

Welcome to our April book, *Historians!*



Our next meeting will be Tuesday, April 13 at 6:30 on Zoom to discuss *City of Fortune: How Venice Ruled the Seas* by Roger Crowley published in 2011. You may remember that in Fall 2018 we read Crowley's *Empires of the Sea* which focused on the siege of Malta. In *City of Fortune*, Crowley takes us through the almost 500 years that Venice dominated the eastern Mediterranean. How did a city without land accomplish this feat? Crowley focuses on the Venetians' single-minded

determination to build and enforce a monopoly over their maritime routes. And they would keep this monopoly at any cost. In the process, the entire city was excommunicated numerous times by numerous popes to no avail. And they fought battles with their closest rivals in Genoa for 150 years. Crowley introduces us to a city state that was less a government and more a joint-stock company with vivid descriptions of the people, their leaders, the sea battles, and the battles for dominance in business—the things that make Venice even more unique than the architecture. The flag of St. Mark's, pictured above, flew like a corporate logo all over the Venetian empire.

You may be surprised by Crowley's focus on Venice as maritime empire rather than on the city. What becomes clear very quickly is that Venice is not interested in land but in sea routes. For this reason, I would recommend that you keep a good map handy as you read the book. Much becomes clear, not only about the Venetian empire, but about the sea lanes of today. As Alfred Thayer Mahan, naval strategist, will say centuries later, "Whoever rules the waves rules the world." The Venetians understood this in their bones. Control of the sea lanes meant control of access to those lanes, ideally access limited to Venetian ships. This meant ongoing battles over Constantinople and a 150-year vicious war with Genoa. In the process, Venice will leave its imprint all over the eastern Mediterranean and will bring the riches of the ancient world to Venice. Everyone knows that the famous horses over St Mark's came from Constantinople. Crowley explains how and why these ancient symbols, among others, come to hold a unique place in Venetian rituals.

Crowley takes the long view in telling a complex history. He makes this long view comprehensible by anchoring it in vivid personalities and in vividly described sea battles. As you read, take note of the doges who most influenced Venetian history. Starting with the Fourth Crusade and the blind doge, notice how economic and trade issues drive Venetian political choices. This is very different from the spiritual and feudal concerns that Tuchman described in *A Distant Mirror*. Why are these differences so important? And why is it important that Venice always looked east rather than to the west?

The most colorful personality in *City of Fortune* is Venice herself. The close relationship between the people and the sea is celebrated each year with the ceremony in which the doge marries the sea, throwing a golden wedding ring into the water. Why does this marriage survive successfully for so long and why does the coming of the Ottomans change everything?

As we conclude this part of our ongoing tour of the Mediterranean, we will focus on one small place with an outsized influence. Venice is unique in so many ways, and the more we know her history, the more unique we realize she really is. This will be focus of our discussion when we meet on Tuesday, April 13 at 6:30 on Zoom to *discuss City of Fortune: How Venice Ruled the Seas* by Roger Crowley. This will be fun!

Donna McBride