

federation of peoples – on the move, in search of lands to settle. The warriors who conquered and occupied northern Italy were accompanied by their families and dependents, but even so they cannot have been very numerous: they were a warlike minority that imposed itself by force of arms on the far larger indigenous population, who called themselves Romans. Until recently historians believed that by the time the Lombards invaded Italy they were no longer pagan, having converted to Arian Christianity – a heresy that denied the divinity of Jesus Christ, and that had deeply divided the Church in the fourth century. But the question of their religious affiliation no longer seems so simple: although the majority of the Lombards were probably Arian, some may still have been pagan, while yet others apparently adhered to the Catholic orthodoxy upheld by the popes and the Italian bishops.

Arianism may not have been the Lombards' sole creed, but even so it created a religious dividing line between them and their Roman subjects, especially in the period immediately after the conquest: we know for instance that Bishop Ursicinus of Turin, who held the see from 562 to 609, was imprisoned for a time by the Lombard duke of the city, who was an Arian. But with the passage of time the religious divide seems to have grown less sharp, as increasing numbers of Lombards, either Arian or pagan, embraced the Catholic faith. By the end of the next century the diocese of Turin was once again in full communion with the popes at Rome, a sign that Catholic orthodoxy now prevailed there. But nevertheless the popes and the Catholic clergy remained irreconcilably hostile to the Lombards: Pope Stephen III in 770 denounced them as the kin of lepers, "perfidious and fetid". His hostility stemmed not only from theological differences, but from the Lombard kings' persistent attempts to conquer Rome and the Papal territories around it – the so-called Lands of St Peter.

The Lombards were first and foremost warriors, who settled disputes with the sword and carried on blood-feuds for generations. Their symbol of kingship was not a crown, but a spear. Their government rested on their military domination over the pre-existing Roman population. But they do not seem to have decimated and enslaved this population, as was formerly believed. They left the peasants and townsfolk to pursue their tasks, and let the bishops minister to their flocks. Turin is a case in point: as far as we can tell, despite the initial tension between the Arian rulers and its bishops, the latter continued in more or less unbroken succession after the conquest, although for a time they had to share their see with Arian prelates. And while some elements of the old Roman landowning class were swallowed up in the conquest,