

THE LOMBARDS' MOVE INTO ITALY

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Abstract: The present study disputes stereotypes in historical scholarship related to the Lombards' move into Italy and takes a position contrary to those common views. It calls into question the idea that the Lombards entered Italy as ruthless conquerors and holds the view that they moved into Italy from Pannonia not unlike the *foederati* in the late Roman Empire on the basis of an agreement concluded with the Romans. The author disputes the idea that King Alboin set out on this journey together with all his people in a single move in the spring of 568, and maintains on the grounds of various logistical considerations that the Lombards migrated to Italy in a number of groupings (so-called *farae*) stretched over a longer period of time and along diverse routes.

Keywords: bloody and brutal, East Roman Empire, Audoin, Alboin, Narses, fodder of a horse, caravan, *farae*

Relying mainly on the description by Paulus Diaconus, historiographical literature assesses the Lombards' move into Italy of 568 AD as the closing phase of the age of great migration and in a way as its grand final episode.¹ Unlike the Ostogoths who as *foederati* abode by the laws and values of Roman life, the Lombards arrived as conquerors whose appearance in Italy was bloody and brutal. A significant part of the middle and upper strata of Roman society lost their goods and chattels, estates, and often their lives, too. The heathen or Arian Lombards did not spare the church or the clerics, but violent and brutal as they were, they did not succeed in subjugating the whole of Italy. The bishops of Milan and Aquileia fled to areas which had remained under Byzantine rule (i.e. Ravenna, Rome, and Naples). The bloody Lombardic conquest caused a serious disruption in social and cultural development in Italy.² This disruption was, however, caused not only by military events but also by the Lombards' political, social and cultural conditions radically different from those of the population in Italy. Starting from this consideration, historical research generally interpreted the relationship between the Romans and the conquering Lombards in

¹ Rosen 2002, 19; Pohl 2007, 216-227; Pohl 2002a, 52; Curta 2006, 62-63; Wickham 1981, 28-29; Schmidinger – Enzensberger 1976, 373; Wolfram 1990 391; Postel 2004, 233-267.

² Jarnut 1982, 35; Jarnut 1993, 173-194; Hauptfeld 1983, 37-94.

a manner that the defeated world of the Romans had lost its leading stratum and, in this condition, existed separately alongside Lombardic society.³

In recent years, however, the view has been gaining ground that calls in question that the Lombards' move was indeed so brutal and resulted in boundless devastation and the leading Roman class disappeared. The centres of government, administration, religious life, industry and commerce continued to be located in Roman cities. The system of large estates invariably survived as did the organization of agricultural production as well as several aspects of the legal and cultural conditions of the late imperial period.⁴ The relationship between the Lombards and the world of Rome as well as the Lombards' move into Italy must be examined in the context of diplomatic and political relations with the East Roman Empire, which calls into question that their move into Italy entailed serious destruction and devastation. Based on the mosaic pieced together from the sources one can assume that the Lombards' move from Pannonia to Italy took place in accordance with some kind of understanding with the world of Rome.⁵ Nor can we ignore the fact that the Lombards did not make contact with the world of Rome for the first time, but they had made it long before when they occupied the land of the Rugii, i.e. Lower Austria in 488. Despite the fact that the proportion of Romanized population was no longer large there, the Lombards yet entered an area to some extent Romanized. Coexistence alongside Roman culture, civilization and social and economic environment proved long-lasting. By conquering Pannonia (527/528) they acquired further former provinces of Rome where, again, there still existed, though in fragments, the economy, society, settlement structures and the network of roads of late antiquity.⁶ As early as the 550s the Lombards had quite strong ties with the world of Rome and Byzantium. King Audoin of the Lombards sent 5500 men at arms in 552 to support the forces led by the Roman general Narses to aid Emperor Justinian in his war with the Ostogoths in Italy. The Lombards fighting for Byzantium had a decisive role in the great victory over the Goths at Bustato Gallorum in Umbria.⁷ According to Paulus Diaconus Narses „had been in alliance with the Lombards before”.⁸ This remark does, in all likelihood, refer to the fact that Emperor Justinian had contracted an alliance with the Lombards as early as 547 and conceded to them areas lying between the rivers Drava and Sava. The alliance was consolidated with an illustrious marriage.

³ Hochholzer 1956, 17.

⁴ Harrison 1993; Tabacco 1990, 691-716; Rocca 1992, 161-180.

⁵ Christie 1991, 79-108; Pohl 1996, 27-36; Pohl 1997, 75-134.

⁶ Vianello 1995, 390-391; Bóna 1974, 19.

⁷ Procop 1966, 924-925; Paulus Diaconus 2012, 84.

⁸ Paulus Diaconus 2012, 84.

The Emperor gave Rodelind, daughter of princess Amalaberga the niece of the assassinated Thuringi king Herminafried and of Theoderich „the Great”, King of the Ostogoths in marriage to the Lombardic king. Together with her daughter Amalaberga fled in 534 to Italy then under Ostogothic rules. In the course of the war she was taken prisoner by the Byzantine general Belisar and sent to Byzantion, where Justinian made her serve his political ends.⁹ Relationship with the Amal-dynasty of a distinguished, highly prestigious gothic royal lineage greatly enhanced the authority of Audoin who ascended the throne in 546 while at the same time he established a claim to Italy, for the contemporary Ostrogothic King Totila (542-552) had no relationship with the former royal dynasty.¹⁰ This circumstance is assumed to have played a role in his sending a considerably large military force (by contemporary standards) against the Goths. From this time on, the Lombardic ruling class and military may have started shaping the idea that they should move into Italy from Pannonia as the allies of the Romans not unlike the Goths had done under Theodorich’s leadership. To thousands of Lombardic warriors sent to Italy the difference between their Danubian homeland and Italy must have been striking, even though a war had been going on in Italy between Byzantinian and the Goths since 535.¹¹ The plan to move to Italy was reinforced by the fact that the Lombards had a long-standing conflict with the Gepids settled East and South of the river Tisza.¹² Subsequent to the death of Emperor Justinian (Nov. 14, 565), the new Byzantine ruler, Justinus II terminated the 20-year long treaty with the Lombards and in order to regain Sirmium (Mitrovica) decided in favour of militarily supporting the Gepids, who had been in possession of this area for three decades. In exchange for the Byzantine support they pledged to return Sirmium. In the spring of year 566 the joint Gepid-Byzantine forces pushed the Lombards out of the area between rivers Sava and Drava. Audoin’s successor, Alboin (560-572) found the situation so menacing that, through the mediation of his brother-in-law, the Frankish king Sigebert I, he concluded a military alliance with Khagan Bayan of the Avars, then staying near the Eastern borders of Thuringia. Alboin pledged one-tenth of the Lombards’ livestock to the Avars, and half of the booty and the land of the Gepids, however, did not live up to his pledge to cede Sirmium to the emperor in return for his support, thus Justinus II left the Gepids to themselves.¹³ In the spring of 567 the Lombardic forces moved across the Danube-Tisza interfluve against the Gepids settled in the Tisza re-

⁹ Giese 2004, 108.

¹⁰ Jarnut 1982, 24.

¹¹ Borgolte 2013, 301.

¹² Pohl 2002b, 193-194.

¹³ Bréhier 1997, 37.

gion, while the Avars advanced south in the direction of Sirmium. Left to themselves the Gepids suffered crushing defeat in both seats of war, the bulk of their lands getting into the hands of the Avars.¹⁴ Sirmium, however, was taken by Byzantine troops. Khagan Bayan set up a claim for the city as well as for an annual tax in return for peace. When Justinus II refused, he forced his way into Dalmatia and Thrace.¹⁵ The final push given to the plan to move to Italy was rendered by the victory over the Gepids. Alboin and the Lombardic ruling class came to the understanding that the Avars settling in the lands of the Gepids in the Eastern part of the Carpathian Basin and representing remarkable military might could well turn against the Lombards and thus might become more ominous a neighbourhood than that of the Gepids had been.¹⁶ Out of the fear that the allies might turn adversaries at any time in the future, Alboin opted for the long cherished plan of moving to Italy. Another circumstance may have also had a role in the Lombardic leaderships' decision to make this move. Because of the post-567 Byzantine-Avar war Justinus II deployed a significant part of his armed forces in the Balkans. Italy remained undefended and at the time of Gothic wars the Franks had given indication of their intent on conquest. The cities and areas that had been occupied were taken back in 562 and 563 by Narses who had disapproved of the government's withdrawal of Roman forces from the peninsula.¹⁷ Nor did he agree with the imperial government officials' intent to ruthlessly collect the taxes to offset expenses incurred by the lengthy warfare and the devastation by the plague. Even Gregory of Tours made mention of the extremely heavy taxes on the subjects by the state in his work on the history of the Franks.¹⁸ The Emperor dismissed Narses and appointed a *praefectus* in Italy. Although Paulus Diaconus attributed his dismissal to personal motives (fear, offendedness), yet he found it important to mention that Narses, the former prefect in Italy, himself had invited the Lombards into the Italian peninsula. It is, however, more likely that Narses in whose army Lombards had also been fighting, and he still regarded them as potential allies. He was afraid at the same time that due to the heavy imperial taxation resentment might undermine the power of Byzantium moreover the absence of military power might entice the Franks as well as the Avars just engaged in the Balkans to try their fortunes in Italy. Narses and the upper circles in Italy wished to make use of their former allies, the Lombards, in upholding Roman rule.¹⁹ They made steps

¹⁴ Pohl 2002a, 50-51; Bóna 1974, 81-84; Rosen 2002, 93; Jarnut 1982, 26.

¹⁵ Bréhier 1997, 37.

¹⁶ Wolfram 1990, 395-397; Pohl 2002b, 196.

¹⁷ Paulus Diaconus 2012, 85; Ewig 1993, 40-41.

¹⁸ Gregory of Tours 2010, 303-304.

¹⁹ Borgolte 2013, 307.

on their own with a view to the interests of Italy contrary to the policy of the imperial court. Given the knowledge of the late imperial period, this did not count as an extraordinary case. This circumstance rendered the final thrust for Alboin to opt for the move into Italy. The war between Byzantium and the Avars as well as the new treaty concluded with the Avars in early 568, in which Alboin ceded Pannonia to Khagan Bayan gave rise to such a state of affairs that prevented the imperial court (which had terminated the alliance) from sending troops across the Balkans against the Lombards heading towards Italy.²⁰

Based on Paulus Diaconus' chronicle there is near consensus in historical scholarship that in the spring of 568 the whole Lombardic population, together with all their goods and chattels and livestock at once set out for Italy. According to Paulus Diaconus, Alboin set out „with all his men at arms and masses of all kinds of people.”²¹ Opinions vary, however, on the question how large this wandering mass of people could have been. Some put it at a figure of 200,000²², others at a smaller figure of 150,000²³, but we also find estimates about 80-100,000 people²⁴. But whichever figure we take into account, each of them indicated a significant mass of people. Also relying on Paulus Diaconus it is quite common to think that the Lombardic invasion of Italy was quick and successful only Pavia resisting for three years. According to the early medieval chronicler, Alboin could be successful because the Romans did not have enough strength to oppose him. The war with the Goths and the subsequent visitation of the plague had taken a heavy toll of life. In the year of 568 famine hit Italy and the king of the Lombards arrived with a great number of people.²⁵ The Lombards were accompanied by Gepids, Bulgarians, Sarmatians, Pannonians, Suevi, people from Noricum, and Saxons.²⁶ Diaconus called the later Lombardic king, Agilulf (590-615) the prince of Thuringii in Turin.²⁷ As a matter of fact the Lombards had concluded a treaty with the Thuringii as early as the beginning of the 6th century because king Wacho's (510-540) first wife was the thuringi princess Radegunda.²⁸ When in 531 the Franks attacked Thuringia, king Wacho gave refuge to a number of fugitives.²⁹ But king Audoin had con-

²⁰ Jarnut 1982, 34.

²¹ Paulus Diaconus 2012, 89.

²² Wickham 1981, 65.

²³ Menghin 1985, 95; Wolfram 1990, 398.

²⁴ Jarnut 1993, 182.

²⁵ Paulus Diaconus 2012, 90, 93, 98.

²⁶ Ibid. 88, 98; Gregory of Tours 2010, 306.

²⁷ Paulus Diaconus 2012, 123.

²⁸ Hartmann 1900, 99.

²⁹ Bóna – Cseh – Nagy – Tomka – Tóth 1993, 107.

siderable Thuringi connections, because he married Rodelinda, daughter of the king Hermanafried of the Thuringii.³⁰

No matter how large the mass of people moving to Italy with Alboin was, who were said to be Lombards, they were in fact a poliethnic mass, estimated to have been around 80-100,000 individuals, it cannot be conceived to have migrated at once and all together in one crowd. According to Michael Borgolte's calculations one man at arms together with his family needed at least 60-80 sq.m. space each. If we take into account a total of 20,000 families it must have been a 100-150 km long route column or caravan.³¹ Such a long stretching column must have been rather vulnerable and hard to defend militarily. Moreover, they could advance very slowly, adjusting their speed to that of their livestock (sheep, cattle). Besides, livestock needed time to graze and in the case of cattle they had to allow time to ruminate. The daily need of fodder of a horse is 14-15 kg of green fodder and 22-23 litres of water (depending on the weather and the required performance). The size of pasture basically depended on grass quality, the season, and the weather conditions. (It is not by chance that Alboin – according to Paulus Diaconus – set out in this long journey in April right after Easter in 568³²). One horse needed 6-8 hours of grazing a day. One head of cattle needed even longer. For this reason a migrating caravan was not able to cover more than 12-20 kms a day. We are not in possession of exact information on what the size of Lombards' livestock was but if we consider the daily provisions needed from the point of view of the horses, it must have been logistically impossible for a mass of 80-100,000 people or more to move in one huge unit. 1,000 horses graze a 25 ha area a day and one must reckon with a large quantity of water as well.³³ In all likelihood the Lombards had a much more sizeable livestock than 1,000 horses so neither a commensurate extent of pasture, nor a commensurate amount of water supplied by streams were available along the route from Pannonia to Italy. A population that numbered 100,000 people only managed to move along separate routes in separate groups or units in consecutive stages, spread over some time and reach a land several hundred kilometres away. One such migrating column may have numbered just a few hundred or thousand individuals.³⁴ The migrants were usually organized around a respectable family or a leader of high prestige along the logic of military retinue. Their name, the *faræ* unequivocally reflected the migratory formations (cf. German *fahren*). All this implies also that the Lombardic kings did

³⁰ Vianello 1995, 394.

³¹ Borgolte 2013, 296.

³² Paulus Diaconus 2012, 89.

³³ Haldon 2006, 142, 144-145; Torma 2013, 167-188; here quoted: 163-170.

³⁴ Heather 2011, 17; Halsall: 2007, 418; Wolfram 2004, 11.

not claim such divine birth as did the Frankish Merovingians, the Balts among the Visigoths or the Amals with the Ostrogoths.³⁵ The Lombards' legend of ancestry did not attribute divine origin to any one of their kings, but the deity Wotan was the leader of the whole people, *gens* which regarded themselves as chosen by Wotan itself. Consequently, they chose their leaders on the basis of their military excellence³⁶ resulting in no long-reigning royal dynasties with exclusive lineage in their historical tradition. This may explain why there emerged no hitch in legitimacy when Wachi killed his uncle in 510 and ascended the throne or when Audoin, a member of a new clan, the Gausus House,³⁷ replaced the Lething clan. Royal power thus remained a military kingdom based on the logic of the organization of military retinue which a successful commander, a warrior with great feats of arms or the head of an illustrious clan with sufficient armed support could challenge at any time. The history of the Lombards in Italy offers several examples of this.

The Lombards, therefore, did not move to Italy in one push, in the form of a single incursion but, more plausibly, in several waves. The expressions *omnis exercitus* and *omnis gens* occurring in the sources can rather be regarded as tropes than statements of fact. Not everybody migrated to Italy subsequent to 568, many remained in Pannonia. The treaty concluded with the Avars may have been concluded mainly for just this reason namely that they moved from Pannonia only gradually, while those who wished to stay could live in peace under the authority of the Khagan of the Avars. The memory of Lombardic presence in Pannonia is preserved in the legend recorded by Paulus Diaconus that Alboin had ceded Pannonia to Khagan Bayan on condition that the Avars were obliged to aid the Lombards for 200 years and permit their return there for the same length of time.³⁸

Owing to the opposition of the Roman and Gothic populations in Italy to Byzantium rooted in the Emperor's taxation policy as well as in the plague, Alboin and the warriors in his retinue met with easy success. The tidings about it carried remarkable incentive for those staying in Pannonia to set out on the journey. The migration to Italy taking place in several stages, while also reinforcing each other had lasted for nearly two decades before the Lombardic realm took its final shape under king Authari in 584.³⁹ Unlike the successful kings of other Germanic peoples, Alboin's success in Italy did not strengthen the power of the royal family (himself was assassinated by his own men at

³⁵ Wolfram 2004, 6.

³⁶ Paulus Diaconus 2012, 55, 59-65.

³⁷ Vianello 1995, 390, 395.

³⁸ Paulus Diaconus 2012, 88.

³⁹ Borgolte 2013, 308; Goetz, 1975, 42.

arms), but it enticed other groupings to the peninsula, whose leaders were looking for a realm of their own, seeking their own position of authority. The Lombardic princes mentioned in contemporary sources were essentially leaders of such military groupings who followed their own interests when they moved from Northern Italy on to Central and Southern Italy or they looked for booty in Burgundy and Provence under Frankish rule.⁴⁰ According to Paulus Diaconus the ethnic groups that arrived in Italy with Alboin settled down in separate villages and retained their ethnic autonomy. As a matter of fact, there still are in Lombardy 5 settlements named "Gepida", 6 named "Bulgaro", 1 named "Sarmata", 7 named "Suevo", 8 named "Goto", 1 named "Alano" and 1 named "Avaro".⁴¹ There used to be names of settlements among them which attested to having been established prior to the Lombards. By the name „Bulgaro" the contemporaries actually meant Huns, but the inhabitants of „Alano" may have got into Italy one and a half century earlier. The village said to be Sarmatian had also existed before 568 and had been attached to the auxiliary units of the Roman military.⁴² The Saxons, Gepids, Suevi and people from Pannonia and Noricum or a few separate groups of Avars may have arrived with separate Lombardic columns that set out at subsequent times. But it even occurred as late as the 7th century that the Lombardic kingdom received a migratory group. At the time of King Grimould (662-671), Bulgarians did actually arrive in Italy under the leadership of a certain Alzecc and they were settled in the South.⁴³ The migratory Lombardic and other ethnic groupings moving in each other's footsteps and also reinforcing each other found a Roman society in which the Byzantine-Gothic war and the subsequent Byzantine regime had caused serious disorders and rendered it vulnerable. This may well explain why Roman traditions in Lombardic Italy were rather frail, rather than explained by the expulsion or brutal annihilation of the Roman ruling class. The Lombardic rule in Italy itself was also made precarious for a long time (572-584) by the endless series of columns *farae* and their princes that made long-term consolidation of political power and daily life impossible.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Junes 2007, 244-245; Rosen 2002, 94; On the Lombardic principalities see Giese, 2002, 46-59.

⁴¹ Menghin 1985, 95, 188.

⁴² Borgolte 2013, 305-306.

⁴³ Paulus Diaconus 2012, 164.

⁴⁴ Delogu 2004, 39.

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