

Serving two masters. Istria between Venice and the Franks in the 8th and 9th centuries

by Annamaria Pazienza

The essay is divided into two parts. The first part portrays the Upper Adriatic, from Ravenna and Venice to the coastal towns in Istria and Dalmatia, as a unified peripheral area. Despite the shifting political context, the socio-cultural composition of the local communities shows similar features because of the ecology of the region and its common Byzantine legacy. Simultaneously, the institutional apparatus demonstrates a high degree of hybridization with the political regimes in the mainland. Some considerations about the impact of international policy on the area are made here. The relevance of the Treaty of Aachen is rethought, and the internal fights for power of the emerging Venetian elites are explained in the light of the building-process of an independent duchy where the control for strategic local resources was a priority. Drawing on older and newer literature, the second part describes the multiple connections between the newly established Venetian political entity and the Istrian peninsula. Patrimonial, commercial and institutional links are considered, and the twofold administrative dependency of Istria from the Church of Grado, i.e., the metropolitan see of Venice, and the Lombard and Frankish rulers is reviewed. What emerges is the agency of an unruly Istrian aristocracy and, above all, the on- and off- control exerted by the Carolingians. In this frame, and in the frame of the above-mentioned Venetian-Istrian connections, the essay moves on to considering the enigmatic figure of the duke John of the Plea of Rižana. In contrast to the traditional interpretation, set of evidence is provided in support of the thesis of his local origin. Even more so, the brand-new hypothesis that he might have come from the nearby duchy of Venice is put forward for future debate.

Middle Ages; 9th century; Italy; Venice; Istria; Carolingians; duke John; Plea of Rižana.

Abbreviations

Documenti = *Documenti relativi alla storia di Venezia anteriori al mille*, ed. R. Cessi, 2 vols, Venezia 1991 (Testi e documenti di storia e di letteratura latina medioevale, 1, 3).

IV = Giovanni Diacono, *Istoria Veneticorum*, ed. L.A. Berto, Milano 1997 (Fonti per la Storia d'Italia, 2).

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MGH, ARF = *Annales regni Francorum inde ab a. 741 usque ad a. 829, qui dicuntur Annales Laurissenses maiores et Einhardi*, ed. F. Kurze, Hannover 1895 (MGH, SS rer. Germ., 6).

MGH, DD Karol. I = *Die Urkunden Pippins, Karlmanns und Karls des Grossen*, ed. E. Mühlbacher, Hannover 1906 (Diplomata Karolinorum, 1).

MGH, DD O I. = *Die Urkunden der deutschen Könige und Kaiser*, ed. T. Sickel, Hannover 1879-1884 (Diplomata regum et imperatorum Germaniae, 1)

MGH DD O III. = *Die Urkunden der deutschen Könige und Kaiser*, ed. T. Sickel, Hannover 1894 (Diplomata regum et imperatorum Germaniae, 2).

MGH, Epp. lang. = *Epistolae langobardicae collectae*, ed. W. Gundlach, Berlin 1892, pp. 691-715 (MGH, Epp. 3).

1. Introduction

In a previous work about the sources of the mid-eleventh-century *Istoria Veneticorum* by John the Deacon, I demonstrated that the chronicler was likely aware of the Plea of Rižana and other documents to which, as they were housed in the patriarchal archives, he had free access¹. Likely dated to 804, and set in an unknown locality in Istria, the *Placitum* is well known, and there is no need here to present it in its totality. It concerns a dispute involving Istrian people, the local bishops and the Frankish representative present, i.e., a certain duke John. John is the main defendant in the court case wherein local inhabitants make several hateful allegations against him.

John the Deacon's knowledge of the *Placitum* is indirectly confirmed by his harsh statement about the rulership of the Venetian duke John Galbaio. The author seldom interrupts the narrative to speak out in the first person, and therefore, the passage under scrutiny is quite unique. It reads as follows: «quem (i.e., John Galbaio) neque scripto neque relatione experti sumus suae patriae commode bene tractasse», where – as I argued – the hint at the written documentation must be read as a reference to the Plea, and the poor opinion concerning the duke's deeds as a case of mistaken identity. In other words, John the Deacon would have misinterpreted the sources at his disposal, confusing the duke John of the Plea of Rižana with the duke of Venice, John Galbaio.

Building on this, and questioning my previous conclusions, in this essay I wish to verify whether John the Deacon was actually right, and if the two Johns were, therefore, the same person. To this purpose, I will analyse first the features of the Upper Adriatic as a whole, and the impact of Charlemagne's policy on this peripheral area. I will then continue by focusing on the political developments of Venice and Istria which, although dissimilar in many ways, show a common thread, because of the economic and administrative interests of Venice in Istria, as well as the simultaneous but precarious control exerted on this latter by the Franks. Finally, I will conclude by showing how such a political situation transformed Istria into an actual political laboratory and

¹ Paziienza, *Archival Documents as Narrative*.

a liminal area between two powers, i.e., into a scenario in which my working hypothesis can gain ground and take form.

2. *Commonality and hybridization in the Upper Adriatic*

In recent years, our understanding of the history of early medieval North-Eastern Italy has been revised based on the study of archaeological finds and a fresh critical interpretation of traditional written sources. A new vision of the entire area, stretching from Ravenna to Zadar, and embracing Venice and the Istrian peninsula, has found itself at the centre of scholarly debate. This revolves around two major aspects: a wider super-regional Adriatic identity formed beyond the shifting political borders, and the profound influence exerted on local societies by the institutional developments of the Italian mainland.

The identity linking the settlements scattered throughout the Upper Adriatic was self-perceived as much as it was acknowledged by external observers. As Francesco Borri points out, its foundation was grounded in a few central elements: first, the links between the local elites and Constantinople; and second, the dual economic nature of their wealth, derived from extensive landholdings and the maritime trade alike². The link with Constantinople was engendered through the several non-commercial trips taken by Istrians, Dalmatians and Venetians to the eastern capital. Frequently attested in our sources, these trips served to obtain imperial dignities and titles. Personal honours, such as *tribunus*, *ypatus*, *spatharius*, were powerful tools of prestige and power, in the same way personal wealth was. Like their peers on the Italian peninsula, Adriatic aristocrats possessed fields and vineyards, but also marshes and swamps plus the facilities for fishing and hunting sea animals and the production of salt. Above all, they were used to own ships and boats. The experience of seafaring and raising a crew, along with the ecology of certain lagoon environments, were instrumental in shaping a commonality marked by a strong sense of belonging³.

An interesting example of this commonality comes from archaeology, which records a specific funeral habit widespread across the area, but absent simultaneously in the neighbouring territories in Friuli. Sarcophagi and tombstones dating to the eighth and ninth century have been obtained from several sites in the Venetian lagoon (Torcello, Sant'Ilario, Jesolo, Murano, and Venice itself), further south in Ravenna and to the East in the Istrian-Dalmatian region. These are similar in shape and decorations and employ the

² Borri, "Neighbors and Relatives"; Borri, *Gli Istriani e i loro parenti*, and again Borri, *Dalmatian Romans and their Adriatic Friends*.

³ Gasparri, *Une communauté à la fois maritime et territoriale*, and Borri, *The Waterfront of Istria*.

local Istrian stone⁴. While there is no direct evidence for the reopening of the Istrian-Dalmatian quarries in this period, the hypothesis is reasonable enough, especially in the light of the enduring relation between Ravenna and Dalmatia on one hand⁵, and Venice and Istria on the other⁶. As I will point out in detail later, even after the political disruption of the old Roman province of the *Venetia et Histria* in the aftermath of the Lombard (768?)⁷ and Frankish conquest (788?-791)⁸, the Venetian-Istrian connections never vanished⁹.

Art and craftsmanship, on the other hand, also testify to the many similarities to the general northern Italian cultural backdrop. This is the case of residential constructions, which show many parallels, and even more so of glazed pottery. In the ninth and tenth centuries, Constantinople was the production centre of a type of ceramic ware associated with urban elites and known as Glazed White Ware. This type of pottery is very rare in the Upper Adriatic, where instead imported tableware produced in the North-East of Italy does appear for the same period and up until the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The cultural shock brought about by the Byzantine bride of the Venetian duke using forks at dinner is revealing of the distance from the eastern customs, at least in the domestic sphere and everyday life¹⁰. Indeed, notwithstanding the already mentioned ideological attachment to Constantinople as a source of prestige, institutional developments are largely paralleled between the Upper Adriatic and the rest of Northern Italy. Specifically, these include the relevance of the local civic assembly which emerges in both territories from the ninth century onwards¹¹; and the founding and endowing of monasteries, which is adopted in the lagoon and continued in Istria as a tool of social distinction and patrimonial management in the traditional Carolingian way¹².

The twofold nature of the political and economic makeup of the Venetian and Istrian aristocracy and the society at large must be ascribed to the dense network of contacts extended across the shores of the Adriatic, and from here towards the kingdom of Italy and beyond¹³. This connectivity was nourished by the high mobility of people and commodities travelling for political and

⁴ Gelichi, *Venice in the Early Middle Ages*, and Gelichi – Ferri – Moine, *Venezia e la laguna tra IX e X secolo*.

⁵ Brown, *Ravenna and Other Early Rivals of Venice*.

⁶ See further below in the text.

⁷ Apparently, the Lombard occupation of the area was ephemeral. On this, see Margetić, *Sul passaggio del potere sull'Istria da Bisanzio ai Franchi*, and Ferluga, *L'Istria tra Giustiniano e Carlo Magno*.

⁸ Many uncertainties exist about the timing of the Frankish conquest. For an overview of the surviving evidence see Štih, *L'Istria agli inizi del potere franco*.

⁹ De Vergottini, *Venezia e l'Istria*.

¹⁰ The anecdote is narrated by Peter Damian, who learnt it – as he himself states – from «a truthful and upright man». The passage is commented by La Rocca, *Foreign Dangers*, pp. 412-415.

¹¹ Gasparri, *Venezia fra l'Italia bizantina e il regno italico*.

¹² Gasparri, *I testamenti nell'Italia settentrionale*, and Rapetti, *Il doge e i suoi monaci*.

¹³ West-Harling, *Venece due sunt*, and Gasparri, *Un placito carolingio*, where the agrarian and mercantile nature of settlements like Comacchio and Venice is highlighted.

diplomatic reasons, as well as for daily affairs. Written sources are extremely telling here. To begin with, one can mention the biography of Fortunatus II (802-825/826), patriarch of Grado, whose episcopate was marked by frequent and prolonged absences and sojourns abroad. In 803 he was at Charlemagne's court at Salz; from 806 until 810 or 811 he was at Pula; around 814 or 815 he was in *Francia* again; in 821 in Constantinople and in 824 he died in *Francia*¹⁴. It is worth recalling then the *Pactum Lotharii* in 840¹⁵, where the movement of men and livestock throughout the border towns of Cittanova-Eraclea, Caorle and Grado is a main concern, being the subject of detailed regulation in relation to the grazing rights and the exploitation of woodland and natural resources by the local inhabitants¹⁶. The *Pactum* give us a glimpse of what was an agrarian society deeply interpenetrated, despite the political-military borders separating the duchy of Venice and the Lombard and later Carolingian kingdom of Italy¹⁷.

This mutual penetration becomes especially clear when one looks at the coexistence of titles and honours which may be ascribed to both political contexts. In 819 the older Venetian archival document handed down to us records some gastalds, i.e., minor officials traditional of the Lombard apparatus, acting in the lagoon territory as public representatives of the duke. It is the donation made by *dux* Agnellus Particiaco (810/811-827/828)¹⁸ to the monks of San Servolo. Agnellus endowed the monks with a plot of land on which to build the new monastery of Sant'Ilario and granted them immunity in order to prevent ducal gastalds from «inquietare vel molestare aut in angaria mittere aut exenia aliqua (...) exigere»¹⁹. The donation was drawn up by Demetrius *tribunus*, while another *tribunus* underwrites the document as a witness. In the sixth century tribunes were imperial public officials in charge of the local army and, although by the time of the donation they had lost their

¹⁴ Rando, *Fortunato*; McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, pp. 255-258; Berto, *In Search of the First Venetians*, pp. 425-431, and Marano, *Le fortune di un patriarca*.

¹⁵ *Pactum Lotharii*, no. 233, pp. 130-135, and *Documenti*, I, no. 55, pp. 101-108. See Gasparri, *Venezia fra i secoli VIII e IX*; Moro, *Venezia e l'Occidente nell'alto medioevo*, and more generally West, *Communities and Pacts in Early Medieval Italy*.

¹⁶ *Documenti*, I, no. 55, p. 107: «28. Peculiarumque vestrarum partium greges pascere debeat cum securitate usque in terminum, quem posuit Paulitius dux cum Civitatinis novis, sicut in pacto legitur, de Plave maiore usque in Plavem siccam, quod est terminus vel proprietatis vestra. 29. Caprisani vero in silva, ubi caulaverunt, in fines Foroiulianos semper faciant reditum, et eam capulent, sicut ante capulaverunt. 30. Et stetit, ut Gradensi civitate secundum antiquam consuetudinem debeat dare reditum et capulas facere, ubi antea fecerunt, in fines Foroiulianos, sicut antiquitus fecistis».

¹⁷ On the nature of the inner borders of early medieval Italy: Gasparri, *La frontiera in Italia*, and again Gasparri, *La frontiera in età longobarda*.

¹⁸ Pozza, *Particiaco, Agnello*; Berto, *In Search of the First Venetians*, pp. 318-319.

¹⁹ The donation, known for being the older Venetian archival document handed down to us, although as a late copy, is published in *Ss. Ilario e Benedetto*, no. 1, pp. 5-17. See also *Documenti*, I, no. 44, pp. 71-75.

military and public functions, their presence in 819 as local elites testifies to the vitality of the Byzantine legacy in the duchy²⁰.

After the ninth century, however, tribunes are no longer mentioned in Venetian written records, showing their final socio-political disappearance, as well as their biological extinction. On the other hand, tribunes are still present in Istria in the ninth and tenth century, therefore, well after the Frankish conquest of the peninsula. This can be shown in the will of the nun Maru, drawn up in Trieste in 847, where the brother of the nun, named John, and a second John *de Petro*, who both underwrite the charter, hold the title²¹. Finally, the will's writer is a certain Domenicus *tabellio*. This is an occupational identity which, often recorded in Rome and in *Romania* where imperial tradition survived longer than elsewhere, is normally absent in a Carolingian cultural context²².

3. *Rethinking the Treaty of Aachen and its local outcomes*

All in all, this portrayal of the Upper Adriatic as a unified and hybrid entity fits perfectly into the current research on borderlands. In contrast to Turner's essentialist approach, recent scholarship emphasizes the relational spaces constituting the frontiers. Accordingly, these are now understood as "contact zones"²³, "zones of indistinction"²⁴ or "zones of interpenetration"²⁵ between two or several social orders²⁶. Far from being neutral, contact zones are frequently characterized by a high degree of violence. The literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt first introduced the concept in 1991, within the framework of colonial studies. According to Pratt, contact zones are «social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power»²⁷. The primary notion of frontiers as places of cultural encounters thus goes hand in hand with the idea of places of power-contest and inequality, where social players face each other over the management of people and resources²⁸.

The control and management of resources is the traditional explanation for the growing interest demonstrated by Charlemagne in the Upper Adriatic

²⁰ On tribunes, see Castagnetti, *La società veneziana*, pp. 66-89. A systematic survey of this title has been undertaken by Berto, *In Search of the First Venetians*, pp. 379-380.

²¹ The will, known for being the older original charter preserved in the State Archives of Venice, is edited in Migliardi O'Riordan, *Per lo studio di una cartula testamenti*.

²² For a comment on Maru's will, see Borri, *L'Istria tra Bisanzio e i Franchi*, pp. 313-315.

²³ The idea of contact zones is outlined by Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

²⁴ The theory of indistinction and indistinctiveness is a key concept of Giorgio Agamben's thought, for which see Agamben, *Homo sacer*. See also: Korf – Hagmann – Doevebspeck, *Geographies of Violence*, p. 40.

²⁵ Thompson – Lamar, *Comparative Frontier History*, p. 7.

²⁶ Hughes, *From Enslavement to Environmentalism*.

²⁷ Pratt, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, p. 34.

²⁸ Schetter – Müller-Koné, *Frontiers' Violence*.

after his coronation as emperor; an interest that – it goes without saying – led to the direct confrontation with his eastern counterpart and to the final compromise agreed upon in 812 in the Treaty of Aachen²⁹. The text of the Treaty has not survived, but its content is known in general terms. In exchange of the recognition of the imperial title and Istria, Charlemagne agreed to let Venice remain under the sphere of influence of Byzantium. Although, as I have pointed out elsewhere, the question of the maritime breakthrough of Venice in this early phase is still open (*pace* McCormick)³⁰, there is no doubt that already in this period the Upper Adriatic was a dynamic and strategic area – if not for long-distance trade, at least regionally as a gateway connecting the heartland of Western Europe to the Po Plain and further afield to Africa and the Aegean Sea. This is demonstrated by the distribution pattern of ceramics in the first place and, secondly, by the economic relevance of Comacchio as a major *emporium* already in the eighth century³¹.

Nevertheless, preoccupation with controlling resources must be reassessed. A rereading of the *Annales regni Francorum* that I undertook with Francesco Veronese reveals how the imperial status had mattered to Charlemagne even more than details about territorial borders³². And apparently the Treaty left precise demarcations unclear. Still in 817 the arrival of a Byzantine embassy had the goal of negotiating borders in Dalmatia. The complexity of dealing with them is then suggested by Louis the Pious' acknowledgement that this could only be done on the spot, using the expertise of locally based individuals³³. The competition over borders and resources, on the other hand, seems to have been central in local political developments. Since the outbreak of the iconoclastic crisis, international issues had profound impacts on imperial peripheries like Venice³⁴. It is believed that the first independent Venetian duke, Orso, was elected in 726 or 727 at the time of the general uprising of Byzantine Italy against the Emperor Leo III, a supporter of the iconoclastic heresy³⁵. For the occasion, the armies of Byzantine Italy, including the *exercitus Venetiarum*, rebelled and elected autonomous dukes. Also, around 735 the Venetian fleet drove the Lombards away from Ravenna, the capital of the Exarchate, which had been occupied³⁶. These were crucial years, marking a divide in the political history of the old Roman province of *Venetia et*

²⁹ On the Treaty of Aachen see the contributions in the recent book *Imperial Spheres and the Adriatic*.

³⁰ Paziienza, *Venice beyond Venice*.

³¹ Bibliography is vast, see the newly published book *Un emporio e la sua cattedrale*.

³² Paziienza – Veronese, *Pipino e la questione veneziana*.

³³ Ančić, *The Treaty of Aachen*.

³⁴ Gasparri, *The Government of a Peripheral Area*.

³⁵ Gasparri, *Anno 713. La leggenda di Paulicio*, and Gasparri, *The First Dukes*.

³⁶ As attested by several sources. These are the *Istoria Veneticorum* by John the Deacon (IV, II, 12, pp. 98-100); the *Historia Langobardorum* by Paul the Deacon (Paul the Deacon, *Historia*, VI, 54, pp. 183-184), and two letters of Pope Gregory II or III, one to the duke of Venice (MGH, Epp. lang., no. 11, p. 702) and one to the patriarch of Grado (MGH, Epp. lang., no. 12, p. 702, and *Documenti*, I, no. 26, pp. 40-41). Some scholars believe that the first letter is a forgery.

Histria. Although the evidence for the administrative unity of the province in the eighth century is very weak, we are sure that from this moment on Istria and Venice would take different paths, with Istria under the distant authority of Byzantium first, and then under the tentative control of western rulers, and Venice under the power of local dukes who consolidated its position as an independent political entity³⁷.

Around 800, according to a well-established historiographical tradition, Charlemagne's interest in the newly formed political entity did cause the splitting up of the Venetian *exercitus* (the army, meaning the people) into a pro- and an anti-Frankish faction. This was followed by a prolonged period of internal fights in the years around the Treaty of Aachen. Events are well known³⁸. It is worth reiterating, however, that interpreting them in the light of the pro- or anti-Frankish paradigm is misleading. The shift from one alleged faction to the other of the protagonists involved, first and foremost the patriarch Fortunatus, shows its inconsistency. Traditionally labelled as pro-Frankish, Fortunatus fought the dukes Maurice and John Galbaio of the opposite side, and was then opposed by his former supporters, the new dukes Obelerio and Beatus, often labelled pro-Frankish too. Interestingly enough, the break-up with Obelerio and Beatus was caused by Fortunatus' project of giving back the episcopal see of Olivolo to Christopher, one of the exiled aristocrats who had left Venice as a result of the conspiracy organized by himself³⁹. Contingency and internal local dynamics seem more reasonable explanations. As Chiara Provesi suggests, the conflicting patrimonial interests of local elites in the area of the Veneto hinterland must be counted amongst them. This was a key area crossed by waterways of strategic importance for communications and traffic⁴⁰.

After all, the pro- and anti-Frankish paradigm has been proved to be inconsistent even in areas of art and architecture. A new interpretation of the ninth-century medieval fragments of a ciborium in Istrian stone from the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie of Grado makes this clear. The fragments with "Carolingian-style" decoration are traditionally attributed to Fortunatus because of his alleged pro-Frankish sympathies. However neither his famous will⁴¹ nor the *Istoria Veneticorum*⁴² mention a ciborium as part of Fortunatus'

³⁷ Borri, *L'Istria tra Bisanzio e i Franchi*, p. 302.

³⁸ Events are narrated differently by two sources, the *Annales regni Francorum* and the *Istoria Veneticorum*. Scholars have tried to reconstruct what really happened several times. On this see Berto, *La Venetia tra Franchi e Bizantini*, and Borri, *L'Adriatico tra Bizantini, Longobardi e Franchi*.

³⁹ *IV*, II, 22-29, pp. 106-115; see also Ortalli, *Il ducato e la 'civitas Rivoalti'*.

⁴⁰ Provesi, *Il conflitto tra Coloprini e Morosini: una storia di fiumi* and Provesi, *Disputes and Connections*.

⁴¹ The edition with a commentary of the text is in Brunettin, *Il cosiddetto testamento del patriarca*. A new edition with commentary and an Italian translation is now provided by Yuri Marano in Marano, *Le fortune di un patriarca*, pp. 98-101 (edition); pp. 102-104 (translation); pp. 105-163 (commentary). See also *Documenti*, I, no. 45, pp. 75-78.

⁴² *IV*, II, 28, pp. 112-113.

renovation works in the church. As far as we know, Santa Maria delle Grazie was indeed furnished with a new ciborium by John II (806-810)⁴³, who was patriarch of Grado during the exile of Fortunatus in Pula. Thus, as Magdalena Skoblar has put it, «to attribute the Istrian stone ciborium with Carolingian-style decoration to patriarch Fortunatus is to give the rivalry between pro-Frankish and Byzantine factions an expression in stone», and this in absence of solid documentary evidence⁴⁴.

4. *Venetian-Istrian connections*

The circulation of Istrian stone across the Upper Adriatic, which the fragments in Santa Maria delle Grazie and the already-mentioned sarcophagi are witnesses to, hints to the enduring link between Istria and Venice in the period under scrutiny. Indeed, Istria can largely be seen as “an appendage to Venice”, even after the Frankish conquest in 791 at the latest. Not even its definitive loss to Frankish rule in 812 as a result of the Treaty of Aachen broke up this link. Until the Council of Mantua in 827, Istria was ecclesiastically under the jurisdiction of Grado, the metropolitan see of the Venetian duchy. In Mantua, one of the arguments advanced by the patriarch of Aquileia in favour of his Church was the re-composition of the institutional unity of the region. As a group of clerics and noble laymen, who had joined the meeting claimed, Istrians could not keep going on serving two masters, that is the Franks and the Byzantines (meaning the Church of Grado and ultimately Venice)⁴⁵. It is worth quoting the entire passage:

Sed et id non omittendum, quod et clerici et nobiles ex laicis viris electi ab Histriensi populo sanctam synodum supplicantes venerunt, ut eos a Grecorum naequissimo vinculo liberatos ad Aquileiam, suam metropolim, cui antiquitus subditi fuerant, redire concedat, quia electi, qui ordinandi sunt, prius piisimis imperatoribus nostris et postmodum ad partem Graecorum fidem per sacramenta promittunt; ed idem in hoc facto gravari se asserunt et servire duobus dominis non posse conclamant⁴⁶.

As early as the late eighth century, the discrepancy between the political and ecclesiastical administration of the region had generated a few tensions. Owing to the Lombard occupation in 770-772, Istrian bishops, who could no longer go to Grado for consecration, had started consecrating one other. Moreover, the landed properties of the Gradese Church in the area were subjected to the *collectae Langobardorum*⁴⁷. This is a generic term, which does not allow us to know who the tax collectors were. Considering later develop-

⁴³ Berto, *In Search of the First Venetians*, pp. 431-432.

⁴⁴ Skoblar, *Patriarchs as Patrons*.

⁴⁵ Azzara, *Il concilio di Mantova*.

⁴⁶ *Concilium Mantuanum*, no. 47, pp. 583-589 (pp. 586-587), and *Documenti*, I, no. 50, pp. 83-90 (pp. 86-87).

⁴⁷ MGH, *Epp. lang.*, no. 19, pp. 711-713, and *Documenti*, I, no. 30, pp. 46-49.

ments, it is likely they were the neighbouring dukes of Friuli⁴⁸. Under these circumstances, Patriarch John I (766-802/803)⁴⁹, predecessor of Fortunatus, asked pope Stephen III for help by making the same complaint which would be made in Mantua almost fifty years later: Istrian *milites* and *famuli* already pay the Gradese Church identical exactions (*aequales collectae*); it is therefore unthinkable that they must serve two masters («quamque nec potest quispiam duobus servire dominis»).

Pope Stephen intervened without delay. At the very moment when he ordered the Istrian bishops to (re)submit to John's authority, he wrote to the patriarch to offer his support. Like the Venetian duchy, Istria – he argued – was included in the pact agreed upon by the Byzantines, the Franks and the Lombards (i.e., the so-called Donation of Pippin made at Quierzy in 754), a pact through which the *fideles Sancti Petri* (i.e., the Franks) had committed themselves to defending both provinces from any enemy («ab inimicorum oppressione semper defendere procurat»)⁵⁰. We know nothing about the practical effects of Stephen's words. Only a couple of years later, in 774, Charlemagne conquered Italy. It is remarkable, however, that the request for help had come in the name of Patriarch John and in the name of the duke of Venice as well («una cum consensus sanctorum Dei filio, Mauricio, consuli et imperiali duci huius Venetiarum provinciae»)⁵¹.

The duke in question was Maurice Galbaio (764–797)⁵². Both personal interests and broader political aspirations could have underpinned Maurice's commitment to the Istrian cause, a commitment that was all but nominal. Maurice's son and future duke of Venice, John Galbaio (797-805)⁵³, had been captured sometime before, precisely in Istria, by King Desiderius, probably during a military campaign against the Lombard occupants⁵⁴. Military support to the peninsula remained part of Venice's policy also throughout the ninth century, when Slav and Saracen raids threatened the north-eastern border of Italy and the whole Adriatic⁵⁵. By the year 840 Venice was obligated to send out its war fleet in defence of the Frankish territories by virtue of a clause contained in the *Pactum Lotharii*⁵⁶. However, protection from piracy was cru-

⁴⁸ At the same period the dukes of Friuli were able to obtain from the Slavs settled in the Gail valley the payment of a tribute (see Gasparri, *Istituzioni e poteri nel territorio friulano*). We may infer the influence exerted around this period by the dukes of Friuli on the region from what we know about Marcarius and Eric. On Marcarius and Eric see below in the text.

⁴⁹ Bedina, *Giovanni*; Berto, *In search of the first Venetians*, pp. 424-425.

⁵⁰ MGH, *Epp. lang.*, no. 20 (Pope Stephen III to the Istrian bishops), pp. 713-714, and *Documenti*, I, no. 31, pp. 50-51; MGH, *Epp. lang.*, no. 21 (Pope Stephen III to Patriarch John of Grado), p. 715, and *Documenti*, I, no. 32, pp. 51-52.

⁵¹ MGH, *Epp. lang.*, no. 19, p. 713, and *Documenti*, I, no. 30, p. 49.

⁵² Azzara, *Maurizio Galbaio*; Berto, *In search of the first Venetians*, p. 313.

⁵³ Bedina, *Giovanni Galbaio*; Berto, *In search of the first Venetians*, p. 314.

⁵⁴ *Le Liber Pontificalis*, I, p. 491.

⁵⁵ On Saracens' activity in the Adriatic: Ortalli, *Venezia dalle origini al ducato*, pp. 396-399.

⁵⁶ *Documenti*, I, no. 55, p. 103: «8. Spondimus quoque, ut nullis inimicorum, qui contra vos vestrasque partes sunt vel fuerint, nos, qui modo sumus vel fuerint, adiutorium ad vestram lesionem faciendam praebere debeamus sub quolibet ingenio infra hoc spatium pacti».

cial to Venice itself. In terms of sea-lanes, Istria was indeed significant. The Adriatic was navigated counter-clockwise. Sailors proceeded very close to the coast and hardly ever ventured out into the open sea. Stops on land were frequent. Istria constituted to be an important stopover for any travellers sailing from the East and aiming to reach the wealthy towns of the Po Valley⁵⁷.

The Venetian commercial protectorate established in the following century proves the importance of Istrian ports and harbours. It proves also the institutional liminality of the region, which, despite being part of the march of Friuli, kept a certain degree of autonomy. Three treaties stipulated by the duke of Venice with the *populus* of Koper in 932⁵⁸, 933⁵⁹ and 976⁶⁰ offer an insight of the continuing power relations. Above all the 933-pact, known as *Promissio Wintherii*, demonstrates how an actual authority was exercised by Venice, for the Istrians – albeit under the rule of the marquis of Friuli – promised the duke to pay an honorary tribute annually and not to charge new fees on Venetian ships⁶¹. Moreover, around this period the archival documentation sheds light on the many patrimonial interests in the area. We know, for instance, that the *palatium* of duke Peter II Candiano (931–939)⁶² owned fiscal lands in the diocese of Pula⁶³ and we also know that in 972 Emperor Otto I⁶⁴ donated Izola/Isola d’Istria to Vitalis-Ugo Candiano († 979)⁶⁵, brother of duke Peter IV (959–976)⁶⁶. Sometime later, Vitalis-Ugo’s estates in Istria were confirmed to his son Dominicus by Otto III⁶⁷.

Because of the ecclesiastical authority over Istrian dioceses, one of the major and older landowners in the area was the Church of Grado. In 803 Gradese properties in Istria were granted immunity by Charlemagne through a diploma issued to Patriarch Fortunatus⁶⁸. The outstanding position of the Church of Grado as a major landowner emerges clearly also from the *Placitum* of Rižana in about 804⁶⁹. As I recalled briefly in the opening, the *Placitum* is about a dispute involving Istrian people, the local bishops and the Frankish

⁵⁷ Borri, *The Waterfront of Istria*.

⁵⁸ *Documenti*, II, no. 35, pp. 52–55.

⁵⁹ *Documenti*, II, no. 36, pp. 55–59.

⁶⁰ *Documenti*, II, no. 56, pp. 105–108.

⁶¹ Pазienza, *Venice beyond Venice*.

⁶² Bertolini, *Pietro [II] Candiano*; Berto, *In search of the first Venetians*, pp. 335–337.

⁶³ This is recorded by the *Promissio Wintherii*. See above note 59.

⁶⁴ MGH, DD O I., no. 407 (972 I 8, Ravenna), p. 554, and *Documenti*, II, no. 52, pp. 93–94.

⁶⁵ Pozza, *Vitale-Ugo Candiano*; Berto, *In search of the first Venetians*, p. 71.

⁶⁶ Bertolini, *Pietro [IV] Candiano*; Berto, *In search of the first Venetians*, pp. 339–341.

⁶⁷ MGH DD O III., no. 293 (998 X 30, Roma), pp. 717–719, and *Documenti*, II, no. 83, pp. 168–169. Actually, the identification of Dominicus is uncertain. See Berto, *In search of the first Venetians*, p. 73.

⁶⁸ MGH, DD Karol. I, no. 200 (803 VIII 13, Salz), pp. 269–270, and *Documenti*, I, no. 38, pp. 58–59.

⁶⁹ The *placitum* has come down to us only as a late copy in the so-called *Codex Trevisaneus* (fifteenth–sixteenth century), preserved in the State Archives of Venice. The classic edition of the text is in *I placiti*, I, no. 17, pp. 48–56. The latest edition is in Krahwinkler, “In territorio Caprense loco qui dicitur Riziano”, pp. 67–81. See also *Documenti*, I, no. 40, pp. 60–67. Literature on the topic is genuinely limitless.

representative, i.e., a certain duke John. Both John – about whom I will talk shortly – and the bishops were accused of several crimes in administrating the province. Most of the allegations made against the bishops were about ecclesiastical tenants' rights, the respect of agrarian contracts (leases and emphyteuses) and the confirmation of traditional customs concerning *herbaticum*, *glandaticum* and other dues from vineyards⁷⁰.

The socio-economic relevance and the political rooting of the Venetian clergy in Istrian society is also emphasised by the role of mediator taken on by Fortunatus in the settlement of the dispute. Listed first amongst the provincial aristocrats presiding over the meeting, Fortunatus was directly involved in the preparation of the *inquisitio*. Not only was the judicial proceeding drafted at his behest (*iussio*), but it also contains a reference to his (diplomatic) missions to the Emperor Charlemagne for the good of the Istrian people (*propter vos*)⁷¹. In the spring 803 Fortunatus, with a group of Venetians, left Venice and went to Charlemagne's residence at Salz⁷². There Charlemagne issued two charters. The first – which I have already mentioned – grants Gradese ecclesiastical properties immunity wherever in the Empire, and in Istria too⁷³; the second gives permission to Fortunatus' ships to call at all ports free of charge⁷⁴. In issuing the charters Charlemagne had been motivated by the special services and merits of the patriarch. And indeed, one must assume that in Salz, Fortunatus and Charlemagne discussed the unstable situation of the newly conquered Istria and scheduled the meeting at Rižana for the following year. Apparently, the emperor was eager to prevent the area from becoming a source of political unrest⁷⁵.

5. *John who?*

The kind of authority exerted in Istria by Venice, embodied by Fortunatus' activism and the activism of Venetian dukes, which I have described earlier, is coupled with the on- and off- Frankish control of this borderland, an

⁷⁰ *Documenti*, I, no. 40, pp. 62-63: «III. capitulo: Quaecumque cartulae emphitheoseos, aut libellario iure, vel non dolosae commutations numquam ab antiquo tempore corruptae fuerunt, et ita ut nunc fiunt. IIII. capitulo: De herbatico, vel glandatico nunquam aliquis vim tulit inter vicora, nisi secundum consuetudinem parentorum nostrorum. V. capitulo: De vineis in tercio ordine tulerunt, sicut nunc faciunt, nisi tantum quarto. [...] VII. capitulo: Qui terras ecclesiae femorabat, usque ad tertiam repressionem nunquam eos foras eijciebat».

⁷¹ Krahwinkler, *Patriarch Fortunatus of Grado*.

⁷² *IV*, II, 24, pp. 106-109: «Prelibatus siquidem Fortunatus patriarcha acriter dolens interfectionem sui decessoris et parentis, insidias adversus Mauricium et Iohannem duces composuit et, relicta sede et urbe, ad Italiam perexit. Quem etiam secutus est quidam tribunus, Obellerius nomine, Metamaucensis, Felix tribunus, Dimitrius, Marinus seu Fuscarus Gregorii alii Veneticorum maiores, ex quibus solus patriarcha in Franciam ivit».

⁷³ See above note 68.

⁷⁴ MGH, DD Karol. I, no. 201 (unknown date), pp. 270-270, and *Documenti*, I, no. 39, pp. 59-60.

⁷⁵ Albertoni, "si nobis succurrit domnus carolus imperator".

on- and off-control due, in the first place, to the modalities of the conquest, whose actual nature and scope remain largely unclear.

Between 776 and 780, a group of Istrian inhabitants, of both Greek and local origins, blinded Bishop Maurice of Novigrad. Maurice was collecting the *pensiones beati Petri* and was accused of planning to deliver (*tradere*) the region to the Franks. Tensions were high, and Pope Hadrian I wrote to Charlemagne demanding the intervention of Marcarius, the duke of Friuli, in order to escort the bishop back to his see⁷⁶. Sometime later in 791 the scenario seems to have changed. That year an otherwise unknown *dux de Histria* with his followers (*cum suis hominibus*) fought successfully the Avars side by side with Charlemagne's army. Recorded in an extremely well-known letter by Charlemagne to his wife Fastrada, the information is traditionally taken as evidence of the definitive submission of the province to the Frankish ruler. In the epistle, the *dux de Histria* is the only commander identified by his territorial district. The other *comites* and leaders are not. The reference to his followers is also unique, as well as the mention to his bravery on the battlefield (*benefecit*)⁷⁷.

The duke's military valour is normally thought to have been the reason why Charlemagne commented on his actions and kept track of his domain – information which afterwards the copyist chose to hand down to us. Another explanation, however, might relate to the “halfway” status of the *dux* who had joined the expedition perhaps as a semi-autonomous ally against the common Avar threat rather than as a fully-fledged subordinate to Charlemagne⁷⁸. The shortly-to-follow violent end of Eric, duke of Friuli and Charlemagne's champion, proves how the north-eastern Carolingian border was still a very tense area. The campaign of 791, though successful, was by no means decisive, and Frankish power was internally contested by a riotous local aristocracy⁷⁹. In 799, while busy with a new war against the Avars in Pannonia, Eric was murdered by the inhabitants of Tsart in *Liburnia* (near the present-day Rijeka/Fiume) at the very periphery of the Istrian peninsula⁸⁰. The episode casts some doubts on Paulinus of Aquileia's words, which sound aspirational rather than factual. In his funerary poem in memory of Eric, Paulinus states that the duke ruled over a vast territory, encompassing the towns and cas-

⁷⁶ *Codex Carolinus*, no. 63, p. 590, and *Documenti*, I, no. 35, pp. 54-55. On Marcarius, Hlawitschka, *Franken*, p. 235.

⁷⁷ *Epistolae variorum*, no. 20, pp. 528-529. The epistle is quoted by McCormick, *The Liturgy of War*, pp. 8-9; McCormick, *Eternal Victory*, pp. 353-354.

⁷⁸ Borri, *The Duke of Istria*.

⁷⁹ On the Avar wars, Pohl, *Pippin and the Avars*.

⁸⁰ MGH, ARF, p. 108, *ad annum* 799: «Eodem anno gens Avarum a fide, quam promiserat, deficit, et Ericus dux Foroiulensis post tot prospere gestas res iuxta Tharsaticam Liburniae civitatem insidiis oppidanorum oppressus est, et Geroldus comes, Baioariae praefectus, commisso contra Avarum proelio cecidit». On Eric, Hlawitschka, *Franken*, pp. 176-177. See also Ross, *Two Neglected Paladins*.

tles of Cividale, Osoppo, Cormons, Aquileia, Ceneda and Pula⁸¹. The *Annales regni Francorum* does not mention Istria amongst Charlemagne's conquests though. In 806 the region does not feature in the *Divisio regnorum* as part of the realm⁸². On the other hand, the *Vita Karoli* lists it along with *Liburnia* and *Dalmatia*, but – Einhard stresses – with the remarkable exception of coastal settlements, still out of the king's control⁸³.

It is precisely this uncertain Carolingian control of the area, which the few sources at our disposal seem to suggest, which makes room for new avenues of inquiry and speculation⁸⁴. One – that I'd like to discuss here and with which I am going to conclude – regards the duke John of the *Placitum* of Rižana. Along with the already-mentioned Istrian bishops, John is the main defendant in the trial. The countless misdeeds committed by him show his rapacity and, at the same time, his great familiarity with the local resources and society. Istrian elites complained, as particularly hateful, of the fact that he used to keep for himself the *solidi* given by the towns and intended for the palace⁸⁵; take possession of the common lands from municipalities and the Church and settle there groups of Slavs⁸⁶; deprive them of their old privileges and positions in society by abolishing administrative customary posts (*tribunatus*)⁸⁷; appropriate their animals (cows and horses)⁸⁸ and human workforce (*liberti* and *excusati*) for the advantage of his own relatives, i.e., sons, daughters and his son-in-law⁸⁹; impose new taxes and corvees⁹⁰. And yet, John could count on large assets in Istria. He owned numerous villas and farms, he resided in Novigard on fiscal lands, where more than two hundreds *coloni* worked and a wealthy annual income of oil and wine, plus cereals and chestnuts, was col-

⁸¹ Paulinus of Aquileia, *Versus*, p. 131: «Herico, mihi dulce nomen, plangite / Syrmium, Pola, tellus Aquilejae / Julii Forum, Carmonis ruralia / Rupes Osopi, juga Cetenensis humus, ploret et Albingauna».

⁸² *Divisio regnorum*, no. 45, pp. 126-130. See Stoffella, *Pipino e la Divisio*.

⁸³ Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, 15, p. 18: «post quam utramque Pannoniam et adpositam in altera Danubii ripa Daciam, Histriam quoque et Liburniam atque Dalmaciam, exceptis maritimis civitatibus quas ob amicitiam et iunctum cum eo foedus Constantinopolitanum imperatorem habere permisit».

⁸⁴ These can be framed in the context of the mechanisms of dynasty- and authority-building outlined by Stuart Airlie in his perceptive recent study on *Making and Unmaking of the Carolingians*.

⁸⁵ *Documenti*, I, no. 40, pp. 63: «Postquam Joannes devenit in ducatu, ad suum opus istos solidos habuit et non dixit pro justitia palatii fuisset».

⁸⁶ *Documenti*, I, no. 40, p. 64: «Insuper Selavos super terras nostras posuit».

⁸⁷ *Documenti*, I, no. 40, p. 65: «Tribunatus nobis abstulit».

⁸⁸ *Documenti*, I, no. 40, p. 64: «Insuper non remanent nobis boves, neque caballi», and p. 65: «tollet nostras autem caballos (...). Nostros autem caballos aut in Francia eos dimittit, aut per suos homines illos donat».

⁸⁹ *Documenti*, I, no. 40, pp. 64-65: «Modo autem dux noster Johannes consuit nobis centarchos divisit populum inter filios et filias vel generum suum (...). Liberos homines non nos habere permittit (...); libertos nostros abstulit».

⁹⁰ *Documenti*, I, no. 40, p. 66: «Omnes istas angarias et superpositas, quae predicate sunt, violenter facimus».

lected, and received annually fifty *solidi mancusi* and plenty of seafood from the fishing rights⁹¹.

John is an enigmatic figure who has attracted the attention of generations of historians. Notwithstanding the fact that his identification with the *dux de Histria* of the letter of Charlemagne to Fastrada is still debated, a cluster of evidence suggests that he was not a Frankish immigrant, as previously thought⁹², but rather a local highborn: first, the anthroponomy – the name John is attested amongst the Frankish officials only once beside this, while it is extremely common in the Adriatic area; second, John's deep knowledge of Istrian society and landscape; third, his family's grounding in the region, as one may infer from the *placitum*. More generally, the ruling policy adopted by Charlemagne in the newly conquered countries must be considered too⁹³. It is now very clear that, at least in the first instance, Charlemagne used to rely on local aristocrats for the administration of distant provinces, including Italy⁹⁴.

The case of nearby Friuli is particularly illuminating. We do not know if Hrotgoud was already duke of Friuli under King Desiderius. What matters, however, is that, even if appointed by Charlemagne, he was a Lombard, almost surely a native of the region. Only after his rebellion, the Frankish Marcarius and Eric – this latter from an Alemannian family – succeeded him in the office⁹⁵. The recruitment of local experts was crucial even beyond the ordinary administration. Among the envoys sent by Charlemagne to Constantinople in 811 for negotiating the upcoming Treaty of Aachen there was the Lombard Aio. Aio came from Friuli and had taken part in Hrotgoud's revolt. After having fled to the Avars, he was captured by King Pippin and finally forgiven in 799 by Charlemagne. Aio's acquaintance with this north-eastern Italian hotspot explains his involvement in the embassy and, before that, in the Plea of Rizana as Charlemagne's *missus*⁹⁶.

Now credited as the most probable hypothesis⁹⁷, Harald Krahwinkler hypothesised a local provenience for the duke John. In his view, John could have come from Istria or «un territorio vicino». His position resembles that

⁹¹ *Documenti*, I, no. 40, p. 63: «Item habet casale Orcionis cum olivetis multis. Item portionem de casale Petriolo, cum vineis, terriis, olivetis. Item omnem portionem Iohannis Cancianico, cum terris, vineis, olivetis et casa cum turculis suis. Item possessionem magnam de Arbe cum terris, vineis, olivetis et casa sua. Item possessionem Stephani, magistri militum. Item casa Ierontiacam cum omni possessione sua. Item possessionem Maurittii ypati seu Basillii, magistri militum instar, et de Theodoro ypato. Item possessionem, quam tenet in Priatello, cum terris, vineis et olivetis, et plura alia loca. In nova Civitate habeat fischo publico, ubi commanet, intus et foras civitate amplius quam duos centum colonos; (...) Piscationes vero habet, unde illi veniunt per annum amplius quam quinquaginta solidi mancusi absque sua mensa ad satietatem».

⁹² Hlawitschka *Franken*, pp. 211-212.

⁹³ Borri, *The Duke of Istria*.

⁹⁴ Gasparri, *Italia longobarda*, pp. 130-132; Gasparri, *Il passaggio dai Franchi ai Longobardi*; Gasparri, *The Dawn of Carolingian Italy*.

⁹⁵ On Hrotgoud, Stoffella, *Rodgaudo*.

⁹⁶ On the embassy, MGH, ARF, pp. 133-134, *ad annum* 811; on the exile, capture and forgiveness, MGH, DD Karol. I, no. 187 (799 II 2, Aachen), pp. 251-252.

⁹⁷ Predatsch, *Migration im karolingischen Italien*, p. 310.

of a local *princeps* rather than a Frankish official, to the point that «la si può paragonare – e non solo per il titolo – con quella di un doge veneziano»⁹⁸. And in fact, a duke named John is found in the same years in the duchy of Venice. He is the John captured in the early 770s during the Venetian campaign in Istria against the Lombards, the son of duke Maurice, who was so committed to the Istrian cause. That being the case, the possibility that the duke John of Rižana and the duke John Galbaio of Venice are actually the same person is tempting and must be taken into account. The chronology is tricky. First, the list of dukes of Istria for the period is very fragmentary. As already mentioned, it is still an open question whether the anonymous duke of Istria who fought the Avars in 791 alongside the Frankish army should be identified as the duke John of Rižana in 804. Furthermore, between 791 and 804, there is the problematic evidence from Paulinus of Aquileia, who attributes Pula to Eric's domain. Secondly, the exact dating of John Galbaio's rulership in Venice is uncertain. We know he was appointed co-ruler in the thirty-first year of his father's rule (c. 795) and, two years later in 797, at his father's death, he became sole ruler. Once in office, he imposed a harsh regime on the duchy. He made his son co-ruler without consent from the local aristocracy. Soon after, he ordered the murder of John II, patriarch of Grado and predecessor of Fortunatus. The rebellion of some Venetians, who elected a new duke, Obelerio, followed. As a consequence, John abandoned the Venetian political stage and took refuge or, as some scholarship claims, was deported to Mantua in the Frankish territory. This happened around 803, right before the *Placitum* of Rižana. From this moment on, narrative sources are silent, and we are left in the dark about the circumstances of John Galbaio's death. At the latest, in 805, the newly elected duke Obelerio held the office.

There are two possible scenarios here: either John was installed in Istria by Charlemagne when he was already duke of Venice following the violent death of Eric in 799, or – as I believe – he was already duke of Istria prior to 797, possibly around 791 when Charlemagne maintained his position. After his father died, John held both offices in Istria and Venice. In this latter case, we may track John's roots in Istria back to the time of the Venetian campaign against the Lombards, when he would have gathered political support for his future domain. Sometime later, owing to this support, he would have been able to participate, almost independently, in the Avar wars and exploit and control the local resources, as we know from the Plea of Rižana. By the time of the Plea in 804, John would have been quite old, and one may question his ability, as an old ruler, to introduce the type of drastic administrative and political innovations that the Istrian inhabitants complain about in the trial. And yet, seeing that he would have been operationally active in the province already some thirty years earlier, we can assume a longer period and an incremental process for the introduction of such innovations. In turn, this would

⁹⁸ Krahwinkler, "In territorio Caprense loco qui dicitur Riziano", pp. 260-264.

explain the fact that official allegations came only toward the end of his life and career, when he was probably in exile in Mantua and the succession of the office was imminent. The lack of any reference in the *placitum* text to the duke John's Venetian connection may be explained by the changing political regime in the lagoon and his deposition in Venice around the same time of the holding of the *placitum*⁹⁹.

In both the scenarios outlined above, considering the less-than-secure Frankish hold over the Upper Adriatic, Charlemagne would have tried using a locally based magnate for minding his interests and maintaining hegemony in this peripheral area. Contemporary and reliable evidence about the geo-political status of the Upper Adriatic around the time of Charlemagne's arrival on the scene is scant. The fact that John Galbaio's appointment turned out to be a serious mistake on Charlemagne's part, on the other hand, makes sense when considering that the appointment was not registered in the *Annales regni Francorum*. It might be interesting to note, however, that during these years, the relations between Venice and the Franks were at their closest. I spoke already of the collaboration between Charlemagne and Fortunatus, and the prominent role played by this latter in the Plea of Rižana. Moreover, it is worthy of note that only a year after Rižana, the new dukes of Venice, Obelerio (805–810)¹⁰⁰ and Beatus, went to Charlemagne's court to offer the emperor their alliance. It is the famous *Ordinatio* that has always intrigued scholars and whose content is unknown¹⁰¹. In the context of the old pro- and anti-Frankish paradigm, traditional interpretation accounts for it as Venice's shift from the sphere of influence of Byzantium to that of the Western Empire¹⁰². On the other hand, in the light of the argument made so far, nothing prevents one to think that the rule of Istria could have been among the issues at stake.

Again, the administrative (re)organization of the entire Upper Adriatic area and the eastern border of Italy would be a leitmotif even in the following years. In this political situation, Istria stands out as a permanent institutional laboratory, where the interplay between external and internal driving forces often led to original compromises and experimentations. Around the years 806-823, a certain Hunfrid is simultaneously attested as *comes Raetiae Curiensis* and *dux Histriae*. One may wonder if the peninsula was tentatively annexed to the northern alpine region. It is a matter of speculation. But the idea that Istria was instead attached to Friuli, and became an autonomous province in 828 after the portioning of Friuli among four *marchiones*, is cir-

⁹⁹ I thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of my manuscript and their many insightful comments and suggestions. In this section I respond to each comment in detail. Again, the mention in the *placitum* text of duke John residing in Novigard, odd as it may seem, fits perfectly into multi-residential pattern of the early medieval and Carolingian aristocracy. On this, Patzold, *Verortung in einer mobilen Welt*.

¹⁰⁰ Pozza, *Obelerio*; Berto, *In Search of the first Venetians*, pp. 315-317.

¹⁰¹ MGH, ARF, pp. 130-132, *ad annum* 806.

¹⁰² On the *ordinatio*, Ortalli, *Il ducato e la 'civitas Rivoalti'*.

cumstantial too. Nonetheless we know that at the beginning of the tenth century a count named Alboin ruled, albeit poorly, the province¹⁰³. Conversely the already mentioned *Promissio Wintherii* makes it clear that sometime later Istria was under the authority of the duke of Friuli, even though its inhabitants benefitted from a large degree of autonomy, thanks to which they could develop a special link with the by-now flourishing maritime power of Venice. Toward the end of the century, finally, it is apparent that Poreč and Pula were ruled by the *dux* of Carinthia whose authority – established in 976 by Otto II – covered a large territory stretching from the Alps to the Adriatic¹⁰⁴.

6. Conclusions

Around the mid-eleventh century, when writing his *Istoria*, John the Deacon did not have a clear idea of the institutional features of Istria, which he describes in some passages as a *comitatus* and elsewhere as a *marchia*. John the Deacon's perception fits well into the vision of Istria as a political laboratory, a vision which emerges from the little surviving evidence at our disposal and is explained by the most recent theoretical research about borderlands, where two or more social and political orders come together and clash. In early medieval Istria, the coming together and clashing is observable at different levels. Local elites thought of themselves as part of a larger provincial community – the Upper Adriatic – shaped by a common Byzantine legacy and a strong maritime identity. The mobility of people, commodities and knowledge from one shore of the Adriatic to the other, and from there to Constantinople and back, was a key factor to the development of a sense of belonging beyond the political fragmentation of the area. Also, despite the military-political frontiers, mobility was high even to and from the western mainland. The interpenetration of resources and institutions resulted into a liminal and hybrid society where parallels to the Lombard and then Carolingian culture and apparatus are remarkable. Conflicting interests, moreover, transformed the whole area into a trouble spot. Traditionally considered as a turning point, the Treaty of Aachen formalized an already existing process, leading to the consolidation of Venice's position as an independent political entity. Owing to the many economic, commercial and proprietary interests in the region, one of the playgrounds where the emerging Venetian power showed its dynamism was Istria. Here the Venetian political elite's engagement in the area was ample and keen, to the point that the province can be described as an appendage to Venice. The role of mediator assumed by the Gradese patriarch Fortunatus in the notorious Plea of Rižana is best evidence of such engagement.

¹⁰³ On Hunfrid, Alboin and the 828-partition see the bibliographical references in Borri, *L'Istria tra Bisanzio e i Franchi*, pp. 320-321.

¹⁰⁴ De Vergottini, *Venezia e l'Istria*, pp. 97-120.

At the same time, the lack of congruence between ecclesiastical and political borders, which emerges from the Plea, brought about quite a few problems in terms of authority and local resource exploitation. Besides, the twofold dependency of the Istrian inhabitants on Grado and Venice on one hand and the newer Frankish rulers on the other was coupled with the concurrent aspirations to self-government expressed by the local aristocracy. All this accounts for the weak and experimental rulership exerted over the years in Istria by the western sovereigns and, simultaneously, provides food for thought for re-reading the key period 791-804 when, in the aftermath of the Frankish conquest, the network of connections between the Franks, the Venetians and the Istrians grew very tight, perhaps as never again later. Within such a geopolitical framework, the hypothesis of a local origin of the otherwise unknown *dux* John in the Plea of Rižana is strengthened and the proposition that he needs to be identified with the duke John Galbaio, ruling Venice in the same years, gains ground. The fluidity of allegiances of leading elites at the peripheries of the Carolingian domain, as well as the possibility of abrupt changes of the geopolitical situation in border regions, accounts for the Franks' reliance on local magnates for fostering their interests. The Franks' control over the Upper Adriatic was less than secure, and a forceful and opportunistic duke might have seemed useful to Charlemagne for maintaining and consolidating hegemony in the region.

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