

Preface

by Giuseppe Albertoni, Manuel Fauliri, Leonardo Sernagiotto

This short preface is divided into two parts. The first aims to recall the research project *Ruling in hard times. Patterns of power and practices of government in the making of Carolingian Italy*, to which this volume belongs. The second part recalls the epistemological principles common to the various essays and, in particular, highlights an aspect that characterises them: the desire to move away from a stereotypical opposition between local elites and the “transalpine” *Reichsaristokratie* that has long dominated the study of Carolingian Italy.

Middle Ages; ninth century; Carolingian Italy; emperor Lothar I; elite; aristocracy.

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This volume collects the proceedings of a conference held at the Department of Humanities of the University of Trento from 13 to 15 October 2022 as part of the initiatives of the PRIN 2017 project *Ruling in hard times. Patterns of power and practices of government in the making of Carolingian Italy*. This was a project structured in four units that operated at the Universities of Trento, Padua, Venice Ca' Foscari and the Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa. Each of them developed lines of research on some specific aspects, that were the basis of five conferences, the proceedings of which are published in the series in which this volume is also included: the “memory” of the Gothic kingdom in Carolingian Italy; the role of the bishops and the texts related to them in the networks of which they were part; the political and social dynamics that characterised the border areas; the elites of the kingdom and their networks between centre and periphery; Lothar I and his actions as a ruler¹.

The study of the elites of Carolingian Italy and their networks has been the main focus of the activities of the Trento unit, but given its central importance, it has also involved many members of the other units. We wanted to involve them in the conference, the proceedings of which we are now publishing, together with those who, although not part of our research project, have been in close dialogue with it since its inception. Among the latter, we can count François Bougard, to whom we entrusted a difficult task, which he carried out in the keynote speech he gave at the opening of the 2022 Conference in Trento, and which has now been revised in the opening essay of this volume². This task is summarised in a question that is simple in its formulation, but complex in its answer: what did it mean to be aristocratic in Carolingian Italy at the time of Lothar I?

With this question, which is in fact the basis of all the essays collected in this volume, we wanted first of all to put a time limit on the research presented at the conference, choosing a historical phase of Carolingian rule in Italy that has not been studied in depth, even in recent research, which has concentrated above all on the age of Charlemagne or on the second half of the ninth century³. One of the reasons for this historiographical “misfortune” of Lothar I’s reign is certainly its complexity and political and institutional ambiguity, which stem from the very difficulty of defining Lothar’s role in Italy. In fact, he was associated with the imperial title by his father Louis the Pious, but he is never defined in the sources as *rex Italiae* or *rex Langobardorum*, unlike his predecessors and successors⁴.

¹ The following volumes have been published: Oppedisano, *Between Ostrogothic and Carolingian Italy*; De Angelis, Veronese, *Networks of bishops*; Betti, Borri, Gasparri, *Carolingian frontiers*; Albertoni, De Angelis, Gasparri, Oppedisano, *Ruling in hard times* (forthcoming).

² Bougard, *Being an aristocrat in the kingdom of Italy in the age of Lothar I* (in this volume).

³ See, for example, Gantner, Pohl, *After Charlemagne* and Albertoni, Borri, *Spes Italiae*. Even in Schäpers, *Lothar I.*, the peculiarities of the political organisation of Italy during the reign of Lothar I, although present, are not explored in depth.

⁴ On these aspects, see Sernagiotto, *Spes optima regni*, p. 243.

“Sovereign” at the head of a *regnum* without *rex* and co-emperor, always in a situation of subordination or conflict with his father, Lothar was never permanently present in Italy, where he made his debut in 822 under the tutelage of Wala, Charlemagne’s influential cousin. Wala had previously been at the side of King Bernard, whose deposition and death after the “revolt” of 817 had allowed Lothar to assume the political leadership of the former *regnum Langobardorum*, after having been king of Bavaria (*rex Baiuariae*) for a few years.⁵

The political ambiguity of Lothar I’s role in Italy was also due to his intermittent presence, which – before his father’s death – was marked by five phases, all of them of short duration, except for the last, which ended in 840 with the death of Louis the Pious and the re-emergence of the conflict with his brothers (822-823; 824-825; 829-830; 831-833; 834-840). It is precisely the intermittent nature of his presence which has, in the past, led to the idea that he was a kind of “foreign body” in the political dynamics of the kingdom, whose ruling class would have been made up of “transalpine immigrants”, with minimal involvement of the local elites⁶. Lothar’s long absences from Italy and the lack of effective central control in Italy were also seen as the cause of a deterioration in the social situation on the peninsula. In this context, the great secular and ecclesiastical aristocracies would have taken advantage of the lack of central power to strengthen their position at the local level, enriching themselves at the expense of the royal fisc and weakening the “middle class” of free men⁷.

But was it really so? Based on an analysis of the lexicon of sources and some case studies, the essays collected here have attempted to reconstruct the forms of political and social prominence and the networks that linked – or opposed – those who, at different levels, exercised forms of power and control over people and territories. These networks could be based on kinship, on different kinds of loyalty, including vassalage, on the exchange of goods and property, on shared lifestyles, and on royal *Königsnähe*⁸. Depending on their nature, these networks could extend from the centre of the kingdom – Pavia or the main royal courts (*curtes*) – to the periphery, or they could be local. These, too, could be of various types, depending on the “pivot” around which they revolved: bishops, abbots or abbesses, counts, major or minor public officials, simple landowners.

⁵ On the context of this dramatic “transition”, see Patzold, *Zwischen Gerichtsurteil und politischem Mord*.

⁶ See for example Hlawitschka, *Franken*. Among the recent challenges to this paradigm within a renewed historiographical perspective on the concept of immigration, see Predatsch, *Migration*.

⁷ See for example Fumagalli, *Storia d’Italia*, pp. 26-29; Delogu, *Lombard and Carolingian Italy*, pp. 304-310 and Marrocchi, *Lotario I*.

⁸ For a recent analysis of the role played by the *Königsnähe* in the context of studies on the elites, see Patzold, *Integration durch Kommunikation*, pp. 199-200.

In order to do justice to this diversity, but at the same time to study cases that would remain comparable, we have chosen a title for the conference and for this volume that, at first sight, may appear contradictory in the terminology we have used. In fact, the concepts of aristocracy and elite appear in it, which, as François Bougard well reconstructs in the essay that opens our volume, have often been juxtaposed with each other in recent historiography⁹. It is precisely because we are aware of the importance of this debate that we have decided to use both terms in order better to describe the social structure that characterised Carolingian Italy during Lothar's reign, notably by stripping the concept of "aristocracy" of any historical-legal value, obviously anachronistic for this historical phase, and using it in a relational sense to define the highest levels of the elites.

Furthermore, by referring to "elites and social dynamics" in the subtitle, we wanted to emphasise the context in which we were working: the various forms of social prominence. As far as early medieval Italy is concerned, Simone Collavini summarised these forms a few years ago, using a series of indicators that could be political, such as the offices held or the presence in court; social, such as parental relationships and clientelist ties; or patrimonial, such as land ownership distributed over a specific territory¹⁰. Based on these assumptions, he identified four forms of social and political prominence that belonged to the local or village elites; to the city elites; to the regional and supra-regional elites; and finally, to those who operated at the royal court and who were mostly composed of "transalpine immigrants". Following the proposal of Collavini and other scholars¹¹, the authors of the essays collected in this volume have attempted to investigate all four of these levels of social prominence, which can be traced back to the common concept of elite, reserving the concept of "aristocracy" for the highest level, fundamental in the management of the kingdom but also in forging bonds and relationships with local, village or city elites.

To make this choice clear, we have divided the essays in the book into two sections. We have called the first *Acting as aristocrats, aspiring to aristocracy* because in it we have analysed the political and social profile of those we can define as "aristocrats" according to what has been said above, identifying the elements of distinction – in some cases already possessed, in others "aspired to" – in social practices such as writing, property management, the exercise of public office or relations with churches and monasteries.

The second section, on the other hand, is entitled *Aristocratic networks between centre and peripheries*, as it investigates a number of case studies that allow us to understand how local elites connected with the regional or

⁹ See Bougard, *Being an aristocrat*, to which we also refer the reader for more detailed bibliographical references. See also Airlie, *Aristocracy*; Bougard, Feller, Le Jan, *Les élites*; Bougard, Bühner-Thierry, Le Jan, *Les élites*; Patzold, *Integration durch Kommunikation*, pp. 198-201.

¹⁰ Collavini, *Spazi politici*, p. 328.

¹¹ See, for example Cortese, *L'aristocrazia* and Tomei, *Milites elegantes*.

supra-regional aristocracy. This happens from two different perspectives. In some cases, the authors of the essays started from the “centre” or the “top”, reconstructing the strategies of important aristocratic family groups towards local societies. In other cases, however, the analysis of local “small worlds” – rural and urban¹² – has been favoured, trying to reconstruct how their elites sought to establish links with the aristocracy “close to the king”, even beyond the borders of the kingdom if necessary, or to aspire to social advancement thanks to the possibilities offered by the various forms of connection with the *Reichsaristokratie*. Finally, by studying the cases of cities on the borders or outside the Carolingian empire, such as Ravenna, Rome and Benevento, we have tried to understand, from a comparative point of view, how their elites, often linked to particular political models, were similar or different from those of Carolingian Italy in Lothar’s time. Taking all these aspects into account, we hope that the essays collected in this volume will reveal a kind of web connecting the different levels of elites in the age of Lothar, a web that has often remained invisible.

¹² For their definition see Davis, *Small worlds* and Zeller, West, Tinti et al., *Neighbours and strangers*, pp. 1-18.

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