

The background of the entire page is a reproduction of the painting 'The Grand Canal in Venice with the Rialto Bridge' by Canaletto. The painting depicts a wide view of the Grand Canal in Venice, with the Rialto Bridge visible in the distance. The canal is filled with various boats, including gondolas and larger sailing vessels. The buildings lining the canal are detailed and colorful, with many windows and balconies. The sky is a mix of blue and pinkish hues, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. A large, stylized 'V' shape is overlaid on the left side of the image, with a gold-colored border.

# GATEWAY TO THE EAST

VENICE:

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Regarded as one of the most romantic cities in the world, the founding of the city of Venice was nevertheless one of strife and upheaval. Rebecca Anne Proctor and Cassidy Hazelbaker explore the historical development of one of the world's most magical cities from its founding by fifth century refugees to its flourishing during the Renaissance, and most importantly, the city's crucial ties to the East.



*Canaletto, The Grand Canal in Venice with the Rialto Bridge, 1724. Oil on canvas.  
145.9 x 234.01 cm. Collection of Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden.*





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Benjamin Disraeli from Contarini Fleming 1832

This Page:  
Simon Pinargenti. Map of Venice. 1573.  
Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Facing Page:  
View from the Rialto Bridge over the Grand Canal.  
Photograph by Rainer Martini.

Often called the jewel of the Adriatic, the city of Venice is strategically located in a marshy lagoon which stretches between the mouths of the Po and Piave rivers in Northeast Italy. Now home to around 120 small islands separated by canals and bridges, Venice looks out onto the Adriatic and thus eastward where for centuries it has been linked through trade and art with the East.

When the acclaimed English writer Henry James first visited Venice in 1869, he wrote of his lack of enthusiasm for the city. There were no monuments akin to the grandeur of ancient Greece and Roman nor the typical Renaissance architecture which one would find in Florence and other Italian cities. Instead, what he discovered was a city which carried as much Eastern heritage as it did Western thought and innovation. Such a confluence of cultures can be seen in the Doge’s Palace located just adjacent to St. Mark’s Basilica, which 19th century English critic John Ruskin said contained “three elements in exactly equal proportions - the Roman, the Lombard, and Arab,” in his first chapter of *The Stones of Venice*. What James saw at first sight was an aesthetic different from what he ever imagined because Venice was inextricably linked to the East. In a short story he wrote a year after his first trip to the city, James has the main protagonist describe himself as a “half-stupefied traveler to the age of a simpler and more awful faith. I had left Europe; I was in the East.”

What James had experienced through the city’s architecture was the remnants of centuries of trade between the city and the Orient. As British politician and novelist Benjamin Disraeli wrote in his 1832 novel *Contarini Fleming*, “I stood upon Rialto; I beheld on each side of me, rising out of the waters, which they shadowed with their solemn image, three colossal and gorgeous structures raised from the spoils of the teeming Orient.” While a dramatic statement, Disraeli had it right: Venice prospered through the East.

#### BUILDING A SAFE HAVEN

Founded in the fifth century, the first Venetians were refugees seeking a safe haven from the destruction wrought by the barbarians ravaging the Roman Empire. These included wars between the Ostrogoths and the Byzantines and later the Huns under Attila, who marched south through the passes east of the Alps to destroy the cities of Padua and Aquileia. Many refugees decided to flee to the marshy islands of a lagoon where they would be out of reach from the invaders. The refugees soon constructed houses made of mud and sand and wove tree branches together and anchored them to protect their dwellings from the waves. They then made boats and fished in the sea. To trade with the mainland, they dried seawater to get salt. What was once a precarious location soon became a prosperous place for trade.

The city was officially founded in 421 by authorities from Padua who had hopes of erecting a trade post in the region. It was under the control of the central Byzantine authority located in Ravenna, but within 300 years of its founding, the inhabitants of Venice broke free and elected their own leader, known as the Doge. Due to its Mediterranean location and large port, trading remained a vital part of its economy. The citystate developed the role as the gateway between Europe and the Middle East, whose lucrative spice and silk trade brought great riches to Venetian traders. Thanks to some political settlements, Venetian merchants received tax breaks on Byzantine goods, which plumped up the Venetian coffers even more.

Trade flourished through the Crusades in the 12th and 13th centuries, with Venetian maritime commercial influence reaching to the Aegean, including Cyprus and Crete. Despite backing the crusaders, Venetians maintained trade relationships with the Muslim world and by the end of the 13th century Venice was the most prosperous city in Europe. It was precisely because of the city’s openness to other cultures that all sorts of philosophical, scientific, literary and religious texts circulated throughout the city and abroad during the Medieval and Renaissance periods. Venetian *literati* understood the importance of the transmission of knowledge through Arabic texts given the

great introduction of Greek philosophy and science to the West through the work of Arabic translators since 1100. When the printing press was first established in Europe in 1469, Venetian publishers immediately multiplied the copies of Arab texts in Latin translation. Diffusion of knowledge between Venice and the East thus grew rapidly. It continued to do so through the visual arts as well, oftentimes through political sacrilege. After the sacking of Constantinople in 1453, the bronze horses from the Hippodrome of Constantinople were brought to Venice and placed on Saint Mark’s Cathedral. Disraeli was right - spoils from the Orient did indeed make up a large part of the city’s aesthetic wonderment and beauty.

#### THE WINGED LION

Another crucial link between Venice and the Arab world is the story of Saint Mark, the patron saint of Venice. Born in what is now Libya, Saint Mark spent the earlier part of his life traveling to different places around the Mediterranean and Middle East. He was one of the seventy disciples of Jesus and, in addition to writing the Gospel of Mark, became known as Mark the Evangelist. In 49 AD, he arrived in Alexandria, on the north coast of Egypt, where he founded the Church of Alexandria and became the city’s first Bishop. Enraged by his efforts to turn Alexandrians away from worship of their tradition gods, in 68 AD the pagans placed a rope around his head and dragged him through the streets until he was dead. After his death, he was buried in Egypt where he remained until 828 AD when a group of Venetian merchants who were conducting business in Alexandria decided to bring Saint Mark’s remains with them back to Venice. According to a mosaic in Saint Mark’s Basilica, the merchants covered his remains in pork and cabbage leaves to prevent detection from the local Muslim authorities.

During the Middle Ages, the dead were very powerful – especially those who lived holy lives. As soon as Saint Mark’s body arrived in Venice, the city’s previous patron saint, Theodore, was cast aside, and the Doge ordered the construction of a magnificent church to house the remains of Saint Mark. Being in the possession of such an important and respected personality of the Christian faith brought great honor and prestige to the city of Venice. The winged lion which represents Saint Mark was adopted as the symbol of Venice and can still be seen throughout the city today.

#### CONTINUAL RESILIENCE

As Williams Wordsworth once wrote in his sonnet on the extinction of the Venetian Republic, “Once did she hold the gorgeous East in fee,



and was the safeguard of the West.” And so she was. The political and economic glory of Venice declined with the fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Ottoman Turks. Venice slowly lost territory and influence, and its population was ravaged by the plague in Europe. From 828 when Venetian merchants brought over the stolen relics of Saint Mark’s body to the fall of the Venetian Republic to Napoleon in 1797, the art and architecture of Venice continued to be influenced by Islamic art. From the 9th century onwards close ties with Cairo, Damascus and Constantinople ensured that there was constant correspondence between some of the most powerful Islamic dynasties and this beacon for trade and prosperity on the Mediterranean.

What is rare to find even today is how the destinies of two regions which are now deemed so antagonistic are yet still historically so intertwined. The colossal structures which marveled Disraeli for their powerful presence and eastern beauty are still present and they recall the centuries-old relationship between Venice and what we call today the Middle East. This jewel of the Adriatic Sea is now but a geographical passing point, yet continuous gateway to - the East.

*Both the UAE and Venice blossomed from unsteady ground - from sand and swamp - to flourishing metropolises. Another parallel can be found in the Venetian explorer, Marco Polo, and his Middle Eastern counterpart Ibn Battuta.*

#### MARCO POLO (1254–1324)

Born into a Venetian merchant family, Polo’s father and uncle had traveled extensively during his childhood, meeting with Kublai Khan in China. They returned to Venice when Polo was 15, setting out two years later to fulfill Khan’s wishes of acquiring European art and Middle Eastern myrrh. Polo visited Anatolia, the Levant, and Central Asia on his way to Khan, and subsequently traveled extensively in Asia, eventually returning to Europe through Persia. He recorded his travels in *Livre des Merveilles du Monde*, which was one of the first books to introduce Europeans to Eastern societies.

#### IBN BATTUTA (1304–1368/9)

Born into a family of Islamic legal scholars in Tangier, Morocco, Ibn Battuta set out to complete his hajj when he was 21. His journey to Mecca led him through Northern Africa and the Levant. Upon completing Hajj, he continued traveling for another 29 years, visiting Iraq, Persia, the Arabian Peninsula, Somalia, Swahili coast, Near East, Central and Southern Asia, the Maldives, Andalusia and Mali. Accounts of his extensive travels were published in his book entitled Rihla.