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*Liber incantuum laboreriorum et reparationum
civitatis Cumarum (1426-1436)*

Overview allegato al n° 9 di **PAYSAGE TOPSCAPE**
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A landmark in the process of the reconstruction of the city of Como

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«... durarono ancor per molto tempo i danni dalle guerre qui <a Como> cagionati, trovandosene la trista rimembranza in diversi decreti e rescritti del duca Filippo Maria <Visconti>. In essi noi scorgiamo case diroccate o incendiate nella città e nei sobborghi, principalmente in quello di Vico, come pure in varie terre del distretto comasco, la popolazione assai diminuita e in alcuni luoghi quasi annichilita, abbruciate o disperse le scritture degli archivi pubblici e privati e le abbreviature dei notai»¹. With these words, Giuseppe Rovelli, author of *Storia di Como*, described the damage suffered by the city over more than ten years of heavy contrasts. Between 1403 and 1416², political and administrative turmoils reduced the area of Como's district, finally causing it to gravitate in the orbit of Visconti's duchy³.

Peace returned with Filippo Maria Visconti. He became Como's lord and provided a transfer of land properties to Loterio Rusca and his descendants. The lands, given through the method of feoffment, covered the whole valleys of Lugano and Riva San Vitale and Balerna's parishes, including Mendrisio, Morcote and Capolago⁴, of Chiavenna⁵ with its mountain passes and Olonio's lands at the entrance of the Valtellina territories⁶. This situation reduced the jurisdiction of Como's mayor over the feuded territories dramatically and weakened the financial ties of the peripheral lands with the city so much that almost destroyed them. Besides, in the region of Sottoceneri, it favoured the moment when the Swiss occupied those very lands, about a century later, once they entered the Upper Ticino's valley and Bellinzona⁷. Even the places around the lake⁸, the valley of Intelvi and Como's background towards the plain of Milan, already at the time of Gian Galeazzo Visconti covered by feelings of independence against the city of Como⁹, could not escape the climate of these years.

Como, «infelice patria manomessa con ogni crudeltà»¹⁰, came out deeply scarred by these years of fightings. The fightings shook the institutions and also marked negatively the economic and social life, causing material damage and compromising the already weak feeling of belonging to

¹ Rovelli, 1794, pp. 73-74.

² «A die .xvii. iunii .M^oCCCC^oIII. quo die guerra sumpsit initium usque ad diem undecimam mensis septembris .MCCCC^oXVI.» (*Statuta civitatis et episcopatus Cumarum*, 2008).

³ To compare the history of Como to the wider Italian context: *La crisi degli ordinamenti comunali*, 1979; Varanini, 1988, pp. 693-724; *Origini dello Stato*, 1994.

⁴ Schaefer, 1954, pp. 317-376.

⁵ Prosdocimi, 1939, pp. 19-20.

⁶ Prosdocimi, 1939, p. 21; Fattarelli, 1986; Della Misericordia, 2006.

⁷ Pometta, 1928.

⁸ Rovelli, 1794, p. 43; Prosdocimi, 1939, p. 22.

⁹ Prosdocimi, 1939, p. 23 ; Grillo, 1995; Mascetti, 2002.

¹⁰ Tatti, 1663.



the vast territory of Como's *episcopatus/districtus*¹¹ for all of the inhabitants, especially the faraway ones.

The gloomy picture sketched by Rovelli and Tatti's words poignantly lingers on what symbolizes collective identity: the architectural structures, on one hand, and the documents preserved in the archives, on the other, destroyed and dispersed. Fires set to records, assaults to walls and the demolition of the defensive structures and gates of the city are classic *topoi* which connect the fate suffered by the city of Como with many other cities whose stories can be read in the chronicles and documentary records¹² of this period which was strongly characterized by numerous civil and politician tensions¹³.

If the attempt to destroy Como's district had its most definite and ferocious realization in the violation of the symbols - monuments and documents - of Visconti's rule, when the peace was restored, these very symbols formed the basis of the hard return to the order and the restoration of the power over the city¹⁴.

The *Liber incantum laboreriorum et reparationum civitatis Cumarum*, kept at the State Archives of Como¹⁵, documents all this. It is the preferred source, and so far not only unpublished, but also only partially examined¹⁶, for the study of the stages which led to the physical and symbolic reconstruction of the city¹⁷.

A unique *liber* in many ways. First of all, because historians of architecture and landscape can rarely rely on sources which are so meticulous, detailed and specifically designed to preserve the memory and, at the same time, illustrate the different steps and various protagonists involved in such important achievements in the construction field. Secondly, because the records written in the *liber* are the only evidence that is contemporary with the making of artefacts no longer preserved nowadays: in fact, they enable us to trace their forms, conditions and functions, identify the roles of the people involved in various ways in the execution (mainly customers and craftsmen), know the tools and the materials used, follow the evolution of individual structures within the city limits. In the end, a unique *liber* because the intent of unity and advertising that have guided its conception allows, and at the same time imposes, a careful analysis not only about the historical and architectural information it contains, but also a study about the times and ways of its genesis and conservation.

¹¹ Rovelli wrote: «sconvolto ogni ordine, rovesciati i regolamenti, squarciato inoltre e diviso fra diversi padroni il territorio comasco, non solamente la giurisdizione giudiziaria, ma ancora la territoriale e politica della nostra città soffrì molti danni» (Rovelli, 1794).

¹² About the *damnatio memorie*: Bartoli Langeli, 1988, p. 12; Lodolini, 2001, p. 110; Varanini, 2007; Leverotti, 2008.

¹³ *Guelfi e ghibellini*, 2005.

¹⁴ To compare Como to other realities: Soldi Rondini, 1984, pp. 85-98; Covini, 1986, pp. 39-54; Andenna, 1994, pp. 369-393; Grillo, 2001, pp. 56-65; Grohmann, 2005, pp. 109-135; Della Misericordia, 2006, pp. 341-352.

¹⁵ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72.

¹⁶ References to the *liber* only in Gianoncelli, 1974-1975, pp. 211-242; no mention in Rovelli, 1794, pp. 73-120; Rodi, 1974; Gianoncelli e Della Torre, 1984; Della Torre, 1993, pp. 64-66; *Como e la sua storia*, 1994.

¹⁷ During the fourteenth century, the fortifications of the citadel were an option widely practiced by unstable and precarious urban rule (Covini, 2009, pp. 47-65): Como was one of the first walled cities built by Visconti, connected to the mighty castle of Torre Rotonda, which had been built by Rusconi at the end of the thirteenth century (Gianoncelli, 1974-1975, pp. 211-242).



The liber

As it is declared in the title page, in an ordered notarial cursive of the fifteenth century that vaguely echoes elements of chancellery in the first line: *Ecce liber incantum laboreriorum et reparationum civitatis Cumarum, et cetera, inceptus die lune vigesimo sexto augusti .MCCCC^o. vigesimo sexto, quarta inditione, tempore regiminis spectabilis domini Raynaldi de Regnis, potestatis, et egregii viri domini Luchini de Conago, referendarii civitatis et districtus Cumarum, et cetera*¹⁸.

It is a *liber* on which we find recorded the minutes of auction regarding the work to be performed and awarded to the highest bidder for the repairs to the fortified structures destroyed during the fights above mentioned or the new construction of other defensive buildings inside the walls. The unusual decision to arrange the text of the auctions in a manuscript *ad hoc specialiter inceptus* gives these agreements a dignity of their own and also gives them the possibility to be recognizable compared to the typological varied mass of the municipal resolutions that pile up in the records of the town councils¹⁹.

The manuscript has a total of 144 sheets of paper, 34 of which are not written, all in good condition. The records contained cover the span of a decade (1426-1436), called *tempore floride pacis*²⁰, within which there is a fairly even distribution of the minutes concerning the start of 44 building sites.

The text of the auction of each initiative is recorded, introduced by *Ecce est incantus laboreriorum et reparationum necessario fiendorum in ...*, often preceded by the date set in the middle top margin. The preamble goes on mentioning the buyers: *incantus infrascriptorum laboreriorum et reparationum fiendorum in castro Turris Rotonde Cumarum, qui fit et fieri intenditur per spectabilem et egregios viros dominos Raynaldum de Regnis potestatem et Luchinum de Conago referendarium civitatis et districtus Cumarum in exequutione litterarum dominorum magistrorum ducalium intratarum super hoc emanatarum*.

Then, the text identifies the funds on which the expenses must insist; then it lists the deadlines, tools and materials, described in detail in a sort of tender document, to be used in order to realize defensive works²¹.

¹⁸ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 2r.

¹⁹ In fact, these records reflect the continuous trend of political and social life by accepting one after the other, in chronological order, the minutes of decisions taken within the public meetings (Della Misericordia, 2009, pp. 155-278). So, these documents are rigid in the shape and, at the same time, messy because of the occasional frequency of the meetings - except for the renewal of the organs of government - and because of the promiscuity of the general and circumstantial decisions (Schaefer, 1954, pp. 269-302).

²⁰ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 37r.

²¹ For example: «Infrascriptus est incantus laborerii fiendi in ... et cetera; laboreria sunt hec et reparationes et cetera. In primis pro custodia una reparanda in dicto castro prope Turrim Quadram respitientem versus civitatem pro hostiis et balchonis seu mantellis et pro aliis reparationibus fiendis ut sotii possint in ea dormire, pro quibus omnibus necessaria sunt brachia et assidum laricis vel circa et pro una lectera una parva in dicta custodia. Item necessarii sunt libras .VII. clavorum a .XLa. vel circa. Item parva tria axarum pro hostiis et balchonis. Item necessaria sunt brachia .v. assidum petii vel circa. Item pro magisterio dicti operis. Item pro reparationibus alterius guardete supra portam et pontes per quos itur in civitatem qui sunt etiam prope Turrim Quadram et pro una lectera parva in ipsa guardeta, pro quibus sunt necessaria ligna duo laricis vel castanee de longitudine brachiorum .IIIlor. et largitudine de spana et somessedo vel circa. Item necessaria sunt brachia .XII. assidum laricis vel circa. Item sunt necessarii libras .VIII. clavorum a .XLa. vel circa. Item pro magisterio dicti operis. Item paria axarum pro hostiis et balchonis. Item sunt necessarii passoni .XIII. longitudinis de brachiis .V. pro quolibet passono. Item sunt necessaria brachia .CXX. staziarum vel circa. Item libras .II. clavorum a .XXti. vel circa. Item pro reparationibus alterius guardete existentis supra portam et pontes respitientem in citadella prope Turrem Totondam; item pro una lectera parva in dicta guardeta pro

Then, the *abocatio* follows the auction: it is a list of the names of those who express an interest to get the execution of works. Among these contractors, the most recurrent names are: *Petrolus* named *Breginus de Bregia*, *magister a lignamine et a muro*, *Iohannolus de Latio*, *magister a lignamine et a muro*, and *Abondiotus de Quarsano*, *magister et inzignerius a lignamine*, who participated in different projects in the city and in the tower named Baradello²². There are quite a few cases of contractors who, in case they got the contract, delegated its execution to other professionals. For example, the restoration of the castle of Torre Rotonda entrusted to the notary *Luchinus dela Porta*, who appointed *Petrolus* named *Breginus de Brega* as his guarantor, principal debtor and sub-contractor the execution of the project²³.

After the *abocatio*, the document records the assignment of the work to the *magister* or contractor who made the best offer and undertook to complete the task *in solidum*, which means as it was required. Finally, when the job was completed, the *cancellarii* of Como went on site and, in the presence of a public officer and a technician appointed as experts to verify the correct execution of the project, wrote the *laudatio laborerii* in which they stated that everything had been done according to the auction, *iuxta formam dicti incantus*.

The *laboreria*

Como's citadel, the center of the defense system built by Azzone Visconti in 1335²⁴, included the area facing the presbytery of the cathedral²⁵, the *palatium potestatis*, the common *forum* and Saint James' Church with the surrounding block²⁶. This space became the archetype of Visconti's authoritarian urbanism against which the factional struggles of the early fifteenth century were unleashed. They also aimed to regain the violated spaces, restore the broken links because of the barriers and the obstacles and recover full freedom of movement within the city.

In 1426, once the order had been restored, the new fortifications ordered by Filippo Maria Visconti split the urban space again, by partitioning the city and creating new separate areas. This was meant to physically divide the factions and protect those who supported the lords from Milan.

The weight that these new structures or the restored ones had within the area bounded by the wall, testifies itself the primary function of maintaining public order in a city that records always defined as treacherous, suspicious and hostile to the rule governors from Milan.

The walls and, more generally, the defences were concrete proof of Visconti's power, but at the same time they revealed weakness and fear towards further riots that could oust them from the city again.

Therefore, the *laboreria* documented by the *liber incantum* were first of all measures dictated by political reasons. In fact, if between the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century, in many urban areas the paradigm of despotism was attenuated and the fortifications lost a lot of reasons to exist, in Como or in Bergamo, Brescia and Verona, all centers that were difficult to govern and defend, the Viscontis continued to intervene in the dynamics of urban development subtracting new areas to the *cives* and inserting other defensive structures in a citadel already in itself not so picturesque,

quibus sunt necessaria brachia .VIII. assidum Iaricis vel circa» (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 3v-4r).

²² State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 10v-12r.

²³ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 4r-5v.

²⁴ Covini, 2009, p. 47.

²⁵ Concerning the position of the wall around the cathedral: Gianoncelli, 1974-1975, pp. 218-220.

²⁶ Rovelli, 1794, pp. 1-2; Gianoncelli, 1974-1975, pp. 211-242.



with towers and battlements, moats and drawbridges. While in Milan and Pavia the values and the characteristics of the residential magnificence were gradually adding to the deterrent and oppressive intents, creating less temporary building solutions, in Como, instead, Visconti increased the measures aimed to better connect the enclosures and allow them to move safely from one area of the fortress to another and also along the walls. They ordered to build new *corritoria* and *ballatoria* and restore the existing ones (in 1426²⁷, 1430²⁸ and 1431²⁹).

To give new shape to these protected areas, repair them, but also largely build them *ex novo*, there were numerous auctions that generated uncoordinated sites: a proliferation of decisions which is difficult to settle into a unique vision.

Because of the political and military intents above mentioned, the first and most important works were located around Porta Nuova and Porta Torre and the Castle of Torre Rotonda. This castle was a structure placed in a strategic position at the southern end of the walls: inside there was the Visconti's military command.

During the following years, Visconti's control over the fortified town lessened and started initiatives outside the urban area. New projects started in the other forts of Como's defensive system: since 1426, in the castle of Baradello, standing on a rock in the South of the city, projects were started *pro fatiando unum focorale in solario ubi est coquina castellani*, in order to repair a downpipe causing flooding on the floor³⁰, restore *de novo forti et dupplo* the access door to the storage of munitions³¹ and rebuild the embattled *qui est super turrem ipsius castri Baradelli qui minatur ruynam super parete qui respiciet supra hostium ipsius turris*³². Other works of defense involved Oleggio³³ and Chiavenna³⁴'s castles and there were also a lot of measures related to water: in Como it was important to repair a house on the lake shore³⁵, *plantare et figere columpnas septem*

²⁷ «Item pro reparando unam guardetam copertam plotis super curratorio, pro quod itur ab ipso castro ad castrum porte Nove, pro qua sunt necessaria quarta pars unius centenarii plotarum, brachia .V. assidum pezii, brachia.III. assidum laricis grossorum ad computum solidos .X. Imperialium pro brachio vel circa»; appena più sotto «Item pro lignis duobus castani vel laricis grossis ... pro faciando unum curratorium supra pontem et planchetam per quod curratorium itur ad curratorium muri civilis ubi est brolium dicti castri» State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 8v.

²⁸ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 77r.

²⁹ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 81.

³⁰ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 11r-v.

³¹ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 24r-v.

³² State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 62r-v. Since 1435 there were other projects in Baradello (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 120v-123v and cc. 135v-136r).

³³ «Hic est incantus infrascriptorum laborerorum et reparationum fiendorum ad pallificatam turris Olegii episcopatus Cumarum» (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 50r-v) and also «Incantus laborerii palificate turris Olegii fiendo simplici modo» (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 62r-v).

³⁴ «Hic est incantus laborerorum et reparatiuonum fiendorum in castro Clavenne et ad turrin prope ipsum castrum et circa ipsum castrum et turrin», 1431 (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 88r-89v); «Hic est incantus infrascriptorum laborerorum et reparationum necessario fiendorum in castro Clavenne episcopatus Cumarum ... in primis ad aptandum et denuo reparandum omnia corritoria circumcirca dicti castri et primo ad corritorium de versus burgum Clavenne aptando», 1435 november 21 (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 130r).

³⁵ «Hic est incantus infrascriptorum laborerorum et reparationum fiendorum in citadela Cumarum pro quadam domo dudum destructa necessario reparanda et coperienda ... respiciens versus orientem et burgum Crugnole, etiam in maiori longitudine quam non sit modo fundata et hoc pro conservando ducali navigio in dicta citadela nuper constructo» (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, c. 37r).

*roboris*³⁶ to secure the pier, and also the bridge to the bishop's residence had to be accommodated with six axes of oak or chestnut³⁷. Other activities began *prope darsinam ducalis navigii ibidem repositi et etiam prope toresinum in lacu fundatum apte respicienti versus Crugnola ac etiam versus lacum*³⁸ and in Lecco³⁹ as well *pro alveo Abdue expatiando et ad provisionem fiendam pro obviando inundationi et excrescentie lacus Cumarum lacus Cumarum que tot damna iam priori tempore civitati et terris episcopatus Cumarum ac reparie Bellani et partium illarum diocesis Mediolani rutulit*⁴⁰.

In conclusion, the *laboreria* recorded in the *Liber incantuum* were dictated by political and defensive reasons: they took away more space to *cives* and got the dual purpose of preventing riots and control the city. So, the importance of this manuscript lies, of course, in the possibility of investigating the dynamics of the landscape-cultural mosaic in transition, discovering the ways, the times and the protagonists of the projects (*magistri a muro et a lignamine, inzegneri*, contractors etc.). Moreover, it was important to note that even before the elements of content, even before the monuments it describes, the *liber* is a *document/monument*⁴¹. It reveals the firm will to communicate each and every step of the new urban planning and ensure its memory through the written language.

A reconstruction of the image of power that, even before developing into the implementation of the architecture, is performed with wise and calibrated self-communication through a *liber ad hoc spetialiter inceptus*. A solution that suggests, and perhaps even requires, to rethink the history of *laboreriorum et reparationum civitatis Cumarum* right from the history of the *liber* which was the landmark in their achievement.

³⁶ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 94r-v.

³⁷ «In nomine Domini, amen. hic est incantus infrascriptorum laboreriorum et reparationum fiendorum in citadella Cumarum ad pontem respicientem versus episcopalem domum... » (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 35r-36v).

³⁸ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 142v-144r.

³⁹ «Hic est incantus laboreriorum et reparatiuonum fiendorum super pontem Leuci in primis pro preparando super ipsum pontem videlicet ad aptandum capsam pontis qui est versus montem Barrum», 1433 July 20 (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 96r-v).

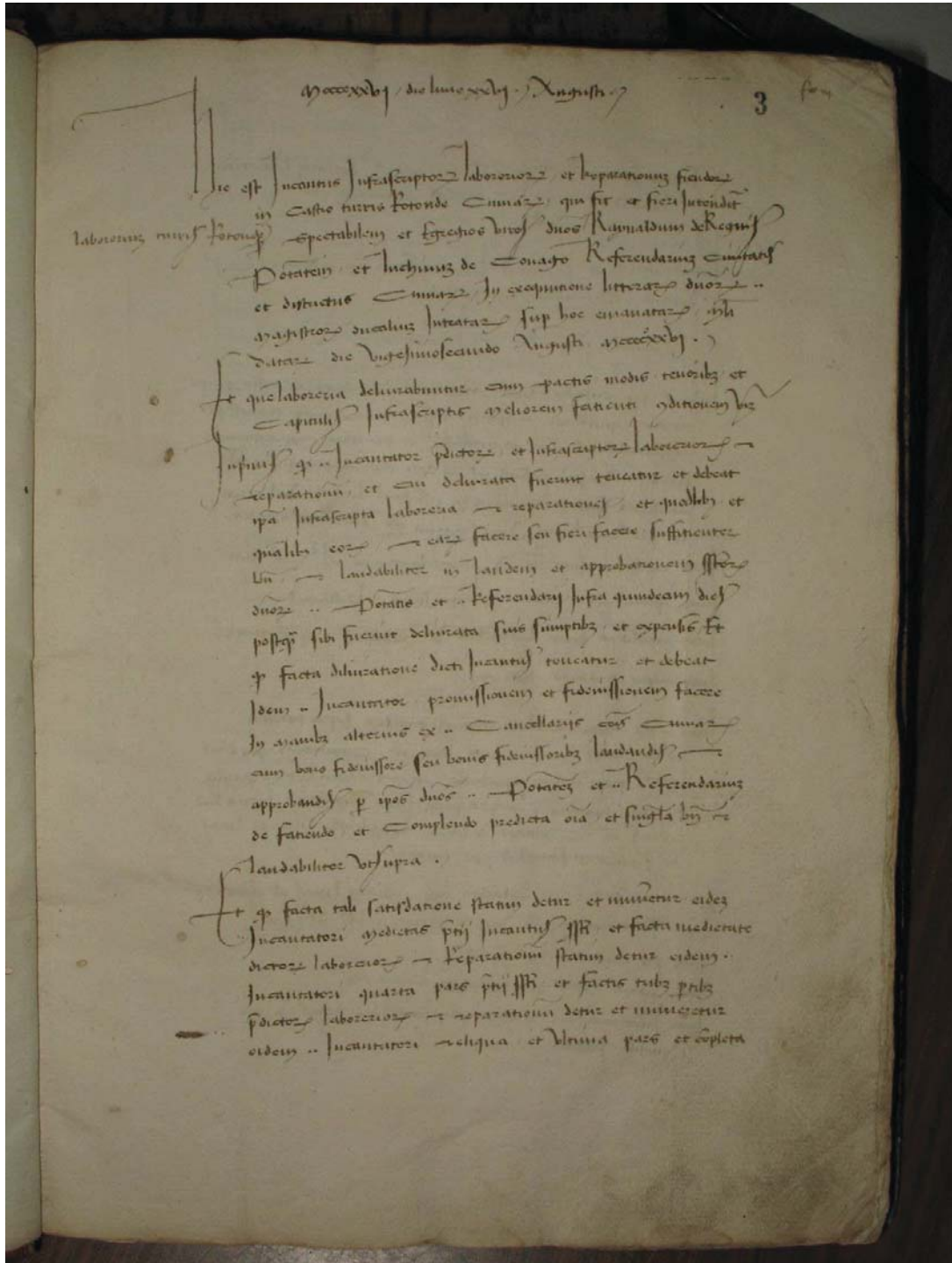
⁴⁰ State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 107v-108; other works for the same bridge (State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, *Volumina*, 72, cc. 137r-138v).

⁴¹ Le Goff, 1978.



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State Archives of Como, Municipal Archives, Volumina, 72, c. 3r.

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Modified image from Googlemap. Red line: Como's Citadel.

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