

Inequality in the Early Middle Ages:

Distribution of Wealth and Societal Changes in Lombard Northern Italy

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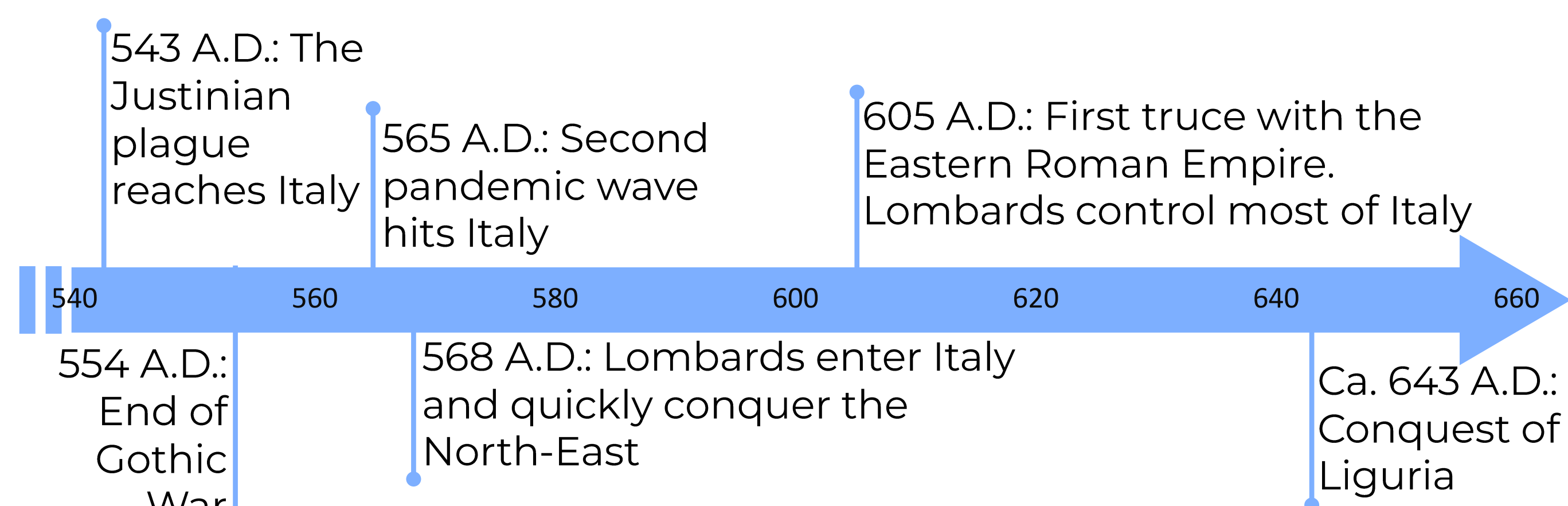
Motivation:

The Roman Empire is thought to be characterized by high levels of inequality (Cfr. Alfani, G., Bolla, & Scheidel, 2025; Scheidel & Friesen, 2009), which is believed to have declined substantially after its collapse (Scheidel, 2017).

There is no empirical study that mapped inequality decline in the post-roman world of the Early Middle Ages. This paper studies inequality in a community of 7th century northern Italy

Background:

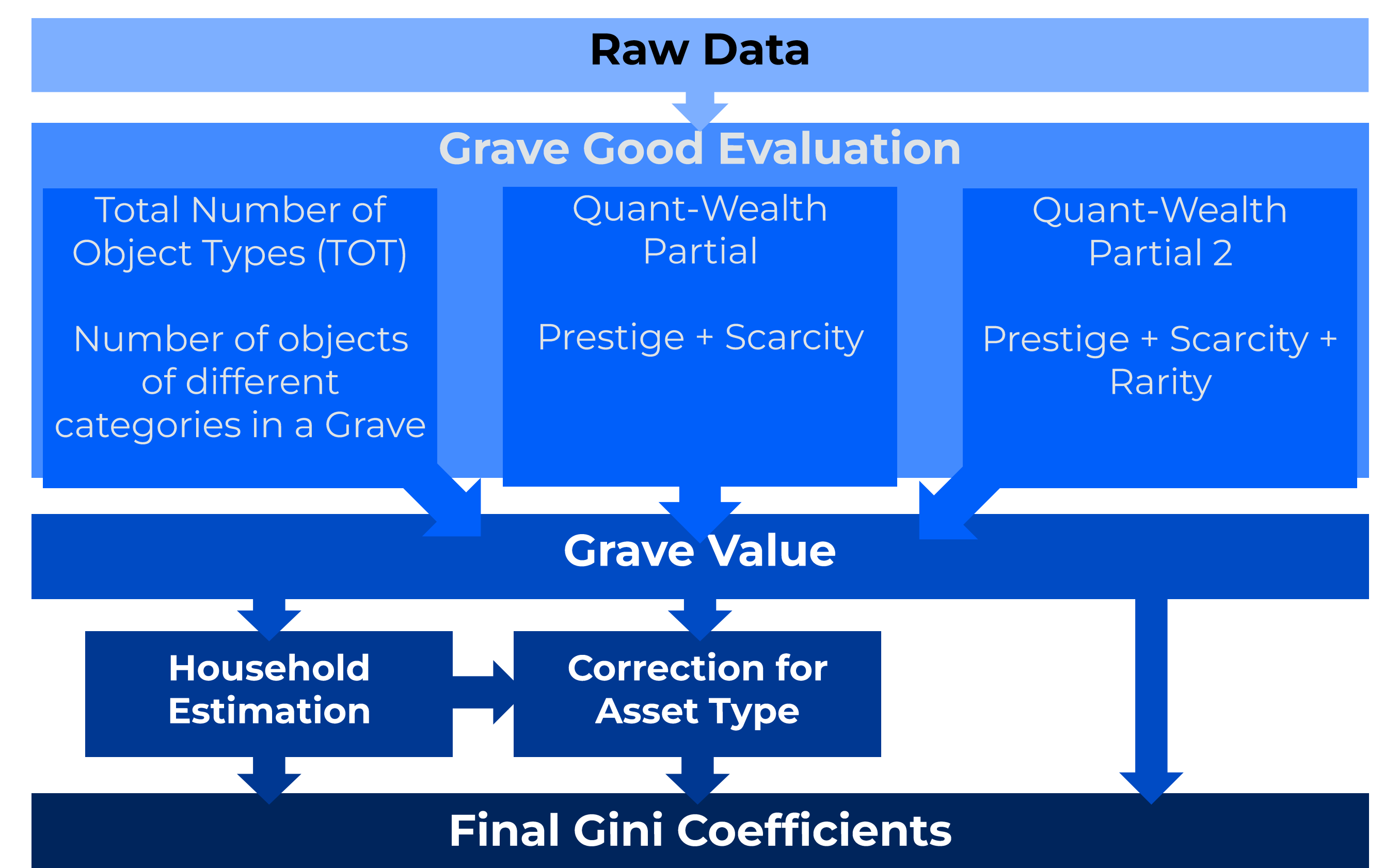
Economic situation: Italy in the 6th and 7th century witnessed significant demographic, political and economic changes. (Cfr. Barbiera & Dalla-Zuanna, 2009)



Society: Lombard society required all free men to be armed and to serve in the army, which offered opportunities for personal and family advancement. By the late 7th century, fewer men could afford to serve. Military organization shifted toward retinues led by local magnates, who became the backbone of the army (Fabbro, 2020; Halsall, 2008)

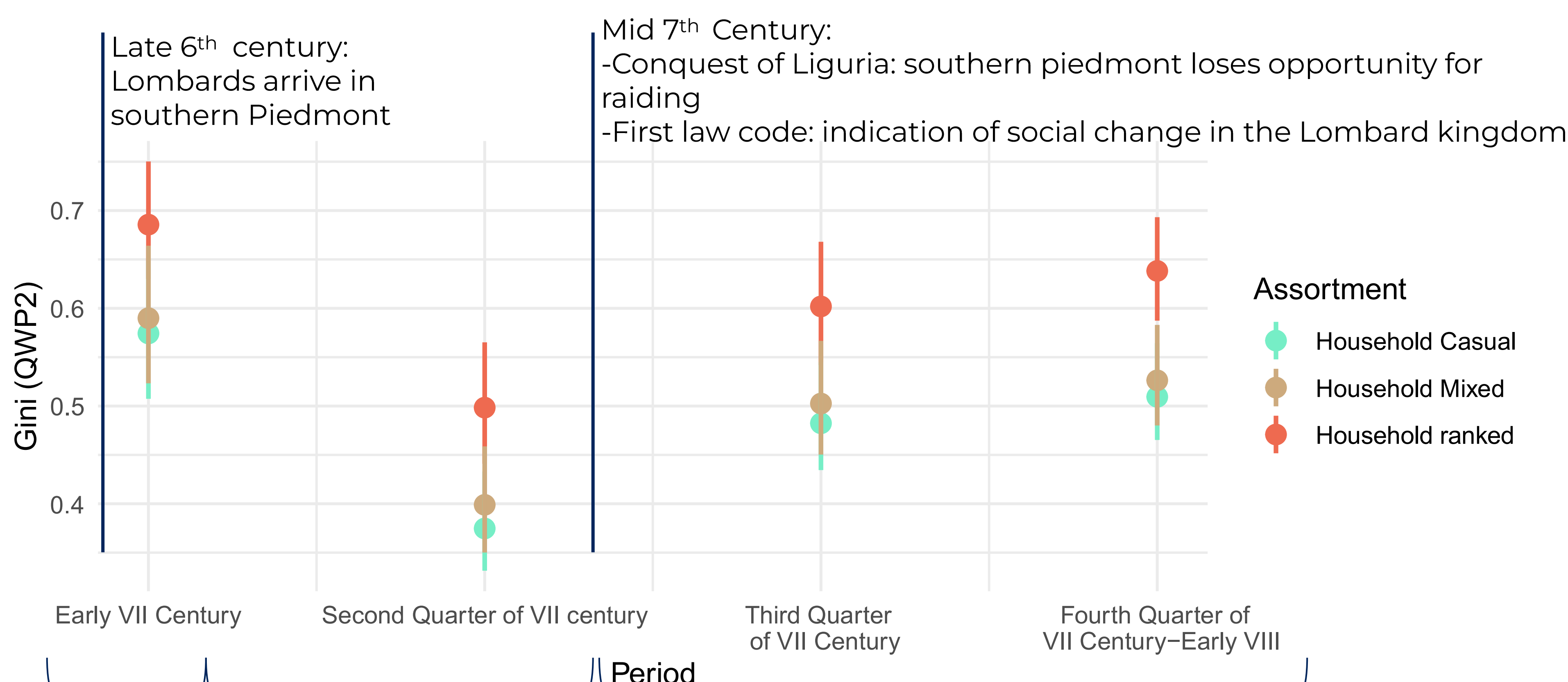
Methodology:

We use grave goods from a large Lombard necropolis from Piedmont (Italy) as proxy for wealth to reconstruct Gini Indexes using the following procedure:



Results:

We find a U-Shaped Trend in Inequality over the course of the century:



1st phase: After the arrival of Lombards, inequality is still high. Roman institutions still persist

2nd phase: End of the Roman fiscal system. Land is abundant and raiding opportunities plenty. Inequality declines.

3rd phase: raiding opportunities decline. Decline of universal military duty and rise of military magnates

Example of a grave:



Credit: Museo Civico di Cuneo

Conclusions:

- Roman Inequality Persisted:** In the late 6th and early 7th centuries, inequality in post-Roman northern Italy remained relatively high, likely due to the lingering influence of Roman fiscal structures.
- Temporary decline:** Inequality then dropped sharply, possibly because abundant land and profitable raiding opportunities allowed more egalitarian wealth accumulation.
- New Elites:** While the law forbidden the use of private thugs to settle private issues, local strongmen became increasingly important as time went on. Their ability to readily provide troops for the rulers made them essential as impoverishment of most freemen reduced the effectiveness of universal military duty. They thus could leverage their military importance to build up highly extractive networks without repercussions from above.

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