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

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Trans- Mediterranean Embargoes: Comparing Venetian and Mamluk Maritime Trade Regimes in the Second Half of the 14th Century

Abstract

This paper will focus on trade regimes with a special focus on embargoes in the context of the Cypriot crusading project culminating in the sack of Alexandria in 1365. While the Papacy re-issued trade embargoes banning commercial contacts between the Latin West and the Islamic East in support of the Cypriote crusade, Venice, in return, imposed embargoes to hinder the enterprise, once it became clear that it was directed against Venice' crucial trading partner- the Mamluks. These competing attempts to impose trade regimes policies will be compared with Mamluk naval policies in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

The question of whether and to which extent the Venetians acted as proxies for the Mamluk Empire (which allegedly did not dispose of significant naval forces) leads to the wider problem of how the regional actors, such as Venetians or the kings of Cyprus in the Mediterranean and the Rasulids or the sharifs of Mecca, designed their naval policies in the face of over-arching imperial claims by the Mamluks or the Papacy respectively. Embargoes and trade regimes thus invite us to reconsider the role of sea borne trade in the process of negotiation between imperial and sub-imperial actors from which emerge early modern states.

Embargoes and hence trade regimes will be analysed at three levels. I will explore how Papal/Cypriot, Venetian and Mamluk trade regimes were formulated, enforced and received against the backdrop of structural change and political developments in the second half of the 14th century:

1. Formulation and justification: The Papal/Cypriot embargoes were justified as part of the crusading effort, while the Venetian and Mamluk embargoes/sanctions including control of the movement of persons (such as the passage of knights on route to Cyprus) were presented as measures to maintain freedom of navigation and trade as well as (imperial) law and order. The Mamluk attempts to control the Red Sea region, however, were connected to the concepts of the Islamic empire and jihâd.
2. Enforcement: Trade regimes could be enforced by maritime/portal policing and juridical enforcement measures taken in the metropolis as well as overseas (e.g. by permanent, hired or conscripted naval forces. Yet both the Papacy and the Mamluk Empire usually would not dispose over such forces and had to police the seas by proxies.
3. Coping: The focus will be on the counter-strategies (dodging and defying restrictions) both on the communal or individual level. Besides illegal (smuggling, false declaration or labelling) also legal countermeasures will be examined. Norms could be challenged juridically or they could be re-interpreted in a more favourable way. Merchants could also try to continue trade while bypassing the norm without explicitly violating it.