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Dimensioni istituzionali del Commonwealth veneziano (secoli XIV-XVII)

The commonwealth of shipping: Venice's means of restraining a greedy industry from wrecking too many ships

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Abstract

In my recent monograph, I argued that Venice's merchant marine hoisted the San Marco flag. This rule also applied to merchant ships from overseas possessions. Their connection to a city or port was probably also represented in some way. All ships hoisted the San Marco flag, but some were more privileged than the rest. Privileged ships enjoyed favourable fiscal conditions and better freights but had to comply with explicit safety standards and regulations.

The point of departure of this paper is a list of San Marco's merchant ships that were lost in tragic circumstances over seventy years (1480 – 1550). The list suggests that it was "normal" for the Republic to lose one to three big ships and numerous smaller vessels per year. The causes of shipwrecks have to be ascribed to the exploitation of vessels until they were practically half submerged. This state of affairs was partly the outcome of greediness on the part of shipowners and partly the product of circumstances rooted in the DNA of shipping economics. The fact is that overloading, navigation in the winter months, fatigue of equipment, and lack of crew were common causes for shipwrecks. Poor maintenance of port infrastructures or their lack exacerbated the problem.

These numbers might appear relatively high to us nowadays. However, other fleets of the epoch faced similar challenges and experienced recurring losses. Our guiding questions are, therefore, what means were taken by the maritime authorities to restrain the shipping milieu from sinking more ships than the "normal"? What were the mechanisms of shipping governance oltremare? How did strict regulations regarding life and safety at sea permit Venice to preserve its relative advantage in offering competitive shipping services in the Levant until the War of Cyprus? In this way, this paper wishes to unveil another institutional dimension in the *stato da mar* - one we might call the commonwealth of shipping.