An insatiable calamity: urban space and political hegemony in a history of fires (880-1080)

Uma calamidade insaciável: espaço urbano e hegemonia política em uma história dos incêndios (880-1080)

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Resumo

Apesar da recorrência documental, os incêndios contam com uma atenção difusa na historiografia. Sobretudo, aqueles que devastaram os espaços urbanos do *Regnum Italicum* entre 880 e 1080. Quando não naturalizam ocorrências desse tipo como fatalidades ou acidentes, as explicações vigentes os fazem figurar como casos de uma suposta desordem feudal, amplamente revista por historiadores. Quando se trata de compreender a história da calamidade das chamas urbanas, há muito por ser feito. Este artigo busca contribuir para esse empenho. Partindo da documentação diplomática e cronística, analisamos a significação e a maneira como tais referências são acionadas na composição dos registros escritos: os incêndios surgem como uma ação social e multidimensional. Além disso, buscamos explicar as mudanças associadas à natureza dessa prática. A hipótese de trabalho é de que o aparecimento documental dos incêndios pertence a uma temporalidade política.

Palavras-chave: incêndios; espaços urbanos; história política.

Abstract

Despite their documentary reoccurrence, fires have received sparse attention in historiography. Above all those which devastated the urban spaces of *Regnum Italicum* between 880 and 1080. When they do not naturalize occurrences of this type as fatalities or accidents, the explanations in force make them appear as cases of supposed feudal disorder, widely revised by historians. In relation to understanding the history of the calamity of urban fires, much needs to be done. This article seeks to contribute to this undertaking. Starting from diplomatic and chronicle documentation, we analyze their meaning and the way these references are used in the composition of the written records: fires emerge as a social and multidimensional action. Moreover, we seek to explain the changes associated with the nature of this practice. The hypothesis of this paper is that the documentary appearance of the fires belongs to a political temporality.

Keywords: fires; urban spaces; political history.

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Neither wars nor revolts. Fires were the most frequent torment of urban life in the *Regnum Italicum*. It is a thankless task to look for a single city saved from fire. Between 880 and 1080 they were constantly swallowed up by the appetite of the flames. At a certain moment, the documentation appears to insist so much on the vocabulary that even the most critical reader would cogitate that the people of medieval times were right to treat those events as punishments preceding the final judgement. Like a fifth horseman of the apocalypse, fire acted like plague or hunger: wandering around the world, returning from time to time, and purging the just and sinners in a final torment, as the texts of the tenth century insisted (DD K I / DD H I / DD O I, 1884, p. 225, 355, 377-379, 378, 532, 590).

Episodes like this call attention not just because of their reoccurrence. The impact on social relations was immediate and prolonged beyond the material destruction. Once the curtain of smoke was lifted and the blackened skeletons of houses and buildings revealed, it was not necessary to wait long for the area affected to become the stage of the mobilization of emperors, kings, bishops, and aristocrats. As we will see below, the measures they proclaimed did more than repair the damage and reconstruct the landscape: they converted the destruction into an occasion to alter and expand not only the urban topography, but also the social practices in force until then.

Although they left frequent and extensive marks on the fabric of social life, fires have not attracted detailed attention from historians. We could not find a single study about their occurrence in *Regnum Italicum* between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Perhaps the reader may think that this is a very specific focus, rather small for this absence to be felt as a relevant gap. However, it should be noted that the kingdom in question covered one of the most urbanized areas in the West. For decades, sociologists and historians have seen it as *the* key piece in the great changes of the time: from the "reopening of the Mediterranean Sea," to the "vanguard of the commune movement," and the "diffusion of mercantile capitalism" (Nicholas, 2014, pp. 54-168; Holton, 2013, pp. 33-115). If we consider the frequency with which the cities of that kingdom were devoured by fire, the absence of research can be felt as a harrowing blind spot in historical knowledge.

Going in search of studies which help to compose an explanatory picture, what emerges is that fires were not ignored. Mentions of them are everywhere – from general works (Borst, 1990, p. 634; Eco, 2010, pp. 269-273) to specialized articles (Ewert, 2007, pp. 222-251). However, when they do not go beyond

this, – passing allusions –, the attention they receive is sparse. After the all the most common attitude is to wrap them within the category of 'natural disasters,' placing them alongside earthquakes, floods, and droughts. Listed in this way, as an item on a list of phenomena whose outbreak does not presuppose human action, they become a type of data, almost an ecological phenomenon. For this reason, in studies such as those of Jean-Pierre Leguay (2005) and Steven Epstein (2012), fire composes the environment which shapes urban life, surrounding it with challenges and fatalities. It is part of the backdrop to daily life, interwoven in the hostile landscape which men and women patiently colonized, handling the technical solutions sheltered in the folds of magical and scatological mentalities. For this reason, according to Johan Goudsblom (1992), the conflict between pre-industrial societies and fire had been an essential stage in the civilizing process which distinguished the West in the control of the physical world and placed it on the path to global hegemony.

When they are placed in the foreground and established by the authors at the center of historical account, fires are events of unquestionable realism. When Thomas Madden (1991/1992, pp. 72-93) proposed to analyze how the 1203 crusade transformed Constantinople into a hell beside the sea, he clarifies from the very beginning that the objective was to offer the most precise description of the calamity. The study was a chance to bring the reader along the route the fires followed, from their outbreak to estimates of their impact on population density. A similar posture was adopted by Philippe Goldman (1987) and Christine Felicelli (2002) in relation to the devastations of Bourges in 1252 and 1487. In this case, the effort fundamentally involves a quantitative approach, so that the numbers spell out the dimension of the tragedy and the reactions to remedy it.

Studies of this type have the clear advantage of seeing fire as an occurrence open to new questions. Thomas Madden, for example, demonstrates how much the theme has to say about historical knowledge exploring the hypothesis that the calamity in Constantinople had not been a mere accident or fatality, but a smart "pyrotechnical strategy of conquest" (Madden, 1991/1992, p. 72). Looking at the question from this perspective, the author ensures that the subject is rediscovered: we can see that fire can be as complex a phenomenon as a religious practice or economic indicator.

However, at least in relation to one aspect, the advantage is controversial. Precisely because it presents these episodes as the terrible outcomes of social relations, approaches such as this make the theme reflect the image of a time

swamped by disorder and brutality. From this perspective fires are a type of violence which, omnipresent, suffocated social life for a thousand years. After all, what more to expect from a period in which living "by the sword and fire" was a daily signal imposed by the "cruelty and atrocity of medieval war" – according to the words chosen by Sean McGlynn (2014) to imprint a celebrated study?

For more than 20 years, research trajectories, such as those of Stephen White (2003, pp. 37-68; 2005) and Dominique Barthélemy (1997; 2009), have demonstrated how much this emphasis in relation to medieval violence was exacerbated by contemporary assumptions. In such a way that it would not be excessive to describe this emphasis as 'mystified.' Therefore, it is necessary to challenge this framework and look for a new perspective. It is this what it is intended to do in this article. The documentation about cases of fire in the *Regnum Italicum* between the ninth and eleventh centuries contain elements which go beyond both dominant characterizations: both those which frame them as 'natural disasters' and those which insert them as 'consequences of disordered feudal violence.' However, it is not only this! We believe that there are sufficient indications to defend this hypothesis: the documental reoccurrence of urban fires consists of a strategy of legitimating new political prerogatives, notably the rise of episcopal power as the cofounder of public order.

Having shown the purpose which will give form to the following pages, we will now move on to the arguments.

Fire, nemesis of public order (880-960)

It is not known for certain when this occurred. However, at some moment during the year of 894, the streets of Mantua burned in a bonfire under the open sky. Caught between the walls of the old city, the flames swept the alleys and headed towards the church. The bishop Eginulfo (?-896?) could not do anything. When the heat receded, it was followed by certainty of the disaster. The fire had done more than scorching walls and ceilings: it reduced to ashes the ecclesiastic records. The documents and letters which different kings and some local lineages had ordered written as a memorial of the donations made to the clergy were lost, consumed by the infernal combustion. Without written evidence, clerical patrimony was at risk. Stripped of the authority of the written word, the prelates were vulnerable, exposed to contestations and

appropriations suddenly carried out in the name of one of the uncountable local customs. To prevent goods from being taken or invaded, King Berengar I (850?-924) issued a new document, confirming the possessions linked to the bishopric of Mantua (D BI, 1930, pp. 41-46).

However, it was more than a restoration. Berengar did not limit himself to trying to preserve possessions from destruction. He conferred new prerogatives on Eginulfo. The first items in the list of benesses were the public levies of *toloneum* and *ripacitum*: authorization to charge tolls on land and water routes. From then on the bishop could demand payments from any soul wandering along local roads or who moored in the city port. The text continues filling sacerdotal hands with privileges: Revere Island, taxation on annual markets, coining of currency. However, one privilege has called little attention. Aware that the new concession could cause disputes – to the point of involving judges invested with 'public functions' (*publicae functionae*) –, Berengar granted the bishop and his successors the guarantee to defend their goods and rights through an investigation by the men of the region. It was enough to gather some suitable individuals and get them to swear about the rectitude of what was claimed by the ecclesiastic. The witnesses thereby obtained would be the actual truth about the subject (*rei veritas*) and this could not be denied by any judicial power (*iudiciare potestatis*), no matter if they were a duke, marquis, or earl (D BI, 1930, pp. 44-45).

This was the *inquisitio*. Granting this prerogative was a recurrent measure in the episodes of fire in the Italic Kingdom. It reappears with a certain insistence. After Piacenza burned in 931, a decree was issued noting that the local church had enjoyed that privilege for 50 years, when it had been granted by Charles III (839-888) (D ULBAII, 1924, pp. 79-81; DD CIII, 1937, p. 67). In 920, the same Berengar who had helped Mantua assured an *inquisitio* to the Bishop of Parma: after receiving the news that a divine scourge had transformed the local parishes into open air furnaces, he ordered that the church in Parma preserve and defend the goods defended by its bishop through an inquiry (D BI, 1930, pp. 336-338; Affò, 1792, pp. 322-333; Drei, 1924, pp. 55-56). This episode was repeated more than 20 year later. An *inquisitio* was once again granted to the prelate of Parma. This time by the kings Hugh (880-947) and Lothair (925?-950) – father and son, coregents. It was not the mere confirmation of the donation of a predecessor, but a new concession. The reason for this appears to have been simple: in 943, the city burned again (D ULBAII, 1924, pp. 216-219). Each fire required a concession. Faced with such an event

the voice in charge of maintaining the *res publica* had to act, create, found: just not perpetuate what already existed.

As the reading of the documentation advances, so does the impression that these cases reveal a pattern. The fires provoked repeated responses. Yes, there actually was a pattern. However, caution is needed! It is less obvious that might be insinuated at first sight. It does not involve the *inquisitio* in itself. After all, not all the episodes of destruction by flames resulting in it being granted. When the Magyars burned Aquileia in 904, Berengar positively replied to the entreaties of the queen and the patriarch confirming all the possessions of the local church – without any mention of the privilege of an investigation (D BI, 1930, pp. 143-145). The same occurred with the monastery of the Holy Resurrection in Piacenza. Despite the intercession of Queen Bertila (860?-915), the abbot did not obtain that prerogative when the monarch confirmed the possession of the patrimony which had been devastated by the Magyar attacks (D BI, 1930, pp. 155-158).

Nor did the concession of *inquisitio* always follow an episode of fire. In 888, the same king guaranteed to the Abbot of Bobbio that it was enough to gather the "testimony of reputable men" (*idoneos homines quorum testimonium*) to defend his possessions from all violence – including from the bishop (D BI, 1930, p. 5). At no moment is the decision attributed to the fact that the monastery had burned down. Its absence is also noted in the decisions of Charles III. Between 879 and 882, he granted the *inquisitio* to ecclesiastic hands at least nine times: in none of these was devastation by fire mentioned as the motive (DD CIII, 1869, pp. 18-19, 33-36, 51-64, 67-68, 72-79, 90-92). The same happened with the Abbot of Santa Maria *di Gazo*, a monastery located in the diocese of Verona, in 890; with the bishop of Modena, eight years later (D BI, 1930, pp. 31-33, 72-74); the monastic superior of St. Peter *in Cielo d'Oro*, in Pavia, in 929; and after 947, in relation to the defense of lands linked to the Church of St. John *Domnarum*, also located in Pavia (D ULBAII, 1924, pp. 54-63, 242-247). Despite receiving the prerogative in question, none of them were mentioned as being victims of an inclement fire.

So, what is the pattern in these cases? The answer emerges as we look at the impact of the *inquisitio*, going beyond its description. We will return to it, since it is the guiding thread to a decisive finding. In granting the *inquisitio*, the monarch invested the ecclesiastic authority with a judicial power: discovering and proving the truth about litigation. Until then this role had been the responsibility of judges, the aristocrats to whom the monarch had delegated

jurisdictio, in other words, the power to 'decide justice.' Bishops and abbots were thus repositioned in the political order in the Italian Kingdom, assuming a greater margin of interference in the practices of governing the *res publica* – as the documents referred to the kingdom. The concession was part of the long list of measures which formed the process of ascension of ecclesiastic agents in *secular* government spaces. Although this rise was rooted in time, going back to Late Antiquity, it is considered that, above all, its concretization resulted from the transformations of the Carolingian era (Tabacco, 2000, pp. 15-66; D'Acunto, 2002, pp. 119-158; Althoff, 2004, pp. 65-101; Leyser, 1982, pp. 69-102; Reuter, 2011, pp. 17-38). It can be concluded that "for a long time historians have commented on the special relations that existed between bishops and rulers, a relationship of control, cooperation, and trust, which reached its zenith under the Ottonians of the tenth century" (Gilsdorf, 2014, p. 126).

The terms chosen in this citation are crucial: "a relationship of control, cooperation, and trust." They need to be highlighted, since they are emblematic of the interpretation from which we start, that this ascension occurred *through* monarchical authority, not in its absence or as a parallel competing phenomenon. It was a mutually strengthening connection, not one of the transfer of attributes which carried forwards would end up stripping the royal voice of any effective power. It is precipitated to consider these relations as acts of a decadent political sphere, which collapsed under the blows of the 'feudal forces' incarnated as the magnates of the land. The connection of further agents to the judicial functions should not be seen as a '*de*-centralization,' as if it was the '*un*-doing' of a correct order of things. A concession such as the prerogative of investigation did not make the monarchical figure dispensable. To the contrary, the crowned voice had their decision making authority reaffirmed. By granting such a guarantee, the king did not subtract it from their authority, as if he had renounced it and deposited it entirely in other hands: he converted it into an extension of the jurisdiction which available only to him – and for which he was the final judge. Royal donation did not transfer public power. Rather, it extended it.

Seen from this angle, the *inquisitio* becomes a fundamental indicator. We will look at the impacts of the practice, not just the gesture in itself: it allowed for the affirmation and the expansion of public authority. This aspect accompanies all the reports of fires which we have found. It is present even when the right to investigation is not mentioned. This is the case of Padua, in 912. After having been ruined by the flames kindled by 'pagan invaders' – the Magyars

– Bishop Sibico (?-920?) received from Berengar the confirmation of the patrimony claimed by the local church. Without, however, receiving the right to use the testimony of local men as judicial proof. But that was not all. The Paduan received something more: authorization to start the construction of castles (*sua adquirere potuerint terram castella aedificare*), all directly submitted to episcopal control to sustain the defense against new attacks (D BI, 1930, pp. 220-222). In the ninth and tenth centuries, a castle was more than a territorial enclave or a bastion of defense: it was the axis of the judicial reordering of life around it, a process which became known as *encastellation*. A fortress was the center from which emanated a new mesh of relations of control, taxation, and protection (Toubert, 1973). In this sense, the prerogative of the building of castles and *inquisitio* are interchangeable. In other words, fundamentally they fulfilled the same function: going beyond restoration and expanding the exercise of public functions.

In 904, in the case mentioned in Aquileia, the absence of the prerogative of inquiry was resolved by the donation of extensive property in Cormons and Cividale. In the latter, the patriarch received control over the so-called St. Peter's gate, the city entrance which was "recognized as belonging to the public and royal party" (*prout publice et regie parti pertinuisse perpenditur*) (D BI, 1930, pp. 143-145). Almost two decades later, when it was the turn of the city to burn under Magyar attack, Berengar acted in a similar manner. Although he did this without granting a *inquisitio*, he assured the patriarch Frederick (?-922) the possession of a castle in Pozzuolo, in the rural part of Cividale. Extolled as an imperial gift, the fortress brought with it "extensions and belongings, along with judicial, discretionary, and proprietary powers, in the radius of one mile" (*suis apendiciis et pertinentiis simul cum iudiciariis et districtionibus atque proprietaribus ... in circuitu ipsius Castelli ex omni parte quantum extenditur ad spatium unius milliarii legitimi*) (D BI, 1930, p. 349).

This is the pattern. References to fires are followed closely by measures which go beyond repairing the destruction. They emerge as tragic occasions which the monarchical power transformed into mobilizations of the expansion of public order. Such written references were strategies of announcing the effectiveness of the government. Which leads to the conclusion: between the ninth and tenth centuries, *incendium* is a political vocabulary. Stating it did not signify reducing its textual appearance to the condition of metaphor. 'Fire' and 'to burn' cannot be considered variations of a linguistic convention, of an idea triggered by an order of discourse and nothing else. Nevertheless, it does

imply recognizing these terms as multidimensional: at the same time that they announce a material tragedy, they say something else. Its meaning is not exhausted in the reference to a calamity, but simultaneously communicates other predicates. As the link to a dynamic linguistic universe, not as a crystalized idea (Kleinhenz, 1976), the idea of fire involved a lot. It was sufficiently vast to embrace a constellation of implications which we, twenty-first century readers, divide with differentiated subjects: political, cultural, or economic. As a name appropriate to a human experience, fires were an insatiable calamity, which cover more and more aspects of – and about – social life.

Those who approximate fire to a 'natural disaster' – as done in part of the historiography, mentioned at the beginning of this article – run the risk of reductionism. It is vocabulary which involves much more than this. Its registration assumed eminently political relations. However, if the elites of *Regnum Italicum* mentioned it with frightening regularity, it was not due to feudal disorder, as if the flames were part of impact waves caused by explosions of dissolute, irrational violence – as it did in the other perspective of studies, discussed in the initial pages. Between 880 and 960, fires inflamed royal authority, provoking it to reaffirm the presence of governance. By consuming material structures, it burned something less palpable, but equally real: the feeling of security, the effectiveness of protection, the sense of obedience. For this reason, it was not enough to reoccupy spaces, substitute goods, and reconstruct buildings. It was necessary to renew the way of life on which these things were based. Increasing regulations, multiplying laws, adding other means of response – these were the greatest urgencies left by the fury of the flames. In the cities of *Regnum Italicum*, fires were experienced as events which strengthened and expanded the *res publica*.

The flames as a flock of sheep protected by the bishop (960-1030)

After the Ottonians, urban fires turned against the monarchs of the Italian kingdom. The role of the redeemers of the calamity followed the destiny of the blood of Otto I (912-973). While the last of his relatives was delivered to the heavy sleep of the death, fires emerged in the documentary narratives as threats to the new rulers. After succeeding to the throne with Conrad II (990?-1039), in 1024, the Salines did not emerge like those who appeared after the tragedy

throwing around guarantees of order. Rather they are described at the center of disasters, cornered like the other citizens, with their crowns glittering as the flames approached.

The image came to haunt the figure of the first name of the dynasty, Conrad. In 1037, during his second expedition to the peninsula, the Holy Roman Emperor and the Italian king went to the city of Parma, where he would attend the Christmas celebrations led by Bishop Hugh. Welcoming such an august guest was an extraordinary distinction for the prelate – and an almost insupportable burden for the city. The citizens of Parma suddenly found themselves obliged to offer shelter and food to a multitude of armed men. Before crossing the Alps, the sovereign had summoned his vassals and demanded that they fulfil their military obligations. They had to gather as many soldier as they could and escort him to the peninsula. When he came out of the gelid north, Conrad was followed by a long military column sufficiently large to fight Christian rebels and Saracen rivals for more than a year. And that December this human mass converged on Parma. Crowded with people, the city overflowed with tension. According to Wipo (995?-1048?), the imperial chaplain, on the day after the Christmas masses a tumult exploded between the Germans and the natives of Parma. Like a spark in dry hay, the aggressions turned into a generalized fight, with the citizens advancing on the army with swords in their hand and torches burning in the air. The blood split was like fuel for the flames. A fire followed which consumed a large part of the city (Wipo, *Gesta Chuonradi II imperatoris*, 1915, p. 57).

When the destruction finally ended, the emperor was not merciful. He acted in the opposite sense. Outraged, Conrad was inclement. Shortly after the fire, he ordered that the walls of the city be levelled: so that the ruin of Parma would show the neighboring cities the price to the paid by the presumption of threatening the monarch (Wipo, *Gesta Chuonradi II imperatoris*, 1915, p. 57). This was something to be noted with greater attention. The knocking down of the walls was a political punishment. After all, the stone belt marked the identity of the city and at that time became a powerful symbol of government: it delimited the extension of a demographic group increasingly more aware of their particularities. It was the visible limit of an emerging political unity, the boundary which retained interests and specific values, which distinguished it from its rural surroundings, and was a reason for differentiated laws and differentiated customs. In the case of Parma, the role of the walls as a symbol of consciousness of being citizens was probably highlighted by the antiquity of

construction, since the walls seem to have been there longer than memory: they predated the birth of Christ (Gonella, 2008, p. 17). Reducing the walls to rubble, Conrad sought to drastically reduce the place of Parma in the imperial public order. The material nudity was a judicial despoliation. After all, by disfiguring it as a fortified zone, it resulted in the disappearance of the limits which demarcated it as having its own jurisdiction (Fichtenau, 1984, p. 202).

A clarification has to be made here. We do not suggest that the measure was taken in response to fire. This would be an extrapolation of the evidence. Wipo's report is clear: the presumption of Parma was *seditio*, an uprising, not the resort to fire in itself. Nevertheless, the narrative reinforces the argument made until now. An urban fire rarely emerges as a natural event or a fatality, but as part of a political episode. Its history has more to do with social struggles and conflicts over hegemony than with floods or earthquakes.

More than this, urban fires were now the way the internal enemy acted. The understanding of their origin was modified in a decisive transformation. During the first decades of the eleventh century, decrees and chronicles rewrote the nature of the worst urban evil. Previously when citied the causes came from outside Christianity. The evil deeds of pagan attacks provoked the fires. By spreading along urban markets and streets, fire was a frontier between the Christian and non-Christian worlds: the destruction it caused was a glimpse of a world without Christian faith, the laws of the Church, holy authority.

However, between 1010 and 1030, this description changed. The modification is subtle, but crucial. The specific manner of announcing the outbreak of that misfortune jumped onto the first sphere and imposed itself on the others. Now pagan violence was no longer the principal reason behind the flames. It was not the absence of faith in the true God which generated that diabolic heat. When a city burned, brightening the nocturnal sky like a gigantic pyre, the certainty it pointed to was another: the sparks were lit by a Christian fallen into perdition. The plague was a materialization of the treason. That blast of destruction was the march of deviants, the way of acting of those who sewed division among Christians. As Conrad demonstrated by punishing Parma, urban fire was an evil resulting from the uprising.

This way of explaining was not unprecedented. It had existed for centuries. But now it assumed the lead in relation to the others. Its reoccurrence is sensitive. It dominates, for example, the broad documentary spectrum aimed at condemning the figure of Arduino (955-1014), Marquis of Ivrea. In 1002, discovering that an invincible fever had taken the life of the young Otto III

(980-1002), part of the aristocracy from the north of the peninsula swore to obey the marquis as the Italian monarch. A risky maneuver. When they met in Pavia and proclaimed the new king, the magnates sought to prevent the crown being given again to a German. If they had been successful, they would have brought to an end almost four decades of the Ottonian hegemony. However, the decision was not unanimous. A no less powerful part of the local lords – formed above all by archbishops and bishops – assumed the resistance in the name of Henry II (973-1024), who claimed the Italian crown from the other side of the Alps (Adaboldo, *Vita Heinrici II Imperatoris*, 1849, 687; Dietmar de Merseburgo. *Chronicon*, 1935, 280-282; Castagneti, 1990, p. 132).

The dispute for the iron crown dragged on for a decade. Henry was crowned in 1004 and although he inflicted defeats on his rivals, did not manage to obtain a victory which could silence the demands of the marquis. First to be crowned, Arduino effectively governed as king: granting privileges, assuring immunities, dictating justice (DD H II, 1903, 699-713). The dispute was long and finely balanced. Nevertheless, in the imperial records can be found another manner of remembering him. Their writing was committed to another memory. Since the very beginning the illegitimacy of the lord of Ivrea was evident and sounded like a *scandalum*. After all, he propagated the damned plaque: it was Arduino who burned Churches. When it confirmed the patrimony held by the Bishop of Vercelli in 1014, the imperial chancellery listed the fires alongside the rapine perpetrated by the marquis (*quia iuncti Ardoino invasore regni nostri ipsam Eusebianam ecclesiam rapinis et incendiis confuderunt*) (DD HII, 1930, p. 408). More than consuming or destroying, burning signified robbing, spoiling, invading: the fires possessed the properties of usurpation. Fire was a measure of illegitimacy, proof that Arduino acted against faith and peace. Nor should we forget: resistance to the lord of Ivrea was principally supported by bishops and archbishops. His quest for the iron crown was not mundane vainglory, but a direct attack on pastoral authority, a misdirection of the directions of the holy religion: this association was a requirement to make him an incendiary.

Writing between 1013 and 1018, Bishop Dietmar of Merseburg (975-1018) retraced the outline of this memory with sharpened reasoning. Arduino was the accursed fruit of a land soaked in treason. In the heart of the *Regnum Italicum*, usurpation was common behavior. "The qualities of the air and the inhabitants of that place are different from ours," warned the German a little before pounding: "there are many conspiracies in Rome and Lombardy. Little

affection is offered to those who go there and everything that a guest requires has to be purchased, with treason being part of this. Many die poisoned there" (Dietmar de Merseburgo. *Chronicon*, 1935, p. 401). It was not accidental that the ground inhabited by usurpers was repeatedly blackened by ashes. Fire was fed more by disloyalty that dry timber. Its occurrence was a trick destined to corrupt the correct order of the Christian *res publica*. For this reason, the Marquis used it as a common expedient – as Conrad II noted, even without having even confronted Arduino. In 1026, for example, when he punished the bishop of Vincenza, he put the boot in: confiscating the land of a priest who, "having forgotten the oath given to Henry, turned to Arduino and his attempt to diminish the imperial dignity, committing sacks and burnings against the churches and believers of God" (*oblitus promisse fidei Ardoino regni sui invasori, ... associatus est suamque imperialem e dignitatem diminuere conatus est, cum quo pariter predas et incendia in ecclesias dei fidelesque suos palam exercuit*) (DD KIII, 1930, p. 63).

The trickery of deviants, the hidden impetus of apostates. This is how imperial decrees came to define the fires: a shameful action produced by the corruption of Christian integrity. An internal evil that sprouted among believers like weeds. To halt the source which fed them it was not enough to build more defenses against pagan attacks: it was necessary to revise the behavior of believers and find lost souls who had succumbed to the fury of sins. Fire was above all an insult to faith and an infraction of Christian laws. In 1030, when he granted control over the port of Cremona to the local bishop, the emperor promised that the privilege would be respected even if the written records were destroyed by "fire, theft, or anything of this nature" (*incendio latrocinio sive quolibet ingenio*) (DD KII, 1909, pp. 197-198, 213-214). This is the characteristic of flames; it is in their nature: a judicial transgression. At an uncertain date, Conrad addressed himself to the people of Cremona. He dictated another decree, whose lines echoed the order: they had to pay the Bishop the money owed due to the "fires and sacks committed against those castles" (*incendio et preda quam fecistis super illius castella*) maintained by the prelate in accordance with imperial will. After this the text went in hunt of the sources of those sins. Like his predecessors, Conrad expanded local judicial attributes: the local dignitary could judge murderers and thieves discovered within the city, once carried out in his presence with the correct faith and legally judged (DD KII, 1909, p. 349).

It was the bishop's responsibility to root out murderers and thieves, those who had caused the fires.

The grammar of time: change in the meaning of urban fires (1030-1080)

After the 1030s, the fire which took hold of the urban landscape was converted into a sin committed by Christians and into a domestic outrage against legitimate authority. What can explain this change? Why did it occur?

Given the absence of research, probably one of the first responses to cross the mind of the reader would be to return to the arguments consecrated by Marc Bloch. In 1939, the year he presented the public with the work *Feudal Society*, the French author proposed the adoption of a new chronology to explain the past. It was necessary to note, he insisted, that two distinction phases in time of social relations could be distinguished, two 'feudal ages.' Running from the tenth century to the first half of the eleventh, the former was distinguished by the retreat of invasions. Christianity had witnessed the ultimate decades of a history of external aggressions with had lasted for centuries. Goths, Saxons, Huns, Lombards, Muslims, and Normans: the invaders succeeded each other in time, with the West continuing as prey. This reality, however, had ended. In the case of the Italian kingdom, after the Magyars halted their attacks, citizens realized that they had suffered the 'final invasions' (Bloch, 1994, pp. 29-31). Rumors of the Christianization of the invaders strengthened the general certainty: the hordes which tore across the horizon bringing destruction on horseback would not return. From this perspective, the pieces fitted together, insinuating the response to our theme: the end of the invasions required another cause for the occurrence of fires. If cities continued to burn even when horse-riding pagans were increasingly rare, the combustion was caused internally, sprouted by Christian fellowship. This change was thus one of the teachings left by the 'first feudal age.'

External aggression left the stage, replaced by 'feudal disorders' (Bloch, 1994, pp. 62-82). Convinced of the periodization proposed by Bloch, many scholars reached an important conclusion: there was much at play in that handful of decades designated the 'first feudal age.' Much more in fact than aristocratic led changes – the focus of *Feudal Society*. It was Georges Duby who in 1953 sounded the alert: although this excessive attachment to the way of life

of a minuscule elite is regretful, it needed to be recognized that the historiographic scent had drawn Bloch in the right direction. A new type of society had emerged between the tenth and eleventh centuries. In a short period, the fundamentals of collective life were modified, ranging from the relations of kinship, those of material exploitation, the manners of feeling and thinking, to the occupation of the soil and harvesting, everything was drastically changed (Duby, 1953; 1973). Occurring on a large scale, the transformations ruptured traditions, broke long chains of customs, deep rooted ancestral practices. These merit what historians understand as 'ruptures.' And everything happened very quickly. The changes were imposed at an accelerated and traumatic rate, uncoupling values and reality, blurring the line between the acceptable and the condemnable. In a few decades, Western lands were taken over by an agitated social mutation (Albertoni, 2015, pp. 43-64). The collateral effects could be felt everywhere: political fragmentation, collapse of the separation between the public good and private interests, uncontrollable explosions of violence, and – why not? – the multiplication of urban fires.

There is a great chance that the modification of the social meaning of fires can be considered a chapter of the crisis associated with this supposed 'feudal mutation.' Actions experienced in medieval times as divine scourges were the collateral effects of a broad social adjustment. The outbreak of fire could have been a way of reacting to the perception that the world known to their ancestors was lost, and that another one with a still unknown outline was emerging through turbulent experience. Strengthened since the 1970s (Bonnassie, 1975-1976; Fossier, 1982; Bois, 1989; Poly; Bournazel, 1998), this way of explaining the medieval era is still relevant, notwithstanding the criticism made of it (Barthélemy; White, 1996, pp. 196-223; Reuter; Wickham, 1997, pp. 177-208; Barthélemy, 2009, pp. 1-11).

Our explanatory proposal follows a distinct direction. As we have sought to demonstrate until now, references to fires were part of a political vocabulary and were used fundamentally to announce transformations of a jurisdictional type. During the tenth century, these mentions were part of the measures to legitimate the expansion of public order, which occurred above all through the attribution of new prerogatives to bishops. The apogee of these measures occurred between 960 and 1000, when the linking of bishops to the government became a pillar of the reigns of Otto I, II, and III (D'Acunto, 2002, pp. 119-158; Leyser, 1982, pp. 69-102; Reuter, 2011, pp. 17-38).

Having gone on for decades, the strengthening of this public clerical position was fully established when the ninth century dawned. This allowed the prelates to establish a new phase in this process: absorbing the exercise of these public prerogatives within their religious position. In other words, incorporating urban government in a pastoral conception of power. Between 1010 and the 1030s, prelates in the Italian kingdom concluded the metamorphosis: they linked the functions legitimately received in the *res publica* to the care of souls. They no longer did this according to a logic transmitted by the king. Rather they dealt with jurisdictional subjects in a sacramental manner, suitable to episcopal office. For this reason, fires came to figure among the outrages perpetrated against the subjects of the altar and became a practice resulting from the corruption of Christian identity. It was as if the fires had become one of the many sheep that had gone astray from the local flock.

Documental change was the effect of the culmination of a tradition of governing. Rather than being the indicator of a political crisis or a calamitous state of things resulting from a feudal anarchy, it was a sign that the dignitaries of the *Regnum Italicum* had taken possession of the place legitimately attributed to them since the end of the ninth century. Continuity is the keyword in this reality. In this case there is no place for ruptures, mutations, or feudal revolutions. After the Ottonids, episcopal power in the north of the peninsular reacted to the fire as if it was dealing with an occurrence which consumed the spiritual obedience rather than structural materials. During the eleventh century, desolation due to fire devastated a specifically episcopal jurisdiction, which decades before was still being formed. Now, it was the bishop who was responsible for the duty of strengthening and expanding public order shaken by such a calamity.

This is what the bishops of Parma did. After Conrad II ordered the demolition of the stone walls surrounding the city, the local prelate, Hugh (?-1040?), began the construction of a new palace. Stating that the measure put into practice the expansion of the episcopal jurisdiction is something certain, based on topographical reasons: after the citizens had used fire against imperial troops, he decided to move the seat of ecclesiastical authority outside the areas then garrisoned within the walls. Parma was the only seat in the North of Italy in which the palace reserved for audiences with the lord bishop was outside the city walls (Miller, 2000, pp. 97-98, 142). It does not seem mere coincidence that this decision was taken after the record of a fire in 1037. The palace embodied the exercise of public powers by the bishop: it was a place frequented

not only by clerics, but by *ministeriales*, vassals, merchants. The powers which emanated from there were translated into a hegemony over the urban space, through the control of the *districtus*, the area linked to taxation of the city. As noted by Roberto Greci (2007, p. 120), these palaces were the regular seats of the administration of justice and were imposed like decrees carved in stone of the grandeur of the ecclesiastical figure in relation to the interests of citizens (Albini, 2005, p. 69). Installed in a new site, extending urban authority beyond the known frontiers, the construction was the episcopal response for the expansion of the urban political order, its projection to new dominions – as required by the perception shared by the elites about the fires.

The response was repeated almost 20 years later. At some moment between 1055 and 1058 – the evidence is not precise –, another bishop of Parma, called Cadalus (1010?-1072), began the construction of a new basilica. Placed in an area outside the old urban walls, like the episcopal palace, the new building formed a *citadel*, creating a new center of power in a city that was expanding demographically and economically (Fava, 2006, p. 74; Guenza, 2005, p. 60). As in the previous case, this building was associated with another fire. As previously, the cause of the second calamity was disobedience, revolt. However, this time the sparks emerged from the insubordination of the flesh. At least, this is what Cardinal Peter Damiani (1007-1073?) said had occurred; Having lived in Parma, Damiani associated the new fire with a priest, a certain Teuzolino (?-1055?). A cleric with a beautiful voice, with an angelical timbre – a falling angel in a dissolute life. His body was found next to that of his lover, covered in ashes. The cardinal had no doubts. The tragic end they came to was not an accident or a random outcome. Having the body charred only consumed the lust which had burned in the flesh of those sinners: "thus, the heat of libido caused the fire of combustion" (*sic nimirum flamma libidinis ignem meruit combustionis*) (Pedro Damião, *Epistolas*, 1988, p. 321). The spark which awoke the fury of the fire was disobedience, so much more inflammable when it came from a cleric who had waivered from the ideal of the apostolic life.

The fires were the evil to be exorcized by the local prelate. Since each inch of ground captured by the flames was felt to be land subtracted, above all, from the episcopal voice. As the columns of smoke snaked into the air, the authority of the bishop crumbled, as if it had been reduced to ashes. That calamity was experienced as a plague which directly threatened the head of the local hierarchy. An idea which could generate another reasoning: if the latter was hanging, weakened, it was a signal that something had occurred. A legitimate bishop and

the urban flames did not occupy the same space. For this reason, when two cardinals arrived in Milan to reestablished the obedience of the ruler of the bishopric, they came to fight fires. It was August 1067. Mainard (?-1073), Bishop of Silva Candida, and Giovanni Minico (?-1090?), presbyter of Santa Maria *in Trastevere*, were important figures within the Roman Church, holding positions of prestige, with regular access to the pontiff Alexander II (?-1073). His choice for the Milanese mission indicated the seriousness of the situation.

The city was convulsed by the confrontation between urban groups and the high-ranking clergy. For more than a decade a crowd seems to remain in the squares, markets and churches of Milan. Men-at-arms, merchants, and the poor knelt down to hear the sermons spoken by priests with a modest position, but an implacable verve. Voices resounded within the clerical hierarchy, thundering to the four winds that the believers of that place had been handed over to dissolute pastors. The hands which touched the holy body of Christ in the Eucharist were unclean and unworthy, as they had been contaminated by sex, since the priests had not remained celibate. When they were not openly married, they kept concubines. All of this occurred – the preachers accused – with the consent of the archbishop, Guido da Velate (?-1071), whose permission was bought with the weight of gold. With the clerical body having been infected from its top down, all the members were exposed to contamination of the worst vices: masses were conducted by usurers, simoniacs, fornicators (André de Strumi. *Vita Sancti Arialdi*. 1934, pp. 1051-1053; Arnulfo. *Gesta archiepiscoporum Mediolanensium*. 1848, p. 17; Landolfo. *Historia Mediolanensis*. 1848, p. 76). From the mouth of the preachers, the prestigious Ambrosian clergy found a hard-fought opposition, which became known as the *Pataria*.

Patarine preaching was followed by a call to resistance. Shepherded by wolves, what was left to the Milanese flock was to seal a pact: they refused to receive any sacrament, or to even appear at the divine offices. Since once touched by these men, the host was nothing more than the "dung of dogs," while the church filled with these presence was as holy as a "crib of donkeys" (Arnulfo. *Gesta archiepiscoporum Mediolanensium*. 1848, p. 19). Churches were empty, tithes dried up. And this was just the beginning of the escalation of the tribulations. *Patarine* sermons spoke of resisting 'even with blood,' proclaiming the use of force as the duty of the good Christian: "accursed be those who withholds their sword of blood" – said the preachers, evoking the justice of the Old Testament (André de Strumi. *Vita Sancti Arialdi*. 1934, pp. 1056-1057). It was a question of weeks for the wives and clerical concubines to be

attacked. During the attacks, the property defiled by sinful living was not spared: clerical goods and houses were vandalized. Skirmishes and attacks become ever more recurrent. Traumatized, the allies of the archbishop would remember the city as becoming a quagmire of blood. "What more can be said?", they lamented, "our citizens have been bewitched and like a tremendous sea storm or a lightning bolt, took to the streets attacking and killing improvident people." In their memorials, Milan had been taken hostage by a furious mob, which broke down the door "like starving dogs barking stupidly: they sacked the house of priests, who raised their eyes to heaven slaughtered like sheep before the wolves" (Landolfo. *Historia Mediolanensis*. 1848, pp. 80-81).

The conflicts continued for years. Councils were called to legislate on the Milanese discord. Excommunications were fired off, while missions sent by the pope followed one after the other without bringing the fighting to an end. When he dispatched the Cardinals Mainard and Giovanni Minico, Alexander II was acting in the wake of a turnabout in events. In the middle of 1066, the *Patarine* leader – a priest with tempestuous rhetoric called Arialdo (1010?-1066) –, was captured and killed by knights associated with the archbishop. When he realized that the news had left the city at the point of ebullition, Guido da Velate fled, leaving behind a situation that until then had been unprecedented: suddenly the two sides in dispute had lost their leaders. Then the envoys from Rome arrived. Apparently, the pontiff sought to grab the opportunity to confer the bishopric on a new prelate. But first it was necessary to reestablish the authority of the position – corroded to the point of continuing to collapse even after the flight of Guido. This was the mission of the cardinals. The third involving men from the papal clergy.

Then the references to fires appear. On 1 August 1067, Mainard and Giovanni Minico promulgated new *constitutiones* for the Milanese church. Reviewing a memorial of the conflict, their manuscript ended by stipulating the provisions which had to govern the local clergy. The list included subordination to Roman decisions as an irrevocable clause, prohibited the practice of the priesthood by those who had paid for ordination and those who kept women with them, and rejected ecclesiastical subjection to lay judgments. Finally, it was demanded that all those who had committed 'forms of violence' such as "fires, depredations, the spilling of blood, and many other injustices" (*incendia, depraedationes, sanguinum effusiones, multasque iniustas violentias fecerunt*) be handed over to the archbishop (Mansi, 1961, p. 948). Although it appears apparent naturally on this list of transgression, the reference to fires

is intriguing. For more than ten years, the Milanese had been involved in conflicts. The chronicles – Patarine or Anti-Patarine – spoke of swords in hands, poisonings, spoliations, street battles, mutilations, and even the hiding of bodies (André de Strumi. *Vita Sancti Arialdi*. 1934, p. 1054, 1066-1068; Arnulfo. *Gesta archiepiscoporum Mediolanensium*. 1848, p. 17, 23; Landolfo. *Historia Mediolanensis*. 1848, p. 11, 80-81, 95, 97). Fires were not given the same emphasis. They appear with clarity here, in the document drafted by the pontifical emissaries to restore public order and to strengthen episcopal authority. It was not a coincidence. As we have seen, mentioning them was a practical requirement of the vocabulary affirming a jurisdiction, especially of a bishop.

Fire would be mentioned a second time. We meet urban flames again in 1075, in a singular episode. Before the end of March, one of the remaining Patarine leaders, a layman called Erlembald (?-1075), gave an order to go to churches and apprehend the olive oil known as 'chrism.' Easter was coming. In a few days the suffragan bishops would fulfil the custom of using the oil to consecrate the baptismal fonts during the rites of the Passion of the Savior. They had to be impeded. Since the local church did not have an archbishop – the position was officially vague –, the oil had not been blessed by the due authority and was thus not really sacred. The liquid would not anoint the fonts for baptism, since it was a trick, a fraud. So it was done. But not only this. According to the orders of Erlembald, a certain Liprando (?-1075?), a local priest, took the place of the bishops and baptized the faithful.

At this point we encounter the protest of the chronicle Arnulfo, adversary of the *patarines*: this behavior was "violence" which, "added to the rancor of having let the city burn, profoundly offended many citizens" (*quidem violentia recenti iuncta civitatis incensae memoriae quamplurimos offendit graviter cives*. Arnulfo. *Gesta archiepiscoporum Mediolanensium*. 1848, p. 24). It is necessary to be emphatic here: fire was mentioned in the context of an episode in which sacramental prerogatives, belonging exclusively to the episcopacy, were usurped by lay orders. We can take the risk of stating that the use of the term was more an attempt to raise awareness about the outrages committed against the bishopric than an indication of the extent of material destruction left by the flames. It was a question capable of shocking, since it aggravated the accusation that the patarines did more than sullying a tradition: fire was proof of how much they had harmed ecclesiastic authority.

Fires are not a backdrop to history. Their occurrence in the life of society goes beyond the destruction which collective memories tried to exorcize,

reducing them to accidental outbreaks or environmental fatalities. Nor were they limited to times of war, as if they were always and everywhere left in the wake of conquests, battles, and attacks. Between 880 and 1080, the elites of *Regnum Italicum* registered the insatiable devastation to give meaning to the directions of governance, making the indomitable fire simultaneously the cause and witness of the public rise of bishops. In light of this experience, fires had political reasons to devour urban spaces.

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NOTE

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