

The Likeness of Venice. A Life of Doge Francesco Foscari 1373-1457

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Political biography has a relatively minor part in medieval and renaissance Venetian historiography when compared to other European states – such as England – or Italy’s other major republic in the period, Florence. The explanation may be in part due to the enduring and influential ‘myth of Venice’, an aspect of which stressed the corporate discipline of the Venetian nobility, and its loyalty to the state, qualities that transcended individual, family or factional interest. However under scrutiny this aspect of the myth does not hold up given, for example, the prominence of tomb monuments in Venetian churches, attention seeking palace building along the Grand Canal, the widespread placing of coats of arms and inscriptions on public and private buildings, the prominence of portraiture in Venetian art. If it were possible to identify more of these portraits and had not the fall of the Republic in 1797 led to the slighting or destruction of many noble coats of arms, the image of a faceless or selfless Venetian nobility would appear even less convincing.

Another explanation that can be offered for the lack of political biography in Venetian historiography lies in the written evidence available to the historian. The archives of the Venetian Republic are incredibly rich, but the records that survive for key councils – like the Senate and the Council of Ten – record motions both proposed and carried, but they do not record the cut and thrust of debate like the *Consulte e Pratiche* of the Florentine Republic. And while there is a rich chronicle tradition, it is only relatively rarely that the historian comes across the personal, Florentine-style *ricordanze* – personal and family memoirs – which can be remarkably revealing in terms of personal and family interest. These are virtually absent from the Venetian tradition, and while the cult of personality does appear in the humanistic literature and in correspondence written by, for and between Venetians, loyalty to the state tends to emerge more strongly than individual achievement, let alone criticism of the government.

However, here too traditional perceptions are being challenged along with the opacity of the Venetian evidence. In the Anglophone literature a start was made in Robert Finlay's *Politics in Renaissance Venice* (1) which drew on the minute diaries of Marino Sanuto – among others sources – to break into the political life of Venice's ruling nobility c 1500 throwing light, for example, on the contests that preceded the election of a doge. (2) Coming from a similarly questioning point of view, is Donald Queller's *The Venetian Patriciate. Reality Versus Myth* which drew on a painstaking study of Venetian records from the early 14th to the early 16th century to show that the Venetian nobility was not as selflessly dedicated to the common good of either their class or the state as the myth claimed. (3) Queller also built on earlier studies of Venetian diplomacy; Venetian ambassadors had once been hailed as models of duty and their reports to the Senate – their *relazioni* – were seen as exemplary in terms of their detail and objectivity. Queller undermined the myth by revealing the reluctance many nobles felt about serving the Republic abroad. (4)

Another approach which has questioned the 'Myth of Venice' has been in terms of prosopography. Here, an early contribution was made by Margaret King in her *Venetian Humanism in an Age of Patrician Dominance*. (5) While this study tended to support the idea that the Venetian nobility was cohesive and loyal to the state, the 'Profiles' included in the book were an attempt to chart the careers, the *cursus honorum*, of some key members of the nobility. This approach has been taken a lot further forward in recent years with the creation a database, *The Rulers of Venice, 1332–1524*. This project was inspired and led by Benjamin Kohl, and provides an insight into office holding within the nobility. (6) One of Kohl's associates on this project, Monique O'Connell, has built on her own earlier research on the key Venetian colony of Crete to produce a study of the Venetians who ruled the Republic's eastern empire, the *Stato di Mar*. (7) Finally, James Grubb has challenged the view that Venetians did not keep personal records. (8)

The book under review offers an opportunity to scrutinise an aspect of the myth of Venice close to its heart. According to the myth, the doge of Venice, though head of state, had the trappings of power only, and the ceremonial that surrounded him was intended to reflect Venice rather than the doge himself or his family. In *The Likeness of Venice*, this is a central theme; Romano raises the issue first in his preface where he discusses his choice of title, 'The Likeness of Venice'. In a debate held in July 1447, the Venetian Council of Ten described the doge, Francesco Foscari, as 'that *Imago* which represents the government (*dominium*) of the Venetians [...] and by whose means the entire government of our state is administered'. Romano's translation of '*Imago*' raises an issue that reverberates throughout his book; 'likeness' suggests similarity and hence some distance or detachment, whereas the Ten perhaps understood – as is suggested by the words 'by whose means the entire government of our state is administered' – a much closer relationship between the doge and Venice, that the former was the reflection or expression of the latter, rather than a mere cipher.

This introduces another major reason for the importance of this study. In his own lifetime, and after his death, Foscari could be seen as challenging the myth of Venice in terms of his own ambition to obtain and use the ducal office. Did that mean that the doge was that powerless and empty? The conduct of his wayward son, Jacopo, particularly in relations to foreign powers, and the relationship between father, son and constitution are also issues that came to attract attention as Venice's historical significance and legacy came to be discussed from the late 18th century. This emerges clearly in the final chapter of Romano's book where he discusses the posthumous reputation of Francesco Foscari, as handled by poets, composers, painters, antiquarians, film makers, and – even – historians.

However, as Romano's book reminds us, Foscari's reign is not just matter of personalities and historiography. He was doge for an exceptionally long time, from 1423 to 1457. (9) In this period, Venice's transformation into a major Italian power was confirmed with the acquisition of key cities in Lombardy (Brescia and Bergamo), from Filippo Maria Visconti, duke of Milan (10), and with an incursion into the Papal States, 'inheriting' Ravenna in 1441. In theory, all these gains were in the Republic's interest, and should have brought with them substantial revenue, but in reality they presented considerable problems in terms of government, defence and diplomacy. Meanwhile, in the eastern Mediterranean – Venice's more traditional area of interest and source of wealth – the balance of power was shifting against the Republic, in terms of the rise of Ottoman Empire, brought home by the capture of Constantinople by Mohammed II in

1453. These developments – in the *Stato di Terra* and the *Stato di Mar* – impacted heavily on the Venetian government in terms of decision making, personal and family interest and the balance of power within an unwritten constitution of which Francesco Foscari was the head.

For obvious reasons, Romano's basic approach is largely chronological. He begins with a discussion of the Foscari family in the 14th century, established as members of Venice's hereditary aristocracy, if not constituting one of its larger clans. He charts the offices they held, and their sources of wealth, which tended to be in property rather than trade, and their acts of piety and charity; he also makes it clear that from an early date the Foscari had interests in the Italian mainland, in terms of land and titles. Francesco was born in 1373, and if aspects of his early life are obscure, his political and social prominence was assured and advanced by his acquisition of the prestigious office as one of the Procurators of St Mark in January 1416. The Procurators were the saint's representatives on earth, and on earth too they had a fiduciary role, as trustees with considerable assets and discretion at their disposal. Romano explains convincingly the significance of the position within the Venetian government, and the opportunities it presented to 'win friends and influence people'. He also suggests how Foscari used the office to support his bid for the ducal title – which he attained in April 1423 – while giving an exemplary account of the complicated constitutional process that preceded a dogal election. This was designed to counter favouritism, lobbying and faction, but Foscari's own election soon became regarded as controversial. Romano rightly agrees with earlier historians like Hans Baron that such a view was largely the product of the personal and political divisions that arose later in Foscari's career.

This was largely dominated by the implications of Venice's increasing involvement in Italy in territorial, political and military terms, and Romano organises much of the rest of the book round the various phases of the wars Venice became engaged in to extend and hold its mainland state, though he does not neglect events in the eastern Mediterranean, for example by showing how the Republic's relatively brief (1423– 1430) acquisition of the Byzantine city of Thessalonika brought it face to face with the realities of Ottoman power. However, the political and financial costs of the Republic's involvement on the *terraferma* had serious repercussions for Foscari himself, contributing to two attempts to resign the dogeship and leading to his eventual abdication in 1457. Foscari was also weakened by the association of his son Jacopo, and other members of his 'circle', with foreign powers, and in particular with Francesco Sforza who became duke of Milan in 1450. In the course of his narrative, Romano explores these issues in some detail, showing how the search for office in, and promise of favours from, the *terraferma* could compromise members of the Venetian ruling class at the highest level. In the end, as the 'likeness', or personification of the Republic itself, Foscari carried the burdens of state even when they were not of his making alone. Already in ill-health and suffering from the disgrace of his son, he died very shortly after his forced abdication on 1 November 1457.

Throughout, Romano writes clearly, though he would have helped his readers if he had broken up his extremely long chapters: the Foscari family background could have been separated from Francesco's own career, and the doge's abdication should have been detached from the later historiography. However, for the most part the narrative and 'asides' to discuss aspects of the Venetian constitution or the geo-political situation in Italy and the Mediterranean – for example – read well. In places the narrative becomes quite dramatic as in its treatment of the Republic's disposal of the ambitious and unreliable mercenary captain Carmagnola (Francesco Bussone) in 1432, or Francesco's relationship with his disgraced son, making one understand why such personalities and events had such an appeal in the nineteenth century. The author displays a sound grasp of Venetian topography, and its significance, which could have been conveyed better to reader with a map of the city.

Another commendable dimension to the book is Romano's interdisciplinary approach, a readiness to use ceremonial, architecture, painting and music to throw light on his subject. However, these insights could have been taken further. For example, the reader is left with 'mixed messages' about the iconography and patronage of the *Porta della Carta* commissioned from the Bon workshop in 1439 this provided an entrance to the ducal palace, while linking it to the Basilica of San Marco; it also carried a likeness of the doge himself. A similar point could be made about the construction of the *Ca' Foscari* from 1453 – where references to Cosimo de' Medici as a model or rival (p. 250) in terms of palace building seem stretched and

too infected by 'Florentinitis'.⁽¹¹⁾ Romano is right to argue that Foscari would not have to have visited Florence to know about Cosimo's palace-building, but the architectural styles of the buildings and the positions of their patrons were so different that explanations for Foscari's commission are more likely to be found in Venice itself, and in his personal and family circumstances, than elsewhere.

This leads to some more substantial points. The political, military and economic relevance of the east and west to Venice is certain, but the subject is relatively well charted. The strength and novelty of Romano's book lies in its close reading of the Venetian archives, and its careful exploration of issues relating to personal and family status, and political groupings and shifts. The book might have gained from less background narrative and more of a 'Namierite' approach to the rivalries, alliances, sects and problems of constitutional balance which so concerned contemporaries. Some observations seem rather unsubstantiated as when (p. 119) it is suggested that 'Foscari's heightened visibility' (in the early 1430s) represented an attempt 'to bind the subject cities and their inhabitants to the dominante through the personage of the doge and by means of a common symbolic and ritual language'. Discussions of the significance of the building of the Ca' Foscari could have been enhanced by more information on Francesco's assets, and by the status of other members of his family.

The promissione drawn up before each election in an attempt to regulate the incoming doge's private as well as his public life – is well discussed here, but it would have been interesting to have been given some insight into Foscari's life within the palace walls and the nature of his household. It also would have been useful to have taken further the search for new material. As mentioned, one of the strengths of the book is its careful reading of the archival record. However there is more chronicle evidence on Foscari's 'reign' than is drawn on here; also missing is an evaluation of the chronicle sources used; Marino Sanudo, a later source, was not as hostile to Francesco's memory as is sometimes suggested here, referring to him in his *Itinerario* of 1483 as 'a most Serene Prince whose fame is ever-lasting', and as 'Pater Patriae'.⁽¹²⁾ Finally, as the 'likeness of Venice' the perception of his dogeship from abroad, in the form and style of diplomatic correspondence as well as in the wider record – beyond the occasional remarks of an Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini – would have been instructive.

There are some minor slips. John Hus could not have been dealt with in the 1430s (p. 120); he had been burnt at the stake at the Council of Constance; the Cenedese was not a region 'furthest from Venice' (p. 199). However, on balance the *The Likeness of Venice*, handsomely produced and reasonably priced, makes an extremely important contribution to the study of Venetian history and its grasp of institutions and events, its coverage and its accessible style are likely to make it a major source of reference for students of the Republic at all levels, as well as encouraging further research into the city's government and ruling class. In 1986, James Grubb published 'When myths lose power: four decades of Venetian historiography'⁽¹³⁾ in which he sought to show how the myth of Venice was being subjected to greater scrutiny by historians. Romano continues this process of scrutiny, but he also shows that the myth retains validity, not just as a challenge to historians, but as something which Venetians believed in themselves, if only when it suited them. This is revealed in the concern felt by contemporaries, and articulated in the records of state, over the threat to the Republic posed by faction, personal and family interest, inequity within the nobility and the influence of the doge, all of which are prominent among the issues discussed in this fine biography.

Notes

1. Robert Finlay, *Politics in Renaissance Venice* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1980).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Sanuto's diaries cover the period 1496-1533.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Donald Queller, *The Venetian Patriciate. Reality Versus Myth* (Chicago, IL 1986).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Donal Queller, *Early Venetian Legislation on Ambassadors* (Geneva, 1966).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Margaret King, *Venetian Humanism in an Age of Patrician Dominance* (Princeton, NJ, 1986).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. <<http://rsa.fmdatabase.com/fmi/iwp/cgi?-db=venice4-0%20intact&-loadframes> [2]> [accessed 14 July 2010].[Back to \(6\)](#)

7. M. O'Connell, *Men of Empire: Power and Negotiation in Venice's Maritime State* (Baltimore, MD, 2009).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. James Grubb, *Family Memoirs from Venice (15th to 17th centuries)* (Rome, 2010), published with the support of the Comitato per la Pubblicazione delle Fonti relativi alla Storia di Venezia, vol. 52.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Foscari was born in 1373. He died shortly after his abdication in 1457.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Rather dismissively, Romano tends to refer to this formidable opponent of the Republic as 'Visconti'.
[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. 'Florentinitis' is a term coined by Vincent Ilardi to describe an exaggerated and myopic view of the significance of Florence in the Italian Renaissance.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. *Itinerario per la Terraferma Veneziana*, ed. Rawdon Brown (Padua, 1847 – though in fact 1848), p. 116. The honour was first bestowed on Foscari by Bernardo Giustinian in the eulogy delivered following the doge's death, *Likeness of Venice*, p. 316.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. James Grubb, 'When myths lose power: four decades of Venetian historiography', *Journal of Modern History*, 58 (1986), 43–94.[Back to \(13\)](#)

The author has read the review with great interest and does not care to respond.

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