

RETAILERS AND CONSUMER CHANGES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Meeting Demand: Retailing Strategies in Early Modern Venice

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The history of retailing and consumption is relatively underdeveloped as far as late medieval and early modern Italy is concerned. While Renaissance Italian consumers have seen a recent surge in interest among historians and art historians, we still know comparatively little about the systems of supply which catered to their needs. Guild statutes, on which much of the work done on Italian cities has hitherto been based, create a static and hierarchical image of urban retailing which bears little resemblance to the turbulent reality of daily commerce. This paper emphasises the dynamic nature of retailing structures in early modern Venice, highlighting their responsiveness to an economy which was constantly developing and yet continued to be vulnerable.

The rhetoric of Venetian guild documents, and of the government which supported the organisations which generated them, describes a fixed and hierarchical pyramid of urban retailers. Established retailers with shops at the heart of the Venetian metropolitan economy form the pinnacle at the top of this pyramid, whereas pedlars - traders without premises who wandered around the city shouting their wares - were relegated to the bottom. Recent research undertaken on unregistered and informal participants within the early modern medical marketplace has exposed the problems associated with this type of theoretical model. Detailed study of Venetian retailing practices encourages similar conclusions. It not only reveals that retailing strategies tailored to meet changing demands were practised by traders at both ends of the commercial hierarchy, but also that the strategies adopted by pedlars were particularly attuned to developments within the market for consumer goods in Venice. Knowledge of these strategies encourages us to form a very different view of Venetian retailing and this will be the focus of this discussion.