

Lombard Origins

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Introduction

A people called the Langobards were encountered by Roman troops around 5 AD along the Elbe River, during a reconnaissance military expedition into northern Germany. The Langobard name is believed to be a reference to their long hair and/or beards.

Centuries later, reportedly at the invitation of an officer of the Eastern Roman Empire, many of the Lombards migrated south and took possession of an Italy that already lay devastated from a century of war with Vandals and Goths. Later, Lombard actions in Italy encouraged a counter-alliance between the Papacy and Charlemagne, King of the Franks, leading to the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire, which shaped the future of Western civilization.

In our day, historians and linguists are beginning to suggest that the 2nd Germanic Sound Shift was a ripple effect from Lombards migrating through Europe.

Thus wherever they traveled, the Lombards have had considerable impact on the unfolding of Western Civilization, whether we refer to their effect on nations and empires, or upon language itself.

Despite this, Lombard origins have remained somewhat of a riddle for the last two thousand years. Most historians have asserted that the Langobards, or Lombards as they were later called, were of Germanic or Scandinavian origin. However, drawing testimony from Lombard and Roman histories, this study asserts that Lombard origins trace to a seafaring people on the French Atlantic coast. Immediately after entering the European theater, these newcomers became key players in events that contributed to the collapse of the Roman Republic, and the emergence of the Roman Empire. Centuries later, they then also played a key role in events that eventually led to the fall of the Roman Empire, and to the formation of much of the society we now recognize as Western Civilization.

Long-haired Gaul

Around 57 BC, when Julius Caesar began publishing the accounts of his conquest of Gaul, he described the Gaul (or modern France/Belgium) he set out to conquer as initially consisting of three regions: Aquitania; Celtica; and Belgica. Caesar said that each of these regions had differing customs and languages, and he referred to the combined regions of Gaul as Gallia Comata (Long-haired Gaul).

Within the Roman Empire, it was fashionable to keep one's face shaved, and to keep one's hair short. However, an emerging tradition of long hair in Northern Gaul precisely at the time of Julius Caesar is of direct relevance to our search for Lombard (Long-hair) origins. Most traditions assume the newly-encountered Gaulish tradition of long hair was independent of the later Lombard tradition of long hair. A main reason for this assumption, however, is that historians studying early European history are frequently working in isolation from one another. However, by comparing evidence from regions assumed to be Celtic with regions assumed to be Germanic, a number of intriguing parallels begin to surface.

First, as mentioned above, Caesar referred to northern France/Belgium as long-haired Gaul – for reasons we are not otherwise told. Few historians have seen fit to comment on this naming convention, apparently assuming that Caesar's naming choice was simply a reference to Gaulish people who did not adopt the Roman custom of shaving and cutting their hair regularly. On closer examination, however, there may be more cultural substance to this long-haired reference than surface hygiene differences.

For example, in 54 BC, shortly after Caesar referred to northern France/Belgium as long-haired Gaul, he reported that one of his legions was lost to Gaulish or Belgian aggressions. In response, Caesar made a seemingly un-Roman response – he vowed to refrain from shaving or cutting his hair until the

tragedy was avenged. And he then set off to hunt down the freedom-fighting ringleader.

Most historians make little of this account. However, it is of distinct interest that Caesar's hair-growing episode was directly associated with an oath – a direct parallel to what Tacitus describes over a century later as the Lombard way. Of course it is quite possible that Long-haired Gaul, Caesar's oath to grow long hair while camped in Long-haired Gaul, and the Lombard oath associated with long hair are independent traditions. However, it is more likely that those three threads are interlinked, suggesting a continuity from Caesar's day forward.

Rome had adopted the custom of close-cropped hair from the Egyptians. This suggests that for whatever reason, Caesar chose to adopt the long-haired practice he encountered somewhere in northern Europe. If so, this would not be the first time he had adopted outside practices.

For example, immediately after advancing into northern Europe, Caesar was confronted by a leader named Ariovistus, who shrugged off Caesar's claims to authority in northern Gaul and who questioned the fighting strength of Caesar's legions. More specifically, Ariovistus reportedly said,

I am not impressed by Caesar's threat to punish my 'oppression' of these people. No one has ever fought me without bringing destruction upon himself. Let him attack whenever he pleases. He will discover what German valor is capable of. We have never known defeat, we have had superb training in arms, and for fourteen years, have never sheltered beneath a roof.¹

Gaul was apparently impressed by a people willing to endure such hardship, as was Caesar. Shortly afterwards, while in Gaul, Caesar himself adopted a similar approach to hardship

1 Julius Caesar, The Conquest of Gaul, I.36

to galvanize and toughen his fighting men. Years later, when civil war broke out, the fact that Caesar's legions had not lived under a roof for years was accepted as matter-of-fact proof that they were more hardened and brave than any of Rome's other legions.

In the example of exposing his men to hardship, Caesar showed a willingness to adopt foreign customs - if those customs held promise of adding to his prestige and success. This willingness may also suggest the main reason for Caesar's vow to grow his hair long while in Long-haired Gaul.

Caesar had clearly suffered a blow to his prestige by the loss of a legion in 54 BC. So by adopting the foreign custom of growing out his hair, Caesar was likely seeking to improve his standing both among his own men, and among those in Gaul he sought to rule. It was a way to suggest that his resolve was equal to those he sought to quell. (By adopting a practice that was prestigious in Northern Gaul, he may also have been attempting to make himself seem more fitting or acceptable as their ruler.)

If this analysis of Caesar's reasoning for adopting a foreign practice is somewhat accurate, it suggests something that isn't expressly mentioned in most accounts. It suggests that whoever it was that Caesar was mimicking by adopting this long-haired practice – that unnamed party held sufficient prestige in northern Gaul to make them worthy of Roman emulation. In other words there were forces in motion in Gaul at this time that Caesar's account merely hints at. These forces may well be proto-Lombards.

Perhaps Caesar deemed the source of the long-haired tradition unworthy of mention. Or, perhaps he intentionally suppressed such information. It is also quite likely that despite his inquiries into such matters, that Caesar simply had limited knowledge about the guerilla forces in Long-haired Gaul he was fighting to subdue. Whatever the background, those in Gaul who originally introduced the long-haired custom were, like Ariovistus, considered worthy of emulation.

Continuity

As additional evidence that the long-hair tradition in northern Gaul represents a continuous tradition, we will turn to two sources: the Merovingian kings of France, and Ptolemy.

The clearest example of long-hair tradition in Gaul is found in the earliest line of Frankish kings. The Frankish Merovingian line was known for its long hair. Their dynasty came to an end centuries later with the forced haircut of the last enfeebled Merovingian ruler – a symbolic act carried out by one of Charlemagne's forebears.

Second, as mentioned elsewhere, most historians assume a Germanic or Scandinavian origin for the Lombard people. However, approximately two centuries after Julius Caesar, Ptolemy reported that some Lombards were living in Gaul. Ptolemy identified their location as neighboring the Sicambri (forefathers of the later Franks). These Lombards bordered the very region where Julius Caesar lost a legion – the region where Caesar made his vow not to cut his hair. Their proximity to his vow may be much more than coincidence.

These two early examples of long hair, plus Caesar's earlier vow, plus his even earlier reference to long-haired Gaul, suggest evidence for continuity of a long-haired tradition in what we would now call France. Thus from 58 BC until the end of the Merovingian kingdom eight centuries later, there is a notable tradition for long hair in France. This reality calls into question the modern assumption that Lombard origins trace to German or Scandinavian lands.

Venelli

In 57 BC, Julius Caesar mentioned launching a two-pronged campaign into the region we now know as Brittany, in the attempt to subdue a number of seafaring tribes on the Atlantic seaboard. The tribes in this region that were allied against Caesar's advances were led by Viridovix, a member of the Venelli tribe, who was “the commander-in-chief” of all the rebel tribes.²

This Venelli tribe is of distinct interest for a number of reasons. First, they are clearly ringleaders in the earliest revolts against Julius Caesar. That valor echoes what we learn sixty years later, and then another century later, of Lombard heroism. Secondly, the Venelli name completely vanishes from history immediately after Caesar's campaigns. And finally, the reason for the Venelli vanishing may well be explained by Lombard origin accounts which explain that an earlier name for the Lombards was the Winnili – a name they quickly abandoned.³

This research suggests that Caesar's maritime Venelli, who promptly vanish from European history, are likely the people to which the migrating Lombards can trace their European origins. Thus the Venelli/Winnili likely vanished from mention because they quickly migrated under a new name, the Lombards, in response to Roman pressures.

To provide corroboration for the assertion that the Lombards trace their European origins to Gaul, the Codex Gothanum states “Here begins the origin...of the Langobardi...There is a river called Vindilicus⁴, on the extreme boundary of Gaul: near to this river was their first dwelling and possession.”

2 Julius Caesar, The Conquest of Gaul, II, 17.

3 Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards, Book 1, chapters 7-8. Or, as the older Codex Gothanum explains, “At first they [the Lombards] were Winili by their own proper name and parentage...”

4 No river by this name exists today. However, it likely refers to a river or ocean current in the Venelli region of Brittany.

Thus although some Lombards later sojourned in Germany, this account suggests that prior to that, their first dwelling place was on the furthest extremity of Gaul, in Brittany, where they were briefly known as Venelli or Winnili.

Migration Place Names

The previous two chapters may initially be rejected by some readers, since they turn previous Lombard assumptions on their head. The continuity of long-haired traditions in Gaul, and the proposed Venelli/Winnili connection have little weight to offer against the ingrained belief that the Lombard people trace to Germanic or Scandinavian stock.⁵

To assist readers in getting over that mental inertia, the next two chapters attempt to demonstrate that early Lombard migration accounts provide two ways of corroborating Lombard origins in Gaul. First, in this chapter, we will demonstrate that the place names used in Lombard migration accounts plot a course eastward across northern Gaul. Second, in the next chapter, we will demonstrate parallels between events described in those migration accounts with events described in Julius Caesar's campaign. The net result is the assertion that the Lombards were engaged in a massive eastward migration right under Julius Caesar's nose. To avoid taxation and slavery, they were attempting to slip through the tightening Roman noose.

The *Origo Gentis Langobardorum* asserts that after abandoning their Winnili name, and agreeing to be known instead as Long-beards, the people traveled to Golaida, and then to Anthaib. We will see this course play out in Paul's account as well.

Paul the Deacon's account, based in part on the above account, and in part on oral legends, expands on this somewhat. He says that they arrived first in Scoringa, a word many believe to simply mean Shore-land. I suspect this is the Atlantic seaboard of Brittany where the Venelli/Winnili were first encountered.

5 This account suggests that equation is upside down – and that much of what we now call Germanic or Scandinavian culture actually traces to Lombard influences (after some of the Lombards migrated from Gaul to Germany, and eventually to Scandinavia.)

Next, Paul explains that after suffering “great privation from hunger” there in Scoringa, his ancestors desired to pass over into Mauringa, and received permission to pass through the region unharmed only after crafty sleight of hand. To be more specific, when the locals balked at allowing them passage, the Lombards “spread their tents wide and kindle a great many fires in their camps” to seem much more numerous than they actually were.⁶ With that show of force, they were quickly granted passage into Mauringa. Mauringa is quite likely the same region as that of the coastal Morini described by Julius Caesar.

After leaving Mauringa, Paul says his ancestors came to “Golanda, where, having remained some time, they are afterwards said to have possessed Anthaib...”⁷ This parallels closely what the Origo said of the Lombards travelling to Golaida (sp) and Anthaib.

We suggest here that “Golanda” is simply Holland. (In Russian and other languages, Golanda means Holland.)

Likewise, we assert that “Anthaib” is Antwerp. To provide some substantiation for this, William Foulke, the translator of Paul's account, explains that locations which end in “aib” “are derived from the Old High German 'eiba' (canton), the division of a state or population.”⁸ Thus Ant-haib and Ant-werp have parallel meanings.

Thus we have four main landmarks mentioned in the earliest stages of the Lombard migration: Scoringa (Shore-land); Mauringa; Golanda; and Anthaib. It is asserted here that this sequence marks an eastward migration from the initial Venelli holding in Brittany to the land of the Morini, followed by an advance into Holland. Then, they took possession of the region surrounding what we would call Antwerp.

6 Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards, ch. XI.

7 Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards, ch. XIII.

8 For this assertion, Foulke cites Ludvig Schmidt, Zur Geschichte der Langobarden, p. 49. Leipsic, 1885.

Such a location, if taken during the period suggested earlier, positioned the early Lombards at the easternmost edge of Roman control – allowing for quick escape eastward across the Rhine, if necessary.

Caesar and Lombards

To strengthen the assertion that the Venelli which Caesar fought to subdue may be the Winnili (Lombards), in this chapter, we will compare Caesar's account of his conquest of Gaul, and early Lombard migration accounts. These comparisons will also provide potential corroboration for the assertion that during Caesar's campaign, the Winnili/Lombards were migrating eastwards.

In the previous chapter, we introduced the Lombard strategy associated with their march toward Mauringa, of spreading their camps and their campfires out wide to exaggerate the size of their camp, in order to be allowed to pass without having to wage battle against a more powerful army.

Julius Caesar recorded a parallel account. In 57 B.C., not far from the Morini, one group “marched their whole army towards Caesar's camp and themselves encamped barely two miles away. The smoke and flame of their watchfires showed that their camp stretched for about eight miles.” Based on that sight, Caesar concluded that the forces “were very strong” and since they had a great reputation for bravery, “Caesar determined...not to fight.”⁹

Now some may assert that the similarities between the Lombard account and Caesar's account are mere coincidence. However, the Lombard account taking place on their advance into Mauringa, and Caesar's account taking place not far from the Morini suggests something else may be at play here.

Another aspect of the Lombard entrance into Mauringa offers additional corroboration for Caesar's writings. According to Paul, when the Lombards entered that region, “in order that they might increase the number of their warriors, they confer liberty upon many whom they deliver from the yoke of bondage...”¹⁰ A mere fifteen years after the slave revolt under

9 Julius Caesar, *Conquest of Gaul*, bk 2, chs. 7-8.

10 Paul the Deacon, *History of the Lombards*, bk 1, ch. 13.

Spartacus, the idea of any army allowing slaves to enter its ranks would have caused alarm to any Roman governor or commander. Towards the end of Caesar's account, there is mention of at least one rebel commander who marched with "slaves to whom he had promised their liberty."¹¹

One key element of the Lombard account which suggests their migration paralleled Roman expansion is the verbiage used in the Origo account. In the Origo, the regions occupied by the Lombards were referred to as *aldonus* or *aldones*. According to Foulke, that Latin term comes from *aldius* or *aldio* the "half-free," "referring to the condition of serfdom or semi-slavery in which the people dwelt in these lands." Foulke further explained that his colleague Hodgkin "thinks the Origo means that the Langobards were in a condition of dependence on some other nation, when they occupied these districts."¹²

The districts being referred to here include Gollanda/Holland and Anthaib/Antwerp. Notably, Caesar's conquests encompassed these regions. Therefore, Lombards occupying that territory in the 50's BC would have been subject to Roman rule.

Two other main issues suggest a possible link between Lombard migrations and the Antwerp region. One of the greatest rivals to Caesar's expansion was the uprising of the Eburones in 54 BC. They were supposedly neighbors and allies of the Sugambri.

Lombard origin accounts, on the other hand, claim that the Lombards were led in their migrations by Gambara and her two sons, one of whom was Ybor or Ibor. Thus the Su-gambri may bear some connection to Gambara. And the Ebur-ones may bear some connection to Ybor/Ibor.

So whether we're referring to campfire enhancements, slave emancipation, the subservient condition of the Lombards

11 Julius Caesar, Conquest of Gaul. Book 8, ch. 30.

12 Paul the Deacon, History of the Lombards, p. 23.

while in Holland and Antwerp, or the names of the early Lombard migration leaders, there are a number of striking parallels between the Lombard migration accounts and Julius Caesar's history of that same region.

More Fierce than the Germans

Most modern historians assert a Germanic or Scandinavian origin for the Lombards. Even Paul the Deacon makes such a claim. Based on the previous chapters, however, I defer to the Origo's earlier assertion that the Lombard's first European possession was in Gaul.

One can easily understand Paul's Germanic leanings if one considers the sources Paul had access to, such as Tacitus' accounts of Lombards in Germania around 100 AD, and perhaps even Velleius' initial account of encountering Lombards around 5 AD. However those accounts are clearly generations after the Lombards' earlier sojourn in Gaul and the Lowlands.

It is at this juncture that we should consider Velleius' account. Around 5 AD, he was a military officer who accompanied Tiberius northward into Germania. There, Roman troops encountered Lombards. Velleius' statement about that encounter is quite pivotal. He said the Lombards were “a race surpassing even the Germans in savagery.”¹³

This statement suggests that even though the Lombards he encountered were physically in Germany, they were not Germanic by race. They were of some other origin.

13 Velleius Paterculus, Roman History, Book II, ch. 106.

Scandinavia

This chapter explores the place of Scandinavia in Lombard origin accounts. We have demonstrated that the Origo traces the Lombard's first European homeland to Gaul, and we have provided considerable corroboration for that statement. To directly contradict Germanic origin claims for the Lombards, we have also demonstrated that the earliest Romans did not even consider the Lombards in Germania to be of Germanic stock. However, there is still a considerable contingent which claim that Lombard origins trace originally to Scandinavia.

There is considerable reason for such a claim. The Origo claims that before landing in Europe, the Winnili/Lombards lived on an island called Scadan, Scadan, or Scandan (depending on which manuscript version one is citing). The Codex Gothanum reverses that order, and states that **after** they first lived in Gaul, the Lombards then came to Scatenaug, on the shore of the Elbe River. (This assertion aligns with what we have demonstrated elsewhere in this account.) Paul the Deacon, apparently borrowing from the geography and spelling of Pliny the Elder, and opting for the Origo version instead of the Codex, ignores the earlier Lombard source spelling and refers to their home island as “Scadinavia.”

Thus whether the Lombards trace their initial European homestead Gaul or to a place called Scadan, Scadan, Scandan, or Scadinavia, depends largely on whether one accepts the explicit statements of the Codex Gothanum, or whether one accepts the combined statements of Paul and the Origo.

As most historians acknowledge that Paul borrowed perhaps too readily from Pliny and Jordanes, when it comes to European geography and landfalls, I initially favor the Codex reading over the Origo (the premise that their first landfall was in Gaul rather than in Germania).

However, there is a third possibility. Both general accounts (island first or Gaul first) may contain a kernel of truth. There

may well be an island somewhere in the ocean populated by “many people” which the Lombards originally called home, as some of the origin accounts attest. They may have later sailed from that island to make landfall in Gaul/Brittany. And it is certain that they subsequently made their way to the Elbe region that was once considered southern Scandinavia – for it was there that Velleius and others later encountered them.

Although I have made a case for Gaul, I will leave it to the reader to determine whether the Lombard's first European homestead was in Gaul, Germany, or Scandinavia. The reader is also free to decide whether the initial evidence presented here is sufficient to assert that the earliest Lombards crossed paths with Julius Caesar in Long-haired Gaul.