

Venice from the air

A 14 hours journey by air provides an excellent opportunity to catch up with one's reading. I chose Lord Norwich's *History of Venice*--a 670 page detailed account of how this city state acquired a great Mediterranean empire that lasted almost 1000 years, growing by means of trade, free enterprise, warfare, and skilful diplomacy.

So progressive was Venice that by 1335 it already had a national health service. The doctors were salaried by the state. They took yearly continuing education courses, with dissection of corpses, and also attended monthly meetings and exchanged notes on new cases and treatments. At times they had to deal with horrendous epidemics--typhus, malaria, dysentery, and especially the plague, the Black Death, brought by Venetian and Genoese ships from Crimea. Doctors' rules required them to remain in the city during epidemics, and not to abandon patients suffering from plague. Even in normal times they were expected to alert their patients as early as the second visit to set their spiritual and temporal affairs in order. Research also flourished in Venice, the anatomist Sarpi describing the valves of veins and perhaps also the circulation of the blood some 25 years before Harvey. Doctors from all over Italy came to practice in Venice, and so did lawyers; but administrators were exported, being in great demand abroad.

Throughout its history many illustrious visitors came to this splendid city: great emperors and popes, Czar Paul--already mad and therefore "very properly assassinated"--and in 1782 "for reasons not altogether clear," John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. At least one Venetian doge died of the plague; one died of a surfeit of grilled eels; one was 90 years old and after his stroke had a shelf built in front of his throne to prevent him from sliding off. Among other celebrities Titian died of the plague; Charles XII of France of probable extradural haematoma; and Francesco Morosini, who defeated the Turks but wrecked the Acropolis, of gall stones. We read about Gregory XII, thin as a spirit appearing through skin and bones; Sixtus IV, his tongue so swollen that he could scarcely speak in opposition to a peace treaty; Selim the Sot, partial to Cypriot wines; and Mehmet the conqueror of Constantinople impaling his enemies or having them cut in half at the waist.

The Venetians' decline began in the 16th century, as they grew increasingly soft and corrupt, increasing public ownership leading to increased taxation. By 1780 over 60% of men were bachelors and divorce was so easy that the Patriarch had 900 cases pending. Over the centuries the government developed into a closed complex oligarchic system designed to prevent any one person from becoming too powerful. The people grumbled at times at this exclusion from government, but they accepted it because on the whole the rule was wise, and for centuries Venice was the envy of Europe and one of the best governed cities in the world.--