



COMUNICATO STAMPA

55th Week of Study Water in the Early Middle Ages Spoleto, 12-17 April 2007

The Power of Rome was based on a perfect organization of the territory. In their centuries long history, initially the Republic and then the Empire realized a perfect system for the management of a territory of a size never heard before, with a capillary network of paved roads, with a perfect system of bridges, tunnels, mansions for the assistance to travellers, irrespective of whether these were men, goods, armies. They proceeded systematically to reclaim the conquered territories, creating banks and ditches, deviating rivers, emptying lakes and creating new ones. The management of such complex system, that enables us to define the Empire as a political body based, above all, on land communications, entered into a crisis in the Third Century, consequence and cause at the same time of a collapse of the administrative and financial system of the power of Rome and the unbearable pressure of populations on the borders.

Above all the maintenance of the works entered into a crisis: bridges crumbled down, roads were interrupted, the banks collapsed and the marsh was back there where before it had been replaced by cultivated fields. It is possible to state that the early Middle Ages witnessed water taking back the control over Rome territory.

In the meantime new populations violated the borders, run through defenceless provinces and settled down therein, in waves, one after another. Initially they followed land routes, along the ancient Roman roads. But soon they started coming from the sea: in the early years of the Fifth Century Angles and Saxons conquered Britain by sea, Vandals went, a few years later, to Africa, creating a powerful independent kingdom

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and became a maritime power, dominating Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, laying waste to Rome, sailing up the Tiber.

In the course of the Fifth Century the imperial power succumbed and a new political geography was defined for Europe, whilst the eastern part of the empire found with difficulty a new different balance, which enabled it to last for almost thousand years, overcoming also the very difficult crisis of the Seventh Century, with the Arab conquest of a large part of Asia and Africa.

Europe of the early Middle Ages witnessed the increasingly aggressive growth of populations culturally fit to face a world where water dominated over land, both in long sea distances and in the complex system of river routes. Water was a threat and difficulty for survival, when it came in the form of snow, ice, or fog, or marsh, and it was defence, for new cities such as Venice and Gamla Upsala, which hide in lagoons.

Peoples arriving from the islands of Frisia, Denmark, Scandinavia, the most inhospitable regions of the world then known, knew how to cope both with ocean distances as well as how to sail up the large rivers of western and eastern Europe. No inland town was safe from the long ships of the Vikings and Varegs, which reached Iceland and north America and in the same years reached from the Baltic Sea also the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, opening new routes for contacts among populations.

The new kingdoms were often maritime, such as the kingdom of Knut, which we recall for the figure of Hamlet, and which united Anglia, Denmark, Scandinavia and Normandy, from where William the Bastard arrived to claim and conquer the throne of England. The ships of these peoples, fit to survive in extreme climatic situations, reached also the Mediterranean Sea at the service of others, like when they devastated the Piraeus and Athens for the Emperor of Byzantium, or, more often, for plundering a world so different from their own, where the sun was shining and summer lasted forever. They extended their conquests also to the Mediterranean sea and Italy, with the Normans, in often winning competition with other peoples, of Muslim faith, which in the same centuries had conducted a deep penetration, from the South, into the territories of western Europe, conquering Spain and also sailing up rivers, deep into the heart of the Alps, in Piedmont or the Valais. Arab Peoples who had with water a relationship different from ours,



but equally stimulating for them, living in arid territories, for which water was rare and precious. Arabs of Spain were therefore masters in the creation of modern rational irrigation systems and utilized water as ornaments for their palaces and their gardens.

CISAM week in 2007 analyses the relationship with water of man in the early Middle Ages, both from the north and from the south, above all drinking water, calling specialists to teach from high up north, Swedish and Danish, as well as from the Spanish area, and the traditional research areas of European continental history.

However, not only the political evolution will be discussed in a world strongly conditioned on water, but also of survival problems in extreme situations, new town planning, the definition of new commercial routes and for pilgrims, technical naval engineering, food problems, illnesses related to increasingly humid environments, etc.

The presence of water will be discussed in particular, in the religious dimension of the early medieval Christian world. The mystic geography of the world was defined and outlined by the rivers of Paradise and water, downgraded in the classic times to an instrument for personal hygiene in the baths, present everywhere in the cities and throughout the territory, was now purification from sin: it was an instrument of divine benevolence in baptism, in the baptismal font and the baptistery, which characterizes so well the building tradition in the early Middle Ages. But water served also for benediction, for sprinkling the worshipper, and had mystic meanings of great suggestion and contents, which, in the traditions of Spoleto Centre, will be handled since the very first inauguration lesson, by Tullio Gregory, in the beautiful room of Caio Melisso Theatre.

Ufficio stampa e relazioni esterne

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