

The Medieval Rialto: The Transformation of an Area in the Developing City

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Abstract The Rialto area, where the church of San Giacomo stands, has a central role in medieval Venice: a market place from the earliest centuries that developed during the Middle Ages. De' Barbari documents the medieval quarter in 1500 before the fire of 1514. The territory was already characterised in the 11th century by long shop buildings. The churches are witnessed from the 11th century (S. Giovanni Elemosinario) and from the 12th (S. Giacomo and S. Matteo). In the 12th century the area was almost completely built. In the 13th century, a stream was buried creating the main road, connected with the Ruga of the Oresi, and the bridge was built, a fundamental link for the entire town. Offices and public buildings are scattered around the area. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries attempts were made to reorganise it. The Loggia (disappeared in the 16th century), at the foot of the bridge, had a central role: the trading centre was also decorated with frescoes (historical episodes and globe).

Keywords Venice. Rialto. Bridge of Rialto. Medieval town. Urban planning.

The Rialto is a key area of Venice, even today when the city is experiencing a flood of tourists making the bridge one of their must-see destinations. As a retail market, the area has shrunk down to a few stalls, owing to the spread of souvenir-sellers and the drop in inhabitants.

The Rialto retains its administrative importance in relation to the administration of justice (the old Fabbriche complex housing the Tribunal), the State Audit Court (Palazzo dei Camerlenghi), and the Ministry of Infrastructures (the former *Magistrato alle Acque*). How long it will continue to retain this importance is difficult to tell.

Nothing is left of the financial centrality of this area, whereas traces of the once dense concentration of purveyors of specialist artisan products survive in the names of its *calli*.

The Rialto area largely owes its current urban layout and the elevation of its buildings to the reconstruction work which took place after the 1514 fire (Calabi, Morachiello 1987). However, the Rialto's centrality in Venice as a trading area across all levels (from everyday

transactions to financial dealings) had shaped its development over the course of the previous centuries, from the 11th century onwards.

Let's start from the name: Rialto/*Rivoaltus* describes the area which for centuries served as a market place and centre of economic-financial activities; in the early centuries of its development, though, *Rivoaltus* was also the name given to the present area around St Mark's, chosen as the Doge's new headquarters in the early 9th century. This area certainly extended from the current Bacino of San Marco to the mouth of the Grand Canal (the *Rivus Altus*, i.e. deep river); it included the whole area at the back (what is now the *sestiere*, or district, of San Marco) down to Campo San Bortolomio and, across the Grand Canal, what is now the *sestiere* of San Polo as far as the present-day Rialto. Originally, internal connections were ensured not just by the curve in the Grand Canal, but also by the *rii* (small canals) connecting the Doge's Palace with this more interior area. Their names are known (something most unusual for the earliest documentary evidence: Dorigo 2003, 120): *Minutolo* (now the Rio de San Moisè), *Batario* (various stretches leading as far as San Salvador), and *rivo Curtis* (*de Palazzo*, now Rio de la Canonica), which flows into the Grand Canal where the Fondaco dei Tedeschi is located. Waterways were originally the main travel routes and these connections must certainly have ensured swift inner circulation. The Grand Canal, the main artery of the developing city, also ensured the circulation of the main freight boats, which – over the course of the 12th and 13th centuries – found their main concentration and mooring area in the present-day Rialto.

The area became a centre of trade long before then, as evidenced by one of the earliest documents: the Orio

brothers' bequest of some shops (*unum ordinem nostrum de stationibus ... positum in mercato de Rivoalto*) to the state (*per congruo honore nostri mercati*) in 1097 (Romanin 1853, 396-7; Dorigo 2003, 397, 854). This donation probably added some structures (a row – *ordinem* – of shops) to an already existing public settlement, reflecting a process of growth and increasing state control. Trade could not be exercised everywhere: in medieval cities it was an activity ensured and controlled chiefly by bishops and later by communes; in Venice – from an early date – by the ducal authorities. However, a (late) chronicle also informs us that when the episcopal seat of San Pietro di Castello was established, the Patriarch of Grado granted that a market be held there on Saturday, when people from *Rivoaltus* would flock to the area¹ – a piece of information that seems to point to a link between the bishop and the market. Trading activities are also well attested on Torcello.

The *stationes* of the Orio family are already mentioned in a 1051 document, the earliest one concerning the area of the Rialto between the Grand Canal and what is now Ruga Rialto: that year, the Gradenigo brothers settled a dispute and agreed to divide a vast property into four parts.² These parts (narrow and long strips) all overlooked – on one of their short sides – the *canale de Rivoalto* for a total of 78 feet (over 23 metres). This property too included *stationes*, but in addition to these buildings reserved for trade we find *solarii* (i.e. multi-storey buildings), *mansiones*, *terrae vacuae* (unused plots), a vegetable garden, and a vineyard. Private *calli* and ones that were shared (by the neighbouring Orio brothers) ensured connections; access (i.e. entrance, exit, loading, and unloading) was possible not just from the *Rivoalto* canal, but from the *rio* named after the church (*rivo Sancti Iohan-*

¹ Simonsfeld 1883, 14; Monticolo 1905, LI.

² Baracchi 1873, 317-19; ASVe, Codice Diplomatico Veneziano, 114; Dorigo 2003, 854.



Figure 1 Jacopo de' Barbari, *View of Venice*. 1500. Xylograph. Detail

nis) - this small canal was subsequently filled in and is now Calle del Paradiso. The document in question also offers the earliest evidence of the existence of the main parish, that of San Giovanni Confessore, which extended as far as what is now Rio delle Beccarie (*Magandessum/Magadesso* in medieval documents), an area traversed by the extension of the *rio di San Giovanni* (partly described by the document), which - as we know from later documents - used to turn northward and join the Grand Canal. This inner canal was crossed by bridges and flanked by *fondamente* (quaysides) that are described in surviving documents (see document of 1134, Dorigo 2003, 855). It came to serve as a border with the new parish of San Mattio, established in 1156 by taking some of San Giovanni's territory. It was then filled in around the mid-13th century, before 1281, when we find mention of the *stratam magnam*: Ruga Rialto.³

In 1051 the Church of San Giovanni must have been closely connected with the local landowners, since the Gradenigos and the Orios enjoyed the use of *loca*:

unum locum in ecclesia Sancti Iohanni, in scola Sanctae Mariae, iuxta locum de mansione Stefano Aurio.

This information points to the connection between big landowners and churches, which were essentially founded by private citizens.

These documents therefore suggest the presence of extensive properties - a dwelling, vegetable gardens, vineyards, uncultivated land - and of structures reserved for trade (*stationes*).

The discontinuous character of the urban fabric as late as the 11th century is also illustrated by the nearby area of San Silvestro: in the most remote phases it was clearly separated from Rio di San Silvestro, but it is

joined to the Rialto today by Riva del Vin on the side of the Grand Canal and by an unbroken pedestrian route on the interior side. At the very beginning of today's *fondamenta*, a building complex preserves the remains of a palazzo (columns, capitals, and arches on the ground floor) that up until the 15th century served as the seat of the Patriarch of Grado in Venice (Dorigo 1998; Rossi, Sitran 2010). In 1070 the Patriarch gave a nearby vineyard in concession in exchange for an annual payment in oil and money to fund the restoration of the *domus maior*: this was a luxury building in its day, since it had *caminitis cum suo solarario et aliis caminitis* (i.e. heated rooms across several floors).

By the late 11th century, the San Silvestro vineyard had been completely parcelled up, yet it remained undeveloped: in 1098 the revenue (*quintello*) from this estate was reserved for the restoration of the basilica of San Silvestro and its belfry. In the 12th century the Patriarch's building is no longer mentioned as *domus* in the documentary evidence, but as *palatium* (1164): it had therefore been renovated. We know that on the upper floor it had a large meeting hall, a chapel adorned with mosaics, a continuous arcade, and an exterior loggia that could be reached through a stairway (these are clearly documented by de' Barbari's engraving [fig. 1] and by Carpaccio's painting *Miracle of the Relic of the Cross* [fig. 2]). On the ground floor were shops for rent:

totas stationes vel cameras positas in suprascripto confinio permanentes sub palatio et ecclesie nostri patriarchatus. (1182)

The development of the market had reached this area too.

The urban transformation of medieval Venice has been reconstructed with the utmost precision by Wladimiro Dorigo - on the basis of documentary evidence - in *Ve-*

³ Cessi, Alberti 1934, 311-12: *stratam magnam*; Dorigo 2003, 399, 849-58.

nezia romanica (2003), especially vol. 2, *Atlante della città medievale* (Dorigo 2003, 397-409, 849-58). The plates featured there (Dorigo 2003, pl. 16 A and B, 852-3) [figs 3-4] clearly illustrate the presence of public and private properties, the arrangement of the buildings in strips along parallel *calli* (reflecting the archaic settlements arranged parallel to the main waterway), and – for the 14th century – the increasing parcelling out and concentration of shops and homes for rent through the increasing revenues ensured by the increase in trade and inhabitants. The entire surface of the main parish of San Giovanni is documented for the whole 14th century.

But when was the market first established? In 1051 the members of the Gradenigo family did not divide everything among themselves: they retained joint ownership of the *stationes de beccaria cum ipsa terra vacua usque in canale*. This *beccaria* (slaughterhouse) had long stood there. John the Deacon's *Istoria Veneticorum* (early 11th cent.) describes the 976 uprising against Doge Pietro Candiano and his assassination just outside the Basilica of St. Mark: on a small boat, the bodies of the Doge and his son were ferried to the *macelli forum*, to expose them to public humiliation (*ob ignominiam primitus exigua nave ad macelli forum*); only after a member of the Gradenigo family intervened, were the bodies moved to the Benedictine monastery of Sant'Ilario, where they were buried.⁴ This information about the existence of a slaughterhouse, the link to a member of the Gradenigo family, and the reference to a public space as *forum* (a term only used twice by John the Deacon: the second time in relation to an armed conflict in *Rivoalti foro*,⁵ which cannot have been Piazza San Marco yet

and thus must be identified with the present-day Rialto) bear witness to the existence of a peripheral place – for bodies are only exposed to public contempt in peripheral areas – where an activity is performed (slaughtering) that adds to the degrading display.

This information from chronicles and the subsequent donation made by the Orio family (1097), which added *stationes* to an already existing market, can be seen to confirm the fact that the central area of what is now the Rialto, surrounded by public building complexes and directly connected to the bridge, was already a site of public interest – located on a bend in the canal – a lowland excluded from the interests of the landowners' properties settled nearby. The fact that both sides of the bend of the Grand Canal were areas of public interest is further shown by the siting of the first mint (Zecca) on the San Bartolomio side, where the Fondaco dei Tedeschi was to be built (Dorigo 2003, 163, 404-6).

The Church of San Giacomo was located at the centre of this public area, overlooking a square: an open space whose boundaries continued to be respected by subsequent building work. The presence of the church is first documented in 1152, in a will drawn up by *Henricum Navigaiosum plebanum Sancti Ihoanni et Sancti Iacobi de Rivoalto*.⁶ The notary was a priest responsible for both churches: the former – San Giovanni – was a parish church, while the latter was included in the parish and closely connected to the ducal authorities. According to late sources,⁷ it was rebuilt precisely by a doge, Domenico Selvo (1071-1084).

⁴ Giovanni diacono 1999, 162-3; Ortalli 1993, IX; Dorigo 2003, 397; Berto 2001, 208.

⁵ Giovanni diacono 1999, 158-9; Dandolo 1938-58, 174,20; Berto 2001, 207-8.

⁶ Lanfranchi 1955, nr. 20, 46; Dorigo 2003, 88-9; Trevisan 2008, 230-1, 348. See also Collins in this volume.

⁷ Sansovino 1581, 196; Corner 1758, 369; Dorigo 2003, 397.



Figure 2 Vittore Carpaccio, *Miracolo della Reliquia della croce*, Venezia, Gallerie dell'Accademia.
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According to a late medieval chronicle, the Church of San Giacomo was erected just after the legendary founding of Venice in 421, as a votive offering by the inhabitants who had survived a fire, and was consecrated by the Bishops of Padua, Altinum, Treviso, and Oderzo (Dandolo 1938-58, 53.27-54.5). This legendary account of the construction of the church cannot be taken at face value, but must be interpreted in the context of the reconstruction of the history of the city's origins, associated with Attila's invasion (Ravegnani 2020, 51-3).

The Church of San Giacomo attested in 1152 was not the lynch-pin of a territorial district (the parish or *confinium*, as it is referred to in the documentary evidence); this role was instead played by San Giovanni, whose territory was restricted with the building of San Mattio in 1156 (Dorigo 2003, 849-50): further proof of urban development in that century. The Church of San Giacomo – directly connected with the Bishop in Castello and later with the Doge – served to ensure and protect the urban space where the market was held, as is declared by the cross and the inscription in the apse, which urges fairness in trade activities [fig. 5]:

SIT CRUX TUA VERA SALUS | HUIC CHRISTE LOCO. |
HOC CIRCA TEMPLUM SIT IUS MERCANTIBUS
AEQUUM: PONDERA NEC VERGANT NEC SIT
CONVENTIO PRAVA.

Your cross, Christ, be true salvation for this place.
Around this temple let the merchants' law be
just, their weights true, and their contracts fair.
(Dorigo 2003, 398)

Reference measurements were to be found at the Rialto, as in market areas elsewhere (for example, on a corner of the medieval Palazzo della Ragione in Padua). This is

witnessed by the 1229 *Capitolare* (statute book) of the *Fornaseriis* (brick-makers): *cupos autem et petras, bonos et bene coctas, ad formam factam in pilona, Rivoalto, fatiam vel fieri fatiam sine fraudem* (Monticolo 1896, 81-2). A public scale (*statera*) is mentioned from as early as 1187 (Dorigo 2003, 398).

In the 12th century the whole *civitas Rivoalti* experienced an increase in the number and size of its buildings, a progressive development of plots of land, and the proliferation of pedestrian routes (*calli*), which came together to form a road network that was used alongside the water one, but which increasingly required the building of bridges to connect the various islands (Dorigo 2003, 117-63). The construction of a bridge linking the *insula* of San Giovanni Confessore (i.e. the present-day Rialto) to Sant'Aponal was authorised in 1228 (Dorigo 2003, 159; Rossi, Sitran 2010, 25), creating a direct interior connection across the canal, as is still shown in de' Barbari's map [fig. 1]. The route is an entirely pedestrian one today, since the old canal has been filled in.

Ever since the 12th century, the Rialto has housed the offices and magistracies in charge of overseeing financial and commercial activities.⁸ In the 13th century we witness the effects of a further growth of the financial-trading district through numerous public reorganisation measures and the establishment of new magistracies and offices, including the *Ufficiali sopra Rialto* (second quarter of the century). Their *Capitolare* (Ortalli, Princivalli 1993) is a valuable testimony concerning the activities on the whole *insula*, the distribution of the various public offices (Fersuoch 1993), and the need to regulate private citizens' conduct, the use of the area, access to the quaysides, and the mooring of ships and boats. The *Capitolare* provides a vivid picture of the proliferation of shops and storerooms, the dwindling of their owners' dwellings, and the predominance of houses

⁸ Ortalli 1993, XI-XIV; Princivalli 1993, XXVII-XXVIII; Dorigo 2003, 402-3.

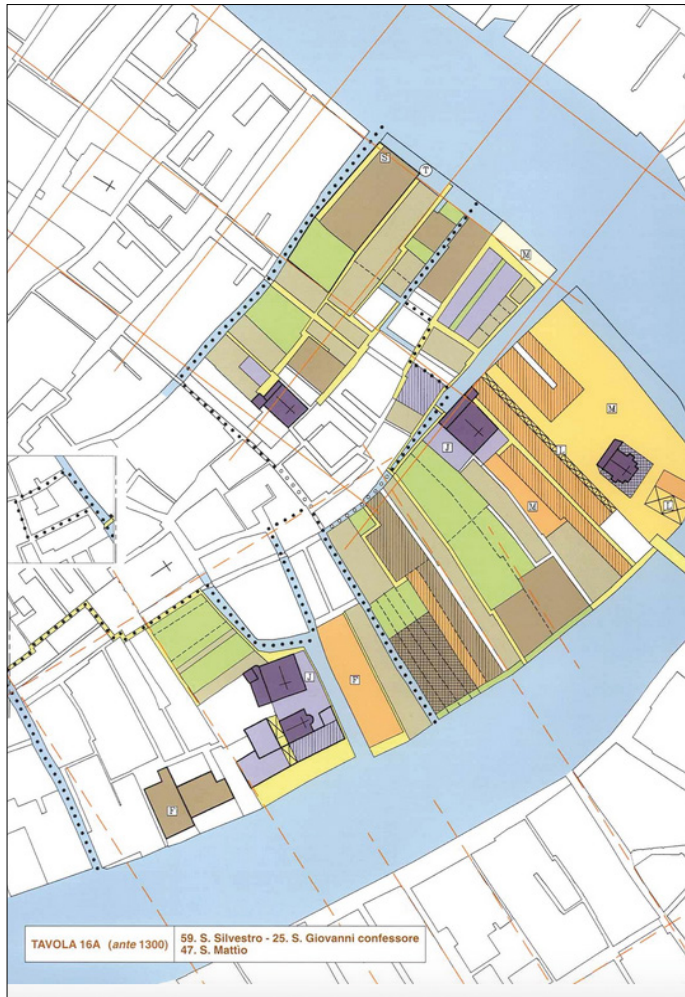


Figure 3 Wladimiro Dorigo, Table reconstructing the urban evolution of Rialto in the Middle Ages: *ante* 1300 (Dorigo 2003, 2, tav. 16A)

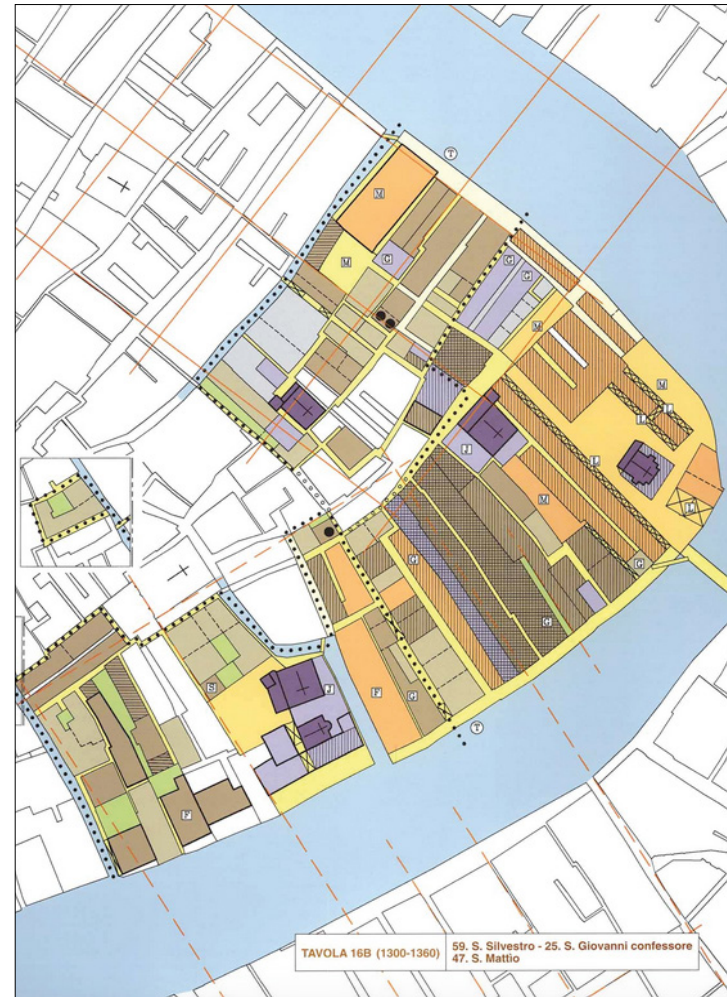


Figure 4 Wladimiro Dorigo, Table reconstructing the urban evolution of Rialto in the Middle Ages: *ante* 1360 (Dorigo 2003, 2, tav. 16B)

for rent. Chapter 49 mentions a Gradenigo house on the quayside, while chapter 95, a deliberation of the Maggior Consiglio of 1260 (Ortalli, Princivalli 1993, 44-5), mentions a Ca' Vidal, located nearby, that was already in the hands of the public authorities (Dorigo 2003, 399-400, 849, 854). Early in this century (1211), a significant portion of the Gradenigo patrimony was divided between the members of the family. The relevant document informs us that they no longer resided in the parish of San Giovanni, but had recently moved to the Santi Apostoli and Sant'Angelo areas:⁹ a clear sign of the specialising of the neighbourhood and of the investments that were being made there (Ortalli 1993, X). Public and private buildings for rent were concentrated in the area around San Silvestro and in the stretch between Ruga Rialto and Campo Beccaria. Consisting of long blocks (*rugae*) which made the most of the available land, they overlooked the *fondamenta* for limited stretches and could be reached via side *calli* [fig. 1].

The area of public buildings surrounding San Giacomo was organised around transit spaces: the so-called Ruga degli Oresi and Campo San Giacomo. In the Middle Ages, the stretch overlooking the Grand Canal to the north progressively witnessed regeneration work, a broadening of the quaysides, building development, and the creation of mooring spaces (ferries and barges came to converge here from the mainland, in addition to those unloading goods for the food market).

Another accelerating factor was no doubt the bridge. According to late chronicles, it was built in the 12th century, but reliable documentary evidence suggests that it was erected in the 13th century, before 1264.¹⁰ Up until then, ferries and barges had to be used to cross from

one side of the Rialto to the other; only in the 13th century was the need felt to create a pedestrian connection with a strong impact on the urban layout. It is worth noting that up until the 19th century the one at the Rialto was the only bridge across the Grand Canal. Up until the 16th century it took the form of a wooden drawbridge, which could be opened to let ships through.

We find a remarkable and detailed representation of this bridge in *Miracle*, the aforementioned large canvas by Carpaccio [fig. 2], and in de' Barbari's engraving [fig. 6], which shows this old bridge (requiring constant maintenance work and repairs on account of its perishable material) in its 15th-century version. The wooden structure consists of two ramps surrounded by wooden shops, which were added with the 1458 restoration in order to reap economic profit from the bridge by letting these spaces – before then, the bridge had simply offered an open view of the canal.¹¹

The state took constant measures to improve mobility and moorings, increase the available spaces (by progressively broadening the quaysides), and prevent unauthorised building work. To some extent, this reflects the lack of any long-term planning (Dorigo 2003, 400). The Rialto market grew through private enterprise and public involvement by checking private interests and attempting to contain and face certain needs, for instance through the creation of a new square (Rialto Novo) in 1281 (Cessi, Alberti 1934, 32-3, 311-12).

Another significant measure was the purchasing of a private property and the establishment at the far end of the island, near San Silvestro, of a Fondaco delle Farine (i.e. a grain storehouse, attested from 1260), the city's main and only one up until the 15th century: the Rialto

⁹ ASVe, San Zaccaria, *busta* 11 perg., 1211; Dorigo 2003, 855.

¹⁰ Cessi, Alberti 1934, 163-4; Calabi, Morachiello 1987, 173-5; Princivalli 1993, XVIII; Dorigo 2003, 163-5, 849.

¹¹ Cessi Alberti 1934, 169-70; Calabi, Morachiello 1987, 173-85; Dorigo 2003, 164.

**Figure 5**

Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice.
Exterior apse, cross and inscriptions.
Photo © Böhm

was also the trading place for grains, which used to be sold from shops rented by merchants but controlled by the state (first through the *Ufficiali al frumento* and then through the *Provveditori alle Biave*).¹²

In the 14th century (especially the first half), further attempts were made to improve the available spaces: public buildings were rebuilt, plans were made to rebuild San Giacomo, the northern side was reorganised, and another public property was acquired by seizing Ca' Querini (when the Baiamonte Tiepolo plot was

scotched in 1310) and moving the Beccaria (slaughterhouse) there.¹³

The numerous measures taken in that century provide a wealth of information about the uses of *rughe* (i.e. rows of shops), the kind of activities exercised there (jewellers, textile sellers and weavers, etc.) (Dorigo 2003, 407-8), and the commercial use of the space adjacent to the Church of San Giacomo. The buildings depicted by de' Barbari [fig. 1], along the Ruga degli Oresi, overlooking Campo San Giacomo and Rialto Novo, can

¹² Calabi, Morachiello 1987, 118-23; Concina 1997, 119-25; Dorigo 2003, 406-9, 851.

¹³ Cessi, Alberti 1934, 35-46, 312-17; Ortalli 1993, XIX-XX; Dorigo 2003, 400-9.



Figure 6

Jacopo de' Barbari, View of Venice. 1500.
Xylograph. Detail

be associated with these measures: they extend across several floors and can be accessed via exterior stairways (those facing Rialto Novo are clearly visible and are mentioned in the documents, since they were used to make announcements, hold auctions and sales, and read out sentences). They had trussed galleries (rather than colonnades as in Piazza San Marco) and irregular windows. As far as we can tell from de' Barbari's engraving, this architecture was not of a sophisticated or luxury sort, but strictly utilitarian. In 1343 the shops adjacent to the Church of San Giacomo were still owned by the latter and the state took measures to bring them under public control: the church (which protested against the acquisition through the bishop) was to be reimbursed by receiving some annual revenue (*Libri Commemorativi* nos. 61-4).

The church therefore owned the surrounding land. Here the front portico was built (see Rialto-Atlas, figs 13-17), along with a clergy house on one side, while another stretch of the property was put to commercial use - by now most trade was conducted along the main road axis. The main façade of the church, with the portico, overlooked the square, where announcements were made and financial dealings were conducted. At the back of the church stood other public buildings and a loggia.

This complex of public buildings - closer to the canal and the bridge - that are shown in de' Barbari's map from 1500 [fig. 1] were replaced in the 1520s, when the Palazzo dei Camerlenghi (the headquarters of a financial magistracy) was reconstructed and enlarged - despite the fact that it had survived the 1514 fire unscathed (Calabi, Morachiello 1987, 82-90).

The loggia was already in existence in 1266; it was made of wood, set on a raised platform, and open on all sides. It underwent various renovations over time and

was rebuilt in the 15th century, when it acquired the appearance recorded by de' Barbari [fig. 6].¹⁴ At the back of the loggia stood two buildings of different heights, with an intermediate one between them: one building was the house assigned to the local physician, the other served as the headquarters first of the Consoli ai Mercanti and later of the Camerlenghi. In the space occupied by these three buildings we now find the Palazzo dei Camerlenghi.

The importance of the no longer extant loggia is also evident from the fact that the wall at the back (probably belonging to the buildings behind it) was frescoed. An atlas - symbolising knowledge of the world and the convergence of international trade networks in this place - was accompanied by a frescoed narrative cycle - still visible in the 15th century - devoted to another foundational myth in the history of Venice: the Carolingians' failed attempt to seize the Rialto.¹⁵ See the account provided in the 13th-century chronicle by Martin da Canal (1972, 10-15).

Decades after the reconstruction of the loggia in 1425 (Basso 2014), the frescoes were repainted in accordance with a 1459 resolution by the Senate, by creating a copy (*accoppiare*) of the pre-existing ones:

Quod in muro novo costruendo ponantur et pingantur istorie depicte in veteri muro pro ipsius istorie memoria antiquitatis costruenda, que, antequam ipse muro, in quo picte sunt, diruatur, excipi et accoppiare debeant, ut in muro novo ipsemet instaurare et depingi possint, et similiter reficiatur descriptio orbis sive mapamundus qui in medio ipsarum picturarum extare consueverat. (Cessi, Alberti 1934, 317-18)

¹⁴ Cessi, Alberti 1934, 34-5, 61; Dorigo 2003, 403; Basso 2014.

¹⁵ Cessi, Alberti 1934, 67; Ortalli 1993, X; Ortalli 2008, 99.

The presence of the loggia thus helps explain why the inscription that the church [fig. 6] bears as a warning occurs in the apse that faces precisely this direction. Between the 13th century and 1525 – when the Palazzo dei Camerlenghi was enlarged –¹⁶ trade dealings used to take place at the foot of the bridge, at the back of the Church of San Giacomo, which another tale about the

city's origins associates with the legendary founding of Venice in 421 AD.

Propaganda, political communication, and the affirmation of an independent and exceptional role for Venice thus came together in that bend on the river which had become a canal in the mediaeval harbour city, there where San Giacomo stands.

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¹⁶ Calabi Morachiello 1987, 79-90; Basso 2014, 116-17.

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