

Teaching Venice in Schools

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Introduction

This paper aims to briefly survey advances made in the field of Venice studies and explore how these can help enhance the teaching of Venice in schools. Focusing on the early modern period, this essay will discuss issues related to Venetian politics as well as government and society. The issues for discussion are sub-divided into: 1.) Republicanism and related systems; 2.) Political system and corruption as a reason for decline of Venice; and 3.) The wider social / social-political organizations or arrangements as a stabilizing (or destabilizing) force of Venetian society. The choice and clustering of these issues are partly based on the content survey on Venetian studies and partly based on the survey of similar issues of concern occurring in contemporary Singapore society.ⁱ

This essay makes reference to and is meant to be read hand-in-hand with the write-up on Venice in the resource package produced by Curriculum Planning and Development Division of the Ministry of Education (CPDD, 2008b). This will hopefully assist in the content understanding of the teachers teaching the topic in schools. An inquiry and discussion process in the classroom entailing a fuller exploration of an issue (warts and all) can lead to a better appreciation and conviction

of not only the subject of history or social studies, but of one's role in society.

Survey of Venice Studies

The field of studies on Venice's history continues to evolve.ⁱⁱ Even at the turn of the millennium (at 2000), shifts in the writing of Venice's history are already obvious in several sub-areas of the field. On the general front, the scholarship of the field is "[doing] away with a unilateral reading of Venice's past" (Martin & Romano, 2000, p. 27). To put it in another way, historiography is probing beyond the "myth," an image of an ideal republic, a strong maritime empire as well as a birthplace of capitalism and economically driven people and society. This meant probing beyond the usual reasons advocated for the rise or decline of the city-state. Current historiography tends to "highlight fissures, tensions, contradictions and elements of disorder (in Venice)"; there is, to reiterate, "a shift in interest from order to disorder, orthodoxy to dissent, from the center of power to the broader social context (or periphery)" (Davidson, 1997, pp. 13-24; Martin & Romano, 2000, pp. 7-8). In contrast, the treatment on Venice in the Social Studies textbook covers the rise and fall of the city-state and it can be deterministic towards human-centered factors and does not convey enough of the "fissures, disorder or the periphery."ⁱⁱⁱ

In terms of participants in a political system, one can move away from the “mythical” by exploring a version of the social reality on the ground. An instructor teaching the topic has to be reminded that MOE materials, not surprisingly, have a value judgment on the “selfish interest” of a participant in a political system. From a more neutral angle, participants in a democracy, whether in positions of power or as common folks, embraced the mode of governance for a combination of reasons that were self-serving and altruistic. The “additional notes” in the teachers’ resource file has stated that the aristocrat republic of Venice was a rule of limited representation from the 8th century (CPDD, 2008b, p. 112). Durant’s (1968) insightful reflection from a long survey of history has revealed that “from Solon to the Roman conquest of Greece, the conflict of oligarchs and democrats was waged with books, plays, orations, votes, ostracism, assassination and civil war.” The “oligarchs” referred to a group of politicians who desired a greater concentration of control or power; the “democrats” referred to a group of politicians who desired a wider base of power sharing as well as checks and balances (p. 73). Whether desiring for more power or more checks and balance, individuals sought to protect their interest to a certain extent. In an article analyzing the state of republicanism after the Battle of Agnadello, the resolve of Venetian subjects to uphold the rule of the city-state was severely tested. Agnadello in the War of the League of Cambrai is mentioned in the textbook as an event of severe setback which “tested Venice’s political and military capabilities” (CPDD, 2008a, p. 113). Granted that Venice’s republicanism was not uniformly implemented throughout its empire (especially in its terra firma colonies, referring to hinterland

territories of Venice), the new subjects (not citizens) strove in certain places to yearn for Venetian influence and in others, to be rid of it, in accordance of the benefits that might reaped in comparison to the previous system of extraction they were subjected to (Muir, 2000, pp. 137-67).

On the issue of governmental efficacy versus checks and balances, Venice appears to have achieved a certain power balance and expediency in its political system. Efficacy in a government and checks and balances in a political system have the potential to conflict with each other. This system allowed Venice to delegate its executive power to a more centralized organ in times of crises and subjected decision-making or “legislation” to a more laborious process of going through the councils and senate under more normal circumstances. Lane (1973) argues that the hallmark of republicanism in Venice, implemented through motley arrangements, was about how the interests of domestic power groups were balanced as the system evolved through time.^{iv} At the highest level, the inner circle was comprised of the chiefs of the council of ten, esteemed representatives from the senate (*savii grandi*), state inquisitors (with their own body of informers and secret police) and the doge (and his councilors). The doge made his decision as part of a team (and members of the “inner group” represented the most dominant families of metropolitan Venice). In practice, strong and decisive executive powers were more needed in external affairs in order to react effectively to arising crises; diplomatic courses of action were, hence, often carried out and informed to the Senate and other councils without debate (Lane, 1973, pp. 427-34).

On many other important matters (such as law, finances and coinage, as highlighted in the textbook), sessions of the great council were called and the senate could set up their committees and commissions to investigate issues (much like in the present American senate) (CPDD, 2008a, p. 96). The Venetian system was “so successful” that the Austrian Habsburgs who took over the city in the post Napoleonic period considered at one time whether there was a need to revive the “old system” (Laven, 2007, p. 217). While there was intention by the later generation to restore the earlier Venetian system, it should be remembered that the history of the city-state’s survival was dotted with intense conflicts between power groups as well as other lapses. A case in hand can be seen in Doge P. Gradenigo’s faction in rivalry against the faction of (a branch of) Querini family over the issue of the war against the Pope over the territory of Ferrara in 1310. The rivalry became intense enough that plots to revolt were conceived against the doge (Lane, 1973, pp. 114-17). The rivalry was often joined by foreign groups residing in Venice. A survey of “Catalogo XXVI” in the Archivo de Simancas (in Spain) reveals that the Habsburgs collected intelligence and kept a close tab of happenings in Venice; most notably, the development of factions involving nobles in the city so that they could readily intervene in domestic politics where the occasion benefitted them.

Students of Venetian studies need to re-question the extent to which corruption is pegged as a reason for decline of Venice. The “additional notes” pins the increasing domination of certain families as “one of the causes of Venice’s decline” (CPDD, 2008b, p. 112). In the textbook, the

affliction of the political-administrative system with incapable leadership (arising from a shrinking pool of nobles, in turn linked to the Black Death) and the associated corruption contributed to the decline of Venice. Discussion of the topic in class can take place along the line to probe the information offered by the textbook and resource package further. A few issues can be discussed here: 1.) The degree to which the nobility had turned in on itself after 14th century. 2.) The nature of corruption. 3.) The history of Venice from a longer time perspective can have a more neutral effect on the perception of the city-state’s decline. We will discuss the issue of the inward turning of the nobility first. We can examine this by, for instance, examining the degree to which the position of the doge was monopolized by noble families. If the thesis of the inward turning of the nobility can be disproven, the importance of the factor on the decline of Venice may be questioned. We can analyze the list of doge-elects from 900-1200s and 1500-1700s (in Appendix A) to assess if there was a monopoly by certain noble families. A survey of the lists (see Appendix A) for the above periods shows that: The number of families (going by the names of the doge elected) which fielded a doge was more in the 15-18th century period compared to the 10-13th century period; the families which fielded more than one doge was correspondingly but not surprisingly more in the 15-18th compared, again, to the 10-13th century period. From the list, one would have realized that the average tenure period of the doges had shortened in the 16-18th centuries. One could argue that the complex process by which a doge was elected prevented any concentration of power in the hands of a few families; one can go one step further to argue that the limited power and hence,

lucrative nature of the position of the doge acted as a brake in a system saddled with checks and balances although this could not be relied on to overcome or solve the problem of the diminishing population (with declining population of nobility and hence, a diminishing pool of talents).

There is no denying that new membership to the nobility became increasingly difficult if not impossible (Lane, 1973, pp. 252, 430-31). If the Venetian nobility failed, it was not for want of trying. Near to two dozen plagues took place from the 14th to 16th centuries with outbreaks stretching into the 17th (1630-31; Lane, 1973, p. 430). The Venetian nobility did try to incorporate new entrants, from within the city (merchant families) and from the terra firma, into its ranks although the result of the endeavor was not enough to stem the declining trend of demography. Perhaps the Venetian leadership should have embarked on a path of mass immigration into its ranks and wider community in order to succeed; for here, even Machiavelli (a contemporary of the early modern Italy) advocated a “more easy access to citizenship by foreigners as a way to expand and renew the population” (Machiavelli, 2003). A more balanced perspective should therefore be given to the cause of plagues, pandemic occurrences and nature’s input in the rhythm of human and state existence.

The phenomenon of corruption in the early modern period needs to be seen and contextualized against the norms and practices of the historical period. This will have an impact on whether corruption should be seen as a key factor in Venice’s decline. Lane’s *Venice: Maritime Republic* (1973) invokes Machiavelli and traditional

definition of the term in context of the Medici family (in Florence) which “put in power men who rendered particular services to the private interests of their supporters” (Lane, 1973, p. 258). Research of the term “corruption” has since advanced and the latest studies highlight issues that are not easily reconciled by more orthodox definitions. In the textbook, the affliction of the political-administrative system with a shrinking and incapable leadership and the associated corruption contributed to the decline of Venice. Laslett (2005), in writing about early modern England, stated that linkage to lineage and inherited privileges (as well as wealth) might be a better guarantee to power than being literate. One should be careful to assert that power being restricted to a few equates to corruption. The early modern world is one where the patronage system permeated the network of human relations. Gifts-giving, for instance, is likely to be part of the cultural norms in certain time periods or certain geographical regions (even in modern day contexts) (Guo, 2001; Scott, 1972). Cross referring the discussion on republicanism and related systems suggests that rival factions were likely to sponsor their own candidates to office positions within the framework of the political system (even if these were not of the best caliber) rather than recommend a candidate from the opposing faction. The successful appointment of a sympathizer office holder represented an extension of the patronage network and influence of the faction in question.

From a holistic point of view, one should merge the other interacting exogenous factors, such as economic and environmental explanations, to come to a more non-human centered and balanced

perspective of Venice's decline. The analysis of the other factors is beyond the limited scope of this essay, but other issues of Venice's diplomacy and military as well as the city-state's economy in relation to its environment also contributed to its decline and fall.

Looking at a longer time frame of the evolution of the political or democratic system of Venice can lead to a different perspective. For a start, the context of the long haul of military history is instructive that, against Napoleon, few or no protagonist would be able to avert a collapse in 1797 (in the case of Venice). Second, the post collapse period saw the Austrian Habsburgs (who took over the northern Italian states) adopted "efficient" Napoleonic administrative practices but considered at one point or other (discussed above) to revive the old Venetian political system. If the rise of Napoleon heralds the beginning of modern period (19th century), the lack of resistance on the part of the Venetian nobility towards the invasion and occupation of Napoleon indicates a relatively peaceful period of transition into modernity; rather than a shift into decline (Laven, 2007).

Finally, I discuss the input of various socio-political groups and institutions on the well-being or lack of well-being of the city-state of Venice focusing on guilds, scuole grandi, carnivals and pagni as well as minority groups and their self-help institutions. In a lesson on nation building and governance discussed in the textbook, the social cohesion of a diverse society like Venice depended in no small part on the guilds. The guilds, however, could be given a little more discussion beyond the descriptions on the "early life" in the city and experience of a carpenter described in

the students' text (CPDD, 2008a, pp. 88 and 107). How the different self-help groups functioned in a highly capitalistic society in Venice such that everybody could come together to "live harmoniously" can be studied more closely to provide "lessons" for the contemporary Singaporean society. Lane (1973) credited (perhaps a little too optimistically) that Venice had "no need for troops in the city [because] the common people [had never] tried to overthrow the rule of the nobles" (p. 271). If the bureaucracy and the councils/senate was the activity ground of the high class and the nobility, the guilds catered to the power jostling in the middle and lower classes of Venetian society. The interest of the guilds might be represented in the meetings of the council raised by a concerned or lobbying councilman. The guild of course helped fulfill an administrative function for the government of Venice – it collected taxes from practitioners of the craft that body of guild sought to represent (which raised the interest of these bodies in the meeting of the Grand Council). Guilds served as an outlet and at the same time, a remedy to the fissures of the Venetian society because in the early modern period, they were, other than the immediate family and closer friends, an important avenue by which a person might resort to in bailing himself out in crisis (Lane, 1973, p. 318). The ethnic (minority) groups residing in Venice, for instance, Jews, Greeks, Armenians and Germans, were also expected to take care of themselves. The Jews were divided into the first waves which came, who were more respected, and the later southeastern Jewish immigrants from Europe, which evoked more adverse reaction and discrimination. Although discriminated by the larger population of Venice for a variety of

reasons, the Jews maintained numerous charitable organizations and schemes in the confined areas of their dwelling (ghettos) in the city to help with the povertized and newly-arrived members of the community. Government intervention sometimes came in the form of for instance, taxing the richer Jews to provide for the new Jewish immigrants in the slums.

The other organization which helped to absorb and allay the tensions of society was the *scuole grandi* (a lay, Catholic-sponsored organization promoting charity). The early modern period in Europe was one in which many stresses of globalization (for example, depletion of diminishing resources, displacement of industries) being felt across Europe were most intimately felt by inhabitants in small and trading states like Venice. In a survey around the first half of 17th century, 16% of the population was found to be “hospital poor” in Venice (Jutte, 1994, p. 128). There was a range of confraternities, numbering about 500 in the 18th century. These were state within a state – the richest foundations even financed military expeditions. Although trying to portray a secular image, these organizations had a religious bent – to promote pious living they forbade blasphemy, adultery and gambling. In addition, they looked after the members’ material welfare – from providing dowry or loans, to free lodging and medical treatment (Jutte, 1994, p. 125). Beyond the above institutions, regularly organized events and activities in the city such as the carnivals and *pugni* (lasted till end of 17th / beginning of 18th century) lent a further hand as a cushion to external forces affecting the society. Along the “informal” channel, the institution of the *pugni* (fights that took place on the bridges

involved personages from influential classes who mobilized resources and fighters/workers from an array of lower classes) helped groups acquire honor or settle differences they could not resolve in more civilized settings (Davis, 1994, pp. 47-88, 165-72). In the 18th century, the lower classes increasingly turned to the carnival of the *ragata* (boat rowing races). Although the social institutions and groups have been discussed as a stabilizing force in Venetian society, the same institutions have the potential to be destabilizing. Instances of this can be seen in the council of ten being “particularly nervous” that *pugni* might disrupt the state’s business or the Jews feeling liberated during the Napoleonic invasion in 1797 after a long period of being discriminated (Davis, 1994, p. 143, Lane, 1973, pp. 299-304).

Conclusion

The coverage in the textbook is on the whole a balanced one touching on Venice’s rise, peak and fall in a chronological fashion and provides static discussions of the individual factors accounting for these milestones in the history of the city. The field of Venetian studies is seeing new impulses which view the developments of the city-state beyond its “mythical image”; one that embraces “fissures, disorder or the periphery.” It is important for readers to critically reconsider the issues pertaining to republicanism in Venice and its empire, the Venetian political system and corruption as an explanation of the decline of the Venetian empire, and the role of social system and groups as a stabilizing force in the prolongation or decline of the city-state. The term and issue of corruption for example, if understood in its historical context and in the context of pandemics,

reduces the importance of it as a factor in the discussion of the decline of Venice. Overall, a benefit to the study of Venice is that it can allow, if facilitated aptly, a deeper exploration of political systems. This, in addition to learning from complementary subjects and experiential programs on modern topics, can permit a more intimate understanding of how socio-political systems operated in the past and present; and in the process, hopefully enable the molding of a learned individual concerned enough to understand and partake in his/her environment in the new millennium. (See Appendix B for a summary of teaching ideas based on this article.)

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ⁱ Although not explicitly pointed out in the textbook, Singapore shares many shared similar features with Venice. Surmising quickly on the possible traits, one can find that both city-states: rely to a great extent on trade; are communication nodal points in their regions and eras (Venice in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, Singapore at one end of the Straits of Melaka in Southeast Asia); are cultural centers, or aspiring to be one (Venice was relatively open which attracted talents and ideas during the Renaissance, right down to the Baroque period; Singapore aspires to become a 'Renaissance city' and has put up concrete plans for the materialization of this); face demographic or environmental challenges (dwindling population and rising water level) in their periods; and are influential commercially. Venice was described as a commerce empire which controlled a network of trade stations and string of hinterlands; a first world city-state operates in a different manner at the dawn of the 21st century, a Senior Minister in Singapore has defined the island-state's network in terms of the market it can reach tagged with the number of flight hours it would take to reach there. Despite whatever similarities one might find, one suspects that the inclusion of the topic in social studies must come at the insistence of the "highest level of authority." In a related video, Mr Lee Kuan Yew recounted the process of transforming Singapore into the "Venice of the East." Mr George Yeo, the one-time Minister of Foreign Affairs, had evoked the idea of comparing Singapore with Venice as early as 1988, and as recently as 2012, continued to espouse the idea in an interview with "The Globalist."

ⁱⁱ Many works suggested from the reading list, including J. Morris' work, are supposed to be considered as works of "popular authors." The magnum opus and comprehensive English work of F. Lane's "Venice: Maritime republic" is categorized as a "general history" of Venice. This is contrasted with "works on specific sub-fields", a dichotomy used by specialists / reviewers in academic journals. Works in general histories need to present balanced views on an array of issues studied in Venetian history; something not easily achieved considering that even Lane's work receives its fair share of critical reviews. A common criticism leveled on works on the general history of Venice is that these specialists, perhaps not surprisingly, are not able to do justice to areas outside their researches.

ⁱⁱⁱ The city-settlement's rise to prominence is traced to the period between the ninth and fifteenth centuries and attributed to several reasons namely, leadership, a reforming (adaptive?) government, trade developments (undertaken by the city-state), developments in the industries, and innovative practices (and ideas). The city-state at its peak and empire is described in terms of the extent of its territories and prowess, the vibrant society make-up, economic prosperity and cultural achievements. Venice was deemed to have faced serious challenges and gone on "a gradual decline" between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. The factors slated for decline are: foreign threats from the mainland European states as well as from the Ottoman empire; maritime and trade competition from certain rising European states (like the Dutch and English); internal political challenges arising from

incapable leadership and corruption; and social challenge as a result of the ruling class becoming 'soft' and complacent. Saddled with the burdens aforementioned, the final fall is dated when Napoleon invaded the city.

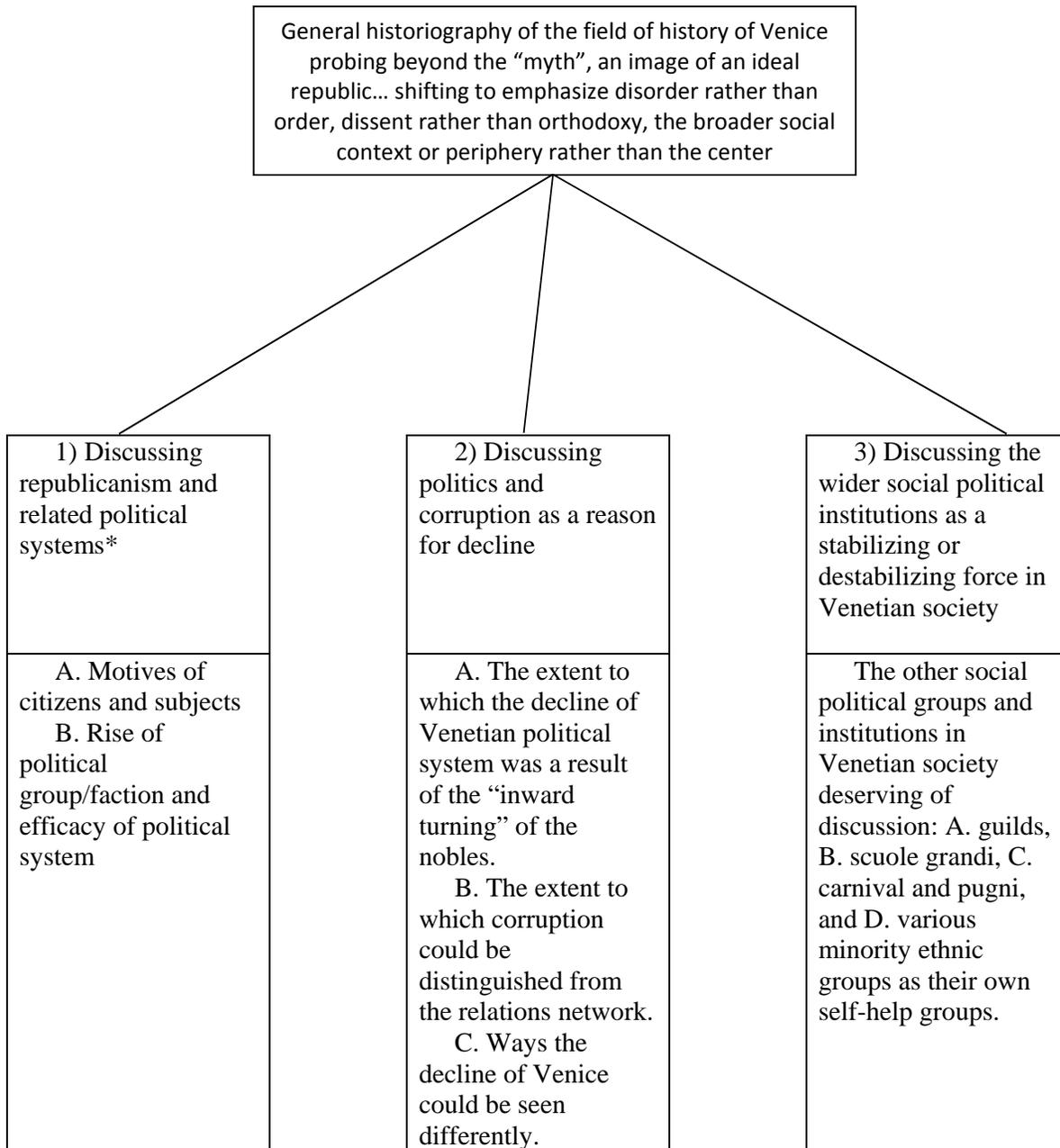
^{iv} The main organs of the Venetian government included: 1. the 3 councils, 2. the senate, 3. the Doge, 4. bureaucrats (governors, commanders, and holders of minor offices) as well as 5. state or judicial attorneys. The councils were classified into the great council, as well as the councils of ten and forty. Members from the latter two (and the senate) were drawn from the former.

Appendix A: List of Doge-appointees

10-13th centuries	15-18th centuries
<p>10th century Orso II Participazio (912–932) Pietro II Candiano (932–939) Pietro Participazio (939–942) Pietro III Candiano (942–959) Pietro IV Candiano (959–976) Pietro I Orseolo (976–978) Vitale Candiano (978–979) Tribuno Memmo (979–991) Pietro II Orseolo (991–1009)</p> <p>11th century Otto Orseolo (1009–1026) Pietro Barbolano (1026–1032) Domenico Flabanico (1032–1043) Domenico Contarini (1043–1071) Domenico Selvo (1071–1084) Vitale Faliero (1084–1096) Vitale I Michiel (1096–1102)</p> <p>12th century Ordelafo Faliero (1102–1117) Domenico Michele (1117–1130) Pietro Polani (1130–1148) Domenico Morosini (1148–1156) Vital II Michele (1156–1172) Sebastiano Ziani (1172–1178) Orio Mastropiero (1178–1192) Enrico Dandolo (1192–1205)</p> <p>13th century Pietro Ziani (1205–1229) Jacopo Tiepolo (1229–1249) Marino Morosini (1249–1252) Reniero Zeno (1252–1268) Lorenzo Tiepolo (1268–1275) Jacopo Contarini (1275–1280) Giovanni Dandolo (1280–1289) Pietro Gradenigo (1289–1311)</p>	<p>15th century Tommaso Mocenigo (1413–1423) Francesco Foscari (1423–1457) Pasquale Malipiero (1457–1462) Cristoforo Moro (1462–1471) Nicolo Tron (1471–1473) Nicolo Marcello (1473–1474) Pietro Mocenigo (1474–1476) Andrea Vendramin (1476–1478) Giovanni Mocenigo (1478–1485) Marco Barbarigo (1485–1486) Agostino Barbarigo (1486–1501)</p> <p>16th century Leonardo Loredan (1501–1521) Antonio Grimani (1521–1523) Andrea Gritti (1523–1538) Pietro Lando (1538–1545) Francesco Donato (1545–1553) Marcantonio Trivisan (1553–1554) Francesco Venier (1554–1556) Lorenzo Priuli (1556–1559) Girolamo Priuli (1559–1567) Pietro Loredan (1567–1570) Alvise I Mocenigo (1570–1577) Sebastiano Venier (1577–1578) Nicolò da Ponte (1578–1585) Pasqual Cicogna (1585–1595) Marino Grimani (1595–1606)</p> <p>17th century Leonardo Donato (1606–1612) Marcantonio Memmo (1612–1615) Giovanni Bembo (1615–1618) Nicolò Donato (1618–1618) Antonio Priuli (1618–1623) Francesco Contarini (1623–1624) Giovanni I Cornaro (1624–1630) Nicolò Contarini (1630–1631) Francesco Erizzo (1631–1646) Francesco Molin (1646–1655) Carlo Contarini (1655–1656) Francesco Cornaro (1656–1656) Bertuccio Valiero (1656–1658)</p>

10-13th centuries	15-18th centuries
	<p>Giovanni Pesaro (1658–1659) Domenico II Contarini (1659–1674) Nicolò Sagredo (1674–1676) Alvise Contarini (1676–1683) Marcantonio Giustinian (1683–1688) Francesco Morosini (1688–1694) Silvestro Valiero (1694–1700) Alvise II Mocenigo (1700–1709)</p> <p>18th century Giovanni II Cornaro (1709–1722) Sebastiano Mocenigo (1722–1732) Carlo Ruzzini (1732–1735) Alvise Pisani (1735–1741) Pietro Grimani (1741–1752) Francesco Loredan (1752–1762) Marco Foscarini (1762–1763) Alvise Giovanni Mocenigo (1763–1779) Paolo Renier (1779–1789) Ludovico Manin (1789–1797)</p>

Appendix B: Teaching ideas from the article – A summary



*The three threads of discussion represent the three objectives of discussion in this article.