

Orseolo was being kept for Byzantium. Pietro had never allowed his *rapprochement* with Otto or Henry to affect his friendship with Basil II. His Dalmatian adventure, if not actually cleared in advance with Constantinople, had certainly found favour with the Emperor of the East, whose rights he had been scrupulously careful to uphold and who was only too happy that Venice should take on the responsibility of policing a region that he was unable to cope with himself. Since then the Doge had acquired even more merit in Byzantine eyes by leading another expedition, smaller but still more valiant, to the relief of the city of Bari. As capital of the so-called Capitanata – the Byzantine province of South Italy which claimed suzerainty over all the land south of a line drawn from Terracina in the west to Termoli on the Adriatic coast – Bari was the largest and most important Greek community in the peninsula. In April 1002, however, it had been attacked by the Saracens and all that summer it lay under siege. Then on 6 September, a Venetian fleet under Orseolo's personal command had forced the blockade, brought provisions to the starving city and, after a three-day battle outside the harbour, had put the aggressors to flight.

The fact that Venice's intervention had been unsolicited – though she had had obvious reasons of her own for wishing to check the expansion of Saracen power in Italy – had further increased the gratitude of the Byzantines; and Orseolo must have seen that now was the moment to consolidate his advantage. Having first associated the nineteen-year-old Giovanni with him on the ducal throne, he sent him off with his younger brother Otto on a state visit to Constantinople, where it was arranged for him to marry the Princess Maria **Argyra**, niece of the two joint Emperors.<sup>1</sup> The ceremony took place in the imperial chapel, with the Patriarch officiating and the co-Emperors both present to crown the bridal pair in the Eastern fashion – simultaneously bestowing upon them the relics of St Barbara. Magnificent celebrations followed, after which the couple withdrew to a palace which had been put at their disposal. The young Dogaressa was in an advanced state of pregnancy by the time they returned to Venice.

Pietro Orseolo II was now at the climax of his career. By his statesmanship he had raised the Republic to new heights of prosperity and prestige. By his valour he had averted, for many years to come, the two

1. Throughout his reign, Basil II, the Bulgar-Slayer, – one of the greatest Emperors in Byzantine history – technically shared the throne with his brother, Constantine VIII. Constantine was, however, a pleasure-loving nonentity who remained in the background, playing virtually no part in political affairs. For the purposes of this history he can be ignored.



principal threats to its security – the Slavs to the east and the Saracens to the south. He had established a Venetian presence – and a modified form of dominion – over the Dalmatian coast. Meanwhile, on a personal level, he had bound his family by bonds of marriage or compaternity to both the Byzantine and the Western Empires and, for the first time in sixty years, has associated a son with him as Doge. But, as his power and reputation grew, so too did the trappings of majesty with which he tended to surround himself. It was not surprising that many Venetians began to wonder whether success was not going to his head and whether he was not secretly planning, as more than one of his predecessors had planned before him, to establish a hereditary monarchy throughout the lagoon.

Then, suddenly, his world collapsed. In the autumn of 1005 a blazing comet appeared in the southern sky, remaining there for three months. Everyone knew it to be a portent; and sure enough early the following year Venice was struck by famine – a famine that the new Dalmatian sources of supply, which had suffered as much as those on the Italian mainland, could do nothing to alleviate. In its wake came plague, carrying off – among many hundreds of more humble citizens – young Giovanni, his Greek wife and their baby son. St Peter Damian, with ill-concealed satisfaction, attributes the Dogaressa's death to divine retribution for her sybaritic oriental ways:

Such was the luxury of her habits that she scorned even to wash herself in common water, obliging her servants instead to collect the dew that fell from the heavens for her to bathe in. Nor did she deign to touch her food with her fingers, but would command her eunuchs to cut it up into small pieces, which she would impale on a certain golden instrument with two prongs and thus carry to her mouth. Her rooms, too, were so heavy with incense and various perfumes that it is nauseating for me to speak of them, nor would my readers readily believe it. But this woman's vanity was hateful to Almighty God; and so, unmistakably, did He take his revenge. For He raised over her the sword of His divine justice, so that her whole body did putrefy and all her limbs began to wither, filling her bedchamber with an unbearable odour such that no one – not a handmaiden, nor even a slave – could withstand this dreadful attack on the nostrils; except for one serving-girl who, with the help of aromatic concoctions, conscientiously remained to do her bidding. And even she could only approach her mistress hurriedly, and then immediately withdraw. So, after a slow decline and agonizing torments, to the joyful relief of her friends she breathed her last.<sup>1</sup>

1. Since Peter Damian does not refer to Maria **Argyra** by name, nor to the deaths – at the same time and by the same causes – of her husband and son, some authorities have suggested that he may have confused her with another Greek Dogaressa: Theodora, the wife of Doge



Giovanni and his wife died within sixteen days of each other, and were buried at S. Zaccaria in a single tomb. Pietro Orseolo was heart-broken. His dreams for the future vanished. Though not yet fifty, he seems to have lost the desire to live. Perhaps, like his father, he underwent a religious crisis. Unlike old Pietro, however, he did not retire to a monastery. Instead, he raised his third son, Otto, to the dogeship with him, made his will, leaving the bulk of his possessions to the Church and the poor, and then withdrew to a remote wing of the palace, separating himself even from his wife. Less than two years later, in 1008, he died.

Young Otto was still only sixteen. In the circumstances, it is odd that the Venetians should have made no objection when he joined his father on the throne; it is odder still that they should have allowed him to succeed to power without, so far as we know, a single voice being raised against him – the youngest Doge in Venetian history. But in the Middle Ages both men and women matured younger than they do now – for sixteen-year-olds to be given command of armies was by no means unheard of – and Otto Orseolo seems to have been old beyond his years. ‘Catholic in faith, calm in purity, strong in justice, eminent in religion, decorous in his manner of life, well-endowed with wealth and possessions, and so filled with all forms of virtue that he was universally considered to be the most fitting successor of his father and grandfather’ – thus Andrea Dandolo was to describe him, after a three-century interval which, if a poor guarantee of historical accuracy, at least argues a relatively unprejudiced standpoint.<sup>1</sup> Otto Orseolo had indeed inherited many of his father’s characteristics, among them his taste for splendour and his love of power. The new Doge was familiar with the imperial courts of the West and the East, having received his religious confirmation at one and several high honours from the other; and the Magyar princess – daughter of the subsequently canonized King Stephen of Hungary – whom he married shortly after Pietro’s death added still more lustre to his position. Like his father, he was quick to build up his image as a magnificent and majestic potentate – so far, at least, as the traditionally austere sensibilities of his subjects permitted.

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Domenico Selvo (see p. 69). As Selvo became Doge only in 1071, however, and Peter Damian himself died in February 1072, this theory does not seem very probable. It may well be that Peter did not know about the plague – or if he did that he kept quiet about it, for the very good reason that it would have ruined his story.

1. John the Deacon’s chronicle breaks off here, leaving us without any detailed or sustained contemporary record of events.