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LINGUE, SCRITTURE E SOCIETÀ NELL'ITALIA LONGOBARDA

Un percorso di sociolinguistica storica

a cura di Elisa D'Argenio, Roberto Delle Donne, Rosanna Sornicola



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The Profile of an Early Medieval Polity: Public Resources and Agents of the Dukes in 8th-Century Benevento

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Abstract: This article analyses the relationship between the Dukes of Benevento, their agents, and the public patrimony in the broad framework of the duchy, which encompassed much of continental Southern Italy at the time. This complex network of relations was centred on the capital and met a twofold need: to share the resources between the duke and major officials, and to preserve the former's absolute primacy in Beneventan society.

Keywords: Early Middle Ages; Lombards; Southern Italy; Public Estate.

Despite its fragmentary nature, early medieval documentation sometimes allows us to bring a whole power structure into focus by following peripheral traces. This is what I will endeavour to do in the following pages, by describing the projection of the Beneventan dukes' power over continental Southern Italy in the central decades of the 8th century: only the Naples area, central-southern Calabria, and possibly a few stretches of Salento remained outside the ducal domain¹. What reliable documentary evidence we have in this field comes almost exclusively from the *Chronicon* of Santa Sofia in Benevento, a monastery founded – or more probably completed, after its establishment by Duke Gisulf II – by Arechis, who became Duke of Benevento in 758 and Prince in 774². In many respects, the *Chronicon* is a remarkable source. As far as the period and

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¹ For an overview of the Duchy of Benevento and its relationship with the Lombard kingdom, see Gasparri (1988: 86-111) and Azzara (2003); further insights into the relationship with Pavia in Loré (2016); a broad and recent overview of Lombard Southern Italy in the 8th century in Zornetta (2020: 21-146) and – with the kind of specific perspective adopted in these pages – Loré (2018; 2019; 2020; 2021). The following pages succinctly draw upon and integrate – in relation to certain points – issues already extensively discussed in these and other works of mine, to which I will be frequently referring for brevity's sake: I apologise to the reader for this.

² On the hypothesis of the first founding of Santa Sofia under Duke Gisulf II – a hypothesis already put forward in the past and based on a passage from the *Annales Beneventani* and the *Chronica Monasterii Casinensis* – see Loré (2017: 955-965) and Zornetta (2019), with additional insights in Loré (2021: 43-44) and in Zornetta's contribution to the present volume. Further bibliographical references may be found in the studies just listed and in some of the footnotes below.

topic under discussion here are concerned, this is true essentially for two reasons: it brings together a dossier of ducal documents from the years between the 720s and the 770s; and the terms and formulas it employs did not undergo the kind of updating that is frequently found in other similar compilations (e.g. the *Chronicon* of San Vincenzo al Volturno, or the Farfa cartularies). The anonymous compiler of the Santa Sofia *Chronicon* had strong philological concerns, as has been perspicuously noted by Jean-Marie Martin in the introduction to his edition of the *Chronicon*³ – published shortly before the edition of the Beneventan dukes' charters which Herbert Zielinski produced for the *Codice Diplomatico Longobardo*⁴. These are two relatively new editions, which is why it is only in recent years that studies on the Lombard age have started taking account of the 8th-century ducal evidence transmitted by the *Chronicon*. In the previous period, scholars were very wary of approaching these charters: no reliable edition was available and they were an object of considerable distrust⁵. Indeed, the few scholars who had carried out systematic research on the ducal charters before the publication of a critical edition of such documents, had drawn directly upon the main manuscript witness, Vatican Latin Codex 4939. In addition to Martin himself, who extensively used these charters to draw an overall outline of Apulia during the Lombard age⁶, we find Stefano Gasparri, who examined them in two important studies on the Duchy and Principality of Benevento⁷.

The Lombard-age documentary evidence from Santa Sofia poses a twofold problem in terms of approach or, if we prefer, of perspective: it reveals the activities of the duke's agents almost exclusively as estate managers – i.e. as managers of the ducal patrimony⁸. They are practically never mentioned as military leaders and only very rarely in relation to the settling of disputes (as ducal envoys: for the duke himself maintained an absolutely central position as judge in Lombard Southern Italy)⁹. Therefore, I will now focus on the

³ Martin (2000).

⁴ CDL, IV/2.

⁵ See the summaries in Bertolini (1926), with references to the earliest editions. Chapter 1 of Delogu (1977) – still a crucial study on Santa Sofia and Arechis – is almost entirely based on narrative and hagiographical sources, and does not take Arechis' charters into account, as no reliable critical edition of them was available at the time.

⁶ Martin (1993: 161-251).

⁷ Gasparri (1978: 86-100; 1988).

⁸ Loré (2012: 251-257; 2019: 40-46).

⁹ On this crucial point, see Delogu (1997: 261-270) and Zornetta (2020: 73-77); on ducal justice, more generally, see also Indelli (2019; 2020: Ch. 3).

central issue posed by the documentary evidence, namely the duke's landed property, which I will use as a guiding thread in my discussion.

The duke's patrimony was a public one, meaning that it was shared by a range of subjects who were also involved in the exercising of power: gastalds, chiefly active at a local level, but also court officials – especially *marpahis* and *referendarii*. It must be recalled that the duke exercised a kind of royal power in the Benevento area. Gastalds, court officials, and minor actors were officials of the duke, not the king; the duke alone was in charge of the public patrimony, as well as of the garrisoning of the territory and of the exercising of justice. These tasks essentially fell outside the king's purview, with a couple of specific exceptions, associated with very peculiar moments in the political dialectic with the capital, Pavia, in the mid-8th century¹⁰. From the perspective of the present study, the Dukes of Benevento must therefore be regarded *sub specie regia*. The second problem posed by the nature of the documentary evidence is this: the charters almost exclusively offer a glimpse of the top-level relations surrounding public assets, namely those between the duke and his most prominent agents. In contrast to Spoleto, which for the same period offers documentation that is almost exclusively limited to the Rieti area, yet typologically more varied, in Benevento we only find a few faint traces of relationships closer to the base of the social pyramid: the structure of peasant society and the profile of minor ducal agents largely elude us. Instead, the Santa Sofia charters and the few coming from other collections of documents give us an overall idea of the patrimony of the Duke of Benevento, of its size, and of its distribution.

The time has come now to briefly describe the main features of the duke's patrimony, starting from a distinction which marks its overall profile. On the one hand, we find very extensive, complex, and compact landed estates, covering thousands of hectares. These *gualdi* – or *gai*, as they came to be called under Arechis, by borrowing a term used in royal charters¹¹ – were most probably managed not by gastalds, but by lower-ranking officials with no fixed seat. Each *gaium* was marked by a specific toponym, and certain traces suggest

¹⁰ On the overall structure of the ducal government, from somewhat different perspectives, see Loré (2019: 33-46) and – more broadly – Zornetta (2020: 21-146). Instances of interference between royal control and the concrete exercising of ducal power may be found esp. in *CDL*, IV/2, no. 43 (756), on which see *ivi* (42-48), and in *CDL*, V, no. 7 (766), on which see Gasparri (1978: 97) and Zornetta (2020: 67-73).

¹¹ On the borrowing of the term *gaium* from royal charters, already under Gisulf II, see Martin (2020: 115-119), with a few interpretive fluctuations. On Beneventan *gualdi* in general see Loré (2019: 35-40).

that these landed patrimonies had a unitary character: they were entirely – or almost entirely – made up of public estates, managed by various subjects, yet always under the duke's strict control. *Gai* were irregularly distributed across the duchy's territory: they were apparently concentrated between present-day Apulia and Molise, with some significant estates also to be found on the Tyrrhenian side, along the border between the Duchy of Naples and Cilento. The other cornerstone of the ducal patrimony was *actus*, which were usually assigned to gastalds and characterised by an urban seat; the properties that made up an *actus* did not form a compact landed estate, but were scattered throughout the territory. The range of the dispersion – or disjointedness, one might say – of the landed patrimony managed by an *actus* requires specific analysis in relation to two episodes.

In 774 Arechis granted Santa Sofia, in addition to other properties, a *curtis* at Montevergine that may be identified as the place where William of Vercelli was to found his famous monastery in the 12th century. The documentary evidence specifies the boundaries of this *curtis* by mentioning the Nola mountains and the castle of Pietrastornina: «usque in aqua suptus eadem plepsco [the rocky outcrop of the *Petra Sturmina* castle, mentioned shortly before] *qui pertinuit de acto Lucerino*»¹². The *actus* of Lucera is said to encompass the Pietrastornina outcrop, but in my view is to be extended to the *curtis* of Montevergine as a whole, which must have had a vast extension, since Pietrastornina – mentioned as a boundary – was roughly twenty kilometres away from Montevergine. But regardless of whether this was the case or not, my main point still stands: Pietrastornina or the *curtis* of Montevergine pertained to Lucera. Pietrastornina/Montevergine and Lucera were between 100 and 110 km apart, with the Apennine ridge separating the two. However, Pietrastornina and Montevergine were not far from the capital, Benevento, and from the border between the Duchy of Benevento and that of Naples. Their dependence on Lucera is as explicitly laid out as it is surprising; nor is this a wholly unique case. In a later document, from 840¹³, Prince Radelchis II grants his treasurer Toto a *gualdo* in the Larino area (“*finibus Larinensis*”), in Molise, pertaining to the gastaldato of Quintodecimo (“*pertinent ex gastaldato Quinto Decimo*”), along with its serfs and everything which, within the *actus* of Larino,

¹² CSS, I, 9, p. 350 (emphasis added). The identification of Montevergine and of other places mentioned in the document comes from Martin's edition (CSS, p. 350, nn. 1-4).

¹³ CSS, III, 36.

pertained to this *gastaldato*. It is clear that this included not just the serfs, but the whole landed patrimony in which they toiled: «et cuncta que ibidem in atto Larinense ex ipso Quinto Decimi *gastaldato* pertinet». Quintodecimo was an ancient settlement in the environs of Benevento. The landed estate and the *gastaldato* to which it pertained were located over 120 km apart, with the Apennines Ridge running between them. This no doubt represents very late, almost posthumous, evidence of a structure that was destined to disappear shortly afterwards: for over the course of the 9th century, Lombard Southern Italy witnessed the emergence of an extensive (if perhaps non-homogeneous) network of districts managed by *gastalds* and counts in charge of the public properties falling within the areas under their control¹⁴.

In light of what has been argued so far, I believe we must reject the hypothesis that the *actus* of Lucera and the *gastaldatus* of Quintodecimo each formed a single unit in terms of the exercising of power, also on the military and jurisdictional levels. In Lucera's case, we would have to envisage an extremely elongated territory that skirted the capital itself, Benevento, so as to encompass the *curtis* of Montevergine; and we would also have to posit something of the sort for the *gastaldato* of Quintodecimo. But this strikes me as an unlikely scenario. *Actus* essentially served as instruments for patrimony management: they generally consisted of scattered estates, not compact and spatially contiguous ones, like *gualdi*. We must bear in mind the perspective underlying the ducal charters from Benevento, which are exclusively focused on public assets and their management. It is in these same terms that we must understand the highly irregular distribution of the *gastald* seats documented in relation to this period. Very few seats are known to us and they are largely concentrated in an area encompassing present-day Apulia and Molise, and the Apennine Ridge: an area which coincides with that with the highest concentration of *gualdi*.

Precisely for this reason, an interpretation of *actus* as “districts” must be abandoned, or at any rate nuanced, in favour of a more fragmented, discontinuous picture: *gastalds* were primarily estate managers and sometimes managed properties located very far from their seats. In such cases, there is no need, or indeed possibility, to imagine that they exercised their function as estate managers over territories structured as districts. On the other hand, we know very little about the jurisdictional and military prerogatives that *gast-*

¹⁴ Loré (2020: 128-129), with references to the sources and main studies.

alds certainly had; we must simply accept the fact that we have no way of defining how such prerogatives were spatially projected. The little information we can infer from narrative sources, starting from mid-7th and early 9th-century episodes, suggests that not even the gastalds' activity of military coordination and command had a strictly territorial character, but rather concerned urban residents. Two Counts of Capua, Transamund and *Mitola*, played a leading role as military leaders in the Beneventan Duke Grimoald's rise to the throne in Pavia, in 662, and in the defence of Benevento against Emperor Constans II's attack shortly afterwards¹⁵. Besides, in the 9th century, the gastalds of Conza and Acerenza, two of the largest centres in the Benevento area, are extensively featured in the *Chronicon Salernitanum* in relation to their military functions¹⁶. Particularly in these later contexts, however, the gastald would appear to have essentially exercised his military prerogatives in relation to citizens: in other words, the soldiers under the gastald's orders were the inhabitants of Capua, Conza, Acerenza, and those residing within the walls of the urban seat – not the inhabitants of the surrounding rural area¹⁷.

Only two of the *actus* recorded in relation to the 8th century would appear to have had a strictly territorial profile, as witnessed by the specific use of a spatial term (*fines*, used alongside *actus*): Canosa and Conza. This might not be a coincidence: the *fines* of Canosa were characterised by a low density of public properties – mostly of limited extension – across a very wide area, encompassing the whole of Apulia, from Ofanto almost as far as Taranto. This territorial characterisation might therefore be related to a limited and/or diffused presence of estates: a profile that is arguably also detectable in the district of Conza, the *fines compisina*, extended across a broad area between present-day Campania and Basilicata (however, at least one *curtis* – a substantial landed patrimony – is attested there)¹⁸. One hypothesis, therefore, might be that we are dealing with a primarily urban power structure, both because of Benevento's undisputed predominance over the duchy and because the duke's main local agents generally had their seats in urban centres. What is missing

¹⁵ On Transamund and *Mitola* see *Historia Langobardorum*, IV, 51 and V, 9.

¹⁶ CS, 42-47; mention of them is also made in Erchempert, 8.

¹⁷ For this interpretation, see Loré (2020: 127).

¹⁸ See Id. (2012: 255, 272-273), on Canosa, and Id. (2019: 43), on Canosa and Conza. Concerning the *curtis* in the Conza territory, see CSS, I, 19. Consider also the so-called *Divisio* between Benevento and Salerno of 848-849, from which it is possible to clearly infer that the "gastaldates" of Conza, Acerenza, and Latiniano had a territorial character: Martin (2005: 205): «et medius castaldatus acerentinus, qua parte coniunctus est cum Latiniano et Consiam».

is evidence of a more strictly territorial projection of these agents' power – and in my view, this is not due to the dearth of documents.

What remains to be sought, then, is an answer to the underlying question: was there a *ratio* for this complex administrative architecture? Is the incompleteness of the territorial structure enough to account for it? In other words: if in the 8th century Pietrastornina/Montevergine pertained to far-off Lucera, is this a matter of chance, possibly reflecting the survival of more ancient balances, or does it reflect a specific logic related to the management of power and of hierarchical relationships on the dukes' part? I do not believe that the evidence in question can be interpreted as a sign of incompleteness or primitivism. The crucial element, in this regard, is provided by a further partition of the public patrimony in Benevento, which served a function different from the *actus* and *gualdi*.

Subactiones have been regarded as minor districts: whereas *actus* were districts, *subactiones*, which – as the term itself suggests – depended on *actus*, were secondary centres for the exercising of power¹⁹. Yet, according to a hypothesis first put forward by Simone Collavini²⁰, the nature of the documentary evidence seems to go in a different direction. *Subactiones* are mentioned not in relation to places, like *actus*, but in relation to people: sometimes gastalds, at other times court officials, such as *marpahis* and arbitrators, not directly involved in the governing of the area; but these structures are always mentioned in relation to holders of public authority. In almost all cases, the *subactiones* included the basic elements of the public patrimony, namely *condome*, which is to say heads of family of servile rank, who would be transferred together with their family and the goods entrusted to them: in these production units, the land and men made up an organic conglomerate that would appear to have derived directly from late-antique *colonatus*. Only very rarely do we find larger and more complex structures in *subactiones*, such as *curtes*, which are largely made up of groups of *condome*. In three or perhaps four different occasions, a *subactio* belonging to someone instead included properties and men located hundreds of kilometres apart. For example, one gastald by the name of Ferdulf was in charge of a *subactio* that included an abbot near Matera and a *condoma* residing in what is now Molise, with a distance of anywhere between 250 and 300 km between the two. It must be said that, in this as in other

¹⁹ For this hypothesis, see Martin (1993: 227).

²⁰ Collavini (2003: 150-153); a more extensive formulation in Loré (2012: 254-257).

cases, the dating of the documents is uncertain; therefore, we cannot be sure that the patrimonies in question were part of the same *subactio at the same time*²¹. However, it seems most likely to me that such structures had a widely fragmented and diffused nature, and that they served a different function compared to *actus* and *gualdi*. Whereas the latter two were administrative compounds (meaning that their revenues would go to the duke), *subactiones* in all likelihood had a redistributive function: they were specifically linked to an official, rather than to a seat, because the revenues from estates and peasant families would go directly to this official. The *subactio* was structured in accordance with the need to divide the patrimony of the Duchy of Benevento in a radial way, rather than by districts, so as to preserve the duke's centrality: ducal agents would access resources not according to distinct – and hence potentially independent – territorial spheres, but rather through a continuous and centralised management and redistribution system. The compact spaces of *gualdi* were probably assigned to minor officials precisely because they tended to conflict with this strategy.

This interpretation of the administrative network as a far from primitive or incomplete one is confirmed – and in a way put into perspective – by certain elements that shed light on the mode of redistribution of landed assets by the central authorities. Whenever 8th- and 9th-century Beneventan documents describe conflicts over the attribution of properties variously controlled by the duke or prince (landed property, but also churches pertaining to the *pala-tium*), they always apply a principle of late-antique origin that is witnessed by the *Codex Theodosianus*²²: if two different subjects lay claim to the same asset, with both being able to present concessions issued by the public authorities, then the dispute will be settled in favour of the claimant with the oldest concession, which overrules the subsequent one²³. The second observation concerns another aspect of the role of the duke (or the prince, after 774) as a redistributor of public properties. We can clearly identify it by turning to a text which concerns mid-9th-century events, but which in all likelihood also sheds light on practices already evidenced in a more opaque way in sources from the first decades of the 8th century. According to the *Chronicon Salerni-*

²¹ CDL, IV/2, no. 41, dated to between 752 and 755, and CSS, I, 1 [69], which can be dated to Arechis' reign, i.e. to after 758.

²² See Delmaire (1989: 629).

²³ CDL, IV/2, no. 47 (which the editor convincingly dates to 764), on which see Zornetta (2020: 62-66), offering a more "political" interpretation than my own. See also Loré (2019: 52-56) for some examples from Spoleto based on a famous *placitum*. For several 9th-century cases from Salerno, see Id. (2013: 114-119).

*tanum*²⁴, the Prince of Salerno, Adhemar, who ruled the city between 853 and 861, earned the local inhabitants' ill will by repeatedly assigning the property of people who had died without heirs to his wife, Gumeltrude. The *Salernitani* – to quote the chronicler, who was very attentive to the collective dimension of this political conflict – turned to the princess and complained about her husband's actions to her benefit. Gumeltrude defended herself by saying that it would be difficult for her to oppose her husband's will; so Adhemar continued to grant her a large number of properties "per preceptum", to quote the specific expression used by the chronicler, with reference to princely written concessions – *precepta*. Shortly afterwards, the prince decided to appoint his son Bishop of Salerno. The *Salernitani* could no longer stand him: as the prince had already dominated laypeople, he now sought to dominate the clergy. They therefore overthrew Adhemar and elected Guaifer in his place, who became the founder of a Salernitan dynasty: his descendants were to rule Salerno for roughly 120 years, passing down the office in strictly patrilineal fashion.

This episode, which at first sight might seem like a legendary one, is in fact perfectly consistent with practices known to us from deeds from the second half of the 9th century, the period following Adhemar's rule²⁵. Whenever the princes came into possession of properties belonging to people who had died without heirs, they would not keep them for themselves, but would redistribute them – and the same in all likelihood had been true of the dukes before them, as documents preserved in the Santa Sofia *Chronicon* seem to suggest²⁶. I should emphasise, however, that this redistribution was based on a legally regulated procedure. The document through which the Prince of Salerno would bestow the properties of people who had died heirless in the 9th century was often referred to as the *breve sigillatum*; in one case the specification *breve sigillatum repetitionis* is added²⁷. Now, *petitio* (not *repetitio*) is a term used in late-antique juridical texts to define a request for the concession of goods that have remained unclaimed and have therefore been seized. Roland Delmaire, the leading scholar of the late-antique imperial patrimony, called these "perishable goods" ("biens caducs")²⁸, precisely because they would not

²⁴ CS, 100-101. For a more extensive discussion of this episode, see Id. (2021a: 175-176).

²⁵ Id. (2013: 114-119).

²⁶ Concerning the earliest period, consider esp. some of the ducal concessions in favour of Abbot Zachary: CDL, IV/2, nos. 8 (721), 9 (722), 11 (723), and 24 (745).

²⁷ *Codex Diplomaticus Cavensis*, I, no. 55 (858), p. 69 = *ChLA*, LI, no. 16.

²⁸ On *petitio* in late-antique legislation (*repetitio* instead indicated second-instance claims, i.e. ones concerning goods already assigned) and for a definition of "perishable goods", see Delmaire (1989: 626-628 and *passim*).

remain in the hands of emperors and their administrators but, on the contrary, would be (at least partly) brought back into circulation.

If we now look at the forms of power of the Duke of Benevento, we find that they are marked by two distinctive features. On the one hand, they are characterised by “light” local structures, which are not particularly articulated, yet are capable of supporting a balance that in my view was functional to the preservation of the duke’s centrality. The remarks made in the second part of this article highlight the fact that the “light” nature of the instruments employed by the duke was, in some case, of late-antique origin²⁹. This suggests that the projection of the central government onto the territory of the duchy was far more regulated and – I would emphatically stress – more procedural than scholars tend to assume in relation to 8th-century polities. The investigations conducted in recent decades on the transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages have somewhat forced us to redefine many of the assumptions made by earlier scholarship; however, we must avoid the risk of positing forms of structural continuity based on the functional endurance of a single element, no matter how central this may be. On the contrary, by anchoring our perspective in forms of continuity – in this case, the endurance of an extensive supply of public landed resources, beyond the specific transfer of this or that property from the emperors to the ducal treasury – it is possible to effectively grasp the underlying changes in the social and institutional framework, and to develop a particularly fruitful interpretation. In this concluding section I have especially stressed some evidence of enduring elements; in the future, by broadening the picture on a comparative basis, it would be worth trying to systematically bring into focus what was preserved and what was lost in terms of the management, size, and use of public patrimonies during the transition from Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. This is a problem as central as it is – paradoxically – under-investigated from a long-term perspective.

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²⁹ Along these same lines, see the hypothetical remarks by Marazzi (2021: 1040-1044).

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