CHAPTER 11

Landowning and Labour in the Rural Economy

Cam Grey

Introduction

Two fundamental challenges confront the study of the rural economy in Ostrogothic Italy. First, and common to almost all fields of agrarian history, the textual evidence available for reconstructing patterns of landowning and structures of labour is thinly and unevenly distributed, and filtered through a series of legal, political, religious, and cultural lenses that serve to obscure whatever realities we may imagine to have existed on the ground. Second, we must engage with questions about temporal resolution, not only as a result of the very different time-frames presented by our documentary and archaeological evidence, but also in seeking to identify legally, socio-economically, culturally, and materially the rather short period of time during which Ostrogothic kings ruled over the Italian peninsula. Is it possible to discern anything distinctively Ostrogothic about land use, agricultural practices, or labour relations in this sixty-year period?

In what follows I explore this question by taking a collection of soundings into the documentary, literary, archaeological, and environmental evidence for the period. I take as my starting point the proposition that the impact of the Ostrogoths on rural socio-economic structures was in fact rather negligible and lightly felt—a proposition arrived at on the strength of the thinly scattered evidence for distinctively Ostrogothic settlement (insofar as it is even valid to make such an identification on the basis of material culture) and the continuation of what we might, with caution, describe as Roman legal categories, structures, and practices. I place alongside this proposition the fruits of recent scholarship on Ostrogothic-period agricultural practices together with environmental reconstructions of the Italian peninsula during the 5th and 6th centuries, which may allow us to nuance and expand upon our understanding of the ongoing dialectical interactions between the countrysides of the Italian peninsula and the various peoples who lived in, settled upon, and exploited those countrysides.¹

My intention is not to write the Ostrogoths out of the story of the rural economy of Italy in the period. Rather, I will suggest that to impose a simple dichotomy between Ostrogothic and non-Ostrogothic elements or to choose between identifying Ostrogothic impacts or averring a complete lack of influence, is to adopt a rather limited and limiting approach. Instead, we should use the opportunity provided by this tightly constrained time period to explore the experience of rural populations in the face of a collection of political, military, economic, and environmental pressures, which together do give this period a particular flavour. I return to this proposition in the concluding section of this chapter, where I suggest that the concepts of vulnerability and resilience provide powerful analytical tools for that project. First, however, I lay out what is known or can be surmised about the physical, socio-economic, and legal conditions of the rural economy—or, better, economies—of Ostrogothic Italy.

Rural Italy and ‘Ruralization’ under the Ostrogoths

Scholars seem increasingly willing to suggest that the Italian peninsula that the Ostrogoths encountered when they arrived in AD 488 was in the midst of a long-term series of processes that transformed the countryside from a world dominated by the city and the villa to one characterized by the village. Where disagreement does persist is over the coherence, timing, and causes of that transformation. On the one hand, studies of the documentary evidence appear to suggest that the legal terminology for different categories of exploitation and settlement continued largely unchanged into the 7th century at least, and probably later. On the other, the archaeological evidence seems to attest a breakdown in the agrarian structures and dispersed patterns of settlement that had characterized the preceding centuries, and their replacement by agglomerated settlements and (somewhat less clearly) agricultural and
