the podestà in the absence of the consuls of the commune, which were substituted by podestà, the chapter evaluates the composition of the lists of the consuls of the pleas (essentially judges). The lists of these officials have traditionally been considered not very important when it came to understand factional patterns behind city governments. However chapter four shows the rising level of competition over the control of the consulate of the pleas that, in turn, made it a carrier of more important information than it has hitherto being realised. The analysis shows that from the mid-1190s onwards the image of the political elite of the commune is once again
a cohesive one. The internal political balance of Genoa in that period was not the result of a power sharing agreement, but rather the consequence of the prolonged period of violent conflict that saw one of the two factions opposing one other emerging as a clear winner.

In the Conclusion (Genoese factionalism and Mediterranean involvement), I further expand these findings by evaluating the significance of the phenomenon of conflict for one of the areas that have been traditionally considered fundamental by the scholarship on Genoa; the city’s Mediterranean involvement. The findings illustrate that, while at the initial stages of internal conflicts it cannot be argued that Genoese foreign involvement responded to a clear factional logic, this aspect of Genoese history too, as was the case for its domestic development, came to be heavily influenced by factions when the families in opposition pursued opposed foreign policies for the city and constantly tried to undermine their opponents’ influence overseas. Genoa therefore appears to have followed a coherent strategy of engagement in the Mediterranean until, during the period of most pronounced factionalism, the two factions pursued different strategies. At the end of the factional period this duality too seems to have ceased when former members of both factions successfully agreed on how to divide the spoils of a major Mediterranean involvement: the Sicilian campaign of emperor Henry VI.

In light of the findings of this thesis, factional conflict emerges as one of the most important driving factors in the history of Genoa between the twelfth and the thirteenth century. There has often been a tendency not to consider the details of civil conflict in Genoa, taking them both for granted and as inexplicable – the result of an overreliance on outdated interpretation. This thesis aims to fill that gap and to offer the future scholar of Genoa an additional, and perhaps vital, key with which to unlock a greater understanding of the intricate history of this city.
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Abbreviations

**Annales**

**ASG**
Archivio di Stato di Genova

**ASLI**
Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria

**Bonvillano**

**Cassinese**

**CGD**
Codice Diplomatico della Repubblica di Genova, C., Imperiale di Sant’Angelo (ed.), (Roma, 1936-1938)

**Giovanni Scriba**

**Guiberto**

**Lanfranco**

**Oberto 1186**
*Oberto Scriba de Mercato, 1186*, CHIAUDANO, M., (ed.) (Genova, 1940).

**Oberto 1190**
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