Before Venice  The Byzantine patrikios Theodosios Baboutzikos arrived in Venice from Constantinople in 840 CE and, according to the written sources, remained there a year.1

Venice was a new city that had not existed in classical antiquity. It had surprisingly sprung up in the midst of a lagoon in the upper part of the Adriatic Sea – an unlikely spot for a traditional city, but a characteristic location for a newly developing maritime society. At a time interpreted by modern scholars as a general decline of established Mediterranean towns,2 the northern Adriatic appears instead to have been experiencing unusual ‘ferment’. This phenomenon was not generally connected with the ancient urban centres, but seemed to favour new spaces, once uninhabited (or sparsely populated): often marginal sites, such as lagoons, but in excellent locations for commerce (inland and along the coast) and far enough away from the existing centres of strong political powers. These ‘grey zones’ favoured the emergence of new communities and new aristocracies, oriented in the construction of new opportunities related to transport and navigation, but they were not yet totally disconnected from land ownership.

Venice was not an isolated incident. To the south 160 km, another lagoonal settlement with very similar characteristics developed slightly earlier: Comacchio. While the archaeology of Venice’s earliest times is still elusive, Comacchio is well known archaeologically and can serve for comparison. Recent excavations at Comacchio have shown that a settlement on small islands had suddenly developed between the 6th and 7th centuries. Archaeological finds show that it was economically oriented and crafts were a mainstay. At the beginning of the 8th century, Comacchio was stable enough to deal directly with the Lombard Kingdom in northern Italy for trading on the Po River and its tributaries. This is attested by an exceptional
Venice and similar places in the region had gathered speed a century or so before Theodosios’ voyage here from Constantinople. In the beginning of the 9th century, the ‘new city’ of the lagoon had been in conflict with the Franks, but following a peace in 814 the aristocracies of the lagoon hinged between two worlds: the Byzantine Empire (upon whom they still formally depended) and the Carolingian Empire (to whom they paid more attention because of new economic opportunities). Before Theodosios Venice was born ‘officially’ in 810-11 when Agnellus Partecipatius was appointed Doge and a new
ducal palace was built. But settlements in the Venice lagoon, like Torcello, had already been developing slowly between the 5th and 8th centuries, according to an interesting process of selection and centralisation, especially in the north. The reasons for this progressive growth were due to three main factors: economy, security and isolation. The lagoon had become important economically for its salt production and for trade, first along the northern Adriatic coast (from Istria to Ravenna) and then into the hinterland through the Po River and its tributaries – the river serving as a corridor between the eastern Mediterranean and Northern and Western Europe. The lagoon itself was a protected and secure place for vessels, even serving as the seat of an important Byzantine fleet during the late 6th to late 8th centuries. Additionally, Venice was located some distance from the existing strong ‘centres of power’ in the region, and this isolation may have facilitated the growth of its own relatively autonomous identity.

But what did the merchants in the northern Adriatic get in return? Perhaps the farms in the Lombard region were producing enough agricultural goods that their surpluses could be traded down the river. Or perhaps Comacchio and other contemporary small settlements in the Venetian lagoon like Torcello dealt only in long-distance maritime trade: terminals receiving goods from afar, independent of the economy of the agricultural hinterland. However, connections into the hinterland are traceable by the presence of globular amphorae and a ‘Comacchio type’ ceramic in several cities of the interior (such as Cremona, Verona, Milan) and in some monasteries (as Nonantola).

In spite of a fragmentation of the economic and productive structures that takes place during the 7th century, signs of recovery can be seen in the exploitation of land ownership especially in the Po Valley. A clue may be sought, although still indirect and archaeologically faint, just in the foundation of new monasteries in the late Lombard period. Monasteries were related directly to the king or to the highest aristocracy that from the start might have been active agents in a re-organisation and ownership of the territory.

A new perspective in the Adriatic Mediterranean After the peace between the Carolingian and Byzantine Empires in 814, a new scenario appears in the northern Adriatic. In this area, certainly among the most dynamic in the Mediterranean, Venice emerges as a powerful lagoonal city, eventually in the 13th and 14th centuries controlling its own maritime empire spanning several seas. But does the situation in the northern Adriatic reflect the general situation of the Mediterranean, or at least that part of the Mediterranean still under Byzantine control, when Theodosios arrived from Constantinople in the 9th century? It does not seem so.

The situation in the southern Adriatic might have been different, but there are few sites here that have been archaeologically investigated. Butrint, in
modern Albania, for example, was an ancient city that had become little more than a village in the early medieval period. In the 9th century, after being controlled briefly by the Bulgars, it became an outpost of the Byzantine Empire.10 There are, for example, other locations which provide more evidence, such as Malta. Here, amphorae dating to the 8th and 9th centuries from southern Italy, the Aegean and the Crimea are found. These finds are not possible to understand if associated only with local consumption on Malta – they are perhaps better explained if the island is seen to function as an emporium in the trade between East and West.11

Up to the time that Theodosios visited Venice in the 9th century, the direct relationship of the lagoonal city with the western Mediterranean seems modest. Venice’s relationship with the East is also not so clear at this time; in the eastern Mediterranean, there was a mix of Caliphate- and Byzantine-controlled territories and maritime activities – some commercial, some piratical. Like in the Baltic, hoards of dinars and dirhams have been found in Venice and some from Torcello, but it is likely that they were brought there by traders who were not from the Muslim caliphates, as these groups did not seem to penetrate the Adriatic at this time.13

46. Settlements in the Venice lagoon began developing like Comacchio between the 5th and 8th centuries. Torcello, in the northern part of the lagoon, was one of the oldest Venetian sites. Today, a view towards Venice from the bell tower of the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, established in the 7th century, gives an idea of how these early settlements must have looked (Photo: Athena Trakadas).
pirates off Corsica and Sardinia; failing to find any, Boniface put in to Sardinia and picked up pilots to guide him to Africa, where he harried the coastline of the Gulf of Tunis: McCormick 2001: 264-265; 913, no. 404; McCormick 2003: 139, 146-149; Dölger 2009: 216, no. 413. 
21. Thurn 1973: 79. These events are also recorded by Joseph Genesios, see Lesmüller-Werner & Thurn 1978: 50-51. 
22. Annales Bertiniani: 42, s.a. 842. 
27. The case for viewing Tisso as an occasional residence of the king was made by Jørgensen 2008: 77-82. See also Duzcko 2004: 39-40, 56-58. 

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The sea of Venice: new cities and the Adriatic Mediterranean economy 
Sauro Gelichi 
1. Giovanni Diacono, Istoria Veneticorum, II, 50 (Berto 1999); see Shepard, this volume, pp. xx-xx. 
2. Hodges & Whitehouse 1983 
4. Gelichi & Hodges 2012 
5. Giovanni Diacono, Istoria Veneticorum, II, 29 (Berto 1999). 
6. As mentioned in the earlier years by Cassiodorus, Varia, 24, 27. 
7. McCormick 2007 
11. N. Cutajar, pers. comm. 
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