Chapter IV

Taking Root in Local Society: Recruiting the Nobility and Relations with Ecclesiastical and Communal Institutions

1. Relations with the nobility

The earliest records of the Templar presence in North-west Italy reveal that the Order began recruiting from the local aristocracy right from the start. In Milan, in 1149, there were two members of the noble Grassi and Cancellieri families amongst the brethren of the Templar house.¹ Also, the likelihood that the affiliate Giselberto, son of Giselberto di Attone, attested to in Bergamo in 1145, may have been a member of the important Colleoni family,² further implies that the local ruling class reacted positively to the establishment of the Templars in the city.

Above all, however, it was the Piedmont aristocracy that was well disposed to Military Orders, not only because of the relationship that some of the families had with the Latin East, but also because of a conscious attempt on their part to affirm their status by associating with these new organisations, as the possibilities of doing this were very restricted by the development of the communes.

Of interest here is the Biandrate family³ who were amongst the first patrons of Templar expansion in the Lombardy area. During the

twelfth and thirteenth centuries this family had been quite active in the East and had participated in a number of crusades. Guido and Alberto di Biandrate, followed by the younger Ottone, had been military commanders in the unsuccessful Lombard expedition of 1100–1101 and, after suffering a defeat in Anatolia, reached the Holy Land and were militarily active for a few years in the service of the king of Jerusalem. More or less equally ill-fated was Guido, Alberto’s son, in the Second Crusade. The Biandrates were, nevertheless, also involved in the Fourth Crusade, which attracted numerous recruits from Lombardy. After the death of Boniface I of Montferrat (1207), participation in this crusade guaranteed Oberto II di Biandrate the regency of the kingdom of Thessalonika. This episode, too, was destined to end badly and in 1214 Oberto returned to the West. The Biandrate family’s involvement in the East had basically been a result of their desire to avoid the pressure that was being applied on them by the Lombard communes which was undermining their influence.

The links they had formed with Outremer imply that the family must have known about the Templars from at least the time of the Second Crusade. In 1148, in fact, William V of Montferrat (d. c.1191) and Guido di Biandrate were present in Acre along with the other main crusaders and the Templar and Hospitaller Grand Masters. A little less than twenty years later the very same Guido, together with his sons, donated all the family’s possessions in Ruspaglia and San Gior- gio Canavese to the Temple. The confirmation of this legacy, which appears only in the unpublished chronicle of Benvenuto di San Giorgio, De origine gentilium suorum et rerum successibus, is here dated 1174. The indiction stated in this document is wrong, though, and actually cor-


5 Haberstumpf, Dinastie, pp. 161–162.


7 Haberstumpf, Dinastie, pp. 174–175.


9 Turin, Biblioteca Reale, Storia patria 530, Benvenuto di San Giorgio, De origine gentilium suorum et rerum successibus, fols. 32v–33r.