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Flourishing places in North-Eastern Italy: towns and emporia between Late Antiquity and the Carolingian Age (1)

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1. Abandoned towns and new towns in North-Eastern Italy during Late Antiquity: an overall picture

A considerable number of Roman towns disappeared in the West between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages; regarding Italy, it has been estimated that about a third did not survive “in the period roughly between AD 300 and 800” (Ward Perkins 1988, p. 16). However, the situation does not reveal uniform parameters: in some areas the ancient urban settlements lasted well (or at least so it seems from the fact that they continue to exist in the same place), while in others they vanished entirely without traces or were established elsewhere; or else, those areas saw urban developments many centuries later, in a process of renewed land organization (in general Brogiolo – Gelichi 1998 and Gelichi 2001). (Fig. 01)

In this situation Northern Italy essentially remained, throughout the Early Middle Ages, a land of towns. In fact, only certain areas, (lower Piedmont, for example) seem to show a total failure of the urban system. In other areas the failures appear to be of a rather modest sort, or else seem to be balanced by the founding or creation of new settlements which can be defined (or will come to be defined) as towns. (Fig. 02)

Included in this last group is the area of the ancient *Venetia et Histria*, where 12 towns are recorded in the Roman Age. A quarter of these, (Aquileia, Altino, Concordia, Este, Adria) vanished entirely, while other places which were once towns, for instance Padua and Oderzo, seem to have had temporary moments of decline.

If, however, we examine the terms used to define the survival of these ancient towns (decline, disappearance), we realise how rather imprecise they are and that they must be compared with the kind of evidence to be taken into consideration. The conditions of urban ‘status’ are generally seen by historians in relation to institutional concepts. The decline of Padua, for example, is linked to the temporary transfer of public authorities (that is, of the count) to other areas (but also its likely endurance is linked to an institutional concept, that of the stability of the Bishop’s diocese). From this perspective only one ancient town (that is, Este) was never a diocese (thereby testifying to a rather early decline) and only four other ancient towns (Oderzo, Adria, Aquileia and Concordia) lost this prerogative during the Early Middle Ages (La Rocca 1994, pp. 547-548).

At the same time many new centres are reported as being bishoprics from the 7th century onwards. During the Aquileian schism, in 610, centres previously inexistent at an institutional level such as Parenzo, Jesolo, Pola, Torcello, Olivolo, Chioggia, Eraclea and Caorle, are recorded as being bishoprics under the Patriarch of Grado (Cuscito 1990). Most of these settlements lie within or in the immediate vicinity of the Venetian lagoon. At an institutional level at least, therefore, these

areas show a certain 'vitality' even in the 7th century; many of these places survived throughout the Early Middle Ages and indeed, in one case, gave form and life to that which was to become the most important Mediterranean city in the coming centuries, Venice. (Fig. 03)

The causes of decline, as indicated by written sources, are generally attributed to events of a traumatic sort, due to natural phenomena or wars in this area. Oderzo would have been abandoned after the final destructions of the 7th century by the Longobards (king Rotari), according to the deacon Paolo. The decline of Altino is associated, even more arbitrarily, with the 'barbarian' devastations (first the Huns, followed by the Longobards once again). It is clear that this town disappeared during the Early Middle Ages (today it is an uninhabited place), but its final misfortune as a settlement is once again associated with episodes of an *evenementielle* nature (the escape to the islands of the Venetian lagoon due to the 'metu barbarorum') (Azzara 1994 and 1997).

Conversely, among those regions in which urban systems of antiquity seem to survive rather well, without any apparent discontinuity, the ancient Regio VIII *Aemilia* is certainly to be included; here, in fact, only a few sites (Velia, Claterna, Brescello) disappeared entirely between Late Antiquity and the beginning of the Early Middle Ages. This substantial endurance of urban systems, however, does not mean unchanging stability in the hierarchy of area organizations. In fact, an area without towns like the Po estuary, a place of vast estates of Imperial revenue in ancient times, records the founding, in the Early Middle Ages, of at least two new centres (Comacchio and Ferrara) and the nomination to a higher institutional status of another (*Vicohabentia* becomes a diocese). (Fig. 04)

Between the 7th and 10th centuries, therefore, old lands without towns (like the Po estuary) and new towns (or almost towns) without lands (like the settlements being created in the Venetian lagoon) emerged as new centres of social and economic organization. A strip of coastal land, that lying between Ravenna (in the south) and Grado (in the north-east) was to become one of the most important areas of Northern Italy.

2. *The Eels of Venice*

In a rather famous passage from his book *Venice. A Maritime Republic*, Frederic C. Lane tells us that even in the 9th century, Comacchio, nearer to Ravenna and the mouths of the Po estuary, was contesting the emerging economic hegemony of the lagoon settlements (which had recently congregated around the Rialto). It was in the late 9th century that the Venetians, besieging and sacking the town, put an end to this dualism and took full control of the river mouths and thereby of inland trade (*Historia Veneticorum*, III, 28 and 44): "Had Comacchio defeated the Venetians and established its control over themouths of the Adige and the Po, it instead of Venice might have become the Queen of the Adriatic, and Venice might now be an inconspicuous village in a stagnant lagoon, as dead as the lagoon of Comacchio, famous only for its eels" (Lane 1973, p. 6)

The destruction of Comacchio, recorded in the chronicles of the time, clearly marks a turning point in the reorganization of settlement hierarchies in this area. Whether one gives credence or not to this event is, from a certain point of view, of little importance. In our opinion, in fact, it undoubtedly testifies to a moment of fundamental change also for the settlements developing even in the lagoon area.

The evolutionary course of these areas in the political and economic systems of Italy in the Early Middle Ages rests upon a point of departure well-known, the settlements of Roman times, and a point of arrival equally well-known, perhaps even more so, the rise of the dominion of Venice. This is the way by which one arrives at this less comprehensible situation, moreover countermarked by a scarcity of references in written sources. It is true that historians of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages have investigated at length the origins of Venice; but it is also true that these investigations have, for the most part, been developed according to a precise perspective, that of Venice (Crouzet-Pavan 1995). Furthermore, it is only recently, and in a very rhapsodic and rather

uncoordinated way, that other sources have been taken into consideration, such as archaeological sources (Gelichi *in print*).

The archaeology of many of these places (that of Altino on the one hand and that of Venice, Torcello, Olivolo, Cittanova and Comacchio on the other) has been, apart from the quality of individual operations, a fact-finding process by no means coordinated. So, while in international debate these places are frequently dealt with and discussed in a framework of the developments of economies and settlements in Early Medieval Europe, their archaeology (and I would add, their history), is instead relegated to a context and issues of an extremely localised nature. With few exceptions, the effort of making comparisons of data and information is begging the question, fluctuating between clarifying the problem of origins or emphasizing the problem through an artificial renewal of scientific thoroughness.

The archaeological research, in truth, is still at the beginning. Nevertheless, one may begin to gather together certain data and, above all, compare the different situations, so as to evaluate archaeological potential; to see what material sources can tell us and what we must (or can) ask of them. In short, to evaluate whether investigation in the field offers more food for thought and historical critique than it has so far been seen to offer (mainly to the discredit of archaeologists, I believe).

Because of the fragmentary nature of the data we must proceed through *exempla*; will shall do so by examining three of these new sites (Comacchio and Ferrara, in Emilia, and Cittanova, in the Veneto) and the new settlements in the lagoon area. First of all, we will evaluate some aspects related to written records; we will dwell upon the degree and quality of each archaeological context; finally, we will attempt to assess whether there are parameters that may help us to correlate and compare these places on the level of material and economic systems.

3. *Castra, civitates or emporia? How these settlements are defined in written sources.*

The question of how these settlements came to be defined in more-or-less contemporary written sources is not a simple one. The simplest solution, in fact, that of a straightforward reading of lexis, besides being of scarce validity on the level of textual critique, may also be misleading on the level of understanding the form and organization of the settlement. In the absence of archaeological sources, then, the tendency may be to transfer very general parameters onto environmental contexts and, I would add, onto chronological, social, political and institutional contexts, very different amongst themselves.

An interesting text to analyse, in these terms, may be the Chronicle of Iohannis diaconi who, as is known, was writing around the beginning of the 11th century (Fig. 05). A highly orientated historiographic text (but then which is not?), set in a period in which the dominion of the centre which developed around Rivoalto had been completed. With the exception of the ancient towns, that is the urban centres of Roman origin, in the *Istoria Veneticorum* no other new place, not even marked by the institutional presence of a bishop, is defined as *civitas*, with only three exceptions: Grado, Rivoalto and *Civitas Nova Heracliana*. That this should happen to Grado is understandable enough, also because the place (originating from the ancient Aquileia) was a metropolitanical centre. That this should be the case for Rivoalto is equally plausible, as it formed part of the self-celebratory programme that it was the historian's intention to perpetrate. Even the designation of *civitas* attributed to Cittanova, to which we will return later, is understandable: here it is the direct action of the Emperor, independently of the material results of his action, which defines the new inhabited centre as *civitas* (to which must be added, on an institutional level, the presence of a duke and a bishop).

If it is useful to evaluate the circumstances in which the term *civitas* is used, it is also interesting to note the names that Iohannis uses for the other lagoon settlements. Torcello is simply defined as *insula* (I, 6); Olivolo, a bishopric, is also recorded as *insula* (II, 19, 33) and then as *ecclesia* (II, 26, 42; III, 24); the same is true of Equilo (I, 6), of which mention is made of the *portus*

(IV, 46); Caorle, another bishopric, is simply a *castrum* (II, 51). Equally interesting are the terms Iohannis uses for the centres in the Po Estuary. Ferrara is defined exclusively in terms of *castellum* (IV, 11) and *castrum* (IV, 43) and finally, Comacchio boasts even more variants: *insula* (III, 44), *castrum* (III, 28) and *villa* (III, 12).

Analysis of the work of Iohannis is interesting for one thing, moreover already indicated with regard to other places and by other historians: it makes explicit the difficulty of defining, above all, these new flourishing places. Iohannis also never uses the term *emporium*, which does not appear to be used either in other written sources (chronicles or otherwise), with the exception of Costantinus Porphyrogenitus (*De adminitrando imperio*, 23-24), who, in the 10th century attributes it only to Torcello (*emporion mega*). For all the other lagoon settlements even the Byzantine Emperor uses the word *castron* (the equivalent of the Latin *castrum* or *castellum*).

According to some chronicle sources of the 10th-11th century, therefore, the Venetian lagoon, like the Delta area of the Po, would have been swarming with castles. Rather particular castles, however, as emphasised some time ago by Castagnetti (1992), in the sense that none of them (with the exception, perhaps, of those in the Ferrara area) seems to be linked to the well-known process of fortification (named in Italian language “incastellamento”); that is, to that phenomenon of the creation of fortified settlements induced by the nobility. Furthermore, rather than indicating a site of actual fortification, my impression is that the word *castrum*, in many of these cases, is a kind of semantic *passpartout* to replace a term difficult to find in the vocabulary. These places are not yet proper towns (or *civitates*), but neither are they simple villages (*villae*); they are something in between, they are ‘almost-towns’ or small towns.

4. Flourishing places in North-Eastern Italy. The archaeological evidence of Comacchio, Ferrara, Cittanova, and the Venetian lagoon.

The archaeology of these places is different in quality, quantity and strategies. On the whole we cannot say that we have good information about these sites, above all with regard to the Early Middle Ages. The period of greatest significance seems to have escaped the archaeologists. A detailed analysis of the kind of archaeology carried out in these places would be very interesting and would explain the reasons for this lack.

Comacchio

The earliest information we have about Comacchio (Fig. 06) from written sources dates back to the 8th century and makes reference (in 715) to *habitatores Comaclo* in the famous Capitular of Liutprand regarding the salt trade; shortly after that, we have the information of the existence of a bishop (723: Vincenzo). The possibility of the treaty with the Longobard king (latest Montanari 1986) being a hundred years earlier and the settlement arising even during the first quarter of the 6th century (Patitucci Uggeri 1986, p. 281-283) are hypotheses only supported by historically plausible arguments. The archaeological data available up to now, in fact, appear to be of a completely different kind.

We have recently had the opportunity to re-analyse pottery from archaeological research carried out in Comacchio and its immediate vicinity over almost fifty years. The resulting picture is surprising (Fig. 07). Pots and jars come mainly from four places: the historical centre, the excavations of Via Mazzini and those at the eastern and western outskirts, or rather, that of Valle Raibosola and valle Ponti (the village of San Francesco). There is a scarcity of imported pottery of Late Antiquity (amphorae and ARS) while there is a most surprising abundance of Italic (or Oriental) amphorae of the 8th and 9th centuries. Together with this material there are, quite naturally, vessels of soap-stone (imported from the Alps) and glazed “Forum Ware” (imported from the central Italic area?)

The picture of material culture, then, testifies to a marked presence of vessels for transport of the 8th-9th centuries: evidence which at present finds no equal, at least in terms of quantity, in the whole of Northern Italy. This fact should not surprise us, considering what we know of Comacchio in the 8th-9th centuries, but it must at least make us reconsider some rather hasty interpretations of the kind of products that were traded by the *habitatores Comaclo*. Not only salt, then, but also oil (which cannot have been made from the few olive groves recorded on the Pomposa island and the hills of Romagna, but rather must have arrived from southern Italy and/or the Orient), and perhaps also fish sauce (*garum*).

The excavation carried out in the location of the village of San Francesco in the second half of the Nineties, during a division of the area into lots, has provided an archaeological picture of great interest, although it has remained unpublished all these years. Along the trenches a series of aligned posts emerged, with, in some cases, wooden boards in a state of perfect conservation (Fig. 08). The materials found in the archaeological deposits contemporary with these structures leave little doubt that these are the remains of landing stages, once again dating to the 8th and 9th centuries. The diverse positioning of these landing stages, located in an area of some hundreds of square metres (225.00 sq m), indicates that they were positioned on a series of canals. This excavation, which lends further plausibility to the remains of pilings found in the Thirties in the same area (Patitucci 1986), has brought to light, although in fragmentary manner, the remains of one of the harbour areas of this place in the Early Middle Ages: a sensational discovery which, unfortunately, up to now has not enjoyed the attention it deserved.

Ferrara

Also with regard to Ferrara there are no data in agreement between the traditional date of its founding (the beginning of the 7th century) and the archaeological records available up to now. Unlike Comacchio, Ferrara has been much explored over the last twenty years, since the early Eighties. Research operations, however, have remained (with a few exceptions) rather far from the areas in which primitive settlements are thought to have been located (the *castrum* on the north bank of the ancient course of the Po) (Fig. 09) (Bocchi 1974 and 1976; Uggeri Patitucci 1974) and San Giorgio, on the south bank (a diocese). In any case, at present there are no indications of sites or material remains from the 7th - 8th centuries and a wall thought to be that of the Byzantine *castrum* is probably a Late Medieval construction (Brogiolo – Gelichi 1986, pp. 49-62).

Furthermore, written sources that mention Ferrara do not go back beyond the 8th century; besides this, the *castrum* is spoken of only from the 10th century onwards; from the 9th, with an ambivalence that tells much about the institutional instability of the seat, a bishop of Ferrara is mentioned.

The fascinating hypothesis of a city that develops in linear form along the river must not necessarily be abandoned, however. The actual location of plots of land along the ancient course of the Po recalls the same kind of division and development that we find in Venice and in Cittanova (which we will discuss later). It is the chronological phases, perhaps, which are at variance with what is generally believed to be so.

In archaeological terms, Ferrara appears to be, in every respect, a flourishing centre between the 10th and 11th centuries, as is shown by the stratifications found and excavated up to now, full of pottery imported from the Byzantine region and amphorae from southern Italy (Puglia) and the Western Mediterranean area. It is likely, therefore, that the Early Medieval origins constitute very little. In some respects the city seems to inherit the role of Comacchio as a bridgehead towards trade with the Po valley area, but within a framework of profoundly changed political and economic situations

Cittanova Eracliana (Diego Calaon)

In historiographic tradition the founding of Cittanova is doubly linked to the destruction of the Roman centre of *Opitergium*, in 639 by the Longobards, and the decision of the Emperor Heraclius who, through Isacio the exarch, recompensed the Opertgian refugees by the founding of a new town which was soon to become the diocese of Oderzo (Cessi 1932).

The new town, known also as *Civitas Nova Eracliana*, was set in a lagoon type environment. The paleo-environmental information is entirely relevant and, indeed, if the archaeological area today persists as a flat agricultural panorama, the result of massive land reclaim in the early twentieth century (Fassetta 1977), the study of numerous corings indicates an unstable river environment, highly variable, with a rapid alternation of fresh and salt waters (Blake et al. 1988). The settled sandy mounts, little above the sea level, are distinctly ‘sandbank’ type areas.

The explanation of some very clear traces visible in a famous aerial photograph of 1977, led to the idea, at a certain point, that perhaps it would be possible to find, just below the level of the land, the remains of a great city organized along the riverside and characterized by a dense network of canals and viable roads (Tozzi-Harari 1984). Subsequent excavations showed that these signs are, in fact, linked to operations of controlling the waters for purposes of creating “reclaimed” areas free from water, most likely for agricultural purposes (Salvatori 1989a) (Fig. 10).

The shift of attention from an urban context of Imperial foundation, of which confirmed monumental archaeological traces are reduced to the presence of a baptistery, to an agricultural, riverside context, seems to be of notable significance: the settlements along the canal, from Late Antiquity – at least from the 3rd – 4th centuries onwards – are distinctly areas provided with land fit for cultivation and, at the same time, areas looking onto the river with a series of wooden riverbank structures and landing stages far from sporadic, which suggest an area of “emporium”.

The research developed from the analysis of the archaeological records of the published data of the different excavation and research campaigns held in the area of Cittanova from the second half of last century. With the use of single GIS platform it has been possible to cross-reference the paleo-environmental information with the data of the settlement and view them inside a DTM (Digital Terrain Model) that should represent as closely as possible the original hydrographical and altimetrical situation of the settled area and its agricultural context.

From the chronological point of view and on a long diachronic view, it is possible to highlight how the area has been interested since the 13th century b.C. by a Recent Bronze settlement, known through surveys (Salvatori 1989b), which is to be found on a river mounts north-east from the area of the episcopate of the medieval town.

Traces of a strong continuity of settlement are found for the classic age (Borghero-Marining 1989), when this area was characterized by a lagoon-like landscape, not far from the coastline. Even if we don’t have any data from stratigraphic excavations, it is possible to describe this settlement as a series of rural settlements dating to the Imperial Age, distributed along a river, navigable, that links the external sea with the lagoon and moving towards the interior, allows to reach the roman centres of Altinum and Opitergium.

These structures, different for typology and size, can be identified partially with rural villas, with mosaics *tesserae* and decorative architectonic elements, and partially with other rural buildings not better identifiable. It is sure that the economy of this kind of settlement is a “resource” economy, where aside the agricultural practices of a semi-lagoon settlement great importance was given to the activities of exploitation of the lagoon itself (fishing and salt production mainly) (Fig. 11).

A certain number of people was living in the area: this is widely highlighted by several necropolis found in the 20th century (Ghirardini 1904).

An interesting data is obtained comparing the number of settlements known for the 2nd century AD with those of the 4th century AD: we see a clear diminishing in the number of settlements, that goes from 7-10 sites to 2-3 sites. This phenomenon, that can be interpreted considering the changes in late-roman agricultural practices that seem to be applicable at least partially for the “*Venetia*”, can lead to the hypothesis of a growth of the size and number of

properties, which become similar to *latifundium*, damaging the small and medium agricultural properties (De Franceschini 1998, Busana 2002).

The foundation of Cittanova has to be framed within this context.

The monumental archaeological evidences that can be referred to the foundation of the town are the structures found in the 50's during the land reclaim operations. In a dig lead by Fassetta in 1954, the side walls of a baptismal building have been found, along with walls of other buildings, of which we can infer at least two phases from the maps drawn in that occasion but whose original function is uncertain. A ichnographic reading of these buildings (Dorigo 1994), of which we have an aerial photo dated 1954, lead to their interpretation as an hypothetical church. It is, certainly, a religious district that can most probably be identified with the episcopate of Civitas Nova Eracliana of the end of 7th century AD.

Basing on these interpretations of the 80's it has been imagined that the perpendicular lines still visible on the ground and visible in aerial photos could be referred to the urban development of the town along the canal that was flowing from the episcopate towards south and towards the coast. The hypothesis then was of the presence of a lagoon-like centre of Byzantine age, perfectly similar to the image of Venice some centuries later.

Probably the disappointment for the "missed discovery" of the town along the canal, confirmed by the archaeological researches of the 80's has not permitted yet a detailed reading of the data from surveys and archaeological trenches realized along the waterfront of the ancient canal of Cittanova.

In fact, if the dark lines visible in the aerial photo do not correspond to roads and canals of a town of 7th and 8th century, but to agricultural water disposal canals from the 4th century onwards, it is possible to describe their continuity of use at least for the beginning of Early Middle Ages.

The distributive analysis of the materials from surveys permitted to reach important conclusions:

- The area along the canal witnesses a settlement continuity from imperial age to Early Middle Ages.
- It is possible to identify some area of greater concentration of roman bricks that witness the topographical distribution of the rural buildings of roman age.
- The different presence inside the field of diagnostic materials, like mosaics *tesserae*, permits to distinguish areas with villas from areas with buildings for the exploitation of the resources.
- The concentration of diagnostic materials (recognized precisely during the study) for the early Middle Ages, like soapstone, do not correspond to the area of greater concentration of roman bricks (Fig. 12).
- The settlement, both late-antique and later, was characterized by many structural elements in perishable material (wood), as highlighted by the study of the water disposal canals.
- The buildings were distributed along the canal and had, for the early medieval phase, a series of wooden docks on the waterfront of the canal itself, that evidently was the main communication way.

It is possible, moreover, to hypotise that during the study of the materials from the surveys not every finding referring to the 7th and 8th century has been recognized properly. The revision of the published materials – even if not complete – permits to identify the early medieval phases as the more representative of the entire area.

The fact that with these phases we have associations of dispersed building material can be explained with the presence of wooden buildings. Not easily identifiable on the surface, especially in an area heavily interest by later ploughing operation.

Concluding, the area of Cittanova can be described as a religious centre, seat of a bishop, from which a settled area is dependent. This area lays along a canal and is characterized by a double economy, linked on one side on the agricultural use of the terrains around the lagoon and on the

other side on to the economical and commercial possibilities offered by the important way of communication (the canal itself) inside a broader system of communication inside the lagoon, that relates the Adriatic area with the interior of the Po valley.

The Venetian Lagoon area

The Venetian Lagoon area would deserve a separate account, impossible in these circumstances. We will limit ourselves to some very general evaluations regarding archaeological contributions to the knowledge we have concerning the so-called question of origins.

Various archaeologists have worked on this subject in the past, but the most thorough, most interesting observations have been made by Polish researchers, who have excavated in the lagoon since 1960-61; first at Torcello (Leciejewicz, Tabaczyńska, Tabaczyński 1977 and Leciejewicz 2000a-b, 2002), then Murano. However, their operations were able to draw upon a very limited amount of information, deriving from few excavation experiments and almost all from a single site (Torcello) (Fig. 13).

In later times, other researchers have tackled this issue, also from an archaeological perspective, with the aim of retracing a presumed Roman history of the lagoon settlement. Many traces of that period have been indicated, even to the point of affirming that in Roman times, the lagoon was not only a permanently inhabited but was also cultivated (Dorigo 1983).

On cooler, critical examination these data are of little significance; there are very few findings which record unequivocally phases of Roman occupation. That the lagoon was inhabited there is no doubt; but whether there was or not a permanent settlement and what it consisted of, is difficult to say.

This interest in the ancient history of the Venetians has put later centuries in the shade, those in which the lagoon settlements were formed and in which an initial hierarchy was created following the transfer of the Ducal seat to Rivoalto in the early 9th century. Concerning these centuries, in fact, we know very little from an archaeological perspective; the only organized data are still those of the Torcello excavations of the early Sixties. This is disappointing, but the reasons do not only concern the quality and nature of the archaeological source; they also depend upon a mistaken strategy in the archaeological approach; or rather, the absence of any strategy at all.

Nevertheless, in recent years some operations have provided noteworthy contributions, as, for example, the paleo-environmental research of Albert Ammerman (Ammerman – McClennen 2001). Excavations at Torcello, San Francesco del Deserto (De Min 2000a-b) and Olivolo (Tuzzato 1991, 1994 and Tuzzato *et alii* 1993) have revealed important phases of the 5th and 7th centuries (Fig. 14). If we know little of the 8th and 9th centuries, we have something more to say regarding Late Antiquity.

The first interesting piece of information is that the environmental changes of the late 4th – early 5th century linked to hydro-geological damage would seem to coincide with the first real permanent settlement in the lagoon: this can be seen at Torcello, Olivolo and San Francesco del Deserto in the construction of embankments, roads, buildings with brickwork molding. Furthermore, it is from this moment onwards that we find imported materials (ARS and amphorae: Grandi *in print*; Toniolo *in print*) which mark the lagoon stratifications uninterruptedly throughout the whole of the 7th century. This could mean that the lagoon inhabitants, between the 5th and 7th centuries were not merely simple, saltwater fishermen (as indeed is also understood from the famous letter of Cassiodorus (*Epistulae Variarum*, XII, 24: 536-537), but probably also merchants; and that the lagoon, in particular the northern part, was beginning to play an important role in trade (linked to the transfer of the court to Ravenna and the decline of Aquileia). A kind of bridgehead of the Altino site which, moreover, in this period seems to have been far from in decline (Tirelli 1995; Asolati 1993-95).

5. *New towns in North-Eastern Italy: a preliminary comparison*

On the basis of archaeological data available to us at present it is possible to offer an initial evaluation concerning two aspects of the subject: that of potential and that of characteristics.

5.1. *The potential of archaeology.*

Of the four places under examination, only one, Cittanova, was abandoned (or partially abandoned) in the Early Middle Ages; other areas of the lagoon also vanished in that period (like Torcello, for example, or Equilo), leaving only fully Medieval evidence of church buildings (on Equilo: Dorigo 1994). The other places, however, have continued to exist: it is clear that the kind of archaeology we can apply is different, in the sense that only in the case of Cittanova is it possible to plan excavations and research over a wide area of land. In the other towns archaeology must take account of the historical construction and the needs of the existing towns: this does not mean renouncing the possibility of planning archaeology for these places also, it means doing it in a different way.

Cittanova is the site most recently excavated with rather advanced diagnostic equipment (Blake *et alii* 1988 and Salvatori 1989, 1990 and 1992). The results, however, have not lived up to expectations. This is rather strange and perhaps may be due to a falling off of interest arising from a disappointment: those working on this project were perhaps expecting to find a Pompeii of the Early Middle Ages and from this point of view they have undoubtedly been disappointed. A reconsideration of the published archaeological data, however, is far from insignificant. Rather than being a fossilized Venice, Cittanova may represent, at an embryonic stage, the defining characteristics, on a structural and organizational level, of these new river or lagoon settlements. The resulting model is that of a settlement organized around a hub where the institutional bodies are gathered (the bishop's seat, the ducal seat), with brick buildings; and a loosely-knit inhabited area consisting very likely of wooden buildings on plots of cultivated land, with canalway access.

A similar account is perhaps possible for many of the other settlements that vanished from the Venetian lagoon. In any case, from this perspective, the archaeology of Torcello remains a great lost opportunity: it is enough to locate the explored areas on a map to realise that the investigations carried out in 1960-61 were opened near or adjacent to the churches. Today we know much more about the baptistery, Santa Maria Assunta and Santa Fosca, but still very little about the social, economic and community characteristics of that *emporion mega*. If the archaeological investment continues to be directed towards the excavation and study of the church buildings, therefore, it will be very difficult for us to understand the nature and quality of these Early Medieval settlements.

The archaeology of the places that still exist is a different issue; but here also there is no doubt that research has been done rather fortuitously. Some of these places have still been explored very little and only occasionally, such as Comacchio, despite the glimpse of its extraordinary potential. Other cities, however, like Ferrara and Venice, have been greatly excavated in recent years, with high-level scientific equipment. The case of Venice is particularly interesting to analyse. Here a shift has been made from an absence of archaeology or from rescue archaeology, to extensive archaeology (in the sense that each small operation is now controlled and monitored), without this having brought substantial improvements to our knowledge (Fig. 15). One reason is the non-circulation of information; it is enough to compare the number of excavations published and how they have been published, to realise this. However, it is also interesting to note where excavations have been carried out; if we locate them, in fact, we realise that very few lie within the areas thought to be potential settlements between the 8th and 10th centuries (Rialto and Olivolo) (Fig. 16). Even within the settlement areas the positioning of investigations is far from irrelevant. Some time ago it was seen as extraordinary that an excavation on the island of Olivolo (a bishopric of the 8th century) revealed important stratifications of the 5th – 7th centuries but virtually nothing beyond the 7th century. In fact, this should not really surprise us. If we superimpose a series of

topographic data we realise that the area chosen for the excavation lies within an area that towards the beginning of the 8th century was absorbed into the church possessions. In this case the most interesting deposits must be sought elsewhere, as we have shown in this map of the envisaged evaluation of archaeological resources. Indiscriminate archaeology, therefore, may not achieve good results, besides being a considerable expense for the community.

5.2. *The characteristics of the archaeological contexts*

So what do we wish to know about these places? That is, what kind of archaeology is needed to enable the source material to give us further, and better, understanding of the Early Middle Ages? I believe the main objectives we must set ourselves are those of defining the extension of these settlements and also their structural features (the type of houses, the materials used) and the functional organization of places; then it will be interesting to assess aspects of ‘material culture’, that is, potential social and economic markers.

Concerning the extension, some hypotheses may already be made; these are based upon written sources (as in the case of the Rialto in the 9th and 10th centuries: Ammerman 2003), or else on the compilation of specific archaeological data (as that of Comacchio, for example). The clearest and most plausible idea remains that of the Cittanova site; but is this model transferable to the other sites?

With regard to the structure and organization of the settlement, the archaeological data are still scarce, if not non-existent. The excavated houses are still few and date back to Late Antiquity (as in Torcello) or between the 10th and 12th centuries (as in Ferrara). A common feature of these places is their position on a waterway (Fig. 17). In the case of Cittanova the impression given is that former agricultural plots constituted the basis for the arrangement of new dwellings. A similar development is plausible also for Rialto and perhaps for Ferrara. We know rather more about the harbours. In Comacchio, although in a partial, fragmentary way, excavation has been made of, perhaps, the most important harbour yet known of in Northern Italy. Finally, regarding handcraft works, these are at present only found in the Venetian lagoon (furnaces for glassmaking in Torcello in the 9th century).

Lastly, the characteristics of ‘material culture’. Up to now economic markers for these periods have been seen only as coins or, indirectly, investments made in the construction of church buildings. These methods have their use, even though they are often based on non-archaeological records (and often unreliable: in this slide we see the revision of information on the foundations of the Venetian churches made by McCormick on the basis of Dorigo: McCormick 2001). However, attention has been focusing recently on the features of some materials that seem to be typical of the 8th-9th centuries: amphorae, found well beyond the 7th century (Toniolo *in print*: from Venetian lagoon area); some unglazed pottery with combed decoration, also dating back to the 7th-8th centuries and which at present may be compared with central-Italic products; lastly, single-fired glazed ware, some perhaps imported, others (from the 9th onwards) made in this area even though we do not know yet exactly where (Gelichi, Sbarra 2003). These products are recorded, in various quantities, in the places we have been discussing, with some differences, and the future will show whether the type of research developed in the individual areas is important and of the proper kind.

The overall picture which emerges, then, at the level of material records, may be at present fragmentary and thus rather disappointing; but it would be ungenerous to attribute to archaeology this scarce ability to inform us about the past, which we must attribute only to ourselves.

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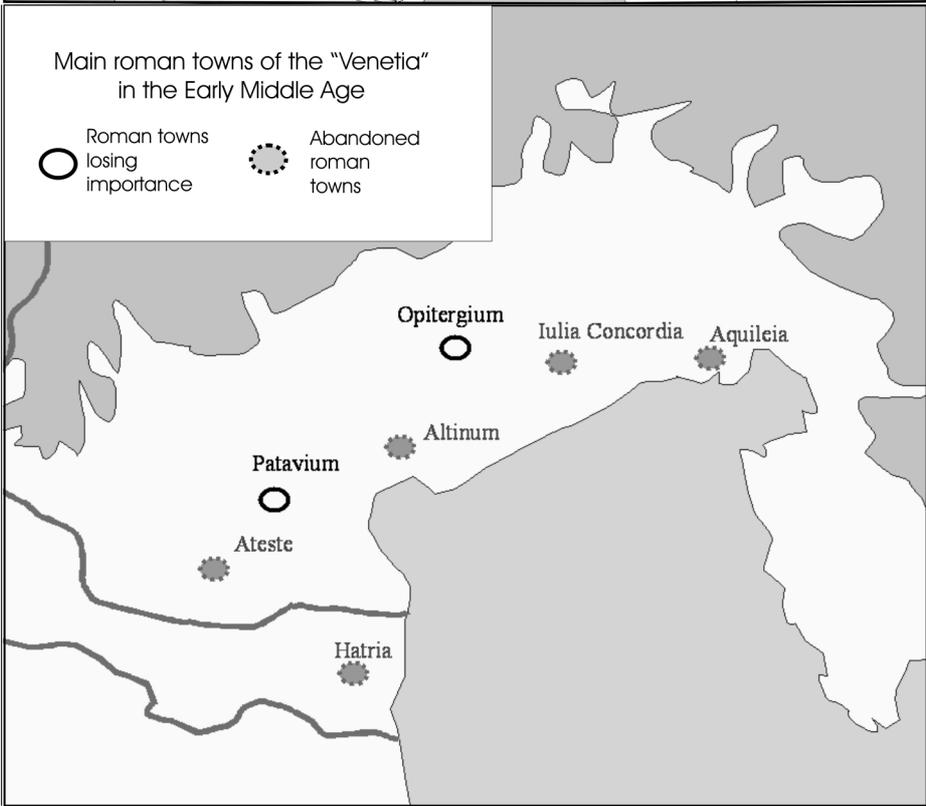
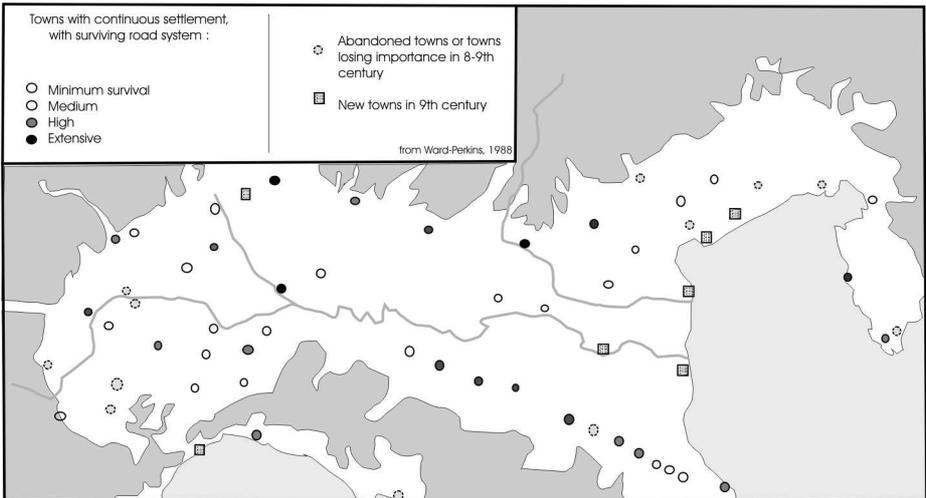
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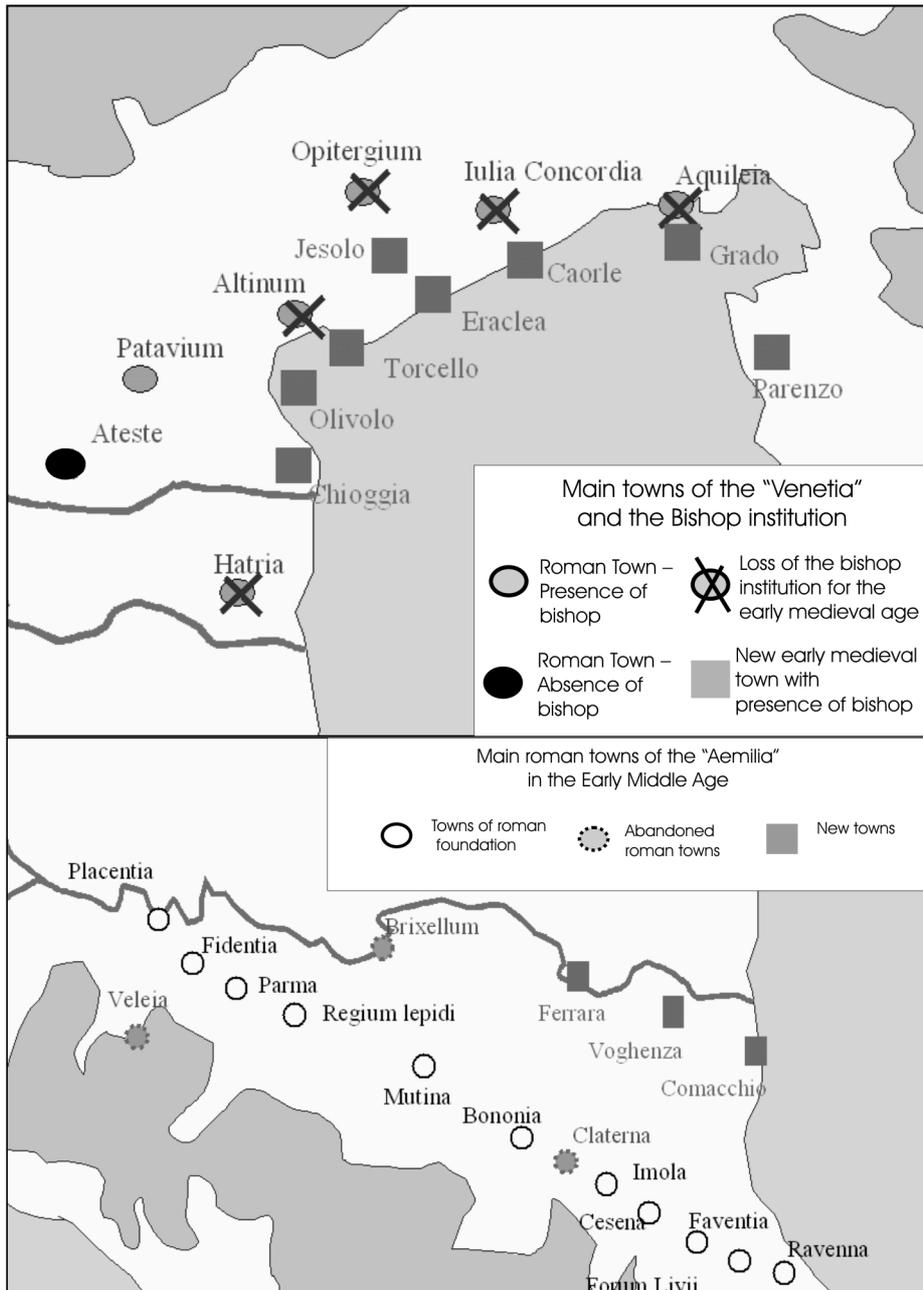
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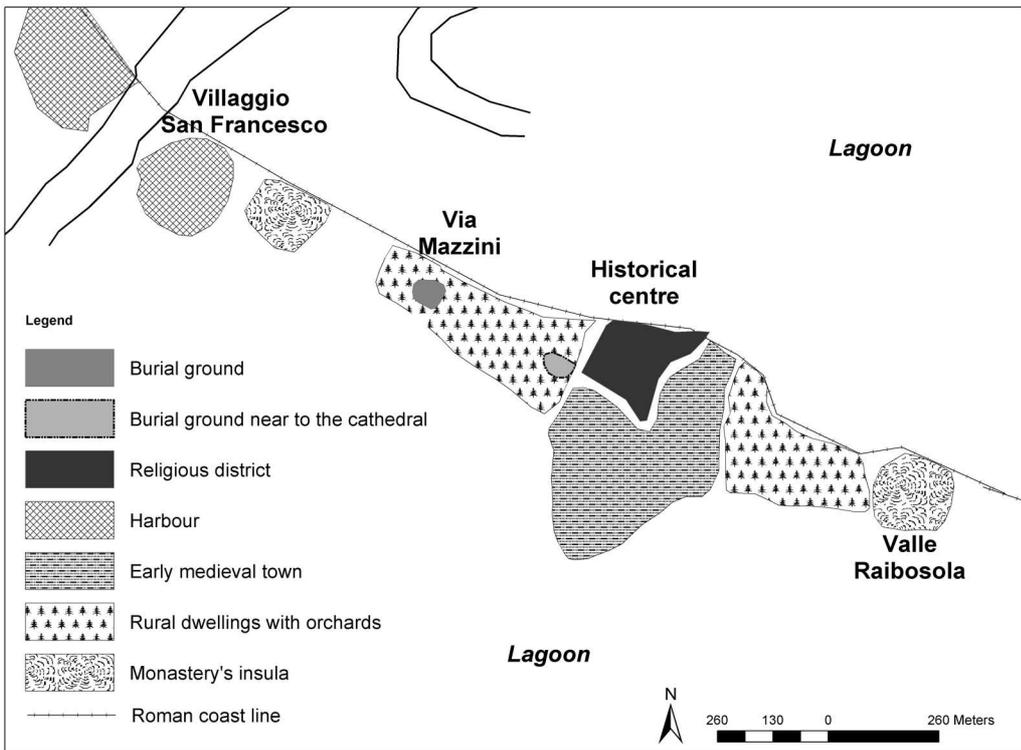
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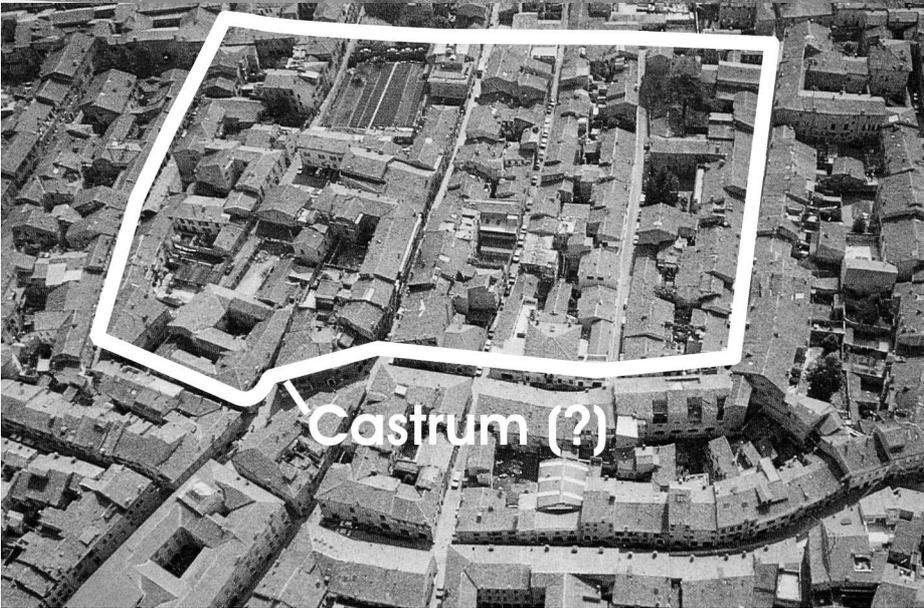




Giovanni Diacono, *Istoria Veneticorum*, beginning 11th century

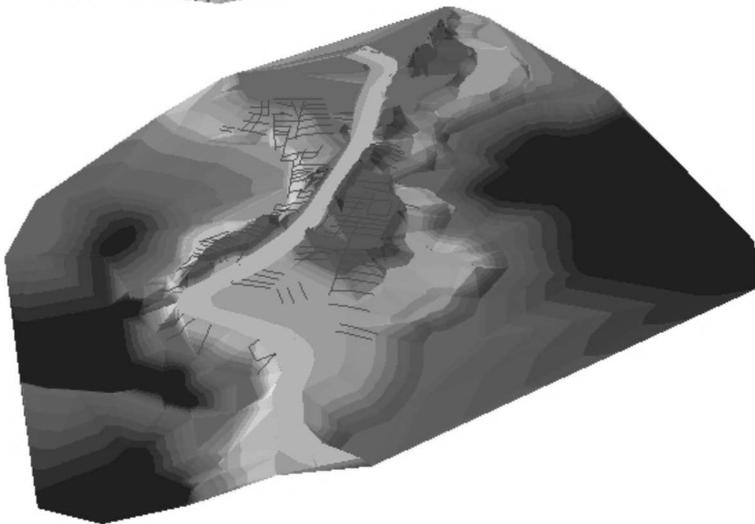
Term used	Early medieval towns
<i>Civitas</i>	Grado Cittanova Riatto
<i>Villa</i>	Comacchio
<i>Ecclesia</i>	Olivolo Torcello Equilo
<i>Castrum</i>	Carole Comacchio Ferrara
<i>Insula</i>	Malamocco Torcello Olivolo
<i>Portus</i>	Equilo Grado







Cittanova: agricultural traces
and digital terrain model



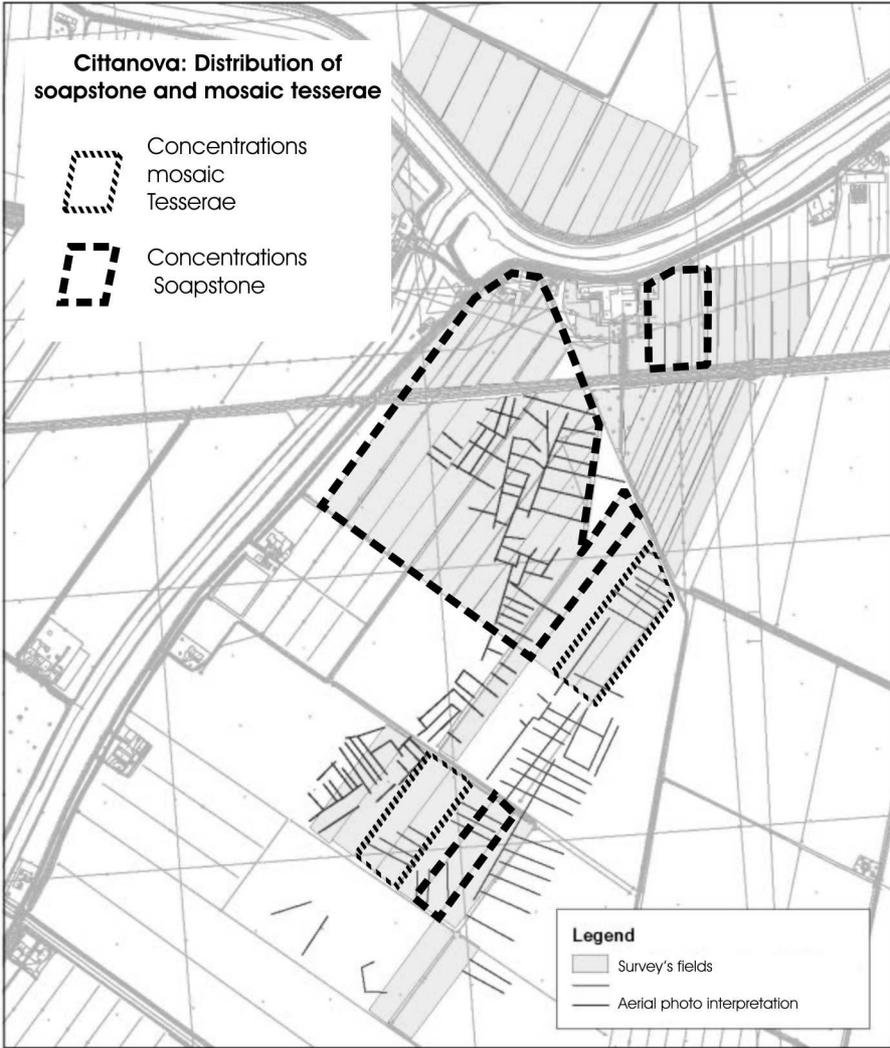
Cittanova: Distribution of soapstone and mosaic tesserae



Concentrations mosaic Tesserae



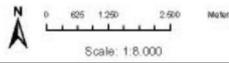
Concentrations Soapstone



Legend

- Survey's fields
- Aerial photo interpretation

SPLGIS - D. Calzon
Terre e Acque Tra Site e Livorno

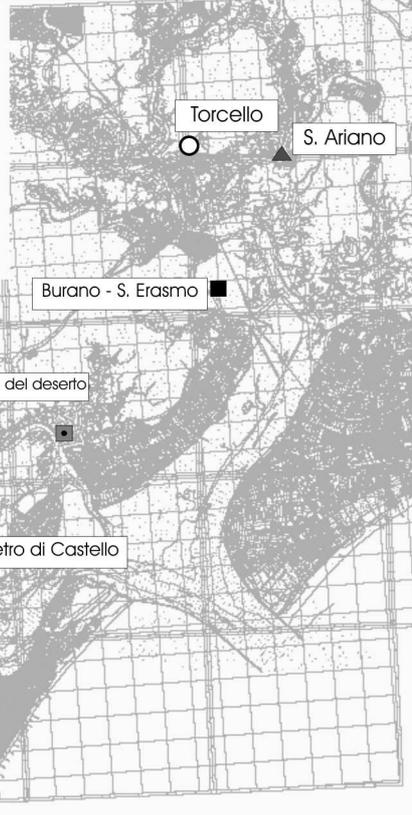




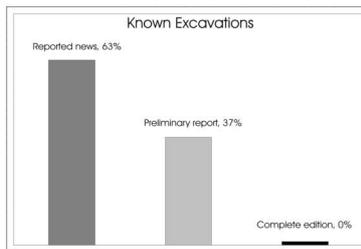
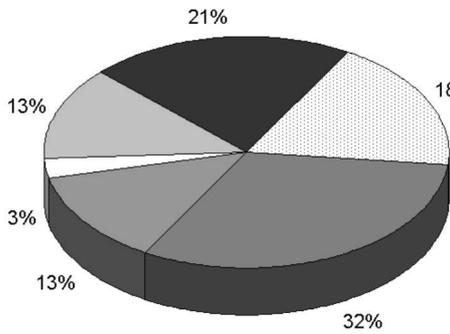
Sites with evidences of 7th century

Evidences of 7th century

- Foundation of church and baptismal building, houses, road
- Ditch
- ▲ Building, graves
- Road
- Brick building, waterfront
- Historical data without archaeological excavation



Excavations in Venice



- Waterfront
- Church/monastic archaeology
- Housing
- Production/trade
- Environmental Archaeology
- Other

