WATER MANAGEMENT IN MILAN AND LOMBARDY IN MEDIEVAL TIMES: AN OUTLINE

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Key words: agriculture, drainage, irrigation, Lombardy, Middle Age, Po Valley, reclamation, water

The abundance of water has certainly been a very important resource for the development of the Po Valley and has necessitated, more than once, interventions of regulation and drainage that have contributed strongly to imprint a particular conformation on the land. Already in Roman times there were numerous projects of canalisation and intense and diligent commitment to the maintenance of the canals, used for navigation, for irrigation and for the working of the mills. The need to control the excessive amount of water present was the beginning of the exploitation of this great font of richness that was constantly maintained in subsequent eras. In the early Middle Ages, despite the conditions of political instability and great economic and social difficulty, the function of the canals continued to be of great importance, also because the paths of river communication often substituted land roads, then left abandoned. After the 11th century A.D. the resumption of agricultural activity was conducive to the intense task of land reclamation of the Lombardian countryside and of commitment by the cities to amplify their waterways with the construction of new canals and the improvement of those already existing. The example given by Milan, a city lacking a natural river, that equipped itself with a dense network of canal, used in various ambits of the city life (defence, hygiene, agriculture, transport, milling systems) and for connections with the surrounding territory, can be considered as emblematic. In the surrounding countryside, the activity of the Cistercian monks of Chiaravalle represents one of the situations more indicative of how land reclamation and waterways contributed fundamentally to the organisation of the territory over the span of the ages.