

CATS OF VENICE

ROBERT DE LAROCHE • JEAN-MICHEL LABAT



RENAISSANCE INTERNATIONAL

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ALONG WITH THE LEGENDARY LION OF ST. MARK, THEY ARE THE TRUE MASTERS OF THE CITY OF THE DOGES. GATHERED ON THE CAMPI, STROLLING ALONG THE NARROW LANES, IDLING IN THE GARDENS AND SOMETIMES ACTUALLY VENTURING ONTO THE GONDOLAS, THE CATS OF VENICE GIVE US SUCH PLEASURE AS THEY SHOW THEMSELVES OFF; TREASURES AMONG TREASURES IN A CITY ALREADY FULL OF WONDERS.

THIS BOOK WILL TAKE YOU ON A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY INTO A SECRET VENICE THROUGH THE EYES OF ITS CATS – THOSE PURRING, CHARMING GUIDES AND LEGENDARY SCOURGES OF RATS, WHOSE PRESENCE IS INEXTRICABLY LINKED WITH OVER A THOUSAND YEARS OF VENETIAN HISTORY AND CIVILISATION.

UNANIMOUSLY ACCLAIMED BY THE PRESS AND AWARDED THE PRIX FERNAND MÉRY FOR ANIMAL BOOKS UPON ITS RELEASE, CATS OF VENICE REMAINS THE MOST TEMPTING OF INVITATIONS TO TRAVEL AND DREAM IN THIS MOST ROMANTIC OF EUROPEAN CITIES, WHICH COULD ALMOST HAVE BEEN BUILT AS A SHOWCASE FOR FELINE BEAUTY! OR SO, AT ANY RATE, YOU COULD EASILY BELIEVE WHILE FLICKING THROUGH THIS MARVELLOUS BOOK, WHICH IS THE FRUIT OF A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN THE WRITER ROBERT DE LAROCHE AND THE PHOTOGRAPHER JEAN-MICHEL LABAT.

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In *Voyage du condottiere*, André Suarès notes: 'Venice is full of stone lions, and relaxed cats sitting on doorsteps, encircled by their own tails. Amid voluptuous Venice, the cats beam happily, and their fur shines.'

By all accounts, the feline hegemony in Venice dates back to 828 A.D. Of course, the cat was already there by then – but the lion was about to make its triumphal entry. In that year, two Venetian merchants, Rustico de Torcello and Buono Tribuno de Malamocco, stole the mummified body of St. Mark from Alexandria in Egypt and brought it back to the lagoon. They received an enthusiastic welcome from the doge Giustiniano Partecipazio, who ordered the construction of what was later to become the basilica to house the holy relic. Ever since then, the Evangelist has been the protector of Venice, supplanting the obscure Saint Theodore. At the same time, the lion consigned the crocodile of the holy Byzantine warrior to the dustbin of history. However, the two animals still continue to needle each other today, albeit at a respectable distance from each other and back-to-back – as if to keep out of range of an inopportune scratch or bite – on the two red granite columns of the *piazzetta*. The lion has the form of an Asiatic chimera, while the crocodile could pass for the improbable fruit of a union between a greyhound and a



dragon. Bizarre indeed... but then again, the Venetians have travelled extensively...

For this water-based city and its colonial empire, it has to be admitted that St. Mark's lion was a better symbol of pride, pugnacity and the thirst for conquest. The cat, although master of the streets, lived for a long time in the shadow of the roaring lion. Some were quick to make unflattering comparisons between the two, mocking the cat's modest appearance and nicknaming it 'the lion of Chioggia' – something of an underhanded swipe at the small neighbouring town made famous by Carlo Goldoni's play... and also at the animal which has never been anything



gold ring into the waters of the Adriatic, 'as a symbol of positive and perpetual sovereignty', all wealth inevitably derived from maritime trade. Is it any surprise that among the astonishing number of boats produced by the Arsenal or one of the shipyards, two particular types were given the respective names of 'cat' and 'rat'? Guillaume de Tyr gives us some
26 information concerning the *gatti* (cats),

military boats with Roman prows, wider than a galley, and one hundred oars, each operated by two men. These combat vessels were used in the early twelfth century, and proved highly effective in mounting sieges against harbour cities; they were loaded with *gatapiata* (catapults), weapons whose name probably derives from that of the boats on which they were transported. The *topo* (rat) was a small, traditional lagoon boat

The wording on the shipping permits read: 'This vessel is in a fit state to travel: there are two cats on board.' Only captains of ships carrying cats were insured against damage by rats.

The usefulness of the cats found by the Venetians in the ports along their routes was complemented by their commercial value. Some of these animals – particularly angoras and Persians – were extremely beautiful... and unknown in Venice, which was filled with the more ordinary kind of cats common to these parts.

Some were also brought back by monks, who found them indispensable for preserving the treasures of religious libraries. Later, the Mekhitarist fathers of the Armenian monastery of San Lazzaro were to do likewise.

Good rat-catching cats were highly sought-after among the varieties found in Egypt, North Africa and Syria, and the latter would enjoy a particularly glittering career in Venice – as well as in Rome.

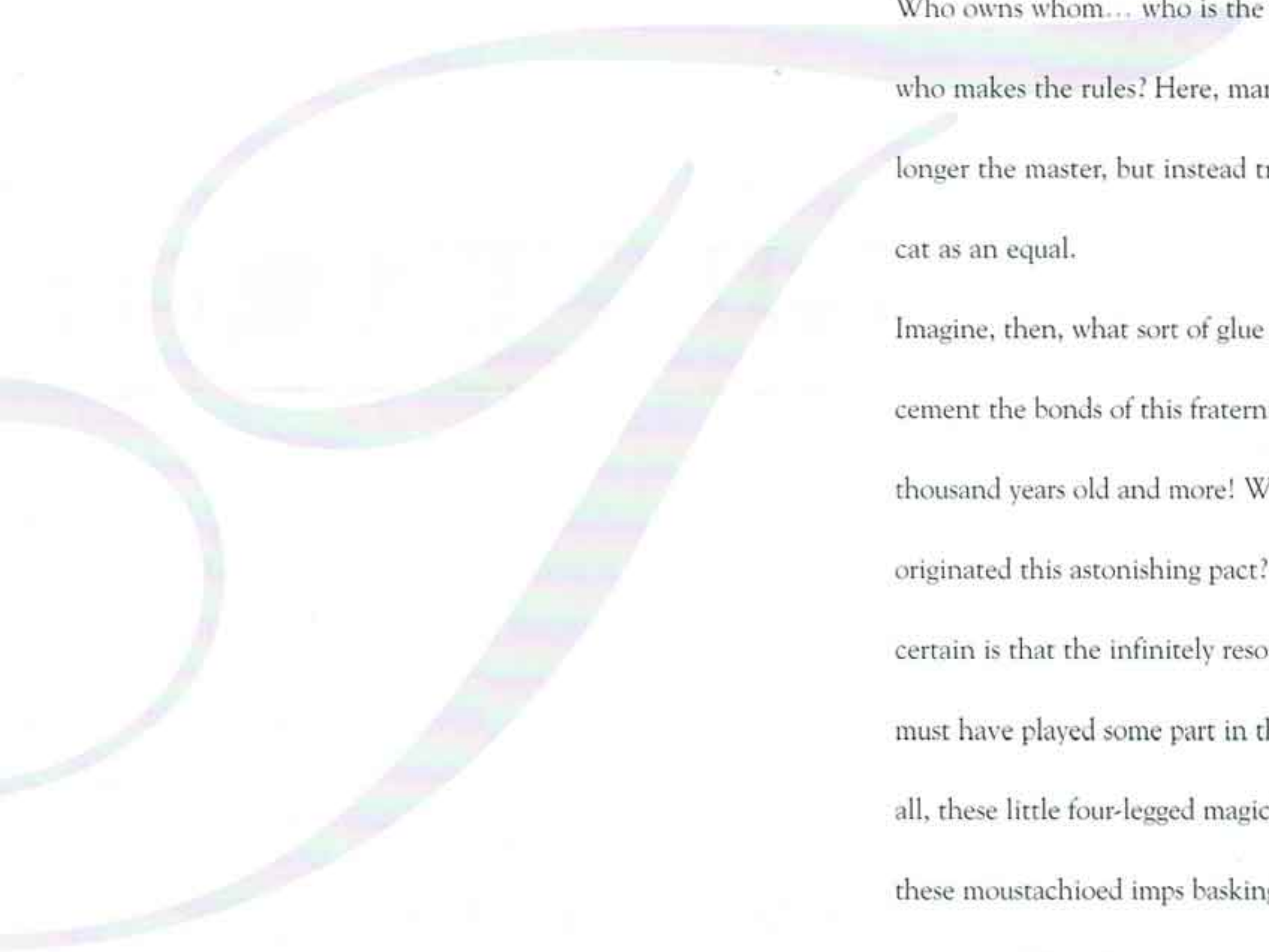
The cats of Syria – which was known at the time as *Sorie* – were called *soriani*; in modern Italian parlance, *soriano* has now become the generic name for the tabby cat. This *soriano*, or *surián* in Venetian, which can now be found in great numbers in the streets of Venice, bears a certain family resemblance to the domestic or gutter tabby cat which can be found in other European countries.

However, we should remember that such cats are the product of considerable cross-breeding with the native lagoon cats! Despite this fact, one type of cat has managed to retain its own distinctive appearance and personality.

It is generally imposing in size. Well-built, and standing firmly on its strong paws, it has a broad head, well-separated ears, a brick-coloured muzzle and eyes in which old gold complements the green 'lagoon colour'. Its beige or fawn fur, tending towards grey or russet red, is adorned with particularly well-balanced black tabby or marbled patterns reminiscent of those found on wild cats. Its back markings are particularly prominent, and there are a number of rings on its tail, the tip of which is black. The cat's thick fur, making it well-equipped to withstand the cold, damp winters, is sometimes embellished with ash-like or blueish highlights.

The *soriano* is indeed a most attractive cat. It is an excellent hunter and affectionate companion, despite a rather independent streak in its character. There is no danger of confusing it with the more slender lines of the long-legged russet, beige, white or black cats with flat heads and long ears which are undoubtedly descended from *felis libyca*, the wildcat of Egypt and North Africa, which the Venetians also used to import in great numbers to keep the rodents down.





ake a look at Venice, its cats and its inhabitants. There exists between them a secret agreement; a mysterious alchemy which has once and for all established the terms of their relationship.

Who owns whom... who is the master... who makes the rules? Here, man is no longer the master, but instead treats the cat as an equal.

Imagine, then, what sort of glue must cement the bonds of this fraternity, a thousand years old and more! Who originated this astonishing pact? What is certain is that the infinitely resourceful cat must have played some part in this. After all, these little four-legged magicians, these moustachioed imps basking with their holier-than-thou attitudes on the sun-warmed flagstones, know more of the mysteries of Venice than many of their learned biped counterparts!

CATS AND SOCIETY