Jewish Presence in the Venetian Empire: A Challenge to Venetian Mythology

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Jewish Presence in the Venetian Empire: A Challenge to Venetian Mythology

An Honors Thesis
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By
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Prologue: Why Study the Jews of Venice

The Venetian Republic: a unique and powerful colonial empire known for its maritime superiority and connection to the patron Saint Mark. Most people, who know nothing about the history of Venice, are completely unaware of the small city’s accomplishments, global influence, or even that Venice was once an independent Empire. Nowadays, Venice is recognized for its unorthodox location in the middle of the Adriatic Sea, its canals, fantastic seafood, stunning churches, and mass tourism. Although the Republic fell in 1797 during the Napoleonic wars, there are still remnants of the Venetian Empire in the city today. Winged lions can still be found as doorknobs, on the sides of buildings, and in artwork, and the iconic Basilica of San Marco still stands perfectly preserved alongside the Doge’s palace in the Piazza San Marco. The importance of these icons cannot possibly be understood in the present tense, so we look to the past for answers. Venice is a truly special city with a long and rich history, one that I intend to uncover.

Origins of the Venetian Empire

To provide some context to this thesis, here is a brief overview of the origins of the Venetian Empire. The beginning of the Venetian Empire is difficult to trace because the lagoon was populated slowly over a long period. Legend states that the human settlement of the lagoon began with the establishment of the church of San Giacomo in 421 CE. Chroniclers of Venice state that the city of Venice was born on the island of Rialto. Of all the islands in the lagoon, the Chroniclers of Venice designated the island of Rialto as the point where Venice’s history began. Historians have debated Venice’s origins due to the lack of records, so there are many contested start dates. For a long time, it was thought that “during the barbarian invasions population groups
from the mainland sought refuge in the lagoons and continued to live there.”\(^1\) Recently, this narrative has changed and offered a defense of the thesis of “Roman colonization of the lagoon basin and ongoing inhabitation of the area between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.”\(^2\) This argument traces the origins of Venice back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The assumption was that the Roman system of land division, known as *centuriatio*, was applied to large parts of the lagoon basin, which would account for the radical changes of Venice and its romanization.\(^3\) Archaeological discoveries in the 1960s confirmed Roman colonization on some of the northern islands in the lagoon.

Venice’s origin story is the lagoon was first populated by refugees from Altino, Padua, Treviso, and Oderzo who fled to the islands to escape invasion and ceased communication with the mainland. The society that developed in the lagoon was “a sovereign society not beholden to any of the forces contending for power on the peninsula.”\(^4\) In the sixth century, settlement in the lagoon changed. During the Lombard invasion of the Italian Peninsula in 568-9 CE, “wherever the Lombards approached the lagoon between Aquileia and Concordia, peasants and townspeople alike abandoned the mainland and sought refuge on the islands of the lagoons and the littoral.”\(^5\) The nature of settlement changed from scattered and disconnected communities to a new type of settlement because there was a massive and definitive exodus to the islands.\(^6\) By the time the Lombards reached the Adige, the second largest river in Italy, and the Brenta, the Italian River that runs from Trentino to the Adriatic Sea, “life amid the marshlands took on new

\(^1\) Crouzet-Pavan, *Venice Triumphant*, 3.
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^3\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Crouzet-Pavan, *Venice Triumphant*, 6.
The city was born, built on a group of between 118 and 120 small islands on wood piles, in a lagoon in the Adriatic Sea.

Although Venetians acknowledged the theoretical sovereignty of the pope as the head of the Church, they constantly were at odds with the papacy. To legitimize their government, however, they believed the doge expressed the will of the people and maintained independence from outside control. Unlike most Italian cities, the Venetians relied on a patriarch as opposed to an archbishop, and the Doge (duke) elected by the Venetian nobility served for life. The first doge, Paolo Lucio Anafesto, who assumed the position in 697 CE, “may in fact have been selected by the inhabitants of the lagoons, as later Venetian chroniclers said, maintaining that Venice had been free and independent from its beginnings.” The doge received orders from the Byzantine emperor since Venice was “part of the Byzantine Empire even after the Lombards had captured Ravenna in 751 CE” Doge Ursus, the third Venetian doge, had led a revolt against the Byzantine empire in 726 CE, but the relationship between the two empires remained intact until the ninth century. This original relationship between Venice and the Byzantine Empire is important because later, the dynamic of the two powers changed, largely as the result of the Sack of Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade in 1204.

The fact that the doge was an elected position was unique. There was no single written document that outlined the Venetian constitution. Like the British constitution, “although it is embodied in no single document but is found partly in scattered statutes and partly in customs long adhered to. Custom was equally important in defining the powers and procedures of the various organs of government in Venice.” The structure of the Venetian government remained

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7 Ibid.
8 Lane, Venice, a Maritime, 5.
9 Ibid.
10 Lane, Venice, a Maritime, 95.
almost the same from the thirteenth century until the late eighteenth century. The government was composed of five sections that formed a hierarchy; on the bottom was the General Assembly, then the Great Council, next The Forty and Senate, Ducal Council, and finally the Doge. The doge, ducal Councilors, and the Heads of the Forty consisted of ten people who were known as the Signoria. The Signoria was essentially the Venetian government. After the death of a doge, the ducal Councilors led the proceedings for choosing the new doge by proposing any reforms, and the senior Ducal Councilor would serve as the interim doge until a permanent was chosen.\(^{11}\) Although the doge served for life and other members frequently came and went, there were still checks on the doge’s power by other members of the government. Other European powers admired the appearing harmonious governmental structure developed by the Venetians.

During Venice’s existence as an Empire, the Venetians had conquered the Adriatic Sea, destroyed its main maritime rival, Genoa, procured Constantinople from the Byzantines, monopolized, and controlled the spice trade for all of Europe, survived the war with the League of Cambrai, and became, arguably, the greatest thalassocracy to have ever existed. These accomplishments of the Venetian Republic are incredibly oversimplified. Venice went to war with Genoa several times from 1256 until 1381, and the eventual defeat of Genoa by the Venetians was extremely difficult. The key turning point for the Venetians, however, was the Fourth Crusade.

The Venetians always looked east toward Constantinople and the Far East as opposed to the West. They admired Constantinople for its trade success and wealth. The Fourth Crusade was launched by Pope Innocent III in 1198 CE with the intent of reclaiming Jerusalem. The Pope was hesitant to ask the Venetians to build ships, but he knew their skill as a mercantile society. The

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\(^{11}\) Lane, *Venice, a Maritime*, 96.
Venetians created an enormous fleet of ships in the early thirteenth century, which was extremely expensive. They were promised they would be reimbursed for their efforts, but the crusade was poorly planned and running late, so the Venetians had no one to pay for their ships. On the verge of bankruptcy, the Venetians decided to participate in the Fourth Crusade. During the Crusade, the pilgrims also went down alternative routes to help regain some of the wealth they had lost from building the ships. The Venetians attacked the Catholic city of Zara on the eastern Adriatic coast, which earned Venice an ex-communication from the pope. When the Crusade was diverted to Constantinople instead of Jerusalem, the Byzantine “heir” Alexios IV Angelos appealed to the Venetians and other lead crusaders and promised to return their money if they helped him regain the imperial throne from Alexios III. Although the Venetians had a lot to lose, the doge believed it would be more beneficial and profitable to sack Constantinople. Attacking the Christian city was a risk, but the Venetians were successful in taking control of Constantinople in 1204 CE. This “victory” marked the true rise of the Venetian Empire as a naval superpower. Venice had control over all of Constantinople’s trade routes and connections, which would make Venice incredibly wealthy. Once Venice gained control, they dominated the Adriatic. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Venice began to decline and continued to lose trade prominence until the Republic fell to Napoleon in 1797. It had ruled independently for hundreds of years. The purpose of establishing Venice’s origins sets the stage for the content of this thesis.

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Content Summary

Venice is a paradox with a profound and unique history that spans from the fifth century to the end of the eighteenth century. Despite the length of Venetian rule, the Empire had not existed concurrently with the Romans and lacked an ancient foundation. The origin of how Venice itself was created and its first settlers are completely unknown, so “its inhabitants had created their own antiquity out of theft and borrowings; they manufactured their foundation myths and stole their saints from the Greek world.”¹³ Venetians manifested the idea that their Republic emerged from the sea as a powerful, wealthy, and Christian nation destined to succeed. These principles served as the basis for the city’s creation myth. Historians generally characterize the values behind the myth of Venice as stability, wealth, justice, toleration, homogeny, mercantilism, and Christianity. For most of Venice's history, all aspects of Venetian life were influenced by this mythology, even during the Empire’s decline after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Tailored to the patron Saint Mark and the ability to dominate the Adriatic, Venetians created an identity that supported the city’s perceived superiority.

The myth of Venice manifested itself in society in various ways, but one of the most important was Venice’s aspirations for maintaining maritime trade dominance. Their positioning in the lagoon forced Venice to develop a strong relationship with the sea. Trade allowed the Venetians to become a wealthy merchant society and their presence in the sea solidified maritime trade as a crucial pillar of the myth of Venice. The Venetians originally became a prominent trade Republic because of their relationship with the Byzantine Empire. During its height, Venice gained full control of the Adriatic Sea, including the Balkans, and held a monopoly on the spice trade in Europe. Over time, however, Venetian commerce began to decline due to the

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discovery of new maritime routes. Upholding the eastward-looking Venetian economy was of the utmost importance to Venice because economic success had resulted from trade superiority over the rest of Europe and, therefore, supported the city’s mythical ideology. The only exception to this was the Republic of Genoa, with which Venice had numerous wars over control of trade in the east.

Jews have been permanently settled in Venice since 1516, but their presence and influence have a long history before and after this point. Jewish presence in Venice specifically impacted both the success of the Venetian economy and the mythical foundation of Venice. Jewish moneylenders and merchants had large impacts and implications on the mercantile Republic. Before Jews were allowed to reside in Venice, moneylenders and merchants were given special privileges to conduct business in the city. Technically during this time, money lending was prohibited for Christians, so the image of the Jewish moneylender was prevalent. Venetians and Jews were naturally connected even before the latter was able to settle permanently because of the spice trade and connection to the Levant. Jews, specifically Jewish merchants, and moneylenders were heavily involved in global trade from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Before Jews were allowed to settle in Venice, Venetians saw Jewish merchants as trade competitors. Despite this, the Venetians still worked with Jews to maintain commercial dominance since their Empire would ultimately benefit. After Jews were allowed to settle in the city, merchants and moneylenders were able to use their extensive networks to both aid trade and provide intelligence for the Venetian government. These professional Jews supported the Venetian economy and helped Venice to maintain its maritime superiority.

Jews have a long history of interaction with the Venetian Empire, but the impact of Jewish presence on the city can only really be seen once Jews permanently settled in the
Republic. Venetian exceptionalism was so ingrained in the citizenry that the presence of outsiders in the city would directly influence Venice’s mythical ideals. In the early sixteenth century, Venetians decided it would be more economically beneficial to allow Jewish people to settle in their Christian Empire. To maintain the city’s homogeneity, on 29 March 1516, Jewish people were separated and isolated within Venetian society, a process known as Ghettoization. Although this relationship between Venetians and Jews upholds the ideals of the myth of Venice, many aspects of Jewish presence complicated Venetian mythology. The Venetian Ghetto was a blemish on Venice’s stable and harmonious city, not to mention that Judaism was inherently not Christianity. The decision to let Jews settle in the city ultimately had complex and paradoxical consequences for Venice. The best way to analyze these consequences on Venetian history is through the myth of Venice.

Significance of the Problem

Historians analyze the history of the Venetian Empire in many ways, and the myth of Venice is one lens. The value of using the myth of Venice as a means with which to analyze the Venetian Empire is that we can understand how and why the Venetians made certain decisions. The preservation of Venetian superiority was always the motivation behind Venice’s actions, and, for the Venetian citizenry, this superiority was justified by the pillars of the myth of Venice. Although the phrase “myth of Venice” was developed by twentieth-century historians, these ideals were deeply ingrained in all aspects of the Republic for almost the entirety of its existence. The myth still influences how Venetians and visitors of Venice view and understand the city even in the modern day. The mythical ideology of Venice as a historical lens does not fully
encompass the breadth of analysis possible for the Venetian Empire, however, the myth is an important tool for understanding Venetian history.

Jewish presence in Venice is a fascinating topic. Venice itself was incredibly contradictory, and its policy on Jews is no different. Historians and authors have acknowledged and cataloged the history of the Jews in Venice, and how Jews have interacted with the Venetian Republic; however, this topic has not been fully examined. Although historians have discussed Venetian Jews and the significance of Jews in the Venetian economy, the importance of Jewish presence as a means of seeing the usefulness of the creation myth when evaluating the Venetian Republic has received very little analysis.

The Venetian Empire is arguably the most successful thalassocracy in history, and Jews played a role in that success, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These events need to be analyzed and placed into a larger historical context. Jewish presence is a crucial part of the history of the Venetian Empire. The current assumption is that Venetian Christian hegemony and maritime strength are the reason for the Republic's success—which is not the case. Jewish presence contradicts and complicates the foundation of Venice’s creation myth. Their support of Venetian trade and profit upheld the myth, but their Judaism and Ghettoization did the complete opposite. Historians who construct a narrative of Venetian history and the myth of Venice without including the impact of the presence of Jews fail to acknowledge the impact of Jews on Venetian society and do not have as strong an argument.

Chapter Overview

The body of this work intends to provide as detailed background on the myth of Venice and Jewish presence in Venice as possible. Chapter I attempts to define the myth of Venice in the
context of this thesis. The origins of Venice and the myth itself are explained fully, as well as the concept of the counter-myth of Venice that challenges the ideals expressed in the myth of Venice. This chapter also includes a literature review of some important texts that explain the importance of the myth of Venice for understanding Venetian history. The purpose of this chapter is to explain what the myth of Venice is, where it originated, and the significance of this analysis on the history of Venice.

Chapter II talks about the history of Jewish interaction with Venice before Jews were allowed to settle within the city limits. Jewish presence in the Italian peninsula dates to the Roman period and is well documented after the second century. The long history of Jews in the Italian peninsula shows how Jews were inevitably going to interact with Venice. This chapter also proves that Jews were interacting with the Venetians in a significant way long before their permanent residence was established by the Senate. Jewish people were valuable enough to the Venetians that the government made concessions to allow Jewish professionals to work in and around the city center.

In Chapter III, we get extensive context on the Venetian Ghetto and what life in the Ghetto was like for Jews. This chapter will explain the establishment of the various Ghettos, the different ethnic groups that resided in the Ghetto, merchant activities and legislation, state secrecy, and the privileges of Jewish physicians. This context is important for understanding why the Venetian government saw the Jews as valuable enough to allow their presence in the city.

Chapter IV brings the myth into conversation with Jewish presence. First, the contradictions of Jewish presence in the myth are outlined to show the concessions made by the Venetian Republic to the myth of Venice. Second, the complements of Jewish presence to the myth are explained to illustrate that, despite their detracting from the myth, Jews were an
important asset to Venice that upheld the myth enough for the Venetian government to justify their presence in the city.

The final chapter of this work will bring our conversation into the present by discussing the current state of the Venetian Ghetto and the myth of Venice.

**Jewish Presence: Another Complication to Venetian Mythology**

How did Jewish presence impact the Venetian Empire? This question is complicated because it can be answered both literally and abstractly. Jews became an integral part of Venice’s Renaissance history. Jewish presence supported the Venetian Empire from the sixteenth century onward since Venice was in decline, particularly in the economic sector, and Jews were well-connected merchants and could work as moneylenders. Jewish physicians were also important to the Venetian Empire because they helped tend to sick patients outside of the Venetian Ghetto. Theoretically, however, is a different story. The myth of Venice is a useful tool for understanding the decisions made by the Venetian government and the citizenry. The myth looks at many aspects of Venetian society, whether it be political structure, immigration policy, mercantile successes, or simply the idealism of Venice’s Empire. The main issue with the myth as a historical lens, however, is historians tend to apply the ideals of the myth to Venice in an inconsistent way. There is no universal definition or set of ideals for the myth of Venice, so there are many different interpretations of how the myth can be used to analyze Venetian society. I argue that the myth of Venice can best be used to understand the contradictions of the Venetian Empire. Venice did not become and remain successful because it strictly followed a mythical set of ideals. The image of Venice and the reality of Venice were very different, a fact that the
Venetians purposefully created. The Venetians were superior because they did what was pragmatic while projecting themselves to the rest of the world as an ideal republic.

Once we accept that the myth is full of contradictions, we can understand why the Venetians allowed Jews to reside in the city. Jewish presence complicates Venetian mythology. The tall, asymmetrical, and unflattering architecture of the Ghetto, the ethnically diverse groups of Jews cohabitating within the same space, and, simply, the fact that Jewish people do not practice Christianity all counter the very ideal that Venice built its entire Republic around. Jews in many ways upheld myth. The contributions of Jewish merchants and moneylenders were invaluable to the Venetian economy, especially since the Venetian Empire was in decline after the fall of Constantinople. The tolerance of Jews to settle in the city was also a pillar of the myth that the Venetians prided themselves on, as well as the charity of allowing Jewish refugees into Venice during the War with the League of Cambrai. So, where does this get us, and why is this important?

Jews served Venice in countless ways, as bankers, moneylenders, merchants and traders, physicians, and spies. The creation of the Ghetto in 1516 represented Venetian pragmatism. Although not always a comfortable relationship, Jews, and other groups (such as the Turks after 1453) performed invaluable services to the Republic. While seeming to contradict the “myth of Venice” relating to religious and civic identity, Jews were essential to the functioning of Venice's imperial, eastward-looking economy. Contacts with different peoples through trade had accustomed Venetians to interaction with diverse peoples that furthered the Republic's economic policies. The relationship was often, but not always, beneficial to both the Venetians and the Jews of the Ghetto except in times of crisis. Yet the myth's emphasis on a stable polity and its
desire for maritime supremacy ensured a better relationship with different groups than was found in most of Europe in the medieval or early modern period.
Chapter I: Mythical Origins of the Venetian Empire

Jacob Burckhardt titled the first part of his book Civilization of Renaissance Italy, “The State as a Work of Art.” The Venetian Empire was just that, a manufactured work of art meant to perpetuate a very specific image. The Venetian Empire as an entity seems almost mythical and imaginary in many ways based on its unique placement in the Adriatic Sea, the longevity of its empire and maritime success, and the ways both historians and political thinkers have described Venice, both in the present and the past. This is exactly how Venetians want others to imagine Venice. Venice represented itself through the image of la Serenissima Republica, or the Most Serene Republic of Venice, which has greatly impacted how the Venetian Empire has been understood and analyzed. This image, the Serene Republic, the strong, successful, stable, homogenous, wealthy, Christian, maritime empire that was destined to dominate the Adriatic Sea has come to be known as “the myth of Venice.”

The idea of the “myth of Venice” is meant to legitimize the superiority of the Venetian Empire, and the pillars that construct Venetian mythology are represented in countless examples of Venetian life. The concept was defined by twentieth-century historians, but Venetians were aware of the myth because its ideals were embedded into the very foundation of the Republic. The myth of Venice determined how the Venetians imagined their success, but how accurate was it? There is no universal definition of the myth, which allows historians to form an argument using only certain ideals to fit their analysis of Venice. The myth is a useful lens through which to analyze the Venetian Empire, specifically to see the contradictions that allowed Venice to be as successful as it was. But for the Venetians, the myth served one goal: economic success through maritime dominance.
What is the Myth of Venice?

When does myth become reality? For the Venetians, the mythological basis of the Republic was, by all accounts, the reality of the Venetian Empire. David Rosand defines myth as “the fictions of half-truths forming part of the ideology of a society.” The myth of Venice was just that, fictions and half-truths invented by the Republic that formed the ideology of Venetian society. Venice was able to be successful while their society maintained outstanding social and political stability, or so the Venetians claimed. By the fifteenth century, “Venice was renowned for its political stability and civic harmony, and even as late as the eighteenth century it was widely believed that Venetians had discovered the secret of a perfect constitution.” For the Venetian citizenry themselves, “liberty was a matter not of personal freedom, but rather the political independence from other powers.” The Venetians had created social and political institutions “so outwardly stable, harmonious, and just that the tensions inherent in any community seemed to be contained in Venice, and self-interest subordinated to the common good.” The perception that Venice possessed the secret to a stable and thriving political system was coupled with the Venetians' ability to conquer a truly hostile environment, the sea. Water controlled all aspects of everyday life and “for the Venetians, the sea was life and death.”

Despite the vast accomplishments and longevity of Venice’s Empire, the Venetians struggled with justifying their superiority. The sea provided a barrier between the city and continental affairs, so, by nature, the Venetians were separate from the mainland. The city was protected without walls and could have dealings with the mainland whenever advantageous. As a
result, the Venetians depended on the Veneto for agricultural production and later the University of Padua for intellectual pursuits. Their presence in the sea, however, was not enough to create a bond of shared cultural memory that would justify their strong and superior nation. Additionally, unlike empires such as Byzantium, Rome, and Greece, Venice had limited ties to the ancient world. Although Venetians believed the origin of their Republic dates to the late fifth century, this did not compare to the longevity and secure foundation in antiquity of other great civilizations. These ancient empires had earned their superiority because of their ability to conquer, length of power, and influence on language, educational systems, architecture, and many other spheres. The Venetians could not align themselves with the great empires of the past, so a solution was manufactured that gave them considerable latitude. To legitimize their success and justify their superiority as rulers of the Adriatic Sea, what historians call, the myth of Venice was born.

The myth of Venice, a phrase coined by historian Gina Fasoli, is meant to encompass the ideology that characterized the Venetian Empire. The myth emphasizes the perception of Venice as “an ideal republic that in itself influenced Western political theory and constitutional development.”\(^{19}\) The notion that Venice represented a model of government to be admired and emulated dates to around the fourteenth century.\(^{20}\) During the sixteenth century, however, the city became prominent in Italian political thought. Venice’s recovery after the War of the League of Cambrai “without internal disorders that under similar circumstances would have convulsed other states, drew special attention to the capacities of its governmental system.”\(^{21}\)

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\(^{20}\) Scott Gordon, *Controlling the State: Constitutionalism from Ancient Athens to Today* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 156.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
Giannotti and Gasparo Contarini\textsuperscript{22} published studies of the Venetian constitution in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which became the main sources of Venice’s glorification by foreign writers.\textsuperscript{23} Florence, in particular, played an important role in developing the “myth of Venice” because they were infatuated with Venice’s constitution. Early in the Medici period, under Cosimo and Lorenzo Medici in the fifteenth century, “Florentines cast their eyes toward Venice as the great living example of a state that was a republic in more than name.”\textsuperscript{24} Beginning in 1494, a thirty-six-year period of alternating republican and Medici leadership generated a rich political literature of the Renaissance where Florence praised Venice as a model of government to replicate.\textsuperscript{25} Although Florence was unable to establish the Venetian model of a republic, the Florentine political literature that praised Venice was read throughout Europe and influenced other European political thinkers.

The image that Venice was an ideal republic whose exemplary government structure ruled over a selfless and independent citizenry created the foundation for the mythology of Venice. The myth of Venice is essentially the self-portrait created by Venetians that reinforced their perceived superiority. It has three central aspects: religious, constitutional, and political.\textsuperscript{26} The elements that contribute to and uphold Venetian mythology include maritime success, commerce, independence and self-government, stability and homogeneity, civic humanism, and Christianity. All these positive attributes combined to create the image that Venice “was stable, ruled by wise laws. It was the Serenissima, the most serene republic.”\textsuperscript{27} These ideas were heavily

\textsuperscript{22} Contarini, in his work, \textit{De magistratibus et republica venetorum}, discusses Venice’s unique government structure. He describes the Venetian state as stable, harmonious, serene, and prosperous. Contarini’s vision of Venice was highly romanticized. This work was also intended for a foreign audience, and helped form the basis of the “myth of Venice”.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{24} Gordon, \textit{Controlling the State}, 157.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} Finlay, \textit{Politics in Renaissance}, 30.

\textsuperscript{27} Martin and Romano, \textit{Venice Reconsidered}, 2.
romanticized, and the mythical superiority of Venice’s republic was incorporated into all aspects of Venetian life.

Venetian mythology also included corresponding icons. The first was the city itself which was said to have miraculously risen from the sea. Without the miracle element, Venice was built in the sea on mud and salt marshes after settlers had first appeared in Torcello. Despite the challenges that accompanied their position in the sea, the water became the symbol of Venice’s independence and power. The myth interpreted the sea as fueling Venetian success because “the protective waters opened onto other spaces, which were soon explored and tamed: the shelter of the lagoons permitted the adventure on the high seas. If the people of Venice naturally ignored the mainland, the sea was their legacy.” The sea provided both protection and an opportunity to grow their maritime domain. The myth then portrayed the lagoon as a means of granting Venice independence and power.

The second was a series of figures that symbolized the republic. To satisfy the need for a shared cultural memory, the myth had to be “anchored to the past and to offer something spiritually significant, such as Saint Mark.” Venetians used the blessing of Saint Mark as a justification for the Republic’s predestination, and he was made the Patron Saint of Venice. There are many fables surrounding the origins of Venice, but it was the legend of Saint Mark that had “defined a sense of identity, in which civic and religious elements were so inextricably intertwined that it is impossible to separate them.” Other figures included “the winged lion that stood for Saint Mark, and then the regal personification of Venetia herself, Queen of the

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29 Crouzet-Pavan, “Toward an Ecological,” 43.
Adriatic.”32 While there are various interpretations of the myth’s impact on Venetian society, the one underlying idea is “that the lagoons, where God entered into a pact with the community, had been designated by Providence as the place where the destiny of Venice would be fulfilled.”33 The ideas of the myth of Venice became so deeply ingrained in the citizenry that the mythology ended up shaping Venetian history.

![Figure 1: View of Saint Mark’s Clocktower. In this aerial view of Venice, a massive statue of the winged lion icon is represented on the clock tower looking over the Piazza San Marco. A remnant of the myth of Venice in the modern day.](image)

Despite its name, the myth of Venice grew to have a basis. For centuries, the myth had presented itself as fact to such an extent that Venetian society was formed by its ideology. The creation of the Venetian myth was not a story embellished by the Venetians about their great republic, “It was a constitutive part of the Venetian’s identity as they had forged it, making themselves up as they had made up their physical site.”34 From its formation, “the myth was organic, an accumulation of inherited beliefs and meanings that accommodated different

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32 Rosand, Myths of Venice, 2.
33 Crouzet-Pavan, “Toward an Ecological,” 42.
emphases and inflections according to changing historical and political circumstances.” This poses a great issue for historians studying the Venetian Empire since separating propaganda and mythology from the real social and political structures is incredibly difficult. Historians studying the myth of Venice must attempt to decipher what is the reality of Venice using a confusing set of beliefs and a series of historically accurate events that are difficult to understand. There are, however, several issues with the myth. Historians have neglected to point out that some ideals of the myth are more important than others. Wealth and trade were the top priority for the Venetian Republic, so any decision made by Venice reflected this goal. Although the myth of Venice formed the basis of Venetian ideology, Venetians would adhere to the myth when it was most pragmatic. The myth is a helpful framework for understanding how other states perceived Venice. In dealing with other states, Venice purposefully perpetuated its mythical image to legitimize its empire.

**Origins of the Myth**

The origin of Venetian mythology is difficult to pinpoint. Since the ideals of the myth developed as the empire was formed, there is no definitive date that the myth came into existence. Even in the first description of the Venetian Republic, themes of liberty and superiority were woven into the image of Venice. Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus in his letter “Tribunes of the Maritime Population” gave the earliest description of the lagoon and its inhabitants in 537-38 CE. Cassiodorus describes Venice as praiseworthy and marvels at the accomplishments of man to create such a city. Additionally, one of the first historical accounts of the Republic of Venice is John the Deacon’s chronicle written in 1008. This narrative “set the

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tone for narratives of the origins of Venice for centuries to come by endowing the men of the lagoons with a primitive liberty.”

John's chronicle does not reference Byzantium or the subjugation of the Venetian basin to the Roman Empire; instead “John chose instead to depict free men fleeing subjugation who settled in the lagoon area to preserve their liberty.” In the late thirteenth century, great writers, such as Martino da Canale, were influenced by the fabricated descriptions of the Venetian Empire and implemented them onto their narratives of the origins of Venice.

There is also no biblical evidence of the evangelical visit of Saint Mark to Aquileia or to anywhere in Venice. The myth of Saint Mark seems to have been fabricated to justify the theft of the relics of Saint Mark from Alexandria. Early Christian churches in the area, none of which were built before the mid-third century, were dedicated to other saints, and, in the sixth century, Venantius Fortunatus reported that Saint Fortunatus was the treasure of Aquileia, just as Saint Mark was the same for Egypt. The first mention of Saint Mark as the founder and patron of the Christian church is in the chronicle of Paul the Deacon. By the ninth century, Saint Mark was a well-established symbol of local privilege, replacing the Byzantine Saint Theodore. The Venetians claimed that the translation of Saint Mark's body from Alexandria to Venice in the ninth century cemented the Saint’s patronage. According to legend, in 827 CE or 828 CE, “ten Venetian ships on a voyage to the East were blown off course and forced to seek refuge from a storm in the Arab-controlled port of Alexandria.”

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37 Ibid.
38 Crouzet-Pavan, *Venice Triumphant*, 158.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
Among the merchants who unloaded from the ship in Alexandria were Buono da Malamocco and Rustico da Torcello who met a monk named Staurizio and a priest named Theodore. There was a fear of the Christian shrines being destroyed, and with them, Saint Mark's remains. A priest named Theodore proposed that the two Venetians rescue the body. Theodore and Staurizio helped smuggle the body past Arab customs by covering the body in pork, and they replaced Mark’s body with another dressed in the Saint’s clothing. Saint Mark protected the ship from an attack on the voyage back to Venice, which further confirmed the authenticity of the relics. Buono and Rustico presented the relics to Doge Giustiniano Particiaco who then pardoned the two Venetians for visiting an Arab country and rewarded their efforts. The doge built his private chapel, the church of San Marco, and placed the relics inside.

Figure 2: The Basilica of San Marco. Also known as Saint Mark’s Cathedral, the Basilica is dedicated to and holds the relics of Saint Mark, the Patron Saint of Venice. The Basilica is connected to the Doge’s Palace and, before 1797, was the chapel of the Doge and under his jurisdiction.

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43 Ibid.  
44 Muir, Civic Ritual, 81.  
45 Ibid.
According to historian Gina Fasoli, the myth of Venice was born the day the doge accepted the relics.\(^{46}\) Doge Andrea Dandolo in the fourteenth century developed the myth into its full version. Dandolo’s chronicles of Venice explain Venetian mythical superiority while conveniently omitting that the first doge of Venice was a Byzantine official.

His picture of Venice was:

the Venetians gathering in 697 CE. on their own initiative from the various settlements in which they then lived scattered over the lagoons and deciding, nobles and common people together, on the creation of a single leader, the dux or doge, to replace the officials called tribunes by whom their settlements had been hitherto separately governed.\(^{47}\)

In his *Chronicon venetum*, Dandolo begins with an account of “Saint Mark’s evangelizing visit to Aquileia on the instructions of Saint Peter and the consecration of his disciple Hermagoras, who was to take control of the diocese after Mark’s departure, as the first bishop of the province of Venetia and Istria.”\(^{48}\) According to Dandolo, the people of Padua took refuge in the lagoons, and, on 25 March, 421, chose the site that became the Rialto and began building the San Giacomo church.\(^{49}\) In reality, the legend of Saint Mark’s arrival in Aquileia was a myth “crafted to suit the political and ecclesiastical circumstances in the aftermath of the schism of 606 CE., when the original patriarchate of Aquileia, while the other, including the islands that were later to become Venice, passed the jurisdiction of Grado.”\(^{50}\)

From the beginning, the myth was organic; “an accumulation of inherited beliefs and meanings that accommodated different emphases and inflections according to changing historical

\(^{46}\) Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 84.
\(^{47}\) Lane, *Venice, a Maritime*, 87-8.
\(^{49}\) Crouzet-Pavan, *Venice Triumphant*, 158.
\(^{50}\) Fenlon, *The Ceremonial*, 9.
and political circumstances.” Modern historians emphasize different stages of the myth development; “for some, the earliest phase was decisive, so that by the fifteenth century the crucial concepts were firmly established, merely to be recycled with minor notifications in subsequent decades.” Different interpretations of the myth are the result of historians emphasizing different periods of Venetian history. Hans Conrad Peyer and Gina Fasoli both identify Venice’s possession of the relics of Saint Mark as the origin of the myth. Praise of Venice began during the Renaissance because European scholars began writing about the beauty of the city and the stability of Venetian society.

Other developments in the fourteenth century were crucial for the creation of Venice’s mythological ideals. For example, both the gradual restriction of the powers of the doge in the late thirteenth century and the reform of the Great Council in 1297 CE helped ease the political discord and violence that impacted other city-states. The definitive form of the myth was primarily fashioned in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The most influential fifteenth-century writer was Bernardo Giustiniani, “who drew liberally from the trecento chronicles of Andrea Dandolo and Lorenzo d’Monaco to compose his History of the Origin of Venice.” By the sixteenth century, the myth was fully formed because Venice was successfully viewed as ancient.

The Anti-M myth

The myth of Venice continued to be the dominant perception of the Venetian Empire until an anti-myth began to gain popularity. Also coined by Gina Fasoli, this anti-myth of

52 Ibid.
Venice, portrayed the Venetians in an overwhelmingly negative light. Some scholars have stressed the anti-myth of Venice because, “from their perspective, the central problem was not Venice’s role as an exemplary Republic, but rather its decadence.”

The anti-myth was born when the Venetian Empire reached its height economically and territorially but also persisted after Venice began to decline. The anti-myth of Venice developed in the early fifteenth century when “Venice began to expand its power over the terraferma, or the mainland towns and villages, of northeastern Italy.”

This expansion aggravated anti-myth sentiment in the Italian Peninsula. Those who believed in the anti-myth, mainly other Italian cities who opposed the Republic's expansion, chastised Venice for its “desire to dominate others and for its ambitions to gain an Italian empire in imitation of ancient Rome.”

Instead of uplifting the Venetian republic, the anti-myth contributed to the empire's downfall. Almost all definitions of the anti-myth state that Venice “was largely the product of foreign propaganda characterizing the Venetian regime and its policies as tyrannical, vile, and militarily impotent.”

Instead of being characterized as the strong, successful, and independent empire portrayed by the myth of Venice, Venice was now seen as “governed by a secretive oligarchy, utterly controlled by a group of wealthy families who established a police state using torture and a network of informers to maintain power and regarded by most of its neighbors as a dangerous and arrogant bully, with much of its wealth guaranteed by vigorously enforced monopolies over trade and, of course, by simple plunder.”

What was once an image of Saint Mark bringing Venice out of the sea became a city of low-class people living among marshlands and mud.

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55 Martin and Romano, Venice Reconsidered, 6.
56 Martin and Romano, Venice Reconsidered, 3.
57 Muir, Civic Ritual, 49.
58 Ibid.
Another element of this was the use of secrecy in statecraft. In the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Turks had controlled the Byzantine Empire for decades, and, without a buffer state between the Ottoman Empire and Venice, Venetian territories were vulnerable to Ottoman advances. This made the Venetians feel that their mythical ideals were being threatened. To ensure political stability and domestic order, the Venetian government used secrecy as a tool to ensure their superiority. The collective feeling of Venetian idealism perpetuated the illusion that state security was an accomplishment when information was difficult to conceal. Venice institutionalized secrecy, which facilitated a culture centered around concealment and intelligence gathering. After the fall of Constantinople, the Venetians continued trading with the Muslim Turks. Although their trade relationship was mutually beneficial, the Venetians wanted to ensure their trade superiority over the Ottoman Empire, so the Venetians would send intelligence gatherers to spy on the Ottomans. Obtaining secret information became so imperative for the Venetian government that all Venetian citizens, in some way, could participate in maintaining state secrecy. The myth had manifested itself in Venice as an image to protect at all costs, which led to the culture of secrets and surveillance. Blinded by their desire for glory, Venice created an environment where deception and secrecy were encouraged among Venetian citizens.

The anti-myth became most prominent in France during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. This was because the Venetian government structure directly counteracted France’s political thought and practices. Machiavelli also furthered the anti-myth by alluding to Venice’s campaign to take over the Italian Peninsula. By the end of the twentieth century, the

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61 Contarini and Sabetti, The Republic, xli.
62 Martin and Romano, Venice Reconsidered, 3.
anti-myth had become a credible perception of the Venetian Empire which has led modern scholarship to resist the idealistic myth of Venice. The myth and anti-myth of Venice are two powerful representations of the Venetian Empire. While one idolizes, the other villainizes which has shaped the way scholars study the city. As Martin and Romano have explained in their book, “neither the myth nor the anti-myth seems compelling.” The reason for this is that Venice acted pragmatically, so regardless of how others viewed Venice, the Venetians would make decisions based on their capacity to become wealthy. In many ways, both the myth and the anti-myth can work together to form a complete picture of the Venetian Empire.

**Literature of the Myth**

Now that the myth and the anti-myth have been established, how have twentieth-century authors understood the myth of Venice? Many historians have written extensively about the myth of Venice and how this ideology shaped Venetian society. There are many different approaches to this topic because belief in Venetian exceptionalism impacted all aspects of life in Venice. Scholars have discussed how myth is represented through art, architecture, politics, trade, and many other aspects of life in the city. Although the myth of Venice has been heavily defined and analyzed, Jewish presence in the city has not been the focus of this literature.

In *Myths of Venice: The Figuration of a State*, David Rosand uses the myth of Venice to explain how the Venetian Empire created its image of *la Serenissima* through art and visual icons. Rosand states that more than any other political entity, “the Republic of Venice shaped the visual imagination of political thought; just as she instructed Europe—and ultimately, the independent colonies of America—in the idea of statehood, so she taught how to give the idea

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64 Martin and Romano, *Venice Reconsidered*, 7.
eloquent pictorial form, especially through the figuration of the state.” Rosand analyzes the myth of Venice through an art history perspective. He claims that “the images themselves come to represent the reality of the myth itself, an artistic incarnation of a political ideal. He argues that the myth of Venice helped form the Venetian ideology, which can be proven by looking at how the Venetians visually displayed the myth. Rosand attempts to disprove historians who argue for the gap between myth and reality by stating that it is “as a set of ‘fictions or half-truths’ that the myth presents itself as reality, ‘forming part of the ideology of society.’” Rosand is arguing for the legitimacy of the myth of Venice as presented by the visualization of the political ideals and self-image of the Venetian Empire. Rosand’s work provides a good description of the myth of Venice and its significance as a visual representation of Venetian exceptionalism, but the ideology of Venetian society and the actions of Venetians were different. Venetians wanted to create imagery to represent the foundation of the Republic, however, the visuals do not necessarily reflect reality despite the Venetians’ best efforts. Rosand argues in favor of the myth, but he does not acknowledge the contradictions of Venetian life.

Rosand looks at Venetian mythology through art, but Elizabeth Crouzet-Pavan talks about the myth of Venice in a different way. In *Venice Triumphant*, Crouzet-Pavan attempts to write a new history of Venice through the lens of the myth. She argues that in Venice, nearly all aspects were defined either by the sea or by the image Venice created for itself. Her work is heavily in favor of the myth of Venice because she wants to show its historical importance. Crouzet-Pavan admires the success of the Venetian Empire and draws attention to its shared ideals and social cohesion. She focuses on the Venetian state as the chief perpetrator of the myth.

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The state facilitated the commercial and territorial expansion and regulated social structure. The last aspect she highlights is the use of “space.” Using the ideals of the myth and their position in the sea, the Venetians made all spaces in the lagoon distinctly Venetian. Crouzet-Pavan crafts a history of Venice that focuses on the symbolic and mythological basis of Venice. Because there is no single definition, Crouzet-Pavan’s argument can focus on a specific set of ideals that describe Venice’s history.

Edward Muir attempts to explain the history of the myth, its ideals, and the debate among writers who favor and oppose the myth through the study of civic rituals. The Venetian Empire was known for its political stability and strong governmental structure by other European countries, and Muir sees the myth of Venice as one of Venice’s many rituals. Because of the myth, in part, he argues that “the reputation of the Venetian rituals was such that all over Europe during the Renaissance the very name of Venice could conjure images of extravagant public display.”\(^{67}\) Although Muir’s description of the myth of Venice is more historiographical and documentary, this is an important point. The myth shaped the Venetian ritual as well as the perception of Venice by other European countries. For the Venetians, the myth was an asset and a justification. Muir’s work traces the origins of the myth of Venice as well as explains its importance in Venetian society and historiography. His work provides important background information for this thesis and explains the significance of the myth on how other European countries viewed Venice.

Finally, John Martin and Dennis Romano’s *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797* is a useful addition to the literature on the myth of Venice. Martin and Romano’s work attempts to reimagine how historians are to analyze the

Venetian Republic. The myth, as well as the anti-myth, have dominated how scholars approach Venetian history. They state that “both the myth and the anti-myth, that is, have enjoyed an extraordinary afterlife in which scholars have, whether consciously or unconsciously, molded their interpretations of Venetian history to further their own political or cultural agendas.”\(^{68}\) Contemporary historians, however, have moved away from the binary of the myth and the anti-myth because the concepts are extremely limiting and there are always exceptions. Martin and Romano enlisted several scholars in a variety of disciplines to write short essays about the Venetian Empire. Each chapter offers a complex analysis of different aspects of Venetian culture that contrast earlier interpretations of Venice that keep to the ideals of the myth.

Through these reimagined interpretations of the Venetian Empire, Martin and Romano argue that “it is now possible to view the legal and governing institutions not merely as rooted in the complex social and economic structures of the city and its territories. In social and economic history, it is now possible to discover beneath the images and representations of Venetian constitutional stability and social harmony an almost incessant fluidity of status groups and tradesmen. In cultural history this shift in perspective has made culture itself an integral part of history.”\(^{69}\) These dynamic interpretations of the Venetian Empire acted as a basis for this thesis. The myth of Venice is an important tool for understanding the Venetian Empire, but historical analysis cannot remain within the confines of the ideals of the myth and the anti-myth. One aspect that Venice Reconsidered does not touch on in its entirety is Jews in Venice. This piece will attempt to add to the literature of complex analysis of the Venetian Empire while acknowledging the significance of the myth as a historical lens. Martin and Romano’s work

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69 Martin and Romano, *Venice Reconsidered*, 9.
reimagines the Venetian Empire in a dynamic way that is important for understanding the myth of Venice in the present.

The Myth and its Contradictions

In act three, scene three of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, Antonio is speaking with Solanio after getting thrown in prison. Antonio states that “The duke cannot deny the course of law. For the commodity that strangers have / With us in Venice, if it be denied, / Will much impeach the justice of his state, / Since that the trade and profit of the city / Consisteth of all nations.” Through this exchange, trade was the most important aspect for the Venetians. Both the myth and the anti-myth are useful tools for understanding the most important ideals of the Venetian Empire, but there are many contradictions. Venice was a unique empire that did everything in its power to be successful. Regardless of how life in Venice was, the Venetians perpetuated the ideals of the myth through art and literature to convince others that its ideals are what made Venice so successful. European scholars were impressed by Venice’s political structure and compared to many other Italian cities at the time, it was. The image that Venice was exempt from all political or social conflict, however, was not true. Venice was always not a perfect society. There were socioeconomic tensions between different classes since Venice relied so heavily on the merchant class. Foreigners were constantly interacting with the city, and there were different privileges for those who supported Venice through trade, whether that be intelligence gathering or network connection, regardless of their Venetian status. Although the ideals of the myth were considered when the Venetians were making decisions, it was mainly used to help the empire prosper. Venetian art and architecture reflected Venetian mythology on

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the outside, but the focus was always on trade. While other European cities focused on the West, the Venetians were willing to trade with the East, which completely countered their Christian foundation.

There are many more contradictions, but the anti-myth does not provide an entirely satisfying explanation either. The image that Venice was tyrannical is entirely untrue, especially since the treatment of foreigners in Venice was comparatively much better than in other places in Europe. Also, the myth of Venice was real simply because Venetians perceived it to be real. There are aspects of both the myth and the anti-myth that explain the actions of the Venetian Empire, but the use of these two concepts as a historical lens is necessary for understanding that Venice was full of contradictions. The Venetian citizenry upheld the image of the myth, but every decision made by the Venetians was influenced by trade. Jewish presence in the Venetian Empire is a perfect example of these contradictions and the Venetians' use of pragmatism. The Jews complicate many of the pillars that make up Venetian mythology, but they were permitted to settle because of their usefulness to the city. The Jews in Venice were never fully absorbed into the collective mythology of Venice’s manufactured ideals, as they embodied some of these values but found themselves at odds with others. Once we acknowledge that the myth is contradictory, we can better understand how the myth was used to perpetuate Venice’s idealism.
Chapter II: The Jews Before the Ghetto

Most historians who write about the Jews in Venice acknowledge that Jews were present in Venice before the establishment of the Venetian Ghetto in 1516. Jewish presence existed in the Italian peninsula long before the Venetian Empire, and, even after its formation, played a role in supporting the Republic. This chapter will discuss the history of the Jews in Italy more broadly to explain the foundation and significance of Jewish interaction with the Venetian Empire before the Senate allowed Jews to permanently reside in the city. Jews were working in Italy and making a significant impact in Venice long before the establishment of permanent residence in the early 16th century.

The Jews of Italy

Jewish interaction with Venice is almost as old as the empire itself. To establish how profoundly historical these interactions are, it is important to look at the history of Jews in Italy. Before I begin this chapter, I want to preface the use of the term Italy. The Italian territory was not one unified entity until the late-nineteenth century. In 1861, the Kingdom of Italy was established, which included most of the peninsula, and by 1871 unification was complete. Therefore, the Italy referenced in this chapter does not refer to the modern unified state. In this context, Italy is meant to encompass the cities in the Italian peninsula. People in the republics, duchies, and kingdoms during this period did not even consider themselves Italian. This is important for understanding the history of Jewish interaction with the peninsula before the modern era.
The Jewish connection to Italy has remained “unbroken from remote times down to the present day.”\textsuperscript{71} Jews have been present in Italy for centuries, and their history is “indeed of profound antiquity.”\textsuperscript{72} Due to its unique geographical position, “Italy was from the very beginning of Christianity the most significant setting of the encounter between Jews and Christians.”\textsuperscript{73} Although not universally recognized by all Christians, especially after the Reformation, Rome was strongly considered to be the symbol of Christendom. The image that the Roman Catholic church was the voice of Christianity “was shaped by the unique role played by the Roman Church during the formative period of European civilization, as well as by the popes’ abiding demand for universal acknowledgment of their apostolic authority.”\textsuperscript{74} As a result, Rome naturally entered the Judeo-Christian relationship. Papal policy towards the Jews and theological statements about Judaism as a practice “came implicitly to be considered as the exclusively legitimate formulation of the Christian attitude towards the Jews and Judaism.”\textsuperscript{75} The Jews of Italy, more specifically the Jews of Rome, were unofficially considered the representatives of Jewish people to the Pope.\textsuperscript{76}

To get a sense of how old the ties were between the Jews and the Italian region when the Roman Republic transitioned into the Roman Empire, numerous Jewish communities were found to be solidly established in various Italian cities.\textsuperscript{77} Jews were most likely brought to Rome as captives in significant numbers as a result of Pompey’s war in Judea in 63 B.C.E.\textsuperscript{78} Josephus

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{71} Cecil Roth, \textit{The History of the Jews of Italy} (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), 1. According to a statement recorded at the start of the preface, this reference source is the first published history of the Jews in Italy written in any language.
\item \textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Bernard Dov Cooperman and Barbara Garvin, \textit{The Jews of Italy: Memory and Identity} (Potomac, MD: University Press of Maryland, 2000), 35.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Roth, \textit{The History}, 7.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Cooperman and Garvin, \textit{The Jews}, 47.
\end{itemize}
mentions “30,000 Jews being enslaved after a rebellion in 53 B.C.E., and more prisoners were taken by Sosius in 37 B.C.E., of whom some are likely to have reached Rome.” 79 A speech made by Cicero in 59 B.C.E. proved that there was an established Jewish community in Rome by that point in time. 80 Jewish presence in the region can, therefore, be traced back to the Roman period before Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan making Christianity the tolerated and favored religion for the Roman Empire in 313 C.E. Based on figures and accounts of the period, the total Jewish population in Rome was at least 30,000 in the first century. 81 Jews could also be Roman citizens. The Romans acknowledged the antiquity of Judaism as a religion, and Jews even received favored status to not serve in the army or worship the emperor. The relative toleration of Jews ended both with the revolts that led to the destruction of the Temple in 69-70 C.E. and the Simon Bar Kochba revolt in 132 C.E. By 380 C.E., Theodosius ensured that Christianity was officially accepted as the only religion in Rome, so Jews no longer received any toleration. The current knowledge of the Jewish communities in Rome is based mostly on epitaphs in the Roman catacombs. According to these epitaphs, the names of eleven different synagogues are known, not necessarily operating at the same time or the extent of how many synagogues existed. 82 Some of the titles that Jewish members held in these synagogues are also known based on the frequency of inscriptions. The languages of the epitaphs are Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Aramaic, and they provide little information about the professions of Jews in the first few centuries. 83 Jews were present in the Roman Empire for centuries, but there are more concrete examples of Jewish presence later in history. According to the Books of the Maccabees,

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
82 Cooperman and Garvin, The Jews, 54.
83 Cooperman and Garvin, The Jews, 56.
in 161 B.C.E., Judas Maccabaeus sent a mission to Rome to establish friendly relations after proving victorious against Nicanor.\textsuperscript{84} The ambassadors, Jason ben Eleazar and Eupolemos ben Johnan, “are the first Jews to be in Italy, or to visit Europe, who are known to us by name, and the spiritual ancestors of Western Jewry as a whole.”\textsuperscript{85} Other records suggest that before 139 B.C.E., a populated Palestinian colony existed in the Italian region.\textsuperscript{86} From this point on, there is a known and steady record of Jewish presence in Rome and Italy as a whole.

By the time Christianity had spread throughout Italy, Jewish settlements had been established from the Adriatic Sea to the islands beyond Sicily. Before the fall of the Roman Empire, there is a multitude of documentation proving that almost every sizable city in Italy had a Jewish community.\textsuperscript{87} The biggest center was understandably Rome, but north of the capital we found Jews in the early centuries at Falerii, Chiusi Luna, Florence, Genoa, Tortona, Milan, Brescia, potentially Bologna, Concordia, and Aquilaea, and Pola in Venetia.\textsuperscript{88} The most important centers, however, were located in southern Italy in the seaports along trade routes because Jews from the Levant, Egypt, and greater Asia could approach Rome from this direction.\textsuperscript{89} One note about the recorded occupations of Jews during this time, there is no evidence of bankers or moneylenders, and, although they undoubtedly existed, there was no specific mention of merchants. There was one epitaph that introduced a Jewish painter and a Jewish physician, and there are records of actors, poets, butchers, tailors, tentmakers, and other craftsmen.\textsuperscript{90} None of these Jews were particularly well off, and, in fact, most lived in destitution.

\textsuperscript{84} Roth, \textit{The History}, 2.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} Roth, \textit{The History}, 4.
\textsuperscript{87} Roth, \textit{The History}, 21.
\textsuperscript{88} Roth, \textit{The History}, 22.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Roth, \textit{The History}, 23.
Amid the Christian Italian empire formation, “the new masters of the country went over to the orthodox beliefs and adopted entirely the Catholic point of view, prejudices and all.”\textsuperscript{91} As a result, anti-Jewish legislation was accepted in Italy more so than anywhere else in the West. After the fall of Rome, authority members of empires throughout Italy were constantly being undermined by successive invasions. The one stable force left was “the Bishops of Rome, who had managed to vindicate for themselves something of the mystical supremacy of the old Imperial City.”\textsuperscript{92} Ultimately, the Popes “acquired a unique position as virtual rulers of Rome and the surrounding area, with vast spiritual influence over the whole of Western Christendom.”\textsuperscript{93} It was at this point that the history of the Jews in Italy became affected by the relationship between Jews and the Papacy.

In 774, Charles the Great, more commonly known as Emperor Charlemagne, intervened in Italian affairs to protect the Pope from the Lombards and destroyed their power.\textsuperscript{94} Charlemagne gained control of northern Italy and was crowned emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in 800. The complete fragmentation of the Italian peninsula began around 1000 to 1100 after the end of the Early Middle Ages, and it was during this time that records of Jewish settlements became more abundant. Additionally, Jewish merchants became increasingly important to the Italians. After the fall of the Roman Empire and its economic processes, the Jews were left as “almost the sole element with a consciousness of other countries, a knowledge of other languages, and reliable correspondents in other regions.”\textsuperscript{95} These Jews had qualifications for importing and exporting that others lacked which made them an important asset to Italian

\textsuperscript{91} Roth, \textit{The History}, 38.
\textsuperscript{92} Roth, \textit{The History}, 42.
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{94} Roth, \textit{The History}, 66.
\textsuperscript{95} Roth, \textit{The History}, 67.
trade. Jewish merchants had numerous opportunities in Italy because of their proximity to Greek and Arab-speaking empires as well as northern and western Europe. Emperor Charlemagne resided miles away from northern Italy in Germany, so his lordship had minimal influence on these territories. This remote leadership made it possible for the emergence of great trading cities to establish themselves as quasi-independent republics.\textsuperscript{96} Before the establishment of these maritime empires, however, Jews played a large role in mercantile activity. The eventual formation of these great republics rendered Jewish participation less and less impactful, but for some time there was an intense rivalry between the Jews and these young empires. It would be impossible to encompass all aspects of Jewish history that are relevant for establishing the foundation for Jewish presence in Venice. The purpose of this overview is to show that this history does not exist in a vacuum. Jews were present in Italy long before the existence of Venice, and this history shows the inevitability of the interaction of these two groups.

**Jews in Venice Before 1516**

Although Jews were forbidden to permanently settle within the city walls of the Venetian Empire until the beginning of the sixteenth century, Jewish presence, and interaction with Venice span almost the entirety of the empire's existence. As stated in the previous chapter, Venice began to form during the sixth century and the Republic of Venice began in 697 with the election of the first Doge. Jews were present in Italy long before this, however, their interaction started with the Venetians around the tenth century. The earliest documentation that mentioned the Jews was a decree of the Senate, dated 945, that forbade “vessels sailing in Oriental waters to take Jews or any other foreign merchants aboard, or even to transport their wares from port to port.”\textsuperscript{97} 

\textsuperscript{96} Roth, *The History*, 66.
\textsuperscript{97} Roth, *The History*, 68.
Among the many great trading cities in the Italian peninsula, the Venetian Republic was extremely competitive with the Jewish merchants. The Venetians received tax exemptions on ships that entered Constantinople, and Jews had become accustomed to transporting their merchandise on Venetian-owned vessels to profit off these concessions. This privilege, however, was prohibited by 962 because of jealousy that was common among many of the northern republics. Nearly half a century later when Venice received a reduction of the dues levied on their ships at a toll-station in Abydos, the Byzantine toll-station, “it was stipulated that no similar preferential tariff should be accorded to merchandise belonging to the Jews.” For a long time, Venice was intolerant towards Jews because of their trade rivalry, however, this policy was impossible to maintain in a mercantile city.

Moneylenders

In the eleventh century, Jewish traders, both from the Levant and Germany, began to appear in Venice for short periods. These groups, however, were prevented from forming an organized community. At first, Jews were forced to carry out trade operations outside of Venice. In 1254, Venice banned borrowing money on pledges at fixed rates of interest, and anyone wishing to conduct such business had to go to Mestre. Mestre was annexed by Venice in 1338 and was the closest point to the city located on the mainland of the Italian peninsula. Money lending was one of the main occupations for Jews in Venice and Europe generally. Traditionally, money lending was a forbidden practice for Christians, which could have been based on several different Biblical verses. In Deuteronomy, 23:20-21, the verse states, “Thou

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98 Roth, The History, 85.
99 Ibid.
100 Roth, The History, 123.
shall not lend upon its interest to thy brother; interest of money, interest of victuals, interest of anything that is lent upon interest. Unto a foreigner thou mayest lend upon interest, but unto thy brother thou shalt not lend upon interest.”¹⁰² This does not refer literally to a brother but to all co-religionists.¹⁰³ Another law on money lending is also found in Exodus 22:24 and Leviticus 25:35-38. Jews, however, interpreted this rule in a different way to adapt to changing environments and counteract the hostile attitude of Christianity toward Judaism.¹⁰⁴ In the New Testament, usury is not overtly banned. The Bible alludes to the disapproval of money lending in Matt 21:12-17, also found in Mark 11, Luke 19, and John 2, when Jesus turns over the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple. These verses may have contributed to the practice being largely looked down upon by Christians. Most likely, however, the negative association between money lending and Christianity was the result of church councils banning money lending for interest. The Fifth Lateran Council of 1515 defined the practice of money lending as “when, from its use, a thing which produces nothing is applied to the acquiring of gain and profit without any work, any expense or any risk.” The practice was largely looked down upon by Christians, but Jews did not fall under the same regulations.

Despite the Christian dislike of money lending, they frequently tolerated the practice. Jewish money lending at interest to poor Christians “not only helped to alleviate the socioeconomic problems of an increasingly urbanized economy but also rendered it unnecessary for Christians to violate this religious tradition.”¹⁰⁵ Because of this activity, “especially throughout the Serenissima’ (the Republic of Venice) periods of economic and political

difficulties, the acceptance and subsequent settlement of the Jews in the city are justified.”\textsuperscript{106} The enforcement of conducting money lending business outside the lagoon was a major inconvenience that put Venice at a disadvantage. This policy was reconsidered because of the general disruption caused by the Black Death in 1348 and 1349, the economic difficulties resulting from Venice’s Third Genoese War, and the fact that Venice was required to raise forced loans and impose new taxes after the war of Chioggia.\textsuperscript{107} All these events caused money shortages and illegal money lending operations to skyrocket. Despite attempts to keep Jews at a distance, the Venetian government in the late fourteenth century “authorized Jews to reside in the city, as part of a change in its attitude toward small-scale moneylending.”\textsuperscript{108} In 1366 the Venetians allowed Jewish merchants to set up loan banks in the city “in order to satisfy the requirements of the poor.”\textsuperscript{109} With an annual payment that eventually rose to 4,000 ducats, three Jewish loan banks were established in Venice.\textsuperscript{110}

The first agreement between the Venetian government and the Jews to conduct business in the lagoon dates to 1382. This agreement about loan management, interest rates, and permanence in the lagoon is the first charter of the Jews in Venice. This piece of legislation was set to be valid for five years and to remain in effect until revoked, “broke with past tradition and allowed any person, whether Venetian or foreigner, to lend at a maximum rate of 10% per year on pledges and 12% on notes in the city itself, in accordance with certain specified terms.”\textsuperscript{111} Three years later, the economic situation in Venice still needed improvement, so the charter was

\textsuperscript{107} Davis and Ravid, \textit{The Jews}, 4.
\textsuperscript{108} Davis and Ravid, \textit{The Jews}, 3.
\textsuperscript{109} Roth, \textit{The History}, 185.
\textsuperscript{110} Roth, \textit{The History}, 123.
renewed in 1385 and was unchanged from its predecessor. In 1387 when the previous charter expired, new provisions were added. For the following ten years and until revoked, “the Jews could either pay four thousand ducats a year and lend at a maximum rate of 10 percent on pledges and 12 percent on notes, or not pay the annual tax and lend only at the lower rates of 8 percent and 10 percent respectively.” This privilege for Jewish money lenders, however, was not able to last forever. On August 27, 1394, the Senate decreed that upon the expiration of the charter in 1397, Jews would be forced to leave the city. The reason for this was that the services of the moneylending Jews were no longer needed, but a resurgence of anti-Jewish sentiment undoubtedly supported this motion. Now, Jews were not permitted to stay in Venice for longer than fifteen days at a time, and, as of 1394, all Jews coming into the city had to distinguish themselves by wearing a yellow circle on the outside of their clothing. This obligation was replaced in 1496 when the symbol of Judaism changed to a yellow hat instead of a circle, and this custom remained intact until Napoleon invaded Venice.

To evade these new regulations, the Jews would enter the city for fifteen days, leave for Mestre, and immediately return to Venice for another fifteen days. As a result, in 1402, the Senate passed legislation that stated the Jews could not return for four months after the fifteen-day period had expired. In 1404, the opportunity to reside in Venice was limited to two weeks “in an attempt to restrict the banking profession to the sale of unredeemed pawned articles at the Rialto, while other trade was to take place in Mestre. Trade of second-hand objects was only authorized as an alternative.”

reside in the city would not come until the beginning of the sixteenth century. In 1503, a charter was issued to three Jewish moneylenders in Mestre. One of the clauses of the charter permitted these moneylenders “to come to Venice in case of war, both for their own safety and to safeguard the pledges of Christians that they held.”\(^\text{117}\) Indeed, in 1509, when the armies of the League of Cambrai overran Venice, “Jewish moneylenders residing in the occupied area were consequently among the many refugees who fled to Venice.”\(^\text{118}\) Beginning in 1508, a charter was renewed in the Venetian territories that set applicable interest rates, stated the Jews had to rent and not own property, and granted permission to lending banks for five years.\(^\text{119}\) The Venetians had an interesting relationship with Jewish moneylenders in the sense that although these Jews supported the Venetian economy, the Venetians still disliked the business in general. Despite passing legislation to prevent money lenders from conducting business in the city, the Venetian government did not want to exclude all Jews from the lagoon.

*Merchants*

The Venetian Empire reached its height in the fifteenth century. It was during this time that they held the monopoly on the spice trade and pretty much anything that came from North, East, or South through Constantinople. Jewish merchants were stationed throughout the Indian Ocean trade system, so they were understandably important to Venice's economic success. Many Jews “who had been expelled from Spain in 1492, and also some of those who had later been forcibly converted to Christianity in Portugal in 1497 and had subsequently chosen to flee the Iberian Peninsula, found a refuge in the Ottoman Empire.”\(^\text{120}\)

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\(^{117}\) Davis and Ravid, *The Jews*, 7.
\(^{118}\) Ibid.
Constantinople and Salonica, Jews soon assumed a prominent role in overseas commerce. Some of these Jews merchants, now considered Ottoman subjects, began returning to Christian ports, such as Venice, where they were granted, the privileges received by the Ottoman citizenry. By Venetian law, these Jews were the only non-Venetians permitted to engage in trade between Venice and the Levant. The Venetian government, specifically, did not want to discourage Jewish merchants from conducting business in the city. Because of the legislation of 1394 and 1402, the Senate was concerned that Jewish merchants were no longer coming to the city and instead traveling to Ancona, Venice’s commercial rival. As a result, the Senate decided in 1408 that Jewish merchants from “elsewhere in the Adriatic were exempt from these laws and could continue to come freely to Venice and send goods to the city.” Although the first official charter for Jewish merchants was not until 1589, “Jewish merchants from Venice’s newly-acquired possessions in the Levant had also obtained a temporary footing in the city.” The transitions of Jewish traders and taxes on their merchandise were recorded in Venice, and “this was the economic basis of the communities of northern Italy.” The presence of Jewish merchants in the Venetian Empire during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries does receive critical scrutiny, however, there is a solid archival record of their activities and the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was not until after the establishment of the Venetian Ghetto that they assumed a significant role in Venetian commerce. Jewish merchants were generally influential

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121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Davis and Ravid, The Jews, 5.
124 Ibid.
125 Roth, The History, 123.
126 Roth, The History, 84.
128 Ibid.
in the Italian peninsula because of their trade networks throughout Europe and Asia. Although they did not play as significant a role in the Venetian Empire before 1516, their presence was important enough to maintain ties and eventually allow permanent settlements in the city. The legal framework for Jews in the fifteenth century was established to prevent Jewish moneylending in the city, but not eliminate Jewish presence. Jewish merchants were reassured that they would be able to conduct business in Venice, and the government also tolerated Jewish doctors.

**Foreign Merchants**

Jews were not the only foreigners who supported the Venetian economy. In the sixteenth century, the Venetian Republic pursued a “strategy of hospitality for merchants of different nations in different *sestieri.*”\(^{129}\) Germans, Greeks, Persians, Albanians, Turks, Armenians, Tuscans, and Luchesi were accommodated for their mercantile role and contribution to the state budget. Each group had been granted physical arrangement, “corresponding in turn to different degrees of diffidence, limitations, or guarantees between distinct groups.”\(^{130}\) Merchant residents with the right of abode, to store goods, self-government, and a guarantee for tax revenues were attributed to each group in a different area of the city.\(^{131}\) The Venetians were hyper-aware of all foreigners carrying out trade in the lagoon and never deviated from ensuring no conflict would ensue. Venice was a hub of international trade, and foreign merchants beyond just the Jews helped support the maritime empire.

**Physicians**

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\(^{130}\) Davis and Ravid, *The Jews*, 20.

\(^{131}\) *Ibid.*
Among the economic occupations of Jews that interacted with the Venetian Empire before the sixteenth century, Jewish doctors were frequently allowed to enter the city. There was some confusion in 1394 after the decision to expire the charter that allowed Jewish money lenders to work in the city also included Jewish doctors. On April 3, 1395, the Great Council decided that the Senate legislation had not intended to exclude Jewish doctors, who had been approved by the government and were living honestly without engaging in moneylending.”\textsuperscript{132} In fact, in 1409, the Great Council allowed some Jews claiming to be doctors to live in Venice and be exempted from wearing a yellow circle. The havoc that ensued because of this, however, forced the Great Council to retract their exemption, but Jews were still allowed to practice medicine in Venice while wearing a yellow circle.\textsuperscript{133} Jewish physicians were considered a privileged occupation even before the establishment of the Venetian Ghetto.

Not far from the lagoon is one of the oldest universities in the world, the University of Padua. In terms of granting access to the education to become a doctor, Padua accepted Jewish students and allowed them to obtain a medical degree. As early as 1409 was when the first Jews received their doctoral degree at the University of Padua.\textsuperscript{134} Although Padua was accepting of Jewish students, many were not easily able to obtain this degree. Most of these Jews were foreigners who lacked the proper prerequisites of admission, including the knowledge of Latin. These students were largely foreigners who, coming from countries where Jews were not admitted to the universities, and from a deeply ingrained Jewish religious atmosphere highly unfavorable to the pursuit of secular education.”\textsuperscript{135} The University of Padua was one of the first

\textsuperscript{132} Ravid, Benjamin. “The Legal Status.” 181.
\textsuperscript{133} Ravid, Benjamin. “The Legal Status.” 183
\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid.}
to accept non-Catholic students to their medical school, and Jews were given the ability to become doctors and work in Venice in many cases with privileges.

**Jewish Life**

The Venetian government tolerated the presence of Jews within the city limits to a certain extent. Initially, Jews were not permitted to openly practice Judaism. The legislation of 1408 and 1426 claiming that Jews were establishing synagogues and holding services in rented Christian property, “condemned both such Jewish tenants and their Christian landlords to a year in jail and a fine of one thousand lire, while all other Jews attending the service were given six months in jail and a fine of three hundred lire.”\(^{136}\) (5) During his papacy from 1458 to 1464, Pope Pius II allowed Jews to practice their religion and threatened excommunication to those who prevented them from doing so. As a result, the Senate established that “although Jews could still not establish synagogues or designate places for prayer in Venice itself, they could thenceforth freely honor and praise God with psalms and prayers according to their laws in their rented houses, as long as not more than ten persons participated.”\(^{137}\)

The government was also concerned about the sexual relationships between Christians and Jews. The yellow marker the Jews were forced to wear aided in distinguishing them from the Christians to prevent sexual relationships.\(^{138}\) In 1424, the Senate passed legislation forbidding sexual relations between Jewish men and Christian women and setting the penalty according to the status of the Christian woman.\(^{139}\) In 1443, the Senate also refined legislation to prevent Christian men from having sexual relations with Jewish women. The Senate did not stop at limiting contact between Jews and Christians in a sexual context. Claiming that Jews were

\(^{136}\) Davis and Ravid, *The Jews*, 5.
\(^{138}\) Calabi, *Venice and Its Jews*, 5.
teaching Christian children music, “the Senate directed in 1443, that, for the honor of God, no Jew was to operate a school of games, crafts, doctrine, singing, instrument playing, or anything else, subject to a fine of five hundred ducats and six months in jail.”¹⁴⁰ Jewish life in Venice before the establishment of the Ghetto was limited to jobs that served the Venetian populace. All this changed when the Venetian government could no longer prevent Jews from residing in the city.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.
Chapter III: The Jews of Venice

Jewish life in Venice began with the establishment of the Venetian Ghetto on March 29, 1516. The presence of Jews within the city limits completely changed the structure of Venetian society as well as challenged the very ideals Venice had built its empire on. This chapter will discuss the establishment of the Venetian Ghetto and Jewish life in Venice. Although all Jewish culture was restricted to the limited geographic space of the Venetian Ghetto, Jewish influence in Venice reached far beyond the confines of the Ghetto. The Venetians understood the value of Jewish presence to the success of the Venetian Empire, so concessions were made that would alter the structure and ideology of Venetian society.

Literature of Venetian Jews

Many historians have published literature on Venetian Jews. There is a multitude of secondary sources that discuss how Jews were allowed to be part of Venetian life and society and how Jewish presence manifested itself in Venice. These secondary sources tell the story of Venetian Jews but lack an analysis of their impact on Venice’s mythical ideals. Donatella Calabi has greatly added to the literature on the history of Venetian Jews. Calabi, along with several other authors, summarized the five-hundred-year history of Venetian Jews from 1516 to 2016 in her book titled, *Venice, the Jews, and Europe*. Calabi’s work adds a great deal of information to the literature on Venetian Jews. Specifically for my topic, Calabi’s book discusses why Venetians ultimately decided to allow Jews to reside in the city. The policy of Ghettoization was “one of inclusion and at the same time of isolation within the city and was driven by economic
reasons rather than social ones.”\textsuperscript{141} Calabi explains that “moneylending for pawns was one of the Jews’ main economic activities in Venice, as elsewhere in Europe. And arguably this occupation, especially in stages of political and financial difficulty that led the Republic was experiencing before and after the crisis of the League of Cambrai, explains the welcoming and subsequent settlement of the Jews in the city.”\textsuperscript{142} Calabi establishes that Jews were allowed in the city primarily to support the economy, but does not explain the significance of their presence. Her book is more focused on the history of Venetian Jews instead of providing an analysis of what their presence means for Venice. Another piece of Calabi’s literature, titled \textit{Venice, and its Jews: 500 Years Since the Founding of the Ghetto}, provides a much more condensed version of Jewish history in Venice. Calabi uses hundreds of documents from the \textit{Archivio di Stato di Venezia} to create a comprehensive account of Jewish presence in the Venetian Empire, mainly after the establishment of the Ghetto. She outlines the extensive history of Jews in Venice including a detailed explanation of the Ghetto system, Jewish trades and professions, cultural and religious life of the Jews, the Ghetto community, and the Venetian Ghetto after the fall of Venice’s Empire. Calabi’s book is an important addition to the literature on Venetian Jews, however, the myth of Venice is not a source of conflict that she uses. Her analytical lens is more focused on Jewish presence in Venice generally without focusing on the impact on the ideals of the Venetian Republic.

Another historian who has published literature on Venetian Jews is Dana Katz. In her book titled, \textit{The Jewish Ghetto and the Visual Imagination of Early Modern Venice}, she defines


\textsuperscript{142} Calabi, \textit{Venice and Its Jews}, 21.
the Ghetto as “a paradox of urban space.” Katz outlines the history of the Ghettoization of Jews within the city limits, and what the implications of this separation were on Venetian society. Using both visual and verbal primary sources from the Venetian state archives and other institutions, Katz focuses on the structure of the Ghetto itself. Her analysis “engages not only Jewish historiography but also early modern religious culture more broadly, for the Venetian Ghetto played a critical role in the sociopolitical and religious infrastructure of early modern Italy.” Katz discusses how the unique art and architectural histories of the Ghetto were integrated into Venetian society. Her commentary supports my thesis in that it analyzes the implications of Jewish presence but leaves a gap when describing life outside of the Venetian Ghetto. Jewish merchants and moneylenders were trapped within the confines of the Venetian Ghetto, but there is more to be said about their impact on Venetian society outside the Ghetto walls.

Benjamin Ravid, professor of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University, has written the most literature about Venetian Jews. Ravid focuses on numerous aspects of Venetian Jewish history, including the history of Ghettoization, the legislation on Jewish merchants and moneylenders, the professions of Venetian Jews, and the early modern history of Jews in Venice, mostly from the economic perspective. Two of his most important articles for my research are titled, “The First Charter of the Jewish Merchants of Venice, 1589,” and “The Legal Status of the Jewish Merchants of Venice, 1541-1638.” Both articles include a detailed analysis of primary source documents directly from the Venetian state archives. Ravid establishes the foundation for just how important Jewish merchants and moneylenders were to

the Venetians. His article about the first charter for Venetian Jews investigated, “primarily on the basis of hitherto unpublished archival material, the background, terms, and significance of the first charter granted by the Venetian republic to Jewish merchants.”\textsuperscript{145} Venetians realized the importance of Jewish merchants to the city, so their charter kept being extended until “the role of the Jewish Levantine merchants in the Venetian marketplace was officially recognized.”\textsuperscript{146} In his article about the legal status of Jewish merchants, Ravid looks at more primary source documents from the state archives of Venice. The Venetian government granted “special commercial privileges unavailable to non-Jews”\textsuperscript{147} Jewish merchants supported the Venetian economy so much so that Jews were able to reach the status of merchants of Venice, “and the only non-Venetians (other than Ottoman subjects), allowed to engage in trade between Venice and the Levant.”\textsuperscript{148} Both articles stress the importance of Jewish merchants to Venice through the use of government-issued documents from the period. Ravid analyzes the presence of Jewish merchants but fails to place his conclusions in the context of Venetian exceptionalism. Ravid has also published several books and book chapters that are crucial additions to the historiography of Venetian Jews. Two of these books are \textit{The Jews of Early Modern Venice} and \textit{Studies on the Jews of Venice, 1382-1797}. These two works discuss the history of the Jews in Venice using Senate legislation focused on the economy. These books provide necessary information about Venetian Jews and include several excerpts of primary sources from the \textit{Archivio di Stato di Venezia}. Ravid’s work is thoroughly researched and analyzed to highlight the value of Jews to the Venetian economy. These works do not analyze the Venetian Empire through the lens of Venetian mythology, and this thesis is attempting to fill that gap.

\textsuperscript{145} Ravid, “The First,” 188.
\textsuperscript{146} Ravid, “The First,” 191.
\textsuperscript{147} Ravid, “The Legal Status,” 274.
\textsuperscript{148} Ravid, “The Legal,” 278.
Finally, British Jewish historian, Cecil Roth, has also greatly contributed to the literature on Venetian Jews. His work is more historiographical than analytical, but his publications are some of the first on the topic of Venetian Jews. *History of the Jews in Venice* provides an extensive and detailed account of the history of the Jews in Venice. Roth focuses on the general account of Jewish presence in the Venetian Republic by explaining Jewish interaction with Venice before 1516 and recounting the establishment of the Venetian Ghetto and Jewish life in Venice. His book provides important background for the history of Jews in Venice without the use of the myth of Venice lens. Although Roth’s work adds to the body of work on the topic of Jews in Venice, there is a lack of acknowledgment of Venetian ideology and mythology. This thesis intends to bridge the gap between these two topics to fully analyze the impact that Jewish presence had on the Venetian Empire.

Figure 3: Map of the Venetian Ghetto. Drawn by Guido Sullam, Pianta del Ghetto di Venezia alla caduta della Repubblica, 1930.
Establishment of the Ghetto

By the early sixteenth century, the Jews were by no means strangers to the Venetian Empire. Despite the official policy of intolerance, a community of Jews had gradually grown in Venice. Specifically, there were merchants from Corfu, the Levant, and elsewhere; physicians; refugees from the Peninsula or elsewhere; the Jews from recent expulsions; bankers from the mainland who stayed longer than the fifteen days permitted to remain in the city.\textsuperscript{149} Record of Jewish presence in Venice became more and more common. In the early seventeenth century, a member of the Luzzatto family, the descendants of a German Jew who immigrated to the Italian peninsula, “reports how his ancestors had been resident under the protection of the Lion of Saint Marco for over two centuries.”\textsuperscript{150} The continuity of Jewish presence in Venice regardless of their lack of permanent residence, was “demonstrated by the manifestations of government solitude on their behalf.”\textsuperscript{151} The foundations of Jewish settlement were already laid in Venice at the beginning of the sixteenth century, but external forces ultimately led to the passing of legislation on Jewish residences. A major contributor to this decision was the military defeat in the War of the League of Cambrai in 1509.

In 1508, the emperor Maximilian entered an alliance, the League at Cambrai, with the Pope, France, Spain, and most of the Italian powers. In February 1508, Maximilian passed through the Venetian territory with his army on his way to Rome. At the same time, Pope Julius II was concerned about the power and influence of the Venetian Empire. The League of Cambrai had the goal of the “conquest and partition of the Venetian possessions.”\textsuperscript{152} On May 14, 1509, armed forces in Venice were defeated in Agnadello and the entire territory was exposed to

\textsuperscript{150} Roth, \textit{History of the Jews}, 38.
\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{152} Roth, \textit{History of the Jews}, 39.
During this war, Jews in the surrounding territories were disproportionately targeted. Jews living in the Venetian *terraferma* experienced the destruction of war, especially in Mestre, which was burned to the ground. The Jews, as well as many other refugees, fled to Venice to escape the invading armies. This right was granted to the Jews through an emergency clause in their *condotta*, which had been passed during the early stages of the war. The Venetian government allowed refugees from the mainland, including Jews, to seek refuge in Venice. These initial Jewish settlers, of German and Italian descent, “were allowed to remain in the city in return for their funding and administration of pawnshops.” The League of Cambrai led to economic difficulties for Venice, so Doge Leonardo Loredan “granted a temporary tax reduction to the minority that carried out moneylending activities even though they were unable to pay the usual 14,000 ducats.”

Although the League of Cambrai was initially successful, the war failed to destroy the Venetian Empire. After the Venetian government had recaptured areas that had been taken during the war, the Jews were ordered to return outside of the city. Despite this, many Jews were unable to return to the outside territories because their homes had been destroyed, so they continued to conduct business in Venice. In most circumstances, this would have been unacceptable, however, Jewish moneylending and mercantilism helped support the Venetian economy after the war. In 1511, the Senate admitted “that ‘a great many hebrei (Jews)’ had gathered in ‘our’ lands, lending the Signoria (the governing body in Venice) an essential sum of

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153 Ibid.
156 Davis and Ravid, *The Jews*, 121.
158 Ravid, “Between the Myth,” 152.
money.” The economic difficulties endured by Venice after the war was enough to change the policy of Jewish presence within the city limits. Eventually, in 1513, the Venetian government granted two Jewish moneylenders from Mestre permission to continue engaging in pawnbroking activities in Venice and authorized the selling of secondhand goods to Jews. The pressing financial needs of the State continued, and in 1515 Jews received a widening of economic activities. Trades such as the opening of ten strazaria shops (selling fabrics, clothes, and second-hand goods) in the Rialto markets were granted in exchange for a new loan.

Although the Venetians acknowledged the value of Jewish presence in the Venetian Empire, this did not dispel anti-Jewish sentiment. The Jewish merchants were useful to the Venetian economy, but the climate was tense because “Christian’s competitors did not fail to point out the damage done by those businesses’ Sunday opening.” In 1511, Franciscan preaching and injunctions encouraged Jews to leave the city. Despite this, the number of Jewish citizens continued to rise to about 700 in 1516. In 1515, around Easter, the government proposed to relocate the Jews to the island of Giudecca, but no action was ultimately taken. Although there was still a large amount of opposition to Jewish presence from many Venetians and the Catholic clergy, the Venetians saw the value of Jewish presence in upholding the economic and mercantile success of the Republic. Finally, in 1516, the Senate figured out a solution to the Jewish question mediating the freedom of residence and the previous exclusion of Jews from the city. At this point, the history of the mythical Republic becomes significantly more complex with the establishment of the first Jewish Ghetto.

159 Calabi, Venice and Its Jews, 16.
160 Ravid, “Between the Myth,” 152.
162 Calabi, Venice and Its Jews, 16.
163 Calabi, Venice and Its Jews, 17.
The development of the Ghetto was meant to be a solution for allowing Jews to permanently settle inside Venice. The Senate required all Jews to live together, segregated on an island to be separated from the rest of the Venetian citizenry. The idea of segregating Jews from Christians in general initially came from the church. The attitude of Christians toward Judaism was a hostile “sibling rivalry” mindset. On a theological level, “Christianity based itself and its legitimacy upon the Old Testament and claimed to be the true Israel while condemning the Jews who were perceived as erring by stubbornly following the rabbinic interpretations of the Bible rather than the new true Christian exegesis.” This sentiment led to the discrimination of Jews, particularly in Europe where Catholicism had rampantly spread. If Jews were allowed to settle within a Christian territory, secular authorities would subject them to various restrictions. Jewish quarters had existed in the Hellenistic pre-Christian Mediterranean world, and as they spread throughout Christian Europe during the Middle Ages, they were designated various names in diverse languages. There was a tendency for foreigners and like individuals to settle in groups, so Jews undoubtedly felt safer cohabitating with one another in the same environment. Additionally, “Jews also desired to be near the synagogue and other community institutions, as well as stores selling food prepared according to their religious rites and other items needed for their religious observances.” It must be stated that there is a difference between the term “Ghetto” and the term “Jewish quarter” and the two should not be used interchangeably.

165 Ibid.
The Ghetto is a specific type of Jewish quarter, defined as a “compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarter.” The association between the term “Ghetto” and a Jewish quarter originated in Venice with the establishment of the Venetian Ghetto in 1516. The original meaning behind “Ghetto” has nothing to do with segregation or Jews. The word Ghetto “came into being to designate the copper foundry of the Venetian government, il Ghetto (sometimes spelled gheto, getto, or geto) where bronze cannon balls were cast, from the root gettare, to cast or to throw, encountered in English words such as eject, jet, and trajectory.” An island was used as a setting to dump waste products from the Ghetto. The island became known as the Ghetto Nuovo, or the new foundry, to distinguish it from the Ghetto Vecchio, or the old foundry. The term referred to the area of the future Ghetto Vecchio, and “bespoke of the lines of wheel barrels that unloaded copper slag from the refining process carried out in the workshop adjacent to the islet of which we are speaking, which became the terrain for smelting waste.”

In the fourteenth century, “when the foundry was no longer able to meet the needs of the Venetian state, it was sold, and the area became the site of modest houses mainly inhabited by weavers and other petty artisans.” In 1516, the term “Ghetto” became associated with areas of Jewish settlers that were both segregated and enclosed. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the word “came to be used for all compulsory, segregated, and enclosed Jewish quarters on the Italian peninsula.” Then, in the nineteenth century, “Ghetto” was used to describe areas of Jewish settlements in Europe and the United States, as well as other regions with densely populated minority groups. The Holocaust led to greater awareness of the term its

168 Ibid.  
169 Ibid.  
171 Calabi, Venice and Its Jews, 27.  
172 Ibid.  
173 Ibid.
meaning extended to encompass Afro-American quarters, as well as other minority groups. The extended uses of “Ghetto” blurred the important distinction between “voluntary quarters and compulsory, segregated, and enclosed ones that reflected completely different attitudes on the part of the government.”

Although segregated and enforced Jewish settlements existed before the Venetian Ghettos, the term and operationalization of “Ghetto” began in Venice.

_Ghetto Nuovo_

The official authorization of Jewish settlement in Venice was an important turning point in Jewish history. On the one hand, the Venetians acknowledged the value that Jewish presence had on the economic success of the Republic, however, the opposition against Jews in the Christian Empire could not be ignored. On March 29, 1516, the Senate issued a compromise. Jews were allowed to permanently settle in Venice, but they must live together on a segregated island known as the Ghetto Nuovo, an area in Cannaregio. In terms of the location of the Ghetto, “it was easy to plan the segregation of the Jews ‘logically,’ away from the center.” According to the actual degree, “all the Jews who are at present living in different parishes within our city, and all others who may come here, until the law is changed as the times may demand and as shall be deemed expedient, shall be obligated to go at once to dwell together in the houses in the court within the Geto at San Hieronimo, where there is plenty of room for them to live.” These houses were occupied by Christians before this new legislation, so the houses were evacuated. Based on laws enacted in 1423 and 1424, Jews were prohibited from purchasing land anywhere in the city. The solution to this was Jews were forced to rent homes in the Ghetto Nuovo. The incentive for landlords to comply with these regulations was “the Jews were to pay one-third

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174 Ibid.
176 David Chambers, Jennifer Fletcher, and Brian Pullan, _Venice: A Documentary History, 1450-1630_ (Toronto: Published by University of Toronto Press in association with the Renaissance Society of America, 2004), 338.
more than the current rents, with the additional amount being tax-exempt.”

The decree stated that “no god-fearing subject of our state would have wished them, after their arrival, to disperse throughout the city, sharing houses with Christians and going wherever they choose day by day and night.” Gates were erected at both entrances to the Ghetto to be opened at sunrise and closed at sunset by Christian guards who were also paid by the Jews. No synagogues were allowed anywhere, except in Mestre, and the curfew was enforced for everyone except physicians who needed to tend to patients after dark.

Because the Jews were confined to the Ghetto Nuovo, they were forced to expand vertically as opposed to horizontally. Nicolas Audeber described the Jews as “all residing together in a single place enclosed by high walls that, on the outside, are removed from contact with the houses of the city, and there they are crammed as if in a cloister to keep them separated from the Christians…In Venice, it is called ‘the ghetto’... there they are enclosed at sunset.”

As more Jews moved into the heart of the city, the Ghetto Nuovo grew taller to accommodate the influx of people. The Ghetto Nuovo had previously been privately owned, and “thanks to the initiative of the Da Brolo family, the area was totally urbanized in the years 1459-1465.” What was defined as spacious by the Venetian government was insufficient enough that many Jews ended up leaving Venice. The original buildings were subdivided “and grew in height by increasing the number of floors to eight or nine, a highly unusual method for a city with sandy soil notoriously devoid of great resistance.” Throughout the sixteenth century, there was a

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180 Nicolas Audeber, *le voyage et obsevations de plusieurs choses diverses qui se peuvent remarquer en italie* (1656), trans. by Don Harràn.
182 Calabi, *Venice and Its Jews*, 34.
rapid increase in population of the Ghetto, but since the buildings could only expand upwards, hygiene was often disregarded. Small apartments would house eight, ten, or however many people could stand the stench of the close living quarters.\textsuperscript{183} The Jews were forced to adapt to these conditions by creating a flourishing community in the Ghetto. In the early period of the sixteenth century, “along with homes, there were butchers, a tavern, and a bakery producing bread in the Ghetto.”\textsuperscript{184} The neighborhood was entirely organized by the second half of the sixteenth century because Jews quickly organized their daily lives. Although the Jews were able to adapt to the restrictions of the Ghetto Nuovo, these limitations could not sustain the growing population. Eventually, the Ghetto needed to expand.

\textit{Ghetto Vecchio and Ghetto Nuovissimo}

The Venetian Republic had reached its peak commercial prominence during the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, however, its commercial success was declining for several reasons the Venetians were unable to reverse.\textsuperscript{185} Throughout the fifteenth century, the Venetians held a monopoly on the spice trade and were in direct competition for commercial dominance with the Portuguese. After the Portuguese discovery of the direct sea route to the Indies around the Cape of Good Hope, fewer goods from Asia and Africa were reaching Venice through the eastern Mediterranean ports, and a general shift in trade moved from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.\textsuperscript{186} Additionally, the French, English, and Dutch “built fleets that increasingly competed with the Venetians for the reduced quantity of merchandise still coming to the Ottoman ports of the eastern Mediterranean, taking advantage of Venice’s weak points: the long trip up the

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{184} Calabi, \textit{Venice and Its Jews}, 31.
\textsuperscript{185} Davis and Ravid, \textit{The Jews}, 14.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.
Adriatic piracy, and a lack of adequate Venetian shipping.”187 Venice also participated in a series of wars with the Ottomans which disrupted the flow of commerce, so many Venetian merchants began to withdraw from maritime trade.188 As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the expulsion of Jews from Spain and New Christians who had been forcibly converted in Portugal emigrated to the Mediterranean port cities, particularly Venice. The Venetian government realized the value of making Venice more attractive to foreign merchants, so the Ghetto was expanded.

The second installment of the Venetian Ghetto was unveiled in 1541, twenty-five years after the establishment of the Ghetto Nuovo. Visiting Levantine merchants complained about the lack of space in the Ghetto, so, “in the context of a larger plan designed to make trading in Venice more attractive to foreign merchants, the government acknowledged that those Jewish merchants were importing the greater part of the merchandise coming from the Ottoman Balkans, and therefore ordered that their complaint be investigated.”189 The Venetian government understood the usefulness of the Levantine merchants for Venetian trade relations, so their request was accommodated. In 1541, the Cinque Savi alla Mercanzia identified “an almost empty strip of land between the Agudi and Cannaregio canals, with a few vegetable gardens, orchards and old wood board houses, where a wall of adequate height and with a single entrance could be erected outside.”190 The merchants were assigned twenty dwellings in the Ghetto Vecchio that was to be walled up with two gates, “one opening up to the pavement on the side of the canal of Cannaregio and the other, at the other end, to the wooden footbridge leading

187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
190 Calabi, Venice and Its Jews, 37.
to the Ghetto Nuovo.’’\textsuperscript{191} This expansion to the Ghetto affected business areas, particularly because trade was illegal in the Ghetto Nuovo. Originally, Jewish merchants were allowed to engage in trade in the Ghetto Vecchio for only four months without their families, but this was extended to two years because of customs exemptions.\textsuperscript{192} In 1549, this rule was changed to one year, but in practice, this regulation was largely disregarded. The Ghetto Vecchio also housed a variety of different ethnic groups of Jews that were more separate from one another, which will be elaborated on later in this chapter. Unlike the Ghetto Nuovo, which was more densely populated and became a center for the distribution of services and community identity, the Ghetto Vecchio “accentuated its nature as a non-centripetal space arranged along a path functionally projected outward, towards the waterways and pedestrian passageway of Cannaregio.’’\textsuperscript{193} The establishment of the Ghetto Vecchio brought more commerce to Venice and expanded the Venetian Ghetto to accommodate more Jewish residents.

The final addition to the Venetian Ghetto was the Ghetto Nuovissmo in 1633. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Jewish population was around 3,000 in Venice.\textsuperscript{194} There had been pressure to expand the Ghetto for over thirty years, so the Ghetto Nuovissmo was created to house more Jewish immigrants. In 1633, “the Cinque Savi all Mercanzia were charged by the Senate to review the sites, conduct a survey, deal with the owner of the area behind the Ca Zanoli, build a bridge of communication and suggest the form of twenty new homes to keep ‘locked and embedded’ in the Ghetto for twenty ‘families and newcomers.’’\textsuperscript{195} This project was at the expense of the Jews who lived in the Ghetto. The aim was to attract more

\textsuperscript{191} Ravid, “Ghetto: Etymology,” 27.
\textsuperscript{192} Davis and Ravid, \textit{The Jews}, 15.
\textsuperscript{194} Calabi, \textit{Venice and Its Jews}, 44.
\textsuperscript{195} Calabi, \textit{Venice and Its Jews}, 45.
foreigners to Venice and to ensure the stability and security of the Ghetto, passage between the Ghettos was banned for three years.\textsuperscript{196} Thirty years later, the number of residences in the Ghetto Nuovissimo increased from twenty to twenty-seven, and by 1740, these numbers had doubled.\textsuperscript{197} These three Ghettos make up the Venetian Ghetto, each densely populated and equipped with differences based on the different professions of the Jewish residents. These groups of Jews were faced with the challenge of cohabitating with various cultures, backgrounds, goals, and finances within a small and heavily policed environment. The Venetian Ghetto not only had an indisputable impact on Jewish history but also the structure of Venetian society. Jewish presence in Venice was valuable enough that the Venetian government changed its immigration policies and attitudes towards those who contradicted their Christian ideals. The Ghetto itself is one piece of this complex puzzle, especially since Jewish life had to exist solely within its walls.

![The Ghetto Nuovo in the present day. The structure of the Ghetto still stands in Cannaregio.](image)

**Life in Venice**

Although Venetians were allowed to leave the Ghetto during the day, Jewish life existed primarily within the confines of the Venetian Ghetto. In addition to their residences, Jews had to

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\textsuperscript{196} Calabi, *Venice and Its Jews*, 45-6.

\textsuperscript{197} Calabi, *Venice and Its Jews*, 46.
fit shops, workspaces, and synagogues inside the Ghetto. Bakeries were selling leavened and unleavened bread, fruit, vegetable, wine, meat cheese, pasta, and wax candle shops. These food stores were particularly important for Jews who were keeping kosher since shops outside of the Ghetto did not adhere to this religious custom. Other shops included barber shops, a hatter, a mender, a tailor, a bookseller, a workshop for alchemy, an inn, a carver, and warehouses for lumber, tiles, and coffins. Inside the enclave of the Christian Venetian Republic, a thriving multicultural community was fully operational and extremely influential.

**Ethnic Groups**

Most Jews that settled in Venice after the establishment of the Venetian Ghetto had emigrated to Venice from different countries. This meant several different ethnic groups populated the Venetian Ghetto. Five main groups of Jews resided in the Ghetto: Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Levantine. These individual groups were put into three general categories, including Tedeschi, Spanish and Portuguese, and the Levantines. Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, namely Portuguese and Spanish, were known as Ponentine Jews, or Western, whereas Sephardic Jews were known as Levantine or Eastern. These groups differed in everything, from language, geography, tradition, and culture, but, over time, gradually settled and assimilated within the Ghetto. Four of the five synagogues that were established in the Ghetto were divided by these different ethnic groups, which will be elaborated on in a later chapter. Since the beginning of the Venetian Ghetto, Italian and German Jews, also known as

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199 Ibid.
201 Sephardic Jews, also known as Hispanic Jews, are one of two ancestral groups of Jewish people who descended from Jews who left the Iberian Peninsula—located between Spain and Portugal. These Jews traveled south to Northern and Western Africa, as opposed eastward like other groups.
202 Ibid
Ashkenazi Jews,203 had lived under the same roof, specifically in the Ghetto Nuovo.204 The expansion of the Ghetto in the 1540s was to accommodate new ethnic groups of Jews, specifically the Levantine and Ponentine Jews.

The number of true Levantine Jewish merchants who came to Venice is largely unknown, mainly because many of them were actually of Iberian origin.205 These were Jews, or descendants of Jews, “who had left the Iberian peninsula for the Levant, or lapsed New Christians from Spain or Portugal who had resumed the practice of Judaism upon arriving in Ottoman lands.”206 The Levantine Jews arrived in Venice with the promise of providing more space in the Ghetto, hence the creation of the Ghetto Vecchio. The existence of a Jewish community in Venice, one that was constantly growing with the immigration of Levantine Jewish merchants, made coming to the city more attractive to Portuguese Jews.207 As has been mentioned, the Inquisition in Portugal in 1536 forced the conversion of many Portuguese Jews to Christianity, which motivated these New Christians to leave Portugal. Once the Portuguese were in Venice, “some reverted to Judaism and either stayed or went elsewhere, especially to the Ottoman Empire, whence some subsequently returned to Venice as Ottoman subjects.”208 The Venetian Jewish community was distinct because the political structure of the Ghetto was led by a multi-ethnic administration and shared responsibilities.209 Although these different ethnic groups all resided in the Ghetto, these groups had varied social classes, professions, and cultures.

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203 Ashkenazi Jews are the other ancestral group of Jewish people whose ancestors originated in Central and Eastern Europe and Northern France. Their traditional language is Yiddish, a Germanic language that combines Hebrew, German, and Slavic linguistic elements.
204 Robert Bonfil, "Venice: A Symbol of Jewish History," in Venice, the Jews and Europe: 1516-2016, by Donatella Calabi, et al. (Venice: Marsilio, 2016), 64.
205 Davis and Ravid, The Jews, 15.
206 Ibid
207 Ibid
208 Ibid
Each Ghetto housed a different demographic, but, because of these multiethnic interactions, a distinct Jewish culture flourished within the confines of the walled area.

**Mercantile Relations**

As a result of the mercantile developments of the sixteenth century, Jewish merchants, especially from Spain and Portugal, began to play a much larger role in Mediterranean commerce. After the Jews were permitted to settle in Venice, the Venetian government passed Jewish merchant charters that were renewed every few years that slowly granted Jewish merchants increased privileges. Prior to 1541, the actual activities of merchants are not as well known. They were generally not harassed, but in 1537, war broke out between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, the Venetian Senate ordered the sequestration of the property of ‘Turks, Jews and other Turkish subjects,’ and required the merchants to post bond.”\(^{210}\) After the establishment of the Ghetto Vecchio, the merchant charters for Jews in Venice became more consistent.

The Venetians understood how important Jewish merchants were to the Venetian economy, so they tried to draw in as many as possible. In 1589, the Senato Mare resolution was passed to increase commercial traffic to Venice.\(^{211}\) The motivation behind this was to reiterate the importance of foreign merchants coming to Venice to conduct business. The Venetian government offered several privileges to merchants if they were to settle in Venice.

The charter stated that Jewish merchants

May they live with their persons, families, merchants and faculties without any danger or molestation, so in this, as in qual other city of our state, and so from Land as from Sea, coming, staying, and departing from it, which is at their will, without being able to be made any impediment to them… May they also navigate freely…And let them be given free transit for their persons, families, merchants and so that they may go without hindrance or molestation of any kind.\(^{212}\)

\(^{210}\) Ravid, “The Legal Status,” 190.


\(^{212}\) *Archivio di Stato di Venezia*, Senato, Mar, filza 104, July 27, 1589. Trans. by Benjamin Ravid.
The Levantine Jews from the Ottoman Empire and the Western Jews from Spain and Portugal “were officially admitted with their families and encouraged to put down roots in the city.”\textsuperscript{213} If these Jews were to settle in the ghetto, they would be allowed to practice freely, they had the option of sea travel, buying, selling, and trading, and they could import any goods by paying a duty like any other Venetian.\textsuperscript{214} This was a major development in the relationship between Venice and the Jews residing in Venice, and Jewish merchants were being offered the status of Venetian subjects. Merchants were extremely important to the Venetian economy, and the Venetian government prioritized their settlement in the city.

Secrecy

There is an inherent association between Jewish professionals and their social disenfranchisement. The Council of Ten, one of the major governing bodies in Venice, often enlisted Jews to gather intelligence information from other empires. Jews were ideal intelligence agents for the Venetian Empire because of their placement on the margins of society. Jewish professionals, such as doctors and merchants, made perfect undercover agents for the Ten, due to their extensive networks.\textsuperscript{215} With the increased culture of state secrecy, the Jewish community in Venice was recruited to gather intelligence and “provided a steady supply of covert operatives and informers for the Ten.”\textsuperscript{216} There are several well-documented cases of Jewish intelligence gathering. Intelligence agents were typically bribed by the Council of Ten, but there were cases where intelligence gatherers were coerced into spying for the Venetian government. The case of the Sephardi Jewish merchant Hayyim Saruk is a key example of this.\textsuperscript{217} In 1571, during the War

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{214} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{215} Iordanou, *Venice's Secret*, 175-6.
\textsuperscript{216} Iordanou, *Venice's Secret*, 176.
\textsuperscript{217} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
of Cyprus, Saryk was residing in Venice when “the Venetian authorities appointed him to travel
to Constantinople to spy on the affairs, designs and military equipment of the Turks.” His
enlistment was forced upon him to settle legal accounts with the Venetian Republic. Although
this is one case study, the culture of secrecy in Venice led to a new advantage for having Jews
reside in the city.

Physicians

Although there were strict rules that governed the Ghetto on paper, there were always
exceptions in practice. Jewish physicians were one of the many concessions made by the
Venetian government. When the Ghetto was established, there was a clause that stated
physicians were allowed to exit the Ghetto after the gates closed at night to tend to their patients.
The Venetian government saw the value that Jewish physicians had in supporting the Venetian
citizenry. In an official letter from the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Matteucci, he stated that when
he went to pay his respects to the Doge, he was urged to grant a medical license to two Jewish
physicians. He said “When I explained that I had no authority to do so, they pressed me, in a way
that brooked no refusal, to obtain one for them from the Pope himself, asserting that these
doctors were men of long tried worth and that they had full knowledge of the constitutions of the
senators and their families.”218 If the pope were to reject the granting of this license, the senators
would beg to allow the Jewish doctors to tend to their families. The archbishop admitted that he
knew one of the Jews had a reputation of being, “although a Jew, a good man, and is said to have
effected some remarkable cures at the time of the plague.”219 Despite general feelings of distaste
toward Jews, the Venetians acknowledged the value of having Jewish physicians residing in the
city to tend to the sick.

218 Archivio di Stato di Venezia, DN, filza 26, f. 477, February 4, 1589.
219 Ibid
Fondaco dei Turchi

Despite the threats and wars between the Ottoman Empire and the Venetian Empire, Venice always maintained trade relations with the Turks. Venice had relatively liberal immigration policies toward foreigners, particularly if they supported Venetian commerce. Like Jews, Turks were allowed to live in the city for short periods. After conflict with the Ottomans caused several Venetian merchants to be arrested, in 1571 the Venetian government decided to set aside an area of the city for the Turks to stay in Venice just as they did for the Jews. If the Venetians were to establish a building for the Turks, they would be prevented from moving around the city freely. In 1621, the Turks were moved into the Fondaco dei Turchi, a large house on the Canal Grande. The Muslims that would be housed in the Fondaco dei Turchi were mainly from Albania, Bosnia, and Asia. There was a wall built around the perimeter and the windows were closed on the outside.

The treatment of the Turks in Venice almost mirrored the rationale the Venetians had for the Jews. The Turks supported the Venetians in trade and commerce, so their presence in the city was granted so they could continue to help Venice remain a prominent trade Empire. The Venetians were more concerned with trade relations in the East whereas the rest of Europe focused on the West. Venice looked eastward to become a successful trade Empire and the Ottomans did help Venice with trade. The establishment of the Fondaco dei Turchi also helps us understand how important trade was to Venice, regardless of religion.
Chapter IV: Jews and the Myth of Venice

As has been established, Jews played a significant role in Venice, which led to the permission of Jews to reside in the city. So far, we have explained the value that Jews served to Venice, enough to convince the Venetian government to allow Jews to settle and conduct business in the city. What does this have to do with Venetian history as a whole? The history of the Jewish presence in Venice acts as a case study to prove the importance of the myth of Venice as a means of analyzing the Venetian Empire. Most literature about the Jews of Venice does not acknowledge the significance of the myth of Venice. One author that should be highlighted for bridging the gap between the myth of Venice and Jewish history is Robert Bonfil. In Calabi’s collection *Venice the Jews and Europe: 1516-2016*, Bonfil writes a chapter titled “Venice: a Symbol of Jewish History.” He argues that “Venice must be viewed as a most efficient metaphor, a visible case study of the enigmatic allegory of Jewish history, concretely proposed, among other things, to sensible observers leaning against the bridge at the Rialto and weighing the purely human dimensions behind the aesthetic perfection of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice.*”

The Jews challenged the fundamental aspects of the myth of Venice, which made the Jewish question difficult for Venetians because Venice had built its empire on the values of the myth. Ultimately, the Senate decided to allow Jewish settlement, so Bonfil explains how this impacted Venice from an ideological perspective. Bonfil concludes that we should rethink the Venetian experience “as a mirror of exclusive, even imperialist, ideologies, the Ghetto forced these ideologies to come to terms with their own reflected image and, ultimately, to wear them away.” The connection between the Venetian creation myth and Jewish history is obvious.

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since Venetian ideology impacted every decision that the Senate made for the Republic. Bonfil argues for Venice’s role in Jewish history and how the myth pertains to this when it is the other way around. Venice is not a symbol of Jewish history, but rather Jews are a symbol of Venetian history. The Venetians made logical decisions based on ensuring trade success, and this pragmatism is perfectly illustrated by the treatment of Jews in Venice. Jews are representative of how the Venetian Empire operated as a whole, not the other way around.

Another author, Benjamin Ravid, connects the myth of Venice and Jews in a completely different way. Ravid challenges the “lachrymose” perception of Jewish history by using the Jews of Venice as a case study. He claims that the establishment of the Jewish Ghetto “marked a positive development in the history of Jews of Venice.”222 Although the Jews were strictly regulated, the Jewish community persisted. Ravid argues that “it is obvious that the Jews wanted very keenly to continue to reside in Venice, notwithstanding all the restrictions and several significant Jewish Renaissance and early modern figures articulated key aspects of the widespread ‘myth of Venice’ in their writings.”223 Ravid proves that, according to the Jewish perception of Venice, Venice constituted an attractive place for Jews to reside. In terms of the myth of Venice, Ravid claims that the myth can be applied to the historical experience of Jews in Venice.224 Although Ravid is enhancing the literature on Jews and the myth of Venice, he is focused on Venice in the context of Jewish history. Jewish perceptions of Venice reveal that Jews enjoyed living in Venice, so we should change our general classification that the history of Jews is plagued by persecution and suffering. While this does contribute to the field of Jewish history and the Jewish experience in Venice, this says nothing about how Venice operated as a

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222 Ravid, “Between the Myth,” 152.
223 Ibid.
224 Ravid, “Between the Myth,” 175.
whole. This thesis aims to place Jews in the context of Venetian history using the myth of Venice. This chapter will explain how Jewish settlement in Venice impacted the ideals of the myth of Venice. Despite their numerous contradictions to the mythological ideals perpetuated by the Venetian citizenry, Jews were ultimately allowed to reside in Venice because the economic benefits outweighed all other contradictions. By illustrating the complexities of Jews and their relationship to the myth of Venice, we can understand the pragmatic actions of the Venetian Empire to ensure trade superiority.

**Jews in the Christian Republic**

The decision to allow Jews to reside in Venice had severe consequences for Venice’s mythological image. The notion that Venice was stable, homogeneous, and Christian would no longer be possible with a Jewish presence in the city. Although Jews were restricted to one area and separated from the rest of the city, Venetian society endured the unavoidable effects of non-Venetians living in Venice. This section explores how the myth of Venice was complicated by Jewish presence.

Perhaps the most significant impact of Jewish presence in Venice was the effect on the Christian pillar of the myth of Venice. As stated earlier, the patron of Venice, Saint Mark, was at the center of Venetian mythology. With Saint Mark's blessing, Venice was destined to become the most successful empire in the world. The main purpose of Saint Mark, more so than a mythical origin story, was to legitimate Venice’s connection to Christianity. Despite Venice's constant quarreling with the pope, Christianity was an integral part of Venetian society. The sheer presence of Judaism inside the city directly contradicted the Christian ideals of Venice, which was heavily considered when the Venetians allowed Jews to settle. Ultimately, maritime
motivations were far greater despite “the economic motives for Jewish settlement in Venice often clashing with concerns over religious difference.” The compromise between the Venetians and the Jews, as has been established, was the creation of the Ghetto. Since all Jews immigrating to Venice were confined to the Ghetto, a multicultural Jewish community flourished inside the Christian nation and “bringing to the city a wide diversity of thought, languages, and customs, they produced an exceptionally rich cultural blend.” This also meant Hebrew texts, translated into several languages, were brought to Venice for religious observation. Since Jews were in an enclave of the Christian city, a distinct Jewish culture formed that was entirely separate from the rest of Venetian culture. The German and Italian, Levantine, and Spanish and Portuguese Jews differed in all aspects, from language, geography, tradition, and culture, but, over time, gradually settled and assimilated within the Ghetto. The ethnic hegemony in the Jewish Ghettos not only impacted the cohesion of Venetian society, which will be discussed in the coming pages but detracted from the Christian ideal of the myth of Venice.

While reflecting on the ethnic diversity of the Jews of Venice, each group brought distinct religious traditions to the Ghetto. Although other non-Catholics and non-Venetians residing in Venice had fewer restrictions, the Jews were granted complete religious freedom within the confines of the Ghetto. In the Jewish tradition, the synagogue is the religious and cultural center of the community. In sixteenth-century Venice, the synagogue was called the Scoula, derived “from shul in Yiddish, but was also something of a confraternity, similar to the Christian Scuole Grandi and Piccole found in lagoon society starting in the second half of the

225 Katz, The Jewish, 8.
227 Ibid
228 Ravid, The Jews, 23.
thirteenth century."\textsuperscript{229} In the small area of the Ghetto, eight synagogues were established. Located in the Ghetto Nuovo, the three major ones were the Ashkenazic Scuola Grande Tedesca and the Scuola Canton, and the Italian Scuola Italiana and the three smaller synagogues were known as the Scuola Coanim or Sacerdote, the Scuola Luzzatto, and the Scuola Meshuallamim.\textsuperscript{230} In the Ghetto Vecchio, there were two synagogues, one called the Scuola Levantina for the Levantine Jews, and one called the Scuola Ponentina or Spagnola for the Spanish and Portuguese Jews.\textsuperscript{231}

Before Jews were able to settle in Venice, religious ceremonies would occur in private homes. In 1408, the \textit{visdomini} of the \textit{Fondaco dei Tedeschi} complained that Jews were practicing Judaism in homes that were rented from Christians.\textsuperscript{232} Both were located on the third floors of two buildings, the first synagogue built was the Scuola Grande Tedesca in 1528 and the next was the Scuola Canton four months later.\textsuperscript{233} The third was the Italian synagogue the Scuola Italiana which was in an attic. All three synagogues were built on the upper levels of buildings because it was customary for Jewish prayer to rise over the city and no building would be higher than the synagogues. Additionally, these synagogues were not built in Christian-owned buildings, so Jews had direct control over the religious and community centers in the Ghetto. These synagogues were very simply constructed without embellishments— contrary to Christian churches— and using both artificial and natural light.\textsuperscript{234} The restrictions on Jews practicing their religion still existed during the time these synagogues were constructed, so these synagogues were

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\textsuperscript{229} Calabi, \textit{Venice and its Jews}, 69.
\textsuperscript{230} Ravid, \textit{The Jews}, 23.
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{232} Archivio di Stato di Venetiza, \textit{Compilazione Leggi}, b. 189, no 48, 5 May 1408 (Capitolare dei Visdomini del Fondaco dei Tedeschi). Trans. by Donatella Calabi. Quod indei in domibus christianorum quas tenant ad affictum faciant singagoas et dicant intus offitia sua iudaice.
\textsuperscript{233} Calabi, \textit{Venice and its Jews}, 71.
\textsuperscript{234} Calabi, \textit{Venice and its Jews}, 72.
\end{flushright}
unassuming religious centers from street view. The three major and three minor synagogues were placed around the Ghetto Nuovo and held social and religious roles for the Jewish community. The two final synagogues— the Scuola Levantina and the Scuola Ponentina— were built in the Ghetto Vecchio facing each other toward the end of the sixteenth century. These synagogues were no longer hidden because they were authorized de facto, so “there was direct access from the calle (street).”235 These two synagogues differed stylistically from the synagogues in the Ghetto Nuovo. The main reason for this was the Jews that resided in the Ghetto Vecchio were from the merchant class, so these Jews could afford to create intricate designs inside their synagogues. Both were used as centers for religious worship, but these wealthy communities of Jews wanted to display their wealth and their role in Venetian society.236 As you can see in these images, the interior of the synagogues is grand and almost look like churches. The ark— where the Torah is kept— is a statement structure in both synagogues, decorated with carvings and marble.237 Although these synagogues have been somewhat Christianized in their architecture, the religious foundation is still present. The bimahs face the ark, which is a customary design for Jewish temples, and the seats are segregated by gender. The synagogues are a physical representation of the religious contradiction to Venice’s Christian Republic.

235 Calabi, Venice and its Jews, 76.
236 Calabi, Venice and its Jews, 78.
237 There was a ban put in place by the pope to prevent Jews from buying marble because it was considered too precious an item for Jews to purchase. The Venetians frequently disregarded the wishes of the pope, and this order was no different. The Venetians decided that if the Jews were able to afford the marble, they could purchase it.
Moreover, the manifestation of Jewish culture in the Venetian Ghetto was present in Venetian synagogues. Artistic expression that reflected Jewish identity was created in the Ghetto community, and Jews were involved in the arts as “collectors and connoisseurs and, more
importantly, vividly expressed their tastes in the decorative aspects of their synagogues and ritual objects.”

The culture that formed was entirely separate from the Christianized culture of the Venetian Republic since Judaism influenced both religious practice and Jewish culture. Not only did Venetian synagogues serve a religious and spiritual purpose, but they were centers for Jewish learning, culture, and art. Jewish life in the Venetian synagogues encompassed “daily activities of prayer, study, and assembly, which in turn are based on a remarkable variety of cultural and artistic endeavors.”

The multiethnic community of Jews in the Ghetto directly influenced daily activities in the synagogues, including literature in various languages (prayers, poetry, and rabbinic sermons), music, architecture, visual culture, and arts, and a broad range of material cultures. The richness of Jewish culture is represented both visually and actively by the synagogues in the Ghetto. The Venetian synagogues display the most extraordinary examples of synagogal art influenced by both Venetian and Jewish cultures. Synagogues from a spiritual perspective were against the mythical ideals of Venice. Still, they also stood as a symbol of Jewish culture, one that was distinct from the typical Christian-influenced culture of the Venetians. As shown by the active practice of Judaism by Jews in the Ghetto, Jewish presence in the Venetian Empire directly countered the Christian pillar of the myth of Venice. Despite this, Venetians purposefully looked past these religious differences to allow Jews to settle in the city.

**Stability and Harmony**

In addition to their Christian ideals, the Venetians valued the image that their empire was incredibly stable. To maintain stability in Venice while also allowing Jews to settle in the city,

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239 Calabi, *Venice, the Jews*, 229.
240 Calabi, *Venice, the Jews*, 264.
241 *Ibid*
the Ghetto was established to provide a physical separation between Venetians and Jews. By constructing the Ghetto, Venetians believed they were perpetuating “the mythologizing of Venice as the harmonious, stable, just, and tolerant republic, one that protected within its walls a well-established political and social order.” In reality, the creation of a distinct Jewish community in Venice caused more deviation from the myth.

The Jewish Ghetto itself threatened the Venetian ideal of stability through a type of visualization that went beyond just the physical appearance of the structures. As has been discussed, Venice had a culture of state secrecy in the sixteenth century to ensure stability and domestic order after the fall of Constantinople. Regardless of its effectiveness, Venetian officials prided themselves on the creation of a complex surveillance system to ensure the stability of Venetian society remained intact. When the Jewish Ghetto was established, it was stipulated that “the Jews would be locked into the Ghetto at night behind gates and would undergo continual surveillance.” The gates to the Ghetto were closed from sundown to sunrise, and Christian watchmen were hired to ensure that no Jews left the Ghetto during prohibited hours. By constantly surveying the Ghetto, the Venetians believed they were upholding the stability of Venice, but this was untrue. The sheer height of the Jewish Ghettos “created an architecture of vision that situated the Jews in a unique spatial relationship with the city.”

Most Venetian architecture appeared relatively similar in height and design until the Ghetto was established. The Jews were not permitted to expand the Ghetto beyond the space designated by the Venetian Republic regardless of the constantly increasing population of Jews. To accommodate the need for more space, Jews were forced to “expand their tenements

243 Katz, The Jewish, 2.
244 Katz, The Jewish, 1.
vertically, constructing buildings up to nine stories around the central campo (public square)."\textsuperscript{245} With this architectural style, it was easy to increase living space since new dwellings could be piled on top of one another. Although not the most ideal, this type of housing allowed the Ghetto to grow “without modifying the internal space and notwithstanding the enormous changes that were taking place in the surrounding non-Jewish area in that period.”\textsuperscript{246} The resulting structures of the Ghetto towered over the typical Venetian buildings and appeared asymmetrical since new housing units were added on top of the existing building of the Ghetto.\textsuperscript{247} Additionally, these structures provided minimal room for the Jews living in the Ghetto, and they were incredibly unstable since the structures were built in terrain that did not support the height.

The height of the Ghettos completely disrupts the ability of the Venetians to keep the Jews under surveillance and prevent Jews from looking out at the Venetians. The purpose of the Ghetto was to isolate the Jews within a space so they would not infringe upon the Venetian citizenry, but, since the Ghetto towered over the surrounding buildings, the Jews could look onto the Venetians. The Ghettos were supposed to serve as controlled spaces, but “built into this system of surveillance was the potential for Jews to conduct their own act of fenestral looking.”\textsuperscript{248} In a society, such as Venice, that relied on surveillance and state secrecy, seeing and looking out was extremely powerful, and the window provided a vessel for watching other people.\textsuperscript{249} Jews could observe life outside the Ghetto and potentially watch the Venetians without their knowledge. In Venice, the urban gaze “engendered an encroachment of space explicitly

\textsuperscript{245} Katz, \textit{The Jewish}, 10.
\textsuperscript{246} Calabi, \textit{Venice, the Jews}, 212.
\textsuperscript{247} Venice nowadays will refer to the Jewish Ghetto as “the Venetian skyscrapers” since the Ghetto is, to this day, the tallest residential structure in Venice.
\textsuperscript{249} Katz, “Clamber Not You up to the Casements,” 137.
identified as Christian that created an uneasy social instability.” Since the Jews were able to look out of the windows of the Ghetto, the mythical stability that Venice revered was impacted. Because the stability of state security was affected by the Jewish gaze from the Ghettos, the stable aspects of the myth of Venice were contradicted.

The myth of Venice affected all aspects of Venetian society, including its architecture. The visual harmony of the city defined the rhythmic symmetry of building design to create opposite settings for Venetian social life. The unique architecture of the Venetian Ghettos upset the cohesive and harmonious appearance of Venice. Because the Jews were confined to the Ghetto, the architecture grew vertically. This style greatly differed from the typical urban planning of Venice, making Ghettos “sites of visual disturbance that disrupted the well-ordered social fabric of Venice.” The Ghettos were tall and asymmetrical which greatly differed from the usual decorative column, capital, and cornice on typical Venetian buildings. The swampy terrain in which the Ghettos were constructed was not meant to support stories over two or three, so not only did the Ghettos stand out for their height, but they were also extremely dangerous and unstable structures.

In addition to the visually unique facade of the Ghetto, the interiors were also distinct. External creativity in the Jewish Ghettos was impossible, so artistry was channeled away from the outside into the inside “where a stylistic freedom was displayed that was totally unknown to the non-Jewish population.” Additionally, the physical Ghettos were not the only architectural distinct structures in Jewish communities. Jewish religious and cultural centers, known as

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250 Katz, “Clamber Not You up to the Casements,” 140.
251 Katz, The Jewish, 15.
252 Katz, The Jewish, 2.
253 Katz, The Jewish, 15.
254 Calabi, Venice, the Jews, 212.
255 Calabi, Venice, the Jews, 214.
synagogues, were also departures from the typical Venetian design. The first synagogues in the Venetian Ghetto were in the Ghetto Nuovo. Although these synagogues had limited external creativity, they had “rich interior decorations refurbished and embellished, stratified over time, and closely connected to nearby lodgings by way of adjacent access.”

The establishment of the Ghetto Vecchio gave Jews an opportunity to create externally elaborate places of worship. The facade of these synagogues is described as the “result of a fusion of Jewish and seventeenth-century Venetian artistic culture.” Synagogues within the Venetian Ghetto were inevitably visually distinct from Venice because Jewish culture influenced their visual appearance. Although the structure and implementation of the Jewish Ghettos were meant to maintain stability and harmony in Venice, the unique architecture completely upset this goal. Although the presence of Jews in the city created contradictions in the myth of Venice, the Venetians allowed them to settle. If the Venetians were to closely follow the ideals of the myth, there were more reasons not to allow Jews into Venice. When it came down to permitting Jews in the city, there was one ideal of the myth that overshadowed these detractions: trade and wealth.

**Homogeneity**

Homogeneity was important for maintaining the perception that Venice was a Christian, stable, and harmonious empire. The very presence of Jews inside the city contradicts the image that Venice was completely homogenous. Furthermore, the ethnic and multicultural diversity of the Jews inside the Ghetto adds another layer of heterogeneity to Venice’s Empire. Inside the Ghetto, the Jews created their own distinct culture from the rest of Venice that incorporated

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257 Calabi, “Religious Life,” 81.
Venetian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Levantine cultures into art, music, and societal customs. From a physical standpoint, the asymmetry and height of the Ghetto buildings completely disrupt the visual homogeneity of the Empire since the city looks much less uniform. Homogeneity allows Venice to appear stable, harmonious, and Christian to those outside of the Empire, but the reality of Jewish settlement completely disrupts this ideal.

Additionally, the Venetian government established the Venetian Ghetto to separate and isolate Jews to maintain Venice’s homogeneity, but Christian Venetians traveled inside and outside the Ghetto and Jews did the same. When the gates opened at sunrise, Jews would leave the Ghetto to shop at Venetian stores or do work in the city, and Christians would enter the Ghetto for various reasons. Despite the physical segregation of Jews in Venice “there persisted a rich cultural life that exhibited tastes and interests acquired during the Renaissance—that time of intense interaction between Jews and their Christian surroundings in Italy.”\textsuperscript{258} The relationship between Jews and Christians in the Venetian Empire led to creative and cultural exchanges in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Venice.\textsuperscript{259} There was a particular relationship between Jews and Christians that unfolded in intellectual life. Two examples of this are Sarra Copia Sulam and Leon Modena. Sarra Copia Sulam was an Italian poet and intellectual who lived in the Venetian Ghetto in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The records we have for Copia only account for seven years of her life; she appeared on the scene in 1618 and disappeared from the public in 1624.\textsuperscript{260} During her life, Copia opened a salon in her home in the


\textsuperscript{259} Evelien Chayes, "Crossing Cultures in the Venetian Ghetto: Leone Modena, the Accademia degli Incogniti and Imprese Literature," \textit{Bollettino di italianistica} 2 (2017): 62.

Ghetto. Copia was probably eighteen or nineteen years old when she opened her literary salon, and Venetians would enter the Ghetto just to attend.²⁶¹ Copia’s salon was a center for literary exchange between Jews and Christians. Her salon was one of the most public displays of the Jewish-Christian interaction in Venice and is a prime example of the heterogeneity that resulted from Jewish presence in the Venetian Empire.

Rabbi Leon de Modena was a Jewish scholar who also lived in Venice during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Modena was a respected Rabbi during his lifetime, but he had a reputation for critiquing Judaism and gambling. His legacy, however, is centered on his writings. Modena’s writings demonstrate “his highly developed skills as an author, educator, preacher, and popularizer of the Jewish religion and rabbinic literature.”²⁶² His most significant work, for which he is best remembered, “are his polemical writings involving Christianity, heretical views about rabbinic Judaism, and Jewish mysticism.”²⁶³ Modena was sought out by both Jews and Christians for different reasons, but one example was Modena’s musical academy. Evelien Chayes argues that “Jewish-Christian relationships as they unfolded in intellectual life of early-seventeenth century Venice shared an impulse to adapt theology and religious life to changing European realities, outlooks and relationships.”²⁶⁴ Modena interacted with Christians through his musical academy, and Modena communicated with his colleagues “through devices of literary culture, a culture learned Jews of his time shared with Christians of learning, a culture that had developed and been transmitted in heterodox circles since several decades.”²⁶⁵ Copia and Modena were two Jewish intellectuals who facilitated the exchange between Jews and

²⁶¹ Copia Sulam and Harrán, Jewish Poet, 17.
²⁶² Modena et al., The Autobiography, 46.
²⁶³ Ibid.
²⁶⁴ Chayes, “Crossing Cultures,” 65.
²⁶⁵ Chayes, “Crossing Cultures,” 80.
Christians. There was a clear mixing of Jewish and Christian influences because of the Jewish Ghetto, which led to Venetian society and culture becoming more heterogeneous. Although the Venetian Empire intended to isolate the Jews inside the Ghetto, the reality was that Jews and Christians were constantly mixing, which completely went against the ideals of the myth of Venice.

**Maritime Trade and Economic Profit**

Jewish presence in the Venetian Empire undoubtedly complicated the mythical ideals of the Venetian Republic. The Venetians were able to justify their decision to allow Jewish presence in Venice mainly because Jews expanded trade for Venice and supported the economy. The policy surrounding the treatment of Jews in Venice “was one of inclusion and at the same time of isolation within the city and was driven by economic reasons rather than social ones.”[^266] Economic motivations led Venetian authorities to accept Jewish presence in Venice, which upheld the most important ideal of the myth of Venice.

Since the founding of the city, Venice had relied heavily on its relationship with the sea. In the simplest of terms, trade had allowed Venice to become a successful and wealthy merchant society which solidified maritime trade as an important aspect of the myth. Venetians were able to rise to prominence based on their profitable trade with the Byzantine Empire.[^267] After the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans, the Venetians were forced to allow trade between the Levant and Venice to maintain the right to trade in the Ottoman Empire.[^268] As was discussed in the previous chapter, the Venetian government understood the value of Jews in aiding mercantile success. Jewish merchants and moneylenders were periodically invited to conduct

[^266]: Calabi, *Venice, the Jews*, 153.  
[^267]: Calabi, *Venice, the Jews*, 130.  
[^268]: Calabi, *Venice, the Jews*, 131.
business in the city before the establishment of the Ghetto, and, after 1516, foreign Jewish merchants were heavily encouraged to come to Venice to work. The service the Jews provided to Venice was invaluable, especially since Venice was on the decline.

Venetian authorities accepted that the benefits to the Venetian economy and trade system of allowing Levantine and Ponentine Jews into the city outweigh religious differences. The result was that Venetians “literally made room in the city for Levantine merchants because of the Jews’ economic potential and trade relations with the East.”

Unlike the rest of Europe, the Venetians looked eastward as opposed to westward. The Venetians always intended to compete with the East in trade, and Jewish presence ensured this would be a possibility. These actions by Venetian authorities are directly in alignment with the mercantilist ideal of the myth of Venice. Levantine Jews bolstered Venetian trading operations throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and were eventually permanently settled within the Ghetto Vecchio.

In conjunction with the ideal of maritime trade in the myth of Venice, the economic prosperity of the city also lends itself to the myth of Venice. The natural right to gain was a large part of the Venetian foundation myth. This sentiment was captured in 1204 when Martino da Canal stood before the walls of Constantinople and explained the conjoined nature of religion and profit in Venice. He said, “Be valiant, and with the help of Jesus Christ, my lord Saint Mark, and the prowess of your bodies, you shall tomorrow be in possession of the city, and you shall be rich.” The ideal of Venetian profit motivated the decision to allow Jewish presence in Venice, especially during the sixteenth century when the Venetian Republic was in decline.

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269 Katz, “Clamber Not You up to the Casements,” 134.
270 Crowley, City of Fortune, 255.
271 Crowley, City of Fortune, 254.
The economic opportunities that Venice offered, as opposed to smaller centers, were an incentive for Jews to immigrate to the large city.\textsuperscript{272} The Italian and German Jews in the Ghetto Nuovo stimulated the economy by “working as moneylenders primarily for the urban poor, selling goods second hand, and serving as physicians.”\textsuperscript{273} These Jews aided in the replenishing of the treasury after the War of the League of Cambrai.\textsuperscript{274} Additionally, Levantine and Ponentine Jews from the Ghetto Vecchio and the Ghetto Nuovissimo worked as merchants and engaged in the Mediterranean economy. Venice was able to profit from the growth of commercial activities as well as the revenue extracted from the taxation of the Jews.\textsuperscript{275} Since Jewish presence was profitable to society, the Venetians showed their appreciation by giving some Jewish bankers and merchants special privileges. This fact shows the importance that Venetians placed on economic prosperity, and, because Jews supported this aspect of the myth, Venetian authorities did uphold the mercantile success ideal by allowing Jewish presence in the city.

**Toleration**

It would be impossible to discuss how Jewish presence upheld the myth of Venice without mentioning the aspect of toleration. The fact that Jews were even allowed to settle within the walls of the Christian Republic is representative of the tolerant ideals the Republic prided itself on. Although the tolerance of Jews stemmed from the Venetian ideal of maritime trade and economic success, Venetian authorities tolerating Jewish presence upheld the myth of Venice. The advancement of the Venetian Republic is a large part of upholding the myth of Venice, and, because the economy was so impactful, toleration was necessary.

\textsuperscript{272} Bonfil, *Jewish Life*, 76.
\textsuperscript{273} Katz, *The Jewish*, 12.
\textsuperscript{274} Katz, *The Jewish*, 8.
\textsuperscript{275} Ibid
Despite its effects on other aspects of the myth of Venice, the Jewish Ghetto also stands as an expression of tolerance.\textsuperscript{276} The formation of the Jewish Ghetto was intended to uphold the city’s republican values. The Ghetto showed that Venice was a tolerant and just nation by allowing Jews to reside within the city, but, also, that the well-established political and social order of Venetian society was protected.\textsuperscript{277} Although not all Venetian Christians were in favor of Jewish presence, and the religious and economic motivations of the Venetian myth at times had conflicting expectations, Venetian authorities showed tolerance to Jewish presence by allowing them to reside within the city. The Venetians were able to maintain superiority for so long by making these types of decisions, and the Jews of Venice are just one example. The Venetians were able to maintain superiority for so long by making these types of decisions, and the Jews of Venice are just one example. The presence of Jews in the city could not have reflected the ideals of the myth of Venice since there were too many contradictions. This proves that Venetians valued maritime success and wealth over all other aspects of the myth. The Venetians were extremely pragmatic, and the concessions made to the Jews reflect how Venice operated as a whole.

\textsuperscript{276} Katz, \textit{The Jewish}, 12.
\textsuperscript{277} Katz, \textit{The Jewish}, 13.
Epilogue

The Venetian Empire may no longer exist as it did, but the remnants of the Republic are still present in modern-day Venice. A complex city, full of contradictions, Venice’s development can be explained by its ultimate goal of prosperity and wealth based on its eastward orientation. Jewish presence represents the concessions the Venetians would make to ensure their trade superiority, a “privilege” with similar restrictions to what would be given later to the Muslims in the Fondaco dei Turchi from 1621 to 1838. The creation of the first Jewish Ghetto in 1516 and the decision to allow Jews to reside in the city is representative of Venice. The Venetians would do anything to prosper, even if their actions compromised its acclaimed values. Jewish presence is one of many examples that illustrates the complex nature of the Venetian Empire. Although the myth and the anti-myth have often been used to analyze Venice, there are limitations to just focusing on the ideals of Venice. The Venetians perpetuated values that justified their strength as an empire while contradicting themselves in practice.

Contemporary Jewish History in Venice

Jewish history in Venice did not cease after 1797. Napoleon broke down the gates of the Ghetto during his rule, and Jews were no longer restricted to one area in the city. Austria was given control of Venice at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which lasted until 1861 with the unification of the Italian Peninsula. The Second World War left the city of Venice largely intact, but many Venetian Jews were deported and murdered by the Nazi Regime, toward the end of the war. The Venetian Ghetto still stands in Cannaregio as a distinctly Jewish area in Venice. There are Jews who still chose to live in the Ghetto, but, since the Ghetto is located outside of the center of the city, there are very few residents. At present, the Ghetto is a tourist attraction for
those interested in the history of Jews in the city. While visiting Venice, I had the opportunity to meet with Shaul Bassi, a professor of English and post-colonial literature at the Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. Professor Bassi is an active member of the Jewish community in Venice and explained that the Ghetto currently lacks the space for Jews in Venice and elsewhere to come together and share experiences and cultures. He hopes to reignite Jewish presence in the Ghetto.

To celebrate the Ghetto, in 2016, Professor Bassi helped organize a performance of *The Merchant of Venice* to be put on in the Ghetto. The year 2016 was special because it marked 500 years since the founding of the Ghetto and 400 years since William Shakespeare’s death. In 2021, Professor Bassi edited and wrote the introduction for *The Merchant in Venice: Shakespeare in the Ghetto*. This work represents the collective effort and historical significance of performing *The Merchant of Venice in the Venetian Ghetto*. There were two important aspects to this performance: “to recognize the Ghetto as a palimpsestic site and to resist the nostalgic performance tradition that longs to make Shylock ‘authentic.’”

Professor Bassi explained that Shylock would have operated within the confines of the Ghetto despite Shakespeare never mentioning it. The Ghetto today is a site “where post-holocaust melancholy and mass tourism interact with a multilayered cultural and religious heritage in the context of an increasingly commodified Venice.” According to Professor Bassi, the horrors of the Second World War currently define the Ghetto more than hundreds of years of Jewish presence. There are two holocaust memorials displayed in the Ghetto that are easily visible to the public. The other historical evidence of Jewish presence is hidden from view because of the strict rules imposed by the Venetian government in the sixteenth century. Today in the Ghetto, “the deportation and

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death of Venice’s Jews in the Nazi extermination camps are more legible to the public gaze than any record of the continuous Jewish habitation there over the past 500 years.²⁸⁰ There is still an active religious presence in the Ghetto since there are two fully operational synagogues. There are around 450 Jews who still live permanently in the Ghetto, but many come from outside of the Ghetto to attend religious ceremonies. The culture of the Ghetto is still present in space, but, like the city of Venice itself,²⁸¹ it has lost Jewish presence significantly over time. Jews had an enormous impact on the city economically, with the Ghetto at the center of its culture. The hope is to reignite Jewish presence in the Ghetto to make it a center for Jews and a historical attraction.

**The Prevailing Mythology**

For those who wonder if the myth of Venice still impacts Venice today, the response would be a resounding yes. The winged lion design is on most buildings and statues in the city. The lion is a reminder and symbol of the Venetian Empire, and the Basilica San Marco, the most spectacular landmark in Venice, still attracts thousands of tourists to the city. The Piazza San Marco is the most highly trafficked area in the city since many of the popular shopping areas and tourist attractions are right in the square. The sea is still essential to the Venetian experience, but Venice has now traded its merchant fleets for commercialized gondola rides. The myth of Venice did not disappear with the fall of the Venetian Empire. Those who live in Venice still think very

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²⁸⁰ Ibid.
²⁸¹ Venice’s population reached its height of over 170,000 by the time of the plague of 1570-1575. In the centuries since, the number of permanent residents in the city has declined to just over 48,000 full-time residents. There are numerous reasons for this, including the loss of Venice’s empire, the dramatic shift in the economy to rely on (over) tourism, and the inability of citizens to afford to live in the city.
highly of their city, and Venice is one of the most highly sought-after tourist destinations in the world.

I had the privilege of visiting Venice to conduct my thesis research in January of 2023, and I wondered how those who live in Venice view their city. There are less than 49,000 current residents on the main island of Venice. I would ask people in restaurants and clothing shops about Venice and the legacy of the myth of Venice. Most of the people I spoke to live outside of the city, but those who resided in Venice spoke very highly of Venice, especially if their families had resided in the city for a long period. These Venetians also identified the purposeful use of the winged lion of Saint Mark in advertisements and designs to enhance the tourist experience. Instead of attracting other European countries and Jewish merchants to Venice, the myth targets tourists to come to the city and experience the magic of Venice. The city is still incredibly unique, and regardless of the validity of the myth, its ideals are still very much alive.

Concluding Remarks

In summation, Jewish presence in Venice was fundamental to its success as an empire. The Ghetto is a physical representation of Venice’s concessions to uphold maritime success, wealth, and stability. The Venetian Empire was the most successful thalassocracy in history with trade success virtually unmatched by any other empire. It would be easy to consider Jewish and Venetian history as operating separately within the Venetian Republic because of the physical separation of the Jews. Every decision the Venetians made to perpetuate the myth of Venice relates to the Jews. Jews are a part of Venice's history. By looking at the empire as pragmatic

282 Particularly in the sixteenth century, Jews were essential for Venice upholding the mercantile and tolerant ideals of the myth of Venice. Trade success was the most important aspect of the myth to Venice, so all efforts to perpetuate the myth of Venice were related to Jews because they allowed Venice to be successful.
above all, we can better understand how Venetians used and interpreted the myth of Venice in a way that included the Jewish presence. Venice’s success depended on exceptions for those, such as the Jews, who could help the city prosper both within—as physicians, merchants, and moneylenders—and without, as traders, intermediaries, and spies.

The myth of Venice and anti-myth are too simplistic. They only become meaningful in the context of Venice’s contradictions. Venice has a rich history, but one that would not have been as successful without the Jews. The connection between Jews and the myth of Venice exemplifies the city’s effort to maintain its wealth and influence over the Adriatic. For those lucky enough to travel to Venice, look beyond the canals and Saint Mark. Despite the Christian Republic’s best efforts, Judaism has become an intrinsic part of the history of Venice.
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