

Imperialism, Economics
and Sacred Experience
in the Golden Mosaics of
San Marco

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La Chiesa D'Oro, the Church of Gold, the Basilica of San Marco has stood for centuries as a striking symbol of Venetian aesthetics, culture and glory. The façade has commanded attention with its ornamentation of vibrant colorful marbles, detailed bronze and stone statues and reliefs, and most importantly, rich golden mosaics. These are just a prelude to the interior where the enormous expanse of golden mosaics inside of the basilica has fabricated an incomparable experience for its visitors. The late-eleventh-century construction of the basilica we recognize today (fig. 1), replacing a smaller, earlier structure from the ninth century, marked one of the first steps in the establishment of Venice's international presence. Over the course of the twelfth century, the basilica was expanded and enhanced with Eastern references, particularly the onion-shaped domes and the Greek cross form. Consecrated in 1094, San Marco was meant to embody Venetian power and piety.¹ The golden mosaics added in the 13th century served as a physical manifestation of Venice's new political and economic power and intensified the sacred experience of the church. Scholars have studied the essential history, politics and iconography of the mosaics, but still lacking is an in-depth iconological analysis that accounts for the Venetians' overpowering appropriation of Byzantine imperial forms and material objects and the formation of a particular local Venetian style. Moreover, the manner of this appropriation and local style needs to be seen in relationship to religious practice and experience within the Basilica. The sacred experience of San Marco was enabled and mediated by Venice's political economy and dominated by the aesthetic experience of the golden mosaics.

The basilica of San Marco was central to the rise of Venice as an imperial power. Imperial use of gold in architecture had numerous precedents going back to

antiquity, for example in Nero's Golden palace in Rome, and always had been used as a vehicle of status. This palace, the *Domus Aurea*, was covered extensively in gold leaf and the ceilings were covered in gems and ivory. It was designed as a setting for entertainment and luxury, displaying Nero's prosperity and status. Throughout were representations of the emperor as the Sun god, so the shimmering golden palace would be fitting for such a title. The Venetians desired this same status, and eventually manifested their own sovereignty through gold in San Marco. Before the 13th century Venice was only a small city-state, but the beginning of this century was the turning point for the Republic. This century was taken over by the fourth crusade, known as the "Crusade of the Venetians." Before going off to the East, crusaders from all over Europe assembled in San Marco in order that they might gain divine protection and aid in battle. After the sack of Constantinople in 1204, Venice was transformed from a small city-state to a major political force. The conquered Byzantine lands were split up and the Venetians gained a substantial amount of new territory.² The *modus appropriandi* of the Venetians during the fourth crusade was politico-commercial expansionism. Even though they proved to be stronger militarily than their Eastern Orthodox counterparts, the Venetians understood that the might of the Byzantine culture was so great that they had to steal it, literally and figuratively, and adapt it to their own ends.

The Venetians admired the Byzantine theocratic conception of government, thriving economics, and magnificent art. The Byzantine Empire had produced numerous golden architectural and decorative representations of sovereignty. Hagia Sophia, with its golden depictions of great Byzantine emperors and symbols of status, and the Church of the Holy Apostles, with its golden ceilings and domes, were two manifestations of imperial power from

Constantinople that the Venetians desired to emulate. The Venetians halted and crippled the growth of the great Empire yet they saw themselves as heirs to Byzantium and pursued new trade, diplomacy, and pilgrimage with the East.³ They had a bond to Byzantium because of trade and a comparative lack of relations with the Italian mainland. Venice could thus be considered something of an Eastern state in the West.⁴

The Venetians pillaged and plundered art, relics, and treasures that had been symbols of Byzantine sacred rule and displayed them in San Marco as physical representations of the Venetian Republic's hegemony over the East. Many of the other *spolia* were displayed outside of the basilica to confirm their conquest, including the four gilded bronze horses from the Hippodrome in Constantinople that grace the entryway to the basilica. Most of these valuables were stored in the treasury inside of San Marco; their possession and occasional display legitimized and glorified Venice's role in the crusades against the Eastern Orthodox Church. The most important relic acquired by the Venetians, albeit at a much earlier date, was the body of St. Mark himself.

The Venetians used the subject matter in the San Marco mosaics to confirm their claim to the body of the Evangelist, thereby making their homeland not just militarily and economically powerful but also a sacred city. St. Mark was martyred in Alexandria, which became his initial burial place. According to legend, in 828, two Venetian merchants, Buono of Malamocco and Rufino of Torcello, stole the body from the city after the Saracen prince of the time destroyed the small chapel that contained the saint. To make sure the Islamic customs officers would not profane the body, they covered the basket containing his remains with pork. St. Mark was safely transported to Venice.⁵ There was a strong

belief in Italy that the worth of a city depended on its patron saint. This bond surpassed the domain of civic relations, religion, and politics. The mosaic of the *Praedestinatio* (fig. 2), completed in 1270 in the Capella Zen, explicitly claimed that Christ designated Venice as the final resting place for the saint. The Venetians believed that the Evangelist was the true founder of Venice. According to legend, St. Peter sent Mark to evangelize the northern Adriatic area before he went on to Alexandria. The *Praedestinatio* depicts St. Mark in the midst of a dream, while in Venice, in which Christ came to him and prophesied that his body was going to be rescued from the Muslim infidels in Alexandria to find a safe resting place in the city of Venice. This legend was meant to justify the theft of his body from Alexandria. The Venetians glorified this religious conquest and even depicted the theft itself in gold, in the mosaic of the *Translatio* (fig. 3) and also in the Pala d'Oro. The documentary nature of the subject was extremely rare for the period.⁶ The *Translatio* does not depict a religious ceremony, or a story of the life of St. Mark; it chronicles the theft. Venice localized its own style through the representation of momentous events specific to their civic history and stature. It is significant that this image was not created right after the theft, but in the 13th century. The construction of a nation's own history is an important step in the maturation of a state, and at this time Venice was in the process of transformation into an Imperial power. The *Translatio* highlights the Venetian sentiment of the time, civic pride and patriotism.

The beginning of a particularly Venetian iconography is thus evident throughout the golden mosaics in San Marco, but the emergence of a local style can also be discerned by comparison to important historical precedents from other parts of Italy and the Byzantine world. The historical, political, and sacred nature of the mosaics

become more transparent when put in the context of similar representations from elsewhere. Comparing the *Reception of the Body of St. Mark into Venice* (fig. 4) to the mosaic of *Justinian and his Attendants* (fig. 5) from San Vitale in Ravenna helps to illuminate Venice's claim of authority.⁷

The *Reception* is the only 13th-century mosaic preserved on the facade of the Basilica. It is depicted in a semi-dome above the Porta di S. Alipio, an extremely prominent portal for visitors entering the basilica. On the facade, the brightness of the gold in the mosaics mingles with symbols of glory.⁸ The body is received by the doge and his retinue in a holy procession that advances in front of a representation of the basilica itself. Christ guides the procession of the doge, dogeressa, bishops, noblemen, ladies of the court, and others into the church. An inscription frames the portal apse: COLOCAT HUNG DIGNISPLEBS LAUDIBUS ET COLIT HYMNIS UT VENETOS SERVET TERRAQUE MARIQUE GUBERNET (“The people place him [here] with worthy praises and reverence him with hymns in order that he guard the Venetians and rule over land and sea.”) The phrase “Protection from the enemy” was added to the inscription in the 13th century as a justification of the Venetian conquest over the Eastern Church. This ideology of “protection” reinforced the authority of Venetian imperialism; that Christ entrusted Venice to protect “both land and sea.” The Patronage of St. Mark thus extends beyond the religious sphere into the duties of their new hegemonic power. With this newfound rule came added responsibility that spread beyond the islands of Venice. These claims of authority are documented in the medium of mosaic for all to see.

Justinian and his Attendants represented the emperor's glory and divine right to power. Like in the Porta di S.

Alipio it combined politics and religion. At the time that this mosaic was constructed in 547, Justinian was in the process of expanding the Byzantine Empire beyond the eastern Mediterranean, an effort to reclaim the original lands of the Roman Empire. Compositional details of the two mosaics align: Justinian was shown in an imaginary procession as well and he is surrounded by a bishop, two dignitaries, guards, and two deacons. They are portrayed as if advancing towards the center of the apse in which the mosaic is placed. Similarly, in the *Reception of the Body of St. Mark into Venice*, the figural procession is placed not within, but in front of the church itself, just as the physical location of the mosaic is in an exterior portal rather than in the apse. The *Reception* mosaic effectively made the Doge Giustiniano Partecipazio the new Justinian because of his similar placement, in the center flanked by bishops and noblemen. Justinian is adorned with purple imperial robes, a crown and a halo. Even though Christ is not present in the *Justinian* mosaic, as he is in the Porta di S. Alipio, the insertion of the halo was an explicit statement that God had called him to be a saint, and thus a savior to his people. The figures represented in both mosaics are dressed in contemporary attire adding to the documentary style, which legitimized the veracity of the claims made by each image. These two processions were set on a glittering golden background signifying the wealth, power, and prosperity attributed to the respective Imperial powers. Both of these ornate, golden, and intricate representations explore the relationship between politics and religion, and both express a divine right to rule. Even though the Byzantine influence is quite evident, there is still a particular style that differentiates this mosaic and makes it “Venetian.” This is seen through the manner of dress, contemporary figures, colors, and the depiction of the eclectic basilica. Much has been said and written about the direct influence of Byzantium on Venetian art, but it is

better characterized as a Byzantine transmission that Venice appropriated to localize a style of its own.

Understanding the additions made to the Basilica in the 13th century, the acquisition of gold and marble, and the manner of production of the mosaics further illustrate the story of Venice's rise as a political and economic power. The golden mosaics of San Marco embody their authority and wealth, but more importantly, helped Venice to construct its own identity by their direct reference to and triumph over Byzantine heritage. They adapted the Byzantine method of mosaic production, seen in Ravenna, from the making of the golden tesserae to pressing of the mosaic by hand. At San Marco the result is a dazzling, independent statement of wealth and status. The tesserae started as small circular pieces of glass, produced locally in Venice. A thin layer of gold leaf or actual gold was then layered on top of the glass and was fused to the glass once put into an oven. Next a layer of fine blown crystal was put on the surface. This was what enabled the tesserae to truly sparkle. The glass pieces were then cut into smaller pieces with a hammer and hardie. Then each individual tessera was embedded into a lime-putty base, all pressed in at different angles to allow them to pick up and reflect light. The artists made mosaics knowing that it must reflect light to get the desired effect. This entire process would have been done on site at the basilica.

The fact that San Marco's enormous expanse of ceiling was covered completely with gold—45,622 square feet—stood as an overwhelming testament to Venice's robust economy. While the specific geographic source of the gold for the basilica remains uncertain, it can be assumed that it came through the Venetian control of the eastern trade routes.⁹ When a city or country has control of trade and source locations for precious natural resources, they have

control as to where items end up, and in this case, the Venetians would have had control of most of the trade of the gold throughout the Mediterranean and Europe. San Marco was a reference point for traveling merchants and sailors. As these pilgrims passed through, they contributed art, marble, gold, and other precious gifts.¹⁰ The wealth of the treasury of San Marco grew throughout the centuries and contained the finest collection of sacred and precious objects in all of Europe. The treasury of San Marco held and preserved relics, gems, and gold from the sack of Constantinople and continued to grow as a result of gifts or debts of visiting nobles, Popes, and Emperors.¹¹ This notion is reminiscent of the heavenly kingdom in Revelation, "The nations will walk by its light, and to it the kings of the earth will bring their treasure" (Rev. 21:24). The Venetians would have been familiar with biblical passages such as this one, especially since they included imagery from Revelation in the mosaics. This acquisition of earthly treasures proclaimed that Venice was rewarded for carrying out their God-given duty to protect both land and sea. San Marco exemplified the convergence of a golden sacred space and a symbol of prosperous imperialism. According to Paul Hills, one should not treat the golden mosaics as a "background" but as "clothing of the building itself."¹² The aesthetic experience of the golden mosaics shaped the sacred nature of the basilica.

The practice of blinding and dazzling the viewer with gold and light and its association with the heavens goes back to antiquity and continued to dominate the vista of Jerusalem in the form of the Dome of the Rock (fig. 6). Biblical precursors referenced this relationship between gold and the divine. Images of gold are everywhere in the Biblical description of heaven, also known as the New Jerusalem: "The wall was constructed of jasper, while the city was pure

gold, clear as glass... the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made from a single pearl; and the street of the city was of pure gold, transparent as glass” (Rev. 21:18-21). Religious precursors like the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem also made this hierophanous association between gold and divinity. The great dome was made of tiles and an ultra-thin golden glasure. The golden dome is reminiscent of the golden city of heaven. San Marco invited participation in a heavenly aesthetic experience defined first and foremost by gold. As visitors stepped into the blinding, light reflected off the gold was meant to give a foretaste of the transcendent. This effect was a highly engineered experience for the viewer, as discussed above, since every single gold tessera had been meticulously and deliberately crafted and set to reflect the incoming sunlight.

These mosaics act as a mediator between the divine and humanity, but this experience is not only a solitary one; more often than not, the experience of the mosaics of San Marco was communal and public. The Venetian citizenry, and every merchant and pilgrim visitor to the city, each played a role in forming the relationship between the golden space and the local identity of Venice. The entire city was involved in the production of religious feast and festivals. However, the relationship between the basilica and the Doge deserves special consideration, because it exemplifies the two natures of the church: political and sacred. The Doge was presented as a living representation of the city of Venice, and therefore the glory of Venice was inseparable from the magnificence of the doge. San Marco had always been considered the chapel of the Doge, “*Solus Dominus patronus et verus gubernator S. Marci*,” literally translated as, “God’s patron alone and the true pilot of St. Mark.” The doge had total patronage over it. Both the economic and political power and the religious experience was mediated and commanded

by the doge. Since Doge Giustiniano Partecipazio received the body of St. Mark and decided to build the first church at the site in the ninth century, the doges had been directly involved in every aspect in the creation, rebuilding and maintenance of the basilica. With the name “Giustiniano”, translated as “Justinian”, one cannot help but make the connection to the great byzantine Emperor. This doge spent much time in Constantinople and would have been familiar with the great conquest and desires of Justinian. One could again compare the desires to build San Marco with the motivations behind Ravenna. With both political and religious authority entrusted to the doges, and the desire for Venice to mimic the great Byzantium, the doges should be seen as new Justinians. The Doge entrusted the maintenance of the church to appointed Procurators. They never failed to impress and display the imperial and religious glory of Venice to visiting emperors and dignitaries. The doges took this as their personal duty to reinforce the splendor of the city. According to Henry Maguire and Robert Nelson, one illustrious guest commented, “marvelous in the extreme, rich and varied and golden . . . and worthy of limitless praise.”¹³ The Doges’ intimate connection with the church extended from their election, to their burials, both of which took place inside the basilica. This relationship combined a religious and political preeminence, on the election of the doge, “a ray of heavenly glory from the patron saint illuminated the figure of the head of the state.”¹⁴ His burial was symbolic of his final farewell to his beloved church.

Venice desired to become a holy pilgrimage site echoing great sacred destinations like the *Loca Sancta* in the Holy Land, or Alexandria. They used the eastern decorative devices, especially gold, to evoke these comparisons, while the narrative of the acquisition of holy relics portrayed in the golden mosaics further justified the sacred authority of the

basilica. The Venetians made sure St. Mark was intertwined with Venetian identity. Therefore, his image was portrayed throughout San Marco and around the entire city. The Porta di Sant' Alipio was one of the pilgrimage highlights of the basilica, and also advertised the principle point of pilgrimage, the shrine of St. Mark. San Marco did not just display relics in various side chapels like other pilgrimage churches; the entire church acted as a reliquary. The body of the evangelist was not revered and displayed in a special chapel, but rather centrally placed in the church under the main altar. Reliquaries had to be made of precious material to reflect the sacredness of the relic inside. The interior of San Marco, completely covered with gold, was a fitting final resting place for the great evangelist.

The experience of the glittering gold mosaics of the Basilica of San Marco gives one a glimpse into the transcendent and metaphysical and into the wealth and glory of Venice. The political economy of Venice during the 13th century set the stage for the opportunity to exhibit the power of the Venetian state through the Basilica of San Marco. This manifestation was expressed through the medium of gold, which directly allowed for the ability to express the sacred nature of the church. The grand golden mosaics separate the basilica from the mundane, everyday world and place the viewer in the presence of the divine, connecting the material directly with the immaterial. Were it not for the earthly gains of the Venetians, one would not be able to experience and participate in the sacred space of the *Chiesa d'Oro*.

Endnotes

- ¹Angelo Maria Caccin, *St. Mark's the Basilica of Gold* (Venice: Trevisanstamp, 1964), 21.
- ²This included the Levant and islands of Crete and Euboea. The Aegean islands came to form the Venetian Duchy of the Archipelago.
- ³Henry Maguire, editor and Robert S. Nelson, editor, *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice* (Washington D.C.: Dumberton Oaks Research Library and Collection), 37.
- ⁴Geographically the city of Venice is not connected to the Italian Peninsula. The lack of relations with Italian mainland was also due to the absence of a strong classical tradition. See "Basilica Di San Marco, Venice and the East," <http://www.basilicasanmarco.it/eng/index.bsm/>
- ⁵Caccin, *St. Mark's the Basilica of Gold*, 125.
- ⁶Maria Georgopoulou, "Late Medieval Crete and Venice: An Appropriation of Byzantine Heritage," *The Art Bulletin* 77.3 (1995): 479-96.
- ⁷Otto Demus, *The Mosaic Decoration of San Marco, Venice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 66-70, 108, and Maguire, *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice*, 66, 70. The *translatio* of the saint's body to Venice and its reception there was illustrated in the Pala d'Oro and in the vault of the south choir chapel dedicated to Saint Clement.
- ⁸Paul Hills, *Venetian Colour: Marble Mosaic, Painting and Glass, 1250-1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 64.
- ⁹The gold may have come from Alexandria or central Europe.
- ¹⁰[http://www.basilicasanmarco.it/eng/index.bsm.](http://www.basilicasanmarco.it/eng/index.bsm/)
- ¹¹Caccin, *St. Mark's Basilica of Gold*, 125. The treasury contained seven centuries worth of treasure but was later destroyed in a fire.
- ¹²Hills, *Venetian Colour: Marble, Mosaic, Painting and Glass*, 47.
- ¹³Maguire, *San Marco, Byzantium, and the Myths of Venice*, 193. When the council of Ferrara and Florence arrived in Venice in 1438, one of the members of Emperor John VIII Palaeologus's entourage commented on the city's beauty.
- ¹⁴Caccin, *St. Mark's Basilica of Gold*, 14.

1.



Figure 1 Basilica di San Marco, Venice. Façade.

2.



Figure 2 *The Praedestinatio*. Basilica di San Marco. Mosaic.

Figure 3 *The Tranlatio*. Basilica di San Marco. Mosaic.

Figure 4 *The Reception of the Body of St. Mark into Venice*. Basilica di San Marco. Mosaic.

Figure 5 *Justinian and His Attendants*. San Vitale Basilica, Ravenna. Mosaic.

Figure 6 Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem. Façade.

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