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VENICE AND THE VENETO DURING THE RENAISSANCE

THE LEGACY OF BENJAMIN KOHL



Reti Medievali E-Book

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**Venice and the Veneto during the
Renaissance: the Legacy of Benjamin Kohl**

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In memoriam: Benjamin G. Kohl (1938-2010)*

by Reinhold C. Mueller

Benjamin Gibbs Kohl died in Betterton on Maryland's Eastern Shore on June 10, 2010, of pancreatic cancer just two months after delivering his last paper, on Renaissance Padua under Venetian governance, at the annual conference of the RSA in Venice; his session was held at the University of Warwick Center in remembrance of Michael Mallett, himself an historian *inter alia* of Venice's Terraferma state.

Ben Kohl was born on October 26, 1938, on the Warwick Road near Middletown, Delaware. He received a B.A. from Bowdoin College in 1960, an M.A. from the University of Delaware in 1962, and a Ph.D. in medieval and Renaissance history from the Johns Hopkins University in 1968, where he was Frederic C. Lane's third-last student. He did the basic research for his dissertation on Padua during the fourteenth century while on a Fulbright fellowship in 1964-65. In 1966 Ben landed the best job on the market, at Vassar College, where he quickly fit in, moving through the ranks from Instructor to Full Professor to Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities (in 1993), to Emeritus Professor in 2001, when he retired early to dedicate himself full-time to research. He was chair of the History Department for seven years. Among his most important honors, after the Fulbright, was the Rome Prize and fellowship in post-classical studies at the American Academy in Rome (1970-71) and a long-term Andrew W. Mellon Emeritus Fellowship in the Humanities received after retirement.

After finishing a thesis devoted primarily to political history, Ben struck out on a quite un-Frederic Lane-ian line of research, thanks to his encounter with Giovanni Conversini da Ravenna, humanist and courtier at the Carrara court. He edited and translated the little-known tracts by this humanist, and his critical editions and translations into English made an important contribution to our knowledge of the work of humanists on the "periphery" away from Florence, where intellectual historians of the Renaissance had been concentrating their attention. In each of these initiatives, Ben worked in collaboration with expert Latinists. His first book, co-edited with Ron Witt

* Ex *Renaissance News and Notes* (Renaissance Society of America), XXII.2 (2010): 4-5. Reproduced by kind permission of the author and the RSA.

and published in 1978 (still in print), was a collection of humanist tracts on government and society. Ben's attendance at the Columbia University Renaissance Seminar, founded and presided over by Paul Oskar Kristeller, played an important part in the development of his interests in this field. He presented two papers to the seminar, the first on Conversini at Padua (in 1976), the second entitled "At the Birth of the Humanities: The Concept of the *Studia Humanitatis* in the Early Renaissance" (in 1985), a daring trial run into a subject at the very core of Kristeller's own interests and publications. He later turned the paper into the important article "The Changing Concept of the *Studia Humanitatis* in the Early Renaissance," published in *Renaissance Studies*, 6 (1992), pp. 185-209, Ben's best article in that field. Significantly, nine of the fourteen articles in his *Variorum* volume are on the topic of humanism¹.

Ben was an ideal historical sportsman. While hardly pugnacious, Ben harbored a little-known love for boxing, and he and a colleague were curators of an exhibition at Vassar in 1996 on the art of boxing and boxing in art². He was a model team player and had a penchant for collaborative projects. His C.V. is peppered with publications in which he appeared as co-author, co-editor, co-guest editor, co-curator; of seventeen book-length productions, including special issues, a CD and a database, thirteen are co-productions! The same is true for three of his many articles. As a natural team player, Ben was ever ready to help people out: that spirit got him into witches and devils, far from his own interests, and into the compilation in 1996 of the *Centennial Directory* of the American Academy in Rome (he simply loved lists). Ben enjoyed spending time gathering facts that could be useful to the profession. He published twenty-two biographical articles, of which twelve were written for the important *DBI* (*Dizionario biografico degli italiani*), and recently wrote thirty-nine entries for Brill's *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*; he collected and published on CD many hundreds of deliberations of the Venetian Senate for the fourteenth century, documents edited over the previous two centuries in myriad books and articles, often not easily available to scholars; the most important undertaking of this kind is his magnificent *The Rulers of Venice, 1332-1524*, a database of many thousands of names of Venetian officeholders, compiled together with M. O'Connell and A. Mozzato, ownership of which was passed to the RSA, on whose home-page, since 2008, it can be found³. In general, Ben was out to promote research, especially among younger

¹ Kohl, 2001. Article XIV, on marriage alliances of the Carrara dynasty, was published here for the first time.

² Bergon and Kohl. Boxing supposedly is still being taught in the Vassar gymnasium as a result of their initiative.

³ *Rulers of Venice, 1332-1524*. *Rulers*, as it has become known, generously financed by the Delmas Foundation, is meant to be carried on through the Cinquecento with the database prepared decades ago by dott. Claudia Salmi of the Archivio di Stato di Venezia, whom Ben brought into the project precisely with its extension in mind, given dott. Salmi's expertise regarding the

historians. If he heard that someone was interested in a subject he had touched upon in the course of his researches, he generously offered that person what he had: a notarial document, a testament, a deliberation – always with the warning that the transcription was hurried, a working draft, by no means a critical edition. He helped many people, including the undersigned, by retrieving information from *Rulers* before the database went on-line.

In the 1990s Ben returned to the study of the Paduan notaries of the fourteenth century, in preparation for writing his *Padua under the Carrara, 1318-1405*, published in 1998, a work of “traditional” history, as he meant it to be. At the same time, this new spurt of research on the subject of his dissertation of thirty years earlier sparked his interest in related themes, such as the women of the Paduan court, the courtiers themselves and the many competing patron saints of Padua, as they were represented in legends and works of art.

Retirement made it possible for Ben to conclude his work on Padua and humanism with the above-mentioned *Variorum* volume and to turn his attention to Venetian history, with his eye on a monograph to be entitled *The Governance of Late Medieval Venice*. In conference papers and in articles he began to give shape to what he was looking for: an in-depth understanding of the day-to-day mechanics of government and their practical results in individual cases. That involved counting and making lists; the database *Rulers* was a cornerstone of the project. His article on Marco Corner (ca. 1286-1368), whose first wife was Giovanna, daughter of Enrico Scrovegni (well, it *was* difficult to close out work on Padua!), is a model of how – with today’s tools – one can reconstruct a career, in this case of a career politician, Venice’s “first professional statesman and administrator”, who was elected doge some two years before his death⁴. It meant revisiting the Serrata, for which project Ben prepared critical editions of the relevant laws, 1282-1323; it meant counting the number of meetings of the Great Council by year and showing how few of them (an average of only 14%) in those years were actually held on Sundays, as has always been assumed⁵; it meant reading the model volumes of the deliberations of the Venetian Senate in critical editions (the *serie misti*) for more than just their high quality and varied content but, again, for understanding the mechanics of

archive of the Segretario alle voci, the contemporary listing of officeholders. Crucial for the understanding of the database, its philosophy and utility, is the little-known and seemingly unreviewed E-book accompanying the database, containing articles by all those involved in the project.

⁴ Kohl, 2009.

⁵ From his notes it turns out that the highest number of meeting-days per year, 106-108, were convened in the years 1283-84-85, at the beginning of the process of constitutional reform, the lowest number in the crucial years of the Serrata, 1297-98-99 (respectively 46, 30, and 47 meetings), and again the fourth-highest number, 100, in the final, momentous year, 1323, full of heated discussions in both the Great Council and the Senate on social status, when important resolutions also regarding immigration and citizenship were passed.

government, including the number of days per year in which the Senate was convened⁶. Ben was ever more convinced that without basic knowledge of the nitty-gritty of political organization, involving prosopography, counting, and careful looks at the calendar, year by year, the historian is forced to rely on inherited, un-tried assumptions about governance. His last paper, presented at the RSA four days before his last departure from Venice, entitled “Renaissance Padua as *Kunstwerk*: Policy and Custom in the Governance of a Renaissance City”, combined nearly all of his interests: Padua, Venice, and the art of governance. Time ran out much too soon and Ben’s monograph remained, regrettably, more in his head than on paper or in the computer. One can only hope that younger historians will carry on his work and adopt his historical methodology and his conviction that only by sifting through the nitty-gritty, intelligently, can one make possible a credible reconstruction of Venice’s mode of governance, shedding new light on an old subject.

One last crucial topic remains. After retirement Ben encountered good fortune and his first desire – naturally, for him – was to share it, largely through the creation of a philanthropic institution, the Hedgelawn Foundation, based at his study, a beautiful old frame house with a wood-burning stove in Worton, Maryland. The aim of the Foundation was and is to support arts and education on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, on the one hand, and Venetian studies on the other. Ben loved the Eastern Shore and its history; he proudly showed guests where George Washington had passed during the Revolutionary War and the last article he saw through the press was an account, with Latin text and translation, of the first commencement address, in 1783, held at Washington College, a nearby liberal arts college of which Ben was a benefactor⁷. And Ben loved Venice and its history. His foundation made possible the publication by the Comitato per la pubblicazione delle fonti relative alla storia di Venezia of a register of the *Grazie* of the Great Council which was practically disintegrating⁸, and with a smaller donation he made possible the digitalization of 28,000 pages of much-consulted archival material at the Archivio di Stato in Venice, especially deliberations of the major deliberative organs of the state. They were then put on-line by the Archivio, on whose website they can be consulted anywhere in the world, *gratis*. That was a final project in which Ben firmly believed: to show by example, in accord with the Director and staff of the Archivio, that private donations could do important things to further research; he hoped his initial donation, recognized on the website of the Archivio⁹, would serve as seed-money and that others would follow suit. That would be a splendid way to remember Ben Kohl.

⁶ See his long review-article: Kohl, 2008.

⁷ Kohl, 2010.

⁸ *Cassiere della Bolla ducale*.

⁹ For all the material digitalized and available, see < www.archiviodistatodivenezia.it >, under Progetto Divenire.