A Companion to Byzantine Italy

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CHAPTER 12

The Venetiae, the Exarchate and the Pentapolis

Sauro Gelichi

1 Introduction

The period in which the Byzantines controlled (at least in part) a portion of the territories in northern Italy constituted an extremely important moment in the history of the Italian peninsula. Byzantine control was first exerted through the creation of two formally recognised territorial units, the Exarchate and Pentapolis,[1] and later indirectly through other political structures that governed a portion of those territories (i.e. the Venetian Duchy).[2] Much is known about the territorial, social and economic aspects of this historical setting,[3] but many questions related to the physical characteristics of these settlements (even their typology) in both rural and urban areas remain unanswered. This is because the archaeological record is still quite inadequate and often failed to produce good general documents. Apart from the singular episodes investigated, is an archaeology rarely expendable as part of a more general historical debate.

The purpose of this paper is to fill in some of these gaps in the archaeological documentation and to provide some general interpretations of the data regarding how settlements were organised and their economic profiles. Between the 6th and 8th centuries the situation in northern Italy was highly turbulent. As will be discussed later, the region was at the centre of various social and economic dynamics with different origins. The territories in question were very important, not only because they were home to the residual areas of Byzantine power following the Justinianic age (up until the final decline of the Exarchate), but also because this area – characterised by its various 'boundaries' (between water and land, and between the Lombard, Frankish and Byzantine powers) – was where the most important political and economic 'games' concerning the northern Italian peninsula were being played during the Middle Ages.

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[1] Guillou, *Régionalisme et indépendance*.

[2] Ortalli, "Venezia dalle origini a Pietro II", pp. 339–438.

[3] Diehl, *Études sur l'administration byzantine*; Guillou, "L'Italia bizantina".

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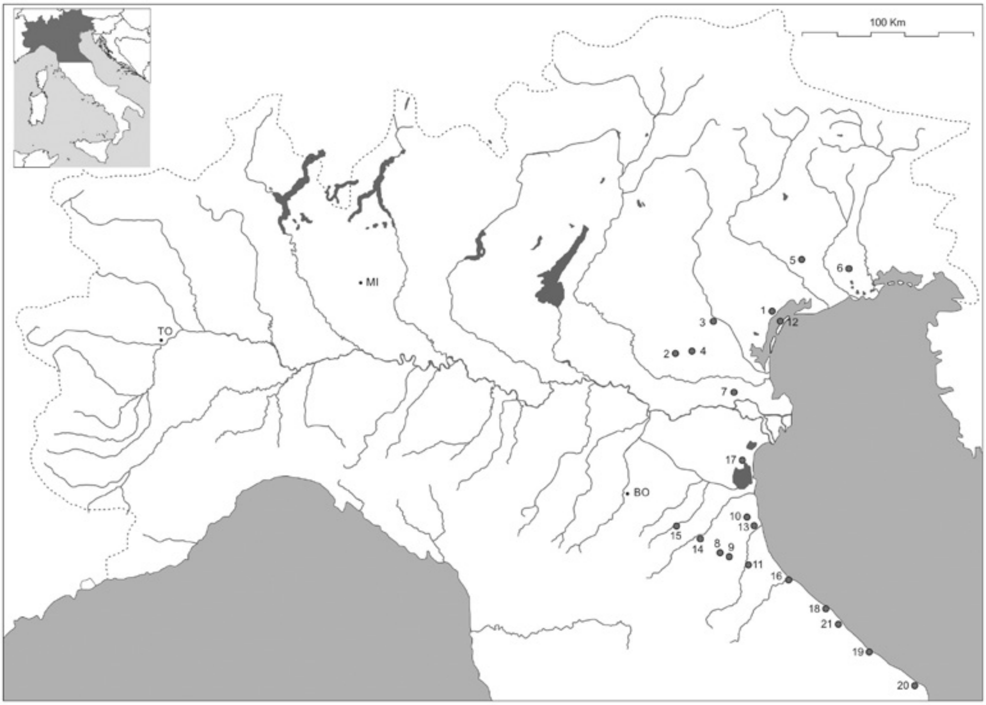

The main settlements mentioned in the text: 1 Altino; 2 Este; 3 Padova; 4 Monselice; 5 Oderzo; 6 Concordia Sagittaia; 7 Adria, 8 Forlì; 9 Forlimpopoli; 10 Ravenna; 11 Cesena; 12 Venezia; 13 Classe; 14 Faenza; 15 Imola; 16 Rimini; 17 Comacchio; 18 Pesaro; 19 Senigallia, 20 Ancona; 21 Fano.

MAP 12.1 The Venetiae, the Exarchate and the Pentapolis: major places
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2 “Everything Changes So That Nothing Changes?”: The Ancient Towns and Ravenna

If we observe the map devised by Ward Perkins that summarises the presence of the cities of northern Italy between the Roman time and the Middle Ages,[4] something becomes very highly evident. Considering the ‘durability’ or ‘instability’ of the ancient towns as indicators of the absence or presence of crisis, respectively, we can see that in contrast to the territories that appeared to be substantially stable (e.g. the Po Valley) and those that appeared to be in crisis (e.g. southern Piedmont), the northern Adriatic area (from Ravenna to Istria) was marked by the occurrence of contradictory processes: many towns were being deserted, yet many new towns were also be founded. Thus, we might speak of a form of 'stability' that was being achieved, not through topographical persistence, but thanks to 'mobility': we might conclude that everything changes so that nothing changes – or was this not really the case?

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[4] Ward Perkins, “The towns of northern Italy”, fig. 1.

This mobility of cities that seems to characterise the northern Adriatic arc in the early Middle Ages is a phenomenon that would surely also have been perceived by the chronicle and narrative sources that, since 1000 AD, had been striving to piece together the historical events of these territories in an attempt to provide explanations and reconstruct a new civic identity a posteriori.[5] Still, recognising a phenomenon does not necessary mean that it has been understood. Indeed, these traditional explanations were based on the principle that the repeated raids committed by barbarian tribes from the 5th century onwards would have caused the displacement of entire populations that, following their bishops, would have moved to safer coastal lagoons, where the Byzantine military forces were positioned. However, the rather 'mechanical' nature of these reconstructions tends to overlook the highly complex dynamics and chronology of events, such that the outcomes of immensely complicated processes with both social and economic implications are simply being attributed to issues of safety alone. This can be understood more clearly if we consider the late stages of some of these coastal towns that were either abandoned or in crisis.

Of these cities, Altino, traditionally considered the ancestor of Venice, plays a central role because it lies at the heart of this real 'mythographic system'. Archaeology has certainly favoured the events related to the ancient phases of the city, dismissing the final centuries of its history as predictable outcomes of an irreversible decline. However, via the careful analysis of the archaeological documentation produced from previous excavations, data has emerged that has enabled us to propose some different scenarios for such towns during the 5th through–6th centuries and, more importantly, indicate a more reassuring situation for future research. Following a period of apparent prosperity, the ancient town of Altino appears to have gone through a sort of recession, starting in the 2nd century and enduring throughout the 3rd. A variety of explanations might be given, but it actually appears to be the product of the relative lack of data sources (written, epigraphic and archaeological) rather than the actual loss of social and economic importance of the town.[6] Nevertheless, it is in these centuries that the first signs of the crisis that will be experienced in various, ambiguous forms up until at least the 6th century can be recognised.

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[5] La Rocca, "Città scomparse"; Gelichi, "Le origini di Venezia".

[6] Cresci Marrone/Cipriano, "Il II e il III secolo d. C.", p. 161.

In fact, a more careful reading of the archaeological sources and rare forms of written evidence seem to indicate that the city, or rather its institutions, faced difficult times, at least through the 4th and 5th centuries.[7] An Altino bishop, one of the first from the Venetian area, is documented as early as 381 and an episcopal complex is mentioned on several occasions (although archaeology has yet to identify it).[8] During the 4th century, Altino was chosen as the location for the enactment of some of the laws of the *Codex Theodosianus* and it was depicted in the *Tabula Peutingeriana* in relation to the same time period. Indeed, the archaeology seems to agree with this scenario. The few excavations performed in the vicinity of the city walls have revealed that significant alterations were made to these structures during late antiquity, such as those located near the northern city gate.[9] In addition, several necropolises also dating to late antiquity have recently been excavated, while the remains of other urban and suburban buildings, that provided evidence of the rebuilding or restructuring of buildings in that period were also investigated.[10] Important data has also been derived from numismatic evidence that describes the existence of circulating coins until at least the 6th century.[11] In brief, the archaeological data produced so far, and those studies subjected to recent reviews, seem to align the behaviour of this city with the general processes of urbanisation which occurred during late antiquity in northern Italy. Moreover, attempts to provide an updated interpretation of the town's transformation cannot evade paleoenvironmental evidence describing the slow irreversible process that was the swamping of the waterways – the vital organs of a city rightly defined as "amphibious."[12] From this perspective, the transformation processes regarding the ancient settlement exerted their effects upon the northern lagoon complex, where, during the same period, new infrastructure was being built. This new infrastructure seemed, to a certain extent, to substitute the functions, strictly economic at first and then demographic, of the ancient town in crisis.[13]

The archaeological situations of the other cities of ancient *Venetia et Histria* engaged in such dynamics are currently less explicit than those for Altino. Nevertheless, it appears that some of these towns went into crisis between the 5th and 7th centuries In some cases, the crisis was early and definitive; for example, *Ateste* (Este) was only re-colonised in the Middle Ages. Other cities experienced a (perhaps) temporary moment of decline, such as *Patavium* (Padua), in favour of new emerging settlements in the area, such as Monselice (however, this crisis does not seem to relate to the bishopric). In the meanwhile, some townships changed hands, such as *Opitergium* (Oderzo),[14] which was conquered in 640 by the Lombards, as was *Concordia Sagittaria*[15] a few years earlier in 615. In the case of *Opitergium*, the transition occurred through military action (a series of fortifications built to defend the city have been identified in archaeological excavations), while the transition of *Concordia Sagittaria* was ecclesiastical in nature.[16] Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the predominant phenomenon occurring in this area of the Italian peninsula was the establishment of completely new settlements (discussed more in-depth later on).

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[7] Calaon, "Altino (VE): strumenti diagnostici".

[8] Possenti, "L'età tardo antica e altomedievale", p. 173.

[9] Tirelli, *Il Museo Archeologico Nazionale*, p. 44.

[10] Possenti, "L'età tardo antica e altomedievale", pp. 174–177.

[11] Asolati, "Altino tardoantica", p. 179.

[12] Mozzi et al., "Geomorfologia e trasformazione del territorio".

[13] Gelichi/Moine (eds.), "Isole fortunate?".

On the contrary, the urban settlements situated within the Exarchate and Pentapolis were exceedingly stable. In fact, all of their major cities still exist today, although this ‘persistence’ does not automatically translate into precise common paradigms. Some of the cities of Exarchate, such as *Forum Popilii* (Forlimpopoli) and *Forum Livii* (Forlì) in present-day Emilia-Romagna, show strong signs that interruptions occurred in the urban structure of the settlements, losing much of the regular urban layout typical of the colonial period. An analogous situation can also be identified for *Caesena* (Cesena); however, written sources indicate an important military function of this town in late antiquity, which has also been substantiated by archaeological findings in the form of the remains of a mighty fortress on the Garampo Hill in its historical centre[17] and luxury domus dating to the 6th century. The presence of a number of buildings with fine furnishings, along with the rise of important ecclesiastical nuclei (suburban churches, cemeteries, urban episcopal seats and chapels) also seems to be a common feature of the late stages of *Faventia* and perhaps *Forum Cornelii*. In a context of generalised disintegration of the urban fabric, detected here as in the rest of northern Italy, only a few residential dwellings and ecclesiastical buildings, dating to the start of the Middle Ages, bear witness to building models and construction techniques typical of the ancient world.

The principal town of the Pentapolis, namely Rimini, presents a somewhat different situation. In contrast to the other cities of the Pentapolis (Pesaro, Fano, Senigallia and Ancona),[18] for which archaeology has revealed very little information to date, urban excavations in Rimini have been able to describe more accurately some important stages of these phases of transition. In particular, the archaeological investigations in Piazza Ferrari provide an example that summarises all the major transformations that urban archaeology has identified in relation to these periods: the renovation of a *domus* with luxury interiors in late antiquity (6th century); the transformation of the inner-most part of the *domus* into a cemetery (7th century); an increase in the density of residential housing along the roads (7th–8th century); and finally, the conversion of inner-city areas through the construction of buildings in wood, clay and earth that were not necessarily used for residential purposes (8th–9th century).[19] This sequence, when compared with the written sources regarding this area of Rimini, is sufficiently revealing of how changes in property ownership (it is probable that the assets were transferred to the nearby monastery of Sts. Tommaso and Benedetto),[20] could also have led to changes, at times radical, in the intended use of the spaces. The creation of a small cemetery during the 7th century that occupied a part of the ancient residential area was not accidental, nor was it the result of the impromptu recycling of space occupied by a ruined building, but the expression of a voluntary functional restructuring of an area no longer used for residential purposes. At the same time, this solution was not a lasting change in function, but it probably saw further changes following a relatively short period of time when the assets were, once again, returned to the secular landowner.[21] The microhistory of this location is not of any obvious general historical value, but it does illustrate and explain some of the processes undertaken to varying degrees in many other cities of the Exarchate and Pentapolis (or perhaps in the northern Italian peninsula in general). Unfortunately, since the past archaeological investigations of Rimini were primarily interested in the Roman period, no other excellent examples of archaeological sequences depicting changes in land use have been revealed to date. Nevertheless, information has come to light from other historical sources (of varying quality): for example, the importance of ecclesiastical institutions and the role of an elite town that, even in the 8th–9th centuries, was using various instruments of self-representation (tombstones with inscriptions and sarcophagi).[22] Equivalent use of this form of media during this period has only been identified in Ravenna and the Venetian lagoon.[23]

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[14] Castagna/Tirelli, “Evidenze archeologiche di Oderzo”.

[15] Croce Da Villa/Di Filippo Balestrazzi (eds.), *Concordia Sagittaria.*

[16] La Rocca, “Un vescovo a la sua città”.

[17] Gelichi et al. (eds.), *Ritmi di transizione*, pp. 59–66; Miari/Negrelli (eds.), *Ritmi di transizione 2.*

[18] About Ancona, see the recent paper by Palermo/Salvini, “Le attività del porto romano”.

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[19] Negrelli, *Rimini*.

[20] Negrelli, *Rimini*, pp. 32–33.

[21] Ibid., pp. 44–45.

[22] Turchini (ed.), *Rimini medievale*, pp. 99–103, 170–173, 177–180, 354–359.

[23] Gelichi, “Venice in the early Middle Ages”.

It now remains to examine in closer detail the urban centre of Ravenna that, from as early as the 5th century, was undoubtedly the most important centre in the whole of the northern Adriatic region. Important questions will be addressed, such as: what was the role of this great city between the 7th and 9th centuries and how did it cope with these dynamics?

The role of the Ravenna between the 5th and 7th century and the impact that this role had on its urban fabric (buildings, infrastructure, churches, and seats of power) has been the subject of intense analysis; especially when considering the large number of public buildings from that period that have survived. The 5th and the 6th century represent a moment of extraordinary prosperity for Ravenna. The transfer of the imperial seat certainly had to involve a profound transformation of the urban fabric of the city which had been in strong decline since the 3rd century. The need for new structures (and infrastructure) for the court and its functions (imperial functions at first, then royal, under the Ostrogoth domination) was first addressed in the residential area of the town. New city walls were added to the town's outer perimeter, which dated to the Republican era, greatly expanding the previously established settlement (33 hectares); the construction of the walls was completed as a single intervention and was performed in the first half of the 5th century. The majority of the new spaces were needed for the construction of structures related to power and its manifestations: first the imperial palace, followed by a circus, a porticoed road, and the provincial mint (*Moneta Aurea*). Moreover, many churches and chapels were founded within this news spaces, particularly in the first half of the 5th century, such as the *Basilica Apostolorum*, the Basilica of St. Giovanni Evangelista and the Church of Santa Croce. Thus, the urban landscape of Ravenna changed radically within just a few decades. Even in the following period, during the Ostrogothic reign, Ravenna held the title of capital. Theoderic the Great, king of the Ostrogoths, who was also buried in Ravenna, was without doubt one of the most important patrons funding the restoration and reconstruction of the ancient buildings. Indeed, a number of impressive and richly decorated churches, including St. Apollinare Nuovo (originally dedicated to Christ) and the *ecclesia Gothorum*, were constructed at his or his court's request. Furthermore, it was during this period that the seat of Arian Baptistery was built (while the ancient orthodox baptistery resided within the perimeter of the ancient city walls).[24] During this period an imperial port settlement (Classe) was developed south of the city. Although Classe had been the seat of the imperial fleet since the era of Augustus, civitas classis (as it is referred to in ancient sources), it only became a populous and active suburb in the 5th century. This has been demonstrated thanks to excavations carried out in the port area, which revealed a series of warehouses and commercial structures arranged along a canal bank developed in this period. In these excavations, archaeologists found an impressive amount of ceramic fragments and amphoras originating from both eastern and western Mediterranean areas. These objects demonstrate the active economic role of the city in this period, certainly one of the most important ports in the Mediterranean during late antiquity, second only to Constantinople. Moreover, the flow of Mediterranean goods transiting from civitas classis (and therefore from Ravenna) would not only have been functional to the needs of the court and the elite, but it would have also served the surrounding hinterland. After the restorations promoted by Roman emperor Justinian I (around the mid-6th century), Ravenna maintained an important political role, becoming the seat of the Exarchate of Italy. At the same time, the power of the local church assumed increasing importance, which began to mature its intentions of autonomy. Even during the course of the 7th century, many of the city's important monuments dating to the previous period would have still been functional, such as the circus: in fact, it was in the circus that the Exarch of Ravenna, Isacius, exposed the head of the *chartularius* Mauricius,[25] following his capture and execution.

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[24] Christie/Gibson, "The City Walls of Ravenna"; Gelichi, "Le mura di Ravenna".

Beginning in the late 7th century, and continuing into the 8th century, the political situation witnessed significant change, strong repercussions of which can be observed in the urban structure. Indeed, it is indisputable that an important turning point occurred in this century – a time when the ancient city experienced profound crisis, culminating in its occupation by Aistulf and the loss of its role as a Byzantine exarchal capital.[26] This crisis is reflected in the town's physical structures and in those of nearby urban centres developed during late antiquity. In particular, signs of abandonment are evident in Classe, not in relation to its occupancy, but its functions as a port.[27] Here, from the middle of the 7th century, the great warehouses, which had lost their original function, became partially occupied by small houses, built using recycled material.[28] Over the course of the 8th century, what was once the great port of the capital became inhabited by a just a few dozen of people, perhaps devoted to artisan crafts:[29] the cessation of large international commerce is also evident from the almost complete disappearance of imported materials. Socio-political reasons, but mostly environmental ones, would have accelerated this process of decline. In fact, in the 7th century the coastline was located only 500 meters from the town (it was almost 3 km distant by the 10th century), and the Po Delta was moving increasingly northwards.[30] From this perspective, it is not surprising that the cornerstone of the Po Valley's trade shifted significantly to the north, towards the lagoon of Comacchio and the coastal strip leading up to the Venetian lagoon and beyond.

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[25] Cosentino, *Prosopografia*, vol. 2, pp. 356–357.

[26] Ravegnani, *I Bizantini in Italia*, pp. 134–135.

[27] Augenti, A., "Nuove indagini archeologiche"; Augenti, "Ravenna e Classe"; Augenti (ed.), *La basilica e il monastero di San Severo.*

[28] Augenti et al., "Case e magazzini a Classe".

[29] Augenti, "A Tale of Two Cities".

However, this does not mean that the city did not retain (or regain) a prominent role at the institutional level. In fact, the end of the Exarchate had accentuated the autonomous dynamics of the episcopate, which had always represented a peculiar trait of the city's politics;[31] at the same time, the city was still perceived as an important political centre, to the point of being chosen in the Ottonian age as a representative seat of Italy's imperial power.[32]

The loss of Ravenna's function as a great emporium of maritime commerce – a role that the city (and its port) had competently performed from late antiquity until the 6th century and a good part of the 7th century[33] – brought about a socio-economic change that was not insignificant. This 'crisis' was also reflected by the systematic spoliation of the ancient city's buildings.[34]

Yet economic damage does not necessarily imply economic crisis, it might only signify changes in the city's 'economic strategies.' As is known, since the 5th century the church of Ravenna had been accumulating an imposing amount of wealth in the form of land within the region (for example, in the Ferrara, Romagna and Bologna districts), as well as beyond the limits of the Pentapolis, as far as Istria to the north and Sicily to the south.[35] These constituted the new territories of the old city and its aristocracy, which had developed in the shadow of the highest ecclesiastical hierarchy. These land assets were skilfully managed by a class of local notables who were able to continue accumulating and managing wealth. Thus, even the rather large number of churches (forty-one to be exact) founded between the 8th and 10th centuries in Ravenna does not need to be explained or justified by the fact that many of these may have been simple chapels or that the majority of these churches only appear in written sources from the 10th century onwards (as described by Cirelli).[36]

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[30] Cirelli, *Ravenna*, p. 163.

[31] Savigni, "I papi e Ravenna".

[32] Warner, "The Representation of Empire".

[33] Cosentino, "L'approvvigionamento".

[34] Cirelli, *Ravenna*, pp. 159–160.

[35] Cosentino, "L'approvvigionamento".

[36] Cirelli, *Ravenna*, pp. 149–153.

3 The New Towns: the Lagoon of Venice and Comacchio

Whilst the Exarchate (and Ravenna) were undergoing an era of crisis, as well as certain other ancient cities near the coast, two new settlements were developing, although they were of marginal significance until the end of late antiquity: the Comacchio lagoon to the south and the Venice lagoon to the north.

During late antiquity, and the early Middle Ages, at least two principal settlements of differing institutional and economic significance emerged and were consolidated in the area immediately south of the Po river – today the province of Ferrara (where the archbishop of Ravenna exercised both ecclesiastical and patrimonial control).

The first, *Vicus Habentia* (Voghenza), founded in Roman times and seat of the first bishopric of this territory (at least since the start of the 5th century),[37] was located more in-land with respect to the coastline, along the course of the Sandalo River. Its early medieval history remains unclear; it seems that this centre played an essentially institutional function, which, as a consequence of early crisis, was later transferred to the site that would become Ferrara.[38]

The second settlement, Comacchio, played a very different role. Built in a in a newly formed lagoon near the sea, Comacchio made an abrupt appearance in a famous document that dates to the early 8th century: the so-called Capitular of Liutprand. In this document, the inhabitants of Comacchio sign a pact with the Lombards for trade on the Po river and its tributaries.[39] Excavations carried out in different areas of the city and its suburbs have revealed evidence of a settlement that was situated over a number of small islands, with a port located to the west and a central area where the seat of the new episcopate was located in the first quarter of the 8th century.[40] According to the few written sources, an astonishingly short amount of time was required to build Comacchio's cathedral. The Capitular of Liutprand does not indicate that any of the bishops originated from Comacchio (we are, it should be remembered, most probably in 715), while only a few years later, in 723, an inscription provides evidence of the first local bishop, Vincentius.[41] If we take this epigraph as authentic, and if we especially believe that it refers to, as most scholars would like it to, a bishop (or rather, the primus episcopus), the fact that it also mentions Felix the Archbishop of Ravenna in the same inscription (and thanks to which we can date the epigraph) is of great interest. The church of Ravenna had controlled these territories for some time, exercising their intent to obtain both political and ecclesiastic domination. However, the explicit reference to Archbishop Felix may implicate that the establishment of an episcopal power in Comacchio was a direct emanation of Ravenna authority, which could be taken as symbolic of the interest that the Ravenna authorities were beginning to manifest towards Comacchio and its increasingly important economic activities.

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[37] Benati, "La Chiesa di Ferrara".

[38] Gelichi, "*Hodierni vero vocant Ferrariam*".

[39] Hartmann, *Zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte Italiens*, no. 1, pp. 123–124.

[40] Gelichi (ed.), *L'isola del vescovo*; Gelichi et al., "The history of a forgotten town".

[41] Gelichi, "Lupicinus *presbiter*".

Archaeological excavations have also revealed significant evidence dating to the late 6th century. For example, an artisan workshop (7th century) that worked metals and glass products (including precious cameos) was located on the site where the episcopal church would be built.[42] The numerous fragments of 8th–9th century amphoras of eastern origin (especially from the Aegean Sea) confirm the fact that Comacchio was at the centre of international maritime connections (this point will be discussed in more detail later on); indeed, it must have constituted a kind of commercial hub through which Mediterranean goods (such as olive oil, wine, garum, spices and possibly textiles) were transported into Lombard territory. Thus, considering all that has been said, Comacchio was not simply an additional port for Ravenna of little significance, but one that would continue to grow outside its direct control,[43] although it would continue to serve the ancient capital.

However, between the Po river and the Venetian lagoon the situation regarding settlements is less clear. Here, despite its ups and downs, the dominance of Adria, an important city of the ancient world, seems to have endured.[44] The continuity of this urban centre is documented by just a few, yet important, archaeological remains: three epigraphs with references to bishops (two of which are only known about thanks to these remains)[45] dating from between the 8th and 9th centuries, and the apse of a church (discovered beneath the present cathedral dedicated to Saint Peter) decorated with frescoes, the style of which has enabled the dating of the structure to between the 9th and 10th centuries. However, although Adria remained a bishopric throughout the Middle Ages, written sources indicate that a second settlement started to compete with Adria, at least on an institutional level, from the 9th century onwards. This second settlement was *Gabellum* (Gavello), which was explicitly mentioned in the

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[42] Gelichi, (ed.), *L'isola del vescovo*.

[43] Gelichi, "Societies at the Edge"; Gelichi, "Comacchio: A Liminal Community".

[44] Casazza, *Il territorio di Adria*.

[45] Canova dal Zio, *Le chiese delle Tre Venezie*, p. 81; Broggi, "8. Adria".

Carolingian period as the base for a comitatus.[46] No archaeological evidence is currently available in relation to this antique settlement.

Beyond the territory of Adria, we have already highlighted how a context of strong urban crisis (or apparent crisis) was underway, which was balanced by a certain vitality of the settlements in the lagoon regions (especially the lagoon of Venice). Still, research has once more focused on a series of interesting interpretative paradigms looking for highly sought-after yet improbable traces of Roman past rather than on the processes that shaped the area's population dynamics during the early Middle Ages.[47] What has nevertheless become clear is that we must abandon the idea of a lagoon that was extensively and permanently occupied during the Roman period. Archaeology has found no traces of a 'permanent settlement' (as defined by Lech Lecjeiewicz)[48] existing before the 5th century, except perhaps in the most northern parts of the lagoon, i.e. those close to Altino.[49] For example, the earliest sequences arising from the excavation of Olivolo (an island of this archipelago that would later become the site of medieval Venice)[50] also date back to this period, which would form the seat of an episcopate by the 8th century. Moreover, a series of waterfronts, perhaps constituting a small port, revealed in excavations on the island of San Francesco del Deserto[51] also date to the 5th century; the repetitive nature of these waterfront structures bears witness to the necessity (proposed here for the first time) to contain and protect spaces and thus organise the settlement. The same undoubtedly happened on the island of Torcello, one of the most excavated islands of the Venetian lagoon.[52] Once again, evidence of waterfronts, houses and roads provide clear signs that the settlement was no longer spontaneous and impromptu; they also indicate the presence of an established settlement well before the establishment of the episcopate (as also occurred on Olivolo), as documented from the 7th century onwards.[53]

What could have fuelled this change in the relationship between a community and its environment that until that time, had certainly not been seen as inhospitable, but was certainly unsuitable for the site of an organised settlement? The main reasons were probably two-fold. The first, and most important was environmental in nature: an environmental change occurred in the period between the 5th and 6th centuries, as indicated by the increased levels of *bittium* (a genus of very small sea snail), indicating that a rise in sea level occurred with its consequent invasion of the lagoon.[54] This would have created difficulties for the settlement that until then had been the most important within the lagoon complex, i.e. Altino (although the town was not yet abandoned); but, at the same time, it would have made occupation of the more internal sandbanks of the lagoon plexus more favourable. These conditions may have favoured and most likely increased salt production activities – the engine driving the economic development of such areas; as well as the construction of a series of internal support points to aid navigation within the lagoon, which until then had been used to a lesser extent than the routes over firmer ground.

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[46] Casazza, *Il territorio di Adria*, pp. 162–168.

[47] Dorigo, *Venezia Origini*.

[48] Leciejewicz, "Italian-Polish researches".

[49] Gelichi/Moine, "Isole fortunate".

[50] Tuzzato, "Venezia. Gli scavi a San Pietro di Castello"; Tuzzato et al. "San Pietro di Castello a Venezia".

[51] De Min, "Venezia e il territorio lagunare".

[52] Leciejewicz/Tabaczyńska/ Tabaczyński, *Torcello*.

[53] Gelichi, "Venice in the early Middle Ages"; id., "La storia di una nuova città".

The second factor which most likely drove the evolution of more organised settlements and favoured the flourishing of the lagoon between the 5th and 6th centuries was the need to reinforce the navigation route that connected Ravenna with the ports in the regions of the Adriatic located further north, thus ensuring the supply of foodstuffs from Istria to the new capital. Archaeological evidence of this flourishing (and of the increasing central role that the lagoon was to play in this period) is provided, not only by the traces of the 'stable' settlement mentioned above, but also by the discovery of amphoras and pottery of Mediterranean origin, which have constantly been found in significant quantities in all contexts excavated and studied to date.

The next phase of evolution within this habitat involved a process of selection and centralisation. Some settlements were abandoned (such as San Lorenzo di Ammiana and San Francesco del Deserto), while others were developed through a process of unification of the populations and their functions; some even became seats of institutional significance, such as Torcello (thought to be the seat of a bishopric from 639), Olivolo (where a diocese was established between 774 and 776), and Cittanova (situated on the mainland but in proximity of the lagoon and the seat of a diocese and the first seat of the duchy in the 7th century).

It appears that the northern lagoon and its neighbouring areas played an important role up until the 7th century in terms of settlements, economics and politics (roles that were potentially inherited from Altino). However, beginning in the 8th century, the relocation of the ducal seat into the southern lagoon (the site of Metamauco) indicates that something must have changed in the dynamics of these territories. In fact, this transfer could be related to the central role that the economy of the Po Valley was starting to assume in this period, centred around the Po river and on the commercial system created by the Lombard kings, to which the previously mentioned Capitular of Liutprand and the floruit of Comacchio provide testimony.

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[54] Ammerman/McClennen (eds.), *Venice before San Marco*.

It is well-known that the dynamics of competition that had developed within the lagoon resulted in the final transfer of the ducal seat to Rivoalto towards the beginning of the 9th century, giving rise to the process of the construction of a city, i.e. Venice, that would be completed just one century later.[55] This transfer must have been the result of new changes occurring in the dynamics of domestic politics and economics within Venetian aristocracy, as well as changes in the directions that international economics were taking: a topic which will be discussed in more detail later on.

4 Rural Settlements and Landscapes

Transformations in the topography of the territories in question and in their population dynamics have been studied in various manners, although mainly via the analysis of written sources. These sources have revealed systems of land ownership that differ profoundly to those that would have developed in the same period in the western region of the ancient *Regio VIII*.[56] The Lombards and the Byzantines would have a marked a political boundary, which would also have had cultural and social consequences, such that even the population's diet was influenced.[57] Differences would also have been evident in the physical structures that characterise the urban landscape (towns in *Romania* would have been more city-like compared to those of *Langobardia*),[58] as well as in the organisation of how land was owned, which would have been transferred to more sparsely inhabited environments, with parish churches playing a very strong, aggregative role, if for no other reason than as a locational reference for *massae* and *fundi*.[59] Furthermore, the Exarchate and Pentapolis land estates would not have known about the curtense system of land management until much later (and even then to a limited extent only), which we know characterised *Langobardia* and a large part of central Italy, in particular from the Carolingian period onwards. In essence, the Exarchate and

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[55] Gelichi, "Venice in the early Middle Ages".
[56] Castagnetti, *L'organizzazione*.
[57] Baruzzi/Montanari, *Porci e porcari*, pp. 16–17.
[58] Fumagalli, *Città e campagna*.
[59] Castagnetti, *L'organizzazione*.

Pentapolis estates constituted a vast massaricio with sporadic islands that were directly managed.[60]

However, these views are the result of radical interpretations that have been ‘toned down’ over time. Indeed, the cities of *Romania* provide evidence suggesting that the same problems and evolutionary processes occurred as in the cities of *Langobardia*.[61] For example, we have already discussed how recent excavations in the major cities of the Pentapolis, such as Rimini, furnish evidence that forms of re-organisation of living spaces occurred that were not dissimilar to those of the contemporary Lombard cities:[62] the widespread use of wood as a building material, beaten earth floors, the concentration of inhabited zones along the roadways and the rare use of the internal areas of the old islets. Even the phenomenon of the burials occurring within the confines of a city does not seem to be characterised by specific spatial variation (it occurred in Rimini and Ravenna as it did in Verona and Bologna). In essence, the signs of strong degradation, of a marked variation/decline of the old urban areas towards the rural setting seem to be rather ubiquitous processes. Thus, in order to construct a new hierarchy of the towns in the Middle Ages, we need to focus more on understanding the changes that occurred in the levels of importance held by cities in this period, and, at the same time, work towards identifying other parameters that distinguish the cities.[63]

A similar process of reviewing the interpretative paradigms should also be applied to studies of the territory as a whole. Indeed, as a consequence of a recent re-analysis of written sources, evidence came to light indicating that it was not exactly true that the easternmost territories of northern Italy were not aware of the forms of land management used in the rest of the region.[64] Following the careful analysis of such documents, it was revealed that the manorial (curtense) system of land management was actually more diffuse than once thought.[65] Thus, the use of archaeological sources is critical in order to provide a more solid framework for the demographics described in written sources that are presented in terms of their own protocols and formalisms (which can be ambiguous and indefinite due to the use of terminologies specific to that time). However, this step should not be taken for granted. The attractive force of the plebeian institutions, for example, and their role as organizers of the habitat is clear from the very significant number of early medieval churches still standing in their primitive forms, in Romagna today (a phenomenon that is found only here). Yet this phenomenon could be explained by the conservatism of these areas, which were only marginally affected by the major renovations that produced the Romanesque phenomenon. Moreover, archaeology in the churches of Ravenna has produced good results, but research has been confined to the study and investigation of individual buildings and has not addressed the rural settlement system to which these buildings are connected.[66] Finally, spatial analysis provides us with some excellent observations about the relationship between churches and settlements,[67] but these observations refer to the present-day towns and can only provide information about the central centuries of the Middle Ages (when it is sure that locational correspondence exists between current towns and those reported in written sources): in essence, it is not legitimate to apply to the context of early medieval settlements (those that essentially date to the founding of a church) a situation that may only have crystallized around the year 1000.

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[60] Andreolli/Montanari, *L’azienda curtense*, p. 164.

[61] Gelichi, “Note sulle città bizantine”.

[62] Negrelli, *Rimini capitale*.

[63] Gelichi, “La città in Italia”.

[64] Pasquali, *Contadini e signori.*

[65] Augenti et al., “L’Italia senza corti?”; Mancassola, *L’azienda curtense*.

The archaeological approach is characterised by the almost exclusive use of surveys,[68] with all the limitations that this kind of research brings with it. Hence, it is not easy to answer the question of whether a different system of land organisation existed, particularly in the vast areas under the direct control of the church of Ravenna, or whether this organisation system lead to the development of different types of settlements. The surveys conducted over large surface areas, even when compared with analogous studies performed in the west of the region,[69] have the disadvantage that the archaeological record becomes increasingly diminished over the course of a long-time scale (for example, settlements can only be detected by the presence of coarse pottery and soapstone); what is more, such surveys are unable to describe in detail, or at most provide only a brief overview, of the habitat's forms and structures: e.g. the settlement's dimensions, the number of residential buildings it contains, the presence of boundaries, how the settlement is organised, and the construction methods used.

Such studies, although performed slightly differently, have produced records that are similar in many ways, and whose salient features can be summarised as follows. After the crisis of the middle/late imperial era (2nd–3rd centuries), a marked reorganisation of settlements occurred, resulting in the total abandonment of some settlements, the strengthening and transformation of others, and a radical change in the characteristics of the 'material culture.' This transformation has been associated with the loss of importance of small properties and the processes of centralisation of land, leading to the creation of the phenomenon known as colonate during Late Antiquity.[70] At the same time, we also witness the persistence, but only in a few sites, of houses of better quality, with the remains of mosaic floors and wall coverings in marble *crustae*, which might indicate the presence of luxury residential dwellings even in the countryside which belonged to 5th-century elite figures closely associated with the imperial court. Even in these areas, the locational persistence of many ancient villas/farms has been archaeologically documented up until at least the 6th–7th century. However, the few published excavations indicate a number of processes from which a number of generalisations can be drawn: some of the structures of ancient settlements were either abandoned or the materials salvaged (wood and earth); a decrease occurred in the quality of the 'material culture' with a strong reduction in imported goods; ruins became frequently used as burial grounds (which may indicate changes in how functional spaces were being used or a shift in habitats, with small cemeteries being allocated to non-productive areas). Archaeological documents often appear to provide data that overlap along the temporal dimension; however, this cannot result from the continuous habitation of a settlement, since material evidence also indicates that profound changes occurred in the organisational structures of the settlements, thus they must be read as an expression of a redistribution of functions within a new network of settlements, and it is only within this new framework that its relevant explanation can be found.[71]

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[66] Gelichi /Gabrielli, "Le chiese rurali".

[67] Torricelli, *Centri plebani*.

[68] Augenti et al., "L'Italia senza corti?"; Gelichi/Librenti/Negrelli, "La transizione dall'antichità al medioevo".

[69] Gelichi/Librenti/Negrelli, "La transizione dall'antichità al medioevo".

This situation, which nevertheless tends towards the prevailing stability (at least in terms of location) of inhabited locations, also documents that a change occurred, although not radical or sudden, after the 7th century. In fact from that period onwards, evidence indicates that settlements were subject to further processes of selection, with the inhabited areas of surviving settlements undergoing processes of expansion that reached a peak around the 11th century.[72] This trend, in line with that postulated for other regions of the peninsula, appears to characterise the early Middle Ages[73] and must co-exist with the presence of a scattered settlements, of which traces should also exist.

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[70] Vera "Dalla *villa perfecta* alla villa di Palladio".

[71] Loré, "Rapporti economici e sociali".

[72] Augenti et al., "L'Italia senza corti?", pp. 40–41.

[73] Francovich/Hodges, *Villa to village*.

5 A Problem of Scale: Communication Routes and Commerce – a Broad Perspective

For some time now, scholars have heavily debated the communication routes and the role of trade and economy in the early Middle Ages in northern Italy. The issue of archaeological visibility plays a significant role in this debate due to the difficulty in combing archaeological 'invisibility' with the ambiguity and scarcity of written sources. However, if we reduce this problem to its simplest form, it entails returning to an interpretation based upon the following concept pairs: local versus international; and dirigiste versus free.

We will first discuss with the system of communication routes. It has long been argued that the network of Roman roads fell into disuse during late antiquity, along with many other infrastructures of the ancient world; indeed, this was most probably the case. Poor maintenance and inadequate security are the two most plausible explanations for the loss of the central role of this system in the context of communications. This loss of 'centrality' concerns not only the roads that followed the coastline (for example the Via Annia), but also those heading in-land. However, this interpretation must be put into perspective. Many of these routes have certainly survived, to the point that they are still in use today (e.g. the Via Emilia), with an extremely faithful superimposition between the ancient route and modern roads in some places.[74] If we interpret the degree of survival of ancient cities along the Via Emilia as a sign of continuity (see above, section 2), we can once again notice how almost all of the ancient urban centres along this consular road have survived. We might ask ourselves how they survived, and it would be interesting to compare the cities located on the main ancient roads to those located along the rivers, to see whether any differences in survival exist between the two contexts. However, there is no doubt that many of the main roads built in the ancient world continued to be used and travelled along, even if they were not actively maintained. This does not mean that alternative routes were not also formed, or that excessive importance is placed on routes that were in reality infrequently used, as demonstrated by archaeology in some cases. However, the most striking phenomenon is the increasingly important role played by the roads running parallel to coastline and the rivers as communication routes. The first written sources of evidence referring to the Venice lagoon, also according to Cassiodorus (*Variæ*, 12.24), date to the time when it was becoming necessary to supply the new capital, i.e. Ravenna, with food from Istria. Comacchio's boom in the late Lombard age can be explained by its convenient position between the Adriatic

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[74] See in this volume the chapter by Denis Sami.

Sea and the river network: a highly branched communication network heavily controlled by the extensive presence of state stations, ports and ports-of-call, providing access to many cities in the Po Valley, including its capital Pavia. Nevertheless, we are talking about a phenomenon with scarce archaeological visibility, one that can only be detected indirectly. Nothing is currently known about the early medieval boats that had to travel up river, probably due to the low preservability of wooden planking. Still, indirect evidence of this process exists thanks to the high number of monossili (boats made from hollowed-out tree trunks that were more readily preserved) exposed along the shores of rivers and in coastal lagoons. In the past, these simple boats have generally been assigned to the proto-historic era; but a more recent series of c14 analyses have shown that these boats mainly date to the early Middle Ages. Monossili were certainly not used (or at least not solely) to transport goods along the Po and its tributaries (these boats were more functional in lakes and lagoons), but their presence still provides evidence of an increase in the use of river/lake communication routes at that time.

The port structures (docks, platforms) and those constructed to contain the river banks were also made of wood (and not of stone and/or brick as in Roman times), and are therefore very difficult to detect traces of today. This applies not only to the river ports, but also to the seaports, of which all archaeological records appear to have completely disappeared.[75] A rather interesting example of how such ports may have been made is evident in Comacchio. Excavations and archaeological research on the outskirts of the town's historic centre have in fact brought to light a series of wooden infrastructures associated with warehouses, which recall the ports of northern Europe of the same period more than those of ancient times.

Finally, another indirect way to investigate these ancient communicate routes is to look for traces of the goods that were transported. Yet once again, the situation is far from simple. Many products, such as foodstuffs and salt, are scarcely traceable. Fortunately, during the course of the 8th and 9th centuries, amphorae produced in the eastern Mediterranean (and in particular in the Aegean islands) continued to circulate. Used to contain wine (and maybe even oil), the remains of these vessels provide very good indicators for identifying the direction and ramifications of the trade routes in operation.[76]

A second problem concerns the types of economic activities that must have characterised these areas. The well-known debate regarding whether a kind of free market existed during late antiquity continues even today. Some scholars think that the movement of goods happened mainly as part of the annona distribution system, while others are more open to the possibility that a free market executed by merchants also existed in addition to the annona. The problem becomes more complicated as we approach the 7th–10th centuries. There is unanimous agreement that a drastic reduction in Mediterranean trade occurred, with the return of extremely small-scale commercial network: the possibility of diverse forms/models of exchange cannot be ruled out. There is the problem of the applicability of certain models to the past. It is well-known that debates about the concept of the 'market' have become more radical over time, with two main positions being held: that of the so-called 'formalists' and that of the 'substantivists.' The first recognises that the law of supply and demand, which regulates modern economies, may also be applied to ancient societies. In essence, the formalists consider the economies of the past as a kind of underdeveloped form of ours. Instead, the substantivists, influenced by the theories of Max Weber, argue that social conditions play a major role in shaping such phenomena, even if they might first appear to be driven solely by economic rationalism; thus, trade would also have been integrated and structured within the social context in which they developed. Moreover, societies (and moments in history) exist in which the principle of the market (as defined by the formalists) either does not exist or exists in very marginal forms with respect to trade.

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[75] Gelichi, "Infrastrutture marittime".

[76] Gelichi/Negrelli, "Anfore e commerci"; Gelichi/Negrelli, "Ceramiche e circolazione".

Thus, the question to ask is whether a form of international trade existed within the multitude of possible trade systems in operation between the 7th and 9th centuries in northern Italy: how was it configured and through what form of economic system were these products exchanged/transported? Once again, various opinions exist. For example, some scholars have simply attributed the evidence of vigorous trade occurring between the 8th and 9th century within the Po Valley to the economic floruit of its systems at that time (that would not have been affected by international trade).[77] Luxury goods would still have been in circulation, independent of the existence of a network of trading relationships between the Adriatic and the Mediterranean. Chris Wickham sustains that the circulation of what he calls 'bulk utilitarian commodities' collapsed.[78] Hodges, from a wider Adriatic perspective (based, in particular, on data obtained from Butrint, Albania), is of the opinion that the dynamism of the 8th century was limited to trade of more modest dimensions,[79] adhering to an essentially ecological interpretation of the maritime trade connections,[80] with significant developments only occurring at the dawn of the Carolingian period, when specific trade routes would have assumed greater international importance. However, Cosentino has rightly highlighted that the economic system of Ravenna would have acted independently with respect to the framework outlined above.[81]

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[77] Balzaretti, "Cities, Emporia and Monasteries".

[78] Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*.

[79] Hodges, "Adriatic Sea Trade".

From this perspective, the rise and flourish of centres such as Comacchio (in the 8th century) and the Venice lagoon (8th and 9th centuries) would seem to have occurred during episodes of 'reduced vigour'; i.e., places of power were called to fulfil a role of international trade that was, however, restricted and limited to an essentially regional area.[82] The fact remains that cases like Comacchio (and, a little later, Venice) constitute episodes that cannot be inserted into such a picture. The archaeological records, at least in the case of Comacchio, show that the town's development was as rapid as it was unusual, with investments being made that required a certain level of commitment, such as the opening (and maintenance) of the artificial channel that connected the city to the town of Motta della Girata on the Pado Vetere (a branch of the Po river). The number of the amphoras (for which similar ones are only, unsurprisingly, found in the Venetian lagoon) also seems to follow the same trend. Thus, we are dealing with centres that were not yet part of the Mediterranean trade system and that had not yet come into contact with Mediterranean merchandise, as it was still being transported by foreign intermediaries (and perhaps, in part, by the *annona militaris*) that were nevertheless surviving at the periphery of the Exarchate (indeed, from that time onwards the Venice lagoon became increasingly autonomous).

Another important point of discussion regards the degree of autonomy that these centres held. In relation to Comacchio, its close proximity to Ravenna and its established economic network would certainly have constituted important aspects that should not be underestimated. However, it is more likely that the origins of Comacchio's *floruit* lay outside that system; at least in part and at the beginning. The fact that the archdiocese made a rather late attempt (as discussed above) to establish an episcopal seat in Comacchio (in approximately the first quarter of the 8th century) supports that this undoubtably occurred after the time of the Capitular of Liutprand. In my opinion, it would be highly limiting to interpret this event as being solely anti-Roman in its function; rather, it exposes the concern of the ecclesiastical aristocracy of Ravenna (which had only recently recovered from a serious crisis), provoking them to intervene in the affairs of a centre that had the potential to impose itself as an autonomous political player against the kingdom.

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[80] Horden/Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*.

[81] Cosentino, "Ricchezza e investimento".

[82] Gelichi, "The eels of Venice".

A change must have taken place in the first decades of the 9th century. The political framework had transformed: the lands held by the Byzantines were increasingly distant, and the Italian peninsula – now part of the Carolingian Empire – was less interested in Comacchio and more interested in getting the most out of places such as the Venice lagoon. Indeed, was no surprise that the Carolingians tried in vain to conquer Venice. The attempts failed and instead a truce was negotiated. After the Treaty of Aachen between the Franks and the Byzantines, the Venetian aristocracies, now living in the heart of the lagoon and endowed with a significant inheritance (all that remained of the Byzantine fleet and the know-how to equip warships), were able to present themselves as authoritative and important representatives of the new rulers. Soon after, the Venetians would begin coining silver Carolingian denarii, indicating very clearly the market they were aiming at. They continued in this expansive manner, first by liberating themselves from their now weaker competitor (Comacchio), then striving to expand their control and dominance over the northern region of the Adriatic Sea (with Istria becoming a protectorate in the 10th century). Their sudden rise in authority was due to the fact that other ships and foreign merchants could no longer reach the Adriatic coast with their products; only the Venetian merchants and ships, protected by an impressive military fleet, were able to sail the Adriatic and, before long, the Mediterranean too. It was the dawn of a new and historic era.

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