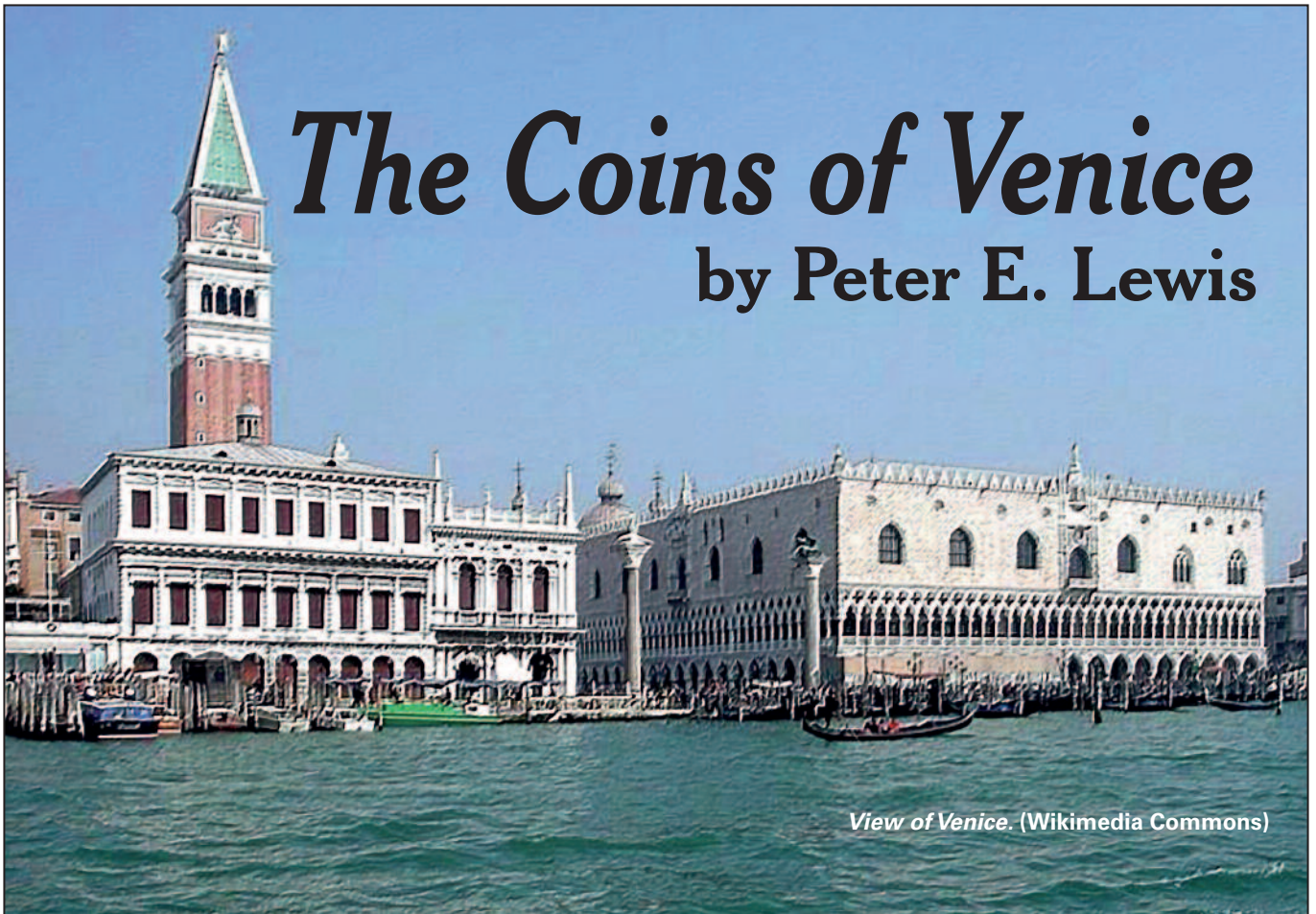


The Coins of Venice

by Peter E. Lewis



View of Venice. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 1 – Painting of Venice by Canaletto, c. 1730, on a coin of the Cook Islands issued in 2011. Diameter 55 mms. The painting is entitled, 'The Bucintoro returning to the Molo on Ascension Day'. The Bucintoro was the doge's ceremonial barge on which he attended a ritual called 'Marriage to the Sea'. The barge is flying the doge's red flag. (Author's collection)

THE coins of Venice are a fascinating area of study, especially if you have a strong Christian faith, because they nearly always have designs relating to Christianity. The people of northern Italy had been converted to Christianity by 400 AD, and when the barbarian invasions occurred in the 5th and 6th centuries, the people living near the coast fled to islands in the large lagoon at the north-west tip of the Adriatic Sea. Eventually the islands in the centre of the lagoon became the city of Venice. (Figure 1)

At first Venice continued to be under Byzantine control, but as Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine Empire, was far to the east, Venice came more under the influence of the Franks, whose empire was founded by Charlemagne (768-814 AD) and included most of Italy. By about 840 AD, however, the city had established a largely independent position between the great empires in the east and the west, and this greatly favoured its development as a centre of trade for the whole of Europe.



Figure 2 – Denier (Italian: denaro) of Louis the Pious (814-840 AD). Diameter 21 mms. Obverse: + H LVDOVICVS IMP Reverse: + VENECIAS. (Leu Numismatik AG, Auction 86, Lot 1123)

Being isolated on an island the Venetians turned to the sea, and soon their merchant ships were sailing all over the Mediterranean but especially to ports in the east where valuable goods such as silk from China and spices from India were loaded on board. The Venetian merchants became very wealthy.

The ruler of Venice was called the doge, a name that derived from the Latin word, 'dux', meaning a leader or ruler. The word, 'duke', also derived from 'dux'. The first doge, Paoluccio Anafesto, was elected in 697 AD, but Venice was never really a democracy: power resided with the leading, wealthy families. On the coins that the doges issued over the centuries the same family names recur, e.g. 'Contarini' occurs seven times between 1275 and 1684 AD.

The first coins that bear the name of Venice were issued by the Frankish king, Louis the Pious (814-840 AD), the son of Charlemagne. (Figure 2) They look like the coins issued elsewhere in his empire, and subsequent rulers of northern Italy issued similar coins. During the period, 1002 to

1024 AD, there were coins without a ruler's name but with the legend CRISTVS IMPER (Christ is the governor) on the obverse, and the word VENICI in a church building on the reverse. (Figure 3) Henry IV of Franconia (1056-1105 AD) issued the first coin to mention Saint Mark. It has the name ENRICVS (Henry) around a cross on the obverse, and S MARCVS VENECIA around a tiny bust of the saint on the reverse. (Figure 4)

The body of St Mark is supposed to reside in Venice in the basilica behind the doge's palace. (Figure 5) According to the tradition, in 828 AD some Venetian merchants sailed to Alexandria where they met the priests responsible for the church in which the sarcophagus containing the saint's body stood. The priests were worried that Muslims might cause damage, and they accepted the merchants' invitation to return with them to Venice and to bring the saint's

body. When they arrived in Venice the saint (by some mysterious means) expressed the wish that he be taken to the doge's palace not the cathedral. A chapel was built behind the palace and henceforth the saint was associated with the doge and not the church hierarchy. It was advantageous for Venice to be linked with St Mark in this way: it magnified the status of the doge and the



Figure 8 – Reverse of a 5 centesimi copper coin of the Provisional Government of Venice in 1849. Diameter 25 mms. The inscription on the book is PAX TIBI MARCE EVANGELISTA MEVS (Peace to you, Mark, my evangelist). (Author's collection)



Figure 9 – Denaro scodellato of Doge Vitale II Michiel (1156-1172 AD). Diameter 16 mms. Obverse: +.V.MICHL'DVX. Reverse: +.S.MARCVS.VNE. (Photocopy of image in book by Artur Zub and Luca Luciani)



Figure 3 – Anonymous denaro (1002-1024 AD). Diameter 19 mms. Obverse: + CRISTVS IMPER. Reverse: VENICI / A. (Photocopy of image in book by Artur Zub and Luca Luciani)



Figure 5 – Picture of St Mark's Basilica on the reverse of a U.S. Kennedy half-dollar. Diameter 30 mms. (Author's collection)



Figure 6 – Soldino of Doge Francesco Dandolo (1329-1339 AD). Diameter 18 mms. Obverse: + FRAN DAN DVLO DVX. Reverse: + S MARCVS VENETI. (Münzenhandlung Harald Möller GmbH, Auction 63, lot 2392)



Figure 10 – Grosso of Doge Enrico Dandolo (1192-1205 AD). Diameter 20 mms. Obverse: +.H.DANDOL. DVX .S.M.VENETI. Reverse: IC XC (monograms of Jesus Christ). (Numismatic Lanz München, Auction 147, Lot 743)



Figure 4 – Denaro of Henry IV of Franconia (1056-1106 AD). Diameter 20 mms. Obverse: + ENRICVS IMPER. Reverse: +S MARCVS VENECIA. (Numismatica Ars Classica NAC AG, Auction 65, Lot 3363)



Figure 7 – Reverse of a tallero of Doge Lodovico Manin (1789-1797 AD). Diameter 34 mms. (Author's collection)



Figure 11 – Image of Christ above the altar in St Mark's Basilica. (Postcard in the author's collection)



Figure 12 – Ducat of Doge Giovanni Dandolo (1280-1289 AD). Diameter 20 mms. Obverse: .IO.DANDVL' .S.M.VENETI. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 93, Lot 1692)

power of the city. The pope might have Rome and St Peter, but the doge had Venice and St Mark. St Mark became the patron saint of Venice and his symbol, a lion, became the emblem of the city. From the time of Doge Francesco Dandolo (1329-1339 AD) a lion has frequently appeared on Venetian coins. (Figure 6) Later the lion was given wings, and then he was shown supporting an open book, which was the Gospel of Mark. (Figure 7). Sometimes the lion is shown supporting a book on which the following Latin words appear: PAX TIBI MARCE EVANGELISTA MEUS. (Figure 8) In English the words are, "Peace

to you, Mark, my evangelist." This refers to a legend according to which Mark happened to be on an island in the Venetian lagoon on his way to Rome when an angel spoke these words to him. The angel added, "Hic requiescet corpus tuum." In English this is, "On this spot shall your body rest."

According to Rev. George Ferguson (*Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*) Mark's attribute is "the winged lion, presumably because his Gospel emphasizes the royal dignity of Christ, the Lion of Judah." In Mark's Gospel a blind man calls Jesus the son of King David (Mk 10:48) and in the



Figure 13 – Silver coin (Mocenigo o lira) of Doge Leonardo Loredan (1501-1521 AD). Diameter 33 mms. Reverse: Christ holds a globus cruciger in his left hand and blesses with his right. GLORIA.TIBI.SOLI. (Glory to you alone). (Author's collection)



Figure 14 – Portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan by Giovanni Bellini. (Wikimedia Commons)

book of Revelation Christ is called "the Lion of the tribe of Judah". (Rev. 5:5) Where the image of a winged lion originally came from is uncertain, but John Julius Norwich in his book, *The History of Venice*, suggests Persia (in the 4th century AD) or China, with wings added. Surprisingly, the lion on Venetian coins reminds a modern coin collector of the lion in *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. In both cases the lion represents Jesus Christ.

The long series of Venetian coins bearing the name of the doge begins with Vitale II Michiel (1156-1172 AD). His little coin was made of billon (debased silver). It has a cross on the obverse and a tiny bust of St Mark on the reverse. (Figure 9) It is very rare. Doge Enrico Dandolo (1192-1205 AD) introduced a larger silver coin, the grosso. According to Raffaele Paolucci (*The Monete dei Dogi di Venezia*) "there was instituted one of the most important reforms of the century, the introduction of the grosso, or first 'heavy' European coin. The creation of the grosso marked the beginning of the political and economic rise of the Serenissima [the Most Serene Republic] which from now on was enormously to develop its commercial potential, conquering new markets in every country of the eastern Mediterranean, where the new coin received a most favourable welcome." The grosso showed the doge receiving a banner from St Mark on the obverse, and Christ enthroned on the reverse. (Figure 10) A similar image of



Figure 15 – Silver ducato of Doge Pasqual Cicogna (1585-1595). Diameter 41 mms. Reverse: St Justina holds a quill and a Gospel. She was an early Christian martyr. Behind her two galleys sail near the Curzolari Islands where the naval battle of Lepanto was fought in 1571. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 93, lot 1735)



Figure 16 – Bagattino of Doge Nicolò Tron (1471-1473). Diameter 20 mms. (Coins: Paulos S. Pavlov)

Christ appears above the altar in St Mark's Basilica. (Figure 11)

Enrico Dandolo is also famous for being the driving force behind the Fourth Crusade. Instead of going to the Holy Land to fight the Muslims the Crusaders went to Constantinople and sacked the city in 1204 AD. Although Dandolo was almost blind and in his eighties he played an active role in the events. The treasure of the city was taken to the west, especially to Venice, and much of the silver for the grosso would have come from Constantinople.

The next great reform of the coinage occurred during the reign of Doge Giovanni Dandolo (1280-1289 AD). According to Paolucci, the reign of Giovanni Dandolo "is of the highest significance, from the numismatic point of view, by reason of the introduction of the gold ducat (ducato). It was not until 32 years after Genoa and Florence that Venice felt the need to strike its own gold coin for until this time the gold coins used for commerce in Venice had been Arab and Byzantine." The Venetian ducat became one of the leading denominations in Europe. (Figure 12) The coin was called a ducat simply because the word 'ducat' (which is short for 'ducatus', meaning 'duchy') occurs at the end of the reverse legend. The whole legend is SIT T XPE DAT Q TV REGIS ISTE DVCAT (Sit tibi Christe datus, quem tu regis iste ducatus).



Figure 17 – Silva osella of Doge Paolo Renier (1779-1789 AD). Diameter 32 mms. Obverse: Ship between the two towers at the entrance to the shipyards (the Arsenal). DISCIPLINA RESTITUTA (Discipline is restored). Embezzlement at the Arsenal had been discovered and punished. Reverse: PAULI REINERJ PRINC: MUNUS ANNO VII 1785. (Classical Numismatic Group, Auction 93, Lot 1776)

According to Paolucci the translation of this Latin sentence is, "It is to Thee, O Christ, that this duchy is entrusted, which Thou governest." In the early 16th century Europe was being flooded with silver from America, and Doge Francesco Donà (1545-1553 AD) increased the value of the ducat in relation to silver. He renamed it, a zecchino, which means 'a coin from the mint (zecca)'.

All 73 doges kept the ducat and the zecchino to an almost identical design, with the doge receiving a standard from St Mark on the obverse, and Christ appearing in glory on the reverse. Christ has a halo and is surrounded by stars in an elliptical aura representing the cosmos. He holds the Gospel in his left hand and blesses with his right hand. Subtle changes were made to the design over the centuries, most obviously to the hat that the doge wears. On the coin in Figure 12 the hat has an even dome with a pompon on the top. By the reign of Doge Leonardo Loredan (1501-1521 AD)

the hat has changed shape so that the back of it rises up like a horn, and it was called the 'corno', meaning 'horn'. Doge Loredan's corno is clearly shown on a large silver coin. (Figure 13). Fortunately the Venetian artist, Giovanni Bellini, painted a portrait of Loredan, which shows his corno in detail. Also we see the close-fitting cap of white linen, called the cuffetta, which was worn beneath it. (Figure 14) Peter Ackroyd in his 2009 book, *Venice: Pure City*, noted the sumptuousness of the doge's dress in this portrait and the strict serenity and reticence of his gaze. He said this severity was part of the official imagery of the Venetian state.

The history of Venice is long and complex, but the main types continued to appear on the coins: the winged lion, the doge kneeling before St Mark, St Justina pierced by a sword (Figure 15), and Christ himself either standing or seated. St Justina first appears on coins of Doge Alvise Mocenigo I (1570-1577) because her feast day was



Figure 18 – Gold osella of 4 zecchini of Doge Marcantonio Giustinian (1684-1688 AD). Diameter 37 mms. Reverse: An angel flies above the Piazza San Marco. She holds the corno and points to heaven. DEO

DVCTA DUCE (To God, ruler of the duchy). The winged lion of St Mark is on the right column and St Theodore is on the left. (Heritage Auctions, A3029, Lot 30192)

7th October and the Venetians with their allies defeated the Turks at the naval Battle of Lepanto on 7th October 1571. Occasionally there were surprises such as the bold portrait of Doge Nicolo Tron (1471-1473 AD) on a bronze coin. (Figure 16) According to Norwich, Tron was “a gigantic man with a coarse face”. He had made a fortune as a merchant in Rhodes and his long beard was unfashionable in Venice at the time. The silver coin of Doge Paolo Renier (1779-1789 AD) has an image of the entrance to the Venice shipyards and was issued to show that corruption would not be tolerated. (Figure 17) Although Venetian merchants were tough businessmen they were not in general dishonest. The gold coin issued by Doge Marcantonio Giustinian (1684-1688 AD) is simply magnificent. (Figure 18) He issued a similar coin in silver.

The doges continued to mint coins until 1797 when the last doge, Ludovico Manin, was deposed by Napoleon Bonaparte, and French troops occupied the city. The French ordered that every stone lion in Venice be destroyed, but few actually were. The sculptural group of Doge Francesco Foscari (1423-1457 AD) kneeling before a winged lion was destroyed, and a copy now stands in its place on the Porta della Carta at the Doge’s Palace (Figure 19). The image of a doge with a winged lion had also appeared on coins, e.g. Figure 15. In 1797 a provisional government was set up in Venice, but later in the same year Bonaparte handed the city over to Austria. In 1805 he seized it again, but ten years later it was returned to Austria. After the defeat of the Austrian army by the Prussians in 1866 Venice was ceded to Italy. (Figure 20)

The standard reference for the coins of Venice is *Le Monete dei Dogi di Venezia* by Raffaele Paolucci. It is a large book fortunately written in English and Italian. A very useful little paperback is *Le Monete di Venezia* by Artur Zub and Luca Luciani, published after 2010. It contains no photos of coins, only drawings, and although it is in Italian it is easy to understand. The coins cover virtually the whole amazing history of Venice, which is still a magnificent city, although in great danger from rising sea levels. Lord Norwich, who for thirty years was the chairman of the *Venice in Peril Fund* ends his history of Venice with these words: “Today, though the *Serenissima* has been dead for nearly two hundred years, it is commemorated with pride in every corner of the city – where, painted on wood or canvas, carved in marble or stone, moulded in plaster or cast in bronze, Venice’s ever-faithful protector, the great winged lion of St Mark, still points proudly and majestically at the word of God.”

Note

This article has been written to coincide with the 2015 Venice Biennale. The Australia Council for the Arts has built an Australian Pavilion in Venice to display the works of Australian artists. (Figure 21)

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Figure 19 – Sculptural group on the Porte delle Carta at the Doge’s Palace. (Wikimedia Commons)



Figure 20 – Cartoon in *Punch Magazine* in 1866. In that year the Austrian army was defeated by the Prussians and Venice was ceded to Italy. In the cartoon a wounded Austrian soldier hands the lion of Venice to Victor Emmanuel, the king of Italy. (Author’s collection)

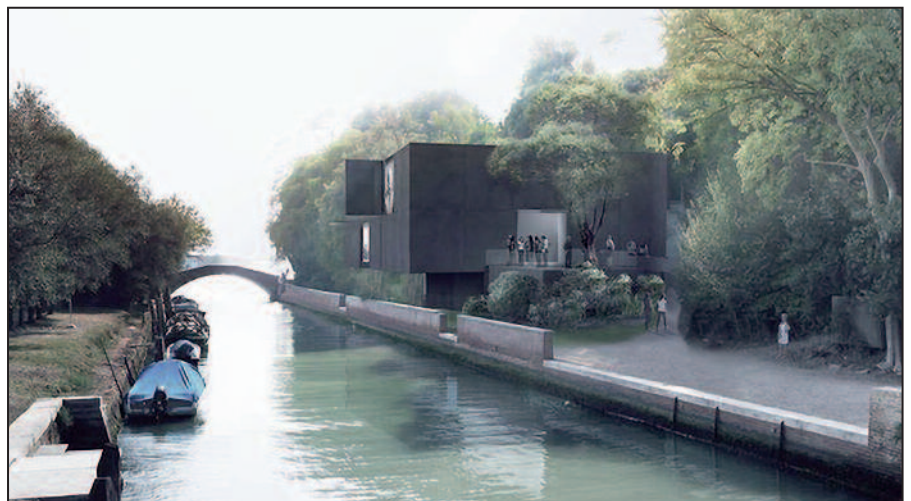


Figure 21 – The Australian Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale. It is clad with black marble from South Australia, but is white inside. (Courtesy of the Australia Council for the Arts. Image credit: John Gollings)