

Carolingian frontiers: Italy and beyond.

An introduction

by Stefano Gasparri

In this short introduction, I will cover two topics. The first is a presentation of the research project on Lothar's rule in Italy, which is behind the conference from which this volume originated. The second is a brief discussion of the way in which the problem of the early medieval frontier has been dealt with in Italian historiography, accompanied by an equally brief focus on the concept of frontier, which has been further developed by historians over the last thirty years, starting with the work of Charles Whittaker.

High Middle Ages; *regnum Italiae*; Italian peripheries; Lothar; Carolingian rule; early medieval frontiers.

The present volume is the fruit of a conference held in Venice in April 2022, sponsored by the PRIN project *Ruling in hard times. Patterns of power and practices of government in the making of Carolingian Italy*. The focus of the project is most specifically on the long period of Lothar's rule in Italy, but it is also interested in the whole of Carolingian Italy, a topic that has long been neglected in the historiography until recently. However, between 2016 and 2018 there were three conferences, two in Vienna and one in Trento, the first of a very general nature, while the other two were focused on the important reign of Pippin; all three have finally shifted the focus towards the role that

Stefano Gasparri, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy, gasparri@unive.it, 0000-0002-1374-504X

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Italy played within the Carolingian world¹. As a result, even within German historiography – as in the very recent book by Paul Predatsch – the results of Eduard Hlawitschka's old book, which had totally devalued the original contribution of Italian society, suggesting the complete replacement (*die Enttausschung*) of the Lombard ruling class and the full “frankisation” of Italy, are now being questioned².

The Venetian conference focused on the areas which made up the periphery of the kingdom of Italy during the Carolingian period, particularly during the reign of Lothar I and Louis II. Actually, studying Carolingian Italy means dealing with the entire complexity of its territorial framework, which goes far beyond the direct domination of the Carolingian rulers. The latter had inherited the situation of their predecessors, the Lombard kings, who had never succeeded in exercising complete control over Italy, although they had come very close, particularly with Aistulf, after the capture of Ravenna and before Pippin's wars³. The Frankish intervention then changed everything.

These peripheral zones were centred around two main areas. The first was traditional Byzantine Italy: the duchy of Venice and its Lagoon, Istria, Ravenna and the old Exarchate, Rome and its duchy⁴; while the second was the *Langobardia Minor*, with its own Lombard political tradition⁵. Carolingian political strategies varied with regard to these two areas, which belonged only in part to the *Regnum*, but were strongly connected to it⁶.

Of course, the Carolingians had many more means to cope with the situation than the Lombard kings: an undisputed military supremacy, together with a now marginal presence of Byzantine authorities, if we exclude Sicily, and, above all, the support and alliance with the Church of Rome. However, a true unification of Italy under the authority of the Carolingians was never achieved. This means that the different areas which were not fully – or not at all – part of the kingdom continued to develop societies with their own characteristics, partly different from those of the area under direct Carolingian control⁷. Even within the latter, there was a difference (as a recent book by Igor Santos Salazar has shown) between Carolingian Lombardy, which was the core of the *Regnum*, and other areas south of the Po⁸. The impact of Carolingian rule on regions like Tuscia and the duchy of Spoleto was slower to

¹ *Carolingian Italy and its Rulers in the Ninth century: Was there a Carolingian Italy?* (Vienna, April 2016; the conference proceedings are published in *After Charlemagne*); *Spes Italiae. Il regno di Pipino, i Carolingi e l'Italia (781-810)* (Trento, November 2016); and *Pippin's Königreich. Die Karolinger und Italien* (Vienna, November 2017). The proceedings of these two latest conferences are in press.

² Predatsch, *Migration im karolingischen Italien*; Hlawitschka, *Franken, Alemannen, Bayern und Burgunder*.

³ Gasparri, *Italia longobarda*.

⁴ West-Harling, *Rome, Ravenna and Venice*.

⁵ Zornetta, *Italia meridionale longobarda*.

⁶ Gasparri, *The Government of a Peripheral Area*.

⁷ Gasparri, *The Dawn of Carolingian Italy*.

⁸ Santos Salazar, *Governare la Lombardia carolingia*.

make itself felt, and more difficult to assess. In those areas, also the appearance of migrants from north of the Alps during the ninth century happened later than in Northern Italy.

Moreover, in Central Italy, the longest-lived Byzantine areas, the Roman duchy and the Exarchate of Ravenna, maintained an ambiguous position within the overall framework of the kingdom. In the case of Rome, the relations of Carolingian power with the city were made more complex on account of the role of the papacy. Rome had more points of convergence with Ravenna than with the rest of the kingdom. The urban landscape of the two cities shared a visible Roman past; also common to both cities was the use of late Roman titles as *consul* or *dux*, or the vocabulary relating to the leases of land or to the properties. Rome and Ravenna also had much in common (for example the titles of honour or offices) with Venice, which, however, not only had no Roman past, but in the ninth century was not yet a city; its position in respect to the Carolingian government was also quite different from those of Rome and Ravenna⁹.

Indeed, the duchy of Venice, together with Lombard Southern Italy, the *Longobardia minor*, was one of the two areas that were most alien to Carolingian power. The small Venetian duchy, which had almost no territory on the mainland, was under the constant control of Byzantium, which was connected to it by sea. This situation created the premises for the only direct confrontation between the Franks and Byzantium following the Carolingian conquest of Italy, because in the Northeast of Italy the Carolingians attempted to govern in a unified way the whole area from the Po plain to the Adriatic coast, a strategy clearly related to the area's political importance (for its links with Byzantium), commercial role (in terms of maritime and river trade) and military position (on the Slavic frontier). However, Byzantium remained in control of the Adriatic Sea and of Venice, with the exception of the years 806-807, when Charlemagne summoned to Aachen the leaders of the Venetian duchy and those of Dalmatia, with the ambition of subduing them and thus assuming control of the Adriatic, and the years 809-810, when Pippin militarily occupied the duchy, albeit for a very short time. This state of affairs was confirmed by the Peace of Aachen (812). Charles had to be content with the unstable control of Istria¹⁰.

The second, much larger, area remaining outside the direct Carolingian domain was the ancient semi-autonomous duchy of Benevento, which resisted the attacks by the Franks by allying itself with its ancient Byzantine enemies, and by creating a new political system, no longer subordinate to the king of Pavia, which was sanctioned by Arichis II's assumption of the title of prince after 774. During the first years of the ninth century, the principality of

⁹ West-Harling, *Rome, Ravenna and Venice*, and Brown, *A Byzantine Cuckoo in the Frankish Nest?*

¹⁰ Gasparri, *The First Dukes and the Origins of Venice*, pp. 5-26, and Gasparri, *The Origins of Venice*, pp. 98-110.

Benevento was, however, progressively drawn into the Carolingian orbit, even if its recognition of the authority of the Frankish king or emperor was always very ambiguous and subject to frequent crises, as it was seen blatantly in 871 when prince Adelchis II captured emperor Louis II¹¹.

In such a complex political and territorial framework, the theme of frontiers immediately comes to scholarly attention. Before addressing this topic, it should be however useful to stress some general points. The very concept of frontier, or border, is not a neutral one, from a historical point of view. As Lucien Febvre had shown many decades ago, the idea of a military frontier, of a linear type, does not predate the nineteenth century¹². It is the offspring of the national states, then applied by French and British imperialism over a century ago to colonial possessions in Asia and Africa, where linear frontiers, resting or not on natural elements, were drawn. These frontiers, by dividing ancient tribal territories, are at the root of many of the ethnic tragedies of the contemporary world. It was the idea of a defensive line that held back beyond it the indistinct and dangerous tide of barbarism. As lucidly explained by Charles Whittaker about thirty years ago, this concept was applied by historians to the Roman empire: the Romans would have identified the great rivers Rhine and Danube as their limits for the same reasons that guided the European states: because they were natural, linear and military borders, and at the same time were a symbol of conquest, an assertion of dominance over barbarism. Such was the Roman ideology, which fitted well with that of European imperialism¹³.

On the contrary, we owe the idea of the Roman empire as an open space, potentially in movement, to the United States, which were literally shaped by the frontier: the reference is obviously to the late-nineteenth-century famous frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, but also (and above all) to Walter Prescott Webb, who wrote in 1931 that a frontier is not «a line to stop at, but an area inviting entrance». According to his view, the border was a place where ethnic and cultural mixing took place, producing new social realities¹⁴. This same concept of permeable frontier could be applied to the Roman borders of the very late period, where – despite the existence of the *limes* – relations between Romans and barbarians were intense and brought together two worlds that were in no way clearly distinct from one another, creating new communities. In this way, the issue about the ethnic identities intertwines with the study of borders; as Florin Curta has written, «one of the most fascinating aspects of the current state of research is the study of political frontiers

¹¹ See above, note 5, and Thomas, *Jeux lombards*.

¹² Febvre, *Il Reno*.

¹³ Whittaker, *Les frontières de l'Empire romain*. This issue is developed in Pohl, *Soziale Grenzen*, pp. 11-18, and in Curta, *Introduction*, pp. 1-9.

¹⁴ Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (Turner's thesis was presented for the first time in 1893); Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*.

as key elements in the *creation*, as opposed to *separation*, of ethnic groups»¹⁵. To quote Walter Pohl: «boundaries do not “naturally” exist between peoples and states, between social groups and religious confessions»; this is «the new paradigm in the study of frontiers»¹⁶.

It is therefore necessary to be aware of the ways in which the idea of the linear frontier in its various forms (limit of civilisation, military barrier, natural-geographical element) arose in order to address the problem of frontiers, even on the relatively small scale of Carolingian Italy. In this perspective, how Italian historiography dealt with the problem of early medieval frontiers?

Despite its political complexity, in the Early Middle Ages the Italian territory was not divided by natural and/or artificial militarily manned barriers. In Italy, there is only one trace of such a border in the Alpine area, where it was based on the remains of the ancient *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes* of the late Roman period, described in the *Notitia Dignitatum*¹⁷. The first certain mention of the existence of border territories in the Alpine area, identified as such by royal powers, dates back to the Lombard period, in the two famous chapters of the laws of Ratchis and Aistulf, in which the two Lombard kings established, in the wake of the conflict with the Franks, strict rules to control the movement of people entering the kingdom¹⁸. The military and perhaps even more psychological importance of the Alpine frontier is also stressed by Notker the Stammerer, who, one hundred years later the breakthrough made by Charlemagne's army at the *clusae* of Susa Valley in the autumn of 773, still wrote that «only a wall» (*una macheria*) divided the Italians from the Franks: it were the remains of the ancient *Tractus*¹⁹.

This statement needs to be downgraded. The *clusae* represented punctual rather than linear boundaries, they were «Grenzen als Punkte», as defined by Walter Pohl, who pointed out that this was a typical situation in Italy²⁰. The network of castles in Friuli mentioned by Paul the Deacon, on the occasion of the Avar raid in 611, should be interpreted in the same way. Despite the incorrect name of *Langobardische Limes* sometimes given to it by the historiography, it was not a fortified linear defense system, but a system of in depth-defense, aiming to control the passage from the Alps to the Friulan plains, through fortified points (*castra*) located far inland in the Lombard territory²¹.

Nevertheless, the Alpine area remains an exception. Within Italy, the frontiers have long been sought in vain by historians and archaeologists. The classic example comes from one of the most famous theories of Lombard

¹⁵ Curta, *Introduction*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Pohl, *Frontiers and Ethnic Identities*, pp. 255-265, cit. p. 265.

¹⁷ Settia, *Le frontiere del regno italico*, pp. 155-169.

¹⁸ Gasparri, *La frontiera in Italia*, pp. 9-19; Pohl, *Frontiers in Lombard Italy*, pp. 117-141.

¹⁹ Notker the Stammerer, *Gesta Karoli Magni* I, 24.

²⁰ Pohl, *Soziale Grenzen*, p. 16.

²¹ Štih, *Die Ostgrenze Italiens*; Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum*, IV, 37, p. 129.

historiography, that of the *arimanniae*. It originated more than a hundred years ago, and later developed in a contradictory way by Gian Piero Boggetti. This theory postulated the existence of particular military settlements, the *arimanniae*: i.e. colonies of Lombard warriors, called *arimanni*, placed by the king on fiscal land, on the borders but also within the kingdom, in every area of strategic value, for garrisoning and defence purposes. According to this theory, traces of *arimanniae* could still be found in the Carolingian and post-Carolingian periods. Today it is well known, from the studies of Giovanni Tabacco, that this theory had no real documentary evidence, based as it was exclusively on misinterpretations of very late sources. Italy was never dotted with military frontiers manned by the Lombard *arimanni*, opposed to the equally imaginary fortified garrisons of the Byzantines²².

On the basis of this erroneous reading of the sources (and with a superficial use of toponomastic data), Italian historiography has multiplied military frontiers within Italy, wherever Lombard and Byzantine territories bordered each other, towards the Venetian plain, towards Byzantine Liguria, the Exarchate, or in Southern Italy, in search of strategic motivations even where they lacked any plausibility²³. Frontiers and borders were identified everywhere²⁴. However, most of these reconstructions did not go beyond the Lombard period. This is due to the fact that Italian historians (and archaeologists) have always thought of the frontier as linear, because it had to separate civilisation and savagery, i.e. the Italo-Byzantines (heirs of the Romans) from the Lombards. According to this reasoning, when the Franks replaced the Lombards, the linear frontier was no longer needed and therefore it essentially disappeared from historical narrative (that also was the only place where it existed).

Today we have overcome these incorrect interpretations. Therefore, we can examine Italy's internal and external borders, be they political, economic or cultural, without preconceptions, to try to establish whether they have contributed to the creation of real frontier societies. All these problems should, of course, be treated always bearing in mind similarities and differences with what happened outside Italy, in the North, East or West of the Carolingian world. Which is what, albeit in a limited way, we have precisely tried to do in this volume.

²² Tabacco, *I liberi del re*, and Gasparri, *La questione degli arimanni*, pp. 121-153.

²³ Classical examples of this kind of historiography are two essays by Fasoli: *Tracce di insediamenti longobardi*, pp. 303-315, and *Inizio di un'indagine sugli stanziamenti longobardi*, pp. 3-12. More recent examples: Magno, *Il limes di Serravalle*, pp. 783-807; Stranieri, *Un limes bizantino nel Salento?*, pp. 333-355. For a correct framing of these problems: Settia, *L'alto medioevo ad Alba*, pp. 23-55, who effectively criticizes the existence of a Byzantine *limes* between southern Piedmont and Liguria.

²⁴ Gasparri, *I Germani immaginari*, pp. 3-28.

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Stefano Gasparri
gasparri@unive.it
Università degli Studi Ca' Foscari Venezia