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Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and  
Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean (review)

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(Review)

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sensible. It is a high compliment to Katia Occhi's book to say, simply, that it is worthy of its publisher.

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Eric R. Dursteler. *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean*.

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. x + 288 pp. index. illus. map. gloss. bibl. \$50. ISBN: 0-8018-8324-5.

Eric Dursteler's *Venetians in Constantinople* presents an original and timely vision of Venetian-Ottoman relations, savoring less of Huntington's clash of civilizations or Said's Orientalism than of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This is a boundary-busting book that takes down our old presumptions as it dissolves the binaries with which most of us normally face the world: West-East, Turkish-European, Christian-Muslim, official-unofficial, and even licit-illicit. Characterizing the inherited historiography as one of impact (how did the Ottoman presence alter the Italian reality, and vice versa?) or image (how did Europeans perceive the East?), Dursteler offers a thick description — based on diplomatic reports and letters, travelers's accounts, and official and notarial documents from the archives of Venice, Rome, and Dubrovnik — of the intersection of Venetian and Turkish cultural zones in sixteenth- to seventeenth-century Constantinople.

The author accomplishes his task by, first, examining in broadening circles the groups making up the Venetian nation within the Ottoman capital. The central figure was the *bailo* (examined in chapter 1), Venice's main representative in Constantinople, a nobleman of considerable power and importance, charged with protecting both the political-diplomatic and commercial interests of his homeland and his compatriots. Around him were arrayed a *famiglia* of some tens of secretaries, cipherists, guards, spies, housekeepers, and dragomans. The latter were generally Ottoman subjects despite attempts to Venetianize the service by training new generations of *giovani di lingua*: inherited from the Greek, Arabic, Aramaic, and even Akkadian, the term *dragoman* designated the interpreter every *bailo* needed in this multilingual setting. Around this domestic staff circled a ring of merchants and diplomats, about one hundred in all, residing not far from the embassy in Galata, the suburb directly across the Golden Horn from the center of Constantinople. The marginality of the bailate, in and not in Constantinople, expressed the marginality of nearly all those associated with it.

In chapters 2 through 4, Dursteler looks at, in turn, the "merchants of Venice" (not exactly congruent with "Venetian merchants") who were in regular interaction with the *bailo*; the "unofficial nation" of *banditi*, judicial exiles from Venice and the Veneto; slaves; Greeks of the Venetian *stato del mar*; and the more loosely related groups of Jews and "renegades," converts from Christianity to

Islam. Here the realities become complex. Among the Venetian merchants were citizens properly licensed to deal in foreign trade, but also noncitizens doing so without benefit of license, and non-Venetians — among them Greeks, Muslims, and Jews — who attached themselves to the Venetian community. The exiles from the homeland, attracted to the opportunities that abounded in Constantinople, were much on the *bailo*'s mind: some he sent packing, while others, just as dangerous, proved valuable because of their linguistic or artisanal skills, and so mingled freely with the law-abiding members of the Venetian nation.

So, too, did the *bailo* pursue and redeem by purchase the Venetian citizens among the many enslaved Christians in the Ottoman Empire. Greek subjects of the Venetian empire, who constituted some twenty percent of its population, were valued intermediaries between Italian and Turkish communities. Jews, some of whom were Ottoman subjects, some Venetian, and some of no particular country but equipped with valuable knowledge of Levantine commercial systems, were welcome members of the Venetian community in Constantinople. Apostasy to Islam was a constant source of anxiety, though renegades who crossed that line often presented just the skill-set a *bailo* needed to assist him in his delicate interface with Ottoman officialdom — of whom a good portion happened to be Christian.

This astonishing setting, by no means a meritocracy, was yet one where knowledge mattered. Normally scorned or marginalized figures — from the Venetian perspective, Muslims, Jews, Greeks, criminals, and slaves — were transformed, redeemed by their mastery of other languages, customs, or crafts, which readied them to serve the interests of the Serenissima as entrepreneurs, workers in the arsenal, interpreters, or spies.

In his final two chapters, Dursteler expands upon the theme that emerges from his taxonomy of the Venetian nation in Constantinople: the tremendous malleability of identity in at least this one early modern community. It is a nation without common denominators: not of place, class, religion, profession, or legitimacy. Former-Christian, Muslim merchants interacted easily with redeemed slaves who had no desire to go home and with Jewish merchants who clung close to their Latin-rite neighbors in Galata. They exchanged goods and information with Venetian nobles or Ottoman grandees, who dabbled profitably in commercial ventures on the side. The pluralism of Venice itself is writ large in Constantinople, whose ethnic mix and religious diversity acted as a force multiplier of social complexity.

Dursteler is to be commended for this insightful and gracefully-written work that delivers a powerful message in brief compass, and will help change the way we consider European-Ottoman relations in the early modern era, and perhaps West and non-West relations in our own.

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