

## Alfredo Betocchi: Origin of the Flag of the Venetian Republic

**Abstract:** *Topic of this presentation are the flags born before the adoption of the famous red flag with the sitting lion holding between its paws a gospel.*

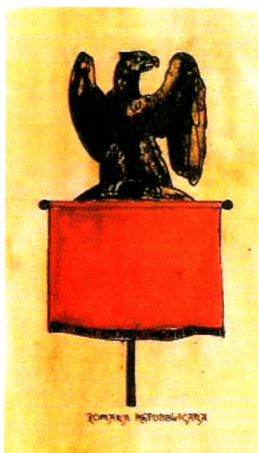
*These are a small banner with a (red?) cross, and years before that, a gonfalon showing Saint Marcus, in person, standing with the former banner held in his right hand (said "Vexillum Triumphalis"), both used from VIII. to IX. century AD.*

This conference is above all a homage to the first president, and the current honorary president, of the Italian Centre of Vexillological Studies, Aldo Ziggio, who is unable to be present at this prestigious Congress in Berlin due to his age and certain inconveniences that life has dealt him. Nevertheless, I am sure that he is in our hearts and minds and that we all acknowledge his extreme expertise and kindness. The recourses which I consulted when preparing for this conference are partly taken from various articles and notes of his published over the years in the *Vexilla Italica* (Italian Flags) journal.

We all know the marvellous city of Venice. A city comprising 18 islands, enriched with splendid palaces, divided not by roads but by canals and the black gondolas navigate the waters ferrying visitors who remain awestruck by the city's beauty.

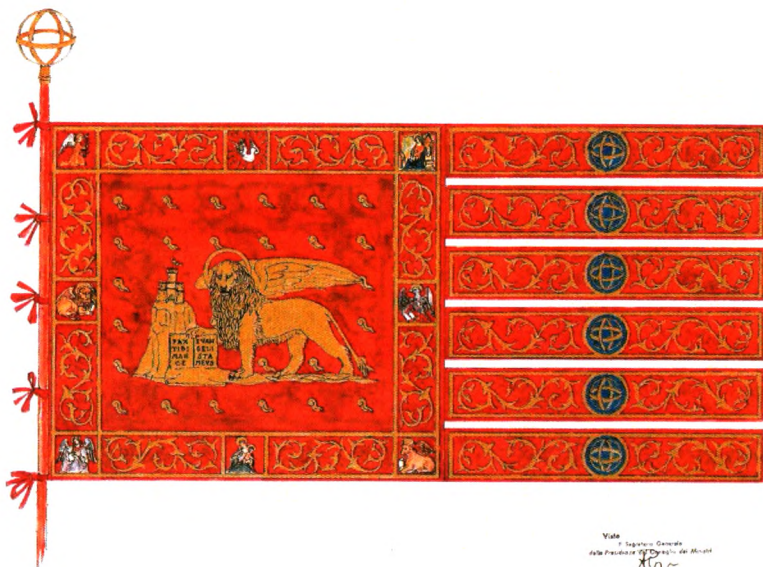
Venice was, in the past, a powerful European and Mediterranean state, respected and feared by all. Her red and gold flags flapped in all the Western and Near Eastern ports.

The city's origin is enshrouded in mystery. It began as a place of refuge for the people from the mainland fleeing the ferocious attacks of the Lombards and the Huns but subsequently became a place of interest for merchants wishing to extend their commerce overseas. Until the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century the city state islands of Venice were under the rule of the Byzantine Empire. They were governed by the *Magister Militum*, a Byzantine appointed head of state whose role was to defend and administer the islands. The first flag (even though it is not exactly the correct terminology to use) was red in colour with symbols in gold. This was the Roman Vexillum (standard), that had been appropriated by the Byzantine empire. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century the Venetians unified and



rebelled, freeing themselves from Byzantine rule. They expelled the *Magister Militum*, who was by this stage merely a weak and ineffective figurehead, and unable to defend the city from the Schiavoni pirates from Dalmatia. They wanted a new symbol to identify themselves with, that would oppose the red standards of the Byzantine rule.

The greatest difficulty for those who wish to tell the history of the origin of the Venetian flag, is that this Republic has never had an official fixed heraldic symbol. Consequently there are very few documents relating to the subject in the Venetian archives which aid in discerning any precise dates and information on the standards used.



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The majority of images represent the famous winged Lion of St. Mark for example, which is depicted either standing or lying down, with

wings and the book of the Evangelist between his front paws. He is situated next to a column and supported by a base. The Latin inscription *Pax tibi Marce, Evangelista meus* (Peace be with you, Mark my Evangelist) is written on the gospel book. There is no reference to this symbolism in the annals. The church had been using the lion as a symbol for St. Mark since the twelfth century, due to the evangelists' strong literary style in his gospel.



St. Mark lived in the east before joining Saint Peter in Rome, afterwards he went to Alexandria to spread the word of the gospel, where he was martyred in 68 AD. In 828 AD his body was smuggled out of Egypt and brought to Venice by two Venetian merchants. The Greek

St. Theodore, nominated during the time of Byzantine domination, was already the city's Patron Saint. The arrival of St. Mark's body was such an important event that he was proclaimed the new Patron Saint of the Republic, and St. Theodore the protector of the city. From the 10<sup>th</sup> century, imagery of St. Mark began to appear on churches, statues, seals and bulls. St. Mark is represented in human form, a man dressed in his patriarchal robes, as well as in the form of a lion in the act of presenting a standard to the Doge, the new ruler of the city.

This standard was given to the Venetian soldiers by the Doge Vitale Michiel in 1095, before they set sail for the third crusade to the Holy Land. It has a blue background with a gold cross in the middle and four flames. There are various references to this standard in chronicles of the time, and one surviving visual example can be seen in the Golden altar piece, *La Pala D'oro*, in St Mark's Basilica.



In 1124 Venice conquered the city of Tiro, during the campaign against Syria under the Doge Domenico Michiel, and the *vexillum civitatis suae* was placed on the conquered city's walls, the same standard which had been given to the Venetian army a few decades before.

This flag was called, by the chroniclers of the time, the *triumphalis vexillum*. It can be therefore be considered the first flag of the newly born Venetian Republic.

The same one is mentioned by an anonymous chronicler when writing about the campaign against Ragusa in 1171. After conquering the city, the Venetians hung from it's towers the *Triumphalis Vexillum*, the flag of the victorious Republic.

In 1177, eight of these flags *Vexilla Sancti Marci* were recorded flying during the famous peace meeting between the Pope, Alexander III, and the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, in St Mark's Square opposite the lagoon. This is most certainly the same flag, the Patron Saint is depicted holding the *Triumphalis Vexillum* in his hand. On the picture, next to that, you can see the city flag, blue with two golden bars.



The Lion, representing St Mark, the first 'official' symbol of the Venetian Republic, appeared in 1329 and 1339 on the money minted by Doge Francesco Dandolo. This lion didn't have wings, is upright on its hind legs and holds a pole attached to a flag with three globes in the background. The significance of the colours and the globes is unknown. The origin of the Lion

dates to a text written by a Dominican monk, Jacopo da Varazze, in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, appearing therefore quite advanced in the city's history.

Another flag to consider is the one used by warships. It had a red field with a golden cross with four little golden circles. Perhaps they stand for the four ancient districts of Venice, as the six tails of the flag with the lion stand for the six districts existing in XIV. century.

Venice formed an alliance with Pisa against Genoa but the flags of Pisa were almost similar in colours and drawing. Therefore the red flags with golden cross was replaced, about the beginning of XIV century, by the most famous lion flags.

That ancient war flag was depicted on a miniature, made by Michiel Sanudo in his book: "Liber Secretorum Fidelium Crucis" edited in 1321, showing a battle between Arab and Venetian army in the Holy Land.

To conclude, in the beginning centuries of the Venetian Republic's history there are at least three standards. A flag featuring a cross either with four flames or as a gonfalon with a painted image of St Mark dressed as a bishop, the other is in the form of a lion holding a pole topped with a little flame fuelled by three mysterious globes, finally a war flag hoisted on the war ships.



### About the author



**Alfredo Betocchi** was born in Athens (Greece) in 27.01.1951 and lives in Florence (Italy). He is married and has a son. He is member of the C.I.S.V. (Centro Italiano di Studi Vessillologici) since 1977. He wrote numerous articles for *Vexilla Italica*, i.e. the Italian bulletin.

He was present at three International Congresses in Europe: in 1991 in Barcelona, with a conference about *A short story of symbols of Florence and of personal standards of early Medici's*, in 1993 in Zurich (CH), with a conference about *Buddhist symbology on Thai flags* and in 2007 in Berlin (D). He wrote some articles for

Flag Bulletin and for *Vexillacta*.

He collaborates with a Florentine magazine to promote vexillology among his fellow-citizens. He organized conferences in elementary schools about flags. He was also on Italian TV in 1990 to talk about the great change of flags in East Europe.

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Attentive listeners at 22. ICV 2007 (C. Spain, W. Smith)

Photo: Mante