

Copy That! The Cultural and Social Role of Late-Medieval Venetian *Zibaldoni*

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KEYWORDS

zibaldoni/ commonplace books; late-medieval Venetian manuscripts; social agency of books; late-medieval merchant culture; medieval travel; late medieval Venetian identity; material performativity and social patronage/connection; late medieval cosmology; negotiating morality

ABSTRACT

One of the codicological phenomena of the late middle ages in Italy was the appearance of self-made books—called zibaldone—created by copying passages from a wide variety of other texts, often with illustrations, tables, and diagrams. These were not personal recollections or diaries, but a cross-section of information that spanned the entire spectrum of medieval knowledge. We do not know of many Venetian examples, but two of them have received considerable individual scholarly attention, The Zibaldone da Canal (early 14th century) and The Book of Michael of Rhodes (c. 1435). Although the two have not been studied together, both have been classified as examples of practical commercial/technical manuals for Venetians involved in maritime travel and commercial activity, and this has been the primary scholarly focus. In this article I look at the function of these two manuscripts as socio-cultural objects that speak to the particular interests, concerns, and worldview of their creators. I demonstrate how the texts, diagrams, and images in both codices served similar multifunctional roles in maintaining their owner's civic and moral identity and providing them with physical, intellectual, social, and emotional well-being as Venetian and Christian persons involved in overseas commercial travel. In particular, this study highlights how the information categories of mathematical problems, astrological and calendric information, and prayers and invocations, act as cultural containers that provide for practical skill development, protection of mind, body, and soul, and social representation and interaction. I conclude that this socio-cultural approach to these particular manuscripts gives us an added dimension to understanding the multilayered complexity that underscores the original creation and use of these codices—and by implication the whole genre of zibaldoni—and also helps explain why they continued to hold their value long after the original compilers' deaths.

One of the codicological phenomena of the late-medieval period in Western Europe was the appearance of self-produced manuscripts consisting of a miscellany of vernacular text and diagrams, copied from other sources directly or indirectly from memory. A small percentage of these codices also contain images, which may have been drawn by the compiler or added by an illuminator. In English these manuscripts are known as common-place or hodgepodge books, but in Italian they are called *zibaldoni*. *Zibaldoni* are not diaries or accounts of personal experiences or thoughts but are composed of impersonal passages copied from the entire spectrum of medieval manuscripts—religious/devotional, scientific, philosophical, natural history, and chronicles. They were originally made for the personal use of the compiler but many became prized possessions and were retained as living documents and added to by future owners, who might or might not be members of the original compiler’s family.¹

Most of the surviving *zibaldoni* are Florentine and therefore it is not surprising that the only systematic examination of *zibaldoni* as a genre, the study by Lisa Kaborycha, deals with Florentine examples. Kaborycha’s study, however, clearly demonstrates that the content, form, and use of such compilations very much reflected local culture and traditions.² It is in this context that this article examines two of the four known surviving Venetian *zibaldoni*, the early fourteenth-century *Zibaldone da Canal* [hereafter *da Canal*] compiled by a young Venetian merchant, and the early fifteenth-century *Book of Michael of Rhodes* [hereafter *BMR*], created by a Rhodian seaman who spent his entire working life as a seaman and small-scale entrepreneur on Venetian commercial vessels.³ While both manuscripts have received scholarly attention, these studies have largely concentrated on the perspective of late-medieval maritime economic or technical history. In other words, these codices have never been looked at

together or considered as fundamental examples of a Venetian *zibaldone* cultural tradition. Although these two manuscripts, compiled a century apart, appear to be quite different, in that they address the particular occupational concerns and interests of a young merchant and a middle-aged seaman, there is, however, a clear organizing principle around what each person chose to be included in their book. The content was chosen from sources that were cultural mirrors of a society that was Christian, Venetian, and mercantile, and of particular applicability to men who engaged in mainly Mediterranean maritime travel for the purpose of commerce.

Indeed, the content of the manuscripts needs to be understood within the realities of late-medieval commercial maritime travel. Sea travel was dangerous, uncomfortable, and uncertain. The possibility of shipwreck, and the resulting loss of life and/or goods, was omnipresent, due not only to the natural forces of weather and tides, but also to accidents caused by incompetent seamanship or faulty construction. There was also the constant threat to one's life, health, and merchandise from ship-borne disease, warfare and piracy, capture and slavery. The prospect of sudden death at sea was particularly traumatic because there was usually no priest on board to hear one's confession or administer last rights, thus imperiling the traveler's eternal soul.⁴ In addition to all of these possibilities for catastrophe, there were the normal trials of seasickness, cramped quarters, and the tedium of long voyages.⁵ Nor was the danger confined to being on ship: once one was in a foreign port one could be caught up in local hostilities and rivalries, forced to deal with locals who might try to cheat or rob one, and to be faced with material or sexual temptations that might endanger one's immortal soul.⁶

In this article I will demonstrate how the texts, diagrams, and images in both codices served similar multifunctional roles in maintaining their owner's identity and physical, intellectual, social, and emotional well-being as Venetian

and Christian persons involved in such a potentially risky environment. After providing a brief overview of the manuscripts and existing scholarship, I will discuss how the content and the codex itself, as a portable, personal object might have been understood within the framework of social relations and social interactions. The social role of *zibaldoni* is inherent in the dynamics of selecting and copying the text the compiler believes would best address his particular concerns.⁷ Lisa Kaborycha believes that as a book, the *zibaldone* enabled one to interact with others to create and repay social debt, and that loaning books so they could be copied was "...a kind of civic obligation."⁸ The article then examines three areas of common content to show how they addressed the particular occupational, cultural and social needs of their owners. These are: 1) Mathematics Problems; 2) Astronomical/Astrological and Calendric Information; 3) Prayers, Invocations, Protective, and Remedial Measures. I have chosen to discuss the role and function of the manuscripts' images and diagrams in its own section, as I believe their role has been either largely ignored (*da Canal*) or understated (*BMR*).

THE MANUSCRIPTS AND THEIR SCHOLARSHIP

a) *Zibaldone da Canal*: Merchant's Common Place Book, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library MS 327, Yale University, early 14th century

The *Zibaldone da Canal* was written in the early fourteenth century, although the only surviving manuscript is a late fourteenth-century copy, with some material added in the fifteenth century. It owes its name to the fact that it was once owned by Niccolò da Canal who had inscribed his name twice in it in 1422, when he would have been eighteen or nineteen years old.⁹ The text is written in ink on paper in a vernacular Venetian dialect using mercantile script. The codex consists of 69 folios measuring 11 x 8.5 inches (280 x 215 millimeters). There are fourteen representational drawings done in ink and coloured wash (fig. 1), and a number of other shapes, diagrams, and tables in ink only. All the drawings and diagrams,

with one exception, are placed to support a particular mathematical problem. Of the fourteen representational drawings, five each are of ships and towers. The content is an eclectic mixture of the following: conversion lists of currencies, weights and measures for many areas in Italy and the Mediterranean, with related information about goods and raw materials; mathematical problems involving arithmetic and geometry; literary selections; healthcare and medical information, which can also include astrological and calendric references; historical information about Venice; spiritual and didactic passages such as the Proverbs of Solomon.



FIGURE 1
Illustrations of ships and couriers from *Zibaldone da Canal*, Beinecke MS 327, folios 16v & 17r. Venice, 14th century. Ink and coloured wash, 280 x 215mm. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University.

Source: <http://beinecke.library.yale.edu>

This codex has been the subject of two monographs, one in Italian (1967) and one in English (1994). In the Italian study, the manuscript was transcribed and translated into modern Italian, alongside an Introduction by Alfredo Strussi and three background essays.¹⁰ The scholarly focus was on maritime economic history.

The only illustrations discussed were the images of the ships, and the only interest in them was from a naval history perspective. In 1994, John Dotson translated Stussi's edition into English, with a substantial introduction and analysis of the content, as well as extensive footnotes, mainly of a technical nature, throughout the work itself. Dotson did not discuss the images at all, even though he had them all redrawn from the original manuscript. Dotson, like Lane before him, understood the *da Canal* primarily as an example of a merchant manual, in the tradition of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's *Pratica della mercatura*.¹¹ Dotson discusses the mathematical problems in context of the abacus schooling young merchants would have received, and noted the similarity between *da Canal*'s problems and those in Leonardo Fibonacci's *Liber Abaci*, an early twelfth-century mathematics textbook that remained in circulation for two hundred years.¹² Dotson identified that the mercantile information was out of date, even by Niccolò's time, and attributed this to a role of the codex in "...the acculturation of a young Venetian nobleman..."¹³ Dotson seems, therefore, to recognize that this *zibaldone* had a socio-cultural function but other than this vague notion of "acculturation", he makes no attempt to examine it from a socio-cultural context, which is the thrust of my analysis here. His concern is rather that of an economic historian interested in late-medieval maritime commerce.

**b) *The Book of Michael of Rhodes: Manuscript in Private Possession*,¹⁴
c. 1435**

Most of this codex was written between 1434 and 1435, although there were subsequent entries by Michael on a yearly basis, and four other hands are also evident, attesting to its use over time.¹⁵ The manuscript contains 253 paper folios written in ink in the Venetian dialect using a cursive mercantile script. The average size of the folios varies around 7.7 x 5.5 inches (196 x 139 millimeters). There are fifty-four pictorial illustrations (fig. 2), all but two of which—a fictional

coat-of-arms and an image of Saint Christopher—are in the shipbuilding (39) and astrological sections (13). All drawings are in black and/or brown ink and many have some degree of coloured wash. In addition to the pictorial representations there are a small number of diagrams, tables and charts, although the charts and tables can go on for several folios. Unlike *da Canal*, only two diagrams support the mathematics problems section.

The content of this *zibaldone* can be classified as follows: mathematical problems and calculations; calendric and astrological information, some of which references physical health and hagiographic information; navigational information; shipbuilding/ship fitting descriptions and instructions; prayers for healing. There are two additional sections containing Michael's service record and a set of Standing Orders issued in 1428 by Andrea Mocenigo, the Captain on one of Michael's voyages.

The recent access to Michael's codex has resulted in a magnificent three-volume work, *The Book of Michael of Rhodes: A Fifteenth-Century Maritime Manuscript* that includes a complete facsimile, a transcription and translation and a series of essays. These essays primarily address the technical issues of early fourteenth-century Venetian shipping, navigation, and commercial activity, but the authors have provided considerable contextual information that might help explain what Michael's motivation might have been and why he chose to include some of the things he did.¹⁶ The codex's illustrations are discussed in some detail but are mainly concerned with issues of production (who and how), iconography, artistic traditions, and technical context.¹⁷ Dieter Blume does not look at the images as a complete entity within the codex, but rather as separate components, and thus he does not consider the issue of the overall function of the images. Rossi's main interest in the images is to try and discern what kind of role the overall graphic program served. He sees two possible functions—a “didactic-explicative” one,

such as the images of the Zodiac, or to “...satisfy a decorative intent...” as in the case of the ships.¹⁸

Therefore, this article will add to the scholarship around these two manuscripts by placing them within a specific Venetian cultural tradition to explain both the content and its purpose. This in no way invalidates the existing scholarship but rather provides an additional dimension that helps us to understand, not only why these codices were created as they were, but also



FIGURE 2
Galley Under Sail from *Book of Michael of Rhodes*, Folio 156a. Venice, 1430's or 40's.
Ink and coloured wash, 196 x 139 mm. Manuscript in private possession.

Source: Pamela O. Long, David McGee, Alan M. Stahl, editors, *The Book of Michael of Rhodes: A Fifteenth-Century Maritime Manuscript*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009), Volume 1, Facsimile, 346.

why they continued to be kept, copied, and valued long after the deaths of their compilers, as well as the archaic nature of some of the practical information.

THE FUNCTIONS OF THE CONTENT

a) The *Zibaldone* as Social Agent

A primary function of the late-medieval Venetian *zibaldone* was its role as an object with social agency—that is, its function as a primary material tool in the enactment of social performance and interaction by its owners.¹⁹ Thus in looking at how the content, the images, and the very book itself, was used by its owners to support their social interactions, we can grasp the importance of these *zibaldone* as social enablers.

The sea voyages of both Niccolò and Michael involved living in incredibly close quarters with the ship's seamen, merchants and other types of passengers, such as pilgrims. Neither men would have had their own cabin, and the amount of space allocated for sleeping would not have permitted much privacy or room for other activities. Anselme Adorno, writing in the 1460's, did not recommend sailing in Venetian galleys, saying: "I advise against it, both because of the narrowness and the crampedness of the space ..."²⁰ The only real social space for non-ranking passengers and crew was on deck when the weather was clement, or in the stern, where they would also have taken their meals.²¹ Thus, the physical limitations of space and the proximity of crew and passengers to one another, created a fluid social situation, since the strict hierarchies of social class that developed as the size of ships increased, did not yet exist.²² Moreover, the officers, petty officers, merchants, and perhaps even common sailors shared a common vested interest since they all had goods on board that they needed to bring safely to market.²³ This type of social situation ensured that almost everyone on the ship had to relate to persons above and below them in rank, in conditions totally

different than what they would have experienced in Venice itself. In such a situation one of the biggest personal advantages was to be an entertaining companion, to be able to regale others with stories, facts, history, health remedies, what day it was and who should be prayed to, and other miscellany which made them feel safe and connected to home and each other. We can imagine the reciting of mathematics problems to a group of merchants, who would have vied with one another to come up with the right answer and then avidly discuss the way in which they solved the problem. Indeed, the structure of most of these problems is designed to enable the calculator to arrive at the right answer using different solutions, enabling them to be recalculated again and again.²⁴ Such ‘recreational mathematics’ would have been welcomed and would place the compiler, who was probably the reader or teller, in a privileged position.²⁵ To be well thought of, especially by one’s social superiors, was important, even if there were no obvious material rewards.

As a book, the *zibaldone* could be lent to others and this earned gratitude and established an obligation, and doing and receiving favors for others was the currency of late-medieval Italian civic life.²⁶ Whatever else the *zibaldone* might have been or represented, it was also a physical object which one could use as a tool in the representation of one’s self to others. To the owner’s superiors it proclaimed the compiler as a man who was literate, and this surely accorded individuals a special kind of social status. In addition, the texts illustrate how deeply their writers were connected to Venetian written culture. The manuscripts thus constitute key displays of knowledge that “...could hardly ever have failed to produce an effect on the various readers.”²⁷ As books they were objects that “...conferred a sense of status” on their possessors irrespective of comparative quality, embodying both symbolic and material value.²⁸ As prized objects that could be handed down to successive generations and read, alone or in shared settings, loaned, and even pawned, these codices could become part of the expression of individual and family status and

identity.²⁹ They thus continued to function as social agents “...as a book in the real sense of the word, a book in every respect.”³⁰

b) The Texts As Cultural Containers

The mathematics problems which spoke to Niccolò's and Michael's commercial skills and values, the astrological charting and calendars that identified auspicious days for such things as phlebotomy, and the prayers and incantations that invoked the protection of saints and holy figures, and the weights, measures, currencies and navigational measures, may all have played a role in connecting the owners to a Christian and mercantile Venice. It is no accident that the most detailed navigational description in Michael's book is about how to enter the port of Venice (folio 119 a & b). Even Michael's treatise on shipbuilding, which describes different types of Venetian ships from the ground up, albeit incompletely and inaccurately, was a deep connector to the *Arsenale*, Michael's probable workplace when ashore.³¹ The content is therefore rooted in the knowledge and culture of the compilers and reinforces their identity as Christians and Venetians when removed from the everyday familiar. The overall content of these codices not only maintained their connections with Venice and its culture and traditions, but also armed them against the physical, moral and emotional perils they faced as they travelled and engaged in commerce. Lisa Kaborycha noted that one of the primary functions of *zibaldoni* was to help one “...to outwit *Fortuna*, involving control of the physical and psychological well-being of the individual and the family.”³² In this sense one can understand not only how some of the individual texts and images might have a protective function, but how the codex itself might be seen as invoking thaumaturgic power. The length of this paper precludes analyzing each category of information to demonstrate how they serve as a connector to Venetian culture, and therefore wrap the reader and listener in a protective mantle, but I am going to examine three broad content areas to

demonstrate how they functioned as containers of Venetian, Christian culture, values, and beliefs.

1. The Mathematics Problems

The material, social and moral values related to money-making through commerce suffuse both manuscripts. The mathematical problems feature a dizzying array of money and material goods: cash, foodstuffs, housewares, spices, raw materials, textiles, and luxury goods such as precious metals and gems. This was the cargo that was the lifeblood of Venetian commerce and the mathematics problems reveal not only what was traded, bartered, and valued, but also how these goods were transported and stored, and how the profits might be proportionately shared amongst the business partners.³³ These posed problems reveal the social and moral importance of merchants' core values, such as trust, the honouring of agreements, and ensuring mutual benefit.³⁴ The mathematical problems, which feature prominently in both *zibaldoni*, thus played a multiple pedagogic and didactic role, keeping not only the computational abilities of the reader sharp, but, referencing certain moral and ethical values that were integral to Venetian society.³⁵ These values included the dark side of religious intolerance, and reflected the virulent anti-Semitic rhetoric and prejudice that were normative in European Christian society at this time. For example, one problem asks the calculator to figure out how to throw overboard half of the thirty passengers of a ship, consisting of fifteen Christians and fifteen Jews, in a way that only the fifteen Jews are sacrificed.³⁶

As noted earlier, these manuscripts were written about one hundred years apart, and this is very much reflected in both the type of content and the societal values each mirrors. While both works reflect a Christological world view, the values they reveal are indicative of a society which had, in the century separating them, grown increasingly comfortable with the notion of money and commerce,

and the reconciliation of the pursuit of money with Christian moral principles. Thus, *BMR* can pose a problem asking what the monthly interest would be on a loan of 20 *lire* for two years, if the debtor repays it with 30 *lire* at the end of the two-year term.³⁷ Such a direct reference to a loan is not found in any of *da Canal's* mathematical problems. And yet while this reflects this shift of the moral acceptability of loaning money, yet there is still a whiff of the moral taint of money-lending present, as Michael makes it clear that the loan is for commercial purposes, not personal consumption.³⁸

2. The Astronomical/ Astrological and Calendric Information

This category broadly captures the knowledge of the natural world within a Christian cosmological framework. We can see the linkages between the systems of knowledge revealed in these two manuscripts and those in the genre of encyclopedic texts.³⁹ The purpose of such encyclopedic texts was clear—to reveal the workings of the natural world as a reminder that there was a divinely ordained natural order which lead one back to a Christian God.⁴⁰ Understanding how God's world functioned meant that one was in harmony with it and the practical knowledge that flowed from this harmony provided protection from a multitude of physical and spiritual evils. Thus, *da Canal* provides the healing properties of herbs and gemstones, such as rosemary and red coral, and both manuscripts discuss the best times to have blood drawn (*da Canal* does this diagrammatically; see fig. 3).⁴¹ Both compilers have included information about the seasons—*da Canal's* is descriptive with almanac type information, whereas Michael's is focused around the odious days of the year.⁴²

Each manuscript has a section that can be termed astronomical/astrological. *Da Canal* uses this information to talk about the movement of the sun and the moon, and the effect on weather, and sees such astronomical information as a predictive tool for certain kinds of activities related to the natural world,

such as ploughing, cutting wood or shearing sheep.⁴³ Michael, understandably, is more interested in astronomical information in relationship to the effect of the moon, planets, and stars on tides and navigation.⁴⁴ *BMR* contains considerably more astrological information than *da Canal*, and discusses, in some detail, each astrological sign and the dominant personality characteristics associated with that sign.⁴⁵ It is also this section of Michael's book that is the most lavishly and colourfully illustrated, with a circular framed depiction of astrological man (fig. 4) and each sign of the zodiac. Michael provides a detailed calendar of a year in which every day is associated with a particular Saint, many of whom have particular meaning for Venetians.⁴⁶ Sometimes there is additional astronomical information about a particular day, such as a new moon or an eclipse, but it always follows the name of the saint whose day it is. The function of this type of calendar enables one to specifically address the saint who is being commemorated to seek their protective intervention for that day. This mixture of astronomical and



FIGURE 4
Astrological Man from Book of Michael of Rhodes, folio 103b. Venice, 1430's or 40's. Ink and coloured wash, 196 x 139 mm. Manuscript in private possession.

Source: Pamela O. Long, David McGee, Alan M. Stahl, editors, *The Book of Michael of Rhodes: A Fifteenth-Century Maritime Manuscript*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009), Volume 1, Facsimile, 237.

hagiographic knowledge would accurately reflect the general cosmological mental framework of late-medieval travellers.

All of the above classes of knowledge would have been immensely important from the perspective of knowing what and when one could do something with comparative safety. It thus provided a framework for feeling more in control of the elements and consequently less threatened by the vicissitudes of nature and *Fortuna* while at sea.

3. The Prayers, Invocations, Remedies, and Moral Guidance

This category of passages is very much evident in both *zibaldoni* and both manuscripts contain overt statements about ways to ensure physical and moral protection. *Da Canal* uses passages such as *The Precepts of Solomon* as a conduct guide to ensure one does not bring about one's own downfall through intemperate or unwise behaviour.⁴⁷ It specifically addresses how to travel safely: "And do not take the long road at night, take good lodging for a time; if you find good company, do not leave it."⁴⁸ *Da Canal* also features prayers to be said to St. Mary Magdalene, and to certain saints when boarding a ship, remedies against fever or to staunch bleeding using communion hosts and Latin invocations, and wise sayings of the Church fathers.⁴⁹ Michael too has included prayers to avert general harm and inflictions such as epidemics and disease, particularly the plague, as well as ones for averting or curing specific types of afflictions, some of which are particularly directed to those who travel by sea.⁵⁰ These include prayers and invocations to protect against drowning and harm in battle; cure fevers, toothache, and snakebite; staunch the flow of blood; and to catch fish.⁵¹ *BMR* does not include the kind of general moral advice and guidance that *da Canal* does, but we still find the occasional passage that is practically moralistic, such as advice on how to cure wine addiction and prevent indecent behaviour.⁵²

All of these types of passages served to provide a formidable and comprehensive set of invocations and actions that called upon the divine power of a Christian God, and his holy agents, to intervene to protect those who called upon them for protection and restoration. These prayers, invocations and rituals contained or accessed real power. This protective power might well have extended to the book itself as an object with real agency.⁵³

c) **The Images: Power and Protection**

There is only one religious icon in either manuscript, a traditional portrait of Saint Christopher in Michael's codex, and for which there is no text or caption. Dieter Blume believes that this image did not require any text because it exerted its power simply through being looked at, serving what Alan Stahl termed "...an amuletic function".⁵⁴ Yet this is not the only image that might be said to exercise direct spiritual power on its viewer. In *da Canal*, the writer illustrates his invocation for staunching bleeding by showing three simple circles with Latin inscriptions, which represent communion hosts (fig. 5). This is a unique type of representation in the manuscript and the presence of the hosts had great symbolic, and perhaps even thaumaturgic power.⁵⁵ Joe Flatman, a medieval illumination scholar, believes that all manuscript imagery contained well-understood symbolic knowledge and had multiple interpretations and functions. He wrote that manuscripts and their illuminations,

...were purposely designed, in most cases, to fulfill multiple symbolic agendas, to offer multi-layered and complex interpretive schemes. Like a complex crossword, they were usually intended to be meditated on at length in order to appreciate the different levels—allegorical, moral (tropological), spiritual (anagogical) and sublime—at which they could operate.⁵⁶

There is no reason to believe that the imagery in these manuscripts was any different.

It is significant that none of the pictorial representations in

either manuscript are records of events or sights. In this regard, the illustrations are as disinterested in what is being observed through the act of travel as are the texts themselves. While the imagery may play certain specific functions in relation to the text, such as illustrating a

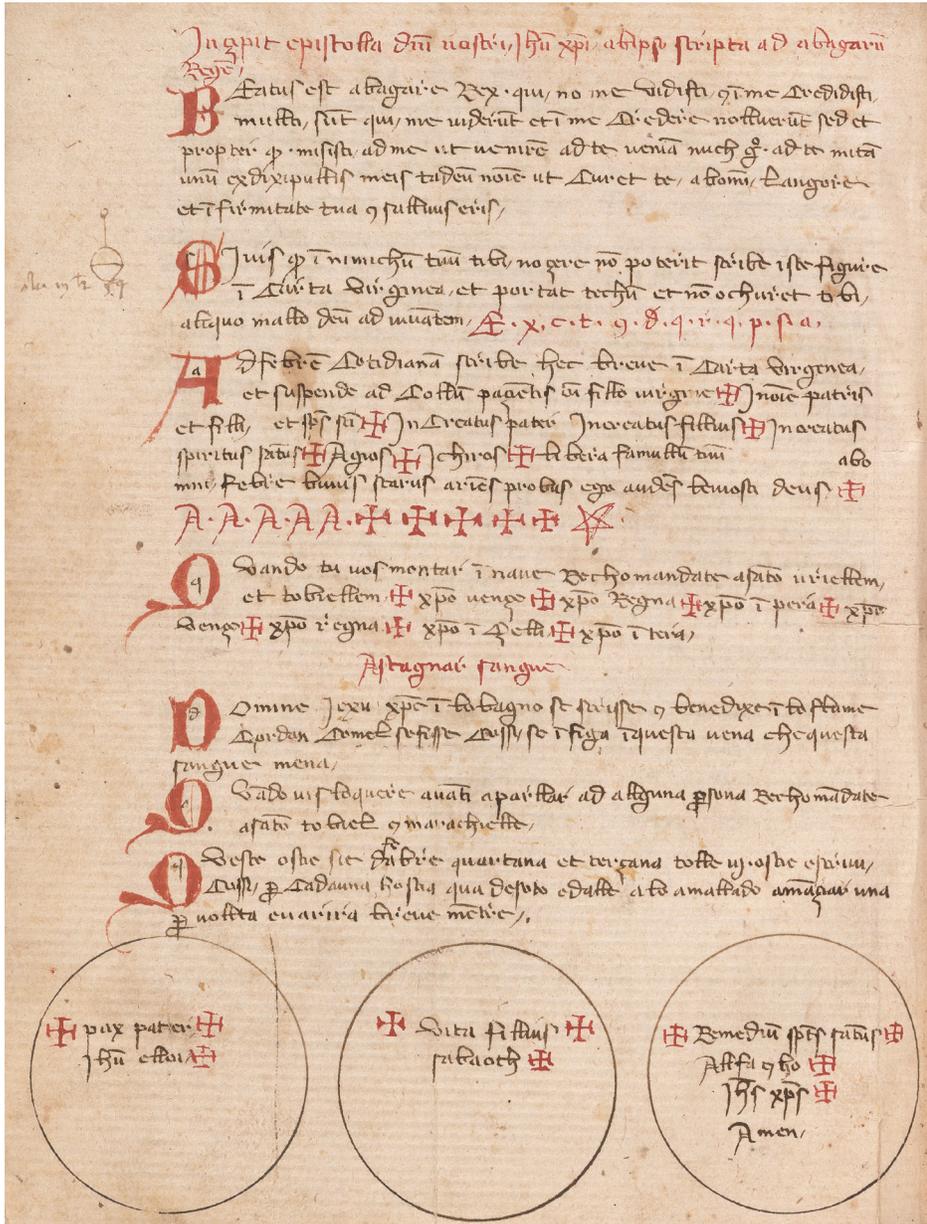


FIGURE 5
 Illustration from *Zibaldone da Canal* of Eucharist hosts used to cure fevers. Beinecke MS 327, folio 53v. Venice, 14th century. Ink and coloured wash, 280 x 215mm.

Source: Beinecke Library, Yale University.

mathematics problem, these functions neither subvert nor contradict the overall purpose or use of the book as a whole. That is, the images support the texts as containers of the culturally familiar and comforting, not the strange and disquieting. They expand the materiality of the text to emphasize the commercial, spiritual and cosmological world of the Venetian merchant.

The most common images in each codex are representations of ships (figs. 1 & 2). In *da Canal*, they are placed within context of mathematical problems involving ships, but in *BMR*, the drawings are technical illustrations to descriptions of shipbuilding or sailing. Although they thus service the text, they do much more. These ships are metaphors for Venice itself, a sea-bound city surviving and thriving through its maritime proficiency. Elizabeth Crouzet-Pavan expressed it this way:

The ships that were always present in images of the city were equally prominent in daily life. On a more allegorical level, ships expressed the singularity of Venice and its functions.⁵⁷

These ships thus signified the power of Venice in being able to protect those who sailed on her ships through the city's technical proficiency in shipbuilding, accurate charts and navigational techniques, forceful diplomacy, military muscle, policies and procedures to ensure safe sailing and orderly conduct, as noted by Michael in a set of standing orders. Niccolò, as a merchant travelling the Mediterranean rim, and Michael serving aboard Venetian state vessels at sea and in the *Arsenale*, would have seen these ships as the very lifeblood of Venice, and also of their own lives. These ships thus function as deep visual affirmations of Venice's ability to cast a protective mantle over its citizens. In this sense, these images of ships, contain real power and, like St. Christopher, provide a talismanic function that was palpably real to its viewers.

The coloured images of the Astrological Man (fig. 4) and each of the twelve astrological signs are the highlight of Michael's illustration program.

Although some features of Michael's illuminations are unusual, his iconography reflects the thorough Christianization of the zodiac as is found in contemporary Books of Hours.⁵⁸ The Astrological Man was a "visual aid" used for medical purposes, which "...may have been intended to increase the understanding of the patient as well as the physician, impressing him or her with the mingling of the celestial in the medical art."⁵⁹ Similarly, every sign was associated with a particular part of the human body and assisted in both diagnosis and remedial action.⁶⁰ The images in Michael's manuscript thus played a multiple role "...never far removed from the occult arts, whether divinatory, magical or alchemical."⁶¹ Ultimately, these images affirmed the sense of divine, cosmological order and were tools that contributed to the understanding of that order and the search for balance, both physiologically and morally. Thus, they too are profound symbols of safety and protection from the diabolical forces that sought to disorder God's creation and natural order.

The illustrations, whether in pictorial or diagrammatic form, lend the text both physicality and boundaries, and both these attributes are a way of affirming identity within a specific sphere. The images anchor, restrain, and frame the familiar, so that they can function as reminders of the world the viewer is temporarily removed from. The need for confirmation that the travellers' social, religious, and cosmological understanding of order is reflected not just in the images of ships, astrological signs or towers, but also in the organization of data, of information that once set down in a particular form is unchanging. It is, I believe, this need of travellers for reassuring order that explains the complex organization of data, and the fact that once set down it was not updated, for to do so might disturb the embedded protective function inherent in the codex as the sum of all its texts and images.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

These two *zibaldoni* are complex, multifunctional objects that capture the knowledge systems that reflect the world of their two creators, a world that is profoundly Venetian, Christian, and mercantile. As persons who faced physical, moral and spiritual risks of maritime travel and engagement with other cultures, their self-made books were highly charged material objects that affirmed their identity and provided practical, moral, and spiritual guidance. The knowledge contained in these codices ultimately gave them the means to feel they could exert a degree of control over the vicissitudes of ‘*Fortuna*’, and to apply this knowledge to their material, physical, and spiritual well-being. These manuscripts need to be understood as holistic entities, not as haphazard collections of practical, technical, and cultural information. The specific content that their creators chose to copy and sometimes illustrate, spoke to their integrated need for commercial/career success, physical, spiritual and moral protection, and positive social relations. The images, tables, and diagrams they contained not only gave visibility to the texts but encoded deep messages of Christian, Venetian identity in their own right, such as the ships, calendars with Saints Days, or communion hosts. These visual elements explicated a culture that would have been immediately understood by those whom Niccolò and Michael would have chosen to show them to and thus reinforced the bonds of collective identity.

As portable objects, their contents helped their owners to negotiate the uncertainties of the shifting geographic, economic, and cultural environments beyond their home city by constantly reminding them of who they were—Christian and Venetian citizens who could depend on both these pillars of identity to keep them safe in this world and the next. The worldview they captured was culturally stable in a way that made the accuracy of information such as exchange rates, tides or construction techniques unimportant. These codices ultimately

affirmed the knowledge and values that defined their creators as Christian and Venetian citizens who were part of a collective that could serve them well in both temporal and everlasting life. And this is ultimately why these manuscripts, which are so far from the luxuriously illuminated manuscripts that are usually the primary interest of art historians, were kept, sold and valued long after the passing of their creators. They were living artifacts that continued to connect future owners to the essence of Venetian identity. And as such, they are valuable case studies in furthering our understanding of the complexities of books as material objects and cultural containers, and how writing and reading allowed for important moments of social interaction and agency.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Lisa Kaborycha, "Copying Culture: Fifteenth-Century Florentines and Their Zibaldoni" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2006), 1-35.
- 2 Kaborycha, especially Chapters 2 & 3, 36-167.
- 3 Pamela Long points out that Michael would have been able to bring aboard and trade his personal supply of goods, acting as a "small-scale entrepreneur. Pamela O. Long, ed., *The Book of Michael of Rhodes: A Fifteenth-Century Maritime Manuscript, Volume 3: Studies* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009), 13.
- 4 Jean Verdon, *Travel in the Middle Ages*, trans. George Holoch (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 71.
- 5 Ibid., 55- 96.
- 6 Francesco Datini was constantly admonishing his partners or employees for their immoral behaviour, such as the time he scolded his agent in Valencia, Cristofano di Bartolo, who wanted "...to do what you pleased and live at ease and have much pleasure and beget bastards..." Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato: Francesco Di Marco Datini 1335-1410* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), 123.
- 7 Ryan Perry observed that "...to possess a copy of a text is also to conterminously possess a direct and personal link to an owner of a copy-text. ...even to be aware of the material existence of a work was concomitantly to be part of a social network." Ryan Perry, "Objectification, Identity and the Late Medieval Codex," in *Everyday Objects: Medieval and Early Modern Material Culture and its Meanings*, ed. Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 311-312.
- 8 Kaborycha, 87.
- 9 John E. Dotson, *Merchant Culture in Fourteenth Century Venice: The Zibaldone da Canal* (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1994), 9.
- 10 Alfredo Stussi, *Zibaldone da Canal: manoscritto mercantile del sec. XIV* (Venice: Fonti per la Storia di Venezia, 1967), vii-lxxviii.
- 11 Dotson, 12.
- 12 Ibid., 13-14.
- 13 Ibid., 17.
- 14 The Manuscript was made available for study and facsimile reproduction in 2001 through the auspices of the Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This resulted in a magnificent three volume work. Pamela O. Long, David McGee and Alan M. Stahl, eds., *The Book of Michael of Rhodes: A Fifteenth-Century Maritime Manuscript*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009). *Volume 1: Facsimile*, edited by David McGee. *Volume 2: Transcription and Translation*, edited by Alan M. Stahl, transcription by Franco Rossi, translation by Alan M. Stahl. *Volume 3: Studies*, edited by Pamela O. Long. Volume 3 consists of an Introduction about Michael's world, followed by a series of essays on the primary content areas of the manuscript.
- 15 Alan M. Stahl, "Michael of Rhodes and the Birth of the Mariner's Manual," *Journal of Early Modern History* 14 (2010), 154. Franco Rossi, "Introduction to the Manuscript" in Alan M. Stahl, ed., *The Book of Michael of Rhodes: A Fifteenth-Century Maritime Manuscript, Volume 2: Transcription and Translation*(Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009), xxiii-xxxiv.
- 16 The scholars involved in the project hold a number of views as to why Michael created this manuscript. These include: using the codex to draw attention to himself in order to win recognition and advancement; to satisfy his intellectual curiosity and demonstrate his intellectual

interest and capacity; to create a tool that could help alleviate the boredom and tedium of long passages. Stahl, “Michael of Rhodes: Mariner in Service to Venice”, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 3*, 87. Stahl, “Michael of Rhodes”, 161. Long, “Introduction: The World of Michael of Rhodes, Venetian Mariner”, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 3*, 26-29. Rossi, “Michael of Rhodes and His Manuscript”, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 3*, 104-105. Dieter Blume, “The Use of Visual Images by Michael of Rhodes: Astrology, Christian Faith, and Practical Knowledge,” *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 3*, 190.

17 Dieter Blume tries to establish a strong case for the supposition that **all** of the illustrations were drawn and painted by Michael himself, and not by a professional illuminator. Blume, 147. Franco Rossi appears to accept Blume’s conclusion, although he does raise the possibility that they might have been done by a professional illuminator. Rossi, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 3*, 113.

18 Rossi, 112.

19 This observation draws on the theory around social performance. See Richard Schechner, “Behavior, Performance and Performance Space,” *Perspecta* 26 (1990), and Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

20 Verdon, 89.

21 *Ibid.*, 86-87.

22 *Ibid.*, 84.

23 *Ibid.*, 86.

24 Rafaella Franci, “Mathematics in the Book of Michael of Rhodes,” *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 3*, 119.

25 *Ibid.*, 137.

26 Ronald Weissman sees the cycles of obligation as key to understanding urban life at this time. “I would argue that central to the problem of urban life in the Renaissance was the interpretive and interactive process of untangling the complex web of obligations engendered by overlapping, conflicting, simultaneous commitments to family, neighbours, political allies, competitors, friends, associates, clients and patrons.” Ronald F. E. Weissman, “Reconstructing Renaissance Sociology,” in *Persons in Groups: Social Behaviour as Identity Formation in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, ed. Richard Trexler (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1985), 45.

27 Blume, 191.

28 Kaborycha, 87.

29 Perry, 311.

30 Rossi, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 3*, 104.

31 Stahl, *Michael of Rhodes*, 94.

32 Kaborycha, 2.

33 As examples see Dotson, 50-51, 55, and Stahl 131, 133, 157.

34 Gunnar Dahl, *Trade, Trust and Networks: Commercial Culture in Late Medieval Italy* (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 1998), 293.

35 Franci, 115-146.

36 Franci, 139.

37 Stahl, *The Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 2*, 45.

38 “One person loaned another 20 lire for 2 years to make a year’s caique voyage.” Stahl, *The Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 2*, 45.

- 39 Rossi, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 3*, 101. Jacques Le Goff's definition of a medieval encyclopaedia would certainly fit the *zibaldone*: "...l'effort d'une integration ordonnée en un seul ouvrage du contenu d'une multitude de livres." This quote was taken from Bert Roest, "Compilation as Theme and Praxis in Franciscan Universal Chronicles," in *Pre-modern Encyclopaedic Texts: Proceedings of the Second COMES Congress, Groningen, 1-4 July, 1996*, ed. Peter Binkley (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 213.
- 40 Robert L. Fowler, "Encyclopaedias: Definitions and Theoretical Problems" in *Pre-modern Encyclopaedic Texts: Proceedings of the Second COMES Congress, Groningen, 1-4 July, 1996*, ed. Peter Binkley (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 18.
- 41 Dotson, 149-151; 145; 163-164. Stahl, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 2*, 311 & 313 (folios 102b – 103a).
- 42 Dotson, 147-148; Stahl, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 2*, 323 & 325 (folios 111a – 111b).
- 43 Dotson, 131-143.
- 44 Stahl, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 2*, 321 & 323 (folios 110a – 111a); 395-415 (folios 131a-135a).
- 45 *Ibid.*, 313-319 (folios 103a – 109b).
- 46 *Ibid.*, 283-309 (folios 95a-102b). For example, the list includes St. Marina, whose relics were in Venice, the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets St. Geremia (Jeremiah), St. Samuel and St. Moses who were particularly venerated by Venetians, and of course St. Mark the Evangelist, the patron Saint of Venice.
- 47 Dotson, 155-161.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 157.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 170-171; 143; 171-173.
- 50 Stahl, *Book of Michael of Rhodes, Volume 2*, 515 (folio 183a).
- 51 *Ibid.*, 515-521 (folios 183a-185a).
- 52 *Ibid.*, 541 (folio 194a).
- 53 Sophie Page, *Magic in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
- 54 Blume, 169. Stahl, *Michael of Rhodes and the Birth of the Mariner's Manual*, 160.
- 55 Several scholars have addressed this kind of relationship in their studies. Their work highlights the importance of addressing the psycho-social dimensions of objects. See David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) and Sarah Blick and Laura D. Gelfand, *Push Me, Pull You: Imagination and Interaction in Late-Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Boston: Brill, 2011).
- 56 Joe Flatman, *Ships & Shipping in Medieval Manuscripts* (London, UK: The British Library, 2009) 26.
- 57 Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, *Venice Triumphant: The Horizons of a Myth*, Lydia G. Cochrane translator (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 139.
- 58 Blume, 158. Sophie Page, *Astrology in Medieval Manuscripts* (London: The British Library, 2002), 45.
- 59 Page, *Astrology*, 56.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 53-54.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 57.

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