

Chapter II

The Barbarians, the Carolingian Empire, and the March of Turin, ca. 500-1100

1. *Turin in the Dark Ages.*

The period from the fall of the Roman empire to the emergence of the feudal principality that became known as the March (frontier principality) of Turin spans over six centuries. During this turbulent period we can trace only the barest outlines of the history of Turin and its surrounding region, for the evidence we possess is extremely sparse and fragmentary. It consists mainly of ecclesiastical documents such as charters and chronicles, and a smaller number of documents left by secular rulers. These sources concern only the great ones of the world – kings and emperors, warrior nobles, bishops and abbots. They tell us next to nothing about how ordinary men and women – especially the latter – lived their lives and earned their daily bread. Statistics on fundamental questions like trade and manufacturing, for instance, or on population and life expectancy, are completely lacking. The historical and archaeological evidence we have allows us to speak only in the most general terms: we know that urban life regressed, commerce shrank, and the population fell, but we cannot measure these declines, or offer adequate explanations for them. We are confronted by great gaps in the chronology of events. Reconstructing the history of Turin in the Dark Ages is therefore extremely difficult, and our explanations can be at best partial.

We know that in these insecure times, walled cities like Turin offered some protection from the waves of invaders that ravaged the region; the more vulnerable rural areas however suffered heavily. Many villages and hamlets disappeared, and the surviving population grouped itself in manors under the protection of some local warrior and his men, eking out a meager existence through subsistence agriculture. The political and administrative structure of the Roman empire withered away, to be replaced by a sequence of short-lived barbarian kingdoms. After the fall of Rome, Turin was absorbed into the kingdom of the Ostrogoths, who had conquered much of Italy. Within a century they were replaced by the Lombards, whose kingdom lasted until the later eighth