

CHIT CHAT CLUB

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“Married to the Sea: Venice and Its Mediterranean Empire”

Introduction: It is said that the sundials in Venice are engraved with a motto in Latin: *Horas non numero nisi serenas* (I do not count the hours unless they are happy). This wonderful city is my subject today.

Venice is composed of 117 islands, made of mud flats, in the center of a lagoon. There is a very complex pattern of canals, many of them being only a few feet across. Originally fresh water rivers flowed in from the mainland, the most important becoming the Grand Canal.

Over the centuries the Venetians allowed the tides from the Adriatic to flow freely through the city, in order to keep the canals clear and clean. BUT they diverted the flow of most of the mainland rivers to keep the fresh water out of the lagoon, especially by the construction in the fifteenth century of the famous Brenta canal, because the rivers brought sediment which would gradually have filled in the lagoon.

The dikes along the sand banks facing the Adriatic were not built until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There are now just three entries into the lagoon from the Adriatic Sea.

The method of building on the mud banks was very ingenious. Twenty-foot long pilings of Istrian pine (Istria is the peninsula that projects southward beyond Trieste) were driven down through the mud until they reached a solid foundation of sand and clay. If the building was light they were driven down in rows to support separate walls, or if the building was to be heavy (as many on the Grand Canal were) the pilings covered the entire surface where the building was to be erected. On top of the pilings were placed planks of wood horizontally, and then on top of those a thick foundation was laid of Istrian stone. Walls were then put on top of this foundation, with great use of wood to keep the building as light as possible. Most of the buildings had wells, which were used for collection of rainwater, which was sifted through sand on the way to the well.

Local people from the mainland began to take refuge on the islands during the various barbarian invasions from the fifth to the seventh century AD, where they joined the fishermen already settled. (These fishermen had made a living by fishing, or by selling clay for bricks.)

The first settlement of refugees was in the fifth century, fleeing the West Goths. Then, larger settlements followed during the invasion of the Lombards in the sixth and seventh centuries.

Venice was ruled by Constantinople, after the re-conquest of Northern Italy by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century. Tradition says that in 697 Venice elected its first local ruler, known as the *dux* (or Doge in Venetian dialect), who owed allegiance to the representative of Byzantium, or Exarch, in Ravenna. But when Ravenna was captured by the Lombards in 751,

Venice became the representative of Byzantium in Northern Italy, and probably many of the architects and makers of mosaics from Ravenna came to settle there. By the ninth century Venice was virtually autonomous, although it maintained its loyalty to Constantinople. It owed its wealth from then on to its virtual monopoly of the goods coming from the East through Constantinople into Europe, above all the most desired goods in medieval Europe, spices and silk.

In 828, the body of Saint Mark was stolen from Alexandria by two Venetian merchants and brought back to Venice, which quite literally gave the city its patron saint. It also gave the city its symbol, the winged lion that represented Saint Mark in Christian iconography. To justify this extraordinary theft, the Venetians invented the legend that Saint Mark had once visited the lagoon during his lifetime (when in fact there was no Venice there to visit), and in a dream had seen an angel, who said to him, "Peace to you, Mark, my Evangelist. It is here that your body should be buried."

So the Venetians at once set out to build the first Basilica of Saint Mark (San Marco) to house the body. Up to that time, most Venetians had lived on the islands of Torcello, Burano, and Murano in the northern part of the lagoon, but with the building of San Marco the center of settlement shifted to the area which is today the Piazza San Marco, the Doge's Palace, and the Grand Canal. When the consecration service was ready to begin, there was one problem. The body of Saint Mark had disappeared. Fortunately a workman noticed that there was a hand sticking out from one of the new columns—a mummified hand—which had been inadvertently built into the new church. The body was quickly recovered, and the service went on as planned.

In the tenth century, the Doge developed a plan for turning Venice into one of the great monumental cities of Europe. He appointed a team of three planners—one to buttress the protective sandbanks, one to dig canals and prepare building sites, and a third to supervise the construction.

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries there was a great diversification of Venice's trade, in addition to its trade with Constantinople. They had a government monopoly of salt from the salt pans in the lagoon. They also developed their own manufactures for export of glass, precious metals, dyed cloths, and armor. Wine, oil, and wheat were brought from Southern Italy. A major trade route northwards was developed across the Brenner pass to Austria and Southern Germany, and was extended to Flanders, where its headquarters was in the expanding city of Bruges. There were offshoots from this central route to Paris and across the Channel to London.

Up to 1099 Venice had ignored the First Crusade, which began in 1097. But it woke up to what it was missing when the Crusaders captured Jerusalem. So in 1099 Venice sent a fleet to Palestine. It met the fleet of Pisa, one of its two most important Italian rivals, which was also sailing to the Holy Land to establish a new trading post. In the ensuing battle, in Rhodes, the Pisans lost, and Venice then had only one rival left, Genoa.

On the way to the Holy Land, the Venetian fleet stole the relics of St. Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors. When they got to the Holy Land, they made an agreement to help the Crusaders if given a colony in each city conquered. They then took Haifa.

To support and expand their trading and fighting fleets, in 1104 they founded the Arsenal. It was a huge state-run manufacturer of arms and naval equipment, and had many repair shops for their ships. But in 14th century they began to construct ships also, both warships and commercial vessels. The Arsenal became the largest industrial complex in Europe before the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century.

In 1173, the Doge began the ceremony of Venice's marriage to the sea. Every Ascension Day, the whole ceremonial fleet of hugely decorated barges and gondolas proceeded to the largest opening through the sand banks to the entry to the Adriatic Sea at the Lido, and the Doge announced: "With this ring, we wed thee, Sea, in token of our perpetual rule". He then dropped the ring, which had been given to him by the Pope, into the waters of the lagoon. (The rumor is that, being good Venetians, there was a young fisherman ready, who dived into the lagoon and caught the ring before it became embedded in the mud. We do not know what happened to it then.)

In the twelfth and thirteen centuries, the Venetians became a self-perpetuating oligarchy. The Doge was no longer chosen by acclamation but by a small, restricted council of the wealthy, which in 1172 was called the Great Council. This Council was closed in 1297 to all except those whose fathers and grandfathers had served on it. Later the names of those eligible were written in a famous Golden Book. After this point, hardly any names were added in the whole of Venice's history.

A smaller body called the Senate was picked from the Great Council in the thirteenth century to act as main legislative authority. This inner oligarchy had no more than two to three hundred members.

Poorer citizens had their own spokesman, called the Grand Chancellor who was second in power to the Doge and whose signature was required for all legislation.

In the fourteenth century, the most powerful men in Venice established the Council of Ten, as the supreme body of state security. They had a secret police, and absolute power to punish treason. They used the device of a lion's mouth in the shape of a letter-box, so that anyone could denounce others anonymously by dropping their letter of accusation in the Lion's Mouth. Probably however there was a full-scale investigation in which the denouncer's name was discovered, and his accusations checked.

Hence the city was governed by closely related patrician families. Marriage alliances were central to the structure. Marriage of a daughter into the right family was very important, and could only be obtained by payment of an increasingly large dowry. Dante said that the birth of a daughter struck terror in her father's heart. The Senate even set upper limits on what the size of a dowry could be. But the dowry also gave a woman independence within marriage, because the money remained her own as part of her father's patrimony. Mothers often gave large dowries to their daughters in order to give them greater independence. To make sure that the alliance was with the best family possible, brothers, uncles, and aunts also chipped in.

The Fourth Crusade of 1203-1204 transformed Venice. The Crusaders arrived in Venice in 1201 on their way to Palestine--4000 knights, 8000 squires, and 20,000 infantry men. They were housed on the Lido beaches to keep them out of Venice, as the Doge Enrico Dandolo worried about what they might do if they were allowed into the city itself. He charged them vast amounts for their upkeep there. After several months the Crusaders found that they would not be able to raise the money (85,000 silver marks) to pay for their transport to Palestine.

The Doge and Great Council wondered how to cut their losses, and perhaps turn this situation to their own advantage. They wanted to get the Crusaders out of Venice anyway. They proposed that the Crusaders should put down the rebellions of Venice's colonies in the Adriatic, especially a dangerous one in the city of Zara (now Zadar). The Crusaders obliged by beginning their Crusade by putting down Christian cities in Venice's empire.

Then, the question arose how to pay for the rest of the way. At the suggestion of the Doge, the decision was made to support a pretender to the throne of Constantinople and to overthrow the government of the Eastern Roman Emperor. The Pope was outraged.

In 1203, the Crusaders besieged Constantinople and took it, making the pretender emperor. But a new rebellion against them in the winter led to second siege in 1204, after which the city was sacked. The Crusaders then decided to remain there. They chose a new emperor, Baldwin of Flanders, from the Crusaders themselves, and created the so-called Latin Empire which lasted only until 1261.

As its reward, Venice sent a Venetian to be the new Patriarch of Constantinople, and to preside over Santa Sofia, which became the Venetian Church in Constantinople. The emperor confirmed their control of the Adriatic, and gave them part of the coast of the Ionian Sea, the central Aegean Islands of the Cyclades and Sporades, ports in Greece called Corona and Modon, and especially Crete. This was the greatest consolidation of their overseas empire.

Spoils brought back to Venice included many carved columns and capitals in marble; cloisonné golden panels, which enriched the famous golden altar or Palo d'Oro in Saint Mark's; and ancient manuscripts encrusted with gold and gems. Four gilded copper-bronze horses from the arch of the Hippodrome, probably dating back to Constantine, were placed above the entrance door to Saint Mark's. The doorway was embellished with the present carved frieze.

This is perhaps the best moment to describe the Venetian Mediterranean empire geographically rather than chronologically.

The Istrian Peninsula was annexed by Venice very early in the eleventh century with the agreement of its inhabitants who wanted to be protected from pirates, Slavs, and occasionally from Muslims. The annexation began as early as 1000 when Venice came to the aid of the nearby cities who were being held hostage by the Slavs. The main Venetian cities on the Istrian peninsula itself were Capodistria, Rovigno Pola (or the old Roman Pula, with a great amphitheater.), and Albona. These were usually completely friendly to Venetian rule, and were built in Venetian style of architecture.

Let us now follow down the Eastern coast of the Adriatic sea and the nearby islands.

Venice took possession of all the main islands. The wonderful island of Rab, which commands the entrance to the Adriatic sea from the north, was taken by Venice in 1409 and kept until the end of the republic in 1797. It was given a special kind of local government, with a popular assembly called the Università, meeting once a year to debate. It has several impressive churches. It kept a war galley at its own expense, to patrol the nearby seas.

The next group of cities going South were on the Dalmatian coast (now Croatia, one of the most beautiful parts of Europe).

One of the most interesting cities on the southern part of this coast was Split. The emperor Diocletian in preparation for his retirement as Roman emperor had built a huge palace on the coast close to his birth place, and he lived there from 305 BC to his death in 313 BC. The buildings, which are still the center of old Split, were the heart of a growing maritime city which was seized by Venice in 1409 and held until it fell to Napoleon in 1797.

The lovely island of Korcula (Curzola) is half way between Venice and Dubrovnik. It was granted full Venetian citizenship in 1571 for resisting the Turks.

The most fascinating city on the Adriatic coast is Dubrovnik, or Ragusa as it was known in the Middle Ages. The city, like Venice, had begun as a center for refugees fleeing the invasions of the Adriatic coast, and had succeeded in winning a form of independence by putting itself successively under the rule of each of the powers controlling either the mainland or the Adriatic. It was a major rival to Venice, which only between 1205 and 1358 took over supreme control, changed the form of government to match the Venetian oligarchy, and transformed the style of architecture into Venetian.

Venice also controlled the Albanian coast, and had cities at Durazzo and Valona. It was very important to control the narrow opening of the Adriatic between Brindisi (a Venetian city) and Valona.

The island of Corfu was vitally important to Venice as the point where the Ionian Sea and the Adriatic met. It was acquired from the Anjou dynasty in Naples in 1386, and made into the seat of the Venetian naval command over the Gulf. The fleet of Corfu patrolled the other Ionian islands under Venetian rule. It was given special privileges, to keep the citizens happy, including the use of Greek as well as Italian.

Corfu was in the possession of Venice from 1386 to 1797. The charm of Corfu is due to the combination of Venetian style churches and houses with the wonderful reproduction of the Rue de Rivoli in Paris built when the French took over in 1797, and the substantial British imperial government palace and country homes dating from British rule from 1814 to 1864. The Duke of Edinburgh was born in the former British Governor's country palace.

After the Fourth Crusade, Venice had major possessions on or near mainland Greece. It had two cities on the southern tip of the Peloponnesus, known as the "eyes of the republic",

called Methoni and Corone. They were fortified ports. Methoni was a center for navigational information. Every Venetian ship passing this way stopped there to give and receive notice of the movement of pirates and other vessels. There are many Venetian remains, especially the bastions in the walls.

Nauplion, on the south-east coast of the Peloponnesus, a marvelous port from where the Greeks may have sailed to the siege of Troy, was taken over twice by the Venetians. From 1388 to 1540, they held out against many Turkish attacks until finally succumbing. But they came back in 1686, and built some of the most remarkable fortresses in the Mediterranean. They were of no avail, however, when the Turks returned in 1715 with an army of 100,000 men.

Venice took possession of many of the islands of the Aegean Sea, but assigned most of them as personal fiefs to Venetian noble families. They were expected to colonize them, and recognize their duty to participate in maintenance of Venice's trade routes. Most important were the Naxos and Mykonos.

Crete was the most important base of Venice in the Aegean Sea. It was taken in 1204 after the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders. It was decided to colonize it from Venice itself. The Governor was sent out from Venice, and there was development of the main city of Candia (now Heraklion) in Venetian style. It remained Venetian until 1671 when it was taken by the Turks.

Cyprus was acquired in a curious way. A Venetian noblewoman called Caterina Corner married the king of Cyprus named Giacomo di Lusignano. Venice made her "an adoptive daughter of the Republic," delivered her for her marriage, and provided her with a dowry in 1472. Her husband died the next year and her son died in infancy. Venice then persuaded Caterina to give the island to Venice, and she was brought back to Venice with great honor and financial rewards. Venice then controlled the island until it fell to the Turks in 1571.

Venice always had trading privileges within Constantinople itself, in the merchants' quarter on the Golden Horn. After 1204, it vastly expanded its position with control of Santa Sofia itself. Although expelled in 1261, it returned within ten years. It maintained its trading status even after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks.

Finally, Venice had control of Azov on the Sea of Azov, which it used for commerce with Russia and for slave trading.

So how did the riches of this vast trading empire display themselves in Venice itself?

First, quite obviously, in the wonderful architecture which is miraculously preserved today, though under great challenges that I will discuss later.

As a result of the growing prosperity, there was a vast building boom between 1000 and 1150. Fifty churches were built; merchants started lavish palaces along the canals; many hospitals and schools were founded.

In 1063, a vast reconstruction of Saint Mark's was begun by Doge Domenico Contarini, who had married Theodora, the daughter of the Byzantine emperor. The Doge decreed that every ship returning to Venice from the East must bring either marble or carvings for the new cathedral, which was modeled on the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. It was intended to be a mausoleum for the Doges, just as the Church of the Holy Apostles was the mausoleum for the Emperors in Constantinople. Vast numbers of columns were brought back so that they were put in the cathedral just for beauty and not for functional need. Beautiful grained marbles covered the brick walls, and mosaics covered the apses and domes.

The earliest Venetian palaces built after 1000 are Byzantine in style. They can be recognized by looking at the arches of the windows or balconies or porticoes.

The form of the Venetian palaces was very functional. They began as combined residence and merchant's factory. They had two entrances -- one on the water called the riva or quay, one from the street, leading into a courtyard, where there was a well and external staircase.

The palace was in a square block. Both the lower floor and upper floor (piano nobile or living quarter) had a large room in the middle and small rooms on each side. Goods were loaded and unloaded on the ground floor, which had store-rooms on each side. Later this floor became a monumental entrance hall. A mezzanine floor was created to give office space for the merchant. The piano nobile was originally a place where the merchant could display his wares. Then it became a reception room.

The palaces were all open to the water and not fortified, unlike those in other Italian cities where family rivalries led to violence.

The Gothic period began quite late, about 1300 AD, due mainly to the coming of the orders of the Dominican and Franciscan Friars, who built two of the greatest churches in Venice. Ss. Giovanni e Paolo was built by the Dominicans in 1234-1430. It is the pantheon of Venice because it contains many tombs of the doges. Its finest paintings are by Giovanni Bellini and Veronese (who it has to be said, is almost everywhere).

Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari was built by the Franciscans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The tombs include that of Titian, who painted the lovely Assumption above the main altar.

The main Gothic architect was Giovanni Bon. He was commissioned in 1424 to build the Ca' d'Oro on the Grand Canal, the most ornate Gothic palace in Venice with very complex tracery on the upper loggias. Giovanni Bon's son was Bartolomeo Bon, who was the main architect in Venice from 1430 to 1464. He designed the great ceremonial gateway called Porta della Carta that links the Ducal Palace to Saint Mark's Cathedral.

As in Florence at the same period, the rich Venetian merchant class also poured their wealth into painting. The Venetian School was begun by the Bellini family. The first really great painter of this whole dynasty of painters was Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516), who brought the

Venetian adoration of the lyrical quality of light into his paintings, as well as the equally Venetian desire to humanize his subjects, even the most tormented of the saints.

Then followed one of the most incredible outpouring of talent in the whole history of European art. First came Giorgione (1477-1510), who wrote poetry and music as well as doing painting -- the most impressive of which is *La Tempesta* in the superb Accademia Gallery, the principal Art Gallery of Venice.

Then followed Titian (1490-1576), a student and partner of Giorgione, who created a vast output during his long life. In Venice he painted many altarpieces, especially that in the Frari church. He spent most of his time, however, doing commissions for patrons abroad, such as the Popes and the Spanish rulers Charles V and Philip II.

Tintoretto (1518-1594) brought in the style now called Mannerism, which is very dramatic, using exaggeration, foreshortening, distortion, and acidic color. He re-imagined all the traditional Biblical scenes. See especially the fantastic paintings in the Scuola di San Rocco. There is no more moving or terrifying piece than the Crucifixion scene in S. Rocco.

I should mention here the Venetian institution called a Scuola or School. It was an institution of laymen (clergy were excluded), which was partly religious and partly social. The earliest were begun in the thirteenth century by very wealthy merchants, and their predominance was recognized by calling their chapel and meeting house a Scuola Grande or Major School, of which there were six, each of which was decorated largely by one great painter. Tintoretto spent 23 years on the fifty paintings he did in San Rocco. The artisans had their own schools, which naturally were called Scuole Minori.

Venonese (1528-1588) (from Verona, of course) settled in Venice in 1553. He decorated the entire church of San Sebastiano, and did many of the vast paintings in the Doge's Palace. His lavish banquet scenes even had him questioned by the Inquisition for putting too many unrelated details in a scene of the Last Supper (in the Accademia, called *The Feast in the House of Levi*).

Among the many fine Venetian architects of the sixteenth century, the greatest was probably Palladio (1508-1580), who designed many major churches, including especially the stately San Giorgio Maggiore which was built on a small island commanding the entrance to the Grand Canal from the lagoon. He was also the inspiration of many Georgian architects in England and the Thirteen colonies, Jefferson above all.

What is amazing about these achievements was that Venice faced enormous challenges from the fourteenth century on. First was its rivalry with Genoa for control of the trade in the Eastern Mediterranean. It fought three long, punishing wars which finally ended in 1381 with the defeat of Genoa.

Second, while those battles were being fought, an even more dangerous enemy came into Venice. In 1348, its ships coming from the East brought in the Black Death, the Plague, which killed up to half of the population. The plague however did not stop coming, and it resulted rather amazingly in some of Venice's finest churches. In 1577, Palladio was assigned the task of

building the Chiesa del Redentore (Church of the Redeemer) on the Giudecca Island. In 1630, to give thanks for the end of a prolonged outbreak of plague, the architect Longhena was commissioned to build in baroque style the church of Santa Maria della Salute (Saint Mary of Good Health) at a stunning location near the mouth of the Grand Canal.

Third, the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453. After that they made constant efforts to drive up through Balkan peninsula and to challenge Venice and later Vienna, and succeeded in taking many of Venice's possessions in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The most important effort in which Venice participated was the sea battle of Lepanto in the Gulf of Corinth in 1571, in which the Turks were at least temporarily stopped.

Venice attempted to protect itself and to advance its commerce by reinforcing its land empire at the mouth of the river Po, which it had first taken in the fourteenth century. It was able to hold onto a whole number of important cities--Treviso, Vicenza, Verona, and Ravenna. This is the period of the great condottieri, the hired knights, such as Gattamelata and Colleoni, whose great statues can be seen on important squares in the city.

Fourth, Venice's European trade was challenged by the Portuguese, who successfully created a trading empire of their own in spices and silks extending as far as China and Japan, and by the discovery and conquest of Central and most of Southern America by Spain, which shifted the focus of much European trade to the Atlantic.

But in spite of these difficulties, Venice continued to prosper, if at a less high level. Great palaces in Baroque and Rococo style were erected on the Grand Canal and the intersecting canals, and decorated in the eighteenth century by Tiepolo, one of greatest painters of interiors.

With the coming of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century, the requisite circuit of the great West European cities by the aristocracy of Britain and France above all, several fine painters, notably Canaletto and Guardi, produced large numbers of paintings of Venice and its festivals, which still (in decreasing numbers) decorate the walls of the country houses of Britain and France.

The now moribund Venetian Republic was destroyed by Napoleon in 1797. Napoleon felt that the Republic was not republican enough, but an oligarchic sham. In 1797, he declared war on the republic. "I want no more Inquisition, no more Senate: I shall be an Attila to the state of Venice", he declared. He deposed the last Doge, Lodovico Manin.

Venice became part of the Austrian empire from 1815 to 1866. Its rule was unpopular, and there was a brief republican revolution in 1848-49, which was put down by Austrian armies. The Austrians even conducted the first air raid in history, setting a very bad precedent, when a few bombs were dropped from a balloon, fortunately without causing much damage.

In 1866 it became part of Italy. It was still declining economically but becoming a romantic destination. It was loved by writers and musicians--Byron, Turner, Verdi, Wagner. Later, D'Annunzio, Proust, Henry James, Monet, Whistler, Sargent.

After 1945, there was an ecologically disastrous program of industrializing the mainland facing the lagoon on the north shore, around the towns of Mestre and Porto Marghera. A deep water canal was dredged to enable commercial shipping to pass throughout the lagoon to the expanding towns, which began the massive pollution of the lagoon itself.

By 1951 the native Venetians had started leaving their home town. By 2007, its native-born population had declined to 65,000, from a one-time high of 200,000. One reason, among many -- including high rents, desire for less cramped homes, better job opportunities, and the relentless pressure of expanding hotels and purchase of homes for seasonal use by out-of-town Europeans -- was the threat of the lagoon to swallow up the city it had nurtured. The great warning came in 1966 when Venice (as well as Florence) endured the greatest flooding in centuries. Since then the Piazza di San Marco has been covered by at least several inches of water a hundred days in a year. After years of argument, in 2003 a plan was approved called Mose (Experimental Mechanical Module), to build seventy-eight movable barriers at the three entrances to the lagoon. In times of very high tide, expected to be about five times a year, the flexible barriers, which normally would lie on the floor of the lagoon, would be pumped full of air and would rise to keep out the flood waters. The four gates protecting the main entrance to the lagoon at the Lido were tested in 2013, and declared a success. The whole project is supposed to be complete in 2016.

But the future of this glorious city remains uncertain. Can it survive the onslaught of industrialization, depopulation, tanker traffic, gigantic cruise ships, and above all of tourism?

I first saw Venice in 1948, and last saw it on May 17, 2014.

After Napoleon destroyed the Republic, William Wordsworth in England wrote its epitaph:

Once did she hold the gorgeous East in fee;
And was the safeguard of the West: the worth
Of Venice did not fall below her birth,
Venice, the eldest Child of Liberty.
She was a maiden City, bright and free;
No guile seduced, no force could violate;
And, when she took unto herself a mate,
She must espouse the everlasting Sea.
And what if she had seen those glories fade,
Those titles vanish, and that strength decay;
Yet shall some tribute of regret be paid
When her long life hath reach'd its final day:
Men are we, and must grieve when even the Shade
Of that which once was great is pass'd away.