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3

FROM ONE SEA TO ANOTHER  
TRADING PLACES IN THE EUROPEAN  
AND MEDITERRANEAN EARLY MIDDLE AGES

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## Comacchio and the central Mediterranean

The purpose of this conference, and the book that has come out of it, is not so much to present the excavations at Comacchio – that has been done in much greater detail elsewhere<sup>1</sup>, although we have the latest updated surveys here (Gelichi et al., Negrelli). Rather, it is to locate the 8<sup>th</sup>-century and 9<sup>th</sup>-century town in the widest context possible. If this was a northern conference, it might be called ‘Comacchio centred’, to mark the concern of its organisers, wholly successful as it turned out, to locate the *castrum Comaclensis* as clearly as possible at the centre of a wider debate on early medieval exchange and urbanism. And it is not surprising that the comparators chosen for Comacchio were indeed northern, essentially the well-known array of *emporia*, coastal trading towns, of the North Sea and Baltic; for these flourished between c. 700 and the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, much as Comacchio did, and many of them lost their centrality as trading centres after that date too, much as did the Adriatic *castrum*. The case for Comacchio as being typologically similar to an *emporium* of the north has been made throughout, and convincingly.

What has been less discussed, however, is what that typological similarity means in Mediterranean terms. The whole point of the special nature of northern *emporia* is that they were new, a way of focussing maritime exchange through nodal points which had not been developed before (for the Roman empire, famously focussed on urban centres as it was, included only a small proportion of the North Sea coastline, essentially only the coasts of what are now England and Belgium, and none of the Baltic). The debate has long been about whether they were, or were not, gateway communities, controlled by rulers so as to channel goods to élites, in a world in which

<sup>\*1</sup> See esp. «Comacchio e il suo territorio tra la tarda antichità e l’alto medio evo», ed. S. Gelichi, in *Uomini, territorio e culto dall’antichità all’alto medioevo*, Comacchio, 2007, p. 365-689.

<sup>2</sup> Following on from Richard Hodges’s path-breaking *Dark age economics*, London, 1982.

long-distance exchange was itself relatively new, or newly important<sup>2</sup>. That, as we have seen in this volume, is now a partly outdated debate (I shall return to the point); but, either way, it does not work so well in the Mediterranean, where exchange had been normal for millennia, and where late Roman exchange had recently operated on a huge scale until the very period in which Comacchio appeared as an active centre, the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The nodal points of that exchange were very large cities like Rome, Constantinople, Carthage, Alexandria, or else medium-sized cities with a significant administrative and political role such as Ravenna, Naples, Syracuse and Marseille. And, even when the large-scale and Mediterranean-wide exchange networks failed, in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century, most of these cities remained as foci for what remained of it in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and onwards<sup>3</sup>. So, to be an *emporium* in the Mediterranean meant to operate inside the framework of those longstanding and continuing urban centres – Ravenna remained large, and close to Comacchio, even if its port (Classe) was not doing well commercially. It is as if Ipswich was founded and developed when Colchester remained an important Roman city not far to its south, or as if Dorestad was already competing in some way with an active and administratively important Rotterdam or Antwerp.

This already imposes on us the need to be clear what we mean when we call Comacchio an *emporium*. What characteristics are we seeking to stress? That it was new; that it was not a major administrative centre for a territorial hinterland (this does indeed seem to be a feature of most northern *emporia*, though there are some exceptions even here, such as Hamwic and York); that it was only an artisanal and commercial centre; that it was liminal; that it was a gateway community for an interior hinterland; that it failed? These could indeed be the elements of a useful ideal type: not necessarily all of them present in every example of an *emporium*, either in the North or the South, but guides to what one one could expect, and to which absences one would need to explain. But in the North there were no other coastal towns in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, so we are looking here essentially at the characteristics of early urbanism. Even then, the focus on *emporia* has been criticised by those who point out that major river ports in northern Francia were often rather older than the coastal towns (many of them indeed were Roman) and that these survived rather better as well<sup>4</sup>. In the South, however, there were

<sup>3</sup> See for example the effective recent survey by Andrea Augenti, *Città e porti dall'antichità al medioevo*, Roma, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> See in particular A. Verhulst, «Roman cities, *emporia* and new towns (sixth-ninth centuries)», in *The Long Eighth Century*, ed. I. L. Hansen and C. Wickham, Leiden, 2000, p. 105-20 (cf. Theuws in this volume).

hundreds of other coastal towns surviving from the Roman world and earlier, and we would have to ask why we were privileging a sub-set of them. Is the 'key' element that such towns were new and had no administrative centrality? Or is it that they served as privileged gateways to a hinterland in a period in which more capillary commercial systems were failing?

Which towns in the Mediterranean actually were *emporía*, for that matter? We do not yet have a gazetteer which can in any sense match the standard list of fifteen or so major northern ports. Venice, Comacchio's later rival and supplanter, is an obvious candidate; Gaeta and Amalfi would in the 9<sup>th</sup> century be others. But can we say – as is increasingly often proposed – that Marseille, even though one of the oldest towns in the western Mediterranean, was 'turning into' an *emporium* in the later 7<sup>th</sup> century, because it was the politically-chosen gateway community for the Frankish kings? This would be to make the gateway-community element of the ideal type the 'key' element, for Marseille certainly continued to be administratively important. It would have the danger that it might force us down the narrow path of trying to characterise the directed trade of the Merovingian period, channelled through this gateway, at just the moment when northern students of *emporía* are abandoning the idea. But if we sidestep this danger, and simply say that it is clear that most Mediterranean trade with Francia, in a period of sharply reducing quantities, was indeed channelled through Marseille (and the neighbouring fiscal warehouses at Fos), then we could begin to ask whether similar gateways existed elsewhere in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century. At Pisa, perhaps? (Commercial traffic on the Arno has recently been shown to be important in the S. Genesio excavations<sup>5</sup>.) At Naples, for sure (Amalfi, etc., never managed to replace its centrality). But at Tarragona, close to the only major river going from the Mediterranean into Spain, and a well-studied city in this period, probably not – and the fact is significant for understanding the economic problems of at least eastern Spain in the years after 650.

These last examples show that using the concept of the *emporium* can indeed help us to ask interesting questions about the structure of Mediterranean trade. They already raise other issues, however, of geography and chronology. They are all in the western Mediterranean, and the main evidence for them is from the late 7<sup>th</sup> century rather than from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>. There is not much doubt, indeed, that very little interregional exchange existed after 700 in that sector of the Mediterranean, except for the southern

<sup>5</sup> F. Cantini, in press.

Tyrrhenian triangle of Rome, Campania, Calabria and Sicily<sup>6</sup>. I would not wish to exclude the possibility of the sort of small-exchange-active but strictly coastal society of the type described by Chris Loveluck (see below) anywhere else in the western Mediterranean in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, but the fact is that not a sign of it has so far been identified. It is now clear, however, that it was quite different in the Adriatic. First, because the Comacchio excavations have shown the sort of exchange activity in those centuries which excavators have looked for in vain in Marseille. Second, because the obvious northern Adriatic comparator to Marseille and Naples would be Ravenna, well-placed for the large-scale river system of the Po valley; but it was not, as it happened, Ravenna which took that role, although it could have – Ravenna's ships are documented in the waterways of the Po delta into the 10<sup>th</sup> century at least (Cosentino). Instead Comacchio, and then, soon after, Venice, which were indeed new towns with no major administrative responsibilities, like those of the North Sea, replaced it. But this puts the spotlight on the northern Adriatic as a possible exception. Was it above all here that an *emporium* pattern of a northern type developed in the Mediterranean? If so, why?

We do not as yet have the answer to the first of these two questions. But (assuming the answer to that question is yes) there do seem to be at least two answers to the second, one geographical, one political. The coastal strip stretching from Rimini round to Trieste is atypical of the Mediterranean in its flexibility and variability, in that it is a constantly-changing alluvial coast, full of lagoons and islands, extending and shifting because of river silt brought down from the Alps. In most of the Mediterranean, there is little choice about where to put one's ports; they are fixed by cliffs and 'natural' harbours, which are the same across the centuries. But along the Romagna-Veneto coast it is different, and it is not chance that this is the single area of Italy with the greatest set of changes in urban structure from the Roman to the medieval period<sup>7</sup>. The second reason is that the 8<sup>th</sup> century saw the failure of Byzantine political power in precisely this area. The 'iconoclast' emperors, who did so much to re-establish the coherence of imperial gov-

<sup>6</sup> For which see, still, L. Saguì, «Roma, i centri privilegiati e la lunga durata della tarda antichità», *Archeologia medievale*, XXIX (2002), p. 7-42.

<sup>7</sup> The best parallels to this sort of flexible landscape in the Mediterranean are the French coast from Marseille west to Perpignan, and the Nile delta; both would repay the sort of study characterised here by Chris Loveluck, although (as implied earlier) I am unsure whether we would find much activity for our period in the former.

ernment in their Balkan-Aegean-Anatolian heartland, made no attempt to keep their north Italian provinces when the Lombards attacked, between the 720s and the final fall of Ravenna in 751; the fact has never been satisfactorily explained (though see below), but it is not in dispute<sup>8</sup>. This might be the very situation which would allow an illegal alternative to Ravenna's economic hegemony (McCormick) to thrive and survive. Had Ravenna maintained its position as a major provincial centre of Byzantine power, neither Comacchio nor Venice might have survived for long; but, as it was, they were hard to stop.

Romagna and the Veneto, then, could be the perfect terrain for finding in the Mediterranean the sort of coastal regions characterised by Loveluck for England and Denmark in this volume, and also shown up by the ever clearer distribution of coinage in eastern England in the late 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries (Naylor)<sup>9</sup>. These authors, here and elsewhere, have set out the most significant development of *emporium* theory of the last decade, in that they have clearly shown how towns in the parts of northern Europe they have studied emerged from narrow strips of liminal coastal society whose inhabitants (whether rich or poor) were well used to active exchange links with ships from other regions; *emporium* began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century as slightly larger nodes in these coastal strips, which they never really dominated – that was for larger towns in later periods. This newly-understood pattern has one consequence, important for the older debate, that *emporium* cannot usefully be seen as founded by kings, or as special gateways at all. I would myself see that as possibly regional: Hamwic still looks more like a gateway town than does Ipswich, for example. And the rejection of royal foundations in the 7<sup>th</sup> century does not prohibit one from positing that the rapid expansion of *emporium* in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and the new imposition of grid planning on their streets, could represent the imposition of royal control over them – indeed, I do not see much disagreement over that point in recent work. Royal control over *emporium* in 800, say, does not look very different as a result, whether in England or Francia or Denmark. But how useful is this model for characterising the Veneto? Very useful, I think. Even without the help

<sup>8</sup> See S. Cosentino, *Storia dell'Italia bizantina (VI-XI secolo)*, Bologna, 2008, p. 240 ff.; L. Brubaker and J. Haldon, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast era, c. 680-850*, Cambridge, 2011, p. 168-174.

<sup>9</sup> The model was first set out, including for the Frankish and Frisian coast, in C. Loveluck and D. Tys, «Coastal societies, exchange and identity along the Channel and southern North Sea shores of Europe, AD 600-1000», *Journal of maritime archaeology*, I (2006), p. 140-169; it is developed for Kent in R. Fleming, «Elites, boats and foreigners», *Settimane di studio*, LVI (2009), p. 393-425.



of Britain's metal-detector laws, recent Italian excavations show a host of small sites with evidence of exchange in the Po delta and Venetian lagoons (Gelichi), of which Comacchio and then Rialto were only the largest nodes. This was a real coastal society, which was doubly liminal in that it was not conquered by the Lombards even after 751 – the narrow coastal strip stayed nominally Byzantine for centuries. And, although Comacchio had a *castrum* and later a cathedral, and Rialto a cathedral and then some form of political centre at S. Pietro in Castello, no-one has sought to postulate that any ruler deliberately intervened to develop exchange in either: rather, they later sought to exploit exchange that already existed, much as Anglo-Saxon kings did in Ipswich or London. The northern Adriatic can thus be used, not just to offer analogues to the history of specific centres, Comacchio like Stavnsager maybe, Venice like Dorestad, but also to offer quite a close analogue to the driving new northern work of the last decade.

But we are still dealing with the Mediterranean, not the North; and with exchange systems which, however regionalised, had different sorts of pre-suppositions from those of the North (less use of low-value coinages, for a start: Rovelli). I would like to end with some comments about the structure of the Byzantine empire in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and early 9<sup>th</sup>, and about the economy of the central Mediterranean.

The Comacchio conference took place in 2009, and I am writing these words in 2011, almost exactly two years later. If the conference had taken place today, it is hard to imagine that it would not have paid more attention to Sicily, which, after decades of being bypassed by medieval archaeological trends, has suddenly bounced into everyone's vision. (Only Malta was represented in the conference, in a paper by Nathaniel Cutajar which, even though unfortunately unpublished, has remained in the memories of all participants for his revelation of the extraordinary amphora finds from the 8<sup>th</sup>- and 9<sup>th</sup>-century island; these were in large part a spin-off of the Sicilian economy.) The active nature of the Sicilian agrarian economy is now ever-increasingly visible, in the work of a group of archaeologists which is reaching critical mass; from west to east, Fabiola Ardizzone, Alessandra Molinari, Maria Serena Rizzo, Kim Bowes, Lucia Arcifa are only some of the most prominent people currently working on Sicilian material from this period, to whom should be added the dense numismatic work of Cécile Morrisson and Vivien Prigent<sup>10</sup>. After

<sup>10</sup> Much of the range of recent work can be seen in three new collective volumes, *La Sicilia bizantina*, ed. M. Congiu et al., Caltanissetta, 2010, *Piazza Armerina*, ed. P. Pensabene, Roma, 2010, and *La Sicile de Byzance à l'Islam*, ed. A. Nef and V. Prigent, Paris, 2010.

the fall of Egypt to the Persians and then the Arabs, Sicily matched North Africa as the major agrarian resources of the Byzantine empire, and after the fall of Africa a generation later Sicily was on its own as a bread-basket, throughout the 8<sup>th</sup> century and into the early ninth. This we knew anyway (as we also knew that its money was rather more readily available in the central Mediterranean after 650 than were Constantinopolitan coins in the Aegean), but the real prosperity of the island is steadily becoming clearer in recent archaeological work. And that of course has implications for exchange.

The other thing that has become ever clearer in the last couple of years is the extent and density of the networks of globular amphorae, the post-LRA 2 type which has been much-discussed in the papers in this volume (Negrelli, Arthur, Vroom in particular), although it still lacks a satisfactory synthesis, based on targeted and detailed petrological analyses. We know that post-LRA 2 amphorae were made in many different locations, in the Aegean, around Cherson, at Carthage, and, in Italy, at Otranto, near Naples, and in Sicily. This might make them seem like the typical 8<sup>th</sup>-century regionalised ware, only unified by a common Byzantine *koinē* of assumptions as to how amphorae should look, but what is becoming ever clearer is that they could travel considerable distances – I am entirely convinced by Negrelli's argument that the Comacchio amphorae were largely from the Aegean, for example. The globular amphora has become the type-fossil for the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine central Mediterranean, in fact; and its ever-clearer distribution across the sea-roads of the Ionian Sea (of which the Adriatic was simply the northern extension) shows us how, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the western provinces of the empire were as economically important as – and arguably more prosperous than – its Aegean heartland. The wealth of Sicily and the amphora finds in Malta can increasingly be seen as the western starting-point of a network of 8<sup>th</sup>- (and 9<sup>th</sup>-) century exchange which linked all the coastlines of the Byzantine West, from Calabria, through Otranto and Butrint, eastwards to Crete and/or Corinth, the Aegean gateways – as well as north to Comacchio and Venice. This exchange was less dense by far than it had been in 600, and more regionalised as well, but, as we have just seen, not *wholly* regionalised, and certainly denser than anything that was going on in the Mediterranean north and west of Rome. Whether this was predominantly focussed on politically important harbours which had always been there – Syracuse, Otranto, Butrint etc. – or whether it could also privilege informally-characterised coastal strips of the Comacchio type elsewhere as well, cannot yet be said (although the Byzantine state and the tax system were far stronger around the Ionian Sea after 700 or so than farther north in Adriatic Italy, and there was less



scope for informal practices as a result). But the activity of this exchange is ever clearer; and it of course gives much of an explanatory context to Comacchio too, above all to the interregional aspect of Comacchio's economy.

The Byzantine empire was a maritime empire. It controlled the sea-roads, and indeed legislated about their conduct, in the Rhodian Sea Law. The main west-east route of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, that from Rome down past Sicily, then across the Ionian sea to the Aegean, was fully in Byzantine hands for its entire course; and in areas where the Byzantines had lost control of mainlands – in the Adriatic, not just the Veneto but also Dalmatia – they still controlled all or much of the coastline. Comacchio was thus not only liminal in Italian terms, but simultaneously part of a political boundary system which linked this coast with those of Dalmatia, the Salento, the Siracusano and others again, by the sea roads which were part of the Byzantine power structure. To repeat, why the Byzantines let the key centre of the northern edge of their realm, Ravenna, go is hard to explain; but it is at least clear that the whole of that northern edge was less important to them, perhaps precisely because the fiscal structure had broken up here; they let Istria be conquered and let Venice drift out of their power network in the next century as well. All the same, Comacchio began in a context in which Byzantine political and maritime power still existed. It was a real point of contact between that political and economic system and that of the Lombards; just as Venice would be, with more autonomy, in the Carolingian period and ever after.

And this marks the essential difference between the Mediterranean and the North, for everything remained much more organised in the Mediterranean, even though, in this period at least, there was actually less interregional exchange there. In the North, there was only one real political power, the Franks, overwhelmingly dominant both politically and economically, set against a host of small and economically simple polities in Britain, Scandinavia and the Slav lands. The way *emporía* operated was very particular as a result, for that economic imbalance was so extreme – a situation which would not change until the 11<sup>th</sup> century at the very earliest. In the central Mediterranean, by contrast, the Lombards in Italy had a polity at least as coherent as that of the Franks, but the Byzantine political system was far more elaborate, and of course, further away, the Arab system was still more so. The structuring of exchange was bound to be different as a result.

I do not think we have got to the bottom of that process of structuration – which, to repeat, is different from the actual density of exchange. But this conference has taken us a very long way towards trying to understand it.