Abstract: Private Shipping in Renaissance Venice, 1480–1550 / Renard Gluzman

Ships, particularly large sea-going ships, were a fundamental component in Venice’s role as a hub of international maritime trade, described by Frederic C. Lane as a “Maritime Republic”. The present dissertation investigates the role of human and non-human actors in shaping the navigations of about 300 such ships that plied the seas during a period of seventy years. More than 15,000 pieces of information scattered over 45 archival series and chronicles were sewed together to build up their biographies, which, in turn, serve to delineate the impact of significant changes—both in the Mediterranean and global scene—on the Venetian shipping economy. The period of interest covers the major geographical discoveries, the rise of the Ottoman Empire as a leading power in the Mediterranean, and the struggle for political hegemony in Europe. These years saw the gradual disappearance of the merchant galley system and a deep economic crisis in Venetian shipping—a crisis affected by such factors as the attrition of private shipping by frequent wars, restrictive legislation, the rise of new maritime powers, and the consequent loss of trade monopolies in the Levant. Statistics on the gradual withdrawal of noblemen from this sector and their replacement by other social groups are discussed on the backdrop of the relative decline in Venice’s position as a leading emporium in the Mediterranean.

**First Part: The Legal, Executive and Judicial Framework (13th – 16th centuries)**

In our modern age international maritime law requires that every merchant ship be registered in a specific country, which is thereafter referred to as its “flag state”. This certificate of origin enables that ship to enter international waters, its ensign providing a form of passport/visa for admission. In Early Modern Venice, the concepts underlying ship registration were quite different than they are now. To date, no scholar has ever attempted to compile a registry of the multitude of ships and smaller vessels that were built and operated in Venice and its overseas territories. The complex statutory framework of Venice is the reason why modern scholars have chosen to largely avoid the complexities of the legal status of private vessels. Even the basic questions have so far remained unanswered: Did ships fly flags at all? Were they perceived as part of the same merchant marine? What was the particular legal status of a colonial ship? How was this treated by port authorities across the borders? Did certain ships have special privileges? And if so, why were these prerogatives denied from others? Did the identity of the shipowner have an effect on the legal status of his ship? In view of this lacuna in our scholarly literature, it is essential to begin here by presenting a basic framework that will hopefully initiate wider discussion and research into the legal status of merchant ships under Venetian rule.

Taking this gap in our knowledge on board, I first argue that the merchant vessels of all Venetian citizens, citizen-subjects, and mere *fideles* flew the San Marco flag (or some local variation of it), and that the rules for displaying the flag were more rigorously enforced in ports than on the open sea. Secondly, it was maintained that the term *navi veneziane* referred to ships built in Venice itself, or in the *dogado* (the surrounding lagoon), while the terms *navi terrièri* and *navi e navilii nostri* refer to the aggregate of commercial vessels under Venetian rule, including those originating in the colonies. Thirdly, I have suggested that commercial vessels were distinct legal entities, some of which enjoyed privileges denied to others. On this score there were two types of concession: 1) privileged shipments, namely, permission to engage in lucrative shipping activities tied to certain destinations and types of cargo; and 2) fiscal advantages, most notably a lower *ancoraggio* tax, plus exemption from the *alboraggio* and the *Levante* duties, along with reduced customs levies for merchandise carried on privileged vessels. I have also argued that by the mid-sixteenth century, ships originating from Venice’s overseas territories of Candia, Zante, Corfu, Sebenico, Zara, Dulcigno, and Curzola enjoyed the same fiscal concessions to which Venetian-built ships were entitled automatically. The territories of Modon and Coron, and possibly Negroponte, enjoyed such privileges before the Ottoman conquest. Ships from other Venetian possessions, including Cyprus (Venice’s largest overseas colony) were not included in this category, and their owners were required to apply for individual privileges. Lastly, notwithstanding the range of vessels and their singular legal status, all ships built in Venetian territories or naturalized were subject to the same sea laws, and were treated as Venetian in foreign ports. The importance of all this becomes clearer when we consider that the identity of a vessel as Venetian was not only debated by jurists and state institutions at varying points in time, but on occasion was also contested by naval commanders, captains, and corsairs at sea. The latter, however, cared much less about the formal legal distinctions, since any ship that flew the San Marco banner was an appetising prey, and whether the vessel had ever cast anchor in the Venetian lagoon was irrelevant to them.

The following chapters examine the shifting of onus among the various institutions for the enforcement of the sea laws, as well as the motives behind the new provisions introduced, and how such policies were negotiated among state institutions, the shipping milieu, and the merchant community as a whole. The documentary background substantiating the discussion at hand are the records of 600-odd sea laws related to the governance of the merchant marine, records I have collated from twenty-three different state archival series covering the years 1480–1550. However, in an effort to present a comprehensive analysis of Venetian maritime authorities and give ballast to my argument, I decided to cast my net wider to cover the fourteenth- and large part of the fifteenth centuries. For this purpose, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century compilations of early laws approved between the 14th and 16th centuries provided useful data on early sea laws. It should be clarified, however, that the changing elements in maritime laws and authorities in the earlier centuries call for a systematic study of the available sources.

As commonly accepted with regard to the judicial sphere, the considerable number of courts in Venice is quite unique for medieval and Early Modern Italy.[[1]](#footnote-1) The subject matter shifts to deal with the multitude of individual administrative and executive agencies related to shipping, which were even more numerous than those concerning the judicial sphere. This very fact underlines the importance of commercial shipping to Venetian life, and the sheer complexity of a sector that necessitated the involvement of so many separate bodies to govern all the different aspects of maritime activity. While navigating through this maelstrom of bureaucratic minutiae, it came to light that the same agencies (often even the same officials) administered both branches of activity – the merchant galleys (totally owned and controlled by the State) and the myriad private vessels. This becomes even more apparent in the early sixteenth century, when the newly formed authority known as the *Cinque savi alla mercanzia* and the *Patroni e provveditori all'Arsenal* assumed sweeping control over the private sector of commercial shipping. Thus, the dichotomy that sees Venice’s merchant marine divided into entirely different categories – public merchant galleys and private ships (a division that recurs in all scholarly works on the subject, and was among the factors prompting this study) cannot be justified from a legislative and administrative viewpoint.

There follows an attempt to define our floating protagonists. My discussion begins by taking a stand on the often subjective nature of classification into types, and the consequent terminological ambiguities. I then argue that Venetian sea laws did not introduce official ratings – nor for that matter unified categories – of vessel type; ship classification was *de facto* privileged-based, and the criteria were set and changed per privilege by the various authorities. As I dredged deeper through the archives, it soon proved necessary to question the commonly accepted classification tabled by Frederic C. Lane, who distinguished between four classes of ships with distinct function, based on their type and hold/cargo capacity.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since I found myself unable to designate any better groupings for the period concerned, I chose to follow all vessels of over 400 *botti* (equivalent to metric tons) that were mostly (but not solely) considered as authorized to engage in voyages outside the Adriatic Sea. It must be however stressed that it would be a mistake to insist on any division of ships into definitive groups with a distinct function that confines them to a particular zone of navigation. As such, the figure of 400 *botti* represents nothing but the state’s own preference regarding the minimum capacity of a carrack-type round ship. Evidently, there were smaller vessels known commonly as “carracks”, and also other types equally large. Furthermore, it became evident that Lane’s designation of *navi grosse* of over 1,000 *botti* ceased to be a valid category in Venetian sea laws after 1490, when Venice officially renounced its aspiration to win a significant market share of the newly opened oceanic shipping routes, in the wake of the Portuguese discoveries.

Shifting our attention to weights and measures, I discuss the difference between overall capacity (that is all space below the exposed deck) and partial capacities (carrying capacity) with respect to a specific type of bulky cargo, such as salt or cereals. After reviewing the official measuring techniques, I propose some alternative means for determining a ship’s effective capacity: 1) by calculating the volume of the cargo according to a system of stowage factors; 2) relying on eyewitness testimonies based on its former voyages. The core of the following discussion is the shifting balance between profitability and safety at sea, the constant tug-of-war between lucre and lives. On this issue, I review the measures taken to police shippers against overloading and overcrowding, a rampant abuse that required state intervention from a very early stage. Contrary to the general conviction, I have argued that throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ships continued to be inspected and duly marked with waterline signs. The fact that the principal magistracy in charge of enforcement changed at least four times over the course of four centuries, suggests that the state was intent on increasing its control, rather than relaxing it. Logically, the daily perils of life at sea – caused by men and nature alike – led to the introduction of other requirements, such as sailing in convoys for better protection against piracy, along with the enrolment of military professionals on board and equipping vessels with adequate weaponry and guns, and so forth. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that, to reduce their operating costs, merchantmen regularly sailed with a reduced quota of crewmen, and the prescribed protection was either insufficient or lacking altogether. The last issue complements a discussion of the fiscal privileges granted to ships regarding the customary impositions in the port of Venice, and primarily at the *dazio dell’ancoraggio* (also called *dazio de’ castelli*).

**Second Part: From Founding to Dissolving a Shipping Company**

The second part of the dissertation follows the shipping enterprise through its various stages, based on primary sources of non-official character, namely, commercial letters, legacies documentations, notarial acts, and private family records. One of the particularities of the organization of the private shipyards in Venice was the requirement that shipowners themselves assume responsibility for construction, including the hire of the necessary workforce and the provision of timber. The process of contracting the captain was another important item on the shipowners’ agenda. These men, many of whom had fabled careers and wide experience on the seas, were highly sought after, and shipowners were willing to grant their captains shares in the ship, and show considerable flexibility with the repayment of any former debts in order to secure their services, thus guaranteeing the profitable outcome of the entire enterprise. Also receiving my scrutiny was the remuneration system for the crew, and I argue that their salaries were only the basic part of the reward they received, and higher-ranking crewmen expecting to supplement their incomes from private trade en route, which could net them up to ten times more than the average salary. To do this they formed joint-ventures with merchants and investors on land, a practice that turned crewmen into co-investors of a sort, as they personally supplemented the freights of the ships they were working on. The system was perhaps tacitly agreed, but certainly symbiotic, as it enabled the operators to keep the crew salaries relatively low, and thus reduce their own operating costs. Another key aspect of maritime activities in Venice was insurance, which has been studied extensively by other scholars. My discussion sheds light on how insurance on freightage was taken out selectively, inasmuch as it varied according to what degree the galleys, shipment, and routes were considered “safe”. Despite frequent shipwrecks befalling the city’s fleet (one or two per year, on the average), it is likely that round ships sailing in convoys along the more infamous routes in periods of relative peace were considered secured. Several other aspects of ship operation, integrating the various specifics with other sections of this dissertation, are then discussed, including the legal implications of general averages and jettison; the unloading procedures in the port of Venice (*libamento*); book-keeping; the balancing of accounts; and disputes resolved by arbitration. The practice of ship-breaking is of particular interest: the dangerous industry of dismantling decommissioned ships and recycling their spare parts has been largely overlooked by scholars. The rare discovery of two contracts for ship-breaking sheds revealing light on this somewhat gruelling activity.

It is worth repeating here some of the arguments made with relation to the services provided by the shipping enterprise:

1. The reliance of the shipping industry on regular freightage: a shortage in demand for shipments invariably led to a reduction in number of ships in service, and of the total volume of tonnage. This somewhat obvious principle provides our guiding compass for the present analysis of Venetian shipping. In truth, the fluctuating tonnage was affected by numerous parallel factors, such as the rising costs of construction (wood supply, manpower), rampant piracy, and shipwrecks – but these were secondary to the plain fact that without freightage contracts, the shipping industry could not thrive.

2. The mechanics of the various services offered by the shipping industry: bulk shipping employed the type of vessel known as a “round ship” that operated entirely according to the demands of the person or group chartering them. Their ports of loading and discharge were specified in the charter, as was the overall cost of the operation, which depended on the supply and demand schedule. On the other hand, liner vessels (ships and galleys) plied fixed routes, working to fixed schedules, and usually with a standard tariff. The most lucrative service in gamut of Venetian shipping ventures was the (twice yearly) *muda*, a flotilla arrangement devised to regulate and rationalize sailing schedules and ports of call, and therefore reduce the overall transport costs. The business module in liner trade was round-trip freightage, whereby merchandise was transported at more or less fixed rates. Further to this, my scrutiny of the archives showed that the special legal status of round ships allowed them to “toggle” between the charter markets and freight carriage.

3. The problem of cargo imbalance on the return voyage from the Levant: A chronic drop in the traffic of bulky cargoes to and from the Near East increased the challenge of sustaining liner shipping along these routes, and prompted the government to intervene by implementing a discrimination in freight rates, whereby the Republic would provide direct backing for round ships by chartering their voluminous hulls to carry a cargo of low-value bulk produce in return for elevated freight rates. This was made feasible by Venice’s near-stranglehold over the trade of staple essentials such as salt or cereal crops in northern Italy, which were priced higher than their actual worth. In this way, the rates on light cargo could be kept relatively low so as to keep the general economy competitive.

Taking a different view, in several instances the late Ugo Tucci argues that shipowning was evidently a critical tool of Venice’s wider commercial activity that would be hard to justify otherwise, given the high operating costs. Scholars who have gauged low profitability from freightage based their calculations on a handful of freight records found in the account books (*sariati*) kept by the ship’s clerk. I explain why this specific accounting tool was not intended as a “proper” record of incomes. What is more, the accounts in question omit that part of the freightage dues collected indirectly by the *Ufficiali all’estraordinario*, who in turn transferred these sums to the shareholders, after tax deductions. Notably, income from the shipment of salt and grain passed through separate magistracies assigned specifically for that purpose. An informed estimate of the real profits from freights would require a thorough investigation at various levels, which is not our case: as a working assumption, I suggest that a 600-*botti* (approx. metric tons) ship employed on a round-trip to the Levant (i.e., for a period of eight to nine months, including the idle time in ports) could yield a gross income of 2,500 to 3,000 ducats from the freightage, a sum that must have been deemed robust and satisfactory, given the evident risks of cashing less. Even though scant, the available information on the voyages to England and Flanders suggests that the expected income from freights on these routes was more than double those in the Mediterranean.

**Third Part: Venetian Shipping During the Commercial Revolution Reconsidered**

Given the protectionist angle of Venice’s policies, the interconnections between shipping, the volume of trade, and the traffic in Venice’s port are relatively more distinguished. For this reason, for nearly a century scholars have attempted to estimate the variations in size and gross tonnage of Venice’s merchant fleet, so as to assess the effects on the Venetian economy of the significant changes taking place both in the Mediterranean and globally. To obtain a more accurate picture of sixteenth-century shipping, the third part of this research reconstructs the merchant marine, focusing on the category of vessels of over 400 *botti*, including those built and operated in the colonies. Drawing on a wide variety of sources containing scattered and fragmentary data on ship movement in that period, I have managed to assemble eight ship lists, each presenting a snapshot of this sector of the merchant marine in approximately ten-year intervals spanning 1480 to 1549. I then discuss the ebb and flow in the gross tonnage, set against the backdrop of the political changes, military conflicts, and economic turmoil of the period.

No statistics of this kind are currently available for the decades preceding the period covered here, although it is fairly evident that Venice’s shipping economy was in distress during the long war with the Ottomans in the 1460s and 70s (1463–79). The sixteen years of attrition triggered inevitable economic repercussions and a corresponding slump in seaborne trade for Venice, and for this reason the year 1463 is regarded as a turning point for the Republic’s economy. Despite the war being over, in the 1480s shipping failed to rally in response to the emerging post-war realities, and seemed unable to secure a foothold in the western sea traffic beyond the Pillars of Hercules. The final decade of the century saw a promising surge in seaborne trade, but this glimmering flame of revival was soon doused by the outbreak of another war with the Ottomans (1499–1503), coupled with the effects of the Portuguese discoveries, the internal War of the League of Cambrai (1509–17), and the dire silting of the port of Venice. This fateful collusion of disparate problems beyond the control of the State plunged Venice’s shipping industry into serious disarray, peaking in *c*.1516. There followed a long period of stagnation, from which Venice did not emerge until the mid- 1540s, when there are signs of an increase in the number of ships being built. The relatively peaceful twenty-five years that followed (1545–70) witnessed a revival of trade, business, and opportunities, such that Venice’s merchant marine eventually exceeded its previous record of size and volume in the beginning of the century. Much had altered, however, new times and events had affected the characteristics of the fleet, with changes also in the composition of the shipowners, the type of vessels being built, the organization of the shipping industry, and the general drift towards a liberalized market.

In their seminal works, the two great historians Fernand Braudel and Frederic C. Lane detailed the triumph of Venice in the sixteenth century, maintaining that by overcoming the grave difficulties it faced, Venetian shipping entered a period of economic growth that lasted until the fall of Cyprus and the battle of Lepanto (1571), when the Republic’s private shipping inexorably ran aground.[[3]](#footnote-3) Without dismissing this scenario entirely, I argue that in the second decade of the sixteenth century the Republic was no longer enjoyed lower costs in furnishing transportation by sea along several lucrative routes. Hence, its protectionist approach became a hindrance rather than an advantage, and the adoption of a laissez-faire policy to shipping had become fulcral to the public debate. In this sense, there is no need to wait for the end of the sixteenth century to come across the full range of government regulatory philosophies: the advocates of liberalized policies in shipping carried significant weight in the arena of political decision-making, and several sectors in maritime shipping were liberalized to maintain Venice’s position as a leading port in the Adriatic Sea (a role that was severely checked during those years). Thus, the dependency of seaborne trade in Venetian shipping was, at least in part, relaxed already in the second decade of the sixteenth century.

The question of the life span of Venice’s ships is of great significance, both for the operators and investors in this sector, as well as for the state. Scholars in this field based their evaluations of an average life span on general impression rather than on any arithmetic calculation, since the number of vessels for which both the date of launching and the date of “death” is provided is too limited to serve as a base for such a calculation. It was maintained that dealing with the question of an average life capacity does not add very much to a better acquaintance of the milieu of Venice’s maritime trade. A more useful evaluation would be to consider four categories of lifespan in economic terms: thus, it was argued that by sixteenth-century observers 11 to 13 years were presumably considered to be ripe old age for a ship. Most round ships were decommissioned or destroyed in tragic circumstances before they reached the age of ten. Therefore, it seems that 8 to 10 years was counted for a respectable life span; 6 to 7 years was short, but still common; and any ship destroyed before the age of 5 was a waste. It was argued that this balance and its direct economic implications must have been very clear to anyone in the treacherous business of shipping.

The last topic addressed in this dissertation is the Venetian nobility’s gradual withdrawal from the entire shipowning and building business during the sixteenth century. I argued that in the early decades of the period treated in this work, the nobility had maintained control over seventy to seventy-five per cent of the fleet of round ships, particularly in the large tonnage sector. The list of ships drawn up for the year 1549 shows that by this date a significant shift in the balance of ownership had taken place: now out of forty privately owned ships of 400 *botti* and more, only eighteen were primarily owned by Venetian noblemen (just under 45%). Even if we assume that a considerable part of the investment in round ships arrived from members of the lower classes or foreigners, still it remained subordinate to the nobility’s continued financial control. So far, at least, there is also no proof to support the idea that Venetian citizens acted as “front men” to enable outsiders access to state loans, or to benefit from lower tariffs and other perks reserved for Venetians. Obviously, such backroom dealings obviously existed, yet the fact remains that while a steady stream of foreign capital was injected into the local shipping economy, the Venetian nobility itself continued to be deeply committed to the entire business of financing, constructing, and operating large round ships.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Nevertheless, this commitment on the part of the higher class was evidently not enough to keep the industry of larger vessels buoyant, and activity plummeted in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Faced with the doldrums, the Senate’s recovery scheme of 1534/5 was an urgent appeal for new actors, a plea for wider civic involvement – regardless of social class – in the financing and ownership of large vessels, with Venice as their base of operation. In this sense, the revival in Venice’s shipping sector was largely the result of new funds siphoned in by entrepreneurs from social groups previously excluded from the business. This welcome influx meant that by 1549 the city’s fleet boasted more round ships either owned or co-owned by non-noblemen than ever before in Venetian history. For the first time, the commoners were in the forefront of commercial shipping’s most lucrative sector. In the years that followed, the entire shipping sector – and the merchant class as a whole – underwent a sweeping social transformation thanks to immigrants from the colonies seeking new opportunities in the capital, swelling the ranks of the *cittadini* class and thereby generating a formidable economic resource. This new spirit of enterprise driving Venetian trade and shipping activity was largely responsible for the commercial heyday that preceded the Battle of Lepanto.

**The appendices:** Annexed to this work are the eight ship lists that provides snapshots to the merchant marine in gaps of more or less ten years; a table containing a systematic record of Venice’s ships of over 300 *botti* that were wrecked, captured or ruined, between 1480 and 1550; a table including the itinerary and life expectancy of twenty-one round ships that were active during this period; a tariff of port duties and other imposts on ships in Venice, according to Alessandro Moresini (c. 1546–63);profits from freights paid by the *Ufficiali all’estraordinario* in 1527/8; and selected documents related to the ownership of vessels and their construction.

1. Padovani, “Curie ed uffici”, pp. 331–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lane, *Navires et constructeurs*, pp. 94–95; id., “Venetian Shipping”, pp. 25–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Braudel, “La vita economica di Venezia”, p. 100; Lane, *Venice, A Maritime Republic*, p. 378; id., “Recent Studies on the Economic History of Venice”, p. 330; see also: Sella, “Crisis and Transformation”, pp. 92–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lane, *Venice, A Maritime Republic*, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)