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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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The Lombards, a completely different story

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 Lombards, Paul the Deacon, post-classical history

Who were the Lombards really? The barbarian enemies of the Pope and Charlemagne or the true inventors of European culture? An interpretation that is particularly relevant to current concerns.

Paul. Paul the Deacon.

If there is a single name that can sum up on its own the story of the Lombards, it's his. And not only because he was the wonderful and tragic bard of their people. No. It is already in his name, and then in his life, that we find summed up everything the Lombards ever were and maybe even what they could have been.

Paul, the son of Warnefrit and Theodolinda, and the grandson of Leupichis from Cividale del Friuli. It is from here that we must begin, with this son of a noble barbarian family who is baptised as a Catholic and given a Roman name, if we are to understand the mindset of this people, so ephemeral in our imagination that even today we still tend to consider them a parenthesis, an incident along the way. Whereas actually...

But let us return to Paul. At the time of his birth, Cividale is in its full splendour. Duke Ratchis is about to become King of the Lombards. He has married a Roman noblewoman, Tassia, who will be the first non-barbarian sovereign since the Roman Empire's demise. We know little of her, but we do know that at his court, her husband adopts Roman customs: he is addressed as *princeps* and writes his documents in a literary Latin that is anything but barbaric. Cividale is a jewel of a town: it is Lombard, because in Roman times it was hardly anything at all, but it is a town, because the Lombards are by now a decidedly urban people. They have a court, and if in the cathedral the altar of Ratchis still has some barbaric motifs, the little temple of the palace, where the court goes to pray, is so exquisitely classical in its forms and decoration, that for many centuries it was believed that they could not have built it. The Lombards, that is.

It is here in Cividale that Paul - "the crown jewel of his people" as a student of his describes him in an epitaph - is educated. In fact, he is a man of culture, deeply immersed in classical literature. To the extent that his Latin will remain one of the most beautiful of the Middle Ages, and as a writer he can comfortably rival a Livy. But his success is attributable to his being, in the depths of his soul, a true Lombard.

If in his *Historia Langobardorum* he is able to accurately portray his people, with all of its contradictions, it is because these contradictions are also his own. Proud and stubborn, he does not shy away from being gruff when needed. Even brutal. If Tacitus praised the ancient Germanic peoples because he had recognised in them certain echoes of the ancient Romans, he would have liked the Lombards, because they were just that: barbaric, the most barbaric of them all. A horde of armed bands, of carts and families that descended from the frigid and inhospitable north like a divine punishment, after the Goths and Byzantines had been fighting each other for decades. It is perhaps the Byzantines who first give them their name, but the first image of the Lombards that Paul gives us is particularly telling. It is the sight of their king, Alboin, climbing to the top of a mountain near the Italian border (Mount Pelsa, maybe), and looking down with avid eyes at the land he is about to conquer.

Land. For the Lombards, it is an obsession. They have wandered for generations without finding peace and now they have finally found it here, within arm's reach: a rich land where they could settle and put down roots. They are not merely passing by: they are looking for a place to finally and definitively possess, a place that they could call home. It is with this spirit that they conquer Italy, and it is for this reason that they settle and adapt to it so quickly.

Alboin dies almost immediately afterwards, eliminated by a conspiracy led by his wife and her lover, who then however kill each other, with the support of a Byzantine exarch. Chaos erupts amidst the dukes. But already just twenty years later, Authari, who has become king, is no longer merely the leader of a quarrelsome pack of barbarians: in his mind, he has a clear idea of a country with borders. He traverses the peninsula, conquering Spoleto and Benevento, and descends all the way down to Calabria, where, touching with his spear a submerged ancient column on the shore, he declares that to be the border of his kingdom.

It is the idea of Italy, extending from the Alps to the sea, which had previously been Roman

and would later be that of Petrarch, protected from the Teutonic fury by its mountains. It is no longer the fury of the Lombards, however, but that of all other barbarians. Not only does Authari consider himself King of Italy, but he takes the Roman name *Flavius*, following in the footsteps of Theodoricus, but most importantly of Constantine.

Rome and the Lombards. If they are at odds with the Pope, it is because they feel that the Eternal City is also theirs: after all, the peninsula, if cut in half and without Rome, simply does not make sense. And if they clash with the Pope it is because in their minds they are the legitimate heirs of the Romans, and the Pope is one of their bishops. In our historical imagination, retouched as it is by the victorious Franks, it is Charlemagne who is the only possible emperor of the Western Empire, the one who reworks the Roman concept of empire and proclaims himself its heir. But before him, as an alternative and a competitor, there were the Lombards.

It is a queen of theirs, the beautiful Theodolinda, who revives the pomp of Roman empresses, picking husbands who become kings, and whom she courts in the manner of Sharon Stone. Wife of the Arian Authari, she converts to Catholicism, thereby forging yet another link with her Latin subjects, and has a diadem forged for her which for centuries would crown the King of Italy. Within it lies a nail of the Cross, originally found by Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine, and given to Theodolinda personally by the Pope. If this isn't a passing of the torch, I don't know what is. Her daughter, Gundeberga, also turns out to be a great elector of kings. Her second husband is Rothari, Duke of Brescia, who writes the famous edict, the first unique act of legislation concerning the subjects of the realm, who are no longer divided into barbarians and Latins, as in the time of Theodoric the Goth, but are now all under a common law.

Therein we find the turning point of the Lombards: at a certain moment there is no longer a 'they' but only a 'we'. This represents a transition that the Goths were unable to achieve, and that the Franks would not have

succeeded in accomplishing on their own either. But the Lombards did. And thus, families intermingle and a language is born that the Greeks would call a *koinè*, but because they're barbarians, they don't know how to call it: they create it and that's all. They don't think of calling themselves emperors because they're interested in Italy and they live in a time when there is still only one Emperor, and that is the Byzantine one. But their habits, their customs, and even their mode of thought have all become Romanised. And the peninsula is the land to which they belong, as Leupichis, Paul's grandfather, makes clear when, having been taken prisoner by the Avars, he does all he can to return to his native Cividale, partly because he wouldn't have known where else to go.

They are no longer barbarians, no longer strangers, nor even temporary or intruding: they have laid the foundation for a common culture that the Franks will later spread. And if Paul, throughout his life, can live equally well in Cividale, Como, Pavia, or with Arechis and Adalperga in Benevento, or else at the Monastery of Cassino, feeling at home everywhere he goes, it is because he is Lombard not only in the sense of belonging to that *koinè* but of being one of its creators. Even when he is kept prisoner at the court of the Franks, after the reign's fall, and must stay there, unable to leave, despite being treated as an honoured guest, he remains a Lombard and therefore a bearer of culture. He comes from Italy and

in him the last strains of Roman civilisation converge, attracting admiration at the court of Charlemagne, who wishes to ennoble himself.

In our minds, the 'true' Middle Ages begin with the Franks, because it is the age of paladins, feudalism, castles, and crusades; this is the medieval period characteristic of folk tales, in which the good Charlemagne with his great white beard is a hero somewhere midway between Garibaldi and Santa Claus. Before, there is the dusk of Late Antiquity and the Dark Ages of the barbarians, and that's where the Lombards are, fumbling around in the dark of indeterminacy. In truth, like our good Paul, they have travelled a parabolic path, starting off as ferocious conquerors and ending as a cultivated, but defeated people. They continue to live in that land, Italy, between the Alps and the sea, which was theirs, merging with the Latins who are now their equals.

The Franks emerged victorious and conquered all of Europe along with the credit for many of the Lombards' innovations: the recuperation of Rome's legacy, the notion that the inhabitants of the new empire, independently of their ethnical origin, are all equal and subordinate to a new greater order. The Lombards had reigned for two-hundred years, but sometimes, reading a history book where they are confined to a transitional chapter, we don't even realise it. For two hundred years. Longer than the Franks lasted, you know.

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