THE PLAGUE THAT DIDN’T HAPPEN

_Yersinia Pestis_ and the Lombard Conquest of Italy, 565-572

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To wrap this up, I offer my gratitude to the New North Collective and an invocation to Clio and Euterpe. Pestilentias virumque cano.

Note on this thesis: translations with attached Latin footnotes are my own. All other translations are sourced from the texts listed in the first two sections of the bibliography. Footnote references with no preceding title refer to internal sections of this paper (i.e., see Section IV.2).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**  

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**  

**MAP**  

**INTRODUCTION — The Penumbra of Paul the Deacon**  

- 0.1: Plague and the Decline of the Byzantine Empire  
- 0.2: Epitomizing the “Microstudy”: Plague and the Lombard Conquest  
- 0.3: Outline of Chapters  

**CHAPTER I — Prelude to a Pathogen: The Ligurian Plague in Context**  

- I.1: Setting the Scene: History and Historiography  
- I.2: First Pandemic Nomenclature: Plague and *Pestilentia*, Waves and Outbreaks  
- I.4: Following the Thread  
  - I.4.1: The British, German, and Italian Evolutions of the Ligurian Plague  
  - I.4.2: Hermannus Contractor and the Plague of 565  
- I.5: Footnotes at Face Value: A 1,200-Year Legacy  

**CHAPTER II — Paul’s Literary Style and Inspirations: The Birth of a Mythical Plague**  

- II.1: (Re)Introducing the *Historia Langobardorum*  
- II.2: The Pavian Injection: Liguria and the Importance of Lombard Relevancy  
- II.3: Paul and The Gregories: Plague Apocalypse or Lombard Apocalypse?  
- II.4: The “Siege” of Pavia and the Lombards as Italy’s Saviors  
- II.5: A Vision Made Real: Paul’s Symbolic, Literary Plague  

**CHAPTER III — The Literary Data for a Plague-Lombard Nexus: A Rebuttal Against Paul**  

- III.1: Introducing Everyone Else  
- III.2: The Primary Sources, Sixth and Seventh Century  
  - III.2.1: The Sixth Century, Part 1: Agathias and Secundus  
  - III.2.2: The Sixth Century, Part 2: The Chroniclers  
  - III.2.3: The Sixth Century, Part 3: The Frankish Contradiction  
  - III.2.4: The Seventh Century, Part 1: The *Liber Pontificalis*  
  - III.2.5: The Seventh Century, Part 2: The Chroniclers (Again)  
  - III.2.6: The Seventh Century, Part 3: Lombard Origins  
- III.3: The Tangential Sources
### III.3.1: Sixth- and Seventh-Century Silence

- Page 106

### III.3.2: The Murkiness of the Eighth Century and Beyond

- Page 109

### III.4: Silence, Confusion, and Invention: Paul Fails his Peer Review

- Page 116

---

**CHAPTER IV — The Non-literate Data for a Plague-Lombard Nexus: More Questions for Paul**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IV.1: Interdisciplinary History: The First Pandemic Model</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.2: Paleogenomics: A Helical Hole in the Story</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.3: Archaeology, Demography, Numismatics, and Epigraphy</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.4: The Palynological Data: Catastrophe or Continuity?</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.5: Unconvincing Evidence: The Need for Further Non-literary Studies</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**CONCLUSION — The Paradigm of Paul the Deacon**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V.1: If Not Plague, Then What?</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.2: Giving Paul the Benefit of the Doubt</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.3: The Future of the Ligurian Plague and the First Pandemic in Italy</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Page 144
Figure 1: Italy and its surrounding regions immediately prior to the Lombard conquest, with relevant peoples and their approximate pre-invasion locations.
INTRODUCTION
The Penumbra of Paul the Deacon

0.1: Plague and the Decline of the Byzantine Empire

Some empires fall, others fade. In the Mediterranean, the Byzantine Empire’s decline shaped a key epoch in late antique history—but with much debated causes. Byzantium’s decay, like that of Rome, has long been defined by the ethos of Edward Gibbon and a broad narrative model of collapse.¹ This methodological philosophy permeates even the most recent scholarship on the sixth through eighth centuries; now, scholars seek a basis for the Empire’s sudden downturn in environmental factors especially. Outside any specific lens, Byzantium’s downturn generates a series of questions. How did Italy fall to the Lombards so soon after Justinian’s reconquest of the west in the mid-sixth century? What allowed various Slavic groups to penetrate deep into the Byzantine Balkans in the same timeframe? In the early seventh century, how did Sassanid Persia bring the Empire to its knees, only to be defeated by the Byzantines and subsequently wiped off the map by the Arab conquests? Concerning the latter conflict, how did

¹ Lee Mordechai and Merle Eisenberg, “Rejecting Catastrophe: The Case of the Justinianic Plague,” Past & Present 244, no. 1 (2019): 4. In this study, Mordechai and Eisenberg discuss the notion of “collapsology.” The sixth century—the time of the Lombard conquest—perhaps marks the worst point in this great collapse. As Gibbon put it, “Rome…had reached, about the close of the sixth century, the lowest period of her depression.” See Edward Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (Vol. III), (New York: Hurst & Co., 1781), 281.
Arab forces then manage to triumph spectacularly over Byzantine holdings in North Africa and the Levant? And so on.

Solely the first of those questions—that of the Lombard conquest—is the subject of this project, but the Lombards did not invade Italy in a vacuum. Clearly, something must have deeply unsettled the status quo in the once-strong Byzantine Empire, which, by the sixth century, had fully reclaimed the mantle of Roman rule in the Mediterranean after the waning of its western counterpart. In other words, a succinct explanation beyond politics, military struggle, barbarian migrations, religious developments, or other anthropological factors seems appealing as an explanation for the Byzantine Empire’s hamstringing so soon after its mid-sixth century zenith of power under Justinian I. Enter the plague.

The Plague of Justinian, or, more broadly, the First Pandemic, has proven to be a tantalizing framework for examining Byzantine decline, including the Lombard conquest therein. In the “maximalist” view, successive “waves” or “amplifications” of the disease—caused by the *Yersinia pestis* bacterium—led to truly astonishing mortality across the Mediterranean. Beginning in 541, these outbreaks caused horrific scenes in Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople, as writers including Evagrius Scholasticus, John of Ephesus, and Procopius documented in their vivid accounts. In western Europe, plague was a ruthless, seemingly

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3 Some scholars dispute the usage of terms like “maximalists” and “minimalists” in the debate over the First Pandemic’s scope. Indeed, such a binary can be quite arbitrary when the metric is estimates of mortality alone. See Peter Sarris, “New Approaches to the ‘Plague of Justinian,’” *Past & Present* 254, no. 1 (2022), 27-28.

4 Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History* IV.29; Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel Mahre, Chronicle (Part III), translated by Witold Witakowski (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), 74-98; Procopius, *History of the Wars* II.22-23 and *The Secret History* IV.
punitive scourge, as described by Gregory of Tours (during the late sixth century) and Paul the Deacon (writing later from the eighth century) in Gaul and Italy, respectively.\(^5\) Due to the placement of the mid-sixth century’s most prominent narrative writers, an overall historical bias exists in the literary record towards Constantinople and the East.\(^6\) Nonetheless, this has not stopped scholars from globalizing the disease’s effects: a wide-ranging, unilaterally destructive plague seemingly offered the non-Byzantine populations of the Mediterranean world the perfect opportunity for conquest and expansion.\(^7\)

Beyond the dramatic extant narratives of Procopius and others, modern scholars have used the appearance of plague, “great mortality,” and pestilence in the texts of chroniclers and other writers to illustrate expansive, recurring outbreaks across Europe and Southwest Asia.\(^8\) Furthermore, the growing number of sequenced *Y. pestis* genomes assembled using late antique human remains across Europe and Southwest Asia and the ongoing study of surviving papyri, inscriptions, and numismatic and archaeological data have been employed to strengthen the maximalist case for this historical scenario.

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\(^6\) Other prominent plague accounts include the Syriac texts of Michael the Syrian and John of Ephesus/Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel-Mahre/the Zuqnin Chronicle. See Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* 100-101; *The Chronicle of Zuqnin* a. 541-542, 542-543 (94-115). See also Pseudo-Dionysios of Tel Mahre, *Chronicle (Part III)*, 80-110. The texts listed here and above are the major literary sources that include detailed anecdotes beyond terser chronicle entries.


\(^8\) The plague disease appears in several lexical forms in Arabic, English, Greek, Latin, and Syriac historiography and sources, ancient and modern alike. See Section I.2 for a discussion of plague nomenclature.
Based on this understanding of the sources, the model of the Second Pandemic—specifically, the Black Death—is an enticing one for late antiquity. The murkier First Pandemic becomes a clear catalyst for historical change when modeled after its notoriously deadly (and much better documented) fourteenth-century counterpart. Indeed, a Byzantine Black Death would offer a poignant answer to the many questions enumerated above. Furthermore, the titles commonly bestowed upon the First Pandemic denote a uniquely Byzantine impact for the disease: without Justinian and the Byzantine Empire, there would be no “Plague of Justinian” or “Justinianic Plague” to devastate its eponymous ruler’s civilization. In sum, the maximalist model describes plague as having a major role in the historical evolution from Roman to medieval times in the Mediterranean, thus officializing an “end of antiquity” and offering an equally brutal prequel to the Second Pandemic.

Meanwhile, the “minimalist” view of plague treats the First Pandemic as a less devastating event, or at least one in which a token watershed quality does not function as a starting assumption. The same literary sources, epigraphic and numismatic data, paleogenomics

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9 Note that the Second Pandemic refers to all the plague outbreaks from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-nineteenth century in the Mediterranean region. The Black Death specifically describes the initial, devastating spread of plague across Europe, Southwest Asia, and North Africa in the 1340s and 1350s. For a modern example of such a model’s application, see Harper, *Plagues Upon the Earth*, 214.

10 Groundbreaking plague scholars Jean-Noël Biraben and Jacques Le Goff posed additional questions of the same nature in their key work on the First Pandemic, bringing under the umbrella of plague the Berber revolts in North Africa during the 540s, the early medieval shift in European power from the Mediterranean to the North Sea, and the rise of Charlemagne and Muhammed alike. See Biraben and Le Goff, “The Plague in the Early Middle Ages,” 63.


12 This notion becomes immediately apparent when reading even the titles of recent plague literature. I.e., Little, ed., *Plague and the End of Antiquity*.

13 Maximalists have accused minimalists of the same assumptive biases that minimalists declare implicit in maximalist studies: see Little, “Life and Afterlife,” 17. The subject of Little’s critique, Jean Durliat, can be regarded as the first modern plague minimalist. See Jean Durliat, “La peste du VIe siècle: Pour un nouvel examen des sources
studies, and archaeological research have been utilized to make the opposite arguments to those of plague maximalists. Palynological data has also become a factor in such studies. Citing exaggerated claims of mortality and the overall lack of reliable, extant data (literary and otherwise), this more conservative stance posits a model closer to that of the Third Pandemic\textsuperscript{14} and stresses non-uniformity in regional impact and epidemic scale.\textsuperscript{15} Implicit in this minimalism is a critique of monicausality surrounding sixth- and seventh-century Byzantine decline, although this issue has likewise been acknowledged by the less conservative plague scholars who approach the First Pandemic from a less revisionist standpoint.\textsuperscript{16} Overall, the vocal minimalist presence in the First Pandemic debate suggests that the question of plague in late antiquity is by no means settled, nor will it be in the immediate future.

0.2: Epitomizing the “Microstudy”: Plague and the Lombard Conquest

Despite the often drastically different viewpoints of plague maximalists and plague minimalists, both sides of this historical question have demonstrated a clear commonality (one that is perhaps shared by all historians): all have noted the need for further studies. From the maximalist-inclined, we have this salient point:

\textsuperscript{14} The Third Pandemic includes the series of plague outbreaks beginning in the mid-nineteenth century in China, which eventually globalized in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This era of plague is best known for the 1894 plague of Hong Kong and the disease’s especially deadly effects in British-controlled India.


Not only is there no comprehensive study of the entire first pandemic, there are no comprehensive studies of this plague in the major geopolitical and cultural–linguistic subdivisions of the Mediterranean world, such as the Latin West or the Near East...Not only is there a need for comparative studies of different plague outbreaks within the vast geographical and chronological parameters of this pandemic, but also a need for comparative studies of different pandemics.  

And from the minimalists, we have the following:

We suggest that further research should analyze plague events at the local level in regions endowed with multiple lines of evidence instead of constructing grand narratives of ‘Roman decline’ and demographic collapse...Such microstudies would serve as a foundation for a more nuanced interpretation of late antique plague.

Clearly, the field has reached an impasse via repeated studies of long-term trends, and scholars are well aware of the need for further, focused research.

As a response to these calls from both maximalists and minimalists alike, we can turn our attention to one of the key events in the Byzantine Empire’s late antique decline: the sixth-century rise of the Lombards in Italy and the years surrounding their invasion that began in 568. In analyzing the interactions of plague, the Lombard conquest, and the historiography thereof, this attempt at a new “microstudy” will elucidate the birth of a mythologized epidemic and demonstrate the lack of evidence for a plague that allegedly catalyzed the change in control of Italy. The roots of Lombard-associated plague maximalism can be traced to their literary origins in Paul the Deacon’s (c. 720-799) Historia Langobardorum (The History of the

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19 Note that references to “Italy” will signify primarily the northern and central regions of the Italian peninsula (modern-day Emilia-Romagna, Liguria, Lombardy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, and Veneto), wherein the Lombards began their conquest of formerly Ostrogothic and Byzantine territory.
20 See Section I.3 for a brief discussion of theories surrounding the early years of the Lombards’ ascension in Italy (specifically 568-572). Not all scholars agree that the “conquest” was in fact a military invasion, per se.
The Lombards, hereafter *HL*\(^{21}\), showing the long shadows this text has cast in the historiography of the First Pandemic. Beyond Paul, the sixth-century historical record can further clarify when an outbreak of plague may have taken place in the 560s or 570s and show if it occurred before, during, or after the time of the Lombards’ arrival. By asking to what extent plague may have precipitated the Lombard conquest, the stances of today’s maximalists and minimalists can be critiqued, demonstrating the vital importance of these deep dives into the literary sources (and other evidence) in First Pandemic studies. Such focused examinations have hitherto remained remarkably infrequent.

The Lombards’ entrance into and rapid takeover of Italy has not been the subject of any plague-related analysis, although Paul, the *HL*, and the history of the Lombards have all received ample scholarly attention of their own. The lack of targeted studies relating to plague in this context has not stopped a form of assumptive plague history taking shape in both the maximalist and minimalist camps, however. For some scholars, a supposed plague outbreak concentrated particularly in Liguria (in northwestern Italy) circa 565 paved the way for the Lombard king Alboin and his followers to migrate into and conquer Italy.\(^{22}\) Since the sixteenth century,

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\(^{21}\) *Historia Langobardorum* translates directly to *The History of the Langobards* (literally, from Proto-Germanic origins: “long beards”). Lombard and Langobard can be used interchangeably to refer to the people.  

\(^{22}\) From Little, “Life and Afterlife,” 14: “The next [epidemic] that we know about, from Paul the Deacon, hit in 565, and it was in 568 that the Lombards began their migration into the Italian peninsula.” From Robert Sallares, “Ecology, Evolution, and Epidemiology of Plague,” in Little, *Plague and the End of Antiquity*, 287: “Plague weakened the Visigothic kingdom in Spain and so assisted the Arab invasion, it facilitated the movement of the Lombards into Italy as Paul the Deacon realized, and it may well have weakened the indigenous Romano–British states and so helped the progress of the Anglo-Saxons in England.” From Biraben and Le Goff, “The Plague in the Early Middle Ages,” 63: “Moreover (and Paul the Deacon already pointed this out), the epidemic could have favored, and even given rise to, the invasion of Italy by the Lombards, who had long been stationed along Italy’s northern borders.” From Russell, “That Earlier Plague,” 189: “But from 565 the Lombards slipped into Italy with little resistance…Had all the Mediterranean-European area had the same mortality, relative power might have been maintained, enabling the Empire to hold out against its enemies.” From Thomas Hodgkin, *Italy and Her Invaders* Volume VI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 167-168: “This pestilence, as Paulus expressly tells us, was one cause of Alboin's easy victories.” From Harper, *The Fate of Rome*, 238-239: “The first renewal of plague started sometime between AD 565 and 571 in Liguria, a coastal strip under the control of Byzantine forces.” Note that the nebulous range of 565-571 comes directly from Stathakopoulos; see Harper, Appendix B.3 (305) and Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence*, 139 (pp. 310-311). However, in his most recent publication, Harper claims the following: from Kyle Harper, *Plagues upon the Earth: Disease and the Course of Human History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
historians have regarded Paul’s plague as an explicit or implicit turning point for Italy, striking the country as if in preparation for the Lombards’ subsequent march south.\footnote{23} For others, the opposite is true, or at least the plague outbreak at that time is conceived of as impacting Lombard and Byzantine forces alike.\footnote{24} Scholars of Lombard history that do not focus on plague have also suggested that Paul editorialized a plague outbreak found in the bishop Marius of Avenches’ sixth-century *Chronicon*, bumping it up in the chronology to suit the broader narrative of the *HL*.\footnote{25} While these latter two viewpoints come closest to this paper’s argument, the problem remains: despite the claims of plague’s either catalyzing or irrelevant effect in the Italian affairs of the 560s and early 570s, an in-depth analysis has not been conducted, despite frequent calls for more research. In fact, this holds true for most of the literary accounts of First-Pandemic plague.\footnote{26} The closest any recent scholarship has come to event-specific microstudies has

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{23}{For example, we chance to have a startling account of a secondary outbreak in Italy, ultimately drawing from an eyewitness record, that gives us a sense of what a desolating force the plague was when the disease returned around 565 CE. It tore through the plains of northern Italy from one end to the other.” In the attached endnote (note 34, p. 546), Harper writes that “the Italian source is Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards...Paul’s source for this episode was in turn Secundus of Trento, a contemporary of the outbreak. This outbreak should be dated to circa 565 CE.” Apart from his citation of Paul the Deacon, Harper’s claims are—as we will see—entirely incorrect. On the origin of 565 as the plague’s supposed date, see Sections I.1-2. On Paul’s sourcing, see Sections II.1-5 and III.1-4. On Secundus, see Section III.2.1. On rural plague, see Sections IV.3-4. For other references to pre-Lombard plague (in 565), see Irene Barbiera and Gianpiero Dalla Zuanna, “Population Dynamics in Italy in the Middle Ages: New Insights from Archaeological Findings.” *Population and Development Review* 35, no. 2 (2009): 379; Keller et al., “Ancient Yersinia Pestis Genomes,” 12366; Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 88-92, and Costas Tsiamis, “Epidemic waves during Justinian's plague in the Byzantine Empire (6th-8th c. AD),” *Vesalius* (2011), 37. Gibbon did not explicitly refer to a plague in 565, but he did allude to the effects of pestilence in the context of Longinus’ time in power (the Byzantine exarch and general in Italy during the time immediately before Alboin’s invasion): from Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. III, 266: “In the preceding years [before the Lombard conquest] Italy had been desolated by pestilence and famine, and a disaffected people ascribed the calamities of nature to the guilt or folly of their rulers.”}
\footnote{24}{On the pre-modern development of the plague-Lombard narrative, see Section I.4.}
\footnote{25}{From Mordechai and Eisenberg, “Rejecting Catastrophe,” 45: “The initial reconquest [Justinian’s] was largely successful, even if the conquests may have stretched the empire’s resources in the long term. Later difficulties were unrelated to plague. Plague did not cause, for example, the Lombard invasion of Italy, which would have equally devastated both Lombards and Romans in any case.”}
\footnote{26}{See Eduardo Fabbro, “Society and Warfare in Lombard Italy (c.568-652),” PhD diss. (University of Toronto, 2008), 13 and Walter Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550-800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 389. The main exception would be Procopius, whose account of the first outbreak of plague in Constantinople has received extensive treatment, especially vis-à-vis the account of Thucydides and the Athenian Plague. See note 392 below.}
consisted of discussions of plague in the context of Slavic incursions into the Byzantine Balkans and of plague outbreaks in Gaul circa 543 and 571. The former’s 200-year lens may make us question whether it qualifies as a microstudy, however.

This work will therefore attempt to respond to two issues generated from the ongoing First Pandemic debate. The goal here is not to look for broad patterns; rather it is to examine specific, overlooked details. First, there is the post hoc ergo propter hoc issue of an anti-Roman plague striking northern Italy immediately prior to the Lombard invasion. This Ligurian Plague (as we will refer to it hereafter) as it appears in Paul’s account has been assigned lynchpin status in the history of the Lombard conquest. The assumption that plague devastated the Romans before the Lombards arrived rests on the tenuous—and, as this paper will argue, incorrect—notion of a plague outbreak occurring in Italy around 565, and further assumes such an epidemic disproportionately debilitated the defenders of the region.

Second, there is the fundamental question of whether the dearth of evidence surrounding the First Pandemic in general necessitates that plague had no effects in Italy in this specific timeframe, as minimalists have implied. Just because the disease’s interaction with the Lombard conquest has not been adequately examined, we cannot yet conclude it was not a factor. Even more importantly, the literary sources for these events have not been thoroughly mined, despite some claims of textual evidence being a weak foundation for plague studies or

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28 The latter notion comes directly from Paul, History of the Langobards II.4: “And these evils happened to the Romans only and within Italy alone, up to the boundaries of the nations of the Alamanni and the Bavarians.”
29 Mordechai and Eisenberg, “Rejecting Catastrophe,” 45. Note that this paper will primarily refer to the non-Lombard population in Italy as “Roman.” While Italy was under Byzantine control at this time, the writers of that time would consider them to still be Roman.
that the late antique corpus has nothing left to offer for insights on the First Pandemic. The written history of the Lombard conquest and First Pandemic in Italy indeed deserves renewed attention and fair treatment. In other words, there may be more literary evidence for studying this plague than scholars assume. Overall, this paper will seek to provide a model for microstudies of the First Pandemic, offering a new angle from which to approach a subject rife with uncertainty. Looking ahead, similar microstudies could consider in smaller scale the events of the Byzantine-Persian wars, the Arab conquest, the Slavic incursions in the Balkans, the Berber revolts in North Africa, and other such episodes of Byzantine decline in late antiquity.

0.3: Outline of Chapters

The first chapter of this work will take a meta-historical approach, analyzing the historical context for the Lombard conquest, the medieval and modern historiography of the Ligurian Plague, and the evolution of Paul the Deacon’s text into the decisive source for the plague-Lombard nexus we see today. Also included in this section will be a discussion of plague and Lombard-related nomenclature and the different theories surrounding the Lombard conquest itself. To date, no scholar has rigorously investigated the so-dated Ligurian Plague of 565. Instead, modern historians often write of a major Italian plague outbreak in 565 as if Paul himself specifically dated it to that year when writing the HL in the late eighth century. However, this date does not come from any primary or chronicle source, or even Paul himself.

30 See Mordechai and Eisenberg, “Rejecting Catastrophe,” 8. The same authors do also note in another review paper that “some of the primary sources still await further nuanced discussion.” See Eisenberg and Mordechai, “The Justinianic Plague,” 162.
32 See note 22 above.
Instead, it is to Hermannus Contractor (Hermann of Reichenau), an eleventh-century German monk, composer, and natural philosopher, that we owe this seemingly concrete date. Starting from today’s scholarship, this chapter will trace the complex evolution of Paul’s plague narrative through the centuries, capturing the hitherto unnoticed sources that have informed much of the modern literature on the outbreak. As this chapter will demonstrate, today’s understanding of the Ligurian Plague has been shaped by centuries of the HL’s earlier readers.

The second and third chapters will engage with over forty texts, from those produced immediately prior to the Lombard conquest to the works of authors like Paul himself, who wrote at least 200 years after Alboin’s invasion. Included among these sources are narrative histories like those of Paul and Gregory of Tours, the works of chroniclers such as Marius of Avenches and John of Biclaro, and a broader “other” category. The latter includes works ranging from the Dialogues of Pope Gregory I (Gregory the Great), to the poetry of Corippus, to the law codes of the early Lombards. In the second chapter especially, Paul’s work will receive a great deal of attention, as he is the main—and possibly only—source for the Ligurian Plague. The sources, themes, and rhetorical devices of the HL all warrant in-depth discussion, especially in the context of Paul’s editorializing of plague to fit a larger historical narrative. Of key importance also are the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, which, as the second chapter will argue, may constitute the true origin of Paul’s plague account. Meanwhile, the third chapter’s analysis of numerous chronicles, narrative histories, and other literary sources can provide a clearer picture of plague’s interplay with the Lombard conquest when analyzed in tandem with (and in critique of) Paul’s

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34 Paul remains the only extant source, discounting any lost annals, chronicles, or histories he himself may have drawn from.
narrative. As will be shown, the *HL* stands alone in its plague-centric treatment of the Lombard conquest. Both of these chapters seek to cast doubt on the common notion of a plague outbreak in 565, present a clarified timeline for the Italian outbreak(s) of the 560s and 570s, and elaborate further on the *HL*’s literary characteristics and relationship with the First Pandemic’s history.

The fourth chapter will consider the many non-literary sources that have continued to bolster the field of historical epidemiology and now offer a complementary angle by which we can assess the impact of plague on sixth-century Italy. Paleogenomics, paleoclimatology and palynology, archaeology, demography, epigraphy, and numismatics will all be utilized to highlight the minimal evidence available for pre-Lombard plague, or indeed any major plague-induced mass depopulation in Italy during the 560s and 570s. While the evidence assessed in this section suffers from a lack of robust or precisely dated evidence in Italy, we can examine longer-term patterns in the non-literary sources that dispute the idea of a sudden downturn in Italy around or after 565. Concrete conclusions may be difficult to draw from the somewhat patchy non-literary data for Italy, and this chapter will demonstrate the need for additional information. Nonetheless, evidence from these rapidly growing subfields in plague research can and will continue to benefit First Pandemic microstudies.

The closing section will summarize the arguments made throughout this thesis and offer other avenues to consider as factors in the Byzantines’ loss of Italy to the Lombards. It will also present general recommendations for historical studies of late antique plague going forward.

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35 The study of ancient DNA (aDNA); in this case, plague genomes sequenced from the dental pulp of human remains can corroborate literary accounts of outbreaks in various areas of Europe and Southwest Asia.

36 The study of pollen deposits. For example, the analysis of sediment cores to track cereal pollen production can suggest trends in historical land usage. Paleoclimatology is the study of ancient climates. For example, the “Late Antique Little Ice Age” (LALIA) has been theorized to have had an indirect catalyzing role in both the First Pandemic and the Lombard conquest. See Ulf Büntgen, et al., “Cooling and Societal Change During the Late Antique Little Ice Age from 536 to Around 660 AD,” *Nature Geoscience* 9 (2016): 231-236.

37 The study of ancient coinage; scholars have suggested that the decrease in Byzantine currency weights can be attributed to plague. See Sarris, “The Justinianic Plague,” 176-179.
Several methodological issues in First Pandemic research deserve flagging, as will be made apparent in the conclusion. In particular, feedback loops have become a staple part of the history of the First Pandemic, especially in the studies that continuously rely on broader, trend-based research. But there are alternative ways of doing things. For events such as the Lombard conquest, we have ample sources to analyze in conversation with each other while the non-literary evidence continues to develop. There is no reason to believe that the methodology of plague microstudies such as this one cannot be applied to other key events in late antique Byzantine history, and future research concentrated on shorter timeframes and more focused contexts may yield more conclusive results than any long-term or region-wide analysis. As we will see, the surviving literary sources must not be condescended to or disregarded on the assumption that they have nothing more to offer.
CHAPTER I
Prelude to a Pathogen:
The Ligurian Plague in Context

I.1: Setting the Scene: History and Historiography

For the Mediterranean world, the First Pandemic was an all-encompassing event, spanning the European continent, Southwest Asia, and North Africa over the course of more than two hundred years. From its apocalyptic arrival in Constantinople circa 541 until at least the 750s, the plague appeared in numerous theaters, from Ireland and Spain to Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia.  

Because of this wide temporal and geographic scope, both the history and historiography of the disease have become immensely complex. We find the same complexity in this paper’s region of focus. Northern Italy (and to some extent, southeastern Gaul) has a complicated pre-plague and plague-era story. Before and after plague’s first appearance in Italy circa 543, the region was subject to decades of war, famine, repeated invasion, and endemic violence.  

These years also saw the rise of several key figures in the Ligurian Plague’s history: Justin II, Byzantine Emperor (r. 565-578), Sophia, his Empress consort (d. 601), Narses, the

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39 Marcellinus Comes provided the first account of plague in Italy, describing “a great pestilence [that] ravaged the land of Italy, and also the Orient and Illyricum which had been already similarly affected” between 542 and 543. See Marc. Com., Chr. a. 542-543. See also Stathakopoulos, “Crime and Punishment,” 101-102.
famous general and Roman patrician (d. 569-572), and Alboin, king of the Lombards (d. 571-573). Each of these individuals played a noteworthy role in the years of the Lombard conquest and the supposed Ligurian Plague, but Narses and Alboin occupy the most important place in the story of the Lombards vis-à-vis plague as it appears in the primary sources. Despite their prominence in the historical narrative, however, accurate biographies of Narses and Alboin can prove difficult to ascertain due to the murky nature of Italian history in the 560s and early 570s.

The history and prosopography of this era are rife with uncertainty, but as we will see in this section—and the next two chapters as well—the historiography of the Ligurian Plague is even more muddled. Even with this lack of clarity, an Italian plague in 565 appears frequently in modern scholarship on the First Pandemic. This year, often given assertively in the timeline of the First Pandemic and rarely with any hint of the ambiguity inherent in its dating, derives from an over 1,000-year-old historiographical tradition. The fascinating and confusing scholarly legacy of the Ligurian Plague has since pervaded today’s plague studies field, perhaps unbeknownst to modern historians. An investigation of the sources that scholars have relied upon to assert the occurrence of a plague in 565 will therefore elucidate the problematic historiographical origins of the so-dated Ligurian Plague, to say nothing of its problematic historical origins in the HL. This analysis can also provide a methodological example for future plague studies—even seemingly straightforward dates cannot be taken at face value.

This chapter thus has three goals. First, there is the important task of establishing a lexical baseline for plague. The disease appears in many forms in the writing of late antiquity, and this varied nomenclature necessitates explication before we proceed with further analysis of the era’s literary sources. Second, we will examine the historical context of the Lombard

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40 See note 22 above.
41 For an analysis of the plague in the HL, see Sections II.1-5.
conquest and Ligurian Plague. In many ways, the rise of Alboin and his people from 568 to 572 constitutes the final years of a three-decade period of strife in Italy. Along with a broad overview of the pre-Lombard era, we will discuss the individuals who appear most frequently in the early medieval sources alongside the Lombard conquest and Ligurian Plague. The lives of Narses, Justin II, Sophia, and Alboin are all interwoven with the events of the late 560s and early 570s. Narses in particular is the subject of a late antique historical tradition involving scandal and betrayal, namely his supposed invitation to Alboin to invade Italy. In this sense, the patrician is intimately tied to the time of the Lombards, and, by extension, to the time of the plague. Furthermore, these stories surrounding the Lombard conquest require some investigation, as the defeat of the Romans in Italy and Alboin’s accession to his kingship are by no means settled events in today’s studies of the era. Finally, this chapter will examine the historiographical context of the Ligurian Plague specifically. By following a millennium’s worth of footnotes, we will see that a plague outbreak striking Italy in 565 does not come from Paul’s eighth-century history directly. Instead, this supposed epidemic stemmed from the quill of the monk and composer Hermannus Contractor, writing from the Abbey of Reichenau (in southern Germany) in the eleventh century.

### I.2: First Pandemic Nomenclature: Plague and *Pestilentia*, Waves and Outbreaks

Just as plague presents in varied clinical forms, so too does it have a range of manifestations in the written sources.\(^{42}\) In the Arabic, Greek, Old Irish, Latin, and Syriac texts of

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\(^{42}\) While bubonic plague (spread most prevalently by ectoparasites and hosted in rodent populations) is generally seen as the culprit behind the three major pandemics, the other two primary forms include pneumonic plague (an infection of the lungs capable of human-to-human spread via aerosols) and septicemic plague (an infection of the blood). Other less common forms of plague include cutaneous (of the skin) and gastrointestinal plague. See Ruifu
late antiquity, the disease rarely goes by “plague” alone. The focus of this paper is largely on the Latin texts of western Europe, but even in these we see differing nomenclature.\textsuperscript{43} Our main subject, Paul the Deacon, primarily used the term \textit{pestilentia} (“pestilence”) to describe the Ligurian Plague in the \textit{HL}.\textsuperscript{44} Other common Latin references include \textit{lues}, \textit{pestilencia}, and \textit{pestis}, which can be translated directly as “epidemic” or “plague,” such as when Gregory of Tours referred to \textit{lues inguinaria} (literally, “inguinal plague” or “plague of the groin”) in his \textit{Historia Francorum} or as in the name of the plague bacterium itself, \textit{Yersinia pestis}.\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Inguinaria} and \textit{inguen} can also be seen as variations on this title, or descriptive substitutes.\textsuperscript{46} In the more general category, we frequently see allusions to \textit{clades} (“destruction”), \textit{mortalitas} (“mortality”), or \textit{pustula} (“swellings” or “pustules”), often with adjectival amplifiers such as \textit{maxima} (“great” or “greatest”) or \textit{nimia} (“excessive” or “severe”).\textsuperscript{47} In later chapters, our investigation of the

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\textsuperscript{43} For the purposes of this section, we are most concerned with broad references to the disease, not necessarily descriptions of its symptomology. For example, symptom-specific terms would include the varied terms for describing the characteristic swellings (the eponymous “buboes”) associated with the disease. In general, scholars have engaged in a rich discussion of plague nomenclature in First Pandemic sources, but mainly in non-Latin sources. On Arabic terms, see Lawrence Conrad, “‘Tā`ūn’ and ‘Wabā’: Conceptions of Plague and Pestilence in Early Islam,” \textit{Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient} 25 no. 3 (1982), 268-307. On Syriac, see Michael G. Morony, “For Whom Does the Writer Write?” The First Bubonic Plague Pandemic According to Syriac Sources,” in Little, \textit{Plague and the End of Antiquity}, 59-86. Scholars have also examined plague etymology in Old Irish texts. See Ann Dooley, “The Plague and its Consequences in Ireland,” in Little, \textit{Plague and the End of Antiquity}, 218-219.

\textsuperscript{44} See Paul, \textit{HL} II.4 and \textit{HL} II.26.


\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Inguinaria} can be found in the writing of Gregory of Tours. See Sallares, “Ecology, Evolution, and Epidemiology of Plague,” 258. \textit{Inguinum} appears in the chronicle of Victor of Tunnuna; see Vic. Ton., \textit{Chr.} a. 542 (2). Paul used \textit{inguinibus} to describe the swellings from plague; see Paul, \textit{HL} II.4.

\textsuperscript{47} Paul himself used \textit{maxima} in reference to the Ligurian Plague, as well as \textit{nimias} to describe severe famine. See Paul, \textit{HL} II.4 and II.26, respectively. \textit{Pustula} appears in Marius of Avenches’ \textit{Chronicon}; see Mar. Av., \textit{Chr.} a. 571. For a reference to a \textit{nimia mortalitas}, see for example the \textit{Excerptis Codicis Sangallensibus}, which referenced severe disease in men and cattle. See \textit{Excerpt. Sangall.} 700, 714-715.
primary sources will use this lexicon as a baseline when looking for specific references to plague to compare to Paul’s account.48

The Latin terms compose only one aspect of the issue with plague’s late antique and medieval nomenclature, however. In modern scholarship, several different plague-related terms appear, in an occasionally confusing fashion. The First Pandemic can be, and often is, defined as the long-term series of plague epidemics in the sixth to eighth centuries. In this paper, we will consider the Plague of Justinian, or Justinianic Plague, to refer solely to the first outbreak of the disease circa 541 or 542 that occurred primarily, as far as sources reveal, in Constantinople and the wider Byzantine Empire. Many scholars have utilized the terms Justinianic Pandemic or Justinianic Plague to refer to the First Pandemic in its entirety, but this overly Byzantine-focused title does not seem warranted given the chronological and geographical breadth of the disease.49 Furthermore, there is the question of plague “waves” versus outbreaks or “amplifications,”50 and pandemics versus epidemics. The notion that the plague repeatedly appeared, wrought devastation, and then returned to a state of relative dormancy is as old as the First Pandemic itself.51 Indeed, most modern scholarship has relied on the wave analogy to categorize the epidemics, generating 14 to 21 waves depending on the author.52 While this method of

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48 This short review is by no means an exhaustive account of the Latin; it merely reflects the most common terms used by the authors of late antiquity this paper analyzes.
49 See note 11 above.
51 For example, we can see an early conception of repeated introduction in the writing of Evagrius Scholasticus, in which the plague seemed to appear every indiction. See Evagr., Eccles. Hist. IV.29. See also Section III.3.1.
52 Jo N. Hays, “Historians and Epidemics: Simple Questions, Complex Answers,” in Little, Plague and the End of Antiquity, 34-35. The works of Dionysios Stathakopoulos and J.N. Biraben and Jacques Le Goff have been most beneficial in organizing timelines for the First Pandemic. See Biraben and Le Goff, “The Plague in the Early Middle Ages”; Stathakopoulos, Famine and Pestilence; Stathakopoulos, “Crime and Punishment.” See also Tsiamis, “Epidemic waves during Justinian's plague,” 36-41. Harper lists 38 amplification events, although he notes that many of these were closely related.
approaching the First Pandemic is highly useful for visualizing the disease’s chronological structure, it can lead to problems.

Relying on set waves of plague, each associated with a specific date or range of dates, can potentially cause scholars to shift a given plague outbreak that appears in a text with little context to fit into another, more specific epidemic. Alternatively, a single reference to the disease in a text can be taken to signify a much larger epidemic, or even a pandemic. Similar issues have been discussed in the fields of radiocarbon dating, palynology, and volcanology: before the more recent boom in First Pandemic studies, paleoclimatologist Michael Baillie discussed the problems with such studies.\(^5^3\) For one, a single “event” can easily become a long-term “period” due to unclear dating.\(^5^4\) In other cases, an event with a specific date can absorb the more nebulous events around it. The same skepticism should play a part in plague studies as well.\(^5^5\)

The Ligurian Plague falls into the “third wave” of plague, which, according to today’s most thorough understanding, impacted Italy and Gaul from 565 to 571 and Constantinople from 573 to 574.\(^5^6\) However, given the limited textual evidence and still nascent paleogenomic data for Gaul and Italy, we cannot definitively describe the nature of these outbreaks. They may have shared the same branch on the plague genome’s phylogenetic tree, thus suggesting they all contributed to a single pandemic that made its way north and eastwards from Italy to Gaul and Constantinople over the course of five to eight years. Alternatively, the plagues described in the early medieval texts of Paul, Gregory of Tours, Marius of Avenches, and other texts could have


\(^5^4\) Baillie, “Suck-In and Smear,” 12.

\(^5^5\) Scholars like Stathakopoulos are aware of this issue; when describing the Ligurian Plague, he rightly included some room for error between 565 and 571. See Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence*, 323.

\(^5^6\) Stathakopoulos, “Crime and Punishment,” 102; Biraben and Le Goff, “The Plague in the Early Middle Ages,” 59. This paper primarily relies on Stathakopoulos’ detailed work delineating the many natural disasters and calamities of the sixth century.
been concurrent but isolated epidemics (arising independently from separate plague reservoirs or introductions). These are only some of the possibilities, each of which would have different implications for the veracity of their sharing a spot in the “third wave.”

Chapters II and III will argue that the actual outbreak of plague in Italy (circa 571/572, not 565), while certainly associated with the outbreaks in Gaul around the same time, was not necessarily the same epidemic as its Gallic counterpart. That question will remain open in the future, hopefully when late antique plague genomes are synthesized from Italian samples. In any case, we will be investigating the details of the first half of the so-called third wave, but with an awareness of these potential chronological issues as a methodological baseline.

I.3: Persons, Places, and the Wars in Italy, 535-568

In the written sources for the Ligurian Plague, four key figures consistently appear in the story of the Lombard conquest. On the Roman-Byzantine side, we have Emperor Justin II, his wife, Empress Sophia, and the patrician and general Narses. Of course, there are other individuals to consider—Pope John III (r. 561-574) or Narses’ successor Longinus (d. 580-590), for example—but it is the former three that appear most frequently, almost always connected to each other in late antique and medieval writers’ discussions of the late 560s. The non-Byzantine side of affairs around Italy had an equally rich cast of characters. King Cunimund (r. 561-567/8) was the last king of the Gepids and an important Lombard rival in the wars immediately prior

57 For a model of First Pandemic plague genomes, see Marcel Keller, et al., “Ancient Yersinia Pestis Genomes from across Western Europe Reveal Early Diversification during the First Pandemic (541–750),” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 116, no. 25 (2019), 12366. For further discussion of aDNA data, see Section IV.2.
58 See Sections IV.2 and IV.5.
59 The Gepids were a Germanic tribe dwelling around Pannonia, having been a part of the earlier Hunnic Empire and later being absorbed under Avar and Lombard control alike. On Byzantine-Gepid relations, see Alexander Sarantis, “War and Diplomacy in Pannonia and the Northwest Balkans during the Reign of Justinian: The Gepid Threat and
to—or possibly concurrent with—Alboin’s move into Italy. Rosamund (d. 572/573), Cunimund’s daughter and Alboin’s eventual wife, played a key role in Lombard politics, perhaps even leading the plot that led to her husband’s demise. Still, for the Lombards, Alboin appears frequently as the catalyst for the move into Italy, and is therefore the focus of our study here. The larger narratives of the written sources from the plague years are tied inextricably to Narses and Alboin, especially when considering the often character-driven style of writers like Paul. However, we should note that amid the seemingly epochal moments of the late 560s and early 570s, these names—despite appearing so often alongside the plague and war of the times—are merely one part of the story. As Paul’s apocalyptic description of the Ligurian Plague illustrated, it was not the powerful figures of Italy, but unnamed “shepherds,” “sons,” “parents,” and “children” who met their demise at the hands of the disease. With this in mind, we turn first to Narses and the situation in Italy before 568.

Narses had a long career across the Empire, taking part in the campaigns against the Ostrogoths during the Gothic Wars (535-554), advancing the larger efforts of the reconquest of former Western Roman territory under Justinian I (r. 527-565), and serving alongside the famed general Belisarius (d. 564). From around 540 to 554, Narses helped repel the reinvigorated Gothic resistance of Totila (d. 552). In the 550s and 560s, he repeatedly defended Italy in the face of successive invasions from Alemanni, Franks, Heruli, and other barbarian forces, often

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60 Fabbro suggests the Lombard-Gepid War and Lombard conquest may not have been successive events, but instead should be uncoupled from one another in the history of the era. Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 57-60.
61 This story appears in numerous forms. For example, compare Mar. Av., Chr. a. 572; HF IV.41; AHE a. 1521-1522; OGL 5; Paul, HL II.28-30; Theo. Sim., Hist. VI.10.7-9; Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 573; Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Codex Augiensis”) a. 574. Rosamund also became a frequent subject of artists, novelists, and playwrights.
62 See Sections II.1-II.4.
63 Paul, HL II.4. On this apparent rural plague, see Sections IV.3-4.
64 On Belisarius’ death, see Joh. Mal., Chronographia XVIII.147-149.
relying on non-Roman foederati and allies—including Lombards—to supplement his armies.\textsuperscript{65}

We should note here that leading up to and following the Lombard conquest, Italy and its dwindling Roman population suffered greatly from nearly constant states of war and famine (to say nothing of the First Pandemic’s appearance in the early 540s).\textsuperscript{66} For our purposes, it is Narses’ murky final years that stand out the most, but his final campaigns and brief retirement before Alboin’s rise formed the coda to a brutal period in Italian history that was followed by still more destruction.\textsuperscript{67} Indeed, the texts of writers like Gregory the Great (covered in the next chapter) derived their eschatological themes precisely from the omnipresent wars, famines, plagues, and floods that punished Italy in the sixth century.\textsuperscript{68}

According to much of the written record, Narses “invited” Alboin and the Lombards into Italy, after “angering” Justin II and/or being “threatened” by the Empress Sophia.\textsuperscript{69} The earliest version of the Narses-Lombard scandal appeared in the Liber Pontificalis and Isidore of Seville’s Chronicle, but the legend persisted and grew from the late sixth century onward.\textsuperscript{70} At some time between 565 to the early 570s, Narses allegedly penned this invitation himself, before dying in either Naples or Rome (possibly as late as 574).\textsuperscript{71} As the story goes, Alboin and his followers then streamed into Italy at Narses’ behest. In Paul’s telling, Justin and Sophia’s mistreatment of

\textsuperscript{66} On late antique Italian demography, see Section IV.3.
\textsuperscript{67} Stathakopoulos provides a nearly exhaustive list of the catastrophes that struck Italy in this time. See Stathakopoulos, Famine and Pestilence, 290-330.
\textsuperscript{68} John R.C. Martyn, ed., The Letters of Gregory the Great (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2004), 17-18.
\textsuperscript{69} Like the story of Alboin’s death, Narses’ betrayal appears in slightly different fashion in nearly every source covering the time. In other cases—such as Marius’ Chronicon, a key source for plague and the Lombard conquest—his scandal is mysteriously absent. For example, compare Isidore, Chr. Maj. 402; LP LXIII; Bede, Chr. Maj. a. 4529; HLCG 9; OGL 5; Paul, HL II.5; Theop., Chr. a. 6063; Const., De Admin. 27; Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Codex Augiensis”) a. 565-567; Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 566. Cf. Mar. Av., Chr. a. 568.
\textsuperscript{70} On the LP and Isidore, see Sections III.2.4-5.
\textsuperscript{71} Hermannus Contractor provided the earliest date for Narses’ invitation (565), and the Liber Pontificalis claimed Narses died around the same time as Pope John III (574). See Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Codex Augiensis”) a. 565 and LP LXIII.
Narses was a key moment in the downfall of the Romans, with the *HL’s* version of the story bolstering the themes of Byzantine hubris that precipitated Alboin’s rise.\(^\text{72}\) It is difficult to say how the last few years of Narses’ life played out, but his apparent loss of favor in the eyes of Justin and Sophia coincided precisely with the plague and Lombard victories of the early 570s.

On the other side of the Lombard-Roman conflict we have Alboin. The Lombards themselves were a mixed people, descended from ancestors in northern Germany and Scandinavia and following a combination of pagan traditions and Arian Christianity. As king of the Lombards, Alboin led his people into northern Italy from the region of Pannonia (north of the Balkans), after himself being involved with numerous military campaigns. In wars against the Gepids throughout the 560s, he suffered some setbacks, leading to a tenuous alliance with the Avars and continued negotiation with the Byzantines, who allegedly attempted to play these groups against one another.\(^\text{73}\) Alboin, like Narses, clearly had a role in Roman-barbarian affairs before he ever set his sights on claiming Italy. Indeed, this continuum in Roman-Lombard relations before and after the conquest should not be discounted, despite the fundamental shift a large-scale invasion in 568 might suggest.

Roman-Lombard conflict was but one side of Alboin and his people’s history. The Lombards’ destruction of the Gepids occurred as late as 571 and may not have been at the hands of Alboin, despite the many legends surrounding him, Cunimund, and Rosamund.\(^\text{74}\) In this sense, Alboin represents only a part of Lombard history after 568, even if the written record focused solely on his exploits in Italy. For a time, Pannonian and Italian Lombard groups indeed may have operated separately, as opposed to them as a monolithic people. Growing Lombard power

\(^{72}\) Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 13-14. See also Section II.2-3.


in Italy also coincided with continued conflicts against the Franks in Gaul, and internal conflicts plagued the Lombards after they took Italy. In light of a generally nondiscriminatory disease like plague, the 560s and 570s should thus be considered just as much in the context of Lombard history, not solely through the lens of a Roman-Byzantine history that can sideline the barbarian groups living on and inside the Empire’s porous borders.

Like Narses’, Alboin’s story is an unclear one. Nonetheless, nearly all the written sources attest to a major migration of Lombards into Italy in 568, 569, or 570. According to some, it was not just an army, but the “entire people” including “wives and children” (and other barbarian confederates) who made their way into Italy, possibly due to aggression from their former Avar allies. Other sources—notably, those that favored the Narses invitation story—treat the migration as a purely military affair, describing only an “army” or the “plundering people” of the Lombards. Once the Lombards arrived in Italy, intermittent conflict continued for decades. However, after a few years of battle, the Roman defenders had lost huge swaths of territory and important cities like Milan, Pavia, and Verona, with only Rome, Ravenna, and southern Italy remaining as Byzantine holdouts. Later wars came and went, but the Lombard Kingdom remained largely intact despite Byzantine efforts. It was only the rise of Charlemagne that saw the Lombards finally fall, with the Carolingians taking Italy in the late eighth century. Alboin’s kingship was ultimately cut short, as he died only one or two years after becoming “lord of Italy”

75 On Frankish-Lombard conflict, see Section III.2.3. Paul (among others) attested to the infighting between Lombard dukes after the deaths of Alboin and his successor Cleph. See Paul, HL II.32.
76 Mar. Av., Chr. a. 568; Paul, HL II.6-7. Cf. Greg. Tur., HF IV.41-42. According to Paul and Gregory, Alboin was also accompanied by a large contingent of Saxons. In Paul’s version of events, Alboin “bestowed” Pannonia upon the “Huns” (the Avars), whereas Marius and Gregory described him “burning” his homeland before departing (presumably to deny its resources to the Avars). Sigibert, writing in the eleventh century, opted to repeat Paul’s story of a peaceful transition in Pannonia. See Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 568. On Sigibert, see Section I.4.2. On Lombard-Avar theories, see Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 57-60.
77 For example, compare Isidore, Chr. Maj. 402, AHE a. 1520; Fred., Chr. 65; LP LXVIII; Bede, Chr. Maj. a. 4536.
78 Paul, HL II.25-27.
(circa 572/573, possibly around the same time as Narses’ death). 79 Like the end of Narses’ life, Alboin’s final appearances in the primary sources nearly all involve political strife. An assassination plot, either at the hands of his wife and a group of disgruntled followers or through the machinations of his Byzantine foes, abruptly cut short an otherwise triumphant story. 80

As many of the sources tell us, Alboin’s rise was not just a military invasion (or rebellion) against Rome, but a migration of the Lombard people. 81 As the rest of this paper will demonstrate, Paul’s pre-Lombard plague in fact began two to three years after Alboin and the Lombards first set foot in Italy. From this, we cannot consider the disease’s presence in Italy to be a uniquely Roman experience, despite Paul’s claim that the “evils” of the plague punished “the Romans only.” 82 This is all the more reason to avoid the title of Justinianic Pandemic when considering the plague in this timeframe. Furthermore, the stories of plague, conquest, and scandal involving Narses and Alboin evolved between 568 and Paul’s time. The continuing lack of clarity we see around these two figures’ activities in the late 560s and early 570s, the mythologizing stories of their deaths, and the general uncertainty about the seemingly watershed moment that was the Lombard conquest thus all contribute a peculiar aura to the history of the

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79 OGL 5. On Alboin’s death and its aftermath, see Section II.3.
80 For the many versions of Alboin’s death, see note 61 above. Despite the many stories involving Rosamund, it is possible that Alboin’s wife in 572 was the Frankish princess Chlothsind, not the disgruntled Gepid Rosamund. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 66.
81 Fabbro provides a thorough and fascinating theory of the Lombard conquest, positing that Alboin’s “invasion” was in fact a military rebellion that arose after Narses “invited”—or rather, recruited—the Lombards to come to Italy. Narses required additional forces from Rome’s neighbors to supplement the depleted Byzantine forces left after Justinian and Justin shifted their focus eastwards. Furthermore, recruiting Lombards would not have been unusual by the late 560s. Once Alboin and his men revolted (possibly due to arrears and other administrative issues; see Section IV.5), Narses provided the perfect scapegoat for Justin and Sophia, thus leading to the origin of his betrayal story. Similarly, Justinian removed Belisarius from command in the early 560s due to fears that he would attempt to seize power. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 1-82. See also Neil Christie, “Invitation or Invasion? The Longobard Occupation of Northern Italy, A.D. 568–569,” Romanobarbarica 11 (1991), 79-108. Other scholars have suggested the Lombards arrived after a call for aid from the Ostrogoths, or as a means for the Byzantines to fend off the Franks (although the Byzantines ended up pleading with the Franks to fight the Lombards). See John Moorhead, “Ostrogothic Italy and the Lombard Invasions,” in The New Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. 1, edited by Paul Fouracre, 140-161 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 152, 154.
82 Paul, HL II.4.
plague that also defined their final years. Without Narses, Alboin, and the legends that became integral to their biographies, the Ligurian Plague would not have become such an important symbolic centerpiece to the early chapters of the *HL*. Because of these two men’s equal significance in the plague’s history, however, the Roman experience of the disease should not be privileged when considering its historical impact.

I.4.1: Following the Thread: The British, German, and Italian Evolution of the Ligurian Plague

We should not attribute the misleading framing of the conquest-era plague to Paul alone. In the roughly 1,200 years since he produced the *HL*, Paul’s narrative has been steadily digested and reframed. Early medieval monks, Renaissance-era historians, and today’s plague scholars have all passed down altered interpretations of the Ligurian Plague, ultimately leading to today’s commonly held view that places the plague concretely in 565. It is worth exploring how Paul’s nebulously dated plague ended up attached to a date so confidently, especially considering the continued reliance on this date to make historical arguments about plague and the Lombard conquest. Fascinatingly, there is a straight line of footnotes from today back to Paul’s time that illustrates exactly how the Ligurian Plague evolved.

It is not uncommon to see 565 cited as the year for the Ligurian Plague today, with this date even reaching scholarship outside the field of plague studies. Scholars will cite this year as

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83 For continued discussion of the plague’s thematic and narrative role in Paul’s work, see Sections II.2-3.
84 We will revisit this notion in Chapter III; see Sections III.2.3.
if Paul himself supplied it, but a reading of the HL says otherwise. William Foulke, whose 1907
translation of the text remains the authoritative English account today, provided a footnote to the
Ligurian Plague chapter that dated the outbreak to “probably 566.”86 With this footnote, we will
begin our investigation of the Ligurian Plague’s historiography. Working backwards from
Foulke’s translation, we can trace this date to its misleading origin.

In his note, Foulke referenced the work of Thomas Hodgkin, a British banker and
amateur historian who published his eight-volume Italy and Her Invaders in the 1880s and
1890s. In his discussion of the Lombard conquest, Hodgkin placed the plague “probably about
the year 566,” but this too came with an attached footnote.87 In the note, Hodgkin explained how
Georg Waitz, the famed nineteenth-century German medieval historian and text editor, “affixe[d]
the date 570” to the plague, but that Julius Weise, another nineteenth-century German historian,
“more probably assigned its outbreak to 566.”88 Waitz’s edition of the HL in the Monumenta
Germaniae Historica (MGH) positioned the Ligurian Plague in either 569 or 570, based on his
reading of Marius of Avenches and the Excerptis Sangallensibus.89 Meanwhile, Weise’s history
of the Lombards, Italien und die Langobardenherrscher von 568 bis 628, itself included a
footnote comparing Waitz’s analysis to that in other scholarship. In place of Waitz’s year of 570,
Weise cited Otto Abel, whose mid nineteenth-century German translation of the HL inscribed the
year 565 in the margins next to the Ligurian Plague passage.90

87 Hodgkin, Italy and Her Invaders, 166-167.
88 Hodgkin, Italy and Her Invaders, 166 (endnote 29 in Volume VI, Chapter 4).
89 In the MGH, a footnote for HL II.4 suggests a date of 569 or 570. See MGH SS. rer. Lang., 74 (note 1). On
Marius’ Chronicon and the Excerptis, see Section III.2.2.
90 Weise claimed that Abel used the year 566, but both editions of his translation in fact dated the plague to 565.
Weise may have been relying on an earlier version, or simply made a mistake. The second edition of Abel’s text was
edited by Reinhard Jacobi and published around 30 years after Abel’s death but maintained the date of 565. See
Julius Weise, Italien und die Langobardenherrscher von 568 bis 628 (Halle: Niemeyer, 1887), 4 (note 5). Cf.
Heinrich Friedrich Otto Abel, Paulus Diakonus und die übrigen Geschichtsschreiber der Langobarden (Berlin: W.
Weise provided two additional justifications in his footnote. First, he utilized a direct chronological reading of Paul, arguing that because of the plague outbreak’s “position within Book II” it had to have come before the events of the following chapters, which we know occurred largely in the late 560s and early-to-mid-570s. Second, Weise wrote that the “other content” of the plague chapter referenced Justinian’s death, suggesting everything contained within chapter II.4 of the HL must have taken place in the same year: namely, 565. This marks the first of several times we will see a scholar use the death of Justinian to date the plague, based on a reading of the few words that come at the end of the HL’s plague chapter: “Meanwhile, the emperor Justinian departed from life and Justin the younger undertook the rule of the state of Constantinople.” As we will show in Chapter II, Weise’s arguments—his reliance on the literal ordering of the chapters, assumption of chronological adjacency, and generally less critical literary interpretation—are faulty. But the trail does not end here.

In the same footnote, Weise referenced the work of Mario Lupi, an eighteenth-century Italian canon from Bergamo. Here, we will depart the realm of German historical scholarship and begin examining the collection of early modern and Renaissance-era Italian interpretations of Paul. In his *Codex Diplomaticus Civitatis et Ecclesiae Bergomatis*, Lupi suggested that the plague’s “severe annihilation” may have “raged for perhaps two or three years.” Lupi had two explanations for this reasoning. Textually, he based this idea of an extended outbreak on Paul’s

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91 Weise, *Italien und die Langobardenherrscher*, 4 (note 5).


94 Mario Lupi, *Codex Diplomaticus Civitatis et Ecclesiae Bergomatis* (Bergomi: Ex typographia Vincentii Antoine, 1784-1799), 96: “Caeterum cum ad tantam internecionem haec pestis faevierit, fortasse duobus, aut tribus annis debacchata est; quod Paulus inuit.”
description of the crops going unharvested and the season changing before the plague ended. However, Lupi’s primary reason was more likely the fact that earlier scholarship had not agreed on a date. Lupi acknowledged the two dates (564 and 565) he found in the eleventh-century *Chronicon* of Hermannus Contractor, as well as another date (566) proposed by Lodovico Antonio Muratori, the Italian historian and antiquarian of the earlier eighteenth century. Rather than picking a date of his own, Lupi conceivably proposed that the outbreak could have spanned multiple years in Italy. Before moving on to discuss Hermannus as one of Lupi’s sources, we will first analyze Muratori and his utilization of other Italian scholarship.

Muratori provided two dates for the plague. In his *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* (published in the 1720s and 1730s), a footnote to Paul’s plague account fixes the outbreak in 565, again because Paul described the death of Justinian in the same chapter. However, what makes Muratori’s brief note most interesting is the fact that his is the first we have seen in which Gregory the Great’s *Dialogues* were included as a cross reference for Paul’s plague. Citing an excerpt in which Gregory described a “great mortality” during “the time of Narses,” Muratori wrote that Gregory’s testimony “also agree[d]” with the notion of a plague around the year of Justinian’s death. Notably, since this work of Muratori’s, no scholar has discussed the *Dialogues* in relation to Paul’s plague specifically. However, this connection to Gregory is vital for explaining the Ligurian Plague’s misleading dating, as we will see in Chapter II.

95 See Paul, *HL* II.4: “The crops, outliving the time of the harvest, awaited the reaper untouched; the vineyard with its fallen leaves and its sinning grapes remained undisturbed while winter came on.”
99 Gregory’s *Dialogues* are cited frequently in reference to the Plague of Rome (circa 590), which he wrote on extensively in his letters as well. He provides the only eyewitness account for the First Pandemic in sixth-century
In a later footnote, this time in reference to Paul’s claims about the Romans’ defeat due to plague and famine, Muratori also referenced Bernardo Sacco’s mid-sixteenth century history, *Patritii Papiensis de Italicarum Rerum Varietate et Elegantia*. Sacco stands out for his willingness to critique Paul and highlight the inherent problems in the *HL*. For example, he wrote that while Paul was generally “accurate in collecting” his information, he frequently “inserted the open errors” of earlier scholars when producing his work. Furthermore, Sacco made no mention of plague in relation to the Lombard conquest, with his only discussion of the disease being in reference to the reign of the Lombard king Agilulf (r. 590-616). While Sacco was less concerned with specific dates, his text shows us that even Renaissance-era studies of Paul adopted a more critical lens when reading the *HL*.

Another of Muratori’s works, the extensive *Annali d’Italia* (published around twenty years after the *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*), also included an analysis of the Ligurian Plague. In this text, Muratori situated the outbreak among the events of 566, although he clarified that “the specific year [of the plague] is not known.” As we know, this notion of an unknown year is at the core of the Lombard conquest-plague problem, and Muratori confirms for us that this problem is by no means a new one. Between his first suggestion of 565 and this later, more uncertain placement in 566, it is no surprise that Lupi’s later study opted for a two-to-three-year chronological window in which he positioned Paul’s plague.

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100 Muratori, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, 434 (note 158).
102 Sacco, *Patritii Papiensis De Italicarum*, 179. This would be the plague (and associated famine and floods) of 590. On these events, see Section II.2.
Muratori also acknowledged one of his sources to be the influential Cesare Baronio, the late sixteenth-century Italian cardinal and historian. Baronio’s text, the *Annales Ecclesiastici*, is a key source for the arguments later echoed by Muratori and Lupi. Baronio situated the Ligurian Plague in the year of Justinian’s death (565), writing in his entry for 565, “In the same year (namely, in which Emperor Justinian died) that violent plague, called *inguinaria*, invaded all Italy and spread through even the northern regions.” More interestingly, Baronio stated confidently that the outbreak described in the *HL* “was precisely the plague that Saint Gregory mentioned in his *Dialogues,*” citing *Dialogues* IV.26 directly.

Baronio also incorporated evidence from the Frankish historian Gregory of Tours’ sixth-century hagiographic compendium, *Vita Patrum (Life of the Fathers)*, to claim that this plague in 565 “could not be kept within the boundaries of Italy” and reached as far as Gaul and Germany. In the *Vita Patrum*, Gregory wrote of two saints—Gallus and Nicetius—who performed miracles to save their people (in Arles and Trier, respectively) from plague. Gallus’s plague most likely occurred as part of the first “wave” of the First Pandemic, when the disease appeared in Gaul in the mid-540s. Nonetheless, Baronio lumped this outbreak with Paul’s Ligurian Plague and Gregory the Great’s epidemic from “the time of Narses.” Indeed, the *Annales* mentioned no other outbreaks between 565 and 575, when we might expect to see

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105 Cesare Baronio, *Annales Ecclesiastici* (Book X) (Lucca: Leonardi Venturini, 1741; originally published 1596 as Book VII), 240: “Hoc eodem anno (quo nimirum Justinianus Imperator mortuus est) pestis illa vehemens, inguinaria dicta, universam invasit Italiam, pervasitque etiam regiones Boreales…”
108 On Gallus, see Greg. Tur., *HF* IV.5 and Greg. Tur., *VP* VI.6. On Nicetius, see Greg. Tur., *VP* XVII.4. Gregory briefly mentioned plague at one additional point in the *VP*, but the only hint to its timing is his framing of the outbreak as the one “of which we have spoken.” This could mean it was the plague of the 540s (in which Gallus was involved) or the later plague of the early 570s, as the *VP* postdates the *HF*. See Greg. Tur., *VP* IX.2.
another major outbreak from Gregory of Tours, the Plague of Clermont.\textsuperscript{109} It would seem that the citation of Gregory the Great’s \textit{Dialogues} in the \textit{Annales} is the first instance in which the pope’s writing was applied to corroborate Paul’s plague, but this was done in the already erroneous context of Baronio’s work.\textsuperscript{110} Baronio’s postulation of a pandemic across Italy, Gaul, and even Germany intriguingly echoed the account of Marius of Avenches’ \textit{Chronicon}, even though he did not cite Marius’ text in the \textit{Annales}.\textsuperscript{111} With this final entry in the Italian historiography of the Ligurian Plague, we are thus left with a blurry pre-Lombard outbreak that spanned a large portion of western and central Europe, evidently at some point between 564 and 566. As Chapter II will demonstrate, Baronio was right to include the \textit{Dialogues} in his analysis of Paul’s plague. However, Gregory’s writing in fact had vastly different implications for the Ligurian Plague compared to what these earlier scholars proposed.\textsuperscript{112}

\textbf{I.4.2: Following the Thread: Hermannus Contractor and the Plague of 565}

Already, we can see the historiographical debate attached to this specific outbreak, demonstrating the problem with modern scholarship’s noncritical acceptance of the date of 565. We return now to Mario Lupi’s brief reference to the work of Hermannus Contractor, the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{110} The editor’s notes to Baronio’s text in the eighteenth-century edition of the \textit{Annales} explain that a plague in 565 would incorrectly imply that Saint Gallus had died in 573, as his \textit{Vita} included detail suggesting he died eight years after the outbreak in Arles. See Baronio, \textit{Annales Ecclesiastici}, 241-242 (note to XXVI). In contrast to Baronio’s implicit suggestion of 573, Gallus died no later than 555, meaning this outbreak most likely occurred in the 540s, probably between 543 and 547. See McCormick, “Gregory of Tours,” 55, 67. The outbreak mentioned in the \textit{Vita} of Saint Nicetius is less clear, as Gregory included no chronological clues in the \textit{VP} and made no mention of any plague related to Nicetius in the \textit{HF}.
  \item \textsuperscript{111} See Mar. Av., \textit{Chr.} a. 571.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} See Sections II.3-5.
\end{itemize}
eleventh-century monk and music theorist from Reichenau. Hermannus’ work, a compendium of events from creation to 1054, underwent a revision by his friend and student Berthold of Reichenau. Both the original chronicle and the edition with Berthold’s amendments are quite likely the ultimate source for a Ligurian Plague in 565, as no extant source predating the eleventh century says the same. For the year 564, Hermannus noted the death of Justinian and an “immense pestilence and mortality” across Italy—and especially Liguria—in the same year. Berthold corrected Hermannus’ error on the year of Justinian’s death, however, changing the date to 565. Either way, both men relied upon Paul as their source here, as they reproduced the HL’s combination of the plague with Justinian’s death in one chapter. Hermannus notably incorporated detail from the sixth-century chronicler Marius of Avenches as well, including for events he placed in 565 (such as Narses’ defeat of Sindual, leader of the Heruli). Unlike the later historians of the Renaissance and early modern eras, Hermannus applied this non-narrative source to his work, quite diligently attempting to form a cohesive narrative between Paul and Marius while also incorporating several other sources.

113 On this chronicle and other key eleventh-century texts, see Ian Robinson, Eleventh-Century Germany, 58-98.
114 None of Hermannus’ contemporaries, and no earlier chroniclers, such as Berthold of Reichenau, Regino of Prüm, or the authors of the Annales regni Francorum mention a plague in 565, or indeed any major outbreak in the 560s or 570s.
115 Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Codex Augiensis”) a. 564: “Constantinopli Justinianus imperator anno imperii XXXVIII decessit…His temporibus immensa pestilentia et mortalitas totam Italiam et maxime Liguriam incredibiliter vastavit.”
116 Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Compendium ex Codice Bernoldi”) a. 565.
117 See Paul, HL II.4.
118 Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Codex Augiensis”) a. 564. As with the preceding entry, Hermannus seems to be one year off from his cited source. Marius’ text for 565 and 566 is somewhat misleading as well, with Justinian’s death seemingly taking place in 566. Cf. Mar. Av., Chr. a. 565-566. On Marius’ text, see Section III.2.2.
119 Curiously, for his entry on 565, Hermannus cited Marius’ Chronicon to describe Narses’ victory over the Heruli, placing this campaign after the plague. This contrasts with Paul, who wrote of it before describing the Ligurian Plague. See Mar. Av., Chr. a. 566 and Paul, HL II.3. Nonetheless, Hermannus cited both Paul and Marius for this same year (along with Bede), resulting in some implicit self-contradiction. On the Roman-Heruli conflict, see note 188 below. Other sources noted by Hermannus for the 560s and 570s primarily include Bede, Evagrius, and Gregory of Tours. For examples, see Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Codex Augiensis”) a. 561-564, 566, 572-573.
The next few years covered in Hermannus’ work include the oft-repeated beats of earlier texts. The text placed Narses’ invitation in 567, the Lombard invasion in 568, the siege of Pavia’s first year in 569 (with the Romans surrendering, according to Hermannus, in 571), and the death of Narses in 571.120 Paul is cited as the source for nearly every event here, with two notable exceptions. First, for 567 Hermannus described “many prodigies” in the sky, including “fiery blades.”121 His source for these is none other than Gregory the Great, in the very passage that, as we will argue in the next chapter, contained the textual inspiration for Paul’s Ligurian Plague.122 The narrative becomes even more interesting in 570. Referencing Marius once more, Hermannus wrote of a “great famine” and yet another plague that “invaded” Italy after a “period of plenty.”123 Here we can see a unique example of the confusion Paul’s plague has caused—and continues to cause—in the historiography. By relying on the more chronologically grounded account of Marius in tandem with the nebulously dated Ligurian Plague in the HL, Hermannus’ summary of the years surrounding the Lombard conquest thus gives us two discrete plague outbreaks in Italy between 565 and 571. Furthermore, Hermannus combined three separate disease-related entries in Marius’ Chronicon, simply placing them in the midpoint of their collected years.124 We are left with a scrambled epidemiological timeline, as Hermannus seemingly inserted and combined outbreaks at will in the process of synthesizing his multiple

120 Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Codex Augiensis”) a. 565-569.
121 Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Codex Augiensis”) a. 567: “Multa prodigia, et praecipua igneae acies in caelo visae, sanguisque coruscans Italiam terrent.” Paul wrote of similar omens, placing them after the plague in his text. Gregory of Tours, however, included these signs before the plague. Compare Paul, HL II.5 and Greg. Tur., HF IV.31. On Paul’s borrowing from Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great, see Section II.3.
122 Greg., Dial. III.38.
123 Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Compendium ex Codice Bernoldi”) a. 570: “Ingens etiam fames post ubertatem Italiam pestilentia attritam invasit.” Cf. Mar. Av., Chr. a. 569-571. The notion of a time of plenty comes directly from Paul; see Paul, HL II.26. Hermannus seems to have combined Paul’s reference—in the context of the siege of Pavia—to the famine that came during the time of the Lombard conquest with Marius’ general discussion of plague in the early 570s. On the siege of Pavia, see Section II.4.
124 Marius wrote generally of disease and famine in 569, bovine plague and a variola disease in 570, and plague again in 571. See Mar. Av., Chr. a. 569-571.
sources. Unfortunately, it is precisely this confused version of events that has informed much of today’s understanding of the HL vis-à-vis the Ligurian Plague. Without Hermannus’ work, a plague in 565 would not have achieved such a level of certainty in today’s scholarship.

And yet, Hermannus was not the only chronicler in the eleventh century. We can compare his work to the roughly contemporary universal chronicle produced by Sigibert, a monk in Gembloux (today in central Belgium). His chronicle also covered the highlights of the 560s and 570s, albeit with different years assigned to most events. Sigibert relayed the death of Justinian in 565, and also wrote that in this year “many signs were visible in the sun and moon.”

In the next year we see Narses’ strife with Justin and Sophia and his invitation to the Lombards. In 567, “fiery spears” were seen in the sky, evidently portending the Lombard invasion. Like Hermannus’ version of events, Sigibert placed the Lombard conquest in 568; however, he pushed Pavia’s surrender to 572. Finally, in 570, the plague appeared. In that year, Italy—having been “overrun by the Lombards”—was first “ground down without any opposition”. Then, the country was “taken by famine and pestilence,” evidently after the Lombards had already swept through the north.

Considering that Hermannus and Sigibert were contemporaries, there are striking variances in their chronicles. For example, Sigibert’s chronicle contains little information on the Roman-Heruli conflict, a useful marker as the final major event in Italy before the Lombards

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125 Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 565: “Multa signa in sole et luna apparuerunt.”
126 Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 566.
127 Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 567: “Hastae igneae in caelo visae sunt, portendentes irruptionem Langobardorum in Italianiam.” This comes from either Gregory of Tours or Gregory the Great, although in his edits for the MGH Bethmann cited the HF in the margins. Cf. Greg. Tur., HF IV.31, Greg., Dial. III.38, and HL II.5. See also note 181 below.
128 Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 566, 572.
129 Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 570: “Italia a Langobardis nullo obsistente pervasa atteritu...”
130 Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 570: “...insuper fame et pestilentia sumitur.” Bethmann attributed this line to Paul—Sigibert most likely was pulling from the HL’s chapter on the siege of Pavia and the Romans’ surrender due to famine and plague. Cf. Paul, HL II.26.
arrived. More importantly, we see no plague in 565. Without Marius’ influence, Sigibert had just the one outbreak (Paul’s) which he placed in 570, along with a famine in 576 (also sourced from Paul).\(^{131}\) Clearly, the main differentiator between the two texts’ sources is Hermannus’ incorporation of Marius’ *Chronicon*, along with his personal interpretation of Paul’s chronology. Sigibert interpreted Paul as describing a plague in 570, after Alboin’s arrival. Hermannus, perhaps more uncertain about his dates, simply opted to include two epidemics in his account. In the former’s text, the plague invaded, and then the Lombards came. For the latter, the Lombards invaded, and then the plague came. This dichotomy was crucial to Paul’s understanding of the Ligurian Plague and his inclusion of plague as catalyst, not comorbidity. Overall, the major discrepancy between these medieval chronicles only further demonstrates that the dating problem for Paul’s plague existed in the centuries much closer to the *HL*’s writing, let alone the 1,000 additional years of scholarship from Hermannus and Sigibert to today.

**I.5: Footnotes at Face Value: A 1,200-Year Legacy**

As we saw in Lupi’s account—and, by extension, the works of Weise, Hodgkin, Foulke, and many scholars today—Hermannus’ impact on our understanding of the Ligurian Plague cannot be overstated.\(^{132}\) Muratori and Baronio likewise had an influence; even if it is unclear whether they also read Hermannus before placing the plague in 565, their reasoning proved similar to his and was partially derived from a Weise-like assumption of chronological adjacency and less critical literary interpretation. Altogether, had Lupi privileged Sigibert’s chronicle over Hermannus’, we might only be reading about an Italian plague in 570 today. Instead, this

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\(^{131}\) Sig. Gem., *Chr.* a. 576.

\(^{132}\) For a list of today’s scholars who have included the date of 565, see note 22 above.
examination of the historiography has shown us that even the earliest sources that assimilated the *HL* did not agree. Moreover, the timing of other events in the late 560s and early 570s, such as Narses’ and Alboin’s campaigns and eventual deaths, is also quite unclear, let alone the date of Paul’s plague. Not even the specifics of the epochal Lombard conquest itself are set in stone, so we should hesitate to assume the same for the Ligurian Plague.

The historiographical context for the Ligurian Plague is just as murky as its historical context. We have now seen the outsize impact of just a few sentences in a non-contemporary chronicle: there is a direct through-line from Hermannus’ placement of plague in 565 to the arguments of today that suggest the epidemic paved the way for Alboin’s invasion by unilaterally decimating Italy’s Roman defenders. This search also has implications for the broader study of the First Pandemic. Reconstructing the debates behind the origination of dates like that of the Ligurian Plague can reveal just how tenuous the foundation for arguments of plague-related historical causality may be. In other words, mining the literary sources for plague should not include the contemporary accounts alone, but the centuries of studies that themselves have had an outsize historiographical influence. With this knowledge in hand, along with our understanding of the Ligurian Plague’s lexicon and the prosopography of the 560s, we can begin in earnest an analysis of the written sources for the outbreak. Sigibert was the closest to the truth when he put Paul’s plague in 570. Nonetheless, an in-depth analysis of the *HL*’s thematic style and rich literary context is necessary to arrive at the core of Paul’s misleadingly formulated Ligurian Plague.
CHAPTER II
Paul’s Literary Style and Inspirations:
The Birth of a Mythical Plague

II.1: (Re)Introducing the Historia Langobardorum

Paul the Deacon spun a grand, poetic narrative in his Historia Langobardorum (HL), tracing the Lombards from their mythical origins to his own era (the mid-eighth century). Any analysis of the Lombards will engage heavily with Paul, including the primary sources he relied upon and the political, historical, and religious themes that characterize his work. Paul himself was born in the 720s, spending time as a monk and historian in various locales in Italy (primarily Benevento, Friuli, and Monte Cassino) and later, Gaul. He lived and wrote under both Lombard and Carolingian rule, the latter after Charlemagne’s absorption of northern Italy. Besides the HL, Paul authored another major history—the Historia Romana—and a few minor works, including a biography (Vita) of Gregory the Great and a brief account of the bishops of Metz, the Liber de Episcopis Mettensibus. The Historia Romana was his first known work, coming some twenty years before the HL’s publication in the late 780s or early 790s, but the HL remains Paul’s seminal literary achievement. More importantly for this study, Paul provided the only other narrative account of plague in western Europe besides Gregory of Tours, dating our outbreak of
As has been shown, this vague chronology is at the core of the problem of positioning the epidemic and assessing its historical impact. Paul claimed this plague devastated “the Romans and the Romans alone” in Liguria, before the coming of the Lombard king Alboin and his followers. While its chronological details narrow down the range of possible dates for the Ligurian Plague, the HL leaves considerable room for conjecture.

Furthermore, Paul’s account, which modern scholars continue to utilize as evidence for population-level devastation and political turmoil in Italy, may not be an original one. Even early modern scholars connected Paul’s text to others, such as the Dialogues of Gregory the Great, to corroborate his description of the plague. But these source texts in fact had a much deeper influence on the HL than providing factual or evidentiary backing as per Muratori and Baronio. In sum, we must consider the scaffolding behind the HL’s construction, as the plague-conquest link cannot rely on Paul alone. The haziness of the HL’s plague account requires a thorough investigation of Paul’s biases, writing habits, and literary themes, along with a cross-examination of the text via the written works that Paul relied upon as semantic or historical sources.

At the time of the HL’s writing—most likely the late 780s into the 790s—Alboin’s invasion of Italy could already be considered distant memory, having happened some 220 years prior. Before Paul’s work, the Lombards had seen little sympathetic treatment in the historical record. Besides the Origo Gensis Langobardorum (late seventh century), a somewhat crude

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133 Paul, HL II.4; II.26.
134 See Section I.3.1.
135 The specific composition date of the HL is ultimately a mystery, although this range of years has generally been agreed upon. See Christopher Heath, The Narrative Worlds of Paul the Deacon: Between Empires and Identities in Lombard Italy (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 109 and Rosamond McKitterick, “Paul the Deacon and the Franks,” Early Medieval Europe 8, no. 3 (1999), 334. Paul’s own life is difficult to date in general. See Stefano Gasparri, Voci dai secoli oscuri: Un percorso nelle fonti dell’Alto Medioevo (Rome: Carocci editore. 2017), 19-22.
summary of Lombard history steeped in mythologizing language, the primary accounts of Lombard activity included the *Liber Pontificalis* and the *Registrum* (Letters) and *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great.\(^\text{136}\) Unfortunately for the Lombards, these Roman and Catholic sources had highly unfavorable views of Italy’s conquerors, describing a barbarous people with “cruel minds” who “work[ed] much havoc in Italy” and “spoiled all that country.”\(^\text{137}\) Given this canon of anti-Lombard literature, one of Paul’s original objectives may have been to present his people in an updated, more positive light.\(^\text{138}\)

Nonetheless, we cannot assume a blanket qualitative bias on Paul’s part. There are undeniable gaps in his history, and while there is a certain sense of pro-Lombard pride present throughout, Paul himself was writing in Friuli (his home in northeastern Italy) under Carolingian rule.\(^\text{139}\) Some scholars have indeed claimed that the *HL* was designed for Friuli’s ruling Franks and their Lombard supporters.\(^\text{140}\) Others have argued that Paul was actually biased towards the


\(^{137}\) Respectively: Greg., *Dial*. III.37; *LP* LXV; Greg., *Dial*. III.11. In a letter composed in 603, Gregory lamented the thirty-five years of “oppression” at the hands of the Lombards. See Greg., *Reg.* XIII.39. Such language recurs throughout the pope’s writing, both in the *Dialogues* and in his many letters. On views of the Lombards by their contemporaries in Italy, see Maciej Dawczyk, “The Image of the Lombards in ‘Liber Pontificalis’ from the Invasion of Italy to the Fall of their Kingdom (568/569-774),” *Przegląd Nauk Historycznych* 19, no. 1 (2020): 6-36.

\(^{138}\) McKitterick, “Paul the Deacon,” 333.

\(^{139}\) On these gaps, see Bullough, “Ethnic History,” 89-91 and Heath, *Narrative Worlds*, 110. On pro-Lombard bias, see Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History*, 343-347 and Heath 168-169. On the hypothesis that Paul instead wrote for an audience of Carolingian Franks (and not the Lombards of Benevento), see McKitterick, “Paul the Deacon,” 326.

\(^{140}\) Rosamond McKitterick has been the major advocate for this argument. See McKitterick, “Paul the Deacon,” and McKitterick, *History and Memory in the Carolingian World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
Lombards of Benevento or structured his work to illustrate the Lombard evolution from barbarian to a legitimized Christian people. Still others have posited that Paul attempted to write a history above the influence of any ethnic ties. In total, the meta-narratives and structure of Paul’s work remain a contested, ongoing topic, but throughout the *HL* aspects of all of these arguments can be seen.

Of vital importance in analyzing Paul’s writing is the fact that for both plague and general sixth- and seventh-century affairs, the *HL* is a secondary source. The current historical consensus has established a sizeable list of primary sources Paul drew upon. Almost certainly included among these are Bede’s *Reckoning of Time* (specifically the *Chronica Majora* therein), the *Registrum* and *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, Gregory of Tours’ *Historia Francorum* (*HF*), Fredegar’s * Chronicle*, the *Liber Pontificalis*, the *Origo Gentis Langobardorum*, Isidore of Seville’s *Chronica Majora*, and the lost *Historiola* of Secundus. Furthermore, Paul likely had access to the *Auctarii Havniensis Extrema* (the continuation of Prosper of Aquitaine’s *Chronicon*), Marius of Avenches’ *Chronicon*, and potentially one or two other chronicles, now also lost. Each of these texts—along with the many others covering the same time period that

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141 For example, Walter Goffart and Walter Pohl. See Goffart, *Narrators* and Pohl, “Historical Writing.”
142 Most recently, Christopher Heath; see Heath, *Narrative Worlds*.
143 For example, Heath has attempted to rehabilitate the previously thought to be haphazard structure of the *HL*. Bullough contested Mommsen’s view of Paul as a brilliant and prosaic historian but described him as an ethnographer and possible product of the Carolingian Renaissance. Garstad discusses Paul’s uneven treatment of Lombard rulers. These views can be compartmentalized and taken in concert while not strictly adopting their authors’ overall lenses for understanding Paul’s work. See Bullough, “Ethnic History”; Benjamin Garstad, “Authari in Paul the Deacon’s Historia Langobardorum, Secundus of Trento, and the Alexander Tradition in Early Lombard Italy,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 9, no. 1 (2016): 218-266; Heath, *Narrative Worlds*; Mommsen, *Die Quellen der Langobardengeschichte*.
144 Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 4. For a full list of texts, inscriptions, and other likely sources for the *HL*, see Heath, *Narrative Worlds*, 128-129. Fabbro argues that Paul only drew on Gregory the Great’s writing “very selectively.” See Fabbro, 117. This may be an underestimate, however. See Section II.3.
145 Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 5, Heath, *Narrative Worlds*, 128-129. For the possibility and partial reconstruction of these lost “consular” and “chronicle” sources, see Fabbro, 4-27 (see esp. 16-27). A “consular” source utilized by Paul would likely resemble the *Chronicon*(s) of Marcellinus Comes or Marius Avenches. The latter may have also utilized such a document when assembling his own work, per Fabbro. The term consular simply refers to the method of dating, in which each entry of a chronicle lists the current Roman consuls (usually alongside an indication of the calendar year).
did not find their way into the *HL*—contains a slightly different account of both the Lombard conquest and the plague outbreak that occurred at roughly the same time. In order to analyze each of these texts in light of Paul’s narrative, we must first turn to the *HL* and the account of the Ligurian Plague.

For the epidemic that supposedly pre-dated Alboin’s invasion in 568, it is worth quoting the *HL* in full:

> During this time [the time of Narses] a very great pestilence (*maxima pestilentia*) broke out, particularly in the province of Liguria. For suddenly there appeared certain marks among the dwellings, doors, utensils, and clothes, which, if anyone wished to wash away, became more and more apparent. After the lapse of a year indeed there began to appear in the groins of men and in other rather delicate places, a swelling of the glands, after the manner of a nut or a date, presently followed by an unbearable fever, so that upon the third day the man died. But if anyone should pass over the third day, he had a hope of living. Everywhere there was grief and everywhere tears. For as common report had it that those who fled would avoid the plague, the dwellings were left deserted by their inhabitants, and the dogs only kept house. The flocks remained alone in the pastures with no shepherd at hand. You might see villas or fortified places lately filled with crowds of men, and on the next day, all had departed, and everything was in utter silence. Sons fled, leaving the corpses of their parents unburied; parents forgetful of their duty abandoned their children in raging fever. If by chance long-standing affection constrained any one to bury his near relative, he remained himself unburied, and while he was performing the funeral rites he perished; while he offered obsequies to the dead, his own corpse remained without obsequies. You might see the world brought back to its ancient silence: no voice in the field; no whistling of shepherds; no lying in wait of wild beasts among the cattle; no harm to domestic fowls. The crops, outliving the time of the harvest, awaited the reaper untouched; the vineyard with its fallen leaves and its sinning grapes remained undisturbed while winter came on; a trumpet as of warriors resounded through the hours of the night and day; something like the murmur of an army was heard by many; there were no footsteps of passersby, no murderer was seen, yet the corpses of the dead were more than the eyes could discern; pastoral places had been turned into a sepulcher for men, and human habitations had become places of refuge for wild beasts. And these evils happened to the Romans only and within Italy alone, up to the boundaries of the nations of the Alamanni and the Bavarians. Meanwhile, the emperor Justinian departed from life and Justin the younger undertook the rule of the state at Constantinople.\(^\text{146}\)

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\(^\text{146}\) Paul, *HL* II.4. Scholars have noted that Paul’s account of this outbreak is—“from a literary view”—one of the most elaborate passages in his entire work. See Pedro P. Herrera Roldán (trans.), *Historia de los Longobardos* (Cadiz: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Cadiz, 2006), 95 (note 8).
Paul references this outbreak once more, in the context of the fall of Ticinum (Pavia):

The city of Ticinum at this time held out bravely, withstanding a siege more than three years, while the army of the Langobards remained close at hand on the western side. Meanwhile Alboin, after driving out the soldiers, took possession of everything as far as Tuscany except Rome and Ravenna and some other fortified places which were situated on the shore of the sea. The Romans had then no courage to resist because the pestilence (*pestilentia*) which occurred at the time of Narses had destroyed very many in Liguria and Venetia, and after the year of plenty of which we spoke, a great famine attacked and devastated all Italy. It is certain that Alboin then brought with him to Italy many men from various peoples which either other kings or he himself had taken. Whence, even until today, we call the villages in which they dwell Gepidan, Bulgarian, Sarmatian, Pannonian, Suabian, Norican, or by other names of this kind.\(^{147}\)

We will revisit these chapters repeatedly, via several lenses. This chapter will primarily consider *HL* II.4 and II.26 through a thematic and source-based framework. We will see that Paul had a consistent habit of maintaining Lombard relevancy, especially regarding natural disasters.

Considering the general pro-Roman slant of Lombard history that had, until the time of the *HL*, painted Alboin and his people in an extremely negative light, Paul fundamentally changed the historical narrative via his editorializations. Next, we will see that the passage on the Ligurian epidemic was not an original account of a plague outbreak. Instead, it found its basis in the apocalyptic language that contemporary sixth-century writers (some of Paul’s key sources) utilized to describe either the Lombard conquest itself or plague outside of Italy. Finally, our examination of the siege of Pavia (quoted above from *HL* II.26) will further highlight Paul’s reframing of the Lombard invasion, showing how he utilized plague as a literary device that justified and rehabilitated Alboin’s rise. Overall, Paul completely changed the chronological placement, literary narrative, and political effects of the Lombard-era plague. In effect, he invented a new outbreak through his application and reframing of old writing.

\(^{147}\) Paul, *HL* II.26. Note the varied makeup of Alboin’s force that Paul discusses. On the ethnic heterogeneity of the Lombard migration, see Section IV.2. See also the discussion of the Lombards’ Saxon allies in Section III.2.3.
II.2: The Pavian Injection: Liguria and the Importance of Lombard Relevancy

Along with the many themes and biases discussed in the ongoing debate over the *HL*, Paul exhibited a particular trait that is highly relevant for his descriptions of the plague. As his work’s title announced, Paul sought to write a history of his people, not Italy as a whole. For the Lombards, then, few places were of equal significance to Pavia, the center of Lombard power and seat of their kings until the advent of Charlemagne in the late eighth century.148 Throughout the *HL*, Pavia takes a central role in historical events—including, notably, catastrophic natural disasters—despite other sources making little to no mention of the city in the same contexts. Liguria, a Roman province and key region of Lombard territory covering a swath northwestern Italy (much larger than the coastal strip that is Liguria today), similarly sees few mentions outside of Paul’s work. This injection of a heightened focus on Pavia and the lands of the Lombards into the historical narrative has been discussed in relation to the floods of 589 and the post-flood Roman plague of 590 (in this case, it has been described as a “sympathetic calamity”149). However, we can see that this habit of Paul’s applied to his account of the pre-Lombard plague as well, with the epidemic in fact marking the first instance of a sympathetic calamity in the *HL*. Following the Ligurian Plague, several key instances of such sympathetic calamities or, more broadly, the injection of Pavia into Italian affairs then follow in Paul’s text. Namely, we will consider the *HL*’s treatment of the flood and plague of Rome in 589/590 (III.23-24), Paul’s discussion of Frankish-Lombard conflict and the death of “Peter the choir director” in

148 Fabbro describes a “special relationship” between both the Lombard royalty and Pavia and between the city and Paul himself. For example, Paul spent time serving in the Pavian court under King Ratchis (r. 744-749). See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 62-63.
the early seventh century (IV.31), and the Roman pestilence of 680 (VI.5) before reassessing the Ligurian Plague.

The first example, with floods and plague in Italy circa 589, has substantial corroboration in sources other than the HL but still demonstrates an example of Paul’s ability to editorialize an event and shift its historical focus. In the Liber Pontificalis (written during the sixth and seventh centuries) and the works of Gregory of Tours (late sixth century) and Gregory the Great (late sixth century), the flooding of the Tiber in 589 was so great that it “overflowed many countries” and destroyed “ancient temples…and the storehouses of the church,” causing “such fearful carnage that no one remembered anything similar ever in the world.” Paul likewise captured the seemingly apocalyptic nature of the event, describing a flood “such as is believed not to have existed since the time of Noah.” Indeed, HL III.23 copies verbatim from III.19 of Gregory the Great’s Dialogues, and HL III.24 does the same with HF X.1.152

However, while Gregory the Great primarily described the effects of this catastrophe in Verona and Rome and Gregory of Tours focused solely on Rome, Paul began his account of the flood as follows: “there was a deluge of water in the territories of Venetia and Liguria, and in other regions of Italy.” The former location seems geographically reasonable, given Gregory the Great’s testimony of the Adige River overflowing like the Tiber, but with the unsubstantiated

150 Greg., Dial. III.19; Greg. Tur., HF X.1; LP LXV, respectively.
151 Paul, HL III.23.
152 Paul explicitly cited Gregory the Great in III.23. The majority of III.24 appears to be lifted directly from Gregory of Tours, especially with Paul’s description of serpents and dragons descending into the sea and the “pestilence called inguinal” that followed the flood. Cf. Greg. Tur., HF X.1. Paul was clearly an ardent admirer of Gregory; he even dedicated a chapter of the HL to the publication of the Dialogues: “In these days the most wise and holy Pope Gregory, of the city of Rome, after he had written many other things for the service of the holy church, also composed four books of the Life of the Saints. This writing he called a dialogue, that is, the conversation of two persons, because he had produced it talking with his deacon Peter.” See Paul, HL IV.5. Earlier, Paul also alludes to the “delightful language in [Gregory’s] Dialogues.” See Paul, HL I.26.
153 Paul, HL III.23. Cf. Greg. Tur., HF X.1: “In the fifteenth year of King Childebert our deacon returned from Rome with relics of the saints and related that in the ninth month of the previous year the river Tiber flooded...”
claim of flooding in Liguria we can see what is effectively another instance of Paul’s general Lombard injection into broader Italian affairs.\textsuperscript{154} The closest form of corroboration for Paul would be Marius of Avenches’ account of various rivers overflowing “in Italy” circa 580.\textsuperscript{155} Had Paul relied upon Marius’ \textit{Chronicon} as his source here, it would have required significant blurring of the timeline, and Marius’ account lacks reference to any specific region in Italy. However, this also would not have been the first time Paul morphed “Italy” into “Liguria and Venetia” for narrative purposes.\textsuperscript{156} Overall, all four sources (both Gregorys, the \textit{Liber Pontificalis}, and Paul) remained relatively consistent in their account of the plague that followed the flood, including the notable example of a named plague victim, Pope Pelagius II (r. 579-590).\textsuperscript{157}

Depending on the author of a given flood account, the disasters of 589-590 carried different literary significance. For Gregory of Tours, the flood and plague cleared the way for

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\textsuperscript{154} Squatriti suggests that Paul may have been drawing on Secundus for the opening lines of \textit{HL} III.23, as did Jacobi. See Squatriti, “Floods,” 805 and Jacobi, \textit{Die Quellen der Langobardengeschichte}, 94. Per Squatriti, in the same way that the \textit{HL} broadened the general scope and scale of Lombard history (when compared to prior accounts of Paul’s people), the widening of the flood created a regional catastrophe equally relevant to both the Lombards and the Romans. On the geological and paleoclimatological evidence for late antique flooding of the Adige and the Tiber, see Squatriti, “Floods,” 809-818. Generally, the data does not align with the notion of widespread devastation: the Adige River maintained a largely “quiet period” between 500-750, although some sediment deposits show more “lively” behavior. Meanwhile, the Tiber delta and its banks display signs of stability throughout the first millennium CE.

\textsuperscript{155} Mar. Av., \textit{Chr.} a. 580: “In this year, in the month of October, the Rhône so overflowed its banks in the territory of Valais that it impeded the gathering of the harvest. And in Italy the rivers so overflowed that the farmers suffered losses.”

\textsuperscript{156} Cf. Mar. Av., \textit{Chr.} a. 568 and \textit{HL} II.4, II.26. Paul’s temporal and geographic shifts will come up repeatedly in the context of plague below. Marius provided descriptions of major flooding from the overflowing of the Rhône as well as various rivers in Italy circa 563 and 580. Gregory of Tours likewise repeatedly described serious natural disasters in this same timeframe, including “great floods” during “the fifth year of the reign of King Childebert [II]” (r. 575-596) and the collapse of Mount Tauredunum and ensuing floods in 563. Marius described the same landslide and flooding, also noting its effects in Geneva; see Mar. Av., \textit{Chr.} a. 563. Gregory’s dating overall lines up evenly with Marius’, although the former tended to lump natural disasters together. In general, the consistency between these two sources is noteworthy when analyzing their accounts of plague in the early 570s alongside Paul’s (see Section II.3 below). On Gregory of Tours and flooding, see Ellen F. Arnold, “Rivers of Risk and Redemption in Gregory of Tours’ Writings,” \textit{Speculum} 92, no. 1 (2017): 117-143 and McCormick, “Gregory of Tours on Sixth-Century Plague and Other Epidemics,” 38-96.

\textsuperscript{157} Generally, named victims are rare in the written record, but they suggest plague’s indiscriminate effect.
Gregory the Great’s ascension to the papacy, illustrating the good that could come of calamity.158

Gregory the Great utilized the flood to illustrate a perseverance of Christian (Catholic) faith in the face of the general hardships of the late sixth century.159 For Paul, it has been suggested that, by describing the flood in Lombard territory prior to its effects in Rome, his structural designs served to legitimize the Lombards in the face of the popular narrative of broad calamity facing Christian (especially Catholic) peoples at that time.160 Paul thus integrated the Lombards into the region and its disasters, allaying some of the blame that was commonly laid on them for causing Italy’s sixth-century suffering. This idea, which we can summarize as a hypothesis of rehabilitation, recurs frequently in Paul’s work when we look beyond the flood alone.

Alternatively, Paul’s inclusions of the Romans’ machinations in attempting to combat the Lombards immediately prior the flood scenes in the HL could suggest the natural disaster’s function as yet another punitive, anti-Roman calamity.161

Most fascinatingly, Paul’s own Vita Sancti Gregorii Magni (the Life of Gregory the Great) described these events via the same method as the HL; that is, by copying both Gregorys. However, the Vita has one glaring omission. In Rome, the Tiber flooded and “its waters flowed through the city walls and lay over a great part of the region,” but Paul does not attest to the flood having an effect anywhere else, including Liguria.162 Paul’s flipped emphasis here is

158 Squatriti, “Floods,” 820. Marius provided descriptions of major flooding from the overflowing of the Rhône as well as various rivers in Italy circa 580. It could be that Paul lumped these Italian floods of 580 into Gregory the Great’s broader story. See Mar. Av., Chr. a. 580.

159 Squatriti, “Floods,” 823. While the flooding is devastating in Gregory’s account, he makes specific mention of a church in Verona that stood fast in the face of rising waters.

160 Squatriti, “Floods,” 821. Squatriti suggests that Gregory’s negative treatment of the Lombards further incentivized Paul’s editorialization. Furthermore, the damage to the northern Italian economy attested to by Paul would further highlight a theme of Roman treachery in Book III of the HL. The flood also served as the HL’s narrative introduction to Gregory’s career in Rome; see Heath, Narrative Worlds, 83-84.


162 Paul, Vita 10.
perhaps reasonable given the purpose and focus of each respective work. Nonetheless, with the
HL’s account constituting another standalone injection of Lombard-relevant information into an
already established Italian historical narrative, this uncorroborated editorialization further
highlights the thematic tendencies of Paul vis-à-vis natural disasters and conflict. In essence, in
HL III.23-24 Paul rewrote a historical account almost exactly as he found it in his sources, but
with his special Ligurian twist. Even if we accept the notion of flooding in Liguria at face value,
Paul prioritized and legitimized Lombard lands over their Roman counterpart by shifting the
effects of a natural disaster. In the HL, these calamities thus included—and indeed started with—
hitherto unaccounted for areas of northern Italy.

Two additional cases of Pavian injection in the HL offer further examples of Paul’s habit
of placing the Lombards at the forefront of history. For one, we have the tragic death of “Peter
the choir director,” who was evidently struck by lightning in Pavia’s Basilica of St. Peter
sometime in the early 600s.\footnote{Paul, HL IV.31. This dating is largely based on the dating of chapters in the vicinity of IV.31. For example, HL IV.29 opens with the line: “Then also in the second year of the reign of Phocas…” (roughly 604).} The only other information in this chapter involved “great
slaughter” in a Frankish-Saxon conflict, from which the Lombards were noticeably absent.\footnote{Paul, HL IV.31.} Indeed, Paul may have added this reference to Pavia specifically because of the non-Lombard
nature of the events in the latter half of HL Book IV to maintain thematic, Lombard-relevant
continuity in his narrative.\footnote{Goffart, Narrators, 403. HL Book IV generally lacks coverage for the Lombard capital or the kings that would have ruled from Pavia, and Peter’s death was likely symbolic. Per Goffart, Paul had little information on the deeds of any Lombard kings in the years between 604 and 662, the date of King Grimoald’s accession.} Other sources simply did not concern themselves with Pavia in this
time, but Paul could not let the capital persist in historical silence.

Next, the Roman plague of 680 followed a similar pattern to the flood and pestilence that
occurred in the same locale a century earlier. Again, Paul copied from a source directly. In this
case, his account described a great pestilence in Rome, specifically dating it to July, August, and September of 680 per the Liber Pontificalis. However, in another divergence from his sources, Paul added the following: “And in like manner too this pestilence also depopulated Ticinum (Pavia) so that all citizens fled to the mountain ranges and to other places, and grass and bushes grew in the marketplace and throughout the streets of the city.” This brief interjection of Pavia’s experience is found in no other source, such as in Agnellus’ account covering the same period from Ravenna. Even Hermannus, Paul’s faithful acolyte when it comes to medieval plague maximalism, did not mention this outbreak anywhere outside of Rome.

From this final example, we can see Paul’s well-established habit of maintaining relevancy for Pavia, the seat of the Lombards. The evident appearance of the plague of 680 in Ticinum cannot even be attributed to Secundus, who is typically cited as the fill-in-the-blank informant for Paul when no other primary source is readily apparent. While we could give Paul the benefit of the doubt regarding a simultaneous plague outbreak in northern Italy circa

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166 Paul, HL VI.5. Cf. LP LXXXI. The dating is identical in the two passages, although the LP described a “great mortality” instead of a “severe pestilence.” Paul also included a mention of a solar eclipse in this plague description, which we can attribute to Bede, Chr. Maj., (a. 4622). See Reinhard Friedrich Jacobi, Die Quellen der Langobardengeschichte des Paulus Diaconus, ein Beitrag zur Geschichte deutscher Historiographie (Halle: Niemeyer, 1877), 98.


168 Agnellus’ description of Theodore’s pontificate in Ravenna (677-691) was a scathing review of a bishop “terrible in form, horrible in appearance, and full of all deceit.” Indeed, he blamed the bishop for a major famine during his rule, even claiming he “devoured the grain of the whole region.” Considering his overall disgust with Theodore, one might think Agnellus would not have hesitated to attribute a region-wide plague to him as well. See Agn., LPR 117-118. Agnellus did copy Paul’s description of a plague in Ravenna during Marinian’s time (r. 595-606), however: see Agn., LPR 101 and Paul, HL IV.14. A minimalist takeaway from these discrepancies could be the suggestion that any given plague outbreak would have been localized, rather than sweeping across all of Italy (although Paul seems to be suggesting the latter in HL VI.5).

169 Herman. Contract., Chr. (“Codex Augiensis”) a. 680. On Hermannus, see Section I.4.2.

170 For example, Jacobi frequently cited Secundus as Paul’s source when no others were apparent. See Jacobi, Die Quellen der Langobardengeschichte, 89-97. Secundus most likely died in 612, well before the outbreak of 680. See Gasparri, Voci dai secoli oscuri, 26-27. Most recently, Harper—without explication—claimed Secundus as the source for the Ligurian Plague having happened in 565, a date that we now know comes from Hermannus Contractor. See Kyle Harper, Plagues upon the Earth: Disease and the Course of Human History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 216 and note 34 (p. 546). On Secundus, see Section III.2.1.
680, it appears conspicuously similar to the *HL*’s other instances of Pavian injection. On this topic, we must ask: does an appearance of “Liguria and Venetia,” Ticinum (Pavia), or any uncorroborated information in general necessitate that Paul’s source was Secundus? Likely no. We cannot assume that plague-related claims in the *HL* can be traced to a now-lost source, especially considering these uncorroborated accounts of the disease continued well after Secundus could have written of them. Instead, we can view Paul as building relevancy for both Pavia and the Lombards in Italy as a whole. By Paul’s time, Rome and Pavia had reversed courses. The former imperial capital had suffered significant losses in population from the third century onwards, now obtaining the backwater status once held by Pavia. Thus, through various shifts in narrative ordering or repeated injections of unconfirmed, Lombard-specific detail, Paul shaped Pavia as true a peer of Rome. By tying events both divine and catastrophic in the heart of the Roman Empire to the Lombards’ new capital city, Paul gave these Italian newcomers a level of legitimacy and a new foundational mythos.

**II.3: Paul and The Gregorys: Plague Apocalypse or Lombard Apocalypse?**

With these themes in mind—namely, the “Pavian injection,” Paul’s editorialization of his sources, and the rehabilitation hypothesis—we can return to the *HL*’s account of the Ligurian Plague. There are two questions to consider. First, does Paul’s method of establishing Lombard legitimacy apply to the plague that apparently came before Alboin’s invasion and unilaterally debilitated the defenders of Italy? And second, how does Paul’s account hold up in comparison to the sources he most heavily drew upon for structural and thematic material?
To begin, the second book of the *HL* can be considered a standalone tragedy in form, or even a series of tragedies.\footnote{HL Book II’s tragedy is a well-established thematic framing. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 12; Goffart, *Narrators*, 388-394; Heath, *Narrative Worlds*, 166-171.} Paul began Book II with the downfall of Narses and devastation of Italy at the hands of the plague and concluded with the murders of Alboin and Cleph (Alboin’s successor). After the loss of these two noble kings, even more desolation came to Italy during the fragmented reign of the Lombard dukes that took Cleph’s place. This portion of the *HL* ultimately painted a bleak picture despite the successful advent of the Lombards in Italy, and the Ligurian Plague itself came as a crucial divider between Narses’ and Alboin’s narrative arcs. Furthermore, this transition extended beyond literary structure alone; the outbreak marked a fundamental shift in the power balance of what would soon be Lombard territory. After the “very great pestilence…particularly in the province of Liguria,” it was Alboin, not Narses, Justinian, Justin II, or any other Roman who took the stage as the true ruler of (northern) Italy.\footnote{Paul, *HL II*.4.} According to Paul, the plague decimated the Roman inhabitants of Italy immediately prior to Alboin’s arrival. Paul’s message is almost too obvious: the pestilence’s disastrous effects “happened to the Romans only and within Italy alone, up to the boundaries of the nations of the Alamanni and the Bavarians.”\footnote{Paul, *HL II*.4.} In spectacularly punitive fashion, the epidemic targeted the Romans who, by this point, had been coexisting with other peoples in Italy for centuries.\footnote{Stefania Vai, et al., “A Genetic Perspective on Langobard-Era Migrations,” *European Journal of Human Genetics* 27, no. 4 (2019), 654. For a discussion of the porous Roman-barbarian borders and migratory continuum, see Sections IV.2 and IV.5.} At the same time as the plague in Paul’s narrative, Justinian “departed from life” and Justin II took his place as emperor. This same Justin, we must note, ended up embroiled in the unjust (as Paul viewed it) scandal against the Byzantine patrician and general Narses. Narses, “a very pious man, a Catholic in religion, generous to the poor, very zealous in restoring churches” without
legitimate reason “incurred the great envy of the Romans although he had labored much for them against their enemies” and retired to Campania, after which he sent messages urging the Lombards to invade Italy (at least in Paul’s account).\textsuperscript{175} In two back-to-back blows to the Romans’ standing in Italy, the foes of the Lombards ignored manifest signs of God’s anger (the plague) and further gave in to jealousy via the mistreatment of Narses. Per Paul, this combination of factors led directly to Narses’ invitation to the Lombards and Alboin’s triumphant arrival.\textsuperscript{176} Thus, the plague not only heralded the political and military downfall of the Romans, but marked a transition into a final state of Roman depravity before Alboin’s ascension. Only a few chapters after Paul’s initial account of the plague, we see the conclusion of the Romans’ plague and impiety-induced downfall:

Alboin then came into Liguria at the beginning of the third indiction on the third day before the nones of September and entered Mediolanum during the times of the archbishop Honoratus. Then he took all the cities of Liguria except those which were situated upon the shores of the sea.\textsuperscript{177}

The notion of a symbolic or punitive plague was not new in Paul’s time, even in the relatively scant written record of the late antique west.\textsuperscript{178} Gregory of Tours, whose \textit{Historia Francorum} (HF) was both a material and thematic source for the \textit{HL}, included such themes in the late sixth century. Additionally, Gregory the Great’s \textit{Dialogues} taught spiritual lessons in the context of the turbulent times of his papacy. Plague, floods, and the Lombard subjugation of Italy

\textsuperscript{175} Paul, \textit{HL} II.3, II.5. Paul, Bede, Fredegar, Isidore, the \textit{AHE}, and the \textit{LP} all discuss the supposed threats from Emperor Justin II and Empress Sophia. See Bede, \textit{Chr. Maj.} a. 4529; Fred., \textit{Chr.} 65; Isidore, \textit{Chr. Maj.} a. 402; \textit{AHE} 1520; \textit{LP} LXIII. On Narses’ feud with Sophia and Justin II, his invitation to Alboin, the general conquest versus rebellion view of the Lombard invasion, and Narses’ later career and death, see Section I.3.


\textsuperscript{177} Paul, \textit{HL} II.25. Between the description of the plague and the beginnings of the Lombards’ conquest, Paul embarked on a tangent in which he described the geography and various provinces of Italy. See Paul, \textit{HL} II.14 – 25.

\textsuperscript{178} Late antique narrators of plague frequently included clear messages of divine tribulation and punishment appearing via the plague in their accounts. Such themes date back to Thucydides’ account of the Athenian Plague in his \textit{History of the Peloponnesian War}. See Thuc., II.47-54. See also Agath., \textit{Hist.} II.3.3-8, II.4 (Note, however, that in his account of the late 550s epidemic in Constantinople, Agathias did not want to suggest a definitive theory of divine retribution for the plague), and Joh. Mal., \textit{Chronographia} 92.
featured prominently in the pope’s letters and Dialogues alike. Overall, both the HF and the Dialogues are filled with ominous portents and violent imagery. Each text established an archetype for the “apocalyptic treatise.”  

The HL is no exception to this model. Indeed, Paul placed the Ligurian Plague account at a location in his text almost identical to Gregory of Tours’ positioning of the Clermont plague—the major outbreak in Gaul in the early 570s—in the HF. Both authors illustrated ominous portents and deadly natural disasters followed by an account of plague, before turning to key political developments (such as the death of Justinian).

For Gregory of Tours, plague carried meaning as a symbol of divine judgment and changing times. In the HF, numerous omens, starting with the landslide at Tauredunum (near modern Lake Geneva) in 563 and the appearance of a comet in 565, predated the plague of 571 in Gaul. After detailing these calamities, Gregory began his account of the disease with a temporal clarifier, introducing the epidemic when it “finally began to rage” after a long period of portents. In this sense, the build-up to the plague was an eight-year affair beginning with the landslide, and Gregory made no mention of any epidemics between the events at Tauredunum

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179 Stoclet, “Consilia humana, ops divina, superstitio,” 137. Stoclet accurately describes the HF as “a strong warning issued to the flock in view of the impending doom.”


181 Greg. Tur., HF IV.31: “Before the great plague which ravaged Auvergne prodigies terrified the people of that region.” On the landslide at Tauredunum and flood of Lake Geneva, see note 156 above. The comet of 565 appears in modern astronomical records, see Yeomans, Donald K. Yeomans, “Great Comets in History,” (Online: NASA, 2007), https://ssd.jpl.nasa.gov/sb/great_comets.html. These prodigies also included a solar eclipse and the appearance of birds which put out lamps in a church in Clermont. See McCormick 63-64. The dating for Gregory’s plague comes from Marius of Avenches’ account of “an unspeakable disease of the groin called the pox” in 570/571. See Mar. Av., Chr. a. 571. Marius and Gregory are generally reliable when read in tandem (see again note 24). For an analysis of Marius’ information on epidemics, see Section III.2.2. For a full timeline of celestial events in early history, see Derek Justin Schove, Chronology of Eclipses and Comets, AD 1-1000, (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1984). The fiery sword, spear, or lance is a common occurrence in chronicles covering these years; along with the accounts of both Gregorys and Paul, the eastern-focused Zuqnin Chronicle likewise noted a “fiery lance” that disappeared after the death of Justinian. See Excerpt. Sangall. 706, Greg. Tur., HF IV.31, Greg., Dial. III.38, Mar. Av., Chr. a. 566, Paul, Hl. II.5, and The Chronicle of Zuqnin, translated by Amir Harrak (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1999), 136, etc.

182 Greg. Tur., HF IV.31
and the actual onset of the disease.\textsuperscript{183} In the \textit{HL}, we find pre-plague portents as well, in the form of “certain marks [appearing] among the dwellings, doors, utensils, and clothes, which, if any one wished to wash away, became more and more apparent.”\textsuperscript{184} These omens, not unlike stigmata, have obvious theological implications. Paul also noted that around the same time “terrible signs were continually seen at night; that is, fiery swords [comets] appeared in heaven gleaming with that blood which was afterwards shed.”\textsuperscript{185}

In the \textit{HF}, the plague has an exceedingly violent effect, akin to total war; the same can be said for the \textit{HL}, in which, during the outbreak, “a trumpet as of warriors resounded through the hours of the night and day; something like the murmur of an army was heard by many.”\textsuperscript{186} We see shared images of people fleeing, death coming after only three days, an uncountable number of bodies, and, as described above, numerous omens surrounding the disease’s occurrence.

Gregory of Tours’ account of the plague came several chapters before the death of Justinian, in

\textsuperscript{183} McCormick, “Gregory of Tours,” 64. McCormick writes that “the long delay between portent and event discloses how flexibly expansive Gregory’s “before” (\textit{ante}) and “after” (\textit{post}) could be.” Goffart makes a similar point about Paul: “Under Paul’s pen, the phrase “about this time” [i.e., \textit{huius temporibus}—“these times”—in \textit{HL} II.4] can refer to spans of as much as thirty or forty years; he has long been noted for defects in chronology.” This lack of temporal clarity is by no means unique to Paul or Gregory, however. See Goffart, \textit{Narrators}, 331.

\textsuperscript{184} Paul, \textit{HL} II.4, continued: “After the lapse of a year indeed there began to appear in the groins of men and in other rather delicate places, a swelling of the glands, after the manner of a nut or a date, presently followed by an unbearable fever, so that upon the third day the man died.” Cf. Procop., \textit{Bella}. II.22: “Apparitions of supernatural beings in human guise of every description were seen by many persons, and those who encountered them thought that they were struck by the man they had met in this or that part of the body, as it happened, and immediately upon seeing this apparition they were seized also by the disease.” Paul almost certainly read Procopius; see Heath, \textit{Narrative Worlds}, 129, 159-161. See also note 84 below. On pre-plague portents, Cf. Greg. Tur., \textit{HF} IV.5: “Suddenly before men’s very eyes signs appeared on the walls of houses and churches.” On this plague (in Gaul, circa 543), see McCormick, “Gregory of Tours,” 66-75 and Eric Faure, “Did the Justinianic Plague Truly Reach Frankish Europe around 543 AD?” \textit{Vox Patrum} 78 (2021): 427-466.

\textsuperscript{185} Paul, \textit{HL} II.5. Paul described comets, “fiery swords,” and “fiery lances” throughout his work. For example, a comet was reported after the 590 plague of Rome, and “bloody lances” were reported in the sky immediately after the plague of Ravenna. See Paul, \textit{HL} IV.10 and IV.15, respectively. Later, in V.31: “a comet appeared in the east with very brilliant rays, which again turned back upon itself and disappeared. And without delay a heavy pestilence followed from the same eastern quarter and destroyed the Roman people.” Intriguingly, Paul appeared to be suggesting some form of repeated reintroduction of plague from the east here.

keeping with his frequently non-chronological writing. Paul’s similarly non-linear style can be seen even in the chapter immediately prior to the plague account. There, he discussed Narses’ struggle with Sindual, the leader of an invading Heruli force. This event most certainly postdated Justinian’s death. Meanwhile in the HF, after Gregory recounted the end of the emperor’s reign and the succession of Justin II, he provided a brief aside on Alboin’s “emigration” into Italy. Through Gregory, we can see that Paul was not the first to position a plague before important political events. Indeed, Paul may have been sourcing from Gregory directly when he described the Ligurian epidemic and finished the plague account with the following:

“Meanwhile, the emperor Justinian departed from life and Justin the younger undertook the rule of the state at Constantinople.” After the plague and Justinian’s death, the Lombards became the focus of the narrative. For Gregory, this was only an interlude. For Paul, the plague offered a turning point at which he could begin in earnest the story of the Lombards in Italy.

Paul extracted an equal share of inspiration and language from the eschatologically inclined letters and Dialogues of Gregory the Great. While the pope’s writings contained multiple references to plague and other natural disasters, it is Gregory’s frequent allusions to the

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187 Greg. Tur., HF IV.40. Between the plague chapter and Justinian’s death, Gregory focused on various hagiographic stories and Gallic affairs.

188 According to two chronicle sources, Sindual (also called Sinduald) was killed sometime between 566 and 568. A literal interpretation of the HL’s structure (like Weise’s) that assumes chronological ordering would therefore seem incompatible with Paul’s placement of the plague after the revolt of the Heruli. Muratori also placed the plague after Sindual’s defeat, again owing to the ordering of the HL’s chapters. Muratori, Annali d’Italia (Book III), 465. See Paul, HL II.3. Cf. Mar. Av., Chr. a. 568 and Excerpt. Sangall. 709. On Sindual, see also Sections III.2.2 and III.2.4.

189 Gregory’s account mentioned neither an invitation from Narses nor any famine or plague at the same time. His narrative paralleled that of Gregory the Great, however, writing that “once [the Lombards] had occupied the country, they wandered all over it for seven years, robbing the churches, killing the bishops, and subjecting everything to their dominion.” Greg. Tur., HF IV.41. Gregory the Great spoke similarly of murdered bishops and general carnage throughout his Dialogues and Letters. On Gregory of Tours and the Lombards, see Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 27-28; 66-67.

190 Paul, HL II.4.

191 See note 152 above. On Gregory’s apocalyptic worldview in the context of plague and the Lombards, see Martyn, The Letters of Gregory the Great, 17-18. See also note 304 below.
devastation wrought by the Lombards that Paul’s plague account most closely paralleled. In a letter to the Byzantine emperor Maurice (r. 582-602) in June 595, Gregory exclaimed, “What times! What immorality! Look, in parts of Europe everything has been handed over to the control of barbarians [the Lombards], and cities have been destroyed, army camps overwhelmed, provinces depopulated, and no farmer inhabits the land.” In an even more compelling account of the devastation wrought by Alboin’s forces, the Dialogues tell of the vision of one Redemptus, a bishop during the time of Pope John III (r. 563-574):

Then the man of God [Redemptus] rose and fell to his prayers with many tears: and straight after, those fearful sights in heaven followed; to wit, fiery lances, and armies appearing from the north. Straight after likewise the barbarous and cruel nation of the Lombards, drawn as a sword out of a sheath, left their own country, and invaded ours: by reason whereof the people, which before for the huge multitude were like to thick cornfields, remain now withered and overthrown: for cities be wasted, towns and villages spoiled, churches burnt, monasteries of men and women destroyed, farms left desolate, and the country remained solitary and void of men to till the ground, and destitute of all inhabitants: beasts possessing those places, where before great plenty of men did dwell. And how it goes in other parts of the world I know not, but here in this place where we live, the world does not foretell any end, but rather shows that which is present and already come.

In the HL, Redemptus’ vision—and to an extent, the lamentations of Gregory’s letters as well—became reality. First, we can point to an excerpt that Paul borrowed directly. After the murder of both Alboin (d. circa 572) and his successor Cleph (d. circa 574), Lombard rule fell to ducal municipalities. Here, we reach the end of Book II and see the ultimate tragedy of Italy:

By these dukes of the Langobards in the seventh year from the coming of Alboin and of his whole people, the churches were despoiled, the priests killed, the cities overthrown, the people who had grown up like crops annihilated, and besides those regions which Alboin had taken, the greater part of Italy was seized and subjugated by the Langobards.

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192 For references to plague in the Dialogues, see Greg., Dial. III.8, IV.18-19, V.26, IV.37.
195 Paul, HL II.32.
From Gregory, the healthy population akin to “thick corn-fields” were withered; in Paul’s account, the people “who had grown up like crops” were annihilated. Both authors attest to cities being overthrown and wasted, and churches left burnt and despoiled. In short, the sourcing for the devastation wrought by the Lombard dukes in the *HL* is eminently clear, and conveniently, Paul only mentioned this destruction *after* the death of Alboin. His noble king was not responsible for the chaos that followed, even if Gregory clearly laid the blame upon him. Note that Paul only lifted part of Redemptus’ prophetic moment for this description of the dukes’ reign, however. The rest found its way into the *HL* via the Ligurian Plague.

We can easily see the parallels between the plague account and Redemptus’ vision. Gregory’s desolate farms and untended fields paralleled Paul’s scenes of pastoral abandonment resulting in “no voice in the field” and “no whistling of shepherds.” “Crops, outliving the time of the harvest, awaited the reaper untouched” in the *HL*, owing to the lands being “void of men

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196 Cf. Greg. Tur., *HF* IV.41. Paul exhibited severe disapproval towards Cleph’s successors. In his narrative, the noble reigns of both Alboin and Cleph (as Christian kings) were cut short, and we see the violent results. See Heath 170. In two chapters, the slaughter of Romans thus received diametrically opposed treatment. In *HL* II.31, after the death of Alboin: “All the Langobards in Italy by common consent installed as their king in the city of Ticinum [Pavia], Cleph, a very noble man among them. Of many powerful men of the Romans, some he destroyed by the sword and others he drove from Italy.” Paul seemed to suggest that Cleph drove out Roman leadership to make way for a new Lombard dynasty. Cf. Mar. Av., *Chr.* a. 573: “many magnates and those of moderate rank were killed by [Cleph].” However, once the dukedom took over, things turned far more chaotic: “In these days many of the noble Romans were killed from [the Lombards’ avarice...” On Cleph vis-à-vis Paul and his sources, see Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 67-69. Note also that Fabbro attributed Paul’s description here to Gregory of Tours, not Gregory the Great. See 114-115. In the *HF*, the advent of the Lombards never came with a stately transition to Lombard rule; Gregory of Tours, like Gregory the Great, wrote only of how the Lombards, “once they had occupied the country, wandered all over it for seven years, robbing the churches, killing the bishops, and subjecting everything to their dominion” (IV.41). Note also this repeated seven-year motif. In Paul, the slaughter started seven years *after* Alboin’s rise, but Gregory of Tours’ writing suggested that the violence lasted for the duration of the seven years from the beginning of the Lombard conquest, thus indicting Alboin as part of the calamity. In his letters, Gregory the Great bemoaned the constant violence of the Lombards. See Greg., *Reg.* V.39 (June 595): “We have already spent 27 years living in the city of Rome, surrounded by the swords of the Lombards” and XIII.39 (July 603): “…how we have been oppressed for the length of 35 years already (just imagine it!) by daily sword thrusts and by great incursions from the Lombards.” After the ten years of the dukes’ reign, however, Paul described an apparent golden age for Italy in contrast: see Paul, *HL* III.16: “There was no violence, no ambuscades were laid, no one constrained another unjustly, no one took spoils, there were no thefts, no robberies, every one proceeded whither he pleased, safe and without fear.”

to till the ground,” as Gregory related.198 “Beasts” possessing places now “destitute of all inhabitants” transformed, in Paul’s words, to the notion that “human habitations had become places of refuge for wild beasts.”199 Indeed, Paul’s “ancient silence” induced by the plague perfectly captured the image of a “solitary” countryside brought on by the Lombards in Redemptus’ (and by extension, Gregory’s) eyes.200 Even the “fiery lances” in the sky described in the Dialogues found their counterpart in the “fiery swords” around the time of Narses’ invitation to the Lombards.201 In a later chapter of the HL, Paul quoted a letter of Gregory’s in its entirety.202 From this, we know it would not just be a fluke for him to have borrowed excerpts from Gregory’s collected writings, nor from other authors in general. Paul’s frequently expressed admiration for Gregory extended far beyond praise alone to include abject paraphrasing and thematic borrowing.203

198 Paul, HL II.4; Greg., Dial. III.38. See also Greg., Reg. III.29: “Look, we now see everything in this world destroyed, as we heard in the Holy Scripture that it would perish. Cities have been sacked, fortresses razed to the ground, churches destroyed, and no farmer inhabits our land.”
199 Greg., Dial. III.38; Paul, HL II.4.
200 Paul, HL II.4; Greg., Dial. III.38.
201 Greg., Dial. III.38; Paul, HL II.5. This comet also appears in other texts. For example, Greg. Tur., HF IV.31: “Then a star, which some call a comet, appeared over the region for a whole year, with a tail like a sword.”
202 See Paul, HL IV.28-29: “There exists a letter of the blessed Pope Gregory to this Arigis drawn up in the following terms…” (Paul goes on to copy the entire letter in the following chapter).
203 Paul’s plague description relied heavily on Gregory the Great, but simultaneously built upon a long tradition of writing depicting disease and catastrophe. Indeed, borrowing and building on earlier authors was a staple of the Roman literary tradition. Along with the famed accounts of Thucydides on the Plague of Athens or Procopius on plague’s effects in Constantinople, Roman authors like Lucretius conjured similar images of devastating outbreaks. See Luc., DRN VI.1090–1286 (his discussion of the Plague of Athens). We can see even more parallels in another text Paul surely would have read—Virgil’s Aeneid. For example, excerpts from the tragic description of Troy’s fall bear some resemblance to the Ligurian Plague: see Virg., A. II.490-491: “Grief everywhere, everywhere terror, and shapes of death.” Cf. Paul, HL II.4: “Everywhere there was grief and everywhere tears” (“ubique luctus” appears identically in both texts). The Aeneid would have been a key component of Paul’s Latin education, especially its famous second book. Finally, Ovid’s Metamorphoses contained another Roman take on plague. As in Paul’s account, we witness “untilled fields” and the notion that “the people all ran off” in Ovid’s description of a plague in Aegina. See Ov., Met. VII.535, 575 (for the full account, see VII.515-980). Ovid’s text itself borrowed from another of Virgil’s works: in his Georgics, Virgil wrote of a cattle plague with clear parallels to Lucretius before him and Ovid after. See Virg., G. III.478-566. Of course, the outbreaks described by Lucretius, Virgil, and Ovid were not the plague disease proper, but each text bears a clear literary resemblance to Paul. See also David West, “Two Plagues: Virgil, Georgics 3.478–566 and Lucretius 6.1090–1286,” in Creative Imitation and Latin Literature, edited by David West and Tony Woodman, 71-88 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and Richard Duncan-Jones, “The Impact of the Antonine Plague,” Journal of Roman Archaeology 9 (1996), 108-136. On Paul’s borrowing, see also note 152 above.
One could ask why it matters that Paul found inspiration in—or even copied directly from—Gregory’s apocalyptic imagery. After all, if there was indeed such a severe epidemic in Liguria, we could expect it to read like those outbreaks described in Constantinople and the Levant by the likes of Procopius, John of Ephesus, and others. Furthermore, the *HL* would by no means stand alone as a Latin text that built upon earlier works. However, Paul’s usage of Gregory would not have been accidental or solely out of his attested appreciation for its literary value. Throughout Book II of the *HL*, we witness the general tragedy of the end of Roman Italy and the end of Alboin’s rule, but more importantly, we witness the legitimization of the Lombards’ initial ascent to power in the region. It is no surprise then that Paul depicted the plague as a conquering army; to Gregory, the Lombards were just that. Similarly, in the *HL* it was the “great famine” preceding Alboin’s invasion that “attacked and devastated all Italy,” not the Lombards. The language of Gregory, when directed away from Alboin and the initial phases of Lombard rule, thus offered Paul the perfect framework with which to describe a punitive, anti-Roman plague (and famine) while absolving Alboin’s followers of their perceived cruelty. In other words, the Ligurian Plague epitomizes the Lombard rehabilitation hypothesis.

Paul transformed the image of the Lombards from Gregory’s text by making plague the item responsible for Italy’s instability and weakness in the era before Alboin’s reign, not any marauding, “barbarous” Lombards wreaking havoc after Alboin’s triumphant entrance. Alboin, the magnanimous—and notably, as we will discuss below, Christian—king, would thus

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205 Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 12: “Paul describes the pest advancing as an army, conquering and devastating the country.” See also McCormick, “Gregory of Tours,” 54 for similar language in the *HF*.
207 In the *HL*, we see only an inspiring image of a king-to-be, not burned churches and murdered bishops. See Paul, *HL* II.8: “Therefore, when king Alboin with his whole army and a multitude of people of all kinds had come to the limits of Italy, he ascended a mountain which stands forth in those places, and from there as far as he could see, he gazed upon a portion of Italy. Therefore, this mountain it is said, was called from that time on ‘King’s Mountain.’”
deliver Italy from both the injustice of the Romans who had mistreated Narses and the horrors of plague and famine that had apparently devastated Italy before his people arrived. As we will see later, by shifting the plague from its actual date (sometime after Alboin’s arrival) to a nebulous, pre-Lombard time, Paul likewise dissociated the negative effects of the disease from the early era of Lombard rule. Nonetheless, Paul’s account of the plague was ultimately based in a factual outbreak. Despite his couching it in the eschatological language of the Gregorys and maneuvering its timing to suit his narrative, the plague epidemic of the early 570s has multiple corroborating sources. Before approaching these other sources for the Lombard-era plague, we will turn to the Ligurian Plague’s second appearance in the *HL*, this time in relation to the siege of Pavia. There we encounter the beginnings of Lombard-Byzantine plague maximalism in context.

**II.4: The “Siege” of Pavia and the Lombards as Italy’s Saviors**

The three-year siege of Pavia, despite offering a compelling narrative of Roman resistance and Lombard mercy, is likely legendary (or at minimum heavily mythologized).\(^\text{209}\) The theme of three-year sieges is not uncommon in Paul’s works, and as an anecdote, the aftermath of the siege served to highlight the greatness of Alboin.\(^\text{210}\) According to Paul, it was the Ligurian Plague and a “great famine” soon afterward that ultimately caused the Romans’ defeat.\(^\text{211}\) When the inhabitants of Pavia surrendered, Alboin broke a vow he had made to

\(^{208}\) See II.4. For a more accurate date for the outbreak, see Section III.4.

\(^{209}\) Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 52.


\(^{211}\) Paul, *HL* II.26.
slaughter the city’s population, instead offering them clemency.\footnote{Paul, HL II.27: “When Alboin entered it through the so-called gate of St. John from the eastern side of the city, his horse fell in the middle of the gateway, and could not be gotten up, although urged by kicks and afterwards struck by the blows of spears. Then one of those Langobards thus spoke to the king, saying: ‘Remember sir king, what vow you have plighted. Break so grievous a vow and you will enter the city, for truly there is a Christian people in this city.’ Alboin had vowed indeed that he would put all the people to the sword because they had been unwilling to surrender. After he broke this vow and promised mercy to the citizens, his horse straightway rose and he entered the city and remained steadfast in his promise, inflicting injury upon no one.”} Immediately after he rode through the gates, “the people…began to feel relieved in mind, and after so many miseries were already confident in hope for the future.”\footnote{Paul, HL II.27. See Heath, Narrative Worlds, 168. On Lombard Arianism, see Steven C. Fanning, “Lombard Arianism Reconsidered,” Speculum 56, no. 2 (1981), 241-258. Many of the sources of the era refer to Italy’s invaders as “pagans” or “idol worshippers”, not Christians. However, many Lombards would have been practicing Arians, at least until the late seventh century. By 568, Alboin had converted to Arianism, but this does not guarantee the rest of his people had. Scholars have suggested the migrating group was composed of a mix of Catholics, Arians, and pagans. See Moorhead, “Ostrogothic Italy and the Lombard Invasions,” 151-153.} Some of these citizens’ “relief” surely stemmed from Alboin’s decision to not butcher them, but Paul framed it as a breathtakingly noble deed on the part of the Lombard king and a key transition point for the soon-to-be capital. Thus, the city’s “Christian people” were saved by the noble Alboin from death at the hands of Lombards, plague, and famine alike, even though their Catholicism differed from the Lombards’ pagan or Arian practices.\footnote{Edward A. Thompson, Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 95-96.} Before the Lombards made it their administrative center, Pavia was essentially a backwater, having been a resilient Ostrogothic stronghold during the wars of the 530s and 540s.\footnote{Like Sigibert and Hermannus, for example. See Section I.4.2.} The siege story thus raised up the Lombards as the saviors of a devastated Italy and noble conquerors, while at the same time adding a new foundational myth for the future Lombard capital.

Compared to the rest of the literary record, this indeed counts as a Pavian injection: no other source mentions a siege of Pavia, besides those that themselves drew on Paul’s text as their source in later years.\footnote{The sources roughly contemporary to Paul merely mentioned the fall of}
Pavia in passing. For example, the *Historia Langobardorum Codicis Gothani*—a ninth-century document likely related to the *Origo Gentis Langobardorum*—described how the citizens of Pavia and Milan “submitted their necks to Alboin,” but made no mention of a siege or any passage of time between the Lombards’ arrival and their taking Pavia.\(^{217}\) Agnellus, author of the *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis*, wrote of how the Lombards “overran Ticinum, which city is also called Pavia,” but likewise did not describe a drawn-out battle or siege.\(^{218}\) We are left instead with an unconfirmed tale of Alboin’s clemency that paralleled the great Roman leaders of old and further rehabilitate his image as a noble king, not some leader of barbarians.\(^{219}\)

Paul’s incorporation of Pavia went deeper than simply establishing a foundational myth.

We can turn again to Gregory the Great to find the *HL*’s source for the idea that “the Romans

\(^{217}\) *HLCG* 5.31-33: “Tunc Papiae cives et Mediolanum metropolim cum reliquaue aliae civitates Italiorum, videntes se vacuae, sicut a Deo fuerat praedestinatum, colla sua ipsius Albuin regi subicierunt.” We will revisit these texts in Chapter III. See Section III.2.6.

\(^{218}\) Agn, *LPR* 94. This can be dated to sometime after 570, as the preceding sentence describes an outbreak of bovine plague in the “fifth year of Emperor Justin II,” so the timing does not necessarily contradict the end of Paul’s siege account in 572. The Byzantine emperor Constantine VII, writing in the tenth century, described the Lombards as settling outside the city of Beneventum since its inhabitants did not allow them to enter. The Lombards ultimately entered and took over Beneventum by “a stratagem,” however. This could perhaps be an allusion to a siege, albeit not of Pavia. See Constantine VII, *De Administrando Imperio* 27. These excerpts will be revisited in Chapter III; see Section III.3.2.

\(^{219}\) One can see the parallels between Alboin’s merciful ride into Pavia and such Roman legacies as the equestrian statue of a clement Marcus Aurelius. Furthermore, per Heath, *Narrative Worlds*, 161: “derogatory remarks associated with Alboin were not to Paul’s liking.” In a similar editorialization to the invasion narrative, Paul contested Procopius’ account of the unruly Lombard mercenaries led by Audoin (Alboin’s father) during the Gothic War (circa 552). Instead of Audoin’s warriors, Paul depicted a “chosen band” led by Alboin, the soon-to-be hero of the *HL*’s later chapters in Book II. This force supported Narses and the Romans against the Ostrogoths as key allies. Procopius described the Lombards’ problematic behavior, “lawlessness,” and apparent proclivity for arson, whereas Paul presented the Lombards as noble victors after their part in the “utter destruction” of Totila and the Goths. Procopius later acknowledged that Narses gave the Lombards a large sum of money and sent them home. In context, this comes across as a bribe to make them cease their pillaging. Indeed, Narses was described as “eager to be rid of the outrageous behavior of the Lombards” before paying them and releasing them from their service. Meanwhile, Paul’s account has “the Langobards return as victors, honored with many gifts, to their own country.” Their chaotic behavior conspicuously disappeared from the narrative. This association of Alboin with Roman military victory and the pious Narses further compounded Paul’s disapproval of Narses’ treatment after his dismissal, thus linking the patrician with the rise of Alboin in a manner extending beyond the invitation hypothesis alone. Overall, we can see the amelioration of apparent Lombard brutality via another post hoc recasting of the Lombards’ image in the *HL*. Such a theme relates significantly to Paul’s recasting of Redemptus’ vision from the *Dialogues*. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 56; Heath, *Narrative Worlds*, 160-161; Procop., *Bella*. VIII.26.12; VIII.33.2-3; Paul, *HL* II.1; Greg., *Dial.* III.38.
had no courage to resist because the pestilence which occurred at the time of Narses had
destroyed very many in Liguria and Venetia.” In fact, the historians of the early modern era
came closest to the truth when they relied upon Gregory as much as Paul for the original
sourcing of the Ligurian Plague. The Dialogues made a single tangential reference that Paul—
a writer clearly well-versed in Gregory’s life and works—noticed: amidst a discussion of
individuals making prophecies on their deathbeds, Gregory noted a “great mortality which
happened in this city, in the time of that noble man Narses.”

“This city” of course refers to Rome, not Constantinople. However, a question remains
pertaining to this “noble Narses.” Given the past-tense reference to “Patricii Narsae temporibus”
(“the time of the Patrician Narses”), the Dialogues almost certainly referred to the Byzantine
Patrician Narses, not the nobleman and correspondent of Gregory’s with the same name who
lived a generation later. If we assume Gregory was referring to this former Narses, then there

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220 Paul, HL II.26. Note the parallel with the “deluge of water in the territories of Venetia and Liguria” circa 589 in
III.23. Paul’s editorializing could quickly turn references to “Italy” or Rome’s “surrounding regions” into
specifically the Lombard territories of Venetia and, more importantly, Liguria and Pavia. See Section II.2.
221 On the evolution of the pre-Lombard plague narrative and the incorporation of the Dialogues therein, see
Sections I.4.1-2.
223 The text in the other sections of this chapter referenced the Appian Way, the city (or rather, port) of Portus, and
the house of one lawyer Valerianus. The former two are clear indicators that point to Rome. A later chapter (IV.52)
refers to Valerianus as a gentleman from Bressa but a prefect of “this city,” and as Gregory wrote these Dialogues as
Bishop of Rome, it is safe to say the numerous references to “this city” are in fact describing Rome. Earlier in IV.26,
Gregory refers to a mortality which afflicted “this town” “three years since;” this is consistent with timing of the
Roman plague of 590 and Gregory’s publication of the Dialogues circa 593. The mortality “in the time of Narses”
appears to have occurred before this one, however.
224 Paul, HL II.26: …quae sub Narsee facta est... Gregory himself wrote many letters to a pious correspondent of
the same name in the 590s, whom he addressed as “Narses, Patrician.” This Narses was an Armenian general and
nobleman in the late sixth and early seventh centuries, serving under the Emperor Maurice (r. 582-602). Phocas, the
leader of a rebellion against Maurice in 602 and the Byzantines’ subsequent emperor, had this Narses burned alive
when he did not submit to his new rule. The mortality in the time of Narses therefore could have been referring to
the general calamities in Rome around the beginning of Gregory’s papacy, but the context in the Dialogue would not
make sense: in 593, Narses was alive and well, actively corresponding with Gregory. “In the time of that noble man
Narses” clearly suggests the events of years past, rather than the plague of 590, which Gregory had already
described in the same chapter as having happened “three years since [the time of his writing the Dialogues].” For
Gregory’s correspondence with Narses, see Greg., Reg. I.6, III.63, VI.14, VII.27. On the two different Narses, note
Martyn, Letters, 124 (note 38) and Theo. Sim., Hist. III.1.1; V.2.8, 5.3; 8.1-10, 11; VIII.15.4.
is still a major problem: Narses lived from the late fifth century into at least the late 560s, if not the early 570s, and Gregory gave no contextual clues for the timing of this mortality.\textsuperscript{225} It could be argued that Gregory was in fact describing a plague in the mid-560s or even later, based on this line from the \textit{Dialogues} when taken on its own.\textsuperscript{226} In this sense, Gregory’s cryptic remark could corroborate Paul’s account in the way that early modern and later scholars suggested.

However, there are more concrete outbreaks of disease that perfectly corresponded with “the time of Narses,” and these occurred well before Paul seems to have suggested. In his \textit{Chronogrophia}, produced in the mid- to late sixth century, the Byzantine writer John Malalas attested to an epidemic in “various cities” around 555 and 557.\textsuperscript{227} The sixth-century historian Agathias described a pestilence in a Frankish army invading Italy in the early 550s that “became an epidemic.”\textsuperscript{228} Later works, including the tenth-century Arabic chronicle of Agapios (the \textit{Kitāb al-ʿunwān}) and the ninth-century Greek chronicle of Theophanes Confessor, added additional context that included descriptions of severe disease in Rome and elsewhere in Italy around the same time.\textsuperscript{229} Notably, Theophanes included a detail that this plague “particularly affect[ed] children.”\textsuperscript{230} If we take Gregory to be the original source for this earlier plague in Rome, we can

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item On Narses’ life, see Section I.3.
\item As we saw in Chapter I, scholars like Muratori and Baronio both included \textit{Dialogues} IV.26 as evidence for Paul’s plague in 565. See Sections IV.1-2.
\item Joh. Mal., \textit{Chronographia} XVIII.120: “In the month of December in that indiction (555) people died of the plague in various cities.” 127: “In the month of February of the sixth indiction deaths occurred in Constantinople from bubonic plague.”
\item As we will discuss in Chapter III, Agathias provided an extensive description of a pestilence in Italy around 554 that decimated an invading Frankish army. Agath., \textit{Hist.} II.3.3-8, II.4. See Section III.2.1. We should note that a mention of pestilence does not necessitate that the disease was plague. Without detailed symptomology, we cannot be sure for any given textual reference whether a mentioned epidemic was \textit{Y. pestis}.
\item Agapios of Manbig, \textit{Kitāb al-ʿunwān}, edited and translated by Alexander Vasiliev, in \textit{Patrologia Orientalis} 8, 398-550 (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1912), 433: “[in the 28\textsuperscript{th} year of Justinian (555)], there was an earthquake in Constantinople. In December, there was a great pestilence in Rome and the surrounding countries.” See also Dionysios Stathakopoulos, \textit{Famine and Pestilence in the Late Roman and Early Byzantine Empire: A Systematic Survey of Subsistence Crises and Epidemics} (London: Routledge, 2004), 302.
\item Theop., \textit{Chr.} a. 6048 (555/556): “In December there occurred a plague among men in various cities, particularly affecting children.” Agathias also wrote of a plague in Constantinople that caused the worst mortality in “the young and vigorous.” Agath., \textit{Hist.} V.10.4.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
see precisely where Theophanes may have gotten his detail about the plague affecting children: the purpose of Gregory discussing the “great mortality…in [Rome], in the time of that noble man Narses” was to highlight the lessons learned from a young boy on his deathbed as he suffered from and eventually succumbed to the disease.\textsuperscript{231} We must also note that the tale of this event came to Gregory via another monk (Ammonius). Gregory would have been only an adolescent in the mid-550s. Had this mortality in Narses’ time occurred in the mid-560s (as Paul and later scholars suggested), we might expect the story of the boy and the plague to have originated from Gregory himself.

Narses had already been in Italy on campaign for some time by the mid-550s. His victories over the Gothic leaders Totila and Teias and the Frankish forces of Buccelinus, along with the broader Byzantine reconquest of Italy, came sometime around 552.\textsuperscript{232} These victories

\textsuperscript{231} Greg., \textit{Dial.} IV.26. Notably, this boy was the \textit{only} victim of the plague in his house. From the relevant passage of the \textit{Dialogues}: “For you [the deacon Peter] were well acquainted with Ammonius, a monk of my Monastery, who while he lived in a secular weed and was married to the daughter of Valerianus, a lawyer in this city, continually and with all diligence he followed his business: by reason whereof he knew whatsoever was done in his father-in-law's house. This man told me, how, in that great mortality which happened in this city, in the time of that noble man Narses, there was a boy in the house of the foresaids Valerianus, called Armentarius, who was very simple and passing humble: when, therefore, that mortal disease entered that lawyer's house, the foresaids boy fell sick thereof, and was brought to the point of death: who suddenly falling into a trance, and afterward coming to himself again, caused his master to be sent for, to whom he told that he had been in heaven, and did know who they were that should die out of his house. ‘Such and such,’ quoth he, ‘shall die, but as for yourself, fear nothing, for at this time die you shall not. And that you may be assured that I have verily been in heaven, behold I have there received the gift to speak with all tongues: you know well enough that ignorant I am of the Greek tongue, and yet will I speak Greek, that you may see whether it be true that I say or no.’ Then his master spake Greek, and he so answered him in that tongue, that all which were present did much marvel. In the same house there was a Bulgar, servant to the foresaids Narses, who in all haste, being brought to the sick person, spake unto him in the Bulgarian tongue; and the boy that was born and brought up in Italy, answered him so in that barbarous language, as though he had been born and bred in that country. All that heard him thus talking wondered much, and by experience of two tongues which they knew very well that before he knew not, they made no doubt of the rest, though they could make no trial thereof. After this he lived two days, and upon the third, by what secret judgment of God none can tell, he tore and rent with his teeth his own hands and arms, and so departed this life. When he was dead, all those whom before he mentioned did quickly follow; and besides them, none in that house died at that time.”

\textsuperscript{232} Mar. Av., \textit{Chr.} a. 553, 554, 555; Vic. Ton. \textit{Chr.} a. 554 (4), Isidore, \textit{Chr. Maj.}, 399b, 402. Buccelinus was also referred to as Bucilinus and Butulinus in this time, see \textit{LP} LXIII and Agath., \textit{Hist.} II.3-4. The plague between 555-557 came at least three years after Narses had taken up his seat as the effective governor (Patrician) of Italy and at least five years before he first arrived in Italy after being dispatched by Justinian to combat the Ostrogoths. Paul described these key victories of Narses at the end of his \textit{Historia Romana} and in the beginning of \textit{HL} Book II. See Paul, \textit{Hist. Rom.} XVI.23 and \textit{HL} II.1. On Narses’ arrival in Italy and defeat of Totila, see Agath., \textit{Hist.} I and II.
were perhaps the highpoint of Narses’ career in the latter half of the Gothic Wars, and more readily constitute “the time of Narses” than the period of his relatively minor victories and alleged scandal in the mid to late-560s.\footnote{Paul, \textit{HL} II.1-2. On Narses’ later victories (primarily over Sinduald and the Heruli circa 566/7), see Section I.3.} We can hardly blame Paul for misinterpreting this section of the \textit{Dialogues}, as Gregory did not include much detail therein. In his typical style, Paul simply lifted from Gregory the notion of a mortality (read pestilence) in Rome that occurred during the “time of Narses” and invented his own context.\footnote{Paul, \textit{HL} II.26.} A Ligurian Plague framed as occurring in “the time of Narses” and injected into the years around Justinian’s death suited Paul’s narrative well and fits perfectly with the themes of the \textit{HL} we have established above.

A final question from the siege of Pavia relates to Paul’s description of an insulated, three-year epidemic. If we take Paul’s account literally and assume that there was in fact a drawn-out battle, how could the plague have weakened only the defenders of the city and Roman territory, leaving the attacking Lombards unharmed? City walls would have done little to keep plague’s reservoirs and vectors—in this case, commensal rodent populations and ectoparasites like fleas and rats, respectively—at bay over the course of three years.\footnote{For additional discussion of plague vectors and the epidemiology of \textit{Y. pestis}, see Section IV.1.} The besieging forces would also have had food stored that would attract and support possible plague-bearing rodents, and military camps are often congested and unsanitary, facilitating interpersonal spread of any disease.\footnote{For \textit{Y. pestis}, this would entail human ectoparasites factoring into the disease’s transmission or an outbreak of pneumonic plague, which can rapidly spread without the need for a non-human vector.} By considering the specifics of the supposed siege (and its surrounding conflict), the dramatic liberties taken by Paul become readily apparent: no reasonable epidemiological model could apply to such a scenario.\footnote{The Second Pandemic has its own popular, almost certainly legendary story mixing siege and plague: during the Tartars’ siege of Genoese-controlled Caffa circa 1346, the attacking force allegedly catapulted plague-infested}
and the Romans alone” for three years in Pavia, let alone all of Italy, is untenable.\textsuperscript{238} To make matters even more confusing, Paul alluded to a “year of plenty” immediately before the famine but after the plague.\textsuperscript{239} The famine and pestilence were thus treated as separate events with a surprisingly happy interregnum, but both still contributed equally to Italy’s downfall, per the \textit{HL}. As we will see in Chapter III, Paul directly contested the rest of the literary record in relaying this famine-plague-conquest nexus. Even if we were to take Paul’s words at face value—an unwise approach—his plague maximalism does not hold up and his narrative contradicts itself.

Resorting to the framework of Pavian injection once again, Paul took a line from Gregory describing a “great mortality” in Rome and expanded it to become a “very great pestilence” in Liguria. No other source can fully corroborate his narrative surrounding the siege. In his own way, Paul engaged in a maximalist interpretation of a plague that he himself editorialized, claiming it a sufficient cause for the weakness of the Romans in the face of Alboin’s forces.

corpses over the city walls, resulting in a terrible outbreak that eventually reached western Europe and catalyzed the Black Death. The source for this siege tactic, Gabriele de’ Mussi, was not even a witness to these events (much like Paul vis-à-vis Pavia). Recently, scholars have demonstrated the utter lack of veracity to his claims via in-depth examinations of other contemporary sources. See Hannah Barker, “Laying the Corpses to Rest: Grain Embargoes, and \textit{Yersinia pestis} in the Black Sea, 1346-8, \textit{Speculum} 96, no. 1 (2021): 97-126. Indeed, this popular history notion of the Tartars’ corpse catapults helped cement some of the frustrating epidemiological orientalist trends in plague studies (as seen with such earlier authors as Josiah Russell). From Ole J. Benedictow, \textit{The Black Death, 1346-1353: The Complete History} (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 52: “[Gabriele’s catapult story] succeeds in maximizing the contrast between the barbaric pagan Muslims and the Christians. Many scholars have taken this story at face value and understood it as the first instance of bacteriological warfare. However, this is impossible, since neither the Mongols or Tartars nor the Arabs or the Christians knew anything of bacteria, but they did share the notion of miasma.” Relating to plague and sieges, another recent paper suggested plague did play a pivotal role in the siege of Baghdad in 1258, despite a lack of evidence in the written sources for such claims. Nahyan Fancy and Monica H. Green, “Plague and the Fall of Baghdad (1258),” \textit{Medical History} 65, no. 2 (2021): 157-177. For a somewhat tenuous analysis of plague in the context of warfare generally, see David Kaniewski and Nick Marriner, “Conflicts and the Spread of Plagues in Pre-Industrial Europe,” \textit{Humanities and Social Sciences Communications} 7, no. 162 (2020): 1-10. Their work relies heavily on Biraben’s datasets from 1976. See J.N. Biraben, \textit{Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens} (Paris: Mouton, 1976). On the issues with this data, see Joris Roosen and Daniel R. Curtis, “Dangers of Noncritical Usage of Historical Plague Data,” \textit{Emerging Infectious Diseases} 24, no. 1 (2018): 103-110. Their study is a highly useful lesson on the importance of critically assessing data before applying it across broad contexts in plague studies.

\textsuperscript{238} Procopius provided a clear—and much more contemporary—contrast when describing siege and plague, wherein a pestilence during Totila’s siege of Rome (circa 545-546) spread inside and outside the city walls. See Procop., \textit{Bella}. VI.3-6 and note 477 below.

Furthermore, the Ligurian Plague, as described by Paul, fell into the category of unilaterally destructive outbreaks that offered non-Byzantine populations in the Mediterranean world the perfect opportunity for conquest, some 1,200 years before the popularization of such a narrative.\textsuperscript{240} Indeed, it is quite miraculous that—as Paul inferred—the Lombards managed to avoid such a deadly epidemic during their time spent subduing Italy. His portrayal of a selective plague also served to recast the narrative of Italy’s destruction: barbarous Lombards could no longer take the blame for the strife of the early 570s as seen in the \textit{Dialogues}, and Alboin’s image remained noble. Lastly, we have seen how this outbreak derived its literary motifs from a collection of contemporary sources—including the pseudo-eyewitness testimony of Gregory the Great—and had its timing obfuscated through Paul’s moralizing hand.

\textbf{II.5: A Vision Made Real: Paul’s Symbolic, Literary Plague}

We have seen quite clearly how Paul had a history of maintaining relevancy for the Lombards, given their unsteady place in late antique historiography and then-unsubstantiated role as the stewards of Italy for the late sixth and seventh centuries. Moreover, Paul’s political motives tied in heavily with his accounts of natural disasters and the military and political actions of leaders like Alboin. Finally, the \textit{HL}’s description of the plague was likely not even an original one. Through Paul’s literal and figurative application of Gregory the Great’s language and Gregory of Tours’ structural and thematic style, we see the tenuousness of the Ligurian Plague from the standpoint of literary analysis alone. The generic, apocalyptic language of western Europe’s earlier sixth-century writers easily found its way into Paul’s work, providing

\textsuperscript{240} See note 7 above.
the perfect fodder for his description of the pre-Lombard outbreak. Indeed, there was no eyewitness testimony that somehow informed and made its way into the HL. Instead, Paul adapted the centuries of eschatological writing preceding him to produce the bulk of his plague passage.

Compared to the other narrative plague accounts (such as those of Gregory of Tours, Procopius, Evagrius, and John of Ephesus), the HL’s epidemic is in fact exceedingly generic and vague, not detailed. Besides some geographical markers, Paul included no anecdotes about individual persons, named leaders, specific cities and dates, or public responses, unlike every other narrative source for the disease. To complicate matters even further, even Paul’s geographical markers themselves are not concrete. As we saw, depending on his source—be it Gregory of Tours, Gregory the Great, Marius of Avenches, the Liber Pontificalis, or elsewhere—Paul’s reports of events in “Liguria and Venetia” could have occurred in Rome, generally in Italy, or nowhere at all, all thanks to his Pavian injections. In other words, the Ligurian Plague may not have even occurred in Liguria.

Instead of a unique source, we owe the description—and by extension, invention—of the Ligurian Plague to Paul’s skill as a storyteller. In Gregory the Great’s writings, Paul found far more than “delightful language” alone. Through his careful hand, Redemptus’ dream (as related by Gregory) found its actualized parallel in Italy’s anti-Roman plague. The pope’s lived experience of Lombard violence was recast to describe the violence of the plague, not Alboin or his followers. The HL’s narrative tweaks thus absolved the now pious, noble figure of Alboin of

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241 Most recently, Harper has argued that around 565 an outbreak “tore through the plains of northern Italy from one end to the other.” He claims that our account of this plague (from Paul), was “ultimately drawing from an eyewitness record” and attributes this account to Secundus. See Harper, Plagues upon the Earth, 216 and note 34 (p. 546). As we will discuss in the next chapter, this is a highly problematic argument. On Secundus in particular, see Section III.2.1. On this error in dating, see Sections I.4.5 and III.4.

any perceived evils performed by him or his people. At its heart, the *HL* was steeped in the traditions of Roman literature, Lombard mythology, and Christian eschatology; the account of the Ligurian Plague should be viewed in this light, rather than as a concretely historical passage of text. Indeed, given his varied sources and inspirations, it is quite challenging to parse out what, if anything, was original in Paul’s account.

Even if we accept the rehabilitation hypothesis, the notion of Pavian injection, and the *HL*’s frequent literary borrowing (especially from the two Gregorys), questions remain if we are to give Paul the benefit of the doubt. For one, what do the other sources say about plague vis-à-vis the advent of the Lombards? Does the pre-Lombard plague appear in any other text? We turn now to our cross-examination of the *HL*. As the next chapter will show, it is possible to demystify and correct Paul’s plague story using other literary and chronicle evidence, including both the texts Paul utilized as sources and those that did not inform the *HL*. There were certainly outbreaks of plague and other diseases in Italy during the 540s, the mid- to late 550s, and the early 570s, each attested to by multiple sources. Crucially, the information passed on from these records can demonstrate how Paul temporally and geographically blurred an already nebulous epidemic in the early 570s to fit his story. As he did with Gregory’s vague Roman plague from “the time of Narses” (relayed via Ammonius), the flood and plagues of 589-590, and the plague of 680, Paul simply shifted an Italian outbreak’s chronology a few years back and specified its geography in his regions of focus. He then introduced Liguria, Pavia (including the siege thereof), and the redeemed figure of Alboin into the historical narrative, thus placing them under his plague’s literary shadow as well.

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243 For a brief account of the Ligurian Plague’s connections to Roman literature, see note 203 above.
CHAPTER III

The Literary Data for a Plague-Lombard Nexus:
A Rebuttal Against Paul

III.1: Introducing Everyone Else

Paul the Deacon was not the only one writing about the Lombards and plague. It is through his sources, contemporaries, and other late antique writers that we can piece together a more accurate narrative of the plague in the time of Italy’s transition from Roman to Lombard control. Through this cross-examination we can perhaps elucidate this era’s plague-related timeline and an epidemiological narrative for the Lombard conquest, witnessing its historiographical development from the mid-sixth century up until the time just before Hermannus penned his own chronicle. We will also see the variations on Paul’s historical themes and dates, specifically surrounding the motif of Narses’ invitation to the Lombards, the beginnings of Alboin’s invasion (or migration), and most importantly, the conquest-era plague. In sum, to study the extent to which plague did or did not impact the Lombard conquest, we must also understand how the contemporaries and the immediate historians of these events understood the invasion and outbreak themselves.

Along with the works of Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great (both from the late sixth century), the most useful writers to start this discussion include Agathias (mid-sixth
century, Bede (early eighth century), Fredegar (mid-seventh century), Isidore of Seville and Secundus (early seventh century), John of Biclaro and Victor of Tunnuna (mid-sixth century), and Marius of Avenches and Secundus (late sixth century). Equally important, anonymous texts include the *Auctarii Havniensis Extrema* (early seventh century), *Excerptis Sangallensibus* (late sixth century), *Liber Pontificalis* (sixth century onwards), and the *Origo Gentis Langobardorum* (late seventh century).244 Finally, we will be considering a large category of texts that were written both before and after Paul but are most impactful for what they do not say. These sources contain little detail on either the Lombards or plague—the absence of the Ligurian Plague from similar Lombard, Italy, or sixth century-focused texts poses questions for Paul’s standalone account. This category includes Agnellus (mid-ninth century), Emperor Constantine VII (mid-tenth century), Corippus (mid-sixth century), the *Edictum Rothari* (mid-seventh century), Evagrius Scholasticus (late sixth century), Freculf (mid-ninth century), the *Historia Langobardorum Codicis Gothani* (early ninth century), and even another of Paul’s works, the *Liber de Episcopis Mettensibus* (late eighth century). In general, we will see many chronicles that incorporated specific dates or a range of years for their discussed event. These more chronologically precise sources are highly useful for contextualizing the often-undated events described in the *HL*, the *HF*, or elsewhere. Of course, such texts can have errors as well.245

244 The dating of the *Liber Pontificalis* (LP) is unclear, as its authors continuously expanded it. The relevant excerpts for this paper may have been published as early as the late sixth or early seventh centuries. See McKitterick, “The Papacy and Byzantium in the Seventh- and Early Eighth-Century Sections of the *Liber Pontificalis,*” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 84 (2016): 241, 245-7 and Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 15. For an authoritative account of the LP, see Rosamond McKitterick, *Rome and the Invention of the Papacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). On the text’s editorial history through the medieval and early modern period, see Carmela Vircillo Franklin, “Reading the Popes: The *Liber Pontificalis* and its Editors,” *Speculum* 92, no. 3 (2017): 607-629.

245 A given chronicle will not necessarily have a decisively accurate date. Many of these texts, such as those of John, Marius, and Victor, have slight errors in their dating that require either a shift of one to two years or additional explanation to clarify the timeline.
This chapter will examine how each of these sources explained the Lombard conquest differently. Nonetheless, the commonality between them all is their lack of any plague, pestilence, or “great mortality” appearing before Alboin’s appearance in Italy. When searching these texts for plague references, the criteria were quite simple. Any reference to epidemic disease in Rome, Italy, or even broader Europe before the time of Alboin or “in the time of Narses” can be treated as a possible source for Paul’s Ligurian Plague, considering his habit of geographically and temporally shifting regional crises.\textsuperscript{246} The overwhelming consensus of these texts—including, notably, all those that were written before the \textit{HL}—point to plague only appearing \textit{after} the initial Lombard invasion. The sources Paul most readily relied upon, such as Isidore’s \textit{Chronica}, the \textit{Liber Pontificalis}, and the \textit{Origo Gentis Langobardorum}, greatly contest his version of events. Every other source does the same, raising questions for Paul’s timeline.

We will examine the first group of texts in roughly chronological order. This group is composed entirely of narrative histories and chronicles. The next group will likewise be sorted by approximate date of composition, but the type of source will vary in this section. Included therein are narrative histories, legal documents, chronicles, and poetry, among other texts. We begin our examination with the texts of the mid to late sixth century, starting with the narrative history of Agathias, the lost work of Secundus, and the chronicles penned by Victor of Tunnuna, John of Biclaro, Menander Protector, and Marius of Avenches. These works represent the extant (or partially reconstructed), contemporary accounts of the Lombard conquest and the era immediately prior.\textsuperscript{247}

\textsuperscript{246} On the plague-associated nomenclature and references that formed the basis for this analysis, see Section I.2. On Paul’s literary habits, see Sections II.2-3.

\textsuperscript{247} The writings of Gregory the Great and Gregory of Tours, which we have already discussed extensively, are also key members of this category. See Section II.3.
The Greek historian Agathias’ *Histories* picked up where Procopius’ monumental *History of the Wars* left off. However, the *Histories* did not cover Italian affairs after Narses’ victories in the later campaigns of the Gothic War. Menander Protector’s *History* could have filled in the gaps, but much of his text is now lost or fragmented; Secundus’ work, which also covered this period, unfortunately followed suit. These holes in the literary canon make our task far more difficult. As some scholars have pointed out, this source vacuum suggests that Italy had generally faded in the broader Byzantine historical narrative as interests turned eastwards during Justin II’s reign.248 Nonetheless, Agathias provides us with three important takeaways.

First, we have his description of “a sudden outbreak of plague” that “decimated” an Alemannic and Frankish army led by Leutharis and Buccelinus while they encamped in Venetia circa 554.249 Agathias remarked that some of the Alemanni “pronounced the air of the region to be contaminated,” but Agathias himself declared the disease’s etiology to include their “ruthless wickedness with which they had flouted the laws of God and man.”250 The *Histories* even provided some symptomology, including fever, “violent seizures,” delirium, and the notion that the malady “assumed a variety of forms, each one fatal.”251 This sickness, which was almost certainly not plague, struck down Leutharis himself and prompted Buccelinus to launch his ill-

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249 Agath., *Hist*. II.3.3-4. On Buccelinus, see note 232 above.
250 Agath., *Hist*. II.3.5. It is unclear if the Alemanni had a miasmatic understanding of disease. Most likely, Agathias simply applied this notion based on his own beliefs. See note 492 below.
251 Agath., *Hist*. II.3.8. If it were plague, it could be argued that this “variety of forms” meant bubonic, pneumonic, and/or septicemic plague, but without further detail we cannot say anything definitive. However, the outbreak was almost certainly not plague, based on the further symptoms that afflicted Leutharis in particular (see subsequent note).
fated attack on Narses’ forces “before the disease became an epidemic.” This, as we will see, is one of multiple examples in which regions of Italy were deemed inherently diseased, or in which a disease seemingly arose as a divine punishment. For Paul, this example is especially notable considering its occurrence in Venetia, one of the future locations of the HL’s pre-Lombard plague. In short, this outbreak represents another an epidemic “in the time of Narses” that Paul could have seen in his studies, even if the disease was not bubonic plague.

The next major epidemiological episode in Agathias’ text came four years later, during the “second outbreak of plague” that swept Constantinople sometime in the late 550s. While this outbreak does not seem to have affected Italy, the Western Mediterranean, or Western Europe, Agathias included the following point: “from the fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Justinian [circa 542] when the plague first spread to our part of the world it had never really stopped, but had simply moved on from one place to another, giving in this way something of a respite to those who had survived its ravages.” From our perspective, this could suggest plague taking root across the Mediterranean and periodically causing short-lived epidemics. An endemic model like this would allow for localized outbursts of the disease, including those that went unmentioned in most sources. Paul’s uncorroborated Ligurian Plague could therefore

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252 Agath., Hist. II.4.4. The description of Leutharis’ death included further symptoms, some akin to rabies. From Agath., Hist. II.3.6-7: “[Leutharis’] mind became unhinged, and he began to rave like a madman. He was seized with a violent ague and let out a series of low-pitched groaning noises. One moment he would fall prostrate with his face to the ground, another time he would tumble over backwards foaming at the mouth and with his eyes horribly contorted. In a paroxysm of insane fury, the wretched man began to eat his own limbs, fastening on to his arms with his teeth and rending and devouring the flesh like a wild beast licking clean a putrefying wound.” See Stathakopoulos, Famine and Pestilence, 301-302.

253 See Section III.2.2.


255 Agath., Hist. V.10.1-2. This understanding of plague is slightly different from Evagrius’; see Section III.3.1.

256 This would be opposed to a theory of reintroduction, as has been suggested for the Second Pandemic. See Boris Schmid, et al., “Climate-driven Introduction of the Black Death and Successive Plague Reintroductions into Europe,” Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 112, no. 10 (2015): 3020-3025. We will discuss the epidemiology of Y. pestis further in Chapter IV.
be justified with such a schema, but only when viewed without its editorialized lens. As we
know, the HL was no pithy chronicle. The literary context created by Paul greatly complicates
dating the specific events of his text, meaning a reliance on Agathias’ thematic suggestion above
would be misguided.

Along with his more detailed symptomology, Agathias also reported the worst mortality
in “the young and vigorous,” perhaps providing another source for the Roman plague that
affected children in particular circa 556 despite the Histories not mentioning Rome.257 Compared
to other authors’ accounts of plague, or even his own description of the anti-Alemanni Venetian
outbreak, Agathias did not mention specific reasons for the destruction.258 In short, we have here
yet another major epidemic in the time of Narses, but still no evidence for any outbreaks in the
early to mid-560s, when Agathias’ account fades out. One additional takeaway from Agathias’
work can be seen in the general issues Justinian experienced with reductions in his armies and
the fact that through “the negligence of the authorities” the size and quality of the legions
deteriorated by the early 560s.259 We must also observe that Agathias blamed Justinian and the
political leadership for these failings, not any disease-induced depopulation. Through Agathias’
Histories we can thus see the broader trend of Byzantine manpower shortages and military
overstretch having a more detrimental, explicitly discussed effect than plague.260

The next source to analyze is Secundus’ Historiola, a text from which we can only glean
information indirectly despite its position as a key precursor to the HL. Since Secundus’ work is

257 Agath., Hist. V.10.4. Cf. Theop. Chr. a. 6048. See also Section II.4.
258 See Agath., Hist. V.10.5-7, in which he described various theories from oracles in Egypt, Persian astrologers, and
others but ultimately declared, “It is not for me to set myself up as a judge in these matters or to undertake to
demonstrate the truth of one theory rather than the other.”
260 Fabbro’s work provides an excellent breakdown of Byzantine recruitment, barbarian hires, and general military
history for this period. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 1-69, esp. 37-51. We will briefly discuss Byzantine
military issues in the era immediately prior to the Lombard conquest in the final chapter; see Sections IV.5 and V.1.
almost entirely lost, we cannot, at first glance, guarantee that Paul was not drawing from it when he described the Ligurian Plague. However, an in-depth analysis suggests otherwise. The first concrete evidence for Paul’s reliance on Secundus could be his use of a specific length for Alboin’s rule in Italy, which the *HL* declared to have lasted “three years and six months” before the king’s untimely murder.\(^{261}\) This reign length contrasts other earlier sources, including the *Origo Gentis Langobardorum* and the *Auctarii Havniensis Extrema*.\(^{262}\) The discrepancy here could perhaps signify that Paul utilized a chronicle source for Alboin’s reign that predated the texts disputing his date; if it was not some interpolation of the *Origo Gentis Langobardorum*, then we could owe this specificity to Secundus.\(^{263}\) Indeed, from the single surviving fragment of Secundus we have, it seems that his work was at least partially structured in chronicle format. The following excerpt, preserved in a later text, may have been the conclusion to Secundus’ chronicle or the chronicle-like portion of a larger work:

5,229 years have passed from creation up to the Passion of the Lord, and 554 years have passed from the passing of Christ up to the present year. And from this Easter, according to what the prophet says, and as far as the intellect can grasp given human frailty, 307 years remain in the present age. And the year mentioned above was a leap year, and the Lombards have been residing in Italy for 12 years, because they entered it in the month of May of the second indiction. All these things happened in the city of Trento in the place called Anagnis, during the third year of the Episcopate of Agnellus. I, Secundus, a servant of Christ, wrote these things in the fifteenth year since my conversion to the sacred religion, in the first year of Tiberius, in the month of June, in the thirteenth indiction.\(^{264}\)

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\(^{261}\) Paul, *HL* II.28. Unlike the three-year sieges that recur in the *Historia Romana* and *HL*, Paul exhibited no habit of ending reigns with a half-year coda in the *Historia Romana* or the *HL*, suggesting a more concrete source.

\(^{262}\) On these two texts, see Section III.2.6. Jacobi first attributed a chapter of Paul’s to Secundus in *HL* II.7, but this does not seem correct given the non-matching dates between Paul and Secundus for the Lombard arrival. See Jacobi, *Die Quellen der Langobardengeschichte*, 91. Of the other sources that described Alboin’s murder, most do not give a specific length for his reign. For example, Marius (a contemporary of Secundus) only mentioned the king’s death in 572, not a length of reign. See Mar. Av., Chr. a. 572. See also *Excerptis Sangallensibus* 717, which put Alboin’s death on the first of June in 571 or 572. The *Historia Langobardorum Codicis Gothani*, however, agreed with Paul’s date (as it likely quoted him directly). See *HLCG* 5.33-34. On this text, see Section III.3.2.

\(^{263}\) The length of Alboin’s reign would not be the last time Paul disagreed with the *Origo*. See Paul, *HL* III.35 and Cf. *OGL* 6. Paul described King Authari’s reign as lasting six years, compared to seven years in the *Origo*.

\(^{264}\) *A principio usque ad passionem Domini sunt anni 5229, passo Christo usque in presentem annum sunt 554, et a presente pascha iuxta prophete eloquium, secundum quod humane fragillicitati datur capere intellectum, restant de presenti seculo anni 307. Et in hoc supra memorato anno fuit bissextus, residentibus in Italia Langobardis ann. 12,*
Secundus, evidently writing from the year 580 (the third year of Agnellus’ bishopric in Ravenna), placed the Lombard arrival in May, twelve years prior in 569, or the “second indiction,” as opposed to Paul’s April of 568. From this small excerpt, we can therefore see that Paul’s dating of the initial Lombard conquest clearly did not rely on the Historiola for information, suggesting that even for the events of the 560s Secundus was not his main source. Considering this departure, for the invasion date, a three-and-a-half-year reign for Alboin likewise may not have come from Secundus, suggesting the existence of either another unknown, lost source for the HL or pure invention on Paul’s part.

Secundus also declared he was writing from the city of Trento (northeast of Milan, in Venetia), his home for some time, and that “all these things happened in the city of Trento.” For the notion that Paul’s Ligurian Plague came from Secundus, this is damning evidence—or rather, the damning exposure of non-evidence. Secundus’ lost chronicle may have ignored Liguria altogether, which tracks with Paul’s usage of Secundus most readily during discussions of Trento and Agilulf’s (r. 590-612) court. It is, however, certainly possible that Secundus’
text contained notice of a local plague epidemic, perhaps even eyewitness testimony from Trento itself. Such an outbreak would constitute a plague in Venetia, which Paul could have then characteristically expanded to Liguria and the rest of Italy. Regardless, had Secundus written of the Ligurian Plague in his chronicle, he surely would have had a corresponding date, perhaps one that even specified a month. In the HL, we see the opposite of such clarity: the plague vaguely struck “huius temporibus” and “in the time of Narses”; we find no “eo anno” demarcation or mention of a precise season or month. As we have seen, this vague timing was both a habit of Paul’s and, for the plague, a useful method to recast the narrative of Italian disaster around Alboin’s time. Even if Secundus described a Venetian plague and Paul relied upon the Historiola as a source, the HL’s lack of chronological specificity is highly suspicious.

Finally, the HL did not explicitly refer to Secundus as a source until well after the plague, and when it did, it was in far from glowing terms. These later references to Secundus either sourced from another of his works postdating the chronicle (which seems to have ended in 580, although it may have been the first half to a larger text of Secundus’ or a first draft that was expanded later). Writing of the Lombards’ triumph over Byzantine-enlisted Frankish forces circa 588, Paul wrote that “it is truly astonishing why Secundus, who wrote a number of things concerning the doings of the Langobards, should pass over so great a victory of theirs as this.” Evidently, the Historiola was not Paul’s final authority for Lombard affairs; or, as mentioned

268 Paul, HL II.4; II.26.
269 See Sections II.3-4. As Goffart puts it, “Under Paul’s pen, the phrase “about this time” [i.e., “huius temporibus”] can refer to spans of as much as thirty or forty years; he has long been noted for defects in chronology.” See Goffart, Narrators, 331. Meanwhile, Paul exhibited clear dating accuracy when drawing on specific sources like the LP. See Section III.2.4.
270 See Gasparri, Voci dai secoli oscuri, 32.
271 Paul, HL III.29. This victory would have taken place at some point in the mid to late-580s, as these Frankish forces were hired by the emperor Maurice. See Joh. Bicl., Chr. a. 587, which had a vastly different (and more contemporary) description of the event: “The Romans, by means of Frankish confederates, ravage[d] the Lombards and bring back part of the province of Italy into their authority.”
before, perhaps Secundus did not always concern himself with events outside of his immediate sphere in Trento. After this scene, Paul explicitly cited Secundus only in *HL IV.27* and *IV.40*, but presumably relied on the *Historiola* for events in the late sixth and early seventh centuries despite not referring to his source by name.²⁷² That said, Paul clearly did not rely on Secundus as a crutch or treat him as the most authoritative source for Lombard or Italian affairs.²⁷³ From the extant clues we have, the notion that Secundus wrote of a Ligurian Plague before the Lombard conquest seems largely untenable. We have also shown already that Paul’s proclivity for epidemiological blurring extended well past the time that Secundus could have been writing.²⁷⁴

In other words, the Ligurian Plague should not be deemed the product of any direct eyewitness testimony or missing source, including the lost work of Secundus.²⁷⁵

### III.2.2: The Sixth Century, Part 2: The Chroniclers

We turn now to the surviving chronicles and histories of the sixth century: those of Victor, Menander, John, and Marius. Victor—writing from North Africa—first mentioned the plague’s devastation during the First Pandemic’s original outbreak. In his entry for 542, he concluded his account with a short mention of an inguinal²⁷⁶ epidemic ravaging the world and

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²⁷² From *HL IV.40*, we know Paul had a copy of some chronicle-like text of Secundus’; in Paul’s words, “He [Secundus] composed a brief history of the deeds of the Langobards up to his time [possibly 612].” The excerpt of Secundus above, ending in 580, may have been an earlier draft of Secundus’ chronicle while Paul’s source for Agilulf may have been the final work.


²⁷⁵ The notion of a lost adaptation is of course non-falsifiable, but it is equally non-rigorous.

²⁷⁶ “Of the groin.” *Inguinaria* was a common term used for the plague, including by Paul and Gregory of Tours. See Section I.2.
claiming the lives of “the better part of the people,” but overall he had little to say about the disease. After 542, we see no other mentions of plague before the Chronicon ends in 567. In the 550s and 560s, we see no reference to any mortality, nor any hint of an epidemic. Narses’ defeat of Totila has a brief mention, but after 554 the patrician vanishes from Victor’s account.

John of Biclaro’s continuation of Victor’s Chronica includes more epidemiological information, albeit none that expressly corroborates Paul. The first few years largely ignored Italian affairs, but in the entry listed for 572 (more accurately 571) we see the defeat of the Gepids at the hands of the Lombards. The next year, John attested to Alboin’s murder and, even more intriguingly, an outbreak of “inguinal plague” in “the royal city.” This epidemic was evidently an eastern affair; the “royal city” would refer to Constantinople, not Rome. In the next year, “the inguinal plague [was] allayed in the royal city.” Since he was writing on these affairs from Constantinople, John clearly had a removed view of the events in Italy, but we cannot determine from this terse text whether the outbreaks after Alboin’s death propagated westwards. The Lombards only appeared again after five years, when John included a brief

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277 Vic. Ton., Chr. a. 542 (2): “Horum exordia malorum generalis orbis terrarium mortalitas sequitur et inguinum percussion melior pars populorum voratur.”
278 While the text’s final entry is listed as the fifteenth indiction and noted the death of Justinian, Victor’s dating is off by about a year. This error carried through to John of Biclaro’s continuation of the Chronicon. For both authors, we can simply subtract a year from their entries for a closer approximation.
279 Vic. Ton., Chr. a. 554 (4). Cf. Isidore, Chr. Maj. a. 399b, 402.
280 Joh. Bicl., Chr. a. 572 (1). The entry is listed as the sixth year of Justin II and the fourth of Leovigild (the king of the Visigoths at the time), meaning the items for that year should be considered the events of 571. Notably, the Gepids and their king Cunimund are said to have been defeated after the Lombards arrived in Italy, rather than well before Alboin’s conquest as we see in Paul. Cf. Paul, HL I.23. For this discrepancy in dating and the resulting problems for Paul’s chronology, see Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 18, 25-26, 54, 58-61.
281 Joh. Bicl., Chr. a. 573 (4). This outbreak likely began in 572, again based on John’s dating error. In this epidemic, “many thousands perished,” but the disease’s spread beyond Constantinople is unclear.
283 Joh. Bicl., Chr. a. 574 (4).
mention of the Romans waging “a lamentable war against the Lombards in Italy” sometime after 578. Other events in Italy may not have reached John, or he simply considered them irrelevant.

Menander Protector, whose History survives today only in fragments, had some intriguing detail to add on Lombard affairs, albeit little on plague. For example, we see that “Caesar sent to Italy a large amount of gold” in response to the pleas of Roman representatives who were “exhausted by the Lombard raids.” This money was likely sent by Tiberius II in the mid- to late 570s, during which time he still acted as Caesar under the Augustus Justin. While this monetary support may parallel the request for aid attested to by the Liber Pontificalis within the same timeframe, the fragment makes mention only of wartime difficulty, not disease-induced struggles or a decrease in the tax base due to catastrophic depopulation. Despite this support from the Byzantine capital, Menander later wrote that “Italy had been almost entirely devastated by the Lombards.” Clearly the aid was not enough, suggesting there were factors at play that bribery or financial support could not fix. We could read between the lines here and suggest Rome’s issues arose from the compounding effects of plague, but the explicit words of Menander leave this ambiguous. As we know from Gregory the Great’s repeated references to his flock’s plight in the face of the Lombards, there was certainly a high level of wartime chaos for years in Italy. Little else on the Lombard conquest survives from Menander’s work, and

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285 Joh. Bicl., Chr. a. 578 (3). John’s work on the Chronicle was largely concerned with the Byzantine conflicts with Chosroes II and the Persians in this time, along with some discussion of Visigothic and Avar affairs.
286 Men., Frag. 22. “Caesar” (Tiberius) suggested the money be used to bribe the Lombard leadership or enlist Frankish mercenaries to fight on behalf of the Romans. Indeed, John of Biclaro wrote that in the 580s, “the Romans, by means of Frankish confederates, ravage[d] the Lombards and restore[d] some of Italy. See Joh. Bicl., Chr. a. 587 (3) and note 194. The footnotes suggest repeated Frankish invasions in 584, 585, 588, and 590. See also note 25 above.
287 Cf. LP LXIV, which did mention pestilence as part of the problems of the time. See Section III.2.4.
289 The LP may have clarified this, however. See Section III.2.4.
290 On Paul’s literary interplay with Gregory, see Section II.3.
nothing in the extant text even mentioned plague.\textsuperscript{291} As with the \textit{Historiola} of Secundus, we are thus left guessing as to what else this contemporary source may have included.

Unfortunately for both Paul and the modern plague scholar, Victor, John, and Menander offer little corroboration of Paul’s writing or details of Italian affairs for the 560s at all. At best, for Victor and John we can say that no outbreak after the epidemic of the early 540s reached a point of intensity that deserved the attention of these geographically removed authors. For Menander, we could make the Secundus argument and suggest that lost portions of the \textit{History} may hold the missing piece for Paul’s plague narrative. Of course, this alone would not make a strong case for the Ligurian Plague or any plague-induced debilitation among Italy’s defenders. Nonetheless, another chronicle of the sixth century remains: Marius of Avenches’ \textit{Chronicon} is one of the most important works in this cross-examination of the \textit{HL}.

Marius’ work attaches concrete dates to the unclear timelines of Paul and Gregory of Tours.\textsuperscript{292} Marius’ dating, like that of Victor and John, is slightly off, as the \textit{Chronicon} puts Justin II’s first year of rule in 567, rather than 566. Furthermore, the surviving text lacks entries between 540 and 547, meaning we cannot see Marius’ account of the initial outbreak of plague, nor confirm Gregory of Tours’ outbreak in 543. Before the Lombards entered the scene, we see one Liguria-specific entry of note: in 539 a Frankish force, led by their king Theudebert (r. 533-

\textsuperscript{291} Another noteworthy fragment described Narses in battle during the conflicts at the beginning of Justin’s reign (likely against the Heruli). See Men., [Unplaced] \textit{Frag} 30: “Narses, who had always been accustomed to beat the enemy, because of some divine anger fled headlong.”

\textsuperscript{292} On Marius, see Justin Favrod, \textit{La Chronique de Marius d'Avenches (455-581): texte, traduction, et commentaire} (Lausanne: Université de Lausanne, 1991). Also note that Fabbro discusses the possible “consular” source that Marius drew upon. This source may have served as the key text for Gregory, Marius, and even Secundus for events in Italy. It has also been suggested that Secundus’ own \textit{Historiola} may have supplied Marius with some information for mid-sixth century Italy. This notion could be tenable given Secundus’ chronicle concluding around 580 (Marius’ \textit{Chronicon} ended in 581). If this is true, it would mean Secundus had multiple works, and the chronicle was not part of the \textit{Historiola} from which Paul sourced some of his information. In any case, the argument that Paul pulled his Ligurian Plague from Secundus grows ever weaker. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 18-20.
548), “entered Italy and wasted Liguria and Aemilia.”\textsuperscript{293} While there, “his army caught the sickness of the region and was greatly afflicted.”\textsuperscript{294} The notion of an especially diseased region here could have stood out to the Lombard-attuned eye of Paul, much like Agathias’ account of the disease in Venetia circa 554.\textsuperscript{295}

The \textit{Chronicon} also provides several extremely useful markers for the 560s and 570s—a quick summary of Marius’ work can highlight the import of his chronology as it pertains to later authors. In 566, we see the defeat of Sindual at the hands of Narses, the beginning of Justin II’s reign, and “a sign appear[ing] in the sky for seventy days.”\textsuperscript{296} This “sign in the sky” (a comet) constitutes a useful method with which to connect the many different texts covering this period. Indeed, modern astronomical data has confirmed the transit of a comet in 565, corroborating the many sources that noted its presence.\textsuperscript{297} Moving forward, 568’s entry included the recall of Narses, with a surprising absence of any strife with Justin II or Sophia.\textsuperscript{298} Furthermore, we see no sign of Narses writing to the Lombards to prompt their invasion. The entry for 568 thus presents a somewhat less editorialized history involving Narses and Alboin.

The \textit{Chronicon}’s record for 569 marked the beginning of a three-year Lombard-Roman-plague nexus. First, Alboin “and his entire people” burned and departed Pannonia to occupy...
Italy; thereafter, “some died by disease, some by hunger, and not a few by the sword.” These events should be considered to have begun in 568, in keeping with Marius’ dating error in 567 and the fact that the Lombards left Pannonia no earlier than April of 568. Here, the text’s terse language could appear to suggest an indiscriminate plague that killed Lombards and Romans alike. The vague notion of “some” dying in Italy immediately contrasts Paul’s account, in which the pestilence affected the “Romans only.” It should also be noted that the language of this entry suggests a theme for the next few years. There was not a specific outbreak or famine in 568 or early 569. Instead, these misfortunes befell Italy (and Gaul, as we will see) for several years to come. From his more removed standpoint from Lombard history, Marius thus gives us insight into the outbreak’s epidemiological reality and again clarifies its true timeline.

Two subsequent entries in the Chronicon present some of the most important contradictions to Paul. In the fourth year of Justin II (569/570), “a severe illness accompanied by diarrhea and pustules (variola) struck Italy and Gaul severely, and cattle perished throughout the above-mentioned regions.” The next year, “an unspeakable disease of the groin called pustula ravaged countless people in the above-mentioned districts.” Despite their abbreviated length,
these two entries have serious implications for both the *HL* and our broader understanding of Lombard-era plague. First, the *Chronicon* does confirm Paul’s story in one way: there was indeed an occurrence of inguinal plague in Italy around the beginning of the Lombard conquest. Per Marius, however, who wrote only ten to twenty years after it happened, this outbreak came *after* Alboin first occupied Italy. Furthermore, there were two epidemics in this time. *Variola* struck in 569/570, followed by *pustula* (plague) in 570/571.

Given the bovine plague’s occurrence within the same timeframe as the other two diseases, Marius’ text suggests a particularly brutal period for Italy in the early 570s. Indeed, outbreaks of disease constituted the entirety of his entries for 570 and 571. This focus could be due to their severity, Marius’ “eschatological anticipation,” or some combination thereof. More importantly, in yet another blow to Paul’s account, we can see that these outbreaks did not take place “within Italy alone.” It is difficult to say whether there was a single, major pandemic across "Italy and Gaul” or numerous pockets of disease springing up throughout both regions. Marius’ seat as a bishop in Avenches (western Switzerland) lay roughly at the geographic midpoint between Clermont and Liguria. Whether he based his account on his own

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304 Eschatological anticipation in the forms of plague, famine, and other catastrophes often accompanied wars and conflict in late antique histories from both Christian and Islamic perspectives. Per Stathakopoulos: “According to the synoptical Apocalypse (Matt 24, Luke 21, and Mark 13), the end of days would be preceded by wars, famines, pestilences, and earthquakes; these would be the signs of Jesus’ coming.” Stathakopoulos suggests that “there is now consensus among scholars that this eschatological anticipation was the reason for the unusually large number of meticulously recorded catastrophes in late fifth- and sixth-century sources” and that “the plague certainly play[ed] a prominent part among them.” See Stathakopoulos, “Crime and Punishment,” 109. Furthermore, as a well-educated Christian and a bishop, Marius—much like his contemporaries Gregory of Tours and Gregory the Great—would be extremely cognizant of the teleology and theological implications of such natural disasters. For another example, in a letter discussing a plague in North Africa circa 599, Gregory the Great wrote, “And so, as you realize from all of this that the end of the world is at hand, with a general destruction, you ought not to be afflicted too much over private troubles.” See Greg., *Reg.* X.20. On Gregory’s apocalyptic view, see Martyn, *Letters*, 17-18, who argues that “exaggeration [was] not unlikely” when discussing various calamities, and it suited Gregory’s eschatological argument concerning the plagues. On Gregory of Tours’ eschatological habits, see McCormick, “Gregory of Tours.” On both Gregorys’ language surrounding plague and the Lombards, see Section II.3.


306 On plague pockets versus widespread outbreaks, see Sections I.2 and IV.2.
experience, firsthand testimony, or other written sources, Marius’ work illustrated simultaneous outbreaks in Gaul and Italy, providing an effective synthesis of the plagues in the HL and HF.

Clearly, something was happening in Italy around the same time as Gregory’s plague in Clermont. Does the Chronicon’s almost entirely epidemiological focus for 568-571 guarantee that the bovine plague and variola outbreaks of 570 or pustula disease in 571 were earth-shattering events in Italy and Gaul? Not necessarily, especially considering the apocalyptic style of and eschatological framework of writers like Gregory of Tours, Gregory the Great, and Marius.307 Furthermore, although Marius grouped Italy and Gaul together when describing the plague in 571, we should not necessarily smear these outbreaks into each other or into Gregory of Tours’ account of the outbreaks across Gaul in that time. In short, we require additional paleogenomic evidence before arguing for a transalpine, widespread outbreak in Western Europe based on the Chronicon. Marius was one of two authors who assigned a specific date to this outbreak, and after incorporating a reasonable margin of error we cannot definitively assign both his and Gregory’s outbreaks definitively to 571. Most importantly, there was no severe pestilence in Italy around the time of Justinian’s death in Marius’ account, or at least none worth writing about in the eyes of an author finely attuned to the significance of such calamities.

The fragmentary Excerptis Codicis Sangallensibus parallels Marius’ text, further confirming the Chronicon’s accounts of a post-Lombard plague and providing another dated account for the Italian outbreak.308 Like Marius, the Excerptis had a primarily eschatological

307 See Section II.3.
structure, focusing on disasters and natural phenomena. For example, in its first year (539), the text described a possible eclipse. The next entry alluded to the first appearance of plague in the Mediterranean (the Justinianic Plague proper): a “great mortality among men” struck in 541/542. Like Marius’ work, this chronicle also has a significant period of silence; there is one entry for events around 549 and then nothing until the death of Justinian in 565. For 565, we once again see signs of a comet coinciding with Justinian’s death. The defeat of the Heruli then comes alongside a lunar eclipse in 566, the first year of Justin’s rule.

Despite its brevity, the end of the Excerptis focused entirely on Italian and plague-related affairs. On the twelfth day of the calends of April (March 21) in 568, the Lombards “entered” Italy. Then, in the fourth year of Justin (570), Narses left Campania and returned to Rome, and there was a “great mortality” of men and cows alike. Here, we see an abbreviated version of the end of Narses’ life, albeit without his Lombard invitation scandal. The text echoes Marius’

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Walhfrid Strabo (circa 808 – 849), a Carolingian poet and abbot of Reichenau (coincidentally the workplace of Hermannus some 200 years later; see Section I.4).

309 Excerpt. Sangall. 698: “Belisarii IIII et Stratici IIII Tenebrae factae sunt ab hora diei III usque in horam IIII die Saturnis.” In the MGH, Mommsen placed this entry in 539, possibly due to it being Belisarius’ fourth year on campaign in Italy.

310 Excerpt. Sangall. 700: “et fuit nimias mortalitas in homines ex vulneribus.” This note is placed in the consulship of Basilius (likely the first year), which began around 541. Cf. Marc. Com., Chr. a. 542 (2): “a great pestilence ravaged the land of Italy, and also the Orient and Illyricum which had been already similarly affected.”

311 Excerpt. Sangall. 705.


313 Excerpt. Sangall. 709: “in caelo luna non comparuit”; 710: “et occissus est Sindual rex.” The MGH dates these events to 567, with no specific year of Justin II’s reign given. Cf. Mar. Av., Chr. a. 566-8. Sindual’s rebellion therefore may have ended at any time between 566 and 567.

314 Excerpt. Sangall. 712: “Longobardi [sic] intraverunt in Italiam XII kl. Apriles.” Cf. Paul, HL II.7: “[The Lombards] came out of [Pannonia] in the month of April in the first indication on the day after holy Easter, whose festival that year, according to the method of calculation, fell upon the twelfth calends of April, when five hundred and sixty-eight years had already elapsed from the incarnation of our Lord.” Cf. Secundus (fragment in Section III.2.1 above); see also Section III.2.6.

315 Excerpt. Sangall. 713-715: “de Neapoli egressus Narsis ingressus Romam...et fuit hominum et houn nimia mortalitas.” The MGH placed this in 571 (perhaps based on Marius’ account), although the fourth year of Justin would more accurately be 569 or 570. Narses leaving Campania in 570 could still work with Marius’ timeline, as the Chronicon gave no explanation for anything relating to Narses after his dismissal circa 567. Cf. Mar. Av., Chr. a. 568, 570.

316 An elaborated account of Narses’ death can be found in the LP; see Section III.2.4.
account of the bovine plague occurring alongside a human epidemic, although no symptomology or indication of the disease’s manifestation—such as Marius’ variola—is provided in the Excerptis. The text placed the death of Alboin in the sixth year of Justin (circa 572, specifically in June) and yet another “great mortality.” This mostly tracks with Marius, although the Chronicon separated Alboin’s death from the pustula of 570/571. From the Excerptis’ combination of these two events, we can place Marius’ plague epidemic more concretely in 571 and the bovine plague and variola in 570, thus discounting a need for any chronological error-induced subtraction after 569. The Excerptis provided no material on any Roman-Lombard conflict besides Alboin’s initial entrance into Italy. However, the text contains enough unique information that we cannot say it was solely a paraphrased copy of Marius’ Chronicon. This anonymous source further corroborates the Italian epidemics of the Chronicon and casts still more doubt on the notion of a pestilence around the immediate time of Justinian’s death, especially when read alongside Marius.

If we read Marius (and to an extent, the Excerptis) uncritically—in a manner akin to how Paul’s plague account has often been approached—the Chronicon could suggest the opposite of the conventional narrative. To wit, starting in 568/569 the Lombards had in fact been the ones

318 Excerpt. Sangall. 716-718: “eo anno occisus est a suis Albida rex Langobardorum...et fuit hominum nimia mortalitas.”
319 See Mar. Av., Chr. a. 571-572.
320 The first part of Marius’ entry for 569 still requires revising since we know the Lombards moved into Italy (or at minimum departed from Pannonia) no later than autumn of 568. The latter half of the entry (discussing the failed Lombard expedition into Gaul) could thus be considered the sole event for 569 in the Chronicon.
321 For example, the Excerptis’ mysterious multi-hour darkness in 539, plague of 542, and lunar eclipse in 567 do not appear in the Chronicon, despite the two texts’ parallel accounts of human and bovine plague for 570-572. The Excerptis itself, part of the Codicis Sangallensis 878 (named for it being attached to a ninth-century manuscript) has been considered both an anthology and “personal scrapbook.” See Reynolds, “Two Notes,” 7. However, it is not clear from whom its author was drawing when he copied the plague-related notes for the mid-sixth century. One could even question whether aspects of Secundus’ lost work made it into the chronicle as well.
weakened by pestilence and famine, and it was they who had to overcome the disease to defeat the Romans. Indeed, three years after the plague, an attempted invasion in Gaul resulted in the Lombards being “killed almost to a man.”\footnote{Mar. Av., Chr. a. 574. We can compare Marius’ plague-invasion juxtaposition to a reading of Paul in modern plague literature: from Little, “Life and Afterlife,” 12: “[The next] [epidemic] that we know about, from Paul the Deacon, hit in 565, and it was in 568 that the Lombards began their migration into the Italian peninsula.” Little does not expressly argue causality here, but it is implied in the very structure of such a statement.} Could we say then that the Lombards were hamstrung by plague? The short answer is no, but these Lombard forays into Gaul highlight yet another shortcoming of Paul’s quintessentially anti-Roman plague and the maximalist interpretations thereof.

**III.2.3: The Sixth Century, Part 3: The Frankish Contradiction**

During the 560s and 570s, we should not think of the Lombards as an unstoppable foe to the Romans. On the contrary, they suffered nearly as many defeats as victories. Fredegar, Gregory of Tours, Marius, Menander, Paul, Theophylact Simocatta, and the anonymous author behind the *Auctarii Havniensis Extrema* all alluded to various routs of Lombard forces by both Burgundian, Frankish, and Gepid armies in the time before and after Alboin’s invasion of Italy. As we saw in Marius’ *Chronicon*, the Lombards were repulsed from Gaul in 569.\footnote{Mar. Av., Chr. a. 569.} Furthermore, evidence from a fragment of Menander and the work of Theophylact Simocatta suggest another Lombard loss—this time against the Gepids—in the late 560s, immediately prior to Alboin’s move south.\footnote{Men., Frag. 12.1-2, Theo. Sim., Hist. VI.10.4-18. On this defeat, see Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 57-58.} Even at the beginning of the conquest, victory was far from guaranteed for the Lombards; one could therefore argue that plague provided them the boost they needed.
needed to catch the Romans on weak footing. This is not an unreasonable proposition. Let us therefore scrutinize a counterexample, via the Lombard defeats in Gaul.

In 574, after the Lombard king Cleph’s death (circa 573/574), a Lombard force was “killed almost to a man,” during an attempt to invade Gaul under the leadership of one duke Zaban, who “disgracefully lost most of the strength of the Lombards.” In the HL, Zaban—having already been defeated by the Frankish king Guntram (r. 561-592) once before—was met and crushed by the Gallo-Roman general Mummolus and his “countless army.” Per one seventh-century source, the Lombards did not recover from this loss for at least ten years.

Gregory of Tours provided the Frankish perspective on these events. In the HF, when the Lombards first invaded Gaul they were “said to have slaughtered so many Burgundians that no one could count the dead” before returning to Italy. In two subsequent invasions, however, Lombard forces and their Saxon allies were defeated soundly by the brilliance of Mummolus. After their second major loss, the “terrified” Saxons even swore an oath of fealty to the Frankish king Sigibert (r. 561-575), paid tribute, and were resettled in Gaul after departing Italy (where they had only recently settled as part of Alboin’s migration). And yet, only two or three years prior to these attempted invasions, the plague had ravaged Clermont, and “Lyons, Bourges, Chalon-sur-Saône, and Dijon were decimated.”

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325 Mar. Av., Chr. a. 574; AHE a. 1523. Zaban was the first duke of the Lombards after Cleph’s death. See Paul, HL II.32.
326 HL III.8.
327 According to the AHE a. 1532, Authari (r. 584-590) “restored by his own ability and prudence the strength of the Lombards that had been shattered in Gaul and overcame the Franks who were wreaking devastation widely in Italy.”
328 Greg. Tur., HF IV.42. These Burgundians would have been residing in the region of the former First Kingdom of the Burgundians, in southeastern Gaul.
329 Greg. Tur., HF IV.42. In the divided Merovingian Kingdom, Sigibert I was king of Austrasia, while King Guntram—who had appointed Mummolus—was king of Burgundy. On the Saxons, see note 76 above.
lay in southeastern Gaul, where the Lombards would have begun their attacks, we can see the ineffectiveness of the plague-induced defeat argument.\footnote{A parallel to this argument can be seen in the rapid Byzantine defeats during the Arab conquest. For example, the Battle of Yarmouk in 636 was a key Arab victory, made even more surprising considering their Byzantine foes’ vast numerical and technological superiority. Plague (and its associated depopulation) has been cited as a cause for the rapid crumbling of Byzantine defenses in the early seventh century, and an effective ally of the Arab invaders, even though numbers were not the cause of the Byzantines’ defeat. In this context, the wielding of plague as a military ally to the Arab invader is a direct instance of epidemiological orientalism. For example, see Russell, “That Earlier Plague,” 174-178 and Harper, The Fate of Rome, 230-232, 282-285. On the battle of Yarmouk, see Saifuz Zaman, “Yarmouk: The Necessity of Studying the Battle in Early Medieval Military Historiography,” Journal of Military and Strategic Studies 16, no. 2 (2015): 160-178 and John W. Jandora, “The Battle of the Yarmuk: A Reconstruction,” Journal of Asian History 19, no. 1 (1985): 8-20.}

Even with Gregory’s account of the Lombards initially slaughtering their Burgundian foes, Mummolus seemingly had more than enough reserves to pull off two spectacular victories. No mass depopulation seems to have taken place to a point where it affected military outcomes, or at least nothing significant enough to stop Mummolus from gathering a “countless” number of men to repel Zaban. The opposite argument—that the Lombards had been weakened by the Italian epidemics of 570 or 571, thus causing their collapse in Gaul—appears unsubstantiated given the scarcity of evidence, but we cannot rule out plague as a factor.

Given the nature of late antique studies, the Roman and Byzantine Empires generally take the forefront for historical events and arguments. However, if we turn to late antique kingdoms like Merovingian Gaul and attempt to apply similar, plague-induced defeat arguments, we can see from the literary record that such notions are tenuous at best. If one argues that a plague in 565 helped the Lombards defeat the Romans from 568 to 572, then the logically consistent argument would have the plague of 571 assisting the Lombards and Saxons against the Franks of southeastern Gaul during their attempted invasions after 573/574. As we have seen, the Lombards were butchered in this latter conflict. Based on the textual evidence, a hamstringing, anti-Frankish plague does not seem to have manifested in Gaul. Similarly, and as this paper is
attempting to show, an anti-Roman, counterpart epidemic did not appear in Italy. In other words, both cases lack the specific epidemiological detail necessary for making a concrete claim about plague as a military ally. By extension, ignoring Lombard-Frankish conflict in the time of plague while relying on what was most likely the same outbreak to explain Lombard-Roman outcomes would be inconsistent. An argument for a specifically anti-Roman plague that disregards the Lombard defeats in Gaul, in this sense, is a complete contradiction, but both arguments disregard the numerous other factors that would weigh into these military outcomes.\textsuperscript{332} Paul certainly made this mistake, especially in the context of the siege of Pavia. Such simplistic or linear reasoning in the context of late antique plague and conflict should not be trusted.

**III.2.4: The Seventh Century, Part 1: The Liber Pontificalis**

Bridging the sixth and seventh centuries and the Italian sagas of Romans and Lombards alike, we have the Liber Pontificalis (LP), the long-running account of the lives and activities of Rome’s bishops. While the dating of any of its individual components is unclear, the writers behind these papal biographies were writing in much closer proximity to the events they described than authors like Paul.\textsuperscript{333} The narrative of the LP from the 530s onwards involved, among other events, the repeated destruction of Italy. During the papacy of Silverius (r. 536-537), the Gothic War devastated the region, and a simultaneous famine reached a point in Liguria where, allegedly, “women ate their own children for hunger and want” sometime around 536.\textsuperscript{334} Here we have another Ligurian anecdote, much like the disease present there in 539 from

\textsuperscript{332} See Sections IV.5 and V.1.  
\textsuperscript{333} On dating the LP, see note 244 above.  
\textsuperscript{334} LP LX.
Marius’ *Chronicon*. Later, we see accounts of Totila’s siege of Rome amidst an already brutal war, another famine (during that same siege) in which “people ate their own children,” and Narses’ victory over the Goths. Surprisingly, the *LP* did not explicitly describe any plague striking Italy between 537 and 575. Indeed, the text was notably silent on the outbreak of the Justinianic Plague in the early 540s, with one exception. In a protest against Pope Vigilius (r. 537-555), angry Roman citizens were said to have cried, “‘Your hunger go with you! Your pestilence go with you!’” as he departed the city. Evidently, Totila’s siege coincided with some type of outbreak in the early 540s, which could align with plague’s initial appearance in the Mediterranean. Indeed, Procopius confirmed this in the *History of the Wars*. The account of the disease in the *LP* stopped with this brief account during Vigilius’ papacy, however.

During the time of John III (r. 561-574), we see no further signs of plague, although Narses’ story reached its dramatic conclusion. First, the Heruli revolted under the leadership of Sindual and, likely hyperbolically, “oppressed all Italy” before their defeat at the hands of Narses. Immediately afterwards in the text, two Frankish leaders (Ammingus and Buccelinus) “in like manner wasted Italy” only to be destroyed by Narses to the “joy” of the country, albeit with no sign of the disease that Agathias claimed to have weakened their army. The *LP* also contains a departure from the standard legend of Narses’ invitation to Alboin. The text described similar accusations levied by the Romans against their patrician, and echoed the story of Narses’

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335 See Section III.2.2.
336 *LP* LXI. Vigilius left Rome sometime in the mid-540s, before Totila took Rome. However, the exact circumstances of his departure are unclear. See *LP* LXI (note 2).
337 Totila sacked Rome in 546 after a year-long siege, thus placing this famine and pestilence at the latest in 545. On the siege of Rome, see Procop., *Bella*. V.16; VI.3-6.
338 See Procop., *Bella* VI.3-4.
journey to Campania from which he wrote to the Lombards to “come and possess Italy.”\(^\text{341}\)

However, unlike other early narratives of Narses’ Lombard invitation scandal, the \(LP\) recounted Pope John’s urgent trip to Campania, where he “entreat[ed] Narses to return to Rome.”\(^\text{342}\)

Evidently a friend and strong supporter of Narses, John convinced the patrician to return to Rome, where “after a long time he died.”\(^\text{343}\) This extension of Narses’ story effectively lengthens what we can consider to be “the time of Narses” as related by Paul.\(^\text{344}\) Furthermore, the \(HL\) clearly drew upon the \(LP\)’s narrative, positively ending Narses’ story with his death in Rome (albeit without any entreaties from John).\(^\text{345}\) If he died around the same time as John (as the \(LP\) suggested), Narses may have lived as late as 574, making Paul’s placement of the plague in that time frame (that is, the “time of Narses”) technically accurate despite his confusing chronology.

Regardless of chronology, the \(LP\)’s theme of Italian destruction until this point paints a clear picture for pre-Lombard affairs, extends the Narses era, and, as we will see, may have inspired Paul’s selective application of plague’s effects.

It is only in the biography Pope Benedict I (r. 575-579) that the Lombard conquest finally appears in the \(LP\). During Benedict’s time, “the Lombards invaded all Italy, and there was also a

\(^{341}\) \(LP\) LXIII: “Then the Romans, inspired by malice, sent an accusation to Justinian [sic, read Justin II] and Sophia, saying: ‘It were better for the Romans to serve the Goths than the Greeks, for Narses, the eunuch governs us and reduces us to slavery; and our most devout prince is ignorant of it. Either free us from his hand or we and the city of Rome will serve the Gentiles.”

\(^{342}\) \(LP\) LXIII.

\(^{343}\) \(LP\) LXIII. Cf. Paul, \(HL\) II.11. The \(LP\), compared to other sources, was “generous towards Narses.” See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 22. Paul seems to have picked up on this pious thread when contrasting Narses with his accusatory Roman subjects in \(HL\) II.5. We can also see the “piety of Narses” in Evagrius’ Ecclesiastical History (IV.24): “Those about the person of Narses affirm that he used to propitiate the Deity with prayers and other acts of piety, paying due honor also to the Virgin and mother of God, so that she distinctly announced to him the proper season for action; and that Narses never engaged until he had received the signal from her.” Agathias, however, contested this notion. See Agath., \(Hist\). I.12.9: “So now everybody began to abuse Narses openly and to call him a blackguard and a villain. He was in point of fact, they said, a brutal murderer, and it was to no purpose that he strove by an elaborate pretense to create an impression of piety and devotion. See Section II.3 and Chapter II note 82.

\(^{344}\) Paul, \(HL\) II.2, II.26.

\(^{345}\) Paul, \(HL\) II.11: “Narses indeed returned from Campania to Rome and there not long afterwards, departed from this life, and his body, placed in a leaden casket, was carried with all his riches to Constantinople.”
great famine, so that many fortified towns surrendered to the Lombards in order that they might be spared the rigor of the famine.”\textsuperscript{346} The text goes on to add that “when Justinian [sic, read Justin II]…heard that Rome was endangered by the famine and by the pestilence he sent to Egypt and dispatched ships laden with grain to Rome; and thus God had compassion on the land of Italy.”\textsuperscript{347} The notion of Justin sending help to Rome appears elsewhere only in Menander, who conspicuously cited the Romans’ desire to pay off their foes as the cause, as opposed to famine or pestilence.\textsuperscript{348} Perhaps the author of the \textit{LP} did not want to associate “the most holy pope Benedict” with deceitful notions of bribery.\textsuperscript{349} Alternatively, there may have been some communication error in the creation of the narratives from Menander and the \textit{LP}, or perhaps even two instances of Byzantine support sent to Rome. If these two descriptions of aid were in fact the same, then Menander could act as corroboration for the plague of the early 570s having a specifically detrimental effect against Rome (and possibly Italy as a whole). We must first consider the complications inherent in the \textit{LP}’s chronology, however.

For one, the late placement of the Lombard invasion is likely due to structural decisions on the part of the \textit{LP}’s authors: as scholars have suggested, John’s story intertwined with Narses, and Benedict’s with the Lombards.\textsuperscript{350} In other words, we should not read the chapter on Benedict as claiming the Lombard conquest began in 575 (the first year of Benedict’s papacy), although that year did mark the end of a seven year period of Lombard violence, a motif we see in the \textit{HL} and \textit{HF}.\textsuperscript{351} Overall, it appears that invasion, plague, and famine coincided sometime in the 570s.

\textsuperscript{346} \textit{LP} LXIV.  
\textsuperscript{347} \textit{LP} LXIV.  
\textsuperscript{348} Cf. Men. \textit{Frag.} 22.  
\textsuperscript{349} \textit{LP} LXIV.  
\textsuperscript{350} McKitterick, “The Papacy,” 251.  
\textsuperscript{351} On the seven-year theme, see note 196 above. It is also possible that Paul was (knowingly or unknowingly) drawing on the \textit{LP}’s jumbled timeline when he claimed that the Lombards did not devastate Italy until seven years had elapsed since their arrival from Pannonia.
Indeed, the *LP* echoed Marius’ assertions of war, disease, and famine affecting Italy sometime after the Lombards arrived, meaning we cannot attribute Roman weakness to a specific famine or pestilence event circa 575 because of this murky timeline.\footnote{Mar. Av., Chr. a. 569-571.} For the *HL* in particular, the *LP*’s description of “fortified towns” surrendering to the Lombards to avoid famine parallels Paul’s siege of Pavia, the important exception being Paul’s insertion of the pestilence “in the time of Narses” that further debilitated Italy’s defenders and encouraged their capitulation.\footnote{Paul, *HL* II.26.} With these details in mind—as well as the knowledge that Paul used the *LP* as a source—we can clearly see Paul’s maximalism at work. Based on his understanding of plague’s occurrence in Italy (from Marius, Gregory, and others) and the *LP*’s repetitive famines affecting the Roman population (including even Liguria circa 536), Paul may have concluded that the plague followed a similar, coinciding trajectory as the other calamities facing Italy. Given the not infrequent requests for aid sent to Constantinople (at least when considering Menander along with the *LP*), we can see how the Roman side of the wartime plague story survived through Paul. Thus, in the *LP* we see yet another tributary supplying Paul’s specifically anti-Roman plague.

Paul and the *LP* maintain a curious relationship with one another concerning plague. We can clearly see how the *HL* shifted *LP*’s plague—the same epidemic we have now seen in numerous texts—nearly ten years earlier than its supposed date during Benedict’s papacy to make it predate Alboin’s arrival in Italy. In another departure from his sources, Paul described a “scab disease” (clades scabiarum) in Rome during the time of King Rothari (r. 636-652) while the *LP* placed this same outbreak around 617.\footnote{Paul, *HL* IV.45; *LP* LXIX-LXXX. The markers for this outbreak are floods and a major earthquake in Rome (as described by Paul), but in the *LP* the flood and ensuing pestilence occur under Boniface IV (r. 608-615) and the earthquake under Adeodatus I/Deusdedit (r. 615-618), both well before King Rothari’s time.} But at the same time, the descriptions of the
Roman plagues of 589 and 680 match almost exactly between the two texts. Paul seems not to have prioritized the Roman timeline when constructing his narrative, although he did at times adhere to it when describing affairs further removed from the Lombards.

The LP thus offers multiple important takeaways. For one, we again see no sign of a pre-Lombard plague during John III’s papacy. Instead, plague became another factor in Italy simultaneously with the Lombards’ continued attempts to claim further territory in the region. As with Marius’ account, we should not interpret this as a one-sided event. If a city changed hands between Romans and Lombards during a time of plague, political ties and governorship would not affect the fleas and rodents spreading disease within its walls. Lastly, the LP provides another window through which we can witness Paul’s adaption process. Italian-specific events with Catholic victims were the norm for the other calamitous events in the LP. The narrative for Italy in the mid-sixth century attested to war and famine repeatedly devastating the Roman citizens of the region, and when combined with the pestilence during Benedict I’s papacy, we can see how Paul may have arrived at his conclusion of a specifically anti-Roman plague confined to Italy alone. We still must account for Paul’s biases and editorial decisions alongside his understanding of his sources, but with the LP the picture grows clearer. Based on the sixth-century sources overall, the case for a pre-Lombard plague in 565 looks quite frail.

III.2.5: The Seventh Century, Part 2: The Chroniclers (Again)

For the seventh century, multiple key sources remain besides the LP. The works of Fredegar, Isidore, and Bede all contain details on the 560s and 570s, and Paul likely read these

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\(^{355}\) See Section II.2.
texts himself. These three chronicles can provide insight into which Lombard-related events received noteworthy treatment. Conversely, they also highlight the trend established in the sixth century: we still do not see plague manifesting as a pre-Lombard event in Italy.

To begin, we have the *Historia Epitomata* of the little-understood Fredegar, which largely paralleled Gregory of Tours’ *HF*. However, the chronicle included twenty-three “interpolations,” or additions, to Gregory’s narrative that likely came from original information of Fredegar’s. For our purposes, Fredegar’s text becomes most interesting around the death of Justinian. The emperor was replaced by Justin, “an unjust and greedy man.” With this brief line, Paul’s eminent disapproval of Justin in the *HL*—and the contrast he provided via Alboin—finds further grounding in the earlier sources. Next is Fredegar’s account of the Lombard arrival, in which he made no mention of any famine or disease before or during the invasion. After recounting the Lombards’ origins, he jumped to Alboin’s death and the attempted invasion of Gaul, however, thus skipping the middle years in which we saw Marius’ various accounts of disease. Fredegar made no note of Paul’s Ligurian Plague, but he likewise did not include any specific information related to Gregory’s plague of Clermont. Indeed, the only appearance of pestilence in the chronicle came when Fredegar paraphrased Gregory’s account of the various

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356 The *AHE* was a continuation of Prosper of Aquitaine’s own extension of Jerome’s *Universal Chronicle*.
360 Fred., *Chr.* 65 and translation note 162. See also Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 22. Cf. Paul, *HL* II.5; *OGL* 5. In an interpolation that added to the chronicle of Isidore (see below), Fredegar did expand the narrative around Justin’s invitation to the Lombards and his conflict with the empress Sophia, however. See Fred., *Chr.* 65 and translation note 162. See also Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 22. Cf. Paul, *HL* II.5; *OGL* 5.
361 Fred., *Chr.* 66-68. The story of Alboin’s murder is very short, likely coming from Gregory (Cf. Greg. Tur., *HF* IV.41) or Marius (Cf. Mar. Av., *Chr.* a. 572). On the Lombard invasion of Gaul, see Section III.2.3.
natural disasters during the “fifth year of King Childebert [II]” (r. 575-596, so around 580) and added that “a very severe plague followed [these] marvel[s].” While this passage echoed Gregory’s description of calamities preceding plague, Fredegar included no additional detail beyond some “dysenteric illness” in Gaul.

Neither edition of Isidore’s Chronica contains explicit references to plague or pestilence for the sixth century. Even the initial outbreak of the First Pandemic makes no appearance. Nonetheless, we do see in his text what may be the earliest version of the Narses-Sophia-Justin feud. After defeating Totila, Narses was “frightened by the threats of Sophia Augusta” and “invited the Lombards from Pannonia and introduced them into Italy.” Then, during the reign of Tiberius II (r. 574-582), the Lombards “came into Italy” after “the Romans had been driven away.”

On the one hand, Isidore could mean that until Tiberius took the role of Caesar and then Augustus of the Empire, the Lombards had been driving the Romans out. Alternatively, this could mean that the Lombard “invasion,” as Isidore understood it, did not begin for some time after their initial “introduction” into Italy. The latter option parallels the LP’s delayed conquest, generating further questions for the conquest’s timeline.

If, for a moment, we take the structures of Isidore and the LP at face value, an issue arises like that of the hypothetical analysis above of Marius and other sources on the Lombard invasion

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363 Fred., Chr. 82: “Et discordi a regis iterum bellum civile parantibus, desentericus morbos totas Gallias praeoccupavit.”
364 The first edition was published circa 615, the second around 626 years later. See Jose Carlos Martín, Isidori Hispalensis Chronica (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 13-20.
365 Isidore, Chr. Maj. 402. Isidore’s dating is nebulous, but the next entry, describing the ascension of the Gothic king Leovigild (r. 569-586) can help place Narses’ invitation sometime around 568-569 (the passage begins with “at this time” immediately after Isidore’s summary of the Lombards’ arrival in Italy).
366 Isidore, Chr. Maj. 404a. Note that Tiberius was effective emperor (as “Caesar”) under Justin II from 574-578 (due to the latter’s declining mental faculties) and ruled alone (as “Augustus”) after Justin’s death in 578 until his own death in 582.
367 Isidore, Chr. Maj. 402.
of Gaul. If the epidemics of 570 and 571, concentrated in Gaul and the regions of Italy within Marius’ sphere, struck while Alboin’s followers merely loitered in occupied Liguria and Venetia (as Isidore seemed to suggest), they would then be susceptible to a specifically anti-Lombard outbreak. Given what we know about the spread of plague in the HF, Marius’ Chronicon, and the HL, this hypothesis is equally viable—albeit just as problematic—as Paul’s anti-Roman pestilence. The questions derived from even Isidore’s brief account show once more the lack of plausibility for a targeted or one-sided plague like Paul’s.

We turn next to the Chronica Majora from Bede’s On the Reckoning of Time, in which the author produced entries for the years of each emperor’s rule. Like many of the other chroniclers we have already discussed, Bede made no mention of the initial plague outbreak of 541/542.\(^{368}\) The entry for Justin II was almost exclusively dedicated to Narses, discussing his defeat of Totila and the accusations levied against him by Justin and Sophia.\(^{369}\) Bede drew directly from Isidore and the LP for these details, restating the idea of Narses’ alleged attempt to “claim” Italy for his own before inviting the Lombards to “come and possess Italy” from his exile in Campania.\(^{370}\) In a further parallel to the LP—almost certainly due to Bede’s usage of that text as one of his primary sources—the Lombards did not make an appearance until the reign of Tiberius. Echoing the thematic framework of Marius’ Chronicon entry for Alboin’s campaign, Bede wrote that (evidently in the mid-570s) “the plundering people of the Lombards, accompanied by famine and plague, seized hold of all Italy, and besieged the city of Rome; at this time Alboin was pre-eminent.”\(^{371}\) There are, of course, a few issues with Bede’s

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\(^{368}\) Bede, Chr. Maj. a. 4518. The entry for Justinian mentioned that Belisarius retook parts of North Africa and “exterminated the Vandals,” but did not discuss the campaign in Italy or the other fronts of Justinian’s reconquest.

\(^{369}\) Bede, Chr. Maj. a. 4529.

\(^{370}\) Bede, Chr. Maj. a. 4529. Cf. Isidore, Chr. Maj. 402, LP LXIII.

\(^{371}\) Bede, Chr. Maj. a. 4536. Cf. LP LXIV. It goes without saying that had the Lombards truly been “accompanied” by plague, they would not have been spared its effects. Bede’s usage of “accompanied” here is largely metaphorical and based on chronological adjacency.
understanding of the event. For one, Alboin was killed before Tiberius had even become Caesar under Justin, let alone full emperor. Moreover, if it did in fact occur, Bede’s siege of Rome appeared only later in the *LP*, under Pelagius II’s papacy (r. 579-590). In sum, Bede’s description of Tiberius’ reign included events from the time of Justin to as late as Emperor Maurice (r. 582-602). This is yet another example of how quickly a timeline can be blurred when later authors attempted to distill their sources into a brief chronicle, let alone when the *HL* interwove many sources into a complex narrative.

Since Bede likely drew the notion of famine and plague “accompanying” the Lombards directly from the *LP*, we cannot say that his text adds anything new to our cross-examination of the *HL*. At best, we can see how Marius’ notion of the Lombard possession of Italy—resulting in deaths by sword, starvation, and sickness—cemented itself in the literary canon for the advent of the Lombards. However, we know that Paul utilized Bede’s work, and both authors relied heavily on the *LP*. We can therefore see how Paul diverted not only from the *LP*, but from the work of another historian roughly contemporary with himself. The historical contrast generated by the *HL* thus grows ever stronger with Bede, as we now know that even Paul’s (approximate) peers described a simultaneous plague, famine, and invasion event. This latter version of the story, originating loosely in Marius but propagated by Isidore and intensified by the *LP* and Bede, only compounded the need for Paul to separate Alboin from such calamities. By absolving the Lombards of responsibility for the devastation of the early 570s and detaching them concurrent plague and famine alike, Paul contested Bede’s narrative. Indeed, when adding this notion to the Gregory the Great-inspired, anti-Lombard narrative of the Roman and Catholic

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372 *LP* LXV.
373 Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 4, 16, 22. Fabbro describes both of these eighth-century texts (the chronicle in the *Reckoning of Time* and the *HL*) as “dependent” on the *LP* for chronology and certain historical details.
establishment, we can see even further the uniqueness of Paul’s conquest narrative. By reframing
the story of Lombard-caused strife as one in which plague was the culprit, Paul contested
Gregory as an ideologue. Compared to these other sources, Paul’s Lombards were not only not
responsible for the misfortunes of Italy, but under Alboin they in fact provided relief from the
very hardships they were alleged to have started in the first place.374

III.2.6: The Seventh Century, Part 3: Lombard Origins

We have three additional sources for the seventh century that Paul relied upon. All
provide unique takes on the Lombard conquest, and notably, none mention plague. First, there is
the Auctarii Havniensis Extrema (AHE), which provided a slightly altered narrative for the
invasion of Italy. This text, in a possible interpolation of Isidore, described how Narses “through
twelve years had restored the cities and walls [of Italy] to their original dignity, and cherished the
people with justice and prudence.”375 Here we see the positive view of Narses appear once more,
especially when considering that the “threats” and “abusive words” he received came from the
“idle woman” Sophia.376 The invitation to the Lombards reappeared in the AHE, albeit framed in
a manner that seemed to justify Narses, not vilify him. Alboin’s host then entered Italy “in the
fifth year of Justin [circa 570/571]” with “the whole Lombard people” who “after the
battles…settled quietly.”377 Evidently, no pestilence interfered with this “quiet settlement,” but

374 See Section II.4.
375 AHE a. 1520. The language here echoed the LP’s account of Italy’s “joy” after Narses’ victories. Cf. LP LXIII.
See also Agn., LPR 95 and in general, III.3.2 below. On the AHE’s structure, sources, and style, see Steven
Muhlberger, “Heroic Kings and Unruly Generals: The ‘Copenhagen’ Continuation of Prosper Reconsidered,”
376 AHE a. 1520. On the positive view of Narses, see Muhlberger, “Heroic Kings and Unruly Generals,” 58. See also
Section II.4 and note 219 above.
377 AHE a. 1520-1521. Cf. Mar. Av., Chr. a. 569; Greg. Tur., HF IV.41; Paul, HL II.7, etc. See also Fabbro, “Society
and Warfare,” 18-19.
the AHE’s timing stands out for the Lombards’ late arrival, coming in the early 570s. As we will see below, this timeline was altered in two additional Lombard texts.

The Origo Gentis Langobardorum (OGL) and the preface to Rothari’s edict constituted important foundational documents for Paul and the mythos surrounding the Lombards’ origin. The preface to the Edictum Rothari—the law codes of the eponymous Lombard king Rothari (r. 636-652), promulgated in “the eighth year of [Rothari’s] reign” (circa 644)—and the OGL may be versions of the same text. Both provide us with key details. For one, Rothari wrote that it was “the seventy-sixth year after the happy arrival of the Lombards in the land of Italy, led there by divine providence in the time of King Alboin, my predecessor” when he published his laws. Rough subtraction puts this “happy” moment in 568—the year that found its way into the HL.

The OGL included some elaboration, and an earlier date of arrival than the AHE:

The Langobards inhabited Pannonia for 42 years. Alboin himself led the Langobards into Italy by the invitation of Narses; and Alboin, king of the Lombards, left Pannonia on Easter during the month of April in the first indiction. After the second indiction, they began to plunder in Italy. By the third indiction, Alboin was made lord of Italy. Alboin reigned in Italy for three years...

For dating purposes, the “first indiction” would have begun in 568, with the second being 569 and the third 570. From the OGL, we can see that the first year of the Lombard presence in Italy was relatively peaceful before conflict began in earnest and Alboin took enough territory to

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378 Edict. Roth. 1. Bullough, “Ethnic History,” 91. See also the discussion of the Historia Langobardorum Codicis Gothani in III.3.2. Paul may have been attempting to refashion the OGL in his own narrative; see Heath, Narrative Worlds, 144.

379 Paul, HL II.7. Gregory the Great’s letters also suggest an arrival date of 568. One, written in June 595, described 27 years of Lombard occupation. Another, from July 603, described 35 years since the Lombards arrived. See Greg., Reg. V.39, XIII.39.


381 This is based on the dating used by Marius in his Chronicon, wherein each year is labeled an Indiction. For each year in these fifteen-year cycles, Marius labeled the corresponding years as Indiction I through Indiction XV.
be considered a lord in the subsequent two years.\footnote{Marius’ corresponding account put the Lombard arrival in 569, but due to his dating error his text should be read in this entry as describing events that occurred in 568. See Mar. Av., Chr. a. 569 and III.2.2 above. To synthesize this with Secundus, it could be that Secundus was referring to the beginning of Lombard-associated violence in 569 when he situated the Lombard arrival in the “second indiction,” since Alboin was described by the \textit{OGL} only as having left Pannonia in 568 but starting to plunder the following year. See Section III.2.1.} Compared to the \textit{AHE}, the \textit{OGL} flipped the timing of the fighting, perhaps to echo Rothari’s description of a “happy arrival.”\footnote{AHE a. 1521. \textit{Edictum Rothari} 1.} Knowing that Paul utilized the \textit{OGL}, we can also see the subtle shift he made for the specific date of the Lombard’s move into Italy. Rather than moving on Easter, as the \textit{OGL} stated, the pious Lombards waited exactly one day \textit{after} that important Christian holiday to begin their conquest.\footnote{Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 19 (and note 61). See Paul, \textit{HL} II.7: “They came out of [Pannonia] in the month of April in the first indiction on the day \textit{after} holy Easter.” Cf. \textit{OGL} 5 and Excerpt. Sangall. 712. However, Secundus evidently dated the Lombard arrival to May 569, based on the surviving \textit{Historiola} fragment (see Section III.2.1 above). Paul disapproved of Easter invasions, such as in his account of Stilicho’s Easter assault on the Goths in Italy. See \textit{Historia Romana} XII.13: “\textit{Qui ipso sacratissimo die Paschae Gothis nil tale suspicantibus super eos inruit magnamque eorum partem prostrauit; nam primum perturbati Gothi ac propter religionem cedentes, demum arma corripiunt, more se solito cohortantur victoremque uirtute potiori prosternunt exercitum.”} Altogether, while the specific dating remains murky, we can still see that Paul altered the narrative of the \textit{OGL}—his main source for this event—to fit with his larger narrative of the piety of the Lombards (or at minimum, the piety of Alboin).

The \textit{OGL}’s notion that Alboin ruled for three years roughly corresponds to Marius’ placement of his death in 572.\footnote{Mar. Av., Chr. a. 572. Cf. \textit{AHE} a. 1521. The continuator of Prosper wrote that Alboin ruled for two years and ten months, while the \textit{HL} had Alboin in power for three years and six months (see Paul, \textit{HL} II.28). Likewise, the \textit{Historia Langobardorum Codicis Gothani} (as we will see in Section III.3.2 below) maintained a regnal period of three years and six months. See \textit{HLCG} 5, p.9 (33-34). The broadest departure from these timings can be seen in Sigibert’s chronicle, which had Alboin reigning for six years. See Sig. Gem., Chr. a. 568.} More importantly, we can see that from these foundational Lombard documents, Alboin had already seized control of Italy when outbreaks of plague and other diseases struck the region in 570 and 571 (per Marius and the \textit{Excerptis}).\footnote{Mar. Av., Chr. a. 570-571. See Section III.2.2.} With this timing, a plague concentrated in pockets of Italy and Gaul would almost certainly be a detriment to Lombard rule, not the status of the Romans in Liguria, Venetia, and elsewhere. Based on the \textit{OGL}, these very Roman forces would have been defeated already. At the very least, a more
conservative reading of the *OGL* in context of the plague in 570/571 would suggest that while there may have been a simultaneous epidemic and invasion, for Alboin’s purposes the conquest was largely complete by the time these outbreaks began. We can contrast this result to the narrative of the *LP*, in which plague and the Lombards were apparent allies. This delineation more accurately reflects the likely timeline for the early 570s and, as Paul would appreciate, even helps rehabilitate the Lombards, albeit via a different timeline. The *HL* pushed the plague much further away from Alboin by moving it into the past, but we can view the *OGL* as a stepping-stone on the way to a full detachment of plague in the 570s from the Lombards.

### III.3.1: Sixth- and Seventh-Century Silence

We have concluded our analysis of the main sources for the Lombard conquest. That still leaves a variety of tangential texts, including those from the same time or afterwards. These texts, notable either for their contemporary silence about plague in the pre- and post-Lombard conquest era or for their character as later works with post-hoc changes to the conquest story, likewise warrant a brief survey.

We begin with texts from the sixth and seventh centuries. For one, Justinian’s *Pragmatic Sanction* (of 554), the updated law codes issued after the reclamation of Italy, spoke only of the risks of barbarians.\(^{387}\) Evidently, any depopulation from famine and plague did not warrant specific updates to the Byzantine tax system in that region. In another example that both ignored

\(^{387}\) *Pragmatic Sanction* C2: “For the republic cannot be properly protected, unless the taxes, religiously due, are paid; the army, receiving the portion thereof assigned to it, resists the enemy, frees our subjects from incursion and wickedness of barbarians…” After the Lombard conquest, Alboin evidently issued a legal text of his own: a “*practicum*” much like that of his Roman predecessor. See Paul, *HL* II.12. See also Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 61.
plague—and even contests Paul’s Ligurian Plague—Corippus’ *In laudem Iustini minoris*, a poem celebrating Justin’s ascension to emperor in 566, painted a rosy picture for the Empire during the change in imperial rule. In the text, we see only examples of Byzantine success, from Avars “begging for peace,” to “vanquished” Franks and Getae, to “tyrans captured and laid low” and the infighting of the Lombards and Gepids. Of course, a laudatory poem will certainly be prejudiced toward its subjects, but we can note that Corippus is essentially a foil to the equally biased narrative of Paul’s pre-Lombard, plague-ravaged Empire in Italy.

For another quick example, Evagrius Scholasticus’ *Ecclesiastical History*, completed sometime in the late sixth century (circa 593/4), attested to repeated plague outbreaks in the Byzantine east. His text claimed that the disease struck in every indiction, specifically during the second year of each fifteen-year indiction. For the “fifty-two years” since plague’s appearance in 541, Evagrius’ waves would correspond roughly to the late 550s, the early 570s, and the late 580s or early 590s. Intriguingly, this timing lines up with many of the epidemics we have already discussed. Of course, beyond his hyperbolic remark that the disease “made a

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388 Coripp. *In Laudem* 85: “God has granted that all kingdoms should be beneath your feet and has subdued proud kings and made hostile arms fade away. That famed people, the Avars, dreadful with their snaky hair, horrible to look upon and fierce in bloody warfare, begs for peace in the middle of your palace, a supplicant with hair outspread, subject to your rule and ready to serve, and though so numerous does not dare to trust to its soldiers and attack the standards of Rome. Who could count the Franks or the Getae so often defeated and vanquished in battle? Or the tyrants captured and laid low? Or the fierce peoples of the Lombards and the Gepids, inflicting mutual wounds on each other in their ferocity over the broad plains, when the good fortune of our emperor destroyed the two races one after another, while his own soldiers remained safe? At that time a large number of your enemies fell, punished by their own treachery. And now, their fighting over, both victors and vanquished alike serve in your palace…You for whom it is right to conquer unvanquished peoples and to lay low barbarian kingdoms…”

389 Little, “Life and Afterlife,” 9, Stathakopoulos “Crime and Punishment,” 105. Evagrius’ account is one of the key narrative descriptions of plague, as he himself suffered from the disease and named multiple family members who were also afflicted by it. See Evagr., *Eccl. Hist.* IV.29: “I was seized with what are termed buboes, while still a school-boy, and lost by its recurrence at different times several of my children, my wife, and many of my kin, as well as of my domestic and country servants…at the expiration of the fourth indiction from its commencement, I lost a daughter and her son.”

390 Evagr., *Eccl. Hist.* IV.29: “This visitation also befell cities and other places in many instances according to the periods called Indictions; and the disease occurred, with the almost utter destruction of human beings, in the second year of each indiction.”

391 550s: Agathias, John Malalas, Theophanes, etc.; 570s: Gregory, Paul, Marius, Bede, Agnellus *LP*, etc.; 580s/590s: Gregory, Gregory, Paul, *LP*, etc. Through Evagrius, we can see the first notion of plague “waves” as they
circuit of the whole world in succession,” we do not gain a detailed understanding of the plague’s effects in Italy during Evagrius’ life, nor do the Lombards really appear at all throughout his work.  

Finally, John Malalas’ *Chronographia*, written in the mid-sixth century, provides yet another example of the eschatological chronicler, although this work focused almost exclusively on events around Constantinople. From the appearance of plague in 541 to the end of his chronicle, nearly every page mentioned famine, pestilence, earthquakes and other natural disasters, or civil strife. However, no epidemic in Italy reached a level of significance warranting John’s attention before 563 (when his chronicle ends). A similar example can be seen in the chronicle of Theophanes Confessor who expanded on John’s work during the early ninth century. Like John’s chronicle, repeated natural disasters and plagues appear throughout Theophanes’ entries for the 540s through 570s, although Theophanes mentioned no plagues between 565 and 587, when he noted that the “lithe Lombards made war on the Romans.”

are often described today. Noel and Biraben’s and Stathakopoulos’ works are at the forefront of this plague categorization system. See Biraben and Le Goff, “The Plague in the Early Middle Ages” and Stathakopoulos, *Famine and Pestilence*. On plague “waves” (amid general nomenclature for the First Pandemic), see Section I.2. 

392 Evagr., *Eccles. Hist.* IV.29. Evagrius echoed Procopius when we wrote that “no part of the human race [was left] unvisited by the disease.” Cf. Procop., *Bella*. II.22: “During these times there was a pestilence, by which the whole human race came near to being annihilated.” Also, numerous comparisons have been made between the plague narratives of late antique authors with Thucydides’ account of the Athenian Plague during the Peloponnesian War circa 430 BCE. See Durliat, “La peste du VIe siècle”; John Maddicott, “Plague in Seventh-Century England,” in Little, *Plague and the End of Antiquity*, 180; Mordechai and Eisenberg, “Rejecting Catastrophe,” 9; Sallares, “Ecology, Evolution, and Epidemiology of Plague,” 237-239, 246, 249; Évelyne Samama, “Thucydide et Procope: Le regard des historiens sur les épidémies,” in *Air, Miasmes et Contagion: Les épidémies dans l’Antiquité et au Moyen Âge*, edited by Sylvie Bazin-Tacchella, et al., 55-74 (Langres: Dominique Guêniot, 2001). For the Athenian Plague (which was not actually the plague disease, *Y. pestis*), see Thuc., II.47-54. Evagrius, however, confronted this notion directly, describing the plague as “in some respects similar to that described by Thucydides, in others widely different.” Here, he may have been alluding to the disease’s novel symptomology despite the two epidemics sharing their (alleged) origins in Ethiopia. See Peter Sarris, “Bubonic Plague in Byzantium: The Evidence of Non-Literary Sources,” in Little, *Plague and the End of Antiquity*, 123.

393 For example, see the following chapters toward the end of Book XVIII of the *Chronicle* (covering 541 to the early 560s). Plague: 92, 120, 127; famine and shortage: 95, 121, 131, 139, 147; natural disasters (earthquakes, fires, and floods): 90, 93, 102, 103, 112, 118, 121, 123, 124, 128 (?), 132, 139, 148; civil strife, riots, and mobs: 105, 108, 117, 131, 132, 135, 136, 138, 146, 150, 151.

394 Theop., *Chr.* a. 6080. The Lombards were almost entirely irrelevant in this chronicle, and this detail for 587 likely referred to a specific campaign, not Alboin’s invasion. Theophanes also included a reference to Narses as
with Marius, we can see with these short examples how other chroniclers who demonstrated a keen interest in calamitous events make no mention of significant pre-Lombard plague outbreak. We could explain this via the fact that both authors were geographically removed from Italy, but these writers were by no means ignorant of events in the broader Mediterranean. Indeed, Theophanes alluded to Lombard campaigns, so we know he kept track of events in Italy, and John ended his chronicle with a discussion of the Moors’ revolt in North Africa.\textsuperscript{395}

**III.3.2: The Murkiness of the Eighth Century and Beyond**

The final section of our analysis will examine the texts that bridge the gap between the *HL* and the Ligurian Plague narrative as Hermannus Contractor—and generations of later historians—recounted it. In short, Hermannus’ plague of 564/565 may have become the dominant narrative for early modern scholarship, but between the eighth and eleventh centuries we will see that the understanding of Paul’s plague and the Lombard conquest in general continued to evolve.

First, the *Historia Langobardorum Codicis Gothani (HLCG)* is a close relative of the *HL*, coming after it in the early ninth century. Sourcing directly from Paul and the *OGL*, this text ultimately regurgitated most of its predecessors’ claims. However, the *HLCG* turned the Frankish conquest of the Lombards into a “happy ending” based on its pro-Carolingian, more heavily Catholic standpoint.\textsuperscript{396} Generally, this text can be considered a rewrite of the *OGL*, which is

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\textsuperscript{395} Theop., *Chr.* a. 6080; Joh. Mal., *Chr.* XVIII.145.

\textsuperscript{396} Bullough, “Ethnic History,” 100, Pohl, “Historical Writing,” 323.
quite clear when we look at *HLCG*’s account of the initial conquest.\(^\text{397}\) The timing of Alboin’s departure from Pannonia on Easter in April of 568 (followed by the plundering that began in 569) is a direct copy from the *OGL*, as is the notion of Narses’ invitation.\(^\text{398}\) Similarly, the plague does not appear. We do, however, see an indication that Pavia and Milan “saw themselves empty” before they surrendered to Alboin “as it had been predestined by God.”\(^\text{399}\) This seems to be adapted from Paul, who described Alboin as entering Italy “without any hindrance.”\(^\text{400}\)

As we discussed earlier, the *HLCG* fails to mention any extended siege or warfare in Pavia (or Italy in general) until after Alboin’s death.\(^\text{401}\) The notion of an “empty” Italy could suggest a plague-induced depopulation event prior to the Lombards’ arrival, but it could just as easily be an allusion to the region’s inhabitants fleeing or simply surrendering without a fight. Indeed, the lack of any warfare specified in the *HLCG* seems to suggest a peaceful initial phase of occupation, as we see in the *AHE*’s “quietly settled” Lombards.\(^\text{402}\) Knowing that this text postdated the *HL*, we can read it as either having ignored the Ligurian Plague, or possibly as evidence that Paul invented the outbreak for narrative effect. In either case, the plague clearly did not factor into the *HLCG*’s own version of the early Lombard mythos, suggesting for us that perhaps the disease should not factor into our understanding of these events. Furthermore, a major takeaway of the *HLCG*’s differing narrative is the fact that for Lombard history, we can see that Paul—like Secundus before him—was not considered the final authority despite his

\(^{397}\) Mommsen was the first to suggest that the *HLCG* was a rewrite of the *OGL*. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 138.

\(^{398}\) *HLCG* 5 p. 9 (27-29).

\(^{399}\) *HLCG* 5 p. 9 (31-33): “Tunc Papiae cives et Mediolanum metropolim cum reliquae aliae civitates Italiorum, videntes se vacuae, sicut a Deo fuerat praedestinatum, colla sua ipsius Albuin [sic] regi subicierunt.”

\(^{400}\) Paul, *HL* II.9.

\(^{401}\) *HLCG* 5 p. 10 (2-3): [after Alboin’s murder] “Unde plures annos scisma et bella inter Langobardos et Romanos fuerunt.”

\(^{402}\) *AHE* a. 1521.
work’s popularity. Given the HLCG’s stronger Catholic and Carolingian standpoint, there would be no reason for its author to forgo the plague narrative outside of a perception of historical inaccuracy or thematic disinterest.

To close out the eighth century, we can also note Paul’s history of the bishops of Metz in Gaul (written soon after the HL in the 790s). This text made no mention of plague, however, despite it covering the same era that included Gregory of Tours’ major plague in the HF. Given its subject matter this is not necessarily surprising, barring the possibility of plague-related miracles in a theological context.

We also have two significant works of history from the ninth century, both of which touched on the rise of the Lombards and associated plagues. First, there is the work of Freculf, a Frankish bishop who, in his mid-ninth century Histories (covering creation to his day), described how Alboin, “accompanied by famine and mortality” invaded Italy after “setting fire” to his homeland. While this phrasing is quite similar to that of Marius and nearly identical to Bede’s, Freculf placed these events after he first noted the reign of Emperor Maurice (r. 582-602), even later than the LP’s placement of the conquest as having occurred under Tiberius (r. 574-582). Freculf also included the LP’s and Isidore’s motif of Narses’ invitation, which we do not see in Marius’ Chronicon. In short, this post-Paul version of the story provides us with even more

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403 On the popularity of the HL and its later propagation, see McKitterick, History and Memory, 77-78.
404 The Liber de Episcopis Mettensibus. On this text, see Heath, Narrative Worlds, 86-107 and Goffart, Narrators, 373-378.
405 Largely a biographical compendium, this text only briefly covered the historical context for its subjects. Scholars have noted that this somewhat unusual text further illustrates Paul’s skill as a writer and metaphorical expert. See Goffart, Narrators, 377.
407 Cf. Mar. Av., Chr. a. 569. Freculf did not provide dates for his Histories, but for the mid-sixth century the discussed events seemed to center around particular popes and emperors, much like the LP.
confusing details, demonstrating further that the jumbling of the Lombard conquest story did not stop with the LP, Isidore, Bede, the OGL, or even Paul. While the basic Lombard-plague-famine event is present in Freculf’s text, the chronological context is so muddled we cannot make any concrete claims on the text’s implications for plague vis-à-vis the Lombards during the late 560s and early 570s.

Agnellus’ Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis (LPR) offers another blurred narrative, albeit one with greater thematic consistency, and no references to plague. Like Paul, Agnellus penned the LPR more than 200 years after the Lombards first moved into Italy, around the same time as Freculf during the early to mid-ninth century. Nonetheless, his narrative differs drastically from Paul’s. Under the entry for the bishop Agnellus (r. 557-570), the death of Justinian was followed by ominous signs and catastrophes, but not plague: along with a comet, “red signs appeared in the sky” and multiple cities suffered from fires. Even with these portents, Agnellus indicated that things seemed to bode well in Italy during the 560s. For one, Narses defeated marauding Frankish and Gothic forces before retiring a wealthy man and dying at the impressive age of ninety-five, with no indication of him having betrayed the Romans. In general, during Bishop Agnellus’ reign “there was great abundance and order among the people of Italy.”

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408 Agnellus wrote the LPR sometime in the mid-ninth century, making him even further removed from the already secondary Paul. On the LPR’s construction and style, see Joaquin Martinez-Pizarro, Writing Ravenna: The Liber Pontificalis of Andreas Agnellus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995). See esp. pp. 5-7, 24. Martinez-Pizarro describes Agnellus as an “often extremely incompetent” historian. Furthermore, the LPR frequently included legends taken directly from the HL.

409 Agn., LPR 90. The red signs may also be referring to the comet. This comet certainly passed over the region in autumn of 565. See note 181 above. Compare to the HF and HL, where we see the alternative ordering of portents, plague, and then Justinian’s death.

410 Agn., LPR 90-91, 95. Note the lack of any Narses-related controversy in this source. This could suggest a refinement of the Lombard origin narrative in the years after Paul, or perhaps Agnellus’ own aversion to including such scandalous details. This “great abundance” parallels the LP and AHE’s accounts of a “joyous” Italy before the Lombards arrived. Cf. LP LXIII and AHE a. 1518.
Under the next Bishop of Ravenna, Peter III (r. 570-578), we can see things taking an unfortunate turn. Around the time of Peter’s consecration, Agnellus wrote of how “the Veneto was occupied by the Lombards and invaded; [the Romans] were expelled without war.”\footnote{Agn., \textit{LPR} 93, 95. Agnellus dated Peter’s consecration to October of the second indication (roughly 568).} Soon afterward, “there was a pestilence among cows and destruction everywhere.”\footnote{Agn., \textit{LPR} 94. The pestilence is placed during “the fifth year of the Emperor Justin II,” putting it between 570 and 571. Marius’ \textit{Chronicon} is the likely source for this bovine plague, an event the \textit{HL} conspicuously lacks. See Mar. Av., \textit{Chr. a. 570}.} This “destruction everywhere” could be interpreted as having been caused by disease, as the phrasing appears to have come directly from Marius.\footnote{Cf. Mar. Av., \textit{Chr. a. 570}.} The Lombards then continued to plunder Italy, including Tuscany and Pavia, the latter of which they “overran,” albeit with no signs of a siege.\footnote{Agn., \textit{LPR} 94. See Section II.4.}

Despite a lack of any explicit references to plague, Agnellus did include some cryptic remarks on long-term decline, along with the more obvious notion of “destruction everywhere” during the time of the Lombard occupation. According to the \textit{LPR}, during Peter’s reign “all Italy was agitated by the greatest disturbance.”\footnote{Agn., \textit{LPR} 95. In his work, Agnellus does not include explicit reference to plague until the time of Bishop Marinian (r. 595-606): “Therefore in [Marinian’s] reign those dwelling around the marine shores and especially in the city of Ravenna were devastated by a disastrous plague. And at the turn of the year a strong and fatal illness consumed the citizens of Verona. After this a terrible sign was seen in the sky, like bloody hosts battling through the whole night, and the clearest light shone.” Note the combination of ominous signs in the sky with natural catastrophe, a well-established theme by Agnellus’ time. This plague account comes from Paul (Cf. IV.4). In this section, Paul notes that this inguinal plague (in Ravenna, Grado, and Istria”) was “was very grievous as it had also been thirty years before.” Here, he is once again referring to his supposed pre-Lombard outbreak. See Stathakopoulos, \textit{Famine and Pestilence}, 323. Furthermore, we can postulate the source of Paul’s apparent mathematical error: Gregory of Tours’ plague description really began in 563, with the landslide at Tauredunum. With no explicit dates given by Gregory, one can see how Paul may have seen that year as the beginning of the epidemic, especially considering Marius’ precise date for the opening natural disasters. Thirty years after 563 puts the timeline in the early 590s, precisely when the plague of Ravenna appears to have begun. Paul also included his account of the \textit{Dialogues}’ publication (593) around the same time as this outbreak. See Paul, \textit{HL} IV.5; Greg. Tur., \textit{HF} IV.31; Mar. Av., \textit{Chr. a. 563}.} Longinus, the prefect who replaced Narses, built a wall near Ravenna “on account of fear of the enemy.”\footnote{Agn., \textit{LPR} 95} At the same time, “the Roman senate failed” and “the Roman provincial citizens were everywhere reduced to nothing.”\footnote{Agn., \textit{LPR} 95.} This latter
notion of decline after an era of apparent abundance in Italy parallels Paul’s narrative surrounding the fall of Pavia: “after the year of plenty of which we spoke, a great famine attacked and devastated all Italy.” It would not be a stretch to conclude that this “great disturbance” involved a plague, thus further aligning the LPR with either Marius’ account of disease in the early 570s or even Paul’s pre-Lombard pestilence. The LP—a model for Agnellus—likewise contained such themes of repeated destruction in Italy from war and famine, as we have seen. And yet, the specifically “agitated” period in the LPR did not begin until 570 (the beginning of Peter III’s bishopric), thus conflicting with a plague in 565.

We must add a caveat to Agnellus’ account. Before describing this apparent decline, Agnellus wrote “let us now return to ancient history, what was done, as some say, in the reign of that Bishop Peter.” “As some say” is almost certainly a reference to Paul. Indeed, the passage describing the decline of Italy’s provincial population may in fact be Agnellus’ own summary of the HL’s pre-Lombard exposition in Book II. Furthermore, Agnellus exposed the issue with his work in a way that highlights the problem of the HL. The days of the Lombard conquest were already “ancient history” to him and Paul (the latter to a slightly lesser extent). Privileging Agnellus’ account over more contemporary chronicles and narratives would be a mistake. That said, with the LPR we can see the results of Paul’s blurring. Based on Agnellus’ utilization of the HL as a source, the calamities that occurred in Italy around the time of Alboin’s rise began,

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418 Paul, HL II.26. Cf. Ang., LPR 95: “…there was great abundance and order among the people of Italy.” In the MGH, this passage is referenced in the footnotes for Agnellus 95. Scholars have placed Paul’s “year of plenty” in 568. See Neil Christie, The Lombards: The Ancient Langobards (Oxford: Malden, 1998), 79.
419 See Section III.2.4.
420 Agn., LPR 95
421 Compare Paul, HL II.4 and HLCG 5. Martinez-Pizarro discusses the overall uneven quality of Agnellus’ writing, such as his combination of established legends with an odd mixture of meticulous research and personal opining. The LPR’s narrative structures turned the work into one that would both teach and moralize. Pizarro notes that Agnellus himself admitted his lack of material when writing and his lack of sources is at times quite clear. Indeed, this often led him to invent details to keep his narrative exciting. See Martinez-Pizarro, Writing Ravenna, 1-99.
according to the LPR, well before the Lombards left Pannonia. But the text made no mention of “great disturbance[s]” or explicit epidemics in Italy until after the Lombards’ actual arrival. This is a troubling contradiction, sowing more doubt about Paul’s Ligurian Plague.

We have one final plague-free summary of the Lombards’ origins in Italy, but from a non-chronological, Byzantine perspective. Constantine VII, known as a scholar as much as an emperor, included a brief description of the Lombard conquest in his De Administrando Imperio, written in the mid-tenth century. As we should come to expect of sources that are not the HL, this text did not reference any pre-conquest plague, although we do see a jumbled version of the Narses-Sophia feud (in which Sophia, through some error of Constantine, becomes “Irene”) and the patrician’s invitation to the Lombards. Furthermore, Constantine described something that could be considered a siege once the Lombards arrived. After “obeying” Narses’ invitation, the Lombards “came to Benevento,” seemingly bypassing northern Italy and arriving immediately in Campania. Once outside the city, “the inhabitants of Benevento did not allow [the Lombards] to come inside,” so the Lombards “built a small city” nearby. However, the Lombards eventually “began to come inside the city” and “having by a stratagem gained the upper hand of

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422 On this work, see András Németh, “A Database for Re-Conceiving Imperial Ideology? Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos and the Historical Excerpts,” in Center, Province and Periphery in the Age of Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos: From De Ceremoniis to De Administrando Imperio, edited by Niels Gaul, Volker Menze, and Csanád Bálint, 80–102 (Leipzig: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018). Constantine VII’s is the last work before we reach the eleventh-century chronicles of Sigibert and Hermannus, the latter of whom was the ultimate source for the modern 565 plague narrative. See Section 1.4.2.

423 Const., De Admin. 27. Constantine’s text described Narses being sent to govern Benevento and Pavia “in the time of the empress Irene” (rather than Sophia) when “Pope Zacharias…was governing Rome.” The actual Irene and Zacharias would not be in power until the eighth century. However, the exchanges between Narses and the empress, along with his subsequent invitation to the Lombards, seem to parallel the original sources of those events quite well.

424 Const., De Admin. 27. As we know from the LP, HL, and other sources, Narses had gone to Campania after his dismissal.

425 Const., De Admin. 27.
the inhabitants,” began to plunder and murder. As with Constantine’s version of the Narses-Sophia spat, this story does not make much historical sense. At best, it could suggest some form of siege warfare during the first decades of the Lombard-Roman conflict, but with no signs of plague. Constantine’s unclear dating and misalignment with our understood timeline of the events in the early conquest era leave us with no answers, and no discussion of plague. And as a corroboration of the supposed three-year siege of Pavia, Constantine’s story is of little use. We thus reach the end of the pre-Hermannus plague story, with ever-diminishing returns for Paul’s version of events.

III.4: Silence, Confusion, and Invention: Paul Fails his Peer Review

From this investigation, we can conclude that Paul’s narrative of the Ligurian Plague stands alone. We now have a much more concrete timeline for the Lombard conquest from the collected literary sources compared to what HL gives us: the Lombards left Pannonia no later than April of 568 and began their invasion in earnest by May of 569. In 570, by which time Alboin had taken control of much of northern Italy, bovine plague—along with a human, non-plague disease—struck the region. In one of the following two years, bubonic plague erupted in

const., De Admin. 27. In the HL, the Lombards did not take Benevento until the time of King Authari (r. 584-590). See Paul, HL III.23. Constantine’s narrative has them take Benevento first, and from there they “marched out and subdued all that land…as far as Pavia [and other cities].”

426 Const., De Admin. 27. In the HL, the Lombards did not take Benevento until the time of King Authari (r. 584-590). See Paul, HL III.23. Constantine’s narrative has them take Benevento first, and from there they “marched out and subdued all that land…as far as Pavia [and other cities].”

427 There are other texts that covered these times with little to no relevant detail, such as Ado of Vienne’s Chronicle, the Chronicon Paschale (which erroneously placed the Justinianic Plague in 532, see a. 532), John of Ephesus (an otherwise notable narrator of the plague), the anonymously written Liber Historiae Francorum, Michael the Syrian’s Chronicle (another preserver of detailed plague depictions), and the Zuqnin Chronicle. This final source included extensive information on plague, with outbreaks in 543-546 and 557-558. The text focused solely on the east, however, with no discussion of Italy or the Lombards. Gregory the Great, our notable narrator of western calamities, specifically mentioned the heightened impact of plague in the east rather than his home region of Italy; see Greg., Reg. IX.232 (written in August of 599): “And the closer you live to Africa, the more accurately you know how that country is being devastated by death and disease, in my view. But those who come from the East announce more serious devastation.” On this African outbreak, see also Greg., Reg. X.20.
Gaul and Italy either as a major transalpine outbreak or a series of localized epidemics; given the literary data alone, we cannot conclude the exact scope of the plague in this time, lest we fall into the “suck-in” problem. Nonetheless, no grand pestilence struck Italy in the 560s, and during those years the region perhaps even witnessed a “year of plenty” and a moment of joyous respite due to Narses’ final military victories.

By the end of 572, Alboin had been murdered, and less than two years later the various Lombard assaults on Gaul met brutal ends during the fragmented ducal era. It should be reiterated here that no other source described a pre-Lombard plague. Even the most charitable interpretations of Agnellus, the Excerptis, Marius, the LP, or any other text (especially those that sourced from Paul, like the HLCG or LPR) suggest that, at best, the plague of 571 would have affected the Romans and Lombards equally—or equally indiscriminately—but not before Alboin arrived. Furthermore, we have seen just how rapidly the stories of Narses, the plagues of the 570s, and the entire Lombard conquest evolved between even two texts. The discrepancies between Bede’s Chronica Majora and the LP, for example, let alone the dozens of written documents and hundreds of years separating Paul from the events of which he wrote, point to the historiographical fluidity of the overall Lombard conquest and plague narratives.

When we consider that the plurality of the chronicles and histories discussed in this chapter directly or indirectly influenced the HL as sources of historical content and thematic material, the problem of Paul’s plague grows ever larger. Simply put, the only literary evidence for a plague in the 560s (specifically, before 569) is the misleading, heavily editorialized account in the HL. We saw only silence from the contemporary sources covering this period, and

428 See Section I.2.
confusion from the noncontemporary ones. From the likes of Agnellus, Bede, Constantine VII, Freculf, and the LP, we witnessed the ever-increasing margin of error for the date of the plague, and the confusing game of telephone that precipitated from the legends surrounding the Lombard conquest. Based on some sources, the plague did not appear until 575 or later (if at all), but this too seems as inaccurate as 565. Moreover, later texts’ choices to forgo Paul’s pre-Lombard epidemic show that Paul’s narrative did not have the final say in the eighth century, and this paper argues it should not today either. We thus have an overwhelming consensus between every late antique and early medieval author, except Paul. At the earliest, there was a simultaneous plague-famine-conquest event in 569, coming on the heels of the already war-torn Italy’s brief period of respite in 567-568. Even this low-end estimate is based on a literal interpretation of Marius; his entry generally discussing disease in 569 should not necessarily be taken at face value.

We can compare our ordering of events to Paul’s, who structured his narrative inconsistently: first there was pestilence, then a “year of plenty,” then a “great famine,” and then finally Alboin’s invasion came to pass.\(^\text{430}\) In truth, this pestilence struck only after Alboin had declared himself a king in Italy. The only significant, pre-Lombard outbreaks in Italy (of plague and other diseases) that we know of occurred nearly fifteen years prior to Alboin’s invasion, per Agapios, Agathias, John Malalas, Theophanes Confessor, and others. The HL thus blurred not one, but multiple epidemics to a hazy midpoint before the time of the Lombards in Italy. Paul effectively conceived an epidemic that never occurred. Modern historians of late antique plague have assigned considerable significance to Paul’s invented epidemic, but the HL finds no external support in the literary sources of the era.

\(^{430}\) Paul, HL II.26.
CHAPTER IV
The Non-Literary Data for a Plague-Lombard Nexus:
More Questions for Paul

IV.1: Interdisciplinary History: The First Pandemic Model

The literary sources do not provide the complete story for plague. As an interdisciplinary topic, the study of *Yersinia pestis* and its effects lie at the crossroads of late antique historical studies, archaeology, epidemiology, and palynology. It is therefore worth looking wherever we can for evidence of Paul’s Ligurian Plague. Unfortunately for the study of plague in sixth-century Italy, the non-literary sources remain thin. As we will see, it is difficult to conclude much about the disease’s spread and damage in Byzantine Italy after 543 (the year of the first Italian outbreak), let alone the veracity of a specific plague epidemic in 565. Nonetheless, we have several avenues to consider.

Although the study of late antiquity is rooted in the textual canon, many of the broader theories of the First Pandemic—maximalist and minimalist alike—now find their basis in non-literary evidence.\(^\text{431}\) We will therefore consult both the broad non-literary frameworks for the spread of plague in the Mediterranean and the granular data these theories draw upon to see what

implications arise for the Ligurian Plague. Alongside the closely studied written accounts of Procopius and other such contemporaries of the First Pandemic, recent decades have yielded a trove of additional means through which we can analyze late antique plague. For one, there have now been several ancient DNA (aDNA) genomes drafted from the remains of plague victims, which have helped construct a phylogenetic tree for *Y. pestis* during the First Pandemic. Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) from Roman and Lombard remains likewise reveals insights into the genealogy of the peoples the Ligurian Plague may have affected. Furthermore, we can analyze findings in archaeology, demography, numismatics, plague-era epigraphy, and even some paleoclimatology in tandem with what we know from Paul and the other written sources. This chapter will briefly touch on each of these fields, pulling in evidence from outside the world of literary analysis to see what conclusions can be drawn regarding the Ligurian Plague. While more data is needed before concrete arguments can be advanced either way, nothing we have today corroborates Paul’s story or provides a smoking gun for the existence of a significant, pre-Lombard or unilaterally anti-Roman plague.

IV.2: Paleogenomics: A Helical Hole in the Story

The plague bacterium’s DNA, when identified in the dental pulp of late antique skeletal remains, can offer extremely useful insights into the spread and historical evolution of *Y. pestis*. For our study, there is one catch. Recent studies have isolated and analyzed aDNA

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samples from modern Germany, Spain, France, and England. However, Italy—especially northern Italy—remains a black hole for confirmed plague victims. The dearth of sequenced genomes from the region means we cannot perform a complete interdisciplinary analysis of Paul’s supposed plague or confirm without any doubt the presence of plague in the region during the sixth through eighth centuries. However, reconstructed plague genomes from Liguria, Venetia, Lombardy, and elsewhere in the north would be essential for answering three questions.

First, and as noted, plague DNA discovered in northern Italy and dated to late antiquity would show unambiguously that the disease reached the region. This is not to cast doubt on the notion that plague outbreaks did in fact impact the region in the sixth century or after; our analysis of the literary sources has clearly shown the plague reached Italy by the early 570s. However, even a single genome would provide confirmation that *Y. pestis* impacted the inhabitants of Lombard (or soon-to-be Lombard) territory. The extent of plague-focused sequencing efforts currently underway and recent advancements in high-throughput genomic investigation bode well for the possible identification of the plague pathogen in Lombard-era Italian remains. Unfortunately, we currently do not yet have this crucial datapoint.

Second, aDNA evidence from northern Italy could be fit into plague’s phylogenetic tree and compared to other sequences associated with late antique western Europe. As recent data has shown, a unique stem of *Y. pestis* originating in Gaul sprouted off from the branch of the plague lineage associated with the First Pandemic (which is populated with sequences primarily

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434 While no plague genomes have been sequenced in central Italy either, we at least have named victims of the disease, as attested to by contemporaries like Gregory the Great. See Section II.2.
concentrated in modern-day Germany).\textsuperscript{435} By comparing Italian samples to this branch, we could, for instance, potentially see a close relationship between strains straddling the Italian and French Alps. In other words, we could test the veracity of Marius’ theory of a transalpine outbreak (the \textit{Chronicon’s} outbreaks that we see in Italy and Gaul in the \textit{HL} and \textit{HF}, respectively) via the drafting of a northern Italian strain’s lineage. Or, quite separately, late antique Italian plague could fall on its own stem, suggesting a regional reservoir or a connection with strains in other regions not yet directly associated with Italy’s plague experience.\textsuperscript{436}

As mentioned in earlier chapters, it would be difficult to confirm a transalpine outbreak without extremely precise and well-dated aDNA data, and even that may not have the chronological accuracy necessary to verify Marius of Avenches’ account. Nonetheless, such data could and should be analyzed before taking the words of the \textit{Chronicon}, \textit{HL}, or \textit{HF} at face value. While radiocarbon dating has not pinpointed the precise year of death for the \textit{Y. pestis}-positive remains found in modern France, Germany, and elsewhere, their chronology does fall within the late sixth and early seventh century range such authors covered.\textsuperscript{437} Again, even a single genomic sample from Italy would provide actionable, comparative data: any additional SNPs\textsuperscript{438} would help us work towards a genomic picture for Italian and Gallic plague. Plague can travel far without diversifying much genetically, as slowly evolving as it is.\textsuperscript{439} However, expanding on the

\textsuperscript{435} See Keller, et al., “Ancient Yersinia Pestis Genomes,” 12366 (see Fig. 2.).
\textsuperscript{436} For example, Spain, England, North Africa, or elsewhere, especially considering the possibility of seaborne introduction.
\textsuperscript{437} The accuracy of dating these burial sites starts, at minimum, with 30- to 40-year windows based on archaeological and radiocarbon dating. Nonetheless, nearly all these sequenced genomes fall into the First Pandemic window. See Keller, “Ancient Yersinia Pestis Genomes,” 12365 and Harbeck, et al., “Yersinia Pestis DNA,” 4.
\textsuperscript{438} Single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) are markers of genetic variation within a DNA sequence. When analyzed in plague victims, SNPs can be used to identify the development of \textit{Yersinia pestis} strains. See David M. Wagner, et al., “Yersinia Pestis and the Plague of Justinian 541–543 AD: A Genomic Analysis,” \textit{The Lancet Infectious Diseases} 14, no. 4 (2014), 321-322.
Germano-Gallic phylogenetic stem (specifically the cluster located in southern France) and identifying a possible Italian branch or cluster as comparison could illustrate the microevolution of plague after its initial appearance in the Roman Mediterranean circa 543. Given the ever-expanding collection of First Pandemic genomes, we could see this question answered soon.

Finally, considering the confirmed presence of plague north of the Alps—in France, Germany, Austria, and even as far north as Britain—it may be that *Y. pestis* also reached Lombard-controlled Pannonia well before Alboin ever departed for Italy.\(^\text{440}\) Plague genomes from modern-day Hungary and Croatia could demonstrate that the Lombards had already encountered their own outbreaks, whether as an extension of the Plague of Justinian proper in the 540s or in a subsequent introduction. In other words, a single sixth-century genome from Pannonia would only further highlight and heighten the tenuousness of plague as a uniquely Byzantine phenomenon in greater northern Italy.\(^\text{441}\)

Even though the extant aDNA data for *Y. pestis* may not be comprehensive enough to make claims about the Ligurian Plague, the plague bacterium is not our only source of relevant paleogenomic information. For one, we can also analyze the mtDNA of individual remains identified as those of Lombards. Studies have shown a distinct lineage arising in Lombard settlements in northern Italy compared to Pannonia.\(^\text{442}\) From this, the possibility of a split in the


\(^{\text{441}}\) Keller’s study included *Yersinia pestis*-positive individuals in Austria, which would roughly correspond to northern Pannonia. However, these remains were dated to a chronological range between the mid-seventh and early ninth centuries. See Keller, “Ancient Yersinia Pestis Genomes,” 12365.

\(^{\text{442}}\) Carlos Eduardo G. Amorim, et al., “Understanding 6th-Century Barbarian Social Organization and Migration Through Paleogenomics,” *Nature Communications* 9, no. 3547 (2018). 8-9. The general heterogeneity of these populations could also corroborate Paul’s notion of a diverse migration coalition, as in *HL* II.26. See also Guido Alberto Gnecechi-Ruscone, et al., “Ancient genomes reveal origin and rapid trans-Eurasian migration of 7th century Avar elites,” *Cell* 185, no. 8 (2022), 1402-1413. The authors of this article suggest the Gepid Kingdom was destroyed by the Lombards by 567 or 568, but some interpretation of the literary sources suggest a split Lombard population did not defeat the Gepids until 571. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 26, 54-60.
Lombard population circa 568 therefore seems more likely than a mass migration. Alboin, as some have suggested, may only have led part of his people south. Furthermore, mtDNA analysis performed on sites associated with Lombard grave goods and culture has suggested a curious genealogical mixture “consistent with the results of migrational exchanges between Pannonia and Italy.” This genetic variation aligns with an understanding of the Lombard conquest as a part of the larger Roman-barbarian migration continuum. Just as the Romans established relationships with the foederati on the frontiers of their empire, the Lombards themselves were part of a heterogeneous group of peoples moving in and out of the later Roman and early Byzantine Empire’s porous Italian borders. In other words, northern Italy was already a diverse region, with provincial Romans, Lombards, and presumably numerous other barbarian groups (Goths, Alemanni, Franks, Heruli, etc.) living in proximity.

While current aDNA and mtDNA data does not provide definitive proof for the plague’s presence (or lack thereof) or its importation into northern Italy, it does illuminate the nonbinary nature of the conquest. The Lombards, like many other peoples along the imperial border, had already been in and out of Italy for some time before 568, as Procopius and Agathias also tell us. While their appearances in the pre-conquest literary history mainly covered their roles as mercenaries and auxiliaries (also called foederati or “allies”), we can postulate that the Lombards’ military relationship with Byzantine Italy would have been accompanied by trade and

443 See Section I.3.
446 Procop., Bella VIII.26-33; Agath., Hist. I.4, III.20. Agathias even wrote that Justinian referred to the Lombards (along with the Gepids, Alemanni, and others) as “his subjects.” See also Section III.2.1.
A specifically anti-Roman plague seems all the more unlikely given Paul’s claims of its spread across all Italy and the region’s non-monolithic population. Considering the dearth of literary evidence regarding its actual spread beyond Paul’s—or rather, Gregory the Great’s—symbolic account, such one-sided effects are practically an impossibility. Moreover, the lack of a sequenced Italian plague genome highlights a surprising, if technical truth: even with the overwhelming literary evidence, it has not been verified whether the Italian epidemics in the late antique sources were in fact caused by the plague bacterium.

IV.3: Archaeology, Demography, Numismatics, and Epigraphy

There are numerous archaeological areas of study in which plague can show signs of its presence, or at minimum, where we can see nonspecific evidence for any general mortality crises. Such studies abound for Italy, especially considering the rich legacy of the Roman Empire and its successor kingdoms. However, the data we have at present, be it settlement archaeology or the analysis of inscriptions and coinage, does not collectively constitute enough information to make a firm argument about plague or mass mortality in Italy, let alone confirmation of an Italian outbreak specifically in 565. We will briefly review some of the current research on the matter, as trend-based studies offer some slight counterarguments to Paul’s depiction of the Ligurian Plague.

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447 On the distinction between foederati and “allies”, see Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 32-36. Cross-border exchange would have been commonplace, having been the status quo since the Roman Republic and only further increasing from the second century CE onward as the numbers of foederati increased and Rome’s territory grew more porous in northern and central Europe. See also Dick Harrison, “Dark Age Migrations and Subjective Ethnicity: The Example of the Lombards,” Scandia 57, no. 1 (1991).
In the *HL*, plague appeared primarily as a rural disease, at least as Paul described it. While his image of abandoned farms and missing shepherds most likely stemmed from Gregory the Great’s metaphorical flock being slaughtered by the Lombards, it is worth giving Paul the benefit of the doubt and interrogating the specifics of a predominantly rural epidemic in Italy. By the sixth century, the formerly urbanized Italy of Roman times had undergone centuries of ruralization and metropolitan decline. Archaeological studies have revealed the spread of autonomous rural villages and communities, generally with small populations and high fertility rates, extensive cultivated farmland and woodland, and abundant livestock. These were often situated on hilltops, replacing the Roman *villa* that had been on the decline since the fourth century. Indeed, the long-term population decline that began after the zenith of the Roman Empire in the second century CE, lasting well into the eighth and ninth centuries, would have been a boon to farmers and these agrarian communities. In this sense, Paul’s description of a rural plague in Italy does track with the demography of the times. However, the settlement archaeology in northern Italy has suggested relative continuity from the fourth century until at least the seventh century. In Liguria, the evidence—while limited—suggests that although some sites slowly lost population due to moves inland from the coast, many settlements remained even in areas once thought to have been abandoned in the sixth and seventh centuries. Instead, it was primarily the towns on the later Lombard-Byzantine frontier that exhibited patterns of

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449 Barbiera and Dalla Zuanna, “Population Dynamics in Italy,” 370. In northern Italy, the authors note that cattle were being slaughtered quite young, suggesting well-fed populations subsisting on hearty, high protein diets. This would not have been universal, however. For example, agricultural decline lasted for several centuries around Rome, well before the plague first hit. See Dick Harrison, “Plague, Settlement and Structural Change at the Dawn of the Middle Ages,” *Scandia* 59, no. 1 (1993), 31.
450 Harrison, “Plague, Settlement and Structural Change,” 32. Paul’s description of abandoned “villas or fortified places” after the plague thus seems apt, considering the spread of this model of settlement during the late antique period.
population decline. This took place over the course of decades, however, not in the short period that we might expect of a plague-induced mortality event.

When considering plague’s impact in Italy, it is the long-term trends that are the most telling, predominantly owing to their archaeological visibility. Population stagnation and decline did not end in the sixth century, or, for that matter, the seventh or eighth centuries, well after the cessation of the First Pandemic’s documented plague outbreaks. Despite the now outdated narrative of Europe falling into a Dark Age after Western Rome’s political collapse, more recent archaeological studies have suggested a (highly relative) “golden age” for the rural communities of late antique Italy. This is not to say that the sixth century was an ideal time for the average Italian peasant. Although rural settlements survived—and possibly thrived—in this time, we must also consider the recurrent and well-documented famines, military conflicts, and invasions that plagued Italy. The decline in general Byzantine administrative control and late antique climate shifts also would have had considerable effects throughout the peninsula. When taking plague into account as well, scholars have suggested a model of “stop and start” demographics, wherein outbreaks of disease (among other temporary catastrophes) caused short-term losses followed by rapid population recovery in these otherwise healthy communities. The

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453 Barbiera and Dalla Zuanna, “Population Dynamics in Italy,” 367-368. The authors’ rough demographic estimate posits that population recovery did not begin until the tenth century, and, even then, it was quite slow.

454 Compared to the Roman era, infant mortality rates decreased, nutrition improved, and rural populations enjoyed relative stability. Even adult stature increased, likely owing to more varied and plentiful diets, especially due to an increase in livestock consumption. See Barbiera and Dalla Zuanna, “Population Dynamics in Italy,” 372-377, 382.

455 As Stathakopoulos has cataloged, such events were indeed numerous. See Stathakopoulos, Famine and Pestilence.

456 On late antique paleoclimatology, see note 472 below.

457 Along with plague, this model should also consider the effects of sieges, pillaging, and wartime losses we could expect from the frequent wars in Italy. Indeed, the authors note that owing to the paucity of evidence, they “cannot exclude the possibility, however, that during the 6th and 7th centuries the general survival level was worse, apart from plagues and other epidemics.” See Barbiera and Dalla Zuanna, “Population Dynamics in Italy,” 379. That said,
understanding of sixth-century Italian history has postulated a “permanent demographic crisis,” but the actual evidence points more to a shift in demographic distribution from urban to rural, accompanied by possible bouts of high mortality from any number of causes.\(^{458}\)

While it is generally difficult to assess plague’s impacts based on settlement archaeology alone, the study of epigraphic and numismatic data can offer another avenue to consider.\(^{459}\) Some scholars have utilized trends in funerary inscription production as a proxy for population decline, with a sharp increase in production possibly suggesting heightened mortality or a decrease suggesting general, perhaps less dramatic demographic or economic decline.\(^{460}\) In Italy, trends in the production of inscriptions do not appear to have been impacted by any outbreaks in the 560s or 570s, when we might expect to see a spike across Italy. For comparison, 543 saw a rapid increase in inscription production, aligning with both the Italian epidemic described in that year and the ongoing Gothic Wars and possibly confirming an inscription-mortality model.\(^{461}\) Epigraphy is certainly not be the best metric for demography, but the text of inscriptions themselves could refer to plague. To date, only two such inscriptions have been found, however,

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\(^{458}\) Harrison, “Plague, Settlement and Structural Change,” 31-32. See also Chris Wickham, “L'Italia e l'alto medievo,” *Archeologia Medievale* 15 (1988), 105-124. The actual causes for these short-term depopulations can only be confirmed on a case-by-case basis, although plague fits as a likely (if speculative) culprit.

\(^{459}\) Settlement archaeology has been applied to plague studies in other regions, such as in Syria where both the written and non-literary evidence is much more abundant than western Europe. However, the evidence likewise does not suggest significant changes in settlement spread due to plague (in Syria, the major changes brought about by the Arab Conquest offer a considerable foil compared to plague’s non-impact). See Clive Foss, “Syria in Transition, AD 550-750: An Archaeological Approach,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 51 (1997), 202. See also Hugh N. Kennedy, “Justinianic Plague in Syria and the Archaeological Evidence,” in Little, *Plague and the End of Antiquity*, 87-95.

\(^{460}\) Mordechai, et al. “An Inconsequential Pandemic?” 25548-25549. See also Sarris, “The Justinianic Plague: Origins and Effects,” 126. Sarris notes that for the Justinianic Plague proper, mortality was so high that traditional burial practices would have been abandoned and this would not be reflected in the epigraphic record.

\(^{461}\) Mordechai, et al. “An Inconsequential Pandemic?” 25548-25549. See also Marc. Com., *Chr.* a. 542 (2). Other scholars have also postulated such theories; see Michael McCormick, “Tracking Mass Death During the Fall of Rome’s Empire (I),” *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 28 (2015), 328. For a thorough study of inscriptions during this period in Gaul and Spain, see Mark A. Handley, *Death, Society, and Culture: Inscriptions and Epitaphs in Gaul and Spain, AD 300-750* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2003).
and neither are Italian. Indeed, a survey carried out for this thesis of solely Italian inscriptions between 540 and 580 also revealed no plague-specific references.

There is some evidence of economic strain in the Byzantine Empire after the first outbreak of plague; scholars have suggested the instability of copper coinage in the 540s and the discovery of coins of lesser weight reflect the stress on imperial coffers due to a declining tax base. Justinian’s tax hikes and proclamations of wage caps on workers may also point to a shrunken workforce that was attempting to garner higher earnings in light of the plague’s depopulation effect. While these arguments may hold for the Byzantine world immediately after the first “wave” of plague, it is difficult to extrapolate this change across multiple decades, centuries, or regions without a trove of comparative data. Generally speaking, other non-literary or less conventional studies of plague abound, but there is currently not enough archaeological, epigraphic, or numismatic data to support any argument about widespread mass mortality from plague, let alone localized effects or the notion of an Italian plague in 565.

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463 This study utilized the Epigrafik-Datenbank Clauss-Slaby (EDCS) to search for inscriptions from all regions in sixth-century Italy (http://www.manfredclauss.de/), with a particular focus on 540-600. With that said, later years similarly lack plague-related epigraphy.
464 Sarris, “The Justinianic Plague: Origins and Effects,” 129. Other scholars have argued that the lack of significant change in coin production or circulation, along with the imprecise or opportunistic dating of the many coins without a mint mark, suggest the First Pandemic had no obvious impact. See Mordechai, et al., “An Inconsequential Pandemic?” 255-49.
466 Sarris ties later economic issues, including reductions in pay and arrears in the military from 588 onwards (and by extension, the ensuing civil strife and war with Persia) to plague, but the military situation was likely more complex. See Sarris, “The Justinianic Plague: Origins and Effects,” 131-132. Cf. Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 37-40.
467 For a less conventional study, focused on a highly specific textual excerpt see Henry Gruber, “Indirect Evidence for the Social Impact of the Justinianic Pandemic: Episcopal Burial and Conciliar Legislation in Visigothic Hispania,” Journal of Late Antiquity 11, no. 1 (2018), 193-215. Gruber draws on a reference to the “sudden death” of bishops in a record from the Council of Valencia in 546 (alongside archaeological evidence) to suggest that plague in Visigothic Spain was a significant event, thus requiring changes in burial practice. On Spanish plague during the First Pandemic, see Michael Kulikowski, “Plague in Spanish Late Antiquity,” in Little, Plague and the End of Antiquity, 150-170.
IV.4: The Palynological Data: Catastrophe or Continuity?

The archaeological means for studying plague extend beyond explicitly anthropological evidence alone. Pollen archaeology (palynology) can provide data that functions as a useful proxy for land use throughout a region’s history.\textsuperscript{468} Considering the evidently rural nature of the Ligurian Plague, well-dated, chronologically secure pollen cores could demonstrate fluctuations in human cultivars (such as cereal crops or cultivated trees), a deliberate transition from cultivated land to pasture, progressive “rewilding” (wherein arable or pastural lands are left untended and redevelop natural flora or undergo reforestation), or, conversely, the clearing of woodlands for settlement expansion.\textsuperscript{469} Overall, the changes in “anthropogenic pressure” on the environment that could result from a pronounced mortality event make palynology an intriguing path through which we can analyze plague outside the influence of literary sources.\textsuperscript{470}

There are certainly issues with the use of pollen data, and these apply readily to our study in Italy. For one, radiocarbon dating pollen cores is not precise, much like with aDNA in \textit{Y. pestis} paleogenomics. Most datasets cover thousands of years with only a few samples, each

\textsuperscript{468} Palynological studies are generally carried out by extracting “cores” of sediment from the ground. These cores are essentially stratigraphic sequences of pollen, which can then be imaged and chemically analyzed. This study utilized the Eurasian Modern Pollen Database (EMPD) to locate sources for pollen cores in Italy (https://empd2.github.io/index.html).

\textsuperscript{469} Trees provide most of the pollen in these sample cores due to their relatively high production compared to herbs and food plants, but palynologists compensate statistically for such biases. This data can be utilized as a marker for changes in climate. See Anna Maria Mercuri, et al., “Olea, Juglans and Castanea: The OJC Group as Pollen Evidence of the Development of Human-Induced Environments in the Italian Peninsula,” \textit{Quaternary International} 303, no. 24 (2013), 25.

\textsuperscript{470} Mordechai, et al. “An Inconsequential Pandemic?” 25550. This minimalist study constitutes the first major foray into a palynological analysis of plague-induced depopulation. The authors found no evidence of widespread agrarian decline (primarily based on no abrupt increases in the presence of pine pollen) where human land use data exists, including modern Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Other scholars have pushed back on these claims but have not yet offered an alternative analysis of the pollen data in question. See Sarris, “New Approaches,” 322. Another recent palynological study, focused on the beginnings of the Second Pandemic, found measurable and significant—albeit highly varied—land use impacts from mass mortality. See Adam Izdebski, et al., “Paleoecological Data Indicates Land-use Changes Across Europe Linked to Spatial Heterogeneity in Mortality During the Black Death Pandemic,” \textit{Nature Ecology & Evolution} 6 (2022), 297-306.
coming with a 40- to 100-year margin of error in dating. Generally, few pollen core sites allow for annual or anything approaching annual resolution. Since so few cores permit high-resolution chronological sampling, it can be difficult to capture the potentially small fluctuations a sudden plague outbreak could generate. To date, most pollen studies in the Mediterranean have been directed at the onset of human agriculture in the early Holocene, thus entailing a wide chronology. While copious pollen cores have been extracted across Europe—including Liguria—many researchers are focused on long-term trends in multiple areas, not land use fluctuations in specific historical periods. Indeed, coring focused on late antique centuries remains exceptionally rare. Future, plague-specific studies, ideally with high-resolution sampling, could thus offer more insights than these paleoecological or paleoclimatological surveys alone.

Paul and numerous other authors attested to plagues across Italy, and there have been a small number of palynological studies in recent years that look at land use as a proxy for population fluctuation and have coverage for the period of our concern. Compared to our

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471 More recently, efforts have pivoted. For example, a palynological study of the Rieti Basin (in central Italy, around 70 kilometers north of Rome) averaged around 30 years between each pollen sample. This can be characterized as higher-resolution sampling compared to other palynological research. Other long-term studies sometimes only quantify a handful of datapoints per millennium. See Scott A. Mensing, et al., “Historical Ecology Reveals Landscape Transformation Coincident with Cultural Development in Central Italy since the Roman Period,” *Scientific Reports* 8, no. 2138 (2018), 2.

472 That said, historical climate data can also be applied to epidemiological models. Recent studies have looked at the long-term impacts of changes in climate in both the First and Second Pandemics, such as the Late Antique Little Ice Age (LALIA) that preceded the first outbreak of plague in the Mediterranean. See J. Luterbacher, et al., “Past Pandemics and Climate Variability Across the Mediterranean,” *Euro-Mediterranean Journal for Environ Integration* 5, no. 46 (2020); Timothy P. Newfield, “Mysterious and Mortiferous Clouds: The Climate Cooling and Disease Burden of Late Antiquity,” *Late Antique Archaeology* 12, no. 1 (2016); Büntgen, et al., “Cooling and Societal Change.” For a climate-related theory of reintroduction for the Second Pandemic (which would contest the notion of European plague reservoirs taking root during the late medieval period), see Boris Schmid, et al., “Climate-driven Introduction of the Black Death and Successive Plague Reintroductions into Europe,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 10 (2015). On plague transmission, see also Lauren A. White and Lee Mordechai, “Modeling the Justinianic Plague: Comparing Hypothesized Transmission Routes,” *PLoS One* 15, no. 4 (2020). Palaeoclimatological data is perhaps too broad for our study here, but it is a worthwhile avenue to consider when analyzing the epidemiology of the broader late antique period. For example, if it was known or even hypothesized that there was a local plague reservoir in a particular sylvatic rodent population, their relationship to climate could be studied.
analysis of plague aDNA, we have a wealth of data for Italy. However, it is difficult to assert anything definitive beyond long-term trends in the region for the First Pandemic in its entirety. Data from one study in Liguria that utilized roughly 100-year sampling intervals for the most recent two millennia shows that human cultivars—such as olives, walnuts, chestnuts, cereals, and other cultivars typical in agricultural land use—showed signs of steady growth from the late fifth century onward after a period of decline in the fourth and early to mid-fifth centuries. Meanwhile, this data showed no increase in pine pollen during the plague years, which is quite striking, as pine pollen can be indicative of rewilding (due to its capacity to rapidly take over new areas). For Liguria and the northern Apennine region, fir and beech trees could function as another proxy for human land use, but a steep increase in fir pollen from the fourth century onward significantly predated the beginning of the First Pandemic and continued well past the time of documented late antique plague. The same applies for beech pollen, which eventually eclipsed the spread of firs and became a dominant tree in the region seemingly outside any human causation. Again, the caveat here is the low sampling intervals and the low dating resolution of those samples. The present data demonstrates neither a drop in anthropogenic indicators nor an increase in the typical signs of rewilding pastures or farmland during the sixth and seventh centuries. A high-resolution dataset could still indicate otherwise.

Other palynological data in mainland Italy that includes land use proxies—again, primarily human cultivated trees and cereal crops—offers similarly mixed results. Around Lake

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473 These conclusions come from an analysis of the data in Maria A. Guido, et al., “A Palynological Contribution to the Environmental Archaeology of a Mediterranean Mountain Wetland (Northwest Apennines, Italy).” *The Holocene* 23, no. 11 (2013), 1521, 1523-1525. See especially Figure 3 (p. 1521). Specifically, the core was taken from Mogge di Ertola, a plateau near the small commune of Casanova (located 25 kilometers north of the Ligurian coast and roughly 75 kilometers southwest of Genoa).

474 As the authors discuss, the shifting fir-beech dynamic in Liguria has carried on for the entirety of the Holocene period, with major shifts predating any human activity (circa 11,650 years before the present to today). While some culling of firs, often via “slash and burn” agriculture, likely took place during the early medieval period, such small shifts are “not so easy to detect.” See Guido, et al., “A Palynological Contribution,” 1523-1525.
Nemi (just south of Rome), we see a decline in tree cultivars (namely olives, chestnuts, and walnuts) beginning in the early sixth century and lasting well into the eighth century and beyond.\textsuperscript{475} We do also see a dip in cereal crops in the mid-sixth century, which could align with the first appearances of plague in the Mediterranean. Around Lake Albano (just north of Lake Nemi), both cultivated trees and cereals decreased sharply in the mid- to late sixth century.\textsuperscript{476} The years surrounding the first outbreak in Italy (circa 543) also coincided with the height of the Gothic Wars in Italy, especially around Rome and Naples. As with the Ligurian data, these pollen cores were not sampled with a high enough resolution to capture any small changes in the 560s and 570s, where we might see the influence of Paul’s pan-Italian outbreak or the Lombard conquest itself. While these significant mid-century downturns in anthropogenic land use are compelling, it is unfortunately quite difficult to separate the effects of the Gothic Wars from the effects of a plague outbreak. Indeed, the devastating sack of Rome came in 546 after a protracted, multi-year siege that presumably affected the areas around Lake Albano and Lake Nemi, especially considering their proximity to the city. Given Totila’s siege tactics, it would not be surprising if this drop in land use derived from that conflict.\textsuperscript{477}

A higher resolution study of pollen cores taken from the Rieti Basin (around seventy kilometers northeast of Rome) demonstrated signs of rewilding—primarily the expansion of wild

\textsuperscript{475} This data is adapted from Anna Maria Mercuri, et al., “Olea, Juglans, and Castanea: The OJC Group as Pollen Evidence of the Development of Human-Induced Environments in the Italian Peninsula,” \textit{Quaternary International} 303, no. 24 (2013). For Lake Nemi, see especially Figure 3 (p. 33).
\textsuperscript{476} See Mercuri, et al., “Olea, Juglans, and Castanea,” 34 (see Figure 4).
\textsuperscript{477} Procopius described just how severe conditions in Rome grew to be as the supply of crops dwindled, owing to Totila and the Goths severing the flow of grain to the city. For a description of the siege and accompanying famine, see Procop., \textit{Bella}. VI.3-4, 6. We can also note that Procopius described a pestilence in these same chapters that seems to have affected the besiegers and besieged alike, as it “pressed hard” upon the Romans and later, the barbarians “suffered the ravages of both the pestilence and the enemy.” See esp. Procop., \textit{Bella}. VI.3.1, VI.6.1. Such a scenario conflicts with the one-sided epidemic during the siege of Pavia, as related by Paul. Cf. \textit{HL} II.26. On the siege of Pavia, see Section II.4. An additional possibility for this decline could be owed to the Lombards themselves. Paul attested to the number of Italian citizens who fled their advance, and later Lombard forays south towards Rome in the late 570s and 580s could be seen as another wartime cause for land use decline.
woodland—in the mid-sixth century, again around the time of the Gothic Wars and the arrival of plague in Italy.\textsuperscript{478} Cereal pollen and cultivated tree levels did not vary to any considerable degree, however, and the general anthropogenic signs of the area did not fluctuate significantly until the Carolingians gained control of most of Italy (during the late eighth and early ninth century).\textsuperscript{479} Such trends track with the data from Albano and Nemi, and the general ruin seen in Italy during the decades of war to which many late antique authors attested. This other Italian sample thus provides another example of an ecological shift that may have occurred outside the influence of the First Pandemic. Indeed, we can more readily make this claim because this same study in Rieti captured land use changes in the context of the Second Pandemic: following the onset of the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, major spikes in reforestation can be seen.\textsuperscript{480} With plague’s subsequent medieval appearance as a foil, the Rieti data provides us with another sign that the Ligurian Plague (and its associated pan-Italian outbreak, per Paul) did not reach a scope comparable to the major outbreaks of the Second Pandemic. That still leaves considerable room for error—we cannot say that a lack of plague signifiers in Lazio means Lombardy, Piedmont, Venetia, and Emilia-Romagna went untouched. However, the data we have so far does not point to a devastating depopulation event in the Italian heartland. The Ligurian data described above similarly lacks any rapid changes, illustrating a mild increase in agricultural land use and little else.\textsuperscript{481}

\textsuperscript{478} Mensing, et al., “Historical Ecology Reveals Landscape Transformation,” 3-4. The authors cite the Gothic Wars as a probable cause for this rewilding, including it as a key event in their timeline.\textsuperscript{479} Mensing, et al., “Historical Ecology Reveals Landscape Transformation,” 5; see also Figure 1 (p. 3).\textsuperscript{480} Mensing, et al., “Historical Ecology Reveals Landscape Transformation,” 5; see also Figure 1 (p. 3).\textsuperscript{481} Another study in Sicily showed a long-term trend of declining land use from the early fifth century through the late seventh century. Due to its even greater geographic separation from our region of concern this data should not necessarily inform our study here, but it likewise suggests macro trends outside the scope of the First Pandemic. See Laura Sadori, et al., “Climate, Environment, and Society in Southern Italy During the Last 2000 Years. A Review of the Environmental, Historical, and Archaeological Evidence,” \textit{Quaternary Science Reviews} 136 (2015), 177.
IV.5: Unconvincing Evidence: The Need for Further Non-literary Studies

The lack of anthropogenic and palynological signifiers for mass depopulation highlights a key problem for the Lombard-plague theory, wherein the disease hypothetically facilitated Alboin’s advance. As far as the current evidence shows us, the same regions the Lombards would capture with ease did not suffer a catastrophic population loss. Considering that the defense of Italy would have been conducted primarily by local military commanders—dukes, *magistri militum,* and barbarian lords—it is difficult to say whether these varied contingents suffered simultaneous manpower reductions. The heterogeneous nature of the late antique Roman military, much like the population of northern Italy, guarantees the impossibility of a plague that impacted “the Romans only.” Moreover, a lack of archaeologically significant rural depopulation suggests that it was not plague-induced mass mortality, but other compounding political factors that led to the collapse of the north. Arrears, mutiny, flaky mercenaries, and tenuous alliances with former foes could all factor in here, but sizeable Byzantine forces still stayed in action during the 570s. We cannot definitively rule out the

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482 *A magister militum* (“master of soldiers”) was a high-ranking officer in late Roman armies. Narses had established at least four army groups under such leaders in northern Italy by the time of the Lombard campaign, but the term may have shifted meaning by this point in time. Sindual, the leader of the Heruli rebellion, was himself in this position before his insurrection in the mid-560s. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 48-49, 52, 65-66. See also John L. Teall, ”The Barbarians in Justinian's Armies,” *Speculum* 40, no. 2 (1965), 294-322. For an analysis of fifth- and early sixth-century Byzantine military organization (including a list of known *magistri*), see R. T. Ridley, “The Fourth and Fifth Century Civil and Military Hierarchy in Zosimus,” *Byzantion* 40, no. 1 (1970), 91–104.

483 On the composition of Byzantine armies—such as the forces under Narses, and later Longinus—in the mid- to late sixth century, see Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 29-34. Roman contingents were raised from provincial forces, barbarian allies, *foederati* or adjacent tribes in the Balkans and beyond.


485 For example, the Heruli, whom Narses had only just defeated in 566/567, likely were a part of the Lombard force Narses “invited” into Italy to bolster the Roman provincial forces. Such recent foes may not have made the best allies. See Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 36-37. See also p. 52: “it is likely that at least two of the four *magistri militum* established by Narses in the north—both in the western Po Valley, in Susa and around the lake Como—were still in place at least until the mid-570s. This [Byzantine] army did not simply disappear—or hid behind the walls afraid of the invaders, as it has been suggested.”
possibility that plague outbreaks in Italy and Gaul impacted Roman recruiting or military readiness on a smaller scale, but the systemic problems faced by the Byzantine war machine in Italy far outweighed any epidemiological factors, and its collapse was not a short-term one.

Admittedly, with the extant data we must be cautious about drawing absolute conclusions on the First Pandemic’s micro or macro presence in Italy, but this incomplete picture can still provide some takeaways. The long-term trends exhibited by settlement archaeology and palynology do not point to a moment of mass mortality in mid-sixth-century Italy, and without more plague-specific studies of these areas in Italy that turn up positive results for signs of *Y. pestis* we cannot reasonably claim that Paul’s plague devastated all of Italy or that a pre-Lombard, anti-Roman outbreak even took place. Indeed, no First Pandemic plague genome has been sequenced in Italy, let alone the specific regions and cities including Liguria, Venetia, and Pavia that Paul mentioned in the context of his plague or the pre-conquest homeland of Alboin and the Lombards. We are thus left with more questions than answers.

The non-literary study of plague remains in a nascent stage, apart from some broader Mediterranean surveys. Going forward, plague genomes synthesized in Italy and Pannonia could help build out the ever-expanding phylogenetic tree of the disease, and possibly illustrate epidemiological relationships between other western European strains. More analysis of settlement archaeology and potential Lombard-Roman intermingling could provide insight into the pre-conquest dynamic in Italy, to further test the feasibility of a specifically anti-Roman plague. Finally, high-resolution land use data from historical settlements and farming sites in the provinces of northern Italy could provide more information on the intensity of the outbreak(s) that occurred, per the written evidence, during the early 570s.
At this point, the non-literary evidence we currently do have is not in Paul’s favor. For example, even the limited archaeological and palynological data in Liguria suggests continuity through the late sixth century, not collapse. The steady decline we see started well before plague arrived on the shores of Liguria and Ravenna or infiltrated the walls of Rome. Moreover, this decline would end up lasting for centuries after plague’s mysterious disappearance from the early medieval Mediterranean.486 Yet Agnellus, Gregory the Great, Marius, Paul and numerous other authors all attested to what were almost certainly Y. pestis’ persistent reappearances in Italy. While the historiographical future of the Ligurian Plague specifically has only been further jeopardized by the results of this survey of non-textual evidence (to say nothing more of Paul’s literary context), continued non-literary analysis holds exciting prospects for the study of the First Pandemic in Italy.

486 The end date for the First Pandemic remains an open question, much like the later Second Pandemic. See Maddicott, “Plague in Seventh-Century England,” 206-207; McCormick, “Toward a Molecular History,” 310-312; Morony, “For Whom Does the Writer Write?,” 71; Stoclet, “Consilia humana, ops divina, superstition,” 145.
CONCLUSION
The Paradigm of Paul the Deacon

V.1: If Not Plague, Then What?

Several questions of causality remain unanswered for the Lombard conquest of Italy. But such questions are also not the most important ones we can ask. As this study has shown, there is a surprising amount of baggage—historical, historiographical, literary, scientific, and otherwise—that accompanies any claim of plague facilitating Alboin’s victory in Italy. Rather than seeking a pivotal moment of decline in the trajectory of late antique Byzantium, we should look at how potentially catastrophic events, like a plague epidemic, may have affected history on a micro scale. We have seen that the supposedly anti-Roman, pre-conquest epidemic in northern Italy did not in fact precede the Lombard conquest, ergo it could not have precipitated it directly. When it did arrive in the early 570s, plague most certainly would not have discriminated in its effects or adhered to political boundaries, especially given Italy’s heterogeneous nature by the mid- to late sixth century. This later date for the epidemic still requires more study: the non-literary data does not suggest a serious mortality at any time in the mid-sixth century, so even the actual Italian plague of the 570s may not have been a mass depopulation event.

Our simple correction in the plague timeline vis-à-vis Paul, the Lombard conquest, and the larger narrative of the First Pandemic produced multiple far-reaching implications. The first
chapter showed that the dating of the Ligurian Plague to 565 arose from the uncritical acceptance of 1,200 years of historical scholarship, in a narrative passed on and left unconfirmed for centuries. In the next chapter, we saw how Paul’s thematic positioning of that plague outbreak, his misleading focus on Liguria and Venetia, and even the very language he used to describe the disease arose from his adaptation of earlier sources and the larger narrative he sought to create in writing the *HL*—especially in its second book. The third chapter demonstrated that the *HL* truly stands alone in its account of a supposedly anti-Roman, pre-conquest plague in Italy, and further demonstrated the extent of the historical inconsistencies in the conquest-era epidemic. Both the sources that Paul relied upon and those he did not adapt contest his narrative of events. Finally, the non-literary data examined in the fourth chapter showed that while we certainly need further, preferably high-resolution research, the trends point more to demographic continuity in northern Italy, not the sudden mass depopulation and rural devastation Paul described. The Roman and Byzantine Empires’ population troubles in Italy started well before plague arrived in the Italian peninsula, and any short-term losses could just as well be attributed to the Gothic Wars.

Above all, we have shown that the texts of late antiquity, including those that mention plague and just as much those that do not, still have more to offer in terms of understanding the First Pandemic and those who experienced or wrote about it. While the surviving literary record for the First Pandemic is biased towards Constantinople and the eastern Mediterranean, we have seen how copious books and chronicles—and the interpretations thereof—inform just two paragraphs in the *HL*. Surely, other plagues have an equally rich historiographical tradition, and other scholars have already begun exploring this.\(^{487}\) The examination of such authors as Paul, Gregory of Tours, or Procopius should also not be limited to their writings and the works of their

\(^{487}\) For example, see McCormick, “Gregory of Tours,” 38-96.
contemporaries alone. Despite the relatively recent boom in plague scholarship, modern academia is still heavily informed by the work of scholars from the medieval era through the Renaissance and early modern period. The likes of Hermannus, Muratori, and Hodgkin have had a profound influence, no matter how unaware of this today’s plague historians may be. Their work should therefore be scrutinized alongside the accounts of late antique authors.

V.2: Giving Paul the Benefit of the Doubt

Looking again at the events of 565-572, much of the existing, non-plague focused literature on the Lombard conquest already disregards the disease as a factor in Alboin’s rapid push south. This study has likely confirmed that assumption. Still, even with our correction to the chronology of the Ligurian Plague, it is difficult to rule anything out when it comes to historical change in Byzantine Italy. There is no lost source for Paul’s plague that can reasonably be constructed from the known sixth-century literary canon and the HL. While all the extant evidence suggests there was no plague immediately prior to the Lombard conquest, it is worth stressing that the conclusions here are not a guarantee: the fundamental patchiness of late antiquity’s written record cannot be avoided.

These chapters have examined the Ligurian Plague both at face value and from a removed, macro-historical perspective. While we must acknowledge the possible non-falsifiability of unsourced claims in late antique sources like the HL, the plague in Paul’s text is not consistent even in a vacuum. Whether considering the disease’s spread, political and

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488 Scholars like Christie, Fabbro, Goffart, Heath, Pohl, and others have written off Paul’s plague as a potential component of Alboin’s victory. See, for example, Fabbro, “Society and Warfare,” 12-13 and Goffart, Narrators, 389-390.

489 This non-falsifiability problem is especially poignant when considering Secundus’ text. See Section III.2.1.
military effects, or usage as a narrative device, scenes like the siege of Pavia, the Lombards’ defeats in Gaul, or the effects of “pestilence” on Italy’s rural communities are only some of the examples that show the internal discontinuity in Paul’s narrative of a catalyzing, anti-Roman plague. Indeed, after unwrapping the layers to the Ligurian Plague passage, we are left with little—if anything at all—that suggests an original account of a plague outbreak in Italy. In other words, giving Paul the benefit of the doubt fails to yield any reasonable epidemiological model or a historically consistent account of the era.

What does this all mean for the Ligurian Plague and the _HL_ as a whole? For one, even if Paul formulated his plague account in a way that would mislead his future readers, we should not condescend to or disregard his work. The same goes for any other late antique text. Historians have not always written for the same reasons, and the discipline of history today would be almost completely foreign to Paul’s enterprise. By examining the _HL_ in the context of solely one event, more layers in Paul’s text have become evident, hopefully adding to our understanding of the _HL_ as a rich literary tapestry alongside its function as an important historical document and significant entry in the annals of Roman and barbarian literature. So too does Paul’s description of plague (via Gregory the Great) add to our understanding of the disease as late antiquity’s authors viewed it. As attested to in the _HL_, plague had the capacity to inflict terrible suffering and human costs on its victims, in both urban and rural environments. The fact that authors like Paul readily adopted biblical language in their plague etiology and symptomology indeed speaks to their understanding of the disease’s severity. Our analysis of the Ligurian Plague has only cast more doubt on the timeline and specifics of the plague, but the outbreak described in the _HL_ did occur in Italy by the early 570s. Paul did not fully conjure an epidemic out of thin air, but we

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should not rely on his account as concrete evidence for plague’s historical impact in Italy. In short, we may know less about this plague, but we know more about Paul.

V.3: The Future of the Ligurian Plague and the First Pandemic in Italy

\textit{Yersinia pestis} certainly made an appearance in Italy and Gaul in the 570s, but it is hard to argue at this point that it enabled the Lombards’ victory. We are thus left with the fall of Rome problem in miniature: was it omnipresent war, repeated famines, declining military recruitment, arrears, the effects of late antique climate change, political strife, religious conflict, disease (including plague), the pressures of continued barbarian migration, or something else that catalyzed the change in power in Italy? It was likely a combination of the above, but such a broad question escapes the bounds of this study.\footnote{Alain Bresson puts it succinctly: “Natural factors must be integrated in multifactorial explanation, and while their role should be fully acknowledged, there is no reason to give them a driving role behind historical development.” See Alain Bresson, “Fates of Romes,” \textit{The Journal of Roman Studies} 110 (2020), 244.} Indeed, we could ask the same of the Arab conquest, the Byzantine-Sassanid Wars, or other pivotal moments in sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-century Mediterranean and Byzantine history. Plague-related handwaving in either direction, based on a limited reading of only some passages, should not be standard practice. As the ongoing debate between plague minimalists and maximalists has shown, large studies are inadequate for assessing the First Pandemic’s historical effects. By shifting attention to individual outbreaks or applying the microstudy framework to each of the plague “waves” that struck the Mediterranean, more concrete answers may be found.

The Ligurian Plague did not happen in 565. Nor did it singlehandedly cause the Lombard conquest. Any statement insinuating that Alboin seized the opportunity of plague’s presence and
marched into Italy should therefore be treated with great skepticism. The ordering of these events is wrong, let alone the monocausal fallaciousness implicit therein. Considering the 1,200-year trend of historians reading the HL through the lens of other historians’ own readings, it is time to finally escape the feedback loop present in the study of Paul’s plague. While the reordering of events in the 560s has important implications for our understanding of the First Pandemic in Italy, more importantly, we have seen the far-reaching influence a text like the HL can have, historically and historiographically.

Methodologically speaking, this study can close with two propositions. First, no written source for plague should be taken at face value. Late antique accounts of the disease must be investigated thoroughly in the context of their internal structure and language, external sources, literary contemporaries, and the later interpretations thereof. Second, any study that concretely dates or describes an outbreak of plague for the purpose of a historical argument should have its historiography examined. In the nearly 1,500 years that have elapsed since *Yersinia pestis* first arrived on the shores of Constantinople, other Hermannus-like characters have almost certainly impacted the historical record. Such figures may have played a hitherto unknown role in shaping our modern understanding of plague during the time of the First Pandemic, further convoluting the Mediterranean plague narrative. These are not groundbreaking strategies, but they could lead to exciting new discoveries from the copious annals and histories that have described plague and its effects. There will always be more to learn about the First Pandemic from the authors of late antiquity. Let Paul be the first example.

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492 It could also be argued that Alboin, had he known of the plague in Italy, would not have led his people into such a disease-infested region. At the same time, we know next to nothing of the Lombards’ medical beliefs, or whether they would have subscribed to the notion of possible noxious air in Italy or miasmatic effects. On miasma theory, see Jacques Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, edited by Philip van der Eijk (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 119-136.
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Men., *Frag.*  

*OGL*  

Ov., *Met.*  

Paul, *HL*  

Paul, *Vita*  

Procop. *Bella*  

Sig. Gem., *Chr.*  

Theop., *Chr.*  

Theo. Sim., *Hist.*  

Thuc.  

Vic. Ton., *Chr.*  

Virg., *A.*  

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