CHAPTER 1

Barons and Castellans in the Mid-Fifteenth Century

Historians writing about the society of medieval and Renaissance Italy have usually focused on towns and cities. Even those writing about rural society often concentrate on the district governed by a particular town. Bankers, merchants, lawyers, are generally seen as constituting the most characteristic Italian social and political elites. The landed nobility – not civic nobilities buying land, but noble clans with fortresses and men who fought for them, for whom soldiering, not trade or the law, was the natural choice of career – has often been disregarded.

In recent years, studies of individual clans – such as the Rossi of Emilia, the Savorgnan of Friuli, the Fieschi of Liguria, the Orsini and Colonna of the Papal States – have begun to go some way in restoring them to their rightful place in the history of the regions. Yet this will be the first comparative study of the military nobility – the signori di castelli, lords of castles, as they were known – to encompass the length of Renaissance Italy. Its foundation is comparison of the major families of three regions in particular, Liguria, the provinces of the Papal States around Rome, and the kingdom of Naples. Alongside them figure families from elsewhere in Italy, from Friuli to Sicily, who feature in their own right, and not just to provide context for the military nobility of those three regions. The period covered is from one watershed in Italian history, the mid-fifteenth century, to another, the end of the Italian Wars in the mid-sixteenth century.

The middle of the fifteenth century is a good vantage point from which to make an introductory survey of the role of barons and lords of castles in different regions of Renaissance Italy, their place in political society and their military resources. In two of the major states, new dynasties were bedding in. Francesco Sforza, the great mercenary captain, made himself duke of Milan in 1450 by force of arms. In Naples, Alfonso V of Aragon had won for himself recognition as king, and was based there rather than in his Spanish or Sicilian dominions. In the Papal States, after a long period of absence followed by decades of schism, the papacy was becoming firmly re-established in Rome, and the popes were beginning to assert control over their temporal dominions. All three states were strongholds of the military nobility, who had to decide how to deal with these changes. The conclusion in early 1455 of an Italian league reaffirmed the new standing of these three rulers, and recast relations between all the Italian states, providing a structure for the settlement of disputes by
concerted diplomacy, or concerted military action if diplomacy failed. This new system also affected the military nobility, circumscribing their freedom of action in some ways, opening up new opportunities in others.

The barons and castellans of each region of Italy in the mid-fifteenth century, moulded by their homeland’s distinct political and physical geography, had their own particular characteristics, many of which would persist until the middle of the next century and beyond. Like dogs, whose diverse breeds are able to recognize they belong to the same species, a great Neapolitan baron ruling vast estates with thousands of subjects might have been able to recognize some affinity with a noble from the northern Apennines, hanging on to a fraction of the lordship of a single castle perched on a crag – but they would have about as much in common as a Great Dane and a chihuahua.

Fragmentation was the key feature of the landscape of the military nobility of Liguria. Much of the region was under the control of their clans. The passes and valleys through the Apennine mountains that loom above the narrow strips of plain along the coast were peppered with their fortresses. Many of the inhabitants were their tenants or subjects, or both. Their partisans disputed control of the coastal towns: clans such as the Doria and Spinola had greater influence over some of these communities than did the government of the republic of Genoa. Not all the territory in Liguria was under the dominion of Genoa, even nominally. There were a considerable number of Imperial fiefs, relics of periods when the Holy Roman Emperors had directly ruled much of northern Italy. At this period, their connections to the Empire were so tenuous that they were, to all intents and purposes, independent statelets. Some Ligurian nobles held lands in neighbouring states – the duchies of Milan or Savoy, or the marquisate of Monferrato – for which they recognized the lordship of the princes. Nobles might also place themselves and other lands they held outside the dominion of these princes under their formal protection. It would have been impossible to draw clear and uncontested state boundaries in Liguria: the complex and uncertain political geography of the region gave landed nobles considerable room to manoeuvre, and to behave as more or less independent political agents.

By the mid-fifteenth century, the Ligurian noble clans were long-established. Over the generations, each tended to split into several branches, a process encouraged by the prevailing inheritance custom of the division of lands in equal shares among male heirs. In some families, one branch became markedly more powerful, or at least more prominent, than the others, although this would not necessarily make them the recognized leaders of the clan as a whole. Among the Fieschi, one branch, the Fieschi di Torriglia, carried much the greatest political and military weight. Their wide estates in the mountains to the north