

STORIES AND LEGENDS FROM VENICE AND ITS HISTORY

Part 1: The Organization of a Mighty Republic

Attempting to tell the story of Venice from the standpoint of the Venetians is not an easy task, but fortunately, there are many legends preserved in the history of that great city-state which make the task easier. Not only that, but the legends enfold a great deal of truth—how much, a historian with a desire to be objective is sometimes pressed to discern. Legends are not always told in writing; some are told in art, some in song, and some in poetry.

Venice, the great city-state like Venus, rose like a pearl from the depths of the sea, to stand coy and aloof from the mainland by virtue of Neptune's protection. Venice did not spring from the sea beautiful and fully-developed like Venus, of course! The sea from which she came, the Adriatic arm of the Mediterranean, was the protector of Venice for many centuries, isolating her but making her irresistible to would-be conquerors and lovers. Perhaps it is the fact that Venice was so desirable—and became so rich—that made the Venetians both aloof and suspicious of strangers, characteristics which are said to endure, to some extent, even to this day. Today's Venice craves tourists because she lives almost exclusively by tourism, but she holds them at arm's length because they not only save the city from bankruptcy, but they also destroy the fragile ruins, the rough paths, and, by repeated touching, even the precious marble.

Then there is that Venice which, according to a Christian legend, was born on the annual celebration of the Annunciation, that day which marked the beginning of the salvation story by heralding the coming of Christ to the womb of the Virgin Mary. The affirmation of this day as a starting-point is not unique in Christian tradition, especially in the Eastern churches from which Venice originally took her inspiration, and which continue to influence the art, architecture, music, and worship of the city which was called, "La Serenissima," Venice, the "most serene."

Both Venices—the sacred and the profane—grew up together. The city-state full of mystery and contradiction, piety and practicality, goodness and greed makes for unusually lively reading. In this paper, we will be tracing the legends and heroes which Venice is proud to call her own, as well as the stories of those whose effect on the powerful city-state was infamously nefarious. From a saintly Doge to a scoundrel lover, from a restless adventuring family who brought pasta back from Asia to an architect who helped shape the taste of America, Venice embraced all kinds of characters.

That which came to be Venice had a rather unpromising start. Imagine with me that the sparkling rivers from the Alps rushed down toward the Aegean Sea, and when they arrived, met with a rather fetid lagoon, replete with mosquitos in the summer, yet teeming with fish and waterfowl. Toward this lagoon, as God would have it, the people who populated the north of Italy were pushed. There was nowhere else for them to go, for powerful and brutal enemies were surrounding them and pursuing them into the shallow waters of the sea. First, there were the Huns, who destroyed the settlement of Aquilileia in 450 CE (AD), when refugees first settled on the Venetian lagoons. There, they hid among the reeds on a few low islands. They ate a lot of fish and seafood, and struggled with mosquitos which brought malaria. Then, in 489, an Ostrogothic kingdom was established at Ravenna (which used to be a seaport, but now is inland!); in 553, the Byzantines, under Belisarius, reconquered the area, which included the Venetian islands.

Though the Lombards, basically a heretical sect (Arians) invaded around 570, the Venetian Islands remained under Byzantine protection. Those settlers who would become Venetians retained close ties to Byzantium, which became a great source of wealth for them. As they began to organize, the Bishop of Altino took the lead to bring his people, as well as those who were in peril from the Lombards and many of the island-dwellers, to the island of Torcello, in the Venetian lagoon. They also took the cathedral of Altino, piece by piece to Torcello in the early 7th Century (639), according to the story, and continued to build Santa Maria Assunta.

When you visit Torcello, you will see what a tiny island held around one hundred thousand people. They must have been standing on tiptoe. The population has thinned to around 11 permanent dwellers at this present date, and early in its history, the Venetian people began to reorganize to Cittanova, where they elected their first Doge.

Early in their history, the Venetians marked the channels where they could navigate with their special boats and changed the markers when enemies were in pursuit. They began a huge industry in salt which exists to this day; it was their wealth in the early times. Though their first administrative center was created on the Lido (Malamocco), less than 100 years later, the administrative center of Venice relocated to Rivo Alto (modern Rialto).

The year 814 not only the establishment of Rialto, but an important treaty with Byzantium, and the building of the first Doge's Palace for Agnello Partecipazio—and the building of San Marco. During that banner year, the body of St. Mark, long held in Alexandria where he had ministered, was transferred from Alexandria to Venice.

The body of St. Mark was a very important symbol to the Venetians, because every important city or state managed to have a patron saint. It was said that St. Mark's body was stolen from its tomb in Alexandria by some clever Venetians and replaced with the body of another, but less

famous, saint. But to get the body out of Alexandria, the Venetians resorted to hiding it under a thick layer of pork, which Moslem guards would not closely examine due to their “halal” dietary regulations. On the sea toward home, of course, St. Mark’s body was said to protect the ship’s crew from a violent storm. Borne in triumph to the newly-erected chapel in the palace of the Doge, the body was reserved at the center of the powerful new city-state.

Great artists, always at the service of the State, have portrayed not only the legend of St. Mark (Tintoretto) but the emblem of St. Mark, a red flag with a golden lion on which is written in Latin, “Peace to you, Mark, My evangelist.” According to Venetian story, the Apostle Mark came to the area now called “Venice” during his lifetime, to preach the Gospel; and while he was there, the Lord visited him in a vision and told him that Venice would be his final resting-place. Why a lion? Because the symbol of St. Mark is taken from the Book of Revelation, in which the “Four Beasts” around the Throne of God were assumed by the Early Church to have indicated the Four Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Mark’s symbol was the lion.

The Lion is a very powerful symbol indeed, even to the point of representing Christ in some way: “The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered.” Though the devil was also represented as “going about like a roaring lion,” the Venetians used the symbol in a very positive sense, for their own pious purposes, and because a lion has long been considered “king of the beasts.” (C. S. Lewis used the Lion, whose name, “Aslan,” is the Turkish word for “lion,” as a mighty symbol of Christ in the Narnian stories of the 20th century.)

With the coming-together of the city of Venice, we will draw the curtain on this part of the history of Venice, replete as it is with fact and legend.