

THE MATERIAL SIDES OF MARRIAGE

WOMEN AND DOMESTIC ECONOMIES IN ANTIQUITY

Edited by

RIA BERG



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Woman with a jewel-box.

Ceiling fresco from the Constantinian Palace in Trier
(Photo: Courtesy Museum am Dom Trier).

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Powerful Women in Byzantine Liguria (554-568)

An Analysis of Late Antique Aristocracies based on Historical, Epigraphic and Archaeological sources

PAOLO DE VINGO

The aim of this contribution is to develop methodological-based considerations regarding a very complex issue: the relationship between archaeological research and the history of social groups and, specifically, the use of archaeological indicators to reconstruct various aspects of the transformation of Italian ruling groups between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. In particular, the analysis will focus on the role played by women during this period of change, examining a small but important group of epigraphic and archaeological sources from one of the areas reconquered by Justinian I after 553, i.e., the western Ligurian coastal zone. This area, the *Liguria Maritima* – governed by the *municipia* of *Albintimilium* (Ventimiglia), *Albingaunum* (Albenga) and *Vada Sabatia-Savo* (Vado Ligure-Savona) where political as well as episcopal hierarchies arose after 476 – remained under direct Byzantine control until 643 when it was conquered by the Langobards, like the rest of the territory that, from a socio-political perspective, formed the Roman-age *Regio IX* (fig. 1).¹

While this is, obviously, a limited perspective – since it does not take into account the numerous variables that, during the same period, involved other Italian regions governed for some time by the Byzantine authorities – it is also no less interesting, since during the transition of the Italian Late Roman society to the early medieval epoch the regions that once again fell under Byzantine control were of fundamental importance.²

These specific territorial contexts preserved the organisational form of the Roman State during the Late Antique centuries and, as such, played a leading role in the transition of this political-cultural legacy to the early medieval period. Such contexts were the main players in the complex transformation of the socio-economic organisational structure of the early Byzantine world following Justinian's reconquest, and during the profound changes that took place in the Italian peninsula between the end of the 6th and early 7th century. Finally, owing to their ties with the eastern authorities, the Italian Byzantine areas continued to be a privileged and active sector of a society that was quite complex – probably more intricate and structured than that of the Langobards which also continued to feel the effects – and characterised by extensive mobility.³

Based on these considerations it becomes necessary, first and foremost, to define – in a more precise manner than what has been realised to this point – the characteristics of the ruling social classes in the

¹ P. DE VINGO, 'Le trasformazioni insediative urbane nella Liguria maritime tra il V e il VII secolo sulla base delle fonti scritte e delle fonti archeologiche', in C. VARALDO (ed.), *Ai confini dell'impero. Insediamenti e fortificazioni bizantine nel Mediterraneo occidentale*, Genova-Bordighera, (Conference Proceedings, 14-17 March 2002), Bordighera 2011a, 323-407, in part. 323-24.

² E. ZANINI, 'Archeologia dello status sociale nell'Italia bizantina: tracce, segni e modelli interpretative', in G.P. BROGIOLO – A. CHAVARRÍA ARNAU (eds.), *Archeologia e Società tra tardo antico e alto medioevo*, Documenti di Archeologia 44, Mantua 2007, 23-46, in part. 23.

³ ZANINI, 'Archeologia dello status sociale', 23-24.

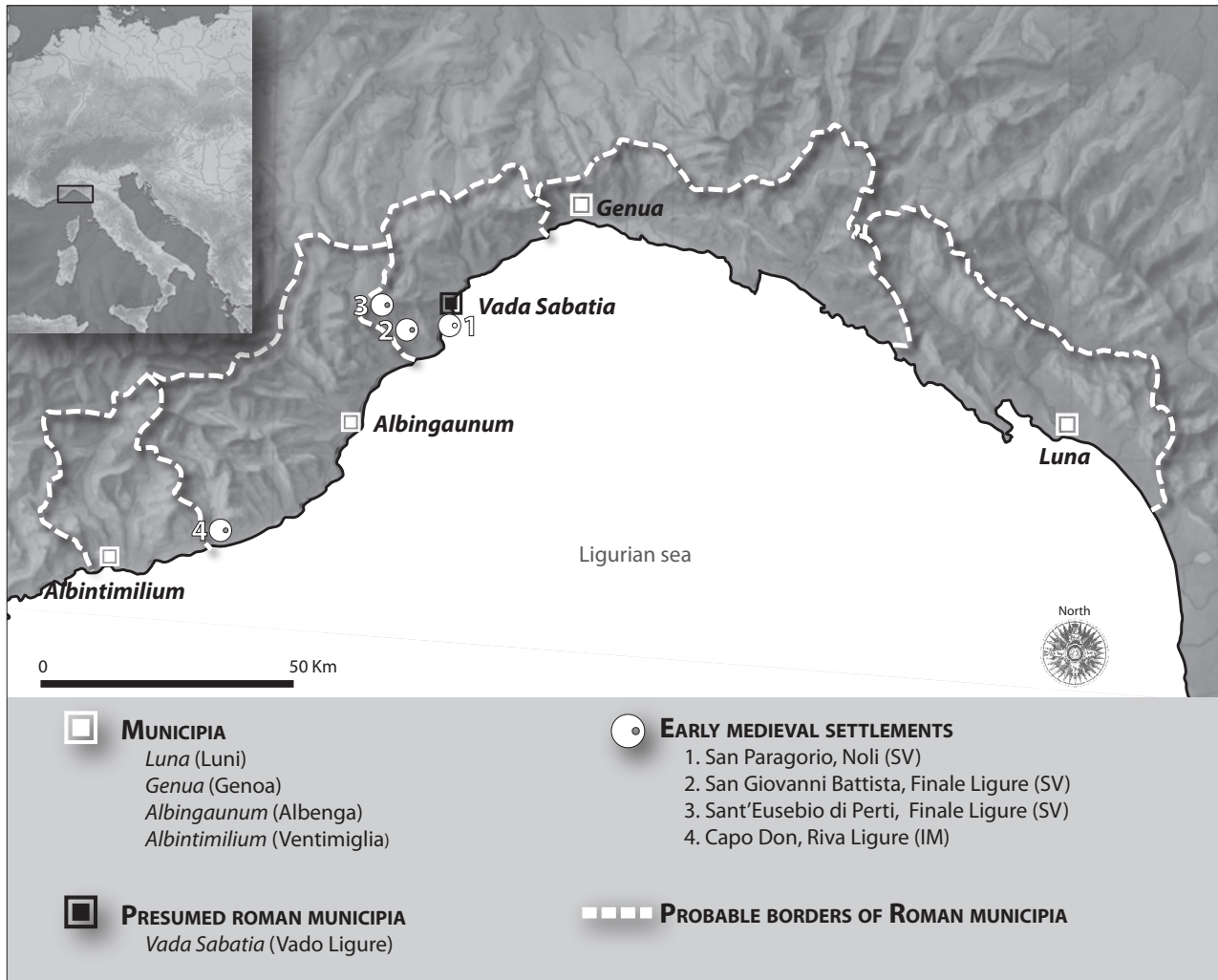


Fig. 1: The territory of Liguria Maritima between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages with locations of known or presumed Roman municipia (© Rossana Managlia)

second half of the 6th century, and to use written sources along with traditional archaeological indicators to substantiate the role played by women in such a changing/transforming society and, specifically, in the *Liguria Maritima* prior to the Langobard conquest that would trigger an irreversible process of social change.

2. Archaeology of social status in Byzantine Italy

The characteristics of Italian society after 564 were extremely complex since it is almost never clear who truly wielded power and, above all, which authority or system of social relationships could legitimately wield such power. The letters written by Saint Gregory the Great are indicative of this situation since they outline minor as well as significant injustices by members of the central administration against the local functionaries, by components of the religious hierarchies to the disadvantage of the military ones, and by them to the detriment of all the others, with different explanations for each mechanism.

Firstly, the long-term development of a kind of 'personalisation of power' implies that the relationships between members of the various hierarchies were not necessarily established in a definitive manner but tended instead to change, in a territory whose features and characteristics differed from others, in relation to individual status and depending on the strong or weak character of those holding individual offices. A

second explanation could be the rapid change, over the years, of the role and importance of individual aristocracies, that in this case also involved a complex interaction between the collective fortunes of a social 'class' and the individual successes of some of its members. A final reason could be the complex transformations that occurred within each social group in relation to the change of a multitude of distinct factors over time.

There is no doubt that the power of the senatorial landowning aristocracy, as a social class in the Italian political scene, declined during this period. In particular, it progressively lost its traditional role as rulers while the individual social and economic status of its individual members gradually decreased and finally disappeared. This entailed a long-term process, that began in the 5th century and continued into the 6th, to end definitively in the 7th, with the even formal break-up of the Byzantine social hierarchy, as well as a complex change, that developed at different rates, involving a progressive loss in political leadership, which began already in Late Antiquity, along with an even greater loss, during the Byzantine centuries, in social role and, above all, economic prosperity⁴. Another equally interesting aspect is the transition of a significant number of members of the old ruling class into the roles of the new hegemonic classes, i.e., the ecclesiastic hierarchies, through a long and intricate phase that also had important 'gender' aspects.⁵

The profound crisis of the landowning aristocracy does not coincide in any manner with the total disappearance of the social hierarchization since the decline of the old ruling class corresponded to the rapid success of the new and complex elite whose members were continuously being defined. Hence, this can be considered a composite elite, which included first and foremost members of the military and ecclesiastic hierarchies, but also those with positions in the government, provincial and local administrations. However, it should also be recalled that it was individual status rather than the office held for which individuals were considered members of that elite. It is almost redundant to emphasise how some members of the new ruling class, the administrative bureaucracy and, at least initially the military hierarchies, wielded their power above all in cities, which continued to act as the nodal points of the administrative, defensive, economic and fiscal system of Byzantine Italy.

One of the factors linked in some way with the local characteristics is the ethnicity of the large groups of the new ruling class, since functionaries and military commanders, at least up to the mid 7th century, came from the eastern areas, spoke Greek and were the direct expression of a society, like the early Byzantine one, that during these decades underwent a profound social and cultural transformation. It is no coincidence that the few written sources that refer to western Liguria during this period would seem to confirm that outsiders played military command roles, as with the *comes et tribunus Tzittanus*, husband of *Honorata*, in Albenga in 568, for which an Armenian origin is proposed.⁶ A similar situation is confirmed by a document from Ravenna, dated 591, that refers to someone called *Rusticiana*, described as the Roman wife of an Armenian soldier (**fig. 2**).⁷

The continued presence in the Byzantine Mediterranean of a monetary-based economy created the conditions for which the poorest and most dynamic parts of a middle class consisting of artisans, merchants

⁴ T.S. BROWN, *Gentlemen and Officers. Imperial Administration and Aristocratic Power in Byzantine Italy (AD 554-800)*, Rome 1984, 21-37.

⁵ M.R. SALZMAN, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy. Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire*, Cambridge 2002; R.W. MATHISEN, 'The Christianisation of the Late Roman Senatorial Order: Circumstances and Scholarship', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 9 (2002), 257-78.

⁶ BROWN, *Gentlemen and Officers*, 75-76.

⁷ BROWN, *Gentlemen and Officers*, 104; P. SKINNER, *Le donne nell'Italia medievale*, Rome 2011, 41.



Fig. 2: Sepulchral epigraphs of *Honorata* (from de Vingo 2011b, fig. 11, 353).

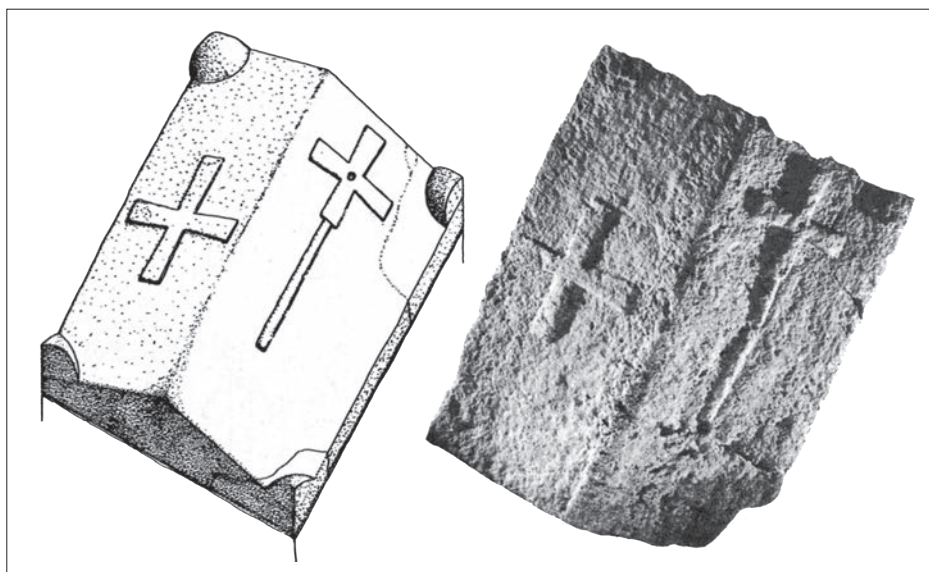


Fig. 3: Graphic reconstruction of a sarcophagus cover with form and dimensions similar to those indicated in the text (© Rossana Managlia)

and middle-level functionaries, could aspire to achieve high social visibility and enjoy freedom of action, which traditionally were denied to them.⁸ As a consequence, through a non-linear process, the old ruling class was replaced by one or more new ruling groups, and a change occurred owing to the success of a new social hierarchization model, with the birth of a new and internally highly differentiated class of *potentiores*, that included all those who, with different titles and in various degrees and forms, were able to play a socially active role.⁹

In the 6th and 7th centuries the presence in the *Liguria Maritima* of a specific component like that of the local *possessores*, supported by the Byzantine civil and military hierarchies, emerges not so much from the rare written sources but from the archaeological and above all the epigraphic ones. The presence in *Albingaunum* (Albenga) of at least two rural churches with cemeteries (S. Calocero and S. Vittore) indicates that the *municipium* had social characteristics in which leading political offices had to be assigned and managed by a class that had acquired power and political legitimacy.¹⁰

The areas outside the previously indicated main urban contexts also had burial centres located near

⁸ E. ZANINI, 'Le città dell'Italia bizantina: qualche appunto per un'agenda della ricerca', in C. VARALDO (ed.), *Ai confini dell'impero. Insediamenti e fortificazioni bizantine nel Mediterraneo occidentale*, Genova-Bordighera (Conference Proceedings, 14-17 March 2002), Bordighera 2011, 173-198.

⁹ E. ZANINI, 'Artisan and Traders in the Early Byzantine City: Exploring the Limits of Archaeological Evidence', in W. BOWDEN – A. GUTRIDGE – C. MACHADO (eds.), *The Social and Political Archaeology of Late Antiquity*, LAA 31 (2007), 373-411, in part. 378-79.

¹⁰ G. MURIALDO, 'Conclusioni: il castrum di S. Antonino nell'Italia nord-occidentale in età bizantino-longobarda', in T. MANNONI – G. MURIALDO (eds.), *S. Antonino. Un insediamento fortificato nella Liguria bizantina*, Bordighera 2001, 749-96, in part. 770-71.

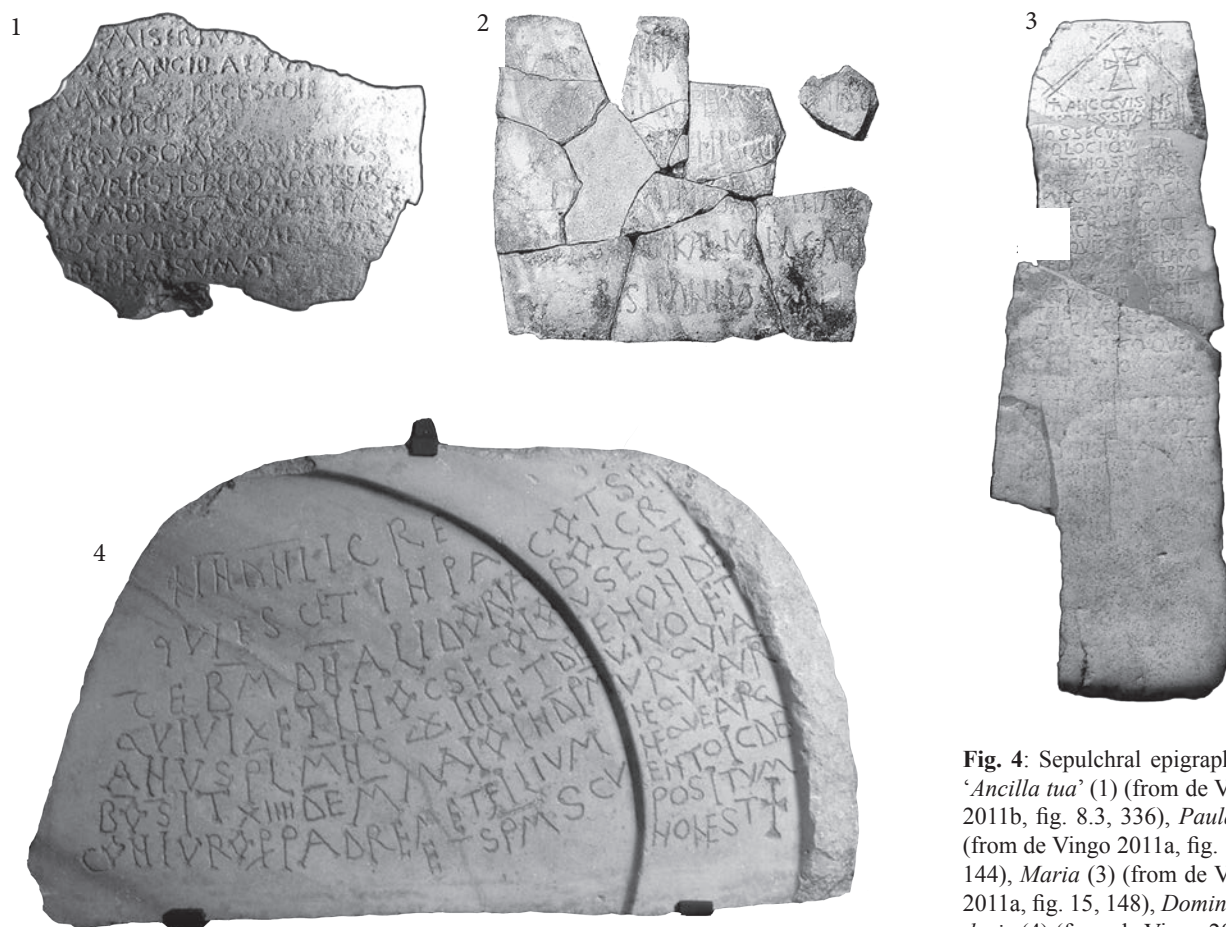


Fig. 4: Sepulchral epigraphs of 'Ancilla tua' (1) (from de Vingo 2011b, fig. 8.3, 336), Paula (2) (from de Vingo 2011a, fig. 13.3, 144), Maria (3) (from de Vingo 2011a, fig. 15, 148), Domina Lidoria (4) (from de Vingo 2011a, fig. 9.3, 140)

large baptismal churches (S. Paragorio-Noli, S. Giovanni-Finale Ligure, Capo Don-Riva Ligure): this provides direct evidence of the presence of a social class, with specific cultural characteristics, that requested privileged funerary environments, with burials in sarcophaguses and in masonry structures.¹¹ The first case refers to stone sarcophaguses with a monolithic, double sloping cover and *acroteria angularia*, on which surfaces are decorated with double crosses in relief – generally with a processional cross on one side and another with equilateral arms on the opposite side (fig. 3) – similar to a model that starting from the 4th century was widely diffused in the Mediterranean and in the transalpine area based on an iconographic model utilised extensively in the 8th-century Merovingian sarcophaguses in France. Such artefacts allow us to infer the presence of an ecclesial hierarchy with a hierarchical order and clients, i.e., members of the elite social class, who demanded privileged burials.

The social and cultural standard of these classes is also exemplified by refined funerary epigraphs that in some cases contain solemn poems written in metric verses. This is the case of *Heliades* and of the anonymous *ancilla Dei* of *Albinganunm* (Albenga), of the *bonae memoriae Maria claro veniens de stirpe parentum* found in the cathedral of capo Don, of the girl *Paula* whose inscription in dactylic verses comes from S. Giovanni (Finale Ligure) and, above all, of the *Domina Lidoria* (fig. 4), reutilised in a burial in the

¹¹ A. FRONDONI – P. DE VINGO – L. GAMBARO, 'La basilica paleocristiana e l'area archeologica di Riva Ligure (Imperia): gli ultimi risultati di scavo', in O. BRANDT – S. CRESCI – J.L. QUIROGA – C. PAPPALARDO (eds.), *Episcopus, Civitas, Territorium* (Acta XV Congressus Internationalis Archaeologiae Christianae, Toleti, 8-12 settembre 2008), Città del Vaticano 2013, 1279-1302, in part. 1281-82.

baptismal church of S. Paragorio in Noli.¹²

3. *The forms of representation of power*

Of the previously mentioned epigraphs, those of *Honorata* – even though the original location is unknown it can be assumed that it was placed on her grave and therefore in a private space rather than a public one – and of *Domina Lidoria* are explicit collective indicators of status since they celebrate a particular individual condition indicating the means through which the elite considered themselves and of how, as a consequence, they deemed it necessary to be represented. The linearity of the text and its compositional characteristics, in the first case, and the surface on which the dedication was engraved, in the second, would seem to confirm how the first subject had indirect contacts with the military hierarchy and how the second belonged, in a direct manner, to the administrative one.¹³

In addition to the ‘implicit’ indicators of status – those that, although part of a shared and perceivable language, do not explicitly qualify as the means for conveying a message of self-representation – it is also necessary to consider those individual or ‘explicit’ indicators that are not only simple accessory elements used to publically denote a status, but also the basic elements constituting a significant part of the social-political position since they are actively rather than passively involved in the formation of a social identity.¹⁴

Such a context can be linked to those objects placed in graves that are not part of the male or female costume but can be identified as ‘grave goods’, i.e. items that because of the quality and nature of the raw materials with which they were made and the means by which they were produced are potential indicators of a middle-high social condition and therefore of membership in that part of the population that could commission such elaborate artefacts and invest significant economic resources to buy them. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the grave of the *Domina Lidoria*, dated to the 6th-7th century, contains a glass bottle (5th century) that, although reused and similar to a type that was rather common in the Roman age, is an important indicator of a privileged social condition. In this case, even though each single archaeological artefact must be carefully evaluated, some considerations can be made taking into account above all how the Byzantine society in which the *Domina Lidoria* belonged no longer perceived the luxury object as something sought after or useable only in life but as an accessory and to some extent functional even after death. Hence, it could confirm how the person, next to whom the artefact was placed, could maintain his/her social position with respect to a consolidated system of values even in the journey into the afterlife. The luxury product, through the various material and immaterial factors based on which its quality was defined, represented an

¹² N. LAMBOGLIA, ‘Il recupero dell’iscrizione paleocristiana *ancilla tua* (CIL V 7795)’, *RII* 20 (1965), 22-24, in part. 22; PH. PERGOLA, P. BATTISTELLI, F. COCCHINI, M. GIACOBELLI, E.M. LORETI, R. MARTORELLI, ‘Nuove ricerche sul complesso paleocristiano tardoantico e altomedievale di Capo Don a Riva Ligure’, *Bollettino d’Arte* 55 (1989), 45-56, in part. 51-52; G. MENNELLA, G. COCCOLUTO, *Regio IX. Liguria reliqua trans et cis Appenninum* (Inscriptiones Christianae Italiae IX), Bari 1995, 119-20; N. LAMBOGLIA, ‘L’iscrizione paleocristiana della Pieve del Finale’, *RSL* 12 (1956), 226-31, in part. 226-27; A. FRONDONI, ‘La cristianizzazione in Liguria tra costa ed entroterra: alcuni esempi (V-IX secolo)’, in M.R. CARRA BONACASA – E. VITALE (eds.), *La cristianizzazione in Italia fra tardoantico e altomedioevo*, Proceedings of the 9th National Congress of Christian Archaeology, I, Palermo 2007, 745-778, in part. 765-66; P. DE VINGO, ‘Églises baptismales, églises et chapelles funéraires dans les zones rurales de la Ligurie occidentale aux premiers siècles du haut Moyen Âge’, in O. ACHÓN – P. DE VINGO – T. JUÁREZ – J. MIQUEL – J. PINAR (eds.), *Esglésies rurals a Catalunya entre l’Antiguitat I l’Edat Mitjana (segles V-X)* (Round Table Proceedings, Esparraguera–Montserrat, 25-27 October 2007), Bologna 2011b, 125-59, in part. 144-48.

¹³ ZANINI, ‘Archeologia dello status sociale’, 29-31.

¹⁴ K. BOWES, A. GUTTERIDGE, ‘Rethinking the Later Roman Landscape’, *JRA* 18 (2005), 405-13, in part. 411.

absolutely intrinsic and innate component in defining the social status of the person who possessed it.¹⁵ In the early medieval society, that based its hierarchical structure on the economic wealth of individuals and on their membership in a more or less extensive group of those wielding power, the possession of luxury goods also denotes membership in these two contexts: it emphasises the real richness of the owner and certifies his/her membership in the group of those who had access to the complex mechanism involving the trade of the goods that could have been either purchased or received as a gift from those with even greater power.¹⁶ Finally, it is also important to consider that where prestige represents an added value and in many cases is completely independent with respect to the intrinsic quality of the object, such value is determined because the person being examined has a clearly recognisable position of membership, attribution or ties with a well-defined social group, no matter what it is.

4. Deciphering and using all available sources

Based on the epigraphs examined and after cross-referencing them with archaeological data, although limited and difficult to interpret, it is likely that there were women in the *Liguria Maritima* who belonged to an identifiable social group like the *potentiores* or *possessores* who were involved in managing even important socio-economic activities. The letters of Saint Gregory the Great confirm that in many cases women controlled large estates and therefore also had decision-making power at a local level in managing properties, taking personal responsibility for their decisions. The Gregorian documents clearly indicate that women lived according to Roman law that granted them a legal personality and considerable independence in administrating their interests. This is also confirmed by the ‘Ravenna papyri’ which describe *Flavia Xanthippi*, daughter of an imperial secretary, who donated a property to the church of St Mary Major in Rome to increase its economic resources.¹⁷

In the letters written by Saint Gregory the Great 6th-century Roman-Byzantine women often appeared as cultured and aristocratic supporters of ecclesiastic projects who were also free to administer their properties: on the same level we can also include the *Domina Lidoria* and *Honorata* in the *Liguria Maritima*. ‘Romanitas’ is a simple but effective attribute that precisely expresses this attempt to refer to a world that had disappeared or was on the verge of doing so completely. Despite the fact that the military campaigns of Justinian I had re-established the Byzantine *status quo* on the Italian peninsula, any possible survival of an exclusively Roman culture seemed to waver before the change, now already in progress in the Po Valley areas, that would soon lead to the formation of a new but ‘Roman-Germanic’ cultural base.

¹⁵ A. CUTLER, ‘Uses of Luxury: on the Functions of Consumption and Symbolic Capital in Byzantine Culture’, in A. GUILLOU – J. DURAND (eds.), *Byzance et les images*, Paris 1994, 287-327, in part. 326-27.

¹⁶ ZANINI, ‘Archeologia dello status sociale’, 37-38.

¹⁷ BROWN, *Gentlemen and Officers*, 186; SKINNER, *Le donne*, 35.

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