

Adriatico altomedievale (VI-XI secolo)

Scambi, porti, produzioni

a cura di Sauro Gelichi e Claudio Negrelli

A Hoard of Byzantine Ironwork from Supersano (Apulia, South Italy) and Its Global Connections

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Abstract Excavations in 2012 have revealed a hoard of nine iron objects hidden within a wall at an early medieval rural site at Supersano. Whilst the site appears to have been abandoned during the 9th century, the hoard seems to date to the second half of the 10th century or not long after. Not only are such hoards thus far known to be typical of the Balkans and parts of northern Europe, rather than of Italy and the Mediterranean, but also its composition is curious. The heterogeneous nature of the objects and the fact that some were broken before being concealed suggests that it was probably a blacksmith or merchant's hoard. However, of particular interest is the presence of a type of winged mattock not usually found in Byzantine contexts and of a spur which known distribution is largely north of the Alps, in Germany, Poland, England, Scandinavia and with a small eccentric concentration in Croatia. The hoard thus shows widespread connections and suggests how much more there is to learn about Italy and the Mediterranean during the later first millennium AD.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Ironwork Hoard. – 3 Discussion.

Keywords Byzantine. Varangian. Balkans. Ironwork. Blacksmith. Spur.

1 Introduction

On-going archaeological excavations since 1999 have gradually been revealing the remains of a Byzantine rural settlement at a site in the locality of Scorpo, near the modern town of Supersano, some 47 km south of Lecce, in southern Apulia (fig. 1). Dating evidence suggests that the site was occupied mainly in the 8th century, although it is likely to have been founded during the 7th, and may finally have shifted or been abandoned in the first half of the 9th century. It lay on the edge of ancient woodland (the Belvedere forest), close to marshes, in an area of somewhat heavy and intractable clayey soil, though with well-drained limestone hills to the west. Albeit towards the western periphery of the Byzantine Empire at the time, the site is of particular importance as being one of the very few early medieval Byzantine rural settlements to have yet been systematically examined through archaeology, thus providing a rare glimpse of Byzantine

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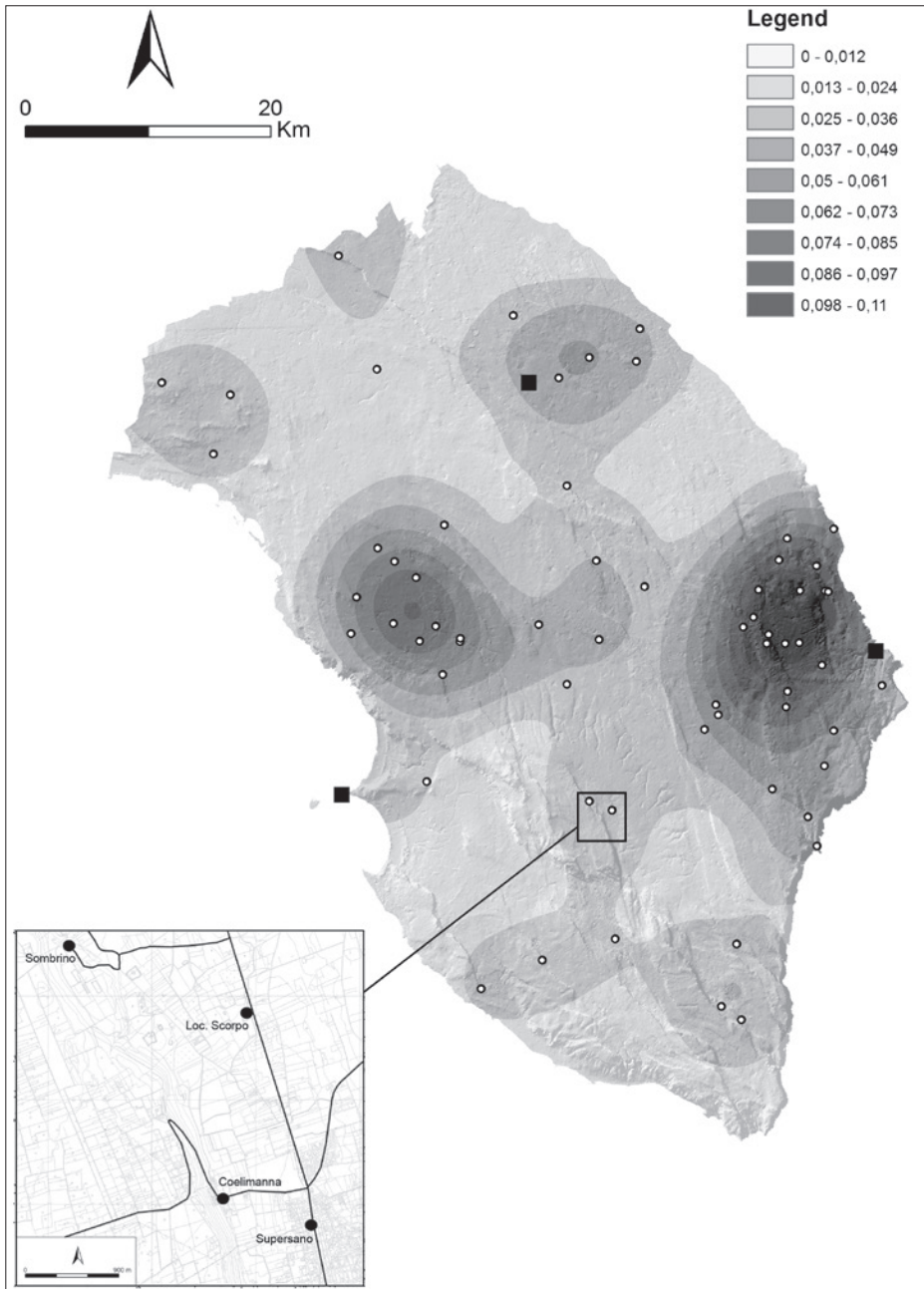


Figure 1. Distribution, with isodensimetric curves, of known Byzantine (7th-10th) settlement in Salento. The site of loc. Scorpo is located in an area of low settlement density, also because of the presence of the Belvedere forest (Giuseppe Muci, LAM)

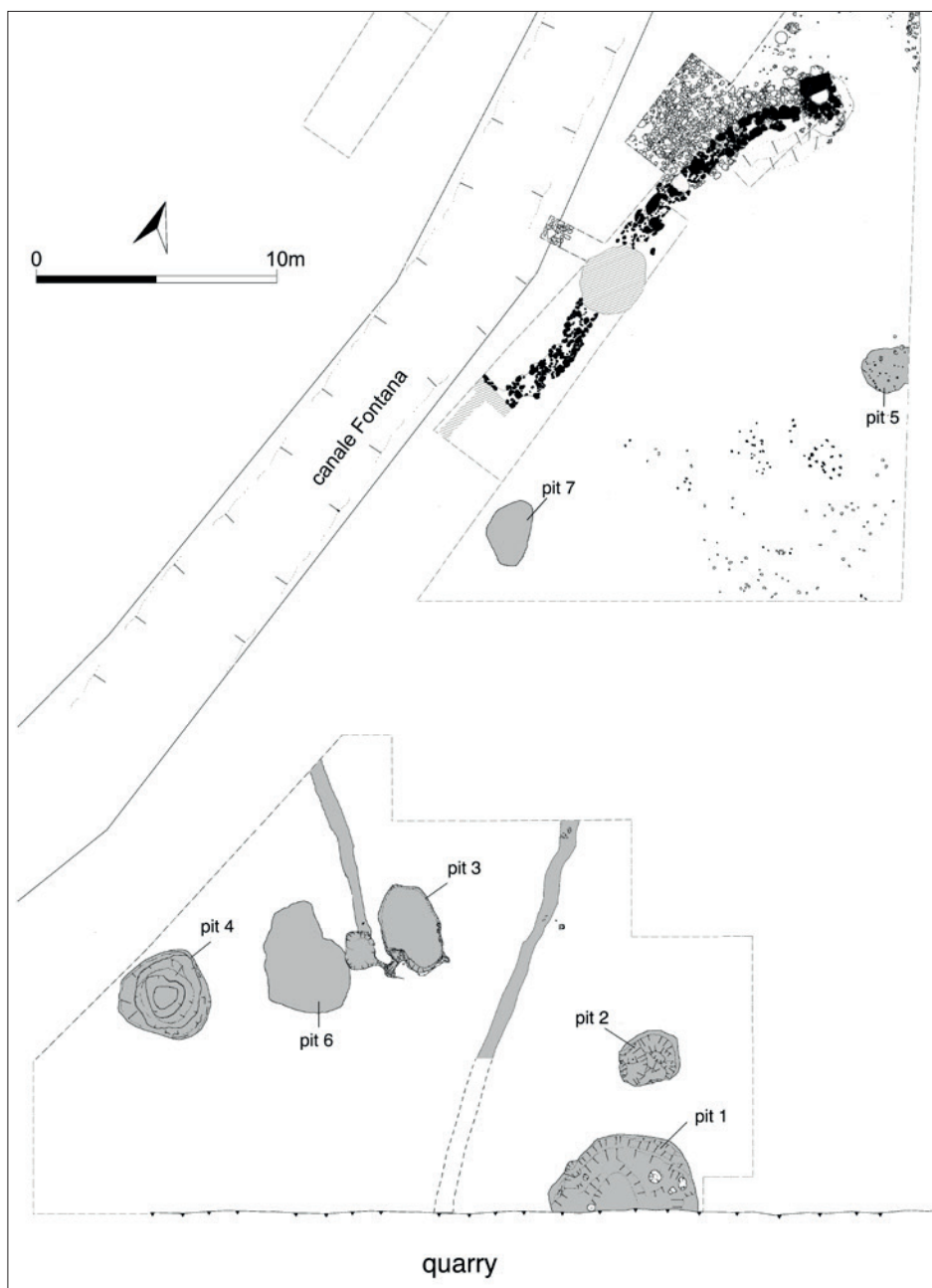


Figure 2. Site plan (Leo Imperiale, LAM)

peasantry, particularly at a moment of substantial political and economic turmoil. The site is also remarkable for a number of somewhat unexpected discoveries (fig. 2). So far, traces of domestic habitation consist of sunken-featured buildings or *grubenhäuser*, a building type that was once seen as exclusive to northern barbarian cultures, including the Lombards, who invaded much of Italy during the later 6th century.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to excavate the whole site as a quarry, modern drainage ditches and roads have destroyed and limited the available area. The northern limit of the site has revealed a substantial dry-stone wall, of which a stretch of some 15 m has been brought to light. It may have been an enclosure or boundary wall, the rest of which is likely to have been largely destroyed by post-medieval activity. At one end of the wall, perhaps close to an original entrance, a well was found in 2007. Its fill proved to be quite remarkable in that it included a substantial quantity of extremely well-preserved organic remains, comprising a few wooden artefacts and numerous cultivated and wild plant remains (Arthur, Fiorentino, Leo Imperiale 2008). The latter included many seeds from cultivated grapes, some with preserved DNA (cf. Cappellini et al. 2010).

During the 2012 season of excavations a further section (US 320) of the possible enclosure wall was excavated. Although the settlement appears to have been abandoned during the course of the 9th century, after which the wall would have gradually fallen into disrepair, a small jug, datable to the 11th-12th century, was found in a layer of ashy soil in the upper part of the wall's collapsed rubble (US 319). Furthermore, excavation along the remains of the drystone wall also revealed a small hoard of nine iron objects, the subject of this current paper (fig. 3).

2 The Ironwork Hoard

The accurate positioning of the ironwork hoard, with objects found tightly packed and lying horizontally within the wall rubble (US 319), suggests that it may have been contained in a sack or similar container, even though no traces of organic material were seen in the corroded surfaces of the tools, and then concealed within the wall. This appears to have occurred in the later 10th or 11th century, as will be discussed below. Unfortunately, there is no stratigraphic evidence for dating the exact moment of the hoard's seclusion, although we might surmise that it happened not too long after the abandonment of the site, when the wall in which it was placed was still largely standing.

The objects comprised by the hoard (fig. 4), all highly oxidised iron, and some partly broken prior to burial, are listed below (SF are small find numbers):

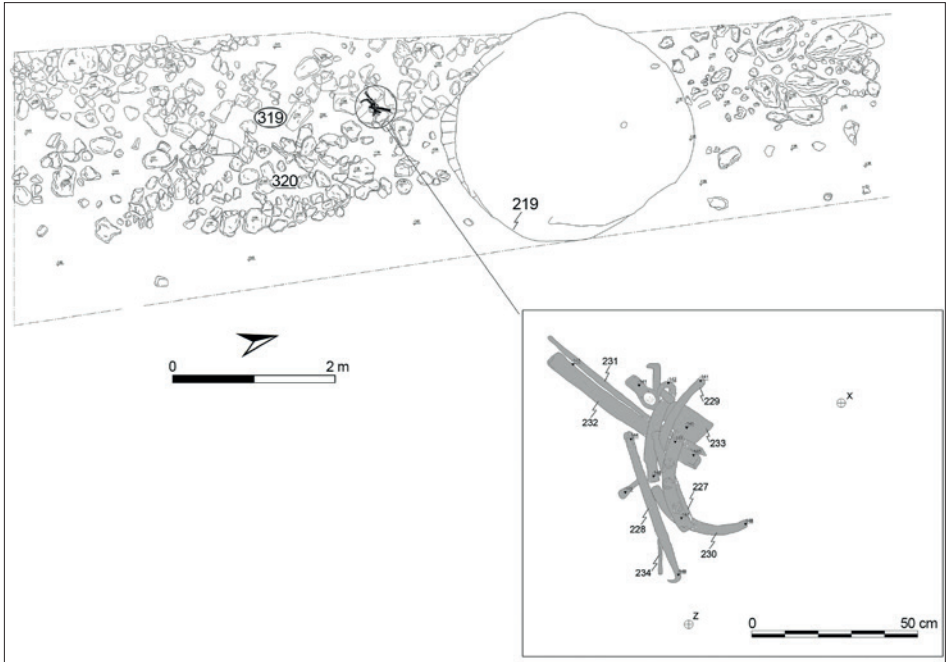


Figure 3. The part of the dry-stone wall in which the ironwork hoard was found (LAM)

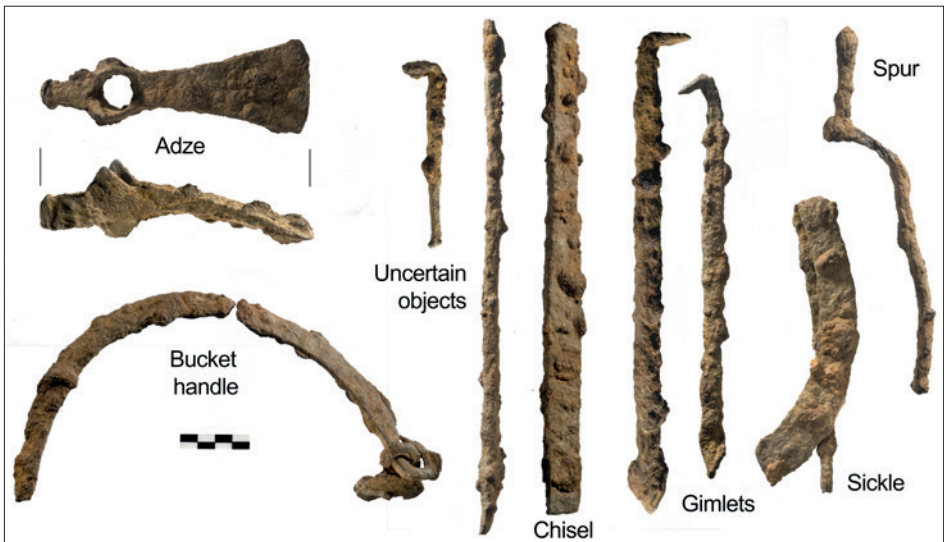


Figure 4. The objects in the hoard (photo P. Pulli)

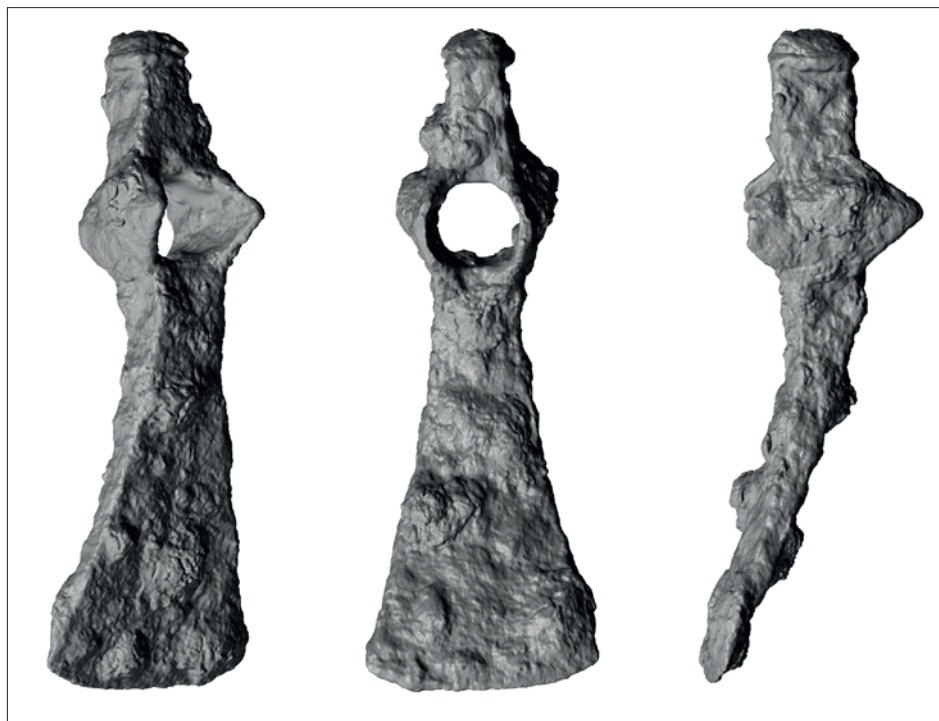


Figure 5. The scan of the winged mattock or adze (SIBA)



Figure 6. The scan of the balanced sickle (SIBA)

1. SF 233: fig. 5. An intact winged mattock or adze. Weight 290.64 gr.
2. SF 227: fig. 6. A purposely-folded blade of a balanced sickle, from which the tang is missing. There is no clear trace of a serrated cutting edge. Weight 124.58 gr.
3. SF 229: fig. 7. A simple horseman's spur with a thickened prick or goad, missing of part of one arm. Weight 70.66 gr.
4. SF 230. Iron cauldron or wooden bucket handle, found snapped in two. Weight 132.75 gr.
5. SF 232. A intact heavy chisel. Weight 372.33 gr.
6. SF 234. An intact wimble, gimlet, or auger with a spiral bit. Weight 271.10 gr.
7. SF 228. A similar, though slightly smaller, wimble, also intact. Weight 130.30 gr.
8. SF 231. An unidentified object with two pointed extremities. Weight 89.14 gr.
9. SF 235. The smallest item in the hoard is not clearly identifiable, although it looks like a nail of sorts. Weight 39.61 gr.

3 Discussion

It is worth considering the various items in the ironwork hoard before attempting to understand its broader meanings.

The winged mattock of Henning type K10 (1987, pl. 51) is a very specific form (fig. 5), only occasionally attested in Byzantine territories. The Supersano example differs from those illustrated by Joachim Henning because of the rounded reinforced knob at its rear end. So far the type seems to appear almost exclusively in hoards and in a relatively well-dated settlement complex of the later 10th or early 11th century.

It is unfortunate that the handle part of the sickle is missing, as it would have helped to ascertain whether or not it belongs to a specific Byzantine sickle form dating to around the 10th-11th centuries (figs. 6 and 8).

The single spur (fig. 7) is of exceptional interest as being virtually unique in southern Italy. It is of a simple type with a long prick or goad without a large tapered point. A study by Thomas Kind (2002) has shown its known distribution to be largely north of the Alps, in Germany, Poland, England and Scandinavia, with a small eccentric concentration in Croatia, and he is in no doubt that it dates to the 10th century.

Spurs do not seem to have been common to the Byzantine cavalry at this date and I have been unable to find details of spurs in any of the Byzantine-style wall paintings that depict horsemen (e.g. those of Saint George) in southern Italy around the turn of the millennium. They were, however, clearly in use by horsemen of the Ottonian Empire, and were probably also in use by the Varangian guard, an essentially northern European Viking



Figure 7. The scan of the horseman's spur (SIBA)

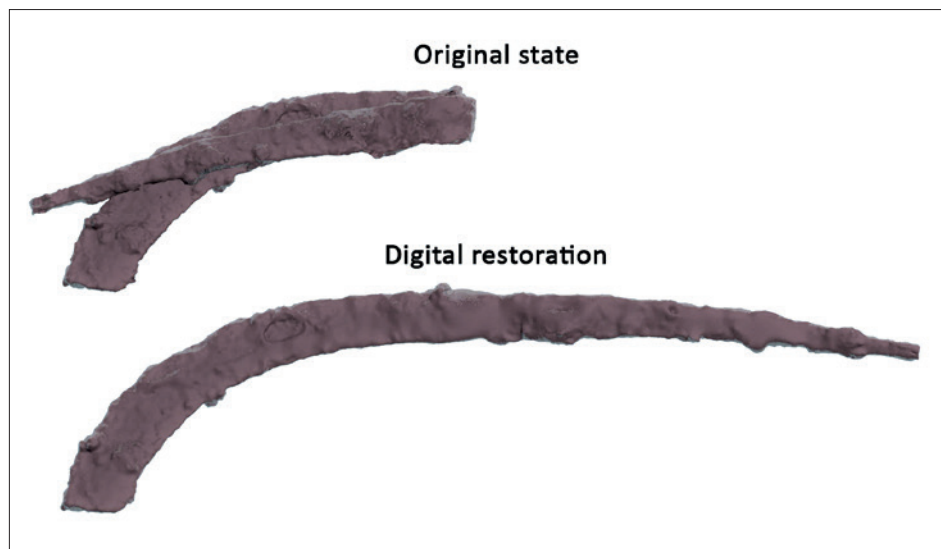


Figure 8. The reconstructed resin sickle and its resin restoration (SIBA and Department of Engineering and Innovation)

cavalry unit in service in the Byzantine army from the 10th century. The Vikings had close contacts with the Ottonians, and some Varangian mercenaries were certainly present in Italy from 935, and were later involved in defending southern Italy from conquest by the Normans, as in December 1047 they apparently sacked Norman-held Lecce (Lupus Protospatrius, Anno 1047). A possible Varangian spur in the south of the peninsula would thus not be totally amiss, and it is worth recalling that another Varangian iron object, the fearsome double-edged hatchet or pelekys, is even attested as having been used by Saint Nilus of Rossano (d. 1004) in laying waste to vineyards in Calabria (Bryer 2002, 108).

Furthermore, it is highly unusual to find a spur in a 10th century hoard in contrast to the large number of spurs present in 9th century ironwork hoards from Great Moravia. The Scorpo find is the second evidence of a spur from a 10th century hoard after the single spur found at Čelopeč, in the region of Sophia, Bulgaria, around the turn of the 19th century (Mutafčiev 1915; Henning 1989, 93; Jotov 2004, 164, 169 and 271, no. 826, pl. LXXIX, 826).

The wimbles, of two clearly different sizes, are typical woodworking tools. They may have been of especial use in producing dowel holes for the wooden architecture that was common at the time, particularly in the absence of iron nails. The study of the deserted medieval villages of Quattro Macine and Apigliano indicate that iron nails, or indeed any iron objects, may not have become particularly common in southern Apulia until the 13th century (Arthur, Piepoli 2011), and therefore that joints were perhaps often fastened through the use of wooden dowels. These would have necessitated the use of wimbles or drills. The same may hold true for Byzantine domestic architecture in general after late antiquity, although we are still very poorly informed regarding medieval rural architecture in the Mediterranean because of the general lack of village archaeology (Pitarkis 2005; some more recent finds are presented in Böhlendorf-Arslan, Ricci 2012. See, now, Galetti 2010, on early medieval housing in the Mediterranean). Wimbles do not seem to appear in contexts dating prior the middle of 10th century. One of the closest parallels seems to come from the Strezevo (Byzantine?) hoard in Macedonia (Janakievski 1980, 1-7). Somewhat similar examples, though not identical, were found in the Rumanian hoards of Dragosloveni and Ploiești-Triaj in the lower Danube area (Ciupercă 2010, pl. 6, no. 3).

Metal cauldrons or wooden buckets appear to have been regular features of medieval households. Apart from the iron handle found in the hoard, the broken iron rim and an iron loop attachment of a bronze cauldron, probably dating to around the 8th century, have already been found at the site of Scorpo, in the fill of a sunken-featured building excavated in 1999. Cauldrons continued to figure as significant domestic items in Apulia. One example (*caldara*) is cited in a dowry from Terlizzi in north-

ern Apulia dating to 1138 (Goskar 2011). Part of another, dating to later medieval times, was recovered from excavations at Otranto (Hicks, Hicks 1992, 299-300, fig. 10.9).

The sum of chronological evidence suggests that the hoard dates to the second half of the 10th century and not much later, which thus makes it Byzantine or late-Ottonian, given its composition and the fact that it dates closely to when the German Emperor Otto II briefly captured the Byzantine town of Taranto in 982. By that time the settlement of Scorpo would appear to have been abandoned, as no other finds from the site are known to date later than the 9th century. Thus someone who thought he would have little difficulty in retrieving the hoard probably hid it in the disused wall at the site. However, a scatter of Byzantine pottery, abundant roofing tiles, and an 11th century anonymous bronze follis, has been found in fields lying at some 200 m to the north-east (fig. 9, areas 5 and 6). Another concentration has been found just to the north of the excavated site (fig. 9, area 7). These may have been extensions of the site, though areas 5 and 6 are now interrupted by a road, a drainage ditch and other recent disturbance. Alternatively, the coin found in area 5 is somewhat later than the artefacts found on the excavated site, it may represent a later phase of inhabitation. Areas 5-7 were also eventually abandoned, probably by the 12th century. By then the site of the present town of Supersano had probably been founded, as the earliest phase of the town's castle may date to late Norman times. All this might well suggest that the various occupation sites essentially belonged to the same community, which had moved short distances over the centuries, whilst perhaps continuing to farm the same land (fig. 10). Indeed, if such was the case, a further site (area 3) may form part of the equation – it dates to Roman imperial times, and lies some 700 m to the south-west of the excavation in località Falconiera (Giannotta 1990). In northern Europe and elsewhere the phenomenon of shifting or fleeting villages (Buck Sutton 1999), even over very short distances, is well attested, as in the cases of Vorbasse, Denmark (Hvass 1986), and Mucking, England (Hamerow 1993). The settlement shifts would seem to indicate a certain flexibility in land control, and may have been caused by either the need to renew the settlement itself and its older buildings after one or two generations of continuous and intensive use, or a form of selective agriculture caused by soil fertility depletion of arable land. In the latter case, discussed by Florin Curta (2006, 419) one would envisage a relatively distant shift of the site, onto fresh or renewed arable, as was practised through crop rotation, which would not appear particularly to be the case at Scorpo during Byzantine times. A final shift to the site of the present town of Supersano may have been occasioned by Norman control of the area with the need to collect and control the indigenous population on a slightly raised hill. Whatever the case, it is quite possible that a member of the local community who lived not too far away from the abandoned settlement deposited the ironwork found at Scorpo.

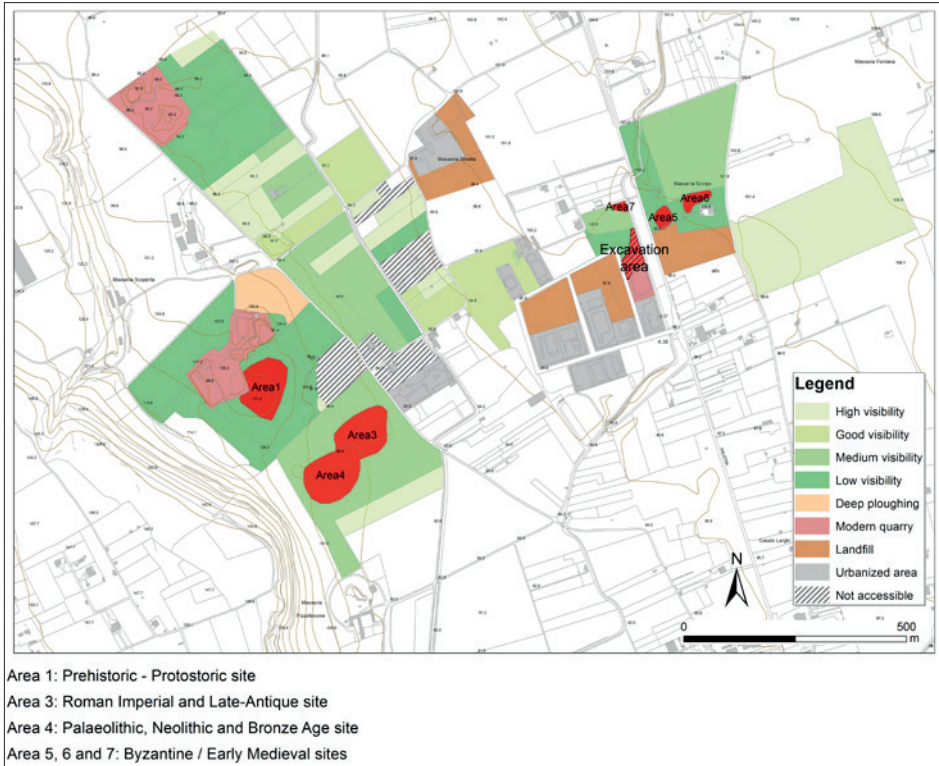


Figure 9. Site location (Giuseppe Muci, LAM)

Curta (1997) has also provided the clearest synthesis to date of knowledge regarding early medieval ironwork hoards, which have been found to concentrate in central Europe. In this respect, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Supersano ironwork hoard is that it appears to be atypical in so far as such deposits are neither common in Italy, nor in most of the territory that was held by the Byzantine Empire. As such, the find would seem to add further confirmation to the impression that the Salento, in Byzantine times, rather than being strongly linked to the rest of peninsular Italy, was more closely linked to the Balkans, through somewhat similar traits, and where the hoarding of iron objects was particularly widespread. Knific (2010), for instance, in discussing hoards from Slovenia, lists the items in the Sebenje (Bled) hoard as comprising agricultural implements, wood-carving tools, weapons, equestrian equipment and bucket handles. Apart from weapons, whose absence may be fortuitous, all are represented at Scorpo. Nonetheless, within the context of the Byzantine Salento, it is

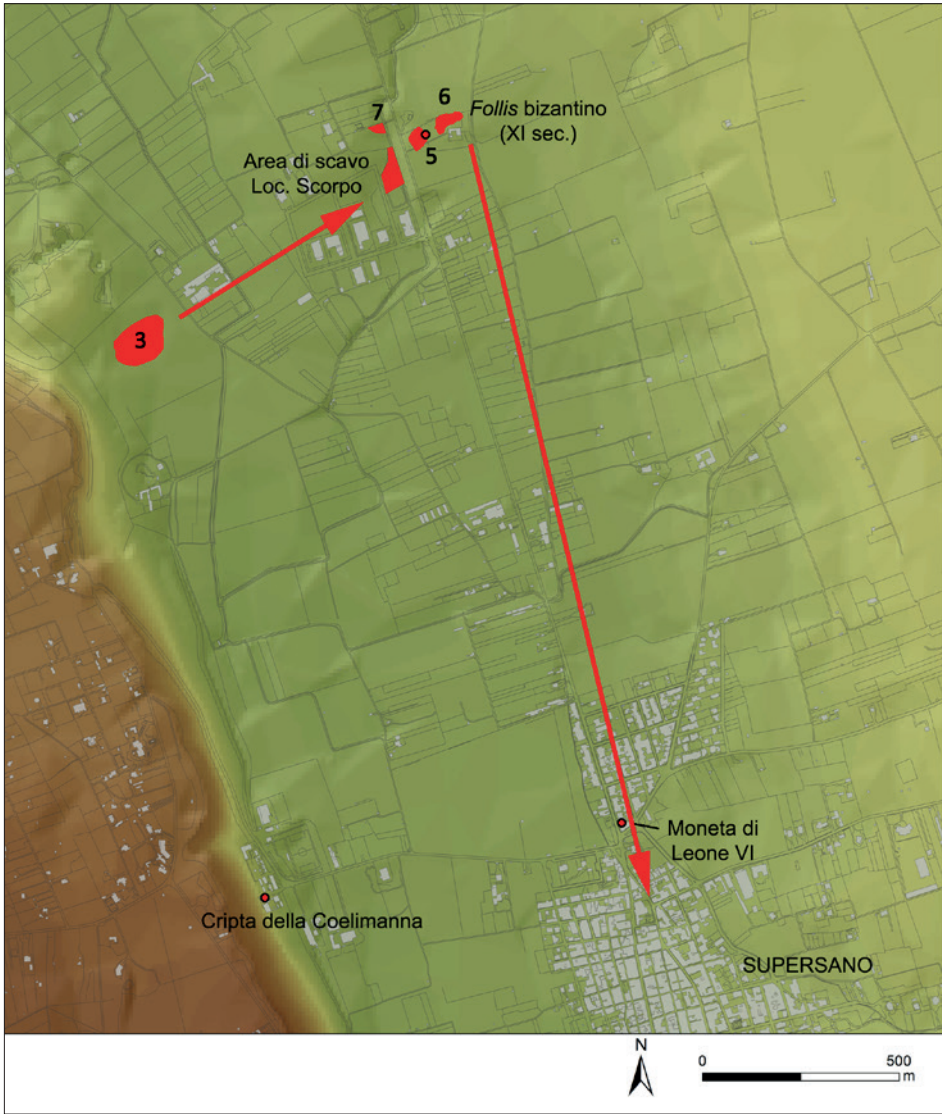


Figure 10. A shifting village? Area 3: Roman Imperial and Late Antique; Scorpo and areas 5,6 and 7: Byzantine; Supersano: medieval to modern (LAM)

hard to construe the Scorpo find as an example of the potlatch interpretation that Curta has advanced for many of the Eastern European examples, where he sees the hoards as possessing particular symbolic values used in establishing and maintaining political and social relationships amongst people of steppe tradition.

Another feature of the Scorpo hoard is that some of the items are quite clearly defunct: the spurs are broken, as is the bucket handle and the sickle, the latter of which was also deliberately folded in two (fig. 8), perhaps to reduce it in size so as to fit comfortably alongside the other objects. This might suggest that the objects were gathered together as scrap metal for reworking, as appears to have been the case of the Kurotnoe (Kordon Oba) hoard, found in a hillfort in the Crimea (Curta 1997, 214). Thus, perhaps, they may have been the property of a blacksmith who had collected discarded or old items. The mix between agricultural implements, woodcarving tools and a spur, which was a high-status item, suggests that the objects originally belonged to more than one individual, before being united in the hoard. Although some scholars claim that, prior to cast iron, the metal was not often reused, there is evidence that some blacksmiths, even as late as early modern times, relied entirely on scrap iron. Indeed, it has been said that reused iron was tougher than new iron (e.g. Clark 2004, 93). Though there is no great evidence for smithing at the village of Scorpo, a few very small fragments of slag have been found during the excavations, suggesting that there may have been a smithy somewhere nearby, perhaps serving the reparation of damaged tools. Blacksmiths' hoards of scrap iron are known in late antique Italy, as for example, that found at Piana San Martino (PC) during the 2007-08 season of excavations (Conti 2008), although the Supersano hoard, as far as I am aware, is the first possible example of such from a Middle Byzantine context. Alternatively, the hoard may represent accumulated wealth that someone intended to exchange with a blacksmith or a middleman.

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