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THE RISE OF AN EARLY MEDIEVAL EMPORIUM AND THE ECONOMY OF ITALY IN THE LATE LONGOBARD AGE

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ABSTRACT

Written sources lead to the assumption that Comacchio, a town near the mouth of the Po River, was a connexion of trade and transport routes in the early medieval period, of which present, incomplete material sources have left no testimony. From this discordance between material and written sources a research project was started several years ago in the wider town area, which should help us better understand the settlement and socio-economical processes in the northern Adriatic between the 7th and 9th century, outlined in the present paper.

Key words: Comacchio, Italy, Early Middle Age, Longobard, Emporium, economy, trade

L'ASCESA DI UN EMPORIO DELL'ALTO MEDIOEVO E L'ECONOMIA DELL'ITALIA NEL TARDO PERIODO LONGOBARDO

SINTESI

Dalle fonti scritte sappiamo che, nell'alto medioevo, Comacchio (città sorta nei pressi delle foci del fiume Po) si trovava alla confluenza di uno snodo commerciale importante. Purtroppo la documentazione archeologica, finora nota, non ha lasciato molte tracce di questo periodo. Per questo motivo qualche anno fa è iniziato un progetto archeologico nel centro urbano e nelle sue immediate vicinanze. Con questo progetto si pensa di comprendere meglio la storia del popolamento e i processi socio-economici che hanno interessato l'area nord adriatica tra il settimo e il nono secolo. Questo articolo illustra questi risultati e contestualizza il sito nel quadro dell'economia padana del periodo.

Parole chiave: Comacchio, Italia, Alto medioevo, Longobardi, emporio, economia, commercio

COMACCHIO: ITS ORIGINS

Today Comacchio is a small town lying near the delta of the river Po, renowned for its fish and its charming historical centre (Fig. 1). Comacchio is also famous, however, for another reason – that of having brought to light some important Etruscan necropoli, full of Attic pottery, linked to the emporium of Spina which prospered between the 6th and 5th century BC.¹

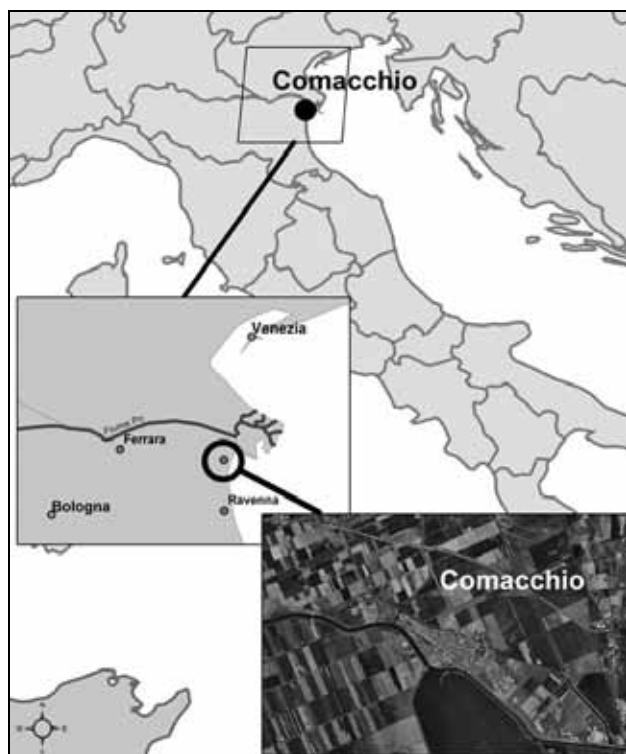


Fig. 1: Comacchio (Ferrara), Italy: localization.*
Sf. 1: Comacchio (Ferrara), Italija: lokacija.**

The existence of Spina has been an archaeological encumbrance for this place. The discoveries that were made during land reclaim works left in the shade another historical period of importance for this area, the

Early Medieval Age. Even when attention was turned to the post-Roman period, following the discovery of a church situated in Motta della Girata and identified with the *ecclesia beatae mariae in pado vetere*,² this was limited to a description of the building, with a propensity to attribute to it more ancient origins than written sources might lead to suppose.

Comacchio, inexistent as an inhabited centre in Roman times, emerges only towards the beginning of the 8th century with the appearance of an extraordinary document, an agreement with the Longobards for trade along the Po and its tributaries.³

There is no reason and no archaeological evidence at present to attribute to it a much more ancient origin. Nonetheless, the scholars who have dealt with it most recently have attempted to trace phases and materials of the Gothic period, to support the existence of trading activities from at least that period onwards.⁴ As the site, in some Early Medieval written sources, is termed *castrum*, its defensive function has been underlined, seen in the context of a process of fortification of the exarchate borders which was undertaken by the Byzantine authorities towards the beginning of the 7th century.

This interpretation, although not necessarily to be rejected as a matter of course, provides access, of no particular originality, to the history of these places and replicates, making little attempt to hide the fact, the processes which have been conjectured for another lagoon area which emerged in that very same period, that of Venice.⁵ Also in this area, it was not so much long-term economic reasons but rather those events connected to the Barbaric invasions and the subsequent Byzantine responses, that would have encouraged the inhabitants to move from the mainland to the lagoon islands; safety rather than reasons of trade.⁶

In any case, leaving aside for the moment the question of the origins of the place, still difficult to determine without undertaking targeted research, what astonishes us is that archaeology has, until now, abdicated from highlighting and analysing the features of these places at the very moment in which even written sources tell us about them. In short, if Comacchio really was an im-

* Drawings, photographs and graphic images in this article are made by the Laboratory of Mediaeval Archaeology – Ca' Foscari University of Venice (D. Calaon, E. Grandi, S. Lora, C. Negrelli).

** Risbe, fotografije in grafika v tem članku je delo Laboratorija srednjeveške arheologije Univerze Ca' Foscari v Benetkah (D. Calaon, E. Grandi, S. Lora, C. Negrelli).

1 The bibliography regarding Spina and its necropolis is substantial and beyond the scope of this work. For a recent compendium see: Berti, 2007.

2 The church, as is known, was found, excavated and thus explained by Nereo Alfieri (1966). Regarding the church and its baptistry see also Mazzotti (1965), for a recent discussion see Corti (2007).

3 This document, known as the Liutprand Capitulary, was first published by Hartmann (1904) later by Fasoli (1978) and has been discussed by many other scholars. It will be examined later in this work.

4 I refer in particular to the research of Stella Patitucci Uggeri, who has written a great deal about Comacchio in the last thirty years. Notable among her works: Patitucci Uggeri, 1983; 1986; 1989a; 1989b; 1989c.

5 I discussed these topics and took this approach in: Gelichi, 2007a.

6 On the Venetian lagoon see a recent work of mine: Gelichi, 2007b.

portant 'nodal point' for the economy of the Kingdom in the first half of the 8th century, it is amazing that material sources have left no trace of this central role.

It is for this reason, and with the aim of verifying the archaeological aspect of this central role, that some years ago we began a research project in these areas; all this in the context of gaining a better understanding of settlement and socio-economic processes in the northern Adriatic between the 7th and 9th century; a period that is obviously crucial for understanding the origins of Venice.⁷

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL REINTERPRETATION OF PREVIOUS RECORDS AND THE HISTORY OF A REGION (FIG. 2)

The archaeological project moved in two directions: on the one part, also as a contribution to an exhibition that was being organised in Comacchio (*Genti nel Delta da Spina a Comacchio*), a complete revision was undertaken of all the material from previous excavations and finds which is kept in the National Archaeological Museum of Ferrara; on the other, a new period of archaeological research was begun, with excavations opened around the site of the cathedral, which were made possible by the laying of new paving stones.⁸

The first discoveries of any interest to post-Roman archaeology of this region date back to the nineteen-twenties when, during the land reclaim operations of Valle Ponti (to the north-west of Comacchio), the excavation assistant Giacomo Proni described the presence of certain structural features (what was presumed to be a baptismal font) and numerous aligned posts which, together with some fragments of marble and limestone and other materials, were dated back to the Medieval Age (Proni, 1921; 1931).

These casual discoveries were followed, in the second half of the century, by the previously-mentioned discovery of a church building with an attached baptistery and a vast necropolis, in the location of Motta della Girata (Valle Pega, to the south-east of Comacchio) (Fig. 3). Subsequent investigations around the town centre, such as the excavations of Corso Mazzini and the investigations in Valle Raibosola, marked incidental opportunities of access to Early Medieval records of these areas. Strangely enough, this period coincides with a considerable effort being made in analytical terms. These were the years in which the history of Comacchio in Late Roman times and the Early Middle Ages was carefully evaluated and discussed and an attempt was made to add to a fragile framework (with few written records and

those rather late), a material record which gradually becomes weaker as one approaches the crucial moment of events in this area in post-Roman times, that is, the 8th century: see note 4.



Urban district / Urbani predel: 1, S. Agostino 1970; 2, S. Agostino 1975; 3, S. Agostino 1925; 4, Piazza XX Settembre; 5 and 5b, Via Mazzini 1975; 6, Aula Regia; 7, Villaggio San Francesco 2003; 8, Villaggio San Francesco 1996; 9, Area Zuccherificio 1984; 10, Valle Ponti 1920–1930.

Countryside / Podeželje: 11, S. Maria in Padovetere 1956–1962 (Church and baptistery / cerkev in krstilnica); 12, S. Maria in Padovetere 1960–1962 (cemetery / grobišče); 13, Paganella, canal Padovetere 1956; 14, Insula / Otok Silva 1975 (cemetery / grobišče).

Fig. 2: Medieval excavations in Comacchio's area.
Sl. 2: Srednjeveška izkopavanja na področju Comacchia.

⁷ These questions have been dealt with, in various degrees of detail, in (Gelichi 2006a; 2007b); see also Gelichi, 2008a and 2008c.

⁸ Preliminary findings of this research are given in: Gelichi et al., 2006a; 2006b. The whole of the research on previous material is found in various essays in the volume-catalogue *Genti nel Delta*, mentioned individually in the work as they appear. The excavations, however, are still unpublished and a preview is given here.

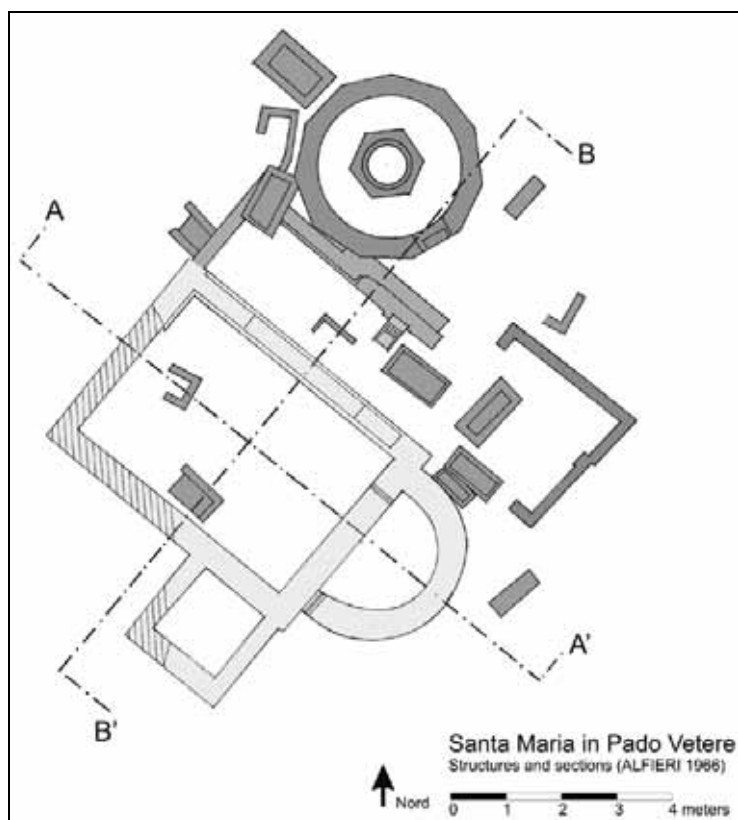


Fig. 3: Santa Maria in Padovetere: Church, baptistery and graves.
Sl. 3: Santa Maria in Padovetere: cerkev, krstilnica in grobovi.

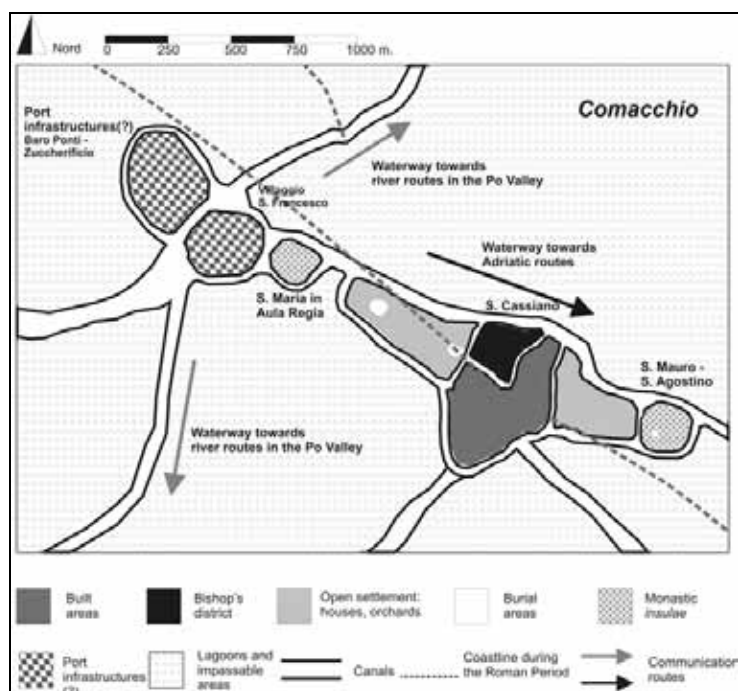


Fig. 4: Comacchio: the localization of the early middle age harbour.
Sl. 4: Comacchio: lokacija zgodnj srednjeveškega pristanišča.

One must wait until the second half of the nineties to record the first noteworthy advance. The subdivisions in an area on the outskirts of the town centre, the village of San Francesco (the same area where Proni had discovered the renowned pilings), made an archaeological investigation obligatory (Fig. 4). On that occasion, the trenches for laying the infrastructures brought to light an archaeological sequence of extraordinary interest: when analysed some ten years later it was found to contain crucial information for the history of these places in the Early Medieval Age (Calaon, 2007).

The compilation of these records, produced in a diversity of circumstances and methods – to which must be added the excavation sample on the site of the ancient monastery of Santa Maria in Aula Regia (Bucci, 2002) – enabled an up-to-date interpretation to be made of the settlement sequence in these areas, which we will attempt to briefly summarise (discussed in more detail in: Gelichi, Calaon, 2007).

The only place in this region that seems to have held a certain institutional status in Roman times is a *vicus*, the *vicus Aventia* (Uggeri, 1975, 105–108), which must have played an important administrative role in the context of management of the imperial revenue. It was perhaps for this very reason that it soon became a diocese (Patitucci Uggeri, 1989b, 431).

Besides Voghenza, the rest of the inhabited area would have featured a settlement on the river banks and the lines of dunes along the coast, with fairly regular distribution along the main lines of communication that crossed this region, such as the Popilia which linked Ravenna to Altino and Aquileia.

The results of this situation in the late Roman period are not so easy to perceive, as the little information available comes from surface investigation. Among the sites of what was to become Comacchio, traditionally identified as villas of some importance, we find the constructions discovered in the localities of Bocca delle Menate, Agosta and Baro Zavalea. These would have

been inhabited centres featuring residential buildings of a certain quality, as well as simpler, rustic buildings. The common feature is, also in this case, the close vicinity of the *fossa Augusta* which intercepts the *Padus Vetus* right in this area. The final outcomes of these sites are also unsure at present.

On the whole, the hypothesis that the inhabitants of the villages located along the riverbanks and the lagoon canals of the ancient Po valley delta were experts in river navigation, and thus also in ship-building, may be confirmed by reading some passages of Cassiodoro in which he describes the concern of Theodoricus himself engaged in the renewal of the fleet of Ravenna (Patitucci Uggeri, 1989b, 461). The appearance, in the first half of the 6th century AD., of a great new fleet in the Po valley delta would have been related to the rise of Comacchio itself. Although at present the archaeological records of Comacchio do not appear to confirm this supposition, the idea that the ancient inhabitants of the delta owed their fortune to the river and sea trade would seem to be true of the late Roman period.⁹

At the same time another set of archaeological data would seem to indicate a tendency towards centralization of settlements. Certain cemeteries found in this area testify to this, such as that found at the *insula silva*, which was excavated in the nineteen-fifties and dates back to the 7th century (Patitucci Uggeri, 1975, 26–29).¹⁰ Another necropolis, even more famous, is that excavated in Motta della Girata, near the previously mentioned church, which dates back to between the end of the 5th and the 7th century (Fig. 5; Patitucci Uggeri, 1970). The extent and the nature of this necropolis, separated from the church by an artificial canal (see below), suggest that it was related to a village community, perhaps not far from the necropolis itself, possibly located in Paganella where, in 1956, Nereo Alfieri carried out some investigations which led to the discovery of a construction on wooden piles (Alfieri, 1960, 37).¹¹

9 Theodoricus in 526 called back from the imperial lands along the river Po, workmen for the building of ships: "...ut per domum nostram navigandi quaerentur artifices..." (Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 18,1). He also gave orders that the building materials, pine, and cypress, should be taken from both the imperial revenue property and from private property: "...sive in domo regia seu in privata..." (Cassiodorus, *Variae*, 16,3).

10 Some investigations have uncovered posts planted vertically in the ground, interpreted at the time as bases for pile-dwellings. In the same geographical area, a few kilometres south, surface works have found another similar site, along the same line of dunes where the necropolis of *insula Silva* was found. Such villages may perhaps be connected with the traces which are visible in aerial photographs not far from via Romea and which may be interpreted as agricultural watering systems (Simoni, 2001, 87).

11 At that time this was taken to be part of a pre-classical habitation, also taking into consideration some comparisons that were emerging with nearby Adria. As has already been noted, (Cremonini, 1993, 157), however, these constructions are probably Late Roman or Early Medieval, as are most of the surface remains found during excavations. The presence of Attic pottery may be explained as residual material found during the building of the major infrastructures of canal building connected with the Motta della Girata canal.

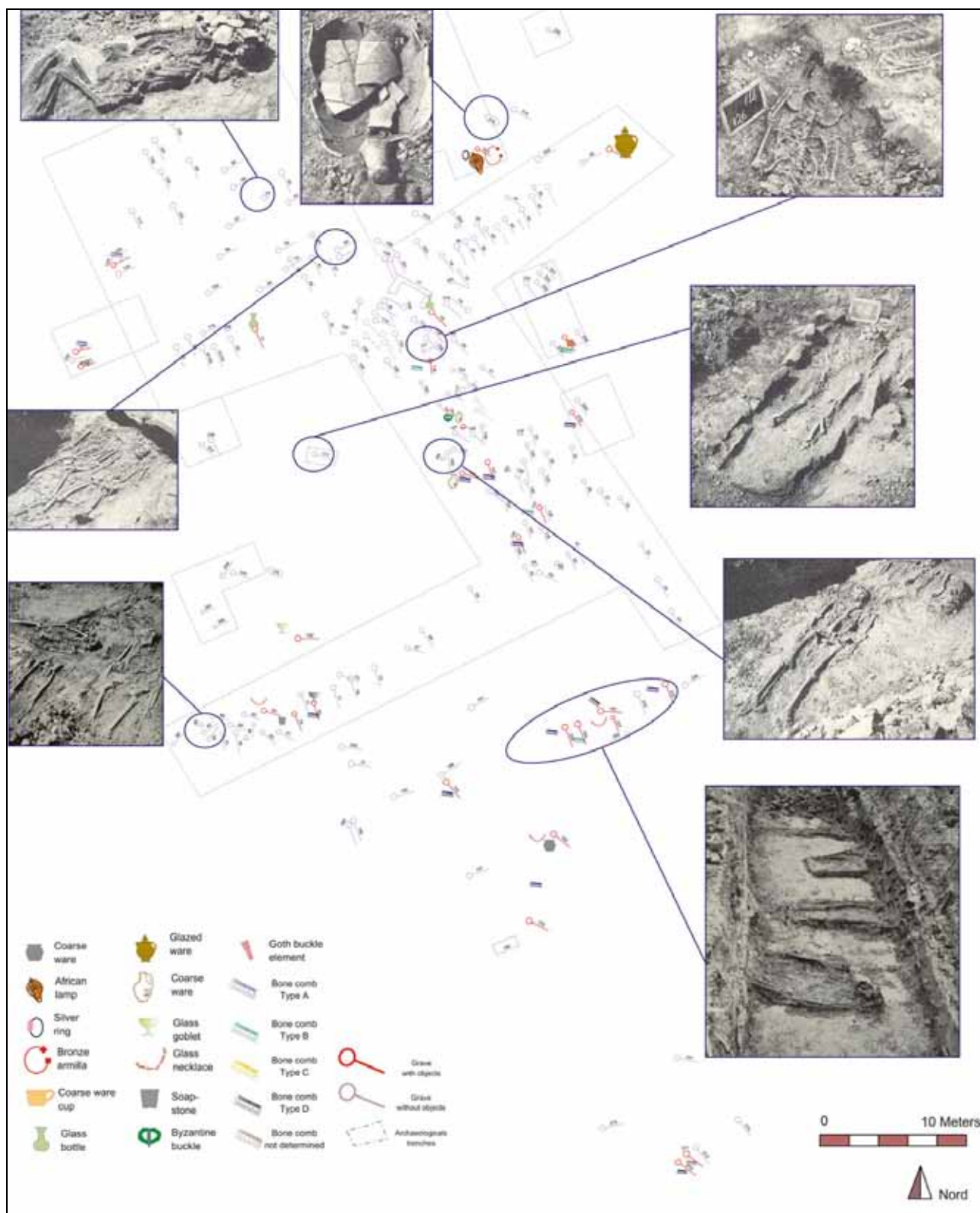


Fig. 5: Comacchio, Motta della Girata: the cemetery.
Sl. 5: Comacchio, Motta della Girata: grobišče.

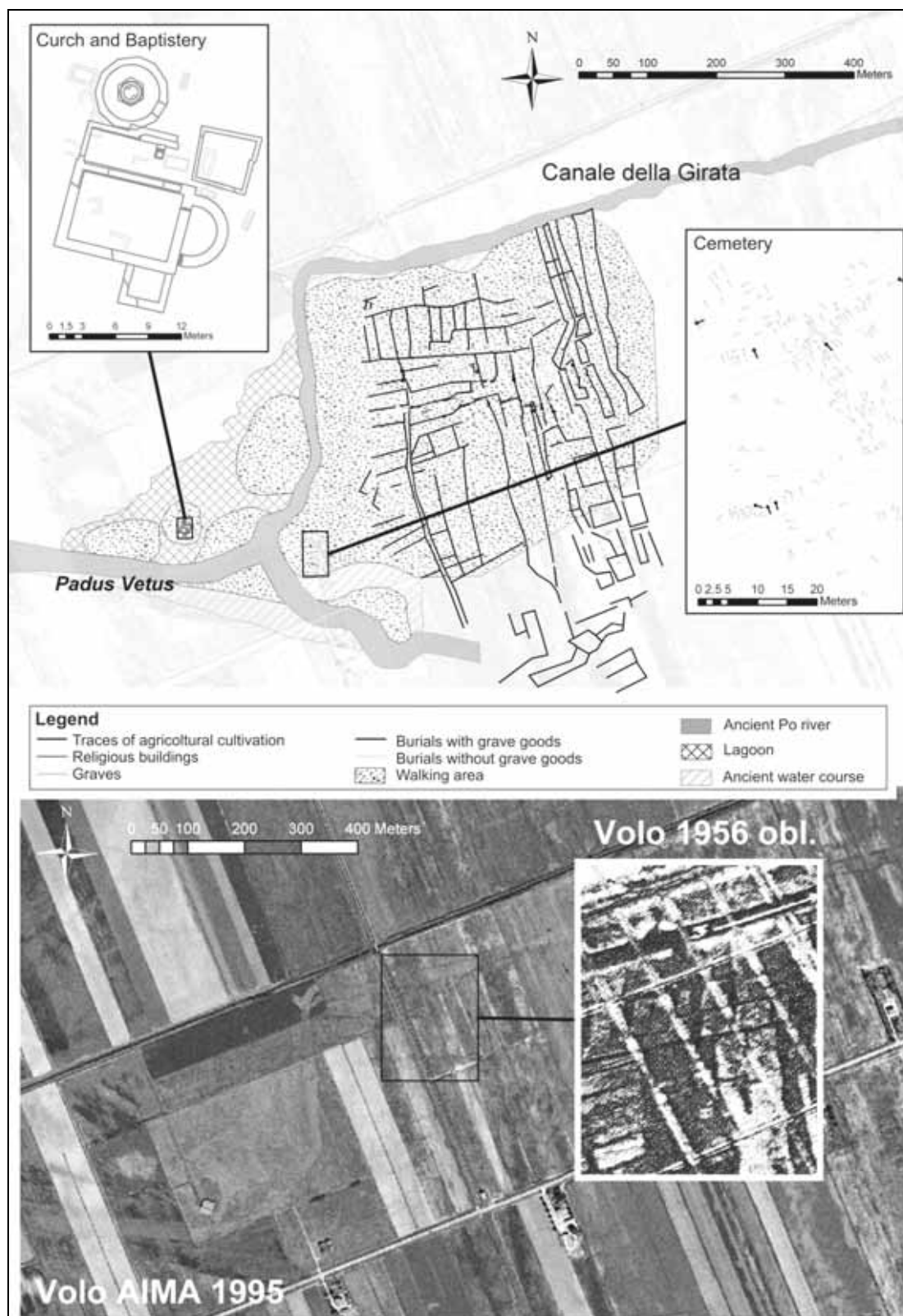


Fig. 6: Santa Maria in Padovetere and Motta della Girata: archaeological elements and aerial photo-interpretation.
Sl. 6: Santa Maria in Padovetere in Motta della Girata: arheološki elementi in interpretacija aerofotografij.

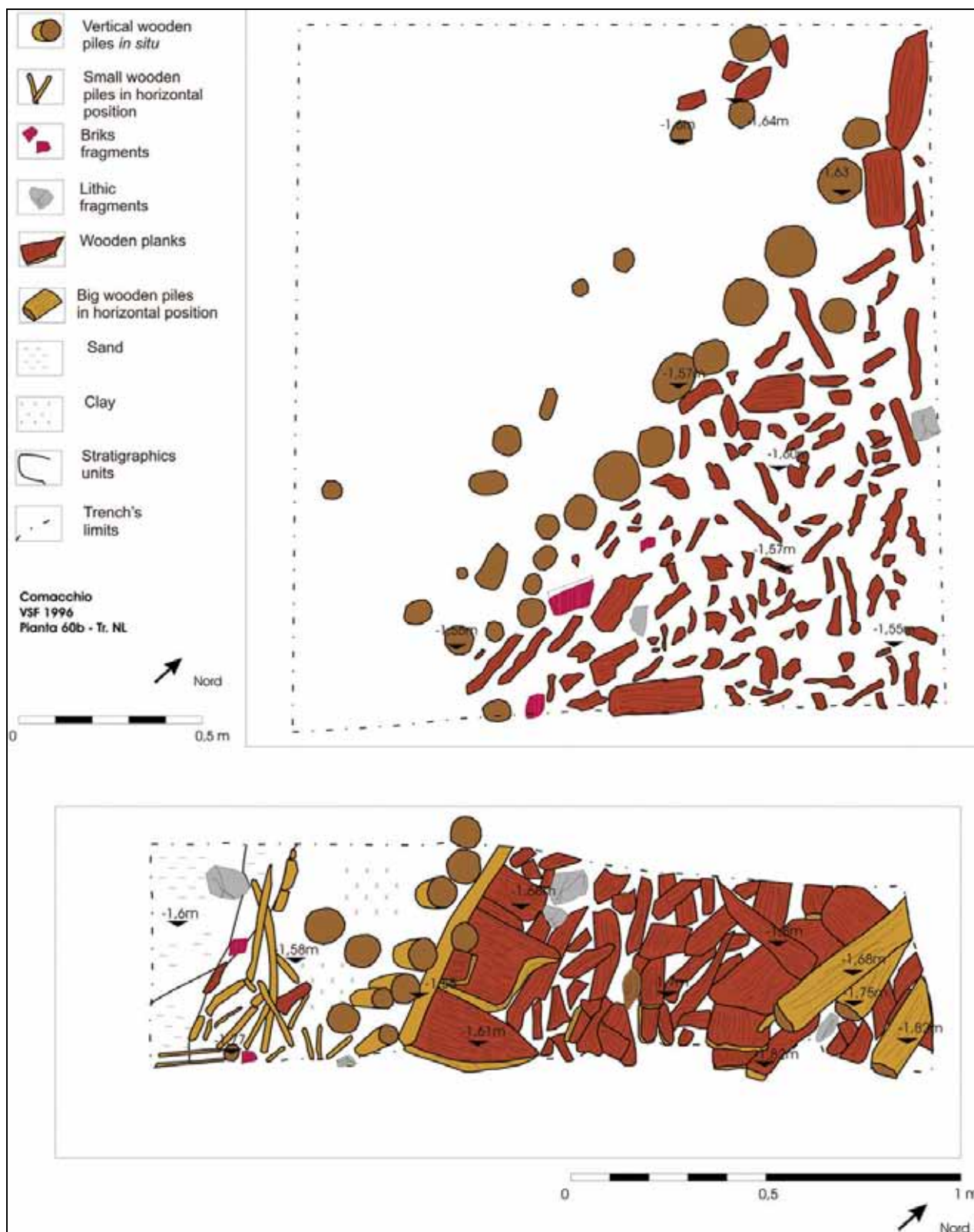


Fig. 7: Villaggio San Francesco (Comacchio): wooden platforms-docks.
Sl. 7: Vas San Francesco (Comacchio): lesene ploščadi – doki.

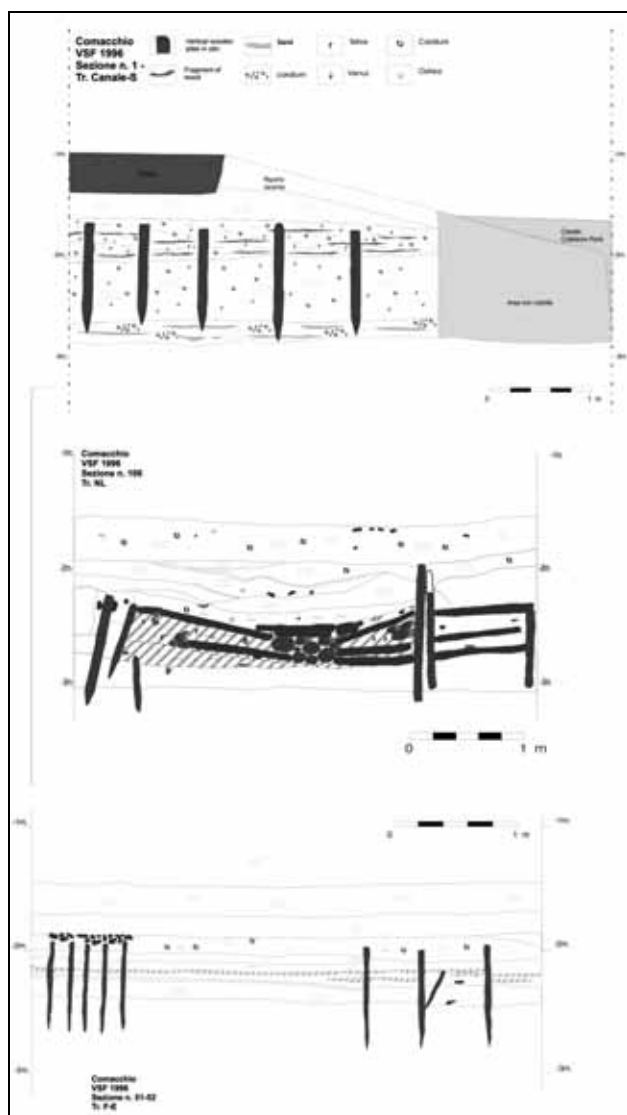


Fig. 8: Villaggio San Francesco (Comacchio): wooden platforms-docks.

Sl. 8: Vas San Francesco (Comacchio): lesene ploščadi – doki.

The canal we have mentioned, that of Motta della Girata, is a topographical feature that leads us to the question of the rise of Comacchio as an inhabited centre (Fig. 6). That this canal was navigable is evident from its appearance: the average depth of 1.5–2 m allowed for the passage of flat-bottom boats, used for journeys within the lagoon. Its construction (as this is very likely an artificial canal) probably had the specific purpose of linking the Comacchio lagoon to the inland area and enabling the most westerly parts of the lagoon to be reached. It is clear that substantial economic resources are needed to create an infrastructure like this canal, for which the major involvement of some authority is nec-

essary. If the building of the canal, or rather, its supervision, coincided with the development of the inhabited centre of Comacchio in the 7th century, this infrastructure would be part of the economic, commercial and institutional *floruit* that marked the rise of the new lagoon town. These canal works, then, would have been an obvious necessity linked to the growth of trade and traffic produced by the people of Comacchio.

The Motta della Girata canal reaches an area located to the north-west of present-day Comacchio, the area of the old sugar factory and the village of San Francesco. As we have seen, this is the area from which we have evidence of pile-dwellings and materials from the Early Medieval Age. A revision of materials and the setting up of a network (with GIS system) of all previous archaeological records, has allowed for the conjecture that right in this area there must have been constructions connected with a port (jetties, wharves etc. – Figg. 7–8). Unfortunately, the limited extent of excavations (those of 1996) and the good, but insufficient, records produced at the time of the findings of the nineteen-twenties/thirties, are not enough to give us a clear perception of the size of these constructions and their spatial relationships. From the kind of archaeological site that this is, the existence may be surmised of wharves, jetties and landing-stages set along the banks of dunes that flanked the canal where it flowed into the northern lagoon.

The materials which were found (mainly amphorae) indicate the scarcity of inhabited buildings in the vicinity, these probably being located further inland from the dunes. The chronology of these materials and therefore, at present, also of these harbour infrastructures, does not seem to date further back than the 7th century nor much beyond the 8th century, restricting their function to a narrow time span.

The chronology and the type of items found clearly coincide in attributing to these places a shipping function, related to the most flourishing period of the Comacchio emporium. It is likely, indeed to be hoped, that further investigations in these areas, which are planned for the near future, will be able to determine the chronology with greater precision and provide clearer indications of the circumstances that led these constructions to be abandoned and, in general, the utilization of this area.

Nevertheless, these findings, their interpretation and the identification of a number of archaeological markers which at last enable us to perceive clearly evidence of the 8th–9th century, have shed a glimmer of light of great importance for the history of these places and, more generally, of the northern Adriatic basin in the Early Medieval Age. On the basis of these discoveries, then, in 2006 investigations began in the very heart of Comacchio itself, on the site of the *insula episcopalis*. These investigations are still underway and will be discussed in the following section.

THE NEW RESEARCH IN THE AREA OF THE CATHEDRAL

In the heart of present-day Comacchio lies the Cathedral, which reproduces in its present form a construction of the 17th century (Fig. 9).

The necessity of laying new paving stones in the area adjacent to the church (piazza XX settembre) provided the opportunity for beginning a number of archaeological investigations, the purpose of which was to assess the depth and quality of stratification and, at the same time, obtain information about settlement progression.

How and when the community of Comacchio was formed, and its institutional evolution, are, as we have seen, not so clear, although there are no definite reasons at present to collocate it earlier than the 8th century, when, moreover, written sources also begin to mention the community and, shortly afterwards, also its bishops (Grandi, 2007, 420–426). As is testified by the complaint that bishop Vitale made to Charlemagne about customs tariffs due from the people of Comacchio for their navigation of the river (Benati, 1989, 616), the diocese undoubtedly held a role of prime importance in the process that led to the reorganisation of the settlement in the

delta area and the development of this emporium.

The archaeological investigation, still underway (winter 2008), involving an area of 180 m², has brought to light a complete distinct sequence that spans an archaeological time of about ten centuries, confirming the supposition of an initial stable occupation of this area in the late 7th century.

The most ancient periods found show a number of wooden structures connected with artisan work, as is evidenced by the finding of a furnace, fire places, metal and glass remains (amongst which, some fragments of wall mosaic tiles), together with a considerable quantity of soapstone vessels (Fig. 10). It may be supposed that these activities related to the workshop of the church building, the remains of which have not at present been found.

The abandoning of this building coincides with a definite change of function of the whole quarter, which became a funeral area with burials laid out in an orderly way, placed within well-defined topographic bounds, presumably in front of the Early Medieval church (Fig. 11). To this building must have belonged the numerous, decorated architectonic elements and remains of mosaic flooring that have been found during excavations.

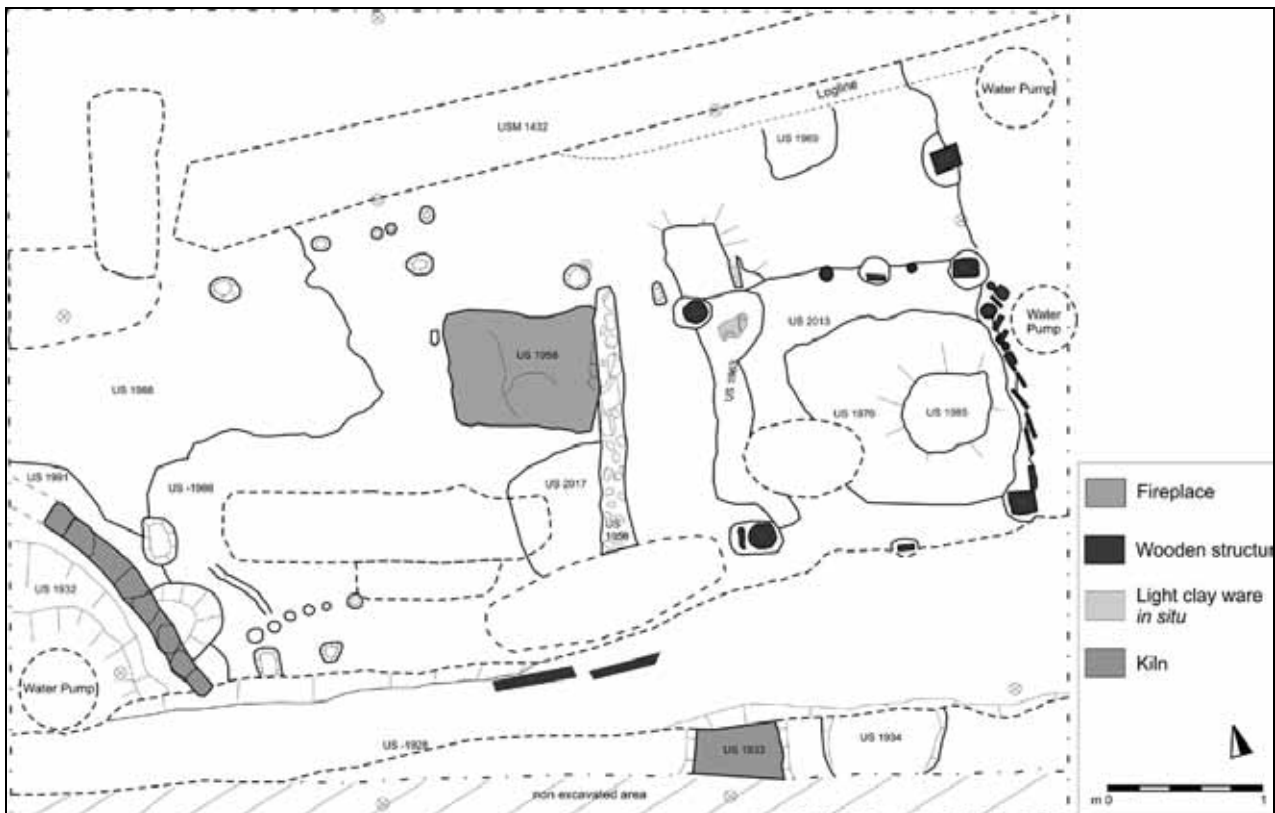




Fig. 10: Piazza XX Settembre (Comacchio): the productive area.

Sl. 10: Piazza XX Settembre (Comacchio): obrtni predel.

The necropolis was of short duration and above it, between the 9th and 10th century, an embankment was built running north to south, which must have flanked a ditch, thus acting as a protective waterfront.

The most substantial walls found in this area belong to the central Middle Ages, when a great workshop construction was built that most likely formed part of the bishopric (Fig. 12). This construction, of rectangular plan, facing east-west and perhaps having a porticoed façade, was built with fragments of brickwork of Roman type and numerous architectonic stone features joined with brittle mortar. The presence of these reused items (Fig. 13), together with other sculptural features and building materials (mosaic tesserae, fragments of painted plaster), show that in connection with these works the Early Medieval church building with its ornaments was, at least partly, demolished. Besides this large building, the excavation has been able to reveal a small portion of a side of a Romanesque place of worship, found near the southern wall of the present-day church. This finding, although not able to tell us much about the features

of this workshop, nonetheless confirms that the Medieval building (and in all probability the Early Medieval building) are to be found in the same place where, in the 17th century, the church was rebuilt and perhaps enlarged.

Successive events in the post-Medieval Age testify to new cemeteries being made in some areas outside the church and a number of architectonic or structural interventions which can be linked to the new version of the 17th century cathedral. At that time part of the outside area was paved in brick.



Fig. 11: Piazza XX Settembre (Comacchio): the early medieval cemetery.

Sl. 11: Piazza XX Settembre (Comacchio): zgodnjesrednjeveško grobišče.



Fig. 12: Piazza XX Settembre (Comacchio): a part of the bishop's palace.

Sl. 12: Piazza XX Settembre (Comacchio): del škofijske palače.

THE CAPITULARY, SALT AND OTHER THINGS

The history of Comacchio, and that of its excavations too, would remain as an interesting page of archaeology but only of local importance, if the context in which this site has developed did not touch upon topics and problems of a broader kind and if the trade connections identified from the 8th century in Comacchio did not place this town of the delta in a network of connections on a Mediterranean scale. Two aspects appear to us of particular importance: the quantity of traffic, which seems to be very different from that of nearby Ravenna, whose main port at that time seems to have been drastically reduced; the direction of traffic, which emerges

very clearly, although indirectly, from an extraordinary (and unique) source, that of the Liutprand Capitulary, and from the nature of the archaeological record.

The situation of Comacchio in the 8th century does not, however, seem to be unique; indeed, this place appears to share some strategies and policies with a whole number of other flourishing new places of the Adriatic, above all those of the Venetian lagoon (Gelichi, 2006a; 2007b).

From the archaeological investigation made around the church, as also from previous findings and excavations in the village of San Francesco in 1996, there is a very substantial number of amphorae (Fig. 14). There are so many of them that they are well documented even in the late and post Medieval levels as residual material. A somewhat detailed analysis of these jars (in particular Negrelli, 2007), including mineral-petrographic analysis (Capelli, 2007), has shown them to be mainly of eastern origin dating back to the 8th–9th century. It remains to wonder what the ports of departure were, what goods they were carrying and for what kind of economy.

The round amphorae undoubtedly bring to mind the great market of Constantinople, to which may be referred certain morphological comparisons with findings in the sequence of Saraçhane. For the same reasons there are also connections with the Aegean-Anatolia area and with the Syrian coast. A possible connection with Ponto,¹² is still to be established. The other major guideline of trade is implicitly indicated by the huge quantity of soapstone,¹³ above all talcoscisti from the central Alpine area: the great Po valley river thus placed Comacchio in touch with the ports and towns of the *Regnum*. It is clear that these remains only testify in an indirect and very limited way, to the nature and volume of traffic. Many goods, not only salt, were carried in wooden or cloth containers. These goods, such as fabrics, spices, wood and other raw materials, like partly-worked materials, may constitute very minor archaeological traces, if indeed they exist at all; without even mentioning the slave trade (McCormick, 2001). Some of these goods are expressly mentioned in the so-called Liutprand Capitulary, while others are mentioned occasionally in other written sources (Fig. 15).

In addition to a long-distance trading economy, finally, we must mention locally developed production, one of the particular features of Early Medieval emporia. Salt, fish in brine, and perhaps pottery and glassware played a fundamental role which does not always appear in the archaeological record.

12 In addition, the link with the eastern coast of the Adriatic, and with some products from southern Italy, still has to be carefully evaluated.

13 For observations regarding steatite as a marker of Po valley trading, see Alberti (1997).



Fig. 13: Piazza XX Settembre (Comacchio): elements from the early medieval church.
Sl. 13: Piazza XX Settembre (Comacchio): elementi zgodnesrednjeveške cerkve.

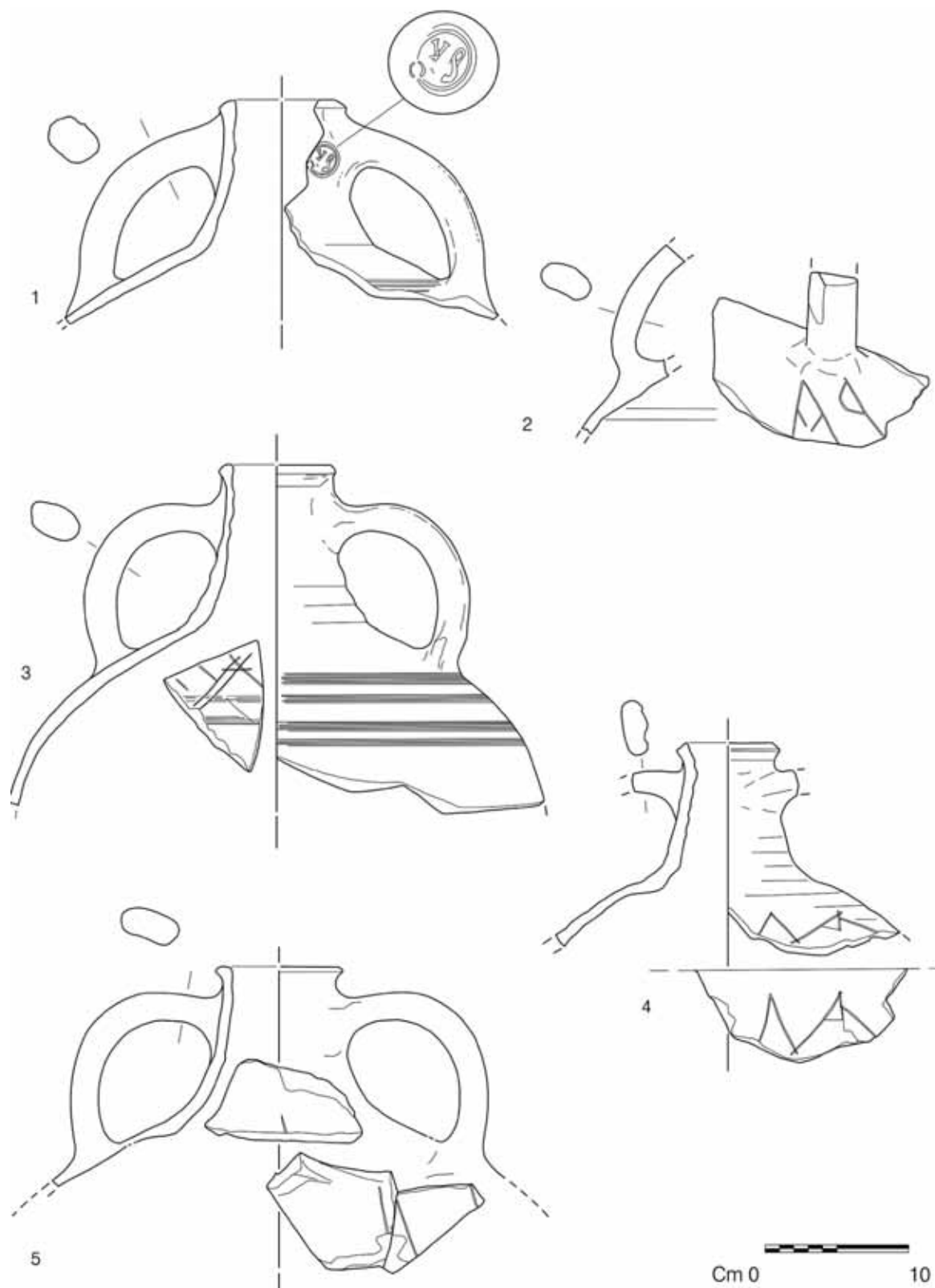


Fig. 14: Early medieval globular amphoras from Comacchio.
Sl. 14: Zgodnesrednjeveška kroglasta amfora iz Comacchia.

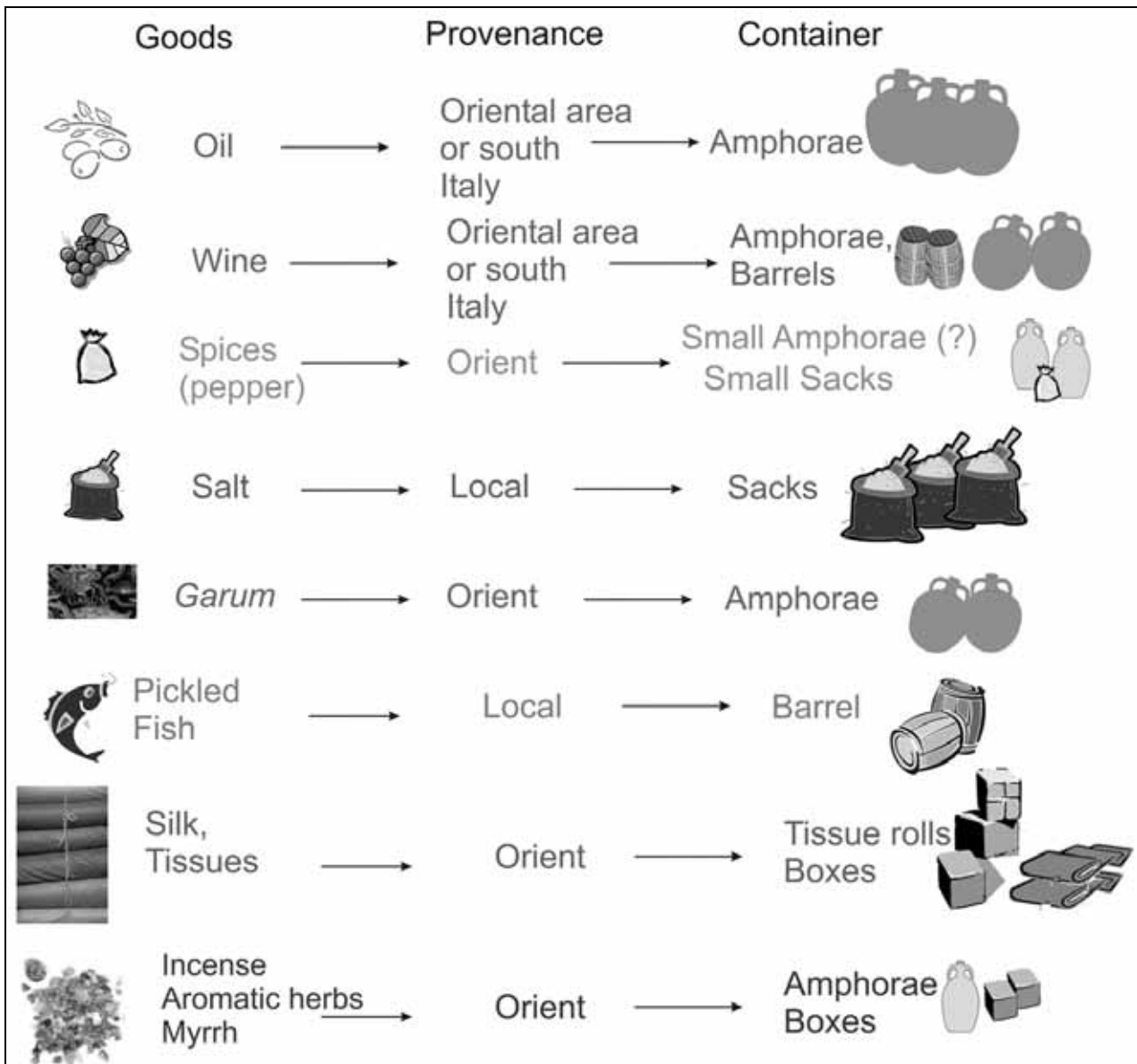


Fig. 15: Goods trades by Comaclenses inhabitants
Sl. 15: Blagovna menjava prebivalcev Comaclenses.

The archaeological research, then, shows a town that was among the most thriving of northern Italy in the 8th and part of the 9th century. A situation that made Comacchio a specialised place, that is, an emporium, too often simply relegated to the position of a mere producer of a common asset (salt), only of relevance in the framework of a scattered and regionalised economy.

The constructions found in the area of the village of San Francesco, on the western outskirts of the present village, seem to be something more than simply a dock area for boats. These constructions, together with the presence of an artificial canal, that of Motta della Girata, indicate a certain care and attention paid to the river-

lagoon infrastructures that was anything but ordinary. It is clear that if our terms of comparison remain the maritime infrastructures of the Late Roman period, the comparison does not stand up (however, it worth underlining the fact that those infrastructures, made of durable material and with rather sophisticated techniques, marked a period that was, all things considered, brief, even in the Greek and Roman world. – Regarding this question see: Gelichi, 2008b).

Throughout the 8th century, then, Comacchio must have been something more than a place devoted to fishing and the salt trade, and the agreement with the Longobards of 715 must be anything but a bizarre



Fig. 16: Reconstruction of Comacchio in Early Middle Age (drawing: R. Merlo).

Sl. 16: Rekonstrukcija Comacchia v zgodnjem srednjem veku (risba: R. Merlo).

document that miraculously escaped the ravages of time (Fig. 16); through the archaeological evidence of Comacchio we may perceive a world, that of the Longobard Kingdom, that was less isolated and more dynamic than opinions, at least the most recent, have attempted to describe (Balzaretti, 1996; Wickham, 2005; Gelichi, 2006b).

This was an area through which travelled goods of local origin but also others (such as oil, spices, *garum*, some wine, perhaps also fabrics) that must have come to Italy from the south or from the eastern Mediterranean. Only in terms of quantity (the volume of traffic) the comparison with Roman times (and Late Roman) obviously will not stand; but what comparison, of this kind, would show a different result for this period?

During the 8th century, following the peace made with the Byzantines in 680, the traffic as described in archaeological records outlines a thriving economy in the

various towns of the Po valley area: the picture of economic relations appears to be anything but 'stagnant' and marginal. It was rather the rise of Venice, in the 9th century, and its trade destined for a European market beyond the Alps, that was to relegate the Po valley area to a marginal role. The products arriving and being traded in the port of Comacchio were, in fact, destined for the élite of the Po valley plain. Conversely, the trade of the following century went beyond northern Italy, which seems rather to become characterized by more local trade of medium and short range.

With the advent of the Carolingian Age, and the choice made by the Carolingians of the Venetian lagoon (and of a site within the lagoon, that of Rivoalto) as a point of reference for their trading interests, the destiny of Comacchio was sealed and that of the Po valley economic system which had found, in the small town to the south of the Po delta, its point of reference.

VZPON ZGODNJSREDNJEVEŠKEGA EMPORIJA IN EKONOMIJA ITALIJE V POZNEM LANGOBARDSKEM OBDOBJU

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POVZETEK

Danes je Comacchio majhno mesto blizu ustja reke Pad, znano po ribah in očarljivosti srednjeveškega jedra, obenem pa je tudi najdišče pomembnih etruščanskih nekropol, povezanih z znanim emporijem Spino, ki je bila na svojem višku med 6. in 5. stoletjem pr.n.š. V obdobju rimske nadvlade na Apeninskem polotoku Comacchio ni bil

poseljen, medtem ko obstaja več pisnih virov, ki orisujejo poselitev in samo mesto v srednjeveškem obdobju. Vendar pa, glede na to, da smemo na podlagi ohranjenih pisnih virov upravičeno označiti Comacchio za stičišče gospodarskih aktivnosti, je o tej pomembni vlogi ostalo ohranjenih presenetljivo malo materialnih dokazov. Ravno iz tega razloga je bil pred leti pričet raziskovalni projekt, ki naj bi osvetlil poselitev in socio-ekonomske odnose na omenjenem območju okolice Comacchia ter širšem območju severnega Jadrana med 7. in 9. stoletjem. Na eni strani so raziskovalci ponovno preučili ves material iz predhodnih izkopavanj, obenem pa so se pričela tudi nova izkopavanja v različnih predelih starega mesta, predvsem z izpostavljenimi grobišči na lokacijah Motta della Girata in San Francesco. Za datacijo pričetka zgodnesrednjeveške poselitve v Comacchiu so posebno pomembni ostanki amfor in drugega odpadnega materiala iz pristanišča, ki naj ne bi segali dlje od 7. stoletja, kar potrjuje hiatus v poselitvi med etruščansko in zgodnesrednjeveško fazo, ko je bilo središče regije predstavljeno v bližnji vicus Aventia. Arheološke raziskave, ki še vedno potekajo, so odkrile arheološka obdobja trajajoča skoraj tisočletje, z začetkom stabilne poselitve že v poznem 7. stoletju. Zgodovina Comacchia in njegova arheološka odkritja pa bi ostala le lokalnega pomena, če ne bi delila usode in težav širšega sredozemskega prostora, katerega mreža trgovskih povezav je obsegala tudi njega. V resnici se zdi, da si Comacchio deli strategije in rešitve s številnimi cvetočimi novimi mesti Jadrana, posebej tistimi v Beneškem zalivu. Poleg širšega trgovsko-prometnega omrežja pa je potrebno omeniti tudi lokalno proizvodnjo, eno izmed posebnih lastnosti zgodnesrednjeveških emporijev, ki pa je zaradi specifičnosti blaga s katerim so trgovali včasih ni mogoče videti tudi v arheološkem zapisu.

Ključne besede: Comacchio, Italija, zgodnji srednji vek, Langobardi, emporij, ekonomija, trgovina

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