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The Venetian Republic

http://www.theworldeconomy.org/impact/The_Venetian_Republic.html

Objective: to understand the importance of Venice as a crucial link which connected Europe to Asia and Africa.

Venice played a major role in reopening the Mediterranean economy to West European commerce and developing links with Northern Europe. It created an institutional basis for commercial capitalism, made major progress in shipping technology, and helped transfer Asian and Egyptian technology in cane sugar production and processing, silk textiles, glassblowing and jewellery to the West.

Venice was the most successful of the North Italian city-states in creating and maintaining a republic dominated by a merchant capitalist elite. Thanks to its geographic position and willingness to defend itself, it was able to guarantee its autonomy and freedom from attacks by feudal landlords and monarchs.

It created political and legal institutions which guaranteed property rights and the enforceability of contracts. It was a tolerant and fairly secular state where foreign merchants (Armenians, Greeks and Jews) could operate as freely as locals. Although it was theoretically part of the catholic world, it enjoyed privileged relations with the Byzantine Empire.

Venetian diplomacy was highly professional, pragmatic, opportunistic and dedicated to the pursuit of its commercial interests. It adjusted amazingly well to political changes. In the ninth and tenth centuries its main commerce was to provision Constantinople with grain and wine from Italy, wood and slaves from Dalmatia and salt from its lagoons, taking silk and spices in return.

The Republic of Venice in the 11th century



The republican territory is dark red, the borders in light red.

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In 1204, it played a major role in persuading the leaders of the fourth crusade to target Orthodox Christian controlled Constantinople instead of Muslim controlled Jerusalem. As a result Venice acquired bases in Dalmatia and an empire in the Aegean. It took the southern half of the Peloponnese, Corfu and Crete. It occupied nearly half of Constantinople and gained access to trade in the Black Sea and Sea of Azov.

When the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople in 1453, Venice quickly negotiated the maintenance of its trading rights, but in 1479, the Ottomans closed their access to the Black Sea. In 1517, they took over Egypt and terminated most of the Venetian trade in spices. However, Venice still had important connections with Northern Europe. Trade with Flanders was carried out mainly at the Champagne fairs where Italian merchants bought woollen goods and sold silk, spices, alum, sugar and lacquer. When the sea route was opened between the Western Mediterranean and the Atlantic, trade with Flanders was carried out directly by ship. A second route linked Venice with Augsburg, Nuremberg, Prague and Vienna via the Brenner Pass. German merchants brought metals and metal products (including silver). Venetians traded these metals up the Po Valley and in the Mediterranean.

In building up its trade, Venice created a political empire. In 1171, the city had about 66 000 inhabitants, and was one of the three biggest in Western Europe until the sixteenth century when its population peaked around 170 000. Venice experienced three demographic catastrophes. In 1347–48, nearly 40 per cent of the population died when a galley brought the plague from the Black Sea port of Caffa. Two other attacks occurred in 1575–77 and 1630; each killing about a third of the population of the city. The Empire overseas (*dominio da mar*) included about half a million people. Between 1388 and 1499, Venice acquired territory on the Italian mainland (*terraferma*) which included Udine, Friuli, Vicenza, Padua, Verona, Bergamo, Rovigo and Cremona. In 1557 the population of these territories was about 1.5 million.

The Venetian state played a leading role in commercial activity, being the major shipbuilder, leasing state-owned ships to private enterprise, arranging the organization and timing of convoys. It developed types of ship suitable for Venetian commerce and the conditions of trade in the Mediterranean. This state activity reduced costs for private traders by making commerce more secure from enemy attack. It also permitted smaller traders, with limited capital, to participate in international trade.

The biggest enterprise in Venice was the Arsenal, a public shipyard created in 1104. It was operative for centuries, and employed thousands of workers. In 1291, the Genoese defeated a Moroccan fleet controlling the straits of Gibraltar, and opened the way for European commerce from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Thereafter Venetian ships used this route to trade with London and Bruges.

Although international trade, banking, shipbuilding and associated trades in timber, carpentry, rope and sail-making were the biggest sectors of the Venetian economy, there were also sizeable manufacturing activities producing goods for local use and export. One of the earliest was the glass industry which had already started in the tenth century. Venice was a pioneer in glassblowing technology in Europe and made glasses, goblets, pitchers, dishes, bottles, vases, mirrors, jewellery, candelabra and decorative products of very high

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quality. From the thirteenth century Venetians produced delicate, carefully blown sand-glasses as a time-keeping device for mariners. From the fourteenth century onwards they started making spectacles — an Italian invention which greatly increased the productivity of artisans and scholars. Angelo Barovier, the most famous glassblower of the fifteenth century, perfected the process for making crystal.

Another important field was book production. In the ninth and tenth centuries, scribes and illuminators were mainly active on sacred books in the scriptoria of monasteries. This gave employment to professional scribes, bookbinders, specialists in ornamented calligraphy and illustration. Less than 15 years after Gutenberg's invention of printing, a German immigrant brought the technique to Venice in 1469. It led to an enormous improvement in the productivity of the industry, with print runs up to 4 500 copies. Venice quickly became the principal Italian typographical centre, and one of the biggest in Europe. By the middle of the sixteenth century, some 20 000 editions had been published.

As a result of changes in ship building technology in Western Europe there was a sharp decline in the main product of the Arsenal. There was increased purchase by Venetian merchants of ships from abroad. Over the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Venice did not expand much in population or per capita income, but it remained one of the richest parts of Italy and Europe until overtaken by the Dutch in the seventeenth century.

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6. Give two concrete examples of how the Venetian state supported commercial shipping activity. 3pts

7. In what way was Venice a pioneer in the glass industry? 3pts

8. The introduction of what invention helped to improve the productivity of the book industry in Venice? 2pts

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Why was Venice such an important city?

Objective: to write a short essay in answer to this question with an **introduction**, **body (or development)** and **conclusion**.

Your response needs to discuss the advantages that Venice possessed in terms of geographical position, access to technological advances, legal institutions that supported trade and the ways in which the State promoted commercial activity, in addition to how it acted as a crucial link that connected Europe with Africa and Asia to the benefit to the city.

ESSAY PLAN

Always write an essay plan! However with this essay you don't need to panic because I have written the perfect plan for you to use below!

Introduction: This is the most fundamental part of your essay. It should state what you will demonstrate in the essay by describing the location of the city, the advantages this gave the city and concluding with your **Thesis Statement**. This will answer the question and present the themes each paragraph will develop (e.g. Venice was important because ...)

Body: These paragraphs offer historical evidence that supports what you were saying in the introduction. Each new paragraph should have a mini thesis topic sentence that supports your **Thesis Statement**. The sentences in the paragraph should then provide evidence to support the paragraph's topic sentence (e.g. you could easily write two paragraphs on the technologies Venice had access to, the legal institutions it enjoyed that promoted trade and an explanation of how the State encouraged commerce).

Conclusion: The conclusion **restates the thesis** in response to the question; it summarizes arguments made; and it adds a final thought.

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