

TOWNS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ITALY: NEW ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF TOWNS IN ITALY BEFORE THE 1980s

The debate about the archaeology of early medieval Italian towns in the 1980s and 1990s was summarized in a book that still provides a useful point of departure (Brogiolo & Gelichi 1998). The early stages of investigation were divided into two phases: (i) the history of the town without archaeology, and (ii) the archaeology of the town without archaeology. They give a good idea as to the direction of the debate on the early medieval town in Italy, as well as the methodologies and sources.

During the first phase, up to the 1960s, the analysis of early medieval towns made no use of archaeological sources even though certain archaeological topics such as the economy, settlement features, population, and ways of life, were potentially much more informative than other sources. At the level of material structure the idea of the town that emerged from these studies was extremely vague, if not wholly misleading. This changed during the second phase in the 1960s and 1970s when archaeological data was increasingly utilized with regard to settlement layout and structures, including boundaries, building techniques and other features and town planning. However, “urban archaeology” still did not really exist in Italy, and investigations in urban areas may be better described as “archaeology in towns”. Archaeological practice was weak in terms of theory and ineffective in its method.

At this time the idea of what made up an early medieval town was less vague than previously, yet it still lacked focus. The features that emerged were basically topographic – the shape of the urban area reconstructed using features related to town planning and the classical world, the reduction of inhabited areas, and written sources. At the same time attention was more specifically directed to

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the analysis of material sources including the reuse of ancient materials, walls and ramparts. The early medieval town in Italy was basically composed of earth and wood but these lie outside the scope of the present discussion.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE EARLY MEDIEVAL TOWN AND URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY

The European debate about the use of archaeology in the study of early medieval towns, and about appropriate analytical methodologies, was introduced to Italy in the early 1980s by way of specific projects (Gelichi 1999). A number of urban projects commenced such as the excavation of Corso Porta Reno at Ferrara, the Courthouse of Verona, excavations in Brescia, the excavation of the Crypta Balbi in Rome and maps depicting archaeological areas at risk were published as for Pavia and Cesena: a monograph for Lombardy also appeared (Hudson 1981; Gelichi, Alberti & Librenti 1999; Brogiolo 1984). These represent the first real advance in the study of Italian early medieval towns. Discussion centred on two issues. The first concerned the role of urban archaeology which was increasingly, and rightly, felt to be a focused analytical process applied to a specific settlement rather than a more generalized transfer of archaeological methodologies. The second concerns the relationship between history and archaeology, and the stimulus provided by the latter for the study of the early medieval town. In the last decade not only has the number of archaeological excavations in towns significantly increased in Italy, but they are of a quality that bears no comparison with that of the past. However, the main problem is that whilst the excavations are a better quality than they were, there are still methodological problems in need of resolution.

OLD TOPICS FOR NEW METHODOLOGIES

In the 1980s debate centred partly upon the idea that a town could be identified from archaeological sources alone, rather than on an evaluation of all sources. This led to discussions that focused on the general notions of continuity and discontinuity between the antique and medieval worlds, and from town to society (Ward Perkins 1997). Some scholars took extreme positions with the debate acquiring social and anthropological dimensions.

This approach tended to work by looking at processes. At the level of macro-regions the number of surviving towns was assessed and compared, together with the number of those that disappeared or were new (Ward Perkins 1988). This revealed different situations in various regions. In the analysis of towns, certain

parameters linked to historic topography received particular attention, such as the shape of the town compared with the course of its walls. Work on the distribution of public buildings for worship, administration or public gatherings, evolved into studies of the topography of Christian locations following research in France for the project *Topographie Chrétienne* (Cantino Wataghin 1992; Ermini Pani 2001). The question of the extension of the town was linked with the notion of density of the inhabited area, for which definitions were created like “a town composed of “islands “ or “a scattered town”. But new research themes were also developed archaeologically. Thus, it was possible to discuss issues related to inhabited and residential buildings, which had been previously covered only on the basis of written sources. At the same time the question of the accumulation of archaeological deposits in relation to the collapse of public buildings and the infrastructure entered into the debate. This, in turn, linked in with the international debate about “dark earth”, in the sense that “dark earth” was a label rather than a concept to be explained by means of targeted excavations.

The picture of the early medieval town that emerged from this research, carried out to varying degrees all over Italy, but especially in the north, shows a number of general features that may be summarised as follows:

1. There was a change in the location of public places characteristic of a new urban topography. For example, the location of bishops’ palaces and churches with burial grounds depended on various factors, not least the availability of building land, placed the new settlement centres at points different from those in the past.
2. This explains why there are fewer differences between the outside and inside of the city, as shown, for example, by the occurrence of burials inside the town. On the other hand the perception of inside and outside remains, as is clear from written sources, as for example, in the use of expressions *infra civitate* in a number of records from Lucca when describing properties relating to the town during the Longobard age (La Rocca 2003).
3. The distribution of built-up areas, as well as those free from construction inside the town, developed in an irregular manner and was seemingly different from that of antiquity, even though in most cases the road route remained that of the earlier Roman period.
4. House construction also underwent a marked change in terms of size, topographic distribution, location with regard to street frontages and the organization of space. Types of building material changed to a preference for wood and earth, whilst floors in *opus sectile*, mosaic and brickwork were abandoned. Stone and brick continued to be used, especially for churches and administrative buildings.

5. The infrastructure that characterized ancient towns, such as aqueducts and sewers, tended to drop out of use, although this may have had more limited implications for urban behaviour than may initially be suspected (Ward Perkins 1984).

Despite the different viewpoints from which these research themes have been interpreted they are unlikely to be seriously challenged in the future. What we can expect is the restatement of such issues with the risk that they become stereotypes. The debate must now shift to other issues.

OLD AND NEW TOWNS IN ITALY: A CHANGING CONCEPT

Research into early medieval Italian towns has concentrated above all on one type, the surviving ancient towns, but in order to analyse the development of urbanization it is also necessary to investigate those that disappeared as well as new towns. By examining both, one issue that has emerged and has been underestimated by archaeologists and historians, is how the town was perceived during the early medieval age (Brogiolo & Ward Perkins 1999; Gelichi 2002). Paul Arthur has recently suggested using a definition borrowed from models of a social and anthropological type coined by geographers (Arthur 2006). In this case, he writes, “a town must depend upon having a surplus sufficient to allow for the existence of a substantial proportion of non-agricultural workers”. As has been rightly pointed out, however, this purely economic definition may also refer to settlements that are clearly not urban, such as some monasteries, or certain castles involved in trade or the management of dependent agricultural land (Brogiolo 2006).

Recourse to written sources may be equally non-productive. Giovanni the deacon, the 11th century author of *Istoria Veneticorum*, defines the site of *Civitas Nova Eracliana*, a 7th century settlement to the north-east of the Venetian lagoon, as *civitas*, while in the same text he never uses the same term for Comacchio, another settlement of more or less the same period in the Po Delta area, which he refers to as *villa*, *castrum*, or *insula* (Fig. 1) (Berto 1999; Gelichi 2008). Yet, both were bishops’ seats and probably the seats of civil magistrates although very little is known about Comacchio; both were certainly trading centres. Again, if we compare the features of the inhabited area including location, the distribution of buildings and types of construction, they reveal many similarities. The same may also apply to Venice at the beginning of the 9th century.

The concept of the town in Roman times had a very precise meaning, the *civitas* was something different from a *vicus* and, obviously, from a *villa* as *domus*. In the early medieval age such concepts tended to evolve – a *civitas*, for example,



Fig. 1. Comacchio (FE) during the early Middle Ages (reconstruction drawing by R. Merlo).

was not always something different from a *villa* as village, or a *castrum*. Let us attempt to see if it is possible to identify some key elements of an ideal type. Following Wickham (2005) and Biddle (1976) we can list elements which may help to define a town: (1) defences, (2) street planning, (3) market, (4) a mint, (5) legal autonomy, (6) a role as a central place, (7) a relatively large or dense population, (8) economic diversification, (9) an “urban” house type, (10) social differentiation, (11) complex religious organization, and (12) judicial functions. Biddle suggests that any three or four of these are needed as a minimum characterization of a town (Biddle 1976), but, as Wickham suggests, “these elements are not all of equal importance” (Wickham 2005: 592). Some depended on others; some were part of the economic sector; yet others were part of the institutional sector and others were connected to the material features of the town. Furthermore, the perception that contemporaries had of the town must have been different, as is shown by the changing definitions that appear in written sources. Here, apart from cases where the use of a word is purely functional, it is clear that there was an unwillingness to define as similar, things which were nonetheless perceived as being different. A single solution, if not purely pragmatic, may be hard to find, but it is a resource, not a handicap. They are a peculiar, specific feature of that period, which we can analyse both in terms of the perception of this concept, and of subsequent settlements, that contemporary people held.

Wickham is right when he defines “variability” as the basic paradigm of early medieval Europe: “stress the variability” is thus the best way for the historian, just as for the archaeologist, to analyse this phenomenon. So, according to the contexts, we may use and compare various town models, like successful and unsuccessful towns, or natural and artificial towns, and in the same situations, financial towns and institutional towns, or ancient surviving towns and new towns.

THE FUTURE – PLANNING FOR THE SAFEGUARD
OF EARLY MEDIEVAL TOWNS AND THEIR HISTORY

I am convinced that the European debate about urban archaeology has reached an impasse in recent years, at least in Italy. The difficulties we have found in reviving the discussion about early medieval towns do not arise from a lack of increase of information in circulation. At Venice, for example, the increase in archaeological research over the last fifteen years as a result of continual monitoring of the lagoon, has produced no improvement in our database in terms of both settlement organization and economic issues (Gelichi 2006). Clearly, investigations into the archaeological heritage without any kind of defined research agenda is an approach destined to fail in scientific terms as well as the cost to society, archaeology being an expense for the whole community. It is therefore necessary to pursue other objectives some of which are set out below.

Critical to the success of a research agenda is a means of assessing the archaeological resource. Without the ability to examine and analyse the potential of

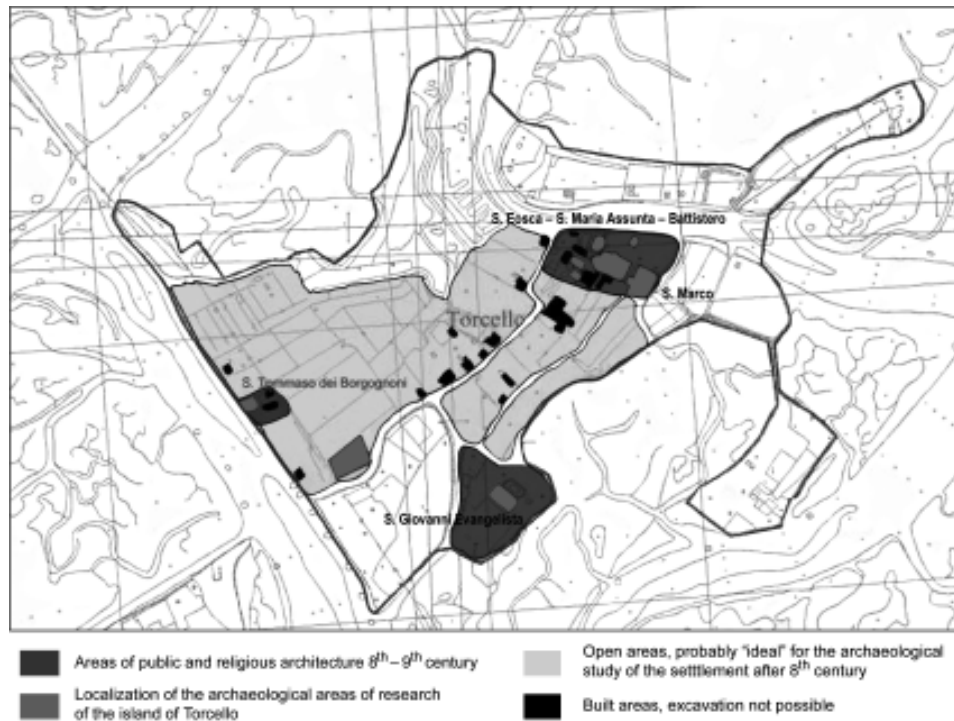


Fig. 2. Torcello (VE), evaluation of the archaeological deposits and distribution of the settlement areas.

archaeological deposits, and their contents, and without urban maps modelling the resource, of which there are very few in Italy at present, it will be impossible to define research agendas and projects (Carver 1993; 2003). Following on from this, a series of targeted projects could aim to assess preservation conditions and the quality of the resource. In Venice such a programme would be difficult and expensive, although not impossible. An alternative approach would examine comparable towns, such as Comacchio, Torcello or Cittanova (Fig. 2) (Gelichi 2006; in press).

Another objective is how to study the early medieval town. It follows that if the concept of an early medieval town is difficult to define, equally difficult must be the understanding and modelling of its archaeology, or at least an archaeology that is not based on the pre-established ideas of the Roman town. These tend to see the early medieval town as something to be defined by subtracting elements rather than real differences. However, historians have reservations over this approach on the grounds that it contains the signs of an outmoded cultural and historiographic model which is destined to die out. Other alternatives include studying the town in relation to its region. An example is Naples where Paul Arthur has tried to compare the changing boundary of the early medieval town with the development of the inhabited areas and the exploitation of regional resources (Arthur 2002).

Improvement of the analysis of “material culture” and, where possible, an examination of the kinds of goods that were circulating is an alternative approach. In recent years new criteria have emerged from the archaeological record rendering less complicated explanations of the periods between the 8th and 10th centuries. This, in turn, enables new research questions to be determined with regard to such issues as economics or social organization. Although towns seem to be too indistinguishable in this respect, mapping the topography of consumption would enable us to construct possible hierarchies of the various behavioural models.

Lastly, as noted earlier, an important objective must be to improve our knowledge of newly founded towns as well as those ancient towns that failed. The former instance entails explaining the social and economic situations in which towns developed, and how the goals to which they apparently aspired were translated in practice. In the latter case we need a better understanding of the various stages through which a town passed before it met its final destiny and failed.

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