

# MEDIEVAL VENICE: ST. MARK'S BASILICA



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## Description

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story behind the construction and style used in designing, building and decorating St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, how and why the saint's bones are in Venice in the first place when he died in Alexandria, and how the church became a symbol of Venetian wealth and power by the early Renaissance.

## Subjects

Art, Architecture, European History, World History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- [Basilica di San Marco, Venice](#)
- [St. Mark's Square, Venice](#)

## Essential Questions

- Who was St. Mark? Why is he buried in Venice? Why is his symbol (and thus the city's symbol) a winged lion?
- Why was the Basilica of St. Mark built in Venice? What architectural style was used in its construction?
- How is Venice's role in the Fourth Crusade evident at St. Marks?
- Why are the mosaics inside the Basilica of St. Mark important to understanding medieval art? How are today's mosaics original? How are they preserved?

## Academic Summary

And it happened in the year of grace four hundred and sixty-six in the time of Leo the emperor, that the Venetians translated the body of Saint Mark from Alexandria to Venice in this manner. There were two merchants of Venice did so much, what by prayer and by their gifts, to two priests that kept the body of Saint Mark, that they suffered it to be borne secretly and privately unto their ship. And as they took it out of the tomb, there was so sweet an odor throughout all the city of Alexandria that all the people marveled, ne knew not from whence it came. Then the merchants brought it to the ship, and after, hasted the mariners and let the other ships have knowledge thereof. Then there was one man in another ship that japed, and said: When ye to carry away the body of Saint Mark? Nay, ye lead with you an Egyptian. Then anon, after this word, the ship wherein the holy body was, turned lightly after him, and so rudely boarded the ship of him that had said that word, that he brake one of the sides of the ship, and would never leave it in peace till they had confessed that the body of Saint Mark was in the ship ...

It happed after, that the body of Saint Mark was closed in a pillar of marble, and right few people knew thereof because it should be secretly kept. Then it happed that they that knew thereof died, and there was none that knew where this great treasure might be, wherefore the clerks and the lay people were greatly discomforted and wept for sorrow, and doubted much that it had been stolen away. Then made they solemn processions and litanies, and the people began to fast and be in prayers, and all suddenly the stones opened and showed to all the people the place and stead where the holy body rested. Then rendered they thankings to God of this, that he had relieved them of their sorrow and anguish, and ordained that on that day they shall hold feast always ...

The merchants of Venice went on a time by the sea in a ship of Saracens towards Alexandria; and when they saw them in peril, they hewed the cords of the ship, and anon the ship began to break by the force of the sea. And all the Saracens that were therein fell in the sea, and died that one after the other. Then one of the Saracens made his avow to Saint Mark and promised him that if he delivered him from this peril he would be baptized. Anon a man all shining appeared to him, which took him out of the water and remitted him again into the ship, and anon the tempest ceased. When he was come into Alexandria he remembered nothing of Saint Mark, which had delivered him from peril, he went not to visit him, ne he did him not do be baptized. Then appeared to him Saint Mark, and said to him that he remembered evil the bounty that he did to him when he delivered him from the peril of the sea, and anon the Saracen came again to his conscience, and he went to Venice, and was there baptized and named Mark, and believed perfectly in God, and ended his life in good works. *Jacobus de Voragine, Legenda aurea (The golden Legend): The Life of St.*

## Mark, approx. 1260 CE

The Basilica di San Marco (Patriarchal Cathedral Basilica of Saint Mark) has dominated the heart of Venice for almost 1000 years. Built early in the ninth century to house the bones of St. Mark the Evangelist (traditionally considered the author of the Gospel of Mark), the church originally served as the private chapel for the Doge, Venice's political and administrative leader, whose offices were in the building next door. After the initial church was destroyed in a fire late in the 10th century, the current basilica was built over the span of twenty years late in the 11th century (1073-1093 CE).

According to legend, St. Mark's bones were smuggled out of Alexandria, Egypt in 828 CE and brought to Venice by merchants, a story immortalized in a famous mosaic at the cathedral, which shows the smugglers hiding the relics in a pork barrel to prevent Muslim authorities from searching the ship's cargo. Ninth century Venetians subsequently embraced St. Mark as their patron saint, dedicated the new church to him and even adopted the "winged lion" (St. Mark's traditional Christian symbol) as their official symbol. It remains so to this day, and images of the lion, often shown holding the Gospel of St. Mark, can be seen all over the city, including on the official flag and its coat of arms.

The basic structure of today's cathedral was completed by the end of the 13th century, although minor adjustments to the façade and mosaics were made after the Venetian led conquests of Constantinople in the Fourth Crusade. By the early days of the Renaissance, when Venice's power and wealth attracted visitors from around Europe, San Marco stood as a shining example of the republic's splendor. Millions of visitors who come to the city every year are awed by its massive structure, its Byzantine inspired domed cupolas and its priceless colorful mosaics. Sitting in the very heart of the city, the basilica and its square are the first image many see as they arrive by boat, and it is often the last picture indelibly ingrained into their memories as they leave.

Through the use of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story behind the construction and style used in designing, building and decorating St. Mark's Basilica, how and why the saint's bones are in Venice in the first place when he died in Alexandria, and how the church became a symbol of Venetian wealth and power by the early Renaissance.

### **Objectives**

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the style and construction methods used in designing, building and decorating the Basilica di San Marco in Venice.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the legends and stories of how St. Mark's bones ended up in Venice almost 400 years after he was martyred in Alexandria, Egypt.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how and why the Basilica di San Marco became a symbol of Venetian wealth and power by the early Renaissance.

## **Procedure**

### **I. Anticipatory Set**

- Writing / Question: What is a “patron” saint? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

### **II. Body of Lesson**

- Lecture / PPT – St. Mark’s Square and Basilica (25 min)
- Video – St. Mark’s Basilica – Eastern Influences (5 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles about St Mark and the Basilica di San Marco in Venice (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of the articles for homework to prepare for class discussion.
- Suggestion: Break students into groups and assign different articles to each group.
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: What was the story behind the style and construction techniques used in designing, building and decorating St. Mark’s Basilica? Why are the saint’s bones in Venice when he died in Alexandria, Egypt? How and why did the cathedral become a symbol of Venetian wealth and power by the early Renaissance? (20 min)

### **III. Closure**

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the story behind the construction and style used in designing, building and decorating St. Mark’s Basilica, how and why the saint’s bones are in Venice when he died in Alexandria, and how the church became a symbol of Venetian wealth and power by the early Renaissance.

## **Extension**

### **On tour: Basilica di San Marco, Venezia**

While on tour, students in Venice will visit St. Mark's Basilica, where they'll see for themselves the priceless splendor of the cathedral. Influenced heavily by Byzantine and eastern architectural styles and building techniques, the building itself is uniquely Venetian. The interior contains many of the greatest mosaics in the world. Students with a keen eye will also be able to see two vivid reminders of a dark day in Venetian history. Above the main entrance are four bronze horses (they are replicas – the originals are inside in a museum) stolen from Constantinople when Venetian knights sacked the old imperial Christian city during the Fourth Crusade. There is also a sculpture called the Portrait of the Four Tetrarchs that depicts a time between 293 and 313 when the empire was ruled by a "tetrarchy" or group of four rulers. The sculpture, made from Egyptian stone, is embedded into the corner wall of the cathedral where it meets the Doge's Palace. The sculpture is of four unnamed Roman emperors embracing each other in a symbol of unity across the divided empire. It originally decorated one of the columns of the Philadelphion in Constantinople (a public square in the center of the old imperial city) before it was broken off and taken during the sacking of the city. The missing heel portion was found in Istanbul (modern day Constantinople) in excavations close to the Bodrum Mosque and today sits in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum. More artifacts from the sack of Constantinople are found in St. Mark's Treasury (inside the Basilica). Note: admission to the Basilica is free, but there is a small charge for visitors to see the Treasury. It is well worth it, as the treasury's collection contains artifacts from across the Western, Byzantine and Islamic world, some as old as the 5th century CE.

## Web Links

### Lesson Plan Websites

- [saints.sqpn.com/golden185.htm](http://saints.sqpn.com/golden185.htm)  
The Golden Legend: the Life of Saint Mark the Evangelist (primary source)
- [www.columbia.edu/cu/arhistory/faculty/Klein/SanMarco-offprint.pdf](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arhistory/faculty/Klein/SanMarco-offprint.pdf)  
San Marco, Byzantium and the Myths of Venice (PDF/Book). A PDF version of a book of essays published in 2010. The real value in the book for this lesson plan can be found in Chapter 3 (The Iniketos Icon and the Display of Relics in the Decoration of San Marco) by Henry Macguire, Professor of Art History at Johns Hopkins, and Chapter 4 (Fashioning a Façade: The Construction of Venetian identity on the Exterior of San Marco) by Michael Jacoff, Art Professor at Brooklyn College. Although this material is probably presented at a level above most high school students, it is highly recommended as an out of class reading for AP/Advanced students, especially those who want to understand architectural styles and how a people come to see their own national identity.
- [venice.umwblogs.org/exhibit/venice-and-the-east-the-facade-of-san-marco/venice-and-the-islamic-east/](http://venice.umwblogs.org/exhibit/venice-and-the-east-the-facade-of-san-marco/venice-and-the-islamic-east/)  
Venice and the Islamic East (website) – online exhibit produced at the University of Mary Washington (VA)
- [www.italyguides.it/us/venice\\_italy/st\\_mark\\_s\\_square/piazza\\_san\\_marco/st\\_mark\\_s\\_basilica.htm](http://www.italyguides.it/us/venice_italy/st_mark_s_square/piazza_san_marco/st_mark_s_basilica.htm)  
St. Mark's Basilica (website) – basic information on the cathedral. Great starting point for all students.
- [www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/st\\_marks.html](http://www.greatbuildings.com/buildings/st_marks.html)  
St Marks (website). From the Great Buildings website. Great for art and architecture students. The website has photos and architectural drawings of the famous cathedral. There is also a 3D model of the entire complex.
- [www.wga.hu/html\\_m/zgothic/mosaics/6sanmarc/](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/zgothic/mosaics/6sanmarc/)  
Mosaics in the Basilica di San Marco, Venice (website). Images of the different mosaics from the Web Gallery of Art website. Highly recommended for students and teachers.
- [www.slideshare.net/gsim776/speech2-saint-marks-square-and-basilica](http://www.slideshare.net/gsim776/speech2-saint-marks-square-and-basilica)  
St. Mark's Square and Basilica (PowerPoint)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTLVs5b\\_ASA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTLVs5b_ASA)  
Venice: St. Mark's Square / Piazza San Marco (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=61laMYD4XjM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61laMYD4XjM)  
St. Mark's Basilica – Eastern Influences (video)
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx8SI7ZHSg0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kx8SI7ZHSg0)  
The Building of Beautiful Venice (video). This 45-minute video, produced by History Channel International, is probably too long for most in-class showings,

but it is well worth it, as it traces Venice's history since its founding during the 5th century. Highly recommended for students and teachers, even if it is seen out of class.

### **Background Information**

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St\\_Mark's\\_Basilica](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Mark's_Basilica)  
St. Mark's Basilica – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark\\_the\\_Evangelist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_the_Evangelist)  
Mark the Evangelist – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/venice](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/venice)  
On the Road: Venice – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/venice\\_a\\_special\\_introduction](https://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/venice_a_special_introduction)  
On the Road: Venice: A Special Introduction – from Passports Educational Travel

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

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

Great Schism of 1054 – Catholic vs. Orthodox

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453)

Byzantine Istanbul – Fall of Constantinople 1453

### **Key Terms**

- Basilica
- Byzantine
- Evangelist
- Identity
- Mosaic
- St. Mark
- Venice

