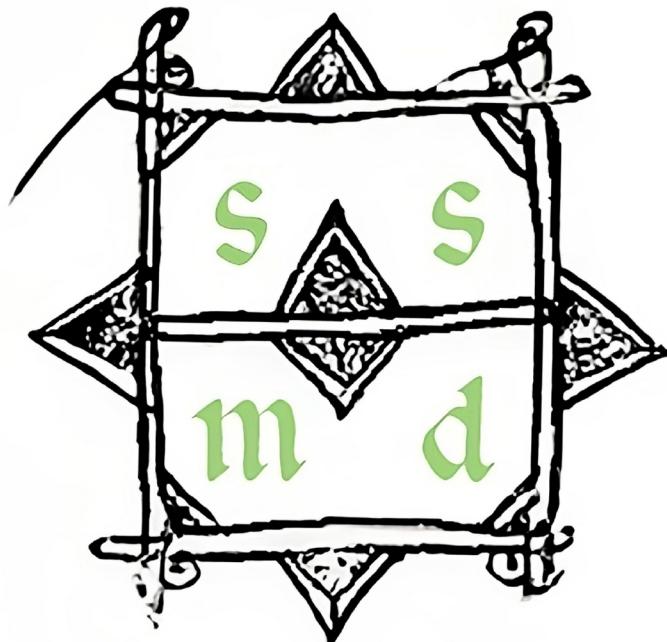


# STUDI DI STORIA MEDIOEVALE E DI DIPLOMATICA

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**Writing the Structures of Landholding  
in a Changing Italy (5th–8th century).  
The PRIN project LEXICONOMY**

di Dario Internullo - Paolo Tomei

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## Writing the Structures of Landholding in a Changing Italy (5th–8th century). The PRIN project LEXICONOMY

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### 1. *State of art*

Over the last three decades, studies on the economy of the 5th to 8th centuries have rightly been at the heart of the debate on the great transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages or, in other words, from the Western Roman Empire to the post-Roman kingdoms as regards Europe and the Mediterranean West.

In setting up new interpretative frameworks, these studies have privileged the more 'dynamic' data from both written and unwritten sources. As regards the former, these studies have mainly examined monetary circulation, the revenues of the aristocracy, the movement of goods and men, the topographical dislocation of land ownership, and any mention of forms of taxation. As for the latter, the studies have focused on those archaeological indicators that best express the interconnections between different places, in an effort to develop a picture of trade and commercial exchanges. The results of these analyses have shown that the progressive dissolution of taxation, the cornerstone of economic structures in the Roman age, was accompanied by two phenomena: on the one hand, the significant growth in importance of landed wealth as the basis of power and social prestige; on the other, a regionalisation of economic and cultural circuits<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU, Mission 4, Component 1, CUP

By focusing on markers of dynamism (money, taxes, movements of goods and people), studies on the great transition have left the apparently static data of the sources in the background: these undoubtedly include the lexicon used to describe economic realities. This has been done for a specific reason: because words in use in the economic sphere are regarded as immutable or changeable only to the slightest degree.

Words such as *fundus*, *colonia*, *massa*, *ratio*, *census*, and *opera*, widespread in the Early Middle Ages even well beyond the 8th century, have been regarded as the result of a reification of ancient cultural patterns throughout the Middle Ages. However, the reasons for such reifications have rarely been investigated: the lack of lexical mobility has been regarded as a research postulate, a historiographical *a priori*, rather than as a historical problem to be addressed. Today many historians are aware of the *Linguistic Turn* and the *Begriffsgeschichte*<sup>2</sup>. They have accepted that the lexicon and, with it, the concepts developed to think about reality are an excellent vantage point to grasp the mentality of past societies. Nor can it be denied in advance that, despite the conservatism found in the signifiers of words, changes occurred over the period in question. Consider the term *curtis*. It appeared from the 5th and 6th centuries onwards to indicate an 'enclosed area' and then became the semantic core of the economic structures of the 8th-10th centuries in the Lombard-Carolingian regions, used to define major land complexes. Its meaning eventually underwent further change: it came to refer no longer to a vast estate, but to a seigniorial territory<sup>3</sup>. The time is ripe, therefore, to turn the above assumption into a problem, by devising an enquiry that aims to better explore economic concepts from the point of view of both the signifier and the signified.

To return to the centuries of the great transition, more targeted studies have already shown how the same reification, or lack thereof, could be explained in the light of complex phenomena. This is the case with 6th-century Ostrogothic Italy, studied by Pierfrancesco Porena, according to whom the marked persistence of Roman land lexicon in the Gothic administration can be explained on the basis of the diffusion and use of the ancient and prestigious *Corpus Agrimensorum* in the administrative centres of Ravenna<sup>4</sup>. To take one more, non-Italian example, a lexical study *à rebours* of the polyptych from the Bavarian monastery of Staffelsee (late 8th century), carried out by Stefan Esders, has shown that technical terms such as *scara* and *parafredus*, describing the services required from the peasants dependent on the monastery, derived from the late antique transport services of

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I53D23007020001 (PRIN 2022 PNRR; P2022X3MHF). Dario Internullo should be credited with paragraphs 1 and 2; Paolo Tomei with paragraphs 2 and 4; paragraph 5 is composed by both authors. For economics, see WICKHAM, *Framing the early Middle Ages*; for the so-called cultural 'pluralisms' or 'particularisms', see *Une histoire juridique de l'Occident* and CHERUBINI - PRATESI, *Paleografia latina*, pp. 159-354.

<sup>2</sup> The *Linguistic Turn*; KOSELLECK, *Vergangene Zukunft*.

<sup>3</sup> TOMEI, *Sul termine curtis*.

<sup>4</sup> PORENA, *L'insediamento degli Ostrogoti*, pp. 22-26, 101, 250-251; see also DEL LUNGO, *La pratica agrimensoria*.

*angaria* and *paraveredus* widespread in the province *Raetia secunda*. These services were reconfigured in the late 8th century in relation to major monasteries under the control of bishops operating within the new Carolingian empire<sup>5</sup>.

These examples, to which several others could be added, show the fruitfulness of a historical analysis of the economic lexicon. But in their geographical and chronological delimitations they also reveal the lack of a comprehensive study of this lexicon from a broader perspective. This is precisely the purpose of *LEXICONOMY*: to bring the reflection initiated by specific studies within a broader chronological arc and geographical space. The chronological arc is that of the great transition of the 5th to 8th centuries. The geographical space coincides with Italy.

## 2. Objectives

The aim of the project *LEXICONOMY. Writing the Structures of Landholding in a Changing Italy (5th–8th Century)* is to use lexicon as a tool capable of linking power-related writings and structures in a reciprocal and complementary way. Power is a complex and somewhat fluid concept. Here it is to be understood in its basic, most concrete, and solid dimension, namely: as land ownership. Hence, on the one hand, the object of analysis will be the forms of land organisation and management – including the words used to describe estates, both as a whole and in terms of the individual elements that compose and hold them together. On the other hand, the project will examine how these elements interact with practices and forms of writing, thus characterising the system of documentation – and the subsequent archival transmission of documents<sup>6</sup>.

The research is intended to focus on a historical phase in which this basic, and apparently constant and changeless, feature acquired increasing importance. This is a fundamental and delicate transition, to which historiography devoted much attention in the 1990s, constructing a new and now consolidated interpretative paradigm: the transformation of the Roman world, from the 5th to the 8th century<sup>7</sup>.

Within this chronological span, with regionally differentiated time sequences and development trends, two processes unfolded in the post-Roman world. Medieval studies have shed considerable light on them over the last decade. They affect, so to speak, the underlying frameworks. In power structures, we witness a shift from taxes to land as the basic economic resource for financing institutions, in the context of what Marc Bloch has called the ‘politics of land’<sup>8</sup>. In writings related to power dynamics, there is a shift from papyrus to parchment as the material medium for writing – and this reflects profound shifts in the trade circuits

<sup>5</sup> ESDERS, *The ‘Staffelsee inventory’*.

<sup>6</sup> GHIGNOLI - BOUGARD, *Elementi romani*; GHIGNOLI, *Istituzioni ecclesiastiche*.

<sup>7</sup> *Kingdoms of the Empire; Regna and gentes*.

<sup>8</sup> BLOCH, *La société féodale*; CAROCCI - COLLAVINI, *Il costo degli stati; Biens publics, biens du roi*.

of the Mediterranean, which became a frontier by breaking along the latitudinal axis, as Henri Pirenne pointed out<sup>9</sup>.

There is one major question that drives this research, stimulated by the encounter between strategic emerging topics and related clusters within Horizon Europe, the EU's key funding programme for research and innovation. After the collapse of the Roman state system in the West, European economies and societies underwent a dynamic of progressive regionalisation in political and cultural terms. How did they respond contextually to drivers of change such as demography, migration, and climate? The centuries under investigation experienced: a veritable demographic crash, which, however, ended up determining a favourable relationship between men and resources, leading to a subsequent season of growth; intense migratory flows, viewed from a perspective that has reconsidered ethnic identities by abandoning the image – at once traditional and traditionalist – of a 'clash of civilisations'; and, finally, the so-called Late Antique Little Ice Age<sup>10</sup>.

Our aim is to reconstruct the complex dialectic between elements of continuity and change by grasping them in depth, i.e. by fixing our gaze on the supporting structures, within a space that makes it possible to fully appreciate variability on a regional scale, a characteristic feature of the post-Roman world<sup>11</sup>.

The project focuses precisely on a geographical reality, the Italian peninsula, which after a smooth transition from imperial to royal rule with Odoacer and Theoderic and a laborious return under imperial control with Justinian, lost its unity and went from being a bridge between the two shores of the Mediterranean to serving as a frontier. In the general context of a combination of calamities, plague pandemics, and abrupt climatic cooling due to catastrophic volcanic eruptions, Italy was severely impacted by the destruction wrought by an almost twenty-year war for control over its territory. Then, with the arrival and the (not always coordinated) action of the commanders led by Alboin, Italy fragmented into a multiplicity of political spaces, with shifting boundaries: on the one hand, the areas still subject to the emperor in Constantinople, centred on the ancient palatial seats of Ravenna and Rome; on the other, the aggregate over which the Lombard king, resident in Pavia, asserted his authority.

This mosaic makes it possible to study several juxtaposed and intertwined variations on the same theme and to address the following questions. What transformations did power-related writings and structures undergo in politically, and increasingly also culturally, differentiated regions of the Roman world? And how did these dissonances interact with each other beyond political-institutional and linguistic-cultural divisions? The presence of several languages – in addition to Latin and Greek, barbarian languages (in the etymological sense of the term) –

<sup>9</sup> PIRENNE, *Mahomet et Charlemagne*; INTERNULLO, *Du papyrus*; WICKHAM, *The Donkey and the Boat*.

<sup>10</sup> DEVROEY, *Économie rurale*; GEARY, *The Myth of Nations*; BÜNTGEN, *Cooling and societal change*.

<sup>11</sup> WICKHAM, *Framing the early Middle Ages*; PETRALIA, *Tra storia e archeologia*.

and their mutual influence in the construction of a lexicon of land tenure constitute another variable that adds complexity and interest to the project, to some extent underlying all these research questions<sup>12</sup>.

A prerequisite of this project is the conviction that words, including ones related to forms of land organisation and management, are renewable resources, shaped by prolonged use and therefore consigned to history – to paraphrase an insightful expression by Marc Bloch – by the very subject of its study<sup>13</sup>. They do not have the appearance of airtight containers or, conversely, of passepartouts: through different rhythms and for historically ascertainable reasons, they change so as to capture various shades of reality and the imaginary more closely, or, conversely, they encompass these changing shades within themselves. The meanings assumed by each word, and likewise words referring to the same meaning, may have coexisted or overlapped. All this happened over time, according to a well-defined chronology, and can therefore be historicised: it is the ‘material’ from which the contours of the past emerge.

Furthermore, documents cannot be considered tight cages to be unlocked, in order to free texts and restore them to their original form by stripping them of all materiality. Nor can documents be reduced to monuments, hieratically erected and preserved to challenge the centuries, to be arranged within an idealised and eternal taxonomy. The philological approach, and likewise the diplomatic one, must necessarily place the source within their time. Indeed, historical research is now approaching documents as light and living sources, that is ones forged by practice and for the sake of practice, drawing upon the theories about ‘documentality’ expounded by Maurizio Ferraris, according to whom ‘nothing social exists beyond the text’<sup>14</sup>. Scholars are stressing dimensions other than what we might call the more traditional aspect of the legal defence of legitimate land ownership over a long period of time. According to this view, writings, as social objects produced and used by people, were designed to act on the present and the near future: while serving as a means of defence in court cases, they could also become weapons to attack established rights; sometimes they formed the basis for forging new documents; other times, they served as real political and cultural models, even centuries after their drafting<sup>15</sup>. Take Cassiodorus’ *Variae*: while the ‘original’ texts in the collection were epistles with political and juridical functions (507-537), their transformation into model letters (538-540) made them one of the most widespread chancery tools in the 11th-14th centuries, a tool which in the 15th century was to provide a new cultural basis for reflecting on the relations between past and present<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> *The Languages.*

<sup>13</sup> BLOCH, *Apologia della storia*, p. 117.

<sup>14</sup> FERRARIS, *Documentalità*.

<sup>15</sup> *Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit*.

<sup>16</sup> INTERNULLO, *The Revival*; MICHEL, *Transmission*.

It is necessary, therefore, to adopt a twofold perspective: to study how words and writings, acting as catalysts, were capable of both reflecting change and transforming the social, political, and economic structures of the past. In short, they can be seen as both a response to change and a process of change.

When viewed as a whole, the proposed project can rightly be described as a work of recomposition. Evidence of this is the effort to bring together realities that are commonly thought of as disjointed, as separated by insurmountable fissures. These are geographical and political splits, the supposed lines between Lombard and Byzantine Italy; chronological splits, the obscure and seemingly unfathomable 7th century; cultural and material splits, the civilisation of papyrus and marble and that of parchment and wood. The project does not seek to avoid these fractures, nor to set them as limits to the investigation; on the contrary, it makes them its focus, seeking to discern paths that might allow one to pass through them and thus to better understand the age of transition.

### 3. Sources

As concerns primary sources, *LEXICONOMY* intends to systematically analyse four major repositories of written sources: Cassiodorus' *Variae*, Gregory the Great's *Registrum*, the papyri from the archiepiscopal archives in Ravenna, and the parchments from the (archi)episcopal archives in Lucca. The following is a brief description of each of these groups.

- Cassiodorus' *Variae*: a selection of texts in twelve books, carried out ex post on the basis of registers of outgoing documents, namely 468 public epistles issued between 507 and 537 by Gothic rulers or by Cassiodorus himself in his capacity as a public official. The *Variae*, a selection conceived by Cassiodorus as a writing model for later generations of Ravenna officials, sheds light on the relations between central authority and land wealth in early 6th-century Italy, touching upon Ravenna as well as many other major and minor cities. The analysis of the *Variae* will be based on the recent edition by Andrea Giardina and his research team, published with a translation and historical commentary<sup>17</sup>.
- Gregory the Great's *Registrum*: one of the very few examples of papal letter registers written from the mid-fifth century (if not earlier) of which a good portion of the text – not entirely complete – has come down to us via manuscripts earlier than the late 12th century. We know a total of 850 epistles issued in the name of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) and covering a wide variety of political, religious, and economic topics. From this perspective, the *Registrum* sheds considerable light not only on the popes' estates and their management, especially in Sicily, but also on the relations between those estates and the peasant world, on the one hand, and the public, Byzantine, and Lombard authorities with which the pope interacted, on the other. The analysis of the *Registrum* will be

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<sup>17</sup> CASSIODORO, *Varie*.

carried out on the basis of Dag Norberg's edition, which is still a reference text today, and also takes into account the lexical interpretations found in modern translations<sup>18</sup>.

- Papyri from the archiepiscopal archives in Ravenna: documents, almost all written on papyrus, preserved until the early Modern Age in the archiepiscopal archives of Ravenna and today dispersed across several locations. They constitute the earliest archival series in the Euro-Mediterranean world and go back as far as the 5th century. By the end of the 8th century, they amount to ca. 61 loose-leaf documents transmitted in papyrus originals or (later) parchment copies, 16 texts derived from citations in Agnellus' *Liber Pontificalis*, 29 summaries in the *Breviarium Ecclesiae Ravennatis*, for a total of 106 items. They concern not only the archbishops' estates, but also the process through which that cluster of properties emerged out of the land holdings of the Ostrogoths and other major aristocrats of the 5th and 6th centuries. In addition to Ravenna and its hinterland, these papyri shed light on the countryside under the control of cities such as Gubbio, Lucca, Rieti, Syracuse, and Palermo. The analysis of the Ravenna papyri will be carried out with the help of the reference editions<sup>19</sup>, while also drawing upon the new data acquired by Dario Internullo through autoptic inspections and studies of the material aspects of the papyri.
- Parchments from the (archi)episcopal archives of Lucca: 292 parchments datable to the years between 685 and the end of the 8th century, preserved in the diplomatic collection of the same archives. For the period under investigation, it is the largest deposit of parchments in the world. Originating from various documentary and archival repositories, mostly churches and monasteries drawn into the bishop's orbit in the last quarter of the 8th century, the documents from Lucca throw light on land management in the countryside around the city and in the more peripheral areas where the bishops accumulated lands. They also offer a broader range of information that helps grasp dynamics, movements, and changes in one of the most important regions of the Lombard kingdom, Tuscany. The analysis of the documents from Lucca will be carried out with the aid of the reference editions<sup>20</sup>, as well as the new data acquired by Paolo Tomei through autoptic inspections and studies of the material aspects of the parchments.

Of these sources, not only the chronological, geographical, and political complementarity, but also the typological diversity will be highlighted. In other words, an attempt will be made to explicate the different information level that each specific documentary type is able to shed light on: for example, the heavier juridical documents (sales, leases, exchanges, donations) mainly shed light on the elites and their ambitions, while lighter texts such as letters and inventories

<sup>18</sup> GREGORII MAGNI Registrum epistularum.

<sup>19</sup> Die nichtliterarischen lateinischen Papyri; Chartae Latinae Antiquiores; Le carte ravennati; Breviarium Ecclesiae Ravennatis; AGNELLI RAVENNATIS Liber Pontificalis.

<sup>20</sup> Codice diplomatico longobardo; Chartae Latinae Antiquiores.

– the latter being extremely rare from a conservation point of view – can shed more light on the social strata close to the land and agricultural work<sup>21</sup>. In this sense, we will also try to stress the degree of ‘representativeness’ of those sources which are very rare from a conservation point of view, but which reflect, and sometimes even drive, economic and cultural practices on a daily and therefore very large scale.

#### 4. Tools

The data extracted from the analysis of the selected sample of sources will shape the heuristic tool that lends its name to the project and constitutes its first result.

*LEXICONOMY* is conceived as an interactive and historical lexicon. As the name implies, it is, first of all, a lexicon collecting a selection of words related to land ownership, the basis of pre-modern economies. The two parts that, combined, create its name are linked to more than one meaning: *LEXICONOMY* will be created with the aim of both constructing a lexicon of economic terms and making the most of the available lexical data, with specific reference to forms of land management. This is the first set of data to be collected: possible examples include key terms such as *fundus*, *massa*, *curtis*, *villa*, *fiscus*, *patrimonium*, *ratio*, *opera*, *angaria*, *sundrium*, and *cafagium*. Each entry will have fields devoted to: the etymological root, a kind of prehistory of the term; the variants attested by the sources, with an indication of their distribution across time and space; the proper nouns associated with the term, accompanied by relevant prosopographical and toponymic references.

*LEXICONOMY* is also intended to serve as an interactive lexicon. In other words, the aim is to connect it to other resources and tools that allow words to be linked both to sources in their material dimension and to space through geo-referencing. The first link will provide the textual context and hence the interpretation of the sense in which a specific term is employed. This is a decisive aspect in the structuring of each entry in the lexicon. The second link will instead make it possible to grasp the equally important spatial repercussions, with reference to both the place where the term is used and the spatial context – if any – to which the term applies. This is not a merely mechanical procedure. Attention must be paid to the link between meaning and space in order to defuse what John Agnew has called the ‘territorial trap’<sup>22</sup>: the risk of fallaciously back-projecting notions related to the territoriality of the modern state when interpreting the spatial aspect of concepts such as *massa*, *curtis*, *patrimonium*, *cafagium* etc. A second set of data will, therefore, be placed on the coordinate of space.

Last but not least, *LEXICONOMY* is a historical lexicon. Its architecture responds to the need to track semantic changes over time and – a more ambi-

<sup>21</sup> CAMMAROSANO, *Italia medievale*.

<sup>22</sup> AGNEW, *The Territorial Trap*.

tious task – to verify whether there is any correlation between these changes and transformations in the field of writing and structures. The combination of these phenomena has a strong impact on the diachronic flow in terms of periodisation. Identifying the phases in which changes accumulate and the ways in which the various elements that make up a society reorganise themselves is a central operation for reconstructing the past. To this end, the lexicon is a tool designed to carry out operations that – accordance with Michel Foucault's theories and Pierre Chastang's more recent approach – might be described as a form of 'semantic archaeology'<sup>23</sup>. The project brings to light the progressive stratification of meanings of a word: a valuable and often overlooked element. However, this stratification is no simple process. To use another archaeological metaphor, one must also be prepared to deal with negative stratigraphic units, i.e. interventions that have removed or mixed up the deposits. Each layer can thus be carefully studied and placed in its context. The third set of data is, therefore, placed on the coordinate of time.

To give a concrete example of how the lexicon works, the user might find in it a word such as *curtis*. First of all, s/he will find a specific section devoted to etymology; s/he will find an organic and orderly illustration of its possible variants from the point of view of the signifier (e.g., *curtis/cortis*) and the signified (e.g., enclosed courtyard/land estate), distributed in their spatial and chronological dimension; finally, for each occurrence, s/he will find an explicit link with the source in which it is attested (e.g., a letter by Cassiodorus/parchment from Lucca). In such a way, an attempt will be made to make the times and places of the changes evident (e.g., enclosed courtyard > land estate).

From a methodological point of view, we have chosen to adopt a bottom-up approach – rather than top-down, vertical one – enriched by a horizontal component. In other words, a structure has been devised that, starting from a detailed analysis, accomplishes a gradual synthesis, from the bottom up, and is based on interdependence and cross-communication. LEXICONOMY is able to place three different sets of data – lexicon, sources, and land geography – in dialogue and to connect with other useful databases and tools. The aim of the project is also to take advantage of consilience. Roman and Byzantine history will offer different vantage points: upstream and downstream with respect to the chronological arc of the great transition, outside the chosen space of investigation – Italy in the 5th to 8th centuries.

##### 5. Final remarks

In conclusion, LEXICONOMY seeks to contribute to the general reflection on the Transformation of the Roman World<sup>24</sup> by drawing attention to elements that

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<sup>23</sup> FOUCAULT, *L'archéologie du savoir*; CHASTANG, *L'archéologie du texte médiéval*.

<sup>24</sup> *Kingdoms of the Empire; Regna and gentes*.

have been left in the background so far, yet are fundamental to power structures, society, and the economy: the landscape of property, its vocabulary, and its writings. Following in the footsteps of the *Inheritance of Rome*, as outlined by Chris Wickham<sup>25</sup>, the project is intended to provide an original link between the themes in New Fiscal History, a current focusing on the study of the economic foundations of power and institutions, and *Begriffsgeschichte*, the history of concepts<sup>26</sup>.

What drives the project is the ambition to stitch together the many and diverse fractures generated by the collapse of Roman unity and to reconstruct the changing fabric of power, with its spatially varied and mutable components. Its decoding will be ensured by a new tool, not yet available to the scholarly community. It is conceived as having a markedly transdisciplinary nature, i.e. an interactive one, open and outwardly connectable, while maintaining a primary historical character: it is a lexicon aimed at identifying the chronology and forms of change in a fundamental season of transition.

Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, Italian societies reorganised themselves under the influence of – and in reaction to – powerful drivers of change: the instability of institutional frameworks, population movements, the transformation of individual and collective ethnic identities, and a disruptive climatic and pandemic crisis that caused a demographic collapse. This social reorganisation also affected a basic constituent of power: land ownership. It was a restructuring from the ground up. A deeper understanding of the complex ways – varying from region to region – in which this process occurred in words and through words is not only important for the study of the past, but can help in the reflection on how to face the challenges of the present time.

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<sup>25</sup> WICKHAM, *The Inheritance of Rome*.

<sup>26</sup> *Economic Systems and State Finance*; KOSELLECK, *Vergangene Zukunft*.

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## TITLE

*Writing the Structures of Landholding in a Changing Italy (5th–8th century). The PRIN project LEXICONOMY*

*Scrivere le strutture della proprietà fondiaria in un'Italia in transizione (secoli V-VIII). Il progetto PRIN Lexconomy*

## ABSTRACT

The article illustrates the PRIN 2022 project PNRR *Lexconomy. Writing the structures of landholding in a changing Italy (5th-8th centuries)*, directed by Paolo Tomei and co-directed by Dario Internullo. The aim of the project is to investigate the centuries of transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages in Italy (5th-8th centuries) from the point of view of the landed property lexicon, whose dynamics, between continuity and transformation, is considered here as a historical phenomenon worthy of scientific analysis.

L'articolo illustra il progetto PRIN 2022 PNRR *Lexconomy. Writing the Structures of Landholding in a Changing Italy (5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century)*, diretto da Paolo Tomei e co-diretto da Dario Internullo. Il progetto ha come finalità quella di osservare i secoli di transizione dall'Antichità al Medioevo in Italia (V-VIII) dal punto di vista del lessico fondiario, la cui dinamicità è qui considerata, tra continuità e trasformazioni, come un fenomeno storico passibile di indagine scientifica.

## KEYWORDS

Late Antiquity, Early Middle Ages, Lexicon, Landholding, Writing

Tarda Antichità, Alto Medioevo, Lessico, Proprietà fondiaria, scrittura