

Nicholas Walton, *Genoa "La Superba"*. The rise and fall of a merchant pirate superpower (London: Hurst and Company, London, 2015)

*Genoa is just a name for a place; the Genoese are an interesting people. Liguria is arguably the most isolated region of Italy, along with Sicily and Sardinia. The Genoese tend to go their own way in their view, ahead of their fellow Italians, to whom this simply confirms the reputation of the Genoese for being an arrogant and aloof people. [...] Genoa led in the rise of capitalism, slavery, and colonization in the Middle Ages, international public finance in the sixteenth century, poor relief in the seventeenth century, republicanism in the nineteenth century. [...] Genoa marched to the proverbial beat of its own drummer.*

These quotations, taken from the Preface of another book about Genoa, can easily represent all the *topoi* of Genoese history that can also be found in this short introduction to the Ligurian capital. *Genoa "La Superba"* is an enjoyable mix of history, analysis, anecdotes and portraits of some Genoese historical figures (Andrea Doria, Giuseppe Mazzini, Giuseppe Garibaldi). This is not (only) a tourist guide and clearly not an academic book. In less than 220 pages, Nicholas Walton provides a vivid portrait and an accurate short biography of a City - forgive me the oxymoron - well-known for being unknown. Or - if not unknown - at least underrated.

Genoa and his historical relevance seem to have gone unnoticed largely because of the pride (some would say arrogance) of its inhabitants. It may seem paradoxical, but it is probably true. Locked between a harsh orography and a deep sea, Genoa managed to rise from obscurity to one of the richest and most powerful European city-states. Devoted mainly to financial and commercial interests, the Genoese played a key role in European history until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, during this time, Genoa remained largely a Republic of families, based on clans and tribal relations, and on the primacy of the private over the public: a peculiar political body whose key institution was the powerful Bank of Saint George, a unique financial organization which combined government function and the running of a public bank. Perhaps because of this mix of pragmatism, economic soft power, near-Calvinist austerity and a characteristic egocentric pride, Genoa remained for centuries in the shadow of the other historical Italian cities, such as Rome, Florence and its secular nemesis, Venice. Today, even if its role has been recognized by historians, Genoa remains largely underrated by the broader public.

*Genoa "La Superba"* can be particularly appealing to those interested in discovering Genoa and its history, since it provides a useful and quick guide for beginners. The book spans ten centuries, from the rise of the Genoese thalassocracy, during the First Crusade, to the present days, including the financial golden age in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the industrial era

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between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Roberto Sabatino Lopez once said, a city is, first of all, a state of mind. In this sense, some excursus to “ethnological” aspects (such as a chapter devoted to the pesto sauce, a symbol of cultural identity, or another devoted to the Genoese attitude towards football) can be a useful way for introducing the reader to the “spirit” of the city. In the same way, some apparent oversimplifications (such as the definition of Andrea Doria as “the Steve Jobs of the Mediterranean”) can be considered as useful analogies for exemplifying - for a broader public - a much more complex historical reality.

Nicholas Walton sketches the history of a “merchant pirate superpower” with a brilliant, humorous and sympathetic style. Indeed, due perhaps to his familiar ties with Genoa, Walton shows throughout the pages of this book some display of Genoese pride, such as in the pages dedicated - not surprisingly - to the *Museo navale* of Venice, full of scale models from the golden age of transatlantic shipping:

*Again and again, the ships catch the eye with their elegance and that special aesthetic only generated by mechanical and industrial ingenuity. The Conte di Savoia is there, as is the Cristoforo Colombo - the sister ships of the Rex and the Andrea Doria respectively. Other names are just as evocative, like the Virgilio and the Michelangelo. It was an era when Italy began to take on the industrialised giants of the Western world, and do it in style. But again and again, the ships displayed in the museum in that great Adriatic city carry the name of its Tyrrhenian rival across their sterns: GENOVA.*

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