

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE FUTURE OF VENICE'S PAST AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY
OF THE NORTH-EASTERN ADRIATIC EMPORIA DURING
THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Sauro Gelichi¹

Were there Italian Emporia in the Early Middle Ages?

The debate about the archaeology of early medieval emporia has been, and essentially remains, entirely north-European, due to both its greater visibility in those regions and the intrinsic nature of archaeology in those countries.² Of course, the development of these investigations has produced records that have been immediately used for a more general discussion of the economy in Europe and the Mediterranean from Late Antiquity to the Carolingian Age, following in the wake of a critical revision of the views of the well-known Belgian historian Pirenne.³ Developed during the first decade of the last century, the Pirenne thesis has been variously discussed and disputed over time.⁴ However, due to its overall persuasive nature, it continues to be one of the few examples that attempts to explain the developments and mechanisms of the economy in early medieval Europe in general terms. Lying in the background of this theory and linked to Pirenne's view of Europe as a centre of the Carolingian economy is the question of towns and their function in the early medieval period. This is a question to which Pirenne had also made a particular contribution in terms of a reassessment of their role and function, at least before

¹ Università Ca' Foscari—Venezia.

² R. Hodges, *Dark Age Economics: the origins of towns and trade AD 600–1000* (London, 1982); M. Anderton, ed., *Anglo-Saxon trading centres: beyond the emporia* (Glasgow, 1999); D. Hill and R. Cowie, eds., *Wics. The Early Mediaeval Trading Centres of Northern Europe* (Sheffield, 2001); T. Pestell and K. Ulmschneider, eds., *Markets in early medieval Europe: trading and productive sites, 650–850* (Macclesfield, Cheshire, UK, 2003).

³ R. Hodges and D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the origins of Europe: archaeology and the Pirenne thesis* (London, 1983).

⁴ H. Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* (Brussels, 1937).

the year 1000, with some exceptions that include, in Italy, Venice.⁵ It is not appropriate to discuss here the reasons for a view so little predisposed towards the phenomenon of urban development which, at least in Italy, was of limited entity and minor importance,⁶ as has been shown by Italian scholars in the past.⁷ It only remains to wonder, beyond begging the question on the basis of non-archaeological records, about the nature of the role of at least some of these towns (or presumed towns) in that crucial period (between the seventh and ninth century) that saw the final collapse of the economic systems of the ancient world and the beginning of new trading systems.⁸

In the early medieval period, barring a few caveats, Italy remains essentially a land of towns;⁹ and it is here that, together with a few vanished towns and many surviving ones, certain 'new' towns make their appearance. This fact has clearly been known for some time, yet scarcely analysed in its entirety. If one takes a quick look at the map of urban sites in northern Italy in the early medieval period one sees immediately that while some areas show a decline of towns (the southern Piedmont region, for example) others compensate for this with the creation of new, inhabited urban centres (the north-east coast on the Adriatic, for example) (Fig. 1).¹⁰ It is perhaps not by chance that at the heart of this flourishing of 'new towns' there lies the lagoon where, as we know, Venice was to rise.

But what are these 'new towns'? What do they have in common? What is their purpose? And lastly, can they be defined as 'emporia'

⁵ H. Pirenne, *Medieval Cities; their origins and the revival of trade* (Princeton, 1925).

⁶ G. P. Brogiolo and S. Gelichi, *La città nell'alto medioevo italiano: archeologia e storia* (Rome, 1998).

⁷ C. Violante, *La società milanese in età precomunale* (Bari, 1953).

⁸ In terms of the collapse of the economic systems of the ancient world, I am in agreement with the views published in B. Ward Perkins, *The Fall of Rome: and the end of civilization* (Oxford, 2005). On the question of the "various early medieval economies," see the timely observations expressed in J. Moreland, "Concepts of the Early medieval Economy," in *The Long Eighth Century*, eds. I. Hanson and C. Wickham (Leiden, 2000), pp. 1–34.

⁹ S. Gelichi, "The cities," in *Italy in the early Middle Ages: 476–1000*, ed. C. La Rocca (Oxford, 2002), pp. 168–174.

¹⁰ For the distribution of urban sites in northern Italy in the early medieval period, see B. Ward Perkins, "The towns of northern Italy: rebirth or renewal?" in *The rebirth of towns in the West AD 700–1050*, eds. R. Hodges and B. Hobley (London, 1988), pp. 16–27 and fig. 6.

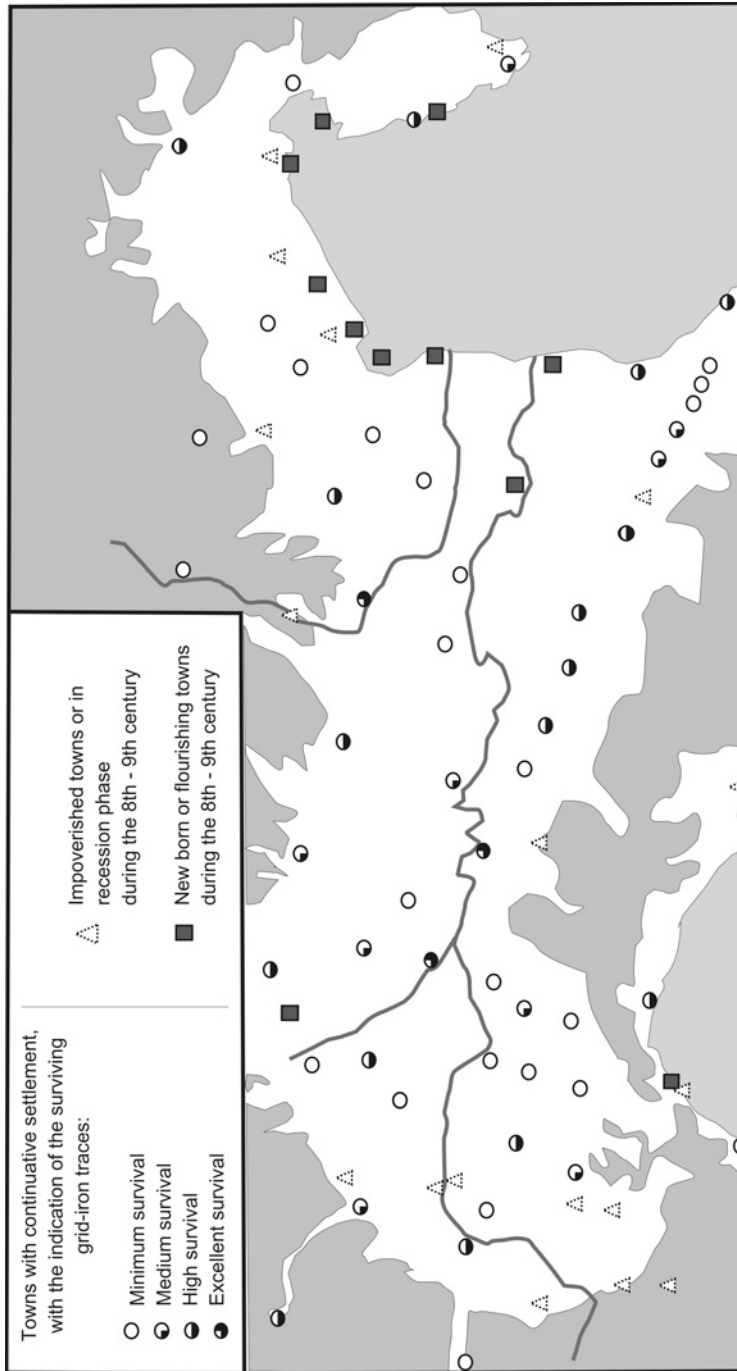


Figure 1: Towns of the northern Italy during the early middle ages (after Ward Perkins 1988)

or anyway compared to the emporia of northern Europe, as certain scholars have been suggesting for some time?

The term 'emporium' (but above all the concept of emporium) as a place for the redistribution of goods, essentially belongs, as mentioned above, to the north European historiography debate.¹¹ While there may not be uniformity of opinion as to its meaning, following Hodges, one may define an emporium and distinguish it from other contemporary settlements on the basis of these features: the role played by the merchandise that passed through there (type and quantity); its spread and the kind of materials used to construct it; and lastly, whether it was also a centre of production.¹² Do these features belong to the 'new towns' in the northern Adriatic area just mentioned, Venice included?

That archaeology may prove a decisive tool in shedding light on these questions is shown by the investment in resources that much of north-European archaeology has devoted to the analysis and study of these sites. One cannot say the same for Italy, where research in the Venetian lagoon and, more generally, in the north-east coastal region on the Adriatic has followed quite different directions and issues (Fig. 2). It may also be interesting to try to understand whether archaeology has been systematically conducted in these areas and if so, towards which topics it has been directed. The present author remains convinced that this subject is of enormous potential but has, as yet, been little developed.

Where work has been conducted, it has centered on Venice and its lagoon. Returning to archaeology in the Venetian lagoon and reflecting upon these sources is therefore also fundamental for reviving and broadening the debate about the European economy in the early medieval period, which currently runs the risk of overlooking the importance of places or of assessing them on the basis of utterly inadequate records. The main purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to reflect upon these issues while discussing the nature of earlier archaeology in the Venetian lagoon (Analysing the Past); evaluating its present approaches (Discussing the Present); placing its potential in a broader regional picture (The Other Venices); and lastly, proposing a different strategy for the future (Planning the Future).

¹¹ See, for example, D. A. Hinton, "Metalwork and the emporia," in *Anglo-Saxon trading centres: beyond the emporia*, ed. M. Anderton (1999), pp. 24–31.

¹² Hodges, *Dark Age Economics*, pp. 47–65 and 104–129.

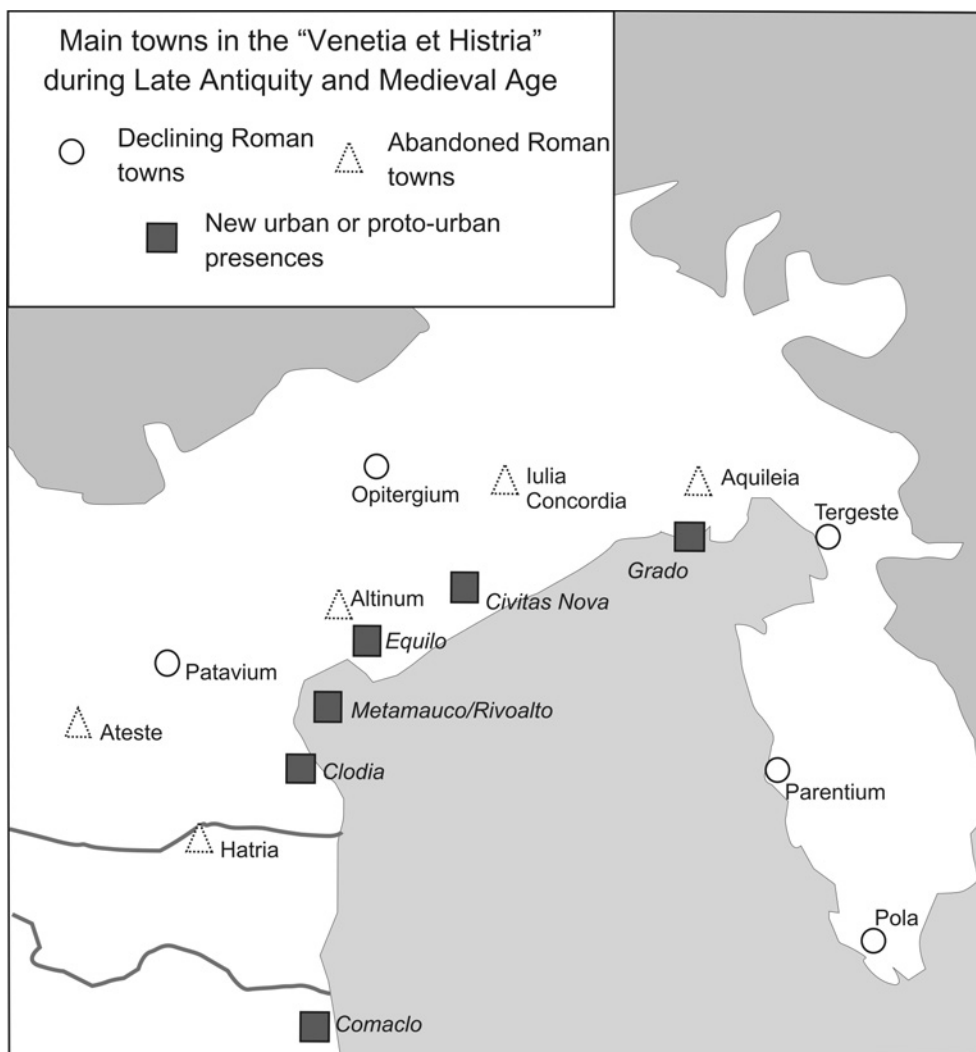


Figure 2: Main towns in the "Venetia et Histria" during the early middle ages

Analysing the Past

If one analyses in perspective the kind of archaeology undertaken in the lagoon up to the 1990s (Fig. 3), one sees that it can be broken down into two main stages. The first, perhaps over-emphasised by subsequent archaeological reviews, is shown in the investigations that Giacomo Boni managed to undertake, towards the end of the nineteenth century, into the foundations of Saint Mark's bell tower (Fig. 4).¹³ The second consists of the excavations made by Polish archaeologists at the start of the 1960s on the island of Torcello, in the vicinity of the large church buildings of S. Eufemia and S. Maria Assunta (Fig. 5).¹⁴ These two events, far apart in time and located in two rather different environments (urban in the first case, but not the second), are isolated episodes in the context of Italian archaeology. In particular, the Polish excavations are noteworthy for their innovative methodology, the tools used, and the historical issues they were meant to deal with, especially if one considers that these tools were applied to study a post-antique context. Unfortunately, this project had no more than a modest and irregular follow-up and was not able to typify and direct archaeology in the lagoon in the subsequent years.¹⁵ However, at the same time, it did have a modest influence on the rise of Italian medieval archaeology.¹⁶

For a long time, archaeological research focused on the early medieval period was ignored as being of no use to the subjects typically investigated in the field of classical archaeology (for example, the study of Roman or Greek origins) or else was only taken up again for the purpose of certifying just those topics.¹⁷ It should not seem surprising, therefore, that until now archaeology has contributed little to the history of the city and, above all, has provided only feeble support in defining that very problem of origins that has always been the real hub around which much of local history turns. Even so, beyond the limits

¹³ G. Boni, "Il muro di fondazione del campanile di S. Marco a Venezia," *Archivio Veneto* 29/2 (1885), 354–368.

¹⁴ L. Leciejewicz, E. Tabaczyńska, and S. Tabaczyński, *Torcello: scavi, 1961–62* (Rome, 1977).

¹⁵ L. Leciejewicz, ed., *Torcello: nuove ricerche archeologiche* (Rome, 2000).

¹⁶ S. Gelichi, *Introduzione all'archeologia medievale: storia e ricerca in Italia* (Rome, 1997), pp. 70–78.

¹⁷ See, for example, W. Dorigo, *Venezia origini: fondamenti, ipotesi, metodi* (Milan, 1983).

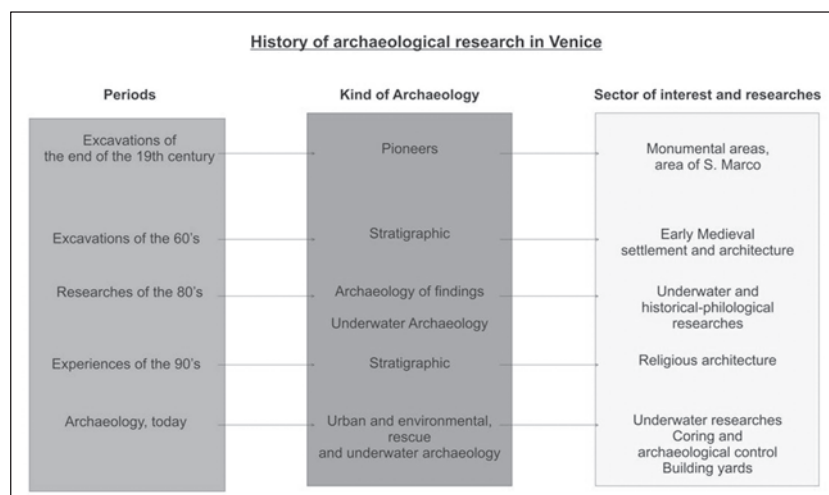


Figure 3: Venice, Saint Mark's bell tower, foundation—1885 (after Boni)

of the lagoon, Venice has always been recognized as being central to the picture of the economic history of the early Middle Ages in Europe and the Mediterranean (*supra*) (Fig. 6). In this context, it is the task of archaeology to shed more light on the subject than historical, literary, and diplomatic sources have been able to do thus far.¹⁸

In recent years, non-selective archaeology on a large scale has been practised, thanks to the commitment of the two Soprintendenze that regularly follow the excavations and restoration of historical monuments in the city centre and on all the lagoon islands.¹⁹ The inspection process has also been extended to the city's underwater heritage. Thus, a new period of archaeological research seems to have opened in Venice: it remains only to ask oneself, at the service of which projects and with what results.

¹⁸ See R. Hodges, *Towns and trade in the age of Charlemagne* (London, 2000), pp. 59–64; M. McCormick, *Origins of the European economy: communications and commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 529–531.

¹⁹ See L. Fozzati *et alii*, "Archeologia delle fondamenta veneziane," in *Tra due elementi sospesa: Venezia, costruzione di un paesaggio urbano*, ed. E. Concina (Venice, 2000), pp. 134–166; M. De Min, "Edilizia altomedievale e medioevale nel territorio lagunare. Nuovi dati conoscitivi dai cantieri di restauro," in *Tra due elementi sospesa: Venezia, costruzione di un paesaggio urbano*, ed. E. Concina (Venice, 2000), pp. 98–133; idem, "Venezia e il territorio lagunare," in *Ritrovare restaurando: rinvenimenti e scoperte a Venezia e in laguna* (Venice, 2000), pp. 15–25.

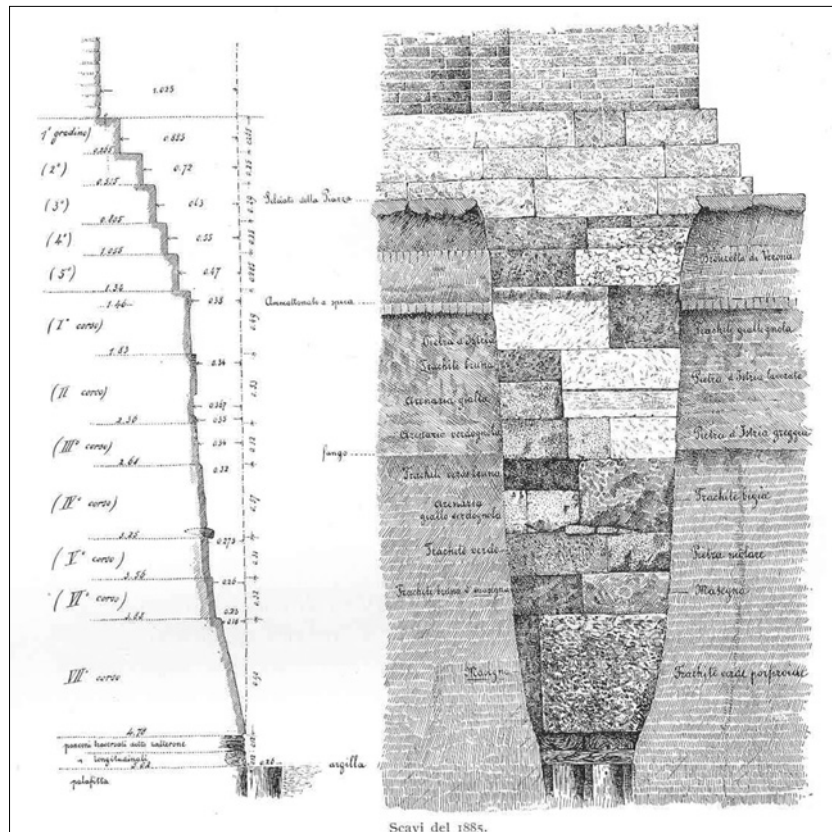


Figure 4: Schematic graphical of the history of the archaeological research in Venice

Discussing the Present

The lagoon islands feature a collection of settlements of different types (Fig. 7). Some of these have resulted in inhabited areas still alive today, the main one being the city of Venice; while others are places partly (e.g. Torcello) or completely abandoned (e.g. San Lorenzo d'Amiana). This diversity influences not only the quantity but also the quality of archaeological deposits. Whatever the object of one's archaeological research, scholars undoubtedly have to take account of this difference.

Archaeological research up to now has operated in both types of site. The city of Venice, still a vital centre, could only be tackled according

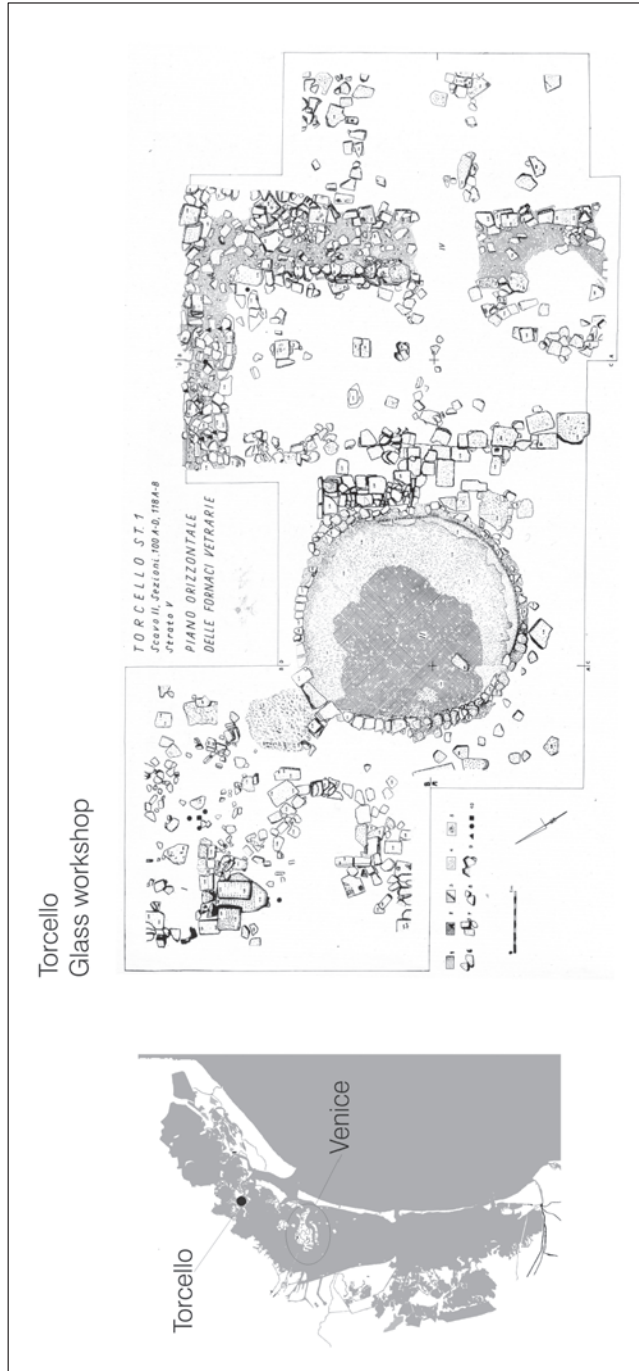


Figure 5: The glass workshop in Torcello, Venice. Polish excavations 1961–1962 (after Leciejewicz, Tabaczyńska, Tabaczyński 1977)

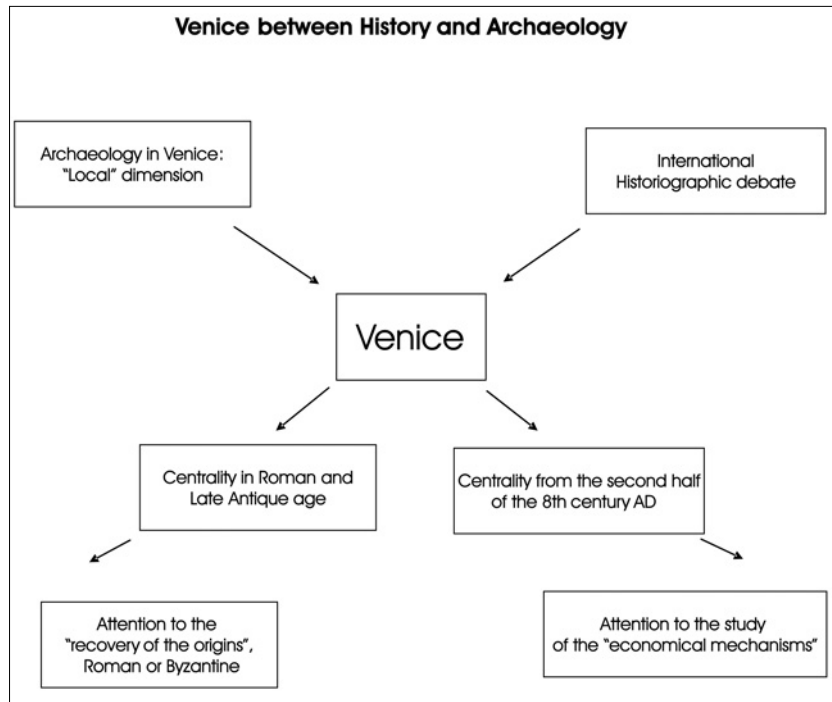


Figure 6: Venice between history and archaeology

to the principles of urban archaeology: archaeology which sets itself the task of studying the city's history, but which may also be useful in analysing the periods prior to its formation. Essentially similar features are found in other sites such as Murano and Burano, which are distinguished from Venice only by their lesser extent as settlements and the location of fewer monuments in their historic centres, but in which the deposits are subject to the same kind of stress and behaviour. Outside of this context, the abandoned or partly abandoned sites outline different situations. These are generally places that had fewer settlements, both in terms of density and often also duration. Among them are places inhabited only in Late Antiquity and reoccupied in the late Middle Ages (San Francesco del Deserto), others which were colonized rather late (San Giacomo in Paludo, not before the twelfth century), and yet others which show continuity up to the Middle Ages (San Lorenzo di Ammiana). Many of these places may be important for studying certain topical aspects of the lagoon settlement such as the phenomenon of monachism in the late Middle Ages or the stages

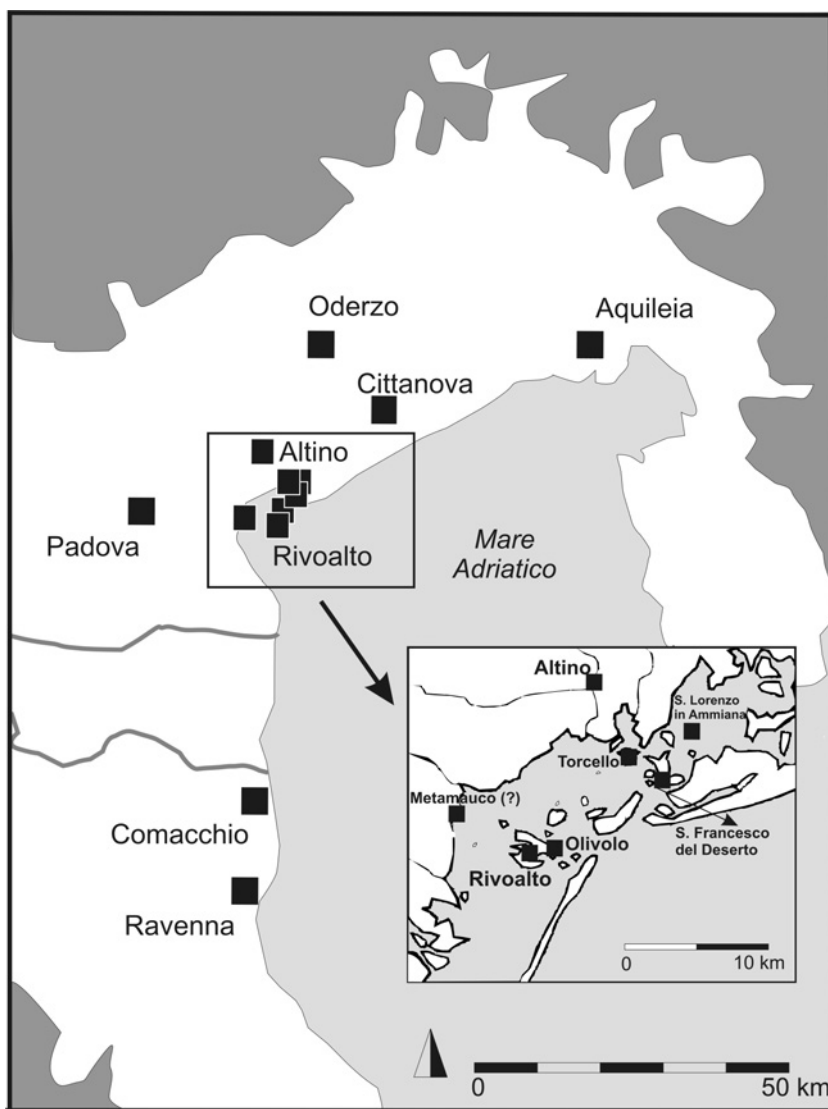


Figure 7: Towns in the North-eastern Italy during the early middle ages and the main settlements in the Venice lagoon

of military occupation of the lagoon during the Austrian period.²⁰ In addition, many of these places may be of considerable interest in understanding the stages of formation of lagoon settlements in the early Middle Ages.

The archaeology carried out in recent years in the lagoon is notable for the number of controlled operations, but has been undertaken without any kind of selectivity. As a result, a variety of sites have been excavated and presumably recorded in the same way. Unfortunately, there is not enough data available regarding quantity and quality to verify the effectiveness of this work throughout the lagoon islands. However, some evaluations are possible concerning the city of Venice, a geographic zone which, in the incidence of operations, is one of the most excavated places in the whole area.

This work may be assessed according to three aspects: how much has been excavated, where it has been excavated, and what has been excavated.²¹ As no absolute quantitative data has been provided in terms of cubic metres of earth archaeologically removed, an idea of quantity may only be expressed through the number of excavations carried out. These amount to 35 in just the historic centre of Venice and reach almost 100 if the entire lagoon is included.²² On the basis of this data one may rightly affirm that Venice has been one of the most heavily excavated cities of Italy during the last ten years. However, if one considers the effect of this activity in terms of historical knowledge, one realizes that this assessment needs a marked reappraisal, as only less than half of the excavations are denoted by preliminary reports without a following final report (41%), and more than half the operations (59%) have come to scholars' attention solely thanks to fleeting references or newspaper articles (Fig. 8).

Restricting our attention to the city centre alone, the topographic location of the excavations is also of some importance (Fig. 9). By far

²⁰ S. Gelichi *et alii*, "Isola di San Giacomo in Paludo (laguna nord, Venezia): gli scavi delle campagne del 2003 (SGp03a e SGp03b)," *Quaderni di Archeologia del Veneto* 20 (2004), 160–177; S. Gelichi *et alii*, "Identity marks, organization of spaces and characteristics of consumption of an island of the Venetian lagoon between the Later Middle Ages and the Modern Age," in *Constructing Post-medieval Archaeology in Italy: a New Agenda*, eds. S. Gelichi and M. Librenti (Florence, 2007), pp. 97–108.

²¹ S. Gelichi, "Venezia tra archeologia e storia: la costruzione di un'identità urbana," in *Le città italiane tra la tarda antichità e l'alto Medioevo: atti del Convegno*, ed. A. Augenti (Florence, 2006), pp. 151–186.

²² L. Fozzati *et alii*, "Archeologia delle fondamenta veneziane," p. 135.

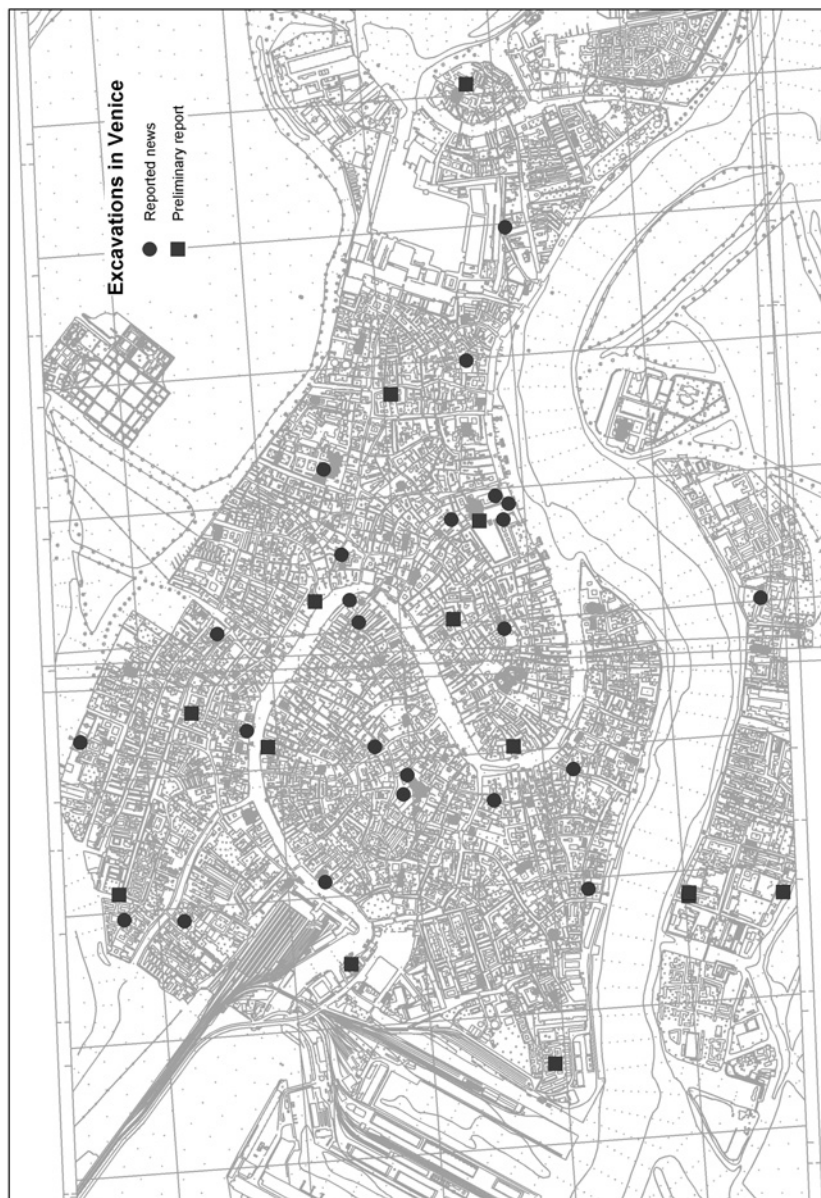


Figure 8: Excavations in the downtown of Venice: (after Gelichi 2006)

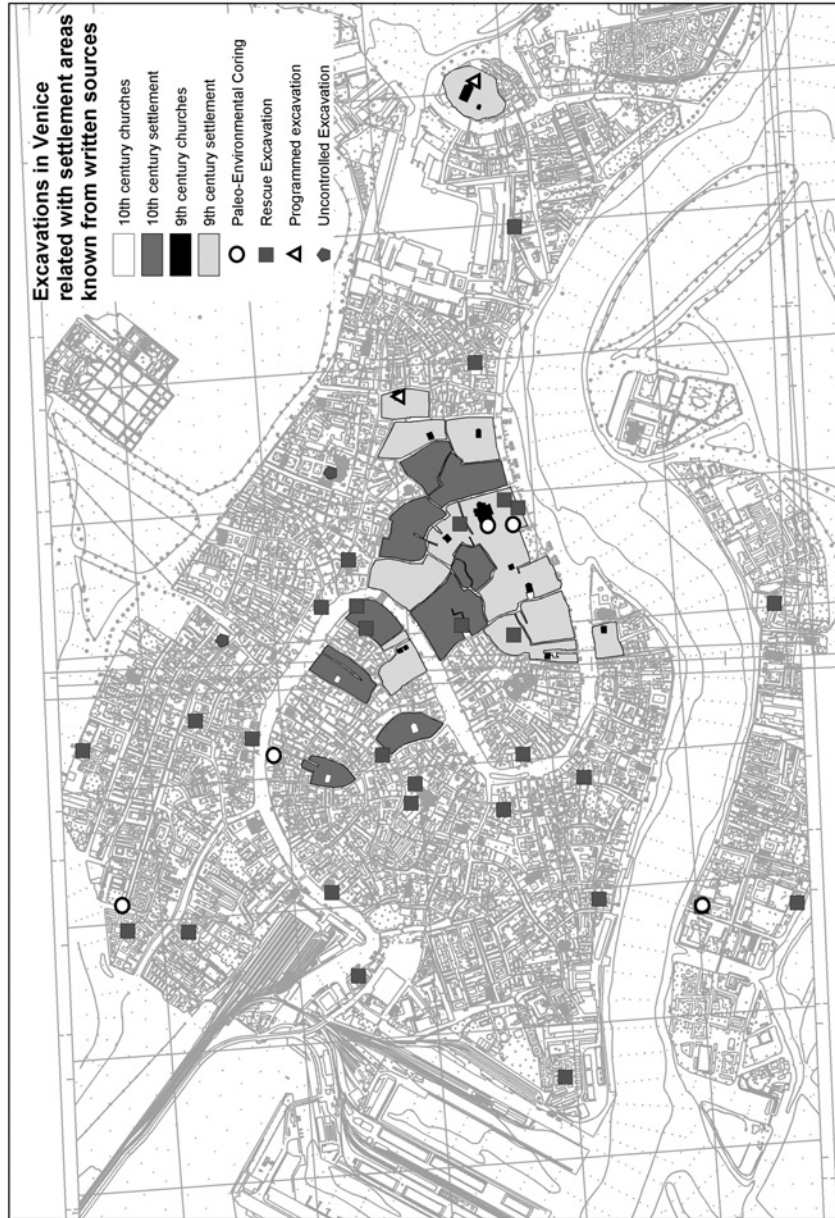


Figure 9: Excavations in the downtown of Venice (after Gelichi 2006)

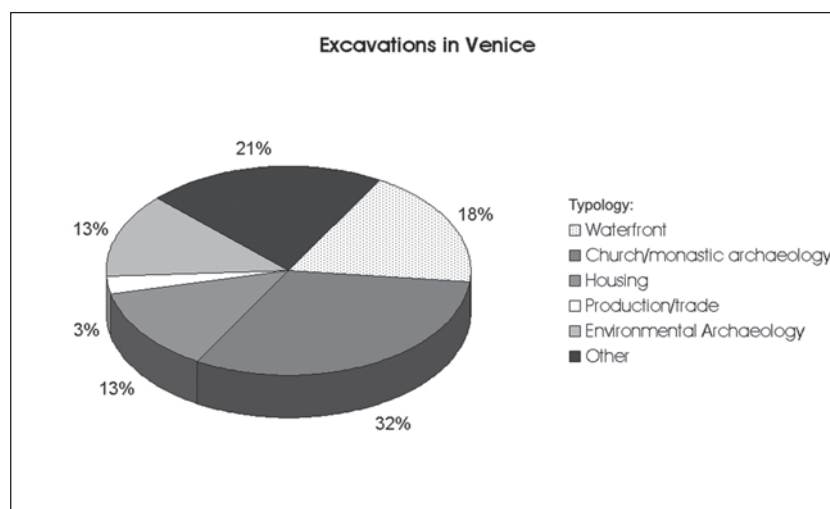


Figure 10: The archaeology in the Venetian lagoon: main topics

the great majority of these operations are carried out in areas which, on the basis of other sources, we may surmise to be outside (and sometimes far from) settlement areas of the early Middle Ages (between the ninth and tenth centuries). Therefore, if one's aim were that of studying the formation of the first Venetian settlement between Rivoalto and Olivolo, it is clear that even when published, these excavations would probably be of little relevance. Still, this does not mean that they cannot shed light on other topics such as patterns of urban expansion or the features of Venetian material culture in the late Middle Ages and post Middle Ages.

Finally, if we analyse what has been excavated (Fig. 10), it becomes fairly clear that most operations have uncovered the construction and settlement phases of ecclesiastical buildings such as churches and monasteries (32%), followed by canal embankments (18%). Other topics such as houses (13%), or buildings connected to goods, trading and production sites (3%) are encountered less frequently. In this case the data are not so surprising if one only considers the high density of religious buildings subject to restoration or the need for continual reclamation work in the canals, which naturally allows also for the investigation of the canal banks and their development over time. Paleoenvironmental research must be considered separately, as at present it occurs in a relatively high quantity (21%) and is often selective, with specific coring operations sometimes programmed and

carried out.²³ It is not by chance, therefore, that it is in this field that the best results have been recorded with regard to knowledge of the transformations the lagoon has undergone from ancient times until the present day.

The nature of the excavations together with the scarcity of publication clearly explains why such a striking accumulation of operations has yielded no corresponding new interpretation of the city's topography during its period of origin, with the exception of those deriving from paleoenvironmental analyses. Instead, careful observation in fact reveals that some recent attempts at a summary of residential buildings and canal embankments essentially derive from written sources and attempt to interpret the archaeological record (which again, is almost completely non-existent, also with regard to residential buildings) on the basis of these, with a view to confirming them.²⁴ Even the volumes that Dorigo has dedicated to Venice may be included, partially at least, in this kind of production. The first, written when archaeological research in the lagoon was not able to count on scientific investigations, uses the archaeological data (whether one agrees with it or not) only to confirm the existence and nature of a stable occupation during Roman times.²⁵ The most recent is one of those excellent products of historical topography, in which the meticulous reconstruction of material assets (types of building construction, topographic collocation of construction, and town plan of dwellings) is mainly based upon what may be drawn from written sources (or the remains, generally rather late, of church buildings).²⁶ If the churches and monasteries, therefore, are the sites most thoroughly investigated, it is not surprising to find yet again that the archaeology of medieval architecture (although a stratigraphic analysis is not used with regard to constructions) is the field that provides the most complete, organic

²³ A. J. Ammerman and C. E. McClennen, eds., *Venice before San Marco: recent studies on the origins of the city* (Colgate, 2001).

²⁴ For a summary of residential buildings, see M. Bortoletto, "Cenni sull'edilizia minore veneziana alla luce di alcuni rinvenimenti archeologici," *Archeologia delle Acque*, 2/1 (2000), 9–20. For a summary of embankments, see Idem, "De canalibus, rivis, piscinisque: primi passi verso un'archeologia idronomastica veneziana," in L. Fozzati *et alii* (2000), 136–152. For a study of the written sources, see the aforementioned work, W. Dorigo, *L'edilizia abitativa nella "Civitas Rivoalti" e nella "Civitas Veneciarum" (secoli XI–XIII)* (Venice, 1993).

²⁵ W. Dorigo, *Venezia origini*.

²⁶ Idem, *Venezia romanica: la formazione della città medioevale fino all'età gotica* (Venice, 2003).

summaries. This is true both for defining the planimetric development of buildings and for attempting some more general interpretation of the features of building techniques.²⁷ It is probable that for studying the formation of lagoon settlements up to the ninth century, archaeology in Venice is of little significance (certainly no more than in other places). From this viewpoint, the archaeology practised so far in the city seems to have eluded the crucial points of settlement prior to and contemporary with the creation of the Rivoalto.

Different issues affect the abandoned or quasi-abandoned sites. In these cases there has been only a moderate invasion of later building where it is not altogether absent. One may therefore presume to have available archaeological deposits which are better conserved and may be investigated over a wider area. Three places in particular have been excavated and, in part, published.

The first, San Francesco del Deserto, has revealed very interesting traces of occupation from the period of Late Antiquity (Fig. 11).²⁸ The sequences of this period, together with those of Torcello of the same period, are the best available at present concerning the history of the lagoon (inasmuch as they do not concern dwelling sites but only embankment constructions). The pottery classifications dating back to between the fifth and seventh centuries, certainly contemporary with the creation of these embankments, indicate a picture of the circulation of pottery and amphorae that appears to offer a different scenario from that reconstructed through the use of historiography and also through a summary reading of the famous passage by Procopius.²⁹ In any case, the settlement does not appear to have persisted (at least in the areas examined) and so carrying on research at this site seems to be more promising for understanding the nature of late Roman sites, rather than those of the early Middle Ages.

²⁷ For a more general interpretation, see De Min, "Edilizia altomedievale," pp. 98–133. For a discussion of the planimetric development of San Lorenzo di Castello, see idem, "Venezia: chiesa di San Lorenzo di Castello: un esempio di scavo correlato al restauro architettonico," in *Ritrovare restaurando. Rinvenimenti e scoperte a Venezia e in laguna* (Venice, 2000), pp. 40–47.

²⁸ Idem, "Edilizia altomedievale," pp. 98–133; Idem, *Venezia e il territorio lagunare*, pp. 15–25.

²⁹ See E. Grandi, "Le ceramiche fini da mensa dalla laguna veneziana. I contesti di San Francesco del Deserto e Torcello," in *La circolazione delle ceramiche nell'Adriatico tra Tarda Antichità ed Altomedioevo: III Incontro di Studio Cer.am.Is sulle ceramiche tardoantiche ed altomedievali*, eds. S. Gelichi and C. Negrelli (Mantua, 2007), pp. 127–153.

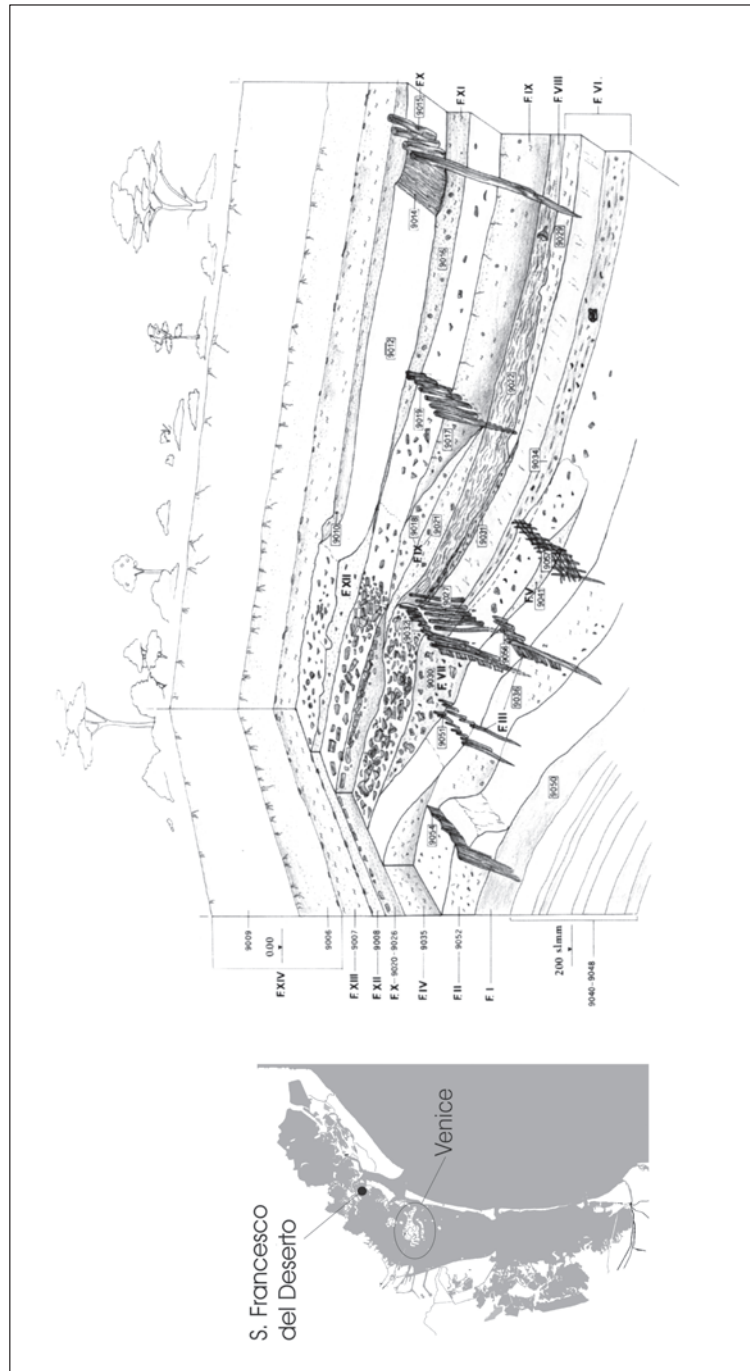


Figure 11: Venetian lagoon, S. Francesco del Deserto, Late Antique waterfronts

The second site is San Lorenzo in Ammiana, excavated on two occasions by different teams. In this case, only the publication of research undertaken by Canal in the 1980s and some brief indications of the 1991 excavation are available (Fig. 12).³⁰ This place, in a really hopeless state of conservation, would appear to have preserved a better stratigraphic progression of about 4 metres in thickness lacking any interruption from the late Roman period to the late Middle Ages. It is clear that this site offers a considerable opportunity for early medieval archaeology in the lagoon taking into consideration the objective difficulties of access to the location and of excavation. However, these evaluations are only possible in intermediate form, through a fragmented and scarcely coherent archaeological record. Furthermore, this record is partly conditioned by the identification of this place with the castle of *Castratium*, of which remains have been recognised in certain wall structures (pilasters).

Regarding Torcello, it may seem rather surprising that the excavations carried out so far have revealed little about that '*emporion mega*' (as Constantine Porphyrogenitus still calls it at the start of the ninth century), while the findings relate mainly to the date and architectonic sequence of the baptistery or the church of Santa Maria Assunta.³¹ If, as has been recently suggested, we must post-date the workshop for glass production brought to light, between 1961–62, opposite the Church of Santa Fosca, "to not earlier than the 9th century," it seems we may gain an understanding of something more than just the emporium. But we may be greatly disappointed concerning other aspects of the site, such as the dwellings or the plan of the settlement.³² The explanation for this is easily found in the location of the various investigations, almost all of which were made near the church buildings (Fig. 13). It is not by chance then, that the only workshop discovered dates prior to the construction of the Church of Santa Fosca to which

³⁰ L. Fersuoch *et alii*, "Indagini archeologiche a San Lorenzo di Ammiana (Venezia)," *Archeologia Veneta* 12 (2000), 134–166; G. P. Brogiolo and S. Gelichi, *Nuove ricerche sui castelli altomedievali in Italia settentrionale* (Florence, 1996).

³¹ On the excavations, see L. Leciejewicz, ed., *Torcello*; M. Bortoletto, "Murano, Mazzorbo e Torcello: tre siti a confronto. Indagini archeologiche nella laguna nord di Venezia," *Archeologia delle Acque* 1/1 (1999), 55–74. For Constantine Porphyrogenitus's comments, see *De Administrando Imperio*, 27–28. For Santa Maria Assunta, see De Min, *Venezia e il territorio*, pp. 23–25.

³² L. Leciejewicz, "Italian-Polish Research into the Origin of Venice," *Archaeologia Polona* 40 (2002), 58.

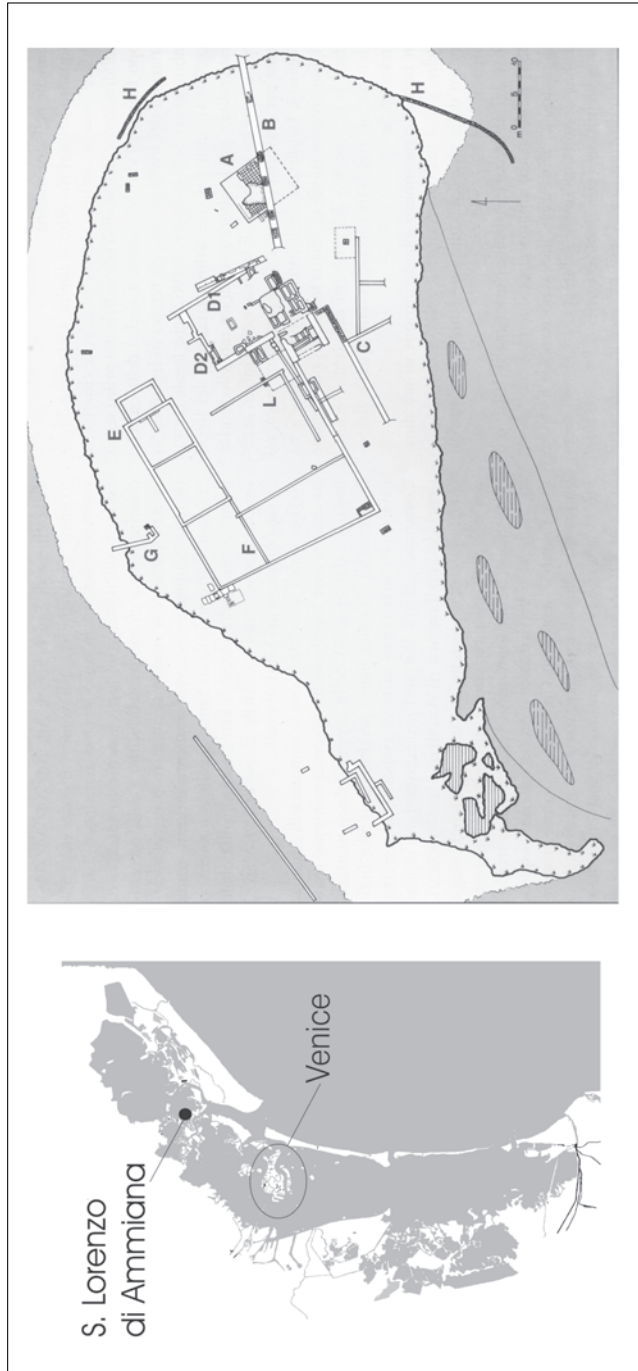


Figure 12: Venetian lagoon, S. Lorenzo di Ammiana, plan of the excavations (after Canal 1995)

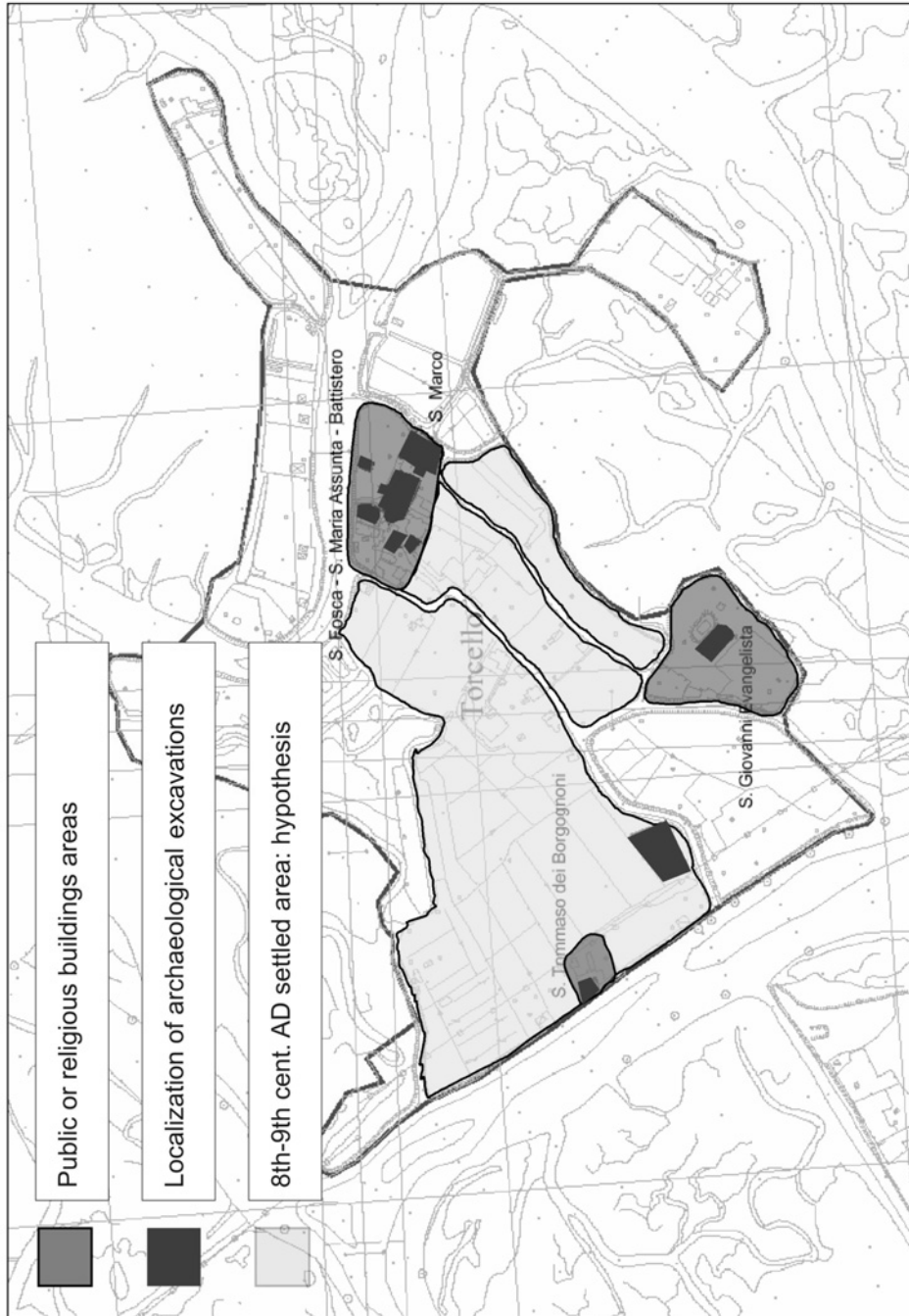


Figure 13: Venetian lagoon, Torcello, hypothesis on settled areas during the 8th–9th century AD

it now lies near, and that the only information known concerning dwellings relates to the periods preceding the building of a span of the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta.

Overall, the archaeology of these three sites, which perhaps lend themselves better than those in the centre of Venice to an understanding of the nature of lagoon settlement before the ninth century, has also been disappointing. This may be partly due to the nature of the stratification (San Francesco del Deserto), and partly also to strategies (San Lorenzo di Ammiana and Torcello). On the whole, non-selective archaeology such as that undertaken in recent years does not seem to be the best way of shedding light on the question of the origins of Venice.

The Other Venices

Archaeology in Venice is not only possible, as has been amply demonstrated by the number of excavations that are effected every year in the city and in the lagoon, but it is also useful. However, for this archaeology to really be of service to history it needs to be guided by a problem-oriented approach. Over time, many research aims have been proposed for the city. Some are false problems or issues of little relevance, such as that of the existence of a 'permanent settlement' even in Roman times. It reminds one of the need, plausible in the laudatory aims of the *Chronicle of Giovanni Diacono*, to restore to the city a sheen of nobility through reclaiming its 'classical' aspect (not to mention those who have tried to find traces of Aegean presence there). Others are more intriguing issues, such as those concerned with understanding the formation of the lagoon settlement in the early Middle Ages through an examination of its topographic position, its features, and the quality and nature of its economy. However, the present author remains convinced that for a full understanding of these issues they must not only be freed from many stereotypes, but must also be linked to episodes and aspects that distinguished the entire northern Adriatic area between the fifth and tenth centuries.³³ This area was one of many

³³ S. Gelichi, "Flourishing places in North-Eastern Italy: towns and *emporia* between late antiquity and the Carolingian age," in *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium*, vol. 1, *The Heirs of the Roman West*, ed. J. Henning (Berlin, 2007), pp. 77–104, in terms of both settlement sites and economic connotations.

emerging new towns and Venice is nothing but the outcome of a long competition, which was not restricted only to the lagoonal area.

Up until the ninth century, the destiny of these places was not yet determined. Archaeological research in the area of Comacchio (the Po Delta) (Fig. 14) is increasingly demonstrating the role of this emporium during the course of the eighth century, bringing out of isolation that remarkable record of the *Capitolare* for trade along the Po, drawn up by the inhabitants of Comacchio with the Longobard king Liutprand, probably in 715.³⁴ Furthermore, the people of Comacchio did not only transport salt, as rather cursory attempts have been made to show, but also other kinds of merchandise coming partly from the eastern Mediterranean, such as oil, wine and spices (Fig. 15).³⁵ This central role has been archaeologically confirmed not only by the conspicuous presence of amphorae (the mineral and petrographic analyses of which indicate that they come from both southern Italy and the eastern Mediterranean area) (Fig. 16) but also by the remains of infrastructures found on the site of Valle Ponti (wharves) (Fig. 17). Thus, Comacchio represents a genuine port at the convergence of communication routes linking the Adriatic coast to the internal marshland (to the south) and the main branch of the Po (to the north) (Fig. 18).³⁶ It is clear that these records oblige us to review the rather summary positions taken concerning not only the Po Valley trade of the eighth century, but also the might of the Longobard kings and, more generally, the economic stagnation of the eighth century.³⁷

³⁴ See L. M. Hartmann, *Zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte Italiens im frühen Mittelalter: Analekten* (Gotha, 1904); 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: atti del Convegno nazionale di studi storici, Comacchio 17-19 maggio 1984* (Bologna, 1986), pp. 461-475.

³⁵ S. Gelichi, "The eels of Venice. The long eighth century of the emporia of the northern region along the Adriatic Coast," in *774: Ipotesi su una transizione*, ed. S. Gasparri, (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 81-117.

³⁶ S. Gelichi *et alii*, "Comacchio tra IV e X secolo: territorio, abitato e infrastrutture," in *IV Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale*, eds. R. Francovich and M. Valenti (Florence, 2006), pp. 114-123; S. Gelichi *et alii*, "...igne castrum combusit... Comacchio tra la Trada Antichità e l'Alto Medioevo," *Archeologia Medievale* 32 (2006), 19-48; S. Gelichi, ed., *Comacchio e il suo territorio tra la Tarda Antichità e l'Altomedioevo* (Ferrara, 2007), pp. 363-685; idem, ed., *L'isola del vescovo. Gli scavi archeologici intorno alla Cattedrale di Comacchio. The Archaeological Excavations nearby the Comacchio Cathedral* (Florence, 2009).

³⁷ Regarding the might of the Longobard kings, see R. Balzaretto, "Cities, Emporia and the Monasteries: Local Economies in the Po Valley, c. AD 700-875," in *Towns in transition: urban evolution in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages*, eds. N. Christie

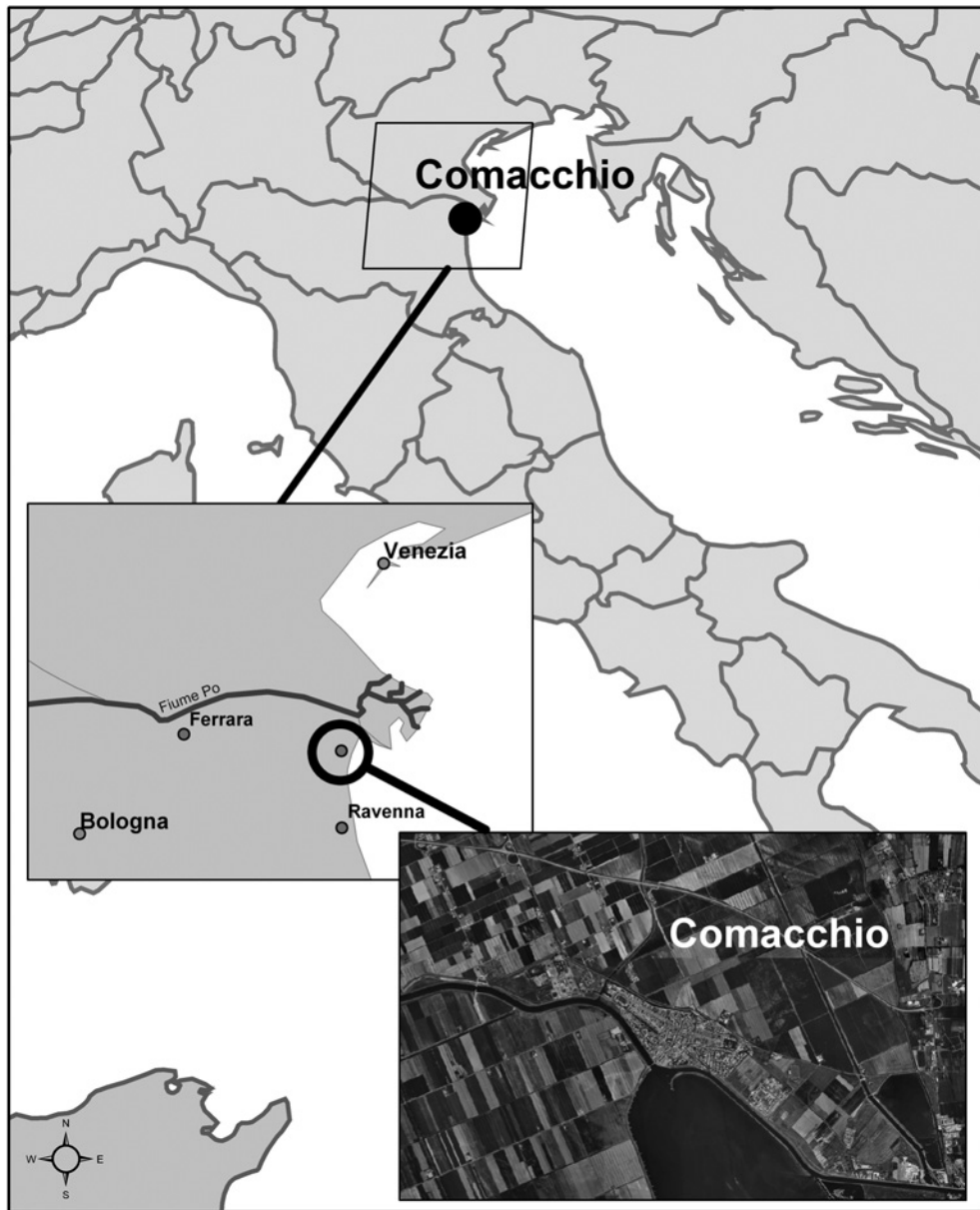
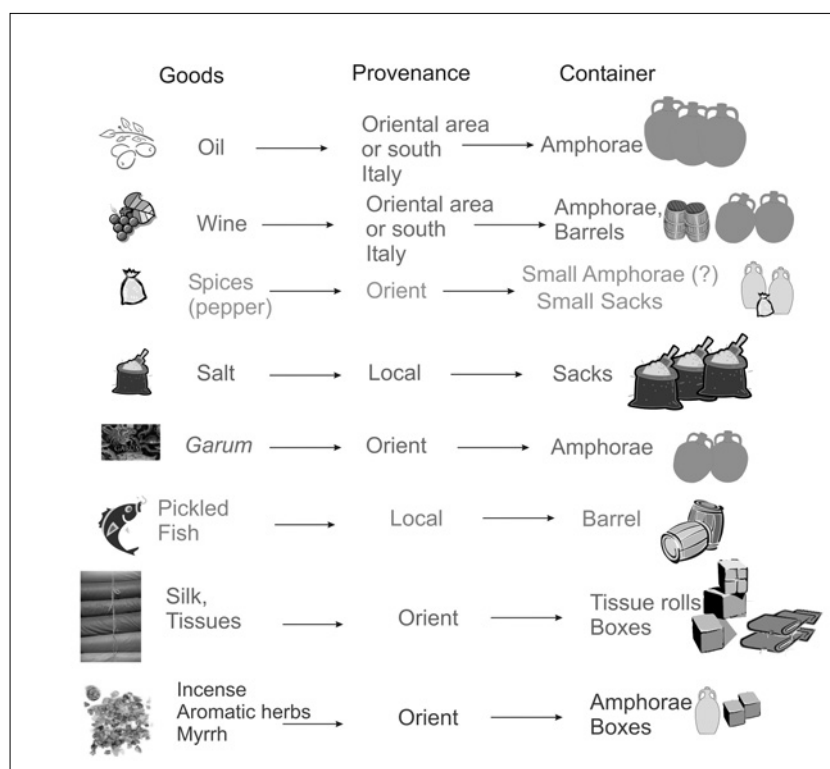


Figure 14: Localization of Comacchio

Figure 15: Goods trades by *Comaclenses* inhabitants

The extent to which such a powerful role is also evident in the Venetian lagoon at around the same period is still awaiting archaeological proof. Unfortunately, the indiscriminate gathering of data seems to confuse, rather than clarify, the picture. At the same time, some stereotypes and prejudices need to be abandoned. The much-vaunted Byzantine Venice appears increasingly as an ambiguously contoured idea, also

and S. T. Loseby (Aldershot, 1996), pp. 213–234. Regarding the more general issue of the economic stagnation of the 8th century, see C. Wickham, “Overview: production, distribution and demand, II,” in *The Long Eighth Century. Production, Distribution and Demand*, eds. I. L. Hansen and C. Wickham (Leiden, 2000), pp. 345–377; C. Wickham, *Framing the early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400–800* (Oxford, 2005); S. Gelichi, “Una discussione con Chris Wickham,” *Storica* 34 (2006), pp. 134–147.

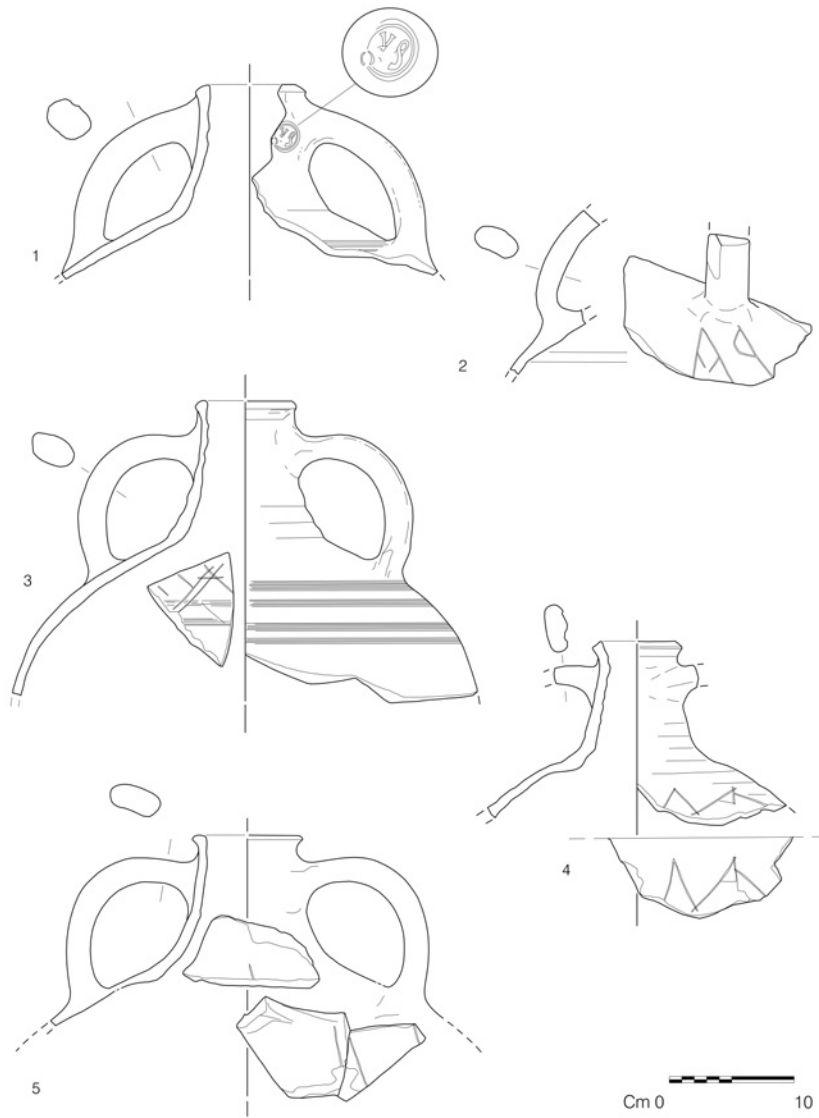


Figure 16: 8th century amphoras from Comacchio

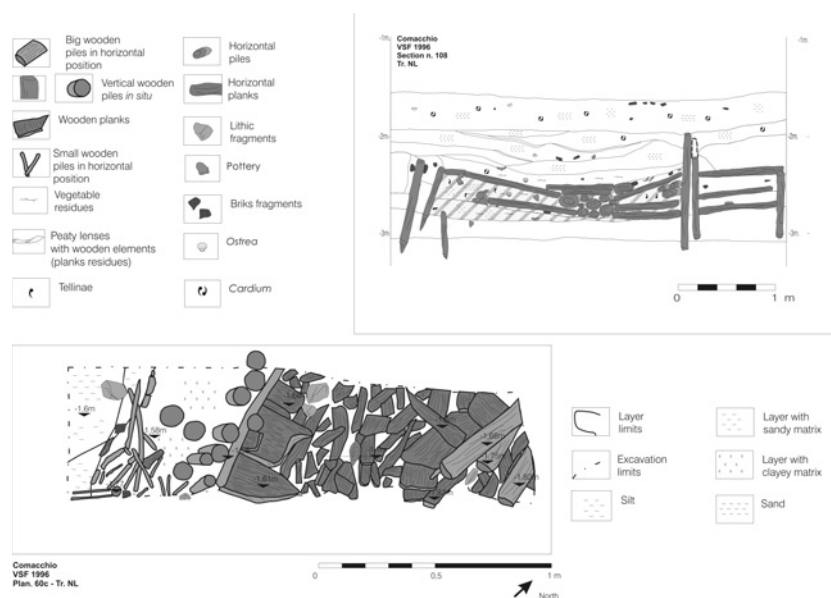


Figure 17: Comacchio, Valle Ponti—Villaggio San Francesco 1996, wooden infrastructures

at an institutional level.³⁸ Therefore, in order to reconstruct lagoon settlement patterns between the fifth and the eighth century, we should look more at contemporary villages along the Po River Valley (and perhaps also at the great emporia of northern Europe) rather than at the architecture of surviving eastern Byzantine (and Arab) towns.

From this point of view, a remarkable site is that of Cittanova Eraclea, where another buried Venice has been sought and, to some amazement, has not been found (Fig. 19). In fact, this settlement, established according to tradition by the emperor Heraclius, reflects the ways of living and building in the lagoon in the early Middle Ages more accurately than archaeologists have initially realized. Archaeological surveys and the few excavations made have shown an organized construction of an area along a canal (dwellings on areas of land surrounded by ditches and with wharves leading out onto the water) with a settlement centre of an institutional nature (seat of the duke and

³⁸ S. Gasparri, "Venezia fra l'Italia bizantina e il regno italico: la civitas e l'assemblea," in *Venezia: itinerari per la storia della città*, eds. S. Gasparri, G. Levi, and P. Moro (Bologna, 1997), pp. 61–82.

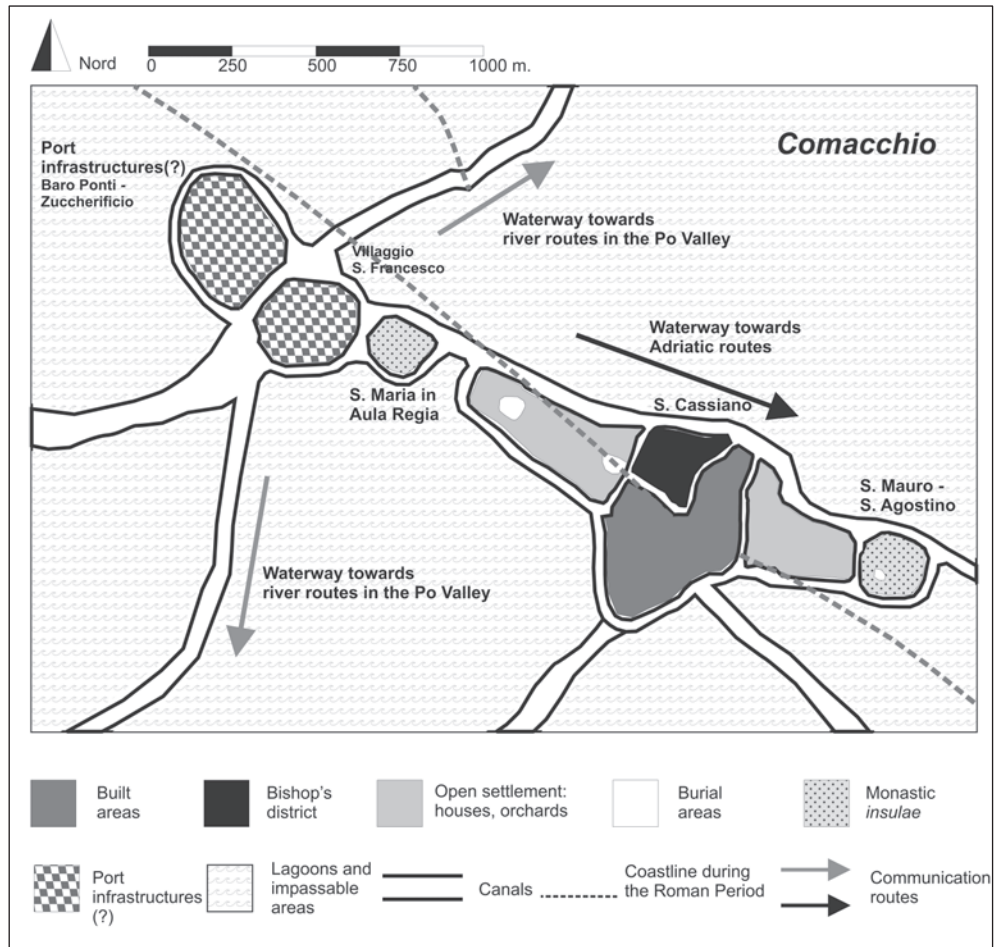


Figure 18: Comacchio in the early Middle Ages

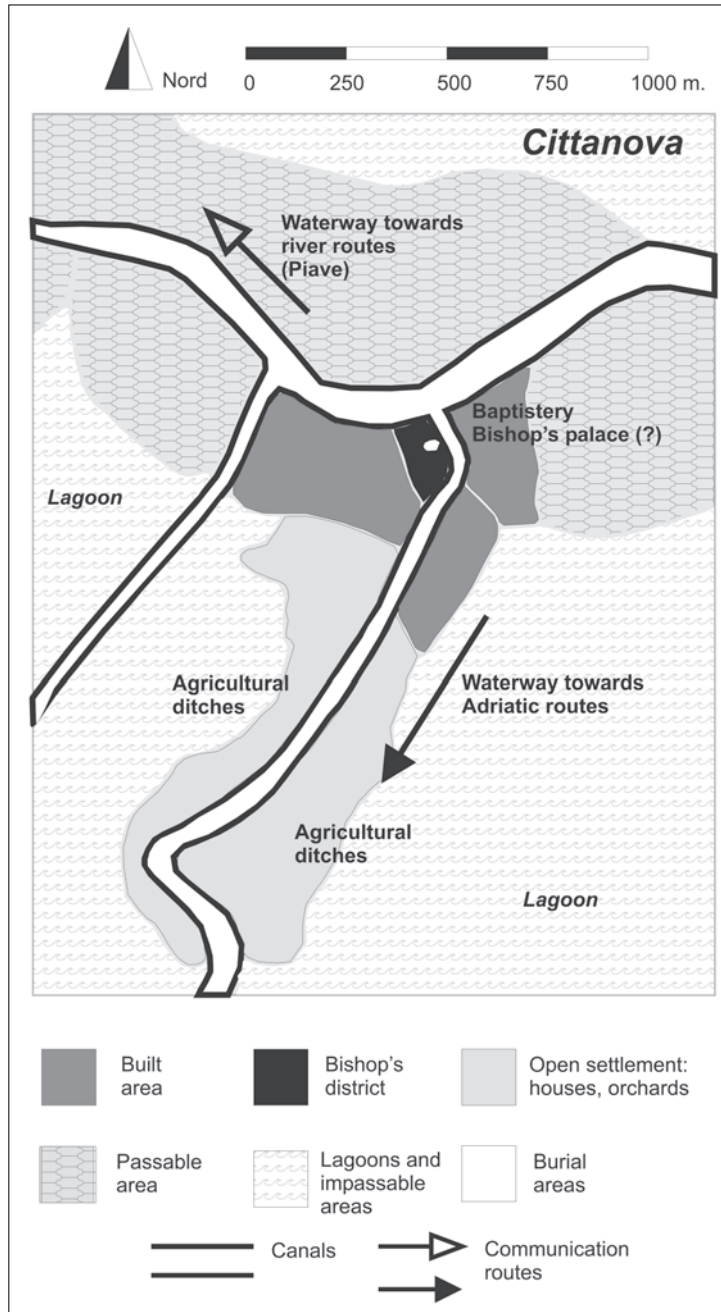


Figure 19: Cittanova in the early middle ages

the bishop) located to the northeast.³⁹ Only in this latter part do brick buildings appear to be found. My impression is that a similar situation would also emerge in Torcello, if excavations were only carried out in the areas not occupied by the churches.

Many historians are well aware of these issues, but they ask no more of archaeologists than the confirmation of their ideas that are based on written records. Archaeology of this kind has little significance; it generally finds the answers that are already known and tends to fix the information that the archaeologist, often by chance, has found onto a predetermined procedure.

Historians and archaeologists of the early Middle Ages are amazed that a city like Venice has not brought back to light the evidence, in material records of the early Middle Ages, that its position and role in history would decree. One also wonders whether, indeed, the archaeological information may help us to have a better understanding of these periods, and therefore whether it is wise to have to relinquish it. Although they are of a fragmentary nature, the publications in fact afford a glimpse of considerable potential, at present scarcely or not at all utilized. Indeed, many themes that are exquisitely archaeological, for instance topographic subjects, are still exclusively based on written sources, even though recent examples have shown that the same items of information say different things, if one only looks at them from a different angle.⁴⁰

One has the impression, moreover, that the birth and development of Venice (a 'winner' site) cannot be understood without also analysing the 'loser' sites. In the eighth and ninth centuries, the whole of the north-east coastal region, as we have seen, was an area of intense activity and competition. This competition developed on two levels: one, of a local nature, concerning the Venetian lagoon and the nearby areas whose diverse destinies are recorded in detail in written records which, in describing the successive shifts of power (from Cittanova to Metamauco, from Metamauco to Rivoalto), help us to understand the economic logic behind them (from a society whose fortunes depended

³⁹ D. Calao, "Cittanova (VE): analisi GIS," in *V Congresso nazionale di archeologia medievale: Scriptorium dell'Abbazia, Abbazia di San Galgano (Chiusdino, Siena), 26-30 settembre 2006*, eds. R. Francovich and M. Valenti (Florence, 2006).

⁴⁰ For example, A. J. Ammerman, "Venice before the Grand Canal," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, 48 (2003), 141-158, where the author discusses the topography of Venice in the eighth century.

on landed property, to one that shifted its interests to trade); and a second level, concerning all the stretch of land from the Venetian lagoon to Ravenna, where other centres (among which Comacchio stands out) seem interested in playing the same game. The archaeology of 'loser' sites is, as we have seen, extremely rewarding because it enables us to better construe the original nature of these places, which, moreover, have not undergone the great transformations of a surviving town. The research carried out so far at Cittanova, as well as that now underway in Comacchio, are an undeniable demonstration of this. However, one may also return to the Venetian lagoon and consider a different archaeological approach.

Planning the Future

The Future of London's Past is a book that marked a turning point in urban archaeological research and the concept of preventive archaeology in Europe.⁴¹ It meant that an archaeological map of a city centre was transformed from a simple instrument of historical knowledge into a model for designing and planning research. Understanding and defining how much, where, and what was conserved of our archaeological heritage came to mean also obtaining the most suitable tools for working with awareness on its future.

The London project became an example throughout Europe and, although only at a later date, also in Italy. Here, during the early eighties, the first map of urban archaeological risk was published, to be followed only by other sporadic episodes.⁴² This means that the question of envisaging the archaeological potential of a site in order to take protective action is not yet felt to be a useful instrument. Instead, the responsibility for continuing to preside over all urban archaeology is

⁴¹ See M. Biddle and D. Hudson, *The future of London's past: a survey of the archaeological implications of planning & development in the nation's capital* (Worcester, 1973).

⁴² H. Andersson, "The Era of Town Inventories. A kind of evaluation," *Medieval Europe 1992—Pre-printed Papers*, vol.1, *Urbanism* (York, 1992), pp. 15–26; P. Hudson, *Archeologia urbana e programmazione della ricerca, l'esempio di Pavia* (Florence, 1981); G. P. Brogiolo, ed., *Archeologia urbana in Lombardia. Valutazione dei depositi archeologici e inventario dei vincoli* (Modena, 1984); S. Gelichi, A. Alberti, and M. Librenti, *Cesena: la memoria del passante. Archeologia urbana e valutazione dei depositi* (Florence, 1999).

delegated to rescue archaeology, fittingly called ‘reactive archaeology’ by Alain Schnapp.⁴³

The laws in force in the field of town planning and archaeological practice also make it difficult to find suitable planning means that render urban change compatible with protective needs.⁴⁴ The shift from a concept of archaeological assets as pure heritage (the manufacture, the monument) to one in which the value lies in awareness (the context: ‘Monumentality versus Research’, to use a fitting expression suggested by Martin Carver) demands different ways of relating to the past.⁴⁵ Furthermore, this extension in terms of the type and chronology of the concept of a cultural asset and therefore also of an archaeological asset has made it even more difficult to manage and conserve them. Faced with the ‘misfortunes of abundance’, it is necessary to choose not to extend in a totally simplistic fashion a general, indiscriminate control. The danger in doing so lies in the risk of creating an impasse due to excess in the accumulation of data, the weakness of routine practice in diagnostic procedures, and the futility of redundancy in the repetition of investigated cases.⁴⁶

One of the expressions most frequently associated with Venice is that it is an extraordinary city. Nobody can doubt this claim if they only think of the uniqueness and special nature of the site. But, does this mean that her archaeology is also extraordinary, or rather, does not follow the rules? Does it mean that Venice cannot be investigated and discovered by applying to her the same diagnostic tools that are used in all other cities?

I previously raised the issue of why the archaeology of this city has contributed little, so far, to solving the question of origins; and in particular why it has little significance, at present, for understanding those very centuries, the ninth and tenth, that were undoubtedly the crucial moment in the rise of the settlement around the Rivoalto on one hand

⁴³ A. Schnapp, “Archeologia urbana, archeologia preventiva,” *Archeologia urbana e centro storico di Napoli. Atti del Convegno* (Naples, 1984), p. 25.

⁴⁴ G. P. Brogiolo, “Attori, autori e ‘fruitori’ del progetto archeologico,” in *Archeologia e urbanistica: International school in archaeology, Certosa di Pontignano, Siena 26 gennaio-1 febbraio 2001*, ed. A. Ricci (Florence, 2002), pp. 305–318; S. Gelichi, “Città pluristratificate: la consistenza e la conservazione dei bacini archeologici,” *ibid.*, pp. 61–76.

⁴⁵ M. Carver, *Archaeological value and evaluation* (Mantua, 2003), p. 40.

⁴⁶ A. Ricci, *I mali dell’abbondanza, Considerazioni impolitiche sui beni culturali* (Rome, 1996); M. Carver, “On archaeological value,” *Antiquity* 70, no. 67 (1996), 45–56.

and the affirmation of Venetian dominance in the Adriatic on the other. Indeed, historians and archaeologists of the early Middle Ages in the Mediterranean and Europe have, up to now, only been able to count on numismatic evidence, together with the development of religious institutions interpreted as an expression of economic resources.⁴⁷ This interpretation would surely be more rewarding if consideration were also taken of the archaeological data relative to such institutions and not only the information, which is still very debatable, deriving from hagiographic sources and chronicles.⁴⁸

In part, I have indirectly answered this question when considering the features of Venetian archaeology in which I identified the elements of its intrinsic weakness (*supra*). One may go further, however, and assess this problem on a narrower scale of detail and on sites not lacking in important archaeological investigation, to try and understand also whether the results obtained could have been predicted. An example is the island of Olivolo, near the Rivoalto, a diocese from the beginning of the eighth century and also the subject of an important archaeological report published in detail.

In the 1980s, an extensive stratigraphic investigation was carried out on the island on the exterior of the apse of the Church of San Pietro in Castello.⁴⁹ This excavation revealed a sequence relating to a permanent settlement from the beginning of the fifth century up to the seventh century. Subsequently, however, the archaeological record seems to come to a halt and to start up again with the late and post-medieval periods (even these are scarcely represented). This is an area, then, that from the beginning of Late Antiquity was densely inhabited and in the early Middle Ages became a large open space, perhaps a market garden. This occurred just at the time when the diocese was established at Olivolo. Such a situation, which might at first seem incongruent, may find a logical explanation when we consider once again the location of this case in point (immediately outside the present day church).

⁴⁷ R. Hodges, *Towns and trade*; M. McCormick, *Origins of the European economy*, pp. 530–531.

⁴⁸ See also Gelichi, "Venezia tra archeologia," pp. 151–186.

⁴⁹ S. Tuzzato, "Venezia. Gli scavi a San Pietro di Castello (Olivolo). Nota preliminare sulle campagne 1986–1989," *Quaderni di Archeologia del Veneto*, 7 (1991), 92–103; idem, "Le strutture lignee altomedievali a Olivolo (S. Pietro di Castello—Venezia)," *Studi di archeologia della X Regio in ricordo di Michele Tombolani* (Rome, 1994), pp. 479–485; S. Tuzzato *et alii*, "San Pietro di Castello a Venezia. Nota preliminare dopo la campagna 1992," *Quaderni di Archeologia del Veneto* 9 (1993), 72–80.

It is likely that it was the reorganization carried out on the island to make way for the new workshops connected with the bishop's residence that caused a shift of the settlement core, the traces of which remain today.

But this situation could perhaps have been predicted. In fact, on the site of Castello a series of written records (transfers of property) clearly indicate, at least in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, the presence of a number of buildings to the south-west of the church but never behind it, where a market garden was marked. The early medieval dwellings, then, of both the clergy and of other social groups in some way connected with the diocese must have developed in the area between the bell tower and the present Fondamenta di Quintavalle. The comparison of such information with the PRG (General Town Planning Scheme) 'Città antica di Venezia' ('Ancient Venice'), which shows in this area the historic buildings still in existence, would confirm this hypothesis. Besides this, the system of bridges, dating to at least the twelfth-thirteenth century, suggests viability located entirely on the western side of the island towards the internal canal of San Pietro. In addition, there seems to be sign of an internal landing-place, of a type already existing in the twelfth century, near the Church of San Sergio and Bacco (Fig. 20).

This, then, should be the ideal place to investigate the development of canal embankments and landing-places, possible boat-building yards, buildings for service or trade, and ultimately, dwellings. The assemblage of a whole series of data of various sorts (and not necessarily, or solely, archaeological) directs us, in the case of Olivolo, towards identifying specific areas of differing archaeological potential (in terms of quantity and quality of the conserved deposit). This is an aspect that will have to be taken into consideration if, in the future, our resources are to be channelled in an appropriate, effective manner.

The general impression one has, therefore, is that Venice appears to be an archaeologically complex, yet a quite 'normal' place. It is these very characteristics that make it possible to apply the methods and procedures that are now standard for other cities to this city and to the lagoon islands. In the last two years, a project of this sort has been initiated for the lagoonal area. Archaeological data, as well as all the information that could be indirectly related to the deposits have been entered into a GIS program with the aim of measuring them using a



Figure 20: Venetian lagoon, S. Pietro di Castello—Venice, evaluation of the archaeological resource

series of parameters such as chronology, extension, depth, quality, and intelligibility.⁵⁰ To do this, we have acted upon a very different series of parameters, using information relating to construction (foundation, destruction, and reconstruction of church buildings and dwellings); to the topographic distribution of production, and areas of transformation and distribution (boatyards, arsenals, furnaces, charcoal stores, warehouses, granaries, etc.); and to the ancient hydrography, with particular reference to the filling in of canals. In addition, a survey is being taken of all the archaeological gaps linked, for instance, to the work of remaking embankments and fondamenta, to the (few) vaults, and to the places occupied by wells.⁵¹ The non-archaeological sources to which we must turn in order to obtain complete results are, therefore, numerous (from archives to chronicles to maps), and are kept in various organizations and institutes. The aim is to construct means that are able to evaluate the amount and nature of what is conserved and, at the same time, indicate to us the various resources of sites and areas so as to better orientate future archaeological work according to the aims and projects it has set for itself.

Venice has been waiting for a long time for archaeology worthy of the place. Unfortunately, the archaeological history of our country, being scarcely interested in the growth of the multi-period aspect of this subject and tied to a very selective concept in which the Middle Ages carries no weight, has had a negative influence on the development of research in the lagoon. In recent years, the situation has seen an inversion of this tendency, but paradoxically the results do not seem worthy of the ample commitment. A return to normality may therefore be advisable. To paraphrase an old expression linked to the concept of urban archaeology, one must move from 'archaeology in Venice' to 'archaeology for Venice'.

⁵⁰ Carver, *Archaeological Value and Evaluation*, pp. 61–64.

⁵¹ Gelichi, "Venezia tra archeologia," pp. 151–186.