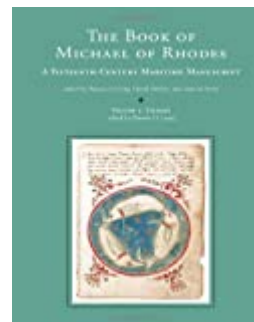


Pamela O. Long, David McGee, Alan M. Stahl, eds. *The Book of Michael of Rhodes: A Fifteenth-Century Maritime Manuscript*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009. Vol. 1, 732 pp.; Vol. 2, 732 pp.; Vol. 3, 384 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-13503-0; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-19590-4; \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-262-12308-2.



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A Rediscovered Venetian Mariner's Notebook

Michael of Rhodes is certainly not the most popular of fifteenth-century writers. A Greek émigré who moved to Venice in 1401 as a humble oarsman, fought several sea battles, and managed to advance to the highest ranks in the Venetian navy, “only with difficulty could [he] be considered an intellectual” (vol. 3, p. 101). Yet the manuscript this “adoptive hero” of the Serenissima started to compose in 1434 (probably as a way to advance in his career) represents a true treasure of information for early Renaissance scholars and, more generally, for historians of early modern science and technology. A 241-folio quarto manuscript, the “Book of Michael of Rhodes” includes treatises and practical exercises in commercial mathematics, a beautifully illuminated section on astrology, extended notes on time reckoning, and a rare portolan, Greek prayers transliterated in Latin characters, officers’ rules, and nothing less than the world’s first extant treatise on shipbuilding. The manuscript, which is being published for the first time, marries medieval encyclopaedism with early fifteenth-century technical knowledge, late Byzantine religious beliefs with Venetian cul-

ture, and science and art with everyday practice. Its varied, if not eclectic, character is enough to make Michael’s manuscript a unique object of study.

The history of the manuscript is itself interesting. It is a saga no less compelling than the adventurous life of its author. Parts of Michael’s book were known in seventeenth-century Italy, but since then the manuscript had been deemed lost, until it “miraculously” surfaced in 1966 at a Sothebys auction. Purchased privately, it once again vanished from the scene, until it suddenly reappeared on auction almost forty years later. Conscious of its historical value, this time the new owner not only gave scholars full access to the manuscript but also allowed its integral reproduction—hence this MIT facsimile edition.

The Book of Michael of Rhodes is a lovely three-volume hardcover set. The first volume is a faithfully reproduced facsimile of the actual manuscript and other original documents related to the life of Michael (including his and his wife’s wills). All the folia (comprising a vast number of blank ones) are entirely reproduced in color on glossy

paper in the same size as the original, making visible different types of ink, margin lines, water stains, and the various marks of time. The quality of the reprint makes it possible to read the original text and fully appreciate the wonderful illuminations in their brilliant colors. The second volume contains the transcription of the manuscript faced by the English translation on the left page, in order to facilitate comparison and assist readers unfamiliar with medieval Venetian. The text is complemented by comprehensive indexes of Venetian general and proper names and of their respective translations, which makes the volume easier to navigate. The third volume comprises studies of the manuscript by nine international experts in different aspects of the early Renaissance, including a paleographer, a mathematician, an art historian specializing in medieval astrological imagery, a historian of Venetian cartography, historians of science and medicine, and an expert in medieval ship construction.

A companion to the facsimile edition, this last volume is meant to investigate and contextualize the figure of Michael of Rhodes and different aspects of his work and make the manuscript “more comprehensible and accessible” to scholars and the general public (vol. 3, p. ix). Pamela O. Long’s detailed introductory chapter certainly fulfills both goals. Here, the coeditor effectively sets the manuscript and its author within the broader context of nautical writing and the Venetian maritime world. Long lucidly presents key aspects of Michael’s life and career and links them to main historical and cultural events, such as famous battles he fought and, more notably, the Council of Ferrara-Florence of 1438, to which Michael’s ship escorted the Byzantine imperial convoy. Details from accounts of other mariners and travellers who journeyed on the convoy are used to shed light on Michael’s experience and immerse the reader in a fifteenth-century mariner’s world. The last part of the chapter links the contents of the manuscript to the hybrid cultural context in which Michael operated. It sheds further light on cultural and religious aspects of the Rhodian officer’s life and discusses various questions presented by the manuscript and further tackled by other contributors in the following chapters. In this sense, Long’s introduction nicely sets up the scene for the following more specialized studies. I personally found this chapter carefully researched and annotated, yet at the same time accessible, compelling, easy to read, and full of illuminating insights, parallels, and links with other Renaissance figures, ranging from obscure late Byzantine travellers to famed Italian humanists, such as Nicholas of Cusa.

Unlike Long’s introduction, most of the following

chapters are unlikely to sustain the continued attention of the “general public.” The casual reader will probably feel overwhelmed by the degree of detail provided in Alan M. Stahl’s meticulous biography of Michael of Rhodes (currently, the most complete source of information about this author), by parts of Raffaella Franci’s accurate study of the mathematics in the manuscript, or by the technicalities of shipbuilding detailed in David McGee and Mauro Bondioli’s chapters, and so on. By contrast, specialized scholars will find all these contributions reliable sources of precious information.

Historical geographers and map historians will find Piero Falchetta’s chapter on the manuscript’s portolan of particular interest. The portolan contains instructions for the coastal navigation of Atlantic Europe, the Gulf of Salonika, and the Adriatic—coasts Michael had more or less extensively sailed. Having contextualized Michael’s portolan within a much broader (yet rather understudied) tradition of *periploi* (ancient Greek and Byzantine lists of ports, villages, and cities as encountered during a coastal journey), Falchetta shows how Michael’s portolan had been copied from another source (like most of the rest of the manuscript). He also shows how the portolan contains a number of technical errors, which go beyond mere transcription and would have made the portolan totally impractical, if not deceitful, for navigational purposes. Falchetta concludes that the utility of the portolan was symbolic, rather than practical. It was the possession of certain “work instruments” (such as the portolan and other sections of the manuscript), rather than their actual content, that “certified the nautical experience of their proprietors, as the proof of the fact that they could have access through their *libro* (book) to specific knowledge” (vol. 3, p. 205). In other words, Michael’s manuscript was less of a practical aid than an object used to instruct and impress potential patrons and employers who were not necessarily familiar with the art of navigation and its technicalities.

As the other studies in the volume show, this thesis seems to be confirmed by other parts of the manuscript. For example, the place of mathematics in Michael’s manuscript, Franci suggests, often appears to be more “recreational” than practical (in the literal sense). Copied from contemporary *abbaci* (or school textbooks), problems, exercises, and much of Michael’s mathematical writing have nothing to do with his own personal needs as a sailor (vol. 3, p. 145). Similarly, the manuscript’s section on the zodiac, Dieter Blume shows, contains some basic astrological mistakes, whereas the treatise on shipbuilding, we read in chapters 7 and 8, was not all

Michael's work. Here, Michael once again reveals his importance as a collator and transmitter, rather than as an authority on the matter (it is worth noting that did not himself build ships).

Overall, the companion volume offers valuable insights into maritime practices and technologies and Venetian commerce, as well as into a variety of aspects of popular knowledge and culture in the broader world of the fifteenth-century Mediterranean: from religious piety to popular medicine and astronomy. Besides providing the reader with detailed commentaries on different aspects of the manuscript, the studies also shed light on its overall purposes, both collectively and individually. While this gives the companion volume coherence and encourages nonspecialist academic readers to venture beyond their area of expertise, it also (and perhaps

inevitably) generates a number of repetitions and slight overlaps throughout the volume. To a certain degree, each chapter could read as a self-contained essay directed to a specific category of specialists.

The price of the set does certainly justice to its publishing standard and the quality of the writing (both in terms of translation and research). Beyond the sheer delight of a high-quality facsimile, the book is a pleasure to read simply for its rigorous accuracy and careful detail. The editors' work has been truly commendable. Long, McGee, and Stahl certainly succeeded in "fixing" the contents of this extraordinary unedited manuscript for posterity, preventing them from getting lost a third time. May *The Book of Michael of Rhodes* serve as an inspiration and example for publishers, private collectors, and scholars.

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