

# Backward glances

## The Venetian connection

**Venice is the wayward child of Istanbul. Rich Carriero details how the serene Republic bore the mark of her mother city and the chaotic relationship between the two rivals.**

Mass at Saint Mark's is a rare glimpse of Byzantium. The incense and chanting evoke the divine mystery. The church itself—columns hewn from the same marble and porphyry as those in Aya Sofya and frescoes a golden picture book of the Christian faith—is a classic Byzantine flourish, designed to overawe the senses with the piety and wealth of the city that built it. More than any other place, Venice is cultural heir to the Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantines established Venice during the heady days when Belisarius nearly retook the Roman Empire. When Lombard invasions broke Byzantine power in the region, the colonists retreated to the lagoon, hammering wooden pilings into the mud to build on. Led by its Senate and Doge and most of all through its burgeoning commercial empire, Venice emerged as a power in its own right. By replacing St. Theodore, the Byzantine choice, with St. Mark as patron saint, Venice declared her independence. Venetian merchants spirited Mark's body out of Alexandria in a pork barrel and brought it to Venice, where the Doge immediately commissioned a great church to honour the evangelist.

As Byzantine power declined, Venice emerged as a rival. The Venetians benefited from trading concessions within the Empire. They dominated Mediterranean trade and grew increasingly wealthy while the Byzantines mortgaged their empire to survive an onslaught of eastern foes. Despite their riches, the Venetians had something of an inferiority complex in their relations with the East. The frescoes and mosaics of Constantinople heavily influenced Venetian art and architecture. Byzantine artisans painted many of the icons hanging in Venetian palaces and churches. Above all, the Venetians adorned St. Mark's with every jewel and piece of art they could get their hands on in the vain hope that their great church could rival the most revered building



*St. Mark's Basilica and Four Tetrarchs*



in Christendom, Hagia Sophia.

Tensions mounted as the Byzantines resented Venetian success. The 12th century saw the imprisonment and murder of Venetian merchants by jealous emperors and the confiscation of their goods. Enrico Dandolo, Venetian ambassador to Constantinople during these persecutions, developed a lasting hatred for Byzantium.

In 1198 the Pope began preaching another crusade; the Venetians agreed to build a fleet and supply soldiers in exchange for a handsome fee. Unfortunately, the few who showed up couldn't pay their bills. Dandolo, now Doge of Venice and ever the shrewd businessman, decided to use the crusade to settle old scores. The Fourth Crusade diverted to Zara, on the Adriatic, which had defected to Hungary, and sacked it—a Christian city—for a handsome profit. While the Venetians were counting their loot, Alexius, son of a deposed Byzantine Emperor, showed up and offered to finance the crusade if the Venetians would help him reclaim the throne. Dandolo didn't hesitate.

The "Soldiers of God" sailed into the Golden Horn, rode their ships onto the beach and made war. A trio of dead emperors, a series of conflagrations and thousands of massacred Christians later, the Crusade took Constantinople. The Franks seized all the gold they could carry. The Venetians took the fine art and relics. The Byzantine Empire was recreated

as the Latin Empire with Venice extracting a 3/8 share. Byzantine power was shattered.

The most obvious question is how could they? In the Grand Chamber of the Doge's Palace hang several paintings that chronicle the entire Fourth Crusade, from Dandolo's taking of the cross to the final capitulation. They are vivid works painted on a grand scale. Clearly this is a triumph the Venetians are proud of. At the same time, in the adjoining chamber hang pictures depicting Venetian battles against the Turks, the largest of which, of course, shows the famous victory at Lepanto when the navy squashed Ottoman aspirations to conquer Italy. What the paintings don't explain, however, is that Venice lost much of its empire fighting Ottoman expansion, which was essentially a problem of the republic's own creation—the crusade removed the bulwark that had protected Europe for centuries and the Ottomans filled the power vacuum.

The truth is that the Venetian-Byzantine relationship was illogical, almost Oedipal. Like the Roman conquest of the Greeks or the Turks over the Arabs, there was a certain amount of hero worship to the Venetian subjugation of Constantinople. They didn't melt down the art they seized, but rather hung it up in St. Mark's Square for trophies. The porphyry relief affixed to the southeast corner of the basilica of the Four Tetrarchs—four emperors—once stood in the hippo-

drome; a foot of one of the tetrarchs broke off and was discovered in the 70's (you can find it at the Istanbul Archaeology Museum). The Quadriga, the famous bronze horses, was also looted from the hippodrome. The treasury of St. Mark's is brimming over with jewelled chalices, icons and religious accoutrements. Another section houses a curiosity shop of relics: arm bones, leg bones, hands, hearts, and teeth. Perhaps the Venetians saw themselves as curators of the Byzantine legacy. Who can tell what might have happened to the treasures in St. Mark's if the Venetians had not taken them? They might have been pawned off, one at a time, to pay off the floundering empire's massive debts. Perhaps Mehmet's hordes would have melted them down for the gold when they were given license to sack the city. The architectural and artistic influence of the Greeks only increased in 1453 with the influx of Byzantine refugees from the fall of Constantinople—an infusion that helped fuel the Renaissance. Like Istanbul, the city thrives on trade and craftwork—glass and lace shops line the streets. Religion still plays a pivotal role: church bells fill the air and icons are on every corner. Venice is the most Byzantine city in Europe.