THE USE OF THE MARIAN ICON IN VENICE: RELIGION AND
POLITICS MERGE IN THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DELLA SALUTE

BY

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ABSTRACT

Michael K. Curry

THE USE OF THE MARIAN ICON IN VENICE: RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL BELIEFS MERGE IN THE CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DELLA SALUTE

Thesis under the direction of Peter D. Kairoff, Ph.D., Professor of Music

The Virgin Mary was central to the success of Venice from the beginning of the Republic. Venice was exposed to the Byzantine idea that the union of the spiritual and material could be achieved in the form of an icon. The church quickly realized the value of visual images in their apostolic mission and began the extensive use of icons, as a non-verbal way to strengthen their flock and attempt to convert non-believers. The Venetian authorities also utilized the icon of the Virgin Mary for promotion of the Venetian Republic, the harbor of Venice inviolate like the Virgin’s womb.

The Church of Santa Maria della Salute is a physical and psychological declaration of Venetian devotion to the Republic and devotion to the Virgin who rescued their city from the plague. The building of the votive church and the public pageantry associated with it truly merged the ideas and interests of the Venetian Republic and the Venetian church into a powerful symbol centered on the Virgin. Both the Virgin and the Republic are reflected as she sits gleaming in the magical light of the canal, giving testament to Venice’s belief that she continues to exist as Venetia Vergine.
INTRODUCTION

To say that the city of Venice is unique is to simply overstate the obvious. The city built on wooden pylons in the marshes of the Veneto is one of the most recognizable places on earth. While the physical presence of the city has continued to erode over the years, Venice always manages to inspire anyone who visits her, even today. Easily one of the most recognizable structures in a city filled with monumental edifices is the Santa Maria della Salute Church. Located at the tip of the sestiere of Dorsoduro, on a thin strip of land, the Salute sits in all her glory commanding attention from the Grand Canal, the Bacino of San Marco and the Piazza San Marco.

Magnificent as the Salute Church is, why build another church dedicated to the Virgin Mary? When the Salute was conceived there were already six churches in Venice dedicated to the Virgin—what motivated the Venetians to build another? I believe that the Salute Church was erected by the Venetian people not only out of devotion to the Virgin Mary but as a physical sign of their fierce independence from outside political and religious influence.

I will begin by looking back at the historical issues I believe had an impact on the eventual building of the Santa Maria della Salute. A clearer understanding of the cultural, political, and religious influences on Venice, her self-image and attitudes, allows the church to be appreciated not only for its physical beauty but for its meaning as well.

Chapter 1 will discuss the Iconography of the Virgin Mary and how the icon became an integral part of Christian worship. The veneration of the Virgin Mary’s icon by the Venetian people will have a significant impact on the design and meaning of the Santa Maria della Salute.
The veneration of icons, particularly female icons, has been an integral part of many religious practices throughout history. The female gods Isis and Cybele were important components in pagan religious practice and their absence created a void that would need to be filled. The new Christian religion did not initially incorporate the veneration of a female or her icon but that would soon change. The Virgin Mary emerged as a substitute for the pagan goddesses of the past. Imagery was also emerging in the spreading of the Christian doctrine and the Virgin Mary would play a major role in the imagery and message of the Christian Church.

The Virgin Mary became a prominent part of worship in Christian Churches after she was declared divine by a Council at Ephesus giving her the title of God Bearer or Theotokos, which legitimized her within the Christian Church.

Constantinople is important due to its enormous influence on Venetian art, architecture, and religious practices. The use of imagery and pageantry seen in later Venetian religious and civil practices can be attributed to Constantinople.

Iconoclasm was a period when icons were officially banned from use in the Christian church. The rejection of iconoclasm was sufficient proof that icons and their veneration were an integral part of the Christian faith, including the Christians of Venice.

The Eastern influence on Venice can be seen prominently in the Basilica di San Marco which was patterned after the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople. The Venetians would continue to look to the East for traditions that would eventually influence the design of the Santa Maria della Salute.

Chapter 2 will highlight the physical and psychological influences exerted on Venice from both the Roman and Byzantine Empires and how those influences helped
shape the Venetians self-image of an independent Republic. Another important factor was that the Venetians saw the Virgin Mary as the protector of Venice and this devotion would eventually emerge in their religious practices, influencing the Salute Church.

The replacement of the Byzantine St. Theodore with the Christian St. Mark marked the beginning of Venetian independence from the Byzantine Empire. Venice was developing an independent sense of self that would eventually distinguish the Republic, both politically and religiously, in the years to come with the building of the Salute Church reflecting that spirit of independence.

The fall of Constantinople after the fourth Crusade marked another significant turning point in the psyche and fortunes of Venice. No longer under Byzantine rule the Venetians expanded their trading empire which made them one of the richest cities in Europe. The fall of Constantinople also gave Venice the legitimacy they desired as they began to solidify their position as a new power in the region.

Significant in the development of Venetian religious and civil practice was the island of Crete. Crete was acquired by Venice after the fall of Constantinople and influenced the Venetian use of icons in religious pageantry. That Cretan influence led directly to the design and building of the Salute Church.

Venice was now actively promoting itself both internally and externally as the new focus of power and influence in the Mediterranean region. This Venetian attitude is reflected clearly in Doge Andre Gritti who envisioned Venice as the “New Rome”. The attitudes and beliefs of Gritti would later be carried on in the building of the Salute Church, a votive temple for the people of Venice.
The culmination of the Venetians campaign to legitimize their Republic is known as the myth of Venice. The myth embodies the self-image and self-promotion of Venice and how they saw themselves as a chosen people. This view of Venice as special was important, both religiously and politically, as Venice navigated the turbulent political and religious waters of the time.

The integration of religious art into the secular government of Venice is crucial in the understanding of the Salute Church. Venice saw herself as a daughter of the Virgin and the Madonna becomes the protector of the Venetian people. This trust in and use of the Virgin Mary will culminate in the building of the Salute Church.

Chapter 3 will discuss the integration of the Virgin Mary into the religious and political life of Venice and her importance in the everyday lives of the majority of the Venetian people.

The icon of the Virgin Mary is second only to St. Mark in the minds and hearts of the Venetian people. The Virgin Mary and her veneration evolved into one of the focal points of religious life in Venice. The Virgin Mary and Venice were viewed by most in Venice as one in the same. With the city of Venice holding the Virgin Mary in such high esteem, it is no surprise that they would turn to her in their hour of need.

Chapter 4 will include an overview of the plague, specifically the devastation and fear it brought to Venice. Next, the great architect Palladio is examined because of his influence on Longhenna, the eventual architect of the Salute Church. A description of both the interior and exterior of the Salute Church follows, its physical beauty concluding the paper.
The plague was a force of nature that not even the Venetians could ignore. They had asserted their independence from all invaders for centuries but the plague would bring the city to its knees. The people of Venice turned to the Virgin Mary in desperation and hope that the protector of Venice would save them from the Black Death.

The noted Venetian architect Andrea Palladio had designed many of the notable churches in Venice, including the Redentore, built during the last outbreak of the plague. His influence on the architect of the Salute Church, Baldisera Longhenna, is both evident and important.

The Santa Maria della Salute was a votive temple built to accommodate the unique Venetian style of religious procession that began in San Marco, proceeded through the streets of Venice, and eventually across a wooden bridge built specifically for the occasion. The church also reflects, inside and out, the total devotion the Venetian people felt for the Virgin Mary. The Salute Church represents both physically and psychologically the Venetians devotion to the Virgin Mary.
CHAPTER ONE

FROM ICONS TO THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE VIRGIN MARY

Chapter 1 will discuss the importance of icons, the use of the Virgin Mary’s icon in Christianity and why the veneration of the Virgin Mary leads to the Salute Church

Icons

Icon, from the Greek EIKON, means a likeness, an image or picture. Eikon could also refer to a living image, an image in a mirror or a vision in the mind. The aim of an icon is to produce an authentic and visible image of the divine word; therefore, it represents the fulfillment of that long-held human wish for achieving a closer relationship with God (Besancon 11). An icon is also conventional; its appearance is not random but rather it is rule bound in form and content. Presented in a standardized form, it builds on authorized models and passes on the official teachings of the church, expressing the community’s faith, shaped within the accepted “fellowship of saints.” Along with its inherent religious function, an icon is also a work of art. It was Plato who urged us to believe that perhaps the loftiest goal of art is to give value to all other possible goals (Nes 12).

From the beginning of Christianity, the new religion was in conflict with the existing pagan religions. Christianity would, however, owe much of its eventual success to the fact that it outgrew its original Jewish roots and adopted many of the elements of the pagan culture it was competing against in the years following the death of Christ (Weitzmann 2001, 2). The makers of Christian icons were seeking to make images that were both accessible to the viewer as well as images that could speak to the personal
experience of the users. There were numerous icon types in both the Christian East and West that were venerated and reproduced in great numbers. Icons were greatly esteemed and produced in great numbers because they utilized sensory and emotional stimuli in order to achieve the spiritual goals of their users (Neff 81). The symbols in art used in cult worship can be traced back at least to the Gravettian epoch of the upper Paleolithic age from 25,000-20,000 BCE. Images from this period are primarily in female form and have been found in France, Austria, Italy and Central Russia.

During the second century the Isis cult was spreading from Egypt with its extensive use of images, used for both public and private devotion to the gods. The Greco-Roman cult of Isis was one of the great success stories in the ancient world of exporting an icon and its cult from one culture to another. Some temples of Isis closed at the end of the fourth century, such as the one at Philae (Fig. 1.1), and were later reconsecrated as churches of the Virgin (Witt 57). During her migration from Egypt to Europe the goddess Isis absorbed the traits of many of the existing goddesses until she was known as the goddess to all, fulfilling the promise that “Isis can be and was many things to many” (Maunder 7). The art of Mithraism with the cult image of Mithras Slaying the Bull, from the second century BCE, is much later but shows that icon worship has been an integral part of human existence from the earliest days of recorded history (Markale 51).
The conquests of Alexander the Great opened up the eastern Mediterranean region to trade and facilitated the integration of eastern deities such as Isis through out the wider Hellenistic world. During Alexander’s reign, foreign deities were integrated and worshiped alongside the existing Greek deities all across the Mediterranean region. Isis was at this time represented as nursing her son Horus and was a favorite mythological figure among the pantheon of Egyptian gods and goddesses exported to the Hellenistic world. Many terracotta statuettes and stele dating from the sixth through the fourth centuries BCE show Isis with a nude, semi-recumbent child suckling at her breast in a relaxed and natural position.
The subsequent Christian development of an image of the Virgin suckling her Divine Son soon crystallized into an early icon type, based on the Egyptian Isis, that became known as the *Virgo lactans* or nursing virgin (Lasareff 29). The *Virgo lactans* icon type eventually became well known in the art of the Christian East as well as the Christian West (Werner 4).

In the East, many cults of goddess-mothers persisted on a local level long after the Edict of Milan made Christianity the official religion of Rome. The cult of Cybele, the mother of gods along with Diana of Ephesus, the virginal all-mother, was particularly strong because, like Isis before them, she could bestow salvation on believers. Plutarch described Cybele as “the justice, which leads us to the divine because it is wisdom” (Belting 33).

The concept that images and artifacts are vehicles and loci of holiness manifests itself early on in Byzantine church worship to a much greater degree than in the West. The aim of engagement with an icon was to put oneself in physical proximity to the holy and to contribute to the personal experience each worshiper had with God. To the Byzantines the Church was God’s dwelling place among men and women. The building itself and all its icons were *Theophanies*, manifestations of God. Because the aim of Byzantine worship was *Theosis*, the actual deification or divinization of humanity, churches and icons were an essential link between God and man (Safran 40).

As the temples were converted from pagan to Christian worship, pagan agricultural festivals were also integrated into the Christian festival calendar. The early Christian leaders incorporated many of the existing pagan rituals by simply substituting
Christian figures into the celebration structure. Agricultural festivals, which pagans used to purify the fields before planting, were seamlessly transformed into Christian ceremonies. The substitution of Mary into existing pagan rites was extensive and included her integration into the traditional feast of sowing in May that became the feast of Mary’s Queenship. The feast of harvesting in August, becoming the Feast of the Assumption, and the feast of vintage later became the Feast of Annunciation in the Christian calendar of feast days (Ruether 59).

Despite the widespread use of females in pagan worship and its absorption by local worshipers, female imagery was all but expunged from the official Christian artistic canon. Pagan peasants continued to worship female deities such Cybele as a grain goddess, keeping her alive and well in private homes. Berger argues that many recent pagan converts still saw women, like the land, as the primary source of life, justifying their continued reverence and worship (Berger 49). Reluctant to abandon deeply rooted mythic pagan idols, many peasants struggled to abandon the protection provided by a grain goddess. The void created when pagans converted to a monotheistic, male-centered Christian religion needed to be filled by some Christian centered female deity. Humans had been worshiping some type of goddess from the dawn of time and a goddess such as Cybele would continue to be worshiped by many if an adequate replacement was not found within the still developing Christian religion (Martin 56).

The early integration of Mary into the role of a Christian goddess can be found in the Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. The Basilica has a depiction of the Virgin Mary in the dress of a Roman Empress that makes her appear as an earthly queen as well as the Queen of Heaven. Mary is identified in Greek as *Mater Theou*, Mother of God.
The S. Maria Maggiore was built on the site of an apparition of the Virgin Mary that was purported to occur around 350. According to tradition, the outline of the church was laid out by a snowfall on August 5, 358. The miraculous snow is commemorated every year by the use of white rose petals during the annual commemorations of the miracle (Berger 22).

While there is no literary evidence referring to the official use of icons before 300, the resistance by some within the early Christian Church to the use of images can be attributed to the strong prohibition of graven images in Mosaic Law and partly because of the central role statuary and painted images played in Graeco-Roman paganism. Epiphanius of Salamis in Cyprus, an outspoken critic of idols said, “When images are put up the customs of the pagans do the rest” (Kitzinger 90). For other early Christian leaders the veneration of icons was accepted along with the increased use of crosses and relics in Christian worship during this time. By the end of the fourth century, *proskynesis*, the custom of ‘kissing towards’ or kneeling before the cross was an accepted practice for Christians. Introduced into the Western world by the Persians, prostrating before the king was a sign of respect. For the Greeks only gods were bowed to and they thought the Persians were worshiping their kings as gods. The Greek world eventually adopted the practice of *proskynesis* as a sign of reverence and worship and Christians subsequently integrated it in their worship (Baynes 99). The use of private icons was greater at this earlier time than was the official use of icons in the church, which still had a number of powerful theologians who did not agree with the widespread use of icons (Weitzmann 44).
Icons were a physical way for Christians to show their support for their faith and communicate to non-believers the basics of Christian faith. Just as the pagans use icons to capture the public’s attention, Christian artists were beginning to use the same technique of a central figure in a panel as a means of telling a story regarding their faith.

In the Middle Ages, a “Holy icon meant an image used for Christian purposes, most often a portrait of a saint that provided the focus for a worshiper as he or she venerated the best examples of the Christian faith. Incorporating techniques already extensively used by ancient pagan cults, Christianity was beginning to utilize icons in both public places of worship as well as in the home for private meditations. Christian art was also becoming recognizable by the third century with images and cycles found both in the West in the catacombs of Rome and in the East at Dura Europos in Syria (Cormack 25). Despite the shortage of information regarding the Virgin Mary in the New Testament there are records of prayers to the Virgin as intercessor among the Nicene Christians of Constantinople by 379 and the annual Feast of the Virgin was established on December 26 around 430, testifying to a Marian piety that was developing within the Byzantine faith (Maunder 74).

While Christianity most certainly developed as a religion of the Book, there were many within the Christian community who understood that imagery was as important a missionary tool as the word (Cormack 29). Most scholars think that it was likely Hippolytus of Rome who first discussed Mary’s role as the model of Christian life and the first fruits of faith through her virginity and obedience (Maunder 10). In the third Century Origen makes specific mention of which room in Christian houses could be used for sacred meditations in the domestic environment in his Treatise on Prayer (Maunder
7). It was also work by Origen that influenced the Byzantine tradition of teaching that Mary and John the Baptist were the two supreme intercessors for the church at the heavenly judgment seat of Christ. Bishops such as Eusebius of Caesarea and Epiphanius of Salamis spoke openly about not only the icons of Christ but of the Virgin, Apostles, and the Archangel Michael, as well (Weitzmann 1977, 3). The church fathers that supported Mary’s increased role in the church built on earlier patristic writing and developed their theological framework for the virgin, with an ever-increasing emphasis on her veneration and glorification. The emphasis on Mary had a lasting impact on Christian art in the years to come.

Art was developing as the most effective means of spreading this theological expansion of the Christian faith. Using art as a missionary tool was both familiar and effective with the people who populated the Mediterranean region at that time. Icons guarantee proper orthodox thinking at a time when education was scarce and the Christian faith needed to get a foothold in the life of newly converted followers. The Christian church was actively suppressing pagan worship but nonetheless it continued to be practiced unofficially in the more remote rural areas of Egypt and Syria (Weitzmann 4). Widespread acceptance of the veneration of the Virgin Mary did not occur until the sixth century, when the official establishment of the Marian Feasts and stories of her appearances and performing miracles became more prevalent.

The icon was becoming a more accepted part of the Christian experience, its meaning and purposes evolving into a more diversified part of the Christian worship experience. A good example of a Byzantine icon would be the Madonna di San Tito
acquired by Venke during the War of Candia. This icon was associated with victory and is found in the Santa Maria della Salute Church (Fig. 1.2).

Byzantine art exerted its influence all across the Mediterranean, especially in Italy during the thirteenth century where it was called “maniera grecca” or maniera Bizantina. The art of the icon was exported from Constantinople to all major cities in the region including Venice, Palermo, Damascus and Cordova (Weitzmann 72). In the Eastern tradition the icon was on equal theological standing with the written word, and that dual status enhanced its importance in contrast to the West. Seeing, like reading, is an act of worship, and the Byzantines knew this as they used the icon to interact with the spiritual world directly and personally from the material one (Morgan 15).

The image on an icon bears the archetype of the saint and is an object to be venerated in its own right, so that a Byzantine icon is not just a picture of a saint but a power into itself (Safran 48). The existence of the icon was for the Byzantine Church a statement of their fundamental faith: that God truly became man and that therefore humans can become God. In the Byzantine theology of Christ, he was the perfect God and the perfect man, one of the Holy Trinity incarnate. The vision for the Byzantines was of a God who has become man and that man then becomes God, explaining the theological structure around which Byzantine art is produced and experienced (Safran 55). The icon for the Byzantines is understood as the actual presence of the person or saint it represents, not just a representation of the individual. When the Virgin Mary was elevated to a status of equality to Christ, the meaning of the icon and its integration into
the liturgy of the East was not fully understood by the Christians in the West (Weitzmann 1987, 66). The icon of the Virgin Mary would be viewed differently in the West where celebrating the Virgin took the form of almost erotic adoration: she was in the West the symbol of sacred love for the archetypical female according to Vasilkē.

Mary as *Theotokos*

The most significant event in the early development of the Christian faith was Constantine’s victory over the emperor Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. The subsequent issuance of the Edict of Milan in 312 establishing a tolerance for the Christian faith gave the struggling sect a legal foothold in the Roman Empire. Christian art began to flourish after that legitimization of the faith, but when Constantine transferred the capital from Rome to Byzantium, now renamed Constantinople, art became an even stronger aspect of the evolving Christian religion. Constantinople was one of the centers of Christian art from that moment until it fell in 1204. In Rome, the art of the icon was important as well, and there emerged four types of icons representing the Virgin Mary in the capital of the West: Mary, Mother of God, The Virgin Saint, The Empress, and displaying a gesture during prayer in which the hands are raised apart with the palms facing outward, or Orant woman, that was seen frequently in early Western Christian art (Maunder 179).

Theologians turned to the writings in the New Testament after the third century because the veneration of the Virgin needed a Biblical basis to solidify her legitimacy. There was however, little information in the Biblical texts that could be used to expand the veneration of the mother of God. Looking to the most prominent author in the New
Testament, there are scant references in the writings of Paul regarding Mary. The one direct reference Paul does make to Mary does not even refer to her by name: “God sent forth his son born of a woman” (Gal. 4: 4-5). In addition to this vague reference, there are a couple of other minor references in Paul’s writings that some Biblical scholars interpret as referring to Mary. Paul was primarily concerned with the expansion of Christianity into the non-Jewish community and not preoccupied with Jesus’ divinity or the virgin status of his mother as some later theologians were. Paul was simply focused on Christ, and not inspired to discuss, even minimally, the issue of Christ’s divinity or any details of Mary’s life (Martin 119). In Matthew, we see some expansion within the canonical description of Mary where he describes her as a virgin and the manner of Jesus’ birth. In Luke we see a more developed description of Mary that includes the story of the Annunciation in Luke 1: 26-38 and the visit of Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1: 39-45. Luke also describes Mary as a devoted mother who was with Jesus from birth until death, exhibiting the traits of a perfect mother (Douglas 112). In the book of Revelation we find a description of a woman that will later be interpreted as the Virgin Mary which will help shape her divine status in later years described as “And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars (Rev. 12: 1). Through her purity she was assumed body and soul into heaven and crowned Queen, her coronation was the culmination of her triumph over evil as she became Queen of Heaven (Hopkins 6). The vision of the Virgin from Revelation would later inspire the statue of Mary that serves as the crown on dome of the Santa Maria della Salute (Fig. 1.3).
The debate within the Christian community regarding Mary’s virginity and status within the church was not conclusively settled among theologians, especially with the limited information provided in the New Testament. An apocryphal text, the *Protoevangelium of James*, contributed to the early discussion regarding the status and worship of the virgin. There are about one hundred thirty surviving texts of the *Protoevangelium of James* in Greek and other languages, which gives a more detailed account of Mary’s life from childhood through her adult life (Foskett 14). The existing texts directly address the issues of Mary’s perpetual virginity and emphasize Mary as a holy person who is individually worthy of veneration. Despite its exclusion from the Christian canon, many took the *Protoevangelium of James* as ample proof of Mary’s legitimate place within the church’ theology (Limberis 103). While many church fathers
took a more conservative approach to the issue of Mary and her virginity, there persisted a group of theologians who looked to the *Protoevangelium of James* as a legitimate source of theological validation for the veneration of the Virgin Mary. Beginning with Justin Martyr in 160, the theological arguments for the veneration of the Virgin Mary began to take shape. Origen in 230 is credited with taking the next step in the process of deification by calling Mary *Theotokos* or God Bearer in his writings. By the fourth century, Athanasius called her the *Theotokos* and held Mary up in his writings as the model for modest and proper behavior for all Christian women (Trigg 25).

Despite support from Christian writers such as Justin Martyr, Origen, and Irenaeus, as well as solid support from the Christian Church in Egypt, the leaders in Antioch were more conservative in their position regarding Mary’s status within the church. They tended to use the more conservative title “Mother of Christ” as opposed to the Egyptians who wanted to use the divine *Theotokos* or “Mother of God” designation (Benko 256).

During the fourth century the debate on the definition of the person of Christ preoccupied theologians and lay persons alike all across the Roman Empire. Mary was a central figure in this debate because, according to some, a human mother was essential as the human mother of Jesus, thus ensuring that he was both man and God. The Docetists raised the question of whether Jesus was in fact human or merely an “appearance” of a body with no human nature countered the issue of Christ’s humanity. During this time of debate regarding her status all similarities of Mary to a goddess, such as Isis or Cybele, were avoided and even Mary’s frailties were celebrated by her supporters (Belting 34).
A council of Christian leaders was called to meet in Ephesus in 431 to debate the Marian issue, symbolically choosing to convene in a church dedicated to the Virgin. There were demonstrations in the street of Ephesus supporting the designation of Mary as *Theotokos*, forcing the gathered church leaders to make a decision on the divisive subject. The council did eventually decide to use the term *Theotokos*, but it was intended to only emphasize that Jesus was God in human form. For many in Ephesus and beyond Mary had now been officially declared a goddess. The *Theotokos* title (God-Bearer) quickly displaced earlier designations of Mary as the mother of God, *Mater Theon*, after the council in Ephesus. All the existing stereotypes of a universal mother already known from other mother divinities could now be applied to her as well, allowing Mary to absorb traits just as Isis had done earlier (Belting 34). Like the icon of Christ, that of the *Theotokos* was considered authentic, an object of veneration because it is a revealed truth. There were holdouts to this transition, notably the Nestorian and Antiochene Churches who came under condemnation because they refused to honor Mary as *Theotokos*, but overall Mary’s divine status was now an official part of church doctrine (Foskett 10).

By tradition, only a person or mystery of the faith can be venerated. An icon was believed to derive its authority from the authentic appearance of a holy person and its correct treatment of the event in the icon itself. The icon is a physical representation of a real event that helps define the history of the church (Belting 30). Tradition holds that the first portrait of the Virgin Mary and child was painted by the Evangelist Saint Luke (Tradigo 169). The story of Saint Luke painting the Virgin Mary first appeared in the writings of Andrew of Crete (660-740) and was a landmark argument in favor of the idea that icons were legitimate from the moment of the incarnation of Christ (Cormack 16).
Many surviving Byzantine portrayals of Saint Luke painting the Virgin and child show Luke seated before an easel, painting the Virgin Mary as a portrait icon. This depiction of the creation of the original icon is an unmistakable attempt by the artist to endorse icons and their veneration (Morgan 16). The mother of God was seen as the ultimate advocate for the sinner, and devotion to her was growing within the ranks of the Christians. As the Theotokos Mary was believed to be the powerful, ever forgiving intercessor, appealing to her divine son on the behalf of the repentant worshipers (Stokstad 206). It is a strong belief in the Virgin Mary’s power of intercession that will later motivate the Venetians to build votive churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary such as the Salute.

Imperial court ritual also helped provide the framework for the early Christians as they attempted to integrate into the pagan dominated Roman world. In many depictions during this period a King and Queen are portrayed together on the throne. Early Christian icons and paintings of Christ with Mary, surrounded by angels and saints, mimic this motif closely. In the imperial world, the image of the Emperor or King was a legal substitute for the Emperor’s actual presence. The concept of residing within the image would also be transferred to the icons of Christ and Mary that mimic this royal style, giving the Christian icon the same legitimacy as the earthly king (Besancon 10). It was during this time that Mary also began to be depicted as wearing an imperial crown that would be essential to her mythos as Queen of Heaven (Fig. 1.4). The Marian cult was beginning to take shape, with its own iconography derived from Biblical symbols, and supported by both Eastern and Western Theological and political thought.
One of the first and most influential Marian icons was the *Hodegetria*, “she who knows the way,” referring to the gesture of the Virgin who is pointing toward her son. The Virgin’s expression is often described as pensive and sad, seeming to predict Christ’s crucifixion. The icon arrived in Constantinople from Jerusalem where it had been found in the fifth century by the sister-in-law of Emperor Theodosius II. Hidden from the Iconoclast in a wall in the Hodegon Monastery, it was later carried to the city walls when Constantinople was under siege and became a symbol of protection for the city (Tradigo 169). For the Byzantines, that Christ was made flesh meant that his divinity and humanity could and should be represented in human form. The belief that the *Hodegetria* was original and that its powers could pass to later versions undoubtedly led to copies of the painting eventually making their way to Rome, the Near East, the Balkans (Cormack 22).
Constantinople

Constantinople was originally known as the city of Byzantion, located at the mouth of the Black Sea and officially christened Constantinople (City of Constantine) in 330 as Constantinopolis Nova Roma, Constantinople the New Rome. The city has been known in modern times as Istanbul since its final capture by the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Straddling the land and sea routes that link Asia and Europe, Constantinople was always of great strategic and commercial value and its influence on Christian art was extensive.

Constantinople was joined by Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem as the patriarchates where Christian art and theology were to thrive from the third century until its fall in 1204 (Weitzmann 1977, 3). During its time as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire Constantinople continued to grow in influence and power and by the time of Justinian (527-565) the city was becoming the political and economic center of the entire Roman Empire. This concentration of power and money naturally attracted the best artists of the day to the city. Those artists would produce the icon types that would have a lasting influence on Venice as well as the rest of the Christian art world (McNeill 101).

At a very early date, religious imagery became intertwined with imperial imagery and ceremony in Constantinople and by the late seventh century the Byzantine Emperor and Christ were on opposite sides of the same coin, showing that the power of religious imagery in Byzantium cannot be overstated (Safran 55). Returning from a successful military campaign against the Rus’ and Bulgarians in 971, Emperor John Tzimiskes chose not to mount the triumphal chariot, as was the Byzantine custom; instead he set a
captured icon of the Virgin on the chariot and rode behind it on a white horse (Haldon 310).

The church of the Byzantine Emperors served as both their burial place and depository of apostolic relics as it evolved into a shrine and symbol of their imperial power. Venice would later follow the example of building a church that could display both religious and political might from the East as a similar testament to their power in San Marco (Lane 204). When the Venetians acquired the relics of Saint Mark, they chose the chapel of the Doge, not the church of the Bishop, and as a result, San Marco came to symbolize the power and independence of the Venetian Republic. The Venetians would exploit this blurring of religious and secular power and authority as their Republic grew in power and influence.

The icon of the Virgin Mary was becoming an inexhaustible source of new inventions and illusions as the artists worked to meet the demand for more and more icons. Types and names of images were freely interchanged within the Christian community with each group bringing its own meaning to the Virgin and her icon (Belting 29). This diversification can be expressed by the wider range of symbols used by Christians to signify the Virgin: throne, altar, dining table, Heavenly palace, open book, red and gold curtains, heavenly garden, gate of paradise, star that points to the sun, burning candle, bright lamp, and prayer censer (Tradigo 171).

The Byzantine prototypes of icons were reproduced in great numbers but eventually the Italian artists began to alter them to suit their own purposes (Neff 81). Between 1081 and 1185 the classical elements in Byzantine art receded in favor of a style that emphasized a more dematerialized rendering of the human body, in an attempt to
achieve a synthesis between the earthbound classical and the spiritual (Weitzmann 1987, 74). As the Empire shrank, the East sought greater abstraction but Western European art developed in the direction of naturalism that was somewhat incompatible with the Eastern spiritual concept of the icon. The more ascetic art style developing within Western Christianity during this time also saw the revitalization of monasticism with its emphasis on mysticism as represented by Simeon, the new theologian. The representation of the face of the Virgin Mary in a soft, naturalistic style is seen in the famous Diesis mosaic in Saint Sophia from 1261 that matches the Madonnas of Giotto and Duccio in Florence from the 1280’s (Vasilkē 96). A harmony was eventually achieved between the trends of East and West, which retained the essence of Byzantine art. This emphasis on dematerializing the body paved the way for an increasing dominance of painting the icon as opposed to sculpture (Weitzmann 66).

Constantinople was engaged in wars against the Avars along with the Persians and ultimately Islam. The Virgin’s cult grew up in the Byzantine capital during this time of turmoil and uncertainty and the people of Constantinople looked to her for help and support. She was the intercessor, the saint that would help the pious people of Constantinople, if they only prayed to her for assistance. The people’s hope of enduring assault after assault was maintained with the idea of divine help from the Virgin Mary. She not only provided support for the city of Constantinople that was under constant siege, but also was a symbol of unity that Venice would again copy during its time of need in the years to come (Belting 41).
Iconoclasm

The veneration of icons was an ongoing subject of sometimes-heated debate within the church, with many church leaders adamantly opposed to the ever-increasing use of icons in both public and private worship. The shrinking of the Christian Roman Empire coincided with the iconoclasm that emerged in the eighth and ninth centuries. Beginning in the middle of the fifth century the Marian icon was in widespread use in the homes of individuals regardless of the official misgivings within the church. Lamps burned before the Virgin Mary, just as they had before the older pagan goddesses who preceded her. *Proskynesis* or the veneration of icons was steadily growing as an accepted practice within the Christian community. The kissing, censing, lighting, or venerating of icons was primarily limited to personal devotionals and not yet fully integrated into the liturgical services of the church (Sevcenko 45). The church sought to separate the icons, perceived miraculous powers from magic incantations, ascribing them instead to the Virgin Mary herself. The miracles were tied to the Virgin Mary but to prayers to the Virgin Mary. Iconoclasts insisted that a priest consecrate the image because for them only the blessing was valued (Belting 41).

In 730, Emperor Leo III began to promote the idea that images depicting divine or saintly persons are equivalent to idols. His advisors were concerned about the increasing threats on the Eastern Empire from Arab invasions and volcanic eruptions. Many believed that these occurrences were a result of God’s displeasure at the ever-increasing devotion to icons and their use in public worship. Leo totally banned the production and use of icons in churches and instigated a council held at Hierieia near Constantinople in 754 that made iconoclasm, “image breaking,” the official dogma of the Orthodox Church.
The council officially declared that images of divine subjects are blasphemy and provided theological justification for that position.

In Western Europe, and Italy in particular, the theological and political issues surrounding iconoclasm were debated and rejected by a majority of the political and ecclesiastical hierarchies. The Roman Liber pontificalis describes the reaction of the Italians to Emperor Leo III’s demand that icons be destroyed: they rose in rebellion, “elected their own dukes, and in this way they all tried to achieve freedom from the pontiff and themselves” (Davis 11). In 731, Pope Gregory III convened a council in Rome and excommunicated the emperor and all iconoclasts. In 767, a synod was held at Gentilly, and iconoclasm was debated and subsequently rejected. Finally, in 769 Pope Stephen III convened another council in Rome, officially rejecting the acts of the iconoclastic Council of Hiereia (Deliyannis 560).

The destruction of images in the Byzantine East continued until the death of Emperor Leo IV in 780. His wife, Empress Irene immediately assumed power and in 787 she convened the Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea. At that council the religious images were officially restored and the theological justifications made at Hiereia were refuted, once again legitimizing the veneration of idols (Deliyannis 564). In 815, Emperor Leo V revived iconoclasm and it lasted until his wife Theodora convened a council that permanently restored icons as part of church doctrine resulting in the Triumph of Orthodoxy in 843. Both Leo III and Constantine V were later accused of acting under the influence of persons and ideas alien to the core of Byzantine civilization regarding their position on icons (Brown 1). Iconoclasm lasted for sixty-one years and countless icons were permanently lost to destruction until the church declared that to
attack icons was heresy (Cormack 12). After the end of iconoclasm, the Virgin was once again proclaimed Theotokos, which was in essence an official proclamation of the Virgin’s status within the history of salvation (Belting 30). Following the end of iconoclasm a refrain attributed to the icon supporter Saint Stephen the Younger was often sung in many churches on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, a feast celebrating the restoration of icon worship “we venerate your immaculate icon” (Sevcenko 45). The icon Triumph of Orthodoxy is today found in the British Museum and shows the Virgin Mary with child as the all-holy one or mother of God. It was painted in the fourteenth century and is the earliest known icon representing the triumph of Orthodoxy (Cormack 10). The reestablishment of Mary as Mother of God was essential for her continued veneration and influence in Venice.

The three persons of the godhead had already caused numerous problems for the new church with a founding tenet of a single god; the theologians had to wrestle with the inclusion of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, but also a woman who had entered the theological discussion (Belting 32). Those within the church who defended the icon did so with two key points: the doctrine of the incarnation and the dogma of the two natures of Christ. To leave the Holy Icons out of Christian life would be to deny that God became man and that men can become God. One of the most prominent supporters of icons during iconoclasm, John of Damascus, wrote his Defense of Holy Images in Palestine, which was then under Muslim rule. In a Muslim country, the writer was safe from persecution from the Byzantine Emperor’s attempts to erase icons and their supporters from the practice of Christians (Weitzmann 1977, 45). The Second Council of Nicaea, the Seventh Ecumenical Council in 787, declared that icons were not only
permissible but that they were necessary to Christian worship. Christians were told that they must use and venerate icons in their churches, homes and streets.

“We define with all precision and diligence that, like the figure of the precious and life-creating Cross, the reverend and holy images are to be set up, made out of pigments and tesserae and other appropriate material, in the holy churches of God, on the sacred vessels and vestments, on the walls and on the panels, in houses and on the ways: the image of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, of our immaculate Lady the Holy Theotokos, of the honorable angels, and of all saints and men.” (Safran 45).

The support in the Orthodox Church for the ritual and devotional practices surrounding the use of icons would now allow icons to flourish. After the end of iconoclasm, the Marian icon became associated with many miracles, such as when it was displayed in a church in Regensburg in 1519 following a miraculous healing there. Pope Leo X later granted indulgences to anyone making a proper pilgrimage to the chapel housing the image (Morgan 15). Many icons were destroyed during the period of iconoclasm but the Marian icon had survived and was poised to become a central focal point of Christian art in the years to follow.

The Orthodox Church was constantly criticized and challenged by the Latin West as was the West criticized by the Byzantines. The Roman Church was perceived as having too much power concentrated in the Holy See and critics pointed to theological issues such as the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist and the addition of the Latin word *filique* “and the son” to the Nicene Creed regarding the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son (Geanakoplos 205). Despite the theological differences between East and West Rome was as interested as Constantinople in claiming
The possession of icons of the Virgin Mary, based upon the original painting done by the hand of St. Luke. Despite their differences, the icon was integral to the worship in both the Eastern and Western churches because the dogma of both institutions are virtual mirror images of one another. In the West, the icon was ensconced on the altar whereas in the Orthodox East only the chalice, paten, and Gospel book were admitted within the sanctuary (Weitzmann 1987, 15). The Eastern Church differed in the intensity of their devotion to the icon making such devotion the major difference between the two churches. The West revered the Mary icon; but the East was fixated on the Mary icon as a central theological issue (Besançon 147).
Constantinople would greatly influence Venice, via Crete, as Venice integrated the use of the Virgin Mary into the religious-civil life of the Republic. Constantinople would have a tremendous influence on Venice in the years to come as their veneration and use of the Marian icon would soon find its way to the Veneto.

Influence from the East

Always looking to Constantinople for inspiration and validity, the Venetians were actively engaged in developing their own narrative well before the sack of Constantinople in 1204. The Church of San Marco is one of the prominent examples of this complex relationship between Constantinople and Venice. San Marco originally built in 836 was rebuilt in 1043-71 under Doge Domenico Contarini, with the new structure being much larger than the previous one (Fig 1.5). The design was based upon the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, including the use of mosaics and sculptural reliefs, found in the Byzantine original (Georgopoulou 479). The Piazza San Marco was not restructured to accommodate the booty from the Fourth Crusade until the middle of the thirteenth century. The western façade of San Marco was remodeled in 1260, the Piazza was repaved in 1266-67, and the Palace of the Procurators of San Marco was restored in 1269. Within this remodeled setting, the Byzantine treasures acquired following the Fourth Crusade adorned the major public space in Venice, proclaiming a special relationship between Venice and Constantinople and projecting Venice as the lawful heir to Imperial Byzantium. The effective display of the Byzantine spoils implies the existence of a sophisticated plan to exploit the symbolic value of the artifacts in order to further the political ambitions of the Venetian Republic.
The successful manipulation of Byzantine artifacts and traditions by the Venetians transformed Venice from a “privileged daughter of Byzantium” into a Republic with a direct link to the Imperial kingdoms of the glorious past. The Byzantine treasures represented for Venice more than victory over the Byzantine state. The treasures were a physical representation of the very essence of the new Venetian Republic and were seen by the Venetian people and foreigners alike as the symbols of the new Venetian Empire (Lane 206).

The other great Byzantine treasure, *The Palla d’ Oro*, was remodeled in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but continued to incorporate Byzantine enamels of several earlier periods. The incorporation of the treasures brought back from Constantinople into San Marco broadcast to the world Venice’s new political identity as the rightful heir to Constantinople (Lauritzen 29).

Following the Fourth Crusade the Venetian Doge took on the new title of “quartae parties et dimidia totius imperii Romaniae Dominator,” interpreted as “Master of one fourth and a half of the whole empire of Romania,” the new title stating plainly that the Republic now had imperial aspirations (Georgopoulou 481). Venice took for its part of Constantinople half of the rest of the empire, including the territory of most interest to an aspiring Mediterranean trading power, the coasts and islands between Constantinople and the Mediterranean. In the years following the Fourth Crusade, Venice was poised to replace Constantinople as the predominant city in the East and Rome in the West, the new Constantinople and Rome combined.
Chapter 2 will highlight the physical and psychological influences exerted from the East and West and how Venetians evolved their own self-image and religious practices as a result.

Saint Mark replaces Saint Theodore

In the middle of the sixth century, the great Byzantine General Narses conquered Italy for his emperor Justinian. The Exarchate of the Eastern Empire was established at Ravenna and two churches were built in the Venetian lagoon: one dedicated to San Geminiano and the other to the Byzantine patron Saint of Venice, Saint Theodore (Lauritzen 20). Saint Theodore was a Greek warrior saint whose patronage by Venice attested to her status as a vassal state of the Byzantine Empire, under the immediate control of the exarchate of Ravenna (Rosand 52). Venice’s continued status as a Byzantine province was a source of constant irritation to the Republic, but their vassal status insulated them from the political upheavals that were soon to change the face of the Italian peninsula, as well as most of Western Europe.

After the fall of Ravenna in 751 to the Lombards Venice was the lone remaining Byzantine stronghold on the Italian peninsula. Venice was surrounded by potential threats as she was caught between Byzantine and Carolingian forces vying for control of the Upper Adriatic (Dale 58). At the end of the eighth century, a new Western Roman Empire was created in Northern Italy with Charlemagne as its Emperor. All of northern Italy was committed and loyal to the new Roman Empire except Venice, which remained
solidly aligned to the Emperor in Constantinople. Twice in the first few years of his reign, Charlemagne attacked the Venetians with no success, the lagoon and its islands providing sufficient defense to repel the invaders, just as it had from the fall of the Roman Empire to the onslaught of the Barbarians. The inhabitants of Venice knew that the same difficulties that made living in the lagoon a challenge for them were also sufficient to repel almost any invader, even Charlemagne. That physical isolation gave rise to a Venetian sense of political independence, separate and immune from outside influences. Despite her physical ability to repel invaders, Venice was like a restless adolescent on the verge of adulthood, wanting to break free from her Byzantine parents. Yet while the longing for autonomy from Constantinople, the Venetians continued to look to Constantinople and Rome as a measuring sticks for their own success. Venice continually drew upon the authority of the imperium examples, from the two ancient capitals in the East and the West in their quest to fully legitimize their burgeoning economic and political ambitions (Pincus 101).

The strategic position in the lagoon that isolated Venice and made a natural barrier from attack was protecting the Republic from the politics and threats of the mainland. Venice had no need for city walls or the massive tower construction of mainland towns such as Florence or Siena. This security allowed the city to grow openly compared to the fortress-like character of so many other Italian cites (Hartt and Wilkins 23). Unaffected by the feudal system that resulted in constant war on the mainland, Venice, through her alliance with the Byzantine Empire, was assuring her future greatness by avoiding internal and external conflicts (Norwich 24). The political and
military struggles that Venice was able to avoid continued on the mainland with the Republic safely on the sideline building up her navy and trading routes.

The close relationship with Constantinople and lack of internal struggle eventually allowed Venice to become sufficiently strong that upon the signing of the Treaty of Ratisbon in 814 between the Emperors of the East and the West, she achieved a tacit recognition of her individual political existence (Lauritzen, 24).

Regardless of her movement toward a more functional independence, Venice was still symbolically tied to her Greek mentor, Constantinople. The existing Patron Saint of Venice, Saint Theodore signified a strong tie to the East and was an unspoken but clear sign that Venice was not a totally independent state. Even with her continued loyalties to Constantinople and the Eastern Roman Empire, Venetian leaders wanted to establish their own claim to political and economic independence, as was warranted for a leading trading and naval power in the region. It is therefore no surprise that the Doges and their councils, while still technically under the rule of the Byzantine Emperor, were operating more and more independently of Constantinople. Thus, the isolation of Venice from the mainland and Constantinople allowed the ever-growing Republic to develop an independent political system quite unlike any other in the region, without constant interference from outside powers. This sense of independence would later enable Venice to maintain her independence from all outside interference, even from Rome.

In addition to the problem of Saint Theodore, signifying Venice’s political dependence on Constantinople, Venice had religious competition from Aquileia for the right to control the Veneto spiritually. Venice needed a new independent identity with
the political and spiritual influence to give them true legitimacy if they were to break away from any outside interference and assert full independence.

The Basilica Patriarcale in Aquileia served as the Archiepiscopal Cathedral for the province of Venetia et Istria as well as the burial place of its first bishop and martyr, Saint Hermagoras, establishing its credentials as a patriarchal see. The leaders of Venice did not want religious interference from Aquileia and they knew that they must establish a history commensurate with the outside powers attempting to control the Veneto both spiritually and politically if they had any hopes of independence.

The four winged beasts from Ezekiel’s vision of God (1:5) provided the Christian West with the apostles represented as beasts: Matthew as an angel, John as an eagle, Luke as an ox, and Mark as a lion. There was a tie to the Evangelist Saint Mark in the history of Venice, but even the established authorities of Venice could not summarily make Saint Mark the patron saint of Venice without the actual possession of his relics and an expanded foundation story. Saint Mark’s apostolic mission to the Veneto is first outlined by Paul the Deacon in his *Liber de Episcopis Mettensibus*, a work commissioned between 783-786 by Bishop Angilram of Metz (Dale 55). After Mark ordained the first patriarch in the mainland town of Aquileia a storm forced him to take cover in the canals around the islands of Venice. The Venetian legend says that an angel spoke to Saint Mark as he drifted in a boat on the Venetian lagoon. He got out to pray on the exact spot where the Doge’s Palace was later erected and an angel spoke the words that would become the motto of the city, traditionally seen on a tablet held by the Lion of St. Mark, which states “Pax Tibi Marce Evangelista Meus,” Peace be with you, Mark, my evangelist.”
It is traditionally held that Mark had been baptized by Saint Peter himself and traveled to Rome with Peter on his evangelistic missions. Legend had it that Peter dispatched Mark personally to Aquileia to spread the word of Jesus in northern Italy and this direct link with Saint Peter and Saint Mark was essential for Venice to later establish a history that would have the spiritual credibility to compete with both Constantinople and Rome. However, if the Venetian Republic were to fully command respect in Medieval Europe, the presence of a sacred relic was necessary for a city to be endowed with a mystique all its own (Norwich 29).

The relics of Saint Mark were in Egypt, and despite a compelling origin story the Doge could not officially sanction or justify the repositioning of the holy relics from Egypt to Venice. Fortunately for the Republic, in 828-829 two industrious Venetians, Buono da Malamocco and Rustico da Torcello, managed to acquire the relics of Saint Mark the Evangelist from the eponymous Coptic Church in Alexandria, Egypt. The Venetians hid the body of the saint in a container and covered it with pork. When the Muslim officials inspected their cargo they were quickly ushered out of Alexandria due to the Muslims abhorrence of pork. They returned them to Venice, providing the authorities with the physical proof that would be the turning point for Venice as a Republic and the psychological break from both Aquileia and Constantinople they so desperately desired (Horodowich 26). The recovery of the relics of Saint Mark allowed Venice to substitute the Italian patron of Christianity for the Greek Theodore, both undermining Aquileian Apostolicity and establishing an independent identity from the Byzantines (Dale 58).
The Venetians now maintain in the foundation document *Apparitio* that their possession of the relics of the apostle to the Italians signified that they had inherited Aquileia’s spiritual authority over the relics and the Veneto. In later years the Myth of Venice would weave the origins of the Venetian state into a convenient tapestry as evidenced by an eleventh-century apologist who in another foundation document, the *Praedestinatio*, stated that the men did not steal the relics of Saint Mark in 829, they merely returned them to their rightful resting place in the Venetian lagoon (Lane 88).

Archeological study has determined that the first resting place of the relics of Saint Mark was probably a small cruciform building with a cupola, built to emulate churches in Constantinople, which were built specifically to house the bodies of martyrs.

![Saint Theodore and Saint Mark, Piazzetta San Marco, Venice. Photo by Author](image)
The Doge Giustiniano placed the relics of Saint Mark not in the cathedral at Olivolo but rather in a building attached to the Ducal palace, deliberately associating the Saint Mark relics from the onset with the civil, rather than with the religious authorities of the state (Norwich 30). The new church holding the relics of St. Mark stood next to the chapel the Byzantine General Narses had originally dedicated to Saint Theodore, further diminishing the importance of the Byzantine icon of Venice (Lauritzen 26). The church of San Marco today has the aura of a great cathedral, but did not officially become the cathedral of Venice until 1807. The official seat of religious power in Venice until then was the church of San Pietro di Castello, founded at the time of the establishment of the bishopric of Rialto in 775 on the island of Olivolo, otherwise known as Castello, located on the far eastern limits of the city (Howard 17). Despite the acquisition of the relics, the title of Patriarch of Venice was not transferred from Grado to the former Bishopric of Venice until 1451.

Saint Theodore and his dragon were replaced, but not forgotten, as the Venetian authorities put the Greek Saint on prominent public display atop a column next to an identical column holding the new patron of Venice, St. Mark, in the Piazzetta facing the Doge’s palace (Fig. 2.1).

For the Venetians and many in the Mediterranean the winged lion of Saint Mark eventually came to physically represent the presence of a Saint and Venice simultaneously. The presence of the relics of such a prominent figure as Saint Mark sparked the civic imagination of the Venetian people and propelled Venice to a more prominent status than its neighbors in the Mediterranean. The Venetians now had the political and spiritual legitimacy they so hungrily desired, and that legitimacy would
allow them to remain independent both politically and ecclesiastically until Napoleon conquered the Republic in 1797 (Horodowich 29). Saint Mark, sovereign Lord of Venice, delegate of Lord Christ, whose authority is bestowed upon the Venetian Doge, becomes one of the basic timbers that Venice builds her reputation and legend upon in the years to come.

Fall of Constantinople

One of the major turning points for the Venetians and their struggle for independence from Constantinople was the golden bulls or chrysobulls granted to the Venetian state, first in 992 and again in 1082, greatly expanding the original trading advantages granted to them in 992. This treaty established the basic diplomatic and economic framework that would shape Venetian-Byzantine relations up until the Fourth Crusade and gave significant trading advantages to the Venetians in exchange for naval and military support against Byzantine aggressors (Lane 186). The major unintended consequence of this trade agreement for Constantinople was an erosion of Byzantine economic control in the eastern Mediterranean and for Venice; it meant increased cultural and economic influence from the Latin West. The eroding of Byzantine political influence on Venice propelled the Republic to continue to seek autonomy from all outside interference.

The ensuing sack of Constantinople, even by the barbaric standards of the Middle Ages, is considered one of the most gruesome slaughters to occur in European history. The Christian Crusaders who were on their way to re-claim the Holy Land from the Moslems had turned their swords on their Christian brothers. There can be little doubt
that the Venetians viewed Byzantine rule, without trade concessions, as an impediment to their continued lucrative trading association with the Moslems and the Orient. Whether chafing from an insult, real or imagined from years before, Venice had taken advantage of circumstances that could enhance their trading supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The devastation of the great city included the destruction of works of art in order to get the gold or jewels they held. The Latins stole many relics, including a (supposed) fragment of the true cross, part of the head of Saint John the Baptist, the arm of Saint George and some of Jesus’ blood (Horodowich 41). The Venetians also brought back the *Triumphal Quadriga* or the Horses of Saint Mark’s, four Greek bronze horses originally brought to Constantinople in the Fourth Century by Constantine (Fig. 2.2). Constantine had originally taken the sculptures out of Rome as a symbol of power transference from the old Rome to the new Rome Constantinople. The Venetians saw the possession of the horses as another sign of their legitimacy to replace both Eastern Constantinople and Western Rome, the new seat of power in the Christian world (Rodley 254).

Venice clearly emerged as the victor following the sack of Constantinople, gaining sovereignty over nearly half of the city of Constantinople along with half of the entire Byzantine Empire. Most importantly for the Venetians were the naval bases they acquired that stretched from Constantinople to Venice, including the entire Greek coast. Control of these ports cemented their stranglehold on the trade routes in the Mediterranean, virtually eliminating Pisa and Genoa as serious rivals (Godfrey 76).

The effects of the Fourth Crusade on the psyche of Venice would shape her destiny from that time forward. The Venetians were no longer a vassal state of the
Byzantine Empire; they were a power in their own right. The attitudes of both the Venetians and the countries that they traded with had changed. The Venetian state was naturally a Christian state, but the primary religion of Venice was profit and the state itself. Continued enhancement of the history of Venice and public display of the spoils of war would tell the world that Venice had arrived as a participant on the world stage. The Venetians were now a major power in the Mediterranean and with significant land holding in the Levant, the outside influences on Venetian culture, especially art, would increase in the Venetian Republic.

Fig. 2.2. *Triumphal Quadriga*, Basilica di San Marco, Venice. Photo by Author

Many scholars such as Queller, in his book *The Fourth Crusade*, argue that the sack of Constantinople was not a Venetian plot but a tragic set of events that occurred without
specific intention or specific direction. Other authors including Godfrey in *The Unholy Crusade*, argue that Venice was not only avenging the events of 1182, but actively conspiring to overthrow the Byzantine capital for their own benefit. Whether Doge Dandolo originally set out to achieve such a stunning victory for Venice during the Fourth Crusade is a still an open subject for debate. What is clear is that when the Venetians saw an opportunity to expand their trading empire they would take on anyone, including fellow Christians, to achieve that goal. The Venetians were not interested in land per se; they wanted land holdings to supply needed resources and to support their trade routes, for above all they were pragmatic business men who relied not on military strength but on their diplomatic skills and economic might to survive. Because of the fall of Constantinople Venice continued to grow in power and influence, leading to Cardinal Bessarion telling the Doge in 1469 that Venice was almost another Constantinople: “indisputably it had now become the leading Christian city in the Mediterranean” (Hopkins 1998, 24). Even though Venice was beginning to exert her independence, she still looked to Constantinople as one of the leading examples of classical civilization. Both Constantinople and Rome would continue to exert enormous influence on the Venetian Republic in the years following the fall of Constantinople as the serene Republic continued to mature and develop (Fig 2.3).

**Crete**

After the sack of Constantinople, Venice had significantly increased her land holdings in the Mediterranean. The new Venetian colonies gave the Republic even more exposure to the Byzantine culture, at a level not before seen or experienced by the
ambitious Republic (Fig 2.3). Most significant of the colonies to come under Venetian rule was the island of Crete. Crete presented Venice with the problems that always confront a conquering power, how to control the new territory and maximize its strategic and economic contribution. Crete was a fortified island that was an essential part of controlling merchant trade in the Mediterranean (Fig 2.4). Venice had inherited a rebellious Greek populace on Crete and desperately needed to control its newest possession as effectively as possible.

Fig. 2.3. Byzantine Icon, 1428, Church of the Pantanassa, Mystras, Greece. Photo by Author
The decision to integrate into the Cretian culture, instead of imposing a Venetian hegemony, would prove to be a significant factor in their successful integration of the Greek Island into Venetian culture.

The integration of the Catholic Church on Crete also proved to be a challenge for the priests who went to Crete to oversee the Church in the new Venetian territory. The clergy were confronted with Byzantine rituals and practices on Crete that were still unknown in Venice. The most prominent ritual the Venetians encountered on Crete was the popularity and widespread use of the miracle-working icon in the Cathedral of Candia known as the Virgin Mesopanditissa. The icon of Candia portrays a Virgin Hodegetria type, the Virgin Mary guiding the faithful, an icon that closely follows the iconography of the original icon from the Hodegon Monastery in Constantinople. The Venetian liturgy of the time did not include the veneration of religious images and there is little evidence of highly venerated Marian icons in Venice before taking possession of Crete (Belting 122). There is also no doubt that images of the Virgin existed as far back as the early sixth century in Italy but there are no records of processions centered on icons in Venice prior to 1204 (Georgopoulou 493). The Venetians were at this time much more aligned with the Roman or Western traditions in the Christian faith, as opposed to the Byzantine East, but that was destined to change with the growing influence of Byzantine practices from Crete and the East on the Venetian religious establishment.
In 1264, there was an uprising on the island led by Greek rebels, which threatened the stability and security of the Venetian colony. There was eventually a peace accord negotiated between the two parties and this miraculous peace was attributed to the miracle-working power of the Candia icon. The icon quickly became known for its mediating properties and the Venetians recognized the potential for the icon to solidify a collective Venetian/Cretin identity centered on an icon with its ties to Constantinople (Georgopoulou 487).

The Venetian church authorities soon established weekly processions featuring the icon and praising the icon’s mediating power. The icon was being transformed from a symbol of Byzantine Crete into a symbol of a unified Crete under Venetian rule. The Virgin Mesopanditissa was a Byzantine icon utilized in all-important civic ceremonies.
and was always carried on the Feast Day of the Assumption as well as other special occasions on Crete (Lauritzen 49). The Venetians now used the Byzantine roots of the icon to establish and justify their claim to Crete as a colonial territory. They incorporated the Tuesday procession of the icon into the Venetian Catholic church and began to integrate the icon into the narrative of the Venetian state itself. The civic ceremonies begun on Crete would soon be integrated into the mainstream life of Venice, led by both the religious and secular authorities of the Republic.

Parallel to the events unfolding in Crete regarding the icon of Candia was the foundation for the importation of Byzantine rituals being laid by the Venetians. Following the Fourth Crusade the Byzantine icon of the Virgin Nikopoia, “victory bringing,” became the most venerated religious image in Venice (Garrett 66). The Byzantines had carried the Nicopeia in battle just as Moses had carried the Ark of the Covenant when the Israelites fought against the Canaanites (Thorndike 464). Attributed to the hand of Saint Luke and carried in battle by the Byzantine Emperors, the icon was brought to Venice sometime after the fall of Constantinople. The icon was, according to the Byzantine tradition, reputed to have powers, especially in military matters. The Venetians decided that it would no longer be carried in battle, not surprising because it had failed to protect Constantinople from the Venetians. The Venetians used their power of imagery and imagination to transform the icon into much more than the Byzantines had ever imagined. The icon of the Mother of God was taken to the Basilica of San Marco where it eventually came to represent the protection of the Virgin Mary over Venice. Processions were soon instituted featuring the Virgin Nikopoia reproducing the Byzantine processions of the Virgin Mesopanditissa imported from Crete. The newly
found devotion to the *Nikopoia* icon and its integration by the Venetian Church now fully paralleled the use of the *Virgin Mesopanditissa* on Crete.

In an effort to emphasize the antiquity and divine origin of the icon the Venetians claimed that the *Virgin Mesopanditissa* was not only painted by the hand of St. Luke but that it was brought from Constantinople to Crete during Iconoclasm to avoid its destruction. By 1275, the Venetian narrative claimed that the city had been founded on the Feast Day of the Assumption and the Blessed Virgin was declared the patron of the Venetian Republic (Georgopoulou 495).

Giovanni Tiepolo published a treatise on the *Nikopoia* icon in 1618, describing it as proof of the Virgin’s promise to intercede for the people of Venice, further increasing the Virgin Mary’s status in Venice (Hopkins 6, 2000). In 1669, the icon of the *Virgin Mesopanditissa* was transported to the treasury of San Marco from Crete. By 1687, the icon was placed upon the high altar of the Church of Santa Maria della Salute and subsequently carried in processions on the Feast of the Presentation of the Virgin, November 21 (Garrett 81).

New Rome

The concept of Venice as the new Rome was an ideal that many Venetians held in the early sixteenth century, and this concept would help shape Venice into a world power in the years to come. Moving Venice forward during this time is the one individual whom most would consider the catalyst of the cultural and intellectual *renovato* in the Republic during the early sixteenth century, Doge Andrea Gritti (r. 1523-1538).
During the War of the League of Cambrai, the majority of European powers joined forces against the Venetian Republic. The military disasters of the war culminated in 1509 with the battle of Agnadello, where Venice lost the majority of the land holdings they had acquired in the previous centuries. This loss of territory on the mainland was seen by most in Venice as divine punishment from God for their collective sins. The Venetian public was thrown into a collective state of despair and panic ran rampant through the entire Republic. Penitential processions were organized and apocalyptic preaching filled the streets and the churches as Venetians came to grip with the reality that they were no longer a leading power on the Italian peninsula (Finlay 2000, 993).

In response to the fear that Venice had displeased God, the Senate passed measures that strengthened the laws protecting the virtue of nuns and the Patriarch ordered that fasting occur not only on Friday, but on Wednesday and Saturday as well (Lane 244). Pope Julius II then added insult to injury to the psyche of the downtrodden Venetians when he excommunicated the Republic for their perceived aggression against
Fig. 2.5. Titian, *Doge Andrea Gritti*, 1546, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Photo by Author
the Papacy. In typical Venetian style, the authorities merely ignored the papal bull by forbidding its publication. Because the bull was not published, the Venetian clergy ignored it, going about their business as if the Pope did not exist.

During the sixteenth century Doge Andrea Gritti was instrumental in the effort to revive the cultural and intellectual spirit of Venice, elevating the Republic to the status of the “New Rome” (Fig. 2.5). His influence on the psyche of Venice would later play an integral part in the building of the Santa Maria della Salute.

Gritti looked to the classics for his guide as he endeavored to rebuild Venice as the new Rome. Rome had been an inspiration and rival of Venice for many years and with her sack in 1527, her demise had actually bolstered Venetian morale. The great Rome was lying in ruin and the Venetians felt that its fall was clearly a sign that they were poised to take Rome’s place as the new seat of power in Italy. What Venice needed now was an urban landscape that attested to their rightful inheritance to the Roman legacy.

Gritti was also close to Gasparo Contarini who wrote *Demagistratibus et republica Venetorum* in the mid 1520’s when he was Venetian Ambassador to the court of Charles V of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. This text was the primary work through which the “Myth of Venice” reached its European audience. The myth extolled the city as possessing no walls, no gates, and no fortifications; rather, its piety, laws, institutions, and people were hailed as Venice’s best protection (Finlay 1999, 989).

Andrea Gritti was an exceptional man who was in the right place at the right time. His diplomatic and charismatic skills overcame his military shortcomings and propelled
him to power when Venice was in desperate need of a leader. Under his guidance, Venice was spared the devastation experienced by many Italian cities on the mainland. His vision and guidance allowed the republic to view itself as a successor to Rome and paved the way for later Venetian leaders as legitimate heirs to both ancient seats of Christendom. There is a painting by Ludovico Flumicelli in the church of the Eremitani in Padua, which shows Doge Gritti presenting a model of Venice to an enthroned Madonna and Child (Finlay 2000, 996). The painting was no doubt commissioned by Gritti himself, showing that the Doge recognized the importance of incorporating the Madonna into Venetian secular history.

Myth of Venice

The early story of Venice, that improbable story of poor settlers fleeing into the lagoon to avoid invaders and building a city surrounded by water, needed to be augmented if Venice was to vie for position and power with the ancient and well-established Rome and Constantinople. The narrative that the Venetians wove into what would become their history was no doubt part fact and part fiction. The Venetians were up against Rome and its history stretching back to 753 BCE, a long-standing world power. The Roman narrative was also full of embellishments from Romulus and Remus to Virgil’s *Aeneid*, but the Romans also had an established history of development and conquest that the Venetians could only envy. The Roman Emperor Constantine later renamed the ancient city of Byzantium, making Constantinople the imperial capital of the Eastern Roman Empire around 330. Constantinople had then gone on to earn its position as one of the most wealthy and powerful city in Europe. Venice’s ongoing task was to
remain as independent as possible, while building up its resources and history, biding
time with the eventual goal of becoming a city capable of competing with both Rome and
Constantinople.

As we have seen Venice considered itself part of the Byzantine Empire and had
thus looked to Constantinople for cultural inspiration. Despite their loyalty and respect
for the Byzantine culture, the Venetians always held that they were independent and
acted under a divine self-governing system. However, other Italian city-states of the
Later Middle Ages did not perceive themselves independent as Venice did. In Genoa or
Florence, there was the acknowledged sovereignty to the Emperor or Pope that simply
did not exist in Venice. While others looked outward for leadership, the Venetians
looked to no such higher authority to legitimize their government. They believed that
their governmental system was inherently legitimate and possessed final authority
because it expressed the will of the Venetian people who had always been free and
independent from outside control (Lane 87).

Doge Andrea Dandolo (1523-1538) was a key figure in the publication and
dissemination of the Venetian foundation story, which for obvious reasons parallels old
Rome. Doge Dandolo was the driving force behind the acquisition of the Pala d’ Oro,
one of the most significant Byzantine relics in Venice. Added to the Venetian narrative
was the story of Antenor, the Trojan hero who escaped the destruction of Troy and would
later establish a new lineage in the West. Doge Dandolo’s *Chronica Extensa* also asserts
that Venice received its privileges directly from Charlemagne, becoming a province
under the jurisdiction of the Western Empire who they subsequently replaced (Pinus
105).
The so-called “Myth of Venice” held that the Venetian Republic was immortal and that it embodied an ideal amalgam of freedom, justice and stability. The Venetian’s tradition going back to the fourteenth century of celebrating the providential destiny of the city, its constitutional excellence, and political wisdom spurred on the myth both internally and externally (Finlay 1999, 931). The essence of the myth has been consistent and substantially unaltered since the sixteenth century: a city founded in liberty and never thereafter subjected to foreign domination. A maritime, commercial economy ruled by a civic-minded Doge that was the guardian of the common good. Venetians themselves as a society that was intensely pious yet ecclesiastically independent (Grubb 44).

The myth of Venice as a republican ideal was very potent, both internally and externally. By at least the fifteenth century the myth had moved beyond simple propaganda: Venice as “island of delight in a world made brutal” made the Republic a model of constitutional and governmental perfection (Grubb 45). This refinement of the historical record was not the exclusive province of Venice, Florence, Milan, Padua all eventually claimed to be “Second Rome.” It was significant however, that Venice aspired to replace both Rome and Constantinople, and again demonstrating that for the Venetians the allure of power was as strong from the East as it was from the West.

Reformation

Important for its effect not only on the Catholic Church at large but also specifically on the Venetian Church, the Reformation would help define Venice as an independent Catholic state. After 1500, the widespread movement for religious separation and nationalism led by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and King Henry VIII
profoundly disorganized the Papacy and split the church into opposing groups of equally zealous believers. The ancient heterogeneous unity that was the Western Church broke irrevocably, causing the Papacy to become completely disorganized by removing a large part of Europe from central ecclesiastical rule and allowing the rule of national churches to be more controllable by civic governments (Mayor 101). This split with Rome for the Protestants was a response to the abuses they perceived in the current system, but for Venice, it was an opportunity to maintain control of the secular and ecclesiastical power in the Republic. In the Holy Roman Empire, bishops had become territorial princes and the position of bishop had evolved into more of a secular rather than purely religious position of power. In Venice this usurping of power by the church and its bishops was actively resisted, just as any other intrusions from outside the Republic were.

The Church’s immediate response to the demands of the Protestant uprising was a strong reaffirming of the necessity of the episcopacy, without clearly resolving some of the more thorny issues regarding its theological or ecclesiological foundations (Bergin 34). The Council of Trent (1545-1563) eventually produced two significant findings: one, it defined the formulation of Catholic doctrine in response to Protestant questions of authority by reforming many of the questionable practices raised by Luther and two; it reorganized the official system of Catholic education for priests. The Council had given a definitive formulation of much of the Catholic doctrine in response to the Protestant reformers. In addition, the Council set out to achieve a thorough reform in the life of the church, attempting to rectify many of the abuses that had developed over the years. The Council had reinforced the ideal that nothing surpasses the importance of the liturgy and that the individual Catholic is most normally sanctified in and through liturgical
observances (McNally 37). Venice represented an older form of Catholicism, as opposed to the new conception of Papal prerogatives, which had become more frequent since the Council of Trent (Yates 123).

Venice had remained faithful to the Pope and was without question a Catholic Republic during the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation failed in Venice, as in all of Italy, due to the historical presence of the Papacy and the established network of local alliances and interests that were closely tied to the Church. This association between the Church and the secular authorities was too great a political, economic and social obstacle for the Protestant movement to overcome in Italy (Firpo & Tedeschi 354). Nevertheless, while very much Catholic in the face of the Reformation, Venetians also practiced their own version of the Roman Catholic faith that often caught the attention of the authorities from Rome. For instance, before 1547, Venice had maintained a neutral stance toward religious dissidents practicing in their city. Venice was primarily concerned with maintaining its sovereignty against the power of the Papacy and as a result, some Venetian policy was in complete opposition to directions coming from Rome (Santosusso 477). In the face of the Protestant rejection of a sacramental basis for the clergy and their insistence on deriving all pastoral and governing functions in the Church from Luther’s notion of the ‘Priesthood of all believers, Rome was forced to defend its authority as exercised through the episcopacy (Bergin 35). Rome was desperate to maintain the status quo in the face of the Protestants and their new form of Christianity. Therefore, the Pope viewed any deviation from or rejection of the authority from the Holy See from Venice with anxiety and less and less toleration.
Venice did follow most Papal directives coming from Rome for they were looking, as was everyone on the Italian peninsula, for the emotional security that order provides. Everyone from the Doge to the most humble worker felt the chaos associated with the Reformation and its turmoil. The Church and what it stood for was still a pillar that most Venetians leaned on in times of trouble, regardless of power struggles between the Pope and Doge. Venetians were attempting to navigate in this sea of chaos, hoping to find some compromise that would allow them to maintain their Catholic faith and at the same time continue to be profitable traders in a world increasingly fragmented by discord. Thus, obedience did not mean blind devotion to the dictates of the Pope or his representative in Venice; it was merely the Venetians’ way of finding a middle path that would satisfy both the secular and religious needs of her people.

One example of Venetian ingenuity while cooperating with the Pope can be illustrated with Giovanni Della Casa, the Papal representative to Venice from 1544-1549. The Venetians wanted to limit his duties to that of lay ambassador, but Rome insisted that he have jurisdictional authority over a wide variety of cases involving the clergy in Venice (Santosusso 478). In typical Venetian style, they agreed with the Pope and allowed Casa the power Rome requested, and then set about to immediately limit his effectiveness. The Venetians knew that the actual power of the Papal representative lay with the Venetian authorities. Any decision regarding punishment or extradition of suspected Protestant sympathizers must be accomplished with the use of Venetian force. Unlike the Spanish, the Venetians controlled the Inquisition and other Papal efforts at rooting out Protestants by refusing to enforce the findings of the powerless Papal representatives. The result of this compromise meant that when Venice adapted her
religious policies to her particular interests, she was made to look, at times, to be too liberal regarding Protestantism (Santosusso 484).

It was during this time of strife with Rome that a stiffed-necked civic pride was swelling within the ruling class of Venice that induced them to oppose Papal policy increasingly openly (McNeil 191). Despite Venice’s overall loyalty to the Catholic Church, Pope Paul V brought matters to a head by putting Venice under interdict in 1606 in an attempt to impose his will on the Republic. The peace treaty the Venetians struck with the Turks in 1573 to facilitate their trade in the East was for Rome, unforgivable. In addition to their abandoning the fight against the Turks, the Venetian government was actively attempting to limit the growth of church properties in Venice and was unwilling to submit to Papal visitations and other encroachments on the autonomy of the Venetian church. The Pope had also determined that some Venetian priests had strayed from practicing true Catholicism and wanted them sent to Rome for punishment. The Venetians refused the extradition of their local clergy to Rome because they felt it was an infringement on their sovereignty. In addition, the Pope was very disturbed at certain Venetian rules concerning the building of churches and the disposition of the property of diseased monks and priests. The Pope felt that the Venetian church would continue to move further and further away from Rome and its influence if they were not brought back into line immediately. This quarrel between Rome and Venice reflected a basic divergence of ideals: papal universal monarchy vs. the sovereignty of the secular state (McNeil 192). There can be little doubt that most of the tension between Rome and Venice stemmed from conflicting political as well as religious differences. Rome was being assaulted both theologically and politically and the power of the Papacy was in
peril. Nevertheless, the Venetian people continued to look to the Virgin Mary for help and support in their hour of need.

The Jesuits of Venice were, on the other hand, more than willing to comply with the Papal decree and they were unceremoniously asked to leave Venice as a result, adding insult to injury as far as the Pope was concerned. The Venetians, without question, defied the Pope’s wishes concerning the Jesuits. Nevertheless, they did it with civility and grace maintaining that state interests always came first, even in their approach to religion. The *signoria* was only willing to crush religious dissenters at the behest of the Pope if the policy did not interfere with their political, social or economic interests. Only then would Venice place theology above the needs of the state (Santosusso 482). The Venetians did not intend to follow the path of Protestant reformation, they merely wanted to continue to worship as they governed, in the independent Venetian style. The Venetians were never irreligious during their disputes with Rome, their resistance to Papal intervention merely affirming that they wished to make their own decisions about liturgical and other ecclesiastical issues (Howard 180).

Bartolomeo Moro’s description of the Venetian Republic as stated in December of 1516 before the Great Council reveals the level of pride and independence felt by the people of Venice: “The Greek Republics did not last more than 450 years, the Roman 700, and this one has already lasted more than a thousand.”(Chambers 73). In Venice, we find a commitment to the Virgin, the Liturgy, and the government in perfect harmony and it was a collective faith that gave the Venetian people the strength to carry on in the face of outside pressure to change.
Use of Religious Art

The use of religious art was now even more important for the indoctrination of the faithful. The Council of Trent had greatly influenced religious art when it organized the modern system of seminary training for priests and they had been given the following directive regarding art: “The Holy Council prohibits painting in churches any image inspired by false doctrine that might mislead the simple…to eliminate all lures of impurity and lasciviousness, images must not be decked in shameless beauty” (Mayor 104). This edict would cause the Inquisition to call Palo Veronese to defend his painting of the Last Supper that he had painted for the Dominican monastery of Santi Giovanni e Paolo. The monks had commissioned the work to replace the Last Supper by Titian that had been destroyed in a fire. If the Inquisitors had been anywhere else and had summoned Veronese he would have been in very serious trouble indeed, but not so in Venice. After being questioned by the authorities regarding his inclusion of drunks, German farm hands, and a man with a nosebleed in his painting, Veronese merely changed the title of the work to Supper in the House of Levi (Fig. 2.6). The use of Levi (the wealthy but still unconverted tax collector) in the revised title tells everyone that the power of the Inquisitors was shockingly minor in Venice compared to other states or countries where their interpretation of the scriptures was unquestioned (Kaminski 323).
Some artists were pushing the boundaries of acceptance with their religious patrons, but for the most part artists continued to produce altarpieces and icons adhering to the Councils' edict that art embody a deliberate program that allows the worshiper to meditate without distraction.

During this time, the churches in Venice continued to practice their Venetian version of worship with the Virgin Mary playing an ever-increasing role. There were at this time six churches already dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Venice: S. Maria Maggiore, S. Maria del Giglio, S. Maria Formosa, S. Maria Annunziata, S. Maria dei Miracoli and S. Maria della Celestia. Between 1619 and 1630, there was an explosion of Marian motets at St. Marks, with no fewer than 68 new motets devoted to Marian texts published by the composers of the Basilica. The largest numbers of works were produced after the arrival of vice maestro di cappella Alessandro Grandi. Commemorations of the Virgin were prescribed for all days in Advent that did not
contain feasts of double rank and the Special Gloria with Maria was used for the Feast of the Annunciation to honor the Virgin Mary on April 25, the day of Venice’s founding. The *Marian Te Deum* was sung on all Saturdays during Lent and a special collect asked the Virgin Mary to intercede on behalf of the Venetian Republic under conditions of adversity such as war or plague (Moore 300). The message for the faithful was clear; through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin you can be saved by the grace of God. Most devotional pictures in Venice were now of the Madonna and Child attesting to her status as the protector of the Venetian people. As demand grew for the personal devotional icons production increased exponentially (Matthew 628). Venice was devoted to the Virgin Mary and it would be the Virgin Mary that they would turn to in their greatest hour of need.
CHAPTER THREE

USE OF THE VIRGIN MARY ICON IN VENICE

Chapter 3 will discuss the integration of the Virgin Mary into the religious and secular rituals of Venice culminating in the Salute Church.

Icon of Virgin Mary

Other than St. Mark, the Virgin Mary is the most revered religious symbol in the life of the Venetian people. The Virgin Immaculate type was popular in Venice as an intercessor for numerous maladies, particularly the plague. Lorenzo Giustiniani, the first Patriarch of Venice, was an enthusiastic supporter of the concept of the Immaculate Conception and after 1480, notices of regular celebrations of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception greatly increased in Venice (Ettlinger 63).

The widespread exposure of Venetians to Byzantine art after 1204 stimulated the imagination of Venetian artists and purchasers of icons alike. The Byzantine influence was dispersed widely in the form of panel icons, manuscripts, ivory carvings, and enamels (Hartt 40). Constantinople was the original “New Rome” and the Venetians had been both inspired and motivated by its grandeur. In Byzantium, the Virgin Mary was elevated to the status of a civil cult and her role was understood as protector of Constantinople, serving as the centerpiece of imperial assertion of divine power that would later be adopted by the Venetians (Liz 367). The Venetians had been so enthralled with the Byzantine Empire that in 1222 a proposal was presented in the Council of Ten to move the seat of the Venetian Government to Constantinople (Chambers 18).
The *Madonna Nicopeia* (Our Lady of Victory) was a Byzantine Icon that was carried into battle with the Turks because of its reputation as an icon of protection during war. Tradition says that the painting was actually painted by St. Luke himself and the people of both Constantinople and Venice revered the ancient Byzantine icon. After being brought to Venice the icon was only displayed publically four times a year: during the feasts of the Purification, the Annunciation, the Assumption, and the Nativity of the Virgin. The *Nicopeia* could also be brought out on the order of the Doge in times of war or plague and carried as the singers of St. Marks sang litanies to the Virgin imploring her for mercy (Moore 304).

The elegant sophistication of the Byzantine style and the visual richness of the materials used in the East inspired patronage for art and architecture from the Doge’s Palace and from various Scuole, as opposed to wealthy individuals in Florence and other cities (Adams 271). The use of Byzantine inspired mosaics in San Marco and patrician houses also testifies to the widespread acceptance in Venice of the Eastern style. Venetian civic harmony was responsible for a stable Republic as well as for a level of art patronage that rivaled all other cities in Italy during this period.

Rome’s influence on art in general, and Venice in particular, had been diminished in 1309 when the Papacy moved to Avignon, France. Not until the latter portions of the fifteenth century did the Papacy begin to commission significant works of art and by the sixteenth century, when Rome had once again assumed its place as a significant political and artistic power on the Italian peninsula (Hartt 24).

Before the Council of Trent, an office written by Leonardo Nogarolis for Pope Sixtus granted the special privilege of the Immaculate Conception to the Virgin to justify
her worthiness to bear the Son of God. Printed in 1478-1480 in Venice, the office was the inspiration for the first church bearing the title Immaculate Conception built in Venice. The Venetian tradition of dedicating altarpieces to the Immaculate Conception first made an appearance in 1350 and the art of the Virgin Mary was intended to affirm what the Protestants denied. Art was being used in Venice as a stimulus to the religious experience along the lines later proposed by Saint Ignatius in his *Spiritual Exercises* that had been approved by Pope Paul III in 1548 (Kahr 239).

Following the changes brought about by the Protestant Reformation the church was in a battle for the hearts and minds of the people, therefore the church increasingly chose to utilize the image of Mary, triumphant over Satan, and restored in the paradise that had been lost to humankind through the sin of Eve. This is a type of art that deals with the dominant concerns of counter-reformation spirituality: encouraging faith in the traditional doctrine of Rome. Altarpieces were therefore being designed to help focus the attention of the congregation on the mass being celebrated at the altar and stimulating prayer and further enhancing the cult of the Virgin (Teuffel 192).

The Venetian versions of the Coronation of the Virgin were different from those found in Siena or other Tuscan cities. The figure of Christ is more formal; he holds the crown, which he places on the Virgins head with only one hand while in his other he holds a scepter as seen in Paolo Veneziano’s *Coronation of the Virgin* (Fig. 3.1) found in the Accademia (Fruler 582). Located on the east wall of the high council room in the Palazzo Ducale and painted in 1368 is a fresco by Guariento that shows Christ enthroned beside the Virgin, placing a crown on her head. Its display in the Palazzo Ducale testifies to the total integration of the Virgin Mary into the secular power base of Venice.
The cult of the Virgin Mary continued to expand, particularly in the private sector with the use of personal icons and most of the people in Venice exhibited strong opposition to the Lutheran heresy often expressed publicly in the form of the Coronation of the Virgin (Kahr 236). As the use of devotional icons increased, the demand for their production rose as well, supporting the work of local artists. The Bellini shop was especially productive as Jacopo, Gentile and Giovanni Bellini produced many of the works that defined the high renaissance in Venice (Robertson 35).

Invocations to the Virgin Mary on icons were often inscribed in her halo, as Ave Marie or Salve Maria, which were common pleas for intersession on behalf of plague ravaged individuals. The use of the intersession is placed above the enthroned Virgin’s head, which was believed to enhance the effect of the plea. In Giovanni Bellini’s S. Giobbe Altarpiece found in the Gallerie dell’ Accademia in Venice the artist integrates the inscriptions as part of the illusion of a glittering mosaic in the apse above and behind the enthroned Virgin’s head (Fig. 3.2). Bellini created his own design that evokes the ambiance and symbolism of the ducal chapel that most sacrosanct and politically charged church in Venice (Goffen 60). The visual effect that Bellini created in the painting was that of the ducal chapel of San Marco enhancing the effect as part of a lavish architectural setting fit for a queen (Matthew 618). Bellini created a work of art where the Virgin and her son seem to occupy the apse of a church, his first attempt at this technique and the first in Venice. The inscription Bellini used in the mosaic of the painting is “Ave
Virginei Flos Intermerate Pudoris” “hail undefiled flower of virgin modesty” and is no doubt alluding to the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception, which in the context of a Franciscan church testifies to Mary’s purity and justification for her to bear the Son of God (Giles 87).

In addition to the use by the various religious groups in Venice, the Virgin Mary’s icon was also being incorporated into the civic ritual of the Republic by the secular authorities as a symbol of Venice. The icon became a center point of the pageantry that meshed the Venetian secular and religious experience. Bellini did the combination of Virgin and Child with saints along with the text of Ecclesiasticus 24 with Saint Benedict holding up a book with the opening verses of the text testifying to the Immaculacy of Mary in his altarpiece for the Sacristy of S. Maria dei Frari (Rosland 68). Mary is presented on the monumental throne holding the Christ child on her lap. She is the seat of wisdom for Christ, the new Solomon fit as the god bearer, pure in every way (Ettlinger 62). The transportation of holy beings by the artist into a physical setting allows the worshiper to literally worship in their presence while at the altar.
Use of Pageantry by the Venetian Government

It is during the Renaissance in Venice that political and economic power was concentrated in the Doge and Council of Ten. Venice was the only state during this time
that did not contend with revolution or invasion, allowing the Republic to develop its own unique civic rituals. This internal unity helped foster a strong sense of loyalty to the Venetian state as Pope Pius II bemoans in his diary, “Today the Venetians are the most powerful Republic on both land and sea and seem not unfitted for the larger Empire to which they aspire” (Chambers 25).

The men who controlled the Republic consciously prevented the passage of wealth from secular hands to ecclesiastical ones controlled from Rome, for they saw themselves having a just form of government, focused primarily on the state and mercantile profit (Howard 186). Maintaining secular control over the affairs of the churches allowed the government to become more closely associated with the religious and therefore control all the messages conveyed to the public. One of the most effective techniques in this process of maintaining power included the use of icons.

The use of public symbols and rituals to reinforce a cities power and aspirations was a common practice on the Italian Peninsula, primarily from the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. City-Republics struggled to find effective means of stressing their particular version of political and religious virtues to their populations. The use of symbolism was extremely important for both the teaching of public virtues as well as a demonstration of power to foreigners who could readily see the prowess of a potential foe.

The Piazza San Marco was specifically reconstructed to accommodate the booty from the Fourth Crusade after the middle of the thirteenth century with public displays of power as its focal point. The western façade of San Marco was remodeled in the 1260’s and the piazza itself was repaved in 1266 or 1267 expanding the space for public gatherings when other cities took steps to restrict the gathering of the public out of fear of
uprisings against the state. No such fear existed in the minds of the Venetian authorities, the gathering of the entire population of Venice was exactly what they wanted to employ as the catalyst of public unity, not public discord (Georgopoulou 19). The Palace of the procurators of San Marco was then restored in 1269, giving further physical proof of Venice’s enhanced status on the world stage (Fig. 3.3). The Basilica of San Marco was designed to hold the relics of Saint Mark, supplying divine sanction for the city’s possession of the relics and the exercise of power in his name, as the doge had become a sacred dignitary (Dale 54).

Fig. 3.3. Palace of the Procurators, Venice. Photo by Author
In addition to the physical displays of the Republic’s power, the other key ingredient in the plan to shape public opinion was the elaboration of the myths surrounding the origins of Venice, specifically those regarding the Virgin Mary and the role she played in protecting the Venetian Republic. The allegorical representation of Venice as a virgin and the special role of the Virgin Mary in the Venetian self-image transformed the city into *Venetia Vergine*. Venice, the pure virgin state, uncorrupted by outside political or religious power, a daughter of the Virgin herself and the exact message Venice wanted to convey to the world (Moore 299). The Milanese Canon Casola wrote of Venice in 1494, commenting on the solemnity and discipline of their services as well as to the number of churches in the city saying: “The Venetians were aided by God in their affairs because they are very solicitous about divine worship/” (Mayor 109).

The association with the Mother of God was vital as well for the concepts of war and defense of the Republic, Venice herself represented by Mary as the virginal sacrifice and defender of the people. The message the Venetian authorities wanted clearly understood was one of overall Venetian legitimacy and power. The effective display of the Byzantine spoils in San Marco along with the continued promulgation of historical and religious myths was a powerful public relations campaign that clearly point to a sophisticated plan of public education by Venetian authorities, which eventually made the Venetian Republic the envy of Europe (Muir 21).

Doge Riccolò da Ponte oversaw a number of projects in the early 1580’s, following the plague of 1575, which were designed to enhance the dignity of the procurators and of San Marco, once again showing the world that Venice could not only
recover from the ill effects of the plague but was also a city of religious autonomy. The renovation of the main Piazza and the building of the arsenal and the new Rialto Bridge (Fig. 3.4) were all undertaken with the express intention of demonstrating Venice’s strength and independence both internally and externally (Tafuri 166).

Fig. 3.4. Rialto Bridge, Venice. Photo by Author

During this time of a unified civil and religious message there was ever increasing pressure on the Venetian economy due to the rising cost of wheat. The Venetians found it necessary, for the first time in their history, to expand their holdings on the terra firma in an effort to control the cost of food for the republic. Venetian expansion into the
Italian mainland was justified in their thinking because they were merely taking back what their ancestors had lost by migrating from the mainland (Libby 25).

With the second wave of the plague and the loss of Cyprus in 1573 Venice found itself treading water both politically and economically, making no new moves to expand her power beyond her traditional position. The slow erosion of her economic power was affecting everyone in Venice, and the poor are always the first to feel the most pain in an economic downturn. The richest in Venice would not see a significant decline in their net worth for years to come, but the lower classes were beginning to feel real downward pressure on their ability to feed themselves (Howard 212). Historically the most common reaction to an increase in food prices and an overall decline in spending power is eventually a revolt by the lower classes. There was most probably grumbling around the dinner table of the poorest in Venice but the public maintained its outward loyalty to the Republic. The loyalty and devotion of the Venetian people to the Republic held Venetian society together when other cities would have crumbled into chaos.

The Venetian authorities continued their successful public relations campaign of influence with the planning and execution of public religious pageantry, which in effect was a de facto part of government policy. Beginning soon after the sack of Constantinople, the Doge’s ceremonial participation in mass was expanded in recognition of his new, princely status. The Doge had begun assisting in mass in 1256 and by 1296; the Doge’s name had been incorporated into the canon of the mass itself. In addition, the Procurators, Magistrates, Council of Ten, and the Collegio of the Senate were often called upon to develop public religious programs or made direct policy decisions concerning the public occasions of pageantry and what the content would be (Hopkins
There were weekly processionals from the principal entrance of the Doge’s palace through the center of the rotunda of St. Mark’s and into the sanctuary for the low mass, followed by their exit via the same route (Hopkins 43). These processionals were

Fig. 3.5. La Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice. Photo by Author
designed to show the unity and purpose of the Venetian people and allow all to participate in the functioning of the Republic. Jacopo Tintoretto’s four votive drawings of Doges Andrea Gritti, Francisco Donà, Pietro Loredano, and Nicolò da Ponte before the Virgin is just one example of the Marian-Ducal iconography utilized by the secular authorities in Venice (Moore 303).

The direct financial support and influence in the public religious displays of Venice was a very effective means of focusing the message of power from the Venetian authorities. Huge amounts of public money had already been spent on Palladio’s Church of the Il Redentore after the plague of 1575 and the public coffers would once again open wide to provide the funding for the next church built in an attempt to defy the plague and its Black Death, the Santa Maria della Salute (Howard 181). The public also participated in the support of religion with private associations and monies. A good example of public devotion is the church and Scuola of San Rocco (Fig. 3.5), dedicated to the saint who was believed to heal plague victims. The Scuola was largely financed through the donations of the people who were looking for any means of protection from the plague and other problems.

Venice had survived the ill effects from recent political and economic troubles in large part because the population had not fragmented. The Venetian people considered themselves as one body and that body could weather any storm as a group, but not as individuals. The Venetian government’s use of the church in civic and religious ceremonies helped to keep the fabric of the Venetian Republic from unraveling during one of the most trying of times in the city’s history.
A devotional fervor was growing in Venice, inspired by the Virgin Mary and leading the patricians to believe that they were called by god to defend the serene Republic. The special veneration of the Virgin Mary dates back to the earliest days of Venetian history but it was becoming an even stronger influence on the people during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Moore 303). It was this devotion to the Virgin Mary that would once again be put to the test as the Venetians coped with another outbreak of the Black Death.
Chapter 4 will first discuss the plague and its effect on Venice. Next, the architects who influenced and built the Salute Church are reviewed. A physical description of the Salute Church follows describing both the interior and exterior of the structure.

Plague

The period of the Renaissance in Italy was one of great change and discovery, but also one of great upheaval in the economic, political, social, and religious lives of everyone who lived there. Beginning with the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 and the subsequent decline in Venetian economic power in the Mediterranean, Venetian power had peaked and then began to wane. The Spanish, English and Portuguese led voyages to the new world and the Venetians were forced to the sidelines, more focused on self-preservation than expansion. The French invasion of 1494 and the subsequent sack of Rome in 1527 began to isolate Venice even more and with the ending of the Republican model of government in Florence, Venice found herself alone, looking out onto a mass of chaos from every direction (Avery 23).

Venice was not, however, accustomed to bowing to the pressures that often affected other cities or countries. She would defiantly rely on her maritime trading power and ancient constitution to weather the economic, political and social storms raging around her. The people of Venice were accustomed to their independence, forged through the centuries since the Republic’s birth. Venice was defiant in the face of outside
pressures but there was one problem Venice had never had the luxury of ignoring, the extensive death brought on by the plague.

Fig. 4.1. Clock Tower, Bruges, Belgium. Photo by Author

European cities during the Renaissance were considered large if the population was near 20,000. Venice’s population was estimated at near 160,000, making it a major metropolitan center. In comparison, London during the same period was estimated to have only 50,000 inhabitants, making it one of the largest cities in Northern Europe. The only other city that could rival Venice in size and economic power was Bruges (Fig. 4.1),
on the northern cost of what is now Belgium, often called the Venice of the North (Thorndike 367). Venice was one of the largest cities in Europe, but despite her size she could not sustain her position as a premier maritime Republic with a third of her population dead from the plague.

The plague ran wild through most population centers throughout Europe, often wiping out up to half of the inhabitants in most of the towns and villages unfortunate enough to experience an outbreak. Venice was no exception to the suffering and great loss of life brought on by the plague. Beginning with the outbreak of 1347-1349, continuing with the plagues in 1572-1575, and culminating with the plague of 1629-1631 Venice was consistently faced with the loss of up to half her population to the disease. During the plague years, Venice experienced severe drops in her population, followed by periods of repopulation before the next outbreak occurred.

The shortage of available men after the plague outbreaks affected both the Venetian army and merchant fleets, forcing the Doge and the Council to encourage immigration from the mainland. The Venetian authorities were desperate to fill all available positions on the merchant ships that were the backbone of the Venetian trading economy. Without sailors to operate the ships, the amount of goods traveling from Asia would be reduced and Venetian profits would fall to unacceptable levels. The campaign to encourage immigration was initially not difficult because most immigrants eagerly moved to Venice because they were motivated by fear of the plague in their hometowns on the Italian mainland. Eventually sailors immigrated to Venice from as far away as Greece and Dalmatia in hopes of steady employment and relative safety from the plague (Lane 70).
After surviving the first plague of 1347 and subsequent outbreaks, including the one in 1575 when nearly one quarter of the Venetian population died, Venice was once again enjoying a period of economic and political success (Martin 200). In the spring of 1630 Venice went to war with the Hapsburg Empire over control of Mantua. Eventually the Hapsburg Army prevailed over the Venetians, but the majority of Venetian casualties were not due to the military skill of the Hapsburg soldiers but rather by another more lethal foe. The plague had returned to Italy once again and with the loss of 40,000 men in the region, the Venetian Army was so depleted that it not only lost to the Hapsburg forces but it was never able to reconstruct itself into a viable military force again (Ell 130). In addition to the loss of an effective military, the plague was robbing Venice of the very merchant sailors on which she depended upon so heavily for economic survival. The decline in Venetian sailors combined with the increasing pressure from the French and Hapsburg Empires and the ever constant threat from the Turks in the East meant that Venice’s position as an effective maritime power was coming to a close (Lane 170).

The news that the plague had returned to Northern Italy so alarmed Patriarch Giovanni Tiepolo that he ordered public displays of the most important sacrament in Venice, the *Madonna Nicopeia* housed in the Cathedral of Venice, San Pietro di Castello. Situated on the island of San Pietro di Castello, one of Venice’s earliest occupied areas, the church stood where a Castello or fortress had once stood. Founded in the seventh century it was the cathedral of Venice until 1807 when it was replaced by San Marco (Pullan 112). The Doge displayed the icon in response to the return of the plague over a period of twelve days when ceremonies were held in the six Venetian churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary, savior of the city. At each service, the litany of Loreto
was to be sung and the Marian collect *Defend Quaes Umus* was recited (Moore 317).
The plague challenged the Republic as no other problem of the time could, and the
Venetians could not ignore or fight this problem as they did against other foes. Almost
everyone in Venice, including the clergy, felt that the stress and psychological pain of the
time could hasten the onset of the plague. In 1656 Geronimo Gastaldi, a prelate who had
served as the general commissioner of pesthouses in Rome said, “The imagination merely
frightened by the plague is enough to bring on the disease.” (Barker 661).

The plague that terrified all of Europe manifests itself in two forms. One was the
pulmonary disease that exhibited the symptoms of severe pneumonia and was easily
transmitted from individual to individual. Medical science at the time was actually more
art than science, and while the medical expertise of the day did recognize that quarantine
was required to fight the plague, no one realized that quarantine would only stop the
spread of the pneumatic strain, while at the same time intensifying the bubonic strain.

Second was the bubonic strain, the more dramatic of the two plague strains
producing the well-known swelling or buboes, which eventually turned black and gave
the plague its black name. Unlike its pneumonic cousin the bubonic strain of plague was
not contagious; it spread from patient to patient via fleabites. The fleas, and their hosts
the black rat transported the Black Death from Asia to Europe on ships of trade and war.
After 1631 the black plague eventually died out, possibly because of the widespread
increase in the number of brown rats that deprived the black rat of its food supply (Lane
20).

With aggression from all sides, the fall of Constantinople in 1453 to the Turks, a
decimated military, and maritime trade teetering on the brink of collapses due to lack of
manpower, how could the residents of Venice not view the plague as a sign of divine retribution for the sins of the city from God Almighty? The fear that the collective sins of the Venetian people had brought the wrath of God on the city was exactly what everyone, nonprofessionals and religious leaders alike believed. The Patriarch Giovanni Trevisan was so thoroughly convinced that God was angry with the people of Venice and that he had sent the plague as a physical manifestation of that anger that he decreed:

“All should attend mass, preparing themselves by fasting on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, that they should pray privately in their homes, their shops, or on the streets, and kneel and recite the Lord’s prayer and the Hail Mary three times a day.” (Martin 211)

From Patriarch to shopkeeper everyone in Venice believed that their sins had resulted in a plague that expressed to Venice God’s anger and wrath. If the actions of the city brought on the plague as punishment then it only stands to reason that the collective actions of a city begging for forgiveness could stem the tide of death threatening the very existence of the city and its people.

Venice was desperate for relief from the plague and where betters to turn in times of trouble than to the Virgin Mary, who was so much a part of the Venetian way of life. There were already six churches dedicated to the Virgin Mary in the Republic and the great intercessor was without a doubt the saint the Venetians turned to in time of plague. Publishers in Venice produced prayer sheets that were believed to protect against the plague if recited multiple times a day. Buyers of the sheets were advised to raise an invocation to the Virgin Mary as a means of protection (Martin 212). Altarpieces were commissioned by many of the Scuole in association with the plague and are widely
interpreted as direct expressions of their member’s hopes and fears regarding the Black Death (Humphrey 410).

In response to the widespread fear associated with the plague the Venetian Senate ordered a series of public processions in hopes of achieving forgiveness from the sins of Venice en masse. Public processions from St. Mark’s to various churches in Venice were public statements to the faith and a visible thanks to the Virgin for all she did for the city.

Venice was desperate for an answer to the plague and they turned to a trusted method, the votive church, for relief from the disease that was killing their population. A votive church is one built as the result of a vow, and the cry arose again for a vow from the Venetian people expressing their everlasting thanks and love to the Virgin Mary if she would save them from the plague.
Fig. 4.2. Chiesa del Santissimo Redentore, Venice. Photo by Author
Palladio & Longhenna

Venice has a long history of erecting plague churches beginning with S. Giobbe (1462), and followed by S. Rocco (1485), and S. Sebastiano (1506). Palladio had built the Chiesa del Santissimo Redentore (Church of the Most Holy Redeemer) or simply Il Redentore (Fig. 4.2) following the plague of 1575 and the grand church had a tremendous influence on Longhenna and the ultimate design of the Salute Church, which followed closely after. The Redentore had a revolutionary layout and much of the design of the Salute was taken from Palladio’s tripartite division of the church consisting of a rotunda, a sanctuary to house the Doge and Signoria before the high altar and a retro choir to house the conventuals in a space separated from the lay congregation (Hopkins 1997, 294).

Palladio began his life’s work in Padua, moved to Vicenza and eventually ascended to the preeminent position for an architect of his time, chief architect of the Venetian Republic. During his amazing life, he left standing some of the most memorable and copied structures in western architecture. Despite coming from a humble background, Palladio was eventually exposed to the beauty of the ancient world expressed through the arts, science, music, and even the military. His study of the ancient world, combined with his keen intellect helped forge a worldview that was the basis of all his future endeavors.

Palladio’s initial attempt to move his architectural practice from Vicenza to Venice was met with resistance from the Venetian authorities. After losing the competition for the office of proto al Sal in 1554 and later for the Golden Staircase project in the Doge’s Palace, Palladio began to find work in the ecclesiastical arena,
thanks to the backing of his friend Daniele Barbaro (Forssman 24). In the early 1560’s, Palladio received several important commissions from religious orders in Venice. His renovation of the Convento della Carità would soon lead to his first great commission (Howard 190).

The first church that Palladio did not re-design or add a new façade on to an existing structure was the San Giorgio Maggiore begun in 1565 (Fig. 4.3). Built on the island of the same name the church has a campanile or bell tower that echoes the one in San Marco just across the bacino. As always there was a heated discussion regarding the design of the church focusing on whether the structure should be round, emulating ancient pagan temples or in the conventional cross shape, more suited for the Christian liturgy. The new church would be facing San Marco giving it a physical prominence that made the decision regarding the design a difficult one for the Benedictine Monks for whom he worked. His design completely deviated from the largest existing Benedictine Abbey in the area Santa Giustina in Padua that took many of its characteristics from San Marco. Palladio omitted domes from his nave, transepts, and chancel. He also replaced the triple apses of the choir and transepts of the Paduan church by single apses (Howard 198). Palladio used Istrian stone that allows the church to reflect the light and appear from the distance to be floating on the water. Palladio said in Book IV, Chapter II of Architecture “Of all the colors none is more suitable for temples than white, because purity of color and life would be supremely pleasing to God.”

Palladio’s last church Il Redentore was commissioned by the Venetian Republic as an official offering to Christ for relief from the epidemic of bubonic plague which had taken thirty percent of the Venetian population beginning in 1575. The Capuchins on the
Giudecca and the Jesuits at San Vidal contended for the privilege to administer the new votive church, with both factions having support in the Venetian Senate. Palladio’s friend and long-time supporter Senator Marcantonio Barbaro pushed enthusiastically for a temple in the “round form” and records of the meeting describe him as having “again tried forcefully to persuade the Senate that this temple should be constructed in the round form, since buildings erected by the excellent Senate must be magnificent and add luster
to the dignity of the Republic” (Sinding-Larsen 419). Palladio had lauded the circular type of temple in Architecture “But circular ones are the most beautiful.” (IV.2). The votive temple was build on the island of Giudecca and the Doge promised to visit the Redentore every year on the third Sunday in July to commemorate the mercy of Christ’s ending of the plague. The use of Christ the Redeemer was a departure from the majority of plague invocations used in Venice at the time. Traditionally the Republic would turn to the Virgin Mary for intercession, especially during times of plague. The Redentore was a momentary departure from the tradition of invoking the Virgin in hopes of ending plagues as they did in 1629 when the Senate commissioned Longhena to build the Santa Maria della Salute. When Palladio died in 1580, the actual façade of S. Giorgio Maggiore was forty years from completion. It was not uncommon in Italy at that time, like today, for building projects to start and stop according to finances and disagreements regarding style. Many churches all across Italy stood with an unfinished façade just as the Maggiore did for many years until the money or consensus could be achieved (Guerra 276). The contrast of Il Redentore with the Byzantine labyrinth of activity on San Marco highlighted Palladio’s masterpiece and showed his genius in full form. Palladio achieved majestic effects using expressive materials, which conveyed a chromatic richness without the use of elaborate decorations that would have obscured the unity and coherence of his creation rising up from the water in glowing splendor. It was the Il Redentore and other Palladio designed churches that would inspire architects such as Longhena to continue the Venetian tradition of erecting great buildings to honor the saints.

In response to the plague that was once again threatening to kill the majority of the Republic’s population the Venetian Senate on October 22, 1630 commissioned a new
church to be named Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute (Basilica of Saint Mary of Health), better known as the Santa Maria della Salute or simply the Salute, praying the Virgin would save the city from the plague that was threatening to overtake them. The Senate held a competition for the commission to build the church with Venetian born architect Baldassare Longhena eventually being chosen by a vote of 66 to 39, just as the Senate had commissioned Andrea Palladio to build the Church of the Redentore at the end of the plague in 1575.

Longhena proposed a church with a rotunda, an octagonal central space that would be surrounded by a large drum and dome (Fig. 4.4) that was surrounded by an outer ambulatory (Hopkins 1994, 499). Longhenna had previously built the cathedral at Chioggia in 1624 and this work led Venetian patrician Nicolò Picolo to nominate him for
the Salute contract. Longhena had proven with his work at Chioggia that he had developed a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between the form of an important religious building and its overall significance in the urban landscape of a city attempting to integrate architectural form with religious function (Hopkins 205).

The prominent Venetian architect Tommaso Temanza (1705-81) described Longhenna and his work habits as that of a man who was self-confident and willing to take suggestions or criticisms, when he wrote:

Baldassare was a man of small stature, dressed always in black, and who upheld the profession of architecture with much decorum. He had a very sweet nature and was of a civil disposition. He had in his confidence some workers of much experience, with whom he would consult about his works. Also he was disposed to listen to everyone, on the contrary when going to visit his own buildings, calling to him the foreman, and many times also the most inexpert day laborers, and with them he discussed how the work was coming along; then collecting the opinions of all of them, and with these insights determining that which he thought was the best (Ivanhoff 36).

The Salute stands watch over the entrance of the bacino, and its design and position were highly desirable for a state always eager to make a grand impression on its citizens as well as visitors. Just as the Venetians had learned earlier in their history that narrative paintings about their heroic moments could have a positive public function, they saw the same possibilities for positive public reactions to their great buildings. Grand both from afar and up-close, the exterior of the Salute, with its two unequal domes and picturesque bell towers strike an imposing pose as one approaches the Venetian harbor from the sea. The steps rising from the canal are waiting for the barges that annually link it with the other side and the parade of dignitaries from Saint Mark’s Square. Longhena eventually changed his original design for the Salute from three front doors to one large door, very similar to the S. Giorgio Maggiore in fact, to accommodate the Doge
and his entourage on feast days (Fig 4.5). The presbytery and choir were also both eventually enlarged based upon the example of the Redentore showing that Longhena was looking to Palladio for inspiration throughout the process of designing and building the Salute. The redesigned sanctuary without altars was large enough to accommodate the Doge and Signoria who would march through on every November 21, during the *Ducal Andata*, the Feast of the Presentation of the Virgin. The re-designed ambulatory of the rotunda was a brilliant invention by Longhena that perfectly accommodated all the participants on feast day. Longhena put the design in perspective when he said: “Between the large nave of the church and the chapels, there will be space for being able to go around and around with the processions of the main feast days without the impediment of the people that one finds in the middle of the church.” (Hopkins 2000, 43).

Fig. 4.5. Santa Maria della Salute, Venice. Photo by Author
Santa Maria della Salute

The Venetians responded to the plague of 1629 quickly, with the Senate deciding to erect as *ex voto* a church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The proclamation of the vow was made in San Marco with the doge and *Nikopoia* on prominent display. The senate chose to dedicate the church to the Virgin Mary to focus on the Venetian devotion to the Madonna in a great monument to be built by the Republic. The Virgin Mary was chosen instead of plague saints such as S. Sebastian or S. Roch because they had no direct bond to the Venetian state (Hopkins 2000, 5). It was to be called Santa Maria della Salute, Salute having the double meaning of health and salvation, and construction was begun in October of 1630. Commissioned and financed by the Senate, the church would carry a huge cost but the expense was justified by its important political message of hope for the Venetian people (Howard 214). From the onset, the church was directly linked to the ceremonial activities of the Venetian Government. The Senate voted to process annually to the church in a public showing of their everlasting devotion and thanks to the Virgin for her protection of Venice. The Venetians feared the wrath of god just as the Greeks did when they erected the Doric temple at Bassae and sought to identify their sins and beg for forgiveness and salvation. In Venice the primary suspected causes for god’s wrath included excessive luxury, Protestant sympathies, and continued contact with the heathen Turks (Howard 311).

In January of 1631 demolition of the older buildings on the chosen site was begun and the foundation stone was scheduled to be placed on the most significant day in Venetian life, March 25. However, due to the illness of the Doge the ceremony was held a week later. The Senate set out specific requirements for the church which Longhena
was obliged to follow: one, from the entrance of the church it should be possible to embrace unobstructed the whole space of the building and two, that the high altar should dominate the view from the entrance, while the other altars should come into view as one proceeds in the direction of the high altar.

Significantly, no religious order was initially assigned to oversee the Salute, allowing the senate to design a church to their specifications without outside interference (Hopkins 2000, 7). Later, the civic authorities placed the Salute in the care of the Padri Samaschi, the only religious order originally from Venice, ignoring the Jesuits and giving the Pope further proof that while Venice was Catholic, it was independent from Roman control (Howard 82). In addition to working within the budget he received, the senate implored Longhena to provide ample light in the church to allow for the full enjoyment of all during Mass (Wittkower 4). The Senate wanted the church to accommodate and accentuate the Ducal procession for which it was constructed; thus the Santa Maria della Salute was conceived as primarily a votive temple, like the Il Redentore before, rather than a monastic church. Longhena seemed to have derived the idea of using a continuous ambulatory around the nave (Fig. 4.6) directly from Palladio and other radical Christian church models, such as S. San Vitale in Ravenna and Santa Costanze in Rome (Howard 218). The Venetian tradition of civic parades would be an integral part of the Salute’s design that allowed the splendor of the Republic to be put on public display with all the colors of the costumes of both the Senators and Ecclesiastics alike, lighting the way across the bridges to the Salute for mass (Plumb 112). The Salute was to be a symbol of the health and well being of Venice, under the Virgin’s eternal protection and functioning visually as an anchor for the Venetian skyline.
Longhena was working within a severely confined space on the tip of the island between the Canale della Giudecca and the Grand Canal at the point where the two merge into the broad Canale di S. Marco, and needed to maximize the space he was provided for his church. The position of the Salute across the water from Saint Mark’s was the Venetian equivalent of the traditional hilltop site of plague and votive churches outside the defined limits of the town (Hopkins 1997, 155).

While Rome was considered the center of Baroque architecture, the Salute was the most notable Baroque church in Venice placing the Venetian brand of Catholicism on proud display for the entire world to see (Edgell 413). The Salute was designed to compete directly with the court of Pope Urban VIII in Baroque elegance and style.
After the sack of Rome and the Reformation the issue of church design became a more open topic for architects as they attempted to design churches that were both religiously acceptable and accommodating to the ceremony and processions so popular in the Republic. Working with the traditional cross design in mind a separate space for chapels was designed flanking the nave along with an independent chamber containing the main altar and a retrochoir behind the main altar. The great dome of the

Fig. 4.7. S. Maria della Salute, Interior, Venice. Photo by Author
Salute represents her crown as Queen of Heaven, the cavernous interior her womb, and the use of eight side chapels represented the eight points of her symbolic star (Murray 132). Longhena represented Mary’s responsibility for the city’s foundation as well as her protection in the layout and design of the church and he went beyond symbolic gestures regarding the Virgin when he inscribed in the center of the floor of the nave the following inscription: *Unde Origo Inde Salus*, (Fig. 4.7) from the origins came the salvation (Wittkower 4).

No churches embodying this theatricality were built in cinquecento Venice before Palladio’s S. Giorgio Maggiore and Il Redentore and Longhena followed his example as he designed the Salute, the ultimate in theatricality (Rowe 190).

Fig. 4.8. Santa Maria della Salute, Venice. Photo by Author
Fig. 4.9. Santa Maria Della Salute, Venice. Photo by Author
A centralized church with an ambulatory is rather rare in Renaissance architecture, but a centralized church looks larger than it actually is and Longhenna needed to employ all his talent and skill as an architect to make the Salute a success. Longhena used the centralized theme not only to meet the physical limitations of the building space itself, but he also used the opportunity to emphasize a sublime mystery he explained as thus: “The mystery contained in the dedication of this church to the Blessed Virgin made me think, with what little talent God has bestowed on me, of building the church in *Forma Rotunda*, in the shape of a crown” Mary the Queen of Heaven, savior of Venice who wore the crown of stars in Revelation 12: “A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars” The apostles were widely depicted at this time as the Virgin’s companions and are symbolized in the twelve stars of her crown. In the Salute, they appear as large figures under the central dome, below the area where the octagon is transformed into the rotunda (Wittkower 6). The rotunda is an octagonal central space surrounded by a large drum and dome as well as an ambulatory (Hopkins 1998, 45). The miraculous origins of Santa Maria della Salute is further symbolized by the carved stone cherubs on the waterfront, apparently supporting the platform on which the church stands as if it had been placed there by angels. Longhena used white Istrian stone on the outside and the sunlight reflects off the surface in a rainbow of colors.

Longhena used Istrian stone on the capitals and projecting cornices above that contrast with the limestone stucco he used on the walls to help adhere to the Senators demand for a well-lit church. The half- columns, pilasters and remaining cornices were simple in design and colors giving the space a warm but aesthetic feel. There is an
abundance of art found in the Salute, some relevant to the Virgin and her protection from the plague and some with less relevance. The use of a variety of Venetian artists reflects the three strands that run through Venetian life: the city’s vigor, its wealth and delight in the visually sensuous (Plumb 2001, 113). Approaching the altar there are three chapels with scenes of the life of the virgin by Luca Giordano: *Presentation of our Lady in the Temple, Assumption of our Lady and Nativity of our Lady*. To the left of the entrance over the third altar is *Descent of the Holy Ghost* by Titian who provided the most of any artist represented in the Salute. In the chief sacristy over the altar on can find Titian’s *Saint Mark Enthroned with Saints Cosmas, Damian, Sebastian and Roch*, the altarpiece of the sacristy, ceiling paintings including *David and Goliath, Abraham and Isaac, Cain and Abel*, eight tondi of the Doctors of the Church and Evangelists found in the great sacristy, and *Pentecost* in the nave (Basilica16).

Fig. 4.10. Josse de Corte, High Altar, S. Maria della Salute, Venice. Photo by Author
The Baroque high altar is a marble group representing the Virgin banishing the demons of the plague from Venice, by Flemish sculptor Josse de Corte (Fig. 4.10). De Court’s group of statues over the high altar provide protection from the plague and the Virgin is flanked on one side by a personification of Venice, kneeling in adoration and on the other side by a hideous old hag rushing away into the night representing the plague (Howard 215). In the chief sacristy over the altar is the aforementioned *Mark Enthroned with the Saints* that represents Venice being preserved from the plague of 1510 by the patron of the Republic. The monolithic columns of the presbytery are from a Roman temple at Pola in Istria. Behind the altar, Tintoretto’s *Marriage at Cana* interestingly includes a self-portrait of the famous artist.

The Salute embodies the sacred while it legitimizes and consecrates the deepest Venetian values of self and Republic. This pride in Venice is recognized in the structure of the Salute along with the annual rituals that forge a mental picture for her people as a city of divine origin (Tafuri 17). The Salute is a result of careful planning and execution by Longhenna that allowed him to fulfill the complex building assignment from the senate. The Salute embodies Longhena’s thinking in terms of existing votive churches and his understanding of urban context, processional usage and effect of architecture on a grand scale (Hopkins 1994, 212). Despite the limitations of space on the selected location, the Salute has become just what the senate envisioned, a monument to the Madonna and a Venetian landmark (Fig 4.11).

Santa Maria della Salute sits at the tip of an island looking out onto a world of sickness and strife and says in a most dramatic fashion that Venice will not bow to the
pressures of the plague. The perfection of the Immaculate Virgin conceived free of sin and triumphant over evil founded the Republic and will continue to protect it through the ravages of the plague.

Fig. 4.11. Santa Maria della Salute, Venice. Photo by Author
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

The icon of the Virgin Mary has played a pivotal role in the history of Venice from the beginning of the Republic. As the Virgin Mary gained prominence within the wider Christian faith, she also became an integral part of both the religious and secular life of Venice. She came to represent Venice as an ideal, the city that was pure, free from outside contamination. As the intercessor between man and God, she played a pivotal role in the everyday lives of the Venetian people as they coped with the large and small problems of everyday life. Her absorption of goddess traits made her even more important for those pagans and later Christians looking for a female deity in the male-centered Christian world. The importance of the Virgin Mary in Venice is manifest in the numerous churches devoted to her, culminating with the Santa Maria della Salute.

In this paper, I have attempted to show the historical influences exerted on the Venetian Republic that resulted in the building of the Salute Church. I began with the importance of icons in the Christian faith and moved to the specific veneration of the Virgin Mary. Next, I discussed the influences from the Roman West and Byzantine East that I felt shaped the Venetian independent self-image as well as the Venetian devotion to the Virgin Mary. I then examined the integration of the Virgin Mary into the religious and secular life of Venice and how that influenced the design and building of the Salute Church. I concluded with a look at the plague and how it affected the Venetian people. The architects Palladio and Longhenna were then discussed and I culminated with a physical description of the Salute Church.
The idea of Venice survived for well over a thousand years and continues today as you enter the Venetian lagoon and make your way to San Marco. The city rising out of the lagoon in an almost mythical defiance of nature. Many significant structures continue to make a lasting impression on anyone visiting Venice, up to modern times. The Republic has long since ceased to exist but the idea lives on in the city that defies both man and nature. Most significant of the landmarks in Venice is the Santa Maria della Salute, rising up from the water and testifying to the Venetians never-ending love of the Republic and the Virgin Mary. The myth of Venice, embodied in the Salute, lives on today as the ultimate symbol of Venetian defiance as she sits gleaming in the magical light reflected from the water of the canal, giving testament to Venice’s belief that she continues to exist as the *Venetia Vergine.*
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VITA

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