

# Longobard Warriors in the Seprio Judicaria



Cristiano Brandolini

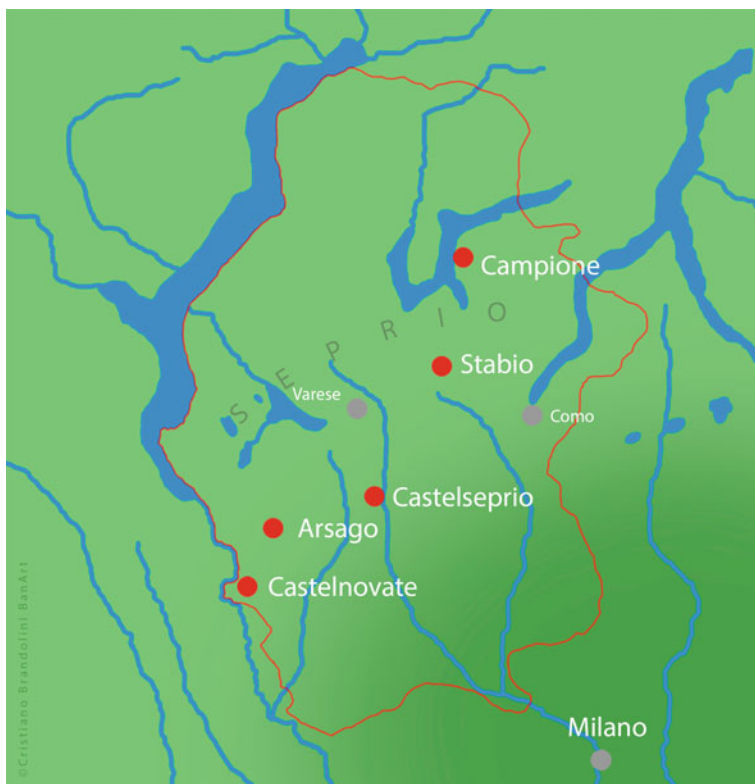
**Abstract** The Seprio is an ancient territory with a history of millennia in which we find five important Longobard centers: Sibirium (Castelseprio), Pagus Artiaco (Arsago Seprio), Castrum Novate (Castelnovate), and, further north, Stabulum (presently Stabio in the Swiss Canton of Ticino) and Campiliorum (now Campione d'Italia, an Italian exclave in Switzerland). The elements present in the grave goods of the Seprio have allowed us to understand that the Longobard warrior held a shield, brandished a *spatha* (sword), and carried a scramasax (short weapon to a single cut), a spear, and in some cases even an ax or bow and arrows, while the most important warriors were equipped with mail or lamellar armor and helmet. From the type of accoutrements (harnesses, belt elements, personal objects, pottery, golden crosses), it is possible to trace the owner's position in the hierarchy of nobility, in the same way, that the degree of sophistication of the weapons and the shield indicated the social position of the warrior who wore them. The *spatha* and the scramasax were status symbols of the Longobard warrior; they brought to the fore and underlined his status as a nobleman and free man. The Seprio has always played a leading role in the geopolitical events that have affected ancient Insubria in all its historical phases. In the last fifty years, many relics of the Arimannia of the Seprio have been unearthed and studied, but much still lies buried which scientific research is only slowly bringing to the surface.

**Keyword** Seprio · Longobard · Arimanni · Warriors · *Spathe* · Scramasax · Northern Italy

The Seprio is an ancient territory with millennia of history (See Fig. 3.1). There, we find five important Longobard centers: Sibirium (Castelseprio), Pagus Artiaco (Arsago Seprio), Castrum Novate (Castelnovate), and, further to the north, Stabulum, now Stabio (located in the Swiss Canton of Ticino), and Campiliorum (which is today's Campione d'Italia, an Italian exclave within Switzerland), home to the noble Totoni family who is descended from Longobard landowners and merchants.

---

C. Brandolini (✉)  
Civic Archaeological Museum of Arsago Seprio, Varese, Italy  
e-mail: [macbran@branart.com](mailto:macbran@branart.com)



**Fig. 3.1** The Seprio territory in the early Middle Ages (Drawing by the author)

In the area that is now the Province of Varese, the Longobards occupied the imposing Castelseprio military fortification, built in the late Roman times, which was established as the capital of the *judicaria* (a district of lesser importance than the duchy, referred to also as a *civitates* or *fines*), governed by a *sculdahis* magistrate or *judex*.

Partly as a result of its strategic position along the main communication routes, the fortified town or castle (*castrum*) took on crucial importance as a military, civil, and religious center and became the site of a local mint. Even the small hamlets of Castelnovate and Arsago assumed strategic significance. The former, on the eastern banks of the Ticino River, had already been a strategic hub during Roman times: its *castrum* controlled the waterway and this, too, was the site of a mint. The latter—at the center of the county and at the point where two of the most significant communication routes met—was chosen by the *Arimannia*, the nobles who governed the district, as their headquarters. As proof of this, there are numerous high-status tombs, which are absent from both Castelseprio and Castelnovate. There were surely *Arimannia* hubs at Stabio and in Campione d’Italia, too. Stabio and Campione have emerged as two strategic points on communication and crossing routes in the Seprio area.

Items present among grave goods—not just in Seprio, but in all Italian necropolises—have allowed us to understand that a Longobard warrior carried a shield, brandished a *spatha* (sword), and carried a scramasax (short weapon with a single-edged blade), a spear, and, in some cases, an ax or bow and arrows. Those of the highest ranks wore mail or lamellar cuirass and a helmet. The type of accoutrements (belt elements, personal objects, crockery, golden crosses) signified the owner's noble rank, in the same way, that the level of refinement of their weapons and shield indicated the social standing of the warrior who carried them.

The *spatha* and scramasax were status symbols for the Longobard warrior. They were carried in plain sight to highlight their status as noblemen and free men. The *spathae* are items that appear in many warriors' tombs from the early sixth century. They are long weapons with double-edged blades, and it is supposed that they were predominantly used on horseback, for striking the enemy with a cut rather than a thrust of the point. The blade was forged using a technique widespread among Germanic peoples. It was made up of three parts: two sharp edges at the sides and the central core. The latter was damascened—a special forging technique to give the *spatha* more flexibility and resistance, as well as providing a decorative pattern on the central groove of the blade, created by the very process of forging together two metals.<sup>1</sup> The ornamental patterns created with the forging of Damascus steel take on various shapes such as knots or herringbones (See Fig. 3.2).

There are few preserved *spatha* grips, due to their being made of perishable organic materials such as wood or horn. Only the grips on the finest examples were coated in decorated metal leaf, as in the example uncovered in Trezzo sull'Adda (See Fig. 3.3).

*Spathae* have an average total length of roughly between 85 and 95 cm, while the total blade width is between 5 and 6 cm. Their weight is around 1000 g to 1200 g. The point of balance is always toward the tip of the blade, on average 20–30 cm from the guard. This makes it very difficult to handle during close combat. Many parts of the *spatha* scabbard have also been preserved. They were made of wood, lined with fur inside, and coated in leather on the outside. They were then attached to a special belt for carrying arms, with a suspension system.

There is also a considerable amount of weapon belt adornments found among the grave goods. These belts were a typical and widespread component of Longobard weaponry and clothing for both men and women. They were generally composed of a leather belt to which iron, bronze, damascened, or plated additions were attached. Various types of belts are documented, which could also be worn at the same time: one for attaching the tunic and for hanging the leather *scarsella*, another more elaborate military one for suspending the *spatha* or scramasax at the wearer's side.<sup>2</sup> The buckles and end tips were for a long time used not just on belts but also as a fastening for attaching cloth strips or gaiters to the calves.

The most common type of belt buckle between the fifth and sixth centuries CE were cast bronze with an oval-shaped frame (the cross-section of the metal would

---

<sup>1</sup> The Damascus forging technique is ancient and was the earliest forging technique used by man.

<sup>2</sup> A *scarsella* is a small bag for carrying commonly used objects such as a fire striker and flint, coins, etcetera.



**Fig. 3.2** Detail of damask pattern with herringbone motif (De Marchi 2013, 529)

be round) and shield-shaped barb. It was often embellished with a fixed plaque, cast as a single item with the frame or, for a more flexible option, with a movable plaque connected to the frame with a joint. Buckles with a U-shaped plate, usually in damascened iron, were particularly widespread. They were also used on military belts and were present among most grave goods in Arsago.

In the early seventh century CE, a new type of bronze-colored buckle with an oval-shaped frame, with a convex cross-section, began to appear and was typical of the “five-piece military belt” of Roman provincial origin. This type of belt was made up of a buckle with a triangular movable plate and a triangular counter-plate. Both were decorated and attached to the leather belt with three studs. An end tip was attached to the belt’s end. Over the course of the seventh century, this was embellished further,



**Fig. 3.3** Trezzo sull’Adda, *spatha* handle with double interwoven silver ring (Caporusso and Provenzali 2011, 180). By permission of the Italian Ministry of Culture—Archaeological Superintendence of Fine Arts and Landscape (Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio) for the Province of Milan. Reproduction and duplication by any means is prohibited

with other plates, ornaments, and accessories. This design is also found on belts that feature a *spatha* suspension system.

Belts with a system for hanging the scramasax were different. They were referred to as “multiple belts,” (*cinture multiple*) made up of a larger number of pieces. In this case, the belt comprised a plated buckle, its main end tip attached to the end of the belt, a loop, and various reinforcing plates and ornamental pendants. “Multiple belts” originated in the East and often featured traditional Byzantine or Germanic decorative Damascus patterns; hence the technique was known as damascening. This



design also underwent a change of style during the seventh century: the adornments took on a longer and finer shape, with stylized and geometric decorative motifs. In some cases, even gemstones are set into the belt. In particular, Almandine, a dark red/purple mineral typical of Caria in Asia Minor.

The Longobards achieved a high technical level in their metalwork. Objects in silver, bronze, and iron are common. They are often embellished with silver, brass, or gold decorations through the inlay technique, damascening, and plating. In Arsago, there is a particularly large number of adornments on inlaid iron belts. Inlaying is a decorative technique where a fine thread of silver, brass, or gold is hammered into a groove cut using a burin and chisel. The most common ornamental patterns are geometric or zoomorphic.

## 1 Arsago Seprio's Warriors

In 1946, the Arsago Seprio municipal government decided to build an elementary school immediately outside the walls of the historic center, to the south of a flat grassland. In 1972, the school building needed to be expanded. During the excavation stages for building the two new main buildings, six Longobard tombs were discovered by chance. In 1983, a further excavation campaign on the same area uncovered another nine tombs. Most were large stone structures topped with a large, double-slope capstone. Others were bare soil graves (Passi Pitcher 1986, 1–15).

Of the fifteen tombs discovered between 1972 and 1983, only one was intact (See Fig. 3.4). The others had already been broken into and looted in antiquity. The cracks through which robbers were able to get inside the tombs, to take valuable objects from the grave goods, can still clearly be seen on the top stones today. The excavation campaigns did not make it possible to be certain of the size of the necropolis, as it remains mostly unexplored. However, geo-radar surveys performed in 1994 showed up a large number of tombs across a vast surrounding area. Such findings provided the basis for further excavations in the same year. This campaign gave the precise location of and unearthed another ten tombs, both stone structures and bare soil graves (See Fig. 3.5).

The necropolis can be dated back to between the late sixth century and the second half of the seventh century. To date, the excavations (1972, 1983, 1994) have unearthed twenty-six tombs, many of which can be attributed to prominent members of the aristocracy.

Arsago was definitely one of the main centers of power in Seprio. Unlike Castelseprio, where a good portion of the Longobard-era buildings has been preserved within the Archaeological Park of the *castrum*, in Arsago the expansion of the hamlet in later periods entirely removed the buildings. Tangible evidence was, however, left in the rich selection of grave goods found inside the necropolis tombs.

The tombs identified and excavated to date can be grouped into four main families who lived there contemporaneously. They consisted of members of the ruling class—that is to say, the head of the family surrounded by their family members and by



**Fig. 3.4** Arsago Seprio, Longobard necropolis excavations, 1972–1983. By permission of the Italian Ministry of Culture—Archaeological Superintendence of Fine Arts and Landscape (Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio) for the Provinces of Como, Lecco, Monza and Brianza, Pavia, Sondrio, Varese. Reproduction and duplication by any means is prohibited

servants (De Marchi, Mariotti, Miazzo 2004, 101–168). As mentioned, they had all been breached and looted in antiquity; still, significant grave goods have been preserved including *spathae* (swords), scramasaxes (short weapons with a single-edged blade), spears, and shields.

The Arsago Seprio necropolis is, to date, the largest Longobard burial area in Seprio and is the only one in Italy to be preserved in situ and visible to the public.

In the burials so far excavated at Arsago Seprio, the following have been found:

Two *spathae* with a simple grip made of organic material, which was not preserved.

The remains of a shield, the umbo (boss of a shield) with its enarmes (leather gripping strips) and studs.

Four punch-decorated ormolu (gold alloy applied to bronze) studs, which were part of a parade shield.

A bay leaf-shaped spearhead.

Three scramasaxes.

The tip of a standard-bearer spear.

Two arrowheads of different types: one “barbed,” the other in the shape of an olive leaf with an opening along the centerline and a short tang for attaching it to the shaft.

Baldrics, matched with *spatha* scabbards, and weapon belts matched with *scramasaxes*.

With regard to the olive-leaf-shaped arrowheads found in Tomb 5 (See Fig. 3.6), the solid structure of the blade and the opening at its center could suggest two

**Fig. 3.5** Arsago Seprio, Longobard necropolis excavation, 1994. By permission of the Italian Ministry of Culture—Archaeological Superintendence of Fine Arts and Landscape (Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio) for the Provinces of Como, Lecco, Monza and Brianza, Pavia, Sondrio, Varese. Reproduction and duplication by any means is prohibited



**Fig. 3.6** Arsago Seprio, arrowhead from Tomb 5. Drawing by the author

hypothetical uses that are not related purely to offensive action: the first is that it was part of a standard holder shaft; the second that it was used as an incendiary arrow, placing a strip of fabric coated in pitch into the gap which was then wound around the arrow and ignited. The second theory arouses skepticism insofar as the arrowhead's tip is not sharp and its leaf shape does not contribute to the acuteness of



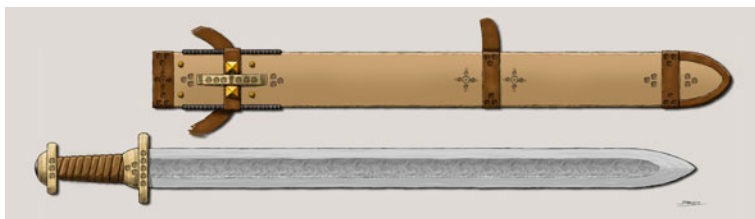
the tip for deeply penetrating the target, which is supposed to be ignited by the arrow. Furthermore, it is too heavy compared to the traditional incendiary arrowheads used in the era.

Bows and arrows formed part of the equipment of aristocratic warriors. The laws promulgated by King Aistulf in the eighth century relating to an obligation to bear arms in line with a subject's wealth, and therefore on the basis of the size of their estate, established that even *minores homines* (men of modest wealth) would be armed with at least a shield, quiver, bow, and arrows (Ahistolfi Leges, paragraph 2).

I have spoken at length with Gionata Brovelli, a scholar of historic archery, on this particular arrowhead from Arsago. He proposes a third theory. The bow the Longobards of Pannonia used was of Asian origin: a composite bow with recurve limbs, intended to also be used on horseback and with a much greater arrow release speed and range than that offered by wooden longbows. Furthermore, it required heavier arrows with heavier-than-standard arrowheads.

Brovelli, therefore, believes that the Arsago arrow could have been a training arrow, for long-range shots over the parabolic path required on the battlefield. When an arrowhead this heavy reaches the end of its course and hits the ground, it penetrates deeply and is difficult to recover. There is the risk of the arrowhead coming away from the shaft and getting stuck in the ground. The gap could therefore have had a specific function: to attach a thin strip of leather to the blade that could then be used to pull the arrow out of the ground, should it be too deeply buried in the earth.

Of the two *spathae* recovered, the one found in Tomb 19 (See Fig. 3.7) was placed along the left arm of the deceased and wrapped in his belts, together with the scramasax and the knife (See Fig. 3.8). The same tomb contained elements in



**Fig. 3.7** Arsago Seprio, graphic reconstruction of spatha and scabbard. Drawing by the author



**Fig. 3.8** Arsago Seprio, graphic reconstruction of scramasax, small knife and scabbard. Drawing by the author

bronze and damascened iron, arranged on the *spatha* scabbard, as well as a barbed arrowhead. The *spatha* blade was damascened.

The Damascus patterns on the *spathae* in Tombs 19 and 26 are however only partially detectable, as the wooden remains and the leather of their scabbards and their inner fur lining have mineralized, covering the blades almost entirely. There are also many metallic parts in damascened iron, iron, and bronze buttons with truncated pyramidal heads and a rear belt loop, iron bridges—all part of the complex system for sliding the *spathae* and scramasaxes—as well as their corresponding belts.

Tomb 13 contained various grave goods, including a scramasax, and the tip of a standard-bearing spear. In Tomb 26, there was a shield from which were preserved the umbo, the iron elements on the enarmes with studs for attaching them (See Fig. 3.9), a *spatha*, and a rider's spur in damascened iron (See Fig. 3.10), as well as some iron and bronze belt additions. Tomb 4 also contained three studs, remnants of a parade



**Fig. 3.9** Arsago Seprio, shield of Tomb 26 (Collection of Civic Archaeological Museum of Arsago Seprio). By permission of the Italian Ministry of Culture—Archaeological Superintendence of Fine Arts and Landscape (Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio) for the Provinces of Como, Lecco, Monza and Brianza, Pavia, Sondrio, Varese. Reproduction and duplication by any means is prohibited



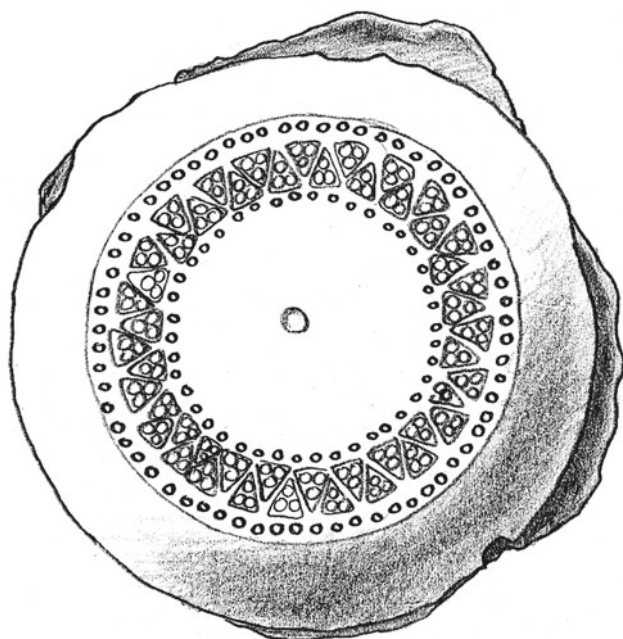
**Fig. 3.10** Arsago Seprio, damned iron spur of Tomb 26 (Collection of Civic Archaeological Museum of Arsago Seprio). By permission of the Italian Ministry of Culture—Archaeological Superintendence of Fine Arts and Landscape (Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio) for the Provinces of Como, Lecco, Monza and Brianza, Pavia, Sondrio, Varese. Reproduction and duplication by any means is prohibited

shield. They were ormolu with a punched decoration of alternating and contrasting opalescent triangles (See Fig. 3.11). There was also the bay leaf-shaped tip of a spear and the buckle for multiple belts in damascened iron.

With regard to weapon belts, two “multiple belts” in damascened iron came from Tombs 5 and 13 (See Fig. 3.12) while in Tomb 15 the material is plain iron. There is a belt with a *spatha* suspension system in Tomb 19 (See Fig. 3.13). In Tombs 7, 17, and 20, there are multiple belts with wolf’s head bronze elements (See Fig. 3.14). The belt in Tomb 20 is associated with a scramasax and knife (See Fig. 3.15).

## 2 The Warrior of Castelseprio

To date, only one Longobard tomb has been found within the *castrum* area. The tomb was discovered in 1966 by chance, during restoration works on the remains of the walls of the facade of the Basilica of San Giovanni. The tomb was unearthed within the footprint of the infill walls of what was previously an opening. The deceased was



*FRAND*

**Fig. 3.11** Arsago Seprio, one of the three shield studs of Tomb 4. Drawing by the author



*FRAND*

**Fig. 3.12** Arsago Seprio, damned iron harnesses from the belt of Tomb 13. Drawing by the author



**Fig. 3.13** Arsago Seprio, graphic reconstruction of the spatha-holding belt of Tomb 19. Drawing by the author



**Fig. 3.14** Arsago Seprio, bronze harness of the belt of Tomb 20 (Collection of Civic Archaeological Museum of Arsago Seprio). By permission of the Italian Ministry of Culture—Archaeological Superintendence of Fine Arts and Landscape (Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Belle Arti e il Paesaggio) for the Provinces of Como, Lecco, Monza and Brianza, Pavia, Sondrio, Varese. Reproduction and duplication by any means is prohibited

buried with a *spatha* placed between the torso and right hip, a spear (See Fig. 3.16) between the torso and left shoulder, a damascened iron spur placed between the thighs, and a belt with damascened iron embellishments at the hips. There is no trace of a scramasax or shield.

The only remaining part of the *spatha* is the central section of the blade. On it, the central Damascus pattern is very clear, with a slanted herringbone pattern divided into three parallel strips. The spear tip has the shape of a willow leaf, a type widespread in Italy's northern territories, which corresponds significantly with tips discovered in Transalpine areas and traceable to Germanic Alemanni and Bavarian peoples (De Marchi 2013, 528–534) (See Fig. 3.17).

### 3 The Warriors of Stabio

The first warrior tomb in Stabio came to light between 1833 and 1838 in the Alla Vigna area. It contained the remains of an ornamental shield and a golden cross. Nothing could be seen of any weapons or other artifacts. The shield is embellished with





**Fig. 3.15** Arsago Seprio, graphic reconstruction of the Longobard warrior from Arsago. Drawing by the author

decorated ormolu plates, shaped into plant-like figures, the tree of life, a *kantharos* (ancient Greek cup for drinking), and animal and human figures: a knight and a rampant lion cub/dog looking behind itself (See Fig. 3.18). The shield and gold cross allows the tomb in which they were found to be dated back to the middle third of the seventh century (Cardani Vergani et al. 2003, 3).

**Fig. 3.16** Castelseprio,  
drawing of the spear point  
(De Marchi 2013, 530)

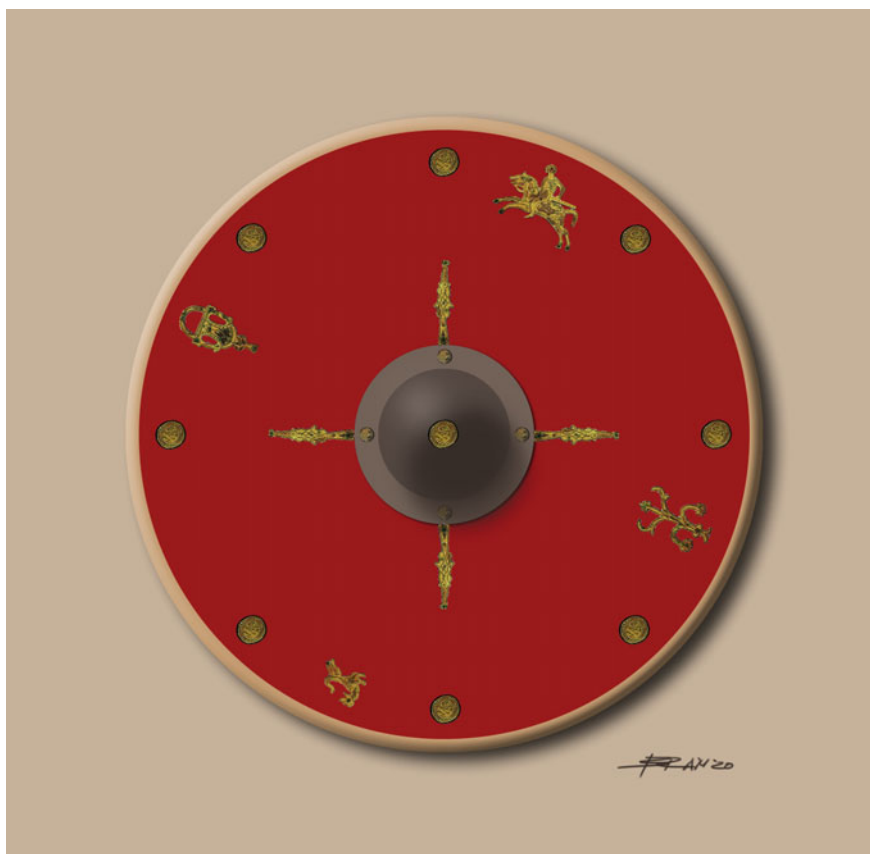


In 1973, scientific research carried out in the area in front of the Church of Santi Pietro e Lucia uncovered another two Longobard tombs. The grave goods in the first tomb are clearly military equipment. They consist of a scramasax, with the remains of its scabbard (of which only the tip has been preserved), ornamental bronze nails and studs, two bridge support elements, a knife, and weapon belt with multiple iron adornments. There was also a fire striker and the corresponding flint. Some of the objects were laid out beside the body, others worn. The weapons are limited to the scramasax. There is no sword, spear, or shield, which were perhaps looted in antiquity, or perhaps we can presume that the body was only dressed in accessories with a high symbolic value, according to Christian tradition. That means the scramasax, which relates to the world of warriors, would have been buried as a status object, but the fact it was placed upside down suggests its function was primarily symbolic (Cardani Vergani, Amrein, Boissonnas 2003, 4–5). In the second tomb, there were remains but no grave goods.

The last warrior grave in Stabio was uncovered in the Barico area during an archaeological survey which, in 1999, enabled the unearthing of a Longobard necropolis consisting of six tombs. Among them, one in particular—Tomb 3, dating back to the first half of the seventh century—contained the remains of an upper-class man, accompanied by a wealth of grave goods, including metal utensils, damascened belt decorations, weapons, a fragment of a golden cross, and various remains of organic materials (See Fig. 3.19). Specifically, the grave goods contained a spear, a sword, a



**Fig. 3.17** Graphic reconstruction of the armament of the Longobard warrior (Drawing by the author)



**Fig. 3.18** Stabio, graphic reconstruction of the parade shield. Drawing by the author

scramasax, a knife, a penknife, a *spatha* belt with damascened iron embellishments, a “multiple belt” which also had damascened iron embellishments, a horse rider’s spur, a pair of shears, a comb, a golden cross, and probably a wooden box (Cardani Vergani, Amrein, Boissonnas 2003, 5–15) (See Fig. 3.20).

## 4 Concluding Remarks

The Seprio has always occupied a key role in the geopolitical matters affecting ancient Insubria, at all points in its history, from the Upper Paleolithic to the Visconti and Sforza duchies of Milan. Crossed by important communication waterways such as the Ticino, and by communication routes on land such as the Mediolanum-Verbanus, it saw cultures develop including the Neolithic Lagozza and the protohistoric Golasecca

**Fig. 3.19** Stabio, a panoply of arms from Tomb 3 (Cardani Vergani et al. 2003, 11)



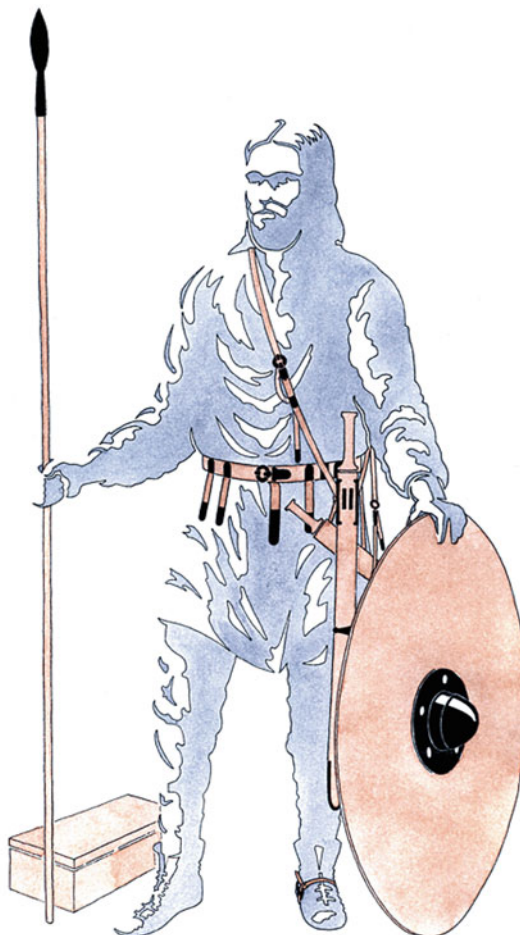
cultures, before later becoming an important center of military and civil power during the Longobard era and later.

In the last 50 years, a great deal of evidence about the Seprio *Arimannia* has been unearthed and studied, but so much still lies buried there. After the ancient *castrum* of Castelseprio and the Torba Monastery became part of the UNESCO World Heritage List (in June 2011), scientific research was resumed a few years ago. Targeted archaeological surveys and studies have been underway for some years now, carried out by the Università degli Studi di Milano Statale and by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, in Milan.

Archaeological research is a fundamental activity to continue to duly value this important territory that has strongly marked and characterized the history of Longobardy and beyond. We hope to soon be able to restart the archaeological surveys, including at the Arsago Seprio necropolis and also—but no less importantly—at the Castelnovate site. This would mean adding so many of the still missing pieces to the area’s history. Doing so here and in the many other Longobard locations within our peninsula, would contribute to restoring to us one of the many identities that contributed to forming our roots.



**Fig. 3.20** Stabio, graphic reconstruction of the Longobard warrior from Stabio (Cardani Vergani et al. 2003, 15)



## References

- Caporusso D, Provenzali A (a cura di) (2011) Guida alla collezione altomedievale. Civico Museo Archeologico Milano, Edizioni ET, Milano
- De Marchi PM (2013) Oggetti in metallo altomedievali dall'area del castrum e da corredi funerari. In: Paola Marina De Marchi (a cura di), Castelseprio e Torba sintesi delle ricerche e aggiornamenti. Ed. SAP Società Archeologica, Mantova.
- De Marchi PM, Mariotti V, Miazzo L (2004) La necropoli longobarda di Arsago Seprio. In: Archeologia Medievale, XXXI.
- Passi Pitcher L (1986) La necropoli longobarda di Arsago Seprio. In: Nuovi contributi agli studi longobardi in Lombardia. Atti del Convegno (Arsago Seprio, 29 settembre 1984), Busto Arsizio
- Vergani C, Rossana HA, Boissonnas V (2003) L'ultimo guerriero longobardo ritrovato a Stabio TI. Dalla scoperta al laboratorio di restauro: una prima sintesi dei risultati. In: AS. Srchäologie der Schweiz Srchéologie Suisse Archeologia Svizzera, volume 26/3, Ed. Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Ur- und Frühgeschichte, Basilea

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

