



## **ST. MARK'S BASILICA**

Together with the Doge's Palace to which it was physically and symbolically attached, St. Mark's Basilica was the force that drew the island fragments of primitive Venice into a unified city. During the three centuries required for its completion, the city evolved

from a sheltered refuge in an alien environment to a center of commerce and power.

Ninth-century Venice had stood just beyond the menacing grasp of both the Frankish rulers in Italy—the last in a long chain of northern invaders to control the Western Roman Empire—and the Byzantine fleet patrolling the Adriatic. Fourteenth-century Venice dominated the land trade shuttling north and south through the Brenner Pass, and its massive, disciplined, fast-moving galley fleet controlled the Adriatic Sea and the Dalmatian coast. Leveraging naval power with diplomacy, Venetian garrisons occupied key points throughout the Byzantine Empire, especially in the Greek mainland and islands. These colonial outposts channeled commerce toward the city and served as fortresses in the long wars with Genoa for dominance in trade with the East. During the Middle Ages, Cassiodorus' world-turned-upside-down itself turned the Mediterranean world of political power and mercantile wealth on its head.

In indirect but unmistakable ways, the basilica of San Marco mirrored the city's increasing self-confidence and power. Left by its architects as a spare brick building based on a Byzantine model, the basilica eventually became so completely encrusted with donations from the faithful that its original form was swallowed up and these embellishments became its defining image. As Venice gained mastery of the Mediterranean, the city represented itself in this most confessional shrine as not just autonomous but autochthonous—self-created and completely free of foreign influences or ties. The multiple narratives of St. Mark that decorate its interior document this transformation. The earliest mosaics retelling the saint's legend acknowledge his ties to the mainland city of Aquileia and Egyptian Alexandria. The last mosaics in the church recount episodes in the saint's afterlife that cancel out any past not connected with Venice.

The San Marco we see today is the much-embellished third state of a church built, according to legend, soon after the arrival of Mark's relics in 829. (11) The first structure on the site suffered a disastrous fire in 976 and was extensively repaired or rebuilt shortly thereafter. The current building was begun some fifty years later in the mid-eleventh century, and despite more than a century of archaeological soundings, the extent to which it duplicates or incorporates its ninth-century original remains a mystery.

The contemporary basilica of San Marco is a cross-shaped structure composed of four intersecting vaulted arms. (Map 2) Each arm supports a dome, and another dome springs from the junction point of the four arms. It is generally agreed that the basilica was based on the form of the sixth-century Apostoleion—or Church of the Apostles—in Constantinople, a political and religious monument that was destroyed by the

Ottoman Turks soon after their conquest of the city in 1453. Though Greek architects familiar with the Apostoleion supervised the construction of San Marco, from the beginning the Venetian church deviated from its



prototype. The designers created a church with roots in Eastern political and religious symbolism that brilliantly accommodated itself to the liturgy and sensibilities of a Western religious community.

Sources describe the church in Constantinople as having four equal arms that met in a central domed space where the high altar stood. Arcades along each arm supported a double tier of superimposed galleries, each enclosed by a colonnade. The arms of San Marco, by contrast, are not of equal size or height, and the domes they support are also unequal. The westernmost arm of San Marco is the widest and highest; the other three arms are lower and narrower. The central dome and the dome in its western projection are equally large, while the other three domes are smaller. (12) Arcades like those in the Apostoleion, supported on columns, line both sides of each arm and divide each one into three unequal spaces, but the galleries that these arcades support, with their low balustrades, lack the monumental impact of the superimposed



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nificant variations between the Venetian church and its Byzantine model transformed San Marco into a hybrid that compromised its Byzantine paternity to better suit the liturgy and traditions of a European church. Like a Roman basilica, San Marco has a long nave divided unevenly into three longitudinal sections and linked through a central domed space to a deep presbytery where the main altar stands. The high altar of the Apostoleion, by contrast, stood in its center. The principal doors of San Marco are on the west façade rather than at the ends of each projecting arm. And unlike its Byzantine exemplar, San Marco has a raised presbytery that lifts the choir a few steps above the general level of the church floor and makes room for a crypt beneath. Finally, the smaller arms on the north-south axis of San Marco act like the transept of a Western church. Both the crypt under the high altar and the transept are features that Western churches adopted in imitation of Old St. Peter's in Rome.

San Marco only briefly looked the way its designers left it—a brick church sharing decorative details with Santi Maria e Donato on Murano. Columns of rare and precious marble with capitals from older buildings

colonnades of the parent church. A vaulted porch on the western end of the church, which protrudes beyond the side-walls of the nave at both its ends, completes the building.

These small but sig-

supported wide galleries. The first light, flooding in through its many windows, shone on walls marked by shallow niches, blind arcades, and bands of ornamental brickwork. The only exterior ornament came from a few inset columns and the decorative masonry surrounding arches, niches, windows, and doors. The bricks, many of them salvaged from mainland ruins, were laid in the Western style with narrow bands of mortar; Romanesque receding frames around openings emphasized the thickness of the walls.

The apse of the presbytery, though circular within, was polygonal on the outside. The ground plan of the original church was not exactly cruciform because the porch on its western façade extended beyond the side-walls of the nave. These protrusions created a sheltered space between the ends of the porch and the transepts on both sides of the church. On the north side, this area was filled in by a continuation of the domed bays that make up the main porch. The pointed Gothic arches separating the bays in this wing suggest that this structure was added in the thirteenth century. On the south side, a baptistery was built in and parts of a tower incorporated from the Doge's Palace were combined with an adjacent space to create the fortified treasury. A new entryway facing south toward the Basin of San Marco was opened into the porch.

Even before these additions were completed, the bare brick interior began to be covered with gold-ground mosaics. Venetian artists worked with masters from Constantinople to complete a program of decoration that welded the entire upper half of the basilica into a single composition even more adventurous and majestic in conception than Michelangelo's Sistine ceiling. Work began in the presbytery at the east end of the basilica.

ica and spread outward. A fire in the early twelfth century damaged many of the mosaics completed by that time; from then on, repairs and new work went on simultaneously. A single concept guided the decoration. At first, that plan was carried out by artists who shared a stylistic and iconographic tradition. But for centuries after that tradition lost hold, mosaic



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work continued. As new mosaics took their place beside old ones, San Marco became a hodge-podge of styles that even the dominating program and the uniform background of shimmering gold cannot fully harmonize. Completion of the decoration of the vaults and apses did not end the work: the building was soon cannibalized to create more space for decoration. Windows were bricked up, and the interior, especially the areas between the colonnades and the outside walls, became exceedingly dark. The galleries above these spaces were narrowed to let more light into the aisles below. The vertiginous catwalks with low balustrades to each side that now top the colonnades are the result. A Gothic rose window in the south transept and the vast demilune in the western vault are efforts to light an interior that the medieval greed for wall space made dim. The mosaics won out, however, and the basilica remains a cavernous, murky hearth where the gilded surfaces glow like the embers of a dying fire. But with its electric

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Completion of the dec-

lights turned on, as they are during Mass and for an hour each weekday starting at 11:30, the interior blazes into life. (13)

Raised up in the half-dome conch of the apse at the eastern end of San Marco and visible from every part of the nave, the image of Christ as Pantocrator, or universal ruler, dominates the church. This mosaic of the sixteenth century replaced a twelfth-century original. The Pantocrator image grounds the program of the mosaics and underwrites its subtheme of Venetian dominance and privilege. (14)

Two figures beneath Christ's feet, the apostle Peter and the evangelist Mark, touch him most closely. These two are flanked by figures of saints Nicholas and Hermagoras. Among his many projects, St. Nicholas looks after sailors, which made him especially important in this maritime culture. Hermagoras, appointed bishop by St. Mark, was a key figure in the battle for spiritual primacy Venice once waged with its neighbor city Aquileia. The story of Peter, Mark, and Hermagoras is filled out in the two chapels set into the smaller apses at each side of the presbytery. The one on the north is dedicated to St. Peter, the one on the south to St. Clement. St. Peter's Chapel served the clergy and made the case for primacy over Aquileia. St. Clement's Chapel, which was used by the Doge, made a broader political statement about Venice as an apostolic center. In both chapels, scenes from the life of St. Mark predominate. Unfortunately, those in the north chapel, which detail his life and martyrdom, were heavily damaged by restorers in the nineteenth century.



The Gospel according to Mark, widely accepted as the oldest and

most occult of the Gospels, reveals nothing about its author. Scattered passages in the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of Peter and Paul fill in the picture. Mark, who is called John Mark in Acts, may have been a Levite, a member of the Jewish priestly caste. His mother, a friend of the apostle Peter, belonged to one of the earliest Christian congregations in Jerusalem. After preaching for awhile in Asia Minor, Mark went to Rome around 60 AD and returned at the time of the martyrdom of St. Paul a few years later. Noncanonical texts later than Acts provide details of his travels and ministry. One of these sources places him in Aquileia, where, according to legend, he converted multitudes to the Christian faith and oversaw the copying and dissemination of his Gospel. A more familiar continuation of Mark's story identified him as the apostle to Egypt and the bishop of Alexandria.

Throughout the Middle Ages the church in Aquileia displayed a marble bishop's throne—now in the presbytery at San Marco—in which the evangelist is said to have “sat while he etched the words of his Gospel into wax tablets” (*Acta Sanctorum* 12.349–350). This link with the apostle was enough to give the bishop of Aquileia a claim to supreme authority in northeast Italy. Once the Venetians came into possession of the relics of St. Mark, they began to challenge his primacy. The mosaics of San Marco are one expression of their counter-claim.

St. Peter's Chapel celebrates the close connection between the apostle Peter and the evangelist Mark. Extending the link between the two described in Acts, medieval legend asserted that Mark's Gospel was dictated by the eyewitness Peter and that Peter sent Mark first to Aquileia and then to Alexandria. Those two events are suggested in the apse por-

traits. Peter holds a book in his left hand and makes a gesture with his right that typically represented speech in early Christian art. He looks toward Mark as if to mime the dictation of his Gospel. Hermagoras, Mark's successor in Aquileia, stands next to Peter, as if he were someone Peter placed in Mark's care. St. Peter's Chapel chronicles their stories, not just to acknowledge them but to show Venice as their ultimate goal. Founded in Christ, passed on by Peter, and brought by Mark to Aquileia and Alexandria, the apostolic appointment eventually reached Venice, the evangelist's final resting place. That assertion is endorsed in the chapel in the figures of the bishop of Grado, who petitions on behalf of the Venetians for the transference of rights of apostolic primacy, which he is shown receiving from Pope Pelagius.

In Alexandria, Mark converted many Egyptians to Christianity, but a significant number continued to worship their idols. "It happened that our most blessed feast of Easter occurred on the twenty-first day of the month of Parmut, the twenty-fourth of April. At that season the Egyptians celebrate their festival of the god Serapis. Pagan conspirators took that opportunity to lay hands upon Mark as he was celebrating Easter mass. Men seized him and placed a rope around his neck by which they began to pull him away. While he was being dragged along, his persecutors chanted to their god, but Mark prayed to our Savior, saying, 'I give thanks to you my lord Jesus Christ, that you consider me worthy to suffer in your name.' His body was thrown to the ground then, and he was stoned until he bled. At nightfall his enemies threw him in prison, to keep him under guard while they decided how best to kill him.

"About midnight when the doors were well secured and the guards

outside his cell had fallen asleep, a great earthquake began. An Angel of the Lord descended from heaven, who awakened Mark and said, 'Prince and servant of God, propagator of the holy faith throughout Egypt, behold your name is written in the Book of Life; your memory will be preserved through all the ages . . . Even now your spirit is winging toward Heaven where eternal rest and unwavering light will never fail you.'

"In the morning a great multitude of people gathered; when Mark came out of the prison, they replaced the cord around his neck and began to drag him again. As he was being dragged Mark prayed, thanking God again and praising his tender mercy. Then he spoke once more and said, 'Into thy hands I commend my spirit, O Lord!' and having said this, the most blessed Mark gave up the ghost" (*Acta Sanctorum* 12.351). Deprived of their victim, the frustrated crowd decided to vent their anger by burning the martyr's body and so destroying it as a relic. But a sudden rainstorm extinguished the flames and scattered the crowd, killing many among them. The Christian community of Alexandria retrieved the saint's body and buried it where "prayers are offered to God without ceasing."

In a series of original mosaics of the eleventh century, St. Clement's Chapel continued Mark's story. Alexandria was not destined to be the evangelist's final resting place. In 641 the city fell to Arab invaders, and once again the body of the evangelist was in the power of unbelievers. Almost two centuries later, in 829, two Venetians came to the rescue. This event is recounted in a wonderfully circumstantial narrative from the *Acta Sanctorum*: "When the Saracens had occupied all of Egypt including Alexandria, Leo Armenus, emperor of Byzantium, upon his assumption of the throne decreed that no one in any part of his empire should