

Greece in Venice, Venice in Greece

An illustrated talk by Dr Alfred Vincent



Dr Alfred Vincent is a Visiting Fellow at the School of Humanities and Languages at the University of NSW. He has had a long affinity with Greece and the Greeks and is a very proud Philhellene.

It was therefore no surprise that on 12 April 2016 Marrickville Library was filled to capacity when Dr Vincent presented an illustrated talk on the theme of Greece in Venice, Venice in Greece. Vincent took the audience— which included a large contingent of Kytherians - on a whirlwind tour through the Levant where the Venetian and Byzantine empires intersected. Venice came to control parts of the Greek world, including Crete (1211-1669), Cyprus (1489-1570), Kythera and the Ionian Islands (to 1797). La Serenissima in turn was also to become home to a large and active Greek community that saw a cultural interaction between Greeks and Venetians over many centuries in the fields of art, literature and learning

As Dr Vincent explained, by 1000AD Venice had become an important maritime power in the Mediterranean and Venetians saw Byzantium as their cultural capital. With the taking of Constantinople in 1204 by the Crusaders Venice received a share of Byzantine territories. Venetian influence started to spread through the Aegean to islands including notably Naxos and Crete and mainland outposts at Methoni and its sister port of Koroni, Nafplion (also known as Napoli di Roumania) and Monemvassia. Kythera came under direct Venetian rule as a result of a dowry arrangement between wealthy Venetian families. The other Ionian Islands also formed part of the Venetian maritime empire, including Corfu



which was regarded as Venice without the canals.

The Venetian empire gradually pulled back under the advance of the Ottoman empire from the east. The Ionian Islands were the last to fall in 1797, initially to a combined French and Russian force before the advent of the British Protectorate.

But Greek heritage also lives on in Venice.

From about the 15th century onwards a Greek community begun to flourish in Venice as refugees from the fall of Constantinople in 1453, including soldiers, scholars, theologians, artists, printers and other emigres from Byzantium, made their way to the Venetian Lagoon.

In 1494 the Greeks in Venice were given permission to establish a Confraternity or Brotherhood in an area that came to be known as Campo dei Greci to represent the interests of the flourishing Greek community which numbered around 5000 Greek residents. In 1539 construction started on a church, the San Giorgio dei Greci, which was completed in 1573 and still stands as the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Saint George in Venice, the oldest and historically the most important church of the Orthodox Diaspora.

The adjoining building which was built to be used a school has since 1953 housed the Hellenic Institute of



Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Studies, the only institute of its type outside of Greece. One of its most famous directors, now retired, was Professor Chryssa Maltezou who back in the early 1970s had been sent to Kythera to restore the archives in the Kasto at Hora which were in a dangerous state of deterioration. Her work on the island and her academic interest in Cerigo are legendary, reinforcing the Venetian connection.

The Greek community of Venice produced many famous artists, including painters, poets, iconographers, mosaic designers and printers. Venice in fact became the centre of the production and printing of Greek language books from 1499.

At the end of his presentation, Dr Vincent was warmly applauded for his interesting survey of the intersection of Venice and Greece in our historical and cultural landscape.

George Vardas