



Venezia!

Roleplaying in Renaissance Venice

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Introduction

Arguably, the two great cities of the Italian Renaissance were Florence and Venice. Both were wealthy, politically important, and centers of art and learning. However, while Florence looked to western Europe for its allies and made its money as a center of banking, *La Serenissima*, the Most Serene Commune of Venezia, looked to the east and was the crossroads of world trade, playing a tremendous role in transmitting the Italian Renaissance to the rest of Europe. It was a city of luxury, Abandon, and a powerful, remarkably stable government. And, of course, it can be a great setting for historical and fantasy role-playing.

Geography and Land Use

Venice sits at the northwestern corner of the Adriatic sea where the northern Italian coast begins to curve eastward towards the Balkan peninsula. The city sits in a long, narrow lagoon with the mainland and the Brenta river delta to the north and west and sandbars and a few small islands to the south and east. The eastern side of the lagoon is defined by a long, fairly straight series of sandbars called the Lido. While the city itself appears to be a single island cut by canals, it is actually a collection

of closely set islands, joined by bridges, construction, and silt deposits from the Brenta. The lagoon is mostly deep enough for all but the largest ships of the age to sail on, but near the shore on the landward side of the lagoon, mud flats and salt pans are exposed by low tides.

At its height, Venice had a population of nearly 200,000 (coincidentally, the modern city held about that many people as recently as the 1960's). However, its population was closer to 100,000 to 120,000 during most of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, dipping to less than half that after bouts of plague.

If other Renaissance cities were crowded, Venice was packed to the gills. It was, at times, the most populous city in Italy, and was physically not significantly larger than any other. The city grew slightly as more land was filled in, but not nearly as fast as its population. Except for piazzas, small private courtyards, and the Arsenal, the city is almost entirely built up.

History

Venice only gradually became a city. The islands in and around the lagoon at the mouth of the Brenta river were lightly populated at least as far back as the Roman empire. Legend has it that the population grew as refugees fleeing Attila the Hun settled there. The region saw another influx of refugees when the Frankish king Pipin invaded northern Italy in the ninth century. It was around this time the people of the region decided they needed a common government, and so the first

Doge was installed at Rivoalto (soon called Rialto), the island that became the core of Venice.

In the years that followed, Venice became the dominant naval power of the Adriatic and spread its influence into the eastern Mediterranean. While colonies were established through the Mediterranean, Venice didn't follow a policy of inland territorial expansion until it was already an established power. Instead of fighting wars for territory, Venice fought for trade concessions: rights of passage through other nations' waters, exclusive rights to trade in certain goods, and exemptions from local taxes.

From its earliest years, Venice enjoyed a close relationship with the Byzantine empire. That partnership helped keep Venice free of the foreign domination of the rest of Italy that was prevalent during the Middle Ages. Initially, Venice was a sort of Byzantine protectorate and agent in the west, in exchange for which the Venitians got special privileges trading in Byzantine ports. As Venice became more powerful and the Byzantine empire less so, the relationship changed considerably. It even turned predatory briefly during the Fourth Crusade in 1204 when Venice drew French Crusaders into a Byzantine dynastic struggle which resulted in Westerners deposing the native emperors for over fifty years.

Venice emerged into the Renaissance after a costly and inconclusive series of wars with Genoa, its chief trading rival. Although its population and coffers were depleted in the wake of war and plague, the city was able to take advantage of its own relative stability in the midst of the chaotic fifteenth century and rebuild its colonies and trade routes as far away as the coasts of the Black Sea. The Venetian policy abroad was to govern only coastal areas rather than inland territory, which could not be supported by her naval power. In fairly short order, Venice came to control most of the eastern Adriatic coast as far south as Greece, as well as Mediterranean territories including Crete and Cyprus.

There was also a concerted move to increase its territorial holdings in northern Italy. Venice realized that trade concessions and control of ports were all well and good, but she needed a larger tax base, an agricultural base under its own control, and more manpower. Venice already controlled the region around its lagoon, but eventually established control over most territory north of the Po river nearly as far west as Milan. This conquest was accomplished by mercenary troops supported by Venetian fleets sailing up the Po and, at times, hauled overland.

Venice's expansion was accomplished by a combination of warfare and diplomacy. In Europe, Venice participated in the shifting alliances and enmities that kept an uneasy balance between the five major powers of Italy (Venice, Milan, Florence, the Papal States, and Naples), a balance influenced by the politics of the rest of the Continent, in which the Italian cities were sometimes used as pawns, and the growing struggle between the Catholic church and the Protestant Reformation. As the most powerful city in Italy, Venice often found itself on the wrong end of most alliances, but it was the only city in Italy never to be taken by a foreign power. In the east, Venice was the western power to bear the brunt of Turkish expansion. Venitians could suddenly find themselves at war with the Turks as they attempted to secure another coastal city, then at peace just as quickly as diplomats negotiated a treaty. Venice was engaged in elaborate diplomacy here as well, negotiating with both the Turks and potential allies farther east, such as the Persians.

Through the sixteenth century, Venice nosed into a slow decline. Growing trade through the Atlantic and increasing problems with the Ottoman empire made Venice's own trade routes less profitable, and the city itself was hard-pressed to compete against increasingly powerful nation-states, particularly Spain. Still, Venice retained its independence and cherished institutions until the end of the eighteenth century. For a thousand years, Venice had been free and self-governing, an achievement no other city in Italy could match.

Government and Politics

By the Renaissance, Venice's government consists of four tiers. The lowest is the Grand Council, a body of several hundred hereditary aristocrats encompassing the majority of Venice's wealthiest merchants. However, not all rich men are on the Council, nor are all Councilors rich, and except for the right to participate in government, the legal distinction between nobles and commoners is slight. The Council rarely convenes as a whole, but it provides members for the second tier, the Senate, a group of sixty men elected for one-year terms. The Senate primarily regulates trade and foreign affairs (in Venice, the two are synonymous). The Grand Council also provides members of the third tier, the Ducal Council, an even more powerful body of six men, who advise the Doge and call on the lesser bodies to form committees and take actions. Finally, the government is headed by the Doge. Formerly a hereditary dukedom, the Doge is elected by the Grand Council for life, although most Doges are elderly, so effective terms of office aren't as long as the life term might suggest. The Doge is responsible for making final decisions, setting policy, and appointing a number of civic officials.

Most of the government's day to day work, though, is performed by officers drawn from the Grand Council. The Council provides members for an endless stream of bureaucratic posts and ad-hoc assemblies: nominating committees, commissioners of police, war councils, tax collectors, investigating bodies, administrators of the Arsenal and other public facilities, and so on. Terms of service run from two months to a year, with individuals usually cycling through a number of positions.

One of the more ominous permanent committees is the Council of Ten. It was originally charged with overseeing exiles: making sure exiles stayed out of Venice, keeping an eye on their activities, and offering a bounty for exiles who appeared likely to take action against their home city. By the Renaissance, it has become a sort of secret police, prepared to take quick action against any threat of insurrection or improper political influence. The Council of Ten, which operates in secret, became increasingly powerful through the Renaissance and once even deposed a Doge.

Like many other early republics, Venice's elections consist of a mix of voting and randomness. For example, to elect a member of a civic office, a number of members of the Grand Council might be chosen by lot. Those councilors would agree on a group of twenty or thirty other councilors, who would be reduced by lot to something like half the original number. They in turn would choose members of a nominating committee, who would in turn be reduced by lot to a smaller body. Finally, their candidate would be presented to the Doge or the ducal council for approval.

As in other early republics, the elaborate procedures are meant to reduce tension between powerful families and other entrenched factions, and they seem to work better in Venice than in other cities. The men selecting nominating committees and potential officials take pains to make sure that all major factions are represented, and laws prohibit family members and business partners from working too closely in government or holding consecutive terms. In part, this can be attributed to Venice's tradition of loyalty to the city, something not so pronounced in other cities of the era.

It may also be attributed to the fact that the government of Venice is, far more than other cities, a money-making organization. The Venetian government takes great pains to funnel trade in the Adriatic and, to a lesser extent, the Mediterranean, through Venice itself and to safeguard its merchants. The government organizes shipping convoys, serves as a registry for mercantile contracts, provides investment opportunities, regulates port facilities, and even operates its own shipyard, the Arsenal. At its best, the government operates as a sort of cooperative mercantile venture and advocate for Venetian merchants abroad, devoted to making money for Venetians at the expense of other countries. Perhaps the universal desire for profit makes the Venetian government a bit more effective and less prone to uprisings than others of its era.



Economics and Industry

By the Renaissance, Venice's adventurous merchants, who traveled to far lands themselves to trade the goods of Europe for the treasures of the east, have largely been replaced by networks of merchant houses and local agents. The great merchant families maintain agents, usually members of the family, in foreign cities. Those agents keep up with local markets, make contracts, and trade goods shipped from Venice for locally available goods. A merchant family or partnership provides funding, and the local agent receives a share of the profits for goods that pass through his hands (five to ten percent is common). However, more adventurous merchants and independent traders might still travel to distant lands themselves to try to open new markets.

The main business of Venice is buying and selling. Vast shipments of all kinds of goods pass through the city's warehouses, from silk, medicines, and gemstones to wool and grain. In addition to vast amounts of distant foreign trade, Venice's iron grip on the northern and central Adriatic allows it to require merchants in the area to ship their goods through the city, where taxes are collected on every wholesale transaction. Opportunities to speculate in all kinds of goods abound, although the risks are considerable.

In addition to mercantile activity, Venice supports several thriving trades. Venice's ships, built both privately and in the Arsenal, are among the best of the era. In fact, in order to preserve its advantage, Venitians are prohibited from selling their ships to foreigners unless they are old and dilapidated. In addition to shipwrights and related trades (carpentry, cooperage, rope-making, sail-making, etc.), the city also hosts textile workers, metalworkers, makers of soap and salt, and a considerable glass-blowing industry which survives to the present day. To reduce pollution and the risk of fire, glassblowing is restricted to the island of Murano, a short boat ride north of Venice itself.

Shipping

Shipping is the life-blood of Venice's mercantile economy. There are two large government-organized sets of convoys sailing to distant ports each year: one leaving at the end of winter and returning in late spring or early summer, the other leaving after midsummer and returning at the end of the fall. Convoys are formed mostly for self-protection. Individual ships might undertake their own journeys, but at their own risk of attack by pirates and enemies. Most convoys head east, but some go west as far as England and Holland. However, as Venice expands west, the westward sea lanes are supplanted in part by increasing overland trade through Germany and Switzerland.

The biggest ships are large galleys, with crews of 200 not being unusual and capacities up to 1000 tons; larger ships might not be able to enter the shallow lagoon. Ships of this size are government-owned, with captaincies auctioned off to qualified citizens each trading season. Galleys are somewhat faster on open seas than plain sailing vessels, far more maneuverable, particularly in port, and their large crews can be pressed into service to repel boarders, giving them considerable protection against attackers. In fact, any ship with a crew of less than sixty is legally considered unarmed. Even "round ships," purely sail-driven vessels, carry far more crew than their sails alone require. One crewman for every 5 or 10 tons is typical. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, round ships become better able to defend themselves because they can mount cannon more readily. However, with their superior speed and maneuverability, galleys remain the dominant military vessels through the period. At the beginning of the Renaissance, crews are almost entirely free Venetian sailors, but by the end, Venice must draw a number of sailors from other countries (mostly Greece and the Balkan coast) and some galleys are rowed by convicts.

Armed Forces

Venice is almost unique among Medieval and Renaissance cities for having no walls. It doesn't need any. It is protected by the lagoon and the most powerful navy of its time. There is no standing navy, but in time of war, Venice's large commercial fleets can be used as a fighting force. The

same advantages the galleys have for shipping, they bring to warfare. Although regular sailors can fight, wearing leather armor and wielding swords, most of the fighting up to the beginning of boarding actions is done by archers using crossbows and wearing metal armor. Ships also start being armed with cannon during this period.

Ground forces, when they are employed, are mercenary armies. Mercenaries betray the Venetians less often than other cities; perhaps the Venetians pay better or just have a better understanding of the people they do business with. Admiralties and most naval captaincies are politically appointed, but mercenary armies are generally commanded in the field by their own officers.

News and Information

In Venice, news is regarded as a valuable commodity. Up-to-date knowledge of markets and political conditions in distant lands is a business tool, and Venetian merchants are willing to pay for it. Merchants might buy or sell recent letters from distant correspondents, and dispatches from admirals in the field are read aloud to paying audiences (the word "gazette" comes from the admission price, a small coin called a gazetta).

Of course, there is no way to absolutely control the spread of news. Drunken sailors happy to be in port could tell their tavern-mates about a battle or royal succession just as well as an official's report, and loose-tongued servants would just as gladly spread interesting tidbits among their friends. However, news in the streets is not as detailed as a written dispatch, and is likely colored by rumor and inaccurate repetition.

Religion

Like the rest of Italy, Venice is staunchly Catholic, avoiding much of the turmoil the Protestant Reformation is causing through the rest of Europe, but its Catholicism does not necessarily mean a close relationship with the Papacy. Sophisticated Venetians don't let religion get in the way of a good time. On the other hand, the Inquisition comes to Venice in the sixteenth century and makes life uncomfortable for many citizens in its pursuit of Protestant heresy.

During the last years of Byzantium, the exodus of Greeks from the crumbling empire means that Venice has a substantial minority of Orthodox Christians who meet with a friendly reception. The city has a small Jewish population as well. While they are not subjected to violent repression through most of the period and hold some respected jobs (Jewish physicians are highly regarded), Venice is nevertheless one of the first cities in Italy to confine its Jews to a ghetto. Indeed, the term "ghetto" comes from Ghetto Nuovo, the quarter of the city where Jews are confined.

While Venetian merchants deal with Muslims more than most Europeans because of their eastern trading colonies, those same colonies also put them on the front lines of frequent wars with the Turks. As a result, the Venetians have no special fondness for non-Christians. Still, they are not bigoted about it either; a Muslim visitor might be regarded with curiosity, but not overt hostility, particularly if he is an ambassador from Persia or some other potential ally against the Turks. Like Jews, Muslims were allowed to practice their religion openly.

Arts and Sciences

With its close ties to the east, Venice is an important conduit for the transmission of Classical learning back into Europe. This is particularly the case late in the fifteenth century, when the last wave of Byzantine scholars flee the final destruction of their empire at the hands of the advancing Ottoman Turks. Any text, particularly any Greek text, is likely to come through Venice.

Venice also hosts an important medical school and many prominent doctors. In other practical arts,

it is an early adopter of many innovations in ship and sail design, and Venetian sailors are quick to grasp the advantages of the magnetic compass. Early models have a margin of error of several degrees, but can reliably be used to mark out sixteen cardinal points.

The city is home to a number of notable painters, including Titian, and sees visits by a number of important foreign artists, including Leonardo da Vinci. It is also a leader in printing books, and because of the importance of navigation, it is home to many cartographers. Venetians freely produce a surprising amount of sensuous, even blatantly erotic poetry and art, perhaps because the Inquisition is more worried about Lutheranism than sins of the flesh.

Clothing

Clothes are typical of the era for Italy in general: shoes or boots, hose, shirt, and a tight jacket or overshirt for men, multiple layers of gowns for women. Hats and long robes are commonly worn by both sexes. While Venice has a number of sumptuary laws prohibiting extravagant dress, those laws appear to have been completely ineffective. Venetian clothing is the height of fashion, using a huge range of colors, patterns, fabrics, and styles. There are certain class and occupational restrictions on clothing. Panderers and prostitutes must wear yellow, magistrates are supposed to wear somber-colored robes of office (black, red, or purple), and Jews must wear distinctive badges or hats (usually a yellow "O" or a red or yellow turban).

One of the best-known items of Venetian apparel is the mask. At least as early as the 1200's, Venetians took to wearing masks for festivals during Carnival, the series of celebrations leading up to the beginning of Lent. The wearing of masks, usually with oversized hooded black robes, is legally permitted for several periods during the year (spring after Lent into early summer, most of the fall, and winter until Lent) and at state events. Because of the obvious potential for mischief, a number of laws have been enacted against masqueraders visiting nuns and going to certain other public places. Given the number of laws, it seems likely that masks are, if not everyday wear, then at least sufficiently common as not to be found unusual in public.

Buildings

As in most cities around the Mediterranean, the homes of Venice are mostly three or four stories tall, with courtyards and flat or slightly sloped roofs, and few corridors. The Venetians sometimes use flat rooftops as a venue for socializing. Like most buildings before artificial lighting, and even afterwards, homes and palaces are rarely more than two rooms deep. Every room has windows or some opening for natural light facing the street or an inner courtyard. The lower and middle classes tend to live in closely set houses that share side walls, much like modern urban row houses, or in apartment buildings sharing common entranceways and courtyards. Windows are high and narrow, and balconies are common.

Due to the inherent dampness, there is little or no mud brick construction. Rather, stone, brick, and wood are the main building materials. There is more wood construction in Venice than in most other Italian cities.

Ground floors tend to house kitchens, store rooms, servants quarters, and shops. If a house has a large common room, it is likely to be on the second story, with apartments on higher floors. Homes on a canal could conceivably have a sort of "garage" on the level of the canal, holding boats, and most have landings, with steps leading up to the "street" level.

Streets and Canals

The streets of Venice are mostly cobble-paved and named for professions ("Street of the Fullers") or saints. However, Venice is a city of more than just streets. Venice's canals are the remnants of

the passages between the islands that came to make up the city itself, made narrow and regular by walls and deliberate dredging. In addition to the famous flat-bottomed gondolas, the Venetian canals see conventional rowboats and even small sailing vessels. Sections of the city separated by canals are linked by numerous bridges. Small boats are also used to reach the mainland, the Lido, and the other islands around the lagoon, so almost every Venetian is an occasional sailor.

Most Venetian bridges are not flat-surfaced. They are usually built on a single large arch high enough for a standing man on a boat to pass under. This usually means that the upper surface of the bridge has to be arched as well or, because of the steepness of the arch, stepped.

Food

Venetian cuisine benefits from being at the heart of the spice trade. Pepper, cinnamon, sugar, and other flavorings are still costly, but no one has better access to them than the Venetians. Sugar is starting to replace honey as a sweetener, giving rise to a broader range of confections, which are mostly based on fruit or almonds. At Venetian banquets, which can be quite sumptuous, cooks are beginning to think in terms of distinct courses which come in a specific order. Modern table manners are also starting coming into shape.

What To See and What To Do

The center of the Venetian business is the Rialto, a district built on the site of the city's founding, at the upper curve of the Grand Canal's backwards S, containing a small plaza, several churches, and a remarkable bridge. The bridge is wooden (the stone bridge there now is a post-Renaissance addition), covered, and steeply sloped like an inverse V. The point of the V, however, is split and movable, like a pair of drawbridges facing one another. Two small sections on either side at the top can be lifted to let tall-masted boats through. The region of the Rialto is where important news and announcements are publicly posted, many bankers do business (including a branch of the Medici bank), and the most important merchants gather to do business, share information, and gossip. To be exiled from the Rialto, a punishment for certain crimes, is one of the worst punishments that could be levied on a Venetian merchant.

While Venice's shore is surrounded by docks and landings, the most recognized landing is at the center of the south side of the city, just past the mouth of the Grand Canal: the San Marco. The Palazzo di San Marco, a painting of which seems to grace every Italian restaurant ever built, is a center of shipping and one of the first sights of the city to greet any visitor. It is also used by the Grand Council on the few occasions when they are convened. It is a large, somewhat blocky building decorated with long arched colonnades. After 1204, the San Marco was decorated by a statue of four horses, looted from the Hippodrome in Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade. The San Marco faces a large L-shaped piazza, which is also faced by the Ducal Palace, housing the offices of the Doge, a number of other government buildings, and the city's tallest bell tower.

The eastern end of Venice holds the city's famous government-owned industrial complex, the Arsenal. While the Arsenal is, in part, a factory and storehouse for weapons, its main purpose is as a shipyard. During the Renaissance, the Arsenal grew considerably from its original dimension to become perhaps the largest factory in the world of its time. The main structure is a large hollow rectangle. The center is flooded so that wood can be seasoned underwater and ships can be floated down a passage out to the lagoon. The Arsenal employs an average of 2000 men using a forerunner of modern mass production techniques, with teams building a part of a ship, then sending it on to be worked on by another team. The Arsenal is joined by the Tana to the south, another large pool, this one for preparing fibers for rope making.

For quiet contemplation, or simply quiet assignments, Venice is amply supplied with churches and convents, but no cemeteries. Land is too scarce in the city itself, so the small island of San Michele, between Venice and Murano, has been converted entirely into a cemetery. Just as Venice

is packed with the living, San Michele is packed to capacity with individual crypts and family tombs.

Venice celebrates Carnival lavishly. Carnival was originally the ten days leading up to Shrove Tuesday, the day before the beginning of Lent and, in Catholic Europe, an excuse to throw riotous parties before forty days of general asceticism. In Venice, however, the period of reveling has come to begin at Christmas, building to its most fevered pitch the day before Lent. During Carnival, characters are likely to find masked revelers filling the streets, elaborately costumed parades (organized by semi-permanent clubs, which might have political affiliations as well), plays, fireworks (the Italians began to make fireworks of their own late in the Middle Ages, and Italian fireworks are the state of the art in Europe), and a general atmosphere of abandon.

But even outside of Carnival, it's easy to find a good time in Venice. Individual saints' days could have public or private festivals, and successful traders may informally celebrate their wealth. Taverns, courtesans, and semi-public parties aside, there's always people-watching. Wealthy young men formed *compagnie delle calze*, social clubs distinguished by colorful tights worn by members, and public processions provide frequent entertainment.

Venice in the Campaign

Venice makes an excellent base of operations for characters. It's a perfect home for a merchant adventurer or political intrigue campaign, and combat-oriented characters can fight Venice's enemies in northern Italy, the Balkans, and at sea (closer to home, inventive duelists can fight across rooftops, balconies, streets, and canals). In a fantasy campaign, Venice would be a source of magical texts and magical materials. Here are some other ways you can fit Venice into a campaign:

- **Diplomacy:** The year is 1468, and Venice is near the height of its power and wealth, but wants more. Seeking to expand holdings on the Balkan peninsula, the Doge invites a powerful warlord to Venice in hopes of striking an alliance against the Turks. The characters must bring the visitor to their side and protect him from potential threats: Turkish agents, agents of his own rivals, and perhaps even Venetians more interested in expanding west than east. And the Balkan warlord? Perhaps it's Vlad Tepes, who may want to elude his protectors for dark purposes of his own. . .
- **Conspiracy:** The Inquisition. The Council of Ten. Lost knowledge returning from the East. People wearing masks. If you can't get an illuminated conspiracy out of that, you're just not trying.
- **Industrial Espionage:** The characters are engaged as spies to discover the secrets of a glassmaker who is producing ever finer and clearer glass. Since trade secrets are always passed down by direct teaching and never written down, they must find a way to infiltrate the glassmaker's workshop and observe him long enough to figure out what he does. And what will they find when they do? A devil living in the crucible? An alien trying to bootstrap Venice's glassblowing technology to the point where he can replace vital fiber optics in his badly damaged spacecraft?

Further Reading

- *Venice, A Maritime Republic*, Frederic Lane.
- *Cultural Atlas of the Renaissance*, C. F. Black et al. (eds.)
- *A Guide To Venetian Domestic Architecture*, Egle Trincanato.
- *Dangerous Beauty* (dir. Marshall Herskovitz), a tale of a courtesan in sixteenth century Venice, filmed on location. Excellent costumes and period music, with a surprisingly plausible improvisational poetry and swashbuckling interlude.
- <http://www.tin.it/veniva/venetie/> In Italian, but a remarkable resource. This site is a web-based reproduction of Jacopo de' Barbari's stunning veduta, a detailed "aerial view" of the city drawn in 1500. Follow the "La Veduta" link or go to

<http://www.tin.it/veniva/venetie/map/map.htm> to go directly to the map. Clicking on the map will bring up increasingly detailed sections.



Legend

1. Grand Canal
2. San Marco
3. Arsenal and Tana
4. Rialto
5. Ghetto Nuovo
6. San Michele
7. Murano

[JPG map of Venezia - \[65K\]](#)

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