

The First Settlements

Before the Ducal seat was transferred from Malamocco to Rialto, (...) a monastery was founded on the island of San Servolo and was **designated** for the use of the holy order of St. Benedict (3). It is not possible to identify a precise date when the first settlements on the island occurred, although it was towards the end of the 7th Century when a group of Benedictine monks, fleeing from the Franks, having been driven out of their Monastery in San Stefano d' Altino, took refuge in this, then very uncomfortable island (4).

These religious figures lived amongst the marshes with very limited means. For this reason, on request from Abbot Giovanni, in 819, Angelo and Giustiniano Partecipazio, Doges of Venice, conceded the church of St. Ilario to the order. It was situated on the mainland, on the borders of the Venetian lagoon and towards the territory of Padua. Most of the monks were relocated there on condition that a small number would remain on the island to serve the church and provide a choir. In turn, the Abbot of St. Ilario was to ensure their upkeep. In the "Dandolo chronicles" we learn that Abbot Giovanni forcefully occupied the Seat of Fortunato when the Patriarch of Grado, having argued with the Venetians fled to France; once the Patriarch had made peace with the Venetians, the Abbot returned to his monastery until (...) having regained the monastery of Sant'Ilario, he went there to live in the company of his brothers (3).

Sansovino reports the reconstruction of the church in 929. (1) The "Dandolo chronicles" report that in 998 Emperor Ottone III lodged at the monastery having secretly arrived in Venice to meet with Doge Pietro Orseolo II, in order to congratulate him on his recent victories in Dalmatia(3). The Benedictine monks continued to live on the island, albeit a small number, until the beginning of the 12th century when, with the permission of Abbot Pietro of Sant'Ilario, the island was conceded, as a refuge, to the Benedictine order escaping from imminent ruin of the city of Malamocco.

Two Benedictine monasteries had been founded in this city of Malamocco, built during the dangerous times of "Attila" by the "Acquilejese" and the "Padovani", on the "Adriatic Lido": one for the order of regulars of the saints "Cornelio and Cipriano", the other for the nuns, order of Bishop and Martyr "San Basso". Due to frequent flooding over the years, the city was slowly destroyed and the monks were forced to re-establish themselves within the islands of the lagoon. Land was assigned to the monks of the order, to build a new monastery on the Island of Murano, while in 1109, the nuns, who did not hold the financial means to rebuild, were assigned the Island of San Servolo.

The Calbana family, having recently set up residence in Venice, from "Capodistria" (Caprizza) restored the foundations of the island, amplified and renovated the buildings for its new purpose, so as to ensure that the nuns, removed from the danger of flooding would not perish within the walls of the decrepit monastery in which they found themselves. Here this religious order remained, uninterrupted for more than 500 years, improving it over the years (...) and erecting the Bell Tower, according to a headstone, which cites its completion on the 15th of September 1456 (2).

We know from "Corner" that in 1470 the church was consecrated, probably during the renovation in which according to "Riboldi" the cloisters were restored (3). On the 27th of June 1615, the nuns of the "Benedictine" order were transferred under the consensus of the senate to the "Santa Maria dell'Umilta" convent. This convent had been vacant since 1606, when the Jesuits had fled, following the interdict of Venice by Pope Paolo V, of Venice. From that time, the island remained vacant except for the "farmers" tending the land and a chaplain who carried out church services and the general upkeep(2): The island was then used as a public and private grain storage, whilst in 1630, it housed a temporary hospital for plague victims. (4).

In 1647, public compassion removed the female members of the religious orders in the Reign of Candia (Crete), put in danger from the Turkish invasion. They were relocated on the island, an ideal refuge for the 200 or more followers of three holy denominations: Benedictine, Franciscan and Dominican (2). They were to stay on the island, maintained by public and private charity, until death, when this sacred place was once more left abandoned. (3). By this time, the island was completely walled, enclosing a considerable monastery, in the form of a Latin cross, a mediocre church behind the bell tower, a large kitchen garden, a house for the chaplain including a small garden and other dwellings for the gardeners and church workers(2).

1. F. SANSOVINO, Venetia città nobilissima et singolare, Venezia 1581 (ed. cit. con aggiunte di G. Martignoni, Venezia 1663, pagg. 233-234).

2. V. M. CORONELLI, Isolario ovvero Atlante Veneto, Venezia 1696-1697 (pag. 48).

3. F. CORNER, Notizie storiche delle Chiese e Monasteri di Venezia e Torcello, Padova 1758 (pagg. 488-492).

4. AA. VV., Restauro Complesso Monumentale di S. Servolo - Indagine storica, 1980 (c/o Provincia di Venezia).