

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Chapter 1*

INTRODUCTION

FARFA AND THE POLITICS OF MONASTICISM IN EARLY
MEDIEVAL ITALY

The same apostolic lord not only recognized that he himself had no lordship over the rights of that monastery, except consecration, but also reinvested Leo, who was advocate of our party and of the same monastery, with all the properties located both in the Sabine territory and in Romania, which the power of the predecessors of the same Pope Paschal had unjustly taken away from the same monastery through their orders.¹

The diploma from which this quotation is taken, issued by Emperor Lothar I in December 840, was not the first attempt by a Carolingian emperor to settle matters between the abbey of Farfa and the papacy in the monastery's favour; it was not even Lothar's first attempt.² The repeated efforts of Farfa's abbots to stave off the threat of papal domination by appeal to the greatest secular power in the region do not simply indicate the feature of the abbey most often emphasized by the historiography – that is, its imperial affiliation.³ The fact that those efforts had to be repeated – that the issue of the control of the abbey and (perhaps especially) its patrimony had to be continually revisited – also highlights quite how precarious was the situation in which the abbey found itself for most of the first four hundred years of its existence. It was precarious, but also influential. If Farfa courted the support of secular powers, it was itself courted: gifts of land and privileges of all kinds flowed to the monastery not just from Italy's rulers, but from the propertied of all social levels. This

¹ RF II 282bis (= CF I, pp. 199–206 at 199–200; D Loth I 51): privilege of the Emperor Lothar, issued 15 Dec. 840, at Chagny, near Chalons.

² RF II 127, 128 (both a.775), 273 (a.801), 173 (a.803), 216, 217 (both a.815), 236 (a.818), 242, 248 (both a.820) and 272 (a.829): the latter issued jointly by Louis the Pious and Lothar.

³ Evident simply in the titles of prominent works on the abbey: I. Schuster, *L'imperiale abbazia di Farfa* (Rome, 1921); C. McClendon, *The Imperial Abbey of Farfa* (New Haven, CT, 1987).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy*

book will investigate why this was the case, and what impact this extensive patronage had – on Farfa, on its immediate region and on Italy as a whole.

Patronage put the abbey among the great monasteries of early medieval Europe – the ‘multinational corporations’ of their era – and it is a standard saw that they should be accorded a prominent place in early medieval history. Nonetheless, despite significant attention to these institutions over decades, recent work focusing largely on the Frankish kingdom raises issues about how we can recapture the way monastic communities integrated with the societies from which they sprang.⁴ At the same time, the importance has also been recognized of the Italian monasteries of a similar size and wealth to those identified as influential north of the Alps. Many of those questions that have recently been asked of north European monasticism have yet to be posed in Italy. One task of this book, then, is to examine the former concerns through the prism of the latter, and specifically through the example of Farfa. A second aim arises from this choice of focus, for Farfa’s particular geographical position allows us to trace the development of a monastery in relation to the lay society around it, and to connect it with a problem of ‘global’ geo-politics. Because Farfa sits in the Sabina, on the edge of the hinterland of the city of Rome, it constantly felt the stresses involved in the continual struggle to define the city’s political status.

The securely historical foundation of Farfa took place between 680 and c.700, the work of Thomas, a monk from Maurienne in Provence.⁵ Although there is no evidence of Thomas’s personal background, we know something of the state of Christianity in the area from which he hailed at around this time, because the will survives of Abbo, who by 726 was rector of the region encompassing Maurienne and Susa (now on the French and Italian sides of the Mont-Cenis Alpine border respectively), and perhaps later also *patricius* of Provence. On 30 January 726 Abbo issued the foundation charter of the monastery of Novalesa, which he had built on and from his own property. Of this splendid charter, which still survives, two things are especially relevant to the early history of Farfa. First, Abbo enjoined that the abbot and monks should live ‘according to the evangelical norm and the rule of the lord Benedict and the institutes of

⁴ See for example M. Innes, *State and Society in the Early Middle Ages. The Middle Rhine Valley, 400–1000* (Cambridge, 2000); J. Nightingale, *Monasteries and patrons in the Gorze reform: Lotharingia, c.850–1000* (Oxford, 2001); H. Hummer, *Politics and Power in Early Medieval Europe. Alsace and the Frankish Realm, 600–1000* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁵ Stated first in the so-called *Constructio monasterii Farfensis*: ‘Fuit namque in Gallia vir vite venerabilis, Thomas nomine, ut alii ferunt Maurigena exortus provincia’, *CF* 1, p. 3; for reservations on this source’s reliability, see below, pp. 13–14.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

the early orthodox fathers'.⁶ A concern for the Rule of St Benedict is, at this date, quite precocious but, as we shall see, it was probably shared at Farfa in its early years.⁷ Secondly, Abbo, through his capacity as *rector* of the region (a secular position, in this context), granted his foundation freedom from the control of the local bishop. This attention to the monastery's independence, frequently echoed by the words and actions of Farfa's abbots in its first two centuries, should not be seen as having been diluted by the proviso in Abbo's testament of 739 that Bishop Walchunus (presumably bishop of Maurienne)⁸ should take authority over the community after the founder's death. As Patrick Geary has pointed out, Abbo was seeking someone closely connected to himself on a personal level to replace him as 'secular' overseer and protector of the monastery. Later in the eighth century, the Carolingian kings would confirm Novalesa's independence of the bishop, and take over the role of its secular protector themselves.⁹

It will be evident from what follows that Farfa too was concerned both to secure its freedom from local bishops and to develop and exploit a relationship with the Carolingian kings. As with adherence to the Rule of St Benedict, however, these parallels between Novalesa and Farfa cannot be ascribed directly to Thomas. They become apparent in the Farfa evidence only some years after his abbacy. Nor are Novalesa and Farfa alone in attaching importance to such things as episcopal immunity and the Rule of St Benedict: these were two strands in a new fabric of monasticism that was being woven in the late seventh and earlier eighth century in a number of different parts of Europe. It may be significant for Farfa, nevertheless, that its founder's place of origin suggests that he may have been influenced by this development.¹⁰ The foundation of Farfa

⁶ '... ut secundum evangelica normam et regula domno Benedicto seu priscorum patrum orthodoxorum instetuta in ipso loco debiant conversare quietem et pro nos vel stabilitatem regno Francorum seo cumto populo Christi baltismate perfoso Domni misericordia iugiter exorare'. *Monumenta Novalicensia Vetustiora*, ed. C. Cipolla (Rome, 1898), vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 7–13, at p. 9. The original is Torino, Archivio di Stato, Archivio di corte, Museo storico, I scat. 1, no. 1 (= *ChLA* XLVII 1463). Though, somewhat surprisingly, its authenticity was challenged in the 1950s, it was convincingly vindicated by G. Tabacco, 'Dalla Novalesa a San Michele della Chiusa', in *Monasteri in Alta Italia dopo le invasioni saracene e magiare* (sec. IX–X) (Turin, 1966), pp. 479–526, at pp. 481–4.

⁷ On the nature and use of the Rule of St Benedict in this period, see G. Moysse, 'Monachisme et réglementation monastique en Gaule avant Benoît d'Aniane', in *Sous la règle de St Benoît: structures monastiques et sociétés en France du moyen âge à l'époque moderne* (Geneva and Paris, 1982), pp. 3–19, and C. Leyser, *Authority and Asceticism from Augustine to Gregory the Great* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 101–30.

⁸ See Cipolla's sensible comments: *Monumenta Novalicensia Vetustiora*, vol. 1, p. 7, n. 1.

⁹ P. Geary, *Aristocracy in Provence. The Rhône Basin at the Dawn of the Carolingian Age* (Stuttgart, 1985), pp. 124–5.

¹⁰ For immunity, see B. Rosenwein, *Negotiating Space. Power, Restraint and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe* (Manchester, 1999).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy*

was, in an Italian context, an exceptional event, but it did not happen in a vacuum.

Farfa shared one other general feature with Novalesa: it stood on, or very near, a political frontier. The spot where Thomas was to found Farfa was at that time in the debatable region between the Lombard duchy of Spoleto and the *ducatus* around the city of Rome ruled over, whether directly or indirectly, by the eastern Roman emperor in Constantinople. Abbo's Novalesa perched on the very edge of Frankish territory, just a few miles from the fortified *clusae* – the passes over the Maritime Alps – at Susa, in the valley of the Dora Riparia, which marked the entrance into the Lombard kingdom of northern Italy.¹¹ Thomas must have come from Maurienne into Italy through the pass that led across the Mont Cenis gap down to this border post. Later, this was to be the route that Charlemagne's army took when it came to conquer the Lombard kingdom in 773.¹² In being located in such politically sensitive areas, Farfa and Novalesa were not alone among the monasteries founded in late seventh- and eighth-century Italy: Nonantola, San Salvatore on Monte Amiata, Monte Cassino and San Vincenzo al Volturno can all be said to occupy similarly liminal positions on or near the borders of political territories (as indeed can Bobbio, founded much earlier in 613). All were also founded with the support of a king or duke. Bobbio, the earliest foundation among them, was established in the Ligurian mountains at a time when these formed the barrier between Byzantine Liguria and the Lombard hinterland.¹³ Nonantola was close to the debatable territory between the Lombard kingdom and the Byzantine exarchate of Ravenna.¹⁴ Three monasteries ringed the Roman *ducatus*: Monte Amiata in southern Tuscany, Farfa in the Sabina, and Monte Cassino, overlooking the Via Appia that led from the city to the south.¹⁵ The locations of these monasteries were to prove of great political importance.

¹¹ On the *clusae*, see G. Tangl, 'Die Passvorschrift des Königs Ratchis', *QFLAB* 38 (1958), pp. 1–66 and K. Schmid, 'Zur Ablösung der Langobardenherrschaft durch den Franken', *QFLAB* 52 (1972), pp. 1–36.

¹² On the details of that campaign, see S. Abel and B. Simson, *Jahrbücher des fränkischen Reiches unter Karl dem Grossen*, Bd. 1 (Leipzig, 1888), pp. 141–8.

¹³ See C. G. Mor, 'La fondazione di Bobbio nel quadro del diritto pubblico ed ecclesiastico longobardo', in *San Colombano e la sua opera in Italia* (Bobbio, 1953), pp. 76–7 and G. Hauptfeld, 'Sur langobardischen Eroberung Italiens. Das Heer und die Bischöfe', *MIÖG* 91 (1983), pp. 37–94, at p. 93.

¹⁴ K. Schmid, 'Anselm von Nonantola. *Olim dux militum – nunc dux monachorum*', *QFLAB* 47 (1967), pp. 1–122, at pp. 15–20.

¹⁵ For Monte Amiata, see W. Kurze and M. Ascheri eds., *L'Amiata nel medioevo* (Rome, 1991); for Farfa, Schuster, *L'imperiale abbazia* and T. F. X. Noble, *The Republic of St Peter. The Birth of the Papal State, 680–825* (Philadelphia, 1984), pp. 157–9; for Monte Cassino, M. Del Treppo, 'Longobardi, franchi e papato in due secoli di storia vulturense', *Archivio storico per le province napoletane* n. s., 34 (1953–4), pp. 37–59.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

San Vincenzo al Volturno occupied a key position on the frontier between the duchies of Spoleto and Benevento.¹⁶

Given these facts, scholars have long recognized that in endowing these monasteries rulers were helping to establish institutions that had the potential to maintain and administer tracts of otherwise sparsely populated land as bulwarks on the fringes of their territories. Their association with these monasteries, therefore, allowed rulers to stake a claim to areas that were marginal, both geographically and politically.¹⁷ Yet frontiers were not simply barriers: at least potentially, they were areas of interaction between different polities, different groups of landholders. Richard Hodges has stressed this aspect of San Vincenzo's position, and the archaeological discoveries there have revealed that it had an economic dimension too: it was partly through its role as an entrepôt that San Vincenzo was a forum for negotiation between the Carolingians and the dukes of Benevento.¹⁸ It is not clear, however, that the choice of such locations was deliberate: that the potential in a monastery's location was recognized from the outset by its founder. The monastic ideal of creating havens of retreat from the secular world may seem sufficient explanation of the foundation of the eighth-century houses at some distance from centres of lay power. It may equally be important that they were distant from episcopal power. Nevertheless, it is the case that the choice of a monastery's location had more usually been dictated by the property interests of its lay benefactors. These could not be bypassed by avoiding population centres. As the example of the 'Columbanian' monasteries in Francia shows, foundation in the countryside did not necessarily imply removal from secular influence.¹⁹ That influence may primarily have been motivated more by considerations of landholding than by direct political imperatives. The large tracts of land that formed monastic *terrae* were more likely to exist in economically marginal areas. Add to that the spiritual mystique associated with certain out-of-the-way places, and the now little-appreciated need to evangelize in the

¹⁶ See R. Hodges, J. Moreland and H. Patterson, 'San Vincenzo al Volturno, the kingdom of Benevento and the Carolingians', in C. Malone and S. Stoddart eds., *Papers in Italian Archaeology* 4. *Classical and Medieval Archaeology*, BAR International Series 246 (Oxford, 1985), pp. 279–80.

¹⁷ For northern European examples, see R. McKitterick, 'England and the Continent', in *NCMH II*, pp. 64–84, at pp. 67–70.

¹⁸ R. Hodges, 'In the shadow of Pirenne: San Vincenzo al Volturno and the revival of Mediterranean commerce', in R. Francovich and G. Noyé eds., *La storia dell'alto medioevo italiano (VI–X secolo) alla luce d'archeologia* (Florence, 1994), pp. 109–33, at pp. 120–4. Recognizing the significance of San Vincenzo's location that Hodges points out in no way implies acceptance of the other suggestions put forward in this highly original paper.

¹⁹ See I. Wood, *The Merovingian Kingdoms, 450–751* (London, 1994), p. 195 for the foundation of Luxeuil and, more generally, pp. 184–9 and 191–4.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy*

countryside, and we may have sufficient explanation for the foundation of monasteries there.²⁰ The notion that ruler-benefactors had a clear appreciation of the geo-political importance of rural monasteries when they first endowed them perhaps benefits too much from hindsight. Nevertheless, discussion of the problem highlights some of the issues involved in explaining not only the fact of these new foundations, but their location. The significance of the location of these abbeys can be explained in two apparently contrasting ways. It could be, and has been, said that political topography dictated that monasteries should be founded in these political frontier zones.²¹ On the other hand, it could also be argued that these abbeys themselves, by dint of the nature of their land-holding, and the legal status, both secular and ecclesiastical, that they enjoyed, actually contributed to defining or reconfiguring political boundaries. That these two explanations need not, in fact, be mutually exclusive will already be obvious. It is one of the goals of this book to explore further the political and social geography of such monasteries through the principal example of Farfa.

Both location and success direct the choice of Farfa. In the size and eminence that it had attained by the ninth century – attested by the privileges issued in its favour by the Carolingian emperors – it was apparently rivalled only by Nonantola.²² But its sources are far more extensive than those for the latter, as we shall see. In the second half of the eighth century, Farfa was the point at which four powers met. Our earliest documents for its foundation show that it provided a unique opportunity for co-operation between the popes and the dukes of Spoleto.²³ As it attracted donations from ever further afield, the abbey also became a crucial meeting point for landholders from the duchy of Spoleto and from the Lombard kingdom.²⁴ The advent of Carolingian power into northern Italy in 774 reconfigured the balance of power between the popes, the dukes of Spoleto and Benevento, and the Frankish king.²⁵ Farfa was, I shall argue, pivotal in these relationships. Not only its presence, but its very existence, tells us something about the modalities of power in this period.

²⁰ For the significance of rural monasteries as centres of evangelization in Francia, see *ibid.*, p. 191.

²¹ On Farfa, F. Felten, 'Zur Geschichte der Klöster Farfa und San Vincenzo al Volturno im achten Jahrhundert', *QFIAB* 62 (1982), pp. 1–58, at pp. 15–20. In general, see Schmid, 'Zur Ablösung der Langobardenherrschaft', esp. pp. 25–30.

²² As avowed by Abbot Hugh of Farfa himself in *Destructio monasterii Farfensis*, written at the end of the tenth century: 'in toto regno Italico non inveniebatur simile illi monasterio in cunctis bonis, excepto monasterio quod vocatur Nonantule' (*CF* 1, p. 31).

²³ *RF* II, nos. 1 and 2, pp. 22–4; *CF* 1, p. 136.

²⁴ For donations from Tuscan landholders, see *RF* II, no. 146.

²⁵ For a full analysis, see below, pp. 278–352.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Thomas of Maurienne himself seems to have taken the route across the frontier for a very different reason from that of the Frankish armies that periodically used it. If we can trust the report of our earliest (but still much later) sources (see below), it was on his return from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land that Thomas came to Farfa. The story as told by Farfa's great high medieval historian, Gregory of Catino, has Thomas embarking on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and in the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem having a vision of the Virgin Mary, who instructed him to return to Italy and to reopen an abandoned basilica dedicated in her name. With divine guidance and accompanied by a small group of followers, Thomas arrived in the Sabina and discovered the ruins of an ancient sanctuary, where he established his monastery.²⁶ Gregory's tale stands in a long tradition of narratives of monastic foundation, and several elements of it are topoi: Thomas was inspired by a saintly vision, he was a pilgrim, he founded his monastery in a deserted place far from habitation.²⁷ Yet in laying out his story, Gregory was not simply following monastic or hagiographical convention. Pilgrimage to Rome was established and relatively popular by the eighth century.²⁸ That pilgrims could and did also visit the Holy Land in this period is evident from other contemporary sources. Notable among these are two insular texts. In his *De Locis Sanctis*, Adomnán, the abbot of Iona (*d.* 704), reported the journey of the otherwise unknown Frankish bishop Arculf to the Holy Land, which must have taken place shortly before 683 × 688.²⁹ Forty years later (723–9) the Anglo-Saxon Willibald (*d.* c.786) journeyed first to Rome, and thence to the Holy Land, returning via Constantinople and Sicily to Monte Cassino, whence he was plucked by Boniface in 741 to be bishop of Eichstätt. His travels are related by Hugeburc, a nun of the double

²⁶ *CF* 1, pp. 5–6.

²⁷ The topos of monastic isolation is evident in Jonas, *Vita Columbani Abbatis Discipulorumque Eius*, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM iv (Hanover, 1902), pp. 64–108, Bk. 1, ch. 10: see the comments by Wood, *Merovingian Kingdoms*, p. 195. Similarly, Fulda is said to have been founded in a 'horrendum desertum': Eigil, *Vita Sturmi*, MGH SS II (Hanover, 1829), pp. 365–77; that this is not strictly accurate has been shown by Chris Wickham, 'European forests in the early middle ages: landscape and land clearance', *L'ambiente vegetale nell'alto medioevo*, Settimane di Studio del CISAM 37 (Spoleto, 1989), pp. 479–545, at pp. 481–3.

²⁸ See P. Llewellyn, *Rome in the Dark Ages* (London, 1971; repr. 1993), pp. 173–98, and B. Lançon, *Rome in Late Antiquity*, trans. A. Nevill and M. Humphries (Edinburgh, 2000; French publ. 1995), pp. 159–60.

²⁹ See Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, ed. and trans. D. Meehan and L. Bieler, *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* 3 (Dublin, 1958) and Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, ed. and trans. R. Sharpe (Harmondsworth, 1995), pp. 54–5 and n. 424. The most likely candidate for identity with 'Arculf' is Arnulf/Arulf, bishop of Châlons-sur-Marne c.682–88, see L. Duchesne, *Fastes épiscopaux de l'ancienne Gaule*, vol. III (Paris, 1915), p. 97 and Adomnán, *De Locis Sanctis*, ed. Meehan and Bieler, pp. 6–9.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy*

monastery of Heidenheim, in her *Hodoeporicon*, written c.780.³⁰ These sources testify that the path to the Holy Land was relatively well trodden at the turn of the eighth century and, crucially, that that path led through central Italy. Remote as it may have been, in relative terms, the Monte Acuziano was not far distant from the Via Salaria that linked Rome with the Pentapolis. It is not inconceivable that Thomas had already travelled down this road. The evidence for habitation of the surrounding area – the Sabina – at this time, drawn from Farfa’s own documents, reveals that, although it cannot be described as populous by early medieval standards, it was not quite the ‘desert’ that Gregory depicted. Many of the early donations to the abbey constitute land already parcelled out into cultivated farms.³¹ Gregory may, in fact, have derived his image of Farfa in its early years from the description of the foundation of San Vincenzo al Volturno by the latter’s eighth-century abbot, Ambrosius Autpert. He ascribed to Thomas of Maurienne a speech directing San Vincenzo’s founders, who were three monks of Farfa, to a spot in the wilderness: ‘In which place is situated the oratory dedicated to Christ’s martyr Vincent, and on each side of the river is a thick forest which serves as a habitation for wild beasts and a hiding-place for robbers.’³² The tradition at San Vincenzo, therefore, placed the site of the monastery in a *silva densissima*: in fact, San Vincenzo was founded on the site of a former villa in a settled landscape.³³

As at San Vincenzo, so at Farfa, later tradition has the monks reoccupying an earlier Christian site. Thomas of Maurienne is said to have established his monastery in an abandoned late antique basilica, reputedly the remains of a monastery built by the obscure St Laurence of Syria.³⁴ Laurence defies attempts to identify him securely. He was certainly not the famous third-century Roman martyr of that name, to whom, inter alia, the Roman basilica of San Lorenzo fuori-le-mura was dedicated. Farfa’s great high medieval historian, Gregory of Catino, thought that his monastery’s Laurence was a Sabine bishop of the sixth century, an opinion apparently based on no more evidence than is now available. The recent attempt to identify him with a sixth-century bishop at ‘Forum

³⁰ Hugelburc of Heidenheim, *Hodoeporicon*, ed. O Holder-Egger, MGH SS xv/1 (Hanover, 1887), pp. 80–117. For comment, see W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 39–43 and McKitterick, ‘England and the Continent’, pp. 78–9. For Hugelburc’s identity, Levison, *England and the Continent*, p. 294 and n. 3.

³¹ For a full analysis, see below, pp. 184–207.

³² *Vita Padonis, Tasonis et Tatonis Vulturumensium*, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SRL (Hanover, 1878), p. 550.

³³ *Chronicon Vulturumense*, ed. V. Federici, 3 vols., *Fonti per la storia d’Italia* 58–60 (Rome, 1925–38), vol. 1 (Rome, 1925), p. 111. For this, and other instances of the same idea, see Wickham, ‘European forests’, p. 482.

³⁴ *CF* 1, 121–132 and *LF*, pp. 3–44.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Novum' (modern Vescovio) is equally incapable of proof.³⁵ On the available evidence, not only the identity but even the existence of Laurence must be questioned. The existence of the late antique church is less doubtful, but still difficult to establish. Excavations to the west of the present church by the British School at Rome between 1978 and 1985 uncovered a late antique phase of occupation, but no structures beyond a walled enclosure.³⁶ Traces of a church, however, are most likely to be found under the present church, where no excavation has been possible. It is at least clear that the terrace on which the abbey church now stands was created in the late antique period. It is also clear that legends linking this site with a St Laurence were current when Thomas of Maurienne arrived there. In the papal privilege granted to the abbey in 705, Pope John VII recorded that a monastery had been built there by a Bishop Laurence.³⁷ All that we can say for certain, therefore, is that Farfa was a recognized cult site by the time Thomas arrived there, albeit one that had fallen into disuse.

The terrace on which the abbey stands is on the north slope of the hill now called Monte San Martino, but then known as Monte Acuziano.³⁸ This rises above the left bank of the stream Riana, which flows into the Farfa river just to the north-west of the monastery. The Farfa itself joins the Tiber about 7 kilometres to the west. The quality of these swift-flowing waters had been recognized since antiquity.³⁹ The surrounding banks were as fertile in the nineteenth century as they had been in the first.⁴⁰ English travellers in the nineteenth century also noted that the slopes of the hill were heavily wooded, as they apparently were in the early middle ages, and still are to some extent today. Lower down on either side of the Riana and Farfa vines and olives have been cultivated at

³⁵ P. di Manzano and T. Leggio, *La diocesi di Cures Sabini* (Fara in Sabina, 1980), p. 14. At least one of the authors has since tempered this view: T. Leggio, *Da Cures Sabini all'Abbazia di Farfa. Trasformazioni del paesaggio tra Tevere, Corese e Farfa dall'età romana al medioevo* (Passo Corese, 1992), pp. 54–6.

³⁶ O. Gilkes and J. Mitchell, 'The early medieval church at Farfa: orientation and chronology', *Archeologia Medievale* 22 (1995), pp. 343–364, at p. 347.

³⁷ *RF* II, 2.

³⁸ See L. Branciani, 'Il monte S. Martino in Sabina: siti archeologici e storia', in P. Lombardozi ed., *Eremitismo a Farfa: origine e storia. Per una ricostruzione archeologico-ambientale del complesso eremitico del Monte S. Martino in Sabina*, Quaderni della Biblioteca 3 (Farfa, 2000), pp. 31–133; and R. Ring, 'The lands of Farfa: studies in Lombard and Carolingian Italy', PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1972, p. 9 and nn. 1–2.

³⁹ Virgil, *Aeneid* VII, 715: 'Qui Tiberim Fabarimque bibunt' (those who drink from the Tiber and the Farfarus).

⁴⁰ For the state of the abbey and surrounding countryside in the nineteenth century, see A. C. Hare and St. C. Baddeley, *Days near Rome* (London, 1907), pp. 178–81; compare Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIV, 30: 'opacae Farfarus umbrae' (the deeply shaded Farfarus).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17830-3 - Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c. 700-900

Marios Costambeys

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy*

least since our records begin.⁴¹ It is the Farfa river which gives the abbey its modern name. In eighth-century documents, the abbey appears, in its most elaborate form, as ‘monasterium sanctae Dei genetricis semperque virginis Mariae, quod fundatum est in territorio civitatis . . . Reatinae in fundo Acutiano’.⁴² (Sometimes the territory is named as that of the Sabina rather than that of Rieti.) In general *fundus* was a term for a landed estate common in both late Roman and early medieval documents. The ‘fundus Acutianus’ seems to have been a relatively large coherent block of land. Some, if not most, of this, however, was not included in any initial endowment – any *terra* – that the abbey may have received: Farfa later acquired from Duke Lupo a church and lands ‘in casale Acutiano’.⁴³ Unlike the *terrae* of San Vincenzo al Volturno and Monte Cassino, acquired in the same period, the extent of Farfa’s endowment remains obscure. Gregory of Catino reported that Faroald’s initial endowment constituted eleven *curtes*, totalling 11,000 *modia* of land, but he admitted that their whereabouts were now unknown.⁴⁴ Lupo’s grant suggests that Farfa may not have been blessed with such a massive initial endowment as the other two abbeys.⁴⁵ It may have come to possess the core of land around it through not one but a series of conscious decisions made by landowners in the eighth century.

Explaining the rise of the abbey to the position of pre-eminent landowner in the Sabina will be a central concern of what follows. Here it suffices to say that the establishment of the material resources for Farfa’s success was an achievement of Lombard landowners that mostly took place before the Frankish conquest of the Lombard kingdom in 774 (though Farfa received not inconsiderable lands from Hildebrand, duke of Spoleto from the time of the Frankish conquest until 788/9; a Lombard allied, for the most part, with the Franks). As we shall see, the abbey’s relationship with the Carolingian family of Frankish kings was crucial both for the maintenance of its position and for the political situation of the region as a whole. That relationship must have rested in part on the reputation that Farfa had already established, one that was fully

⁴¹ Hare and Baddeley, *Days near Rome*, p. 181. ⁴² CDL IV/1 5 (746).

⁴³ CDL IV/1 14 (761) is the record of a judgement establishing the validity of an earlier grant by Duke Lupo (r. 745–51).

⁴⁴ *CF* 1, pp. 135–6; and see E. Migliario, *Strutture della proprietà agraria in Sabina dall’età imperiale all’alto medioevo* (Florence, 1988), p. 39 and Migliario, *Uomini, Terre e Strade. Aspetti dell’Italia centroappenninica fra antichità e alto medioevo* (Bari, 1995), pp. 28–9 with n. 9. Faroald’s other major donation recorded in the *Chronicon* (though not in the *Regestum*) was in the Reatino, some miles north of the abbey: *CF* 1, pp. 139–40.

⁴⁵ See C. Wickham, ‘The *terra* of San Vincenzo al Volturno in the 8th to 12th centuries: the historical framework’, in R. Hodges and J. Mitchell eds., *San Vincenzo al Volturno. The Archaeology, Art and Territory of an Early Medieval Monastery*, BAR Int. Series 252 (1985), pp. 227–58, esp. pp. 227–31.