

In the Renaissance, Venice was one of the richest cities in Europe.

Her merchants and emissaries travelled far and wide, establishing diplomatic relationships and trading with the great rulers of the Islamic states. This continuous - though not always peaceful - exchange left an indelible mark on the city's identity.

Gentile Bellini, Doge Giovanni Mocenigo (Museo Correr, Venice)







In 828 AD, two Venetian merchants stole the relics of St Mark the Evangelist from a church in Alexandria of Egypt and offered them to the doge at the Palazzo Ducale.

With this symbolic act, Venice had acquired a prestigious patron. The city began establishing trading relationships in the southern and eastern Mediterranean, along the route of pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Paolo Veneziano, St Mark saving the ship transporting his relics (St Mark's Basilica)



Trading with the Islamic states became so profitable that Venice often fought against the Pope's embargoes to prohibit trade between Christians and Muslims.

In the wake of the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204) and the sack of Constantinople, an abundance of Islamic artefacts reached Venice.



Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs (St Mark's Basilica)

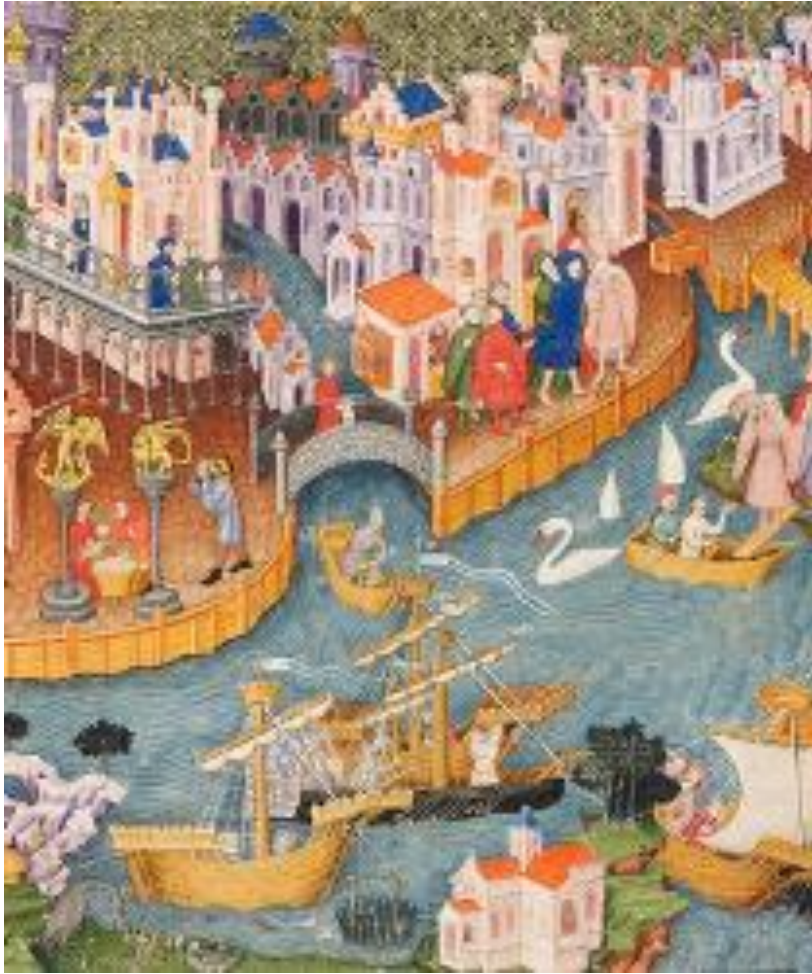


If Venice needed to trade with the Islamic states in order to maintain its economic wealth and political status, the same was not true for the Islamic states.

Preserving the monopoly over the exchange of goods with the Levant was therefore critical.

Anonymous Venetian, *The Reception of the Ambassadors in Damascus* (Musée du Louvre, Paris)





Several accounts document the lives of Venetian merchants and emissaries in the Levant and their impressions of these exotic and remarkable lands.

The most famous explorer is Marco Polo, who in 1271 embarked on a twenty-five-year journey through Asia along the Silk Road and recorded his extraordinary experience in the pages of *Il Milione*.





Venice began to develop 'colonies' in the Levant.

They were equipped with a fondaco for storage and lodgings, a church, a bakery and public bathhouses. Barbers, garment-makers, bakers, cooks, goldsmiths, pharmacists were available for the merchants and diplomats' everyday needs, and interpreters, known as 'dragomans', were available for hire.

Travelling to the Levant became a crucial step in a man's political career, and young men were sent to the ports of the southern and eastern Mediterranean to learn Arabic, bookkeeping and business.

Francesco Guardi, *The Doge on the Bucintoro near the Riva di Sant'Elena* (c. 1766-70)