

'Feeding the citizens?' Urban land and landownership in past and present

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Abstract

Bread, rice, and water: The role of urban land and water-ownership in victualling and agriculture in the early modern Venetian State

In September 1594, the Venetian Senate decreed the ban on the creation of new rice fields in the State. According to the senators' words, the decision was justified by an alarming problem: in the Venetian Mainland State (i.e. the so-called *Terraferma*, the regions under the lion's wings covering the northeastern side of the Italian Peninsula) rural lands were endangered by the speculative attitude of many *Serenissima's* subjects. Landowners had started to cut vineyards and trees, and more in general to replace wheat cultivation, to convert lands suitable for grain production into paddy fields, with the aim to exploit the market. Hence, the consequences of an unregulated expansion of risiculture in the Veneto during the 16th century – on the back of the aggressive Venetian reclamation strategy aiming at grain self-sufficiency –, were, in the end, affecting the central provisioning policies of the Republic, as well as the traditional companion cultivation system that had characterised the region since the Middle Ages; menacing food supply both in the Capital and the rest of the State. Those paddy fields were largely owned by Mainland elite families or monasteries, who with their actions were proving more tempted by their individual interests and entrepreneurial attitude in the agricultural market, rather than devoted to the Capital's targets. They were also marking their spaces of independence and self-rule in front of the political and institutional system of the State.

This paper will deal with this context, in order to investigate the role played by Renaissance Veneto city elites in pursuing entrepreneurial agricultural strategies to profit from their land estates, as a result of their politically privileged position (i.e. the urban rulers of the peripheral and rural areas). An institutional place Venice granted them at the moment of the creation of the State. In the analysis, the case study of rice cultivation between the 16th and early 18th century will highlight the spaces of economic self-determination those urban ruling classes could profit from in managing and controlling farming, city provisioning, and food policies into their district economies; in front of the ineffective attempts of the Venetian central policies. Furthermore, I will underline how the process intertwines with the new water agency of the Republic, coming from the recent centralised management of many resources (water systems and water rights of use among them). For those city elites a privileged position in acquiring the rights to own water use as well, progressively became another element to stress in front of the community both their control over rural lands and their right to choose how to manage them, despite any local rural interest and demand for supply.

To analyse this framework, I will focus mainly on the documentation of the Venetian central magistrate in charge of reclamation, agricultural development and water policies since the mid-16th century: the *Provveditori sopra i Beni Inculti*; in combination with the decisions of the officers supervising the Capital's victualling strategies (the *Provveditori alle Biade*). These sources will be integrated by private archives of Mainland families, together with contemporary local policies on provisioning the main urban areas.