

# VENICE, COMACCHIO AND THE ADRIATIC EMPORIA BETWEEN THE LOMBARD AND CAROLINGIAN AGES

SAURO GELICHI

## **EMPORIA IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ITALY?**

The debate about the archaeology of early medieval *emporia* has been, and still is, an entirely northern European one, due both to its importance in those regions and the nature of archaeology in those countries (Hodges 1982; Hill & Cowie 2001; Pestell & Ulmschneider 2003). The development of this research has produced publications that have been analysed for use in more general discussions about the European and Mediterranean economy, from Late Antiquity to the Carolingian Age. New views have been established in the wake of a recent critical revision of the well-known Belgian historian Pirenne's views (Hodges & Whitehouse 1983).

In reconstructing the early medieval economy, Pirenne stressed the modest economic role of the Carolingian European cities. Indeed, from a northern European perspective (as was Pirenne's) the role of the Italian cities was quite modest, perhaps with the single exception of Venice (Pirenne 1925), which the Belgian historian did not study in detail.

The role of the Italian cities in the Early Middle Ages, particularly from an economic viewpoint, was partially reconsidered in the 1950s by Cinzio Violante (Violante 1953). However, the historical arguments did not consider the archaeological data (Brogiolo & Gelichi 1998:14-15), and instead concentrated on a critical analysis of the numismatic evidence. At the time Violante's research had a remarkable influence on the Italian debate, but it did not adequately consider the wider international perspective.

The research problems connected to the early medieval Italian cities seemed to differ from the main economic models in Carolingian Europe, despite the fact that the Italian peninsula was part of that system. Thus, it is no surprise that the revitalisation of the northern European debate about *emporia* (Lebecq 1983), contemporary with new archaeological approaches to the material sources of that period (Hodges 1982), has been of little interest to Italian scholars. With a few exceptions (Hodges 2000:59-64 and McCormick 2001:523-31) the Italian cities in general, and more specifically Venice,

have never been properly considered by scholars. Their geographical position and functional characteristics have tended to distance them from Carolingian and post-Carolingian Europe. There are some good reasons for this separation: for instance, the diverse nature of Italian urbanisation, compared to northern Europe, and the very different development of medieval archaeology in Italy to that of northern Europe.

However, this situation has other peculiarities of a cultural nature. Pirenne's position established an historical division between Europe and the Mediterranean, which consequently caused a division among the scholars. The phenomenon of urbanisation is well known in Italy. Moreover, Italy, in the Early Middle Ages, was essentially a land of towns (Gelichi 2002) where some ancient towns disappeared but those that survived were added to by 'new' towns.

If we take a quick look at the map of urban sites in northern Italy in the early medieval period (Ward Perkins 1988:Fig. 6) we see immediately that while some areas show a decline in the number of towns (the southern Piedmont region, for example) others compensate for this with the creation of new inhabited urban centres (the northeast coast on the Adriatic, for example). It is perhaps not by chance that at the heart of this flourishing of 'new towns', there lies the lagoon from which, as we know, Venice was to rise (Gelichi 2007).

Historians and then archaeologists paid little attention to these 'new towns', instead looking at their political-institutional elements (and broad economic ones). The debate, which mainly covered the northern Italian regions, and which has also produced some very good syntheses (Brogiolo & Gelichi 1998; Augenti 2006), also concentrated on understanding the reasons behind the end (or the survival) of the ancient cities, rather than the reasons for new developments.

Scholars did not consider, for instance, the reasons which brought about their rise, or how they were organised, or whether they had commonalities, and further, scholars did not look at trading activities and whether or not these may have modified the settlement or the physiognomy of the in-

habitants of these new towns. Venice, with its extraordinary history, has always been considered an *unicum* which has also obscured the activities of its neighbouring centres such as Torcello (Crouzet-Pavan 1995). Hence, studies about Venice have been too auto-referential and are partly responsible for limiting the analysis of formation processes to the lagoon region surrounding it, instead of looking at a wider geographical area.

This article aims to discuss not only Venice, but also the entire northeastern Adriatic arch, from the Late Lombard Age to the Early Carolingian Age (7th-9th centuries). Recent archaeological research has greatly contributed to our knowledge of this period and area and will be used for this debate, primarily examining whether or not the new settlements can be defined as *emporia* in comparison to the *emporia* of northern Europe.

**Fig. 124.** Venice (Rialto-Olivolo) and the main places in the text. Illustration: Venice, Medieval Archaeology Laboratory.



The term *emporium* (but above all the concept of *emporium*) 24 as a place for the redistribution of goods, essentially belongs, as we have said, to the north European historiography debate. The term *emporium* is however very rare in early medieval sources and totally absent in those of Anglophone areas (Samson 1999:79): such settlements have been indicated in the medieval northern European sources with words such as *wic*, *wik*, *portus* (Lebecq in press), as also occurs in the Italian peninsula (Gelichi 2007:80-82).

This debate will therefore focus on understanding the distinction between a town and an *emporium* (Samson 1999). Lebecq affirms for instance that they could constitute sort of 'suburban trading places', in relation to ancient urban centres (as for instance in the case of *Lundinium*/*Lundenwic*: Lebecq, in press). However, there some peculiarities with a number of settlements which qualify them as 'exchange places' (beyond the definition given by scholars today) and extend the parameters of the debate.

Examining these parameters allows an investigation into the origin of the cities and the characteristics of the early medieval economy and also allows the extension of the debate to other European and Mediterranean areas. Hodges defines an *emporium* and distinguishes it from other contemporary settlements on the basis of the following features (Hodges 1982): the role played by the merchandise that passed through (type and quantity); its geographical spread and the types of materials used to construct it; and whether it was also a centre of production.

Additionally, the position of these new settlements is of note – they are generally placed on estuaries or in areas close to rivers (Lebecq, in press). Hodges distinguishes three different types of *emporia*: type A ('seasonal'), type B ('permanent') and type C, which constitutes the evolution of the second type, tending towards local trade (Hodges 1982:50-52). Type C exists as a negative evolution of B. These settlements are not only 'exchange places' but they are centres for long-distance exchange. The question which arises is: beyond the definition of the written sources, do these features belong to the 'new towns' in the northern Adriatic area, including Venice?

#### VENICE

In the last fifteen years Venice (Fig. 124) has been the centre of intense archaeological activity, which however did not produce a great improvement in our knowledge of early medieval cities (Gelichi 2006a). Better results were produced by the excavations of the Polish team in Torcello in the 1960s (Leciejewicz, Tabaczynska & Tabaczynski 1977), but they refer to another lagoon settlement (and not to the place near Rivoalto which produced Venice), the excavations were of limited size (hence they refer very much to the area close to the Episcopacy complex, but not the attached settlement) and, above all they were completed at a time when knowledge of the material culture of the lagoon was in its infancy and many markers, such as pottery or amphorae, were not properly examined.



**Fig. 125.** Venice in the Early Middle Ages, from Ammerman 2003.

Within the research agenda, we still need to resolve the issues concerning early medieval Venice's status as a settlement: the dimensions of the settlement, the material characteristics of the settlement and the spatial organisation; the date of its formation (which did not coincide necessarily with the one attested by the written sources); the social identity of its citizens; and the dynamics of its economy. Concerning the first issue the idea that we have of early medieval Venice is often quite stereotypical, as if the city structure assumed in the Middle Ages was already present in a sort of original model: in brief, it is thought that the city had, from the beginning, the same structure that it has today. Recently, Albert Ammerman, on the basis of the distribution of Venetian churches, proposed a new topography of Venice in the 8th century (Ammerman 2003) (Fig. 125).

He has noted that almost all churches are to be found on the eastern side of the town and not one of them is placed around the Grand Canal (which was probably larger than at present), and finally their distribution is quite scattered. That means, according to Ammerman, that the Grand Canal did not have an important role initially in the shaping of the settlement. This hypothesis is very attractive, but it is based only on the written sources: in fact not one of the churches considered has been archaeologically investigated and the chronology refers to dubious documents (Baudo 2006a). Therefore it is difficult to apply this interpretation to the 8th century, while it is instead more plausible for the 9th century, when those buildings are better documented (Baudo in press).

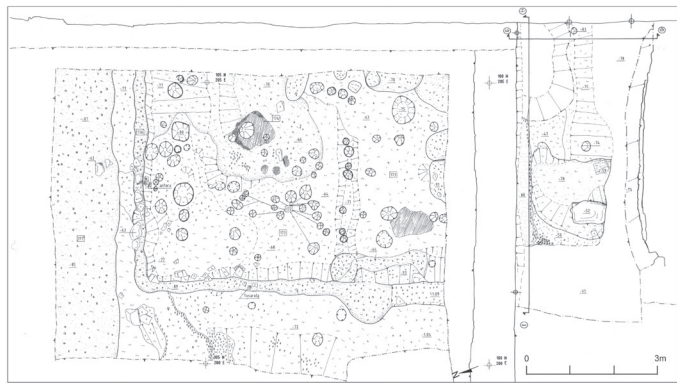
It is more probable that the settlement, in the 8th century, was dispersed on different islands (where there are more secure archaeological data). In brief, Venice is the result of a sort of agglomeration between a dispersed settlement, scattered on small marshy banks, and two main core areas, the new one which was wanted by the Particiaci near Rivoalto, and the Episcopal base of Olivolo, already documented in the 8th century (Schulz 1991).

The Grand Canal could now be interpreted not so much as an internal means of communication but, as it was much larger than today, as a sort of port channel (Baudo in press). The dimensions of this settlement however are difficult to measure. A characteristic of this new settlement (and of other similar ones) is in fact the lack of precise borders. Walls, which traditionally delimitate an urban space, and which the chronicles referring to Venice (Giovanni Diacono, *Historia Veneticorum*, III, 39) misrepresent, may in fact never have been built and instead they may have been a sort of linear structure which protected the front of the new settlement on the Grand Canal (Gelichi 2006a:171-2).

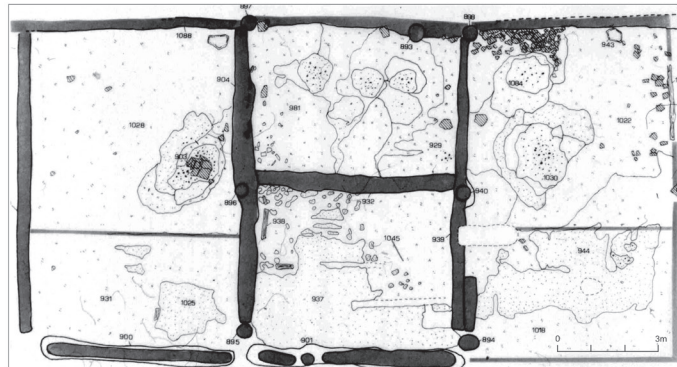
The material character and the spatial organisation of this original settlement are still obscure in the archaeological record, with the obvious exclusion of the ecclesiastic structures, such as the San Marco basilica (that has been hypothesised as a 9th-century structure: Cecchi 2003) which go up to the early medieval phases (e.g. San Lorenzo di Castello: De Min 1999).

Actually, only one current excavation allows for a reconstruction of the settlement structure of the Early Middle Ages (Gobbo 2005:43-5). It is a house, which has not been fully investigated, but it is clearly of a rectangular shape (more than 3 m on one side and the other side is 6 m long). The structure, realised with timbers, must have been divided internally into at least two areas, with fireplaces directly on the beaten earth.

The assimilation of this structure to the *casone* which are still present on the lagoon (Gobbo 2005:43) is actually misleading, as this building type refers to a local scenario which instead had a notable presence on the mainland, in Veneto (Villa 2001:304-5 on Concordia Sagittaria; Castagna & Tirelli 1995:128-30 on Oderzo), but more generally in northern Italy between the 8th and the 10th centuries (Gelichi & Librenti 2006 and 2010:20-2) (Fig. 126).



1



2



3



4



6



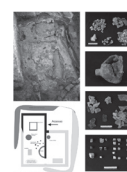
5

**Fig. 126.** Early medieval houses compared. 1: Ca' Vendramin Calergi, Venice (Gobbo 2005); 2: Village near Sant'Agata, Bologna (Gelichi & Librenti 2006); 3: Piadena, Mantova (Brogiolo); 4: Concordia Sagittaria, Venice (Villa 2001); 5 and 6: Fidenza, Piacenza (Catarsi).



**Fig. 127.** Comacchio (Ferrara), Villaggio San Francesco, wooden waterfront from the 8th-9th century AD. Illustration: Venice, Medieval Archaeology Laboratory.

**Fig. 128.** Comacchio, Villaggio San Francesco, wooden jetty from the 8th-9th century AD. Illustration: Venice, Medieval Archaeology Laboratory.



**Fig. 129**  
page 44

This auto-referential tendency, which is applied for instance to other structural elements (the wooden bank structures of the channels, which have been named as ‘volparoni’, but which are then dated to Late Antiquity: Bortoletto 2000), is not incorrect, but inserting it within the traditions of Venetian uniqueness prevents us from looking at Venice, and its society, as a place fully compatible with its geographic location and period (see Gasparri 1997 on institutions).

Additional data, even more significant, originate from the material culture, which informs us both about consumption and trade relationships in this phase of transition. The area of the lagoon seems to be oriented, from Late Antiquity, towards a discrete consumption of Mediterranean goods (identified through the presence of amphorae: Toniolo 2007) and of imported pottery, both of African (ARS) and Eastern origin (Grandi 2007). This trade does not end in the 7th century other than for the imported fine wares (which corresponds to the end of those productions *tout court* and which expresses a general change in the social behaviour of a large part of the northern Italian population), though there is a slight decrease in the volume of imports of amphorae.

A revision of the old excavations of Torcello (Leciejewicz, Tabaczynska & Tabaczynski 1977) and an examination of more recent findings (Toniolo 2007:98-101) has brought to light the presence of globular amphorae imported from southern Italy and the Mediterranean. Those archaeological documents demonstrate again a peculiar circulation in the Adriatic area of Mediterranean goods between the 7th and the 9th centuries.

As this situation is visible both in Comacchio (see below) and in some inland settlements (Gelichi & Negrelli 2008:Fig. 7 and 2009:51-53, Fig. 3-6), the presence of these amphorae cannot be read as evidence of the goods supplied simply for a Byzantine community (even military) as the historiography of the Byzantinization of the lagoon generally suggests.

The lack of archaeological investigations in the lagoon demonstrates nevertheless its potential for further investigations. With the data to hand it is difficult to understand the physiognomy of the settlement and its economic identity. Recently McCormick rightly affirmed that ‘at Venice the tempo of growth and the geographical structures of trade changed quickly, even within a space of a decade’ (McCormick 2007:44).

However in the 8th century, Venice, was not the only ‘new place’ which was growing in terms of trade, well beyond the limits of local or regional activity (Gelichi 2008 *contra* Balzaretto 1999). In recent years, new archaeological work has been carried out in Comacchio, a small town near the Adriatic coast and the Po estuary. Comacchio, which flourished during the 8th century AD, was Venice’s competitor during that period. Investigating Comacchio can help us to understand something about these kinds of settlements (location, sources, economy and so on).

#### COMACCHIO

Today Comacchio (see Fig. 124) is a small town lying near the delta of the River Po, archaeologically notable for the Etruscan necropolis investigated during the 20th century and linked to an *emporium* which flourished between the 6th and the 4th

centuries BC. However, the Etruscan settlement is located inland, several kilometres away from modern Comacchio, which in that period did not exist. During the Roman period, the whole territory of the delta was characterised by dispersed settlements (*villae* and farms) and large imperial properties (*saltus*).

The first written document attesting the existence of Comacchio can be dated to the beginning of the 8th century (Hartmann 1904). It is a treaty between the Lombards and the Comacchio inhabitants (*habitatores Comacchi*) related to the tolls that the people from Comacchio had to pay at several stations along the Po river and its affluents (Fasoli 1978). Later documents refer to competition between Comacchio and the rising Venice. Due to trading controls in the northern Adriatic area Comacchio settlement underwent two periods of destruction (Cessi 1963:313-14).

The last of these destructions, in 932, was particularly violent and definitive (Giovanni Diacono, *Istoria Veneticorum* III, 44); in fact, after this event, Comacchio disappeared from the Adriatic scenario, becoming a modest village where the only evidence of its notable past was the presence of the Episcopacy. Even if the written sources are quite explicit in their definition of the chronological parameters of Comacchio's history, the local historiography has tended, in both written (of dubious provenance) and material sources, to imply chronological lacunae.

Nevertheless, there is no reason, and no archaeological evidence at present, to attribute to it a much more ancient origin. As the site, in some early medieval written sources, is termed *castrum*, its defensive function has been underlined. This interpretation, although it need not be rejected as a matter of course, provides little further access to the history of these places and replicates the analyses of other lagoon areas of the same period, including Venice. Also, in this area, there are no long-term economic reasons why the inhabitants would have moved from the mainland to the lagoon islands other than those connected to the barbaric invasions and the subsequent Byzantine responses: safety came before trade.

Comacchio and its territory have been archaeologically investigated since the first half of the 20th century. Early medieval material and contexts also came to light during the drainage works of Valle Ponti (Loc. 'Baro delle Pietre') and of Valle Pega ('Motta della Girata'), but an increase in research activities occurred mainly from the second half of the 1990s. From this moment onwards several investigations were carried out in the extra-urban area of the modern settlement named San Francesco village. It is important to recall the recent excavations (2006-2008) in the Piazza XX Settembre, near the cathedral (Gelichi 2009) and, again, in the San Francesco village (2008-2009). Those archaeological investigations give clues about the settlement's formation (late 6th-7th centuries), and illustrate the settlement's characteristics and the social physiognomy of its inhabitants, in this crucial period of the history of the medieval northern Adriatic.

In 1997, following new building works in San Francesco village, excavations were carried out that revealed substantial remains of wooden structures on piles (Calaon 2007). Subsequent excavations (2008-09) provided clear evidence of extensive port infrastructures (landing-stages, wharves and jetties) (Fig. 127 & 128). This site can be dated to the 8th and 9th centuries on the basis of the materials recovered.

The settlement must have had an institutional centre, a seat of religious authority (the bishop, at least from the second half of the 8th century onwards), perhaps also civil authority, which, we may reasonably suppose, would have been located in the area where it still stands today – the Cathedral. In fact, the excavations near the Cathedral revealed early traces of the settlement. This evidence is represented by structures which were used for habitation (wooden buildings), and a number of sandy dunes which formed a lagoon near the sea at the end of the 6th century (Gelichi 2009:24-25).

Those wooden buildings were replaced during the 7th century by a craftsman's workshop, where glass and metals were worked (Fig. 129). Craftsmen probably undertook every stage of metal-working here, from processing the coarse iron to forming particular objects. From this workshop are several wasters, and also moulds for bronze letters. The kiln used for glass production seems to have been used between the 7th and the beginning of the 8th century. This kiln made daily objects, such as goblets. However, the presence of a mould for glass cameos, of a type that was common in northern Italy at the end of the 7th century (Gagetti 2007), leads to the suggestion that this workshop also specialised in luxury products. In fact, the cameos are documented as quite valuable objects, with a symbolic meaning, as for example the Desiderio's cross kept at Brescia (Sena Chiesa 2002:186) or the reliquary stored in Capella di Cividale del Friuli (Gagetti 2007:167-78), where a specimen very similar to the mould described above is kept (Figs. 130 & 131).

As for the rise of Venice, Comacchio also flourished quite quickly, though the archaeology is still lacking in detail. However, the sequence at Piazza XX Settembre suggests, thanks to this craft workshop, material evidence from a particular moment of this settlement's evolution and economic development. The existence of this workshop, abandoned or moved during the 8th century, when the area was converted to leave room for a cemetery linked to the new Episcopal church, actually follows the development of the new settlement in a commercial way. This is witnessed also by the important construction works along the river bank, completed around the same period as the more western area of the settlement.

Another important archaeological marker is represented by the important number of globular amphorae imported from southern Italy or from the eastern basin of the Mediterranean. This signifies that eastern goods (wine and oil) but also probably goods which do not leave strong archaeological traces, such as spices, were travelling in the 8th-century Adriatic and reached some of the Italian ports



Fig. 130  
page 45



Fig. 131a  
page 45



Fig. 131b  
page 45

from where they travelled inland (and not only for consumption by a small elite, as the archaeological evidence is beginning to demonstrate). This vitality is also demonstrated by another archaeological marker represented by a group of double-handled vessels of small dimensions with a flat base, which seem to be a peculiarity of Comacchio and which are probably local: they are quite clearly vessels used to transport goods inland via river boats such as the *monossili*.

All these data point to the second half of the 7th century as the key moment for the formation of the settlement of Comacchio within a commercial web which went further than simply local or regional networks. The data also modify the suggestion that salt was the driving force behind its economy, even if its importance remains unquestionable. The flourishing of Comacchio (but in general of the entire northeastern Adriatic arch in this period) seems therefore to reflect a change in the economic strategies of the Lombard kings, and at the same time it seems compatible with the maintenance of political and naval control by the Byzantines of a large part of the Adriatic (Delogo in press).

Fig. 132  
page 45



At Comacchio, more than in Venice, the archaeology illustrates some of the material aspects of those economic and social changes (Fig. 132):

- the fragmentation of the settlement and the absence of precise borders, which is focussed around the Episcopal *insula*, the seat of the bishop from the middle of the 8th century and which is the institutional core of the settlement; all around, separated by channels, the town must have grown. In the southeast and in the northwest there were two *insulae*, the locations of monasteries (Santa Maria in Aula Regia and San Mauro); in the western part, at the point of confluence between an artificial channel (the 'Motta della Girata') and of the inland salty water lagoon, were the functional structures for the stocking and transfer of goods (banks, warehouses, platforms) (Fig. 133);

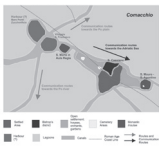


Fig. 133  
page 46

- the specialisation of some areas compared to others;
- the investment of a series of functional structures connected to commerce, such as the opening of an artificial channel or the arrangement of the banks;
- the presence and the development of craftsmanship which is partly related to commercial activities (such as a group of small local amphorae) and which also reused local resources for specialist goods (such as the glass and the glass cameos).

The written documents do not mention the origins of this place, other than the episode which shows that the people from Comacchio were already working as an established community by the beginning of the 8th century (715 or 730) when they sign the treaty with the Lombards. This datum is very significant: the bishop for instance is not yet present (the first secure attestation is dated to the third quarter of the 8th century). It is very improbable that an external power founded or reconstructed the settlement, as is generally thought for northern European *emporion* (Lebecq in press).

#### THE OTHER VENICES

Venice and Comacchio constitute two very similar phenomena, but do we have to consider them as isolated within the dynamics of the 7th- and 8th-century settlements of the northern Adriatic arch (see Fig. 124)? A series of still relatively unstructured archaeological data seems, however, to suggest a negative reply to this question. As is well known, the written sources describe a rather mechanical process when they refer to the history of the seats in these territories between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages.

Several ancient cities disappeared (Altino, for instance) or decayed (Concordia Sagittaria, Oderzo, Aquileia), but other new cities rose up on the islands of the lagoons along the coasts. These processes have been linked with the fear of barbaric invasions (first Huns and then Lombards) and hence the necessity to seek safety: the conclusion is that each of cities that disappeared or decayed has its own counterpart within the lagoon. This idea should be rejected (La Rocca 1994) because it is not historically sustainable: the trajectories of each urban centre depended in fact on its original characteristics (Concordia Sagittaria: La Rocca 2001 and 2005) and the changing economic, and often environmental, conditions (Altino: Calaon 2006a). The reasons which brought about the rise of these new settlements are complex and varied and cannot be broadly generalised.

However, one aspect is clear: we are not witnessing a process of marginality in the area, rather exactly the opposite; their survival is illustrated through the movement of the settlements and not through their persistency (the question on how the persistency of urban settlements could be a sign of vitality within these territories remains unanswered). These new centres (some of which had a transitory life) which rose up in the Early Middle Ages are revealing very interesting, but very different archaeological footprints.

Cittanova, a place traditionally associated with the Emperor Heraclius is situated to the north of the Venetian lagoon (Fig. 134). Thanks to recent studies (Calaon 2006b), which have re-assessed the interesting records produced at the time of the 1980s archaeological research, we can now see how this town developed along a longitudinal axis, in this case a large channel, at the end of which there was a nucleus located on a natural rise (the centre of religious and civil authorities). Alongside this waterway there were portions of land bordered by channels, with wooden dwellings and entrances (also archaeologically excavated) on the channel itself. The well-preserved site of Cittanova provides us with a picture of how this type of settlement must have been organised, which was certainly not so different from that of primitive Venice.

Another such site is Torcello, which has been the subject of lengthy excavations. These have, however, produced more information on the ecclesiastic structures than the *emporion mega*, described by Constantine Porphyrogenitus in the 9th century in *De Administrando Impero* (here it would have been worthwhile to focus research on other areas of the island: Fig. 135).

Fig. 134  
page 46



Fig. 135  
page 46



However, the information from Torcello helps us to understand the potential of the site and it shows similarities with Comacchio. First, we are better informed about the formation phases of the settlement, which does not rise *ex abrupto* with the traditional transfer of the Episcopal seat (a suggestion which is based on the recovery of an inscription of dubious authenticity: Baudo 2006b), but represents the product of a slow process of organisation from the end of the 5th century (De Min 2000:101-22; Ammermann & Mc Clennen 2001). Furthermore, the excavations stressed evidence of a material culture which for Late Antiquity already demonstrates a strong orientation towards Mediterranean goods (for the pottery, see Grandi 2007). The domestic contexts, pottery and glass, have many similarities with material from Comacchio (see above). Also the amphorae, recovered mostly in the 8th-century phases, allow us to place Torcello (and the lagoon environment) within the northern Adriatic milieu to which Comacchio belongs. Finally, we must not forget that in Torcello a kiln was excavated that indicated glass production (Tabaczynska 1981), whose chronology, originally linked to the foundation of the Episcopal church (7th century), has recently been moved to the period just before the 9th century (Leciejewicz 2000 and 2002).

The list of other similar settlements continues, starting at Grado, Caorle and then again the Venice lagoon, Malamocco and finally in the south, Gavello (Casazza 2001:153-68). Some of these new settlements have been the subject of archaeological investigations, such as Grado, but only recently have non-ecclesiastical contexts been examined (Brogiolo & Cagnana 2005). Other settlements, such as Malamocco or Gavello, are still difficult to identify and they have scarcely been investigated. However, Caorle has undergone thorough investigation recently and the results have been published in a monograph (Fozzati 2007) whose findings have been astonishing, as the archaeological data seem to match completely the historical version, and no attempt has been made to look for new original interpretations.

The publication suggests that Caorle came about as a Byzantine *castrum*, to which the bishop of nearby Concordia Sagittaria escaped after the Lombard invasions in 568 (Passariello 2007:29). However, the institution of a diocese in Caorle is dated three centuries later (9th century) and the reference to the bishop's escape come from chronicles which are chronologically quite distant from the episodes that they describe and which also disagree about the existence of the *castrum* (they are respectively: Giovanni Diacono, *Historia Veneticorum* I, 6 and for the mention of the *castrum*, *Chronicon Gradense*, in Croniche, p. 44: *castellum, in quo ecclesiam in honore Sancti Stephani protomartyris fundavit*).

But we can attempt to reconstruct the original structure of the settlement and the perimeters of the early medieval *castrum* through material evidence (Flores David 2007:37-39, Fig. 4) and models of formation suggest an evolutionary process (that does not consider the foundation *ex nihilo*) of the passage from a maritime villa to a Byzantine *castrum* (Fozzati & Gobbo 2007:70-72).

The archaeological data are still insufficient to explain the formation process of this interesting settlement, but they do offer some productive research perspectives, thanks to the presence of contexts and materials dated to the 5th to 6th century (such as the excavations in Piazza Vescovado: Fozzati & Gobbo 2007:90, Figs. 21-24) or the 8th century (globular amphora from the excavations of the ex-school 'A. Bafile': Fozzati & Gobbo 2007:113, Fig. 68). The archaeology of these new northern Adriatic settlements shows the potential for furthering our knowledge but also highlights the deficiencies which need to be addressed with future work.

#### RETURNING TO EMPORIA

It is clear that the northern Adriatic arch flourished between the 7th and the 8th centuries. If we abandon the explanation that links this mobility to motives of defence, and we instead link the rise of these new settlements to environmental and economic factors, the phenomenon takes on a new life. I have already discussed the reasons which make this area particularly commercially vibrant and I have tried also to trace the dynamics of this process within the economy of northern Italy in the Early Middle Ages, based on archaeological sources (Gelichi 2008).

As is known, this perspective reassesses the economic vitality of the Late Lombard Age (Wickham 2005) and instead considers the 8th century not as a long (and sleepy) period of waiting (Wickham 1998 and 2000), but rather as a moment of intense activity (Gelichi 2006b). We can therefore go back to the first question and ask if these settlements had anything in common with those that flourished in northern Europe, without having to say 'that Venice is the archetype which explains all' (McCormick 2007:41).

McCormick suggests that around the 9th century Venice was linked with the northern *emporìa* through its contacts with the Frankish Empire. A driving force behind these contacts could be the commerce of slaves and we have material evidence in the distribution of money coined by the Venetian mint from the beginning of the 9th century onwards (McCormick 2001:361-369 and 523-531).

The archaeological evidence of these links is still quite fleeting. It is tempting to see links, for example, through the trade of glass mosaic *tesserae*, which are considered to be of Italian origin (for the analysis of those recovered in Ribe, see Sode 2004:88), and were recycled for the production of glass beads in northern Europe (from Dorestad to Ribe and from Ribe to Rusland: Willemsen 2009:138-39 and 144). From the Pohansko site, in the 'Grande Moravia', which surely controlled long distance trade (defined as *munitio, emporium* and *palatium* of the Moravian ruler: Macháček 2007:59), a sherd from a Byzantine amphora and a jug in single-fired lead glazed ware were found (Poláček 2007:507-08, Fig. 6), which if produced in the northern Adriatic (and not around Rome: Gelichi et al. 2007:632-38) could constitute further traces of these relationships.

It is probably more worthwhile at this point to consider this phenomenon more broadly rather than to attempt to



trace material evidence, which will probably increase with future excavations. Venice (or the settlements of the lagoon which preceded it between the 7th and the 8th centuries) does not represent an exceptional and isolated episode, but is the product of a long period of evolution. This evolution occurred not only within the Venice lagoon and its immediate hinterland, but also within a wider geographical space, which stretches from the mouth of the Po river up to Istria. This geographical space was fundamental for Byzantine interests and then for the Lombards, followed by the Franks. This dynamism (which is economic but also demographic) is represented in the framework of Italian urbanisation, which is very deep-rooted and linked to the Roman world. These new settlements cannot be compared with what preceded them, which may be why scholars find it so difficult to qualify them: in terms of their location (they are mainly placed on islands within the lagoon which surrounds the coasts or along rivers); in terms of the internal articulation of the settlement (lack of a precise perimeter or distinction between the areas of power and the settled ones); in terms of the important investment in the infrastructures linked to commerce; and in terms of the specialised craftsmanship. Moreover, these settlements were founded in areas which previously were not inhabited or only sparsely settled. That means that there is no tradition behind these settlements, because they simply did not exist before.

Only later, when they began to flourish (such as Venice), did people try to find historical traditions which might explain their origins. These new Adriatic settlements do not appear linked to any specific external act of foundation, not even in those cases in which the written sources suggest an external agent (as for instance in the case of Torcello, which is however linked to the interpretation of a dubious epigraph: Baudo 2006b). The same occurs in northern European *emporía* which were founded from scratch, and only later were controlled (and maybe also fortified) by some external power.

Unlike northern Europe, many of these settlements remained somewhat independent: Venice, as is known, had an extraordinary degree of autonomy, explained by its origins. About other settlements we know very little; at Comacchio, for instance, the Episcopal power seems to follow and not anticipate the rise of the settlement. Finally there is the chronology: it could be the case that these places started to appear in Late Lombard Italy as in Frankish Europe (7th-8th centuries). They actually anticipate the system which brought about Carolingians, and which ushered in many 'new places' throughout the Adriatic. Looking at northern Europe as a reflection of what was happening in the Adriatic (if not in the Eastern Mediterranean) or vice-versa, is very challenging and should not be underestimated. It is time to think again about linking these two areas, one century on from Pirenne's theory.