In the sixteenth century, merchants and bankers gained greater social influence and political relevance, due to their capacity of “faire travailler l’argent des autres”. As a way to increase their efficiency, merchants established networks through corresponding agents settled around the globe, with whom cooperative relationships were established. Many Portuguese and international historians have studied different merchant networks throughout the Early Modern period (Braudel, Wallerstein, Gentil da Silva, Magalhães Godinho, among others) and concluded from their studies that the social structures of business operated through the interrelations between different individuals, in different places. Yet none of these historians focused their studies on the concept of cooperation.

One of the commercial hubs in Iberia Peninsula between 1557 and 1597 was the Castilian Simon Ruiz. Trying to improve his profits in his olive oil, spices, indigo, salt and wheat trades, Simon Ruiz started to place trustworthy agents in places vital to his business. He also fostered an informers’ network in places with international relevance in the world of trade and finance – Lisbon, Genoa, Rouen, Rome, Venice and Lyon, but also in India, Brazil and the Spanish...
Indies. The importance of Simon Ruiz’s company was not exclusively trade-related. Medina del Campo was also an important place of exchange where Ruiz the merchant would soon become a banker. Between 1574 and 1588 he was one of the main creditors and asientistas of the Spanish king, Philipp II. In general, this man typified the merchant-banker of the sixteenth century.

First, a little information on Ruiz’s background should be given. His company was not built upon an already-existing family enterprise and neither was it the beginning of a long-lasting business dynasty. In fact, his father was a small dealer in Spanish wool and Simon began his professional career as a small entrepreneur who was an intermediary in the import of French textiles by the French merchant, Yvon Rocaz, from Nantes in the Castilian fairs. The existing studies have not clarified if Ruiz’s elder brother, Andrés, already established in Nantes, had an influence in establishing this partnership. Still, Simon built his business up as a “self-made man” and as he died without direct progeny, a nephew inherited it. Ten years after his death, his name as a merchant died out. The company defaulted in 1606 at the hands of Cosme Ruiz Embito.

Many other historians have studied the company of Simon Ruiz in the last sixty years. Henri Lapeyre has described how he established his company, how the company evolved, the role of other elements of the Ruiz family in Simon’s business activities, as well as his business with France. Contempory studies by Gentil da Silva and Vasquez Prada have underlined the role of the Portuguese partners both in Portugal and in Antwerp, and their role as Simon Ruiz partners in his financial activity, namely in the asientos with the Castilian Crown. Also his business relations with Florence have been studied, linking Simon Ruiz with spices, dying stuff and Spanish wool imports to Italy, as well as to the Genoese fairs and bankers and their silver transportation circuits. These classical studies have revealed the main axes of Ruiz’s commercial and financial activity and have described his preferential agents and partners in different places. More recently, scholars like J.P. Priotti and Oscar Villanueva have used the Ruiz archive to characterize trading networks based on groups of merchants, naturals from certain locations, as Bilbao or Laredo. However, this