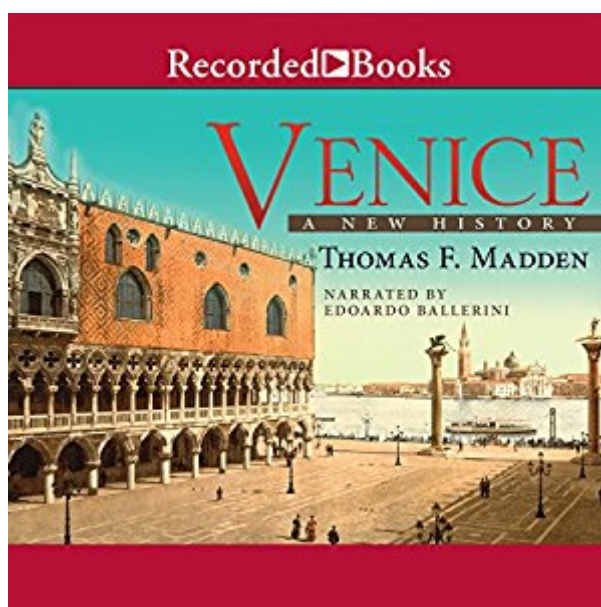


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Venice: A New History



Synopsis

An extraordinary chronicle of Venice, its people, and its grandeur Thomas Madden's majestic, sprawling history of Venice is the first full portrait of the city in English in almost thirty years. Using long-buried archival material and a wealth of newly translated documents, Madden weaves a spellbinding story of a place and its people, tracing an arc from the city's humble origins as a lagoon refuge to its apex as a vast maritime empire and Renaissance epicenter to its rebirth as a modern tourist hub. Madden explores all aspects of Venice's breathtaking achievements: the construction of its unparalleled navy, its role as an economic powerhouse and birthplace of capitalism, its popularization of opera, the stunning architecture of its watery environs, and more. He sets these in the context of the rise and fall of the Byzantine Empire, the endless waves of Crusades to the Holy Land, and the awesome power of Turkish sultans. And perhaps most critically, Madden corrects the stereotype of Shakespeare's money-lending Shylock that has distorted the Venetian character, uncovering instead a much more complex and fascinating story, peopled by men and women whose ingenuity and deep faith profoundly altered the course of civilization.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

First, Madden goes all the way back to the Romans who fled Attila's invasion in 450. He explains how they modified the islands to survive. In 697 the first Doge was elected and how Venice's survival became linked to Constantinople. St. Mark's body was moved from Alexandria in 829 for safekeeping from the Muslims. By 1094 Venice had a population of 50,000 which doubled in a century. While Europe was in the feudal age, Venice became democratic, a maritime powerhouse,

and a decisive military power. The 4th Crusade is not discussed until chapter 6 which is where most other books begin. Chapter 7 debunks the theories of historians that Venice planned or got benefits from the 4th Crusade. The almost continuous wars with Genoa, Muslims, and European kings is described in detail. Chapter 9 explains the unique methods employed to limit the Black Plague and the construction of San Marco as we see it today. Chapter 11 reveals how Venice's need for the necessities of life drove it to trade for everything. This required a quick medium of exchange. Money, deposit banking, loans, bonds, insurance, and bookkeeping came into use. Jewish money lenders played a significant role. When the Portuguese and later the Dutch began direct voyages for spices and Asian luxury goods, Venice went into decline. But it became a major art, crafts, architecture, and education center for Europe. Commercial shipping continued through the 18th century but their military power was gone. As early as 1600 Venice became a tourist destination. Silk, lace, and glass became major industries. Napoleon conquered the mainland empire and in 1797 the government was dissolved. The Habsburgs ruled until Italy became a nation.

I really wish I had read this book before visiting Venice. That said, Madden provides a fascinating and detailed biography of Venice, his emphasis on its unique place in European history as a republic and as a center of commerce and capitalism hundreds of years before the rest of the Continent adapted these ideas. The unique relationship of Venice with Constantinople and its place as a major medieval commercial center are the primary foci of the book. It is at once entertaining, informative and insightful. This high praise aside, there are two issues I took with Madden's writing. The first is the almost unapologetically Venetian view he takes on Venice's role and place in Mediterranean politics. I cannot imagine a historian of Genoa (Venice's Italian maritime rival to the west) having the same attitude and coming to the same conclusions about Venice's role as Madden does. Similarly, Madden's treatment of the Fourth Crusade, if not a white-wash of Venice's role in the sacking of Constantinople, than something close to it, was a bit much for my tastes. Admittedly the Byzantine Emperors were often some shady characters, but as Madden writes it, the Venetians were wholly unsoiled of any wrongdoing. The second issue I have is with its lack of detail since the Napoleonic age. Some allowance can be made on this point, as Madden's area of expertise is the Middle Ages and Early Modern period; still, given the depth and fascinating details of the birth and growth of the Venetian republic, I had anticipated the same of his coverage of Venice in the 19th century: its relationship to the Habsburgs, the unification of Italy, the "Italia Irredenta" of the early 20th century.

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