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"The Cistern-System of Early Modern Venice: Technology, Politics and Culture in a Hydraulic Society."

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At a time when European cities depended on three sources of fresh water for their domestic and industrial needs—rivers, spring-fed aqueducts and groundwater wells—early modern Venice added a fourth possibility: a dense network of cisterns for capturing, filtering and storing rainwater. Venice was not unique in relying on rainwater cisterns; but nowhere in Italy (indeed in Europe) was the approach so systematic and widespread, the city concerned so populous, the technology so sophisticated and the management so carefully regulated as in the lagoon city. To explore Venice's cistern-system, a range of primary sources (medical treatises, travellers' accounts, archival records) and the contributions of architectural, medical and social historians, and archaeologists are analysed. The article examines the system's functioning and management, including the role of the city's acquaroli or watermen; the maintenance of freshwater quality throughout the city, in the context of broader sanitation measures; and the place of the "wells" and fresh water in daily life in Venice. As a means of teasing out the myriad links between nature, technology and society in early modern Italy, the article concludes with a brief comparison of the politics of water supply management in the very different urban realities of (republican) Venice, (viceregal) Naples and (papal) Rome. (Abstract)



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