

“*Venetia* (Venice)”: Its Formation and Meaning in the Middle Ages¹

The word Venice has not always indicated the world city recognizable today. This was a long and complex process and the purpose of this overview is to illustrate the main phases of this evolution.

Narrating the Lombard King Alboin’s conquest of some cities, located in modern-day Veneto, in 568/569, the Lombard historian Paul the Deacon (ca. 720-ca. 799) felt the need to add a geographical explanation about that area.

Then Alboin took Vicenza and Verona and the remaining cities of *Venetia*, except Padua, Monselice and Mantua. For *Venetia* is composed not only of the few islands which we now call *Venetia*, but its boundary stretches from the borders of Pannonia to the river Adda. This is proved in the annals in which Bergamo is said to be a city of *Venetia* and in histories we thus read of lake Benacus [Lake Garda]: “Benacus, a lake of *Venetia* from which the river Mincio flows.”... Istria is also joined to *Venetia* and both are considered one province... The city of Aquileia was the capital of this *Venetia*, in place of which is now Forum Iulii [Cividale], so called because Julius Caesar had established a market for business there.²

The ancient *Venetia* Paul the Deacon talks about was the *X regio* (“the tenth region”), which Octavian Augustus created in ca. 7 A.D and Emperor Diocletian (284-305) renamed *VIII provincia Venetia et Histria* (“the eighth province, *Venetia* and Istria”). In current terms it included modern Lombardy east of the Adda river, Veneto, Trentino (excluding the Venosta Valley, Pusteria Valley and the upper Isarco Valley), Friuli Venezia Giulia, and Istria as far as the Arsa/Raša river (Croatia). The capital of this region—a sort of bridge between northern and central Italy and the northern and the north-eastern parts of the Roman Empire—was Aquileia. As a consequence, this city, currently a very small town in south-eastern Friuli Venezia Giulia region,

became one of the most important and dynamic hubs in Northern Italy during those centuries; the beginning of its downfall was caused by its destruction at the hands of the Huns, led by Attila, in 452.³

The “few islands” Paul the Deacon mentioned are those of the Venetian lagoons, which, unlike the mainland, were never conquered by the Lombards. After being a part of the Byzantine empire for ca. 150 years, the islands had become an independent duchy during the eighth century (Pavan and Arnaldi 409-56). As for the Roman province *Venetia*, the Lombards created a kingdom subdivided into districts called duchies—the main ones in north-east Italy were those of Verona, Trento, Vicenza, and Cividale; the previous terminology became obsolete and this is why the Lombard historian decided it was necessary to provide an explanation.

The first stages of the formation of a *Venetia* “of the islands” cannot be clearly determined. It is likely that both the fifth-century barbarian raids into Italy and the Huns’ destruction of Aquileia caused part of the population of the Roman province of “*Venetia* and *Istria*” to seek refuge in the neighboring Venetian lagoons. After the raiders left, most of the refugees probably returned to their homes, but some of them decided to settle on the Venetian islands, thus increasing their relevance.⁴ Clear evidence of the existence of a “Venice of the lagoons” is provided in the description the Roman official Cassiodorus gave in one of his letters in 537/538. Asking the locals to take food supplies to Ravenna, he compared to aquatic birds’ nests the houses, which the Venetians had built with great care and to whose walls they hitched their ships like animals, and also praised their simple and egalitarian way of life.⁵ It was, however, the Lombard invasion in 568/569 that marked the formation of an area with its own identity. Over the following seventy years, the barbarians were able to conquer all the Veneto’s mainland, thereby provoking the migration of a portion of the inhabitants of that region to the Venice of the lagoons, which remained under the control of Constantinople (Pavan and Arnaldi 409-27). This was clearly emphasized in the first medieval Venetian chronicle, the *Istoria Veneticorum* (IV), which was composed at the beginning of the eleventh century and attributed to a deacon called John (Giovanni Diacono IV 7-12). It begins in this way:

“*VENETIA (VENICE)*”

Given that there are two Venices. The first is the one that can be found in the histories of the ancients... The second Venice is the one that we know to be located among the islands... in the gulf of the Adriatic Sea, where among flowing waves, in a wonderful position, a multitude of peoples live happily. This population... takes its origin from the first Venice.⁶ (IV 1.1)

The chronicle then goes on to describe the Lombard invasion of Italy. As a product of the eleventh century—when the duchy became a dominant power on the Adriatic (Ortalli, “Il ducato” 774-80)—this account was meant to assert that the Venetians were of Roman origins. From uninhabited lands and a reconstruction of prior settlements, they forged a homeland without prior connections to Constantinople. The Venetians could, therefore, claim to have been independent since the birth of the new Venice and consider themselves at the same level as the Byzantines.⁷

John the Deacon’s work also illustrates the meaning of ‘Venice’ in this period.

After having decided to establish their future dwellings in those islands, they built very well fortified centers and cities and recreated a new Venice and a wonderful province.

The first of them is called Grado. It has high walls, is embellished by many churches, is full of bodies of saints, and is the capital and the metropolitan see of all the new Venice so as Aquileia was of the old Venice. The second island is named Bibione. The third is called Caorle... The fourth is the island in which, some time before, a city was built with great care by Emperor Heraclius, but, the Venetians remade it (Civitas Nova – Eracliana [Eraclea]) smaller because it was consumed by time. The fifth island is called Equilo [Jesolo]... The sixth island is Torcello... The seventh island is called Murano. The eighth island is Rivoalto. Although it is the last one peoples chose to live on, it is however the richest and the most celebrated of all the islands, not only because of the beauty of its churches and houses, but also because it has the ducal office and an episcopal seat. The ninth island is called Metamauco [Malamocco]... The tenth island

Berto

is Poveglia. The eleventh is called Chioggia the lesser in which the monastery of Saint Michael is located. The twelfth is called Chioggia the greater. At the extremity of Venice there is also a fortified center which is called Cavarzere. Moreover there are many other inhabitable islands in this province. (IV 1.5-6)

As this description and all the other medieval sources show (Berto 141-62), the term Venice indicated the entire Venetian duchy, formed by several islands,⁸ and not the modern city of Venice.

As for the mainland, the Lombards created a kingdom subdivided into duchies (in north-east Italy there were, for example, those of Verona, Vicenza, Treviso, Trento, and Cividale) and, as a consequence, this led to the fragmentation of the previous period's geographical unity.⁹ Because the Roman terminology was no longer used, Paulus Diaconus felt clarification was necessary.

After being located in Civitas Nova—Heracliana and in Metamauco, the capital of the duchy was moved to the Rivoalto (Rialto) island group in 811, when the ducal palace was built (Giovanni Diacono IV 2. 29). This nucleus expanded over the following centuries thanks to the reclamation of the neighboring areas.¹⁰ Probably between the second part of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century the importance and the size of Rivoalto, compared to the other Venetian centers, had become such that both the duchy and its capital started to be referred to as Venice (Ortalli 1995 775-80). This terminological shift is clearly emphasized in the first chronicle written in the Venetian vernacular.¹¹

Questa si è la Cronica di Venexia et de tucto 'l scito che è tra Grado et Cavarçere, le qual tucte contrade si apella il Distreto antigo et proprio de Venexia, como è... Rivoalto, del qual è nomenada la nobelle citade de Venexia si como indicio primo de quella.¹²
(*Cronica* 3)

In the fifteenth century, the expansion on the mainland drastically changed the nature of the Venetian state, which, at that point, included modern Veneto, Brescia and Bergamo (Lane 225-31), and, as a result, from that period on, the word Venice was reserved for the city.

In about 900 years, the Venetian lagoons underwent massive

“VENETIA (VENICE)”

transformations: from a periphery of the Byzantine empire, which maintained the legacy of the Roman province “Venice and Istria,” to the creation of one of the most important Mediterranean powers, whose heart became one of the most dynamic cities in Europe and in the Mediterranean. Moreover, by conquering a part of north-east Italy, Venice was able to return to its place of origin, thus laying the foundations for the reconstruction of the political and cultural identity of that area.

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ENDNOTES

¹ I wish to thank Simona Wright for inviting me to collaborate on this volume and Adam Matthews for help in translating this essay into English.

² Translation taken with a few changes from Paulus Diaconus (*History* 71). The Latin text can be found in Paulus Diaconus, *Historia Langobardorum* (II.14).

³ For further information, see Santo Mazzarino and Claudio Azzara.

⁴ In general on this area during this period, see Lelia Cracco Ruggini (“Veneti”).

⁵ The Latin text of the letter can be found in *Documenti relativi alla storia di Venezia anteriori al Mille* (1: 2-4), edited by Roberto Cessi. The way Cassiodorus wrote some of his remarks has been compared to “the spirit in which a high-powered executive in New York, looking down on its slums from a Rockefeller tower, might slip into a letter he was dictating some glowing phrases about the one-time virtues of villagers in rural New England” (Lane 3).

⁶ This part was probably copied from the account of the theft of Saint Mark’s relics by some Venetians in ca. 828, written either shortly after this date or in the tenth century (*Translatio Marci Evangelistae Venetias* 111-13).

⁷ In general, on the origins of Venice in the Venetian chronicles, see Antonio Carile.

⁸ For the geography and the settlements of the Venetian duchy, see Andrea Castagnetti (“Insedimenti”).

⁹ For the Veneto’s area during the early Middle Ages, see Andrea Castagnetti (“Dalla caduta”).

¹⁰ For this process, see Wladimiro Dorigo.

¹¹ It is believed that this text was written in 1360-62. On this, see the “*Cronica di Venexia*”(xli).

¹² According to a chronicle composed in 1450s, the city of Venice had this name since its foundation. See Giorgio Dolfin (1: 105): “l’ è de voluntà divina che una citade sia edificata in le lagune di Venetia et Venetia sia chiamata.”

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“VENETIA (VENICE)”

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