

ENCOUNTERS, EXCAVATIONS AND ARGOSIES

ESSAYS FOR RICHARD HODGES



EDITED BY

JOHN MORELAND, JOHN MITCHELL
AND BEA LEAL

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(Photo: Sarah Cocke)

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Bone plaque with hunting dog leaping over eye.
Butrint, Triconch Palace, c. AD 400. (© Butrint Foundation)

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The monastery of Anselm and Peter

The origins of Nonantola between Lombards and Carolingians

Sauro Gelichi

Introduction

The author of the *Catalogus abbatum nonantolorum* writes of Anselm, the first abbot of Nonantola, 'In primis is [sic] ipse —venerabilis Anselmus rexit ipsam abbatiam annis quinquaginta temporibus regum Aystulfi et Desiderii et Karoli Magni imperatoris (Bortolotti 1892: 141). The long abbacy of the founder of the monastery (more than fifty years: 752-804) is summed up in these few words, to which we must add references to his exile at Monte Cassino (during the reign of Desiderius) and his subsequent return to the monastery.

The second abbot in the list after Anselm is a certain Peter (Bortolotti 1892: 142-43) who ruled the monastery for a further 20 years (804-24/25). So, for a long period of time (from 752 to 824/25) the monastery of Nonantola (Figure 1) was under the rule of only two abbots who consolidated its prestige and power. The aim of this article is to contextualise its foundation and understand its evolution within the politico-economic context of the Franco-Carolingian world.

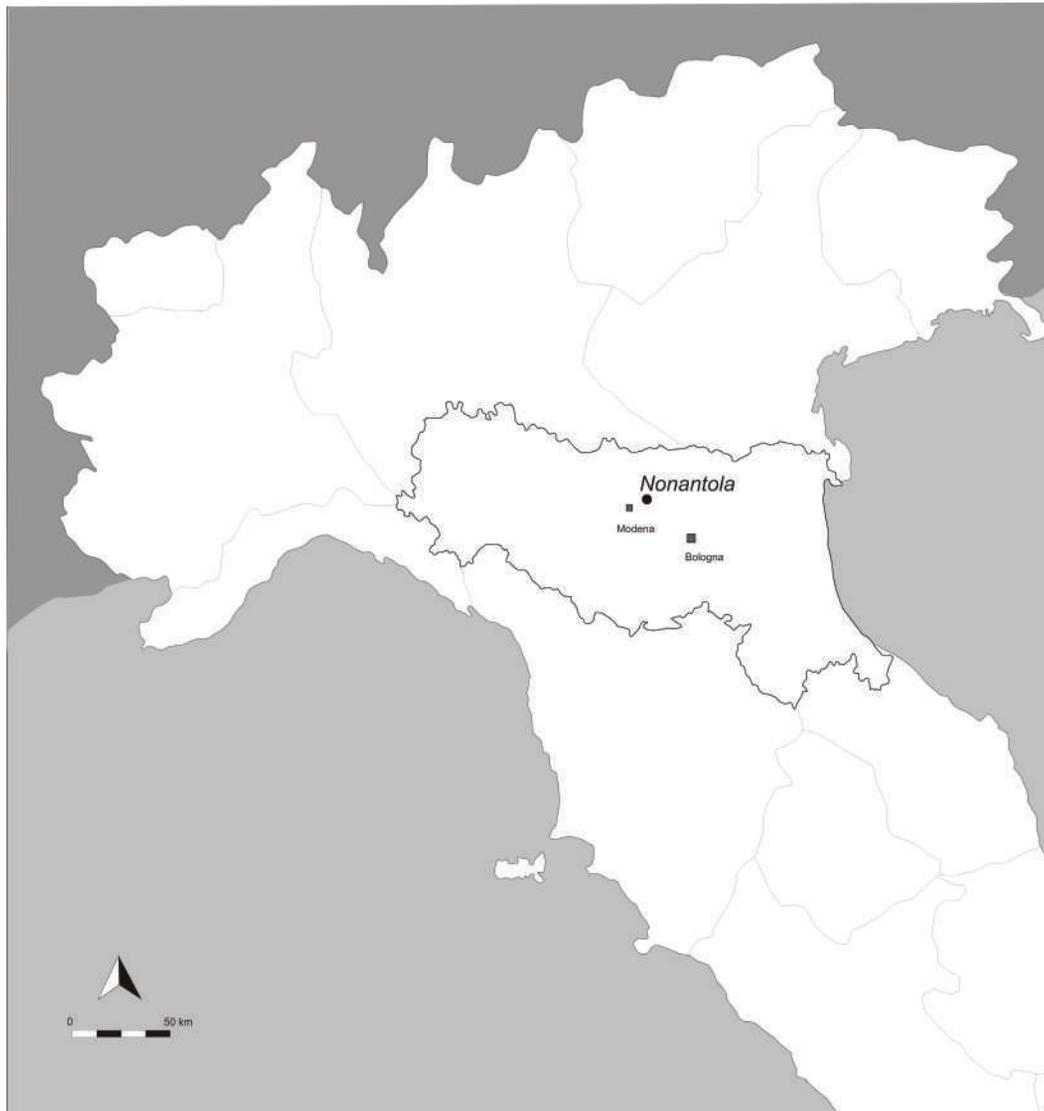


Figure 1 Location of Nonantola (MO).

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No man's land?

Thanks to a false diploma of King Aistulf and references contained in hagiographic works like the *vita Anselmi* and the *Catalogus abbatum nonantolorum* mentioned above, we know quite a lot about the circumstances of the monastery's foundation – dating, donations and so on. There is also an extensive erudite tradition of studies suggesting that *Nonantula* was established in an uncultivated, almost uninhabited place (Fasoli 1943: 116). This narrative in part follows a stereotype often associated with the foundation of monasteries and in part is based on a rather loose interpretation of the extent of the *silva Gena*, an area of woodland mentioned in the false act of donation of King Aistulf, dated 18 April 752 (Brühl 1973: n. 26). The act (Gaudenzi 1916: 125-27) lists a series of plots of land between the rivers Panaro and Secchia that made up a single estate known as the *curte Gena*, where the *silva Gena* lay – however, despite claims to the contrary, the *curte* did not coincide with the *silva* (Tiraboschi 1784-85, III: 8).

In fact, there is no sound basis for this interpretation. Despite its considerable extent – which probably remained unchanged until the disappearance of these woodlands in modern times – the *silva Gena* lay within the confines of the *curte* (Gelichi and Librenti 2004). The entire area south of the monastery, which still has traces of ancient centuriation, would still have been both inhabited and cultivated. On this basis, it has been assumed that the *curte Gena* was a compact estate probably dating to Late Antiquity and containing both cultivated and uncultivated land (Gelichi and Librenti 2004). After becoming part of the *fiscus regius* (probably in the Lombard period and possibly during the rule of King Aistulf), it became the locus of the fortunes of the nascent monastery.

Clearly the monastery of Nonantola was not established in a no man's land. But why here in particular? Historians have explained the foundation, both in very general terms (Fumagalli 1984, 1993: 11-12) and in detailed reconstructions (Bottazzi 1997), as being motivated by contingent circumstances like the military policies of the Lombard kings and conflict with the Byzantines – specifically Liutprand's campaigns against the Exarchate in 727-28. For some, geo-political considerations such as military campaigns and kinship within the Lombard aristocracy, intermeshed with topographic factors, such as road networks and the strategic position of monastic foundations, are likely to have determined the location. These explanations, which receive fragile support from particular archaeological and written documentation, of course refer to various archetypes in Lombard historiography that tend to transfer the generalised motives given for Lombard settlement in Italy to a specifically religious, in this case, monastic context.

In order to contextualise the foundation, we will first need to determine the monastery's environmental context. Observing a digital model enhancing the current altimetry of the Nonantola area, we can clearly see the drop between the site of the abbey – and the entire area of land lying south of the building – and the north-eastern corner of the ground, which lies in a deep hollow. If we superimpose this model upon a map showing the archaeological finds we can see that Roman sites are scattered throughout the area, with the exception of the north-east corner that coincides with the *silva Gena* mentioned in the *placitum* of Aistulf (Figure 2). We cannot exclude, however, the possibility that there were woodlands/marshlands on this site already in Roman times.

The monastery was founded on a natural glaxis on a boundary between an area of solid dry land to the south and unstable low-lying marshland to the north-east. Also in the vicinity, but not so close as to pose a risk of flooding for the monastery, was an important navigable river known as the Scoltenna/Panaro. Lastly, the archaeological excavations discussed below have revealed the existence of another smaller river of lesser capacity that ran alongside the monastic buildings along the ancient route of what is now the Canal Torbido (which now runs past the historic town). This may have been the *flumen Gena* mentioned in the donation of Aistulf (Figure 3).

In conclusion, the origins of the foundation stem from closely connected factors relating to the type of estate, the topography and the geomorphology of the sites. The abbey is not situated precisely in the centre of the estate (for a more detailed definition of its boundaries, see Chouquer 2015: 68-71), but on a clear internal boundary line defined by a watercourse and a marked difference in elevation. These features show that the underlying intent in founding the monastery was to create a structure to manage the new estate, thus increasing the revenue produced. The motives for its foundation seem to be linked less to the presence of road networks (while the nearby Roman road may have been viable, watercourses would have provided better transport) or military strategies than to internal property-related factors: to the strategy

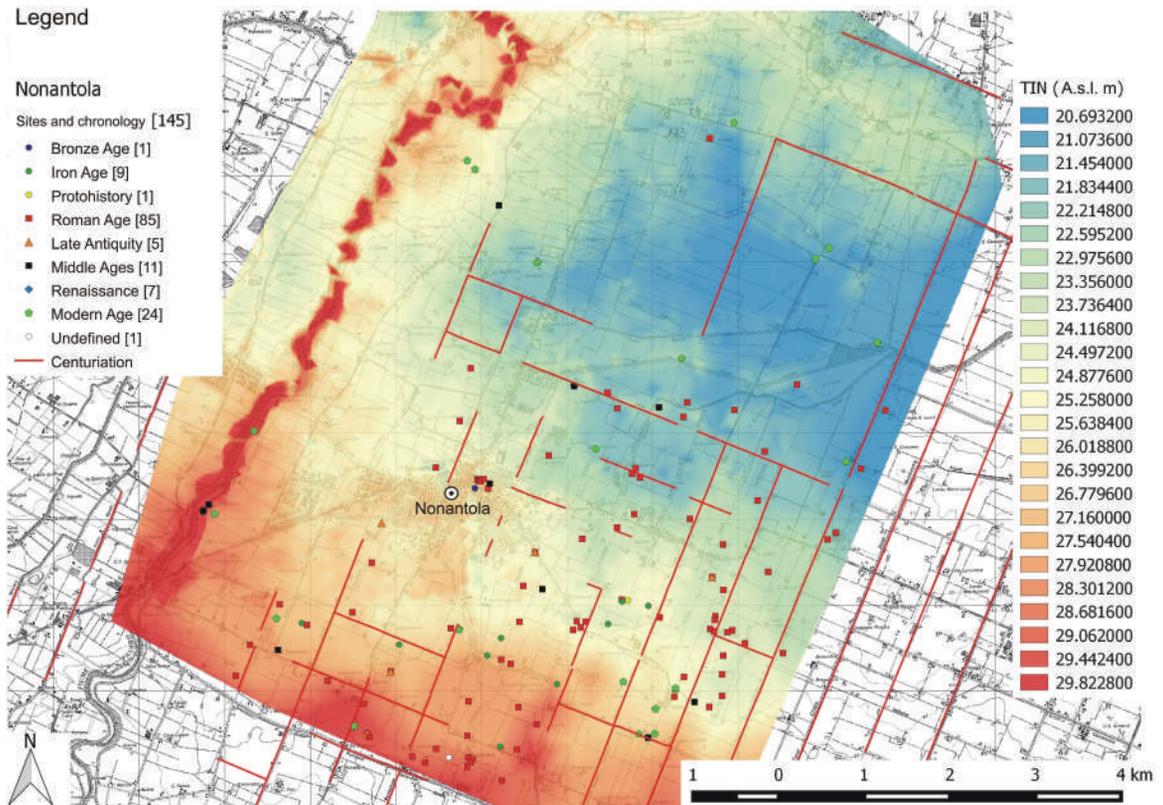


Figure 2 Digital model of the Nonantola region showing settlements and the preserved Roman land divisions.
© Alessandro Alessio Rucco.



Figure 3 Aerial photograph of Nonantola and the surrounding area with the course of the Torbido river over time.
© Mauro Librenti and Alessandra Cianciosi.

of transferring fiscal properties to members of a family entourage in order to create locations capable of attracting wealth or building up a clientele (Gasparri 2000: 33). The monastic institution was therefore an instrument designed to help extend and consolidate territorial control as well as optimise the use of the land to produce a surplus. In the case of Nonantola, we have indirect proof of this strategy in the marked personalisation of the foundation: Anselm would govern the monastery for approximately fifty years (despite one brief interruption).

Reading the transition in the words: the life of Anselm and Petrus

We have few texts to help us with our reconstruction of the lives of the first two abbots to rule the monastery: Anselm (752-804) and Peter (804-24/25). In addition to the *Vita Anselmi*, the life of the monastery's founder composed in the 11th century (Bortolotti 1892), we can find a few references in disparate fragmentary sources and in the *Catalogus abbatum nonantolorum*, preserved in the monastic archives (again Bortolotti 1982: 30-47, 62-75). Anselm is also named in the donation of Aistulf mentioned above, and there are references to his life in some of the carved stone panels in the jambs of the Romanesque door of the abbey (Trova bene 1993; Quintavalle 2010) (Figure 4). As well as being mentioned in the *Catalogus* (Bortolotti 1892: 140-53), the second abbot is also referred to in a number of contemporary documents mainly known from later transcriptions.

Despite the paucity of biographical material available on these two abbots, the profile that emerges is of great interest for our understanding of the underlying political situation in the early period of the monastery.



Figure 4 Decorative sculpture from the portal of the abbey of Nonantola (12th century). Probably king Astolfus giving the land to Anselmus, the first abbot – by Saikko, and licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

Abbot Peter was clearly a key figure (Zoboli 1997). The few references to Anselm's successor in the *Catalogus* include generic hagiographic *topoi* referring to his capacity to organise the estate and turn it to account (even the drawing up of an inventory (see Zoboli 1997: 86, on the basis of this text: 'Hic fecit totam abbatiam conscribi et universum redditum')), his charity to the poor and his hospitality ('... et ordinavit quantum in helemosinis pauperum, in susceptione hospitem', Bortolotti 1892: 142-43), and, lastly, his ability to cope with the needs of this community of monks in general. There is also a specific mention of investments made in order to improve the buildings ('in ornamentis ecclesiarum', Bortolotti 1892: 143). Although all rather generic, these references take on a different slant if we compare them to the scant space accorded to later abbots in the *Catalogus*; with only a few exceptions, it provides little more than an indication of the dates of their tenure of office.

We can glean more precise information about Peter's life from a handful of contemporary documents describing the strategies adopted with regard to the monastery's property. Not only did he wish to expand the estate, he also intended to consolidate it into a more compact and more easily manageable holding – an argument supported by a number of documents for the exchange of properties (Zoboli 1997: 79-140).

Yet another episode offers further insight into the role and function of this abbot: in 813-14, Charlemagne chose him to accompany Amalarius, bishop of Trier, as ambassador to the Byzantine emperor (Zoboli 1997: 164-75). This is surely a sign of close links between Peter and the courtly entourage; however, his biography does not allow us to go any further than this (Zoboli 1997: 31-61).

The strong ties between the monastery and the Franco-Carolingian court were apparently maintained during the rule of Peter's successor, Ansfrid, who also governed the monastery for a considerable period of time (17 years). The *Catalogus* dedicates several lines to Ansfrid that not only contain the obligatory references to his religious devotion but also mention a number of liturgical objects commissioned by him (a reliquary, a paten and a chalice) that 'mirifice vestivit aureo et ornavit lapidibus' (Bortolotti 1892: 143). He too, like Peter, was sent as an envoy to Constantinople, in 828 (Zoboli 1997: 189-90).

This information clearly reveals the role assumed by Nonantola by the early Carolingian period, a role indirectly borne out by its vast holdings and direct links with leading European monasteries of the time like Reichenau and St Gall, known to us thanks to their confraternity books listing monks from associated monastic communities, both of which mention Nonantola (Zoboli 1997: 203-35).

Anselm, the first abbot, was instrumental in building the relationship between the abbey and the Empire. As mentioned, little is known of him. His *Vita* refers to a series of episodes linked to the foundation of the monastery and to the role that he played in this: his decision to choose the monastic life, his encounter with King Aistulf (a relative of his) who donated the land for the foundation of the monastery, the choice of Nonantola as the site on which to build the abbey – following a brief period in the northern Apennines, at Fanano (751). It ends with his journey to Rome to meet the pope who was to hand over the relics of Sylvester, from that moment on the patron saint of the abbey. Most of the *Vita* is constructed to underline the historical distance separating Nonantola from the looming presence of the powerful bishop of nearby Modena. Written or rewritten during the 11th century, it undoubtedly reflected the tendencies and political mood of the time (Cantarella 2003). However, leaving these aspects aside, we have no reason to doubt the truth of a number of episodes dating to the foundation phase (Schmid 1967): Anselm was a Lombard belonging to the Friulian aristocracy and the monastery was founded, as we mentioned earlier, at a time when the policies of the Lombard sovereigns were promoting and developing such institutions (De Jong and Erhart 2000: 107-09). It is likely that Anselm was a duke and that he would have had a duchy near to that of *Forum Iulii* and in the same geo-political context – like the duchy of *Ceneda*, for example (Gasparri 1978: 50-51). We can be sure, however, that the foundation of the monastery would have represented a key political moment for the dominant Friulian aristocracy, whose leading figures were Ratchis, then Aistulf, followed by Ratchis, who took the throne again after the death of Aistulf in a vain attempt to oppose Desiderius (Gasparri 2001).

But how can we link these Lombard origins to the new political role of the monastery? How can we explain, in a relatively straightforward manner, this transition from one ruling party to another? Yet again the *Catalogus abbatum nonantolorum* comes to our assistance with an episode regarding Anselm not described in other sources: it seems that Anselm was banished to Cassino by King Desiderius and that the monastery was governed by a presbyter, Vigilantius, during his exile (Bortolotti 1892: 141-42). After the defeat of Desiderius, Anselm returned and went on to rule the monastery for many years (until his death in fact). Leaving aside the reliability of this information, the message is clear: Anselm, a Friulian Lombard, was a supporter of Ratchis in the power struggle with Desiderius (duke of Brescia). After the defeat of Ratchis – and therefore of the Friulian faction – and the rise to the throne of Desiderius, Anselm would have found himself in an awkward position that ended with his exile from the monastery – to which he would return once the Franks had conquered the Lombard Kingdom by defeating Desiderius.

The date of the *Catalogus* is uncertain – we can only give a *terminus ad quem*, the years of the abbacy of the last abbot mentioned (Rodolphus, who died in 1053; Bortolotti 1892: 75). However, historians believe that most of the work was written and compiled in the 11th century (the paleographic date of the codex), although they do not exclude the possibility that it could contain older sections (Bortolotti 1892: 73-74). Indeed, this particular episode regarding Anselm would not have been of critical interest in the 11th century (in fact, it is

not included in the *Vita*), but its inclusion would have been useful, if not necessary, in the 9th century when the monastery became one of the most powerful Carolingian monasteries of the period.

Reading the transition in the stones: the monastery under Anselmus and Peter (and Ansfrīt?)

What archaeological traces were left by the events that we have attempted to outline above? How did the transition between the Lombard kingdom (the foundation of the monastery) and the early Carolingian age (its consolidation) appear at a material level? In brief, what do we know about the monastery in that period?

Nonantola was the focus of an archaeological project carried out from 2002 to 2009 that investigated much of the area of the monastery and part of its historic centre (Gelichi and Librenti 2005; Gelichi and Librenti 2013; Librenti and Bertoldi 2007; Librenti and Cianciosi 2011) (Figure 5). Despite their limited scale, these excavations were able to identify parts of the original monastery: although the areas excavated were not adjoining and a number of important topographical links are missing, we have enough data to understand the material, functional and structural character of the monastery during the rule of its first abbots.

As mentioned, the original monastery was built on a natural bank by a watercourse, which may or may not have been navigable. While it is unclear whether the river acted as a physical boundary we do know that in the 11th century it was covered over, a new larger abbey church was built and the entire monastery complex was rearranged on a new layout that is still partly visible today.

Part of the old monastic area must have been situated in an area now lying within the abbey church (11th century). Dug up with no regard to stratification or context in the course of a 19th-century restoration, absolutely nothing is known about previous phases on the site of the 11th-century building. For this reason, we can only speculate about the location, type and dimensions of the original monastic church. However, the archaeological

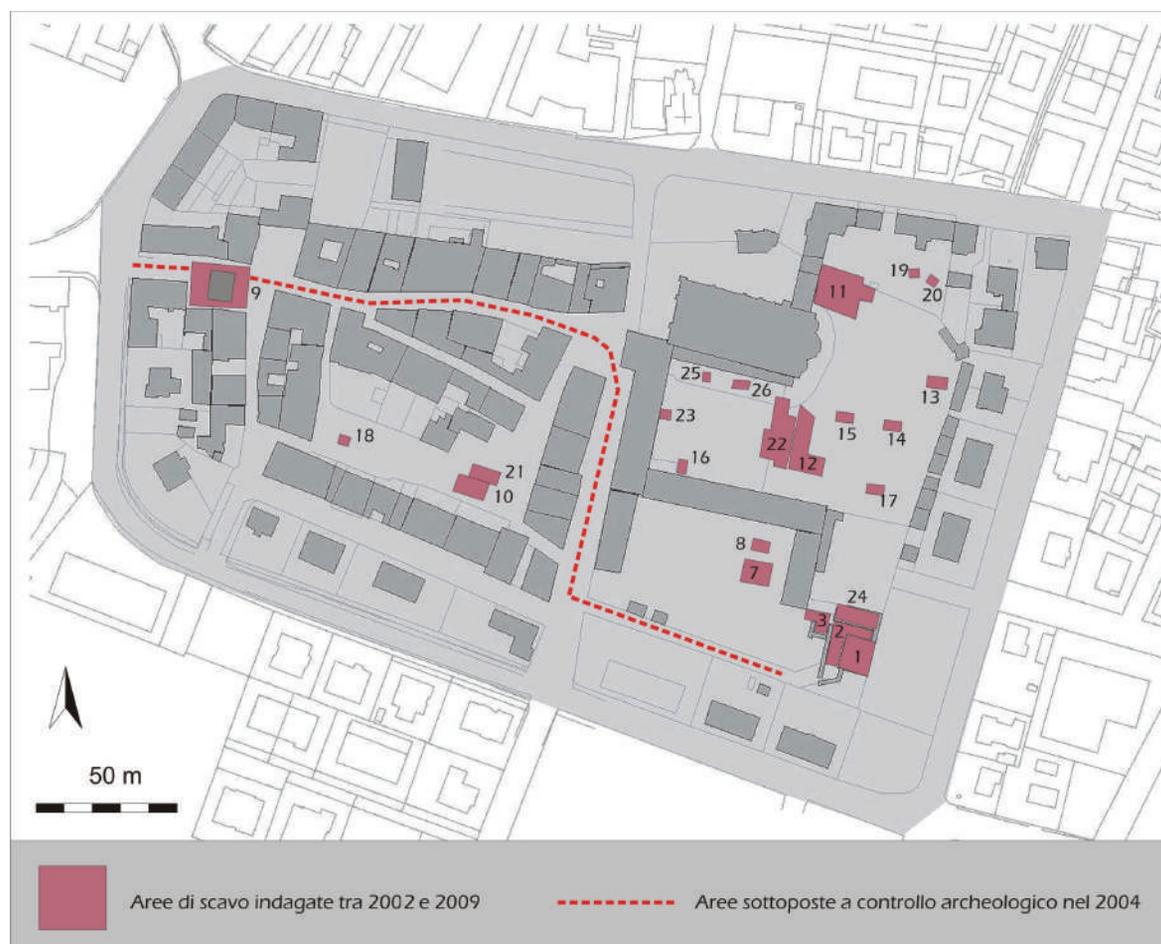


Figure 5 Map of Nonantola highlighting the excavated areas.
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excavation of a large sector to the east of the Romanesque apses (sector 11), and two large adjoining sectors (sectors 12 and 22) lying to the south of the church and coinciding with part of the present abbey courtyard, revealed the remains of the original monastery (probably the monastery of Anselm) as well as of the monastery immediately succeeding it – the monastery of Peter, and possibly also of Ansfrut.

We found two structures probably belonging to the first phase, which we can date to the second half of the 8th century: a church that may have served as the first abbey church (in sector 11) and a rather large building with a loggia situated near the watercourse (in sectors 12 and 22). The latter had brick rubble foundations, three large rooms, an unpaved ground floor and possibly a first floor: the presence of an open fire on a beaten earth floor suggests that the building may have been used as a storeroom or as a workshop for the processing of farm produce (a press probably used for grapes was found in one of the rooms).

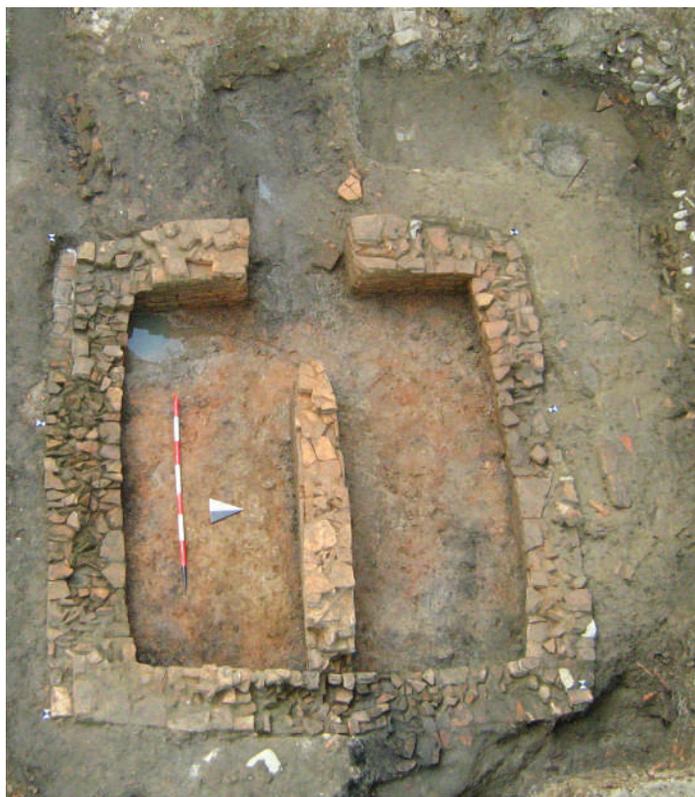


Figure 6 Nonantola – furnace for tiles (9th century).
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The next phase was characterised by the destruction of the building that may have been a church, which was replaced by a kiln for the production of bricks (probably tiles) flanked by a metal-working area (Figure 6). Radiometric dating (C14 and thermoluminescence) indicate a chronology in the first half of the 9th century. We do not know exactly how long the kiln remained in use but we believe that it was used only for a short period in association with specific building work. We could speculate that this work concerned the abbey church itself but we cannot exclude repairs to other monastic buildings. Indirect evidence of such activities is revealed by work on the buildings in sectors 12 and 22, which were not rebuilt but remodelled. The interior of one of the buildings was paved using re-purposed roof tiles laid upside down to transform what must have been a work or storage space into a room that could be used to receive visitors (Figures 7 and 8). After the demolition of the kiln and the abandonment of the metal-working area, a new building was constructed in sector 11. Though poorly preserved, the structure was well-built and had an elaborate floor made up of brick squares with inserts of small hexagonal tiles from the Roman period, and painted plastered walls. The presence of elements from the fore-edge fastenings of manuscript books inside the building suggest that it may have been a *scriptorium*.

If all these activities are considered together, a fairly clear picture emerges. The first phase, which we can confidently attribute to Anselm's period, is characterised by the remains of a series of relatively elaborate buildings, some on two floors (possibly with a *dormitorium* on the first floor) all built in a single campaign and destined to remain unchanged until at least the 10th century. During the subsequent phase (the abbeys of Peter, and Ansfrut?) the only significant changes regarded sector 11 and may have been due to its proximity to the abbey church, which had had to be rebuilt.

The situation revealed by the monastery's physical structures is borne out by the ceramic evidence. Mediterranean globular amphoras and small amphoras in light-coloured fabrics produced in the 8th century in north Italy are followed by Otranto amphoras from the 9th century onwards (Figure 9). It seems therefore that from the very beginning the monastery belonged to the networks of exchange characterising north Italy during the late Lombard period (the main terminus being in Comacchio, Gelichi 2008) and throughout the Carolingian phase.



Figure 7 Nonantola – paving with inscribed floor tiles (9th century).
 © Laboratory of Medieval Archaeology, University of Ca' Foscari, Venice.



Figure 8 Nonantola – inscribed tile from the excavations (9th century). © Laboratory of Medieval Archaeology, University of Ca' Foscari, Venice.

Ultimately, the archaeological evidence reveals no traumatic interruptions or radical transformations between the Lombard and Carolingian periods: certainly none affecting the location of the monastery, which must have been the same throughout, nor of the layout of the various areas. Maybe no changes were necessary. With the possible exception of the abbey church, the monastery seems to have been laid out according to a plan that would remain substantially unchanged and that was linked to contour boundaries that would only be altered two centuries later. In fact, the plan seems to have been dictated by practical reasons and the need to adapt to the contours of the terrain

rather than by pre-established organisational principles. However, the situation revealed by the excavation was not completely static. Not only do the structures found in sector 11 provide direct evidence of a spatial rearrangement of the area, they also provide indirect proof of a major remodelling of other buildings in the complex – possibly even of the abbey church. The contemporaneity of these activities with the abbacies of the first Frankish abbots (Peter and Ansfrut) is not only suggested by the written sources (in the parts of the *Catalogus* mentioning work on the buildings, especially with reference to Peter) but is also shown by the chronology of the production facilities in sector 11 and by the written documents describing the monastery's property policies, which were intended to rationalise their holdings and increase revenue.

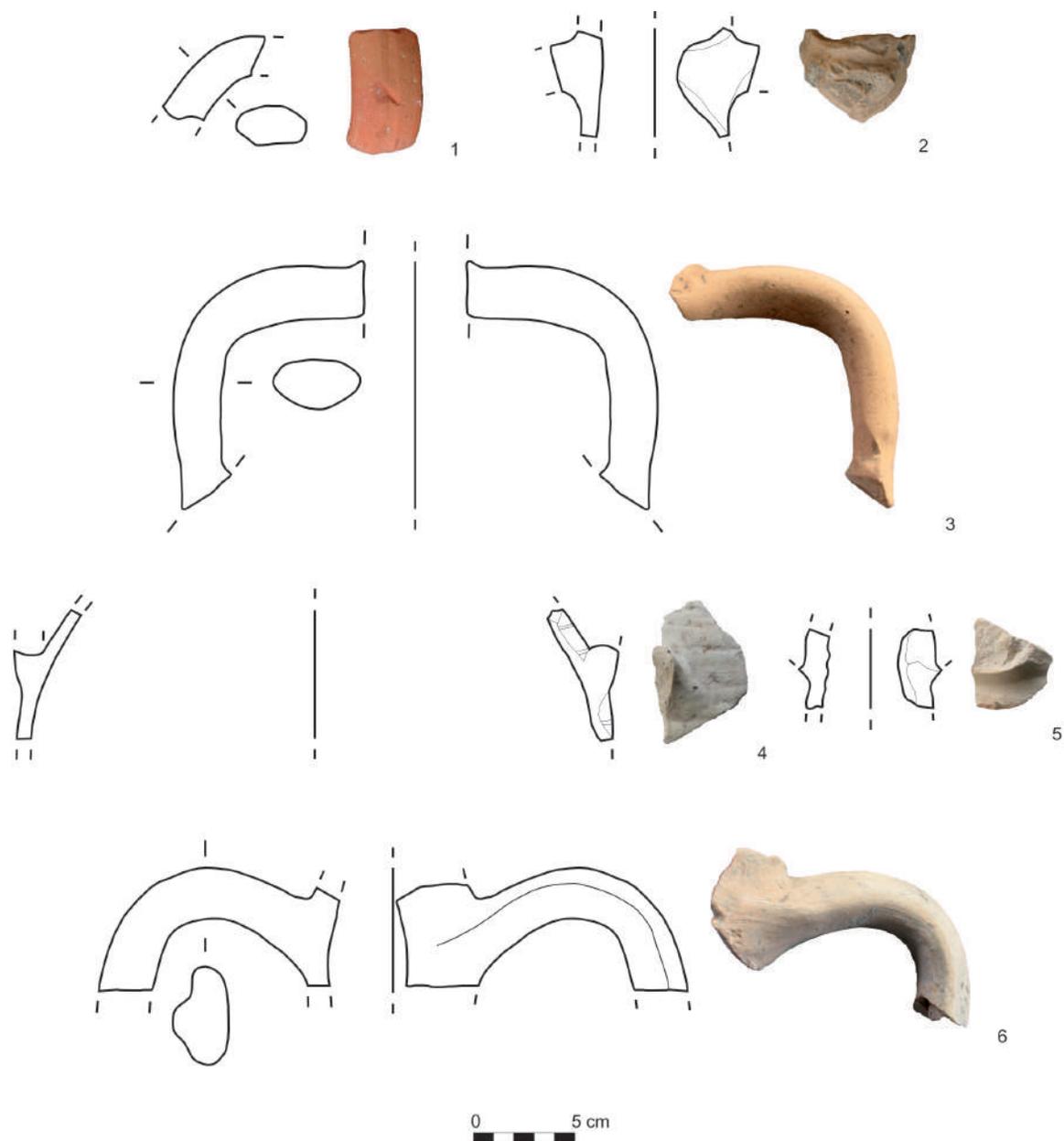


Figure 9 Nonantola – globular amphorae (1-3) (upper), and ‘Otranto 1’ type amphorae (bottom) (UTS 11000, phase 5 and 4: 9th-10th century). © Lara Sabbionesi.

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