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europea in eta moderna (review)

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Acque e agricoltura: Venezia, l'Olanda, e la bonifica europea in età moderna.

By Salvatore Ciriaco. Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1994. Pp. 332; notes/references, index.

This book was published as number 188 in a series designed to broadcast “the new voices of Italian historical culture.” *Acque e agricoltura* is, nevertheless, made mostly of solid, old-fashioned economic history, and the novelty of its voice is only faintly heard. Yet in Salvatore Ciriaco’s remarkable openness to other European historiographies, and in his willingness to study non-Italian topics, there lies a profound originality. Italian historians tend not to look much beyond their particular urban centers, so Ciriaco’s engagement with English, German, French, and especially early modern Dutch cases of land drainage and irrigation is a sign of a new European dimension in Italian historiography, and a refreshing change. Citing Marc Bloch to justify his comparative urge, Ciriaco places the Venetian effort to manage the hydrology of the lagoon and the Terraferma within a continental context. Thus, *Acque e agricoltura* offers a rich understanding of western Europe’s confrontation with its waters between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

As its title suggests, the book is concerned principally with the agricultural dimension of water management. In five chapters, all previously published between 1979 and 1991 as articles but here “corrected and amply overhauled” (p. 20), Ciriaco discusses the involvement from about 1500 to 1800 of Venetian elites in irrigation, especially rice cultivation, and in drainage schemes (chapters 1 and 2, those with the deepest archival base);

the surprisingly tenuous connection between Venice's sophisticated tradition of theoretical hydraulics and the hydraulic infrastructure of the Most Serene Republic (chapter 3, and it is a pity that this does not look to Venice's empire, too); the Dutch drainage experience before 1800 (chapter 4); and the dissemination of Dutch techniques and technical personnel throughout western Europe (chapter 5, which, interestingly, indicates that no Dutch engineers worked in Venice). Against the odds, the collection works well as a monograph.

This success is due less to its focus on an unchanging "structure," water, than to Ciriaco's skill at correlating technological installations such as canals, waterwheels, windmills, and dredging machines to important themes in early modern historiography. Among these themes the most important to the author are the development of capitalistic, market-oriented agriculture, the involvement of the state in this development and in hydraulic works, and the interplay of these two forces with local political and social conditions. Ciriaco offers a nuanced picture of the emergence of "modern" economic forms even when his description seems to retrace the image of golden ages and slumps found in economic history textbooks (he seems embarrassed that painstaking study of hydraulic agriculture offers only confirmation of what is already established about European economic cycles; e.g., pp. 16–17). The willingness of seventeenth-century Venetian aristocrats to invest capital in specialized agriculture, the recovery of Venice's economic vitality in the 1630s, the limited impact of English enclosures on productivity—all are examples of how Ciriaco manages to introduce complexity into what might otherwise seem a canonical, well-worn account.

A residue of teleology does remain in *Acque e agricoltura*, and Ciriaco's zeal to record "advances" or "agricultural and economic progress" or "historical delays"—whether in diverting the Veneto's rivers away from the lagoon, or erecting the *murazzi* against the Adriatic, or disseminating wind-powered pumps capable of lifting water four meters high—is perhaps too overtly celebratory of Modernity and Technology. Despite his protestations against such criticism, for Ciriaco there is an "ageless antagonism" (pp. 23, 210) between people and water, and the only good water is canal water, tamed and bent to rational human economic purposes. Yet there are signs throughout the book that antagonism did not always prevail between humans and "unimproved" waterscapes. Ciriaco mentions many examples of early modern cultivators and gatherers who resisted schemes to drain swamps, measures seen as benefiting elites and damaging their own subsistence. He also records the less intense opposition to irrigation, interestingly different from the resistance to drainage despite the fact that rice was long resisted in north Italy, even by major landowners. In Venice, those indifferent to large-scale waterworks included the wood thieves who, in collaboration with voracious sea worms, demolished the *palade* that kept the sea from flooding the lagoon—at least until the late 1700s, when the stone-and-hydraulic-cement *murazzi* went up.

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But even if Ciriaco too often “sees like a state,” in James C. Scott’s phrase, he still has much to teach about technological diffusion and impediments to diffusion, about the value of comparative perspectives, and about the centrality of water to life, past and present.

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