Part Three

From Ancien Régime to Bourgeois Society: France
a. The Development of ‘Feudal’ Power Relations

a. The rule of the aristocracy

a.1. Princes and knights

In the mid-eleventh century, according to Duby, a new concept appears in written texts, that of castellania, literally ‘castle rule’.\(^1\) This description marked the acceptance of a condition that a few decades earlier (and in some regions still a few decades later) was criticised as a mauvaise coutume, an encroachment on customary ‘right’.\(^2\) It signalled the beginning of a new form of rule that would be decisive for several centuries to come, that of seigneurie banale.

Until quite recently, these developments were depicted chiefly as the result of a de facto dissolution of royal rule: from the end of the ninth century, supposedly, ‘magnates’ had appropriated their power of office as a hereditary possession, initially on the borders of the West Frankish empire, setting themselves up as lords over (other) counts in their region and thus establishing regular territorial principalities. Subsequently, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, many counts and viscounts managed to gain autonomy in relation to these princes, by successively

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\(^1\) Duby 1991, p. 56.
\(^2\) Poly and Bournazel 1980, pp. 94–5.