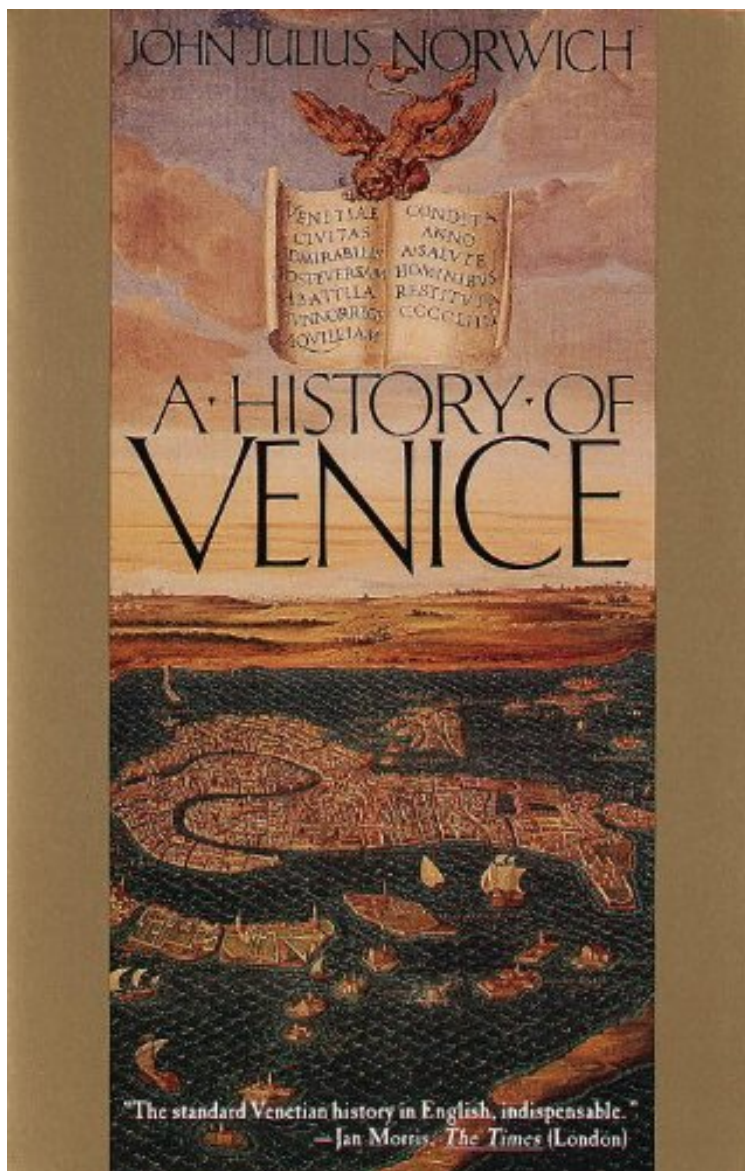


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## A History of Venice

John Julius Norwich

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**John Julius Norwich : A History of Venice** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A History of Venice:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. 1400 years, told with panache and accuracy By Robert J. Crawford This is a dazzling history of a unique political entity - an oligarchic republic surrounded by feudal autocracies, religiously moderate hundreds of years before toleration developed anywhere else, and a highly profitable

form of public-private capitalism. In this splendid book, the reader is treated to the entire arc of rise, reign, and fall, in luminously beautiful prose and plenty of fascinating stories. In the beginning, Venice was a stronghold for Roman citizens seeking refuge from waves of barbarian invasions, 2.5 miles off the coast, a backwater as the Western Roman empire crumbled. Then, as a client under the protection of Byzantium, Venice slowly rose to become the premier commercial power of the Mediterranean. As a small island, everyone knew each other, so had to act in a relatively trustworthy manner in a time that piracy was indistinguishable from trade. It helped that Venetian merchants stole the body of St. Mark, using it as the basis for cosmic legitimacy and lending a kind of ideological coherence to their community - they acted in concert in unique ways for over 1,000 years. The Venetians developed effective laws, the greatest seamanship in existence, and amassed capital that it could use for further investment, mercenaries, and bribes. Its trading partners appreciated these attributes, i.e. that Venice was relatively more trustworthy than its competitors. Together, these attributes enabled Venice to establish a number of exceedingly profitable monopolies over centuries, in particular that on spice for Europe (transport via the silk road over Asia). Though it fought many brutal wars with competitors Genoa and Pisa, Venice emerged triumphant for a time. About 1200 a.d., Venice became an empire and reached its apogee, controlling a vast land and sea empire, often under the dangerous control of condottieri (knight mercenaries). It also moved into a unique public-private domain, in which the state had a strong hand in organizing the economy, in particular setting standards for sea vessels but also trading practices, maintaining the rule of law, and taking over the arsenal, which could produce fully functional war galleys in a matter of hours, with strategic cutting-edge technology for the time. These attributes made it an even more dependable trading agent for its allies and partners - they knew where the ships were, what their quality would be, etc. It is during this period that the Doge, Enrico Dandolo, led the warriors of the 4th Crusade to sack Byzantium, the most shameful despoliation of a civilized capital in the history of Christendom. But already, as the Renaissance was beginning to flower, the seeds of Venice's decline were sown. Most important, mastery of trade slipped from Venetian hands once the Portuguese discovered the cape route around Africa - the Mediterranean was no longer the center of the world, immediately consigning Venice to backwater status in the Adriatic. It never recovered. Second, the Ottoman Empire was also challenging Christendom, a force against which the disunified West could not compete. After Constantinople fell, Venice was the only true bulwark against the Ottomans. Third, with its haughty distance, pragmatic cynicism, and naked self interest, Venice had made innumerable enemies in Europe, and faced a series of wars against huge coalitions such as the league of Cambrai. Still, for centuries, the Venetians were able to pull together and recover in ways that awed its adversaries. It is astonishing to read how often Venice was on the edge of complete ruin, only to emerge renewed and powerful, to fight its way to survival and then dominance. A great deal of this was due to its unique political system, which allowed fresh infusions of talent into leadership circles at crucial times and institutionalized the alternance of power. However, with the loss of trade, the energy of Venice was eventually sapped, leading to a long decline and a tenuous diplomatic balancing act (of which Casanova was a part) as the forces of revolution were rumbling in 18th C France; eventually, it became a tourist pleasure spot of wild indulgences and petty intrigue. Once it fell to the young Napoleon, though looted, Venice was never destroyed - it was the first occupation by a foreign power in its 1400 year history. This is an incredible story, in many ways as a coherent span of time equal to Rome itself. You can tell that this book was a labor of love - every page is engaging and elegantly written. The feeling of witnessing history unfold is rarely so well executed, truly it is an inspiration and source of wonder. Warmly recommended.

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Illuminates a neglected, yet important period in history. By R. E. Moore I've been researching the Venetian Empire for a novel I'm writing and have found this book to be an invaluable resource. While there may be other historians who have heaped upon us more detail, Norwich keeps the verbiage spare enough without sparing the important details. For example, while reading an exhaustive history of Venice, the author heaped detail after detail into his report. As I had already read Norwich's book, I knew the author was talking about the sack of Constantinople that occurred during the fourth Crusade. Norwich editorialized convincingly that this lay the groundwork for the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks. The author of the other history failed to comment about the fourth crusade. While I was hoping to find illumination of aspects of the history of the Rialto that I needed to understand, Norwich did light a flame upon much of this and informed me of many things I needed to know to provide me with the authenticity I seek in the writing of my novel. While Norwich's "A History of Venice" is not my only resource, I have come to rely on it as it has informed deeply my understanding of this, ignored in the United States, yet deeply important epoch whose repercussions echo in the affairs of men even today.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. More than just Venice By Santa Fe buyer The reader will learn important concurrent history - the crusades, the Byzantine Empire and the popes, among others - in addition to the fascinating and powerful city-state of Venice. Norwich's wry humor pervades the book and gives useful context to many events. I bought this book because I knew so little about Venice. It motivated me to read more of his works and more about those other passages of history that influenced Venice and vice versa.

As comprehensive as it is engaging, John Julius Norwich's *A History of Venice* is a complete history of "the most beautiful and magical of cities." This necessary volume traces the rise of Venice from its fifth-century origins through

1797 when Napoleon put an end to the thousand-year-old Republic.

At once the most comprehensive and the most engaging history of Venice available in English, this book will be treasured by all those who share the author's fascination with "the most beautiful and magical of cities." "As a historian Lord Norwich knows what matters. As a writer he has a taste for beauty, a love of language and an enlivening wit.... He contrives, as no English writer has done before, to sustain a continuous interest in that crowded history." -- Hugh Trevor-Roper "Will become the standard English work of Venetian history." -- C. P. Snow, Financial Times "Lord Norwich has loved and understood Venice as well as any other Englishman has ever done. He has put readers of this generation more in his debt than any other English writer." -- Peter Levi, The Sunday Times (London) From the Inside Flap Traces the rise of empire of this city from its 5th century beginnings all the way through until 1797 when Napoleon put an end to the thousand year-old Republic. 32 pages of black and white photos, 4 maps and charts. From the Back Cover At once the most comprehensive and the most engaging history of Venice available in English, this book will be treasured by all those who share the author's fascination with 'the most beautiful and magical of cities.'