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Forging an early medieval royal couple: Agilulf, Theodelinda and the ‘Lombard Treasure’ (1888–1932)

I. HISTORY OF A FAKE ‘TREASURE’

In the spring of 1930, the Burlington Fine Arts Club of London – one of the most prestigious private institution of art dealers and traders of Europe – organised an international exhibition called “The Art of the Dark Ages in Europe”. As many magazines and newspapers emphasized, it was the first exhibition totally dedicated to early medieval arts and crafts, and there was vivid interest in its broad European context, from Scandinavia to Italy. Beside early medieval archaeological finds belonging to the most important European Museums (the British Museum, the National Archaeological Museum of Budapest, the Archaeological National Museum of Berlin) and from the most important private collections, a new group of unpublished finds ‘dug up in Italy’ – belonging to the international firm Durlacher Brothers (London and New York) – attracted public attention. The group was formed from 11 golden objects exceptionally well preserved, the most striking of which was an iron and golden collar, reproducing in the centre the iconography of the so-called ‘Lamina di Agilulfo’ (or Agilulf plate, found at Valdinievole and now kept at the Bargello Museum, Florence) (Fig. 1). The other pieces from this group were an iron and golden helmet and a sword with gold double rings, a spear head decorated in gold (Fig. 2), two saxes and a shield decorated in gold (Fig. 3), nine squared belt decorations (Fig. 4), a golden spur and a belt-buckle with golden eagles (Fig. 5), a golden cross, and a golden saddle (Fig. 6). While most of the pieces found striking comparison with the archaeological finds of the Lombard cemeteries of Nocera Umbra and Castel Trosino, both findings discovered at the end of the 19th century and published between 1902 and 1923, other objects – such as the helmet, the spur and the eagle belt-buckle – were instead more generally compared with east European materials from the 5th to the 10th centuries.

But this striking find, which was exhaustively reproduced in many art magazines, was not sold on this occasion (its enormous price was 120.000 Pounds). Therefore its contents were temporarily locked in the British Museum. In the meantime the Durlacher Brothers printed – with the scientific assistance of Reginald Smith, the keeper of the Department of Antiquity of the British Museum – a very smart catalogue with luxurious pictures of each of the golden items, bearing the title “Treasure from a Lombard chieftain’s grave”, which was sent all over Europe to potential customers. In its preface, probably written by Smith, it was strongly suggested that “the scene embossed in the collar may inspire some antiquary to identify the original owner of this panoply”, implying that these finds were to be connected with the grave of Agilulf, king of the Lombard at the beginning of the 7th century, although the main suggestion was that the grave was generally a royal one that could allow one “to date to a year several works of art that show the Lombards at their best, and have an important bearing on the archaeology of Europe in the Dark Ages”. Judging by the International Library Catalogues, this volume was distributed by the Durlachers in Europe and America in at least four copies: in England (British Museum, Sackler Library, Oxford); in Norway (University Library, Bergen); in Germany

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5. [Reginald A. Smith], Treasure from a Lombard chieftain’s grave, London [1930–32]. The authorship of Reginald Smith is only presumed on the basis of his deep involvement in this affair. In the Oxford Sackler Library and the Passau Library copies of this catalogue this suggestion is strongly emphasised in pencil.

Fig. 1. ‘The Lombard Treasure’. First Group. Golden collar and golden cross.

Fig. 2. ‘The Lombard Treasure’. First Group.
a. Iron helmet. b. Dagger and sword

Fig. 3. ‘The Lombard Treasure’. First Group. Two saxes.

Fig. 4. ‘The Lombard Treasure’. First Group. Belt decorations
(University Library, Passau) and finally in New York (Metropolitan Museum). But if we look at them we can have the vivid impression of a book ‘in construction’. In fact these copies all vary concerning the number of finds in the ‘Lombard Treasure’: the Passau copy bears only eight photos (reproducing the objects displayed in the London Exhibition in 1930); the Bergen copy has instead sixteen images; and the Oxford one has twenty-three, the same number of the copy preserved at the Metropolitan Museum.

As it is recorded in the letters of the Durlacher Archive at the Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the Durlachers wrote to Smith after the London exhibition, in September 1930, announcing that the site of the
Lombard Treasure had been dug again and more finds had been discovered. At the same time they promised to reveal the name of the site once the British Museum had purchased the objects. The progressive structure of the catalogue shows that between 1930 and 1932 the Agilulf treasure was progressively increased, but at the same time that its morphology completely changed: in fact the ‘new finds’ were all golden objects showing clearly that the grave belonged not just to Agilulf, but also to his wife Theodelinda. Not only was every ‘new’ object very explicitly connected to the iconography of the ‘Lamina from Valdinievole’, but also the whole

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7 B.M., B.F., from Alfred Durlacher to Reginald Smith, September 11th, 1930: “We have had more finds, the chief object is another shield which is in a very delicate state”.
group assembled finds known from other royal graves in Europe, first of all Childeric’s in Tournai. Included were not only ‘insignia’ of royal military power (another golden shield, another two swords mounted in gold, saxes and crowns) (Fig.7a, b), but, at the same time, some ‘female’ objects appeared (belonging therefore to Theodelinda), such as a golden fibula, an ivory comb, a gold vessel handle, a gold purse handle, a couple of disc-brooches, two golden earrings, a necklace composed by glass-beads and a coin of emperor Justin II (Fig. 8a, b, c).

Most interestingly, in the new version of the catalogue, the treasure was firmly linked to the grave of Agilulf and Theodelinda through the written word. Inscriptions appear on a certain number of power symbols that combined iconography and words from other Agilulfian finds: a sword bore the same image of the ‘Lamina from Valdinievole’ of Agilulf sitting seat on the throne together with the inscription ‘+ AGILULF GRACIA DEI VIR GLORIOSISSIMUS REX TOTIUS ITALIAE’, which was the same inscription as in the so-called Agilulf votive crown, now lost (Fig.9). Another sword instead bore the inscription ‘TEODELENGA REG[INA] GLORIOSISSEMA+’ (Fig. 10a, b) and the shape of its handle clearly referred to the swords of the Tetrarchs statue in Venice. An iron helmet, decorated in gold and surmounted by a cross, bore the inscription ‘AGILULFUS REX + ITALIE TOTIUS GRATIA + DEI + GLORIOSISSIMUS’, and ‘VICTURIA’ and ‘REX’, which were each repeated twice (Fig. 11). A glass horn, decorated in gold and red enamel, bore the inscription ‘+VICTURIA+’ four times and the inscription ‘REX’ three times (Fig. 12). A golden cross carried the inscription ‘VICTURIA REX’ (Fig. 13). Therefore, the ‘new finds’ used in a very explicit way the royal image and words of the ‘Lamina from Valdinievole’, reproducing four times an image of the king seated on the throne (on the crown, on the horn, on the cross, and on the buckle). The word ‘VICTURIA’, which appears on the standards of the ‘Lamina from Valdinievole’, became a distinctive sign of Agilulf’s identity. The same mechanism was used for queen Theodelinda, who appears with long hair and a crown, on a sword and on two

Fig. 10. ‘The Lombard Treasure’. Second Group. Theodolinda dagger

Fig. 12. ‘The Lombard Treasure’. Second Group. Horn (detail)

Fig. 11. ‘The Lombard Treasure’. Second Group. a: Golden crown with Agilulf portrait; b: Dagger with Agilulf portrait
belts (Fig. 15). Completing the image of this royal Lombard couple as a truly early medieval European one, other explicit signs of royal power were inserted, such as two golden crowns (similar to the Visigothic votive crown of Guarrazar9) and eleven golden bees, directly inspired by the bees discovered in the grave of the Merovingian king Childeric in Tournai (Fig. 16). At the same time the cautious introduction of the catalogue’s first edition was radically changed, now quoting the lamina from Valdinevole in order to provide a reliable

source for the collection and stating with certainty the interpretation that this was the very grave of Agilulf and Theodelinda, although its location remained undisclosed.10

The history of the Lombard Treasure is thus an interesting point of departure for at least three strands of research. From one side it demonstrates the growing interest in early medieval objects as defining national identities and collective memories at the beginning of the 20th century, a subject that recently has been at the core of much archaeological and historical research.11 From another perspective it shows the insertion of Lombard material evidence into a broader European context with an interest in its role as a witness to Germanic civilisation in Mediterranean culture. Finally it reveals the progressive tendency to define individual characteristics of kingship that were thought to be highly attractive in defining the material presence of important and documented ‘heroes’ of the early medieval past, satisfying the Italian local tradition of identifying the names of individuals buried and found in archaeological cemeteries, and attributing to them the character of local civic ancestors.12 But, at the same time, the failure of the Lombard Treasure shows the extreme fragility of Lombard memory, as in the 19th century the increasing number of Lombard cemeteries discovered all over Italy were not sustained by any national pride.13 Thus, the role of the Lombards in Italian cultural memory that had been important in many contexts since the late medieval period was not continued on a national level.14 In contrast to other European nations, in Italy the early medieval period was not conceived, in the historiographic tradition elaborated during the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, as the moment of birth of the present nation; it was instead conceived as a dark period of cultural regression, politically dominated by ‘foreign people’. This hostility toward emphasizing the Germanic occupation of Italy during the early Middle Ages certainly also dominated the ambiguous relationship between Italy and Germany before the Second

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10 Treasure from a Lombard chieftain’s grave, 1 (University of Passau Library copy).
14 During the late medieval period, instead, Lombard memory was a very important political tool for the elaboration and legitimization of the Signorie in Lombardy: see Piero Majocchi, Papia urbs regia. Storia e memoria di una capitale altomedievale (Roma, in print); and Piero Majocchi’s contribution in this volume.
World War, in the cultural opposition between Hitler and Mussolini and their conflicting ideas about the heritage of Mediterranean and Germanic civilisation in the past.15

For this reason the attribution of this ‘treasure’ to a Lombard king is extremely interesting. The faked Lombard objects are at the same time a sign of the ideological utilisation of the Lombard period in Italy structured by the historiography between the second half of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century, and the sign of interlacement between national and international memory in defining the identity of the early medieval Italian past. These fake archaeological materials were copied from genuine Lombard objects from central Italy (possibly their iron parts are genuine Lombard objects, while their golden decoration was added later16). A fundamental role in reconstructing this early medieval Italian past – local but also international – was played by the artistic and archaeological patrimony that archaeological research of the 19th century continued to emphasise, although as pure remains of cultural decline: primarily, the Lombard cemeteries, which were increasingly dug up due to the unification of Italy at Testona (Turin), Cividale (Udine), Castel Tesino (Ascoli Piceno), and Nocera Umbra (Perugia). Recent research shows that these remains were for a long period conceived only as a local history: if for Italian history they were material evidence for the ‘Dark Ages’ of the nation, they became evidence of the excellent past of some cities.17 Local museums and national research therefore had conflicting interests and reasons for preserving and exhibiting barbaric objects, alternately interpreting the Lombards as local citizens and/or invaders.18 But this local appeal, emphasised as it was in local magazines and monuments, was not enough to transform the Lombards into authentic European leaders.

In a sense the construction of the Lombard Treasure by the Durlachers shows how distant and unappealing the Lombards were – even when linked to one of their most famous kings, Agilulf – for the international art market. In fact, despite the efforts of both the Durlachers and Reginald Smith, the ‘treasure’ never found a customer: in 1938 its price dropped down to 32.000 pound, and, after a long series of letters, the Metropolitan Museum of New York refused to buy it.19

But at the same time it is interesting to study the evolution of this failure, as this very effort proves at least the possibility of inserting the Lombard finds into a broader wave of interest, if not by Italian national authorities, then by northern European collectors and museums. It was the chance to create an interest in the Lombards as representatives of Germanic or Teutonic art, and not as representatives of Italian invaders. This opportunity was presented by Italian Lombard finds that, since the end of the 19th century, were discovered in northern Italy and capitalized on the increasing local fame of Theodelinda in ‘her’ town of Monza.20

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15 Cfr. the vivid report by Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli of Hitler’s visit in Rome and the explicit conflict between him and Mussolini on the value of Roman antiquities and the supremacy of Roman civilisation: Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli, Hitler e Mussolini 1938: il viaggio del Führer in Italia (Milano 1995).
16 B.M., B. F. September 1930. Analyses at the British Museum Laboratory on the iron parts of the shield; the golden decoration has been shown to result from a modern chemical process instead: see Darfydd Kidd, Fakes of the early medieval European jewellery, in: Fake? The Art of Deception, ed. Mark Jones (London 1990) 173–176.
19 See the correspondence between Alfred Durlacher and George Eumorfopoulos in 1938: “I am sorry Grancsay [N. T. Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, New York] gave you no idea why they see no chance of their endeavouring to buy the Gold Treasure, I have a strong suspicion some one may have crabbled it. I consulted my friend Reginald Smith who made the Catalogue at the British Museum, he merely said you cannot prevent people telling lies” (Durlacher Archive, Paul Getty Foundation, Los Angeles, 22. 03. 1938).
20 Various stages in the archaeological discovery of Theodelinda’s grave are illustrated by Gunther Haseloff, Die Funde aus dem Sarkophag der Konigin Theodelinda in Monza, in: Germania 30 (1952) 368–377; the local tradition in Piacenza is examined by Emilio Nasalli Rocca, La tradizione piacentina della tomba di re Ildeprando, in I settimana del Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto medioev (Spoleto 1951) 417–426. On the Theodelinda treasure in Monza, see Piero Majocchi in this volume. The list of chronological discoveries of graves of Lombard kings is in Karl Heinrich Krüger, Königsgrabkirchen der Franken, Angelsachsen und Langobarden bis zur Mitte des 8. Jahrhunderts (München 1971).
Of course we are dealing with a fake collection, as was officially stated by German archaeologists in 1940, but its cultural value has been underestimated as it is completely unknown to Italian and international historiography, apart from a short article in 1990 devoted to examining fake early medieval objects in the British Museum collections. Its inconsistency was shown as early as July 1930 (two months after the London exhibition) by the director of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nürnberg, Ernst Zimmermann, who did not hesitate to call it “eine plume Fälschung” in a letter to the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum. But the collection also had strong admirers: Albert Dresdner, Professor in Art History in Berlin, presented it as “a new find which was made in the south of the territories occupied by Teutonic races, a find which exceeds in splendour anything that had hitherto been preserved of Germanic civilisation”, being “so thoroughly Germanic that it affords evidence of the pertinacity in which the Langobardi adhered to their Germanic character even after embracing Christianity”.

In this context the key figure is certainly Reginald Smith, keeper of the British Museum, not because he was consciously involved in the forgery, but because he strongly believed that the ‘Lombard Treasure’ would restore his image and his local reputation as an European expert of ‘Teutonic Antiquities’. In this history, personal difficulties and cultural history are strongly intertwined: as his correspondence with the Durlachers shows, Smith was really convinced as to the authenticity of the Lombard collection, thinking that the doubts on its authenticity were merely tools of personal insult against him. In fact his bad reputation and difficult relationship with the British Museum staff emerge vividly even from the writings on his memory after his death.

From his correspondence it is clear that Smith considered the early medieval exhibition at the Burlington Club a good opportunity to improve his reputation and that he was engaged in it for a year, despite some doubts. He had known about some pieces of the ‘Treasure’ since May 1929 when Alfred Durlacher had sent a golden sword to him for an expert opinion, and soon, he wrote that he had bought it “although I had to give a certain amount for it”. After giving his (positive) opinion on the sword, Smith wrote to Alfred Durlacher because “I am interested in know[ing] where they [i.e., the sword and a shield] go as the Burlington Fine Arts Club is having an exhibition of such things in the spring.”

From their side, the Durlachers acted in the paradigmatic way expected of dealers of forgeries. First they were very cautious toward Reginald Smith. They had dealt with him well before the London exhibition, asking at first for some bibliography on a “gold hilted sword which has been offered to us [which] ..is one of those objects which are open to doubt”. Then they offered to the British Museum some objects from the ‘grave’, stating that “the firm does not desire publicity because these and other relics from the cemetery might occasion

22 Kidd, Fakes.
23 B. M., B. F. July 10th 1930: from E. Zimmerman to E. MacLagan; July 16th 1930: from E. MacLagan to E. Zimmermann, where it is asked “I hope I may have your permission to quote your letter if such proposal (of acquisition) is for one of our national collections”; reference to this correspondence also in June 7th 1938 from E. McClagan to T. D. Kendrick.
24 Durlacher Archive, Los Angeles: 1933, March, 23 to T. S. Grancsay from Kirk Askew (Durlacher Brothers, New York); this letter includes the translation in English of Albert Dresdner, Professor in Art History at the Technische Hochschule Berlin, A Lombard Royal Treasure, formerly in Deutsche Rundschau, s.d., 1–10.
25 Smith is in fact the author of the first catalogue of the British Museum dedicated to evaluating the impact of the early medieval European and British past: Reginald A. Smith, A Guide to the Anglo-Saxon and Foreign Teutonic Antiquities in the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities (London 1923).
26 Durlacher Archive, Los Angeles, 1938, March 22.
27 See, for example, the few lines dedicated to him in: The History of the British Museum (London 1996) 275–276; Alec B. Tonnochy, Four keepers of the department of British and medieval antiquities, in: British Museum Quarterly 18 (1953) 83–88 (I owe this reference to Dr. Leslie Webster – British Museum).
28 B. M. July 17th 1929 from Reginald Smith to the Secretary, Burlington Fine Arts Club: “I do not see how anyone can accumulate enough material to provide an exhibition of the high standard usual at Savile Row.”
29 B. M. May 3rd 1929, Alfred Durlacher sent the sword to Reginald Smith for an expert opinion, writing that “in the case with the sword is a rough map of the district where the tomb is said to be” (this map was not found later); June 7th 1929: Alfred Durlacher bought the sword “although I had to give a certain amount for it”, obviously after having had a positive reply.
30 B. M., B. F. July 23rd 1929 from Reginald Smith to Alfred Durlacher; September 27th 1929, positive reply from Alfred Durlacher.
31 Anthony Grafton, Forgers and Critics. Creativity and Duplicity in Western Scholarship (Oxford 1993).
32 The correspondence between the Durlacher Firm and Reginald Smith date from at least 1928: cfr. B. M., January 20th 1928; January 21st 1928; July 20th 1928; December 21st 1928; March 21st 1929.
33 B. M., B. F. July 19th 1929.
difficulties with Italy, especially as the graves discovered may well be those of Agilulf king of the Lombards and his queen Theodelinda".34 Showing doubts and caution, asking for an expert opinion, and finally acting in a mysterious way were the classic moves with which forgers convinced their clients of the authenticity and rarity of their pieces. Certainly he was unaware that the Italian government was totally uninterested in the Germanic past of the Italian nation; although eventually, the later project of classifying and publishing the Germanic material past in Europe, promoted by the Germans, would be seen by the Italian government as a real threat for the political future of the Italian nation. Emphasising Germanic roots and the spread of their settlement in Italy would have meant providing material evidence for a German re-occupation of native lands.35

But this ‘Lombard treasure’ is also interesting from another perspective, one that concerns the difference in structure between the first group – the pieces exhibited in the London Exhibition – and the second one, modelled on the idea of “Aladdin’s cave” as Otto Kurz has put it.36 The first nucleus of the treasure was composed by philological and chronological criteria, satisfying – through the shared conscience of the image of a ‘barbarian chief’ – the idea that Italian archaeologists and historians had developed about early medieval Italy and about the role of the Lombard domination. As we will also see in the second part of this paper, the choice of Agilulf as a prestigious king was based on the increasing local fame of queen Theodelinda in Monza and her reputation as a catholic medium for the pagan Lombards, while the appeal of her second husband Agilulf relied on his reputation as victorious and ‘wise’ king Agilulf (a fame that was alive since the 14th century on account of Giovanni Boccaccio’s novel17). The later additions, certainly produced between 1930 and 1932, traced in a striking and inaccurate way ownership of the objects to Agilulf and Theodelinda, copying very famous royal objects from all over Europe, showing no care about chronology or cultural contexts. We can then suspect that the original project of the contents of Agilulf’s grave was later increased to try to convince European customers of the royalty of the grave and its link to the Lombard couple.

As the choice of Agilulf and Theodelinda, from the other known Lombard kings and queens, for this forgery was not casual, it is very surprising that recent archaeological and historical research did not consider the various objects connected over time to this royal couple, since the elaboration of its material personality present many uncertain and obscure sides, that we will explore in the second part of this paper.

2. AGILULF OR “IL CAVALIERE INESISTENTE”38

Now, it is necessary to take a step back, to examine the objects related to Agilulf and Theodelinda, regarded as authentic in the scientific literature. This is the case in first place with the plate from Val di Nievole and of Agilulf’s crown, and secondly with the background, the whole Treasure of the Cathedral at Monza (containing the so-called Theodelinda crown). As a preliminary remark, we should admit that several of these objects are surrounded by many doubts – of interpretation, of attribution, and even of (total or partial) authenticity.

Today the famous Agilulf plate is kept at the Museum of Bargello in Florence (Fig. 17). It is a gilded copper plate that, as Michael McCormick writes, “preserves the earliest known portrait of a Germanic ruler seated on a throne”. Agilulf makes the gesture of allocutio, typical of the imperial iconography. His feet rest on a support and he clasps his sword in his lap. Behind him stand two bodyguards, holding lances and shields and wearing helmets. These figures are flanked by two winged Victories, holding horns and inscribed standards. The Victories introduce to the king two sets of figures with outstretched hands and bent knee, apparently proceeding from the towers or city-symbols that are on each side of the plate. The right-hand suppliant is bearded and has been identified as a Lombard, while the left-hand suppliant appears to be clean-shaven and has been

34 Dafydd Kidd thinks that this was the main reason for the British Museum choosing not to buy the Treasure. But in these years Mussolini’s regime was not at all interested in the early medieval Italian past, aimed as it was at celebrating the glories of Rome: Daniele Manacorda, Ostia e l’archeologia fascista, in: Archeologia Medievale 4 (1980) 341–349.
37 Giovanni Boccaccio, Decameron (ed. Vittore Branca, Florence 1960). The ideas about Agilulf as an efficient and civilised ruler were very strong in North European culture: see for example the lyric Opera Agilulf the Wise (1932). The subject of connection between national identity and lyric operas has been examined recently by Carlotta Sorba, Teatri. L’Italia del melodramma nell’Italia del Risorgimento (Bologna 2001), following the suggestion by Homi K. Bhabha, Nation and Narration (London/New York 1990).
38 Italo Calvino, Il cavaliere inesistente (Torino 1977).
interpreted as a Roman. Each is followed by a clean-shaven person, carrying decorated helmets or crowns surmounted by crosses.39

On the plate one can read the letters ‘DN AG IL V’ to the right of the king, ‘REGI’ to the left, that is, ‘domno Agilulfo regi’. The only other writing on the plate is the word ‘VICTVRIA’, inscribed twice on the Victories’ standards. The inscription allows us to identify the king seated on the throne as Agilulf (590–616). McCormick describes the scene as similar to a triumph, but he is not sure “whether the scene was meant to commemorate a particular ceremony along the lines of the arrival of the Roman symbols of victory”, for example, Agilulf’s victory over his rebellious dukes, according to Paul the Deacon’s account, “or whether it was intended as a symbolic depiction of Agilulf’s quality as victor and ruler of Roman and barbarian alike”.40 McCormick’s interpretation is more plausible than that by Otto von Hessen, who thought that the scene showed Agilulf’s accession to the throne, with crowds brought to him by his Roman and Lombard subjects.41 von Hessen affirmed that the two crowns represent Lombard and Byzantine Italy respectively, but this interpretation is weakened by the fact that the crown as the symbol of a kingdom is proper only to the political culture of the late Middle Ages.42 As far as the offering of the aurum coronarium is concerned, this gift-procession, typical of the imperial ceremonial of Late Antiquity, could not be interpreted in the sense supposed by von Hessen. Recently, Gerhard Dilcher recognized in the scene depicted on the plate the gairenthix, the assembly of the arimanni chaired by the king, on occasion of which manifested “das zentrale Element langobardisch-germanischer Königsherrschaft”, that is, “die gentile Komponente”.43

As one can see, the scene is not easy to interpret. The complexity of the plate hindered an univocal interpretation by the several scholars who studied it. It is certain, however, that the purpose of the relief was to exalt King Agilulf. Wilhelm Kurze has even suggested that the scene has been copied from one of the wall paintings of the royal palaces in Monza or Pavia.44

There are many iconographic models for this plate, even if they are not of help in the interpretation of its content. The relief could be modelled after the political iconography of the imperial missorium (the most famous is the missorium of Theodosius I, today in Madrid, a silver plate made in 388 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Emperor’s accession to the power) or after the scenes of Constantine’s column. Single elements can be taken from consular dyptics or coins. Another iconographic model could have been the Christian iconography, in particular the figures of Mary and Christ on the throne, flanked by angels holding lances and by groups of offerers, represented on the mosaics of Parenzo and Ravenna. The metalworker could also have adapted the iconography of Ravenna’s sarcophagi.45

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39 Michael McCormick, Eternal Victory. Triumphant Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West (Cambridge 1986) 289–293. The importance of hairdressing in the definition of the belonging, as free-men, to the regnum Langobardorum or to the lands of Byzantine Italy is apparent in a passage of the life of Gregory III (731–741), in which the pontiff’s biographer remembers how Liutprand, after having invaded the countryside around Rome, shaved and clothed many Roman nobles in Lombard manner: Liber Pontificalis (ed. Louis Duchesne 1, Paris 1886) here 420.


42 Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies. A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology (Princeton 1957). For the quotation, von Hessen, I ritrovamenti 15. The first to advance the hypothesis of the two crowns was Wilhelm Kurze, La lamina di Agilulfo: usurpazione o diritto?, in: Atti del VI Congresso internazionale di studi sull’alto medioevo, II (Spoleto 1980) 447–456, here 452. Seeing in the plate the expression of “a political idea never realized completely” (Ibid. 455), that is, the sovereignty of Agilulf over the whole of Italy, over the land occupied by the Lombards as well as over the Byzantine territories (on the crown attributed to the king, Agilulf is defined rex totius Italiae, see below and notes 39–45). Agilulf’s sovereignty was recognized by the Byzantine Empire during the reign of Phocas in 609–610, but soon revoked by Heraclius: ibid. 452–455.


44 Kurze, La lamina 452. Kurze is referring to the renowned passage of the Historia Langobardorum, in which Paul the Deacon describes the frescoes commissioned by Theodelinda at Monza: Paulus Diaconus, Historia Langobardorum IV, 22 (ed. Georg Waitz, MGH SS rerum Langobardicarum et Italicarum saec. VI–IX, Hannover 1878) 122; for Pavia, we have no data, and this is a simple conjecture by Kurze.

Scholars do not completely agree on the meaning of the relief and on the models that inspired the metalworker, but the difference is not great on these two issues. Instead, there is a greater divergence in scholars’ interpretations of the plate as an object. The traditional interpretation is from Otto von Hessen who thinks the plate is a helmet’s visor of a Lamellenhelm; he says also that there are no elements to confirm that this was Agilulf’s helmet, but he thinks it is very likely that a lavish helmet like this could have been made for the king and then gifted by him to one of the Lombard dukes.46

This interpretation poses several problems. First of all, the Lamellenhelme are poorly known; moreover, we are struck by the uncertainty shown by von Hessen in the interpretation of the helms worn by the warriors flanking Agilulf on the plate. Each wears a helm defined by von Hessen himself as “a placche” in his contribution of 1968, but which he, in 1981, identified as Lamellenhelme (a type to which he attributed the plate, as a front-guard). Von Hessen does not justify this change of opinion, but it seems that it has been stimulated by the need to validate the assumption of his thesis, as demonstrated by the fact that he himself admits the extreme rarity of the Lamellenhelm among the grave-goods. So, in short, the representation of two similar helmets on the plate would strengthen the attribution of the plate as a part of a Lamellenhelm.47

Von Hessen’s thesis has been already questioned. Wilhelm Kurze made the most significant changes in the interpretation of the plate. According to him, the plate originally was fixed as a decoration on a wooden casket or perhaps on a throne; only later would it have been adapted as a helmet’s visor.48 Recently, Chiara Frugoni further developed the first part of Kurze’s interpretation, but she completely refuted any possibility that the plate would have been used as a helmet’s visor. The Spangenhelme had a visor that was almost straight, like the helmets of the plate’s warriors (while Agilulf’s plate has two bends on the lower side). Moreover, the visors of the Lamellenhelme we know are smaller than Agilulf’s plate and they do not have the double bend on the eyebrows. Two other comments of Frugoni are, first, the plate’s bends end with a tip that leaves no place for the nose; second, the holes for the nails are near to the bends, and this could have been very dangerous if the plate should have been really a helmet’s visor, because the nails would have been too close to the eyes.49

Moreover, the plate is flat, and this feature does not match the interpretation of the plate as a helmet’s visor. Von Hessen admits that the plate is “almost flat”, but he thinks that “it took this shape only later, because it remained underground and it was also restored”. But Frugoni rightly observes that the restoration of the crack on the left side of the plate joined the two pieces, but it did not straighten the plate. Besides, if the weight of the ground should have straightened the so-called visor, it should also have crushed the fragile relief, which is not damaged at all.50

Frugoni’s analysis is more convincing than the traditional one. She also suggested that, because of the traces of wood on the back, the plate was nailed down, like a decoration, on a precious casket that was used as

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46 The two different versions are in Otto von Hessen, I ritrovamenti barbarici nelle collezioni civiche veronesi del Museo di Castelvecchio, Museo di Castelvecchio (Verona 1968) 44–46, and id., I ritrovamenti longobardi, 3–6.

47 Chiara Frugoni points out these contradictions in Immagini fra tardo antico e alto medioevo: qualche appunto, in: Morfologie sociali e culturali in Europa fra tardo antichità e alto medioevo, Settimane del CISAM, II (Spoleto 1998) 703–744, here 720 and 724–725. Moreover, the two warriors’ helmets do not show any nose-piece, which is instead a characteristic of the three Lamellenhelme quoted by von Hessen. As observed by Chiara Frugoni, von Hessen uses the same drawings, already published in his first article to demonstrate how the helmets depicted on the Isola Rizza dish and on the plate are of the type “a placche”, to prove, in his second contribution, their nature as Lamellenhelme. This proves that von Hessen was not working with real facts. Silvia Lusuardi Siena agrees with von Hessen, cf. Una precisazione sulla lamina di Valdinnievole, in: Studi di Storia dell’arte in onore di Maria Luisa Gatti Perer, ed. Marco Rossi/Alessandro Rovetta (Milano 1999) 15–26, in which she defines the lamina as a “front-guard pertaining to an helm of the Asiatic type”, that is Lamellenhelm, similar to those attested in archaeological contexts of the 6th and 7th century in Alamanni and in the Lombard territories. Doing so, Lusuardi Siena underlines how one of the three examples cited by von Hessen, the helm from Niederstotzingen, is Alamannic, and how just two are the Lamellenhelme from Lombard Italy: they were discovered respectively at Castel Trosino and Nocera Umbra, but they both show significant differences with the helmets depicted on the plate (Frugoni, Immagini 724).

48 Kurze, La lamina 451–452. The same thesis was proposed by the Keeper of the Bargello Museum: Il Museo Nazionale di Firenze nel triennio 1889–1891, in: Archivio Storico dell’Arte 6 (1893) 1–24, here 22. On the nexus between Rossi and Kurze (who probably did not know the mentioned article), Frugoni, Immagini, 720 note 38 and 724 note 52. On Rossi, see below, text and note 14.

49 Frugoni, Immagini 724–727. A different opinion has been expressed by Lusuardi Siena, Una precisazione 19–23, who thinks that the holes were used for the passage of the straps that tied together the single parts of the Lamellenhelm.

50 Frugoni, Immagini 725–726, text and note 55; the rupture on the plate has been romantically ascribed to a stroke of one’s sword, or to the pressure of the stones, or to a clumsy restoration attempted by the discoverer (Lusuardi Siena, Una precisazione 22 f.). On the back of the plate, there is an iron sheet that Frugoni thinks was added successively, perhaps after the restoration, because it fills several holes along the edges of the plate itself.
a shrine. This shrine could have been gifted to the same king Agilulf from his subject dukes or from a bishop. In fact the writing on the plate says “victory to king Agilulf”, so it is likely that the object of which it was part was a gift presented to the king and not the inverse.\textsuperscript{51}

We will return later to the problem presented by the inscription. My brief analysis of the recent bibliography shows that the disagreement about the origin of the relief’s iconography and its meanings is very narrow; instead there is great disagreement about the object’s original function. What was the Agilulf Plate? What was it used for? The theory of the plate as a helmet’s visor has been completely demolished by Chiara Frugoni. But I am convinced neither by her idea that the plate was a shrine’s decoration, nor by Kurze’s solution that it was a part of a throne. This object seems to me an \textit{unicum}. And we must remember another peculiarity of this plate: its relief was – as McCormick wrote – the first known portrait of a barbarian king seated on a throne.\textsuperscript{52}

Therefore, it is very intriguing that nobody doubted the authenticity of the plate. Now, to probe deeper into the question, it is necessary to investigate how the plate was bought by the Museum of Bargello.

Between July and November 1891, the Keeper of the Bargello, Umberto Rossi, wrote to the Director of the Royal Galleries in Florence, asking him to buy the plate for a price of 600 lire. The plate was found “carrying rocks between the ruins of a castle in Val di Nievole”, between Lucca and Pistoia. The seller was Guido Luigi Carrara of Lucca; the negotiations were handled by a middleman. In December the plate was the property of the Bargello.\textsuperscript{53}

The purchase of the plate is relatively well documented. But darkness surrounds the period of its discovery. Its unearthing in the ruins of a castle in Val di Nievole is the only evidence we have. Such vague information, according to Giulio Ciampoltrini, could result from the desire to hide the real place of discovery in order not to compromise future digs or to avoid paying the estate’s owner.\textsuperscript{54}

But was the plate, which is in good condition – except for a crack on the left side (now restored) – really found between rocks and ruins? As Chiara Frugoni wrote, the rock’s weight should have damaged it seriously.\textsuperscript{55} It could have been from a collection of grave goods, as Melucco Vaccaro wrote more than thirty years ago: but, if the plate comes from a grave, it is no longer necessary to think of a link with the Val di Nievole: the grave goods to which the plate belonged would likely have been found far from there, because no other object of Lombard age comes from the Val di Nievole.\textsuperscript{56} Moreover, the so-called \textit{limes} between the Byzantines and Lombards, traditionally situated not far from the Val di Nievole, is only a fantasy of local historians. So the idea that the plate was a helmet’s visor, which belonged to an important Lombard warrior who died fighting against the Byzantines around the \textit{limes}, is a romantic idea with no historical background.\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{51} Frugoni, Immagini 727–733.
\textsuperscript{52} See note 39.
\textsuperscript{53} The files concerning the acquisition are at the Archivio centrale dello Stato di Roma: ACS, MPI, Dir. Gen. AABBA (1891–1897). Il versamento, I serie, busta 64; I thank Simona Troilo, who personally carried out the research in the archive. In his letter (RR. Gallerie e Musei di Firenze, n. 29), Rossi describes the plate as a golden bas-relief on bronze, dating to the 10th century (even if the subject of the letter is “a golden bas-relief of the Lombard period”). Rossi thought that the plate was originally applied to a piece of furniture, a throne or a cathedra, and he did not identify the central figure with certainty, “perhaps the marquis Reginerus” (he reads only AG IN), but he affirms that the cleaning of the inscription could reveal all the text. Lastly, he says that the plate is broken in two pieces. A draft of the letter is in the archive of the Bargello Museum (Smalti, n. 183). It differs from the definitive text in not citing the inscription around the figure seating on the throne, but just those on the banners carried by the winged Victories (VICTURIA), without proposing any identification. On 18th November 1891 Enrico Ridolfi, Director of the Galleries and Museums at Florence, wrote to the Minister of Education asking to acquire the plate (defined a “oggetto d’arte italo-bizantina”) for the Bargello, underlining the really moderate price of 600 lire. The Minister, after having received from Ridolfi a photo of the plate, enclosed in the letter and in which the rupture is clear, authorized the acquisition on 8th December. On 16th December the acquisition was communicated to the Ministry, and Carrara urged the payment, whose order had been already sent on 7th December 1891. This is the story of the acquisition of the plate. The latter, as demonstrated by Giulio Ciampoltrini, was proposed even to the Regio museo Etrusco Centrale at Florence during the month of July 1891: see below, note 22; by consequence, Rossi’s letter should be dated between July and November of the same year.
\textsuperscript{54} Ciampoltrini, Un contributo 50, in which the author calls Carrara a simple middleman, an improbable statement in the light of what we will see later; moreover, the intermediary was Emilio Neri (see n. 60).
\textsuperscript{55} Above, note 50.
\textsuperscript{56} Mostra dei materiali della Toscana longobarda nelle raccolte pubbliche toscane, Catalogo, ed. Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro (Firenze 1971) 21f. It is clear that Melucco Vaccaro has no information regarding the fact that the plate was discovered “in a tomb in Val di Nievole”. The plate should be the sole piece coming from this area.
\textsuperscript{57} On the supposed \textit{limes} see Andrea Magni, Il “limes” di Serravalle Pistoiese: considerazioni sull’invasione longobarda della Toscana settentrionale, in: Studi Medievali 39/2 (1998) 783–807. For a general analysis of the so called Lombard and Byzantine frontiers see Stefano Gasparri, La frontiera in Italia (sec. VI–VIII). Osservazioni su un tema controverso, in: Città, castelli, cam-
We do not have any real reason to link the plate with the Val di Nievole. And we have nothing that could link Agilulf himself to the whole of Tuscany, but the military campaigns in central Italy of 593 and 595, which the writings of pope Gregory the Great made famous.\footnote{Gregorius Magnus, Registrum Epistolarum V, 36 (ed. Ludo Moritz Hartmann, MGH EE 1, Berlin 1891) 317–320 (July 595)}

This is very little. Moreover, in the last years of the 19th century no objects that could be linked to Agilulf’s plate appeared on the market of antiquities. So, if the plate was a grave good, it remains an isolated object, totally out of any archaeological context.

It is instead very interesting to investigate the seller, Guido Luigi Carrara. He was a member of the city elite of Lucca and he was the son of a famous law scholar, but, as his father’s letters show, Carrara was a man with many psychological and economic problems. He was a collector of many different objects, from autographed letters to insects, and therefore he was in contact with many people of different nationalities. Moreover, Enrico Ridolfi, the director of the Uffizi and of all the Museums of Florence, was his friend.\footnote{For this information I am indebted to Marco Stoffella, who personally carried out the research in the archives and libraries at Lucca, and who personally carried out the research in the archives and libraries at Lucca, and who is currently working on a paper entitled “Tra erudizione, mercato antiquario e istituzioni. La vendita della lamina di Agilulfo e l’interesse per gli studi storico-archeologici tra Lucca e Firenze nella seconda metà del XIX secolo” to be published in the volume edited by Cristina La Rocca and me, printed by Brepols, temporarily entitled “Barbarians and Romans”. When the plate was offered to him, Ridolfi was vice-director, but – at the moment of the acquisition – he was the director, as demonstrated by above-mentioned letters with the Minister of Public Education. See above, note 53.}

Why did Carrara not offer the plate directly to Ridolfi, but instead offer it, through a middleman, to the Etruscan museum, which was the least qualified museum to evaluate it?\footnote{The letter with the offer is in Ciampoltrini, Un contributo 51: on July 17th, 1891 Emilio Neri writes, using headed paper of the Camera di Commercio ed Arti at Florence, to Luigi Milani, director of the Regio Museo Etrusco Centrale, saying that he received the plate through one of his agents at Lucca, Guido Carrara, and that it had been discovered transporting stones, among the ruins of a castle in Val di Nievole. In his answer, Luigi Malnati addresses Neri to Umberto Rossi, at Bargello Museum.} Only later did he offer the plate to the Bargello, but still not to the Uffizi. What is more, we know that Ridolfi was not completely in the dark about the operation, because Carrara asked him to help get the sale money.\footnote{In a letter dated to December 17th, 1891 (see note 59).}

The plot looks suspicious. In the Italian kingdom there were no laws to protect the cultural heritage, so Carrara had no reason to sell the plate secretly. The fact that no other object of the Lombard period appeared on the antiquarian market of Tuscany during the same period demonstrates that it is improbable the plate could actually come from an excavation, and by consequence, the above-mentioned hypothesis by Ciampoltrini (the will not to compromise future digs or pay the estate’s owner) appears implausible, because even if the object had been stolen from another owner’s land, selling it to the Uffizi was no more dangerous than selling it to the Etruscan Museum or to the Bargello.\footnote{See above, note 16. For the confused legal situation preceding the promulgation of the first Italian law for the preservation of the heritage, in 1909: Simona Troilo, La patria e la memoria. Tutela e patrimonio culturale nell’Italia unita (Milano 2005).} Perhaps it is easier to conclude that Carrara did not want to implicate his friend Ridolfi in the purchase of an object of doubtful origin.

The only other object that looks like Agilulf’s plate is a gilded plate at the Walters Art Museum of Baltimore. Its relief shows Christ in the centre, at his sides Mary and Joseph. Instead of the winged Victories of the Etruscan Museum or to the Bargello, it joins elements of the 11th–12th centuries with much earlier details (for example the crosses, modelled after the Lombard ones).\footnote{In a letter dated to December 17th, 1891 (see note 59).}

To identify the origin of the Baltimore plate, we can observe that in the Walters Art Museum there is a gilded fibula of unknown origin, which is identical to other fibulae in the Metropolitan Museum of New York from the burial ground of Arcisa, near Chiusi. These buckles were sold by an English surgeon and merchant of antiquities who lived in Chiusi, S. T. Baxter. They came from a grave of a “Lombard chief that was completely totally out of any archaeological context."


59 For this information I am indebted to Marco Stoffella, who personally carried out the research in the archives and libraries at Lucca, and who is currently working on a paper entitled “Tra erudizione, mercato antiquario e istituzioni. La vendita della lamina di Agilulfo e l’interesse per gli studi storico-archeologici tra Lucca e Firenze nella seconda metà del XIX secolo” to be published in the volume edited by Cristina La Rocca and me, printed by Brepols, temporarily entitled “Barbarians and Romans”. When the plate was offered to him, Ridolfi was vice-director, but – at the moment of the acquisition – he was the director, as demonstrated by above-mentioned letters with the Minister of Public Education. See above, note 53.

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61 In a letter dated to December 17th, 1891 (see note 59).

62 See above, note 16. For the confused legal situation preceding the promulgation of the first Italian law for the preservation of the heritage, in 1909: Simona Troilo, La patria e la memoria. Tutela e patrimonio culturale nell’Italia unita (Milano 2005).

63 Herbert Kühn, Wichtige langobardische Funde in amerikanischen Sammlungen, in: Ipek 12 (1938) 178–179. The new chronology has been proposed for the first time by Mayer Shapiro in 1954, as pointed out by the letters with the keeper of the Walters Art Museum, in the archive of the same Museum.
covered with gold”, according to the digger’s accounts. The graves, which were dug and plundered in 1874 (Baxter wrote: “I heard of a helmet and shield inlaid with gold as being amongst them, but of this I speak from rumour alone”).64 provided perhaps the distant models for the fakes of the British Museum.65 It is also likely that the Baltimore buckle comes from Chiusi. In fact the grave goods of Chiusi were dispersed and sold in various cities of Italy; then a part of these objects arrived in Paris, France, and another part arrived in the USA, in New York, in Philadelphia and in Baltimore.66 Perhaps the forged plate of the Walters Museum travelled with them. At the end of the 19th century there were many fakes in circulation, and the wealth of the Chiusi grave could have stimulated the wish to make it even richer. In my opinion, the origin of the plate of Baltimore could be from the milieu of the art dealers in south Tuscany, and specifically in Chiusi, a place that – unlike the area of Lucca67 – was rich with Lombard findings of the 6th–7th centuries.

Now, once we have realized that the most similar object to Agilulf’s Plate is a fake, we must question if the plate itself should be considered a total or a partial fake. At the present state, the answer to this question should not be final: there are several reasons for and against a forgery. First of all, the results of recent archaeo-metrical analysis of the plate have demonstrated definitively that the latter is in gilded copper, and not in bronze.68 The subsequent and more sophisticated analysis, unfortunately carried out just on two minuscule fragments, added new data: the technique of production was not particularly refined (a fact that could corroborate the antiquity of the plate); moreover, the gold used to gild the plate had been extracted in the area of Massa Marittima (Tuscany).69

The last piece of information is of the greatest importance, because it makes every link between Agilulf and the plate absolutely problematic. On the provenance of the object (whether it was a helmet’s visor, a part of a throne, of a casket or of a reliquary), the scholars stated that the plate was a gift from the king’s court to someone based in the Val di Nievo, or, on the contrary, that it was a gift to the king (this last hypothesis explains the dative case of the inscription). I think instead that the plate was manufactured in an area not distant from the Val di Nievo (as the gold used to gild it comes from Massa Marittima), where it was also discovered; consequently, the plate has probably never left Tuscany. How then can we explain the anomalous inscription and its dative case, especially since Agilulf probably never set foot in Tuscany?

The inscription clearly represents the major problem in the interpretation of the plate. The plate could hardly be considered a fake, even due to the fact that it presupposes the existence of forgers able to conceive a complex scene such as the one represented on the plate, though a similar circumstance is not totally implausible, as demonstrated by the vicissitude of the so-called Tesoro Sacro Rossi, a series of counterfeited objects constituting the grave goods of a 6th-century bishop. Said to be fought to light in the Marche and appearing on the antiquarian market in 1885, they were the work of goldsmiths based in Via del Pellegrino at Rome.70

As far as the iconography is concerned, models were not totally absent. The renowned golden cross with a bearded and long-haired face and the inscription AGLU.F REX from Beinasco (Turin) was discovered in 1929, but similar representations on Lombard crosses were already available at the time of the plate’s appearance. Moreover, the face on the golden cross from Beinasco and that on the plate are not so similar as to justify their interpretation as a realistic image of Agilulf dating to the 7th century, validating their reciprocal authenticity, as affirmed by Otto von Hessen, taking up the assertions by Siegfried Fuchs. The resemblance is undeniable, but that applies to coeval representations.71 Striking is the similarity between the warriors

65 See above, part I, the contribution by Cristina La Rocca.
66 Pazienza, I Longobardi 64–71.
69 The results of these analyses, carried out by Renzo Bertoncino in the laboratories of the University of Padua, will be published in the volume cited at note 59.
70 Angelo Lipinsky, Ritorna il “Tesoro Sacro Rossi”?, in: L’Urbe 5 (1964) 31–37, who defines the Treasure a work of unskilled forgers.
71 Von Hessen, I ritrovamenti 12, affirms that the plate attempted to portray the king, because of the analogous images on contemporay items, such as – first of all – the cross from Beinasco and the portraits on the seal-rings, such as that of Rodchis, coming from the tomb 2 of Trezzo d’Adda. Nonetheless, it should be underlined how, in these cases, a clear link with Agilulf is totally absent, and von Hessen himself speaks generically of royal images. As we said, von Hessen bases his argument on the authority
and offerers' costumes on the plate and those on the dismounted warriors on the silver dish found at Isola Rizza, near Verona – a similarity that induced von Hessen to suggest the same chronology for the two objects. In any case, we should emphasise the fact that the discovery of the plate took place in 1873, and such a close resemblance could raise suspicion rather than constitute a chronological connection.

As we can see, we have at our disposal several divergent factors, none of them conclusive. The authenticity of the plate could be confirmed by the circumstances of its discovery, making it an object completely out of context and isolated. On the other hand, the forgeries seem to be typical of a southern area of Tuscany, and not of the territory of Lucca from which the plate is said to come.

Lastly, we should question the existence, in Lucca, not only of the technical skills necessary to copy an ancient object, but even of the historical knowledge of, and interest in, the Lombard period necessary to produce such a forgery. Once again, we have to develop a twofold series of remarks. On the one hand, the history of the Dukedom of Lucca under the Lombards, well known thanks to the incredible amount of charters present in the local archives, was a source of local pride since the second half of the 19th century, as demonstrated by the dispute between Niccolao Cianelli and Francesco Liverani. Liverani maintained the existence of the Duchy at Chiusi, in open opposition to Lucca. On the other hand, during this period the archaeological remains of the Lombard period were not recognized as such, and the items brought to light near the church of Santa Giulia were attributed to the 12th or 13th century. Nonetheless, the discovery took place in 1859, and similar finds were made even in earlier periods. On the contrary, the historical knowledge of the Lombard period inspired two paintings, commissioned – around the middle of the century – by the Duchess Maria Luisa of Borbone and by her son Carlo Ludovico. They depicted scenes from the life of Agilulf and Theodelinda: the baptism of their son Adaloald and Adaloald’s election as king of the Lombards. The author of the paintings was Pietro Nocchi, who purposely visited Milan and Monza to gather information. He certainly saw the Treasure in the Cathedral of Monza, as demonstrated by the presence in the painting of a representation of the famous Golden Hen with her brood of chicken.

This shows an interest in and a certain historical consciousness of the age of Agilulf, but the discovery of the plate has left no trace in the local scholarly literature of the period, or in the accounts of the local members of the Accademia dei Lincei: is this proof of ignorance or of the indifference toward the archaeology of the Lombard period, or of the secrecy surrounding the purchase of the plate? This must be emphasized since, even in the following period, scholarly literature has paid little attention to the plate: Gian Piero Bognetti cites it, but hastily, in his book devoted to the church of Santa Maria at Castelseprio, whose main characters are Agilulf and Theodelinda, which is quite surprising in light of the fact that Bognetti is the sole scholar in post-war Italy, who attempted the dual use of archaeological and written sources in his works.

of Siegfried Fuchs, Die langobardischen Goldblattkreuze aus der Zone südwärts der Alpen (Berlin 1938) 45f., although he does not agree with Fuchs' transcription (AGLU..F REX). Fuchs affirms that his interpretation is confirmed by the combination of the image on the Beinasco cross and that on the plate: “die beiden Darstellungen stimmen in ikonographischer und stilistischer Hinsicht besser miteinander überein, als bei ihrem einfachen Charakter eigentlich erwartet werden kann”. The catalogue by Fuchs shows other faces on the crosses, which, in part, could be close to the supposed images of Agilulf (42–45 and n. 1 and 32), that is, the so-called “Gisulf’s Cross” (from Cividale del Friuli), and the Cleph’s one (from Lavis, nearby Trento). It should be noted how Fuchs ignores the fact that the Gisulf Cross is not from the tomb of the duke, and that the inscription mentioning Gisulf on the sarcophagus is a fake: Irene Barbiera, “E ai di remoti grande pur egli il Forogiulio appare”. Longobardi, storiografia e mito delle origini a Cividale del Friuli, in: Archeologia Medievale 25 (1998) 345–357. Fuchs did not even know that the three crosses from Monza in the Nürnberg Museum were forgeries (the discovery of the forgery was communicated by Angelo Lipinski in 1943). Two of them were the work of a forger, who reproduced a marble slab on the right side of the façade of the church of S. Giovanni at Monza, published in 1776 by Anton Francesco Frisi, Memorie della Chiesa Monzese (Monza 1776) 66. For this aspect see Carla Orlando, Teodolinda, Agilulfo e i Longobardi nella memoria storica di Monza e nel territorio lombardo, tesi di laurea specialistica, Università Ca’ Foscari di Venezia (Venezia 2005–2006). A rich survey of the faces similar to that on the Beinasco cross is in Marco Sannazzaro, Una stampiglia con busto frontale virile da Vicenza: nuovi dati per la conoscenza della ceramica longobarda in Italia, in Atti del III. Congresso Nazionale di Archeologia Medievale, ed. Rosa Fiorillo and Paolo Peduto (Firenze 2003) 40–45, who maintains the existence of a wide series of examples of the “image of the Lombard”, with thick hair parted in the middle and a pointed beard.

72 Von Hessen, I ritrovamenti 44–52.
73 For this and other information concerning the studies devoted to the Lombard period at Lucca around the half of the 19th century, see the contribution by Stoffella cited at note 2. A distorted version of the hen – transformed in a lamb with cups – is clearly recognizable among the objects of the Tesoro Sacro Rossi (Lipinski, Ritorna il “Tesoro Sacro Rossi”? 34); a proof of the fame of the objects at Monza connected to Agilulf and Theodelinda.
74 Gian Piero Bognetti, S. Maria foris portas di Castelseprio e la storia religiosa dei Longobardi, in id., L’età longobarda II (Milano 1966) 211f. The previous and really scanty bibliography concerning the plate is cited in Ciampoltrini, Un contributo 52.
Another element to reflect on is the inscription, and the attribution of the plate to the age of Agilulf. We have already noticed how the origin of the gold used in the manufacture of the plate could be traced to the area of Massa Marittima, and how this evidence is puzzling for the interpretation of the inscription, to be read as “victory to king Agilulf victory”. The inscriptions inserted in the two tabellae (victuria) are written in capital letters, without any significant characteristic from a palaeographical point of view. The inscription running around the figure seated on the throne has been written down in a ‘campo di ripiego’, – a space not organised for receiving the inscription – with letters lacking any characterization, which, by consequence, could not be dated. Moreover, they show such an amount of inconsistencies that we can disprove that the inscription post-dates the plate; in this case, we should consider double gilding, because the gold penetrates into the furrows of the inscription.75

It is worth reflecting on the possibility that the inscription, and – by consequence – the attribution of the plate to Agilulf could be a fake, especially on account of the absolutely unusual use of the dative. It cannot be denied that, among the rare objects dating to the early Lombard period inscribed with personal names, Agilulf is over-represented. We can cite at least three cases: obviously, the plate, the above-mentioned golden cross, and the crown. As far as the golden cross from Beinasco is concerned, it should be underlined how in the catalogue drawn up by Fuchs, the golden crosses bearing the name of a king number only three. The one attributed to Aistulf, dating back to the 8th century, is a fake; another one, carrying the name of Cleph, shows a really dubious inscription. The last one is that of Agilulf, whose origin is relatively well documented and whose provenance from Turin fits well with the personal history of the king, who had been duke of Turin before his accession to the throne. In this case, there is an apparent concordance between written and archaeological sources, absolutely absent in the case of the plate.76

Besides the plate and the golden cross, there is a third object strongly connected to Agilulf’s royalty: the above-mentioned crown, carried to Paris by Napoleon in 1797 and stolen (and then melted) in 1804. On this crown, known only in drawings, there was the famous inscription Agilulf rex glorioissimus rex totius Italie offeret sancto Iohanni Baptiste in ecclesia Modicia. For a long period, scholars maintained that it was a fake, but today they generally think the crown was authentic.77 But doubts remain: for example, the formula gratia Dei does not appear before the 8th century and it does not match the elective character of Agilulf’s royalty. The statement “king of the whole of Italy”, which was written on the crown, could suggest that it was a fake linked to the struggle between Monza and Milan over hosting Italian royal coronations, a struggle that began in the age of the Stauffer.78

Our doubts are increased by the fact that the ancient inventaries of the Treasure of the Cathedral at Monza (respectively dating to 1275, 1345, 1353), citing four golden crowns, never attribute any of them to Agilulf. This is puzzling, if we consider the inscription. (In parenthesis, they do not even cite Theodelinda’s crown, while the tradition tenaciously links to the queen the only extant crowns of the Lombard period nowadays part of the Treasure). The first explicit mention of Agilulf’s crown is in the list attached to the account of the pastoral visit by Carlo Borromeo, dating to 1581. In the same way, as far as the iconographic evidence is con-
cerned, the sculptures of the lunette of S. Giovanni at Monza (of the first half of the 14th century) comprise four crowns, but none similar to that of Agilulf; even the crowns depicted on the slab of the coronation by Matteo da Campione (end of the 14th century) and those in scene 37 in the Zavattari Chapel (middle of the 15th century) do not show any resemblance to Agilulf’s crown. The most ancient representation of the latter should be recognized in one of the crowns appearing on the shutters of the organ in S. Giovanni, dating to 1508. In the light of what we said, the crown could be a forgery, probably manufactured after the Staufer age, as initially hypothesized by Reinhard Elze.79

The crown found no mention even since about 1230, when the legend of the corona ferrea as the crown of Italy knows its first diffusion. It should be underlined how Henry VII, in 1311, desperately sought the corona ferrea to be crowned in Milan, but without success, and he was obliged to commission a new one for this purpose. Even the inhabitants of Monza, lively protesting the choice of Milan and claiming the dignity of their own town as the most appropriate see for a coronation, surely in the light of the memory of Agilulf and Theodelinda, affirmed that they neither possessed the corona ferrea, nor offered Henry VII the crown of Agilulf, nor mentioned it. Moreover, the Treasure of the Cathedral was repeatedly removed from Monza, legitimating the doubts concerning the authenticity of the crown, which were even stronger than the ones surrounding Agilulf’s plate.80

At this stage of our research, all these doubts cannot be resolved. We do not know if the plate and the crown are fakes. But we know that, even if they were fakes, totally or in part, they maintain their historical relevance. I would like to give only two examples on this issue. It is very significant that Agilulf’s crown was carved on the verso of the coins minted for the coronation of Napoleon as king of Italy in 1805. The crown looked like a symbol of the legitimacy to rule Italy, at the same level of the so-called corona ferrea (the latter crown was used in the ceremony, and its image was known in the artistic milieu of Paris in this period).81 The second example refers to the Visconti, a family that in the 14th century aspired to the Italian crown. The Visconti linked themselves to the city of Monza, where they not only rebuilt the church of St. John, founded by Theodelinda, but also transferred, with an impressive ceremony, the king’s and queen’s remains from the church floor into a marbled tomb.82 In that period, the legitimating value of Agilulf and Theodelinda was striking, as well as that of all the material testimonies – authentic or not – tied to their persons, as clearly shown by the high number of churches traditionally attributed to the queen.83

After this long survey of doubts, we can nonetheless propose two conclusions. The first is related to the memory of the Lombard period, and the tradition of royalty. From this point of view, Agilulf and Theodelinda’s fame, which was created in Lombardy as in Tuscany since the late Middle Ages, could explain their reputation and the forgeries based on them.84 Because the royal couple embodied the tradition of Lombard royalty, the only one that could give legitimacy to Italian rulers, they were also the only Lombard rulers that, through the centuries, were worthy of forgery. The second concern in particular a question of method in the analysis of the materials from the Lombard period. An objective and scientific interest in them should not be blurred by the desire to attribute a name to their proprietors, recipients, or to the figures represented on them. In this case, we would commit a mistake absolutely similar to those previously made by the local historians, traditionally prone to improbable attributions and aimed at filling the gaps of their local histories. Many of the objects are destined to remain enigmatic, but – notwithstanding this – they do not lose importance. On the contrary, the loss of superficial attributions gives them a more appropriate role in the history of early medieval studies.

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79 See note 78. I am indebted for these data to Piero Majocchi, who carried out the archive researches; the pastoral visit by Carlo Borromeo is in ASDMI, Visite Pastorali, Monza, IV, 14, cc. 323–325: corona una aurea in qua imagine apostolorum videntur sculptae. The presence of the crown is recorded by the inventaries from the 17th century onwards.


81 Elze, Per la storia delle corone 393–394, affirms that those who ideated the medal did not know the corona ferrea; on the contrary, Alain Pillepich, Napoleon I e la corona ferrea, in: La Corona Ferrea nell’Europa degli Imperi. La Corona, il Regno e l’Impero: un millennio di storia I, ed. Graziella Buccellati (Monza 1995) 341 writes, that Vivant Denon, director of the Louvre and author of the medal, could not ignore the fact, that Agilulf’s crown had been stolen the year before and that instead, in Paris there were several Italian artists who could describe him ‘la corona ferrea’.

82 Majocchi, Pavia Città regia (Roma 2008).


84 Gasparri, I Longobardi 261, concerning Tuscany, with a reference to a novel of the Decameron by Giovanni Boccaccio.
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