

## 8 Narrating ethnic identity and competition in Lombard southern Italy through burial practices (6th–7th centuries)

*Giulia Zornetta*

### Introduction

Archaeological research on early medieval cemeteries from the 6th to the 8th century CE has brought to light substantial differences between southern Italy and the burial grounds excavated in the northern and central part of the peninsula. Apart from a few remarkable exceptions – such as the two neighbouring cemeteries of Vicenne and Morrione in Campochiaro (Molise) and some scattered finds in Benevento (Campania) (Figure 8.1) – the funerary areas investigated so far do not present the features that scholars have traditionally recognised as ‘Lombard identity markers’, that is, row cemeteries with earth-cut tomb pits and lavish burials with a specific set of grave goods, which in the case of male tombs especially includes weapons (Bierbrauer 2005; Giostra 2011). On average, southern cemeteries are smaller in size and show a certain internal variety in funerary practices. The most striking differences from the rest of the Italian peninsula are the scarcity of unlined earthen pits as well as that of weapons and precious objects (Campese Simoni 2003; Ebanista 2011).

According to an outdated but sometimes still implicitly accepted approach to funerary archaeology, the occurrence of rich grave goods would make it possible to map the settlement of the so-called ‘barbarian peoples’ within the fading Roman Empire. Since the arrival of the Ostrogoths in the late 5th century had no discernible influence on funerary practices, the early medieval lavish burials in the Italian peninsula have traditionally been associated with the Lombards (La Rocca 2004a; Possenti 2014), who moved into Italy from central Europe around 568.

The Lombard settlement took place by right of conquest, without any mediation of Roman imperial authorities. It also lacked any effective resistance by local populations, probably due to the crisis that affected both economy and society in the aftermath of the Gothic War (535–553). Nevertheless, the Lombards failed to conquer the entire peninsula and the coastal areas remained under the control of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Lombard territory was then organised into duchies, each centred on a city with a strategic position. A prominent city during the Roman period, Benevento (Beneventum) was designated as the capital of a duchy due to its favourable location on the *Via Appia*. According to Paul the Deacon, who wrote the *Historia Langobardorum* in the second half of the 8th century, a duke named

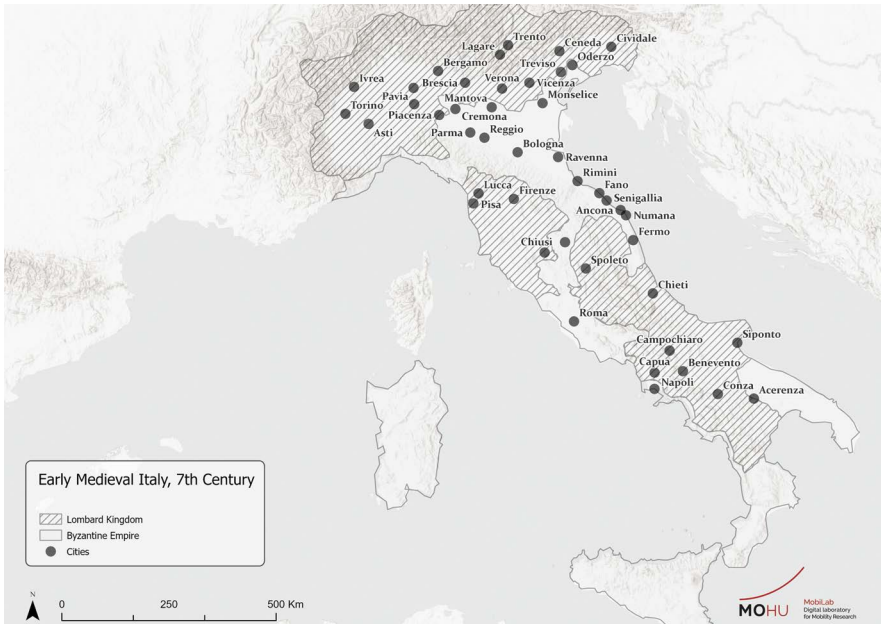


Figure 8.1 Map of early medieval Italy, first half of the 7th century CE.

Source: Marco Orlandi, MobiLab, DISSGeA, University of Padova.

Zotto was already in charge here during the reign of King Authari (584–590) (HL III, 32–33).

The emperor Justinian's seizure of the Ostrogothic Kingdom, followed by the Lombard conquest, marked a turning point for both political and social structures in the Italian peninsula. At the beginning of the 6th century, the senatorial class still had a political role in the Ostrogothic Kingdom, but their members were later unable to maintain their wealth and social status (Wickham 2005: 158–164). The economic and demographic crisis that followed the Gothic War triggered a major societal change in the Italian peninsula, especially (but not only) for the elites (Gasparri 2002: 61–67). In the second half of the 6th century, the late Roman social stability preserved by the Ostrogoths was deeply undermined, leaving room for intense local competition, in which the newcomers also participated.

Both historians and archaeologists have analysed the social transformations taking place during this period, and much research has specifically addressed Lombard migration and ethnicity. As with the case of early 20th-century German archaeology, Italian archaeology has associated the ethnic identity of the Lombards with specific building techniques, funerary rituals, and grave goods. Late Roman burials are generally distinguished by modest grave goods – in both quantitative and qualitative terms – or contain objects associated with funerary attire (e.g. brooches, bracelets). By contrast, burials from the Lombard period can feature the presence of composite grave goods: alongside everyday objects (pots, combs, and shears), male burials sometimes include weapons (swords, scramasaxes, lances, shields,

even axes and arrows), along with markers of high social status (belts, rings), while women's accessories (brooches, earrings) are often found in female burials, although they feature styles that may differ from the Late Roman period.

Archaeologists have sought to identify Lombards via burials rich in weapons and jewellery, and the local population via burials devoid of grave goods or with only very simple items (Bierbrauer 2005). This has led scholars to interpret the coexistence of burials with and without grave goods within the same cemetery as evidence of a community made up of a group of warriors from outside who ruled over native servants and farmers or, at best, as a sign of the process of possible integration between Lombards and locals (Paroli 1997; Pejrani Baricco 2004: 30). Such an ethnic interpretation of early medieval cemeteries identifies migration as the main driver of change in funerary practices and, even if often implicitly, of the overall social transformations that occurred between Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. It also leaves room for specific contradictions concerning the Lombard settlement. For example, row cemeteries with richly furnished burials are generally located in peripheral areas, far from the cities and centres of power, where the presence of Lombard authorities and elites is otherwise documented. Moreover, 'Lombard burials' are scarcely attested in southern Italy.

The Duchy of Benevento is, then, an interesting context within which to test the limits of this traditional approach to funerary archaeology. It was located at the farthest periphery from the centres of royal power, and almost surrounded by Byzantine territories. Although regional identity was proudly Lombard, the funerary practices attested here during this period can hardly be related to the model of the 'Lombard cemetery'. Only some of the burials unearthed in Campochiaro and Benevento present features at least comparable to that of the large, row cemeteries located in northern and central Italy, most notably the deposition of weapons among other grave goods.

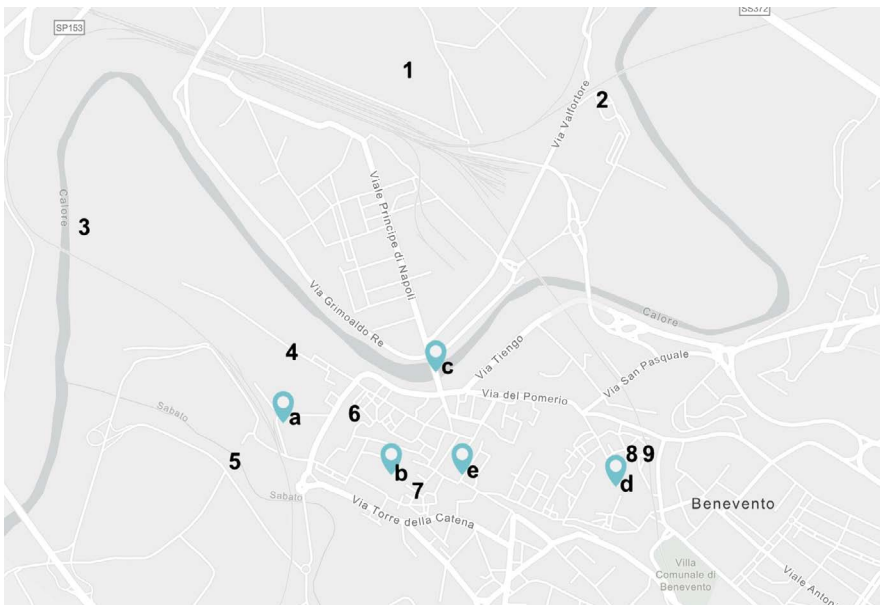
According to the ethnic interpretation of early medieval cemeteries, these sites have been presented as material evidence of the settlement of non-native, 'allochthonous' populations, and their acculturation process in southern Italy (Rotili 2008–2011). However, even the archaeological finds in Benevento and Campochiaro do not fit the 'Lombard' pattern perfectly. At the same time, since most of the burials in southern Italy did not present 'Lombard identity markers', they appear to be more an exception than the norm. Would this mean that there were very few Lombards in southern Italy or that they underwent a remarkably fast process of acculturation? Given both the quick success of the Lombard conquest in this area and the elites' claim to Lombard identity, such assumptions are difficult to support.

By considering some of the suggestions which have unfolded within the wider debate on funerary transitions, this chapter discusses the data that has emerged so far for Benevento and Campochiaro, focusing on different possibilities of interpreting the funerary practices attested here. It surveys the archaeological investigations conducted at three key funerary areas located in the city of Benevento and two rural cemeteries. Each section then offers a different interpretation of the archaeological evidence, and especially of the lavish burials found at each site. These interpretations do not concern themselves with the deceased's ethnic identity, but rather competition and strategies of distinction within a changing society. The analysis of both

urban and rural sites aims to show that there was probably a correlation between funerary investment and social stress, suggesting that the deposition of grave goods could be linked to heated social competition triggered by the transformation of the Roman world.

## Benevento

Archaeological excavations carried out in Benevento so far have revealed a variety of funerary practices in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, which can sometimes be identified even within the same cemetery. Located predominantly in suburban contexts, each site was used over a certain span of time, which in many cases has been only broadly defined. The tombs excavated in the Cellarulo district and in the nearby Santi Quaranta area (Rotili 2006) are dated mostly to Late Antiquity, as well as the cemetery in Santa Clementina (Tomay 2009: 140–141). Burial grounds from the Lombard period are primarily clustered in three other areas: the suburban region located in the north of the city, beyond the river Calore, the area of the then-abandoned Roman public buildings (forum and theatre), and the eastern part of the present-day city centre, where the church of St. Sophia is (now) located (Figure 8.2). In addition to these cemeteries, there are several isolated tombs which



*Figure 8.2* Late antique and early medieval cemeteries in Benevento mentioned in the present study: (1) Pezzapiana, (2) Valfortore, (3) Cellarulo, (4) Santi Quaranta, (5) Santa Clementina, (6) Via San Cristiano, (7) Via Bosco Lucarelli, (8) Museo del Sannio, (9) Palazzo de Simone; (a) Roman amphitheater, (b) Roman theater, (c) bridge over the River Calore, (d) Church of St Sophia, (e) Cathedral.

Source: © Map by Giulia Zornetta.

may have been part of larger burial grounds that have not been thoroughly investigated so far, some in the suburban area north-east of the ancient town, and others within the walls.

At present, the only fully published cemetery is positioned in the eastern section of the city. Therefore, all arguments presented here must be considered only provisional. However, excavations undertaken by both the Soprintendenza per i beni archeologici and the University of Campania have provided summary reports on the cemeteries so far identified. This overview of the funerary landscape of Benevento has been vital to the present investigation (Rotili 2008; Tomay 2009–2011).

### *The ‘warriors’ graves’ of Pezzapiana*

One of the first discoveries of an early medieval cemetery in Benevento occurred in 1927 in the Pezzapiana district north of the city centre, from which only a handful of de-contextualised grave goods have been preserved. These are essentially weapons, jewellery, and golden crosses, now housed in the Sannio Museum collection (Rotili 1977; 2008–2011). Like most early medieval cemeteries uncovered between the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century, the dearth of information about the site can be attributed to the accidental circumstances of its discovery and to the shortcomings of contemporary excavation methods. In this period, items deemed valuable – such as gold and silver objects – were commonly sold on the antiquarian market, while less valuable grave goods – such as ceramic and glass items – were passed over in silence in the excavation reports and almost invariably became dispersed or sold because they were regarded as finds of little scientific value. As a result, the cemetery in Pezzapiana can now only be the subject of speculation. It certainly included an undefined number of tombs broadly dated from the late 6th to early 8th century, some of which were richly furnished (Rotili 2008–2011).

Other de-contextualised grave goods came from the nearby Via Valfortore, while an early medieval cemetery was found in the San Vitale district. It should be emphasised that all these sites were situated well outside the ancient town, in an area that connected the city centre to the road network via the bridge over the Calore River. Such spatial relationships between burial grounds and roadways have been acknowledged as a common feature of early medieval cemeteries and a continuation in practice from the Roman period, which can also be traced in many rural sites of Lombard southern Italy (Campese Simoni 2003).

The cemetery in San Vitale features several children’s tombs and no valuable grave goods, and may have been connected to a small suburban settlement (Tomay 2009: 140). A similar assumption was not made for Pezzapiana, mostly because the weapons recovered there led scholars to link such burials to Lombard ethnicity, and thus directly to the warrior elite settled in Benevento. Female ornaments from the same site have not received comparable attention. They have been ascribed to a broad Roman-Mediterranean culture and taken as evidence of an early acculturation of Lombard warriors, possibly through marriage with local women (Rotili 2008–2011).

The ethnic interpretation of early medieval cemeteries has led scholars to place the deposition of weapons at the heart of their analysis, on the assumption that it provides evidence of Lombard settlement. As discussed at the end of this section, however, it is not necessary to ascribe the archaeological findings in Pezzapiana to the ostensible display of an alleged Lombard ethnicity or evidence of ongoing acculturation. Both weapons and female ornaments could have been intended to claim the deceased's high social status and that of their kin group in a context of intense societal change and competition, such as that at the turn of the 6th and 7th centuries.

### *Lavish burials and Roman buildings*

A different situation occurs in the so-called *civitas nova* area, in the south-western section of Benevento. Important research on late antique urban transformation has revealed how this area, marked by the presence of ancient buildings such as the theatre and thermal baths, had been excluded from the wall circuit during the 4th century, or during the Gothic War at the latest (Tomay 2009: 122; Rotili 2014).

During the Lombard period, the surroundings of the Roman theatre appear to have been extensively used as a burial ground. A tombstone pertaining to a certain Radichis, son of *gastaldus* Ansret, possibly comes from the cemetery located on the present-day Via San Cristiano, which was placed inside a ruined building dating to the Roman imperial period. Even if the theatre was partitioned and reused for residential purposes from the second half of the 8th century onwards, it is possible that its structure was also employed as a burial place in the earlier period (Tomay 2009: 135). On the opposite side of the theatre, a cemetery located in what is now Via Bosco Lucarelli contained a group of brick coffins covered with stone slabs with grave goods also dating to the Lombard period: a processional cross, a silver fibula, some glass beads, coins, and, most notably, two signet rings (MacGregor 1997: 215–216; Giostra 2004).

Unfortunately, burials in the *civitas nova* were also targets of unsystematic and unreported excavations, but archaeologists have been keen to identify those in Via Bosco Lucarelli with the highest Lombard elite of Benevento. It has thus been suggested that also a disc brooch with three pendants and a cameo, which was purchased on the antiquarian market in 1889 and is currently housed in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, may have come from here (MacGregor 1997: 211; Tomay 2009: 136) (Figure 8.3). This type of brooch, a Roman-Byzantine artefact, is usually associated with people who held prominent public offices in the post-Roman world (Rotili 2021: 150–151). Interestingly, none of the graves in this site contained sets of weapons, which means that the higher social identity of the deceased was expressed through a model of masculinity that did not refer to military symbolism. This is in line with recent research focused on the northern part of the Italian peninsula, which has shown that representations of masculinity were in fact quite varied within Lombard-era cemeteries and did not exclusively conform to a military model (Vollono 2017: 322–328).



Figure 8.3 Disc brooch with cameo, helmeted figure perhaps Athena (Benevento, 6th century CE)

Source: © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.

Although it is not possible to reach a full understanding with only partially excavated materials and without osteological analysis, the groups of burials investigated within the *civitas nova* so far were distinctive not only for their proximity to ancient monuments, and their occasional reuse of building materials, but also because some of the deceased seem to have been associated with a public role and/or public authority (La Rocca & Zornetta 2022: 82). Undoubtedly, the funerary inscription presenting Radichis as the son of a public officer is the clearest example of this association, but it is also possible to assign the deposition of both signet rings and the disc brooch to the same intention, if we accept the presumed origin of the latter. Unlike in the Pezzapiana district, the strategy of distinction employed in the *civitas nova* suggests forms of commemoration of the dead that were dealing increasingly with the relationship with public authority.

#### ***Burials with no or almost no grave goods***

In general, most of the burial grounds in Benevento have provided few or no valuable grave goods. The site of the Sannio Museum is the most striking example in this regard. Excavations carried out between 1989 and 1996 uncovered 46 burials,

some of which dated back to the 7th century and could have been part of a much larger cemetery (Lupia 1998). It has been suggested that this was a large funerary area surrounding a now lost religious building, thus being an example of the clustering of burials around a church. However, similar to what has been observed at other sites for the 7th and 8th centuries, including Castel Trosino in central Italy (Paroli 1997), it is possible that the church of St. Sophia was built here in the middle of the 8th century precisely in connection with the cemetery, thereby placing the old burials within a new Christian framework (Zornetta 2023: 251–252).

Although the burials located around the Sannio Museum are somewhat damaged by subsequent construction works, two patterns emerge. Firstly, grave goods are very few and, where present, extremely modest. Only in one male tomb located in the southern sector of the cemetery a set of objects consisting of a belt, a knife, and a glass bottle was found (Lupia 1998: 193–199). Secondly, the pits are mainly brick-lined, while the unlined earthen pits, which are common in northern Italy during the same period, are less frequent.

#### ***Burial practices in early medieval Benevento between ethnicity and social competition***

The prevalence of burials with no or almost no grave goods, such as those at the site of the Sannio Museum, has long led to the assumption that the Lombards who originally settled in southern Italy must have been a small group that soon lost its ‘barbarian identity’ following a rapid process of acculturation. Scholars have consequently focused on archaeological findings such as those from Pezzapiana, which have been interpreted as a snapshot of the newcomers’ acculturation process within the framework of local late Roman tradition.

This kind of analysis assumes that early medieval funerary practices reflect individual identities and, therefore, that Lombard warriors’ graves would have been marked by the deposition of a specific set of objects, including weapons. In the last decades, however, the heuristic potential of archaeology for providing evidence of individual identities has been profoundly questioned (Pohl 2010). Some studies, for example, have highlighted how the presence of weapons cannot always relate to the deceased’s martial abilities, as seems likely for the burials of children or people with disabilities (Härke 1990). On the other hand, the very small number of weapon burials within early medieval cemeteries makes it difficult to interpret the deposition of such grave goods as a funerary practice designed to express the deceased’s ethnicity (Brather 2004; Halsall 2011). Objects such as those from Pezzapiana were probably part of a comprehensive memorial strategy, which included the association of a specific person within a larger kin group with a warrior identity.

Weapons and the representation of masculinity are traditionally at the centre of the debate on early medieval burial practices. It must therefore be stressed that commemoration of the dead by means of their association with military status is not unique to this period: it was common also in the late Roman world, as is widely attested by tombstone inscriptions. The use of epigraphy as a memorial strategy

declined during the Early Middle Ages, to the extent that it remained in use only for the highest members. This may have played a role in the re-emergence of weapon burials from the 5th century onwards. In the absence of tombstones, the deposition of grave goods allowed for the continued conferral of military attributes in the commemoration of the deceased (Barbiera 2013). However, since weapon burials appear to have taken place most frequently in the Italian peninsula in the late 6th and first half of the 7th century (Vollono 2017: 336–337), they have been traditionally associated with Lombard settlement. Yet Lombard ethnicity has been shown to have been a fluid and situational construct, especially during the early period (Geary 1988; Pohl & Reimitz 1998).

If issues relating to ethnic or other individual identities are left aside, the analysis of funerary practices can still provide answers – albeit to different research questions. In the last decades, some scholars have come to regard the choice of early medieval grave goods as a selection consciously made by the deceased's relatives in the framework of the funerary ritual, which was designed to display the social and gender identities of certain individuals in a context of societal change and/or stress (Halsall 1996; von Rummel 2007; Harland 2021). Consequently, early medieval burials may be used to question where and how social groups decided to invest their wealth in presenting some of their deceased as warriors and/or high-status individuals before other members of the local community (Theuvs & Alkemade 2000).

In my opinion, the funerary evidence from Benevento principally shows a certain degree of experimentation in the strategies of distinction implemented by the local elite, perhaps each of them relating to slightly different chronologies. Such variety was not so much linked to the representation of Lombard ethnicity as to a wider funerary transition triggered by local competition within the new capital city.

Since the Lombard body politic was conceptualised as a group of *exercitales*, as free armed men (Gasparri 2003), it is hardly surprising that claims to high social status in the period that followed the establishment of the Duchy of Benevento involved military role models. By depositing weapons in the graves of their deceased relatives at Pezzapiana, the Beneventans probably aimed to present their ancestors exactly as free armed men, and thus themselves as members of the local elite. This emphasis on the military status of the deceased could possibly be linked to the early period of the Duchy of Benevento, in other words within the time of broader societal change that followed the Gothic War and the Lombard settlement, when competition was also more intense.

It is likely that any early instability linked to these ongoing transformations was soon limited through the mediation of the Lombard public authorities. As early as the mid-7th century, the Duchy of Benevento was firmly held by a single dynasty, which sought to regulate competition by sharing public resources and power among the local aristocracy (Zornetta 2020). The strategies of distinction improvised by local elites changed during this period, shifting away from the military model and assuming new forms, which traces are also discernible in burial practices. Despite the richness of some grave goods, no weapon burial is reported in the *civitas nova* area. These archaeological findings suggest the emergence of new

memorial strategies within urban society, which aimed to stress the link between the deceased and the public sphere through both the deposition of specific grave goods and funerary inscriptions. This may well have been the situation during the 7th century, when an exclusive relationship with the ducal palace increasingly defined the aristocratic status of those living in the capital city. The urban elite may also have been keen to display this relationship in a funerary context, so as to emphasise their social position in an environment in which competition, albeit regulated, was still fierce.

By the end of the 7th century, other means of commemorating the dead became popular among the Beneventan elite. They did not involve the deposition of grave goods, but still provide evidence of how burial practices continued to be used to represent high social status and relations within the urban fabric. On one hand, the local élite started to build their own private churches, largely attested by written sources both in and outside the city, where they were probably buried alongside their family members (La Rocca 2007). On the other hand, especially in the first half of the 9th century, some chose to be interred in the cathedral portico, where the Lombard rulers' graves also started to be located (Tomay 2009: 130–134; Zornetta 2020: 202–206).

### **Campochiaro**

The ethnic interpretation of early medieval cemeteries also reveals certain limitations in the case of Campochiaro. Between the 1980s and 1990s two large cemeteries in rows were excavated in Vicenne and Morrione, revealing around 350 tombs in total between the two cemeteries. Most notably, there are 19 armed men, each buried with a harnessed horse in the same earth pit. Set about 800 m apart in the plain between the ancient towns of Sepino and Boiano, these funerary areas were certainly linked to one or more rural sites located along the route once connecting Isernia to Benevento. Although late antique burials have been reported in Morrione (Ceglia 2004: 80), the settlement pattern in this area has yet to be defined, and at present no late antique or early medieval dwellings associated with the two cemeteries have been identified.

Since only the Vicenne site has been partially published, it must be stressed that any arguments presented here should once again be considered provisional until the complete edition of both cemeteries are available. This funerary area comprises 175 earth pit graves, which seem arranged – in almost all cases with the same east-west orientation – around the so-called ancestors' graves, that is, a certain number of extremely lavish burials relating to male and female individuals which belong to the early phase of the cemetery (Barbiera 2007; Provesi 2010: 100) (Figure 8.4). The anthropological analyses currently available do not provide much information about the gender and age of the deceased, since their primary aim was to identify ethnic markers and to analyse the life conditions of the population group buried here (Belcastro et al. 2003). It has nevertheless been observed that in Vicenne the consistency and wealth of grave goods change depending on how close the burials are to the centre of the cemetery: the quantity and quality of the items increase the

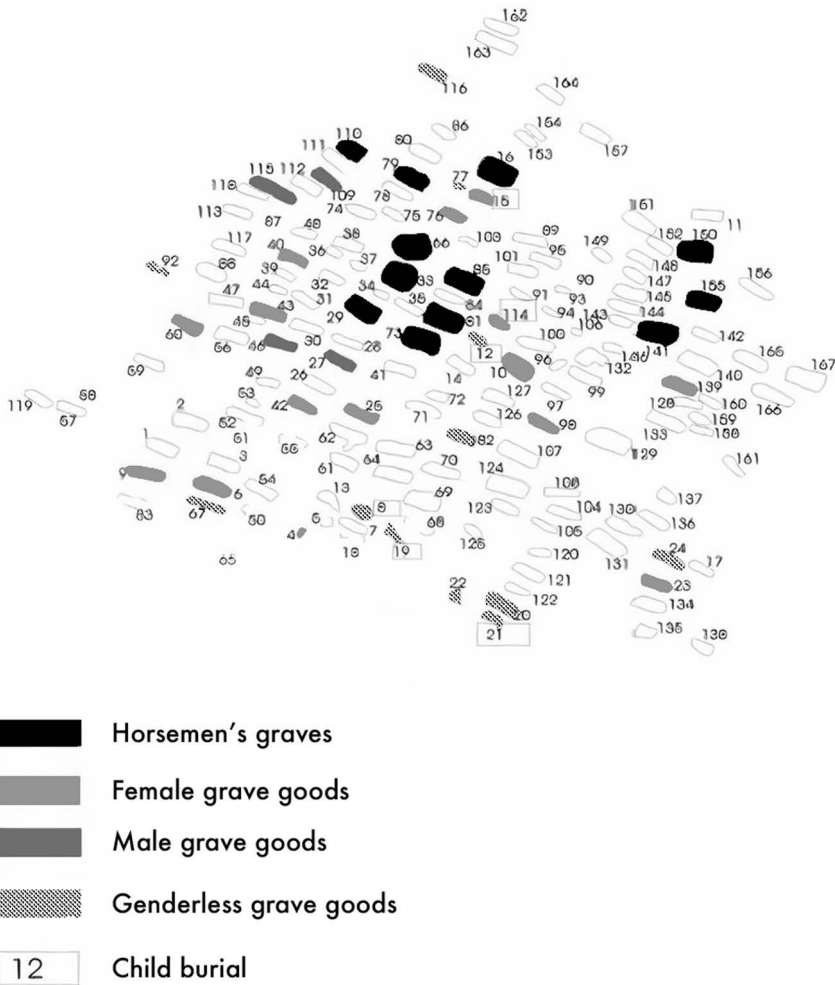


Figure 8.4 Plan of the cemetery at Vicenne.

Source: Provesi (2010: 101).

closer they are to the graves with horses or richer female ornaments (Provesi 2010: 100–102). In Morrione, by contrast, horse burials are distributed across a wider area, which makes the presence of clusters of tombs associated with kin groups more evident.

Comparative analysis of the grave goods indicates that the cemetery was active from the late 6th/early 7th century to the end of the 7th century. Some items, such as weapons and the composite belts in five pieces, appear to be widespread in contemporaneous funerary contexts in other parts of Lombard Italy. Other less common objects have been described as ‘of an Avaric sort’, as in the case of the stirrups

and globular earrings (Ceglia 2010: 250). Other artefacts have been associated with a broad Roman-Byzantine culture, for example certain types of brooches and earrings, while the glassware and pottery were certainly locally produced (Ebanista 2011: 353). None of the studies published so far have closely considered the trade and possible circulation of these artefacts, but rather connect grave goods to the individual identity of the deceased. Consequently, Campochiaro has been described as having a ‘multicultural context’, marked by the coexistence of a local population and a group of nomads displaying distinct eastern influences in their choices of material goods (Ceglia 2004).

Right from the very first discoveries, the joint burials of men and horses were analysed in light of Paul the Deacon’s later *Historia Langobardorum*, which mentions that Alcek, the Duke of the Bulgars, settled in this area with his troops in the second half of the 7th century (HL V, 29). The hypothesis that the cemeteries in Campochiaro were used by this documented group of Bulgars is at any rate disproved by the chronology established for the sites: some of the earliest and richer tombs appear to date from the first half of the 7th century at the latest – that is, before the arrival of Alcek (Provesi 2010: 108). Moreover, as research into ethnonyms in central and eastern Europe has demonstrated, the very label ‘Bulgars’ was used by Western authors of the early Middle Ages to describe a wide range of different populations and it is thus unclear to which of these Alcek belonged (Pohl 2004: 96–97).

Considerably less attention has been paid to female burials, which in some cases also contain particularly rich grave goods. On the one hand, these items have been ascribed to different cultural traditions, which reveals a greater disposition towards acculturation in the representation of the female gender (Ceglia & Marchetta 2012: 232–233). On the other hand, other studies have tried to identify the ‘ancestors’ graves’ in some of the richest female burials as well (Provesi 2010: 103). Despite the lack of exhaustive data, the women who died during their reproductive period or immediately before received a higher funerary investment in Campochiaro. This phenomenon can be observed in many early medieval cemeteries around Europe and has been related to the attempt to compensate a major loss to families through expensive funeral ritual. Since the death of a young woman could endanger the survival of the group by preventing the birth of new offspring, and even undermine the alliances established through marriages (or arranged future marriages), such a degree of funerary investment could therefore be necessary to stress the social status of families at these specific critical times (Halsall 1996: 12–22).

***Between ethnicity and social competition: burial practices in early medieval Campochiaro***

Undoubtedly, Campochiaro represents an unusual site in southern Italy, insofar as it is more similar to the cemeteries of graves in rows found in the northern and central part of the peninsula than the small- or medium-sized sites discovered in the south so far. Understandably, the debate about Vicenne and Morrione has focused on the striking presence of many joint burials of men and horses in the same funerary area,

which does not have close similarities with other parts of Italy (Genito 1988). Such differences from the ‘Lombard cemetery’ model as well as the presence of certain ‘allochthonous’ objects among the grave goods have led archaeologists to question the ethnic identity of the individuals buried here. Some scholars view the funerary practices attested in Campochiaro as foreign to the Italian peninsula, suggesting a group of outsiders who settled in the area; however, some of them are wary of assigning this group a nomadic or central Asian origin (Ebanista 2011: 354–355; De Vingo 2017: 20). Other scholars have instead identified it as an armed Lombard garrison established in the late 6th or early 7th century to counter the Byzantines (Staffa 2004: 236).

Other studies have approached the problem from a different perspective, pointing out that the uniqueness of Campochiaro is not so much the presence of joint man-horse burials but their high number in the same funerary context. In other Italian cemeteries, the equestrian status of the deceased is also emphasised, either by inserting specific grave goods such as saddles and bits, or even by combining the inhumation of an armed man with that of a horse or part of it (La Rocca 2004b: 69–75). This type of male grave seems to have been more common from the second quarter of the 7th century, possibly reflecting the representation of landowners as *exercitales*. These funerary practices could thus be linked to a specific phase in the transformation of the post-Roman rural areas, in that they would provide evidence of the new settlement of small-scale free-status landholders in areas which became largely abandoned with the demise of the Roman villa system (Wickham 2005: 465–488). They could therefore testify to the economic and social reconfiguration of the rural landscape.

Again, though archaeology hardly offers clear answers about the ethnic identity of the deceased, it can address the reasons that led a group of individuals to present their dead as warriors on horseback in the middle of the Molise countryside. These eccentric burials should be viewed within the framework of a more general phenomenon within rural communities where an effort was made to highlight the status of the deceased as an armed horseman (Provesi 2010). Osteological analyses of the horses in Campochiaro have revealed them to be old and worn out by farm work, thus providing support for such hypothesis (Bökönyi 1990).

In his research on late antique northern Gaul, Theuws hypothesised that weapon burials may have been associated with new kinds of landowners who were ritually defining their claim to the soil outside the traditional bonds of the Roman villa system (Theuws 2009: 311). It is quite possible that, even in the case of Campochiaro, kin groups were dispatched to rural areas to revive the settlement pattern and increase agricultural production. If we give credence to Paul the Deacon’s account about Alcek, this revival could also occur through a systematic settlement policy during the 7th century. Following the introduction of new families, the need to define and establish new relationships may therefore have emerged and the funeral ritual could have been used as a stage to assert the new social role and prestige of these groups. According to this premise, the individuals buried with rich grave goods in Campochiaro could have been social climbers who needed to highlight their worth by justifying their right to land ownership in terms of their equestrian

function (La Rocca 2004b: 72–73). Similarly to the warrior graves unearthed in Benevento, the display of military status may therefore be connected to significant changes in the local elite's composition and self-definition. Consequently, far from constituting evidence of strategic and military occupation by the Lombards or by nomadic groups from eastern Europe, the horsemen's graves and those of their female counterparts could bear witness to a widespread, complex, and ongoing effort to display wealth and aristocratic status, in order to face an uncertain future as newly settled landowners in Campochiaro.

### **Final remarks**

Although the deposition of rich grave goods has long been recognised as one of the defining phenomena of the funerary transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages, recent surveys have pointed out that lavish burials in Lombard Italy, and most notably in the Duchy of Benevento, represent only a small percentage of the total number (Vollono 2017: 205–274). As far as can be inferred from the data that has emerged so far, the funerary landscape of early medieval southern Italy appears to be extremely varied and characterised by a very limited number of tombs with grave goods, albeit with some of them containing exceptionally valuable objects. The ethnic interpretation that has traditionally been given to lavish burials has led archaeologists to associate them either with members of the Lombard elite (Benevento) or, if cemeteries did not completely fit the 'Lombard cemetery' model, even with nomadic peoples from eastern Europe (Campochiaro). Burials with little or no grave goods are instead linked to local populations, defined as 'autochthonous' or Roman. Even this label, however, ultimately proves to be problematic, since it relies on a dichotomy unable to reflect the social complexity and regional differences of post-Roman society (von Rummel 2013).

The limited number of lavish tombs has led scholars to argue that the Lombards who arrived in Benevento were small in number and soon integrated with the local population. This narrative of funerary practices identifies migration as the most relevant cause of societal change in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. However, this assumption has been profoundly challenged by late-20th century historiography, which no longer considers the migration of 'barbarian peoples' as the main cause of political and social transformations in the Roman world (Pohl 1997; Wickham 2005). Although ethnic identity has been central to this debate (Pohl & Reimitz 1998), many scholars agree that archaeological research cannot provide conclusive evidence of the ethnicity of the deceased.

Based on these methodological and historiographical premises, this chapter suggests that a different, non-ethnic interpretation of the rich burials found so far in the Duchy of Benevento is possible – one which asks why and under what circumstances kin groups decided to stress the social and gender identity of some of their members. Since the elite of the Lombard Kingdom sought to present itself as a group of free armed men, the most common strategies of distinction revolved around military and equestrian symbolism, as emerged both in rural areas and, to a lesser extent, suburban contexts. The lavish and eccentric horsemen

graves of Campochiaro could thus be associated with the need of a recently settled group of people to justify their new position as landowners. Other strategies of distinction, however, were possible. In Benevento, the deceased might also be presented as public officials, or at least as individuals with a direct relationship to public authorities, possibly as a result of the increasing pervasiveness of the Lombard dukes in regulating competition within the capital city from the 7th century onwards.

Assuming that funerary performance could be used as a stage for local competition, the burial practices attested in Benevento and Campochiaro could thus be linked to the need to assert the actual or intended status of kin groups within a society that witnessed the progressive demise of the political and social structures of the Late Roman Empire. Rather than interpreting the archaeological evidence as an expression of individual ethnicity, and thus identifying migration as the main driver of transformation in both burial practices and society at large, I suggest that funerary investment must be linked with times and places of more intense social competition, which burial practices help us identify. In Lombard southern Italy, the most lavish burial practices expressed the need and desire of some kin groups to present themselves as members of the new elite within the overall transformation of post-Roman local societies.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Cristina La Rocca, Chiara Provesi, and Salvatore Liccardo for reading and commenting on this chapter; Benjamin Savill for his proofreading; and Marco Tonus and Marco Orlandi for their help.

### **Ancient sources**

Paul the Deacon. 1878. *Pauli Diaconi Historia Langobardorum*. Edited by L. Bethmann & G. Waitz. In: MGH, *Scriptores rerum langobardicarum et italicarum*. Hannover: Hahn, pp. 12–187.

### **Bibliography**

- Barbiera, I. 2007. Affari di famiglia in età longobarda. Aree sepolcrali e corredi nella necropoli di Santo Stefano a Cividale del Friuli. In: Brogiolo, G.P. & Chavarria Arnau, A. (eds), *I Longobardi: Dalla caduta dell'Impero all'alba dell'Italia*. Milan: Silvana, pp. 243–247.
- Barbiera, I. 2013. Remembering the Warriors: Weapon Burials and Tombstones between Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages in Northern Italy. In: Pohl, W. & Heydemann, G. (eds), *Post-Roman Transitions. Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West*. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 407–436.
- Belcastro, M.G., Bonfigli, B. & Mariotti, V. 2003. Il popolamento del territorio di Campochiaro in epoca altomedievale. I dati antropologici della necropoli di Vicenne. In: *I Longobardi dei ducati di Spoleto e Benevento*. Spoleto: CISAM, pp. 1009–1029.
- Bierbrauer, V. 2005. Archäologie der Langobarden in Italien: Ethnische Interpretation und Stand der Forschung. In: Pohl, W. & Erhart, P. (eds), *Die Langobarden: Herrschaft und Identität*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, pp. 21–66.

- Bökönyi, S. 1990. Two more Horse Graves from Vicenne. In: Capini, S. & De Niro, A. (eds), *Samnium: Archeologia del Molise*. Rome: Quasar, pp. 342–343.
- Brather, S. 2004. *Ethnische Interpretationen in der frühegeschichtlichen Archäologie*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Campese Simoni, A. 2003. Gli spazi funerari del ducato di Benevento (VI-IX secolo). In: *I Longobardi dei ducati di Spoleto e Benevento. Atti del XVI Congresso internazionale di studi sull'alto medioevo (Spoleto-Benevento, 20-27 ottobre 2002)*. Spoleto: CISAM, pp. 1263–1292.
- Ceglia, V. 2004. Varietà di influssi culturali nelle necropoli di Campochiaro: Considerazioni preliminari. In: De Benedittis, G. (ed), *I beni culturali nel Molise: Il Medioevo*. Campobasso: Grafica Isernina, pp. 79–86.
- Ceglia, V. 2010. *Presenze funerarie di età altomedievale in Molise. Le necropoli di Campochiaro e la tomba del Cavaliere*. In: Roma, G. (ed), *I Longobardi del Sud*. Rome: Bretschneider.
- Ceglia, V. & Marchetta, I. 2012. Nuovi dati dalla necropoli di Vicenne a Campochiaro. In: Ebanista, C. & Rotili, M. (eds), *La trasformazione del mondo Romano e le grandi migrazioni*. Naples: Tavolario, pp. 217–238.
- De Vingo, P. 2017. Les chevaux dans les rituels funéraires du haut Moyen Âge dans la péninsule italique. In: Lorans, E. (ed), *Le Cheval au Moyen Âge*. Tours: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, pp. 297–318.
- Ebanista, C. 2011. Gli usi funerari nel ducato di Benevento: Alcune considerazioni sulle necropoli campane e molisane di VI-VIII secolo. In: Ebanista, C. & Rotili, M. (eds), *Archeologia e storia delle migrazioni*. Naples: Tavolario, pp. 337–364.
- Gasparri, S. 2002. The Aristocracy. In: La Rocca, C. (ed), *Italy in the Early Middle Ages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 59–84.
- Gasparri, S. 2003. Nobiles et credentes omnes liberi arimanni. Linguaggio, memoria sociale e tradizioni longobarde nel regno italico. *Bullettino dell'Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo e Archivio muratoriano* 105, pp. 25–51.
- Geary, P.J. 1988. Ethnic Identity as a Situational Construct in the Early Middle Ages. *Medieval Perspectives* 3, pp. 1–17.
- Genito, B. 1988. Materiali e problemi. *Conoscenze. Rivista annuale della Soprintendenza archeologica e per i beni ambientali architettonici artistici e storici del Molise* 4, pp. 49–67.
- Giostra, C. 2004. Tre nuovi anelli-sigillo aurei longobardi. In: Lusuardi Siena, S. (ed), *I signori degli anelli*. Milan: Vita e Pensiero, pp. 89–96.
- Giostra, C. 2011. Goths and Lombards in Italy: The Potential of Archaeology with Respect to Ethnocultural Identification. *Post Classical Archaeologies* 1, pp. 7–36.
- Halsall, G. 1996. Female Status and Power in Early Merovingian Central Austrasia: The Burial Evidence. *Early Medieval Europe* 5, pp. 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0254.1996.tb00045.x>.
- Halsall, G. 2011. Ethnicity and Early Medieval Cemeteries. *Arquelogía y territorio medieval* 18, pp. 15–27.
- Härke, H. 1990. Warrior Graves? The Background of the Anglo-Saxon Weapon Burial Rite. *Past & Present* 126(1), pp. 22–43.
- Harland, J.M. 2021. *Ethnic Identity and the Archaeology of the Aduentus Saxonum. A Modern Framework and Its Problems*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- La Rocca, C. 2004a. L'archeologia e i Longobardi in Italia. Orientamenti, metodi, linee di ricerca. In: Gasparri, S. (ed), *Il regno dei Longobardi in Italia. Archeologia, società, istituzioni*. Spoleto: CISAM, pp. 173–234.
- La Rocca, C. 2004b. Tombe con corredi di armi, etnicità e prestigio sociale. In: Moro, P. (ed), *I Longobardi e la guerra*. Rome: Viella, pp. 51–57.
- La Rocca, C. 2007. Le élites, chiese e sepolture familiari tra VIII e IX secolo in Italia settentrionale. In: Depreux, P., Bougard, F. & Le Jan, R. (eds), *Les élites et leurs espaces. Mobilité, Rayonnement, Domination*. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 259–272.

- La Rocca, C. & Zornetta, G. 2022. Quanto erano ‘longobardi’ i Longobardi meridionali? Sepolcreti e pratiche funerarie nel ducato di Benevento (secoli VI-VII). *Archeologia medievale* 49, pp. 45–61.
- Lupia, A. 1998. *Testimonianze di epoca altomedievale a Benevento: Lo scavo del Museo del Sannio*. Naples: Soprintendenza archeologica per le province di Salerno, Avellino e Benevento.
- MacGregor, A. 1997. *A Summary Catalogue of the Continental Archaeological Collections in the Ashmolean Museum*. BAR International Series 674. Oxford: BAR Publishing.
- Paroli, L. 1997. La necropoli di Castel Trosino: Un laboratorio archeologico per lo studio dell’età longobarda. In: Paroli, L. (ed), *L’Italia centro settentrionale in età longobarda*. Florence: All’Insegna del Giglio, pp. 91–111.
- Pejrani Baricco, L. 2004. L’insediamento e la necropoli dal VI all’VIII secolo. In: Pejrani Baricco, L. (ed), *Presenze longobarde. Collegno nell’alto Medioevo*. Torino: Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologica del Piemonte, pp. 17–51.
- Pohl, W. 1997 *Kingdoms of the Empire. The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*. Leiden: Brill.
- Pohl, W. 2004. Die Namen der Barbaren: Fremdbezeichnung und Identität in Spätantike und Frühmittelalter. In: Friesinger, H. & Stuppner, A. (eds), *Zentrum und Peripherie. Gesellschaftliche Phänomene in der Frühgeschichte*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, pp. 95–104.
- Pohl, W. 2010. *Archaeology of Identity: Archäologie der Identität*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.
- Pohl, W. & Reimitz, H. 1998. *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of the Ethnic Communities, 300–800*. Leiden: Brill.
- Possenti, E. 2014. Necropoli longobarde in Italia: Lo stato della ricerca. In: Possenti, E. (ed), *Necropoli longobarde in Italia: Indirizzi della ricerca e nuovi dati*. Trento: Comune di Trento, pp. 35–54.
- Provesi, C. 2010. Uomini e cavalli in Italia meridionale da Cassiodoro ad Alzecone. In: Ebanista, C. & Rotili, M. (eds), *Ipsam Nolam barbari vastaverunt*. Naples: Tavolario, pp. 97–111.
- Rotili, M. 1977. *La necropoli longobarda di Benevento*. Naples: University of Naples, Istituto di storia medioevale e moderna.
- Rotili, M. 2006. *Benevento nella tarda Antichità: dalla diagnostica archeologica in contrada Cellarulo alla ricostruzione dell’assetto urbano*. Naples: Arte tipografica.
- Rotili, M. 2008–2011. Archeologia dei Longobardi. Per una nuova edizione dei rinvenimenti di Benevento. *Rendiconti Dell’Accademia di Archeologia, Lettere e Belle Arti in Napoli* 70, pp. 447–477.
- Rotili, M. 2014. Benevento fra tarda antichità e alto medioevo. In: Cuozzo, E. & Iadanza, M. (eds), *Il ducato e il principato di Benevento: Aspetti e problemi (secoli VI-XI)*. Benevento: La provincia sannita, pp. 37–69.
- Rotili, M. 2021. Sepolture di prestigio nella Langobardia minor. In: De Vingo, P., Marano, Y.A. & Pinar Gil, J. (eds), *Sepolture di prestigio nel bacino Mediterraneo (secoli IV-IX): Definizione, immagini, utilizzo*. Florence: All’Insegna del Giglio, pp. 141–162.
- Staffa, A.R. 2004. Bizantini e Longobardi fra Abruzzo e Molise (secc. VI-VII). In: De Benedittis, G. (ed), *I beni culturali nel Molise: Il Medioevo*. Campobasso: Grafica Isernina, pp. 215–248.
- Theuvs, F. 2009. Grave Goods, Ethnicity, and the Rhetoric of Burial Rites in Late Antique Northern Gaul. In: Derks, T. & Roymans, N. (eds), *Ethnic Constructs in Antiquity. The Role of Power and Tradition*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 283–317.
- Theuvs, F. & Alkemade, M. 2000. A Kind of Mirror for Men: Sword Deposition in Late Antique Northern Gaul. In: Theuvs, F. & Nelson, J.L. (eds), *Rituals of Power: From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*. Leiden: Brill, pp. 401–476.
- Tomay, L. 2009. Benevento longobarda: Dinamiche insediative e processi di trasformazione. In: D’Henry, G. & Lambert, C. (eds), *Il popolo dei Longobardi meridionali, 570–1076: Testimonianze storiche e monumentali*. Salerno: Arcipostiglione, pp. 119–152.

- Vollono, G. 2017. *Constructing Identity in Lombard Italy*. PhD Thesis. University of Sheffield.
- von Rummel, P. 2007. *Habitus Barbarus. Kleidung und Repräsentation spätantiker Eliten im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- von Rummel, P. 2013. The Fading Power of Images. Romans, Barbarians, and the Uses of a Dichotomy in Early Medieval Archaeology. In: Pohl, W. & Heydemann, G. (eds), *Post-Roman Transitions. Christian and Barbarian Identities in the Early Medieval West*. Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 365–406.
- Wickham, C. 2005. *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Zornetta, G. 2020. *Italia meridionale longobarda. Competizione, conflitto e potere politico a Benevento (secoli VIII-IX)*. Rome: Viella.
- Zornetta, G. 2023. Pluralité des modèles et transformations des espaces et des pratiques funéraires en Italie du IVe au IXe siècle. In: Cuchet, G., Laubry, N. & Lauwers, M. (eds), *Transitions funéraires en Occident. Une histoire des relations entre morts et vivants de l'Antiquité à nos jours*. Rome: Ecole française de Rome, pp. 233–260.