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978-0-521-18134-1 - The House of Gold: Building a Palace in Medieval Venice

Richard J. Goy

Excerpt

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General introduction

The principal aim of this book is in essence a simple one: to describe the story of the construction of the most beautiful and ornate of all the many medieval palaces of Venice. By a detailed examination of the documents recording its construction, I hope to try and piece together the history of the building of the Cà d'Oro and to analyse the contributions made to its construction by many different people: by the wealthy and enlightened client, Marin Contarini; by his important teams of master masons and sculptors, notably Raverti and the two Bon; but also the work of many secondary and even quite minor craftsmen, all of whom made some contribution to the whole masterpiece. In the process, I hope to provide some insights into the organization of the building industry and into the relationships between these masters and between them and their employer.

We are doubly fortunate in the case of the Cà d'Oro. It is one of comparatively few great medieval houses that were not significantly altered by Renaissance modernizations; it is also possibly unique in that detailed accounts of its building have survived today. Such records from this period, the early *quattrocento*, are notoriously rare; in the cases of many dozens of important buildings the written evidence, if it survives at all, often consists solely of a single brief agreement, a 'statement of intent', couched in the most general of terms, and with no detail of design approach or method of construction. Drawings are rarer still; although dozens were produced for any major building project, they were considered by the masters who produced them to have no intrinsic value of their own, and were simply destroyed when the work itself was complete.

So the Contarini papers, though by no means voluminous, may give us a unique insight into the minutiae of the Venetian building industry in the later middle ages. The documents were originally identified by B. Cecchetti, who published his discussion on them as 'La Facciata della Cà d'Oro dello Scalpello di Giovanni e Bartolomeo Buono' (*Archivio Veneto* vol.xxxi, 1886); later writers who drew on this 'discovery' were P. Paoletti in *L'Architettura e la Scultura del Rinascimento in Venezia* (Venice 1893) and, much more recently, Edoardo Arslan, with a useful and accessible summary in *Venezia Gotica* (Milan 1970).

An important word of warning is necessary, though, regarding the present condition of the palace. Many works of alteration and destruction took place in the nineteenth century, culminating in the various works of Baron Franchetti. These collectively resulted in the loss of a considerable amount of original material. The long, extensive programme of restoration that began in the 1960s (and which is effectively not yet concluded in 1991) also revealed

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[More information](#)

extensive deterioration of structural timber and plasterwork, which has again been largely replaced. These works are discussed a little more fully in Chapter 40, but we may summarize by recording that most of the present interior – both visible structure and decorative finishes – is not original, as is fairly clear on inspection. Most of the structural external ‘shell’, however, has survived largely intact. The *cortile* windows survive, as do many important elements of the main façade.

The terms of reference of this study are admittedly narrow. One day it may be possible to published a more wide-ranging work on the flourishing building industry in this important period. The most significant study so far is undoubtedly Susan Connell’s *The Employment of Sculptors and Stonemasons in Venice in the Fifteenth Century* (London and New York 1988), to which a number of references will be made in this study.

A more broadly based survey is Giovanni Caniato and Michela Dal Borgo’s excellent *Le Arti Edili a Venezia* (Venice 1990), which was unfortunately published too late for the author to consult in preparing the present work. It contains much archival material, chiefly from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, and is comprehensively illustrated.

The Cà d’Oro appears to have been something of a special case in some respects (for example, as far as site practices and procedures are concerned) and it seems unwise to draw too many broad conclusions from an analysis of the way in which Marin Contarini built his unique palace. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study is of some value, and may at least allow a few of the documents relating to the palace to reach a slightly wider readership than they have hitherto.

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[More information](#)

PART I

VENICE IN THE EARLY *QUATTROCENTO*

The first three chapters of this book form a general introduction to the context in which Marin Contarini's new palace was to be built. We cannot consider any work of art in a vacuum, particularly when that work is also a practical structure reflecting the social and economic requirements of the time. To understand as fully as possible how and why the house came to be built, we should first set the scene in these wider terms, and outline the chief characteristics of the city and Republic of the early *quattrocento*. The man who built the Cà d'Oro was a member of one of the most notable of the 150 patrician clans that made up the body politic of the *Serenissima*; we therefore see here, built in brick and stone, a direct expression of power both political and economic, a palace built by a patrician whose family helped to rule the state. Let us first briefly consider Marin's Republic, the great power that would shortly become the wealthiest state in Europe.

1

The economic and political background

‘... the one home today of liberty, peace and justice, the one refuge of honorable men ... Venice, rich in fame, mighty in her resources but mightier in virtue, solidly built on marble, but standing more solid on a foundation of civic concord, ringed with salt waters but more secure with the salt of good counsel ...’

Petrarch wrote these familiar and somewhat ingratiating words in 1364, in recognition of the Republic which had given him a (temporary) new home, and expressed in rather more literary terms the commonly held view of the Most Serene Republic in the later *trecento*: a city-state of extraordinary wealth and equally extraordinary stability of government. Despite the undeniable existence of *côteries* of discontent (among the patriciate rather than the common people) the Republic was indeed a remarkable haven in an era of turbulence and change. Later, in the sixteenth century, the *Signoria* – by now long used to generalized expressions of awe – encouraged the image of Venice as ‘the new Rome’, a simile with which once again many of its notable visitors found it easy to concur. Native Venetians were naturally the first to extol their capital and its unique environment, in which the material wealth of the Republic and its noble clans could be happily balanced in the eyes of Petrarch and other intellectual observers by its sagacious and ‘democratic’ government. It was not truly democratic, since all power was concentrated in the hands of a few adult male nobles, but in sharp contrast to the widespread despotic rule of many other Italian cities by individual dynasties (the della Scala in Verona, the Este in Ferrara, the Visconti in Milan, the Carrara in Padua), the *Serenissima* was seen from all parts of the peninsula as a symbol of the prosperity that could derive directly from ‘democracy’, stability and continuity. The perception, then, was of a benevolent oligarchy – a gerontocracy, in fact – of wise, learned men, whose own interests coincided with those of the state, and hence by implication and extension with the whole population.

Despite these enduring images, the *Serenissima* suffered two major crises in the later *trecento*, both of which threatened (in very different ways) the fabric of government of this apparently immutable Republic. The first was the plague, and notably the devastating outbreak of 1348; the short-term effects of this disaster were so severe that for a time it was very difficult for some agencies of government to function. The effects on the economy were similarly devastating, leading to acute shortages of manpower in all spheres of activity for some decades. Indeed, the only mitigation to this social and economic disaster was the fact that every other city in northern Italy had been similarly afflicted; all found themselves in a greatly weakened

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[More information](#)

condition. No precise figures have met with universal acceptance, but it is probable that more than half of the city's population died in barely two years, and there were many lesser outbreaks over the following decades.

When Petrarch wrote, therefore, the economy was still recovering, a process enhanced by the recovery of Candia (Crete) in that same year. But two decades later, Venice was still short of men when the final, decisive conflict with Genoa, the ancient sea-rival, became inevitable. The final victory at Chioggia in 1380 was only achieved with the herculean aid of many ordinary citizens; the war had further weakened the economy, though, and foreign trade had been severely disrupted. The remarkable underlying resilience of the economy greatly assisted the recovery, and the last two decades of the *trecento* can thus be characterized as an era of the re-establishment of trade, of the reconstruction of the Republic's fleets (both mercantile and military) and the consolidation once again of the city's pivotal position at the centre of east–west trade. It was into this climate of reconstruction that Marin Contarini was born, six years after the War of Chioggia.

Immediately after 1380 the Republic had reinforced the ranks of the patriciate by ennobling thirty citizen families, all of which had made considerable sacrifices towards the war with Genoa. This gesture not only reinforced the rôle of the patriciate as the oligarchy that ruled the Republic, but it also significantly shifted the balance of power at San Marco away from the older dynasties such as the Contarini towards these 'new' men. Prior to this ennoblement, the patriciate had been broadly divided into two groups, the so-called 'long' and 'short' families, the *case vecchie* and the *case nuove*. The older families numbered only 24, and included the Contarini, Giustinian, Zeno, Dandolo and Morosini. All of them claimed direct descent from the earliest noble clans that had settled in the lagoons and founded the Republic back in the eighth and ninth centuries. Some even claimed descent from the Classical Roman nobility who had ruled this part of Italy. The 'short' families were more numerous; many had risen to prominence in the thirteenth century as a result of successful trade, and they included such equally familiar names as the Foscari, Grimani, Trevisan, Venier and Vendramin. The groupings were more than a reflection of a superficial élitism, however, and gave rise to serious factionalism in the later fourteenth century.¹

There is some evidence to suggest that the ancient families, like the Contarini, had fared worse from the war and its aftermath than the 'short' families had, possibly because they had more resources committed to long-distance trade.² As this trade was re-established in the 1380s and 1390s it tended to become concentrated on luxury products, goods of high value (and potentially high profit) but small bulk; they could thus be carried on smaller ships with fewer crew and still yield good returns.

Manpower shortages persisted, though, and the *Signoria* actively encouraged migration of suitable skills to re-populate the city. Dalmatia had been lost to Hungary under the treaty that followed the defeat of Genoa, and this deprived the Republic of a valuable and convenient source of both men and materials, particularly of timber for the Arsenal and the building industry. Much of the migration came from the other direction, from the Italian mainland, particularly after 1404, when the *Serenissima* began its notable era of *Terraferma* expansion.

Despite short-term difficulties, the economic picture slowly improved. Venice's trading empire remained extensive, and its subject towns in the eastern Mediterranean were widespread. Corfu was regained in 1386, and this key island – though not a major source of materials – remained a vital fort and way-station for the merchant fleets for the long

¹ S. Chojnacki 'In Search of the Venetian Patriciate' in *Renaissance Venice*, J. R. Hale ed. (London 1974); pp.48 *et seq.*

² F. C. Lane *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore 1973); p.196, *passim*.

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[More information](#)

remaining life of the Republic. Many further ports were retained, including Modone, Negroponte and Crete. Later, Lepanto and Durazzo were gained, despite the ominous advance of the Turk on the Balkan mainland.

The vital element in this recovery, and one in which Contarini had a direct stake, was the system of voyages of the *galere da mercato*, the fairly small (100–300 tonnes) trading galleys which made regular voyages to many parts of the Mediterranean. After 1380 convoys to Alexandria and Beirut were resumed almost immediately and, by the mid-1380s, a regular service had again been established to Constantinople, ‘Rumania’ (the Black Sea), and the longest regular route of all, via the Straits of Gibraltar and Biscay to Flanders, Bruges, London and Southampton. Later in the fifteenth century, further routes were added, such as the *Trafego* route to the north African ports of Tripoli and Tunis, and thence to Aigues-Mortes, Valencia and Málaga. This extensive network formed the regular basis of the Republic’s ‘spice’ trade and the source of much of its wealth.³

Soon after 1400, the *Serenissima*’s foreign policy began to take two distinct directions; the first was the traditional one outlined above, based on well-established sea-trading links; the other concerned its relationship with mainland Italy, where circumstances conspired to compel the *Signoria* to take a more positive rôle than it had done hitherto. The immediate threat to Venice’s traditional policy of carefully balanced neutrality came from Padua and the Carrara, a threat that became so serious and so close to the lagoon that the *Signoria* made the unlikely ally of Gian-Galeazzo Visconti of Milan, to reduce the danger of Venice being surrounded by the Carrara and their allies, and hence cut off from the vital routes north and west that conducted the Republic’s *Terraferma* trade. The unlikely alliance was successful; Carrara was defeated, with the result that both Padua and Treviso came under direct Venetian control for the first time. Fortunately for the Republic, Visconti, who himself could have become a danger to Venice’s security, was carried off by a recurrence of the plague in 1402; with his successor still a child, there was no danger from Milan for some years, during which time the Venetian economy further improved and these first gains were consolidated. The culmination of this first phase can be said to have been the re-taking of Dalmatia in 1409.

Despite further threats from Hungary, the period from 1404 to the early 1420s was one in which peace dominated over war, and the regaining of wealth over intermittent setbacks. At the very end of this period, work began on Marin Contarini’s optimistic masterpiece, his confident act of faith, and we can hardly avoid drawing an immediate parallel between his new palace and the spirit of the era.

The years to 1405 had already seen the new mainland territories further enlarged; by that year the important cities of Verona and Vicenza had fallen to the winged lion, as well as the smaller but strategic towns of Feltre, Bassano and Belluno. This was a considerable gain; besides the wealthy towns themselves, much of their territory was flat, rich farmland, while much of the remainder was hilly and forested, a valuable source of timber and building stone, as well as iron ore from Feltre.

Thus, after centuries of pursuing a policy of non-intervention in the territorial affairs of the *Terraferma*, the Republic had in the space of a very few years become a major power in the peninsula. The process took time, but the domestic economy became larger, stronger and more complex, as these new riches were absorbed within the patrimony of the state. Later, in the 1420s, it became clear that this new empire had to be retained and defended, that it was by no means simply a provider of funds for the coffers of the Palazzo Ducale; that the financial

³ Lane *Venice* p. 197. See also F. Braudel *The Perspective of the World* (Civilization and Capitalism: 15th–18th Century, III) (London and New York 1984); p. 126 and map, p. 127.

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[More information](#)

traffic was to be two-way, as the *Signoria* was forced to spend massive sums on the defence of Verona, Vicenza and the rest.

However, the general economic atmosphere during this ‘honeymoon’ period to around 1423 is well summarised by the tone of the famous ‘state of the nation’ address given to the *Signoria* by doge Tommaso Mocenigo shortly before his death. Despite the inevitable suspicion of hyperbole, many of his figures are perhaps not far from the truth; among the impressive economic achievements that he recorded (chiefly, of course, those during his own reign), was the reduction of the national debt from ten million to six million ducats. The income of the Republic from the city alone was 750,000 ducats a year, with a further 464,000 from the Empire *da Terraferma* and 376,000 from the Empire *da Mar*. As Braudel has pointed out, this total of more than 1½ million ducats was substantially more than that of the entire kingdom of France, with ten times the population and twenty times the territory of the *Serenissima*.⁴ Venice was now undoubtedly the wealthiest state in Europe. Mocenigo’s atmosphere of economic confidence is further evinced by his investment figures: ten million ducats a year were invested in trade, he claimed, and they yielded two million a year in interest and a further two million in trading profits. These were returns that many lesser rulers could only dream of.

Doge Mocenigo had presided over a decade of territorial consolidation but he advised caution over further expansion that would directly incur the enmity of the Visconti, into whose traditional sphere of influence the Republic had already made considerable inroads. Mocenigo counselled a circumspect policy of further consolidation and, just before his death, he went as far as to directly petition the *Maggior Consiglio* not to elect Francesco Foscari as his successor because of his known aggressively expansionist views. Mocenigo named several suitably moderate candidates as his successor among whom was a pivotal figure in our story. But the bitterly fought election of 1423, soon after Mocenigo’s speech, did indeed bring Foscari to the throne of San Marco. This was a further decisive phase in the development of Venice’s foreign policy, which might be characterized – at the risk of over-simplification – as the victory of the ‘hawks’ (those favouring a strong, even bellicose foreign policy) over the ‘doves’, the more moderate Mocenigo faction.

Foscari’s policies embodied higher risks, but also potentially much higher rewards, and the economic climate in the Republic thus also changed significantly in the years after 1423. In the same year, though, Federico Maria Visconti’s attack on the Romagna set the stage for a further act in the struggle for a balance of power between Milan and the formerly purely aquatic interloper on the *Terraferma*. Two years later a further unlikely alliance of mutual self-interest was formed, this time between the *Serenissima* and the Medici and the Dukes of Savoy, to curb Federico’s own territorial ambitions. The battles of the following year brought Venice the prize of Brescia, and victory over Visconti at Vignola. A year later again, Bergamo, too, came under the flag of San Marco, and a peace was signed in 1428 which confirmed almost all of these new gains by the Republic. This was to be the maximum westward extent of the *Terraferma* empire, and it took Venetian territory three-quarters of the way from the lagoon shores towards the gates of Milan itself. Venice was no longer a maritime trading port but one of the three great powers of the Italian peninsula, with lands wealthier in cities and resources than either Milan or Florence.

The Republic was soon forced to defend this newly acquired empire on several occasions. A further peace with Milan in 1433 was immediately followed by more fighting, and the

⁴ Braudel *The Perspective* p.120. There are still very few reliable general histories of the Republic in English; but see also J. J. Norwich *Venice: The Rise to Empire* (London 1977) and the same author’s *Venice: The Greatness and the Fall* (London 1981).

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

hostilities that began in 1437 continued intermittently for a further five years; among them were the famous battles over Lake Garda in 1438, and the Venetian victory at Verona in the following year. Even the ancient rival Genoa was not entirely beaten; there were still occasional conflicts of interest over trade, and physical encounters off Chios, a surviving far-off Genoese possession in the Aegean. They were concluded by a resounding victory by the Venetians at Portofino, within Genoa's own maritime backyard, a rather belated retribution for Genoa's own impudence in taking Chioggia half a century earlier.

The 1430s were thus a decade of considerable although intermittent military activity, most of it essential if the new *Terraferma* empire was to be retained. Despite the wealth of the mainland cities, their defence was very costly, and for a time the massive works of fortification to Verona and Bassano began to exceed the revenues from these and other towns, a situation that probably prevailed until the 1450s, when once again the *Terraferma* began to show an overall 'profit'.

It is most instructive to superimpose Marin Contarini's early life onto the events just outlined. He was born in 1386, the year of the taking of Corfu, and he came of age in 1404, the year in which Rovigo and the Polèsine had come under Venetian dominion. Indeed, the years in which he achieved adulthood coincided precisely with this great era of territorial expansion. In 1406, at the age of 20, he was betrothed; by now the *Serenissima* had added Verona and Vicenza to its conquests, and six years later, when Contarini had finalized his purchase of the Zeno palace at Santa Sofia, the Republic had further added Zara and Dalmatia to the Empire *da Mar*.

In 1418 Contarini finally began the preliminary works that were to lead to the building of his new palace. It must have seemed an extraordinarily propitious time to embark on such a venture: the city was at a peak of power, prestige and confidence. Indeed, the riches of the Republic had by now almost transcended reality in the minds of many outsiders, to achieve the status of myth and legend. A few years later, Bernardo Bembo was to claim grandiloquently that 'the Venetians are called new Romans'; less narcissistically, even Pope Pius II, by no means an unquestioning champion of the winged lion, had to concede that 'today the Venetians are the most powerful people both on land and at sea, and seem not unfitted to the larger empire to which they aspire'.⁵

It is therefore in this context of political and commercial self-confidence and the many and increasingly frequent parallels with ancient Rome that Contarini's masterpiece must be set. He was by no means alone in expressing confidence in both himself and his Republic in brick and stone; the mid-*quattrocento* was an active era for palace-building, dozens of which rose along the Grand Canal and on almost every large parish *campo*. But none was to display quite the same measure of technical skill and flamboyant decoration as the house that came to be known as the Cà d'Oro.

⁵ For some observations on Venice as the new Rome, see D. S. Chambers *The Imperial Age of Venice 1380 to 1580* (London 1970) pp.12–72; for the *Terraferma* expansion, see, *inter alia*, N. Rubinstein 'Italian Reactions to Terraferma Expansion in the Fifteenth Century' in *Renaissance Venice*, pp.197–217.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

The city in 1400

... *E adunque terra grandissima, bella et eccellente ... et ha un Canal Grando; ... Atorno, da tutte do le bande, e case de patritij, et altri bellissimi, da ducati 20,000 in zoso ... Et quelle sono sopra ditto Canal e molto appresiate, et valeno più delle altre ...* (Marin Sanudo, 1493)¹

What was the general appearance of Venice in the early 1400s, when Contarini was a young man? Into what urban context was his new palace to rise? Firstly, of course, it was a very large city indeed; although numbers fluctuated and we have no accurate census figures, Venice nevertheless probably contained an average of more than 100,000 people throughout the *quattrocento*. Sanudo's own estimate of 150,000 in 1493 is generally thought to be rather high, but perhaps not excessively so. Even within a range of perhaps 100,000 to 130,000 it was a true metropolis, one of the handful of largest cities in western Europe, certainly the largest in northern Italy after Milan; and northern Italy was the most highly urbanized region in Europe.²

There are no reliable illustrations of the city in 1400. Such *quattrocento* views that have survived are not only much later, from after c.1475, but all are highly stylized views, with very little urbanistic detail. We can only attempt a sketch of Venice's general appearance by an interpolation between two famous views, one earlier and the other from 1500. The first, drawn in 1346, is, of course, 'Paolino's' drawing, a true plan of the city, indicating over a hundred of the island-parishes, as well as the network of minor canals and the perimeter extent of the metropolis. There is no detail of the physical fabric, although we know from other sources, chiefly the surviving buildings themselves, that the overall texture of the city, from Mendigola in the west to San Pietro in Castello, was by now well-established. Equally well-established were the twin hubs of Rialto and San Marco, while the course of the Grand Canal was lined with palaces and *fondachi*. They varied considerably in size and grandeur, certainly in 1346, but by 1400 reconstruction had led to the first stages of a long period of redevelopment, particularly of noble palaces, that was to continue for much of the *quattrocento*.³

De'Barbari gives us a far more precise picture of the city 150 years later, but to arrive at an approximate image of Contarini's Venice we must interpolate between these two illustrations. In 1400 the peripheral zones were certainly less built-up than they were by de'Barbari's time,

¹ Marin Sanudo 'De Origine, situ et Magistratibus urbis Venetae'; Bibl. Correr, Venice, MS Cicogna no.969 c.9r. Published as *La Citta di Venetia*, A. C. Arico ed. (Milan 1980) p.20.

² D. Beltrami *Storia della Popolazione di Venezia dalla Fine del Secolo XVI alla Caduta della Repubblica* (Padua 1954); K. J. Beloch *Bevölkerungsgeschichte Italiens* (Berlin 1961) Vol.3. See also Lane *Venice* pp.11–21, 462.

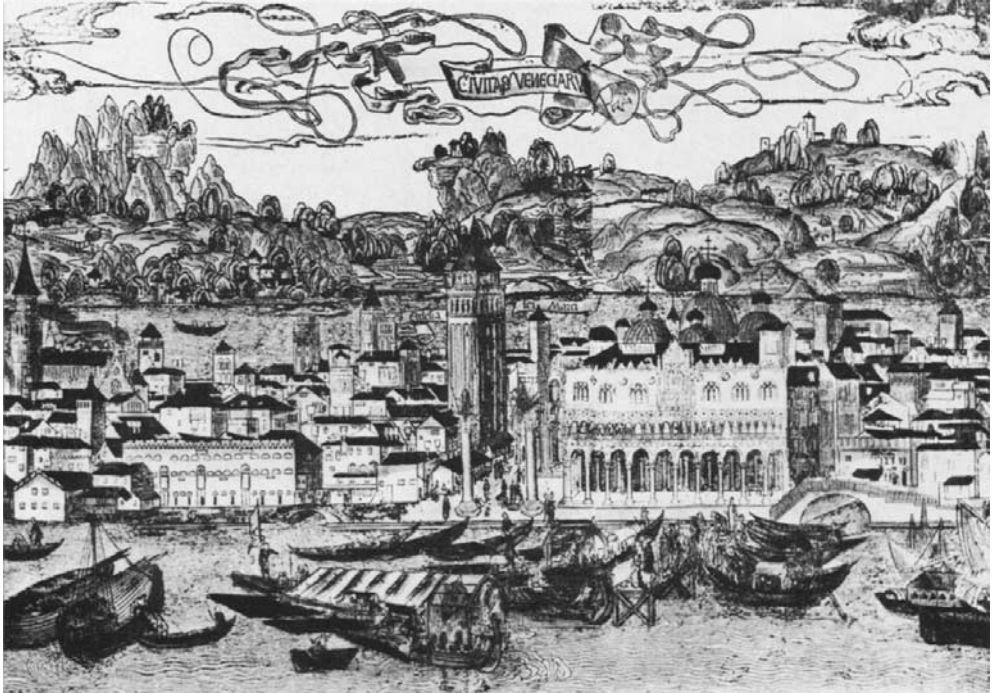
³ The plan of 'Paolino' is in Bibl. Marciana Venice MS Lat. Zan. 399.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 *Civitas Veneciaru(m)*: view of the Molo and Piazzetta San Marco by Erhard Reuwich, 1486.

and in many places there was a green fringe of orchards and vineyards down to the muddy edge of the lagoon. The city centre, though, was fully built-up, particularly the *sestieri* of San Marco, San Polo and western Castello. Many new palaces were begun in the early *quattrocento*, often replacing smaller, older houses; others were enlarged or modernized. Most palaces were naturally built by the patriciate for its own use, but in an era of numerical expansion and increasing prosperity, some were built for rent, either by the noble *casade* themselves or by the many religious houses or the *scuole grandi*. Marin Contarini was thus brought up into an era of significant building activity, and he would have soon become aware of the value of a building site.⁴

Of the remaining basic form of the city, all of the elements shown by de'Barbari had been well established considerably more than a century earlier. The great axis of the Grand Canal divided the metropolis into two roughly equal parts; of the two nuclei, Rialto and San Marco, the former was the hub of trade and commerce and the latter the seat of government. The collection of streets forming the Mercerie, joining these two hubs together, had the most dense collection of specialized retail activities, and they were lined with shops and workshops, not only of mercers, but selling many types of domestic requirement: ironmongery, cloth and fabrics, pots and pans, furniture and so on. Nearby were other specialized groups, the names of which survive today in the street-names: Frezzeria (arrow-makers); Fabbri (smiths); Stagneri (tin-workers); Casselleria (chest- and cabinet-makers).⁵

⁴ The most authoritative analyses of Venice's medieval urban development are: S. Muratori *Studi per una Operante Storia Urbana di Venezia* (Rome 1959); P. Maretto *L'Edilizia Gotica Veneziana*, 2nd edn (Venice 1978); and P. Maretto's encyclopaedic *La Casa Veneziana nella Storia della Città* (Venice 1986).

⁵ See note 4 above.