

THE VENETIAN ARSENAL

The Foundation of the Arsenal Shipyard to build the Venetian Navy by Doge Ordelafo Falier and the foundation of the Venetian Empire

Trade and battle were not separated in the Venetian mind, but the over-riding concern was trade. They entered slowly and unenthusiastically into the Crusades since they traded with the Muslims and recognised superior learning in Mathematics, Astronomy, Medicine and many other cultural achievements, in the Arabs. They had no interest in racist thuggery or religious theorising. They only allowed themselves to become involved in war when it would open up trade. This was a quite different mode of becoming prosperous than that employed by the Franks in the Crusades, who saw looting and rapine as a means of enriching themselves.

The Doge Ordelafo Falier and Doge Domenico Michiel had however two real problems to solve. They were harried in their Dalmatian territories by the Croats and Hungarians whose attempts at annexation of Split and the offshore islands had to be repelled. The second problem was that in order to maintain tax-free trading advantages in the Eastern Empire they were obliged to please the Eastern Emperor, to whose territories the new Crusader States including the Kingdom of Jerusalem, now belonged. The Crusader States were actively threatened by the Muslims, Fatmids from Egypt and Seljuks from Syria and then King Baldwin II, King of Jerusalem was captured and taken as a hostage in 1123.



The entrance to the Arsenal as it is now, built between 1692 and 1694 by Alessandro Tremignon

In order to defend both its dependencies on the Dalmatian coast and to fulfil its military obligations in the Near East, Venice had to have a Navy. To that end, it could, Doge Falier saw clearly, not have to depend on requisitioning suitable ships at short notice when need required. He set about building what was to be the world famous 'Arsenal' dockyard on two islands named 'Zemelle' to the East of St Mark's Square, which was the location of the first instance of industrial 'production line' methods in the world. Its artificers were highly

specialised, only working on one tiny aspect of building a ship, with great speed and skill. This specialism was facilitated by the newly invented, 'rib and plank' method of ship-building that, instead of building a complete hull from the bottom of the keel, first built a framework and then attached planks to the skeleton. This made construction far quicker and lighter. Eventually with the 'production line' technique. By the 1500s the Venice Arsenal could turn out a fully equipped large warship in a day, employing 16,000 workmen making and fitting standardised parts.

Venice's Naval supremacy enabled her to win back Dalmatian territories and in the East put a permanent end to the Saracen naval threat. The Franks, who at that time ruled the Crusader 'Outremer' States, as vassals of the Eastern Emperor, gave the Venetians land in return for their military aid. This was the beginning of the Venetian Empire, over which the flag with the Venetian lion was to fly till Napoleon put an end to the Republic. The Byzantine Emperor, in alliance with the Franks, restored the favourable trading rules and indeed gave even greater concessions.