History | *Book Review*

‘The eldest child of Liberty’

The rise and reinvention of a maritime superpower

By Larry Wolff

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“The Piazza of Saint Mark’s, Venice” by William Logsdail, 1883 | © Heritage Images/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

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VENICE

The remarkable history of the lagoon city
800pp. Oxford University Press. £31.99 (US $41.95).

Dennis Romano

A VIEW OF VENICE

Portrait of a Renaissance city
456pp. Duke University Press. Paperback, $31.95.

Kristin Love Huffman, editor

SHYLOCK'S VENICE

The remarkable history of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto
256pp. Bloomsbury. £20.

Harry Freedman

One Venetian quarter that could not have been recorded in “Venetie MD” was the Jewish Ghetto, created in 1516. It was the world’s first “ghetto” - possibly named as the site of copper casting (*gettare*, to cast) - and, though ghettos are usually understood negatively as segregated quarters for second-class citizens, the Venice Ghetto was also created as a way to invite Jews (previously allowed only as short-term business visitors) to come to Venice as permanent residents. They came as pawnshop owners, moneylenders, bankers and traders, working in the city by day, but locked behind the Ghetto gates at night. Harry Freedman’s S*hylock’s Venice: The remarkable history of Venice’s Jews and the Ghetto* does an admirable job of compiling an anecdotal account of the cultural achievements of Jews who lived and worked there.

Because Venice was arguably the leading centre for print and publishing in Europe, the establishment of the Jewish community in 1516 made the city almost immediately a European centre for the publication of Hebrew books. In the decade following the creation of the Ghetto the publishing house of Daniel Bomberg in Venice published both the Hebrew Bible and the Babylonian Hebrew Talmud, the latter for the first time complete in print. The Venetian publication of the Talmud became increasingly controversial until that work was ultimately subjected to public burning by the Roman Inquisition. There was Europe-wide interest in Venice’s Hebrew publishing, and Henry VIII had a copy of the Venetian Talmud sent to England in the hope that rabbinical rulings might provide arguments for his divorce from Catherine of Aragon, while Rabbi Moses Isserles of Kraków eventually had to rule on which of two Venetian publishing houses had the proper rights to print the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides.

The Venetian Jewish community was structured in ways that corresponded to the dynamics of the Venetian Republic itself: with large and small governing councils and formal balloting, with intellectual academies and charitable confraternities, with Purim plays instead of Carnival theatre. Freedman provides a clear account of the cultural world of the Venice Ghetto and suggests that Shakespeare could have had some awareness of this world when he wrote *The Merchant of Venice* in the 1590s. The Ghetto ceased to exist in 1797, at the same time that the Venetian Republic was abolished, when Napoleon opened up the gates and lifted civic restrictions on Jews.

“Thou know’st that all my fortunes are at sea”, admits Antonio to Bassanio in the opening scene of *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare certainly understood the nature of the wealth of the Venetian patriciate. Shylock, considering Antonio, shows himself well informed: “He hath an argosy bound to Tripolis, another to the Indies”. The whole drama turns on the uncertainty of the ships’ return and of the wealth they represent. In “Venetie MD” the uninhabited Venetian cityscape is crowded with boats, from little gondolas to sturdy sailing vessels, perhaps about to set out for the Indies, perhaps just safely returned. Dennis Romano, who gives due attention to the print, also explains that in Venice the merchant fleet was built and owned by the Republic itself, and leased by auction to patricians, who could then invest in predetermined routes of trade.

Romano is fascinating on the emergence of a more “Roman” Venice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Byzantine Venice was partly classicized with the building of the island church San Giorgio Maggiore by Andrea Palladio and of the Biblioteca Marciana by Jacopo Sansovino on the Piazzetta, facing the Doge’s Palace. This Romanization could have been even more extreme if Palladio’s plans for the redesign of the Doge’s Palace and the Rialto had been adopted. The author notes that Roman cultural influence in Venice went hand in hand with fierce resistance to the presumptions of authority by the popes

and the Roman Inquisition, and that Venice twice resisted the papal interdict, that is, the excommunication of the entire city, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Its defiance of the papal interdict testified to the solidarity and self-confidence of Venetian republicanism, and Romano rightly eschews the narrative of "decline" that many historians have found convenient. Yet he perhaps shortchanges the eighteenth century, the final century of Venice's independent history, by summing up too quickly the richly varied elements of Venetian Enlightenment thought and Rococo culture under the rubric of "failure to reform". While the Republic did fall to Napoleon in 1797, it's hard to imagine a counterfactual path forward for Venice to survive into the nineteenth century as a small independent republic on the model of Alpine Switzerland.

Instead the modern history of Venice was bound up with the Habsburg monarchy for much of the nineteenth century, then with Italy since 1866. For the Habsburgs there was rivalry, friction and warfare with Venice, along the Adriatic and on the Friulian border, dating back at least as far as the sixteenth century. Yet there was intimacy too, for it was Titian who painted the most famous portraits of the Habsburg emperor Charles V, on horseback in armour and seated in black, the most powerful man in the world. The Venetian poet Lorenzo Da Ponte came to Vienna in the 1780s to reinvent modern opera as Mozart's brilliant librettist, before moving on to London and New York, where he continued to embody the traditions of Venetian culture even after the demise of Venice.

It was under Habsburg rule in 1846 that Venice experienced another historic turning point: the construction of the railway bridge across the lagoon, unimaginable on de' Barbari's "Venetie MD". That connection would eventually help to make Venice a part of united Italy after the upending of Habsburg rule. Romano pursues the history of Italian Venice partly through the figures of Filippo Grimani, the descendant of doges, who served as mayor from 1895 to 1919, and Giuseppe Volpi, a powerful entrepreneur who was sometimes called the "last doge". Grimani helped to develop the international art exhibition, the now-famous Venice Biennale, which offered its first instalment in 1895, while Volpi renewed the city's historic commercial relations with Turkey and invested heavily in electricity. Together they established Venice's modern industrial port on the mainland at Marghera, and Volpi would continue to pursue the economic development of Venice as a prominent figure in the fascist regime during the 1920s and 1930s. He welcomed Hitler and Mussolini to the Biennale of 1934. Freedman notes in the epilogue to *Shylock's Venice* that the chief rabbi of Venice, Adolfo Ottolenghi, was deported and murdered at Auschwitz in 1943.

Venice attracted tourists at least as far back as the Grand Tour of the eighteenth century, but the building of Marco Polo airport in 1961 brought it definitively into the era of modern global tourism. On the one hand Venice was truly an international and cosmopolitan city, as expressed in the Biennale every other year. When Igor Stravinsky wrote an opera to a libretto by W. H. Auden based on William Hogarth's paintings, *The Rake's Progress*, the premiere in 1951 was at La Fenice in Venice. On the other hand tourism involved a commitment to Venice's most traditional self-imagery, the city of the gondola, the Carnival, the café musicians of Piazza San Marco. Venetian glass craftsmanship on Murano went through one last brilliant development, as Romano notes, with artists like Archimede Seguso, who began his career under fascism in the 1930s, but continued to produce glass masterpieces that brilliantly refracted the postwar Venetian light of the 1950s: weighty sculptured ashtrays with rippling patterns of colour that are now collected all over the world by people who have never smoked a cigarette.