AN EXEMPLARY MARITIME REPUBLIC: VENICE AT THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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IN VENICE, 'the sea was all that mattered'. Truly, this was the founding principle that marked the history of this celebrated city.[1] For a very long time historians made the Serenissima a model of success, wealth, and opulence, sometimes asserting that the Venetians 'had a monopoly of the transit trade in spices from the Orient' and 'that they were the masters of the Mediterranean'.[2] Such accounts, flattering to the pride of the inhabitants of the lagoons, emphasised the prestige of Venetian navies and the patriotism of its noble lovers of liberty, united to defend the city against the adversities of nature and of men. All this is entirely misleading.

The Venetians were not the only ones who used the maritime routes of the Mediterranean Sea, an area that they were forced to share with great rivals.[3] Beginning in the eleventh century, the Venetian government, determined to take a place in international affairs, intervened vigorously against the Normans who had recently installed themselves in southern Italy and Sicily. At that time all of the Christian West, not only the Venetians, was excited by the success of the crusaders, and tried to find advantage in these unsettled commercial conditions. So it was that the drive to establish a trading presence on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, from Ceuta in Morocco to Lajazzo in Cilicia, began with violence. The Middle Ages were a time of war in which periods of peace were extremely brief. Governments knew how to manage unpredictable economies that were continually buffeted by the repeated conflicts of the age. The Venetians were not the masters in the western basin of the Mediterranean. There the Genoese and the Catalans reigned. In the East they were forced to share the wealth of the Byzantine Empire, the Armenian kingdom and caliphates with their competitors, the Pisans, the Amalfitans, and the Genoese. Though faced

1 F. C. Lane, *Venise, une république maritime* (Paris, 1985), 96, and in 'Venetian Shipping during the Commercial Revolution', in *The Collected Papers of F. C. Lane* (Baltimore, 1966), 3–24.

2 F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* , 2 vols (Paris, 1982), I, 493.

3 J. H. Pryor, 'The Naval Battles of Roger of Lauria', *Journal of Medieval History*, 9 (1983), 179–216, and also in his *Geography, Technology, and War. Studies in the Maritime History of the Mediterranean (649–1571)* (Cambridge, 1988).

with fierce opposition from the other Italian cities, little by little, the tenacity and the communal spirit of the Venetians succeeded in lifting the Serenissima to dominance. They knew how to build the foundations of their maritime power.

From the eleventh century onward, the successive governments of the city wanted above all to take control of navigation in the narrow Adriatic Sea, from the Po Valley with its populous and prosperous cities, and reaching out toward distant lands. It is the Adriatic problem that gave the first impetus to Venetian imperialism. Later, the peace that Venice concluded in 1177 with the emperor Frederick I established the Republic's 'Lordship of the Gulf', which it alone would dominate until the middle of the sixteenth century.[4] For some Italian maritime cities the first Crusades in the Near East provided an opportunity for conquest, but the Venetians would wait until the Fourth Crusade when, in 1204, they finally dismembered the Byzantine Empire for their own gain. Their naval power rested upon constantly growing trade, closely following a considerable growth in the demand for maritime transport between the two shores of the Mediterranean. These conditions allowed the creation of an overseas colonial empire, the *stato da mar*. Radiating outward from major islands such as Euboea and Crete, and from bases at strategic points along the coast, such as Coron and Modon in the Peloponnese or, in the Aegean Sea, from the many islets of the Duchy of Naxos, the enterprise of Venetian colonists and tradesmen grew unceasingly. Great successes, as much in battle as in the marketplace, are the mark of a powerful state. Without a doubt these successes rested on three critical and all-important determining elements. First was the creation of that unique institution, the Arsenal, by the communal authorities. Second was the implementation of vigorous oversight of the Republic's naval potential as is clearly demonstrated in the establishment of convoys of merchant galleys. Finally, there was the continuing concern for associating the defence of economic interests with preoccupations of territorial expansion aimed at the founding of a colonial empire. These, it seems, were the reasons why Venice became a great maritime power.

There was a technological solution to the new equation that determined the relation between time and distance. This 'world economy', as defined by Fernand Braudel, saw new kinds of sailing craft brought into use. In Venice, even as the traditional role of sailors was called into question, the galley remained the preferred vessel. Venetians saw no reason to force cargo ships to evolve in a different way from warships when the galley could fill both these functions that were intimately bound together in medieval deep-sea navigation.[5] If the numerous crew of a galley was expensive, it was much less so than the loss of the vessel and its cargo. The galley was the favourite weapon of the Venetians and all means were employed to optimise its capabilities within the parameters

4 G. Cracco, *Un altro mondo, Venezia nel medioevo dal secolo XI al secolo XIV* (Turin, 1986), 52.

5 F. Melis, *I trasporti e le comunicazioni nel medioevo*, ed. L. Frangioni (Florence, 1984), 111.

dictated by necessity. From a very early time Venice had several shipyards, the well-known *squeri*, within the city itself. Perhaps from the beginning of the twelfth century – some have suggested that it was as early as 1104 – the ruling elite decided to provide the city with a shipbuilding establishment controlled by the government.[6] Archival documentation from 1206 confirms the existence of such a state-controlled naval shipyard and also attests that the construction of ships for the Commune was to be confined to this facility. In 1223, the first evidence appears for the existence of the *patroni arsenatus*, directors of the Arsenal, elected from among the nobles of the Great Council and salaried by the Commune. Their task was clearly defined: to provide necessary raw materials to the craftsmen, especially wood for ships' frames, hemp for sails, and cordage, and to see to the timely delivery of sound and robust ships. The details of Doge Enrico Dandolo's direct intervention in the preparation for the attack on the capital of the Byzantine Empire during the Fourth Crusade of 1204 are well known. This intrusion of the public authority into the management of naval construction would continue until the end of the Republic. In 1258, the *capitulares illorum de arsena* defined the role of the directors. From 1277, after some hesitation, the state attempted to retain its skilled labour force by forbidding craftsmen from emigrating. Within two years, between 1269 and 1271, the government decided to codify the regulations that governed the craft guilds in the Arsenal. The statutes of the caulkers', shipwrights', and rope-makers' guilds also date from this period. By 1265, the districts that produced wood and hemp for the Arsenal were managed by public administrators. Then, in 1276, the government required that at least one squadron should always be prepared to put to sea at a moment's notice, which required the continual presence of craftsmen at the Arsenal. Finally, in 1278, an arms manufactory completed the complement of activities sheltered within the protecting walls of the shipyard.[7]

In 1302, the Venetian government implemented a revision of 'the corrections and additions' to the Arsenal regulations.[8] This action was necessary to encourage the full development of the technological revolution that would maximise the Republic's naval potential. A short time later, between 1304 and 1307, the Arsenale Novo was created.[9] By 1325 every sector of maritime activity had been reformed. The speed with which the authorities decided, the promotion of *utilitas* favourable to the public good, and a real will to innovate gave expression to a powerful movement toward a goal of dominating the sea. In 1301, the Senate declared that it was necessary to arm a permanent squadron for the protection of 'the Gulf' (the Adriatic Sea). The cramped port facilities in the

6 E. Concina, *La casa dell'Arsenale*, in *Storia di Venezia*, Temi, Il Mare (Rome, 1991), 147–210.

7 G. Luzzato, *Studi di storia economica veneziana* (Padua, 1954), 6.

8 F. Melis, *I mercanti italiani nell'Europa medievale e rinascimentale*, ed. L. Frangioni (Florence, 1990), 9.

9 E. Concina, *L'Arsenale della Repubblica di Venezia* (Venice, 1984), 26 ff.

lagoon led to a natural expansion with new basins in the Arsenale Novo.[10] This expansion of facilities was completed by the creation of naval bases at Pola and Pore? in Istria. Until the final phase of renovation at the end of the fifteenth century, this naval establishment was the pride of Venice's oligarchy. In 1435, the Senate declared, 'our Arsenal is the best in the world' and encouraged visits by the famous and powerful as they journeyed toward Jerusalem. This evocation of the labour, ingenuity, and efficiency of the seamen of Venice resounded all across Europe and flattered the pride of the subjects of the Serenissima. The myth of Venice, forged by the political powers around the Arsenal, helped to elicit respect, fear, and effective administration.[11]

It is necessary to pause for a moment to consider this assertion of a clever political will that quickly adapted to circumstances. In looking at the overall situation in the Mediterranean basin it is clear that by the late thirteenth century the Venetian position had weakened. In 1261, a Byzantine–Genoese coalition took control of Constantinople and a part of Romania that, up until that time, had been controlled by the Franks and Venetians. Meanwhile, the Republic relentlessly defended Crete, the coastal bases of the Peloponnese, and the important islands of the Aegean Sea.[12] In 1291 the fall of Acre marked the final defeat of the Crusaders in the Latin States of the Levant. It appears that the Venetians had already begun a withdrawal toward the west when, in 1274, Doge Lorenzo Tiepolo prohibited investment in agricultural estates on Terra Ferma 'to oblige the Venetians to take an interest in naval affairs'. A little later, in 1298, their perpetual rivals, the Genoese, entered the Adriatic to support the Hungarians with an attack on Venetian possessions in Dalmatia.[13] Naval war within the confined spaces of the Adriatic forced the government to undertake a major reform effort to confront this threat from the enemies of the Republic. This was more than a territorial conflict. It was also an economic war that engulfed the entire Mediterranean basin. The desire to capture commerce and to dominate distribution networks for goods placed great importance on the ability to keep fleets at sea. The last phase in the creation of Venice's magnificent Arsenal took place between about 1473 and 1475. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, fear seized the Venetians who dreaded a naval assault on their colonial possessions. The defence of the *stato da mar* was undertaken by reinforcing the defences of the system of naval bases. First, Negroponte and

10 Ibid., 28, and E. Concina, 'Dal tempio del mercante al piazzale dell'Impero: l'Arsenale di Venezia', in *Progetto Venezia* (Venice, n.d.), 57–106. Originally the 'gulf' or 'Gulf of Venice' referred to that part of the Adriatic north of a line between Pola and Ravenna. As Venetian control of the Adriatic expanded, so did their definition of 'the Gulf'. See F. C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, 1973), 24.

11 E. Crouzet-Pavan, *Venise triomphante, les horizons d'un mythe* (Paris, 1999), 122.

12 B. Doumerc, *La difesa dell'impero*, in *Storia di Venezia, dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*, vol. II, *La formazione dello stato patrizio*, ed. G. Arnaldi, G. Cracco and A. Tenenti (Rome, 1997), 237–50.

13 B. Krekic, *Venezia e l'Adriatico*, in *Storia di Venezia*, III, 51–81 and P. Cabanes, *Histoire de l'Adriatique* (Paris, 2000), 191.

Nauplia, and then, the Arsenal of Candia, an important strong point on Crete, were completely renovated between 1467 and 1470. At home, in Venice, momentous changes in circumstances created a need to augment the Republic's naval forces. Henceforth, fierce naval war against admirals in the pay of the Ottomans brought unaccustomed reverses. In this context, the senate asked Giacomo Morosini (called *el zio*, 'Uncle') to prepare plans for an extension of the Arsenal in 1473. With an additional eight hectares added to its area, it became the greatest shipyard in Europe and 'the essential foundation of the state'.[14]

By demonstrating its undeniable concern for optimising the financial and technical resources devoted to naval construction, the government showed the way for the whole people. The authorities obtained indispensable support from all those social groups whose destiny was tied to the vigour of the city's maritime activity. At the same time, the desires of those groups corresponded to the announced public policy of giving priority to the naval forces. It is not true that a permanent and effective naval force did not appear until the sixteenth century.[15] A navy existed in Venice from the fourteenth century. As described above, the patrol squadron charged with policing the Adriatic was at the heart of that force, but there were other available units. First among them were the galleys armed by the port cities that had gradually come to be included in the *stato da mar*. In the event of conflict these Dalmatian, Albanian, Greek, and Cretan cities were required, by the terms of their submission to Venice, to provide one or more galleys for the naval draft due to the metropolis. There are many instances of these drafts. One example is sufficient to indicate their nature.[16] During the conflict against the Turks during the 1470s, the Arsenal could not quickly provide the thirty galleys demanded by the Senate. All the subject cities of the Empire were required to contribute to the fleet. Crete provided eleven galleys, four came from the occupied ports of Puglia, two from Corfu, eleven from Dalmatia (three from Zara, two from Sebenico, one each from Cattaro, Lesina, Split, Pago, Arba, and Trau). Cadres of loyal 'patriots' known to Venetian administrators leavened the crews gathered from these various ports. Neither the ardour of these fighters from 'overseas' nor their fidelity to St Mark was taken for granted. The Senate did reward loyal commanders such as Alessandro de Gotti of Corfu, Francesco Chachuni of Brindisi, and Jacopo Barsi of Lesina.

The second Venetian trump card was the initiation of an unprecedented system for the administration of sea-borne trade. This system provided a formidable tool, designed to respond to the needs of *la ventura*, of commerce, laying a

14 Archivio di Stato, Venice, senato, mar, reg. 15, fol. 14 for example, and S. Karpov, *La navigazione veneziana nel mar Nero (XIII–XV sec.)* (Ravenna, 2000), 12.

15 J. Meyer, 'Des liens de causalité en histoire: politiques maritimes et société', *Revue historique*, 614 (2000), 12.

16 A. Ducellier and B. Doumerc, 'Les Chemins de l'exil, bouleversements de l'Est européen et migrations vers l'Ouest à la fin du Moyen Âge' (Paris, 1992), 163; Archivio di Stato, Venice, senato, mar, reg. 15, fol. 161.

foundation for a dominating and expansionist people. These innovative procedures put in place by the ruling oligarchy were developed to take advantage of an exceptional organisation that would raise Venice into the first rank of Mediterranean naval powers. During the first twenty years of the Trecento, there was a period of maturation punctuated by different attempts to develop a system of navigation that eventually evolved into the galley convoys known as *mude*. Having achieved this objective with the consensus of all the participants in the financial and business world, it was then necessary to create an efficient system of management. Even if maritime trade was prosperous, it remained fragile and subject to unforeseeable risks. It was always possible that a major conflict with the Genoese or the Catalans, or even a brief outbreak of extreme violence due to piracy, might place the whole economic structure of the Republic at risk.[17] Meanwhile, in the city of Venice as well as in the small island market towns of the lagoon, in the warehouses and in the tradesmen's shops or the craftsmen's booths, men pursued gain, but they did so without an overall plan and without looking for any really consistent method in their approach. Around the middle of the fourteenth century Venetian patricians came to realise the necessity of undertaking ambitious measures to surmount the major obstacles to a rational exploitation of the merchant fleets by making major changes in their organisation. Perhaps the terrifying War of Chioggia (1379–81) accelerated the rapid development of this concept. The patriciate instituted regulations providing for general communal equipping of merchant fleets to offset the disadvantages of the privately outfitted trading expeditions that had been paralysed during this long conflict. It is clear that the implementation of this new system affected all of the Republic's economic and social structures. Progress toward fully implementing this model for the unique and exemplary management of Venetian maritime potential took place only slowly, but it was to dominate the Republic's actions at sea up to the middle of the sixteenth century.[18]

The founding act of this state-controlled regulation was the *Ordo galearum armatarum*, decreed on 8 December 1321. It concerned both the galleys and sailing cargo ships. The experimental phase lasted until the end of the Venetian–Genoese war of 1379. The cooperation of several outfitters was needed for a merchant convoy so the galleys received collective financing. This innovative policy originated after the fall of Acre in 1291. The entrepreneurial merchants, far from pulling back from risky undertakings, soon became involved in the conquest of the Atlantic routes to Flanders and England. This rapid expansion encouraged new initiatives, sometimes hesitant and disorganised during the first half of the Trecento, then coordinated by the public authorities under the careful supervision of the city's aristocratic patriciate. Opening navigation routes

17 B. Doumerc, *Il dominio del mare*, in *Storia di Venezia*, IV, 11; A. Tenenti and U. Tucci, eds, *Rinascimento* (Rome, 1996), 113–80.

18 D. Stöckly, *Le Système des galées du marché à Venise (fin XIIIe–milieu XVe)* (Leiden and New York, 1995), 158; F. C. Lane, *Navires et constructeurs à Venise pendant la Renaissance* (Paris, 1965).

toward the west, along with intensification of maritime relations with the Levant, placed the keys to international trade in Venetian hands after 1350. They also profited from a remarkably favourable position in relation to the Alpine passes leading to northern Europe. By this time the system of auctioning the charters of galleys belonging to the Commune had been definitively established. To avoid a destructive confrontation between the authorities and the merchants (even though at Venice it is sometimes difficult to discern a difference between the two groups) the state asked that the Black Sea convoy be managed according to this new principle. After some years it was adopted for all navigation routes, to the general satisfaction of both groups. Besides the galley convoys, there was also a whole sector of maritime endeavour involving sailing round ships with high freeboard (*naves*). Sometimes their operation is described as free outfitting, because it was subject to fewer regulatory constraints. These *naves* transported necessary bulk products such as grain, all kinds of raw materials of high volume, construction materials, salt, ashes, and so forth. The primary purpose of the more strongly defended galleys was to transport costly cargoes of spices, silks and precious cloths, metals, and weapons. In the middle of the fourteenth century, when the Church lifted its prohibition of trade with the Muslims, the Venetians had a fleet ready to open trade once again with the Syrian and Egyptian ports of the Levant. In 1366, a sailing route involving both galleys and *naves* established connections from the lagoons to Alexandria and Beirut, beginning a promising trade. In the 1440s, nearly ninety *naves* and fifty-five galleys sailed for the Near East, and about thirty for Constantinople. The volume of the goods continued to increase, as did the pattern of massive investment and fiscal returns for the treasury. The reform of maritime statutes that had become obsolete, the creation of new work contracts that imposed a minimum wage, improvements in living conditions on board ships and a mariners' residence in the city attracted a skilled labour force, mostly from Dalmatia, Albania, and Greece. These immigrants, originating from its overseas colonies, allowed the Republic to raise the banner of St Mark throughout the Mediterranean.[19] The Senate, the real architect of this system, far from putting the system of private management in opposition to the one controlled by the Commune, took the best of each of the two systems and combined them. For that reason, some historians speak disparagingly about bureaucracy or state control to describe the Venetian system of trade.

Henceforth, the state owned the merchant fleet, chartering galleys to merchants who operated them. The operator was the highest bidder in the auction for charters. Only nobles were allowed to participate in this auction, an exclusive privilege that gave them control of the financial and commercial operations of the fleet, in return for which they were expected to respect rigorously the specific terms and conditions of the charters. After 1420 all merchant

[19] E. Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1981), 381; J. C. Hocquet, *Voiliers et commerce en Méditerranée, 1200–1650* (Lille, 1976), 442; B. Doumerc, *Venise et l'émirat hafside de Tunis* (Paris, 1999), 172.

galleys were constructed on the same model according to the plan of the 'galley of Flanders'. This was a vessel of 250 tons burden, delivered as a bare hull (a 'barebones charter') for which the operator furnished all the necessary equipment – sails, cordage, oars, and maintenance materials. The Commune thus freed itself completely of the need to invest in those lesser items. On the other hand, the merchant, knowing that the necessary capital for naval construction was provided by the state, could keep most of his financial resources free for the commercial transactions that were the goal of the expedition. In addition, the winning bidder who took charge of the galley (called the *patrono*) got priority in loading the most precious goods and a monopoly in the transportation of these goods at fixed prices. These incentives earned the merchants' approval because they no longer dreaded aggravated competition amongst themselves, the law was the same for everyone, the costs of transport were fixed and conditions on board were identical for all galleys.

There is often a feeling of modernity about a state when its economic functions predominate. This would make Venice of the Quattrocento a real laboratory of modernity.[20] The economic stakes involved in these operations were very high. In 1409 a *muda* to Flanders carried in its holds merchandise worth 460,000 ducats, equivalent to a tonne and half of gold! In the 1430s, cargoes of spices and drugs loaded on galleys voyaging to Alexandria were often valued at more than 150,000 ducats. Figures like these justify the care taken by the authorities to supervise such transactions, which, after all, provided the bulk of the state's tax revenues.[21] This was remarkable for the time since surely a patrician merchant, following his own bankruptcy, would not have turned to the communal authorities expecting financial assistance. On the contrary, it was to improve competitiveness and to establish its supremacy that the government accepted a transfer of power to merchants even while introducing a measure of coercion into the process. The organisation of the maritime economy took on the characteristics of a mixed economy, promoting private interests while safeguarding the public interest. This was the strength of the Venetian system.

Consider two examples of constraints freely accepted by the operators of merchant galleys. The first concerns the financing of the expeditions. As was mentioned above, it was necessary to invest a considerable amount of capital. At the end of the fifteenth century, the cost to charter a merchant galley for one voyage was 9200 ducats (33 kg of fine gold). Not only was it necessary to pay for the charter of the galley but also the cost of operating the vessel during a voyage of five to eleven months – depending on the destination – including victualling and salaries for a crew of a hundred and fifty rowers and some twenty specialists and officers. The Commune required that a company be established to manage the operation of the galley so that a complete bankruptcy caused by insolvency of any of the partners might be avoided. A magistracy, the *avogaria*

20 B. Doumerc, *Il dominio del mare*, 123.

21 J. Day, 'Les Instruments de gestion du monde', in *Venise 1500, la puissance, la novation et la concorde: le triomphe du mythe* (Paris, 1993), 142–56.

di Comun, supervised all financial commitments proposed by the *patrono*. The total amount of the estimated cost for the operation of the galley was divided into twenty-four equal shares (*carati*) as was the case for the purchase of a ship. The value of a share varied according to the actual length of the voyage, any unforeseen expenses, and risks at sea. An adjustment was made when the convoy returned to Venice allowing the distributed operating expenses to be deducted from the profits of the voyage. Merchant literature is full of descriptions of these temporary companies aimed at limiting each partner's financial risk, because the cost of operating a galley exceeded the investment potential of a single entrepreneur. Such associations were indispensable, and since the objective was to verify financial investments and the quality of commercial transactions, the *patrono*'s family played an essential role. In these cases, the family enterprise was preferred above all other options, especially the *fraterna*, which created a core of investors around the brothers of the *patrono*.[22] Little by little during the fifteenth century, the circle of the financial partners was limited to the members of a single family. This cut down considerably on the number of shareholders from an average of twelve in the 1450s to, in many cases, as few as two by the beginning of the sixteenth century. Under these conditions the prevailing commercial regulations benefited certain participants who were henceforth free to set sale prices as they wished because they had the advantage of a transportation monopoly. This perversion of the *incanto* system eventually caused its demise and its being denounced by Marino Sanudo in his *Diarii*.

The second constraint imposed on merchants engaged in the state-controlled sector concerns the presence of a *capitanio*, an agent of the government elected by the members of the Great Council and paid by the Commune. The *capitanio* of the galley convoy supervised the activities of the *patroni* of the individual galleys, enforcing adherence to the terms of the charter to maintain regularity, speed, and security during these long voyages.[23] It was also the responsibility of this state representative to decide, in accordance with the merchants, to change course or to shorten a stay in port when circumstances warranted. As guarantor of the common interest, he had to limit the ambitions of entrepreneurs who would not hesitate to compromise the interests of their rivals if, by so doing, they could increase their personal gain. Disagreements were numerous and litigation frequent, but in the event of a serious breach of the rules of the *incanto*, a *patrono* could be banned from participation for a period of several years.[24] The role of the *capitanio* was essential to the regulation of this complex mixed management system and crucial to the smooth operation of the voyages. The reports read in the Senate upon return of the *muda* were complicated because of

[22] B. Doumerc, C. Judde de Larivière, 'Le Rôle du patriciat dans la gestion des galères marchandes à Venise au début du seizième siècle', *Studi veneziani*, 36 (1998), 57–84.
[23] B. Doumerc, D. Stöckly, 'L'Evolution du capitalisme marchand à Venise au XVe siècle, le financement des mude', *Annales H. S. C.*, 1 (1995), 133–57.
[24] B. Doumerc, 'La Crise structurelle de la marine vénitienne au XVe siècle: le problème du retard des mude', *Annales E.S.C.*, 40 (1985), 605–25.

the difficulties encountered by these agents of the government as they confronted the representatives of capitalist enterprise. Despite it all, and this was part of the miracle, the collusion of interests maximised profits for both individuals and for the enterprise as whole.

This system of managing the merchant galleys hid a little-known aspect, which was in fact the keystone of the success of the Venetian thalassocracy in the Mediterranean during the closing centuries of the Middle Ages. Until now, historians have placed the Venetian system of navigation only in a context of maritime transport and trade. In fact, the political decision by the Senate to manage maritime commercial expeditions of the merchant galleys directly by organising them in convoys was exemplary and innovative in more ways than one. First, the government avoided maintaining a naval patrol squadron outside of the Gulf. It would have been a vain hope to eradicate the plague of piracy in the waters extending from the Channel to the Aegean Sea. Instead, the captains of the *mude* were ordered to intercept and to neutralise any pirates that they met and sometimes to engage in hot pursuit, even if it meant diverting from their planned course. However, the Republic did not supply letters of marque or of reprisal to ships' captains hoping to participate in the *guerre de course*. To maintain control of these high-risk activities that might put the vital interests of the state at risk, the Senate almost always preferred to entrust them to meticulously organised expeditions, avoiding any improvisation with the attendant possibility of dangerous and harmful consequences[25] Often, the communal galleys of the cities of the *stato da mar* participated in these operations to police the seas but, on the whole, this tactic did not produce satisfactory results. Second, another lesser-known aspect of Venetian policy must also be taken into consideration: the requisition of merchant galleys. After having encouraged the development of regular convoy routes, which may have seen as many as fifty great galleys in service, the Venetian government in 1465, forced to react to an unfavorable military situation, found that its fleet, as a whole, did not contain enough warships.[26] Social concerns regarding the employment of a large number of seamen on board the 'man-eating' galleys, and fiscal considerations resulting from the fixed pricing of the *noli* (charters) and the control of cargos which this facilitated, concerns which were as important as worries about the defence of merchant ships, led to the galley becoming a privileged instrument of Venetian maritime expansion. The choice of the Venetian authorities in favour of convoys of merchant galleys (*mude*), however, must have been somewhat detri-

25 A. Tenenti, 'Venezia e la pirateria en Levante: 1300–1460', in A. Pertusi, ed., *Venezia e il Levante fino al secolo XV. Atti del i convegno internazionale di storia della civilta veneziana* , 2 vols. (Florence, 1973–4), I, 705–71.

26 B. Doumerc, 'Le Rôle ambigu de la muda vénitienne: convoi marchand ou unité de combat', in *Histoire maritime: thalassocratie et période révolutionnaire, Actes des 114e et 115e Congrès Nationaux des Sociétés Savantes* (Paris, 1989; Avignon, 1990; Paris, 1991), 139–54 and R. Cessi, *Storia della Repubblica di Venezia* (1968), 191.

mental to the profitability of the unarmed *naves* that remained in private operation.

The security of trade relations was the source of all profits, so an argument was put forward that the companies of the wealthiest aristocrats should be favoured by making them the only ones authorised to organise the profitable *mude*. Over the years this point of view became a determining factor in the evolution of the place of the *galere da mercato* in the complex whole of the Venetian maritime economy, reviving the basic debate, which set in opposition the objectives of the private managers of the voyages and the objectives of the government. The great network of navigation routes favoured the noble entrepreneurs who collaborated with the authorities within the system of the *incanto*. Whenever an accident of circumstances threatened the regularity of the voyages, the state encouraged the *mude*, sometimes forcing independently equipped and operated ships to remain inactive in port. This transfer of activities worked to the profit of the galleys as demonstrated by the creation of the route to Aigues Mortes in 1415 and then to the Barbary Coast in 1436 in response to the problem of maritime insecurity. Indeed, the senate announced that it was preferable 'in any case to fit out two galleys on the Aigues-Mortes route for one alone does not seem safe'.[27] Here is the heart of the debate: the Venetian *muda* was a merchant unit but also a combat unit and it is necessary to consider that it made a permanent contribution to the naval forces placed at the disposal of the government's military commanders. These galleys were armed 'for war and for trade' and the terms of their charter agreed to after the auction provided that the government could exercise its right of requisition at any time. During the fifteenth century this procedure was often used. This was the third element of Venetian maritime supremacy.

It is necessary to see the activities of the *mude* in another context as well. The galleys provided the state with a very efficient naval potential for general tasks aimed at preserving the supremacy of the Empire. From the beginning, the Senate specified that the *patroni* of galleys had to accept some missions 'in the service of the Signoria' in return for the numerous advantages from which they benefited.[28] What did this mean? A few examples make the Senate's intention clear. The least coercive of these requirements concerned the transportation of officials designated by the government, *baili* and ambassadors, as well as colonial administrators. These voyages were always made aboard communal galleys protected by the flag of St Mark. Sometimes the captain of the merchant convoy played the role of government representative in dealings with local authorities in Tunis, Alexandria, or London. In 1438, the Senate asked the captain of the Aigues Mortes convoy to agree to the request of the Grand Master of the Order of St John of Jerusalem who wished to travel from the great Provençal port of

27 Archivio di Stato, Venice, senato, misti, reg. 53, fol. 29, and Antonio Morosini, *Annali, extraits de la chronique de Morosini relatifs à l'histoire de France* (Paris, 1898), I, 374.

28 B. Doumerc, 'Les Flottes d'état, moyen de domination coloniale à Venise (XVe siècle)', in M. Balard and A. Ducellier, eds., *Coloniser au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1995), 115–29.

Marseilles to Rhodes. The clamour of protest from the expedition's investors had no effect on the Senate's decision and for several weeks the galleys remained far off their planned course. Another kind of requisition for peaceful missions concerned the transportation of funds or strategic materials destined for the administrators of the cities of the overseas empire. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, the *mude* of the Levant carried a considerable quantity of oars, yards, and cordage, as well as timber and cut stone in order to renovate the arsenals of the Peloponnese and Crete. In the middle of the fifteenth century, these requisitioned services were frequent because it was then necessary to add the transportation of troops and the repatriation of refugees resulting from an expansion of the area of hostilities.[29] In addition, the *capitanio* was often assigned to inspect the strongholds of the colonial domain to provide an objective report on the needs, genuine or not, put forward by the rectors 'of our overseas possessions'. During the Venetian–Genoese war in the 1430s, and then again during the one against the Turks in the 1460s, the *mude* participated in naval actions under the orders of the Captain General of the Sea. The dramatic break in ranks at the defeat of Zonchio in 1499 revealed the reluctance of the crews and merchants to assume the task of national defence. Strikes broke out among crews 'who refused to fight so often' and demanded a salary increase of 30 per cent. The investor's mistrust was often in evidence, putting the effectiveness of the government in peril.[30]

The only mission willingly accepted by the *patroni* of the galleys was to hunt for corsairs. This service of policing the seas was profitable to their private activities since they were all owners of cargo vessels operating in the unregulated shipping sector. Be that as it may, the government had succeeded in reducing unproductive investment in a permanent naval squadron. The evolution of international political conditions among the countries along the coasts of the Mediterranean requiring increasing participation by the merchant galleys 'in the service of the state' had grave consequences for the peace of mind of the entrepreneurs. Indeed, the threat of a requisition always hung over every departure and the meagre and consistently tardy indemnities from the government discouraged the sailors as much as the ship-owners.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the reconciliation of economic policy with the constitution as well as with the defence of a colonial empire was no longer appropriate. Then, it was said, 'the whole navy is devoured by the army' and numerous voyages of merchant galleys cancelled at the last moment or diverted from their course put an end to the trust of the Venetian merchant partners.[31] Henceforth, the fleet of the state, giving priority to the defence of empire, could no longer play a leading role in trade. Venice remained the maritime power that it had always been, but was no longer a first-rank naval power.

29 Doumerc, 'Le Rôle ambigu', 152.
30 Marino Sanudo, *I diarii* (Bologna, 1969), vol. I, chapter 30.
31 Girolamo Priuli, *Diarii (diario veneto)*, ed. A. Segre, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* 24, 2nd edn (Citta di Castello, 1912–1941), 39.

One after another the sailing routes closed at the turn of the sixteenth century: the Barbary Coast, then Aigues Mortes, and finally Flanders.[32] Only the Levant routes continued to be active but even those suffered long interruptions in their traffic. The disaster of 1484 was fresh in everyone's mind; in that year, French pirates had attacked the *muda* of Flanders. The consequences were dreadful. The galleys had been captured after a hard fight. A hundred and thirty sailors were killed, three hundred wounded, and, of course, their cargos had been confiscated by King Charles VIII's representative. A few months later, a major incident provoked a panic around the Rialto, the financial centre of the city. To save the last bit of the Languedoc spice import market, the Senate demanded that the Aigues Mortes convoy depart, knowing that another interruption in shipping would sound the death knell of any claim to trading in that region. It took six auctions before one was successful, and the *patroni* were able to extract important fiscal advantages from the government for the voyage including the payment of a 3500-ducat subsidy for each *patrono* and a 30 per cent increase in the charter rate. The voyage was an exceptionally long one because it included stops along the Barbary Coast. This course full of pitfalls made martyrs of the sailors and merchants. When they had returned, the accounts told the story. The cost of stopping for forty-five days to defend Zara, which was besieged by the Turks, was estimated at 10,000 ducats per galley, due to expenditures for the supplementary purchase of victuals for the crews and the payment of higher wages than had been foreseen. The *patroni* also asked for 8000 ducats for the lack of profit on lost charters and unsold merchandise. All this added up to an indemnity of 25,000 ducats for each *patrono* who had been forced to make this voyage against his better judgement.[33] The government faltered because, in a backhanded way, the difference of opinion at the heart of the system of managing the galley fleet was expressed virulently in debates at the meetings about the accounts.

A census of the naval forces undertaken in 1496 by the Ministers of the Marine (*Savii ai Ordini*) demonstrated the naval inferiority of the Republic 'because there are too few armed ships at sea'. This explanation given by the chronicler, Marino Sanudo, is astonishing because, he adds, 'there are few ships because, until now, we had no fear of the Turks'.[34] The result was that the obligations imposed upon the captains of the *mude* increased continually. In 1496, for example, the galleys of the Barbary Coast convoy participated in a massive counter-attack, launched to limit the audacious actions of the Barbary pirates.

Two dramatic episodes permit an evaluation of the interventionist role of the Venetian government in the management of the fleet. The first concerns the conflict involving the kingdom of Naples during the Italian Wars. In 1495, a league including Venice, the Duke of Milan, the Pope, and the king of Aragon, wanted to oppose the plan of the French king, Charles VIII, to annex a part of

32 Sanudo, *Diarii*., I, column 302.
33 Priuli, *Diarii*, 273.
34 Sanudo, *Diarii*, I, column 30.

southern Italy. The Senate issued a general requisition order 'to retain all ships and large merchant galleys'. The Captain General of the Sea, Marco Trevisan, could, with great effort, assemble a war fleet of only about twenty galleys. That is why the contribution of eleven merchant galleys was absolutely necessary, so he waited for the arrival of galleys from the Dalmatian cities. The second episode, with more tragic consequences, was that of the Battle of Zonchio in 1499. The animosity between Antonio Grimani, the Captain General and the *patroni* of the merchant galleys led to a catastrophe in which the disheartened crews' weariness and the merchants' rebellion caused a military disaster. Some months later, outside the port of Modon, which was besieged by the Turks, the *patroni* of the *galere da mercato*, by their unforgivable refusal to fight, caused the loss of the city. Despite sensational court proceedings and some sentences based on principle, the *patroni* were absolved since the state was willing to acknowledge its share of the blame because of the incompetence of its representatives in the battle.[35] Naval battles in the following years offered further proof of the problem. During the spring of 1500 off the island of Cephalonia Captain General Marco Trevisan, warned by Grimani's unhappy experience, considered sending back the merchant galleys that he had received as reinforcements because they seemed poorly equipped to fight, and the *patroni* were outspokenly critical of their mission.[36] The weariness of the demoralised crews and the condemnation of the *patroni* of the merchant galleys, little involved as they were in safeguarding the *stato da mar*, heralded the end of an exemplary system. The redefinition of the specific role of the *muda del mercato* had not taken place because of the lack of a clearly expressed political will. Contrary to what had happened in the middle of the Trecento, this crisis of confidence in the Cinquecento quickly turned into open opposition.

In this way it is possible to discern the main lines of power that lead the Republic of Venice to dominate a large portion of the Mediterranean. The senatorial nobility, uniting the most important investors and committed merchants in the maritime economy, patiently forged a tool without equal among the rival nations and competitors: the system of regular navigation routes plied by convoys of merchant galleys. The modest ship-owners, nobles or not, were discouraged by the regulatory and fiscal obstacles that favoured the *mude* and by the permanent insecurity of sea-borne commerce, but were powerless to compete efficiently against the mixed private and public management of the naval potential. This was all the more true when *raison d'État* generated an indisputable argument for the use of these convoys, at times in the form of five galleys with 1200 men in each crew ready to intervene quickly in any zone on missions in the public interest. At the end of the fifteenth century and especially

35 Ibid., IV, columns 337, 360.

36 B. Doumerc, 'De l'incompétence à la trahison: les commandants de galères vénitiens face aux Turcs (1499–1500)', in *Félonie, trahison, reniements au Moyen Âge, Les Cahiers du Crisima*, 3 (Montpellier, 1997), 613–34, and F. C. Lane, 'Naval Actions and Fleet Organization (1499–1502)', in J. R. Hale, ed., *Renaissance Venice* (London, 1973), 146–73.

at the beginning of the following century, this senatorial nobility, united into the 'Party of the Sea', even after having gained considerable advantages, often in violation of the law, was no longer able, considering the circumstances, to protect their essential prerogatives. The nation, threatened by sea and by land, no longer gave priority to this system which for two hundred years had given glory and fortune to those who lived around the lagoon. This was the beginning of the downfall of the Venetian colonial empire in the Mediterranean and, at the same time, of this unique and long-effective system of operating the merchant marine.