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THE SYMBOLOGY OF POWER THROUGH THE STUDY OF GRAVE GOODS IN LANGOBARD CEMETERIES IN ITALY

Abstract

Il corredo funerario costituisce una delle componenti più indicative nella valutazione di una necropoli di età longobarda, non solo sotto il profilo cronologico, ma anche per un inquadramento più completo del complesso archeologico. Bisogna però osservare che le nostre conoscenze sul significato dei singoli oggetti deposti nelle tombe, sulle loro combinazioni e sulla differenziazione delle singole offerte sono ancora molto lontani dalla comprensione nei loro significati più profondi. I limiti dei modelli tradizionali con i quali è stato affrontato lo studio delle tombe longobarde, basati su strette corrispondenze tra la qualità del corredo e lo status *del defunto, tra il contesto produttivo in cui i manufatti sono stati concepiti e realizzati e le caratteristiche etnografiche del defunto, alterate solo da graduali e forse troppo lineari processi di acculturazione e di cristianizzazione sono stati da tempo individuati. Un riesame delle tradizioni funerarie potrebbe offrire non solo la possibilità di apportare nuovi dati al dibattito in corso ma capire quali messaggi la società longobarda voleva comunicare attraverso il mondo dei morti a quello dei vivi.*

1. *Introduction*

Many studies have focused on the transformation of the western European areas before the end of Roman political power. The disappearance of a centralised State, the difficulties in receiving primary food supplies as a result of loss of control of the maritime routes - with the inevitable reduction in the volume of commercial traffic in the Mediterranean - brought about significant social, economic and cultural changes which, in the end, also transformed many aspects of material life. The loss of Roman political authority also led to the uncontrolled settlement - to a much greater extent than ever before - of groups of German populations within the areas of the Rhine-Danube *limes*[1]. Historians and archaeologists have discussed at length the consequences

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[1] Rotili 2011, pp. 97-98; Rotili 2012a, pp. 345-346; Rotili 2012b, pp. 181-182.

of these transformations, contributing to an interesting debate between those who see the end of the *pars occidentis* as a socio-political implosion - fuelled by relentless population movements beyond the imperial frontiers - and those who, on the other hand, recognise gradual processes of change within the Roman world[2]. It will therefore be important to understand the elements of continuity and the elements of novelty that characterised the early medieval cemeteries and the processes and timescales involved in their replacement or integration of the previous funerary traditions. Consequently it will be fundamental to ascertain how the cemeteries were formed and in what way they represented the final stage of the funeral ceremony, in order to understand their potential and limits as a source for the study of the past[3].

2. *The funeral as a form of self-representation of power*

Mike Pearson has imagined funerals as plays in which the deceased becomes the vehicle of communication between the actors - those who organise the funeral - and the public. The purpose of this form of representation is that in this way the funeral ceremony could be seen, witnessed and remembered - the message is codified but is comprehensible, above all to those present - as if the funeral were a natural stage with a choreography including three different types of cultural entity, i.e. the site, the objects and the body. The corpse of the deceased comes onto the stage accompanied by gestures, rites and objects, the choice of which is predetermined, as it has specific meanings for the spectators originating from their personal, social, cultural and aesthetic perceptions[4]. The relatives in mourning are the secondary actors whose role in the funeral management phase can vary in the different societies, as they may be responsible for the entire organisational phase or they may only verify that the wishes of the deceased are respected[5]. If the funeral is a rite, it can be assumed that it takes place according to a script entailing certain parameters and pre-defined ceremonies, which vary according to the societies and cultural contexts in a certain historical period[6]. At the same time, however, also the actors can add variations, on the basis of their socio-political status, that of the deceased or the personal wishes of the deceased. In any case it is always the actors who decide how the funeral is conducted and select the objects displayed during any manifestation that may accompany the deceased. It is always the relatives who choose the grave, and decide (or pay for) its position, from a variety of possible places. The selection of some objects displayed during the funeral implies that other elements are excluded so that not only will the ceremony be transformed into an operation of assembly and ostentation - determined by the presence or absence of one artefact rather than another - but it will also be valued for its capacity to represent a hypothetical world. The objects can be made exclusively for the funeral

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[2] For the theory of catastrophism, WARD PERKINS 2005, pp. 138-168, and for the transformations within the Roman world, WICKHAM 1998, pp. 56-57; GASPARRI 2002, pp. 59-61; HARRISON 2002, pp. 290-291; WICKHAM 2009, pp. 184-196; ROTILI 2012a, pp. 346-347.

[3] BARBIERA 2012, pp. 15-16.

[4] PEARSON 1998, p. 33.

[5] BRATHER 2007, p. 304; BARBIERA 2012, pp. 16-17.

[6] METCALF-HUNTINGTON 1985, pp. 56-59; WILLIAMS 2006, pp. 20-22.

but they can also belong to everyday life where they have significant representative functions, mutating from tools into performative communication vehicles[7].

Selection and omission operations are involved also in the representation of the deceased, in the choice of which of his/her different identities to propose. This decision stems from the combination of the different social dimensions present in the society of the living[8]. The various forms of identity that distinguish each individual have different meanings and importance: some comprise all the members of a community, others only particular groups. Age and gender are fundamental forms of identity, but the importance they can take on in the context of the funeral, via the choice of the objects or treatment of the body, varies in time and space. According to the same principle, religion, origin and ethnic identity can be manifested and overlap when they co-exist in different forms, or they can be taken for granted and therefore not manifested, or deliberately concealed in areas with high levels of conflict. Profession, wealth and political role can be significant or not, according to the different degree of hierarchization in the community of the living and between those who take part in the funeral. Lastly, quantity and type of the goods invested in for the funeral - and the relative level of wealth or poverty with which the deceased is represented - do not necessarily reflect his/her actual social status[9]. The contexts in which the funerals are held become the space in which social relations develop between the relatives-actors and the community-public so that the cemeteries - i.e. the place where at least the final part of the funeral ceremony takes place - are transformed into places of power, i.e. into areas where reality is represented by combining a pre-determined ritual with subjective interpretations, via which reality is filtered, altered and invented[10].

3. *Continuity and innovation in grave goods in Langobard society*

Before examining the meaning of the objects placed in the graves, it should be pointed out that by grave goods we mean any item deposited intentionally or incidentally in a grave, i.e. not deriving from an accidental inclusion, not part of the body, of the means used to transport the corpse to the grave or of the structure of the grave[11].

In the Italian peninsula all the Langobard cemeteries are based on a pyramidal and patriarchal social structure where the members of the different clans that formed the community of the living - we are therefore dealing with uniform demographic groups united not only by kinship but also by common cultural elements - were carried into the world of the dead following the same principles[12]. In general they are newly founded cemetery areas, but there are several cases of continuity or overlap with more ancient cemeteries[13].

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[7] Barbiera 2012, p. 17.
[8] Williams 2006, pp. 36-39; Brather 2005, pp. 160-161; Brather 2007, pp. 306-307.
[9] Brather 2005, pp. 160-162.
[10] Härke 2001, pp. 19-28; Williams 2006, pp. 196-197; de Vingo 2010b, pp. 60-65.
[11] Gastaldo 1998, p. 16.
[12] Gasparri 2011, p. 37; Rotili 2012a, pp. 343-344.
[13] Paroli 2007, p. 204; Pejrani Baricco 2007b, p. 264.

A comparative study carried out on Pannonian and Friulian cemeteries has high-lighted a process of accentuation of the family group among burials after the migration, confirmed by a clearer separation between the areas of deposition of the families, and a greater differentiation in the type and richness of the grave goods, in contrast with the relative egalitarianism of the Pannonian cemeteries where, in determination of the grave goods and in the spatial distribution of the deceased, only the gender (male or female) of the deceased and his/her age were used - at least in the cases examined: weapons for adult men, the complementary elements of female clothing for women of fertile age and no grave goods or neutral elements for children[14]. The vertical distinc-tion of gender and age is not abandoned in the Italian cemeteries - in fact there are cases in which certain sectors of the cemetery were reserved for children, the elderly, men only or women only - and underlines more emphatically a horizontal separation between family groups and individuals with more or less rich grave goods, the sign of an advanced process of social transformation to favour a more rapid inclusion in the complex Italian settlement picture[15].

During the Langobard conquest of the central-northern Italian peninsula, an ex-ponential increase is observed in the quality and quantity aspects of the grave goods, reaching the highest percentage around the 7th century and the years immediately afterwards. The presence of graves - in some cases very rich coinciding with the most closely-fought settlement period during which large fortunes were made - has been reasonably interpreted as the desire to exhibit and confirm in the eyes of the local communities the status acquired in a context of very unstable economic and social relations[16]. Very similar dynamics have been observed in this same period in northern Gaul and justified as a consequence of reorganisation of the territories and settle-ments, which in that phase became more widely distributed and scattered than in the previous centuries, following the dissolution of Roman political control[17].

In the first decades of the 7th century female grave goods become simpler, the radiate-headed bow brooches disappear, the buckles and belts connected to the main belt are reduced. The saucer brooches, included in female clothing only after 575, continue to be used until the 7th century but are slowly replaced or integrated by zoomorphic brooches[18]. The decorative elements include necklaces with beads made of ceramic, precious stones, glass paste, bone and amber in which coins could be inserted in various ways (perforation or soldered hook), while earrings, armillas and rings are less commonly found. The finding of long bronze pins in female graves, positioned alongside the skull of the deceased, could be related to social status sym-bolically represented by the type of hairstyle used. Neutral elements such as knives, combs and ceramic or glass pottery complete the picture. All the objects indicated, in

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[14] Halsall 1996, pp. 22-24; Barbiera 2005a, pp. 307-311; Barbiera 2005b, pp. 277-290; La Rocca 2004, p. 210; Barbiera 2007a, pp. 357-358; Barbiera 2007b, pp. 245-246; Giostra 2007a, pp. 321-322; La Rocca 2007, pp. 273-274; Barbiera 2008, pp. 456-457.

[15] La Rocca 2004, pp. 210-211; Barbiera 2005a, pp. 311-312; La Rocca 2007, pp. 265-266; Barbiera 2010, pp. 128-142; Barbiera 2012, pp. 138-141.

[16] La Rocca 2004, pp. 210-211; de Vingo 2010b, pp. 57-58.

[17] Halsall 1995, pp. 25-37; Effros 2002, p. 89; Effros 2003, pp. 165-166; Brather 2007, p. 306; La Rocca 2007, pp. 266-267; de Vingo 2010a, pp. 268-269._

[18] Martin 1997, pp. 351-353; Paroli 2001, p. 266; Rotili 2012a, pp. 344-345.

Fig. 1. Cemetery of Collegno (Turin), planimetric survey of grave (1), detail of the position where male clothing artefacts and weapons were found (2), weapons of the deceased warrior (3).

addition to recurring non-systematically, could be combined in a number of different ways[19].

The lesser investment in female grave goods occurring in the first half of the 7th century is very well exemplified, for instance, by the cemetery of Nocera Umbra, and even more obviously by that of Collegno (Turin) or Porzano di Leno (Brescia) where the phenomenon is confirmed by the fact that in these cemeteries women constitute a clear minority with respect to the overall number of burials[20]. This numerical difference appears fairly generalised and remains a distinctive element of the Italian medieval cemeteries which has only been partially explained. The phenomenon of the reduction in female grave goods - considered as the expression of a more rapid process of integration of women with the cultural tradition of the native population - could indicate, rather, a change in the function of women in the first phase of the Langobard conquest, which should perhaps also be related to a redefinition of their social role vis-à-vis the new conditions of life in Italy[21].

The development of male grave goods during the 7th century appears completely different and for a long time continued to be characterised by the presence of weapons. *Spatha* and/or *scramasax*, spear and shield continue to be regularly deposited together with belts for suspension of weapons (with five elements or multiple) with equestrian elements denoting the status of horseman. Initially the elements pertaining specifically to the horse are more frequent, such as bits and bridles, more rarely saddles, when the horse itself is not buried beside or in the same grave as the horseman[22]. Subsequently spurs, first deposited individually and in pairs only from 620-630 onwards, represent the status of the deceased as a horseman[23]. Military belts and spurs are the objects used longest as elements to define identity and social distinction, re-

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[19] Paroli 2007, p. 205; de Vingo 2010b, pp. 63-64.
[20] Pejrani Baricco 2004, pp. 38-40; Paroli 2007, p. 205; Pejrani Baricco 2007a, pp. 372-376; Pejrani Baricco 2007b, pp. 263-264; Giostra 2011, p. 261.
[21] La Rocca 2011, pp. 65-68; Barbiera 2012, pp. 129-130.
[22] Giostra 2007a, pp. 319-324.
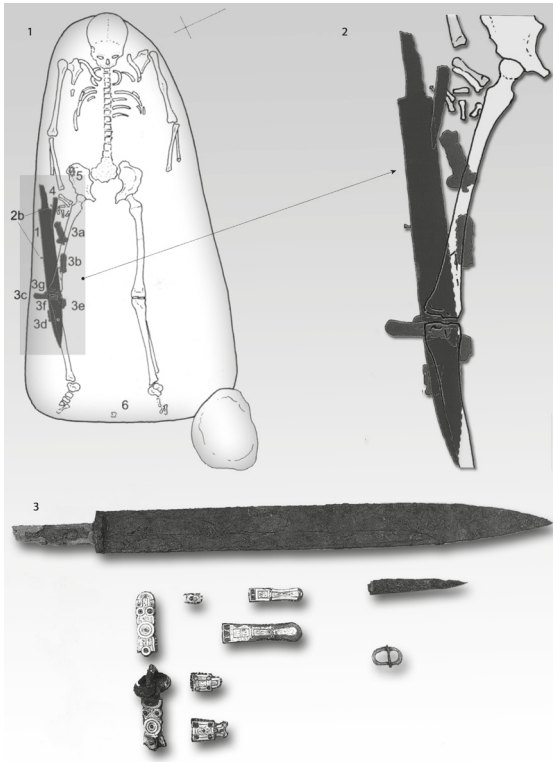[23] Giostra 2004b, p. 109.

Fig. 2. Cemetery of Collegno (Turin), planimetric survey of grave (1), detail of the position where male clothing artefacts and weapons were found (2), long seax and small iron knife (3).

curring in graves until the end of the 7th century[24] (fig. 1).

The burial depositions constitute a multiform set of objects highlighting a very complex web of relations and exchanges both with the outside, i.e. with the Byzantine areas - featuring artefacts like bronze basins, African slip ware and glass crockery, belts, silver and damascened metal harnesses, brooches, buckles and jewellery - and with the internal areas where there was a circulation of fairly standardised objects in terms of form and decoration, pointing to a diffusion controlled by a network of centralised workshops[25].

Although graves with weapons are only a minority in Langobard cemeteries and of limited duration, with some significant exceptions including Nocera Umbra where 96% of the adult male individuals are buried with a set of weapons or Trezzo-Adda where 100% of the male burials are armed, their frequent occurrence in the territories of the Kingdom – for example the large cemeteries in the areas of Turin and Brescia – has often led to purely ethnic interpretations, as an expression of separation and differentiation from the Roman population[26]. Concerning the complex theme of ethnic identity, it has been underlined that the reference to a common origin, although constituting an important ingredient for the cultural construction and cohesion of the ruling groups of the *gens Langobardorum,* was only one of the many elements that sustained the process of formation and evolution of the Langobard socio-political structure in Italy which had a multi-ethnic composition[27]. As far as we know, the ruling groups were never par-

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[24] Giostra 2004a, pp. 41-43; Giostra 2007a, pp. 332-335.

[25] Paroli 2007, pp. 205-206; De Marchi 2011, pp. 286-291.

[26] De Marchi 2007, pp. 235-236; de Vingo 2009a, pp. 80-81; de Vingo 2009b, pp. 97-107; Ahumada Silva 2010, pp. 165-173; Giostra 2011, pp. 253-256; Micheletto-Uggè-Giostra 2011, pp. 243-244; Bruno-Giostra 2012, p. 218; Rotili 2012b, p. 190.

[27] Rotili 2011, pp. 98-99; Rotili 2012b, pp. 187-188; Bedini-Caramelli-Giostra-Lippi-Mallegni-Pejrani Baricco-Petiti-Vai 2012, pp. 449-451.

Fig. 3. Cemetery of Collegno (Turin), grave 32 of the cemetery of Collegno (Turin), with body buried in a simple grave wrapped in a shroud with arms folded.

ticularly interested in underlining this heterogeneity and it is no surprise that in the profoundly militarised context of the phase of territorial conquest - with continuous internal and external military tension - the symbols of power were taken from the military sphere regardless of whether the exercise of weapons was actually practised[28].

In the second half of the 7th century the grave goods, including male grave goods, began to significantly decrease in terms of consistency and number, while those consisting of neutral elements progressively increase, with a strong percentage growth in pottery, including many glass vessels (fig. 2). The situation changes irreversibly during the 8th century when goods are no longer deposited in the graves[29].

Although what is described constitutes a general phenomenon which has many territorial variables due to the presence of specific local factors which make each individual cemetery a case in itself, it nevertheless indicates the strength of the need for self-representation of the elite classes that developed in Langobard society over approximately two centuries[30].

The disappearance of the grave goods also led to a change in funeral customs as burial began to be performed in narrow oval graves dug in the ground shallower than those used in the previous centuries. This change has been recognised in the cemetery of Collegno (Turin) where the graves of the 8th century occupy the spaces left free between those of the previous phases (fig. 3)[31]. Another important development recorded during the later part of the 8th century is that of multiple burials in family

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[28] Paroli 2007, pp. 206-207.

[29] Pohl 2002, p. 24; La Rocca 2004, p. 211; Giostra 2007a, pp. 338-339; Paroli 2007, p. 208; de Vingo 2009b, pp. 107-108.

[30] Rotili 2012a, pp. 343-344; Rotili 2012b, p. 190.

[31] Pejrani Baricco 2004, pp. 40-42; Pejrani Baricco 2007a, pp. 374-376; Pejrani Baricco 2007b, pp. 264-265.

graves. This innovation highlighted in the cemeteries of Bolgare (Bergamo), Mombello (Alessandria) and Povegliano (Verona) has a long tradition in the late Roman period and appears to become established in particular in the funerary areas connected to buildings of worship where the presence of relics acted as a centre of attraction for burials[32].

4. *The wealth of the deceased: grave goods and status*

Cultural transmission should not be perceived as one single process; it has a complex, pluridirectional and variable course as applicable and depending on the circumstances. This is because material culture has never been a static phenomenon: it is a perpetual infinite motion in which continuous human contacts and movements constantly modify it, creating a new mixture in which the components that have contributed to initially forming and shaping it are different from those of the subsequent phases[33]. The process via which an authentic ancestral tradition is identified is always determined *a posteriori*, as happens in history, crystallising those aspects of culture essential for legitimising the lines of demarcation between distinct ethnic, social, political or religious groups[34]. Every cultural system is subject to continuous modifications over time, determined not so much or not only by contact with different cultural systems - i.e. by the spread of ideas and the mixing of different groups - but rather by significant social and economic transformations within the system itself[35]. In addition to this, functional and environmental components can also trigger other changes and influence the forms of material culture. Individual cultural systems - since they are subject to modifications determined by social, economic and environmental factors - are in no way uniform: on the contrary, the different technological, decorative and morphological variations of each system are distributed in a non-uniform manner in the same culture[36]. At the same time the discontinuity in the distribution of single elements in a cultural system is extensively conditioned by social factors. The material culture is not passively maintained and does not necessarily have to be shared. The possibility of adopting a particular cultural variation may be reserved only for some individuals or only for single groups and be inaccessible to others, since each member of a certain society has different possibilities of accessing the culture according to his/her social role. All this points to the fact that the different archaeological cultures identified can never have been uniform and circumscribable, since they are extremely heterogeneous. If we could produce a distribution chart of the different cultural components defined by the archaeologists, we could verify how, in certain areas, artefacts attributed to different cultural contexts coexist while, at the same time, there

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[32] Fortunati-Ghiroldi 2006, pp. 91-96 (Bolgare); Giostra 2007b, pp. 101-103 (Mombello); Bruno-Giostra 2012, pp. 218-219 (Povegliano).
[33] Rotili 2012a, pp. 339-340.
[34] Wilpert 1989, pp. 21-23; Bayart 1996, pp. 45-48; Aime 2004, pp. 56-57.
[35] Rotili 2012a, pp. 340-341.
[36] Binford 1965, pp. 207-208.

are contexts not characterised by a distinguishable culture. Furthermore, the areas of distribution of a specific material culture do not always coincide with the settlement sites of the ethnic group thought to have been the originators of the culture. This would demonstrate that the transformations of material culture are determined by complex and wide-ranging social and environmental variations, and not just by the ethnic component[37]. Funerary practices must be considered no longer in terms of cultural diffusion; they must be studied with particular attention to the structural variations and complexity of the communities examined. What has to be verified, therefore, is the relationship between the degree of investment for preparation of the funeral and burial, and the rank of the deceased: elaborate depositions and numerous refined grave goods are assumed to reflect the high social status of the deceased[38]. In complex societies, in which the division of wealth is unequal, the family clans with most power and control over the available agricultural and livestock resources tend to prepare and organise rituals designed to underline their hegemony in order to confirm membership of the dominant group, investing greater resources in complex ceremonies and more elaborate forms of burial, and therefore to reiterate their ability to absorb and maintain the prerogatives of the deceased. If the early medieval graves are characterised by the presence of numerous and various objects, it is possible that the grave goods were used to define the rank and social role of the deceased during their life. According to this possibility, the socio-political role converged in the formation of the ethnic identity without undermining it: the richest grave goods were deposited by the immigrant component, both as a distinguishing tradition and to confirm the power obtained in the conquered areas not only over the native population but also over all the different clans that had taken part in the occupation phase[39].

The concept of ethnic identity should not be understood in a monolithic sense since the sense of inclusion or exclusion in a certain demographic group is contingent and not innate, and definition of the ethnic entities themselves is determined by the interaction capacity of different groups. In this perspective ethnic identity is used as a strategy for self-definition and identification vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, so that its confines are not static but subject to continuous transformations and mediations. Also the significance attributed to the material culture is not stable, but continuously redefined, to the extent that a particular cultural form can remain unchanged but its significance can be altered in different historical and social contexts[40].

In this particular case it is important to underline the function of funerals as ritual operations performed by the family members or relatives of the deceased in which the choice of the symbols used to remember the deceased reflects first and foremost the need to strengthen, affirm and create social relations in the present and not necessarily to faithfully reproduce the life experience of the deceased. Of all the different identities (age, gender, ethnic and family membership) assumed by the deceased during his/her life, only some can be chosen as representative in the burial phase, without excluding the possibility of adding new elements not included

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[37] Barbiera 2012, pp. 104-106.
[38] Williams 2006, pp. 39-42; Brather 2007, p. 306.
[39] La Rocca 1998, pp. 78-80; Barbiera 2012, pp. 99-100.
[40] Barbiera 2012, pp. 95-98.

previously. At the same time also the bonds of affection act as filters, so that an individual can be commemorated differently depending on whether his children, his wife or only secondary relatives mourn his death. The preparation of the grave and choice of the grave goods represent the images of the ancestors constructed and prepared by the descendants for the community of the living as a whole. In this way, people of the same social status can easily receive burials of different entity, or graves with the same content in terms of wealth can contain individuals with very different social status. The main actors are not included in the world of the dead but are part of the world of the living, i.e. they are represented by those who organise the funeral in material terms and take part in it as spectators[41]. Therefore the deceased constituted not only a means of communication from the afterworld; in the phases of greatest social instability, the investments in the funerary ritual were very substantial. Only after the 8th century, when social status and consequently agricultural and livestock property - personal objects not only of sentimental value but also of considerable economic value - became hereditary was the deposition of grave goods replaced by individual wills[42].

5. *Conclusions*

In central-northern European areas the profound political transformations and high level of social instability that characterised the transition from the Late Antique to the Medieval phase required a continuous reaffirmation and negotiation of the roles acquired by the members of the various communities. The end of the Roman world not only determined a process of profound change in the aristocratic element; the senatorial ruling class saw the basis of its political and economic power disappear and was replaced by a military aristocracy[43]. The dissolution of the political authority in the *pars occidentis* and the relative situation of instability caused by this power vacuum created difficulties with management of the vast properties owned by the senatorial class, distributed throughout the old imperial provinces, favouring the birth of a new aristocracy whose property was not only located in much more circumscribed areas but where the new elite also took control of the civil, administrative and religious powers[44]. The Germanic populations integrated into this process of transformation of the aristocratic element, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the territory, penetrating into the imperial areas[45]. In the case of the Italian peninsula only the Langobards, not the Goths, were the expression of this ruling class which based their hegemony on the two pillars of land and livestock ownership[46]. In this situation of

[41] WILLIAMS 2006, pp. 195-196; LA ROCCA 2007, pp. 272-273; BARBIERA 2012, pp. 107-108.

[42] LA ROCCA 1989, p. 88; EFFROS 2003, pp. 91-94; GIOSTRA 2004a, p. 50; LA ROCCA 2005, pp. 456-457; WILLIAMS 2006, pp. 44-45.

[43] GASPARRI 2002, pp. 59-61; NOBLE 2003, pp. 17-22; GASPARRI 2006, pp. 163-166.

[44] GASPARRI 2002, pp. 61-64; POHL 2002, pp. 22-23; WICKHAM 2002, pp. 133-138.

[45] PEJRANI BARICCO 2007b, p. 265; GASPARRI 2011, pp. 39-41; BARBIERA 2012, pp. 108-109; ROTILI 2012a, pp. 347-348.

[46] GASPARRI 2002, pp. 67-73; DE VINGO 2009a, pp. 66-67; NEGRO PONZI 2010, pp. 14-17.

instability - which required continuous mediation of social relations - new forms of manifestation of power and construction of memory developed, as the expression of a new and coalescing political mentality[47].

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Fig. 1 (from Giostra 2004b, pp. 96-97)
Fig. 2 (from Giostra 2004b, pp. 116-117, partially modified)
Fig. 3 (from Pejrani Baricco 2004, p. 42)