

# The Decline of the Arte dei Mercatanti di Calimala in Sixteenth-Century Florence: What the 1561 Data Can Tell Us

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## The Arte dei Mercatanti di Calimala: A Brief History

The earliest record of the Arte di Calimala guild is from 1180s and, at its origin, the guild was created in order to represent Florentine merchants conducting business abroad.<sup>1</sup> It is believed that the name “Calimala” is derived from the original location of the residence and offices of the Guild which were situated on the Via di Calimala, close to the Mercato Vecchio.<sup>2</sup> The Arte di Calimala is also referred to as the Arte dei Mercatanti or the Arte dei Mercatanti di Calimala and the coat of arms of the Arte di Calimala is the golden eagle perched on a log against a red background.<sup>3</sup> The Calimala guild was comprised of merchants and bankers who specialized in importing rough foreign cloth from England, Flanders, and France, finishing and dyeing the cloth, and then exporting the finished product throughout Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Levant.<sup>4</sup> The employees and agents of the Calimala guild were exclusively contracted to buy and sell foreign-made wool cloth and, thus, were not involved in the production of domestic wool.<sup>5</sup> Wool was a staple industry in Florence, particularly in the early history of the city and the Arte di Calimala was particularly prosperous in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup> Sales were only allowed to take place inside the shops of the Calimala which was done in deference to the Wool Guild (Arte della Lana) so as not to be a direct rival in the sale of woolen cloth and clothes.<sup>7</sup>

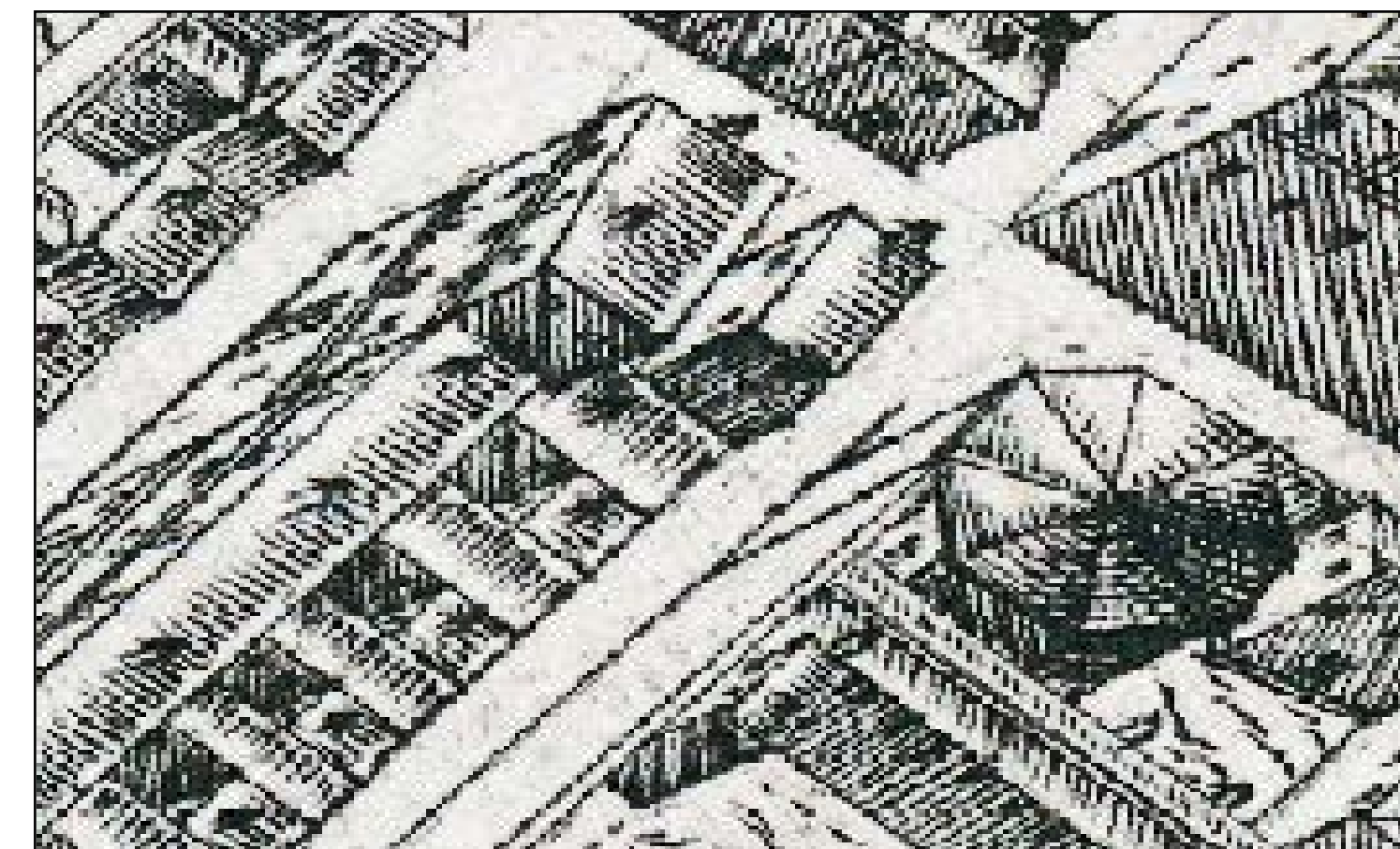
Toward the end of the fourteenth century, the commercial focus shifted from the import-export practices of the Arte di Calimala to the local production of high

- 1 Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 109, 484.
- 2 Edgecombe Staley, *The Guilds of Renaissance Florence*, (London: Methuen & Co, 1906), 105-106
- 3 Staley, *The Guilds of Florence*, 105.
- 4 Goldthwaite, *Economy of Florence*, 270.
- 5 Staley, *The Guilds of Florence*, 115.
- 6 *Ibid*, 106; Ferdinand Schevill, *History of Florence*, (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1961), 211-212;
- 7 Staley, *The Guilds of Florence*, 115.

## The Rotonda degli Angeli di Brunelleschi: A Case Study in Artistic Patronage

The Arte di Calimala had an illustrious history of artistic and public patronage.<sup>1</sup> The construction of the Rotonda di Brunelleschi, also known as the Rotonda degli Scolari or the Oratorio di Santa Maria degli Angeli is an interesting example of the Arte di Calimala's physical impact on the Florence cityscape and its role as an artistic patron in Florentine society. The Oratorio di Santa Maria degli Angeli was financed as part of the estate of Andrea and Matteo Scolari.<sup>2</sup> The Arte di Calimala, as the executor of the will of Andrea and Matteo Scolari, was instructed to supervise the construction of some religious or public work.<sup>3</sup> The Calimala consuls received a concession from Pope Martin V and a declaration from Abbot Dini that the funds from the Scolari estate would be used for the benefit of a Calmoldese monastery, in this case, the Monastery of Santa Maria degli Angeli.<sup>4</sup> In 1434, in conjunction with the monks of Santa Maria degli Angeli, the consuls of the Calimala guild decided to construct an oratory dedicated to the Virgin Mary.<sup>5</sup> Filippo Brunelleschi was commissioned to build the oratory and he developed a unique design for an octagonal building with a central plan.<sup>6</sup> However, the building was never entirely completed as the funds being used to build the oratory were re-attributed by the *Signoria* to finance military conflicts.<sup>7</sup>

- 1 Schevill, *History of Florence*, 243.
- 2 Howard Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings*, University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993, [https://books.google.ca/books?id=s1QAtNlm2zwC&pg=PA469&dq=rotonda+di+brunelleschi+arte+di+calimala&hl=en&sa=X&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q=rotonda%20di%20brunelleschi%20arte%20di%20calimala&f=false](https://books.google.ca/books?id=s1QAtNlm2zwC&pg=PA469&dq=rotonda+di+brunelleschi+arte+di+calimala&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=rotonda%20di%20brunelleschi%20arte%20di%20calimala&f=false), 391.
- 3 Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings*, 389.
- 4 *Ibid*, 389.
- 5 *Ibid*, 389.
- 6 *Ibid*, 400-401
- 7 *Ibid*, 390-391



Buonsignori, Stefano. DECIMA. Screenshot, April 15, 2017. <http://utoronto.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=d9692905ff41436d99cf7c398552ca39>.

quality wool and silk that was then exported across Europe.<sup>8</sup> The textile production of the Calimala guild was outstripped by the Arte della Lana as of the early fourteenth century and the Calimala began to experience difficulties with supply from the mid-fourteenth century onward.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the Calimala halted their activities associated with finishing imported textiles.<sup>10</sup> Instead, the Calimala guild focused on producing luxurious fabrics as part of its “San Martino” branch made from English wool and the “Garbo” branch made from lower-quality wool imported from different countries around the Mediterranean.<sup>11</sup> The Calimala continued to produce San Martino and Garbo wool until the 16<sup>th</sup> century when a law was passed in the British Parliament under Henry VIII that prohibited the export of unshorn cloth.<sup>12</sup> This legislation from England would have been especially difficult for the Arte di Calimala since their business was dependent on the importation of foreign cloth.<sup>13</sup> Shortly after, Duke Cosimo I began implementing protectionist policies and, in 1561, he forbade the importation of light woollen cloths from England and Flanders.<sup>14</sup> Although this ban may not entirely have inhibited the flow of textiles between Florence and England, according to Edgcombe Staley, this was a “final and deadly blow” for the Arte di Calimala.<sup>15</sup>

My research interest is to observe what the 1561 Decima data can tell us about the state and importance of the Arte di Calimala in the sixteenth century and whether the 1561 data does, in fact, reflect the decline of the presence and importance of the Arte di Calimala in the Florentine economic and city life as a result of its financial troubles.

- 8 Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 77.
- 9 Schevill, *History of Florence*, 211-212; Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 273.
- 10 *Ibid*, 273.
- 11 *Ibid*, 273.
- 12 Staley, *The Guilds of Florence*, 137.
- 13 *Ibid*, 137-138.
- 14 *Ibid*, 138.
- 15 *Ibid*, 138.

It is interesting to study the DECIMA data of the block connected to the Rotonda degli Angeli di Brunelleschi because, within the same block, three different institutional landholders are present which demonstrates the importance and involvement of institutional landholders in sixteenth-century Florence. Out of the seventy-one properties documented within the block, thirty-three properties belong to three different institutions; the Spedale Santa Maria Nuova owned thirty properties within the block, the Convento degli Angeli owned two properties, and the Arte dei Mercatanti owned one property. The average property value of the block was 26s and the mode was 60s while the average rent price was 22s and the mode was 8s.

For the purpose of evaluating the state of the Arte di Calimala in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Florence, it is interesting to note that, across from the Rotonda and within the same block, stood a house that is registered as belonging to the Arte dei Mercatanti. It was leased a *livello* and there is no record of rent cost. However, the property is valued at 70 scudi. Of all the properties belonging to the Arte dei Mercatanti in 16<sup>th</sup> century Florence, 70 scudi was the highest property value and much higher than the majority of the property values in Florence.

Within the same block as the Rotonda, there are several connections that provide interesting examples of the physical and economic presence of the Arte di Calimala in Florence. I researched the two tenants who lived in the Arte dei Mercatanti building on the Via dei Servi but I was unable to trace them except for Michele di Francesco Banchi who, was recorded in the 1551 data, as living in the Via dei Canacci in Santa Maria Novella and had one servant. In the course of my research, I discovered that there was a Tiratoio called the Tiratoio dell'Aquila in the Via dei Servi that may have been partially owned by the Calimala guild but seems to have been destroyed in 1510 so it does not seem likely that it is the building at the corner of the Via dei Servi and the Via degli Alfani across from the Rotonda.<sup>8</sup>

- 8 Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings*, 394-395.



I, Saiko. “Rotonda di Brunelleschi”. Wikipedia. Accessed April 16, 2017. [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotonda\\_del\\_Brunelleschi#/media/File:Rotonda\\_del\\_brunelleschi\\_12.JPG](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotonda_del_Brunelleschi#/media/File:Rotonda_del_brunelleschi_12.JPG).

## The 1561 DECIMA Data

As stated by Daniel Jamison in his table describing the contract types used by the wealthiest institutional landlords in the 1561 data, the Arte dei Mercatanti di Calimala owned seventy-three holdings valued at one thousand one hundred and seventeen scudi.<sup>1</sup> This means that, according to the values in the 1561 data, after the Congrega di S. Maria del Fiore, the Spedale di S. Maria Nuova, and the Spedale degli Innocenti, the Arte dei Mercatanti was one of the wealthiest institutional landlords in Florence in 1561.<sup>2</sup>

Aside from the total landholdings and financial summaries of the Arte di Calimala, I studied the different occupations of the people who lived in the properties owned by the Arte di Calimala. I wanted to understand the breadth of the Calimala's business interactions and connections to the city of Florence by examining the different levels of society the Calimala may have interacted with, at least on a professional level. To my mind, this allows us to comprehend the connection and presence that the Calimala retained in the city of Florence. According to the Decima data from 1561, the majority of the properties owned by the Calimala appear to be houses that are rented or leased. There is also a *bottega* for stonemasons and one *Hosteria*. In addition, almost none of the most prominent families associated with the Calimala guild appear to live in these properties.<sup>3</sup>

It is interesting to note that none of the residents of the properties “Held By Service” were directly related to the production of textiles and appear to have fulfilled primarily bureaucratic or financial functions. In the data from 1561, a *Maestro dei Cherici* and a *Batte in Zecca* live in houses “Held By Service”. There are thirteen houses owned by the Arte di Calimala that are rented or leased to weavers or *tessitore*. In each case, the tenants pay rent so it is probable that they were not employed by the guild.

One of the properties was rented to La Gina Pisana, a *meretricia*. The 1561 data relates that there were two women living in the house rented by La Gina Pisana. I used the DECIMA Web Map to examine the area in which the house of La Gina Pisana was located and it is surrounded by the houses of other prostitutes. Thus, it is possible that the Arte dei Mercatanti may have been involved in renting out a house that served as brothel.

Thus, in addition to being a well-off institution in Florence, the Calimala guild appears to have been actively involved with a wide variety of different professions and people throughout the city as a large landholder.

- 1 Daniel Jamison, “Shaping the Streetscape: Institutions as Landlords in Early Modern Florence”, in *Mapping Sense, Space and Movement in Florence: Historical GIS and the Early Modern City*, edited by Nicholas Terpstra and Colin Rose, Taylor and Francis ebooks: Routledge, 2016. <http://www.tandfbooks.com/myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/isbn/9781315639314>, 74.
- 2 Jamison, “Shaping the Streetscape: Institutions as Landlords in Early Modern Florence”, 74.
- 3 Staley, *The Guilds of Florence*, 137; see page 137 for a list of prominent families associated with the Arte di Calimala.



Buonsignori, Stefano. DECIMA. Screenshot, April 17, 2017. <http://utoronto.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=d9692905ff41436d99cf7c398552ca39>.

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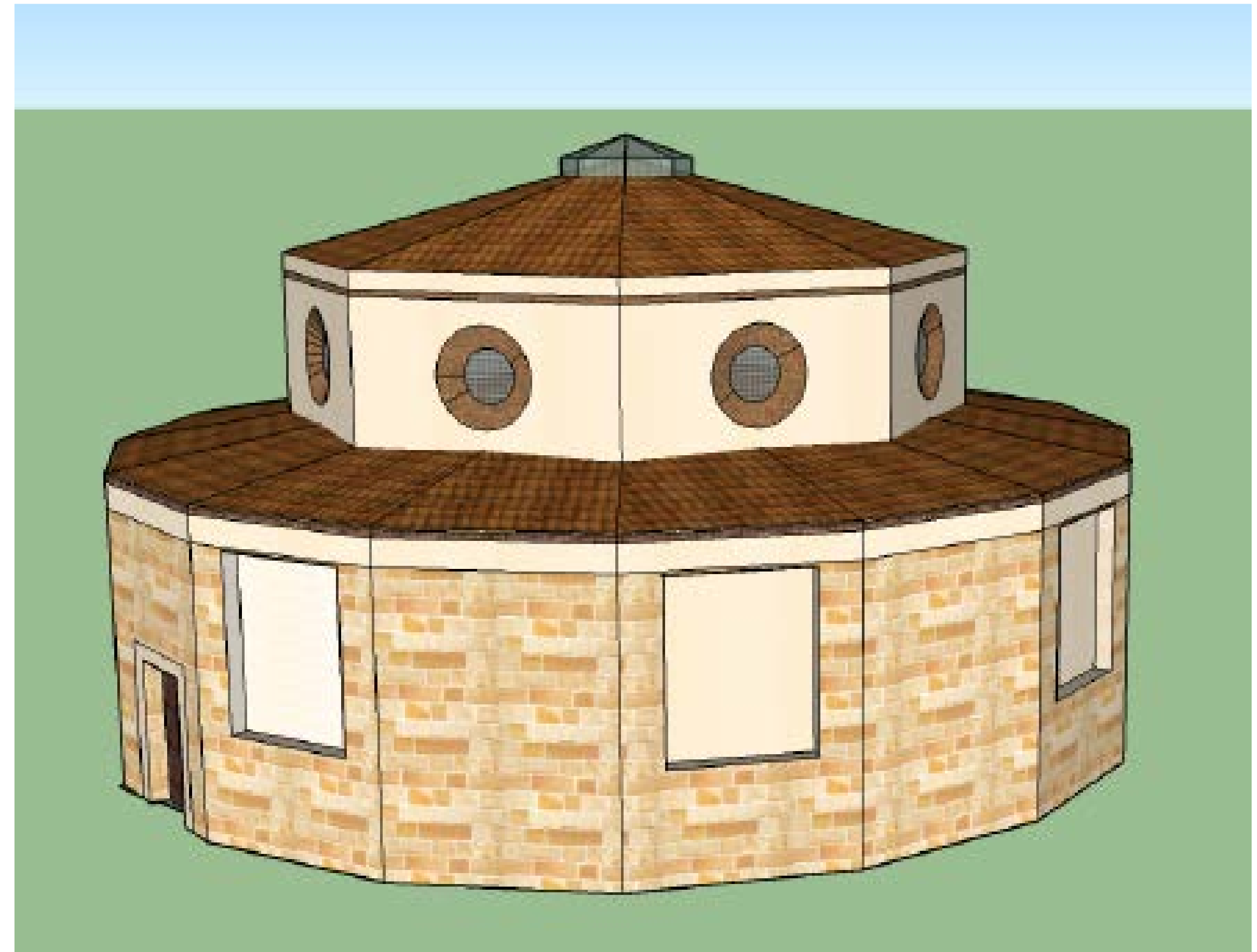
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## Conclusion

The academic literature I have consulted focuses on the financial setbacks that the Arte di Calimala faced as a result of changing interests in the textile markets and production methods and the rise of protectionist policies internationally and locally that led to the gradual decline of the guild.<sup>1</sup> Staley portrays the Calimala guild as heading “slowly but surely” to its death after 1532 but he writes that there is no actual record of the “end” of the Calimala guild.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, institutions are not listed in the 1551 and 1632 data sets so it is difficult to provide any comparison. However, in contrast to the academic literature, the Decima data from 1561 gives us a “snapshot” of a much more optimistic narrative of the state of the Arte dei Mercatanti in the mid-sixteenth century. In addition to its history as a great artistic and public patron and the continued presence of the buildings that it funded and supervised in the Florentine cityscape

- 1 Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 273; Staley, *The Guilds of Florence*, 16; Schevill, *History of Florence*, 211-212, 297.
- 2 Staley, *The Guilds of Florence*, 138.



I, Saiko. “Rotonda di Brunelleschi”. Wikipedia. Accessed April 16, 2017. [https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotonda\\_del\\_Brunelleschi#/media/File:Rotonda\\_del\\_brunelleschi\\_12.JPG](https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotonda_del_Brunelleschi#/media/File:Rotonda_del_brunelleschi_12.JPG).

according to Buonsignori's map, the 1561 Decima data indicates that the Arte dei Mercatanti maintained a powerful physical presence in Florence and the Florentine community throughout the mid-sixteenth century as a prosperous landholding institution and landlord in spite of its economic troubles and the downsizing of its textile production. This could imply that, by the sixteenth century, the Calimala's business was shifting because its commercial prosperity and status may have been directly linked to its landholdings in Florence and its revenue as a landlord instead of solely relying on the profits of importing, finishing, and exporting foreign textiles.

