

Eduardo Fabbro: *Warfare and the Making of Early Medieval Italy (568–652)*. London/New York: Routledge 2020 (Studies in Medieval History and Culture). XV, 216 p., 3 maps, 7 tables. £ 110.00/\$ 140.00. ISBN: 978-0-367-23366-2.

When it seems that there is little left to say about the Lombards and, in general, about the Early Middle Ages because of the lack of written sources and because any possible progress must necessarily depend only on the progress of archaeological discoveries, we are confronted with the product of a new research that shows how the available sources, and their intersection with the growing availability of material evidence, can still propose almost completely new scenarios and perspectives.

This is certainly the case with Eduardo Fabbro's book "Warfare and the Making of Early Medieval Italy (568–652)", which appeared in print in 2020, but which has not yet received the attention it deserves, and that for this reason can still be usefully reviewed today.

Fabbro had his university education in his country of origin, Brazil, and subsequently completed his training in Canada, at the University of Toronto, teaching – also in Canada – at the universities of McGill and Waterloo. If we think of Canada, and of the University of Toronto in particular, we cannot avoid remembering how within it in recent decades there has been one of the most lively study cells on Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, and for this purpose it would be enough to recall the names of Walter Goffart and Nicholas Everett, the latter one of the finest connoisseurs and exegetes of the narrative sources of Lombard Italy,<sup>1</sup> and the first author of some of the most discussed theories on the processes of settlement of barbarian peoples on imperial territory.<sup>2</sup> Everett, moreover, was the supervisor of the doctoral thesis that subsequently generated the book discussed here.

The author wanted to give it a title that places emphasis above all on the military events that occurred in the period between the year 568, traditionally considered that of the entry of the Lombards into Italy, and 652, the year of

1 N. Everett: *Literacy in Lombard Italy, c. 568–774*. Cambridge 2003 (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. Fourth series 53).

2 W. Goffart: *Barbarians and Romans, A. D. 418–584. The Techniques of Accommodation*. Princeton, NJ/Oxford 1980.

the death of King Rothari. If the choice of the first chronological term is quite intuitive, that of the second requires a brief explanation. The reign of Rothari is in fact the period in which the phase of military stabilization of the Lombard presence in Italy ends and, at the same time, also the process of ‘nation building’ of the kingdom reaches some important goals. In fact, through the release of the Edict that provided for the first time to his people a code of written laws Rothari, through the prologue to the Edict itself, set up a narrative aimed at justifying the role of the monarchy in the history of the Lombards as an element always present in their history, since its most remote origins. In Fabbro’s work there is much more than a mere examination of the war events that characterized this phase, but there is no doubt that the reading of these facts is an excellent starting point for giving rise to a geopolitical analysis of wider scope, also because it is the story of war events that feeds in many cases the sources we have.

On the other hand, the fact that the book we examine here took shape in the context of the medieval school of Toronto, has positively influenced its realization, for having certainly strengthened in the author the ability to build his own narrative and his own arguments starting from a very broad look at written sources, thus bringing to light the fact that the historical story of the Lombards (at least that concerning the period between the sixth and the early decades of the seventh century) can be reconstructed from a series of points of view more diversified than that, normally considered in a prevalent way, of Paul the Deacon.

The highlighting of the limits inherent in the *auctoritas* of Paul the Deacon as a reference for the reconstruction of the history of the Lombards represents a crucial point that Fabbro’s research pinpoints. The approximately two centuries between the events narrated and the time in which he wrote, the political context in which he wrote, dominated by the Frankish conquest of Italy and, finally, the position of Paul himself towards the Frankish monarchy, are factors that inevitably require careful consideration of the possibility that he has abundantly ‘filtered’ the information available at the time of writing his own narrative.

The theme of the context – temporal, political and individual – within which Paul wrote the *Historia Langobardorum* had been known for a long time and it was certainly not Fabbro who first highlighted it; but surely we owe him a great merit in having shown how, by changing the criteria according to which the analysis of the birth of the Lombard presence in Italy is constructed, we

may change definitely also the possible interpretative result of all the events related to that story. And the first step to take, as Fabbro quite wisely does, is to put Paul's history into a different perspective.

Fabbro opens his book highlighting the 'incipite' nature of the story of Paul the Deacon who, in the analysis of modern historiography, played both a role as a 'primary' and 'secondary' source. In fact, Paul was at the same time 'the' source for the reconstruction of the historical events of the Lombard age, but also the apparent exegete of other sources that he consulted (and sometimes even cited) to build his own narrative plot. Some of these sources have survived to the present day (to name but a few, the *Liber Pontificalis* of the Roman Church, and the *Historia Francorum* of Gregory of Tours), but others have disappeared, although cited by Paul, such as the chronicle of Secundus of Non (or of Trent). The idea that Fabbro cultivates – and exposes in a large part of his book – is that there should be other historical works on which not only Paul could count, but also other authors more or less contemporary to the events. In particular, the author hypothesizes the existence of two sources contemporary to the events, but currently lost, which he has defined as "chronicle source" and "consular source".

The identification and distinction of these two sources have been made on the basis of the division of the surviving sources into two groups on the ground of a basic distinction: those who believe that the arrival of the Lombards in Italy was caused by an invitation to enter, probably issued by Narses (or at least by representatives of the imperial government), and those who do not take this possibility into consideration, opting for an action triggered *motu proprio* by the Lombards themselves and therefore to be considered as a real invasion of the Italian territory. The sources that do not speak of the invitation of the Lombards instead all mention Alboin as commander of the people marching towards Italy and as its undisputed king. Among the sources that mention the invitation, some report the fact that, behind Narses' decision to call the Lombards to Italy, there would have been the desire to take revenge on the Empress Sophia, wife of Justin II, who – no longer trusting the old eunuch and fearing that he would pursue his political goals in Italy – would have tried to lure him to Constantinople to have him arrested. This divergent interpretation of the key event of the story persuaded Fabbro that, at the base, there must be two distinct narratives, which we no longer have today.

The version of the facts that does not refer to the Byzantine invitation to enter Italy is the one credited mainly with the Frankish sources closest to the facts, namely Gregory of Tours and Marius of Avenches, while the one that speaks of it is represented by the *Liber Pontificalis* of the Roman Church, written in times almost contemporary with the events, and then, at the beginning of the seventh century, by Isidore of Seville and a few decades later by the so-called *Chronicle of Fredegar*.

The chronicle of John of Biclaro who not only does not mention the invitation addressed to the Lombards but does not even speak of their entry into Italy in 568 and still attests them in Pannonia in 570, makes the situation even more intricate. The author of this chronicle would have lived in Constantinople between 567 and 578 and, Fabbro rightly notes, the fact that the entry of this people into Italy was not perceived by an observer placed in the imperial capital as an event worthy of being recorded with concern leaves much to think about how it should actually be interpreted.

Whether Fabbro's theory about the existence of the two lost sources is correct or not is difficult to say; his research, in addition to the inductive process that – in his opinion – allows us to hypothesize its existence, offers no other footholds. But it must be said that, even if such sources had never existed, the effect that the research that the Brazilian scholar intended to produce on the traditionally accepted reconstructive framework of the entry of the Lombards into Italy would have been equally achieved. His proposal for reordering and rereading the sources calls into question three fundamental cornerstones on which this framework is based: the date of the entry of the Lombards, their entry as a decision entirely internal to that people (and therefore the re-evaluation of the probability that they had been invited to enter Italy by the Byzantines), the centrality of the figure of a king in the organization of the movement to Italy.

In fact, there is much room to advance conjectures of this kind, especially if we place ourselves in the perspective of trying to connect the event of the entry into Italy with the scenario in which the Lombards previously operated during their stay of almost a century in the territory of the central-northern Balkans and the interactions they had in that period with the Empire, within the framework of the policies of *divide et impera* that the latter practiced towards the different peoples settled in that area.

In particular, Fabbro gives appropriate importance to the recruitment of the Lombards into the imperial armies that took place in the final part of the war against the Goths, to emphasize the ‘normality’ of their relationship with Byzantium. A well-known fact, but which has normally remained isolated in the historiographical reconstruction plot of the events of those years, being used above all to highlight the ferocity and uncontrollability of the Lombards and, therefore, to corroborate apocalyptic readings of what happened with their entry into Italy in 568, or the year before.

That episode allows to create what Fabbro considers a precedent of what happened in 568, when the imperial forces quartered in Italy found themselves short of personnel following the rebellion of the contingent of Heruli led by Sinduald. This rebellion would have been triggered by one of the many situations of discontent fueled by the delays with which the imperial government paid its *foederati*, a term that in those days indicated troops that fought as units of the imperial army and no longer – as was the case between the late fourth and fifth centuries – groups that fought with the Romans, but keeping their own commander (a situation that, in the lexicon of the late sixth century, is defined by the term *symbachoi*). Groups of Lombards would then have been called to settle in Italy to restore consistency to the imperial contingents, together with groups belonging to other ethnic units, in a situation that could probably see the Lombards in greater numbers than the others. In this framework, Fabbro supposes, the figure of Alboin could have found a place and he could then have been the head of one of the Lombard contingents (or even of all the Lombard contingents, I would add), but not necessarily the king of all that people.

Pannonia, therefore, would not have been abandoned by the entire Lombard population in 568, but only later, that is, shortly after 570, following the occurrence of two other events. The first is that the rooting of the Avars would have progressively represented a problem for the Lombards, reducing their vital space there; the second is that even the troops who entered Italy in 567/568 had suffered from an irregular payment of pay, rebelling in turn (together with the other groups) and negotiating with the imperial government different – and more favorable – conditions of settlement, pushing also most of the Lombards who still stayed in Pannonia to move to Italy.

At this juncture, Fabbro says, two other things could have happened: the first is that the need for political coordination of the rebellion has made Alboin emerge as a leading figure of the Lombards, also recognized by the

groups of the other peoples who entered in 568 and perhaps also by what remained of the Heruli who had previously entered Italy. The second is that the Lombards, no longer content to act as mercenaries of the Empire (that is, being paid for the services rendered), have obtained to be assigned lands on which to settle with their families, distributed in relation to the city districts of which the various groups should have guaranteed the defense, each obeying its own military commander, that the sources recognize in the figure of the *duces*.

Perhaps because inevitably influenced by the ‘Toronto context’ in which Goffart’s theories on the processes of accommodation of the barbarian peoples on imperial soil were born and developed, Fabbro understandably struggles to take a clear position on ‘how’ *this* accommodation of the Lombards could have been defined from a legal and operational point of view. Fabbro thus tends (although not taking a hundred percent explicit position) to re-propose the idea that the Lombards were assigned tax revenues and not the actual possession of the lands on which to settle, which appears as the most logical solution, which also may not have prevented the Lombards from trying to maintain control over the tax revenues that could still be paid to the imperial government by the local populations. Unfortunately, on this specific topic Fabbro’s book suffers the lack of knowledge of the work of Pierfrancesco Porena on the settlement of the Ostrogoths in Italy,<sup>3</sup> whose argumentative solidity has probably put a definitive tombstone on Goffart’s hypotheses. But the prevalence of this orientation still represents, if one can say so, a venial sin in the broader framework of a very interesting reconstruction effort, which above all aims to give some answers to a series of questions most often remained evaded in the process of historiographical reconstruction of this crucial period of Italian and European history. And, in fact, the reasoning just mentioned here all starts from the observation, which Fabbro appropriately highlights very well, that for about seven/eight years starting from 568, the sources (all sources) do not report any actual imperial reaction to the entry of the Lombards on Italian soil. And logic suggests that this can only mean that such entry was at least negotiated with, if not encouraged, by the imperial government itself.

3 P. Porena: *L’insediamento degli Ostrogoti in Italia*. Rome 2012 (Saggi di storia antica 33).

This starting assumption pushes the author to pose the problem of the relationship of the Lombards with the other actor of the Italian scene of that time, namely the Franks. In some of my recent works I have carefully examined the policy of the Franks towards Italy since the period of the Gothic wars, and it appears very clearly not only that they have acted decisively to insert themselves into this chessboard since the 30s of the sixth century, but that they have also tried to negotiate with the imperial government for an agreement of real partition of the Italian territory. The imperial government, in turn, has supported or hindered these aims of the Franks in relation both to its own conveniences of the moment, and – when this was possible – to a more comprehensive evaluation of the role of the Franks, who constituted the only real competitors of weight in the West and who now openly showed their willingness to overcome the phase in which they acted in the already imperial territories in the role – as Walter Pohl would say – of “Kingdom of the Empire”.<sup>4</sup>

This political dynamic continued to persist even after the end of the Gothic-Byzantine conflict and it cannot be excluded that the Lombard entry into Italy may have been evaluated by the imperial side also in an anti-Frankish function: indeed, logic would lead us to think that, if in Byzantium (or among its Italian representatives) the need was felt to strengthen the defensive apparatus involving the Lombards and other groups of ‘barbarians’, it is because they wanted to keep at bay some threat and the only one really relevant was precisely the Frankish one.

And on this point, there is another position taken by Fabbro I disagree with. Why, I wonder, after the alleged and probable rebellion of 569/570 and the achievement of some agreement with the Empire should the Lombards ally with the Franks against Byzantium and not, rather, collaborate with Byzantium for the purposes for which they were called to Italy? Curiously, Fabbro seems to lean towards the first possibility, giving little importance to the fact that, for five years, the Lombards have incessantly attacked the Frankish territories, going as far as Arles and Avignon. Probably, they acted in Provence both to reverse the area of Frankish influence on Italy, and – perhaps – to loosen the weight of their own presence in the Italian area, allowing the Em-

4 W. Pohl (ed.): *Kingdoms of the Empire. The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*. Leiden/New York/Cologne 1997 (*The Transformation of the Roman World* 1).

pire to regain more direct control of some territories of northern Italy. Anyway, it is difficult to give definitive answers to all these questions, given the extreme elusiveness of the sources.

Fabbro's work carefully examines the evolution of the Italian situation until the beginning of the seventh century, proposing very interesting hypotheses also on the reasons and outcomes of king Agilulf's campaigns and on the formation of the duchies of Spoleto and Benevento. Even on these themes the trace that the book will leave will not be secondary. The space of a review, however, does not allow me to deal appropriately also with these problems and therefore I am going to conclude here these reflections of mine.

As I explicitly said, the volume does not find me in agreement on everything, but precisely these points of reflection and potential comparison show that we are faced with a work that never leaves indifferent, that always proposes a thought and, in many cases, does so with such acuteness as to oblige, from now on, to deal with it. After many discussions, often cloying, on the ethnic identity of the Lombards, definitively buried by the last works of Caterina Giostra<sup>5</sup> and Marco Valenti,<sup>6</sup> a study that starts from a narrative trace – apparently completely traditional – of *histoire evenementielle* has been able to re-open in an exciting and unexpected way a debate on the geopolitical dimension of the events of which the Lombards were protagonists. There was a need for a stimulus of this kind and fortunately it came.

5 C. Giostra (ed.): *Migrazioni, clan, culture. Archeologia, genetica e isotopi stabili*. Mantova 2017 (*Archeologia barbarica* 3).

6 M. Valenti: *Il barbaricum. Una periferia che si fece centro. Società, insediamento ed economia tra I e X secolo*. Mantova 2021.



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