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Beyond the coast – Venice and the Western Balkans: the origins of a long relationship

It falls to me to be the first speaker at our conference so in agreement with the Wissenschaftlicher Ausschuss, I would like to sketch quickly the aims and the scholarly framework underlying the planning of the meeting. You will remember that over the years the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti has organized (always in collaboration with other cultural institutions) a series of meetings dedicated to the study of the relationship between Venice and various foreign territories or communities. These have included Crete, Genoa, the Levant, the Ionian Islands, the Armenians and Byzantium (the priority perspective in this latter case being that of art history). The proceedings of all these meetings have been published.¹ It was therefore natural to focus the attention also on the eastern coast of the Adriatic and on its hinterland, in other words the part of the Balkans which has always had extremely close relations with Venice. Actually, the initial intention was that the area of study should comprise the entire Balkan Peninsula, but given its extent and the complexity of the problems that need to be tackled it was decided to adopt a gradual approach and to explore the theme on two separate occasions. This conference on the western Balkans will therefore be followed by a second, dedicated to the Eastern Balkans. But I will return to the subjects we shall be dealing with today. As on previous occasions, the Istituto Veneto wished to undertake the journey to today's conference with particularly highly qualified travelling companions, also with the intention of developing existing contacts between individual scholars and cultural institutions. Hence the link with our Austrian partners. There were two rea-

¹ Venezia e Creta. Ed. Gherardo ORTALLI. Venice 1988; Genova, Venezia, il Levante nei secoli XII–XIV. Eds. IDEM/Dino PUNCUH. Genoa, Venice 2001; Gli Armeni e Venezia. Dagli Sceriman a Mechitar: il momento culminante di una consuetudine millenaria. Eds. Boghos Levon ZEKIYAN/A. FERRARI. Venice 2004; Venezia e Bisanzio. Aspetti della cultura artistica bizantina da Ravenna a Venezia (V–XIV secolo). Venice 2005; Venezia e le isole Ionie. Eds. Chryssa MALTEZOU/Gherardo ORTALLI. Venice 2005.

sons for this choice. The first was the internationally acknowledged excellence of their research in the area in question. Then we wished to consolidate still further the already established connection between our Academy (the Istituto Veneto) and the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften.

In dealing with the main events (from 1200 to the end of the 18th century) of the region that today includes the eastern Adriatic coast, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and Croatia, we want to identify and explore the features of an integrated Adriatic system, one of its centres being Venice. Underlying the choice of approach were specific considerations of historiographic nature. There is no need to go exhaustively into the importance of the Adriatic Sea as a linking agent between the various territorial entities adjoining the Adriatic Sea. It goes without saying, too, that Venice performed an important connecting role linking the various coasts of the Adriatic and the worlds that gravitated around them; relations between the maritime area and the hinterland were often difficult but nevertheless fundamental. And in relation to the mainland “continental” areas, it is worth remembering that the Venice Lagoon is the northernmost point not only of the Adriatic Sea but of the entire Mediterranean. In centuries when the great transport routes were waterways (seas, rivers), geographical location offered a huge potential that could be turned to considerable real advantage by places that managed to develop appropriate economic and institutional structures. Once Venice had achieved adequate advances in this direction it began to claim a role as an ideal point of interchange between the Adriatic and the countries of Central Europe. Its apparently marginal position – at one extremity of the Adriatic system – became one of centrality with the change of perspective implied by the growth in relations between the Adriatic area and the much bigger economic and political system of continental Europe. In the historical period that concerns us (from the 13th century) this process was already completed and Venice had taken to presenting itself as a great power at an international level. What I want to do now is quickly to summarize how this came about. My contribution will therefore be a sort of prehistory, a prologue to our programme, whose aims include an attempt to remedy a certain oversight of historiography on the Balkans, where analysis of the role played by great states and empires in South-East Europe has somewhat forgotten the role performed by Venice.

The commendable exceptions to this neglect certainly exist² but they almost always occur in the work of Venetian history specialists. Then again

² More recent works include for example Jorjo TADIĆ, *Venezia e la costa orientale dell'Adriatico fino al secolo XV*, in: *Venezia e il Levante fino al secolo XV*. Vol. 1: *Storia, diritto*,

venezianisti too are often guilty of working from a distorted view point. The risk is that scholars tend to divide Venetian history into sections or slices and to lose sight of the global dimension. Thus it often happens that a scholar researching the Venetian presence on the mainland will pay insufficient attention to what is happening at the same time in the *Dominio da Mar* and vice versa; or that the expert on Venetian penetration into Dalmatia or Trentino will not take into account contemporary developments in Crete or Cyprus. Of course, this is one of the consequences of scholarly specialization, in itself undoubtedly positive; and there is no denying that historiography on Venice enjoys good health. Nevertheless, I repeat, failure to apply a global approach implies serious risk: events involving Venice in Padua or Friuli can be fully understood in the light of Venice's actions, at the same time, in Cyprus or Constantinople or Albania, or on the markets of London, Tunis and Flanders.³ Perceptions of the role of Venice in the various sectors (and here we are concerned with the Balkans) are also conditioned by the problem of relations between different historiographical traditions. In our case difficulties arise (the consideration is not a banal one) because of language barriers and limited opportunities for meetings. This is one of the reasons why we made a point of inviting scholars from the various countries involved to take part in this conference: not for reasons of "cultural diplomacy" but as an expression of our commitment to facilitating and increasing reciprocal contributions. Venice wishes to present itself as a useful point of interchange, as indeed it also was in the past.

economia. Ed. Agostino PERTUSI. Firenze 1973, 687–704; Ruža ČUK, Srbija i Venecija u XIII i XIV veku. Beograd 1986; Bogumil HRABAK, Venecija i bosanska država, *Istraživanja*, 12 (1989), 407–505; Lujo MARGETIĆ, Iz ranije hrvatske povijesti. Odrabrane Studije. Split 1997; Tomislav RAUKAR, Hrvatsko srednjovjekovlje. Prostor, ljudi, ideje. Zagreb 1997; Croatia in the Early Middle Ages: a Cultural Survey. Ed. Ivan SUPIČIĆ. London, Zagreb 1999; Oliver J. SCHMITT, Das venezianische Albanien (1392–1479). Munich 2001; Povijest Hrvata. Vol. 1: Srednji vijek. Ed. Franjo ŠANJEK. Zagreb 2003; Bariša KREKIĆ, Unequal rivals: Essays on Relations between Dubrovnik and Venice in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries. Zagreb, Dubrovnik 2007. The history of the Balkans in general requires separate consideration and here we should mention at least the extremely high level of the most recent Greek historiographical production; cf. in general Italia – Grecia: temi e storiografie a confronto. Eds. Chryssa A. MALTEZOU/Gherardo ORTALLI. Venice 2001.

³ In my opinion the writings of Roberto Cessi and Gaetano Cozzi remain exemplary because of their clear perception of the global nature of the problems and of the close interconnections between the events. Despite the many differences in their basic approach (and in character), the two greatest Venetian historians of the last century may usefully be associated here.

CONTINUITY IN VENETIAN HISTORY

After these introductory remarks, I wish now to trace the process by which Venice came to perform a function that was crucial for the entire Adriatic area and which had enormously important consequences for the history of the Balkans. But before I do, let me make a couple more comments about methods. I am thinking especially of what I would define as the “canon of continuity”. In many ways a peculiar feature of the history of Venice is its capacity to move through time tendentially without abrupt surges or catastrophic changes. It is curious how the image one has of the history of Venice changes, depending on whether one’s perspective is, as it was, close to or from a distance. With a close range analysis of events, what we see is a series of dramatic situations or moments: serious internal disputes; the deposition or killing of doges; catastrophic military defeats; successes that open the way to especially favourable conditions; economic crises and moments of splendour and success, and so on. In short, the historical process we see is often dramatically uneven, with extraordinary highs and lows; not very different from what we find in many other historical contexts.

However, if we stand back from individual events and observe the overall development of Venetian history in general, the jagged outlines dissolve into an extraordinarily linear consistency of a kind that is found hardly anywhere else. In short, when it comes to giving a concise account, the life of the Venetian *respublica* seems to be an almost uninterrupted flow. And I think this sort of optical illusion is the fruit, on the one hand, of the unusual ability of Venetian society to absorb changes and transform them into growth, and on the other of its aversion to radical alterations.⁴ Let me explain with a few simple examples: for over a thousand years and despite the huge changes seen over that time, the Venetian state was always headed by a Doge; and when the last, Ludovico Manin, laid down the insignia of power in 1797 so that they could be burnt before the Tree of Liberty in St. Mark’s Square (in the style of the French Revolution), he also handed over the Doge’s *corno*, the ceremonial cap that originated with the *skiádion*, worn centuries earlier by high Byzantine dignitaries such as the *protospatharios*, or perhaps with the imperial *kamelavkion*, in use at Constantinople from the

⁴ I already insisted on the stable nature of the basic tendencies in Gherardo ORTALLI, *Il mercante e lo Stato: strutture della Venezia altomedievale*, in: *Mercati e mercanti nell’alto medioevo. L’area euroasiatica e l’area mediterranea*. Spoleto 1993, 85–135, 88–91; IDEM, *Venezia nel secolo di Federico II. Modelli statuali e politica mediterranea*, *Atti dell’Istituto veneto di scienze, lettere ed arti – Classe di scienze morali, lettere ed arti* 157 (1998/1999), 409–447, 413–414.

beginning of the 9th century.⁵ And the end of the *respublica* was decreed by the Great Council, the *Maggior Consiglio* that had governed the state without interruption since the 12th century. And the governing class of Venice was formed by the families that conformed to requisites decided at the end of the 13th century, combining into an oligarchic structure that operated until the end. And the fundamental law of the *respublica* was that of the Statute commissioned by Jacopo Tiepolo in 1242.⁶ And, to turn to money, the coin symbolizing the State at the fall of the republic was the *zecchino*, which was exactly the same in terms of weight, quality and appearance as the *ducato*, which itself had been struck for the first time in 1284–1285, over half a millennium before.⁷

To enumerate such details might seem like retailing folklore or curious facts, but I think they provide clear evidence of the Venetian suspicion of brusque change and of a deeply felt commitment in defence of continuity which, though it adapted constantly and often extremely rapidly to changing times, was the pre-eminent sign of the soundness of the State and of the guarantees assured to the citizenry. Exactly this sort of “canon of continuity” ensures that the best comprehension of Venetian history comes not only (as we said earlier) when the overall picture of Venetian interests is kept in mind but also when a long-term perspective is applied. And this is also true in our case, for the relationship between Venice and the Balkans. So if we wish to understand the events of the centuries we are more concerned with, it is necessary first to examine how Venice arrived in those centuries, how it created the foundations that were then destined to remain as a constant aspect of the Venetian approach.

VENICE’S “DEBUT” ON THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE

From what date should we start the search for the conditions that gave rise to the events that characterize Venice’s “imperial” period? What were the antecedents that led to Venice being indisputably able, from the 13th century,

⁵ Agostino PERTUSI, *Quedam regalia insignia. Ricerche sulle insegne del potere ducale a Venezia durante il Medioevo*, *Studi veneziani* 7 (1965), 3–123, 83.

⁶ As regards Venetian political and institutional structures see Giorgio ZORDAN, *L’ordinamento giuridico veneziano*. Padua 2005².

⁷ Frederic C. LANE, *Venice: a Maritime Republic*. Baltimore, London 1973, 148–149, 327; IDEM, Reinhold C. MUELLER, *Money and Banking in Medieval and Renaissance Venice*. Vol. 1: *Coins and Moneys of Account*. Baltimore. London 1985, 280–285, 336, 472; Alan STAHL, *Zecca: The Mint of Venice in the Middle Ages*. Baltimore, New York 2000, 212–217.

to perform a front rank role amongst the great powers of the time? I would not hesitate to date the beginning of the period in question at around the turn of the millennium. During the 10th century Venice was still formally a province of the Byzantine Empire.⁸ This subject status brought advantages rather than limitations or dangers and Venice had managed to maintain it for centuries without difficulty. As Byzantium's capacity to intervene in Italy and the northern Adriatic gradually diminished during the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries and Venice was growing stronger, it was much better to be the furthest outpost of an ever more distant empire than to be subject to a nearby and powerful lord. The point was clearly made when Charlemagne's Frankish troops entered the lagoon and it was reiterated when Otto II moved against Venice and the issue was only settled by what contemporaries considered a miracle: the unexpected death of the young emperor. The ancient and increasingly theoretical subjection to Constantinople not only provided formal protection from other, far more burdensome subjugations, but from an economic and cultural point of view it meant being able to keep its well-established membership of the Byzantine "commonwealth", an extraordinarily rich system that was far ahead of the underdeveloped Europe of the time.⁹

⁸ The traditional interpretations, according to which Venice enjoyed full autonomy or even real independence from the 9th or as early as the 8th century, now appear unsustainable. In this connection I would mention the nevertheless fundamental studies of Roberto Cessi; a good example would be Roberto CESSI, *Venezia ducale*. Vol. 1: *Duca e popolo*. Venice 1963. The final setting aside of the traditional interpretations was due above all to the work of Byzantinists such as Agostino Pertusi, André Guillou and Antonio Carile. For a well-balanced summary of the duration of ties between Venice and Byzantium cf. Giorgio RAVEGNANI, *Bisanzio e Venezia*. Bologna 1966, 47–49. And, in particolare 67–74 for the complexity of the relationships and the difficulty of confining them within rigid frameworks.

⁹ Gherardo ORTALLI, *Venezia dalle origini a Pietro II Orseolo*, in: Paolo DELOGU/André GUILLOU/Gherardo ORTALLI, *Longobardi e Bizantini*. Turin 1980, 369–370, 389–391. The chrysebull granted to the Venetians by Basil II and Constantine VIII in 992 is as much evidence of the advantages guaranteed by the connection with Byzantium as of the considerable degree of autonomy achieved by Venice: Ralph-Johannes LILIE, *Handel und Politik zwischen dem byzantinischen Reich und den italienischen Kommunen Venedig, Pisa und Genua in der Epoche der Komnenen und der Angeli* (1081–1204). Amsterdam 1984, 1–8, 326–327; Marco POZZA/Giorgio RAVEGNANI, *I trattati con Bisanzio 992–1198*. Venice 1993, 16–25. The privilege may have been connected with Basil II's need to consolidate his positions behind the enemy for the campaign against the Bulgars launched in 991. Something similar may have underlain the suggested link with Jovan Vladimir, the ruler of Duklja, cf. Georgije OSTROGORSKY, *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates*. Munich 1963, 255.

But as the first millennium closed, so things changed. The gradual growth of its independence enabled Venice to play her cards from a position of strength. The Latin “Byzantineness” of Venice was starting to develop differently from the great Greek “Byzantineness” of the capital Constantinople. And now we come to the year 1000 and the naval campaign led by Doge Pietro Orseolo II along the Dalmatian coast. Poreč, Pula, Osor, Zadar, Trogir, Krk, Rab, Split, Korčula mark the stages in what Venetian chroniclers recorded as a triumphal progress. In actual fact the campaign emphatically did not result in Venice taking control of these Dalmatian centres, but its equally undeniable success allowed Orseolo to assume the title of Doge of the Venetics and the Dalmatians, *dux Veneticorum et Dalmaticorum*, a tangible sign of the new role Venice was now able to play in the international theatre.¹⁰

We must however examine more closely the terms in which Orseolo’s action related to the extremely complex international context. For the most part, the events are interpreted from a strictly local perspective, as an expression of Venetian expansionism or as a response to the urgings of Dalmatian communities who no longer felt protected by Constantinople. This indeed is the line taken not only by Venetian historians, including the leading specialist in mediaeval Venetian affairs of the last century, Roberto Cessi, but also the most famous and reliable of historians of the non-Italian school, such as Frederic C. Lane or Donald M. Nicol.¹¹ In fact, however, a much more convincing interpretation would seem to emerge if we examine the events in the light of what was happening in the Balkans. The turbulence and piracy that were upsetting Venetian maritime interests really could not be divorced from the situation of the Byzantine Empire and of the interior of the Balkans. From Constantinople Basil II, who was in the process of restoring long-forgotten prestige to the empire, had also to deal with the challenge of another prominent personality, Samuel, the Czar of the Bulgars, who represented the real threat to revived Byzantine power in the Balkans. And the danger of the Bulgars absorbed energies that could not therefore be

¹⁰ Nada KLAJČ, *Povijest Hrvata u ranom srednjem vijeku*. Zagreb 1971, 326–329; Lujo MARGETIĆ, *Le cause della spedizione veneziana in Dalmazia nel 1000*, in: IDEM, *Histrica et Adriatica*. Raccolta di saggi storico-giuridici e storici. Trieste 1983, 218–254; Gherardo ORTALLI, *Pietro II Orseolo*. “*Dux Veneticorum et Dalmaticorum*”, in: *Venezia e la Dalmazia*. Anno Mille. Secoli di vicende comuni. Treviso 2002, 13–27.

¹¹ See for example CESSI, *Venezia ducale*. Vol. 1, 369–372; LANE, *Venice: a Maritime Republic*, 26–27; DONALD M. NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice: a Study in Diplomatic and Cultural Relations*. Cambridge 1988, 42–44: “The Doge’s triumphal progress down the Adriatic had nothing to do with the Byzantine Emperor’s strategy.”

dedicated to the western Balkans, where the main risks lay in the unstable situation of the Croatian kingdom, with ongoing disputes between the sons of Stjepan Držislav (whose stance was pro-Byzantine): Svetslav Suronja was an ally of Samuel and had adopted anti-Byzantine and anti-Venetian positions, while Kresimir and his younger brother Gojislav took the opposite line.

I find it really very difficult to think that with this background situation Orseolo's expedition could have been a purely Venetian-Dalmatian affair. Personally, I am rather of the opinion that it will have been an action undertaken in some way with the agreement of Byzantium and with strategic objectives that benefited both parties. Seen in this light the campaign will have been intended to support Byzantine Dalmatia and at the same time reinforce Venice's role in the area, thus opening the way to eventual control over places that Byzantium was no longer able to rule directly.¹² If Basil II was to contain the action of the Bulgar Czar Samuel in the Balkans he needed Venice (as well as what Croatian forces were available) for a diversionary action in the west so whether formalized or not, an agreement between the two would seem to have been a probable expedient. What is certain is that links between Venice and Byzantium were particularly strong at the time and the combination of mutual interests and special needs will have been an incentive to an agreed (or at least a complementary) action.

Confirmation of this far from casual concurrence of interests and action is provided by an event that was perhaps less clamorous but certainly more significant than the Dalmatian expedition: this was the help Venice gave to Byzantine Bari when the latter was besieged by the Saracens in 1003. Contemporary chronicles and an extraordinary epigraph record what happened.¹³ The inscription can still be read on an islet off Vieste in the Gargano, where the Venetian fleet waited for three days before entering the harbour of Bari:

¹² Gherardo ORTALLI, *Il ducato e la «civitas Rivoalti» tra carolingi, bizantini e sassoni*, in: *Storia di Venezia dalle origini alla caduta della Serenissima*. Vol. 1: *Origini – Età ducale*. Section 2. Eds. Gherardo ORTALLI/Lellia CRACCO RUGGINI. Rome 1992, 777–778. But see also Ernesto SESTAN, *La conquista veneziana della Dalmazia*, in: *La Venezia del Mille*. Florence 1965, 85–116 (reprint in: *Storia della civiltà veneziana*. Vol. 1: *Dalle origini al secolo di Marco Polo*. Ed. Vittore BRANCA. Florence 1979, 85–116); MARGETIĆ, *Le cause della spedizione veneziana in Dalmazia*; Jadran FERLUGA, *L'amministrazione bizantina in Dalmazia*. Venice 1978, 195–202.

¹³ For the epigraph, which enables us to fix the exact year of the expedition, uncertainly dated by the chronicles, cf. ORTALLI, *Pietro II Orseolo*, 23–26.

“In the name of God and of our Saviour Jesus Christ. In the year 1003¹⁴ of our Lord’s incarnation, in the month of September on the 3rd day, in the first indiction. Lord Pietro, Doge of the Venetics and the Dalmatians, entered this harbour with one hundred ships, ready to take arms against the Saracens who were besieging Bari.”

The testimony was later completed, perhaps by another hand, at the moment the fleet was setting sail for the lagoon: “and [the Doge] fought with them; some he killed, others he put to flight.”

At the time, Basil II was fully engaged in the great counter-offensive against the Bulgars in the Balkans. He had retaken control of Thessaly in 1001, had reached the Danube in 1002 and, having taken Vidin, was about to enter Skopje in 1004. At the height of these events, which excluded a strong Byzantine presence in Italy, Orseolo’s expedition to Bari would appear to fit perfectly into a strategic plan in which the Upper Adriatic province, which had now grown to become a regional power in its own right, acted as an ally in support of its increasingly theoretical imperial ruler.¹⁵ A military operation of this kind was in any case an obvious sign of Venice’s growing international role, with a presence throughout the Adriatic.

AN ADRIATIC POWER

So I think we really can date the beginning of the period in which Venice became a key player in the Adriatic (and consequently in the situation of the Balkan coast) from the events of 1000–1003. However, for some time to come, the importance of the Venetian presence remained complementary compared with the primary role that Byzantium was still capable of playing in the western Balkans and the Adriatic. But the successful years of Basil II were destined to give way to much more difficult times: also in Italy, where the blows struck by the Normans put an end to centuries-old Byzantine domination. The decisive moment came in 1071, when Bari fell to the Duke of Apulia, Robert Guiscard, after a three-year-long siege. From that moment,

¹⁴ The year 1003 corresponds to 1002 according to modern dating, taking account of the fact that the Pisan system of incarnation is used in the epigraph. See Marco POZZA, *Gli usi cronologici nei più antichi documenti veneziani (secoli IX–XI)*, in: *Studi in memoria di Giorgio Costamagna*. Vol. 2. Ed. Dino PUNCUH. Genoa 2003, 801–848, 814–815.

¹⁵ A different opinion, for example, is expressed in FERLUGA, *L’amministrazione bizantina*, 201: the naval expedition to Bari was “a spontaneous action on the part of Venice [...] a warning that Venice possessed an efficient navy and would not tolerate any interference along the vital routes to and from the Orient.” The opinion of NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice*, 44–45, is less clear-cut.

Byzantium was no longer present on the western coast of the Adriatic. But the situation was still worse in the east, with the catastrophic defeat of Mantzikert, also in 1071. And as we know, the problems facing the Empire were not confined to military defeats. Dynastic turmoil, internal conflicts and economic difficulties also darkened the picture and naturally had consequences in the western Balkans. These were the years when King Petar Krešimir IV (1058–1074) was extending his influence from Croatia over Dalmatia,¹⁶ a situation that was reinforced by his successor, Dmitar Zvonimir (1075–1089) and a period rightly defined as “the golden age of Croatian state”.¹⁷ In Duklja in 1077, the son of Stefan Vojislav (1040–1052 ca.), Michael, received the title of sovereign of Zeta/Montenegro from Pope Gregory VII (which meant passing to the western area of influence)¹⁸ and his successor Constantin Bodin (1081–1101 ca.) extended the area subject to his authority. Byzantium also had to deal with threats from Hungarians and the Pechenegs. Our focus of interest, however, is what was happening on the Adriatic coast rather than in the interior. And here Venice found itself performing a control function that the Byzantine fleet could no longer keep up. The situation became critical when Robert Guiscard, having taken control of southern Italy, shifted his attention directly towards the eastern territories and the heart of the Byzantine Empire in 1081, occupying Corfù and placing Durrës under siege.¹⁹ At this point a weakened Byzantium found a natural ally (again) in Venice, which had everything to lose if the Normans took control of both the Adriatic coasts.²⁰ The contest came to an end in

¹⁶ FERLUGA, L'amministrazione bizantina, 238–240; RAUKAR, Hrvatsko srednjovjekovlje, 44–55.

¹⁷ Lujó MARGETIĆ, The Croatian State during the Era of Rulers from the Croatian National Dynasty, in: Croatia in the Early Middle Ages, 204–209. For the support provided by the Papacy, see Franjo ŠANJEK, Crkva i kršćanstvo u Hrvata. Srednji vijek. Zagreb 1993, 132–142.

¹⁸ Concern about papal, and even more about Norman, interests towards the Eastern coast of the Adriatic drove Venice to impose restrictions on the Dalmatian cities under its control in 1076: Documenta historiae Croatiae periodum antiquam illustrantia. Ed. Franjo RAČKI. Zagreb 1877, 101–102.

¹⁹ For a summary of the complex, protracted, three-sided contest that now began between Venice, Byzantium and the Normans, see Ferdinand CHALANDON, Les Comnène. Vol. 1: Essai sur le règne d'Alexis I^{er} Comnène (1081–1118). Paris 1900, 70–75, 91–93; Gherardo ORTALLI, Il Mezzogiorno normanno-svevo visto da Venezia, in: Il Mezzogiorno normanno-svevo visto dall'Europa e dal mondo mediterraneo. Atti delle tredicesime giornate normanno sveve. Ed. Giosuè MUSCA. Bari 1999, 63–71.

²⁰ For the fundamental role of Venice in the conflict fought out against the background of Albania, Epirus, Greece (as far inland as Larissa in Thessaly) and the offshore islands, see: Agostino PERTUSI, Venezia e Bisanzio nel secolo XI, in: IDEM, Saggi Veneto-bizanti-

1085 with the death of Robert Guiscard, but in the meantime the Venetians had won the prize they wanted from their decisive intervention. The golden bull granted by Alexius Comnenus I in 1082 in general guaranteed substantial privileges in the markets of the empire and in particular marked a further stage in the advance of Venice in the Adriatic basin.²¹ Byzantium's old authority was becoming weaker and weaker and the ancient lagoon province would soon move from being an ally on the seas to becoming the almost natural opponent of the former imperial power.

The new, more strained climate is summed up well in a famous passage by Cinnamus, the historian who was also secretary of Manuel Comnenus I, which denounces the arrogance and pride of the Venetians, who were behaving as if they were they who controlled the Empire. They treated "a citizen and a servant in the same way" even "with those of the status of *sebastos*, or an even higher degree of Roman nobility."²² Thus in 1126, when John Comnenus II came to renew the privileges granted in 1082, it was no longer a question of rewarding precious (or perhaps unavoidable) allies for their help but rather of yielding to pressures (which included the threat of reprisals) exerted by the Venetian *respublica*.²³ It was another important stage in the process of establishing new relations between Venice and the western Balkans. If the start of the second millennium had for the first time shown Venice's potential as regards control of the waters off the Balkan coast, and if the events of 1080–1085 had signalled the moment when the Venetian presence had already become decisive for the equilibrium of the region, in 1126 it became clear that Venice saw itself as a tendentially hegemonic power in the Adriatic area.

At this stage the influence of Venice, the maritime state par excellence, was felt mainly along the coast and did not penetrate directly into the hinterland, but increasing control of the coast meant possession of the means to condition the essential connections (not only commercial) between the interior of the Balkan peninsula and the sea. And links between the coast and the hinterland had already given rise to early examples of integration

ni. Ed. Giovanni Battista PARENTE. Florence 1990 (previously in Venezia del Mille, Florence 1965), 83–94; Roberto CESSI, Venezia ducale. Vol. 2: Comune Venetiarum. Venice 1965, 89–120.

²¹ POZZA/RAVEGNANI, I trattati con Bisanzio, 16–25.

²² IOANNIS CINNAMUS Epitome rerum ab Ioanne et Alexio Comnenis gestarum. Ed. August MEINEKE. Bonn 1836, 281.

²³ LILIE, Handel und Politik, 17–22, 370–373; Silvano BORSARI, Venezia e Bisanzio nel XII secolo. I rapporti economici. Venice 1988, 16–20.

and fusion between Latin and Slav elements.²⁴ Naturally the Balkan or Mediterranean dimension of events influenced and was influenced by what happened in other major sectors. The old shape of things had been complicated by events such as the schism of 1054, which spelled the definitive separation between the Roman Papacy and the Church of Constantinople. 1095 had seen the explosion of the era of the Crusades. But perhaps of greater impact than these issues on the Adriatic system was the game now being played between Byzantium, Venice, the coastal cities of the Balkans and the Normans, who certainly had not retired from the scene. Taking advantage of the problems posed to Byzantium by the need to keep a check on the dangerous and unpredictable participants in the Second Crusade in the east, the forces of Roger II directed their attentions to the western coasts of the Balkans. They did not stop at the temporary capture of Corfù (1147) but went on to sack Thebes and Corinth and carried off enormous amounts of loot.²⁵ Once again Venice wasted no opportunity to turn the situation to its advantage and the self-interested offer of renewed help to Byzantium duly led to an increase in the old privileges.²⁶

And these were not the only actors. If Byzantium had to count on Venice and linked up with the still uncrowned Germanic emperor Conrad III (who in any case died in 1152, before taking any actual step) with the illusory intention of conducting an action in Italy, Roger II played his cards by supporting the Hungarians and the Serbs. But other signals were being made by these events. If Corfù had yielded to the Normans out of hate for Byzantine power, this was evidence of how fragile its sense of belonging to the Empire in fact was. But this was nothing new. When Durrës opened its gates to Robert Guiscard in 1082, Anna Comnena explained the capitulation by claiming that “the inhabitants of the city were mainly citizens of Venice and Amalfi.”²⁷ Certainly there must have been a significant foreign presence but

²⁴ Tomislav RAUKAR, *Land and Society*, in: *Croatia in the Early Middle Ages*, 184, speaks of an “inexorable process of Croatization of the Roman towns along the Eastern Adriatic”.

²⁵ NICETAE CHONIATAE *Historia*. Ed. Jan Louis VAN DIETEN. Berlin 1975. Vol. 1. Book 3 (2 about the reign of Manuel Comnenus), 76: the vessels that carried the booty appeared to be cargo boats rather than pirate-ships.

²⁶ The temporary convergence of interests forced Manuel I Comnenus to make the concessions of 1147 (with an extension of the old Venetian privileges to the islands of Cyprus and Crete) and 1148 (with the expansion of the Venetian district in Constantinople): POZZA/RAVEGNANI, *I trattati con Bisanzio*, 58–75.

²⁷ ANNE COMNÈNE, *Alexiade. Règne de l'empereur Alexis I Comnène: 1081–1118*. Ed. Bernard LEIB. Vol. 2. Paris ²1967, 1, 7.

it is also easy to come to the conclusion that long-established situations and relationships were changing under the pressure of a new dispensation.²⁸

THE IMPERIAL DIMENSION

The contest with Byzantium was about to reach its most dramatic turning point. Byzantium's ambitions and demands as regards the western coast of the Balkan peninsula were now openly at odds with the maritime policy of Venice. For the *respublica* control over the Adriatic (which at that point it considered the "Gulf of Venice")²⁹ was a *sine qua non* for maintenance of the positions acquired on the international political scene and for any further economic development. It was therefore inevitable that Manuel Comnenus's actions to re-establish the authority of Byzantium over the Balkans would arouse Venice's apprehension: in a decidedly fragmented and unstable international scenario, with rapidly changing alliances, he even went so far as to conclude an agreement with the kingdom of Hungary, marked in 1164 by his promise of the hand of his daughter, the porphyrogenite princess Maria, to the Hungarian heir apparent, Béla.³⁰ The Comnenan restoration seemed to be proceeding well. Example of the many events that could be cited include the reconquest of positions in Dalmatia, Croatia and Bosnia and the gaining of control over Sirmio. As for Serbia, the *Grand Župan* Stefan Nemanja of the state of Rascia sided with Hungary and Venice but the attachments were ill-fated and in 1172 it was as a defeated rebel prince that he took part in the triumphant celebrations of Manuel Comnenus in Constantinople.³¹

²⁸ The decision to hand over Durrës to Guiscard should be seen as evidence of the existence of a *communitas* capable of exercising autonomous choices: Alain DUCÉLLIER, *La façade maritime de l'Albanie au Moyen Âge. Durazzo et Valona du XI^e au XV^e siècle*. Salonica 1981, 105.

²⁹ It should be remembered that as early as the 10th century Ibn Hawqal indicated the Upper Adriatic as *Giûn al-Banadiqîn*: the Gulf of Venice.

³⁰ OSTROGORSKY, *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates*, 319–321. On the complex dynastic system of Hungary and on the interest of Manuel Comnenus cf. Paul STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier. A Political Study on the Northern Balkans, 900–1204*. Cambridge et al. 2000, 247–253.

³¹ Jadran FERLUGA, *La Dalmazia fra Bisanzio, Venezia e l'Ungheria ai tempi di Manuele Comneno*, *Studi veneziani*, 12 (1970), 63–83 (reprint in: *Byzantium on the Balkans: Studies on the Byzantine Administration and the Southern Slavs from the 7. to the 12. Centuries*. Amsterdam 1976, 193–213); Paul MAGDALINO, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*. Cambridge 1993, 78–83; STEPHENSON, *Byzantium's Balkan Frontier*, 253–256, 261–271. Stefan Nemanja was also depicted in the frescoes the emperor com-

Under these circumstances it was not only the eastern coast of the Adriatic that became more difficult for Venice to control. Indeed, Byzantium was becoming a dangerous presence on the western coast too: Ancona came into the orbit of Comnenus, who in the meantime was curtailing the privileged role of an increasingly meddlesome Venice throughout his empire and at the same time fostering relations with Venice's direct competitors, Genoa and Pisa, by granting them commercial and various other entitlements (in 1170).³² These actions hurt Venice indirectly, but a direct clash was not long delayed. It came in 1171, on 12th March. An in some ways admirable operation led, in the course of a single day, to all the Venetians present in the Empire being arrested and to their property being confiscated.³³ It was the toughest imaginable action in the circumstances. The Venetian response registered the odd success on the Dalmatian coast but turned out over all to be a substantial failure that was serious enough to lead to the assassination of the current Doge Vitale Michiel II, who was stabbed to death in the monastery at San Zaccaria in 1172. Once again events and circumstances in distant territories had serious consequences in Venice. Not least in the field of alliances. The *respublica* tried to intervene by supporting the troops of Frederick I *Barbarossa*, who were engaged in the siege of Ancona (in 1174), and joining forces with the Norman Kingdom of Sicily with the treaty of 1175, which also expressed support for Serbian aspirations to independence.³⁴ But once again the balance of power in the international arena worked in Venice's favour.³⁵

missioned to celebrate his successes over the Serbs: Dimitri OBOLENSKY, *Six Byzantine Portraits*. Oxford 1988, 115–116.

³² Paolo LAMMA, *Comneni e Staufer. Ricerche sui rapporti fra Bisanzio e l'occidente nel secolo XII*. Rome 1955–1957. Vol. 1, 149–242 on the return of Byzantium to Italy; Vol. 2, 239–334 on the problem of *Romania* and the renewed success of the West.

³³ For a summary account, with an abundance of contemporary sources, see: Roberto CESSI, *Venezia ducale*. Vol. 2; LILIE, *Handel und Politik*, 489–496; NICOL, *Byzantium and Venice*, 96–100.

³⁴ Ancona was the fundamental nexus (also as regards financial support) for a revival of the Byzantine presence in Italy, linked to the actions carried out on the other side of the Adriatic. It was no coincidence that the envoy the Byzantine emperor sent to Ancona was the *protosebastos* Constantine Ducas, *dux* of Dalmazia. Cf. Peter SCHREINER, *Der Dux von Dalmatien und die Belagerung Anconas im Jahre 1173*, *Byzantion* 41 (1971), 285–311. In general: David ABULAFIA, *Ancona, Byzantium and the Adriatic, 1155–1173*, *Papers of the British School at Rome* 52 (1984), 195–216 (now in: IDEM, *Italy, Sicily and the Mediterranean, 1100–1400*. London 1987, n. IX).

³⁵ The temporary surmounting of the tensions between Venice and Byzantium took place thanks to the agreement with Andronicus Comnenus (the text of which has not survived)

Here too it is impossible to recount all the swiftly shifting events: the defeat suffered by Manuel Comnenos at Myriocephalon in Phrygia in 1176 at the hands of the sultan of Iconium Kilij Arslan II; the dynastic turbulence in Constantinople; the revival of the Serbs and the Normans; the end of the Comnenus dynasty with the lynching of Andronicus Comnenus in 1185; the revolt of the Bulgars and the birth of their empire with Asen, Petar and Kalojan; the return to power of Stefan Nemanja.³⁶ It would be more productive to go straight to 1204, to the Fourth Crusade and its diversion away from its stated objective, the Holy Land. This was the start of the Latin Empire of Constantinople.³⁷

The unexpected outcome of the Crusade marked a decisive turning point for the political system of the Adriatic, with the old Byzantine now really leaving the scene. The checks and balances of the entire eastern basin of the Mediterranean underwent a radical change and Venice formally placed itself at the level of the great powers of the age while the Doge assumed the title of *dominator quarte et dimidie partis totius imperii Romanie*.³⁸ The new empire was born in response to pressure from Venice and in fact remained under its protection. Certainly, in this new dimension the *respublica*-cum-imperial power did not discard the characteristics it had developed during its long existence, so its maritime and commercial vocation remained fundamental. Its ruling class kept its traditional mercantile connotations. And above all, in pursuing an imperial role Venice kept sight of the fact that it had always had “extremely limited territorial ambitions.”³⁹ Extensive mainland possessions were much less of interest than commercial markets, ports and great trading centres. For a considerable time to come it was generally accepted that the vocation of Venice was “to cultivate the sea and leave the land alone.”⁴⁰ Even after the conquest of Constantinople, therefore, Venice

and especially thanks to the three chrysobulls granted by Isaac II Angelus in 1187. LILIE, *Handel und Politik*, 24–35; POZZA/RAVEGNANI, *I trattati con Bisanzio*, 77–99.

³⁶ STEPHENSON, *Byzantium’s Balkan Frontier*, 275–315.

³⁷ As regards the Fourth Crusade, the circumstances that led to it and its consequences, see in general the essays now included in: *Quarta Crociata. Venezia – Bisanzio – Impero Latino*. 2 vols. Eds. Gherardo ORTALLI/Giorgio RAVEGNANI/Peter SCHREINER. Venice 2006.

³⁸ With special reference to the position of Venice, see Antonio CARILE, *Per una storia dell’impero latino di Costantinopoli (1204–1261)*. Bologna 1972.

³⁹ I return to the formula “bassissimo indice di territorialità” that I used previously in: *Il mercante e lo Stato*, 107–108.

⁴⁰ The formula is proposed in RAPHAYNI DE CARESINIS *Chronica*. Ed. Ester PASTRORELLO. Bologna 1923, 58: “essere cosa propria di Venezia coltivare il mare e lasciar stare la terra”. As regards the much debated nature and significance of Venice’s policy towards

took great care to avoid taking control (whether effective or theoretical) of the three eighths of the lands of the defeated Byzantine Empire that had been agreed as its due.

The fulcrum of this new imperial dimension remained the Adriatic and the extensive part of the Balkan peninsula with coasts on the Adriatic now found itself more than ever part of a system in which Venice was an unavoidable point of reference. But control over the coast did not imply neglect of interior routes. Even before 1204 Venetian commercial documentation (though there is very little of it) shows that sea and land were closely integrated. It was a transbalkan route that the merchant Filippo di Albiola of Malamocco followed in 1161 to take a sum of money to the Abbot of San Nicolò del Lido: he travelled overland from Constantinople to Durrës and proceeded to Venice by sea, and in 1183–1184 Pietro da Molin followed the same route (Venice-Durrës-Constantinople) in reverse. In 1185 in Thebes Vitale Voltani entrusted 250 hyperperes to Pietro Morosini to purchase merchandise due to be transported to Durrës for shipping to Venice; the return journey was to go via Corinth and thence to Thebes by land, or alternatively from Venice to Durrës by sea and then on to Constantinople over land.⁴¹ These were trade routes along which merchants travelled buying and selling between cities during the journey.⁴²

Symbiosis between coast and hinterland can in any case be taken for granted. Ports are the point of interchange between the sea and the interior. And so the situation remained long after the end of the Latin Empire of Constantinople in 1261. Venice's conquest of the Italic mainland in the 15th century should also be seen less as a retreat and more as an expression of its determination to avoid the growth of strong states at its back that could close down the routes linking the Adriatic with continental Europe. And the terms of the peace treaty stipulated in 1479 at Constantinople-Istanbul with Mehmed II the Conqueror, acknowledged Venetian control (albeit intermittent) over the eastern shores of the Adriatic. Certainly the instruments that attest to the presence of the *respublica* change. From the 13th century Venice's authority over coastal centres is expressed through accords and pacts (whether agreed or imposed!): Koper, Umag, Poreč, Rovinj, Pula, Krk, Rab,

the *Terraferma*, I believe the best brief account remains that expressed in this and many others of his works, by Gaetano COZZI, *Politica, società, istituzioni*, in: IDEM/Michael KNAPTON, *Storia della Repubblica di Venezia. Dalla guerra di Chioggia alla riconquista della Terraferma*. Turin 1986, 3–5.

⁴¹ DUCCELLIER, *La façade maritime de l'Albanie*, 74, 80–81; BORSARI, *Venezia e Bisanzio*, 92.

⁴² For another journey of this kind, in 1151, see BORSARI, *Venezia e Bisanzio*, 92.

Osor, Nin, Zadar, Skradin, Šibenik, Trogir, Omiš, Korčula, Dubrovnik, Kotor, Durrës, Duklja, Epirus. From north to south it is these agreements that define the cities' relations with the *respublica* and its power. And these links, supported by the traditional Venetian ideology of "good government" and considerable mediation skills, shaped these places (thanks also to their modest demographic dimensions) more significantly than happened in more complex locations such as the great centres of the mainland.⁴³ The Venetian presence in these places was firmly rooted (and in some cases lasted until 1797) in contexts in which, after Byzantium, other great actors from "outside", including Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, would continue to exert an influence beside the local forces: Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. But at this point we must stop. The purpose of this talk was basically to provide no more than an introduction to the papers which will explore the centuries that provide the focus of our conference. My words, as I said, are offered as a sort of prologue, a pre-history, and an attempt to identify an initial development and features that were there in the beginning and lasted in time.

⁴³ As regards the nature of the agreements between Venice and its subject communities, cf. in general Gherardo ORTALLI, *Entrar nel Dominio: le dedizioni delle città alla Repubblica Serenissima*, in: *Società, economia, istituzioni. Elementi per la conoscenza della Repubblica Veneta*. Verona 2002, 49–62; in particular, for the Dalmatian area: IDEM, *Il ruolo degli statuti tra autonomie e dipendenze: Curzola e il dominio veneziano*, *Rivista storica italiana* 98 (1986), 195–220.

