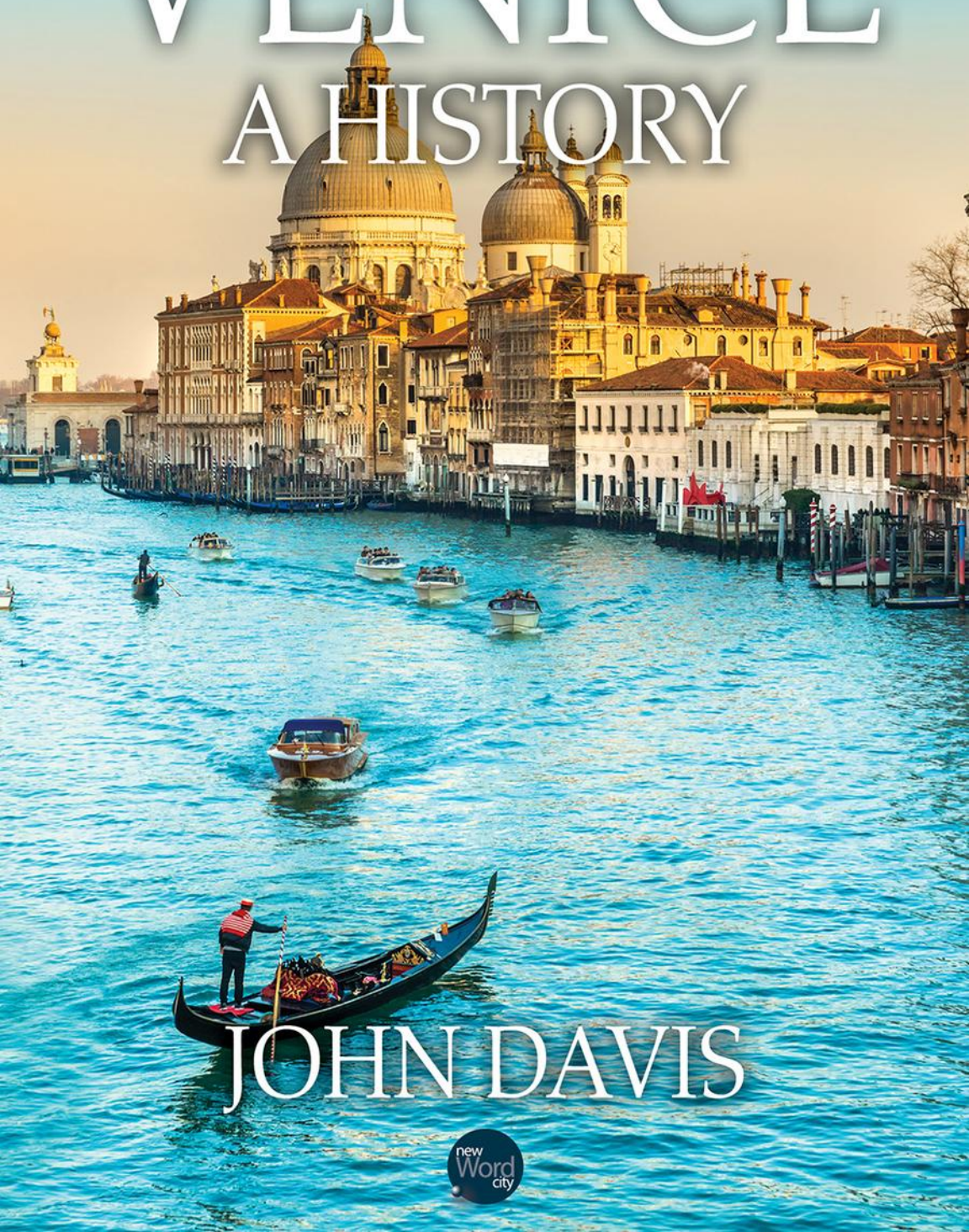


VENICE

A HISTORY



JOHN DAVIS





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I

“A STANGE AND
MYSTERIOUS CREATION”

"The most triumphant city I ever set eyes on." Such was Philippe de Commines's impression of Venice when he arrived as the French ambassador in 1495. The widely traveled nobleman was not exaggerating. At the time of his visit, Venice was a world power, the strongest city-state in Italy, one of the wealthiest countries in Europe, and the dominant naval power in the Mediterranean. Its mainland frontier extended from Lake Como in the west to Trieste in the east - embracing such cities as Bergamo, Brescia, Padua, Treviso, Verona, and Vicenza - and its overseas empire reached all the way to Turkey. It owned part of Albania, the Dalmatian coast, all of Corfu, most of the Ionian islands, several ports on the Peloponnese, Crete, Cyprus, several Aegean islands, and a large stretch of Anatolia. In addition, Venice held entire quarters in such wealthy cities as Alexandria, Jerusalem, Sidon, and Tyre and owned trading posts as far away as the Black Sea and the Indian Ocean. The empire's population of 3.5 million was larger than Great Britain, and its ruler, the doge, was able to boast that he held sway over "one quarter and a half of one quarter of the Roman Empire."

The island city itself was the greatest marketplace and clearing-house in the Western world and the principal port of entry in Europe for the commodities of Arabia, China, and the Indies. Virtually anything could be bought or sold in fifteenth-century Venice: spices, gold, oil, slaves, silk, wild animals, jewels, hides, tin, copper, steel, brocades, ivory, ebony, galleons, paintings, mosaics. Entire fleets were moored along the Venetian quays. By the end of the fifteenth century, the value of Venice's exports totaled 12 million ducats a year, of which 5 million were profit.

The center of this vast commercial enterprise was the Rialto, the Wall Street of its day and one of the settings in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. In porticoes around the Rialto's Piazza San Giacomo, hundreds of goldsmiths, jewel merchants, money changers, and commodity brokers conducted business. They, in turn, were surrounded by endless shops and *fondaci*, or warehouse-hotels. The huge *fondaco* of the Germans, which was filled with Prussians, Saxons, Swabians, Saxons, and every conceivable variety of merchandise, stood just beyond the Rialto Bridge. On either side of the bridge, the

banks of the Grand Canal were jammed with hundreds of trading vessels, and the quays swarmed with porters. The bustle was incessant, and it often extended well into the night. No port in Europe could compare with Venice in its heyday, not even Bruges or Genoa, its chief trading rivals on the continent.

The other great center of the island city was the immense Piazza San Marco. Here stood the republic's most important church, the Basilica of St. Mark, focus of both religious devotion and patriotic feeling for the Venetians, and the Doge's Palace, seat of the republic's efficient, paternalistic government. In the state rooms of the palace hung scores of paintings depicting heroic episodes of Venetian history. The titles of some of these gigantic canvases give us an idea of what the Venetians thought of themselves: *Venice Triumphant*, *Venice Ruling the World*, *The Apotheosis of Venice*, and *Venice, the Queen of the Adriatic* - depicting Venetian victories over the Albanians, the Franks, the Genoese, the Greeks, the infidels, and the Paduans.

By 1495, the *Serenissima Repubblica Vèneta* (Most Serene Republic), as Venice liked to call itself, ruled not only the world of commerce but also the world of architecture and art, having constructed on its islands some of the most splendid buildings, bridges, and squares the world had ever seen. Late-fifteenth-century Venice was a miraculous vision of gleaming domes, stately towers, ornate bridges, graceful piazzas, and elaborate marble palaces - "a compressed splendor," wrote the nineteenth-century Swiss critic and historian Jacob Burckhardt, "where the richest decoration did not hinder the practical employment of every corner of space." Working to adorn these structures were some of the greatest painters of all time: Gentile and Giovanni Bellini, Vittore Carpaccio, Cima da Conegliano, Carlo Crivelli, and the incomparable Giorgione (Giorgio Barbarelli da Castelfranco) - who were soon to be joined by Titian (Tiziano Vecelli), Paolo Veronese, and Tintoretto (Jacopo Comin). It has been said that no people in history, not even the Flemish or Florentines, ever lavished as much time and money on the embellishment of their city as did the Venetians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In so doing, they made Venice one of the greatest monuments of Western civilization.

The visual splendor of Venice in 1495 was not confined to its

architecture, painting, and sculpture, however. Venice was also a city of pageantry perhaps unequalled in human history - tournaments, regattas, flotillas of gilded gondolas, processions of scarlet-robed senators and white-clad ambassadors, and parades of white horses draped with gold braid and white taffeta.

The foundation for all this magnificence was Venice's maritime trade, particularly with the East. This trade was carried on by the world's largest merchant fleet and protected by its largest navy: 300 seagoing vessels manned by 8,000 sailors, 3,000 smaller craft carrying 17,000 men, and forty-five galleons crewed by another 11,000 sailors.

The ships were constructed, fitted, and repaired in Venice's great *Arsenal di Venezia* (Venetian Arsenal) - two miles of fortifications enclosing 110 acres of sheds and shipyards. It was unquestionably the largest single industrial complex in the Renaissance world. Some 15,000 men labored in this navy yard, where 100 ships could be built or repaired at a time.

Venice's supremacy on the high seas was symbolically confirmed each year on Ascension Day, when the most lavish pageant of all, the Marriage to the Sea, was held. On this day, the doge's ceremonial barge - the huge, gilded *Bucentaur* - would draw away from the Riva degli Schiavoni, at St. Mark's basin, to the accompaniment of trumpet fanfares and chants of massed choirs. The city's chief governing body, the *Consiglio dei Dieci* (Council of Ten), and all its patricians and ambassadors followed in their gondolas. At the Porto di Lido, where the Adriatic joined the lagoon, the doge would stand on the stern of the glittering *Bucentaur*, raise a bejeweled hand, and cast a golden ring into the waters declaring, "O sea, we wed thee in sign of our true and everlasting dominion."

By 1495, the wedding of Venice to the Adriatic had become one of the most famous ceremonies in Europe. The mighty came from far and wide to witness it, and as many as 500 gondolas and barges escorted the *Bucentaur* across the lagoon. The feasting went on for days. To observers like Philippe de Commines, there seemed no question that Venice's dominion would be everlasting.