

Historian Engagé

Republicanism and Oligarchy in Carlo Sigonio's Political Histories

Guido Bartolucci

Abstract

The famous historian Carlo Sigonio taught at the University of Bologna between 1563 and 1584. During this period he published several works on the medieval history of the city and of Italy which included a stronger political interpretation than found in his previous works on Roman and Greek antiquity. His history of the Italian cities and states focused on the concept of republican libertas, and underlined the conflict between them and the temporal power of the Pope. While Bologna was subject to that temporal power, the city was rife with republican tensions, with the Bolognese magistracies' coming into open conflict with the institution of the Church in Rome. This paper will examine Sigonio's political thought in the context of the broader struggle between the Senate of Bologna and the State of the Church, and will explore the role played by the historian in supporting the republican side of the debate.

Keyword: Italy; Carlo Sigonio; Bologna; Renaissance; History

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Scholars who have studied the work of Carlo Sigonio have proposed the idea that he was an Erudite very careful in analyzing the sources to reconstruct the history of the Roman Republic, Medieval Italy and of the Church and that, in the last years of his life, he was a victim of the Counter-Reform culture which could not accept a free and rigorous interpretation of the sources. The Roman Church, in fact, expected from those who wrote history a militant engagement in opposing the works written and published by the Protestant world.

My paper aims to add something new to these studies. While recognizing that the historical and scholarly interpretation of Sigonio is absolutely legitimate, I would like to add the figure of Carlo Sigonio as intellectual Engage, that is, I would show how the professor of Modena, within his historical reconstructions, inserted analysis on power and on the history of political and religious institutions which was influenced by the political debates of his time.

In 1574 Carlo Sigonio, professor at the University of Bologna from 1563, published in Venice the work entitled *Historia De regno Italiae* in 15 books: a study which examined the history of the kingdom of Italy from the death of Emperor Justinian in 565 to the death of Henry the VI, son of Frederick Barbarossa and the interregnum under Otto and Philip at the beginning of the XIII century. The text represented a turning point in Sigonio's historical research. Until then, in fact, he was well known as an authority in the field of studies on Greek and Roman antiquities, as evidenced by the numerous works on the institutions and the right of Republican Rome. If, therefore, the publication of *De regno italiae* was Sigonio's first official encounter with the studies on the post-imperial peninsula or, shall we say, barbaric, as, before him, other historians did, such as Flavio Biondo's *Italia Illustrata*, Sabellico's *Enneades* or Machiavelli's *Historie Fiorentine*, the 1574 is not to be considered the beginning of the interest in the medieval history of Italy of the Professor of Bologna. Sigonio, in fact, in 1568, when the senate of Bologna commissioned him to write a history of the city, began to be interested in this period.

As it is well known, the publication of *Historia Bononiensis* was blocked by the censors of Rome, so to transform the *De regno Italiae* into the first debut of the historian into medieval history: a debut which was extremely difficult, as it had been for the history of Bologna. As early as May 1573, in fact, the ecclesiastical censors took their first critics on the work, forcing Sigonio to change four passages. Despite the accusations that were addressed, Sigonio not only managed to publish the Venetian edition, but the following year, 1575, other editions came out in Frankfurt, at Wechel Press and, in the same year, also at the publisher Pietro Perna in Basel. Later the work was reprinted in 1580 in Bologna, with some modifications, by the Società Tipografica Bolognese, and finally, after Sigonio's death, it was completed with the publication of 5 other books (which included the years from 1200 to 1290), promoted by Sigonio's friends Alessandro Caprara and Gian Vincenzo Pinelli and, published first in Venice and then in Frankfurt in 1591.

We can read the main accusation directed to Sigonio in a letter from an Unknown Cardinal addressed to Pinelli:

In the beginning of his History he says that the ruin of Italy was caused by the popes. And aside from the fact that this is the opinion of Machiavelli in the *Discorsi*, it is a danger in these times. As well, the papacy, both the present one and from time immemorial, has always called for the defense of Italy against the barbarians of France and other kingdoms. And if nothing else, Sigonio being Italian, it fell to him to maintain the reputation of the papacy; for there is no other good in her [Italy] than the Holy See. This political consideration ought certainly to have made Sigonio more cautious.¹

The attacks of the censors, therefore, that were articulated after the Bolognese edition of 1580, in 47 censures, were not limited to identifying single problematic passages discussed by the Historian within his work, but they

¹ Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Ms. R 109 sup. f. 148r: «quanto alla verità, nel principio della *Historia* dice la ruina della Italia esser stata causata da Papi. Et oltre che questa è opinione del Machiavelli ne' *Discorsi* e pericola ne' tempi d'hora. Oltre che il papato, e questo et sempre, ha chiamato alla defensione de quella contra barbari et Franza et altri Regni. Et almeno l'esser italiano el Sigonio toccava a lui mantener la riputazione del papato, per che altro bene non è in essa che questa Santa Sede. Et questa ragione politica doveva certo fare più cauto il Signor Sigonio» [McCuaig 1989, 258].

criticized the general structure of the work and, in particular, Sigonio's presentation of the Church of Rome in the development of the history of Italy. In particular, the most important point, beyond the reference to Machiavelli, was the accusation to be an anti-Italian, not defending, or rather, not having praised the role that the Church and the Papacy had had, after the fall of the Roman Empire, in defending the Italian *libertas*.

Let us now turn our attention to the work itself, not only to verify Censor's charges against him, but also to investigate how Sigonio represented the history of Italy.

Already in the letter of dedication, directed to Giacomo Boncompagni, son of Ugo Boncompagni who ascended the papal throne as Gregory XIII, Sigonio introduces three elements around which he will develop his discussion of the main events of the kingdom of Italy.

Sigonio recognizes that never in history has there been a more tragic moment, but at the same time more worthy to be remembered when the barbarians, moved by the unbridled desire for new lands, occupied the fertile plains of Italy.²

If, therefore, the topic was worthy of being told in a work, Sigonio added a principle that could almost be called 'nationalist', noting that the study of Italian events was to fill a void that other peoples, the French and Germans had already filled.³ And at this point he had to put a tribute to those who preceded him in writing about the events of the Italian peninsula after the fall of the Empire, namely Flavio Biondo of *Italia Illustrata* and Sabellico of *Enneades*: authors who, Sigonio writes, to extend the chronological line of their works, failed to present numerous facts and events crucial to understanding the history of Italy.⁴

The third element added to the dedication was Sigonio's interest in the sources used in writing his History. He remembers the instruments used: an impressive list of town statutes, official documents of kings, emperors and popes held in towns, churches and monasteries, up to the town chronicles that, after the XI century, had been written and that now, Sigonio writes, are preserved in the private archives of families. This list, which he then, in 1576, published in Bologna in a complete and systematic way, that included the names of friends who had helped him, as the Paduan Gian Vincenzo Pinelli, demonstrated the exceptional scholarly effort made by Sigonio.⁵

So there is no doubt that it was an Erudite work, but since the beginning of his treatise Sigonio went on a way that no one before him had dared to take. It's worth reading in full the first few lines of the first book:

The kingdom of Italy was built by other nations, when the Roman virtue had already been switched off for a long time: Longobards, Franks and Germans. Among these the Longobards

² C. Sigonio, *Historiarum De regno Italiae libri XV*, Basileae, ex officina Petri Pernaie, 1575, 2r-v: "Et enim si superiorum memoriam temporum cogitatione complecti, ac memoria repetere voluerimus, profecto inveniemus, nec memorabiliores unquam motus in terris exitisse quam cum barbarae nationes efferata libidine novae regionis elatae florentem sese in Italiam intulerunt, neque insignores Italicis rebus calamitates ullo tempore contigisse, quam cum immani earundem irruptione non pulcherrimi solum agri nobilissimaque oppida eius direpta passim vastata atque incensa, sed integrae quoque familiae ac civitates deletae prorsus atque extinctae sunt».

³ Ivi, 2v: «Quinetiam illud meam in primis auget admirationem neminem adhuc aut patrii soli caritate incensum, aut domesticae laudis dulcedine captum ita fuisse, ut iniquo atque acerbo, quemadmodum decuit, animo adhuc tulerit Francos atque Germanos, unde superiora nobis detrimenta illata et foeda illa quasi inusta vulnera sunt, veteres rerum suarum scriptores, atque explicatores habere; Italiam vero, unde ad illos omnia ornamenta dignitatis et subsidia humanitatis manarunt, omni prorsus literarum splendore carere»

⁴ *Ibidem*: «Itaque magnam mihi iure egregiae voluntatis consilii laudem meruisse Blondus Foroliviensis videtur, qui patrum nostrorum memoria primus res omnes Romani labentis imperii scribere est professus. [...] Nam cum omnium gentium Regumque bella motusque colligere, ac mandare memoriae voluit, Italiam, quam interiore ornare studio atque accurazione perpolire opera debuit, festinanti prope stylo ac praecipiti quadam, ut ita dicam, industria pertractavit, etenim cum res gravissimas multas annorumque descriptionem diligentem omisit, tum quae scripsit tanta ubique brevitate perscripsit ut historiam non solum nobis mancam, sed etiam prope orbem attulerit. Sabellicus autem, qui emulatione laudis eius accensus in eodem proxime post illum studio videtur esse versatus, quo altius narrationem repetiit et latiore gentium temporumque quasi campo se extulit, eo angustius atque impeditius universa exposuit». On these two authors see also Sigonio's letter to Manuzio in 1571: «Fra tre di sarà finita l'Historia di Bologna, et sono fatti cinque fogli di quella d'Italia. Se vi parvi mai diligente nelle cose di storia, voglio che mi giudicate la diligentia medesima in queste. Legete poi il Biondo et il Sabellico et restate di non ridere, et pur non mancheranno che havranno ardire di scrivere ch'io non so altro che l'istoria romana infra ad Augusto, cosa che sa ogni bottegaro. Et quel che importerà più in tanta moltitudine di cose di tanta importantia, sarà che ogni cosa è tratta da scritti autentici, le quali et questa età et la buona sorte m'ha fatto venir alle mani, ma sopra tutto gli archivi di Bologna e Modena». Cfr. A. Ceruti, *Lettere inedite di dotti italiani del secolo XVI tratte dagli autografi della Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Per nozze Ceruti-Pirovano*, Milano, Tipografia Arcivescovile, 1867, 185.

⁵ Sigonio, *Historiarum De regno Italiae libri XV*, 3r: «Quamobrem ad perscrutanda omnia sive manifesta, sive occulta ad hoc studium quoquomodo pertinentia monumenta conversus, primum omnes mihi sive profanarum, sive sacrarum actionum qualescunque essent, commentarios comparavi, deinde vetera Italiae et maxime Lombardiae tabularia perlustravi, atque omnia fere quae apud civitates, ecclesias, monasteria Pontificum, Regum atque Imperatorum diplomata redidebant, aut praesens inspexi, aut certe absens beneficio amicorum hospitumque cognovi, postremo singularum etiam chronica civitatum, quae post millesimum a Christo annum confici in Italia coepta apud privatas nunc etiam familias asservantur, adiunxi».

instituted it, the Franks augmented it and the Germans ordered the kingdom a way which made possible the achievement of liberty.⁶

Sigonio's proposal of the birth and the historical and institutional development of the Italian Kingdom is, as Sergio Bertelli has written few years ago, a very brave choice. The Professor of Bologna not only severs all links between the Kingdom of Italy and its Roman heritage (republican or imperial), but also he recognizes the Longobards as the people who founded the kingdom, the same Longobards who threatened the power of the Popes, forcing them to seek help from Frank Kings.

Sigonio not only identifies the invaders as the founders of the kingdom, but he also enhances their Political and Juridical capacities of restoring the Italian Statual dignity to a peninsula ravaged by wars, plagues and floods. He writes at the end of Book III, that the rule of the Longobards, especially after they converted to Catholic faith, was worthy of great respect: an evidence of their role in the History of Italy was the laws that different kings, from Rotari onward, imposed, with which they punished severely theft, murder and adultery, but at the same time, they protected the freedom and the property of individuals. In the same way they built churches and monasteries, founded new cities and rebuilt the ruined ones.⁷

There is therefore no wonder that the Cardinal, author of that letter that we have read at the beginning, accuses him of being an anti-Italian, if we consider being an Italian the exaltation of the papacy as a defender of libertas. Sigonio follows a completely different way.

The Franks succeeded to the Longobards, who lost the kingdom especially because of the libido dilatandi Regni that marked the last kings. They, in Sigonio's view, represent the second stage of the evolution of the regnum Italiae. When Charlemagne was crowned Emperor and King of Italy, the Peninsula changed his institutional skin, the emperor introduced the feudal system of the Dukes, Counts and Marquises. It should be emphasized that the history of Italy is not interpreted by Sigonio according to a progressive and slow penetration of new legal systems, but, on the contrary, the Historian prefers to describe the various changes as impositions of single kings and emperors who introduced Institutional organizations already mature and defined.

The real turning point in Sigonio's narrative is book VII, in which he introduces the discussion of events that saw Emperor Otto I descending to Italy. This book opens the third phase of the history of the Kingdom of Italy, according to the scheme presented by Sigonio at the beginning of his work, where he has maintained not only that the Germans took over from the Franks, but also that, *Libertas* was granted.

In this part of the work Sigonio in fact, not simply reports in an annalistic way the events that marked the descent of Otto in Italy and his assumption of power as Emperor and king, but at the end of the chapter, he interrupts his discussion to dedicate few dense pages to the legal and institutional renewal of the *Regnum*.⁸ Here Sigonio puts aside his Scholarly dress, to enter, as we shall see, in a reflection, not obvious, and of extreme bravery indeed, on the concept of power, its origin, and on the relationship between temporal and spiritual power.

After stating that Otto confirmed the Franks feudal privileges, Sigonio adds:

He stated that the freedom of the towns consisted in having both, in accordance with the law and autonomously, laws, customs, jurisdiction, judges, taxes, but also in taking the oath to the king.⁹

He continues by noting that these towns, which he called Comuni or respublicae, instituted, as magistrates, in imitation of the Roman model, two or more consuls, and established assemblies to govern all aspects of Town life.

As rightly the medievalist Giovanni Tabacco has observed, Sigonio's statements are surprising for two reasons.

⁶ Ivi, 1: «Regnum ab exteris nationibus, Romana virtute iam pridem extincta, inductum est, Longobardis, Francis atque Germanis. Ex quibus Longobardi ipsum instituerunt, Franci auxerunt, Germani opportunioribus ad constituendam libertatem legibus temperarunt» [McCuaig 1989, 81].

⁷ Sigonio, *Historiarum De regno Italiae libri XV*, 184: «Caeterum Longobardorum imperium saevum ab initio atque impotens, post Christianam religionem Catholicamque fidem ascitam, mitius ac benignius erat effectum. Testes sunt rectae leges eorum, quibus furta, latrocinia, rapinae, caedes, adulteria severissime vindicantur, ac libertas et fortunae privatorum summo studio conservantur. Docent templa magnifica, et monasteria amplissima, quibus pietatis ergo ipsi potissimum ceterorum Italiam exornarunt. [...] Haec autem omnia decora nimia una dominandi ac dilatandi regni libido corruptit ita ut etiam fastigio regio et inveterata iam Italiae dominatione exuerit».

⁸ Ivi, 286-292.

⁹ Ivi, 286: «Libertatem autem civitatum in eo fere posuit, ut leges, consuetudines, iurisdictionem, magistratus, vectigalia sui ferme iuris atque arbitrii haberent, ita tamen ut sacramentum regibus dicerent».

1) The Historian of Bologna proposes an anachronism according to which the *libertates* of the Towns and the magistrates and institutions that hold them already emerge with a maturity and systematic nature incompatible with the Ottonian age.

2) Sigonio's idea was «a way of establishing the legitimacy of the entire development of the autonomy of the Towns through an act of imperium of the king, an act inserted into a Italian State tradition established by Germanic rulers after the death of Constantine».¹⁰

Why did Sigonio recognize in the Ottonian age the foundation of Town *libertas*? *Libertas* which, as Sigonio will show later in the work, was the starting point for the gradual expansion of the civic domain on the countryside, for the empowerment of civic regimes from the authority of the kings; *Libertas* which was at the basis of the opposition of the Lombard towns, allied with each others, to the Emperor Frederik Barbarossa.

But the question remains: can we only respond that the reference to Otto is to be considered as a tribute to the town of Bologna, in order to make its institutions more ancient? (The same episode, in fact, is recorded in the *Historia Bononiensis*).

The interpretative hypothesis I propose is different. I want to read up on imperial concession of *libertas* throughout Sigonio's discussion on this specific moment in the history of the kingdom of Italy, where the German emperors temper the kingdom and its institutions. In the analysis made by Sigonio, in fact, Otto not only just accorded the *libertas* to the towns, reaffirmed the Feudal bonds introduced by the Franks and established new ones, but in his descent into Italy as king and emperor, he introduced the use to receive the different members of the kingdom (towns, Counts, feudal lords) in the plain of Roncaglia. At this time, again an anachronism if compared to the imperial prerogatives of the tenth century (and which anticipates nearly two centuries the diet held at Roncaglia by Frederick Barbarossa) Otto had the prerogative of receiving the homage of the representatives of towns and feudal lords, resolving disputes and, if necessary, enacting new laws.

But what interests us here is to see how Sigonio interprets the relationship between the Emperor and the pope, and, above all, the equilibrium between the two powers.

Sigonio writes few pages after treating the *libertas* of the Towns:

And certainly, although Italy was held by the king, who was the Emperor, and by the Roman pontiff, they did not have identical *auctoritas*. The pope held Rome, Ravenna and the other regions by *auctoritas* more than by *imperium*, because the cities regarded the pontiff as princeps of a *res publica*, but the king as supreme lord and to him they paid tribute and homage, which I have mentioned. The powers of the pontiff resided in the power of excommunication (*sacris detestationibus*), then greatly feared by Christian kings, those of emperor in armies and military intervention, to which the pontiffs themselves were often forced to succumb. [...] Both were sacred powers, instituted for the conservation of the *Respublica Christiana*.¹¹

Sigonio's passage proposes a representation of the two 'universal' powers, the papacy and the empire, extremely articulate. In the first part, he photographed the relationship between the two *auctoritates* during the Ottonian period, in which, Sigonio writes, the *auctoritas* of the pope in governing the cities of his domain had no *imperium*, which was instead a prerogative of the Emperor. In distinguishing between *auctoritas* and *imperium*, the historian claims that only the Emperor had those powers that he exercises, for example, in the plain of Roncaglia, as pointed out by writing that only to him (the emperor) «they paid tribute and homage».

If then the first lines recognize *de facto* a limit in Pope *auctoritas*, in his later analysis Sigonio takes a step further, he seems to proceed through a process of abstraction, from a concrete historical example (the comparison between the powers of Otto and Pope John XII) to the theoretical representation of the relationship between the two *potestates* (depicted by the Pope and the Emperor), legitimized by a single source (God), but which are exercised in two separate and distinct spheres (the spiritual and temporal) in defense of the Christian *respublica*, without any hierarchical dependence.

¹⁰ G. Tabacco, *Latinità e Germanesimo nella tradizione medievistica Italiana*, «Rivista Storica Italiana», CXXIII, 1990, 690-716: 698.

¹¹ Sigonio, *Historiarum De regno Italiae libri XV*, 290: «Et sane, quanquam Italia a rege, eodemque imperatore et a Romano pontifice tenebatur, non eadem tamen erat in utroque *auctoritas*. Pontifex Romam Ravennamque et ditiones reliquas tenebat *auctoritate* magis quam *imperio*, quod civitates pontificem ut *republicae principem*, regem vero ut *summum dominum* intuerentur, atque ei tributa obsequiaque quae dixi praeberent. Et pontificis vires in *sacris detestationibus* versabantur, quas Christiani reges tum maxime exhorruerunt, Imperatoris in armis et expeditionibus, quibus ipsi etiam pontifices cedere saepe compulsi sunt. [...] Utraque vero potestas sacra erat, ad Christianam conservandam *republicam instituta*» [, *Carlo Sigonio*, 85].

In light of this passage then, the anachronistic choice made by Sigonio to place the birth of the *Libertas* of the cities during Otto's reign acquires a specific meaning. In my opinion here the historian of Bologna anticipates the creation of municipal institutions, not only to make them descend from the will of the Emperor Otto, but especially to place them in a period in which the balance between the spiritual and temporal power of popes was absolute and when, above all, the popes did not have any imperium over the cities of the kingdom. This is, in my opinion, an ideal representation, but we could also say an 'ideological' description, of the emergence and articulation of the different powers that characterize the history of Italian Kingdom from the beginning until Sigonio's time. This idea was important for the historian of Modena. That is also demonstrated by what he wrote in his later works, where, not only he rejected the legitimacy of the Donation of Constantine in *De Occidentali Imperio*, but also in the comment to Sulpicius Severus *Historia Sacra*, and in *De republica Hebraeorum*, as if it would be an archaeological excavation, he sought to recognize the origin of the relationship between those two potestates. In the work on the Jewish republica, in particular, published two years after the last edition of *De regno Italiae* (1582), Sigonio took into account some central themes of the Ottonian kingdom. Even in the Jewish state, in fact, we find the idea of the law that God gave to Moses and to the Jewish people, distinguished in precepts governing the spiritual sphere and those governing the temporal one, whose principles and whose division the different magistrates had to conform.¹²

In conclusion: what I have tried to demonstrate by analyzing some passages of *De regno Italiae* is that Carlo Sigonio was not only a historian committed, through the careful study of the sources, to reconstruct fragments of Roman, Greek or Italian history. He was well aware, beyond the formula that made him famous, (*alia tempora, alii mores*), that his studies and in particular those on the late Empire and on the kingdom of Italy, (where sacred and profane history was intertwined), had a strong meaning for his time. It is not difficult to imagine that this reflection on the relationship between institutions in Middle Ages Italy, the exaltation of the barbarians, the limits of papal power were functional to the conflict, which committed the town where he taught, Bologna, and Rome, a conflict which he started getting familiar with when he became professor at the Studio in 1563. But there's more. His analysis of certain major events in past history, especially in the works of the last decade of his life, shows that Sigonio was engaged in an intellectual debate, not only locally but also nationally and internationally on the nature and origins of power.

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¹² C. Sigonio, *De republica Hebraeorum libri VII*, Bononiae, apud Ioannem Rossium, 1582, 15-16: «Expositiis iis, quae ad populi de quo acturi sumus, notitia pertinebant, redeo ad legem huic populo a Deo latam, quae rempublicam a nobis describendam continuit. Haec igitur lex per Moysen a Deo data duo praecipue capita est complexa, vitam religiosam et disciplinam civilem, quarum ratio duobus potissimum iussis est comprehensa, cultu Dei et caritate proximi».