RICHARD HODGES

Becoming Europe

Retracing the Origin of Medieval Cities from Comacchio and Oegstgeest

To Peter Brown

ABSTRACT A hundred years ago Henri Pirenne delivered his seminal lectures on the medieval city in the USA. In the aftermath of the late antique collapse of Mediterranean Sea commerce, Pirenne pinpointed North Sea traders as agents that led to the origins of the Carolingian revolution which eventually put in place new towns. With the publication of major archaeological reports about Comacchio and Oegstgeest — early medieval centres on the Adriatic Sea and North Sea respectively — this article considers key tropes of Pirenne's narrative. In ranging between the end of Antiquity and its so-called temple society and the rise of the Merovingian and Carolingian North Sea, the article reviews the preliminary stages during which the divergence between the Mediterranean regions and north-west Europe was repaired.

KEYWORDS Early medieval Europe; the Mediterranean; the North Sea; long-distance trade; emporia; commodities

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> This little volume contains the substance of lectures which I delivered from October to December 1922 in several American universities. It is an attempt to expound, in a general way, the economic awakening and the birth of urban civilization in Western Europe during the Middle Ages. (Pirenne 2014 [1925], 1)

> The birth of cities marked the beginning of a new era in the internal history of Western Europe. Until then, society had recognized only two active orders: the clergy and the nobility. In taking its place beside them, the middle class rounded the social order out or, rather, gave the finishing touch thereto. (Pirenne 2014 [1925], 138)

Henri Pirenne's Thesis, 1922–2022

On the hundredth anniversary of the lectures on medieval cities that Henri Pirenne delivered in the USA, and the publication of his first essay on the relations between Mohammed and Charlemagne, two major archaeological reports about Comacchio and Oegstgeest have been published. These two places — on the Adriatic Sea and North Sea respectively — significantly change the narrative of how Europe's patchwork quilt of tribes became Europeans in the sixth to eighth centuries. They also incidentally take us back to many of the key tropes of Pirenne's narrative.

Pirenne's American lectures in 1922 were given with a clear purpose (Fig. 6.1). This is set out in his subsequent book, *Medieval Cities* (Pirenne 2014 [1925]), which immediately became a canonical work. Having suffered in captivity in the First World War, the Belgian historian was using this visceral experience to make a point about change rather than continuity (cf. Boone 2012; Effros 2017). This challenged the German historiographic tradition of continuity with its emphasis upon deep roots in rural society.

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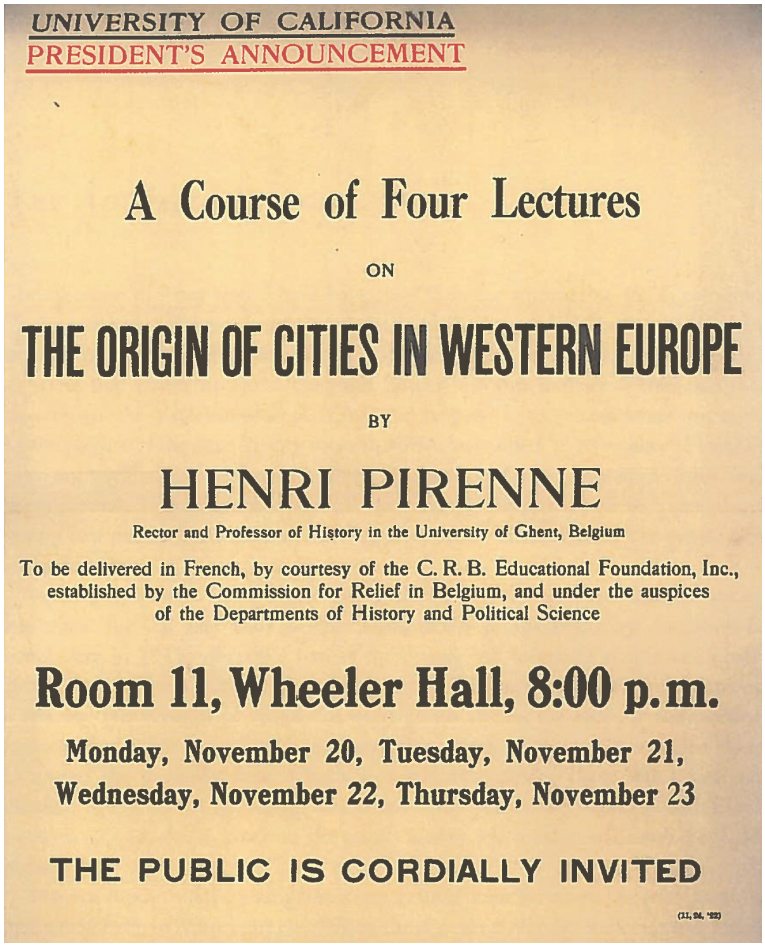
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ON

THE ORIGIN OF CITIES IN WESTERN EUROPE

BY

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THE PUBLIC IS CORDIALLY INVITED

Figure 6.1. Poster for Henri Pirenne's lectures at the University of California, 1922. From Keymeulen and Tollebeek 2011.

He was also emphasizing the importance of freedoms that stemmed from medieval communal life for the formation of civilization. It was an argument that played well to his post-war American audiences, aware of its implicit meaning for the USA. Pirenne argued that the western city, born in the Central and Late Middle Ages, was identified not only by its market functions, but also by its corporative capacity to produce and execute its own laws (cf. Boone 2012, 348). Aaron Gourevitch cogently developed this point in his classic book on medieval European culture, pinpointing that medieval urbanity and the type of the 'burgher', a member of a free and independent urban community, were crucial inputs. However highly developed on the cultural level the cities of both the Byzantine and Islamic world may have been, they failed to develop this social type, the basis for further social and economic developments that help to explain the European *Sonderweg* (Gourevitch 1983, 210–11). Pirenne's economic explanation was also an unspoken tenet of the founding ethos of the EU, encapsulated in the Treaty of Rome, 1957, as well as in the EU's premier award, the Charlemagne Prize (cf. Davis 2015, 433).

A hundred years ago, too, Pirenne also published the essay that he developed into another book that has since lent him lasting fame: 'Mahomet et Charlemagne'. Published in the first issue of the *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* (Pirenne 1922), it has become a canonical work that wove certain of the themes of *Medieval Cities* into a larger canvas. In his later, posthumously published, book (Pirenne 1939), Pirenne tried to trace the connection between the end of the Roman world in the Mediterranean and the beginnings of the rise of Carolingians. In Pirenne's view

> the Empire of Charlemagne, a Northern Germanic Empire unimaginable in any previous century, marks the true beginning of the Middle Ages; all that had preceded it was the autumn of the ancient Mediterranean culture. The change happened, Pirenne insisted, not through any slow entropy of *Romania* in the South, nor through any discrete rise in the economic and human potential of the Germanic North. Rather, by breaking the unity of the Mediterranean, the Arab war fleets had twisted a tourniquet around the artery by which the warm blood of ancient civilization, in its last Romano-Byzantine form, had continued to pulse into Western Europe. (Brown 1974, 26–27)

Again, as in *Medieval Cities* this was a history of discontinuities, in which, simply put, the agrarian Germanic tribes triumphed in the Carolingian renaissance.

Bonnie Effros has cogently summarized the impact of Pirenne's thesis as follows:

> [The modern] ideological reading of *Mahomet et Charlemagne* contrasts starkly with the work's more nuanced interpretation and reception in European medieval and Mediterranean historiography, where what is now known as the Pirenne Thesis has made its largest contribution in economic history. Although the influence of the monograph's argument has ebbed and flowed since the time of its composition in response to contemporary trends in medieval studies, nearly eighty years after its publication, medievalists continue to debate the merits of Pirenne's contribution. Its influence in medieval studies has also varied regionally. Whereas Anglo-American, French, and Italian scholars, on the whole, have generally accepted the research priorities established by *Mahomet et Charlemagne* while they have questioned its conclusions, the impact of Pirenne's work in Austrian and German circles

> has been markedly less profound than the legacy of his contemporary, the Austrian historian Alfons Dopsch. Medievalists specializing in the Carolingian period and the epochs that succeeded it or those who work on Mediterranean history more generally have been most apt to embrace Pirenne. (Effros 2017, 184–85)

For sure, some parts of Pirenne's thesis have been consigned to historiography. The role of Islam in the end of the Mediterranean, to which Pirenne attaches one axis of his model, no longer holds (Brown 1974; Hodges and Whitehouse 1983; Effros 2017). Mediterranean cities, regional economies, and trade were suffering variable decline from the mid-sixth century (Lavan 2013). By 698, when Carthage fell to the Arabs, Mediterranean trade, to judge from a significant amount of archaeological evidence, was a small fraction of its scale in the emperor Justinian's time. The source of this decline is now focusing either upon events, such as the Justinianic plague and environmental factors (McCormick and others 2012; Harper 2017), or upon administrative paralysis,[1] or more broadly upon social change, such as the staggering rise of the Church and the eclipse of an urban aristocracy resulting in an unsustainable temple society (Brown 2012; Wood 2018; 2021). By contrast, the quest to explain how Charlemagne in his 'Northern Germanic Empire' created the foundations of the Middle Ages including feudalism has continued. The search for external support to account for Charlemagne's imperial adventure in the form of Arab silver has been advocated enthusiastically once the numismatic and archaeological evidence was available (Bolin 1953; Hodges and Whitehouse 1983; McCormick 2007). This has focused upon long-distance trade from the Rhine up to western Denmark to obtain dirhams that entered the Baltic Sea by way of western Russian river trade, as well as more direct trade across the Mediterranean from the Near East to Venice. There are significant problems now with these hypotheses. The chronology of the large-scale trade in Arab dirhams to Scandinavia no longer holds; in an exceptionally well-excavated example, the dirhams arrived in the Norwegian emporium at Kaupang a generation or more after Charlemagne (Kilger 2008; see also Philippsen and others 2021). Similarly, it seems unlikely after preliminary isotopic analyses that the familiar Carolingian reform deniers were made with silver imported through Venice (which only had a Carolingian mint after Charlemagne's death) (Sarah and others 2008). Instead, new studies lay emphasis upon the expansion of the Melle silver mines in Aquitaine during the later Merovingian and Carolingian eras (Loveluck and others 2018, 1579). On these grounds, the foundations of the Middle Ages appear to lie in the social and economic changes that occurred mainly within north-west Europe between the sixth and late eighth centuries.

The debate, nonetheless, has endured largely for a simple reason. The sources have not been deployed coherently but in piecemeal, invariably as regional studies. Of course, the political histories of Mediterranean and north-west Europe are well known from the contemporary textual sources. This said, there is a division between those historians who have focused on the secular histories and those who have featured the role of the Church (Wood 2013, 305–09). Artisans and merchants in all cases feature as incidental figures in the contemporary texts. The art-historical evidence mostly concerns monuments and fine objects. Some monuments and works are well dated by reference to specific text-identified individuals; most are not. Dendrochronological dating is now being used, but the results are limited (see, for example, Mitchell 2013, 367–90; Werther and others 2020). By contrast, the archaeological evidence has focused upon exactly those areas where the texts are least helpful: trade, craft-working, and the countryside. The archaeology of the 'clergy and nobility' that feature in Pirenne's *Medieval Cities* (1925) and *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (1939) is still extraordinarily inadequate. Only with the combination of historical, art-historical, antiquarian, and modern archaeology can we form a picture of the post-classical Church and the palatial settlement history of the nobility before the mid-ninth century. This fragmented evidence has undoubtedly inhibited making any modern sense of the outstanding questions posed by Pirenne's thesis:

First, was there any connection between the end of the sixth-century Mediterranean world and the rise of north-west Europe? Second, what role did the artisans and merchants play in the eventual rise of the Carolingian Empire and its renaissance (and the foundations of the Middle Ages)?

The End of the Temple Society

If European civilization is built on that of Rome, it now appears obvious that the Rome involved was not that of Augustus, Cicero, and classical urbanism, but that of Constantine, Augustine, the Justinianic Code, and the Church. The Roman Empire had

1 Sarris (2006, 174–75) notes that Justinian issued 142 edicts and constitutions between 533 and 542 (14.2 per year) whereas from 543 to 565 there was a total of 31 (1.3 per year).

evolved through several different institutional iterations before it entered a final chapter now well documented by numerous archaeological excavations in the Mediterranean region. Explaining the end of the empire as the consequence of events such as immigration and invasion (*pace* Ward-Perkins 2005) or either environmental change or pestilence (e.g. McCormick and others 2012; Harper 2017) is to seek a *deus ex machina* solution that has left little or no impact on the archaeological record (cf. Moreland 2018; Sessa 2019). It would be a mistake to deny such events ever happened. Of course, they did, but if we trust the material record it focuses our attention upon a massive social upheaval that caused economic collapse. Towns that had been populated by rich houses in the fourth and fifth centuries, in the aftermath of Constantine's revolution, were suddenly filled with churches in the sixth century (Brown 2012, 521–22; cf. Hodges 2021). After them, from the mid-sixth to the later seventh centuries came the inexorable ruralization of great and small classical cities and the incremental abandonment of the countryside.

The unequivocal evidence is before us, and so is an explanation that is well supported by the textual histories. Public benefaction, an age-old tradition in ancient cities, was suddenly upended. Gifts to churches were thought to join this world to the celestial world beyond. Supporting churches, the clergy, and the poor steadily emerged as a rite of passage to this boundless world beyond. Between 370 and 430, this new Christian worldview did not pass without controversy. The fifth century was marked by increasing pressures on the secular elite, who resisted the ideals of the ambitious bishops. In the latter part of the century, as the state steadily weakened, the Church inexorably accumulated wealth — especially moveable and landed wealth — altering the very axes of society. The collapse of traditional aristocracies left the Church in a prime position. 'It was an age of managerial bishops and their clerical staffs', Brown (2012, 530) has written. Western Roman aristocrats, faced with economic stresses brought on by the larger fiscal circumstances, opted to redefine the future. 'Led by a clergy made ever more starkly different from themselves in culture and lifestyle, the laity sought out new ways to place their wealth beyond the grave for the salvation of their souls' (Brown 2012, 530). In a society that knew all about the main social effects of friendship and patronage, the emergence of men and women who claimed intimate relations with invisible patrons meant far more than the rise of a tender religiosity of personal experience, and more than the groping of lonely men for invisible companionship. It meant that yet another form of 'power' was available for the inhabitants of a Mediterranean city. Salvation of souls, especially in sixth-century cities, in terms of gift-giving became the driving ambition of Christian society and was to remain so for the coming centuries (Wood 2018; 2021).

Rome became a quintessential city of churches and remained largely unchanged in this form until the later ninth century (cf. Santangeli Valenziano 2015). To quote Brown (2003, 429) once more, '[it] would have struck visitors as a dream-like temple city as vast as Angkor Wat'. It became, what Richard Krautheimer (1980, 143) described as 'merely […] a respectable county seat'. Ravenna, the eastern capital of the Exarchate, followed the same decline and transformation from a city of large townhouses to one dominated by churches (Cirelli 2008). In its huge port, Classe, a great basilican church, S. Apollinare, was erected as its commercial life formerly encompassing the Mediterranean drained away. By the later seventh century, in the areas excavated recently, residual trade with Constantinople and the surviving mercantile nodes of the eastern Mediterranean, was in an indisputable twilight phase (Augenti 2010; Augenti, Cirelli, and Marin 2009). With Byzantium competing to retain its Italian territory in enclaves, and the rise of the Lombards, Italy entered a new era. This era coincided, exactly, with the incremental growth in the Merovingian North Sea commercial network, that a century ago fascinated Henri Pirenne.

The temple society described by Peter Brown was largely an old urban phenomenon. It led to the collapse of rural society in the central Mediterranean and with it, agrarian production. Much of the east Mediterranean was to be impacted by the same transformation by the early to mid-eighth century. Yet tribal societies, including the Church and aristocracy still had use for exotic traded goods to articulate local gift-giving spheres. This is the context for the port of Comacchio at the deltaic mouth of the Po, as well as other similar small ports along the perforated Upper Adriatic Sea coastline. Cinzio Violante (1974 [1953], 3), in his tacit homage to Pirenne on the pre-commune society of Milan, observed: 'with the conclusion of the peace of 680 between the Lombards and Byzantines, there developed trade between the ports of Comacchio and Venice and the principal cities of the Po Plain'. The port was active at least until the mid-eighth century and arguably until the ninth century when the Venetians ensured its eclipse. Its apparent apogee is summarized in a capitulary dated to either 715 or 730 issued by the Lombard king, Liutprand. Liutprand recognized the merchants as *navicularii comaclenses* and agreed to the tolls they charged to communities along the river Po. These included Ferrara, Mantua, Parma, Cremona, Piacenza,

Pavia, and almost certainly the monastery of Nonantola, close to Modena. At face value, the Comacchio traders appear to have been an independent enclave, given royal support to serve the largely deserted temple towns along the Po.

One of several enclaves, probably including Venice, the Comacchio enclave emerges from the terse textual (and epigraphical) history thanks to outstanding modern archaeological research. Sauro Gelichi's magisterial report (Gelichi, Negrelli, and Grandi 2021) on excavations undertaken over the past twenty years provides an invaluable counterweight to detailed studies of similar emporia from the North Sea region — notably Dorestad, Quentovic, Gipeswic, Hamwic, Lundenwic, and Ribe (as well as the ports of Birka, Haithabu, and Kaupang). No less importantly, Gelichi's discussion of the significance of the material evidence shines a spotlight on the economy of the central Mediterranean Sea in the twilight of Byzantium in Italy. Let us consider the newly published excavated evidence in more detail (Fig. 6.2).

Figure 6.2. Map showing the principal places mentioned. Map by Sarah Leppard.

Illuminating Comacchio

The modern Comacchio excavations cover two specific areas within a settlement area encompassing an estimated 37 ha. There were stratigraphical excavations at the Piazza XX Settembre and salvage trenches at the Villaggio San Francesco, 1996 (Gelichi, Negrelli, and Grandi 2021).

Comacchio is a successor site in many respects to the Etruscan port of Spina with its rich associated cemeteries. Situated on the edge of a lagoon, on dunes that once formed the Adriatic Sea coast here, there was direct access through a maze of deltaic channels to the river Po, and the many ancient and medieval places alongside this fluvial corridor reaching inland towards Milan. Lagoon workers as well as locals with an interest in archaeology have assembled over the past century a good deal of information about the port, just as at Dorestad and Hamwic. The new stratigraphical excavations by the cathedral help to phase those parts of Comacchio which are dated only by relative means. The excavations beside the cathedral show that this was a dune landscape in Antiquity with its many undulations and outcrops. In period 9 (as defined by the excavators), during the sixth to seventh centuries AD, the site was occupied by a small hut with a hearth, possibly part of a coastal village. In the next period, 8, dated by African Red Slip Ware and coins to the seventh century and lasting to the eighth century, there was extensive evidence of a glass-working workshop. Limited remains of metalworking were also found in the building, suggesting it might have served multiple artisanal functions. The workshop was destroyed

in the early eighth century when, in period 7, the area was designated as a cemetery, presumably for the cathedral. This cemetery lasted until the mid-ninth century, period 6, when changes were made to it. The next periods span the tenth to thirteenth/fourteenth centuries and the creation of a probable fortified cathedral. There then followed a rich post-medieval sequence that predates the making of the piazza beside the cathedral in the nineteenth century.

Excavations in the areas not occupied by the modern town at the Villaggio San Francesco and in the zone of an ex-sugar refinery revealed timber structures of early medieval date, all abandoned by the late ninth or early tenth century. Using the same periodization as the Piazza XX Settembre, on the bases of their ceramic finds, a variety of post-built structures have been assigned to period 7, the eighth century. Of special importance are the foundations of an almost complete dwelling or warehouse in area 2000, traces of timber walkways, and evidence of a wooden pier or quay in area 4000. Overall, these excavations reveal a short but intense period of construction for dwellings and perhaps warehouses, with limited associated activities, and then an equally clear phase of abandonment. The timber buildings resemble others known from the Po Plain and Veneto.

No other site of this type has yet been discovered in Italy or indeed in the central Mediterranean. Textual sources describe coastal ports like Gaeta, Naples, and Salerno, as well as beach landing places principally on monastic properties, but the archaeology of these ports is minimal by comparison with Comacchio (cf. Petralia 2005; Hodges 2018). Crucial to the dating and interpretation of the Comacchio remains are the excavated ceramics. Only a small number of sixth- to seventh-century African Red Slip Ware sherds were found in the Piazza XX Settembre excavations, which along with red-polished and red-painted wares, provide a starting point for the Comacchio sequence. The associated amphorae comprise a range of late Roman types (Samos Cistern, LR1–LR6, African, and Keay 52). These, like the African Red Slip Ware do not occur in great numbers, but the variety dispersed through the later (high medieval and post-medieval) periods is noteworthy. The presence of post-classical, early medieval globular amphorae is crucial to the eventual interpretation of Comacchio as an emporium. Nineteen sherds of amphorae were found in the Piazza XX Settembre excavations, and seventy-five sherds were retrieved from the Villaggio San Francesco salvage excavations. These vessels came from a variety of production sites. In the Piazza XX Settembre eleven different amphora types have been identified: these include an indeterminate western Mediterranean type (Fabric 19), four Aegean types (Fabrics 7.1, 8, 9, and 13), and several anomalous fabrics occurring in small numbers; in the Villaggio San Francesco excavations the number of identified amphora fabrics amounts to twenty-four. These include familiar Aegean-sourced wares, anomalous western Mediterranean vessels and two distinctive amphorae, one of which is tentatively ascribed to north-east Sicily (Fabric 5), and the other is attributed to either Sicily or the Aegean (Fabric 18).

The sources of the amphorae indicate two interconnected Byzantine trade networks, first from the eastern Aegean, and then that involving Sicily. These identifications, as we shall see, are an important part of the new narrative illuminating Comacchio's Mediterranean connections. Small numbers of these globular transport amphorae have also been identified at sites from Classe to Venice along the Adriatic Sea coast, as well as at the important monastery of Nonantola (Gelichi, Librenti, and Ciancosi 2018, 188–89), close to Modena. Residue analyses of sample amphorae add to the picture of a resilient Mediterranean trade in transport amphorae. Wine appears to have been carried in the Aegean amphorae; a North African (Tunisian) seventh-century amphora was used to carry plant oil; one of the unidentified western Mediterranean amphorae had traces of ricinoleic acid which is considered to result from cereals or castor oil. All the amphorae were coated with pine resin. How long did this amphora trade last? The excavators have proposed that it endured throughout the arc of the eighth century but not into the ninth century (characterized by distinctive local domestic pottery). However, pinpointing a terminal date for the trade in these transport vessels remains a matter of discussion. Clearly, dendrochronological dating would be of immense help here, as it has proved to be at Dorestad and Ribe (see, for example, Jansma and van Lanen 2015; Philippsen and others 2021).

The glass workshop (with some metalworking) constitutes an important episode in the later seventh- to eighth-century periods of the Piazza XX Settembre excavations. Predating the cathedral and its cemetery, the workshop belonged to a type known from other Italian excavations, notably San Vincenzo al Volturno and Torcello (each associated with major churches). The Comacchio installation appears to have been a multifunctional workshop (a prototype, perhaps for a collective workshop known from late antique sites such as the town of Sardis (Crawford 1991) and late industrial sites in Italy such as Spolverino situated in the river Ombrone delta area of Tuscany (Chirico and others 2011)). Over two thousand fragments of

glass-ware as well as droplets and a range of crucibles were recovered. These comprise four groups: ornamental objects, building materials (window glass and mosaic tiles), glass-ware ranging from goblets to lamps, and waste from working the glass. Analyses of the glass vessels point to an origin in the eastern Mediterranean, either Egypt or the Levant. What, though, was this workshop producing? Was it glass for remelting in places along the river Po and further north, or for lamps to use in Comacchio itself (as was certainly the case of the Benedictine monastic workshops at San Vincenzo al Volturno (Hodges, Leppard, and Mitchell 2011))?

Pertinent to the Comacchio enclave, the excavations have provided downstream evidence of reverse trade to Comacchio in the form of an important assemblage of southern Alpine soap-stone vessels. Quarried in the southern Alps, these vessels were in demand at Po riverside sites, Adriatic Sea coastal sites, and even further south (see Alberti 2021, 333–43, esp. 340–42). The excavations produced a range of metal and bone objects, three relevant coins, a collection of glass vessels as well as faunal and botanical evidence. This assemblage is unexceptional by early medieval urban sites like the Piazza Venezia (Molinari, Santangeli Valenzani, and Spera 2015) and Cripta Balbi excavations in Rome (Vendittelli 2012). There is also a collection of distinctively carved stone sculpture, much of it from church furniture presumably associated with Comacchio's cathedral and its rebuilding works at various times. The sculpture belongs to a group generally assigned in the larger Veneto area and the northern Adriatic Sea sphere to the earlier ninth century (Belcari 2021, 477–516; 2013).

Gelichi places Comacchio as an emporium, or nodal point, serving the Mediterranean and Po Plain principally in the later seventh to ninth centuries. Recently compared to the North Sea emporia (cf. Gelichi and Hodges 2012), this full report with its immense detail enables us to review the significance of Comacchio and perhaps to answer certain lingering questions posed by Pirenne a century ago.

First, chronology. Gelichi divides Comacchio into three early medieval phases based principally upon its historical sources: (i) based upon the first capitulary, AD 500–715; (ii) 715–774, from the date of the capitulary (715/30) to the end of the Lombard Kingdom (when it was conquered by the Carolingians); (iii) 774–932, from the date of the Carolingian occupation until the destruction of the place by the Venetians. This chronology follows a familiar historical paradigm, but how helpful is it? The archaeology provides an alternative periodization that merits consideration. The relative stratigraphical periodization is elegantly tabulated in this report. The archaeology in the Piazza XX Settembre area begins with modest residential occupation, followed by a multifunctional workshop, followed by the making, use, and eventual abandonment of a cemetery. The archaeological periods begin with period 9 which is dated to the sixth to seventh centuries; period 8, the glass-maker's workshop dated to the later seventh to eighth centuries; period 7, associated with the reorganization of the area for a graveyard, is ascribed to the later eighth century; period 6, as the cemetery is rearranged, is attributed to the ninth century.

The dating is, of course, crucial. There are no radiocarbon dates or dendrochronological dates, although in the future these are certain to be of great significance, as they are proving to be at Ribe. Four coins throw oblique light on the chronology: (i) a *follis* of Constant II (644–645) issued in Ravenna; (ii) a *decanummo* issued by Maurice (582/86–602); (iii) a denier of Louis the Pious issued in Venice (816–818/22); (iv) a denier of Hugo of Arles, King of Italy, issued at Venice (926–931/45). No less important are six identifiable sherds of African Red Slip Ware (Gelichi, Negrelli, and Grandi 2021, 201, tab. 1), two pieces of which — forms H105C and H91C — can be attributed to the seventh century. A sherd of H103B may also date to the earlier seventh century. Otherwise, the dating of the globular amphorae and other ceramics is based on relative dating, often associated with later Roman coins and dated African sigillata. This relative chronology has been much scrutinized and may perhaps be susceptible to future refinement.

Now let us return to consider Comacchio and its European context. The archaeology points to a coastal community that grew from a village occupying former dunes, and that possessed skilled artisans operating in the later seventh and earlier eighth centuries. At about this time Comacchio emerged to become a major emporium extending over an area of possibly as much as 37 ha, with a population that Gelichi estimates between eight hundred and one thousand (Gelichi, Negrelli, and Grandi 2021, 679). Significantly, this new settlement included investment in timber wharfs or quays as well as walkways. Were these timber installations built by individuals or by some agency such as a king or a bishop for the collective good? Certainly, the investment in infrastructure facilitated the transition to urban status. Diego Calaon (2014, 813), for example, has estimated the ecological implications: 'If it is assumed that the port was realized (including timber warehouses) within the arc of one year, we must estimate the felling of 110,000–120,000 trees, or about 300 a day.' These procurement implications bring to

mind those at, for example, Dorestad and Hamwic at exactly this time. Another estimate to consider is Claudio Negrelli's (2021, 260) calculation of the possible globular amphorae based on those found in the excavated cubic metres and the likely number of cubic metres of deposits spread across Comacchio. Negrelli arrives at a figure close to 100,000 amphorae.

The excavated areas indicate no more than one or two construction phases, not the intense occupation palimpsest of, say, contemporary Ribe (Sindbæk 2018). In other words, Comacchio as an emporium was not long lived. Its merchants apparently reached an agreement with the Lombards about their commercial operations in the Po Plain territories. The possibility of a bishop at Comacchio by *c.* 723 (under the jurisdiction of the Byzantine Exarchate at Ravenna) is important to resolve. If this was the case, it indicates an institutional presence even if the community itself was composed of independent traders. It might also suggest the community was sufficiently coherent to remain outside specific Byzantine (until the empire abandoned the Exarchate in 751) and Lombard jurisdictions. The archaeology also points to trade with the eastern Aegean (en route to Constantinople) and to a lesser degree with Sicily, besides places along the river Po.

Comacchio's Byzantine network to the eastern Aegean and Constantinople was two centuries old by 700, so the route by which Comacchio's glassmaster obtained his cullet should not surprise us. Contact to a lesser extent with Byzantine Sicily was also a legacy of the large-scale fifth- and sixth-century connections maintained by major Adriatic Sea ports like Dyrrhacchium (Shkodra-Rruggia 2021) and Nicopolis (Reynolds and Pavlidis 2014) as well as Butrint (Reynolds 2017). Whether there was contact with the newly established Umayyad conquerors of North Africa, after Carthage was conquered in *c.* 698, is intriguing and is left in doubt by Negrelli's study of the amphorae.

This picture of Byzantine trade sustaining small-scale commercial relations with the central Mediterranean finds echoes not only in its strongholds on Crete (Randazzo 2019, 321 n. 56), Naxos (Crow and Hill 2018), and Sicily (Vaccaro 2017), but also until about 750 with Rome itself (Delogu 2007; 2017). Thereafter, the political geography changed dramatically with important ramifications. As the Byzantine Empire became increasingly isolated with its iconoclastic ideology, the Lombards, opportunistically reacting to a political vacuum after 751, seized Comacchio as well as other places, and threatened the papacy who turned to the early Carolingians for support. Prompted by Pope Stephen, King Pepin acted swiftly. The Carolingians defeated the Lombard king, Aistulf, in 756, established an alliance with the papacy, and, significantly, initiated an uneasy ideological conflict with Byzantium which, in Italy, was now reduced to territory in the far south as well as Sicily. Relations would only be resumed slowly after the Treaty of Aachen in 812 (Ančić, Shepard, and Vedriš 2018).

Did Comacchio continue as an active port after the end of Byzantine commerce in the Adriatic Sea? On the present evidence, it is not possible to tell. The next chapter of the story begs yet more questions. In 774 Charlemagne, in response to Lombard political resurgence under King Desiderius (which included the seizure of Comacchio, presumably from the papacy (Noble 1984, 129)), descended on Italy and crushed the opposition. Charlemagne immediately imposed control over northern Italy. Returning northwards, under the spell of Italian advisors, Charlemagne now encouraged a major phase of monumentalism — conspicuous consumption — invested in the principal monasteries and palaces of his realm (Nelson 2019, 233, 249–69, 284–85). Beginning in the 780s, he arranged for the removal of marble and glass from Ravenna to build his new palace at Aachen (Untermann 2015). While supporting the Church in the city, Charlemagne treated the ancient capital like a museum (cf. Herrin 2020). Other palaces were similarly rebuilt in a late antique style. As Charlemagne imposed his authority on Italy, he confirmed a bishopric at Comacchio in 781 that may have owed its origins to the later years of the Exarchate when Felice was bishop of Ravenna.

Did the Carolingians in their alliance with the papacy not only install a bishop at Comacchio but also encourage a new commercial episode, one that again connected the Mediterranean to the North Sea trading zone? The archaeology of Comacchio to date does not help us resolve this question. Future excavations, however, might throw invaluable light on the later periods of the port.

Before returning to the questions arising from Pirenne's thesis, three observations on the excavated evidence: first, Comacchio would be unusual as an emporium if the Church (as of the 720s) was an active presence in the community. This was almost certainly not the case in the North Sea emporia. These places appear to have operated outside the orbit of the Church, even if certain monasteries had property in them. Second, the later eighth-century Carolingian (and Anglo-Saxon) emporia, in contrast to their earlier later seventh-century iterations, exhibit signs of more political control. This picture of Carolingian control over commodity production and trade is also evident from the rash of new Carolingian mints in Po Plain settlements. The

absence of a mint let alone coins from this period in Comacchio, when some of the commonest coins found in Dorestad are from Italian mints (Milan and Pavia), is telling (Coupland 2018, 447). It was, we should remind ourselves, when the architect of the great palace at Aachen was arranging for the despoliation of nearby Ravenna. The marbles and glass must have been taken by barge along the river Po before being transported through the Alps.[2] Third, the discovery of a small shipment of glass cullet from the mid-Byzantine tower-house at Butrint, Albania, dated by radiocarbon to the later eighth century, suggests that there was a revival of the earlier Byzantine trade in glass waste, originating in the eastern Mediterranean to meet a surge in demand in the Carolingian monasteries and palaces as well as the bead production in western Scandinavia (Hodges 2021).[3] At Butrint, however, the crucial ceramics found with the crate of glass include Otranto globular amphorae made in the Byzantine-controlled heel of Italy, as well as Aegean and Sicilian transport vessels. The absence of Otranto wares from Comacchio so far suggests the Po port was no longer engaged in international trade involving Byzantine merchants. If this were the case, we need to identify the destination of the Butrint crate of glass cullet. Was it intended to reach the Carolingian sphere through other Byzantine enclaves either in southern Italy or the Upper Adriatic Sea region?

Returning to the nub of the Pirenne thesis, do the Comacchio discoveries help to shed new light on century-old issues? In summary, it seems they do. Mediterranean Sea connections bringing east Mediterranean goods (including eastern Aegean transport amphorae) to western Britain and Ireland began as early as the late fifth century but ceased abruptly with the Justinian-period crises by *c.* 550 (Duggan 2020; Doyle 2021).[4] From this period, long-distance trade through two routes — Marseilles into Gaul and through the Alpine passes to the Rhineland and Danube — became the dominant axes of connection between the two increasingly separated worlds. As of about 600 this south to north axis was realigned with the decline of Marseilles. Mediterranean merchants discovered other access routes through the Alps to the emergent late Merovingians and beyond. As a result, throughout the seventh century Mediterranean exotica were prominent in the grave goods of the tribes around the North Sea. It is presumed these goods arrived at the Lombard strongholds of Pavia and Milan, and a proportion were dispatched 'down-the-line' through tribal networks towards the Rhine. The village of Comacchio at the Adriatic Sea end of the route to Pavia and Milan belongs to the very end of the phase of rich Lombard grave goods and the beginnings of an entirely different era when the fluid operations managed around the North Sea were suddenly subjected to control through new emporia. Institutionally, around 675/80, as the community at Comacchio managed declining relations with Byzantine traders, the institutional role of North Sea long-distance trade, was revolutionized. As Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian abbots and bishops regularly passed through northern Italy on their way to Rome during this period, this institutional revolution must have been known to the Lombard court and possibly the Exarchate. One aspect of the new institutional role of trade around the North Sea after 680 was the importance of the trade in glass for church lamps and lighting in England (cf. Fouracre 2020), and for bead-working in the new emporium of Ribe, western Denmark, founded about 700.

Comacchio, on the evidence now available to us, played an important short-lived part in connecting the very end of Pirenne's 'pond' to the very beginnings of the first post-classical urban communities of north-west Europe. In this role as middlemen, it cannot have been lost on either the isolated Byzantine Exarchate enclave, the Church, or the Lombard courts that Comacchio's merchants were intermediaries with access to increasingly exotic east Mediterranean and Sicilian products as well as salt. This may explain the capitulary of 715/30, composed as the North Sea emporia were about to experience a recession (or mercantile downturn) for reasons that are still to be properly explained.

What happened next at Comacchio with the foundation of the cathedral in the 780s coincides with increasing Carolingian control in Italy as in other parts of its realm. Was the port still active at this time, as Gelichi and Negrelli have assumed? Certainly, Mediterranean glass was in significant demand not just in the new age of Carolingian monumentalism (greatly influenced by Lombard monasteries and palaces) but also for an incipient vogue

2 For the routes, see Nelson 2019, xxi, fig. 8.

3 There is a temptation to regard this as material destined for other Byzantine enclaves along the Adriatic Sea coast. However, the present evidence of a Byzantine revival appears on the bases of the excavations at Stari Bar to begin a generation or more a later: Gelichi and Zagarčanin 2013.

4 As traders pursued opportunities along the Atlantic Sea coast, so others at this time ventured to India (Tomber 2008, 161–70) in search of exotica including pepper and possibly the glass beads found at Oegstgeest and in the recently excavated cemetery at Burnham Market, Norfolk as well as other Merovingian North Sea sites. Either by this maritime route or across land, Syrian glass was taken to the imperial Shōsō-in storehouse at Nara for use in the great Tōdai-ji temple, see *Imperial Envoys to Tang China* 2010, 371–77.

in wine-drinking glasses (palm cups (Hunter and Heyworth 1998, 58)), chalices or goblets (Hodges 2020a, 173), and a continuing demand in Denmark for glass beads made with recycled ancient glass (Sindbæk 2018; Philippsen and others 2021). By 820, though, both the monumental investment in the Carolingian Empire and the North Sea network had greatly receded. The demand for Mediterranean-sourced glass waste, it must be assumed, declined.

To better understand the place of Comacchio merchants and the light their archaeology throws on century-old issues we need to invert the chain of connectivity and look southwards from the drivers of the North Sea network living at the mouth of the Rhine.

Comacchio's Peers at the Rhine Mouth, *c.* 600–700: Oegstgeest

When Henri Pirenne thought of traders he principally had in mind the Frisians (Pirenne 1914, 498).[5] For modern historians these are shadowy argonauts. In Altfrid's *Vita Liudgeri*, written almost certainly at Utrecht during the Carolingian period, these were people 'who almost dwell in water, by which they are surrounded on all sides, so that they rarely have access to the outside world, unless they travel by ship' and as 'remote from other nations and thus brutish and barbarous' (Wood 2001, 105). It is a familiar narrative. Frisian merchants appear as largely incidental actors in the margins of other stories. Nevertheless, Dirk Jellema (1955) identified Frisians as the main agents in the sixth- to seventh-century southern North Sea trade.

In the contemporary texts, Frisians occur as diasporas — ethnically identifiable traders' communities — at London and York (the *naves Fresonum* that transported the Northumbrian Alcuin to the Continent) and formed similar mercantile communities in old Rhenish ports like Cologne, Mainz, and Worms. Their forebears had quit the liminal reaches of the coastline from the Rhine mouth to Jutland in the fifth century in search of what the historian of these tribes, Stéphane Lebecq (2020, 26), has called the dream of the British Eldorado.[6] After settling, principally in eastern England, they created a veritable koiné — an imaginary community — that in time loosely embraced their kin on the Continental rim of the North Sea. This was sustained throughout the next half-millennium, with the Danish colonizers of eastern England in the late ninth and tenth centuries sharing many common words. As Lebecq put it

> the result of intermingling populations, the persistence of a common North Sea German and the longevity of the North Sea koiné, more than 60% of the terms of Scandinavian origin […] relate to maritime life, navigation, fishery resources and their exploitation. (2020, 31)

Quite who these traders were in ethnic terms is a matter of debate. Friesland, after all, stretched along the fractured coast from the islands west of Antwerp almost to Jutland in the north. The archaeological evidence, as we shall see, places the celebrated Frisian traders in the central Dutch river area, west of Leiden, and possibly on the coastline out as far west as the now lost emporium of Domburg on the dunes of Walcharen. Lebecq has struggled with the ethnic label, even going so far as to suggest that Frisian meant mainly being a trader. Being termed Frisian may have come to define those outside normal ethnic distinctions, who pivoted around points such as the Rhine mouth and Domburg, engaged in maritime exchange.

Dorestad, the major emporium at the confluence of the rivers Lek and Rhine, is often regarded as the quintessential port of the Frisians. This has now been challenged. Its earliest (archaeological) phase dating from the 680s has produced relatively few silver sceattas by contrast with Domburg, from where over a thousand examples have been found in unstratified circumstances (Coupland 2018, 447, table 3; see however Rovelli 2009, 69–70). Dorestad was not at first the only place in the area that played a key role in long-distance trade (Theuws, de Bruin, and Bult 2021, 457–58).[7] It may have been one of many where traders came from all directions to meet on a seasonal basis along a specific stretch of the Rhine[8]

5 'Of the condition of the *negociatores* who served as the instruments of these exchanges, we know almost nothing. Many of them were unquestionably merchants of occasion, men without a country, ready to seize on any means of existence that came their way. Pursuers of adventure were frequent among these roving creatures, half traders, half pirates […]. Clearly no one will try to find in this strong and fortunate bandit an ancestor of the capitalists of the future' (Pirenne 1914, 498).

6 For an introduction to the international scholarship on Frisian migration and subsequent contact, see Hines and IJssennagger-van der Pluijm 2021.

7 A peer of Domburg (possibly predating Dorestad and Quentovic) is a beaching-place or short-lived emporium discovered in recent excavations close to Burnham Market in north Norfolk with conspicuous Merovingian connections (Near Eastern beads, jewellery, and pottery) (cf. Rogerson 2003). This appears to predate Gipeswic (pers. comm. Ian Riddler).

8 See also, for example, the excavations at Wijnaldum (Nieuwhof and others 2020).

(this includes the riverside village of Oegstgeest, see below). In time, Dorestad developed into the most important place, possibly on the initiative of its traders, as it ensured that they might meet and exchange with the right people and not have to search for them over a longer stretch of the river. Perhaps too, Theuws proposes, there was pressure from the Frankish kings, who started to exact a tribute (toll) from the traders and preferred to do this in one place (Theuws 2019).

The late seventh-century emporium was drawing upon the emerging commodity production of the Rhineland, especially wine transported in barrels, and found demand for this in the Anglo-Saxon world as well as Denmark. It was also drawing upon more than a century of maritime tradition that had its roots in the Iron and Roman ages. This tradition has been put into perspective by the recently published discoveries made in excavations at Oegstgeest, on the banks of the river Rhine, not dissimilar in location to Comacchio, three kilometres from open water (de Bruin, Bakels, and Theuws 2021). The large-scale open-area excavations provide an invaluable window upon the very people that plainly intrigued Pirenne and tacitly were at the heart of his origin narrative.

The Oegstgeest excavations reveal a peer of Comacchio when it was a village. There is also good evidence for down-the-line Mediterranean connectivity as the Merovingian North Sea network began. Like the Comacchio merchants, these peer river trader-farmers were almost certainly the Frisians that feature marginally in the texts.

It is not clear whether the village at Oegstgeest was built on the bank of the main river channel or a channel parallel to the main channel. The inhabited site was not an uninterrupted dry strip of land as it was dissected by gullies, little streams, and depressions. Their timber houses were built on raised platforms. They combatted the water by building dams, but these measures were only partly successful against flooding. Twenty-nine excavated buildings were identified as houses. Another seven possible houses were noted. The settlement existed between *c.* 550 ± 15 and 725 ± 15. This led the excavators to estimate six houses existing contemporaneously with approximately ten persons per house, making an average settlement population of sixty.

Each farm lay within a fenced wickerwork compound. Within the compound were multiple timber outhouses, pits, and wells, as well as one or more timber houses. Many of the dwellings are partitioned internally, to accommodate livestock. Animal husbandry was important; every farmhouse had a stable to keep ten to fifteen cows. Even short houses may have incorporated a stable for keeping cows. These numbers are likely to be minimum numbers. The stables may have been used for special animals such as milking cows. Cattle that needed less attention were kept on the flood plains. Although it is difficult to identify amenities for keeping sheep in the compounds, the faunal material suggests they kept sheep too. Pigs too were probably raised in the farmyards as at Comacchio. Grain production was modest in view of the limitations of the landscape surrounding the settlement and the available space to plough. Fish was an important element of the diet here as at Comacchio. Oegstgeest's inhabitants were probably involved in fishing both on the river and in inland coastal waters. The archaeological evidence shows the inhabitants practised crafts such as ironworking, copper-alloy working, and working with imported amber. Other non-agricultural activities such as textile production, bone-working, and wood-working may have been normal practice on a farmstead. What is surprising is how much its inhabitants depended on the provisioning of utensils, base materials, and food from outside sources, some of them as far away as the middle Rhine Valley, the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea region, and England.

Oegstgeest's inhabitants belonged to the last generations of Merovingians to be interred with rich grave goods. Consequently, the range of their connections is perhaps clearer than those at Comacchio. The ditches, pits, wells, and gullies in compounds also produced an extraordinary wealth of objects. Pride of place goes to a silver hanging bowl with garnet-inlaid escutcheons decorated with figures picked out in gold leaf. Found discarded in a gully, this magnificent seventh-century object was probably made in an Austrasian workshop. Eight gold tremisses from Frankish mints and twenty-five silver sceattas were discovered, showing paradoxically a more evolved use of currency than contemporary Comacchio. From the graves come gold, silver, and copper-alloy jewellery, glasses and beads, some of which (in common with the many later Dorestad glass beads) originated from Near Eastern or Indian Ocean sources (de Bruin, Bakels, and Theuws 2021, 278–93; Langbroek 2021). Much of this may have originally come along the river Po corridor. Perhaps the most remarkable finds are prosaic discoveries, such as leather turn-shoes, a grape-pip, and fig remains (de Bruin, Bakels, and Theuws 2021, 443).

The key to the rationale and economy of this riverside settlement and its exotic wealth, vulnerable as it was to Rhine floods, is almost certainly the wooden barrels reused as wells by the inhabitants. These were brought to the lower Rhine as containers of wine, although they may have contained grain too. Sixteen barrels have been found at Oegstgeest.

Two types of barrels were found. The smaller barrels were on average 133 cm high and 74 cm wide and had a capacity to contain some 480 litres of wine. The larger barrels stood more than 2 m high, resembling those from the great emporium of Dorestad, and were on average 300 cm high and 70–80 cm wide with a capacity of 1500 litres (de Bruin, Bakels, and Theuws 2021, 455). The Oegstgeest barrels show not only that the wine trade, so important to Dorestad, existed long before Dorestad was active in the commerce, but also on a scale which dwarfs the present evidence for trade in Aegean and Sicilian wines to Comacchio.

Consumption at Oegstgeest took two contrasting forms. Agrarian consumption resembles the many Frisian mound settlements excavated over the past century. It is unexceptional. The material culture, on the other hand, strongly resembles the emergence of ostentatious wealth in eastern English tombs around 600, as well as that in the central Swedish tombs at Vendel. Mediterranean and middle Rhine goods were being consumed in life and death. On this coastal edge, however, while subscribing to an apparent display of wealth, the dwellings, unlike the ostentatious timber halls of England or southern Scandinavia at this time, broadly conformed to contemporary farming norms.

Frans Theuws, Jasper de Bruin, and Epko J. Bult (2021) believe the inhabitants of Oegstgeest and similar riverine communities like the later (nearby) site of Leiderdorp (Verhoeven and Dijkstra 2017; Dijkstra 2019) were sometimes known as *Ribuarii*, 'dwellers of river banks'. These were different from coastal dwellers and inland inhabitants. Near the coast, this distinction might blur because some of the people in the estuaries such as the Rhine might also be interpreted as coastal dwellers. In an important assessment of these liminal communities, Christopher Loveluck and Dries Tys (2006) suggested that the trade of the mariners lay beyond the control of domanial lords, which is one of the reasons for their freedom to specialize and exchange goods. Later written sources, their argument goes, have seduced us to search for aristocrats and control of (agrarian) production and exchange. The world of the riverine inhabitants must be interpreted differently.

The excavated evidence from Oegstgeest shows how dependent its inhabitants were for their provisioning on the riverine exchange network. How this network based on exchange value eventually changed into a production-controlled system is unclear. This significant change occurred after the late eighth century as the Carolingian Empire implemented customs tolls, control of minting, and started to regularize the management of large estates (cf. Davis 2015). With Charlemagne's reforms, more rigorous controls of production instead of exchange values accompanied the accumulation of landed property. It appears that the production by inland dwellers (*principally* of grain and wine) became more vulnerable to production control. Until these reforms, the exchange values of the riverine and coastal dwellers appear to have existed outside the controls implemented by Frankish kings. Herein, perhaps, is a parallel with the Comacchio merchants until the capitulary of 715/30 and possibly until the Carolingian annexation of Lombardy in the 770s.

The role of these riverine people in what unfolded in north-west Europe, as the Mediterranean economy collapsed, reveals a world that lay not only beyond the landed producers but no less importantly, unlike Comacchio, outside the grasp of the Church. This makes the outcomes of their trading activities, as Pirenne long ago anticipated, all the more fascinating. Importantly, communities like Oegstgeest's, numbering perhaps sixty people, were in time to provide a critical ingredient to the Anglo-Saxon Church in the form of Rhenish wine, and no less of a critical ingredient to the Danes, almost certainly as middlemen providing glass beads as well as wine and other exotica from the Rhineland and the Mediterranean.

Viewed alongside their later Merovingian contemporaries, the importance of the Oegstgeest traders is inescapable. Peer Frankish riverine communities in Aquitaine reaching up to the Irish Sea communities, delivering E wares, glass vessels, and surely much more besides to an economically expansive Celtic world, failed to develop new trading emporia or any enduring reputation (Campbell 2007; Doyle 2009; 2021). By contrast, these Rhine-mouth entrepreneurs appear to have been able to secure Mediterranean and Frankish exotica from not only the Rhineland, but also by way of the Rhône (from Marseilles) and through Neustria to the Meuse Valley. Their dendritic tentacles were funnelling exotica almost from the inception of Oegstgeest. No less remarkable was the consumption and apparent display of moveable goods by these Rhine-mouth traders. They appear to have lived like kings without, quite obviously, palaces.

What made the Frisian impact all the greater was their reception in eastern England, at the north Frisian coast, and in western Jutland. They exchanged goods that in the flat pre-Christian tribal hierarchies around 600 altered the social conditions and accelerated the ostentatious behaviour — especially display competition — of the elite. Their intervention, as best we can tell, triggered the sense of an imaginary community encompassing western Scandinavia, the North Sea littoral, and eastern England. In other

words, unlike their Aquitanian peers there was no cultural imbalance or colonial intentions because of the trade partnerships.

Loosely defined as Frisians, the river traders of Oegstgeest and later Leiderdorp — as well as at coastal places in greater Friesland now lost to the sea — espoused a bottom-up economy that in the long term, as these marginal peoples were integrated into the later Carolingian world, lent them an enduring historical presence. Without doubt, given the outsider status of these traders, they must have appeared as exceptional as well as potentially dangerous when they arrived at new emporia like Hamwic, Lundenwic, Gipeswic, Eoforwic, and Ribe (McCormick 2007).

The North Sea emporia appear to be outcomes of networked trading partnerships starting as Justinian's imperial adventure was confronting the paralysis created by taxation and over-investment in a temple society (see Sarris 2006, 174–75). The foundation of emporia such as Domburg, Dorestad, and Quentovic occurred a century later in the immediate aftermath of the decision to reform the gold coinage and issue silver sceattas (cf. Loveluck and others 2018). This transition from a gold to silver standard, the beginnings of which are now attributed to the English Church (Theuws 2019), must relate to larger political and ideological circumstances as clerics and kings vied for authority.

These enigmatic places ranged around the rim of the North Sea were institutionally the binary opposite of quintessential temple cities like Rome. The Church was largely absent in the emporia (unlike at Comacchio).[9] Its exponents instead had regularly colonized old, largely abandoned, Roman centres like Canterbury, Mainz, Tours, Trier, York, and Winchester. This bifurcation of lay and clerical power in terms of settlement was to be highly significant. Unlike Italy, where the aristocracy tended to occupy old Roman *places*, Anglo-Saxon, Danish, and Frankish kings as well as magnates favoured peripatetic living to manage their flat hierarchies. They travelled from one rural estate or palace to another as opposed to living in the shadow of old Roman urban ruins or indeed inside the new emporia. Unsurprisingly, the emporia, being unassociated with the clergy or the lay elite, passed largely unnoticed in the contemporary texts. They were *non-places* much like modern airports today (cf. Augé 1995).

The institutional character of the emporia continues to be a subject of historical debate. It is hardly surprising as they were the largest places in Latin Christendom in the eighth century. The Belgian historian, Jan Dhondt, struck a chord in his description of Quentovic, one of the least known archaeologically of the emporia (Hill and others 1990; Lebecq, Béthouart and Verslype 2010):

> cities are terribly grounded realities: they can wither away, dwindle, move in a regional setting, but it is exceedingly rare to see them disappear so completely. But this exceptional fate was that of all these 'mushroom towns' of the Merovingian period. (Dhondt 1962, 244)

The German historian Edith Ennen (1953, 63) observed, echoing Pirenne perhaps: 'The irregular and wandering life of these leading merchants meant that they were not so firmly bound to the wik as later town dwellers were to be to their settlements'. Ennen offered a surprising explanation for this interpretation: 'they are created by people who were reluctant and hostile towards the city as a settlement'. She reiterated an influential belief in German historiography that the Germanic peoples had been emphatically disinclined to urban settlement. Looking to the German historian Walther Vogel (1935), she paraphrases as follows: 'Germanic people were farmers […]. The adventurous merchants — as one might aptly call them — pursued trade without towns for as long as possible' (Ennen 1953, 244; cited by Sindbæk 2020, 131). The vision of an ancient Germanic civilization, unspoiled by the decadence of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern urbanism, was widely championed in German scholarship in the 1930s. Herbert Jankuhn, the excavator of Hedeby, the emporium at the base of Jutland on the eastern terminus of the Danevirke, stated that the people of northern Germany 'developed on a domestic basis and preserved its patrimony much more faithfully' (Jankuhn 1938, 1).

Before the archaeological evidence was well known, historians can be forgiven for lumping all these places into an enigmatic category of places. Interpreted through the prism of contemporary texts these places resemble airports in our world, points of departure and arrival, and little more. Pirenne himself identified a variety of ports on sea-coasts — Marseilles, Rouen, Quentovic — or on the banks of the rivers — as at Maastricht on the Meuse or at Valenciennes on the Scheldt — as emporia. These served as wharves or harbours for merchandise,

9 Eagles (2015, 128–29; cf. Yorke 2018) has made the case for St Mary's being a minster at Hamwic. The few graves found in over fifty years of excavations, however, suggest either that there was one central cemetery close to the alleged minster, or the church was absent. Blair (2018, 172–73) offers an alternative interpretation. He persuasively proposes that Hamwic was the commercial and industrial adjunct to a nearby minster complex. Graves are also notably rare in Gipeswic and Lundenwic.

where missionaries took ship for distant destinations, and as winter quarters for boats and boatmen. In Pirenne's mind they differed from the towns of the later tenth and eleventh centuries. Rarely were these places surrounded by defences; their buildings seemed to be scarcely more than wooden sheds, and their populations, to use Pirenne's word, appeared to be *floating*, apparently destitute of all privileges and forming a striking contrast to the bourgeoisie of the future. No organization apparently bound together the inhabitants of these non-places (Sindbæk 2020, 133). These images were accepted as vivid components of Pirenne's persuasive narrative about the genesis of European medieval cities. As Søren M. Sindbæk has astutely pointed out, these observations belong to hindsight, an imagined picture of primitive origins of the Low Countries communes of the twelfth century, reverse-engineered on the expressed assumption that 'the steady progress of economic activity from the end of the tenth century would result in […] aggregations of like character but much more important and more stable' (Sindbæk 2020, 134 n. 24).

To understand these places in institutional terms we have to interrogate the archaeology. These were exceptionally large places for their time, essentially communities of traders and craftsmen arranged in early tenemental plots. Nonetheless, these communities possessed no monuments including churches, and yet they were extraordinarily rich in material culture largely associated with production as well as perhaps conspicuous consumption. Topographically, of course, by comparison with the infrastructure of their counterparts belonging to the great civilizations of China, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, or the Maya, these Dark Age 'mushroom cities' were unprepossessing.

The fundamental issue is why certain beaching-places or riverside sites were transformed over time into emporia? Approaching these Middle-Saxon towns from the Roman Empire going forwards in time, rather than from the later medieval or modern periods going back, one would not set up criteria of urban status that privileged the economic sphere as against the political. Grenville Astill (2000, 33) was more precise about this in the case of the English examples: 'The wic may represent a relatively short-lived experiment in the exercise of royal power, similar perhaps to the granting of exemption from tolls at about the same time'. His explanation for the institutional force behind the founding of the emporia is royal power linked to the newly introduced management of customs tolls (such as occurred at Comacchio) (Middleton 2005). Michael McCormick (2007, 47) describes this as the '"*reges ex machine*" explanation'. This hypothesis would be unsurprising to classical archaeologists long familiar with imperial foundations and customs controls. Yet, lacking explicit written affirmation, even the vaunting organizational ambition of new centres like Hamwic or Ribe has failed to impress many archaeologists and historians. Loveluck and Tys (2006) offer an important nuance to this thesis. The emporia, they argue, were essentially designed for taxing traded commodities like wine as opposed to the control of prestige-goods exchange. Apart from wine, or wool going the other way, those commodities primarily consisted of domestic and personal items. Significantly, weapons and ritual accoutrements were apparently absent. Smaller beach sites that remained impermanent — places like Sandtun in Kent (Gardiner and others 2001) — continued to be consumers of prestige goods, participating in maritime networks that dealt in these goods, and also prized utilitarian items such as Mayen quernstones. Impermanent sites, Loveluck and Tys (2006) believe, were the norm in a largely rural political economy, with the emporia being the exception rather than the rule.

Theuws (2004) offered another explanation. He emphasized the power of the imaginary world in establishing the new values of these places. He makes the case not for binary commodities/gifts being handled in the emporia, but for transactions of either the long term *or* the short term. Long-term transactions affected the social or cosmic order, while short-term transactions touched upon the arena of individual competition. Plainly, given the absence of monumental sacred spaces, the emporia were not involved in the articulation of exchange 'linked to the keeping of inalienable possessions at a cult place' (Theuws 2004, 132). Emporia like Dorestad, Theuws proposed, were experiments in international exchange which made these places vulnerable when the economy was realigned around regional central places with well-established cosmological roots.

This raises yet more issues regarding exchange between permanent and impermanent places. Were there spheres of exchange, with controlled royal trade in certain places where taxes might be levied, and uncontrolled prestige-goods exchange in those places where royal authority was limited or non-existent? Middleton looked to Byzantine models for the seventh-century introduction of Anglo-Saxon tolls. He improbably considered that there were contacts with Byzantine merchants as the agents of this new system (Middleton 2005, 252–58). More to the point, having created a taxation model in ports like Hamwic or London, how easy was it to sustain? Are we not witnessing a system that inevitably proved difficult to manage over several gen-

erations? An incident described in Altfrid's *Vita Liudger* illustrates why. A Frisian trader in York killed the 'son of a certain noble'; fearing the worst, the Frisian trading community fled. From this David Rollason (2003, 178–80) deduced that the Frisians were not 'under royal protection in a royally controlled emporium'. Indeed, Rollason points out that it was the charismatic Northumbrian abbot, Alcuin, not a royal agent who intervened to assist the foreigners.

The Anglo-Saxon and Frankish emporia appear to have broadly spanned three different phases. The first phase spanned the later seventh century to the second quarter of the eighth century. In this period, the Merovingian North Sea network seems to have scarcely overlapped with a network emanating principally from Quentovic, reaching across the English Channel from Lundenwic to Hamwic. The second phase has been described as a recession encompassing the central decades of the century (Metcalf 2009, 30; Naismith 2012, 330–31).[10] The recession, if indeed it was one, is principally distinguished by the indisputable reduction of silver in so-called secondary sceattas after

Figure 6.3. Map showing the principal trade routes to and around north-west Europe in the sixth to ninth centuries. Map by Sarah Leppard.

c. 720/30. This reduction, of course, needs explaining but the Anglo-Saxon recession may be a chimera created by a shift in focus with an emphasis upon the (newly discovered) networks of undocumented Mercian and West Saxon regional periodic markets handling commodities (cf. Blair 2018, 179–231; Costen and Costen 2016). This merits serious re-evaluation taking particular account of the archaeologically dated evidence or lack of it for a similar recession from Dorestad, Domburg, and Leiderdorp (cf. Dijkstra 2019, 17). The third phase began in the 770s or 780s, and varied from place to place, lasting until the 820s,

10 Metcalf (2009, 31) concluded as follows: 'The third quarter of the eighth century witnessed a severe recession in the volume of minting and also of monetary exchanges; and, even more severe, in the net inflows of coinage from the Continent. Money from the Low Countries, which had in the first half of the century been a major component of the English currency, disappeared dramatically. Merovingian silver had never entered England in quantity. The date of the downturn is difficult to specify, but the minting of sceattas appears to have declined as early as the 730s and to have dwindled in the 740s. It is not obvious how this might relate to political or military events in Frisia, or the Rhine mouth area.' It remains to be seen how numismatists such as Metcalf and Naismith react to Theuws's (2019) persuasive thesis that many of the sceattas were produced by the Anglo-Saxon church to exchange for Frankish wine. A recession would suggest that the trade in silver–wine ceased at exactly the moment the Anglo-Saxon missionary presence in the late Merovingian and early Carolingian eras was at its apogee. This observation merits closer analysis. It suggests that regional trade in commodities within southern England as opposed to foreign imports now became important. If so, could the Mercian and West Saxon new markets be the models for those envisaged by Charlemagne's reforms in the late 780s and 790s?

or in the case of Gipeswic until at least the central decades of the ninth century (Brown and Popescu with Loe 2020, 416–22). In this third phase, North Sea trade to western Scandinavia declined as extensive Baltic Sea networks pivoted on Hedeby grew in scale and importance.

The rise of the emporia followed by a possible North Sea recession belongs to a period that predates the great Carolingian changes, manifested principally in the reform monasteries and palaces, and predating the *correctio* with its singular emphasis upon managing production (Fig. 6.3). Let us look first at the management of the earliest emporia, and then return briefly to their post-recession phase below.

The emporia belong to an age of visionaries. The scale of the wharves at Dorestad and the thousands of tons of gravel employed in the gridded streets in Hamwic and Lundenwic are surely examples of architectural visions that were introduced conceptually by those who had travelled and enacted locally. Like the Danevirke and Offa's Dyke or Charlemagne's proposed canal — the *fosse Carolina* — to connect the river Rhine to the Danube (cf. Nelson 2019, 292), the emporia were operations that involved hundreds of people and provisioning of materials on a scale unlike anything that each community had previously undertaken. In reflecting upon large early medieval projects including Charlemagne's canal, Janet Nelson observes:

> In each case an ambitious ruler sought to enhance his power by mobilizing men on a hitherto unknown scale, commandeering their services, and making their demands acceptable to their subjects. To enhance their power and technological capacity, rulers in early medieval times too undertook these huge projects to demonstrate their authority and prestige, often producing miniaturized applications of coercive power at the level of local landscapes within which these great works were meant to be seen. The chief preconditions, then, were an ideology of state-building, and a rulership style. (Nelson 2019, 296)

It is hard not to imagine that clerics who regularly travelled to Rome and the Holy Land were somehow involved in the conceptual creation of these new urban hubs. Some with their broad high streets resembled a version of the *decumanus* still in use in Umayyad towns such as 'Anjar in Lebanon (Leal 2017) and Jerash in Jordan (Walmsley 2007; see also Stott and others 2018). If so, this conceptual planning makes the absence of the Church in these places more intriguing.

What distinguishes the emporia from the age of periodic beach markets is the scale of craft production that was to be concentrated in these places. Unlike the Irish Sea regions, the North Sea trade stimulated by the Rhine-mouth merchants led to an exponential growth in artisanal activity. Where did these skilled workers come from? Who had trained them? The answer in the English case has to be either in royal or ecclesiastical settings where they were either itinerant specialists or tied workmen. Many must have learnt their crafts from peers, many of whom ultimately had gained technical experience in the late Roman Mediterranean world. Royal sites like Rendlesham, Suffolk, close to Sutton Hoo, certainly boasted high-level craft production by the seventh century (Scull, Minter, and Plouviez 2016). But was this the norm, and did palaces also oversee more prosaic craft production? Both high-quality and quotidian items, it is now clear, were made from the later sixth-century Irish and Pictish monasteries in designated areas (Ó Carragáin 2021; Carver, Garner-Lahire, and Spall 2016). This practice appears to have been adopted by Anglo-Saxon abbots, by the later seventh century. In the well-studied case of Lympne, the royal estate was transformed into a minster site with agrarian and industrial sectors (Thomas 2013; 2017). Collective workshops feature in Carolingian monasteries from the mid- to later eighth century, first to assist in constructing and providing for the community, and then, as in Ireland, for providing specialized items as gifts to donors (Hodges, Leppard, and Mitchell 2011; Hodges 2012, 79–89).

Significantly, unlike the workshops known from the Carolingian monasteries — and depicted on the plan of St Gall (*c.* 820) (Coupland 1990, 36) — weapons were not made in the Anglo-Saxon emporia. However, the discovery of 'at least' twenty swords from Dorestad probably indicates that this Rhine-mouth port dealt in an apparently illicit arms trade with Scandinavia (Willemsen 2021; cf. Coupland 1990, 44).[11] Besides weapons, the emporia also appear not to have made or traded in ecclesiastical commodities: reliquaries, ivories, liturgical vestments, or fittings for books.[12]

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11 Willemsen (2021, 114) speculates that the swords found in Dorestad were made in the town. This must be doubted given the complex technology and, in some cases, the stamped signatures on the blades (Müller-Wille 1970). Unlike glass-bead production requiring small furnaces (Preiß 2009), making swords necessitated high-temperature kilns and a mix of materials, which monasteries like Corbei as well as San Vincenzo al Volturno (Hodges, Leppard, and Mitchell 2011) certainly possessed (Coupland 1990, 36).

12 The absence of swords from the Anglo-Saxon emporia may be illusory — many swords have been found in the Thames at London, for example, leading to the hypothesis that these were ritual depositions: Reynolds and Semple 2011.

Working as a collective in the monasteries as well as the emporia may have provided the craftsmen with protection as well as critical access to raw materials. Artisanal collectives also facilitated a cross-fertilization of craft ideas as long ago V. Gordon Childe pointed out (1950). Whether procurement was achieved through bottom-up initiatives, as some archaeologists claim, or through managed oversight, as in the Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and later Carolingian monasteries, remains a matter of debate (cf. Hodges 2012, 8–11). Certainly, a century ago, Pirenne (1914 [1925], 84) recognized the importance of the entanglements of craft practices which led to the specialized functions of the early emporia prefiguring the managed towns of the tenth and eleventh centuries as well as high medieval guilds.

The operational networks sustained by workshops from the very outset of the emporia are examples of how urban life created a productive dynamic that transcended the sum of its parts. This could not have been lost on anyone involved with or connected with these mushroom cities. The silence of the texts, about these places, largely written by churchmen, is revealing. Plainly these places challenged the Christian mores of the age (Le Goff 1980, 58–62). Yet by about 800, the concept of the collective workshop (depicted on the plan of St Gall (*c.* 820)) almost certainly modelled on artisanal production in the emporia had become a critical feature of the gift-giving strategies of the Carolingian monasteries (Hodges, Leppard, and Mitchell 2011; Hodges 2012, 79–89). Jacques Le Goff interprets the social context of these Carolingian craftsmen as follows:

> man's work was supposed to be in the image of God's. God's work, of course, was Creation. Any profession, therefore, which did not create was bad or inferior. It was imperative to create, as the peasant, for example, created the harvest, or, at least, to transform raw material, like the artisan, into an object. If there was no creation, then there should be transformation (*mutare*), modification (*emendare*), or improvement (*meliorare*). The merchant, who created nothing, was thus condemned. (1980, 61)

Finally, continuity in the North Sea emporia (as at Comacchio before the open conflict with Venice) has been assumed rather than proven. As we have seen, the assumption that these hubs were the precursors of high medieval towns is a case of reverse engineering. Likewise, were the emporia more episodic in terms of trading partnerships and commodity production and therefore subject to regional microhistories? In time the existence of competing transactional places, however small in demographic terms, is certain to have skewed the founding purposes of the emporia. Equally, the regional impact of the emporia through time is likely to have been highly variable. Ribe, for example, which has fine dating for the period *c.* 750–800, appears to reach out to trade with points in Norway during this time and early in the ninth century began to increasingly prioritize southern Baltic Sea connections over North Sea ones (Sindbæk 2018; Philippsen and others 2021).

Archaeological evidence of an entirely different kind suggests the so-called mid-eighth-century recession around the North Sea may be a result of specific political actions affecting the Anglo-Saxon and Frankish economies. John Blair (2018), for example, has made a strong case for the emergence of small inland periodic markets in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Often as not, these were at key points in the landscape associated with known places — ancient sites, churches, or palaces. Many of these vestigial markets predated permanent versions as of the tenth century. Theuws (2007; Theuws and Kars 2017) has argued for much the same change to the Meuse Valley towns during the ninth century. In both cases, these were responses to increasing royal controls with an emphasis upon managing commodity production through taxation.

To sum up, Comacchio, as a place, was a peer first of Oegstgeest and then Dorestad. Like Oegstgeest its origins were connected to managing maritime traffic at a deltaic junction with a major seaway. Mediterranean exotica entered Europe through this gateway and exited at the Rhine mouth. Interestingly, though, the traffic travelled mostly northwards; apart from pilgrims, relatively little that can be identified in the archaeological record passed southwards. The Mediterranean goods going northwards were fillers accompanying Rhenish wine (and perhaps arms) that headed in large quantities to meet demand around the North Sea. The Alpine soap-stone that came south down the river Po to Comacchio and Adriatic Sea consumers was important but in no way comparable to the Rhenish wine trade. The tectonic plates of the European economy had moved away from the Mediterranean.

Comacchio, like Oegstgeest and possibly Dorestad, lay in a liminal location that was slow to attract political annexation. Political annexation may explain Comacchio's capitulary of 715/30, just as tolls were to be imposed on traffic through Dorestad. If Comacchio had as many as one thousand citizens, then it was a smaller version of Dorestad and comparable to Ribe at about 700. But Comacchio's full size remains to be demonstrated. It is not possible to compare the lifeways of Comacchio's first villagers

with the rich material culture of Oegstgeest's inhabitants, but there is reason to suppose Comacchio's community was exceptional and comparatively affluent. This material affluence, we may surmise, may well have been the Po port's undoing. It attracted church oversight unlike Dorestad, in which it was assimilated into the lingering post-classical ethos of a temple society. Emporia like Dorestad, to return to Theuws's (2004) hypothesis, were experiments in international exchange which made these places vulnerable only when the economy was realigned around regional central places with well-established cosmological roots. This begs one final question: Did Venice attack Comacchio when it was a thriving port, or merely a reduced transactional place that posed a renewed threat in the post-Carolingian age when the pendulum was swinging away from seaborne trade in favour of regional commodity exchange?

Conclusion

A century ago Pirenne launched a new narrative for the origins of Europe's economy. Now we possess increasingly refined new tools for interrogating this narrative. Fifty years of modern archaeology, in particular, have provided us with the means to analyse the chronology, geography, and social implications of his thesis. Much of Pirenne's model may no longer hold, but nonetheless the essential thinking behind his histories remains compelling.

Becoming Europe, now we have measured material evidence as well as texts to shape the narrative, involved minimal but significant connection with the sixth- to seventh-century Mediterranean region. Exotica and other prestige goods including Near Eastern/Indian Ocean beads destined to serve the funerary rites around the early Merovingian North Sea were the principal imports. The archaeological evidence also highlights the place of artisans and merchants during the two centuries that provided a platform for the Carolingian *correctio* of the 780s and 790s. Becoming Europe also involved an almost hermetically sealed Latin Christendom pursuing its Christian identity as 'a closed State' (Pirenne 2014 [1925], 18; cf. Brown 2003). The only exceptions to this isolationism were the traders to western Denmark, and the Anglo-Saxon and Frankish pilgrims who travelled to the Holy Land. This explains much about the (textual) reaction to the raids inflicted upon Christendom from the outside by Vikings and Arabs. Finally, as Pirenne rightly gauged a century ago, the Carolingian renaissance was constructed upon agricultural management. New research shows this management was sporadically in place in the Anglo-Saxon and Merovingian realms by the seventh century, as incidentally Mediterranean agriculture was massively reduced in terms of output (Hamerow 2020; Quirós Castillo 2020; Blair 2018; Crabtree 2010; Rippon 2018; Oosthuizen 2016; Vigil-Escalera Guirado, Bianchi, and Quirós 2012). The reforms implicit in the *correctio* of the 780s led over the following half-century by *c.* 850 to the implementation of best agrarian practice throughout much of Christendom. With regionally varied commodity exchange, in this period a new social order was added to the world of the nobility and clergy, the *laboratores* (Le Goff 1980, 56). The social change may have been prompted by a palace society but was largely implemented by Carolingian monasteries. These monasteries furnished not only the intelligentsia that promoted the new ideology but also the craftsmen who provided the objects that through gift-giving cycles locked secular landowners into a quest for salvation inherent in most of the reforms (Hodges 2012). The craftsmen, like the intelligentsia drew on concepts and knowledge of late antique date, but significantly these artisans had principally fashioned their experience in the collective workshops operating in the North Sea emporia a full century before Charlemagne's reforms. Pirenne's thesis, in short, was both prescient — as he had almost no archaeological evidence at his disposal — but shaped, necessarily, by the state of history in his times.

The collapse of the Mediterranean Commonwealth, as Pirenne (2014 [1925], 14) called it, indubitably occurred piecemeal over two centuries after *c.* 525–550. Questions remain about the scale of the collapse and its precise chronology as well as the reasons for it. Brown's model (2012) of a society in search of salvation and essentially losing its way as of the sixth century has ample textual affirmation but may seem less than convincing to the largely secular twenty-first-century academy.[13] A significant issue is that Brown's model begs for measurements, especially of late antique church economics. Measurements of a rare analysis of Italian peasant economics, for instance, are revealing (Collins-Elliot 2018). These show that in the late Republic and

13 It is worth recalling Bryan Ward-Perkins's (2005, 174) observations about such models: 'a shared Christian heritage has good historical credentials as the basis for a common culture and identity, but is awkward for present-day reasons: Christianity, with its many sectarian squabbles, is now as divisive as it was once unifying; and adopting it as a badge of "Europeanness" would, of course, definitely exclude all non-Christians from the club. Furthermore, linking Europe with Christianity, might give the Pope ideas above his station, would be disturbingly "American", and would certainly clash with liberal and left-wing European traditions of secularist politics.'

early Empire, peasants' lives were distinguished by lower levels of coin circulation and greater variability in site investment, despite a more homogenous lifestyle. In Late Antiquity, by contrast, craft production and coin-based exchange were much more diffuse throughout society, perhaps indicating diminishing networks of long-term reciprocity and interdependency among different communities as local production and cash transactions became more common. If upheld by further analyses, the emphasis upon the local made rural communities and production especially vulnerable to church-led socio-political change. Certainly, in the shadow of a temple society, from the mid-seventh century until the 780s, material culture in post-classical Italy was minimal and, apart from the conspicuous consumption in Lombard and papal palaces, there was a primitivism quite unlike north-west Europe (cf. Hodges 2020a; 2020b). What would Pirenne have made of this? In his colonialist model, Islamic, not Germanic, barbarians were the catalyst of collapse that led to the divergence of southern and northern Europe. Attributing this divergence to the Church would surely have perplexed him.

Brown's model has a deeper reach on the story of becoming Europe. As Mediterranean exotica were exchanged by down-the-line tribal networking, his model forces us to examine parallel networks reaching from the sanctuary-city of Rome to Canterbury as of 600 involving clerics. The two networks, undoubtedly, were as often as not intertwined. As objects from Mediterranean sources (some with east African and Indian Ocean provenances) reached the ship burial at Sutton Hoo around 625, close by an architect — of Frankish or Italian origin — conceived and built the basilican church of Bradwell-on-Sea. This entanglement, as Byzantines struggled with issues of salvation, was no less important to the rise of the Merovingian North Sea network. Herein is how the end of Antiquity impacted and accelerated the rise of north-west Europe. From the port of Comacchio up the river Po and over the Alps was principally a one-way direction, just as once Christianity was established in the British Isles, the flow of pilgrimage was predominantly southwards. Not until 753 did a pope cross the Alps (Noble 1984, 79–80).

Comacchio's growth from village to emporium matters. Was it a place of liminal traders like, for example, the Tyrrhenian *vicus* of Portus Scabris at the mouth of a minor fluvial corridor (Vaccaro 2018), independently controlled during the rapid rise of the Lombards, which then became subject to tribal regulation in the early eighth century, or was it part of a temple society with oversight by the Church? Future excavations at Comacchio will hopefully resolve the nature of the entanglement in the twilight of the temple society. One thing is certain, however, the river traders of Oegstgeest, at the North Sea terminus of a long febrile fluvial corridor extending south to the Adriatic Sea, always enjoyed different cosmological circumstances. They operated in the interstices of the volatile political geography of the later sixth to eighth centuries. Their entrepreneurship presumably garnered them respect as it was to win esteem for later Frisians (cf. Lebecq 2020).

The sea, unlike towns, Pirenne believed, offered a certain liberty (Lebecq 2020, 34–35). This indomitability in contrast to those tied to the land, Pirenne proposed, was to be the catalyst of change as Europe reset its bearings after the end of the Mediterranean Sea as an economic region. But were these maritime communities change-makers or even future capitalists as Pirenne hinted for his American audiences in 1922? It is a far-fetched image, we now know given the evidence for managed landscapes as of the seventh century (Blair 2018), though not totally wide of the mark. Their legacy as change-makers was that they gave an impulse to create emporia which accommodated a significant increase in craftsmen and their apparently independent collectives. Through these non-places, and the intercession of merchants, knowledge was exchanged that provided a basis for the grandiloquent expansion of later eighth-century Frankish monastic and palatial economies, and their championing of commodity-based production that led to varying forms of 'feudalism'.

One obvious mystery remains. A major episode in becoming Europe involved creating emporia in which neither kings nor the Church were apparently present. Both kings and the Church were integrally involved, yet how are we to account for their physical absence? Of course, this might explain the apparent absence of craftsmen making weaponry, liturgical items, and book furniture in the emporia. The social alchemy of the phenomenon of the North Sea emporia between 670–700 was to change by the mid-eighth century and considerably during their last iteration between *c.* 780 and 820. These urban dwellers proved to be a discrete though essential connection between the world of Late Antiquity and the collective workshops of the Carolingian reform monasteries after the 780s.[14] It is a silent his-

14 Peter Brown (2003, 442) provides a characteristically vivid insight upon the Carolingian revolution: 'Beyond the world of traders and shabby gentility […] Christianity […] covered western Europe with a more diverse and fragile net, and in so doing […] dotted the landscape with little portions of paradise […]. Some 180 episcopal sees and 700 great monasteries (in some 300 of which the emperor had a direct

tory emerging stealthily from the archaeological evidence which, to be absolutely clear, sheds no light on the matters of liberty and progress that Pirenne presented to his American audiences in 1922. Instead, the archaeology reveals the experimental pathways connecting places like Comacchio and Oegstgeest that as of the 780s were to be adopted as regulated operating behaviour by the Carolingian Church as it renewed the proselytization of salvation even to the much-reduced Mediterranean temple society (cf. Brown 2003; Wood 2021).

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interest) were reconfigured as shrines.' The pool of skilled workers and their outputs have been readily acknowledged in the case of the industrial production of books. Six thousand Carolingian volumes survive; estimates suggest about fifty thousand were made at this time (McKitterick 1989, 163). Rupert Bruce-Mitford (1967, 2) calculated that 515 calf skins were needed to produce the celebrated late seventh-century Codex Amiatinus.

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