

## From Constantine To Charlemagne: An Archaeology of Italy, AD 300–800

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Bryan Ward-Perkins

Post-classical archaeology emerged into the limelight in Italy in the 1970s, in particular with the founding of the national journal *Archeologia Medievale* in 1974 (whose principal editor and driving force, Riccardo Francovich, was recently killed in a tragic accident). In the years that followed, our knowledge of late and post-Roman Italy was transformed by a series of important surveys and excavations (including projects on a very large scale, as in Brescia under Gian Pietro Brogiolo, and at the eighth- and ninth-century monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno under Richard Hodges). Some of this work has been published in English, since there has always been a strong involvement of British archaeologists in post-classical Italian archaeology, but publication is generally in Italian, putting it beyond the reach of many in the English-speaking world.

Neil Christie is ideally qualified to survey, assess, and make available in English these rich results, since he has himself been active in Italy since the mid 1980s, and, amongst other achievements, published a general account of the history and archaeology of the Lombards and saw through to publication the pioneering work on medieval churches carried out by the British School at Rome in the 1960s (1). Not only is he well qualified to write this present book, he has also put in a remarkable amount of hard graft in preparing it, as is clear from a dense bibliography of over fifty pages (which, in the very few areas where I feel qualified to test it, is both accurate and comprehensive). Italian archaeology, particularly of the post-Roman period, tends to disintegrate into regional studies—even the most active and intellectually brilliant archaeologists (like Francovich and Brogiolo) have tended to write only about their own regioni (Toscana and

Lombardia/Veneto, respectively). One enormous strength of Christie's book is that he ranges all over peninsular Italy, and, indeed, into Sicily and Sardinia (both of which, for instance, have substantial entries in the index) (2).

His book is divided into six chapters. The first chapter, although entitled 'Sources and Contexts', is really a narrative of the political history of the peninsula, as known from textual evidence, and an introduction to the various 'peoples' who occupied Italy and the regions into which it was, at various times, divided. Inevitably, given the complicated history of this period—with an only partial (and shifting) Lombard occupation, followed by another partial (Frankish) invasion—the material in this chapter makes for quite hard reading, with a map on page 43 that is meant to clarify the changing Byzantine-Lombard frontiers, but is more confusing than helpful. Christie's strengths definitely lie in comprehensive coverage, rather than in reducing complicated narratives and descriptions to their bare and clear essentials. The contents of this first chapter, with its detailed 'historical' content, set the tone for the rest of the book in one important sense: Christie is an archaeologist from a tradition that seeks to understand the past using textual and material evidence in tandem, rather than one who presents material evidence in opposition to what the texts can tell us. Readers of *Reviews in History* can rest assured—he is 'History friendly'.

The next four chapters are the meat of his work, examining in turn 'Church and Society', 'Urban Evolutions', 'Defence and Power', and 'Rural Settlement and Patterns of Change'. As he explains at some length in his introduction (pp. 9–13), Christie does not consider one other very important area of archaeological evidence, that for production and exchange. This is a sensible decision, since there is a huge bibliography on this subject (inevitably, almost exclusively about pottery), and it could not possibly have been comprehended within a single volume, if it were treated in the same detail that Christie deploys for other aspects of Italy's archaeology.

Chapter 2, 'Church and Society', looks first at the evidence of declining paganism, and at the slow spread of churches through the urban and rural landscape of Italy; it then considers some detailed general themes, such as the evidence for burial practice and monasticism, and the thorny issue of whether an 'Arian' Church can be revealed in the excavated and standing buildings of Italy. Since there is such a wealth of both textual evidence and surviving churches in Italy, this is a chapter where a great deal of what is presented is not startlingly new. Chapter 3, 'Urban Evolutions', on the other hand, looks at an area where archaeology has transformed our vision of the past, through discoveries in a large number of cities up and down the peninsula, including work on an impressive scale in Naples, Rome (the Crypta Balbi and imperial fora), Milan, Brescia, Verona, Ravenna, and Classe (3). Although the excavations discussed are of great interest, for me this is Christie's least successful chapter, because he divides his material thematically in a way that I found confusing—for instance, in a section called 'Living Spaces', he opens with a general account of the rather ephemeral remains of early-medieval housing excavated in places like Verona, Classe, and Brescia; but then breaks up his material topographically, so that for Rome (pp. 237–43) we are treated to a case-study that jumps from the sumptuous fourth-century aristocratic domus of the Caelian Hill, to the very different world of the houses of reused brick and peperino blocks, built in the ninth century over the forum of Nerva. It would have been much clearer to have presented a peninsula-wide discussion of late domus (and their eventual disappearance), focusing on the fourth to sixth centuries, and to have followed this by a similar general discussion of what housing looked like in later centuries.

Chapter 4, 'Defence and Power', is, for me, Christie at his best. Partly because he knows a very great deal about both urban and rural fortification (he began his archaeological career with a PhD on the Lombard and Byzantine defences of Italy), but mainly because it is arranged chronologically. It opens with an account of the defences of late Roman Italy; continues through the response to crisis and invasion in the fifth century (an impressive campaign of fortress and townwall construction); and ends with the fortifications of a peninsula divided between Byzantine and Lombard areas of power.

In his final central chapter, Christie discusses 'Rural Settlement and Patterns of Change', presenting a lot of interesting evidence, but again in a rather confusing thematic arrangement—four of his sections, for instance, cover (in this order): 'Churches, Monasteries and Burials'; 'Germans and the Land'; 'Rural

Insecurities and “Private” Defence: Hills, Refuges and Caves’; and ‘Environments, Economies and Bioarchaeologies’. These are all reasonable sub-divisions of the material, but do they fit together, and do they help the reader form a clear overall impression of what was happening in Italy?

Christie closes his book with a sixth, very brief, chapter entitled ‘Conclusions: Living (and Dying) in Late Antique and Early Medieval Italy’. This does contain a few pages, in a sub-section called ‘Continuities, Change, Transformation?’ (pp. 505–7), where he reflects on the overall conclusion of his book—in sum, he favours a picture of the inhabitants of Italy adapting to very changed circumstances. But the chapter also introduces new material: a discussion of the demographic impact of plague and other natural disasters (pp. 500–4), and a brief consideration (pp. 507–9) of whether or not the peninsula was really divided between distinct Germanic and ‘Roman’ peoples in the sixth and seventh centuries.

In an overall assessment of the book, there are areas of interpretation that I don’t myself agree with. For my taste, there is too much ‘evolution’, ‘change’, ‘transformation’, and ‘adaptation’ in what Christie writes, and not enough ‘crisis’, ‘dislocation’, and ‘decline’. The title of his chapter on cities, ‘Urban Evolutions’, is very telling—‘evolution’ is an essentially positive word, that Christie has used twice before in the titles of books covering the post-Roman centuries: (with Simon Loseby) *Towns in Transition: Urban Evolution in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996); and *Landscapes of Change: Rural Evolutions in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004). As the author of a book with the apocalyptic title *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), needless to say, I think ‘evolution’, and all it conjures up, underplays the drama and crisis that occurred when the Roman empire disintegrated. These are, however, issues of interpretation, and Christie has every right to disagree with me.

I do wish, however, that he had written the book in a clearer and slimmer style, and with more of an archaeological focus. As discussed above, the arrangement of the material is not straightforward and not crystal clear; and, if I ask myself the key question, ‘How much of this book will I set to undergraduates?’, the answer will be, ‘Very little beyond Chapter 4 (on fortifications)’. In most of the book, I think students would get bogged down and lose their way. Scholars will be able to learn a lot on individual themes (helped by an excellent index), though I don’t think many of them will read the book from cover to cover—there isn’t a strong enough argumentative thread to carry the reader along. (And such flow as there is, is often disrupted by long brackets, serving the purpose of foot-notes or end-notes, which I presume were banned by the publisher.)

Christie’s book does, however, contain fascinating material that will be new to all but experts in the various specific fields that he surveys. To take one example, on pages 112–13 (in his chapter on ‘Church and Society’), he presents the intriguing evidence of a villa site in Umbria, which in the fifth century became a child cemetery with some very peculiar associated burials—of puppies and young dogs, all mutilated in some way before deposition. This is a very telling, if highly enigmatic, insight into ‘popular’ religious practice. Everyone will find similar gems in Christie’s rich collection. Although I am in theory familiar with Italy’s post-classical archaeology, I found much in this book that I had never heard of (but was glad to know); and experts on contiguous areas (say, Gallic urbanism or Anglo-Saxon monasticism) will certainly find it a productive vein to mine for parallels and contrasts.

Ironically, although I am very much with Christie in wanting to link the evidence of ‘history’ and ‘archaeology’, I found his book too historical, and not archaeological enough. He sets out textual evidence in considerable detail, often taking it back to the primary sources; but I think historians will either know this material already, or will want subtler interpretations of the textual evidence, while archaeologists will probably find the historical detail boring. The main thing I missed in what is billed as ‘An Archaeology of Italy’ was better illustrations. There are 101 figures in this book, but very many of them are familiar (and occasionally rather generalized) views of places and standing monuments; or are useful, but rather dry, plans and maps. There are not enough photographs and drawings of the many new and important discoveries, which Christie describes in words, to make the material really come alive. This is a pity, and could have been avoided, despite the real problems that any author faces over copyright. Archaeologists are generally

keen to have their work publicized in books of this kind (aimed at an international and wider readership), and through the internet it is now not difficult to track down first-class illustrative material. For instance, it only took a few minutes, with the help of Google, to find an excellent plan and one very moving photograph of the child cemetery mentioned above (which Christie does not illustrate). To me, a good illustration says a great deal more than a long description.

This is a book with very considerable strengths, that summarizes and presents a mass of new information, and gives all the necessary bibliographical leads for further exploration. It will be very useful for detailed research, both into things specifically Italian and as a mine for parallels and contrasts; but, unfortunately, it is not sufficiently clearly and economically constructed, nor well enough illustrated, to reach the audience it deserves.

## Notes

1. N. Christie, *The Lombards* (Oxford, 1995); N. Christie (ed), *Three South Etrurian Churches* (London, 1991). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Corsica, although part of 'Italy' in the period we are considering, does not get included—but it would be decidedly churlish to complain about this! [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Besides Christie's chapter, there is a very useful summary (in Italian) of much of this work, and its implications, in Gian Pietro Brogiolo and Sauro Gelichi, *La città nell'alto medioevo italiano: Archaeologia e storia* (Roma-Bari, 1998); while the recent remarkable finds from Rome are well presented and discussed in R. Meneghini and R. Santangeli Valenziani, *Roma nell'altomedioevo: Topografia e urbanistica della città dal V al X secolo* (Roma, 2004). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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