

# Mobility, Displacements and Identity In and Around the Medieval Italian Countryside (6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries)

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This article is concerned with peasants' ideas and outlooks, the conflicts in which they participated, the decisions that they made, and the individual and collective actions that they took, including decisions about emigrating or staying put in view of certain political or climatic/environmental constraints. Its target region is Italy between the sixth and the tenth centuries. The investigation is based on written and archaeological evidence. The first part of the paper attempts to illustrate the living conditions, the social stratifications and the technological knowledge of peasantries and discusses the nature of village societies by looking at peasant initiatives in terms of both collective action against the lord of the moment and individual careerism as a way to climb the social ladder. The second part of the paper accounts for larger repopulation/depopulation processes, on the one hand, and individual regional and micro-mobility, on the other. It shows how the peasantry was an actual political player in that they negotiated their displacements and mobilizations with the neighbouring lordly powers. Contextually, the possibility that environmental and climatic hazards might have acted as undercurrent forces of far-reaching rural migrations is taken into account. Finally, it sheds some light on peasants »on the road« and the reasons behind their mobility, ranging from everyday affairs – sometimes even not related to farming – to their desire to leave in search of their fortune. There emerges a picture of a rural Italy that was anything but static and immutable, where farmers formed a not-negligible factor of change in settlement patterns and power dynamics.

*Keywords: early medieval Italy, peasantry, landholding, solidarity, migration, mobility, farming, additional income*

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### Introduction

In the popular imagination, the medieval peasantry is often homogenized as a subaltern group, a perception which has been shaped both by medieval ecclesiastic writers and contemporary historians. This underplays peasant agency, confines peasants to normative paradigms – like poverty, risk aversion, resistance – and treats them as victims of aristocratic brutality. The historiographical myth of the feudal system and the so called »servi della gleba«, that is, landless peasants who worked the fields and could not lawfully leave, embodies perfectly this simplistic vision of medieval rural societies. As a survey recently conducted on a collection of Italian textbooks intended for primary and secondary schools shows, this way of thinking about the living conditions of rural populations and power relations in the medieval countryside is one of the most popular misconceptions about the Italian Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of the peasantry as an undifferentiated mass of largely passive and subaltern historical subjects can be tracked back to the Three Orders theory, which envisions a tripartite and trifunctional scheme of society in classes and places peasants in the *ordo laboratores*, the category of those who work, as opposed to those who pray (the clergy, called *oratores*) and those who fight (the nobility, called *bellatores*). Recorded in a number of English texts from the late ninth century to the turn of the first millennium, and notably in the writings of Ælfric (c.955-c.1025), abbot of Eynsham, and Wulfstan (1002-1023), archbishop of York, in this context the model held a meaning where the focus was differentiation rather than stratification, and a sense of interdependence among all the societal components, which were bound by mutual service, was predominant.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to how it was used in England, Bishop Adalbero of Laon (c.947-1030), alongside his cousin Gerard of Cambrai (c.975-1051), who developed the Three Orders theory in continental Francia in the early eleventh century, gave the model a clearer hierarchical and normative connotation. Writing in around the AD 1020s, like his predecessors, Adalbero divided the earthly world into three classes. In his view, peasants formed the largest demographic. They possessed nothing but their manual work, were entrusted with the mission of working with their hands to feed society and were all serfs. Highly theoretical, the Three Orders theory of Adalbero was already obsolete in the AD 1020s, for it bore little or no relation to the social and legal reality of the time. Other medieval writers, such as Ratherius of Verona (c.890-974), were better able to portray the diversity of the peasant world and to distinguish between free and enslaved workers.<sup>3</sup>

Despite being inaccurate, Adalbero's conceptualization of peasants and peasant servitude gradually gained ground. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, other writers – Benoît de Sainte-Maure, John of Marmoutier, Étienne de Fougères, Edmer of Canterbury, Gillebert of Limerick and John of Worcester – added to this idea, laying the foundation for the institutional enforcement of the social classification of the orders. In France, where a status-based scheme of stratification in clergy, aristocracy and commoners lasted until the French Revolution in 1789, modern historians, such as Georges Duby, have written extensively about it, helping to popularize an understanding of the medieval rural economy as being inherently averse to the peasantry.

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1 Loré and Rao, *Medioevo da manuale*.

2 Powell, *The ›three orders‹ and Moilanen, Concept of the three orders*.

3 A reconsideration of the works of these two writers can be found in Carrier, *Travail et servitude paysanne*.

In his classic book *Les trois ordres ou l'imaginaire du féodalisme*, Duby links the increase in the concept's prominence to the much-debated issue of the so-called feudal revolution. The ideology of the Three Orders would have served to justify the misdeeds of the warring nobility and castle-based magnates against the rest of the population, peasantry included, in the aftermath of the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire and the power vacuum which followed.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, this understanding has been embedded in the Caging of the Peasantry paradigm, developed by the medievalist Chris Wickham to describe the harsh working conditions of farmers in most of early medieval western Europe between AD 800 and AD 1000. Key to this paradigm is the idea of lordly pressure and rapacity, and the loss of autonomy of farmers, who were progressively forced to give up their allodial estates and enter the cellular structure of local power. Although innovative in that it dismisses the traditional conceptions of feudalism as a system and recognizes the diversity of arrangements and developments throughout the period and across regions, Wickham's paradigm is still a top-down model that does not ascribe to the peasantry any agency in shaping the societies and communities in which they lived.<sup>5</sup> It is only recently that Wickham has reinterpreted this paradigm by thinking of lordly and peasant demand and needs as complementary to the post-1000 economic growth. He recognizes that unlike aristocrats, peasants were the overwhelming majority, and therefore held a tactical advantage on the ground, whereby they proved to be capable of resisting and/or negotiating signorial dues.<sup>6</sup>

In this regard, some valuable insights come from sociology and anthropology. As a growing body of literature points out, the interpretative frame according to which the peasantry is inherently passive, shows conservative tendencies in nature and follows safety-first economic strategies is no longer tenable. There seems to be little empirical evidence about a univocal behaviour of subsistence-oriented farmers in relation to risk. Comparative field experiments highlight how attitudes vary region by region, and peasants may be risk-averse, risk-neutral or risk-takers, depending on an array of factors.<sup>7</sup> This new way of looking at farmers has also been emerging in the context of the present-day global challenge of the changing climate. From sub-Saharan Africa to the Pacific Ocean, rural local communities show the know-how necessary to implement multiple adaptation strategies, including engaging in small businesses and making strategic and rational economic choices – which, what is more, often conflict with those foreseen by the political decision-makers.<sup>8</sup>

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4 Duby, *Les trois ordres*. See also Arnoux, European workers.

5 Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages, 570-588*; Wickham, *Inheritance of Rome, 529-551*. For a review of this master narrative, see Tomei, *Le società post-romane*.

6 Wickham, *Donkey and the Boat*.

7 The literature is vast. See, for example, Henrich and McElreath, *Are peasants risk-averse?*; Nurdin *et al.*, *On factors that influence farmer's behavior*; Ullah *et al.*, *Factors effecting farmers' risk attitude*.

8 Mashizha, *Adapting to climate change*; Farbotko, *Anti-displacement mobilities*.

Given the above – as recently stated by Jean-Pierre Devroey – the moment has come »for historians to emancipate themselves from the ideas spread since the eighteenth century by the Agronomists in France and Great Britain «who» emphasized the technical superiority and greater productivity of large exploitations and reasoned agriculture, as opposed to peasant know-how and practices, which were considered retrograde and inefficient«. <sup>9</sup> And in fact, over the last decades this stereotyped vision has been progressively challenged and a fresh picture of the medieval countryside and its inner dynamics has emerged. However, while research is steadily expanding, our knowledge is at present restricted by geographical biases, with most studies covering western Central and northern Europe, and only a minority focusing on Mediterranean Europe. An uneven temporal focus is also observable, with comparatively few studies covering early medieval times, and most focusing on later periods. <sup>10</sup>

This article is concerned with peasants' ideas and outlooks, the conflicts in which they participated, the decisions that they made and the individual and collective actions that they took, including decisions about emigrating or staying put in view of certain political or climatic/environmental constraints. Conceptually, it owes much to Jean-Pierre Devroey and Laurent Feller's works, and through a joint archaeological-textual analysis, it seeks to contribute further and make the conventional picture less rigid and schematic. Its target region is Italy between the sixth and the tenth centuries, an area which has only recently received some coverage and therefore needs a more attentive investigation. <sup>11</sup> There are two aspects in particular to which I shall draw attention. First, I shall discuss the living conditions, the social stratifications and the knowledge of peasantries. I shall also examine peasant initiatives in terms of both collective action against the lord of the moment and individual protagonism as a way to climb the social ladder. Against this background, I will then account for both larger repopulation/depopulation processes in relation to political constraints and climatic stresses and the individual mobility of peasants for everyday affairs – sometimes even not related to ploughing their acre – or in search of their fortune. There emerges a picture of a rural Italy that was anything but static and immutable, where the peasantry formed a not negligible factor of change in settlement patterns and power dynamics.

### *On Terminology*

To start with, a short explanation of definitions and terminologies seems useful here. Unlike Adalbero of Laon's statement about the condition of serfdom of all *laboratores*, it is now patent that, between slaves and unfree or *aldii* (half-free peasants), a large section of the rural workers found themselves within a grey area, where the boundaries of one status and the other were blurred, and a multitude of people lived in an intermediate position. <sup>12</sup>

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9 Devroey, *Social responses*, 14.

10 This is only partially due to the patterns of surviving written records. Scholarly traditions also play a major role. See the special issue of the *Journal of Migration History* by Klír and Lindström, *Meanings of Mobility Among Peasants*.

11 Two maps at the end of the article give an overview of the places mentioned herein.

12 On the change from slavery to serfdom, a vast literature, which also includes case studies from Italy, exists. On theory and concepts, see Bush (ed.), *Serfdom and Slavery* and Epstein, *Speaking of Slavery*. On the late antique and early medieval periods, see Rio, *Slavery after Rome*.

Not only our conceptual framework today, but even the early medieval law codifications were for the most part deficient and not equipped to understand and fully categorize the multifaceted nature of the different bonds of dependence. The same holds true for free peasants, in relation to whom the vocabulary employed in medieval texts and charters fails to account for the whole spectrum of socio-economic realities of the time. Free peasants could be landless labourers who worked as tenants the land belonging to someone else; others could own parcels of land themselves as their only source of supply; or they could possess sufficient landed properties to rent out some of them and still work the remaining ones.<sup>13</sup>

In the Italian countryside, small and medium landowners were a category of agriculturalists who never disappeared but rather continued to prosper in many regions. The circumstance whereby they re-emerge periodically in given historical conjectures is a clue that, despite their only intermittent visibility in written sources, they were a persistent substratum in the rural landscape.<sup>14</sup> Regional studies have long illustrated the varied distribution of the great monastic and lay estates across Europe. Within this context, the high fragmentation of the landholdings in Italy may be, at least partially, explained by the institutional, climatic and orographic variability of the country. Nor did the affirmation in the ninth and tenth century of the so-called manorial system, which somehow changed dramatically the outlook of the Italian countryside, have too much effect on the lives of their inhabitants. Given the multiple typologies of *curtes* attested in Italy, no unequivocal link between the bipartite farmsteads and the legal status of the workers, subjected to different forms of organization of labour, can be established. There exists a large consensus about the scattered distribution of the lands belonging to the *massaricium*, as well as about the fact that the *curtes* were far from covering the territory uniformly.<sup>15</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that a small number of landholders inhabited the Val di Cornia (in southwestern Tuscany) between the eighth and the tenth century, and that similarly in the South, at the turn of the millennium, flourishing allodial peasants populated the Agro Nocerino and the region between Salerno and the Sele River (in Campania). In the same years, small landowners were also common in the Duchy of Naples and in central Apulia.<sup>16</sup>

With all of this being considered, a definition of peasants which is as inclusive as possible will be adopted in the following discussion in order to encompass the entirety of rural, non-aristocratic society, comprising farm workers, tenants and owners of small and medium-sized holdings, that is, all of those individuals who, regardless of their legal status and wealth, made a living mainly by farming.

The same broad approach applies to the related concept of village communities. Historiographical research has long investigated the villages and rural settlements of medieval Italy, and the forms of common use of woods, pastures and natural resources that took place there, and has finally concluded that, prior to the eleventh century, it is not even possible to speak of communities.<sup>17</sup>

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13 As an example, see the fuzzy category of early medieval *manentes*, Tomei, *Sulle tracce dei manentes*. See also the classic work by Pasquali, *La condizione degli uomini*, and the case study concerning the case *tributarie* by Carminati and Mariani, *Le case tributarie nelle leggi*.

14 Collavini, *Mobility and lordship*.

15 Pasquali, *L'azienda curtense*.

16 On the Val di Cornia, see Collavini, *Spazi politici e irraggiamento sociale*. On southern Italy, see Di Muro, *Stratificazioni sociali*.

17 An overview of the historical debate is provided in Feller, *Le village des historiens*.

Of course, projecting the institutionalized organization of the social life of the twelfth-century villages backwards into earlier centuries would be a mistake. These rural communities were cohesive units even from a territorial viewpoint, as may be observed especially at the moment when written agreements between peasants and lords (*franchises* or *franchigie*) were drawn up, or in the creation of new population centres (the so-called *vilafranca* or *vilanova*). And yet, early medieval legal provisions and charters, especially the *placiti*, that is, court cases and settlement disputes from the Carolingian and post-Carolingian era, despite forming a discontinuous body of evidence, are very telling here. These documents record the capability of early medieval peasants to participate in coordinated acts of insubordination, obtain access to royal justice and stand for their rights and common interests.<sup>18</sup> More interestingly, regardless of the forms of the habitats, which could be more or less nucleated or scattered, *placiti* testify to the different levels of social organization and political representativeness expressed by the inhabitants of a rural territory. This occurred through the informal appointment of mediators and spokesmen – men able to negotiate and publicly defend the claims of their co-villagers in court hearings.<sup>19</sup>

For the purposes of this study then, it is convenient to understand the concept of village community as a group of people who, beyond mere familial and blood cohesion, were able to promote and advance coordinated actions. In this regard, the fact of them dwelling in proximity to the same hamlet is unremarkable. In early medieval Italy, the material community and the community of people might indeed overlap or diverge.

#### *Living Conditions, Social Stratification and Know-How*

Although any statistics for the early Middle Ages are questionable, there is no doubt that the majority of the population lived in the countryside, and some 85-90 per cent of them could be described as peasants. Peasants outnumbered the nobility, clergy, artisans and merchants and were the most prevalent type of workers in the medieval era. Who they were, what their role in rural society was, and what their lives were like, however, is still a matter of debate. To date, archaeology has provided most of the evidence to answer these questions and has dispelled at least two clichés about countryfolk in the early Middle Ages. The first aspect concerns poverty, that is, the nutritional and health conditions of the rural population. Despite the lack of any demographic data suitable for statistical modelling, a scholarly consensus exists that the population curve of post-Roman Italy fell during the first millennium and the number of inhabitants then remained fairly constant for centuries.<sup>20</sup> Within this depopulated environment, where reforestation and the advancement of marshes was the predominant feature, a sample of cemeteries from the fifth to tenth centuries offers an insight into the world of the time, where a healthier population, in comparison to the levels of pathology and malnutrition found in earlier and later historical periods, lived.

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18 Albertoni, Law and the peasant.

19 Lazzari, Comunità rurali.

20 Lo Cascio and Malanima, Cycles and stability. On the effect of the Justinianic Plague for the Mediterranean population, see for example, Mordechai and Eisenberg, Rejecting Catastrophe; Mordechai *et al.*, The Justinianic Plague; Meier, The Justinianic Plague.

From them, a number of osteological indicators, from stress markers on the bones, to the body size, the enamel on teeth and the porousness of crania, seems to suggest that Italian countrymen and women worked less, suffered fewer illnesses and had a better and richer diet than their Roman ancestors and the subsequent later medieval generations.<sup>21</sup>

A balanced diet, based on vegetable but also protein intake (meat and fish alike, plus milk and its derivatives), is observable, for example, in the cemeteries of San Vincenzino di Cecina, Livorno (fifth to eighth centuries) in Tuscany; Castro dei Volsci, Frosinone (sixth century) in Latium; and Collegno, Turin (sixth to eighth centuries) in Piedmont.<sup>22</sup> At the latter site, interestingly enough, it has been found that women had a more complete diet than men.<sup>23</sup> This evidence is in tune with data relating to incidence of hypoplasia, which indicates that in the early Middle Ages, the nutritional status of children was good and the age of weaning was delayed. It is therefore possible to link these findings with the hypothesis that women were effectively able to breastfeed their children for a prolonged period, owing to a more varied diet, and that accordingly, prolonged breastfeeding could then make children less subject to nutritional stresses.<sup>24</sup> Whether the peasantry kept population levels deliberately and artificially low by prolonged breastfeeding and other means – such as a late age at first marriage for women, which is also documented<sup>25</sup> – is debatable, but still a possibility. The fact remains, however, that the equilibrium between population and resources in the early medieval Italian countryside challenged the misconception of miserable living conditions. On the other hand, it would be misleading to fall for too rosy a vision. Indeed, according to the estimates of demographers, the mortality rate was still very high.<sup>26</sup>

The second aspect which archaeology has helped to clarify concerns the presumed egalitarian rural lifestyle, to which I shall also return later on. Excavations led by Marco Valenti and his team in Tuscany (central Italy) have unearthed a number of villages where the diverse range of peasant houses, settlements and landscapes supports the idea of heterogeneity in terms of wealth, political authority and economic specialization. The early medieval hilltop villages of Poggibonsi (near Siena), and Montemassi (in the province of Grosseto) – both of which have been systematically excavated by archaeologists – provide food for thought here and shed light on the differentiated societal complexity at different localities.<sup>27</sup>

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21 Squatriti, *Barbarizing the Bel Paese*, 392-398.

22 For San Vincenzino, see Pagni and Mallegni, *Paleobiologia*; for Castro dei Volsci, see Rubini, *La necropoli di Castro*, 70-71; for Collegno, see Bartoli and Bedini, *Le abitudini alimentari*. For an overview see the maps at the end of the article.

23 Bartoli and Bedini, *Le abitudini alimentari*, 241-247.

24 Barbiera and Dalla Zuanna, *Le dinamiche della popolazione*.

25 According to the estimates conducted by Barbiera and Dalla Zuanna on the polyptych of the abbey of Farfa, the average age of women at first marriage was between 22.2 and 24.8 years, and the average age of men was between 24.8 and 27.2 years. See Barbiera and Dalla Zuanna, *Le dinamiche della popolazione*, 27-28. These data contrast with the Lombard legislation that sets the earliest age for marriage as being around twelve years. See *Liutprandi Leges*, cc. 12 and 112, ed. Bluhme, 111-112 and 153. Actually, the discrepancy can be easily explained through the different societal groups the two sources target. The polyptych is about the rural dependant population; while the Lombard legislation primarily concerns the aristocracy.

26 Barbiera and Dalla Zuanna, *Population Dynamics in Italy*.

27 Valenti, *L'insediamento altomedievale*; Valenti, *Villaggi e comunità nella Toscana*.

From the late eighth century, Poggibonsi underwent a redefinition of its urban planning. The inhabited area was reorganized around a large »longhouse-type« building, equipped with service facilities and warehouses for the storage of agricultural products. The consumption of quality beef, as highlighted by zooarchaeological remains, speaks for the introduction of a protein diet. Altogether, these clues point to the emergence of a more structured economy, beyond mere subsistence, and to the rising of a peasant elite that distinguished itself from the rest of the community by its lifestyle.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, signs of sharp social stratification and emerging local elites are far less evident at Montemassi. Here, the large eighth-century hut, brought to light in the southwestern district, should be interpreted as a collective workplace, rather than as a privileged residence. The distribution of ceramics does not attest to any patent hierarchical differentiations, whilst it gives a glimpse of a community of small and medium-sized landowners.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the case may be. It must be stressed that the technology needed to conceive, build and maintain infrastructures similar to those found at Poggibonsi and Montemassi was certainly available, existing as an actual component in the rural world.

And in fact, a certain expertise in building and in construction can be documented in Italian rural contexts throughout the early Middle Ages. The case of Rocca degli Alberti, Monterotondo Marittimo, in the province of Grosseto, again in Tuscany, is revealing. The site shows early medieval material evidence linked to the storage and processing of cereals and legumes. Archaeologists have brought to light five ovens for the toasting process and eight silos devoted to long-term storage – from six months onwards – which must be interpreted as collective facilities.<sup>30</sup> The heterogeneity of cereal and legume species and the big size of the silos indicate a village community where peasant elites kept a certain amount of the harvest as a food supply for times of need and for the following sowing season. Only in a later phase do the obliteration of these facilities and the construction of a walled circuit and a smaller above-ground granary, wherein only one type of grain was stored, seem to suggest a newer centralized management of the agricultural resources of the area.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike Rocca degli Alberti, the question of the political actors behind the infrastructural water works found in Comacchio is still open. Located about 35 kilometres away from Ravenna, in northeastern Italy, Comacchio was a maritime and agriculturally oriented site alike, made up of several smaller settlements by the Po delta.<sup>32</sup> An artificial waterway connecting the coast to the hinterland was in use between AD 580 and AD 780. The watercourse was the result of a collective undertaking, for which a workforce of at least 260 diggers, hypothetically working continuously for a year, has been estimated by default.<sup>33</sup> Who were they? What was their legal status? Were they all locals, or did some of them come from outside? Was the waterway a cooperative effort or an enterprise executed under coercion? Whatever the case may be, who coordinated it?<sup>34</sup>

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28 Salvatori, *Le ossa animali*.

29 Bianchi, *Curtes*, castelli e comunità rurali, 502-503.

30 Bianchi and Grassi, *Sistemi di stoccaggio*.

31 Bianchi and Grassi, *Sistemi di stoccaggio*.

32 On Comacchio see Gelichi, Negrelli and Grandi (eds.), *Un emporio e la sua cattedrale*.

33 Grandi, *Un delta in movimento*, 243-248.

34 For questions related to a specialized workforce, the mobility of labourers and their legal status, see the newly-studied site of Vetricella in central southern Tuscany. Bianchi and Viva, *Archaeological and anthropological analysis*.



As Robert Portass has recently pointed out for early medieval Iberia, by pondering the material traces of everyday life (like skeletal remains and animal bones) and by assessing the anthropogenetic changes of the landscape (like large storage pits and canals), archaeologists have emphasized a series of questions ranging from the living and nutritional conditions of the peasantry and the population-resource ratios to the social hierarchy of village communities and the role of peasant initiatives.<sup>35</sup> The scale of certain infrastructures which have been brought to light in Italy is impressive enough to allow us to speculate about there being a collective action of some kind underpinning them. On the other hand, »collective action is not by definition cooperative«, and we should also take into account the possibility that »it required coordination or coercion« and that this was provided by lords, as well as by leading peasants.<sup>36</sup>

### *Solidarity, Strategic Thinking and Entrepreneurship*

The peasants' ability to be the protagonists of their own lives, as suggested by archaeology, is fully supported – albeit in different ways – by written records. One of the earliest references to forms of collective agency in the Italian countryside must be found in Rothari's Edict. The Edict is the oldest written collection of Lombard laws. It was codified in AD 643 in the aftermath of the conquest of new territories, east and west of the kingdom. Its main concern is the regulation of inheritance rights and the defence of private property. It establishes a complex system of monetary compensation for injuries, to prevent intra-family conflicts, to restrict violence in the form of *faida* (feud) to that carried out upon royal orders and to ensure social cohesion.<sup>37</sup> Chapters 279 and 280 of the Edict deal with armed bands of peasants and the compensation for those peasants (*homines rusticani*) who, gathered together, dared to participate in a turmoil such as »when a lord is trying to take bondsman or animal from his slave's house, blocking the way or taking the bondsman or animal«. Chapter 280, which implies that the gang leader was definitely a peasant, stipulates that this latter shall either be killed or pay a fee equal to his *adpraetium* (wergild) and that each of the participants in the rebellion who injured someone shall pay 12 *solidi*.<sup>38</sup>

The chapter is clearly designed to respond to the protection of property rights in the broader context of Lombard legislation. By the same token, although by accident, it sheds some light on the possibility of not institutionalized peasant associations – perhaps managed by informally appointed leaders – and gives us a glimpse of co-villagers actively and violently involved in the protection of their own interests in opposition to those of the lordly class.

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35 Portass, *Archaeology of peasant protagonism*.

36 Portass, *Archaeology of peasant protagonism*, 258.

37 On violence, justice and early medieval conflict resolution, see Halsall, *Reflections on early medieval violence*; Esders, *Wergild and the monetary logic*.

38 *Edictum Rothari*, cc. 279 and 280, ed. Bluhme, 66-68. See also Azzara and Gasparri (eds.), *Le Leggi dei Longobardi*, 84-87; Fischer Drew, *The Lombard Laws*, 108-109.

The history of peasant riots – that is, those uprisings on a sufficiently large scale to strike the imagination of medieval legislators and chroniclers – is a well-established strand of study. Chris Wickham has recently counted 15 rural popular revolts before 1200 – six before 1000, nine after – in western and northern Europe.<sup>39</sup> And yet, it must be stressed that such rebellions were exceptional and rare events. Negotiations, litigations and agreements were rather the norm for dealing with social tensions. The Carolingian legislators elaborated further on the political and military actions carried out independently by the peasants. Several capitularies from the eighth and ninth centuries dealt with the non-aristocrats (collectively labelled as *pauperes*, meaning helpless people), who were not supposed to gather together, take oaths nor dare to drive *conspiraciones*. Contextually, as per the same royal ideology, *pauperes* had the right to be defended via the laws issued by the king and via full access to a functioning judicial apparatus.<sup>40</sup>

Court cases where groups of co-villagers stand up against lay and mainly ecclesiastic lords in defence of their common interests can be tracked down over the following centuries. One of the most well-known cases is that of the inhabitants of *Flexum*, in the modern territory of Mirandola (province of Reggio Emilia). In AD 818, being represented by a *scabino* (a legal expert and alderman) and a deacon amongst others, they attended a court hearing where the *actor* of the royal court of Mantua and the abbey of Nonantola faced each other in relation to ancient rights for the exploitation of woods and marshes in various fiscal lands of the Po plain.<sup>41</sup> Sometime later, in AD 824, they themselves sued the abbey of Nonantola in connection with these same ancient rights. The dispute ended poorly for the prosecutors, who were beaten on the orders of the judges for protesting and inciting the other co-villagers (*consortes*).<sup>42</sup> The case of the inhabitants of *Flexum* is not unique in the landscape of Italian sources, nor is the unfortunate result. In fact, because of the pattern of preservation of written sources, where in most of the surviving cases the key role is played by the church, the winning side in the trial is always that of the monastery. Nevertheless, this does not undermine the most important data for us, that is, the ability demonstrated by the peasants to represent themselves legally and to act collectively. As regards the men of *Flexum*, or even the inhabitants of the Valle Tria (in the Abruzzi Apennines), about whom there is no room to talk here, this piece of information is particularly relevant, since *Flexum* was not a nucleated village, but rather a large area of smaller, scattered settlements.<sup>43</sup>

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39 Some recurring features are detectable. First, most of the revolts were against powerful landlords. Secondly, they took place in the context of specific socio-political circumstances, wherein no deep local tradition of aristocratic hegemony is attested; poverty and the erosion of peasant economic and/or political autonomy was not the only triggering factor. Wickham, *Looking forward*.

40 Provero, *Società contadina e giustizia regia*, 510-514.

41 *I placiti del Regnum*, n. 30, ed. Manaresi, 92-95. On the *scabini*, see Hicklin, *Scabini in historiographical perspective*; on the *actors*, see Gasparri, *Il regno longobardo in Italia*, 27-29.

42 *I placiti del Regnum*, n. 36, ed. Manaresi, 109-113.

43 Wickham, *Space and society*; Lazzari, *Comunità rurali*; Santos Salazar, *Fiscal lands, rural communities*.

The collective action and forms of solidarity which legal provisions and charters prove have long been interpreted within primitivist theories as indicators of societies of equals, who resided and lived peacefully and in unison with their neighbours.<sup>44</sup> By the same token, a certain Marxist-oriented scholarship has read socio-economic changes simply as the product of »class struggle without classes«, where lordly predation is understood as the only driving force of economic growth and innovation, whereas farmers are associated with a way of life and a frame of mind counter to »modernization« and prone to a subsistence economy.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, it cannot be argued that lords were unimportant as movers of economic change, in that they farmed for profit and mobilized the surplus. However, a growing body of studies shows that the medieval peasantry was characterized by good judgement, economic rational initiatives and dynamism. The archives of the abbey of San Salvatore al Monte Amiata (in Tuscany, between Siena and Grosseto) illustrates this clearly. The contracts (*livelli*) through which the abbey leased back to the donor the lands which he had previously ceded to it, were advantageous for the donor himself, especially when the latter received back, alongside the lands donated, other terrains.<sup>46</sup> In a society where the inheritance system provided for the equal division of the family assets among all children, this meant ensuring enough land for the survival of the household through the generations, not to mention the fact that the land rents were not very high. Indeed, the sum obtained from the sale would have allowed the seller, at least theoretically, to pay off the rent for the following 50 to 200 years.<sup>47</sup>

Beyond this, some peasants wanted to rise above their peers and make a profit. As I discuss in more detail below, enterprising cultivators could engage in multiple occupational activities. Participating in the land market was one of the most successful paths toward local prominence. The fact that a land market existed after AD 1200 is considered so self-evident that its defining features are rather taken for granted, or else described in very straightforward terms.<sup>48</sup> Prior to that date, however, the matter is more controversial.<sup>49</sup> That being said, there are several examples of peasant dealers accumulating lands through strategic transactions and enriching themselves at the expense of their peers throughout the entirety of early medieval Europe.<sup>50</sup> Two examples from Italy should be considered: Gundualdo, in eighth-century Tuscany, and Karol, in ninth-century Abruzzo (southern Italy). Both farmers directly cultivated the lands which they owned, then shortly after rose from this position through the progressive accumulation of landed assets, in the hamlet of Campori (province of Lucca) and *Vico Teatino* (province of Teramo), respectively. The accumulated landholdings were not too large, but large enough to produce surpluses and allow both Gundualdo and Karol to control a small number of tenant houses each.<sup>51</sup>

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44 Hodges, Primitivism.

45 Quirós Castillo, Inequality and social complexity.

46 See, for example, *Codex diplomaticus Amiatinus*, nn. 75, 86, 98, 103, 111, 123, 124, 139, ed. Kurze, 147-150, 170-174, 203-206, 214-216, 234-236, 261-262, 262-265 and 293-295.

47 Sigoillot, *Destins d'hommes libres*.

48 See the essays in the volume by Feller and Wickham (eds.), *Le marché de la terre au Moyen Âge*.

49 Portass, Peasants, market exchange, 33-34.

50 Portass, Peasant proprietors, social mobility.

51 For Gundualdo, see Wickham, *La montagna e la città*, 51-62; for Karol, see Feller *et al.*, *La fortune de Karol*.

We can only speculate about the possibly disruptive effects which this may have had on the internal stability of the respective communities. And yet, in addition to vertical peasantry-lord conflicts, horizontal conflicts between peasants and village communities were likewise a component of rural life. Chapter 134 of the laws issued by King Liutprand in AD 733 gives us a glimpse, for it regulates the controversies among »the men living in a village« who come to blows over »a field or vineyard, meadow or forest«.<sup>52</sup>

### *Population Displacements, Lordly Pressure and Climatic Hazards*

Notwithstanding the many challenges to traditional approaches found in historical and archaeological studies that see the peasantry as a passive, subaltern, homogeneous class, the »resignification of the role of peasant societies in Western European history has not yet been explored in all its complexities«.<sup>53</sup> Of the many underexplored facets of these complexities, the geographical mobility of individuals and/or smaller and larger groups of people within the rural landscapes is probably the most undertheorized.<sup>54</sup> The evidence is indeed sparse and fragmentary. To be sure, individual and collective mobility, which involved aristocrats and subaltern groups alike, was a structural component of early medieval societies. Depending on the evidence that is considered, large-scale displacements, in terms of people involved and distance covered, as well as micro-mobilities of single persons, family groups and workers of different kinds may be detected throughout the centuries. Archaeology, bioarchaeology and a fresh rereading of traditional written sources have progressively highlighted the importance of both long-term local repopulation and depopulation processes and everyday permanent or semi-permanent movements.<sup>55</sup> How to integrate the two different scales, however, is still hard to say.

Besides regional variations in the onset of the *incastellamento*, the establishment of new fortified hilltop villages, evident in many Italian regions, hints at far-reaching peasant migrations. As Pierre Toubert defined it, the *incastellamento* consists of a vast mobilization of rural populations, set in the context of a general reorganization of landholding patterns and the colonization of new arable lands in an age of economic growth.<sup>56</sup> However, unlike Toubert, who championed the thesis of signorial entrepreneurship as the sole driving force, it is now clear that the reasons and modalities for such a mobilization were multifaceted. The idea of an abrupt change coming out of nowhere in the tenth-century Italian landscape has given way to a more nuanced paradigm. In Latium, there is archaeological evidence of at least some small-scale pre-*incastellamento* hilltop occupations.<sup>57</sup> Sometimes, where the fortifications preceded the villages, only a tiny fraction of the inhabitants moved in, while the wider population remained dispersed for a longer period.

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52 *Liutprandi Leges*, c. 134, ed. Bluhme, 165-166. See also Azzara and Gasparri (eds.), *Le Leggi dei Longobardi*, 220-221; Fischer Drew, *The Lombard Laws*, 204. It is noteworthy that the law refers directly to those of Rothari (nn.279-280) I mentioned above and is framed as an expansion and emendation of that legal content.

53 Quirós Castillo and Tejerizo-García, Filling the gap, 390.

54 Klír and Lindström, Introduction: Meanings of mobility.

55 Patzold, Verortung in einer mobilen Welt; Paziienza, Mobilità interna.

56 Toubert, *Les structures du Latium médiéval*, 303-368, and Toubert, *Dalla terra ai castelli*, 44-98.

57 Moreland *et al.*, Excavations at Casale S. Donato; Patterson, Rural settlement.

Finally, in at least three documented cases, the fortified village was constructed and settled by peasants, not lords.<sup>58</sup> In southern Tuscany, since the seventh century, peasantries are supposed to have spontaneously come together and grouped in nucleated villages in search of self-protection, such as in the aforementioned Poggibonsi. Only in a later phase were these villages finally walled, as a result of their entering into the signorial power network.<sup>59</sup>

All in all, this variegated picture forces us to take into account the peasants' initiative, both in terms of proactivity and resistance. As stated by Laurent Feller in one of his influential works, the failure or success of the population displacements organized by lay and ecclesiastical lords at the turn of the millennium owes much to the involvement at different stages of the resettlement of the countryfolk through the mediation of the rural elites.<sup>60</sup> The coercion *versus* negotiation binomial is too simplistic a way to illustrate the *incastellamento* process. The confrontation between the rural population and the powerful may be better described through the concept of »consensual domination«. This concept accounts for a medieval society where the lordly hegemony and its ability to impose itself was real, but where the peasantry also had ample margins to manoeuvre, which became even more ample when concurring signorial powers acted in the same region. In this regard, peasants were not just a group of people to be dominated and exploited. Lords had to negotiate with them in order to establish compromises that could guarantee a stable and not too conflictual exercise of power for the benefit of everyone, and especially of the lords themselves.<sup>61</sup>

Any (re)population project requires elaborate planning and, above all, bringing people in, whether from nearby territories or from further afield. Two well-known cases of population displacements can help in clarifying the complex power dynamics behind the changing settlement patterns which Italy witnessed in these centuries. The attempted foundation of the *castrum* of Mandra Camellaria, some fifteen kilometres outside of Rome, reveals how workforce relocations could turn out to be a resounding flop when they were a purely top-down imposition. In around AD 994, the two brothers Aliprandus and Stephanus from the aristocratic Roman family *de Imiza* committed themselves to the foundation of a new fortified village on the land of the monastery of S. Gregorio sul Celio. According to the deal, the two brothers would have to build the walls and bring the inhabitants in (*populare*). However, by around the year AD 1018, they had still only managed to build a bit of the wall in the upper circuit and to gather and settle (*congregare*) only a few people in some marginal sectors of the site.<sup>62</sup> Likely, trying to make people move without letting them know what they would have to expect in the new place was a strategy that did not pay off. The importance of involving the local communities for the success of such undertakings emerges in the narration of the deeds of Aligerno (948/950?-985), abbot of the monastery of Monte Cassino, situated some 130 kilometres southeast of Rome. As reported by Leo Marsicanus in his chronicle, in about AD 950, Aligerno decided to reorganize the vast, and by then, long abandoned monastic landed patrimony.

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58 Wickham, *Medieval Rome*, 42-53.

59 Francovich, Changing structures of settlements.

60 Feller, Les mouvements migratoires.

61 Provero, *Contadini e potere*, 69-80.

62 *Il regesto del monastero dei SS. Andrea e Gregorio*, nn. 126 and 130, ed. Bartola, 498-502; 512-515.

To this end, he went to overpopulated areas, for example Termoli, on the Adriatic coast, about a hundred kilometres away. There, he summoned the local inhabitants and sought to persuade them to move to the monastic lands and to build new castles where they could live.<sup>63</sup>

On the other hand, beyond the political discourse, there is still much work to do for integrating the possible human-environmental dynamics into the scholarly debate about these and other changes in the Italian landscape. One should, for instance, wonder whether the earlier moving up to the hills might have been a response to the spread of malaria, due to the advancement of marshes after the crisis of the Roman villa system.<sup>64</sup> Also the general climatic instability, which preceded the medieval climate anomaly (c.900-1250), when wetter and colder meteorological conditions led to increasingly frequent flooding and precipitation episodes, might have played a certain role.<sup>65</sup> The model of farmsteads and hamlets established in upland areas in times of epidemic and climatic change has proved to be a valid explanation in other geographic and historical contexts. In fourteenth-century Sweden, as a new archaeological and palynological study shows, a certain number of hilltop villages were founded in the 1300s. At Ivarsbråten, a few kilometres away from the older Skasås by the shore of the Glafsforden water system, the micro-mobility of a group of peasants who, in an area of low seignorial control, established a new hilltop site may be interpreted as a risk management strategy to cope with environmental constraints. Technological innovations, including terraces for water runoff, the paving with stone of the flatter part of the settlement to keep the ground drier, the construction of an unusually large hearth built up with stones and clay to create good heat storage and finally, the simultaneous cultivation of cereals – barley, rye and oats – with different harvesting times are all evidence of adaptation to a changing climate.<sup>66</sup>

The long-term modifications in settlement patterns observable in northern Italy and the Po Valley between the fifth and eighth-ninth centuries can also be read within the framework of the climatic and environmental instability of the period. Despite the many uncertainties in the palaeoclimatic reconstructions of the first millennium of the Mediterranean basin, a certain consensus about the general weather conditions exists. A colder and wetter period in the sixth century was followed by a sequence of particularly rainy and harsh winters between AD 750 and AD 950.<sup>67</sup> The hydrological instability of the Po Valley is in all likelihood connected to this climatic variability. A study conducted by a team of climatologists on the salinity of the Ionian Sea as a proxy for the hydrology of the Po River has allowed them to reconstruct the decadal discharge of the river on a millennial scale. Three periods of maximum discharge have been detected. One of them dates between AD 300 and AD 600.<sup>68</sup> Another study on the lake-level fluctuations in Tuscany (central Italy) and Trentino (northeastern Italy) suggests higher water levels in the ninth century.<sup>69</sup>

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63 *Chronicon Monasteri Casinensis*, ed. Hofman, 179.

64 Skinner, *Health and Medicine*.

65 See Zanchetta *et al.*, *Beyond one-way determinism*.

66 Svensson *et al.*, *Moving up the hill?*

67 McCormick *et al.*, *Volcanoes and the climate forcing*; Newfield, *Climate downturn*; Büntgen *et al.*, *Cooling and societal change*.

68 Taricco *et al.*, *Marine sediments*.

69 Magny *et al.*, *Holocene climate changes*; Magny *et al.*, *Late Holocene climatic variability*.

Extensive geoarchaeological investigations have brought to light early medieval alluvial deposits, often several metres higher, in Lombardy, Romagna, the Po Valley and along the Adriatic shoreline. The foundation of Venice itself can be framed within this shifting settlement pattern, which, in the long term, affected the whole northern Adriatic arc. In Adria, an ancient Roman town located at the edge of the Venetian lagoon, two alluvial events, attributed to a tributary of the Po River, buried a ninth-century church under two metres of overbank deposits, turning it into an underground hall.<sup>70</sup> In all the areas struck by such inundations, archaeology has documented a variety of short- and medium-term coping strategies implemented by the local communities. These range from in situ adaptation through the construction of new buildings on top of the alluvial deposits and the diversion of water streams to the decline of pre-existing centres, like the above-mentioned Adria, and the creation of new hamlets and towns in safer places.<sup>71</sup>

### *Individual Mobilities, Everyday Affairs and Careerism*

An exceptional snapshot of an in-motion settlement comes from a charter dating around the year AD 840, when, as a result of the demarcation of boundaries between the *comitatus* of Monselice and Verona (in present-day Veneto) in a marshy lowland area, we are told that the older town of *Argile* was abandoned by its inhabitants. A new church, the church of S. Martino in *Armentaria*, was then built in a nearby location (*Casellas*). Here the villagers collectively excavated a *fossatus* (a drainage ditch), probably in an attempt to reclaim new land for agriculture. The place name *Casellas* refers to the characteristically wooden houses forming the predominant rural habitat throughout the Italian countryside until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries at the latest, when stone and tiles completely replaced the use of timber and other perishable materials.<sup>72</sup>

The use of perishable materials for domestic rural dwellings has long been interpreted as a marker of the miserable life conditions of medieval peasants and the lack of expertise in building technology characteristic of the rural world. More recently, however, both archaeologists and historians have set aside the allegedly economic and technological factors, to emphasize instead a conceptual shift in the ways that housing was understood during the early Middle Ages. The plan of many villages suggests that peasant houses could periodically be renovated and even moved. A small or structurally poor house could be demolished after one or two generations. Or, it could be enlarged, divided or split into several independent parts to meet the needs of a growing (or decreasing) family. The house could be dismantled and relocated a few metres away from its original location within the same settlement or else be transported elsewhere.<sup>73</sup> Archival documentation clearly indicates that the house was intended as a »movable good«, like other personal belongings, such as furniture or agricultural tools, rather than as real estate. In the case of departure from the village or the field, the peasant-owner was expected to take the timber with him, or even to move the house in its entirety to the new location.<sup>74</sup>

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70 Corrò and Mozzi, *Water matters*.

71 Brogiolo, *Flooding in northern Italy*.

72 *Codice diplomatico veronese*, n. 156, ed. Fainelli, 219-220

73 Arthur, *Edilizia residenziale*.

74 Hubert, *Mobilité de la population*.

Transportable wooden huts met the needs of a mobile rural population in a countryside where landownership was still very fragmented and nucleated villages and dispersed settlements coexisted. In the region of Nocera, in the province of Salerno (Campania), in the ninth and tenth centuries, there are numerous cases of plots of land located in the territory of a village and owned by farmers living in another nearby hamlet or in Nocera itself. Daily journeys on foot to reach the cultivated fields must therefore have been usual in the area.<sup>75</sup> The same holds true for *Liburia*, a fertile border zone between the duchies of Naples and Benevento, in the modern region of Nola and Pozzuoli in Campania. At the turn of the tenth century, the area was highly populated, with 60 rural villages (17 *castra* and *casalia* and 43 *loca* and *vici*). Tenant cultivators, mostly of free status, could have a parcel of land assigned to them (*hospites fundati*) or else not be attached to any specific field (*hospites exfundati*). Furthermore, the *hospites fundati* might or might not live and build their houses on the land they worked. Very often they preferred to remain in their own *vicus* and, accordingly, travel daily from their home to the estate and vice versa.<sup>76</sup>

The road travelled daily to one's field was the most elementary aspect of the space-time relationships that linked farmers to their environment. The rich archival material of the already mentioned abbey of San Salvatore al Monte Amiata, in southern Tuscany, draws a picture of a dynamic mobile society, where peasants and medium rural elites covered both smaller and bigger distances at least once in their lifetime. One such peasant, Fulcardo, came from afar. An inhabitant of Sovana (in the province of Grosseto), he was originally from the Duchy of Benevento. In AD 816, he sold the land that he owned in Boceno (in present-day Val di Paglia), a hamlet about 30 kilometres away from Sovana, to the abbey. He had probably met and married his wife, a local woman, in Boceno, thereby obtaining the land that he was now selling as a wedding gift from his father-in-law.<sup>77</sup> Richari and Alticunda came from even further afield. They were from Alamannia. In AD 826, Abbot Audualdo leased back to them the lands which they had previously ceded to the monastery along with some other properties that the monastery itself had acquired via exchange or as the result of a court case.<sup>78</sup> Certainly, Farolfo travelled fewer miles. The son of Farago from Gracciano (in the province of Montepulciano), he owned his portion of his father's inheritance in *Feroniano*, a now unknown locality situated a few kilometres away from Chiusi (in the province of Siena). In AD 862, Farolfo sold the lands in *Feroniano* to a priest named Celestino. He received a sword and a silver belt worth 20 *solidi* in exchange.<sup>79</sup> Why did Farolfo engage in such a deal? Why did he exchange his land for prestigious commodities? Was he about to venture somewhere? Questions remain open, but economic transactions concerning movable assets were probably more frequent than one might think.

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75 Loré, *I villaggi nell'Italia meridionale*, 545.

76 Di Muro, *Stratificazioni sociali*, 569-570.

77 *Codex diplomaticus Amiatinus*, n. 76, ed. Kurze, 151-152. Paziienza, »Cum p(re)misso Masarie socrus mee« and Paziienza, Residential (Im)mobility investigate hypergamous marriages of low-status Lombard immigrants as a way to climb the social ladder.

78 *Codex diplomaticus Amiatinus*, n. 98, ed. Kurze, 203-205.

79 *Codex diplomaticus Amiatinus*, n. 143, ed. Kurze, 301-302.



Supplementing the income derived from farming through the diversification of a household's economic portfolio, via renting out or transacting movable goods, such as beasts of burden, agricultural tools or even components of mills, set people and commodities in motion.<sup>80</sup> Some types of side occupations practised by peasants implied a greater degree of mobility. As we come to know from a famous letter written by Cassiodorus, in the sixth century, a market fair for Saint Cyprian was held annually in Lucania (present-day Basilicata). Countryfolk attended the market, where they could find all the finest produce from the surrounding regions of Campania, Bruttium, Calabria, and Apulia, and where they probably offered for sale their own merchandise, including young boys and girls. Traditionally, the reference about the children has been read as a proof of their parents' dire economic straits and used to infer widespread economic depression in rural Italy. As Cam Grey has pointed out, however, it seems more likely that it accounts for the continuation of long-established practices whereby a child's labour might be sold, rented, or leased for a specified period of time.<sup>81</sup> An entry contained in chapter 120 of the laws issued by King Liutprand in AD 731 must be read in this light. The chapter deals with mistreatments committed against a free woman. These range from »let her go hungry« or »not give her clothes or shoes«, or marrying her »to someone else's slave or *al dius*«, or again to »strike her dishonourably«, unless she was still a child. In this case – the legislator adds – an exception is made, for beating a little girl for the sake of correcting her bad habits or of teaching her how to carry out female works (probably housework) properly is permitted.<sup>82</sup>

For ambitious peasants carrying out occasional or additional activities, other than farming their fields or tending their flocks, in order to supplement their income could turn out to be a profitable business. I have already mentioned prosperous landowning peasants like Gundualdo and Karol, who made a fortune through accumulating and leasing land. Providing some sort of service to the local lord was potentially the most profitable of all the side occupations associated with the rural lifestyle. The example of the men of Bellagio – a small town by Lake Como – is instructive. These men – five in total – travelled around to serve the monastery of Sant'Ambrogio in Milan as »professional« witnesses on several occasions.<sup>83</sup> In AD 879, they witnessed the *vestitura*, that is, the public ceremony through which the estate of *Limonata*, a hamlet 40 kilometres north of Milan, by the shores of the lake, was transferred into monastic control. In AD 880, they testified for Sant'Ambrogio in a court case held in the cathedral of Como against the monastery of Reichenau which contested the possession of *Limonata*.

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80 Portass, Peasants, market exchange.

81 Grey, Landowning and Labour; for Cassiodorus' letter, see Cassiodorus, *Variae* 8.33, ed. Mommsen, 261-263; transl. Bjornlie, 352-354.

82 *Liutprandi Leges*, c. 120, ed. Bluhme, 157-158. See also Azzara and Gasparri (eds.), *Le Leggi dei Longobardi*, 210-211; Fischer Drew, *The Lombard Laws*, 197.

83 Balzaretti, Monastery of Sant'Ambrogio; Balzaretti, *Lands of Saint Ambrose*, 421-473.

And finally in AD 882, they testified again for Sant'Ambragio which was claiming labour-service from forty-seven *servi homines* and their families from Civenna, Cantoligo, Madronino and Selvaniaco.<sup>84</sup> We can only speculate about the reasons why the men of Bellagio, who were not clients of the monastery, engaged in such an activity. The prospect of economic advantages (financial capital) and the consolidation of their social prestige (social capital) back in their hometown may be counted amongst these.

### *Conclusions*

The one thousand years of history that the Middle Ages cover and the different political developments we encounter in the different regions of post-Roman Europe make any inquiry into the subject of peasantry and landlord-peasant social relations a complex one. Rural migrations, for their part, still remain a neglected aspect of research in both agrarian and political studies. Only recently has the trope in the European historical imagination of a rooted peasantry with a strong attachment to the land been disrupted in the wake of a fresh rereading of old and new evidence. To date, a steadily expanding body of sources, encompassing written texts, material culture, bioarchaeology and palaeoclimatic reconstructions, allows us to reconsider some key issues and add nuances to the idea of the miserable life and nutritional conditions of the rustics, the egalitarian lifestyle they were supposed to lead and the strength of their ties to the land. Also, this collection of data has been crucial in order to delve into the many asymmetrical power dynamics of rural societies and highlight the capacity of peasants to make strategic choices and take advantage of periods of crisis triggered by political constraints and/or environmental and climatic hazards.

Zooarchaeological remains and bioarchaeology show, for instance, a more varied diet and a better protein supply than in the earlier Roman centuries. Likewise, they hint at an unequal distribution of food resources within village communities. Additional material evidence, such as the diversity of peasant houses and other facilities in terms of size and the quality of building materials, opens a window on the social complexity of rural societies and the hierarchy of settlements. Written records, and especially records of court proceedings, stress forms of peasant solidarity and cohesion in defence of common goods and the use of woods and water resources. These same texts show how coordinated economic actions went hand in hand coupled with individual initiatives put forward by careerist peasants to make a profit at the expense of impoverished neighbours. For free small and medium-size allodial farmers, selling and buying lands or movable goods could be profitable activities. Other side occupations required peasants to be accustomed to moving around and changing their residence. Economic and societal rewards could come from serving as witnesses of a powerful local lord or, after migration to a new place, getting married to a local woman, and consequently acquiring new landed assets.

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84 For the 879 and the 882 documents, see *Codex Diplomaticus Langobardiae*, nn. 291 and 314, ed. Porro-Lambertenghi, 495-497 and 528-531. For the 880 document, see *I Placiti del Regnum*, n. 8, ed. Manaresi, 581-585.

The research field on the peasantry in medieval Italy is very well established, but despite the vast bibliography on the subject, a lot of data still needs to be interpreted or reinterpreted under a new light. It is impossible to define the characteristics of »the« medieval peasant. However, bearing in mind the risk of generalization, promising results can be obtained – as shown in the present study – by limiting the investigation in time and space to sixth- to tenth-century Italy. For this period, the adoption of new approaches and interpretative categories can help us clarify the extent to which factors such as the persistence of small landholdings influenced changes in the land market and, accordingly, affected both larger migratory flows and short-distant movements between settlements.

Micro-mobility, especially resettlement a few kilometres away from the parental hamlet or uphill to environmentally safer places, was a basic formative element of the rural societies of the time. Yet, the association between macro migrations and local displacements on the one hand, and societal changes in terms of wealth, status and access to resources by peasant elites, on the other, still remains in the shadows for the most part. Further in-depth investigations are, therefore, needed to fully understand the nature of these mobilities and shifting settlement patterns and the interplay between individual aspirations, political and territorial fragmentation, environmental and climatic stresses which determined decisions about staying put or venturing away.

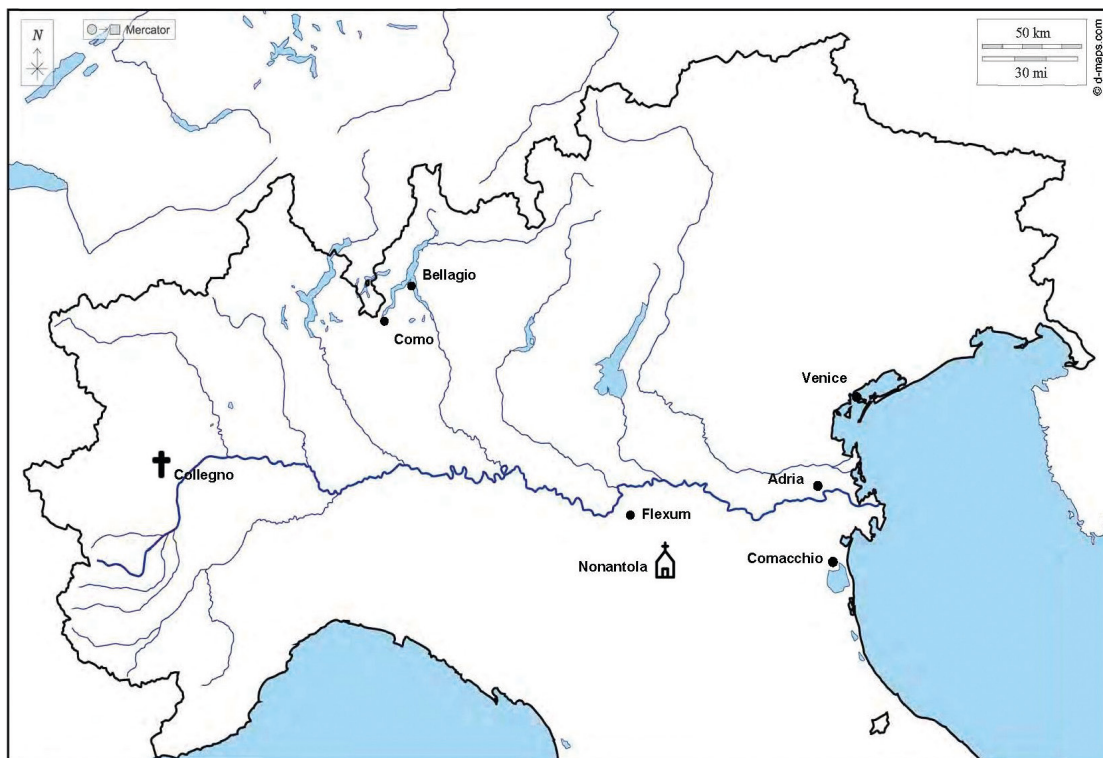


Figure 1: Map of northern Italy showing the sites referred to in the text (Annamaria Paziienza, 2024)

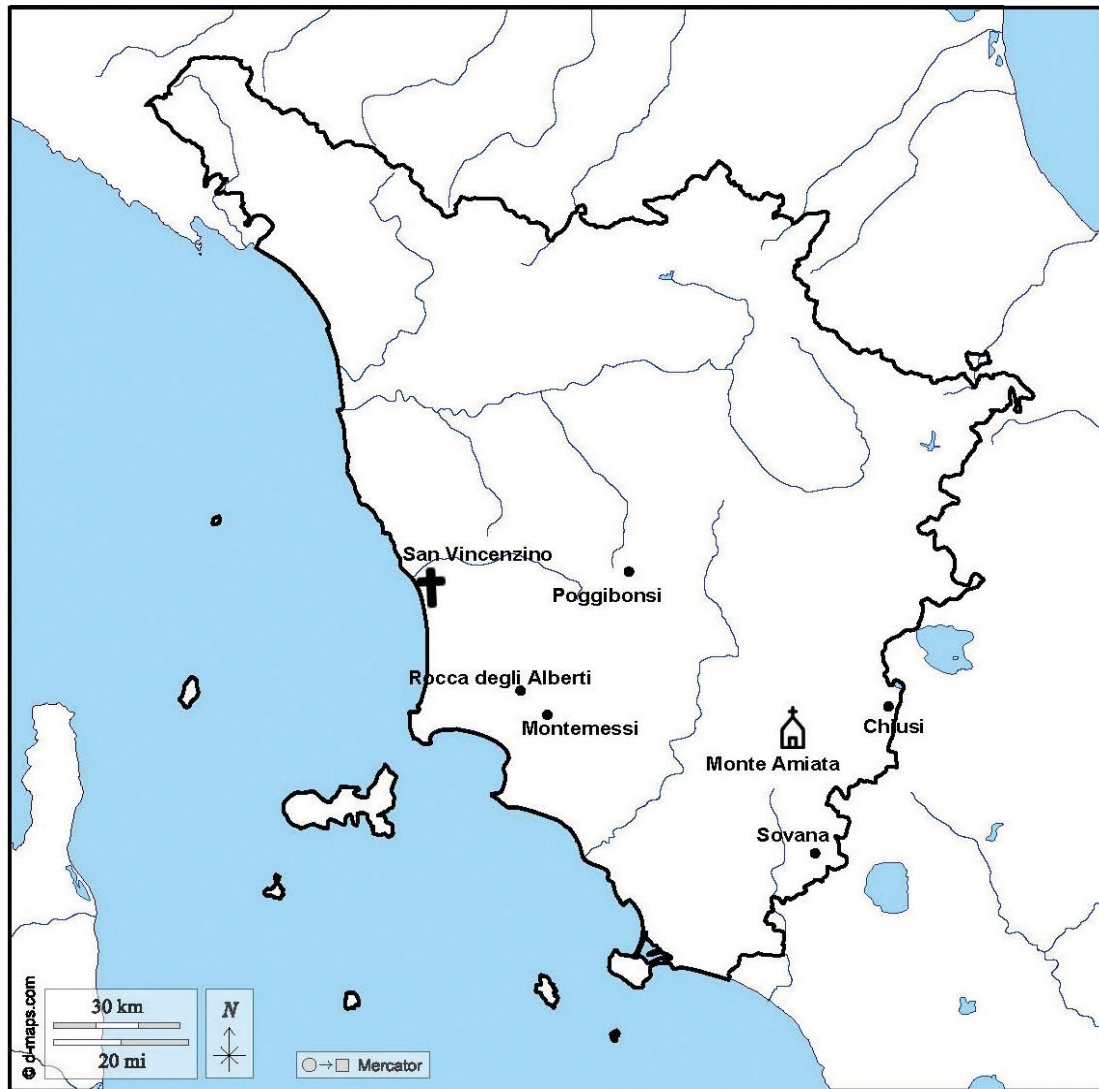


Figure 2: Map of Tuscany (central Italy) showing the sites referred to in the text (Annamaria Paziienza, 2024)

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Figure 2: Map of Tuscany (central Italy) showing the sites referred to in the text (Annamaria Paziienza, 2024)