

BOOK REVIEW

LE PERGAMENE ARAGONESI DELLA MATER ECCLESIA CAPUANA (1449-1454). L'ETÀ DI ALFONSO IL MAGNANIMO by Giancarlo BOVA

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Giancarlo Bova is an Italian historian, paleographer and philologist, who has been dealing with the Middle Ages in Terra di Lavoro (province of Caserta, Southern Italy) for thirty years with the publication of original studies as well as unpublished sources. He is well known to the scientific community worldwide for his work, with which he has opened up new horizons to European culture. He was editor of some Italian scientific journals, as well as a member of the *Società di Storia Patria di Terra di Lavoro* (Caserta) and of the *Piazzolla Foundation* (Rome) and he worked at the Universities of Naples and Cassino. Also, he collaborates in the "Europe Angevine" project, directed by Professor Thierry Pécout and promoted by the Jean Monnet-Saint Étienne University.

Author of many printed works, Bova has been directing for about twenty years the critical edition of the *Corpus Membranarum Capuanarum* (CMC), which in 17 volumes has so far published about 1700 unpublished Lombard, Norman, Swabian, Angevin and Aragonese of Capua parchments in full edition.



The parchments, related to Caserta province, are held at the local Archiepiscopal Archive, whose reach covers a geographical area of about five hundred km². This huge work, carried out at the expense of the author himself, is followed by dozens and dozens of the most important universities and research centers of medieval history worldwide. Over the years Bova "*has shown his competence as a paleographer, diplomatist and editor*" (Norbert Kamp), working on parchments in poor condition, often in scraps. He has also been able to historicize the data in his possession, placing them in a regional, national and European context, where necessary. His studies have allowed many researchers, who have never attended the Archiepiscopal Archives of Capua, nor that of the Campano Museum, to write summary works about different historical periods of the diocese, working second-hand.

The *Corpus Membranarum Capuanarum* is fundamental not only for the economic history of the Middle Ages in Southern Italy, but more generally in the Mediterranean, through the leases in which the censuses in money and in kind are recorded, as well as the measures of the lands. The contracts also document relations with several European countries, which traded with Capua and Southern Italy through a dense network of merchants. For example, relations with Jews, present in various ethnic groups, are very documented, including some descendants of the tribe of the Judges, as well as Saducites (dissident Jews who fled from Jerusalem after the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 AD), Medici (Jews of Mesopotamia) and Syriacs, called Surici (formerly Suria). In particular, the oldest reference to the Surici is the denomination of the *ecclesia S. Marie cognomento Suricorum* (879-880), that is of the Syriacs, in ancient Capua (today Santa Maria Capua Vetere). Currently, thanks to Bova's studies, it is unanimously affirmed that "*Jews and Syrians also lived near Capua*" (G. Holzherr). The Surici were Jewish converts from Syria, then passed to Greece and from there to the Frankish kingdom and to Southern Italy. Later they were confused with the *sullici* (mice), due to the anti-Semitic campaign promoted by the Aragonese. In this regard, Bova recalls for the first time how the Hitler campaign also described Jews as mice (*Mein Kampf* 1925, *Der Ewige Jude* 1940), referring in addition to the comic book *Maus* (1980), by Art Spiegelman - son of two Polish Jews survivors of Auschwitz - in which Jews are drawn as mice in a concentration camp.

In the considerable introduction, the author, also using the study of hundreds of still unpublished parchments, dedicates some original pages to the biographical lines of the Archbishop of Capua Giordano Gaetano d'Aragona (1447-1496), almost completely unknown to scholars. Great attention is also destined for the artists who frequented his court at the time; among them the *magistri pictores* Iohannellus de Philippo (from Capodrise), Gregorius Tamborinus (from Capua) and Fidelis Tamorinus (from Capua?) are cited for the first time. From Bova's studies it is clear that in the area there was not only the painter Nicola de Caserta, to whom so far, a little bit of everything had been attributed. Among

the merits of Archbishop Giordano, in addition to that of having tried to recover the usurped assets of his diocese in the struggle for the succession between the Angevins and Aragonese, there is also that of having held in great consideration the basilica of S. Maria Maggiore (IV-V century), with five naves, in Capua Vetere, the ancient cathedral of the diocese (after the destruction of the basilica of Sts. Stefano and Agata), which has always been considered a "co-Cathedral", when the bishop's seat, after the Saracenic destruction of the city in the ninth century, was transferred to the new Capua, about four miles from Capua Vetere.

The floor mosaic of the baptistery of S. Maria Maggiore, from the early sixth century, is beautiful, linked by the author to the symbolism of Easter: "*It was Bova's merit to connect the mosaic with the symbolism of Easter*" (Mario Pagano). The motif is an eight-pointed star ("*I am the light of the world*", John 8:12), in the center of which there is an eagle on a fish, a symbol of the soul that is saved. The ornamental figures on the four sides (eagle, fish, crater, crow) could refer to constellations (*aquila, piscis austrinus, crater, corvus*) and to possible astral conjunctions. In addition, Bova takes the opportunity to remember a visit to the basilica de Alfonso I of Aragon on 15th August 1452, on the occasion of the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin.

The author then treats in great detail the *Perdonanza di S. Maria del 1° agosto*, that is the plenary indulgence for the living, which Pope Leo I the Great would have granted on 1st August 460 at the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. About a thousand years later, in 1471, the first written version of the *Legend of the leper prince* dates back, from which the *Perdonanza* itself, elaborated in Aversa by Loise De Rosa, originates. Were there perhaps millennial celebrations promoted by Archbishop Giordano? The thing is not known. Meanwhile, in 1470 Paul II granted the privilege of *Perdonanza* also at the homonymous basilica of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome. On 1st August 1487, 1489, 1490, the king of Naples Ferrante I was also present at the *Perdonanza di S. Maria* in ancient Capua. On 11th April 1580, Pope Gregory XIII added to the one for the living to the basilica of S. Maria also the plenary indulgence for the dead. In this way the sacred temple became a key to Heaven!

Bova, from unpublished documents, also highlights for the first time the existence in the new Capua of some hitherto unknown corporations of arts and crafts, relating to the fifteenth century: the *misteria speciarie* (of the apothecaries), the *misteria armerii et cultellerii*, as well as the *artes scalasie* (to build stairs) and the *artes campi et orti*. The author also deals with the different procedures for the granting of sterile lands by the archbishop and abess of S. John, various costs, wars and plague, earthquakes, strangers, foreigners and Jews, as we have already anticipated. The chapter about the appeal of the Cathedral of Roccamonfina to the archbishop of Capua against the bishop of Teano (1452) is interesting, in which a pastoral visit is mentioned for the first time in the local documentation. The

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paragraph about the masters and prosecutors of the *Annunziata* of Capua and Marcianise is engaging, in which the figure of the "*bastoniere*" is illustrated. A reference to S. Venera could not be missing, much loved in Marcianise, of which Bova had already found a precious relic in 2004 in the church of S. Pietro ad Corpus in S. Maria Capua Vetere. The introduction to the significant volume concludes with a succession of curious names, including a certain Sabatino *Nato in Paglia* and two homonyms of Alfonso *de Aragona* and Tommaso *de Aquino*.

Finally, the author returns to the theme of the Constantinian basilica site, built in ancient Capua, to be identified with the cathedral of Sts. Stefano and Agata (today the church of S. Maria delle Grazie). He remembers how Granata, an accredited scholar, in 1766 saw the mosaics of Sts. Peter and Paul in the church of S. Maria delle Grazie and not in that of S. Pietro ad Corpus, as claimed in 1757 by Pratilli, a well-known forger.

A scholar like Giancarlo Bova, author of dozens and dozens of volumes and a hundred essays, articles, communications and various reviews about the territory of the diocese of Capua, could not fail to attract the attention of improvised researchers who, with awkward summaries and "cuts and pastes" of entire paragraphs and critical apparatuses, have repeatedly plagiarized his works: all this online and through an unreliable publishing. Bova, in addition to the parchments, has also published for the first time original studies relating for example to daily life in Capua at the time of the crusades, the sack of Capua in 1501, the villages of S. Angelo Informis, San Prisco, Casagiove, Casapulla, Recale, Pontelatona, the centers of Gaiano and Cuccagna, the properties of the monastery of S. Giovanni delle Monache, the fountains of Capua, the cultivation of linen and hemp: the dates of publication are authentic.