



46

THE LONGOBARDS IN ITALY. PLACES OF POWER (568-774 A.D.)

“If I ask for one last effort from you, it’s because I know that Italy is where Ibor and Aio, our divine brothers, intended for us to arrive. It is there, at the foot of the Alps, that our people will find peace and where the Longobard empire will take root, before expanding to conquer new lands.”

La grande marcia, Sabina Colloredo

Two centuries of Longobard rule represented for Italy a cultural, historical and institutional turning point. It is Paul the Deacon, in his extensive *History of the Lombards*, that informs us about the pact between King Alboin and the Saxons to conquer the Italian peninsula in 568 A.D. Friuli region served as the entry gate from where the Longobards spread unhindered across territories still deeply infused with Byzantine-Roman culture, ultimately laying a bridge to modernity. Within a few generations, they undertook a formidable process of cultural synthesis, evolving from a fragmented group of Arian families into a united Catholic society. The Longobard kingdom comprised two large areas, separated by the Byzantine dominions between Rome and Ravenna: in the north *Langobardia Maior*, extending from the Alps to Tuscany, while in the centre-south *Langobardia Minor*, excluding Calabria and Sicily. This UNESCO serial property encompasses seven locations across Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Lombardy, Umbria, Campania, and Apulia: Cividale del Friuli, the capital of the first Lombard duchy; Brescia and the monastic complex of San Salvatore and Santa Giulia along with the archaeological area of the Capitolium; the *castrum* of Castelseprio with the frescoes of Santa Maria foris Portas and the monastery of Torba; the *Tempietto del Clitunno* in Campello (Perugia); the Basilica of San Salvatore in Spoleto; the Church of Santa Sofia in Benevento; the “Longobard crypts” in the Sanctuary of San Michele in Monte Sant’Angelo (Gargano).



SERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE
UNESCO DOSSIER: 1318
CITY OF INSCRIPTION: PARIS, FRANCE
DATE OF INSCRIPTION: 2011



CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The Longobard buildings testify to the cultural and artistic convergence between Roman tradition, Christian spirituality, Byzantine influences, and values borrowed from the Germanic world that occurred in Italy from the 6th to the 8th centuries, thus heralding and fostering the development of Carolingian culture and art.



“All these buildings [...] are large and magnificent, but of the most awkward architecture.”

The opinion on the Longobards, and in general on “barbarian” art expressed in the 16th century by Giorgio Vasari in his work *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* is merciless and has long biased the opinion on these art forms, far from the classical canons and yet bearers of novel, deeply-rooted values.

When the Longobards made their way into the Italian peninsula in 568, they immediately occupied “*Forum Iulii*”, then under Roman rule. **1 Cividale del Friuli** thus became the first Lombard capital under Duke Gisulph, nephew of King Alboin. The gold crosses and jewellery on display in the National Archaeological Museum evoke a society of warriors yet inclined to arts. Evidence of this can be found in the nearby Christian Museum of the Dome, boasting the *Tegurio di Callisto* – a splendid octagonal baldachin structure above the baptismal font – and the Altar of Duke Ratchis, whose multimedia display brings to life the shapes and colours of a too-long-overlooked early medieval masterpiece. A change of scenery awaits the visitors before the six saints of the *Tempietto Longobardo*, a palatine chapel of the

court of Aistulph and Giseltrude. Its 8th-century exquisite stucco figures in high relief make a striking prelude to the Romanesque art that would flourish centuries later. The Longobards reached **2 Brescia** barely a year later. The UNESCO heritage buildings tell two distinct stories through the Capitulum and the theatre, the most impressive Roman remains in northern Italy, the still-bright colours of the frescoes in the Republican Sanctuary and the hypnotic bronze Winged Victory on one side, and through the Benedictine monastery of San Salvatore and Santa Giulia, founded as a centre of power by Desiderius, the last Lombard king, and his wife Ansa in 753 on the other. It is an architectural treasure spanning a number of ages and styles; it includes masterpieces such as the so-called Cross of Desiderius (late 8th century),

embedded with 212 opulent decorative elements, climaxing with the Basilica of San Salvatore, where highly refined sculptural features survive. The ruins in the woods of the Varese area may seem negligible today, yet they used to form a powerful Longobard *castrum*. **3 Castelseprio** preserves traces of fortifications and places of worship as well as a piece of work bound to pose enigmas and stir up debates. In the Church of Santa Maria foris Portas, located just outside the walls, an anonymous fresco painter of alleged eastern origins depicted one of the most original, lively cycles of early medieval art based on the apocryphal Gospels. In the monastery of Torba, once incorporated into the Castelseprio *castrum*, enigmatic figures of nuns and saints stare down from the walls of this ancient fortified building.



SACRED WATERS

“And on thy happy shore a temple still, Of small and delicate proportion, keeps, Upon a mild declivity of hill, Its memory of thee; beneath it sweeps Thy current’s calmness; oft from out it leaps The finny darter with the glittering scales, Who dwells and revels in thy glassy deeps; While, chance, some scattered water-lily sails Down where the shallower wave still tells its bubbling tales.”

Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage, George Byron

Despite its small size, the *Clitunno* is a place where poets’ hearts thrill. Virgil, Propertius, Pliny the Younger, Carducci, and many others praised its fresh waters, in which bulls were bathed before sacrifices. The ancients ascribed miraculous properties to it, and several shrines dedicated to tutelary deities, including Jupiter Clitunno, once existed in the area. The only one preserved, initially thought to be late-Roman, is actually fully Lombard in architecture from the 7th-8th centuries, as evidenced by the carved cross and epigraph dedicated to the “holy god of angels”.



“The nation of the Lombards was much given to idolatries and to the adoration of brute beasts, insomuch that [...] at other times they even worshipped the heads of goats.”

According to Pietro Piperno, a Beneventan protomedicus and author of the 1640 treatise *Della superstitiosa Noce di Benevento*, the legend of Beneventan witches dates back to the time of the Lombard Duke Romuald. The pagan people, worshippers of a golden viper, celebrated their rites around a walnut tree that would later be uprooted by Saint Barbarus.

Langobardia Minor was under the rule of the duchies of Spoleto and Benevento. The **1 Basilica of San Salvatore** in Spoleto exudes an arcane charm, where the cultural pluralism that the Lombards embodied is more perceptible than elsewhere. The reuse of original or reworked Roman spoils here reaches new heights, combined with a strong influence of Syriac-inspired oriental elements. The **2 Tempietto del Clitunno** is equally stunning, towering over the idyllic natural landscape of the sources of the Clitunno River, so beloved by poets. The creators of this architectural pastiche designed such a bewildering structure that historians long believed it to be a Roman temple. After the fall of Pavia, the capital of the Lombard

kingdom, to Charlemagne's Franks in 774, Benevento gained prestige due to its convenient location along the Via Appia and the Via Traiana. The artists commissioned by the Lombard duke Arechi II conceived the **3 Church of Santa Sofia**, using Byzantine architecture as an inspiration for its unique star plan structure offering multiple viewpoints and perspectives. Traces of refined apsidal frescoes reflect the influence of Middle Eastern painting in the powerful duchy, where an autonomous liturgical chant and a new writing style (the “*minuscula beneventana*”) were also introduced. From the 7th century onward, the Longobards made the **4 Sanctuary of San Michele** sul Gargano a national sacred place, with the archangel becoming the

patron saint of their people. The reason for the site's inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List is evident at the end of the tour, in the Museo Lapidario. Located directly under the grotto of the archangel's triple apparition, the Lombard crypts house the epigraphs of the dukes of Benevento, including Romuald I's, who financed the renovation of the complex. Additionally, there are about 200 inscriptions of pilgrims who visited between the 6th and 9th centuries, many in Germanic, Lombard, and even in Runic languages. The gilded copper icon preserved in the Devotional Museum, featuring the first depiction of St Michael the Archangel, is allegedly an 11th-12th century Norman artifact rather than a 6th century Longobard piece.



MAP



QUIS UT DEUS?

“We step inside. We cross a Gothic nave. We move forward. We then find ourselves deep within the cavern. The place is damp, but in the midst of the darkness, a gold-armoured statue gradually reveals itself, surrounded by flickering candlelight. It is the Angel! [...] I stop where the darkness is thickest. I am now deeply connected with the harshness of nature. Cavern: a place of herds, and therefore of angels, a place of apparitions and oracles. Yet in this heart of the earth, there may have been a man before the terrors, close to his divine origin: a prophetic ghost of himself, of his painful becoming civilised.”

The Desert and After, Giuseppe Ungaretti

A natural grotto and a complex of overlapping buildings, the Sanctuary of San Michele is preceded by an octagonal bell tower dating back to 1274. Walking through a courtyard, you encounter a magnificent bronze portal cast in Constantinople in 1076, with panels engraved with biblical episodes featuring angels. Past the atrium, proceed into the mystical grotto of the archangel, indicated to the bishop of Siponto as his home in the first of three revelations at the end of the 5th century, and roofed in the Angevin period by a Gothic nave. Inside, a 1507 marble sculpture depicts the warrior archangel as he tramples Satan, wielding the sword.



‘HER SOFT BRAIDS / ON THE THROBBING BREAST/ARE EASED, LOOSELY SPREAD / HER HANDS’ GRIP SLACKENS, / THE DEWY PALENESS OF THE DEAD / IS ON HER MIEN: PIOUS SHE LIES / HER EYES SEEKING THE SKY.’

Although Alessandro Manzoni is mostly known (and studied at school) for his historical novel *The Betrothed*, he also authored popular tragedies, such as the one dedicated to the Longobard

prince Adelchi, who helplessly witnesses the fall of his kingdom alongside his long-braided sister Ermengarde. The Longobards, likely named for their long beards similar to those of their god Odin, invaded Italy in the year 568. Until then, they had lived on the eastern fringes of what had been the great Roman empire. Their king, Alboin, led the grand expedition of men, women and children across the Alps to Friuli. Despite being barbarian warriors, they appreciated art, as you will discover on a visit to Cividale del Friuli and its incredible UNESCO treasures. You can get there via Cesarino, the children’s train leaving from the station of Udine, and make friends with many

of your peers on board. Founded by Julius Caesar as *Forum Iulii*, Cividale was the first Lombard capital. The town’s first duke was Gisulph, nephew of King Alboin. In the **1 National Archaeological Museum**, you will be surprised to discover that Longobard soldiers were buried with their horses, together with swords, armour and valuables too. They trained for war from childhood, which is why child burials have also been found with full funerary sets, including traditional weapons and jewellery. Notice how skilfully this people worked metals to create highly decorative objects, such as golden crosses and fibulae – clasps used to fasten clothes for both men and women. Next, move to the **2 Christian Museum** and marvel at the somewhat “alien” faces on the Altar of Duke Ratchis. The carving style is rather unusual, wouldn’t you say? Yet, each civilisation has its own rituals and creative approaches deserving consideration regardless of our individual preferences because they reflect their culture. Thanks to the beams of coloured light hitting the altar at different angles, visitors can see that the stone slabs were originally painted and embellished with precious stones in order to resemble a gigantic work of goldsmithing. The final stop on this tour is the **3 Tempietto Longobardo**. Once inside, lift your gaze upwards: you too will feel as if you are hovering in front of the six saints. The 2 metre-high sculptures are made of stucco, much softer than stone. Have fun finding similarities and differences between them: some wear crowns on their heads, others hold them in their hands, others have crosses in their fists. But they all have one thing in common. What is it? Here’s a clue: it is something round.



THE LONGOBARDS IN ITALY in books

Reading suggestion for a better insight into the sites and vicissitudes of the Longobards.

• **History of the Lombards**, Paul the Deacon (789). The Christian monk from Cividale del Friuli wrote his vast *Historia Langobardorum* at the court of Charlemagne, following the decline of the Lombards. His work spans six books covering their story from their origins to the death of King Liutprand in 743.

• **Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects**, Giorgio Vasari (1550). This art history masterpiece not only compiles biographies of Italian Renaissance artists but also testifies to the intellectual culture of the 16th century.

• **Della superstiziosa Noce di Benevento**, Pietro Piperno (1640). As a protomedicus, Piperno connects the tale of the Beneventan witches to a walnut tree dedicated to Odin, around which the Lombard community near Benevento congregated.

• **Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage**, George Gordon Byron (1812-18). In Canto IV, Byron narrates his journey across Italy, reflecting on how his past experiences have shaped his observation on society and history.

• **Adelchis**, Alessandro Manzoni (1822). This work is well known for the Chorus revolving around Adelchi, the Lombard prince who witnesses the tragic downfall of his kingdom alongside his sister Ermengarde, who sought refuge in the

Monastery of San Salvatore in Brescia after being disowned by Charlemagne.

• **The Desert and After**, Giuseppe Ungaretti (1961). February to September 1934. Ungaretti travels across Southern Italy for the *Gazzetta del Popolo*. Among his destinations is the Sanctuary of San Michele on the Gargano. This volume collects his travel accounts.

• **History of the Lombards**, Jörg Jarnut (1982). This historical narrative by a German scholar offers a different viewpoint on the Lombard people, diverging from the interpretations put forth by most Italian authors.

• **Teodolinda. La longobarda**, Alberto Magnani, Yolanda Godoy (1998). The authors’ fascinating profile of Queen Theodelinda. As the wife of Authari and later of Agilulf, she was a beloved monarch who initiated the conversion of her people to Catholicism and turned Monza into a splendid capital city.

• **Il Longobardo** (2004), **La vendetta del Longobardo** (2005), **L’ultimo longobardo** (2006), Marco Salvador. This three-novel series by a passionate researcher delves into the Lombard period. From the same author is also *Il trono d’oro* (2013), a work set in *Langobardia Minor* which follows the aforementioned trilogy.

• **568 d.C. I Longobardi. La grande marcia** (2011) and **Il re solo** (2012), Sabina Colloredo. In her first historical novel, Sabina Colloredo recounts the extensive preparation and final march that brought the Lombards from distant Pannonia to our lands. The narrative continues in the second novel.

• **I longobardi**, Claudio Azzara (2015). As a Professor of medieval history, Azzara offers a concise yet precise reconstruction of Lombard history and its legacy across Central-Northern Italy and the Southern principalities.

• **Desiderio**, Stefano Gasparri (2019). 774 A.D. Following a crushing defeat, Desiderius is forced to surrender his kingdom to Charlemagne. Gasparri, a medieval historian, retraces the exploits of the last Lombard king, providing an insight into the places of power, i.e., Brescia, Pavia, Benevento, and Salerno, and even the French monastery where Desiderius died after a long imprisonment.

• **I Longobardi. Un popolo alle radici della nostra Storia**, Elena Percivaldi (2020). An updated history of the Lombard people, which emphasises their cultural contributions to language, customs, institutions, and the legal system of Italy.

Children’s books:

• **Bertoldo**, Roberto Piumini (2004). This child-friendly adaptation of the popular tale of Bertoldo, a cunning peasant at the court of King Alboin, originally told by Giulio Cesare Croce in 1606 is suitable for ages 4 to 11. It has been adapted for children by Roberto Piumini and illustrated by Andrea Rivola.

• **Prima che il gallo canti** (2023). This is a fantasy role-play game and graphic novel available for free at www.longobardinitalia.it. Young readers can encounter characters such as Adelmo, Folco, Ilderico, Randwulf, and creatures like the Basilisk and Pipino the Pig.