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EARLY M EDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN ITALY: THE LAST TWENTY YEARS

I first thought of writing this brief survey in the framework of a new edition of my historical text-book, L’Italia nel primo medioevo. As I began to write it, however, it became once again clear to me that a high percentage of the major rethinking in the field of early medieval Italian studies is the result of the last two decades of archaeological studies in Italy, a period in which our understanding of the discipline, and of early medieval Italy, has been transformed; it therefore seemed appropriate to publish it in "Archeologia Medievale". Although there are no shortage of syntheses of recent archaeological work on Italy, archaeology constantly renews itself, and it seems to me that a new one could be useful. I intend in this text to present a survey that is comprehensible to non-experts in the field, whether students or colleagues in other fields (including of course, historians), while I hope also saying things that may be interesting to experts.

In 1979, the major early medieval archaeological publications were all of cemeteries; the first results of the new wave of settlement excavations, the Torcello glass kiln, the castle of Invillino in Friuli or the wooden houses of Luni, were as yet isolated and hard to interpret. But now, twenty years later, there are major excavations for the period 550-1000 in, among cities, Venice, Verona, Brescia, Milan, Ravenna, Luni, Pisa, Siena, Rome, Ostia, Cagliari, Naples, Pescara and Otranto – and that is only to cite cities for which there are substantial publications, for dozens of others have undergone smaller-scale (or unpublished) interventions. Among rural sites, the late Roman castrum of Invillino has been joined by Monte Barro near Lecco, Belmonte near Turin, S. Antonio di Perti in Liguria, Cosa in Tuscany, Squillace in Calabria, and, among the earliest examples of the incastrella-mento of 900-1150, M ontantii and Scarlino in Tuscany, Caprignano in Lazio, Colle Castellino in Molise. Despite the number of isolated and hard to interpret. But now, twenty years later, there are major excavations for the period 550-1000 in, among cities, Venice, Verona, Brescia, Milan, Ravenna, Luni, Pisa, Siena, Rome, Ostia, Cagliari, Naples, Pescara and Otranto – and that is only to cite cities for which there are substantial publications, for dozens of others have undergone smaller-scale (or unpublished) interventions. Among rural sites, the late Roman castrum of Invillino has been joined by Monte Barro near Lecco, Belmonte near Turin, S. Antonio di Perti in Liguria, Cosa in Tuscany, Squillace in Calabria, and, among the earliest examples of the incastrella-mento of 900-1150, Montantii and Scarlino in Tuscany, Caprignano in Lazio, Colle Castellino in Molise; open sites-in-

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1 I am grateful to Gian Pietro Broglio, Paolo Delogu, Riccardo Francovich, Stefano Gasparri, Sauro Gelichi and Cristina La Rocca for critiquing this text; they are a good proportion of the current experts in the field, and I have tried to reflect their (sometimes contrasting) opinions.

2 M ilan, 1982.


4 Archaeological reports are frequently short and/or numerous, or else appear in multiauthored publications. A full bibliography of them all would unbalance this article, which anyway has no pretensions to archaeological completeness. The publications listed in these notes contain full lists of all but the most recent excavations. So as not to weigh the notes down, I have therefore cited excavation reports and wider syntheses in the most abbreviated form possible (while allowing them still to be located), omitting titles of articles and occasionally names of authors. My apologies to the authors concerned. «AM » represents Archeologia Medievale throughout; «MEFRM »: Mélanges de l’Ecole française de Rome. Moyen Age; and «PBSR »: Papers of the British School at Rome.


clude Piadena and 'Pontelongo' presso Sant'Agata Bolognese, near the Po, Poggibonsi in Tuscany, and the ecclesiastical estate-centres of S. Cornelia and Mola di Monte Gelato in Lazio; significant excavations have also taken place at rural monasteries such as Novalesa in Piemonte and S. Vincenzo al Volturno in Molise. This is a long way from a full list of even the more important sites. Furthermore, there are good, or at least adequate, guides to the early medieval archaeology of perhaps two thirds of Italian regions: the only substantial exceptions are Marche, Umbria and Basilicata, and even here there may well be something I have missed. Italy is, I think, at the present moment more densely covered in its early medieval archaeology than any other part of the former Roman empire with the exceptions of Britain, the Rhineland, and Jordan; and it is also satisfying in the intensity of its archaeological debate. It is obvious that such a quantity of material as this must inevitably transform our understanding of Italian economy and society as a whole.

Here, I wish to discuss three aspects of it above all: the structures of exchange; urban society; and the patterns of settlement in the countryside.

Our archaeological understanding of the patterns of exchange is mostly derived from the technology and the range of distribution of ceramics. This is not because pottery has ever been the most important good exported, but because it survives very well on sites, and its geographical origin can be traced, thanks to the ever more refined typologies of forms available, and thanks to petrographic analysis of its fabrics. It can stand for a wide range of medium-price bulk products such as cloth, glass, and ironwork, which do not survive archaeologically or whose provenance is much harder to trace. These bulk products are normally the basic elements in any economic system, along with staple foodstuffs, such as grain, wine and oil; and the movement of wine and oil can often also be traced archaeologically in the Mediterranean, for they were usually transported in amphorae, which survive in substantial numbers. (Luxury products, silk or spices or precious metals, are referred to more often in documentary sources, but luxuries are by definition marginal to economic systems.) The presence of ceramics from a long way away on an archaeological site does not prove trade, it must be stressed: they could have been brought by the state as part of its military commissariat, or indeed by a private landowner moving goods from one of his properties to another. But when we find – to take a real example – at the castrum of S. Antonino di Perti in Byzantine Liguria, in the early seventh century, that out of the total finds of pottery, excluding amphorae, 58% came from Byzantine Africa and 1% was ‘ceramica longobarda’ from Lombard northern Italy, whereas only 35% were demonstrably locally made, we can begin to draw clear conclusions about economic structures. In this case, we could indeed propose that the African pottery (both fine terra sigillata tableware and ‘common’ wares) was brought in by the army as part of its supply system, but this at least shows that the Byzantine military system still operated on a Mediterranean scale in the early seventh century, and had not localised its organisation so as, for example, to produce pottery in Liguria itself for its Ligurian soldiers. As for the Lombard pottery, its percentage, though small, is nonetheless important, for it shows that there was at least some trade (here, it must be commercial exchange) across political boundaries in Italy. To this must be added the numerous finds there of containers in ‘pietra ollare’, mined in the western Alps; scholars currently propose that these came to S. Antonino down the Rhône, i.e. from Francia, rather than from Lombard Italy, but either way they show the long-distance commerce of a very simple product. S. Antonino was a very atypical site, for nowhere else in early medieval Italy has such a dependence on long-distance exchange been documented except in the heart of Rome:


11 For the figures, see G. MURALDO et al. in I Congresso, cit., pp. 389-95.

normal sites show a predominance, often an overwhelming predominance, of local productions, often of a very simple type. But if one tracks the percentage relationships of local, regional, and long distance exchange, from site to site, from region to region, and from period to period, based on the origins of pottery finds, one can build up a composite picture of exchange in Italy that could barely have been dreamt of two decades ago.

The main lines of this picture, as it appears at the beginning of 1999, is as follows. In 400 or so, before the troubles of the later Roman empire began, African pottery was widely available on sites throughout Italy: terra sigillata, amphorae (i.e. olive oil) and even, sometimes, cheap cooking wares, were exported from Africa on a large scale – the olive oil mostly through the fiscal movement of goods, the terra sigillata commercially. There were local, Italian, pottery productions as well, often of coarse ware but sometimes of a high quality, like the glazed pottery of northern Italy or the red-line painted wares (ceramica verniciata a bande rosse) of Tuscany, Campania, Calabria and other parts of the South. Some of these imitated African pottery, perhaps indicating that they were a cheaper local substitute – in particular in the Po valley, where African terra sigillata was always less common. All this indicates two phenomena: the integration of an exchange system extending across the whole western Mediterranean (products from the east were less common, except in Puglia); and the existence of regional demand that was sufficiently buoyant to permit local pottery production of an industrial type to exist as well. In the following centuries, these patterns vanished, however, with sharp breaks in c.450, c.550 and c.650.

Around 450, the density of the penetration of African pottery began to slip. It is less and less found in inland areas of Italy, although it still reached the coast. Imitations of terra sigillata become increasingly common. It is likely that the cause of this shift was simply the Vandal conquest of Africa, which ended the land-tax in grain and oil from that region; the Vandals presumably still wanted to export these goods, for example to Rome, which was dependent on them, but in return for money, and the publicly-funded grainship route from Carthage to Rome, which subsisted the export of other goods, no longer existed. In northern Italy, one could add that the weakening of the routes over the Alps due to political disruption beyond them, plus the move of the capital to the coastal city of Ravenna, undermined the patterns of internal movement of goods in the Po plain. The whole distribution system began to decline. Rome’s population began to decrease rapidly (it dropped from about half a million in 400 to under 50,000 by 550 – scholars disagree about how much less), and, in this context, the steady decline in the availability of fine pottery beyond the coast makes some sense as well. So does the increase, clearly noticeable between 450 and 550, of east Mediterranean amphorae in Italy; the peninsula was importing foodstuffs from the parts of the Mediterranean area still under Roman rule.

The next moment of change is the mid-sixth century. By 550, local productions in much of Italy had become less numerous: the red-line painted ware production of northern Campania and northern Basilicata seems to have ended, for example, and that of Naples and Calabria gets weaker. African pottery has almost vanished from inland areas by now, and even on the coast seems to be easily found only in certain major political centres such as Rome, Naples or Ravenna – though it was certainly at least accessible everywhere on the coast still, perhaps at a price. It seems that the Mediterranean exchange system was steadily weakening, and that local production had been hit very hard indeed. Inland areas were now almost entirely cut off from the Mediterranean economic world. These processes are generally associated with the devastation of the Gothic wars, I am sure rightly, even if exactly how this association worked is not yet fully worked out. It is worth noting that it is the inland areas, already cut off from the Mediterranean, that the Lombards would shortly conquer. The Lombards did not create the fragmented Italy of the early middle ages; they inherited it. But, of course, that economic fragmentation would only be reinforced by political boundaries, and by the incapacity of the Lombards even to halt regionalisation, still less to reverse it.

13 For all this, see most recently Ceramica in Italia, cit., pas-sim, with P. Reynolds, Trade in the Western Mediterranean AD 400-700 (Oxford, 1995), and the classic analysis by C. Panella in Storia di Roma, III, ii, ed. A. Carandini et al. (Turin, 1993), pp. 613-97. For how the shipping worked, see M. McCORMICK, «Settimane di studio», XLV (1998), pp. 35-118.


16 This observation has been developed by P. Dolci in La storia dell’alto medioevo, cit., pp. 15-17; E. Zanini, Le Italie bizantine, pp. 320-32; F. Marazzi in The sixth century, ed. R. Hodges and W. Bowden (Leiden, 1998), pp. 152-59.