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A Road to The North: Italy, the Lombards and the Barbarians Between National Historiography, Archaeology and Policy

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Abstract. For a long time, Italian academic tradition viewed the cultural and historical interpretation of the Lombards as simple and uniform, shaped largely by the 19th-century author Alessandro Manzoni, a key cultural figure and author of *The Betrothed*. In his view, modern Italians were seen as direct descendants of the Romans, periodically reemerging during defining national epochs like the Renaissance and the Risorgimento. Within this framework, the Lombards were dismissed as just another group of foreign invaders. This perspective has significantly shifted in recent decades. Following the decline of Italy's 'First Republic', the rise of regional political movements, and the development of the European Union, the Lombards have been reinterpreted in more complex ways: in some cases, being viewed as regional ancestors supporting new territorial identities; in others, as early contributors to a pan-European identity. These reinterpretations parallel earlier local-national tensions after Italy's unification in 1861. Archaeological discoveries have further supported these revised views.

Keywords. Lombard Italy, Italian national discourse, history, archaeology.

Introduction

The Lombards (i.e., ancient Longobards) were a late-Antique *gens*, allegedly originating from Scandinavia, which in 568 moved from Pannonia to Italy, where they founded a kingdom lasting until the Frankish conquest of Northern Italy in 774. Academic tradition has long assumed that the cultural

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and historiographical appropriation of the Lombards (along with the other *gentes* of early medieval Italy) was straightforward and monolithic, being directly influenced by the nationalist and highly rhetoric vision elaborated in the nineteenth century in the years preceding the Unification of Italy in 1861. In fact, interpretations of the Lombard period, arguably more so than for any other historical period, was then closely associated with more general issues surrounding Italian identity and the construction of local and national historical narratives.

Among the most influential works which shaped interpretations of the Lombard period was the one by Alessandro Manzoni (1785-1873). As a senator of the Kingdom of Italy and author of *The Betrothed*, perhaps the most widely read Italian novel, Manzoni endorsed a master-narrative according to which modern Italians were the offspring of the ancient Romans. Conquered by subsequent invading armies, but never actually vanished from the peninsula, the Romans would re-emerge in specific historical conjectures, considered as distinctively Italian – the Age of the Communes, the Renaissance and, *ça va sans dire*, the Risorgimento. It was a selective reading of history deeply rooting into the culture of the age (BURROW 2002). On their part, the Lombards were seen only as one of the many foreign oppressors and conquerors of Italy, though particularly fierce ones. They especially gathered Manzoni's interest: in his writings, which strongly influenced successive historiographical and artistic works, as well as popular culture (WOOD 2013: 113-136), they have also the function of representing the Austrians, governing most of Northern Italy before the foundation of the kingdom (GASPARRI 2001, 2003; ARTIFONI 2007; MORES 2020).

This, however, was only one among concurring discourses staged both in geographical and chronological layers. Firstly, already in the years of Italy's Unification in 1861, the Lombard past gained significance in local realities. Indeed, a harsh competition arose between the municipalities and the centre (i.e., the national State) to reaffirm their respective institutional roles in the frame of the newly unified country. In this context, especially through exceptional archaeological discoveries, the Lombards began to be seen as the initiators of a new social and political order where several local communities thought they could traced back their roots. Secondly, this reading has been layered in many ways over the last decades. The end of the so-called First Republic and the subsequent flourishing of localism reshaped the very idea of Italy and of an Italian identity. In the light of this renewal, the Lombards became feasible ancestors in populist discourses of new regionally-grounded political parties. Contextually new meanings were added at a broader level

in relationship to the European Union project. This trans-national building process brought about new emphasis on the history and culture of Lombard Italy as a fundamental link between the areas stretching from the Rhine to the Loire, i.e., the heart of Charlemagne's dominion, and the Mediterranean regions[3].

By framing historiography, archaeology and politics in their cultural and historical backgrounds, the present essay will track the uses and abuses of the Lombards in Italian cultural memory and, while underlining the multifaceted and multidimensional appropriations they encountered, it will contribute to shed light on a debate still little known in international scholarship.

1. The Ghost of Rome

In the year 539, war between emperor Justinian and the Goths was raging in Italy. In the same year's summer, king Witigs sieged the invading forces of Byzantium in the metropolis of Rome, which the Byzantines had newly conquered. According to Procopius of Caesarea, the great historian of the age, the king of the Goths mustered two hundred thousand men to fight the eastern Romans. For modern historians, this figure is clearly fictional. Yet, 1937 Piero Rasi (1859-1961), teacher of Latin and Greek literature at the University of Pavia, took Procopius' witness at face value in his book *Exercitus Italicus e milizie cittadine nell'alto Medio Evo (Exercitus Italicus and civic armies in the Middle Ages)* (RASI 1937). According to Rasi, the army of Italy, the *exercitus* formed by the Goths, was then joined by the *militia,* which, in his interpretation, was a semi-professional group of non-Gothic fighters gathering citizens and farmers of the province. The vision of Rasi is very much isolated.

To a first extent, in the milieu where Rasi was writing, the name "milizia" recalled dark associations at the very heart of Fascist ideology, clearly mirroring the myth of the *camicia nera* and the *manganello* – the black shirt and the truncheon, the notorious attire and weapon of the early days of Mussolini's rise to power. Moreover, the year of the book's edition, 1937, was a momentous one – it came after a year from the victorious and atrocious Ethiopian enterprise when Mussolini's consensus was at its the highpoint and in the aftermath of the Duce's alliance with Hitler through the Rome-Berlin Axis (1936) then formalized by the Pact of Seal in 1939. In this tense political atmosphere, the bygone alliance described by Rasi between Goths/Germans

[3] A notorious example is: CIOLA 1997. On the different usages of the Middle Ages in changing cultural contexts, see the seminal survey by DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2011, and his essay 2013.

and Romans/Italians was highly welcome. In the 1930s the Catholic circles of the Institute of Roman Studies undertook an overall re-examination of the historiographical theme of the relationship between *romanitas* and Germanism. This occurred even through the re-reading of certain historical episodes, such us the Battle of the Catalaunian plains or the Siege of Rome recalled by Rasi, which were reinterpreted in the light of the joint effort of the two peoples against common aggressors (TOMASELLA 2013; ARAMINI 2020; MECELLA 2024). Also, it could have found a common ground in the scientific notions of the age, as these were the years when the poisonous Aryan ideology toxically spread in many European countries[4]. It was according to these views that Rasi's alliance could have make sense: Romans and Germans descended indeed from the same ancient tribes. Secondly, the Goths were very less divisive in the reading of Italian history since they appeared to bridge somehow between Roman and Barbarian heritages: seldom they were seen as hostile to the Italians' ancestors as the Lombards were[5].

Many Italian intellectuals and politicians, however, came at odds with the idea that the Northern Germans and the old Italians could have forged an alliance against the Greeks (the Byzantines). For many Italian students of Classics, the Greeks kept the flame of learning, and were the cradle of culture through the Dark Ages, although many ancient Latin authors had described them as treacherous and perfidious (HUNGER 1987). The same could not be said of the Germans, who, in the Italians' perspective, were barbarians *par excellence*. The state of the art in Italian medieval studies was probably signed by the 1941 book by Gabriele Pepe *Il Medioevo barbarico in Italia*, where the title is outspoken of the role of the early-medieval conquerors of Italy (PEPE 1941; BERTO 2021: 32-64). Pepe (1899-1971), who was professor of Medieval History in Bari, was very close to the antifascist circles led by Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) and by establishing explicit parallels between the Lombard domination of Italy and the authoritarian regime of Hitler its book resounded as a warning to the risks connected to the alliance with the Germans (MORETTI 2015).

Indeed, Rasi's proposition was in friction with the widespread anti-German feelings of the majority of Italian intelligentsia, which even in the case of scholars and politicians aligned to Mussolini remained always rather impervious as Mussolini himself to the Aryan mythology. This is a major difference of the Italian culture (and historiography) comparing with the ones of Northern European countries. As an example, the influential anthro-

[4] On this, see: ARVIDSSON 2006.

[5] On the perception of the Goths in the Italian historiography of the period see: PAZIENZA 2022: 437-465.

pologist Giuseppe Sergi (1841-1936) believed that, in the distant past, the Etruscans had fought the Aryans back and saved the Mediterranean civilization, which, therefore, was not considered a part of the great Indo-European civilization[6]. Sergi had his own racial theory, but he dispassionately opposed the growing Nordicism. Instead, he proposed that the Mediterranean peoples were the founders of the greatest civilizations of history, such as Egypt, Carthage and, of course, Rome. Not only were the new ideas looked at with hostility, but many scholars also showed a deep-rooted scepticism in the belief that a language could say much about its speakers. Here, it could be useful to compare the Swiss scholar Adolphe Pictet (1799-1875) with the almost contemporary Enrico De Michelis (1877-1938). While the former was the great theorist and poet of the Aryan origins, De Michelis, who had a log career teaching in high schools and ethnography in different Italian universities, while writing on the very same topic in *Origine degli Indo-Europei* (*The origins of the Indo-Europeans*) complained on the great confusion between blood and language, and firstly used the expression "scientific myth" to dismiss this huge and still growing scholarship[7].

The impenetrability of the Italian scholarship to this appalling and frightening theory of race had a specific reason: Rome and the long shadow projected by her eagle. The permanent centrality of Rome as a Christian centre and the all-present majestic remains of the imperial age constantly inspired politicians and intellectuals such as Otto III, Dante Alighieri, Edward Gibbon or Goethe. In Italy, every woman and man with some acquaintance with the Classics knew of Romulus' asylum in the fatal hills back in the archaic days of the eighth century B.C.E. and the mongrel origin of the first Romans as narrated by Vergil (DENCH 2005). In all these centuries, being a Roman had much to do with culture, practice, and law rather than blood. If there was a race of Rome, this race was perceived as being also spiritual and not only biological. Also, Benito Mussolini, who in 1937 was prone to sign the Racial Laws, could, in a private conversation with the journalist Indro Montanelli (1909-2001) in 1934, still utter that "il razzismo è roba da biondi" – "racism is stuff for blonde people"[8].

The heritage of Rome was, in fact, no prerogative of Italy, being almost constantly contend and challenged by neighbouring countries. Imperial capitals rose in France, Germany, Serbia, Greece, and Turkey, and, since the Middle Ages, the

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[6] SERGI 1898; POLIAKOV 1971: 104; GILLETTE 2002. On Sergi: MONTANARI 2018.

[7] PICTET 1850-1853; DE MICHELIS 1903, quotation is from p. 88; POLIAKOV 1971: 104. On De Michelis see: QUARANTA 2019.

[8] MONTANELLI 1996. On Montanelli: GERBI and LIUCCI 2011.

recurring obsession of Empires, Holy Empires and German Empires showed the centrality of Rome (GIARDINA and VAUCHEZ 2000; WILSON 2017). Yet, since Romanticism, it became more and more an Italian phenomenon. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the ancestors of modern nations were searched in the bearded barbarians of the past. Particularly in Germany and England, the barbarians became the subject of growing interest, both historical and literary. It may be enough to remember the construction of the *Hermannsdenkmal* the huge statue of Arminius, in the alleged place where the Germans humiliated Varus's legion in the forest of Teutoburg (WIWJORRA 2006). Thereafter, in the Italian national discourse there was no barbarian ancestor for the modern nation, as it was the case of the great majority of European states. Instead, it was almost a common ground that the Italians found their ancestors in the proud Romans of the Republic – the Scipios as we still hear in the Italian national anthem. In the words of the great Russian-French historian Léon Poliakov (1910-1997), "the grandiose myth of the eternal city, mistress of the world, casted in shadow all the remaining genealogical affiliations" (POLIAKOV 1971: 85).

It was during the *Risorgimento*, the time which saw first the intellectual project for a kingdom including the whole Italian peninsula (and the factual conquest afterward, moved by the kings of Sardinia from the House of Savoy), and Fascism that the Romans of Italy reached its high tide. Rome, both as the archetypical symbol of power and greatness and as a Christian capital, became the very centre of every ideology aiming to unify Italy. In the men of the age, the sentimental attachment to Rome was overwhelming. Writing his autobiography in 1864, the Italian patriot Giuseppe Mazzini (1805-1872) (MONSAGRATI 2008), the man that Karl Marx used to call "that everlasting old ass," went back to his first visit of Rome in the anxious month of the Roman republic in 1849:

> Rome was the dream of my youth, the mother of all my ideas, the religion of my soul. I entered it on foot that evening in early March, trembling, almost in adoration. Rome was to me, and in spite of her present degradation, she is still, the temple of humanity. From Rome will one day spring the religious transformation destined for the third time to bestow moral unity upon Europe[9].

If in the Italian discourse of the *Risorgimento* the revival of the *romanitas* was imminent, there was a long time between Ancient Rome and the unified

[9] MAZZINI 1864 (1986): 382, quoted in GIARDINA and VAUCHEZ 2000.

kingdom of Italy. The main question concerned the destiny of the Romans in the process of becoming Italian. What had happened to them in these long years? This, as it often happened, brought a clearly selective reading of history. Looking at the past, Italian intellectuals had to choose who were the proto-Italians and who were not. Finding ancestors in the stoic ancient Romans, these busy men of the *Risorgimento* forced themselves in a complicated historical cage. Yet, a model was offered by France, where, among others, Augustin Thierry (1795-1856) dedicated his work to the destiny of the Gauls under Frankish rule.

In the Italian discourse, the ancient Romans, destined to grow into the modern Italians, became the victims of successive aggressions and conquests of foreign populations, which limited their freedom and their genius. In certain historical circumstances as the Age of Communes, or the Renaissance, the spirit of the ancient Romans came once more to light, but they were just episodes. Generally, it was a past made of misery, decadence, and foreign oppression. These ideas were spread by a gifted group of writers working between 1815 and 1847. Generally, they wrote historical novels, very similar in pattern, settled in various epochs and featuring archetypical characters. There was a hero, defender of his community and with a vision of united Italy, better if republican, there were the foreign rulers, harsh and cruel, and often there was a traitor and a woman whose virtue is threatened by the foreign ruler, the traitor, or both of them (BANTI 2004: 54). This discourse is still present and, until few years ago, it was at the backbone of the teaching of history in most of Italy's public schools. Suggestively, is the very plot of the movie *Barbarossa*, strongly wanted by the Italian party Lega Nord, of which we will discuss in short[10].

In modern times, these foreign powers could have been found in the French, the Spaniards, or the Austrians, but in the Middle Ages the matter became more complicated. While the Goths and the Carolingians where somehow digested in the Italian proto-national discourse, it was the Lombard kingdom that troubled the historians. In Italian historiography, the Lombards were mostly pictured as ravenous barbarians, just emerging from the Baltic forests and with no previous contact to civilization, bloodthirsty haters of the Roman world, destroyers of almost everything, pagans with terrible tastes and poorly dressed.

As mentioned above, Alessandro Manzoni was one the strongest proponent of the idea of an Italian population enslaved and humiliated through its

[10] R. Martinelli (dir.) *Barbarossa* (01 Production, 2009). T. DI CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2009.

history. Manzoni's legacy was hard to overcome. Writing about the Migration Period in his *Sommario della storia d'Italia* (*Summary of Italian History*), Cesare Balbo (1789-1853) (PASSERIN D'ENTRÈVES 1963) wrote:

> In Italy, by contrast, we see in succession the barbarians of Odoacer, the Goths, Lombards, old Franks and new French, and old and new, ancient and modern Germans. And the old invaders, pushed away by the new, never had enough time to melt in the nation. And thus, what is usually said of the other modern nations, that their servile blood of Roman provincials, was renewed by free German blood, is not true for Italy[11].

Even Gian Piero Bognetti (1902-1963) (MOR 1969), who gave new impetus to the research on the Lombard period in the aftermath of the Second World War, still had Manzoni's words in his mind. His *Santa Maria "foris portas" e la storia religiosa dei Longobardi* (*Santa Maria "foris portas" and the religious history of the Lombards*)accounts for the survival of the Roman tradition under the Lombard rule through the mediation of the Papacy and the Eastern monastic missions it would have promoted (BOGNETTI 1948). In countries such as Italy, Greece and others, most remarkably Germany, there is a tale of resistance and resilience of the allegedly original inhabitants against successive waves of invasions.[12] The great positivist work of Thomas Hodgkin, which became a master narrative of Italy during the early Middle Ages, was evocatively titled, *Italy and Her Invaders*[13].

It is suggestive to compare the role of the Lombards in the construction of Italian history with the one of the Franks in France and particularly the Visigoths in Spain. In many European countries, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the origins of the nation were explained through the migration of barbarian tribes during the Middle Ages, which in the cultural discourse of the age took the name of *Landnahme*, which Patrick Geary translated in English as primary acquisition (GEARY 2002: 34). It happened once:

> the ancestors of modern nations—speaking their national language, which carried and expressed specific cultural and intellectual modes—first appeared in Europe, conquering once and for all their sacred and immutable territories and, in so doing, acquiring once and for all their natural enemies. Wonderful examples are the incoming Angles and Saxons, the

[11] BALBO 1846 (1985): 416, translation adapted from WOOD 2013: 122.

[12] On the German experience: BORRI forthcoming.

[13] HODGKIN 1880-1899. On this WOOD 2013: 217-220. See also: BROWN 1997.

Croatians, and the Hungarians.

The former Roman provinces of Britannia, Dalmatia and Pannonia became the new fatherland due to an ethnic and linguistic change, which was permanent and irreversible. The following migrations in the same territory during the successive centuries were dismissed as invasions.

Yet, in Italy different stories were written and alternative models became suitable. This became clear in regional contexts where alternative discourses were mostly backed up by archaeological evidence.

2. A Homeland for the Lombards

When one turns from historiography to cultural heritage policy and archaeology, in fact, the *questione longobarda* and the role of the successive barbarian settlers for the national discourse in Italy loses its centrality, as does the very idea of Rome. This becomes apparent when the developments of Italian medieval archaeology as a discipline are considered. The beginnings of medieval archaeology in Italy date back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when early medieval graves started being dug up by amateurs as well as professional archaeologists who acknowledged them for the first time as material traces of the Lombards. The Castel Trosino and Nocera Umbra cemeteries in central Italy are two of the most notorious and large sites discovered in this pioneering phase, respectively in 1893 and 1897-98[14]. Brought to light by state-backed excavations, they were documented through the highest scientific standards following a positivistic approach, which was then in vogue (GELICHI 1997: 27-51; 2005: 169-184).

Like in other parts of Europe, also in Italy, therefore, medieval archaeology took its first steps as Germanic Archaeology (EFFROS 2012). Unlike other European countries, however, after the initial impetus at the turn of the century, the rising discipline very soon went off the national research agenda (LA ROCCA 1993: 13-43; 2004: 173-234) and remained a marginal field of study also in the post-war period (PAZIENZA 2022: 437-465). The editorial of the first issue of the journal *Archeologia Medievale* in 1974 makes this discontinuity very clear. In a neo-Marxist perspective, accessing and studying "subordinate classes" was chosen as the main goal for future research of the newly founded discipline (BROGIOLO 2009). No connection was made with its original debuts, and no room was left for the Lombards. After all, in the Seventies memories of

[14] See below through the text.

National Socialist archaeology were still pretty vivid.

From 1937 to 1943 the German Archaeological Institute in Rome had engaged in a research programme usually referred to as the *Langobardenforschungen*. As similar projects launched elsewhere in Europe (FEHR 2002: 177-200 and FEHR 2004: 97-228), the *Langobardenforschungen* aimed at justifying the alleged German cultural and political hegemony across the continent. Siegfrid Fuchs (1903-1978), a fervent National Socialist and *SS-Obersturmführer*, was the archaeologist in charge of carrying out the programme (VIGENER 2012: 223-236). Supported by the Third Rich, Fuchs looked for, photographed, classified and finally published hundreds and hundreds of Lombard-period finds, which were preserved in various local and provincial museum collections all over Italy (FRÖHLICH 2008: 183-213).

Italian authorities showed few or no interest in Fuchs' work. The General Division of Antiquities and Fine Arts (i.e., the office then in charge for the protection of archaeological heritage) put its entire intellectual and financial resources in recovering and studying the Classic and Roman past, which was so central in the propaganda of Mussolini's fascist regime[15]. On the other hand, the perilous chauvinism inspiring Fuchs became apparent only later, when the war was over.

Notwithstanding the scant interest shown by governmental archaeologists, it is meaningful that precisely in the context of archaeology, and particularly in field of the conservation of archaeological heritage, a different attitude developed towards the Lombard-period finds. A national law protecting archaeological heritage was only issued in Italy in 1909 (BALZANI 2003). Before that year, landlords and diggers were the lawful owners of the materials which were unearthed on their estates, and they used to sell these to the highest bidder. The antiques market was very flourishing, and the General Division was constantly at a disadvantage due to the limited funds of the newly unified country and the demands of wealthy European private and public competitors (PAZIENZA 2006: 61-78).

In order to get the materials and prevent their sale abroad, government officials were often forced to engage in lengthy negotiations with private individuals and, from time to time, to use even some gimmicks. At least to a certain extent, the entry of archaeological finds into public collections, or conversely into the antiques market, was a matter of causality. In this respect, the story of the discovery of the Nocera Umbra cemetery is highly representative. After the first accidental findings, the government official Angelo Pas-

[15] MANACRODA 1982: 443-470; MANACORDA and TAMASSIA 1985. See also BARELLA 2019: 199-233 and BRENNAN 2020: 1-13.

qui (1857-1915) was able to gain control of the site only thanks to the poor economic conditions of the landowner Vincenzo Blasi, who did not have the means to finance the excavations by his own. The cemetery was brought to light in its entirety through two archaeological campaigns in 1897 and 1898[16]. A first agreement between the parties foresaw the overall partition of the grave goods. Later, Blasi accepted to sell his share for a reasonable amount. However, the decision was the result of his lack of expertise and knowledge. Pasqui had minimized the actual value of the items, managing to control the purchase price, which in the end was set up at 24.000 Italian lire: a high sum, but not as high as it should have been (PAZIENZA 2009: 8-18).

Be that as it may, in the end, the grave goods from Nocera Umbra were secured to the State collections and ultimately exhibited in the Roman National Museum of the Terme di Diocleziano in Rome, in the same room where the finds from Castel Trosino had already been on display for some years (BARNABEI 1895: 35-39 and PARIBENI 1920: 121-123).

A trend that was already underway in Italian museum policy was mirrored. Since the very first years following the unification of Italy, museum directors and keepers had spent great efforts to prevent the losses of Lombard-period finds, and to hold them on display to the general public in their institutions. These efforts had few or nothing to do with the intrinsic value of the objects themselves. Museum directors and keepers were driven and inspired by civic pride and patriotic rhetoric. The possession by an Italian public institution of "non-Italian" archaeological materials – indeed, the Lombard-period finds were thought to be products of a foreign people – held a symbolic meaning and was thought to be instrumental to achieve at least two purposes: recalling the past of a foreign domination as a warning for future generations; and celebrating the end of that domination, which had begun precisely with the Lombard conquest of Italy in 568 C.E. and ended only many centuries later thanks to the Italian *Risorgimento* in 1861[17].

This anew and partially positive attitude towards the Lombard-period archaeological finds developed further and in original ways above all at a regional and sub-regional level, where the interest in the archaeological heritage went hand in hand with the identity-formation of local communities. The post-unification period witnessed a widespread process where each town and

[16] The excavation of Nocera Umbra was published only in 1918 due to the death of Angelo Pasqui. See PASQUI and PARIBENI 1918: 137-352.

[17] These two arguments were fundamental for the successful acquisition for the State collections of the finds excavated at the early medieval cemetery of Testona. See the archival documentation published by PEJRANI BARICCO 1980: 12-15.

village began rethinking of its own cultural and political position in the context of the newly unified Italy. Italian historians refer to this phenomenon as "paura dell'assorbimento", literally "fear of assimilation"; a phenomenon that brought about the re-emerging of localisms and parochial interests (SORBA 1998: 157-170; CARPEGNA FALCONIERI 2017: 78-101; SESTAN 1981: 21-50). As a result, antiquarian societies started flourishing everywhere across Italy. These were institutionalized venues, which were created by prominent and learned citizens with the programmatic aim of writing and promoting the particular history of their respective hometown and region. A competition – in some case even harsh –soon arose among Italian municipalities seeking to prove their importance and prominence (BARBIERA 1998: 345-357). Naturally, since these importance and prominence were thought to be grounded in the past, archaeological discoveries came to play a fundamental role[18]. This, in turn, resulted in a conflict between central and local authorities over the preservation and management of archaeological heritage.

The discovery of the Castel Trosino cemetery gives us an insight into such post-unification dynamics and tensions. The first graves were discovered by chance in 1893, during farming works on the lands of the parish church. Soon after, Raniero Mengarelli (1865-1944), engineer of the newly established Roman National Museum, was appointed head of the archaeological excavations. The cemetery was brought to light through a single campaign between the spring and the summer of the same year[19]. The take-over of the excavations by the State brought about right away the protest of the villagers, which became harsher and harsher when the grave goods were sold by the local priest for the paltry sum of 10.000 Italian lire and transferred to Rome upon decision of the Minister of Education (PAZIENZA 2009: 23-27). The mayor and other leading citizens started addressing petitions to the General Division of Antiquates and Fine Art to have the grave goods returned and in March the dispute was even discussed in the parliament. Senator Filippo Mariotti (1833-1911) (SEVERINI 2008), who had embraced the cause, used a perfect metaphor to explain the disappointment of the inhabitants of Castel Trosino. In his words, the act of taking away finds from the discovery place was like to rip the page from a book, a book telling the local history of that community. Even despite this, however, in the end, only a few objects were delivered back to the community of Castel Trosino as a representative sample of the necropolis.

The episode testifies to the new meaning attributed to Lombard-period

[18] On the archaeology as a tool of cultural identity see SMITH 2001: 441-449.

[19] The excavation of Castel Trosino was published in 1902 by MENGARELLI 1902: 145-380.

finds as valuable local relics. Interestingly, this new meaning also brought along a different understanding of the Lombards as historical agents. Rather than just foreign conquerors and oppressors, they became the forerunners of a new social order. In the view of local scholars, the Lombard conquest had in fact brought about the reorganization of the entire province. The fleeing population, who had left the older Ascoli, began to populate the surrounding hills, where new fortified settlements and castles were founded, including Castel Trosino itself.

The strong interconnection between historiographical thought and nationalist propaganda profoundly influenced the developments of Italian medieval archaeology. As said, in Italian nationalist historiography a parallel was established between modern Italians and the Roman local population, who had been conquered by the Lombards. Already in the aftermath of the earlier discoveries dating to the Lombard period, professional and governmental archaeologists showed little or no interest in Lombard-period finds, which they considered not really "Italian" and, therefore, little worthy of being studied systematically. Not surprisingly, it was the German scholar Siegfried Fuchs who conducted the only major research programme on Italian Lombard materials in the interwar years.

On the other hand, museum directors and keepers were able to renegotiate the centrality of these finds. First and foremost, they were interested in the use of archaeological heritage as a tool for shaping the new consciousness of Italian citizens. In their view, the exhibition of Lombard materials in public museums served the goal of remembering a painful past that was over and shouldn't happened again. In addition, the city elites operating in the venues of local antiquarian societies were also responsible for a further renegotiation of meaning. By promoting the research into local history, they engaged in the identity-building process of their respective communities. In this process, the Early Middle Ages and the Lombards were integrated as a natural component of each micro-history, and consequently also the Lombard finds were as valued as many others.

3. Alaric's Fever and Other Tales

The conflict between central and local authorities for the preservation and management of the archaeological heritage, as well as the key role played by this heritage in the construction of local identities and the shaping of civic pride, is still underway nowadays. Following the interlude of the Fascist dicta-

torship, in fact, the 1947 Italian Constitution not only restored the country's tradition of municipal and provincial government and local democracy, but also added the idea of the Region-based State to the unitary State (MANGIAMELI 2014: 1-33). In the process of decentralization of power from national to regional governments, which became especially marked since the 70s, areas such as healthcare, transportation and, last but not least, culture were delegated by the law to local administrators (LEONARDI, NANETTI and PUTNAM 1981: 95-117). From this moment on, the latter have renewed their stance in promoting local archaeological discoveries and in funding excavations and exhibitions. As a result, the confrontation with the representatives of the central State has re-flourished even harsher while, once again, the Lombards and the barbarians have entered the scene.

In September 2018 the mayor of Curreggio, a small village of two thousand inhabitants on the hills around Novara in Piedmont (North-Western Italy), began a dispute on behalf of his community to have returned the grave goods of a "Lombard warrior", which had been unearthed sixteen years earlier near to the baptistery of the local church. Soon after their discovery in 2002, indeed, upon order of the *Soprintendenza Archeologica* (i.e., the present-day office responsible in Italy for the protection of archaeological heritage), the grave goods had been transferred to Turin, the regional capital, to the great disappointment of the town and its representatives, who were eager to see them exhibited in the civic museum, then under construction. At the museum inauguration in March 2019, however, the materials were still in Turin and visitors had to be content with a 3D rendering of the "Lombard warrior" and his equipment[20].

Of some interest to the local and national press, the episode founds parallels in another contemporary dispute, which in 2015 saw the major of Cosenza in Calabria (Southern Italy) and the Minister of Cultural Heritage confronting each other over the legacy of Alaric, king of the Visigoths. As reported by Jordanes in his best-known work, *Getica*, after the sack of Rome, Alaric died in Cosenza, to be buried there with a marvellous treasure underneath the bed of the Busento river. The reliability of Jordanes has long been debated and today the tale of his burial is considered by most scholarship a literary trope. This notwithstanding, through the creation of a museum dedicated to him, the municipal administration decided to exploit his figure as a cultural brand for Cosenza's rebirth. The idea of the museum – dating back to 2009 but still under construction – was relaunched in 2015, when the town's

[20] *La Stampa*, 13.09.2018: https://www.lastampa.it/topnews/stampa-plus/2018/09/13/news/la-battaglia-del-sindaco-il-guerriero-longobardo-conteso-deve-riconquistare-la-sua-torre-1.34044725/.

mayor, Mario Occhiuto, decided to undertake archaeological excavations in search for the royal treasure. The news bounced around newspapers all over Europe and even the *Telegraph* talked about it. The Minister of Cultural Heritage, however, slowed down the initiative and refused to concede the permit for starting the survey due to the groundlessness of the legend and inconsistency of historical data. The stop inflamed the protest of the mayor, who saw it as a brutal attack to his person. Mario Occhiuto, though, was not the only one to experience the seductive power of Alaric's legend over the years[21].

In 1820, August von Platen (1796-1835)'s famous poem *Das Grab in Busento*, which Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907) translated into Italian, enveloped the figure of the king and his alleged treasure into a romantic aura, i.e., that of the hero sumptuously buried far from his homeland. Since then, travellers, novelists, and adventurers have been fascinated by the legend. The famous Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870), for example, reports it in his book *Viaggio in Calabria* (*Voyage in Calabria*). In 1937 on a visit to Rome with Hitler (CARDINI and MANCINI 2022), the leading member of the Nazi Party, Heinrich Himmler, went to Cosenza, where, standing at the centre of the bridge over the Busento, addressed the Nazi salute to the river as a sign of political identity and respect to the barbarian king (ROMA 2015: 205-219). Alaric's myth was of great importance in Nazi ideology, for which the warlike virtues of the Germanic tribes and their leaders were the motive for the superiority of the Aryan race. More specifically, it was believed that Alaric's treasure included the spear that was used during Jesus' crucifixion. The Holy Lance (*Heilige Lanze*) represented an exceptionally powerful magical-archetypal object and an indispensable symbol of the Reich. In 1943, Hitler called the military offensive that would have led to the occupation of Italy *Unternehmen Alarich* (*Operation Alaric*) (SANGINETO 2009: 73-74; ROMA 2015: 206).

Alaric's myth did not stop to flourish even after the post-war period, when newly-found Indiana Jones continued their treasure hunt. News of illegal excavations periodically appear in the local press. On the Facebook page *Quelli che vorrebbero trovare Alarico e il suo Tesoro* (*Those who would like to find Alaric and his treasure*), a group counting hundreds of members, it is possible to read the most recent developments of a mania in which the relationship between

[21] *Quotidiano del Sud*, 27.10. 2015: https://www.quotidianodelsud.it/calabria/cosenza/societa-e-cultura/cultura-e-istruzione/2015/10/27/alarico-va-bene-la-leggendama-larcheologia-e-unaltra-cosa; *CosenzaPost.it*, 4.11.2015: https://www.cosenzapost.it/tesoro-di-alarico-a-cosenza-presto-le-rilevazioni-con-il-georadar-041115/; *Il Fatto* Quotidiano, 19.11.2015: https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/11/19/cosenza-la-farsa-della-caccia-al-tesoro-dalarico-il-comune-non-ha-chiesto-autorizzazioni-stop-della-soprintendenza/2235312/; *La Repubblica* 16.11.2016: https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2016/11/16/news/_quel_tesoro_e_una_farsa_ii_sogno_di_alarico_spezzato_dal_ministero-152101392/.

archaeology, popular culture and politics emerges in all its problematic nature (GHILARDI 2014).

One of the most original and controversial momentous witnessing pseudo-scientific appropriations of the Italian barbarian past is represented by the years after 1994, when as a consequence of a major financial scandal which brought about the end of the so-called First Republic, an archipelago of new political formations replaced the old traditional Italian parties which had dominated the scene in the second half of the twentieth century (DONOVAN 2015: 192-203). Among these new political subjects, the Lega Nord, a secessionist and populist movement, collecting the inheritance of the older Lega Veneta and Lega Lombarda, emerged. The Lega Nord's autonomist claims found fertile ground first in the older process of power devolution that had empowered Italian regions with growing duties and responsibilities since the 70s and then consolidated in the vacuum left by the fall of the First Republic. At the regional elections in 1990, it obtained 20% of the votes in Lombardy, the most populated and richest region in Italy, and 5.4% in the whole country, showing how the political landscape was rapidly changing. A few years later, at the regional elections in 1993, it obtained greater success, as to ultimately becoming a government party in the political elections in 1994 (COLARIZI 2007: 192-194 and CENTO BULL 2015: 204-214).

From the outset, the main propaganda goal of Lega Nord was to cut off Padania (the region of the Po River) from the rest of the country, and especially from the allegedly underdeveloped South. Several times throughout history, the alleged economic and political divide in Italy into a generic, rich and avant-garde North and an equally generic, lazy and economically towed South has been interpreted through an ethnic lens, that is, in a way which naturalizes differences and therefore removes them from any social and political responsibility. In supporting these claims, a common origin and a shared history was invented by the party's ideologues, who selected two historical periods when Padania would have formed a political unity independent from the rest of Italy, i.e., under the Celts of Gallia Cisalpina and under the Lombards ruling manly over Northern Italy (BARBIERA 2010: 195-197). The discourse of Padania's distinctiveness was very much mutated by the Italian national discourse although with momentous perspectives' turns, such as by making Brennus the hero instead of the villain of the famous Gallic conquest of Rome, or appropriating myths like the Battle of Legnano, in different declinations (CAVAZZA 1994: 197-214).

During a rally, Mario Borghezio, the right-hand man of Umberto Bossi, founder of the Lega Nord, described the concept in these terms:

> We, we who are Celts and Lombards, are not Levantine or Mediterranean shit. We, the white and Christian Padania, white and Christian, those of Lepanto, of the flags of the crusader heart, we who will never become Islamic, we followers of Bossi until the end![22]

According to this view, "Padania was born with the Lombards, led by Alboin, after their conquest of the north of the peninsula, which brought to the foundation of the so-called "Langobardia" […] from Friuli to Piedmont, from the Alps to Tuscany." [23] Also, the Lombards were not seens as a migrating group, "because they were our people who escaped from another land. They had the same ancestors, the same gods, the same habits of those who already had lived here forever"[24]. In other words, Lombards should be considered to all intents and purposes the same people as Celts, for they moved from the North to the Italian peninsula, where the latter lived since the beginning of time and welcomed them as relatives.

Besides the political vacuum left by the fall of the First Republic, the new surge in populist parties, such as the Lega Nord and other European right--wing parties, owed much to the contextual launch in the 90s of the European Union project. This trans-national building process started in 1990, when Italy signed the Shengen agreement, through which the border checks between subscribing European States fell. Two years later, in 1992, the Maastrich treaty established the European Union and in 1999 the replacement of the Italian currency, the Lira, with the Euro began. Since its establishment in the early 90s the Lega Nord has mainly expressed a pessimistic view of the EU as a reaction to supra-national integration processes and the redistributions of power and duties which came along. In this context, even the cultural life of the European member states witnessed a re-orientation through a funding policy apt to promoting research projects and exhibitions addressing what was perceived as a possible shared common past. Thus, the so-called barbarian kingdoms and Charlemagne's Holy Roman Empire offered a seemingly acceptable and appropriate model for a proto-European *koinè*.

A significant example of this cultural policy, whose goal was to present a "New Europe", is the scientific programme the *Transformation of the Roma World* which was financed from 1992 to 1998 by the European Science Foundation to foster the cooperation between scholars from as many of the European Union member states as possible and promote research on European

[22] For the quotation see VERENI 2009: 92.

[23] BARBIERA 2010: 196, who cites G. Oneto, "Cultura e Territorio", *Quaderni Padani*, 34 (2001), 30 (26-30).

[24] BARBIERA 2010: 197, who cites Oneto, "Cultura e Territorio", 26.

history as a whole. An idea of the numbers involved came from the second of the three plenary conferences organized in the context of the programme where ninety-two scholars from eighteen countries participated. Several edited volumes originated from the programme. By the same token, exhibitions on Charlemagne and the Franks were organized between 1996 and 1997 at different avenues. These were meant at presenting early medieval period cemetery evidence and material culture to the public at large and getting common citizens more familiar with them. The *Die Franken* (WIECZOREK 1997) exhibit held in Mannhein, Berlin and Paris where the Franks were celebrated as the pathfinders of a proto-unified Europe made clear the political massage behind such initiatives (WOOD 2103: 315-319).

On a smaller scale, since the 90s even in Italy the recognition of the importance of displaying the Early Middle Ages to the general public came at the foremost. In 1990 the regional government of Friuli-Venezia Giulia organized in Cividale – a highly significant location where the Lombard-period heritage can count on extraordinary still standing monuments and architecture – the first national temporary exhibit dedicated to the Lombards (MENIS 1990). Archaeological finds throughout Italy, Southern Italy included, and from central Europe were collected together for the first time. The exhibit curators portrayed the settlement of the Lombards in Italy as an evolutionary process, from the invasion to the acculturation process, and the establishment of society, which centred on written documents and the foundation of religious buildings, could finally be defined as truly Italian. Following the success of the exhibit in Cividale, a decade later another major exhibition titled *Il futuro dei Longobardi. L'Italia e la costruzione dell'Europa di Carlo Magno* (*The Future of the Lombards. Italy and the Construction of Charlemagne's Europe*), took place in Brescia in Lombardy with an even broader scope (BERTELLI and BROGIOLO 2000). For this initiative, the ambition was that of presenting the Lombards as significant agents in the construction of Italy and Europe alike and, as the channel through which classical culture transformed into the Holy Roman Empire. The organizers thus portryed Lombard Italy not only as a peripheral and local entity and a marginal province of the Carolingian empire, but as a fundamental component of the political and cultural framework of medieval Europe and a link between the areas stretching from the Rhine to the Loire, i.e., the heart of Charlemagne's dominion, and the Mediterranean regions (VOLLONO 2016: 85-96 and MARAZZI 2017).

This new perspective on the Lombards as transnational agents emerged even more vividly in 2011 when seven monumental Italian sites dated to the Lombard period were registered in the UNESCO's World Heritage list. The

listed monuments were meant to signify the cultural, architectural and artistic synthesis that the Lombards were supposed to have achieved in Italy, drawing on the Roman and Christian legacy and combining it with Byzantine, Hellenistic and Middle Eastern influences. In the background, the urgency to adopt and emphasis the multicultural dimension which still today is a prerogative and a matter of harsh debate and tension in the construction and the maintenance of a European identity is patent[25].

Conclusions

Between nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, a pervasive intellectual thought conceived nations and peoples as coherent units with their own *Volkseele* and unchanging cultural makeup. With very few exceptions, like for instance Rasi's vision of a unified army of Goths and Romans, the merging between two or more peoples into a new formation was deemed mostly undesirable. According to this paradigm, historical events such as the Fall of the Roman Empire and the *Völkerwanderung* along with the archaeological finds embedding those events took on different and opposite meanings north and south of the Alps. Unlike in France and Germany, in Italian national discourses, the barbarians, and the Lombards in the first place, represented the Other on whose backdrop Italian identity was built. The Italians of the *Risorgimento* looked at their past, separating their ancestors, regarded as descendants of the ancient Romans, from the invaders who could have been Barbarians, Spaniards, or Austrians. It was a metahistorical duel which culminated in the Italians' triumph under the aegis of Savoy.

In this frame, archaeological Lombard-period finds were understood as not truly Italian, but simultaneity thought to be worthy of being excavated and exhibited in public venues as a *mementum* for future generations. Seen as material relics of Italy's political disunity and foreign oppression, these finds took on a twofold meaning, that of celebrating the end of the political fragmentation of the country and of a warning for Italian citizens against the perils of a returning history. Simultaneously, at a local level, a further meaning was added. As invaders and disruptors of the old Roman order, the Lombards and their material traces became the symbol of a period of changes in which several villages and communities established the roots of their newer foundations. However, as for the town of Castel Trosino, this was especially the

[25] UNESCO 2011b. The Longobards in Italy. Places of Power (568-774 AD). 2011. UNESCO World Heritage List. Nomination Format. Accessed 29 March 2016. http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1318.

case of those local communities that could not count on a specific Roman heritage, which continue to function as a *mythomoteur* on several occasions and places.

Yet, the Roman past of the Italians did not survive the poisoned chauvinism of National Socialist-Archaeology and the bloody downfall of fascism between 1943 and 1945. And while the huge symbolic legacy of ancient Rome went irremediably lost, also the barbarians, and the Lombards among them, dropped their meanings for Italian national history and the nascent medieval archaeology. On the other hand, they gained a place in the sun thanks to a renewed flourishing of localism in the context of new regionalist and territorial political discourses fostered by the power-devolution process in the 70s and further nourished by the end of the First Republic and the fall of the traditional political system. As the experimental cultural elaboration put forward by the Lega Nord Party on the Lombards/Celts and the Padania region shows well, the discourse on the regionalism brought out the Barbarians from the shadows of national identity-politics, but, while doing that, this new conceptualization undermined the very essence of Italian identity, which has been troubled since then.

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