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Unconventional Places and Unconventional Biographies?

Colonizing the Lagoon in the Middle Ages: The Case of Venice

ABSTRACT The aim of this article is to compare traditional narratives and new narratives regarding the theme of the origins of Venice (from the Roman period to the Early Middle Ages). New narratives can rely on traditional and less traditional archaeological approaches. However, they are able to question some myths related to the city (that of migrations, for example) and place its history within more complex and articulated social, political, and cultural dynamics related to the Early Middle Ages. A promising approach is to study the colonization processes of lands that are inhabited despite a lack of water or food shortages. This article identifies and explains the reasons for such an unconventional choice.

KEYWORDS Venice; archaeology; Late Antiquity; Early Middle Ages.

Why Colonize a Lagoon?

A lagoon is not an easy place to colonize. While it does have a few advantages (e.g. in terms of security), it also presents several drawbacks. Unless one is ready to live like they do on Lake Inle in Burma, the need to build on firm ground requires a continuous monitoring of the dry land. Moreover, although lagoons consist almost exclusively of water, drinking water is not always available: this has indeed always been a problem for the Venice area, lacking as it is in natural freshwater springs. Finally, food supply too can be quite a challenge if one wishes to avoid relying entirely on external sources.

And yet, despite these objective difficulties, as many as two coastal saline lagoons in northern Italy — Venice and Comacchio — were colonized in the Early Middle Ages (Fig. 7.1). Not only were they colonized, but they also gave birth to two communities that developed into being considerably populous and, later, institutionally prominent settlements. One of them was to become Venice. Asking why as well as how it all came to be is therefore a highly promising project for archaeology.

Traditional Historical Explanations

There are two traditional explanations for the birth of at least one of these settlements, namely Venice. Such explanations matured within the chronicle tradition that started in the eleventh century with the *Istoria Veneticorum*.¹ They were taken up by later scholars and are still acknowledged in historiography.

The first explanation involves entire populations moving to the lagoon for security reasons, possibly as a consequence of barbarian invasions. The local Roman populations supposedly fled to the lagoon along with their bishop and established a new settlement. The people who fled to the islands of the archipelago would have maintained the same social organization and culture. Based on ancient traditions, they kept the new settlement alive.

¹ *Istoria Veneticorum* is a narrative source attributed to John the Deacon/Giovanni Diacono (see *Istoria Veneticorum*, pp. 7–12). This *Istoria* was probably written between the late tenth century and the early eleventh century. All dates in the paper are AD.

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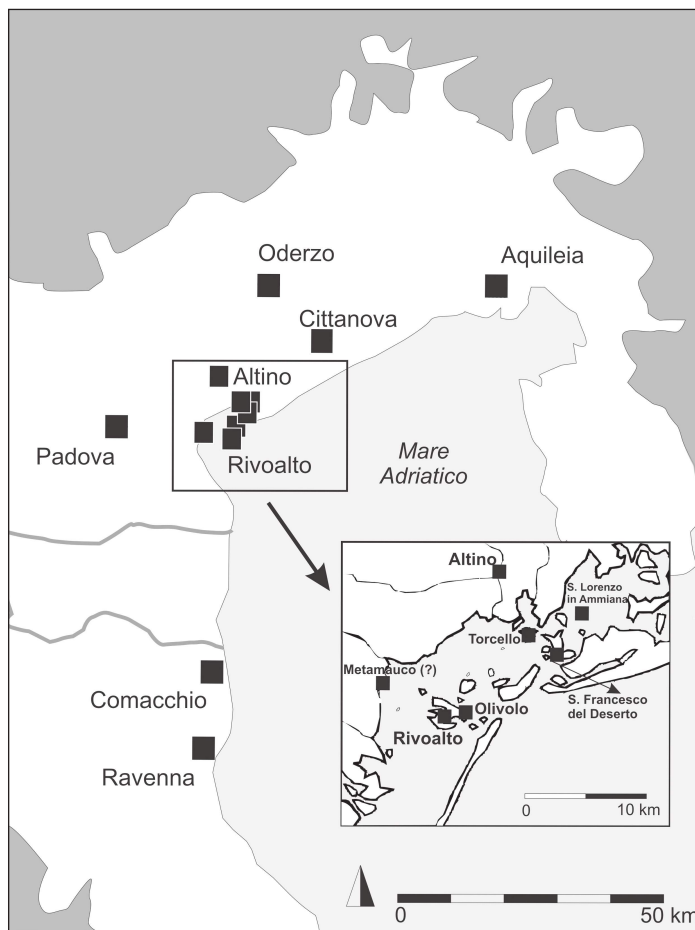


Figure 7.1. Plan of the northern Adriatic area with the locations of the main places in the text. The inset map shows the area of Venice. Illustration: Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale, Venice.

The second explanation specifically regards the times and modes of lagoon colonization down to its current innermost area, namely the Rialto archipelago. The reason, in this case, is simply identified with the need to move the institutional headquarters. After a long peregrination (from the north of the lagoon to the south and centre), the dukes, i.e. the local authorities, eventually decided to move their duchy (810) to the proximity of a place where, a few decades earlier, the new episcopate of Olivolo had been established (c. 775).

As one can see, both explanations are mechanical and, as such, have been rightfully rejected in the past few years. Nevertheless, they do contain, like a watermark, several potentially useful pieces of information. The first is chronological. The action (the arrival of the barbarians) and reaction (the flight to the lagoons) are traditionally dated between the fifth and sixth centuries (Huns/Longobards). The data provided by archaeological surveys of the lagoon confirm this chronology, insofar as they record in

the same period a radical change both in the lagoon ecosystem and in the reorganization of the settlements. Thus, if the causes cannot be limited (only) to security concerns and to a fear of barbarians, this tradition is indeed supported by some chronological plausibility.

The second piece of information is of a socio-political nature. The entire history of the Venetian Duchy is obviously under the scrutiny of historians, who seem less and less convinced by Giovanni Diacono's account of the first dukes, and especially by the idea of such an early formalization of an institutional structure. Thus, even the transfer of the duchy's headquarters appears as a rather mechanical explanation. However, here too the traditional explanation could reveal a specific social dynamic, namely the inner conflicts of Venetic aristocracies unfolding over a long period of community formation and power experiments. The various transfers of the duchy's headquarters could reflect these tensions and indirectly reflect how locational centralities varied with time and with the changing fortunes of individual families on the local political arena (along with their specific interests, including patrimonial ones) and in their relationship with the power.

So much for traditional historical explanations. Let us now consider the contribution of archaeology and of its traditional tools.

Traditional Archaeological Explanations and First Chronological Sequence of the Lagoon Settlement

Despite the rather unfavourable conditions faced by lagoon archaeology,² scholars recently managed to at least clarify the chronology of the lagoon and, in some cases, the modes of its colonization. Such explanations rely on what we would call 'traditional' archaeological sources: stratigraphic excavations, when present; study of materials (ceramic, glass, metals, coins); and study of monuments (landmarks of secular and especially ecclesiastical power).

We can roughly divide these processes into five main historical periods:³

- 2 A critical updated assessment of the archaeology in the Venetian lagoon is in Gelichi 2010.
- 3 See Gelichi 2006, 164–74 for a first critical guide to this interpretation.



Figure 7.2. Sarcophagus from the Monastery of Sts Ilario and Benedetto of Gambarare. Venice, Archaeological Museum. Ninth century. Photo: Polacco 1980.

The Roman Period

Archaeological surveys clearly show that the lagoon was inhabited and used in the Roman period (at least since the imperial age).⁴ The evidence available, however, indicates an absence of settlement centres and an economy based on the exploitation of natural resources (fishing, salt). At the moment, the clearest evidences, and also the oldest, are located in the north lagoon.

Late Antiquity

Climate and political changes brought about a new state of affairs around the fifth–sixth centuries, when lagoon settlements appear to acquire a new commercial value. When traces of stable settlements are found, they suggest the presence of *stationes* or, more generically, of housing complexes with warehouses (*stationes* are a kind of equipped stopping stations). Such traces are also particularly clear in the northern part of the lagoon, which urban aristocracies (from the ancient city of Altino) had transferred their economic activities towards.⁵ This state

of affairs is accurately recorded in Cassiodorus's (*Variae*, XII. 24) famous letter to the *tribuni maritimum* (537–538),⁶ in which he highlights the natural features of the lagoon economy (by referring, as mentioned above, to fishing and salt), while also explicitly describing the area as functional to the coastal itinerary (Istria-Ravenna). The latter aspect also led the lagoon to amass goods from the Mediterranean, as testified in particular by ceramics and amphorae.

Seventh to Eighth Centuries

Written sources relating to the seventh–sixth centuries explicitly mention a series of political actors who were active on the lagoon. These included Byzantine authorities (through their fleet and the presence of

in San Francesco del Deserto (De Min 2000) and Torcello. Regarding the Torcello excavations, the best comprehensive work remains the classic volume Leciejewicz, Tabaczyńska, and Tabaczyński 1977 (and recently Leciejewicz 2000). Regarding the other small excavations in late antique phases, see De Min 2000 and Fozzati 2014. From this point of view, the recent excavations in Jesolo (a settlement on the edge of the lagoon, flourishing during Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages) are very promising; see Cadamuro, Cianciosi, and Negrelli 2015, and more recently Gelichi and others 2018.

4 There are different opinions, however. Some scholars believe that the lagoon was fully colonized in the Roman age and the landscape completely different; see Dorigo 1983.

5 There are several archaeological evidences for this period. Concerning the previous excavations on the island of San Lorenzo di Ammiana, see Fersuoch and others 1989, and most recently Gelichi and others 2012. Other prominent archaeological investigations have been made

6 This very famous document has often been subjected to divergent interpretations. The text is edited by Cessi 1942, doc. 2: 2–4. About this document, see also Luzzatto 1961, 3 and 1979, 96, and more recently, Cracco Ruggini 1992. According to Carile and Fedalto (1978, 79) the presence of *tribuni maritimum* would be the sign of a society far from primitive. Lane (1973) and Röscher (1982), however, are of a different opinion.

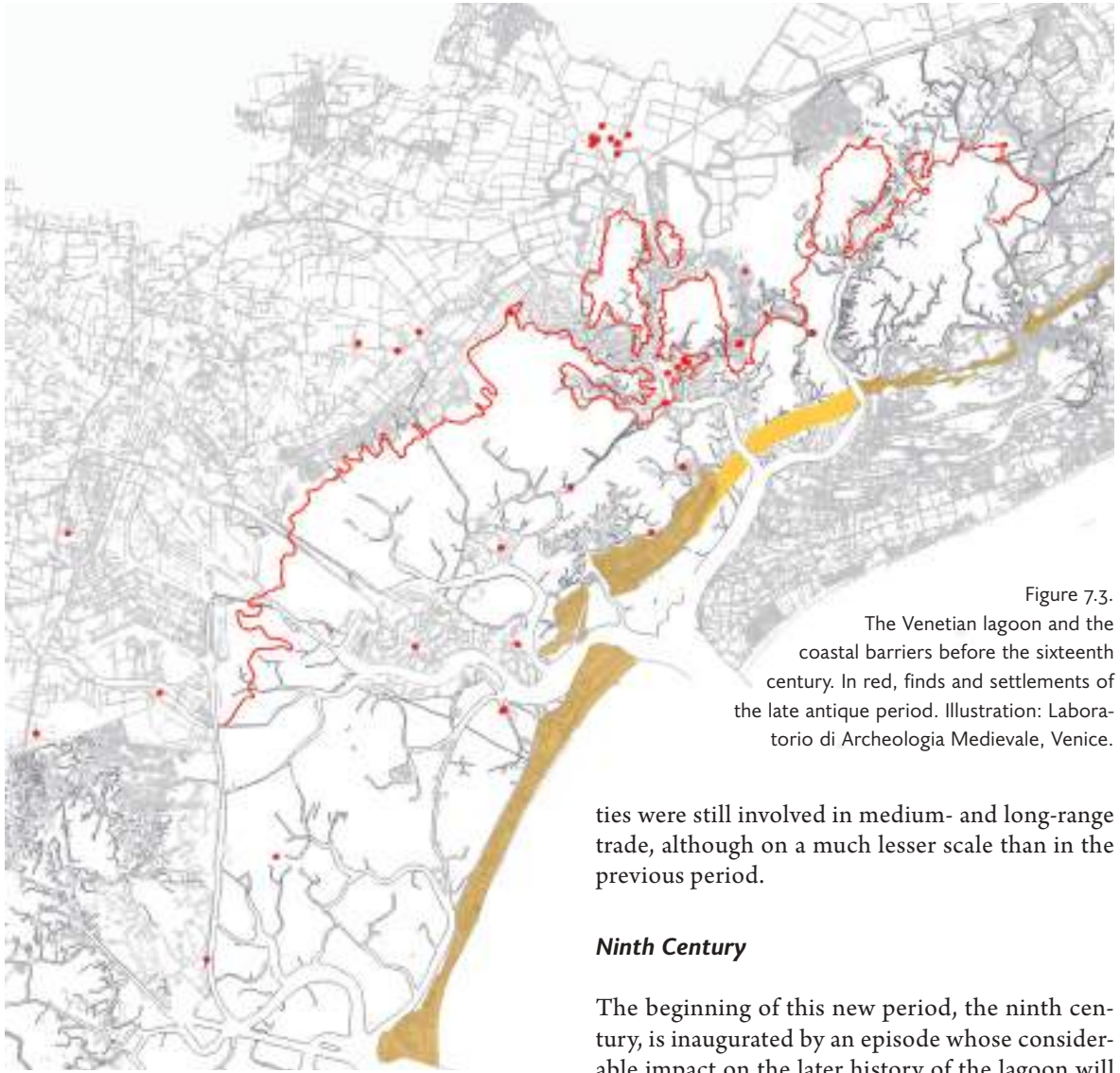


Figure 7.3.
The Venetian lagoon and the coastal barriers before the sixteenth century. In red, finds and settlements of the late antique period. Illustration: Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale, Venice.

magistri militum),⁷ bishops (such as the bishop of Torcello, known since the seventh century), and, later, the dukes. Archaeological data clearly indicate the abandonment of numerous settlements dating from the late Roman period. Old settlement locations were taken over by new settlements (Torcello, Metauaco, and Olivolo on the lagoon; Cittanova and Equilo in the intermediary area between the lagoon and the mainland), which developed into densely populated centres and gave birth to new communities. At different moments in time, some of these communities evolved into seats of power (be they permanent or transitory). In any case, their material culture indicates that the lagoon communi-

7 A *magister militum* (named *Mauricius*) is mentioned in a famous inscription discovered at Torcello and connected with the foundation of an episcopal church, dedicated to Santa Maria (c. 639). Regarding this inscription, see Cessi 1942, doc. 14: 24–25; Pertusi 1962.

ties were still involved in medium- and long-range trade, although on a much lesser scale than in the previous period.

Ninth Century

The beginning of this new period, the ninth century, is inaugurated by an episode whose considerable impact on the later history of the lagoon will require some explanation: the transfer of the duchy's headquarters to the Rialto archipelago (Giovanni Diacono, *Istoria Veneticorum*, II. 29).⁸ This period is marked by limited archaeological evidence, except for numismatics (McCormick 2001, 832–33). However, this could be due to a lack of archaeological surveys in the area rather than to a lack of actual evidence. Some additional information is provided by the foundation of a series of churches and monasteries. Particularly interesting indicators of this period are the sarcophagi (Fig. 7.2), which became a means of recording the memory of the new aristocracies of the lagoon (Polacco 1980).⁹ Along with the investment made in the construction of churches, these sarcophagi are also the most visible material expression of the economic means of the local elites of the time.

8 On the formation processes of the town in the beginning, see Gelichi 2015b.

9 Regarding these sarcophagi as a sign of identity of the lagoon elite, see Gelichi 2015b, 261–66, figs 8–10.

Tenth Century

At the finish line of the consolidation of the Rialto archipelago's power, in the tenth century, local aristocracies appear to be increasingly oriented towards a trade-based economy. However, archaeology currently does not have the means to highlight this particular passage. We shall examine the possible implications of this.

A Geological Approach and Explanation

Let us now try to locate this sequence in the framework of a geoarchaeological reading of the lagoon and assess the possible contribution of such an approach.

Although people have been living in or visiting the Venice lagoon since Roman times, the area's configuration was quite different from today. The formation of the coastal barriers took place through time: some are quite recent, while others now form distant islands in the open sea. What interests us here is the evolution of the central inlet, the one that gives access to Venice (Fig. 7.3). Its historical reconstruction is no simple task, but a series of geoarchaeological clues identify the islands of Sant'Erasmus, Lio Piccolo, and Lio Maggiore as the ancient external margin of the northern lagoon, with three inlet openings. The new, more seaward-lying littoral was to be formed only at a later stage.

In this context, it is necessary to explain why and when the decision was taken to colonize the current Rialto archipelago and to turn it into the most prominent settlement on the lagoon, i.e. Venice. The area was probably more stable and more elevated than others, located as it was on what remained of the raised bed of an extremely ancient river (Fig. 7.4) (Zezza 2014) active in the Holocene up to the formation of the first lagoon. Although the history of

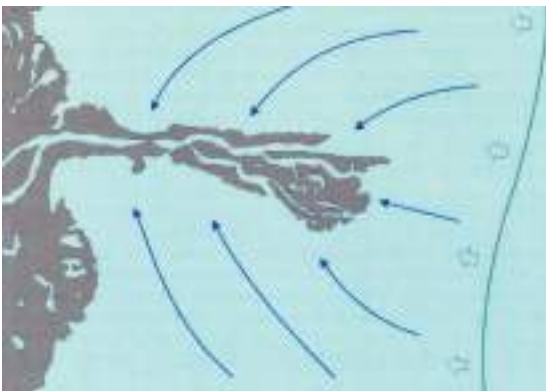


Figure 7.4. Schematic reconstruction of an unknown river delta in the early Holocene. Illustration by Zezza (2014, fig. 20).

this river is independent from the human history of Venice, what remains of its sediments probably contributed to the selection of that particular area. The land was not only higher but also more solid and, above all, close to the ancient inlets: this internal area was therefore both safe and in proximity to the direct ways of access to the open sea, i.e. the Adriatic. This aspect was to play a crucial role in the future choices and configurations of the settlement.

Combining the Tools – Combining the Evidence

Let us now return to the sequence that we discussed earlier, and try to explain it in light of this geomorphological situation.

We shall start with a location in the Rialto archipelago and an excavation. The location is the island of San Pietro di Castello, ancient Olivolo, known to have been chosen around 775 as the lagoon's second episcopal seat (Fig. 7.5). An excavation carried out towards the end of the 1980s near the cathedral church of San Pietro showed that the location was inhabited long before the establishment of the episcopal institution.¹⁰ The area was reclaimed towards the end of the sixth century and, in the seventh century, featured a mixed-technique building whose relics include one golden tremissis from the time of Emperor Heraclius and three Byzantine seals, of which two at least can be attributed to public servants. This could corroborate the hypothesis that the place was a fiscal property or even a seat of government. One cannot rule out the possibility that the Byzantine fleet, well documented in written sources, may have been stationed there. In light of the above, the location's topographical position and good conditions of geological stability could explain why it had been selected, however surprising this choice may seem today.

The public power, the fleet, and/or the proximity to the inlets can explain this choice, which turned out to be decisive when, one century later, the duke signed away a parcel of land in Olivolo to establish the episcopal seat (the relationship between the Olivolo episcopate and the rising power of the Venetian duke was extremely close and should be understood in light of the power competition that marked the lagoon in the eighth and ninth centuries).¹¹ Between the eighth and ninth centuries, this

¹⁰ The results of the excavation have been published by Tuzzato (1991), and a new interpretation is found in Gelichi 2015a, 65–80.

¹¹ According to Giovanni Diacono (*Istoria Veneticorum*, II. 19), the

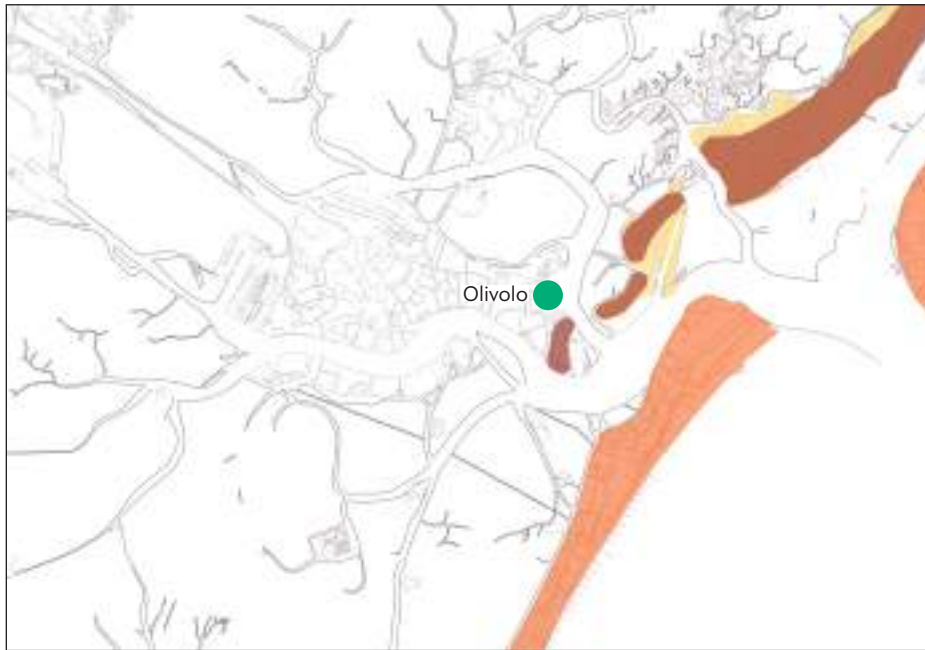


Figure 7.5. Location of Olivolo island (episcopal seat – San Pietro di Castello) and the coastal barriers during the Early Middle Ages. Illustration: Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale, Venice.

group of islands acquired an increasingly central role and, within a century, became the seat first of ecclesiastical power (the bishop), then, in the early ninth century, of secular power (the duke). Around 810–811, the ducal seat was established not too far from Olivolo and still within the same archipelago. From then on, the Rialto archipelago was to be regarded as a unitary plexus evolving towards an urban dimension.

We mentioned that the lands of this archipelago were more stable. However, there is no doubt that most of the natural levels of the city were submerged at least until the twelfth century, as demonstrated by a recently developed model that takes into account both eustatic and subsidence factors (Fig. 7.6). Consequently, the survival of Venice has always relied on constant and incisive human intervention.

Archaeological data on anthropization processes are currently quite insufficient. In this light, the analysis of old Venetian churches and their topographical distribution provides rather interesting indirect data. The problems involved in their chronology cannot be overlooked (none of the churches has ever been excavated or published, and none of their early medieval stages is visible above ground).¹² However,

bishopric of Olivolo would be established by will of the duke ('novum episcopatum fore decrevit').

12 There are different points of view on the chronology of the churches of Venice. For example, McCormick (2001, 530, chart 18.1) and Ammerman (2003) agree on a high chronology of many of these churches, and many of their explanations on the history of Venice depend on this fact. However, I do not agree, because

several written sources allow us to achieve a reliable and calibrated dating of their foundation.¹³ It is worth noting that, as a rule, the places of worship documented in the ninth century were not homogeneously distributed across the more stable lands. The first churches were essentially concentrated around the basin of San Marco (whereas numerous lands north of the lagoon, despite being more stable, present no record of churches in the ninth century). The most prominent area between the ninth and the tenth centuries therefore appears to be the basin of San Marco, located next to the inlet and well connected to the southern part of the lagoon. Only towards the eleventh century did the number of churches increase considerably, and they also spread along the banks of the Canal Grande.

In Conclusion?

After the sixth century, environmental changes and socio-political processes outlined a scenario for the lagoon far more dynamic than earlier. In a first stage, these changes appear to have left a deeper mark in the northern part of the lagoon. This may be due to the greater availability of archaeological evidence, but also to the central role still played at the time by the

many of these chronologies are dependent on narrative sources, therefore on celebratory sources.

13 I proposed a new chronology based on the principle of calibration, between traditional narrative sources and historical, contemporary, written documents; see Gelicchi 2006, fig. 29.



Figure 7.6. Venice in the twelfth century. In green, natural deposits emerged; in light blue, natural deposits emerged in the ninth century; in red, ecclesiastical buildings. Illustration: Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale, Venice.

ancient city of Altino and its aristocracies. This situation led to the formation of new settlements on the lagoon and to the reorganization of the population around strong political figures such as the bishop of Torcello first, and then the bishop of Olivolo.

Public servants, who in the seventh century were still associated with the Byzantine Empire, also had a role to play in the political arena. They were probably the ones responsible for the choice to settle in Olivolo and (although I do realize this is quite a bold juxtaposition) to establish the fleet there or nearby. Moreover, the position was quite appropriate to that function as it overlooked the lagoon while ensuring rapid and direct access to the open sea. Other powers emerged during the seventh century, namely those of local aristocracies linked to various extents to the empire. Still on the political plan, the internal competition within the Venetic elites led to the formalization of the organization of the ducal power, which was to become the backbone of Venetic society until its disappearance. I shall not dwell on this

process because these passages are quite difficult to determine outside of *Istoria Veneticorum* mythology. What we know for sure is that at the end of this process, the (recently constituted or still emerging) power of the duke chose to establish its permanent headquarters in the Rialto archipelago. The reasons for this are now clear, as they are the same that had motivated, a long time before, the choice of the Byzantine authorities and of the bishop of Olivolo: stable dry lands, a safe harbour for the fleet, but also easy communication with the southern part of the lagoon (is it a coincidence that the first doge who moved to Rialto, Agnello Partecipazio, owned a considerable amount of land in the southern part of the lagoon?) and, most importantly, easy communication with the open sea. The basin in front of today's St Mark's Square, where the Palazzo Ducale was founded, remains the focus of the urban development of the ninth and tenth centuries, although the areas next to the basin were not particularly favourable considering the archipelago's consist-

ency and stability: locational, social, political, and economic reasons therefore prevailed over environmental ones. Control over the land thus came to play a crucial role in Venice's geopolitical game, and it still does to this day.

The present reconstruction relegates to the background several important issues that would merit deeper discussion: What part did economic reasons play in this process? What was the economic and commercial role of the lagoon between the seventh and tenth centuries? What was the extent of its maritime trade and, most importantly, what was the economic orientation of its aristocracies? To conclude, should the lagoon be defined as a central place or as a nodal point, to employ a conceptualization recently used (Sindbæk 2009)? Or even better, could its status change with time?

Planning the Future

Some time ago, I published a paper on the future of Venice's past (Gelichi 2010). On that occasion, I attempted to suggest that evaluation, prediction, and selection might be operational and conceptual tools needed to design an archaeology in the lagoon,¹⁴ and I still think that these tools are essential for any good approach to the past in any place. On this occasion, however, I tried to use the wide range of tools available (historical, archaeological, and geological) to focus on the biographies of this place (I deliberately use the term 'place' and not 'town'). I emphasized what we might call a global approach, and I used an interdisciplinary approach, taking into account the fact that interdisciplinarity is inherent in the examined object itself and cannot be produced. How can we combine a global approach with a selection concept? Selection has two objectives: economic sustainability and scientific performance. Economic sustainability is a social problem and should be negotiated socially. Scientific performance, on the other hand, is a problem of project quality and feasibility. I too am convinced that the quality of the project must be assessed, above all, with regard to what is defined here as the ability towards an analysis of coherent situations.

In the case of the Venice lagoon, geological investigations (carried out independently from archaeology) have proven particularly useful for the reconstruction of the biographies of this place, especially in its early stages. They integrated very well into the sci-

entific project giving rise to a new and interesting dialogue. Insignificant in themselves, they came to life when historical, topographic, and archaeological sources were connected and communicated with each other. However, it is impossible to hide the fact that all these sources were produced in a totally independent way. Assembling them proved to be a long, hard, and difficult process; and the result is, probably, not equal to the effort.

The future will involve identifying not only new and renewable archaeological sources, but above all it will involve undertaking new research projects with global approaches, while managing to govern and construct all the knowledge processes concerned. The impossibility of doing so in all European countries means that results sometimes fail to live up to expectations.

I am sure that Venice is an unconventional place, but I am not entirely certain that the biographies that it describes are unconventional. Venice will, however, need unconventional archaeology in the future.

14 I have been positively influenced by the papers of Martin Carver, especially Carver 2003.

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