# The Invisible Bridge between the United Kingdom and Piedmont

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By

Andrea Raimondi

With a contribution by Giorgio Rossi Accastello

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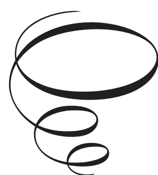

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By Andrea Raimondi

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# INTRODUCTION

## Of Walls and Bridges

It is always the right time to refer to bridges or use metaphors which convey the concept of bringing people together, especially in a historical period when the erection of new walls is being persistently threatened. Despite clearly serving opposing purposes, walls and bridges are both typical human constructions. I could be wrong, but I think there is nothing exactly like either a wall (perhaps a mountain chain?) or a bridge in nature. It is therefore humans who, by means of walls and bridges, decide whether to divide or unite themselves, include or exclude others, and remain friends or become enemies.

Not only do real walls and bridges, made of steel and concrete, exist, but so do figurative and invisible ones, which can nonetheless ideally divide and unite individuals. The bridge of the title thus reveals the aim of my research, which is the investigation of the special but apparently invisible bond that has united the United Kingdom with the Italian region of Piedmont for centuries. I have chosen to do this by means of eight individuals' stories. As you will soon discover, most of these stories, with the exception of the one concerning Sir James Hudson, are about characters hailing from Piedmont. After all, I am Piedmontese myself, and I suppose I know my fellow citizens better than more-or-less renowned British people. Furthermore, English-speaking readers are probably less familiar with Piedmontese characters, and this study represents a good opportunity to make them acquainted.

Actually, a very special British "character" finds a place in the present study—the *Vercelli Book*, or *Codex Vercellensis*, an Anglo-Saxon code written in England in around 975 and successively brought to the city of Vercelli in Piedmont, where it can still be found. It is particularly important for this research since it represents one of the earliest and most significant contacts between the United Kingdom and Piedmont. The *Vercelli Book* is also symbolically pertinent: a book, like a wall or a bridge, is another typical human-made product. Luckily enough, books resemble walls more than bridges, as they are supposed to unite rather than divide.

Why did I choose to speak about seven men and a book to investigate the historical relations between the United Kingdom and Piedmont? First of

all, as is common knowledge, History, as we learnt at school, is always about telling stories—it is no coincidence that the English words "history" and "story" come from the same root. We must be perfectly aware, therefore, that the facts that happened in the past are one thing, and the oral or written accounts of these facts are a different matter—in the best case, a good approximation of the true state of affairs. Consequently, as happens in every tale or account, even in the most detailed and accurate one, choices have to be made (not everything can be told!) and a specific viewpoint has to be taken; that is, one that is never completely objective.

Also, comparing Piedmontese and British political, military, and economic histories would require too much time, space, and especially competence (actually, I will give an overview of such historical relations shortly afterwards). Finally, I assume that behind any political alliance, military campaign, commercial relationship, and diplomatic tie there are essentially people. It is people, with their individual existences and relations, who make history.

## Where is Piedmont Located?

For those who are not familiar with Italian geography and history, Piedmont is the westernmost and second largest Italian region, presently home to nearly 4.4 million inhabitants. The region is surrounded by the Alps to the northwest and the Ligurian Apennines to the south. To the east, Lake Maggiore and the Ticino and Sesia rivers separate it from Lombardy. Piedmont borders the western tip of Emilia-Romagna to the east, with Liguria to the south, France to the west, and Switzerland and the Aosta Valley to the north. Its territory is divided into eight provinces, and the region has the second highest number of municipalities (or *comuni* in the Italian language) after Lombardy at 1,206. The capital of Piedmont, as well as its economic and cultural centre, is Turin, a city with a population of about 882,000 inhabitants.

As for its history, Piedmont, as is known today, grew progressively out of the territories occupied by the French House of Savoy, which included the area corresponding to modern-day Piedmont, the Aosta Valley, the county of Nice, and the region of Savoy. A crucial moment for the regional history coincided with the transfer of the capital city of the Duchy of Savoy from Chambéry to Turin in 1563, an overtly political decision in an attempt to escape the influence of France and shift the focal point of the region eastwards.

Being a frontier land, the region has been open to foreign influences more than other Italian areas. Linguistically speaking, its history was at first

marked by French-Italian vernacular bilingualism, with French being used by the upper classes and local parlances by the illiterate majority. A third linguistic variety, Latin, employed by churchmen and diplomats, remained the prevalent written code until the end of the sixteenth century.

Later, when the House of Savoy was charged with unifying Italy under one language, Tuscan Italian was preferred over Piedmontese because the latter was considered peripheral and lacking an aura of literariness and distinction. The region played a key role in spreading the Tuscan variety all over Italy, a language that initially sounded foreign to the Piedmontese themselves but whose mastery was deemed a hard-fought achievement.

Besides the national language and a wide range of local parlances, Piedmont is one of the Italian regions with the highest number of recognised and protected linguistic minorities. There are in fact four linguistic minorities: Franco-Provençal, Occitan, Walser, and French, as well as a fifth regional variety, simply called Piedmontese, which has not yet received official recognition. According to Italian Law no. 482, 1999, which protects all historical minorities, 161 Piedmont villages declared themselves linguistic minorities in 2006. The inhabitants of the villages number more than 240,000, representing 5.4% of the regional population, in spite of the fact that the percentage of those who can really speak a minority language is no more than 4.4%. The best-known Piedmontese linguistic minority is Occitan (spoken by 3.8%), followed by Franco-Provençal (1.6%), French (1%), and Walser, known by only 0.2% of the regional residents.

Despite sharing some characteristics with other regions, the case of Piedmont is clearly distinctive within the national and possibly European panorama as well. In fact, after straddling Italy and France and placing itself on the margins of the Italian political and cultural debate for centuries, during the nineteenth century the region became the driving force behind the national unification movement. The presence of the House of Savoy guaranteed a sense of continuity between the former Kingdom of Sardinia (also called Piedmont-Sardinia, which was the title given to the Savoy state after receiving Sardinia from the Austrian Habsburgs in 1720) and the new Kingdom of Italy declared in 1861, which managed to embody the unitary cause and was able to act as a point of reference for most political and social forces that aimed to unite Italy. Besides, in the panorama of political equilibrium among European powers, the Savoy House was considered the only body able to carry out the process of unification. This was true especially for British governments.

While until the eighteenth century there were no significant differences between the economic power and political weight in Europe of the two countries, from the nineteenth century things began to change radically. The

United Kingdom grew into a giant, whereas the small Piedmontese state, showing shrewdness rather than strength, continued to struggle to preserve its independence by sneaking into all European questions so as to secure itself the protection of more powerful countries and avoid political isolation. It was precisely during this period of an apparently widening gap that diplomacy gained a vital role in maintaining balanced relations between the two countries.

## A Brief History of a Long Friendship

History books frequently refer to supposed similarities between Piedmont and the United Kingdom and their respective inhabitants. The same books also mention formulas such as a "special relationship" or "ancient friendship." Regardless of the rhetoric, an old and durable liaison really did exist, and perhaps still does.

It is reasonable to assume that both countries needed each other. The alliance between Piedmont and the United Kingdom, though temporarily spoiled by passing clouds, was cemented by the common French threat as well as the necessity, for the United Kingdom, of gaining access to the Mediterranean, while the Piedmontese state may not have survived between aggressive enemies and large empires without British backup. It has to be specified that, at first, the relationships between the two countries only concerned an inner circle of diplomatic and political elites. Then, after a few centuries, they opened to a larger number of individuals, such as merchants, travellers, adventurers, and artists.

According to nineteenth-century ministry and jurist Federico Sclopis, the first significant contacts between England and Piedmont date back to 1241, even though—in my humble opinion, and as will be clear afterwards—they should be traced back at least to 1216. In that year, Cardinal Guala Bicchieri from Vercelli was sent to the English court as a papal legate to support the young monarch Henry III against the French invasion and the rise of English barons. The history of these earlier contacts is recounted in chapter two.

King Henry must have been positively impressed by the Piedmontese in any case. In fact, in 1236, after generously remunerating the Cardinal, the monarch married Eleanor of Provence, daughter to Beatrice of Savoy and the Count of Provence. Henry then allowed his wife to bring several relatives to England, one of whom was her uncle Peter, the future Count of Savoy. While still in Italy, Peter had initially undertaken the ecclesiastical career, which he interrupted following the death of his father in 1233. Seven years later, in April 1240, his niece invited him to England. The Savoyard

prince arrived at court at the end of the year, and in January 1241 was knighted as Earl of Richmond by the king, although he never assumed the title. Nonetheless, Peter was able to gain the complete trust of Henry III, who in turn granted him several favours, such as the land between the Thames and the Strand on which the Savoy Palace was built, which would soon be known as one of the grandest buildings of medieval London.

The queen consort of England called another uncle, Boniface of Savoy, across the Channel, and who was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury in 1245. Once in charge, Boniface swore to excommunicate on the spot anyone who dared either directly or indirectly to offend and contravene the Magna Carta issued by the king at different times. Another Savoyard, William, became advisor to the English monarch and was responsible for the negotiations of the marriage between his niece and King Henry III. The English subjects could not tolerate all these Savoyards at court and their influential positions in the government and realm. It followed that the queen became more and more unpopular, although these concessions contributed to establishing substantial contact between the countries.[1]

Whereas in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, for Sclopis, "there were no particular shared interests and exchanges between the two countries" (1853, 8), after the earthquake triggered by the Protestant Reformation and subsequent European Wars, the ties between the Duchy of Savoy and the English court became closer and stronger over the course of the sixteenth century.[2]

Having faced several difficulties during the Last Italian War of 1551–9, Duke Emmanuel Philibert desperately sought English support against the French army. To this purpose, in 1554 a Savoy representative was sent to London, followed by the duke himself. Luckily for him and his people, in 1557 the Savoyard army managed to defeat the French at the Battle of St. Quentin, Picardy, thanks to Spanish and especially English support.

The following Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis in 1559 put an end to the conflict between Spain and France for the control of Italy. Consequently, the French armies abandoned most of the previously occupied territories of Piedmont and Savoy and returned them to the Duchy of Savoy. Shortly afterwards, Emmanuel Philibert decided to move the capital to Turin in an attempt to escape the influence of France. At the same time, the Duke travelled again to England, where he proved extremely popular and successful. He won over most people at court, was ordered a Knight of the

[1] A comprehensive overview of Henry III's reign is provided by Weiler and Rowlands (2002). On the life of Eleanor of Provence see Howell (2001).

[2] For the sake of readability, all Italian quotations have been translated into English. All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

Garter, and was even offered Princess Elizabeth Tudor's hand in marriage. The marriage negotiations, however, came to a standstill for religious reasons, after which nothing ever came of them.[3]

According to those particularly prone to conspiratorial thinking, in the sixteenth century the House of Savoy became the pivot around which the relationships between Mary I of Scotland (whose family was related to the Savoy's) and Catholic Italian princes turned. The ruling families of Piedmont and England supposedly used an emissary, a certain David Rizzio (whom will be discussed in chapters three and four), in order to strengthen the relationships among European Catholic rulers and close ranks against the Protestant invasion (Sclopis 1853, 9–10).

Following the rise to the English throne of James I in 1603, the ties with Piedmont became even more solid. Seeing the increasing power of France, the English needed a reliable ally in continental Europe to throw a spanner in the works of the French. The Piedmontese, on the other hand, were looking for steady support against the aggressive neighbour as well as the Spanish army.

To this end, some marriage proposals began to take shape at the beginning of the seventeenth century. First, Duke Charles Emmanuel I of Savoy wanted to marry his son, the Prince of Piedmont, to James I's eldest daughter, Elizabeth Stuart. The English king considered the proposal carefully, although some apparently insurmountable obstacles pushed Elizabeth towards Frederick V of the Palatinate.

The second hypothesis concerned Mary of Savoy, the duke's daughter, and the English sovereign's son, Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales. On this occasion, too, several problems arose, among which the Duke of Savoy's scarcity of money and the premature death of the Prince of Wales which put an end to all negotiations. However, in the words of English historian Roy Strong, "[i]f Henry had not died on 6 November 1612, he would have married a daughter of Charles Emmanuel, Duke of Savoy" (in Pennini 2013, 287).[4]

Nonetheless, the English court never stopped supporting the Savoy. Initially, although with little success, Charles Emmanuel I asked the English king to intercede with the Protestant courts of northern Europe so as to allow the Savoy Duke to regain Geneva, which had escaped the Savoyard control in 1602, and had remained Charles Emmanuel's dream ever since. What England especially cared for was containing the Spanish expansionism

[3] On Emmanuel Philibert's reign and politics, consult Merlin (1995) and Moriondo (2007).

[4] See Cognasso (1999, 369–94) and Kleinman (1975) for an in-depth study of Charles Emmanuel I's reign and politics.

across Italy. For this purpose, James I did not refuse to give the Duchy the necessary financial help during the First War of the Montferrat Succession. The latter was part of the Thirty Years' War in which the Savoyards got themselves involved with the aim of taking the region of the Montferrat, previously occupied by the Spaniards. They only partially succeeded—only at the end of the Second War of the Montferrat in 1631 did the Duke's army regain a part of the territories.[5]

The outbreak of the English Civil War, followed by Charles I's execution and Oliver Cromwell's climb to power, led to a halt in the friendship between the English and the Piedmontese. In fact, from 1649 to 1660 the Savoy court in Turin refused to recognise the new republican regime and considered Charles Stuart II the only legitimate sovereign.

The relationships between the governments of the two states reached an all-time low in 1655. In April of that year, the infamous Piedmontese Easter took place—that is to say, a series of massacres on Waldensians carried out by Savoyard troops in the Pellice, Chisone, and Germanasca Valleys. At first, Cromwell offered the Piedmontese Waldensians hospitality in Ireland, from where he had already planned to banish Catholics and Jacobites. Following their refusal, he sent Sir Samuel Morland as a plenipotentiary representative to protest against Charles Emmanuel II, and finally threatened the Duke of Savoy with military intervention. One witness of the massacre of thousands of Waldensian civilians was indeed Samuel Morland, who wrote a historical account entitled *History of the Evangelical Churches in the Valley of Piedmont*. Cromwell's threat had the effect of encouraging the representatives of the main European countries to persuade the Duke of Savoy to sign a peace treaty in August 1655—the so-called Patents of Grace.[6]

Once the Stuarts regained power, relations with the Court of Turin returned to friendly terms. Taking advantage of a period of calm between wars, in September 1669 Duke Charles Emmanuel II of Savoy—Charles Emmanuel I's as well as King of France Henry IV's grandson—drew up a commercial agreement with King Charles II of England. Aiming to revive the commerce in his territories after years of conflict, the Duke granted the British merchants a series of economic advantages and tax reliefs provided that they used the small port of Villefranche-sur-Mer near Nice and within the Savoy territories, thus cutting out the passage through France. However, despite the appointment of an English representative at Nice, the agreement did not achieve the expected results because the Savoyard port was too small

[5] For a detailed analysis of the Thirty Years' War refer to Wilson (2009).

[6] Contino (1953) and Muston (1866) provide throughout studies of the Piedmontese Easter.

and poorly connected with the main commercial routes. For these reasons, the British merchants continued docking their vessels in the ports of Genoa, Leghorn, and Marseille.[7]

In the meantime, a new European war was already looming on the horizon. Like in the recent past, the purpose of the conflict was to restrain the King of France's expansionist policy. Obviously, Savoy alone could not face the armies of Louis XIV, and so it was that, on October 20, 1690, the English Government invited Duke Victor Amadeus II to join the anti-French Grand Alliance alongside the Dutch Republic, the Holy Roman Empire, and Spain. To the surprise of the English, when the conflict was almost finished, and shortly before the Peace of Ryswick of 1697, the Duke of Savoy did an about-turn and moved to the French side in order to get his hands on Pinerolo, which had been previously conquered by the French troops.[8]

As is known, in the first half of the eighteenth century, several conflicts of succession followed one after another—the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), the War of the Polish Succession (1733–8), and the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–8). The Duchy of Savoy as usual stuck to the military giants, every time managing to slip into the most favourable alliance —in other words, the one that could protect the Savoyard territories and possibly allow the House of Savoy to acquire new ones, but never against the English in any case.[9]

The second part of the century was instead marked by the Seven Years' War, which mainly involved French and English fleets, and ended up with the naval and colonial supremacy of the English, as well as the political earthquake generated by the outbreak of the French Revolution that temporarily removed the House of Savoy from its territories.

Also for the English and the Piedmontese, the eighteenth century opened up with a succession issue. In 1688, the Glorious Revolution had overthrown James II of England and led to the conjoint ascension to the throne of Mary II, James's eldest daughter, and her husband William III. Although the Act of Settlement of 1701 excluded King James's Catholic descendants, at the death of William III in 1702 and of Queen Anne in 1714, the House of Savoy was in theory the first in line to the British throne. The Duchess of Savoy, and later queen consort of Sardinia, was at the time Anne Marie d'Orléans. Her mother was Henrietta of England, who was King

[7] On this subject, consult Bulferetti (1953).

[8] On the Savoyard and English involvement in the War of the Grand Alliance see Childs (1991) and Rowlands (2000).

[9] For detailed information on the Anglo-Sardinian relations in the first half of the eighteenth century refer to Venturi (1956) and Black (1983).

Charles II's sister and the youngest daughter of the deposed Charles I. She was then heiress presumptive to the British throne.

Unlike Anne, her husband, the Duke of Savoy and later King of Sardinia, Victor Amadeus II, was not very enthusiastic about the British succession to say the least. Basically, he was afraid to bite off more than he could chew and thus contribute to the subversion of the European balance of power and eventually bring his country to a premature end. Instead, his wife Anne, by means of the Savoy representative in London Annibale Maffei, presented an official claim to the English parliament in order to assert her rights. The parliament officially accepted her claim, although the Savoy succession to the throne ultimately proved unsuccessful mainly due to the British aversion to Catholic rulers. The nearest Protestant relative, George I Hanover, was preferred as monarch.[10]

In the meantime, the death of childless Charles II of Spain in 1700 had seriously threatened to break the European balance of power in favour of the Bourbons of Spain and France. Fearing reprisals from France, at first the Duke of Savoy sided with the Bourbon Alliance; then, the British government once again convinced the Piedmontese to cross over to the Grand Alliance in exchange for substantial military and economic support.

The British government had indeed identified the Duchy of Savoy as a leverage to contain the Bourbons' hegemony over mainland Europe. The Siege and Battle of Turin in 1706 have passed into the annals of local and European history, mainly as a heroic resistance battle fought by the Piedmontese against the French, proving a turning point for the war in Italy. In fact, although the British were not directly involved in the fighting, the break of the siege of Turin and the subsequent decline in the Sun King's firepower were the most important achievements obtained by the British government in the course of the War of the Spanish Succession (Pennini 2013, 289).[11]

After the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, Savoy received Sicily and a part of the territories formerly under the control of the Duke of Milan. When Sicily was exchanged with Sardinia in 1720, the Duchy of Savoy officially became the Kingdom of Sardinia. It was the new royal dignity, together with its domestic political stability and diplomatic shrewdness, which allowed the Kingdom of Sardinia to become the Foreign Office's point of reference in Mediterranean Europe until the Unification of Italy.[12] In this stretch of time,

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[10] On Victor Amadeus II's long reign consult Symcox (1983).

[11] See Gariglio (2005) and Galvano (2005) for an in-depth analysis on the Siege and Battle of Turin in 1706.

[12] A report sent in June 1748 by the Savoy Ambassador in London, Giuseppe Antonio Osorio, to Charles Emmanuel III of Sardinia provided a revealing insight

the Kingdom of Sardinia remained the only Italian state to receive permanent representation in the United Kingdom, while the UK was in turn the first European country to recognise the new Kingdom of Italy in 1861.

During the French Revolutionary Wars, the relationships between England and the Italian states became closer and more direct than before. The Kingdom of Sardinia entered the First Coalition in 1793, while only the Kingdom of Naples took part in the second and third Coalition Wars.

More interestingly, in the nineteenth century a real *Anglomania* broke out in Piedmont, as in other Italian regions. The Industrial Revolution, the wealth of the British Empire, and the stability of its political system brought English culture, language, and literature to the fore. New words describing recent advances and products even entered the Italian vocabulary in their original forms, such as *ferry boat*, *whisky*, and *jersey*, while others were Italianised (e.g. *bilancio*, *locomotiva*, and *coalizione*). In the nineteenth century, English words, either translated or in their original form, also entered Italian via other channels, for example, the success and translation of Walter Scott's historical novels, and the dissemination of the periodical press in the second half of the century (Cartago 1994, 735–6). In 1859, the spread of English in Italy was also encouraged by law, since the *Legge Casati* provided for the teaching of English in secondary schools across the Kingdom of Sardinia.

Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the British Government by means of the Foreign Office had a significant hand in the merging of the Kingdom of Sardinia with the Italian national state. One of the main roles was played by her majesty's representative at Turin, Sir James Hudson, who will be dealt with in chapter eight.[13]

## Choices and Sacrifices

Going back to the choices I made for the present research, at the same time some things had to be sacrificed. For example, at first I thought to write about illustrious Piedmontese characters such as the Count of Cavour

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into the relationships between the two states in this period. After half a century of conflicts, devastation, and diseases, Europe was hopefully heading towards the end of the War of the Austrian Succession. Fearing the outcomes of the forthcoming peace treaty and further invasion, the King of Sardinia, by means of his representative, wished to communicate his worries to the English sovereign, George II. The latter reassured the Savoy Ambassador and King, saying that "there is always England between Her Majesty and all the dangers that may threaten the Kingdom of Sardinia" (in Sclopis 1853, 91).

[13] On this topic see also Greppi and Pagella (2012).

Camillo Benso or Vittorio Alfieri, both of whom had spent a part of their lives in England. I could also have focused on one of the numerous British travellers who passed through or stayed in Piedmont during their Grand Tour. However, on second thought, all these possibilities turned so predictable that I decided to give up my initial choices.

My biggest regret, instead, is that I was not able to find at least one female character to include in my research. I wonder if someone, provided it has not been done yet, will fill such an unforgivable gap in the future.

# CHAPTER ONE

# THE *VERCELLI BOOK*

## A Short Introduction to the Codex Vercellensis

The *Vercelli Book* is a parchment manuscript dating from the second half of the tenth century most probably compiled in a *Scriptorium* in the southeast of England. It is one of the four major texts to survive from the Anglo-Saxon period, the other three being the *Cotton Vitellius*, now located at the British Library, the *Junius XI*, and the *Codex Exoniensis*, held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and in the Cathedral Chapter Library of Exeter, respectively. Together, they represent a unique source of knowledge of tenth-century English literature and language, adding up to ninety percent of all poetic production of the time (Scragg 1973, 189; Del Turco 2017, 6).

The peculiarity of the *Vercelli Book* is that it is the only document to be kept outside of Britain and, on palaeographical grounds, the earliest of the four (Zacher 2007, 175). It includes six verse texts and twenty-three prose homilies, eleven of which are only present in the *Vercelli Book*. The manuscript, also referred to as *Codex Vercellensis*, is currently housed in the Chapter Library of the Cathedral dedicated to Saint Eusebius in Vercelli.

## Probable Years and Place of Production

We cannot tell for certain where the codex was compiled and how it found its way onto the shelves of Vercelli Cathedral's library. According to Treharne and other scholars, it seems likeliest that the book, like the *Codex Exoniensis*, is the result of the early Benedictine Reform era. It is quite certainly of southeastern origin and was probably compiled at Saint Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, it being the only monastic institution in the diocese of Canterbury at the time (Treharne 2007, 253–6).

As for the date of production, most researchers concur that parchment code must have been written sometime in the late tenth century, arguably no later than 975 (Ker 1957, 460; Sisam 1976, 36; Treharne 2007, 255).

The manuscript remained in England until around the first half of the eleventh century. This can be inferred from two Anglo-Saxon inscriptions

added by an early eleventh-century hand: "writ þus" ("write in this way," perhaps an instruction to the copyist themselves) on the left bottom of folio 63v, and "scealan" ("to owe") between line 7 and 8 of folio 99r. Their presence may indicate that the book was still in England at the time.

## An Unreadable Book Arrives in Italy

The approximate time of the manuscript's arrival in Italy is based on similar assumptions. The document was probably in Vercelli towards 1100 because, at the bottom of folio 24v, someone left a line consisting of northern Italian church music dating to the first half of the twelfth century (Zacher 2007, 176).[14] It is an extract from Psalm 26 written in small Carolingian minuscule with a musical notation that is typical of north Italian scribes of the twelfth century (Richard and Quinn 1999, 15).

Once shelved in the Biblioteca Capitolare of Vercelli, the codex remained there practically untouched until the beginning of the seventeenth century. It was then that the protonotary apostolic Giovanni Francesco Leone, while supervising an inventory of the library, spotted the book and catalogued it as a "Liber Gothicus, sive Longobardus" ("Either Gothic or Langobardic book").

In 1748, palaeographer Giuseppe Bianchini was in Vercelli to classify several documents found in the Cathedral's library. When the *Vercelli Book* fell into his hands, he examined it thoroughly, even transcribing a short extract from one of the homilies, but eventually was not able to tell what he was really dealing with. He concluded that the book was a "liber linguae ignotae" ("book written in an unknown language").

The actual identification did not happen until 1822. In that year, German jurist Friedrich Blume, while doing some research on medieval documents in Vercelli, came across the old manuscript and recognised it as a collection of texts in the Anglo-Saxon language. Despite Blume's discovery, the existence of the precious codex remained unknown to most people, and the book itself continued to be labelled as a "Homiliarum liber ignoti idiomatis" ("book of homilies in an unknown idiom"), as can be read on the back of an eighteenth-century binding.

The *Vercelli Book* has only recently come out of its cultural seclusion. In the last few decades, the amount of research and academic writings has progressively increased. Moreover, a few projects aiming to restore the

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[14] Refer to the page devoted to the *Vercelli Book* on the British Library official website: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/vercelli-book.

damaged parts of the document have been attempted, while the whole manuscript has been rigorously digitalised and can now be consulted online.

Accordingly, the *Vercelli Book* has stopped being just an obscure old document collecting dust on a library shelf, but has been put at the centre of several educational initiatives and can be admired by anyone who desires to do so.

## What is Written in the *Vercelli Book*?

What exactly are visitors confronted with once they enter the Biblioteca Capitolare of Vercelli through its shadowy rooms and corridors, soaked with history? Certainly, a thick and extremely old book, though in rather perfect condition despite its age, made up of 136 thin parchment sheets, each measuring circa 31 centimetres by 20 centimetres and containing between 23 and 32 lines of text (Del Turco 2017, 5).

The codex features an original combination of prose and poetry. The poems, which are interspersed between the prose texts, are six in number: *Andreas*, *Fates of the Apostles*, *Soul and Body I*, *Homiletic Fragment I*, *Dream of the Rood*, and *Elene* (Zacher 2007, 176). All the compositions are anonymous with the exception of *The Fates of the Apostles* and *Elene*. Both of these poems feature eight letters arranged to form the name of Cynewulf, possibly the most famous of the twelve poets from the Anglo-Saxon period of those we know, who is considered the author of the compositions.

The longest poem contained in the *Vercelli Book* is *Andreas*, which tells the life of Saint Andrew, portraying him as a warrior fighting the forces of evil, while the most popular composition is undoubtedly *Dream of the Rood*. This is regarded as one of the masterpieces of Anglo-Saxon poetry and survives in two forms, the second of which is abbreviated and carved on the Ruthwell Cross along the Scottish border. *Dream of the Rood*, in which the cross of Christ's martyr describes how Jesus suffered and died, shares with the poem entitled *Elene* the same interest in the cross as an object of devotion. *Elene* is about the discovery of the cross on which Christ was crucified by Roman Empress Helena, the mother of Constantine.

Most texts contained within the collection are written in prose. There are twenty-three of these and, as Zacher points out, are "generally classified according to two main varieties: homilies and hagiographical prose, though … these terms are often misleading and insufficiently descriptive" (2007, 177). For instance, the texts catalogued as numbers XVIII and XXIII, based on the lives of Saint Martin and Saint Guthlac, respectively, despite being typically hagiographic in both language and theme, present certain stylistic features which make them very similar to homilies.

Some of the remaining writings seem to correspond to portions of the temporal cycle, like Homily I, which is supposedly set for Good Friday, Homily III for Lent, and homilies V and VI for Christmas, while others "are usually described as being either catechetical (in their emphasis upon points of general Christian doctrine) or eschatological (in their emphasis upon Judgment Day) or both" (Zacher 2007, 178).

## The Arrangement of the Texts

The organisation of the texts, or the lack of it, has puzzled researchers and academics for years. Although, as we have seen, some compositions can be grouped according to theme, the manuscript as a whole is neither arranged in the order of the liturgical year (like any traditional homiliary) nor by any clear thematic development.

The inclusion of poems and their distribution among homilies complicates things even further as the combination of poetic and prose genres is rare in both Old English and Latin manuscripts. According to Treharne, "[t]he failure of the *Vercelli Book* to meet the generic compliance of a book of religious prose … has resulted, in many respects, in the relative isolation of the manuscript as a whole" (2007, 260). Other scholars and researches have reached similar conclusions over the years (Scragg 1973, 190; Zacher 2007, 180).

## Author and Copyist

There is little doubt that the *Vercelli Book* is the production of one scribe, who must have worked on it over an extended period of time. Possibly due to the latter reason, the size of the scribe's writing varies noticeably at different points, particularly towards the end of the volume where the lineation changes as well (Scragg 1973, 189).

Since copying errors are fairly frequent throughout the manuscript (such as the repetition of Homily II in the second part of Homily XXI), and the meaning of some passages is barely discernible, it has been argued that the scribe may not have been particularly interested in what they were doing. They have also been "labelled as a mechanical and unintelligent copyist, described as engaged in 'slavish copying'" (Treharne 2007, 257). It seems likeliest, then, that the scribe or compiler was writing under someone else's direction, someone willing to gather religious prose and poetry together so as to make a precious collection of devotional materials and prayers (Del Turco 2017, 5).

It is not clear, however, whether the text was a private object or intended to serve a public function. These hypotheses do not necessarily rule each other out. As suggested by Treharne, providing that the manuscript was committed and used by a distinguished user (such as a priest or abbot of a monastery), it may have been read in public within the abbey and later absorbed by the monastic institution itself. From this perspective, it is plausible that the codex represents the result of "spiritual and pastoral impulse emerging from a major monastery in the early years of the Reform movement, possibly under the influence of a leading figure of that movement" (2007, 265).

What is certain is that the "collection was not planned in its entirety before execution began, and the explanation for the confused order of items, with overlaps in content, is that a number of different exemplars were used for the material" (Scragg 1973, 205). At least three exemplars have been established for the *Vercelli Book* material: a late West Saxon collection, a southeastern homiliary from the second half of the tenth century, a Mercian homiliary of an unknown date, and probably more than two other sources for certain compositions of the manuscript.

Consequently, an interesting feature of the book is its variety of linguistic forms, such West Saxon alongside Mercian forms (recognisable in *Elene* and in Homily XXIII, the latter consecrated to the life of St Guthlac, hailing from Mercia) as well as Kentish varieties (Scragg 1973, 205).

## The Author's (or Copyist's) Handwriting

The *Vercelli Book* was penned in script form conventionally described as *Anglo-Saxon square minuscule*. Since around 700, the most widely practised handwritten form in England was the Insular minuscule, which entered its square phase during the tenth century. The Anglo-Saxon square minuscule was a kind of writing that resulted in the squaring of the characters and particularly in the simplification of the typographical ligatures typical of the Insular minuscule (Olivieri 2014, 523).

The introduction of the square minuscule was part of a reforming wave that, starting from the last part of ninth century, concerned the ecclesiastical institutions in England, although this script form was specifically used in the southern part of the country (Olivieri 2014, 526–7).

## How did the Book End up in Vercelli? Three Hypotheses

The most fascinating and mysterious aspect of the book concerns its presence in Vercelli: why did it end up in this apparently obscure Italian centre, and who took it there?

It must be kept in mind that Vercelli was instead an important stopping point on the pilgrimage route (known in Italy as Via Francigena) from Northern Europe to Rome or the Holy Land. In the Middle Ages there were several institutions in town where pilgrims could stay and take shelter, including the hospital of Saint Brigid or of the Scots (*degli Scoti* in Italian), which was particularly favoured by English travellers.[15]

The hospital and the annexed church of Saint Brigid (the second patron saint of Ireland, whose people were mostly known in Europe as Scots) were situated a few steps from the Cathedral of Saint Eusebio (by which they were both managed) where the Palazzo Berzetti di Murazzano can nowadays be admired. Although the exact year of the foundation of the hospital is not known, it was certainly established before 1140 (Mandelli 1857, 322). The founder was a certain Bonfiglio, the treasurer of the Cathedral of Saint Eusebio. During the fourteenth century, the hospital ran into economic difficulties and for this reason was united with the Ospedale Maggiore of Sant'Andrea, originally founded by Guala Bicchieri.

As for the second part of the question, no one really knows who brought the manuscript to Vercelli. The most accredited theory is that a high-ranking traveller from the north, such as a bishop or a cardinal, may have donated it to the Cathedral of Saint Eusebio while staying in, or passing through, the city. Books were at the time far rarer and more precious objects than they are now; besides, the tradition of donating manuscripts to churches had long been established by the time the book was left in Vercelli, and it was thus common for prelates to travel with manuscripts to aid them in their daily devotions.[16]

Several English archbishops visited Vercelli in the eleventh century, including Aelfheah in 1007, Lyfing in 1018, Aethenoth in 1022, and Eadsige in 1040. However, the attention of historians has mainly focused on Sigeric, who was Archbishop of Canterbury from 989 or 990 to his death in 994. He was formerly a monk of Glastonbury, and was then elected abbot of St Augustine's Abbey—that is to say, the same cathedral city where the *Vercelli Book* might have been compiled.

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[15] Refer to Ferrari (2001) for an in-depth study of the hospital of Saint Brigid in Vercelli.

[16] For further information, consult the section devoted to the *Vercelli Book* on the Museo del Duomo website: http://tesorodelduomovc.it/vercelli-book.

Fig. 1-1. Former Ospedale Maggiore of Sant'Andrea, Vercelli.
Photo: Andrea Raimondi.

According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Sigeric left Canterbury for Rome in 990 to receive his *pallium*, which is a liturgical vestment worn by high prelates belonging the Roman Catholic Church. Since around the ninth century, an archbishop like Sigeric was not allowed to exercise his functions until he had received the *pallium* directly from the pope. Therefore, once consecrated, the prelate had to leave for Italy (Giles 1914, 87). Sigeric used the Via Francigena to and on his way back from Rome, and during his return journey, or possibly once he had returned to England, he wrote a diary, known as *Itinerary of Archbishop Sigeric*, covering his route and all his stops on the return journey (Ortenberg 1990, 197). Vercelli corresponds to the forty-third stop, and here Sigeric may have left a precious gift for the hospitality received.

Another person who may have been responsible for bringing the manuscript to Vercelli is Bishop Leone. This high prelate was originally from Germany, where he was born around 965. He became Archbishop of Vercelli in 998 and a protégé of the German emperors, for whom he worked vigorously for the extension of their authority in Italy—particularly against Arduin of Ivrea, leader of the opposition to Otto III and claimant to the Italian crown after the emperor's death (De Gregori 1819, 210–11).

The archbishop was not only a prominent figure in the European politics of the time, but also a highly cultured man. He owned a large number of books, many of which were gifts from monasteries of northern Europe, and glossed several manuscripts now kept in the Biblioteca Capitolare of Vercelli.[17]

Moreover, he commissioned the building of the monumental crucifix for the Cathedral of Saint Eusebio as a symbol of the rising power of his diocese.[18] Before being appointed archbishop and moving to Vercelli, Leone lived at the Ottonian court. He was made an archdeacon and worked as an official for the imperial chancery. Around the year 1000 he even became *logothete*, a title corresponding with the emperor's highest-ranking advisor.

In return for his work for the imperial court, the bishop obtained important concessions for the diocese of Vercelli, which at the time peaked in power and wealth. When Otto III passed away, his successor Henry II wanted Leone as his advisor. Leone followed him and made his culture and legal skills available over the course of several councils held in Italy between 1021 and 1022.

It was during his journeys following the emperor through Europe and Italy that the bibliophile bishop had the opportunity to enrich the Chapter Library of Vercelli, as well as the imperial libraries, by means of the acquisition of several manuscripts. Was the *Vercelli Book* among these manuscripts?

A third possible donor may have been Ulf, Bishop Emeritus of Dorchester from around 1050 to 1052. He was one of Edward the Confessor's most unpopular Norman bishops since he was repeatedly accused of laxity in his clerical duties.

The scandal of Ulf and his misbehaviour was soon heard about by the papal authorities, and for this reason, when an ecclesiastical council was held in Vercelli in 1050 to discuss church reforms, the Bishop of Dorchester was cited to appear.[19]

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[17] Archbishop Leone was also the author of different writings as well as several epistles. Only a few of his writings have survived. Among them are an elegy written for his predecessor at Vercelli, Pietro, who was assassinated by Arduin's hired killers, some Latin verse encomium praising Otto III and Pope Gregory V, and an Adonic poem known as *Metrum Leonis*. For more information on Leone's writings see Gavinelli (2001) and Gamberini (2002).

[18] Consult Lomartire (2016) for an updated and technical study of the crucifix.

[19] More information on the Council of Vercelli can be found in Capellino (1989) and (2010).

According to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Ulf went to Vercelli and "well nigh would they have broken his staff, if he had not given very great gifts; because he knew not how to do his duty so well as he should" (Giles 1914, 118). He was then able to return to England with his pastoral staff unbroken and keep his Bishopric as well, but "at the cost of a lavish expenditure of treasure" (Herben Jr. 1935, 94).

It is not unlikely that, among the "very great gifts" Ulf had to surrender, there was the Vercelli Codex. Such a manuscript represented a splendid example of an English work of the period and would have been considered as a handsome present, too. As mentioned, the codex contains a poem devoted to Saint Andrew, who was locally held in high esteem, and for this reason deemed particularly appropriate (Herben Jr. 1935, 94).[20]

## Digitalisation and Restoration Attempts

As mentioned, the *Vercelli Book* has been at the centre of several projects in the last couple of decades. First of all, in 2001 a group of researchers led by Roberto Rosselli Del Turco, professor of Germanic Philology and Old English language and literature at the University of Turin, started the digitisation process of the manuscript, aiming at creating a digital version. Thanks to the economic support of regional public funds, the pages of the book were individually scanned at the highest resolution available, encoded, and eventually uploaded to a website that is currently online and available for everyone to study (Del Turco 2017, 5–7).[21]

At the same time, some attempts to restore the corrupted pages of the manuscript have been made. Particularly, the first page as well as fragments of others are completely ruined because of the application of some chemical reagents in the nineteenth century that eventually made most words unreadable. Then, of course, water, the passing of time, and the thinness of the parchment have made the reading of some areas even more problematic.[22]

The first attempt to virtually restore the damaged parts dates back to April 2010, when the National Library of Turin provided a multi-spectral scanner apparently able to read the deleted parts. The attempt eventually failed, however (Del Turco 2017, 9).

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[20] On this possibility see the introduction of Förster (1913). Also consult Lastella (1993).

[21] The second beta version of the digital *Vercelli Book* was launched in 2016. It can be consulted at the following address: http://vbd.humnet.unipi.it.

[22] For more on the ruined parts and the first attempts to restore them, see Del Turco (2017, 9–16).

With the same aim, the Lazarus Project started in spring 2013, a collaboration between researchers of the University of Mississippi and the University of Rochester. By conjointly applying transmissive lights from below and multispectral lights from above with multiple filters, the research team were able to recover some illegible text, although the front page and other parts damaged in the nineteenth century remained unreadable.[23]

Alongside this project, new non-invasive technologies have also been attempted by the CenISCo Laboratory (University of Eastern Piedmont) and the BAM Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing in Berlin to perform a chemical analysis of the manuscript and further improve its readability.[24]

More recently, the *Vercelli Book* and three other ancient manuscripts kept in the same library have undergone minor restoration works carried out by Bottega Fagnola, a Turinese workshop specialising in restoring old books. The works have concerned the bindings and containers in which the manuscripts are stored.

## Old, But Still Alive and Kicking

Several activities pivoting around the book have also been organised in order to make the codex known to as many people as possible. Since 2010, philology workshops and cultural trips have been taking place in Vercelli every year, bringing students from the universities of Oxford and Göttingen.

Following these encounters, in 2012 a collection of essays penned by Oxford University students was published. Actually, the essays centred around the so-called "small *Vercelli Book*," a prayer book kept by the Chapter Library of Vercelli and also known as *Codex CCXXV*. It was most likely made in a Yorkshire scriptorium in the fifteen century, and contains prayers and homilies written in Middle English**.**

A more recent event called "Readings from the *Vercelli Book*" has also sprung from the previous research activities. During these public meetings, taking place inside the Cathedral of Saint Eusebio, professors and researchers Winfried Rudolf (from the Georg-August-Universität of Göttingen), Susan Irvine, and Rebecca Hardie (from University College London) read out passages and stories taken from the *Vercelli Book*. What is extraordinary is that the readings are performed in the original Old English idiom.

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[23] More information is available at the Lazarus Project website: http://www.lazarusprojectimaging.com/previous-projects/vercelli-book-project.

[24] Consult the British Library website on this topic at the following address: https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/vercelli-book.

On Saturday September 29, 2018, an exhibition and lecture entitled "Bye-bye *Vercelli Book*" was organised by the Chapter Library of Vercelli. The choice of the title is explained by that fact that this was the last event before the *Vercelli Book* would temporary return to England. In fact, in October 2018 the codex was brought back to where it had come from for the first time in almost one thousand years. The *Vercelli Book*, together with other manuscripts and precious objects from medieval England, will be on display at the British Library until February 2019 on the occasion of an exhibition called "Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: Art, Word, War."[25]

The book is supposed to come back to Vercelli in spring 2019 when it and other manuscripts from around the same era will be at the centre of a thematic exhibition entitled "Il *Vercelli Book* non l'ha portato Guala Bicchieri" ("Guala Bicchieri did not bring the *Vercelli Book*"). The exhibition, scheduled for March 9, 2019, will represent a good opportunity to debunk one of the myths surrounding the *Vercelli Book*, according to which Guala Bicchieri, a Cardinal born in Vercelli, was supposed to have brought the manuscript back with him from England where he had been papal legate from 1216 to 1218. Though this has been proved as incorrect, it is still deemed to be true by many.

In order to celebrate the *Vercelli Book*'s homecoming as well the eight hundredth anniversary since the first stone of the Basilica of Sant'Andrea was laid, an exceptional event is going to take place in the same months: the exhibition of Hereford Cathedral's copy of the 1217 *Magna Carta* at the former Saint Marcus Church, Vercelli. One of the four revised copies of the charter still in existence will be on display for the first time in Italy.

[25] A thematic page on the exhibition can be consulted at the following address: https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2017/11/anglo-saxon-kingdoms-exhibition-to-open-in-2018.html.