Holocene evolution of Portus Pisanus, the lost harbour of Pisa

D. Kaniewski1,2,3, N. Marriner4, C. Morhange5, M. Vacchi6, G. Sarti7, V. Rossi8, M. Bini9, M. Pasquinucci9, C. Allinne10, T. Otto1,2, F. Luce1,2 & E. Van Campo1,2

The ancient harbour of Pisa, Portus Pisanus, was one of Italy’s most influential seaports for many centuries. Nonetheless, very little is known about its oldest harbour and the relationships between environmental evolution and the main stages of harbour history. The port complex that ensured Pisa’s position as an economic and maritime power progressively shifted westwards by coastal progradation, before the maritime port of Livorno was built in the late 16th century AD. The lost port is, however, described in the early 5th century AD as being “a large, naturally sheltered embayment” that hosted merchant vessels, suggesting an important maritime structure with significant artificial infrastructure to reach the city. Despite its importance, the geographical location of the harbour complex remains controversial and its environmental evolution is unclear. To fill this knowledge gap and furnish accurate palaeoenvironmental information on Portus Pisanus, we used bio- and geosciences. Based on stratigraphic data, the area’s relative sea-level history, and long-term environmental dynamics, we established that at ~200 BC, a naturally protected lagoon developed and hosted Portus Pisanus until the 5th century AD. The decline of the protected lagoon started at ~1350 AD and culminated ~1500 AD, after which time the basin was a coastal lake.

While Italy’s rich maritime history has sharpened focus on ancient harbours and human impacts in port basins (e.g. Altinum-Venice, Portus Lunae-Luni, Portus-Rome, Ostia-Rome, Neapolis-Naples)4–9, the evolution of Portus Pisanus, the powerful seaport of the city of Pisa (Italy, Tuscany), was, until recently, largely unknown9–15. The city is currently located ~10 km east of the Ligurian Sea coast but its long and complex history16,17 is closely linked to its port, named Portus Pisanus by late Roman sources (Rutilius Namatianus descriptions in De Reditu suo, Itinerarium Maritimum 501)15,16,20. Since the Imperial Roman period, most of the supplies imported from Mediterranean provinces reached the city of Pisa through a complex harbour system that included Portus Pisanus, the fluvial Ports San Piero a Grado and Isola di Migliarino, and other minor landings along the ancient coast, the Arno and Serchio rivers and canals including the site of Pisa–Stazione Ferroviaria San Rossore21–24. The heyday of the seaport played out from the Late Republican Roman period to the Middle Ages, when Pisa became an influential Commune and maritime power25,26. In the Middle Ages, Portus Pisanus was the main harbour of Pisa: the harbour system included Vada, the ports of the Piombino promontory, Castiglione della Pescaia and other minor landings27. During the 13th century AD, it was one of the most important seaports in Italy, rivaling Genoa, Venice, and Amalfi27. The name Portus Pisanus, documented since the 5th–6th centuries AD, was probably in use earlier. In 56 BC, Cicero mentioned a harbour (Ad Quintum fratrem 2.5), Portus Labro, probably located in the same area. Is Portus Labro an earlier name for Portus Pisanus (as might be suggested by the current hydronym Calambrone, situated north of Livorno) or a different harbour? In the Middle Ages, the name Portus Pisanus was used to identify both
The significant slowdown in the rising rates at ~4050 BC has been constrained by multiple RSL index points, placing the RSL at ~35 m below sea-level. This period, with very slow sea-level rise, is consistent with the phase of rapid expansion of the Roman Empire, when ports like Portus Pisanus and Porto di Livorno coexisted. The name Porto di Livorno was prevalent at this time, and Portus Pisanus was still named Portus Pisanus. The name Porto di Livorno has prevailed since the late 1500s AD.

Here, we use bio- and geosciences to probe the long maritime history of the seaport of Pisa. We present a 10,500-year Relative Sea-Level (RSL) reconstruction to understand the role of long-term sea-level rise in shaping the harbour basin. We also report an 8000-year reconstruction of environmental dynamics in and around the harbour basin to establish when Portus Pisanus became prevalent, part of the harbour basin was still named Portus Pisanus. The name Porto di Livorno has prevailed since the late 1500s AD.

The exact location of Portus Pisanus has long been discussed, despite several Roman literary sources (e.g., Itinerarium Maritimum, de reditu suo) and studies that placed the harbour ~10–13 km south of the city of Pisa, in an area which presently corresponds to the north-eastern edge of the port city Livorno, and despite an accurate description of the area (Santo Stefano ai Lupi) published by Targioni Tozzetti in 1775 with an associated map. Recent archaeological excavations at Santo Stefano ai Lupi corroborate both the classical sources and Targioni Tozzetti’s description with the discovery of portions of sea bed covered by fragments of ancient pottery (dated to the 6th–5th centuries BC and to a period between the 1st century BC and the 6th century AD), ballast stones, part of a small stone dock, some buildings including a warehouse, and a necropolis dated to the 4th–5th centuries AD. These structures belong to Portus Pisanus’ harbour system, but just a small area of the ancient port city and the adjacent basin has been excavated. The pottery fragments found on the ancient sea bed prove that, in this part of what was called Portus Pisanus, boats and ships were loaded and unloaded. The associated harbour basin is believed to be a large, naturally sheltered embayment that accommodated ships from the Etruscan and Roman periods to the Late Medieval Ages, when Pisa grew into a very important commercial and naval center, controlling a significant merchant fleet and navy. The existence of a highly protected natural basin would have been of great benefit to navigation and trade, facilitating the establishment of port complexes, through the use of the natural landscape. Historical sources or archaeological excavations have not unearthed any artificial moles at Portus Pisanus, suggesting a very confined harbour that was naturally protected by its geomorphological endowments.

Here, we use bio- and geosciences to probe the long maritime history of the seaport of Pisa. We present a 10,500-year Relative Sea-Level (RSL) reconstruction to understand the role of long-term sea-level rise in shaping the harbour basin. We also report an 8000-year reconstruction of environmental dynamics in and around the harbour basin to establish when Portus Pisanus became a “naturally sheltered embayment”, reported in literary sources as the main hub of the ancient Pisa harbour system. Finally, we map the location and evolution of the harbour basin since the Roman period. These environmental data were compared and contrasted with the history of Pisa (written sources and archaeological data).

**Results**

**RSL reconstruction.** The harbour basin is the outcome of an environmental history in which long-term sea-level rise has played a key role. A total of 31 RSL index points has been used to frame the Holocene sea-level evolution of the eastern Ligurian Sea (Fig. 1). At ~8550 BC, the oldest index points place the RSL at ~35 m below current Mean Sea Level (MSL). Younger index points indicate that RSL rose rapidly until ~5050 BC followed by a slowdown in the rising rates. At ~4050 BC, multiple RSL index points constrain the RSL to ~5 m MSL. Since this period, index points delineate a significant reduction in the rising rates that become minimal during the last ~4000 years, when the total RSL variation was within 1.5 m MSL. The reconstructed RSL history reflects the pattern observed in the mid to northern portion of the western Mediterranean. The significant slowdown in
rising rates after ~5550 BC is consistent with the final phase of North American deglaciation \(^3\) while the further decrease in rising rates is related to the progressive reduction in glacial meltwater inputs that were minimal during the last ~4000 years \(^3\), \(^\text{40}\).

**Drilling the harbour basin.** The terrestrial, marine and freshwater biological indicators used to reconstruct palaeoenvironmental evolution of *Portus Pisanus* were extracted from an 890-cm sedimentary core (PP3, 43°35′55.33″N, 10°21′41.71″E; +2 m MSL; Fig. 2) drilled ~5 km from the sea on the southern portion of the modern Arno River alluvial-coastal plain, close to Livorno and the Pisa Hills. According to previous studies \(^1\), \(^\text{15,18,20}\), the sedimentary core was taken from the former harbour area, active from the Archaic Etruscan (6th–5th centuries BC) to the Late Roman periods (5th century AD). In the Middle Ages, the port shifted westwards, as testified by the building of the fortified harbour basin of Leghorn including medieval towers dated from 1300 and 1400 AD (Fig. 2), and then again further westwards in modern times, consistent with the progradation dynamics of the delta. The core was recovered behind the innermost beach-ridge of the Arno Delta complex, where a meter-thick back-barrier succession occurs, recording the development and prolonged persistence of a wide lagoon basin during the Late Holocene. Back-barrier deposits,
mainly represented by fossiliferous clay-silt interbedded with sandy layers, are overlain by a progradational suite of coastal-alluvial facies, deposited during the recent phase of decelerating sea-level rise.

The chronology of the core PP3 is based on nine accelerator mass spectrometry radiocarbon (14C) dates (Fig. 3). Dated samples (short-lived terrestrial samples: seeds, small leaves of annual plants) were calibrated [2-sigma (σ) calibrations, 95% of probability] using Calib-Rev 7.1 with IntCal13. According to the 14C chronology, the core covers the last 8000 years (Fig. 3). The age model (Fig. 3) was calculated using XL-Stat 2017 and Calib-Rev 7.1. The dates obtained in between each 14C dating are modeled and therefore are liable to mask some of the temporal variability in the depositional patterns. The calculated model displays an average 2-sigma range of 50 years (P < 0.001) for the whole sequence. All the calibrated ages are shown/discussed as BC/AD to fit with the archaeological-historical data and are presented at the 2-sigma range (95% probability). The two scales, BC-AD and BP, are both displayed on each figure. While the average chronological resolution of the core stratigraphy is 9 years per cm (1.11 mm per yr), a homogeneity test (Monte Carlo simulation, standard test, P_value < 0.001) suggests two abrupt changes in the sedimentation rate at 740 cm depth (4300 ± 70 BC) and 290 cm depth (200 ± 30 BC).

Biological proxies in the harbour basin. Terrestrial data retrieved from Portus Pisanus’ harbour basin were analysed using a cluster analysis (descending type). Each cluster was summed to generate pollen-derived vegetation patterns and assigned to a potential location, from the intertidal zone to the hinterland (Fig. 4), referring to modern patches of vegetation along the Ligurian coast (local data and Vegetation Prodrome). Three vegetation communities (backshore shrubs, shrubland, and coastal pine-oak woodland) are linked to a marine influence (from the supratidal zone to the lower coastal zone; Figs 4–5A) whereas the other communities (mixed oak forest, wet meadow, fen trees, freshwater plants) are related to fluvial inputs from the Calambrone River (coastal alluvial zone and marsh-swamp zone). Cross-correlations (vegetation patterns versus marine proxies; Fig. 5B) also indicate that seawater has influenced proximal vegetation patterns (positive correlations on the null lag score: Lag0 = 0.665,
Lag0 = 0.547 and Lag0 = 0.307, P = 0.05) around the basin. The vegetation group “warm woodland” is set apart as this cluster is mainly related to a third influence, agro-pastoral activities (Fig. 5A) that are observed in the area after 3350 ± 90 BC. Agriculture is composed of cereals (Poaceae cerealia), olive trees (Olea europaea), common grape vines (Vitis vinifera), and other trees (Prunus). The associated anthropogenic indicators are common weeds (Centaurea, Plantago, and Rumex).

Pre-harbour facies (sensu Marriner and Morhange). Marine versus fluvial influence since 8000 years is represented by the importance of marine indicators (dinoflagellate cysts and marine components) and

Figure 4. Pollen-based ecological clusters from the harbour basin for the last 8000 years. A cluster analysis (paired group as algorithm, Rho as similarity measure) was used to define the ecological assemblages. Each cluster was summed to create pollen-derived vegetation patterns. The potential location of each cluster, from the intertidal zone to the hinterland, is indicated.
supratidal-intertidal scrubs in and around the pre-harbour (Fig. 6). A principal components analysis (PCA) was run to test the ordination of ecosystems by assessing major changes in the area including vegetation patterns, dinoflagellate cysts and marine components (Fig. 7). Environmental dynamics (marine versus fluvial influence) in the basin is indicated by the axis-1 of a principal components analysis (PCA-Axis1). The PCA-Axis1 (61% of total variance) is positively loaded by vegetation patterns indicative of a saline-xeric environment, dinoflagellate cysts and marine components. The negative scores correspond to freshwater vegetation types (Fig. 7). The PCA-Axis1 reflects the ecological erosion of wetlands by the intrusion of seawater into the freshwater-fed plains, raising salinity in the hinterland, with land fragmentation and salt-water intrusion into the groundwater table, in and around the basin. The PCA-Axis1 can be considered as a proxy for marine ingression in/around the pre-harbour (with a main physical impact and several secondary influences such as salt spray and salinization)43.

While permanent inputs of seawater and fluvial freshwater were recorded in the pre-harbour, occurrences of higher marine influence are locally underlined by a combination of peaks in marine indicators, the occurrence of different ostracod ecological groups (shallow marine; brackish-marine and euryhaline), important increases in Posidonia oceanica debris (Fig. 6), and strong positive deviations in the PCA-Axis1 scores (Fig. 7). Our reconstruction shows two early periods of seawater influence (at 5800 ± 40–5425 ± 55 BC and 4750 ± 60–4500 ± 60 BC) when the site was a marine invagination, followed by an unstable phase when sea-level stabilized along the Tuscany coastline (Fig. 1), between 4250 ± 60 BC and 2000 ± 45 BC (Fig. 8). Potential discontinuities in environmental dynamics were assessed using a homogeneity test on the PCA-Axis1 (Monte Carlo simulation, Pettitt and Buishand tests). The outcome indicates that the environmental dynamics are not uniform, underlining a major break around 2000 ± 45 BC (P_{value} < 0.001). A second homogeneity test, only applied to the period 3350–6050 BC, highlights a second important break around 4250 ± 60 BC (P_{value} < 0.001, Monte Carlo simulation, Pettitt and Buishand tests), when the pre-harbour evolved into a leaky lagoon. During this period (4250 ± 60–2000 ± 45 BC), the last main peak in the PCA-Axis1 corresponds to a wave-dominated delta and occurred within the chronological interval of the 4.2 ka BP event44, suggesting the potential role of climate in influencing the pre-harbour’s
evolution. A later phase was recorded at 1250 ± 40–850 ± 40 BC when the pre-harbour evolved into a delta plain, corresponding to the 3.2 ka BP event.45,46

Among the main periods of marine influence in the harbour basin, before the establishment of Portus Pisanus, the period 4250 ± 60–2050 ± 45 BC was the hinge phase, culminating in a wave-dominated delta. These periods, characterized by inland salt intrusion, significantly affected the agricultural productivity of this coastal area (Fig. 7). Prolonged marine inundation appears to have led to the salinization of agriculturally productive soils resulting in diminished output for long periods of time (Fig. 7).

**Portus Pisanus.** Because the area has been frequented by archaic ships since at least the 6th–5th centuries BC, the first phases of navigation had to be carried out on a delta plain characterized by wetlands.34,35 According to our reconstruction (Figs 6–7), marine influence increased in the harbour basin after 200 ± 30 BC, when a naturally protected lagoon developed and hosted Portus Pisanus up to the 5th century AD (according to archaeological evidence).44,45 During this period, a first peak in charcoal fragments is recorded at 180 ± 30 BC. A second inflection in charcoal fragments occurred at 550 ± 25 AD and is synchronous with a major fall in agro-pastoral activities (Fig. 7). From 1000 ± 20 to 1200 ± 20 AD, a first decrease in marine influence was documented before the last major marine phase at 1300 ± 20 AD. The decline of the protected lagoon started at 1350 ± 15 AD and ended at 1500 ± 10 AD, when the basin evolved into a coastal lake, concomitant with the development of agriculture, then to a floodplain (1700 ± 10 AD) and finally a soil atop a fluvial plain (1850 ± 5 AD).

Stratigraphic data from several cores (Fig. 8) and archaeological trenches (Fig. 9) undertaken at Santo Stefano ai Lupi (Fig. 2), along with prominent geomorphological features (e.g. outcropping beach ridges and residual reliefs), were used to produce three maps, which illustrate the landscape evolution of the southern portion of the Arno alluvial-coastal plain, between the Roman period and the Modern age (Fig. 8). The extension and the environmental characteristics of Portus Pisanus are based on facies correlations (chronological framework based on 14C dates and archaeological data). The core PP3 (and also PP1) formed the type stratigraphy of the basin (Fig. 8).

**Discussion**

Recent archaeological and palaeoenvironmental studies at Pisa have focused both on Portus Pisanus44,45 and the ancient fluvial port in the area of Pisa-Stazione Ferroviaria San Rossore, where several ships dating from the 2nd century BC to the 5th century AD were discovered.21–25 These exceptional findings (amphorae, artefacts pertaining to the loads carried, and on-board equipment such as sails, ropes, anchors) engendered a wider environmental study focused on the analysis of Arno flood events in relation to the shipwrecks26,47 and on archaeobotany.6

---

Figure 6. Reconstructed marine influence in Portus Pisanus during the last 8000 years. The marine influence (components per cm$^{-3}$) and the backshore scrubs (%) are displayed as a LOESS smoothing (with bootstrap and smoothing 0.05) plotted on a linear timescale (BP and BC-AD). The *Posidonia oceanica* debris (presence/absence) are indicated by green marks along the marine curve. The ostracods (presence/absence) are displayed as dots. Fire activity in the area is shown as charcoal concentrations (fragments per cm$^{-3}$) plotted on a linear timescale. The relative sea level, displayed as MSL, is depicted for the last 8000 years. The shipwreck curve from the Mediterranean region is also plotted on a linear timescale. The brown-shaded horizontal section indicates the harbour development and the blue-shaded horizontal section shows the period when the sea-level stabilized.
Although the study of the Pisa-Stazione Ferroviaria San Rossore fluvial port is imperative for improving our knowledge of both the Pisa territory and its commercial activities, Portus Pisanus was the city’s main harbour, centered on Mediterranean-wide trade. This port witnessed the rise and fall of Pisa. The lagoon, which hosted the seaport, has recorded the long environmental history of the coast before turning into a protected lagoon and becoming one of the most important natural harbours in the western Mediterranean.

Before the environment becomes a harbour basin. Portus Pisanus and the related lagoon are the result of a long and complex environmental history (Figs 6–7), leading to the development of a lagoon characterized by a narrow entrance (Fig. 8). The base of this ancient lagoon corresponds to a long and narrow marine invagination (inlet channel) that developed to the south of the city of Pisa from 6000 ± 35 to 4300 ± 70 BC. The formation of the channel resulted from sea-level rise from −10 to −4.5 meters below MSL (Fig. 1), with two phases of stronger marine influence at 5800 ± 40–5425 ± 55 BC and 4750 ± 60–4500 ± 60 BC (Fig. 6). No evidence of agro-pastoral activities are recorded during this first stage, suggesting the absence of human impacts on the coastal area (Fig. 7).

Around 4250 ± 60 BC, the inlet channel evolved into a leaky lagoon (Figs 6–7) as the sea-level rose from −4.5 to −2 meters below MSL (Fig. 1). As a consequence, the area was characterized by recurrent seawater inputs of increasing intensity (Fig. 6). The emergence of agriculture is dated to 3350 ± 90 BC (Fig. 7), consistent with nearby coastal sites such as Lago di Massaciuccoli (northwest Tuscany48,49) and Stagno di Maccarese near Rome50.

The hinge phase of marine influence recorded by a prolonged wave-dominated delta period is centered on 2150 ± 45 BC and may fit with the 4.2 ka BP event 44,51,52. This climate event corresponds to a stronger seawater imprint in the basin area probably due to decreasing precipitation53,54 and weaker fluvial inputs55,56. As a consequence, agro-pastoral activities also declined around the basin, with the lowest scores centered on 2150 ± 45 BC (Fig. 7). The event ended at 1950 ± 45 BC (Fig. 7) and the basin was transformed into a delta plain characterized by higher inputs of freshwater (Fig. 6).

The last phase of marine influence before the emergence of the lagoon that hosted Portus Pisanus occurred at 1250 ± 40–850 ± 40 BC, but with a weaker intensity compared to the 4.2 ka BP event (Fig. 7). This deviation...
Figure 8. Geographic maps showing three evolutionary stages of the lagoon, in relation to Portus Pisanus as documented by historical sources and archaeological data. Maps were produced by integrating stratigraphic (cores and trenches) and geomorphological data (Pranzini, 2007) with historical cartography. Dots indicate cores used to draw the maps (key cores are highlighted by red dots). The modern shoreline is depicted on each map for reference. The grey arrow indicates the direction of the predominant wind (Libeccio). (A) Roman period - a wide lagoon basin, hosting Portus Pisanus as mentioned in literary sources; (B) late Middle Ages - the accretion of arcuate beach ridges, belonging to the Arno Delta strandplain, led to an increase in the degree of confinement of the lagoon basin. Construction of the maritime harbour of Livorno in a seaward position with respect to the lagoon; (C) 17th century AD - the rapid accretion of strongly arcuate sets of beach ridges led to the siltation of the lagoon that was transformed into a wetland, physically detached from the Ligurian Sea. Portus Pisanus abandonment and expansion of the fortified maritime harbour of Livorno.
may correspond to the 3.2 ka BP event, a dry spell that favored marine inputs into the basin as a result of decreasing river flow (Fig. 7). In Italy, this event is characterized by reduced precipitation (Buca della Renella cave, central-western Italy) and a drop in lake levels. At the end of this event, river flow increased until 200 ± 30 BC, when a large, naturally sheltered lagoon with a good connection to the sea, developed and hosted Portus Pisanus.

**The lagoon as a mirror of Portus Pisanus.** Although the area has been settled since the late Iron Age, Pisa only became a city in the archaic period (7th–6th centuries BC). According to archaeological evidence, the earliest navigation and port activities recorded in what later became Portus Pisanus are documented by Greek, Etruscan and local pottery fragments scattered on the lagoon floor and dated to the end of the 6th or early 5th century BC (Fig. 6). The first evidence of Roman harbour infrastructure in the Portus Pisanus area date back to the 2nd century BC when the rate of shipwrecks intensifies in the Mediterranean, suggesting a sharp increase in maritime trade (Fig. 6). The environmental reconstruction indicates that the onset of the protected lagoon (Fig. 8) is chronologically constrained to around 200 ± 30 BC (Figs 6–7). A break in sedimentary deposition (Fig. 3), as well as the development of marine-influenced ecosystems (Fig. 7) and the emergence of typical lagoonal ostracod fauna, dominated by Cyprideis torosa (Fig. 6), attest to a changing environment, characterized by a shift towards a calmer basin (Fig. 3). This evolution suggests that the harbour basin constitutes a natural lagoon with a good connection to the sea, consistent with historical sources that mention, in the early 5th century AD, "a large, naturally sheltered embayment" (de reeditu suo, 1, 527-540; 2, 11-12). A first peak in fire activity at 180 ± 30 BC (Fig. 6) may correspond to the period when the Ligures repeatedly set fire to Pisan crops and countryside. The important development in agriculture (Fig. 7), marks the period when Pisa was romanised. While the growth in population during the Roman period, as well as the development of trade and shipbuilding, favored by Portus Pisanus, the Via Aurelia and the Via Aemilia Scauri, resulted in an extension of the inhabited area, agro-pastoral activities around the basin decline (Fig. 7). The first decline of Pisa is documented during the 5th and 6th centuries AD, especially during the Gothic War (~550 AD). A second peak in fire activity and a strong decline in agro-pastoral activities at 550 ± 25–600 ± 25 CE probably resulted from destruction wrought by the Gothic War. Nonetheless, the seaport continued to be active after the fall of the Roman Empire (476 AD). For instance, Pisa remained an important harbour city for Goths, Longobards and Carolingians (from 493 to 812 AD). No major environmental changes were recorded in the harbour basin during this period, suggesting the presence of a natural deltaic coastal spit protecting the environment (Fig. 7). The first phase of decreasing seawater inputs (1000 ± 20–1250 ± 20 AD), due to increasing coastal progradation processes, corresponds to the period when Pisa became a powerful Commune and when the fortified medieval harbour of Livorno was built to the west of the Roman port. Part of what once was the Roman Portus Pisanus remained a protected lagoon basin but with a
lower degree of sea connection (Figs 6–7). Agro-pastoral activities increased after 900 ± 25 AD (Fig. 7), probably favored by the extension of wetlands (Fig. 8).

In the late 13th century AD, when the last peak of marine influence was recorded (1300 ± 20 AD; Fig. 7), the defeat of Pisa’s navy in the Battle of Meloria against Genoa (1284 AD) marked the onset of the city’s declining power. In 1290 AD, Genoese ships attacked the Medieval Portus Pisanus, sealing the fate of the independent Pisan state. Livorno was finally sold to Florence in 1421 AD60,62 when the former Roman harbour basin started to lose its direct connection with the sea (Fig. 6) due to silting and coastal progradation (Fig. 8). The juxtaposition of strongly arcuate sets of beach ridges is consistent with a pronounced increase in fluvial inputs63. At 1500 ± 10 AD, the lagoon was cut off from the sea and replaced by the maritime harbour of Livorno located on a rocky coast beyond the deltaic system (Fig. 8). The decision to build two new docks in this port was taken by Cosimo I Medici in 1573 AD. The old basin was then transformed into a coastal lake (from 1400 ± 15 to 1700 ± 10 AD; Figs 6–7) and then into a floodplain (from 1700 ± 10 to 1850 ± 5 AD). During these latter periods, the highest peaks in agriculture were recorded at 1550 ± 10–1600 ± 10 AD (Fig. 7), when Pisa was under the influence of the Duchy of Florence and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

**Catastrophic flood events.** A comparison with “catastrophic flood events” recorded at Pisa47 shows that the hinge phases65,66 correspond to periods of minor decreases in marine influence in the harbour basin, suggesting a weak impact of these hydrological events on the seaport. A weak agro-pastoral signal during the period 50 ± 30 BC-900 ± 25 AD (Fig. 7) is probably not the outcome of recurring floods, which would have affected human activities, but is likely the result of small cultivated fields in a marshy deltaic environment.

**Conclusions**

Bio- and geosciences have unraveled the complex history of the protected lagoon that hosted Portus Pisanus, shaped by relative sea-level changes, coastline variations, fluctuations in river discharge and sediment supply, climate and human impacts. The site where the harbour complex was located was both its strength and its weakness because, like other deltaic contexts65,66, sediment supply eventually entrained its demise. Portus Pisanus was destined to disappear due to long-term coastal dynamics and environmental change.

**Methods**

**Relative sea-level reconstruction.** We built a database of RSL index points (i.e. a point that constrains the palaeo mean sea-level in space and time67,68) for the eastern Ligurian Sea (Fig. 1). We followed the recent protocol proposed by Vacchi et al.36 for the Mediterranean Sea. Index points were mainly produced from radiocarbon-dated samples of brackish lagoonal sediments collected near Portus Pisanus (i.e. the Arno and Versilia coastal plains, Fig. 1). We further added a suite of radiocarbon-dated samples deriving from fossil Lithophyllum byssoides rims in Northern Corsica69. All the radiocarbon ages were calibrated into sidereal years with a ± 2σ range using Calib-Rev 7.1. We employed the IntCal13 and Marine13 datasets for terrestrial and marine samples, respectively. The indicative range (i.e. the relationship of the samples with respect to the former mean sea level) of each RSL index point was established according to Vacchi et al.36.

**Maps.** Different surface and subsurface datasets were used to reconstruct the late Holocene palaeoenvironmental evolution of the Portus Pisanus area15,19. A geomorphological survey complemented by remote sensing analysis (satellite images, multitemporal photographs, LiDAR images) was undertaken to identify outcropping beach ridges and to verify data previously proposed by other authors70,71. In order to accurately reconstruct changes in coastal morphology and place constraints on the location and size of Leghorn port structures during the Modern Age (between the 16th–17th centuries AD), historical maps72,73 were georeferenced and coupled with the geological data.

In a GIS environment, the geomorphological features were matched with stratigraphic subsurface reconstructions based on facies correlations and geometric criteria. Subsurface data include archaeological trenches from the Santo Stefano ai Lupi site15, the highest quality stratigraphic descriptions available for the Arno coastal plain74,75 and two reference cores (9 m-long PP1 and PP3 cores) obtained using percussion drilling equipment (Atlas Copco, Cobra model, equipped with Eijkelkamp samplers). The latter were analysed for their sedimentological features (e.g., mean grain size, colour, plant debris, wood fragments) and the fossil content (i.e., benthic foraminifera and ostracods, palynomorphs).

The chronological framework is based on 9 radiocarbon dates performed at Beta Analytic Inc. (Miami, USA) and CIRCE Laboratory of Caserta (Naples University). Further control points were provided by archaeological material from the Santo Stefano ai Lupi site and on the surface of the Arno delta plain35.

**Biological indicators.** Sampling was done according to the different depositional layers. On average, this corresponds to one sample every 10 cm, but with some variations to respect the core stratigraphy (Fig. 3). All the samples from the core PP3 were prepared for pollen analysis using the standard procedure for clay samples. Pollen grains were counted under x400 and x1000 magnification using an Olympus microscope. Pollen frequencies (expressed as percentages) are based on the terrestrial pollen sum, excluding local hygrophyles and spores of non-vascular cryptogams. Aquatic taxa frequencies were calculated by adding the local hygrophyles-hydrophores to the terrestrial pollen sum. Dinoflagellate cysts (marine plankton) were counted on pollen slides and are reported as concentrations (cysts per cm−2). The fire history was elucidated by counting the pollen-slime charcoal particles (50–200 mm) and is expressed as concentrations (fragments per cm−3). Concentrations have been plotted on a linear depth-scale. Foraminifera, marine bivalves and Posidonia oceanica debris were extracted from the same samples as the pollen grains, charcoal fragments and dinoflagellate cysts in order to avoid any analytical bias. These marine components (Foraminifera, marine bivalves) and P. oceanica debris were picked from the
washed sediment fraction. The marine components are displayed as concentrations (scores: remains per cm$^{-3}$; Fig. 6). Ostracods were extracted from the core PP1 (Fig. 8) and correlated to PP3 using depth and stratigraphy.

The potential effect of different depositional layers (silty clay versus sand) on the conservation of bioindicators (ostracod assemblage) was also tested using the pollen sums, n-scores, and Simpson index. The data do not show a direct correlation between variations in depositional layers (Fig. 3) and the conservation of bioindicators, suggesting that taphonomic processes, which could affect the signal, are not significant. The whole data set is available in the “Raw data file”.

**Statistical analyses.** All data were analysed using XL-Stat$^{2017}$ and the software package PAST, version 2.17 c. A regular interpolation (50-yr) was first run on the dataset. Biological data and charcoal fragments were analysed using cluster analysis (descending type; Figs 4–5A). Cross-correlations (P = 0.05) were subsequently calculated (Fig. 5B). Cross-correlations concern the time alignment of two time series by means of the correlation coefficient. The time series were cross-correlated to ascertain the best temporal match and the potential delay between the two time-series. The outcome is plotted as a function of the alignment position, focusing on the Lag$_0$ value. A LOESS smoothing (with bootstrap and smooth 0.05) was applied to the “marine influence” and backshore scrubs to define the 2.5 percentile and the 97.5 percentile (Fig. 6). Use of the LOESS curve is better than the percentage/concentration-curve to show long-term trends because it is a non-parametric regression method that combines multiple regression models in a k-nearest-neighbor-based meta-model. The LOESS smoothing is here plotted on a linear timescale (Fig. 6). A principal components analysis (PCA) was then run to test the ordination of ecosystems by assessing major changes in the matrix including pollen-derived vegetation patterns, dinoflagellate cysts and marine components (Fig. 7). The “agro-pastoral activities” assemblage (Fig. 4) was excluded from the matrix (Fig. 7). The main variance is loaded by the PCA-Axis I, which is also shown as a LOESS smoothing (with bootstrap and smooth 0.05) plotted on a linear timescale. A boxplot was added to separate the natural variability from the extreme values. Matrix plots are also displayed to mark the hinge phases (Fig. 7).

**Data availability statement.** All data generated during this study are included in this article (“Raw data file”) or are available from the corresponding author upon request.

**References**

1. Ninfo, A., Fontana, A., Mozzi, P. & Ferrarese, F. The Map of Altinum, Ancestor of Venice. *Science* 325, 577 (2009).
2. Alfaro, E., Rossoyalmo, E., Boetto, G. & Di Pasquale, G. Pollen-wood analysis at the Neapol harbour site (1$^{st}$–3$^{rd}$ century AD, southern Italy) and its archaeobotanical implications. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 37, 2365–2375 (2010).
3. Bini, M. et al. Palaeogeographies of the Magra Valley coastal plain to constrain the location of the Roman harbour of Luna (NW Italy). *Palaeogeography, Palaeoclimatology, Palaeoecology* 337–338, 37–51 (2012).
4. Sadiri, L., Giachi, G., Bini, M. & Mazzini, I. The plant landscape of the imperial harbour of Rome. *Journal of Archaeological Science* 37, 3294–3303 (2010).
5. Sadiri, L. et al. Archaeobotany in Italian ancient Roman harbours. *Review of Palaeobotany and Palynology* 218, 217–230 (2015).
6. Mazzini, I., Barbaro, C., Giachi, G., Bini, M. & Sadiri, L. Late Holocene palaeoenvironmental evolution of the Roman harbour of Portus, *Journal of Paleolimnology* 46, 243–256 (2011).
7. Di Donato, V. et al. Development and decline of the ancient harbour of Neapolis. *Geaearchaeology* 33, 1–16 (2018).
8. Salamon, F. et al. Geoaecology of the Roman port-city of Ostia: Fluvial-coastal mobility, urban development and resilience. *Earth-Science Reviews* 177, 265–283 (2018).
9. Pasquinucci, M. & Mazzanti, R. La costa tirrenica da Luni a Portus Casanum, in *De placement des lignes de rivage in Me diterrane e et auprés des données de larchéologie* (ed. CNRS) 95–106 (Colloques internationaux du CNRS, 1987).
10. Pasquinucci, M. & Mazzanti, R. La costa tirrenica da Luni a Portus Casanum, in *De placement des lignes de rivage in Me diterrane e et auprés des données de larchéologie* (ed. CNRS) 95–106 (Colloques internationaux du CNRS, 1987).
11. Allinne, C., Morhange, C., Pasquinucci, M. & Roumieux, C. Geoaecologie des ports de Pise «Stazione Ferroviaria San Rossore» et de Portus Pisanus. Dynamiques géomorphologiques, sources antiques et données archéologiques. *Revue Archéologique De Narbonnaise* 4, 321–338 (2016).
12. Bini, M. et al. Deciphering the effects of human activity on urban areas through morphostratigraphic analysis: The case of Pisa, *Journal of Archaeological Science* 33, 43–51 (2017).
13. Sarti, G., Bini, M. & Giacomelli, S. The growth and decline of Pisa (Tuscany, Italy) up to the Middle Ages: correlations with landscape and geology. *Il Quaternario - Italian Journal of Quaternary Sciences* 23, 311–322 (2010).
14. Bini, M. et al. Palaeoenvironments and palaeotopography of a multi layered city during the Etruscan and Roman periods: early interaction of Fluvial processes and urban growth at Pisa (Tuscany, Italy). *Journal of Archaeological Science* 59, 197–210 (2015).
15. Mazzini, I., Rossi, V., Da Prato, S. & Ruscito, V. Ostracods in archaeological sites along the Mediterranean coastlines: three case studies from the Italian peninsula, in *the archaeological and forensic applications of microfossils: a deeper understanding of human history* (eds Williams, M., Hill, T., Boomer, I. & Wilkinson, I. P.) 121–142 (Geological Society, London, 2017).
16. Bettazzi, F., Giachi, G., Staccioli, G. & Chimichi, S. Chemical characterisation of wood of roman ships brought to light in the recently discovered ancient harbour of Pisa (Tuscany, Italy). *Holzforschung* 57, 373–376 (2003).
17. Colomini, M. P., Giachi, G., Modugno, F., Pallecchi, P. & Ribeichi, E. The characterization of paints and waterproofing materials from the shipwrecks found at the archaeological site of the Etruscan and roman harbour of Pisa (Italy). *Archaeometry* 45, 659–674 (2003).
24. Giachi, G., Larzeri, S., Mariotti Lippi, M., Macchioni, N. & Paci, S. The wood of “C” and “F” Roman ships found in the ancient harbour of Pisa (Tuscany, Italy): the utilisation of different timbers and the probable geographical area which supplied them. *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 4, 269–283 (2003).

25. Macchioni, N. Physical characteristics of the wood from the excavations of the ancient port of Pisa. *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 4, 85–89 (2003).

26. Benvenuti, M., Mariotti Lippi, M., Pallecchi, P. & Sagi, M. Late-Holocene catastrophic floods in the terminal Arno River (Pisa, Central Italy) from the story of a Roman riverine harbour. *The Holocene* 16, 863–876 (2006).

27. Ceccarelli Lemut, M. L. Il sistema portuale pisano e i porti minori della Toscana nel Medioevo, in *I sistemi portuali della Toscana mediterranea. Infrastrutture, scambi, economie dall’antichità a oggi* (eds Ceccarelli Lemut, M. L., Garzella, G. & Vaccari, O.) 117–132 (Pacini Editore, 2011).

28. Baldassarri, M. Strutture portuali e comunicazioni marittime nella Toscana medievale alla luce della fonte archeologica (VIII-inizi XIII sec.), in *I sistemi portuali della Toscana mediterranea. Infrastrutture, scambi, economie dall’antichità a oggi* (eds Ceccarelli Lemut, M. L., Garzella, G. & Vaccari, O.) 81–116 (Pacini Editore, 2011).

29. Ceccarelli Lemut, M. L., Garzella, G. & Vaccari, O. I sistemi portuali della Toscana mediterranea. *Infrastrutture, scambi, economie dall’antichità a oggi* (Pacini Editore, 2011).

30. Gattiglía, G. *Mappa. Pisa in the Middle Ages. Archaeology, spatial analysis and predictive modelling* (Nuova Cultura-Pisa, 2014).

31. Pasquinucci, M. Il territorio in età romana, in *Il fiame, la campagna. Il mare. Reperti documenti immagini per la storia di Vecchiano* (ed Banti, O., Biagioli, G., Ducci, S., Giusti, M. A., Mazzanti, R., Pasquinucci, M. & Redi, F.) 82–87 (Pontederia, 1988).

32. Pasquinucci, M. An efficient communication network: Roman land, sea and river routes in north-western Etruria, in *Honesta Missione Festschrift für Barbara Pferdehirt* (ed. Alexandrescu, C. G.) 33–48 (Monographien des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums - Schnell & Steiner, 2014).

33. Targioni Tozzetti, G. *Relazioni dalcuni viaggi fatti in diverse parti della Toscana. II*, published in 1775 (reprint Firenze- Stamperia imperiale, 1968).

34. Pasquinucci, M. & Menchelli, S. Il sistema portuale di Pisa: dinamiche costiere, import-export, interazioni economiche e culturali (VI sec. a.C. - I sec. d.C.), in *Bollettino di Archaeologia Online*, 1/2010, Roma, *International Congress of Classical Archaeology* (ed. Malnati, L.) 1–13 (Meeting between Cultures in the Ancient Mediterranean, 2010).

35. Pasquinucci, M. *Guida all’archeologia delle coste livornesi. Porte del passato, testimonianze di una, rotte mediterranea* (Nardini Editore, 2013).

36. Melis, R. T., Depalmas, A., Di Rista, F., Montis, F. & Vacchi, M. Mid to late Holocene relative sea-level changes in the western Mediterranean: sea level variability and improvements in the definition of the isostatic signal. *Earth-Science Reviews* 155, 175–197 (2016).

37. Zanchetta, G. *The Holocene climatic evolution of Mediterranean Italy: A review of the multiproxy assessment of Holocene relative sea-level changes in the western Mediterranean: sea level variability and improvements in the definition of the isostatic signal. Earth-Science Reviews* 155, 175–197 (2016).

38. Carlson, A. E. *Multiproxy assessment of Holocene relative sea-level changes in the western Mediterranean: sea level variability and improvements in the definition of the isostatic signal. Earth-Science Reviews* 155, 175–197 (2016).

39. Milne, G. A., Long, A. J. & Bassett, S. E. Modeling Holocene relative sea-level observations from the Caribbean and South America. *Quaternary Science Review* 24, 1183–1202 (2005).

40. Roy, K. & Peltier, W. R. Relative sea level in the Western Mediterranean basin: A regional test of the ICE-7G_NA (VM7) model and a constraint on Late Holocene Antarctic deglaciation. *Quaternary Science Reviews* 183, 76–87 (2018).

41. Della Rocca, B., Mazzanti, R. & Franzini, E. Studio geomorfologico della pianura di Pisa. *Geografia Fisica e Dinamica Quaternaria* 10, 56–84 (1987).

42. Biondi, E. et al. Plant communities of Italy: *The Vegetation Prolrome. Plant Biosystems* 148, 782–814 (2014).

43. Marriner, N. & Morhange, C. The “ancient harbour parasequence” anthropogenic forcing of the stratigraphic highstand record. *Sedimentary Geology* 186, 13–17 (2006).

44. Weiss, H. Global megadrought, societal collapse and resilience at 4.2–3.9 ka BP across the Mediterranean and west Asia. *PAGES* 24, https://doi.org/10.22498/pages.24.2.62 (2016).

45. Kanievski, D. et al. Middle East coastal ecosystem response to middle-to-late Holocene abrupt climate changes. *P. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* 105, 13941–13946 (2008).

46. Kanievski, D., Guiot, J. & Van Campo, E. Drought and societal collapse 3200 years ago in the Eastern Mediterranean: a review. *Wires Climate Change* 6, 369–382 (2015).

47. Mariotti Lippi, M. et al. Pollen analysis of the ship site of Pisa San Rossore, Tuscany, Italy: the implications for catastrophic hydrological events and climatic change during the late Holocene. *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 16, 453–465 (2007).

48. Colombaroli, D., Marchetto, A. & Tinner, W. Drought and societal collapse 3200 years ago in the Eastern Mediterranean: a review. *Wires Climate Change* 6, 369–382 (2015).

49. Mariotti Lippi, M., Guidoni, M., Menorzi, B. I., Bellini, C. & Montanari, C. The Massaciuccoli Holocene pollen sequence and the vegetation history of the coastal plains by the Mar Ligure (Tuscany and Liguria, Italy). *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 16, 267–277 (2007).

50. Di Rista, F., Celant, A. & Magri, D. Holocene environmental instability in the wetland north of the Tiber delta (Rome, Italy): sea-landlake interactions. *Journal of Paleolimnology* 44, 51–67 (2010).

51. Weiss, H. et al. The genesis and collapse of 3rd millennium north Mesopotamian civilization. *Science* 261, 995–1004 (1993).

52. Staubwasser, M. & Weiss, H. Holocene climate and cultural evolution in late prehistoric–early historic West Asia. *Quaternary Research* 66, 372–387 (2006).

53. Drysdale, R. et al. Late Holocene drought responsible for the collapse of Old World civilizations is recorded in an Italian cave flowstone. *Geology* 34, 101–104 (2006).

54. Banerjea, G. et al. The so-called “4.2 event” in the central Mediterranean and its climatic teleconnections. *Alpine and Mediterranean Quaternary* 29, 5–17 (2016).

55. Magny, P. et al. Possible complexity of the climatic event around 4300–3800cal. BP in the central and western Mediterranean. *The Holocene* 19, 823–833 (2009).

56. Giraudo, C., Magny, M., Zanchetta, G. & Drysdale, R. N. The Holocene climatic evolution of Mediterranean Italy: A review of the continental geological data. *The Holocene* 21, 105–115 (2011).

57. Kanievski, D. et al. Environmental roots of the Late Bronze Age crisis. *Plos One* 8, e71004 (2013). 10.1371.

58. Magny et al. North–south palaeohydrological contrasts in the central Mediterranean during the Holocene: tentative synthesis and working hypotheses. *Climate of the Past* 9, 2043–2071 (2013).

59. Tangheroni, M., Renzi Rizzo, C. & Berti, G. Pisa e il Mediterraneo occidentale nei secoli VII–XIII: l’apporto congiunto delle fonti scritte e quelle archeologiche, in *Il mare, la terra, il ferro. Ricerche su Pisa medievale (secoli VII–XIII)* (eds Berti, G., Renzi Rizzo, C. & Tangheroni, M.) 109–142 (Pacini Editore, 2004).

60. Vaccari, O. Il porto alle origini della “città nuova” di Livorno, in *Livorno 1606/1806. Luogo di incontro tra popoli e culture* (ed. Prosperi, A.), 302–323, (Umberto Allemandi, 2009).

61. Tazzara, C. *Il free port of Livorno and the transformation of the Mediterranean world* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

62. Vaccari, O. Infrastrutture e regolamenti del porto di Livorno dal Medioevo alla prima età moderna, in *I sistemi portuali della Toscana mediterranea. Infrastrutture, scambi, economie dall’antichità a oggi* (eds Ceccarelli Lemut, M. L., Garzella, G. & Vaccari, O.) 183–208 (Pacini Editore, 2011).
63. Camuffo, D. & Enzi, S. The analysis of two bi-millenary series: Tiber and Po river floods, in Climatic variations and forcing mechanism of the last 2000 years (eds Jones, P. D., Bradley, R. S. & Jouzel, J.) 433–450 (Springer-Verlag, NATO-ANSI Series, 1: Global Environmental change, Springer 41, 1996).

64. Lamb, H. H. Climate, history and the modern world. Second edition (Routledge, 1996).

65. Anthony, E. J., Marriner, N. & Morhange, C. Human influence and the changing geomorphology of Mediterranean deltas and coasts over the last 6000 years: from progradation to destruction phase? Earth Science Reviews 139, 336–361 (2014).

66. Morhange, C. et al. Geomorphology of ancient harbours in lagoon contexts: an introduction. Journal of Roman Archaeology supplementary series 104, 97–110 (2016).

67. Shennan, I., Long, A. J. & Horton, B. P. Handbook of sea-level research (John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

68. Rovere, A., Stocchi, P. & Vacchi, M. Eustatic and relative sea level changes. Current Climate Change Reports 2, 221–231 (2016).

69. Laborel, J. et al. Biological evidence of sea-level rise during the last 4500 years on the rocky coasts of continental southwestern France and Corsica. Marine Geology 120, 203–223 (1994).

70. Pranzini, E. Updrift river mouth migration on cuspatte deltas: two examples from the coast of Tuscany (Italy). Geomorphology 38, 125–132 (2001).

71. Pranzini, E. Airborne LIDAR survey applied to the analysis of the historical evolution of the Arno River delta (Italy). Journal of Coastal Research 50, 400–409 (2007).

72. Lepore, F., Piccardi, M. & Pranzini E. Costa e arcipelago toscano nel Kitab - i Bahriye (1521 e 1525). Un confronto cartografico (secoli XIII-XVII) (Felici Editore, 1997).

73. Funis, F. Gli insediamenti dei greci a Livorno tra Cinquecento e Seicento, in La città cosmopolita (ed. Calabi, D.) 61–75 (Città & Storia, Università degli Studi Roma Tre-Croma, 2007).

74. Rossi, V., Amorosi, A., Sarti, G. & Mattei, R. Influence of inherited topography on the Holocene sedimentary evolution of coastal systems: an example from Arno coastal plain (Tuscany, Italy). Geomorphology 135, 117–128 (2011).

75. Amorosi, A., Rossi, V., Sarti, G. & Mattei, R. Coalescent valley fills from the late Quaternary record of Tuscany (Italy). Quaternary International 288, 129–138 (2013).

76. http://oxrep.classics.ox.ac.uk/databases/shipwrecks_database/0to20/ (Accessed: 15th February 2018)

Acknowledgements
Support was provided by the Institut Universitaire de France, CLIMSORIENT program, the Université Paul Sabatier - Toulouse 3, the University of Bologna, the University of Pisa, the Labex OT-Med (ANR-11-LABX-393 0061) and A*MIDEX (ANR-11-IDEX-0001-02).

Author Contributions
D.K., N.M., C.M., M.V., G.S., V.R., M.B., M.P., C.A. and E.V.C. conceived the study, performed the analyses and wrote the paper; T.O. and F.L. participated in technical discussions at an early stage and co-wrote the paper.

Additional Information
Supplementary information accompanies this paper at https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-018-29890-w.

Competing Interests: The authors declare no competing interests.

Publisher's note: Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

© The Author(s) 2018