



Continuitists, Catastrophists, and the Towns of Post-Roman Northern Italy

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Source: *Papers of the British School at Rome*, 1997, Vol. 65 (1997), pp. 157-176

Published by: British School at Rome

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40310949>

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CONTINUITISTS, CATASTROPHISTS, AND THE TOWNS OF POST-ROMAN NORTHERN ITALY

Urbanism in the post-Roman period is currently a popular area of research. In northern Italy interest in the subject has fostered a large number of excavations and a lively debate. In this article I shall review this discussion, and also suggest some reasons why scholars have come to widely divergent conclusions on the basis of the same available evidence.¹

Italy both in the Roman period and in the later Middle Ages was a highly urbanized society; consequently there has always been some interest in the urban history of the intervening period. However, the subject was given a new dimension and a fresh lease of life by the spread during the last two decades of serious excavations within towns, designed to cast light on their medieval as well as their Roman appearance and character. Already in the 1960s important excavations had been carried out by a Polish team on two new foundations of the late antique and early medieval periods, Castelseprio and Torcello.² But it was only really when excavation took place on sites with a classical Roman past, in particular at Luna, Brescia and Verona, that active debate started, because here the appearance of the early medieval town could be directly and immediately compared with that of the Roman town below.³ The contrast was striking, and invited discussion and interpretation.

What was discovered was both very un-Roman and very unprepossessing. At Luna, for instance, the Roman forum was found to have been completely abandoned as a public space by the end of the sixth century, with its buildings demolished and robbed of their marble elements. Instead the square was occupied by small wooden houses datable to the end of the sixth century (Fig. 1).⁴ There is a huge gulf between the character of these early medieval buildings and the sumptuous and solid Roman aristocratic houses (*domus*) known from earlier in the city's history (Fig. 2). In other

¹ Some of the ideas I express here have already been given a brief airing in B. Ward-Perkins, 'Urban continuity?', in N. Christie and S.T. Loseby (eds), *Towns in Transition. Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1996), at pp. 11–13. The geographical area I am covering is basically the Po plain and Tuscany, with the occasional glance as far south as Rome. One detail of presentation in the present article needs explaining: references are given in full in the text or footnotes, except for those works marked by an asterisk (thus: *Brogiolo, 1993). These are listed, by date of publication, in the bibliography of principal works discussed, given at the end of the article. This article is intended to be the first in a series of review and discussion articles in *Papers of the British School at Rome* covering major themes in Italian studies.

² M. Dabrowska, L. Leciejewicz, E. Tabaczynska and S. Tabaczynski, 'Castelseprio, Scavi diagnostici 1962–1963', *Sibrium* 14 (1978–9), 1–138; L. Leciejewicz, E. Tabaczynska and S. Tabaczynski, *Torcello. Scavi 1961–62* (Rome, 1977).

³ Luna (modern Luni): B. Ward-Perkins, 'Two Byzantine houses at Luni', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 49 (1981), 91–8. Brescia: *Brogiolo, 1984 and *Brogiolo, 1993. Verona: *La Rocca Hudson, 1986.

⁴ Ward-Perkins, 'Two Byzantine houses' (above, n. 3).

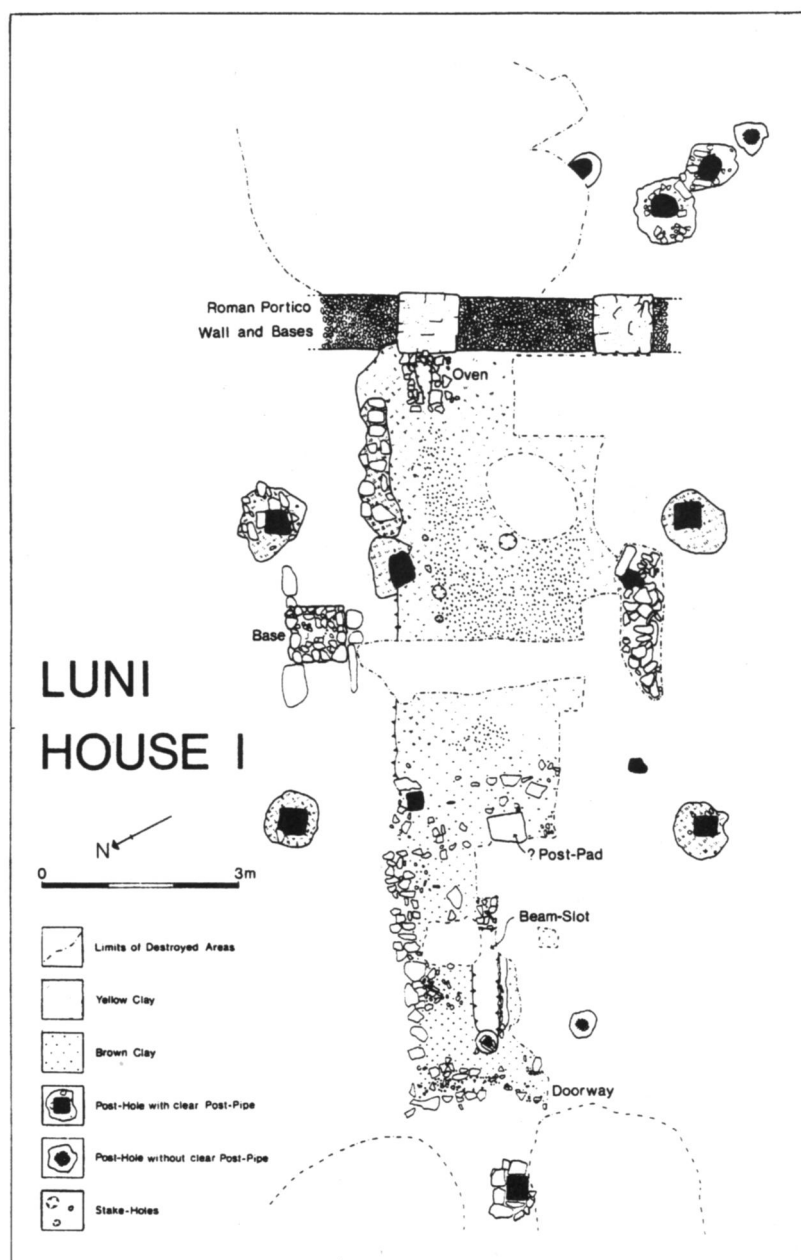


FIG. 1. House of the later sixth century excavated above one corner of the abandoned Roman forum of Luna (modern Luni). The house is divided into two rooms: one end, with a poorer floor and with evidence of subdivisions, was perhaps used for animals. The floors were of clay, the walls supported on footings of clay-bonded stone, and the roof structure held up principally by large earth-fast timbers. The internal dimensions of the building were *c.* 4 × *c.* 11 m. (From B. Ward-Perkins, 'Two Byzantine houses at Luni', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 49 (1981), 93)

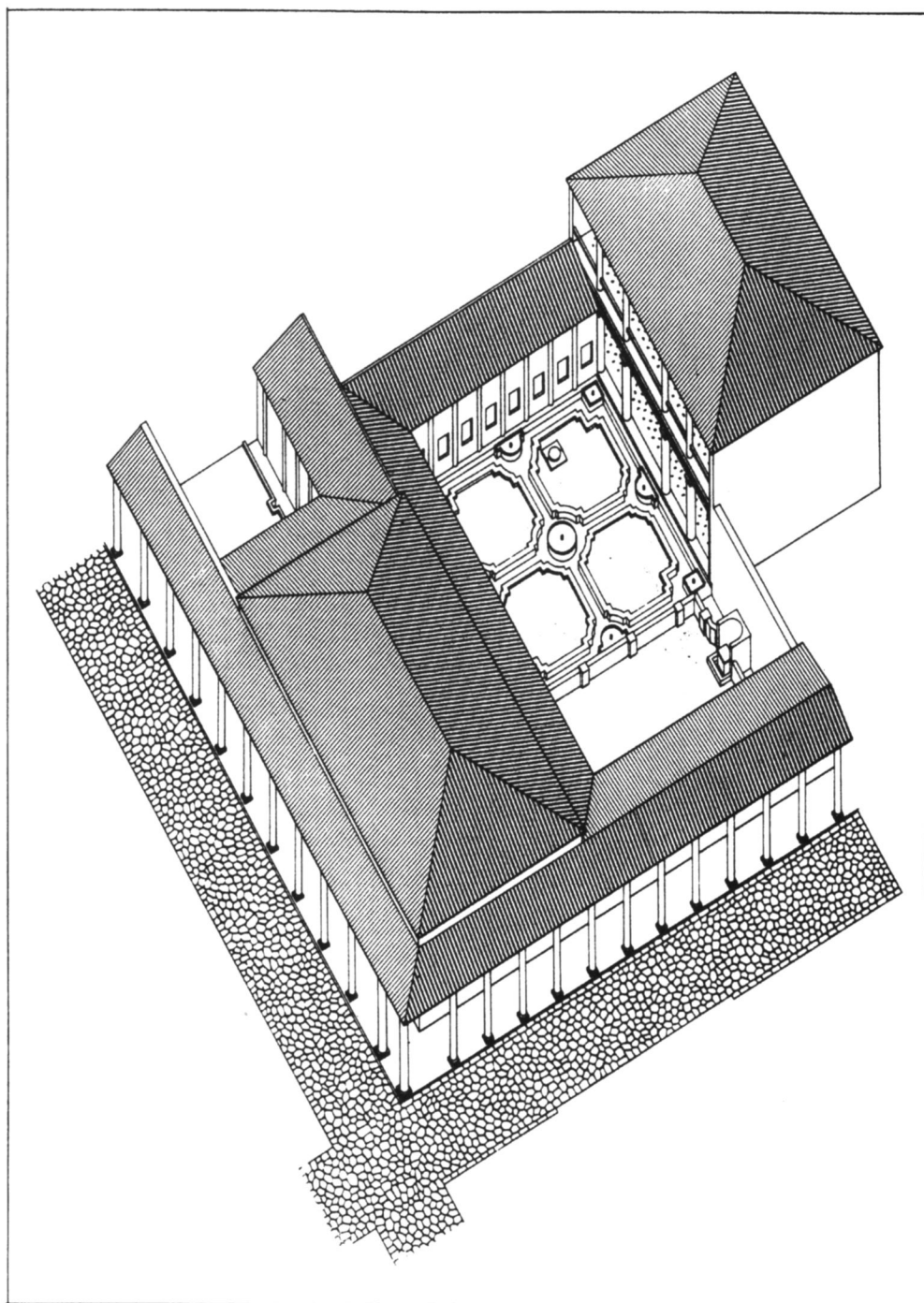


FIG. 2. Luni, reconstruction drawing of a first-century BC aristocratic *domus*. (From Luni. Guida archeologica (Sarzana, Editore Zappa, 1985), 79)

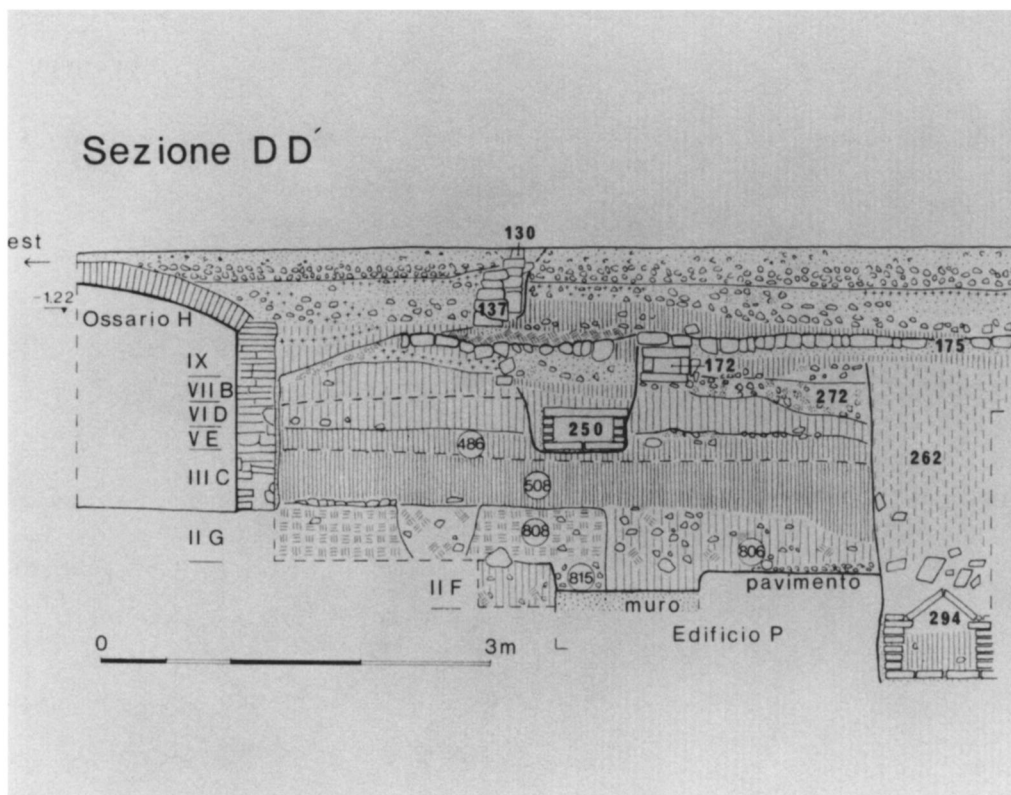


FIG. 3. Bologna, San Giorgio site. Section through the apse, showing a thick dark-earth layer (numbered 486 and 508) between Roman remains below, and late medieval and post-medieval structures above. (*Unpublished drawing*)

towns the early medieval remains were sometimes even less impressive. On a number of sites the excavators found only thick 'dark earth' layers sandwiched between the structures of the Roman period and those of the later Middle Ages (Fig. 3). There is still much debate about how such layers formed and about whether they were used for cultivation. But it is not disputed that dark earth formed *outside* buildings; so where it is found above Roman buildings it is a clear indication of the abandonment of some areas of settlement in the post-Roman period.

Not surprisingly, this new archaeological evidence has provoked a lot of thinking about what early medieval towns in Italy were like. Some scholars have argued that there was an almost complete collapse of urbanism, to the point where it becomes unrealistic to label the surviving settlements as 'towns'. For instance, Hodges and Whitehouse, in 1983, cited unnamed archaeologists (amongst whom they presumably included themselves) as 'beginning to wonder whether the decay of Luni [which disappeared entirely during the early Middle Ages] can be used as a model for the decay of classical towns generally in Italy'; and in 1994 Carandini wrote of the post-Roman excavated remains as 'symptoms of the death-throes of

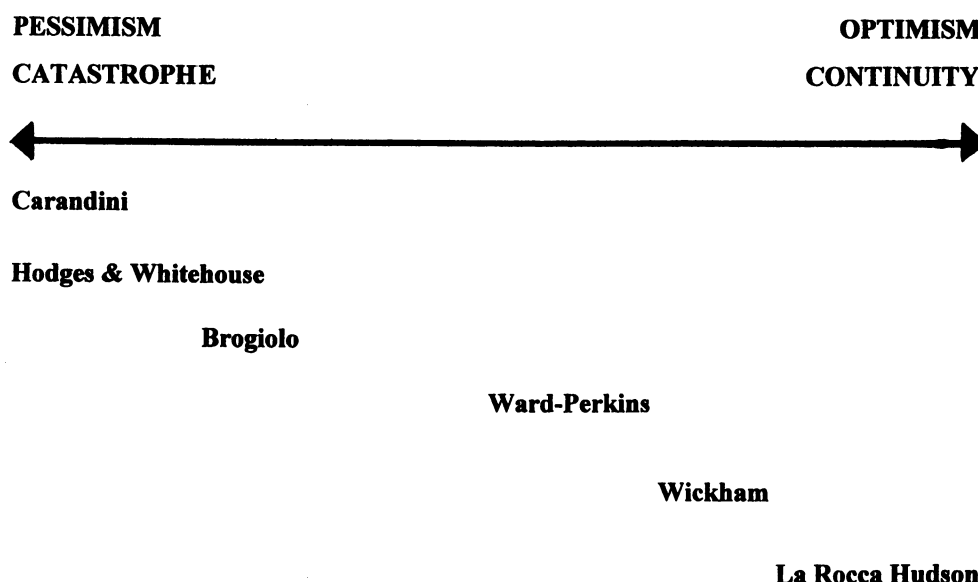


FIG. 4. Diagram to show the position taken by various scholars in the debate on Italian towns.

the cities'.⁵ On the other hand, other scholars, using the same evidence, have argued for considerable urban continuity within northern Italy. In 1989, for instance, Wickham wrote combatively: 'Verona with its structural innovation was an active and substantial medieval city. It will have looked more dilapidated than its Roman predecessor, we should not doubt; whether it was as heavily populated we can not know; but urban it was: here, as elsewhere, in my view the burden of proof rests with those who maintain that it wasn't'.⁶

In Figure 4 I have attempted to show in diagrammatic form the positions taken up by some of the principal participants in this debate, though I fear I will offend both those scholars whom I have omitted (in order to keep the article and diagram manageable), and those whom I have included, by reducing their carefully-nuanced positions to a single point on a chart.

COMMON GROUND, AND DIVERGENT OPINIONS

Despite the very different conclusions that scholars come to, there is a great deal of agreement amongst them on many of the essential building-blocks in their arguments. In particular, it has never been doubted that things called '*civitates*' by contemporaries existed in Italy in all centuries. The written texts, partial and unsatisfactory though they are, make it quite clear that northern Italy always had

⁵ *Hodges and Whitehouse, 1983: 32; *Carandini, 1994: 28 '*i sintomi . . . dell'agonia delle città*'.

⁶ *Wickham, 1989: 146 (he is here seeking to pass back the 'burden of proof' in response to a challenge set by *Hodges and Whitehouse, 1983, at p. 53).

civitates. What is at issue between scholars is whether, on seeing one of these *civitates*, we would be happy to call it a 'town'.

It is also agreed, and by now fully absorbed into scholarly thinking, that something which we might reasonably term the 'classical city' died and disappeared in every area of the Roman world during the late antique and early medieval periods. The 'classical city' was a very particular type of town and town-life, characterized by close aristocratic involvement in civic politics and urban culture. It spawned, for the archaeologists and tourists of today, an impressive and semi-standardized collection of monumental buildings, paid for by the local aristocracy as a mark of their involvement in the city and as an appropriate backdrop to their preferred urban lifestyle. No one doubts that this 'classical city', with its monumental *fora*, *thermae*, basilicas, statues, etc., disappeared in Italy (as elsewhere) sometime between the third and the seventh centuries AD.⁷ What is disputed is whether, stripped of its classical finery, the essential underlying prerequisites of town-life persisted.

Quite what these essential prerequisites are, is a much debated issue in itself. But, to take a very loose definition of a 'town', everyone probably expects towns to contain substantial and permanent concentrations of both people and activities. The Italian debate certainly revolves around whether *civitates* persisted as centres of population and of specialized activity; or whether they were reduced to empty shells, inhabited by tiny numbers of people who led a life indistinguishable from that of the surrounding countryside.

So far we have looked only at the very broadest parameters of agreement — that *civitates* persisted in contemporary texts and therefore, presumably, also in contemporary minds, and that the 'classical city' died. But, interestingly, scholars also agree on a number of points that get us much closer to the city as a concentration of people and of activities. At the risk of stating the obvious to those already familiar with this debate, it is worth setting out these points of agreement in summary form.

(1) A substantial number of towns disappeared altogether in the late Roman and early medieval centuries; but most survived in some form or other. By AD 800, at the latest, some new centres, like Venice, had emerged and were already becoming important.⁸

(2) The secular and ecclesiastical administration of northern Italy was always primarily based in the former Roman towns.⁹ This continuity was reflected in the maintenance and survival of many of the Roman buildings that were needed by the ecclesiastical and secular rulers: city-walls, palaces and churches.¹⁰

(3) Some new monumental building took place, particularly in churches, and this maintained some tradition of sophisticated craftsmanship, like the working of mosaic and marble. In a very major centre like Rome, there was perhaps enough work to supply a stable group of craftsmen; elsewhere specialized craftsmen may

⁷ This change is the theme of *Ward-Perkins, 1984.

⁸ See the map in *Ward-Perkins, 1988: 17, fig. 6; but note Gelichi in *Francovich and Noyé, 1994: 569, fig. 1, for an improved version for Emilia-Romagna.

⁹ See, most recently, D. Harrison, *The Early State and the Towns. Forms of Integration in Lombard Italy* (Lund University Press, 1993), chaps V and VI.

¹⁰ *Ward-Perkins, 1984: chaps 4, 8 and 9; *Brogiolo, 1993: 55–65, for the ducal palace at Brescia.

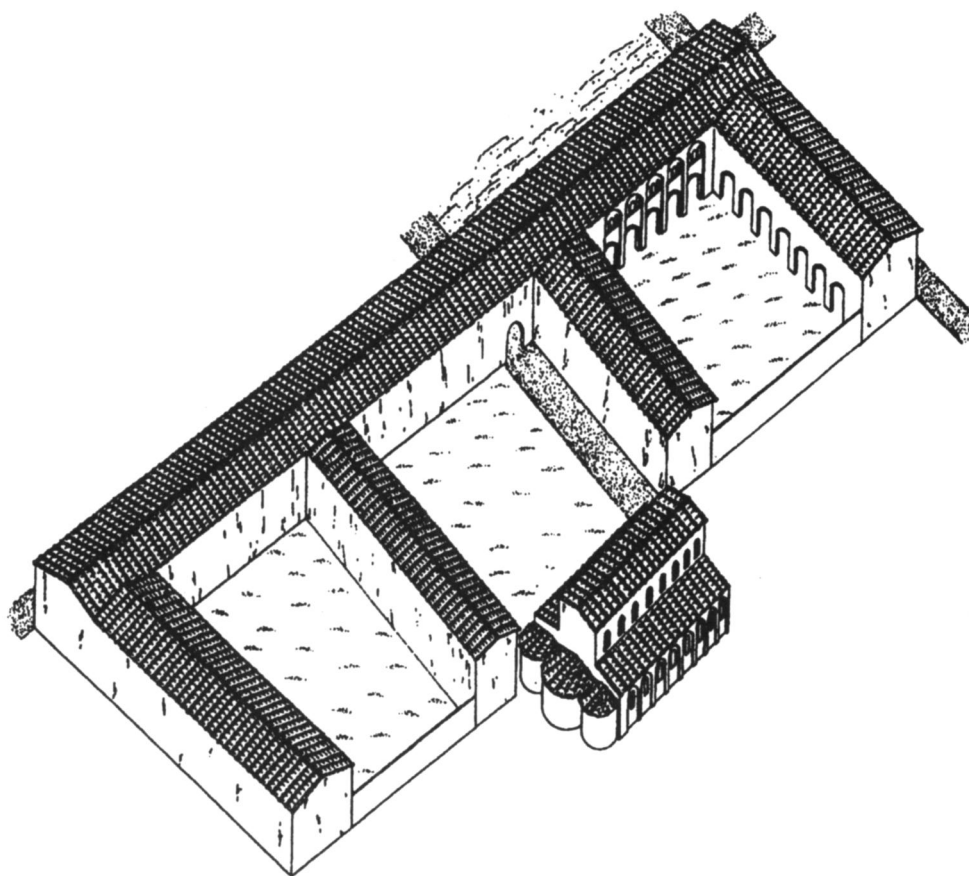


FIG. 5. Reconstruction drawing of the church and monastery of San Salvatore (later Santa Giulia) in Brescia, as built towards the end of the eighth century. The reconstruction is based on excavated evidence and partially-surviving standing remains. (From *Brogiolo 1993: 103)

have been itinerant.¹¹ However, particularly in the period *c.* 550–*c.* 750, almost all new building was on a tiny scale compared to that which came both before and after.¹²

(4) Everyone (except Carandini) would agree that by the later eighth and ninth centuries, Italy certainly contained ‘real’ towns.¹³ These were not as attractive to our eyes as Roman towns, but were full of people and activity, and even some substantial new public and religious building-projects. At present we know about these towns principally through charter evidence, which proliferates in the ninth and tenth centuries; but some impressive ecclesiastical buildings are also known through standing remains and excavation (Fig. 5).

¹¹ *Brogiolo, in press.

¹² For Rome, stressing the continuity rather than the slump: R. Coates-Stephens, ‘Dark age architecture in Rome’, in this same volume of *Papers of the British School at Rome*.

¹³ *Carandini, 1994: 31–3 favours an eleventh-century date for the re-emergence of real towns.

(5) Finally, there is general agreement that the pattern and nature of housing changed very considerably between Roman and early medieval times, and that urban houses of the early Middle Ages were much less impressive than those of Roman times. Whole areas of towns were abandoned, and even in the settled zones there was much more open cultivated ground. The huge and sophisticated aristocratic houses (the *domus*) that characterized Roman towns disappeared, and were replaced by much less imposing buildings, often in perishable materials (Fig. 6).

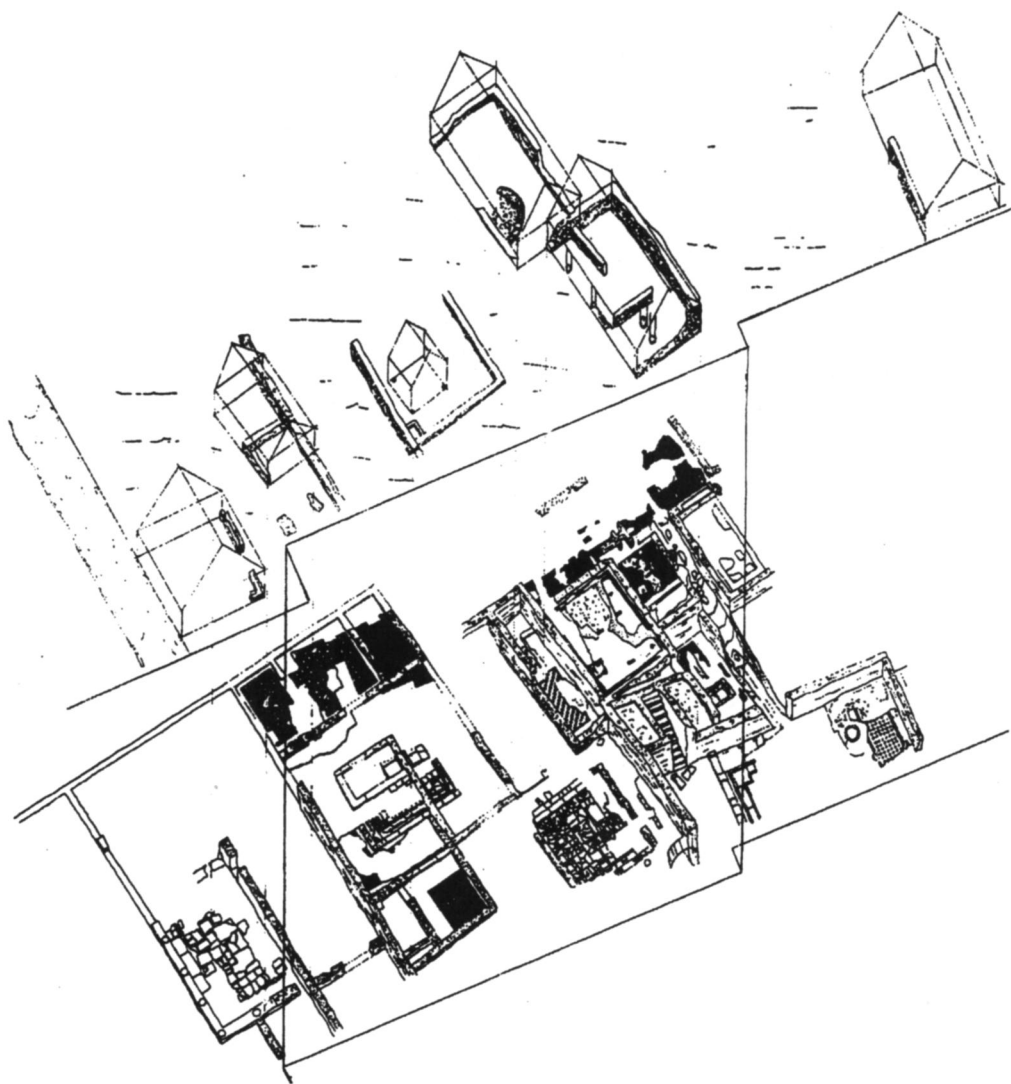


FIG. 6. Brescia, Santa Giulia site. Ruins of an abandoned Roman *domus*, with, superimposed above it, a schematic representation of the houses built on the same site in the early Lombard period (sixth-/seventh-century). Some of the buildings used ruinous Roman walls as footings. (From *Brogiolo 1993: 91)



FIG. 7. Verona, Via Dante site. Doorway of a late antique house which was continuously occupied until demolished in the twelfth century. As the street-level rose, the threshold had to be raised three times (on the first occasion with a narrowing of the doorway).

There were apparently still some domestic houses built of mortared stone, such as the one excavated on the Via Dante in Verona (Fig. 7); but, so far, even these reveal none of the sophistications characteristic of the Roman *domus*.¹⁴

However, as we have seen at the start of this article, a considerable amount of common ground over the primary data does not mean that scholars have agreed on the overall conclusions to be drawn from it. Some have seen in these changes the end of true towns, others transformation within a broad context of continuity.

¹⁴ *Brogiolo, in press. Admittedly the apparently *total* disappearance of *domus*-type aristocratic houses is puzzling; since rich landed aristocrats certainly lived in towns from as early as charters survive to document their presence (from the eighth century in Lucca, a little later elsewhere), and since rulers undoubtedly continued to enjoy some domestic luxuries, like private bath-suites. Indeed eighth- and ninth-century charters occasionally describe private houses with *balnea* (*Ward-Perkins, 1984: 146–8). But, as yet, no early medieval house with such sophistications as a marble or mosaic floor, a hypocaust, or a bath-building has been uncovered. (I have recently been told that an imposing ninth-century house has now been excavated in the forum area of Rome; but I have not seen it, and it is, as yet, unpublished.)

These very different conclusions can partially (but only very partially) be explained by the fact that some important details remain unclear, which may in time be resolved by further excavation. In particular, I do not think continuitists and catastrophists can yet agree on the density and spread of settlement within the former Roman towns. The currently popular model amongst catastrophists is of scattered nuclei of housing, each perhaps concentrated around a church and separated from each other by areas of cultivation.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, continuitists, although accepting that by no means all areas of Roman habitation were settled in the early Middle Ages, favour a more even spread of housing through the former Roman towns.¹⁶ This latter model is undoubtedly much more town-like than that propounded by the catastrophists. Small scattered islands of settlement, held together only by a Roman defensive wall and by the designation '*civitas*', certainly would not look like any town with which we are familiar today.

There is also disagreement on a less important point, the frequency of mortared domestic buildings of the Verona type (Fig. 7). Admittedly, it should make little difference whether houses were of poor-quality mortared stone, or entirely in perishable materials. But it does have some effect on our impression of early medieval Italian towns if we imagine them almost exclusively of wooden buildings (as Figs 1 and 6), or if we intersperse amongst these a substantial number of mortared houses.¹⁷

It must also be said that scholarly harmony over the data, even when it exists, is not always as evident as it might be, since the desire to reach a different conclusion can mean that continuitists and catastrophists present the same piece of information in subtly different ways. For example, it is interesting to compare three descriptions of the same wall (the façade of the Verona, Via Dante house, Fig. 7), one by a continuitist, two by catastrophists: 'This structure had a rough, mortared stone façade' (Ward-Perkins); '[a] house ... at least in part of stone, although of hair-raising quality' (Carandini); and 'buildings ... constructed of reused material bonded with earth and very little mortar' (Brogiolo).¹⁸ Only someone familiar

¹⁵ For instance *Brogiolo, 1984: 52-3; and Brogiolo in *Francovich and Noyé, 1994: 562.

¹⁶ *Ward-Perkins, 1988: 20; *La Rocca Hudson, 1986: 53-9. I have been a particular exponent of the argument that the survival of a Roman street-pattern (which is quite common in northern Italy) is evidence of continuous fairly dense settlement in the post-Roman period: *Ward-Perkins, 1984: 180; *Ward-Perkins, 1988: 20. This argument was already criticized, on the basis of excavated north Italian evidence, by Brogiolo (*1987: 31-5); and I have now retracted it in part, having become aware of evidence from Rhodes and Antioch, which shows that former street-patterns can survive very well in an entirely rural environment: B. Ward-Perkins, 'Can the survival of an ancient town-plan be used as evidence of dark-age urban life?', in G. Cavalieri Manasse and E. Roffia (eds), *Splendida Civitas Nostra. Studi archeologici in onore di Antonio Frova* (Rome, Quasar, 1995), 223-9.

¹⁷ The choice of wood can be culturally and environmentally determined, and in no way indicative of economic stringency, as housing in much of modern North America and Scandinavia shows. But the wooden houses of early medieval Italy are scarcely very sophisticated in construction, and both rulers in their palaces and saints in their churches always preferred to dwell in solid mortared buildings (often inherited from Antiquity). It is therefore very apposite to consider whether there was some survival of a domestic building tradition more impressive than the Brescia houses.

¹⁸ *Ward-Perkins, 1988: 21; *Carandini, 1994: 30 '*qualche rara casa è ancora, almeno in parte, di pietra (seppure in tecnica orripilante, come a Verona)*'; *Brogiolo, in press, '*edifici ... costruiti di recupero legati con terra e pochissima malta*'.

with the evidence could spot that the structure being described was in fact the same wall.

A lot can hinge on a single word. 'Casa/house' is favoured by continuitists when describing the dwellings of early medieval people, since it has a comfortable ring of permanence, even of civilization. 'Capanna/hut' is the equivalent catastrophist word for the same buildings, with its connotations of primitivism and prehistory.¹⁹ In Figure 1, the excavator, a continuitist at heart, has labelled his small building of wood, dry-stone and clay, with the reassuring tag 'House 1'. 'Hut 1' would instantly make it look more draughty and precarious, and, indeed, less urban.²⁰

In the hands of different writers, even a very similar image can be used to very different effect. Wickham, for instance, in 1981 summed up his impression of early medieval housing, based at this date almost exclusively on charter evidence, in the following words: 'Private housing seems often to have been in wood, and set back from the road, with a courtyard in front and a garden behind, looking perhaps more like a run-down garden suburb than like Pompeii'.²¹ The image is quietly unpretentious, and derives from the English idyll of a Ford Fiesta in the front drive and neighbours, not too close, over the garden fence. Apart from the adjective 'run down', the wording could almost come out of an estate agent's window in the Home Counties. In 1994 Carandini, presumably after a visit to the USA, used a closely comparable image to argue the opposite point: 'A certain level of intense activity and of maintenance is essential to the city, and where it is lacking, as today in some North American centres, the city dies or is transformed into one of those suburban settlements of houses with gardens, which resemble compacted bits of countryside rather than true and proper cities' (my emphasis).²² In one memorable sentence, Carandini, who presumably prefers the roar of traffic to that of the lawnmower, dismisses the leafy suburbs of America and the garden cities of England, and, with them, casts early medieval Lucca out beyond the pale of true urbanism.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

To understand why different scholars have drawn such different conclusions from the same material, it helps, I think, to know more about their backgrounds. Figure 8 is an elaborated version of Figure 4, with additional information on the scholars' intellectual and national origins. It is also relevant that Carandini is a Romanist who has spent his career excavating some of the more spectacular manifestations of Roman life, generally in or close to the metropolis itself.

¹⁹ *Carandini, 1994 is particularly rich in belittling alternatives to *casa* (which he does also use): '*capanna/hut*', '*casetta/houselet*', '*casupola/hovel*', '*costruzione di tipo rurale/building of rural type*', as well as the neutral '*struttura/structure*'.

²⁰ Brogiolo (*1984: 50) refers to the Luni 'houses' as '*capanne di legno*'; though by the time of *Brogiolo, in press, he has softened his language to '*case di VI secolo*'.

²¹ *Wickham, 1981: 81–2.

²² *Carandini, 1994: 28 '*Un minimo di attività intensiva e di decoro è essenziale alla città e dove essa manca, come accade oggi in alcuni centri nordamericani, la città muore o si traduce in quegli insediamenti di case con giardini dei sobborghi, che sembrano delle campagne concentrate più che delle città vere e proprie*'.

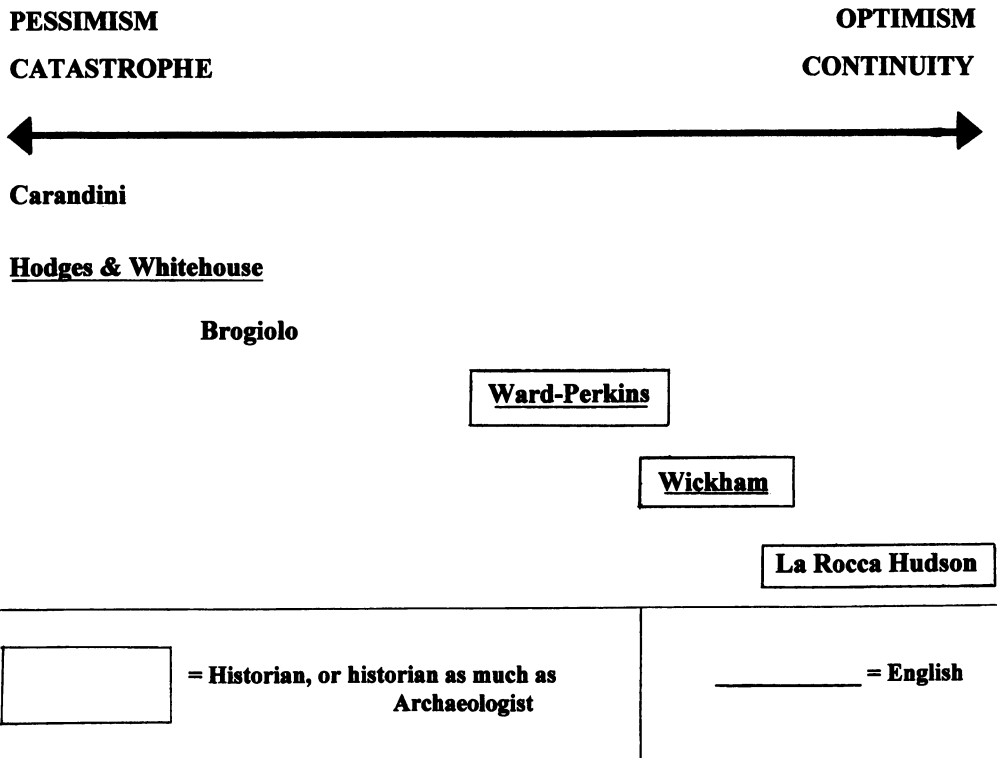


FIG. 8. Elaborated version of Figure 4, now showing the intellectual and national origins of the protagonists.

The most obvious, and the clearest divide revealed in Figure 8 is between those scholars whose training was primarily as historians (and who now teach in History departments) and those who are primarily archaeologists. That there should be such a divide and that the historians should be ranged in the continuist camp and the archaeologists in the catastrophist, is not at all surprising. Historians approach the post-Roman towns of northern Italy through contemporary texts, and find in these continuous references to *civitates*, and to a *civitas*-based ecclesiastical and secular administration.²³ If what is excavated does not look very ‘city-like’, then it is *our* expectations of a town that must change. For who are we to gainsay the opinion of contemporaries?

Archaeologists, on the other hand, are naturally more trusting of *things* as evidence (post-holes, ‘dark earth’, for example). With considerable justification, they are suspicious of words and texts, as ideological constructs designed to deceive as much as to inform. The words and sentiments of ancient and medieval sources are,

²³ See, for instance, the papers by Jarnut and Gasparri in *Società e Storia* 46 (1989); and Harrison, *The Early State and the Towns* (above, n. 9).

for archaeologists, much less reliable than hard evidence from the soil.²⁴ Furthermore, there is certainly some pleasure for archaeologists in almost literally rubbing the noses of historians in the dirt and squalor of the post-Roman towns. Historians with their texts are not always kind to archaeologists with their supposedly humbler pots; there is therefore some pleasure to be derived from exposing the textual *civitates* of the historians as miserable collections of run-down huts.

The divide by nationality is less clear-cut, but also easy to explain. Indeed we have already encountered it in the different expectations of a modern city held by Wickham and Carandini. British scholars have been involved in the Italian urban debate from the start, partly because British archaeologists played a major role in importing rigorous stratigraphic excavation into Italy, but mainly because Wickham, unlike many historians, has always been prepared to engage with the archaeological evidence and has proved the most constant and sophisticated defender of the continuist position.

Italians inevitably measure post-Roman towns against a Roman benchmark and, equally inevitably, these are then found sorely wanting. The British, however, carry in their minds a clear idea of what a *real* urban Dark Age can look like. In post-Roman Britain perhaps only Canterbury had any continuous history as an important settlement, and even this case is dubious. The other Roman towns of Britain died, and, if they reappeared later, this was through acts of refoundation. In comparison to post-Roman Britain, what is found in Italy — in the textual evidence, in the survival of late antique churches, and even in the excavated record — can only impress.²⁵ The masonry wall of the Via Dante house (Fig. 7), for instance, rightly horrifies a Romanist; but is very impressive to us barbarians from the North, where for a time the technology of building in stone appears to have been lost altogether.

Northerners are also familiar with an image of towns, when they re-emerge in the eighth and ninth centuries, as wooden in construction, squalid in appearance and chaotic in plan. Indeed, we almost feel that early towns *should* be like this. For instance, an influential article by a British scholar on the unplanned towns of the early Islamic Near East depicts them as more vibrant and commercial than the ordered Roman settlements that preceded them, precisely because they were unplanned.²⁶ Inevitably, the view from Italy, and particularly from Roman Italy, is very different. Carandini has identified a number of clear symptoms of the terminal disease that he believes affected Italian towns in the post-Roman period: an uncontrolled and rapid build-up of the habitation level; a lack of public buildings and sophisticated services; wooden houses and badly paved trackways; poor rubbish

²⁴ Thinking along these lines is very evident in the works of Brogiolo, who knows well and confronts the textual evidence, and in *Hodges and Whitehouse, 1983, who totally ignore the written sources for Italy but explicitly challenge them elsewhere (for example, on pp. 83–5, in relation to northern Europe). The title of Carandini's article (*1994), '*... secondo un archeologo*', also takes up the theme — unsurprisingly, since he has spent much of his career battling against ancient historians reluctant to accept the evidence of pot-sherds.

²⁵ This comparative approach is central to my article, *Ward-Perkins, 1988.

²⁶ H. Kennedy, 'From *polis* to *madina*: urban change in late antique and early Islamic Syria', *Past and Present* 106 (1985), 3–27. For an analysis and critique of part of his argument, see B. Ward-Perkins, 'Urban survival and urban transformation in the eastern Mediterranean', in G.P. Brogiolo (ed.), *Città altomedievali nel Mediterraneo occidentale* (Mantua, Padus, in press).

disposal; and the presence of cultivated areas and scattered burials within the urban area.²⁷ He is undoubtedly correct that none of these elements is typical of the Roman city. However, except for the scattered burials, all might feature in a description of an eighth- or ninth-century North Sea town.

Similarly, when scholars from northern Europe see the published reconstruction drawing of small wooden houses built over an abandoned Roman *domus* at Brescia (Fig. 6), they will note, as they are meant to, the remarkable difference in building style and sophistication between the houses of these two eras; but they will also see in the early medieval houses a familiar image from similar drawings of northern towns like Hamwic or Dorestad (compare Figures 6 and 9). And when they also learn that sixth- and seventh-century Brescia had a functioning Roman city-wall, a large late Roman cathedral, and an impressive ducal palace, not to mention, probably, an episcopal palace and a substantial number of other late Roman and early medieval churches, then they will have no doubt at all that early medieval Brescia was a town.²⁸ Indeed, they cannot but see it as an impressive one.²⁹

Towards the end of his article, Carandini writes dismissively of early medieval Rome: 'At the start of the ninth century the city was inhabited by a few tens of thousands of people, mostly poor'.³⁰ He is right to stress that an 'abyss' separates this reality from that of Rome in Antiquity, with its huge monuments and its population of up to a million souls. But, from my own perspective in medieval history and in northern Europe, I cannot help noticing that 'a few tens of thousands' is a very large population for a medieval city. England in 1086 perhaps contained only one city, London, with a population of over 10,000, and only a handful of others with more than 4/5,000 inhabitants.³¹ Even in much more heavily-urbanized Italy it was only in the thirteenth century that the population of a number of towns came to exceed Carandini's 'a few tens of thousands'.³²

²⁷ *Carandini, 1994: 28 '*La crescita sproporzionata e desolante della stratificazione (per il degrado dello smaltimento delle acque), i crolli degli edifici pubblici, privati e dei servizi (strade, acquedotti e fogne), le rare capanne o casupole collegate da poveri percorsi e scorciatoie, gli accumuli dei rifiuti (l'idea stessa di pulizia è scomparsa), i riporti di terra per le colture, i terreni abbandonati (le famose "terre nere") e le tombe relative ai nuclei rimasti abitati sono i sintomi principali dell'agonia delle città*'.

²⁸ The information on Brescia is collected and presented in *Brogiolo, 1993.

²⁹ There is also a notable difference between British and Italian scholars in their discussions of the role of the Lombards in urban change. The British (for instance Wickham and Ward-Perkins) view early medieval Italy as a single socio-economic unit subject only to slow and generalized 'Braudelian' change, whereas some Italians (for instance, Brogiolo throughout his works, and Delogu in his foreword to *Francovich and Noyé, 1994) follow historical fashion in Italy, and see the settlement of the Lombards and the subsequent Lombard-Byzantine wars as very significant in the decline of towns. The British are perhaps stuck in a thought world of the 1960s, which shunned the event and the individual as a significant force in History; while some Italians may be reluctant to accept that their ancestors abandoned *romanità* without a big shove from the North.

³⁰ *Carandini, 1994: 32: '*Agli inizi del IX secolo la città era occupata da poche decine di migliaia di persone, per lo più povere*'. The 'mostly poor' is typical of the rhetoric of his article, and, I think, unhelpful, since it could probably be said with equal justification of Augustan or renaissance Rome.

³¹ H.C. Darby, *Domesday England* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), 302–3.

³² M. Ginatempo and L. Sandri, *L'Italia delle città. Il popolamento urbano tra medioevo e rinascimento (secoli XIII-XVI)* (Florence, Le Lettere), especially p. 195, *prospetto* 1 and first *cartina*.



FIG. 9. Reconstruction drawing of Hamwic, Saxon Southampton (eighth-/ninth-century). The detailed inset is taken from a reconstruction of the Six Dials site. (*From two drawings by John Hodgson. Copyright the artist, by kind permission*)

ITALIAN TOWNS AND THE STATUS OF THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES

Scholars view the evidence in the light of their own parochial perspectives (to which I am as bound as anyone else). But a grander narrative of debate also runs through the discussion of urbanism in early medieval Italy.

The post-Roman centuries were once dismissed as a 'Dark Age' that followed the collapse of Roman civilization, and as a period in which very little worthy of note took place. However, scholars have been revising this view over the last few decades, and have been attempting to place the 'early Middle Ages' (as it is now fashionable

to call them) on an equal footing with other periods. In Italy this revision is both particularly necessary and especially difficult to achieve. Here the Roman past is at its most impressive and alluring, despite the inevitable post-fascist reaction against *romanità*; and here the very term 'Middle Ages' was invented during the Renaissance, in order to describe the supposedly empty space between two peaks of civilization.

Interpretations of the early Middle Ages have also been greatly affected by a very important general fashion in later twentieth-century thought. The unparalleled horrors of our own century have led to a questioning of any idea of 'progress' in human history, and inevitably this has encouraged the questioning of related concepts, such as those of 'dark ages' and of 'decline'. Many historians, and some archaeologists, have duly taken refuge from all such bothersome ideas in one of the most powerful and influential doctrines of modern anthropology: that all cultures are equal, and that none are more equal than others. Viewed in this perspective, there can be neither 'progress' nor 'decline', only 'change'.

This approach has heavily influenced work on towns in the post-Roman period, at least amongst British scholars, and the current orthodoxy amongst them appears to be that we should banish 'decline' from both our vocabulary and our thinking on the subject.³³ These ideas have undoubtedly left their mark on the specifically Italian urban debate. La Rocca's article (*1986), for instance, explicitly sets out to challenge the concept of an urban 'Dark Age', and reinterprets as changes many features of Italian early medieval towns, which are more normally seen as evidence of decline (dark earth, scattered burials, small churches, rapidly changing street-levels, for example). In an essay which touches on the Italian debate and which is strongly influenced by it, Carver has written: 'The investigation of urbanism in the Dark Ages can ... be seen as an investigation, not of decline, but of alternative investment strategies by the leaders of the new polities'.³⁴

Carver's provocative prose-style is uniquely his own, but his ideas derive in part from Wickham's writings on Italy. Specifically, Wickham has argued that the unimpressive nature of the material remains of early medieval Italy (including its towns) did not derive primarily from economic and demographic decline. Rather, it came about because the peasantry now kept more of the surplus of the land for themselves, and because the aristocracy now spent their resources on perishable items, rather than on the bricks and mortar beloved of the Romans.³⁵

Normally Romanists ignore the writings of medievalists, rather as scientists disregard the thinking of theologians. However, the medievalist can scarcely avoid straying into the territory of the Romanist when discussing the changes in towns

³³ See, for example, the title of the recent book *Towns in Transition. Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (above, n. 1), where 'transition' is strictly neutral and 'evolution' perhaps slightly positive in tone; or the chapter on 'Urban change ...' in A. Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395–600* (London and New York, Routledge, 1993), 152–75.

³⁴ M.O.H. Carver, *Arguments in Stone. Archaeological Research and the European Town in the First Millennium* (Oxford, Oxbow Monographs 29, 1993), 50. The text is seriously marred by spelling mistakes and other evidence of having been rushed. For a useful critique of its arguments, see G. Halsall, 'Towns, societies and ideas: the not-so-strange case of late Roman and early Merovingian Metz', in Christie and Loseby (eds), *Towns in Transition* (above, n. 1), 235–61.

³⁵ *Wickham, 1989: 147–8; C. Wickham, 'L'Italia e l'alto medioevo', *Archeologia Medievale* 15 (1988), 110 and 121–3.

which are the subject of this article, particularly since the origins of many of these developments can be found in the later Roman period. Furthermore, if we challenge the idea of a post-Roman decline into 'Dark Ages', and replace it with a sideways transformation into 'early Middle Ages', our view of the past is levelled out and is no longer dominated by a Roman peak of civilization. This new viewpoint can rile those who are convinced of the primacy of Roman civilization; and it has drawn Carandini, who has devoted much of his career to trying to prove how sophisticated the Roman economy was, into seeking to demolish the revisionist position on the early Middle Ages, in order to re-establish an older picture of them as a period of disastrous regression, in both economic and urban life (*Carandini, 1994).³⁶ The natural ordering of the past has to be restored: Roman greatness, followed by decline, and then fall. For Carandini, this decline and fall was not just the collapse of a powerful state, but the end of a civilization.

The early medieval remains discovered overlying the Roman towns of Italy provide an ideal venue for this grand debate, and an ideal context in which to test different perspectives on the evidence. It is, after all, certain that something went on within the former Roman towns, and it is equally certain that the material remains of this 'something' look much less impressive than those of Roman times. Within these remains scholars can see and emphasize slightly different things: comfortably spaced houses, or 'scattered huts'; a large cathedral, or ruinous *thermae*; a surviving street-pattern, or the abandoned Roman paving beneath; the continued use of a Roman wall-circuit, or the failure to build a new one; constructive and pragmatic reuse, or the desperate grubbing out and adaptation of earlier structures. Medievalists and Romanists, historians and archaeologists, Britons and Italians, revisionists and catastrophists, all will pick over the evidence in a slightly different way, and all will then hoard and display different bits of it.

Where the debate will go now is anybody's guess. It may be that it has substantially played itself out. The papers of a conference held in 1992, on early medieval Italy in the light of recent archaeological research (*Francovich and Noyé, 1994), reveal a notable shift towards a common centre in the positions of Brogiolo and Wickham, respectively the most important catastrophist and continuist in the debate. A consensus seems to be establishing itself roughly around Brogiolo's new position (which can be summarized as one of 'modified gloom').³⁷ Carandini's harsh attack on the continuists, which was written independently of the conference, therefore came as something of a surprise, and may not stir things up again.

Though scholars may have agreed a truce in their debate, much important work on post-Roman towns still needs to be done. For example, in central and

³⁶ From one footnote (*Carandini, 1994: 25, n. 19) it would seem that the author, an ex-Marxist, is also keen to use his article to distance himself from his former political loyalties. With some possible justification, but with quite a cheek from someone who spent years arguing for the 'slave mode of production', Carandini accuses Wickham of being overinfluenced in his work by 'ideological leanings towards Communism' (*'una inclinazione ideologica comunista'*).

³⁷ Wickham in his summary of the proceedings (*Francovich and Noyé, 1994: 742–7) has become markedly less 'optimistic'. For instance, he now accepts that the prevalence of wooden housing should be seen as evidence of economic decline, not of cultural change. On the other hand, Brogiolo's article (at pp. 555–66) has a much less apocalyptic tone than some of his earlier work.

southern Italy early medieval urbanism has not yet attracted the same intensity of excavation and discussion as in the North; and, all over Italy, clearer evidence is badly needed as to exactly when the changes mentioned in this article took place. In the course of my argument I have moved from an ill-defined 'Roman' period to an equally ill-defined 'early medieval' one. If pressed, I would have to admit that I have been talking about the contrast between the city of the second century AD and that of the seventh. Five hundred years of change separate these two periods; and a lot of patient work remains to be done to fill that gap and better understand when and why towns were so radically transformed.³⁸

If scholars decide to move on to pastures new, there are certainly plenty of them around, even within research into early medieval Italian towns.³⁹ Compared with what we now know from archaeology about Italian towns in the sixth and seventh centuries, what we know about the immediately subsequent period of revival (in the eighth to tenth centuries) is remarkably scant. This is a great pity, partly because by this time enough charter-material survives to promise a useful dialogue between historical and archaeological evidence, but mainly because the written evidence alone does not record at all adequately the economic developments that supported and stimulated the expansion of towns. Much more excavated evidence is needed to cast light on the beginnings of the remarkable period of urban growth, which was to culminate in the great Italian cities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁴⁰

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Bibliography of main works discussed (arranged by date of publication)

- Wickham, C. (1981) *Early Medieval Italy. Central Power and Local Society 400–1000* (London, Macmillan), 80–92. Primarily on the basis of written evidence (in particular from his own research on Lucca), argues for considerable urban continuity in Italy.
- Hodges, R. and Whitehouse, D. (1983) *Mohammed, Charlemagne and the Origins of Europe* (London, Duckworth), 24–33. Using the evidence of a handful of excavations (the *Schola Praeconum* in Rome; Carthage; Luni) and very little else, argue for dramatic post-Roman urban decline throughout the West (including Italy).
- Ward-Perkins, B. (1984) *From Classical Antiquity to the Middle Ages. Urban Public Building in Northern and Central Italy AD 300–850* (Oxford, Oxford University Press). Argues, from documentary and inscriptional evidence, for very considerable change in public building; but in the context of considerable urban continuity, with upkeep (if little

³⁸ Brogiolo's recent work has begun to produce a more precise and nuanced picture of change.

³⁹ If scholars do move on, it is strongly to be hoped that they do not leave unpublished their earlier research projects. Only Brogiolo has a good record of pushing his sites to full publication.

⁴⁰ Work on this period in the Mediterranean would also be helped by a wealth of comparative material from northern Europe, where several decades of archaeological work have already transformed our knowledge of the growth of towns from the eighth century onwards. For some very promising preliminary results from Rome and Venice: L. Paroli and P. Delogu (eds), *La storia economica di Roma nell'alto medioevo alla luce dei recenti scavi* (Florence, All'Insegna del Giglio, 1993); and the preliminary reports of excavations behind San Pietro in Castello in Venice, *Quaderni di Archeologia del Veneto* 7 (1991, pp. 92–103) and 9 (1993, pp. 72–80).

new building) of churches and essential secular buildings (for example, defensive walls, and palaces).

- Brogiolo, G.P. (1984) *La città tra tarda-antichità e medioevo*. In *Archeologia urbana in Lombardia. Valutazione dei depositi e inventario dei vincoli* (Modena, Edizioni Panini), 48–56. A very influential article, centred on Brogiolo's own excavations in Brescia, but bringing in a wide range of other evidence from Lombardy and elsewhere. Argues for radical decay and disruption in the post-Roman town: abandonment of many areas of settlement; build-up of habitation level; and a drastic decline in the quality of both buildings and artefacts in use.
- La Rocca Hudson, C. (1986) ‘“Dark Ages” a Verona. Edilizia privata, aree aperte e strutture pubbliche in una città dell’Italia settentrionale’, *Archeologia Medievale* 13: 31–78. Uses evidence from her own excavations and from documents at Verona, to argue that many ‘signs of decay’ (build-up of soil, scattered burials, tiny churches, robbing of Roman structures, etc.) are either the result of neutral cultural change or are evidence of positive developments. Suggests, at the end of her article, that Brogiolo has misinterpreted the evidence from Brescia.
- Brogiolo, G.P. (1987) ‘A proposito dell’organizzazione urbana nell’altomedioevo’, *Archeologia Medievale* 14: 27–45. Vigorously defends his conclusions on Brescia against La Rocca’s criticisms, and counter-attacks into Veronese territory. Accuses her of misusing and misinterpreting evidence from excavations at Verona (drawing some of the information he uses to do so from her close associates).⁴¹
- Ward-Perkins, B. (1988) ‘The towns of northern Italy: rebirth or renewal?’, in R. Hodges and B. Hobley (eds), *The Rebirth of Towns in the West AD 700–1050* (London, Council for British Archaeology), 16–27. Argues for marked decline in urban population and urban wealth and sophistication; but also stresses that, in comparison to other parts of the West, Italy remained very urban: ‘towns in . . . Italy had a slightly less grim history in this period (c. 300–800) than elsewhere in Europe’.
- Wickham, C. (1989) ‘Italy and the early Middle Ages’, in K. Randsborg (ed.), *The Birth of Europe: Archaeology and Social Development in the First Millennium A.D.* (Rome, L’Erma di Bretschneider), 140–51. A strong restatement of the case for urban continuity. Written in 1987, before Brogiolo’s counter-attack was published, it leans heavily on the evidence of La Rocca’s 1986 article. An Italian translation of Wickham’s text appears in *Archeologia Medievale* 15 (1988), 105–24; in this same volume (on pp. 649–51) Wickham reviews and attempts to reconcile the rival positions of La Rocca and Brogiolo.
- Brogiolo, G.P. (1993) *Brescia altomedievale. Urbanistica ed edilizia dal IV al IX secolo* (Mantua, Padus). A very useful overview of the Brescia evidence. Argues, as before, for dramatic post-Roman decay and ‘ruralization’ of the city; but, on the basis of the large and impressive monastery of San Salvatore of the later eighth century, sees a revival of Brescia at roughly this date.
- Francovich, R. and Noyé, G. (1994) (eds) *La storia dell’Alto Medioevo italiano (VI - X secolo) alla luce dell’archeologia* (Florence, All’Insegna del Giglio). The papers of a conference held in Siena in 1992. There is a section on ‘*Le città*’, with north Italian papers by

⁴¹ The fierce tone of this article is exceptional in what has been in general a good-tempered series of exchanges. The tone can probably be explained by the fact that, even more than British archaeologists, Italians are fiercely territorial over their data. One positive feature of the early medieval towns debate has been the way that it has drawn a number of archaeologists out of the bunker of their own particular *regione*, or even *provincia*. However, crossing into another person’s patch is still a delicate and dangerous business. It must also be said that the archaeology of some towns, including the very important sites of Aquileia and Ravenna, continues to operate as if the world outside simply did not exist.

Brogiolo and Gelichi; the post-Roman urban debate is also referred to in the opening remarks of Delogu and the closing considerations of Wickham. Both Brogiolo's article (on Brescia and Milan, at pp. 555–66) and Wickham's concluding remarks (at pp. 742–7) display a marked softening of their authors' previous positions.

- Carandini, A. (1994) 'L'ultima civiltà sepolta o del massimo oggetto desueto, secondo un archeologo', in A. Carandini, L. Cracco Ruggini and A. Giardina (eds), *Storia di Roma* III.2 (*L'età tardoantica. I luoghi e le culture*) (Rome, Einaudi), 11–38. A powerful anti-continuitist tract, aimed particularly against the writings of Wickham, but, in its section on towns, also strongly criticizing La Rocca (*1986) and Ward-Perkins (*1988). For Carandini, the economy and towns of post-Roman Italy were a mere shadow of their former selves. True towns (*vere città*) disappeared, to reappear only in the tenth/eleventh centuries.
- Brogiolo, G.P. (in press) 'Aspetti economici e sociali delle città longobarde dell'Italia settentrionale', in G.P. Brogiolo (ed.), *Città altomedievali nel Mediterraneo occidentale* (Mantua, Padus). A wide-ranging and well-documented article, that describes and attempts to explain the changing building-techniques of the fourth through to the seventh centuries.