Imagine the audacity of people deciding to build a city of marble palaces on a lagoon. But not content with conquering the known world, Venice sailed mighty ships right off the map to establish new eastern trade routes. When the maritime empire passed its high-water mark, Venice refused to concede defeat on the world stage. Instead Venetians flooded the world with vivid painting in Venetian reds, baroque music and modern opera, independent thinkers, and parties without parallel. In its audacious thousand-year history, Venice has not only risen above sea level, but repeatedly risen to the occasion.

FROM SWAMP TO EMPIRE

A malarial swamp seems like a strange place to found an empire, unless you consider the circumstances: from the 5th to 8th century AD, Huns, Goths, and sundry other barbarians repeatedly sacked Roman Veneto towns along the Adriatic, and made murky wetlands off the coast seem comparatively hospitable. Celtic Veneti had lived in the area relatively peacefully since 1500 BC and had been Roman citizens since 49 BC, and were not in the habit of war. When Alaric led a Visigoth invasion through the province of Venetia in AD 402, many Veneti fled to marshy islands in the lagoon that stretches along the province’s Adriatic coast. Some Veneti tentatively returned to the mainland when the Visigoths left, but after Attila, king of the Huns, attacked in 452, many refugees came to stay on the islands for good.

The nascent island communities elected tribunes and in 466 met in Grado, south of Aquileia, forming a loose federation. When Emperor Justinian claimed Italy’s northeast coast for the Holy Roman Empire in 540, Venetia (roughly today’s Veneto region) and the islands elected representatives to local Byzantine government in Ravenna, which reported to the central authority in Constantinople. But when warring French Lombards swept across the Po plains eastward in 568, Veneti refugees headed for the islands in unprecedented numbers, and the marsh began to look like a city. Thousands settled on the commercial centre of Torcello; others headed to the now submerged island of Malamocco, bucolic Chioggia, and the fishing and local trading centre of Rivoalto (colloquially known as Rialto).

Crafty Venetian settlers soon rose above their swampy circumstances, residing on land lifted above tides with wooden pylons driven into some 100 feet of soft silt. When the Byzantine grip slipped, Venice seized the moment: in 726 the people of Venice elected Orso Ipato as their dux (Latin for leader), or doge (duke) in Venetian dialect, the first of 118 elected Venetian dogi that would lead the city for more than 1000 years. Like some of his successors, Orso tried to turn his appointment into a hereditary monarchy. He was assassinated for overstepping his bounds; some later dogi with aspirations to absolute power were merely blinded. At first, no one was able to stay in the doge’s hot seat for long: Orso’s successor, Teodato,
managed to transfer the ducal seat to Malamocco in 742 before being deposed. Gradually the office of the doge was understood as an elected office, which was kept in check by two councillors and the Arengo (a popular assembly).

The Lombards had failed to conquer the lagoon, but the Franks were determined to succeed. When they invaded the lagoon, the Franks were surprised by capable resistance led by Agnello Partecipazio from Rivoalto, a shallow area of the lagoon virtually unnavigable by large seafaring vessels unless they knew how to navigate the maze of deep-water channels criss-crossing the lagoon basin. Partecipazio was elected doge in 809, and the cluster of islets around Rivoalto became the focus of community development. Land was drained, canals cleared, and Partecipazio built a fortress on what would later be the site of the Palazzo Ducale. The duchy launched commercial and naval fleets that would become the envy of the Adriatic, with Venetian ships trading as far away as Egypt.

THE STOLEN SAINT

Venice had all the makings of an independent trading centre – plenty of ports, a defensible position against Charlemagne and the Huns, leadership to settle the inevitable trade disputes – but no glorious shrine to mark Venice’s place on the world map. So Venice did what any ambitious, God-fearing medieval city would do: it procured a patron saint. Under Byzantine rule, St Theodore (San Teodoro) had been the patron saint. But according to local legend, the evangelist St Mark (San Marco) had once visited the lagoon islands and been told by an angel that his body would rest there – and some Venetian merchants decided to make the prophecy come true.

In 828, Venetian smugglers stole St Mark’s body from its resting place in Alexandria, Egypt, apparently hiding the holy corpse in a load of pork to deter inspection by Muslim customs officials. Venice summoned the best artisans from Byzantium and beyond to enshrine these relics in an official church of the doge that would impress visitors with the power and glory of Venice. The usual medieval construction setbacks of riots and fires thrice destroyed exterior mosaics and weakened the underlying structure. Occasionally higher purpose got clouded over in construction dust: St Mark’s bones were misplaced twice. But even while the basilica was under construction, the winged lion of St Mark was adopted as the official emblem of the Venetian empire, symbolically setting Venice apart from Constantinople and claiming St Mark as the patron saint of an independent empire.

### PIRATE BRIDES

Today the only pirates you’re likely to spot in Venice are the ones selling knock-off Prada handbags at the Ponte dell’Accademia, but for centuries pirate ships prowled the waters around the Lido. In 944, a bevy of wealthy Venetian brides sparkling with golden dowries were sailing off into the sunset to weddings on the Lido when their boat was intercepted by pirates. The women were whisked off to a nearby harbour at Caorle, but Venetians in hot pursuit discovered the lair, slaughtered the pirates and delivered the rattled brides to weddings that must have seemed comparatively anticlimactic. The event was long commemorated with the annual Festa delle Marie (Feast of the Marys), in which Venice’s 12 wealthiest families presented money for dowries to 12 poor but beautiful young women. Today the ‘Marys’ are remembered during Carnevale with a procession and a beauty pageant crowning the most beautiful of the 12 Marys.

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<th>c 1500 BC</th>
<th>AD 726</th>
<th>828</th>
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<td>Celtic Veneti tribes, possibly from Anatolia (in present-day Turkey), arrive in northeast Italy to inhabit the region now known as the Veneto.</td>
<td>Orso Ipato becomes the first elected Venetian doge. The Byzantines consider Ipato’s election an act of rebellion, and if not actually behind it, are certainly not devastated by Ipato’s assassination in 737.</td>
<td>According to legend, the corpse of St Mark the Evangelist is smuggled from Alexandria (Egypt) to Venice in a shipment of pork. St Mark is adopted as the patron saint of Venice.</td>
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