

The Winged Lion of St. Mark: Logo of Venice, Inc.

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Abstract

“A brand becomes an icon,” writes the Harvard Business Review, “when it offers a compelling myth.” Few brands have a myth as compelling as that of the lion of St. Mark, which has been associated with Venice since the 9th century and continues to live as its logo today. What accounts for such longevity?

The answer is twofold. First is the fact that Venice itself has persisted for that period of time, not just as a city but also as a unique phenomenon. Secondly, and the topic of this paper, is that the lion has demonstrated both resonance and fluidity.

The myths of Venice – of which the lion is an overall symbol – have been consciously and diligently cultivated for more than a millennium. As Venice evolved – from upstart trading community to imperial satellite to successful polity to regional power to world power to pleasure capital to occupied territory to tourist destination – the myth evolved as well. The particular success of the lion has been its ability to represent both the Venice of the present and the Venice of the past at many different points in time.

Based on close study of over 50 depictions of lions from the 5th century through today – mosaics, sculpture, bas relief, flags, manuscript, fresco, metalwork, prints and JPGs – the paper argues that the winged lion played a central part in every sphere of Venetian public life throughout the span of the Republic (697-1797) and continues to function as a living logo today.

NOTE: the presentation will include many illustrations.

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1. Introduction: the power of brand

“Iconic brands,” writes Douglas Holt in the Harvard Business Review, “beat the competition not just by delivering innovative benefits, services, or technologies, but by forging a deep connection with the culture. A brand becomes an icon when it offers a compelling myth².” The lion of St. Mark has been associated with Venice since the 9th century and continues to live as its logo today. We are not accustomed to thinking in historical spans as long as this - an image that emerged in mosaic during the early Christian era is going strong as a JPG in the internet age. What accounts for such longevity?

The answer is twofold. First is the fact that Venice itself has persisted for that period of time, not just as a city but also as a unique phenomenon³. Secondly, and the topic of this paper, is that the lion itself has demonstrated both resonance and fluidity. By resonance I mean robust, multiple connections with viewers on many levels. By fluidity I mean the ability to shift in meanings across time, so that its meaning is abiding: it signifies both the Venice of the past and the Venice of the present, as different as those things might be.

The myths of Venice – of which the lion is an overall symbol – have been consciously and diligently cultivated for more than a millennium⁴, and have lodged deeply into the Venetian psyche – so deeply that they have generated persistent counter-myths. (Myth and counter-myth have only played themselves out in recent years after 200 years of scholarship.⁵)

As Venice evolved – from upstart trading community to imperial satellite to successful polity to regional power to world power to pleasure capital to occupied territory to tourist destination – the myth evolved as well. The particular success of the lion has been its ability to move continuously in the mind of viewers to reflect the moving reality of Venice itself.

² Harvard Business Review, “What Becomes an Icon Most?”

³ The reasons for this are fascinating but outside the scope of this paper. See my EBHA 2004 paper “Venice: The Model Turned Upside Down?”

⁴ “Il Gonfalone di San Marco” by Giorgio Aldrichetti and Mario De Biasi traces the lion and other symbols of Venetian mythology through original documentation from its earliest years. David Rosand’s “Myths of Venice: the Figuration of a State” is a brilliant exploration of this myth-making, deeply grounded in painting and sculpture, through the Renaissance period. John Julius Norwich’s “A History of Venice” and Frederic Lane’s “Venice: a Maritime Republic” discuss both the propagandistic activities of the Venetian government to cultivate its official “myth,” as well as the “anti-myth” generated by its detractors, through the fall of the Republic in 1797. David Pemble takes up the story of post-fall Venice and its myths into the mid-20th century in “Venice Rediscovered.” Jan Morris has written extensively on late 20th-century Venice and the transitions of its myth in her many works on Venice. The Art Newspaper has reported diligently since the 1990s on transitions in Venice’s contemporary image.

⁵ And the projection of contemporary concerns onto Venetian history. Pemble, pp. 87-109.

2. Venice, Inc.

In order to think of the lion as a brand one must argue that Venice itself is a corporation. A strong case can be made for this. The Republic of Venice, from its founding in the late 7th century to its dissolution in the late 18th, was governed by an oligarchy of wealthy merchants. The fortunes earned by this ruling class, and by a number of those outside it, were enabled by the Republic itself providing essential services: military protection, custody of a high-maintenance port and canal infrastructure, diplomacy with important markets and supply centers, state-sponsored ship making, and financial and other institutions. Indeed, the Venetian state played such an important coordinating role in the trading activities of its people, its fortunes were so closely tied to their fortunes, and its reach into the daily lives (and purses) of nobility and commoner alike was so pervasive⁶, that it is reasonable to regard the state itself as an umbrella corporation.

3. St. Mark and the lion

St. Mark is one of the four “Evangelists” who wrote the Gospels of the New Testament. Mark was born wealthy in Jerusalem, where his family at one point sheltered a persecuted Peter. Mark preached Christianity with others in Antioch and Cyprus, associated with Paul, became Peter’s assistant in Rome and transcribed his sermons. These presumably became the basis of his Gospel, “a masterpiece in miniature” known for vivid prose. Mark brought Christianity to Alexandria, where he was martyred in the year 68. A legend grew up in the 7th century that, before going to Alexandria, Mark was sent by Paul to preach to the people of the northern Adriatic, that on his return trip his boat foundered in the marshes where Venice is now located, and that an angel told him in a dream that his bones would find their final resting place there.⁷

Each Evangelist is identified with a symbol: the lion for Mark, the man or angel for Matthew, the ox for Luke, and the eagle for John. The symbols were incorporated into religious art, notably mosaics – the first, perhaps, those of Santa Pudenzia in Rome – as elements of worship and teaching, and thus became widely recognized by a largely illiterate population.⁸

4. Venice and St. Mark

The longstanding affiliation between Venice and St. Mark is essentially political in origin. Nine-century Venice occupied a precarious position in the world. Located between the disheveled remains of the Western Roman Empire and far-away, prosperous Byzantium, Venice liked to think of itself as beholden to neither, while in fact dependent on both for trade and peace. Maintaining equilibrium between the two was important not just for reasons of security and

⁶ Norwich, p. 272.

⁷ Niero, in “The Basilica of St. Mark in Venice,” ed. Vio, p. 18

⁸ See Appendix B.

commerce, but for the pride of the young state as well. These are the factors that came together in the *Translatio Sancti Marci* – the theft of the bones of St. Mark.⁹

In 827 the Synod of Mantua was convened to decide whether Grado or Aquileia – both cities near Venice – was the proper patriarchal seat for the Veneto region. Patriarch Paul of Aquileia had fled from there to Grado some 300 years before in the face of the Lombards – whether temporarily or permanently was the gist of the question. Venice, founded after a similar flight from Grado to the lagoon, was strongly in favor of Grado, as were the Byzantine prelates at the conference. The Carolingian bishops favored Aquileia, and were helped in their cause by “a staggering array of falsified documents and spurious arguments.”¹⁰ The conference being dominated by the Carolingians, Aquileia won the seat, and the Carolingians won more direct control over the stubbornly independent Venetians.

Or so they thought. Instead, the Venetians reached for the ultimate trump card. What would it matter where some fear-stricken, Lombard-fleeing prelate had settled, if Venice could claim the very saint – indeed, one of the four Evangelists – who had Christianized the region in the first place?

It was an era of relic hoarding. Persecutions being a thing of the past, there was no longer a steady supply of relics. Places that had them gained not only a feeling of spiritual protection and a rallying point for their people, but also income from pilgrimage. The tomb of Mark was in Alexandria, a place Venetians knew well from trade. His bones had been moved from tomb to tomb, and were now slated to be moved again to make way for a mosque. It was time – the Venetian argument went – for the great saint to rest in peace in a place that appreciated him. And where might that place be? According to tradition, while sleeping in the lagoon en route to Aquileia, Mark heard a voice say PAX TIBI, MARCE EVANGELISTA MEUS, HIC REQUIESCET CORPUS TUUM (“Peace be to you, my Evangelist Mark, here your bones will find rest”).

And so it happened. In 828 two Venetian merchants, Bonus and Rusticus, went to Alexandria and convinced the Greek tomb guards of the rightness of their cause. The merchants, in a move of cleverness and bravado that have flattered the Venetian self-image ever since, stole the body and covered it with pig flesh, so that the Muslim cargo inspectors shouted “Kanzir! Kanzir!” – “Pork! Pork!” – and fled in horror. Back they came to Venice, where the body was taken into the personal care of the Doge, who built a shrine and eventually the grand Basilica of St. Mark around it.¹¹

⁹ A *translatio* is an account of the movement of relics from one place to another, often by theft, which happened so often in the middle ages that there was a standard format. Geary, pp. xi-xiii

¹⁰ Geary, p. 89

¹¹ This great story has been told by every Venetianist who ever wrote. Particularly well documented versions are to be found in Aldrighetti and De Biasi, pp. 38-9, Geary, pp. 88-94, and Nieri, in Vio, pp. 9-19.

The adoption of St. Mark as their protector suited the Venetians from every possible perspective. At a stroke they transcended a grubby squabble of backwater cities and heroically rescued the bones of a Christian saint from infidel depredations. They evaded a head-on confrontation with the Carolingians. They acquired a major pilgrim attraction. They became the heroes of with a story that would reward retelling – a compelling myth.

Perhaps most important, they got themselves the protection of St. Mark, which in itself has four layers of significance, all boons for Venice:

- First, of course, was Mark's stature. An Evangelist was a major saint. Only the Virgin Mary and Christ himself were higher up in the church's eyes, and their bones weren't to be had.
- Second was Mark's distinct suitability for Venice. Early Christian art – and we must take into account the enhanced influence of religious art in a pious, pre-literate society – associates the four Evangelists with water, and the earliest mosaics show them emerging from rivers. So watery Venice got, with an Evangelist, an appropriately aquatic patron. Furthermore, Mark was their kind of Evangelist. He was specifically associated with places the Venetians knew well: Antioch, Cyprus, Alexandria. He had been sent by Peter to the Veneto. He was an aristocrat, cosmopolitan, an acknowledged leader, and died a hero's death.
- Thirdly, Mark was not Theodore. This was a major subtext of the *Translatio*. St. Theodore had been the patron saint of Venice until this time, and Theodore was a Greek saint – an uncomfortable reminder of a colonial relationship to Constantinople the Venetians would just as soon forget. The eclipsing of Byzantine Theodore by Venetian Mark was an unspoken declaration of independence for Venice as a polity.
- Finally, with Mark came the lion. The roaring king of the forest suited the Venetian self-consciousness of the central middle ages, young and expansive.

The lion was made concrete for Venice in the 12th century with a load of war booty. An immense statue of a lion was brought to Venice from the east, wings were affixed to it, and the Lion of St. Mark was installed in a place of honor atop one of two columns in front of the Doge's Palace.¹²

The lion's origins are unclear. Guesses include Etruscan, 5th c. BC Assyrian, 4th c. BC Sassanid art from Persia, or a Chinese *chimera*. In any event, it was built to last: crouching, legs splayed and weighing a sturdy three tons. Firmly anchored, his head is turned, showing a broad face. He doesn't have much mane, and his teeth are showing in an odd grimace that has been replicated on many other Venetian lions.

¹² The two columns were also war booty; a third fell into the water. Lorenzetti, p. 150

So a theft of relics and a looted lion with wings glued on gave Venice an identity with rich political resonance. The lion showed Venice exactly as Venice wished to be seen: neither Roman nor Byzantine – a people apart, rising from the water – and a cut above. Their lion was a regal symbol, as they intended to be ruler of their expanding horizons, and they embraced him.

5. Binding the saint to the city: the mosaics of St. Mark's

Three churches were built on the site that is now occupied by St. Mark's Basilica, each grander than the last, and each designated not as a cathedral, which would have implied a subservient link to Rome, but as the chapel of the Doge. Even the first, relatively humble structure deliberately overshadowed its neighbor, the church of San Teodoro, a colonial echo of churches in Constantinople.¹³

From the 11th through the 14th centuries St. Mark's Basilica was decorated with its famous mosaics.¹⁴ These vast works, covering over 10,000 square feet, provide a detailed history of the founding myths of Venice in a medium accessible to literate and illiterate alike, and to visitors from any country, speaking any language. The mosaics and other architectural elements of the Basilica tell the story of the state's protection by St. Mark and other myths concerning the supposed justice and benevolence of the Venetian state. During this period the Basilica and its piazza were the focal point for many parades and ceremonies, in which Venetians at all levels of society played proud parts. (Venice, it has been said, was a place where statecraft was choreographed.) These rituals were a central element of Venetian life, providing cement for civic society and impressing visitors with the splendour and internal peace of the Republic.

Portrayals of the life, death and afterlife of St. Mark are the centerpieces of the Basilica's immense artistic program. The mosaics are rendered in stunning detail and carefully annotated for the benefit of the literate few. We see Mark on shipboard en route to Alexandria, two men carefully raising the sails, the ship rendered in detail to pass the scrutiny of Venetian shipbuilders. There is the famous dream scene, Mark and another apostle asleep in the boat, with Venetian reeds and sandbars visible below and the angel swooping down from above. We see Mark, with dark hair and beard and an intelligent, sensitive face, healing Anian in Alexandria. A slightly greyer Mark writes his gospel at a well-appointed desk. A mitered Mark, holding his crozier, and greyer still, stands erect as he is ordained a bishop. We see the martyred Mark dragged through the streets of Alexandria by men whose dress is rendered in detail down to their shoelaces – and we see the saint laid to rest, face now wrinkled, by a somber funeral party. We see the clever and daring theft of his bones by Venetian merchants, their arrival in Venice, and the veneration given to them over the years. Special attention is given to an incident that demonstrates Mark's special care for his

¹³ Likewise St. Mark's itself would spawn respectful replicas in Venice's own colonies. Concina in Vio, pp. 35-40

¹⁴ Concina in Vio, pp. 35-50

Venetian people: the Doge's chapel was burned down in 976; during the subsequent rebuilding Mark's body was lost, only to be revealed in dramatic fashion after city-wide prayers and fasting were offered in 1094¹⁵.

The story of St. Mark, important though it is, comprises only one part of the mosaics. Stories from the Old Testament and the life of Christ are given more space. And yet one receives the distinct impression that the life of Christ is part of the story of Mark, and not the other way around. This is subtly reinforced where elements of the Basilica and the Doge's Palace are incorporated into the mosaics: one shows the façade of the Basilica with the four horses clearly visible, stamping and snorting, another the doorway through which the doge attends mass, with mosaicized figures gesturing welcome.¹⁶ The life of the universal Church is all contained in the Doge's chapel in Venice.

As with the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, the Basilica in Venice was more than a place of worship; it was designed and operated as an instrument of state, for the dazzlement of diplomatic visitors.¹⁷ The mosaics emphasize over and over the important place Mark and his lion – and by extension, Venice – occupy in the cosmos. In the words of Garry Wills, "Mark's body ordered the whole of society around itself." Lions, not surprisingly, feature prominently in the Noah mosaics, the male (i.e., St. Mark's lion) in the foreground, first off the ark, in the position of leadership, the female in the background with the hand of Noah on her head. Likewise in the mosaic showing Adam naming the animals, he is portrayed naming the male lion first.¹⁸

The Adam and Noah mosaics are in the narthex of the Basilica. In this prominent place, these mosaics would have been seen and studied by visitors waiting for entry, and given them their first introduction to the Basilica. The narthex mosaics constitute an offhand, seemingly uncontrived, reference to the importance and primacy of the lion among beasts embedded in the familiar stories of Genesis. The natural vigor of the lions gives a sense of great confidence and fitness for rule – just the impressions the Venetians would have wanted to convey to foreigners and natives alike.

6. The Venetian lion vs. other lions

Although the lion is a common component in non-Venetian heraldry, there is usually a distinction noticeable between Venetian and non-Venetian lions. The

¹⁵ "Half-way through High Mass there was suddenly heard, from the south transept, the sound of crumbling masonry. All eyes turned to find that part of one of the main supporting piers had fallen away, revealing a hold from which there protruded a human arm. It was immediately recognized as being that of the Evangelist, whose body was now, amid scenes of great jubilation, removed *in toto* from its hiding-place and reburied in the crypt." Norwich, p. 74

¹⁶ The figures are in fact Cain and Abel and the inscription makes clear the not-so-subtle message that the actions of the doge must occur in clear view and be above suspicion. Niero in Vio, p. 10,

¹⁷ Harl, lecture two.

¹⁸ Wills, pp. 33-4

most obvious difference is that it has wings and a halo and often holds a book. But there are others.

The mosaics and the statue in the Piazzetta inaugurated a trend in lion making that was to last throughout the life of the Republic, generating countless lions in every imaginable form, both artistic and utilitarian.¹⁹ Inevitably some trends emerged in how these lions were depicted that made the lion of St. Mark different from other lions. The typical non-Venetian heraldic lion is shown on his hind legs, clawing the air (*rampant* in heraldic terms). The Venetian lion almost never adopts that pose (hard to do when you're holding a book). Likewise, Venetian lion is often shown sitting – something heraldic lions don't usually do. Other differences: the heraldic lion is often shown with an elegant, thin, S-curved body. Venetian lions are generally more substantial. Heraldic lions are often shown in profile – Venetian lions usually have their head turned to face the viewer.

The most obvious attributes of the Lion of St. Mark are the halo, wings, and book, sometimes closed, sometimes open to a page showing the *pax tibi* message.²⁰ Other signs are water – this is often subtle and easy to miss – taken from the early mosaics – and the odd, grimacing smile taken from the statue in the Piazzetta. Sometimes he holds a sword.

The two most common poses for the Venetian lion are:

- *in moleca* – Literally, this means “like a crab.” It means a lion that is – either by sitting or being portrayed in a foreshortened view or up to his belly in water – compact, suitable for a round coin or a square tablet.
- *andante* – This means walking – analogous to the heraldic lion *passant*. In later Venetian depictions, this often means walking from water to land.

Contemporary branding wisdom advises “Rather than spend marketing dollars on branding individual products, giants like Disney and Microsoft promote a single umbrella image that casts one glow over all their products.”²¹ Michael Eisner and Bill Gates might have taken their cues from Venice, where the lion was attached to every type of official activity and to many aspects of ordinary Venetian life.

7. The Venetian lion in battle: flags and pennants

The history of Venice is one of battle, against the pirates of the Adriatic, the Genoese, the Turks and others. These battles (and the trade for which they were fought) were carried out by galleys flying under the Venetian flag.

¹⁹ Of the thousands of extant specimens, I have studied 59 specific depictions of Venetian lions in preparing this paper (see Appendix A).

²⁰ According to popular tradition, lions holding books open to the phrase *PAX TIBI* were associated with times of peace, while in wartime the book with its pacific invocation would be slammed shut – “although they could hardly revise the ones that had been painted, sculpted, woven, etc., to meet current events.” Martin

²¹ Harvard Business Review, “Are the Strategic Stars Aligned for Your Corporate Brand?”

Textiles being notoriously fragile, only a few actual flags have come to us from early Venetian history, but depictions and accounts abound. The first flag of St. Mark may have been made for Doge Pietro Orseolo II in 998. According to chronicler John the Deacon, the Doge led a naval expedition against the Narentines, pirates who moored off the eastern coast of the Adriatic and harassed Venetian seamen. Before the navy left, Bishop Domenico of the house of Gradenigo chanted a solemn mass and gave the Doge a *triumphale vexillum* - triumphal banner.²²

Was this the first lion banner? We don't know – the records are unclear about whether the saint or his symbol was depicted on the flag dispatched against the Narentines. A clearer record was left 300 years later by the Dominican monk Jacopo da Varazze, a Genoese archivist (d. 1298) who explicitly makes reference to the lion as the official symbol for Venice. He also mentions the phrase *PAX TIBI MARCE EVANGELISTA MEUS*.²³

The standard naval flag stabilized early. It was a red field with a gold lion, winged and haloed, holding his book. The shape might be rectangular with “tails,” or splits in the flag, at the end, or it might be in a pennant shape. We can imagine that battle flags are in some respects very personal items, and certainly not all of them were standard; some extremely interesting examples exist.²⁴ But we see many depictions of naval flags, and most fall into the readily recognizable style.

This consistency should come as no surprise. Venetian galleys were made and outfitted centrally, by the famous Arsenal, the state-owned shipyard that used factory methods long before the industrial revolution. These methods included standardized parts, and the flag would be seen as one such part. The Arsenal first went into commission in 1104, so Venetian ships and flags were made to be consistent at a very early time. This early standardization of flags is demonstrated by a miniature painting from 1350 depicting the naval battle between the Venetian fleet and that of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa,²⁵ and a 1355 mosaic in the Basilica of St. Mark commemorating the 1125 theft of the corpse of St. Isidore

²² Aldrighetti and De Biasi, p. 18

²³ Ibid., pp. 17-8.

²⁴ A particularly distinctive flag sailed into battle with Francesco Morosini, 1688-94. Morosini's flag, now in the Museo Civico Correr, features a Byzantine-style Madonna and child with dark faces. On the right is a lion (with clearly articulated musculature, a flowing mane, erect neck, face in profile with mouth open and teeth showing) whose rear paw is in the water. On either side are five busts of saints. In the front at the bottom is the shield of Morosini. While the lion is a standard depiction, the Byzantine Madonna is not. Aldrighetti and De Biasi, p. 242

²⁵ All battle scenes are confusing. This is rendered more so by what look like scratches, but are in fact oars and arrows, depicted in white, that crowd the bottom and top of the painting respectively. Faces of the fighting men are distinguishable on the Venetian side - there is a doge in scarlet with the ducal hat, leading with a mace, while others watch. Two bloodied bodies float in the water in the foreground. The Venetian flag flies from the ship on the right; on the left ship flies the opposing flag, the black imperial eagle on a field of gold. Aldrighetti and De Biasi, p. 152

from the Island of Chio to the care of Doge Domenico Michiel²⁶, both of which show multiple identical standard flags.

8. Marking the territory: lions abroad

The Republic of St. Mark was not just a city, but an empire. From the 11th through the 17th centuries it left a very large footprint in the Mediterranean and beyond, stretching from Bergamo, near Milan, around the Dalmation Coast in the Adriatic, down the Ionian Sea to Corfu, to the fingertips of the Peloponnesus, around to the islands of the Aegean, south to the large island of Crete, and all the way to Cyprus, a stone's throw from Beirut – over 1,500 miles from end to end.

Venice marked its territory with lions of stone. Unlike the consistency we see in naval flags and in the stone lions of Venice itself, the territorial lions varied widely in style and quality. While some are carved in the standard way – in the *moleca* or *andante* pose, front facing, with wings, halo and book – others are unique, even bizarre. Some examples:

- Lassa Pur Dir Palace, a deep pink 13th-century Venetian gothic building in Pirano, Slovenia, has a bas relief of a lion in heraldic *rampant* form, his upper half extending from a two bands of waves from which protrude, down and out, flourishing, plume-like elements. A shield with a “B” is below. This lion is seen in profile, upright and clawing.²⁷
- Another 13th century lion in Pirano bears not the standard “pax tibi” inscription but instead a poetic inscription beginning with “Behold the winged lion! I pluck down earth, sea and stars...”²⁸
- The cathedral in Capodistria, Slovenia from the same era contains a very arresting bas relief of a picture within a picture. Two knights are kneeling and praying in front of a horse. On the other side of a trefoil-shaped opening is a flag showing a lion of St. Mark, winged and haloed (standard) but in the *rampant* pose (not).²⁹
- In Zadar, Greece (near the Straits of Otranto) is a bas relief from 1792, a mere five years before the Republic would fall, described by Jan Morris as “among the least successful” of the lion images: “he grins toothlessly, points at his book with what appears to be a hoof, is surrounded by

²⁶ Two galleys wait offshore as the Doge in red, accompanied by a priest and three knights, approach the fort where they are greeted by a bearded man in green with a hat of some kind. He appears to be welcoming them, and the fort flies the Venetian flag, so we may assume that the island is already in Venetian hands. Three women with rosaries grieve by the saint's open tomb, distraught, we might conjecture, by the loss of their protector. Aldrighetti and De Biasi, p. 154

²⁷ Zorzi, p. 108

²⁸ Morris, Empire, p. 157

²⁹ Aldrighetti and De Biasi, p. 140

plumped-out feathers, like a turkey, and bears on his head a lightening conductor in the form of a palm tree."³⁰

- Perhaps the strangest of all is a 16th century bas relief, from Preveza, Greece (also near the Straits of Otranto). A very primitive and unusual beast, nearly unrecognizable as a lion, stands full length, with a man behind him who appears to be connected to the lion by a chain, although who is master of whom is unclear. We see both the lion's crazed eyes, but also his open mouth in profile, with a full set of teeth. He floats on his hind legs, and just below the open grasp of his front are the low building and belltower of a town.³¹

Such a bizarre assortment of lions contrasts sharply with their ship-borne brethren. This should come as no surprise. Not only were naval flags issued from a centralized place as part of a standard package of equipment, they were made by expert craftspeople³² who were close, both literally and figuratively, to the heart of the state. In contrast, the territorial lions were chiseled under widely varying circumstances by colonial artisans of widely varying background and talents – and sometimes under wartime circumstances.

In Venice itself, allusions to the territories were the subject of some of the best-known Venetian paintings. The iconic 1516 Carpaccio painting *The Lion of St. Mark* marks an important turning point in Venetian imperial policy. The brilliantly depicted lion, wearing the odd grimace of the winged statue, is stepping onto land out of the lagoon, with his face to the cities and his back to the ships. Six years before, Venice had prevailed against the League of Cambrai, the allied European powers that had tried to curb its power. The time had come, the lion clearly said, for Venice to extend its empire from water onto land.³³

Garry Wills explicates Veronese's painting *Mars and Neptune* on the same theme, from later in the century when naval losses had lowered Venetian confidence:

³⁰ Morris, *Empire*, p. 157

³¹ Zorzi, p. 161. Maybe it was something about the narrow Straits of Otranto, near the bottom of the Adriatic, that generated unusual lions. "Here the great confrontations took place... The Adriatic was the life-line of the Venetian empire, and control of the narrow straits of Otranto was a vital Venetian interest; but with the Turks on one side and the Spaniards on the other, it was always in danger, and Venice would give up its neutrality to defend it. The Turks had seized Otranto in 1480, but could not keep it. After the victory of Lepanto in 1571, Turkish warships were excluded from the Adriatic, but the Spaniards then sought to strangle Venice by the same means. They also encouraged the Uskoks [pirates], who preyed on Venetian (and other) ships from Senj. Venice was forced to make war on the Uskoks, 1613-18, and clung to its positions guarding the entry to the Adriatic... until the extinction of the Venetian Republic by Napoleon (1797)." *Times Atlas*, p. 187

³² These craftspeople would likely be women as well as men. Since women exclusively made sails at the Arsenal, it is reasonable to think they might have made the flags as well. Lane, *Ships*, p. 162

³³ Wills, p. 47

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the gradual shrinking of Venice's sea empire before the expanding power of the Turks made the city look to its land holdings as more secure than its ports in the Mediterranean... The two aspects of the empire are figured as Mars and Neptune, just as in Sansovino's statues for the 'Giants' Staircase.' But here Neptune is old and wrinkled, his trident at rest on his lap, the ship's masts and pennants fading in the sky behind him... and the lion of Saint Mark looks back at him fondly, as if sharing his reverie, while his body is turned toward Mars, who is vigorous, in his prime, holding his commander's baton.... His horse snorts with eagerness for the fight...[T]he omens were clear. The city of the sea must rely more on its terraferma holdings than on its galleys. In fact, the painting suggests that it will be reborn in this element - a little-noticed figure is the small lion cub lurking in the cloak of Mars, peering cautiously around his war baton. The city will have a new life on the mainland.³⁴

9. Propagating the myth

For a very long time the Republic of Venice was a wealthy and peaceful place, effectively governed by a hereditary ruling class.³⁵ There are remarkably few instances of social unrest in the whole of Venetian history. Venetian panegyrists attributed this to natural blessings and the wisdom of its rulers, in a system of beliefs that came to be known as the myth of Venice. Like all persistent myths, it had its basic foundations in reality, some components of which were these.

- **Equal justice.** In a court of law nobles and commoners had equal standing. Those who could not afford to hire a lawyer were assigned one by lot (all lawyers were registered by the state and required to serve when called). This system gave Venice a reputation that stood in contrast with those prevailing in other states during the Renaissance.³⁶
- **Wealth.** Venice was an entrepot for goods all over the world, and these goods, and the prosperity to buy them, made it a place of obvious material wealth. On a more mundane level, there was enough to eat – the grain supply was tracked daily.³⁷
- **Freedom from warfare.** The lagoon surrounding Venice on all sides was impassable by all but the flattest boats, and even those had to be piloted by local pilots. No foreign armies invaded it, because none could reach it.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 68

³⁵ The ruling class constituted a tiny percent of the total population. This oligarchic system of government lasted so long that what seemed strikingly progressive at its founding was risibly anachronistic at its fall – not because it had changed, but because the world around it had.

³⁶ This facet of the Venetian experience is particularly impressive when one remembers that in the rest of Europe during the years of the Venetian republic, most people lived under serfdom.

³⁷ The census of 1509 refers to the units counted as *anime*, or souls, a word used to cover all people regardless of legal or social status. By 1586 the term used was *bocche*, or mouths. Beloch.

The myth of Venice had a highly articulated visual vocabulary and the lion played a central role in it. The celebration of Venetian justice is the subject of a 1421 painting by Jacobello del Fiore, *Venice flanked by lions and archangels*, originally commissioned for the Magistrate of Property, where justice would have been top of mind. David Rosand explains:

The two lions bracketing the throne of Justice allude to the gilded throne of Solomon... and, as Jacobello's triptych makes clear, that throne was ultimately inherited... by Venice herself. Moreover, the convenient coincidence of the leonine decoration with the beast of St. Mark offered to Venetian iconography a special set of possibilities, or correspondences and cross-references, and a new range of resonance.³⁸

By the high Renaissance the lion seems to have aged, his role moved to the side as the benefits of his patronage – wealth and power – take center stage. Paolo Veronese's *Venice enthroned with justice and peace*, 1575, shows an uncomfortable-looking lion, who seems to have just been told to sit quietly beneath the throne of a pudgy, placid Venice and not get in the way of the bejeweled ladies. The celebration of Venetian plenty is the subject of another Veronese, *Juno offering the ducal Crown to Venice*, 1554, in which Juno showers down on Venice the Ducal Crown with coins and a laurel wreath. The lion is in the background, looking out at us plaintively. His teeth show, not in the famous grimace, but as if he were a simpleton whose mouth hangs open.

Perhaps the frankest celebration of wealth is Tiepolo's 1740 painting *Neptune offering Venice the riches of the sea*, where Neptune empties coins out a seashell before an emine-clad Venice who orders him back to the sea for more, leaning on her lion like an armrest.

The lions in these paintings seems much removed from what Garry Wills refers to as “a tougher Venice” – the Venice that had made the myth happen. One can't help but notice a “protesting-too-much” quality and ask if the gorgeously painted lions weren't trying to make up for a lack of the real thing³⁹ – the qualities of discipline and courage that brought about Venetian success in the first place. Certainly the toothless lions shoved underneath the thrones of the sleepy matrons are a far cry from their muscular forbears.

10. Celebrating work and duty: *insegne*, guild books and commissions

Throughout the life of Venice, the lion served as a reminder of duty and a guarantor of good work. Guilds were legitimized by the state as early as the 13th century, and each guild had its own *insegne*, or guild painting, showing guild

³⁸ Rosand, pp. 19-26

³⁹ In a similar vein, observers of American business sometimes observe that codes of ethics are most prominent in the least ethical companies – Enron was said to be full of them.

members diligently going about their work under the approving eye of St. Mark or his symbol.

The barber's 1518 lion, as we might expect, is dapper and well-coifed, with a full curly mane, shapely wings and sinuous body. His head is cocked and he snarls like a matinee idol playing an action hero.⁴⁰ The 1436 *mariegola* (guild rules) of the olive pressers is decorated with a remarkable lion with multicolored wings and a green fishtail floating on a cloud.⁴¹

The 1577 cover of the carpenters' *mariegola* is a fine piece of metalwork featuring a three-dimensional lion on the front, while their *insegna* had a lion *andante* overseeing working carpenters. Note the position of the lion on a plane above the carpenters and the nobleman inspecting their work.⁴²

The lion also oversaw philanthropic duty. The late 14th century votive tablet of the Brothers of the Scuola di San Marco, one of the most prestigious of the Venetian *scuole* (philanthropic confraternities), shows a lion clasping a closed book and banner as two brothers kneel before him, dressed in their hooded robes.⁴³

The ruling class also used the lion to remind them of their duties. Alvise Zorzi explains one instrument for defining such duties, advisors' *capitulars*:

oaths of office that were read during the swearing-in ceremonies of the six personal advisors to the doge. These all-powerful politicians, who comprised the Consiglio Minore... were responsible for monitoring the doge's every move, and they themselves were subjects of a number of rules and regulations. They... could not leave the city for so much as a single day without the doge's permission. They were also forbidden to receive foreign ambassadors or delegates without the express authorization of the Senate.⁴⁴

These *capitulars* – along with the *commissions* that were made for nobles taking on positions aboard and *promissiones* that constituted the doge's oath of office – were an art form with a very specific social role.⁴⁵ Manuscripts conveying instructions to Venetian nobles became important family heirlooms, and the

⁴⁰ Aldrighetti and De Biasi, p. 194

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 168

⁴² Ibid., p. 198

⁴³ Rosand, p. 73

⁴⁴ Zorzi, p. 168

⁴⁵ One might think of silver trophies engraved to show who won a tennis match or a yachting race in a certain year. These trophies certainly had a role at the moment when the winner was announced, but perhaps their more important role was to sit on the shelf or mantle of a family's home to demonstrate not so much the achievement of a transient honor, but rather membership in an elite group that was eligible to compete for such an honor.

memory of the appointment became a lasting validation of membership in a ruling class.⁴⁶

This practice of lavish decoration on official documents began early. One *capitular*, from 1396, a Latin manuscript, is decorated on three sides with flourishes, flowers, and devices and figures in red and blue. The left-hand side holds a long, thin triangle standing on its point, and its base (at the top) contains a lion, full-length, striding, quite thin, in the medieval style. Its front paw juts straight out. Its face is turned to us, it has a halo, and its tail forms an s-shape above it. Underneath the lion, in the next pane down, are a group of men in long red robes, and in the two panels below are floral devices.⁴⁷

A *capitular* from 1519 for the Savi della Mercanzia or trade regulators shows the lion walking out of the water, in recognition of the post-Cambrai era. In his front paw he holds the shield of doge Leonardo Loredan, topped by the red ducal corno, while the right front paw rests on the green of the hill. At the bottom are the shields of the five Savii: Andrea Priuli, Pietro Zen, Marino Molin, Tommaso Contarini and Tommaso Mocenigo. The message is clear: you are responsible, and we know who you are.⁴⁸

A painting that uses the lion as part of the reminders of civic duty is Domenico Tintoretto's 1607 *Votive painting of three Avogadori*, in the Avogaria of the Doge's Palace. A glowering lion and religious figures on a cloud overlook four figures at the bottom of the picture: three Avogadori (lawyers) in ermine lined cloaks, all hands clearly showing (no graft here), staring out at us nervously. Their notary, more simply dressed and on a lower plane, hands them an envelope. The Avogadori dealt with many secret, life-and-death matters on the part of the state. The religious figures and the lion, in addition to enacting their own drama, are there to guarantee the honesty of the men below.⁴⁹

Even the doge was reminded of his duty, and much of the art in and around the Doge's Palace take up this theme⁵⁰. The 1438 Bartolomeo Bon bas relief of Doge Francesco Foscari is an example of how this art represents struggles of governance between the doge and council, what Garry Wills calls "battle scars, frozen blows and counterpunches of a power struggle."

⁴⁶ The Zorzi book gives a vivid illustration of the lasting importance of these appointments. In an appendix giving the names of all the Venetian noble families still living, the paragraph on each tells who from that family was a doge, *proveditor*, *savi*, *podesta*, etc.

⁴⁷ Zorzi, p. 168

⁴⁸ Aldrighetti and De Biasi, p. 196.

⁴⁹ There is much more in this painting, having to do with Venetian-Papal politics. Rosand, p. 39

⁵⁰ One example is Jacopo Palma il Giovane's 1615 "Doge Memmo Before the Virgin with Patron Saints," a painting in the Liago of Doge's Palace. The Doge kneels self-consciously before the Virgin, with St. Mark in the foreground commending the Doge to the Virgin, who is trying to keep the squirming infant from crawling off her lap. The other half of the painting - almost as if a completely different painting - are allegorical figures of war, peace, prosperity and so forth, in rich classical garb, sitting among ruins and looking almost as if they are masquers among the detritus of a long and lively party. One senses the Doge would rather be with them - but duty calls.

Looking closely at this stone portrait of a stubborn doge with the lion, Wills sees how outside influences were felt in Venice and forced important moments of transition:

Renaissance humanism spread to Venice in the fifteenth century, introducing new concepts of individualism and heroic leadership. The first to put these concepts into visual form for the glorification of the doge's office was Francesco Foscari... although the statue of Francesco is kneeling, over the gate, before the lion of Saint Mark, whose standard he holds in his hand, his is hardly a humble posture... The kneeling doge has his head on the same level as the lion... he looks more like the lion's keeper than its servant.... With Foscari's image, Renaissance humanism has arrived in Venice, and with it the lone heroic leader.⁵¹

My favorite of all the duty paintings is Battista d'Agnolo del Moro's 1572 painting *Saint Mark at the recruiting table*. In the words of Garry Wills,

Saint Mark himself is seated at the recruiting table outside the doge's Palace, where a man is being paid in advance to serve in the fleet. Mark is so involved in the process that it is hard to tell whether he holds his gospel open in front of him or a list of recruits. He has to guarantee the quality of the men who row and fight and conquer under his flag.⁵²

The lion sits under the table between the saint's feet and three sacks of coins for paying the new recruits. The three nobles entrusted with the job of these advance payments are seated at a counting table, their family crests on the wall on the wall above them. They look directly at us, nervously conscious of their responsibility to both recruit the best men and account properly for the money. Their hands are conspicuously visible, as if to emphasize that no coins are disappearing to the pockets of their stately red robes. The three sacks of coins, mounded full, would present temptation for theft or graft. The saint, the lion, the crests – indeed, we, the viewer – are all there to ensure full fiduciary responsibility.



⁵¹ Wills, pp. 100-1

⁵² Wills, p. 14

11. After the fall: from Napoleon's chisel to tourist destination

The last 200 years of the Venetian Republic were a defensive game, played to preserve as much power and wealth as could be salvaged from a irreversibly deteriorating economic and political situation. The sea routes to the east pioneered by Columbus, da Gama, Magellan and others from the late 15th century rendered the Mediterranean a backwater, as goods from the east could now be brought directly to the wealthy northern European markets. At the same time, the Ottoman Empire enjoyed successes on its eastern front that enabled it to focus militarily on its western front, challenging the Venetians in their holdings throughout the eastern Mediterranean, Ionian and Aegean Seas. Gradually – although not without moments of success (notably the Battle of Lepanto in 1571) – the Venetian Empire slipped away. When Napoleon invaded it in 1797, he only kicked over a hollow shell.⁵³

As part of the conqueror's prerogative, Napoleon offered contracts to have lions removed from Venetian buildings. Fortunately the contractors were remiss in their duty; few lions felt the chisel. But if few lions came down, few went up either – and the ones that did were no longer the lions of the Republic. One lion erected in Treviso in 1797 held an open book with an overtly anti-Venetian message: *DIRITTI E DOVERI DELL'UOMO E DEL CITTADINO* (“*RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF MAN AND CITIZEN*”).⁵⁴

A Pietro Longhi painting – *Lion side-show* – was emblematic of how far the lion had fallen. As Jan Morris says,

for a time a State Lion lived in a golden cage in the Piazza: he died, it is said, because licking the bars gave him gilt poisoning, and thereafter captive lions were forbidden in the city for several centuries. When one turned up, though, at the Venetian Carnival of 1762, Pietro Longhi showed him grandly on display, with a little dog on his back, dancing dogs all around him, a monkey on a beam above, a differ fiddling, and the strolling Venetians engrossed as ever by his presence.⁵⁵

The confidence that had sustained Venice through wars with Genoese and pirates and Turks could not cope with the loss of purpose occasioned by the opening of the sea routes to the east. Venice had become a place more famous for its courtesans and boot makers and musicians than its military men and long-distance merchants, and the domesticated, trivialized lion reflected this.

Ultimately this reputation as a luxury destination was to sustain Venice. Venice had always attracted visitors – pilgrims from the Crusading era, diplomats from

⁵³ Napoleon ceded Venice to Austria in 1798; only in 1866 did it officially become part of Italy.

⁵⁴ In perhaps the biggest insult of all, the Venetian lion was inserted into the two-headed eagle crest of the Austrians. Aldrichetti and De Biasi, pp. 282-4

⁵⁵ Morris, *Bestiary*, p. 72

its era as a world power, businessmen always – and this trend would only accelerate. By 1600 Venice was already beginning to be visited for pleasure by the upper classes in an early form of the “grand tour” of Europe that would in the 18th century be seen as practically a rite of passage by wealthy Europeans (and later Americans).

As an early tourist destination, Venice was also significant in developing the essential paraphernalia of the tourist trade: guidebooks and souvenirs. The first book on what to see in Italy appeared in the 17th century⁵⁶, and by the 19th century there were books on Venice clearly meant as guidebooks: lists of sites with illustrations, historical tidbits, sections on customs and manners, and even fold-out maps⁵⁷.

12. A living logo

In the 19th and 20th centuries some sculptural lions were erected, but these were more likely to be secular lions rather than proper lions of St. Mark. Some of these are quite romantic. A good example is the Luigi Borro bronze sculpture, erected in 1875 as a memorial to Daniele Manin, the hero of an ill-fated Venetian uprising against the Austrians. The lion stretches out his paw and wings, in the beginning of a roar. But there is no enemy in sight, and the fully seated lion knows that he is handsome but doomed to irrelevance. The tragic aspect of this statue is magnified by the fact that Manin is also the name of the last doge of Venice, who surrendered the city to Napoleon without a fight.

The lion in the age of tourism was to take on a new life as the label of all things Venetian. Virtually all Venetian guidebooks, and many of its souvenirs, would bear the winged lion. So ubiquitous was the use of the lion for official business, tourist promotion and commercial enterprise that with the rise of computer usage the Commune of Venezia had in 1990 eight logos for official use. Four of the 1990 lions are *in moleca*, of which two are encircled, one in a square and one adrift, all in different styles but all with open books and the standard PAX TIBI. Only the square one shows water. All of these have haloes and wings, one whose wings point downward. The other four lions are *andante*. One holds a sword aloft, no book, no halo. One, more stylized, has a halo and an open book but the letters are indistinct. One, more stylized still, has no halo and the book is blank; his paws are like trefoils. The final lion is simply a stylized outline.

These lions were made available for the sake of consistency, but no real effort was made to manage the lion as a brand. This changed with the turn of the new century. In January of 2002 The Art Newspaper ran this item:

⁵⁶ “The charter or foundational text for the [Grand] Tour is *The Voyage of Italy*, a treatise-cum-guidebook by Richard Lassels (c.1603-1668).” Redford, p. 10.

⁵⁷ An example is a work by Edmund Flagg published in 1853 called “Venice, the City of the Sea,” and noting on the title page that it includes “map and embellishments.”

Everybody is exploiting the image of Venice without the city getting any crumbs from the feast, complains its mayor Paolo Costa. In the US alone, he says, that there are 141 brand names including the word "Venice", not to mention the Venetian Resort Hotel in Las Vegas, which is a reduced scale version of the Grand Canal. He points to the success of the official logo of New York, "I Love New York," invented in 1977 by Milton Glaser, which brings millions to the city coffers each year.

A competition was held for a new, single logo for the city, with Philippe Starck, a French designer, acting as advisor. In January of 2003 The Art Newspaper announced the results:

The Venetian city council has decided to rebrand the city with a new logo, consisting of a lion with a human head and one wing. It will be used by companies or government initiatives, which promote Venice, as a trademark of quality. The council expect to make a large profit from the royalties. The lion's head was designed by French graphic artist Thibaut Mathieu of the Cake design studio in Paris, with Philippe Starck as consultant.

The new logo depicts the head of a lion, front-faced, with a single wing extending to the right, all super-imposed over the letter "V". There is no water, halo, book or sword.

Reaction was generally negative, not on the idea of a single logo but on that particular logo. "Unbelievably cemeterial" was one verdict. "We wonder how a one-winged lion could fly" was another. A poll showed that over 49% of those polled agreed with the statement "Non mi piace per niente" ("I don't like it at all"). One unhappy viewer opined, "If Costa had been at Lepanto - flags displaying the new logo of course - the western world would be speaking Arabic."⁵⁸ Another, linking the logo to Venice's modern troubles, suggests its motto might be "getting by on a wing and a prayer."⁵⁹

No word on whether the new logo is filling city coffers. Indeed it doesn't seem to be popular; one doesn't see it in wide use. But the fact that such a logo can continue to excite passion after more than ten centuries shows a longevity unmatched in business history.

⁵⁸ www.veniceword.com

⁵⁹ Martin

Appendix A

Lions Examined

In writing this paper I studied 59 works depicting lions associated with Venice (out of thousands of extant specimens). Some of these 59 works depict multiple lions – for example, battle scenes with many pennants flying.

I have studied many of these lions first-hand, others in reproduction. In two early cases the lions themselves no longer exist but we have contemporaneous accounts of them.

The works date from the 4th century through the year 2003. (Dates reflect the time that they appeared in Venice. Three – the lion atop the column in the Piazzetta and the Arsenal lions – are much older; they were brought to Venice as war booty.) Within this date range, there is a reasonably good distribution across the centuries, with the fewest in the early years and the most in the 16th century.

Some lions underwent a rite of passage from mere lion to Venetian lion by virtue of coming to Venice and being installed in a place of honor, such as the Arsenal lions. The Piazzetta lion underwent the further transfiguration of having wings added to it to become a proper lion of St. Mark.

Some of the works are famous. Carpaccio, Bellini, Bon, Veronese, Tintoretto, Tiepolo and Titian and all represented. Two of the works are mosaics from the Basilica of St. Mark. Many are anonymous.

Of the 59 works, 19 are paintings, 12 bas reliefs, nine sculpture, six mosaics, four flags, two manuscripts, one miniature, one fresco – a rarity in damp Venice! –one piece of metalwork, one woodcut, one engraving, and the most recent are JPGs. All the works are more or less “public”; there is no jewelry or apparel or signets, although lions have been put on all of these things and more.

Appendix B

Biblical and Early Christian Origins of the Iconography of the Lion of St. Mark

Elements of the iconography associated with the lion of St. Mark – the lion itself and the river from which he emerges – have important biblical origins. The books of the bible from which the elements are taken were written perhaps as much as a millennium apart. Christian writers of the 2nd-4th centuries conflated these biblical passages into symbols for the instruction of largely illiterate audiences. These symbols were in turn incorporated into church mosaics beginning in the late 4th century.

The first reference is to the river and occurs in the book of Genesis. Scholars have put the date of “composition” as early as the 10th century BC⁶⁰, written “in the context of the history of the Near East in the latter part of the second millennium (1500-1200 B.C.)”⁶¹; it is in any event the oldest part of the bible. The pertinent verses (Gen. 2:6,10) read:

*But there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground....
And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads....*

The four rivers are named in Genesis. Two – the Tigris and the Euphrates – exist by those names today. The two others – the Pishon and the Gihon – are not known to us (although there has been much speculation as to where they might have been).

The second biblical source for Martian iconography is found in Ezekiel, written by a priest of that name in the post-exilic 6th century B.C.⁶² The verses containing reference to the lion (Ezekiel 1:4-12) are an account of a vision:

*And I looked, and, behold, a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire infolding itself....
Also out of the midst thereof [came] the likeness of four living creatures....
And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings...
As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle.*

⁶⁰ Bloom and Rosenberg, p. 7. The authors also posit that the original author of this and other sections of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy was a woman living in the court of Solomon.

⁶¹ *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, p. 1 OT

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 1057 OT

The third and last biblical reference to the iconography that became attached to St. Mark and Venice is to be found in the book of Revelation. This book was written by an author named John during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (A.D. 81-96), a time of persecution for the Christians.⁶³ Revelation 4:2-7 reads in part:

*And... behold, a throne was set in heaven...
And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices...
And before the throne [there was] a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the
midst of the throne, and round about the throne, [were] four beasts full of eyes
before and behind.
And the first beast [was] like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the
third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast [was] like a flying eagle.*

Only in this third passage do we see an image that is recognizable as the lion of St. Mark. While it draws clearly from Ezekiel, the four beings with four faces have in Revelation become four separate beings with one face each. The element of water, missing from Revelation, has been added (although it is still, and not flowing, as the four rivers in Genesis).

The association of the four beings – man, lion, ox and eagle – with the four evangelists – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – was the work of subsequent centuries. St. Irenaeus (d. 202) initially assigned the symbols to their evangelists based on alleged personal attributes; according to his initial scheme Mark's symbol was to be the eagle and John's the lion. Later he reversed these two, so that the symbol of John would be the eagle, and Mark's would be the lion, as we know them today.⁶⁴

It was the martyr Hippolito of Rome (d.235) who linked the water with the Evangelists: the river, beginning in Eden, dividing into four streams and irrigating the entire world, was the Christian church, which would come to reach the entire world through the work of the four Evangelists.⁶⁵

St. Jerome (d. 420) reaffirmed the association of the symbols with the Evangelists, giving as his rationale the opening verses of their respective gospels: Matthew begins with the genealogy of Christ, suggesting the man; Mark with a scene from the desert, home of the lion; Luke begins with an allusion to sacrifice, hence the ox; and John with his soaring prose, indicative of the eagle.⁶⁶

⁶³ "One reason for the author's couching his teachings in mysterious figures and extraordinary metaphors was to prevent the imperial police from recognizing that this book is a trumpet call to the persecuted..." Ibid., 364 NT.

⁶⁴ Aldrighetti and De Biasi, pp. 34-5

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid. St. Jerome was a favored saint by the Venetians by virtue of his Dalmation origins – rendering him “a Venetian colonial” (Morris, Bestiary, p. 72) - the fact that his symbol was also a lion – and, later, I suspect, by his association with books, since Venice was for a time the printing capital of the world.

So, by the end of the 4th century the symbolism of the four Evangelists had stabilized to what we know today.

These symbols were soon to be rendered in lasting works of art. In the late 4th-early 5th centuries, unknown Roman artists created apse mosaics in the Basilica of Santa Pudenzia featuring the Evangelists with their "winged zoomorphic symbols."⁶⁷ In 450 the four symbols, flying with their books clutched to their chests, appear in the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, sister of the Roman Emperor, in Ravenna.⁶⁸ Galla Placidia was also responsible for the commissioning of mosaics at the Church of St. Paul Outside the Walls, in Rome, including the lion and the other three Evangelistic symbols.⁶⁹

Hence, by the time of the creating of the mosaics in St. Mark's Basilica in the 7th-8th century, the iconography of the lion of St. Mark – as a lion with multi-colored wings stepping out of a river – was well established.

⁶⁷ Lewis, p. 91

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 152

⁶⁹ Aldrighetti and De Biasi, p. 124

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