

Rapporti mediterranei, pratiche documentarie, presenze veneziane: le reti economiche e culturali (XIV-XVI sec.)

MEDITERRANEAN RELATIONS, DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES AND THE PRESENCE OF VENICE: ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL NETWORKS (14-16TH CENT.)

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Archival evidence in the study of cross-cultural artistic connections

Abstract

When I first began to explore the documentary evidence for cross-cultural diffusion, the standard histories still focused on times of tension - wars, crusades, commercial disputes and piracy - because these were the frictions that dominated the narratives of official and diplomatic exchange.

However, the more I began to investigate other types of documentation, the more this seemed to present a very one-sided view of cultural interaction in the Mediterranean world.

I soon realised that private correspondence, diaries, pilgrim chronicles, portolans and merchant handbooks painted a very different picture. Some of these were intensely personal accounts intended solely for family members or business partners, while others were copied and re-copied, to be passed down through the generations. Portolans and merchant handbooks were read actively, annotated and updated. Some texts were illustrated with drawings, maps or prints. The fact that so much of this private material has survived indicates that its content seemed worthy of preservation.

In particular, these records suggested that interaction between Italian travellers and Muslims in the Eastern Mediterranean world was both more frequent and more friendly than official documents suggested. Merchants, for example, shared their knowledge and experiences in the market place or on overland journeys. In general they were more open-minded and observant than pilgrims.

The varied documentation recording the experiences of travellers, pilgrims and merchants was not the only source of knowledge about the oltremare. The accumulation of material goods interacted with the written word and the graphic evidence, and indeed objects such as merchandise and souvenirs were often described in the documentation. The home provided a centre for the exchange of such knowledge, as returning travellers showed off their acquisitions and recounted their adventures.

Despite the rich variety of sources, however, careful deconstruction of the information is needed in order to understand the intentions behind each document and the intended audience. There is no such thing as 'correct' evidence - misunderstandings, faulty memories, and invention pervade many of the texts and make their analysis a challenging task.

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