

# Cemetery Contexts in Mid Eastern Liguria in the Medieval Centuries

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*Liguria (Italy); death; burial; grave goods; body position; social and cultural aspects*

## Summary

The detailed analysis of cemeteries excavated in the eastern region of Liguria will help us to identify burial-related historical, social and cultural aspects. The archaeological evidence produced by such cemeteries is examined at two working levels. The first is the analysis of each grave considered as a complex of physical contexts (position of the body, grave goods, different kinds of structures). The second regards the comparative study of several cemeteries in order to point out the presence of elements indicating any detail in the organisation of the burying area capable of providing information about the evolution of the social pattern in the Middle Ages.

## Introductory premises

The process of decodifying evidence originating from funeral contexts presents us with difficulties extremely diverse and problematic from both a theoretical and a methodological point of view (Cuozzo 1996, 1–2). With this study, a preliminary to a much wider ranging research on the burials and the medieval/post-medieval funeral usage of eastern Liguria and in particular the context after the 11th century, it was necessary to establish a methodological foundation that was capable of taking into account and evaluating the specific characteristics of each singular funerary situation. Currently a general analysis of the medieval and post-medieval burials for the area of Liguria, on the lines of that recently published for the Piedmont (Crosetto 1998), does not exist. The research of Crosetto represents a revision of

the systematic work carried out in previous years such as that on the Novalesa burials (Lambert 1989), which was followed by work in the area of Asti (Crosetto 1993) and subsequently by other successive revisions.

Therefore, here is presented a preliminary catalogue of the burials identified in stratigraphical archaeological excavations carried out in eastern Liguria, together with an exhaustive review of the numerous data, originating from archaeological research of the post-war period, which is not always supported by methodological rigour.

Particular attention is dedicated to the burials found in non stratigraphic soundings of the 1950's, at Isola del Tino, beside the cathedral of Brugnato – those, however, previous to the recent restructuring which were in contrast carried out under constant archaeological supervision (Frondoni 2001) – and beside the church of San Venerio of Migliarina (for the work inside the building see Cimaschi 1961).

Regarding the stratigraphic research, in course are the respective analyses of the graves excavated at the church of S. Maria in Vezzano Ligure (Geltrudini 2000), the oratory of the Misericordia of Sarzana (Frondoni 1999; Frondoni/Geltrudini 2000; Frondoni/Geltrudini/Howes 2001) and the abbatial church of San Fruttuoso of Capodimonte (Gardini 1987; 1990; 1998). A preliminary note concerning the graves excavated in the area of the cathedral of Luni was published in 1987 (Lusuardi/Sannazaro 1987), upon which a recent catalogue was based (Durante 1998). For motives of space, the building sequence of each site examined will be referred to in a relatively simplistic way accompanied by a bibliographic source for further reference.

The catalogue that has been realised, notwith-

standing it is based on a broad foundation of research on a wide scale, must remain an instrument utilised always with the consideration that, apart from rare cases – such as those in analysis referred to above – often, for the limited nature of the areas investigated and the small number of inhumations documented, the various excavations cannot be taken as truly representative samples suitable for generalisation. In addition we should be aware of the potential distortions caused by the wide range of different contexts and realities represented by the excavations. In this context the recent work at Sarzana is significant, representing as it does an example of modern archaeology in eastern Liguria that, however, was carried out in a limited area and above all on a building peripheral to the centre of the medieval city and therefore cannot be taken as an absolute paradigm for an early medieval cemetery. Rather, Sarzana should be taken as a starting point for the direction of future research.

Together with these contexts, of which a preliminary or complete *corpus* describing the burials already exists, the present research is extended also to those numerous inhumations, up until now unpublished, documented at the Sanctuary Mariano of Soviore (Frondoni 1998a; 1998b) where a burial area related to the buildings of a pre-Romanesque cult is attested; and ultimately to the elaboration of data from the most recent of excavations at the cathedral of Brugnato (Frondoni 1996; 2001).

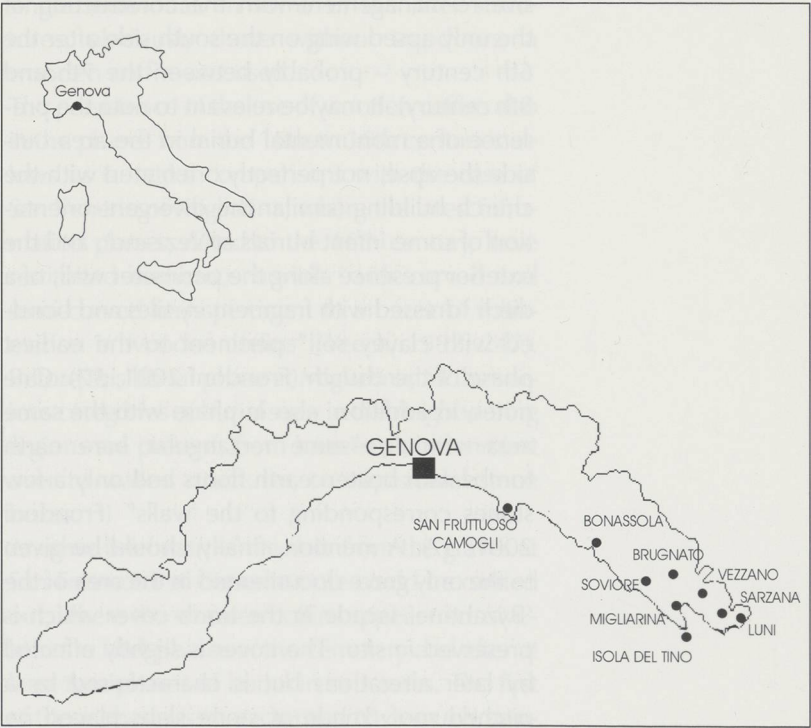
The comparison between various types of burials follows the scheme devised for the edifice of Vezzano, the only example of those analysed in which, excluding the limited number of post-Renaissance burials, the excavation was complete and above all the publication included a comprehensive range of data (but see below for the section regarding the skeletal studies for a note of caution).

### From S. Maria in Vezzano Ligure to the burials documented in eastern Liguria

During the early medieval phases of the cemetery at Vezzano (with reference to the area external to the cult building in use between the beginning of the 7th century, through successive modifications, to the beginning of the 11th century), tombs with structures are ab-

sent. The inhumations are placed in trenches dug in the bare earth that occasionally have rough cordons of stones, simple covers realised with stone slabs sealing the grave-fills and, in one case only, a vertical slab was placed against the western wall of the grave-cut as a headstone. The bare earth burials and their variants with stone cordons and headstones are comparable with examples found in eastern Liguria in the numerous graves of these types documented at Luni (Ward Perkins 1977; Durante/Gervasini 1993) and at Brugnato (Frondoni 2001). In addition, recorded practises are also such as the reopening of tombs for successive burials, which confirms the religious importance of this area. It should be noted that burials are seldom found inside the edifice, also a feature in the Piedmont sample (Crosetto 1998). In Piedmont, up until the Romanesque period, burial inside the ecclesiastical building was reserved for a restricted number of individuals. The pattern is repeated in the case of Soviore where only a single burial is present inside the church, this grave is positioned close to the facade and partially truncates a portion of the foundation. In this example one notes the particular importance of the internment because the walls of the facade of the cult building itself are partially modified at the level of the foundations, in order to form a support for the tomb cover.

Fig. 1: Sites mentioned in the text.



During the period of use of the cult building at Vezzano all of the area external to the perimeter wings is eventually taken over for burial use, though with diminishing density: one emphasises the privileging of specific zones in the chronological development of the site. The first, the earliest, concerns the area adjacent to the facade, in close relationship with the entranceway to edifice. The presence of structural elements in front of the church, which are a flight of steps with perimeter wall, has influenced the orientation of the graves which, utilising the existing wall as supports are thus systemised in a direction north-south with the head to the north.

In a later phase, but during the same period, the tombs occupy another important zone, that around the exterior of the apse.

When the church is subject to a remanagement that corresponds to its latest phase of use, the area adjacent to the western wing is utilised. In this case the presence of structures pertinent to an outbuilding on the lateral side of the wing may suggest the existence of a cemetery boundary wall.

The same areas external to the church, with different distributions and with the impossibility of establishing the exact chronological sequence of the utilisation, are used at Brugnato where the presence of inhumations outside the edifice is confirmed for the earliest phases (first apsed building dated to the 5th–6th centuries, successive re-management with the construction of the only apsed wing on the south side after the 6th century – probably between the 7th and 8th century). It may be relevant to note the presence of a monumental burial in the area outside the apse, not perfectly orientated with the church building (similar the divergent orientation of some infant burials at Vezzano), and the exterior presence along the perimeter wall, of a ditch “dressed with fragmentary tiles and bonded with clayey soil” pertinent to the earliest phase of the church (Frondoni 2001, 57). One notes, in addition, also in phase with the same area of cult, “some rectangular bare earth tombs with beaten earth floors and only a few stones corresponding to the walls” (Frondoni 2001, 57). A mention, finally, should be given to the only grave documented in the area of the ‘Byzantine’ facade in the tomb cover which is preserved *in situ*. The cover is slightly effected by later alterations but is characterised by a pitched roof “made of stone slabs placed on

side walls made of irregular stone, bonded with mortar” (Frondoni 2001, 57). The most recent burial, dating before the realisation of the later church (late 11th to early 12th centuries) is built against a modification of the old church around about the beginning of the 11th century. This tomb consists of a rectangular grave “with walls of dressed stones and slabs positioned vertically as a headstone” (Frondoni 2001, 58).

One should note the presence of an early medieval tomb – with walls in stone and tiles, bonded by clay and cover in stone or reused slabs of marble – close to the cathedral of Luni (Lusuardi Siena/Sannazaro 1987, 226–227).

Confirming the choice of the area close to the apse as a privileged zone, even if in the case of Vezzano the choice is secondary, are the comparisons once again with Soviore, a single-apsed cult edifice dated between the 9th–10th centuries (plastered tomb with the sign of an incised cross built against apse and infant burials); Luni, excavations of the cathedral of S. Maria (Belli Barsali 1964, Durante/Gervasini 2000) and, as noted above, Brugnato.

All of the inhumations next to the church of Vezzano are placed in a supine position except one, which is in a prone position. The only other grave in this last position in Liguria was found at the medieval cemetery of San Pietro in Carpignano (Martino 1983; Bulgarelli 1998). None of the tombs at Vezzano contained grave goods (Geltrudini 2000, 208). The preliminary examination of the data under analysis has not provided us with other examples of non-supine burials, while the cataloguing of the position of the upper body for the tombs is more complicated, as it is only partially published. The orientation, almost always east-west, can vary in the case of the tombs with structures, according to the tendency to integrate them with the alignments of existing walls. It is also relevant to note the fact that at Vezzano the areas chosen for the burial of single, young individuals are those close to the apse or in the western zone. The typological details of the Vezzano case study emphasise for the late medieval (pertinent the edifice reconstructed around the 12th century, modified in the course of the 14th and 15th centuries) and post-medieval phases the initial use of the internal area of the church for burials in bare earth without coffins. Only later are coffins used, particularly relevant is the absence, in the first inhumations, of covers that at a later date appear as

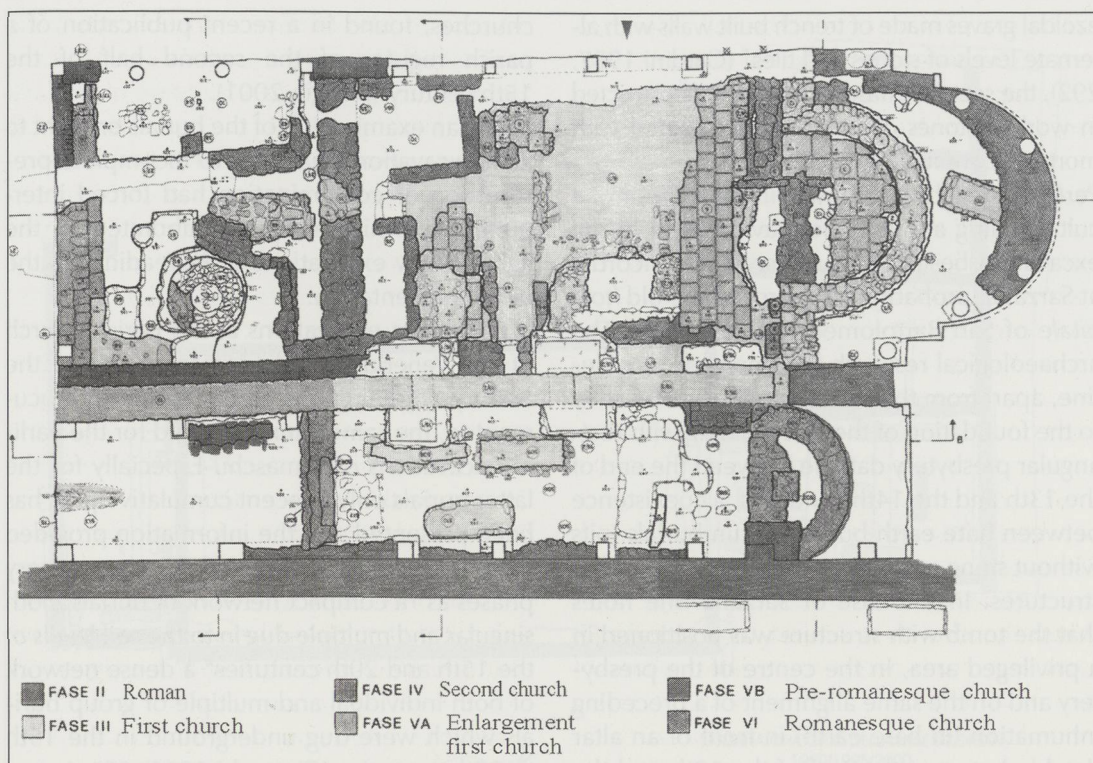


Fig. 2: Brugnato.  
Phases of the building  
(Frondoni 1998).

stone slabs in reused slate. The use of coffins becomes predominant and continuous also during the successive fabrication of tombs with walled structures.

The evident intention to circumscribe the internal space of the cult building destined for burial use is documented starting from the first post-Romanesque depositions. A precise scheme is obvious inside the edifice that confines the interior inhumations inside symbolic limits defined by the truncated wall foundations of the preexisting church.

The utilisation of tomb structures in masonry and mortar appear soon after with the construction of burial niches, realised alongside the tombs in bare earth but respecting them.

It is notable that, as the preceding inhumations seem to be organised in such a way as to continue the use of the older walls of the primitive facade as a boundary, so the first structures initially respect the same limits. Only with the latest post-Renaissance phases do the graves occupy the complete area of the interior of the church, with a particular concentration in the area in front of the presbytery. A preliminary classification according to the type of cover is possible regarding the later tombs, even if the numbers of the sample involved are not high: one can hypothesise that the earliest are of the type with slate covers compared to those with

brick vaults, occasionally with trapdoor entrances, that are a later development. It was not possible to establish if the presence of the trapdoor was a part of the original tomb construction (anticipating already at the moment of the construction the use of the structure as an ossuary) or else a secondary modification practised upon a grave initially destined for a single individual. In some of the later structures, obviously those without trapdoors, a wooden coffin was used.

The persistence of the use of wooden coffins also in the phases from the 15th to 16th centuries allows us to make comparisons with the case of San Venerio di Migliarina, where the latest inhumation phases, dated to the 16th century, have restituted numerous burials "with curved and semi-curved nails pertinent to an area of inhumation in wooden coffins" (Vecchi 1987, 247). Before this burial phase at Migliarina, all the various categories of burial seen in the neighbouring regions are present, from bare earth internment over to walled structures, to trapezoidal stone boxes.

Another brief scan of the data from the graves at San Fruttuoso di Capodimonte could be carried out, where the wooden coffins appear exclusively in the later phases of the cemetery and after at least two phases of burial in structures. The first of these phases is characterised "by vaguely trap-

ezoidal graves made of trench built walls with alternate levels of stones and tiles" (Gardini 1987, 292), the second phase is of tombs "constructed in worked stones of variable size bonded with mortar" (Gardini 1987, 292).

Pertinent to a burial context in the interior of a cult building are also the graves found in the excavation beside the oratory of Misericordia at Sarzana, probably the church of the old *hospitale* of San Bartolomeo (Donati 2001). The archaeological research has enabled us to define, apart from the building phases successive to the foundation of the cult building with rectangular presbytery datable between the end of the 13th and the 14th centuries, a coexistence between bare earth burials, coffin burials (pits without stone cordons) and burials with walled structures. In the case of Sarzana one notes that the tomb with structure was positioned in a privileged area, in the centre of the presbytery and on the same alignment of a preceding inhumation (in bare earth) in front of an altar datable between the end of the 13th and the 14th centuries. The research regarding this building, limited to the area of the presbytery and a sounding adjacent to the facade, has permitted the documentation of tombs also exterior to the church: two test pits showed tombs with wooden coffins and simple bare earth burials. To the data presented above can be added the coffin burials found in the church of S. Andrea, also at Sarzana, for which a date in the 14th century has been proposed (Bonora/Castelletti 1975, 158–160).

The case of the oratory of the Misericordia at Sarzana enables us to hypothesise a non-casual choice of inhumation type according to the area. Excluding the few tombs with structures, a preliminary research suggests a ratio between bare earth burials and coffin burials of 6:1 inside the church, while outside the ratio is inverted in favour of the coffin burials. Finally one notes that for the exterior area the only tomb without coffin has a rough structure in unbonded stones and a cushion stone under the cranium.

The only burial structure found during the excavation was particularly monumental (2.60 x 1.35 m, more than 1 metre deep) and seemed to have been cleared of its contents and then backfilled when the church was decommissioned. Very interesting regarding the city of Sarzana are also the series of references to the positions of the inhumations inside the various

churches, found in a recent publication of a parish register of the second half of the 15th century (Freggia 2001).

Lastly, an examination of the burials brought to light excavations that, due to incomplete preservation or contamination had forced interpretations which were re-elaborated in the light of new excavations or re-readings of the old documentation.

If the recent excavations at the parish church of San Venerio a Migliarina (east part of the oratory adjoining the church) are well documented, the same cannot be said for the earlier excavations of Cimaschi. Especially for the latter burials only a recent cumulative plan has been presented and the information provided by the excavator defined the late cemetery phases as "a compact network of burials, both singular and multiple dug in to the soil levels of the 15th and 20th centuries" a dense network of both individual and multiple or group burials which were dug underground in the 15th to 20th centuries (Cimaschi 1961, 29). A preliminary examination of the general plan permits the identification of three walled tombs in the central area that, for their relative dimensions could be comparable with those at Vezzano dated to the post-medieval phase. Also to a decisively late phase one must preliminarily assign a large barrel vaulted ossuary, visible in the photographs of the excavation. Concerning the other older burials found in the excavations of Cimaschi, two tombs were described as of a common type of thin walled tomb (without reused slabs) and internally plastered, dating from the early medieval period, "belonging to the very common type with very thin walls (without any recycled material) and plaster inside" (Cimaschi 1961, 36–37). A partial revision of the documentation regarding the oldest tombs has been carried out by Eliana Vecchi (Vecchi 1985, 856; 1986, 286 nota 122; 123).

The research at the Isola of Tino (1960–1962), conducted without stratigraphic methodology, has brought to light some burials that the author assigns to the early medieval period based "on the simplicity and the use of pre-existing elements and to the relationship with a presumed Roman wall that they were intentionally built against" (Cimaschi 1963, 59). In addition, a series of ossuary built into an existing Roman cistern are shown, "divided in both lengthways and widthways" (Cimaschi 1963).

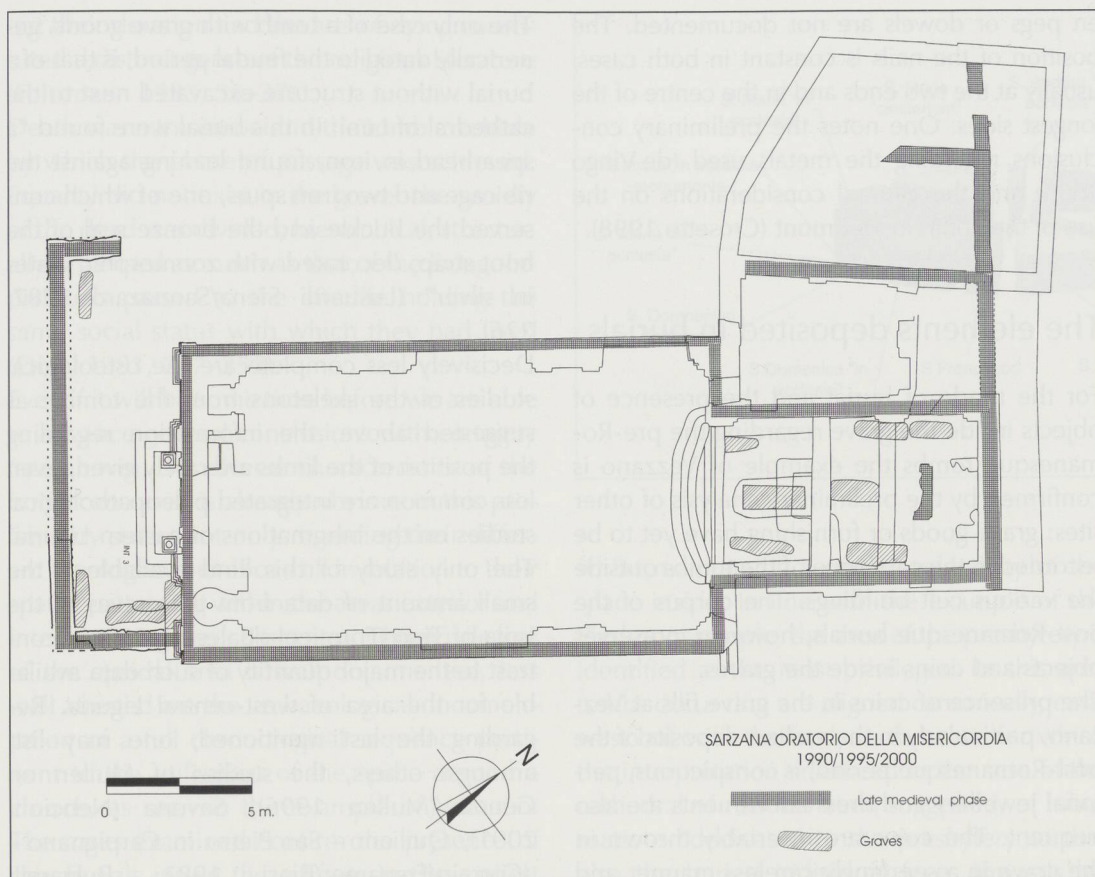


Fig. 3: Sarzana, Oratorio della Misericordia 1990/1995/2000.

During the same excavation campaign a limestone slab was found that could be the cover of a tomb from the 1200's, with a low relief in the form of the cross and a lateen sail (Cimaschi 1963, 56).

Resumed in the 1980's, the excavations have brought to light a limited number of burials in the area of the cloister that, if not enough for a chronological scheme, are at least sufficient to enable us to distinguish two distinct phases of deposition: two burials are realised before the cloister was constructed and one afterwards. The so-called Roman cistern of Cimaschi has been redated to a much later period (since it is built against a Romanesque foundation) but the date proposed by him for the burials inside remains substantially intact (Frondoni 1986; 1987; 1995; 1998d).

The material from another Cimaschi excavation of this period besides the church of San Giorgio of Resegunti at Bonassola remains completely unrevised (Cimaschi 1962), in which the cemetery area outside the edifice (generally thought to be of Romanesque date) was examined. From this site Cimaschi published however, without details of provenance, a circular belt

buckle in bronze that seems to be of late medieval date.

The current re-elaboration of the data from the site of Brugnato, that have enabled us to define a first phase of inhumation relative to the edifice pre-Romanesque, will permit higher precision in the construction of a typology also for the later inhumations at present published as "large rectangular graves bounded by walls set against the earth whose function was to enclose multiple burials" (Frondoni 2001, 61).

### Preliminary conclusions regarding burials in wooden coffins

In the context of Vezzano one can, if only in a preliminary manner, formulate some conclusions regarding the wooden coffin burials. Even if it is not always possible to define the length or the exact form of the coffin, we can state that in general the individuals buried in trapezoidal coffins are infants or sub-adults, whilst for adults the rectangular shape predominates. Common to both types are the use of nails to fix together the wooden walls of the coffin; wood-

en pegs or dowels are not documented. The position of the nails is constant in both cases, usually at the two ends and in the centre of the longest sides. One notes the preliminary conclusions regarding the metals used (de Vingo 2000) and the general considerations on the use of the coffin in Piedmont (Crosetto 1998).

## The elements deposited in burials

For the mode of burial and the presence of objects inside the grave regarding the pre-Romanesque tombs the example of Vezzano is confirmed by the preliminary analysis of other sites: grave goods or furnishing have yet to be recorded in the catalogue of the tombs outside the various cult buildings. The corpus of the post-Romanesque burials, however, preserves objects and coins inside the graves.

The presence of coins in the grave fills at Vezzano, particularly in the earliest deposits of the post-Romanesque period, is conspicuous, personal jewellery and dress adornments are also frequent. The coins are invariably thrown in the grave in a seemingly careless manner and do not seem placed systematically with respect to the skeleton. In the later tombs one notes the presence of rosaries, in some cases found near to the pelvic region suggesting that the individual was buried with a rosary in his hand. In a single case, a series of bronze pins were found around the cranium. Objects in the grave fills of later tombs are very common; however, given the continuous reuse of these structures it is often difficult to assign objects to buried individuals. These objects include votive medallions in bronze and gold plated silver (de Vingo 2000, 269–275) and dress elements such as buckles in bronze, rings and buttons (de Vingo 2000, 261–263). In one case of a burial with a belt buckle, the object was found *in situ* in the pelvic region.

At Migliarina, the stratigraphic excavation produced “rings and belt buckles in silver, bronze or iron” (Vecchi 1987, 247). At San Fruttuoso of Camogli in the second phase, datable to the 13th and the 15th centuries, were found “three bronze rings and an iron key collected between the hands of the interned” (Gardini 1987, 292). Also at San Fruttuoso a coin was found in a grave of the post-medieval period, later obliterated by a wall of the 1700’s (Gardini 1987, 295).

The only case of a tomb with grave goods, generically dated to the feudal period, is that of a burial without structure excavated next to the cathedral of Luni. In this burial were found “a spearhead in iron, found leaning against the rib cage and two iron spurs, one of which conserved the buckle and the bronze seal of the boot strap, decorated with zoomorphic plates in silver” (Lusuardi Siena/Sannazaro 1987, 226).

Decisively less complete are the osteological studies of the skeletons from the tombs; as suggested above, the information regarding the position of the limbs are rarely given, even less common are integrated paleopathological studies on the inhumations of eastern Liguria. The only study of this kind available is the small amount of data from the graves of the Isola of Tino (Formicola/Balestri 1987) in contrast to the major quantity of such data available for the area of west-central Liguria. Regarding the last mentioned, one may list, amongst others, the studies of Mullen on Genoa (Mullen 1996), Savona (Nencioni 2001), Quiliano – San Pietro in Carpignano – (Corrain/Erspamer/Biasi 1983; Bulgarelli 1998), Noli (Mullen, in press), San Lorenzo di Varigotti (Mullen 1999), Corti (Mullen 1999) and Riva Ligure – Costa Balenae – (Corrain/Erspamer/Meneghello/Biasi 1988).

## The body, the gestures and the objects in Medieval religious themes

According to traditional conceptions, the Christian doctrine envisages man as composed of two parts: body and soul, exalting the soul over the body. The medieval reality, that which appears in the texts and in the iconography, was much more complex. Whilst the soul is immortal, the body is not, because it is destined to be resurrected. The Christian dogma of the resurrection of the physical body represents an historical promotion of the body and underlines its importance during a period in which its suffering depiction is very close to contemporary concept based in the popular mentality. The human body, as its cultural horizon and as its extreme limit, had only death, unavoidable above and beyond the eventual prospective of resurrection. The medieval centuries are steeped in this conviction through-

out their duration and the arts of dying constituted a distinct genre of the religious literature (Fuhrmann 1993, 35–37).

Death was a transition and the tomb a vehicle by which the phase of passage was achieved. Equality did not exist in the grave: the society of the dead was divided, hierarchical, structurally organised as much as that of the living. Individuals passed to the afterlife holding the same social status with which they had lived (Duby 1991, 247–252).

Even if it will be some time before we are able to advance general conclusions with certainty (see above), the diverse characteristics of the burials analysed is already obvious in this preliminary study, not only regarding their different typologies, but above all in relation to their spatial patterning within the areas exterior and interior to a given cult centre. The privileging of the apsidal area is well documented, less well attested are the archaeological documentation of a full chronological sequence pertinent to the utilisation of the space around a church, as seen in the example of Vezzano. The cases examined confirm the presence of rare burials inside the edifices in the earliest phases, systemised in proximity to the most important zones, between which the example of Soviore is most evident (internal, built into the foundation of the facade). Less certain, in the specific case of the post-Romanesque graves, due to problems regarding the reviewing of old sources of data (Vecchi 1985) are the chronological attributions of the so called privileged inhumations inside the early medieval edifice of Migliarina (initial review of the Cimaschi data in Lusuardi Siena 1982, more recently Vecchi 1998). Relevant may be the presence of a privileged early medieval burial in the apsidal area of the pieve of Filattiera (Massa Carrara), not included in this survey due to its position beyond the regional boundary of Liguria (Giannichedda/Ferrari 2001).

In the same chronological framework, but referring to the tombs in the exterior zones, it is important to observe the positioning of graves along the longitudinal axis of the cult edifice of a structure at Bugnato: in addition, amongst the inhumations in the facade, those at Vezzano are influenced in their orientation by the presence of the perimeter walls of the edifice. The “invasion of the tombs into the internal space of the cult buildings” (Crosetto 1998, 221) occurs, following the most recent data,

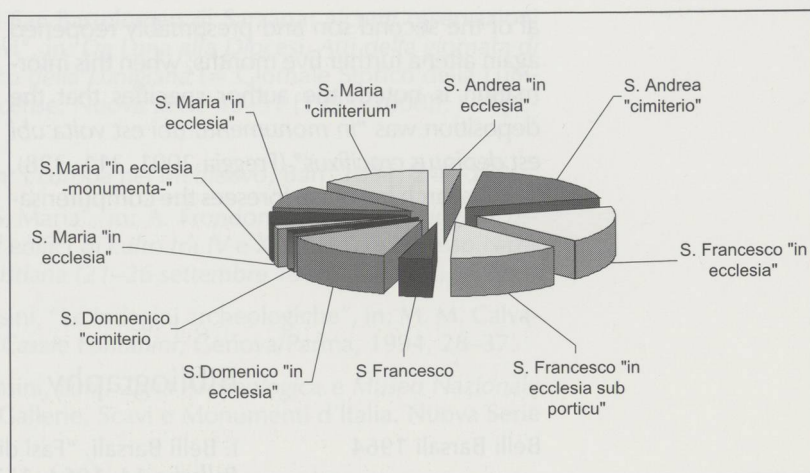


Fig. 4: Distribution of graves in Sarzana 1459–1463 (Freggia 2001).

whilst maintaining a certain selectivity of the space inside. In line with the example of the Piedmont sample, the area of the presbytery is identified as the most privileged. In this area tombs occur that are aligned canonically, east-west but with the body in the east, for which the interpretation advanced in the case of the cathedral of Asti has been suggested, of inhumations “dedicated to the presbytery so that also the buried individual faces towards his spiritual flock” (Crosetto 1998, 227).

In almost all of the cases considered, the latest phase of the cemeteries are characterised by the conspicuous presence of individual or collective monumental tombs, often tied to a single family and covered by barrel vault with entrance via a trapdoor.

Without going into a specific analysis of the data provided by the “*Liber Mortuorum*” of Sarzana (mentioned above), a preliminary note regarding the distinctions advanced by the author of the register between the burials systemised “*in ecclesia*” and those “*in cimiterio*”. Amongst the first mentioned one distinguishes, in a particular case (S. Francesco) the burial “*in ecclesia*” and those “*sub porticu ecclesia*”. In the case of the church of S. Maria to the distinction between “*in ecclesia*” and “*in cimiterio*” is added the position internal to the cult building (usually in respect to the altars) from which one can deduce the privileged areas for distinct families: in the case under discussion, for example, the members of the family “*Melchioniis peliciarii*” are buried “*in monumento ante chorum Sancte Marie*”. Similarly the family “*de Griffis*” are buried close to the porch of San Francesco in a “*monumento*” constructed after the death of the first son of Jacobus, reopened just five months later for the buri-

al of the second son and presumably reopened again after a further five months; when this information is noted, the author specifies that the deposition was "*in monumentu ubi est volta ubi est depintus crocifixus*" (Freggia 2001, 311–328). The research in course foresees the computerisa-

tion of the data from each single context and the creation of a database that should be constantly revised and linked to the auspicated analyses of parish documents as, on a smaller scale, is already being attempted in the specific example of the city of Sarzana.

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