

09

Inland Aquatic Heritage and Venice's Hydrophilia: Meandering Along Sentimental Waterways

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Notes

This lesson is dedicated to the long-lasting and effectual domestication of the hydrosphere in the Venice lagoon. A great attention will be paid to the historical processes that have allowed the formation of the Venetian urban materiality. Within the theoretical approach of 'hydrophilia', water mobility is among the most effectual agencies that allow the understanding of the peculiar social-cultural water heritage in Veneto plain.

Urban wetlands show us a pivotal environmental eloquence. This peculiar narrative is reinforced by multiple and deep symbolic layers, strongly grounded in the humans' very inborn sense of belonging to the water realm. When considering the case of the Venice lagoon, it is worth connecting the long-lasting and effectual domestication of the hydrosphere to what is now commonly recognized as 'hydrophilic turn'. Looking at the historical processes allowing the triumph of the astonishing Venetian urban materiality, it is possible to detect fruitful relationships between the surrounding lagoonscape and the social groups living in. This symbiotic coexistence with the amphibious mosaic of wetlands and lagoons was fuelled by an 'utilitarian hydrophilia', that is widely recorded by a huge amount of documents, maps and literary texts throughout the centuries.

After this long-term historical evolution, present human-water interaction in Venice lagoon is strongly affected by human-related impacts (petrochemical plants, water pollution, floods, over-tourism). Because of these growing concerns, a shared environmental awareness has been developing, besides fostering new social attitudes. This is the context of the 'hydrophilic' approach, where the reinforcement of water appreciation is the conscious reaction as a result of the increasing frustration due to the overarching decay of both local and global waterscapes. Reimagining lagoon waterscapes as affective, life-enhancing and health-enabling geographies is the proper core of a meditative strategy allowing the recovery of a wide range of water related material agencies.

Within such non-human scenarios, the research strand is focusing on the multifaceted lagoon water mobility, viewing the whole Venetian wetland as an extensive network of navigable itineraries connecting the open sea to the low plain hydrography. Canals and rivers flowing into the Venice lagoon are actually linear paths of high cultural value where it is possible to identify specific and unique environmental and social-cultural heritage (Vallerani 2004). Since the beginning of Venice history, lagoon canals allowing navigation were much more than a passive morphological asset for daily activities. Their meandering courses, when natural, and straight, if artificially dug, are the most active scenes of water agencies. For centuries up to today, they establish the specificity of waterscape scenes, like a theatre set, where water mobility shows its visible role as a fundamental territorial performance. The wooden materiality of boats is the perfect interface between biosphere (trees) and hydrosphere (lagoon), that is the non-human materiality supporting the effectiveness of watery perspective.

Documented in detail by the archives and various man-made structures scattered along the banks and in the vicinity, the effective evolution of hydrography can provide additional information to support the stories of those who have long experienced the changing inland waterfronts. When researching water memories through fieldwork and with the aid of historical geography and cultural anthropology methodologies, it becomes increasingly interesting to detect the vestiges left by

centuries of waterscape evolution. The intricate network of natural and man-made waterways flowing through the lower plains surrounding the Adriatic coastline is indeed an endless repository of water-related stories simply waiting to be re-evaluated, surveyed, and carefully catalogued in order to retrieve one of most remarkable cultural heritage within the Venetian *terraferma*. Scientific work in this context entails the analysis of environmental frameworks that have witnessed the consolidation of major river routes in addition to the unravelling of minor routes that connected scattered houses and small villages during the long process of creating agricultural landscapes in the Veneto flatland (Vallerani 2019). It involves focusing on the remains of a cultural and environmental heritage left in the shadows, neglected, nearly functionally extinct, fading from memory, almost a 'holocaust' caused by the overwhelming onset of different economies, activities, and perceptions.

This unavoidable process of obsolescence may seem a little less dramatic in other situations, as in Battaglia Terme, a tiny town on the twelfth-century Battaglia canal heading towards south Padua, where a handful of competent and enthusiastic volunteers offer their constant and worthy commitment in the local Inland Navigation museum. These volunteers have set themselves the existential objective of retrieving the cultural components tying a wide range of hydrographic elements such as rivers, lagoons, and lakes to their riparian communities. The generous efforts of the guardians of water memories (Jori 2009; Mainardi 2012) have long been supported by the activities of researchers from academia as well as of local cultural institutions. The work of these researchers has provided a rich bibliography, which expresses a stimulating cultural vibrancy, recovering significant land and river knowledge founded not only on navigation and boat building, but also on other related topics such as fisheries, ports, and the dynamics of riverside settlements.

The geographical position of Battaglia Terme, on the waterway connecting the Euganean hill to the Venice lagoon, is definitely a meaningful case study because of the deep connections with the expansion of Venice in mainland, after subduing flourishing city-States like Padua and Vicenza. The low plain between Euganean hills and the southern Venice lagoon was actually a strategic area where a complex hydrographic system had been adequately managed since the twelfth century in order to foster inland navigation connecting the thriving markets of the above mentioned Vicenza and Padua with the port of Chioggia. Clear evidence of the importance of these connections can be seen in the increasing demand for slabs of trachyte for use in the flooring of *calli* (roads), *campi* (squares) and *fondamenta* (quay sides) of Venice. For centuries, the quarries of Monselice and Lissida supplied stone, contributing to the spreading and consolidating of Venice's materiality. The consolidation of the complex waterways network in the area is the result of relevant engineering interventions affecting the lower Bacchiglione and Brenta rivers, whose natural water flows were constantly regulated to improve both commercial navigation routes and land reclamation (Vallerani 2017). At the core of such hydrographic setting, the Battaglia canal was dug at the end of twelfth century, joining Padua to Monselice, a relevant stronghold defending Paduan southern borders.

The issues discussed so far have shown the importance of Venice's inland nautical heritage. It is worth mentioning that today there is an increasing awareness of the importance of waterways, in terms of both their touristic and recreational value. As a matter of fact social attitudes are revealing an increased appreciation for fluvial environments insofar as they provide ideal settings for sports and recreation as well as opportunities for cultural tourism. Hydrographic atmospheres belong mostly to rural landscapes eschewing urban development making. As a consequence it is possible to define waterways as 'cultural corridors', that is a repository of manufactured items related to specific hydraulic functionalities, but also of Venetian villas, old churches and chapels, traditional farm houses and water mills. Many of these buildings have become landmarks for tourism along European rivers, even being transformed into thematic museums also involving the surrounding environment.

In countries such as Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, and Germany, the established practice of river tourism has stimulated the recovery of almost all the locks necessary to fluvial navigation, and encouraged new businesses to reopen old river inns, thereby facilitating friendly and lively encounters among land and river travellers.

Matters concerning fluvial tourism should be addressed by means of specific governance strategies aiming at the strict safeguarding and restoration of the natural environment, in order to satisfy the growing demand for attractive leisure spaces providing opportunities for city dwellers to relax and regenerate physically and psychologically. The prospects outlined here concerning the promotion of tourism in the area should obviously aim not only to increase the number of visitors, but, as just mentioned, should also respond to the growing demands of residents wishing to improve the quality of day-to-day living. The humanisation of living space does not only mean taking care of the physical locations, but also involves finding the means to satisfy the habitation needs of the local population, recapturing the pleasures of social relations, and therefore encouraging a more aware sense of place.

Up to the 1950s, before the general spread of engine propulsion, a wide range of wooden boats dominated the theatricality of water mobility. The fascinating variety of typologies were the tangible and mobile heritage clearly explaining the social and material relationships with lagoonscape. Despite today the serious reduction of traditional vessels is an indisputable fact, we can however realize the growing recovery of leisure boating on both rowing and sailing wooden boats. This is not a new aspect of hydro-social practice (as gorgeously witnessed in eighteenth-century landscape painters like Canaletto), but the encouraging sign of water affection involving both insiders and an increasing number of visitors.

Finally, it is of some interests to expand the analysis of not local floating mobility, especially considering the great diffusion of both fibreglass and inflatable kajaks and canoes. This new materiality gives an extraordinary opportunity to go well beyond the usual practice of transport, allowing a more aware embodiment with rivers, canals and lagoons, thanks to the navigation at the water's edge. Paddling on board of kayaks or canoes is actually one of the best opportunity to become knowledgeable of untrodden Venetian waterscapes.

Mandatory Reading

Vallerani, F. (2019). "Inland Waterways as Modern Landscapes in Northeast Italy: Recovering a Cultural Heritage for Sustainable Governance". Bernhardt, J.C.; Koller, M.; Lichtenberger, A. (eds), *Mediterranean Rivers in Global Perspective*. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 179-202.

Further Optional Reading

Jori, F. (2009). *L'ultimo dei barcari. Riccardo Cappellozza, una vita sul fiume*. Pordenone: Biblioteca dell'Immagine.
Mainardi, M. (2012). *Zingari d'acqua: L'epopea dei barcari della bassa pianura Padana nella vicenda di un vecchio navigante*. Venezia: Filippi.

Vallerani, F. (2004). *Acque a Nordest: Da paesaggio moderno ai luoghi del tempo libero*. Sommacampagna (VR): Cierre.

Vallerani, F. (2017). "Italian Minor Rivers in a Bio-Regionalist Vision: The Case of the Low Plain Between the Euganean Hills and the Venetian Lagoon". Pinton, S.; Zagato, L. (eds), *Cultural Heritage: Scenarios 2015-2017*. Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari, 733-44. <http://doi.org/10.14277/6969-052-5/SE-4-45>

