Enrico Cirelli
Ravenna. Rise of a Late Antique Capital

RAVENNA – RISE OF A LATE ANTIQUE CAPITAL

Enrico Cirelli

Abstract

The town of Ravenna, in northern Italy, today contains eight buildings listed on the UNESCO World Heritage list, all dating between the fifth and the sixth centuries – a time when it was one of the most important cities of the Mediterranean. The Roman town underwent a major transformation at the beginning of the fifth century, from a small Roman 'Municipium' to an Imperial capital. This role called for new buildings of power, housing the Imperial Court and the related bureaucratic body, a Bishop's Palace and other monuments such as the Circus. In addition city-walls, churches and others community zones were created; all following late antique models such as Milan, the previous capital, and of course Constantinople. An expansion of Ravenna's infrastructures was also necessary, in particular new roads and sewer system, a port, warehouses, and aqueducts.

From the fifth century to the Early Medieval period Ravenna flourished as one of the main centres of North Italy and during this period its archbishop played an important role in the religion, politics and economy of the region. This paper seeks to illustrate the archaeological evidence related to the 'longue durée' of the urban centre of Ravenna as a fulcrum of power and control.

Introduction

Ravenna was selected by Honorius, or more probably by the general Stilicho (A.D. 359–408), in A.D. 402 as an alternative Imperial seat. The main reason for this choice was because Ravenna was better defended, in terms of landscape accessibility than Milan (Pietri 1991: 287–8; Rebecchi 1993: 121; Christie 2006: 28). Some scholars have suggested that Ravenna was chosen because it had a more flourishing hinterland than the previous capital; however, this idea has been recently refuted by Mazza (2005: 22). Ravenna was also an ideal capital because of its strategic position on the coast of the

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Adriatic Sea, its road connections with central and north Italy, and a wide canal system and River Po (Augenti and Bertelli 2007; Cirelli 2007a: 45). In the fifth century, using the waterways, ships departing from Milan might reach Ravenna in three/four days; if using the road system to cover the same distance, it needed at least eight days (Patitucci-Uggeri 2005: 279).

Before its promotion to the rank of capital-city, Ravenna was similar in extension to several other north Italian centres and only slightly bigger than any town-fortress of the *limes*: Aquincum, for instance, covered 24 ha, while Ravenna was around 33 ha in size. After A.D. 402 the new capital quickly rose followed by its two suburbs at Caesarea and Classe covering an area of around 372 ha (Augenti forthcoming: 8). As Augenti has clearly demonstrated, the increase and the development of Ravenna in the fifth century were planned through specialized centres gravitating around the administrative and political capital, as for example the production and the trade area at Classe (Augenti 2006a: 17) (Figure 10.1).

The transformation and the increase of Ravenna are much more remarkable if we consider that, until the beginning of the fifth century, the city was touched by the same phenomenon of decline and destruction that affected the Italian urban centres between the third and the fourth centuries (Cantino-Wataghin 1996: 246).

We cannot say if Ravenna was similar to the 'half-destroyed corpses', as bishop Ambrose described the north Italian towns (Ambr. *Ep.* 39, 3); archaeological evidence shows that most of the *domus* in the ancient city had been destroyed (some with burnt deposits), abandoned or adapted for other functions, between the end of the third and the fourth century (Cirelli 2008: 52–4) (Figure 10.2). Scholars have attempted to demonstrate how this phenomenon was connected with Barbarian raids or other catastrophic events (Ortalli 2001: 28). Yet, such events in Ravenna are not attested in the written sources, or within archaeological contexts. The most likely hypothesis is that the burnt layers found in the stratigraphy preceding the fifth century were overall connected to the urban society and public administration's inability for maintenance and requalification of the common and private areas even in traumatic or ordinary events.

The transformation of Ravenna into a capital inverted this trend, increasing the imperial public investment and private and ecclesiastical munificence. The expanded economy also influenced settlements and the neighbouring cities within the surrounding region of Romagna (Ortalli 2003: 103). In these sites the new imperial and private programme was, however, of short duration, with elitist enterprises that did not modify the general structure of the urban system.

Ravenna began to take on the form it still possesses in part today: a much reorganized townscape with new structures of power and commerce, and new town defences.
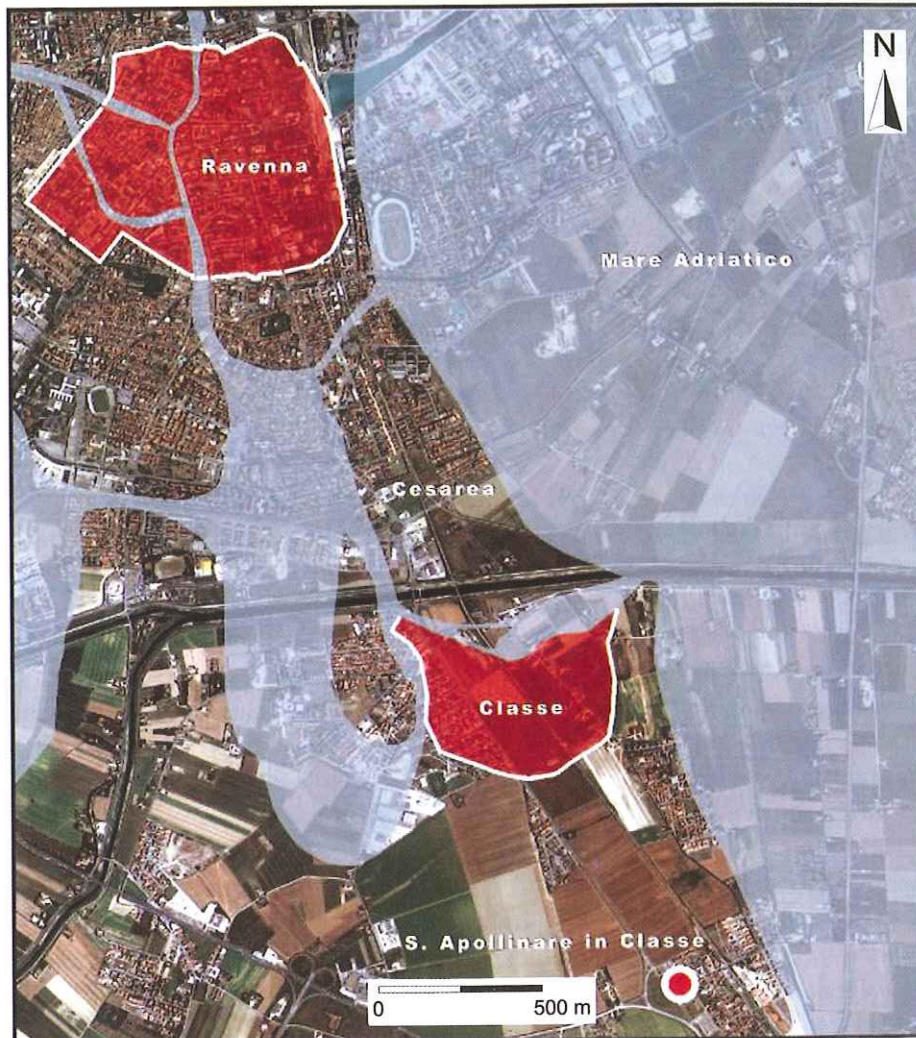
Figure 10.1: Ravenna, Caesarea and Classe during the fifth to seventh
centuries (drawn by A. Fiorini).

Town defences of a capital city

One of the most important public enterprises of Ravenna, once it became the
capital, was the building of a new defensive circuit. The town walls sur-
rounded areas that denoted suburban expansion in the first century but which
were in a state of crisis between the third and fourth century. But the city-
walls also included a wide zone close to the coastline, crossed by the *Via*
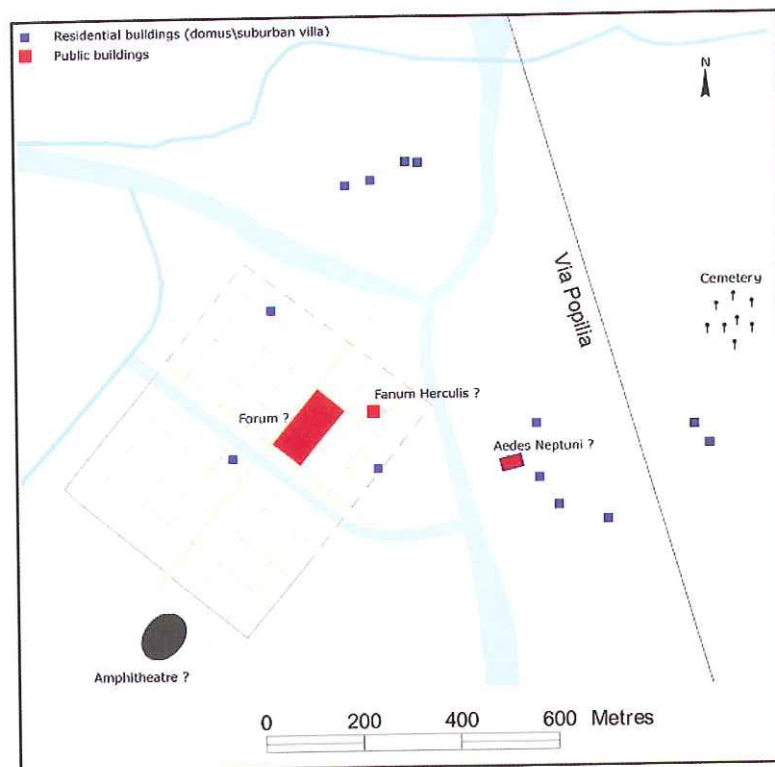
Figure 10.2: Roman Ravenna (second to the fourth century A.D.).

Popilia – a crucial connection road, running from Rimini to Adria, and the axis that conditioned the late Republican *oppidum*.

Today we still do not know the exact date of the city-walls foundation, even if it is generally ascribed both to the emperor Honorius (A.D. 395–423), and to Valentinian III (425–55), in the second quarter of the same century. Following a later written source, some scholars propose that the city-walls were finished, or more probably restored, by Odoacer, at the end of the fifth century, but these sources are referring to a new part of the walls located on the east side of the city, facing the sea, called in A.D. 971 *murnovo* (Manaresi, II, 114–17, n 169; Novara 1990: 81). Archaeological investigations have demonstrated that the substantial city-walls were built in a single phase (Christie and Gibson 1988: 191–2; Christie 1989; Gelichi 2005a: 834, 838). Whilst Christie has argued for the bricks used in the walls to be newly manufactured, other scholars view these as reused material from abandoned Roman buildings (Ortalli 1991: 171–2; Gelichi 2005a: 836–7).

The late antique city-walls, in their final form, enclosed an area of 166 ha, against the 33 ha of the earlier Roman circuit. The settlement never had

intense urban density, even during the fifth century. Despite its size, the city-walls were, until the early medieval period, 'a limit and a boundary' of the town (Gelichi 2000: 117). The city did not infact fill the intra-mural space until the modern period.

Many other northern Italian cities were defended by new fortifications during the third and fourth century, because of barbarian attacks and threats. Most of the defences were restructured by adding, to the republican defences, new towers or other defensive structures (Christie 2006). Other centres had entirely new circuits added, as at Bologna (Gelichi 2005b: 720–5), Parma (Dall'Aglio 1990: 49–50), Mantua (Tamassia 1993:146), Brescia (Brogiolo 1993: 52–5) and probably Pisa (Brogiolo and Gelichi 1998: 56). Despite these cities, where the size of the settlement seems to contract in different ways, we also know of some cases where the later Roman city-walls continue to be the same, as for example Florence (Scampoli 2007: 63–70), Lucca (Ciampoltrini 1994: 616) and Piacenza (Marini Calvani 1985: 272; Pagliani 1991: 79–84; Marini Calvani 2000a: 385–6). These are a few cases where the city-walls becomes wider, as at Rimini, probably refortified between Gallienus and Aurelian and incorporating the amphitheatre (Ortalli 1995: 516; Negrelli 2008: 8), and Milan (Brogiolo, Gelichi 1998; Cirelli 2008: 54).

Despite the dimensions of the area surrounded by the new city-walls, it became notably greater in comparison to the previous urban plan. We need nevertheless to consider that, compared to other capitals of the Mediterranean, Ravenna was a rather small city. Rome was surrounded by the Aurelian defences at the end of the third century which delimited the extension of the inhabited area to 1373 ha, with an extension of 18,837 linear m of city-walls (Meneghini and Valenzani 2004: 54). The urbanized area of other cities of fundamental importance in the late Roman Empire was 285 ha at Trier (during the second to third century) (Kuhnen 1996); Lyon (in the same period) contained in its urban perimeter around 200 ha (Bonnet and Reynaud 2000: 248–50); Carthage (in the fifth century) measured around twice the extension of Ravenna, with a surface equal to 321 ha and a population between 70,000–100,000 inhabitants (Hurst 1993: 337). Milan also expands its urban perimeter in the fourth century, reaching around 250 ha (Ceresa Mori 1993).

However, it is probable that the city-walls of Ravenna surrounded an area within which there was the intention to display a new project of urban development. This was destined to contain buildings connected to imperial ceremony and others of public character such as the circus (Vespignani 2001). It will also have been necessary to create buildings of the Christian state religion, like the great basilicas and those connected to the clergy – these needing large open areas that were easy to aquire, such as those areas in which large late Roman *domus* had been abandoned or demolished in the third and fourth centuries (Gelichi 2000: 117–18; Manzelli 2000: 238) (Figure 10.3).
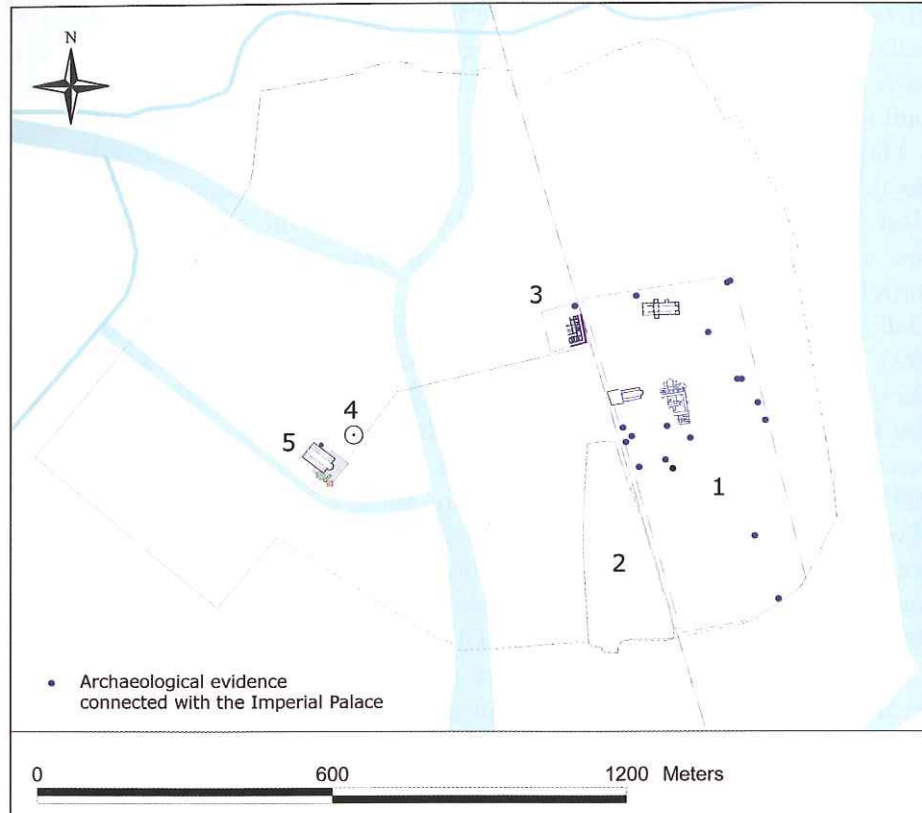
Figure 10.3: The late antique city-walls of Ravenna and the structures of power:
1) the Imperial Palace complex; 2) possible area of the Circus; 3) the Mint;
4) Roman city-walls and the Bishop's Baths; 5) Bishop Palace complex and
the basilica Ursiana.

Power and exchange

Central to the organization of the capital was an Imperial Palace with exten-
sive related buildings: the Audience Room and *Triclinia*, the Guard Building,
the Circus, the Mint and the Imperial chapel (Augenti 2005) (Figure 10.4).
The Palace consisted of various spaces with vast areas for ceremonies and for
demonstration of imperial power (Figure 10.5).

The administrative structures and main occupied area of the city developed
around the imperial zone, in the south-east of the city, near the church of S.
Giovanni Evangelista, in space previously occupied by few suburban buildings
and marked by the passage of the *Via Popilia*, subsequently the *Plateia Maior*,
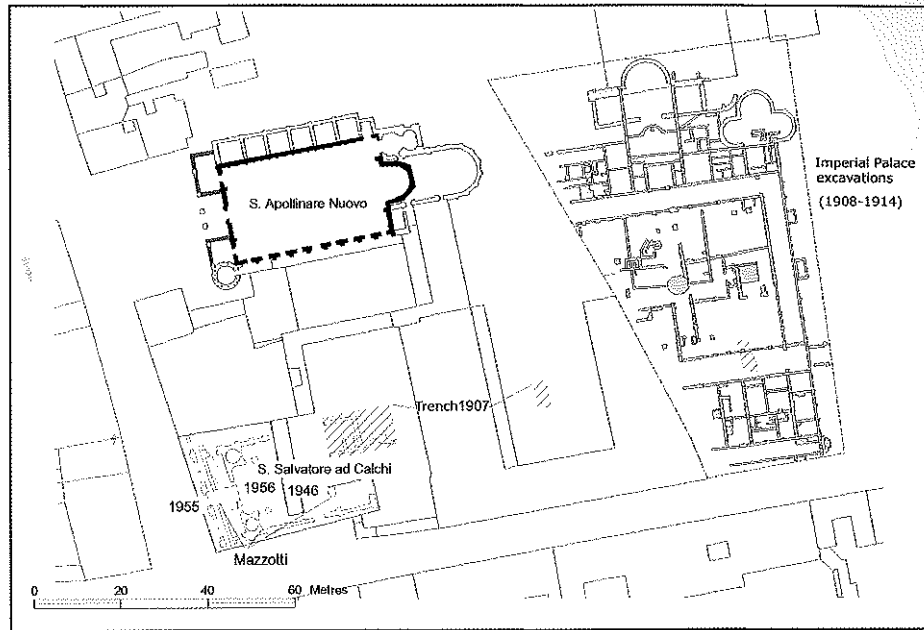which constituted the main axis of the late antique urban plan.

Figure 10.4: Imperial palace complex of Ravenna.

One of the key elements of this complex is clearly the Palace built by Valentinian III "in locus qui dicitur Laureta" (*LP*. 298), and in a sector of the city situated close to the Wandalaria gate. The Palace built by Theoderic, but not dedicated (*Theod.*, 1892, 24, 79: *Palatium usque ad perfectum fecit, que non dedicavit*), was located further north, perhaps inside the Orti Monghini, behind the church of S. Apollinare Nuovo (Gelichi 1991: 157–8; 2000: 110). Its structures were partially found in a series of archaeological excavations conducted at the beginning of twentieth century (directed by Gherardo Ghirardini); the discoveries were of great prominence and they aroused a great interest, but have never received full publication (Ghirardini 1917; Berti 1976).

In the same period the religious centre grew around the Archbishop's Palace — this actually set within the old town wall, not far from the Basilica Ursiana (Figure 10.6–7). The episcopate initially appeared as a private aristocratic *domus* provided with richly decorated *balnea* and a dining room ('*domus qui vocatur quique accubita*'), subdivided by several apses which were periodically restored until the ninth century (Miller 2000: 56–7; Rizzardi 2007b: 227, 232). The religious space was the real centre of power inside the cityscape (Augenti 2007; Cirelli 2008: 102).

From the early fifth century Ravenna developed a role of primary importance in the exchange of goods from across the Mediterranean. In the fifth and up to the middle of the sixth century, the main partner in these trades
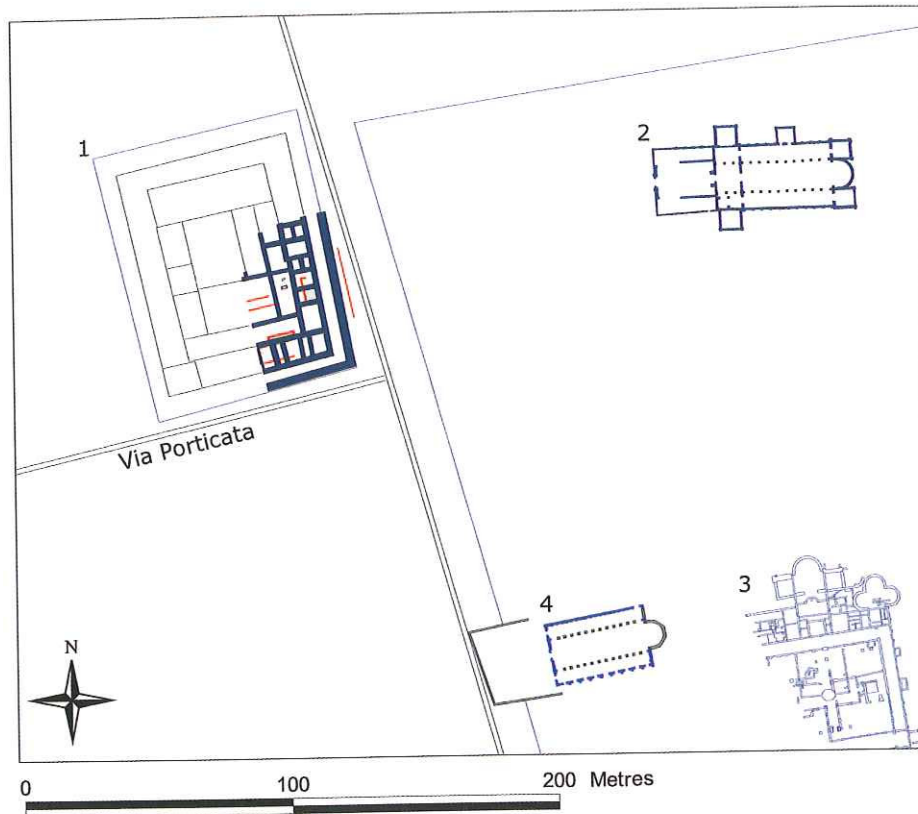
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Figure 10.5: Moneta Aurea and the Via Porticata connecting the Imperial to the Bishop Palace. 1) Moneta Aurea; 2) S. Giovanni Evangelista; 3) Imperial Palace buildings; 4) S. Apollinare Nuovo, Theoderic's Palatine chapel.

was North Africa, and in particular the Proconsolaris Province (modern Tunisia). The peak of the imports from North Africa occurs in the second Vandal period (from the mid-fifth century). At this stage Ravenna was governed by king Theodoric (A.D. 493–526), when there was good trade relationships between the Vandal and the Ostrogothic kingdoms. Immediately after the Byzantine conquest (after the A.D. 530s) an economic decline is recorded towards the East, a phenomenon attested in almost all of the western late antique Mediterranean area (Augenti *et al.* 2007; Cirelli 2007a: 46). Nevertheless, Ravenna continued to receive a considerable quantity of North African products, an effect of a globalized market with Carthage at its centre (Murialdo 2001: 301; 2007: 10). The trend of imports changes again at the beginning of the seventh century, and by the second half of the same century the warehouses in the port of Classe started to be 'colonised' by domestic structures, the large open-plan warehouses were partitioned off and occupied by smaller wooden houses (Augenti 2006b: 214) (Figure 10.8–9).
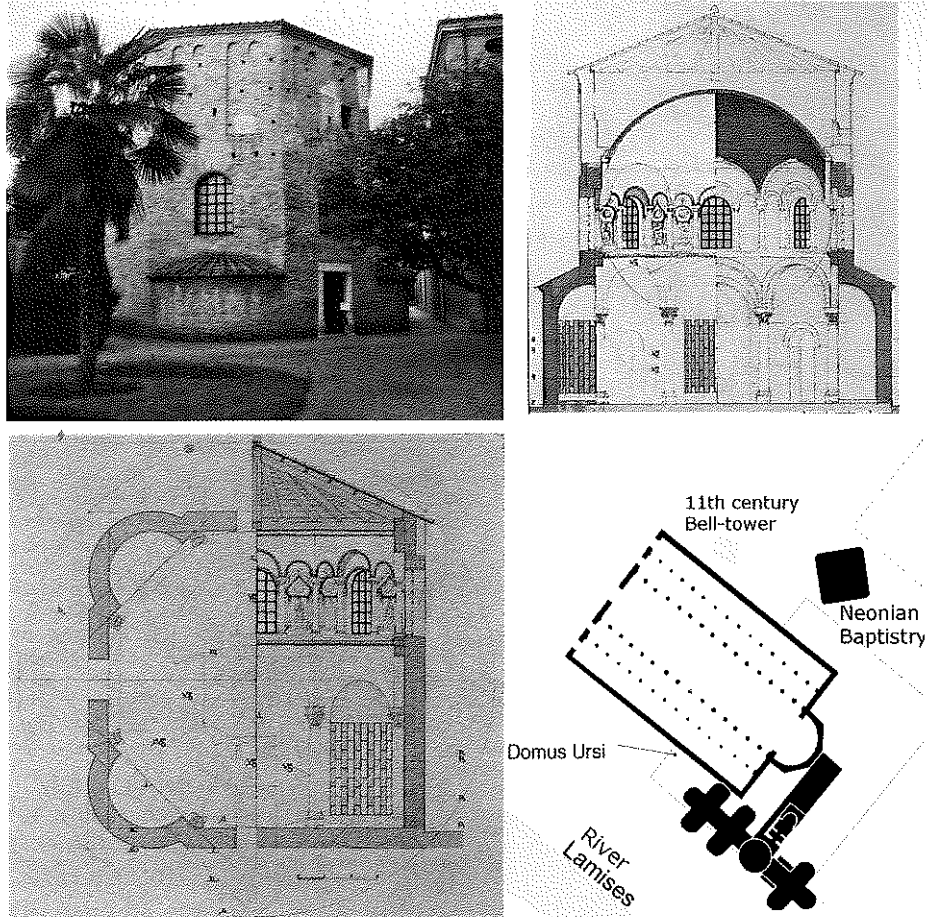
Figure 10.6: Bishop's Palace, Basilica Ursiana and Neonian Baptistry
(drawn by R. Trinci).

From preliminary analyses of the ceramic material identified in the recent excavation of the Basilica of S. Severo – carried out with the Universites of Leicester and Barcelona, and with the Central European University of Budapest (Augenti *et al.* 2007b; Laszlovszky 2007) – a notable continuity of economic and productive vivacity for a significant volume of trade lasts between the eighth and eleventh centuries, with the extended presence of transport containers coming from the eastern Mediterranean and from southern Italy (Cirelli 2006: 35–6). What is quite certain is also the continuing and intensive easy connection, through the late antique *Cursus Publicus*, between Ravenna and North Italy. This quite easy connection was probably the same one that guaranteed, for instance, the thief and merchant Felix, who stole the
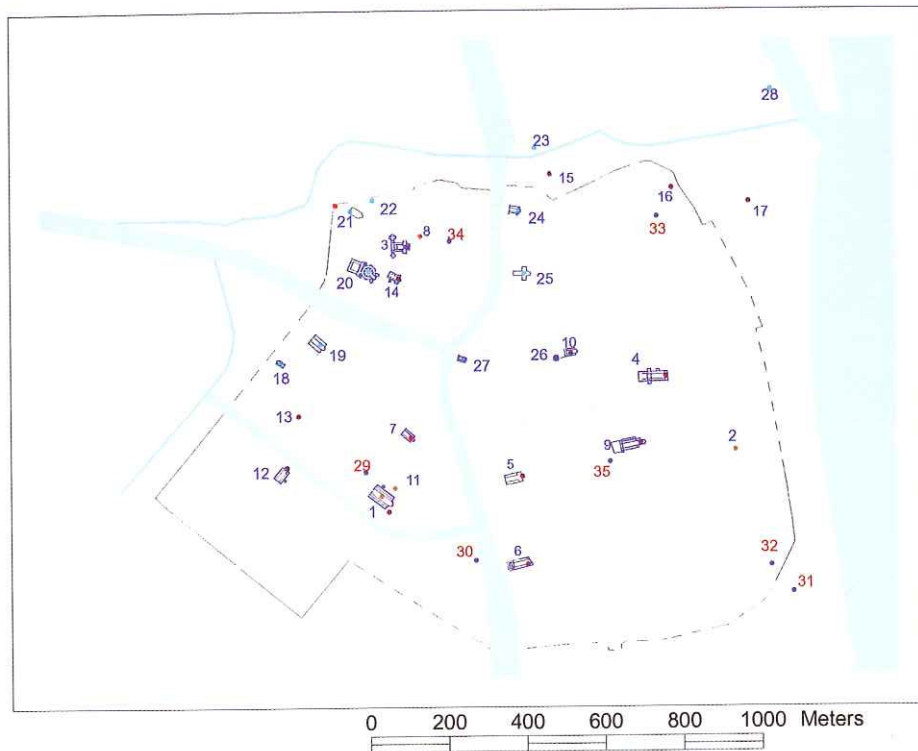
Figure 10.7: The churches of Ravenna between the end of the fourth and the second half of the sixth century: 1) Basilica Ursiana; 2) S. Pullione; 3) S. Croce; 4) S. Giovanni Evangelista; 5) *Basilica Apostolorum* (S. Francesco); 6) S. Agata Maggiore; 7) S. Agnese; 8) SS Giovanni e Barbaziano 9) S. Apollinare Nuovo; 10) Cattedrale degli Ariani; 11) Cappella di S. Andrea nell'Episcopio; 12) S. Andrea Maggiore; 13) S. Pietro *in Orphanotrophio*; 14) S. Maria Maggiore; 15) S. Eusebio; 16) *Ecclesia Gothorum*; 17) S. Giorgio *ad Tabulam*; 18) SS Giovanni e Paolo; 19) S. Eufemia *in Arietem*; 20) S. Vitale; 21) S. Stefano Maggiore; 22) SS Barbaziano e Zaccaria; 23) S. Giovanni *in Marmorato*; 24) S. Vittore; 25) S. Giovanni Battista; 26) S. Maria *in Cosmedin*; 27) S. Michele *in Africisco*; 28) S. Maria *ad Farum*.

relics of S. Severo from Ravenna in A.D. 836 and headed to Pavia and then to Mainz in Germany (McCormick 2005: 287–8).

Changing building materials

Ravenna is characterized by the distinctive elements of a late antique town. It features some of the indications considered in other towns to be signs of 'decline' (Liebescheutz 2001: 233), but these stand in contrast with evidence
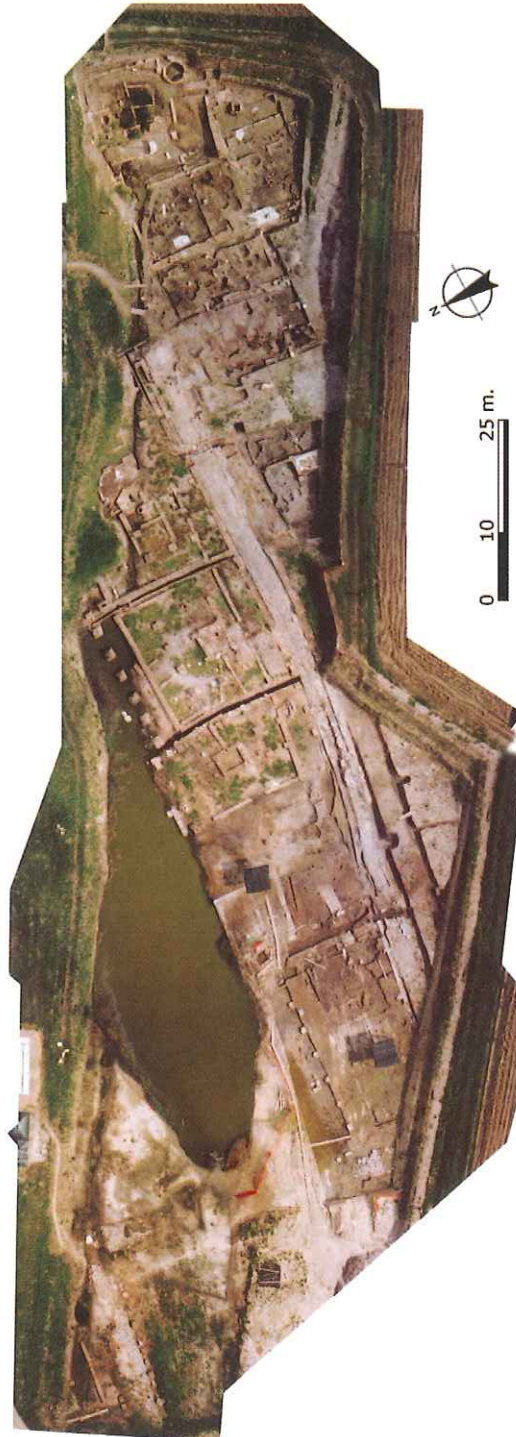
Figure 10.8: Aerial view of the excavated area of the port of Classe (photo by Zanfini and Gottarelli).

Figure 10.9: Building 17 at the port of Classe, burnt down at the end
of the fifth century.

for increased economic and political influences (Lusuardi Siena 1984: 526).
The cityscape of Ravenna is, for instance, characterized from the beginning of
the fifth century by wide empty areas without buildings, within the new city-
walls. The outstanding imperial investments and the monumental interven-
tions that took place between the fifth and the seventh centuries define the
urban make-up of Ravenna for the whole course of the early Middle Ages.
The great buildings of the aristocracy close to the imperial court, for instance
the *domus* of Via D'Azeglio (Figure 10.10), and the great public buildings iden-
tified by archaeological excavations inside the city centre, together with the
notable ecclesiastical complexes built up to the end of the sixth century, are
the clear material evidence of economic power and they are a demonstration
of religious and royal pre-eminence that met little comparison in Italy and in
the western Mediterranean region during the same centuries.

Comparable or notable public interventions are rarely documented in other
late antique centres in north Italy after the mid-fourth century (Cirelli 2007a:
305–06): rather, a contraction of construction activities in the private sector is
attested in many centres of the eastern Cispadana region. In contrast, within
the territory of Romagna, there was an upturn in the regional economy, due
to the transfer of the imperial court, and thanks to the enhanced commercial
activities of the harbours of Ravenna and Rimini (Ortalli 2003: 103).

A description of a more standard building in seventh century Ravenna is
provided in a famous papyrus. It describes a building belonging to a banker
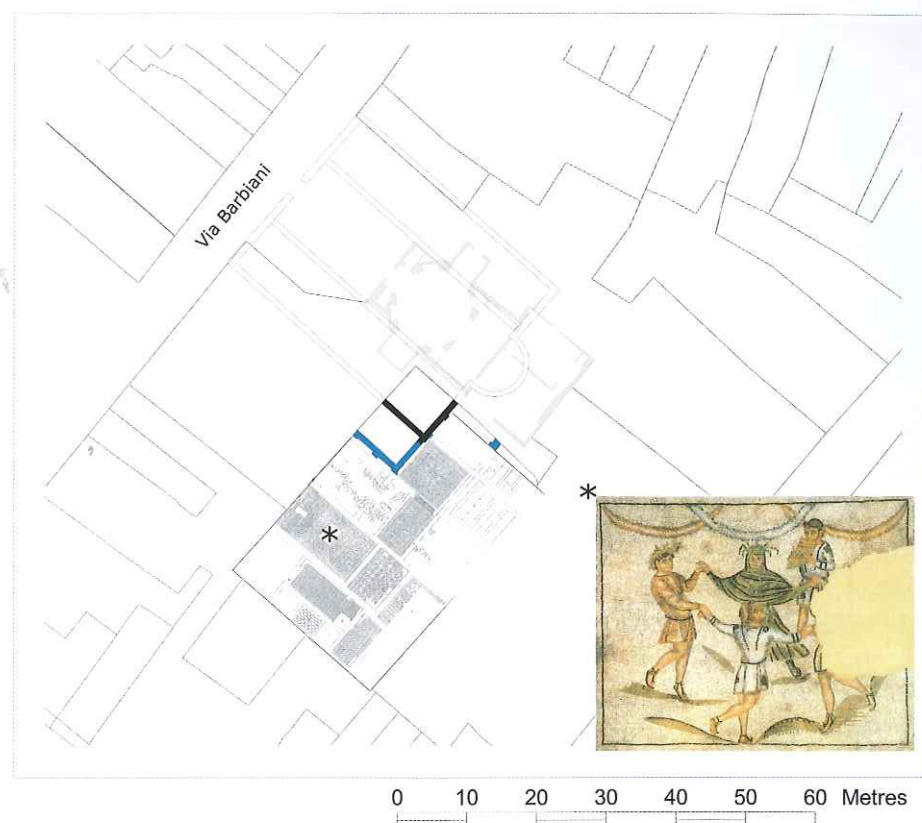
Figure 10.10: Via D'Azeglio *Domus* and the 'Four Seasons mosaic Panel', a late antique residence close to the ancient *Forum*.

(*argentarius*), Theodorus (Marini CXXIII = Tjader: II, 38–41; Ortalli 1991: 179–80; Augenti 2006b: 213; Christie 2006: 233), comprising a two floor building with portico on the façade, conforming to a model that becomes most commonplace during the early Middle Ages in different regions of Italy (Augenti 2004: 39). Buildings of the same kind were in fact rather common to Ravenna during the whole of the seventh century, as seen by the archaeological evidence at Via D'Azeglio (Negrelli 2004a: 120; Librenti 2004: 126).

At the same time, the material evidence and the written sources underline the limited quality of middle and low status buildings of the same period. This is seen most clearly with wooden buildings within Classe. In one of the porticos of the warehouses, dated to the end of the seventh century (Ortalli 1991: 178), two timber-houses have been identified during recent excavations, built inside the buildings of the harbour, but with different techniques and functions, and dated to the first quarter of the eighth century. These houses reused and divided the previous warehouses with new timber walls, held up by large
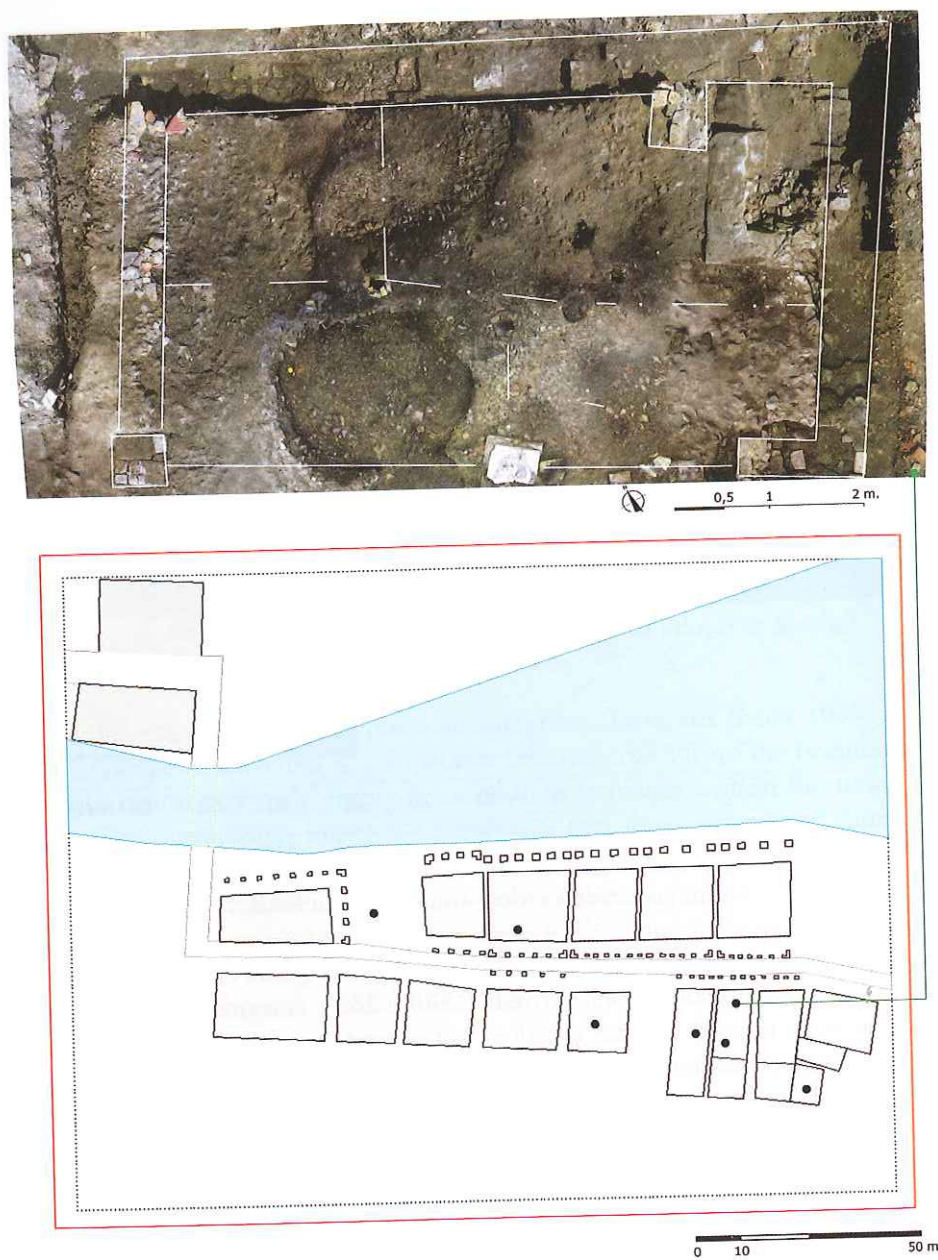
Figure 10.11: Plan of the dock area of Classe. Above, detail of a timber-house built inside one of the warehouses after A.D. 640.

posts (Augenti 2006b). Two different houses were built within a single late antique warehouse (Figure 10.11), with a small courtyard that divided the buildings, flanked by an internal *ambitus* and facing the main paved road. At the two opposite sides of the buildings various burials have been found (Augenti 2006b).

Close to the reused building were some sunken-dwellings, used for grain storage, and to dry vegetables (Augenti *et al.* 2006: 126–8). Inside the city of Classe, during the second half of the seventh and in the eighth century, other houses and structures were built with foundations in reused bricks and mud-walls (Augenti 2008). This new evidence allows us to recognize the same characteristics of other late antique cities, marked by gradual abandonment.

Later redefinition of the cityscape
(seventh and eighth centuries)

From the later seventh century, and more markedly during the eighth, Ravenna reveals very different settlement units. These are organized around the main ecclesiastical buildings, close to the great monuments of the Imperial Palace and the Episcopal area, or along the river that ran through the inhabited area (Gelichi 1996: 67–76) (Figure 10.12).

Other early medieval houses and structures of different types start to be recognized with greater frequency inside the excavations conducted in Ravenna, as in the case of Via Pier Traversari, where a recent dig, still unpublished, brought to light a house dated between the eighth and ninth centuries.

In this period the main housing model is certainly the one characterized by wood and clay, evident also at Classe (Augenti *et al.* 2006), Comacchio (Bucci 2002; Gelichi and Calaon 2007: 413), Torcello (Gelichi 2006:160–1), Cittanova (Calaon 2006: 221) and Venice (Gobbo 2005: 43–5; Gelichi 2007: 384).

Medieval archival documentation in Ravenna confirms the continued existence of aristocratic residences, constructed of brick and stone, during the ninth and tenth centuries (Brunterc'h: 2002); these were surrounded by and often built above ruinous buildings inside now wide open spaces within the town (Brogiolo and Gelichi 1998: 103–54; Brogiolo 2006: 616–17). Some buildings from this period were identified during a nineteenth century excavation close to the Imperial Palace and the monastery of S. Stefano *in Fundamento Regis* (Cirelli 2008: 151–2; Novara 2008a: 24–5), revealing plans similar to ninth and tenth century houses in Rome (Nerva's and Caesar's forum. Santangeli Valenzani 2007: 132). The evidence at least indicates elites continuing to reside in cities (Wickham 2005: 654–5).

It is in this way that the landscape around the Bishop's Palace, close to the Basilica Ursiana, started to rise, with the new buildings built by the bishops

Figure 10.12: Distribution and thematic map of early Medieval Ravenna.

Giovanni and Valerio, at the end of the eighth century and the great *domus* built by Andrea Agnello, using *spolia* from the Arian Episcopal Palace, placed into a landscape of ruins and wooden and clay houses, built inside the surviving structures of the late antique capital, matching in fact what we know of the setting of the Carolingian Palaces of Aachen and Ingelheim (see Schofield and Steuer 2007: 138).

Death and memory

The urban population of Ravenna partially continued to use the great suburban funerary areas that had developed in the Roman period. During the fifth century these cemeteries became larger following the construction of funerary churches, as in the case of S. Lorenzo in Caesarea, one of the most important late antique buildings in this suburb, set close to the city wall (Cirelli 2008: 234).

But new cemetery areas developed inside the inhabited zone, especially in the proximity of ecclesiastical buildings like S. Giovanni Evangelista, S. Croce and S. Eufemia, and inside the old colony zone (Figure 10.13). Some important *mausolea* were built close to the main ecclesiastical buildings, as at SS Nazario and Celso (so called Galla Placidia's Mausoleum), and, in the case of Bishop Neone's burial, inside the Basilica Apostolorum (now dedicated to S. Francesco: Baldini Lippolis 2004). In the same period we find different cases of isolated burials, whose relationship to the surrounding structures has not been clarified, but these fit a well known pattern of intramural burials in Italy (Lambert 2003: 234) and European cities between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (Meier and Graham-Campbell 2007: 432, 434).

Crisis and '*Longue Durée*'

Thanks to the substantial archaeological data related to early medieval Ravenna we can observe a serious crisis during the eighth century. This break
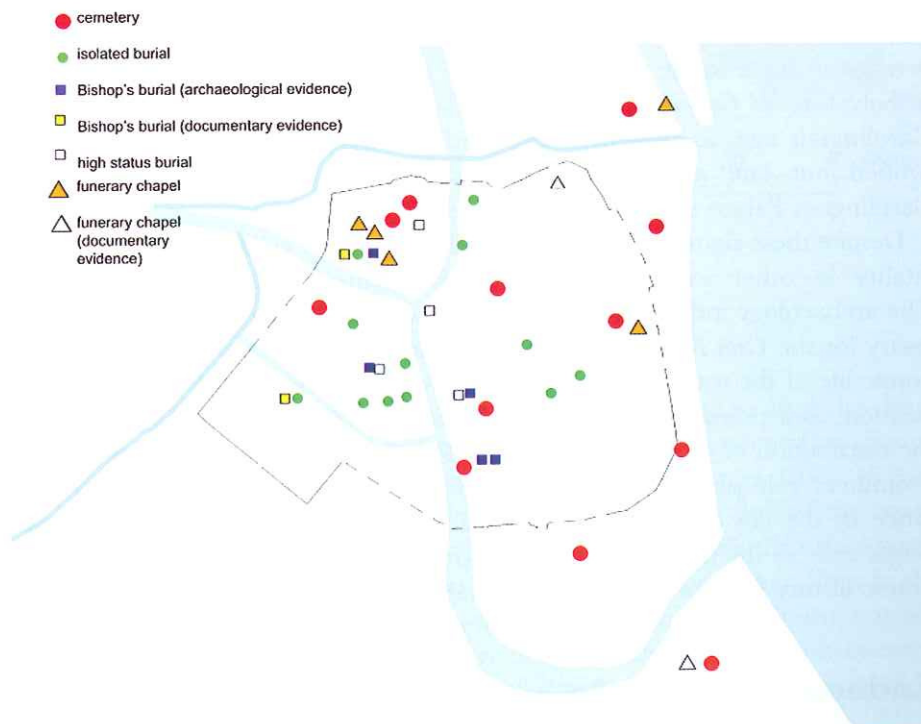

Figure 10.13: Distribution map of the late antique and early medieval burials at Ravenna. (after Cirelli 2008).

clearly related to – and was determined by – military and political losses. Firstly, with the institution of the Duchies of Rome, Calabria and *Venetiae* creating splits in Byzantine Italian control (Delogu 1994: 20), and secondly in the middle of the eighth century (A.D. 751), when the city was conquered by the Lombard army of Aistulf, when Ravenna loses its role of exarchal capital. Despite these political crises, the Archbishop of Ravenna still owned vast property in Istria, Calabria, Sicily, and in Romagna, in Faenza, Forlì, Forlimpopoli, Cesena, Sarsina, Comacchio the duchy of Ferrara, Imola and Bologna, until the ninth century (Carile 1992: 395–6; Cosentino forthcoming).

Yet in the following decades, in particular around A.D. 800, the city was partially stripped of its signs of power, when it fell into the Carolingian sphere and into the property of the rising Papal State (Arnaldi 1987: 107–08). The Imperial Palace, for instance, was plundered of its marble fittings and partially destroyed, as happened to other important public monuments. Nevertheless, Ravenna retained an important role in the economy of the north Italian territory, thanks to its 'post-Byzantine' elites, as it is demonstrated by the *Breviarium Ecclesiae Ravennatis* (*Brev. Eccl. Rav.*; Carile 2005: 44–5)

The investments of the urban elites did decrease in number and quality (Brown 1986: 146–7; Cirelli 2007b: 313). The ecclesiastical buildings constructed, for instance, during the seventh century are smaller and leave no permanent trace inside the urban space. The only exception is the church of S. Salvatore *ad Calchi* (Figure 10.14) that we must probably attribute to the Carolingian age, as shown by the evidence that its foundations cover the robbed out late antique Palace, destroyed to extract marbles for the Carolingian Palace of Aachen (Gelichi 2000: 109).

Despite these signs of partial decline, the city shows evidence of considerable vitality in other aspects, particularly in terms of public infrastructures. The archaeology indeed shows restoration of roads, bridges and wharfs, – necessary for the *Cura Riparum* and for street management – key tools for the economic life of the town, whose main resource was constituted by its favourable position, as a primary port of the Padanian intra-lagoonal circuits, as also for the distribution of salt (Pini 1993: 513). This factor, together with the ongoing prominent role played by Ravenna's Bishop, whose position rose in importance in the city administration (Durliat 1996: 276), helped determine the '*longue durée*' of the urban centre and its prominent role in the political and economic history for North Italy and central Europe (Cosentino, forthcoming).

Endnote: decline of a capital

The end of Ravenna's economic and political growth and prosperity had begun slowly in the eighth century, and finally ended in the twelfth century,

Via di Roma

Via Alberoni

0   10   20   30   40 Meters
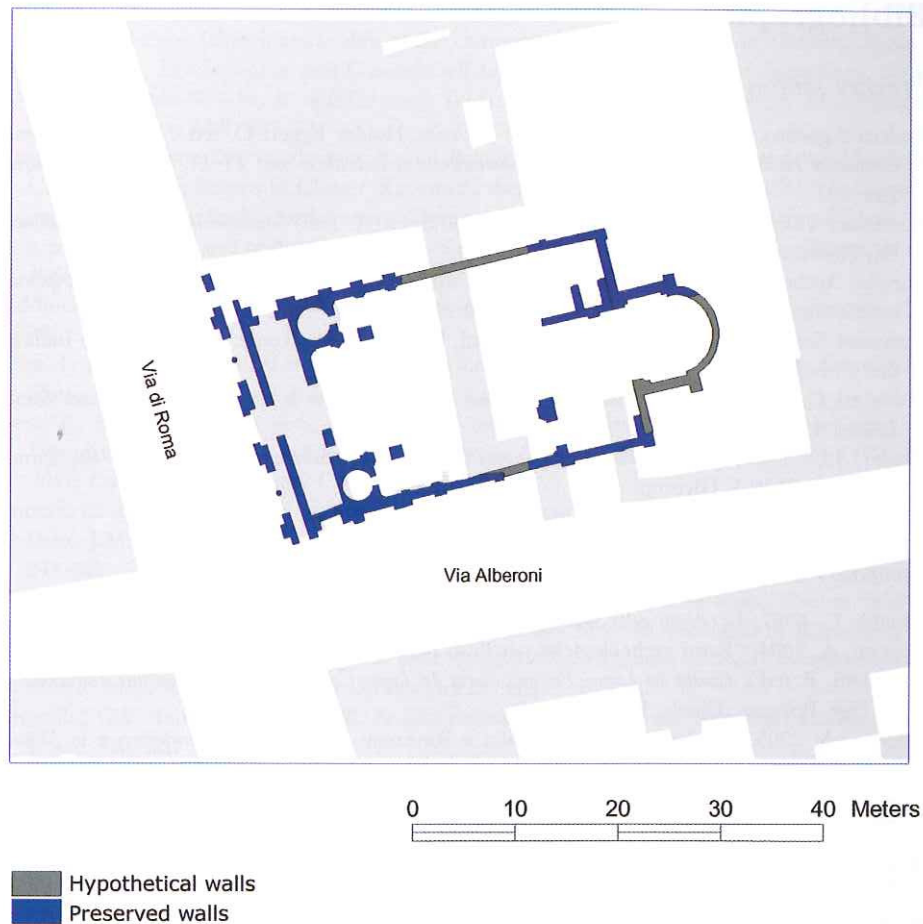
Hypothetical walls
Preserved walls

Figure 10.14: S. Salvatore *ad Calchi*.

notably with the loss of prestige and power of the Archbishop after the death of Gualtiero in A.D. 1144, and the emergence of independent City States, depriving Ravenna of most of its economic resources (Tavoni 1975: 435–7). Ravenna then became an isolated city and the progressive shift of the coastline, and the depletion of the course of its river that ran inside the urban zone, bought to an end a once glorious late antique capital city. Other cities in the region took control of the trade routes Ravenna once had, most notably Venice, a city that after the destruction of Comacchio in the tenth century, became the most important competitor of Ravenna for economic control of the Adriatic Sea.

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