

Venice and Its Neighbors from the 8th to 11th Century

Through Renovation and Continuity

Edited by

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The First Dukes and the Origins of Venice

Stefano Gasparri

At the end of the seventh century, a large part of the ancient Roman province of *Venetia et Histria* was conquered by the Lombards. Besides the cities occupied in the first years after the invasion, Monselice and Padua had fallen into the hands of the Lombard king Agilulf around 602; later, between 640 and 670, first Rothari and then Grimoald conquered Oderzo, causing the transfer of the command centers of the Byzantine province to the edge of the lagoon, at Eraclia.¹ The dismembering of the province continued in the silence of the sources, to the point that Paul the Deacon—the historian who provides us with all these reports—could write that in his time (the end of the eighth century), *Venetia* was reduced to “a few islands.”² The Venetian lagoon, however, was not absorbed by the Lombard kingdom and remained linked to the Exarchate of Ravenna, whose story it shared for as long as the latter survived, i.e., the middle of the eighth century.

The story of the Exarchate is far from well-known, due to the sources being very scarce. In particular, in Byzantine Italy, the role and importance of local military commanders, who were subordinate to the Exarch of Ravenna but, most likely, were in possession of a greater or lesser degree of autonomy, remains obscure. Moreover, even on the Exarchate itself we are poorly informed, so that we know neither the exact number nor the name of all the exarchs.³ The origins of the Exarchate and the office of Exarch are also unclear: they are linked to the discussion—central to the history of early medieval Byzantium—on the organization of the themes, with which too often the Exarchate was confused. Instead, the hypothesis that seems more plausible is that the Exarchate of Ravenna was formed, not as the result of a precise design by the imperial side, but on an experimental basis, locally determined by the needs for a military defensive response against the Lombard offensive.⁴

1 Paolo Delogu, “Il regno longobardo,” in *Storia d'Italia I* (Turin, 1980), pp. 38–39, 60–61, 95.

2 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, ed. Georg Waitz, MGH, SS rer. Lang. (Hanover, 1878), II, 14, p. 81.

3 A prosopography of the exarchs of Italy is in Giorgio Ravegnani, *Gli esarchi d'Italia* (Rome, 2011).

4 Francesco Borri, “*Duces e magistri militum* nell'Italia esarcale (VI–VIII secolo)”, *Reti Medievali Rivista* 6/2 (2005), pp. 3–5.

It is within such a vague framework that we must research the origins of the political and institutional structure of what would later become medieval Venice. These origins are certainly related to the Byzantine defense strategy. The duchies born in the lagoon and elsewhere in Italy were the local nodes of the Exarchate but, at the same time, they descended directly from the military Byzantine structure pre-dating the Lombard invasion in 569. For example, in the geographical area of north-eastern Italy, a *magister militum* was probably set up in Aquileia in 559; other Byzantine units were quartered in Forum Iulii (then known as Cividale), Treviso, and Verona. Part of these troops, after the Lombard invasion, retreated to Ravenna, but others remained in the regions: in 579 three imperial regiments were present in Grado.⁵

Because of the highly incomplete character of the Lombard conquest, the Byzantine commanders who had remained at the forefront were close to Lombard leaders—the dukes (*duces*)—who carried titles much like theirs.⁶ Moreover, at the end of the sixth century, in the hierarchy of the Byzantine army, the difference between *duces* and *magistri militum* was not very distinct—they were both high-ranking officials, who could hold or not a territorial command—and between the seventh and eighth centuries there was an almost complete overlap of the two charges.⁷ The Lombard dukes also probably commanded mixed troops not entirely different from those that were dependent on the imperial commanders. The Lombards' federated nature in Pannonia favored the similarity between the two military structures; accordingly, when the first two Lombard kings in Italy, Alboin and Clefi, were killed, many dukes, being left without a central command, returned for several years under the Byzantine authority. This was in particular the case, in the North-East, of the dukes of Friuli, who had their base in Cividale.⁸

The origins of the Venetian duchy therefore lie within this confusing framework, as it developed from the end of the sixth century onwards. To reconstruct these origins, we will use the few Venetian sources we have and compare them to those that we have available for another center of Byzantine Italy: Comacchio, south of Ravenna. Based on the data they provide, these sources will allow us to make assumptions, even though these relate to a period after the beginning of the eighth century. Comacchio had many traits in common

5 Giorgio Ravegnani, *L'esercito bizantino e l'invasione longobarda*, in *I Longobardi e la guerra. Da Alboino alla battaglia sulla Livenza (secc. VI–VIII)* (Rome, 2004), pp. 68–75.

6 On the Lombard dukes, see Stefano Gasparri, *I duchi longobardi* (Rome, 1978).

7 Borri, “*Duces* e *magistri militum*,” pp. 5–7.

8 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, II, 28, 31–32, pp. 87–89, 90–91. On the dukes of Friuli: Gasparri, *I duchi longobardi*, pp. 65–66.

with Venice: it was a small town, equally new—it was not a *civitas* of Roman times—was located in an area similar to the Venetian lagoon, and had a clear commercial vocation.⁹ Its fate became intertwined several times with that of Venice. So the mutual exchange of information on these two new cities can be very useful for historians.

Much less useful, however, is the comparison with other Byzantine duchies of Italy. As I have already said, even the duchies themselves, the central structure of the Exarchate, are little known: some of them were short-lived, such as the duchy of Liguria; of others, such as the duchy of Pentapolis, we know little or nothing. Apart from Venice, the most important duchies were those of Rome and Naples. The first had a difficult time because it had to deal, from the late sixth century on—the first duke of Rome is mentioned in 592—with the authority of the pope, which was becoming stronger. We know a dozen names of dukes, sometimes hostile to the pope, sometimes collaborators. Towards the end of the eighth century, some of the last dukes of Rome came from the same families that provided the popes. The duchy of Naples is also different from the Venetian one, because in Naples the same ducal dynasty ruled from 840 until the Norman conquest.¹⁰

Another important point that one needs to underline is the strong militarization of the society of Byzantine Italy after the Lombard invasion. Almost everywhere the military leaders were at the head of the society; officers and soldiers from the East settled in large numbers in the Italian peninsula.¹¹ The process of militarization was accentuated by the fact that during the seventh century, in ways we can not fully understand, the recruitment of troops was increasingly effected on a local basis. As a result, in a clear parallel with the evolution of Lombard Italy, in the part of Italy that remained linked to the empire the majority of the free male population had the title of *miles* and were associated in *numeri* and *bandi*, i.e., military units of the Byzantine army.¹² Similarly, in the Lombard Kingdom, free men bore the title of *exercitalis* or *arimannus*, always with the meaning of “soldier” in the public army.¹³ Throughout the

9 See below, text and note 66.

10 Bernard Bavant, “Le duché byzantin de Rome. Origine, durée et extension géographique,” *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen-Age, Temps modernes* 91/1 (1979), pp. 41–88.

11 Thomas S. Brown, *Gentlemen and Officers. Imperial Administration and Aristocratic Power in Byzantine Italy A.D. 554–800* (Rome, 1984), pp. 61–108.

12 Francesco Borri, “Towns and Identities in the Italian Eastland: 790–810,” in *Urban Identities in Northern Italy (800–1100 ca.)*, ed. Cristina La Rocca and Piero Majocchi, *Seminari del Centro SAAME* 5 (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 91–93.

13 Stefano Gasparri, “La questione degli arimanni,” *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo e Archivio Muratoriano* 87 (1978), pp. 121–153.

eighth century, in the documents of Ravenna we find men defined as *milites*, who are linked to certain regiments. Next to them there are, to a lesser extent, others that are called *domestici* and *tribuni*, which have to have been officers: the latter in particular were placed in the military hierarchy immediately below the *duces* and the *magistri militum*.¹⁴

What do we know about the Venetian military and political organization before the birth of the city of Venice, which is to say not earlier than the late Carolingian period? As previously shown, within our sources for the reconstruction of the origins of the Venetian duchy, though fairly difficult to trust, we must focus on the fundamental institution of the duchy: the duke. We need to use this institution as a kind of fossil-guide. Compared to the duke, in fact, the other institutions of the duchy are sketchy. So we will go in search of the “first Venetian duke,” i.e., the first *doge*, meaning the first duke the Venetians elected independently from Byzantium, because this election was a fundamental moment in the history of Venice. However, we must emphasize the fact that, as early as the late sixth century, *duces* or *magistri militum* had to be at the head of the Venetian duchy, just as in the other Byzantine duchies of Italy.

The seventh century offers us the first useful information. On the epigraph conserved in Santa Maria di Torcello, dated between 1 September and 5 October 639, it is written that the church was founded by Mauricius, *gloriosus magister militum*, “who resides in his place.”¹⁵ This means that the church was built on land owned by Mauricius, who obviously had roots in that place. We can suppose that he is the oldest Byzantine commander of the lagoon of whom traces remain in the sources. The other interesting information of the epigraph is that the foundation of the church had been ordered by the exarch Isaac. We do not know if Isaac had personally traveled to the lagoon, but the epigraph is a clear trace of his interest in what was happening in the *Venetia*. Mauricius had executed the order, dedicating the church “for his (Isaac’s) merits and those of his army.”¹⁶ This could suggest a direct involvement of Isaac in the defense

14 Ruggero Benericetti, *Le carte ravennati dei secoli ottavo e nono* (Faenza, 2006), nn. 1, 4, 5, 6, pp. 3–4, 8–15; Bavant, “Le duché byzantin de Rome,” pp. 67–70.

15 Agostino Pertusi, “L’iscrizione torcellana dei tempi di Eraclio,” in id., *Saggi veneto-bizantini*, ed. G.B. Parente (Florence, 1990), pp. 1–31. On Isaac: Salvatore Cosentino, *Prosopografia dell’Italia bizantina (493–804) II* (G-O) (Bologna, 2000), pp. 225–226, and Ravagnani, *Gli esarchi d’Italia*, pp. 71–75.

16 “In nomine Domini Dei nostri Iesu Christi, imperante domno nostro Heraclio perpetuo augusto, anno XXVIII indictione XIII facta est ecclesia sancte Marie Dei genetricis ex iussione pio et devoto domno nostro Isaacio excellentissimo exarcho patricio et Deo volente dedicata pro eius meritis et eius exercitu. Hec fabricata est a fundamentis per bene meritum Mauricum gloriosum magistro militum provincie Venetiarum resedentem in

of the lagoon, which—as previously said—was under attack by the Lombard king Rothari, who in fact took Oderzo for the first time in the same period.¹⁷ The Armenian Isaac was a very active exarch on the military level: beyond that of Torcello, two other inscriptions remind us of the military merits of the exarch, one in Ravenna and another found in Comacchio.¹⁸ Isaac finally opposed Rothari, during the offensive launched by the king against Liguria, and was defeated and probably killed in 643 at the battle of Scultenna, which was the most important fight in the whole history of the conflicts between the Byzantines and the Lombards.¹⁹ The presence of Isaac in Venice is therefore probable and confirms the value of the military defense of all that remained of the ancient *Venetia et Histria*.

After Isaac, we find in the *Venetia* the patrician Gregory, who around 650 caught in a trap in Oderzo (temporarily back in Byzantine hands) the two Lombard dukes of Friuli, Taso and Cacco, killing them.²⁰ Paul the Deacon, who recounts the episode, is usually quite accurate in his use of titles, so it is likely that Gregory too was an exarch (ordinarily a *patricius*) and not the *magister militum* or *dux* of Venice, even if the latter cannot be entirely excluded: in fact, an officer called *dux* and *patricius* is found in Rome in the next century.²¹ Finally, a lead seal was found in a tomb in the territory of Eraclea, near Venice, and dated to the seventh century. This belonged to the patrician Anastasios: the latter, who bore the same title of Gregory, may have been another high-ranking representative of Byzantium in the *Venetia*.²²

There are no other traces of the presence of a *magister militum* or a duke in the lagoon up to the beginning of the eighth century. The story concerning the election of the first doge belongs to the latter period; it is narrated in the oldest

hunc locum suum, consecrante sancto et reverendissimo Mauro episcopo huius ecclesie feliciter" (ed. by Pietro Rugo, *Le iscrizioni dei secoli VI, VII e VIII esistenti in Italia, II: Venezia e Istria* (Citadella, 1975), n. 1, p. 17).

17 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, IV, 45, p. 135.

18 See above, n. 15, and Stefano Gasparri, *Un placito carolingio e la storia di Comacchio*, in *Faire lien. Aristocratie, réseaux et échanges compétitifs. Mélanges en l'honneur de Régine Le Jan*, ed. Laurent Jegou, Sylvie Joye, Thomas Lienhard and Jens Schneider (Paris, 2015), pp. 179–189.

19 See above, n. 17; Delogu, "Il regno longobardo," p. 61.

20 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, IV, 38, pp. 132–133.

21 Bavant, "Le duché byzantin de Rome," p. 77.

22 According to Giorgio Ravegnani, Anastasios was an exarch: Ravegnani, *Gli esarchi d'Italia*, p. 39; see also Salvatore Cosentino, *Prosopografia dell'Italia bizantina*, I (A-F) (Bologna, 1996), p. 139, and Wladimiro Dorigo, *Bolle plumbee bizantine nella Venezia esarcale*, in *Studi in memoria di Giuseppe Bovini* (Ravenna, 1989), pp. 223–235.

Venetian chronicle, which is attributed to John the Deacon (even if the text is anonymous), a close collaborator of the duke Pietro II Orseolo, and was written around 1000. Despite many general problems that this chronicle raises, and which have been studied by myself and by others, it remains the main source we have for the 8th–10th centuries: but it is always necessary to exercise very strict criticism of this text to use it properly.²³

In the first part of the chronicle—the part that raises major problems of attribution²⁴—John writes that, during the reign of Anastasios II in Byzantium, and the reign of the Lombard Liutprand in Italy, all Venetians, assembled in Eraclea together with the patriarch of Grado and the bishops, established that, from now on, it would be more honorable for them to be subjected to dukes instead of tribunes. Therefore, after a careful discussion, they elected as duke a certain Paulicius, to whom they promised fidelity. According to John, Paulicius was a righteous man, governed with justice and signed a major peace treaty with the Lombard king Liutprand, whose provisions were still in force in John's time. The chronicler adds that Paulicius also established the boundaries of the territory of Cittanova.²⁵ Overlaying the years of government of Anastasios and Liutprand, we obtain as a possible date of Paulicius' election a year between 713 (the date that is traditionally accepted) and 715.

In previous chapters John, recounting a story modelled on Paul the Deacon's *Historia Langobardorum*, told the stories of the Roman population's escape to the lagoon fleeing the barbarian invasions, and that of the patriarch of Aquileia who had also fled to the lagoon to Grado.²⁶ Also according to John, in those distant times the province of the *Venetia* was governed by the tribunes, that is by Byzantine army officers. The picture that John presents, which is characterized by the harsh struggles of the local population against the barbarians (the Lombards), is very vague, and he gives no information about what actually happened. Paulicius' election is the foundation stone on which he builds the story of the city of Venice: hence it derives its exceptional importance.

John's story is largely a tale of fantasy, which deliberately ignores the fact that Venice until then had been a Byzantine duchy, and presents its history

23 See the introduction of Luigi Andrea Bertò to his edition of the chronicle: Giovanni Diacono, *Istoria Veneticorum* (Bologna, 1999), pp. 7–25 (hereafter cited as *Istoria Veneticorum*), and Stefano Gasparri, *The formation of an early medieval community: Venice between provincial and urban identity*, in *Three Empires, three cities: Identity, material culture and legitimacy in Venice, Ravenna and Rome, 750–1000*, ed. Veronica West-Harling, Seminari del Centro SAAME 6 (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 35–50.

24 *Istoria Veneticorum*, pp. 12–21 (Bertò's introduction).

25 *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 2, p. 94.

26 *Istoria Veneticorum*, I, 5, 11, 38, pp. 52, 62, 82, II, 1, p. 94.

as if it had always been completely independent from any external power.²⁷ Similarly fantastic is that it was the news reported by the Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus. Fifty years before John, Constantine also wrote that the first duke, unnamed, had been elected at a meeting of the Venetian people, but this meeting could in fact only have happened after the victorious resistance of the Venetians to the attempt of the Frankish king of Italy, Pippin, to take possession of Venice.²⁸ In the story of Constantine, which is legendary although probably built on information coming from Venice, the first election took place a century later than in John the Deacon's story.

Despite the required criticism, the elements regarding the election presented by John must be examined carefully. The first description of the ducal election, apart from this one, is that of Giovanni II Particiaco, which occurred much later, in 887: in this case the presence of the clergy is not mentioned.²⁹ However, the claim of John about their presence in 713 is not entirely far-fetched, because the first surviving Venetian document, written in 819, a donation of duke Agnello Particiaco and his son Giustiniano, tells us that the decision was taken in the presence of the highest ecclesiastical authorities and the Venetian people (i.e., the secular elite of the duchy).³⁰ It's possible then to admit the existence of an already highly structured ducal assembly at the beginning of the ninth century, but it remains difficult to think that the same assembly could have been so well articulated a hundred years before, when, according to John, Paulicius was elected.

Nevertheless, the existence of local assemblies in the 8th century seems at least plausible, as I shall discuss below; the character of these meetings would have been basically military. As for the tribunes mentioned by John, this social layer is certainly present in ancient Venetian sources and in the sources for the whole Byzantine area: a famous example is an epigraph of Jesolo (7th–8th centuries), which recalls a tribune Antoninus.³¹ Tribunes are mentioned, but as members of a past class of landowners, in the will of the doge Giustiniano Particiaco (829);³² other tribunes are remembered as landowners in the

27 Another source used by John the Deacon was the *Translatio Sancti Marci*, an anonymous text written in the tenth century, edited by E. Colombi, "Translatio Sancti Marci Evangelistae Venetias [BHL 5283–5284]," *Hagiographica* 17 (2010), pp. 112–139.

28 Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De Administrando imperio*, ed. Gyula Moravcsik, in *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae*, I, 2nd ed. (Washington, 1985), col. 28, pp. 118–121.

29 *Istoria Veneticorum*, III, 32, 35, pp. 147, 149.

30 *Ss. Ilario e Benedetto e S. Gregorio (819–1199)*, ed. Luigi Lanfranchi and Bianca Strina (Venice, 1965), n. 1, pp. 8–12.

31 Pietro Rugo, *Le iscrizioni*, n. 17, p. 24.

32 *Ss. Ilario e Benedetto e S. Gregorio (819–1199)*, n. 2, pp. 17–24.

charters of Ravenna of the 8th and 9th centuries.³³ The tribunes mentioned in the famous dispute-settlement (*placitum*) held at Rižana in Istria in 804, would have also likely been landowners. From this *placitum* emerges a vivid picture of the characteristics of the class of the Istrian tribunes, which would have been, if not identical, at least very similar to their Venetian and Ravenna counterparts. The nature of the powers exercised by this class on the rural population in 804, the date of *placitum*, was hovering between its original public function and the private domain. But in the 8th century their nature of public officials was probably still widely prevalent; and in Venice in the 7th and 8th centuries too the tribunes would have had a public function.³⁴

Of great interest, as a comparison with the story of John the Deacon, are also the hints in the *placitum* of Rižana of the persistence of municipal assemblies, called *communiones* or *congressus*. The oldest lagoon congregation is thus given an indirect but valuable visibility: it too would have had a strong military nature. The tribunes and other members of the assemblies constituted the intermediate levels of the local army (*militia*), and had led from the general militarization of the political structures to the government of cities and castles. There must therefore have been an assembly in the lagoon *Venetia* of the eighth century, but its role in the ducal election and its degree of autonomy from Byzantium are unknown. It seems difficult to imagine that it had a stable role in such elections, at least in normal times; however its role could have been different in revolutionary times.

Moreover, John the Deacon explains the election of the duke by saying that the Venetians decided that from then on it was “more honorable” to be under the authority of the dukes than under that of the tribunes, and therefore they elected Paulicius.³⁵ This information is obviously false, since we know that the tribunes were not at the head of the Byzantine military regions: the head of the latter were always the *duces* or *magistri militum*. However, to understand how John the Deacon worked, it is interesting to note that this passage, though perhaps not literally, reminds one suspiciously of a similar one of Paul the Deacon, who, along with Bede (and the *Translatio sancti Marci*), is the main source of

33 Some examples above, note 14 (in Benericetti, *Le carte degli archivi ravennati*).

34 Francesco Borri, “L’Istria fra Bisanzio e i Franchi: istituzioni, identità e potere,” in *L’heritage byzantin en Italie (VIIIe–XIIIe siècle)*, II, *Les cadres juridiques et sociaux et les institutions publiques*, ed. Jean-Marie Martin, Annette Peters-Custot, and Vivien Prigent (Rome, 2012), pp. 297–323.

35 *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 2, p. 94: “omnes Venetici, una cum patriarcha et episcopis convenientes, communi consilio determinaverunt quod dehinc honorabilius esse sub ducibus quam sub tribunis manere.”

all the first part of John's chronicle. Paul wrote that the Lombards, "in the likeness of other peoples" (and, by implication, to reach these peoples' superior level of government, claimed that it was more honorable), decided to abandon the government of the dukes and to elect a king.³⁶ This passage of the chronicle was built specifically by John in order to reuse the information that he had gained from a different source—we will see soon after which source—and which he wanted to include in the narrative of the chronicle, up to that point relying on Paul the Deacon and Bede. Its purpose was to begin an independent political history of the Venetian community in a lofty manner.

The source John relied on referred to Paulician and to the pact with Liutprand but did not speak about the election of a duke. John's source was part of a text, the pact of Lothar of 840, which John had seen and which, fortunately for us, is still extant.³⁷ This document has always been considered of great importance, and has long been interpreted as the first official recognition of Venetian independence. In fact it was the text of a pact between the Venetians and their neighbours, i.e., the inhabitants of the neighbouring territories of the Italian kingdom; a pact that the Frankish emperor Lothar had ordered to be put in writing at the request of duke Pietro Tribuno. But it was clearly not an agreement between two powers of the same level; on the contrary, it was the act of an emperor who, from the height of his power, brings order in the border areas of his empire.³⁸

The pact contains two chapters, 26 and 28, that refer to the question that interests us here. According to Roberto Cessi, who had devoted extensive studies to the pact, the two chapters belong to two different periods: Chapter 28 to the age of the peace of Aachen, or immediately after, that is around 812–814; Chapter 26 to the age of Lothar.³⁹ This is certainly a text with several strata, with a layer of the 8th century, represented precisely by the same content as these two chapters. Chapters 26 and 28 deal with the boundaries between the territories of the Lombard kingdom and Cittanova-Eraclea, which was part of the Venetian duchy. Chapter 26 mentions in general terms the establishment

36 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, I, 14, p. 54: "nolentes iam ultra Langobardi esse sub ducis, regem sibi ad ceterarum instar gentium statuerunt."

37 *Pactum Hlotharii I*, ed. Alfred Boretius and Victor Krause, MGH Capitularia regum Francorum 2 (Hanover, 1897), n. 233, pp. 130–135.

38 This is the opinion of G.B.V. West, "Communities and *pacta* in early medieval Italy: jurisdiction, regulatory authority and dispute avoidance," *Early Medieval Europe* 18/4 (2010), pp. 367–393.

39 Roberto Cessi, "La « terminatio » liutprandina per la definizione del territorio di Cittanova," and id., "Paulician dux," in id., *Le origini del ducato veneziano* (Naples, 1951), pp. 149–153 and 155–173.

of boundaries (*terminatio*) made in king Liutprand's time between the duke Paulicius and the *magister militum* Marcellus, and which must have remained valid in the terms established by King Aistulf when he bestowed it "to you inhabitants of Cittanova." Chapter 28 says that the flocks "from your side" (Lothar's) can graze undisturbed up to the boundary appointed by the duke Paulicius with the inhabitants of Civitanova, i.e., between the two branches of the Piave, "as we read in the pact."⁴⁰

It is evident that John, who, as part of his duties as collaborator of Pietro II Orseolo frequented the ducal palace—the chancery and the archives—had before him nothing but this text, and that, by rearranging the information that it provided him, he built on it the whole of Paulicius's election story, pretty much inventing it. This explains the anachronisms and inconsistencies that I have stated. But the fact remains, that in the pact a duke Paulicius is appointed, and is mentioned at the time of Liutprand: was he really the first independent Venetian duke, the first doge? On this point, i.e., the historical reality of Paulicius as the first Venetian duke, local historiography was divided in the past and in part remains divided today. Roberto Cessi, already many years ago, put most strongly in doubt that Paulicis was the first duke, and I agree with him on this point. It's on the rest of his reasoning that it's impossible to agree.

To understand his reasoning we must leave aside for a moment the ducal problem and focus on the pact between Paulicius and Liutprand mentioned by John. Cessi states that an overall political agreement between the Lombards and the Venetians at the time of Liutprand, as mentioned by John the Deacon, would never have existed. The *terminatio* mentioned in the Lothar pact of 840 would have been simply the memory of the establishment of borders between the Venetian and Lombard territories, coinciding with the area of Cittanova, an act that was carried out independently by two Byzantine authorities of the lagoon and only later confirmed by the Lombard king Aistulf, who in this way gave to it legal validity for the Lombard kingdom. We would thus be simply in the presence of a material drawing up of borders, which was followed by a subsequent bestowal (*largitio*) by Aistulf. The two authorities involved in the affair would have been the duke Paulicius, who for Cessi was the exarch of

40 *Pactum Hlotharii* I, cap. 26, p. 135: "De finibus autem Civitatis novae statuimus, ut, sicut a tempore Liutprandi regis terminatio facta est inter Paulitionem ducem et Marcellum magistrum militum, ita permanere debeat, secundum quod Aistulfus ad vos Civitatinos novos largitus est"; cap. 28, p. 135: "Peculiarumque vestrarum partium greges pascere debeant cum securitate usque in terminum, quem posuit Paulitius dux cum Civitatinis novis, sicut in pacto legitur de Plave maiore usque in Plavem siccam, quod est terminus vel proprietas vestra."

Ravenna Paul (his name, according to Cessi, was a corrupted form of *Paulus patricius*) who, before becoming exarch, had been duke and had perhaps kept his old title, and the *magister militum* Marcellus, commander in chief of the Byzantine lagoon with a title that, according to Cessi, expressed dependence on Byzantium and not autonomy.⁴¹ Thus John, when presenting Paulicius as the first duke, intended instead to emphasize the autonomy of the origins.

The main objective of Cessi, in harmony with the more traditional trends of Venetian historiography, was to deny any link between the mainland (first Lombard and then Frankish) and Venice, but I believe this to be an erroneous view. On the contrary, we now know very well that the links between the Venetian duchy—and Byzantine Italy in general—and the Lombard (then Carolingian) kingdom were very close and that the influence of the mainland on the lagoon society was remarkable.⁴²

Nevertheless, Cessi was right about many things: the overall agreement between Liutprand and Paulicius was an invention of John the Deacon; Paulicius was not the first doge; the mention of Liutprand in Chapter 26 was only an element of dating, that is a reference to the fact that the deal was struck while Liutprand reigned. But the rest of Cessi's reasoning can not be accepted: above all, it is not necessary to think about the derivation of the name of Paulicius from that of an alleged *Paulus patricius* (so reconnecting to the exarch Paul). In fact, the name Paulicius existed in the Lombard area.⁴³ The purpose of Cessi's strained interpretation stemmed from the scholar's will to reduce the Lombard intervention to the mere confirmation by Aistulf of an autonomous Byzantine-lagoon act, in which only two Byzantine officials, Paulicius and Marcellus, appear, but no Lombards.

Italy in the 8th century, however, was a very different world from the one sketched by Cessi, which focused on the hostile opposition between Romans and barbarians. In fact, we are facing two closely interrelated societies, especially in those border areas where the population of the Byzantine and Lombard lands was often mixed. In addition, the meaning of the definition of the borders between Cittanova and the kingdom can be understood only if we consider it within a complex set of other local accommodations made at the time of Liutprand—and then continued by later sovereigns—both internal to

41 Above, note 39.

42 Stefano Gasparri, "Venezia fra l'Italia bizantina e il regno italico: la *civitas* e l'assemblea," in *Venezia. Itinerari per la storia della città*, ed. Stefano Gasparri, Giovanni Levi, and Pierandrea Moro (Bologna, 1997), pp. 61–82.

43 *Codice Diplomatico Longobardo*, II, ed. Luigi Schiaparelli, in *Fonti per la storia d'Italia* 63 (Roma, 1933), nn. 136 (759) and 246 (770), pp. 28 and 322.

the kingdom, and with the neighboring political entities, the most important of which was that with Comacchio in 715, of which more later.⁴⁴

In summary, we have here two different acts; both involve the Lombards and deal first with the establishment of the borders, and then with the confirmation of Aistulf. The first act, which interests us most, was a Lombard-Byzantine bilateral pact. In it, Liutprand's name was just one element of dating, he did not intervene at all in the stipulations of the agreement. Locally, there were two actors: Marcellus, the Venetian *magister militum*, and Paulicius. Since one has to have two parties in order to give validity to the boundaries, Paulicius was definitely a Lombard duke of a north-central Italy duchy, perhaps the duke of Treviso, which was the Lombard duchy nearest to the border.

It may be useful, at this point, to make a comparison between the Venetian agreement of 713 and the pact with Comacchio of 715.⁴⁵ The latter contains the confirmation of the conditions under which the Comacchiesi, i.e., the inhabitants of Comacchio (a small center south of Ravenna), called *milites*, were allowed to trade in a series of ports (Mantova, Brescia, Cremona, Parma, Piacenza, and others) of the Lombard kingdom, located along the Po river and its tributaries, paying taxes in cash or in kind. Among the products subject to tax, in addition to salt and oil, there were pepper and garum, which prove the existence of an import trade flow from the East run by the merchants of Comacchio. The pact is defined in the text, which is unfortunately mutilated at several points, "chapter granted by us Lombards, faithful" (to the king):⁴⁶ the king is Liutprand, who in this case is remembered again at the beginning as a dating element ("at the time of king Liutprand"). The agreement was issued in Pavia, where evidently the people of Comacchio had gone to ask the king for recognition of their customs, which could then have gone back to the late seventh century, perhaps after the peace of 680.

In the pact of 715 the priest Lupicinus, Bertari *magister militum* and the *comites* Maurus and Stephen appear as representatives of all the inhabitants (*habitatores*) of Comacchio. This suggests the existence of a politically structured community according to the model of Byzantine Italy, i.e., under a military commander who also held with civilian power, the *magister militum*; then

44 Stefano Gasparri, "Venezia fra i secoli VIII e IX. Una riflessione sulle fonti," in *Studi veneti offerti a Gaetano Cozzi* (Venice, 1992), pp. 6–7.

45 Ludo Moritz Hartmann, *Zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte Italiens im frühen Mittelalter. Analekten* (Gotha, 1904), p. 74.

46 Loc. cit.: "capitulare porrectum a nobis cunctis fidelibus Longobardorum."

there are the *comites*, which are always part of the group of the tribunes.⁴⁷ The situation in Venice had to be more or less the same: the analogy between the command structure of the two centers, which emerges from the two pacts, is evident. The real difference is that next to the *magister militum* in Comacchio is mentioned a *presbiter*. Instead in Venice in 713, despite the existence in the lagoon of the patriarch of Grado, no ecclesiastical figure is mentioned in the agreement. The difference may be due to a greater weakness, of the political and military structures of Comacchio compared to those of Venice: thus Comacchio had to lean on the church hierarchy, although in the pact no bishop or even an archpriest or archdeacon are mentioned, or any element that could suggest the existence of a bishop and a bishopric.

Soon, however, the similarity between Venice and Comacchio was to be restored from that same point of view. In fact a bishop may well have existed in Comacchio from a time perhaps not much later than the pact, in 723.⁴⁸ Excavations carried out around the cathedral of Comacchio, however, have identified traces of a cult building only from the late eighth century,⁴⁹ and this coincides with the first reliable evidence of the presence of a bishop in Comacchio, which is 781: in that year, a diploma issued by Charlemagne for Vitalis bishop of Comacchio confirmed to the inhabitants of Comacchio, represented by the bishop, the right to carry out their business in accordance with the rules that were in force with the previous kings (of which only Liutprand is mentioned).⁵⁰ The comparison, even chronologically, with Venice holds even more if we consider that in 776 was founded the first bishopric in the heart of the lagoon, in the archipelago of Rialto, on the island of Olivolo (now Castello).⁵¹

At this point, if we compare as a whole the pacts of 713 and 715, we see that in the latter—unlike in the Venitian pact—only one side, that of Comacchio, is presented in detail, but the other is still there: the names of Liutprand's officers may have disappeared at the time of the copying of the original. As in

47 Bavant, "Le duché byzantin de Rome," pp. 67–70, and Brown *Gentlemen and Officers*, p. 57, note 34.

48 Sauro Gelichi, "*Lupicinus presbiter*. Una breve nota sulle istituzioni ecclesiastiche comacchiesi delle origini," in *Ricerca come incontro. Archeologi, paleografi e storici per Paolo Delogu*, ed. Giulia Barone, Anna Esposito, and Carla Frova (Roma, 2013), pp. 48–52: according to an epigraph in the cathedral of Comacchio, *Vincentius primus episcopus* would have built the church of S. Cassiano in the year 723.

49 *L'isola del vescovo. Gli scavi archeologici intorno alla Cattedrale di Comacchio*, ed. Sauro Gelichi (Florence, 2009).

50 *Pippini, Carlomanni, Caroli Magni Diplomata*, ed. Engebert Mühlbacher, MGH, DD Karolinerum 1 (Hanover, 1906), n. 132, pp. 182–183.

51 *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 19, p. 104.

the Chapter 26 of Lothar's pact, here Liutprand provides an element of dating and his officers are the actors. The difference is that we are not faced with an agreement, but with a concession made by the Lombard side to the Comacchio merchants: from this point of view, the *capitulare* of 715 recalls Lothar's pact, which in turn has included the previous pact of 713.

With the interpretation we have proposed, the figure of Paulicius as the first independent duke of Venice vanishes. The second doge of the traditional catalogue, identified as such by John the Deacon, Marcellus, is much in doubt, despite his (albeit uncertain) mention in a papal letter of 723, concerning the conflict between the sees of Aquileia and Grado.⁵² It is indeed very likely that Marcellus is listed as second duke by John for the same reasons that had inspired the imaginative reconstruction of Paulicius' election, i.e., the need to fill gaps in the ancient ducal catalogues and to highlight the first steps of the history of Venice. To this end, John used the second name, after that of Paulicius, that he had available from Lothar's pact, that of the *magister militum* Marcellus.⁵³ The latter was certainly at the head of the Venetian duchy, but it is very unlikely that he was elected in an autonomous way. The institutional break came later.

With Orso, the third doge mentioned by John and then by all Venetian sources after him, we are on less uncertain ground.⁵⁴ It is believed that Orso was elected in 726 or 727, at the time of the general uprising of Byzantine Italy against the emperor Leo III, a supporter of the iconoclastic heresy. We know from the Roman *Liber Pontificalis* that in that year the armies of the Byzantine duchies of Italy, among which is expressly mentioned the *exercitus Venetiarum*, rebelled against Byzantium and elected autonomous dukes.⁵⁵ Leaving aside for the moment the duke's name, the first and most important here is the chronology, which tells us that around 730 an independent duchy was emerging in the Venetian lagoon.

Around 735, according to John the Deacon, the exarch went to Venice for help to free Ravenna, the capital of the Exarchate and of the whole Byzantine Italy, which had been occupied by the Lombards.⁵⁶ While Byzantine Italy

52 *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 10–11, p. 98; *Epistolae Langobardicae collectae*, ed. Ernest Dümmler, in MGH, Epp 3 (Berlin, 1892), n. 9, pp. 699–700: in the *intitulatio* of the letter, “et Marcello duci” could be an interpolation.

53 See above, note 40.

54 *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 11, p. 98; Gherardo Ortalli, “Venezia dalle origini a Pietro II Orseolo,” in *Storia d'Italia*, I (Turin, 1980), pp. 366–367.

55 *Vita Gregorii II*, in *Liber Pontificalis*, ed. Louis Duchesne, I (Paris, 1886), p. 404.

56 *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 12, pp. 98–100.

faltered, the Venetian duchy began to be distinguished by its military strength: the Venetian fleet intervened and drove away the Lombards.⁵⁷ We must not exaggerate the strength of this fleet, given that the Venetians were defeated at sea by both the Slav pirates and the Saracens until the second half of the ninth century.⁵⁸ But there is no doubt that the Venetians already owned, in the eighth century, a war fleet, with which they reconquered Ravenna on behalf of the exarch. This is also demonstrated by a letter (726 or 735) of Pope Gregory II or III, who asked a duke Orso for help for the exarch Eutychius, a refugee in the lagoon (*apud Venecias*), to recapture Ravenna.⁵⁹ This is a significant point because it is with the rising military role of the Venetians that we could explain the election of Orso as autonomous duke of Venice by the local army. The general uprising of Byzantine Italy in 726/7, the political and military instability of the subsequent years, and the weakening of the Exarchate offered the Venetians the possibility of greater autonomy than in the past: the result was the election of Orso as *dux Venetiarum*. So Orso could have been the first independent duke from Byzantium, the first doge. On the contrary, in the context of the previous ten years an independent election of a duke in Venice seems totally implausible.

In this framework of political and military growth of the duchy, the Venetian trade of the eighth century remains almost undocumented. This confirms the idea that the first progresses of Venice were not directly in the commercial field, but in the military one. We can certainly pick up some signs of Venetian trade. The *Liber Pontificalis*, for the pontificate of Zacharias (mid-eighth century), tells us that the Venetians were slave traders, and that they bought slaves in Rome to resell in Africa; therefore they were present in the western Mediterranean, in the Thyrrhenian sea.⁶⁰ The Venetians had also clearly traded in the Eastern Mediterranean for a long time, since at the very beginning of the ninth century they were able to procure relics in Egypt for the Frankish count of Treviso.⁶¹ Finally, in 787 Charlemagne, already master of Italy, ordered Pope Hadrian I to eject the Venetians from Ravenna and the whole Adriatic area: again a clear proof of the military and strategic importance of the duchy, but at the same time a proof of the fact that the latter, which at the time was hostile

57 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, VI, 54, pp. 183–184.

58 Gherardo Ortalli, “Il ducato e la « Civitas Rivoalti » tra Carolingi, Bizantini e Sassoni,” in *Storia di Venezia*, I (Rome, 1992), pp. 739–745.

59 *Epistolae Langobardicae collectae*, n. 11, p. 702.

60 *Vita Zachariae*, in *Liber Pontificalis*, p. 433.

61 *Miracula sancti Genesii*, ed. Georg Waitz, MGH, *Scriptores* 15 (Hannoverae, 1887), p. 170.

to Charlemagne and allied with Byzantium, could be hard hit commercially through the closing of the Adriatic ports.⁶²

It remains to explain the lack of sources related to Venetian trade. If this absence is partly to be explained by the Venetian commercial traffic on smaller rivers, which would have had to be of a local nature and thus at a rather modest level, the question remains about the presence of Venice on the Po-axis, the center of Northern Italy's internal trade. The attempt to fill this gap means recalling again the pact signed in 715 between the Lombard kingdom and the inhabitants of Comacchio. Northern Italian sources of the eighth and ninth centuries mention repeatedly commercial convoys of ships, the *naves militorum*; *militēs* is a generic name for the Byzantines in Italy, which does not allow to distinguish between Comacchiesi, Venetians, or inhabitants of other Byzantine cities.⁶³ But the existence of the pact of 715, which is the oldest document on the Po river trade of the 8th–9th centuries, and which is mentioned several times in the sources, has led historians to interpret all the *militēs* as Comacchiesi. On the contrary, it is virtually certain that under this label Venetians were also included. For example in Lothar's pact, in a chapter that goes back to the time of Charlemagne, it is said that royal Frankish officers must collect the duties owed by the Venetians "according to the ancient custom for our ports and rivers."⁶⁴ The mention of the custom could refer precisely to the old pact between the Lombards and the Comacchiesi. This pact almost certainly served as the basis for all the business relations in the ports of the Po between Lombards and Byzantines in Italy. For this reason it also applied to the earliest commercial relations with the Venetians, which would have been similar to those required of the Comacchiesi, meaning a mixture of cash, in-kind payments, and meals to be provided to port officials. The relations between the kingdom and Venice were regulated in written form for the first time only in the age of Charlemagne, in the text just mentioned, and which was then inserted into Lothar's pact.

The strategic location of the lagoon therefore offered to the duchy the opportunity to play a significant military role during the eighth century, especially after the whole of Adriatic Italy was devastated by the fall of Ravenna and the Exarchate at the hands of the Lombard king Aistulf in 751. Moving on from this military role, from the end of the eighth century onwards the duchy built its fortunes by developing its trading activity, which, even if dimly lit by

62 *Codex Carolinus*, MGH, Epp 3, n. 86, pp. 622–623.

63 See above, note 12.

64 *Pactum Hlotharii I*, cap. 17, p. 133; on the *capitulare*, see Gasparri, "Venezia fra i secoli VIII e IX," pp. 8–13.

the written sources, existed already from the beginning of the eighth century, or even before: we shouldn't forget that in 680 a general peace between the Byzantine Empire and the Lombard kingdom had been concluded, which no doubt stimulated the commercial recovery in the whole Adriatic area and in the Po valley.⁶⁵ The wars of Aistulf probably didn't upset this development, on the contrary the Lombard conquest of the Exarchate, by politically joining the Adriatic coast to the kingdom, made business contacts between the coast and the interior easier.

As we have seen, it is impossible to understand the early history of Venice without considering the entire Adriatic coast area, at least as far as Comacchio. Excavations carried out in Comacchio revealed that the beginning of the port of Comacchio's growth can be traced back to the second half of the seventh century, perhaps in connection with the aforementioned peace of 680. Consequent port facilities have been excavated (quays and traces of wooden warehouses), in a center located in an area of channels, very similar to the area in which Venice was developing, and with a development plan divided into districts with different functions (ecclesiastical, artisanal, portual). Amphorae from the East (from the Aegean Sea, Palestine), dating to the 8th–9th centuries were also found in Comacchio in large quantities, proving the existence of a long distance trade flow, and not only of a local activity of the transportation of salt.⁶⁶ These amphorae were found everywhere in the northern Adriatic coastal area: Cervia, Rimini, Grado, and Venice, as well as in the Po valley.⁶⁷ All this confirms the testimony of the pact of 715 and shows how the Venetian duchy at that time was certainly part of the commercial movement that the pact regulated.

We know from the *Liber Pontificalis* that Aistulf took possession of Comacchio, probably when he occupied Ravenna; the *Comiaculum castrum* then passed to the pope through Frankish intervention, was temporarily taken over by king Desiderius, and finally returned to the pope—this time contending

65 Delogu, "Il regno longobardo," pp. 99–100.

66 Sauro Gelichi, "The eels of Venice. The long eighth century of the emporia of the northern region along the Adriatic coast," in 774. *Ipotesi su una transizione*, ed. Stefano Gasparri, Seminari del Centro SAAME 1 (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 81–117; Sauro Gelichi, Diego Calaon, Elena Grandi, and Claudio Negrelli, "History of a forgotten Town: Comacchio and his archaeology," in *From one sea to another. Trading places in the European and Mediterranean Early Middle Ages*, Seminari del Centro SAAME 3 (Turnhout, 2012), pp. 169–205.

67 Gelichi, "The eels of Venice," pp. 90–92; Claudio Negrelli, "Towards a definition of early medieval pottery: amphorae and other vessels in the northern Adriatic between the 7th and 8th centuries," in *From one sea to another*, pp. 393–415.

with Ravenna—in 774.⁶⁸ This shows that in the eighth century Comacchio was an important pawn in the political game in the Emilia and north Adriatic area, so that there was no doubt about the interest of the central powers toward it. Interest and play that were also of a military nature: in 809, according to the *Annales regni Francorum*, a part of a Byzantine fleet, originally coming from Constantinople, but which had wintered in Venice, attacked in vain the *Comiaculum insulam*, i.e., the “isle” of Comacchio, and, rejected by the garrison that had been installed there by the Franks, took refuge again in Venice.⁶⁹ This time Comacchio is presented in military terms, as a stronghold which, moreover, in the eyes of the distant chronicler, appeared set on an island. Apart from the geographical approximation, the mutual role—rival and symmetrical—of Comacchio and Venice, is striking.

The relationships and intersections of the two parallel stories of Comacchio and Venice in the 7th–9th centuries are really very frequent. In both centers, the same exarch (Isaac) placed a commemorative epigraph (mid-seventh century). The exarch Euty chius who takes refuge in Venice (mid-eighth century) is the same exarch who issued a *iudicatum* for Comacchio (the only one we know of that was issued by an exarch). Both in Comacchio and in Venice there is a *magister militum*. Finally, almost in the same year, at the beginning of the 8th century, both centers receive a grant from king Liutprand (it does not matter here whether it was a pact or a *capitulare*).⁷⁰

The parallels had different outcomes, because the golden age of Comacchio was brief: the written sources tell us about the Saracen and Venetian raids that took place during the ninth century, and the archaeological evidence proves that the port facilities of Comacchio were abandoned in the 9th century, no later than the first half.⁷¹ Comacchio never became a city, Venice instead became a city and then a Mediterranean commercial and political power.

Reflecting on the relations between Venice and Comacchio and the parallels that they draw, further underlines the unlikely possibility that the lagoon communities should have been able to give themselves an autonomous duke at a time when the richer Comacchio was not able to do so: in fact, in the pact of 715 Comacchio appears to be headed by a *magister militum*, who was

68 *Vita Stephani II*, in *Liber Pontificalis*, pp. 453–454; Codex Carolinus, nn. 49 and 55, pp. 568, 579 (Adrian I to Charlemagne).

69 *Annales Regni Francorum*, ed. Friederich Kurze, MGH, SSRG 6 (Hanover, 1895), p. 127.

70 Stefano Gasparri, “Un placito carolingio e la storia di Comacchio,” in *Faire lien. Aristocratie, réseaux et échanges compétitifs. Mélanges en l’honneur de Régine Le Jan*, ed. Laurent Jegou, Sylvie Joye, Thomas Lienhard, and Jens Schneider (Paris, 2015), pp. 179–189.

71 See above, note 66.

undoubtedly a Byzantine official, precisely in the same years in which traditionally the less important Venetian community is alleged to have elected an independent doge, the fabled Paulicius.

Furthermore, the Venetian institutional development during the eighth century was slow and uncertain. According to John the Deacon, who is our only source about it for those years, because we no longer have the (albeit distant) help of the chronicle of Paul the Deacon and there are as yet no Venetian archival sources, the Venetians killed the first autonomous duke, Orso, and after him for five years, “wanted to remain subject only to the *magistri militum*,” each of whom ruled for a single year.⁷² Apart from the chronology, which is very uncertain, the meaning of this change as narrated by John remains obscure. Historians have interpreted it in two completely opposite ways, either as a return of the control of Byzantium or as a greater assertion of autonomy by the local aristocracy. According to these interpretations, the return of the dukes to the government of Venice, after five years, meant either the restoration of an autonomous way, or more control on the part of Byzantium (or Ravenna).⁷³

It's impossible to understand John's account about the *magistri militum*, which is likely to have been constructed like his previous story, that is by integrating information from the ducal palace archives with personal reflections. For example, John certainly knew what Paul Deacon had written about the period of ten years that the Lombards had spent without a king after the assassination of king Clefi: and he may well have wanted, in this case, to reuse the prestigious model of the narrative suggested by Paul.⁷⁴ The parallel is further increased by the fact that the first duke after five *magistri militum*, Deusdedit, was the son of the murdered duke Orso, just as Autari, elected king in 584 after ten years of “ducal anarchy,” was the son of the murdered king Clefi.⁷⁵

In any case, even if John has not copied Paul, he did mix the little information he had, to the point that we cannot reconstruct everything that happened. However, it seems unlikely that there should have been a Byzantine intervention in the lagoon between 726 (the year of the revolt of the Byzantine armies of Italy) and 751, when Ravenna fell into the hands of the Lombards, because at this period the Exarchate was getting weaker and Byzantium was virtually

72 *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 11, 14, 17, pp. 98, 100, 102.

73 Ortalli, “Venezia dalle origini a Pietro II Orseolo,” p. 367; Agostino Pertusi, “L'impero bizantino e l'evolversi dei suoi interessi nell'alto Adriatico,” in *Le origini di Venezia* (Florence, 1964), p. 69.

74 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, II, 32, pp. 90–91.

75 Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, III, 16, pp. 100–101, and *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 17, p. 102.

absent from Italy.⁷⁶ Perhaps the story told by John must be interpreted in light of domestic policy, like the memory of an attempt by the Venetian elite to control the duke's power, limiting his government to one year. The attempt failed, because afterwards the duke's office remained for life. A consequence of this feature, and the lack of clear rules of succession, was that most of the first dukes died a violent death or were blinded and deposed. Deusdedit himself was blinded around 742 by Galla, who met the same fate. With the following duke, Domenico Monegario, according to John, tribunes under the duke's command appeared on the political scene, perhaps another form of control by the aristocracy of the autocratic power of the duke (tribunes appeared again with Agnello Particiaco, half a century later).⁷⁷ It's hard to say more about this other political change: at any rate, it indicates that, about the middle of the eighth century, the political structure of the duchy, through various experiments—carried out locally and autonomously—was becoming more complex. Not by chance, these are also the years of the collapse of the Exarchate.

In the period that saw the fall of the Lombard kingdom under Charlemagne and the beginning of Frankish rule in Italy, the internal situation in Venice remained stable: none of the forces that were confronting each other in Italy had either the strength, or a real interest, in dealing with the duchy. With the long rule of Maurizio Galbaio, perhaps elected in 764, which is mentioned both by John the Deacon and in a letter (768–772) from the patriarch of Grado to Pope Stephen III, as well as in the later testament of the doge Giustiniano Particiaco (829), the institution of coregency appears for the first time, a first attempt to solve the problem of an orderly succession and, at the same time, to set up the seeds of hereditary rule. After Maurizio, his son and his grandson were dukes.⁷⁸ Later, the turbulences of the early ninth century, when Franks and Byzantines fought over the possession of the Venetian duchy, broke this first dynastic experiment.⁷⁹ Once the struggles between the two empires ended with the peace of Aachen in 812, there was the foundation on the Rialto islands of the ducal palace, the church of San Marco, and San Zaccaria monastery by the Particiaci

76 Stefano Gasparri, *Italia longobarda. Il regno, i Franchi, il papato* (Roma-Bari, 2012), pp. 85–89 and 100–103.

77 *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 17–18, 30, pp. 102, 104, 114; Ortalli, “Venezia dalle origini a Pietro II Orseolo,” pp. 367–372, 374–375.

78 *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 19, p. 104; *Epistolae Langobardicae collectae*, n. 19, p. 713; for the duke's testament, see above, note 32.

79 Ortalli, “Il ducato,” pp. 725–732.

family, between 811 and 829; thus the first nucleus of the *civitas Rivoalti*, i.e., the city of Venice, was born.⁸⁰

The choice of the Particiaci—the first Venetian ducal dynasty—of the Rialto archipelago definitively closes a period when cities like Eraclea, or other islands, had alternated as the seat of the central power; a period in which it's impossible for us to identify different “parties”—for or against Byzantium, or against the mainland powers—which fought against one another: the impression is that they were internal struggles for power and nothing else, without big connections with what was going on outside the duchy.⁸¹ According to all the historians, with the building of Rialto, the Particiaci dukes (Agnello and his two sons, Giovanni and Giustiniano) moved the political center of the duchy towards the Grand Canal, definitively marginalizing Olivolo and other even more remote islands, such as Torcello and Malamocco.⁸² A change that could not have been painless, given that the Particiaci's family interests were originally far from Rialto: we know that they owned lands, with a small family church, on the mainland, in the area of the river Brenta.⁸³ This shows the revolutionary impact of the changes of the years 811–812. The construction of the palace led to the establishment of a chancery and an archive, and in fact the first Venetian document preserved, albeit in a copy, was issued in 819.

This document records that Agnello and his son Giustiniano, called solemnly “by God's grace dukes of the Venetian province,” gathered in Rialto together with the patriarch of Grado, Fortunatus, Christopher, bishop of Olivolo, and “all the people of Venice” to found the ducal monastery of Sant'Ilario on the land the Particiaci owned next to the course of the river Brenta.⁸⁴ In thus balancing the public and private, this document testifies to the existence and the functioning of a real political assembly within the duchy: an assembly John the Deacon had anticipated by a century with respect to the reality.

To conclude, it must be stressed that the history of the trade and the economic growth of the Venetian duchy coincides with the maturing of its institutional structures: only if analyzed together, are the two processes understandable.

80 Sauro Gelichi, “La storia di una nuova città attraverso l'archeologia: Venezia nell'alto medioevo,” in *Three Empires*, pp. 51–89.

81 West, “Community and *pacta*,” p. 373.

82 Ortalli, “Il ducato,” pp. 732–735.

83 *Ss. Ilario e Benedetto e S. Gregorio*, n. 1, p. 9: “nos quidem Agnellus et Iustinianus per divinam gratiam Venecie provincie duces [...] ad nostram devenit memoriam ut capellam condam in honore Beati Yllarii Confessoris Christi super flumine qui dicitur Une ad iura proprietatis nostre cum suo territorio constructam.”

84 Above, notes 30 and 83.

At the beginning of the ninth century, once the peace of Aachen was signed, Venetian trade was heading toward its first takeoff: at the same time, in the duchy a political assembly existed, and next to it the ducal power appears solidly built, surrounded by the highest ecclesiastical offices and by the tribunes, all subordinated to it,⁸⁵ and settled in the first nucleus of the *civitas Rivoalti*. In every sense, the prehistory of the Venetian duchy was over.

85 Crisis of the tribunes: Ortalli, "Il ducato," pp. 734–735.