Fiscal Resources, the *Regnum Italiae* and an Empire in Crisis (1080-1130)

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In recent years, analysis of the economic foundations of power in the early medieval kingdoms of western Europe has increasingly focused on fiscal assets.[1] This is a wide-ranging and traditional topic of research, already present in works linked to an institutionalist conception of politics typical of the national-centric approach to the study of power of such nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European historians as Paul Darmstädter and Silvio Pivano.[2]

The revisiting of these historiographical questions is driven today both by new interests and by contemporary issues. In particular, the influence of current events in research can be observed in essays aimed at interpreting public goods as tools-for-governance (i.e., the search for political consensus by the holders of central power). The study of public rights and fiscal goods serves, therefore, as a pretext to deconstruct the different forms of political articulation and social complexity during the Middle Ages.[3]

Various Italian historical contributions have examined fiscal assets between the eighth and eleventh centuries. Fiore's book belongs to this strand. One of his main chronological focuses is the

[1] For a broad European perspective, see *Biens publics*, 2019.
[2] Darmstädter, 1896, and Pivano, 1908; also Brühl, 1968.
[3] Fouracre, 2009, pp. 287-297, and Carocci and Collavini, 2014, pp. 125-158.

fifty years between 1080 and 1130, the span of time that witnessed the definitive crisis of the traditional hierarchies and power systems that had been developing in the *regnum Italiae* since the time of Carolingian government. The book tackles two complex questions: First, when the political instability of the mid-eleventh century exploded in the "civil wars", what responses were implemented at both local and supralocal levels in northern and central Italy? Second, what was the reaction of the emperors to such a political challenge?

Although he also pays attention to what he calls protocomuni (the first urban communes), Fiori interprets the data found mainly in charters associated with rural areas, tracking the political and economic behaviour of local lords and village communities and the ways in which the central authority tried to respond to these practices throughout the *regnum*. He considers fiscal resources and their administration as useful (but not unique) evidence of the emperor's efforts to preserve and expand imperial authority over the country.

Around the year 1050, the social structure of the *regnum Italiae* was based on the traditional hierarchies created in the Carolingian era. At local, diocesan and supradiocesan levels, marquises and counts, archbishops, bishops and abbots represented the imperial power. Royal authority continued to be a model for everyone who exercised, or intended to exercise, political rights rooted in the public sphere of the *regnum*.

In rural areas, however, secular and ecclesiastical aristocracies were able to exert economic pressure on the inhabitants of villages. Meanwhile, charters show the emperors' tendency to transfer their *possession* of power – including the public rights to exercise *districtio* and consent to the fortification of rural centres – to the local aristocracies. This reinforced the aristocracies' prerogatives of social and economic dominance, which they rapidly translated into political power in an increasingly militarised context.

Against this background, one of the main novelties of Fiore's book is his analysis of the political and economic strategies pursued by the emperors, from Henry III to Conrad III, to regain power in local contexts. This phase is usually not studied in its full diachronic

sweep, most historians tending to concentrate on the clash between figures such as Henry IV and Pope Gregory VII. In Fiore's view, in contrast, "This troubled stage was perceived by the imperial authorities not just as a threat to themselves and to their traditional supremacy, but also as an opportunity to break free from the bonds of the old political system, so as to attain new and direct access to the kingdom of Italy and its resources."[4]

Fiore reads the evidence by following the changes in the forms of administration of public rights, fiscal resources and "royal infrastructure", that is to say "centres under the direct control of the royal authorities". His approach raises important methodological issues. Although it is possible to identify how many public assets were transferred or confirmed in a given period of time to different people and institutions, there is no way of knowing, for each emperor, the true extent of the fiscal assets subject to imperial government and administration.

This difficulty arises from several causes. To begin with, numerous diplomas have been lost. Second, the surviving diplomas only tell us about the transfers of fiscal assets. Third, assets granted by way of oral agreements remain in the shadow.[5] Fourth, in the absence of public inventories, it is exceedingly difficult to unravel the whole set of assets kept under the direct dependencies of the royal actors. Finally, it is also hard to gauge the real size of the assets transferred. With a few exceptions, the public documentation does not describe the characteristics of the assets included in the diplomas.[6] Consequently, we can never gain a full picture of the properties involved as they pass from the hands of the *fiscus* into those of powerful individuals and ecclesiastical institutions.

Still, some strategies are clearly documented. Emperors tried to regain control of the main territorial districts of the kingdom, such

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[4] Fiore, 2020, p. 37.
[5] Collavini and Tomei, 2017, pp. 205-216.
[6] See West, 2019, pp. 157-177, and the critiques on Bachrach, 2013, pp. 1-27, included in pp. 162-163.

as Tuscany and Friuli, as well as of the ancient public Marches of Spoleto and Verona. The March of Turin provides one of the clearest examples of how imperial strategy operated. Henry IV did not acknowledge the rights inherited by countess Adelaide's daughter. At the same time, the emperor secured domain over the local fiscal assets through armed intervention. He sent his son Conrad to Piedmont with the task of "conquering" *manu militari* the margravial fiscal estates. In this way, the emperor contributed to the collapse of the old public district of the *Marca*.

As Fiore points out, great districts, and particularly Tuscany, "represented intermediate structures designed to control the web of *Reichsguten* and to mediate the relation between the sovereign and local political actors. Henry V promoted the resurgence, as a royal infrastructure, of the March of Tuscany, which had been without a margrave since Matilda's deposition in 1081. In 1116 the king entrusted it to his *ministerialis* Rabodo and set out to (at least partially) restore the traditional system of power, by regaining old rural fiscal estates and imposing the authority of the new *Amtsmarkgraf* on urban communities and lords in the region."[7] Similar strategies were pursued throughout the region of Veneto. The importance of the Marches in imperial policy had no direct parallel north of the Alps and must be regarded as reflecting a strategy to gain control over Italy.

The significance of these districts for the imperial party lies entirely in their capacity to frame a series of central places (royal estates and castles) from which to exercise control over extensive areas and the societies of the countryside (i.e., Borgo San Donnino, Nogara, Ficarolo, among others). Economic and political platforms of this kind guaranteed imperial economic hegemony in a social landscape where possession of land and resources was essential to control the political competition of a military aristocracy which was not always loyal to the imperial authority.

[7] Fiore, 2020, p. 45.

Nevertheless, the limited military capacities of the men linked to the emperors greatly complicated the situation and the possibilities of the imperial "party". Diplomas were not issued to Italian recipients between the years 1097 and 1110, a telling fact that underlines the interruption of the channels of political communication between the central power and its faithful peripheries. The determined effort of Henry V to take over the March of Tuscany after the death of Matilda of Canossa, appointing a *fidelis* to govern it, also failed after the assassination of the new marquis at the hands of the Florentines.

This is not to say that all these imperial initiatives were doomed to failure. Fiore shows how defeat was not the sole, inevitable consequence of imperial policies. Beyond the crisis, the March of Friuli, for example, ceded to the Archbishop of Aquileia, maintained its coherence well into the Late Middle Ages. The emperors were indefatigable in striving to regain control over public patrimonies and great political districts. Their efforts to identify the assets still linked to the *fiscus* continued well beyond the civil wars. A twelfth-century manuscript reports a list of *curiae* located in various areas of the empire, some of them in northern Italy, from which the emperors obtained resources.[8] The drawing up of the list concerning Italy was linked to the needs of the future emperor Frederick I, about to embark on his journey to the peninsula (1152-1153). The manuscript is, therefore, an inventory of public assets, like one of those of which the Carolingian capitulars often speak. The testimony of the time of Barbarossa reveals, in any case, the dynamic nature of the royal assets, which might revert to the public or royal authority even after centuries of "private" administration, as the *curtis* of Coriano (*Coiranum*) clearly shows. Coriano was a fiscal estate, located south of Pavia, on the banks of the Po River. Late-ninth-century diplomas show that the estate was often transferred to different recipients but, just as often, regained by the royal *fiscus*.[9] Public goods such as Co-

[8] Brühl and Kölzer, 1979 and Bordone, 2011.
[9] Santos Salazar, 2021.

riano demonstrate (or bear witness to) the very strong "fiscal memory" that characterised some of the lands linked to the empire in Italy well into the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, during the reigns of the Swabian emperors.

From the twelfth century onwards, some differences can be documented in various Italian areas. In the Po plain, the radical growth of the communes dwarfed the presence of fiscal assets and castles directly linked to the empire. In Cremona and Piacenza, those imperial platforms were placed on the borders of the *territoria* controlled by the cities. Conversely, in southern territories, like Umbria (where the March of Spoleto acted as a frame for imperial politics), the emperors controlled several castles and rural communities, and the deep exercise of its sovereignty enabled the empire to become a leading political player.

Fiore's book shows how the political languages changed in Italy, and how the empire and its officials played a significant role that developed in the context of *seigneurial* action induced by those changes.[10] By the second half of the twelfth century, the political transformation was almost complete.

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[10] Fiore, 2004, pp. 49-51.

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