

**Re-reading *The Lands of Saint Ambrose***

by Ross Balzaretti

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**Fra impero e società locale.  
Milano e le terre di Sant’Ambrogio  
nell’alto medioevo**

a cura di Gianmarco De Angelis

Firenze University Press



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This paper reflects on the observations made by Giuseppe Albertoni, Gianmarco De Angelis, Anna Rapetti and Igor Santos Salazar in their discussion of the book *The Lands of Saint Ambrose. Monks and Society in Early Medieval Milan* (2019).

Questo articolo risponde ai punti chiave sollevati da Giuseppe Albertoni, Gianmarco De Angelis, Anna Rapetti e Igor Santos Salazar nella loro discussione su *The Lands of Saint Ambrose. Monks and Society in Early Medieval Milan* (2019).

Early Middle Ages; Milan; Sant'Ambrogio; Carolingians; charters and archives; archbishops.

Alto Medioevo; Milano; Sant'Ambrogio; Carolingi; carte e archivi; arcivescovi.

Understandably, most authors are fascinated by what readers make of their work, and I am certainly one of those authors<sup>1</sup>. I have found the comments on *The Lands of Saint Ambrose* published here (and elsewhere in reviews) to be enlightening and thought-provoking<sup>2</sup>. It is reassuring to know that a book which took far too long to write is of interest to others. I have been writing it in my head ever since I first encountered the Milanese charters at the suggestion of Wendy Davies and Chris Wickham in 1985. Having been converted by Wendy to early medieval history as an undergraduate – my final year “Special Subject” was a comparative course on Wales and Brittany – I was originally intending to study the charters preserved at Piacenza but because that archive was “closed for restoration” (a very Italian phrase which

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Cristina La Rocca for inviting me to Padova and for chairing the roundtable discussion of my book in November 2019. It was a most enjoyable occasion in large part due to the generous comments made by all the participants, including the doctoral students who were kind enough to attend. I am indebted to the authors of the four commentaries for taking the time to engage so fully and interestingly with my work.

<sup>2</sup> Reviews have so far appeared in 2019 in «Archeologia Medievale», 46 (Gian Pietro Brogiolo) and in 2020 in «Speculum», 95 (Hendrik Dey); «Theologische Revue» (Josef Lössl); «Journal of Ecclesiastical History» (Janet Nelson); «Al-Masaq» (Christopher Heath); «The Medieval Review» (Renie Choy); «Francia» (Caterina Cappuccio); «Parergon», 37/2 (Stephen Joyce); «Mediävistik», 33 (Scott G. Bruce).

puts fear into the heart of the researcher), I changed to Milan. Milan suited me well as my father was born in a small village south of the city, to be precise Inverno (PV) which was, as I later learned, an early medieval royal estate associated with the palace at nearby Corteolona. I had (and have) relatives in Milan and thereabouts, so the PhD thesis became in one way an exploration of a far distant aspect of my own personal history. I looked at all the documents in manuscript in 1986, a time long before digitization, and my imagination was captured above all by the lives of the people in the villages which they documented, some of whom signed these texts.

The book which finally emerged from that far off thesis is inevitably much changed, both expanded – as one reviewer rather brutally put it “two books in one” – and significantly developed. In particular it is much more methodologically grounded than the thesis as the result of a lot more reading and as importantly many conversations with my students and colleagues at the universities of Nottingham (and later Genoa), who helped me to discover the value of archaeological, ecological, gendered and micro-historical approaches to the past.

In the rest of this response, I consider the different arguments put forward by my four interlocutors namely the nature of urban life at Milan (Santos Salazar); the relationships of patronage which developed around the monastery of Sant’Ambrogio (Rapetti); my micro-historical approach as evidenced in the Valtellina case-study (Albertoni); and my ideas about how charters should be read (De Angelis). As can be seen, Igor Santos Salazar and Anna Rapetti focus on two very specific themes of the book, while Giuseppe Albertoni and Gianmarco De Angelis focus a little more broadly on methodological issues. After this I conclude with some reflections on how the subject has already developed since publication and how might be further developed in future years.

*Urban Life.* In *The Lands of Saint Ambrose* (Ch. 3 and Ch. 5) I termed the city of Milan a «large world». I have a long-standing interest in the nature of early medieval cities which was the subject of my first published paper in 1991. In the late 1980s, as is will be known to readers of this journal, there was a period of explicit debate between archaeologists and historians about the continuity or otherwise of towns and cities in northern Italy from Roman to early medieval times, as exemplified by several articles published in «Archeologia Medievale» by Cristina La Rocca, Gian Pietro Brogiolo and Chris Wickham. I have always come down more in favour of continuity than discontinuity (although that binary certainly oversimplifies most aspects of the question), despite having learnt so much from archaeology as a discipline and from archaeologists’ ways of looking at the material cultures of the past. I was therefore delighted to read Igor Santos Salazar’s comments which provide a very interesting analysis of my approach to Milan’s urbanism. His lively argument begins by stating that I took a “polemical” approach to the issue of urban continuity. Although I might prefer to say “provocative” – in the sense that while those polemical debates of the late 1980s are over it does not hurt to challenge the general drift towards urban discontinuity evident in recent

years – it is more than fair to say that I do still believe in urban continuity in the *exceptional case* (I would stress this) of Milan. I do not think, to allude to Edoardo Grendi's use of the phrase "exceptional normal" in his analyses of early modern Genoa, that this place was anything other than exceptional. I favour continuity because, first, the catastrophist written sources ("stories" might be better) of the fifth and sixth centuries are not very convincing to my way of thinking and, second, the archaeology of early medieval Milan remains too patchy to be certain if what it is telling us can be generalised as "normal". This is not, of course, the fault of archaeologists but mostly of problematic preservation (a point Santos Salazar also acknowledges). Even if absolute continuity, in the sense that people continuously lived in an urban environment at Milan, cannot be proved in the current state of knowledge (and may never be provable) and even though it is self-evident that late Roman Milan did not continue into the eighth century in anything like the same form, the idea of the city was perhaps not so different, at least in the eyes of the author – whoever that was – of the famous praise poem known as the *Versum de Mediolano civitate*. Here Santos Salazar makes the excellent point that the *Versum* evidences a strong awareness of the city's past, which I would interpret as a sort of continuity story, which carries more weight because it was written from inside the society it is about<sup>3</sup>. While, therefore, we may not agree about the balance between discontinuity and continuity we do, I think, agree upon the different character of and context for early medieval urbanism. I would nevertheless continue to argue that Milan then was a city as much as anywhere else in the early medieval world.

*Patronage relationships.* Anna Rapetti, as an authority on medieval monasticism, duly focuses on the Sant'Ambrogio community and the extensive relationships of patronage in which it was involved throughout the period (covered in *The Lands of Saint Ambrose*, Ch. 4). The significance of these relationships for monasteries – with kings, bishops, other aristocrats and those significantly further down the social scale – has received much excellent attention (e.g. Matthew Innes and the late Jannine Raaijmakers, as well as Rapetti herself), and I no doubt could have contextualised the Milanese case more fully with that research. Rapetti sees patronage as «a system of actions and reactions», an approach which describes very well the reciprocal nature of the numerous patronage relationships traced in this part of my book. As part of her discussion, she quite rightly points out that we know surprisingly little about the monks themselves, the main drivers of this "powerhouse of prayer" (De Jong's evocative phrase). As this is something which has continued to perplex me, I was intrigued by Rapetti's argument that this was precisely because the institution was dominated by successive abbots and archbishops. In the case of Sant'Ambrogio this is most especially plausible because of the apparently domineering personalities of some of these peo-

<sup>3</sup> See also Gamberini, *Il Versum de Mediolano civitate*.

ple, notably Abbot Peter II, Archbishop Angilbert II and most particularly Anspert, each of whom I feel I have got to know a little in the last three decades. Another reason for the low profile of Sant’Ambrogio’s monks could be that many of them (assuming that there were many which is not certain) had little to do with the management of the community’s properties, which is what the surviving charters mostly evidence. Furthermore, few of this monastery’s books have survived as far as we can tell and this means that we cannot draw many conclusions about the levels of education to be found at Sant’Ambrogio, something about which it would be good to know more. Rapetti also develops the important point that the community followed the Rule of Saint Benedict, as also happened at Venice a little later with the patronage of the doges<sup>4</sup>. Although I do discuss the Rule in several places in my book it is quite true that I could have made more of it given that following it was rather unusual in late eighth century Italy. However, the problem of how assiduously the monks may have followed the Rule does of course remain and is quite difficult to address given the absence of the sorts of evidence we would like to have. More could be made of comparisons with local Benedictine institutions, especially San Pietro di Civate, admirably studied by Mayke De Jong, with which Sant’Ambrogio may have had links. Last, there are Rapetti’s stimulating insights about the “refoundation” of 835 and the role of Archbishop Angilbert II, in particular the thought-provoking point that frequent later monastic interpolations into the key documents of that year – royal diplomas and episcopal *precepta* – give some insight into how the monks saw the history of their own community.

*Micro-stories.* As Giuseppe Albertoni rightly points out I am very interested, as is he, in micro-histories or micro-stories. This was an approach to the dossiers of charters which I developed almost instinctively in my PhD thesis without having read any work advocating the micro-historical approach at that point (I think, although I may have read Ginzburg’s *Cheese and the Worms* as an undergraduate). Some years after completing my thesis, my understanding developed through reading the work of Carlo Ginzburg, Edoardo Grendi (with whom I worked on several Ligurian field trips) and others (I used to teach the topic at master’s level for many years). Given that one of the criticisms often made is that micro-history ignores the macro, it was pleasing to see Albertoni suggest that the charters are analysed in «a constant dialogue between micro and macro history»<sup>5</sup>, as that was precisely what I set out to do! He very kindly noted as well that my book is methodologically innovative in the way it reads single (micro) charters as part of wider dossiers (macro), despite being “old-fashioned” as I put it (a little provocative perhaps, but deliberate given that I focus firmly on the value of empirical evidence in reconstructing a past society). Albertoni then goes on to consider my section on the Valtellina (*The Lands of Saint Ambrose*, Ch. 8), highlighting better that

<sup>4</sup> Rapetti, *Il doge e i suoi monaci*.

<sup>5</sup> As evident in Albertoni, *L’elefante di Carlo Magno*.

I was able to that the wider story here is about landlord competition. This I absolutely agree with. One of the landlords which Sant’Ambrogio may have been in competition with was Saint Denis, one of the most important monasteries for the Carolingian family<sup>6</sup>, a “site of memory” for them in ways which Sant’Ambrogio later came to resemble («una sorta di St. Denis a sud delle Alpi», as Albertoni puts it). In his analysis of the case of the serf Magnefred, he sees that exceptional case as “a type of model of dependence with wider validity” in this area, perhaps a case of the exceptional normal in action. Last, I particularly liked the idea that a dossier as a whole expresses or represents a single historical development, once again the macro to the single charter’s micro.

*Reading documents.* Gianmarco De Angelis in his rich contribution focuses on how to read documents and how I have read the documents surviving from Milan. I have not read the work of Paul Auster but I now feel that I should given the insights gained in this context by the use of his concept of “truth experiments” by De Angelis. As far as I understand it Auster suggests that the juxtaposition of a sequence of insignificant events creates a new reality, which speaks clearly to the approach I took with my dossiers about Cologno Monzese, Limonta, Inzago and other “small places” in which Sant’Ambrogio became the principal landowner in a matter of a few decades. Routine buying, selling and exchanging of land and other seemingly mundane activities associated with agricultural production added up to a transformation of existing social relationships into something entirely new – monastic exploitation – and not necessarily better for those who lived in these villages. De Angelis is of course quite right to caution that the single lens of the archive of Sant’Ambrogio results in an inevitably partial story. I suppose one could conduct another sort of thought experiment to wonder how the hinterland of Milan would have looked if the archiepiscopal archive had survived, one of those “what if” questions loved by counterfactualists. Clearly, the answer is very different as there is little doubt that, as Rapetti notes, Milan was one of the most important sees in Europe. In the remainder of his fascinating contribution De Angelis examines in more detail two types of document which he (correctly) feels I did not pay enough attention to. First, he gives a deep and convincing analysis of the grant of immunity to Sant’Ambrogio by Louis II in 873, which attributes more weight to royal strategy than I did with my attention distracted as usual by what this meant for the monastic community<sup>7</sup>. Second, he draws attention to the distinctive form of certain charters of investiture (*brevia*) which demonstrate careful archival manipulation and deliberate shaping to favour monastic interests because such charters some-

<sup>6</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, pp. 68-69, 95-96; Airlie, *Making and Unmaking*, pp. 39-47.

<sup>7</sup> Compare the comments of Roach, *Forgery and Memory*, pp. 11-12.

times refer to other documents which are now lost, a point I certainly agree with and ought to have made clearer (in *The Lands of Saint Ambrose*, Ch. 1)<sup>8</sup>.

Reflecting on these four insightful readings of my book has also prompted me to consider how, since *The Lands of Saint Ambrose* was published in August 2019, the subject has already moved on with the appearance of many important new books and papers. Reading these during the last locked down year has taught me how the analysis in parts of my book might have been deepened. The sections on Carolingian politics are already in my opinion looking outmoded in the light of two long-awaited and outstanding books on the Carolingians: Janet Nelson's biography of Charlemagne – a key figure in the foundation of Sant'Ambrogio as Rapetti reminds us – and Stuart Airlie's tour-de-force on Carolingian political culture<sup>9</sup>. These issues were inevitably rather compressed in my book given the size and scope of recent historiography. Comparative analysis is vital to historical work and two other important books – Herrin on Ravenna and Goodson on cultivation in Italian cities – have challenged me to think further about the relationship of Milan to Ravenna and to other cities elsewhere in Italy<sup>10</sup>. In terms of the meanings of documentary forms important work has appeared by Ansani on the *brevia* discussed by De Angelis<sup>11</sup>, and Levi Roach has produced a fascinating volume on tenth-century forgery which I would love to have read before I tried to explain why the monks of Sant'Ambrogio, who undoubtedly forged charters, did it<sup>12</sup>.

One of my pet topics which was not much remarked on by my four readers is ecological history and this too has recently also fared very well with the remarkable book on pigs by Jamie Kreiner, a crucial paper by Noah Blan on ecological adaptation and a whole themed issue on southern European gardens<sup>13</sup>. In *The Lands of Saint Ambrose* I tried to convey the nature of the early medieval landscape across Milan's hinterland, relying largely on the very imperfect evidence of charters in the absence of sufficient environmental archaeology. I would like to have done a more thorough job here, developing a more nuanced analysis of the historical ecology of the area around Milan along the lines of my chapter in *Dark Age Liguria*<sup>14</sup>. Liguria however has seen much important research in that field (pioneered by Diego Moreno), much more than Lombardy – a much larger region – where it is to be hoped that more might be

<sup>8</sup> For the participation of laymen in making documents see De Angelis, *Scabini e altri ufficiali pubblici minori*.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*, p. 183; Airlie, *Making and Unmaking*.

<sup>10</sup> Herrin, *Ravenna*; Goodson, *Cultivating the City*.

<sup>11</sup> Ansani, *Pratiche documentarie*. I am very grateful to Gianmarco De Angelis and Cristina La Rocca for letting me read their unpublished article *Spectating communities? Agents, spaces and rituals of taking possessions in Carolingian Lombardy* which further examines these fascinating charters.

<sup>12</sup> Roach, *Forgery and Memory*.

<sup>13</sup> Kreiner, *Legions of Pigs*; Blan, *Charlemagne's Peaches; Gardens and gardening in southern Europe*.

<sup>14</sup> Balzaretti, *Dark Age Liguria*, pp. 13-34.

possible with greater collaboration between historians and archaeologists, including more research on specific known productive sites such as recent work on the monastic estate at Capiate<sup>15</sup>. How cultivation differed in the early medieval period from what came before is crucial to fully understand what impact monastic communities and other ecclesiastical institutions really had upon the land itself<sup>16</sup>.

In conclusion, it is perhaps surprising that readers of English will soon be able to read three books providing continuous coverage of the history of Milan from the late Roman period to the age of the communes<sup>17</sup>. Italian scholarship is also, once again, active in this area<sup>18</sup>. As De Angelis notes, this includes more about the role of bishops in Milanese politics before the eleventh century, aspects of which are now being addressed by Michele Baitieri<sup>19</sup>. More comparative work would also be welcome, to challenge the supposed exceptionality of Milan, which I have myself espoused. That sort of detailed comparison was something I had to sacrifice in *The Lands of Saint Ambrose* although I have explored one aspect of it – the relationship between Milan and Genoa – in papers elsewhere<sup>20</sup>. It is also increasingly being tackled as comparison between the cities in the modern region of Lombardy<sup>21</sup>. There is still much work to do.

<sup>15</sup> Carminati and Mariani, *The Court and Land of Capiate*.

<sup>16</sup> Panato, *Environment, society and economy*; Panato, *Rural monasteries*.

<sup>17</sup> Norrie, *Urban Change and Radical Religion*; Wickham, *Sleepwalking into a New World*, pp. 21-66 on Milan.

<sup>18</sup> *Milano allo specchio*.

<sup>19</sup> Baitieri, *Politics and documentary culture*; Baitieri, *The Archbishops of Milan*; Baitieri, *Legal culture across the Alps*.

<sup>20</sup> Balzaretti, *Chestnuts in charters*; Balzaretti, *Milan, Genoa and the Alps*; Balzaretti, *Urban Life in Lombard Italy*.

<sup>21</sup> Santos Salazar, *Governare*; Rao and Santos Salazar, *Risorse di pubblico uso*.

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Ross Balzaretti  
University of Nottingham  
ross.balzaretti@nottingham.ac.uk