

## FOREWORD



This book is based on long-term fieldwork in Venice and in areas of the northern lagoon, mainly the island of Burano. My initial proposal, when I began my research for a D. Phil. thesis in 1980, was to conduct participant observation in Burano, while also maintaining a strong focus on Venice as the urban centre of which it is an integral part. In particular, I planned to analyse environmental problems in the lagoon and to examine ways in which inhabitants of Venice and Burano were affected by them and involved in their solution. Proposals put forward to repair ecological damage would illustrate relations between communities living in the island periphery and the city's politicians and administrators at the centre.

At that time my choice was undoubtedly influenced by changes and debates in anthropology, and especially critiques of structuralist studies. In particular, since the mid-1970s, critics of Mediterranean ethnographies have pointed out that attempts to describe societies as isolated and self-contained wholes had led to a proliferation of village studies in which little attention was paid to the dynamic relations of the areas observed with larger social contexts, whether cities, regions or nation states. The resulting overall picture was one of static social systems, hardly touched by change and modernity. Such concentration on village ethnographies, it was observed, was particularly surprising for a country like Italy, where urban values were pervasive and where migration from the countryside had been quite massive, especially since the Second World War (Boissevain 1975: 11; Crump 1975: 21–22; Davis 1977: 7–20; Gilmore 1980: 3; Macdonald 1993: 5–6, and see Just 2000: 20–28).

An initial theoretical problem was, therefore, the validity and usefulness of an urban/rural dichotomy – one as firmly rooted in anthropological tradition as it is in Italian culture. As we shall see, such dichotomous description did not fit my understanding of Burano, in some ways part of Venice, but in many other respects – and most importantly in its inhabitants' view – a village, separate and different from it. At any rate, as emerges from recent anthropological studies in cities, too clear-cut a distinction between urban and rural settings does not always fit ethnographic observations. For example, as Hirschon has shown in her path-

breaking book on Kokkinia, an urban district between Athens and Piraeus harbour, in-depth examination of family, religious and in general moral and affective, attitudes, makes evident the continuity rather than opposition between rural and urban lifestyles and world views (1998: 232–5).

That observation is also fitting for Venice, where (leaving aside its foreign trading communities that in time became integral parts of the city) street names recall that significant groups of the working population came from its rural hinterland: workers in Murano's glass factories, as well as many of the city's bakers and domestic servants, came from Friuli, while smiths moved to Venice from Bergamasque villages (Trivellato 2000: 58–62; Sanga 1979). Herzfeld thus questions 'the wisdom of constituting a distinctive category and separate discipline "urban anthropology"' (Introduction to Hirschon 1998: xii).

Burano too proved resistant to a rigid categorisation based on an urban/rural (or non-urban) polarity: it is in many ways a village-like community, yet is part of the city's administrative and bureaucratic structures. Although it is undoubtedly very closely tied-in with the city, it could not be treated merely as a Venetian *quartiere*, because it emerged as an idiosyncratic and unique community, tightly bound to Venice and yet separate and keenly conscious of long-standing differences as well as dependencies and ties. Consequently, as I hope will become clear through my chapters, Burano eventually took centre stage, while notes on Venice are now kept in store, as part of future research on the city's historical centre. I should, nonetheless, emphasise that far from treating the island as a discrete and closed social entity, I focused mainly on its relations with the city, and their changes through time.

A challenging theoretical question concerning my position as fieldworker was readily prompted by my thesis title: *Relations between Centre and Periphery in the City of Venice. A Study of Venetian Life in a Lagoon Island*. Why, I was asked, had I defined Venice as the centre, Burano the periphery? Was I placing myself on one side of a power structure, whether cultural, political or economic, through which Burano was marginalised? The question was certainly thought-provoking, given that, like the urban/rural opposition, that of centre/periphery has been overlaid with polarities such as advanced/backward, modern/traditional, complex/simple and so forth, which clearly bring to mind ethical concerns and postcolonial critiques of anthropology. A conception of cities as the main centres of social and intellectual progress has deep roots in the discourses of Italy's dominant culture. For Venice, the point is best illustrated in early maps. For example, in the work of a Renaissance cartographer, Benedetto Bordone (1500), the city is at the centre of the lagoon, enclosed within a string of beaches, the Lidos; and, while in reality the beaches are straight, in the map they are drawn as an almost circular protective wall (map f. 1,2,3). By contrast, Burano is little more than a dot on the map's north-eastern corner; with its tiny bell-tower, it appears as a distant outpost of the city and the Church. Such stylisation considerably alters the lagoon's topographical reality (map f. 2), since, placing the city at the top of a hierarchy of human settlements, it clearly reflects an ideological stance of which present-day Buranelli are well-aware and sometimes resentful.

On reflection, while bearing in mind implications of this influential commonplace of Italian culture in terms of hierarchy and power, I have nonetheless found it unnecessary and potentially misleading to change my description of Venice and Burano as respectively centre and periphery – one I wholly share with the Buranelli's own characterisation of their island, based, as they say, both on topography and on culture. However, I have found it useful to make a distinction between the 'centre' as a space characterised by multiple elements of organisation (Hannerz 1980) and my 'frame of reference' as observer. Because I conducted research both in Burano and in Venice's historical centre – and often went from fieldwork to library – I clearly had a double vantage point, but in reconstructing the history of relations between inhabitants of the two areas and looking at their interactions and mutual stereotyping, my main frame of reference was Burano and my focus its inhabitants' viewpoints and sensitivities.

Far from describing Buranelli as the passive recipients of Venetian hegemony and economic power, I have emphasised their agency, as shown, for example, by their strong sense of independence, their capacity for hard work, the efforts of Burano's politicians to obtain better housing and medical services through democratic debate and, not least, by the women's virtual abandonment of unrewarding lacemaking and their rejection of strict family and social control.

To come back to my fieldwork, also other – more contingent – considerations led me to think (even against the wise advice of some of my teachers) that mine was a potentially rewarding choice. Personal reasons interacted with those of a disciplinary and academic nature, but were nonetheless integral to my work's development: I was born and educated in Venice, but spent most of my adult life in England. Indeed, my curiosity about that city's social life and history was undoubtedly sharpened thanks to many conversations with colleagues and friends in Oxford. When, for example, on being asked where I came from, I explained that I was Venetian, their response was frequently one of surprise. 'Why', I was told several times, 'I didn't think people actually *lived* in Venice'. This was usually followed by further questions, such as was Venice really sinking, was anything being done about it, and so forth, which made me feel as if I too had somehow been implicated in the culpable neglect of the city's environment. My fieldwork in Venice was thus also connected to my relations with persons in England, where I had lived since the 1960s, and this too raised theoretical questions that I can sum up as 'problems of representation'.

Partly, my interlocutors' interest was due to a rather unhappy and frightening circumstance – one experienced by Venetians as a 'total event' that had changed their attitudes and their discourses about the city: a violent flood in November 1966 (see below) had made evident both the city's fragility and the fact that its protection had been neglected by politicians and administrators and indeed gravely undermined through indiscriminate industrial development at the margins of the lagoon. Because of a coincidence in time with the period of political protest and environmental concern that culminated in 1968, the predicament of Venice was often cited as a foremost example of the evils of industrialisation and capitalist greed.

Throughout the debate that followed the floods – and in witnessing the sense of alarm, and the world-wide activities of dedicated committees in publicising the city's plight and gathering funds for its restoration – my response may have been one in which I identified mainly with Venetians: solicitude on the part of the international community was clearly due to the status of Venice as an object of beauty and a testimony to past political and artistic achievement. It was a concern with heritage, not always matched by true understanding of the history and the needs of the population. It was quite revealing in this respect that, with few exceptions, most historical or art-historical studies in English ended at 1797, when Venice's life as an independent city-state came to an end. Aspects of its day-to-day contemporary existence were then overshadowed by a heightened awareness of, and interest in, the past – or, in Herzfeld's words, the 'monumental past' (1991a). By contrast, to my knowledge, Venice had not yet been a subject of anthropological study.

Although I was well aware that no account can uncritically claim adherence to 'reality', I shared with many Venetians a feeling that a steady production of historical works, paralleled by ignorance of the population's circumstances, perpetuated a vision of Venice as a dying city, elaborated by Romantic and Decadent poets and writers, especially since its loss of political independence. Typical in this respect was Ruskin's description of the view from Torcello's bell-tower: 'There are no living creatures near the buildings, nor any vestige of village or city round about them.' Probably blinded by his long view of the sea, the 'misty land of mountains touched with snow', and Venice's 'multitude of towers, dark and scattered among square-set shapes of clustered palaces, a long and irregular line fretting the southern sky' (1867, II; 12) – and no doubt absorbed in the study of Torcello's Byzantine ruins – he then entirely failed to note the lively presence of nearby overpopulated Burano. The theme of representation, both of Venice by an international community of scholars, art-lovers and tourists, and of Burano, mainly by other Venetians, is a subtext I have not developed in this work, but one present in several parts of the book.

My position as 'native' observer also raised other theoretical problems: because I was born and brought up in Venice, my colleagues very soon asked, was I conducting 'anthropology at home'? (Jackson 1987). Or was mine an exercise in 'personal anthropology'? (Pocock 1977). But, while I fully appreciated that my choice was clearly a departure from a well-established tradition of long-term continuous fieldwork in some remote and isolated area, I did not experience the matter as a problem, either in practical or intellectual terms. After all, as Allen writes, pointing out 'the relativity of otherness', 'there is no cut-off point where otherness begins or ends' (2000: 245). Perhaps due to my Jewish, Venetian and Italian roots, I actually find it difficult to conceive of any society or community, albeit metaphorically, as 'home'. At that time a distinction between home/private and society/public seems to have been firmly in place in my unreflective use of language, and I still do not usually think of 'home' as anything other than a very intimate and personal place I associate with the family and the hearth, certainly not opposed to, but distinct from, community and country (Du Boulay 1974: 38; Hirschon and Gold 1982: 66;

Sciama 1981: 101). Such divergence in my Italian, as distinct from English, understanding of 'home' finds validation in dictionary glosses for, while in Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary (1949) we find home = 'one's house or *country*' (my italic), Zingarelli's Italian dictionary (1962) gives simply 'walled edifice built for dwelling, family, or persons who dwell together as family'. In other words, the meaning of the Italian *casa* does not extend to country, village or nation.

However, my unease about the very idea of 'anthropology at home' need not be explained only in terms of lexical difference; as I hinted above, it may be due partly to personal history: I left Italy in my early twenties, settled in England on marrying in 1960 and studied anthropology in Oxford as my second education from 1970. Following Strathern's redefinition of 'anthropology at home' as 'auto-anthropology', that is, 'anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it', my field could not easily be described as 'home' (1987: 16–17). By the time I started my research, my long residence in England had changed my perspective and, despite frequent visits, had created a distancing from Venice and Italy, while other factors that contributed to my difficulty in defining my research as 'at home' were undoubtedly the limitations of my early social experience, due to boundaries of education, place of residence and schooling, as well as the fact of having grown up in the 1940s as a member of a minority in a then divided and oppressive society.

All the same, I certainly would not wish to deny or renounce a strong sense of belonging that still ties me to Venice: while at the beginning of fieldwork my knowledge of Venetians, especially those spread through the lagoon's islands, was limited, I knew my way around the city's libraries and archives, and I occasionally benefited from the presence of some old acquaintance in relevant administrative or political offices. Above all, having grown up as a Venetian speaker, I was easily able to cope with my informants' diglossia, or their outright reluctance to speak in Italian. In sum, my position as fieldworker is probably best described in Peter Loizos's observation about the slippery nature of categories like 'outsiders' and 'insiders'. 'Insiders who become anthropologists in their own societies [he writes] have obviously undergone a trans-formation. [They have] come out of a single culture and become bi-cultural.' (1981: 170–71).

As will appear from references to my fieldwork in various part of this work, I did not develop a strictly worked-out methodology; indeed I found serendipity was a better guide than a pre-established set of rules and guidelines. For example, at the outset I had no interest in lace, I did not know that lacemaking, with all its implications in terms of gender, honour and sexuality was quite as prominent a factor in Buranelli's sense of their history and self-image as I eventually learned from my informants' accounts. Because I hoped to be accepted in the island in complete independence from any political party or organisation, I did not make contact with agencies or persons who might have helped me to settle there, but I am still not certain whether this had the desired effect, given that living with a family itself made it difficult to get close to persons of different political orientations and views.

As well as observing Buranelli's everyday lives and trying to identify their interests, analyse their attitudes to family, history, religion and authority, in light of their changed living conditions and outlooks, my attention was inevitably focused on the theoretical questions that had dominated the anthropology of Italy and of the European Mediterranean since the 1950s, in particular the 'honour and shame' complex. A rethinking of 'honour and shame' through the analytical lens of gender led to a view of both terms of the dichotomy as more nuanced and less gender-biased than I might have assumed on the basis of earlier ethnographies in comparable areas.

Finally, another question that runs through the work is that of the Buranelli's construction of their collective identity, mainly based on their strong sense of place and their view of their society as a community structured and held together by its intricate and numerous kinship links and its people's use of kinship idioms.

## **The Writing**

Writing about relations between Venice and Burano poses problems of style, and, in particular, of priorities and relations between different parts. Given the complexity and inter-relatedness of topics such as honour and shame, religion, economics, politics and modernisation, themes could not be tidily confined to different chapters. For example, my section on religious practice and belief is relatively short – not because religion is not central to Buranelli's lives, but, on the contrary, because it so pervades all aspects of Burano's society that its discussion is inevitably present in my chapters on history, kinship, honour and lacemaking.

Although I was quite mindful of the critiques of the writing styles, subject divisions and aspirations to objectivity of earlier ethnographies – and well aware that my chosen field would have offered ample opportunities for experimental postmodern writing – I have mainly followed a conventional style. Because of the changing, elusive, and sometimes difficult to grasp social reality, I found that a formal treatment, especially in my chapters on kinship and 'honour and shame', helped to bring to light coherent patterns and structured regularities.

Given that environmental problems and dilemmas which characterise Venetian life – in particular, the contrast between conservation and change – are matters of concern and personal involvement for most people both in Burano and in the historical centre, I have introduced my first chapter with a brief description of the lagoon, which is their common geographical setting. In the second part of the chapter I have described the island's housing problems – for its inhabitants the most pressing of all environmental issues and the reason why numerous Buranelli, especially young couples, move to the Venetian hinterland. Buranelli's discussion of housing illustrated aspects of their lifestyles and residence patterns, while their expressions of anxiety when faced with the choice between seeking modern accommodation elsewhere and remaining on the island, despite its remoteness and its poor housing conditions, revealed their strong sense of belonging. As a

dramatic example of their past poverty, poor housing was also the most obvious material evidence of a lack of assistance from the city and the state, and was a central issue in Buranelli's political debates in the 1970s and 1980s.

In Chapter Two, 'A sense of history' I report some of my informants' perceptions of the past, based both on known accounts, whether recorded or orally transmitted, and on their awareness of gaps and lacunae in what they would otherwise envisage as a continuous linear narrative. In that context, 'history' includes 'the past' and its 'written or orally transmitted records', as well as 'memories', while 'a sense' connotes knowledge and experience, but also fantasy, by which Buranelli construct their own metahistories. Narrative segments are therefore introduced in my text as flashbacks mostly prompted by questions developed in cooperation with informants in the field.

Direct quotation of descriptive and historical writings on Burano have been introduced, not only for their information value, but also to convey, in the writers' own voices, representations and views which in turn had a bearing on the islanders' self-images. One of my informants, for example, maintained that the portrayal of Burano's fishermen as comic villains in Renaissance comedies had considerable influence in developing their self-mocking and ironical vein. As several of my informants stressed, and as appears from literary evidence, throughout history Venetians and Buranelli have mutually emphasised their differences, while, at the same time (paradoxically) recognising their common roots. Indeed, writing about relations between Buranelli and inhabitants of Venice's centre, or in general those Buranelli regard as their 'others', naturally involves the issue of stereotyping and image-making. Descriptive accounts of the island at different periods, therefore, illustrate the writers' attitudes to rural, remote and peripheral areas – which were often equated with 'the primitive' in the eighteenth century and with backwardness and underdevelopment in the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. They thus cast some light on aspects of Italian social thinking.

One of the main themes in Chapter Two, but one present also in other parts of the work, is that of the embarrassment of historical riches, and, conversely, the sense of deprivation where documentary evidence is poor or entirely lacking. At the time of my fieldwork a superabundance of historical and literary writings on Venice was experienced by inhabitants of the historical centre as a weight, and there was a growing awareness that, when coupled with strict conservatism and added to the severe constraints posed by the city's environment, history could have a paralysing effect. By contrast, Buranelli, puzzled by obscurities in accounts of their community's beginnings, often deprecated the fact that their island had long been ignored by historians. As a result, speculation about their early origins was open-ended and indeterminate.

In my chapter on kinship, I have described patterns of residence and household organisation and have examined uses of kinship terms, as well as traditional jural rules and notions about reproduction. Older peoples' narratives of their early years illustrate modes of socialisation that clearly contrast with recent practices and show

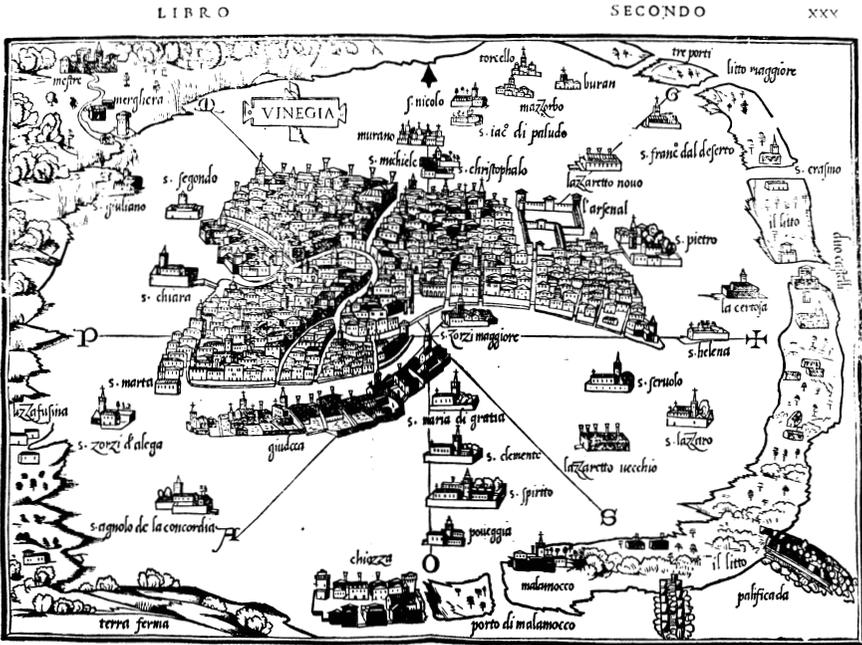
significant changes in family and gender relations, in particular in the exercise of authority. I have described uses and attitudes to nicknames, and have looked at ways in which kinship connections and networks link people resident in different islands and ways in which kinship shades into friendship at the outer edges of the kindred.

A long time-dimension was required in my chapter on honour and shame, because of the long history of both notions and their prominence as moral and behavioural complexes. Much has been written on the subject throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and some of my general criticisms of earlier works have been admirably covered, especially by Herzfeld, Llobera and de Pina Cabral, while various aspects have been discussed by Du Boulay, Hirschon, C. Stewart, Gilmore, Brandes, A. Lever, F. Stewart, Just, Goddard and others. However, I have concentrated on 'shame' as an experience and a concern of women – one that in earlier works was not treated as extensively as was male honour. As a sensitivity to censure and a fear of transgression instilled in early childhood, shame has undoubtedly been a strong factor in limiting the range of occupations open to women and maintaining rigid gender boundaries. Lacemaking in Burano, the topic of Chapter Six, is a particularly strong example.

The history of that craft shows how secular ideas about honour are supported by Catholic attitudes to gender and to women's sexual morality, while in the past a fear of shame was traditionally instilled at a very early age and went hand in hand with the teaching of the first lace stitches. Discourses about lacemaking, the main professional occupation of Burano's women, in which the craft and its history were overlaid with religious and symbolic meanings, as well as the Church's influence over its organisation, strongly reinforced patriarchal attitudes. By contrast, recent developments, especially since the 1960s and the closure of the old Lace School, are examples of significant change in Burano's economic and political life, as well as in gender relations.

In the last chapter I have returned to the ethnographic present (by now recent past) and have described particular moments in Burano's relations with Venice. Although the island was excluded from industrial development in the lagoon, and was thereby increasingly marginalised, its inhabitants too are now suffering the negative consequences of environmental damage. Their interactions with the Venetian municipality, therefore, are often tense and sometimes give rise to lively confrontations with the city's representatives. Debate is, as ever, conducted with a high consciousness of Burano's peripheral nature, and a keen awareness of long-standing connections, as well as resentments and memories of neglect and unanswered claims.

Most of the themes in this book – Buranelli's attitudes to their past, sentiments and behaviours in kinship relations, changing views about honour and women's work – are also relevant to the main issue of relations between Venice and Burano. Different threads come together in the last chapter, as in their political discourses and their negotiations with the Venice commune, Buranelli express their distinctive collective identity.



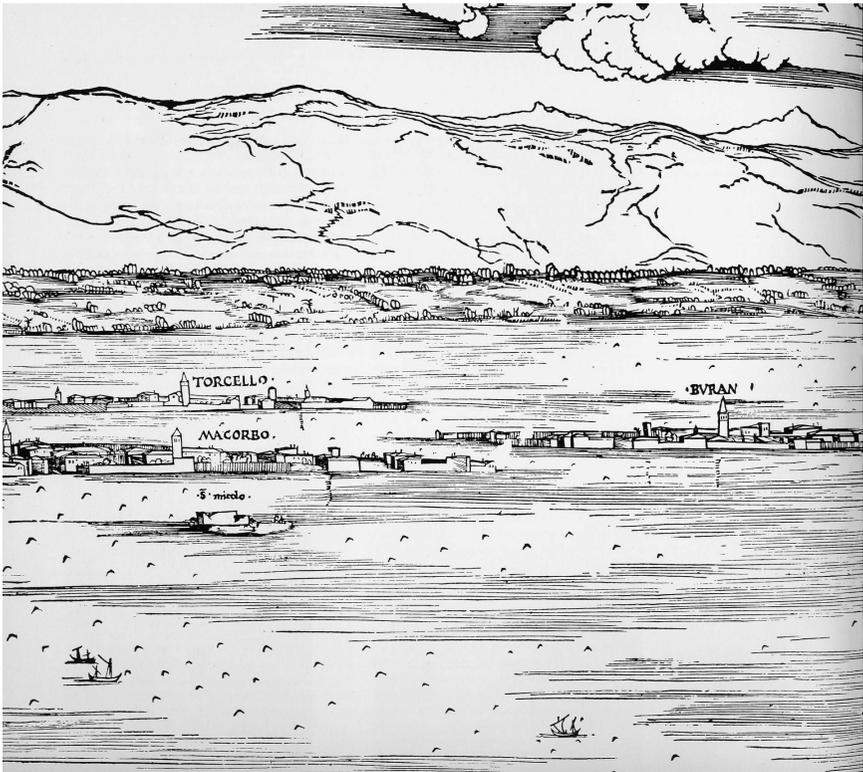
Map 0.1 Benedetto Bordone, 1528. Venice and the Lagoon. Oxford, Bodleian Library.



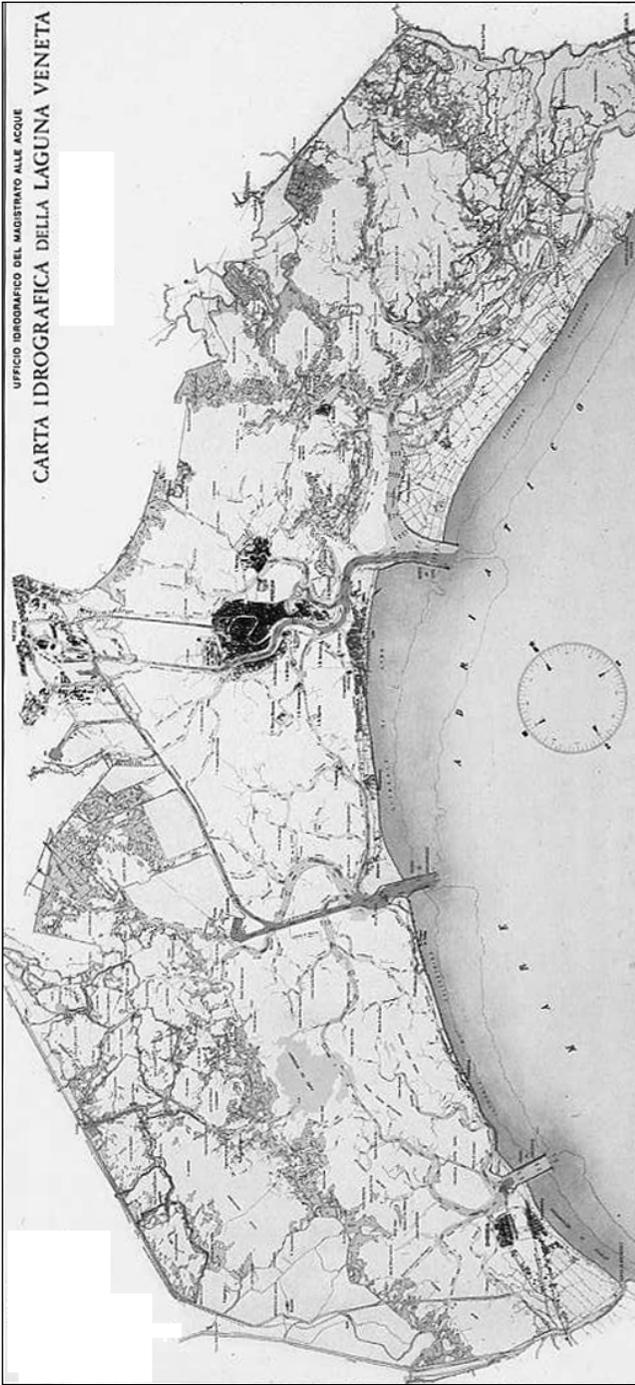
Map 0.1 Detail, Burano, Torcello and Mazzorbo.



Map 0.2 De Barbari 1500. Original in Venice, Museo Correr.



Map 0.2 Detail, The islands of the northern lagoon.



**Map 0.3** The lagoon's topographical reality.