

## Italian Paleography Website Project “Venice”

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### *Renaissance Venice: An Overview*

Venice was known as “La Serenissima”—the most serene one. This moniker referred to the idea that among other Renaissance city-states and European powers, Venice was the most stable and the peaceful. Venice was characterized as particularly enduring because it was less often beset by the internal struggles that plagued other states at the time, and it was also geographically well-protected by its location in a vast lagoon; in general, there was less worry in Venice about the threat of invading armies than in someplace like Florence.<sup>1</sup> It was believed that Venice’s serene status was due to its unique system of republican government, which in reality was a mixture of monarchy and oligarchy that concentrated power in the hands of a restricted patrician class. Venice was a cosmopolitan city, as well as one of the first to possess overseas colonies in the form of a series of conquered ports along the Adriatic coast and in Greece. During the Renaissance, Venice was known for its vast trade networks, particularly its relations with the Ottoman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Venice crafted an elaborate series of civic rituals to uphold its own myth, which centered on a story of its founding by St. Mark that tied it closely to imperial Rome and also put it on equal footing with the papacy. The Newberry holds several manuscripts featured on the Italian paleography website which offer an in-depth look at various parts of Renaissance Venice—especially when paired with premodern maps such as those drawn by Giovanni Merlo and Jacopo de’ Barbari.

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<sup>1</sup> There existed a real spirit of cooperation in Venice because of its watery locale—Venetians needed to work together to keep the city from flooding, which was a constant battle (one that continues to this day). Renaissance Venice was the site of some of Europe’s first environmental regulatory agencies and big hydrological projects. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53361958> and <https://www.mosevenezia.eu/project/?lang=en> for information on the MOSE dam project and Venice’s ongoing relationship with the Adriatic Sea.

<sup>2</sup> Venice was often the first European state entity to make peace with the Ottomans during times of conflict (in order to preserve the lucrative eastern trade). This sometimes earned the Republic the ire of the papacy and other continental powers.

*Students should work in pairs or small groups. You do not need to answer all of these questions, but you should think about several of them as you begin your analysis of the Venetian sources.*

**1. Describe the item:**

Does the item have a title? Author?

What is it? What format is it?

If there is text, is it printed or handwritten? What language is it in?

Is the work illustrated? If so, what kind of illustrations and what do they represent?

Are there page numbers, chapters, highlighted text?

Are there any other interesting features?

**2. Interpret the item:**

What is this work about?

Is this work for public or private use? Who is the audience?

What is the purpose or significance of the work?

**3. Question:**

Think about your observations and the answers to the above questions. What do they mean? What story does this item tell?

Do you trust the author's point of view?

What does this item NOT tell you? What questions does it raise? What do you want to know more about?

**4. Research:**

What story do these items tell? Does comparing the items bring up more questions? What sources would likely help to answer any questions you have about this item regarding the item itself or its content?

## > Venetian Chronicle

[https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP\\_024](https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_024)  
[Chicago, Newberry VAULT folio Case MS 87 .1/]

- This manuscript is a chronicle. What is a “chronicle” and what does that mean about the way the text written, what it contains, who it was meant for, etc.?
- Are there any words that catch your eye? Any repeated terms of note?
- What do you notice about the style, embellishments, choice of ink colors, hands, format, etc. in this manuscript? What do these things tell us?
- From a paleographic standpoint, what are the pros and cons (as it were) of this manuscript?
- What is the utility of this document as a historical source? How might this be used in scholarly work?

## > History of Venice by Gian Giacomo Caroldo

[https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP\\_049](https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_049)  
[Chicago, Newberry VAULT Case MS folio F 35994 .148/]

- This manuscript is a history. Is that different from a chronicle? What elements (textual or otherwise) do they have in common (especially re: Venice)?
- What can we learn—paleographically and otherwise—from just the preface?
- What does Caroldo find worthy of inclusion in his historical account? Why?
- What connections can we make between what is discussed on this page and Venice’s physical/civic landscape as it is depicted on the Merlo map?
- From a paleographic standpoint, what is useful and interesting about this manuscript? What is frustrating or unhelpful?
- What is the utility of this document as a historical source? How might this be used in a scholarly work?

## > Negroponte Notarial Certificate

[https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP\\_041](https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_041)  
[Chicago, Newberry Wing MS ZW 1 .581/]

- This manuscript—a notarial certificate—is a different kind of document from the first two manuscripts. Why is it different? How?
- What do we know about notaries? Renaissance notaries? What does it mean to certify something? Why would this have been necessary?
- What is the purpose of this document? What is it meant to do? What is “at stake” and how do we know?

- What do we notice about this document in the physical sense? What about the hand? Are there other significant identifying features?
- From a paleographic standpoint, what is useful and interesting about this manuscript? What is frustrating or unhelpful?
- What is the utility of this document as a historical source? How might this be used in a scholarly work?

### > Register of Criminals Executed in Venice

[https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP\\_072](https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_072)  
 [Chicago, Newberry Library, VAULT Case MS 6A 34]

- What type of document is this? What is its purpose/intention? What are the values of this document?
- What kind of punishments are listed? For what crimes? What can we learn about the criminal justice system in early modern Venice from this document?
- What information does it give us? How are the entries written and why?
- Is there anything unexpected that you can find here? Are there any trends or commonalities among entries?
- From a paleographic standpoint, what is useful and interesting about this manuscript? What is frustrating or unhelpful?
- What is the utility of this document as a historical source? How might this be used in a scholarly work?

### > Copies of Venetian Documents in Latin and Vernacular

[https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP\\_037](https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_037)  
 [Chicago, Newberry Wing MS ZW 1 .575]

- What kind of document is this? How can you tell? What identifying features does it have?
- How is this document written?
- What Venetian values are on display in this document?
- From a paleographic standpoint, what is useful and interesting about this manuscript? What is frustrating or unhelpful?
- What is the utility of this document as a historical source? How might this be used in a scholarly work?

## > The Merlo Map

<https://publications.newberry.org/venice/>

[Newberry Library - Franco Novacco Map Collection: "Vero e real disegno della inclita città di Venetia." 1676. Novacco 4F 288]

- Before navigating past the section "An Introduction," consider what stands out to you about Merlo's Map at first glance—perhaps toggle **layers** and **local details** off (bottom lefthand side), and choose **color** or black and white, and discuss generally what you see in terms of "the big picture" here.
- Now choose one or two areas of Venice to really zoom in on. What do you notice in terms of the physical makeup of the city? What has Merlo chosen to show us? What is labeled, what isn't? Thinking in terms of architecture and urban planning, what can we see when we zoom in compared to the big picture, and vice versa?
- Toggle off **layers** (middle righthand side) and then toggle on **churches**—where are the churches located? Why do you think they are situated where they are? What do the churches look like, or how has Merlo depicted them? Are there any common or surprising features? Click on some of the highlighted churches and see what you can find out.
- Now toggle on **convents & monasteries**. Are these buildings in different areas than the churches? What does the "religious geography of Venice" look like with these institutions added to the mix? Do convents and monasteries look different than churches or basilicas? What do you find interesting from some of the descriptions in the highlights?
- And now toggle on **non-catholic communities**—what happens when you do this? How and why is more of Venice's religious geography filled in? Who are the members of these communities? What do these buildings/areas look like, and where are they? Why?
- Finally, toggle on **processions** (you can toggle off the other layers if things are getting too crowded on the map)—where were these processions held? What kind of processions were they—religious, political, something else? Public or private? Click through the highlights here and take a look at the accompanying images displayed on the righthand side with the context entries. What did these processions look like? As best as you can tell, what symbols and rituals were being deployed in these processions, and why?
- With the other layers toggled off, toggle on **printing**. Read through the highlights and look at the accompanying images of texts—what kinds of texts were being printed in Venice? What do you notice? What stands out to you? Can you learn anything about Venice's place in the history of the book/printed word? How does printing fit into the religious geography of Venice?

## > The Barbari Map

[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1895-0122-1192-1197](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1895-0122-1192-1197) or

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/111219/view-of-venice-jacopo-de-barbari>

[Newberry Library Special Collections - Edward E. Ayer Collection: "Venetia." 1575. VAULT  
oversize Ayer 135 .L2 1575 A1]

- Barbari's map was printed almost two hundred years earlier than Merlo's (although the Newberry's editions are only one hundred years apart in age). What similarities and differences

do you notice? Which are most striking, and why? What did Barbari choose to depict, versus Merlo; what did they both include?

- Look at some areas on the Barbari map that you're already familiar with from the Merlo map—did anything appear to change in the city time between the two depictions of the city? Has the “bird’s-eye view” changed? Architecture, the structure of the city?
- Can you follow Venice’s religious geography on the Barbari map? How well, and why or why not?
- If you were going to visit Venice as an early modern traveler, which map would you want to take with you and why? Would your answer change if you were a foreign power seeking knowledge of Venice as a potential ally, or conquest?