



INTRODUCTION: VENICE'S EMPIRE

It has already been repeatedly stated, that the Gothic style had formed itself completely on the main land, while the Byzantines still retained their influence at Venice; and that the history of early Venetian Gothic is therefore not that of a school taking new forms independently of external influence, but the history of the struggle of the Byzantine manner with a contemporary style quite as perfectly organized as itself, and far more energetic. And this struggle is exhibited partly in the gradual change of the Byzantine architecture into other forms, and partly by isolated examples of genuine Gothic, taken prisoner, as it were, in the contest; or rather entangled among the enemy's forces, and maintaining their ground till their friends came up to sustain them.

John Ruskin¹

From the fascination with the merging of cultural traditions in Venice to the true admiration of Byzantine elements in Venetian art of the Middle Ages, the writings of John Ruskin set the tone for much of what is still generally perceived as the cultural relationship between Venice and Byzantium. The architecture and decoration of the San Marco basilica have been admirably explored by Otto Demus and other art historians to offer excellent insights into the workings of Byzantine artistic currents in Venetian architecture, sculpture, and the art of mosaics.² When the subject of inquiry is Byzantium's legacy on public and domestic architecture, however, current scholarship still follows Ruskin's tracks.³ When these "byzantinisms" are addressed, they come, one feels, directly from Ruskin's works and are presented as purely formal incrustations without any deeper cultural meaning. For instance, a page from the *Stones of Venice* entitled "The Orders of Venetian Arches" still stands as the normative visual aid for identifying and dating the Venetian palazzi (Fig. 1). Yet, we implicitly assume that the translation of Byzantine architectural or decorative forms into a Venetian

vocabulary had a particular cultural and perhaps also political significance because within the sociohistorical framework of the Venetian maritime empire these formal elements pointed to the Byzantine empire and its cultural supremacy. By the same token, the presence of Venetian (read Gothic) architectonic and decorative forms on the soil of Venice's colonies would have the opposite effect, that is, to boast Venetian hegemony overseas. This overly simplified view of artistic encounters played out within the context of Venice and its empire may be enriched by an inclusive look at the colonies of Venice as agents that were shaped by Venetian rule and that in their turn molded the metropole herself.

From the legendary foundation of Venice in 421 to the Fourth Crusade of 1204 the status of Venice vis-à-vis Byzantium changed dramatically.⁴ Originally a dependency of the exarchate of Ravenna, by 751 Venice was turned over to the Byzantines. Venice remained under their jurisdiction until the ninth century, when she sought her independence from Byzantium by proclaiming herself a *civitas*. To boost these claims of independence the Venetians forged a sacred history for their city by raising the cult of the relics of St. Mark, stolen from Alexandria in 828, to a state religion. The depository of these relics, the new eleventh-century basilica of San Marco, was modeled after the celebrated Constantinopolitan church of the Holy Apostles, and as the chapel of the doge it became a major symbol of the city of the lagoon (Fig. 2). At the same time Venice established its commercial authority in the Mediterranean by securing privileges and tax exemptions from the Byzantines in the form of imperial decrees (*chrysobulls*) and by building a formidable fleet.⁵ The tables were turned in favor of Venice in 1204 when the Venetians urged the crusaders to attack Constantinople and to plunder the city for treasures.

The significance of the Fourth Crusade for Venice cannot be overstated. The Republic transformed herself from a small state into a superpower: she had multiplied her territorial holdings, was the leader in Mediterranean trade, and claimed hegemonic rights over Byzantium.⁶ An overview of the artistic remains in the Venetian colonies along the Adriatic and the Aegean coastline reveals port cities, such as the Dalmatian cities of Zara/Zadar and Ragusa/Dubrovnik and the Greek cities of Modon/Methoni, Candia/Herakleion, Corfu/Kerkyra, and Negropone/Chalkis, endowed with Latin churches dedicated to the patron saint of Venice, as well as with impressive fortifications, palaces, and loggias adorned with effigies of the lion of St. Mark. A collective view of the architecture of these towns sends a clear message even today: these places belonged to Venice's empire as they partook in its architectural tradition. All these monuments seem to proclaim the submission of indigenous cultural traditions to the religious, political, and

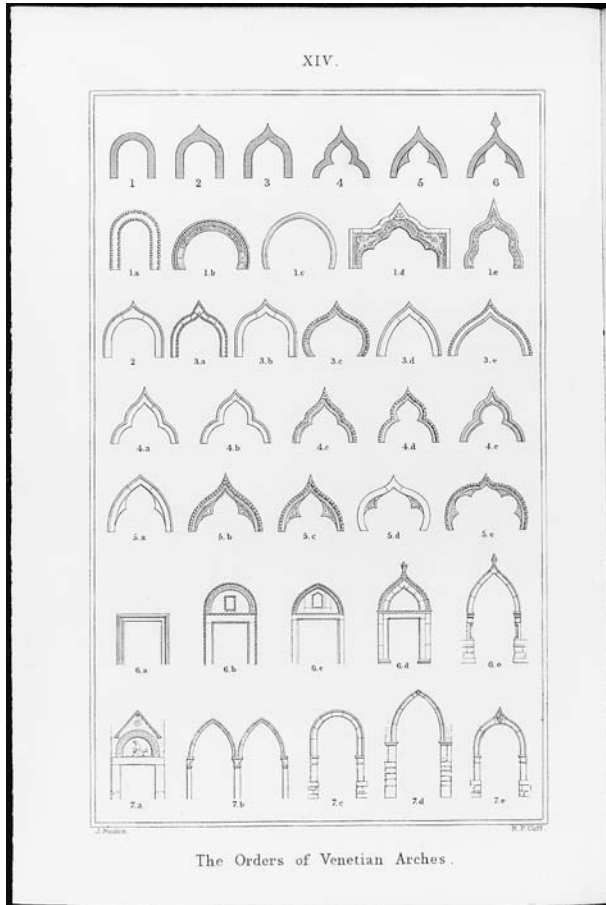


FIGURE 1. Orders of Venetian windows, John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, vol. 2 (1851), pl. XIV (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University)

architectural heritage of the mother city. But this transformation was a gradual process, which was not completed until the sixteenth century, when many of the fortifications were erected. How did Venice set the foundations of its rule in the Eastern Mediterranean in the course of the thirteenth century? While in most instances of modern colonization there is a violent imposition of the “national” traditions of the metropole, which overtake the local heritage of each colony, the Venetian colonies exemplify a different pattern: an exchange of cultural forms that allowed the colonizers to maintain a smooth transition from the former Byzantine to the new Venetian hegemony.

The term that the Venetians use to designate their maritime empire, the



FIGURE 2. Venice, basilica of San Marco, western façade

Oltremare, stresses the distance between Venice and its colonies along the coast of the Adriatic, the Ionian, and the Aegean Seas. The strong mark that these colonies left on Venice, however, suggests that they functioned as extensions of Venice herself well beyond the economic sphere. The carefully arranged system of commercial maritime convoys constituted a well-trod communication path between Venice and its colonies in the Eastern Mediterranean and has been adequately explored by scholars.⁷ Just as goods, merchants, and pilgrims traveled this path so did intellectual and artistic ideas. But this communication path was a two-way street. The complexity of this colonial reciprocity as it is exemplified in architecture has been already addressed by Ruskin, albeit obliquely: for him the hybridity of forms in the ducal palace made it “the ‘central building of the world’ offering an imperial model for architecture.”⁸ It comes as no surprise that an Englishman of the Victorian era would look to Venice for imperial models for Great Britain as the parallel that the maritime empire of Venice offered to that of the British is striking. What is surprising is the extent to which the study of the relations between Venetian and Byzantine culture is usually confined to Venice and Constantinople and neglects the rest of the Venetian and Byzantine commonwealth.⁹ This study seeks to broaden this horizon by bringing to the fore the complex relationship between Venice and its colonies, focusing on the exchange and transfer of cultural forms from and to the metropole. The



lasting traces of Greek/Byzantine heritage in Venice confirm the fact that her colonial expansion in earlier Byzantine territories offered the Venetians the necessary economic, ideological, and cultural capital to define themselves as an imperial entity.¹⁰ As the buildings sponsored by Greeks, Armenians, Albanians, and Slavs in Venice indicate, the metropole was the destination of numerous immigrants (merchants, but also artists and scholars) from its former colonies.¹¹ These people were by no means outcasts, as was often the case in the modern colonial empires. The dominion of Venice cast its net widely: it incorporated customs, practices, and forms peculiar to the colonies directly into the heart of the metropole. Thus, the inquiry into the architectural styles in Venice and its colonies proves a slippery ground as it drifts between the familiar and the foreign: was Venice's Byzantine façade a result of the colonial experience? Was there in the minds of the people a clear, meaningful distinction between "Byzantine" (i.e. Eastern, Christian Orthodox, Greek) and "Gothic" (i.e. Western, Latin Catholic, Venetian) forms? Finally, how were the colonies constructed in the rhetoric of the Venetian regime and in the minds of the colonists living in the Oltremare?

Crete is a prime case study for these considerations because it was the first full-fledged colony of the Venetians. The island's geographic position at the crossroads of three continents provided a strategic base for the growing Venetian maritime empire, which was made up of a network of outposts. Crete was situated on the crossing of the major maritime routes that connected, on the one hand, Constantinople with Alexandria and, on the other hand, the Western Mediterranean Sea with Syria (Fig. 3).¹² The Venetians ruled Crete for four and a half centuries (1211–1669), a period during which the island became an important commercial center in the Eastern Mediterranean, with agricultural and artistic products renowned in the East and West.¹³ Drawing on the works of political, economic, and social historians of the Venetian maritime empire as well as on archival material, my work centers on the buildings, architecture, and art that the Venetians set up in the colony's capital city, Candia (Byzantine Chandax/modern Herakleion), in relation to their urban setting and use. The issues of urban planning and civic practices revealed by the study of these buildings and their topographical relationships speak to the realities of colonization and address several points about which the governmental records are mute. Not only is the identity of the users of the built environment in a colonial setting by definition multi-cultural, but the very act of erecting buildings in a colonial territory is a process that problematizes notions of neatly organized categories according to ethnicity or cultural background: in many cases the patron was a Venetian colonist (or the state authorities) but the masons and architects were locals.¹⁴ Moreover, the topographical arrangement of a colonial town by directing

movement through streets or squares and by controlling access to civic resources prescribes specific perceptions of power relations within the urban space. By analyzing these issues this study seeks to bridge the distance between Venice and Candia and to understand better the impact of Venetian imperialism on the colonies and the metropole. Although the bulk of the archival material applies to the city of Candia, six other colonies in the area of the Aegean will also be surveyed here to flesh out more fully the outlook and meaning of architecture and urbanism within Venice's Mediterranean empire.

The focus is on the formative period of Venetian colonization, that is the first three centuries of Venetian rule in the Levant and on Crete in particular (roughly 1204 to 1500). Although it will often be necessary to look at documents, objects, and structures of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to supplement incomplete archaeological and archival information, the considerable change in the urban fabric of the city that occurs around the year 1500 offers a natural break point in the architectural and urban outlook of Candia and most of the Venetian colonies. The fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, the collapse of the Byzantine empire, and the increasing Ottoman threat in the Mediterranean modified the role of Crete in international politics. With the islands of Crete and Cyprus remaining the only strongholds of Christianity in the Levant, Venice could no longer afford the open display of hostility toward its subjects in the area that it could in the past.¹⁵ The extensive archival material on Crete shows that the Republic made significant concessions to its non-Latin inhabitants that resulted in a new *modus vivendi* for the population of the island, a climate of creative coexistence between Latins and Greeks. Moreover, in the sixteenth century the medieval appearance of the cities was gradually transformed to accommodate technological developments in warfare as well as new architectural projects that followed the model of Renaissance Venice, using "state" architects and the lessons learned from the newly available architectural treatises.¹⁶ My study tries to reconstruct and understand the appearance of the city that preceded this Renaissance homogenization of the urban centers. In this context the case of Negroponte/Chalkis, which fell to the Ottomans in 1460, is particularly instructive because it does not display the grand Venetian fortification schemes of the early modern period.

Thinking about all this in our postcolonial frame of mind it is easy to theorize about the architecture of empire and the overwhelming power that urbanistic and architectural associations with the metropole had on the fabric of the colony. Indeed, numerous examples of urbanistic and architectural choices of the Venetian colonial authorities confirm schemes that have been observed in modern imperial configurations.¹⁷ As soon as the Venetians



FIGURE 3. Map of the Eastern Mediterranean

settled Crete for instance, they reorganized the capital city, Candia, to satisfy the needs of the colonists. The other major centers of the island, Canea, Rethymnon, and Sitia, followed soon. In all colonies large administrative monuments housed the Venetian government and new large Western churches served the Latin population. Candia, Canea, and, to a lesser degree, Retimo/Rethymnon, Modon/Methoni, and Coron/Koroni had ports that could support the exigencies of international trade and the burden of maintaining or constructing a war fleet in their arsenals. As important centers for international and local trade these cities became poles of attraction for merchants and professionals of Venetian, Latin, or other origin. In line with that of all major harbors of the Mediterranean their population was multiethnic: Latins/Venetians, Greeks, Jews, and a few Armenians (immigrants of the midfourteenth century) figure prominently among the residents of Venetian Candia. While the hinterland was populated primarily by Greeks, in the urban centers the Venetians constituted a considerable part of the population, which, nonetheless, never outnumbered the locals.¹⁸ Each colonized city with its political, economic, social, and religious institutions was essential in

the construction of this empire, so it is paramount to identify the processes of cultural negotiation generated in these colonies, and the contention of this study is that much of this is borne out in the physical appearance of the cities.

As in other multicultural cities in the Mediterranean religious monuments occupy a unique position in this symbolic appropriation and colonization of urban space. The two dominant groups in the Venetian colonies, Venetians and Greeks, adhered to two competing Christian rites: Catholic Latin and Greek Orthodox. The differences between the two rites were especially acute in the wake of the Fourth Crusade and the sack of Constantinople by the crusaders. After all, the dissolution of the Byzantine empire and the formation of Venice's colonial empire were the prize for the Republic's involvement in the crusade. Even if the chroniclers of the Fourth Crusade accused the Venetians of having participated merely for economic and political purposes, Latin Christianity had been a significant component of the image of the Republic after the schism between the Eastern and Western churches in 1054.¹⁹ For the Greek population Western Christianity was linked with the pope and insurmountable differences in doctrinal matters prevented a rapprochement between the Latin and Orthodox rites. For the Venetians, on the other hand, the Eastern rite embodied a dangerous tie with the Byzantine empire. Orthodoxy represented a spiritual cause for rebellion and a unifying force for local resistance against the Venetian lords. To prevent such revolts and contacts between the Greek clergy and the Orthodox patriarchate of Constantinople, the Republic banned the Byzantine metropolitan and the Orthodox bishops of Crete and replaced them with Latin prelates: the major ecclesiastical authority on Crete was the Latin archbishop of Candia.²⁰ Only Orthodox priests of a lower rank were allowed in the Venetian colonies and they had to endure a complicated ordination process.²¹ Having officially proclaimed religious tolerance in the document that handed Crete over to the colonists in 1211 (the *Concessio Crete*), the Venetians placed the church of the island under the jurisdiction of the Latin patriarch of Constantinople, maintaining the framework of the preexisting ecclesiastical structure in the former Byzantine territories.²²

Despite the concerted efforts of the authorities to establish a rigid administrative and political apparatus that controlled the locals, the colonial enterprise of the Venetians does not appear as a straightforward military campaign against the colonized peoples. An analysis of civic ceremonial, economic interaction, artistic production, and religious practices illustrates how the city was used by the various social and ethnic groups and suggests new ways of interpreting its meaning for both its designers and its users. In contrast to the



binarism that characterizes earlier studies on Crete, this study attempts to uncover the instances of interaction and blurring of boundaries between the new settlers and the indigenous people. The issues that such an approach confronts are the formation of community identity before the advent of nationalism, the significance of a cultural/artistic style for defining a social or ethnic group, and the exchange/appropriation of cultural forms. As the studies of Sally McKee have shown, the first centuries of Venetian rule in Crete have to be looked at very carefully because they provide prime examples of multiethnic and polyglot societies that challenge our traditional understanding of two constantly competing cultures.²³ The illuminating cases that McKee explores in her work come from a deep knowledge of the notarial material and a commitment to understanding history from the bottom up, so to speak. The economic, civic, and social relations of Latins and Greeks in the fourteenth century show “diminishing distinctions between [the] communities.”²⁴ For her, ethnic identity in Venetian Crete seems to be a purely practical matter of a legal stature. My own work differs in that although there is no doubt that to a certain extent the population experienced a common “material life,” I believe that the physical world that the Venetians constructed in Candia embodied a colonial framework that promoted Venetian hegemony. A daily encounter with such a landscape presented an uneven environment for Greeks and Venetians in Candia even if in the testaments of the Latins, for instance, we detect a nexus of social relations, economic interactions, and emotional attachments to their Greek family members and servants.²⁵

At this point I should clarify the usage of *Byzantine* and *Greek* in this study. I use the term *Byzantine* to refer to the population and institutions of the Byzantine empire, including the inhabitants of Crete before the arrival of the Venetians in 1211. In relation to buildings, the term *Byzantine* alludes to structures built before 1204, or to churches whose form followed the Byzantine artistic tradition. On the other hand, the term *Greek* is used to designate the Greek-speaking, Orthodox Christian community of the Venetian colonies after 1204. The parallel existence of the Latin and Greek communities in Crete created peculiar conditions for the cultural development in the late medieval and Renaissance period, observed primarily in language, literature, architecture, and art. To the degree that artistic products created at the same time in the same place are based on common grounds, the art of these ethnic groups inevitably shared many technical, iconographic, and stylistic features. There are indeed examples of unique artistic trends of Cretan origin, especially in painting, literature, and theater, which are known as the *Cretan school*.²⁶ The last centuries of Venetian rule on Crete witnessed

an especially pronounced symbiosis between the two communities. Following 1453 religious and ethnic differences lost their importance in the urban societies of Crete, which were increasingly stratified by class.²⁷

The architecture and urban planning of the Venetians in their colonies in relation to the architecture commissioned by non-Latins are seen here as a means to mitigate conflict among the diverse population groups of the city while still embodying Venetian colonial ideology. Examples of a cultural rapprochement between Greeks and Latins abound in the arts of Crete but are still not perfectly understood. For instance, Western architectural features and artistic styles of painting appear on many of the Orthodox churches of Crete from the second quarter of the fourteenth century.²⁸ And the image of a purely Western saint, Saint Francis, shows up at least four times in wall paintings of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Byzantine rural churches of Crete.²⁹ Are we to follow Gerola's suggestion that the asceticism of St. Francis appealed to Orthodox monks?³⁰ Or should we imagine that the patrons of these churches were products of a mixed marriage of a Greek and a Latin or some other cross-ethnic relationship with another member of the household, to include an otherwise "foreign" saint in their church? Only multiple prosopographic studies, which surely can be generated from careful scrutiny of the extensive unpublished notarial material, may give us a clearer picture of the role that the colonized people played in this context.³¹ In the absence of such collective information I have tried to reconstruct the physical and symbolic landscape of each colony by situating the different publics of the city – its designers, everyday users, and visitors – at a variety of positions so that we may see the topographical features and architecture of the city from multiple viewpoints. Buildings commissioned by Greeks and to a lesser extent by Jews, as well as one Armenian church in Candia, are placed vis-à-vis the Venetian urban monuments to establish their history, appearance, location, and function, as well as their symbolic presence in the city.

As in any colonial city, the architectural metamorphosis of Candia (which is taken here as the most sophisticated example of Venetian colonial rule) – apparent in the names, form, and placement of buildings and their linkage to, or exclusion from, official civic practices – made a strong hegemonic statement in favor of the rulers. What sets Candia apart from later colonialist enterprises is the systematic incorporation of local heritage into the colonial "language" of Venice. In Candia, enough Byzantine structures remained in place to suggest that the Venetians made a concerted effort to present their rule not as a mere military conquest over the Byzantines, but rather as a continuation of imperial Byzantine administration. The topographical characteristics of Candia and the legendary "hagiographies" that favored the settlement of the colonists on the island exemplify how the Venetian author-