

# From *Nerulum* to Lagonegro

## The Story of a “Camouflaged Lombardic Fossil”

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The location of the *oppidum* of *Nerulum* in Lagonegro<sup>1,2</sup>, raises new questions about the subsequent change of name, which certainly took place between the 6<sup>th</sup> century (last attestation of *Nerulum*)<sup>3</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> century (first attestation of Lagonegro - Λακκουνίγρου)<sup>4</sup>.

The element “*lago*” (lake), used to form the new place name, has so far only been given a hasty interpretation, referring to a body of water, which, however, does not exist<sup>5</sup>. This fact links Lagonegro with many other places where it has been considered legitimate to “adapt” geography to the explanation of the place name, disregarding the fact that sounds and languages change and evolve with the times of men and populations, while land and water do so at the pace of geological and glacial eras (barring cataclysms that would hardly escape the chronicles)<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, lakes that have disappeared are said to have been in Casteldilago (Terni), Langhirano (Parma)<sup>7</sup>, Viticuso (Frosinone)<sup>8</sup>, Bardonecchia (Turin)<sup>9</sup>, as is said of Lake Delmona in San Martino del Lago (Cremona) or Lake Gerundo with its legendary dragon Tarantasio in the area of Fara Gera d'Adda (Bergamo), or the legend of Lake Agordo in the Belluno area.

Some of these “lakes” are found in compound place names with other terms designating a fortified site (e.g. Turlago, in Lunigiana, with *turris* or also Castello del Lago in the province of Avellino), in others they are combined with words in the Lombardic language such as *\*offa* (e.g. Offlaga in the province of Brescia), a word meaning “court”, or with *sala* (e.g. Salagona near Laggio, in Cadore), indicating the “manor building”.

<sup>1</sup> G. Greco, *Nerulum*, Lagonegro (PZ) 2020.

<sup>2</sup> G. Greco, *A few insights into Nerulum*, Academia Letters, Article 4216, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> De Buck, *Passio S. Felicis martyris Venusiae in Apulia*, Bruxellis 1860.

<sup>4</sup> G. Cozza-Luzi, *Historia et Laudes Ss. Sabae et Macarii, auctore Oreste Patriarcha Hierosolymitano, graece et latine*, Romae 1893. This is the Βίος καὶ πολιτεία τοῦ ὁσίου πατρὸς ὑμῶν Σάβα τοῦ Νέου (St. Saba's biography), written by Orestes, Patriarch of Jerusalem, who had personally met the Saint during a trip to Southern Italy shortly before the year 1000.

<sup>5</sup> P. Moradei, *Di un lago che non c'è e che non è neanche nero - ovvero proposta di interpretazione dei toponimi del tipo lakar/lagar*, Sileno [in press].

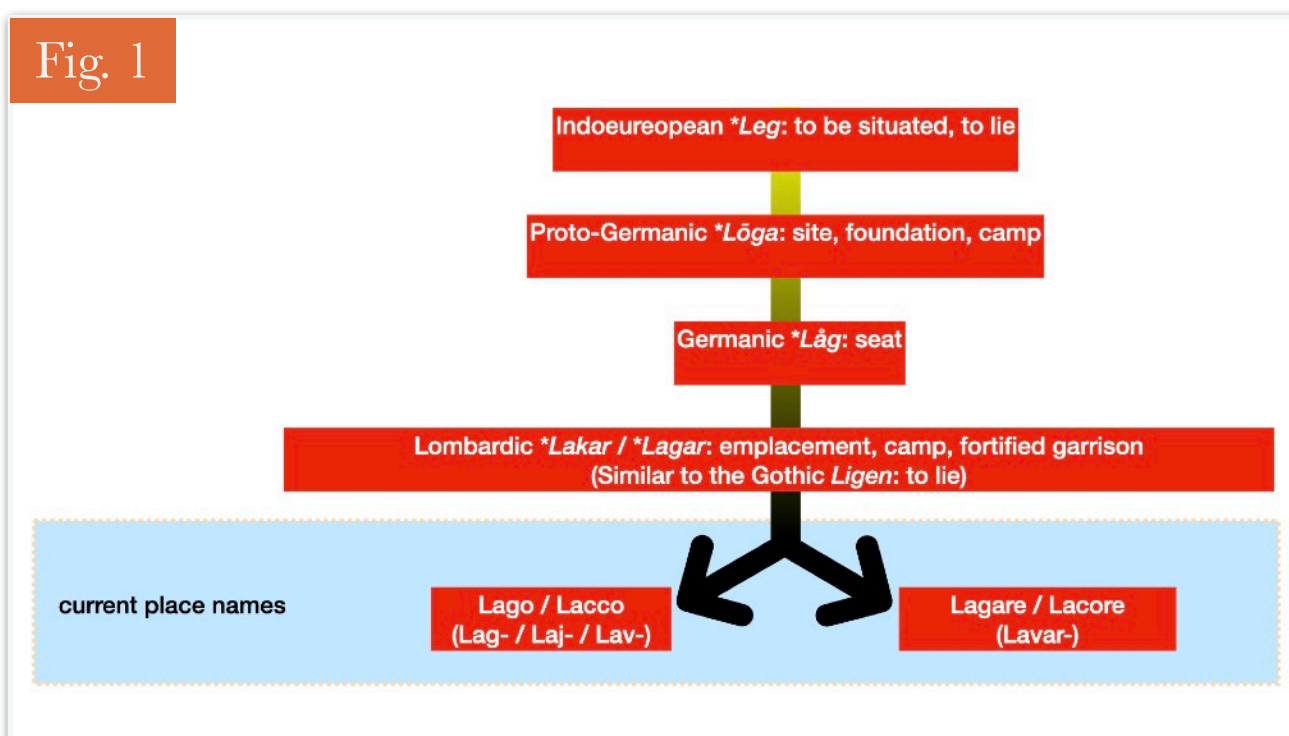
<sup>6</sup> No lake has ever existed in the immediate vicinity of Lagonegro in historical times. However, the place name gave rise to the legend of an ancient “black-water lake” located at the foot of the castle. G. De Lorenzo, *Guida geologica dei dintorni di Lagonegro in Basilicata*, Roma 1897, in *Bollettino della Società Geologica Italiana*.

<sup>7</sup> Langhirano appears as Lagorano in 1038 (first attestation). L. Molossi, *Vocabolario topografico dei Ducati di Parma, Piacenza e Guastalla*, Parma 1832.

<sup>8</sup> Viticuso appears as Lacus Vitecusi in the Donation of Gisulfo II (744). E. Pistilli, *I confini della terra di San Benedetto dalla Donazione di Gisulfo al sec. XI*, Cassino 2018. The same document also mentions Lacus Rademprandi, located on the site where the FCA (formerly FIAT) plant in Cassino is currently located.

<sup>9</sup> The parish church of Bardonecchia appears in medieval documents under the title of “St. Maria ad Lacum”. This gave rise to the popular legend of an ancient lake that was drained by the Saracens. Instead, it constitutes an emblematic link between the ethnonym Bardonecchia and the toponym *Lago*. N. Bartolomasi, *Valsusa Antica*, 1985.

Laino in Calabria itself, seat of an important Lombardic boundary gastaldato, appears in the earliest sources as *Laginus*<sup>10</sup>. It should also be noted that in some of these places important archaeological finds have been made that also certify with material evidence the presence of the Lombards in the sites thus named: this is the case of the locality of Lago di Castel Trosino (Ascoli Piceno) and Lacchiarella, between Milan and Pavia<sup>11</sup>. Ernst Förstemann himself, the father of Germanic onomastics, recognised a number of sites in northern Germany where the *LĀG* root of the place name was apparently in no way related to the Latin *lacus*, yet it must have been in some way, with the meaning of "seat"<sup>12</sup>, linked to the Gothic *ligen* (to lie) or to the Lombardic *\*lagar* (camp)<sup>13</sup>. It was precisely the Lombards who settled in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century in the lower middle river Elbe, where Ptolemy, at the same time, reported the city of Lakiburgium (Λακιβουργιον)<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, the Lombards were also settled along the banks of the Danube in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century when Procopius of Caesarea located the fortified site of Laccoburgo (Λακκοβουργο)<sup>15</sup>. This name therefore seems to have marked many of the settlements of this Germanic-speaking people and, just like the pebbles left by Hänsel



<sup>10</sup> Sheets 30-32 of the Patetta1621 Manuscript. See also B. Moliterni, *Alfano, Pietro e la Diocesi di Policastro*, 2013 in *Archivio Storico per la Calabria e la Lucania*, Roma, anno LXXIX.

<sup>11</sup> M.V. Antico Gallina, *La via Mediolanum-Ticinum nel quadro insediativo dell'agro mediolanense sud-occidentale con Appendice di Caterina Giostra*, in *Rassegna di Studi del Civico Museo Archeologico e del Civico Gabinetto Numismatico di Milano*, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Even today, in German, next to the term *lager*, "camp, military camp", the word *lage* meaning "site, position" can be found.

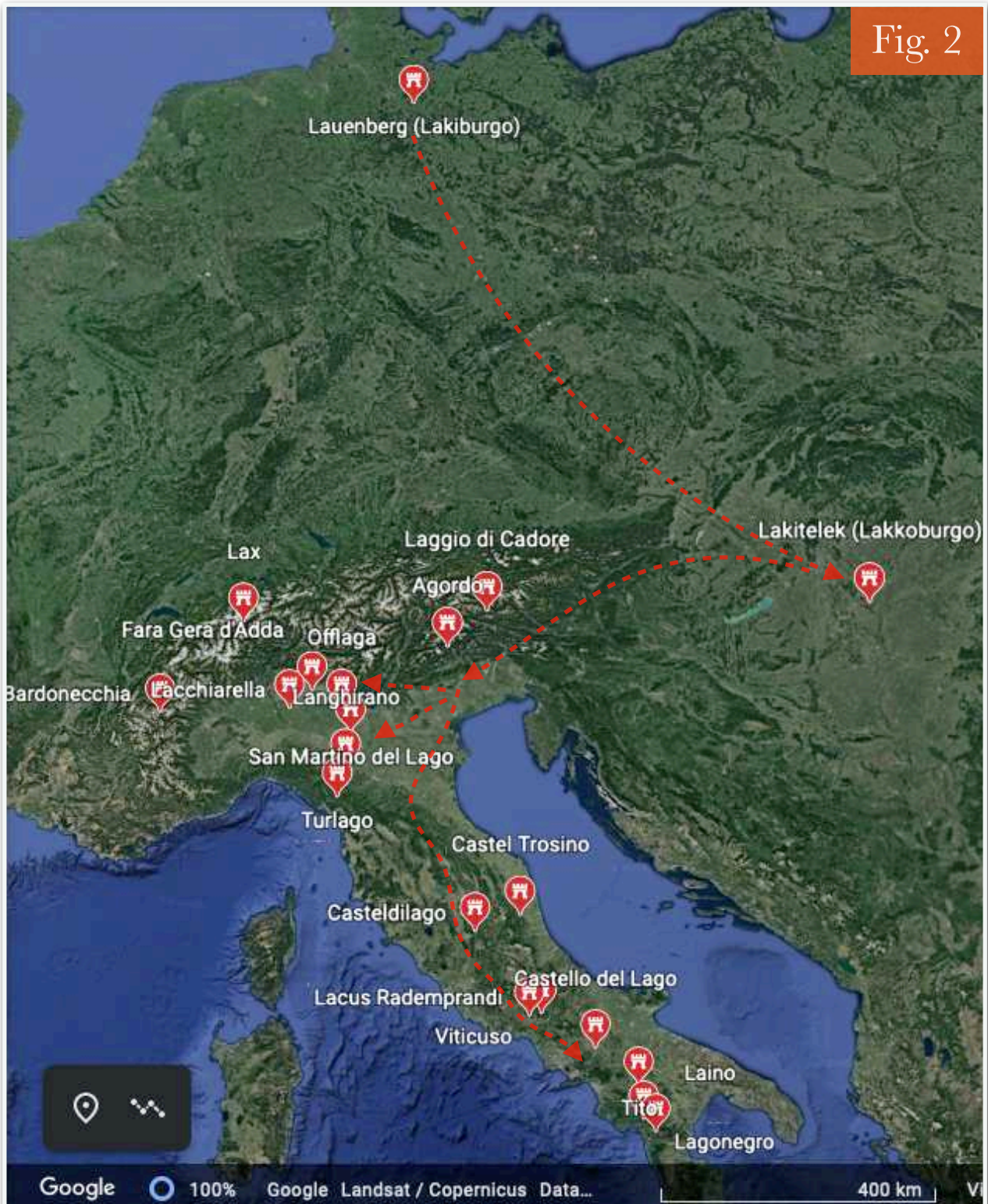
<sup>13</sup> E. Förstemann, *Altdeutsches Namenbuch*, Nordhausen 1872.

<sup>14</sup> Ptolemy, *Geography*. The site probably coincides with the present-day centre of Lauenburg, generating here, as in Bardonecchia, a coincidence between Lombardic ethnicity (the area was called Bardengau until the 13<sup>th</sup> century) and the toponym Lago (the town of Bardowick is located 13 km from Lakiburgio/Lauenburg as the crow flies).

<sup>15</sup> Procopius, *De Aedificiis*. It is worthy to note that the transcription in Greek of the first part of the toponym is identical to that which found for Lagonegro in St. Saba's biography. The site may be located in the Hungarian town of Lakitelek.

and Gretel, it represents the “hidden” trace of their passage on their migration to Italy. Once again in Italy, often camouflaged as a “missing lake”, it could be found along the routes of penetration of the Lombards and on the Byzantine border. A “toponymic fossil” of their presence.

In Figure 1, the reconstruction of the evolution of this Germanic term can be seen, while in Figure 2, it is possible to see the Lombard migration with the layout of the sites named in this article on the map.





Going into even further detail by means of a cartographic analysis<sup>16</sup>, at least 60 sites in Lucania can be identified with a place name containing the root *LĀG* (mainly Lago, but also Lacco, Lagarone, Lagarella, Lagatone), and in which the absence of a water reservoir demonstrates the impossibility of an etymology deriving from *lacus* (fig. 3). These are mainly high-altitude sites (some even located at around 1000 m above sea level) in a dominant position along communication routes on the valley floor. Other place names of probable Germanic origin can often be recognised in the surrounding areas. Then, if the general distribution on the map is examined, it is possible to observe that the density of such findings tends to decrease dramatically in the Ionian coastal areas and in the lower hills of Matera, precisely where the Lombard presence was certainly less solid and long-lasting (and where the place names tends towards Greek).



Some of these sites also have “peculiarities” that shall be highlighted below:

1. In two cases, the toponym *Lago* is associated with a specificative that could refer to the Lombards or to an early medieval manorial élite. These are Lago Lamcardo (Lombard Lake), in the municipality of Abriola (Potenza), and Lago della Corte (Lake of the Court), in the municipality of Anzi (Potenza);
2. In two cases, the toponym *Lago* is associated with a specificative referring to a possible Nordic pagan context. This is the case of the sites known as Laghi della Serpe (Snake Lakes) and Lago del Dragone (Dragon Lake).
3. In one case, in correspondence with the toponym, this combination of elements occurs: a) the presence of archaeological investigations attesting to an early medieval fortification; b) the close spatial correlation

<sup>16</sup> Analysis conducted on IGM (Italian Military Geographic Institute) 1:25000 maps.

with a toponym referring to the Lombardic ethnic group (Piani Bardi)<sup>17</sup>; c) the proximity (6-7 km as the crow flies) to the site where the most important Lombardic finds in Basilicata (and among the most significant in the South) were made: the so-called “Ori di Senise” (*Gold of Senise*). This site is known as Piano Lacco<sup>18</sup>.

4. In one case, the site of the toponym is strongly suggestive of having been the site of an ancient settlement. This is the locality of “il Lago” (Fig. 4) in the municipality of Tito<sup>19</sup>.

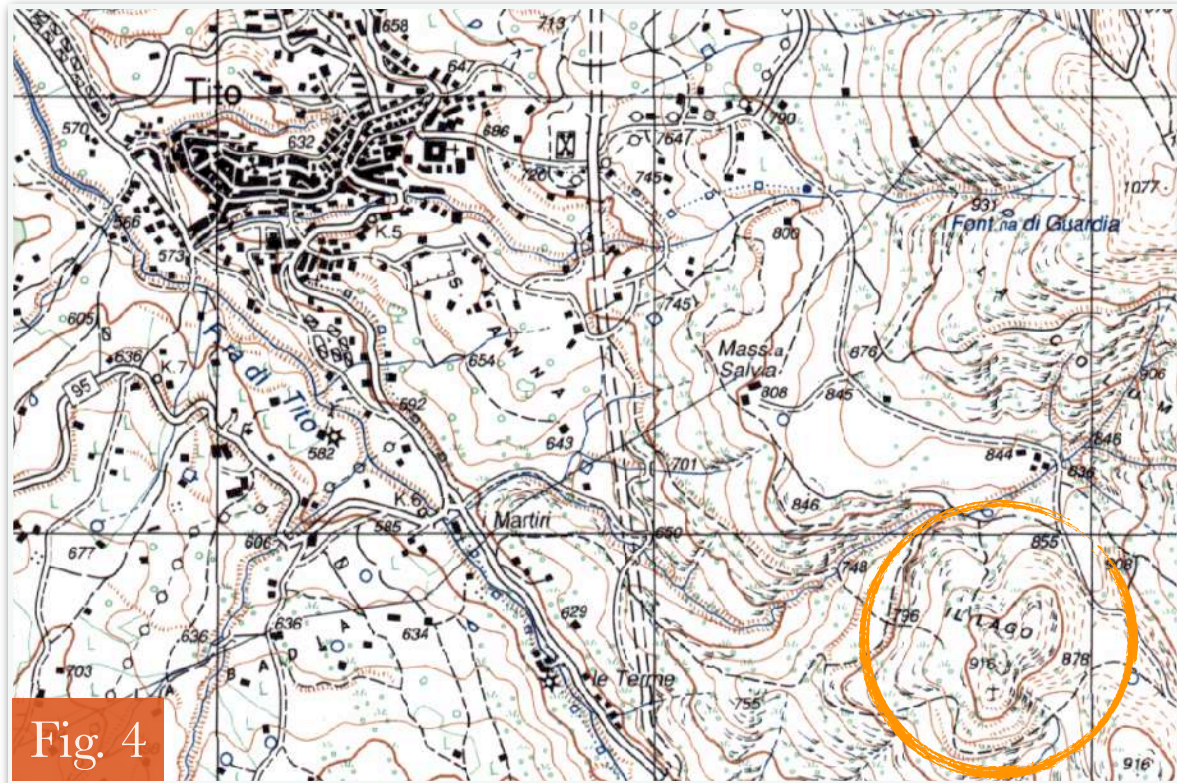


Fig. 4

In the light of the above arguments, a new interpretation is proposed for the place name *Lagonegro*:

**On the same strategic site where a thousand years earlier, the Lucanians had founded the *oppidum* of *Nerulum* (-*negro*, from the Oscan word *\*nero* meaning “strong”), the Lombards settled there at the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and established an important garrison (*lago-* from the Lombardic *\*lagar* or “post, camp”) and held it for almost five centuries.**

<sup>17</sup> This is therefore the Lucanian example of the co-existence of toponyms based on “*Bardi*” and toponyms based on “*Lago*”, as already found in Bardonecchia and Bardowick.

<sup>18</sup> L. Quilici, S. Quilici Gigli, *Carta archeologica della valle del Sinni*, Roma 2001.

<sup>19</sup> At the end of the 1980s, beautiful maps of the Kingdom of Naples compiled in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century were found in the archives of Naples and in the National Library in Paris. The map shows the village of Tito (Potenza). This village still exists and is a municipality near Potenza. However, on the map, this village is split into two: there is both a Tito and a Tito Novo. From the graphic representation and the adjective “*novo*” one can imagine that it was an old village in decline and a new village on the rise. However, there is no trace of the old Tito today. On the map, it appears to be located east of, and higher up than Tito Nuovo. Well, on the IGM maps to the east of the present-day village of Tito, there is still a hill marked with the toponym “Lago”.

This small town in Lucania, in whose name all its history is embedded, thus suggests new elements regarding the presence of the Lombards in Italy and their tactical-managerial organisation. Thanks to the frequent contrasting toponyms such as *lago* with those of the *filetto-filicara-filicaja* type (deriving from Greek φυλάσσω/φυλακτήριον), both in Lucania and in Tuscany, in Campania as well as in Veneto, and in many other places<sup>20</sup>, the *limes* can finally be drawn with the Byzantines, as clear and visible as it had never appeared up until now.

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<sup>20</sup> In Switzerland, in the upper Rhone valley, an area of historically attested Lombard incursions (the Lombard attack against the Burgundians federated with the Byzantines dates back to 574) can be found the village of Lax (reported as Lacx in 1295) as opposed to Filet.