



*The role of the venetian Doge:  
understanding the transition from  
monarch to primus inter pares*

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## *Abstract*

The transition of the role of the doge, from an absolute (if elected) monarch to the first magistrate of the republic, is in direct correlation to the shift of what constituted the elites of the city from the XI° century onward. The creation of a *res publica* is a deliberate act in favor of the commercial and trading interest of its most influential families: in containing the absolute power of one and the social mobility of newcomers, a closed (but replenishable in case of need) aristocracy can maintain indefinitely a monopoly on the political and economic rights used to achieve such a position in the first place. The way the government functions and is elected further cements this. Peace and justice, necessary for the *Serenissima*, also become symbols and myths central to the self-representation of Venice.

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On the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 1355 Marino Faliero is executed for high treason to the *Serenissima*. As the blood drips down the steps of Palazzo Ducale, Francesco Petrarca reports in a letter what he considers a lesson to any future doge: that they are «*le guide e non i padroni dello Stato. Che dico le guide? Unicamente gli onorati servitori della Repubblica*»<sup>1</sup>. The motives behind the conspiracy come from both circumstantial personal (the mythical insult of Michele Steno) and political reasons (the crippling trade war with Genoa, the extended net of clientelism of Faliero or the discontent of the population), but the power struggle has similarities to previous episodes in the earlier centuries.

The 55<sup>o</sup> Doge would be the last to be forcefully removed from office, guaranteeing the survival of the *Serenissima* while the rest of Italy was transitioning from the medieval commune to the *signoria*. Why the aristocratic republic was chosen over the alternatives by the venetian elites? In order to respond to this question, it is important to understand the transition of the role of the Doge during the period from the XI<sup>o</sup> to XII<sup>o</sup> century from a monarch to a head of state and first citizen. It is necessary also to contextualize the contemporary shift of what constituted the upper echelons of society of medieval Venice: from an essentially landed and religious nobility, a group of these families started to reinvest their capital in trade and maritime activities and found itself in a conflict of interest with those who still focused their wealth in a more traditional activities.

Given this social and historical introduction, the next step is an analysis of the powers in place: which were the checks and balances necessary (or perceived as) to the functioning of

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<sup>1</sup> "Marino Faliero" at Treccani.it

the republic? Does the state become something separated from the ruler? As *res publica* implies, the political life is collective activity, where power is derived from the society itself (and while not from directly from God, the Doge is still a sacred and central figure). Given that the most influential members of venetian society derived their position from trade, stability and justice will be their main interest. Protected both from the tyranny of one and of the majority by creations such as the *Consilium Sapientium* the *promissione ducale* and the *Gran Serrata*, the republic maintained its political system almost intact until 1797.

Primary sources shed a light on this transition, detailing how the trade oligarchy cemented its economic primacy by shaping the political institutions during the course of time. Social, political and economic rights are one in the early modern state.

## *Transformations of the venetian political structure*

### 1. The early monarchy (VIII° to X° century)

Venice started its life as dependent from the Byzantine empire, first as part of the Italian Exarchate and later as part of the *Venetia* ducat. However, cracks began to appear almost instantly during the Iconoclasm or with the forced implantation of a *magister militum* at the desire of the exarch in Ravenna. In 742 the election of the *dux* is transferred to the *Concio* or *Arengo*, the council of the free men and the clergy, just before the Lombard occupation of the peninsula cuts the political tether to Constantinople.

In this moment, the venetian monarchy shift from an appointed to an elected office; from this point forward, a conflict is sparked between the doges attempting to transform their position as a hereditary one (with the practice of the *Co-Dux*, usually a family member



nominated coregent) and the popular assembly. The struggle for power often turned violent: of the 28 doges elected until the XII<sup>o</sup> century, half of them were deposed by force<sup>2</sup>. Still, a basic diarchy between the *Dux* (who represents the Ducat internally and externally with its control over the state) and the *populus* (that elects the former and formally approves its activity) is present.

The most important aristocratic families would often vie for the role of the Doge. Such a prestigious and powerful position (as it was an absolute monarch) allowed the control and acquisition of ecclesiastical revenues or lucrative trade connections. Still, in order to maintain the necessary clientele network, lavish and economically unproductive spending was necessary: pomp and connections supplied the necessary legitimization. Those left without power could only hope in very limited social advancement and only in the forms of the *Curia Ducis*, responsible for the administration of justice as a subsidiary of the Doge, or as part of the *Sapientes*, a loose group of state functionaries and advisors. Only in 1032 the absolute power of the head of state is "constitutionally" controlled, at least in preventing the *de facto* the Doge's choice of an heir as Co-Dux: after a period of continual dominance, the Orseolo family is eternally exiled from Venice and the practice of the coregent is declared unlawful<sup>3</sup>.

As Venice slowly stabilized its position as the one of the dominant commercial powers of the Mediterranean due to its close ties to Byzantium (the Golden Bulls of 1082 and 1126) and the lucrative opportunities brought by the first crusade, some of the great families start to base their profits primarily on commercial activities; the conflict of interest between them and the Doge is now not only of political priorities, but also of economic ones. As such, the

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<sup>2</sup> Norwich J. Julius, *A History of Venice*, New York Vintage Books, 1989. ("List of the Doges of Venice" at Wikipedia.org)

<sup>3</sup> Zeno Apostolo, *Compendio della storia veneta*, Venezia, Bonvecchiato, 1847, Volume "fino alla caduta della repubblica", p.37

unrestrained power of the Doge can be detrimental to the families whose influence derives from commerce and not land. A later example would be the different courses of action proposed the events of 1171: the arrest of all the venetian merchants in Constantinople and confiscations was met with a declaration of war by the Doge (which had nothing to gain from peace, while his prestige was at stake), while the main families found reconciliation as more profitable<sup>4</sup>.

The lower classes did find their loyalty in the merchant families: mostly outside the inner circles of the Dux, they served as manpower for the ever expanding activities of the aristocratic few.



Figure 1: The extent of the venetian state in 1084

<sup>4</sup> Cracco Giorgio, *Società e stato nel medioevo veneziano*, Firenze, Olschki, 1967, pp.15-16

## 2. New lights at the horizon (XI° and XII° century)

As the most influent families consolidated their power bases, they became the main economic force of the city. Finding common ground in their interest of having at least some form of control over the Doge, in 1143 a *Consilium Sapientium* is formed by accord of the members of the Curia Ducis and of the Sapientes<sup>5</sup>. This council, which would later become the *Maggior Consiglio*, was entrusted with overseeing the activities of the head of state and was capable of vetoing any of his actions.

In the primary sources (an act of February 1142), the Doge Pietro Polani reports the convocation of a council of "*nostris iudicibus et ipsis viris sapientibus*" for their approval of his decisions "*pro honore et utilitate seu et salvatione nostre patrie*". Even before the formal creation of the *Consilium Sapientium*, the influence of those who would be part of it was considered necessary for the state (be it by force or choice, as the document does not delve into the matter)<sup>6</sup>.

Considering how close political and economic rights are in medieval society, it is in the best collective interest of the aristocratic families to prevent the pre-existing concentration of power in the hands of just one of them. Thus, a system of checks and balances slowly takes shape during a process spanning from the XI° to the early XVI° century (with the institution of the *Inquisitori del doge defunto*, a commission tasked with evaluating the activities of a doge after its death). The complex election of the head of state, for instance, is constructed mainly in order to avoid corruption; its deep ritualization can be considered not only "*as commercial brand-building for Venice, reassuring the oligarchs' customers and trading*

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp.25-30

<sup>6</sup> Edited by Cessi Roberto, *Deliberazioni del maggior consiglio di Venezia*, Bologna, Forni, 1970-1971, Volume I, pp. 235-6

*partners that the city was likely to remain stable and business-friendly”, but also as the fact “that they took seriously their responsibility to try to elect a Doge who would act for the good of Venice”<sup>7</sup>.*

As venetian society is no longer organized only around the political or economic interest or resources of one (free from any theoretical restrictions), its becomes a *res publica*. However, far from modern democratic conceptions, only a group of the most powerful elites would control the actual political (and economical) landscape of the city. As the main interest of this clique is the stability and growth of what made them so influential in the first place, the now *Serenissima* is slowly shaped in their image. The practical policy of being the peacekeeper of the Mediterranean (despite having its history dotted with protracted trade conflicts) becomes one with its international image, creating a myth that, effectively, shapes itself.

While the Consilium Sapientium did wield the power of an important advisory and vetoing council, it could not shape the general political agenda of the doge. In 1148, the *Promissione Ducale* is instituted: as a “constitutional” oath to the “Commune Veneciarum”, it served both as collection of penal laws and pledge of just and impartial government, in compliance to the decision of the *Maggior Consiglio* (that acquired this name in 1172). The power of the Doge is thus limited and dependant on the approval not of the pope or the emperor, but of the city council. The first known promissioni that survived to this day is the ones of Enrico Dandolo, Pietro Zaini and Jacopo Tiepolo of 1192, 1205 and 1229 respectively.

A prevalent theme in the three oaths is the swift and impartial delivery of justice, as in the first and last the same phrase is repeated: “*Et studiosi erimus ad rationem et iustitiam*”

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<sup>7</sup> Mowbray Miranda and Gollmann Dieter, *Electing the Doge of Venice: analysis of a 13th Century protocol*, Bristol, HP Laboratories Bristol, 2007



*omnibus qui eam quesierint et queri facerint exhibendam sine dilacione aliqua bona fide sine fraude*", a concept present in a different form also in Zaini's one ("*quod omnes homines Venecie maiores et minores equaliter portabimus in ratione et iustitia et in offensionibus [...] Et nullum hominem Venecie iuvabimus nec nocebimus per fraudem*")<sup>8</sup>. In a similar way to the centrality of peace for the well-being of venetian society, justice seem to be another pillar in the self-representation (and political interest) of the Serenissima. The fact that the state prisons were located just beside the Palazzo Ducale from the get go can be considered as a very deliberate choice, especially when considering the spatial limitations of the city: state and justice are one, both in political practise and ideological self-representation.

Another recurring point is denying the doge of any possibility of personally choosing key figures such as judges, notaries or the patriarch of the nearby Grado ("*Iudices in palatio nostro sine electione non fatiemus. Notarios sine maiori parte Consilii et collaudatione populi non faciemus.*"), while at the same time putting the control of embassies, tax collection and even personal gifts under the approval of the Maggior Consiglio ("*De universis Scolis laboratoriiis terre nostre nichil amplius servitii inquirere debeamus excepto cum voluntate maioris partis Consilii nisi quantum predecessoribus nostris et in nostro Palacio facere use sunt.*")<sup>8</sup>.

While the role of the Doge was gradually transformed from king to most distinguished among several magistrates, it could still be a very influential figure. The three individuals listed before (Dandolo, Zaini and Tieopolo) achieved great wealth and prestige due to their leadership (be it from shrewd economic policy, public image or military and diplomatic

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<sup>8</sup> Edited by Gisella Graziato, *Le promesse del doge di Venezia dalle origini alla fine del Duecento*, Venezia, Comitato per le fonti relative alla storia di Venezia, 1986 (Fonti per la storia di Venezia, sez. 1, Archivi pubblici), pp. 1-22.

activity), using such leverage to govern in a dialogue (and not as a subject) with the Consiglio. In the words from Lane's *Venice, A maritime republic* "It was impossible to prevent a successful doge from enhancing the status of his family through the glory which reflected on them from his notable achievements, but the Venetians attempted to restrain his use of the position for either personal or family gain by adding restrictions to the oath of office of each new incumbent."<sup>9</sup> Over time, such gaps were closed with new oaths at the moment of the promissione or with a review of the activities of a doge after his death (as tool against a unruly family).

The aristocratic families, in order to consolidate their power, curtailed not only the economic monopoly of the doge, but also the political one of the popular assembly, the Concione. A savvy leader could potentially steer public support in its way by citing public acclamation (as many aspects of political life were still *formally* ratified here), potentially sidestepping the influence of the Consilium Sapientium.

### 3. Against the tyranny of the masses: The *Gran Serrata* (from the late XIII<sup>o</sup> century)

The intricacies of the venetian political system appear more understandable when considering the events happening on the mainland, namely the widespread shift from the medieval commune to the *signoria*. As the political struggle between shifting factions mined the internal stabilities of such communities (generated in the first place by accumulation of wealth and control), power is slowly or abruptly concentrated in the hands of a single family.

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<sup>9</sup> Lane C. Frederick, *Venice – A maritime republic*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University press, 1973, p.95

Well aware that newcomers could achieve a great degree of influence (in the same way the original families did), restrictions on those could hold political and economic rights were in the best collective interest. After all, continuous power struggle does not mix well with lucrative trading activities.

The process starting from 1297 (the *Gran Serrata*) to 1319 (immediate and exclusive access to the Maggior Consiglio for those belonging to a select group of families) is the answer to this systemic problem of medieval republics. The formal abolition of the *Concio* in 1423 is just an overdue recognition of the political situation of Venice. It is necessary to note that the system was carefully engineered with the interests of the aristocracy in mind: the number of those now part of the Consiglio was increased and individual families could be introduced (at a hefty price) during times of crisis, while the monopoly of political power was still in the hands of those inscribed in the *Libro d'Oro*. *Oligandria* was thus avoided until the XVII° and XVIII° century<sup>10</sup>. Trading rights were also strictly centralized (limiting the number of beneficiaries and by redirecting all the internal flow of good to Venice) while the *stato de mar* maintained its maximum extension; after the loss of critical outpost such as Cyprus or Crete land investment was favored by the venetian aristocracy, as trade was no longer tolled and controlled in the lagoon city (while this niche was filled by those in the best position with connections and experience, namely the local Greek elites<sup>11</sup>).

Those wealthy citizens that were not part of the aristocracy by birth could still find social mobility. Bureaucrats, notaries and administrators were in constant need, while being profitable positions. These were however reserved to the *cittadini originari*, those who were

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.428

<sup>11</sup> Greene Molly, *Catholic pirates and Greek merchants*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2010, pp.30-31

venetians by several generations. Amusingly enough, the process of defining who could be part of such clique unfolded in a similar way to what happened inside the Maggior Consiglio: only a selected group of families could partake in such activities (inscribed in the *Libro d'argento*), probably due to the interest of maintaining a monopoly of these positions over newcomers.

## Conclusions

The physical decapitation of Marino Faliero was only the beginning of the retribution for his conspiracy. With the idea of creating a strong example for the future doges, a complex ritual of *damnatio memoriae* was put in place: a plaque reciting "*Hic fuit locus ser Marini Faletri, decapitati pro crimine proditiōnis*" was placed on his portrait in the room of the Maggior Consiglio (later painted as a shroud, after the fire of 1577) and the celebration of Saint



Figure 2: The black shroud of Marino Faliero

Isidore (16<sup>th</sup> April, the day when his death sentence was emitted) happened, at the presence of the doge, in that room. This ideological victory, of one group of aristocrats over a single one of them, was transformed in one of the myth of the *Serenissima*.

The transition of the role of the doge, from an absolute (if elected) monarch to the first magistrate of the republic, is in direct correlation to the shift of what constituted the elites of the city from the XI<sup>o</sup> century onward. The creation of a *res publica* is a deliberate act in favor of the commercial and trading interest of its most influential families: in containing the absolute power of one and the social mobility of newcomers, a closed (but replenishable in case of need) aristocracy can maintain indefinitely a monopoly on the political and economic rights used to achieve such a position in the first place. The way the government functions and is elected further cements this. Peace and justice, necessary for the *Serenissima*, also become symbols and myths central to the self-representation of Venice, as shown by primary sources.

One interesting topic of further research would be if the similarities between the roman and the venetian republic were incidental (and *ipso facto* used as a justification for power) or actively pursued. The concepts of time-limited offices, collegiality and timocracy (when considering in a strict sense the *comitia centuriata* or, in a more broader understanding, the Senate) come to mind here. It can also be said the venetian state was "depersonalized"; as true political power did not rest in the hands of a single individual, only an abstract loyalty to the republic was feasible. Shrewd individuals could later foster this ideal in what would become a very diverse maritime empire, composed of different religions, political and cultural tradition and (most importantly) economic interests.



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