

THE FIRST DOGES OF VENICE, REPRESENTATIVES OF THE BYZANTINE ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this study is to present the origins of the Venetian rulers and the relationship of the first doges with the Byzantine Empire. The fact that the first doges were officials of the Byzantine administration is an obvious form of Byzantine civilization over Venice. On the other hand, the accentuation of the Byzantine matrix of the Venetian doge is capable of shedding light on the role the doges have had in universal history. The fact that the Doges adopted the ideological hegemony of the Byzantine emperors, as well as numerous forms of protocol and ceremony, inspired the Venetian rulers to impose the North-Adriatic state as the main economic force of the Mediterranean Sea. The special status that Venice acquired on the Byzantine route explains today's separatist tendency of the Veneto region, which also includes Venice. As all these tendencies find the answer in the past, it is necessary to research some important aspects of the relationship between Byzantium and Venice during the Middle Ages.

Keywords: Venice, Byzantine Empire, Doges, Middle Ages

The Byzantine model manifested in Venice the first forms of political organization¹: "The first dukes of Venice were Byzantine officials"². Giorgio Ravegnani, in his work on the Venetian Doges, makes it very clear: "Byzantines were the original forms of government. First, a *dux* meant a general governor on the model of other masters in Italy, to whom the Venetians gave the name of *doge*"³.

"The title of duke, which is at the same time Germanic, Lombard, Carolingian, is, above all, Byzantine"⁴. From an etymological point of view, the word *doge*⁵ came from the Latin *dux*, through the dialectical *doxe*. "The Doge

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¹ Stefano Gasparri, *Venice between the VIIIth and the IXth centuries. A reflection on the sources*, in: *Venetians Studies offered to Gaetano Cozzi*, ed. Gherardo Ortalli, Venezia: Publishing House, 1992, 16.

² Giorgio Ravegnani, *Il doge di Venezia* (Bologna: Il Mulino), 8.

³ The duke was a military commander of the border provinces.

⁴ Nicolae Iorga, *Les commencements de Venise*, in: *Bulletin de la Section Historique*, tomes XVIII, (București, 1932), 15.

⁵ The duke was a military commander of the border provinces.

title is nothing but a Byzantine Duke”⁶, being the governor of a territorial-administrative unit of the Byzantine Empire, or the abbreviation of *domesticus scholae*, a kind of imperial cavalry ruler. If the oldest Venetian documents that mention this word date back to the 9th century, especially during the 7th to 9th centuries, the true ruler of the lagoon was the emperor of Constantinople and the ducal leader was, at best, a governor⁷.

The Doge, a high ranking dignitary of the Eastern Empire, distinguished himself by his noble origin and on the other hand had a special status through the increased interest of Constantinople in the Northern Adriatic Sea: “Venice is a small Romania administered by a chosen duke with his officials or judges, as they were called in Rome, with his local patricians, elective creation and imperial denomination”⁸. Not by chance, the first Ducal families were Veneto-Byzantine.

At first, the doge was “appointed by the emperor, depending on the emperor, adorned with titles by the emperor, related to the emperor”⁹. However, the Venetian urban community enjoyed a certain autonomy, “to which the Byzantium imposed nothing but the recognition of its power and the fulfilment of certain duties”¹⁰. Although the Byzantine emperors could have named the Venetian Doges, they were satisfied only with confirming the choice even if they wanted someone else.

The first doge, detained more by the Venetian tradition that tends to deceive the beginnings of history of the lagoon, was Paoluccio Anafesto. Venetian chronicles strive to emphasize the democratic character of the event¹¹, “but the choice would require the approval of the Byzantine Emperor”¹². Some chronicles have fantastically interpreted the name Anafesto as “the primitive name of the Falier family”¹³. It is far more likely that Paulicius, Paoluccio or Paolo Lucio Anafesto was not a Venetian, but a Byzantine diplomatic representative, perhaps Paul the exarch of Ravenna. Thus, the supposed Venetian Doge was, at best, a Byzantine official and the legendary view of the sources of the 10th century, such as that offered by John the Deacon, is the product of pro-Western agendas of that period.

More a Byzantine governor than doge, the second doge of Venetian tradition was Marcello Tegaliano, who ruled Venice for 9 years until 726. Although the first Venetian rulers received the same title of doge, only this year can we talk of a clear Venetian political organization at the head of which is the Doge.

⁶ Nicolae Iorga, *Cinci conferințe despre Veneția*, Ediția a II-a (Vălenii de Munte: Așezământul de Tipografie Datina Românească, 1926), 46.

⁷ Thomas F. Madden, *Venice: A New History* (London: Viking Penguin, 2012), 13.

⁸ Nicolae Iorga, *Études Byzantines*, vol. I (București, 1939-1940), 219.

⁹ Iorga, *Cinci conferințe despre Veneția*, 73.

¹⁰ Nicolae Iorga, *Relations entre l'Orient et l'Occident* (Paris, 1923), 159.

¹¹ Mario di Biasi, *La cronaca veneziana di Giovanni Diacono*, vol. I (Venezia: Ateneo Veneto, 1986), 73.

¹² Wilhelm Heyd, *History of sea trade in the Middle Age* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1885), 109.

¹³ Ravegnani, *Il doge*, 15.

The event that marked the beginning of Venice's national history was the Iconoclast Schism¹⁴, which tightened the relationship between the West and the Byzantine Empire. At that time, pro-Byzantine doges were replaced by a local ruler, without the consent of the Byzantine exarch of Ravenna. It was a nobleman, named Orso Ipato, who occupied the ducal chair between 726 - 737. It took the traditional Byzantine strategy, offering gifts, rewards, and titles, for the relationship to return to normal. The privileges were not very numerous, but it was enough that the Venetian rulers were assimilated to the Constantinopolitan aristocracy. Emperor Leon III the Isaurian (717-741) recognized "the province of Venice protected by us and God" and confirmed the doge Orso by offering the title "of consul" (*hypathos*) the first Byzantine noble rank offered to the Venetian rulers. Byzantine tactics worked as the Venetian fleet played a decisive role in rejecting the Longobard siege on Ravenna in 732. During the siege, the exarch of Ravenna fled to Venice, and Pope Gregory III (731-741) had a direct epistolary exchange with the doge, aspects that influenced the political evolution of the Venetian state¹⁵.

After the reign of Orso, Emperor Leon III decided to return Venice under Byzantine authority. That is why he suspended the appointments of the doges and forced the lagoon to be led between 737-742 by career soldiers, *magister militum*¹⁶: "When the relations with Byzantium were tense, they returned to the old military system. When they were in good terms, they'd go back to the doge system"¹⁷. The Venetian chronicles describe this period in elusive terms, suggesting the impossibility of keeping the string of doges. The same Venetian tradition retained the names of the new rulers: Leone, Felice called Cornicola, Deusdedit, son of former doge Orso, Giovanni and Giovanni Fabriciaro.

The next doge, politically oriented towards Constantinople, was Deusdedit (742-756). Chronicler Giovanni Giacomo Caroldo emphasized the continuity of the relationship with Byzantium under the reign of the new duke, who due to his nobility was invested with the dignity of consul and was much loved by the Greek emperors. After the end of the exarchs period of Ravenna in 751, Venice took over the position of the Byzantine centre in Northern Italy. At the same time, the new political status increased Venice's independence, which was formally dependent on a distant gentleman who was in Constantinople and not in Ravenna. Nevertheless, the military collaboration maintained friendly political relations between Venice and Byzantium: "The political link with Byzantium remained operative and can be

¹⁴ The Schism or the iconoclast crisis started with the decision of Leo III the Isaurian (717-741) to prohibit the cult of icons.

¹⁵ Pierre Daru, *Histoire de la République de Venise*, vol. I (Paris: Imprimeurs de L'Institut de France, 1853), 37.

¹⁶ "Magister militum" was a political-military governor who ruled an army made of local soldiers that fought on behalf of the Byzantine Emperor.

¹⁷ Iorga, *Les commencements de Venise*, 14.

found in the participation of the Venetian troops in the defence of Istria"¹⁸. The removal of Deusdedit from the Ducal Chair was carried out in a Byzantine manner: he was "blinded by Galla who takes his dukedom only for a year. He is also blinded by Domenico Monegario"¹⁹.

After several years of reign (756-764), Doge Monegario will lose the ducal throne in the same manner.

The first doge, a nobleman of Byzantine Heraclea, was Maurizio Galbajo (764-787). By associating his son, Giovanni instituted a form of Byzantine reign, the co-regency that offered a dying character to the Venetian reign between 764-1032²⁰.

At the beginning of the 9th century, the supremacy of Venice was disputed by the two great Christian empires, the Byzantine and Carolingian Empires. In 803, during the reign of Emperor Nikephoros I (802-811), a compromise was reached on dividing the spheres of influence between the two empires. The Pact, known under the name of *Pax Nicefori*, stipulated that Venice, Istria, Dalmatia and Southern Italy would remain under the influence of the Eastern Roman Empire. Three years later, the same territory enters the authority of Charles I's son, Pepin, during the first division of the Carolingian Empire, and to prove his authority, Pepin invaded Venice. During the confrontation the Venetians who "did not want to become Frank and could not be Byzantine"²¹ nevertheless affirmed adherence to the Eastern Empire. That is why the Venetians were supported by a powerful Byzantine fleet led by Admiral Nicetas. The High Byzantine dignitary rejected the Franks, confirmed the Doge Obelerio Antenorio (804-811) and offered him the Byzantine title "bearer of the sword" (*spatharios*). However, in order to prove the Byzantine authority, Admiral Nicetas sent the associate of the doge, Beato, the patriarch of Olivolo, Christopher and the tribune Felix, into exile to Constantinople.

Unexpectedly, the conflict between the Venetians and the Franks brought together the Byzantine Empire and the Carolingian one, and the Venetians became the indirect agents of the first settlement between the Eastern and Western Emperors. In 810 Emperor Nikephoros sent an ambassador, the *spatharios* Arsaphios, to the court of the sovereign Charles the Great, from whom he received the recognition of Byzantine authority over Venice and Istria.

During the reign of the next basileus, Michael I Rangabe (811-813), more precisely in 812, peace between the Byzantines and the Franks was reconfirmed, by which Charles the Great was recognized as emperor in exchange for the transfer of rights to Venice and Dalmatia. So the Venetian region remained under the "further, but efficient protection of the Byzantine Emperor. This dependence

¹⁸ Giorgio Ravegnani, *Bisanzio e Venezia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2006), 40.

¹⁹ Biasi, *La cronaca veneziana*, 87.

²⁰ Ravegnani, *Il doge*, 29.

²¹ Nicolae Iorga, *Venice and the peninsula...*, 7.

will mostly favour the peaceful penetration of the Venetians into the Empire"²². Another consequence of the war between the Venetians and the Franks was the relocation of Venice's administrative centre to the island called Rialto²³. The first doge who settled here, Agnello Partecipazio (811-827), had probably, like his wife Elena, Byzantine origins. The Armenian Emperor Leon V (813-820) confirmed this move by sending the relics of Saint Zachariah and by building a house of worship. As a token of respect, Doge Agnello sent an embassy to the new Byzantine Emperor, Michael II (820-829). The diplomatic mission gained a memorable character by marrying the doge's nephew to a Byzantine princess²⁴.

Justinian, the son of Doge Agnello, received the title of "consul" (*hypathos*) in 827 from Constantinople to complete the title "of imperial consul and humble duke of the province of Venice" (*imperial hypathos and humilis dux provinciae Venetiorum*)²⁵. Venice's diplomatic delegation to Constantinople, ruled by Justinian, recalls the close ties between Byzantium and Venice since the beginning of the 9th century, for "the Doges continued to look to the Eastern Empire as a factor of decision to confirm their legitimacy"²⁶. This embassy is an example of the diplomatic relations of the 9th and 10th centuries: between the years of 807-991, numerous diplomatic missions were registered and crossed the Mediterranean between Constantinople and Venice, more precisely seven Venetian embassies in Constantinople and five Byzantine diplomatic missions in same period. The intense diplomatic activity seems to be due to the same effect of the Byzantine model. During Justinian Partecipazio's reign – although he only ruled between 827-829 – two memorable events took place in Venice: the reception of the relics of St. Mark's Apostle or Mark's episode in Alexandria of Egypt, and then the campaign against the Arabs. Since the beginning of the 9th century, the Arabs have taken possession of Sicily, the Taranto Bay and the Tyrrhenian Sea coast. The Sarasin issue required firm action. That is why the Byzantine basileus Michael II (820-829), who strived for the Adriatic Sea „to remain a great Byzantine sea"²⁷, asked for the assistance of the Venetian fleet against the Arabs.

²² Freddy Thiriet, *La Romanie vénéitienne au Moyen Âge. Le développement et l'exploitation du domaine colonial vénitien (XIIIe-XVe siècles)* (Paris: Editions E. de Boccard, Paris, 1959), 29.

²³ Rialto, in the past *Rivus altus*, then *Rivo-alto*, that is the deep canal, the canal which was dug where the lagoon was at its the highest point, is the most beautiful and well-situated island in the Venetian archipelago which became the center of the Venetian fortress.

²⁴ G. F. Tafel, G. M. Thomas, *Urkunden zur altern Handels und Staatsgeschichte der Republik Venedig* (Wien, 1856), 4.

²⁵ Roberto Cessi, *Storia della Repubblica di Venezia* (Firenze: Giunti Martello, 1981), 36.

²⁶ Șerban Marin, *Giustiniano Partecipazio și reprezentarea primei ambasade venețiene la Constantinopol în cronică Serenissimei*, in: *Studii venețiene*. vol. I, *Veneția, Bizanțul și spațiul românesc* (București: Editura Academiei Române, 2008), 89.

²⁷ Vera von Falkenhausen, *The Byzantine domination of Southern Italy from the IXth to the XIth centuries* (Bari: Ecumenica Editrice, 1978), 41.

During the reign of Justinian Partecipazio or Badoer (827-829), his brother, Giovanni, retired to Constantinople. The choice of the Byzantine capital as a place of refuge, tells a lot about the relationship between Venice and Byzantium. The physical impotence and the fact that he did not have a direct successor led Justinian to recall his exiled brother, making him a consort and successor.

The Partecipazio dynasty, that ruled Venice between 811-836, is particularly significant for the relations between Venice and the Byzantine Empire because “it expresses the return of the dukedom of Venice to the completion of Eastern allegiance; these are the true founders of Venice as we know it today”²⁸. Not even the fiercest defenders of the Venetian autonomy could fail to notice that the Byzantine elements were evident during that period.

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²⁸ Antonio Carile, *La Romania dalla Venetiarum Provincia alla Signoria di Venezia*, in: *Porphyra*, V, Nr. 11, (Venezia: Associazione Culturale Bisanzio, 2008), 31.