CHAPTER TEN

THE PROFESSION OF ARMS AND THE NOBILITY IN SPANISH ITALY: SOME CONSIDERATIONS*

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This essay will present a consideration of the relationship between the profession of arms and the Italian nobility during the age that saw first the affirmation and decline of Charles V’s imperial ambitions, then the consolidation of the Catholic Monarchy of the Spanish Habsburgs in the age of Philip II. I shall add some reflections on the seventeenth-century phase of the settlement, crisis, and stagnation of Spanish power in Italy, focusing on military careers among the Milanese patriciate. I shall exclude the eighteenth century, although it is good to keep in mind that for the Italian nobility as a whole, and in particular for nobles in provincial areas that had been part of the Catholic Monarchy, the death of Charles II in 1700 by no means signified either the eclipse of the Habsburgs (given that the Austrian Habsburgs succeeded the Spanish Habsburgs, bringing new dreams of empire) or the end of all relations with Madrid and the Bourbon dynasty that took over the Spanish throne.1

* Translated by Lydia G. Cochrane.

Before, During, and After the Italian Wars

Before examining the effects of Habsburg hegemony in nearly the entire Italian Peninsula and the adjacent islands (with the partial exception of the Venetian Republic) on the military role of the nobility, a preliminary question arises: Is it accurate to speak of the concept of the Italian nobility in terms of a unique, homogeneous group, or should we take into account regional differences among the nobility?

This problem is central to the famous dialogue on nobility of the Florentine humanist Poggio Bracciolini, written around 1440. After noting the leading theories and practices among the various nationes of Italy (Neapolitans, Venetians, Romans, Florentines, Genoese, and Lombards), Bracciolini arrives at the conclusion that there was no consensus on qualifications for ennoblement. Indeed, there were clear, if not irreconcilable, differences, particularly in regard to involvement in commerce, participation in civic responsibilities, the use of the weapons of war (but also of the hunt), and a preference for living in the country or in the city. Thanks to this varietas, the two participants in the dialogue, the humanist Niccolò Niccoli and Lorenzo de’ Medici (the brother of Cosimo II Vecchio) reach opposing conclusions. Niccolò Niccoli, although not concealing his predilection for Florence, where nobility was defined by the ability to boast of ancestors who had filled major offices in the city’s administration, arrives at a negative opinion of the very existence of any such phenomenon (“Are we not forced to admit that, since nobility is revered on such disparate grounds, there is no sure definition in all this to guide us?”). Lorenzo de’ Medici, on the other hand, justifies the undeniable difference of opinion regarding nobility by appealing to custom:

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