

«Come dimostra il congiunto disegno»: Sketches, drawings and maps of the Po river in Early Modern Italy

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Po is the most important river in Italy. Its plain and its tributaries were and are part of a peculiar economic system, still the most productive of the national balance.

But during the early modern age it was a sort of liquid road that crossed many different states and princedoms: the duchy of Savoy; the marquisate of Monferrato; the duchy of Milan; the duchy of Parma and Piacenza; the duchy of Modena and Reggio; the duchy of Mantua; the duchy of Ferrara, ending in the Republic of Venice. How to use this important “highway” in such a fragmented context? How to represent it?

This paper aims to show when and how sovereignties and technics started to use Po’s waters, to discipline them, to draw them and to attach sketches and maps to hydraulic projects and to juridical documents. The thesis is that the more the river was considered as an economic source, the more princes and other authorities (like bishops or abbeys) tried to control it, dictating stronger boundaries and imposing fiscal limitations. That is why drawings and maps represent not the whole course of the river, but segments of it, according to the interested space. In particular some governments, from the second half of the XVI century, developed instruments and skills to measure and divert the many branches of the river, or to trace a border in correspondence of states and inner islands.

The variety of authors of sketches and drawings is impressive: while many of them, especially until the half of the XVII century, rest anonymous or were obscure land-surveyors, some are important engineers and architects, like the Mantuan Gabriele Bertazzolo or Giovanni Battista Aleotti, called “l’Argenta”, from Ferrara. A selection of cartographies from the most important State Archives of Northern Italy will show the evolution from description to politics.

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