



INTRODUCTION

In the sixth century, waves of barbarians devastated Italy and eventually gained control of the Western Roman Empire. Just beyond their grasp on the edge of the habitable world—some would say beyond the edge—Venice came to life in the shelter of its Lagoon.

Divided from the sea and its Byzantine masters by a long barrier island, and separated from the mainland of Italy by a tract of shallow water, Venice found security in its tidal estuary. Safely out of reach of potential overlords on both sides, the Venetians crafted a way of life perfectly suited to their strange environment. Fishers, salt gatherers, and traders, they lived in widely dispersed communities throughout the Lagoon.

Two events in the ninth century galvanized Venetians along the main Lagoon channel and pushed them to form a cohesive city. The regional governor appointed by the Byzantine emperor relocated to the site of the city in 810 AD. And then in 829 the body of St. Mark was stolen from its sepulcher in Alexandria and brought to Venice. From this time onward, political and theological power were consolidated in one location. Together, these forces focused and drove the development of the city.

Founded on a spongy salt marsh surrounded by open water, Venice was well placed to capitalize on the trade that passed inland from the city

toward the Italian mainland in shallow-draft boats and outward into the Adriatic in heavier and larger craft. Venice stood at a point of exchange between two different markets and the specific vessels they depended on. Along the deep channel that ran past San Marco on its way from the mainland to the sea, Venetian merchants constructed distinctive houses that combined dock, warehouse, and living space in a single structure. Land was precious, and families built cheek-by-jowl all along this serpentine commercial waterway. At a pinch point in the Grand Canal they created a marketplace, which they soon expanded into the legendary Rialto. Goods from North Africa, Russia, and India were exchanged there for the products and wealth of Europe.

Land reclamation added new territory to the city, clump by clump. In the thirteenth century, expansion at what was then the city's perimeter was spurred by new religious brotherhoods, the Franciscans and Dominicans. Granted territory on opposite margins of the city, these mendicant orders reclaimed huge tracts of marshland to support their massive churches, and in the process they opened new areas of the city to domestic and commercial development.

When the Turks took Byzantium in 1453, they destroyed the last barrier between an invading Islamic force and the Mediterranean colonies and trade routes of the Venetians. Soon after, the Portuguese circumnavigated Africa and challenged the city's centuries-old trade monopoly with the East. In that same era, as Venice began to take over territories on the Italian mainland, its colonies dragged the city headlong into the unceasing and fruitless warfare that convulsed Renaissance Italy. A new style of building gained predominance in the city, one that cancelled every link with the architecture of the basilica of St. Mark and the palace of the

Doge—the two iconic buildings that had anchored the city's identity since the ninth century.

Sometime in the sixteenth century, the city of Venice stopped growing. For the next two hundred years it remained more or less in balance, poised for collapse but in many ways still vital and appealing. Throughout this long twilight, the city was a wonderful and secure place to live, and a fabled destination for the increasing number of outsiders who came to enjoy its festivals and marvel at its palaces.

Then, in 1797, a French army under the leadership of the young Napoleon Bonaparte occupied Venice. The city's precious autonomy, which ingenuity, diplomacy, and military power had preserved for nearly a thousand years, came to a sudden and absolute end. The French bled the city of its resources before passing it on to the Austrians, who governed, with occasional lapses, until unification with Italy in 1866.

The occupying powers were mainlanders, whose ideas about the proper structure of cities had no place for island clumps linked by waterways. They worked to transform the amphibious city into something more orthodox—filling in canals, building bridges, and creating pathways that have now linked almost the entire city into one homogeneous pedestrian network. The train line from the mainland, and the much later motorway built alongside it, were the most decisive steps in this transformation. Their placement on the opposite side of the city from San Marco turned Venice on its head. Food for residents and tourists began to arrive by train and then by truck, rather than by boat. Electricity, gas, and water were piped in from the mainland. Trash was hauled away in the opposite direction.

Industrialization reached Venice in the nineteenth century and fled

even more quickly in the twentieth. A significant percentage of the Venetian population followed. In the same era, mainland industries poisoned the Lagoon and made it inhospitable to marine life. Deprived of its population, divorced from its environment, the Venice we know today threatens to become a historical theme park run by government entities for the benefit of a world community of the interested and curious. But the city itself seems to shrug off its fate and carry on with beauty, energy, and purpose, despite confident predictions of its imminent demise.

This book explores the culture of Venice that is imprinted most distinctly on its urban form—the webwork of canals and the counterpoint of bridges and walkways, soaring churches and crumbling palaces, the grand ceremonial Piazza San Marco and peaceful neighborhood campi. Chapters follow both a chronological and geographical arrangement, so that readers can trace the city’s evolution through the narrative and, with just a little backtracking here and there, explore it area by area on foot and by boat if they are fortunate enough to make a visit. Venice is relatively free of archaeological reconstructions that showcase a particular era, or museums where the past is repackaged for modern consumption. What a visitor sees is for the most part where it has always been. As a result, few monuments are pure examples of their type or perfect representatives of the period that gave them birth. The buildings of Venice have always been immersed in its daily life, and they have grown and changed with the city.

But urban form is not the only representation of urban culture explored in *Venice from the Ground Up*. As it follows the long arc of the city’s maturation and transformation, this book looks at artifacts on every scale, from the grand layout of the city as captured in Jacopo de Bar-

bari's imaginative aerial view of 1500 to a tiny ducat of African gold stamped with the portrait of a thirteenth-century doge. The city's ambition and its sense of itself were expressed not just in the architecture of San Marco and the Palazzo Ducale but in the majestic mosaic program of the basilica's interior and the sometimes outrageous official art commissioned to decorate the Doge's Palace. Great paintings in the mendicant churches and in the city's unique confraternities chronicled the aims and self-understanding of those organizations, while private devotional paintings in homes along the Grand Canal encouraged piety and reaffirmed the restricted roles women were allowed to play in this most patriarchal society.

Venice's far-reaching influence was grounded in entrepreneurial drive and an extraordinary ability to organize. So much restless energy found expression not just in great buildings and great art but also in public institutions dedicated to the welfare of citizens and the stability of the city's way of life. In the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, granaries along the Grand Canal stored food for public use during famine. Confraternities looked after not just the spiritual health of their members but their physical needs as well. Hospitals sheltered lepers, quarantined plague victims, and nursed foundlings. Medieval housing projects for employees of the Arsenal remain, today, among the most beautiful and livable buildings in Venice.

This imminently orderly city was also home to Carnevale. The public masquerades and licensed revelry of the pre-Lenten period gave birth to an industry of the imagination. Virtually every parish in Venice boasted a theater, whose season expanded beyond Carnival as the years passed. In campi throughout the city, groups of players staged the conventional dramas of the *commedia dell'arte*. Gambling was a riskier outgrowth of the

carnival spirit, and widespread prostitution, with its threat of death from syphilis, was its most sordid by-product. And despite the license Carnevale encouraged, Venice was a cruel enforcer of orthodoxy, and it could be heavy-handed in its pursuit of treachery and sedition.

Not every Venetian artifact speaks of the city's self-conception. Like any ambitious metropolis, Venice took up the challenge of justifying the foundations of its broader culture. The basilica of San Marco is the most Venetian of shrines, but its mosaics record the history of the apostolic movement throughout the world. Again and again the city took upon itself the costly and difficult task of expounding the fundamental doctrines of medieval Catholicism. A painting like Titian's *Assumption of the Virgin* in the monumental church known as the Frari, or Tintoretto's *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, was a meditation not on Venetian themes but on theological subjects at the heart of Western Christianity. Seizing on these central truths of Christian dogma and recreating them in unique and memorable ways was the work of a city that saw itself as the embodiment of a cultural ideal. Early in its history, Venice rivaled Constantinople for commercial dominance, and in the mid-sixteenth century it took on Rome in a series of military engagements. But in its aim to sponsor and house the greatest expressions of Christian dogma, the city vied with these capitals of Christianity throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Thriving metropolis, charitable haven, city of the imagination—historical Venice maintained its multiple identities with uncommon devotion and flair. Preserved in its remarkable urban fabric, its wealth of magnificent churches, and its handful of superb museums, the city's history of enlightened living can still instruct and inspire.