

# Mediterranean and Ligurian ceramics in Genoa in the XII and XIII centuries

## New data from the excavation of the Embriaci Tower

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Archaeological excavations performed by the Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Liguria, between 2000 and 2004 in the area of Santa Maria delle Grazie La Nuova (Figure 1) have yielded new data concerning the settlement in the 'Collina di Castello' from the Iron Age to Modern age.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, and concerning the middle ages, the discovery of the structures of the *curia Embriacorum* (the urban settlement of the Embriaci family) and the investigation of the filling layers of the base of a square tower dating back to the first half of the twelfth century showed new information on the circulation of Mediterranean and Ligurian ceramics in Genoa between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The importance of this new archaeological context after forty years of research in Liguria concerning the circulation of ceramics produced around the Mediterranean area<sup>2</sup> have suggested that we should examine some of the important aspects of this discovery, even if the restoration and examination of the finds is still at an early stage. Only an overall and comprehensive study of the excavation context will yield a correct classification of types and a morphological and quantitative analysis will allow us to understand the 'choice' aspects upon which this specific group of imported and Ligurian ceramics were used in Genoa between the mid-12th and 13th centuries.

The first archaeological phase recorded in the area of the S. Maria delle Grazie Church is represented by a wall and by anthropic layers which can be dated to the late 6th century B.C. The structure can be associated to the first period of urban definition of the area which is documented also by other evidence within the S. Maria in Passione complex.<sup>3</sup> Further works in the area have preceded the building of a portion of the curtain wall of the Genoese oppidum (mid-5th century B.C.), with a postern gate, which was partially destroyed in the first half of the 4th century B.C. in order to allow the construction of a room or a basement cellar. The area was progressively abandoned from the 3rd century B.C., possibly due to a growing instability of the slope, recent landslides and the formation of layers of runoff. A new period of settlement is dated to the late Republican age, showing the creation of terracing.

A new re-organization of the area, with a regularization of the anthropic layers and the building

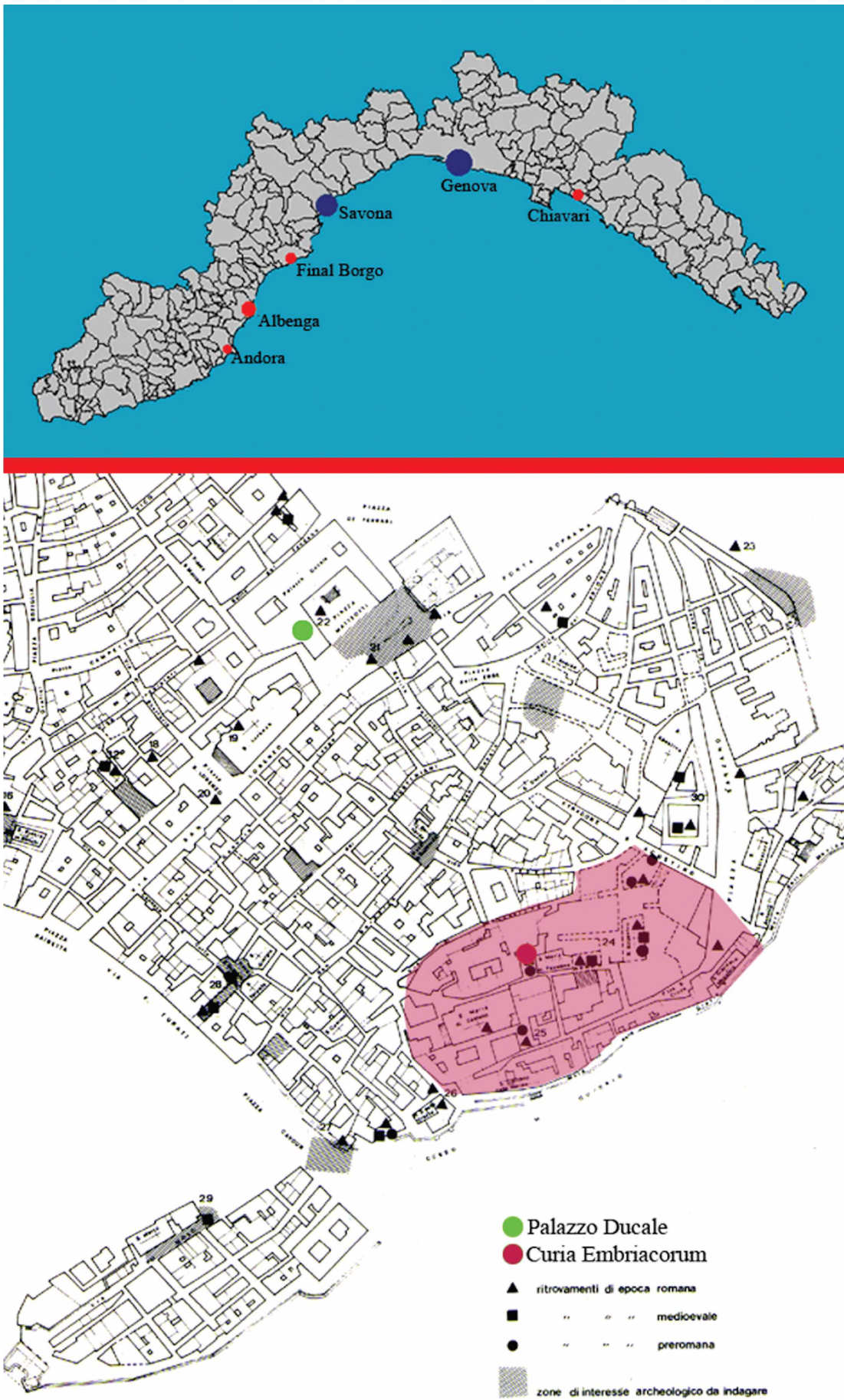
of two parallel wall structures, is dated to the 10th–11th centuries A.D., when the Collina di Castello becomes the object of a renewed period of building, linked to the fortified presence of the Genoese bishop.<sup>4</sup> This evidence of settlement precedes the building of the structures pertaining to the *curia Embriacorum*. In relation to these phases, the excavation has yielded the base of the large square tower and its connection with the curtain walls which defined the first perimetric border. The tower is built on a square plan, with walls about 2m thick, constructed with squared stone blocks. These define an internal area of about 6 square metres which was paved with limestone slabs. The Southern side of the tower, which has been incorporated into more recent structures, is the only one which retains a height of about 15 metres. The external masonry presents bossed blocks which are quite large and carefully carved.

The archaeological analysis of the tower's masonry has allowed us to date it to the first half of the 12th century.<sup>5</sup> The internal stratigraphy of the tower's base shows evidence of the building site, a period of abandonment, upon which was a deposit with many shards of glass, ceramic fragments and animal bones. These layers have also yielded fragments of imported ceramics from all of the Mediterranean area which can be dated to the second half of the 12th century and which are characterized by a small percentage of fracturing and can often be completely reconstructed or are even complete.

Between the 14th and 15th century the fall of the Embriaci family determined a change in the use of the area, which began to host commercial and crafting activities.<sup>6</sup> A first female religious community was established during the 14th century while in the central years of the 15th century the construction of the S. Maria church and monastery were begun.

The context yielded a considerable number of artefacts (at least 400 ceramic objects) relative to kitchen, storage and tableware of the *curia* of the Embriaci family, used between the 12th and 13th century. Examples of common ceramics are mainly pots and jugs intended for liquids and for preserving food. The closed shapes sometimes feature a sparse lead glaze (invetriatura 'a macchia'). The archaeometric analysis of the ceramic body – performed by Claudio Cappelli – have determined the presence of four distinct

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**Figure 1**  
Urban sites of Liguria. Genova and the excavation areas of Palazzo Ducale and S. Maria delle Grazie la Nuova (Curia Embriacorum).

**Figure 2** left

S. Maria delle Grazie la Nuova: glazed frying pan.

**Figure 3** below

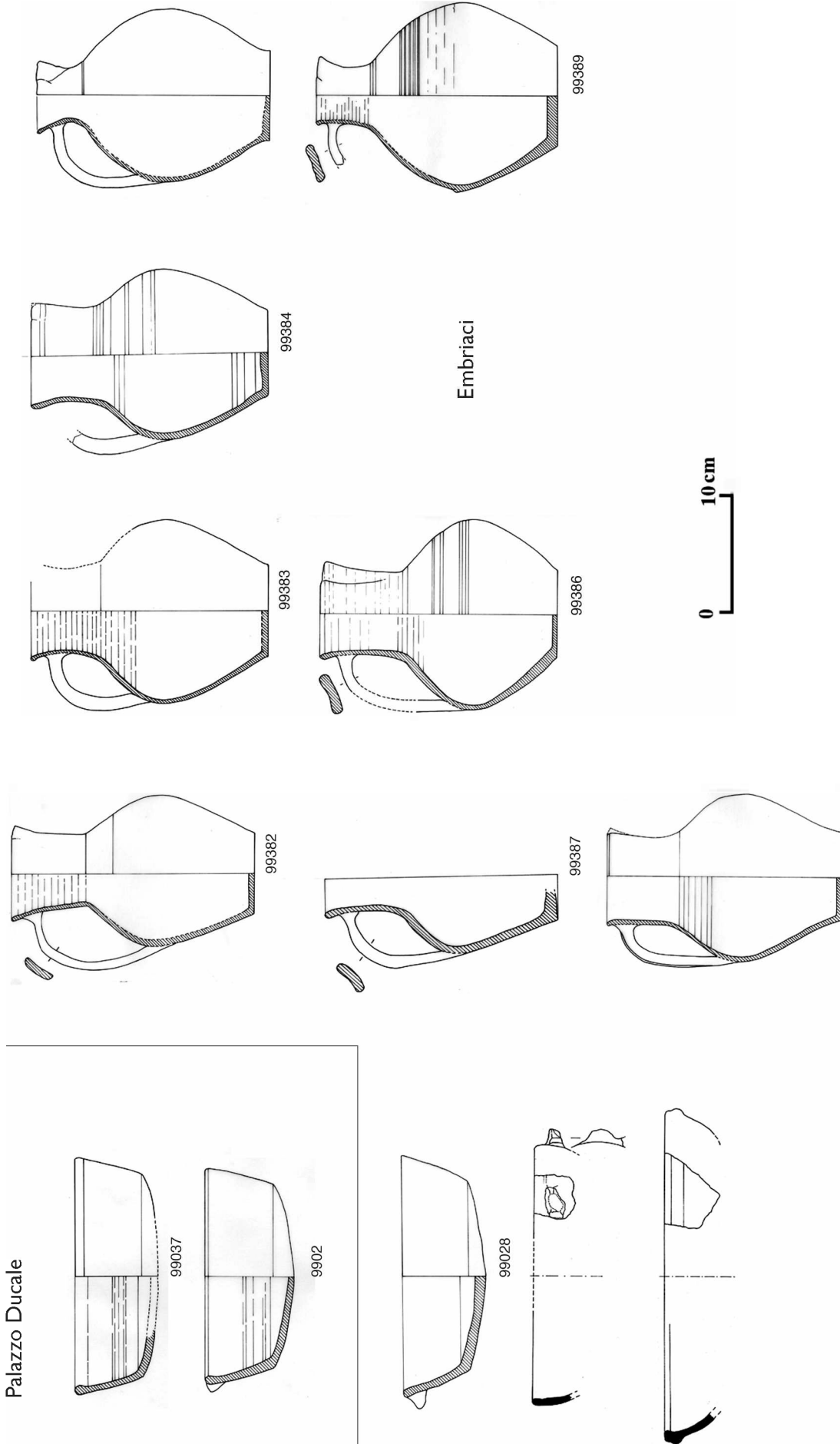
S. Maria delle Grazie la Nuova: coarse type and sparse glazed type jugs



mineralogical and petrographical groups. Besides a Ligurian production (specifically from Savona) of lead glazed frying pans, featuring a characteristic single small boss handle, which can be dated from the second half of the 12th and 13th centuries (Figure 1), we also wish to draw attention to a group of pottery for cooking (frying pans, pots) and jugs, featuring a characteristic ceramic body that were found specifically in the Northern Tyrrhenian area (Pisa, Genoa, Marseille) and (few fragments) in the Eastern Mediterranean area (Acre, Israel)<sup>7</sup> (Figure 2). Another group comprises a series of frying pans and jugs covered with a dark brown lead glaze, and which can be assigned to the 'sparse glaze' group. The mineralogical analysis of this group may suggest a possible production in

Liguria (but not in Savona) or in the Anatolian–Aegean area. (Figure 3 and 4). Among the pottery used for storage there is at least one amphora produced in the Eastern Mediterranean area, very similar to a type which was widely known and found in the Northern Tyrrhenian area (Marseille, Corsica, Liguria).<sup>8</sup> Furthermore there is also a fragment of an Islamic jar featuring moulded decoration.<sup>9</sup>

Tableware is exemplified especially by open shapes for individual use (dishes and bowls) slipped and covered with a green monochrome lead glaze or tin glaze, which can be assigned to various types known in Liguria dating to the 12th and mid-13th centuries<sup>10</sup> and which testify to a precise taste for using tableware characterized by a monochrome green colour.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 4** Frying pans and jugs from Palazzo Ducale top left and S. Maria della Grazie la Nuova (Curia Embriacorum)



**Figure 5** above left

S. Maria delle Grazie la Nuova: cobalt and manganese ware

**Figure 6** left

S. Maria delle Grazie la Nuova: monochrome slip ware

**Figure 7** above

S. Maria delle Grazie la Nuova: archaic tyrrhenian sgraffito (an unusual monochrome version)

A special role was given to the large open shapes of *cobalt and manganese ware* produced in Tunisia.<sup>12</sup> The usual decorations are zoomorphic and pseudo-epigraphical (Figure 5). It is important to recall the presence of an example of ‘*cuerda seca total*’, which can be dated to the 11th – first half of the 12th centuries. This type of ware – produced in al-Andalus – is quite rare in the archaeological contexts of Liguria.<sup>13</sup> Ceramics imported from Western Islam (Syria and Egypt) mainly comprise objects made from a siliceous body and an alkaline glaze<sup>14</sup> with underpainted or incised decoration.<sup>15</sup> A group – or better yet, a part of a tableware set – comprises a series of plates decorated with ‘*metallic lustre*’ – these are very deteriorated and are now undergoing restoration – whose origin might be from Spain.<sup>16</sup>

The Anatolian–Aegean area and the Syrian–Palestinian coast have yielded polychrome sgraffito ceramics (including *Zeuxippus ware* class II), monochrome slip pottery and glazed slip ware with green splashed decoration whose study will have to be performed with the support of archaeometric analysis.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, the monochrome green slip ware (Figure 6) and the monochrome green lead glazed ceramics appear to make up the greater part of the tableware

sets. Products from Central and Southern Italy, Sicily and Apulia – respectively *Spiral ware*, *Gela ware* and *protomaiolica* – make up a numerically rather poor group, but which is, nonetheless, quite simple to place into context, since their presence in Ligurian contexts is testified from the beginnings of the 13th centuries.<sup>18</sup> The set of ceramics discovered is completed with the Ligurian production of *Archaic Tyrrhenian Sgraffito* (*graffita arcaica tirrenica*), *Monochrome slip ware* from Savona and *Ligurian protomaiolica*,<sup>19</sup> whose dating and origin are currently being debated.<sup>20</sup> The analysis of the ceramic shapes and their morphology and decoration show the presence of several examples of *Archaic Tyrrhenian Sgraffito* (polychrome but also in the rarer monochrome version) which are quite different from the usual production from Savona (Figure 7).

The peculiar privileged context and the area in which it was discovered, within the Genoese settlement of the Embriaci family, allows for an articulated and complex view of ceramics imported from the Islamic and Byzantine part of the Mediterranean or locally produced at the end of 12th and in the 13th century. The importing of ceramics, and also their use within domestic Genoese households, must be correlated

with the presence of Genoese colonies in the Levant and in the Eastern Mediterranean,<sup>21</sup> to the aspects of commercial activities and should also be contextualized regarding the topic of circulation of knowledge and know-how which characterized the Mediterranean area during the central centuries of the Middle Ages.

## Endnotes

- 1 Melli *et al.* 2004, pp. 49–57; Melli, Benente 2006.
- 2 Cabona, Gardini, Pizzolo 1984; Gardini 1992; Gardini 1993, Gardini 2000; Benente 1996; Benente 2001; Capelli *et al.* 2001; Benente *et al.* 2002.
- 3 Melli 1999.
- 4 Cagnana 1997, pp.82–92.
- 5 Boato 2004, p. 59.
- 6 Melli 1982.
- 7 Baldassarri, Benente, Capelli 2009; Avissar, Stern 2005, p.95.
- 8 Démians d'Archimbaud, Vallauri 1999.
- 9 Gardini 2000, p. 277; Benente 1996, p. 351; Palazzi *et al.* 2003, pp.218–219.
- 10 Capelli *et al.* 2001; Frondoni, Palazzi, Parodi 2001.
- 11 Mannoni 1975, p. 39; Cabona, Gardini, Pizzolo 1986, pp.461–464; pp. 469–470.
- 12 Benente *et al.* 2002 ; Berti 2002.
- 13 Berti, Gelichi 1992, pp. 24–25; Gómez Martínez 2002, p. 29; Berti, Renzi Rizzo 2005, p.174
- 14 Also called *Soft-past monochrome ware*, and *Under-glaze painted soft-past ware*. Avissar, Stern 2005, pp.25–33.
- 15 Gardini 2000, p. 275, Benente 2001, pp. 146–148.
- 16 Berti 1998, pp.246–247.
- 17 Gardini 1993.
- 18 Gardini 1997, pp.80–81; Benente 2001, pp. 156–157.
- 19 Gardini, Benente, Sfrecola 1993, pp.13–23.
- 20 Capelli *et al.* 2002; Maggi 2008.
- 21 The Embriaci hold Gibelletto (Jbail) and members of the clan are also in Acre (Akko), Tripoli and other towns in the East until the fall of the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem. After 1291 they are back in Cyprus and elsewhere.

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## Résumé

Les fouilles archéologiques réalisées par la Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Liguria entre 2000 et 2004 dans la région de Santa Maria delle Grazie La Nuova ont mis à jour de nouvelles informations sur les sites d'habitation dans la 'Collina di Castello' de l'âge de fer à l'ère moderne. Plus spécifiquement, au Moyen Âge, la découverte de structures du curia Embriacorum (habitation urbaine de la famille Embriaci) et l'analyse des couches de remplissage d'une tour carrée datant de la première moitié du 12e siècle ont fourni de nouvelles données sur la circulation des céramiques méditerranéennes et liguriennes à Gênes entre les 12e et 13e siècles.

## Zusammenfassung

Archäologische Ausgrabungen, die zwischen 2000 und 2004 von der Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Liguria im Gebiet von Santa Maria delle Grazie La Nuova durchgeführt wurden, haben neue Daten zur Besiedlung an der "Collina di Castello" von der Eisenzeit bis zur Neuzeit ergeben. Insbesondere und mit Bezug auf das Mittelalter haben die Entdeckung der Bauten der curia Embriacorum (des städtischen Anwesens der Familie Embriaci) und die Untersuchung der Füllschichten am Fundament eines quadratischen Turms, der in die erste Hälfte des 12. Jh. zurückdatiert, neue Informationen über die Verteilung von Keramik aus dem Mittelmeerraum und Ligurien in Genua zwischen dem 12. und 13. Jh. ergeben.

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