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

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Benjamin ARBEL, Tel Aviv University

Life on board Venetian Ships: The Evidence of Renaissance Travelogues

Abstract

To a great extent, and despite reservation expressed by some modern scholars, Renaissance Venice was still a "Maritime Republic". Sea voyages were an integral component in the life of many subjects of the Republic, wherever they lived on land. Therefore, the experience of sea voyage has to be considered as a central element among the various aspects of human existence in Renaissance Venice.

A great number of travellers and pilgrims who sailed between Europe and the Levant have left written accounts of their voyages. During the Renaissance, this literature underwent a process of secularization, reflected in a much greater sensibility and attention to aspects of everyday life. Most of the travellers to the East during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries used Venetian ships, and their descriptions constitute a rich source for examining life on board these vessels.

The ships plying the Mediterranean between Venice and the Levant carried people of different cultural and social background, who were cramped up in a very small space for a period of several weeks. Venetian Ships, especially at sea, can therefore be considered as "closed communities", in which various forms of human interactions assumed a much greater intensity, compared to similar phenomena on land. The very ability of people to share a common space with one another was often put to a test in such circumstances. A few facets of this 'social laboratory', such as accommodation on board, manifestations of social and

cultural differences, culinary habits, the presence animals on board, religious practice, and death at sea, as well as the methods employed to cope with these particular conditions, have been selected for discussion in this paper.