

2 A SENSE OF HISTORY



Two questions...were set up against one another. – ‘How did the past lead to the present?’, and ‘How does the present create the past?’

Tonkin, McDonald and Chapman, *History and Ethnicity*

When, in the early days of my fieldwork, I explained my interest in local history, several people told me that, before settling in Burano, their community had lived in a different island, Buranello, Boreano, or Burano da Mar. It was not very far from their present location, but, as it was exposed to the winds and the sea, it was destroyed by tempests and disappeared under the waters. They, therefore, arrived in Burano like shipwrecks, refugees twice over, first from inland Altino, fleeing from barbarian invaders, then from the elements.

The legend is also reported in a few passages by those rare Venetian historians who gave Burano more than a passing mention. As Coronelli writes,

Some people maintain that the population of Burano may have been increased by refugees from Buranello, a small island about five miles away in the direction of Sirocco; vestiges of its ruins can still be seen under the water, when the sea is clear. (1696: 33–34)

Also Flaminio Corner, almost echoing Coronelli, reports that, according to tradition, Burano would have been settled by inhabitants of a nearby island when that proved so ‘badly exposed and gravely threatened by the impetuous currents of the sea that they feared they might all be submerged’. The move would have occurred in 959, and Burano would then have been known as *Burano Nuovo*. There, according to Corner, the settlers would have built the church of San Martino, named after the Bishop of Tours, but the church was only consecrated by the Bishop of Torcello at a much later date, in 1630.

Both writers, however, introduce their mention of an Ur-Burano with a degree of skepticism, describing it as a vague and obscure folk memory. Like them, at the time of my fieldwork not all Buranelli gave the legend much credence, although they did often mention and discuss it. Several fishermen claimed that when the weather conditions are favourable, the sky is clear and the water transparent, the ruins of Buranello can be seen at the bottom of the lagoon, but others assured me that they thought such an island had never existed. Are today's Buranelli echoing the words of seventeenth- and eighteenth- century historians? Or did the historians, like latter-day anthropologists, take note of the Buranelli's ancestors' narratives?

The legend may well be based on a real event, since, after all, several islands are known to have given way to erosion and disappeared after their inhabitants abandoned them to escape from malarial infection and seek safer and healthier environments. Archaeological investigation and photography may soon provide an answer, meanwhile, the legendary existence of an earlier Burano remains a subject of interest and fascination. Indeed, both the story and its aura of uncertainty were typical of Buranelli's feelings about their island's history at the time of my fieldwork.

Not long after my arrival members of the library committee had set themselves the task of putting together an archive that would document the island's history – an operation of recovery then widespread throughout the country and partly motivated by a fear that intense social change might bring about a loss of memory and identity. A poster with the heading 'Burano and its Vicinity: ... a history puzzle' (figure 2.1) affixed on the walls and circulated in the schools, showed an early photographic view of Burano, fragmented by the superimposed lines of a puzzle, over the following words:

In the context of our initiative to create a local historical archive, Burano's library is promoting a collection of historical and documentary materials concerning the environment, and the customs of Burano and its lagoon. The population and cultural associations are asked to make available materials they may possess: old photos, especially family and wedding ones, postcards, manuscripts, sound recordings of the dialect, or any other materials that may illustrate the life-styles, customs, political life, the world of labour and the social and economic changes that have taken place in our area.

The documents would be copied and then returned. The project, comparable to those of 'History Workshop', was to record as much of Burano's history as could be reconstructed from memory and from material objects, that is, at the most four generations.¹ Speculation about the legendary existence of an earlier Burano and the islanders' plan to record a far more recent past, were both signs of a need to have, or to make, history at the two extremes of the island's social time, its beginnings in a remote past and its present, or indeed a future when, it was hoped, the archival collection would have been of value to new generations.

A desire for a 'beginning' was also due to the fact of being in a culture area in which foundation stories are ever present (Fortini-Brown 1996), but where

Burano's settlement is generally treated as a detail in narratives about its more illustrious neighbour, Torcello. Medieval chronicles begin with accounts of the flight from Altino of the Christian faithful, under the pressure of barbarian invaders. The *Chronicon Gradense* explains that the island was settled by people who had previously lived near the northern gate of Altino, Borea, hence its name, *Vicum Burianum*.²

The idea of a common origin, however, is sometimes denied by the Torcellani, who claim that only they are the true descendants of the Altinati, and who argue that Buranelli could not possibly have come down from a population of cultivators, since they were not in any way like peasants (*contadini*). To add to the mutual stereotyping, it is sometimes suggested that the population of Torcello must have been Altino's aristocracy, while Burano's inhabitants may have been mainly plebeians who followed their superiors in their flight and joined a community of humble fishermen, settled there since time immemorial. Indeed, inhabitants of neighbouring islands always emphasise the Buranelli's difference, echoing vague conjectures about their supposed oriental roots, or suggestions that Burano, as well as areas of the coast near Altino, may have been Greek colonies settled since pre-Roman times, while both claims are vigorously denied by those partial to the idea of Roman origins.³

Partly the reason for such uncertainties is the fact that throughout that early period the cultural and economic centre of the northern lagoon was Torcello, first the seat of government and residence of the tribunes in Roman times, then seat of the Bishop and *podestà* under Venetian rule. When Torcello lost its dominant position, its population decimated by malaria and its churches and convents abandoned and ruined (see below), Burano became the administrative centre of the small estuary. By that time, however, all political and economic activities had moved to the Rialto area, while the islands of the Northern lagoon had lost all their power and prestige. Thanks to the presence of its late Roman and Byzantine monuments and ruins, valued by humanists and later by romantics, Torcello, which Ruskin described as 'mother' to Venice (1867: 12), retained the prestige of antiquity, but Burano, which had no comparable architectural or historical remains, was increasingly treated as a remote and isolated area of little interest or significance.

An awareness of the overwhelming production of historical works on Venice made the silence surrounding Burano even more humbling, so that its inhabitants were faced with the need to negotiate their pride in sharing in Venice's antiquity and political history, with a firm conviction that theirs was a distinct community – one marked with vivid memories of past poverty and marginalisation. Their feelings no doubt also derived from the prestige of the written word, which, as they learnt in their early school years, and were often reminded by representatives of the dominant culture, was held superior to tradition and memory.

Having records of the past was associated with prosperity, reputation and respectability (somewhat like owning family portraits), while the lack of any such records seemed a proof of their insignificance. In contrast to inhabitants of

Venice's centre who feel oppressed by a surfeit of history, Buranelli, then, saw their absence from most official versions as evidence of a hurtful lack of recognition by historians. Several people recalled that because they had long suffered from a low level of literacy, they had felt a sense of dissatisfaction at the difficult confrontation of vernacular traditions with the national language and culture.

Despite such feelings, and despite some uncertainty about the extent to which they shared in Torcello's history, many Buranelli proudly emphasised that their village too was settled earlier than Venice. Legendary versions of Attila's arrival at Torcello (in 452 A D) were often related with a degree of skepticism, although the expression 'he is a real Attila',⁴ was sometimes used to describe the most restless and unruly boys. Christian origins were often proclaimed, and legendary accounts of the miraculous landing in Burano of its patron saints were known to most people, since their memory, charmingly recorded in a large canvas in Burano's church of San Martino (figure 2.2) was also kept alive by grandparents and Sunday school teachers. Counter to those, however, as we have seen, were speculations about supposedly foreign or non-Christian elements that might have formed some strata of the population. For example, the surname Barbaro, 'barbarian', was said to have derived from the nickname of a barbarian slave who had served in the household of one of Torcello's Roman tribunes: he was eventually freed and went to live in Burano, where he handed down to his descendants the secrets and refinements of a rich cuisine, which he had learnt during his captivity.

A favoured theme was that of freedom and independence. Some people recalled with pride that, when, in the ninth century, Venice became the Lagoon's political centre, the islands continued to administer themselves in accordance with ancient municipal statutes and institutions. In particular, Torcello and Burano retained some privileges, which, according to tradition, could be traced back to Roman or pre-Roman times. A sixteenth-century actor and comedy writer, Calmo (below), described himself (perhaps in jest) as 'a descendant of good old Torcellans, all...faithful keepers of their jurisdiction.' But, although memories of political autonomy and independence still inform some of the islanders' attitudes and sometimes enter political debates, documentary evidence must have been long lost. As a historian observed, in 1441 the Venetian Senate passed a motion to ask that the people of Torcello should not continue to refer to customary laws *de quibus tamen non reperitur aliqua scriptura* (of which no record was found) and ordered the *podestà* to observe the laws and ordinances of Venice and to draw from approved local custom only when laws were lacking (Cozzi 1982: 11 but cf De Biasi 1994).

A striking feature of Buranelli's accounts was the lack of detail for almost a whole millennium of Venetian rule; the time dimension was completely flattened out, and Burano's social history viewed as one of unremitting poverty and isolation. Images of the island as one of poor 'fishermen and lacemakers' then became almost timeless, while the few better-off and successful people were, in a

way, made invisible. Burano's one really famed individual, the composer Baldassare Galuppi (1706–1785), after whom are named the main street and piazza, was remembered with pride, but it was often observed that as soon as he had reached success, his life and work had become part of that of Venice – or of the world – while Burano was only mentioned as his humble birthplace.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, when the Venetian economy was in a state of recession and disarray, and to an even greater extent after the Veneto was taken over by Austria in 1815, Burano too was severely impoverished and increasingly isolated. It was especially from that time that its image as a community of paupers became fixed – both in the minds of the islanders, and in the eyes of its various visitors, benefactors, and educators. References to Burano then began to enter the writings of the philanthropists and politicians who contributed to the organisation of its Lace School (chapter 4).

Historical interest was naturally much livelier as more recent events were touched on, and the topics most old people remembered with a great wealth of detail were the advent of fascism and the Second World War. The joining of Burano to the Venice commune in 1924, the suppression of the democratic election of mayors and the return to rule by a *podestà*, as in the days of Austrian domination, were often mentioned by the more politically conscious. Episodes that occurred during the German occupation, such as encounters with the fascist Black Brigades, executions of partisans on a nearby abandoned island and the Allied bombing of a house, were all recorded in many people's minds and were usually transmitted to the very young by their grandparents.

Questions about origins, hinted at in the heading of the poster and the puzzle image (above), but wisely left in abeyance by those who collected materials for an archive, remained a frequent theme in Buranelli's historical discourses. Like sophisticated ironists, several people then offered me their own suppositions about the circumstances that might have led to settlement in their island, or in general about their past, through self-deprecating or semi-serious myth-making, slight narratives and in-jokes (often offered to me complete with exegesis). And, while these cannot, in any sense, be described as fully-developed and articulate myths, but rather as conjectures and deliberate fantasies, they are, nonetheless, of interest as indications of attitudes and sentiments, rather than real answers to Burano's historical questioning. Stories, carnival sketches, segments of history and, in some instances, also life-histories were assembled in such a way as to leave transparently in evidence superimposed images and bricolage pieces, so that an attentive and well-informed observer could probably identify, disentangle and relocate the fragments.⁵

Answers to unresolved questions were sometimes provided in the form of imaginative tales or just-so stories, often told in facetious and ironical self-mockery. A common underlying theme was that of Buranelli's slight physical 'difference' from inhabitants of neighbouring islands. By the time of my fieldwork such differences had entirely disappeared, but some people recalled that in the

past Buranelli used to be somewhat shorter and slightly darker-skinned than their neighbours, although blue eyes were not at all unusual.⁶

The most common and, in their view, most plausible explanation was that they are simply the descendants of *povera gente* (poor folk), but another possibility Buranelli sometimes contemplated was, as we have seen, that of some ill-defined, but 'different', ethnic origin from that of other Venetians. One suggestion was that Burano was originally a penal colony where Venetians relegated thieves and prisoners of war, and more than one informant said that they had an obscure certainty that the physical characteristics of Buranelli showed that they must have descended from Turks. The name of a street, *Calle degli Assassini*, or Street of the Assassins, was once explained to me by a woman in terms of a crime of passion, committed by one of her ancestors who was insanely jealous of his wife. The street name *Assassini*, a word derived from hashish, is also found in Venice, where it is usually explained as designating an area where sailors smoked and traded that drug. Both glosses lend support to some suspicion of Turkish influence or presence, but, in the woman's dramatic interpretation of the street name, a hot temper and violent defence of honour was viewed as strong evidence of 'southern', and possibly 'infidel', character traits.

The presence of a number of Jewish-seeming family names, as well as the fact that a kind of biscuit traditionally made in Burano curiously resembles some types of Passover cakes, and, above all, that one of Burano's neighbourhoods is called Giudecca, had led people to suppose that some families must be Jewish in origin. As Guiton writes, quoting a Buranello friend, 'Then there is the Jews' bridge. There were never many Jews here in the old days, but there were always some, which is why we had a Giudecca' (1977: 117). However, 'Giudecca' may not be linguistically related to 'Jew', but to the past participle of the verb 'to judge', *giudicare*, in Venetian *Zudegà*, which would support a view of Burano as a place of confinement or prison. The Venice Giudecca, initially called Spinalunga from its shape, would owe its present name to the fact that some of its areas were assigned to a number of Venetian families when, after a period of political exile, they were pardoned and encouraged to settle there. *Zudegà* would then refer either to the fact that such families had undergone a 'judgment' in the sense of a trial and sentence, or to the fact that properties were 'adjudicated' by the drawing of lots (Correr, G., et al. 1847, Vol. I: 493; Ravid 1977: 201–225).⁷

An imaginative version of the early history of Burano was offered to me when I asked a man why the islanders paint their houses in many different colours. His answer was:

Because once upon a time Burano was one great isolation hospital. When there were cholera epidemics, individuals or whole families would be sent here. The Republic's sanitary officers would come and spray our houses inside-out with quick-lime, but the white-wash made them look desolate and almost sinister, so that, as soon as all

members of a household were declared free from infection, they would come out and paint their cottage in vivid colours to celebrate, and to let others know that they could join society again.

Here historical memories about the nearby island of Lazzaretto Nuovo, which was indeed an isolation hospital, are extended (or symbolically identified with?) Burano.⁸ Such sporadic inventions in which bits of history were woven with fantasy could hardly be considered to form a well-developed body of myth. What is of interest, however, is that some common traits run through many of them, and those are the themes of marginality and exclusion, expressed through symbols of stigma, such as contagious illness or the fact of being at odds with the law, or through examples of embattled independence and defiant intolerance of authority.

A revealing example of this was the Buranelli's explanation of the way their local archives were lost. The first time I inquired, I was simply told that the municipal offices were set alight 'by a madman' and all archival materials had been destroyed before the flames could be put out. A much fuller account, however, was spontaneously given me a few months later: it was the winter of 1944 and people were suffering from cold and hunger. Somehow the Buranelli had managed to have a greater number of food ration cards than their population justified, but, when they were warned that (whether due to treachery or indiscretion) the Black Brigades then controlling Venice had become suspicious and would soon come with German soldiers to check Burano's municipal documents, the commune's offices were set on fire. The incident is usually related as a gesture of resistance against outside interference, and a deliberate act to destroy evidence that would have allowed their wartime rulers to impose strict controls on food rationing and possibly inflict some dreadful reprisal.

Despite a feeling of loss and the knowledge that some gaps may be very difficult to fill, Buranelli said that they knew that relevant documents must have been kept in Venice's archives, but they had not yet been fully ordered and examined. To view the history of Burano as irretrievably lost would have been a mistake, given that even on a first attempt to collect a bibliography I found that literary and archival documents are certainly in existence and remain partly unexplored (cf. De Biasio 1994).

Meanwhile, I collected a variety of writings on the northern lagoon. The result was a small number of texts of diverse styles and periods: references to Buranelli in a few sonnets, a fictitious letter and a poem in Burano's dialect by a Renaissance comic poet, Calmo, illustrate early versions of enduring stereotypes; descriptions of Burano and brief accounts of its history by a geographer and a Church historian shed some light on the island at the turn of the seventeenth century, while the writings of a late eighteenth-century scholar show the continuity of earlier representations, as well as a tendency, widespread in that period, to equate peasants and fishermen with primitives.

A debate which followed Italian unification in the 1860s, and was revived in the 1920s, concerning whether Burano should have been joined to the Venice commune illustrates important aspects of the history of relations between Venice and its island periphery. For the nineteenth century we learn much about Burano's history from writings about its lacemakers and Lace School. Contrary to a general silence on the history of women, in this case it is the women who are the main protagonists and who are the link between Burano and those parts of the world involved in the international lace trade.

Burano's Fishermen as Comic Stereotypes in Renaissance Drama

Glimpses into life in the lagoons in the sixteenth century can be found in a few texts by an actor, poet and comedy writer, Andrea Calmo (1509–1571), in whose works Burano's fishermen are represented as the Venetian equivalents of rude peasants and comic villains in Ruzante's Paduan comedies. Very little is known about Calmo's life, but passages from his works suggest that he may have been born or brought up in the northern lagoon area 'among baskets, fishing rods and nets'.⁹ References to such humble origins may have been ironical, but several of his works show that he was intimately acquainted with the speech of the northern lagoon islands, indeed they are often referred to by scholars as rich sources of linguistic knowledge (Filiassi, below, and Padoan, 1982: 159–60). In his early comedies, which reflect the realities of Venice as a lively cosmopolitan sea port, he explores, exaggerates and parodies the manners and speech of its diverse and colourful population, at the same time portraying the true linguistic preferences of its merchants, craftsmen, working people, clerics and aristocracy (Devoto 1960: 70–1; Dionisotti 1968: 1; Migliorini 1984: 214–5; Sciana 1992: 361–2).

While earlier writers in the Venetian vernacular had tried to develop a genteel aulic dialect, Calmo's characters, a medley of Bergamasque porters, Greek, Slav or Istrian sailors, prostitutes, citizens, maidservants and fishermen, enacting their fortuitous and comical encounters in a crowded urban setting, each speak her or his own patois. The writer thus goes through a wide range of dialects, from those of the Paduan and Bergamasque countryside, respectively associated with servants and porters, to *Grechesco*, a lingua franca with large numbers of Cretan or Rhodian words, mainly spoken by Greek and Albanian sailors and mercenaries (or *Strathiotti*, the Venetian equivalents of Rome's *Milites Gloriosi*).¹⁰

In Calmo's vivid dramatisation of the meetings of such diverse people, Buranelli are characterised as behaving according to 'nature's way', *naturaleza*, and their speech and manners are contrasted with the stilted diction, and aulic dialect of Petrarchan love poetry, and, in general, all social and literary affectations. Like the best of parody, Calmo's portrayals of the islanders, in which fantasy is woven in with acute observation, successfully capture the essential traits of their behaviour and speech.

In his *Epitaphs*, a parody of the mannered and lengthy poetical epigraphs of renaissance tombstones, he records the circumstances of the lives and deaths of his characters (Calmo 1600: 54 ff.). While his parodic mode clearly leads to exaggeration, nevertheless the *Epitaphs*, rather like the *Spoon River Anthology*, show a very keen understanding of the manners and preoccupations of lagoon islanders. The inscriptions engraved on the burial stones record essential character traits, events, ambitions and desires in the lives of those who are buried, and they thus highlight motifs and concerns that friends in Burano assured me they recognise as true to island life. The main themes are those of self-worth and desire for honour and respect; despite the indignities of poverty, people universally demand to have a good burial. They also feel great pride in their descent, and they express strong male solidarity. The peer group, and, in particular, the community of men (*brigae*), are very important, but friends are sometimes treacherous.

As well as their sense of the fulfillment of life through love, satiety, companionship and the reassuring certainty of a line of descent, several of the epitaphs recount the circumstances of violent deaths, often meted out in the solitude of the marshes or among the high grasses and reeds of fishing enclosures. Indeed, several of the poems record a tendency to take revenge even for some imagined or unimportant slight, or they sadly recount the frequent occurrence of drowning or of accidents at sea. The stereotypes created by Calmo appear to have been based on a very close and intimate knowledge of his subjects, and seem in turn to have had an influence on their own self-perception and self-presentation: as if to play up to Calmo's burlesque representations of island life, at Carnival time Buranelli still impersonate some of his stock characters in laughter and self-mockery.

The History of the Northern Lagoon from the Works of Vincenzo Coronelli, and from Flaminio Corner's Ecclesiastical History

In contrast to Calmo's flamboyant parodies, Vincenzo Coronelli and Flaminio Corner ¹¹ both describe at length the sombre life of the northern lagoon's numerous convents – undoubtedly the places where Burano's lace craft was sedulously practiced and brought to technical perfection, and where ideas about gender, sexuality and shame became deeply-rooted *habitus*.

Both writers report the folk memory according to which Burano was settled by inhabitants of another island when the latter was submerged. Coronelli's description of that event as 'popular legend' and 'common opinion' shows how the mixing and mutual influences of oral traditions and recorded history actually renders them inseparable. In antiquity, Coronelli writes, the islands were known as 'the six sestieri of Altino', a city named after a Trojan hero, built 'entirely in the style of Ravenna' by Antenor on the shores of the rivers Zero and Sile, just eight miles from Treviso. When Altino was destroyed during Attila's invasion, its people were able to escape and reach the islands from the rivers thanks to their mastery

of seamanship. The nobility then established themselves in Equilio and Eraclea, while the 'plebs' mostly settled in Torcello, Burano, Mazzorbo, Costanziaco, Ammiana and Murano.

Coronelli then describes Torcello's great power, when it was the residence of the *podestà* who also governed Mazzorbo and Burano, and when, from 635, it was also the seat of the bishop, whose rich diocese owned lands on the shores of the river Sile and included no less than twelve parishes and sixteen convents of nuns. By the time of his writing, however, the population had been decimated by malaria and 'such was the unwholesomeness of its air, that, but for the convents that adorned the city and that were used as places of retirement and seclusion by highly qualified ladies, Torcello would have been entirely deserted' (1696: 33).

Religious communities, like the rest of the population, were always sensitive to the effects and echoes of war, to the intemperance of the climate and the decay of buildings, which forced them to move from convent to convent.¹² Images of a more prosperous past also characterise Coronelli's description of Mazzorbo. When it was first settled by refugees from Altino, and when, later, it had numerous country houses 'for the enjoyment and delight of the nobility', it must have been much different, but at the time of his visit, he writes:

nothing worth notice is to be found in Mazzorbo, except piety, which flourishes in a truly exemplary manner, in four convents of nuns... all under the rule of Saint Benedict. In them there shines the Venetian nobility, who, with generous contempt for the fasts and luxuries of the world, see their daughters most religiously cloistered, attracted by the pleasant solitude and the venerable antiquity of the islands, and by the famous relics kept in their sanctuaries (Ibid.).¹³

Burano also had a relatively large religious population, which included two Benedictine convents: one, which housed forty nuns, by the quay of San Moro and the other in San Vito, close to the piazza. A third convent, Santa Maria delle Grazie, was of the order of Capuchin Servites.¹⁴ In addition, it had no less than forty priests, an oratory and a hospice for the poor. Like Mazzorbo, however, the island presented an image of decay: the bridge that joined the two islands was thoroughly ruined 'through carelessness and time', but its population was nonetheless livelier and more numerous than elsewhere in the northern lagoon.

The streets are sometimes too narrow. The islanders are completely dedicated to fishing and to the construction of ships, by which Burano acquires its riches and renders important services to its rulers. The women work at *punto in aria* and they weave nets. Buranelli are always in competition with the inhabitants of Torcello and Mazzorbo, and, although close to the direst poverty, they boast noble origins (Coronelli 33–34).

As we have seen, for Corner the history of Burano coincides with the foundation of its first church, San Martino, in 959, but that date, as he writes, 'so far remains uncorroborated by other evidence'.

Events that occurred in the Renaissance period are naturally told with greater assurance. Of particular interest is the arrival from Noale of nuns fleeing from the violence of war in 1514¹⁵ and their resourceful foundation of a Benedictine convent on the ruins of the old church of San Vito (1749: 600 &ff.). With them, also numerous lay refugees must have taken shelter in Burano – one may wonder whether, and to what extent, the nuns had a role in the development of organised lacemaking among the island women.

The O-Tai-Tans of the Lagoons

A work that eventually exercised considerable influence on later scholars, and contributed most strongly to a view of Burano as an authentic repository of Venetian tradition, is Count Jacopo Filiasi's *Memorie Storiche de' Veneti Primi e Secondi* (1796). Writing at a time of intense political change and keen interest in ethnic origins, and drawing his evidence from archaeological as well as literary and linguistic sources, Filiasi attempted to fill the long gap between prehistoric, Atestine and Roman Venetia. In the words of a later historian, Filiasi tried to bring to light 'the moral character and the national and spiritual physiognomy' of the early Veneti (Cessi 1944: 389).

Although partly of the kind anthropologists would later have described as 'conjectural', Filiasi's work provided a lively picture of early insular Venice, thus enriching both popular and scholarly traditions and laying the basis for an early romantic vision of Burano as a precious survival and testimony to a primordial Venetian identity.¹⁶ As he maintains in one of his most speculative chapters, before Romanisation, and certainly long before Attila's invasion in the fifth century and the settlement of refugees in the islands, the north-eastern corner of Italy was inhabited by a population of Asian origin, the Heneti, or *Veneti Primi*, who had originated in Babylonia and Assyria. After migrating to Paphlagonia, on the northern border of the Black Sea, they would have moved to Illyria, eventually to spread throughout the north-east of Italy and settle in the area that lies between the sea, the Friulan mountains, the river Timavo and Lake Garda, and extends to present-day Brescia, then populated by Celtic Gauls.

According to Filiasi, Asian origins are also proved by the early Veneti's cult of Belen, their worship of the Dioscuri and their periodical sacrifice of a white horse to the Thracian king Diomedes. In Abano, now a health resort where hot mud springs are used for therapeutic purposes, they observed an oracle of Gerion, and at the baths there was found an inscription to Isis, the Goddess of nature. The Veneti's usual costume also recalled Oriental dress. According to descriptions by Juvenal and Strabo, men wore a sleeved tunic over wide trousers and a hat on short curly hair, while women were veiled as in eastern countries; they did not often appear in public and they were considered extremely chaste. The favourite

colour of the Veneti was deep blue, and their clothes were still that colour in the twelfth century.

The clearest marks of Asian origins, which, in Filiasi's view, were still present at the time of his writing, were the Venetians' accent and language. Although their early speech was greatly altered through mixing with the tongues of Etruscan, Umbrian and Euganean tribes, and in time it entirely gave way to Latin, it nonetheless kept its original accent, as well as some words.¹⁷ Numerous place names and dialect words were derived from Greek words, but these were themselves formed from the languages of Assyrians and Paphlagonians. Such influence was particularly evident from the abundance of final diphthongs, which recalled the Ionic dialect, as well as the lengthening of vowels and a kind of singsong or lilt, still typical of the speech of Chioggia and Burano.¹⁸ As Filiasi writes,

It is not rare still to find among Buranelli fishermen some of the most illustrious and ancient surnames, i.e., those of families which are already extinct elsewhere.¹⁹ Their dialect, and especially their accent and pronunciation, are very different from those of other islands. They drag their words and they lengthen and double their vowels in the highest degree. 'Paare', they say and 'Buraa' instead of 'pare' and 'Burà' as others do... In this the Buranelli can truly be said to be the O-tai-rans of the lagoon (1796, Vol.4: 203).²⁰

According to Filiasi's theory that accents are the most enduring feature of languages, Buranelli's way of pronouncing first Greek then Latin words, 'almost singing', must have been a characteristic of a particular groups of early Veneti and of those inhabitants of Oderzo and Altino who fled to the islands from the area between the rivers Sile and Livenza under the pressure of Barbarian invasions, in the fifth century. Unlike the populations which remained in inland areas, such as, for example, Treviso, the islanders never came into contact with their barbarian conquerors and their speech remained close to its original forms. Because of their bizarre singsong, which was 'imitated by poets, like Calmo in his writing of national, that is, Venetian, comedies they have become the models for... the well-known mask of the *Gnaga* which is a parody of the Buranelli and their speech. (Ibid: 10)

Implicitly echoing debates between linguistic purists and those who wished for a more dynamic and freely created Italian national language than one strictly based on the fourteenth century Tuscan of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, Filiasi shows his regional loyalty in defending the speech of Venetians against the criticism of Dante, who described it as 'so raucous that a man talking sounded like a female (*De Vulgari Eloquentia*). On the contrary, Filiasi writes, Venetians were endowed with remarkable musical sensitivity, but then, Filiasi concludes, 'Dante's judgements do not deserve to be respected just because he is Dante... he may have spoken so just to humble a little the peoples of Venetia. Possibly because in those days they valued and praised their own dialects too much' (ibid. 204).

Filiasi's defence of Venetian speech makes an interesting comment on Italy's long-standing 'language question', just before the dawn of Italian state formation. Indeed, a search for origins and for memories and symbols of early tribal groups

and linguistic forms was widespread among late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars as they sought to identify earlier ethnic cores that would become part of a wider Italian nation (A. Smith 1988: 61). By his appeal to a primitive root of an imagined Venetian identity, Filiasi's aim was in the first place to establish the great antiquity of the bond between people and territory, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to supersede the debate over Roman versus Greek origins of Venice and to counter too full an intellectual and linguistic subjection to Tuscany and Rome. However, Filiasi's affirmation of local identity need not have been hostile to national unification, especially, as was the case for Venetia, when joining Italy was tied to the need to break free of foreign domination. Indeed, since the fall of its republican government to Napoleon, Venice was first under French rule (1797–1815), then, except for a short period of renewed independence in 1848–1849, it was under Austrian occupation from 1815 to 1866, when it was joined to Italy by plebiscite.

Segments of the history of Burano can also be recovered from a number of reports ordered by different governments. Of these, possibly the most detailed was written in preparation for the Austrian Cadastre of 1827. It covered the areas of Cavallino, Sant'Erasmo, Torcello, Mazzorbo and Vignole, of which Burano was at that time the administrative centre. Even allowing that the hardships of the area may have been overstated to evade the Austrians' punitive taxation, the picture we derive is one of a truly impoverished and desolate lagoon. Because the inquiry was based on pre-established categories related to the prices of agricultural lands, rents and labour, passages on Burano, where at this period hardly any vegetable gardens or fields were left, alternate with paragraphs on its neighbouring islands. The nearby fish farms, which were Burano's main source of income, as well as the climate and the cycle of fishing, unfamiliar to Austrian officials, are described in some detail.

The soil of the *valli* is a soft mud...in which eels multiply, without any need of work, and in which even white fish can find adequate nourishment, but, although the climate is usually temperate, when the northern winds clash violently against the sweet and salty Sirocco, they cause severe storms which may break down the reed walls and embankments of the fish farms, and cause great losses.

To make a precise estimate of the size and productiveness of the fish farms was indeed very difficult and the only certain information was that their rent was very low.²¹

Those with a sandy bottom, shallow water mirrors and few and narrow canals...have very little wild fowl and in them the new fish has little success because they are a considerable distance away from fresh waters, while in the autumnal season those exposed to Sirocco are liable to have their locks torn apart by the winds and be thrown open, so that all the eels and the fish are lost.

During the long period of Austrian occupation, which ended in 1866 when the Veneto was joined to Italy, and the Italian Wars of Independence, the whole

of the Veneto was dramatically impoverished. In particular, Venice, especially after the 1848 uprising, suffered outbreaks of cholera, while its peripheral islands became increasingly cut off and desolate. For Burano the nineteenth century was a time of increasing isolation and, despite the revival of lacemaking in the latter part of the century, its economy only began to improve after World War 2. Before I come to that, however, I shall return briefly to their history and to the debates surrounding its annexation to the Venice commune as they emerged from government reports which illustrate a vision of Burano from the centre at a time of political change and authoritarian centralisation.

From Foreign Occupation to Internal Colonialism. Three Government Reports

Soon after Venice and the Veneto joined Italy, a need was felt to redraw their internal boundaries that Napoleon's classification of departments, municipalities and communes had rendered rather vague and ill-defined. The inland cities, which had formerly been under Venetian rule, claimed their surrounding territories and demanded a more equal position with their erstwhile capital than they had held before 1797. Venice thus seemed to have contracted and to have remained isolated within the natural confines of the lagoon. Moreover, a need to reorganise its internal administrative structure led to a drawn-out and sometimes acrimonious debate over the opportunity of aggregating or else excluding its peripheral islands. The background was Article 74 of the 1848 Statute of the Kingdom of Sardinia, which stated in a very broad and general way that 'Communal and Provincial Institutions are regulated by the law', followed in 1865 by a law which granted that it was allowed for a commune to *spontaneously* join another.

Legislation on the running of communes, which fully reflects the difficulties posed by a direct confrontation between the central state and local entities, was in fact characterised by highly contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, attempts were made to grant some degree of autonomy to local governments by extending the administrative vote to larger categories of people and establishing that mayors were to be elected. On the other hand, the laws were clearly formulated in the context of postunitary tendencies towards rigid centralisation.²² Statements that fractions or communes could *voluntarily* fuse to form larger units, or else separate *by Royal decree* thus appear inconsistent.²³

To further illustrate Burano's relations first with Venice and then with the newly formed Italian state, we must go back to the postunitary period, when it was first proposed that the island should be joined to the city's municipality – a proposal rejected by the Venetian council (24 July 1878) on the grounds that such a union would only have been a burden. The first relevant document is a report by a lawyer, Marco Diena, to Venice's Provincial Government, which was to

mediate between the local authority and the central state represented by the *prefetto*. Its exposition of the issues involved and of arguments made in favour or against aggregation of different islands illustrates the tensions at the heart of relations between Venice and its periphery – some of which are still echoed in today's political and administrative interaction.

As emerges from Diena's report, not all islands were prepared to forgo their communal independence, and not all were equally acceptable to the Venetian administration. On the one hand, Malamocco and Murano had firmly refused to become part of the Venice commune (29 December 1877) despite the view of the city's municipal junta that 'thanks to a convergence of material, civic, and economic interests, it appeared entirely proper that they should be joined to the city.' On the other hand, when, in 1878, Burano's representatives applied to be joined to the Venetian municipality, their proposal was rejected with twenty-two votes against and only thirteen in favour (Diena, 1880).

To avoid appearing contradictory, Diena first established that each of the three islands gave rise to different considerations. Much of the discussion revolved on the definition of a 'walled commune', since that was the category named in the law as the most likely to benefit from aggregation of its outlying fractions. Could Venice be considered a walled city, as rhetorical comparisons of its canals with defensive walls had often implied? The main separatist argument put forward by the councils of Malamocco and Murano in defense of their autonomy was that Venice could in no way be considered a walled city. But, as Diena argued with a painstaking pedantry that almost looks like self-parody, the law could not cover a topographical condition as singular and out of the ordinary as was that of Venice: its case was neither excluded, nor touched on, nor was it even contemplated in the terms of that law.

Venice is neither, in a literal sense, a walled commune, nor is it in the same condition as a commune that is not walled, but is like a village or city with a surrounding territory...No fiction or metaphorical language can have the powers to change the waters which surround our built areas into a true external territory, and, although Venice does not literally find itself in the condition of a castle surrounded by a wall, it is, beyond a doubt, in a completely analogous and equivalent condition, and the equivalence and analogy, in view of the aim and the spirit of the law, can in this case be invoked quite plausibly (11–12).

Because of Venice's unusual environment, therefore, the law was entirely open to the discretion of its interpreters. The city's refusal of Burano's request to be joined was sufficient to make its aggregation legally impossible. The Venice commune could not be forced to accept Burano's proposal; its application was declared legally inoperative and the refusal was confirmed by the Provincial council.

Concerning Murano, it was Diena's conclusion that the determination of its inhabitants to remain independent was to be respected. 'The subject,' he writes, 'was examined from a civil and moral, even more than a material, point of view'.

However, his arguments in favour of aggregating Murano (which eventually prevailed in the 1920s), were entirely practical and economic ones. In the first place, Murano was very close to Venice, one of the city's ports, Sant' Erasmo, was in its circumscription,²⁴ and, above all, Murano's numerous and productive glass factories were largely supported with Venetian capital (*ibid.*: 16–17). On the other hand, no reason was strong enough to take away Murano's autonomy, and a forced aggregation would have implied 'a complete abandonment of Venetian tradition' (*ibid.*: 28).

As for Malamocco's refusal to be joined to Venice, Diena's conclusion was that in that case the reasons for aggregation were quite overwhelming. Indeed, Malamocco's *comune* included the Lido, with some of Europe's best beaches, where private Venetian investors had recently built modern bathing resorts. Malamocco also gained importance and prestige from its port, with customs, telegraph, and civil engineering offices, all of which were supported with Venetian capital. What is more, its territory, a long strip of beach, with its dams and its two port openings, was like 'a seaward circle' and 'a natural bulwark round the city'. The Venice commune already owned the Lido's main street, which led directly from the lagoon to the sea front, and large sums of money had been spent on its lighting, tending its flower beds, building its bathing establishments and, not least, on policing; order and hygiene demanded that the territory should come fully under its aegis. For all those reasons, Malamocco was perfectly suited to the terms of the law; on joining Venice its land would at once rise in value, and the populations would certainly benefit and enjoy better hygienic conditions.

Here then, the reasons for or against joining the islands to Venice are clearly in evidence. With the exception of Burano, where a spirit of independence was eroded by poverty, inhabitants of the periphery at first were determined to defend their autonomy. In the case of Murano, awareness of being the main centre of the glass industry gave rise to the strongest opposition to the idea of being absorbed into the city's municipality. On the part of Venetians, however, the main reason in favour of Murano's aggregation was clearly the desire to protect their investments in the glass industry by administrative and political control. As compensation for their loss of autonomy, Venice offered the Muranesi the benefits of modern health services and infrastructures, like electricity, fresh water and so forth; a pattern of exchange that was repeatedly and persistently proposed, until the completion of communal unity in 1926.

Arguments in favour of aggregating Murano and Malamocco were evidently based on economic expediency, as were those alleged to justify the rejection of Burano; the island offered no hope of gain or profitable investment: it had no land, it was not a port, and, more important, it held no promise of economic development. As one of Venice's past mayors observed: 'Burano's real estate yields nothing; the landowners do not pay their taxes, and properties fall into the hands of the revenue, which has no use whatsoever for them' (Barizza 1987: 122). Its

distance from the centre may also have been a relevant factor. In other words, Venice, at that time, simply had no use for that remote and impoverished island.

The proposal that Burano and Murano should be joined to the Venetian municipality was taken up again in the 1920s. A policy of internal colonialism, in keeping with an increasingly autocratic political climate, would both have favoured the realisation of an industrially developed 'Greater Venice' and allowed full control over the territory, so that no opposition might develop and simmer in peripheral areas, especially among Murano's socialist glass workers.

Before carrying out the desired annexation, inquiries were conducted to sound out the feelings and opinions of the people concerned and acquire direct knowledge of their living conditions and economic potentialities.

The two reports I am about to summarise provide a telling detail in the history of the rise of Venetian fascism. The first report was the result of a preliminary inquiry in Murano and Burano by a lawyer, Chiancone, in 1924. The second report (also 1924) was by his superior, Davide Giordano, a surgeon who was elected to Venice's council in the administrative elections of 1920, and subsequently called to manage its 'extraordinary administration' while the commune was temporarily commissioned between April 1923 and July 1924. Like the Austrian government inquiry of 1826, Chiancone's report includes the whole of the area from San Giacomo della Palude to the mouth of the Old Piave, of which Burano was then the administrative centre.²⁵ Rather untypically, Chiancone describes Burano as not too badly off. As he writes:

The population of the chief town is mainly composed of fishermen, who in the past led a miserable life, while today their conditions are improved. The products of fishing, drawn especially from very extended *valli*, are sold in Venice. But the greater well-being of the village, is also due to the development of the industry of needle lace, which is very well known throughout the world, and in which are occupied about 800 women, who earn a decent daily wage. (15)

In the Burano commune there were altogether five parishes and three graveyards. Seventeen elementary schools were scattered through different hamlets. The school buildings were in good condition; their state of hygiene, as well as their balance of accounts, were reasonably sound, and pupils registered as poor were given free books and copybooks. Burano also had a nursery school, in which were gathered about two hundred children, both boys and girls. The only charitable institution was that of the *Congregazione di Carità* which had no income of its own and received a yearly subsidy from the commune. In a room which was municipal property, and under the guidance of the parish priest, there was an old peoples' hospice, or rather a dormitory, where about fifteen homeless persons were sheltered at night.

Burano only had one main road, that which joined it to Mazzorbo, but its state 'was no different from that described in the Cadastre of 1826'. The provision of water was still inadequate. Although two deep artesian wells dug in 1913 gave

chemically pure water, they were not really sufficient for the needs of the population. Burano did have public lighting. The energy was provided by the Italian Society for the Utilisation of Hydraulic Forces in the Veneto, for an annual payment of 6,200 liras, but, as Chiancone writes, in a way that reads almost like a threat, that contract was going to end on 31 December 1923, and, had they refused to be joined to Venice, Buranelli might literally have been left in the dark. Moreover, they might soon have had to pay heavy taxes on staple foods, since the city intended to increase taxation by applying duty to a large number of goods, such as oil, sugar and coffee, which so far had been exempt.

Touching on an important area of fascist concern, that of the bureaucracy, whose members were often instrumental in exercising control over peripheral areas because of their eagerness to gain access to power structures at the centre, he describes the personnel of Burano's commune, two secretaries, an archivist, two clerks and a typist, in addition to its sanitary staff, which consisted of three doctors, a veterinary, four midwives and a health supervisor. To ensure their loyalty and support it was emphasised that, being in the employment of the state, they were all entitled to receive pensions, while their 'subalterns', a messenger, an urban guard, three burial officials and four dustmen, could benefit from state insurance.

Burano's finances, while 'not of the most flourishing', were not such as to cause any serious worry. As in many areas that had to be evacuated during the First World War, government subsidies had been stopped in 1919 and expenses had to be reduced; some communal employees had been laid off, and local taxes increased. Indeed, as Chiancone writes, contradicting his earlier statement that Burano's finances were reasonably sound, the situation was altogether precarious and made life very difficult for the administration. More positively, however, he predicted that, thanks to fascist plans for the large-scale reclamation of marshes, the commune would greatly benefit by the drying up of a vast coastal zone from Tre Porti to the mouths of the Piave, which, 'would be transformed from fruitless swamps into fertile fields and fish farms'. A new land register would be compiled, and consequently the value of land would soon be more than quadrupled. A general revision of real estate would also bring in more taxes, and, with the rent increases that had taken place in previous years, the total income for Burano's building patrimony would certainly be trebled. The commune would then be in a position, 'to give to public services all those impulses towards renewal suggested by reasons of hygiene and public utility'.

The reason for the writer's eagerness to bring about Burano's annexation was mainly the fact that, since Murano was located on the route from that island to Venice, its joining would have made the case for annexing Murano all the stronger. As he writes, drawing on a repertoire of phrases and references dear to fascist rhetoric, when, fifty years earlier, Burano had asked to join 'its mother city'.

Venice had not understood the advantages of its domination over the lagoon. But the lagoon itself now feels the need of a powerful hand to protect its well-being and watch

over the interests of the city and the port. Today, when Venice can better consider the benefits of expansion, it certainly will not want to refuse to grant its sister island, Burano, the embrace it is asking for... With Torcello, Mazzorbo, and San Francesco del Deserto, Burano is the best gem in Venice's crown. (18)

According to the report, the decision of Burano to join Venice (19 September 1923) was reached unanimously. But, as I was told by some Buranelli, who in the 1980s were still deeply upset at the memory, in reality the population had been uncertain and divided. The strongest opposition had come from the Popular Party, but, when its representatives saw that their views were ignored or forcibly suppressed, they walked out from the council room in indignation, so a proper debate never took place and the alleged 'unanimity' was reached at the expense of a correct democratic procedure. According to Chiancone's report, asked to explain the reasons why they were against annexation, 'they were not able to express their opinions'. A few days later they sent a written memorial,²⁶ so that nothing remains to be evaluated or refuted'. In Chiancone's view, therefore, resistance to the proposal of joining the Venice commune, 'found no echo in any person of the main town of Burano, and even less in its hamlets – a truth also confirmed by the parish priest, who pointed out that by their objections, the councillors of the Popular Party were not obeying any aspiration, other than that of continuing to occupy their seats in the council' (18).²⁷

Ending his Report on a more positive note, Chiancone states that the main requests of the population were that some administrative functions, such as the registration of births, marriages and deaths, should continue to be carried out in Burano so that people should not be forced to travel to Venice for those acts, which they were used to carrying out locally. Also they asked that the personnel of Burano's commune should be allowed to continue in their jobs with no reduction of salaries. Other requests were for transport to be improved by the addition of two steamboats and the return to the timetables in operation before the First World War, which included ten daily return journeys. They also required that the construction of six artesian wells to provide drinking water should be completed, and that the list of the poor of the commune of Burano should be compiled with the same criteria as those adopted for Venice.

Touching on a more personal note, and disclosing patronage links on which hinged political power and influence, as well as a convergence of interests that could effectively join periphery and centre, Chiancone asked that persons with whom he had come into contact during his investigation should be permitted to keep their jobs; in particular, he asked that 'the secretary – who had declared that he would have been very happy to serve – should be continued as head of Burano's communal offices' (20).

While Chiancone's Report on Burano was based on the careful collection of data, predictably, his conclusion on the views of inhabitants on annexation of their commune to Venice was politically motivated. The same is even more

evident in the pronouncements of his superior, Giordano. The factual basis of the two Reports is largely the same, as are their ideological premises. Giordano's Report, however, concerns the whole of Venice, and, with its aggressive patriotism, wordy rhetoric and unlimited use of classical references, it provides a vivid illustration not only of relations between Venice and Burano, but of those of Venice with Italy during the period of transition between Mussolini's March on Rome (October 1922) and the firm establishment of fascist control over Italian cities and municipalities.

Recalling that he had been appointed to take charge of the commune at a time of political disorder, 'a most evil assault on the Italian motherland', Venice, he writes:

was one of the first great Italian cities to rise up against such danger. The parties of order and patriotism then joined together to form a bloc, of which the core were the National Alliance and the Fascio. A small group of brave young fascists, careless of danger, then, won that beautiful battle... Some who were not Venetian shed their blood here, while Venetians shed theirs in the streets and piazzas of other cities (3).

Here then, upholding the value of national unity, Giordano condemns both Italian localism and socialist internationalism, adding a strong note of contempt against those who 'wasted their time in empty polemics'. When he was called to run the commune, the main legacy left by the previous junta was one of financial and administrative disorder, 'while the dying counter-currents of the demagogic storms which had raged with deplorable violence' were making all council meetings convoluted and ineffectual.²⁸

A strong theme in Giordano's writings is that of the Venetian state as precursor of Italian imperialism; its symbols of conquest and 'sweet domination' had been revived as 'the Winged Lion again roared in the square of Gradisca, beside the Roman Wolf'... and the long-lost amity between Venice and the cities which were once its subjects, Gorizia, Pola, Cormons, Fiume, Rovereto, Zara, was restored, as 'they all remembered with passion and nostalgia its ancient, glorious and just domination.'²⁹

Concerning the estuary islands – in this context Pellestrina – Giordano again criticizes earlier administrations for not accepting 'with immediate spontaneity' its request 'to return to the breast of its ancient mother' (28 March 1920). Hesitation, he explains, was due to a need to weigh the 'financial passivities' which the island would have added to the balance of the commune, but not acceding to Pellestrina's 'legitimate' desire would have driven it into the sphere of Chioggia, whose periphery would then have extended in the direction of Venice as far as Alberoni. It was that argument, he adds, that induced the Venice council to 'magnanimously approve the aggregation of Pellestrina, which will open the way for further expansion of the commune, and restore to the city its ancient domains in the lagoon'.

When he mentioned this in the council, his speech was greeted with incredulous smiles, but the opportunity to carry out his plans had come much sooner than his opposers had anticipated, since it was favoured by the

Government's resolve 'to infuse into the vital organisms of large municipalities the rudiments and larvae of neighbouring communes struggling in the miseries of their penurious lives or torn by conflict and petty personal ambitions'. When the mayors of Burano and Murano were asked by the *prefetto* what their views were about the fusion of their communes with Venice, both said they were personally favourable, but the mayor of Murano feared that many Muranesi would be against the union – according to Giordano, such reluctance was due only to political instability (*ibid.* 12–13).³⁰

As for Burano, Giordano naturally realised that the financial balance of Venice's commune was not going to gain from its annexation, and the island would be a burden and a source of expense for many years to come, but the benefits would be long-term ones; 'Those who were protesting would pass away, while Venice would remain in all its greatness'. It certainly was the city's purpose to remain prosperous and healthy, but it also was its mission to 'morally redeem ... those miserable areas undermined with malaria, poor in water, and only rich with wine cellars'.

Works had already been initiated to bring electrical energy to 'the trusting and industrious population of Pellestrina'.³¹ A plan to provide drinking water to Burano, Vignole and Sant'Erasmus, whose inhabitants had complained about delays, was going to be examined. Naturally, huge sums would have to be spent. By acquiring new territory Venice would soon find new sources of income, but first the value of land needed to be improved, for, although destined for a prosperous future, large tracts were still unhealthy swamps. For example, in the recently annexed area of Mestre, large expenses would have to be met to reclaim land that was infested with malaria, but 'the money sown in the lagoon, and its desolate littoral, one day would flower [sic] with vegetable gardens, and villas would be built at the side of a new road, all the way from Punta Sabbioni to the mouths of the Piave'. Fortunately, to sustain Venice's economic renaissance, Mussolini and his finance minister De Stefani had canceled its war debt (eighty million liras), but careful planning and considerable investments were still required to give life to 'a greater Venice'.

Looking at the commune's plans for works, and examining lists of contracts for the years 1923 and 1924, one is struck by the fact that, although the measures proposed appear to stem from a need to exercise total control and domination over peripheral areas, priorities show sound business sense and a clear tendency to favour the more promising enterprises; the largest sums were in fact invested in Marghera, and the second main focus of expenditure was the Lido, in particular the construction of beach huts, roads, bridges, and sewers. A relatively large-scale project for Venice was the partial filling in of the Sacca di Sant' Elena, where there was built housing for a new contingent of bureaucrats and communal employees, as well as a new *Piazza d'Armi* for the training of cadets, and for such sporting and military activities as were required for a sound fascist youth. However, there is no mention of any money spent in Burano, or in the northern Lagoon.³²

In the following paragraphs, Giordano returns to the topics of hygiene and good order. He deprecates behaviour that clearly went counter to his notion of

discipline, such as the refusal of Venice's musical band to perform on some state occasion, or that of 'selfish and greedy' shopkeepers, who went on strike because state imposed prices were making their economic survival difficult. In his enumeration of social evils, which the new order was proposing to cure, Giordano points out that consumption of wine was excessive, and the police needed reorganising, as did all public exhibitions and festas.

Some of the measures suggested by Giordano (who seemed to have turned his medical training to the most intransigent and self-righteous authoritarianism), applied equally to Venice and its lagunar periphery. Much stricter discipline was to be imposed on gondoliers, 'a notoriously troublesome class'. There was an urgent need to check the numbers of street vendors: selling of fruit, vegetables and eggs, which was a convenience to the population, could be allowed, but sellers of cloth, saucepans, etc., 'a class often entered by the least commendable elements', had to be treated with utmost severity.³³

Applications for licenses would be controlled by functionaries of the *Ufficio d'Igiene*.³⁴ They would check if the applicant was domiciled in Venice, or if he had gone there to ply his trade, what his conduct was, from which factories he obtained his goods and where he stored them during the night. They would also examine the health conditions of his house, as well as his own and his family's. Some foodstuffs, for example, milk, would have to be removed from street vending, because it was impossible to watch over the sellers and punish them for its adulteration in Venice's narrow streets.

Restrictions in the issuing of licenses for street vending, based on information taken by local officials, were, of course, extended to the islands as well. Indeed, in Giordano's view of the new order, the office for Public Hygiene had a very prominent place. Although supervision was rendered difficult by the distance and the slow pace of transport, great attention would also be given to school-buildings, teaching materials and, especially in poorer areas, to the cleanliness of pupils.

The most formidable task of the *Ufficio d'Igiene* would be the fight against tuberculosis and alcoholism. Its efficiency would be put to a hard test in Pellestrina, Murano and Burano. There, as Giordano writes, 'we have to fight against endemic problems: hygienic-sanitary provisions suffer from grave lacunae, which it will be both a duty and an honour for Venice to fill.'

To make that work easier, he had ordered that some small 'disinfestation units', already in existence in the islands but left in complete abandonment, should be restored, a prophylactic service for infectious diseases should be organised, and a speedy means of transport should be purchased, to make the admission of patients in the city's hospitals easier (ibid.:157).

Many of the measures proposed were, of course, much needed and salutary ones, but, as my informants remembered, they were applied with such heavy-handed and patronising insolence that their mere memory is tinged with feelings of humiliation and anger.

Notes

1. Doubts and curiosity were also due to archaeological discoveries which challenged earlier datings of settlement in the northern lagoon.
2. Among the names in a list of Torcello's bishops in the *Chronicon Alinate*, are one Giovanni, the son of the tribune Aurio, and Stefano, both natives of Burano (Monticolo 1890).
3. In the past, it was sometimes said that Buranelli were 'orientals' because they supposedly had curly hair and sallow skin, or that they were the descendants of galley-slaves confined to Burano, and thought to be devious, thieving, litigious and particularly aggressive in canal traffic disputes.
4. References to Attila are also common in rural Friuli.
5. A visual analogue may be 1960s narrative 'pop art'.
6. Travel writers give currency to such stereotypes. For example, as J. Morris writes, 'a special race of men, too, has been evolved to live in this place: descended partly from the pre-Venetian fishing communities, and partly from Venetians who lingered in the wastes when the centre of national momentum moved to the Rialto. They are the fittest who have survived, for this has often been a sick lagoon... Like the rest of the fauna [*sic*], the people vary greatly from part to part, according to their way of life, their past, their degree of sophistication, their parochial environment. In-shore they are marsh people, who tend salt-pans [these actually went out of existence at the turn of the century], fish among grasses, and do some peripheral agriculture... Their dialect varies, from island to island. Their manners instantly reflect their background, harsh or gentle. They even look different, the men of Burano... tousled and knobby, the men of Chioggia traditionally Giorgionesque' (1960: 258).
By contrast Dorothy Menpes describes Buranelli as 'statuesque': 'One sees boatfuls of them returning from the sea; and lines of them towing heavy mud-filled barges on the way to Pordenone, all the men stepping in time. With their long cleanly-moulded limbs, they remind one of ancient Egyptian bronzes. The sculptor would find plenty of scope in Burano. The people, however, are of evil repute by heredity. They are the scapegoats of the lagoons. If anything goes wrong, the blame is always laid upon them. They work harder and receive less pay than the inhabitants of any other islands. (1904: 165).
7. Whether *Giudecca*, in Venetian *Judeca*, *Zuecca*, *Zudecca* or *Zudegà*, derived from the Latin *Judaica*, or from *iudicare*, to judge, is a question that has vexed historians since the seventeenth century. Derivation from *Judaica* would support a view that Jews resided there since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While historians have looked to Constantinople, Crete and Negroponte for comparison, the fact that nearby Burano also has a quarter named Giudecca has not led to much comment.
8. Lazzaretto Nuovo was originally inhabited by hermits. In 1468, it was equipped to store goods that were feared to carry infections. During the plague of 1756, those who had been in contact with the diseased were sent there while waiting to be admitted to the old Lazzaretto, or dismissed if they were found to be healthy. Later, the island was used for military installations, and it is now left in a state of abandonment.
9. In a letter to a patron he describes himself as 'fruitless Calmo, brought up on fishing boats, fed in the baskets, and taught to capture fish' (Rossi 1888: 211). One supposition is that, after an early childhood in one of the lagoon islands, he may have been sent to a seminary, but may have abandoned a clerical career in favour of the theatre. That would explain both his familiarity with fishermen's lives and his intimate knowledge of aulic poetry and manners, which enabled him so effectively to satirise them. Written at an important turning point in the linguistic history of Italy and Venice, when Italian was increasingly used in literary writings in place of both Latin and Venetian, Calmo's works are a vindication of the great expressive potential of the dialect, or of the numerous dialects then spoken in and around the city.

10. Calmos' characters eventually developed into the stock figures of the *Comedia dell'Arte*, everpresent in the theatrical as well as the carnival traditions, which in turn contributed to fixing them in the popular imagination as enduring stereotypes (Padoan 1982: 16).
11. Corner was a devout and dedicated Church historian, by contrast Coronelli was a worldly and well-traveled Jesuit geographer, who also drew maps of Oxford and Cambridge (1702) and accounts of all areas under Venetian influence in the Adriatic and Aegean.
12. For example, by 1432, Filippa Condulmero, Abbess of Santa Cristina and of St Mark of Ammiana, was forced to abandon her convent and join the community of St Antony, as 'she had remained quite alone, and no other person wanted to take the veil' because of the bad state of the building' (Coronelli 1696: 33–34).
13. Mazzorbo had four convents, and two parish churches, with curates elected by the local landowners, as was the custom in Venice, as well as five women hermits and only one male congregation, that of the Celestine fathers. Indeed, except for St. Francis of the Desert, in the island which bears that name, the islands seem to have been dominated by communities of religious women.
14. In San Vito there were twenty-six nuns, eighteen choristers, and some lay members, while in the 'Capuchins', founded in 1626 by pope Urban VIII, the total number was twenty-three, fourteen officiants and nine lay sisters.
15. That, Corner writes, was 'A most dismal time when the main powers of Europe [united in the League of Cambrai] were plotting against the Republic...and enemies were ferociously overrunning Venetian lands, filling every place with ruins and destruction. To preserve their honesty, which they valued even above their lives, from military insults, some afflicted nuns, women of the most upright and religious life, fled to Venice from the convent of Santa Maria della Misericordia in Noale, a castle in the territory of Treviso...In 1516, on the day of the martyrdom of Saint Vito and other saints, 15th of June, the nuns were granted the ancient Priory of the Saints Cornelius and Cyprian, which had been abandoned and gone into *commendam* since time immemorial' (1759: 600).
16. Anticipating criticism, Filiassi acknowledged that his work was speculative and his sources fragmentary. For example, he refers to a tradition derived from the *Iliad*, according to which, during the Trojan wars the Heneti would have fought against Athens. The reference is actually not an extensive one, 'Pylamenes of the shaggy breast led the Paphlagonians, from the lands of the Heneti, from which come the wild mules (trans. E.V. Rieu, II, 1977 [1950]).
17. Following Filiassi's view that 'language is the most indelible mark of all nations', Romanin also describes the lengthened vowels of Burano's dialect as 'a remnant of the pronunciation of the *Veneti Primi*'. Their early marriage customs are thought to derive from those of Babylonia, but mention of Oriental origins is qualified with remarks that, after the Veneti settled in Italy, 'under a different religious form, their customs had changed and they had abandoned their Asiatic laxity' ([1853] 1972: 30).
18. To support this, Romanin quotes a twelfth century song in Buranello dialect,

'Che me mario se n'è andao/ Chel me cor cum lui á portao/Et eo cum ti, me deo confortare.'
(Because my husband has left / and with him he has taken my heart / with you, now, I must comfort myself) (1972:13).
19. Mention of aristocratic origins illustrates the difficulty of reconciling the islanders' poverty with assertions by early chroniclers that all the settlers were descendants of aristocratic Christian *Gentes* – a problem we often find in Venetian historiography, and which probably finds an answer in the hypothesis that the islands may have been inhabited before the arrival of refugees by *Veneti Primi*. In that view, Buranello, like isolated communities of peasants or mountain dwellers, are ennobled by antiquity, as they are thought to embody some essential and uncorrupted primordial character lost to other Venetians. Despite being viewed as an exciting find by the linguist and ethnologist concerned with ethnic identities and origins, however, Buranello have often been described as backward and uncouth.

20. Filiasi refers to Captain Cook, and in his analytical index he describes 'O-Taitians' as people who hold the belief that 'the dead intensely desire to drink the blood of their living relatives'.
21. Rents were no higher than six or lower than four Venetian lire for the poorest *valli*. Prices for basic staples were roughly the same as in Venice, but labour costs were slightly lower, and the wages of men were always higher than women's by amounts that vary between 15 percent and 80 percent. A man's average daily pay was 2.10 lire – it could sometimes be as high as four Venetian lire in summer and three in winter – and it included drink, salt and wood for heating.
22. One such law was that promulgated by Rattazzi in October 1859 (*La Costituzione Italiana*, Article 74. 1975: 56). Further legislation on local government was issued in 1862, 1865 and in 1888 (30 December, N.5865).
23. In some instances the redrawing of boundaries could be brought about by state authority, provided it was carried out within five years. That deadline was later postponed by five more years. As Ghisalberti writes in his Constitutional History 'After centuries of political particularism, and institutional pluralism, aggravated by foreign domination, as well as lay and ecclesiastical tyranny... this structure had to be recomposed on new bases with the total commitment of the state apparatus. Hence the veneration for the state, the cult of its very idea and trust in its laws and institutions on the part of the leading exponents of moderate liberalism' (1985: 105).

In reality, government vigilance and control were tenaciously upheld, both to keep checks on separatist tendencies, considered anti-national and anti-unitary, and to maintain at the periphery the political hegemony of the liberal bourgeoisie which then dominated. Statism (of a kind) reached a peak with Mussolini's March on Rome and the victory of fascism, when locally elected mayors were substituted by *podestà* nominated by the central government, while *consulte* made up of members of fascist unions took the place of communal councils, so that any form of local government was eliminated. It was soon after the establishment of a fascist government that several estuary islands were annexed to Venice.

24. As Diena writes, since the hamlets of Sant'Erasmo and Vignole, like Murano itself, were plagued with infections, and their ditches and drains were causes of malarial fevers, they were threats to the well-being of the larger commune.
25. According to the official census of 1921 the Comune had 9,574 inhabitants, and its extension was 22km in a direct line. It was subdivided into two census areas, Burano and Treporti, and it included the fractions of Cavallino, Mesole, Liopiccolo, Torcello, S. Cristina, Montiron, Cura, Mazzorbo, San Francesco del Deserto, and Valli Dogado, Grassabo' and Ca' de Riva.
26. Chiancone claims to have included that document with his own transcript, but it was nowhere to be found in the files which I consulted.
27. Proposals concern issues like transport, medical services and needs that are still not adequately provided for by the municipality, and are the causes of much resentment against the city.
28. As some Venetians remember, the walk-out of opposition councillors was prompted by indignation and by a feeling that all was lost, as much as by a fear of Black Shirts' violence.
29. The Lion, as Giordano writes, also 'crossed the Ocean to climb on to the façade of a church consecrated to St Mark, in the Brazilian city called "New Venice" by migrants mindful of their glorious Mother and Queen'. During Giordano's three years in office, the Ministers Mussolini, De Stefani, and Ciano were granted honorary citizenships 'because they loved Venice'. Others were the historian Arrengo, the Duchi della Vittoria, General Diaz and Admiral Thaon of Revel.
30. Murano's commune was in a state of deficit, one which, as Giordano threateningly reiterates, was going to deteriorate very rapidly, because with new arrangements for the collection` of duties, it would soon receive even less revenue than it had up until then. He writes, 'Murano had four political parties for a population of barely 5,000...As soon as they heard the news of the annexation of their commune to Venice, its citizens were put into a state of alarm by some of their leaders, or by persons who pretended to be that, almost all of them members of the Popular Party'. The main issues were a dire lack of services, a 'need of everything', and a deficit which would have got worse as long as Murano remained a separate tax area.

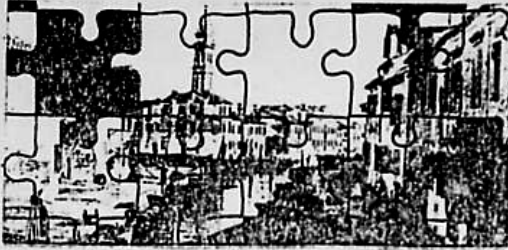
31. In reality the Electrical Company, Sade, had been overproducing, and at this time was having some difficulty marketing an excess of energy!
32. As Giordano writes, 'The decision to build a new parade ground on the Sacca Sant'Elena, the cancellation of the war debt and the 'gift' of the Doges' Palace are such great concessions of the Government of his Excellence Mussolini to Venice, that they fill me with intense gratitude...for having had the good fortune of acting as intermediary in actions of such vital interest to the city.'
33. Before 1923, there were over one thousand street vendors, but over three hundred licenses were withdrawn in a short time.
34. The *Ufficio d'Igiene* was responsible for a very broad range of repressive measures. 'Hygiene' itself, had become a highly ambiguous notion and had acquired heavily moralistic and didactic connotations.

BIBLIOTECA DI
BURANO

CONSIGLIO DI QUARTIERE
DI BURANO

"BURANO E IL SUO INTORNO..."

..., puzzle di storia, ...



Nell'ambito dell'iniziativa già avviata riguardante la costituzione di un archivio storico locale, la Biblioteca di Burano promuove nel paese la raccolta di materiale storico documentario riguardante l'ambiente, i costumi, le usanze di burano e del suo intorno lagunare.

Si invita pertanto la popolazione del quartiere, le associazioni culturali a collaborare fattivamente all'iniziativa mettendo a disposizione il materiale in loro possesso: vecchie illustrazioni fotografiche (di famiglia, di matrimoni, ecc.), cartoline, manoscritti, dattiloscritti, documenti sonori dialettali e qualsiasi altro materiale riproducibile che testimoni i modi di vita, le usanze, le tradizioni, la vita politica, il mondo del lavoro, le trasformazioni sociali ed economiche avvenute nel nostro quartiere.

Tutto il materiale verrà riprodotto e gli originali restituiti, assicurando l'anonimato delle persone riprodotte nelle illustrazioni.

Il materiale così raccolto costituirà assieme ad altro materiale la base per una prossima mostra antologica; lo stesso sarà collocato nell'archivio storico della Biblioteca e potrà essere liberamente consultabile.

RACCOLTA DEL MATERIALE

Il materiale verrà raccolto in Biblioteca nell'orario di apertura e dovrà essere consegnato in busta chiusa all'interno della quale dovrà essere specificato: il Cognome, il Nome, l'Indirizzo e il Numero Telefonico del proprietario dei documenti.

SI RINGRAZIANO FIN D'ORA, QUANTI VORRANNO COLLABORARE ALL'INIZIATIVA.

Figure 2.1 The puzzle of history.



Figure 2.2 The arrival of Burano's Patron Saints, Albano, Orso and Domenico from the sea. Innocent children miraculously draw in the heavy sarcophagus. (Antonio Zanchi 1690. Parish Church of San Martino, Burano)