

# A Special Southern Italian Village

## *The Authoritative English History of Lago, Cosenza and Its Environs*

Copyright 2021

by Mike Gatto

### Introduction

Lago is a territory (“*comune*”) in Italy. The term is akin to both a city and county. In Lago, there is a small, dense, urban area, but also several villages (i.e., Aria di Lupi, Terrati, etc.) that are grouped together administratively, with significant open space between them.

Lago is in the province of Cosenza. There is also a city named Cosenza, the province’s capital, much like the city of Los Angeles in Los Angeles county.

Cosenza is the northernmost province of the region of Calabria. Calabria is the southernmost region in mainland Italy – commonly called the “toe” of the boot. However, Cosenza is not near the actual toe – that part of Calabria is called Reggio.

Lago is relatively small. It is safe to estimate that the population was probably about 300 during the classical era, then perhaps 750 as a Lombard garrison, and that the population didn’t exceed 1000 until about 1000 A.D. Over the time for which we have good records, the population has fluctuated from about 3000 to 6000.<sup>1</sup>

However, there are tens of thousands around the world who are descended from immigrants from Lago. Many are in the United States, and yet there is no English-language history of Lago or its environs. Even the Italian histories often focus on one period or another, or one topic, for example, Lago’s churches. This work attempts to remedy this and break new ground.

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Guida Storico-Culturale di Lago*, by Gino and Francesco Gallo (2005), p. 160, 324.

## Prehistory - 201 B.C.

As a place with abundant water, it's likely humans have occupied Lago for millennia, but without archaeological discoveries or histories, we cannot ascertain what those original inhabitants called it, or whether their settlements were permanent.



*The Licetto River near Lago*

Writing came to Southern Italy around 1000 B.C. From those early texts, we know that what is now Calabria was the first place in the world to be called, "Italy."<sup>2</sup> Italy at that time was split into tribal confederations, and a local tribe was called the *Itali*<sup>3</sup> and their land, *Viteliu*,<sup>4</sup> meaning, "land of the life-giving calf."<sup>5</sup> Another major

---

<sup>2</sup> Dionysius of Helicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, Book I: 35; *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, "Italy" (1978) pp. 556-57.

<sup>3</sup> *De Re Rustica*, by Marcus Terrentius Varro, Ch. 3.5 (37 B.C.)

<sup>4</sup> Dionysius of Helicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, Book I: 35.

Thucidides in c. 400 B.C. was the first to extend the terminology beyond Cosenza, when he referred to Lucania, just to the north, part of Italy too. The term has always been tied to male cattle. (Compare modern Italian, *vitello*: veal).

The first attested use on coinage is during the Social War (the rebellion of Italian tribes against the Romans in about 90 B.C.) The coins feature graphics of an Italian bull goring a Roman wolf.

<sup>5</sup> Compare the ancient Israelites' "land flowing with milk and honey."

tribe, in the Cosenza province, were the *Oenotri* (“winemakers.”)<sup>6</sup> Not much is known (or ascertainable) about these tribes except their names, which could be exonyms or endonyms.

Around 500 B.C., three large groupings characterized the Italian tribes. The lowlanders, speaking Latin and Faliscan, lived near Rome. Umbrian speakers lived north of Rome. And those who spoke Oscan lived south of Rome, mostly in the mountains.<sup>7</sup> Around this time, an Oscan tribe called the *Bretti* conquered and incorporated the predecessor tribes of Cosenza, and named their country “Brettiōn.”<sup>8</sup>

The ancients describe the Oscans as fierce and rugged highlanders: “*rusticorum mascula militum proles.*”<sup>9</sup> The Oscans dominated most of Southern Italy by a process called “Sacred Spring.”<sup>10</sup> Every few decades, a generation would be dedicated to Mars, the god of war and agriculture, and then evicted from the tribe, with the mandate to form a new one. Foodless and landless, they would wander until they conquered new territory.<sup>11</sup>

The original Oscans were the Sabines, who lived in the hills northeast of Rome. Together with the Latins from the lowlands and the Etruscans to the north, these three groups fused to form the Roman people.

Splitting from the Sabines were the Samnites, the most famous Oscan speakers. They innovated key military formations and certain literature. They fought four major wars against Rome, and but for a few twists, history books would discuss the “Samnite

---

<sup>6</sup> Geography (*Geographica*), by Strabo (7 B.C.) Book VI, Ch. 1; Dionysius of Helicarnassus, Roman Antiquities, Book I.

<sup>7</sup> Oscan in Southern Italy and Sicily: Evaluating Language Contact in a Fragmentary Corpus, Katherine McDonald (2015), *passim*.

<sup>8</sup> The Ancient People of Italy, by The Saylor Foundation, pp. 7-9.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Odes (*Carmina*), by Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace) (13 B.C.), Book III, Ode 6.

<sup>10</sup> Geography (*Geographica*), by Strabo (7 B.C.) Book IV-V.

<sup>11</sup> The Ancient Italic People, Encyclopedia Britannica.

Empire” today.

An offshoot of the Samnites were the Lucanians, who penetrated still further south. They were also known for their martial qualities, providing the Roman army with soldiers, and for inventing the sausage.

An offshoot of the Lucanians and Samnites were the Brettii.<sup>12</sup> The Romans and Lucans called them *Brutti*, which means, “renegades.”<sup>13</sup> Lago’s history begins with this tribe.

The Brettii’s capital was Cosenza (“*Consentia*”), and they dominated much of Calabria.<sup>14</sup> Nearby Carolei was also a major Enotrian and Brettian center.<sup>15</sup> The Brettii reached their peak as a nation in about 300 B.C. Like New York in the 1900s, London in the 1800s, Paris in the 1700s – around 300 B.C., *Consentia* was in the limelight. Home to dynamic Lucanians and Brettians, positioned near Greek and Carthaginian ports, and good relations with Romans and Etruscans, meant prosperity.<sup>16</sup> The Brettii also minted beautiful coins, sought-after by collectors.



The Brettii and Lucanians were stubborn resisters of all things Greek. Greeks had colonized some coastal cities of Sicily and Southern Italy, but the Brettii and Lucanians contested those territories, eventually evicting the Greeks.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, when Alexander the Great’s uncle invaded Cosenza in 331 B.C., the Brettii and Lucani defeated and killed

---

<sup>12</sup> Phonetics and Philology Sound Change in Italic, Jane Stuart-Smith (2004), p. 77.

<sup>13</sup> Compare the nearly identical Etruscan “*Latni*” (*Latini*: Latins).

<sup>14</sup> Geography (*Geographica*), by Strabo (7 B.C.) Book VI, Ch. 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Museo dei Brettii e degli Enotri* (in Cosenza), Exhibition 2018.

<sup>16</sup> See “The Peoples of Ancient Italy”, “The Brutti” pp. 321-336, by Loredana Cappelletti (2017).

<sup>17</sup> See *id.*

him, in a battle near Lago.<sup>18</sup> This is largely why Alexander the Great ruled an empire from Greece to Afghanistan, but never tried to conquer Italy.<sup>19</sup>

For much of the pre-Roman period, mercenaries were another local feature. An interesting Italic tribe with a presence were the Mamertines (“Sons of Mars”), mercenaries from Campania.<sup>20</sup> They colonized a few towns in the area (like Martirano), like they did elsewhere in Italy. And for a while, among the Greek colonies in Sicily, the byword for mercenary was “*Sileraioi*” – “Southern Italian mountain men.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> History of Rome (*Ad Urbe Condita Libri*), Titus Livius (Livy) (27 B.C.), Book VIII: 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* Book IX.

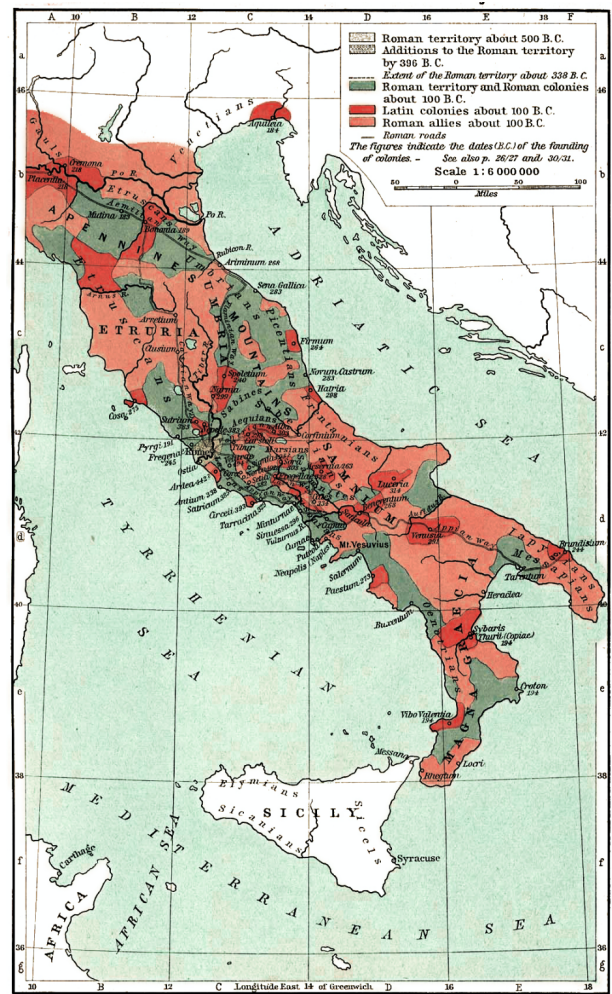
<sup>20</sup> The Histories, Polybius, Book III (c. 150 B.C.)

<sup>21</sup> *Sileraioi*, by Giulia Falco (2012).

## 200 B.C. - 600 AD - The Roman Period

The Brettii lost power precipitously after siding with Hannibal in the Second Punic War. Rome confiscated half of their territory, and clear cut their valuable forests (the *Sila*) for timber and pitch for Roman fleets.<sup>22</sup> Rome treated the Samnites similarly harshly.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Romans who served twenty years in the army were given large plots of the best Italian farmland. Rome sited colonies in Campora San Giovanni, 10 miles from Lago (194 B.C.), and in Figline Vegliaturo, San Lucido, and Cosenza (along with Nocera Terinese, Squillace, etc.).<sup>24</sup> In addition, Rome gave much of Amantea to the Roman people as public land – anyone could grow crops there. Finally, the Romans also likely located a small military base near Lago, in Aiello.<sup>25</sup>



Combined, these mechanisms Romanized the population, and are the reason why Italy speaks a Latin-derived language today. By the reign of Caesar Augustus, tribal distinctions were largely forgotten. Italy was Roman; Rome was Italy. The modern population of Lago is descended largely from this Brettii-Roman population.

<sup>22</sup> See also *History of Rome (Ad Urbe Condita Libri)*, by Titus Livius (Livy) (27 B.C.), Book XLIII (ripping the copper roof off a temple in Calabria).

<sup>23</sup> See *The Civil Wars*, by Appian of Alexandria (c. 160 A.D.) Book I: 93 (Lucius Cornelius Sulla torturing and executing 8000 Samnite combatants).

<sup>24</sup> *L'esercito come fattore della mobilità personale dai Bruttii e verso i Bruttii in età romana*, by Alessandro Cristofori (2013); *Museo dei Brettii e degli Enotri* (in Cosenza), Exhibition 2018.

<sup>25</sup> *Campora San Giovanni, Serra d'Aiello, Aiello Calabro, Cleto, e Savuto*, by Armando Orlando (2015), p. 35-36.

Many famous classical-era personalities had a significant presence in Cosenza or were ethnically Oscan. For example, Cicero had a beach villa south of Cosenza, and named the area among the most beautiful places in the world. Caesar Augustus's ancestry was partly from Cosenza, and he spent some of his formative years in a town 70 miles from Lago.<sup>26</sup> Pythagoras came up with his famous theorem nearby.<sup>27</sup> St. Paul passed through the province on his way to Rome.<sup>28</sup> Pontius Pilate and Horace were Samnites. And Titus Statilius Taurus, who the forces of Antony and Cleopatra surrendered to at Actium, was Lucanian. The Roman Emperor Libius Severus had ancestry from the Cosenza region, as did the Empress Bruttia Crispina.<sup>29</sup>



In the waning days of the Western Roman Empire, Alaric, king of the Germanic Visigoths who had pillaged Rome, caught malaria in Cosenza. His followers diverted Cosenza's rivers, buried Alaric and Rome's treasures in the riverbed, killed those who dug the location, and re-routed the rivers to cover the tomb, which has not been found. Archaeologists have recently renewed efforts to locate it, as it is believed the find would rival Troy in its splendor and significance.

---

<sup>26</sup> See "The 12 Caesars (*De Vita Caesarum*)", by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, "Augustus" 7.1 (121 A.D.)

<sup>27</sup> Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History, by Charles Kahn (2001).

<sup>28</sup> See Acts of the Apostles, 28: 13-14.

<sup>29</sup> For each, see generally, the Encyclopedia Britannica entries for the same.

## 600 - 1200 A.D.: Lago's Foundation and the "Dark Ages"

Most histories assume that Lago was formally founded around 1000 A.D., when many other small mountain towns in Cosenza were established.

In that era, a power vacuum led to Saracen pirates raiding the region and kidnapping the population. Starting in 986 A.D., the Saracens sacked Cosenza, and later Mendicino, then Cosenza again, and they briefly captured Amantea.



Those cities' populations dispersed and settled in various safer mountain communities. From those redoubts, watchmen would warn of approaching vessels. The scant Lago histories usually assert that Lago was first settled during this period. In Lago, where it regularly snows in the winter, and which is most surely in the mountains, – there is also a view of the ocean.





However, Lago's exact foundation has remained a mystery, due to poor records and its name. Lago means "lake" in Italian, but no such lake exists. Four theories exist:

- 1) Lago got its name from Latin *Lacus* ("lake"), as the *-us* in Latin (for example, Marcus→Marco) becomes *-o* in Italian. At some point in history there was a lake-like body present. Perhaps the Licetto river had silted up, creating a bulge, like "Lake" Havasu in the Colorado River.<sup>30</sup> Alternatively, the Oliva stream used to form a lake-like swamp (called "the little sea") until drained in the 19th Century, visible to visitors from the southeast, on the main road.
- 2) Lago got its name from Latin *Lacum* ("basin"), as (frustratingly) the Latin *-um* suffix also became *-o* in Italian. Lago is situated in a small valley. The city's dialect name is "*Vacu*," like "vacuum."<sup>31</sup>
- 3) Lago derives from Norman French, "*ullac*," place of banishment. When the Normans ruled Calabria, they seized the coastal strongholds and banished the Italian population to Lago. This would produce a foundation around 1050 A.D.
- 4) After the Crusades, some of those returning from battling in the eastern Mediterranean disembarked at Amantea, walked to Lago, settled it, and named it after their pagan king, Lago.<sup>32</sup> This would produce a foundation around 1100 A.D.

I will briefly address each.

---

<sup>30</sup> See "Mass-movement, geologic structure and morphologic evolution of the Pizzotto–Greci slope (Calabria, Italy)" *Geomorphology* 30 (1999) 147–163 .

<sup>31</sup> Despite the similar meaning, the dialect form just reflects two standard sound shifts in the Neapolitan language, and is thus coincidental.

<sup>32</sup> See "Storia del Comune di Lago CS (1093-1976)", by Alberto Cupelli (1977). The author agrees this story "seems a bit imaginative to give prestige" to Lago. But the mythology persists in other works.

We know that Southern Italians were speaking Italian by 950 A.D., and likely well before then.<sup>33</sup> Settlements receive names; names usually stick. Thus, a town first founded in 1000 A.D. would be named in 1000 A.D. It seems a little strange for Italian speakers to name a town in Latin, casting some doubt on the first two theories.

Yet elusively, the first mentions of the town are in Latin documents. Some histories state that the first conclusive mention of Lago is in 1208, in a church document where it is called "*Lacu*."<sup>34</sup> However, there also appears to be a Norman-era document in Latin from 1070, describing a road connecting the towns of "*Grimaldo*" and "*Lacum*."<sup>35</sup> In the first documents in Italian, from around 1250, the town is already called, "Lago."

Regardless, Theory 3 can be dispatched easily. Everyone agrees Lago was already populated by 1000 A.D. The Norman "*ullac*" theory occurs too late to be credible – especially since a Norman document likely itself refers to Lago as "*Lacum*."

The mythological etymology mirrors countless others from around the Mediterranean: it's patently a tall tale. And it too comes too late in time. The first crusade ended around 1100 A.D., the others much later. As we saw above, Lago was already settled and named by then.

In fact, none of these theories on Lago's name and foundation have sat well with me. When historical records don't produce a clear answer, one must turn to linguistics, geography, and logic. Let's review the empirical evidence.

---

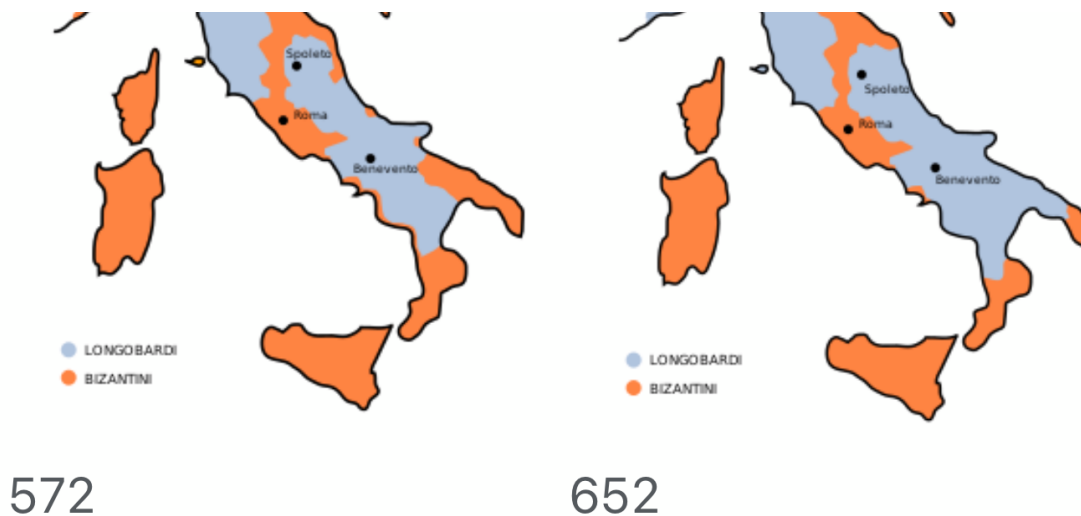
<sup>33</sup> In fact, the *Placiti Cassinesi*, and the *Placito Capuano* are the oldest Italian (non-Latin, non-Vulgar Latin) documents in existence, pre-dating Tuscan Italian documents by centuries.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., *Storia di Lago e Laghitello Attraverso le Locali Istituzioni*, by Sergio Chiatto (1992), p. 38.

<sup>35</sup> *Le Grandi Famiglie di Aiello Calabro*, by Dr. Francesco Gallo, p. 22.

Lago was almost certainly unnamed or insignificant in Roman times, since in all the vast corpus of Greek and Roman texts, we find no mention. This means it was not formally founded by the end of the Western Roman era, in 610 A.D.<sup>36</sup>

Around that date, much of Calabria, along with Rome, Venice, and Emilia-Romagna, remained Eastern Roman (“Byzantine”) territory, despite the Germanic Lombards (“Langobardi”) conquering the rest of Italy. However, in 652, the Lombards overran the narrow strip of territory where Lago is, and it became the border in a war zone between Romagna and Langobardia.



*A graphic of the changing borders. Note the change in the Amalfi Coast and Cosenza.*

Borders are fortified – especially those in a war zone. Thus, early in this period, the Lombards founded a town, which served as the first outpost in their country: the town of Longobardi, on Lago’s northwest. Also during this period, the Lombards founded another town in immediate vicinity of Lago: Grimaldi, to the southeast. Grimaldi was named after Grimoald, a Lombard leader.<sup>37</sup> Finally, closer to the ocean,

<sup>36</sup> Dating not from the end of the reign of Romulus Augustulus, or Zeno, or Justinian, but Phocas. The point remains the same.

<sup>37</sup> Note in earlier documents, one can see how “Grimoald” had become “Grimaldo.” This Italian habit of shuffling letters, is also seen in the province of Capitanata, originally “Catapanata.”

the Lombards founded a customs station, the unimaginatively named Tarifa.



*A close-up of the borders. Amantea was in Byzantine territory; Cosenza, Lombard.*<sup>38</sup>

There were four Lombard rulers named Grimoald. Grimoald I, Duke of Benevento, King of Italy, died in 662, and was a popular leader with many military conquests in the area. Duke Grimoald II ruled for three uneventful years as a child. Grimoald III was another successful general, who fortified the area and defeated the Byzantines nearby in 788.<sup>39</sup> Grimoald IV was a minor prince in Charlemagne's era who was assassinated. Thus, Grimaldi, near Lago, was almost certainly named after Grimoald I or Grimoald III, and either founded around 662 or 788.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> This map (and several facts of the Langobardia-Romagna borders) courtesy of the brilliant (and aptly or ironically named) Dr. Giuseppe Lombardo, of Nicotera, Calabria, publisher of the "Arte e Architettura in Calabria" blog.

This fascinating status quo, which persisted for quite some time, of Amantea being Byzantine, and Lago and the other towns being Lombard/Italian, resulted in some fascinating linguistic oddities today. For example, the same river flows through Lago and Amantea. In Lago, it's called the Licetto, a Latin-derived hydronym. The same river in Amantea is called the Catocastro, which some assert is a Greek-derived hydronym. The Byzantines, of course, spoke *Koine*.

<sup>39</sup> We also know that Lombard King Liutprand, Grimoald III's cousin, threw an elaborate party in Terni, near Rome, when Pope Zachary (himself a Calabrian) consecrated a new Bishop of Cosenza, and that this occurred right around the time of Grimoald III's exploits in the area. See "Italy and Her Invaders," by Thomas Hodgkin, Volume VI, Book VII, "The Lombard Kingdom," (1880), p. 493. So clearly the region had major strategic significance for the Lombards.

<sup>40</sup> For more information on both major Grimoalds, see the exhaustive "Italy and Her Invaders," by Thomas Hodgkin, Volume VI, Book VII, "The Lombard Kingdom," beginning at Chapter VI (1880).

In sum: Longobardi likely dates from 652. Grimaldi dates from the same general era. Lago, at that time would have been a strategic outpost on the main road between a foreign government in Amantea, to the populous and important regional capital of another nation in Cosenza. Like most governments, the Lombards insisted on collecting tariffs from import commerce. And the many recorded battles make us understand that this was a hotly contested area for hundreds of years.

It would not make sense for the Lombards to develop and name the other three border towns, but to leave unguarded the road on which Lago is located. Doubtlessly, they stationed a garrison near the road to Cosenza, and it doubtlessly needed a reliable water supply. It is thus quite safe to conclude that Lago was founded by the Lombards as a fortification sometime between 662 and 788 A.D.



*A map showing the territories of the various counties discussed in this section.<sup>41</sup> The brick-red squiggle running through Domanico represents the road to Cosenza – the Brettian, Roman, Lombard, and modern capital (not pictured).*

*Amantea, on the left, was a Byzantine fortress.*

*It would be hard to imagine holding Longobardi, Grimaldi, and Cosenza, and not locating an army camp in Lago.*

<sup>41</sup> From Dr. Francesco Gallo.

What about the name, then? Well, “Lager” in Lombardic, like in modern German, means “camp” or “settlement.” It was often used for militarized settlements, like army camps or forts. It is easy to imagine the Italian-speaking population transposing “Lager” into “Lago.”<sup>42</sup>

This theory gains significant credibility because we know this sound shift occurred elsewhere in Italy among the same peoples. Near Verona the Lombards founded a militarized settlement. They called it “Lager” and eventually, “Lagertal” (“camp valley”). The Italians call it *Lagarina*.<sup>43</sup> The same phenomena occurred in *Lagerenza*, Basilicata, another hill town and Lombard fortress – fortified in the same era – by none other than Grimoald III.<sup>44</sup>

Lastly, it must be noted that among modern Italian towns, the suffix *-ago* always indicates Lombard origin – and the Lombards used such a designation to indicate settlements with pastureland and a watercourse or spring.<sup>45</sup> (Compare *Lurago*, *Lomnago*, and many more such towns in Lombardy).

**For these reasons, I conclude that Lago was founded around the Seventh Century and the etymology reflects its origin as a militarized Lombard frontier town with water.**

It should be noted that Theory 4, the folk etymology – of people returning from fighting religious wars against easterners, founding a town and naming it after a King – stunningly supports the Lombard theory. The Lombard-Byzantine wars were holy wars

---

<sup>42</sup> It’s even possible that Lago’s name was originally similar to the neighboring town’s. The original spelling was “Langobardi” with an “a” -- and examples abound of long town names being shortened (Cf. Mediolanum → Milan or Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium → Cologne → Köln). Could it have evolved from “Langobardia Castra” → “Lango” → “Lago”?

<sup>43</sup> Modern Val Lagarina. Note how the first word even preserves the Germanic “tal” (valley). See *Limes Tridentinus, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des spätrömisch-ostgotischen und byzantinisch-langobardischen Grenzschutzes* by Richard Heuberger (1932) at 33.

<sup>44</sup> Early Medieval Italy: Central Power and Local Society, 400-1000, by Chris Wickham (1981), p. 149. In modern Italian, the town name has become “Acerenza” in honor of its original Roman root.

<sup>45</sup> *I Nomi dei Fiumi, dei Monti, dei Siti: Strutture Linguistiche Preistoriche*, by Claudio Beretta (2003), p. 93.

for religious supremacy between Arian and Orthodox Christians. The Byzantines came from the east – indeed the same lands that the Crusades targeted. Grimoald was a King, and a town was indeed named after him. Moreover, the Lombard version of Christianity was considered heretical, so this would even explain why the King is “pagan” in the mythos. It is therefore entirely possible that vague popular memories, slightly obscured and embellished over the years, have some validity. However, instead of proving the Crusades theory, they prove the Lombard theory.

There was plenty of time for 662’s “Lager” to become “Lago” in Italian, and then be translated *back* into Latin for official ecclesiastical documents in 1208. These etymologies are not obvious because “Lago” is so short and has a meaning in Italian. But of course, we began this exercise because “lake” doesn’t make sense.

People sometimes wonder about the blondes in Lago or the blue-eyed people of Calabria. This author hates pop-historical origin myths. There were doubtlessly Bretti with blue eyes and blond Romans. Still, we may accurately speculate that the blonde, blue-eyed people of Lago derive partly from Lombard (*i.e.*, not Visigoth) stock.

And regardless, we know that the population of Lago was significantly augmented by the existing Romance populations from Cosenza, Mendicino, and Amantea around 1000 A.D. Some sources state that the existing mountain settlements saw their populations expand fourfold from refugees escaping the cities, around 1000 A.D.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> *Storia di Lago e Laghitello Attraverso le Locali Istituzioni*, by Sergio Chiatto (1992), p. 13.

Surnames did not affix for most of the population until the 16th Century. Thus, despite what some think, surnames are of little use to determine remote origins. For example, someone given the “Saraceno” in 1550 is not descended from Saracens who passed through the region six-hundred years before. Instead, it reflects the role the person played in the town’s puppet theater.

However, due to Italian naming conventions (the first son is named after the father’s father; the second after the mother’s father), given names are often better at tracking a town’s heritage dating even back to Roman times. (Indeed, the common Italian and Spanish first names, like Giulio/Julio, Sergio, Antonio, Aurelio, Mario, etc.) reflect Roman noble *gentes*, which conferred citizenship and given names. Indeed, around 40 B.C., all men in Gaul had the given name Julius, as Caesar had conferred citizenship on them.

For whatever it’s worth, the prosopography of Lago during the 1753 census indicates that the population largely (wholly?) has a Romance-speaking origin. Traditional Lombard names are largely absent.

And the pirate raids were not the only reason why the population abandoned the lowlands during that era. As discussed above, the Romans and then the popes coveted Cosentine timber.<sup>47</sup> Deforestation caused the topsoil to erode and the rivers to fill with silt.<sup>48</sup> Slower-flowing rivers meant mosquitoes could breed. Thus, the lowlands became malarial.<sup>49</sup> But mosquitoes do not breed above a certain elevation. Hence, the population fled to the mountains, where malaria wasn't so prevalent.

Names can be strange. Few understand that Calabria is not the region's "real" name. For much of history, it was known as *Lucania et Bruttium*, or *Ager Bruttius* ("Land of the Brettii"). For over 1500 years, the "heel" of Italy, Puglia, was the original Calabria. But heel, arch, and toe were united politically during the early Middle Ages, and together known as Calabria. Ironically, the other two territories were invaded and lost, so all that was left of the three regions was modern Calabria. Thus, the name migrated west.<sup>50</sup> Had every step not been recorded, we would find it perplexing, when ancient texts describe the coast of Calabria being on the eastern side of Italy, facing Albania.

Lago's mysterious name has vexed historians for generations.<sup>51</sup> Unlike the Calabria example, records are poor. Memories are lost; wisps remain. However, with effort and a scientific approach, matters like Lago's strange name can be understood.

---

<sup>47</sup> The cutting of Calabria's forests continued into medieval times, as the wood was especially desirable. See "Letter of Pope Gregory the Great to the Lombard King Arichis" (Epp. ix. 126), requesting Cosentine timber to repair the basilicas of St. Peter and Paul (599 A.D.); *Historia Langobardorum*, by Paul the Deacon (c. 790 A.D.), Ch. XIX.

<sup>48</sup> Ancient World Mapping Center, Map 46, Bruttii, Compiled by I.E.M. Edlund-Berry and A.M. Small (1997).

<sup>49</sup> Old Calabria, Norman Douglas (1915), Ch. XXXIV, Malaria.

<sup>50</sup> Ancient World Mapping Center, Map 46, Bruttii, Compiled by I.E.M. Edlund-Berry and A.M. Small (1997).

<sup>51</sup> It is astounding how comparatively unaware all of the local historians are about the Lombard-era foundation of their towns. Further to the east of Lago is the town of Figline Vegliaturo. Local statements on the name regularly repeat that it is an unexplained mystery. Yet the other "Figline" town in Italy, Figline Valdarno in Tuscany, understands that the etymology of "Figline" is from Lombardic *feginne*, indicating that a town was pleasant/beautiful. (Both towns are.) See *The Longobards in Tuscany*, by Bella-Toscana.com (2020).

It is worth noting that right next to Figline Vegliaturo is a town called Piano Lago. There is no lake there either. s



## **1200-1400 AD: Lago's Ecclesiastical Heritage: Religion and Religious Tolerance**

The quiet hamlets of Lago have always hosted a variety of ecclesiastical institutions. References abound in church texts from the early Middle Ages about Lago's convents and monasteries, in villages like Ponticelle and Terrati, attested as early as 1151.<sup>52</sup>

But even the newer churches feature significantly older details. In Saint Nicholas Church, built in the 1500s, on the altar there is a tabernacle from the 7th Century. Doubtless this newer church was built on the site of an older one, and that tabernacle likely came from the older church. Note that the presence of the tabernacle supports an older origin of Lago, too.

The church of the Madonna of the Mountains was similarly built in 1652, similarly over the site of Saint Peter's church, from the 1200s.

These strong ecclesiastical institutions continued through the Renaissance, with Fra Bernardo, a famous Augustinian monk, preaching in Lago, and likely being buried there. Archaeological digs are necessary to uncover the full extent of history contained in Lago's ecclesiastical institutions.

As devout as Cosentines are with their Catholicism, they have exhibited a long history of being tolerant of outsiders, embracing people of all faiths. In the 14th Century, Calabria welcomed the Waldensians (proto-Protestants fleeing religious persecution) from Southern France, and consequently there are still Occitan-speaking enclaves today.<sup>53</sup> In the 15th Century, Cosentines welcomed Eastern Christian-rite Albanians, also fleeing persecution, and thus there are still Albanian-speaking enclaves

---

<sup>52</sup> *Storia di Lago e Laghitello Attraverso le Locali Istituzioni*, by Sergio Chiatto (1992), p. 36, 50.

Of course places of worship were present wherever there were people, since the adoption of Christianity.

<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, a century later, during the Spanish Inquisition, the Spanish persecuted the Calabrian Waldensians. See "History of the Waldensians," *Musee Protestante*.

to this day.<sup>54</sup> This general tolerance continued through World War II, with Cosentines being the only people in Europe to tear down the walls of a concentration camp, and continuously feed and care for the Jews housed there, such that the handful that succumbed during the war, died of old age.<sup>55</sup>

*A graphic depicting the various towns of the area and their settlers, from 1000 B.C.-1500 A.D.*



<sup>54</sup> Old Calabria, Norman Douglas (1915), Ch. XXII. Regis Philbin was a Cosentine Albanian.

<sup>55</sup> "Civilization: How Italy's army saved Jews" by Lou Marano, UPI (2003); "Ferramonti was not a death camp" by Angela Giuffrida, The Local (2013)

## 1400 AD – 1700 AD: The Renaissance in Cosenza

After medieval instability, Cosenza was for centuries a relatively static part of the Kingdom of Naples. The kingdom was organized into territories. Lago was part of the province known as *Calabria Latina* or *Calabria Citra*. For a while, Lago was a “suburb” (in the territory of) the city-state of Aiello. Different re-organizations have occurred until recently, like making Terrati and Laghitello (previously independent cities) part of Lago.

Lago probably did not change much due to the Renaissance. Because of its remote isolation, Southern Italy was a comparative backwater to Northern Italy during the Renaissance. But there were some important people from Cosenza who contributed much to the world during that epoch.

First, two of the navigators on Christopher Columbus’s voyages were from the area around Lago (one from Amantea, the other from Aiello). Second, the Cosentine philosopher Bernardino Telesio did much to develop thought and scientific method during the Renaissance, and influenced thinkers like Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes.

St. Francis of Paola was, of course, a noted religious thinker and personality.

And finally, there were several painters of local heritage who painted masterpieces throughout Italy, notably “*Il Cavalier Calabrese*” Mattia Preti.

During the late Renaissance, several churches in Lago were built, some of which are still standing. The church, “Madonna of the Mountains,” built in 1652, is gorgeous. One wonders how the devout townsmen, after a hard day’s work in the fields, found the time to erect structures like this, with no advanced machinery.

Cosenza was a center of world silk production during much of its history.<sup>56</sup> Before the Industrial Revolution enabled cheap clothes to be manufactured in England, our ancestors were mostly silk farmers. In the 1753 Lago census, wealth was counted primarily by how many mulberry trees one owned (and how many daughters were marriage material).<sup>57</sup>



Like the rest of Southern Italy, Lago was part of the Kingdom of Naples and then the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (basically all of Italy south of Rome) until Italian reunification in 1861.

---

<sup>56</sup> *The Cost of Empire, The Finances of the Kingdom of Naples in the Time of Spanish Rule*, by Antonio Calabria (1991), p. 2.

<sup>57</sup> *Lago, 1753: Ricchezze e Poverta delle Locali Famiglie nel Catasto Carolino*, by Sergio Chiatto (1993).



*Part of the restored façade of the Madonna ad Nives Church. Note the detail on the door arch.*

## Modern Times: 1701 to the Present

This author cannot do justice to the modern history of Lago, nor begin to detail what life was like for Lago's people, because my efforts would not compare to the extant corpus. Other authors have studied the original sources, compiled them, interviewed people, and synthesized it all.<sup>58</sup> My strengths lie in understanding and interpreting the pre-modern sources. I've worked to locate them, studied them, and tried to synthesize the big picture, for twenty-five years.

Suffice to say that life in Lago was difficult, causing many to emigrate.<sup>59</sup> Because of less water and different governments, Southern Italy has fewer cities than the North. Fewer cities meant fewer places where commerce and new ideas flourished, fewer universities, and fewer opportunities for rural dwellers. The rural dwellers in places like Lago worked from dawn to dusk, and had to share a large portion of their income and products with their landlords. Chances are, if you're reading this in English, you know what immigrants from Lago endured, because you're descended from one of them.

Yet the people continued to be stoic in the face of tough challenges. As one prominent English historian wrote, "The Greek in similar circumstances would surely have told us something of his reverses. He would have ... sung elegies, or in some way or other coined his sorrows into gold. The [Italian], always naturally unexpressive, endured, was silent, and died."<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, for having such a tiny and long-oppressed population, Lago has produced a remarkable share of scholars and intellectuals, and people playing a role in

---

<sup>58</sup> See *The Lago-Salida Connection*, by Dr. Francesco Gallo (2014); *Guida Storico-Culturale di Lago*, by Gino and Francesco Gallo (2005). If you're interested in the recent history (and the sociological aspects) of Lago in the 1800s and 1900s, I strongly suggest those works.

<sup>59</sup> *The Lago-Salida Connection*, by Dr. Francesco Gallo (2014) at 12-14.

<sup>60</sup> *Italy and Her Invaders*, by Thomas Hodgkin, Volume VI, Book VII, p. 610 (1880).

history. Some of those include Pietro Scaramelli, notable Carbonari; Emanuele Coscarelli, who won the Silver Medal of the Resistance during Italian Reunification in 1870; Leopoldo Cupelli, who led anti-fascist activities during World War II; Giovan Battista Aloe, who battled the bandit Giuliano in 1949, Super Centenarian Serafina Naccarato-Magliocchi; Italo Scanga, sculptor; and Joseph Gatto, author. There are countless others – dozens of authors, scientists, political leaders, and artists – truly a shocking number from such a small town.<sup>61</sup>

There is also no shortage of modern luminaries either. Mario Runco is an astronaut who rode the Space Shuttle. Giuseppe Cino, who has incubated a worldwide association of people interested in their Lago heritage, has also begun the monumental task of categorizing Lago's birth records and cemetery. The current Mayor, Enzo Scanga and the current city council, who have dramatically improved the look and pride in the town. Wladimiro Politano, is another illustrious sculptor. And of course, we have Doctor Francesco Gallo, a busy psychiatrist, who nevertheless has written a voluminous corpus on Lago and the other towns of the Savuto mountains — thousands of well-researched pages in Italian and English.

Lago. It's a special place. One that continues to exert a strong, emotional pull on anyone who has ancestry there, and anyone who visits.

If your roots are from the area, I hope this history helped you understand your origins better.

If you haven't visited, I suggest doing so. The ancient origins and traditions of our town run through all of us. It is up to us to stay engaged and pass them on.

---

<sup>61</sup> See *Guida Storico-Culturale di Lago*, by Gino and Francesco Gallo (2005) pp. 121-142.