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THE MEDITERRANEAN EMPORIUM OF COMACCHIO AND EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN TRADE (the 6TH–10TH centuries AD)



Recent research has demonstrated both from the archaeological and historical point of view the inclusion of Comacchio (Ferrara, Italy) in the mostly unknown formation and development of new settlements that characterized the upper Adriatic Sea between the 6th and 10th centuries AD. The importance of Comacchio as a new town, able to take a fundamental role in the management of the trading relationships on a Mediterranean scale, has to be analysed in connection with the birth of other new urban settlements.

Comacchio, as Venice (Torcello, Rialto, Olivolo and Malamocco), Cittanova, Grado and Caorle, is an extraordinary element of novelty and vivacity in historical period traditionally considered critical and stagnant.

Apart from their topographic location in a marshy environment, the main feature of these new towns is the enhanced ability of promoting a wide range of commercial activities based on the revenues from the exploitation of the local resources (salt production and fishing). These commercial activities enabled the development of a strong local navigation able to provide constant and efficient transport on the shallow waters of the rivers and lagoons. The new 'emerging centres', often competing against each other, are localized in a political territory that can be considered as a border between the eastern/Byzantine world and the Western Lombard/Carolingian world. The ability to distinguish their relationship with Constantinople apart from the elite of the continental kingdoms provides their fortune in becoming true *emporia*.

Key words: Comacchio, Adriatic Sea, Early Medieval *emporia*, trade routes, port infrastructure.

The settled centre of Comacchio (Ferrara, Po Delta) (Fig. 1) originated in the Early Middle Ages. Written sources place the full formation and development of the settlement during the 8th century.

Comacchio takes a fundamental role within the system of 'new centres' which were born along the North-Western Adriatic coast between the 7th and the 9th century. These 'new centres' show extremely diverse material evidence both with regards to quantity and to quality. However, it is possible to classify them from the historical and archaeological interpretation, as ports and markets, therefore as '*emporia*' [12, p. 83-88]. From the political viewpoint these new towns are located within the narrow strip of land which is under Byzantine control after the fall of Rome.

We focus on Comacchio in order to assess the quality of its late antique and early medieval archaeological information. The objective is to verify the material characteristics defining the site as a *nodal-point* in the economical relationship occurring between the Adriatic and Mediterranean routes on one side and the trade with the hinterland of the Po river (and therefore the relationship with the *élites* of the Po valley) on the other. [13; 15].

This paper is organized into three sections:

- 1) First, the events that led to the birth of the settlement is sketched for the first time;
- 2) Second, the material structures of the early medieval settlement and the characteristics which identify Comacchio as an '*emporium*' are described;
- 3) Finally, the last part will consider the role of Comacchio as an emporium within the early medieval Adriatic, Po River and European economy.

Between Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages: the path towards a new settlement

The delta of the Po during Late Antiquity is a territory that can be defined as an area without towns. Along the banks of the old course of the river called *Padus Vetus* a certain number of settlements have been identified. The only significant centre is a *vicus*, called *Vicus Aventia*, where imperial legates were residing, carrying out the management and administration of large areas belonging to the imperial treasury. A good quantity of funerary inscriptions are the indirect evidence of the presence of wide *saltiz*, large estates consisting of uncultivated land, areas partially submerged by water and large patches of woodland [14, p. 395-410; 21; 26].

The sites, from the Imperial Age onward, were located along the main river ways (Fig. 2). Amongst the structures which have been found we can list houses (some with a high level *pars urbana*), structures for fish breeding, for the production of brick, salt-works and infrastructures connected with river navigation [27, p. 168-172; 28, p. 59].

Both written and material sources highlight how the people living around the delta in the Late Imperial Age were experts at lagoon and river navigation. Located in an area acting as a link between the large sea ports of the Upper Adriatic, the sites of the area of Comacchio seem to carry out the role of intermediate stopovers in the internal lagoon routes between Ravenna and Aquileia [11]. Both the river routes and the land ways needed *stationes* with bridges, ferries and docks [14].

It is not casual that at beginning of the 6th century Cassiodorus mentioned the people of the Po delta as skillful ship builders, whom emperor Theodoricus requested in AD 526 to provide qualified workers for the construction of boats (*«ut per domum nostram navigandi qaererentur artifices»*) [14, p. 399; 18, fig. 18,1; 24, p. 461].

A change in the settlement system of the area of Comacchio is evident between the 6th and 7th century AD. Clustered *nuclei* – almost villages – are grouped around religious buildings and in close relationship with structured agricultural areas. At the moment this interpretation, however, depends only on indirect data: concentrations of pottery collected during fieldwalking surveys, the presence of wide collective cemeteries and the construction of new religious buildings [22; 23].

New elements, for example, can be identified in the complex structure of the site of Motta della Girata (Fig. 4). In this area the church of Santa Maria in Pado Vetere was excavated. The building, dated to the age of Justinian, was surrounded by two funerary areas. Some of the burials contained objects, including glass or ceramic vessels, soapstone containers, personal objects made of metal or glassy paste and above all, bone combs [1; 20].

The materials allow us to date the cemetery to between the second half of the 5th and the 8th century, and emphasize in particular how the area was used for several burials even before the church was built [8].

The understanding of this settlement cannot be complete without reflecting on the specific landscape in which it was found, strongly influenced by the presence of the canal 'della Girata' wick can possibly be dated to the 7th–8th centuries, and by a large area of reclaimed land [4; 7; 9; 14, p. 407].

Settlement and port facilities. Comacchio in the 8th century

The settlement of Comacchio developed between the 7th and 8th century on a series of sandy dunes separated by canals, resembling 'islands' (Fig. 3) [14, p. 494, fig. 9]. The settlement is not far from the Adriatic coast and is naturally protected from the outside by a wide lagoon. The knowledge available at present allows us to imagine a central nucleus of the settlement clustered around the religious buildings (built with re-used bricks) which constitutes, from the first few years of the 8th century, the Episcopal district. At present, this *insula* corresponds with the area of the cathedral of Saint Cassiano.

Two other islands stretching northward and southward, with open spaces were alternatively used for housing, orchards and vegetable gardens. The houses were of course completely built of wood. There are also some funerary areas.

Valle Raibosola (the area of Saint Mauro and Saint Agostino) and the *insula* where the monastery of Saint Maria in Aula Regia (documented from AD 956) is located, are peculiar settlements, corographically separated from the remaining settlement and destined to be used by two different monastic institutions [6].

It is possible to identify the point of confluence of important waterways in the north-western part of the town, waterways which connected Comacchio with the mouth of the Po towards the north, with the settlement of Saint Maria in Pado Vetere and the southern river branches towards the south (and from here with Ravenna) and finally, going past the coastal dunes, to the Adriatic Sea routes. It is in this area that traces of large infrastructures, probably related to a port, the focus of the commercial activity of the settlement, can be identified. It is here that Francesco Proni identified, between 1924 and 1931, a series of wooden posts regularly inserted into the ground, at that time interpreted generally as pile-dwellings. It is however still possible to recognize, by looking at the pictures of that time, a platform made of wooden planks which probably constituted a walking level supported by vertical poles. Not far from here, in the present day Villaggio San Francesco, a salvage excavation found further groups of aligned posts, with different dimensions, on which the wooden planks were sometimes still visible [5, fig. 3-5].

The structural types of the post alignments are homogeneous: they mainly relate to structures protruding towards the lagoon (platforms-docks), waterfront and embankments.

The site, which occupies a very wide area, estimated to be around 75,000 sq. m., can be interpreted as a port facility working during the 8th century (Fig. 5).

The port was connected with the external coasts by a wide tidal canal of natural origin conveying salt water towards the interior, and was protected by the lagoon. The location allowed the exchange of goods between boats arriving at Comacchio from the Adriatic Sea and flat-bottom boats appropriate to navigate the shallow waters of the rivers of the Po valley.

Almost all finds are sherds of transport vessels: in the excavation of Villaggio San Francesco carried out in 1996, 89% of finds are sherds of closed vessels and transport containers, 55% of which are amphorae. In addition, under the docks parts of barrels (for transport?) and two stone anchors were found [15, p. 514-516].

From a structural point of view the most prominent element is the wide platforms consisting of vertical oak posts in parallel rows, planted into the ground. These posts were supporting the wooden planks. It is easy to imagine that these wide structures did not function only as docks but were also proper working platforms (Fig. 6)

[15]. These kinds of structures are very similar in building materials and techniques to the wooden platform-docks found in Dorestad, on the Rhine river in Holland [29, fig. 22], in Groß Strömkendorf on the German Baltic Sea coast [25, p. 210] or in Resen in Germany [3, fig. 6,7,8].

Ceramic sherds have been found under the heads of posts, under the collapsed wooden planks connecting them, or in layers of soil used for embankments and/or reclaiming of land. The pottery can be dated to the 8th–9th centuries.

Three peculiar elements of the 8th and 9th- century assemblages are the classes defined as 'light clay pottery', the 'early medieval globular amphorae' and the 'soapstone'. Light clay pottery shows usually closed shapes, mainly with two handles (Fig. 7). We hypothesize a Po River or Adriatic provenance. The presence of amphorae known as 'early medieval globular amphorae' (Fig. 8) in the excavations of Comacchio is necessary to frame the economy of the Comacchio emporium [16, p. 601-608; 19].

It is therefore an 'extra-regional' function which can be read through the amphorae, for which we suppose a consistent import from the Mediterranean and the southern Adriatic area.

Comacchio: Po valley, Adriatic and Mediterranean 'emporium'

Trade, then, but what of?

From oil to wine, from spices to fabrics, perhaps *garum*: eastern products requested in the West. It was the allure of supply and demand that led the Byzantine ships up to the Upper Adriatic and provided the local fleets with a monopoly of the river trades in Northern Italy, to which the primary market for the locally produced salt added up.

Trade, then, but who for?

The new towns of the Upper Adriatic kept in direct contact with the Byzantine East. They belonged to an area of consumption and circulation of specific goods, some eastern productions, in which the Lombard and Franks elite progressively got interested.

Obviously the establishment of a commercial emporium with a Mediterranean scope was connected with a stable aristocratic hegemony. Elites, in fact, provided the 'demand' in the early medieval economy. If Venice in the 9th century appeared to be strictly connected with the Carolingian world, Comacchio in the 7th century appeared to be an emporium of Lombard economy (Fig. 9).

The importance of Comacchio (Fig. 10) within the economic dynamics of Northern Italy, between Lombards and Carolingians, has been variously evaluated at the scientific level.

Written sources, in particular the 'Capitolare' (a *pactum* signed in the beginning of the 8th century between Lombards and the *habitatores* of Comacchio regulating trade along the Po), provided hints of the commercial role of Comacchio. Some scholars have emphasized this role [10; 30]. They describe a certain dynamism which characterized the last phase of the Lombard age. It would be a preamble to the following Carolingian *floruit*. Other scholars have belittled these functions [2; 31; 32]. They place Comacchio in a net of short and medium range commercial relationships. Comacchio would have traded, basically, salt. At the same time McCormick has highlighted the decisive role of Venice in the first part of the Carolingian age, considering in a reductive perspective the economy properly pertaining to the Lombard in the 8th century [17].

Conclusions: from Comacchio to Venice

Venice in the 9th century, especially after the peace treaty of Aachen, was chosen by the Carolingians as a nodal point in the trade towards the east. As a matter of fact, the importance of other trade centres, like Comacchio, seemed to diminish the closer we get to the 10th century. The privileged position of the Venetian doges with the Carolingian kings not only caused the decline of Comacchio, but also caused a powerful change in the economical structures of northern Italy.

During the 8th century the economy and the trade described by the archaeological evidence of Comacchio shows a vitality of economy in different towns of the Po valley: the framework of economical relationships is anything but 'stagnant'. The rise to power of Venice in the 9th century and its 'trade' aimed at European market gave a marginal role to Northern Italy.

The products which arrived and were traded in the port of Comacchio seemed to be addressed to the elites of the Po valley. On the contrary, the commercial relationships of the following century bypassed Northern Italy, which appeared to be characterized by more local exchange with a short and medium span.

There was also a fundamental change in the new market: not only Byzantine ships navigated the Adriatic to reach the emporia, but the Venetians also targeted the whole Mediterranean. Their fleet grew bigger and stronger.

Venice, however, felt the need to establish its commercial power by means of war actions aimed at destroying Comacchio. The war of AD 932 was the most acute episode: probably in that period Comacchio was still felt to be an economical 'competitor' which needed to be drastically curtailed [15].

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СЕРЕДЗЕМНОМОРСЬКИЙ ЕМПОРІЙ КОМАКЬО ТА РАННЬОСЕРЕДНЬОВІЧНА ЄВРОПЕЙСЬКА ТОРГІВЛЯ (VI–X ст. н.е.)

Останні дослідження продемонстрували, що місто Комакьо (Феррара, Італія) відноситься до найменш вивчених поселень, як з історичного, так і з археологічного погляду. Його формування і розвиток дає зовсім нову картину регіону верхньої Адриатики в період з VI по X ст. н.е. Значення Комакьо як *нового* міста, здатного відігравати провідну роль в управлінні торговими відносинами в усьому середземноморському регіоні, має бути проаналізовано у зв'язку із виникненням і інших урбанізованих поселень.

Комакьо, як і Венеція (Торчелло, Ріальто, Оліволо та Маламокко), Читтанова, Градо та Каорле є якісно новим і життєздатним елементом в історичний період, що традиційно розглядається як переломний та рецесивний.

Основною рисою *нових* міст, окрім їх топографічного розташування у болотистій місцевості, є розвиток широкого діапазону комерційної діяльності, заснованої на доходах від експлуатації місцевих ресурсів (видобування солі та рибальства). Комерційна діяльність мала стосунок також і до розвитку морської справи в регіоні, яка могла забезпечити постійне та ефективне перевезення в умовах мілких річок та лагун.

Ці нові «центри активного розвитку», які часто між собою конкурували, обмежувалися політичною територією, яку, своєю чергою, можна розглядати як кордон між східним – Візантійським і західним – Ломбардійським/Каролінзьким світом. Вміння диференціювати відносини між Константинополем та елітою континентальних королівств забезпечувало успіх цих міст як справжніх емпоріїв.

Ключові слова: Комакьо, Адриатичне море, ранньосередньовічні емпорії, торговельні маршрути, портові інфраструктури.

СРЕДИЗЕМНОМОРСКИЙ ЭМПОРИЙ КОМАКЬО И РАННЕСРЕДНЕВЕКОВАЯ ЕВРОПЕЙСКАЯ ТОРГОВЛЯ (VI–X вв. н.э.)

Недавние исследования продемонстрировали, что город Комакьо (Феррара, Италия) относится к наименее изученным поселениям, как с исторической, так и с археологической точки зрения. Его формирование и развитие даёт совершенно новую картину региона верхней Адриатики в период с VI по X вв. н.э. Значение Комакьо как *нового* города, способного сыграть главенствующую роль в управлении торговыми отношениями во всем средиземноморском регионе должно быть проанализировано в связи с возникновением и других урбанизированных поселений.

Комакьо, как и Венеция (Торчелло, Ріальто, Оліволо и Маламокко), Читтанова, Градо и Каорле является качественно новым и жизнеспособным элементом в исторический период, традиционно рассматривающийся как переломный и рецессивный.

Основной чертой *новых* городов, помимо их топографического расположения в болотистой местности, является развитие широкого диапазона коммерческой деятельности, основанной на доходах от эксплуатации местных ресурсов (добыча соли и рыболовство). Коммерческая деятельность имела отношение также и к развитию морского дела в регионе, которое могло обеспечить постоянные и эффективные перевозки в условиях мелких рек и лагун.

Эти новые «активно развивающиеся центры», часто конкурирующие между собой, ограничивались политической территорией, которую в свою очередь можно рассматривать как границу между восточным – Византийским и западным – Ломбардским/Каролингским миром. Умение дифференцировать отношения между Константинополем и элитой континентальных королевств обеспечивало успех в становлении этих городов как настоящих эмпориев.

Ключевые слова: Комакьо, Адриатическое море, раннесредневековые эмпории, торговые маршруты, портовые инфраструктуры.

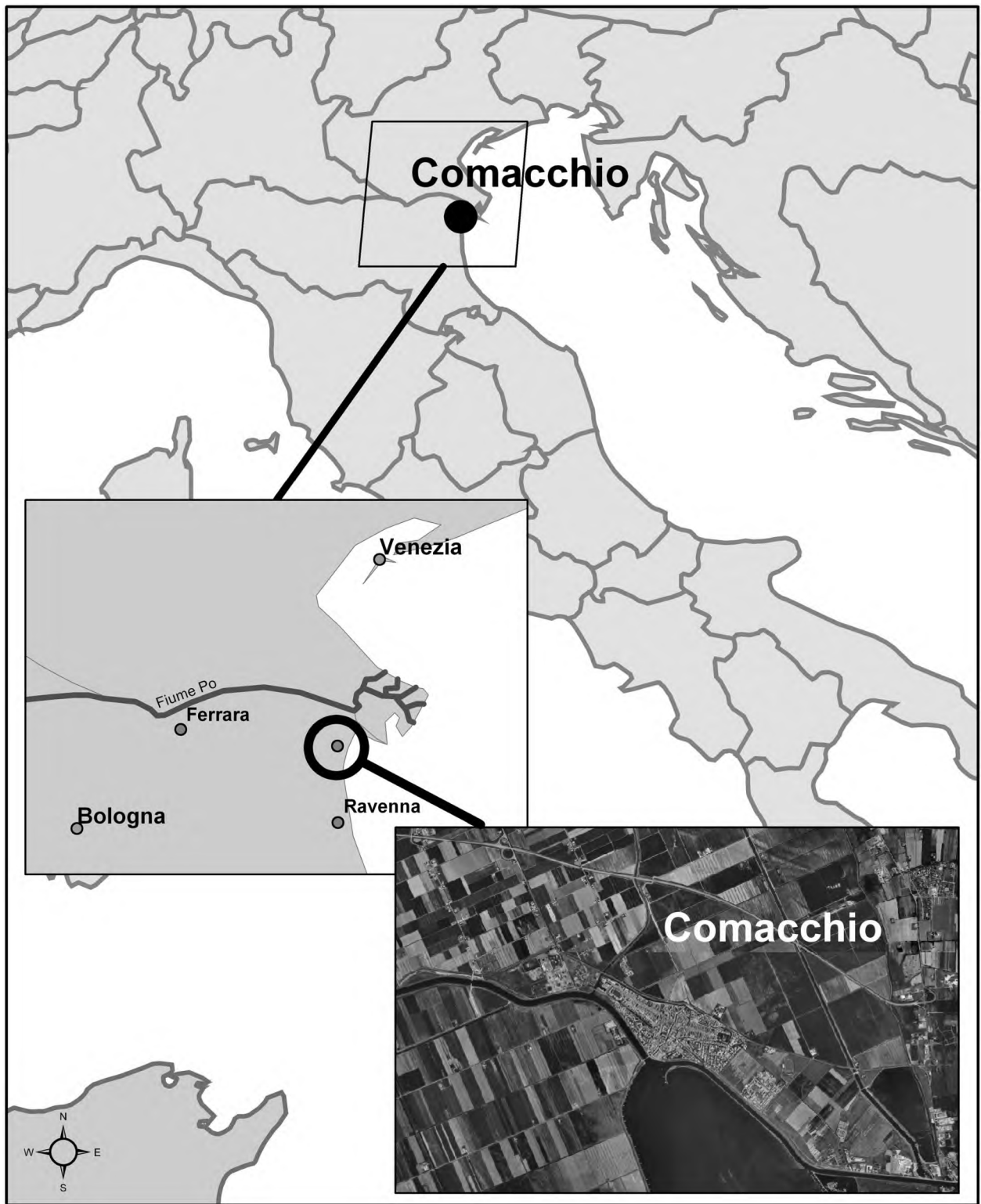


Fig. 1. Location of Comacchio.

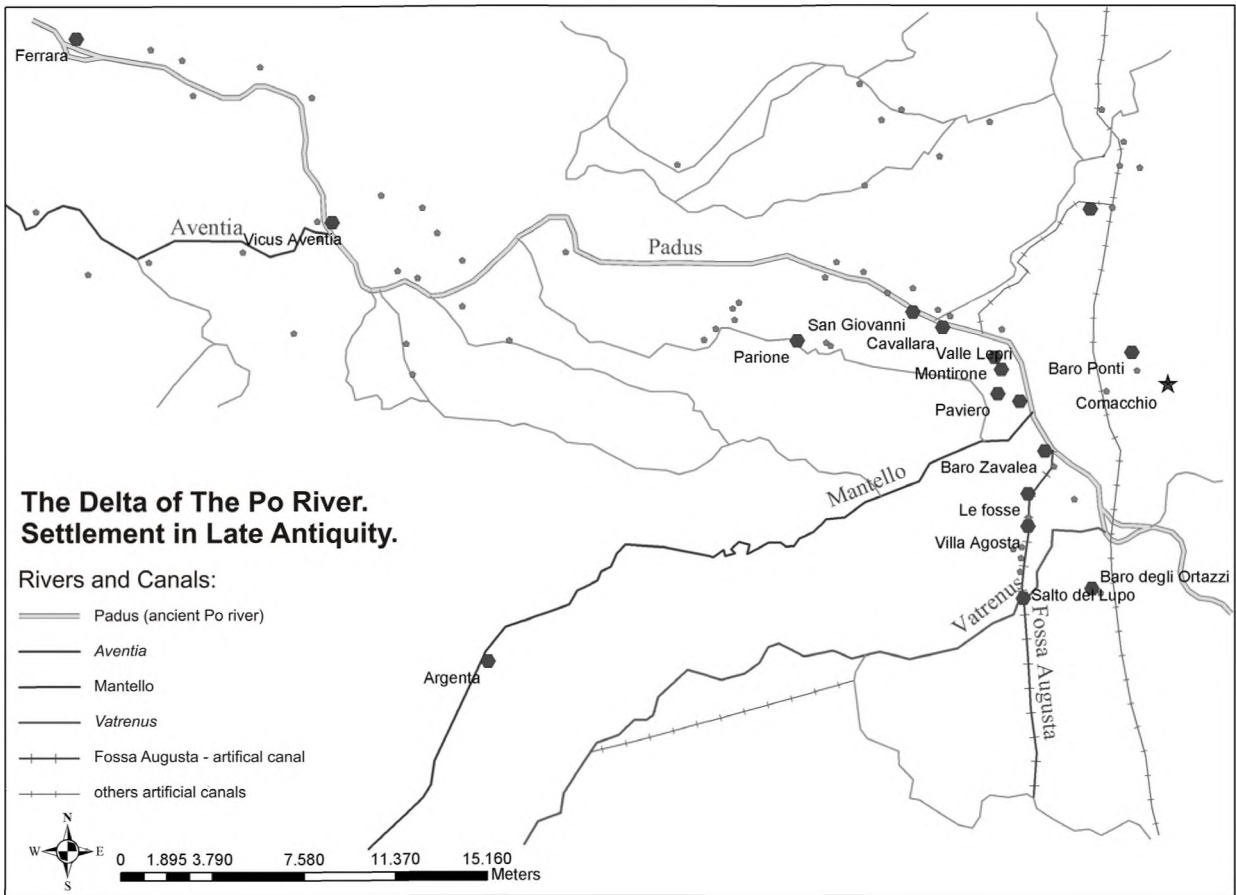


Fig. 2. Delta of Po River: Settlement in Late Antiquity.

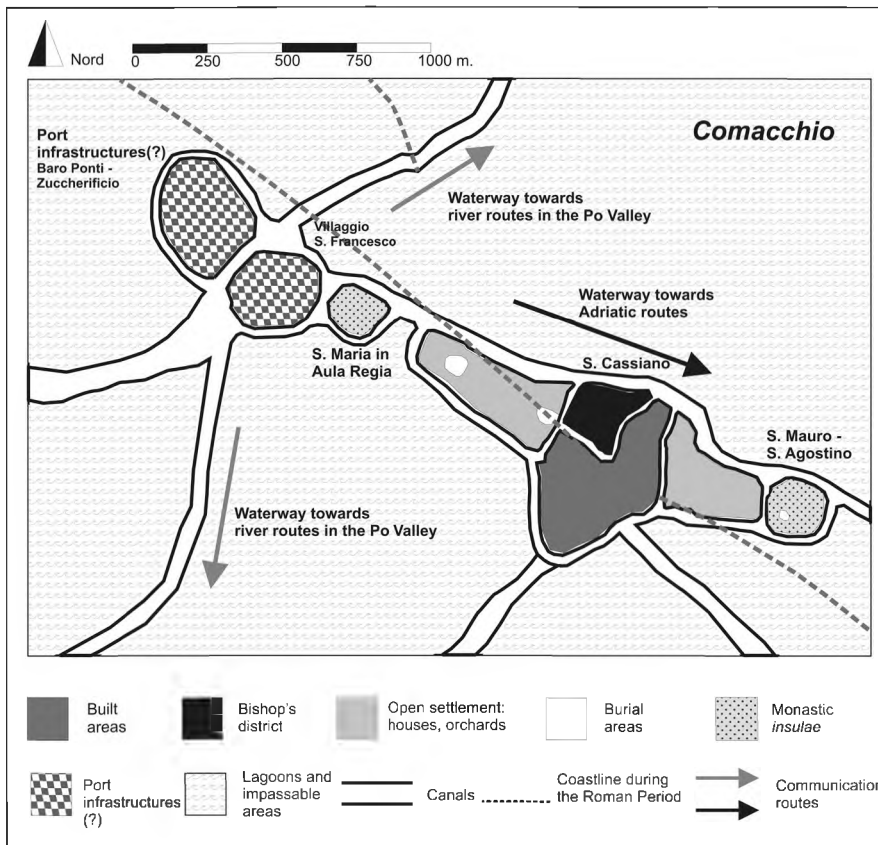


Fig. 3. Comacchio in the Early Middle Ages.

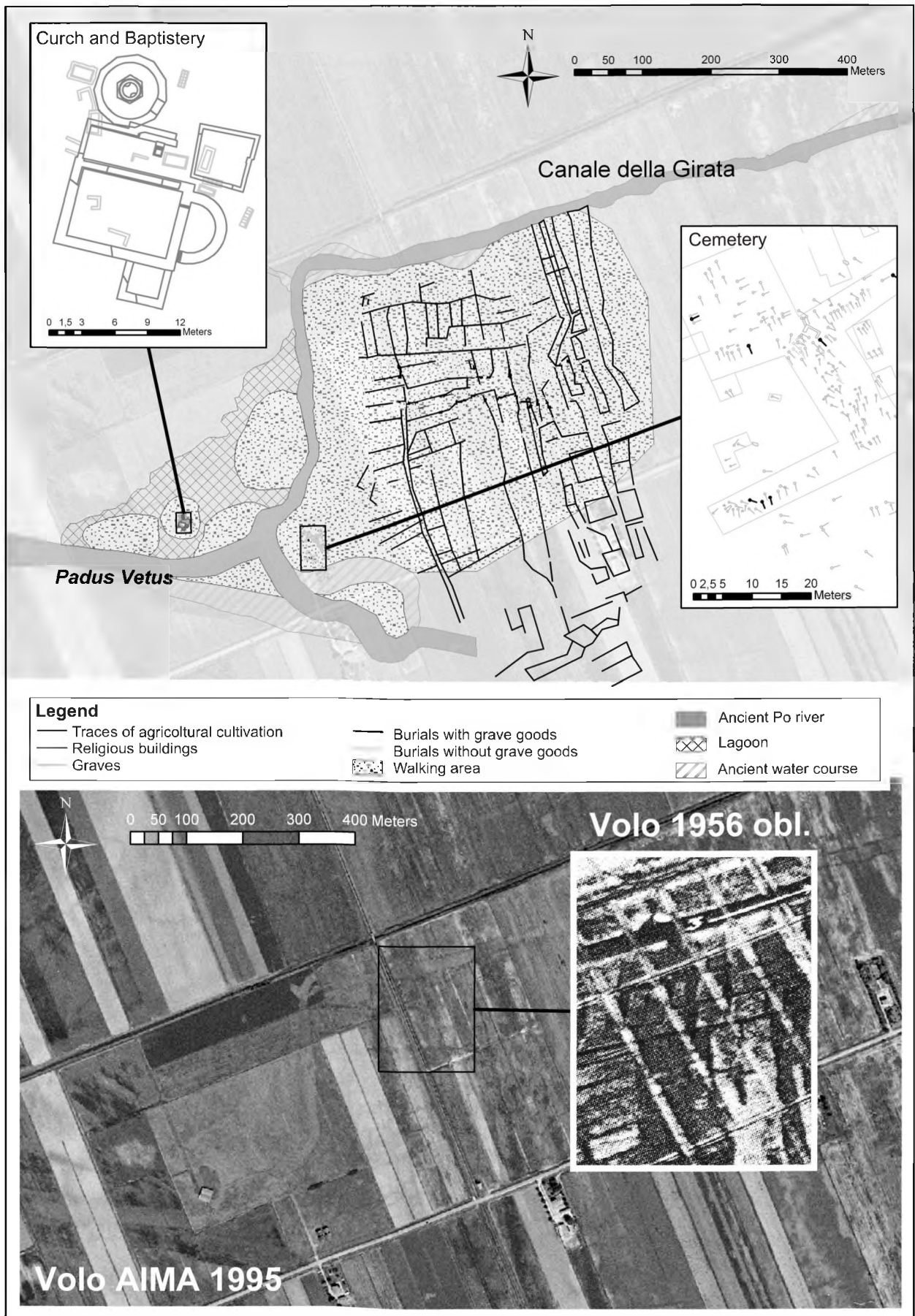


Fig. 4. Santa Maria in Padovetere. Archaeological elements and aerial photo-interpretation.

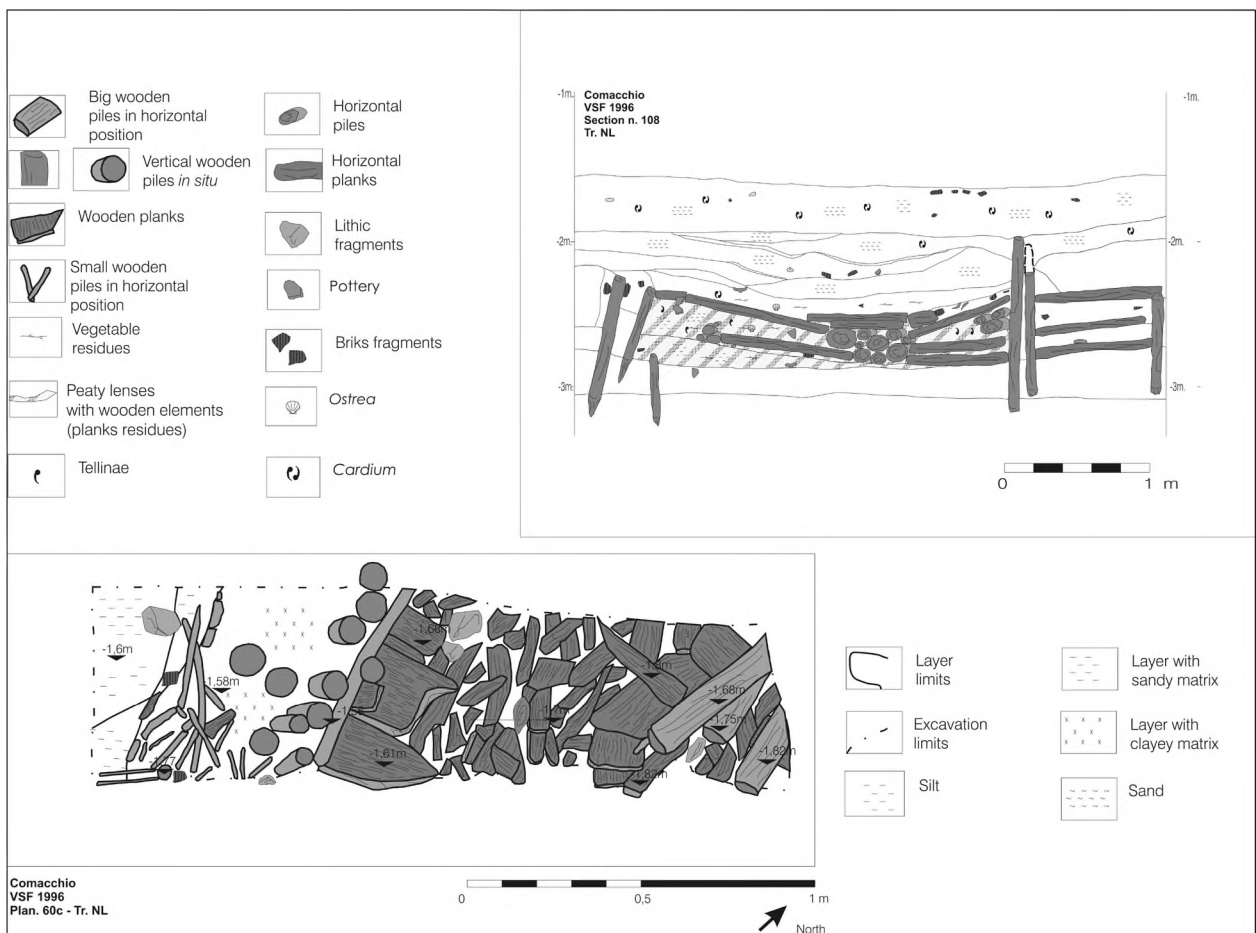


Fig. 5. Villaggio San Francesco (Comacchio): wooden platform-docks.

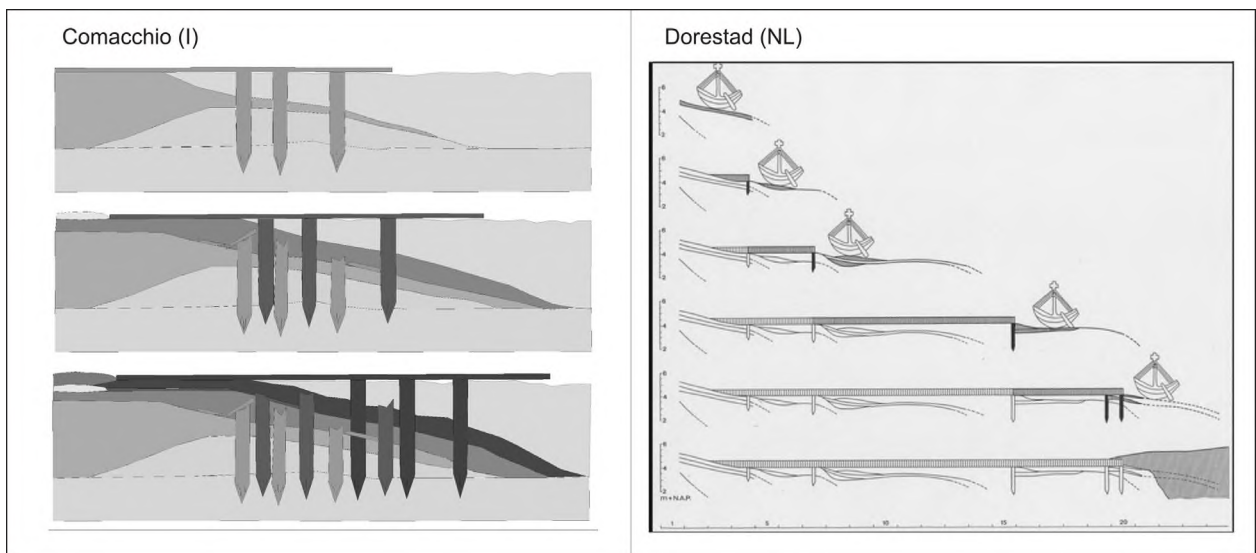


Fig. 6. Landing stages in Comacchio and in Dorestad.

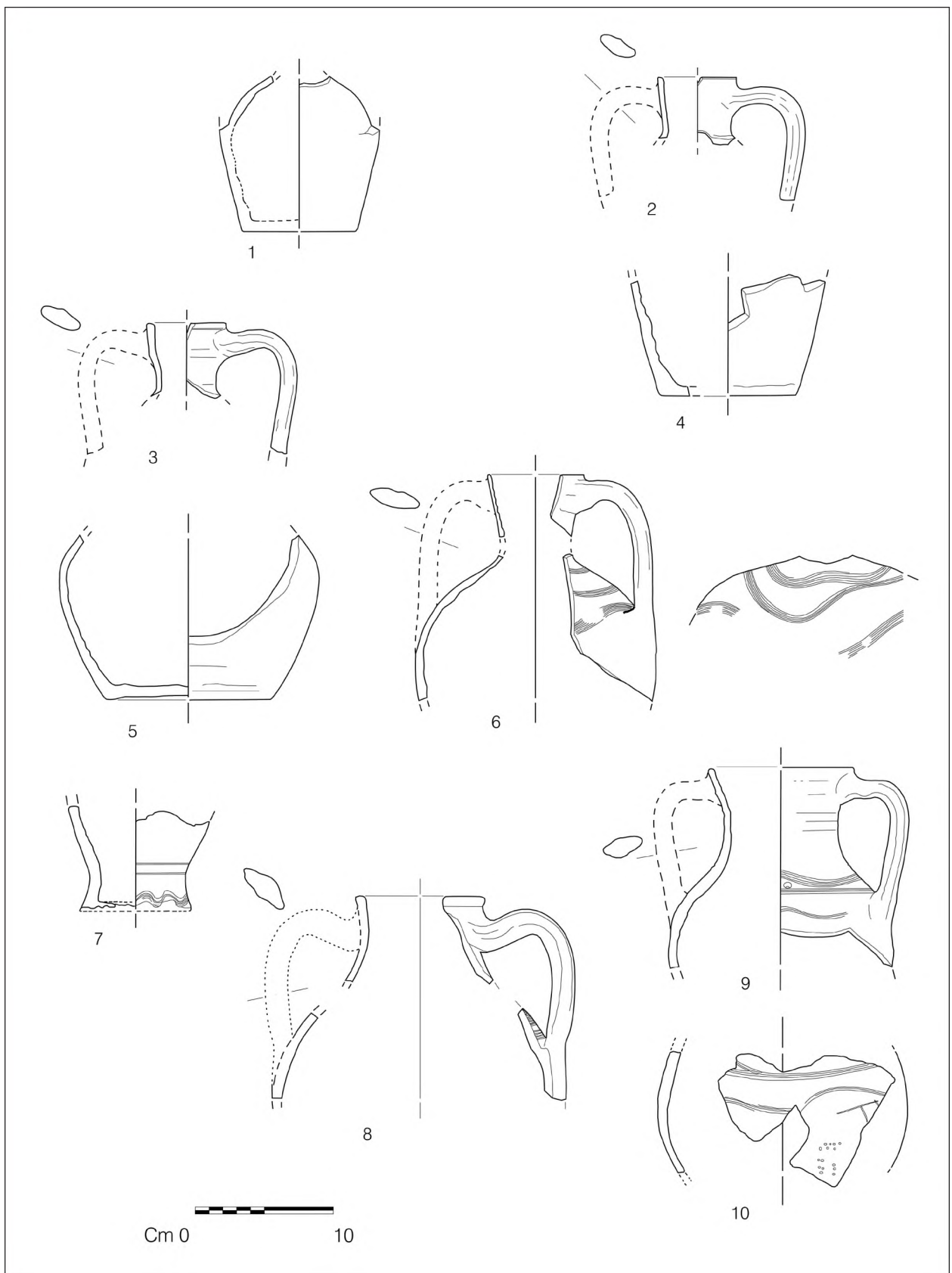


Fig. 7. Light-clay pottery from Comacchio.

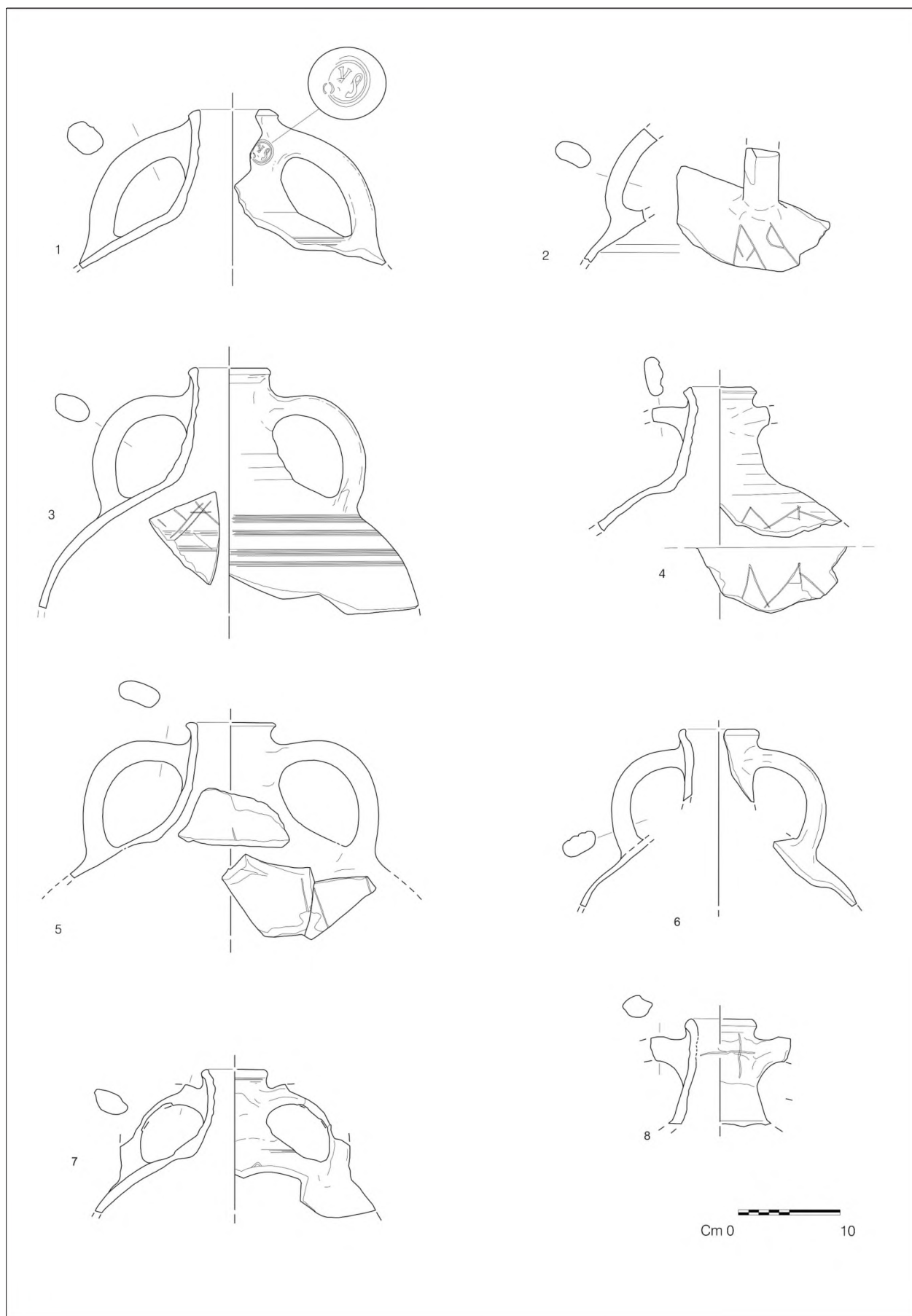


Fig. 8. Early medieval globular amphorae from Comacchio.

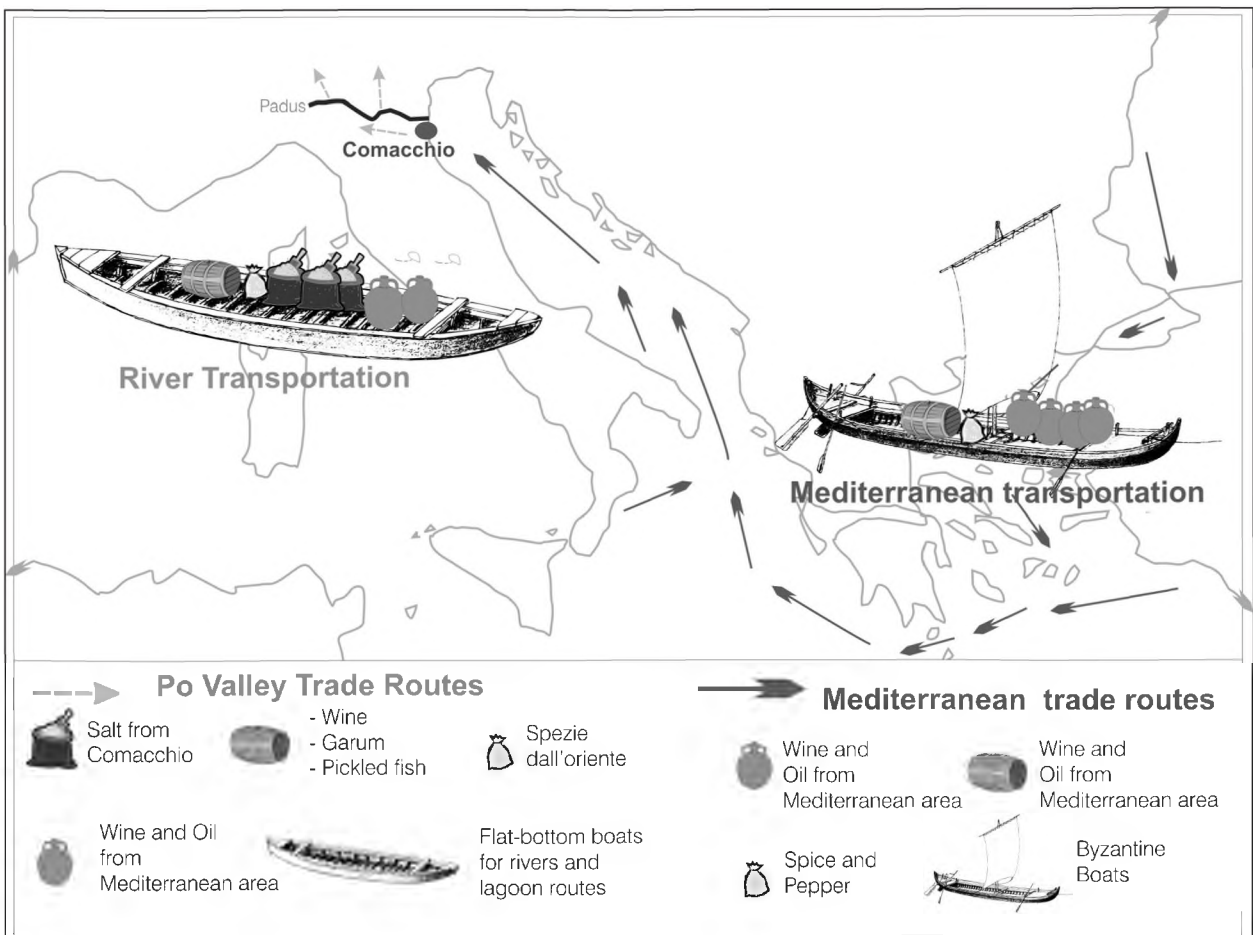


Fig. 9. The trade routes "from" and "to" Comacchio.



Fig. 10. Reconstruction of Comacchio in the Early Middle Ages (R. Merlo).