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The Eels of Venice.

The Long Eighth Century of the Emporia
of the North East Region along the Adriatic Coast

The Eels of Venice

“Had Comacchio defeated the Venetians and established its control over the mouths of the Adige and the Po, it instead of Venice might have become the Queen of the Adriatic, and Venice might now be an inconspicuous village in a stagnant lagoon, as dead as the lagoon of Comacchio, famous only for its eels.” Thus wrote Lane, in 1973, near the beginning of his book *Venice. A Maritime Republic*¹, effectively summing up in a few lines the destinies of both places.

I have to say that Lane’s words often come to mind when, walking along the canal banks of Comacchio, I try to imagine what the place might have become if things had turned out differently. However, Lane’s metaphor, in its simplicity, conceals something more than the inversion of a series of real events (the destruction of Comacchio by the Venetians), moreover mentioned almost only in biased sources (and quite far in time from their actual occurrence)². It contains an indirect reference to an area, the stretch of land lying between Ravenna and the Venetian lagoon, and above all to its role (firstly economic, but also social and institutional), which must have been, from the 8th to 9th century, a highly dynamic one. This was one of the most vibrant areas of northern Italy (if not of the whole peninsula), but with a still uncertain future, where a considerable number of new settlements (that were almost towns) were competing for the control of trade traffic (fig. 1).

The history of Venice boasts an endless bibliography, while the story of Comacchio, although not having been unworthy of attention, has obvi-

¹ A. C. Lane, *Venice. A Maritime Republic*, Baltimore- London, 1973, p. 6.

² Essentially Giovanni the Deacon, in *Istoria Veneticorum*, and *Annales Regni Francorum* (see R. Cessi, *Venezia ducale. I. Duca e popolo*, Venice, 1963, p. 151, 278-286-287 and 313-314).



Fig. 1. Location map of the main sites mentioned in the text.

ously met with minor interest: this also is the fate that awaits the losers. But in the endeavour to understand the origin of Venice, to forget about Comacchio (and other early medieval settlements of this area) means to relinquish a real understanding of the historic and economic conditions within which such a development arose. I have thought for some time that the history of the origins of Venice, which has fascinated, and still fascinates, a substantial group of researchers, is not possible unless analysed within the framework of historical and archaeological evidence from this whole area (and not only from the lagoon, as Crouzet-Pavan has said regarding another neglected settlement, that of Torcello)³. I also believe that only material data are able to supply new prospects of interpretation. For some time now, some of the more perceptive historians and archaeologists have been observing with interest the archaeology of the Venetian lagoon area

³ E. Crouzet-Pavan, *La mort lente de Torcello. Histoire d'une cité disparue*, Paris, 1995.

as a resource of unknown yet predictable potential⁴. I have already written recently about the situation of this archaeology, a work to which I refer⁵.

It is, however, to the overall question of the role and significance of the economy in Lombard Italy of the 8th century that I wish to devote my attention here, not only to respect the title of the seminar, but also because I believe, contrary to what has been written even recently by respected scholars like Chris Wickham, that the 8th century was, on an economic level, by no means a period of stagnation⁶.

Monasteries, emporia and towns in the Po valley during the 8th century: an overview

Ten years ago Ross Balzaretti published an article dedicated to a re-examination of the role of the economy in the Po valley between 700 and 875⁷. Balzaretti disagreed with a number of Italian researchers⁸ who, in a more or less categorical manner, had stressed the role of revived towns during the 8th century in relation to “a river-based exchange network”⁹, maintaining that the same historical and archaeological evidence could, in fact, be used to prove not the exact opposite but certainly only “a case for local economic vitality in the countryside”¹⁰. Balzaretti poses two main

⁴ R. Hodges, *Towns and Trade in the Age of Charlemagne*, London, 2000; M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy. Communications and Commerce. AD 300-900*, Cambridge, 2001.

⁵ S. Gelichi, «Venezia tra archeologia e storia: la costruzione di un'identità urbana», in A. Augenti (ed), *Le città italiane tra la Tarda Antichità e l'Alto Medioevo*, Ravenna, 26-28 February 2004, p. 151-18; S. Gelichi in press, «Flourishing Places in North-Eastern Italy: Towns and Emporia between Late Antiquity and the Carolingian Age», in J. Henning (ed), *Post-Roman Towns and Trade in Europe, Byzantium and the Near East*, Bad Homburg, 2004.

⁶ C. Wickham, «Overview: production, distribution and demand, II», in I. Hansen - C. Wickham (eds), *The Long Eighth Century*, Leiden- Boston - Köln, 2000, p. 345 and 358-360; C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean*, Oxford, 2005.

⁷ R. Balzaretti, «Cities, Emporia and Monasteries: Local Economies in the Po Valley, c. AD 700-875», in N. Christie - S. T. Loseby (eds), *Towns in transitions. Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, London, 1996, p. 213- 234.

⁸ C. Violante, *La società milanese in età precomunale*, Bari, 1953; G. Luzzatto, *An Economic History of Italy*, London, 1961; G. Fasoli, «Navigazione fluviale. Porti e navi sul Po», in *La navigazione mediterranea nell'Alto Medioevo - XXV Settimana di Studi sull'Alto Medioevo di Spoleto*, Spoleto, 1978, p. 565-607.

⁹ R. Balzaretti, «Cities, Emporia and Monasteries», p. 218.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

questions; whether the urban élite were really dependent upon goods coming from the East (which were exchanged for local products, especially food-stuffs) and, above all, if in these regions there really were emporia able to play a role as nodal points between international and regional exchanges. So the main problem was not so much to prove the vitality of the Po valley in the 8th century, as to establish the nature and features of it, or in other words, to evaluate the finer aspects of it.

Balzaretti's answer to these questions is that we find ourselves faced with a kind of 'restrained vitality', a situation in the Po valley that developed locally and concerned "a society made up of a cellular units – towns and cities"¹¹, which operated individually, rarely connected with one another; that therefore it was not possible to make out a more general picture of the control, management and exchange of goods in these areas¹².

Balzaretti analyses with great care both written sources and material data. The written sources, as is known, are not particularly abundant and tend to be open to interpretation. The Liutprand Capitulare (an agreement between the people of Comacchio and the Lombards, dating to 715-30 see *infra*), is assessed according to the availability of material sources (the archaeological records for Parma, Cremona, Piacenza and Comacchio itself) and, on the basis of this, held to be of little significance as evidence of "a region-wide system of exchange"¹³. I agree that the archaeological sources at that time (and partly also now) are not particularly abundant. However, use of them must be pertinent, because evidence *ex silentio* is not always proof of the contrary.

The archaeology of northern Italy has invested a great deal, especially during the Eighties, in urban excavations and this has meant growth in the debate about early medieval towns (although scarcely touching on economic issues)¹⁴. We could not, however, say the same of, for example, research into monasteries and rural settlements, including ports¹⁵. At the same time even urban excavations have not affected, with the same evi-

¹¹ C. Wickham, «Problems of comparing rural societies in early medieval Western Europe», *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 42, 1992, p. 221-246.

¹² R. Balzaretti, «Cities, Emporia and Monasteries», p. 228.

¹³ *Ibidem* p. 223.

¹⁴ In general G. P. Brogiolo - S. Gelichi, *La città nell'alto medioevo italiano. Archeologia e storia*, Bari-Rome, 1998.

¹⁵ Regarding the archaeology of early medieval monasteries in northern Italy see G. Cantino Wataghin, «Archeologia dei monasteri. L'altomedioevo», in S. Gelichi (ed), *I Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale*, Pisa, 1997, p. 265-268 and S. Gelichi in press2, «Nonantola and the Archaeology of Early Monasteries in North Italy», in A. Buko - W. Duczko (eds), *Przez granice czasu*, Pultusk.

dence, many towns that perhaps it would be appropriate to investigate, or else have not analysed them in the right way. Besides this, archaeological data in recent years have increasingly shown that the centralization of settlement on the one hand and the strong hierarchical nature of the social use of spaces, on the other, make the urban archaeological record extremely disconnected and thus difficult to subject to generalizations.

Lastly, the quality of much urban archaeology, on the one hand, and the conditions for consultation of the scientific results of excavations, on the other, are not irrelevant aspects for the correct use of this resource. I will give just a few, but important, examples. The large excavation of the former courthouse of Verona, published in sequence¹⁶, has remained unpublished as far as materials are concerned. The archaeology of towns like Piacenza and Parma (both mentioned in the Liutprand Capitulare) which are taken by Balzaretti as negative evidence¹⁷, cannot be said to have benefited from any planned research projects. Investigations into Cremona have focused their attention on phases of the Roman period and almost nothing has been published on the early medieval period. Regarding Milan, Brescia and Mantua some specific excavations have been well studied, but the overall view, with the exception of Brescia¹⁸, is lacking. Finally, the archaeology of Pavia¹⁹ has not been, up to now and despite some important excavations, worthy of the role and function of this city.

Nevertheless, I would like to abandon an entirely pessimistic view, because I believe that old excavations seen through new eyes and a different approach to the material source may change our way of interpreting the history of this period and of these places.

The emporia of the north-east coastal region: archaeological evidence

Balzaretti, as we have said, examines the archaeological records to analyse, on one hand, the vitality of the towns, and on the other the existence of the emporia. We will focus our attention in particular on the latter. As is known, the term 'emporium' (but above all the concept of empo-

¹⁶ P. Hudson, «La dinamica dell'insediamento urbano nell'area del Cortile del Tribunale di Verona. L'età medievale», *Archeologia Medievale*, XII, 1985, p. 281-302.

¹⁷ R. Balzaretti, «Cities, Emporia and Monasteries», p. 222.

¹⁸ G. P. Brogiolo, *Brescia altomedievale. Urbanistica ed edilizia dal IV al IX secolo*, Mantua, 1993.

¹⁹ P. Hudson, *Archeologia urbana e programmazione della ricerca: l'esempio di Pavia*, Florence, 1981; S. Nepoti (ed), *Archeologia urbana a Pavia*, Pavia, 2000.

rium) as a place where goods were redistributed, including those of an international kind²⁰, belongs essentially to the north European debate²¹. The word 'emporium' rarely appears in early medieval sources referring to the Italian peninsula (I recall, for example, that it is absent from the writing of Giovanni the Deacon, while we find it in that of Costantino Porfirogenito)²². Here, then, it is used in a purely technical sense, expressing better than other words the meaning and role of new settlements which were characterized by a marked ability for trade and production and which, almost always (and here lies the difference from the north European situation) became centres of institutional authority (secular and religious); places, therefore, that it does not seem appropriate to define as towns nor as villages. Moreover, this is a problem that was even felt in the early medieval written sources, as we see in Giovanni the Deacon again, perplexed as to how to define Comacchio or other places of the Venetian lagoon, with the exception of Venice²³.

Although the discussion concerning the emporia is still going on²⁴, the features that define them, from a material viewpoint, compared, for example, to villages, are: the role played by the merchandise that passed through them (type and quantity)²⁵; their extent and the construction

²⁰ D. A. Hinton, «Metalwork and the emporia», in M. Anderton (ed), *Anglo-Saxon trading centres. Beyond the Emporia*, Glasgow, 1999, p. 27.

²¹ R. Hodges, *Dark Ages Economics. The Origins of towns and trade. AD 600-1000*, London, 1982.

²² In, respectively, *Istoria Veneticorum* and *De Admistrando Imperio*.

²³ Concerning this question, see S. Gelichi in press, «Flourishing Places in North-Eastern Italy».

²⁴ Regarding the questions of the emporia see also R. Samson, «Illusory emporia and mad economic theories», in M. Anderton (ed), *Anglo-Saxon trading centres. Beyond the Emporia*, Glasgow, 1999, p. 76-90; K. Ulmschneider - T. Pestell, «Introductions: Early Medieval Markets and 'Productive' Sites», in T. Pestell - K. Ulmschneider (eds), *Markets in Early Medieval Europe. Trading and 'Productive' Sites, 650-850*, Bollington, 2003, p. 1-10; J. Nylor, «Access to international trade in Middle Saxon England: a case of urban over-emphasis?», in M. Pasquinucci - T. Weski (eds), *Close Encounters: Sea- and Riverborne Trade, Ports and Hinterlands, Ship Construction and Navigation in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and in Modern Time*, Oxford, 2004, p. 139-148. With regard to a revision of the debate about aspects of early medieval economy/ies (as representing the categories of Some and Other and the meaning of the "Gift Exchange System") see J. Moreland, «Concepts of the Early medieval Economy», in I. Hansen - C. Wickham (eds), *The Long Eighth Century*, Leiden- Boston - Köln, 2000, p. 1-34.

²⁵ R. Hodges, *Dark Ages Economics*, p. 104-129.

materials that are representative of them²⁶ (fig. 16); lastly, the fact that they were also production centres. Do all these features belong to places like Comacchio and a whole other group of settlements in the lagoon area prior to the rise of Venice?

The merchandise

To evaluate the kind of merchandise that it was preferable to transport along the Po (and its tributaries), the Liutprand Capitulare is still the main source (even though various other items of information may be deduced from other records). As you know, this is a document, taken to be authentic by most scholars although it is known to us through a transcription of the 13th century²⁷, in which are laid down the terms of collecting customs duties from the ships of Comacchio which were obliged to pay them when they sailed up the Po. Although some scholars, like Mor, have attempted to back-date the period to the years between 603 and 643 in view of the fact that the document refers to usage already in existence²⁸, the document is currently, and I would say correctly, attributed to the reign of Liutprand (or to the year 715 or 730 because these were the years of the 13th Indiction)²⁹.

²⁶ *Ibidem* p. 47-65.

²⁷ R. Balzaretti, «Cities, Emporia and Monasteries», p. 219-224. This famous document was first discussed, in great detail, by Hartmann in L. M. Hartmann, *Zur wirtschaftsgeschichte im fruben Mittelalter*, Gotha, 1904; later dealt with at great length by, amongst others, G. P. Bognetti, «La navigazione padana e il sopravvivere della civiltà antica», *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, series IX, LXXXIX, II, 1964, p. 5-16, and G. Fasoli, «Navigazione fluviale».

²⁸ G. C. Mor, «Un'ipotesi sulla data del "Pactum" c. d. Liutprandino coi "milites" di Comacchio relativo alla navigazione sul Po», *Archivio Storico Italiano*, CXXXV, 1977, p. 493-502.

²⁹ A *presbyter* is mentioned among the interlocutors of the Lombards. If the epigraph, now in the wall on one side of the cathedral of Comacchio, in which a *Vincentius primus episcopus* is mentioned and which dates back to 723, is authentic, it is very likely that the chapter is of 715 rather than 730 (as seems to be implied, although not explicitly, by S. Patitucci Uggeri, «Il 'castrum Cumiaci': evidenze archeologiche e problemi storico-topografici», in *La Civiltà Comacchiese e Pomposiana dalle origini preistoriche al tardo medioevo*, Comacchio 1984, Bologna, p. 263-264). In fact, there is no certain information testifying to the existence of an episcopal cathedral in Comacchio prior to the middle of the 8th century, despite the efforts of Bellini (L. Bellini, *I vescovi di Comacchio*, Ferrara, 1967; *contra* see A. Samaritani, «Medievalia ed altri studi», *Deputazione Provinciale Ferrarese di Storia Patria. Atti e Memorie*, series III, IX, 1970, p. 7-96).

An indication of the goods transported (at least some of them) comes to us from their being mentioned as tithes which the merchants were obliged to pay at almost all ports of call (fig. 2): salt is obviously the product most frequently mentioned³⁰, but there are also oil, *garum* and pepper. Of course payments in money are also mentioned. Some of these goods that were taken as tolls, and which therefore means that the people of Comacchio could make them available, as the Venetians were also to do³¹, were not produced locally, despite the efforts of some scholars to prove the opposite. Oil, destined mainly for the church³², was not local production because it seems quite ridiculous to suppose, as some have done, that it was produced in the olive groves that are recorded in *Insula Pomposiana*³³ or in Romagna³⁴. The spices were certainly not local production³⁵ and nor, perhaps, was even the *garum*, a fish sauce that was still appreciated during the western early medieval period³⁶ and which should not be confused, as it has been, with marinated fish³⁷, even today a spe-

³⁰ This because the Comacchiesi had to produce it and also because, as underlined by Montanari, it must have been of great economic value for the Lombard king, and not only for him: M. Montanari, «Il capitolare di Liutprando: note di storia dell'economia e dell'alimentazione», in *La Civiltà Comacchiese e Pomposiana dalle origini preistoriche al tardo medioevo*, Comacchio 1984, Bologna, p. 468.

³¹ See, for example, the tribute in pepper and cinnamon paid by these to the monastery of Bobbio in the 9th century: A. Castagnetti - M. Luzzati - G. Pasquali e A. Vasina (a cura di), *Inventari, Inventari altomedievali di terre, uomini e redditi*, Roma 1979, p. 138.

³² M. Montanari, *L'alimentazione contadina nell'alto Medioevo*, Naples, 1979, p. 396-399.

³³ L. Bellini, *Le saline dell'antico Delta padano*, Ferrara, 1962, p. 101, note 2; A. I. Pini, «Due colture specialistiche del medioevo: fra la vite e l'olivo nell'Italia padana», in V. Fumagalli - G. Rossetti (edited by), *Medioevo Rurale*, Bologna, 1980, p. 130-131.

³⁴ See S. Patitucci Uggeri, «Il 'castrum Cumiaci'», p. 265. This despite the cultivation of olives having been more common, in northern Italy, than has previously been thought (G. Pasquali, «Olivi e olio nella Lombardia prealpina. Contributo allo studio delle colture e delle rese agricole altomedievali», *Studi Medievali*, XIII, 1972, p. 258). Regarding the production of oil in northern Italy and its influence, see the recent works: G. M. Varanini - A. Brugnoli, «Olivi e olio nel patrimonio della famiglia di Totone da Campione», in S. Gasparri - C. La Rocca (eds), *Carte di famiglia. Strategie, rappresentazione e memoria del gruppo familiare di Totone di Campione (721-877)*, Rome, 2005, p. 141-156 and G. M. Varanini - A. Brugnoli, «Olivi e olio nel medioevo italiano», in A. Brugnoli - G. M. Varanini (edited by), *Olivi e olio nel medioevo italiano*, Bologna, 2005, p. 3-100.

³⁵ M. Montanari, *L'alimentazione contadina*, pp. 407-411.

³⁶ *Ibidem* pp. 410-411.

³⁷ See L. Bellini, *Le saline dell'antico Delta padano*, p. 100-101.

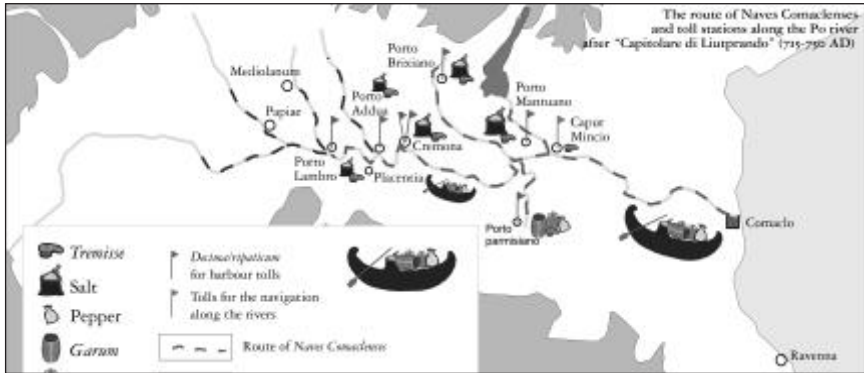


Fig. 2. Distribution map of ports used by the Comacchiesi, according to the Liutprand Capitolare.

Goods	Provenance	Container	
Oil	→ Oriental area or south Italy	→ Amphorae	
Wine	→ Oriental area or south Italy	→ Amphorae, Barrels	
Spices (pepper)	→ Orient	→ Small amphorae (?), Small sacks	
Salt	→ Local	→ Sacks	
<i>Garum</i>	→ Orient	→ Amphorae	
Pickled Fish	→ Local	→ Barrels	
Silk, Tissues	→ Orient	→ Tissue rolls, Boxes	
Incense, Aromatic herbs, Myrrh	→ Orient	→ Amphorae, Boxes	

Fig. 3. Table of goods traded by the Comacchiesi (cloths, fabrics, wine are not expressly mentioned in the Capitolare).

ciality of Comacchio³⁸. It is also possible that the ships from Comacchio traded other products from the Far East, not expressly mentioned in the Capitolare, such as cloth and highly-valued fabrics.

But what are the archaeological markers of these goods, which are able not only to certify their passage but also to explain to us their entity and distribution? (fig. 3)

Salt could be carried in sacks³⁹, as could spices; barrels could be used for fish in brine; silks and fabrics could travel in rolls and chests; amphorae could preferably be used for the *garum*, oil and also for wine⁴⁰. Most of these products, therefore, could escape from archaeological evidence and it is not enough to monitor, as has been suggested⁴¹, the distribution of soapstone vessels as return merchandise, to fully understand the sense of these relationships. It is clear that soapstone acts as an indirect marker of these relationships between places in the Po valley area and it also seems clear that its capillary diffusion, reaching its peak between the 8th and 10th century⁴², must be associated with a renewed vitality and efficiency of the waterway connections (which made the export of these products more competitive, or cheaper, than the production of cooking pots). Nevertheless, the distribution of soapstone vessels is not able to answer our question regarding the entity of imports and their distribution.

In recent years increasingly detailed research into amphorae as containers⁴³ has shown that the production and, above all, the circulation of amphorae continued in Italy well beyond the 7th century. Going beyond this chrono-

³⁸ For a technical meaning of the term see M. Montanari, «Il capitolare di Liutprando», p. 470. Of course this does not mean that the Comacchiesi lacked the raw materials to produce it.

³⁹ But G. Fasoli, «Navigazione fluviale», p. 590, seems to think that the salt was directly loaded onto the ships and protected with a covering of mats and wooden boards.

⁴⁰ Although not mentioned in the Capitolare, wine continues to be a widely diffused product throughout the Po valley, even though it is generally taken to be of local production. See M. Montanari, *L'alimentazione contadina*, p. 378: "Ben di rado, e più per motivi di prestigio che per reale necessità, si doveva importare vino da lontano" ("Very rarely, and more for prestige than real necessity, wine had to be imported from afar").

⁴¹ S. Patitucci Uggeri, «Il 'castrum Cumiacli'», p. 281.

⁴² A. Alberti, «Produzione e commercializzazione della lapis ollaris in Italia settentrionale tra Tardoantico e Altomedioevo», in S. Gelichi (ed), *I Congresso nazionale di Archeologia medievale*, Florence, 1997, p. 336.

⁴³ I refer in particular to the study of the Crypta Balbi areas in Rome and the sites of Ostia and Porto: B. Ciarrocchi - A. Martin - L. Paroli - H. Patterson, «Produzione e circolazione di ceramiche tardoantiche ed altomedievali ad Ostia e Porto», in L. Paroli - P. Delogu (ed), *La Storia economica di Roma nell'alto medioevo alla luce dei recenti scavi archeologici*, Roma 1991, Florence 1993, p. 203-246.

logical barrier (which also removes from isolation the regions of the Byzantine world and partly of the Islamic world, which were to continue, in relation to the western world, to use amphorae as containers but only for medium-range local trade), has allowed us not only to look at some past findings in a new light but also to reconsider the possibility that this extraordinary archaeological marker may also be used to understand the phases of the 8th and 9th century in Italy and, with regard to our present subject, in northern Italy. This revision has thus enabled us to recognise these amphorae in Rimini⁴⁴, Venezia⁴⁵, Verona⁴⁶ and, on a smaller scale or sometimes uncertain, in Grado⁴⁷, Cervia, Brescia, Milano⁴⁸ and perhaps in Pavia⁴⁹ (fig. 4).

⁴⁴ C. Negrelli, «Rimini tra V e VIII secolo: topografia e cultura materiale», in A. Augenti (ed), *Le città italiane tra la Tarda Antichità e l'Alto Medioevo*, Ravenna 26-28 February 2004, p. 219-271.

⁴⁵ Amphorae of this kind are illustrated in the volume concerning the excavations of Torcello (L. Leciejewicz - E. Tabaczyńska - S. Tabaczyński, *Torcello. Scavi 1961-62*, Rome, 1977), but the date of their recognition is much more recent. The first indications are from I. Modrzewska, «Anfore romane e bizantine nella laguna di Venezia. Problemi da risolvere», *Terra Incognita*, Venice, 1996, p. 25-40, and I. Modrzewska, «Bizantyjskie amfory (wydobyte) z laguny weneckiej», in *Studia Zdziejów Cywilizacji (Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Jerzemu Gæssowskiemu)*, Warsaw, 1998, p. 267-271; subsequently, also thanks to new excavations in the lagoon, the number of official recognitions has increased considerably: see A. Toniolo, «Importazioni tra IV e VIII secolo d. C. nella Laguna di Venezia», in *Atti del Convegno L'Archeologia dell'Adriatico dalla preistoria al Medioevo*, Florence, 2003, p. 616-622; A. Toniolo, «Le anfore», in L. Fozzati (ed), *Ca' Vendramin Calergi. Archeologia urbana lungo il Canal Grande di Venezia*, Venice, 2005, p. 90-94; A. Toniolo in press1, «Anfore dell'area lagunare», in S. Gelichi - C. Negrelli (eds), *La circolazione delle ceramiche nell'Adriatico tra Tarda Antichità ed Altomedioevo. III Incontro di Studio Cer.am.Is sulle ceramiche tardoantiche ed altomedievali*, Venice, 2004 and A. Toniolo in press2, «Venezia, ex Cinema San Marco. Le anfore», in *I vasai del Leone*, Venice, 2004.

⁴⁶ B. Bruno in press, «Ceramiche da alcuni contesti tardoantichi e altomedievali di Verona», in S. Gelichi - C. Negrelli (eds), *La circolazione delle ceramiche nell'Adriatico tra Tarda Antichità ed Altomedioevo. III Incontro di Studio Cer.am.Is sulle ceramiche tardoantiche ed altomedievali*, Venice, 2004.

⁴⁷ I. Modrzewska, «Bizantyjskie amfory», Ruc. 4.

⁴⁸ C. Negrelli in press1, «Vasellame e contenitori da trasporto tra Tarda Antichità ed Altomedioevo: l'Emilia Romagna e l'area medio-adriatica», in S. Gelichi - C. Negrelli (eds), *La circolazione delle ceramiche nell'Adriatico tra Tarda Antichità ed Altomedioevo. III Incontro di Studio Cer.am.Is sulle ceramiche tardoantiche ed altomedievali*, Venice, 2004, Mantua, p. ? and C. Negrelli in press2, «Circolazione produzione e consumo tra VI e IX secolo: dal territorio del Padovetere a Comacchio», in *Genti del Delta*, Ferrara.

⁴⁹ H. Blake, «Ceramiche romane e medievali e pietra ollare dagli scavi nella Torre Civica di Pavia», *Archeologia Medievale*, V, 1978, p. 157.

But it has been, above all, a recent analysis of materials, both old and new, from Comacchio that has offered unexpected indicators. These materials are important for three reasons. Firstly, their quantity: there are, at the moment, about fifty items (a low assessment that does not take account of portions and uncertain fragments), widely underestimated, if one only considers the fact that Comacchio has never been the subject of any specific, extensive archaeological investigation⁵⁰. Secondly, the organization into type of these remains, further confirmed by suitable minero-petrographic analysis⁵¹, which indicates a great variety of origin, some from southern Italy, others from the Aegean and the Black Sea. Thirdly, their concentration in the site of Villaggio San Francesco, subjected to emergency excavation in 1997 and which we interpret as one of the landing places of Comacchio (and to which we will return) (fig. 5).

Of course it has not been possible to establish with certainty which products these amphorae contained (I suppose oil and wine, but perhaps also *garum*), although in the future analysis expressly dedicated to this subject may tell us; and, of course, it is equally premature to claim for them a widespread, consistent circulation in the Po valley. However, their presence indicates: a) the existence of substantial imports from southern Italy and, even more surprising, from the east during the 8th and perhaps part of the 9th century; b) these imports, widespread both in the lagoon of Venice and that of Comacchio, testify that these places were undoubtedly nodal points in the redistribution of merchandise, not only of local origin; c) to these places must have been added others, along the coast, as testified by the cases of Rimini, Cervia and Grado; d) their consumption, beyond the redistribution area, must have been socially selective, as shown by the cases of Rimini (a *domus* of the aristocracy), Cervia (an *ecclesia*) and perhaps Brescia (the monastery of San Salvatore) and Verona⁵².

⁵⁰ In September 2006 a survey excavation was begun in front of the cathedral of Comacchio (by the Ca' Foscari University of Venice and the Soprintendenza per I Beni Archeologici dell'Emilia Romagna). Although still underway, there is already a substantial presence of this kind of amphorae, mostly residual in late and post-medieval levels, confirming that the information obtained from the calculation of those from Villaggio San Francesco, and from various other finds in the town and surrounding areas, have indeed not been overestimated.

⁵¹ C. Capelli in press, «Analisi mineralogiche», in *Catalogo Mostra Genti del Delta*.

⁵² For Rimini see C. Negrelli, «Rimini tra V e VIII secolo»; for Cervia see S. Gelichi - M. G. Maioli - P. Novara - M. L. Stoppioni, *S. Martino prope litus maris. Storia e archeologia di una chiesa scomparsa del territorio cervese*, Florence, 1996; for Brescia see G. P. Brogiolo (ed), *S. Giulia di Brescia, gli scavi dal 1980 al 1992. Reperti preromani, romani e alto medievali*, Florence, 1999; for Verona see G. Cavalieri Manasse - B. Bruno, «Edilizia abitativa a Verona», in J. Ortalli e M. Heinzelmänn (eds), *Abitare in città. La Cisalpina tra impero e medioevo*, Wiesbaden 2003, p. 47-64.



Fig. 4. Distribution map of 8th-9th century amphorae in northern Italy.

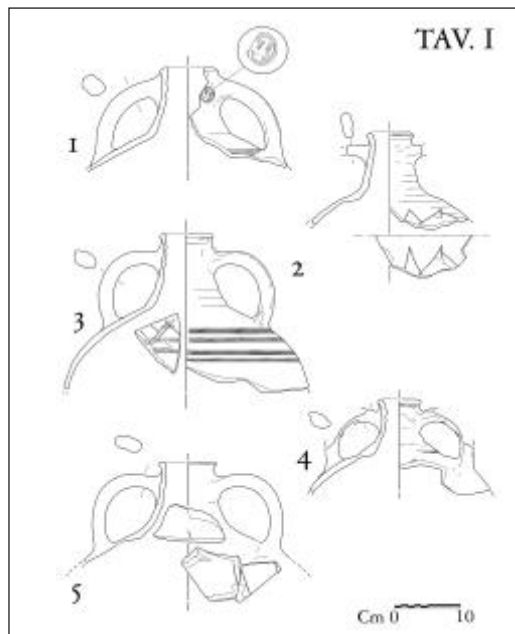


Fig. 5. Amphorae of 8th-9th century from Comacchio.

The presence of amphorae in the Po valley, as containers from the 8th and 9th century, not only increases our possibilities of interpreting the archaeological record of these centuries, but constitutes, even at this level, an important element for evaluating the entity and ramification of trade relations. Lastly, it throws a new light upon the explicit reference, in written sources of that time, to the term *anfora*, which is expressly used as a term of measurement, for example, for wine (*Inventari passim*) and of which an echo may be recognised, again in the early medieval period and in a Venetian context, in the use of the capacity measure *botte d'anfora*⁵³.

The organization of the settlement and the infrastructures

A second aspect highlighted by Balzaretti to contest the fact that, in the 8th century, emporia did indeed exist in this area, is based once again on archaeological evidence *ex silentio*. In fact, it is possible to have some ideas, although not yet plentiful, about some of these places now.

The site which is, once again, most important in this respect, remains Comacchio. In 1997, following the trenches for the creation of infrastructures linked to new building works in the location of Villaggio San Francesco, excavations were carried out of substantial remains (in terms of quantity, distribution and characteristics) of wooden structures on piles (fig. 6). Subsequent elaborations of this excavation, unpublished up to now, when related to discoveries made in the Nineteen-twenties⁵⁴ (fig. 7), provide clear evidence of extensive infrastructures (landing-stages, wharves and jetties) certainly linked to use of the place as a port (figs. 8-9). Here I will pass over the commentary on single items of evidence and the reasons, also technical, that have led us to this interpretation⁵⁵. This site, dating back to the 8th and 9th century on the basis of products found, combines rather well with the other material data, more or less confirmed by excavations and findings, relating to this settlement and allows us to propose an explanation of the development of the site less uncertain than that which has been given up till now.

The settlement must have had an institutional centre, a seat of religious authority (the bishop, at least from the second half of the 8th century

⁵³ A. I. Pini, «Alimentazione, trasporti, fiscalità: i “containers” medievali», *Archeologia Medievale*, VIII, 1981, p. 177.

⁵⁴ S. Patitucci Uggeri, «Il ‘castrum Cumiacli’».

⁵⁵ S. Gelichi - C. Negrelli - D. Calao - E. Grandi, «Comacchio tra IV e X secolo: territorio, abitato e infrastrutture», in R. Francovich - M. Valenti (eds), *IV Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale*, Florence, 2006, p. 114-123.



Fig. 7. Comacchio, palings found in Valle Ponti by Proni in the Twenties.

onwards), perhaps also civil⁵⁶, which we may reasonably suppose was found in the area where there still stands today, although greatly changed, the cathedral. All around, separated by canals, the town must have grown (about the features of which we have little information at present) (fig. 10). In the south-east and in the north-west there were two *insulae*, the locations of monasteries (Santa Maria in Aula Regia and San Mauro). To the west of the *insula* of Santa Maria in Aula Regia there are to be found the port infrastructures we have mentioned, in a connecting position between an artificial canal (that of Motta della Girata) which used to connect with the *padus Vetus* (on which there used to be the church of *Santa Maria in Pado Vetere*) and Ravenna to the south, and a coastal lagoon, therefore with the sea to the north (where the salt-works must also have been located). The organization of spaces, the nature of the infrastructures and the size of the site cannot fail to remind us of the features of the most famous emporia of northern Europe (fig. 11), although with some obvious differences.

⁵⁶ I do not enter into the issue of the functions represented by the community and of the figures mentioned in the Capitolare, among which a *presbyter*, two consuls and a *magister militum* (on which see G. Fasoli, «Navigazione fluviale», p. 583-584).

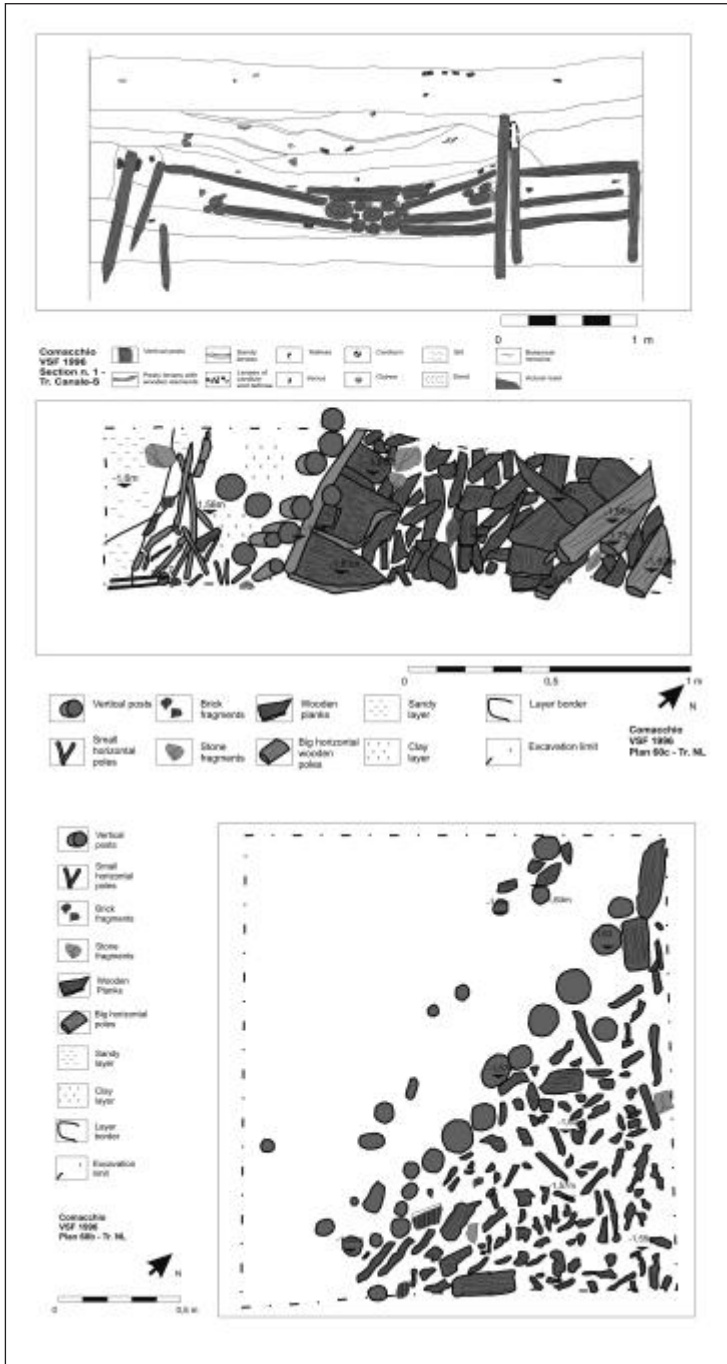


Fig. 8. Comacchio, Villaggio San Francesco. Plans and sections of landing stages and waterfronts found in the excavations of 1996.

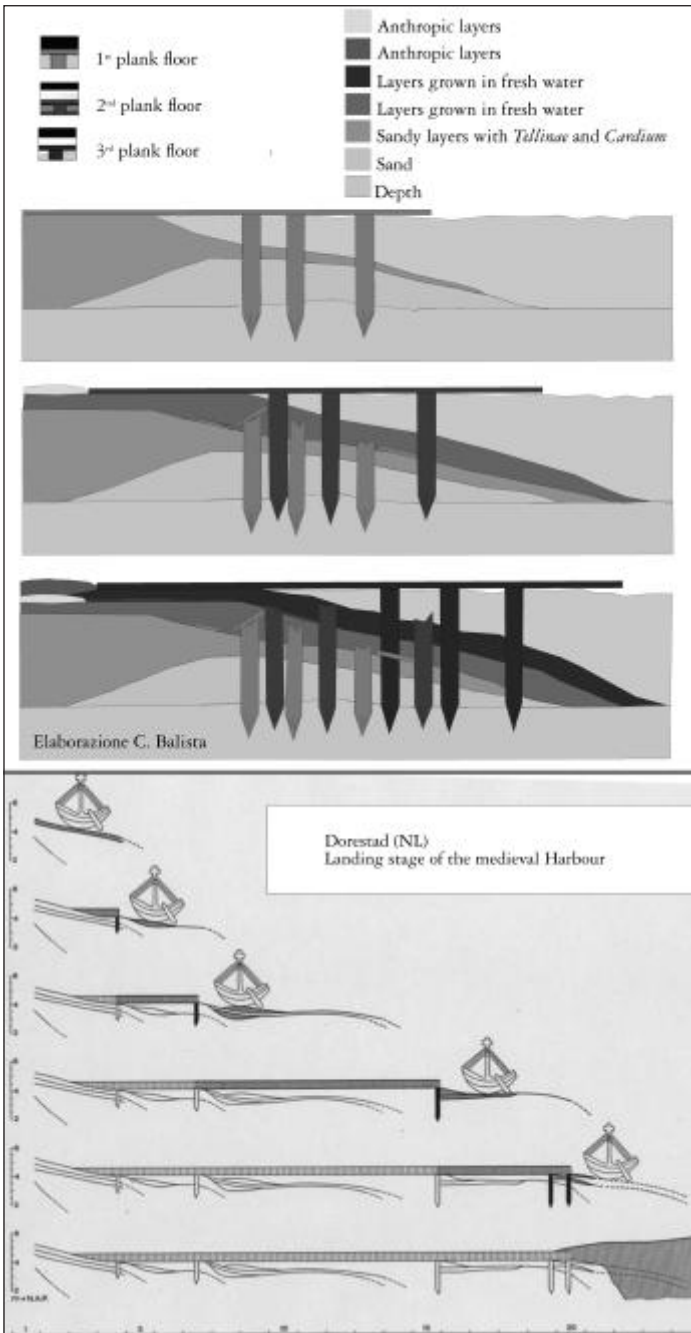


Fig. 9. Comacchio, Villaggio San Francesco. Development section of landing stages (above, ric. Balista) compared with those found at Dorestad (W. A. Van Es - W. J. H. Verwers, *Excavations at Dorestad 1. The Harbour: Hoogstraat I*, Amersfoort, 1980.

A fairly clear plan of how the inhabited areas were organized in a settlement of this kind is provided for us, at present, by the site of Cittanova, a place traditionally associated with the Emperor Heraclius (but this is a late tradition) to the north of the Venetian lagoon. Thanks to recent studies⁵⁷, which have re-elaborated the interesting records produced at the time of the archaeological research of the Eighties⁵⁸, it can be very clearly seen how this town also developed along a longitudinal axis, in this case a large canal, at the end of which there was a nucleus located on a natural rise (the centres of religious and civil authorities). Alongside this waterway there were portions of land bordered by canals, with wooden dwellings and entrances (also archaeologically excavated) on the canal itself (fig. 12).

The organization of Cittanova, well-preserved due to its having been one of the loser 'sites' of the Venetian lagoon, therefore provides us, approximately well enough, with the picture of how this type of settlement must have been organized, certainly not very different from that of primitive Venice.

Lastly, regarding Torcello we have quite general data concerning the extent of the settlement, while more specific information refers exclusively to the collocation of institutional residential areas (at least the Episcopal church, monasteries and other churches) (fig. 13).

As far as we can tell up to now therefore, these settlements are characterized by: a) the fact that they grow along a waterway (Cittanova) or else within a lagoon area (Torcello, Olivolo, Comacchio); b) a certain regularity of plan; c) an appreciable extent of the inhabited area; d) a marked distinction between areas of an institutional nature (residences of the bishop, public authorities and other church groups and institutes), generally inhabited areas (Comacchio, Cittanova, Torcello) and production/artisan areas (Torcello) or areas with maritime infrastructures (Comacchio). Settlements of this kind (to which other cases may be added, like that of Ferrara⁵⁹, per-

⁵⁷ D. Calaon, «Cittanova (VE): analisi GIS», in R. Francovich - M. Valenti (eds), *IV Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale*, Florence, 2006.

⁵⁸ S. Salvatori (ed), «Ricerche archeologiche a Cittanova (Eraclia) 1987-1988», *Quaderni di Archeologia del Veneto*, V, 1989, p. 77-114; S. Salvatori, «Civitas Nova Eracliana: risultati delle campagne 1987-1988 e prospettive generali», in *Aquileia e l'Arco Adriatico* (A.A. 36), Udine, 1990, p. 299-309; S. Salvatori, «Cittanova-Eraclia e il suo territorio», in G. P. Brogiolo- L. Castelletti (eds), *Il territorio tra tardantico e altomedioevo. Metodi di indagine e risultati*, Florence, 1992, p. 93-98.

⁵⁹ Ferrara is, from this point of view, quite an unusual case, as the very consistent number of archaeological investigations carried out in the city centre over the last twenty-five years has not yet explained at all the early-medieval phases of the city. On this problem see some remarks in S. Gelichi, «I castelli bizantini ai confini



Fig. 11. Comacchio, environmental reconstruction of the early medieval settlement (drawing by Merlo).

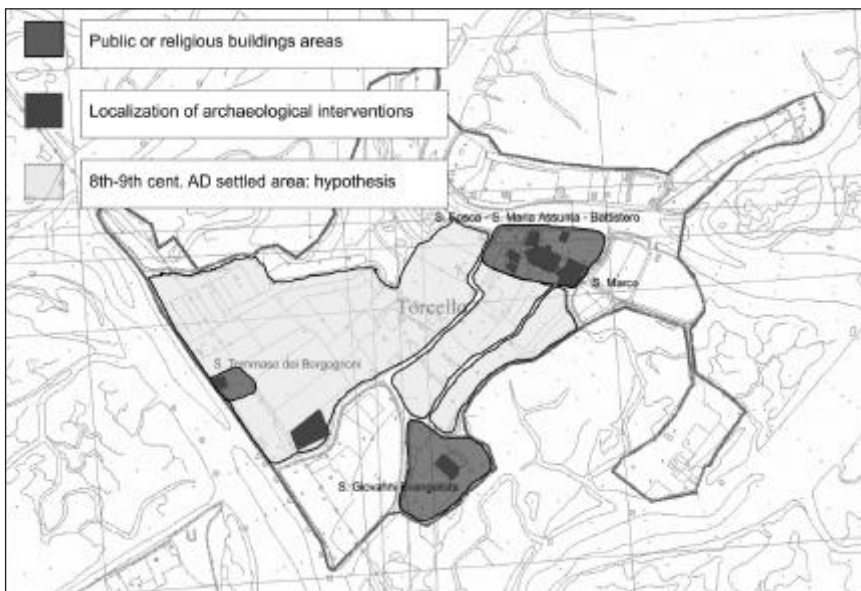


Fig. 13. Torcello, hypothesis of the location of early medieval settlement areas.

dell'Esarcato: Ferrara, Argenta e Comacchio», in S. Gelichi - G. P. Brogiolo, *Nuove ricerche sui castelli altomedievali dell'Italia settentrionale*, Florence, 1998, p. 49-62, S. Gelichi in press, «Flourishing Places in North-Eastern Italy» and M. Librenti - C. Negrelli, «Le indagini archeologiche 1990-1991. Dati per la topografia tardomedievale dell'area urbana», in R. Francovich - M. Valenti (eds), *IV Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale*, Florence, 2006, p. 109-113.

haps a little later but appearing to have developed in the same way, or those not yet completely investigated, like Olivolo, or not even clearly identified, like Metamauco), are unique settlement systems which, at present, find no convincing parallels in the rest of Italy.

Artisan trades

As said previously, the emporia were also centres of production and artisan trades⁶⁰. Here also, even though the archaeological evidence is still rather scarce, some signs, both direct and indirect, already exist.

The most important example remains that of Torcello where, during the excavations of the early Sixties, a structure for the production of glass was found (fig. 14). At first associated with the manufacturing works of the episcopal church of Santa Maria Assunta (and thus dated to the 7th century)⁶¹, it has recently been dated to no earlier than the 9th century⁶². This chronological shift, which finds a better explanation in a period when, not altogether by chance, Torcello (the only place in the lagoon to be so) was defined as *emporion mega*, exonerates such artisan trades from the sense of improvisation (and impermanence) imposed by their close relation with the church workshop. I would avoid judging this evidence in a summary manner, as a careful analysis of the features of the archaeology undertaken at Torcello shows very well, as I have already had occasion to emphasise⁶³, the reason why extensive traces of settlement and commercial and artisan trades have not yet emerged (although there is some evidence of metalworking).

Artisan trades have not at present been found in Comacchio, but with regard to the archaeology of this place, as we have seen, strong reservations are held although some indirect, interesting references exist, which are worth looking at briefly.

Recently, in the excavation of piazza Ferrari in Rimini at levels of the 8th century⁶⁴, some fine pottery (closed forms) was found, frequently decorated with comb and wave motifs on the shoulder, which bear close com-

⁶⁰ R. Hodges, *Dark Ages Economics*.

⁶¹ L. Leciejewicz - E. Tabaczyńska - S. Tabaczyński, *Torcello. Scavi 1961-62*; E. Tabaczyńska, «Le origini della produzione vetraria veneziana», in *Le origini di Venezia. Problemi esperienze proposte*, Venice 1980, Venice, 1981, p. 120.

⁶² L. Leciejewicz, *Torcello antica e medievale alla luce delle nuove ricerche archeologiche*, in Leciejewicz (ed.), p. 87-98, 2000, and L. Leciejewicz, «Italian-Polish research into the origin of Venice», *Archaeologica Polona*, 40, 2002, p. 58.

⁶³ S. Gelichi, «Venezia tra archeologia e storia».

⁶⁴ C. Negrelli, «Rimini tra V e VIII secolo».

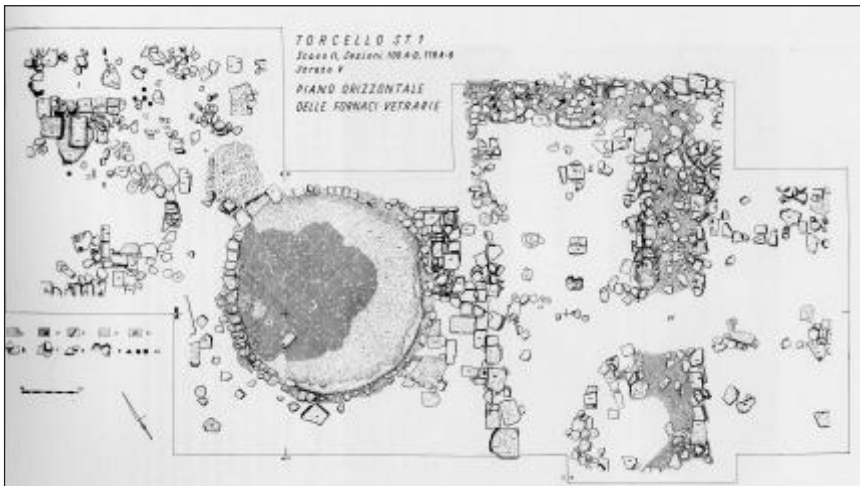


Fig. 14. Torcello, glass factory (da L. Leciejewicz - E. Tabaczyńska - S. Tabaczyński, *Torcello. Scavi 1961-62*).

parison with similar products of the same period from the *Crypta Balbi* in Rome and from Ostia and Porto. The circumstances of piazza Ferrari in Rimini ceased to be isolated once the pottery that was found in Comacchio was more carefully analysed (fig. 15, n. 4-12), especially those from the excavations of Villaggio San Francesco and Santa Maria in Aula Regia, which, moreover, confirmed them as dating back to the 8th century⁶⁵. The minero-petrographic analyses of the clay body of some of these items found in Comacchio seem to exclude importation from central Italy (which had been at first thought), while they reinforce the possibility that the centre (or centres) of production are to be found in this very area of the north Adriatic. A Venetian excavation (that of Ca' Vendramin Calergi), published recently⁶⁶, has produced, at the oldest levels dated by the author to the 7th and 8th century, items of this kind⁶⁷, leaving more than a suspicion that similar items are more frequent in the lagoon than the archaeological literature now available (that is, published) would lead

⁶⁵ C. Negrelli in press², «Circolazione produzione e consumo».

⁶⁶ L. Fozzati (ed), *Ca' Vendramin Calergi. Archeologia urbana lungo il Canal Grande di Venezia*, Venice, 2005.

⁶⁷ V. Gobbo, «Le ceramiche della prima fase medievale», in L. Fozzati (ed), *Ca' Vendramin Calergi. Archeologia urbana lungo il Canal Grande di Venezia*, Venice, 2005, p. 95-98, n. 1-5.

us to suppose. In the picture of pottery production in northern Italy, known about for some time⁶⁸, these items form a notable exception. It is premature to claim a widespread use of fine pottery tableware beyond the 7th century in the Po valley, but these findings undoubtedly indicate at least the presence of social groups whose habits, in terms of production and consumption, were different from others in those areas.

A similar case may be put forward with regard to glazed pottery: the completely glazed type, decorated with applied pine-seeds, similar to the 'Forum Ware' of Lazio but definitely made in northern Italy and dating back between the last quarter of the 8th and the 9th century (fig. 15, n. 1-3); also the partially glazed type, recognised for some time in Romagna and part of Emilia ('Sant'Alberto type')⁶⁹ and now widely recorded even in Venice⁷⁰, dating back between the 9th and 11th century (fig. 16).

The existence of these items, first the fine, unglazed pottery, then the once-fired glazed pottery, independently of the exact location of the kilns which is not yet known (but it does not seem to be by chance that their distribution is concentrated partly in the Po Delta area, partly in the Venetian lagoon), testifies to technologies that were considerably diversified compared with the traditional pictures of pottery production known in northern Italy between the 7th and 10th century. Here, however, we are interested not so much in highlighting the production and distribution circumstances, although extremely interesting, as in the fact that they seem in themselves to be the mark of artisan specializations which may have found, in these emporia, their natural collocation.

The birth of Venice and the end of Comacchio

In 932 the doge Pietro II Candiano sent an army against the people of Comacchio in response to an alleged grievance received⁷¹. The violence of the Venetians, at least in the account given, appears to have been dreadful, as they attacked not only the 'castrum' (*igne combussit*), but also the

⁶⁸ G. P. Brogiolo - S. Gelichi, «La ceramica grezza medievale nella pianura padana», in *La ceramica medievale nel Mediterraneo occidentale*, Siena-Faenza 1984, Florence, 1986, p. 293-316.

⁶⁹ S. Gelichi - F. Sbarra, «La tavola di San Gerardo. Ceramica tra X e XI secolo nel nord Italia: importazioni e produzioni locali», *Rivista di Archeologia*, XXVII, 2003, p. 119-141.

⁷⁰ V. Gobbo, «Le ceramiche», p. 98-102.

⁷¹ R. Cessi, *Venezia ducale*, p. 313-314.

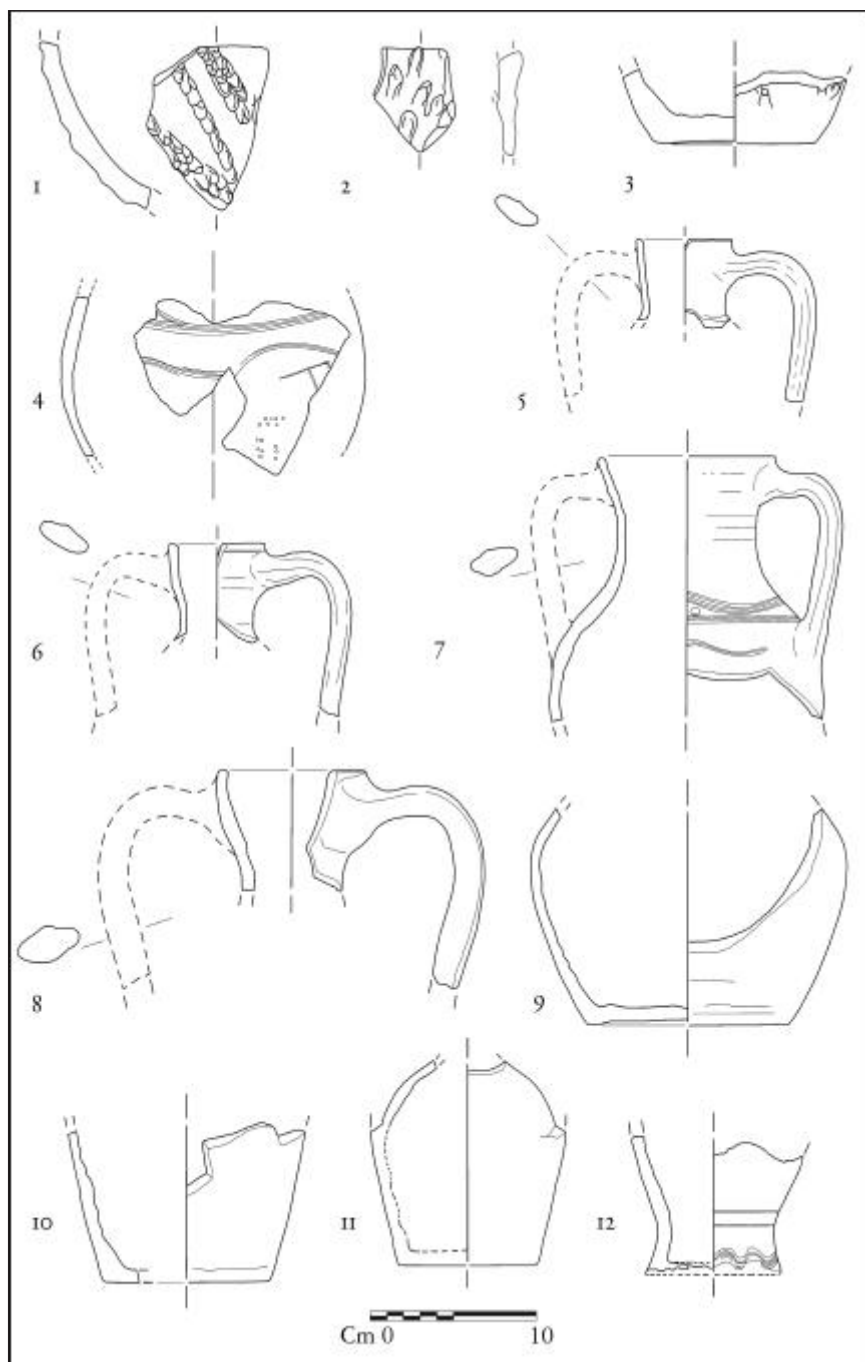


Fig. 15. Comacchio. Early medieval fine pottery and once-fired glazed pottery with applied lozenge decoration.

inhabitants⁷²: those who survived were deported to Venice. This military action, then, seems to have been of a decisive kind and, in fact, from that moment on, nothing remains of the flourishing emporium but faint traces in written records, all describing a strictly local historical situation.

The incursion into and destruction of Comacchio in 932 was not the first that the settlement had had to bear (although the outcome appears to have been the most extreme). If we are to believe what Giovanni the Deacon writes, in July 875, about sixty years earlier, it appears that the settlement had been damaged when it was attacked by the Saracens who had tried to conquer Grado. Not succeeding in this, due to the doge Orso having sent a fleet against them, they fell back on Comacchio and sacked it⁷³. Furthermore, in 881, the town was subjected to an initial reprisal from the Venetians, who had taken, as a pretext, the capture by the Comacchiesi, of the doge's brother Giovanni who had been stopped on his way to Rome to see the Pope (moreover, to request that the Comacchiesi should be placed under Venetian jurisdiction)⁷⁴.

In fact, the fate of Comacchio had been sealed for some time. In the *Pactum Lotharii*, in 840, Venetian predominance over trade was already sanctioned (despite the norms that had been fixed by Liutprand with Comacchio retaining formal validity)⁷⁵. Even earlier, in 812, following the peace of Aquisgrana, the Venetians found themselves at last in a privileged position with regard to the Carolingian kings⁷⁶, after Charlemagne, as is known, had tried in vain to take over the lagoon⁷⁷. The treaty of

⁷² Giovanni the Deacon, *Istoria Veneticorum*, III, 44: "Ubi dum Comaclensis insule hominis quosdam Veneticos temere comprehendissent, ipse vero tanti dedecoris iniuriam non ferens, misso illuc exercitu, ipsorum castrum igne combussit quosdamque illorum intericiens, reliquos utriusque sexus ad Veneciam duxit".

⁷³ *Ibidem*, "protinus recedentes ab urbe, Cumaclensem villam depopulati sunt". The same episode is also narrated by Andrea da Bergamo, *Chronicon*, c. 17, who points out that it happened in July 875, about one month before the death of Ludovico II. Andrea is also more precise in indicating the damage done to the town ("in mense iuli Sarracini venerunt et civitate Cummaclo igne cremaverunt").

⁷⁴ Giovanni the Deacon, *Istoria Veneticorum* III, 12 (this is, moreover, the first time that he mentions Comacchio); see also R. Cessi, *Venezia ducale*, p. 286-287.

⁷⁵ G. Luzzatto, «L'economia veneziana nei suoi rapporti con la politica nell'alto medioevo», in V. Branca (ed), *Storia della Civiltà Veneziana. I - Dalle origini al secolo di Marco Polo*, Florence, 1979, p. 98-99.

⁷⁶ C. Azzara, *Venetiae. Determinazione di un'area regionale fra antichità e altomedioevo*, Treviso, 1994, p. 130-135.

⁷⁷ R. Hodges, *Towns and Trade*, p. 62.

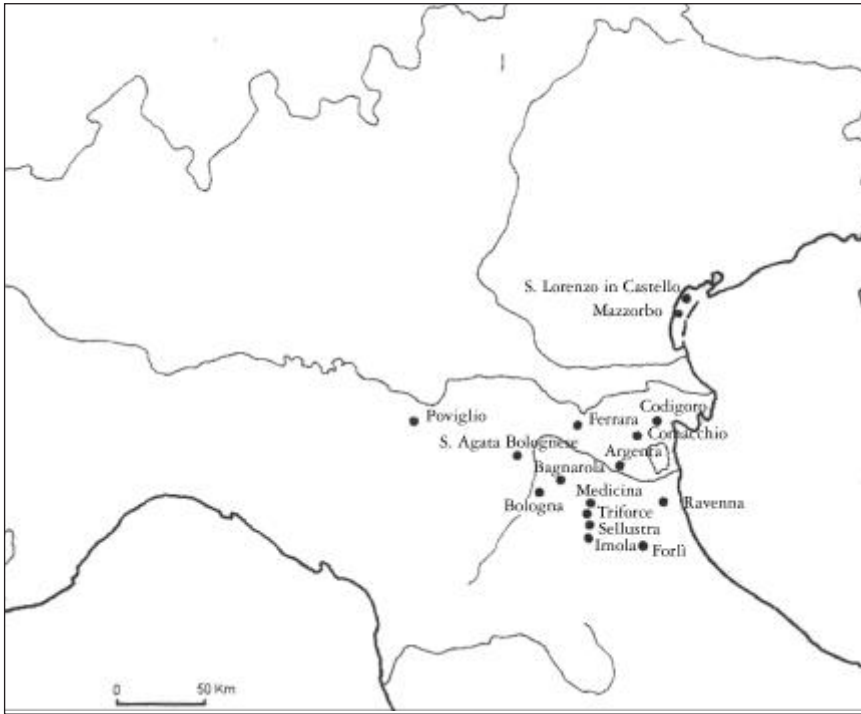


Fig. 16. Distribution map of 'S. Alberto type' glazed pottery
(from S. Gelichi- F. Sbarra, «La tavola di San Gerard»).

Aquisgrana had, moreover, definitively sanctioned the Adriatic as a privileged passage in relations with the East and had identified Venice as the nodal-point of this relationship.

The archaeological evidence of the decline of Comacchio, like that of the rise of Venice, also begins, although of the opposite nature, to look interesting.

With regard to Comacchio, the lack of stratigraphic excavations (with a few recent exceptions that we have mentioned) provides evidence that is very scattered and circumstantial in time, if not altogether devoid of significant markers. The excavations of Villaggio San Francesco (already mentioned) record, for example, levels that do not seem to be beyond the end of the 8th century. It is true that the abandoning of these ports and dwellings may have been due to non-traumatic factors (not emphasized by archaeologists, however); but it is also true that, whatever the reason, these large infrastructures do not seem to have been used any more after the 8th, or at most the first half of the 9th century, in a remarkable coincidence with what the written records tell us concerning more or less likely incursions into the

settlement of Comacchio. Another item of information, which will be evaluated better in future but is not devoid already of some worth, is the total absence, at present, in any site of Comacchio, of the sparse glazed 'S. Alberto type' pottery, a category of products that was widespread even in this area (besides in Venice) during the 9th and above all in the 10th century.

The archaeological data regarding the rise of Venice during the 9th century appear less clear at present. As we know, the political decision to transfer the centre of civil power to Rialto at the beginning of the 9th century⁷⁸, is rightly interpreted by all historians as the birth of the city. This episode, moreover, coincides with a number of events of a strongly ideological nature; that is, the transfer of St. Mark's remains during the rule of duke Justinian in 828⁷⁹, the creation of the walls⁸⁰, which were to protect the new city against the assault of the Hungarians⁸¹ and the fact that, from the time of Ludovico il Pio (814-840), the Venetians were authorized to mint coins⁸², which they did using the Carolingian currency. This last fact leaves us somewhat disconcerted (if one only considers the nominal dependence on Byzantium that peace still sanctioned) and says a great deal about the independence and the Byzantine nature of Venice⁸³.

The material evidence relating to this *floruit* is at present essentially indirect and not without some serious critical reservations. The walls⁸⁴ have been identified in a stretch of wall discovered in 1822 on the island of the Virgins⁸⁵, but such an association seems by no means convincing. The very presence of the walls, also given their direction, leaves some doubts about their actual existence or, at least, their real effectiveness⁸⁶.

⁷⁸ Giovanni the Deacon, *Istoria Veneticorum*, II, 29.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem* II, 39.

⁸⁰ G. Ortalli, «Il problema storico delle origini di Venezia», in *Le origini di Venezia. Problemi esperienze proposte*, Venice 1980, p. 85.

⁸¹ As Giovanni the Deacon seems expressly to indicate, *Istoria Veneticorum* III, 37 and 39.

⁸² M. Stahl, *Zecca. The mint of Venice in the Middle Ages*, Barltimore and London, 2000, p. 4-5.

⁸³ As Gasparri has recently shown, with regard to the first Venetian institutions, in particular the forms of assembly and decree, closer to the methods of the Kingdom: S. Gasparri, «Venezia fra l'Italia bizantina e il regno italico: la civitas e l'assemblea», in S. Gasparri - G. Levi - P. Moro (eds), *Venezia. Itinerari per la storia della città*, Bologna, 1997, p. 69-70 and 77-78.

⁸⁴ Giovanni the Deacon, *Istoria Veneticorum* III, 39.

⁸⁵ G. Casoni, «Sulla destinazione di un'antichissima opera murale scoperta in Venezia», *Memorie del Reale Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere e Arti*, VI, I, 1856, p. 209-234.

⁸⁶ S. Gelichi, «Venezia tra archeologia e storia».

Moreover, the topography of the primitive early medieval town, that which would develop around Rivoalto, still remains uncertain, as also do its confines and thus its extent (so much so that, even recently, there have been no lack of original explanations regarding the possibility that another, and not the Grand Canal, was the main waterway along which the town would develop)⁸⁷. Some scholars have imagined that the church of St. Mark, which was built in the first quarter of the 9th century, is actually preserved within the Contarini edifice⁸⁸, showing how, in this case, the church founded in the period of Partecipazio would have been a building of considerable size for its time. McCormick, to reinforce this sudden *floruit*, links the substantial increase of church buildings, founded during the 9th century, to the growth of the population⁸⁹. Although I am convinced of the relevance of such an association, I must, however, say that this information is based on written records of dubious reliability and on an equally debatable elaboration of them⁹⁰, at present devoid of archaeological verification (fig. 17).

The only aspect, therefore, which concerns material sources, able to provide us with a sufficiently clear picture of the Venetian economic situation at the close of the 9th century, remains the numismatic evidence, already analysed by Tabaczyński with regard to Torcello⁹¹ and recently rediscussed by McCormick with more attention to detail⁹². This is evidence based on the analysis of both circulating currency and, above all, the presence of hoards (including Arab coins).

A lengthy stagnation?

Chris Wickham has recently returned to analysing the situation during the 8th century in various areas of the Mediterranean⁹³. The evidence of this period, taken up again in his recent book *Framing the Early Middle Ages*⁹⁴ is, moreover, the diffusion of merchandise perceptible to the

⁸⁷ A. J. Ammerman, *Venice before the Grand Canal*, "Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome", 48, 2003, p. 141-158.

⁸⁸ J. Warren, «The first church of S. Marco in Venice», *The Antiquaries Journal*, LXX, 1990, p. 327-359, and J. Warren, «La prima chiesa di San Marco Evangelista a Venezia», in R. Polacco (ed), *Storia dell'arte marciana: l'architettura*, Venice, 1997, p. 184-200.

⁸⁹ M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, Ch. 18.1.

⁹⁰ W. Dorigo, *Venezia Origini. Fondamenti, ipotesi, metodi*, Milano, 1983.

⁹¹ In L. Leciejewicz - E. Tabaczyńska - S. Tabaczyński, *Torcello. Scavi 1961-62*, p. 271-285.

⁹² M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, p. 529.

⁹³ C. Wickham, «Overview».

⁹⁴ C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.

archaeological record and which should constitute the diagnostic elements for evaluating the sense, the entity and the role of trade in that period⁹⁵: that is, ARS (and eastern types) and amphorae. Their disappearance, certain in one case (ARS) but, as we have seen, not at all confirmed in the other (amphorae), would signal, basically, the loss of these relationships, of a marked regional diversity and lastly, a localisation of economic and trading relationships. This would have happened at the same time in various regions of the western Mediterranean and, more specifically, in both southern France and northern Italy. The evidence from the Comacchio Capitolare (this time a written source) is summarily interpreted as being exclusively concerned with the trading of salt (a valuable commodity, but of local production)⁹⁶ and not as the tip of an iceberg that hides relationships of far greater implications and extent. Essentially, the 8th century, in particular that of Italy during the Lombard reign, is seen as a long period of stagnation and, although society in the Po valley cannot be said to have been underdeveloped⁹⁷, its economic function would have been simplified enough to be placed outside what we may define as a system.

I am not at all convinced by this interpretation. Archaeological evidence that is used to explain certain aspects of society in Late Antiquity (the presence or absence of ARS, for example) does not necessarily offer the same parameters for interpreting early medieval society. The absence of ARS, already very infrequent in the Po valley during Late Antiquity, as Wickham himself did not fail to point out⁹⁸, may instead be correctly understood as a sign of the disappearance of particular, widespread behavioural norms, in both food usage and ways of eating. At the same time, in various forms and above all in various sizes, fine pottery (first unglazed, then glazed) are in any case recorded in these areas in the 8th and 9th century. The volume and entity of the merchandise that circulated in the Po valley, along the main route of the Po itself (which provided a direct link to the capital of the kingdom) are still underestimated, but the refining of our ability to perceive the archaeological sensors (e.g. the amphorae) is showing that it appears to be of a different kind. I do not know, therefore, to what extent early medieval society had become 'unsophisticated', but I am certain that our way of analysing material sources is still 'unsophisticated'.

⁹⁵ C. Wickham, «Overview», p. 359.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem* p.359.

⁹⁷ Here I refer to R. Balzaretti, «Cities, Emporia and Monasteries», p. 228.

⁹⁸ C. Wickham, «Overview», p. 359.

The information which seems the most important to me, at present, is not only the quantity but also the extent, the nature and the features of these new settlements that developed in a region of land lying between the Venetian lagoon and Ravenna. In those cases where there has been better investment in research into material sources, there has been no lack of results. What is impressive about some of these places is not only the extent in hectares potentially occupied by the settlement (equal to, if not greater than, many emporia of northern Europe) (fig. 18), but also the imposing size of infrastructures, the investment in the creation of real harbour facilities or in the opening of artificial canals. Even the fact that the vast majority of these settlements became bishops' seats or were characterized by a complex society, about which little is known or described in written records, I believe is a further aspect that confirms not only the vitality but also the growing, knowledgeable social and economic function that these places were exercising.

To sum up, and to end here, I believe that following the peace of 680, as Hartmann had already underlined in his time⁹⁹ and, more recently, Paolo Delogu¹⁰⁰ there was a change of political climate that may well explain the social and economic picture we have outlined. Even the numismatic evidence¹⁰¹, "e che consiste [verso la fine del VII secolo n.d.r.] nella comparsa simultanea, nelle varie regioni politico-economiche in cui si era frazionata l'Italia dopo la conquista longobarda, di monete nuove" ("which consists [towards the end of the 7th century, ed. note] of the simultaneous appearance, in the various political and economic regions into which Italy was divided after the Lombard conquest, of new coins"), cannot be considered of little significance. Furthermore, with regard to coins, one must not forget the existence of silver fractions of *siliqua*, probably eighths, minted in Italy at least from the second half of the 7th century onwards, which seem to have been in circulation for quite some time (at least until the first decade of the 8th century)¹⁰². These coins, found ever more frequently in archae-

⁹⁹ L. M. Hartmann, *Zur wirtschaftsgeschichte*.

¹⁰⁰ P. Delogu, «La fine del mondo antico e l'inizio del medioevo: nuovi dati per un vecchio problema», in R. Francovich - G. Noyé (eds), *La storia dell'alto medioevo italiano (VI-X secolo) alla luce dell'archeologia*, Siena 1992, Florence, 1994, p.20.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹⁰² E. A. Arslan, «Le monete di San Zeno a Campione d'Italia», in S. Gasparri - C. La Rocca (eds), *Carte di famiglia. Strategie, rappresentazione e memoria del gruppo familiare di Totone da Campione (721-877)*, Rome, 2005, pp. 108-110.

ological sites¹⁰³, confirm not only the two-metal form of gold and silver in circulation in Lombard Italy, but also seem to confirm the need for coinage to make smaller transactions¹⁰⁴.

To fully understand this economic situation, better clarification is needed of the nature and degree of wealth of the aristocracy in Lombard society¹⁰⁵. Independently of its comparison with the Frankish social order¹⁰⁶, an analysis of written sources seems to describe the existence, within the Lombard élite, of groups with a hierarchy in terms of economic resources¹⁰⁷, some of which (not at the highest levels of the scale) centred their wealth on a rather modest regional base, while they possessed strong liquid assets and were engaged in economic affairs within a relatively wide area¹⁰⁸: it is not unlikely that these figures represent the *negotiantes* mentioned in legal records of

¹⁰³ E. A. Arslan - F. Ferretti - G. Murialdo, «I reperti numismatici greci, romani e bizantini», in T. Mannoni - G. Murialdo (eds), *S. Antonino: un insediamento fortificato nella Liguria bizantina*, Bordighera, 2001, p. 233-238 e 239-254; E. A. Arslan - E. Bonora - F. Ferretti, «Considerazioni sulla circolazione monetale protobizantina a S. Antonino», in T. Mannoni - G. Murialdo (eds), *S. Antonino: un insediamento fortificato*, p. 717-718; A. Rovelli, «La moneta dell'Italia Lombarda: aspetti e problemi», in J. Arce - P. Delogu (edited by), *Visigoti e Lombardi*, Seminar papers, Rome 1997, Rome, 2001, p. 357-370; E. A. Arslan - S. Ugge', «Ritrovamenti dalla pieve di San Giovanni di Mediliano (AL)», in S. Gelichi (ed), *L'Italia alto-medievale tra archeologia e storia. Studi in ricordo di Ottone d'Assia*, Padua, 2005, p. 33-54.

¹⁰⁴ A. Rovelli, «Economia monetaria e monete nel dossier di Campione», in S. Gasparri - C. La Rocca (eds), *Carte di famiglia*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁵ Regarding the concept of aristocracy or ruling class in the Lombard Age and the difficulty in attributing it (or defining it) correctly, see the appropriate remarks in S. Gasparri, «Mercanti o possessori? Profilo di un ceto dominante in età di transizione», in S. Gasparri - C. La Rocca (eds), *Carte di famiglia*, p. 157-159.

¹⁰⁶ The question of the minor wealth of the Lombard élite compared to the Frankish élite has been convincingly raised by Wickham (in C. Wickham, «Aristocratic Power in Eighth-Century Lombard Italy», in A. C. Murray (ed), *After Rome's Fall. Narrators and Sources in Early Medieval History. Essay presented to Walter Goffart*, Toronto - Buffalo - London, 1998, p. 153-170, and again in C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*) and partly contested by Gasparri in S. Gasparri, «Mercanti o possessori?», p. 161.

¹⁰⁷ See the interesting collection of papers relating to the family of Totone da Campione that describes a group that belongs to the "piccola aristocrazia, cioè al gruppo dei piccoli proprietari fondiari che arrivano a formare una propria identità di élites locali proprio nel periodo qui considerato" ("minor aristocracy, or group of small landowners that had their own identity as local élite in the very period under consideration here", that is, the 8th - 9th century) (S. Gasparri - C. La Rocca, «Introduzione ad un dossier documentario altomedievale», in S. Gasparri - C. La Rocca (eds), *Carte di famiglia*, p. 9).

¹⁰⁸ S. Gasparri, «Mercanti o possessori?»

about the same period. The presence, although we do not know how diffuse but certainly not irrelevant, of these kinds of people, leads in the direction of a confirmation of the existence of an organized and complex network of economic relationships, which affected various social groups, together with, obviously, the church and monastery authorities.

From this point of view, moreover, the very substantial increase in monasteries both urban and rural, right in this period¹⁰⁹, does not appear to be a coincidence, nor is the fact that most of these monasteries were built by royal command. Some of them, as we know from records, had river terminals, such as San Salvatore in Brescia, which in the Carolingian Age was exempted from customs duties in that very *portus Brixianus* that was mentioned, as luck would have it, in the Liutprand Capitulare. Nobody would deny that these monasteries were also linked to local planning, on the one hand, and to reasons of a social or purely political nature (control of the region), on the other; but their economic function must not be diminished or underestimated, their role as a connection, as centres of agricultural production (able therefore to obtain surplus)¹¹⁰, with purely trading enterprises (in later periods we know that these institutions had warehouses in the town or else controlled ports, as in the case of Nonantola)¹¹¹.

I think that the Liutprand Capitulare, miraculously saved for posterity, is an exceptional document¹¹² in its uniqueness, not because it describes an exceptional or abnormal situation. A similar view may be taken of the role of the Venetian lagoon and its surrounding areas which, not by chance, in this period show more than one similarity with what is happening to the south of the Po estuary (Comacchio). This, independently of whether one wishes to highlight or not, in economic and trading terms, the reference contained in the *Pactum Lotharii* of 840 to the *fines Civitatis Nove*¹¹³ or whether one wishes to underline the importance of circumstances, again marked by the written sources, that often see the people of

¹⁰⁹ G. Cantino Wataghin, «Monasteri di età Lombarda: spunti per una ricerca», in XXXVI *Corso di Cultura sull'Arte Ravennate e Bizantina*, Ravenna, 1989, p. 83.

¹¹⁰ A. Verhulst, *The Carolingian Economy*, Cambridge, 2002, p. 99-100.

¹¹¹ Racine (P. Racine, «Poteri medievali e percorsi fluviali nell'Italia padana», *Quaderni Storici*, 61, 1986, p. 9-32, p. 12) suggests the existence of two levels of exchange: one international, managed by the king and the Comacchiesi, which would have controlled the traffic with the Byzantine East, and another regional, managed, under the king's dispensation, by the church authorities.

¹¹² R. Balzaretto, «Cities, Emporia and Monasteries», p. 223.

¹¹³ S. Gasparri, «Venezia fra i secoli VIII e IX. Una riflessione sulle fonti», in *Scritti Veneti offerti a Gaetano Cozzi*, Venice, 1992, p. 3-18.

Venice and Comacchio associated (from their joint presence in the various ports of the Po to the episode of the transfer of St. Mark's remains)¹¹⁴.

During the 8th century, then, the north-western stretch of the Adriatic appears as an area strongly orientated towards maintaining and consolidating a special relationship with the Po valley area and, more generally, with the Kingdom. This, moreover, is the economic policy not only of Comacchio (sanctioned by the Capitolare) but also of the Venetians. It is an extremely dynamic area, marked by places that appear to us to be in competition with one another on at least two levels. One, more locally, concerning the Venetian lagoon and the nearby areas, whose alternative destinies are recorded in detail by the written records which, describing for us the successive shifts of power (from Cittanova to Metamauco, from Metamauco to Rivoalto), help us in fact to understand the economic reasoning behind them (from a society whose fortunes depended upon landed property to another that moved its interests towards trade); and a second level, concerning the whole area between the Venetian lagoon and Ravenna, where other centres (amongst which Comacchio stands out) seem intent on playing a similar game.

This system anticipates by about a hundred years, that *floruit* which saw the birth and rise of Venice as we know it, whose fortunes depended, as has been clearly shown also recently, on a decisive shift of the economic centre of gravity to the Adriatic on the one hand (the closure of the port of Marseilles)¹¹⁵, but also on the consolidation of a new, more decisive trade route, that of the Rhine. The histories of the capital of the kingdom (Pavia) and of the new capital of the Empire (Aquisgrana) were decisive for the destiny of the Venetian lagoon, as for that of Comacchio; and today, if things had gone differently, the images of these two towns would really be entirely different.

¹¹⁴ See G. Fasoli, «Navigazione fluviale», p. 595.

¹¹⁵ R. Hodges, *Towns and Trade*; C. Wickham, «Overview», p. 357.

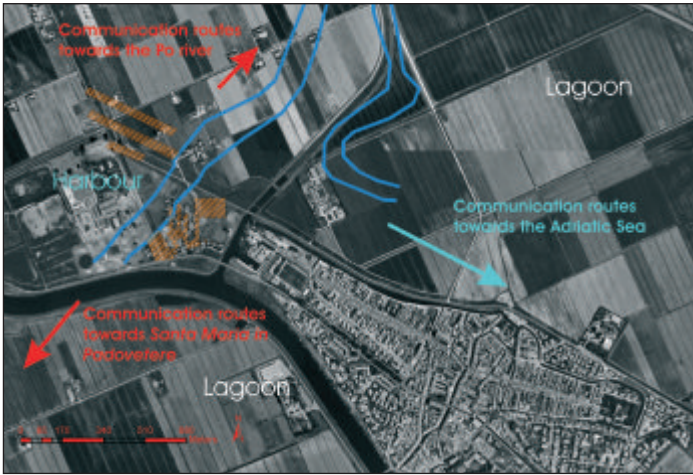


Fig. 6. Comacchio, area of Villaggio San Francesco: position of the findings in the presumed early medieval port area in relation to the waterways.

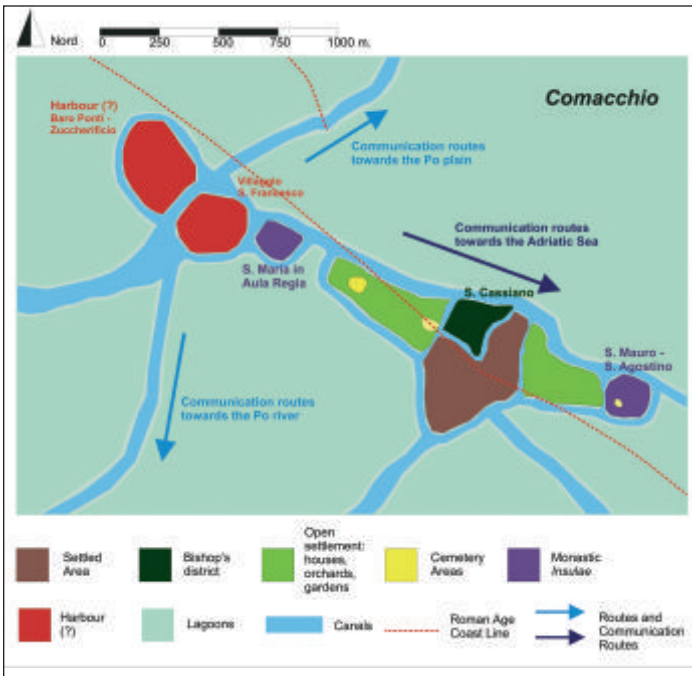


Fig. 10. Comacchio, reconstruction of early medieval settlement distribution, in relation to the waterways.

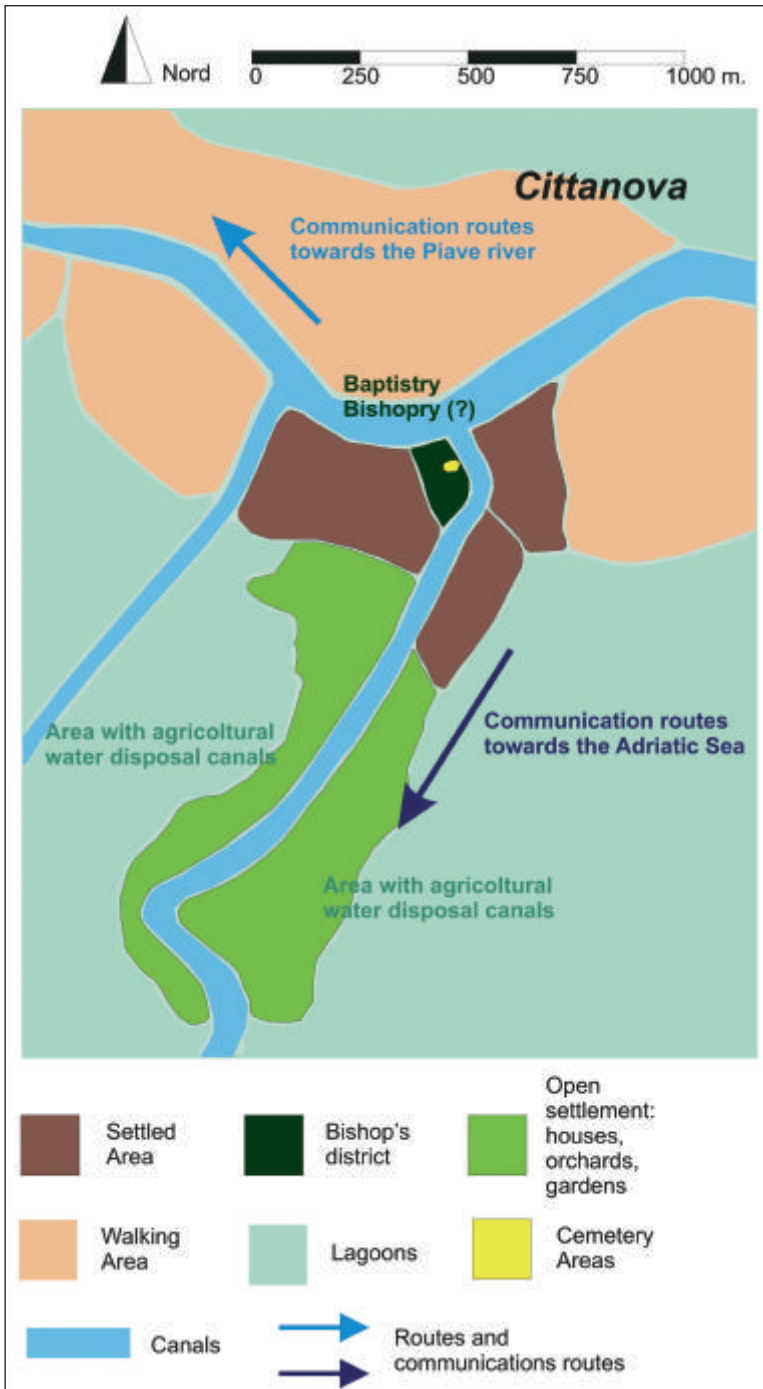


Fig. 12. Cittanova, reconstruction of the early medieval settlement.

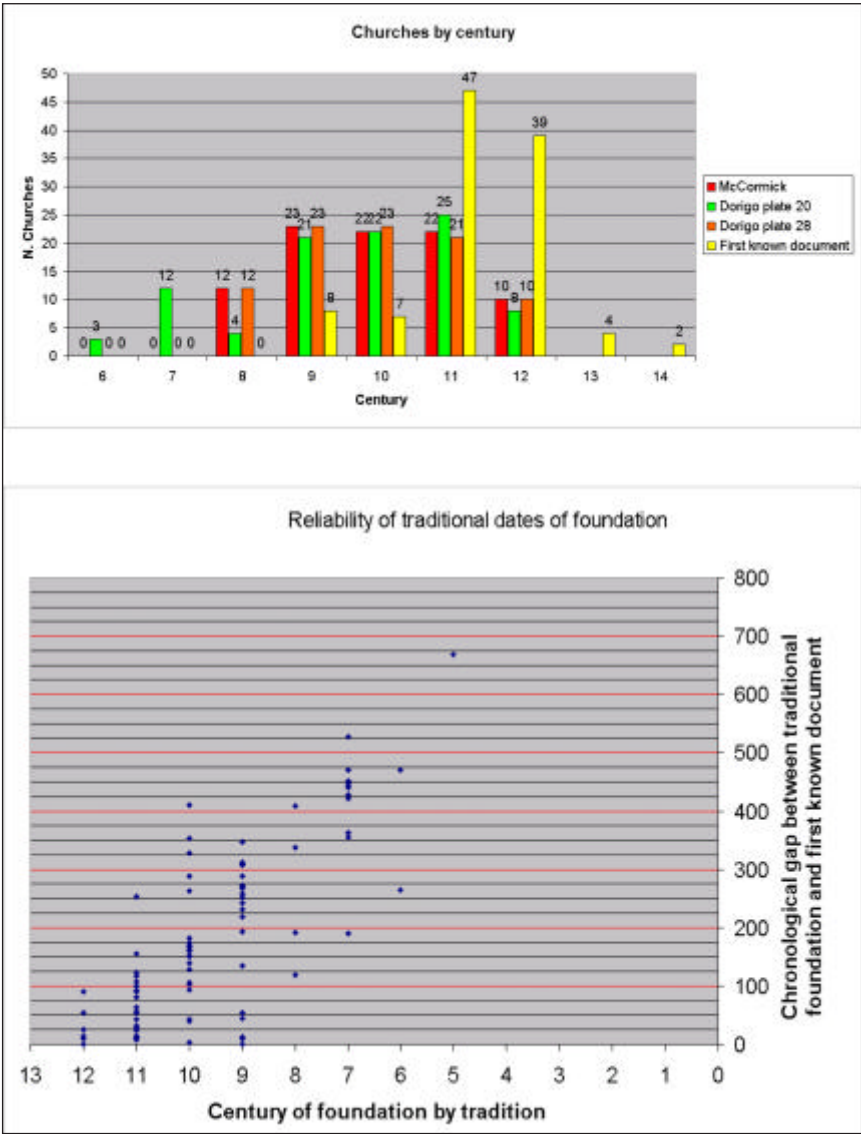


Fig. 17. Illustration relating to the foundations of churches of Venice during the early medieval age.

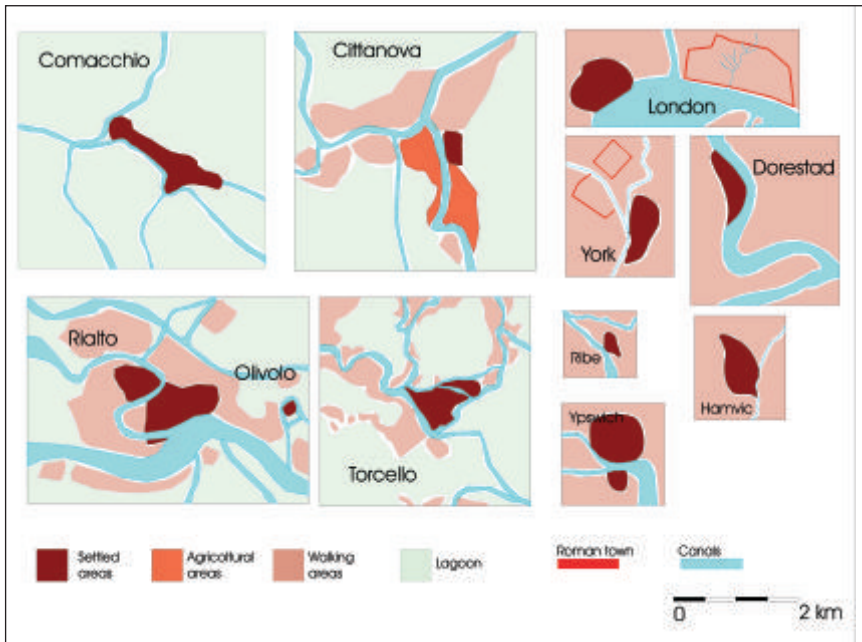


Fig. 18. North and South: emporia compared.