

Geographical location: the generating axes

Between Venice and Trieste». This is how the Friulians around the world explain to foreigners where their «Little Homeland» is; in fact, in the last centuries, Friuli has lived in the shadow of these two big maritime cities; for four centuries the former, for four decades the latter. Long, long time ago they could have said: «around Aquileia». Aquileia, Venice and Trieste: throughout history, on the tip of the Adriatic sea, where the waters run deeper into the continent, large cities sprouted one after the other promoting trade between the Mediterranean Sea and Central Europe. The history of Friuli has been largely influenced by its geographical position, that is by its relationships along the North-South and East-West axes. Its first relationship is linked to geology: here the African tectonic plate, where Italy lies, is constantly overthrust onto the European plate.

The northern border of Friuli is clearly marked by the ridge of the Carnic Alps, formed as a result of the pressure exerted by the African plate against Europe's landmass. This mountain range is swept by warm and humid air masses coming from the Mediterranean Sea, which made Friuli one of the wettest regions of Italy (this has changed in the last few years, the weather is no longer as it used to be); heavy rainfall and the limy nature of rock make Friuli's mountains subject to erosion; mountain slopes are often steep and rugged, with narrow valleys and wide riverbeds at their feet, result of the strong erosive action and sudden changes in river flow. As they reach the plain, Friuli's rivers form wide fan-shaped deposits of gravel - the so-called "debris flow fans" - through which waters flow for most of the year. Despite abundant rainfall (1,800 mm/year on average), the higher plain of Friuli is dry, lacking permanent waterbodies. The waters resurface further down, along the a "resurgence" line that runs straight from the foot of the Cansiglio Plateau (the Livenza springs, near Polcenigo) to that of the Karst (the mouths of the Timavo river). Below this line, the lowlands of Friuli ("Bassa Friulana") is a soil that is incredibly rich in waters, with all that this entails. When man became capable of controlling waters, as presently and in Roman times, the Bassa Friulana was a highly-productive farmland; in other periods - for approximately twelve centuries - this land was marshy, insalubrious and depopulated. Like all the faults between geological plates, every so often also the one that extends in the middle of the region gives rise to a slab pull. Thus Friuli is a "dancing land" and, as far as records go, it was struck by half a dozen disastrous earthquakes.

Therefore, overall we can say that nature has not been lenient with Friuli. This land is geographically rather young, and as all youngsters it is quite sour, unstable and extreme. As we will see later on, these geological features are curiously at odds with the social and cultural features that characterise its population. Its geographical position, between the Mediterranean Sea and Central Europe, is such that Friuli is influenced these respective weather areas. Plants that are typical of the Mediterranean basin, such as the holm oak, but also the olive and the fig tree, comfortably grow up to the first mountain buttresses of the Prealps; whilst, due to heavy rainfall, the climate of most of the Friulian Alps is like that of Central Europe. As a result, Friuli has a higher number of vegetable species than many other European regions. In part this also holds true for the animal species. In recent

years the case of Lepidoptera has become quite outstanding. Where the Tagliamento River reaches the plain, on Mounts Brancot and San Simeone – the epicentre of the 1976 earthquake – scholars found the presence of an extraordinary quantity of butterfly species, typical of both northern and southern Europe. Due to this variety of geographical traits, concentrated in a rather small area (7,885 sq km, approximately 2.5% of the Italian territory), Friuli proudly identifies with the famous quotation by Ippolito Nievo which defines it as a “small summary of the whole universe”; even if, to say the truth, the writer perhaps referred to its human rather than natural aspect. From the socio-economic point of view, the north-south axis characterises Friuli in many ways. Apart from Alto-Adige, Friuli is the northernmost region of Italy; the one that is most closely in contact with the German world through the Mount Croce pass and the Canal del Ferro valley. This toponym (ferro in Italian means iron) is a clear indication of the most important goods being transported along this route, over most of Friuli's history. But before then, this was the Amber route, the route used to transport the precious golden material collected on the beaches of the Baltic Sea and much appreciated by the Romans. Throughout history, the relationships between Friuli and the Mediterranean area have been important in the period when Aquileia was a Roman colony and, more recently, with the development of seaside tourism that has attracted masses of Austrian and German tourists to the beaches of Grado and Lignano. As for the rest of its history, Friuli has been essentially a land-based region, separated from the sea by a strip of marshes and lagoons that were difficult to access.

On the East-West axis, a feature of Friuli is being a compulsory route, or rather the open gate between the Italian peninsula and Europe and, farther away, Asia. Apart from the rivers, there is no continuity between the Friulian plain, the Veneto plain and the Po Valley plain. To the West the mountains are low and the mountain passes are easy to cross. For much of history, the flow has been mainly from the East towards Italy; as it is in the immense East that most of the demographic and cultural dynamics take place and then hit the Italian peninsula like ocean waves, starting from the invention of agriculture. Surely the Greeks and the Phoenicians colonised the European coasts by sea; but the great migrations of peoples took place by land. Friuli was crossed by Paleovenetians and, later, by the Quadi and the Marcomanni, the Herules, the Ostrogoths and the Visigoths, the Huns, the Lombards, the Franks, the Hungarians and the Turks. Among those coming from the East – the majority – and those from the West, Friuli was marked by forty six invasions; some were simple raids or military expeditions, others lasted longer and resulted in some sort of settlement. The most important expedition is undoubtedly the one made by the Romans. In 181 B.C. Rome decided to found here - on the northern tip of the Adriatic Sea - a colony with the triple task of organizing the recently annexed Veneto territory, overseeing the “gate of Italy” to the east and acting as bridgehead for the economic and cultural, and then political and military expansion of the north-east territories: Noricum and Pannonia, that is today's Austria and Hungary. Aquileia then becomes the capital of the Regio X of Augustan Italy, called Venetia et Histria: From the Adige River to the Kvarner. The name Friuli is associated with the Lombards and comes from Forum Iulii (today's Cividale) which was the capital of their first duchy in Italy as well as the bulwark of Lombard Italy against the pressure of the Avars and the Slavs. Later, with the Frankish, Saxon, Franconian and Swabian emperors, this region became instead the gate of Italy to the benefit of the Roman-Germanic Empire. Under Venice, Friuli

resumed its role as Venetian bulwark – i.e. Italian – against the Central and Eastern powers; a role it will maintain also during the Kingdom of Italy and then the Republic. In late years, after re-establishing good relationships with central-eastern European countries, Friuli wanted to act as a bridge or hinge between Italy and that world, and today, with the enlargement of the European Union, it aspires to become one of the core places, one of the hearts of the new united Europe. Here is where Corridor V, the connecting axis between far west Europe (Spain and Portugal) and the Far East (Ukraine).