

**MEDIEVAL/  
RENAISSANCE VENICE:  
THE DOGE: MERCHANT  
RULERS OF VENICE**



# MEDIEVAL/RENAISSANCE

## VENICE: THE DOGE:

# MERCHANT RULERS OF VENICE

### Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how a merchant became a Venetian Doge, what powers the Doge exercised in the performance of his duties and how the citizens of the Venetian Republic retained a measure of control over their elected officials.

### Subjects

European History, World History

### Grade Level

11-12

### Duration

90 minutes

### Tour Links

- Doge's Palace, Venice
- St. Mark's Square, Venice

### Essential Questions

- Who was the "doge" of Venice?
- How did one become the doge?
- What was the doge's primary responsibility in Venice?
- How did the citizens of the Venetian Republic see the Doge?

## Academic Summary

THEN the noble Doge Rainieri Zeno died, and was buried, clad in cloth of gold; and seventeen days after, Messer Lorenzo Tiepolo was elected Doge. At that time there were six councilors in Venice who remained in the palace until the new Doge was elected, and their vicar was Messer Nicolao Michele. And he assembled all the people in the church of St. Mark, and spoke to them very wisely of all that belonged to the electing a Doge of Venice, and all that the Doge must swear to observe; and the people approved that which had been established. And this was how the election was made: The noble councilors assembled that day the Great Council; and for each one who was in the council there was made a little ball of wax, and inside thirty of these balls was a piece of parchment on which was written "Lector." Then each one took a ball, and the councilors and the forty broke them in the sight of all; and when there was found within the word "Lector," he who had drawn it; went and sat down in a certain place, and those who found nothing written went behind. Thus when all was done there were thirty electors. When they were assembled together, Messer Nicolao Michele spoke to them of the manner in which the election was to be made. And when they had sworn their oath before the council they remained in their room above in the palace, and the others went away. Then these thirty men made balls of wax, and in nine of them was a parchment with the word "Lector"; and each one took his ball, and those who found the word within tarried and the others went away. Then these nine assembled together and chose forty Venetians; and they had power to choose from the council, and from outside the council, seven of them agreeing together. And when they were agreed, they made known to Meser Nicolao Michele, and to the councilors, and to the three heads of the forty, the names of the forty men whom they had chosen; and they sent to fetch them to the palace. And they made forty balls of wax of which twelve had within the word "Lector"; and they put the forty balls in a hat. And there was brought in a child of the age of eleven years; and as each one came up, they said to the little child: "Put your hand into the hat, and take out a wax ball for such a one" (naming him); and the child took it and gave it to the councilors, and they broke it before him; and if there was written within "Lector," they made him sit down, and if not they sent him away. Then the vicar made the twelve chosen swear to observe all that the wise men had established; and they went into a room and chose twenty-five men, eight of them agreeing together. Then they made known the names to the vicar and to the others; and they assembled them together, and made twenty-five balls, and within nine of them was the parchment with the word "Lector." And they came one after the other up to the hat, and the child drew a ball for each and the councilors broke them. And they made the nine chosen swear the oath, and they went into a chamber and chose forty-five men, seven men agreeing together. Then the vicar and the others assembled the forty-five, and made forty-five balls of wax, and in eleven of them put the parchment; and the child drew for them. And the eleven having been sworn, went into a chamber, and

chose forty-one men, nine men agreeing together. These forty-one were to choose the Doge, twenty-five agreeing together. So they made the forty-one swear to observe the rules that the people had approved, and to support and defend the Doge who should be chosen. So these forty-one men chose Messer Lorenzo Tiepolo; and they were of the nobles of Venice. Also in all the elections there was no man chosen who was not thirty years old at least.

*Unreported Source, from Eva March Tappan, The Chronicles of Venice (1914)*

Venice grew up as a city of merchants and trade. From its earliest days in the 5th and 6th centuries, Venetians, by necessity, had taken to the sea. With little land available for food cultivation, Venetians from the beginning had to import almost everything its citizens needed to survive. Its location on the Adriatic Sea necessitated a marriage to the water, and Venetians “dove in” to their task headfirst. Soon, many merchant families began to accumulate wealth, power and prestige. While much of Europe was suffering through a dark age of poverty and misery as the medieval period dragged on, Venetians prospered, and the city’s population swelled to over 110,000 by 1400 CE, making it one of the largest cities in Europe by the early Renaissance. Records from the time period are spotty, but tradition says that in 697 the merchants of Venice established a republic dedicated to protecting their rights and the rights of all citizens. Venice was led by an elected leader called the “Doge” (an early Italian version of the Latin word “Dux” – the modern Italian version is “Duce”). Originally the Doge ruled like a king, but by the high middle ages he functioned more like the head of state and all government institutions, similar in power to the President of the United States today. The Venetian Republic over the years also created other elected and civil offices over the years, including a bicameral legislative branch consisting of all citizens who would make the laws. The Doge, who ruled for life unless he was “removed” from office (a few were executed), would then enforce these laws for the good of the community. By the Renaissance, the Venetian system looked remarkably similar to many of the democratic republics across the western world that would follow it hundreds of years later. While Italy would see the creation of many such republics in the late medieval and Renaissance eras, none would be led by an elected merchant like the Venetian Doge. The system worked for almost 1000 years, ending in 1797 when the last doge abdicated his position after the city was conquered by French forces led by Napoleon.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain how a merchant became a Venetian Doge, what powers the Doge exercised in the performance of his duties and how the citizens of the Venetian Republic retained a measure of control over their elected officials.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how a merchant in the Venetian Republic became “Doge.”
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain what powers the Doge exercised in the performance of his duties.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how citizens in the Venetian Republic exercised a measure of control over their elected officials.

## Procedure

### **On tour: Palazzo Ducale, Venezia**

While on tour, students in Venice will visit the Doge’s Palace, where they will see for themselves priceless artworks and amazing feats of architecture, a testament to the wealth of Venice during its heyday. They will also be able to cross the “Bridge of Sighs” behind the palace where, legend holds, condemned prisoners were heard to sigh as they crossed over the rear canal to the city’s prison, from which many would never return. The palace is now a museum. Inside the palace, have students look for the “Lion’s Mouth”, a special wall opening where citizens could place notes to the Doge anonymously reporting their friends and enemies for having committed crimes. In the republic, collusion and hiding income (sort of like tax evasion today) was a heinous crime. The “Lion’s Mouth” in the palace has the following slogan imprinted on it (this is a rough translation):

*Secret denunciations against anyone who will  
conceal favors and services or will collude to  
hide the true revenue from them.*

## Extension

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/dogesvenice.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/Halsall/source/dogesvenice.asp)  
The Chronicles of Venice: How the Doges Were Chosen (primary source) – from the Medieval Sourcebook at Fordham University
- [faculty.apec.umn.edu/jcoggins/documents/Selected%20Publications/Majority.pdf](http://faculty.apec.umn.edu/jcoggins/documents/Selected%20Publications/Majority.pdf)  
64% Majority Rule in Ducal Venice: Voting for the Doge (academic paper). From Jay Coggins, Associate Professor of Applied Economics at the University of Minnesota. Highly recommended as an out of class reading assignment for AP/Advanced students.
- [www.constitution.org/jadams/ja1\\_19.htm](http://www.constitution.org/jadams/ja1_19.htm)  
John Adams: Letter XIX (primary source). John Adams (one of America's founding fathers) critically examines the Venetian Republic. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.
- [rangevoting.org/VenHist.html](http://rangevoting.org/VenHist.html)  
The Most Serene Republic of Venice (website). Good overview of the Venetian government under the doges. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- [missnnghumanities.pbworks.com/w/file/51907666/Venice%20revised.ppt](http://missnnghumanities.pbworks.com/w/file/51907666/Venice%20revised.ppt)  
Venice Revised (PowerPoint) – a long presentation. First portion goes over the Venetian system of government as it developed over the course of time in the Republic, including how and why it changed to a more democratic system.
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILsGE3\\_kqsc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILsGE3_kqsc)  
The Doge's Palace (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxlgugrLNHo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxlgugrLNHo)  
The Marriage of the Sea (video) – describes the ceremony held in Venice every year to celebrate the city's relationship to the sea. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx8SI7ZHSg0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx8SI7ZHSg0)  
The Building of Beautiful Venice (video). This 45-minute video, produced by History Channel International, is probably too long for most in-class showings, but it is well worth it. It traces Venice's history since its founding during the 5th century. Highly recommended for students and teachers, even if it is seen out of class.

### Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doge\\_of\\_Venice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doge_of_Venice)  
Doge of Venice – Wikipedia article

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doge%27s\\_Palace,\\_Venice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doge%27s_Palace,_Venice)  
Doge's Palace of Venice – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Council\\_of\\_Venice](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Council_of_Venice)  
Great Council of Venice – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/venice](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/venice)  
On the Road: Venice – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/venice\\_a\\_special\\_introduction](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/venice_a_special_introduction)  
On the Road: Venice: A Special Introduction – from Passports Educational Travel

### **Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans**

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-tales](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-tales)  
Medieval England – Geoffrey Chaucer: Canterbury Tales
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215)  
Medieval England – Magna Carta 1215
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy)  
Medieval France – The Avignon Papacy 1309-1378
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge)  
Medieval / Renaissance Venice - The Doge: Merchant Rulers of the Republic
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348)  
Medieval Europe – Bubonic Plague 1348
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-inferno](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-inferno)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Inferno
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-paradiso](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-paradiso)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Paradiso
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Purgatorio
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco)  
Medieval Venice – Basilica di San Marco
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-travels](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-travels)  
Medieval Venice – Marco Polo
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade)  
Medieval Venice – Fourth Crusade
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain)  
Al-Andalus – Islamic Spain 711-1492
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054)  
Great Schism of 1054 – Catholic vs. Orthodox
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453](https://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453)  
Byzantine Istanbul – Fall of Constantinople 1453

## **Key Terms**

- Bicameral
- Citizen
- Democratic
- Doge
- Executive
- Legislature
- Merchant
- Republic
- Venice



