

ROGER CROWLEY

CITY OF FORTUNE

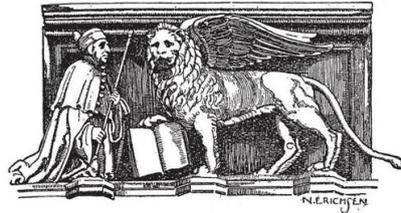
HOW VENICE WON AND
LOST A NAVAL EMPIRE



ROGER CROWLEY

CITY OF FORTUNE

*How Venice Won and Lost
a Naval Empire*



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For Una

‘The people of Venice neither have any foothold on the mainland nor can they cultivate the earth. They are compelled to import everything they need by sea. It’s through trade that they have accumulated such great wealth.’

LAONICUS CHALCONDYLES, fifteenth-century Byzantine historian

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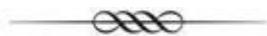
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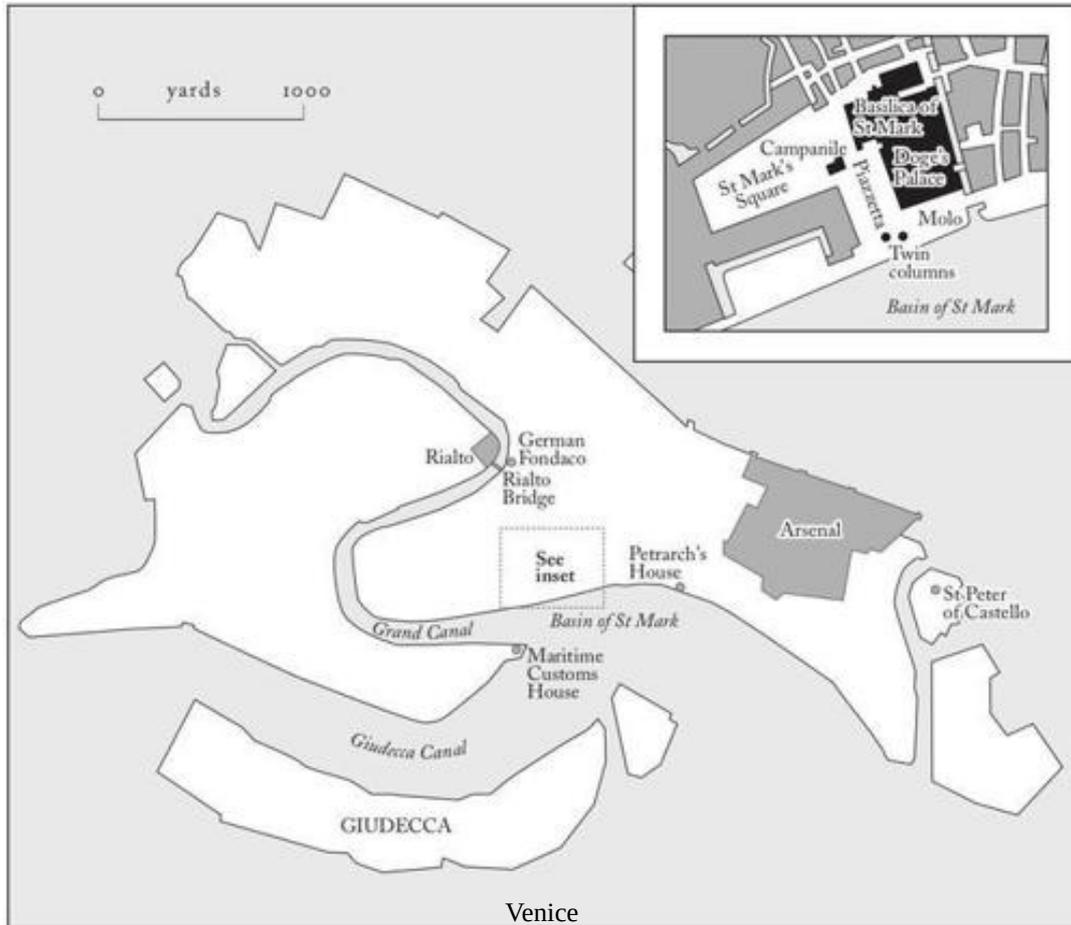
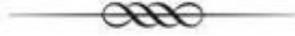
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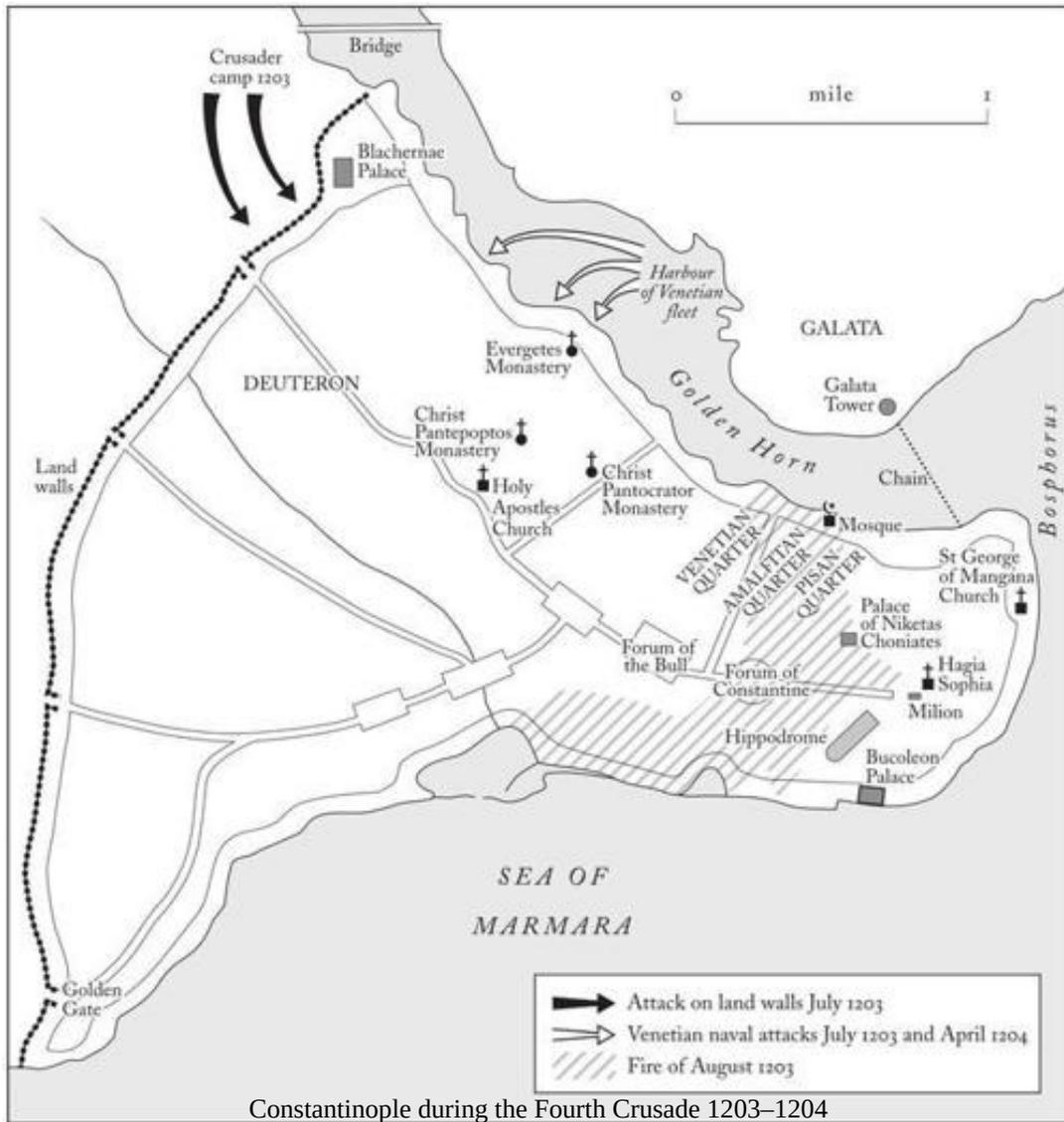
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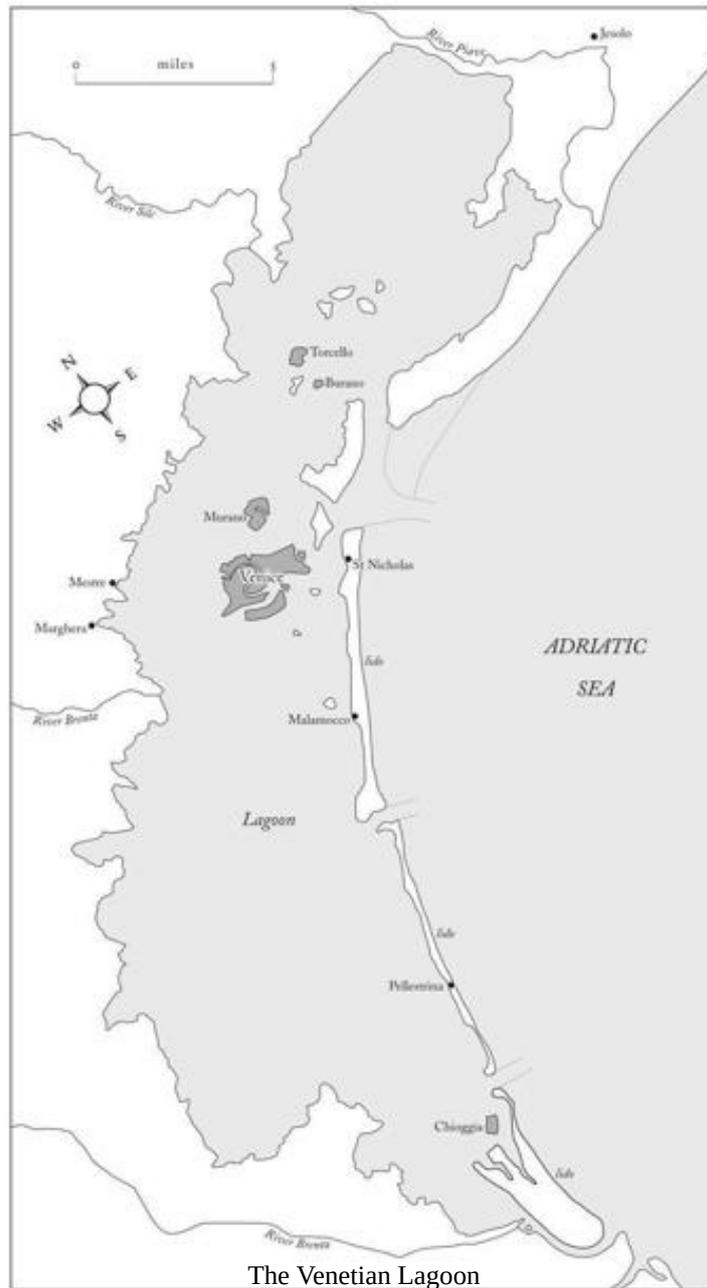
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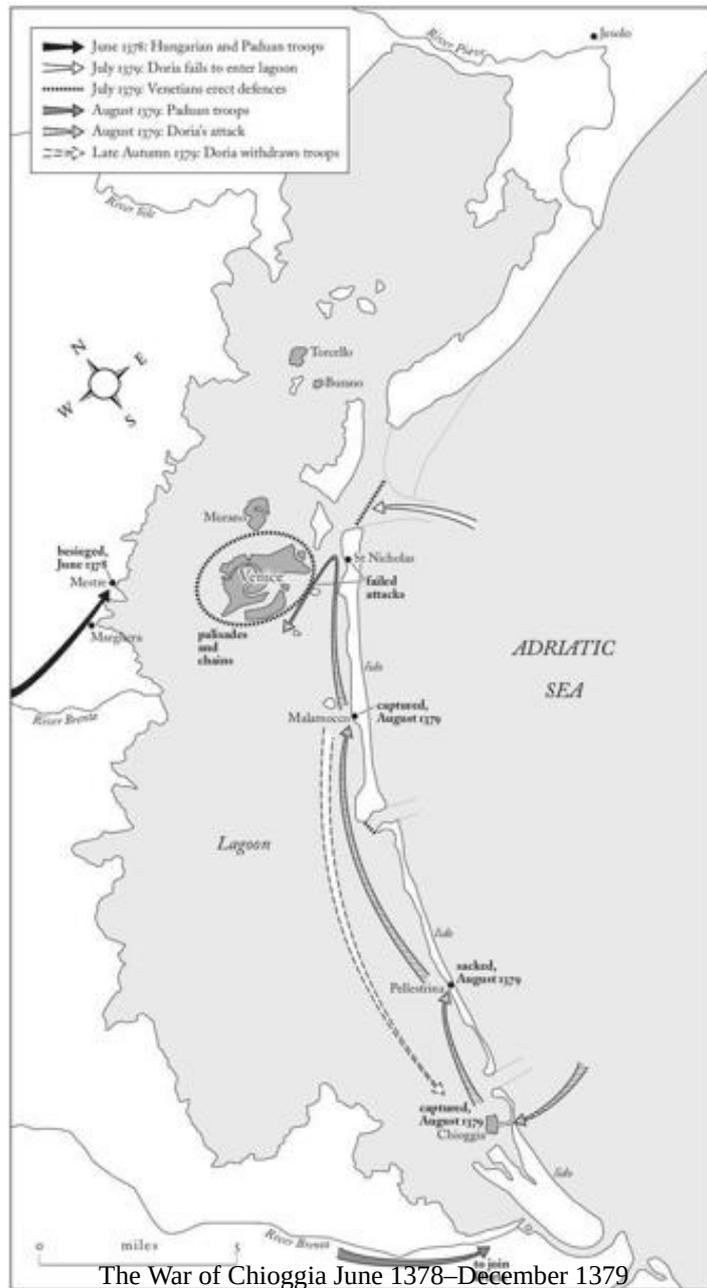


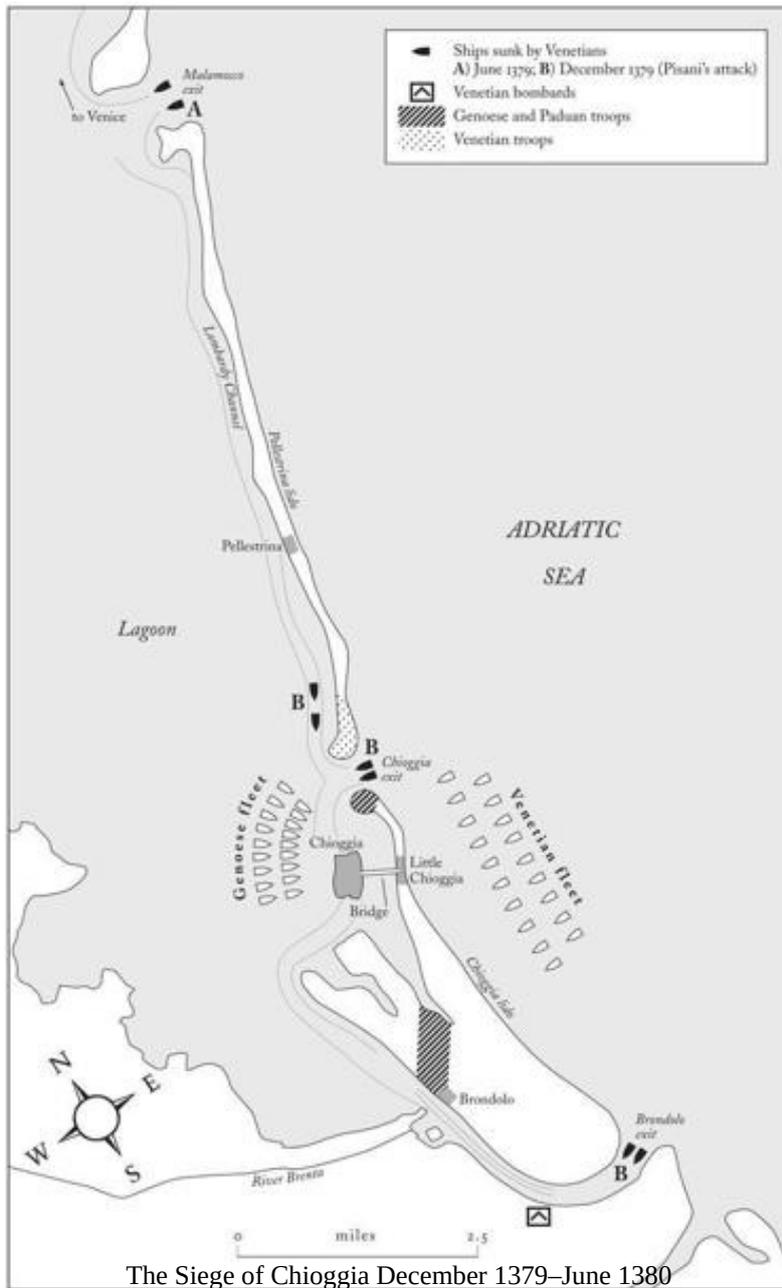


Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade 1203–1204



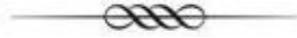
The Venetian Lagoon





The Siege of Chioggia December 1379–June 1380

Place Names in this Book

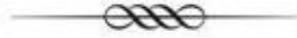


I have used a number of place names employed by the Venetians and others during the period covered by this book. This is a list of their modern equivalents:

Acre	Akko (Israel)
Adrianople	E dirne (Turkey)
Brazza	The island of Braç (Croatia)
Butrinto	Butrint (Albania)
Caffa	Feodosiya on the Crimean peninsula (Ukraine)
Candia	Heraklion (Crete). The Venetians also used Candia to refer to the whole island of Crete.
Canea	Chania or Hania (Crete)
Cattaro	Kotor (Montenegro)
Cerigo	The island of Kythira (Greece)
Cerigotto	The island of Antikythira (Greece)
Coron	Koroni (Greece)
Curzola	The island of Korčula (Croatia)
Durazzo	Durrës (Albania)
Jaffa	Now part of Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv-Yafo (Israel)
Lagosta	The island of Lastovo (Croatia)
Lajazzo	Yumurtalık near Adana (Turkey)
Lepanto	Nafpaktos (Greece)
Lesina	The island of Hvar (Croatia)
Modon	Methoni (Greece)
Naplion	Naflio or Navplion (Greece)
Narenta River	Neretva River (Croatia)
Negroponte	The Venetians used this name for both the whole island of Euboea, off the east coast of Greece, and its main town Halkida (or Chalkis)
Nicopolis	Nikopol (Bulgaria)
Ossero	Osor on the island of Cres (Croatia)
Parenzo	Pore (Croatia)

Porto Longo	Harbour on the island of Sapienza (Greece)
Ragusa	Dubrovnik (Croatia)
Retimo	Rethimno (Crete)
Rovigno	Rovinj (Croatia)
Salonica	Thessaloniki (Greece)
Santa Maura	The island of Lefkadtha or Lefkas (Greece)
Saray	The now vanished capital of the Golden Horde, on the river Volga, probably at Selitrennoye near Astrakhan (Russia)
Scutari	Shkodër (Albania)
Sebenico	Šibenik (Croatia)
Sidon	Saïda (Lebanon)
Smyrna	Izmir (Turkey)
Soldaia	Sudak on the Crimean Peninsula (Ukraine)
Spalato	Split (Croatia)
Tana	Azov on the sea of Azov (Ukraine)
Tenedos	The island of Bozcaada at the mouth of the Dardanelles (Turkey)
Trau	Trogir (Croatia)
Trebizond	Trabzon (Turkey)
Tripoli	Trablous (Lebanon)
Tyre	Sour (Lebanon)
Zante	The island of Zakynthos (Greece)
Zara	Zadar (Croatia)
Zonchio	Later Navarino, the bay of Pylos (Greece)

Prologue



DEPARTURE

Late in the evening of 9 April 1363, the poet and scholar Francesco Petrarck was writing to a friend. The Venetian Republic had granted the great literary figure of the age an imposing house on the waterfront overlooking the Basin of St Mark, from where he could survey all the rich hubbub of the city's port. Petrarck was drowsing over his letter when he was jolted rudely awake.

It was completely dark. The sky was stormy. I was tired ... when suddenly the shouting of sailors struck my ears. Remembering the meaning of this from previous occasions, I hurriedly got up and climbed to the top of this house, which surveys the harbour. I looked out. Good God, what a sight! At once touching, marvellous, frightening and exhilarating! Here in the harbour there were some sailing ships which had moored at the marble quayside over the winter, as massive as this great house which the most generous of cities has put at my disposal. Their masts rise as high as its square corner towers. At this very moment, while the stars are muffled by thick cloud, while my walls are shaken by blasts of wind, while the sea roars and bellows horribly, the largest of them casts off on its voyage ...

If you'd seen this vessel, you would have said it was not a boat but a mountain swimming on the surface of the sea, and so heavily laden with a huge quantity of cargo that the great part of its bulk was hidden beneath the waves. It is setting out for the River Don, for this is as far as our ships can sail on the Black Sea, but many of those on board will disembark and journey on, not stopping until they have crossed the Ganges and the Caucasus to India, then on to farthest China and the eastern Ocean. What is the source of this insatiable thirst for wealth that seizes men's minds? I confess, I was gripped by compassion for these unfortunate men. I understand now why the poets rightly call the sailor's life wretched.

Petrarck the landlubber was awed by the outsized ambition of this enterprise; the humanist poet was disturbed by the fierce materialism that propelled it. For the Venetians themselves such departures were the stuff of daily life. In a city where every man could row, the experience of embarkation – the drift from land to sea – was almost as unconscious as crossing the threshold of your house: a ferry across the Grand Canal, a gondola to Murano or Torcello, a night's crabbing in the eerie reaches of the lagoon, the heady departure of an armed war fleet to the blare of trumpets, the seasonal sailings of the great merchant galleys on the regular run to Alexandria or Beirut – these were deep, cyclical experiences of a whole people. Embarkation was a central metaphor of the city's life, endlessly repeated in art. In St Mark's, a mosaic boat departs with swelling sails to carry the saint's body to Venice; Carpaccio's St Ursula treads a realistic gangplank into a rowing boat while the high-sided merchant ships wait off shore; Canaletto catches Venice setting sail in holiday mood.

Leave-taking was accompanied by elaborate rituals. All seafarers would commit their souls to the Virgin and St Mark. St Nicholas was also a firm favourite and stops would be made at his church on the Lido for a last prayer. Significant enterprises

would be prefaced by services, and ships were routinely blessed. Crowds gathered on the waterfront, then the ropes were cast off. For Felix Fabri, a pilgrim on his way to the Holy Land in the fifteenth century, it happened ‘just before dinner time; all the pilgrims aboard, and the wind fair, the three sails were spread to the sound of trumpets and horns and we sailed out to the open sea’. Once through the barrier of the sheltering sand bars of the lagoon islands, the *lidi*, ships passed into the open sea and another world.

Departure. Risk. Profit. Glory. These were the compass points of Venetian life. Voyaging was a repeated experience. For nearly a thousand years they knew no other. The sea was at once their protection, their opportunity and their fate; secure in their shallow lagoon with its deceptive channels and treacherous mud flats that no invader could penetrate, shielded if not insulated from the surge of the Adriatic, they wrapped the sea around them like a cloak. They changed its gender from the masculine, *mare*, to the feminine *mar* in the Venetian dialect and every year on Ascension Day they married it. This was an act of appropriation – the bride and all her dowry became property of the husband – but it was also one of propitiation. The sea was danger and uncertainty. It could and did smash ships, hasten enemies and periodically threaten to overwhelm the defences of their low-lying city. The voyage could be terminated by an arrow shot or a rising sea or disease; death came in a shroud weighted with stones and dropped into the lower depths. The maritime relationship would be long, intense and ambivalent; not until the fifteenth century did the Venetians seriously question whether the marriage should be with land rather than water and during this time they moved up the gradient from eel trappers, saltpanners and bargemen on the slow inland rivers of north Italy, to merchant princes and coiners of gold. The sea brought the fragile city, existing like a mirage on its tenuous oak pilings, riches beyond measure and a maritime empire as splendid as any. In the process Venice shaped the world.

This book is the story of the rise of that empire, the *Stato da Mar* they called it in dialect, and the commercial wealth it created. The crusades provided the Republic with its chance to ascend the world stage. The Venetians took the opportunity with both hands and profited hugely. Over five hundred years they became masters of the eastern Mediterranean and nicknamed their city *La Dominante*; when the sea turned against them, they mounted an exhaustive rearguard action and fought to the last breath. The empire that they constructed was already well advanced by the time Petrarch looked from his window. It was a curious, cobbled-together affair, a collection of islands, ports and strategic bastions, designed solely to harbour its ships and channel goods back to the mother city. Its construction was a story of courage and duplicity, luck, persistence, opportunism and periodic catastrophe.

Above all it is a saga about trade. Alone in all the world, Venice was organised to buy and sell. The Venetians were merchants to their fingertips; they calculated risk, return and profit with scientific precision. The red-and-gold lion banner of St Mark fluttered from mastheads like a corporate logo. Trade was their creation myth and their justification, for which they were frequently reviled by more terrestrial neighbours.

There exists no more explicit description of the city's *raison d'être* and its anxieties than the appeal it made to the pope in 1343 for permission to trade with the Muslim world:

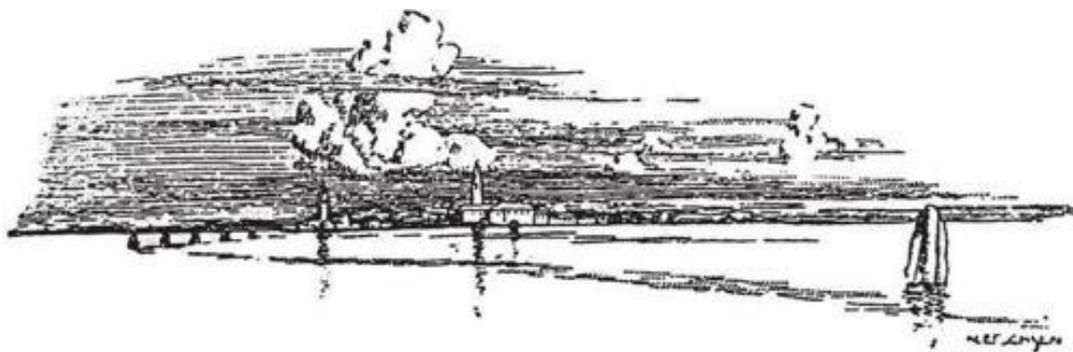
Since by the Grace of God our city has grown and increased by the labours of merchants creating traffic and profits for us in diverse parts of the world by land and sea and this is our life and that of our sons, because we cannot live otherwise and know not how except by trade, therefore we must be vigilant in all our thoughts and endeavours, as our predecessors were, to make provision in every way lest so much wealth and treasure should disappear.

Its gloomy conclusion echoes a manic-depressive streak in the Venetian soul. The city's prosperity rested on nothing tangible – no land holdings, no natural resources, no agricultural production or large population. There was literally no solid ground underfoot. Physical survival depended on a fragile ecological balance. Venice was perhaps the first virtual economy, whose vitality baffled outsiders. It harvested nothing but barren gold and lived in perpetual fear that if its trade routes were severed, the whole magnificent edifice might simply collapse.

There is a moment when the departing vessels shrink to vanishing point, and the watchers on the quay turn back to normal life. Sailors resume their tasks; stevedores heft bales and roll barrels; gondoliers paddle on; priests hurry to the next service; black-robed senators return to the weighty cares of state; the cutpurse makes off with his takings. And the ships surge out into the Adriatic.

Petrarch watched until he could see no more. 'When my eyes could no longer follow the ships through the darkness, I picked up my pen again, shaken and deeply moved.'

It had been arrival however, rather than departure, which launched the *Stato da Mar*. A hundred and sixty years earlier, in Lent 1201, six French knights were rowed across the lagoon to Venice. They had come about a crusade.



PART I