Cosmopolitanism on Board Venetian Ships
(Fourteenth-Fifteenth Centuries)

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Abstract
During the Middle Ages the Republic of Venice sought to establish a thalassocracy in the Mediterranean by all possible means. To accomplish this end, succeeding governments used the maritime economy as the spearhead for their expansionist, colonial politics. The creation of a commercial and military fleet of the first order involved the resolution of the problem of recruitment of qualified manpower, available in spite of vicissitudes of conjunctures. The colonial empire had to keep the crews available at all moments. Certainly, the cosmopolitanism of men of the sea was a shared feature of the maritime powers of the time, but at Venice an evident particularism reigned. Numerous new colonial subjects both devoted and loyal—Greeks, Dalmatians, and Albanians—constituted the essential components of the crews, with some contributions from the towns of Terra ferma. Thanks to this effective force, the Republic of Venice never lacked the human resources indispensable to sustain the hegemony of their naval forces in the Mediterranean.

Keywords
Ship, Medieval, Italy, Venice, Crews, Foreigners, Naval History, Europe

In Venice during the whole of the medieval period, maritime economy was the spearhead of politics for successive governments. In the city of the lagoons, the patricians stated repeatedly: “The founding principle of our power, such as it was installed by our ancestors, has always been our navy.”¹ There is no doubt that the fate of Venice was linked to maritime activity! Thus, it is important to assess the degree to which the history and destiny of the republic were determined by the measures taken to remain in the first rank of naval powers. The history of the Venetian navy can be divided into several phases following a long process of evolution and adaptation to


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the whims of economic circumstances and to the enduring conflicts with thalassocratic rivals, Genoa in particular, marked by the terrible hostilities of 1298, 1350, and 1379. It was during these times of trouble that the critical problem of recruitment of ships’ crews reached its height.

The first decisive phase was that of the nautical revolution in which the Venetians participated with dynamism. As early as the beginning of the thirteenth century, after the taking of Constantinople as a result of the Fourth Crusade of 1204, a colonial empire across the seas was created in Dalmatia, Albania, Greece, and later Crete. With the objective to control the sea route to the East and the naval plan of action in place, after the restructuring of the arsenal and the perfection of a legislative machinery adapted to the content of the codes of maritime laws, the development of naval activity grew apace until the beginning of the sixteenth century. A second stage of this growth in the early fifteenth century constituted the apogee of the Serenissima: a colonial empire extending from the gates of the lagoon via the eastern shore of the Adriatic to the confines of the East, a network of commercial trading posts from the Iberian peninsula to the Syro-Egyptian Levant, and especially an exemplary and innovative system of lines of maritime navigation that afforded economic dominance of the transportation systems as well as the circuits of international trade. All of this is well known, and numerous studies have traced the prestigious exploits of a maritime republic envied and combated by its redoubtable rivals, the Pisans, Genoese, and Catalans.

Finally, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, there came a radical change in political objectives to confront the rise of the Ottoman power which, in its turn, wished to dominate the Mediterranean world. In this era, the Venetians were slightly outdistanced by the fleets of their adversaries, and they recentered their activities on the Adriatic, abandoning after about 1520 the pinnacle of their previous achievement—that is, the convoys of merchant galleys of the celebrated mude da mercato.

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