From the Late Antique City to the Early Medieval Town in Central and Northern Italy. Models and Narratives from Debates over the Last Thirty Years

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Abstract: The debate on the late-antique city and the Early Middle Ages that developed in Italy in the last thirty years has been the consequence of a different archaeological approach over time, but has produced some important interpretative models. In some cases these models have proved unsatisfactory, in others they have become stereotypes that are often applied mechanically and a priori, regardless of the characteristics of the stratifications investigated. A series of examples, which concern the main categories of cities documented in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (the surviving cities, the disappeared cities, the new foundations) can reveal the varied complexity of the solutions, highlighting the obvious tendency to simplify the models identified at the time. Between individual narratives and generalizations, it indicates the need to overcome the biological concept of the history of the city and is invited to introduce the most flexible concept of life cycles (of a place, rather than a city). In doing so, however, it is suggested to broaden the spectrum of available archaeological sources, giving more space, for example, to palaeo-environmental components.

Keywords: Late Antiquity, Early Medieval Ages, Italy, Towns

1. Towns in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Past to Current Studies

An analysis of the (ongoing) debate on late ancient/early medieval urbanism in central and northern Italy over the last thirty years is roughly like analysing the same theme on a national level (Christie, 2006, pp. 183-280) (Fig. 1). There has been plenty of research also in the south of the peninsula (e.g. Naples: Arthur, 2002; Otranto: Michaelides & Wilkinson, 1992; D'Andria & Whitehouse, 1992; and, more recently, Bari: Dapalo, Disantarosa & Nuzzo, 2015); however, it is still primarily the large-scale excavations in northern Italy in the 1980s and 1990s that have produced many of the generalising patterns and interpretations. These models have been collected in papers and published in the proceedings of congresses and seminars (for example: Francovich & Noyé, 1994; Augenti, 2006) and, in particular, have seen articulation in two monographs published by myself and Gian Pietro Brogiolo in 1998 and, more recently, by Brogiolo in 2011. In the first

book, moreover, two main interpretative models formulated in that years (above all deriving from the excavations in Brescia and Verona) are discussed (Brogiolo & Gelichi, 1998, pp. 29-37, with bibiography) - models that became opposing interpretative paradigms, which using the same archaeological data delineated two different ways to interpret the transition (Continuitists vs Catastrophists) (for a critical approach to this debate see Ward Perkins, 1997).

In this debate, essentially two types of towns have been analysed: ancient towns that endured (from Roman or even pre-Roman times) into medieval and modern times; and those that became abandoned and so no longer correspond to a modern town or city. These two categories of cities have, of course, been studied using different archaeological approaches. The first category (the surviving towns) has benefitted substantially from recent developments in urban archaeology – that is, archaeology within surviving towns and cities. As elsewhere, many Italian cities were damaged during the Second World War and saw rebuilding shortly afterwards, in the 1950s and 1960s, but in those years work was undertaken without much attention paid to the archaeological value – and depth – of the deposits beneath and exposed in the rebuilding; similar losses – in between rare recognition of important finds – occurred across Europe, such as in England (see Schofiels & Vince, 1994, pp. 1-12).

A major difference came in the 1970s. This is when planned stratigraphic urban excavations began, replacing the less demanding archaeological checks during construction works (Gelichi, 1999). Such excavations generated a mass of new data, mainly regarding structures and artefacts, sometimes burials, and revealed for the first time the multi-layering of urban activity. Only now – often, but not everywhere – was the medieval heritage of these sites starting to be recorded. A new debate started as a result, especially in northern Italy, where some sizeable and extended excavation projects took place. The new debate had the merit of shifting attention from the written sources to the material sources and to looking to the mechanics and minutiae of urban life; all this prompted the reformulating of some of the older interpretative paradigms.

Perhaps surprisingly, deserted towns, by contrast, have enjoyed less fortune. Precisely because they no longer exist as modern towns, their archaeology has almost always been the result of a planned – i.e. research-led – archaeology. Generally speaking, however, the main purpose of such archaeology was to uncover the ancient – i.e. classical – city; as a result, sadly in many cases, this has caused the (near) total erasure of late antique, post-classical and medieval deposits. Some exceptions exist, with projects (once again from the 1970s) seeking also to analyse the fates of these sites during Late Antiquity and even the Middle Ages, with the processes of abandonment considered of historical interest. Thus, a change in project design can be recognised in work conducted at the town of Luni (ancient *Luna*) in south-eastern Liguria (Fig. 1), where notable early medieval contexts began to appear, such as burials, wells and timber houses,
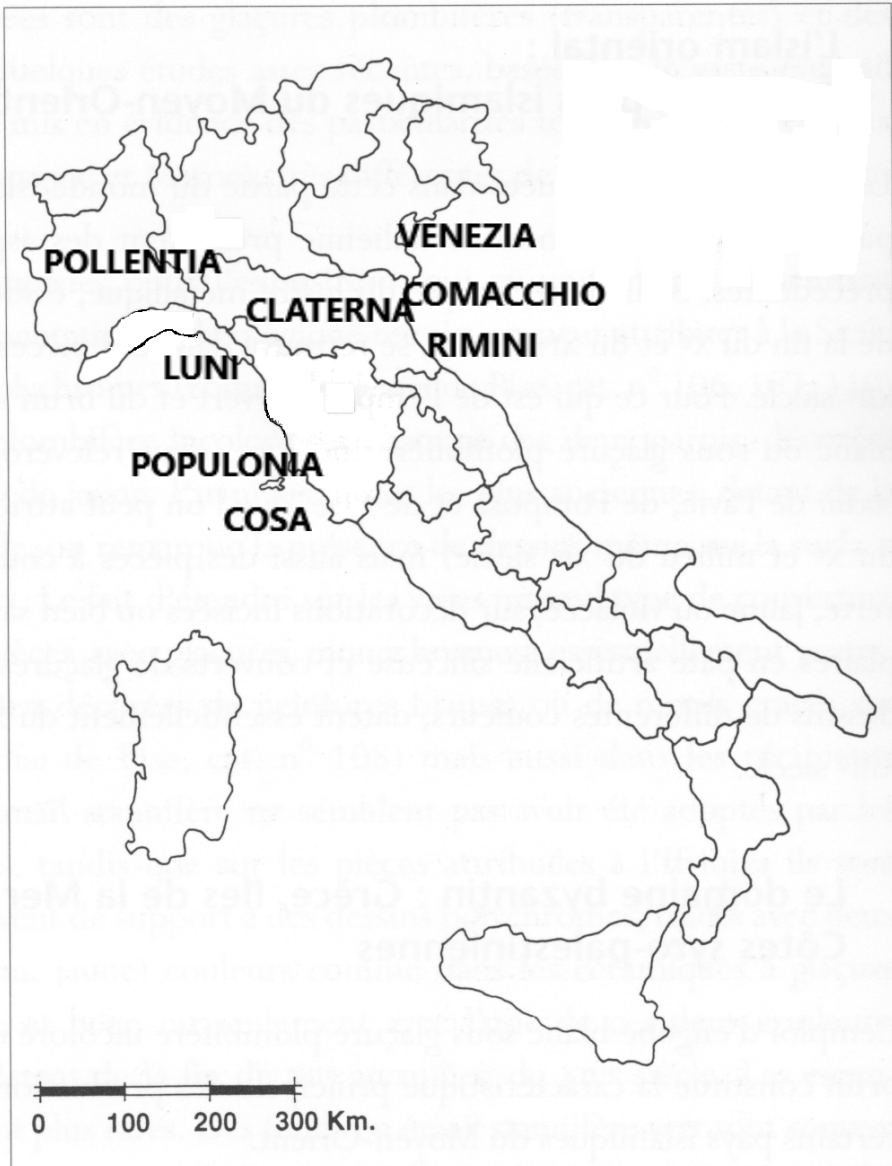
Fig. 1. Italy and the main towns discussed in the text.

these often cut into classical deposits, as well as the prominent remains of the cathedral church (Ward Perkins, 1977, 1978 and 1981; Lusuardi Siena, 1976; and, more recently, Durante, 2010) (Fig. 2). Similarly, the recent excavations by

the American Academy of Rome in *Cosa*, in southern Tuscany, have produced significant data related to the city's decline and defensive change from the middle Empire (Fentress, 2004) (Figs. 1 and 3). In Piedmont in north-west Italy, the abandoned town of *Pollentia* has been the subject of important research that has likewise highlighted the longer term evolution of the settlement (Micheletto, 2004 and 2006). Finally, and more recently, a project on the abandoned town of *Claterna* in Emilia-Romagna has paid special attention to the late-classical phases (Ortalli, 1996 and 2003; Desantis, Molinari & Negrelli, 2010) (Figs. 4-5). Nevertheless, despite these and a few other examples/exceptions, it can be claimed that the archaeology of abandoned Roman towns is still lacking in quality.

Post-Roman towns were for long less attractive to researchers. The phenomenon of the founding of new towns was not unknown in the Middle Ages, but generally were of modest significance. And yet one of these new foundations was Venice, whose emergence reflected a particular demo-settlement vitality along the entire north Adriatic coast. We will return to this site and context later.

Arguably, in the current situation there has not been any substantial change in strategy: active towns and cities continue to receive the most interest and investigation – for the obvious reasons of ongoing (albeit sometimes infrequent) urban redevelopment – but intensive excavation does not always correspond to a prompt and full publication of the findings of such research; this means that much of what has been done is not scientifically accessible and thus usable.

Fig. 2. Luni (La Spezia), aerial photo, focussed on the partially exposed ancient forum.
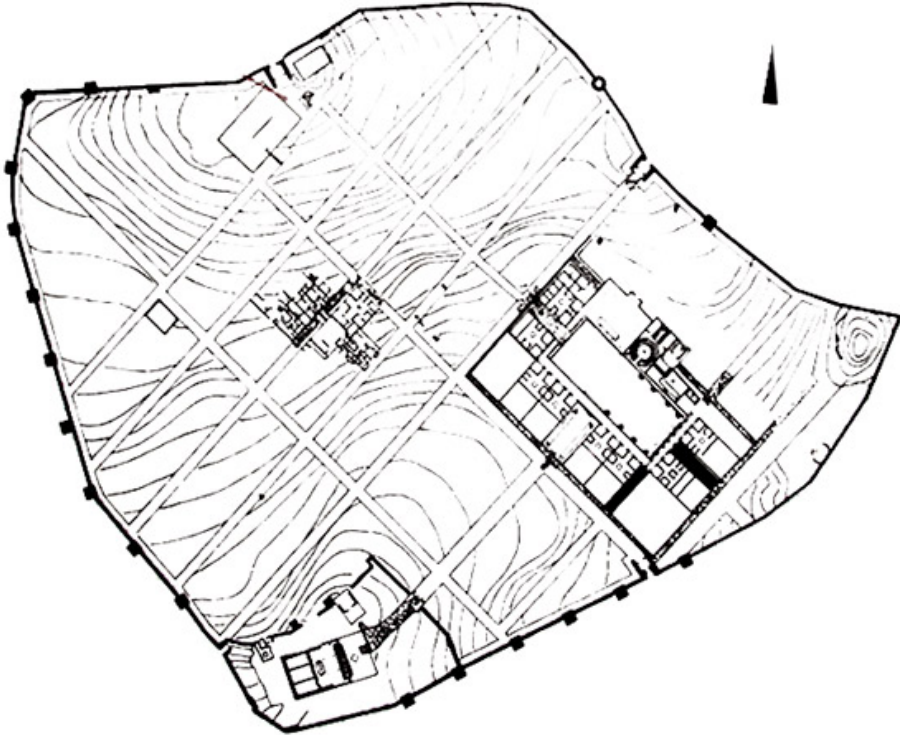
Fig. 3. Cosa (GR), plan of the Roman town.

In this paper I would like to discuss the state of the research very briefly and, above all, to indicate the strengths and weaknesses of the current epistemological models used to study the phenomenon of early-medieval urbanism.

2. Models?

Research into the post-ancient city has, however, generated some models based on archaeological evidence. In brief, two key aspects have emerged with great clarity. The first is that any distinction between the ancient city and the early medieval one is a simplification: the late antique town should be recognised as a separate entity, with its own evidence types and identity, worthy of independent scrutiny. Moreover, the early medieval town was not always the product of a subtraction, i.e. a removal of much of the classical form; it, too, could sometimes adopt original solutions. Certainly it is not scientifically correct or even useful for researchers to reconstruct its physiognomy by comparing it to the Roman past;
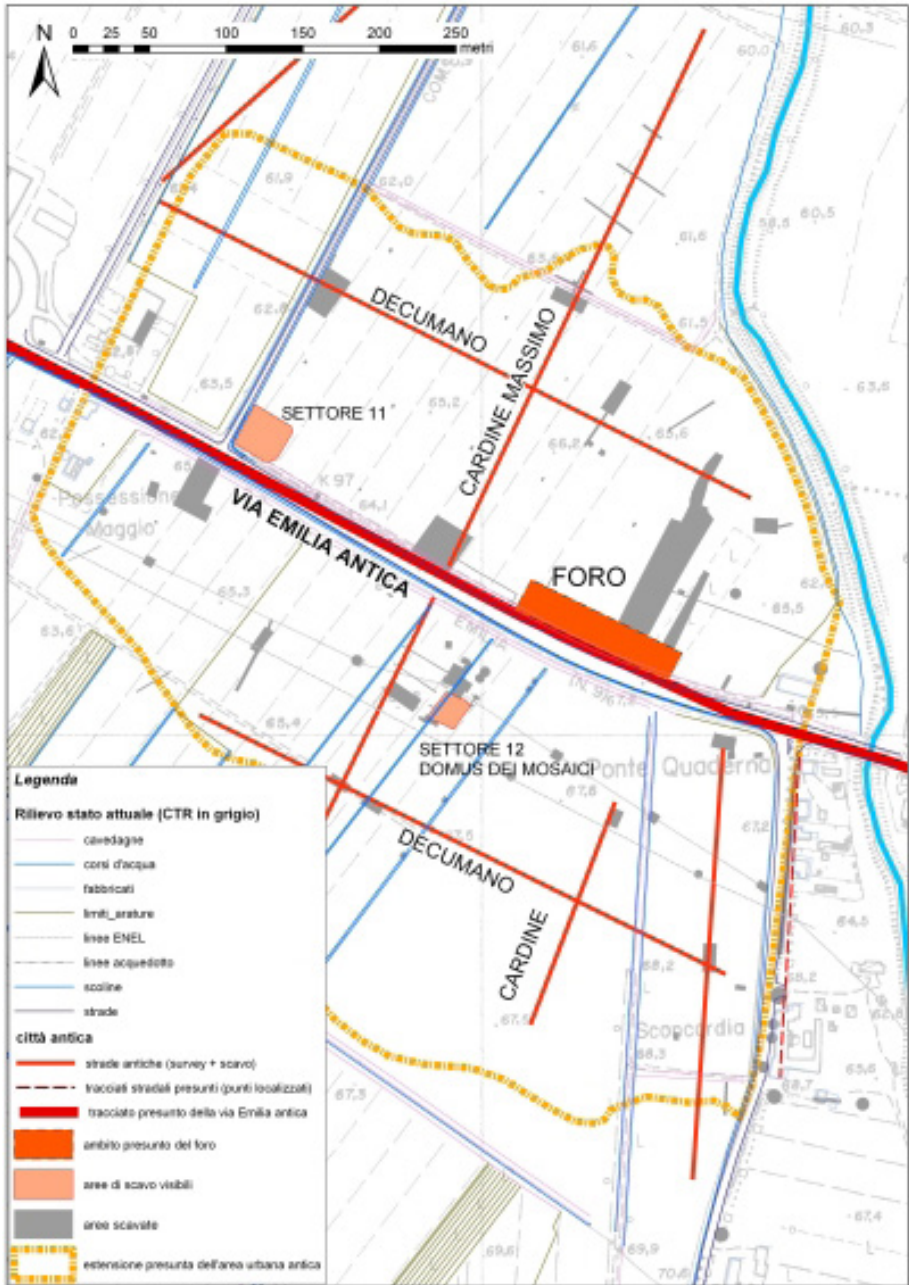
Fig. 4. Claterna (BO), plan of the Roman town.

Fig. 5. Claterna (BO), aerial photo.

early medieval urbanism should be studied first and, foremost, as a subject in its own right, without recourse to classical 'expectations'.

Secondly, archaeological research has helped focus on some paradigms, which can be used to reformulate our idea of the urban form and role and to explain the causes of its transformation; these causes can be conjunctural or structural. Among the conjunctural causes, the devastating impact of the 'barbarian' invasions and takeovers has come to be reduced: this is not to deny their existence, but to make these play a different role. Climate change and hydro-geological disasters meanwhile play less of a role in the narrative, although recent – and some quite notable – scientific findings and analyses have elevated some aspects, such as likely climate change between the fifth and seventh centuries; however, caution is needed in seeking to link it climate change directly to the collapse of the ancient world and urban transformation.

Social changes are recognised as having had a strong impact, particularly the dissolution of the imperial civic structure and apparatus, and the failing of private evergetism. Economic factors are also relevant: these are linked to fragmentation, changes in taxation and a concentration of land ownership.

Finally, we must consider cultural changes, such as the advent of Christianity and all its consequences. The spread of this new religion is often used to explain substantial changes in the topographical structuring of cities, with many scholars applying – not always accurately – the concept of the 'Christianization of spaces' to both towns and local territories.

These (albeit legitimate) social/cultural explanations have quickly become as commonplace as the economic explanations just mentioned, but these must be re-assessed, especially as they essentially arose from processual theoretical approaches, in order to progress further in our understanding of post-classical urbanism.

3. Single narratives

We need also consider single narratives. The histories of some towns have developed not only within, but also outside, these paradigms; they have proved to be particularly performative and have introduced a certain complexity to the outcomes, making generalisations inadequate.

Examples can be found for all the categories noted above: those of the abandoned city; the 'surviving' city; and the new city. For example, in the case of deserted or 'lost' towns, recent archaeologies signify a diversity of sequences, both in terms of when they were abandoned, at what pace and how (Christie & Augenti, 2015). An analytical approach to the local territory, and not just to the city, means that we can now trace better the story and fate of Populonia, a town in ancient *Tuscia* (Bianchi & Gelichi, 2017) (Fig. 1): a highly important town under the Etruscans, Populonia was no longer classed as a town in the 1st century AD. By then trends in settlements had changed: the sparsely populated settlement became the norm (villas and farms), while ports, mining and other activities (e.g. fishing) continued to play an important role for the zone. Despite its limited form and scale, Populonia became a bishopric (a seat of a rural diocese) in the 5th century, probably linked, once again, to the exploitation and control of local resources (e.g. iron) and not simply due to the will of a spontaneous community of Christian people. Populonia would remain an episcopal see until the 9th century; in the same century, the Adobrandeschi family chose this place as the temporary seat of their comital power (Fig. 6). And so the story continues.

Even surviving centres–Roman towns that endured – show signs of internal development, where the paradigms do not always coincide with those already mentioned. For example, the excavation of a sizeable area within the historic centre of Rimini in Italy's ancient *Regio VIII* (Negrelli, 2006 and 2008) has provided evidence of a complex, articulated transformation that took place over a few centuries and which is hard to explain as mere simplification, reduction or impoverishment. In fact, the story of this urban sector is best unders tood when seen in the context of land ownership. Here, in the imperial Roman period,

the zone was occupied by a large aristocratic *domus* (perhaps belonging to a surgeon?) endowed with many fine floor mosaics. While this elite house was destroyed during the 3rd century, in the period between the 5th and 8th century (a span generally described as one of 'prolonged abandonment'), there was a flurry of construction activity, of structures with a range of different purposes. Most prominently, between the 5th and 6th centuries, the ancient *domus* was rebuilt according to the dictates of 'aulica' construction with new mosaic floors and brick construction. There was then a short period of inactivity and, later in the 6th century, at least part of this house area was taken over by a cemetery (Fig. 7). But this was no parasitic or spontaneous use; rather it was an organized move, as new parcels of land were specifically acquired for this purpose. It is more than likely that this phase coincides with a change in site ownership: in fact, the whole area became the property of the important monastery of St. Andrew and St. Thomas. Finally, during the 7th century, the cemeterial role was quitted and the zone once more became residential, albeit with a focus on the road with outbuildings built behind, constructed using poorer quality materials. Nevertheless, an important lead seal survives from this period, bearing the name
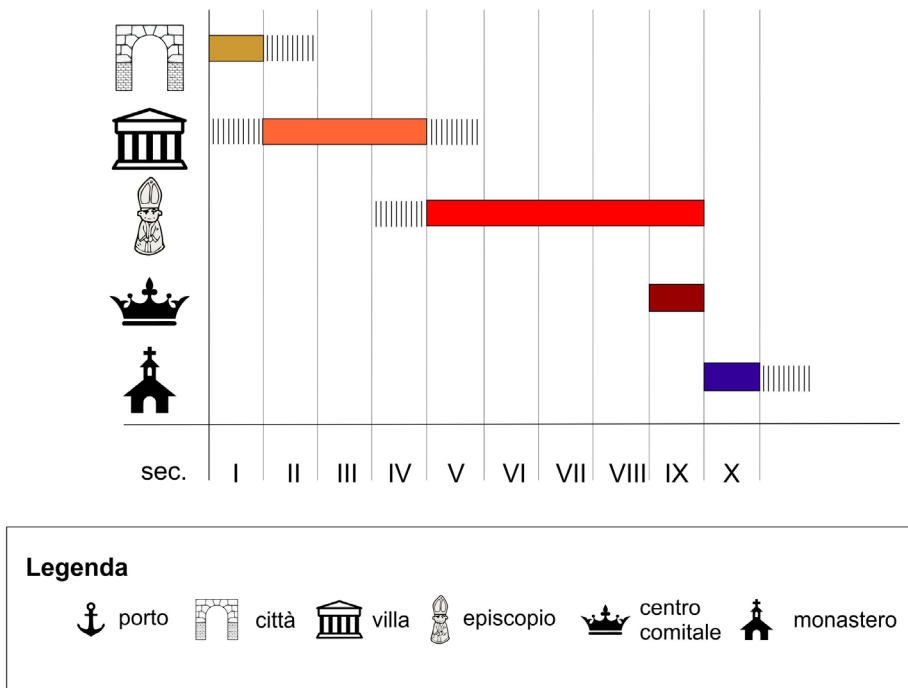

Fig. 6. Populonia (LI): the projected lifecycle of the place.

of *Iohannes*; this *Iohannes* might relate to the *Iohannes vicarius ariminensium numeri* who had the right to claim a *domocella* (small *domus*) at the monastery of St. Andrews and St. Thomas. The document in question dates back to the late 7th/early 8th century (AD 689-705).

However, the entire settlement process did not flow smoothly from rich Roman *domus* to rich late antique *domus*, followed by abandonment plus cemetery and then poor or 'functional' occupation. In other words, there was no irreversible decline in fortune: in fact, there were several abrupt changes, linked to ownership which, in this case at least, can be partially reconstructed through written documentation. And the case of Rimini should not be considered an exception, but does reflect to one of the many possible variables that a less distracted archaeology can reasonably try to recognise and interpret.

Finally, new towns are an equally valuable field of research. These are settlements established in previously uninhabited spaces, or where no true cities existed, meaning that any analysis of the process of colonisation is extremely useful. The cases of Comacchio (Fig. 8) and Venice, both foci of archaeological projects in recent years, are very instructive in this regard.

The birth of Venice can only be explained by being set in a broader context (Gelichi, 2015a and 2015b; Gelichi & Moine, 2012; and Gelichi, Ferri & Moine, 2017). Some stages in its history are clear-cut: thus, archaeological surveys clearly show that the lagoon saw settlement activity and was used economically in the Roman period (at least since the early Imperial era), although the area was overall sparsely populated; in the 5th-6th centuries, more centralised lagoon-based or oriented settlements developed; then rivalry between elites (secular and religious)

Fig. 7. Rimini: burials cut into the mosaic floors of the "*domus* del chirurgo".

Fig. 8. Comacchio (FE): a reconstruction view of the town during the Early Middle Ages.

was reflected in how sites were chosen and for what purpose. By the 9th century the duchy was established and, with it, Venice came into being. The beginning of this new period was inaugurated by an episode whose considerable impact on the later history of the lagoon requires some explanation: namely the transfer of the Duchy's headquarters to the Rialto archipelago, sited at the end of an old river delta and in what was clearly a strategic position for naval communication – in other words, near the '*bocca di porto*', at the access to the lagoon. This is probably why a station belonging to the *cursus publicus* was moved to the island of Olivolo (i.e. Rialto) in the first place (Gelichi, 2015a, pp. 72-78). Church authorities then gained control in the 7th century, turning the nascent Venice into the home port of the Byzantine fleet and its powerbase. The transfer of the headquarters of the new ducal power in the Rialto (early 9th century) had to be another decisive political step. It was destined to consolidate the centrality, with the already existing episcopal seat in Olivolo, of the Rialto archipelago towards the other settlements of the Venetian lagoon: a centrality not only geographical but also, and above all, political and social. Subsequent developments are, of course, equally interesting, but they are beyond the assumption of this intervention.

4. Future research

Can individual narratives such as these help us to create new, more applicable paradigms? Are they important anthropological models in themselves?

To date, the paradigms have been generally used to explain processes that analyse what we might term the 'biological life' of towns, from the perspective of their birth/ growth/ decline/ death or, where successful, persistence. Perhaps it would be more interesting to read these processes from the perspective of the lifecycle of a place. Thus, a city, before becoming a city, is a place, a geographical location, a physical space. A city statute might be only one of the legal formats given to a physical space assumed over time… and status may disappear, continue or even return.

The paradigms provided over the course of the last century to explain late antique and early medieval towns/urbanism have mainly focused on the topographical/urban aspects (namely what structures were built and where, how the spaces were settled and used, including churches and burials) and the material aspects (the types and forms of the roads, infrastructures and homes, the material debris). In essence, archaeology has long followed the historiographical debate, trying to provide answers to the following questions: Did cities survive? If they did, how/why so? What were they like? How far did they resemble or differ from ancient/ Roman cities? What were the foci of these places and who controlled them?

If, however, we consider the physical location (which just happens also to be the site of a town), we can develop some new, less typical approaches: for example, we might want to reconstruct more clearly the environment of the site (how the environment acted upon the site and how communities responded); we may consider the ecological aspects (the relationship between communities and the colonisation of places); and we could also analyse the local economy better and look at various aspects of society, of all levels, not just the elites.

All these approaches seem, I would argue, rather different from what we see in general archaeological research and, more specifically, in archaeological studies concerned with urban centres. However, two things are needed to alter our overall approach: the first concerns the *type* of archaeology we want to develop; the second concerns archaeological projects *per se*. We are in control of the former, in the sense that we often decide how best, archaeologically, to deal with a topic (and site). The second, however, concerns another key aspect of modern urbanism, namely the public management and use of our archaeological heritage, its accessibility and what strategies are available or desired to protect it. This second aspect does not depend on us, but on how a national state organises, legally and scientifically, the protection of its rich and varied urban heritage. But perhaps it is best to stop here and not write anything more on this matter, especially when it comes to Italy…

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