



CONTRIBUTI DI ARCHEOLOGIA MEDIEVALE
PREMIO OTTONE D'ASSIA E RICCARDO FRANCOVICH

7

Cecilia Moine

Chiostri tra le acque

I monasteri femminili
della laguna nord di Venezia
nel basso Medioevo



All'Insegna del Giglio

In copertina: Le isole di Ammiana e Costanziaco nella cartografia storica con evidenziate le aree occupate dagli istituti monastici; sullo sfondo, rielaborazione grafica di un particolare dalla carta

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via della Fangosa, 38; 50032 Borgo S. Lorenzo (FI)

tel. +39 055 8450 216; fax +39 055 8453 188

e-mail redazione@edigiglio.it; ordini@edigiglio.it

sito web www.edigiglio.it

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Chiostri tra le acque

Ai miei genitori

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PRESENTAZIONE

Nel panorama dell'archeologia lagunare, contrassegnato negli ultimi decenni da un frenetico attivismo, è raro trovare spazio compiuti tentativi di analisi nei quali la fonte materiale venga utilizzata con la funzione di spiegare (o aiutare a spiegare) processi, piuttosto che abbellire livelli interpretativi già dati. Non solo, ma è raro anche riscontrare un interesse a lavorare verso la costruzione di letture che vadano oltre il particolarismo del singolo contesto di scavo. Tutto questo, oltre ad indebolire lo spessore euristico della fonte archeologica, la relega in quel ruolo di ancillarità che a parole molti archeologi vorrebbero scongiurare, ma che poi, nei fatti e forse inconsciamente e inconsapevolmente, contribuiscono a rafforzare.

Così, e non è la prima volta che ci capita di sottolinearlo, l'archeologia nella laguna veneziana soffre di una sorta di afasia, che non sarebbe congenita solo si volessero tentare altre vie e, soprattutto, si volesse cambiare il nostro modo di osservare le testimonianze del passato. In questo panorama, dunque, un volume come quello di Cecilia Moine costituisce una felice eccezione per diversi motivi.

Il primo perché è un testo coraggioso, che non rimanda un ambizioso tentativo di comprensione complessiva di fenomeni storici ad un futuro indistinto, ma lo tenta pagina per pagina, mettendosi in gioco e raggiungendo, in più di un caso, risultati mai banali e scontati.

Il secondo perché non proclama, petizione di principio, una multidisciplinarietà nello studio delle fonti, ma la pratica di fatto, analizzando con competenza testi scritti, documenti cartografici, resti archeologici. In questo, peraltro, dimostrando come l'integrazione (o il confronto/scontro) tra sistemi informativi differenti riesca a produrre risultati veramente compiuti quando a governare i processi analitico/interpretativi stia un unico centro ordinatore (penso infatti che una interdisciplinarietà che sia solo il paratattico dispiegarsi di diversi specialismi abbia più difficoltà a raggiungere risultati di una certa compiutezza scientifica).

Il terzo motivo, infine, è che si tratta di un libro che analizza un fenomeno, nella laguna, tanto diffuso e noto, quanto di fatto poco studiato e compreso. E si tratta di un fenomeno, si badi bene, che ha un notevole impatto sociale, con ricadute non

irrilevanti sul piano dell'organizzazione dell'habitat e dello sfruttamento delle risorse, delle dinamiche familiari e parentali, ma anche delle tensioni che rappresentano i diversi poteri, primi tra tutti quelli ecclesiastici. Dunque, storie che non si esauriscono nel chiuso dei 'chiostri sulle acque', ma che da quei chiostri si muovono per spiegare paesaggi e società, individui e luoghi.

Negli ultimi anni l'archeologia si è indirizzata molto verso l'analisi delle strutture sociali, intese non più come 'un volgo indistinto che nome non ha', ma cercando di dare, a quel volgo, spesso un volto, una identità, in qualche caso perfino un nome. Non è solo un approccio derivato dalla lezione di una storiografia che, negli anni '80 e '90, ha valorizzato il quotidiano fin nelle sue più minute rappresentazioni (quando questo, ovvio, fosse possibile); né dall'influenza degli umori del post-processualismo finalmente sbarcati anche in questi specchi d'acqua. Ma è soprattutto un modo di usare al meglio quelle esperienze come utile background per far rivivere le fonti archeologiche, di valorizzare in forme diverse un documento, quello materiale, che rischiava di impantanarsi nelle secche di un erudito, quanto spesso infruttuoso, approccio antiquario.

Così, il fenomeno del monachesimo femminile in laguna, lambito inoltre dalle sirene dell'archeologia di genere, può ambire a rappresentarsi anche attraverso quei pochi documenti materiali che le attività di scavo sono riusciti a produrre e a mettere a disposizione della comunità scientifica. Non vi è dubbio che la bilancia, in un'ipotetica e forse ingiusta comparazione, penderebbe dalla parte delle fonti documentarie 'per eccellenza', cioè quelle scritte (anche se pure quelle archeologiche, di fatto, lo sarebbero!): questo è un risultato che era già scontato in partenza, per chi avesse solo consapevolezza di quale sia lo stato delle ricerche su queste tematiche in questi luoghi. Dunque non è da tale prospettiva che si deve giudicare questo volume (cioè non si deve pesare quanta archeologia esso contenga); viceversa sarà invece da valutare in relazione a quale tipo di archeologia abbia utilizzato o, ancora meglio, giudicarlo per come l'abbia utilizzata.

Così, se riandiamo ai punti nodali sviluppati in questo lavoro, ci accorgiamo come a tematismi che non faremmo difficoltà a ritrovare in un qualsiasi

buon lavoro di topografia storica (ubicazione dei luoghi, caratterizzazione dei paesaggi) si accompagnano argomenti più desueti, che tentano di andare al cuore delle dinamiche sociali che hanno prodotto questi fenomeni per cercare di spiegarle. Così, le fonti archeologiche che raccontano della struttura e dell'organizzazione degli spazi vengono analizzate non nei loro valori architettonico-formali, ma nella loro dimensione distributiva in quanto potenzialmente capace di descrivere il significato sociale che tali contesti vengono ad assumere. Così, i manufatti che circolavano nei monasteri non restano solo anonimi contenitori di cibi, ma strumenti per rappresentare

identità, singole e collettive, mutevoli e cangianti nel tempo, anche in istituzioni che spesso si considerano o si analizzano come se fossero imperturbabili e immutabili.

L'archeologia in laguna deve ovviamente crescere, ma le potenzialità che essa lascia solo intuire sono tali da far bene sperare che tale crescita ci sarà. Questo libro, sul monachesimo femminile, ne costituisce, a mio parere, un importante tassello: non solo per quello che ha saputo dirci su quel passato, ma soprattutto per quello che ha saputo insegnarci per il futuro.

SAURO GELICHI
Venezia, gennaio 2013

ABSTRACT

Cloisters over the Waters. Late Medieval Nunneries in the Northern Lagoon of Venice

This book aims to investigate the development of nunneries during the Late Middle Ages, considering their interaction with the particular surroundings, the northern lagoon of Venice, and its social context.

These communities were analyzed in the light of their gender and religious status. Both characteristics were considered as socially and chronologically determined. The identity of these nuns was not studied merely through the opposition of male and female, laity and religious, but was reconstructed considering numerous other variables: the layout of the nunneries, the relationships with the landscape, the perception of the cloisters by the laity, the organization of the community and so on. Traditional sources, such as historical reconstructions, cartographical information and archival data were also considered because they provide essential information that, if it is available, is related to the material culture. Moreover, late medieval monasticism in the Venetian lagoon, especially outside the city centre, has been inadequately researched, making an historic background necessary. However, I became aware of the fact that written sources and historical cartography could provide double information: not only about the topic of the discussion, but also about the intention of the authors. Both types of data were used considering their potential for information.

The archaeological data were collected by means of a systematic survey of scientific papers and specialized journals. Although there were numerous studies concerning the Roman period, I found that there was a remarkable lack of excavated and published research related to Medieval contexts. This was no doubt due to the particular interest of the scientific community at the time, which was still focused on the imperial past, rather than a lack of evidence related to the Middle Ages. The most detailed research on early and late medieval sites in our sample area had been conducted in the last ten years by different teams from Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Noteworthy excavations had also been conducted on the islands of San Giacomo in Paludo, San Lorenzo of Ammiana and Costanziano.

In this book, historic reconstructions have been based on transcriptions and *regesti* of archival

papers. Important data was also derived from the monumental work by Flaminio Corner. The author was an 18th century savant, who consulted and edited a great number of ecclesiastical archives before they were partially dispersed during the Napoleonic invasion and the Risorgimento.

The oldest cartographical record of the Venetian lagoon had been produced in the Early Modern Age, however, the landscape described there, was very helpful in reconstructing the preceding shape of the lagoon, which is a geomorphologic element constantly in transformation. All the data were collected and managed with a GIS solution.

In the Early Middle Ages, the northern archipelagoes, like all of the lagoon, were divided into different local administrative entities called *Contrade*, under the central government of Venice. Starting in the 12th century, while the Serenissima increased her power overseas, they slowly lost their autonomy and their importance. In the Early Modern Age, the northern regions were completely transformed: some of the islands became the outskirts of Venice, while others became rural settlements, and the least fortunate ones turned into swamplands.

Scholars have always noticed the great number of medieval religious communities, especially female ones, in this area; however, no specific studies have been conducted in order to explain this particular proliferation of monasteries or to describe the main characteristics of this phenomenon. In general, two opposing solutions have been proposed. Giovanni Spinelli claims that Venetian monasticism underwent a significant development during the Late Middle Ages, exactly as occurred in other parts of Italy in the same period. On the other hand, Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan considers the multiplication of monastic institutions an attempt to colonize and to maintain populated lands, which the inhabitants and secular clergy (priests, cardinals, bishops, canons, etc.) were abandoning, to escape from the economic and environment decline. Both theories have weak points. For example, the first thesis does not explain why in this area the traditional manifestation of the spiritual renaissance was absent: congregational and mendicant orders were not predominant and most of

the communities followed the traditional Benedictine Rule. Besides, no heretical movement had appeared. The other hypothesis considers the possibility that religious communities, even if they were mostly female, could be attracted to and even financed for occupying deserted land.

The two *Contrade* of Costanziaco and Ammiana were located in the extreme northern district of the lagoon and they are now profoundly different from a geomorphologic point of view. The archipelagoes are totally rural and many of the islands are periodically submerged by tides. Nevertheless, in the Middle Ages they were well populated settlements, able to host eight religious communities. Seven of them were Benedictine nunneries. Although all of them were financed by host communities, each one organized its property in ways that were sometimes very different. For example, while San Lorenzo of Ammiana primarily controlled the fish ponds near the institution, San Maffio of Costanziaco, a Cistercian community, acquired numerous land holdings along the navigable rivers, which connected their island to the nearby country side, controlled by the city of Treviso. In general, these nunneries reflected the political and economical aspirations of the new social groups. The success and versatility of the secular counterpart were reflected in the achievements of the religious communities. San Maffio, for example, was supported by an enterprising mercantile family, the Viarios. They chose abbesses and monastic administrators and they organized the country estates. Furthermore, when the first site was threatened by the encroaching swamps, they were able to manage the move of the nuns to a safer island. In other words, despite the similarities, nunneries could represent very different social groups, moved by different interests.

On the basis of extensive archival research and data collected from recent archaeological campaigns, we attempted to create a partial reconstruction of the medieval landscape. All the nunneries were located along the banks of the canals, which guaranteed communications from the north to the city of Venice and from the countryside to the lagoon. The nunneries also left an important mark on the territory because their names became those of the islands on which they had been located even a century after the disappearance of the religious communities. Unfortunately, only San Lorenzo of Ammiana was extensively excavated. The results of past archaeological research were poorly edited and have been subject to question by recent studies. However, a reconstruction of the medieval plan of the nunnery was possible. Residential buildings were partially distributed around a cloister area; facilities, such as a brick fire place, water drainage, a small refuse

dump, were available. Moreover, signs of restoration activities during the 14th centuries show that, in the Middle Ages, the religious community was lively and relatively dynamic. In the past, this period has been traditionally interpreted as a moment of decline because of the absence of written sources.

A different situation occurred in Torcello, which was the most important *Contrada* in the medieval northern lagoon. It was the site not only of the most ancient Cathedral in the Venetian area, but also the local secular authority, called the *podestaria*. Moreover, its position was strategically and symbolically in the heart of the north district. The monumental area near the Cathedral has been well documented from an archaeological point of view and, since the early 20th century, it has been excavated by both Polish and Italian teams. Unfortunately, scientific investigations were conducted and published only in this zone. The medieval location of the ecclesiastical and secular power has been completely reconstructed, but we have only sporadic and random information concerning daily life in Torcello. A case in point is the nunnery of San Giovanni Evangelista, which is located in the south-west part of the archipelagoes. While the Cathedral area was being carefully and scientifically investigated, San Giovanni island was simply dug up for the purpose of discovering the floor plan of the church. No dating material was collected or studied and the stratigraphical units were not recorded. Certainly, this was a missed opportunity. However, archival and landscape research have depicted an original picture of medieval religious institutions in Torcello where the competition between monasteries was more intense than elsewhere. Furthermore, many of them were not subsidized by host communities and often came from other areas in order to obtain more independence. The turbulent relationships between the two Cistercian nunneries and San Tommaso, the only monastery of the same order, are particularly significant for understanding the social and economic dynamics involved in the development of late medieval monasticism in the lagoon.

The history of the area between Burano and Murano was quite different from the northern *Contrade* previously described. Despite the similar development of late medieval religious communities, especially female, the proximity of Venice profoundly influenced the history of these institutions. As a matter of fact, in these archipelagoes the religious communities flourished, in particular during the 14th century. In addition, they did not suffer the same dramatic decline as the northern monasteries during the 15th century. On the contrary, in certain areas, such as Murano, religious institutions actually increased in number at the end of the Middle

Ages. Probably the southern part of the northern lagoon had always been conditioned by the city centre. At first, nunneries grew along the navigable canals towards Venice, and then their development was maintained by the economical and geographical expansion of the city. In fact, some of these islands later became the suburbs of the city.

An entire chapter has been dedicated to the nunnery of San Giacomo in Paludo, which was located on the island of the same name, along one of the main waterways of the lagoon. From an archaeological point of view this is one of the better known sites in the Venetian area due to the fact that a six year excavation project was conducted here by Ca' Foscari University of Venice under the supervision of prof. Sauro Gelichi and most of the results have already been published¹. Archival sources and material culture were used together to reconstruct the identity of the nuns, their perception and occupation of the spaces, the population and the active role of everyday objects, especially tableware, within the community. The differences in the occupation of space and distribution of accesses within the island under the control of the medieval nuns and the Early Modern friars is also discussed here

The decades between the end of the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age were a period of great transformation for both the northern lagoon and their nunneries. A number of religious communities were suppressed and entire *Contrade* were completely deserted. A commonly held belief is that the causes of this phenomenon were primarily two: damage to the environment and a general crisis of religious feelings starting in 14th century. The research presented in this book attempts to analyze in detail this crucial moment and to focus on its complexity.

In fact, during the first half of 15th century, many nuns deplored their living conditions. They wrote to the Holy See that they feared the encroach-

ing swamps, suffered deadly fevers and were longing to move elsewhere. Probably the environmental decline was real but, certainly, it was not the only reason to abandon the northern islands. In fact, not all the communities moved out in the same way. Some of them simply moved to a more suitable location, maintaining intact their identity and their heritage. Others were completely dispersed. In some cases the nuns joined different communities, even of different orders, and their goods were divided between the major religious institutions. Moreover, the environment underwent the most significant changes in the north, above all near Costanziaco and Ammiana, which had become the most uninhabited and economically depressed areas. They were also too far from Venice to benefit from its development and they were never protected from the swamps and tides. It could be claimed that nunneries and the social groups that had represented them were definitely attracted by the urban centre. Furthermore, the environmental decline described by the nuns' letters seems to have had moral consequences as well physical. A case in point is the isolation, which was perceived as a danger for the salvation of their soul. Probably water-snakes inside nuns' cells were both a realistic and metaphoric presence. After the Black Death, and even more in the following decades, the attitude towards female sexual behavior changed significantly. Society and the lay government started not only to increase control on marginalized categories, such as prostitutes and homosexuals, but also to supervise nunneries more effectively. Laity involved in sexual scandals with nuns were usually punished. In the end, the monastic reform movement, called "Osservanza", also played a role in the transformation of northern lagoon monasticism.

To summarize, late medieval nunneries in the northern lagoon can be understood only through the study of the landscape and the social context around them. Despite the strong symbolic value of these institutions, the women within the cloister were deeply influenced by the society outside; even when a strict cloistering forbid them to go out into the secular world, the world itself overwhelmingly entered into the nunnery.

¹ Recently, new research has partially modified some of the details of the archaeological reconstruction of the medieval island. Hopefully, they will be published soon with all the studies undertaken on San Giacomo. However, the considerations presented in this book can still be considered valid.

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