THE TERRAFERMA STATE

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Introduction

a. Origins and Main Coordinates

Many of the high medieval settlers in the Venetian lagoon transferred there from mainland locations, and links with the terraferma were throughout an essential part of Venice’s history.1 Its early relations with mainland rulers concerned such issues as inland landholding by Venetian owners, and especially trade routes and commodity flows linking it with both the hinterland and more distant areas. Its territorial annexations in the Italian peninsula began timidly in the 14th century and expanded massively in the early 15th.

With the transition in northeast Italy from city-states towards larger territorial blocks after about 1300, Venice’s previous strength in bilateral relations with numerous governments became potential weakness in facing fewer, aggressive lordly rulers, inclined to dispute its economic interests and threaten its security. Its first annexation was Treviso (1338), strategic for communications north of the lagoon. After the death of Giangaleazzo Visconti of Milan, it broadened the buffer area under its control and thwarted potential aggressors, occupying Padua, Vicenza, and Verona (1404–06). By 1420 this dominion had been extended northwards and eastwards: to Rovereto, in the southern Trentino; to Belluno and Feltre; to almost all Friuli. From the 1420s to the mid-century, Venetian foreign policy was primarily committed to augmenting its Italian

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territories, especially westwards—Brescia and Bergamo (1426–28), Crema (1449)—and also in the Trentino (Riva del Garda in 1440) and towards the Romagna region (Ravenna in 1441).

Though extensive and rapid, 15th-century mainland territorial expansion was no abandonment of Venice’s maritime, Mediterranean interests, nor was it the realization of a preordained plan. Rather, it was an empirical, progressive involvement, exploiting opportunities as they occurred. As in the stato da mar, these annexations served largely to guarantee security and support to trade flows benefitting Venice and involved significant voluntary choice by new subjects rather than mere imposition, as emphasized in the procedures solemnizing their passage under Venice. However, they did develop Venetian government awareness of the rationale and potential for territorial acquisition in Italy in the final phase of late medieval regional state formation there. Creation of the terrafirma dominion indeed settled the political geography of most of northeast Italy, and made Venice the strongest Italian state, as confirmed by its annexation of Rovigo in 1482, despite opposition by the other Italian powers. In the Italian Wars (1494–1530), Venice initially gained further mainland territory on the western and eastern borders and in Romagna, but after defeat at Agnadello (May 1509) it temporarily lost almost all the terrafirma. It recovered stable control there in 1516, though it suffered marginal losses—especially lands occupied since 1494—and was completely forced out of the Trentino and Romagna. Thereafter, terrafirma borders remained substantially unchanged until 1797.

As in its sea empire, the political experience of dominion was characterized profoundly and permanently by power sharing between Venice and its subjects, with considerable delegation by the former to the latter, but also by clear separation of their spheres of influence, almost totally excluding provincial elites from mainline political activity. This choice expressed the Venetian patriciate’s conviction that its corporate identity and monopoly of mainstream power preserved the nature of the state and quality of government, thus rationalizing its adaptation of a city-state mentality to the regional state.

The mainland dominion was a fairly compact area of more than 30,000 square kilometers, mostly densely populated: about 1,410,000 inhabitants in 1548 and about 2,033,000 in 1766.² Though including more rural