

**THE RISE OF THE REPUBLIC
OF VENICE: THE ARNOLD
PRIZE ESSAY, 1876**

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The Rise of the Republic of Venice: The Arnold Prize Essay, 1876 by William George Waters

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WILLIAM GEORGE WATERS

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The Rise of the Republic of Venice.

THE
ARNOLD PRIZE ESSAY,
1876.

BY
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*"Viderat Adriacis Venetam Neptunus in undis
Stare urbem et toto dicere jura mari."*—SANNAZARO.

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THE RISE OF THE REPUBLIC OF VENICE.

ALTHOUGH it is no longer the practice of political writers to extol as a model of excellence the system of government under which Venice arrived at the zenith of her power; there is in the story of her greatness, even when set forth in the plainest language, a fascination which will arrest the attention of the most cursory observer. Like a fair pillar, erect in a ruined city, Venice, progressive and enlightened amidst the confusion and ruin of the dark ages, remains a standing marvel to the student of history, who, in contrasting the symmetry and order of her government with the chaos which prevailed in Europe for centuries after her foundation, turns with eagerness to the task of investigating the conditions under which her system of rule was brought to perfection.

The Venetian state dates its birth from the decay of the social and political fabric which the Romans had perfected in Italy, its earliest regulations for the preservation of order being simply the usages of the Roman municipium. Its founders, like those of Rome, fled to a desert, and by their industry built up for themselves a powerful commonwealth; but had they sought refuge in a city, what little wealth they carried with them would have been quickly absorbed, no separate political existence would have been theirs, and the Venetian name, as identified with the Queen of the Adriatic, would have been unknown. As in the foundation of Rome, the struggle for existence was keen and the earth was full of violence. Continual vigilance, a vigilance rendered necessary by the presence of outward foes and domestic traitors, tended to strengthen rather than enervate the infancy of the commonwealth. The exiles of the lagunes, like the settlers by the Tiber, early in their national existence gave indications of the policy which was destined to characterize the full-grown state; but it was by widely divergent paths that the citizens of the two republics advanced towards their respective ends. There is abundant evidence, after eliminating the myth of Romulus and the castle on the Palatine, to shew that the spirit of the earliest Roman community was aggressive. The fugitives from Padua, on the other hand, withdrew to obscurity, to a site the nature of which seemed to promise that they might neglect with impunity even defensive preparations. The Roman courted strife *semper et ubique*. The

Venetian looked to nature to save him the trouble of defending himself. The Roman advanced by conquest and subjugation towards his object. The vanquished race surrendered their lands and bowed their necks to the laws and institutions of the victors. The Venetian was the product of another age, and his civic life drew its nourishment from different sources. He was indeed the heir of Roman citizenship and of the civilization which had grown up in the provinces under the order and quiet of Imperial rule; but the collapse of the Empire had made the former a *δαρὸν ἄδωρον*: while the possession of the latter induced him, in dealing with the hostile barbarians with whom he was brought in contact, to use finesse and craft instead of force; and, by becoming necessary to his foes, to disarm their hostility. The early policy of Venice was adverse to the acquisition of territory. With a sagacity worthy the attention of modern commercial states, she concentrated her power, instead of scattering it in remote and profitless colonies. Her wealth and population increased in a ratio far greater than did the limits of her dominions; and of her extensive conquests she was careful to reserve those only which might be useful as trading centres, or as outposts against foreign aggression.

It is a marvel that, with such untoward conditions as those under which the early settlers set forth to found their island society, an organism so perfect as the Republic of Venice could have arisen. Let it be remembered that its founders were denizens of separate and even hostile cities: that they were not high-spirited barbarians, full of the vigour of young national life, rising doggedly before the superior art, and not the valour, of the more civilized foe; but terror-stricken degenerate men, whose fathers had been corrupted by the evil influences of the declining Empire, and they themselves ruined and demoralized by the continuous inroads of the merciless swarm from the deserts of Asia. The mud banks to which they fled gave forth not one of the first necessities of life, being destitute alike of food, of water, and of fuel; and, on account of the unstable nature of the ground, they were forced to build the walls of their humble dwellings upon artificial foundations. Yet, in spite of all these drawbacks, the lapse of a few generations shews the republic courted and respected by the surrounded states; while as she advances towards her splendid prime, such facts as the commerce of the world almost monopolized by her traders, the sea dominated by her fleets, the Eastern Empire overthrown and restored by her power, will force us to admit that she is *sans égal*; and that the panegyric of Wordsworth, poetry though it be, does not fail to express a literal and sober truth.

The origin of the Veneti, a tribe inhabiting the fertile country at the head of the Adriatic sea, at the time when the Roman power began to extend itself beyond the peninsula, is lost in obscurity. Many theories have been propounded, based upon

resemblance of national custom and tradition, to connect them with other tribes bearing the same name in the North and West of Europe and in Asia Minor. Some would identify them with the Veneti who lived on the shores of the Baltic, from the commercial spirit and love of enterprise which was common to both. Others derive their origin from Asia Minor, their immediate ancestors having been engaged in the siege of Troy.* These, however, are questions for the antiquary. It is enough here to glance at their position at that period when the decrepit Empire of the West was falling to pieces, and the miserable dwellers upon the banks of the Po and the Adige were beginning to feel the strokes of that scourge, under which the unhappy sons of Theodosius had already been forced to abandon the border provinces, and to give to the insolent Goth a vantage ground within the limits of Italy itself.

According to the theory which makes the fertile valleys of great rivers the earliest seats of human societies, it would be just to regard the plain between the Alps and the Adriatic Sea as one of the cradles of civilization. Few spots can boast of such a fertile soil beneath such a genial sky. Under the Romans it was one of the richest provinces, evidence of which appears in the early grandeur of Patavium and Aquileia; while, from the rare mention of Venetia in classic history, it may be concluded that the province enjoyed comparative freedom from civil broils and foreign invasion. The fortresses of Illyricum had hitherto kept back the barbarians; but as soon as Alaric, who at the end of the fourth century was promoted by the feeble Arcadius to the honourable magistracy of Master General of Eastern Illyricum, had firmly established himself in that province; then the Veneti began to feel the hand of the destroyer of nations. As the army of Alaric advanced westward, Honorius fled from Milan; and, but for the vigilance and daring of Stilicho, the Gothic chieftain might have led the Emperor of the West a prisoner to Rome. Rome was the goal of Alaric's ambition, but, defeated at Pollentia and Verona by Stilicho, his path seemed blocked. The check was however only temporary. Jealousy, and the detestable intrigues of court parasites, working upon the fears of the despicable Honorius, were able to overthrow the only man who had shewn himself capable of withstanding the enemy. The Emperor gave his consent to a plot for the assassination of Stilicho, and thus the last obstacle to the triumph of Alaric was removed.

The death of Alaric in 410 did not rescue Italy from Gothic dominion, or bring any respite from the state of pillage and bloodshed which seemed now to have become normal. The career of Attila was yet to come. He ravaged the provinces of the Empire from the suburbs of Constantinople to the interior of Gaul,

* Virgil, *Æneid*, l. 242.

and after his repulse at Chalons in 415, he determined to invade Italy. Aquileia, the key of Illyricum, made a valiant and prolonged resistance, but the heroism of its garrison was vain against the fierceness and fanaticism of the Huns. It fell, and so complete was the vengeance of Attila, that its very site became afterwards a question of dispute. The same measure of destruction was dealt out to the minor cities; and Milan and Pavia, warned by the terrible example, submitted to the conqueror without striking a blow. The cities of Venetia were prosperous and rich, and were the homes of a skilled and industrious population. Life must have become unendurable, hope of any amendment must have perished entirely, before the dwellers in Padua and Aquileia decided to forsake their once comely cities, and to fix their habitation on the banks of accumulated sand and debris, formed by the Po and the Adige opposite their embouchure in the Adriatic. The destruction of Aquileia in 452 was probably the occasion of the first migration of the citizens of that town; although as early as 421 the senate of Padua had issued a decree, ordering the erection of houses and a church dedicated to St. James upon the island of Rialto, for the use of a number of husbandmen who had been driven out of their habitations by the Gothic marauders. Many of these colonists were probably natives of the maritime province, the Venetia Secunda of the Empire, who had for generations carried on the callings of fishing and salt-making: and who found that their new home, barren and desolate as it seemed, was as well adapted for the prosecution of their hereditary pursuit as the one they had been forced to abandon. These two primitive industries became the foundation of Venetian trade and manufactures. The skill and diligence of the fishers and salters produced much more than the infant community could consume; so there remained a surplus of marketable commodity to be sold to the nearest purchaser. Salt in its raw state was probably the first article of export; and although to a people so hard pressed by want as were the exiles, the proceeds derived from the sale of it may have been important, its properties as a preserving agent proved ultimately to be of still greater service: since by its use, the superabundance of fish, which would otherwise have perished, became the chief article of export. The condition of the settlers was in many respects deplorable. It was only by severe toil that the barest necessities of life could be won; but the physical features of their retreat afforded them what was the great desideratum of a trading community, security from the attacks of the Huns. The barbarian nations, with the exception of the Vandals, shewed no inclination for maritime warfare; but the forces of Attila, even if they had been provided with the requisite armament, would surely have passed by the squalid home of the exiles, in their eagerness to pillage the richer cities of the south. Italy was ravaged to the very gates of Rome. The march of the army of

the Huns was marked by murder, pillage, and conflagration, and fugitives from all parts betook themselves to the coast and the islands of the lagune. The lapse of time brought no relief, but rather increased the desolation of the peninsula; and in the terror and despair which seized upon the inhabitants, urban and rural alike, numbers of the more wealthy citizens of Padua were driven to believe that it was their destiny to found for themselves a home upon the islands, where their humble neighbours had already established themselves. The return of Attila to Pannonia* did not induce them to quit their asylum, when once they had transported thither the remnant of their wealth. The possession of property, trifling as the amount might be, gave to these later emigrants at once preëminence in a society where all else were destitute. Padua and Aquileia had for centuries been governed by a municipal senate after the Roman model; but the proprietors of the adjacent lands, by appropriating the right of nominating the members of the Curia, originally a popular assembly, had gradually acquired the entire control of affairs. In the last contingent of fugitives there were doubtless many men of this order, who had taken active part in the affairs of their native towns, and who were therefore quite competent to administer whatever form of government they may have found established in the islands. The first settlers had been too few in number and too dependent upon the Senate of Padua to aspire to, or probably to care about, the rights and duties of self-government. Their city had hitherto sent to them magistrates to enforce a certain amount of order, and to arbitrate in matters of dispute according to the legal provisions which obtained in the Roman province. Of some of these officials, the names have been preserved,† and the fact that the descendants of many of them played a leading part in the history of the Republic, throughout its long and chequered existence, seems to prove how strong and active was the oligarchic principle from the very first, and how favourable to its growth the industrial and political conditions of the age and locality must have been. After the advent of the citizens of Aquileia, Padua was no longer able to protect the islanders or to demand any allegiance from them. A fresh swarm of invaders, the Vandals, now descended upon the southern and western shores of Italy, and Rome again underwent the horrors of capture and pillage. The final collapse of the Western Empire in 476, when Odoacer became sovereign of Italy, enabled the islanders to cast off the last remnant of their dependence upon the cities from which they sprang. The remembrance of their own flight, the reports of the atrocities under which Italy was still groaning, caused them to regard the invaders with the greatest horror and detestation; and at the same time their religious sense was shocked by hearing of the shrines of the saints

* Sismondi, c. v., p. 305.

† Daru, vol. vii. p. 1.