

Local and Interregional Exchanges in the Lower Po Valley

(Eighth–Ninth Centuries)



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Beyond Pirenne

LOOKING AT THE MEDITERRANEAN, BUT also focusing much more locally on the north of Italy and particularly on the Po Valley plain, historians and archaeologists seem to agree that the population was largely self-sufficient in its production and distribution of commodities in the years between the seventh and the tenth centuries.

Whether one follows the view put forward by the great Belgian historian Henri Pirenne,¹ or advocates the theory that signs of a crisis can be seen well before the advent of the Arabs,² there is no doubt that even the most recent historiography tends to treat the eighth century as a period of stagnation,³ with low vitality and little creation or use of medium- or long-range trading networks.⁴ This is not to suggest

that trade relations completely ended, since valuable merchandise would in any case have continued to circulate for a restricted elite.⁵ However, the crisis would have been felt in terms of what may be called the intermediary systems, and trade relations would have been reduced to a very local and regional scale. More recently even Michael McCormick, who sees the flourishing of Venice at the end of the eighth century as the turning point of the European and Mediterranean economy,⁶ pays no attention to the features and the nature of earlier trade relations, even in those areas that contributed to the origins of the future *Serenissima*.

The analysis of those areas and of their economies, therefore, may be useful not only to establish more firmly the origin and fate of a unique city like Venice but also to evaluate whether the eighth century should be seen as a sort of long, stagnant waiting period or as revealing, at least in certain situations and specific places, more dynamic features.

The purpose of this chapter therefore is to discuss the scale of the northern Italian economy between the late Longobard age and the early Carolingian age, drawing on archaeological sources. Its objective is to demonstrate how the eighth century may be seen as a time of considerable vitality with regard to medium- and long-range trade, how this vitality must have been connected to an inadvertent

1 As is well known, Henri Pirenne defined his theory at the beginning of the last century and published a synthesis in his famous volume *Mahomet and Charlemagne* (H. Pirenne, *Mahomet et Charlemagne* [Paris, 1922]). His theory has been broadly discussed; for a recent article, see P. Delogu, "Reading Pirenne Again," in *The Sixth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand*, ed. R. Hodges and W. Bowden (Leiden, 1998), 15–40.

2 Pirenne's theory has been discussed, from an archaeological viewpoint, particularly by R. Hodges and D. Whitehouse, *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe* (London, 1983).

3 See I. L. Hansen and C. Wickham, eds., *The Long Eighth Century: Production, Distribution and Demand* (Leiden, 2000).

4 See also C. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005), and idem, "Overview: Production, Distribution and Demand, II," in Hansen and Wickham, eds., *The Long Eighth Century*, 345, 358–60.

5 Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*. A similar position has been developed by B. Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005).

6 M. McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce, A.D. 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001), 523–31.

system created by the Longobard rulers following the establishment of peace with the Byzantines in 680, and, lastly, how the flourishing of Venice may be rooted in these events.

The Economy of Northern Italy during the Eighth Century: A Historical and Archaeological Assessment

More than ten years ago, Ross Balzaretto published a highly interpretive article that discussed in particular northern Italy's economy between the eighth and the ninth centuries;⁷ it essentially uses written sources, particularly a treaty between the Longobards and the inhabitants of Comacchio (a town that developed in the early Middle Ages at the mouth of the River Po; fig. 9.1) about trade on the River Po and its effluents.⁸ As the people from Comacchio were obliged to pay duties on trade, the record of these taxes (paid in cash but also in kind) make it possible to get an idea of the goods they exchanged along those rivers.

The Liutprand Capitulary, one of the few written sources of the eighth to ninth centuries, explicitly refers to the types of goods circulated,⁹ but there is a danger of misjudging its importance. When consulting this source, scholars tend to focus on salt,¹⁰

not only because of its role in early medieval nutrition but also because the tax on salt was actually mentioned as the principal duty that had to be paid in the port stations. This suggests that salt was the most sought-after commodity and that the people from Comacchio provided large quantities of it, but says nothing about the role and the importance of the other traded goods.

Indeed, the archaeological evidence considered by Balzaretto, recovered from the urban excavations and from the monasteries, suggests an alternative scenario. The archaeology of the principal cities that for different reasons are mentioned in the capitulary (Cremona, Mantua, Pavia) seems to indicate a lack of long-distance trade and exchange: the traditional long-distance traders are totally absent and, further, the quality of their material structures does not offer signs of the settlements' vitality. At the same time, even the monasteries' archaeology points toward a sort of impasse, though data on important urban or rural coenobia have not yet been published, with the exception of San Salvatore a Brescia.¹¹

Essentially, the scarcity of both material and written sources seems to fit the theory of economic decline. The signs of dynamism displayed by the Liutprand Capitulary refer to the inner Po Valley. This could be described as a sort of constrained vitality;¹² and the goods attested in the capitulary,

7 R. Balzaretto, "Cities, Emporia and 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*, ed. N. Christie and S. T. Loseby (Aldershot, 1996), 213–34.

8 This source, known as the Liutprand Capitulary, has been dated to 715 or 730. The *habitatores* of Comacchio were in fact the pact's contracting party (represented at this time by a *presbyter*, a *magister militum*, and two *comites*) and, generically, the Longobards. The text is known thanks to a thirteenth-century copy, which is kept in the Archivio Vescovile di Cremona; it was first published by L. M. Hartmann in 1904 (*Zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte Italiens: Analekten* [Gotha, 1904], 74–90). G. C. Mor has also examined the capitulary, with a different interpretation; see "Un'ipotesi sulla data del 'Pactum' c. d. Liutprandino coi 'milites' di Comacchio relativo alla navigazione sul Po," *ASIt* 135 (1977): 493–502. Its text has also been discussed particularly with regard to relations with the Padano River ports by G. Fasoli, "Navigazione fluviale: Porti e navi sul Po," in *La navigazione mediterranea nell'Alto Medioevo*, Settimane di studio 25 (Spoleto, 1978), 565–607.

9 See, for example, the tribute in pepper and cinnamon paid by the Comaclenses to the monastery of Bobbio in the ninth century: A. Castagnetti, M. Luzzati, G. Pasquali, and A. Vasina, eds., *Inventari altomedievali di terre, uomini e redditi* (Rome, 1979), 138.

10 On salt cultivation, and on the roles of Comacchio and Venice within the salt trade system, see the standard studies by Hartmann, *Zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte Italiens*; M. Merore, "Die

venezianischen Salinen der älteren Zeit in ihrer wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Bedeutung," *Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 13 (1916): 71–107; and G. Volpe, *Medio Evo italiano* (Florence, 1923), 256; as well as J.-C. Hocquet, *Le sel et la fortune de Venise*, vol. 2, *Voiliers et commerce en Méditerranée* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq, 1979). On salt production in Comacchio, see L. Bellini, *Le saline dell'antico delta* (Ferrara, 1962). Further, regarding the role of the salt in relation to the Liutprand Capitulary, see 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* (Bologna, 1986), 461–75.

11 The monastery was founded by King Desiderio and his wife Ansa, ca. 750. The archaeological sequence of the excavations was already known by the end of the 1980s (G. P. Brogiolo, "Trasformazioni urbanistiche nella Brescia longobarda: Dalle capanne in legno al monastero regio di San Salvatore," in *Italia Longobarda*, ed. G. C. Menis [Venice, 1991], 101–19), but a more recent series of monographs have pushed their date back by a few years: see G. P. Brogiolo, ed., *S. Giulia di Brescia gli scavi dal 1980 al 1992: Reperti preromani, romani e alto medievali* (Florence, 1999); G. P. Brogiolo, F. Morandini, and F. Rossi, eds., *Dalle "domus" alla corte regia: S. Giulia di Brescia: Gli scavi dal 1980 al 1992* (Florence, 2005).

12 S. Gelichi, "Tra Comacchio e Venezia: Economia, società e insediamenti nell'arco nord adriatico durante l'Alto Medioevo,"

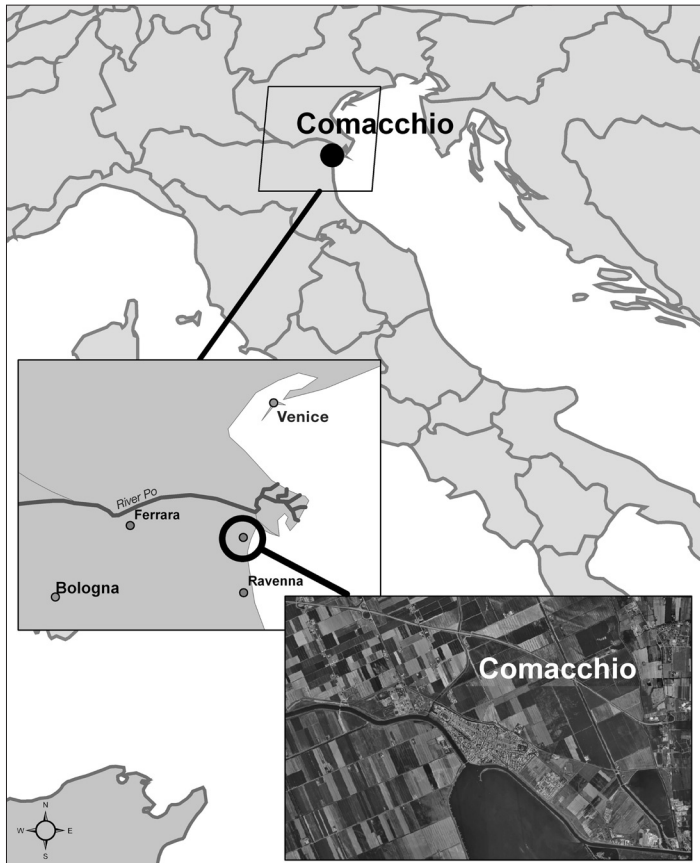


Figure 9.1.
Location of Comacchio (Ferrara)
(drawn by Laboratorio di Archeologia
Medievale—Venezia)

which were certainly exotic (for instance, the spices and maybe the garum), have been interpreted as luxuries directed at an elite client base.

Thus we see, on the one hand, a drastic reduction in Mediterranean trade—the collapse of the bulk utilitarian commodities system,¹³ which was characteristic of the late antique economy—and, on the other hand, a very high level of circulation of luxury goods. The latter phenomenon has always existed, and therefore it does not help our understanding of the qualitative and quantitative level of Mediterranean trade.

It is important to underline that there is a remarkable lack of evidence in the archaeology of northern Italy for the new settlements (towns or emporiums) that appear in the written sources from the seventh

to eighth centuries (fig. 9.2). Among these settlements are a number of centers from the Venetian lagoon plexus (or at the borders of the lagoon), such as Torcello,¹⁴ Olivolo,¹⁵ Cittanova,¹⁶ Costanziaco,¹⁷

14 On Torcello, see E. Crouzet-Pavan, *La mort lente de Torcello: Histoire d'une cité disparue* (Paris, 1995). On its archaeology, see L. Leciejwicz, E. Tabaczyńska, and S. Tabaczyński, *Torcello: Scavi 1961–62* (Rome, 1977). For the most recent excavations, see L. Leciejwicz, ed., *Torcello: Nuove ricerche archeologiche* (Rome, 2000).

15 On the excavations carried out at the nearby church di S. Pietro di Castello (the antique Olivolo), which have provided fifth- to seventh-century contexts, see S. Tuzzato, “Le strutture lignee altomedievali a Olivolo (S. Pietro di Castello–Venezia),” in *Studi di archeologia della X Regio in ricordo di Michele Tombolani* (Rome, 1994), 479–85; S. Tuzzato, V. Favero, and M. Josè Vinals, “San Pietro di Castello a Venezia: Nota preliminare dopo la campagna 1992,” *Quaderni di Archeologia* 9 (1993): 72–80.

16 On Cittanova, see D. Calao, “Cittanova (VE): Analisi GIS,” in *IV Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale*, ed. R. Francovich and M. Valenti (Florence, 2006), 216–24 (with the earlier bibliography).

17 The area of Costanziaco, in the northern lagoon, has been partially investigated. In particular, excavations have been carried out on San Lorenzo di Ammiana island; see E. Canal, L. Fersuoch,

in *Genti nel Delta da Spina a Comacchio: Uomini, territorio e culto dall'antichità all'alto medioevo*, ed. F. Berti, M. Bollini, S. Gelichi, and J. Ortalli (Ferrara, 2007), 380–82.

13 Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*; Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome*.

and Malamocco.¹⁸ In the northern part of the lagoon area, the episcopal *castrum* of Grado (Udine) emerged, while in the south are Chioggia (Venice), the site of Gavello, nearby Adria (Rovigo),¹⁹ and Comacchio, on the delta of the Po. The archaeology of these areas looks very different, but its analysis has rarely concentrated on their origins.

In the Venice lagoon, for instance, the archaeology has developed quite atypically, in that the most important element has been the discovery of its classical origins (or “Romanity”); the researchers did not focus their excavations on understanding the original phases of the settlement.²⁰ In general, the archaeology carried out has not taken account of the postclassical phases, even though the historical evidence suggests that they are worthy of study.

To use a maritime metaphor (pertinent to these places and topics): if in antiquity taking refuge meant landing in a safe place, then attempting new ways could have suggested adventure in unknown far-off seas (and often in stormy weather)—as I am trying to do with my research. Take, for example, Comacchio, which is known from the written sources only from the beginning of the eighth century, but presumably has a much earlier history, both in the episcopal sequence and in the date of its foundation.²¹ A strat-

egy of effective investigation therefore requires more active consideration of the material sources.

A Small Lagoon and a Small Settlement? Comacchio during the Early Middle Ages

Today Comacchio is a small town lying near the delta of the River Po, renowned for its fish and its charming historical center. Not inhabited during Roman times, it emerged only toward the beginning of the eighth century with the appearance of the extraordinary capitulary mentioned above.²² At present, there is no reason and no archaeological evidence to ascribe a more ancient origin to it. As the site is termed *castrum* in some early medieval written sources, its defensive function seems clear, given the fortification of the exarchate borders undertaken by the Byzantine authorities toward the beginning of the seventh century.²³

This interpretation, which should not necessarily be rejected out of hand, gives these places a history whose processes replicate those suggested for another lagoon area which emerged in that very same period, that of Venice. The inhabitants may have been encouraged to move from the mainland to the lagoon islands not so much by long-term economic trends as by events connected to the barbarian inva-

S. Spector, and G. Zambon, “Indagini archeologiche a S. Lorenzo di Ammiana (Venezia),” *Archeologia Veneta* 12 (1989): 71–96; E. Canal, *Testimonianze archeologiche nella Laguna di Venezia: L’età antica* (Venice, 1998), 33–44. See also E. Canal, “Le Venezie sommerse: Quarant’anni di archeologia lagunare,” in *La laguna di Venezia*, ed. G. Caniato, E. Turri, and M. Zanetti (Verona, 1995), 206–21.

¹⁸ The location of the ancient Metamacum/Metamauco does not seem to coincide with the present village of Malamocco.

¹⁹ On Gavello, and in general on Adria and its territory in the early Middle Ages, see L. Casazza, *Il territorio di Adria tra VI e X secolo* (Padua, 2001).

²⁰ It is not possible to detail all the scientific knowledge of this period developed by Italian archaeologists, but see W. Dorigo, *Venezia origini: Fondamenti, ipotesi, metodi* (Milan, 1983). For a critical analysis of this type of archaeology, see S. Gelichi, “Venezia tra archeologia e storia: La costruzione di una identità urbana,” in *Le città italiane tra la tarda antichità e l’alto Medioevo*, ed. A. Augenti (Florence, 2006), 151–83; idem, “Tra Comacchio e Venezia,” 368–73.

²¹ The first definite bishop is dated to the second half of the eighth century; on the episcopal sequence, see L. Bellini, *I vescovi di Comacchio* (Ferrara, 1967), and the observations of A. Samaritani, *Medievalia e altri studi* (Ferrara, 1961). For a synthesis of the problems, see E. Grandi, “La cristianizzazione del territorio,” in Berti et al., eds., *Genti nel Delta*, 420–26. Concerning the archaeology of Comacchio, see a synthesis in S. Gelichi and D. Calaon,

“Comacchio: La storia di un emporio sul delta del Po,” in *ibid.*, 387–416.

²² Although the bibliography on Comacchio is abundant, there is still a need for up-to-date publications containing historical synthesis. Concerning the early Middle Ages, see, on the territory of Comacchio in the Roman era, J. Ortalli, “I Romani nel Delta: Una prospettiva archeologica,” in Berti et al., eds., *Genti nel Delta*, 233–55; for the phase of transition between antiquity and the Middle Ages, see again Gelichi and Calaon, “Comacchio: La storia,” 387–416.

²³ Comacchio is sometimes called *castrum* and its inhabitants labeled *milites*, but no ancient (or humanistic) written source associates its foundation with the establishment of a fortification to defend the borders of the exarchate during the Byzantine age, despite the suggestions of some scholars: for instance, see C. Diehl, *Études sur l’administration byzantine dans l’exarchat de Ravenne (568–571)* (Paris, 1888), 57; A. Guillou, *Régionalisme et indépendance dans l’Empire Byzantin au VII^e siècle: L’exemple de l’Exarchat et de la Pentapole d’Italie* (Rome, 1969), 58; A. Vasina, “Il territorio ferrarese nell’alto medioevo,” in *Insedimenti nel Ferrarese: Dall’età romana alla fondazione della cattedrale* (Florence, 1976), 81; S. Patitucci Uggeri, “Il *castrum* Ferrariae,” in *ibid.*, 153–58. About this issue and the significance for these territories of some of these terms (including *καστρον*) in the written sources, see Gelichi, “Tra Comacchio e Venezia,” 380–81.

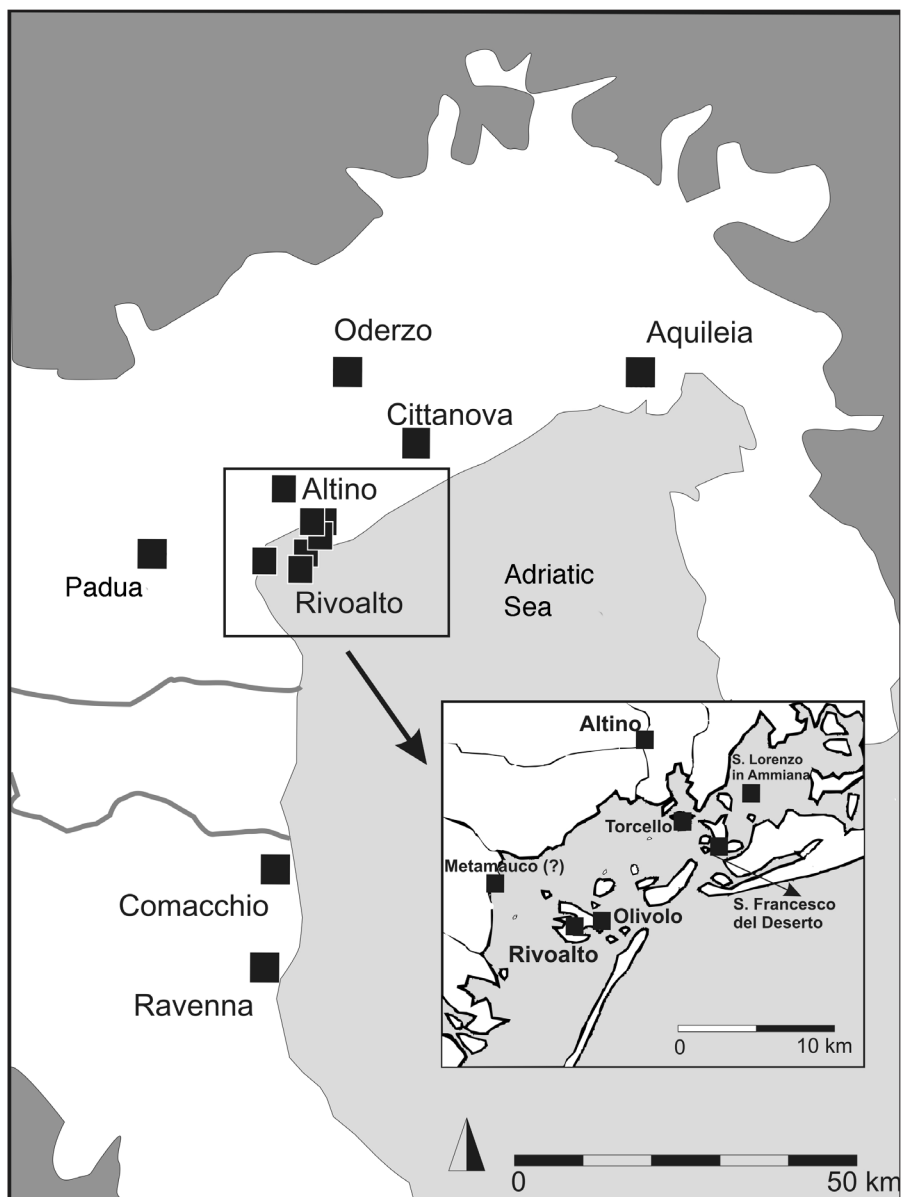


Figure 9.2. The northern Adriatic arc and some of the places mentioned in the text (drawn by Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)

sions and the subsequent Byzantine responses: in other words, for reasons connected to safety rather than trade.²⁴

24 For a different interpretation of this phenomenon than the traditional one, see C. La Rocca, “Città scomparse in area veneta nell’alto medioevo: Dati archeologici, fonti scritte e memoria storiografica,” in *L’Adriatico dalla tarda antichità all’età carolingia* (Florence, 2005), 287–99; S. Gelichi, “La nascita di Venezia,” in *Roma e i Barbari*, ed. J.-J. Aillagon (Milan, 2008), 584–87.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of the origins of Comacchio, which are still difficult to determine in the absence of targeted research, it is surprising that archaeology has not yet highlighted or analyzed its features during the period about which written sources inform us. In short, if Comacchio really was an important nodal point for the economy of the Lombard Kingdom in the first half of the eighth century, it is amazing that



Figure 9.3. Comacchio: posts recovered in the 1920s in the northwest area of the settlement (photo by Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici per l'Emilia-Romagna—Bologna)

no trace of this central role has emerged from material sources. It is for this reason, and with the aim of verifying the archaeological record of this central role, that some years ago my colleagues and I began a research project in these areas. The main aim was to gain a better understanding of settlement and socioeconomic processes in the northern Adriatic between the seventh and ninth century—a period that is obviously crucial for understanding the origins of Venice.

The archaeological evidence from Comacchio is, today, very unequal in quality. It includes finds recovered at the beginning of the twentieth century when areas in the northwest of the present settlement were drained (where formerly a sugar refinery was located)²⁵ (fig. 9.3); tombs and wall remains recov-

ered during the 1970s in the northeast area of the settlement (the area of the monastery of Sant'Agostino) and in the historical center (via Mazzini);²⁶ and some stratigraphical excavations from the late 1990s, in front of the monastery of Santa Maria in Aula Regia and again in the northwest area, in conjunction with a building being divided into lots.²⁷

We can add to these investigations the excavation carried out between 2007 and 2008 in the area around the cathedral, as well as the more recent stratigraphical excavations in the village of San Francesco. Further, we should not forget the gen-

25 On the excavations of that period (with bibliography), see Gelichi and Calaon, "Comacchio: La storia," 387–94. A number of these findings have already been discussed by S. Patitucci Uggeri, "Problemi storico-topografici di Comacchio tra tardo-antico e altomedioevo: Gli scavi di Valle Ponti," in *Actes du XI Congrès International d'Archéologie Chrétienne* (Rome, 1989),

2301–15; eadem, "Il Delta Padano nell'età dei goti," in *XXXVI Corso di Cultura sull'Arte Ravennate e Bizantina* (Ravenna, 1989), 269–322.

26 S. Patitucci Uggeri, "Il castrum Cumiaci: Evidenze archeologiche e problemi storico-topografici," in *La civiltà Comacchinese*, 273.

27 D. Calaon, "Lo scavo di Villaggio San Francesco 1996 (COM 96): Le strutture portuali di Comacchio?" in Berti et al., eds., *Genti nel Delta*, 505–30; G. Bucci, "COM 03, Villaggio San Francesco," in *ibid.*, 553–56; eadem, "COM 01, via Mazzini," in *ibid.*, 557–63.



Figure 9.4. Comacchio, San Francesco village, excavations, 2008: waterfront on the canal (8th c.) (photo by Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)

eral archaeological researches in the territory of Comacchio, which have brought to light several early medieval contexts, such as the church and the cemetery of Motta della Girata.²⁸ In all, this evidence is very significant and needs to be considered carefully, but here it would be better to discuss two specific contexts that help us understand the topography and the socioeconomic character of the settlement in the centuries under consideration: the area of the San Francesco village/former sugar refinery and the area around the cathedral.

The evidence from the first site indicates very clearly that we are dealing with an area constructed for use as a port. For instance, the numerous remains of posts, bank structures, and wooden platforms are suggestive of port structures. The ceramic mate-

rial recovered (89 percent unglazed ware, 55 percent of which are amphorae dated to the eighth to ninth centuries) confirms the nature of the context and the chronology. New archaeological investigations should make possible a new reconstruction of this area, as recently excavated trenches have started to demonstrate. At this point, however, the mercantile character of the place continues to be prominent. Of the three trenches opened in the autumn of 2008, one has brought to light a waterfront, on the canal: this is perfectly preserved and filled with fragments of early medieval amphorae (fig. 9.4). A second trench underlines the presence here of docks. The most recent excavations confirm that the northwest area of Comacchio was occupied by port structures in an area of ca. 75,000 square meters.

Analysis of the surrounding environment enables us to see how the port area was naturally protected by the lagoon and was effectively linked to the external seashore areas by a tidal canal that ensured a constant flow of salt water from outside (fig. 9.5). Via this canal, goods from Mediterranean and

28 See the recent article by C. Corti, “Santa Maria in Padovetere: La chiesa, la necropoli e l’insediamento circostante,” in Berti et al., eds., *Genti nel Delta*, 531–52; eadem, “La frequentazione nell’area di Santa Maria in Padovetere: Materiali dalla chiesa e dall’insediamento circostante,” in *ibid.*, 569–89.

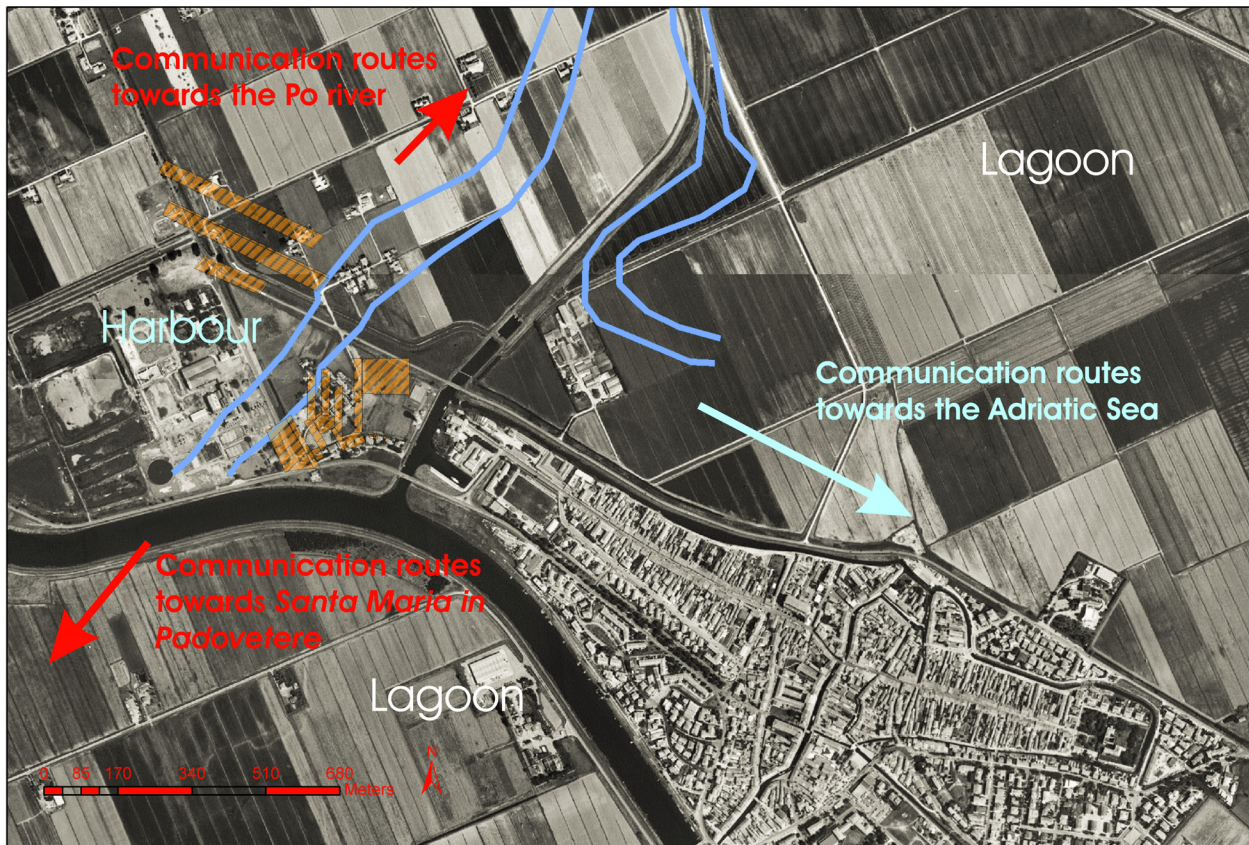


Figure 9.5. Comacchio in the early Middle Ages in relation to the water canals (drawn by Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)

Adriatic sea routes could reach the port. Wharves and wooden jetties formed quays and areas for warehouses, while local flat-bottomed boats, suitable for traveling along the shallow waters of the rivers in the Po Valley plain, would have guaranteed distribution of the goods inland.

A second area of recent archaeological investigation is located near the cathedral (fig. 9.6).²⁹ Excavations have been under way for about two years and the sequence that has been recovered, though of extraordinary interest for many reasons, cannot be discussed until published in full.

The most significant preliminary data are linked to the first occupations of the area. The most ancient traces of occupation of the site, dated to before the seventh century at the latest, are represented by a

series of wooden households (fig. 9.7). These buildings seem to be associated with manufacturing (probably glassworks), perhaps connected with the cult building (probably the episcopal church) that was constructed in that area.

From this moment onward (eighth to ninth centuries) the sequence seems to change: the production facilities and the households are covered by a necropolis, which was in use until at least the tenth to eleventh century, when important new renovations appear to have taken place in the church (and presumably also nearby). From the recovered material of this period we are able to gain a better understanding of the nature of the early medieval church, which was most probably located under the area occupied by the cathedral (rebuilt in the seventeenth century): this church seems to be characterized by a mosaic pavement, with walls made of marble slabs and a possible chancel screen (or iconostasis), constructed in the ninth century, of which

²⁹ S. Gelichi, ed., *L'isola del vescovo: Gli scavi archeologici intorno alla Cattedrale di Comacchio* = *The Archaeological Excavations nearby the Comacchio Cathedral* (Florence, 2009).



Figure 9.6. Comacchio, cathedral area, excavations, 2007–08: a general view (photo by Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)



Figure 9.7. Comacchio, cathedral area, excavations, 2007–08: the earliest phases of the area (7th c.) (photo by Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)

we have a few precious fragments (fig. 9.8). What is interesting here is not only the presence of a cult building of apparently high quality but also significant contemporary materials not commonly found in what we understand to be the characteristic material culture of the eighth to ninth centuries in the northern Italy region.

Single-firing glazed ware,³⁰ unglazed ware (fig. 9.9),³¹ coins (fig. 9.10),³² and above all amphorae (see below) are important, especially because of the quantities found, and they are predominant among the residual material from the layers dated to the medieval and modern period. These finds certainly associate the cathedral area with privilege and high rank, but importantly they also reflect quite closely the economy and trading activities of the emporium.

The combination of this old and new data immediately raises questions about the role of Comacchio in the framework of early medieval settlement of the

30 This pottery presents analogies with the so-called Forum Ware of Roman-Laziale production—see L. Paroli, “La ceramica invetriata tardoantica e medievale nell’Italia centro meridionale,” in *La ceramica invetriata tardoantica e altomedievale in Italia*, ed. L. Paroli (Florence, 1992), 33–61; M. Sannazaro, “La ceramica invetriata tra età romana e medioevo,” in *Ad mensam: Manufatti d’uso da contesti archeologici fra Tarda Antichità e Medioevo*, ed. S. Lusuardi Siena (Udine, 1994), 242–50—but mineral-petrographic analyses have ascertained that it was not produced in that area. To date, pottery of this type has been recovered in Romagna (S. Gelichi and M. G. Maioli, “Emilia-Romagna,” in *La ceramica invetriata tardoantica e altomedievale in Italia*, ed. L. Paroli [Florence, 1992], 216–17 n. 1 [from Rimini], 265 nn. 10, 11 [from Imola]), in Comacchio itself (ibid., 272–73 nn. 4, 5; S. Gelichi, C. Negrelli, G. Bucci, V. Coppola, and C. Capelli, “I materiali da Comacchio,” in Berti et al., eds., *Genti nel Delta*, 632–38; Gelichi, ed., *L’isola del vescovo*, 39), and, above all, in the Venice lagoon (L. Paroli, I. de Luca, F. Sbarra, M. Bortoletto, and C. Capelli, “La ceramica invetriata altomedievale in Italia: Un aggiornamento,” in *VII^e Congrès International sur la Céramique Médiévale en Méditerranée, Thessaloniki, 11–16 Octobre 1999, Actes*, ed. Ch. Bakirtzis [Athens, 2003], 485–86). It is possible that it was manufactured in the Delta area of the Po River (perhaps in Comacchio itself).

31 This pottery, made with a fine fabric, is represented by only a single form: a sort of jug, almost always with double handles and with a flat base (Gelichi, ed., *L’isola del vescovo*, 38–39). And though this pottery shows parallels with Roman products recorded in eighth-century deposits (e.g., the Crypta Balbi in Rome), the mineral-petrographic analyses of the fabrics seem to indicate, at least for the vessels recovered in Comacchio, that its production was probably local.

32 For example, Mauritius Tiberius (582–602) *decanummius*, Ravenna; Constans II (643–ca. 650) *folles*, Ravenna; Louis the Pius (819–22) *denarius*, Venice; Hugh of Provence (926–57) *denarius*, probably Venice (courtesy Alessia Rovelli).



Figure 9.8. Comacchio, cathedral area, excavations, 2007: fragment of the chancel screen (9th c.) (photo by Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)



Figure 9.9. Comacchio, cathedral area, excavations, 2007–08: early medieval unglazed ware (photo by Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)

Po Valley area. What is the relationship between this place and the economy of the Po Valley? Who were the participants (active or passive) in these trading operations? Did these activities really center mainly or only on salt?



Figure 9.10. Comacchio, cathedral area, excavations, 2007–08: *denarius* featuring Louis the Pius (819–22), Venice (courtesy of Alessia Rovelli; photo by Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)

Mediterranean Exchanges?

In considering the amphorae, which clearly represent an archaeological marker of high significance, it is important to stress that the archaeological evidence about the eighth-century chronology has been recorded only recently (fig. 9.11). In fact, until only a few years ago it was believed that the circulation of amphorae, at least via the Mediterranean, ended in the seventh century, apparently coinciding with the end of long- and medium-distance trade. However, detailed archaeological investigations, paying particular attention to eighth- and ninth-century levels in different areas of the Italian peninsula, have clearly shown that amphorae continue to be present in these two centuries.³³ Even in northern Italy, eighth- and ninth-century amphorae have been found in, for example, Rimini, Verona, and the Venetian lagoon (fig. 9.12).³⁴

³³ The early medieval globular amphorae have large bodies with wide curved shoulders, flat or convex bases, conical necks, straight or slightly enlarged lips, sometimes with internal grooves, and either ribbon handles (sometimes with a central large rib) or a loop handle. The dimensions can differ, but generally are attested as high as 50–60 cm (the dimensions of the materials from Comacchio, though conjectural, are fully compatible with those of entire vessels from other places), with lips 7–8 cm in diameter. They derive from the similar Aegean forms LR2 and they have a clear link with the Yassi Ada 2 type (typologically speaking, a variant of the large category LR 2), which is still widespread in the Aegean and the Mediterranean Sea in the seventh century. For a good synopsis, see C. Negrelli, “Produzione, circolazione e consumo tra VI e IX secolo dal territorio del Padovetere a Comacchio,” in Berti et al., eds., *Genti nel Delta*, 454–62.

³⁴ For early medieval amphorae from Verona, see B. Bruno, “Ceramiche da alcuni contesti tardoantichi e altomedievali di Verona,” in *La circolazione delle ceramiche nell’Adriatico tra Tarda Antichità ed Altomedioevo: III Incontro di Studio Cer.*

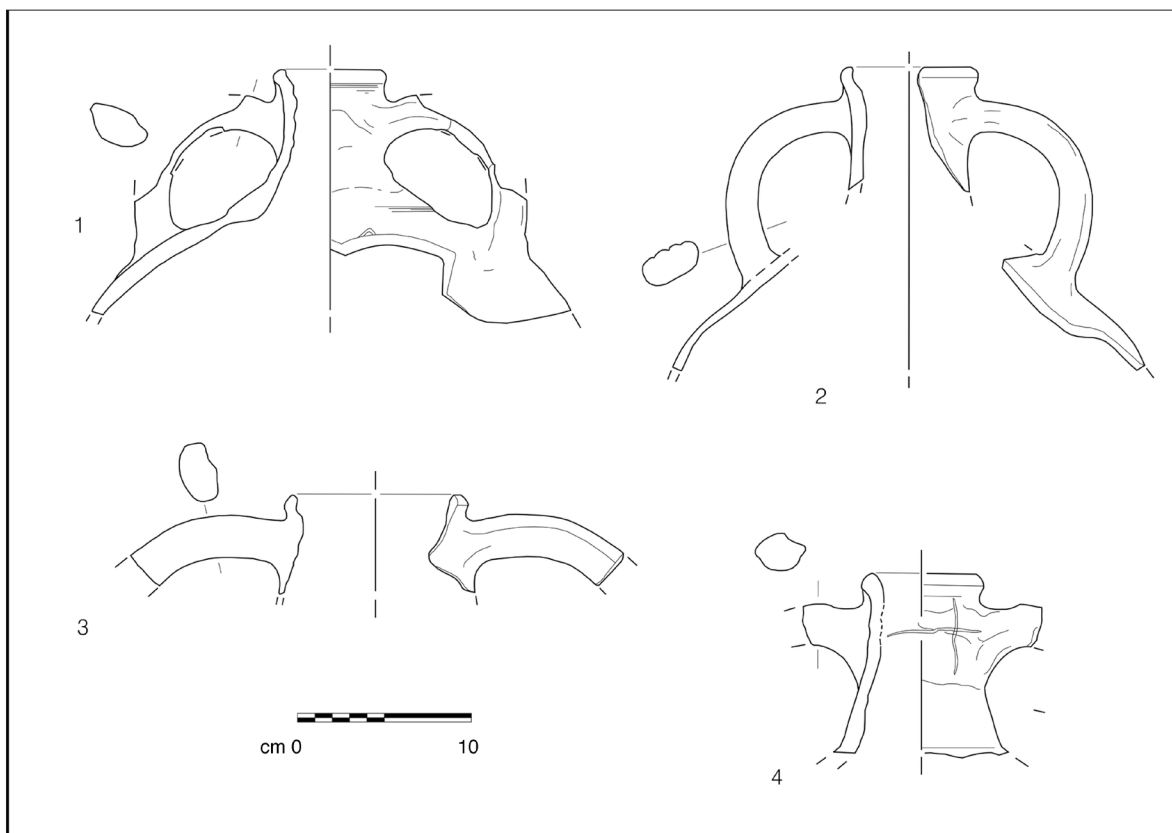


Figure 9.11. Comacchio, settlement area, excavations: early medieval amphorae (drawn by C. Negrelli)

To return to the amphorae recovered in Comacchio, archaeological and archaeometric investigations are still in progress, so it is too early to present a detailed typology. But we can already start to sketch the important questions that this evidence may be able to answer (and begin to guess at what those answers might be): Where do these amphorae come from? What were they carrying? And who were the consumers of these commodities?

am.Is., ed. S. Gelichi and C. Negrelli (Mantua, 2007), 157–82. For the amphorae from the Venice lagoon, see I. Modrzewska, “Bizanyjskie amfory (wydobyte) z laguny weneckiej,” in *Studia Z dziejów Cywilizacji (Studia ofiarowane Profesorowi Jerzemu Gessowkiemu)* (Warsaw, 1998), 267–71; A. Toniolo, “Le anfore,” in *Ca’ Vendramin Calergi: Archeologia urbana lungo il Canal Grande di Venezia*, ed. L. Fozzati (Venice, 2005), 90–94. For the amphorae recovered in Rimini, see C. Negrelli, *Rimini capitale: Strutture insediative, sociali ed economiche tra V e VIII secolo* (Florence, 2008), 77–80, 94–95.

First, possible sources of such containers, of extremely uniform shape (but with very different ceramic fabrics), are southern Italy, the eastern Mediterranean, and particularly Syria-Palestine and the Aegean (although possible imports from Pontus cannot be excluded).³⁵ Their uniformity suggests that the containers may have been sent directly from a single center—presumably the capital of the Byzantine Empire, if we base our judgment on comparisons with the site of Saraçhane in Istanbul studied by J. W. Hayes.³⁶ The contents of the amphorae are more difficult to determine: reasonable guesses are oil, garum, and wine, but only future scientific

³⁵ On these transport vessels, the publication by Negrelli, “Produzione, circolazione e consumo,” 437–71, is outstanding, particularly about the amphorae, 454–68.

³⁶ J. W. Hayes, *Excavations at Saraçhane in Istanbul*, vol. 2, *The Pottery* (Princeton, N.J. 1992).

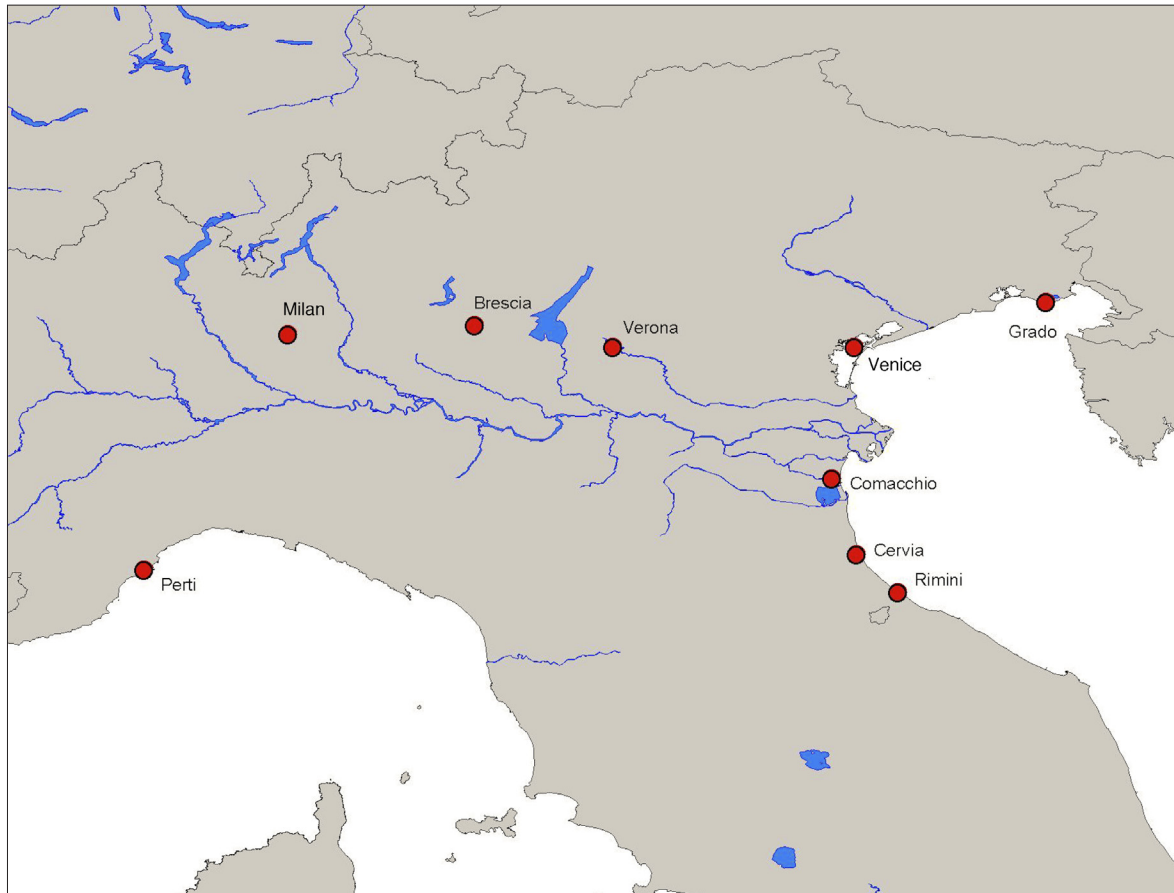


Figure 9.12. Distribution map of the early medieval amphorae of northern Italy (drawn by C. Negrelli)

analysis of their residues, which is certainly feasible, will determine which is correct. These amphorae are important not only for their contents but also simply for their presence, which helps us understand the movement of vessels made of wood or vegetable and animal fiber, which have not been preserved in the archaeological record.

Finally, let us try to answer the last question, which focused on the consumers of these amphorae. Does the amphora evidence correspond with the hypothesis that luxury goods were traded for a limited elite? The lengthy excursus on Comacchio and the character of the emporium trade during the eighth century is very helpful here. Contrary to expectation, the quantity of archaeological evidence found (which suggests only indirectly the real volume of traffic) is of a magnitude that would have seemed unimaginable until recently (see fig. 9.13). It reveals that there were still, during the eighth century, active trading relations with the Byzantines

that apparently were neither sporadic nor accidental. Indeed, the economic picture had changed drastically, starting in the last quarter of the seventh and continuing into the first half of the eighth century, with the creation and development of these emporia, for which I believe these finds provide very precise material testimony. The number of round amphorae of Mediterranean origin, but above all the very existence of sites like Comacchio, with complex and extensive infrastructures, is by no means explained by the circulation of a few luxury goods to a limited elite. In addition, other archaeological and historical evidence points to the presence of a relatively high social class during the Longobard reign in the late seventh and eighth century, the *negotiantes*.³⁷ This

37 The figures of the *negotiantes* appear in the legal documents of the Longobard period (from the Ahistulf's *leges*: C. Azzara and S. Gasparri, eds., *Le leggi dei Longobardi: Storia, memoria e diritto di un popolo germanico* (Milan, 1992), 250–51. Regard-



Figure 9.13. Reconstruction of early medieval Comacchio (courtesy of Comune di Comacchio; drawn by R. Merlo and Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)

more detailed analysis of Longobard society in the eighth century, together with the level of its wealth, has been more clearly explored in recent research and seems to agree with the data emerging from the archaeological record.³⁸

The history of Comacchio and its excavations would under any circumstances be of continuing archaeological interest, even if of only local significance; but the context in which this site has developed touches on broader topics and problems. In fact, from the eighth century onward the trade networks include Comacchio, placing it in a web of connections that reach across the Mediterranean.

Two themes in particular are apparent: the quantity of trade, archaeologically witnessed by the presence of amphorae, and the transregional nature of this traffic, suggested by the Liutprand Capitulary and other written sources. However, since the archaeological framework is still partly incomplete, it is important to reaffirm that some centers, such as

ing their presence in the Longobard society and their function, see the discussion in S. Gasparri, “Mercanti o possessori? Profilo di un cetto dominante in un’età di transizione,” in *Carte di famiglia: Strategie, rappresentazione e memoria del gruppo familiare di Totone di Campione (721–877)*, ed. S. Gasparri and C. La Rocca (Rome, 2005), 161–62.

³⁸ The observations of Gasparri on the family of the Totoni, as well as his general information on Longobard society, are worth noting (Gasparri, “Mercanti o possessori?” 157–77). On these issues, see also S. Gelichi, “Una discussione con Chris Wickham,” *Storica*, no. 34 (2006): 134–47.

Ravenna, were in decline during this period.³⁹ On the other hand, the archaeology of other antique coastal cities, such as Rimini, seems to follow a different trajectory.⁴⁰ The best evidence, judging from the published material, comes from the Venice lagoon. A recent excavation located in the historical center of Venice, Ca’ Vendramin Calergi, has brought to light an archaeological sequence dated from the seventh century, which is paralleled in Comacchio.⁴¹

³⁹ For Ravenna in this period, the most up-to-date analysis is E. Cirelli, *Ravenna: Archeologia di una città*, Contributi di archeologia medievale 2 (Florence, 2008).

⁴⁰ See the results of the excavations in the area of Piazza Ferrari, recently published (Negrelli, *Rimini capitale*); the particular attention to excavating the postclassic phases has made possible precise descriptions of the changes of a rich Roman *domus* and its later functional elements. These transformations (from mosaic pavements to beaten pavements) do not influence the characteristics of the contexts, which during the seventh and the eighth centuries still include evidence of imported amphorae, fine tablewares, and Islamic coins.

⁴¹ The excavation—one of the few sites of the lagoon definitively published—is particularly significant for several reasons. First, it indicates, in this central area of the future Venice, the presence of a settlement dated earlier than the seventh century. Further, it shows the presence of a household that very closely resembles wooden buildings in the north of Italy dated to the same period. Finally, it is remarkable because the associations of materials in the eighth- to ninth-century deposits (amphorae, unglazed pottery, Monochrome Glazed Ware with appliqué decorations) are the same as in the contemporary deposits of Comacchio. On the excavation, see V. Gobbo, “Lo scavo d’emergenza nel cortile occidentale di Ca’ Vendramin Calergi,”

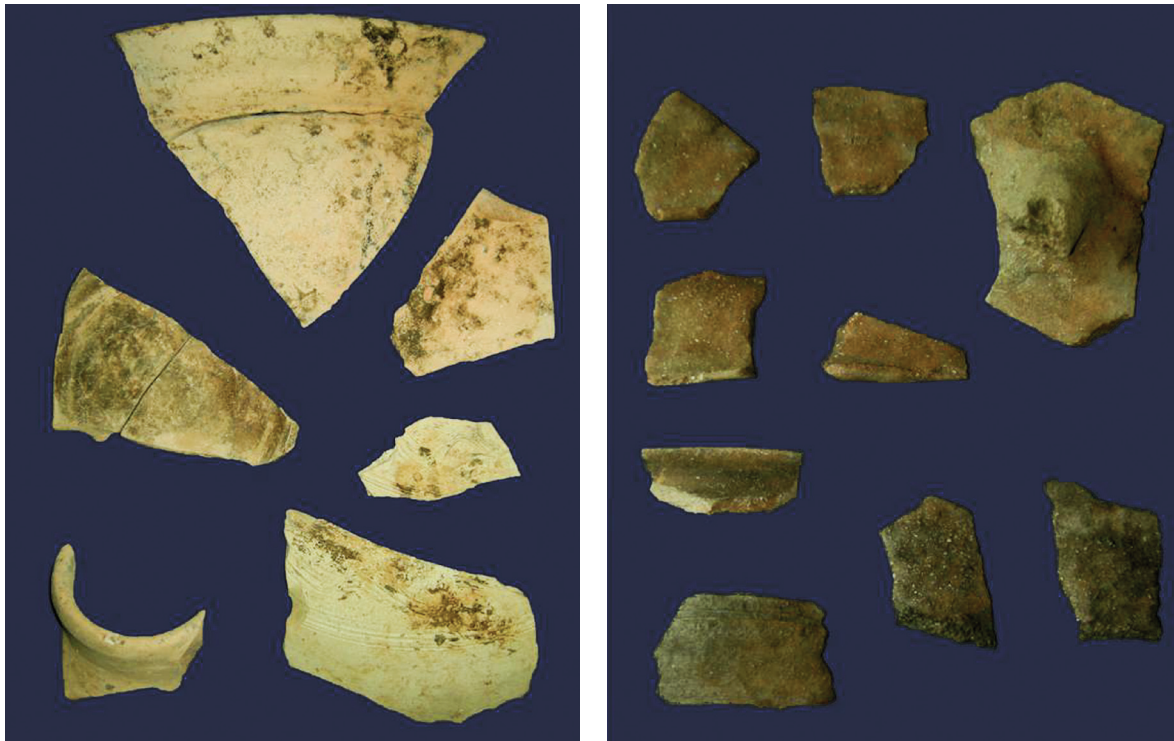


Figure 9.14. Nonantola (Modeno), excavations of the monastery: pottery from the 8th c. (on left) and 9th–10th c. (on right) (photo by Laboratorio di Archeologia Medievale—Venezia)

How should we characterize these “new emergent centers”? The contemporary (or slightly later) sources seem to find it difficult to label them.⁴² The term “emporium” would probably be most appropriate, not only because it links this area with northern Europe, where a similar phenomenon was occurring,⁴³ but also because this word more specifically identifies centers with economic characteristics.

in Fozzati, ed., *Ca' Vendramin Calergi*, 41–57; on the material, idem, “Le ceramiche della prima fase medievale,” in *ibid.*, 95–102.

42 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*, ed. J. Henning, vol. 1, *The Heirs of the Roman West*, Millennium-Studien zu Kultur und Geschichte des ersten Jahrtausends n. Chr. 5.1 (Berlin, 2007), 83–84.

43 The bibliography on northern European emporiums is very rich. Among the most important works are R. Hodges, *Dark Age Economics: The Origins of Towns and Trade, A.D. 600–100* (New York, 1982), and, more recently, T. Pestell and K. Ulmschneider, eds., *Markets in Early Medieval Europe: Trading and “Productive” Sites, 650–850* (Macclesfield, 2003).

The situation of Comacchio is therefore not unique in the eighth century in the northern Adriatic arc. The birth and development of this place, which appears to be linked to the economic policies of the Longobard reign, is also a part of the strong dynamic system in the northern Adriatic arc.⁴⁴ Within this system, different locations appear to compete with one another, on two different scales: one is within the Venetian lagoon, signaled by the alternations among different centers of power until the birth of Venice; the other is much wider, and includes the whole northern Adriatic arc, within which Comacchio seems to be a major player. This competition also appears in the written sources, though they are strongly colored by the view of the winners, who are the *Venetici* people.⁴⁵ It eventually ended with the consolidation of the settlement

44 I have discussed these issues in “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), 81–117.

45 See the *Istoria Veneticorum* by Giovanni Diacono, the first chronicle that tells about the initial phases of Venetian history (Comacchio appears in 3.44 and 3.12).

around Rivoalto, the heart of the future Venice, to which the Frankish kings were politically close.⁴⁶

I believe that this research has cast new light on the economic characteristics (especially the question of local versus international factors) that seem to define northern Italy between the late Longobard age and the early Carolingian age, demonstrating that Mediterranean trade did not completely cease, but instead developed in many different ways (and to varying extents). Fragmentation, which remains the real paradigm of early medieval Europe and the

⁴⁶ The Carolingians attempted several times to conquer Venice and to come to agreements with the Venetians; R. Hodges, *Towns and Trade in the Age of Charlemagne* (London, 2000), 62. For several reasons, and in particular the nature of the location, the area of the Venice lagoon must have appeared to the Franks more interesting than the southern coastal centers.

Mediterranean (as Chris Wickham has argued), took a different form in these regions. Paradoxically, it seems that the Carolingian renaissance actually reduced the international economic role of the Po Valley area—as at least the archaeological evidence from the important monastery of the Nonantola, on the far fringes of this economic system, suggests (fig. 9.14).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ This is demonstrated by two contexts, of the eighth and ninth–tenth centuries respectively, recovered during the recent excavations within the monastic complex. See S. Gelichi and M. Librenti, “Nascita e fortuna di un grande monastero altomedievale: Nonantola e il suo territorio dalla fondazione al XIV secolo,” in *Monasteri in Europa occidentale (secoli VIII–XI): Topografia e strutture*, ed. F. De Rubeis and F. Marazzi (Rome, 2007), 239–57; S. Gelichi, M. Librenti, and A. Cianciosi, *Nonantola e l'abbazia di San Silvestro alla luce dell'archeologia: Ricerche, 2002–2006* (Carpi, 2006).