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INQUISITION BY PRESENCE. ROUTINE POWER, SHIP VISITATION AND MARITIME ROUTES IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY PALERMO

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the practice of visita de navíos – ship inspections – conducted by the Inquisition in seventeenth-century Palermo. Based on the unique surviving visitation register of the Sicilian tribunal (1643-1663), it reconstructs the procedure as a routine exercise of jurisdictional presence rather than as an instrument of censorship or repression. The study situates the Palermo visitas within the broader polycentric governance of the Spanish monarchy, showing how repetition, brevity, and bureaucratic formality transformed inspection into a performative ritual of authority. Through serial reading of more than five hundred entries, the article explores the relation between mobility, documentation, and power in an early modern Mediterranean port. The visita de navío emerges as an act of recognition, an institutional gesture by which the Inquisition asserted visibility within the overlapping jurisdictions of the Sicilian maritime world. The analysis contributes to a redefinition of early modern surveillance practices, highlighting the performative and relational nature of routine administration in the Iberian imperial context.*

KEYWORDS: *Spanish Inquisition; Sicily; Spanish Monarchy; Mediterranean ports*

INQUISIZIONE PER PRESENZA. POTERE DELLA ROUTINE, ISPEZIONI NAVALI E ROTTE MARITTIME NELLA PALERMO DEL SEICENTO

SOMMARIO: *Il saggio esamina la pratica della visita de navíos, l'ispezione inquisitoriale delle navi, svolta nel porto di Palermo nel XVII secolo. Basandosi sull'unico registro di visite superstite del tribunale di Sicilia (1643-1663), ricostruisce la procedura come un esercizio di presenza giurisdizionale più che come strumento di censura o di repressione. L'analisi colloca le visitas palermitane nel contesto della governance policentrica della monarchia spagnola, mostrando come la ripetizione, la brevità e la formalità burocratica trasformassero l'ispezione in un rito performativo di autorità. Attraverso una lettura seriale di oltre cinquecento atti, l'articolo indaga il rapporto tra mobilità, documentazione e potere in un porto mediterraneo dell'età moderna. La visita de navío emerge così come un atto di riconoscimento: un gesto istituzionale con cui l'Inquisizione affermava la propria visibilità all'interno delle giurisdizioni sovrapposte del mondo marittimo siciliano. Lo studio contribuisce a ridefinire le pratiche di sorveglianza dell'età moderna, mettendo in luce il carattere performativo e relazionale dell'amministrazione ordinaria nel contesto imperiale iberico.*

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Inquisizione spagnola; Sicilia; Monarchia spagnola; Porti mediterranei*

This work is dedicated to Ninni Giuffrida, who many years ago first pointed out to me the existence of the only inquisitorial register of the *visita de navío* preserved at the Archivio di Stato of Palermo. I wish to express my gratitude to Lorenzo Commensoli, Roger Calvello and Luigi Pio Giorgio for their generous assistance and invaluable contributions to the realisation of this study.

List of Abbreviations: Archivio di Stato di Palermo (ASPa); Tribunale del Sant'Uffizio (SO); Ricevitoria (Ric.); Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid (AHN): Inquisición (Inq.), libro (lib.).

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On 1 September 1652, Diego García de Trasmiera, senior inquisitor of the tribunal of Sicily, appeared at the harbour of Palermo. A surviving entry from the inquisitorial register records his presence alongside the notary don Juan de Rettana during the inspection of the *Águila Dorada*, a vessel loaded with timber, recently arrived from Venice, and commanded by «Nicolo Cornelio», «natural de Amsterdam», with a crew of forty-six men «de diversas naciones». Although the ship, its captain, and much of its sailors were Dutch, and therefore probably heretical and, until only a few years earlier, enemies of the Catholic king of Spain, the document follows the familiar procedure of the *visita de navío*: the captain was questioned under oath, the route was declared, the cargo briefly listed, and the presence of prohibited books denied with the customary formula «no trae libros, ni estampas, ni otras cosas contra nuestra santa fe católica». The inspection was brief, leaving no trace of ancillary acts, irregularities, or interrogations beyond the standard subscription formula. Nothing in the record suggests either urgency or suspicion: no goods were seized, no arrests were made. The page would be unremarkable were it not for the simple fact that Trasmiera was there[1].

A judge of his rank, soon afterwards appointed to the Toledo tribunal, the most prestigious seat of the Spanish Inquisition, was not expected to supervise minor routines[2]. Such duties at the waterfront ordinarily fell to lower-ranking officers. Nothing in the document explains why he would step outside the ceremonial and judicial sphere of inquisitorial activity to descend to the dock. Nor was this an isolated incident: it was the second time in twenty years that he personally conducted a *visita de navío,* the other being Trasmiera's appearance at the harbour on 14 February 1644, in a period marked by social unrest, fiscal pressure and war, during which he would later play an instrumental role in suppressing the anti-Spanish revolt of 1647[3]. Yet

[1] «En Palermo a primero de septiembre de mil seyscientos y cinquenta y dos años El R.mo S.or Inq.or Don Diego Garzia de Trasmiera se conferió en el muelle desta dicha çiudad a visitar un baxel», giuramento del primo settembre 1652, ASPa, SO, Ric., 190, s.f.

[2] For an analysis of Trasmiera's actions in this period as *juez de fe* in Sicily, particularly during the revolt of 1647, as well as for a brief biographical sketch, see the works of M. Rivero Rodríguez, *Técnica de un golpe de Estado: el inquisidor Garcia de Trasmiera en la revuelta siciliana de 1647*, in F.J. Aranda Perez (ed.), *La declinación de la Monarquía Hispanica en el siglo XVII*, Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Cuenca, 2004, pp. 129-153; Id., *Los santos los crea el pueblo: el inquisidor García de Trasmiera y la venerable sor Orsola Benincasa*, in I. Arias de Saavedra, E. Jiménez Pablo, M.L López-Guadalupe Muñoz (eds.), *Subir a los altares: modelos de santidad en la Monarquía hispánica (siglos 16-18)*, Univ. de Granada, Granada, 2018, pp. 401-422.

[3] ASPa, SO, Ric., 190, s.f.

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it is precisely the sobriety of the record that demands further attention. The episode is not evidence of crisis, nor of exceptional intervention. It is, rather, an institutional gesture that raises questions about what the *visita de navío* was in practice, and why it mattered to the tribunal. This entry of 1652 exposes some structural questions. What function did the ship visitation perform within the inquisitorial power in Sicily? Why did this practice persist with such regularity, despite producing no tangible results in terms of prosecution? And what does its persistence reveal about the position of the Inquisition within the political landscape of the early modern Spanish Sicily? The presence of Trasmiera suggests that the *visita* was not a negligible duty, but a meaningful act of authority, whose significance has been obscured precisely by its routine character.

The *visita de navíos* has received only incidental attention in the historiography of the Spanish Inquisition[4]. When mentioned at all, it appears as a marginal procedure, classified under the mechanisms of censorship aimed at preventing the circulation of prohibited books[5]. In this view, even where extensive archival series exist, ship visitation has been treated merely as a defensive device within the wider system of inquisitorial vigilance, rather than as a procedure with its own institutional logic[6]. As a result, it had been of greater use to economic

[4] None of the modern syntheses on the Spanish Inquisition devote more than a brief mention to ship visitation. The only general study to treat its organisation at any length is the classic, still valuable work of H.C. Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, The Mac Millan Company, New York, 1907, III, pp. 480-485.

[5] See: J. Gil Sanjuán, M.I. Pérez de Colosía Rodríguez, *Inspección inquisitorial a los navíos y control de libros*, «Jábega», n. 25, 1979, pp. 25-37; C.A. González Sánchez, P. Rueda Ramírez, *«Con recato y sin estruendo». Puertos atlánticos y visita inquisitorial de navíos*, «Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Classe di Lettere e Filosofia», Serie V, 1, 2009, pp. 67-95.

[6] For the inspections carried out by the Canary Inquisition, see: A.D. Brito González, *Visitas de navío en el Tribunal de la Inquisición de Canarias en el siglo XVI*, «Vegueta. Anuario de la Facultad de Geografía e Historia», n. 3, 1997-1998, pp. 89-100; F. Fajardo Spínola, *La vigilancia del mar. La Inquisición canaria y las visitas de navíos*, «Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos», n. 49, 2003, pp. 87-124; J.C. Galende Díaz, B. Santiago Medina, *Las visitas de navíos durante los siglos XVI y XVII: historia y documentación de una práctica inquisitorial*, «Documenta & Instrumenta», n. 5, 2007, pp. 51-76. On the inspection of foreign ships by the Portuguese Inquisition, see: V. Rau, *Subsídio para o estudo do movimento dos portos de Faro e Lisboa durante o século XVII*, «Anais da Academia Portuguesa da História», n. 5, 1958, pp. 197-277; F. Espinosa, *A Inquisição, os navios estrangeiros e os mercadores do Porto no século XVIII*, Porto Editora, Porto, 1972, pp. 309-318; M. de Fátima, M. Dias, A. dos Reis, *Um Livro de visitas a naus estrangeiras: exemplo de Viana do Castelo (1635-1651)*, in M.H. Carvalho dos Santos (ed.), *Comunicações apresentadas ao 1.º Congresso Luso-Brasileiro sobre Inquisição*, Universitária Editora, Lisboa, 1989, pp. 709–742; Ead., *O Porto de Viana do Castelo no século XVIII através do olhar da*

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historians reconstructing maritime traffic than to historians of the Inquisition[7].

The documentation preserved in Palermo invites a quite different approach. The register now held in the *Archivio di Stato* is, to present knowledge, the only surviving visitation book of the Sicilian tribunal, and one of very few known examples of systematic ship inspection records by the Inquisition within territories of the Spanish monarchy[8]. The dispersal and destruction of inquisitorial archives in Italy and Spain during the nineteenth century make such a survival rare, and the Palermo register is exceptional not only for its integrity but for its serial extensiveness: it contains 527 entries of ship inspections conducted between 1643 and 1663. Unlike scattered references in trial records or inquisitorial correspondence, this manuscript provides a continuous record of a single administrative practice over two decades. Although it has been preserved, the register has never been used as a historical source. It is absent from both classic and recent studies on the Sicilian Inquisition, despite the renewed scholarly interest the field has enjoyed in recent times[9]. The *visita*, however, was neither casual nor sporadic. It was a repetitive act performed with evident institutional commitment, requiring personnel, writing, and time.

Inquisição. Estrutura, Imagem e Resultados: Novos Dados, in A. Novinsky, M.L. Tucci Carneiro (eds.), *Inquisição. Ensaios sobre Mentalidade, Heresias e Arte*, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 1992, pp. 170-194; M.D. Domingos, *Visitas do Santo Ofício às naus estrangeiras. Regimentos e quotidianos*, «Revista da Biblioteca Nacional», n. 11, 1993, pp. 117-129.

[7] See, for example, B. Crivelli, G. Maifreda, *Seeking 'Forbidden Books': Religious Courts and International Trade in the 17th Century Port of Lisbon*, in N. Alessandrini, M. Russo, G. Sabatini (eds.), *Homo est minor mundus. Construção de saberes e relações diplomáticas luso-italianas (sécs. XV–XVIII)*, CHAM, Lisboa, 2017, pp. 85-104.

[8] The *visitas de navio* registers, which originally formed part of the archives of the *Ricevitoria* of the Holy Office, escaped the well-known burning of the inquisitorial records ordered by Viceroy Caracciolo on 27 June 1783. When Pietro Burgarella surveyed the collections preserved at the Gancia branch of the State Archives of Palermo in 1971, he reported the existence of four surviving registers of *visitas de navio*. Today, however, only the first volume of this small series remains, and it is the focus of the present study. The three other volumes have since been lost or destroyed. The surviving register is itself in an advanced state of deterioration. See P. Burgarella, *I registri contabili del Sant'Uffizio di Sicilia nell'Archivio di Stato di Palermo*, «Rassegna degli Archivi di Stato», XXXI/3, 1971, pp. 677-689.

[9] See, among others, F. Renda, *L'Inquisizione in Sicilia. I fatti. Le persone*, Sellerio, Palermo, 1997; M.S. Messana, *Inquisitori, negromanti e streghe nella Sicilia moderna (1500-1782)*, Sellerio, Palermo, 2007; Ead., *Il Santo Ufficio dell'Inquisizione. Sicilia 1500-1782*, Istituto Poligrafico Europeo, Palermo, 2012; V. La Motta, *Contra haereticos. L'Inquisizione spagnola in Sicilia*, Istituto Poligrafico Europeo, Palermo, 2019; G. Fiume, *Del Santo Uffizio in Sicilia e delle sue carceri*, Viella, Roma, 2021.

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The present study adopts a serial reading of the Palermo register. Rather than isolating individual cases, it examines the practice cumulatively, tracing patterns of frequency, language, personnel, and variation over time. This approach shifts the focus from the outcome of the inspections to their function. The question is not what the tribunal discovered at the harbour, but what it did there. Routine, in this context, is a form of institutional intention. Read within the interpretive frameworks that conceive early modern Iberian governance as polycentric and negotiated, these records invite a reading attentive to the communicative and adaptive dimensions of the Inquisition as an Imperial institution[10].

Three questions guide this study. First, how did a procedure introduced by the *Suprema* in the mid-sixteenth century to control maritime mobility evolve, by the seventeenth century, into a stable feature of inquisitorial administration? Second, why did the visitation continue once its declared purpose of seizing heretical books had become largely symbolic? Finally, what kind of power and interest are exercised through a practice whose apparent function has been exhausted?

I argue that the *visita de navíos* was primarily a jurisdictional performance. Each inspection imposed, however briefly, a relation of submission not only by the arriving ship but also between the harbouring territory and the tribunal. The act had force even when nothing was found, because its function was not repression but recognition. In this sense, the visitation was a practice of presence. And presence, in an early modern composite monarchy, where institutions constantly negotiated their position, was never neutral, was a claim.

1. Mobility and Jurisdiction: Reframing the *Visita de Navíos*

The *visita de navío* emerged gradually in the second half of the sixteenth century, developing from royal and inquisitorial provisions designed to control the circulation of printed matter. In 1550, Charles V ordered that all books shipped to the Indies be registered at the port

[10] See A. Brendecke, *Imperium und Empirie. Funktionen des Wissens in der spanischen Kolonialherrschaft*, Böhlau, Cologne, 2009; F. Bethencourt, *The Inquisition. A Global History, 1478-1834*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009; T. Herzog, *Ritos de control, prácticas de negociación. Pesquisas, visitas y residencias y las relaciones entre Quito y Madrid (1650–1750)*, Fundación Hernando de Larramendi, Madrid, 2000; Ead., *Frontiers of Possession. Spain and Portugal in Europe and the Americas*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2015; P. Cardim, T. Herzog, J.J. Ruiz Ibáñez and G. Sabatini (eds), *Polycentric Monarchies. How Did Early Modern Spain and Portugal Achieve and Maintain a Global Hegemony*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton, 2012.

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of departure, requiring royal officers to ensure that no volume left the kingdom without prior inspection. This provision was reiterated and expanded by the *Ordenanzas* of 1552, which prohibited the shipment of unlicensed books, instructing officials «*que no consientan pasar a las Indias libros profanos ni historias fingidas*»[11].

The initial royal concern with printed material was soon extended to ships themselves. Although the earliest provisions focused on regulating printed matter, the first explicit order to inspect ships predates the later inquisitorial instructions. On 9 October 1558, Philip II issued a royal decree commanding that vessels arriving in Atlantic waters be searched to prevent the introduction of prohibited literature. The order required that ships be inspected upon arrival and that no cargo be disembarked before examination, stipulating that «*se visiten todos los navíos que llegaren a los puertos de la mar para que no traigan libros prohibidos*»[12]. The decree made ship inspection a formal obligation and linked it directly to the repression of heresy. In those years, fearing Protestant infiltration and the formation of clandestine groups, local judges of faith in maritime towns. above all in the international port of Seville, extended their vigilance to the inspection of ships and crews, following orders issued by the Inquisitor General[13]. These inspections, however, were carried out only sporadically and with a certain degree of voluntarism, rather than as part of a stable institutional procedure. The surveillance of maritime frontiers and the procedures to be followed in the inspection of vessels calling at imperial and Spanish ports attracted constant attention from both the Crown and successive Inquisitors General. On several occasions they intervened directly, issuing instructions to local tribunals, and urging peripheral officials to carry out ship inspections with diligence and regularity[14]. In 1585, cooperation between royal and inquisitorial

[11] See C.A. González Sánchez, P. Rueda Ramírez, *«Con recato y sin estruendo» cit., pp. 474-475.*

[12] AHN, Inq., lib. 248, f. 88r-v.

[13] A specific example illustrates the climate of vigilance operating in Andalusian ports in these years. In the first months of 1562, the Flemish vessel *El Ángel*, arrived from Antwerp and inspected at Cádiz, led to the prosecution of twelve members of its international crew, who were subsequently sentenced in the *auto de fe* celebrated in the same year. See G. Civale, *«Con secreto y disimulación». Inquisizione ed eresia nella Siviglia del secolo XVI*, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, Napoli, 2007, pp. 270-273.

[14] The discovery of clandestine Protestant conventicles in Valladolid and Seville in the late 1550s prompted sustained royal and inquisitorial intervention. Between 1558 and 1612, no fewer than two royal decrees (*cédulas reales*) and thirty-three *cartas acordadas* were issued to reinforce vigilance over maritime routes and prevent the spread of heretical ideas. See V. Pinto Crespo, *Inquisición y control ideológico en la España del siglo XVI*, Taurus, Madrid, 1983, p. 99.

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officers in port inspections was formally regulated. Treasury officials were instructed to assist inquisitorial commissaries when ships were suspected of carrying prohibited material, and notaries were required to record the proceedings in writing[15]. At the same time, commissaries received more detailed procedural instructions. Inspections were to be conducted in the presence of the *maestre* and *piloto*, and witnesses were to be examined separately to prevent collusion.

Despite injunctions from Madrid, practice remained uneven. Contemporary complaints stressed disorders and abuses in how tribunals executed ship inspections, which varied by period, local geography, ministers, and overlapping civil jurisdictions. Examples from Mexico, Seville and northern ports like Bilbao illustrate the diversity of on-the-ground arrangements, rather than a uniform routine. By contrast, the Canary Islands preserve serial visitation records from 1570 and show continuity to 1798, making them the best-documented laboratory of the practice[16].

What seems to unify these manifestations was their reactive character, as inspections were triggered by suspicion and political concern. The transition to seriality began in the opening decades of the seventeenth century. Instructions complained that «la mayor negligencia está en los puertos» and urged tribunals to record the result of inspections, inaugurating what would become a culture of systematic reporting. Yet this evolution was far from linear. Local conditions, the varying strength of civic and mercantile bodies, and the differing degree of cooperation between Holy Office's delegates and municipal officers all shaped how such mandates were implemented. What emerged, rather than a uniform bureaucratic model, was a repertoire of adaptive practices, provisional, negotiated, and often dependent on the initiative of individual commissaries.

Gradually, the practice also acquired a financial dimension. By the late sixteenth century, inspectors had begun to collect *derechos de visita*, small fees charged to shipmasters for each inspection, ostensibly to cover administrative costs.

These payments soon attracted criticism in Madrid, where they were viewed as a potential source of abuse, and the *Suprema* issued repeated circulars urging restraint. It eventually moved to proscription, explicitly forbidding the collection of such fees on the grounds that they compromised the integrity of the procedure and exposed inquisitorial

[15] Cédula real of 18 january 1585, cited by C.A. González Sánchez, P. Rueda Ramírez, *«Con recato y sin estruendo» cit., p. 486.*

[16] J.C. Galende Díaz, B.Santiago Medina, *Las visitas durante los siglos XVI y XVII cit.*

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officers to allegations of venality[17]. In practice, despite repeated attempts to impose uniformity from the *Suprema* and from the district inquisitors, conscious as they were of belonging to a single organization extended across multiple territories, the norms were continuously reinterpreted on the ground. Commissaries adjusted to economic pressures and local expectations, transforming official prescriptions into workable arrangements that allowed the system to function despite chronic scarcity of funds. They were not salaried officers and local tribunals often lacked sufficient funds to maintain routine operations. What central authorities condemned as irregularity or excess frequently represented, at the local level, a mode of negotiation that sustained both the presence and legitimacy of inquisitorial power[18]. Although officially discouraged, the collection of *derechos de visita* continued to be tolerated, particularly in financially strained districts. As a result, the fiscal implications of the *visita de navío* did not replace its original purpose but contributed to its persistence by embedding it in the ordinary functioning of inquisitorial administration.

Within this architecture, the Kingdom of Sicily occupied a structurally ambiguous position. Established in 1487, the Inquisition operated at the intersection of royal sovereignty and local negotiation and represented a peculiar form of power. While other organs of governance were either strictly "national" or structurally amalgamated through forms of shared administration with the local elites, the Inquisition resisted hybridisation. Drawing on a broad auxiliary base of Sicilian *comisarios* and *familiares*, it preserved a Castilian core. Its structured, highest offices remained in Spanish hands, its officials were appointed through Iberian channels, and it maintained an unbroken chain of dependence upon the *Suprema* in Madrid. In the Sicilian administrative landscape, it was the only institution that retained unequivocal Spanish identity and jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the *Concordia* of 1597, which regulated jurisdictional relations between the Holy Office and the secular authorities, had in practice curtailed the tribunal's supremacy within the island's political landscape. Consequently, directives issued from Madrid required local reinterpretation, as the Inquisition sought to reassert its authority after the conflicts with Sicilian institutions that had marked the

[17] *Instruciones del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición, sumariamente antiguas y nueuas, puestas por abecedario por Gaspar Isidro de Argüello, oficial del Consejo*, Imprenta Real, Madrid, 1630, f. 21r-v.

[18] On these adaptive and negotiated dimensions of the *visitas de navío* in the Basque ports under the jurisdiction of the Logroño tribunal, see H. Sonkajärvi, *Kommissäre der Inquisition an Bord. Schiffsinspektionen in Vizcaya ca. 1560-1680*, in A. Brendecke (Hg.), *Praktiken der Frühen Neuzeit. Akteure, Handlungen, Artefakte*, Böhlau, Köln, 2015, pp.177-186.

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sixteenth century. As elsewhere in the Monarchy, practice evolved not through codification but through negotiation and custom. It is in this context that the *visita de navío* assumed a significance that exceeded its procedural form.

By the early seventeenth century, it was accepted, though never formally legislated, that the tribunal of Palermo possessed the faculty to inspect foreign vessels upon arrival, administer the customary oath concerning prohibited books, and seize illicit material when necessary. In practice, however, the procedure encountered persistent resistance. Port officials obstructed the operation, crews and passengers often disembarked before inquisitorial officers reached the quay and foreign captains were reluctant to recognise the jurisdiction of the Holy Office. In 1602, the inquisitors of Sicily drew the attention of the *Suprema* to the difficulties they faced, noting that such disorder also eroded the dignity of the Holy Office, since, as they observed, «se pierde mucha autoridad». To remedy this situation, they requested authorisation to equip the tribunal with a «chalupa», enabling officials to intercept vessels before they docked and to prevent disembarkation prior to inspection. They further proposed that shipmasters should contribute to the cost of this equipment through the payment of *derechos de visita*, as was already customary in Spain, arguing that without such funding it would be impossible to maintain an effective service. Finally, in order to reinforce the public authority of the procedure, they proposed that inspections should not be conducted by local commissaries alone but should always include a notary, accompanied by *familiares* of the Holy Office, so as to ensure both legal formality and visible coercive capacity[19].

This proposal, however, still operated within the traditional delegated framework, in which inspections were performed by commissaries acting as peripheral agents of the tribunal. Yet, in the years that followed, Sicily moved in a different direction. The use of a boat to board vessels before docking was soon abandoned in favour of a fixed inspection point at the harbour, and the structure of the procedure itself was reorganised. Instead of reinforcing delegation, the tribunal progressively dispensed with it. The *visita de navío* was no longer entrusted to commissaries and *familiares*, but was executed by salaried officers of the Holy Office, based since 1603 in the nearby Palazzo Steri.

[19] «Pues para que çessen estos inconvinientes y otros, conbendrá que aquí aya notario con título y salario y familiares, y que se pueda dispensar con que no sean tassados por la nesçesidad que ay, constando de su limpiesa y de su buen juyzio y assiento; y con esto tendrá el comissario la authoridad que combiene y será tenido, obedescido y respetado en los mandamientos tocantes al Santo Offiçio, y assí mismo se deve señalar salario al familiar». The inquisitors of Sicily to the Council of the *Suprema*, 7 December 1602. AHN, Inq, Lib. 883, ff. 270r-271r.

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This marked a structural transformation. What elsewhere in the Monarchy remained a delegated act became, in Palermo, a centralised function of the tribunal. Ship inspection was integrated into the regular activity of the secretariat and carried out by officers directly bound to the tribunal rather than by auxiliaries. The Sicilian Inquisition absorbed the inspection service into its own administrative core. This was not a minor adjustment but a deliberate reconfiguration of jurisdiction and an assertion of control.

2. Routine as Power: The Functioning of Palermo's *Visitas de Navíos*

In seventeenth-century Palermo, naval inspection became a ritual of jurisdictional visibility at the maritime threshold of the kingdom. The port was a dense administrative arena, governed by overlapping magistracies – royal, municipal, customs, health, and military – whose jurisdictions intersected and frequently competed. Within this environment, the visita *de navíos* shared important procedural elements with other administrative genres that regulated maritime mobility. Alongside royal and municipal officials, the *Secrezia*, the *Tribunale di Sanità* and *Deputazione del Molo*, military officers, and the consuls of foreign merchant nations all exercised forms of oversight, sometimes converging and at other times colliding[20]. In this crowded institutional landscape, inquisitorial visitations resembled both customs documentation and the travel reports produced by health offices. Like the *fedi* released by medical authorities, they required captains to declare their route, crew, passengers, cargo, and encounters at sea, turning maritime circulation into concise and standardised narratives of movement. As in the case of the health office, whose officers patrolled the harbour in small boats to intercept arriving vessels and guard against potential sources of infection, these procedures were designed to protect the city's threshold with minimal disturbance to commercial rhythm[21].

[20] The harbour of Palermo was administered by multiple and often overlapping authorities: the *Deputazione del Molo*, the *Secrezia* or customs office, the *Magistrato di Sanità*, the *Maestro Portulano*, the royal Arsenal, and the military command of the Castello a Mare. O. Cancila, *El tráfico en el puerto de Palermo en la primera mitad del siglo XVII*, in L.A. Ribot García, L. de Rosa (eds.), *Naves, puertos e itinerarios marítimos en la época Moderna*, Actas, Madrid, pp. 283-304.

[21] On the functions and multiple uses of Mediterranean sanitary institutions, see P. Calcagno, D. Palermo (a cura di), *La quotidiana emergenza. I molteplici impieghi delle istituzioni sanitarie nel Mediterraneo moderno*, New Digital Press, Palermo, 2017. For examples of the use of health-office travel reports and customs documentation in maritime history, see Giuseppe Felloni, *Organizzazione portuale,*

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The Inquisition, installed at the Marina, operated among these authorities rather than above them. The presence of its officers at the harbour did not merely certify the absence of prohibited books; it established that foreign vessels entered Palermo under inquisitorial control and thereby acknowledged the authority from which that scrutiny derived. For this reason, the Sicilian *visita* was an instrument of authority, sustained by regularity. The very straightforwardness of the procedure was likely the result of deliberate simplification, meant to avoid delays and friction with the other port magistracies.

The register of ship inspections conducted in Palermo between 1643 and 1663 permits a serial reconstruction of the *visita de navíos* in its concrete form. Across all the surviving entries, what emerges is a remarkably stable juridical ritual, reduced to a concise but enduring structure: a sworn interrogation (*juramento*), a succinct questionnaire of six points concerning origin, cargo, crew, and passengers, concluded with the formulaic denial of prohibited books and the signature, authenticated by an officer, binding ship and crew to inquisitorial jurisdiction. A standard example is the inspection carried out on 30 March 1643 by the notary Juan de Velasco on the Genoese polacca *San Miguel Arcángel*, arriving from Naples and commanded by «Pantaleo Vissi», an illiterate captain:

> En Palermo, a 30 de marzo de 1643, yo, el infrascrito secretario, en compañía de don Vicente Cossença, salí a la cala desta ciudad a visitar una polaca llamada *San Miguel Arcángel*; y habiéndole dado al patrón el juramento acostumbrado, prometió de decir verdad en lo que le fuere preguntado.
> Preguntado al patrón cómo se llama, dijo llamarse Pantaleo Vissi, natural de Génova.
> Preguntado de dónde viene la polaca, dijo que de Génova, y ha dos meses que partió y ha tocado en Nápoles.
> Preguntado qué mercancía trae, dijo que vidrios, vaquetas y ladrillos de Génova.
> Preguntado si trae algunos libros, dijo no traer ninguno.
> Preguntado cuántos marineros trae, dijo que veinte, todos conocidos, y diez pasajeros, cuatro frailes y los demás milaneses.
> Preguntado si trae otra mercancía, dijo que no, para el juramento que ha hecho; y por no saber escribir hizo una cruz, la que dijo reconocería por firma al tiempo que sea necesario.
> +
> Ante mí,
> Don Gerónimo de Velasco, secretario[22].

navigazione e traffici a Genova: un sondaggio tra le fonti di età moderna, «Atti della Società Ligure di Storia Patria», XLIII-1, 2003, pp. 337-364; G. Buti, *L'Intendance de la Santé de Marseille au XVIIIe siècle: service sanitaire ou bureau de renseignements?*, in *La quotidiana emergenza* cit., pp. 187-212.

[22] *Ibidem*.

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The set of questions posed in Palermo is almost identical to those used in other inquisitorial *visitas de navío*, but the resemblance ends there. In the Canary Islands the visit was performed on board and the questionnaire administered to two or three witnesses before a full inquisitorial entourage composed of a commissary, a private notary, an interpreter, and several *familiares*. Its outcome was later recopied into a ledger that also recorded the small *derechos de visita* paid by each captain. Almost the same procedure appears in the few surviving records of the tribunals of Mexico and Logroño, and in the more complete Portuguese collections. In Palermo, by contrast, the act took place on the quay, before the tribunal's own officials, and was entered directly into the working register, closed solely with the shipmaster's signature. The record reveals a procedure of constant brevity and formality, a bureaucratic script of obedience, repeated almost unchanged over decades. Its persistence marks the consolidation of a functional script whose purpose was to register presence. Even the formula concerning books, «preguntado si trae cosas que sean contra nuestra santa fe cathólica», followed an unvarying pattern[23]. In roughly 10% of the surviving entries, it disappears altogether, without correction or comment. The omission point to the marginality of doctrinal scrutiny within the practice. When the question was asked, the answer was invariably «no trae libros sospechosos», and the record usually ended there. The act of inspection, as written, contains no evidence of verification of cargo or actual inspection: its essential function was to produce submission through institutional formality. What endured, then, was not the policing of heresy but the discipline of repetition, the small, routine performance through which inquisitorial jurisdiction reaffirmed itself day after day.

Except for the two occasions already mentioned, when the inquisitor himself presided over the inspection, the procedure was conducted either by the secretary of the tribunal alone or by the secretary accompanied by a chaplain of the *secreto* or a *portero*, occasionally both[24]. In his absence

[23] Like, for example, in the *juramento* registered by Lorenzo de la Guardia on 9 May 1660. *Ibidem*.

[24] Within the inquisitorial hierarchy, the *secretario* (or notary) occupied a position of considerable authority, responsible for drafting procedural acts, recording depositions, managing correspondence, and overseeing much of the tribunal's internal administration. Together with the inquisitors and the *fiscal*, the *secretarios del secreto* were the only officers granted access to the secret archives, and thus formed the documentary backbone of the institution. Distinctions among titles, such as *secretario de secuestros*, attested for don Lorenzo de la Guardia, and *secretario de juzgados*, for don Juan de Rettana, reflect specific functional competences within this administrative elite. For a general discussion of the minor inquisitorial officers, and especially of notaries and their differentiated functions, see J. Contreras, *El Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en Galicia (1560–1700). Poder, sociedad y cultura*, Akal, Madrid, 1982, pp. 235-298. The quantitative series were constructed within an unpublished thesis defended under the author's supervision, and have subsequently been verified and reworked. See R. Calvello, *Lo sguardo dell'Inquisizione*, MA thesis, Università degli Studi di Milano, a.a. 2017–2018.

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they performed the inspection under an explicit delegation formula recorded in the opening lines of the document. The chaplains, present in 309 of the 527 inspections, served an administrative rather than pastoral role. Their steady participation reveals the adaptability of the Sicilian *visita*, reorganised to ensure continuity with minimal personnel[25]. The *porteros*, mentioned in 230 acts, formed the most distinctive component of this system. In the inquisitorial hierarchy, they occupied the lowest salaried rank, responsible for guarding access to the tribunal and executing orders within the city[26]. In Palermo, however, the office acquired a distinct maritime dimension: when not acting as redactors, *porteros* served as escorts to the principal officer during ship inspections, effectively replacing *alguaciles* or *familiares* in this auxiliary function. Recurrent titulatures such as «portero de la visita de los navíos» or notes specifying that he was «destinato per tale effetto» indicate that some were permanently assigned to harbour inspection, becoming permanent port agents, as the inquisitorial bureaucracy incorporated the quay itself as a space of daily action[27]. The case of Domenico Sasso, who appears in seventy inspections, illustrates both the stability of the practice and its integration into local labour structures[28].

A further feature of the Sicilian *visita* emerges from the language of the records. Each act is written either in Castilian or in Italian, and the alternation follows a consistent hierarchy. When the secretary conducted the inspection personally, the record appears in Castilian, the administrative language of the Holy Office; when the operation was delegated to a chaplain or *portero*, it was drafted in Italian. Of the 527 surviving acts, 315 are in Italian and 212 in Castilian, a ratio that mirrors the dual structure of inquisitorial authority in Sicily of an institution Castilian in origin but reliant on local personnel for its daily

[25] Among the several chaplains who accompanied the secretaries during ship inspections, only two actively replaced them in drafting the acts. Don Vincenzo Cosenza did so for roughly eight months between 1647 and 1648, while Guglielmo Pirelli carried out no fewer than forty-three ship inspections between March 1648 and 6 September 1650, formally acting in place of the secretaries. ASPa, SO, Ric., 190, s.f.

[26] According to Contreras's classification, the *portero* belonged to the group of "subaltern" officers, whose tasks, though modest, were essential to the tribunal's daily functioning. He controlled access to the building, delivered summonses and decrees, and acted as intermediary with the outside world. See J. Contreras, *El Santo Oficio de la Inquisición cit.*

[27] In some cases, as with Francesco Nicosia, the title overlaps with that of *familiar del Santo Oficio*, suggesting a dual role that combined salaried service and peripheral affiliation. ASPa, SO, Ric., 190, s.f.

[28] Domenico Sasso is repeatedly designated as «portere di lu tribunale di la visita di li vasselli», as recorded on 16 June 1662, 18 April 1663, and again on 16 June 1662. *Ibidem.*

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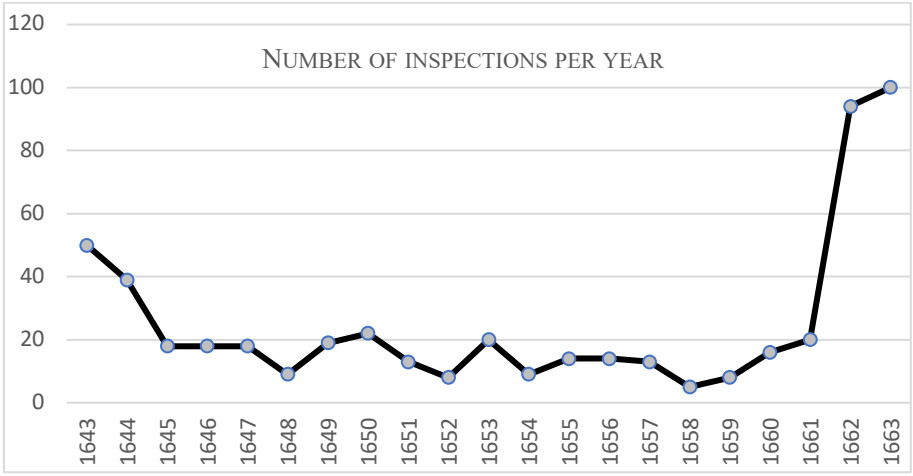
operation. Language thus functions as a marker of rank: Castilian denotes institutional authority and legitimacy; Italian signals delegation and execution.

The temporal structure of the *visita de navíos* is as revealing as its personnel and linguistic form. The Palermo register seems to reveal an administrative rhythm: sometimes attenuated, sometimes accelerated, but never abandoned.



In 1643 the tribunal recorded over fifty inspections, followed by a sharp decline during the next decade, when only five entries appear in 1658. Yet this decrease did not mark institutional neglect, but reflects the personal discontinuities of the *secreto* staff and the episodic nature of bureaucratic zeal. A new cycle began in 1661–1663, when more than a hundred ships were visited within less than two years. The sudden inflation of records, including inspections of small coastal boats, suggests the consolidation of the *visita* into the ordinary administration of the tribunal. What had once been an exceptional act became a repetitive gesture, a steady pulse of inquisitorial presence in the port of Palermo. The decisive variable in the rhythm of visitation was not the number of ships entering Palermo, but the presence – or absence – of the notary. The register reveals a direct correlation between the intensity of inspections and the personal initiative of individual officers[29]. Don Gerónimo Velasco, in office during 1643, personally conducted 82% of all recorded acts that year, establishing a pattern of regular attendance at the harbour. Under Don Joan de Vela

[29] The register contains acts drawn up by six notaries of the Holy Office; one of them, don Francisco Pérez, appears only once, on 21 May 1648. *Ibidem*.

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(1643–1647), the number of inspections declined sharply, and the secretary himself appeared in only 13% of cases, delegating almost all operations to chaplains and *porteros*. His successor, Don Francisco Andrés (1644), briefly restored a higher level of activity, before another period of decline under Vela. The turning point came with Don Lorenzo de la Guardia (1656–1663), whose tenure dominates the second half of the register. Under his direction, the number of inspections rose markedly, from 57 in 1656–1661 to 194 in 1662–1663, though his personal presence diminished over time, reflecting an increasingly delegated but continuous system of oversight. This personalised administration demonstrates two structural facts. First, the *visita* depended on the voluntary engagement of local officers who chose to inscribe inquisitorial presence at the harbour. Second, the surge of inspections under De la Guardia coincided with a broadening of scope: visits were extended to smaller vessels (*tartane*, *feluche*, *barche*) previously excluded from scrutiny[30]. The expansion was not driven by doctrinal anxiety, for by these years the *juramentos* contain almost no reference to religious control. Rather, it reflected the pursuit of systematic coverage of maritime mobility. What had begun as a selective check on foreign ships evolved into a comprehensive ritual of jurisdiction, encompassing the full spectrum of seaborne movement, however modest. While the tribunal's ordinary judicial activity experienced a period of marked contraction, the *visitas de navíos* came to function as a compensatory assertion of authority, an institutional ritual performed at the maritime threshold of inquisitorial jurisdiction.

3. Ships and Shipmasters under Inquisitorial Scrutiny

The Palermo visitation register (1643–1663) shows that the selection criterion for interrogation was extremely simple: any commercial ship arriving from outside the Kingdom of Sicily was subject to inspection, regardless of its origin, allegiance, religion, or prior contact with Spanish inquisitorial ports. This emerges from the language of the acts themselves, where the reason for inspection is almost formulaically justified by the phrase «vino de fuera deste Reyno». In an entry recorded by

[30] During the tenure of Lorenzo de la Guardia (1656–1663), the register records a total of 194 inspections for the years 1662–1663 alone. Of these, 115 (59.2%) concerned *tartane*, 40 (20.6%) *vascelli*, 16 (8.2%) *navi*, 13 (6.7%) *petacchi*, 7 (3.6%) *polacche*, and 3 (1.5%) *barche*. Compared to the preceding period (1643–1661), when 331 inspections were distributed across 64% *vascelli* and only 3.6% *tartane*, the shift is striking. Under de la Guardia, the inquisitorial inspection extended systematically to smaller coastal craft, transforming what had previously been an episodic procedure into a comprehensive mechanism of harbour surveillance. *Ibidem*.

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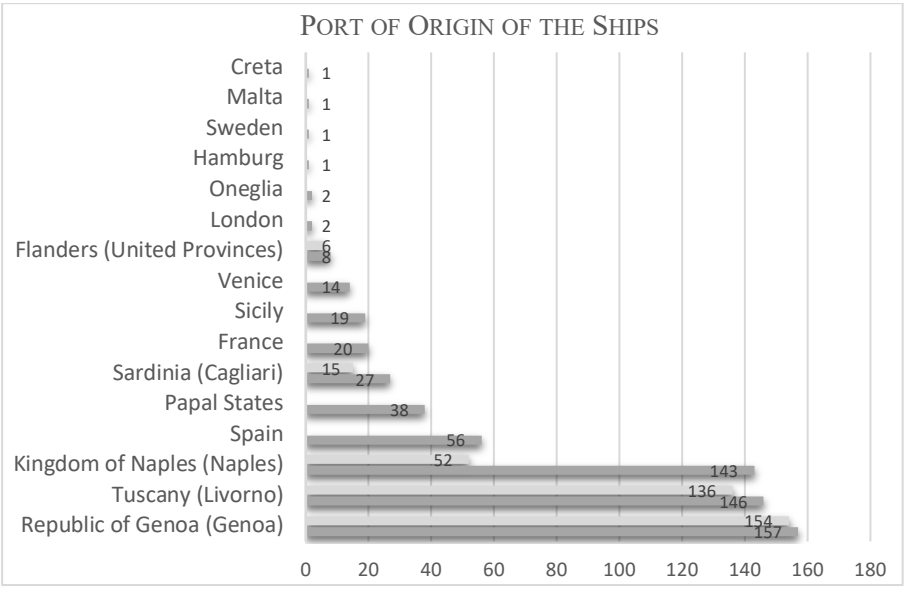
Don Juan de Rettana, the secretary notes having gone to the quay «a visitar un Patache que vino de fuera Reyno»; similarly, Don Lorenzo de la Guardia writes of a vessel that «vino de fuera deste Reyno», without specifying any suspicion or denunciation[31].

The graphic of port departures confirms this systematic approach[32]. Ships were inspected whether they came from Marseille, Genoa or Livorno, but also from Majorca, Cartagena, Barcelona, Alicante and other ports already under inquisitorial jurisdiction. In total, 102 ships (16%) came from Spanish havens, yet they were inspected again as soon as they docked at Palermo's port. The case of the *Lanterna Dorata*, arriving from Cartagena in 1645, and the flemish *Nostra Signora della Vittoria*, commanded by «Giacomo Seriche» of Amsterdam, coming from Alicante at the end of 1649, illustrate this repetition of control despite previous exposure to inquisitorial procedure[33].



[31] Inspection of 19 September 1655; first visit of 5 May 1656. *Ibidem*.

[32] Even when the vessel was clearly of northern European origin, the records usually mention only Mediterranean ports of transit rather than the ship's native harbour. This may reflect the long-term presence of northern vessels engaged in intermediary trade within the Mediterranean or, in some cases, the captains' choice to declare the first Mediterranean port of call – often Iberian – to indicate prior inquisitorial inspection. Twenty-nine cases meet these conditions, explaining the small number of northern ports recorded (twelve out of 636, 1.88%) despite the large proportion of foreign ships and captains. *Ibidem*.

[33] *Ibidem*.

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A similar logic governed the treatment of vessels from Naples. Although the kingdom was subject of the same Catholic monarch, 22.5% of recorded port entries in the Palermo register originated from Neapolitan harbours such as Vietri, Gaeta, and Naples itself. These ships, were inspected with identical formality, and 35 Neapolitan captains, along with 3 vessels explicitly identified as Neapolitan, appear in the register, almost all between 1662 and 1663. Altogether, nearly 40% of ships came from ports within the Monarchy, confirming that the *visita* operated on a strictly territorial criterion of arrival. Formulae in the acts themselves make this principle explicit: vessels are described as arriving «de fuera reyno» or «de fuera deste reyno», even when they had merely crossed from one dominion of His Catholic Majesty to another[34].

In later period, even ships already operating within Sicilian waters were not exempt from inspection. Nineteen acts concern vessels that had previously docked in Sicilian ports before entering Palermo. The rule of inspection did not coincide with a frontier function but followed circulation itself, applying equally to internal coastal routes. In such cases, ships engaged in short-range trade of grain, timber, or hides were inspected as if coming from abroad. Eleven of these came from Lipari, but eight arrived from Termini and Milazzo, both Sicilian coastal towns. In the act of 2 August 1658, Don Lorenzo de la Guardia explicitly records that a *tartana* arriving from Termini was inspected on arrival in Palermo even though it had not left Sicilian territory[35].

If the ports of departure reveal a wide geographical spectrum, the nationality of the shipmasters provides clearer insight into who, in practice, came under inquisitorial scrutiny. The information regarding the origin of vessels is incomplete, but the nationality of captains is almost always recorded, allowing a comparative reconstruction of those who most frequently encountered the *visita*.

A first striking element emerging from the data is the so-called braudelian *Northern Invasion*: the progressive penetration of vessels and shipmasters from the Atlantic ports into Mediterranean traffic. Their presence in Palermo reflects a broader seventeenth-century phenomenon well known to maritime historians[36].

[34] Inspection of 19 September 1655 and first inspection of 5 May 1656. *Ibidem*.

[35] *Ibidem*.

[36] For a critical reprisal on the "*Northern Invasion"*, more than fifty years after Fernand Braudel's *Mediterranée*, see M. Greene, *Beyond the Northern Invasion: The Mediterranean in the Seventeenth Century*, «Past & Present», n. 174, 2002: pp. 42–71; C.J. Heywood, *The English in the Mediterranean, 1600-1630: A Post-Braudelian perspective on the "Northern Invasion"*, in M. Fusaro, C.J. Heywood and M.S. Omri (eds.), *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel's Maritime Legacy*, Bloomsbury, London, 2010, pp. 23-44; Or a more recent

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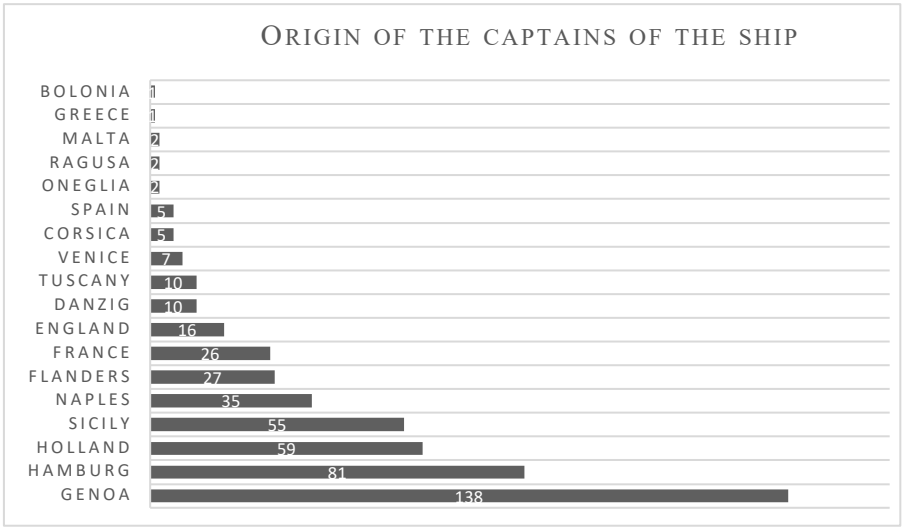

In the Palermo register, Genoese captains remain numerically predominant (138 cases), but they are followed closely by Dutch and Flemish (86 combined) and by Hamburgers (81).

Together these three groups account for more than 60% of all foreign shipmasters inspected. Often, these northern captains operate as regular participants in Mediterranean trade. Their vessels circulated for years within the basin, often between Genoa, Livorno, Venice, and Palermo, handling intermediate exchanges rather than long-haul routes. The repeated appearances of certain ships, such as the Flemish *León Rosso* captained by the Hamburger «Silvestro de Gasparo», recorded three times in 1643 arriving from Genoa, Venice, and Livorno, or the already mentioned *Lanterna dorata*, also of Hamburg, regularly sailing between Genoa and Palermo between 1643 and 1648, illustrate this pattern[37].

reflection on the topic, see Ead., *Political Economies of Empire in the Early Modern Mediterranean: The Decline of Venice and the Rise of England, 1450–1700*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015.

[37] Inspection of 27 August 1647 of a *nave flamenga* commanded by a Hamburg captain arriving from Sweden with «40 marinari flamenghi di Svezia e di Danimarca»; inspections of 22 March 1648, 10 October 1648, 17 February and 10 June 1649 of the vessel *Il Conte Guglielmo*, under captain «Giacomo di Francesco», who in the first case declared himself English and in the following three as "naturale fiamengo"; inspections of 23 March 1643, 12 September 1644 and 29 June 1647 of the ship *Li tre valenti di David* (*Los tres valientes de David*), commanded by «Adriano di Nicolas», first recorded as English and later as Flemish; as well as the inspections of 19 September 1655 and 5 May 1656. ASPa, SO, Ric., 190, s.f.

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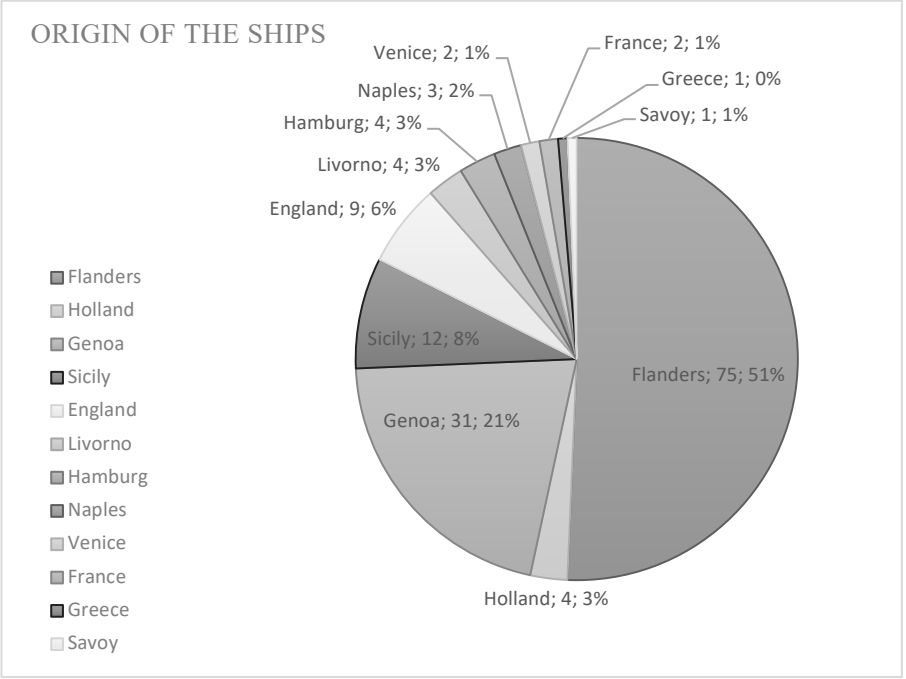
These ships, northern in origin but Mediterranean in operation, did not supplant local trade networks so much as integrate themselves into them, occupying spaces once dominated by Genoese tonnage and adapting to existing commercial rhythms.



A remarkable discrepancy emerges between the number of ships and the number of captains identified as Flemish. While 75 vessels are designated as "from Flanders", only 27 captains bear that qualification. The opposite occurs with Hamburg: 81 captains are recorded as natives of the imperial city, yet only four ships are registered as "from Hamburg". This divergence reflects the loose and often interchangeable use of ethnonyms in the register. The term "Flemish" (*flamengo*) functioned as a generic label for anyone originating from northern Europe between the Low Countries and the Baltic. Many entries explicitly describe captains as «flamengo natural de Amburgo» or similar formulations. The breadth of this designation is revealed by the inspection of a *nave flamenga* on 27 August 1647, commanded by a Hamburg captain who had sailed from Sweden after seventy-nine days of navigation with a crew of «40 marinari flamenghi di Svezia e di Danimarca»[38].

[38] *Visita* of 27 August 1647. *Ibidem.*

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In other cases, nationality was ambiguous or changed over time: the ship *Il Conte Guglielmo*, commanded by «Giacomo di Francesco», was registered four times between 1648 and 1649 – first as English, later as Flemish[39]; while the vessel *Li tre valenti di David*, under captain «Adriano di Nicolas», appeared initially as an English ship, before being listed in 1644 and 1647 as Flemish[40]. Such fluctuations show that the same vessel could shift linguistic and political identity according to circumstance.

The generic "Flemish" label often concealed captains and crews from the United Provinces, whose ships were only explicitly defined as "Dutch" (*Olandese*) from 1649 onward, precisely after the year in which the peace between Spain and the rebel republic was concluded. From that moment, Flemish designations virtually disappear from the Palermo records, replaced by references to «Olanda». The same prudence may have governed the occasional claim of Hamburg origin, which served as a convenient fiction for northern captains seeking to navigate safely within Spanish waters. Indeed, Hamburgers are almost entirely confined to the 1640s and vanish thereafter, a pattern that nonetheless confirms their substantial presence in the Mediterranean during those decades.

The opening decades of the seventeenth century had seen a partial softening of inquisitorial practice at sea. The treaties with England and the Twelve Years' Truce with the United Provinces included clauses protecting merchants and sailors. Yet the 1640s and 1650s, marked by renewed wars and the reassertion of Habsburg power, saw the restoration of routine visitation even towards allies. The nationality of the sailors enumerated by their captains reveals that, despite earlier treaties, northern crews were subject to the same procedures as all others. The tribunal had to obey the logic of international politics and to respect commercial pragmatism, avoiding disruptions to trade even when conflict resumed: an attitude encapsulated in the case of the merchant «Dominico Sey», whose punishment, as the act records, was mitigated «por el comercio y interes de los mercaderes»[41].

The Genoese, the group most frequently encountered, were also among the closest political and economic partners of the Spanish Crown. Their persistent appearance in the register confirms their commercial centrality rather than any confessional suspicion. Genoese vessels, such as the *San Miguel Arcángel* of the already mentioned «Pantaleo Vissi» inspected in 1643 and the *Nostra Signora del Soccorso*

[39] Inspections of 21 January 1648, 4 May 1648, 26 August 1648, and 25 August 1649. *Ibidem*.

[40] Inspections of 12 September 1644 and 29 June 1647. *Ibidem*.

[41] Marginal note to the *juramento* of 21 May 1658. *Ibidem*.

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e San Giovanni Battista commanded by «Battista Murcio» on 8 February 1644, often transported goods and passengers across well-established Ligurian–Sicilian routes[42]. Genoese captains appear steadily throughout the two decades of records, without sharp fluctuations.

In comparison, Sicilian and Neapolitan ships formed a much smaller contingent. Sicilian captains constitute 11.3% of those identified by origin, and Sicilian vessels 8.1%. Their presence extends throughout the twenty-year period, increasing only in 1662 and 1663, when twelve and eleven Sicilian shipmasters appear respectively. These were inspected as vessels returning from foreign ports, and therefore subject to the principle of «vino de fuera deste reyno». Among them were ships engaged in ordinary commerce with Italian harbours, such as Livorno or Genoa, transporting grain, hides, or timber. Subjects of the Spanish Crown from the Kingdom of Naples received the same treatment. 35 Neapolitan captains and 3 Neapolitan vessels appear in the register – almost all between 1662 and 1663, corresponding to the expansion of the *visita* to smaller ships such as *tartane* and *polacche*. Earlier Neapolitan traffic likely went unrecorded due to the more intermittent activity of the 1640s and 1650s. Neapolitan vessels were typically small and employed in short-range circuits between Sicilian and Neapolitan coasts. The fact that they were inspected with the same formal procedure as all other ships shows that the Palermo tribunal applied its authority uniformly to all arrivals, whether foreign or domestic. Overall, 19.6% of those inspected were subjects of the Spanish Monarchy (Sicilians and Neapolitans combined), confirming the bureaucratic rather than confessional logic of the inspections. The *visita* thus operated not as a national or confessional border, but as a mechanism of jurisdictional presence over maritime movement itself.

4. Ports, Routes, and Maritime Geography of the Visitas

Although neither complete nor exhaustive, the Palermo visitation register makes it possible to reconstruct the maritime geography and trade itineraries converging on Sicily during the mid-seventeenth century. The documentation shows that inquisitorial inspection was closely interwoven with regional seaborne networks and the patterns of Mediterranean commerce. Such information is particularly valuable, since the *responsali*, the customs records of the *Secrezia*, preserved in the Archivio di Stato of Palermo, do not specify the precise origin of ships and goods from abroad who entered in their ledgers.

[42] *Ibidem.*

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The ships subjected to the *visita* reflect a system dominated by medium and small tonnage, engaged largely in coastal and cabotage trade. Most vessels were *tartane*, *feluche*, *polacche,* designed for short and medium-distance traffic[43]. These vessels were often used for the intense and flexible exchange of goods between neighbouring ports; still, some of which were of substantial tonnage and could also cover longer routes. The few references to large vessels in the register were exceptions, confirming that Palermo's commercial life rested on regional rather than intercontinental circuits. Yet two remarkable cases stand out: one *vascello* commanded by the Fleming «Angelo Croppo», arriving directly from Flanders after eighty-four days at sea, and another, the *San Jusepe* under the Genoese captain «Geronimo Gosuzo», sailing from Cartagena with a cargo of wool bound for Venice[44]. These exceptional voyages underscore, by contrast, the essentially regional scope of Palermo's trade.

The documentation, in fact, confirms that Sicily in this period did not generate autonomous long-distance trade, but functioned within a redistributive system connected to larger commercial centres. This picture aligns with the quantitative trends established by Gotteri for the early, and Cancila for the mid-seventeenth century, showing that the intensity of Palermo's traffic fluctuated while remaining structurally dependent on external markets[45].

The pattern of arrivals follows the same logic: variation reflects less inquisitorial initiative than the commercial season, warfare, and political conjunctures shaping maritime connections.

[43] The term *vascello* seems to have borne both a specific and a generic meaning in inquisitorial parlance. Judging from the known crew sizes, *vascelli* were generally among the largest merchant vessels, comparable to those labelled *navi*. Even allowing for two smaller outliers, about 86% carried at least twenty sailors and 44% more than thirty, which places them firmly within the category of medium-to-large merchantmen. The similarity of pattern among ships classified simply as *navi*, (and the interchangeable expressions "*vascello seu nave*" or "*petacha seu vascello*", suggest that inquisitorial officers used *vascello* as a generic label for large sailing ships. By contrast, *polacche* of 800-1,000 *salme* usually had crews between ten and nineteen, *tartane* almost always under twenty, often fewer than ten, and *petacci* mostly in the ten-to-nineteen range. No record mentions the visitation of a *galera*, naval or otherwise, though such craft must have entered Palermo's harbour. For a definition of the various types of vessels in use, see G. Bertoni (a cura di), *Dizionario di marina medievale e moderno*, Reale Accademia d'Italia, Roma, 1937.

[44] Visits of 29 October 1654 and 7 March 1663, ASPa, TO, 190, s.f.

[45] See N. Gotteri, *Gens, navires et marchandises à la douane de Palerme (1600-1605)*, «Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire», n. 81-2, 1969, pp. 783-860; O. Cancila, *El tráfico en el puerto de Palermo cit.*

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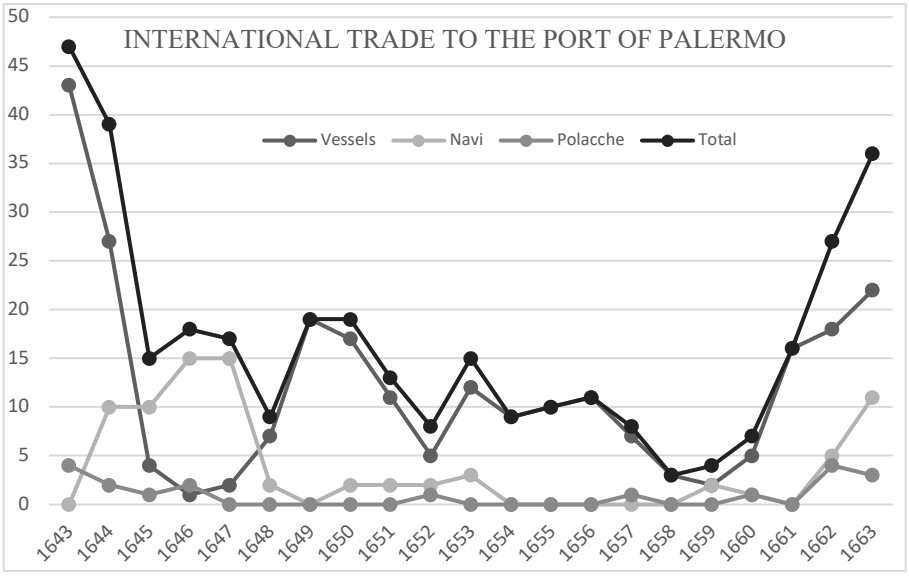

The monthly distribution of inspections shows that inquisitorial activity mirrored the seaborne calendar. The highest concentration occurred between May and September, coinciding with optimal sailing conditions and the peak of grain exports, while from January to March maritime movement declined sharply, producing a parallel reduction in inspections. The register thus reveals a practice governed by the rhythms of maritime life itself. Ships reached Palermo in waves, driven by harvests, prevailing winds, and regional demand for Sicilian wheat, the island's most strategic export[46].

At a broader level, the evidence situates Palermo as a "node" rather than a hub, a port of transit integrated into Mediterranean routes without dominating them.

Its most frequent connections formed a triangle with Genoa, Livorno, and Naples, each structuring Sicilian trade in distinct ways. Beyond these, as already noted, Palermo maintained regular though secondary routes with Barcelona, Cádiz, Alicante, Majorca and Marseille, and intermittent links with northern Europe through Flemish, Dutch, and Hamburg shipping. Before analysing briefly individual regional routes, it is important to note a constant: the inquisitorial presence at the harbour intersected but did not alter this maritime geography. Ships continued to arrive according to the logic of trade, and the Inquisition

[46] On the "colonial" features of Sicilian maritime traffic in the early modern period, see O. Cancila, *Impresa redditi mercato nella Sicilia moderna*, Palumbo, Palermo, 1993, pp. 233-284.

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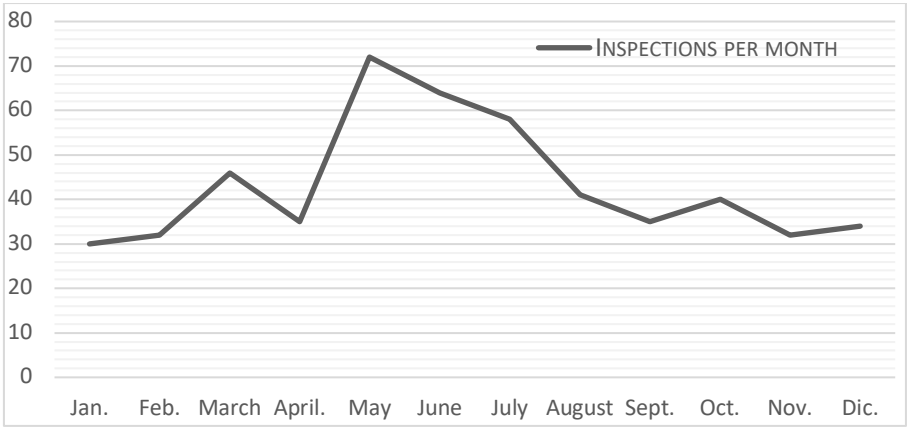
followed and never obstructed the commerce[47]. Had the tribunal attempted to enforce intrusive searches or interrogate intention, the visit would have generated resistance and conflict. Instead, by restricting itself to a minimal yet inescapable rite, the tribunal transformed the harbour into a stage of visibility.



Within the network of ports connected to Palermo, Genoa is confirmed in the register not only as the most frequent point of departure but also as the most structured and continuous commercial relation maintained by Sicily during the period under examination. The regularity of Genoese traffic reflects the historical integration between the Ligurian maritime republic and Sicily, rooted in long-term contracts for grain provisioning, credit mechanisms, and commercial intermediation between Sicilian producers and wider Mediterranean markets[48]. As repeatedly confirmed by economic historians, Genoa maintained privileged access to Sicilian grain, exported to Ligurian ports to compensate for the structural insufficiency of local agricultural production[49]. The *visitas* registers confirm this pattern through

[47] See G. Maifreda, *Sant'Officio e mercatura nell'Italia moderna: questioni generali e problemi aperti,* in *Mercanti, eresia e Inquisizione nell'Italia moderna*, «Storia Economica», XVII, 2014, pp. 15-42.

[48] A comprehensive discussion of the commercial, economic, and cultural exchanges between Genoa and Palermo in the early modern period lies beyond the scope of this study; reference may be made instead to the seminal works of E. Trasselli, *Mediterraneo e Sicilia all'inizio dell'epoca moderna*, Pellegrino, Cosenza, 1997; Id., *Genovesi in Sicilia*, «Atti della Società ligure di Storia patria», n. IX-2, 1969, pp.155-178.

[49] For instance, between 7 and 9 April 1643, two flemish *vascelli* arrived at Palermo from Genoa completely empty, declaring that they were to load grain for the *Superba*. ASPa, TO, 190, s.f.

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their frequency of national and foreign captains, who were not merely transient sailors but stable agents in Sicilian trade, often reappearing several times within a single year and maintaining enduring links with local merchants and magistrates.

The rhythm of Genoese trade with Sicily, however, was not uniform throughout the period covered by the register. The 1640s marked a phase of contraction, affected by recurrent shortages, the disruptions of war, and the financial instability following the revolts in Naples and Sicily. Fewer Genoese ships reached Palermo in those years, reflecting both the reduced purchasing capacity of Ligurian merchants and the insecurity of maritime routes. Yet by the early 1650s the connection had recovered its intensity. The reopening of credit channels and the renewed demand for Sicilian grain, driven by demographic and commercial recovery in Liguria, restored Genoa's presence to its former prominence. A temporary slowdown can again be detected around the mid-1650s, when the intensification of privateering and the military operations unfolding in the eastern Mediterranean made navigation more hazardous, but by the early 1660s the traffic had regained stability[50]. Genoa served simultaneously as final destination and redistribution port. Ships left Ligurian harbours laden with textiles, metalware, oil, and capital, and departed Palermo carrying grain, salted tuna, sugar, and leather, the produce of Sicilian agriculture and coastal industries[51]. Yet the Genoese route was frequently interme-

[50] The inquisitorial visits also allow the fluctuations of Genoese trade to be measured with unusual precision. Between 1651 and 1659, large vessels from the Republic appeared only eight times out of 104 recorded inspections, just 7.7% of the total, thus confirming, almost exactly, the quantitative trends identified by Cancila and Grendi. Yet the point of maximum contraction seems to fall in the 1650s rather than the 1640s, as Cancila's broader data set includes departures not only for Sicily but also for Apulia. The decline in Genoese arrivals reflected above all the reduction in Sicily's grain and silk exports and attests to the wider crisis of the Palermo harbour during those years. The devastating plague that struck Genoa in 1656–1657 further depressed maritime traffic, contributing to the temporary collapse of exchanges between the two ports. See E. Grendi, *La repubblica aristocratica dei genovesi*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1987, p. 318; O. Cancila, *El tráfico en el puerto de Palermo cit.*; P. Calcagno, F. Ferrando, *Tra tutela dell'ordine pubblico e salvaguardia delle manifatture. La peste di Genova del 1656-1657*, in P. Fontana, L. Nuovo (a cura di), *Il cardinale Stefano Durazzo. Esperienza diplomatica e servizio pastorale*, CLV Edizioni, Roma, 2019, pp. 117-147.

[51] The cargoes recorded in the visitation register indicate only the frequency of goods, not their quantitative volume. Three product groups dominate, together accounting for 73% of all mentions: textiles, metals, and paper. Textiles appear in 147 cases (36%), mostly *baiette* and *saie*, but also generic *panni* and *tele*, attesting to the insufficiency of local production and to Genoa's role as a redistribution centre for northern cloth. Metals (91 attestations), chiefly iron, followed by lead and tin, were likewise likely imported from northern Europe and stored in Ligurian

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diate: many captains declared itineraries such as *Genoa-Livorno-Palermo* or *Genoa-Cagliari-Palermo*, employing Ligurian harbours as staging points in broader Mediterranean circuits[52].

Genoese ships also figured prominently among those transporting passengers, underlining their social as well as economic function in connecting Sicily with the wider Mediterranean. Numerous inspections record travellers embarking or disembarking from Genoese vessels, merchants, factors, clerics, and occasional noblemen. In one notable entry, the *San Giorgio*, inspected in 1646, was found to be carrying goods belonging to the Duke of Infantado, newly appointed viceroy of Sicily[53]. The inspection proceeded without exception, confirming that even ships serving the highest officers of the Crown were subjected to inquisitorial procedure in the same manner as ordinary merchantmen.

Alongside the Ligurian corridor, the visitation register records a second, though less continuous, axis connecting Palermo with Livorno. The Tuscan route represents roughly one fifth of all recorded arrivals, an irregular but persistent complement to the Genoese connection. It shares the same mid-century contraction and a partial recovery after 1660: traffic almost vanished in 1648 and again in the early 1650s, before peaking in 1657, when ten inspections (nearly 8% of all that year's entries) concerned ships from Livorno, including four Sicilian vessels that reached Palermo within the same week. The structure of the route was relatively simple: 85% of voyages were direct, while a few included calls at Naples or minor Tyrrhenian harbours. Nationality patterns reveal the northern complexion of Livorno's trade. Alleged Hamburg captains dominate until the Peace of Münster, after which Dutch shipmasters appear more openly; French captains number seven, English three, and at

warehouses. Paper ranks third, reflecting the continued activity of Genoese booksellers in Palermo. Other commodities, salted fish, glassware, spices, and manufactured goods, occur far less frequently but reveal the variety of Palermo's imports and the penetration of northern trade circuits into the Mediterranean.

[52] The Genoese route to Palermo formed a dense yet hierarchised network: 62% (99 out of 159) of voyages were direct, while about 22% (34 cases) included a stop at Livorno, the second most frequent itinerary, followed by scattered connections through minor Italian ports. Larger vessels generally undertook the direct passage, whereas smaller craft preferred itineraries with intermediate calls. Some voyages, however, combined several stops: the *petaccio San Francesco*, captained by «Battista Chiapoli» of Sestri, reached Palermo on 6 October 1655 after calling at Livorno, Porto Ercole, and Ponza, a month after leaving Genoa. Yet even small ships occasionally sailed without interruption, eight *petacci* and five *tartane*, all Italian, declared having arrived *«sin haver tocado en parte alguna sospechosa»*. ASPa, TO, 190, s.f.

[53] Visit of 9 February 1646. *Ibidem*.

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least one, «Francisco Martin», is recorded as resident in Livorno. Cargoes largely mirrored Genoa's imports, textiles, metals, and hides, but with a higher proportion of colonial products, particularly pepper, cinnamon, and tobacco, consistent with Livorno's function as a free port entrepôt[54].

The Neapolitan connection presents a different physiognomy. It accounts for approximately 10% of the series and concerns primarily small craft engaged in short-haul traffic between Sicily and the Campanian coast. Timber dominates the cargo structure (nearly half the attestations), confirming long-standing provisioning ties between the two regions. Many vessels (about one in five) declared themselves empty, in route to load grain or salt in Sicilian ports. In 1656, a Dutch captain, «Martino de Martino», explicitly stated his intention to proceed to Trapani to load salt, while the Trapani shipmaster «Simon Tipa», active between 1643 and 1645, handled horses and naval stores with crews of entirely local composition[55]. The preponderance of small tonnage in 1662-1663 (81% of recorded departures) underscores a commerce governed by repetition and cabotage rather than expansion.

Beyond these principal routes, the Palermo register sketches a wider constellation of Mediterranean connections, but these remained episodic, each representing less than 3% of total arrivals. The rhythm of the Tuscan and Neapolitan traffic, with its contractions in the 1640s–1650s and partial revival after 1660, mirrors the broader oscillations of Mediterranean commerce shaped by war, epidemic, and the reopening of credit networks. In this light, the *visita* series does not portray an economy under inquisitorial control but rather one the Inquisition learned to inhabit. Every inspection followed the cadence of trade, not the suspicion of heresy.

[54] The *fregata Santa Maria Magdalena* (7 June 1659), commanded by «Vincenzo Ysola» of Livorno, illustrates this traffic: a Catholic crew of thirty-three men, carrying cloth and lead, reported a brief stop at Talamone «por huir de unos vageles de corso», a concise reminder of the persistent hazards of Tyrrhenian navigation. Inspection of 7 June 1659. *Ibidem.*

[55] Active between 1643 and 1645, Simon Tipa appears at the helm of three different vessels: the *Nostra Signora del Carmino e Santo Francesco*, carrying two horses as its sole cargo; the *Nostra Signora della Grazia e San Francesco di Paula*, transporting timber and cloth from Vietri; and the *Madonna Santissima di Trapani e San Francesco*, manned by twenty-six Trapanese sailors and sailing in ballast, probably to load grain or salt. The scale and variety of his operations suggest a shipmaster of some standing, possibly connected to viceregal provisioning networks. Inspections of, 14 March 1643, 11 November 1643, 18 July 1644, and 17 September 1645. *Ibidem.*

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5. Beyond Surveillance: The Documentary Logic of Acknowledgement

The contrast between the *visitas de navío* and the judicial production of the Sicilian Inquisition in the same decades confirms this interpretation with empirical clarity. The *relaciones de causas* of the Palermo tribunal reveal the modest judicial scope within which the inspections operated. Between 1643 and 1663 the Holy Office judged over three hundred defendants, only twenty-five of whom were foreigners, roughly 6% of the total[56]. Among these, the presence of Protestants was residual: three foreigners in all. Each appeared *sponte comparentes*, voluntarily denouncing himself to the tribunal to abjure Lutheran or Calvinist errors.

The case of the Norwegian sailor «Erasmo Ulesin», examined in 1651, is particularly revealing. Having arrived in Palermo as a crew member of an unidentified merchant vessel, he was almost certainly listed among the crews declared by captains during the inspection. A few days after disembarking, Ulesin appeared before the inquisitors, declaring his wish to live «como buen católico», although he had been raised by «padres luteranos» and believed «lo que creen los demás contra el Pontífice, la eucaristía, buenas obras y Purgatorio». The inquisitors absolved him and directed him to a convent to be instructed «en las cosas de nuestra Santa Fe». His case illustrates both the reach of inquisitorial reputation and the continuity between maritime inspection and conversion: the *visita* marked the threshold of a jurisdiction into which Ulesin stepped of his own accord[57]. Heresy entered the tribunal's orbit only when voluntarily confessed, never through discovery at the port. The same absence of connection holds for the circulation of books, the very object invoked in the legal justification of the *visita*[58].

The cumulative effect of this pattern is striking. Hundreds of ships and thousands of sailors passed under inspection without yielding a single incriminating find. Yet records transmit no anxiety or frustration, and no institutional impulse to transform the practice into something more intrusive. On the contrary, the inspectors appear satisfied with captains compliant, and the ritual stable. This procedural confidence reveals that the Palermo *visitas* must be understood as an active and repeated mechanism of recognition. The Iberian world was

[56] The *relaciones de causas* of the Sicilian Inquisition for these years are preserved in AHN, Inq., Lib. 902.

[57] *Ibidem*, f. 201v.

[58] Across the entire register, books are declared on only thirty-two ships. They are routinely described as «libros que cree no son prohibidos», often destined for clerical recipients: for the Capuchins of Messina or «para el Provincial de la Misericordia». Inspection of 6 May 1644, 30 July 1659, 15 and 29 May 1662., ASPa, SO, Ric. 190, s.f.

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governed through rituals of control and networks of communication rather than through efficient supervision[59]. The *visita* belonged to this functional order: an act of visibility that transformed observation into acknowledgment and documentation into authority. Its aim was neither to interrogate belief nor to intercept heretical texts, but to compel every ship entering the harbour to recognise inquisitorial authority. The oath transformed maritime arrival into a documented gesture of obedience. That it required no verification was a conscious design: verification would have turned the procedure into an inquiry, risking conflict with secular and maritime authorities, delaying navigation, and burdening commerce. The tribunal instead made the oath both the means and the end of control: truth was declared, not tested. The procedure was built for empowerment, not detection.

As Tamar Herzog has persuasively argued, in the Spanish Empire, records and *visitas* were performative acts that created and stabilised social and legal realities[60]. An official document did not merely register; it authorised, confirmed, and displayed the reach of jurisdiction. It marked the inclusion of persons, goods, or acts within a recognised order, giving tangible form to authority rather than serving as an instrument of administrative efficiency. The value of such writing lay not in the mechanical reuse of data but in its capacity to be reactivated within new proceedings, each reference renewing the legitimacy of both the information and the institution that preserved it.

Within this customary framework, in the routine presence of inquisitorial officers at Palermo's harbour, vigilance took precedence over surveillance. Surveillance evokes a vertical, centralised system of observation that accumulates information to exercise control. Vigilance, by contrast, as Arndt Brendecke has suggested, operated through a more diffuse and participatory process[61]: power emerged from the interplay of testimonies that linked the Holy Office, its agents, and the subjects, merchants, shipmasters, and sailors, who were subjected to inspection. The archive functioned, therefore, as an active interface between inquisitorial governance and maritime society, sustaining a continuous acknowledgment of inquisitorial power rather than a

[59] In this regard, see at least S. Gruzinski, *Les quatre parties du monde. Histoire d'une mondialisation*, La Martinière, Paris, 2004; B. Yun Casalilla, *Iberian World Empires and the Globalization of Europe 1415–1668*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2019.

[60] See, in this regard, the fundamental reflections of T. Herzog, *Frontiers of Possession cit.*, pp. 1-15.

[61] On this point, see A. Brendecke, *Imperium und Empirie cit.*, especially pp. 31-71; A. Buono, *Archiviare per amministrare? A proposito della produzione e dell'uso della documentazione nell'Impero spagnolo*, in A. Buono, M. Giuli, *Archivi del mondo moderno. Pratiche, conflitti, convergenze,* Carocci, Roma, 2020, pp. 65-96.

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system of knowledge. The lists of ships, names, and oaths were not instruments designed to store and perfect information, but devices that made authority visible through performance and writing. Their value lay in the act of inscription rather than in the subsequent use of what was inscribed. Inquisitorial record-keeping remained oriented toward the confirmation of order more than its rationalisation. The *visita de navío* thus belonged to a world where the document recognised rather than informed, and where the archive's power resided not in what it knew, but in what it could compel to acknowledge.

A final episode recorded in the tribunal's correspondence seems to offer an involuntary confirmation of these arguments. In March 1700, the inquisitors of Palermo informed the *Suprema* that several French captains, newly arrived in the harbour, had refused to submit to inspection. They justified their defiance by claiming that «los Ingleses, y Olandeses, y todos en Messina y puertos de España entravan libremente sin ser visitados de la Inquisición». The *visita* had functioned for decades as a relational liturgy of authority and submission. When shipmasters ceased to perform their part in that exchange, inquisitorial power was left void. The inquisitors perceived this with remarkable lucidity, warning that such defiance «puede traer consequencias de mucha consideración» not only for the tribunal, but for the entire configuration of Spanish dominion in Sicily and beyond[62]. They sensed, with the clarity of those who guard ruins, that the Catholic empire of which they were custodians was collapsing.

In Messina, the most vital of Sicilian ports, as if enumeration itself could restore authority, the local commissary sought to salvage the tribunal's dignity by compiling a meticulous inventory of all inspections conducted between 1665 and 1698: «vaxeles y naves sesenta y quatro, tartanas ciento y veinte y dos, Polacas ocho, Pataches siete, barca una, botes o lanzinos cinco, saicas dos, pingue uno». Yet the very register that once documented routine subjection served to record its end. What had been a ritual of empowerment became the archive of its own disappearance. In doing so, the commissary unwittingly inverted the logic of those records: for the first time, he used them not anymore to reproduce authority but to document its loss, transforming the ritual archive into an instrument of administrative knowledge.

The *visitas de navío* had been acts through which inquisitorial power was constituted by being acknowledged. Without recognition, that power vanished.

[62] Inquisitors of Sicily to the *Suprema*, Palermo, 24 March 1700. AHN, Inq., Leg. 2300, exp.1. I am grateful to Luigi Giorgio for having drawn my attention to this document.

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