

SEMINARI DEL CENTRO INTERUNIVERSITARIO
PER LA STORIA E L'ARCHEOLOGIA DELL'ALTO MEDIOEVO

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

PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
COMACCHIO 27TH-29TH MARCH 2009

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PREFACE

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The discovery of an early medieval emporium at Comacchio, at the mouth of the river Po, towards the northern end of the Adriatic Sea has altered the debate about the role of emporia and wics in this era. Previously thought to be an unique urban phenomenon of the North Sea and Baltic Sea between the 7th and 9th centuries, the discovery of this small but distinctive emporium with its Lombard royal associations, located between the old Byzantine capital of Ravenna and Venice has shown that these monopolistic trading centres existed south of the Alps too. In other words, with the collapse of Roman and Byzantine long-distance shipping around the Mediterranean Sea and the concomitant collapse of the later Roman hierarchy of regional towns including ports, a new form of regional production and distribution centres evolved. Comacchio, so far, is the best studied of these new Mediterranean Sea emporia. From one sea to another, so it now seems, the emporium was an urban production-distribution centre that appears to have characterized the urban economies of an era.

The central issue in this Comacchio conference is the part played by sites described by archaeologists as emporia in the transition from the ancient to the medieval economies. Put simply, perhaps too simply, it is a transition from ancient cities defined by consumption to the medieval cities defined by production and distribution. Of course, this is an old argument, famously first fashioned by Max Weber (1958) and given great oxygen by Moses Finley (1999). It is an argument that underpins how medieval Europe is often described in world history, viewed comparatively with India, China and Japan. E.L. Jones puts it tellingly: “It is better [...] to look on Europe, and before that Christendom, as a single culture-area set apart from other cultural or religious zones like, say, Islamdom. Because of its internal similarities and cross-contacts, Europe began early to form an economic system in which change in one part tended to diffuse to or at least be imitated by other parts. Peasant farming may seem to have trudged along everywhere in the world unaffected by differences in government or trade, but Europe’s rain-fed agriculture distinguished it from both desert and monsoon Asia. Even agriculture was not exempt from a slow diffusion of new ideas or new

ways of taxing and administering the land". (Jones 1988: 168-69). Now, we are not about to fall into the trap to quote Kenneth Pomeranz (2000: 5) that the "Dark Ages has now come to be seen as quite creative. This has tended to reinforce the notion that western Europe was launched on a uniquely promising path well before it began overseas expansion". Equally, though, this conference at Comacchio dedicated to a hitherto north European concept, inevitably draws attention to two issues, first, a Europe that reaches from the Constantinople to the Lofoten Islands in the Arctic Circle, and second, that during the lifetime of this extraordinary site located at the mouth of the Po this Continent experienced great changes that underpinned the transition from the consumption city of classical antiquity to the productive city of the Middle Ages.

These issues have been the subject of a long historiography: from the first elegantly made excavations in the 1880s by Hjalmar Stolpe in Birka, Sweden to the recent two-volume conference report edited by Joachim Henning, *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium* (2007); from the ground-breaking arguments about medieval city origins posed by Henri Pirenne after the First World War to the present historical debates concentrated around Michael McCormick's *Origins of the Medieval Economy* (2001) and Chris Wickham's *Framing the Middle Ages* (2005). Transcending the simple identification of urban origins rooted in nationalist histories, the conspicuously rich archaeological evidence brings us continually back to major themes about the transformation of the Roman world and of course the rise of medieval Europe. But unlike previous conferences on this theme, this one aims to reintegrate the Mediterranean and Italy, in particular, into the passage from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. This may seem odd to many historians raised upon the unchallenged pre-eminence of Italy, yet until recently the strong tradition of north European archaeology had reinforced the notion that the flame of economic development passed from the Mediterranean to the North Sea (and even the Baltic Sea) during the 7th century. Now, with the availability of the results of many important excavations in Italy it is possible to redress this balance. Nowhere in this European story is more important than Venice, as McCormick has cogently argued (McCormick 2007; this volume). But to understand Venice, we believe, it is essential to start at its immediate forebear, Comacchio. Emporia like Comacchio were undoubtedly change agents – perhaps in common with the Carolingian monastic cities, part of 'an inter-mezzo' that was possibly more of a burden than an impulse for economic advancement, as Henning has observed (Henning 2007: 21). This, of course, is debatable. But the existence of emporia, sites rich in archaeological detail,

if invariably obscure in the written sources, are now benchmarks that historians of this age ignore at their peril. What matters most is that as archaeologists and historians we engage to look beyond our disciplinary boundaries to explore together a key stage in European history that continually re-defines how we should examine and re-examine our sources.

This volume of papers arising from the conference at Comacchio between 27-29 March 2009 reviews not only the significance of this newly-discovered Adriatic Sea emporium, but includes chapters dedicated to reinterpreting the role of the emporium as a central-place in north-west Europe and in the central Mediterranean. It also includes important new interpretive studies of sites North Sea emporia like Dorestad and Ribe, as well as Mediterranean sites such as Butrint. Finally, with an ever richer body of numismatic and ceramic evidence to draw upon, the whole basis of trade in this era – especially administered or directed commerce – is examined by scholars for Anglo-Saxon England as well as Byzantine Italy and its trading sphere.

Thanks to Lia Gaetano and Elena Grandi for their invaluable help with the copy-editing; and thanks to the Municipality of Comacchio, for the economic and logistical support into the organization of the Conference.

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