Proposal for the 3rd MMHN Conference

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Religious Conversion and the Venetian Military Milieu

In the present paper I wish to examine the phenomenon of religious conversion in the 18th century within the Venetian military milieu as an aspect of the more general issue of the connection between conversion and the experience of peregrination in the eastern Mediterranean. The army remained an important feature of the 18th century Venetian maritime empire, when Venice had lost all its possession in the Aegean Sea and was consequently confined to the Adriatic Sea. The army’s function was based to a very large extent on the compagnie mercenarie, that is on salaried mercenary groups. These groups comprised a large number of non-Christians from the Venetian settlements in Istria and the Dalmatian coast, as well as from the Ottoman Empire, mostly the hinterland of Bosnia and Croatia, but also the northern African coast. These non-Christians were predominantly Muslims and more rarely Jews, who were employed in the Venetian army and fought along with the Christian mercenaries.

Within this framework, the mercenary milieu was a privileged field for conversion. Inside this rather secluded and predominantly Christian setting, and frequently under circumstances of war that entailed danger and fear, association and coexistence of non-Christians with the Christian mercenaries provided the appropriate circumstances that rendered fairly effective the more or less indirect pressure for conversion exerted from the Christian fellows of these men, as well as from the important figures of the military chaplains. At the same time, conversion implicated better employment prospects for non-Christians, and was thus also sought by them. Then again, other Muslims and Jews, originating mainly from the Ottoman Empire, after peregrinating around the Mediterranean Sea - an experience that gave them an opportunity for religious indeterminacy and transition - converted in Venice and were afterwards recruited in the Venetian army.

The cardinal location for these conversions was the institution of the Casa de’ Catecumeni in Venice, which maintained a proselytization network that controlled the process of conversion in the Adriatic Sea with the aid of both the military authorities and the various religious officials in the Venetian colonies of the Adriatic. In this sense, the Venetian army, partaking in this network, functioned as a place for the homogenization and “domestication” of non-Christians. The paper will be principally based on the depositions of Jews and Muslims that arrived at the Venetian Casa de’Catecumeni in order to convert to Christianism and afterwards continued or initiated their mercenary careers.
CV
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2002-2005 Master of Early Modern Greek History, Department of Early Modern and
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Supervisor: Prof. Olga Katsiardi-Hering
Dissertation subject: “The City of Corfu through the eyes of the travellers, 18th-19th
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For the first two years of my postgraduate studies I was granted the scholarship of the
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1995-2001: Ptychio of Early Modern and Contemporary History, Department of History
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2000: Socrates student, Sociology Department, Faculty of Political Science and
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Written essay: “El nacionalismo griego en el siglo XIX”

Work & Research Experience
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Duties: gathering of iconographic material
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