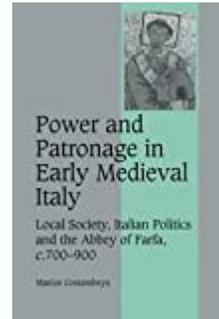


Marios Costambeys. *Power and Patronage in Early Medieval Italy: Local Society, Italian Politics and the Abbey of Farfa, c.700-900.* Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Tables, charts. xvi + 388 pp. \$115.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-87037-5.



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Farfa Back into the Early Middle Ages

The Abbey of Farfa, nestled in the Sabine hills, and little known on the tourist trail, has survived to this day with its community of Benedictine monks because it has constantly diversified its activities and reasons for existing. Today, the abbey is online, allowing you to take a virtual tour of its beautiful interiors—what was once the product of patronage and the intimate relationship between lay and monastic realms is now a museum.[1] You can book yourself in for a retreat and enjoy *l'esperienza monastica*. La nuova Farfa is now a social enterprise running socially minded projects aimed at local young people. This adaptation to social and cultural change has not always been a dynamic that has come from within. In 2005, TV chef Jamie Oliver arrived at Farfa hoping to find inspiration in the abbey's long-famed medieval herb garden, and expected the monks to still be eating like kings. However, the garden was nearly dead and the community was just about surviving on frozen vegetables and other processed food. The chef reminded them of their great medieval culinary heritage and got to work with them, particularly Don Alfonso, to

replant the garden and regain some of its former glory—the visible glee on Alfonso's face when it all started to bloom again was testament to the still continuing importance of religious and lay people working together to retain the profound sense of place a major religious center can give a locality.

And so to Farfa in the early Middle Ages, a time during which cycles of exchange and negotiation established the abbey as a European political powerhouse and a considerable influence on the changes experienced in the region. Marios Costambeys begins his detailed study of two hundred years of the abbey's early medieval history by placing Farfa within its wider ecclesiastical world. The issues Farfa had to face from the eighth to tenth centuries are crystallized in an excerpt from a charter of the Carolingian emperor, Lothar I, from 840. As on previous occasions, the emperor confirmed the monastery's rights over certain territory in the Sabina as well as beyond, in Rome's buffer zone—regularly the cause of contention between the popes and other Italian rulers throughout the Middle Ages. This scenario frames the author's open-

ing gambit which suggests that, although appeals for support to the highest secular powers (not just the Frankish emperors) were a feature of Farfa's strategy for self-determination, this relied on a fundamental understanding of reciprocity: secular leaders needed the abbey's support as much as the abbey needed theirs. This is the leitmotif of the book and is tackled from many different angles in subsequent chapters. It is a story of careful and sometimes delicate maneuvering and negotiation, courting patronage for the practical and spiritual support that it could offer in return.

The author's arrangement of the book is traditional and is based on themes familiar to early medieval historians, including authority and rulership, legal and political structures, kinship, power negotiation, foundations of ecclesiastical wealth, and so on. As such, it will appeal largely to historians of early medieval Europe, particularly those interested in northern Italy. However, other scholars of this region might also benefit from the context it provides. Scholars unfamiliar with Farfa and its region may struggle with the lack of background description of the place and its landscape, and there are no pictorial illustrations in the book to help in this regard.

Chapter 1 comprises the lengthy introduction and presents the book's principal ideas. Most of the chapter is composed of a very detailed description of its archival sources, including an analysis of the production of these documents, illustrated with charts and tables. The introduction ends with a taster of what is to come by setting out how the author perceives monastic patronage in a European context, and provides an orientation of its geo-historical situation between three major secular power cultures: the Franks, the Lombards, and the papacy (not quite the good, the bad, and the ugly), a theme that returns in the last two chapters of the book.

Chapter 2 focuses on establishing the nature of power emanating from the Lombard duchy of Spoleto, the abbey's nearest secular peers. The increase in patronage in ecclesiastical, agricultural, and other property received from the Lombard dukes during the eighth century is analyzed in detail and bolsters the author's contention that the distribution of landed power was much more complex than other narratives have suggested. The abbey played an important role as a broker in disputes between lay powers. One assertion that some scholars may question, however, is that early medieval society was one where 'communications were poor, administrative structures weak and political groupings fragmented' and that all these factors underpinned a sense of insecurity when it

came to the control of property (p. 94). Such comments ought to be made relative to the experience the protagonists of those communications and administration in any particular instance—something that the book does actually make clear in the examples it provides.

Chapter 3 takes the book on a more oblique course and addresses big themes that will be more familiar to early medieval historians than to others. Entitled 'Authority, Rulership and the Abbey,' the chapter is concerned with shaping definitions. It is very often an impossible task to delineate precisely what people meant when they used particular terms in charters, and this chapter raises many of the problems that historians come up against when figuring out the roles and statuses of such people described as 'actor' and what was meant precisely by 'potestas' (defined by the author as the 'power to act and to control' [p. 95]). What the author succeeds in doing is to use the practical examples of the charters to demonstrate process. By doing so, the reader gets a fairly clear idea that, in spite of the ambiguities and partial survival, the paper trail left by the abbey and its peers provides a compelling insight into the vagaries of the situations in which they found themselves.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Farfa communities themselves and how individual cultural affinities influenced the business of the abbey. This chapter begins to make more sense of the political background that was sketched out in the previous chapters and for the first time we meet the protagonists at the center of the narrative. The author acknowledges the fundamental importance of understanding the community makeup by saying, 'here we can redress an imbalance in the historiography, for while it has been noted that some Farfa monks hailed from beyond the Sabina, the extent and importance of the abbey's recruitment within the Sabina has rarely been appreciated' (p. 133). The chapter explores how, from the shady view we get, individuals fostered a corporate identity and most important, how the local lay elite fostered intimate links with the abbey, particularly through oblation. Here are fascinating stories of how small 'politics informed the bigger society of the abbey, and for me, these examples provide the most tangible understanding of how early medieval ecclesiastical institutions were able to function at the most fundamental level.

Chapter 5, on Sabine lands and landownership, is the densest of all the chapters in the book, but probably also the most important. It demonstrates patronage in action and colors the picture of how the abbey used social and political reciprocity to broker its own power strategies,

and how a balance of control in the abbey's environs was maintained with the changing face of lay elites. The author very eloquently summarizes the major issues associated with determining the character of a local society and introduces readers to the problems associated with analyses of early medieval social hierarchies which we know instinctively to be fluid and changeable, but a feature that is not often detectable in our sources. I would have welcomed more discussion of the author's own standpoint on this issue.

The second half of chapter 5 provides readers with an opportunity to pause and reflect on the detail of land-based relationships presented thus far. Here, the author explicitly tackles how we are to understand the full spectrum of land structures described in the sources, and how they were managed, from patterns of landholding; to the organization of labor; and ultimately, to the mechanics of how wealth was generated for landowners, such as the abbey and its lay peers. Two very brief sections on family property and the role of marriage and women in the region expand the dimensions of this chapter somewhat, but some readers, particularly social and gender historians, might be left wanting more.

Chapter 6 on the elite families of the Sabina is very short in comparison to others in the book and extends the interesting discussion of kinship and family identities presented at the end of the previous chapter. It is of particular interest for demonstrating the permeability of lay and ecclesiastical realms and how this comes through in the documentary evidence. While first impressions might suggest that old families faded from view in the abbey archives, the author demonstrates beautifully that this was not the case, rather it was the way in which their exchanges with the abbey were documented that changed.

From the detail and personalities of the previous chapters, chapters 7 and 8 take us back to the bigger picture, the first focusing on the Lombard period, the second on the Carolingians. Both chapters re-outline several important strands that have already been woven into the book, such as the nature of the relationship between Lombard rulers, the papacy, and the abbey in the eighth century, and what happened after the crucial event of the Carolingian conquest of the northern Lombard kingdom in 774. The author interrogates sources outside the main body of the Farfa charters hitherto deployed, such as the Codex Carolinus and papal pacts. These chapters reaffirm the author's contention that the abbey was an essential institution and network that provided rulers with a way to connect with localities, but perhaps more im-

portant, allowed these local elites to participate in higher government, particularly after the advent of Carolingian rule. This unique role enabled the abbey to preserve its own independence, something that was to change radically at the turn of the tenth century, as the author reminds us in his last sentence.

To conclude this review, I want to return to my opening comments about Farfa Abbey today. Farfa Abbey has adapted to changing cultural and social circumstances over the *longue durée*. It will occupy a comfortable position in the Anglophone literature on early medieval Europe, following in the tradition of many of the other titles in the Cambridge series Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, which has also carried several other regional studies on medieval Italy, such as Patricia Skinner's work on Gaeta (*Family Power in Southern Italy: The Duchy of Gaeta and Its Neighbours, 850-1139* [1995]) and most recently, Caroline J. Goodson's study of ninth-century Rome (*The Rome of Pope Paschal I: Papal Power, Urban Renovation, Church Rebuilding and Relic Translation, 817-824* [2010]). However, perhaps because the author follows in the style of much recent historical writing on early medieval Europe, tightly argued and immersed in the deep of detail of the charter evidence, I felt it held back on conveying an overall sense of Farfa's uniqueness and character and why, therefore, other historians of Italy should pay attention to its more distant past. Although it has been referenced in some notes and the bibliography, some more engagement with the interesting archaeological and architectural heritage of the abbey might have added shape to the arguments and narratives presented here.[2]

Notes

[1]. *Abbazia di Farfa. Comunità benedettina*, <http://www.abbaziadifarfa.it/> (accessed August 20, 2010).

[2]. The classic archaeological and architectural study is Charles McClendon, *The Imperial Abbey of Farfa Architectural Currents of the Early Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), updated by more recent work under the aegis of the Farfa Survey by the British School at Rome, for example, John Moreland, "The Farfa Survey: A Second Interim Report," *Archeologia Medievale* 14 (1987): 409-418. For the most up-to-date summary of the Casale San Donato site with references to interim publications, see John Moreland, *The Farfa Survey*, <http://www.shef.ac.uk/archaeology/research/farfa/farfa.html> (accessed September 14, 2010).

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