Venice and the Ottoman Empire: Crash Course World History #19

Crash Course: World History
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course World History and today we're going to talk about a relationship. No, not you, college girlfriend. No, not that kind of relationship either. No. STAN, THIS IS A HISTORY CLASS. We're gonna talk about the relationship between a city, Venice, and an empire, the Ottomans, and in doing so, we're going to return to an old theme here on Crash Course World History: How studying history can make you a better boyfriend and/or girlfriend. Probably or, but I'm not here to judge.

Me from the Past: Mr. Green! Mr. Green! No offense, but you don't really seem like an expert in how to get girls to like you.

John: Here's something amazing, Me From the Past. You know that girl, Sarah, in 10th grade, who's super super smart?

Me from the Past: Yeah, she's really hot. She's like three or four leagues hotter than I am.

John: Yeah, I married her. So shut up and listen.

[Intro]

Ten minutes from now, I'm hoping you'll understand how one mutually beneficial relationship, between the Venetians and the Ottomans, led to two really big deals: the European Renaissance and Christopher Columbus. Not like his birth, I mean he wasn't like a half-Ottoman, half-Venetian baby, his travels!

So Venice is a city made up of hundreds of islands at the northern tip of the Adriatic Sea, but walking around it, you can't help but feel that the city is essentially a collection of floating buildings tied together by some canals. If ever there was a place where geography was destiny, it was Venice. Venice was literally built for ocean-going trade. As you can imagine, Venice didn't have a lot of natural resources — except for fish and mustaches — so if they wanted to grow, they had to rely on trade. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

First, Venetians became experts in shipbuilding. Remember that when the crusaders needed ships for their crazy Fourth Crusade, they headed to Venice, because the Venetians were famous for their ships, including merchant ships like the galley and the cog. Not only could they build ships; they could also sail them to pleasant locales like Constantinople and the Levant, so the Venetians formed trade treaties, sometimes called concessions, with the Byzantines, and then when Constantinople fell to the Ottomans and became Istanbul, the Venetians were quick to make trade treaties with their new neighbors, famously saying that while Istanbul had been Constantinople, the matter of Constantinople getting the works was nobody's business but the Turks.

But even before the Ottomans, Venice had experience trading with the Islamic world: It initially established itself as the biggest European power in the Mediterranean thanks to its trade with Egypt's sultan in the outlandishly lucrative pepper business. Can't blame the Europeans, really, that stuff is delicious. Oh, you mean like actual pepper? Ah, that's good too, especially since it masks the taste of spoiled meat, which most meat was in the days before refrigeration. Due to some awkward… Crusades… the Egyptian merchants weren't terribly welcome in…ya know...Europe. But they had all the pepper, because the Egyptians imported it from India and controlled both overland and oversea access to the Mediterranean. And when others cited moral or religious opposition to trade, the Venetians usually found a way. Which is why the whole freaking town is made of marble. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

To avoid the sticky situation of having to consort with the heathen Egyptians, the Venetians employed a handy story. This is the Piazza San Marco, the #1 Destination in the Entire World for People Who Like to Be Pooped on by Pigeons. It's also home to this church, which includes some bronze horses you may remember that were looted from Constantinople. And it contains the body of St. Mark, author of the Gospel According to St. Mark, who had once been the bishop of Alexandria, in Egypt.

So naturally he died and was buried in Alexandria, but the Venetians claimed him as their own, because apparently one time he visited Venice, and these two merchants hatched a very clever plan. They went to Alexandria on business, stole St. Mark's body and then hid it in a shipment of pork, which the Muslims didn't check very carefully because, you know, they were disgusted by it.

You can even see a version of this on the mosaics in the Basilica of St. Mark, complete with the Muslims shouting an Arabic version of "ewww gross." And then, forever after, the Venetians were like, "Listen, we HAVE to trade with these guys. We use it as a secret way to ferry saint bodies out of Egypt. We don't WANT to become fantastically wealthy. It's just a necessary byproduct of our saint-saving."

So what did Venice import? Lots, but notable for us, they imported a lot of grain, because if you've ever been to Venice, then you might have noticed that it is basically made out of marble and therefore kind of difficult to farm. The Ottomans, on the other hand, had abundant grain, even before they conquered Egypt and its oh-so-fertile Nile River in 1517. Also, while trade was certainly the linchpin of Venice's economic success, they had a diverse economy. They also produced things like textiles and glass. And in fact, Venice is still known for its glass, but they couldn't produce it without a special ash that they used to make the colors. And you'll never guess where the ash came from. The Ottomans.

Am I making you a better boyfriend yet? You have to add to your partner's life. You have to color their glass. That sounds like a euphemism. but it's not-- BACK TO HISTORY.

One last thing about Venice that makes it special, at least for its time. Venice was a republic, not a monarchy or, god forbid, an empire. So its leaders were elected, and had to answer to the populace- I mean, at least the property-owning male populace. The ruler was the ***doge*** and he got to live in a very nice house and wear a funny hat.

The Sultan of the Ottoman empire also got to live in a nice house and wear a funny hat, but there the similarities end. To begin, the Ottomans were an empire that lasted from around 1300 CE until 1919, making it one of the longest-lasting and richest empires in world history. The Ottomans managed to blend their pastoral nomadic roots with some very un-nomadic empire building, and some really impressive architecture, like this and this and this, making them very different from, wait for it, the Mongols.

The empire, or at least the dynasty, was founded by Osman Bey, and Ottoman is a Latinization of Osmanli, which basically means like the House of Osman. No, Stan, the house, y-, yes. Oh my Gosh. The Ottomans were greatest in the 15th and 16th centuries under two famous sultans: First, Mehmed the Conqueror ruled from 1451 to 1481 and expanded Ottoman control to the Balkans, which is why there are Bosnian Muslims today. But Ottoman expansion reached its greatest extent under Suleiman the Magnificent, who ruled from 1520 to 1566. He took valuable territory in Mesopotamia and Egypt, thus securing control over the western parts of the Asian trade – both overland and oversea. He also defeated the king of Hungary and laid siege to Vienna in 1526. And he turned the Ottomans into a huge naval power. Also, judging from his hat, he had the largest brain in human history.

The Ottomans basically controlled about half of what the Romans

controlled, but it was much more valuable because of all the Indian Ocean trade you'll remember from last week. So all this land brought a lot of wealth, but it needed to be ruled. The Ottomans could have followed the Roman model, where you send out generals and nobles to rule over conquered territories, or they could've demanded the allegiance of client kings like the Persians, or developed a civil service system like the Chinese, but instead, they created an entirely new ruling class, a system that some historians call the slave aristocracy.

So if you are a King, one of your main problems is hereditary nobles, because they always want to replace you, and they don't want to give you your money, & they want their ugly sons to marry your gorgeous daughters, etc. One way to deal with this problem is to make them part of the government so they feel included and shut up. Another way is to kill them. That's what they usually do in Russia. I'm whispering so Putin doesn't hear me. Ahh! Putin!

The Ottomans just bypassed the problem of hereditary nobles altogether by creating both an army and a bureaucracy from scratch so they would be loyal only to the Sultan. How? The devshirme, a program in which they kidnapped Christian boys, converted them to Islam, and raised them either to be members of an elite military fighting force called the Janissaries, or to be government bureaucrats. Incidentally, which of those gigs would you prefer? Because I think that says a lot about you as a person. Either way, you weren't allowed to have kids, which prevented the whole hereditary nobles problem, and also ensured that the Ottoman government would contain quite a lot of Eunuchs. Oh, it's time for the Open Letter?

An Open Letter to Ottoman Eunuchs. But first, let's see what's in the secret compartment today. Oh, its a blow up globe. See what quitting smoking will get you, Me From the Past?

Hey there Ottoman Eunuchs,

How's it hanging? I'm just kidding, that was mean. Listen, there've been eunuchs all around this great planet of ours. But you're special. I'm not going to give you the details why, because they're horrifying. I'm just going to link to an article in the video info.

You started out just being harem guards, Ottoman Eunuchs, which is kind of an obvious gig for you, but then, you expanded. As had happened in China, you made yourselves indispensable, and you were often the center of palace intrigue.

In fact, few people in the Ottoman Empire were as wealthy and important as many of you were. Way to turn lemons into lemonade. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have brought up lemons.

Best wishes, John Green

This system eventually broke down as Janissaries (who had guns) lobbied to be allowed to have families. But until that happened, the Ottomans system of using a mix of slave administrators and Eunuchs to run everything worked incredibly well. But to return to the relationship between the Ottomans and the Venetians: After the Ottomans captured Egypt, they pretty much controlled the flow of trade through the Mediterranean, but the Venetians had centuries of experience as mariners, and also lots of boats. Speaking of ships, I ship these guys. So the Ottomans were content to let the Venetians do all the like, trading and carrying of goods, and they just made their money from taxes. And that worked because both Venice and the Ottomans added value to each other.

Healthy relationships — listen up, Me From the Past — aren't about extracting value; they have to be mutually beneficial to work. And boy, was that a mutually beneficial relationship. For instance, Venice became super rich, and being super rich was a prerequisite for the European Renaissance because all that art and learning required money, which is why Venice was a leading city at the beginning of the European Renaissance before being eclipsed by Florence, Rome, and I don't know, say Rotterdam.

Also, this relationship established firm connections between Europe and Islamic world, which allowed ideas to flow again especially old Greek ideas that had preserved and built upon by Muslims. I mean, I guess those connections had existed for a long time, but crusades aren't a great way to exchange ideas.

But perhaps the most crucial result of the Venetian and Ottoman control of trade was that it forced other Europeans to look for different paths to the riches of the East. And that fueled huge investments in exploration. The Portuguese sailed south and east around the southern tip of Africa, and the Spanish went west, believing that the Indies and China were much closer than they turned out to be. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller, our script supervisor is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher Raoul Meyer and myself. And our graphics team is Thought Bubble. Last week's Phrase of the Week was: "Unfortunately they didn't have pizza." If you want to suggest future phrases of the week or guess at this week's, you can do so in comments where you can also ask questions about today's video that will be answered by our team of historians.

Thanks for watching Crash Course. And as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.