



HAL
open science

Book review - Ersie C. Burke, *The Greeks of Venice, 1498-1600: Immigration, settlement, and integration*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2016, xxvi-239 p.

Mathieu Grenet

► **To cite this version:**

Mathieu Grenet. Book review - Ersie C. Burke, *The Greeks of Venice, 1498-1600: Immigration, settlement, and integration*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2016, xxvi-239 p.. *European History Quarterly*, 2018, 48 (3), pp.331-333. hal-02303329

HAL Id: hal-02303329

<https://univ-tlse2.hal.science/hal-02303329v1>

Submitted on 27 Feb 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Ersie C. Burke, *The Greeks of Venice, 1498-1600: Immigration, Settlement, and Integration*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2016; xxvi-239 p., 4 colour ill. + 14 b/w ill. + 2 Maps + 9 b/w tables ; ISBN: 978-2-503-55926-1, 80€

Ersie C. Burke's *The Greeks of Venice, 1498-1600* stands out as the first comprehensive English-language study on the Greek presence in sixteenth-century Venice since James G Ball's PhD thirty years ago (*The Greek Community in Venice 1470-1620*, University of London, 1985). It therefore constitutes a welcome contribution to the current renewal of Anglophone historiography on early modern Venice, along with works from leading scholars such as Eric Dursteler, Monique O'Connell, Rosa Salzberg, and Maartje van Gelder. Actually, the book is a revised version of a PhD Ersie Burke defended at Monash University in 2004, under the title *The Greek Neighbourhoods of Sixteenth Century Venice, 1498-1600 : Daily Life of an Immigrant Community*. Those who had the chance to read the PhD version (which has long been available online) are left wondering the reason for such a belated publication, especially since the original manuscript underwent only minimal changes – and although the bibliography was updated with some twenty post-2004 references. In any case, the book's ambitious reach as well as its author's clear and accessible style make for a must-read for both fellow "Venetianists" and non-specialist readers.

Burke's study is divided into two parts, each made of three chapters. The first part focuses on patterns of Greek migration and settlement in Venice. Taking a revisionist stance towards both the "Myth of Venice" and the Greek "nationalist" historiography (a catchword that would need further explanation), Burke offers a careful review of the history of late medieval and early modern Greek migrations to what William H. McNeill once dubbed "the hinge of Europe." In particular, she convincingly stresses that most Greeks in Venice were actually imperial subjects and not foreigners, and that voluntary emigrants and refugees arrived in fairly even numbers: this, in turn, implies that their "transition from immigrants to settlers" (p. 22) has to be understood within this specific political, social, and legal framework (Chapter 1). Burke then moves on to study the demographic and social outlooks of Greek households in 16th-century Venice, including their size and spatial distribution in the city, the role of family, kin and friendship connections (Chapter 2), and the importance of work and occupation in enforcing these networks as well as creating new ones (Chapter 3). To be sure, such a perspective fruitfully explains some of the specifics of what was still very much "a community in transit" by the end of the 16th century (p. 30). However, one is left to wonder the kind of methodology Burke put to use in this quantitative work: in several instances, "a sample of 201 couples" (p. 32), "ten Greek to non-Greek marriages" (p. 54), "a small sample of 250 wills" (p. 158), or "a sample of 250 donors" (p. 163) hardly seem to correlate with broader estimates of the Greek population. Also, the vast majority of the material on which the study is based comes from the archives of Venetian notaries – and to a lesser extent from the Venetian church archives (*Archivio della Curia Patriarcale di Venezia*). To be sure, unearthing records of so many Greek lives in such immensely vast yet understudied collections is no small achievement. However, resorting to such material – and in particular to notarial records – calls for a careful understanding of the kind of "social world(s)" that are brought to life: in this respect, at least, Burke's claim to reconstruct the daily life of "*popolani*" Greeks falls short of acknowledging how within this broad category, different social stratas, occupations, and genders are represented in the very material she relies upon.

The second part of the book is perhaps the most original, as it traces and interprets changes in Greek-Venetian society and identity during the 16th century. Burke's careful analysis of the Greek community's institutional framework (Chapter 4) offers fascinating

insights into what she aptly characterizes as “a shift from an immigrant to a permanent community” (p. 120). This was no linear path, though: while the foundations of both the confraternity of San Nicolò (1498) and the church of San Giorgio dei Greci (1511) gave Greeks places of their own where to gather and worship, they were also met with staunch opposition by the local Catholic hierarchy, as well as bitter factional tensions within the community. Eventually, chapters 5 and 6 are dedicated to analyzing the effects of community life on both perceptions and expressions of Greek identity in Venice. In particular, Burke’s finely nuanced study of burial rites and bequeathing strategies goes a long way in debunking a number of myths about memory and solidarity within migrant communities.

This well-documented book does not shy away from addressing “big issues,” such as the fate of immigration in early modern states, and the construction of communal identities. In so doing, it offers a valuable contribution to ongoing scholarly debates, while at the same time providing rich insights into the daily life of Greek immigrants in sixteenth-century Venice. While some of the book’s concepts and methods could certainly have benefitted from a little clarification, its blend of erudition and empathy accounts for a read that is both pleasant and highly instructive.

Mathieu Grenet