

Georg Christ. *Trading Conflicts: Venetian Merchants and Mamluk Officials in Late Medieval Alexandria*.

The Medieval Mediterranean: Peoples, Economies and Cultures, 400–1500 93. Leiden: Brill, 2012. xviii + 366 pp. \$212. ISBN: 978–90–04–22199–4.

At the core of this volume is a microanalytical case study of Biagio Dolfin, the Venetian consul in Alexandria, 1418–20. Biagio Dolfin was an experienced merchant from an established family. He arrived in Alexandria in October 1418 to serve his second term as consul, his first having taken place in 1408–10. While in Egypt he was involved in the day-to-day activities of trade as well as a participant in several major conflicts between the Venetians he represented and the Mamluk ruler (al-Mu'ayyad Shaykh, r. 1412–21) and the latter's officials and subjects among whom the Venetians lived and did business. Dolfin died in Cairo in April 1420, shortly after arriving at the capital to seek an audience with the sultan about the mistreatment of Venetian merchants. Drawing upon the heretofore-underutilized papers (*commissaria*) of Dolfin deposited in the Venetian archives, Christ firmly situates this case study in several wider contexts, ranging from Levantine trade to aspects of Muslim-Christian relations to models of conflict analysis. The result is a valuable book of use to those interested in the economic, social, and/or religious history of the medieval Eastern Mediterranean.

The book is organized in four parts. Part 1 (chapters 2–5) provides the necessary background knowledge for the rest of the volume: chapter 2 presents deft introductions to the topics of trade, the Mamluk Sultanate, Venice, and the importance of merchant correspondence; chapter 3 summarizes prior Venetian-Mamluk commercial relations that culminated in the privileges granted in 1415; chapter 4 describes the physical world of early fifteenth-century Alexandria, its trade calendar, and the physical and administrative structures established there by the Venetians to oversee their interests; and chapter 5 gives a brief biography of Biagio Dolfin.

The microanalytical core of the book is developed in parts 2 and 3. Part 2, entitled "Presumed Religious Conflict" (chapters 6–10), explores specific tensions and conflicts that arose over slaves (chapter 7), Christian pilgrimage to Mamluk-controlled lands (chapter 8), relics, focusing on the case of St. Mark's head that complicated Coptic-Venetian relations (chapter 9), and an incident where Venetian wine was destroyed by local Muslims (chapter 10). While these conflicts were (and are) commonly framed as primarily religious in nature, Christ's investigations into the specific cases uncover a more nuanced set of local circumstances.

Part 3, “Conflicts over the Spice Trade Fair” (chapters 11–14), presents four analyses of conflict that arose from doing business. Chapter 11 illustrates how Dolfin negotiated the multiple and conflicting interests of the Venetian Senate, the Venetian merchants in Egypt, and the Mamluk officials had when dealing with the limited stay of the annual galley convoy in Alexandria. Chapter 12 focuses upon customs collection in Alexandria, demonstrating that local practice in terms of clearance or avoidance of customs fees and the use of confiscation often varied from the policies set by Cairo or Venice. Chapter 13 details the challenges Dolfin faced when speculative forward sales of pepper by local Venetian merchants complicated his obligation to purchase set quantities directly from the sultan. Lastly, chapter 14 describes how Dolfin settled a convoluted case of debt confinement that reverberated from Venice to Cairo and tested the limits of collective responsibility. These four chapters demonstrate clearly that trade between Venice and the Mamluks was a negotiation not just about prices, but also about the rules that governed that trade.

Finally, part 4 wraps up with an epilogue (chapter 15) and conclusion (chapter 16). Additional matter includes sixteen figures and three tables, an appendix (1) that summarizes Dolfin’s known correspondence, and appendix 3, which adds four edited texts to the available corpus of contemporary trade documents.

In sum, Dolfin’s brief sojourn in Egypt was filled with tensions — social, ethnic, core-periphery, intra-communal, and sectarian — and rife with the possibility of misunderstanding and conflict. As Christ states, while the Venetian senate — from its perspective at the core — saw events in Alexandria as conflicts between Venetians and Moors, Dolfin — from his perspective at the periphery — saw events in more nuanced ways and acted according to his knowledge of local society and practice. Similarly, Christ’s book encourages us to move beyond easy “narratives of antagonism” in dealing with accounts of conflict, and to eschew “dependable explanations” based primarily on religion and ideology (289–90).

WARREN C. SCHULTZ
DePaul University