Chapter 11

Agilulf, “The Nonexistent Knight” and the Forging of the Italian “Germanic” Past

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E voi lì, messo su così in pulito… — disse Carlomagno — che, più la guerra durava, meno rispetto della pulizia nei paladini gli capitava di vedere.

— Io sono, — la voce giungeva metallica da dentro l’elmo chiuso, come fosse non una gola ma la stessa lamiera dell’armatura a vibrare, e con un lieve rimbombo d’eco,—Agilulfo Emo Bertrandino dei Guiliverni e degli Altri di Corbentraz e Sura, cavaliere di Selimpia Citeriore e Fez!

— Aaah… — fece Carlomagno e dal labbro di sotto, sporto avanti, gli uscì anche un piccolo strombettio, come a dire: «Dovessi ricordarmi il nome di tutti, starei fresco!» Ma subito aggrottò le ciglia.—E perché non alzate la celata e non mostrate il vostro viso?

— Il cavaliere non fece nessun gesto; la sua destra inguantata d’una ferrea e ben connessa manopola si serrò più forte all’arcione, mentre l’altro braccio, che reggeva lo scudo, parve scosso come da un brivido.

— Dico a voi, ehi, paladino!—insisté Carlomagno.—Com’è che non mostrate la faccia al vostro re?

— La voce uscì netta dal barbazzale—Perché io non esisto, sire.

Italo Calvino, Il cavaliere inesistente, 1959

1 This paper is an expanded version of an earlier article published with Stefano Gasparri, under the title “Forging an early medieval royal couple. Agilulf, Theodelind and the “Lombard treasure,” in Archaeologie der Identität/Archeology of Identity, Mathias, Mehofer & Walter Pohl (eds.) (Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 269–287.

This research was funded by the national Italian PRIN 2004–2006 (S. Gasparri, C. La Rocca). I would like to give thanks to Leslie Webster and Barry Ager (the British Museum, London) for their kind assistance and invaluable help; Dafydd Kidd (London) for his useful suggestions. The main sources for this project are the letters from the British Museum Archive and a few later letters preserved in the Durlacher Archive at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, as the Durlachers destroyed their correspondence after the failure of the London branch in 1938—see below, Appendix, pp. 251–266. Transcriptions of the Getty materials were kindly provided by Dr. Edward Schoolmann (UCLA). I would like to thank Patrick Geary for having involved Ned in this project.
The “Lombard Treasure”

In May 1930, the Burlington Fine Arts Club of London—one of the most prestigious gentlemen clubs, famous not only for providing a showcase for amateur artists but also for organizing since its foundation in 1866 regular exhibition venues—organized “The Art of the Dark Ages in Europe,” the first exhibition in Europe fully dedicated to early medieval arts and crafts. In 1930 many magazines and newspapers emphasized that the exhibition was a unique occasion to see “the distilled essence of more than half a century of treasure hunting in the graves and mounds of the second half of the first millennium of the present era” and there was vivid interest in it, from museums and collectors, for its broad European context, from Scandinavia to Italy. Beside early medieval archaeological finds belonging to the most important European Museums (the British Museum, the Hungarian National Museum of Budapest, the National Museum of Ireland, the Museums of Oslo and Bergen, the Völkerkunde Museum of Berlin) and from the most important private collections, a new group of unpublished finds “dug up in Italy”—belonging to the international firm of Durlacher Brothers (London and New York)—attracted public attention. The group consisted of 11 golden objects exceptionally well preserved, the most striking of which was an iron and golden horse collar, reproducing in

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2 The history of the Club, its aims and members were briefly reviewed in 1951, when the Club went into voluntary liquidation: “Editorial. The Burlington Fine Arts Club,” The Burlington Magazine, 589, xciv (April, 1952), 97–9.


6 Their art dealership was established in London by Henry and George Durlacher in 1843. In the 1920s, a branch was opened in New York City, which was managed by R. Kirk Askew. Between 1850 and 1938 the London branch of Durlacher Bros maintained a close association with the Victoria & Albert Museum acting as its agent at various auctions. On his retirement in 1938, George Durlacher destroyed the records of the London branch and sold its remaining stock at Christie’s. Askew purchased the New York City branch and continued to trade under the name Durlacher Bros until c. 1969. Cf. Steven Watson, Prepare for Saints. Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thompson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 190–2.