

“Bill of Exchange”

A short note about these kind of documents

In the 13th-14th centuries the increase in long-distance international trade and the growth of Italian merchant groups with their networks of agents fostered the development of a new commercial instrument: the bill of exchange. An instrument of remittance and credit, the bill of exchange facilitated international payments and transfers between different monetary systems, therefore becoming one of the most important financial and commercial instruments in Europe in the 13th-16th centuries. It was at the Champagne fairs, which offered a privileged space of commercial articulation between the economies of Northern and Southern Europe in the 13th-14th centuries, that the largest European market for bills of exchange was born.

Since the late 13th century the growth of trade between Portugal and the Northern and Southern Europe economies, and especially the presence of foreign merchants (Italian, Breton, Flemish, Castellan and Catalan, among others) most likely contributed decisively to the introduction of bills of exchange in Portugal. Between 1415 and 1500, Portuguese overseas and commercial expansion gave the Portuguese Crown direct and privileged access to African and Asian economies, turning Lisbon into one of the main commercial centres in Europe. This allowed the dissemination of the bill of exchange in the Portuguese capital. Here, in the «Rua Nova» (New Street), one could find a complex business area under municipal and royal regulation, which combined merchandise, insurance, freight and currency.

This particular bill of exchange may result from activities within this specific setting, providing evidence of the existence of commercial and financial relations between Portugal and Rome. Here the Portuguese presence was mainly associated with the Catholic Church and diplomatic missions to the Holy See.