Barons in the City

Traditionally, the landed, military nobility of medieval and Renaissance Italy was seen by historians as standing apart from urban and civic life – as disruptive, oppressive forces that had to be kept out, controlled and repressed if the urban economy and civic society and culture were to flourish. Many local studies of Italian towns and cities are now presenting a rather different picture, one of members of the landed nobility – lords of castles, not just families of the civic elite who had become landowners – having an influential, sometimes dominant voice in the affairs of Italian urban communities. In some cases, the question arises whether, rather than urban communities taming the landed nobility of the surrounding countryside, it would not be nearer the mark to think of the landed nobility controlling the town. It would be an exaggeration to suggest this was the general pattern, and it is far from being established as the new prevailing paradigm. In fact, it is no great exaggeration to say that general interpretations of the relations between the landed nobility and the city in Renaissance Italy still tend to start from Machiavelli’s condemnation of ‘gentlemen ... who live idly on their revenues’ as being ‘pernicious in every republic and every province’, with those who also ‘have castles at their command, and subjects who obey them’ being more pernicious still. Because the kingdom of Naples, the lands around Rome, the Romagna and Lombardy were full of such men, Machiavelli argued, there had never been any republic or ‘vivere politico’ (fully-fledged civic government) in those regions, because ‘these kinds of men are wholly enemies to all civic life (civiltà)’.¹

This line of interpretation has long held sway among historians of southern Italy, preoccupied with explaining the problem of the Mezzogiorno: why for so long the region has been poorer and more “backward” than the rest of Italy. For the period from the late thirteenth to the sixteenth century (when the blame could begin to be laid on the Spanish) the favoured explanation has been the dominance of the barons – who have been regarded as hostile to towns just as they were hostile to the monarchy, or to anything that might curb their power or conflict with their interests. Southern Italy was poor and backward because there was no strong local bourgeoisie that could have allied with the monarchy against the barons. That towns were natural allies of the crown against the

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, Discorsi sopra la prima Deca di Tito Livio, Book 1, Chap. 55.
landed nobility is an idea familiar from the historiography of much of medi-
eval Europe, although not one that still prevails, at least in such a stark form.

The role of the military nobility in the development of the communes in
medieval Italy is one of the most debated aspects of Italian urban history.
In broad outline, the long-standing picture could be described like this.

With the revival of trade in the eleventh and twelfth centuries came the re-
vival of towns, most notably in northern and central Italy. Townsmen took on
the government of their own communities, establishing communes, and com-
munal governments asserted their control over the surrounding countryside.
Towns grew and prospered in part through conquering and taming the landed
nobility around them. Some rural nobles migrated into the towns, often being
compelled to live there by the communal governments for at least part of the
year, so they could be more effectively controlled. But they brought with them
their violent ways, their feuds with other families, their contests for power.
They built imposing houses, with lofty towers that could be used for defence,
as a refuge during fighting and as visible symbols of the family’s power and
prestige.

In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the political and judicial
institutions of the communes developed and changed in efforts to contain the
threat to public order from unruly nobles. The citizens, notably merchants and
tradesmen, coalesced into associations generically known as the *popolo*, the
people. The institutions of the *popolo* attained increasing prominence in
the government of the city, and formed militias which could take on the vio-
lent noble clans. The fortified houses of the nobles, with the tall towers asso-
ciated with them, could be demolished if their owners caused too much
trouble; sometimes the towers were just cut down to size, so that they no longer
stood high above the rooftops, as symbols of noble power. In many towns,
there was legislation against the “magnates”, directed against those powerful
clans who vied for dominance and disdained the *popolo*; their exclusion from
government curbed their political influence. In some urban communities,
however, particularly in Lombardy and the Romagna, the nobles were either
not repressed or they contained the challenge of the *popolo*, and they contin-
ued to be a disruptive presence. Unable to break their power, the *popolo* in
these communities acquiesced in the rise of *signori*, lords – sometimes known
as *tyranni*, despots – surrendering the possibility of being their own political
masters in the hope of greater security and public order.

Challenges to various aspects of this classic picture have been gathering im-
petus over the last thirty years or so. The economic basis of the revival of

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2 Philip Jones, *The Italian City-State from Commune to Signoria* (Oxford, 1997), brings together
evidence and arguments from a myriad of studies; for the nobility in particular, see Renato