



CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF
MEDICINE AND THE BODY
IN THE RENAISSANCE

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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PARMA



STUDIO FIRMANO
PER LA STORIA DELL'ARTE MEDICA E DELLA SCIENZA



CSMBR
ONLINE
EVENTS



MONITORING WATER QUALITY IN EARLY MODERN EUROPEAN CITIES

8
APRIL
2025
5.00 pm CET

THE VENETIAN CASE

DAVID GENTILCORE • University of Venice

When looking to the past, we need to re-examine the assumptions we bring to the questions of water quality. What were these assumptions? Early modern Europeans knew, through long experience, which waters were “best”, as they saw them, and to take certain precautions when it came to the consumption and use of fresh water. Of course, the rationale behind these measures was necessarily couched in a different medical philosophy and their effica-

cy sometimes questionable from the perspective of modern bio-medicine. In the Republic of Venice, a flourishing and independent state until 1797, fresh water quality was monitored by the “Provveditori alla Salute” (or Health Office), the body responsible for overseeing public health and hygiene, established in late fifteenth century to deal with plague epidemics. One of the largest and most economically vibrant of

early modern European cities, Venice was uniquely dependent on rainwater capture for all of its freshwater needs, which fed several thousand “well-cisterns” located in the city’s public squares (*campi*), courtyards, private houses and religious institutions. Nowhere else was the approach to their use so systematic and widespread, the city concerned so populous, the technology so sophisticated and the management so carefully regulated as in Venice. My talk will present the results of research in progress into the role of the Venice’s Health Office in monitoring and managing the city’s fresh water supply.