THE MYTH IN IMAGE: VERONESE'S CEILING IN THE HALL OF THE COLLEGE

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Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Venice was at the forefront of European political thought. Resilient in the aftermath of the crushing military defeat at Agnadello, it had survived without the convulsion of any internal unrest or challenges to the established order. Venice truly appeared the Most Serene Republic, and Europe was captivated. From the printing presses of the Continent came book after book praising the Republic. While some authors extolled Venice as a model of civic virtue to be emulated, others saw it as a conceptual source of constitutional machinery to be studied. Of particular interest to republican theorists were those mechanisms that could contrast the rise of absolutism and ensure the broader participation of the elite in governance without opening the way to the instability of democratic rule. Their ideal was the Aristotelian-Polybian mixed government,[1] and alongside the histori-

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[1] The ideal of the mixed constitution stems from the observation that the three pure forms of government – monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy – are naturally unstable and tend to devolve into tyranny, oligarchy, and anarchy respectively. Polybius sees a perpetual cycle among the various forms, both pure and degenerate. For summaries of Polybius' political theories see S. Gordon, *Controlling the State: Constitutionalism from Ancient Athens to Today*, Cambridge (ma), Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 107-110; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton (nj), Princeton University Press, 1975, pp. 77-78; Z. Fink, *The Classical Republicans: an essay in the recovery of a pattern of thought in seventeenth-century England*, Evanston (il), Northwestern University Press, 1962, pp. 3-5. The mixed constitution is premised on the idea that an equilibrium between a monarchical element (the 'one'), an aristocratic element (the 'few'), and a democratic element (the 'many') can bring stability. By balancing between these three components of the society, leadership and strong executive authority

cal examples of Sparta and republican Rome, they placed Venice as the living model.[2] A core tenet of the myth of Venice came to be the widespread belief that the Republic's social harmony and political stability originated in its constitutional structure, and as the other Italian city-states succumbed to foreign domination or local princely rule, the image of Venice as an enduring sovereign Republic became more compelling. This accounts for much of the European interest. But that interest coincided with the idea, equally intriguing and integral to the myth, that Venice possessed a *corpus* of unique laws and institutions that precluded degenerative vices and thus ensured the civic virtue and moral integrity of its ruling class.[3] To the tumultuous

can be provided through the 'one', consultation and experience through the 'few', and equality through the 'many'. Each can also pursue its particular value – grandeur, honor and liberty – without destablizing the polity. In Renaissance political writings, the proposition is attributed to Aristotle, although the Author of *Politica* merely references the mixed governments of Sparta and Carthage (oligarchy and democracy) and Athens (oligarchy, aristocracy and democracy) but does not conclude that such a combination necessarily renders a government stable and permanent: cf. Fink, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3; Q. Skinner, *Political Philosophy*, in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. by Ch. Schmitt, Q. Skinner, Cambridge (uk), Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 397. The idea is further developed by Thomas Aquinas, who in *De regno* actually states that the best form of government is a mixed monarchy that allows others to participate. The Dominican Enrico da Rimini, envoy in the service of Venice, concurs in *Tractatus de septem vitiis capitalibus* and concludes that the Republic of Venice approximates the ideal of the mixed regime. The presence of the doge meant that Venice was fundamentally a monarchy. But the concurrence of the counselors introduced an aristocratic element, and their election in a broader assembly assured a democratic base. More essential to the development of the myth, Enrico expressly attributes Venice's peace and security to its unique constitutional order: cf. Skinner, *op. cit.*, p. 398. Earlier, the Byzantine scholar Eustathius of Thessalonica had similarly seen Venice as an example of a mixed constitution: cf. A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium. The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition*, Cambridge (uk), Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 308. In the corrispondence between Francesco Barbaro and George of Trebizond, dated 1452, Venice is expressly compared to the mixed constitution as outlined in Plato's *Laws*. Gaeta considers this to represent the full flowering of the myth: cf. F. Gaeta, *Alcune considerazioni sul mito di Venezia*, «Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance», xxiii, 1961, p. 62.

[2] The customary interpretation was that the monarchical element (the 'one') was identifiable in the doge, the aristocratic element (the 'few') in the Senate, and the democratic element (the 'many') in the Great Council. Contarini sees the Council of X and the College as participating in the aristocratic element, whereas Giannotti considers the College to be a fourth element that bridges between the doge and the Senate: cf. Pocock, *op. cit.*, pp. 311-312. For a historical summary of the mixed constitution and its reception in Renaissance political thought see Fink, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-21.

[3] Foreign observers were particularly attracted to the secret ballot and to the distinction and separation of the functions of consultation, which should be the purview of the 'few',

nations of Europe and the instable regimes elsewhere in Italy, Venice consequently offered a convincing paradigm. It demonstrated how a polity might be maintained in time and how it could provide the framework in which its citizens could realize their virtue. No other State in the early modern era had a greater influence on the civic aspirations and imagination of the Continent. Even at a time in which its territories were diminishing and its economic and political relevance declining, Venice was educating the rest of Europe on constitutional theory and civic virtue.[4]

The Venetians themselves were convinced that they enjoyed a superlative constitution and unparalleled freedom. Venice surpassed even the ancient models of Sparta and republican Rome in excellence. It had already lasted a thousand years, and it was destined to endure because of certain unique qualities that made it eternal. In the visual arts, official historiography, political essays, and State pageantry, the Venetians routinely celebrated the salient elements of the myth: constitutional perfection, civic virtue, original liberty, and self-determination. But particularly in the sixteenth century, as the role of the Republic in European affairs declined, the promotion of the myth became the means for the Venetians to reassure themselves about Venice's place – and relevance – in the political reality of the modern world.

The clearest artistic exposition of the myth is the iconographic program of the ceiling in the Hall of the College, as it was rebuilt after the fire of 1574.[5] While the decorative ensemble has always been understood as a general exposition of good government, many of the allegorical figures have never been unequivocally identified, nor have they been correlated to a comprehensive underlying system that provides a matrix for the entire program. In several instances, the conventional readings simply do not reflect the mentality or circumstances of the historical moment. When, however, the ceiling is

and deliberation, which should be left to the 'many': cf. Pocock, *op. cit.*, pp. 288-289 and 304. For the secrecy of the voting procedures and the counterposition of Guicciardini and later Harrington see *ibidem*, p. 285.

[4] For the perception of Venice and its influence on Renaissance political theory see F. Gaeta, *L'idea di Venezia*, in *Storia della cultura veneta*, vol. III, parte III, Vicenza, Neri Pozza, 1981. For the seventeenth-century English discussions see Fink, *op. cit.*

[5] For the general history of the reconstruction see G. Zorzi, *Nuove rivelazioni sulla ricostruzione delle sale del piano nobile del Palazzo ducale di Venezia dopo l'incendio dell'11 maggio 1574*, «Arte Veneta», VII, 1953, pp. 123-151.

viewed through the lens of the contemporary political essays, particularly Gasparo Contarini's *De magistratibus & Republica venetorum*,[6] it becomes perhaps the culminating moment of Venice's vast apologetic enterprise in the sixteenth century.

The Hall of the College: the decorative ensemble

The ceiling of the Hall of the College is organized around three large canvases – two rectangular and one oval – oriented along the central axis (see Diagram). These three paintings are flanked by six subsidiary verdailles that illustrate events drawn from ancient history and that are customarily understood as exemplifying the themes of the central paintings. Interposed with the three main paintings are four Latin inscriptions – «Robur imperii», «Nunquam derelicta», «Reipub[licæ] fundamentum» and «Custodes libertatis» – each located between two allegorical figures. Francesco Sansovino simply lists these inscriptions in his guide to the city *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* (1581) without correlating them to specific paintings or explaining their sense within the overall iconographic program.[7] In the expanded and corrected edition of 1604, Stringa maintains Sansovino's earlier description. In contrast, Carlo Ridolfi in *Le maraviglie dell'arte* (1648) specifically sees the four inscriptions as explicative of the three axial paintings, resolving the evident numerical discrepancy by assigning two of the inscriptions to the central oval. In this reading, «Robur imperii» («Strength of the State») is said to accompany the painting with Mars and Neptune and

[6] The earlier works of D. Morosini, *De origine, situ et magistratibus urbis Venetæ*; P. Morosini, *Defensio Venetorum ad Europae principes contra obtrectores* and *De rebus ac forma Reipublicæ Venetæ*; and M. Sabellico, *De Venetis magistratibus* had limited resonance. Alongside Giannotti's *Libro de la republica de vinitiani* (1540), Contarini's treatise, intended for both educated foreigners and Venetian patricians, is the principal exposition of the myth. It summarizes and coherently presents convictions deeply held by the Venetian aristocracy and by Contarini's own humanist colleagues Andrea Navagero, Giovanni Battista Cipelli 'Egnazio' and Andrea Mocenigo. After the posthumous *editio princeps* (1543), five Italian, five Latin, two French, and one English editions were published by the end of the century: cf. E. Gleason, *Gasparo Contarini. Venice, Rome, and Reform*, Berkeley (ca), University of California Press, 1993, p. 39, note 50. It continued to influence political thought in the writings of Paolo Paruta and Paolo Sarpi and to animate republican debate in France, England and Holland throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

[7] Cf. F. Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare descritta in 14 libri*, Venetia, I. Sansovino, 1581, c. 123*r*.

is considered an allusion to Venice's «vast dominion» («ponderoso dominio») on land and sea. Both «Nunquam derelicta» («Never abandoned») and «Reipub[licæ] fundamentum» («Foundation of the Republic») are seen as references to Faith in the central oval and are construed as evoking Venice's religious devotion. Finally, the allegorical figures of Justice and Peace in the painting above the dais are assumed to be the «Custodes libertatis» («Custodians of liberty»).[8] But in many respects, Ridolfi's interpretation contrasts with the political and military reality of sixteenth-century Venice. Significantly, it also disregards the humanist – and specifically the republican – understanding of key concepts about the sovereignty of the polis and about man's capacity to exercise his virtue as citizen. Yet despite these substantial shortcomings, Ridolfi's reading has become conventional over time, even though it was not accepted in Martinioni's subsequent edition of *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* (1663). This would mean that the six verdailles and the four inscriptions all refer to the three central paintings, leaving the eight allegorical figures disconnected and without any clear relationship to a unified whole. The proposed reading that follows argues that the ceiling is in reality conceived as seven parallel rows: the six verdailles are indeed illustrations that support the themes of the three axial paintings, but the four central inscriptions are connected to the eight flanking allegories and clarify their meanings. This maintains a constant two-to-one relationship.

With regard to the allegorical figures themselves, many lack standard iconographic attributes, and their identities are not always immediately clear. Various titles have consequently been advanced over time.[9] Sansovino only identifies «Faith» and «Concord» which are readily understood as relating to *Fidelity to God* (Dia., 17) and *Public Happiness* (Dia., 16).[10] Ridolfi, in referring to the eight allegories, men-

[8] Cf. C. Ridolfi, *Le marauiglie dell'arte, ouero Le vite de gl'illustri pittori veneti, e dello Stato*, Venetia, G. B. Sgava, 1648, parte I, p. 318.

[9] Giorgio Tagliaferro notes that the decorative program for the College was conceived *ad hoc*. Many of the figures are consequently unconventional and lack standard attributes. But if Veronese's creative impulse can be invoked to account for some of the particularities, it seems highly improbable that the artist would have been given complete freedom to determine the 'message' in the chamber where the government received foreign delegations: cf. G. Tagliaferro, *Le forme della Vergine: la personificazione di Venezia nel processo creativo di Paolo Veronese*, «Venezia Cinquecento», XV, 30, 2005, pp. 79 and 82.

[10] Cf. Sansovino, *op. cit.*, c. 123*r*. A sketch for the decorative program of the College (Biblioteca Correr: *Ms. P. D.* c, 399/39) has titles for all eight allegories. These are correlat-

tions only five virtues: «Faithfulness», «Eloquence», «Concord», «Vigilance», and «Secrecy». The remaining allegories are simply said to be other virtues «appropriate to the government of States» («altre adequate al governo degli Stati»).[11] While the virtues of «Faithfulness» and «Vigilance» are easily identifiable respectively with *Fidelity to God* (Dia., 17) and *Vigilance* (Dia., 11), both «Eloquence» and «Concord»

ed to the historical subjects of the red monochromes in the frieze which are also identified. Martin Gaier considers this sketch to be the work of Veronese, noting that the lettering is very similar («molto simile») to the artist's writing. He consequently argues that the titles for all of the allegories as indicated on the sketch are accurate and definitive and that Sansovino, in mentioning only «Faith» and «Concord», chose to indirectly identify the six remaining allegorical figures by providing just the titles of the adjacent monochromes in the frieze as a guide for his readers who were to then make the association: cf. M. Gaier, *Il programma iconografico della sala del Collegio. Un disegno inedito di Veronese*, in *Paolo Veronese: giornate di studio*, a cura di B. Aikema, Th. Dalla Costa, P. Marini, Venezia, lineadacqua, 2016, pp. 39-43. Charles Hope is similarly of the opinion that the identity of the individual allegorical figures is indicated by their association with the historical scenes illustrated in the frieze: cf. Ch. Hope, *Veronese and the Venetian Tradition of Allegory*, «Proceedings of the British Academy», 71, 1986, pp. 411-412. But if the historical scenes in the frieze are meant as the key necessary to decrypt the allegories on the ceiling, multiple issues remain without resolution: 1. The legibility of the monochromes in the frieze along the ceiling is severely compromised due to their small size (58 cm in height) and distance from the viewer. 2. When compared to the subjects as indicated both on the Correr design and in *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare*, some of the historical scenes have clear anomalies that complicate the reading and, in some instances, render the scenes unintelligible; *e.g.*, the monochrome identified as *Faith of Damon* (*Fedde di Damone*) on the Correr design presumably refers to the friendship of Damon and Pythias. But the identification must be in error. Rather than portray the moment in which Damon, having taken the place of his friend, is led to death before the tyrant Dionysius and Pythias returns to honor his word and accept his own fate, the monochrome actually shows an incoronation as three soldiers look on. Also there is an inexplicable elephant in the left background. These details are clearly inconsistent with the story of Damon and Pythias as narrated in the traditional sources by Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, 10, 4, Cicero, *De officiis*, 3, 45, and Valerius Maximus, *Factorum et dictorum memorabilium*, iv, 7, 3. Although the identities of some of the protagonists seem accurate, the meanings that are given to the events themselves are often in contrast with the narrative sources; *e.g.*, both the Correr design and *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* refer to the *Obedience of Leonidas* (*l'obedienza di Leonida*) and the *Industry of Archimedes* (*l'industria di Archimede*). But Valerius Maximus, iii, 2 proposes Leonidas as an exemplar of courage, which would therefore be the meaning most likely inferred by the viewer, assuming that he was able to recognize the event depicted in the small monochrome. With regard to Archimedes, Valerius Maximus, viii, 7 writes that his diligence did not bear fruit due to a fatal distraction. This would preclude Archimedes as a positive example of industry. 4. With the exception of «Faith» and «Concord», the titles for the allegorical figures as stated on the Correr design are almost completely incongruous with the allegories as depicted. In several cases, there is no iconographic correspondence. See *infra*, notes 23, 40, 77, 87, 121, 133 and 170.

[11] Cf. Ridolfi, *op. cit.*, parte i, p. 318.

would seem to correspond to the caduceus in *Public Happiness* (DIA., 16) as there are no other attributes in the ceiling that could be construed as symbolic of these virtues. It is not evident which painting Ridolfi sees as «Secrecy» since Ripa describes Secrecy as gagged and enveloped in a black mantel.[12]

The customary titles for all eight allegorical figures – «Moderation», «Recompense», «Dialectic», «Simplicity», «Vigilance», «Meekness», «Happiness», and «Faithfulness» – were proposed by Francesco Zanotto in 1853.[13] In the case of «Simplicity», the title is based on a visual error: the «dove» held by the figure appears instead to be an ermine. This was rectified by Juergen Schultz.[14] More importantly, Zanotto does not articulate an underlying and unifying message, nor does he identify any specific audience. Some of the allegories – «Moderation», «Dialectic», and «Simplicity» – are said to elicit virtuous conduct in the aristocracy and would therefore be 'directed' toward the nobles present in the College. «Recompense» is similarly seen as being intended for the nobles, but rather than illustrating a virtue to be inculcated, it is interpreted as a promise of future reward to those individuals who serve the State. «Happiness» alone is specifically said to be a quality of the Republic. «Vigilance» and «Faithfulness», as virtues, are not correlated to either the aristocracy or the State. «Meekness» is similarly not ascribed but seems inappropriate both as a self-proclaimed virtue of the Republic and as a virtue to impress upon the aristocracy.

Reasonably, however, the 'message' of the iconographic program was intended primarily for foreign observers since, more than any room within the Doge's Palace, the Hall of the College – where ambassadors were received – was eminently suited to project Venice's self-image to the world by highlighting and substantiating those specif-

[12] Cf. *Segretezza* in C. RIPA, *Iconologia di Cesare Ripa perugino*, Siena, Heredi di M. Florimi, 1613, parte II, p. 217. In the nearby Hall of the Four Doors, the statue of Secrecy is similarly cloaked and silent.

[13] Cf. F. ZANOTTO, *Il Palazzo ducale di Venezia*, II, Venezia, Antonelli, 1853, tav. LXXXV, pp. 2-6. Some of Zanotto's titles differ from the slightly earlier meanings proposed by Emmanuele Antonio Cicogna who sees the virtues as references to humility and moderation, liberality, industry, friendship, assiduity and strength, meekness, concord and abundance, and faithfulness: cf. E. A. CICOGNA, *Il forastiere guidato*, Venezia, Pinelliana, 1817, pp. 49-50.

[14] Cf. J. SCHULTZ, *Venetian Painted Ceilings of the Renaissance*, Berkeley (CA), University of California Press, 1968, p. 106.

Ducal Palace, Hall of the College.

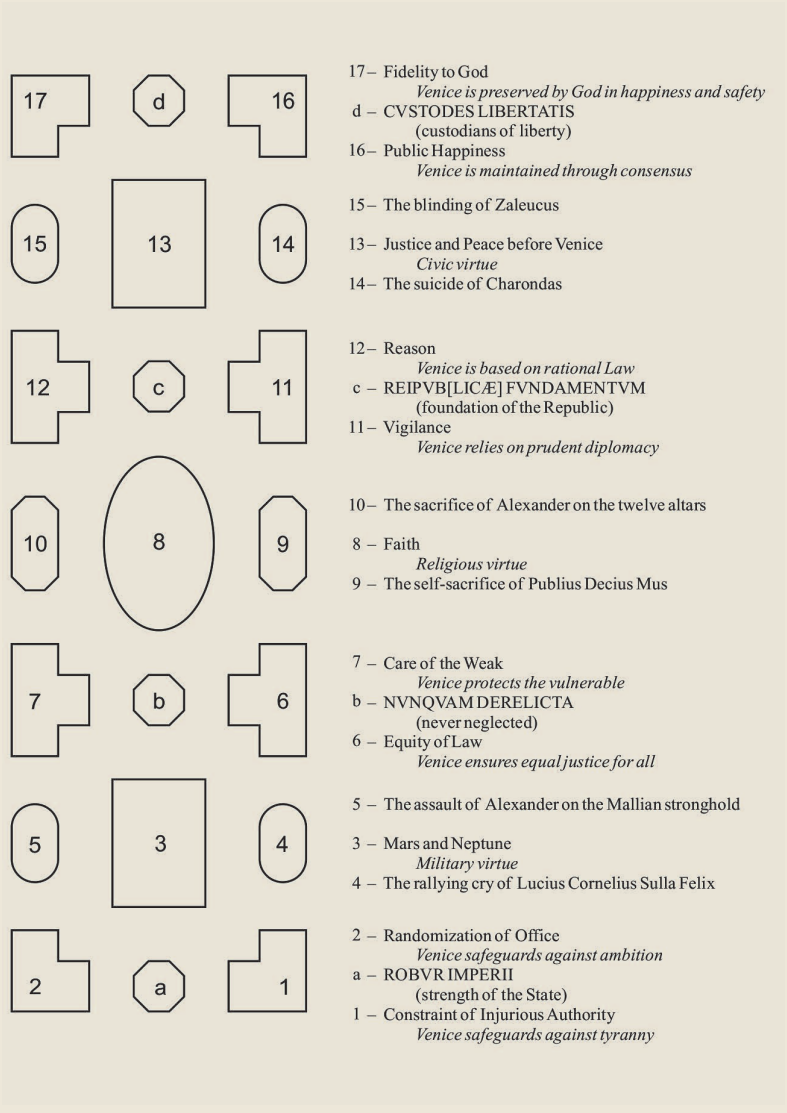

Diagram. Iconographic scheme.

ic qualities and virtues for which the Venetian government was most renowned and admired throughout the Continent.[15] This may very well explain the inclusion of the four prominent inscriptions which would have facilitated the 'decryption' of the program, even during brief audiences. Regardless, the ensemble would have undoubtedly been intelligible to those visitors aware of Venice's international reputation and versed in the contemporary political essays concerning Venice that circulated widely.

These sixteenth and seventeenth-century writings on Venice were principally interested in the constitutional mechanisms and procedures instituted to ensure the stability of the republican order by contrasting the degenerative vices that could otherwise lead to tyranny and oligarchy. In the ceiling, this is the theme expressed by the first two allegorical figures: *Constraint of Injurious Authority* (Dia., 1) and *Randomization of Office* (Dia., 2). The following figures, *Equity of Law* (Dia., 6) and *Care of the Weak* (Dia., 7), exhibit the government's concern for the well-being of the disenfranchised and invoke its ability to prevent civil discord and popular tumults. *Vigilance* (Dia., 11) and *Reason* (Dia., 12) point to the wisdom and prudence embodied in Venice's laws and policies which subordinate appetites and passions to the pursuit of the common good. Finally, the allegorical figures of *Public Happiness* (Dia., 16) and *Fidelity to God* (Dia., 17) relate to the longevity and stability of the State. The exposition of all of these themes largely follows Contarini's *De magistratibus*.

The admiration of foreign writers for Venice simultaneously focused on the devoted service of the Venetian aristocracy to the Republic and on the reciprocal acceptance of common interests between the patricians and the *popolani*. On their part, Venetian publicists, although mainly concerned with explaining the order and effectiveness of the Republic's constitution, were also laudatory toward the aristocracy's virtues, and Contarini himself considered the wisdom and virtue of the nobility to be necessary parallels to the constitutional structure in order to guarantee good order and civic harmony. In the ceiling, the innate virtue of the Venetian aristocracy is the subject of

[15] Martin Gaier sees the iconographic program as undoubtedly conceived to instruct the patricians who sat in the College, exhorting them to obedience and encouraging them to work for the common good. For the reception of ambassadors, he considers the decoration of the room as simply intended to create a suitably lavish setting: cf. Gaier, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

the three main canvases which concern military, religious, and civic virtue. The adjoining monochromes present *exempla virtutis* from Antiquity that evoke the individual qualities of self-sacrifice and devotion. Implicitly, these classical exemplars affirm that the noble virtues of the great heroes of the ancient world are incarnated in the Venetian aristocracy.

Overall, the ceiling of the College exalts and explains the political stability and social harmony of the Republic. To the diplomatic representatives of the turbulent States of sixteenth-century Europe, Venice is presented as the very essence of good government. It is the living reality and the ultimate perfection of the classical republican ideal, the fulfillment of the greatest aspiration of Renaissance Humanism, namely to transmit the political wisdom of the ancients to the modern world and to create a stable polity, immune to corruption and free of tension, wherein man could realize his full potential and achieve honor and distinction as citizen.

«Robvr imperii» («Strength of the State»)

With few exceptions, the sixteenth and seventeenth-century political treatises dealing with the Venetian government include panegyrical descriptions of the city of Venice itself. For many a foreign observer, convinced that the city's outward beauty expressed its inward virtue, Venice's marvelous physical situation confirmed the Republic's exceptionalism. The Venetian apologists were no less laudatory in their writings and similarly equated Venice's magnificence with its moral excellence and civic qualities. Contarini begins:

> I having oftentimes observed many strangers, men wise and learned, who arriving newly at Venice, and beholding the beautie and magnificence thereof, were stricken with so great an admiration and amazement, that they woulde, and that with open mouth confesse, never any thing which before time they had seene, to be thereunto comparable, either in glory or goodlinesse.[16]

[16] Card. G. Contareno, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, transl. by L. Lewkenor esq., London, I. Windet, 1599, p. 1; «Sæpenumero animaduerti complures advenas, prudentes homines, nec bonarum artium ignaros, qui cum primùm Venetias venissent, ac amplitudinem eius urbis contemplati essent, adeò sunt admiratione ac veluti stupore quodam perculsi, ut nihil mirandum magis aut illustrius se unquam vidisse præ se tulerint, ac totius oris significatione ostenderint.» (Idem, *De magistratibus & Republica venetorum*, Parisiis, M. Vascosani, 1543, p. 1).

Equally remarkable, Venice was singularly without walls and yet secure. Some of the Republic's admirers attributed the impenetrability of the city to the grace of God, others to civic concord or to the innate virtue of the ruling aristocracy. But over time, political essayists became virtually unanimous in their opinion that the strength of Venice resided in the wisdom and prudence of its institutions and laws which ensured the security of the State. On this point, Contarini is clear:

> …for though it is apparant that there hath beene many commonwealthes, which have farre exceeded *Venice* as well in empire and greatnesse of estate, as in militarie discipline and glory or the wars: yet hath there not beene any, that may bee paragond with this of ours, for institutions & lawes prudently decreed to establish unto the inhabitantes a happie and prosperous felicitie, the proofe whereof is made manifest by the long continuance thereof in such security and happinesse…[17]

Appropriately then, the decorative program of the College begins with an illustration of the constitutional mechanisms that defend the Republic; it is organized around the central inscription «Robur imperii» («Strength of the State»).[18]

The epigraph, located directly under the scene that depicts Mars and Neptune, is customarily understood as an allusion to Venice's military and naval prowess, following the indication of Ridolfi in 1648. Zanotto in the nineteenth century specifies further that it refers to Venice's

[17] Idem, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*, cit., pp. 5-6; «Nam etsi compertum est nonnullas Respublicas extitisse, quæ imperio, ditione, necnon militiæ disciplina, ac bellorum gloria Reip. Venetæ longè præstiterint, nulla tamen institutione ac legibus ad bene beateque; vivendum idoneis, cum hac nostra conferri potest: quo effectum esse perspicimus, ut neque; adeò diuturna ulla unquam perstiterit.» (Idem, *De magistratibus & Republica venetorum*, cit., p. 5). For similar assessments and a general discussion on Venice as a city without walls see M. King, *Venetian Humanism in an Age of Patrician Dominance*, Princeton (NJ), Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. xvii-xix.

[18] Unlike *vis* which is strength in motion, *robur* is the static strength that supports and resists. It is defensive rather than offensive: cf. A. Traina, G. Bernardi Perini, *Propedeutica al latino universitario*, 5, a cura di C. Marangoni, Bologna, Pàtron, 1995, pp. 164-165. In *The Firmness of the Wise* Seneca clearly distinguishes the difference: «Think that the wise man belongs to this class, that of men who, by long and faithful practice, have acquired strength [*robur*] to endure and tire out all the violence [*vim*] of their enemies.»: Lucius Annæus Seneca, *De costantia sapientis*, 9, 5, in *Moral Essays*, vol. I, *De Providentia, De Constantia, De Ira, De Clementia*, transl. by J. W. Basore, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1928 («Loeb Classical Library», 214): «ex hoc puta genere sapientem, eorum qui exercitatione longa ac fideli robur perpetiendi lassandique omnem inimicam vim consecuti sunt.».

power («possanza») on land and sea.[19] But none of the early descriptions of the College make such a connection. More importantly, this interpretation would appear anti-historical in view of the fact that throughout the sixteenth century Venice had been forced to retreat on numerous fronts and concede to far greater powers. Furthermore, after the peace of Bologna, which sanctioned Hapsburg hegemony in the Peninsula, Venice lost much of its influence. Its survival depended increasingly upon a policy of vigilant – but passive – neutrality.[20] As Niccolò Machiavelli had already laconically concluded in the immediate aftermath of Agnadello: «…they [*scil.* the Venetians] …not recovering their forces and reputation, do (like all other princes of *Italy*) remaine at the devotion and discretion of others».[21] Even the Venetians' triumphant rejoicing that followed the Christian victory at Lepanto was parenthetical, and in the end Cyprus was lost.

But despite its declining power, Venice was routinely lauded by political essayists throughout the Continent for the stability of its government, which enabled the Republic to survive.[22] Hence, rather than an exaltation of an illusory military prowess, the inscription «Robur imperii» – in perfect accord with the contemporary political treatises – more credibly indicates that the strength of Venice lies in its institutions and laws which defend the State not from external forces but from the corrupting forces that threaten from within. Specifically, the two allegorical figures flanking the inscription illustrate that the laws and customs of the Venetian Republic successfully restrain the individual's quest for grandeur which can lead to tyranny and the ambition of the aristocracy for honor which can result in oligarchy.

[19] Cf. Zanotto, *op. cit.*, tav. lxxxv, p. 6.

[20] Machiavelli and Guicciardini both consider Venice to be the example of the *città disarmata* in contrast with the Roman Republic which is indicative of the armed and expanding State. Similarly, Giannotti sees republican Rome's military glory in opposition to Venetian peace and stability: cf. Pocock, *op. cit.*, p. 289.

[21] N. Machiavelli, *The Florentine Historie*, transl. by T. B. Esquire, London, Th. Creede, 1595, p. 21; «…non havendo riaquistata ne la riputatione ne le forze; a discretione d'altri, come tutti li altri Principi Italiani vivono.» (Idem, *Historie fiorentine*, Firenze, B. di Giunta, 1532, c. 28*v*). This becomes the prevalent assessment throughout the sixteenth century of both Venetian apologists and foreign observers: cf. W. J. Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty: Renaissance Values in the Age of the Counter Reformation*, Berkeley (ca), University of California Press, 1968, p. 107 and *passim*.

[22] Venice's recovery from the defeat of Agnadello was a decisive catalyst for the full development of the myth. For the response in European political treatises see Gaeta, *L'idea di Venezia*, in *Storia della cultura veneta*, cit., pp. 614-632.

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