Setting the Scene: The Role of Sant’Ilario Monastery in Early Medieval Venice in Light of Recent Landscape Studies

Elisa Corrò, Cecilia Moine and Sandra Primon

Introduction

In A.D. 978, Pietro Orseolo, the doge of Venice, escaping from his homeland, sailed from Rivo Alto to the monastery of Sant’Ilario, and from there he and his companions continued on horseback to the city of Vercelli. The episode was reported in the *Istoria Veneticorum*, one of the most ancient chronicles of Venice, written by John the Deacon in the early decades of the 11th century.1

This anecdote effectively summarizes some of the most problematic issues of the early medieval history of Venice: the relationship between the political center of Rivo Alto and the surrounding land, the role of religious communities in ducal policies, and the connections between lagoon and mainland, in this case in terms of transport but also significant in matters of control, resources, and cultural and economic contacts. The monastery of Sant’Ilario, one of the main religious institutions sponsored by the early ducal families, was a well known intersection between different environments—lagoon and mainland—and different modes of transportation—boats and horses (Fig. 6.1).

Today, where the monastic buildings once stood, cultivated fields extend over a wide and fertile plain; nothing remains of the medieval settlement. Furthermore, the landscape itself fundamentally differs from its description in the chronicle where the countryside directly faced salt water and artificial embankments completely separated mainland from lagoon.

The aim of this research is to frame the role of the monastery of Sant’Ilario in the Early Middle Ages, considering the environment and its numerous changes

---

as key factors in understanding the social and political network in which it functioned. Firstly, the monastery will be contextualized in the early history of Rivo Alto, with particular attention to monasteries and convents funded and sponsored by ducal authority. Secondly, a brief methodological summary will describe the strategies adopted for landscape analysis, listing limits and potentialities of the study area. Then the role of the monastery of Sant’Ilario during the Early Middle Ages will be analyzed in detail in light of our reconstruction of the landscape. Finally, the period of main environmental changes, represented by the resumption of flow of the Brenta river, will be described, highlighting issues of chronology and land exploitation.

(E.C.)

Early Medieval Monasteries of Venice

The traditional description of the origins of lagoon settlements describes Rivo Alto, the ancient name of Venice, as the end point of successive moves within the lagoonal and perilagoonal area. The legendary narration of the so-called migration of the capital from Cittanova, in the north, to Malamocco, somewhere in the south, and eventually to Rivo Alto, can be read as the consolidation of