

LONGOBARDS AND CHURCH OF ROME TWO PHASES IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

In his works, Paul the Deacons blames the belligerent attitude of the Longobards toward the Pope and the Church of Rome. This was one of the major conflicts between various analysts of the Longobard historical period. To better understand the reasons and goals of the narrative approach taken by the first chronicler of the Longobards, we should review the Italian context both at the time when the peoples led by Alboin arrived (568) and in the following years.

After 20 years, the devastating Greek-Gothic war was won by Byzantium (535-553). Rome was just a Byzantine duchy neglected by the Emperor, who had to deal with serious problems and conflicts in his Eastern territories.

The Bishop of Rome only had the privilege to reside at the historical seat of the Roman Empire, which was also the place where Peter and Paul had been martyred. As regards the exercise of ecclesiastical power, the Pope was just *primus inter pares* amongst the five Patriarchs of Early Christianity. The others were based in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Constantinople.

Furthermore, the Patriarch-Bishop of Rome was directly under the imperial authority of Byzantium. Any new bishop chosen by the people and the Senate of Rome had to be confirmed and actually appointed by the Emperor of Byzantium. Failing this official act, the throne of Peter remained vacant.



MONZA, Dom Museum and Treasure - Agilulfo Cross

A heated theological controversy triggered by a decree on theology passed in 553 by Justinian had entailed a severe breakdown between Western dioceses. The Roman Pope with his followers separated from the Bishop of Aquileia and his followers, whose influence extended to most of Northern Italy and the Pannonian area (Schism of the Three Chapters).

This situation was exacerbated by the fact that, at the time of Gregory the Great, there were no representatives from the imperial authority in the Byzantine duchy of Rome to ensure good governance to the city and its territory.

For the first time in the history of the Church, the Pope was obliged to provide for the needs of his exhausted people. The same fate would befall his immediate successors. The territorial expansion of Saint Peter's Heritage was the only means of livelihood for the Roman people. These are the main political and economic reasons that led to the expansion of the temporal power of the Church in the Longobard period.

To Longobards, who by that time were dominating most of Italy, the weakness of the Byzantine Duchy of Rome appeared as an opportunity to acquire in their domain the absolute prestige of the ancient capital, subtracted from the imperial power.

A basically temporal dispute with the Popes began. The Franks, whose kings had converted to Catholicism in 496, were their most natural allies.

This explains why Paul the Deacons publicly defended the Popes against the attacks of Longobard kings and dukes threatening the emerging power. In short, chronicles were aligned with the most prevalent interest of the author's reference authority. Nothing had changed in the way Greek and Roman proto-chroniclers were used to report events.

Atrocities against priests and monks as well as the destruction of churches and monasteries should be placed within their historical reference context. Similarly, the valuable works done by Longobard aristocracy for the Church and the ecclesiastical world should be taken into account.

At the beginning of the invasion, alongside other minor events, the shocking episode of the destruction of the Monastery in Montecassino (577) by the Longobards is reported. After a certain period of time, thanks to the Longobard dukes in Beneventum, Petronax, a monk from Brescia, started the rebuilding works (at the beginning of the 8th century).

Rome was besieged by Longobard kings several times. However, it was one Longobard king, Cuncipert, who reconciled the Schism of the Three Chapters (Synod of Pavia, 698) and reunified Western churches.

According to a document whose authenticity is not well established), another king, Liutprand, made the Donation of Sutri (728), which symbolically acknowledged the political and institutional role and weight of the Church.

Lastly, after some hectic moments during the first invasion, many Longobard aristocrats built and reinforced monasteries and churches and disseminated cult elements throughout Europe (*in primis* the cult of Saint Michael the Archangel), which are still worshipped by local communities.