

# San Paragorio (Noli): The development of a religious settlement in Western Liguria between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

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*The history of Noli as a Maritime Republic of Western Liguria is reflected in the wealth of its monuments, such as the Romanesque church of San Paragorio, the 11th-century castle and its walls, and the numerous towers of this beautiful late medieval town. Archaeological excavations carried out around the church of San Paragorio and outlying areas not only discovered an early-Christian baptistery, but confirmed the existence of a highly complex residential and artisan settlement occupied between Late Antiquity and the early medieval period. Archaeological work conducted between 2005 and 2006 was of fundamental importance, producing evidence that has transformed the history of this ancient town, once thought to have originated with the Byzantine reconquest of the Ligurian territory after the middle of the 6th century.*

## ***Introduction***

The small town of Noli is an important medieval historic centre of the Italian Republic, in the province of Savona. Today it is a part of Liguria, situated approximately 13 km from the capital city, also called Savona, bordering the municipalities of Spotorno, Finale and Vezzi-Portio. The centre of the town spreads out along a coastal arc, on a small plain between two mountainous spurs stemming from the hills of San Giacomo. The western side is dominated by Capo Noli, a calcareous rock promontory which drops 200m to the sea (Fig 1). It forms a natural harbour extending from the promontory to the east and, because it has always provided vessels with a safe haven, it has attracted flourishing maritime and commercial activities. Coastal navigation offered Noli's inhabitants a safe and rapid means of

communication from its beginnings, its hinterland not being conducive to easy travel (Lamboglia 1970, 150). On the Genoan side of Capo, Mount Orsino and its castle protected its seaward front and defended the town against any land-based attacks (Frondoni 2007, 17).

## ***The church of San Paragorio***

Noli's origins were unknown, although in 19th to 20th-century historiography they are always traced back to the Roman period. At the end of the 19th century, Alfredo d'Andrade's initial restoration work, followed by excavations in the church of San Paragorio, discovered a crypt beneath the modern floor level and numerous Roman and early medieval sculptures. This was the first scientific evidence relating

Fig 1

*Central-northern Italy and Western Liguria with Noli in particular*

to its origin, suggesting the existence of a religious building dating back to the Langobard period (Frondoni 1988a, 77-88; Frondoni 2007a, 73). The church, now Romanesque in style, certainly goes back to the early 11th century, a date derived from an important assemblage of Islamic wall-tiles which decorated the exterior of the apse (Frondoni 1996, 273-276; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 149). The building is located a short distance from the sea, close to a natural landing point, and at the confluence of two streams: the Mazéno to the west and the Luminella to the east. The walled medieval historic centre lies at the base of Mount Orsino, dominated by the feudal castle above (Frondoni 2003, 149; Frondoni 2007a, 73). This arrangement was accurately reproduced in an 18th-century watercolour by Matteo Vinzoni (Bulgarelli et al 2005, 151; Frondoni 2007b, 363), which shows a sequence of three sets of town walls that track Noli's development between the early 11th and 14th centuries. The earliest defensive wall, which has been dated to the 11th century, encircled the medieval castle. The second, from the 12th to 13th centuries, enclosed the contemporary residential centre and continued up to the Luminella stream. The third, built during the 14th century, completely surrounded Noli on all four sides.

The church of San Paragorio, documented from 1079, was Noli's original parish church; it respected the late medieval settlement phase, and was originally situated outside the walls (Fig 2). After the creation of an independent bishop's see for Savona in 1239, San Paragorio served as cathedral until 1572. Then, in order 'to ensure safety against Barbary pirates', and because it was at some distance from the town centre, this ecclesiastic function was transferred to the parish church of St Peter which was located within the walls (Lamboglia 1970, 152-153; Varaldo 1978, 10-11).

Fig 2

*Noli (SV); Church of San Paragorio: detail of the apsidal area*

The previously discussed 19th-century excavations discovered a crypt. In addition, four sarcophagi made from local calcareous stone, with saddle-roof covers and corner *acroteria* (decorative pedestal), were found beneath the church's bell tower, at a depth of about three meters below the current floor surface. These are now located outdoors, to the right of the entrance to the church. This type of sarcophagus is fairly common in the Mediterranean, in the northern Alpine territories and in Liguria, and was particularly widespread between the 5th and 6th centuries (Frondoni 1988, 49-50; Frondoni 1988a, 77; Martino 1988, 266-268; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 156-157). The discovery of the crypt raised the possibility of an earlier church on the site, perhaps linked to the worship of relics. This hypothesis was strengthened by the church's dedication to the *Passio* of Paragorio, Parteo, Parthenopeus and Severinus, four saints who according to tradition had been martyred in Corsica during the reign of the Emperors Macrinus and Alexander Severus. This legend probably refers to a transfer of relics by African bishops exiled in Corsica (c 439-442) (Molteni 1995, 45-46; Frondoni 2003, 149; Frondoni 2004, 70; Frondoni 2007, 73; Frondoni 2007b, 368).

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### *Archaeological excavation*

The site of San Paragorio saw its first scientific archaeological investigation in 1972 when, after protracted negotiations, private land adjacent to the southern side of the church became available. Directed by Marina Vavassori and coordinated by Nino Lamboglia, excavations focused on a medieval cemetery situated above an early-Christian baptistery, reaching a depth of 3.7m, approximately six metres below sea level (Frondoni 2007a, 74). A continuous stratigraphic sequence of burials was recorded: the most recent was an ossuary related to the cemetery which was still in use at the end of the 16th century, while the earliest was dated tentatively to between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (Vavassori 1973, 46; Frondoni 2004, 70).

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The most significant discovery here was a masonry structure, 0.44m thick, extending over the entire surface of the excavation, and oriented parallel to the Romanesque church; this was cut by numerous stone graves (Frondoni 2007a, 76) (Fig 3). Further

*Fig 3*  
Noli (SV); San Paragorio: plan of the baptistery with baptismal font (1), fragment of floor inscription (2), plan of the burial of Lidoria (3), (Frondoni 1988c, 150, modified)

excavation indicated that the structure was the perimeter wall of a building with an apse, with a 'reddish *opus signinum*' pavement, and the partial remains of a 0.8m-deep baptismal font with an octagonal exterior and circular interior. An *arcosolium* (arched recess) grave partially rested against the walls of the first church or baptistery. A longitudinal footing cut the part of the earlier apse which was used as an offset foundation for the extant church. While this footing was attributed to an intermediate phase of the church of San Paragorio, the apsidal structure was later interpreted as a baptismal room with a longitudinal plan. This has close parallels with numerous Greek and eastern examples, previously thought to be geographically unique (Frondoni 2003, 149; Frondoni 2005, 197; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 150; Frondoni 2007a, 76-77).

The first church was dated to the 6th-7th centuries because late Roman deposits were in direct association with the fill of the baptistery and its *opus signinum* floor. However, the *arcosolium* grave was attributed to the 8th century on the basis of an epigraph describing the burial of a woman named Lidoria which was cut into a semi-circular slab, re-used in the interior of the

burial, and dated to the early medieval period (Fig 4) (Vavassori 1973, 46-53; Frondoni 2001, 752-753; Frondoni 2004, 73; Frondoni 2007a, 76; Frondoni 2007c, 757). These discoveries led Lamboglia to suggest that Noli was the site of a '*plebs cum baptisterio*' above the previous late-Roman settlement. He further suggested that Noli might be identified as the *Néapolis* mentioned by Giorgio Ciprio (Bulgarelli 1988, 61; Frondoni 1988c, 154; Frondoni 1996a, 35; Frondoni 2007a, 73; Frondoni 2007b, 369), and that as such it formed 'a single context' with the *castrum* and the nearby harbour of Varigotti '*in the military organisation promoted by the Byzantines*' after the middle of the 6th century (Lamboglia 1973, 64-65; Lamboglia 1976, 129), and in the early medieval period (Christie 1989, 29-30; Pavoni 1992, 76-77; Murialdo 2001, 63-64).

Excavation in 1974 was restricted to the area behind the sacristy of the church and to a late medieval cemetery. A major archaeological project took place between 1984 and 1987 and this led to the discovery of a structure lying parallel to the perimeter wall of the early Christian baptistery; subsequent investigation identified this as 'Building G', a building which was

Fig 4

Noli (SV); Marble slab with its funerary inscription of Lidoria (Frondoni 2007a, 77)

<b>Areas with imperial age levels</b>	<b>5th-7th century structures</b>
<b>Roman age structures</b>	<b>7th-9th century structures</b>
<b>9th century-early 10th century structures (on previous walls)</b>	<b>Romanic and early medieval structures</b>

*Fig 5*

*Noli (SV); San Paragorio: building phase plan (Bulgarelli et al 2005, 152, modified)*

utilised for various purposes between the Late Antique and early medieval periods. Ceramics from the early and mid-imperial period were recorded, although they did not form part of the original context (Bulgarelli 1988, 63; Frondoni 1988b, 128; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 153).

The baptistery was subjected to a comprehensive survey. During the disassembly and removal of the *opus signinum* pavement for restoration purposes, a further significant discovery was made: *in situ* imperial Roman deposits associated with pottery and glass dated to the 1st and 3rd centuries (Frondoni 1988c, 153-154; Frondoni 2007a, 74). Work carried out in the late 1990s located two substantial walls at right-angles to each other and dovetailed, oriented east-west and north-south. The baptistery was constructed upon these earlier foundations (Frondoni 2003, 154-155; Frondoni 2007a, 77; Frondoni 2007b, 364-366). Similar footings in the same Roman levels (not completely excavated due to static load problems) had been identified during work to consolidate the interior of the Romanesque church. This had revealed a north-south wall connected to the external façade wall of the baptistery, dated to the second half of the 5th century, to judge from directly associated deposits. It was presumed that these features represented an earlier church, probably a primitive *ecclesia*, adjacent to the baptistery (Frondoni 2007b, 364). However, research carried out between 2000 and 2003 confirmed that the baptistery was not replaced by a pre-Romanesque church as previously thought (Frondoni 2001, 754-759; Frondoni 2003a, 153-155; Frondoni 2005, 197; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 153).

Various building and restoration phases prior to the construction of the new church were dated from the early 11th century continuing up to the end of the medieval period (c 1400), in parallel with the large 'Building G' and the living quarters around the baptismal zone (Fig 5). The pavement of the baptismal chamber was decorated with an inscription in white and black sea pebbles (Mennella, Coccoluto 1995, 76-77) and incorporated four water run-off channels made with African amphorae or ceramic pipes (Fig 6). The earliest channel was linked to the ill-defined remains of an original baptismal font, which were found in the area adjacent to the northern side of the later font. These excavations demonstrated numerous phases of alterations of the baptistery within a narrow



Fig 6  
Noli (SV); San Paragorio: detail of floor with inscription in sea pebbles (1) and shown on Fig 3/2 above: neck of amphora inserted in opus signinum floor (2), (Frondoni 1988, 104)



Fig 7  
Noli (SV); San Paragorio: detail of the semi-circular apse of the baptistery and the adjacent high status arcosolium tomb (Frondoni 2007a, 76)



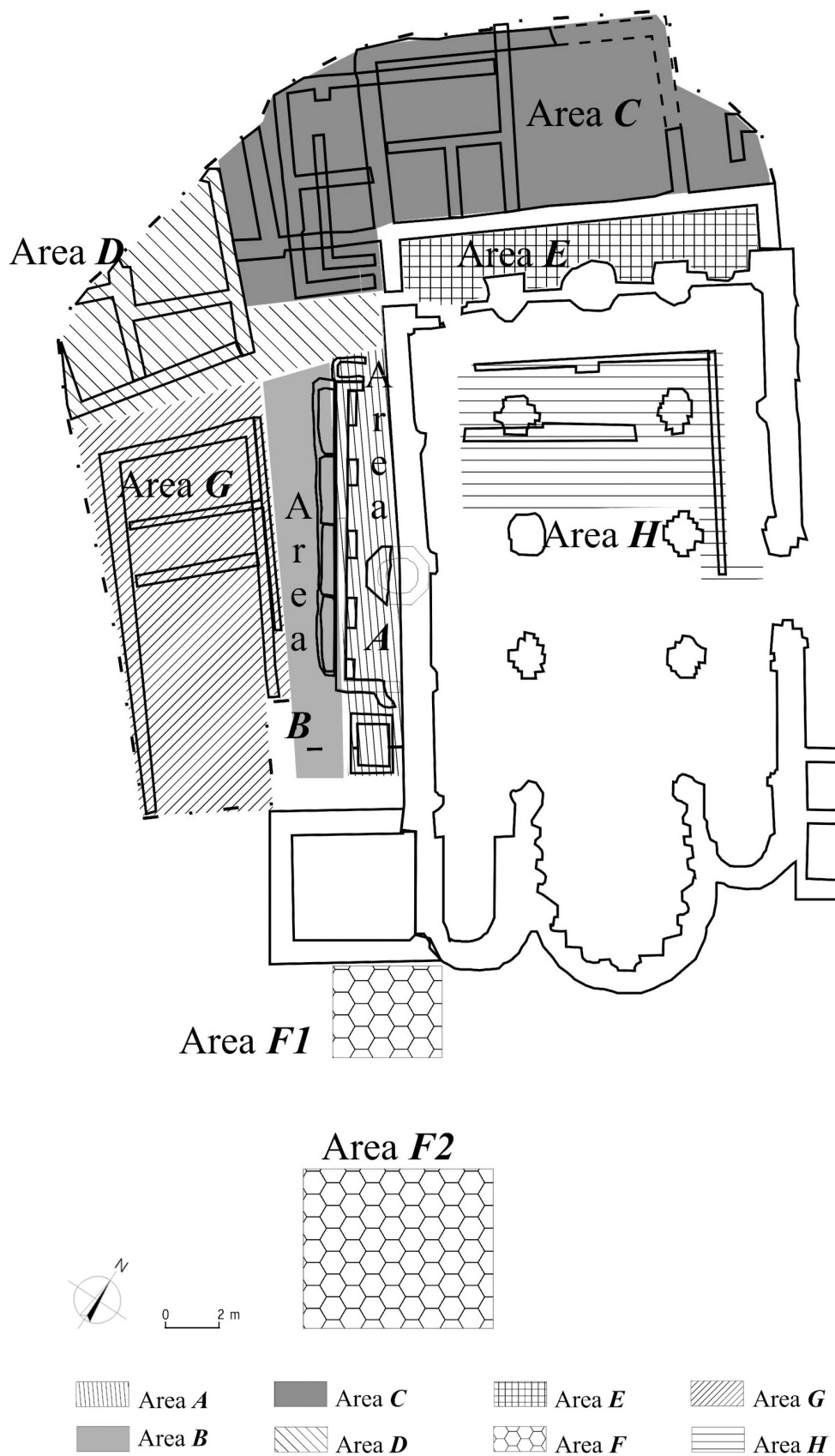


Fig 8  
 Noli (SV); San Paragorio: schematic plan showing archaeological areas (Bulgarelli et al 2005, 152, modified)

time span: the first channel was constructed between the early 5th and 6th centuries, the construction date of the sepulchre of Lidoria (Fig 7) that sealed previous construction features lying next to the apsidal final phase of the church (Frondoni 2007a, 76-77; Frondoni 2007c, 757).

Perhaps the most crucial result was the identification of an early phase of the baptistery that originally had no apse and terminated in a recessed rectangular presbytery. This has reopened the debate about the original function of Noli's baptistery, focusing on its relationship to other urban models, its numerous structural modifications over time, some high status graves and the problems posed by a late-6th-century fragmentary inscription referring to a *Theodorus* (Pietri 1988, 351-380; Mennella, Coccoluto 1995, 83-85). For all these reasons the baptistery can no longer be ascribed to a simple rural environment (Frondoni 2003, 152; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 153-154; Frondoni 2007a, 77; Frondoni 2007b, 367).

The 1990/91 planning brief enabled a series of excavations to remove the embankment of the railway station that extended close to the façade and on the southern side of the church of San Paragorio (Fig 8). Excavation comprised removing horizontal spits using mechanical machinery and revealed a series of domestic quarters divided internally into various rooms; there was evidence of numerous hearths within a large residential building (Area C). The perimeter wall of this building, facing the façade of the church, was not preserved: the construction of the Romanesque monument, which cut the side of the hill, must have destroyed this wall. However, the construction of San Paragorio only minimally affected the earliest residential portion, which extended as terraces along the natural slope rising from the sea toward the hill; the terraces commence 1.5m above the level of the medieval church site (Frondoni 1995, 798-804; Frondoni 1997, 714-715; Frondoni 1998, sheet 14). The rooms of Building C were constructed of slight dry-stone walls bonded with clay, and earth floors (Brogiolo 1994, 7-8; Brogiolo 1999, 164-165; Cagnana 2001, 197-198; Murialdo 2001, 786-788). Occupation evidence suggests extended use through time, with signs of repair and various overlapping surfaces, each of which contained numerous hearths (Frondoni 2007c, 757).

The earliest residential levels found in the initial excavations were dated to between the end of the 6th and the early 7th century by late African slip ware, soapstone, glass and bone artefacts. One bone comb top is decorated in a similar fashion to Langobard grave goods and artefacts from Byzantine sites (Frondoni 1995, plate 107c; Frondoni 1998, fig. 12; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 154; Geltrudini, Taddei 2007, 83).

The 2002/03 excavations in Area C reached settlement levels of the 5th to 6th centuries, which existed contemporaneously with the baptismal building. Subsequent phases dated to the 8th-9th centuries were characterised by soapstone, coarse ware and glazed pottery similar to Forum Ware; these phases were associated with the village that developed near the early medieval church and subsequently formed its parish (Frondoni 1987, 49-50; Frondoni 1988a, 77-78; Ferretti 1982, 50-51; Vivaldo 1986, 105-106). In the residential part (Area C) and the area of the portico of the Romanesque church (Area E), the Late Antique/early medieval walls overlap 4th- to 5th-century deposits. These in turn are linked to an Imperial Roman settlement that produced a significant number of good quality glass fragments (Frondoni, Ubaldi 2003, 59-60).

Part of the early medieval settlement in Area C, adjacent to the church, was damaged by an extensive fire, evidenced by burned beams from the collapsed roof. Radiocarbon results from timbers gave a date of the second half of the 9th century for this event (Frondoni 1998, fig 16). After destruction the sector was partially reoccupied by at least two new buildings, constructed between the end of the 9th and the early 10th centuries. There were numerous putlog holes in the walls and the posts (inserted in these holes) were hooked to ceilings made from perishable material (Geltrudini, Taddei 2007, 84). The date of the final settlement phase before the construction of the medieval church was confirmed by some 10th-11th-century plain clay jugs, of the type found in the areas of Luni and Tuscany (Frondoni 2004, 82; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 154).

A similar situation was found in another building in Area D, contiguous to that in Area C. Unfortunately this had been recently partially destroyed, leaving only traces of 9th-10th-century construction phases and



*Fig 9*

*Noli (SV); San Paragorio: Area G, detail of the Late Antique wall footings (1) and Roman period walls (2) (Bulgarelli et al 2005, 155, modified)*

*Fig 10*

*Noli (SV); San Paragorio: Area G, detail of the early medieval phase (7th to 8th centuries) with channels and metal slag (Bulgarelli et al 2005, 156, modified)*

associated earth floors and corner-hearths. Excavation confirmed that the rooms in the buildings in Areas C and D continued beyond the limits of the excavation, heading for the hill above and to the east, toward the village of Noli.

A further building from the Byzantine/early medieval period was found in 2000, to the west of the baptistery (Area G), but separated from it by a walkway descending toward the sea. The original 7th-late-8th-century walls comprised a perimeter of dry-stone walling bonded with clay, about 10m long, 5m wide and surviving to a height of 0.6m. This was built on earlier footings, part of which it had destroyed. The southern perimeter wall, adjacent to the baptistery, lay on an earlier plastered wall, part of which had been destroyed by modern building, while two structures belonging to other building-phases were found in the interior (Fig 9). The Late Antique wall in the foreground has tentatively been dated as contemporary with the early Christian baptistery. The wall in the background, heading towards the nearby property, is Roman, being phased with rubbish pits containing significant amounts of Imperial ceramics. This structure is provisionally interpreted as extending southwards while the rubbish pits occupied an open space (Frondoni 2004, 77-78; Frondoni 2007c, 758).

The internal spatial distribution of Building G is complex (early medieval phase). At least four chambers have been identified, divided by east-west masonry partitions, which created a corridor against the western perimeter. Each room contained a corner-hearth with perfectly preserved fragments of burnt wood, while the central/western band of the rooms was studded with post-holes. The rooms had earthen floors and significant traces of industrial activity: one had a series of channels full of metallurgical slag (Frondoni 2007b, 373-374; Geltrudini, Taddei 2007, 84) (Fig 10).

Preliminary analysis indicates an early medieval production site connected with the village around the baptistery (Frondoni 2003, 155-156; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 156; Frondoni 2007c, 758), one of the few recognised to date in northern Italy (Micheletto, Pejrani Baricco 1997, 315-317). Another building, dated to the Carolingian period, was constructed on top of the destruction level of Building G. This more recent structure had an earth floor (Frondoni 2005, 198) which developed in two phases: the earlier showed traces of human habitation represented by

hearth-vents, while there was no sign of occupation or industry in the later phase. Large stones on the floor in the middle of the room along a north-south alignment presumably were used as post-pads (Fig 11). Some of these stones were flat, with hollows in the centre to position the post, but four post-holes situated within the perimeter walls contained the remains of wooden scaffolding posts belonging to the construction phase of the structure.

Excavation of destruction levels behind Building G revealed burnt wood, mainly roof-timbers, perfectly preserved below a layer of destruction debris that was radiocarbon-dated to the second half of the 9th century (Fig 12). More than two hundred separate wood fragments were distributed in two layers. The later floor, partially disturbed by medieval burials, sealed a deposit containing circular posts and rectangular planks with consistent dimensions revealing identifiable alignments (Geltrudini, Taddei 2007, 84-85) (Fig 13).

While residential structures in Areas C and D were rebuilt after the fire in the second quarter of the 9th century, Area G was converted into a cemetery. Six phases of burial were recorded which related to this cemetery that subsequently extended over the area between Building G and the baptistery (Geltrudini, Taddei 2007, 86; Frondoni et al 2008a, 275-276).

Archaeological evidence suggests that it is likely that the entire late Roman and early medieval settlement developed from the San Paragorio complex. The latter was superimposed on Roman structures, probably a *vicus* (Settia 1991, 43-44; Cagnana 1994, 171-172; Brogiolo et al 1999, 499; Frondoni 2007a, 80; Frondoni 2007b, 378-379), with a continuous stratigraphic sequence from the early Imperial to the Late Antique periods (Brogiolo 1999, 157-158; Cantino Wataghin 2000, 227-229; Brogiolo, Chavarria Arnaù 2003, 33; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 160).

The construction of underground parking lots provided further opportunity to explore Noli's post-Roman development period (Fig 14). Limited work started in the spring of 2004, followed by an excavation in the zone to the north of the church (the site of the former railway station). The results were central to understanding changes in Noli's topography (Frondoni 2007, 20-21; Frondoni 2007b, 374-375; Frondoni 2008, 280-281). The initial excavations produced significant late medieval structures

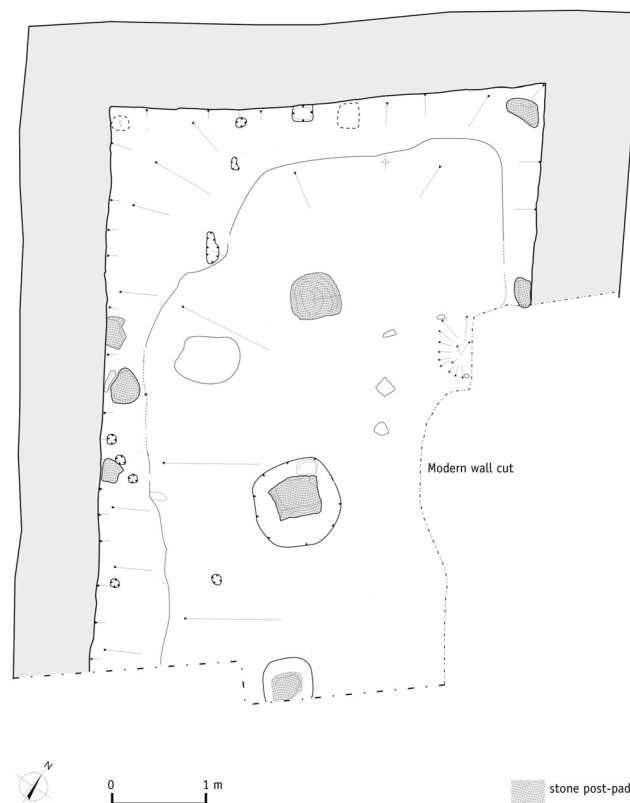


Fig 11

Noli (SV); San Paragorio: Area G, layout of the 9th century early medieval phase showing the stones used to drive in posts (Bulgarelli et al 2005, 157, modified)

comparable to the situation near San Paragorio. Both may be associated with the parsonage buildings of the 14th-15th centuries documented during a pastoral visit by Monseignor Niccolò Mascardi in the 16th century (Frondoni 2004, 84; Bulgarelli et al 2005, 160; Frondoni et al 2006, 107). Analysis of the 2004 excavation results indicate identical stratigraphic sequences in both locations, starting with deposits containing Roman artefacts, followed by Late Antique/early medieval material, and ending with a 9th-century fire-damaged phase (Frondoni 2008, 280). The combined evidence confirmed that the early medieval village extended more than 150m from the church of San Paragorio, close to the late medieval walls of the village of Noli (Frondoni 2007c, 758-759).

One unexpected discovery was an extensive Roman funerary zone situated in proximity to San Paragorio (Frondoni 2007b, 377), a cremation burial site (Torre 2007, 89) which continued to be used into the Late Antique period (Elefante 2007, 121).

Finally, an excavation carried out on via XXV Aprile, in advance of the construction of underground parking close to the current coastline, uncovered early Imperial period foundations, alternating with gravel horizons; these were identified as the formation of a Roman quay that was subsequently buried (Frondoni et al 2008, 277-278). A crucial stratigraphic sequence included mortared walls of a Roman building (Frondoni 2007b, 371; Geltrudini et al 2007, 31-32). Structures dating from the 5th and 6th centuries were built on these foundations, associated with a rich assemblage of artefacts (Geltrudini et al 2007a, 35-37). A hoard of 13 gold coins, the most recent of which dates from the brief rule of Petronius Maximus (455), had been carefully hidden in a small hole in the floor of a probable storeroom area of the building (Arslan 2007, 53-56; Frondoni, Bertino 2008, 279).

A later phase was characterised by foundations and occupation levels related to 7th- to 9th-century buildings, including a destruction and abandonment

*Fig 12*

*Noli (SV); San Paragorio: Area G, early medieval phase from the last quarter of the 9th century (Bulgarelli et al 2005, 157, modified)*

*Fig 13*

*Noli (SV); San Paragorio: Area G, detail of burnt timbers (Bulgarelli et al 2005, 157, modified)*

*Fig 14*

*Position with respect to coastline of the three excavation sites in Noli (SV), Port area (1), centre of San Paragorio (2), former railway station area (3)*

phase marked by burnt deposits including wooden beams (Geltrudini et al 2007a, 38). This material provided new and significant evidence not only for the correct dimensions of the spatial development of Noli's early medieval phase (Frondoni et al 2006, 104-106; Parodi 2007, 125-127), but, even more importantly, for artefactual studies. The finds from these excavations will constitute an essential contribution to the overall understanding of the territory's socio-economic transformation between Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (Lamboglia 1973, 66-69; Ferretti 1982, 18-19; Varaldo 2002, 55-56; Varaldo 2003, 165-166; Frondoni et al 2006, 98-101).

## Conclusions

This recent archaeological work in Noli has produced key results, confirming that the early settlement did not shift into the hills, but continued to develop with surprising consistency along the coast from the early Roman foundation of the settlement up to the end of the 9th century. Feudal changes in 1004 caused territorial reorganisation resulting in the centre of the settlement moving to the base of Mount Orsino, on whose summit the feudal castle was built. The castle's first wall was followed by others that moved down the hill to surround the medieval village.

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