

# pca

postclassicalarchaeologies

volume 1/2011

**SAP Società Archeologica s.r.l.**

Mantova 2011



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#### DESIGN

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#### PUBLISHER

SAP Società Archeologica s.r.l.  
Viale Risorgimento 14 - 46100 Mantova  
[www.archeologica.it](http://www.archeologica.it)

#### PRINTED BY

La Serenissima, Contrà Santa Corona 5, Vicenza

Authorised by Mantua court no. 4/2011 of April 8, 2011

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## A PERSONAL (AND VERY PATCHY) ACCOUNT OF MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE EARLY 1970S IN NORTHERN ITALY<sup>1</sup>

BRYAN WARD-PERKINS

Working in medieval archaeology in northern Italy in the early 1970s was very exciting: we knew we were breaking new ground, and opening up a huge, and fertile, field of research. We were also very young and rather arrogant; but perhaps that was essential to maintain morale within an archaeological environment still dominated by the 'fine object' and by large-scale rapid clearance. I remember, at Luni in 1973, claiming to be annoyed at finding the statue of a Julio-Claudian prince partly sticking into the side of our trench, and religiously excavating a tiny extension, layer by layer, to liberate this inconvenient Roman artefact.

We were not, of course, the first archaeologists to dedicate time and effort to the post-Roman period in northern Italy; indeed we were well aware of heroic predecessors, in particular the Polish excavators at Castelseprio and Torcello sponsored by Bognetti. But what was different in the early 1970s was a sense of community. We were no longer alone. We were part of a movement – and it was this that allowed medieval archaeology to take off during that decade, rather than stutter, once more, to a grinding halt. The people involved were distinguished and diverse, and, because they were doing something new, they were a much more interesting and intellectual crew than the established and homogenised medieval archaeologists of northern Europe. Some came from pottery-studies (like Hugo Blake and Sergio Nepoti), some were historians (like Riccardo Francovich), while others came from the natural sciences (like Tiziano Mannoni and Lanfredo Castelletti). Our approaches, and temperaments, also differed widely: for instance, Hugo Blake and I were unmistakably 'English' in just wanting to excavate and publish interesting sites; but many of our colleagues, not unnaturally, were more 'Italian' in their intellectual approach, relishing every opportunity to politicise and theorise. Whether Hugo and I were more narrow-minded, or more pragmatic, I leave to others to decide.

Even at the time, I knew that I was very lucky to be involved in an important movement at an early stage of its development. I was privileged by birth and upbringing, as the son of a distinguished archaeologist and as a speaker of Italian from childhood. But I would have got nowhere without the inval-

<sup>1</sup> In writing this piece, I am very conscious it is a contribution to the history of medieval archaeology specifically in northern Italy, indeed really only in north-western Italy. Elsewhere – above all Rome and central Italy, and the South and Sicily – the development of medieval archaeology happened under different people and with a different trajectory, but was, of course, just as important.

able help of a number of people based in northern Italy – above all Hugo Blake, who at Genova in 1971, and at Pavia and Luni in 1972, trained me in the ins and out of running a site, and, in 1973, when I was only 21 and fresh out of a History degree at Oxford, entrusted me with the continuation of his excavations in the Torre Civica at Pavia, and his work with the team excavating at Luni<sup>2</sup>. Hugo was an important influence on me, and played a pivotal role in the emergence of medieval archaeology in Central and Northern Italy, largely because, as a foreigner, he moved freely across regional boundaries and knew people throughout the Centre and North, whereas Italian scholars then, as now, were heavily regionally constrained.

With the passage of time, I have come to appreciate more and more the people who sponsored and encouraged our painstaking work, and put together the complex packages of support that made it possible. Medieval archaeology, in order to succeed, required not just qualified, interested and enthusiastic archaeologists (like us); it also needed people in positions of power and influence, often from intellectual backgrounds very different to that of us practitioners. At Pavia, my work and Hugo's was made possible by Adriano Peroni, director of the local museum, an art-historian by training, but one who was happy to encourage a new discipline whose main aesthetic endeavours lay in deciding between various shades of brown-grey soil. At Luni, Antonio Frova, overall director of the excavations, was an even more unlikely supporter of post-Roman archaeology – a classical archaeologist very much of the old school, whose passion was for Roman architecture and the formal aspects of Roman urbanism. But Frova was a true gentleman (in the very best sense of the word) and completely straight, and, having been persuaded by the younger members of his team that post-Roman archaeology had to be taken seriously, he backed me to the hilt, and I owe him a huge debt.

Working in Liguria and Lombardia, the archaeologist whom we most respected was unquestionably Tiziano Mannoni – hearing Tiziano enthuse over a piece of hand-shaped pottery, or an unprepossessing fragment of slag, was an experience not to be missed, and taught me how much very ordinary things can tell us about the past. I worked for Tiziano and Hugo Blake at the San Silvestro site in Genova in 1971, the very first multi-period urban excavation in Italy – a site which led the way for subsequent projects like Santa Giulia in Brescia and the *Crypta Balbi* in Rome. Riccardo Francovich, simply because he was over the border in Tuscany, was a more distant figure. I am, of course, now well aware of what a vital role Riccardo

<sup>2</sup> I have not been back to Pavia since the Torre Civica collapsed, and I am reluctant to see its tragic stump; but I hope to get over this – since it is a town, particularly under an autumn mist, that casts a deep spell.

played, above all as the driving force behind “*Archeologia Medievale*”, the only instrument, before the emergence of truly national conferences, that held the medieval archaeology of Italy together. But I am ashamed to say that when we first met we had a blazing row – I was furious that Riccardo insisted on holding over for a year the publication of the excavations at Pavia; and I accused him of publishing articles in the journal in order to please important figures in Italian academic life, rather than on the strict criterion of quality. I was wrong to do this, because, even if archaeological politics did play some role in how Riccardo prioritised material, embedding medieval archaeology within the institutions of Italy was far more important than pleasing a callow youth from England.

Looking back at the excavations carried out in the early '70s, there are elements that now seem strangely dated, in particular the obsession with sections and section-drawings – these were the very last years of Wheeler-style excavation, just before open-areas and Harris-matrixes swept the board. But, in my memory at least, the excitement of those years is still fresh – a post-hole cutting into a Roman structure was then one of the very first ever recorded in Italy, and a sherd of ordinary pottery could be of a completely unknown type. Medieval archaeology had to be constructed almost *ex novo* in Italy. It was exciting, and a great privilege, to play a small part in achieving this.