

Philippe Braunstein. *Les Allemands à Venise (1380-1520)*. Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 2016. 975 pp. EUR 65.00, paper, ISBN 978-2-7283-1125-5.

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Men set out. The great majority young and single, they leave home for many reasons: war, epidemics, hunger, fear, the search for steady work, peace, tranquility, a shot at success. A European story of today, one might think. But no, we are talking now about the Middle Ages, about men on the move, aspiring toward a better life. But instead of coming from the world's South, these men abandoned northern Europe, and where they arrived they were called *tedeschi*, a broad term covering a vast swath of territory from Flanders to the Hanseatic League and Poland. They were all headed the same way: toward rich, civilized Venice.

The story of this North-to-South migration is told today in a monumental work of almost a thousand pages by a master of French historiography, Philippe Braunstein. Anyone who has read his work already appreciates his astonishing knowledge of medieval Venice, rendered in this volume with exceptional narrative skill, as he guides the reader through the dynamics, outcomes, and ways of life of this extraordinary migration with a style, a passion, and an authority that perhaps only this author could so masterfully bring to the table.

The question that triggers his story is the first that comes to mind: why Venice? What were the

motives that provoked this myriad of people, in an arc of time from the end of the eighth well into the sixteenth century, to relocate from their own lands to the city “over the salt waters”? Certainly, there was the fascination that emanated from this metropolis, half port, half caravanserai: a meeting place of men and merchandise arriving from every corner of the globe. There was the siren call of wealth, to which was added that other great *atout*: the city's power and reach far into the Orient through its “dominium maris.” Those factors are perhaps already enough to explain Venice's magnetic attraction. But the author does not stop only at these aspects, which we might consider givens. He goes deeper, tracing other motives, such as, for example, the city's relative geographical proximity. At a first impression one might balk at the forbidding wall separating the Adriatic from the German hinterlands: the 250 square kilometers of the Alps. But the mountains were only apparently an insurmountable barrier. In fact, the massive range was ruptured here and there by deep valleys, providing no fewer than twenty-two passes that permitted constant dialogue between the Trevisan hills and the plains of Bavaria. Further, there were the navigable rivers, the Adige and the Isarco, with boats carrying horses, livestock, carts, merchandise, and people, always people, bearing their large and small cargoes. The

seasons, varied climates, and human contingency all caused temporal oscillations in the volume of movement, but as Braunstein demonstrates, the flow was never-ending. Once through the Alps, the journey of the *tedeschi* was further facilitated by a particular vaunt of the Venetian *terraferma*: a network of postal stations, inns, and refuges managed by resident *tedeschi* who received the travelers, helping them to feel less harshly the thousand miles that separated them from home and hearth.

Having crossed the final plain, Venice splayed open before them, showing, as it does to all, its contradictory faces: enchanting and chaotic, splendid and perilous. Every *calle* was crowded with people, bales of merchandise, stores, barrels; every landing flaunted vessels of every description. It must have been a shock for a new arrival, who would have understood little of what was happening around him, neither the traditions, nor the culture, nor, at first, the language, that salty reef that every newcomer who set foot in the lagoon was forced to come to terms with. The migrants adapted bit by bit to their unpredictable habitat, where any given morning they might come across representatives of the great business families; young men in search of masters, mentors, and jobs; soldiers and mercenaries; pilgrims waiting to board ship for the Holy Lands; sly locals offering assistance of every kind for pay; packers, scribes, shopkeepers, vagabonds.... They all formed a dynamic, heterogeneous, often unscrupulous mass that wheeled around the lung of the city's commercial life, the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*, an open wholesale and warehouse market that first arose near the Ponte di Rialto in the 1220s. Braunstein traces in depth the evolution of this structure, which included fifty-four rooms on two floors and 450 square meters of warehousing. He describes the rental agreements and administrative controls in place, and details the conflicts that arose with seated officials over cases of negligence, absenteeism, fraud, contraband, and the

sometimes violent tensions between *tedeschi* and Venetians.

One aspect of this history merits particular attention: the fact that Venice, despite the innumerable problems that arose around issues of inclusion, was a city that accepted newcomers and knew how to welcome them, providing many with the opportunity to become part of the larger community thanks to a guarantee of stable citizenship. Legislation about newcomers inevitably evolved over a long period of time, beginning in the early fourteenth century, because the administration of the foreign presence was considered an affair of state. One could become a citizen “*de intus*,” with the right to conduct commerce only within the city, or “*de intus et extra*,” which granted authority to trade internationally as well. In the first case, the foreigner had to demonstrate at least fifteen years of residency in Venice, while the second category was restricted to those resident for at least twenty-five years. Over time, the time requirements diminished. The plague of 1348 led the city to encourage immigration after the disease had drastically reduced the native population; the war with Chioggia, which ended in 1381, had a similar effect. Ultimately the city required “only” eight years residency to meet the lesser requirement, and fifteen for the privilege to conduct trade abroad. In addition, there was a sort of “*ius soli*,” in the form of a 1313 law that granted “*de intus*” citizenship to children born in Venice who had resided there uninterruptedly to the age of twelve, and qualification as “*de intus et extra*” for those who remained to the age of eighteen.

Thus the civic administration demonstrated a striking degree of enlightened institutional awareness, despite instances of resistance and suspicion, that immigrants from outside the lagoon represented a capital resource worth investing in and banking on, both in terms of manpower and technical know-how. The history of the germanic minority in this fabled city of the western Middle

Ages can be read for what it reveals about the openness, tolerance, and dynamic adaptability shown by the *Serenissima* toward principles of integration and acculturation, and more simply toward outsiders. Braunstein offers a fine lesson to help us comprehend the Occident today, which is so often internally refractory and unprepared to receive those regarded as other and different.

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