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# VENICE AND THE VENETO DURING THE RENAISSANCE

## THE LEGACY OF BENJAMIN KOHL



# **Reti Medievali E-Book**

**21**

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

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**Firenze University Press  
2014**

# **Renaissance Padua as Kunstwerk: Policy and Custom in the Governance of a Renaissance City\***

by Benjamin G. Kohl  
edited by Monique O'Connell

## *1. Introduction*

In a famous speech made in the House of Commons in March 1775 urging reconciliation of Great Britain with its American colonies, Edmund Burke wrote that

an empire is the aggregate of many states, under one common head, whether this head be a monarch, or a presiding Republick. It does, in such constitutions, frequently happen... that the subordinate parts have many local privileges and immunities. Between these privileges and the supreme common authority the line may be extremely nice<sup>1</sup>.

Students of early modern states Helmut Koenigsberger and Sir John Elliott have wrestled with the problem of empire, highlighted in Burke's speech, whether the early modern empire was a composite state, a federal state, or as Burke held, an aggregate of many states<sup>2</sup>. Michael Knapton, in a lecture on the Venetian Terraferma state at the conference held to honor the memory of Michael Mallett in December 2009, discussed whether the concept of composite state should apply to Venice and its empire in the early Renaissance. Knapton has also highlighted the heavy taxation and the resentment of Venetian judicial structures in Padua in particular<sup>3</sup>.

\* This article was originally presented in April 2010 at the Renaissance Society of America's annual meeting in Venice, as part of a series of panels organized by John Easton Law and Gabriele Neher in honor of Michael Mallett entitled "Michael Mallett Remembered". This was the last conference that Ben attended, and while he intended the paper as an early version of an article considering the impact of Venetian rule on Padua, his June 2010 death meant that he was not able to complete the article. The present piece was lightly edited by Monique O'Connell, with the main interventions being the formatting of the notes, the addition of section titles and some bibliographic references, and minor adjustments to the language to accommodate the change from an oral to a written format.

<sup>1</sup> Burke, 150, also quoted in Elliott, 2009, 219.

<sup>2</sup> Koenigsberger; Elliott, 1992 and Elliott, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Knapton, 1981 and 1992.

As is well known, conquest, voluntary surrender and purchase were the three basic ways that Venice acquired its overseas and Terraferma dominions in the late Middle Ages<sup>4</sup>. The most famous act of conquest was that part of the Byzantine Empire, referred to in the sources as “one quarter and one half of one quarter”, that Venice conquered and ruled from 1204 onward, including Crete and part of Negroponte as well. Venice’s possessions on the Dalmatian coast, from Capodistria to Zadar and Split, were originally trophies of conquest, which were lost by treaty to King Louis of Hungary in 1358. But these cities were repossessed by Venice, starting with the purchase of Zadar from King Ladislas of Naples in 1409. Venice had acquired Corfu by voluntary surrender in 1386, only a step ahead of a similar effort to acquire the island by the Carrara lord of Padua. These acquisitions were ratified in treaties and pacts with the conquered states and their cities, usually guaranteeing certain local rights of the cities and regions. These pacts created a patchwork of jurisdictions that were the result of piecemeal conquest and the creation of empire by agglutination. In other words, the patchwork was the product of the pacts. In the case of the subject cities there was almost always a local board that negotiated the terms of surrender and forged a treaty or pact, often an act of dedition to define the relationship between Venice and its newly acquired city and territory. The process started with Treviso, conquered in 1338 and reoccupied, by agreement with Giangaleazzo Visconti, in 1388<sup>5</sup>. As James Grubb has shown, Vicenza’s 1404 freely-given act of surrender made this city the “firstborn” of Venice’s mainland empire and a possession on the mainland that in the eyes of the Venetian governor was far different from Padua, which had been conquered and whose hated Carrara lords were executed in the process of completing that conquest<sup>6</sup>. In addition to Padua, Verona and its *contado* were added to the Terraferma state in 1405 and Friuli in 1420.

## 2. *The Golden Bull of 1406 and Paduan Governance*

In establishing its control over Padua, Venice had to provide the basic functions of any medieval government: defense against external enemies and internal order through a court and police system. But in conquering Padua, Venice inherited a mature commune and complex government, as complex and detailed in some ways as in Venice itself, as had been set forth in detail in the Carrara statutes of 1362<sup>7</sup>. Thus, Venice never had the option in Padua to create a new government *ex nihilo*. It always had to adapt and adopt what it

<sup>4</sup>The events discussed in this paragraph are covered in Cozzi, Knapton, and Scarabello, 1:11-21 and 179-232.

<sup>5</sup> Knapton, 1980.

<sup>6</sup> Grubb.

<sup>7</sup> Kohl, 162-66.

found there, as is shown by the Golden Bull that Doge Michele Steno granted on January 1406<sup>8</sup>. The Bull was a response to a long, complex petition from local notables of Padua who argued for as much continuity as possible with the former regime, while remaining mindful that the Carrara state was anathema to Venice's interests and sensibilities. Written and negotiated by the local élite, composed of jurists, law professors, notaries, merchants, several of whom were conspicuous members of the former Carrara élite, the Golden Bull resulted in the retention of as many former Paduan privileges as possible. For example, Venice guaranteed Paduans in possession of their property, except those possessions that had been sold by the Carrara lords in their last frenzied effort to raise funds to the defense of Padua the year before, and assured continuity of the court system and contracts with peasants in the contado. The main distinction in the Golden Bull was that Venice reserved the right to dispose of Carrara property as its governors saw fit. This vast landed wealth, perhaps a quarter of the Padovano, had been managed by the Carrara as *gastalderie* (estate jurisdictions) in major villages<sup>9</sup>. Now this property was confiscated by Venice and sold, village by village, to wealthy Venetian nobles, who early established extensive rural villas in the countryside. But, to be sure, some Paduans were eventually confirmed in the purchases that they had made.

Another key issue covered in the Bull was local governance: oversight of this function was given to the Venetian podestà and especially the captain installed in Padua, and Venetian nobles were made podestà and/or castellans in seven Padovano strongholds and larger towns (sometimes called *quasi-città* by historians): Camposampiero, Castelbaldo, Cittadella, Este, Monselice, Montagnana and Piove di Sacco. Significantly, the smaller towns in the Padovano, such as Arquà, were to be governed by Paduan citizens appointed as vicars by the Venetian podestà in consultation with a citizen council.

The third issue was the nature of taxation and provision for defense.

### 3. *The Dadia delle Lanze and the Defense of Padua*

As Michael Mallett demonstrated, the Terraferma soon became a battleground for Venice<sup>10</sup>. The reacquisition of Dalmatia in 1409 precipitated a reaction from Sigismund of Hungary, who invaded Friuli the next year. Venice hired large numbers of mercenary troops, mainly under the command of Pandolfo Malatesta, to repel the Hungarian invasion. The large expenditures of up to 300,000 ducats, according to some contemporary estimates, were born by Venice alone and weighed heavily in the minds of policy makers.

<sup>8</sup> Archivio di Stato di Padova (ASP), Ducali, v. 2, ff. 1r-6r, now edited in Melchiorre.

<sup>9</sup> Lazzarini.

<sup>10</sup> Mallett and Hale, 127-29; the fiscal aspects of defense are also discussed in Cozzi, Knapton, and Scarabello, 1: 275-86.

Eventually a truce was arranged, and Padua and the other Terraferma cities were secure for a time. When the prospect of the end of the truce loomed large in the autumn of 1417, the Senate met to consider financing a new mercenary army to repel a renewed Hungarian attack.

The tax imposed for this purpose became the famous *dadia delle lanze*<sup>11</sup>. The basic idea behind the *dadia delle lanze* was that the cities of the Terraferma, which benefited from Venice's protection, should bear the costs of their own defense, especially against the king of Hungary who was known for "his appetite and vendetta (*intentio*) against the freedom and well-being of Italy and especially against our dominion and city and territories". In November 1417, three proposals were made in the Venetian Senate to appoint two nobles to set taxes in the cities of Padua, Vicenza and Verona for 100 lances and 100 infantry each to protect the Terraferma state at end of the truce with the king of Hungary in spring 1418. The suggestion that was adopted was jointly proposed by the young procurator of San Marco and future doge, Francesco Foscari, and his colleague and sometime rival, Leonardo Mocenigo. Their bill's preamble set forth, as was often the case in Venetian legislation, the rationale for certain action, providing what might be called a specimen of popular political philosophy. The two Venetian nobles elected were to consult with the Paduan council, so that

Venice can make such usual provision that, with God's help, we will be able honorably and in manly fashion (*viriliter*) to maintain and preserve our honor and state and our cities, places, subjects and faithful and their possessions and goods.

In this case, the subject city of Padua should reasonably expect "to offer a hand and help to our dominion" in the form of paying for 100 lances and 100 foot based on the local *estimo*, with no exceptions, save the friars and nuns of the mendicant orders. The two nobles were then to argue the same case in the other two cities and impose the tax for troops to defend Vicenza and Verona.

The other two proposals (which were not adopted) were harsher and more insistent in demanding that Padua pay for its own defense, especially in time of war. Albano Badoer cited the large payments to Malatesta and Visconti *condottieri* already expended in the wars with the king of Hungary, and suggested ways to make the subject cities pay their share. Antonio Contarini emphasized that Venice's income from customs duties was much diminished due to the wars on the mainland, and moved that the three main cities contribute specific annual sums for their own defense: 12,000 ducats each from Padua and Verona, and 10,000 from Vicenza, for an annual total of 34,000 ducats as long as the threat existed. The Senate ultimately adopted the gentler proposal.

<sup>11</sup> Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASVe), Senato Secreta, reg. 6, fols. 175r-176v, 30 October 1417 and 4 November 1417.

From the moment the tax was adopted, Padua, Verona and Vicenza became garrison cities in the mainland empire, which they remained for centuries. But the local notables immediately challenged these new taxes, based on estimates of property and income, which fell largely on the Paduan élite. The next year, the distinguished jurist Prosdocimo Conti led a delegation of Paduan lawyers and merchants to protest and seek reduction of the new tax. The assessment and collection of the *dadia delle lanze* remained a point of friction for centuries, reminding us of the difference that Adam Smith developed in his *Wealth of Nations* between conquest and commerce<sup>12</sup>. In Smith's eighteenth century world, the project of commerce was the European nations in the East Indies, while the project of conquest was Spain in the Americas.

In an analogy to Smith, for fifteenth century Venice, the sphere of commerce was its trade in the Levant while the Terraferma state was the object of conquest. Of course, Crete and other eastern colonies provided commodities for consumption as well as trade while the Terraferma state was a source of raw materials, food, and fiber, investment in land, and taxes to support the newly conquered mainland state. Some of the taxes extracted from the Terraferma state were directed to the defense costs of the overseas empire, which most contemporary balance sheets show, did not pay for itself. Venice retained several monopolies in conquered Padua, most obviously conduct of all foreign policy, the administration of justice and control of the defense establishment, its garrison in Padua and other smaller centers, and the right to hire soldiers and their leaders, the best *condottieri* that Venice could find and money could buy. Venice enjoyed a monopoly, too, in the production of arms, most obviously, not only war ships, the light galleys, but many other vessels that were constructed in the Arsenale. Less noticed were arms and armor, arrows and crossbows, and later cannon, for its own navy. These arms were also sold as favors to gather allies overseas, especially to the counts of the Dalmatian coast, who were enticed by the lure of fairly cheap Venetian arms of excellent quality. In short, there developed by the fifteenth century an advanced defense establishment that provided almost all Venice's needs for the defense of its empire, and whose surplus could be used to win allies and influence friends.

#### 4. *The 1420 Statutes and the New Role of the Paduan Élite*

How does Padua fit into Venice's imperial scheme? After the Golden Bull of 1406, the next key document is the reformed statutory code of 1420, which incorporated explicitly, even self-consciously, the Paduan commune as the best frame of government for the newly-conquered city and territory<sup>13</sup>. The eternal commune stretched from the twelfth to the eighteenth century, from

<sup>12</sup> Smith, bk 4, ch. 7, pt. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Padua, Biblioteca Civica, ms. BP 1236, *Codex statutorum reformatorem*, 1420.



the age of Frederick Barbarossa to the era of Napoleon, and it was the basic structure for the organization of justice, police, civil and criminal law, guilds and industry, and the privileges of church and university<sup>14</sup>. This eternal commune, in a sense, survives even in contemporary Padua. It is not by accident that the *municipio* of the city in united Italy was built next to the Palazzo della Ragione, the Town Hall of medieval Padua.

Of course, the government of Venetian Padua, as set forth in the statutes of 1420, not only built upon but made significant changes in the power structure of the city<sup>15</sup>. The board of sixteen Paduan notables that drew up the new code was appointed by the Venetian rectors. The board, composed of four nobles from each of the city's four quarters, included members of Padua's leading families, among them Prodocimo Conti, Enrico Scrovegni, Alessandro Dottori, Galeazzo Dondi dall'Orologio, Pietro Zabarella, Sicco Polenton and Andrea Curtarolo. As the statute's Preamble shows, the board was charged by the Venetian senate to work with the current Venetian podestà, Marco Dandolo, and the captain, Lorenzo Bragadino, to draw up reformed statutes worthy of the great city of Padua. In so doing they were to preserve the best of the older statutes while they eliminated those laws which were evil (*iniqua*), obscure, or contrary to current practice. The result was to be a government that combined the best of tradition, the institutions and structures handed down "from our forebears (*a nostris maioribus*)", with new legislation that would make Padua a happy and fortunate city (*civitas felix et fausta*)<sup>16</sup>.

In fulfilling this goal, Venice guaranteed that its nobles would govern the conquered city. The first book of the reformed statutes defined the structure and office of secular government in Padua. The four chief officials had to be Venetian nobles: podestà, capitano, camerlengo and castellano, who oversaw justice, defense, treasury, and city guard, respectively. And in the countryside, as we have seen, only Venetians could serve as rectors of the seven major towns, the *quasi-città* of the Padovano. The podestà's curia, which administered high justice and exercised police powers, was also composed of foreigners. The three judges included the vicar, who had to be a doctor of laws and handled major cases, the judge of *victualia*, who heard cases on food supply, weights and measures, and market regulations, and the Aquila, the judge on taxes and fiscal matters, aided by two knights who policed trades, markets, and manufacturing. This small staff had to be non-Paduans, who were to reside, eat and sleep in the communal palace, to avoid contact with the natives and the possibility of bribes and gifts that might lead to corruption. In contrast, the judges of the local civil courts were all Paduans, elected on rotating terms from the membership of the College of Judges.

In addition, the statutes provided for two major advisory bodies made up of Paduan citizens. One was the Town Council, composed of forty-eight men,

<sup>14</sup> Pino-Branca.

<sup>15</sup> Ms. BP 1236.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., fols. 3v-4r.

selected by the Venetian podestà, twelve per quarter, who served for a year and advised the Venetian governors on the administration of communal law and agencies. The other was a board of four *savi* appointed for the welfare of the commune (*sapientes deputati ad utilia communis*), held over from a Carrara statute of 1376<sup>17</sup>. These four local notables, selected by the podestà for four month terms by lot from a short list, were charged with the upkeep of communal property and empowered to arrest offenders. Initially they were, in effect, a zoning board to make sure the fabric of the city, its streets, dykes, waterways, and buildings, were maintained. Other new regulations governed the communal chancery, town attorneys, the care of prisoners and paupers, the leadership of the guilds, and the duties of the notaries who served the courts, offices and people of Padua. The rest of the Reform Code followed the structure and statutes of the Carrara Code that it replaced. The high proportion of ancient, that is pre-1420 statutes, sometimes modified and updated, in the later books of the Reformed Code confirms that in judicial procedure, guild structure, university privileges, and ecclesiastical prerogatives, local customs and tradition prevailed. Thus, perhaps ninety percent of the laws that governed Venetian Padua had been enacted long before the Venetian conquest.

Excluded from sharing real power with the Venetian nobility by what Angelo Ventura defined in his memorable phrase as a “*diaframma insuperabile*”<sup>18</sup>, how did Padua’s élite function under Venetian rule? Their yearning for power and authority was perhaps satisfied by positions of leadership assumed in the university, the confraternities, and the guilds, as well as the council of forty-eight (later one hundred) and the boards of the Paduan commune just mentioned. But an outlet for the talents of local leadership was also found in the major NGOs, non-governmental organizations of Quattrocento Padua, as two recent studies demonstrate. Francesco Bianchi’s study focuses on the development of the city orphanage, the Ca’ di Dio<sup>19</sup>. Established in 1265 as the city’s general hospital for needy adults and hospice of the infirm and orphans, the Ca’ di Dio was transformed in the course of the late Middle Ages into the city’s principal orphanage, as other institutions, notably the hospital of San Francesco Grande, were established to care for Padua’s poor, elderly and infirm. The transformation of the Ca’ di Dio into an orphanage can be viewed within the context of a general movement of welfare reform in north Italian cities of the fifteenth century, where the foundling hospital was a major innovation in response to a new social and cultural situation. The communal statutes that set up the Ca’ di Dio provided that it be governed by a prior and two assistants, elected by a citywide committee of twenty laymen, under the supervision of its own confraternity. Thus, the administration and leadership of the hospital was to be lay, communal and secular from the outset. The Ca’ di Dio’s leadership in the Quattrocento, who

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 18r-v.

<sup>18</sup> Ventura, 43.

<sup>19</sup> Bianchi.

were university professors, jurists, and notaries, was recruited from many of the leading families of Padua. Bianchi's prosopographical analysis confirms the view that non-governmental organizations such as the Ca' di Dio provided an important outlet for leadership roles of local élites in the Terraferma cities under Venetian rule. And the bulk of the employees were external wet nurses, who were often immigrants from Dalmatia, reminding us that Padua, as one of the wealthiest cities in Venice's dominions, drew immigrants from less prosperous regions of the empire.

The second work on the changing role of the Paduan élite is Silvana Collodo's study on the patronage of the Hospital of San Francesco Grande, which documents the careers of a former Carrara functionary and his wife, Baldo Bonafari and Sibilia Cetto, as lay philanthropists in Venetian Padua<sup>20</sup>. As a *referendario* and merchant under Francesco Novello, Bonafari had become a wealthy landowner in many parts of the Padovano, but with the change of regime he essentially 'went into hiding' as a private citizen. The couple's sense of social justice remained strong, and working with the College of Jurists and local mendicants, they transformed a small house into the major hospital for the aged and infirm in Quattrocento Padua. Significantly, this outlet for good works for the local poor was aided and guided by members of the Paduan élite, including Prosdocimo Conti.

Of course, many Paduans continued to seek public office under the Venetian regime. Membership in Padua's *Maggior Consiglio*, first of forty-eight, later of 100, played an advisory role to the *podestà* and his foreign staff, and acted as a platform for negotiation with the Senate and *Collegio* for reforms and redress of grievances. Thus, the commune that gave structure to Venetian Padua provides the key to continuity, the tradition of local government, that gave Padua its distinctive customs and character. Through a number of guilds and confraternities, governed by local notables serving as *gastaldo* and *massaro*, and especially the Confraternity of Sant'Antonio, the feasts and fairs of the communal era were continued and indeed promoted. Moreover, the conciliatory attitude of Venetian churchmen serving as Padua's bishops has recently been documented by Ian Holgate<sup>21</sup>. For instance, the Venetian noble Pietro Donato served as bishop for two decades and promoted the cult of local saints by installing chapels for the early bishops Massimo and Prosdocimo in the *Duomo* and by overseeing the restoration of the Baptistery, which, after all, provided the greatest pictorial record of the local saints, a celebration of Padua's holy men and women. He was also a notable patron of the arts and elaborate liturgical texts for the celebration of Mass in the *Duomo*.

Continued celebration of local saints perhaps hit its peak in the Quattrocento. A notable example was the feast of St. Anthony in June. Here actors representing the city's four patron saints rode in a cart among the

<sup>20</sup> Collodo, ch. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Holgate.

faithful, each in his or her own distinctive garb: Prodocimo as a grave and bearded early bishop, Justina a virginal martyr, with her palm, Daniel as a youthful deacon, and Anthony as the beloved friar, who proceeded from the Town Hall to the Basilica di Sant'Antonio, the two poles of Padua's civic pride and power. But soon a Venetian feast also came to predominate, Corpus Christi, which was celebrated with a procession but also jousting and mock combat between the best knights in Venice's garrison and young Paduan worthies, the flower of the local nobility. Thus, Padua was allowed to keep the best of its heritage. Sally McKee has argued that the key to understanding the social complexity of the Levant is not race or ethnicity, but a concept of parentage and ancestry, and the same insight should be extended to Venice's Terraferma state<sup>22</sup>. Venetian Padua was a work of art in the sense that Venetian authority permitted the continuation of institutions and customs that allowed for Paduans' self-respect, through the celebration of local traditions of sanctity, charity and civic life. That pride of place captured in the term *Patavinitas* flourished in Venetian Padua, even if its local élite no longer ruled. Still, the ongoing struggle between local Padua's privileges and Venice's central authority remained, as Edmund Burke saw, "extremely nice".

<sup>22</sup> McKee.

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### Abstract

One of the thorniest issues in the recent historiography of Venice's mainland empire is the quality and justice of its governance. Michael Knapton has depicted the Terraferma cities — Vicenza, Verona, and especially Padua — as dominated by the Dominante, which governed harshly, and taxed heavily for the benefit of the capital, while others have viewed the mainland state as a patchwork of jurisdictions, with Venice retaining local custom and leadership wherever these served the interests of the central government. This paper argues that Venice's policy was in large measure the affirmation of custom, using the ancient institutions of the commune of the mainland cities as the basis for its rule, and confirming the remnants of the signorial élites as its new aristocratic governing class, which filled the offices of local government, especially the councils and judiciary. Fifteenth-century Padua prospered under this arrangement.

### Keywords

Middle Ages; 15<sup>th</sup> century; Padua; Venice; politics; institutions

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