

The Authoritative English History of Lago, Cosenza and Its Environs

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by Mike Gatto

Introduction

Lago is a territory (“*comune*”) and town in Italy, akin to both a city and county. 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 spaces 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. Calabria is the toe of the boot. However, Cosenza is not near the actual toe’s point – that part of Calabria is called Reggio.

Lago is relatively small. It is safe to estimate that the population didn’t exceed 1000 until about A.D. 1000. Over the time for which we have good records, the population has fluctuated from about 2000 to 6000.¹ 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-language “histories” often focus on one period or another, or one topic, for example, Lago’s churches. This work attempts to remedy the above.

¹ 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."² Italy at that time was split into tribal confederations, and a local tribe was called the *Itali*³ and their land, *Viteliu*,⁴ meaning roughly, "land of the life-giving calf."⁵ Another

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

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

⁴ 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.

⁵ Compare the ancient Israelites' "land flowing with milk and honey."

major tribe, in the Cosenza province, were the *Oenotri* (“winemakers.”)⁶ 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.⁷ Around this time, an Oscan tribe called the *Bretti* conquered and incorporated the predecessor tribes of Cosenza, and named their country “Brettiōn.”⁸

The ancients describe the Oscans as fierce and rugged highlanders: “*rusticorum mascula militum proles.*”⁹ The Oscans dominated most of Southern Italy by a process called “Sacred Spring.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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 Empire” today.

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

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

⁸ The Ancient People of Italy, by The Saylor Foundation, pp. 7-9.

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

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

¹¹ The Ancient Italic People, Encyclopedia Britannica.

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.¹² The Romans and Lucans called them *Brutti*, which means, “renegades.”¹³ Lago’s history begins with this tribe.

The Brettii’s capital was Cosenza (“*Consentia*”), and they dominated much of Calabria.¹⁴ Nearby Carolei was also a major Enotrian and Brettian center.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ Moreover, when Alexander the Great’s uncle invaded Cosenza in 331 B.C., the Brettii and Lucani defeated and killed him, in a battle near Lago.¹⁸ This is largely why Alexander the Great ruled an empire

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

¹³ Compare the nearly identical Etruscan “*Latni*” (*Latini*: Latins) – connoting “freedmen” in Etruscan.

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

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

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

¹⁷ See *id.*

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

from Greece to Afghanistan, but never tried to conquer Italy.¹⁹

A fascinating mystery is where exactly that battle occurred, a mystery that plagues historians to this day. It is very possible that this watershed battle occurred in Lago's territory. The ancient sources say the battle occurred in a settlement named, "Pandusia." Strabo, a Roman-Greek geographer, states that Pandusia was "a little above" Cosenza. And that it had "three summits, and the River Acheron flows past it."²⁰ Lago is indeed a little above Cosenza. The coat of arms of the town of Lago features the three mountains (Cocuzzo, Difesa and Virzi) that surround the town. And amazingly, the river that flows beside the city is called the "Acero," which in Italian, is pronounced just like "Acheron," minus the "n." We know the battle occurred in the small Cosenza province, and no other place there has three mountains and a river named, "Acero" – thus it's very likely that the Battle of Pandusia occurred very close by.

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.²¹ 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."²²

¹⁹ *Id.* Book IX.

²⁰ Geography, Strabo, Book VI (c. 7 B.C.)

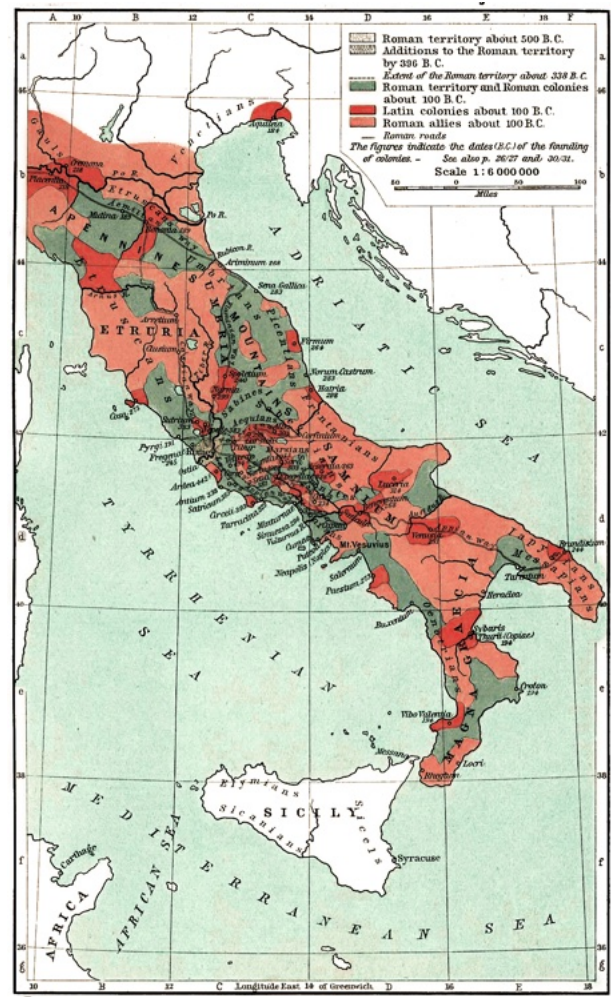
²¹ The Histories, Polybius, Book III (c. 150 B.C.)

²² *Sileraioi*, by Giulia Falco (2012).

200 B.C. – A.D. 600 - The Roman Period

The Brettii lost power precipitously after most Brettian towns sided with Hannibal in the Second Punic War, particularly since the Brettii were known as such fierce fighters. Rome confiscated half of their territory, and clear cut their valuable forests (the *Sila*) for timber and pitch for Roman fleets.²³ Rome treated the Samnites similarly harshly.²⁴

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.).²⁵ 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.²⁶



²³ 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).

To this day, the oldest bridge in Italy is in nearby Scigliano, built by the Romans to move troops to the area to fight Hannibal.

²⁴ See *The Civil Wars*, by Appian of Alexandria (c. 160 A.D.) Book I: 93 (Lucius Cornelius Sulla torturing and executing 8000 Samnite combatants).

²⁵ *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.

²⁶ *Campora San Giovanni, Serra d'Aiello, Aiello Calabro, Cleto, e Savuto*, by Armando Orlando (2015), p. 35-36.

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 Bretti-Roman population.

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.²⁷ Pythagoras came up with his famous theorem nearby.²⁸ St. Paul passed through the province on his way to Rome.²⁹ 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.³⁰



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.

²⁷ See "The 12 Caesars (*De Vita Caesarum*)", by Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, "Augustus" 7.1 (121 A.D.)

²⁸ Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans: A Brief History, by Charles Kahn (2001).

²⁹ See Acts of the Apostles, 28: 13-14.

³⁰ For each, see generally, the Encyclopedia Britannica entries for the same.

Lago's Foundation

There is no lake in the town called lake. Previous versions of this document exhaustively discussed the origins of the name of Lago (which also sheds light on when Lago was founded, since settlements invariably receive a name). Such detail was necessary due to the works of previous local Italian “historians,” like Sergio Chiatto and Alberto Cupelli, who meant well and who published valuable works, but whose historical methodology was utterly lacking by modern standards, and who perpetuated gross inaccuracies.

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 610.³¹

For the sake of brevity, it is safe to now say without any doubt that Lago was founded by the Lombards in AD 652 (and no later than 788), and that its original name was “Lagar” meaning “fortification” or “camp.”³² The sound shift from “Lagar” to “Lago” occurred many dozens of times in Italy, in towns founded by the Lombards, and where, like in Lago, Cosenza, there is no lake.

Before 652, 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

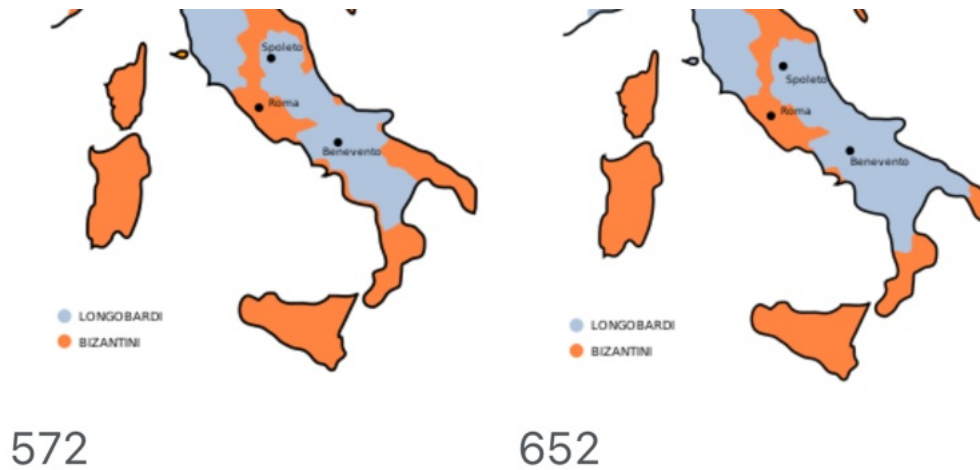
³¹ Dating not from the end of the reign of Romulus Augustulus, or Zeno, or Justinian, but Phocas.

³² From *Nerulum to Lagonegro: The Story of a Camouflaged Lombardic Fossil*, by Giuseppe Greco (2022), *passim*. This exhaustive work identifies almost a hundred sites in Italy with near-identical circumstances to that of Lago, Cosenza. Such sites were founded by the Lombards, originally designated “Lagar” (for a fortification), but changed to “Lago” in Italian despite there being no lake.

For another clear example, see also *Limes Tridentinus, Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des spätrömisch-ostgotischen und byzantinisch-langobardischen Grenzschatzes* by Richard Heuberger (1932) at 33. Near Verona the Lombards founded a militarized settlement. They called it “Lager” and eventually, “Lagertal” (“camp valley”). The Italians call it *Val Lagarina*. Similarly, Laghitello was almost certainly “Lagartal” – “camp in the Valley.”

See also *Early Medieval Italy: Central Power and Local Society, 400-1000*, by Chris Wickham (1981), p. 149, discussing the same transformation occurring in Lagerenza, Basilicata, another hill town and Lombard fortress fortified in the same era by none other than Grimoald III.

strip of land where Lago is, and that area became, for hundreds of years, the fortified border in a war zone between Byzantine Romagna and Langobardia.



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

The neighboring town of Longobardi, northwest of Lago, was a Lombard stronghold. The neighboring town of Grimaldi, southwest of Lago, was named after the Lombard ruler Grimoald I or III.³³ Closer to the ocean, the Lombards founded a customs station, the unimaginatively named Tarifa (“tax station”). Lago was a lair because just south of Lago was an international border.³⁴

³³ Longobardi even preserves Lombard legends about Liutprand burying treasure in Lago’s mountains, and there is any area named “Lipranno” after him. See *Toponimi nel Tarantino e nel Salento* by Romano Colizzi, p. 5, n.28.

Grimoald III fortified many towns and defeated the Byzantines nearby in 788. It could be possible that Grimaldi is named after him, instead of Grimoald I, which could push the four towns’ formal foundation to later. The Cosenza province held major significance for the Lombards. 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. This occurred right around the time of Grimoald III’s exploits in the area. “Italy and Her Invaders,” by Thomas Hodgkin, Volume VI, Book VII, “The Lombard Kingdom,” (1880), p. 493.

That local historians were ignorant of the history of the nearby towns (and what it means for Lago) is difficult to fathom. Another example is Figline Vegliaturo. Local historians regularly repeat that it is an unexplained mystery. Yet the other “Figline” town in Italy, Figline Valdarno, 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).

³⁴ See “The Still Byzantine Calabria: a Case Study” by Ghislaine Noyé (2015).



A close-up of the borders. Amantea was in Byzantine territory; Cosenza, Lombard.³⁵



A map showing the territories of the various counties discussed in this section. 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. Longobardi, Grimaldi, Lago, and Cosenza, were Lombard territory.

³⁵ 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*. Also, people often wonder about the blondes in Lago or the many blue-eyed people in the area. This author hates pop-historical concepts. There were doubtlessly Brettii with blue eyes and an occasional light-haired Roman. Still, we may accurately assume that the blond, blue-eyed people of Lago (and Longobardi, etc.) derive from Lombard (*i.e.*, not Visigoth or even Norman) stock.

There is a foundation myth, which even those who perpetuate acknowledge “seem a bit imaginative”: that foreign soldiers returning from holy religious wars that involved the eastern Mediterranean settled Lago and named it after their pagan king.³⁶ This folk etymology may reflect wisps of reality. The Lombard-Byzantine wars were holy wars for religious supremacy between Arian and Orthodox Christians. Grimoald was considered “pagan” and a town (nearby) was indeed named after him.

In any event, from 652 until approximately the millennium, Lago was a Lombard town, at the border of Byzantine lands, possibly switching hands a few times. Southern Italians had transitioned from Latin to Italian by 950, and likely well before then³⁷ meaning the sound shift from Lombard “Lagar” to Italian “Lago” likely occurred during the chaotic times between 885 and 1000.

A.D. 885 - 1200: The Dark Ages

Around 1000, Lago experienced a fourfold surge in population,³⁸ when many other small mountain towns in Cosenza were established, or similarly augmented. During that era, a power vacuum led to Saracen pirates raiding the region and kidnapping people from urban centers. Starting in 986, the Saracens sacked Cosenza, and later Mendicino, then Cosenza again, and they briefly captured Amantea.



³⁶ See “Storia del Comune di Lago CS (1093-1976)”, by Alberto Cupelli (1977). The myth is repeated in other works.

³⁷ 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.

³⁸ *Storia di Lago e Laghitello Attraverso le Locali Istituzioni*, by Sergio Chiatto (1992), p. 13. Prosopographically, Lago is almost exclusively Latin; a few Lombard words persist in the dialect though.

Those cities' populations dispersed and settled in various safer mountain communities. From those redoubts, watchmen would warn of approaching vessels.

In Lago, where it sometimes snows in the winter, and which is most surely in the mountains, – there is also a view of the ocean.



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.³⁹ Deforestation caused the topsoil to erode and the rivers to fill with silt.⁴⁰ Slower-flowing rivers meant mosquitoes could breed. Thus, the lowlands became malarial.⁴¹ But mosquitoes do not breed above a certain elevation. Hence, the population fled to the mountains, where malaria wasn't so prevalent.

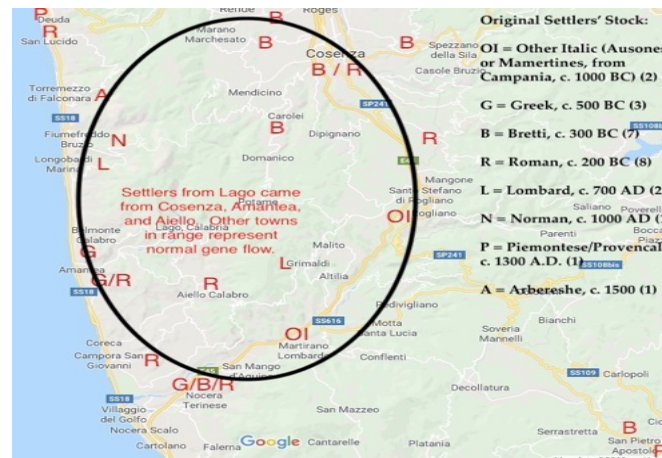
Lago was therefore heavily re-populated with people from places like Cosenza

³⁹ 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.

⁴⁰ Ancient World Mapping Center, Map 46, Bruttii, Compiled by I.E.M. Edlund-Berry and A.M. Small (1997).

⁴¹ Old Calabria, Norman Douglas (1915), Ch. XXXIV, Malaria.

and Amantea. The first written mentions of the town also come after this period. There is a Norman-era document in Latin from 1070, describing a road connecting the towns of “Grimaldo” and “Lacum.”⁴² There is a church document in Latin from 1208 where it is called “Lacu.”⁴³ In the first documents in Italian, from around 1250, the town is already called Lago of course.



A graphic showing each town's original settler stock.

It was also during this period that Calabria got its name. For ~1500 years, our area (the “toe” of Italy) was known as *Lucania et Bruttium*, or *Ager Bruttius* (“Land of the Brettii”). Whereas the “heel”, Puglia, was called Calabria. But heel, arch, and toe were then united politically during the early Middle Ages, and together known as Calabria. Ironically, the other two territories were then lost, so all that was left of the three regions was modern Calabria. Thus, the name migrated west.⁴⁴ Had every step not been recorded, we would find perplexing how ancient texts describe Calabria being in eastern Italy, facing Albania.

⁴² *Le Grandi Famiglie di Aiello Calabro*, by Dr. Francesco Gallo, p. 22.

⁴³ E.g., *Storia di Lago e Laghitello Attraverso le Locali Istituzioni*, by Sergio Chiatto (1992), p. 38.

⁴⁴ Ancient World Mapping Center, Map 46, Bruttii, Compiled by I.E.M. Edlund-Berry and A.M. Small (1997).

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 1151.⁴⁵ 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, doubtlessly from an older church from around Lago's foundation. The church of the Madonna of the Mountains was similarly built in 1652, 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.

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.⁴⁶ In the 15th Century, Cosentines welcomed Eastern Christian-rite Albanians, also fleeing persecution, and thus there are still Albanian-speaking enclaves to this day.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Storia di Lago e Laghitello Attraverso le Locali Istituzioni*, by Sergio Chiatto (1992), p. 36, 50.

⁴⁶ Unfortunately, a century later, during the Spanish Inquisition, the Spanish persecuted the Calabrian Waldensians. See "History of the Waldensians," *Musee Protestante*.

⁴⁷ *Old Calabria*, Norman Douglas (1915), Ch. XXII. Regis Philbin was a Cosentine Albanian.

⁴⁸ "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 Citra* or *Calabria Latina*. For a while, Lago was a “suburb” (in the territory of) the city-state of Aiello, which was for centuries an important county. Different re-organizations have occurred up until modern times, like making Terrati and Laghitello (previously independent cities) part of the territory 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 province 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.

Cosenza was a center of world silk production during much of its history.⁴⁹ 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).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The Cost of Empire, The Finances of the Kingdom of Naples in the Time of Spanish Rule, by Antonio Calabria (1991), p. 2.

⁵⁰ Lago, 1753: *Ricchezze e Poverta delle Locali Famiglie nel Catasto Carolino*, by Sergio Chiatto (1993).

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.

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



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

Modern Times: 1701 to the Present

The area around Lago was on the world stage again during the Napoleonic wars, during a period when England and Calabria were the main stubborn holdouts resisting Napoleon. The French forces put Amantea to siege, and the Amanteans held out bravely, killing thousands French soldiers. The Bourbon redoubt was in Potame, just above Lago, so Lago again was sort of a border zone. A French general's diary speaks of an episode where the French army, forced to retreat from Amantea, headed up the road to Lago, only to discover in the darkness when they arrived that the Calabrians had them near-surrounded, pointing whatever weapons they had at them. The men of Lago, like the other Calabrians, wanted the French soldiers to stay out of their food stores, and not so much as glance at their women.⁵¹

The region enjoyed a famous visitor in the 1740s: Giacomo Casanova, who stayed in the area instead of his native Venice. He wrote, "Cosenza is a city where rich men can have fun, since there is a rich nobility, beautiful women, and cultured people." Yet despite Casanova's kind words, the beginning of the modern era was the beginning of the great migration period.

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.⁵² Suffice to say that life in Lago and similar towns was difficult, causing many to emigrate. 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

⁵¹ The Most Monstrous of Wars: The Napoleonic Guerrilla War in Southern Italy, 1806-1811, by Milton Finley (1994).

⁵² See The Lago-Salida Connection, by Dr. Francesco Gallo (2014) at 12-14 and *passim*; *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.

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."⁵³

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 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.⁵⁴

There is also no shortage of living 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. A recent Mayor, Enzo Scanga, has dramatically improved the look and pride in the town. Wladimiro Politano is another illustrious sculptor. And of course, there is Doctor Francesco Gallo, a busy psychiatrist, who has written a voluminous corpus on Lago and the other towns of the Savuto mountain region — thousands of well-researched pages in Italian and English. Although the author may seem biased, one consistent thing people notice when visiting

⁵³ Italy and Her Invaders," by Thomas Hodgkin, Volume VI, Book VII, p. 610 (1880).

⁵⁴ See *Guida Storico-Culturale di Lago*, by Gino and Francesco Gallo (2005) pp. 121-142.

Lago is the intelligence of the population. Even those who have never left and only speak dialect are clearly quite smart.

Lago is 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.

M.G.

