

Venice and Its Neighbors from the 8th to 11th Century

Through Renovation and Continuity

Edited by

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Contents

List of Figures VII
Notes on Contributors IX

Introduction 1

Stefano Gasparri and Sauro Gelichi

- 1 The First Dukes and the Origins of Venice 5
Stefano Gasparri
- 2 Archival Documents as Narrative: The Sources of the *Istoria Veneticorum*
and the Plea of Rižana 27
Annamaria Pazienza
- 3 The Waterfront of Istria: Sea and Identity in the post-Roman
Adriatic 51
Francesco Borri
- 4 Disputes and Connections: Venice's Affairs in the *Regnum Italiae* 68
Chiara Provesi
- 5 The *Insula Equilus*: A Lagoon Community in
the Early Middle Ages 90
Silvia Cadamuro, Alessandra Cianciosi and Claudio Negrelli
- 6 Setting the Scene: The Role of Sant'Ilario Monastery in Early Medieval
Venice in Light of Recent Landscape Studies 116
Elisa Corrà, Cecilia Moine and Sandra Primon
- 7 Comacchio: A Liminal Community in a Nodal Point during the Early
Middle Ages 142
Sauro Gelichi
- Conclusion 168
Sauro Gelichi and Stefano Gasparri
- Bibliography 173
Index 182

Comacchio: A Liminal Community in a Nodal Point during the Early Middle Ages

Sauro Gelichi

Introduction

Over recent years, archaeological research in Comacchio (FE), located to the south of the Po delta (Fig. 7.1), has improved our understanding of one of the most important Italian settlements of the Early Medieval Period.¹ These archaeological investigations, together with a set of intrinsic data, have introduced (or re-introduced) a number of socio-historical and economical-historical themes back into the scientific debate. Some of these themes are not only relevant to Comacchio, but concern the formation of communities and their relationships with the powers-to-be in general. The aim of this study is to analyze the role and the nature of this community emerging in a liminal place, along the coast in a lagoon area. Although not an obviously favourable site, the availability of natural resources led to the development, in a relatively short time, of a community living from fishing and salt harvesting. This borderline location was key to the economic and later political success of a stable though short-lived settlement whose brief history is outlined below.

A Brief Introduction to Comacchio

In the written sources Comacchio is famous for being at the centre of a treaty drawn up between the Lombards and the inhabitants of the site in question in relation to trading activities taking place along the Po and its tributaries.

1 On Comacchio and its medieval archaeology, see Sauro Gelichi and Diego Calaon, “Comacchio: la storia di un emporio sul delta del Po,” in *Genti del Delta. Da Spina a Comacchio. Uomini, territorio e culto dall'antichità all'alto medioevo* (Ferrara, 2007), pp. 387–416 (with previous bibliography).

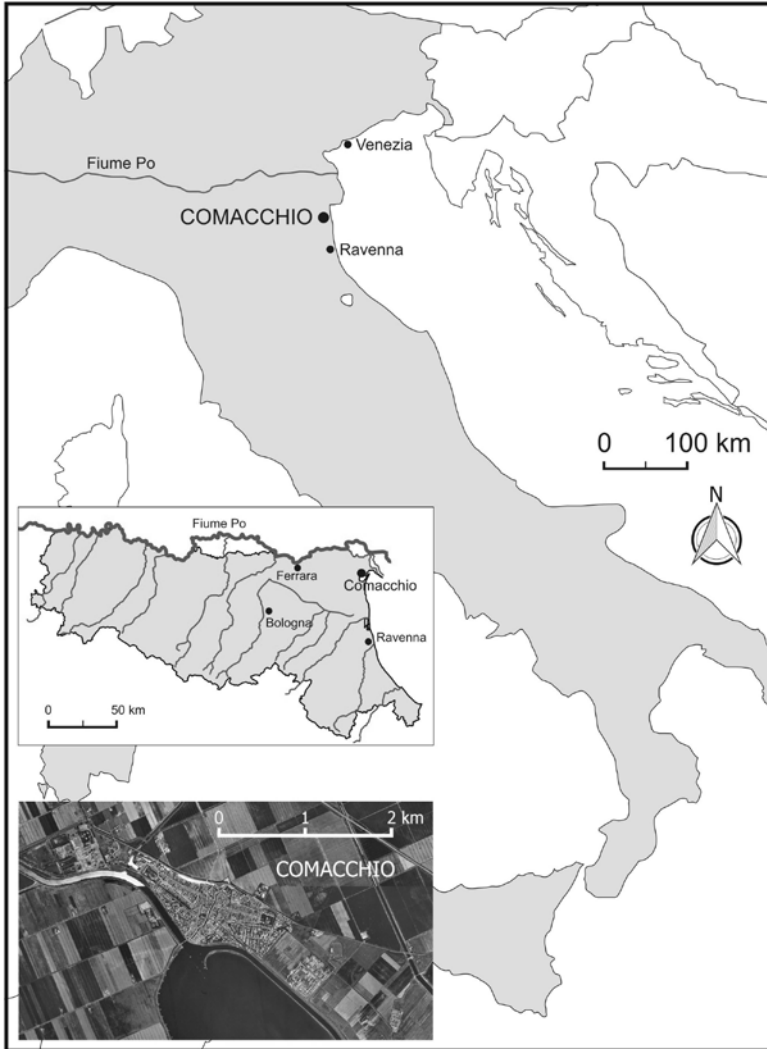


FIGURE 7.1 *Location of Comacchio.*

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The treaty, which dates to 715 (or 730), is the first historical text to mention Comacchio.² References to Comacchio are also found in the *Istoria*

2 On the Capitulary, see Ludo Moritz Hartmann, *Zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte Italiens im frühen Mittelalter* (Gotha, 1902), pp. 123–124, n. 1 and, more recently, Massimo Montanari, “Il capitulare di Liutprando: note di storia dell’economia e dell’alimentazione,” in *La Civiltà Comacchiese e Pomposiana dalle origini preistoriche al tardo medioevo* (Bologna, 1986), pp. 461–475.

Venetorum attributed to John the Deacon, which describes damage to the site following an attack by the Saracens in 875. The raiders had originally set their sights on Grado, but after being put to flight by a fleet of Veneti, they set sail for Comacchio, sacking it.³ The community's fate was definitively sealed in 932. Another act of war would seal the community's fate when the Venetian duke, Peter II Candiano, sent an army against the *Comaclenses* (the inhabitants of Comacchio) to respond to an insult. This time, the use of weapons seems to have decreed the end of the settlement. According to the *Istoria Veneticorum*, Comacchio was burned to the ground and its inhabitants deported to Venice.⁴

The archaeological excavations, carried out between 2007 and 2009 in two areas of the historical town (around the cathedral and within Villaggio San Francesco) (Fig. 7.2) brought to light a sequence of structures and layers spanning the time period of the settlement's development: from its beginnings in the second half of the 6th century through its further growth in the 7th century to its consolidation in the 8th century.⁵ Most importantly, they not only revealed the town's economic and social characteristics but also confirmed that the settlement had been an important trading center.⁶ They also provided direct evidence of Comacchio's status as an episcopal see in the 8th century and of a crisis having taken place around the 10th century, revealed by the destruction and reconstruction of the cathedral/episcopal church and by the abandonment

3 Giovanni Diacono, *Istoria Veneticorum*, ed. Luigi Andrea Berto, *Fonti per la Storia dell'Italia medievale. Storici italiani dal Cinquecento al Millecinquecento ad uso delle scuole 2* (Bologna, 1999), III, 12, pp. 136–137: "... protinus recedentes ab urbe, Comaclensem villam depopulati sunt." The same episode is also narrated by Andrea da Bergamo (*Chronicon* c. 17): even more detailed than John the Deacon, telling us that the incident occurred in July 875 and that Comacchio was burned.

4 Giovanni Diacono, *Istoria Veneticorum*, III, 44, pp. 152–153.

5 On these excavations, see: *L'isola del vescovo. Gli scavi archeologici intorno alla Cattedrale di Comacchio*, ed. Sauro Gelichi (Florence 2009); Sauro Gelichi, Diego Calaon, Elena Grandi, and Claudio Negrelli, "The history of a forgotten town: Comacchio and its archaeology," in *From one sea to another. Trading places in the European Early Middle Ages*, ed. Sauro Gelichi and Richard Hodges (Turnhout, 2012), pp. 169–205.

6 On Comacchio as a trading center, see: Sauro Gelichi, "Flourishing places in North-Eastern Italy: towns and emporia between late antiquity and the Carolingian Age," in *Post-Roman Towns, Trade and Settlement in Europe and Byzantium 1: The Heirs of the Roman West*, ed. Joachim Henning (Berlin–New York, 2007), pp. 77–104; idem, "Venice, Comacchio and the Adriatic Emporia between the Lombard and Carolingian ages," in *Dorestad in an International Framework. New Research on Centres of Trade and Coinage in Carolingian Times*, ed. Annemarike Willemsen and Hanneke Kik (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 149–157; idem, "Local and Interregional Exchanges in the Lower Po Valley (eighth–ninth century)," in *Trade and Markets in Byzantium*, ed. Cecile Morrisson (Washington, 2012), pp. 217–231.

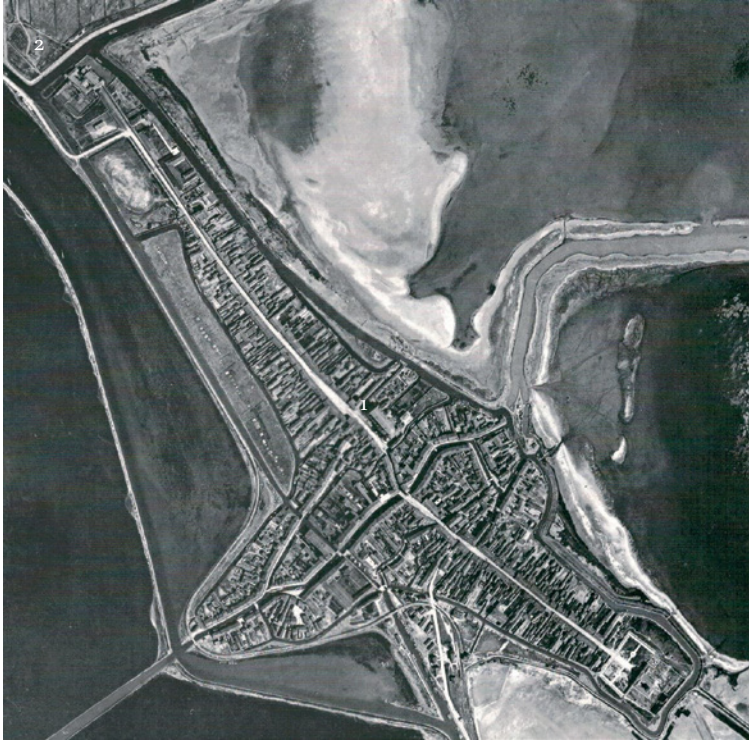


FIGURE 7.2 *Plan of Comacchio and the main excavation areas: (1) Piazza XX Settembre, (2) Villaggio San Francesco.*

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DI VENEZIA

of the area of Villaggio San Francesco (according to the written sources).⁷ This area, which lies outside the historical center, played an important role in the Early Middle Ages; in fact, as the presence of port structures and warehouses show, it was located in a transfer point between the inland waterways and sea communications. The excavations around the cathedral, however, have shown that a new church was built and life went on. Although Comacchio remained a bishopric, its economic situation changed radically as shown by the absence of imported pottery and amphorae in the layers from the 10th century onwards.

7 On the episcopal church and its chronology by the excavations, see: *L'isola del vescovo*; Sauro Gelichi, Riccardo Belcari, Diego Calaon, and Elena Grandi, "Spolia' in contesto. Il riuso nell'episcopio medievale di Comacchio," *Hortus Artium Mediaevalium* 17 (2011), pp. 49–59.

Dry Lands and/or Waters?

No one disputes the fact that Comacchio was founded within a lagoon. Indeed, until the early 20th century, it was still an island. What is less certain is the type of lagoon environment in which this settlement developed. It is likely that the environmental context proposed some years ago requires some modification. In fact, recent studies of the area have revealed the presence of a larger area of dry land than previously thought, some of which was situated in the vicinity of the original site of Comacchio⁸ (Fig. 7.3).

The few written documents referring to Comacchio provide little idea of the extension of the dry land or of its potential role in the structural development of the settlement. In addition to the so-called Liutprand Capitulary already mentioned, two texts explicitly refer to the commercial activities of the *Comaclenses*: one is a diploma of 781 attached to a document dated 715 and issued by Charlemagne to Bishop Vitale of Comacchio, in which the Frankish king confirmed the right of the people to carry out their trade according to their past customs.⁹ The other is a mid-9th-century *placito* (a judge's verdict from between 850 and 859) that refers to a dispute between the *Comaclenses* and the Archbishop of Ravenna over the possession of a *massa* (area of dry ground).¹⁰

Thus, one of the texts in our possession emphasizes the strong trading activities in Comacchio from at least the second half of the 7th century, therefore specifically slanting Comacchio's commercial history in a particular direction, while the other suggests that there was a more contained level of trading and a local aristocracy more interested in land possession. Given that ecosystems containing human settlements require farming land, it would not be surprising to find at least two macro-areas intended for agricultural purposes near Comacchio. The 9th-century *placito* provides evidence, not only of the presence of two such areas, but also of their use.

Moreover, written documentation also provides evidence of the presence of enclosed areas designated for fishing, or perhaps even for fish-farming

8 Alessandro Alessio Rucco, *Comacchio nell'alto Medioevo. Il paesaggio tra topografia e geoarcheologia* (Florence, 2015).

9 Luigi Bellini, *Le saline dell'antico delta padano* (Ferrara, 1962), pp. 599–600.

10 On this document, see: Antonio Samaritani, "Un placito per Comacchio nel maggio 801," *Atti e Memorie della Deputazione ferrarese di storia patria*, s. III, XXVII (1977), pp. 43–50 and the more recent and useful Stefano Gasparri, "Un placito carolingio e la storia di Comacchio," in *Faire lien. Aristocratie, réseaux et échanges compétitifs*. Mélanges en l'honneur de Régine Le Jan (Paris, 2015), pp. 179–190.

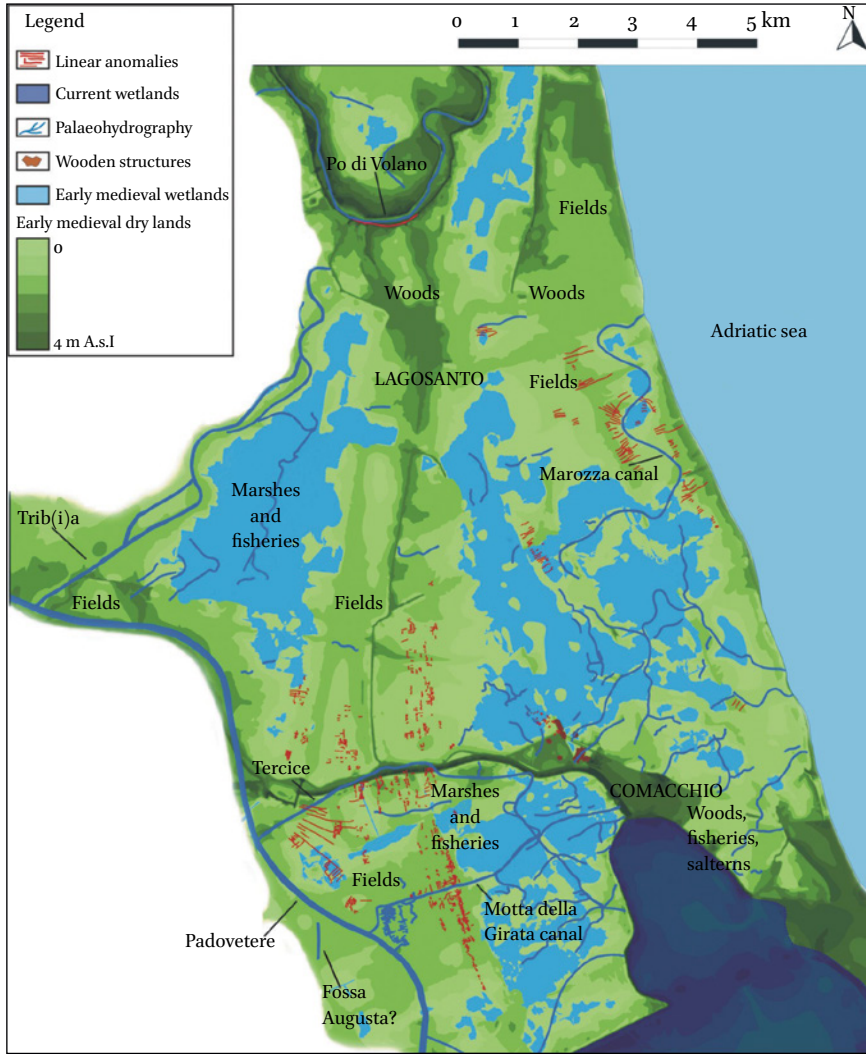


FIGURE 7.3 *Reconstruction of the territory of Comacchio during the Early Middle Ages (land and lagoons) (by Rucco).*

(we have perhaps archaeological evidence of this);¹¹ if we add the existence of salt production structures (at least 11 have been identified in the written

11 Alessandro Alessio Rucco, "Dalle 'carte' alla terra. Il paesaggio comacchiese nell'alto medioevo," in *Costruire territori/ Costruire identità: lagune archeologiche a confronto tra antichità e medioevo*, ed. Sauro Gelichi, *Reti Medievali* 16, 2 (2015), pp. 216–221.

sources to date), we already have the signs of a settlement with an integrated economy.

Despite the presence of such activities in Comacchio, the town owes its fortune—or the first stage of its existence—to its pre-eminence in trade. Without belabouring the point, we can safely say that the archaeological evidence for this fact is beyond doubt; although the same cannot be said about the Venetian lagoon. The 9th-century *placito* could also be considered a consequence of a renewed interest in land suitable for building on and not as proof that the local aristocracy had always been fundamentally interested in real estate or in both, land and trade.¹² In the second half of the 9th century, Comacchio was a dramatically different town to the settlement involved in negotiations with the Lombards just one hundred and forty years earlier.

Wild Origins or an Intermediate “Grey Zone”?

The issue of the so-called wild origins of the Venetian lagoon, a topos that fuelled Venetian mythology for many centuries,¹³ has recently been laid to rest, and rightly so. Comacchio has also been the subject of similarly “dangerous” discussions and interpretations. However, in this case the interpretation is based not on a paradigm bolstered by a traditional historical narrative (as in the case of Venice), but on a series of considerations deriving from both written and epigraphic sources. What is more, it takes a new direction by touching directly upon the relationship between Comacchio, Ravenna, and those we could define as the “higher powers-to-be.”

Our knowledge of Comacchio’s social structure is very limited and not without ambiguity. However, we do know that when the community of Comacchio was called upon to represent itself in public documents, in one case the treaty with the Lombards, it did so by means of a group of “powerful” individuals (a *magister militum*, two *comites*, and a presbyter) while in a second case—the document from Charlemagne—their representative was the bishop. In a third case, that of the *placito*, the community did not seem to be formally represented.

12 This seems to be Gasparri’s hypothesis in “Un placito.”

13 On the problem of the “wild origins” attributed to Venice, see: Gherardo Ortalli, “Il problema storico delle origini di Venezia,” in *Le origini di Venezia. Problemi esperienze proposte* (Venice, 1981), pp. 87–88; Antonio Carile, “Il problema delle origini di Venezia,” in *Le origini della chiesa di Venezia* (Venice, 1987), p. 77; and Gherardo Ortalli, “Torcello e la genesi di Venezia,” in *Torcello alle origini di Venezia tra Occidente e Oriente* (Venice, 2009), pp. 26–27.



FIGURE 7.4 *The inscription of the first bishop of Comacchio (about 723?).*

Between the Capitulary from 715 and Charlemagne's document of 781, novelty comes in the form of the presence of the bishop. While it is highly unlikely that Comacchio was already established as a diocese in 715, if we give credence to an inscription dating to the period in office of Archbishop of Ravenna Felice (723?) that apparently certifies the foundation of the episcopal see and the construction of the bishop's cathedral, there is the possibility that it may have become such before of the 781 (Fig. 7.4).

While the elements of doubt concerning the authenticity of the inscription are, in my opinion, outweighed by the evidence in favour of its being genuine, there are no doubts concerning the fact that Comacchio became an episcopal see after (and not before) it began to flourish economically.

Politically speaking, the area around Comacchio was "Byzantine" territory, remaining such with the exception of few brief periods over the course of the 8th century, until the fall of the Exarchate in 751 (the period of rule of King Astolfo). For a long time, the region came under the control, both spiritual and temporal, of the archbishops of Ravenna. Two of these archbishops were directly responsible for the foundation of two churches: Santa Maria in Padovetere, not far from Comacchio, dating back to the time of Archbishop Aureliano (540),¹⁴ and of San Giorgio d'Argenta (570), another church built

14 For a more recent review of material data from excavations of the site identified as Santa Maria in Padovetere, see Carla Corti, "Santa Maria in Padovetere: la chiesa, la necropoli e l'insediamento circostante," in *Genti del Delta. Da Spina a Comacchio. Uomini, territorio e culto dall'antichità all'alto medioevo* (Ferrara, 2007), pp. 531–552.



FIGURE 7.5 *The inscription of Exarch Isacius.*
BOLLINI, *LE ISCRIZIONI*

within the same territory but connected to a different Archbishop, Agnello.¹⁵ However, it is not certain that these churches functioned as “parish churches,” as references to them being *pieve*, or baptismal churches, date to a much later period. In one case this episcopal property was also connected to the use of land (for example, the Archbishop of Ravenna owned a great number of properties around the town of Argenta up until the Early Middle Ages). While the presence of these two institutions (Bishopric and Exarchate) seems to play no role in the growth and the development of Comacchio; how can we verify this?

The only evidence supporting a connection with the Exarchate is the epigraph ordered by Exarch Isacius on the death of a relative (between 625 and 643)¹⁶ (Fig. 7.5). The epigraph was probably found near the site of the monastery of San Mauro in Comacchio under circumstances that are unclear.¹⁷

15 On Argenta, its territory and the church of San Giorgio (which is only documented as a baptismal church in relatively late, i.e., 11th century, written sources), see *Storia e archeologia di una pieve medievale: San Giorgio di Argenta*, ed. Sauro Gelichi (Florence, 1992).

16 Maria Bollini, *Le iscrizioni greche di Ravenna* (Faenza, 1975), pp. 44–45.

17 A manuscript from the 17th century, therefore contemporary with its discovery, provides more reliable information. Attributed to a certain Giovan Battista Gasparini, it is known from excerpts contained in a volume by Alberto Felletti Spadazzi, *Spina senza vasi. Storia di Comacchio*, vol. 1 (Ferrara, 1983). Spadazzi writes with regard to the discovery, citing from the Gasparini’s manuscript: “Gasparini provides us with an authentic, highly credible description of the event (F. 39)”: under the pontificate of Urban VIII, during the so-called Barberini Wars (1640s), the church of Santo Mauro—Sant’Agostino was transformed into a stronghold; during excavations carried out as far as Valle Raibosola “they

The text contains no reference to the monastery, meaning there is no evidence of a connection to the monastery of San Mauro or even to Comacchio itself.¹⁸ Moreover, the epigraph is not complete¹⁹ and there is evidence that the stone was reused at some time in the past.²⁰ It is also difficult to imagine what type of funerary monument it originally belonged to (it measures 1.22 by 0.78 metres) and in what context it may have been used. Like other spolia found in Comacchio—see for example, the capitals and the columns of the first episcopal church in Comacchio²¹—it may well have originated in Ravenna.

There are far more connections to the episcopal presence than to the Exarchate, but they all concern buildings with no direct links to the settlement of Comacchio. No traces of a religious building dating prior to the foundation of the episcopal church have been found in Comacchio or in its immediate suburbs;²² this bears out what we already know about the cathedral.

In essence, the idea that Comacchio provided the Exarchate capital with a port following the collapse of Classe (the port of Ravenna) seems rather simplistic, and for many reasons reductive. Besides, no written source from Ravenna makes explicit mention of this (a circumstance that is in itself rather curious). Moreover, in the Capitulary dated 715, the *Comaclenses* themselves act as political subjects. The Capitulary makes explicit reference to past trading

found a large Greek marble slab bearing a eulogy that was neither ruined nor worn, worthy of esteem for its antiquity and for the quality of its letters.” It was deciphered and translated by a Jesuit father apparently living in Rome. (*ibid.* p. 15).

- 18 Confirming the questionable connection, Felletti Spadazzi, *Spina senza vasi*, pp. 15–16.
- 19 The inscription, now attached to a wall in the Museo Arcivescovile, Ravenna, is missing just under a quarter of the upper part (Bollini, *Le iscrizioni*, photos on p. 44). It seems that at the moment of its discovery the inscription was fragmentary (or was recovered in fragments), and, as Gasparini also informs us (in Felletti Spadazzi, *Spina senza vasi*, p. 15), it “was transported to Ravenna by Danese, the architect of the Apostolic Chamber of Ferrara, and reassembled before being set into the wall beneath the portico of his house.”
- 20 I refer not so much to the fact that it was discovered in incomplete and fragmentary form (as mentioned above this may be due to the circumstances of its discovery), but to the fact that the left edge has been trimmed and several final letters are missing. Although only a small section was cut away, and the missing letters are easy to fill in, the smoothness of the left edge clearly shows that it was deliberately cut, not damaged, in the past, probably prior to its discovery, and therefore due to its reuse.
- 21 On the *spolia* found in Comacchio and their possible provenance from Ravenna, see Gelichi, Belcari, Calalon, and Grandi, “Spolia’ in contesto.”
- 22 On the ecclesiastical situation in the Comacchio area, with a recent bibliography and some critical reflections on a number of traditional and controversial interpretations, see Elena Grandi, “La cristianizzazione del territorio,” in *Genti del Delta. Da Spina a Comacchio. Uomini, territorio e culto dall’antichità all’alto medioevo* (Ferrara, 2007), pp. 417–436.

traditions that have yet to be formalized. The context is unequivocal and borne out by the results of the archaeological research: it is one in which the *Comacclenses* have just begun to engage in profitable exchanges with the surrounding territories and the Lombards intend to exercise their rights on this trade, based on their fiscal ownership of the docking facilities along the water courses concerned. Basically, by declaring these rights, the Capitulary indirectly ratifies the existence of this community, giving it legal status.

It has rightly been pointed out that the community of Comacchio (like the Venetian community) had found a form of representation that fully integrated it into the political-military structure of the Exarchate. Thus, their situation was far removed from the naive spontaneity of their “savage origins.” Nevertheless, we cannot ignore the fact that this same community, and its elite, was based in a place that was relatively distant, both geographically and, above all, politically from that of the capital of the Exarchate. As mentioned, there are no written traces indicating a clear connection with the Exarchate prior to the foundation of the new episcopal see—an act with strong political implications that marked a true turning point in the development of local society. Comacchio’s fortune may, therefore, have been linked to a series of circumstances, including the fact that it operated within a context that was politically fragmented (as was generally the case in the north of the peninsula between the 7th and 8th centuries), and, above all, in a sort of “grey zone.”

Comacchio as a Trading and Craft Center

In order to throw more light on Comacchio’s social identity in the early medieval period, it may help to briefly examine two aspects emerging from the archaeological documentation: the first concerns Comacchio’s trading role, the second its crafts role.

The so-called Liutprand Capitulary is not just an interesting example of an early medieval port tax,²³ but also offers indirect evidence of the type of goods available to the inhabitants of Comacchio. This text has already been examined in some detail,²⁴ so I will limit myself to a brief description. The

23 On this issue, see the recent study by Neil Middleton, “Early medieval port customs, tolls and controls on foreign trade,” *Early Medieval Europe* 13 (2005), pp. 313–358.

24 Montanari, “Il capitolare”; Sauro Gelichi, “Flourishing places,” pp. 77–104; Sauro Gelichi, “The eels of Venice. The long eighth century of the emporia of the northern region along the Adriatic coast,” in 774. *Ipotesi su una transizione*, ed. Stefano Gasparri (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 81–117.

inhabitants of Comacchio were required to pay taxes in the form of salt (the most frequent form of payment), money, oil, garum, and pepper. This therefore means that, at the beginning of the 8th century, in addition to their local goods, the people of Comacchio also had access to products of non-local (possibly oil and garum) or even oriental origin (like pepper).

However, the importance of trading activities emerges more clearly from the results of archaeological investigations. One of the key indicators for this phenomenon, visible from the archaeological record, is represented by globular amphorae, which are constantly present in deposits from the 8th and part of the 9th century in Comacchio. There is little doubt that Comacchio is the northern Adriatic site with the greatest numbers of these amphorae (adding up all available data, a hundred-odd examples).²⁵ Shown by analyses to have differing origins, they are tangible evidence of Comacchio's role as a terminus for goods from southern Italy and the eastern Mediterranean. Obviously, we have yet to determine which vectors and agents transported this merchandise,²⁶ but they have no bearing on the commercial role of this center between the second half of the 7th century to the 9th century.

It has been suggested that craft activities played a decisive role in the formation of permanent sites of exchange (or emporia as above, if preferred),²⁷ and both direct and indirect traces of production activities have been found in Comacchio. The former relate to the remains of a workshop discovered in the context of the 2006–2009 excavations around the cathedral. The workshop was a fairly large building (8 × 4 meters, c. 120 square meters) combining wooden elements with brickwork and foundations made from brick rubble (Fig. 7.6).

25 The situation in the Venetian lagoon remains open; globular amphorae are present, but we have yet to establish the entity and number.

26 For the phenomenon of Comacchio seen in the context of the political and economic evolution of the Empire, see the convincing observations of Delogu (Paolo Delogu, *Le origini del medioevo. Studi sul settimo secolo* (Rome, 2010), pp. 115–125). For an attempt to model various types of nodal points in connection with the presence of local vectors, see also Sauro Gelichi, "Societies at the Edge: new Cities in the Adriatic Sea during the Early Middle Ages (8th–9th centuries)," in *New Directions in Early Medieval European Archaeology: Spain and Italy Compared. Essays for Riccardo Francovich*, ed. Sauro Gelichi and Richard Hodges (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 298–299. See also note 6.

27 Richard Hodges, *Towns and Trade in the Age of Charlemagne* (London, 2000), pp. 83–89. This characteristic is a prerogative of the centers that Hodges defines as class B emporia: Richard Hodges, *Dark Age Economics: the Origins of Towns and Trade AD 600–1000* (London, 1989²), pp. 51–52.



FIGURE 7.6 *Comacchio, piazza XX Settembre. Workshop in Comacchio.*
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There was evidence of metalworking (including iron) and glass making activities, including abundant glass waste.²⁸ While it is impossible to demonstrate exactly when and for how long the workshop was active in this area, we can establish that it was active for a period of approximately seventy years (from the second half of the 7th to the first quarter of the 8th century). The final date is indirectly indicated by the phases of abandonment and levelling to make room for a small necropolis (Fig. 7.7).

The presence of this cemetery indicates that there had been a clear change in use of the entire area, probably caused by the foundation of an episcopal church following the institution of the episcopal see (probably towards 723).²⁹ Traces of the activities of a smith were also found in the workshop. In addition, there is direct evidence of glassmaking, and by examining the waste it was possible to establish that the workshop produced glass objects for everyday use, such as stemware (Fig. 7.8).



FIGURE 7.7 Comacchio, piazza XX Settembre. Small necropolis (second half of 8th century–9th century).

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28 *L'isola del vescovo*, pp. 30–36.

29 Sauro Gelichi, “*Lupicinus presbiter*. Una breve nota sulle istituzioni ecclesiastiche comacchiesi delle origini,” in *Ricerca come incontro. Archeologi, paleografi e storici per Paolo Delogu*, ed. Giulia Barone, Anna Esposito, and Carla Frova (Rome, 2013), pp. 48–52.

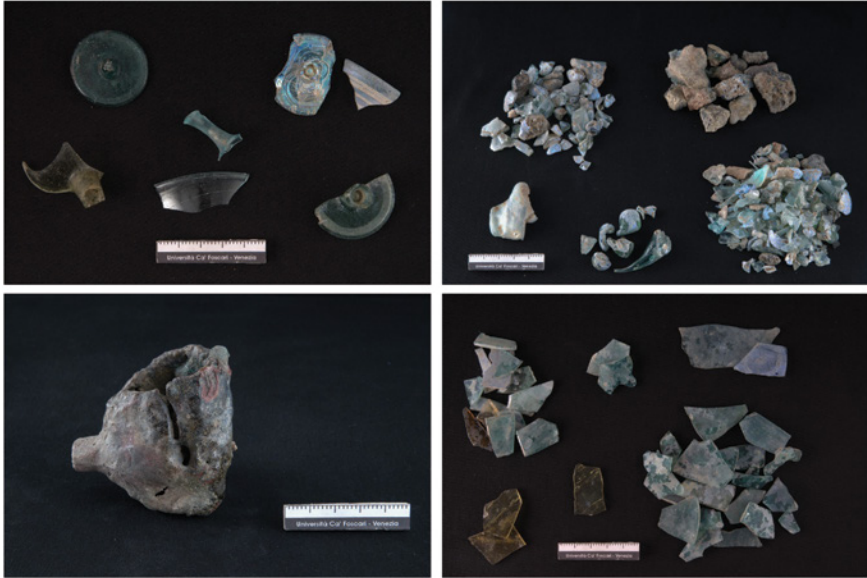


FIGURE 7.8 *Comacchio, piazza XX Settembre. Evidence of glassmaking.*
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Nevertheless the presence of a matrix (the only one of its kind to be found in a western context) used to produce bi-colored cameos is evidence that this workshop also produced luxury items (Fig. 7.9).

There is a pendant piece to the matrix, which depicts a male bust in three-quarter profile, in the form of a cameo decorating a reliquary casket in the Museo Cristiano e Tesoro del Duomo di Cividale del Friuli,³⁰ which is extremely similar although not identical to it. In fact, the presence of slight differences between the cameo and matrix mean it is unlikely that the Cividale cameo was produced by the Comacchio matrix. However, the resemblance is so marked that they were almost certainly based on the same model or even produced by the same workshop. Both the Cividale cameo and Comacchio matrix belong to a very small group of two-layered glass cameos, of which no more than thirteen examples exist today.³¹

30 Elisabetta Gagetti, "Magistras Romanitas? La matrice di Comacchio e la produzione di cammei vitrei a due strati a imitazione dell'antico," in *Un emporio e la sua cattedrale. Gli scavi in piazza XX Settembre e Villaggio San Francesco a Comacchio* (in press).

31 See Gagetti, "Magistras Romanitas?" for an excellent historical-critical framing of the problem.



FIGURE 7.9 *Comacchio, piazza XX Settembre. Matrix for glass cameos and related cameo on a capsella from Cividale.*

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DEL FRIULI

However, a second production indicator, again found during the cathedral excavations, may help us understand the type of activity being carried out by this workshop. The object in question, also a matrix and also one of a kind, was used to produce small bronze letters (c. 4 cm in height) (Fig. 7.10).³²

Bronze letters were widely used in the Roman world, especially for public inscriptions, but only rare examples of their use exist for the early medieval period (such as the inscription in the palatine chapel of Arechis in Salerno dating to 770 or the monumental inscription on the facade of the basilica of Abbot Giosué in San Vincenzo al Volturno from 808).³³ Given its dimensions, it seems probable that it was used to make a dedicatory inscription on a small

32 For a historical-critical study of this matrix, see John Mitchell, "An Eighth-Century Matrix for a Bronze Letter," in *Un emporio e la sua cattedrale* (in press).

33 See again Mitchell "An Eighth-Century Matrix." On the inscription of San Pietro a Corte, see Paolo Peduto et al., "Un accesso alla storia di Salerno: stratigrafia e materiali dell'area palaziale longobarda," *Rassegna Storica Salernitana* n.s. 5 (1988), pp. 9–63, and on the inscription of San Vincenzo al Volturno, John Mitchell, "Late antique and early medieval carved inscriptions," in *San Vincenzo al Volturno 3: The Finds from the 1980–86 Excavations*, ed. John Mitchell and Inge Lyse Hansen (Spoleto, 2001), pp. 39–40, 43–40.



FIGURE 7.10 *Comacchio, piazza XX Settembre. Matrix for bronze letter.*
 LABORATORIO DI ARCHEOLOGIA MEDIEVALE UNIVERSITÀ CA'
 FOSCARI DI VENEZIA

scale—for the architrave of a portal or for some sort of church furnishing such as a ciborium, or to compose a funerary epitaph. The matrix was found in a 10th-century context, but it is almost certainly a residual find, given that the palaeographical analysis suggested a chronology from the 7th to the 8th century.³⁴ In view of its physical vicinity, it is highly probable that the object comes from the workshop described above and that it can be dated to the period of time in which the workshop was active.

These two matrices provide clear proof of the existence in Comacchio of a workshop that not only produced everyday objects (glasses) but also highly refined artifacts requiring skilled workmanship that drew upon the practices of the ancient Roman world in terms of both technology and typology. The high degree of sophistication achieved by the workshops of Comacchio during this period would be further reinforced if we could confirm the provenance of another artifact, one known to us for some time and traditionally held to come

34 See again the palaeographic arguments and chronological proposal made by Mitchell in “An Eighth-Century Matrix.”

from Comacchio: I am of course referring to the 7th-century gold fibula in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.³⁵

There is other indirect evidence of craft activities in Comacchio, this time in the form of ceramics. The Comacchio excavations have unearthed numerous fragments belonging to light clay unglazed ware (Fig. 7.11): so far we have only found closed forms, almost always with two handles and sometimes decorated with incised lines running in bands, as well as horizontal motifs sometimes taking a wavy form.³⁶ In Comacchio these ceramics are almost always found

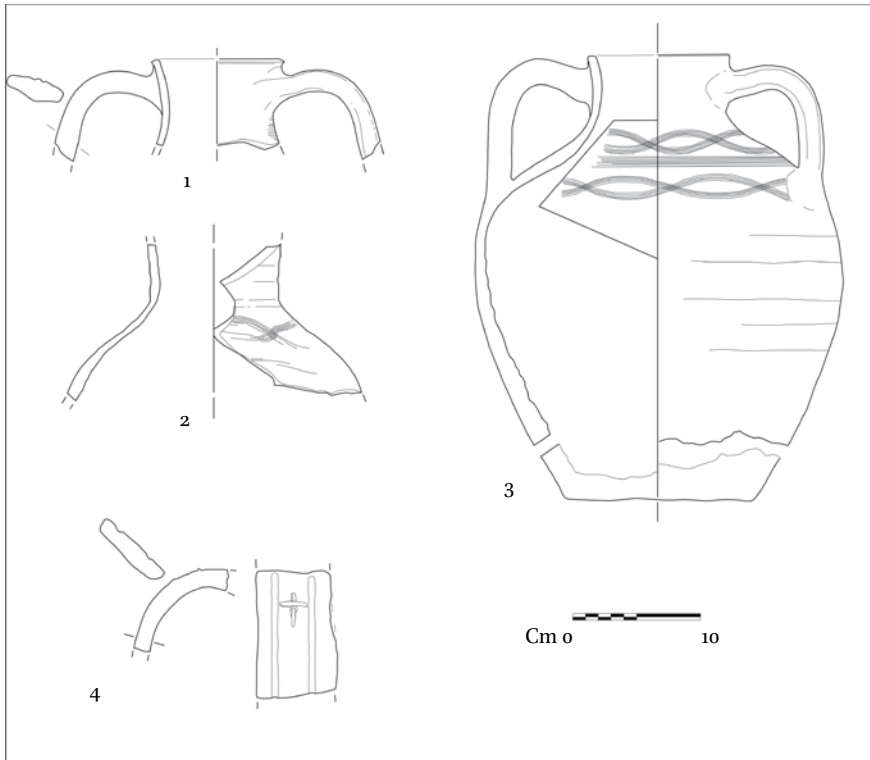


FIGURE 7.11 *Comacchio, unglazed ware (8th–9th century).*

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35 On the fibula, with a recent bibliography, see Raffaella Farioli Campanati, “Una scheda sulla fibula di Comacchio,” in *La Civiltà Comacchiese e Pomposiana dalle Origini Preistoriche al Tardo Medioevo* (Bologna, 1986), pp. 455–459.

36 On this type of production, see Claudio Negrelli, “Towards a definition of early medieval pottery: amphorae and other vessels in the Northern Adriatic between the 7th and the 8th centuries,” in *From one sea*, ed. Gelichi and Hodges, pp. 309–413.

in association with globular amphorae in 7th–9th-century contexts. Despite the similarities between this category of products and ceramics from Rome and Latium, minero-petrographic analyses have excluded that the Comacchio ceramics were imported from that area (or even from southern Italy). On the other hand, the analysis of the fabric showed that these ceramics must have been produced locally or not too far away (sub-regional area), even though we are lacking clear evidence allowing us to identify the precise production area. Moreover, given the function of this light clay unglazed ware, it seems likely that it was produced in Comacchio. Most of the containers are small flat-bottomed amphorae, about a third smaller in size than the globular amphorae. It is possible that we are seeing a specialized production of containers suited to river rather than sea transport; in fact, it is no coincidence that we are beginning to discover evidence of these containers in inland centers, such as monasteries, together with fragments of globular amphorae.³⁷

These craft activities clearly qualify our center as a nodal point (see note 6 above). As pointed out, the nature of these productions is not so much linked to the specialization of craftsmen as to the origin of the raw materials.³⁸ Activities connected to glassmaking or metal casting involve the consumption of raw materials imported from a distance (unlike other types of activity such as weaving, forging, or bone working, which use raw materials found everywhere). As the arrival point for goods from the eastern Mediterranean and southern Italy, Comacchio found itself in a privileged position in this regard. Moreover, these activities do not seem to be connected to a program promoted by the Church. We should not be misled by the fact that the workshop was next to the cathedral because it was active prior to the foundation of the episcopal see (and therefore did not apparently depend upon it). Although situated in another latitude to the emporia of northern Europe, Comacchio is distinguished by the same innovation and independence that made these trading settlements stand out in contemporary Christendom.³⁹

37 Gelichi, "Societies at the Edge," pp. 292–297.

38 Søren Sindbæk, "Networks and nodal points: the emergence of towns in early Viking Age Scandinavia," *Antiquity* 81 (2001), pp. 126–127. This also applies to the Venetian lagoon and, in particular, to the glass workshop discovered in Torcello, even though the date is uncertain (7th or 9th century?): Eleonora Tabaczyńska, "L'officina vetraria," in *Torcello. Scavi 1961–1962*, ed. Lech Leciejewicz, Eleonora Tabaczyńska, and Stanisław Tabaczyński (Rome, 1977), pp. 89–153; Lech Leciejewicz, "Italian-Polish researches into the origin of Venice," *Archaeologia Polona* 40 (2000), pp. 51–71. On glass-making in Torcello, see also Margherita Ferri, "Reperti vetri altomedievali dalle isole di Torcello e San Francesco del Deserto—Venezia," *Journal of Glass Studies* 48 (2006), pp. 173–191.

39 Hodges, *Towns and Trade*, p. 86: "They (i.e., emporia) embody three features which were alien to much of later seventh and early eighth-century Latin Christendom." And again

Comacchio from Nodal Point to Central Place?

In the debate about Comacchio (and, in some respects, about Venice), the term “emporium” is often brought up, a word infrequently used in relation to the early medieval period (and, of consequence, in our historiography).⁴⁰ Conversely, and as is well known, emporium is commonly used in relation to discussions about northern Europe, where it is used to define a series of trading settlements that, in many cases, would have formed the grounds for the origin of the urbanization in these territories.⁴¹

A comparison between the emporia of northern Europe and these settlements appearing near the littoral areas of the Mediterranean has been proposed,⁴² not only to identify possible typological similarities (albeit on rather dangerous grounds), but also in order to help contextualize a phenomenon that has been largely ignored within the scientific debate until now. There are a number of similarities, including temporal overlapping, between the phenomena of the emporia of northern Europe and the birth of these new settlements on the North Adriatic Sea that are worth highlighting.

“the emporia were consciously transgressing the ethos of kin-based society, aggregating people for economic purposes.”

- 40 Stephen Lebecq, “The new wiks or emporia and the development of a maritime economy in the Northern Seas (7th–9th centuries),” in *From one sea*, ed. Gelichi and Hodges (2012), pp. 15–16 for an interesting discussion of the meaning of the term and of the lexicon used by northern European sources to describe this type of trading center.
- 41 There is an extensive bibliography on northern European emporia. By way of example, in addition to the text by Hodges mentioned above, *Dark Age Economics*, which makes an important contribution to enlarging this debate, see *Wics. The Early Medieval Trading Centres of Northern Europe*, ed. David Hill and Robert Cowie (Sheffield, 2001); Richard Hodges, *Dark Age Economics. A new Audit* (London, 2012); *Markets in Early Medieval Europe. Trading and “Productive” Sites, 650–850*, ed. Katharina Ulmschneider and Tim Pestell (Bollington, 2003). Of course there is also much on emporia in two recent important volumes on the early medieval economic history of the Mediterranean: Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD 300–900* (Cambridge, 2001); Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005). For an Italian take on the phenomenon, see Ross Balzaretto, “Cities, Emporia and Monasteries: Local Economies in the Po Valley, c. AD 700–875,” in *Towns in transition. Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Neil Christie and Simon T. Loseby (London, 1996), pp. 213–234, with regard to which I express my reserves in Gelichi, “The eels of Venice.”
- 42 *From one sea to another. Trading places in the European Early Middle Ages*, ed. Gelichi and Hodges (Turnhout, 2012).

Furthermore, there are many similarities between Comacchio and the class B emporia originally proposed by Richard Hodges (some of which are mentioned above): that it developed in a previously unsettled area (or that it did not evolve directly from an ancient city); that it was mainly based on trade, including long-distance trade; the fact that it was a place where craft activities developed; finally, the fact that it was not directly established by the central power, and that, in the initial stage at least, it had no direct link with ecclesiastical power.⁴³ But was Comacchio also at that heart of dependent territory? Did it exercise the functions that we usually assign to a central place?

In a recent article dedicated to locational principles in southern Scandinavia, Søren Sindbæk re-examined central places,⁴⁴ organizing them according to a hierarchy of basic concepts (such as open access and nodal points) characterizing coastal settlements. This approach appears to be equally applicable in explaining the existence of a center like Comacchio. In an initial phase at least, Comacchio seemed to fall into the category of nodal points: favourable position for trade routes protected by a lagoon, thus offering safe landing places and berths for ships; arrival and nodal point for international goods; absence of a strong power. At the same time, until the first quarter of the 8th century at least, Comacchio does not seem to have controlled a territorial district or to have carried out a specific function of redistribution of goods in its immediate hinterland given that its trading sphere covered the entire Po plain. It was only during a subsequent phase (from the second quarter of the 8th century at least) that the presence of a bishop (directly appointed by the archdiocese of Ravenna) would introduce a figure of institutional rank and with a high political profile who would play a key role in the centuries to come. It is in this period, moreover, that the few surviving documents testify to the existence of a land-owning aristocracy (see note 4 above). Comacchio, therefore, seems to be evolving towards functions causing it to resemble a central place, while at the same time maintaining the prerogatives of a place for the long-distance redistribution of goods, also because in this circumstance “long-distance transport can be understood as a simple extension of the central place function.”⁴⁵

43 In fact, as McCormick points out with regard to Venice, Comacchio was certainly not founded by a king: Michael McCormick, “Where do trading towns come from? Early medieval Venice and the northern emporia,” in *Post-Roman Towns*, p. 44; on the role of local actors, as the protagonists of forms of self-government in the development of Comacchio’s society, Delogu agrees (Paolo Delogu, “Questioni di mare e di terra,” in *From one sea* p. 460).

44 Søren Sindbæk, “Open access, nodal point, and central places,” *Estonian Journal of Archaeology* 13, 2 (2009), pp. 98–99.

45 Sindbæk, “Open access,” p. 103.

Comacchio's decline after the 9th century would not only lead to the collapse of a maritime trading link, but would also constrain its community within an increasingly lifeless dimension of localism.

Conclusions

Comacchio lies in a peripheral area that was thinly inhabited or entirely uninhabited in Antiquity and Late Antiquity, and therefore lacking settlements with a well-defined social and political profile. The Capitulary of Liutprand, the first document to mention Comacchio, can therefore be considered as a text ratifying the existence of a community and attributing to it, for the first time, a social role and legal status. I am convinced that Comacchio's marginal position played a positive role in the development of this center and even decreed its success.

Comacchio provides a good example of how some coastal sites evolve from a subsistence economy based on the exploitation of spontaneous resources (salt and fish) to a trade-oriented economy. This transition requires favourable social conditions and equally favourable locational conditions. Seventh-century Comacchio appears to have had both, and owes its initial success to them.

This transition was relatively swift. Just over a hundred years passed from the end of an economic system based on the exploitation of the natural resources of vast fiscal properties and on a series of scattered settlements (*villae*, *stationes*?)⁴⁶ mainly situated along riverbanks (5th century) to the emergence

46 As is known, no center has been documented in the area during the Roman age that could be considered a town. The only settlement with a reasonably sized population and institutional value appears to have been a *vicus*, the *vicus Habentia*, which was probably the seat of the administrator of the various *saltus* belonging to the imperial revenue property (Gelichi and Calaon, "Comacchio," pp. 395–396). The settlement was probably situated on the river and coastal banks, following the main communication routes (both rivers and roads). Given the absence of large-scale farming activities, the main resources must have involved exploitation of natural resources and specialist production activities such as brick-making: Gelichi and Calaon, "Comacchio," pp. 398–399, and, concerning these issues in general, Giovanni Uggeri, *La romanizzazione dell'antico delta padano* (Ferrara, 1975). Nevertheless, we need to distinguish between the area immediately adjacent to the coast and the areas lying further inland, where there were probably farming estates of some kind. Excavations carried out in a number of these settlements, defined as *villae* with production structures, seem to indicate the late 4th century as the period of abandonment. However, as a recent review of the materials has revealed, it is likely that there were also later phases of occupation, lasting until at least the 5th century (for example,

of a trade-oriented center (7th century): by the early 8th century, Comacchio's role was clearly defined.

This development should be considered in the general context of the evolution of relations between the Empire and the Adriatic that was developing after the Arab conquest of North Africa and the interruption of imports from these provinces to the West and to the East. This process undeniably caused a shift in the balance of Byzantine interests, and the maintenance of lines of communication and of traffic, in a belt running north of the Mediterranean from Asia Minor to Italy.⁴⁷ Moreover, during this period—7th to 8th century—direct Byzantine control, especially along the coasts, was still rather strong.

Already in an early phase, Comacchio appeared to be a place where both trade and craft activities were concentrated. The latter activities, which served to produce goods closely linked to trade activities (light clay unglazed ware), bulk utilitarian commodities (glass), but also luxury goods (cameos, inscriptions with bronze letters), reveal a complex economic picture as well as a sophisticated social reality. Its social structure affirmed its links with the Roman (now Byzantine) world by perpetuating technologies, modes of communication and iconographic models evoking that world. These characteristics would be rediscovered and accentuated at a time when, following the foundation of the episcopal see and construction of its cathedral, the new power would represent itself by means of the same devices (dedicatory inscription, church with a nave and two aisles separated by columns, spolia capitals, opus sectile wall decorations and mosaic floors) (Fig. 7.12).

In this initial phase, Comacchio resembled a nodal point more than a central place, sharing with the latter its favourable geographical position, the provision of a safe harbour for ships and international trade links; in addition, the river network provided a swift and safe connection to the leading towns and ports in the inland.⁴⁸ It also seemed to offer a considerable investment capacity in the building of infrastructures such as the Motta della Girata canal that linked the *Padus Vetus* (possibly senescent during this period but still

Salto del Lupo). We also need to reconsider the purpose of these settlements. Nonetheless, it seems likely that different settlement models emerged during the 6th century, based on a nucleated village or clustered settlement. Although they are currently only known through their necropolises (for a brief summary, see Gelichi and Calaon, "Comacchio," pp. 402–403), the Motta della Girata represents an important site.

47 Delogu, *Le origini*, pp. 116–117.

48 For a preliminary evaluation of the distances and travel times of boats going from Comacchio to the hinterland, see Michael McCormick, "Comparing and connecting: Comacchio and the early medieval trading town," in *From one sea to another*, ed. Gelichi and Hodges, p. 97.



FIGURE 7.12 *Comacchio, piazza XX Settembre. Spolia from the early medieval episcopal church (a, b) and parallel from Ravenna (c, d).*
LABORATORIO DI ARCHEOLOGIA MEDIEVALE UNIVERSITÀ CA'
FOSCARI DI VENEZIA

navigable) and the settlement of Comacchio.⁴⁹ In this phase, the so-called strong powers (exarch and archbishop) appear to be absent. There is no trace of the archbishop of Ravenna (or of a local bishop) until the first quarter of the 8th century, when the diocese is founded. At that time, Comacchio had already become a flourishing center and home to a relatively sophisticated society that had acquired a legal identity enabling it to stipulate a pact with the Lombards. Although officially lying in Byzantine territory, Comacchio seemed to respond to the interests of the inhabitants of the Lombard kingdom more than those of the aristocracy in Ravenna, which was losing its hold in this period.

As mentioned above, towards the end of the 8th century, the situation changed, and the center's trading functions went into decline just as a new

49 Recent studies have attempted to establish how many people would have been needed to carry out similar works, and how long it would have taken them: Elena Grandi, "Un delta in movimento. Il caso di Comacchio tra tarda antichità e alto medioevo," in *Costruire territori/Costruire identità: lagune archeologiche a confronto tra antichità e medioevo*, ed. Sauro Gelichi, *Reti Medievali* 16, 2 (2015), pp. 245–248.

center began to emerge. That center was Venice.⁵⁰ There are several reasons for this downturn,⁵¹ including the shrinking markets in the hinterland following the collapse of the Kingdom, Venice's emerging role with regard to Franco-Carolingian interests, as well as intrinsic locational reasons (like the hydrogeological changes brought about by the Po di Volano).⁵² It is likely that this process also caused the aristocracies to strengthen their ties to their lands. The property being contended in the famous placito above can be interpreted in this sense rather than otherwise. In the 9th century, however, the settlement's main political actor seemed to be the bishop.⁵³ The "Stefanus" whose sarcophagus is in the cathedral of Comacchio was probably a bishop (Fig. 7.13): dating to the 9th century, the sarcophagus draws upon a type that



FIGURE 7.13 Comacchio, cathedral. Sarcophagus of Stefanus (9th century).
CURIA VESCOVILE DI COMACCHIO–FERRARA

50 Gelichi, "The eels of Venice."

51 Paolo Delogu, for example, attributes it to the fact that the Frankish conquest of Comacchio from the Byzantine Empire, leading to a discriminatory customs system that had a negative impact on Comacchio's access to Byzantine markets (Delogu, "Le origini," pp. 121–122).

52 At the level of macro-phenomenon, geographers have identified the gradual erosion of the coast, which could in turn have limited Comacchio's access to the sea: Marco Stefani and Stefano Vincenzi, "The interplay of eustasy, climate and human activity in the Late Quaternary depositional evolution and sedimentary architecture of the Po delta system," *Marine Geology* 4 (2005), pp. 222–223. However, this process would have taken place over a period of time not compatible with this contingency, and, what is more, no clear traces of the phenomenon were uncovered in the excavations at Villaggio San Francesco in Comacchio, where remains of maritime infrastructures have been found: Grandi, "Un delta in movimento."

53 Carver has recently expressed interesting views on the role of ecclesiastical structures in the promotion of trade (Martin Carver, "Commerce and Cult. Confronted ideologies in 6th–9th Century Europe," *Medieval Archaeology* 59 (2015), pp. 1–23), but in the case of Comacchio they seem to come into play at a later stage (see note 4).



FIGURE 7.14 *Comacchio, piazza XX Settembre. Early medieval decorative stone from the episcopal church.*

LABORATORIO DI ARCHEOLOGIA MEDIEVALE UNIVERSITÀ CA' FOSCARI
DI VENEZIA

can be found from Ravenna to the Venetian lagoon and beyond.⁵⁴ Moreover, he was responsible for the renewal of the liturgical furnishings in the episcopal church (Fig. 7.14).

Nevertheless, the activities of the local community, including those of the bishop, seemed to have shrunk to a more local dimension. The sources continue to refer to boats from Comacchio in the ports of the Po plain, but—as Cinzio Violante pointed out—they no longer seem to transport spices (just salt) and are often replaced by boats belonging to the inhabitants of the Lombard towns.⁵⁵ As suggested by the Chronicle of John the Deacon, the death blow may have taken the form of the Venetian raid of 932. However, by this time Comacchio had already gone from being a trading center receiving both local and Mediterranean goods (7th–8th centuries) to a center with an exclusively local dimension: its time as an emporium belonged to the past.

54 On the sarcophagus, see Stella Patitucci Uggeri, “Il sarcofago del vescovo-duca Stefano. Contributo alla storia di Comacchio nel secolo IX,” *Analecta Pomposiana* 5 (1980), pp. 7–23; on this category, see my recent essay, Sauro Gelichi, “Venice in the early middle ages. The material structures and society of ‘civitas apud rivoaltum’ between 9th and 10th centuries,” in *Urban identity in northern Italy (800–1100 ca.)*, ed. Cristina La Rocca and Paolo Maiocchi (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 260–266.

55 Cinzio Violante, *La società milanese in età precomunale* (Bari, 1974), pp. 9–10.