



16th Century Map by Piri Reis

Venice in Context

Venice has always been different. Originally a place of refuge from marauding barbarian tribes filling the void left by the collapse of the Roman Empire, its location was picked not because of its attractiveness, but because of its inaccessibility, its inhospitable environment, and its natural defenses against both land and sea attacks. With no agricultural hinterland to sustain it, Venice had to trade in order to survive. Isolated politically and culturally from the feudal successors to Rome, she aligned

herself instead with the Byzantine Empire that dominated the eastern Mediterranean. She survived and eventually prospered by exploiting her position as a commercial and cultural middleman between the Greek/Byzantine civilization to the East and the Latin/Frankish civilization to the West and North.

During the 8th and 9th centuries, after defeating the invading forces of Charlemagne and then stealing the body and relics of St. Mark from Muslim Alexandria, Venice began to emerge as an independent entity with a strong sense of purpose and communal identity. To build a city on those marshy islands in the middle of a shallow lagoon required planning, organization, and cooperation on a grand scale. Land had to be drained and reinforced. Densely packed timber pilings were needed to support large structures (100,000 beneath the San Marco Basilica alone). River courses, shipping channels, and tidal flows needed to be carefully managed to keep the lagoon navigable and reasonably clean. And maritime trade based on convoys of oared galleys with large crews of hired sailors needed innovative mechanisms for pooling investments, sharing risks, and ensuring political and social stability.

During its rise to greatness in the 11th-13th centuries, Venice adapted to its special needs and circumstances with pragmatic ingenuity. Political power was concentrated in the hands of a broadly inclusive oligarchy composed of hundreds of leading families, with no rank differentiation between them. The Doge was elected for life, but his power was circumscribed by elaborate checks and balances that ensured the position could become neither over-mighty nor hereditary. Strong bureaucratic institutions broadened political participation and ensured a stable rule of law within which commerce could flourish. The system was so successful that it became frozen in form, even as the world around Venice continued to change in dramatic ways. Venice was highly adapted to its early environment, but was no longer adaptable. When she finally fell to Napoleon's forces in 1797, Venice was the longest-lived political entity in Europe (about 1100 years old), but was largely irrelevant.

Another example of successful innovation leading eventually to stagnation was the Arsenale (an Arabic term meaning "house of industry"), that was founded in 1104 and expanded in the early 1300's to become the state-owned manufacturing site for all Venetian ships. Using standard designs, interchangeable parts, and mass production techniques, it employed 16,000 workers at its peak, and could turn out large galleys suitable for both warfare and commerce at an amazing rate of one per day. The scale and efficiency of this operation was unmatched in the world, and not seen again until the industrial revolution, but when ocean-going trade routes and heavy maritime artillery forced a revolution in ship design and construction, the Arsenale could not adapt, and Venice lost the strategic advantage that had once ensured her maritime dominance in the Mediterranean.

Venice's inexorable political and economic decline after the 15th century corresponded with a cultural flowering in art, architecture, and music that dazzled the world. With her relatively tolerant cosmopolitan culture, she also became the European center for the nascent printing and publishing industry and the primary channel for the reintroduction of original Greek works into Western Europe after the fall of Constantinople. Venice also found a new source of revenue as the first major secular tourist destination. She invented opera and turned it into a mass entertainment spectacle through a half-dozen opera houses. She extended Carnival from a few days to months of partying, with pervasive gambling and widespread prostitution. And with the anonymity and social leveling of masked costumes, she made sure that "whatever happened in Venice, stayed in Venice."