

*Un emporio e la sua cattedrale. Gli scavi di piazza XX Settembre e Villaggio San Francesco a Comacchio.* Edited by Sauro Gelichi, Claudio Negrelli & Elena Grandi. 29 × 21 cm. 752 pp, 843 colour pls and figs, 93 b&w pls and figs. Sesto Fiorentino (FI): All'Insegna del Giglio, 2021. ISBN 978-88-7814-799-7. Price: €120.00 hb.

King Liutprand's charter of 715 (or 730) granting the inhabitants of Comacchio the right to ship salt, oil and *garum* (fish-sauce) upstream through the Po valley from the Adriatic coast is one of the most often quoted sources on 'international' trade in early-medieval Italy. Today a pleasant, sleepy town in the Po Delta, Comacchio developed into a substantial emporium and briefly rivalled Venice as dominant commercial node in northern Italy between the late 7th and early 9th centuries. Our knowledge of early-medieval Comacchio was long based on a handful of written records, but things have changed in the last 20 years through excavations carried out by the University of Venice, under the direction of Sauro Gelichi, uncovering ample traces of the period. These reveal Comacchio as an emporium recalling the northern European model, if somewhat smaller and with a Mediterranean scope.

Beautifully produced and edited, this volume brings to publication these exciting results. Dedicated to the excavations at the cathedral and Villaggio San Francesco, the religious centre and the harbour of early-medieval Comacchio respectively, the first two sections introduce the archaeology and history of the site that is later unravelled through the artefactual and palaeoenvironmental data. In subsequent essays, the rich ceramic assemblage (coarse, fine and glazed wares, amphorae) and other finds, which include glass, *pietra ollare* (soapstone) vessels, bone and metal artefacts, coins, stone building materials, and human, zoological and botanical remains, are all documented and illustrated. Extensive archaeometric analyses were performed on both pottery and glass in order to characterise their chemical and mineralogical composition and to pinpoint the sources of the raw materials. Comacchio emerges as part of a larger Mediterranean trade system: copious evidence of globular amphorae of Aegean origin used to transport wine is matched by the presence, on a much lesser scale, of amphorae from eastern Sicily. Given that the same types are attested in the cities and monasteries of the Po Valley, it is inferred that Comacchio's traders formed middlemen handling goods of Mediterranean origin in northern Italy. At the same time, the emporium was engaged in high-quality craft production: a 7th-century glass workshop was excavated near the cathedral, and a stone matrix for casting a small letter ('N') in copper alloy – a rare witness to the revival of gilded inscriptions – and the bronze mould for the manufacture of two-layered glass cameos depicting the cuirassed bust of a beardless man (nearly identical to those decorating a Carolingian reliquary from Cividale del Friuli), come from the same area.

The last section offers a general overview of the environmental, material and socio-economic structures of Comacchio. In his final essay, Gelichi reconstructs the operating characteristics and historical development, arguing first that Comacchio resembles the emporia and central places of southern Scandinavia. Located in an apparently marginal lagoon, Comacchio acted as a hub or nodal point for long-distance trade within a network of more local contacts and commercial relations. Its steady growth during the 8th century was undoubtedly fostered by the Longobard-Byzantine treaty of 680, which marked the stabilisation of Italian political situation and allowed a revival in exchange. If the last century of the Longobard kingdom was a phase of general prosperity, the Frankish conquest of Italy had a depressing effect on the Peninsula's economy: power drifted inexorably from the cities to the countryside, where the new Carolingian elites lorded over large estates, often acquired to the detriment of those small and middle landlords who had played an active role in the economic revival of the previous century, and direct seigneurial control was imposed over trade and exchange. In this context, the fortunes of Comacchio dwindled as Venice (slowly) emerged as the main commercial intermediary between the Carolingian Empire and the Mediterranean. This great panorama emerges from masterfully dominated primary data, and – simply put – this volume should be required reading for anyone interested in the history and archaeology of early-medieval Italy, Europe and the Mediterranean as a whole.

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