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Franca Caterina PAPPARELLA, *Some examples of burials with weapons in southern Italy (6th-8th century)*

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SOME EXAMPLES OF BURIALS WITH WEAPONS IN SOUTHERN ITALY (6TH-8TH CENTURY)

Franca Caterina Papparella*

Keyword: weapons, funerary objects, southern Italy, Lombards, Byzantines, acculturation/integration

Parole chiave: armi, corredi funerari, Italia meridionale, Longobardi, Bizantini, acculturazione/integrazione

Abstract:

In this contribution we will analyze those necropolises in southern Italy that have returned weapons as funerary objects. The problem of the presence of weapons in burials between the 6th and 8th centuries is much debated, whether it is an element of ethnic and social distinction, especially in the territories of southern Italy where there is a process of acculturation and integration between the Lombards and the Roman-Byzantine tradition.

In questo contributo si analizzano quelle necropoli dell'Italia meridionale che hanno restituito armi come oggetti funerari. Il problema della presenza di armi nelle sepolture datate tra il VI e l'VIII secolo è molto dibattuto, se si tratti di un elemento di distinzione etnica e sociale, soprattutto nei territori dell'Italia meridionale dove si assiste a un processo di acculturazione e integrazione tra i Longobardi e la tradizione romano-bizantina.

In the study of funerary archaeology, great attention is paid to the analysis of the grave trousseau, one of the most emblematic, significant and, at the same time, controversial constituent factors of funerary costume. The trousseau, as a tomb deposit, should be read in its complex semantics: ritual offerings, functional elements for clothing, elements for personal adornment. Other types of objects, such as work tools and weapons, are included in this broad panorama. The latter, together with jewellery, are considered indicators of the *social person* and identity character of the individual laid in the grave. The discovery of weapons in burials is commonly considered to be of Germanic character, a sign of ethnic distinction. However, the clear distinction that has been attempted to be made between autochthonous and immigrant populations, with regard to the choice of grave trousseau, places certain limits on research. In this regard, the expression “archaeologically the dead are indigenous, anthropologically they are Germanic”, used by Hugo Blake in 1983 to explain the dichotomy found in the funerary context of Pettinara in Umbria, still remains illustrative and explanatory.

In this way, we get to the definition of that process of mutual integration/evolution established between “Romans” and Lombards, demonstrating the now outdated distinction that had been firmly established between natives and “barbarians”. And still on the subject of ethnic identity, the reference we find in Paolo Delogu is explicit when, in his examination of the early medieval necropolises, he asserts that: “[...] L'intenzione di isolare la 'germanicità' – rimasta sinora senza risultati – negli insediamenti di superficie, dovrà quindi prima o poi rassegnarsi a limitare le proprie pretese anche nell'analisi dei materiali provenienti dalle necropoli”. Consequently, an ethnic interpretation cannot derive solely from the deposit of the trousseau in weapons and/or gold, but it requires other elements of identifying attribution, and weapons should not be read solely as a military attribute, but also as a symbolic element representing the social and legal status of the deceased, of a man, that is, a free man of high rank¹.

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¹ Cf. the discussion in AUGENTI 2016, pp. 217-223, with particular reference to the deposition and choice of elements of trousseau.

Weapons are considered first and foremost “una parte dell’identità di genere maschile dell’aristocrazia: nelle fonti scritte, anche quelle di età carolingia, la spada non è infatti considerata un’arma in senso stretto, bensì l’indispensabile complemento dell’abbigliamento di un aristocratico, anche in tempo di pace”². Weapons were an element of social *discrimen* so that we can identify, for *Langobardia minor*, in a chapter of the law of Arechi II of 774, in which a profound social differentiation is affirmed with the ousting from the army of those *Arimanni* whose modest economic conditions did not allow them to be armed as knights³.

The deposition of the weapons and their suspension belts is read as a symbol of power and not as a realistic transposition, a “espressione rituale di una condizione etnica, sociale e forse ideologica basata sullo *status* di guerriero” and not on the warrior activity carried out in life by the deceased. In this regard, we cite the case of the 6th-8th century necropolis of Collegno in Piedmont, where weapons are attested in many tombs, but the individuals are in very poor physical condition, with diseases or malformations found from birth or childhood. This example leads one to wonder whether in this case, too, weapons could be elements of distinction and attribution for the activity carried out in life, given the state of health of the buried individuals, and not rather elements of *memoria* of belonging to a certain legal status⁴. Belts were also attributed apotropaic power and were laid unworn⁵, or intentionally broken⁶ and defunct within the burial⁷.

The importance of the grave trousseau and the significance attributed to the weapons is explained and traced by Marcello Rotili⁸ in the episode of Giselpert, Duke of Verona. The latter, in around 760, had Alboin’s tomb opened in order to seize not only the precious objects (jewellery and ornaments), but also the weapons, as they were considered to be charged with magical power. They were, in fact, objects that had belonged, or presumed to have belonged, to the condottiere Turismondo, son of the Gepid king Turisindo, whom Alboin had killed in battle, and to King Cunimondo, killed in a duel. The value and sacredness assigned to weapons is identified in the act of the duke’s taking possession of the sword as his first object. “L’episodio dimostra che persino all’interno della società longobarda ormai cristianizzata, nel rispetto di valori stabilizzati nell’antropologia culturale di questo popolo, le armi conservarono a lungo un valore sacrale; ciò significa che per molti decenni la progressiva acquisizione della cultura cristiana ha dovuto coesistere con manifestazioni di fedeltà al paganesimo odinico e alla mitologia delle origini, nutrita di valori militari e magici”.

It is evident that this reciprocity documented in the simultaneous deposition of artefacts of the Romano-Byzantine tradition makes it difficult to univocally interpret the identity of the archaeological materials and testimonies as products and fruit of a complex and heterogeneous cultural and social context.

There is not much material evidence in southern Italy in the 6th-8th centuries, the period in which the Lombards arrived and settled in the Byzantine territories in the south, as documented in various written sources. The numerical paucity of graves containing weapons and purely allogenic evidence has led to the publication, in the vast bibliographic apparatus, of a recent contribution in which the question is raised as to “Quanto erano Longobardi i Longobardi meridionali e dove sono i Longobardi in Italia meridionale”. Starting from this assumption, the emphasis can be placed on the late-Roman and Byzantine substratum that is best known and evident in the various material testimonies, which lead to an argument about the relationship of acculturation, integration, hybridisation⁹ and mutual intermingling, about an already defined form of representation of power, of alternative types of identity, noting a diversity in the funerary practices of the Duchy of Benevento, which are defined with diluted traits, “tanto da svanire in un complesso mosaico di compresenze e abitudini funerarie” far from the identifying traits typical of the Lombards in northern Italy¹⁰. However, one cannot deny a “Germanic” presence with its own characteristics in Southern Italy, historically documented, already during the Greco-Gothic war, by the toponymy and onomastics present in the territories¹¹ concerned and by some funerary practices that are influenced by their own tradition, as in the case of the necropolis of Benevento, Pezza Piana.

In the light of what has been said so far and underlining the cultural fluidity to which the southern territory (fig. 1) witnessed in the 6th-8th centuries is undisputed, we will analyse the necropolises that have yielded weapons, such as grave trousseau, consistent with the site of discovery, in which cultural and social peculiarities can be traced.

² LA ROCCA 2000, p. 33; LA ROCCA 2000a, pp. 50-51.

³ ROTILI 2012, pp. 447 – 477.

⁴ SETTIA 1994, p. 63; the issue is also addressed in numerous other contributions, including: LA ROCCA 1992, p. 28; DELOGU 1997, p. 426; LA ROCCA 1997, pp. 32, 37-38; AUGENTI 2016, pp. 221-222.

⁵ T. 44 of Pagliarone di Marsico Nuovo and T. 49 of Il Finocchiaro di Lavello are cited for the area under examination: see below.

⁶ T. 3 from Lavello, Il Finocchiaro, and t. 71 from Venosa also re-

turned only parts of the belt: see below.

⁷ On this issue and the transmission of part of objects to blood relatives, see GIOSTRA 2018, pp. 225-231.

⁸ ROTILI 2021, p. 146.

⁹ Cf. AUGENTI, p. 220

¹⁰ LA ROCCA, ZORNETTA 2022, p. 85.

¹¹ Cf. SABATINI 1963-64, pp. 125-249; DE PRESBITERIS 2010.

Fig. 1. Southern Italy. In red the sites mentioned in the text (graphic elaboration eng. A.A. Zappani).

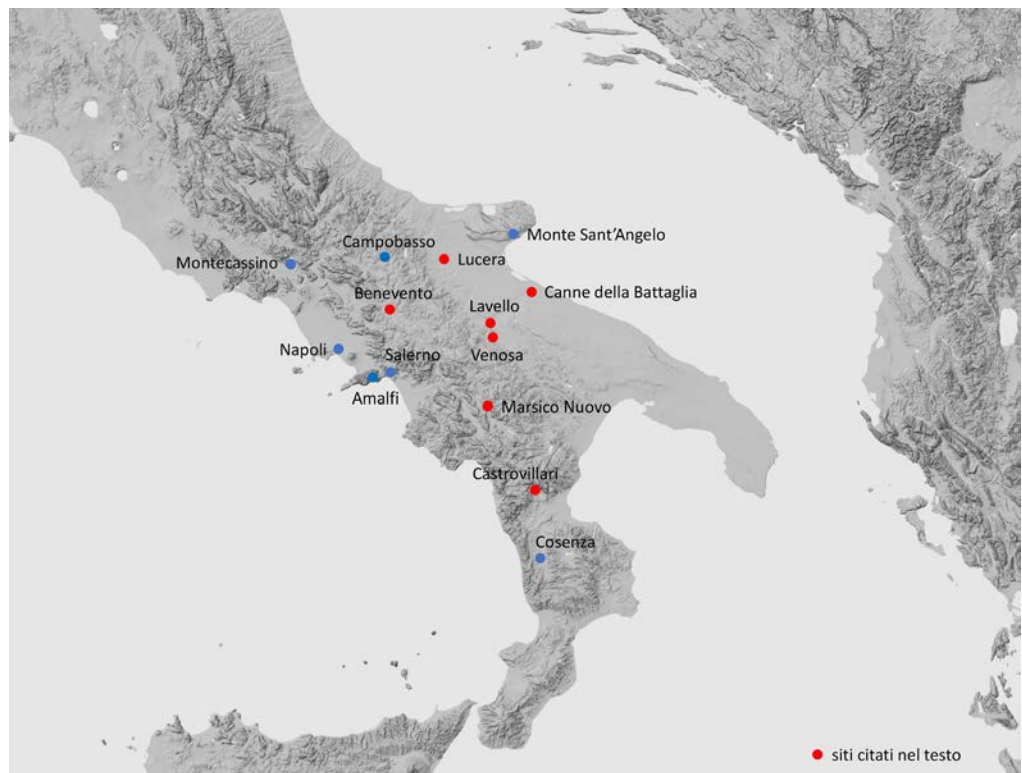
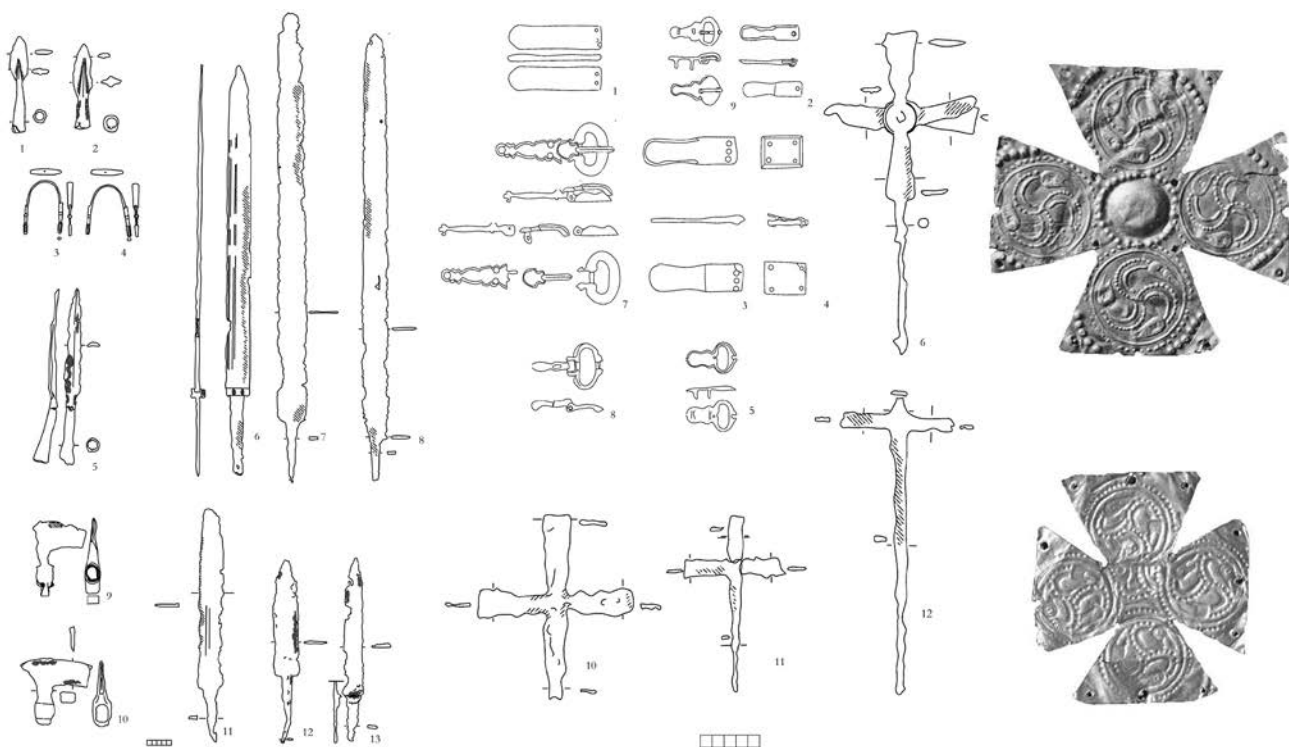


Fig. 2. Benevento, loc. Pezza Piana, grave goods (after ROTILI 2012).



At Benevento, the seat of the Duchy, in the locality of Pezza Piana¹² (fig. 2), in 1927, an extensive necropolis datable between the 6th and the beginning of the 8th century was found, which yielded a conspicuous number of grave trousseau, including weapons (axes, *scramasax*, swords, spearheads, a shield), belt elements, jewellery (earrings, armillas, necklaces), and two gold crosses. The tombs, with travertine roofing, have not been stratigraphically investigated and much data has been lost, but the type of grave trousseau was considered typical of the Lombard *Arimanni*,

¹² The numerous studies on Longobard Benevento are due to Marcello Rotili to whom we refer; for the Pezza Piana necropolis see,

among others, ROTILI 2012.

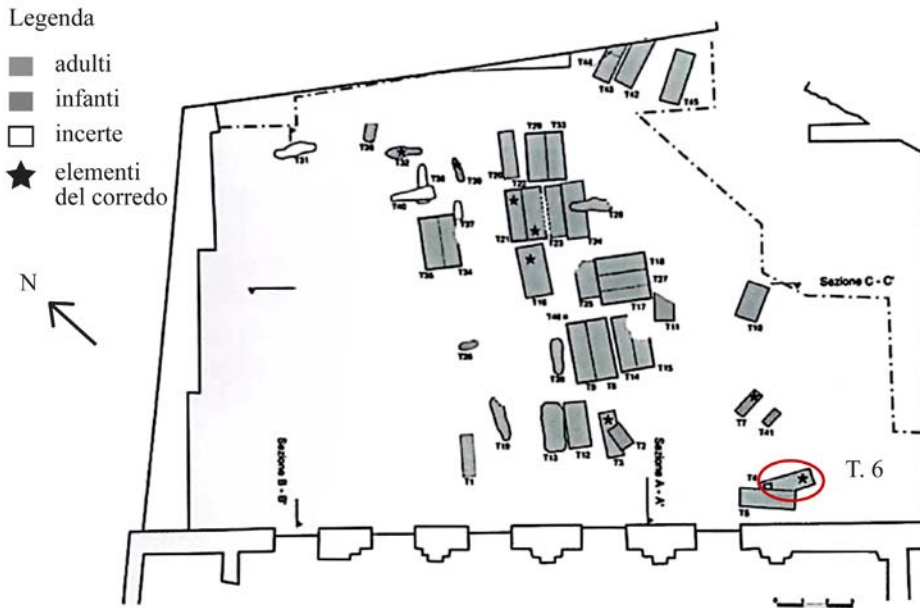


Fig. 3. Benevento, Museum of the Sannio. Planimetry of the necropolis (after TOMAY 2009).

T. 6

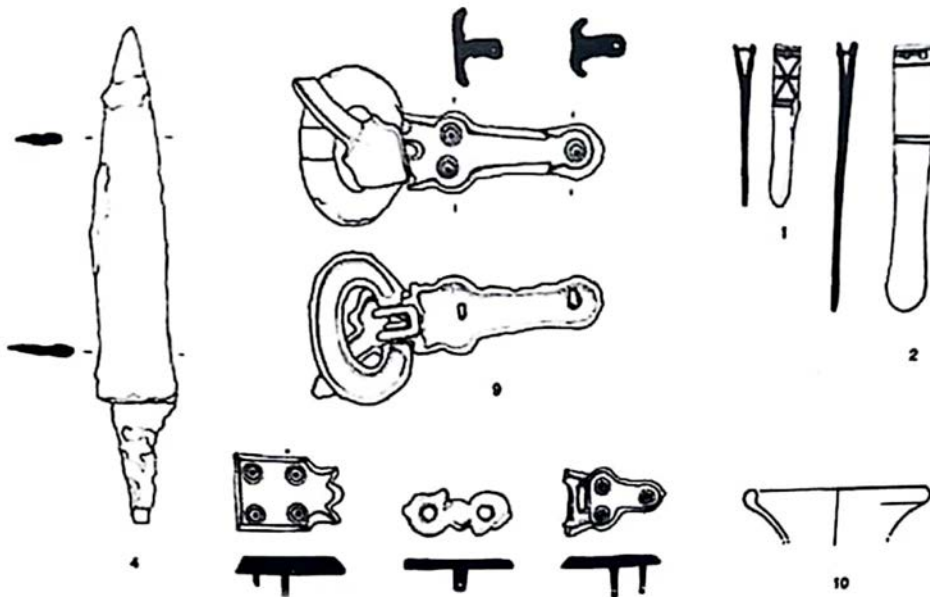


Fig. 3a. Benevento, Museum of the Sannio, grave goods of tomb 6 (after TOMAY 2009).

i.e. the freemen of the *exercitus*. However, “[...] Se la produzione di spade e *scramasax*, secondo la raffinata tecnica della saldatura di lame in ferro carburato all’ossatura centrale in fogli di metallo dolce, saldati e ritorti in maniera da produrre l’effetto della damaschinatura, riflette modelli ampiamente diffusi in ambito germanico, le fibbie di cintura e alcuni monili appaiono derivati o influenzati dalla cultura ‘romano-bizantina’”¹³.

In the area of the Sannio Museum¹⁴, also in Benevento, 46 tombs have been identified (fig. 3), part of a larger funerary nucleus located on the eastern elevation of the city and ascribed between the 5th and the first half of the 8th century. The grave trousseau, present in only 8 burials, made up of a ceramic or glass vessel and elements of personal ornamentation in the case of female or child burials. Tomb 6 differs from the others in its tomb type and grave trousseau (fig. 3a). An iron knife, a glass bottle rim, plaques and bronze pendants of a belt dating back to the 7th century were found; the tips and plaques are compared with similar artefacts from tomb 16 at Vicenne in Campochiaro, Molise, a necropolis known for particular funerary uses, including the deposition of weapons and horses, which refer to further discussion.

¹³ Refer to ROTILI 1977, for the analysis of the necropolis and for the first important and still valid study on the metallurgical technique of weapons with a large cataloguing apparatus of the finds and related macroscopic and microscopic analyses of the metal (pp. 34-74; 130-

140 and related tables; ROTILI 2021, p. 143, also for comparisons with the weapons found in Borgovercelli. Cf. EBANISTA 2014, pp. 445-471 (447).

¹⁴ Most recently EBANISTA 2014; ROTILI 2021, p. 158, fig. 24.



Fig. 4. Canne di Battaglia, Langsax (after CORRENTE 2007).

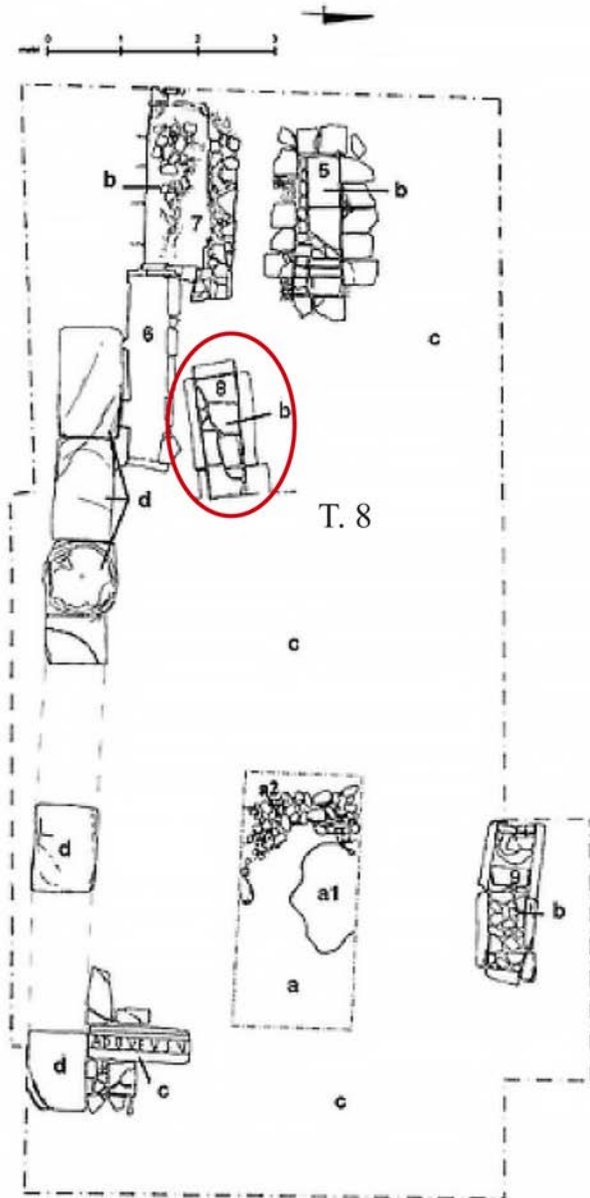


Fig. 5a. Lucera, Castle, tomb 8 (after ROTILI 2021).

Fig. 5. Lucera, Castle. Planimetry of the necropolis with highlighting of tomb 8 (after FABBRI 2008).

Turning to the Apulian territory, we can mention the *langsax* (fig. 4) from the second half of the 7th century found in an earthen and uncovered burial at the early Christian basilica of Canne della Battaglia¹⁵, and the grave trousseau from tomb 8 discovered in 2004 (figg. 5-5a), in the castle of Lucera, seat of the gastaldate. The burial, characterised by a masonry case and brick deposition bed, yielded a sword, a *langsax* and a bronze astylar cross (fig. 5a). The *spatha* with tang must have had a wooden handle and scabbard. Of the scabbard, the bronze lateral bands at the attachment point of the suspension system were preserved. Decorative elements are the numerous studs with a hemispherical head and knurled ferrule, widespread from the second thirty years of the 7th century onwards¹⁶. The grave trousseau are referable to a male burial and the 'prestigious panòpia' consisting of *spatha* and *langsax*, placed along the left side, points

¹⁵ CORRENTE 2007, pp. 223-224.

¹⁶ Cf. FABBRI 2008, pp. 327-341; CORRENTE, ZAMBETTA 2014, p. 161.



T. 48

Fig. 6. Venosa, Suspension belt, tomb 48 (after COSCARELLA 2008).



Fig. 6a. Venosa. Elements of suspension belt, tomb 71 (after COSCARELLA 2008).

towards the identification of a Lombard warrior, and the presence of a bronze processional cross leads to reasoning on the religious beliefs of the inhumed, on the value attributable to the cross and on the broader cultural aspects of reference¹⁷.

The territory of Basilicata shows just as many interesting examples of grave trousseau in weapons dating back to the 7th century. Venosa returns two burials of armed men¹⁸. From tomb 71 (fig. 6), find in the area of the *triconco* church, a medium *scramasax* and multiple belt trimmings was found (in bronze, brass, and silver *agemina* decoration), while from tomb 48, found behind the apse of the old church, an interesting and complete example of a multiple belt in chiselled bronze, composed of ten elements, was found (fig. 6a). It is worth noting the peculiarity of the main prong, which bears the inscription of the owner's Germanic name, engraved between a snake and a cross, an element found on other plaques of the belt.

The necropolis of Pagliarone in Marsico Nuovo (PZ)¹⁹ has yielded grave goods in association with other types of objects, such as ceramic and glass artefacts, from tombs 22, 43 and 44. Tomb 22 (fig. 7) is characterised by a long *scramasax* and an iron knife placed along the right side of the inhumed person. The particularity of the upward pointing tip of the *scramasax* would indicate the defunctionalisation ritual of the weapon²⁰, attributing it a symbolic value and meaning.

¹⁷ There is an extensive bibliography on the value of the cross symbol in Longobard burials: see, among others, GIOSTRA 2020, pp. 158-160; ROTILI 2021, pp. 144-146 and bibliography.

¹⁸ Cf. SALVATORE 1991, pp. 290-291; PAPPARELLA 2009, pp. 247-249; PAPPARELLA 2010, pp. 394-395; SOGLIANI 2020, pp. 277-279.

¹⁹ RUSSO, GUERRINI *et alii* 2009, pp. 96-102; PAPPARELLA 2010, pp. 394-395; RUSSO *et alii* 2012, pp. 265-282.

²⁰ Generally, the *scramasax* was laid to the left of the deceased, at the

level of the abdomen and along the arm. However, there are examples in which the weapon was laid with the tip pointing towards the head of the inhumed person and the handle towards the feet, to be read as meaning the defunctionalisation of the weapon. 'Interestingly, this practice of laying down the weapon upside down - compared to the normal position of use - never affects the *spatha* but possibly only the *scramasax*': PONTALTI 2017, pp. 143-228.

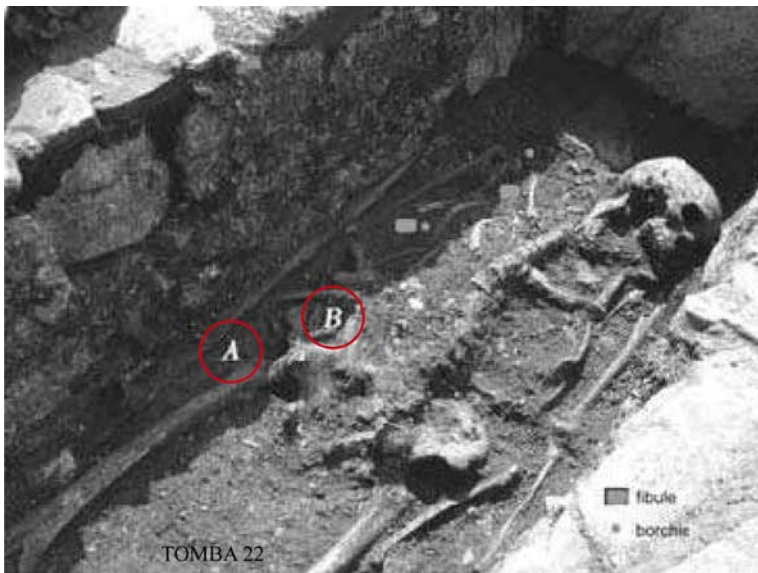


Fig. 7. Marsico Nuovo, loc. Pagliarone, tomb 22 (after RUSSO, GUERRINI *et alii* 2009).



Fig. 7a. Marsico Nuovo, loc. Pagliarone, tomb 43 (after Russo *et alii* 2012).

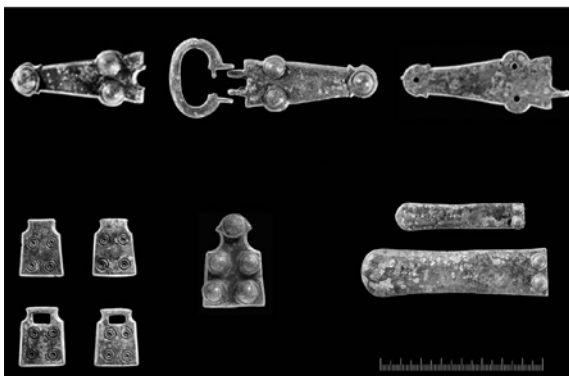
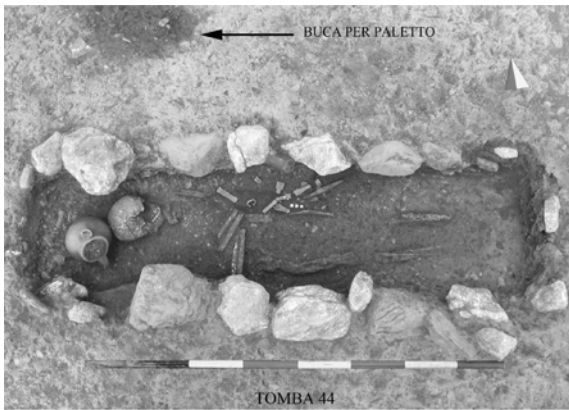


Fig. 7e. Marsico Nuovo, loc. Pagliarone, tomb 44, grave goods (after Russo *et alii* 2012).



Fig. 7b-d. Marsico Nuovo, loc. Pagliarone, tomb 43, grave goods (after Russo *et alii* 2012).

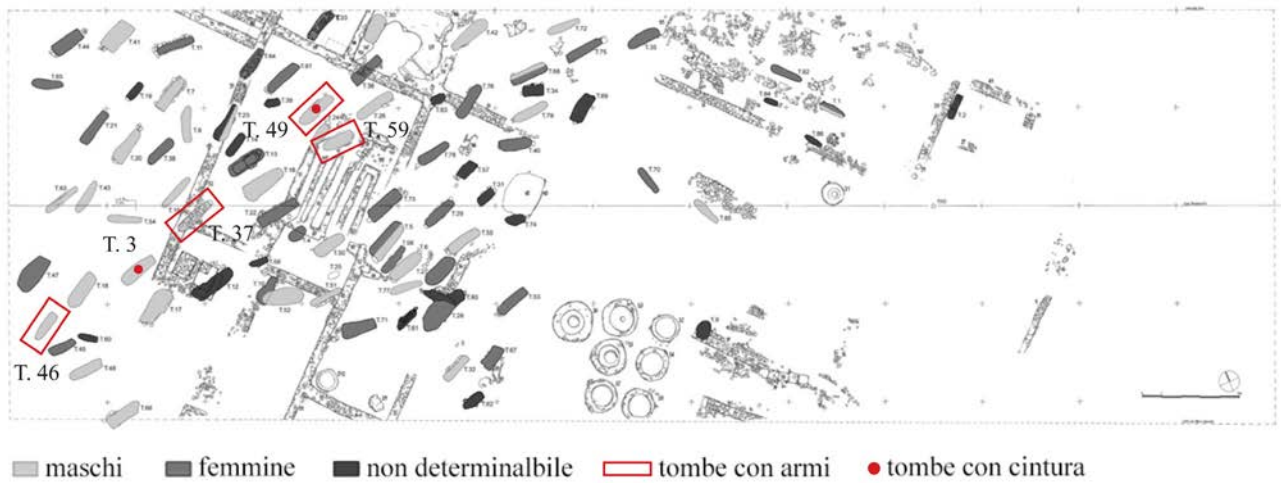


Fig. 8. Lavello, Il Finocchiaro (site 241). Planimetry of the necropolis (after CIRIELLO *et alii* 2015).

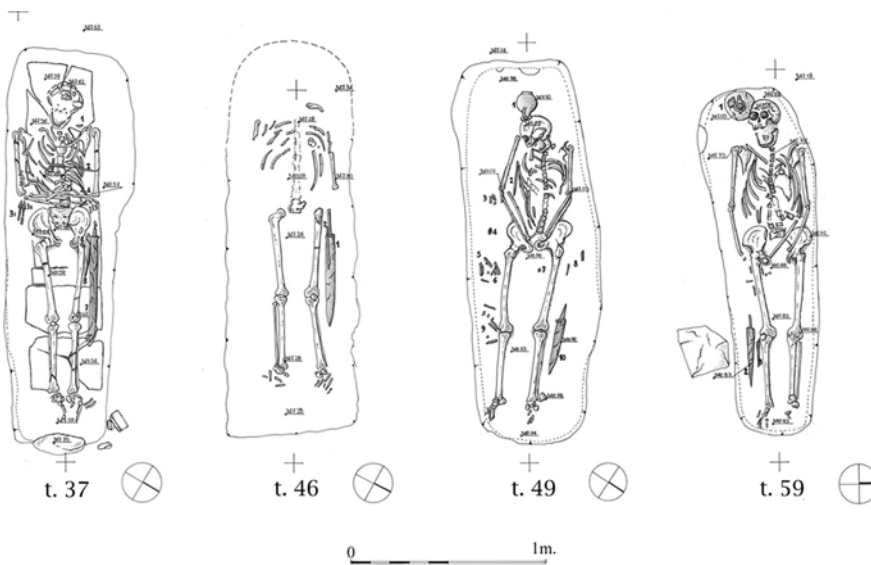


Fig. 8a. Lavello, Il Finocchiaro (site 241). Highlighting of graves with weapons (after CIRIELLO *et alii* 2015).

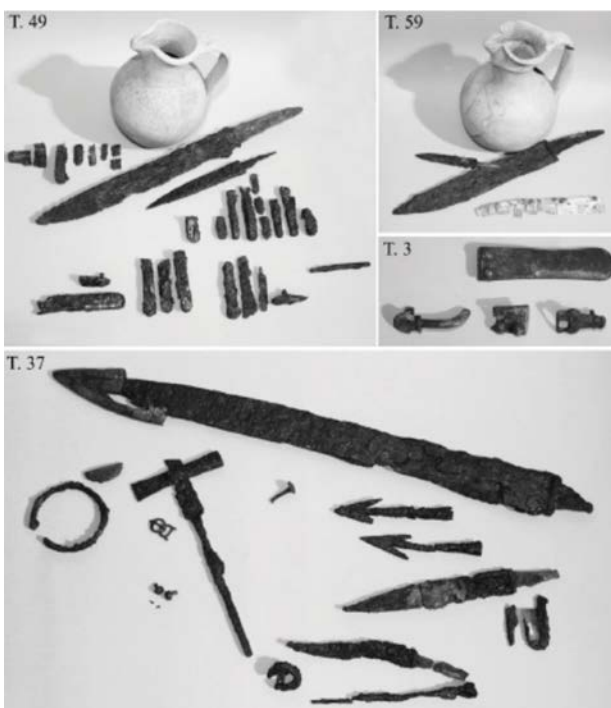


Fig. 8b. Lavello, Il Finocchiaro (site 241). Funerary trousseaus with weapons (after CIRIELLO *et alii* 2015).

Bisoma tomb 43 shows both inhumates deposited with a scramasax, of different sizes (one long: individual 1; one medium: individual 2), and a knife on their left side. Pertinent to Individual 2 are multiple belt seals and a pair of spurs placed near the feet²¹ (figg. 7a-7d)

Tomb 44 (fig. 7e) relates to an adult male individual. It is characterised by the presence on the outside of the tomb, in the direction of the head of the inhumed person, of a small hole, which can be interpreted as the negative trace of a pole, like those *signacula* mentioned by Paolo Diacono in his *Historia Langobardorum* (V, 34), and whose evidence can also be found in Calabria, in the locality of Celimarro di Castrovillari (CS). The inhumed person has a hole in the skull on the cause of which one can only speculate, in the absence of anthropological analyses. The grave trousseau consists of a five-piece belt, not worn, but laid along the left side of the deceased. Hanging from it were a dagger, a large square nail and a blade, all made of iron²².

²¹ Russo *et alii* 2012, pp. 269-272.

²² Russo *et alii* 2012, pp. 273-276. For a study on five-piece multiple belts, their social significance and product circulation: DE MARCHI, SIMONE ZOPFI 2014, pp. 73-92.



Fig. 9. Castrovillari, loc. Celimarro. Cusp of spear (after ROME 2001).

Fig. 9a. Celimarro. Horse-shaped fibula (after ROME 2001).



Fig. 9b. Celimarro. Reconstructive drawing of the necropolis with poles (after ROME 2001).



In Lavello (PZ), in the locality of Il Finocchiaro (site 241)²³, a cemetery (fig. 8) was identified characterised by the presence of 4 burials with weapons (tombs 37, 46, 49, 59: fig. 8a) and one (t. 3) with only the elements of a multiple belt, lacunose. The 4 male burials with weapons are aligned in the central part of the burial context. Tomb 37 yielded a medium *sax*, two swallow-tailed arrowheads with flared shafts, a dagger placed next to the sax on the left side, where a fire pin with folded looped head and a flint were also placed, a little above the sax. The latter are considered to be typical items of the 7th century male tool bag. Of particular note is the presence, on the chest of the inhumed person, of an iron astylar cross, obtained by coarsely welding two rectangular bars. Tomb 49 returns, in addition to the weapons, an ageminated multiple belts found laid vertically to the right of the inhumed person, therefore not worn, and a ceramic jug adjacent to the head (fig. 8b).

Calabria, a profoundly Byzantine territory, with the exception of the northern part, where there are *gastaldato* seats (Cassano, Cosenza, Laino), shows with the sepulchral context of Celimarro di Castrovillari (CS), a clear example of ‘cohabitation’ of populations with different funerary traditions.

The first news about the necropolis came in 1957, when eight burials were found, four of which Agostino Miglio reported had already been violated, and a ‘gladius and other weapons’, now dispersed, were found. Of the weapons, only the iron spear tip is preserved at the Castrovillari Museum (fig. 9). The other grave goods are interesting, such as the clay pottery for its documented morpho-typology, the decorated lead cross, and the zoomorphic fibula in the shape of a small horse (fig. 9a). The peculiarity of the necropolis, excavated at the end of the 1990s by the University Chair of Christian and Medieval Archaeology at Unical, is to be found in certain material evidence, such as the tomb typology (fig. 9b), the presence of pole holes (*pertiche*) excavated in the rocky bank, near the head of the burials²⁴, the

²³ CIRIELLO *et alii* 2015, pp. 109-124; SOGLIANI 2020, pp. 266-271; PAPPARELLA 2023, pp. 406-408.

²⁴ Paolo Diacono, *Historia Langobardorum*, V, 34: “[...] Ad Perticas autem locus ipse ideo dicitur, quia ibi olim perticae, id est tra-

bes, erectae steterant, quae ob hanc causam iuxta morem Langobardorum poni solebant: si quis enim in aliqua parte aut in bello aut quomocumque extinctus fuisset, consanguinei eius intra sepulchra sua perticam figebant, in cuius summitate columbam

completion of the *refrigerium* rite identified outside some tomb structures due to the presence of a hearth, traces of firedamp, fragments of fire pottery and goblet glasses²⁵.

From what has been said so far, it is evident that there is a sort of common thread running through the 6th-8th century burial contexts analysed in this portion of the area, which can be clearly read in the grave goods, i.e. those material testimonies in which the mixture of the Germanic and Roman-Byzantine cultural contexts is evident. Evidence, therefore, albeit with sometimes blurred contours, of the process of encounter and cultural and social integration that took place between the Lombards and Byzantines, where the weapons and related suspension belts laid in burials are indicative of a change in 7th-century burial practice, which should be read without preconceived generalisations. Weapons may take on symbolic value, belonging and/or *status*, an 'investment' made by the family to support or promote its position on a political and social level²⁶, just as belts, which were often intentionally laid broken inside the tomb, may indicate apotropaic values for the possessor in addition to the ostentation of the social role of the inhumed. The archaeological literature shows that such belts may not have been worn, but laid beside the inhumed person. The position in relation to the body of the inhumed would point towards the ritual significance of an offering-symbol of prestige and/or protection. An interesting issue concerns, moreover, the deposition of only some of the elements of the belt²⁷ or the association of seals, differing in style and chronology, which have been related to the hereditary transmission of what is considered a symbol of personal bond and recognised and distinctive *status*. The belt, or part of it, constitutes that object of dowry which, in its materiality, conveys, at the time of the individual's deposition, the *immaterial inheritance*, i.e. prestige and social relations, consensus and respect: factors useful to the social hierarchy²⁸.

ex ligno factam ponebant, quae illuc versa esset, ubi illorum dilectus obisset, scilicet ut sciri possit, in qua parte is qui defunctus fuerat quiesceret..

[...] That place is called 'alle pertiche' because once there were poles driven into the ground, according to a Longobard custom, and for this reason if one had died somewhere, in war or any other accident, his relatives would have planted a pole between their graves, on the top of which they would then place a wooden dove facing the place where their loved one had died. This was to know on which side he rested".

²⁵ ROMA 2001, pp. 29-50, 100-104, footnote 126; COSCARELLA 2001, pp. 51-58, 105-111; BRUNO, PAPPARELLA, pp. 71-91; PAPPARELLA 2009, card 146 and references in the text. A probable

horse harness element from the site of Timpone Santo Litano in S. Mauro Marchesato (KR) is reported at the current state of research: CORRADO 2004; PAPPARELLA 2009, pp. 31, 146. For the possible identification of some metal elements as parts of horse harnesses, of a bronze pyramidal stud, interpreted as the terminal button of a suspension belt for the sword, found in the Cyrotian territory, see CORRADO 2004, pp. 15-18.

²⁶ ROTILI 2021, p. 142.

²⁷ In the bibliography, it is often possible to find the definition of an incomplete belt, perhaps to be interpreted, in the light of the above, with intentional value.

²⁸ Cf. GIOSTRA 2018, pp. 226-229.

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