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MONICA BALDASSARRI

BETWEEN EARTH AND HEAVEN:
A FIRST ASSESSMENT ON THE COIN FINDS IN
ITALIAN CHURCHES (7th–17th CENTURIES)

1. Some preliminary notes

Extensive works have been already carried out in Italy about coins in the graves – of both common people and saints – located in or around churches and, more generally, about the so-called «not-economic uses» of coins in religious contexts of medieval and early modern age. With different point of views and interpretations, scholars with distinctive approaches and of diverse generations have woven a dense and lively debate on the subject.¹

However, as far as I know, a systematic study of the coins found in Italian churches, based on a census of actual archaeological data, has not been conducted yet. Moreover, the intensification of archaeological investigations in medieval and post-medieval sites in the last thirty years has enabled the acquisition of a wealth of data about the Italian territory. That is why and how I started this research of the subject, of which I am presenting here a first assessment.

The space taken into account corresponds to the peninsular and insular Italy, including Corse and some northern sites in the Alpine region on the actual border with Switzerland and Austria. The chronological span goes from the 7th to the end of 17th century, when important politic changes concerning the churches, the cemeteries and the ecclesiastical institution occurred.²

As for the sites and types of excavations examined, I included any type of churches, *i.e.* parish and monastery churches as well as abbeys, chapels, oratories, and baptisteries, with all kinds of dedications.

I have taken into account excavations at medium and big scale inside the buildings (1/2 to 2/3), but I did not exclude archaeological digs of small extension and occasional/not stratigraphic finds, when relevant to the study. The census comprised all the data edited until the late fall 2019 that I could find in the major archaeological and numismatic publications as well as in the volumes

¹ About coins in the graves of saints: SACCOCCI 1999 and SACCOCCI 2018; SACCOCCI – TOMASSONI 2017; TRAVAINI 2004, TRAVAINI 2013 and TRAVAINI 2015; about coins in common burials see SACCOCCI 1999 and SACCOCCI 2018; TRAVAINI 2004; FIÒ 2011–2012; DEGASPERI 2013; about the possible use of coins as foundation deposits in the churches see TRAVAINI 2013, TRAVAINI 2015 and *contra* SACCOCCI 2004 and SACCOCCI 2018; about the not-economic uses of the coins in the Middle Ages more in general see also TRAVAINI 2009a, TRAVAINI 2009b, TRAVAINI 2018 and TRAVAINI 2020.

² See DONATI 1981; DI BELLA 1982; FRANCESCHI 2010; PENNINI 2018.

devoted to related topics, reaching a sample of 335 sites.³ Thanks to the kind collaboration of colleagues, I was able to recover some information scattered in local publications and to incorporate also some unpublished data.⁴

The elements and the archaeological features that I noted, which correspond to different fields in my database, are:

- the general geography and the region of the sites and finds;
- the site typology and / or the kind of church, and the dedication/s;
- the chronology of the sites / coin finds, with the distinction, when possible, between the date of issue and the date of deposition of the coins (if indicated);
- the topography of the finds (zone in the church; more precise ubication in planimetry and / or through georeferentiation);
- the typology of coin finds (singles, hoards) and their size / quantity;
- the stratigraphy and formation processes (if indicated);
- the position in the layers (if indicated);
- the association among coins and with other materials (if indicated);
- the possible container (if present).

Besides those, I obviously registered also the numismatic characteristics of the specimens, namely the mint, the authority, the date of issue of the coins, the metal type, the conservation and the secondary marks, if any. Whenever possible, the previous interpretations have been checked and discussed.

I took into account only the coins found inside the buildings, excluding those from common burials and analysing instead the numismatic pieces from the graves of saints, kings and queens or privileged people, usually located in the apse, in the presbytery or very close to the altar, or in a key position in the crypt. In fact, I preferred to avoid to examine the evidences related to the other main

³ I consulted the principal journals devoted to medieval archaeology and numismatics in Italy such as *Archeologia Medievale*, *Post Classical Archaeologies*, *Rivista Italiana di Numismatica*, *Annali dell'Istituto Italiano di Numismatica*, *Bollettino di Numismatica*, *Quaderni di Numismatica e Antichità Classica* and the recent *Journal of Archaeological Numismatics and Dialoghi di Numismatica*. I took a census also of the *Quaderni* or *Notiziari* of the Regional Soprintendenze (Piemonte, Liguria, Lombardia, Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Emilia Romana, Toscana, Abruzzo, Molise, Puglia, Cagliari e Oristano, Palermo), *FASTI ONLINE-FOLD&R* and of some other regional or local series (like *Quaderni Friulani di Archeologia*, *Rassegna di Archeologia*, *Layers. Archeologia, territorio, contesti*, and so forth). The research was extended also to international and national congress proceedings such as those of the various International Congress of Numismatics, the *Workhop Internazionale di Numismatica*, the congresses of the *Società degli Archeologi Medievisti Italiani* and other specific or local congresses and symposia. The brief indications in the general repertory made by *ARSLAN 2005* and *ARSLAN 2016*, *GIANAZZA 2019*, *MEC 12* and *14* were also very helpful. Moreover, I checked also the monographies that I could reach devoted to the full publication of the excavations conducted in churches and chapels, parish churches, hospital churches and abbeys / monastery churches.

⁴ I would like to thank Antonio Alberti, Federico Barello, Marco Bazzini, Fabrizio Benente, Maila Chiaravalle, Cristina Cicali, Angelica Degaspero, Luca Parodi, Federico Pigozzo, Giuseppe Sarcinelli.

topic of coins in the medieval graves of «common people», likely connected also to different social and cultural dynamics; besides, the most part of these burials are outside the church and in many cases it's rather difficult to assess if they were found actually on the body of the dead and furthermore if they were put intentionally or just left there.

By setting the coordinates of the study as described above, I have already encountered some issues, both in the quantity and the quality of the edited records.

As already mentioned, the excavations in churches / sites taken into account have been 335 until now, but almost 25% of them were mentioned in a very brief and generic way in the preliminary report of the excavation. Thus, this study can be considered just a preliminary sample, surely ample yet not exhaustive. On the total of churches I considered, only 61% (204) gave back coin finds and 54% among them published the coins just with the annotation of the general context,⁵ namely saying if they were recovered from the inside parts of the churches, only sometimes distinguishing the nave from the apse and so forth, without any further kind of information about the archaeological context (detailed topography, type of stratification, material association, etc.). However, among the 46% (93) accompanied by complete or almost complete information about the context of their last use and deposition (*Fig. 1–2*), there are still very interesting cases that I will present later, along with some general data and trends that I have been able to outline.

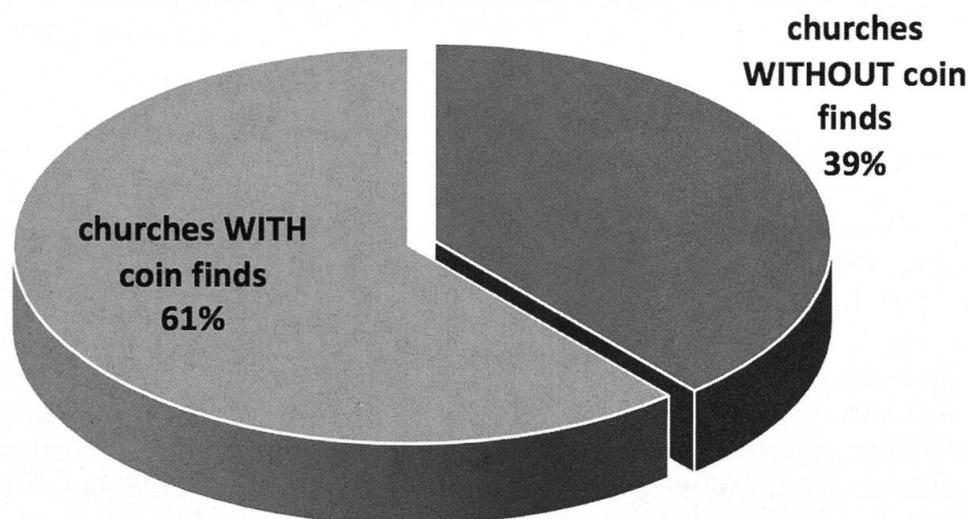


Fig. 1 The percentage of churches with coin finds on the total sample of 335 religious sites considered.

Finally, another aspect to keep in mind is that the sites for which I could reach the bibliography and I found positive and more detailed information are mostly

⁵ On different declinations of the concept of context in relation to coin finds see the various contributions in VON KAENEL – KEMMERS 2009.

located in the Northern and Central part of the peninsula: so the sample could be affected in some way by an uneven level of recording and publishing of the archaeological evidences in different zones of the country.⁶

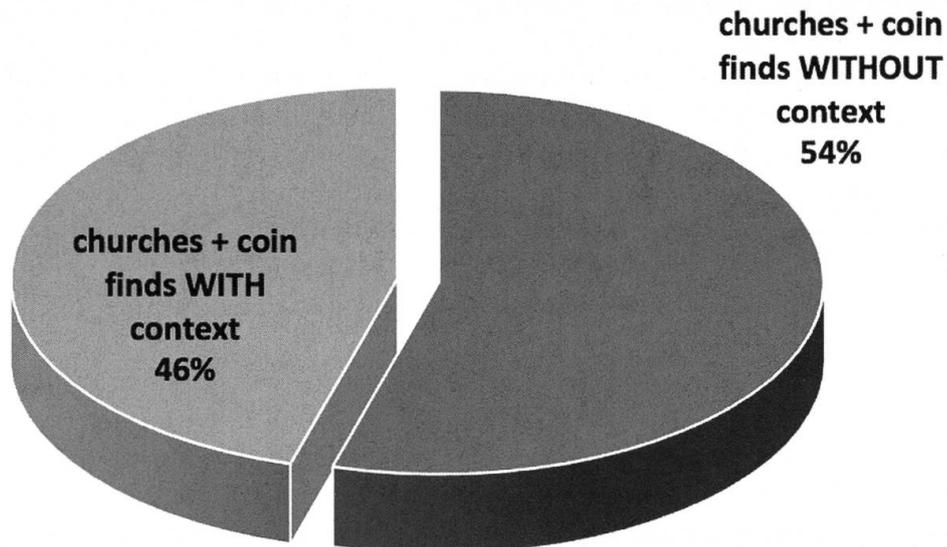


Fig. 2 The percentages of churches with coin finds in context / published without context on the sample considered.

2. General data and some examples

Before presenting the more detailed data and some interesting or illustrative cases, I would like to share some general information about the geography, the chronology and the types of churches in which the coin finds considered here have surfaced.

Looking at the geographical distribution of the site finds, as I anticipated before, about 49% are located in the Northern Italian regions, 36% in the Central ones and only the remaining 15% in the Southern peninsula and the Major Islands (*Fig. 3*). These figures can be explained with different causes, going from current economic factors (i.e. quantity of funding available for extensive archaeological research unevenly distributed in the country; the same for the study and publication of the data) to actual cultural reasons (*e.g.* the greater importance of classical archaeology in comparison to the development of medieval archaeology, or researches more projected to study and to intervene on the buildings than to investigate the soil, or possibly with very small excavations

⁶ It seems that in the Southern zones of Italy and in the Islands, the excavation in churches tend to be less extensive, and seldom fully published or reported in detail; moreover the journals published by the regional Soprintendenze are less prolonged and continuous in time, often more devoted to the publication of researches in ancient sites or to pre-medieval artefacts.

limited to checking the foundations, etc.). But, as we will see, also historical and past cultural reasons (availability of coins and monetary developments of some regions during the Middle Ages, masonry and floor type, and so forth) can play a role in this matter.

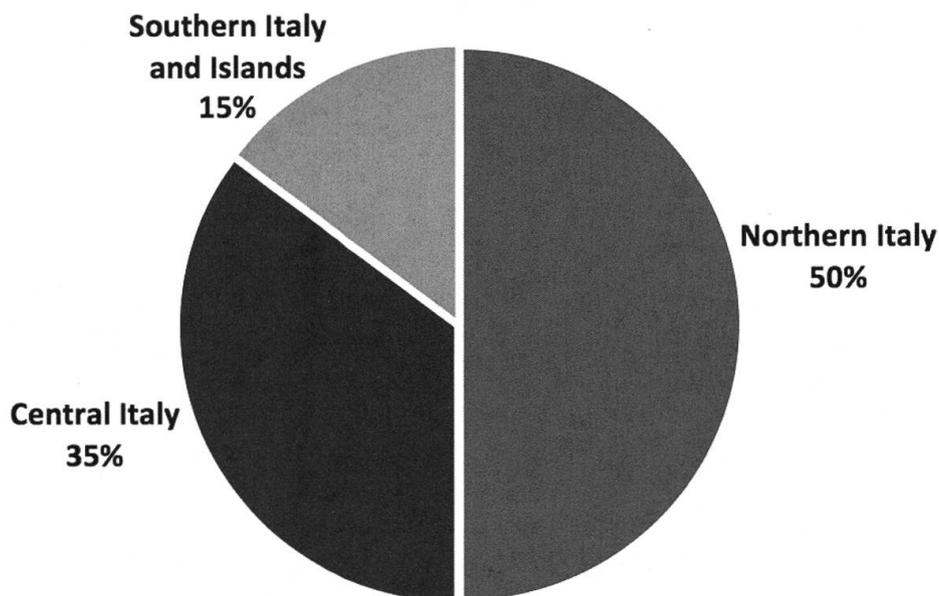


Fig. 3 Geographic distribution in percentage of the sample considered (coin finds in churches).

If we consider the general chronology of the finds, taking in account the issue date of the coins (*Fig. 4*)⁷ at first, we can find a substantial increase in quantity during the 12th century, followed by a slight diminution during the 13th century and again a major growth in the 14th century. Then, after a reduction in the number of pieces for the 15th century, we see a sharp drop while proceeding into the following period, with a significant reduction in the 17th century.

Likely, this picture is not very far from the general trend of coin finds in the same period, at least until the 15th century: it is clear from a comparison with a chart about coin finds in the Tyrrhenian region and Liguria I drew already some years ago (*Fig. 6*).⁸ That means, obviously, that the quantity of finds is affected/connected by the general money supply;⁹ it is interesting, however, to observe that in the churches a lesser reduction of coin finds in the 13th and in the 15th centuries seems to occur.

In the graph showing the chronology per number of sites and deposition date (*Fig. 5*), the phenomenon is more evident, albeit with a slight increase in the 15th

⁷ In these graphs I considered those sites for which sufficient information was available at least on the chronology issue of the coins, some context data and the presumed date of deposition of the finds.

⁸ BALDASSARRI 2017b.

⁹ See SACCOCCI 1999.

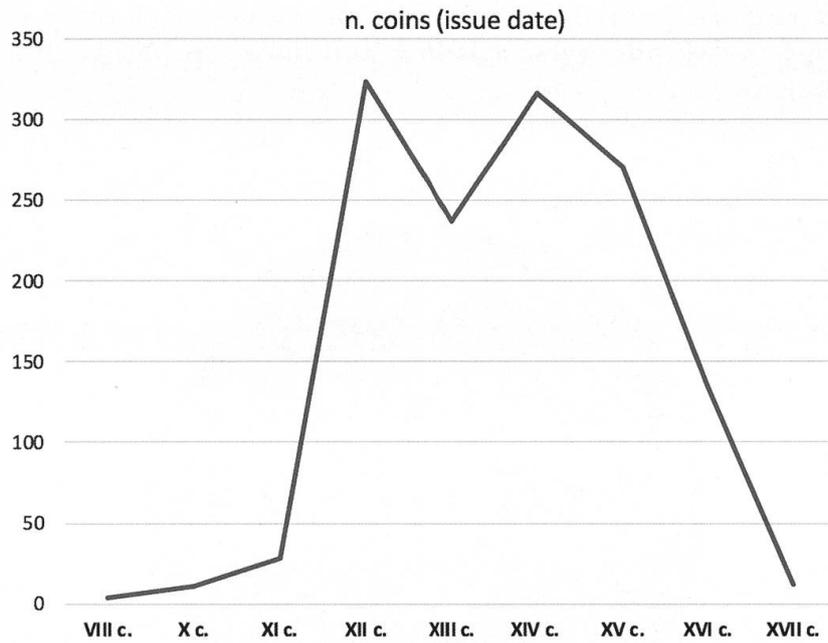


Fig. 4 Graph showing the issue chronology of the coins recovered in the Italian churches (coins in contexts).

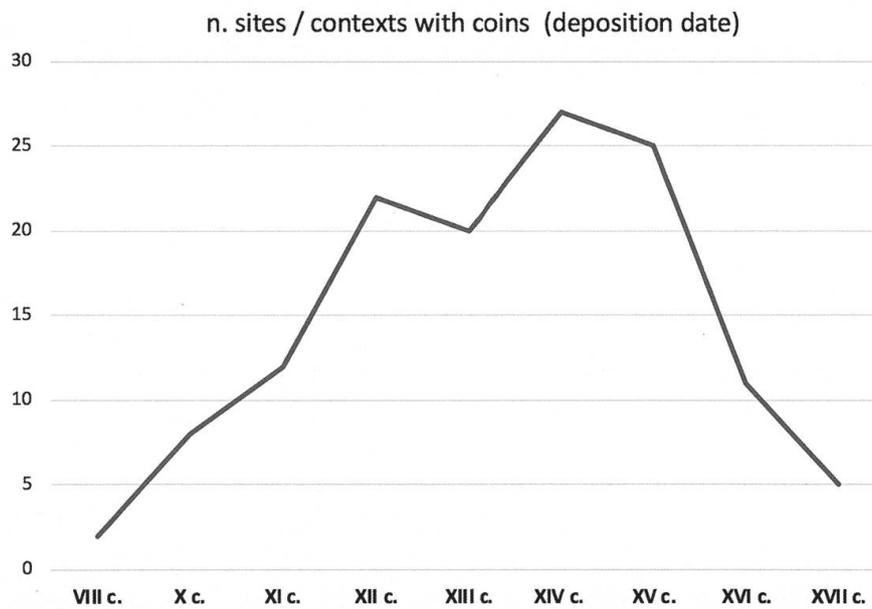


Fig. 5 Graph showing the deposition chronology of the coins recovered in the Italian churches (number of sites / contexts in the sample considered).

century. This can be explained with the different geographical extension: in fact, a lot of 1400's coin finds are from religious sites located in Piedmont, Lombardy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and the borders areas.

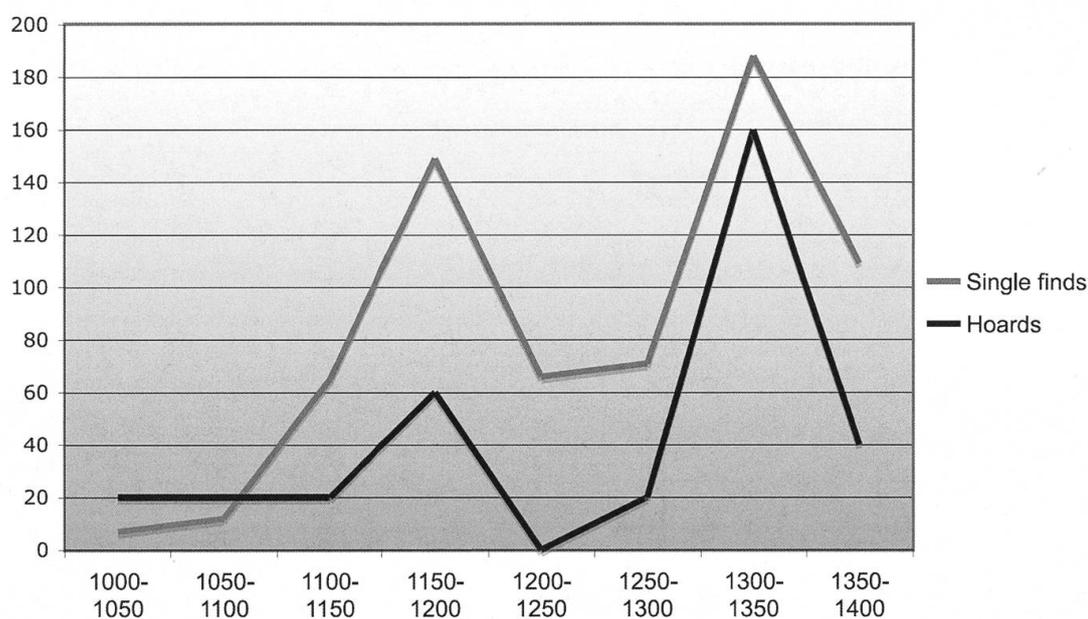


Fig. 6 Graph representing issue chronology of coin finds (single and hoards) in medieval sites of the Northern Tyrrhenian area and Liguria (from BALDASSARRI 2017b, p. 219).

Instead, if we compare just the two graphs related to the Italian churches, it appears clear that in the Early Middle ages the finds in each sites are single or very few as well as the sites number, while in the 12th and 14th century there are more finds (single or possible little hoards) in each site. In the 15th century there is a decrease in the quantity of numismatic specimens, combined with a rise in the number of sites where they were recovered in that time span: this could be also explained with the presence of coins issued at an earlier date with a later deposition. This is an aspect verified also for the 13th century for coins issued in the second half of the previous century, although it is not so evident from this graph.

Speaking of the typology of sites, no particular prevalence among cathedrals, abbeys, parish and conventual churches is noted in general, but a greater variety of coin find types seem more common in churches, sometimes also private, mostly located in rural or mountain areas. In city cathedrals, abbeys and conventual churches we have the major presence of saints' graves with coins, though.

The finds types can be grouped following the topography, the deposition type and the micro-context (and the secondary and tertiary context in the Myrberg – Kemmers interpretation categories)¹⁰ (*Fig. 7*).

¹⁰ MYRBERG – KEMMERS 2011, pp. 89–95.

The most quantitatively represented group collects the saints' graves, but also the privileged tombs are attested: in the first case the grave often collected several coins, put all together or in different occasions, while in the second one only single coins were found until the later period (14th–15th centuries), when little hoards appear in the burial. The coins of this group can be considered the result of intentional deposition.

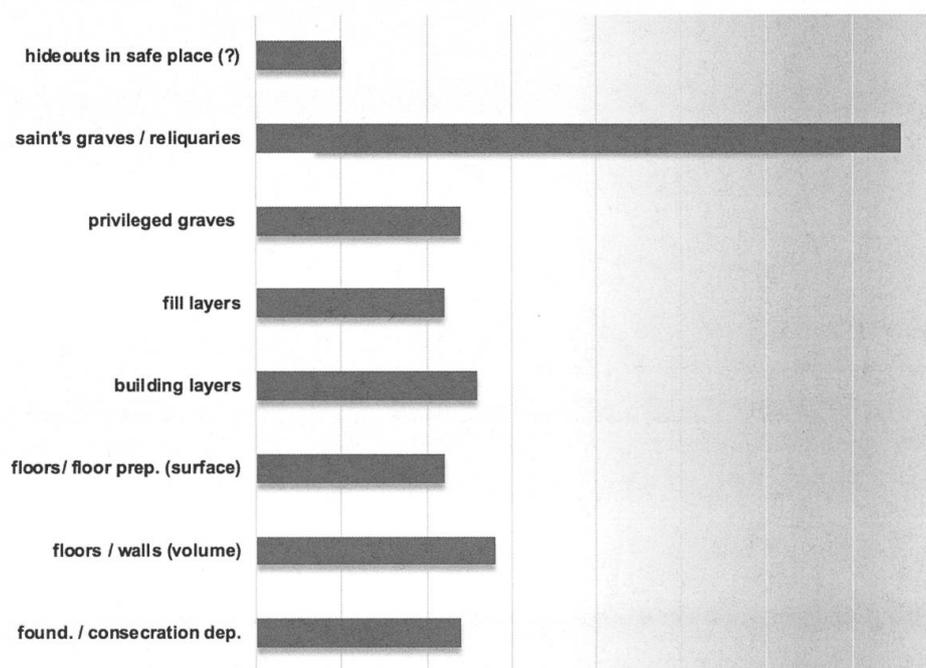


Fig. 7 Typology of coin finds in the Italian churches (coins in contexts).

The same holds for those coins grouped among the foundation/consecration, re-dedication or votive deposits, which can be located in the foundations cuts or in front of the main pillars or inside/in front of the altar at the moment of their construction; in some cases, the coins lied together with other liturgical or more common materials in little votive pits in a special section of the nave. They usually count a single coin, but also small parcels formed by 12 (several sites) to 28 (one site) pennies are not uncommon.

Other coin finds that I think can be evaluated as voluntary are those in the volume of floor and of walls mortar or plaster, in the possibility they were the only «exogenous» materials as well as put in such a way that they could not be lost and/or recovered. In this instance we speak again of single coins, from a couple to 20 specimens at most.

Instead, among the coins probably lost, there are those found on the floor surfaces or in the upper interface of its preparation if it was built in wooden boards. The same can be said for the coins in the construction and in the fill layers, even if in these cases a secondary position in the stratification is to be taken in consideration.

Finally, there is a small group represented by late 12th and 13th century coin hoards unearthed from the more recent floor, but without other clear information

about the original stratigraphy, which for the most part have been interpreted more or less dubiously as temporary hideouts.

To understand better these evidences, I would like to present more in depth the groups that are more relevant to a discussion about the presence and the use of coins in Medieval and Early Modern Ages Italian churches.

*2.1. Coins in privileged graves, Saints' graves and reliquaries
(7th–early 8th centuries / late 10th–17th centuries)*

Coins in privileged graves that are located in crucial position in Italian churches, mostly mausolea and funerary oratories, are documented during the first part of the Lombard period and the evidence is represented by one single coin or few coins per site.

Tomb nr. 10 discovered in St Zenone at Campione d'Italia (Como), the most important burial for central location and monumentality placed in the atrium-chapel of the funerary oratory of the Totonni family, gave back a Lombard silver coin during its excavations in 1996–1997. In this case, a 1/8 *siliqua* fraction of Perctarit (672–688) was in the masonry of the grave case, which for dimensions was intended for two individuals whose remains laid there: the woman found in the northern sector, who was wearing a rich brocade robe, and an infant; in the grave there was also a stone phallic amulet.¹¹

A similar use of a Perctarit silver *siliqua* fraction has been suggested by Caterina Giostra for another privileged burial unearthed in the chancel of St Michael in Sallianese church, at Trezzo sull'Adda (Milan). Here, however, the coin was found in the grave that was already disturbed and partially destroyed in its upper part.¹²

In regard to this, the same author stressed an important point resulting from her numerous studies on Lombard tombs: single silver or gold coins located in the construction of the grave, or on the dead body or sometimes mounted in a ring have been discovered mostly in graves located in a central position in urban churches or basilicas, possibly of high status members of the society, close to the top of the social hierarchy and perhaps engaged in particular civil functions performed within the city. According to this author, beyond the possible amuletic or magical value of coins,¹³ this act was probably intended to emphasize the proximity of the dead and his/her family to the highest social ranks in the same way in which gold thin crosses stamped with actual coin or coin punches were used in funerary contexts of the same period.¹⁴

¹¹ BLOCKELEY *et al.* 2005.

¹² GIOSTRA 2012.

¹³ On the use of coins as amulet and talisman in the Roman period PERASSI 2011; about this value also in the Middle Ages GILCHRIST 2008 and TRAVAINI 2009a–b.

¹⁴ The accurate currency reproduction on the gold crosses is in relation to the role and the social position of the recipients: personalities of the high urban aristocracy tied with royal groups, that earlier than others required a burial in churches, and in the more prestigious ones: see GIOSTRA 2007, p. 326; PERASSI 2014.

The latter type of gold crosses could be used also in a more generic religious context, like maybe the three gold *tremisses* found in the St Luxorius crypt in Fordongianus (Oristano): two of them were directly cut out in the shape of a cross from a coin stamp, while a third was an actual coin; they all had a single hole for suspension by the obverse side and were issued by King Liutprand (712–722).¹⁵ This religious building, whose current forms date back to the beginning of the 12th century, stands above a hypogeum crypt that, according to the *Passio Sancti Luxurii*, welcomed the body of the decapitated martyr in the Diocletian period. The artefacts were recovered in the corridor of the crypt, underneath the mosaic that covered drainpipe water, documenting the frequentation of the martyrial sanctuary still in the 8th century. They were found probably in secondary deposition, though.

While I found no trace of such an use of coins in the Carolingian period, single coins or very small hoards recovered from privileged graves in the crypt or in the chancel area are known again in contexts from the late 10th /early 11th century onwards, with an increase only from the 14th century onwards.

A parcel of small coins was also retrieved from the grave of Lombard Queen Teodolinda in the Cathedral of Monza, albeit the issues were not from her period of reign but much later. There were in fact 17 different pennies (*denari*) of Parma, Milan and other various Lombard mints dating back to a period spanning from the late 12th to the beginning of 14th century. It has been assumed that these coins were inserted at the time of the translation from the original location to the sarcophagus in the transept of the cathedral and its last inspection before the 20th century (1941), which took place in 1308.¹⁶ In the tomb were also found a spearhead, small gold nails, fragments of gold decorations and lamellar gold threads from decomposed fabrics, all dated back to the first deposition of the body in the Lombard period.

We have to remember, however, that Teodolinda was regarded as a sort of saint (a *beata*, blessed), and that similar evidences and analogous explanations have been offered also for many cases concerning coins found in the tombs of saints.¹⁷

The phenomenon of the coins in a saint's grave or in a reliquary is registered in the 5th/6th century, with a following hiatus and again a revival in the late 10th century through all the Modern Era. The position of the grave or of the reliquary usually is in a relevant zone of the church, like the altar, the chancel, the apse or a chapel nearby, or in the crypt.

There are cases represented by coin hoards of different sizes (from five to hundreds of pieces), but also with a single coin, sometimes of relatively high value for the period (St Christina of Bolsena and St Bartholomew at Benevento)¹⁸ or single multiple coins, from few specimens up to around two thousands (i.e. St Catervius's grave, Tolentino, not far from Macerata; the altars in the *Confessione* of SS Peter and Paul in Vatican, Rome).¹⁹

¹⁵ GIOSTRA 2010; PERASSI 2014.

¹⁶ ARSLAN 1989; SACCOCCI 1999; TRAVAINI 2004.

¹⁷ ARSLAN 1989; SACCOCCI 1999; TRAVAINI 2004.

¹⁸ PURI 2016; TRAVAINI 2004.

¹⁹ ALTERI 1996; SACCOCCI 1999; TRAVAINI 2004.

The coins were usually deposited without a container, with a possible contact with the body remains,²⁰ but some exceptions are known, like the case of St Regolo in Lucca where the pennies were grouped in a small metal cylinder;²¹ sometimes, the coins were found in the grave with other precious or religious objects (*i.e.* St Geminiano, Modena).²²

In some instances, it has been possible to connect the coins to the date of the translations and inspections that were often carried out from the 10th century onwards (SS Christina, Regolo, Geminiano). The burial of St Luke preserved in the Abbey of St Giustina in Padua is of particular relevance. Here one older glass jar contained one *grossone* da 8 soldi issued by the venetian mint for Doge Francesco Foscari since 1429, but engraved with the date 1463, corresponding to a known survey of the saint's grave. In another later glass *albarello* there were 11 coins among which two Roman late imperial bronze issues, a votive medal engraved in 1562 and a parchment bearing the same date, coinciding with another inspection. At the same time probably dates back a Venetian 6 soldi coin issued in 1560 for Doge Antonio Priuli and contained in a ceramic *albarello*.²³

This kind of deposition has been well studied by Italian scholars, although with different approaches and interpretations: some, like Lucia Travaini, explained them as «memory» token – either personal or for remembering the chronology of the survey event – with a possible choice of pieces among those in circulation; some others, like Andrea Saccocci, viewed them as votive donation or *ex voto*, picked directly from the bulk gifted to the relics at the time, or collected through tithing, without a selection, with few exception in later medieval/early modern times, like St. Luke's grave.²⁴

In other cases it appears more likely that the coins were introduced in the grave as offerings either in some particular moments or in more continuous way through an opening into the grave (St Catervius, SS Peter and Paul in Vatican and St Amico of Avellana, Isernia). The number of coins found inside these burials is much higher and there are many foreign coins, probably brought and introduced into the tomb by pilgrims.

An uncommon and debated example is the burial of St Zita in Lucca, where the mummified body of the saint is preserved. Zita died in 1285 and received the canonization much later, in 1695. However, the studies conducted on her mummy

²⁰ In some cases the contact with the body is clearly stated by the documentation of the survey. See St Julian's grave in Rimini, during whose inspection in 1584 was found «una moneta d'argento piccola» on the body, exactly in the position «tra la codiga e l'osso»: GEROLA 1911, p. 107 e nt. 4. However, in the same occasion a lot of other coins were found inside the wooden coffin where the saint's body was contained, while other coins were outside of it, in the outer Roman stone ark where the coffin was preserved, but they were mixed and put all together in a box, without a precise documentation. Only the later insertion of 17th century Bologna coins between the ark and its lid is precisely recorded as well as a 15th century Aragonese specimens found stuck in there in 1584, see GEROLA 1911, p. 107, n. 4, p. 115 and p. 120 nt. 1.

²¹ MACRIPÒ 1995.

²² SACCOCCI 1999; MISSERE FONTANA – TRAVAINI 2005.

²³ GORINI 2003; ZAMPIERI 2003, pp. 319–322.

²⁴ SACCOCCI 1999; SACCOCCI 2018; SACCOCCI – TOMASSONI 2017; TRAVAINI 2004, TRAVAINI 2015.

could find evidences of an early deposition, not much later than her death. In the same occasion the analyses carried out on the body revealed the presence of a round piece of metal, of the shape and the size of a medieval coin in her mouth.²⁵ This evidence has been viewed like a proof that intentional deposition of coins on the body in the burials were used during the Middle Ages, but some authors objected that the penny could be in the mouth of Zita since she was still alive because silver was believed a cure for toothache.²⁶

Among the more recent finds of this group, I would like to mention the bust reliquary of St Donatus, Arezzo (*Fig. 8*). It is a precious reliquary in a form of a bust of the saint bishop, made in 1346. In 2008 after the radiography realized before the restoration inside the bust were found one coin struck in 1373, other ten coins issued from 1537 to 1660 by the mint of Florence, Luca, Urbino and Naples and two devotional medals of 17th/beginning 18th century. In this case the author who published them believed that the coins could be part of votive offerings as well as the later medals.²⁷



Fig. 8 Coins and medals in the St Donatus reliquary, Arezzo
(from VANNI 2014, p. 20 and https://www.amarantomagazine.it/news_dett.php?id=648).

²⁵ FORNACIARI *et al.* 1997.

²⁶ TRAVAINI 2015; TRAVAINI 2020; SACCOCCI 2018.

²⁷ VANNI 2014. During the restoration medieval coins from Castile, León, Navarre, England, and the Low Countries, as well as a bracteate of Schleswig were found inserted also in the bust reliquary of St James in Santiago de Compostela: see TRAVAINI 2009a, p. 35.

Differently, in the pyx-reliquary of St Lawrence, kept in the crypt of the Cathedral of Feltre (Belluno) and made about 1489–1493, probably as a copy of an older one, four *denari enriviciani* minted in Verona around the mid-second half of the 12th century mixed with brown earth became the relic of the saint himself: they are considered the symbols, practically the incarnation of Lawrence, because he received the task to distribute the riches of the Church to the poor in need by Pope Sixtus II.²⁸

2.2. *Coins in foundation and/or votive deposits in the religious structures* (10th–16th centuries)

In Italy there are few sites in which coins have been discovered in the foundation cut of the church walls or in other architectural structures, mostly in the later Middle Ages. One of them is the Cathedral of Alba (Cuneo), where a sestertius of Sabina was found in the foundation of a medieval wall of the building, but from the publication is not clear its position and it seems to be residual in the backfill of the foundation trench.²⁹

In the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Casale Monferrato (Alessandria) a little hoard of coins dating back to the first half of the 14th century has been uncovered in a cut at the foundation level of the church, that in this period was rebuilt with a different orientation from a previous Romanesque one: because of its position and depth the archaeologist considered this a votive deposit.³⁰

In fact, coin finds are more frequently interpreted as evidence of a devotional gesture in cases of consecration or re-consecration after a major restoration/reconstruction of religious buildings, sometimes also with traces of a ritual connected with the deposition. This type of finds is documented from the late 12th to the 16th century, with particular evidence of the possible ritual from the late 14th century on.

The coins considered in this group were found in a little space built in the altar or under it, or in the soil at the intersection of chancel and nave, mostly in front of the altar where the recovery was exposed to everyone eyes and/or difficult, like under a high stone step, and so forth³¹ (*e.g.* Santa Maria in Sumirago, Varese;³² Santa Maria Maddalena in Refrancore, Asti; San Bartolomeo, Formigine, Modena³³). There are cases testified by little coin parcels (from 3 to 12 pieces, in only one case up to 28), but also here we can find a single coin or single multiple coins, albeit in few specimens.

Sometimes the coins were put in a little pit associated with other objects of no particular value and even of no primary liturgical function, covered with charcoal and ashes still present in traces (*e.g.* Santa Maria at Gorto, Ovaro, Udine); in

²⁸ BERTELLI 2002; <http://www.restituzioni.com/opere/capsella-reliquiario-di-san-lorenzo/> (visited 10.4.2020). On coins as Christian relics see TRAVAINI 2020.

²⁹ BARELLO 2013.

³⁰ CROSETTO 2015.

³¹ See SUCHODOLSKI 1995, pp. 174–176. See also BERG – VIBE MÜLLER 1989 and SACCOCCI 2004.

³² MARTINI 1992; TORRE 1992.

³³ BALDASSARRI 2013.

some sites there was evidence that they were also wrapped all together with a cloth; in other also food remains were included (Santa Lucia, Cagliari³⁴).

Among the more exemplary sites is the crypt of the Church of Sant'Eusebio at Perti (Savona), where two interesting different intentional coin deposits have been documented: an older one, presented in the next chapter, and a more recent one, briefly discussed here.³⁵ In a dedicated space at the center of the apse of the crypt, in the layers pertinent to a restoration, a *denaro minuto* of the Genoa mint, issued in 1443–1447, was left in a decorated *sgraffito* bowl together with a glass and an *unguentarium*. Around the objects also traces of ashes and vegetal fibers were found (Fig. 9).

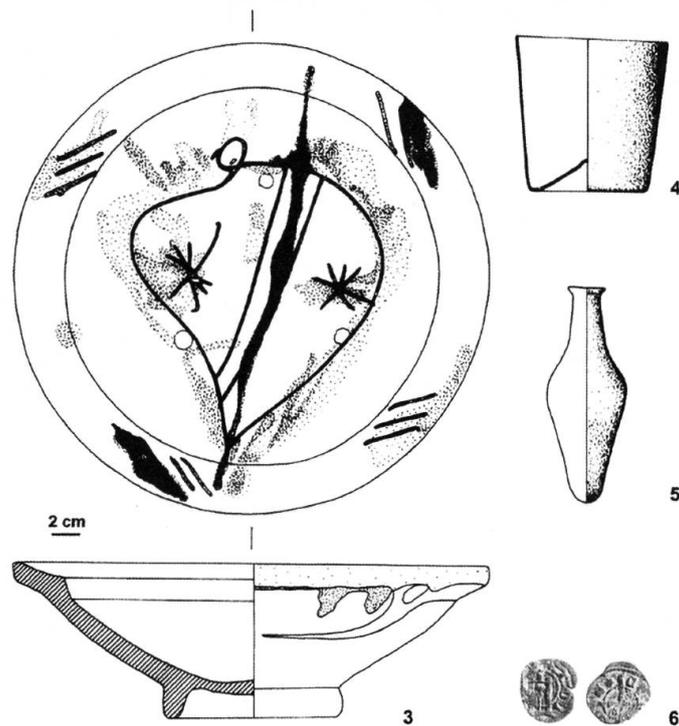


Fig. 9 The re-consecration deposit in the Sant'Eusebio Church, Perti nearby Savona (from AROBBA *et al.* 2003, p. 707).

Very similar to the latter is the case of Santa Maria at Gorto di Ovaro: here during the excavations at the centre of the nave, at the floor level, a cubic storage room was discovered consisting of lithic slabs bound with mortar, covered with a layer of coal. Inside there were 3 silver coins, 11 glass balsamaries, one copper container with iron handle, one bronze cap and 3 curved iron nails. The analysis of the artefacts and of the stratigraphy dated back to the second quarter of the 15th century, probably lodged in the cubic pit for the re-officiating of the building after a fire in 1430 and a subsequent restoration.³⁶

³⁴ MARTORELLI 2017.

³⁵ AROBBA *et al.* 2003; GAVAGNIN – ROASCIO 2006.

³⁶ CALLIGARO 1977, pp. 138–140; GAVAGNIN – ROASCIO 2006, p. 301.

Although in these cases the voluntary depositions of the coins is undoubtful, the material documents were variously interpreted by the scholars: for some authors the type of materials involved and the kind of deposition are testimony of a sort of foundation or re-consecration rite; instead, for some others they could be done for other religious and votive motifs.³⁷ However, they seem to trace a kind of ritual, with a first part maybe conducted outside the church.

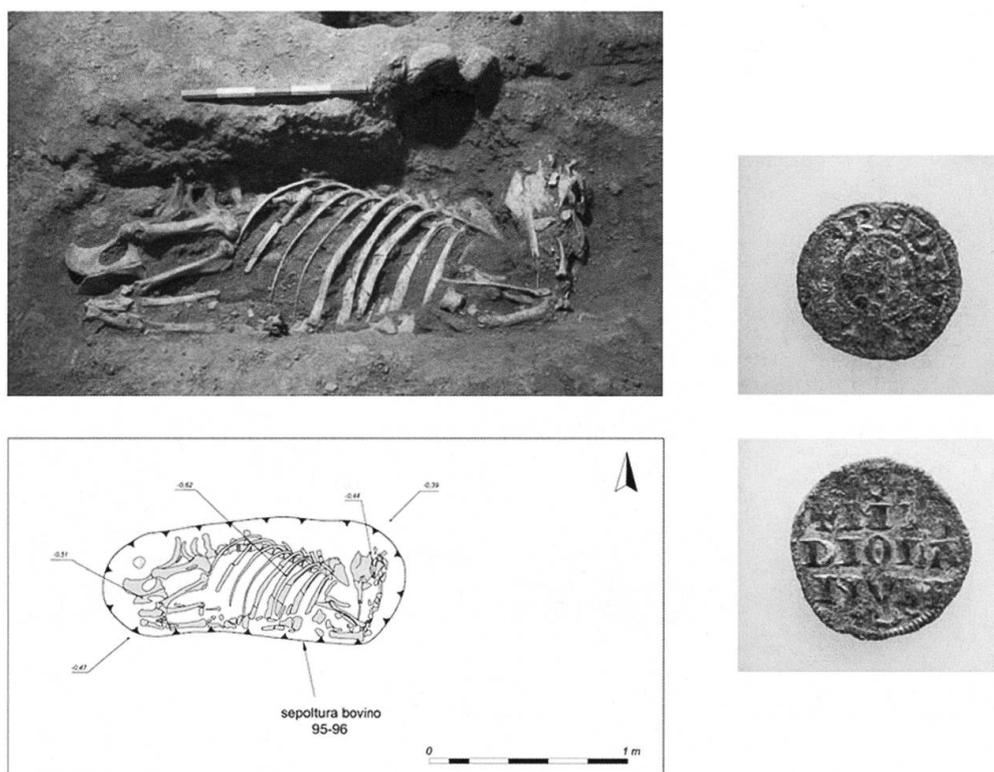


Fig. 10 A coin found in the mouth of a cow buried under the church at Caronno Pertusella, Milan (from CHIARAVALLE 2011, p. 171 and GRASSI – RIDOLFI 2011, p. 149).

There are other debated examples that could refer to a ritual, like Santa Maria della Purificazione, Caronno Pertusella (Varese). This church, whose building dates back to the first half of the 16th century, was founded on the site of a previous castle, probably in the zone of the medieval chapel. During the excavation of the stratification, a burial of a cow was brought to light, sealed under the modern floor alongside the middle line of the nave. There were no signs of butchering on the skeletal remains of the animal and in its mouth a *denaro* of Milan struck

³⁷ In particular Andrea Saccocci asserted that a foundation rite involving coins was not possible in a medieval church and more in general that this kind of ritual was not known in the Middle Ages, at least till the 14th century as a result of the humanistic discovery of Antiquity: see SACCOCCI 2004, SACCOCCI 2018. On foundation rites in later medieval Italy and the medals used for them see BERNARDELLI 2010.

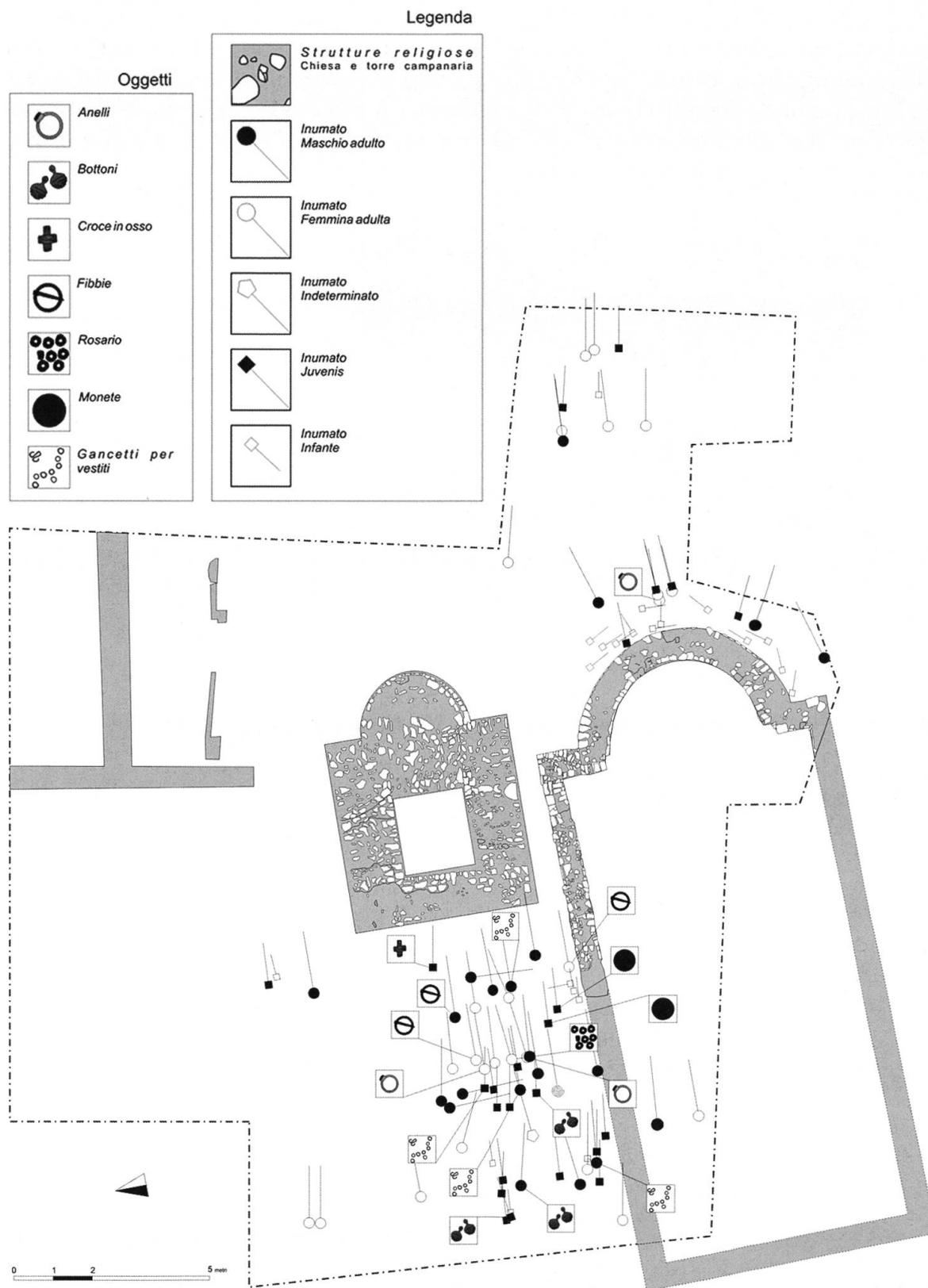


Fig. 11a Excavation plan of the San Bartolomeo Church and its burial area, Formigine, Modena (<http://www.sistemonet.it/incoming/viewArchaeology-action.do?id=3169&tab=image&imageId=11246>).

in the 13th century has been found (*Fig. 10*).³⁸ This unique deposition is already well known thanks to the studies of Maila Chiaravalle and Lucia Travaini, who read this as the evidence of a foundation rite in a rural – and more conservative – environment.



Fig. 11b The little coin hoard found in the church of Formigine, Modena
(from BALDASSARRI 2013, p. 133).

³⁸ GRASSI – RIDOLFI 2011; CHIARAVALLE 2011.

In all the previous cases either a single or very few coins were involved, but there are also some instances where parcels of *denari* in the number of 12, i.e. the value of one *solidus*, or a sort of multiple numbers were used.

During the excavation of the Church of San Bartolomeo inside the castle of Formigine, a little hoard of 12 *denari* (pennies) was found buried without traces of a container in the zone in front of the altar, at the middle intersection with the chancel (*Fig. 11a–b*), sealed under the levels of more recent floors. The coins belong to the local mints of Bologna, Parma and Ferrara, and they were issued in the first quarter of the 13th century and deposited about 1250/1260 in occasion of a restoration of the building.³⁹

In a situation like that, it has been objected that this could be the result of an accidental loss during the construction phases, but the layer was not so thick and was made by sorted terrain: these facts and the crucial position in the church suggest an intentional deposition.

Something similar happened in the church of Montemassi castle (Grosseto).⁴⁰ In the space below the heavy masonry steps of the new altar connected with the apse extension a hoard of 28 *denari* of Lucca, issued at the end of the 12th century, was discovered. The archaeologist has interpreted the hoard as a re-consecration deposit, and at the moment it is the oldest example of such a deposition.

To interpret these as foundation/consecration deposits or votive ones depends on a more general consideration about those practices; it has to be said, however, that more often the donations *pro remedio animae* and the *ex voto* offerings in churches were placed where they could be seen or evaluated by everyone and, most important, in material contact with the relics of the saints and their graves, or the altar above them.⁴¹

2.3. Coins in the floor or wall in crucial zones of the church and in particular contexts (late 10th/11th–17th centuries)

Another group of finds is represented by coins put on the mortar of the floor or in the plaster in a crucial position of the church that cannot be considered unintentional and/or casual, like in the choir or in the apse, in front or behind the major altar, or in the intersection between the chancel and the nave or at the base of one pillar in the crypt.

³⁹ BALDASSARRI 2013.

⁴⁰ BRUTTINI 2008.

⁴¹ Reading the hagiographic narrations and the private wills, for instance, when the saint's coffin was closed the offerings in coins were left on the grave lid or in any case were put on the tomb or on the altar above it. In his will, drawn up on December 4, 1251 a merchant of Poggibonsi ordered to deposit after his death five local *soldi* on the grave of the Blessed Lucchese (*super sepulcro Beati Luchesi*): SAN LUCCHESE 1980, pp. 9–12. Following a late 14th century chronicle Sir Iohannes Figli put a sum of money into the hands of his son, made blind by the swelling in his face, and ordered him to place it on the tomb of Blessed Giovanna da Signa to be healed: MENCHERINI 1917, 19. For both mentions see also see BARTOLINI 2009, pp. 24, 243.

The specimens are placed in the volume of the floor, i.e. in the sorted and pressed earth or in the mortar or in the plaster, in stratigraphic units not interpreted as construction layers and that did not contain any other artefacts, and sometimes also in periods in which there were no frequent losses of coins, mostly small denominations. Cases like that are documented from the late 10th to the beginning of the 17th century, in little parcels (from 3 to 5 pieces) or single coins.

The most interesting example comes again from the crypt of Sant'Eusebio in Perti (Savona). At the base of two of the four pillars of the ancient crypt the archaeologists found two anonymous folles of the Constantinople mint issued in 976–1028. These pieces usually were not in circulation in the area at that time and, more interesting, they were laying in horizontal position i.e. carefully placed and laying on the upper interface of the mortar at the foot of the pillars, with the side bearing the image of Christ facing upside (*Fig. 12*).⁴²



Fig. 12 The two byzantine coins inserted in the mortar at the basis of the pillars in the Sant'Eusebio crypt Church, Perti nearby Savona, (from AROBBA *et. al.* 2003, p. 707).

A much later instance is the church of Santa Maria di Loreto, Tramutola (Potenza), where during the last restoration in the plaster decorating a modern altar on the South wall of the church, five coins (one *grano* and four *tornesi* of Naples) dating back to the 16th/first half of the 17th century were discovered, distributed in two groups one at the left and one at the right of the altar (*Fig. 13*).⁴³ Francesca Sogliani, who published the coins, noted that they were all very worn: some of them with a size exceeding the usual one as a probable effect of a heating action, and some others with traces of cutting along the edges. The presence of defacing marks on the obverse of a specimen, a procedure that could be carried out on a previously heated coin, seems to confirm that those coins were intentionally withdrawn from circulation.

Thus, while in Perti the *folles* were placed in a position that reveals a devotional intention and/or an auspicious gesture, as a kind of blessing from Christ represented on the coins whose presence was at the base of the pillars, the meaning of the finds in Tramutola is more ambiguous. Was this in fact an act connected to the amuletic or magic properties of the coins, or was it a mere way to eliminate them from circulation once and for all? I would like to resume more in depth this discussion in the next chapter.

⁴² AROBBA *et al.* 2003.

⁴³ SOGLIANI 2010.



Fig. 13 The coins found during the restoration of the painted plaster in the Church of Santa Maria di Loreto, Tramutola, Potenza (from SOGLIANI 2010, pp. 33-34).

However, the more common situation encountered is either one or few single coins put in «strategical» position in the mortar or its selected preparation in the choir and apse (sometimes also positioned parallel to the mortar application interface), in layers mostly dated from the end of the 10th/11th to the 14th century. This happens at Santa Maria in the Scarlino castle, nearby Grosseto (a penny struck in Pavia for Otto Imperator, end of 10th century, at the end of the nave, close to the apse),⁴⁴ at San Fruttuoso di Capodimonte, Camogli (four pennies of Pavia and Venice struck between the mid-11th and the first decades of the 12th century, in the selected gravel at the end of the nave, close to the chancel),⁴⁵ at Sant'Eusebio in Castelnuovo Don Bosco, Asti (a penny of Mantua, 1150–1256 in the mortar in the apse, just behind the altar)⁴⁶ and at Sant'Egidio of Campoimperatore, L'Aquila (a penny of the Roman Senate, third quarter of the 14th century, in the nave).⁴⁷

These kinds of evidence have not been read in the same way by the scholars: for some – and I am one of them – they were the result of a voluntary depositions, even if the motives behind that could be various; for others they could be just accidental losses in a construction phase of the floor or of the plaster. In my opinion, the decisive aspects that help to distinguish this type of finding from other accidental leaks in the floor preparation mortar layers or plasters are the topography in the church, the fact that they were immersed in selected layers where no other artefacts were present and that sometimes they had a position which was clearly the result of voluntary placement, besides being irrecoverable.

⁴⁴ MARASCO 2008.

⁴⁵ Unpublished, currently under study by the author; archaeological data kindly communicated by Fabrizio Benente.

⁴⁶ CROSETTO 1999.

⁴⁷ GIULIANI – SISSIA 2017.

2.4 Coins lost on floor or floor preparation surfaces
(13th–beginning 16th centuries)

A different scenario is outlined when coins have been found on the floor or the floor preparation – in case the former was made in wooden boards – surfaces. This phenomenon rarely occurs in Italy and it has been mostly documented in the churches of the Alpine area (Trentino Alto Adige and Valle d’Aosta) and in a very few cases in religious buildings in the other zones of the northern part of the Peninsula. The coins and the contexts usually are Late Middle Ages and Early Modern Era, spanning from the 13th to the beginning of the 16th century.

In Alto Adige churches like that of SS Cosmas and Damian in Siebeneich / Settequerce in Terlano (Bolzano) are in fact not uncommon. Here more than 80 coins have been located on the preparation of the timber floor of different periods. These pieces sometimes were found together with other devotional objects or personal clothing and ornaments (beads, buttons etc.).⁴⁸

The position of the coins in a different zone of the building in relation to the preparation of phase C, excluding those in the vicinity of the high altar, was interpreted as a possible trace of the previous side altar locations where the votive offerings were placed, or as parts of the church corresponding to «gender» positions during the religious services (*Fig. 14*).⁴⁹

In the parish Church of Natività di San Giovanni Battista of Flavon in Val di Non (Trento) 29 coins have been recovered from the frequentation levels on the stone floor, distributed into two little concentrations in the east and in west side. Michele Asolati hypothesized that they were dispersions generated in the second half of 14th century by some specific cause such as the presence of an alms box from which part of the contents might have fallen.⁵⁰

Usually one or two single coins are recovered from the excavation of the use level of the floors, maybe lost and not recovered because of the poor cleaning in some zones of the church, like in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Damaso in Rome.⁵¹ The occurrences of coins in the interconnections of floor coverings, made either in stone or terracotta elements, like the one documented in the Santa Maria Assunta Church at Civezzano (Trento; some 16th-century *quarti* issued by the Merano or Gorizia mints), are more rare.⁵²

Finally, in other cases the coins recovered from the floor surfaces are linked to frequentation after the temporary or permanent de-functioning of the religious site. Among them is San Michele Arcangelo della Verruca, nearby Pisa, where the archaeologists found late 15th century *quattrini* close to several fireplaces lit on the terracotta tiles floor of the abbey church when the Florentine soldiers occupied the abbey to pursue the siege of a close Pisan fortress.⁵³

⁴⁸ NOTHDURFTER – RIZZOLLI 1993.

⁴⁹ NOTHDURFTER – RIZZOLLI 1993, p. 69.

⁵⁰ ASOLATI 2018.

⁵¹ MUNZI 2009.

⁵² FONTANA 2012–2013.

⁵³ BALDASSARRI 2005.

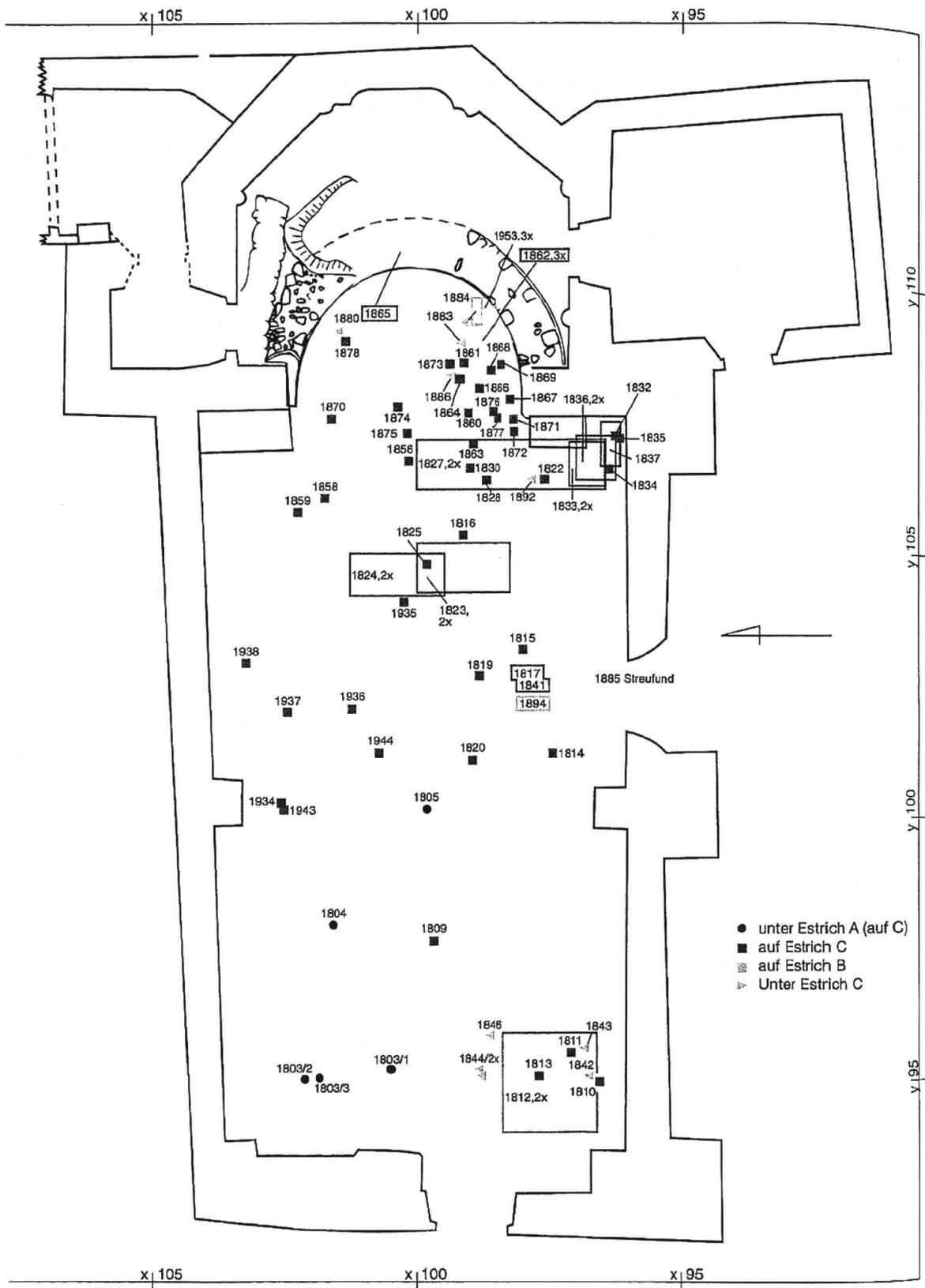


Fig. 14 Plan of the coin finds in the SS Cosmas and Damian Church, Siebeneich / Settequerce, Bolzano (from NOTHDURFTER – RIZZOLLI 1993, p. 68).

2.5. *Coin hoards as hideouts in a safe place?*
(late 12th-late 13th centuries)

There is a small group of monetary hoards found inside the churches: in most cases they were hidden near a reference element in the building, such as a pillar between the presbytery and the nave (Santi Giovanni and Reparata, Lucca), near the altar (Santu Miali, Padru, Sassari) or in a corner near the foundations of the bell tower (Santi Andrea and Anna, Perteole, Udine).⁵⁴

Usually there were accumulated silver or billon coins, stored in a number that can vary from almost a hundred to several thousand *denari* (pennies) and sometimes even *grossi*. Their deposition chronology goes from the last quarter of the 12th to the second half of the 13th century. Often the specimens were collected inside a common ceramic container, such as a jug or a pot, in some instances with clear traces of use nearby the fire (SS Giovanni and Reparata, Lucca) or also broken (San Giovanni at Bovolone, Verona). Unfortunately, most of these hoards were found without accurate documentation of the precise stratigraphic location and of the deposition context. Thus, it is very difficult to assess if they were in relation to some phases of construction or restoration of the church or of one of its structures, or if they could be associated with a nearby grave.

Among the examples that look like a saving hoard hidden in a place considered safe and inviolable there is the treasure discovered in the San Giovanni baptistry at Bovolone. During the restoration of the building in 2005 the hoard was found inside a pot, which was already broken, buried inside a hole and placed on a brick. The container was probably closed by a non-metallic and deteriorated lid, while the pieces – 129 pennies of Verona issued between 1164 and 1183 – were wrapped inside in a hemp fabric, still partially visible at the moment of the recovery.⁵⁵ Antonella Arzone, who published the coins, explicitly says that because how the treasure was recovered, two aspects cannot be ascertained: namely the relationship with a privileged tomb identified next to the hoard, and whether the treasure was buried by drilling a hole in the floor when the baptismal building was in use, or when there was no flooring during one of the phases of its reconstruction between the 12th and the first half of the 13th century.⁵⁶ However, she thinks that the last scenario is the most probable, even if it states that a ritual burial with augural function cannot be excluded at all.

The Santu Miali hoard had about 3600 coins of the Genoa and Asti mints, issued between the second half of the 12th century (very worn and cut specimens) and the third quarter of the 13th century, when the coins were hidden nearby the altar of the nowadays ruined Church of San Michele (Miali in local dialect) nearby Padru, in the Northern Sardinia. The Romanesque church was built some time before the hoard deposition, being equipped with two apses and also provided with a little stone chapel buried under the altar with some human bones believed to be the relic of St Miali.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ On the Lucca and Padru hoards see below, notes 55–57; on the Perteole hoard see LOPREATO – BLASON SCAREL 2000.

⁵⁵ ARZONE 2008.

⁵⁶ QURINALI 2006; see ARZONE 2008, p. 174.

⁵⁷ AMUCANO 2004.

The size and the type of deposition, apparently without a durable container and without any connection with the saint's grave, as well as the composition and the chronology of the hoard suggests a motive unrelated to religious rituals or devotional practices.⁵⁸

A more ambiguous example is perhaps represented by the coin hoard recovered in the Church of Santi Giovanni and Reparata in Lucca. This hoard with 283 late 12th-century billon pennies (276 of Lucca and 7 of Pisa mints, very probably issued after 1181), corresponding roughly to the nominal value of twenty two local *soldi*; the pieces were contained in a *terracotta* jug with smoke traces and probably deposited inside the church at the foot of a pillar («accanto al fondamento destro del pilastro») probably during a major restoration that took place between 1182 and 1190.⁵⁹

In some respects (topography, context in the general history of the building), this deposit could be similar to those of re-dedication, which often took place on the occasion of or after major church renovations. However, the number and type of coins accumulated (too high for a symbolic / votive deposition; coins very typical of the local currency) and the type of container used indicate with greater probability that it could be a small savings hoard, buried perhaps by some worker during the restoration phases and not recovered for unknown reasons.

3. Coins in the Italian churches: mirror of a kaleidoscope of intentions and behaviours

As stated before, this research about coin finds in Italian churches somehow is still preliminary and in the future the study sample and the data should be increased, maybe through a collaborative work. On the basis of the data collected, it is clear that it would be necessary to extend the sample to the geographical sectors currently less represented (the southern Peninsula and the Islands). Above all, there would be the need for more careful archaeological recording and detailed publication of data about coin finds and their deposition contexts in postclassical sites. But even taking into account the limitations of the current study, we can characterize some general aspects and trends (*Tab. 1*) and present some considerations about this debated and complex topic.

After the end of the 6th century the presence of coins in the Italian churches seems to undergo a setback, if not for few cases in Lombard privileged graves during the late 6th and the 7th century; the evidence is starting to be available again from the late 10th century onwards (while coins in graves outside the churches begin to appear again during the 9th century).⁶⁰

Most of the coins discovered in Italian churches were issued from the 12th century onwards, with larger peaks between the 14th and the beginning of the

⁵⁸ Author's ongoing study.

⁵⁹ The restoration is well documented by archaeological and epigraphic sources: see BALDASSARRI 2014, p. 108, ntt. 9,10 and bibliography there quoted. On the hoard and the coins see VANNI 1992, MATZKE 1993 and BALDASSARRI 2014.

⁶⁰ DEGASPERI 2013.

BETWEEN EARTH AND HEAVEN: A FIRST ASSESSMENT ON
THE COIN FINDS IN ITALIAN CHURCHES (7th–17th CENTURIES)

16th century, while there is a drastic drop of coins from the later part of the 16th century. As mentioned, this trend largely corresponds to what we know more generally about the production, circulation and use of metallic currency in the

Group/Type	Position/ Topography	Coins provenance	Nr. of coins	Chronology	Ass. materials
Saints' graves or reliquaries; privileged burials	Atrium; crypt; apse and/or altar	When 1 or few specimens, mostly local; when hundreds and more also foreign coins	Mostly 1 to 12/14; some cases dozens up to 2000	(5 th)7 th – early 8 th c. // late 10 th – 17 th c.	Apotropaic amulet (Lombard graves only); silver crosses, inscribed lead plate (contemporary); votive medals, sanctuary amulets, rosaries, glass e ceramic vessels, written documents (from later surveys and since 16 th c.)
Foundation/ dedication or re-consecration, or votive deposits	In or under the altar; intersection of chancel and nave, in front of the altar; in the middle of the nave	Mostly local; in very few cases foreign coins	Mostly 3 to 12; sometimes up to 24 or 28	12 th – 16 th c.	Glass liturgical vessels; copper or ceramic container; curved iron nails (in one case); sometimes with ashes or food remains
In floor mortar or volume, or in wall plaster, in crucial zones and particular contexts	In the choir or in the apse, in front or behind the altar; intersection of chancel and nave; at the base of pillars in the crypt	Local currency	1 to 5	Late 10 th – 17 th c.	None
On floor or floor preparation surfaces or upper interfaces	In particular concentrations alongside the nave or in the apse or close to the entrance	Local currency	1 to about 90	13 th – 16 th c.	Beads; buttons; little rings
In backfills or in building layers	No particular distribution or concentration; no particular position in the building	Mostly local currency	1 to 5	13 th – 15 th	Pottery and/or brick sherds; other little metal artefacts or slags; mortar pieces and other building materials
Hoard (temporary hideouts in a safe place?)	Close to the altar; close to a pillar between chancel and nave; in the nave; in a corner close to the bell tower	Local currency	About 120 to about 3600	Late 12 th – late 13 th c.	Common ceramic vessel as container (in most of the occurrences)

Tab. 1 Main types and general characteristics of the coin finds in Italian churches - preliminary census.

Italian territory during this period, and here the church seems prone more to exploit and to organize the monetization of the society rather than being the its first engine.⁶¹

However, this correlation seems to show some differences at the end of the chosen chronological span, that is, from the latter part of the 16th century onwards. In fact, we observe a severe drop in the occurrences of coins in churches that is also stronger in the following century, despite the fact that in different areas of Italy the production and circulation of coins in that period of time had not decreased, at least not so strongly.⁶²

There could be different explanations to that, *e.g.* that in the Modern Era churches often had a structured floor in stone or in tiles, or that coins of that period or coming from archaeological layers of that age have been recorded with a lesser attention or left unpublished for the recurring prejudice that they were too much recent. But, in some cases, it is evident that one of the concurring reasons was the «substitution» of coins with votive medals and «amulets», produced in large quantity in various religious centres and sanctuaries of Italy from the end of 16th century onwards, as documented in some saints' graves (St Catervius in Tolentino and St Giuliano in Rimini)⁶³ and reliquaries (St Donatus of Arezzo).

This phenomenon is manifest also in the burials of common people inside and outside the churches, where often from the 17th century little votive medals, originally attached to a rosary or to a chain, can be found on or nearby the dead's bodies, while coins tend instead to disappear.⁶⁴

The coins found in Italian churches are often small denominations in silver or billon, with rare cases of pieces of major value (like *grossi*), but in general not in gold (again the Lombard privileged graves are the only exception). In many cases, there are also coins worn, tossed or, sometimes, with secondary signs of demonetisation (annulment, chopping, etc.), like those in the Tramutola church.

Like already observed by Saccocci, they usually are of the same types and mints of the contemporary coins in circulation in the area where the building stands,⁶⁵ but few exceptions are known as in the case of the St Eusebio of Perti

⁶¹ Unlike in the Scandinavian area for the High Middle Ages. Instead, a similar trend has been highlighted at least for the late Middle Ages (from the late 12th and more in the 14th century) in the study of monetary finds from churches in Norway and other areas of Northern Europe: see GULLBEKK 2015.

⁶² See some studies about money and economy in various Italian areas between the 16th and 18th centuries: CIPOLLA 1952; DE ROSA 1970; DE ROSA 1982; DE GENNARO 1980; LONDEI 1990; FELLONI 2001.

⁶³ On St Catervius see the report written during the *ricognizione* in 1750 published in ALTERI 1996, p. 7; for St Giulianus see GEROLA 1911, p. 109: «*amuleto in piombo con il trasporto della Santa casa di Loreto*».

⁶⁴ On the votive medals in 17th–19th century Italy see BELLUCCI 1907; CORRAIN 1975; GALLAMINI 1977; GALLAMINI 1989; DE RUITZ 2008; MARTINI 2009. On the votive medals from post-medieval burials see, among others, LEONIO – FERSINI 1986; CANDUSSIO 1993; ROMA *et al.* 1998; BALDASSARRI 2002, CIAMPOLTRINI – SPATARO 2011; on the «competition» of coins and devotional medals in the tombs between the late Middle Ages and the Modern Period see BALDASSARRI, forthcoming.

⁶⁵ SACCOCCI 1999 and SACCOCCI 2004.

crypt, the St Catervius's and St Amico's graves or the *Confessione* of St Peter in Vatican.⁶⁶

All these data again can in part be explained by the availability of coins and currency flows, like for the Tyrrhenian area. In Sardinia, where little metallic money circulates and it is used inland before the 13th century,⁶⁷ there are no cases of coins in churches even before that date.

However, cultural causes cannot be excluded. The inclusion of coins in the tombs of the saints is clearly linked to the growing movement of the cult of these relics and of their translations in new or renewed churches, which has a strong increase since the late 9th/10th century onwards.⁶⁸ The change in funerary costumes in the late Middle Ages – from the naked body wrapped in shroud to the clothing enriched also with the deposition of objects symbolic of the status of the deceased from the 11th/12th century – may have played a role in the deposition of coins in privileged graves or in which the deceased had a particular social status.⁶⁹ Deposits of coins and other artefacts on the occasion of major re-constructions or construction of sites deemed to be of particular difficulty could be linked to the same culture and beliefs of the architects and of the workers under them since the growing complexity of religious architecture again after the 11th century.⁷⁰

So, in spite of similar trends in the general chronology (particular concentration between the late 12th and the 15th century), coin types (often small denominations locally in circulation), saint's gender (all males, except St Zita, St Cristina, St Paola and the Blessed Giovanna, *i.e.* about 8%) and for most cases in the topography of the church (main altar, chancel, apse, crypt because the relics must define and strengthen a sacralised space), there is a certain variety of cases not always easy to interpret beyond the completeness of the information available on the material evidence.

This is clear when we look at the coins inserted in the tombs of the saints or in their reliquaries. While in the examples of St Catervius, St Amico, St. Julian and St Donatus the devotional nature of these depositions and the role of pilgrims' offerings seems more obvious,⁷¹ in other examples the limited number, the dating of the finds and other elements make the scene more ambiguous and do not allow us to exclude other motivations that could be behind such a gesture.

Looking through this preliminary inventory, nor the explanation presented by Travaini (coin/coins as memory token to mark the translation and/or the survey

⁶⁶ SERAFINI 1951; TRAVAINI 2004; see also the paper presented by Michael Matzke at this conference.

⁶⁷ BALDASSARRI 2017a; BALDASSARRI 2017b.

⁶⁸ On the translation of the saint relics as their «re-actualization» through the reposition of the cult in a new architectural frame and sacral legitimation of a new space between Early and Late Middle Ages see ORSELLI 1998; BARONE 2006; LONGO 2006; CAROLI 2006.

⁶⁹ DEGASPERI 2013; BALDASSARRI 2013; MOINE 2013; BENENTE – DENTONE 2019.

⁷⁰ See FRANCHETTI PARDO 1994.

⁷¹ On currency, coin offerings and pilgrimage/pilgrims from the observatory of the Italian written and numismatic sources see TRAVAINI 2000; TRAVAINI 2004; PICCINI – TRAVAINI 2003; PIGOZZO 2004; PIGOZZO 2012.

of saint's grave or the visit of the devotees)⁷² nor that by Saccocci (a significant sample of the offerings paid by the believers to the saint as *ex voto* or in tithe form)⁷³ seems to fit well with every site documented through the centuries, also if the latter maybe corresponds better to the cases represented by numerous low value and sometimes worn coins. In this instance the use of depositing money inside the tomb of a saint perhaps could be a particular form of tithing, by which the saint was recognised as the owner of the offerings that were made in his name. However, the occurrences where a single or very few specimens (anyway way lesser than a *soldo*) of major value were left in the saint's grave, like one 14th-century silver *gigliato* in the S. Bartholomew tomb at Benevento,⁷⁴ may have been caused by motives very close to those proposed by Travaini. If not to record the date of the survey, as in later examples like St Luke's grave, at least to remark the inspection and to remember in a durable way the experience of the witnesses, creating a tangible connection between them, not only as individuals but as representatives of a devotees community and of the local authority, and the event.

Despite the differences, I think that even in these two interpretations we can point out a common trait: the coins are inserted in the saints' graves not just for their economic value, but as a symbolic materialization of a relationship established for diverse reasons among devotees (the local community and/or the pilgrims) and the saint, often mediated by the religious authorities who put – or let toss and leave – them inside the grave.

In Canetti's words, objects taken from the reality, like coins, in these contexts become «the tangible and visible precipitate of an invisible relationship that forever binds the devotee to his heavenly benefactor and therefore to the society in which that relationship is inscribed».⁷⁵ But the coins are also the media that permit the social authority (politic and religious) to «count» and to organize, that is to say to control in some way, this crowd of devotees and/or to create a personal bond with the saint as a suitable agent to strengthen the faith but also his own authoritativeness, as in other occasions it worked with the invention and/or translation of the relics itself.

Travaini and Saccocci have debated also about the reasons which could have led to the abandonment of little parcel of coins or bigger hoards outside the burials, deposited in particular areas of the church, sometimes connected to the foundation or building phases. Following Travaini, they could be the evidence of an actual foundation rite, while Saccocci excludes this possibility, believing that this phenomenon was not known at all in the Middle Ages but was recovered at the end of this period (14th century) with the rediscovery of Antiquity.⁷⁶ It is indeed true that the documentation of indisputable evidences of foundation deposits in Italian churches during the time span chosen is not frequent. As we have seen,

⁷² TRAVAINI 2004; TRAVAINI 2009a.

⁷³ SACCOCCI 1999.

⁷⁴ TRAVAINI 2004, p. 170; FIÒ 2011-2012, pp. 45-46.

⁷⁵ CANETTI 2014, p. 216: «*il precipitato tangibile e visibile di una relazione invisibile che lega per sempre il devoto al proprio benefattore celeste e quindi alla società in cui quella relazione si iscrive*».

⁷⁶ SACCOCCI 2009; SACCOCCI 2018.

however, there are few incontrovertible cases in which the coins appear to have been deposited intentionally during the foundation or construction of the church or of its relevant parts (apse, crypt, pillars, the centre of the nave).

This phenomenon has been attested, albeit very rarely, since the end of the 10th/11th century (Sant'Eusebio at Perti crypt) and it seems to become a little more recurrent since the 14th century. In the latter period the coin deposition seems to be part of an articulated ritual, with the lighting of a fire outside the church or associated with a celebratory meal (Santa Maria at Gorto di Ovaro, again Sant'Eusebio at Perti and Santa Lucia in Cagliari).

It is therefore plausible that this way of doing synthesized a dimension at the same time ritual, because it was linked to the consecration or re-dedication of the church, apotropaic/propitiatory, connected to a possible foundation rite in challenging conditions or after a calamity, and memorial, as a remembrance of the opening ceremony but also of the previous church in the event of a restoration.⁷⁷

The most striking aspect for such occasions is the geography of the evidences and in some instances the type of coins and the materials associated with them. In fact, in most cases such depositions have been documented in churches sited in the mountainous and/or inland rural areas of the peninsula or in the islands (Sardinia);⁷⁸ the solution seems to recur in the occasion of re-construction of the church or its parts after an incident (fire, wall collapse and so forth) or an abandonment period. This could prove the existence of such practices in culturally more isolated areas or zones where the construction or the restoration of a religious building maybe was perceived as difficult and in need to be associated with specific acts of sacralization.

We have to remember that also in the Middle Ages the construction of a new building represented a sort of «violation» and reorganization of a natural space.⁷⁹ It was a challenging enterprise whose success depended not only of the economic resources, the quality of materials and the technical expertise of those who built. So, the foundation took place in ceremonial forms, through rituals and invocation of supernatural powers, likely the assistance of the saints and God himself.

All these are examples of voluntary coin depositions. Slightly fewer are the sites that witness various amounts of lost coins on the upper interfaces of the floor or in connection with floor uses. The rare examples are found mainly in the Alpine area, where the interstices in the wooden floor let small artefacts pass through, which could not be recovered.

The churches in the remaining areas of Italy, where structured floors in *cocciopesto* or mortar or stone or brick were used, never returned coins on their surface except in relation to the abandonment phases. We therefore have only

⁷⁷ See CERVINI 2009. The artefacts used in these dedication deposits could come from the previous church as well as part of the building materials. In fact, one of the requirements of the ecclesiastical authorities often was that the remains of the demolition of the old religious building should be reused in the new one and not intended for secular use: see TILATTI 2014, p. 777.

⁷⁸ For a distribution map of these findings, including also depositions without coins (mostly pottery and glass), see GAVAGNIN – ROASCIO 2006.

⁷⁹ CERVINI 2009, p. 67.

a very sketchy and quantitatively reduced idea of the extent and scope of this devotional phenomenon and its cultural, social and also economic implications.

The increasing availability of minted money after the 11th century intercepted the changing needs of the believers who found in small metal objects, often also bearing the sign of a cross, the perfect materials to realize their devotion. Through the renunciation of such objects and their potential economic value by means of their donation during Mass or in the alm boxes placed near the altars, they could fulfill a generic *commendatio pro anima* purpose and help to sustain the church such as its living stones, inspired by the saints on whose relics the building itself was often based.

As many other material documents, the coins found in the Italian churches «should not be seen as the traces of a uniform phenomenon, but as a mirror reflecting diverse – individual and collective – stories».⁸⁰ Similar evidences in slightly different context and conditions could be generated by diverse gestures and aims. And the preliminary census realized showed a kaleidoscope of attitudes, intentions and behaviours, collective and individual, tracing possible various «biographies» of coins despite the common nature and the same type of site / general context of use and, then, discovery.⁸¹

But even with the diversity of the case studies and the difference of the practices and the motives behind them, it is possible to affirm that the use and deposition of coins in Italian churches – with the exception of few bigger hoards hidden in a sacred place for safety reasons – mostly happened because of their symbolic value in those contexts, that is to say the materialization of a link between individuals or a community and the divine, rather than for their economic value.

This seems valid if we interpret the coins gifted as memory token, or as symbolic fraction of the tithe, an *ex voto*, or a more generic sign of devotion or a propitiatory / apotropaic donation in particular phases of the construction of the church. They are individual intentions that more or less lastingly «incarnate» artefacts; but they are also the tangible signs through which religious and social practices were materialized. Sometimes the iconography of the coins could help with that, through the representation of Christ (the few byzantine coins), of the cross or letters pattern in form of a cross (a lot of 11th and 12th century coins) and the Madonna or the Saints (issues from the 13th century onwards). The portability and the circular shape could have also contributed.⁸²

These aspects, connected with the durability and growing availability of coins in late medieval and early modern Italy, could explain some figures showed in the graphs and the existence of coins in the stratigraphy, in the walls and in the other structures of the Italian churches between the 7th and the 17th century. However, there was a part of the coins gifted to the saints on their graves or on the altars that did not arrive to us because they were collected and used for their economic

⁸⁰ TARNOW INGVARSDON 2019, p. 33.

⁸¹ Pointing out the complexity of Italian medieval society especially after the 11th century: see KOPYTOFF 1986.

⁸² GILCHRIST 2008, p. 135.

value, as clearly shown also by written records.⁸³ But since there are no situations for which we know both the archaeological-material sources and the written contemporary sources, it is not easy to evaluate the rate of this withdrawal, nor the statistical incidence of the monetary finds on the total amount of coins actually used for various uses and motivations in Italian churches.

The Church looked always in a very suspicious and negative way – at least officially – at the accumulation of money, and the only use of monetary wealth deemed acceptable by religious norms was charity, almsgiving and gift.⁸⁴ And almost the totality of coins finds/deposition discussed here may fall within those areas, also those left in the mortar binding floors and walls.

In this respect, it is interesting to recall the symbolic association between the church and the human body or the Christian society often reaffirmed in the Middle Ages. Following this conception, if the pivot of the structure was Christ, foundations and supports were Apostles, Doctors and Martyrs, the polished stones of the inner and outer wall were the saints, who kept the other believers – the inner stones – together with their prayers. The mortar that made them stable was charity, or the result of the mixture between charity (lime) and faith (water). As stated by Fulvio Cervini,⁸⁵ church walls and foundations, therefore, ideally were strengthened if there was something inside them strictly connected with life: was there a better choice than current small coins used in everyday life deposited in the mortar or inserted in the plaster?⁸⁶

The use of coins in the saints' graves or in the privileged burials at the church core could be not very far from that: a way to renew the bond among the relics upon which the church was founded, the living community of devotees and the church authorities with a permanent and tangible sign of active charity and as a token of faith and devotion.

It has been observed that for many of these uses there is almost no trace in the written sources of the time, except in rather late texts, written from the 14th century onwards, like later saint's surveys, hagiographic or urban chronicles.⁸⁷ It evidently is the difficulty of understanding how much the normative prescriptions and literary descriptions corresponded to the practice and imagination of the laity, especially its illiterate portion, and the risk is to just follow the cultural logic of the sources, at the time produced almost exclusively by clerical and monastic elites.

Nonetheless, we have a substantial material evidence, and to the myriad of different reasons and behaviours at the origins of the coins found in Italian churches corresponds the difficulty of establishing a single reason because of the multi-semanticity of currency and of the complex relationship that people

⁸³ See PIGOZZO 2012.

⁸⁴ LE GOFF 2012.

⁸⁵ CERVINI 2009, p. 66.

⁸⁶ On the other hand, still in recent times sachets containing the plaster of the «Sacra Casa» to be used as a protective amulet were sold at the Sanctuary of Loreto: BELLUCCI 1907, pp. 135–138.

⁸⁷ SACCOCCI 1999; SACCOCCI 2018.

had – and still have – with it.⁸⁸ Undoubtedly, the durability and the relative preciousness of small coins and their relative availability and familiarity to the majority of the people especially since the 12th century have played a role: they all are characteristics suitable to show the capability of sacrifice for charity and the personal devotion, and to symbolize the existing relationship between individuals and the public authority, but especially the divine from which the public authority – politic/royal and religious – descended. Beyond that, a lot of others personal and specific issues could find in a coin the right *medium* to materialize a spiritual bond with God or the society in whose culture this was relevant, but sometimes it is hard to prove through the only reflection of the material sources.

Abstract

The growth of archaeological researches in Italian post-classic contexts during the past forty years allows a first census of the coin finds in churches from the Early Middle Ages to the Modern Age. The goals of this paper are to present the first results of this preliminary study and to discuss some issues related to the documentation and interpretation of these finds, in order to enrich the ongoing debate and to propose new research perspectives. To this end, the numismatic, archaeological and contextual aspects (topography, stratigraphy and formation processes, association of finds, general contexts) have been considered.

Sommario

La crescita quantitativa negli ultimi quarant'anni delle indagini archeologiche in contesti post-classici in Italia consente di impostare un lavoro di censimento dei ritrovamenti di monete nelle chiese dall'Alto Medioevo fino all'Età Moderna. In questo contributo si illustrano i primi risultati di questo studio preliminare e si discutono le problematiche connesse alla documentazione e all'interpretazione di tali rinvenimenti, al fine di arricchire il dibattito in corso e proporre nuove prospettive di ricerca. Per fare questo sono stati presi in considerazione gli aspetti numismatici quanto quelli archeologici e di contesto (topografia, stratigrafia e processi formativi, associazione dei ritrovamenti, contesti generali).

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⁸⁸ FURNHAM 1984; PRZYBYSZEWSKI – TYSZKA 2007.

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