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# Social Mobility in Medieval Italy (1100-1500)

*edited by*  
*Sandro Carocci and Isabella Lazzarini*

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MARIA ELENA CORTESE

## Rural *Milites* in Central and Northern Italy between Local Elites and Aristocracy (1100-1300)

The focus of this essay will be the rural *milites*, a social group who occupied the highest position within the villages and the fortified settlements known as castles (*castelli*). They were – to give a very loose definition – a group who performed military duties on horseback, were particularly close to the local lords, enjoyed specific juridical and economic privileges, owned estates of widely varying size (though not usually castles) and had access to networks of clients that were active at every level of local society.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not this social stratum belonged to the aristocracy is disputed, and inclusion or exclusion has depended on the choices made by the historians that have discussed this. Reasons of space prevent me from analysing these choices in detail;<sup>2</sup> my personal view is that, despite the extreme variation in the range of their economic resources, the *milites* cannot, as a group, be placed outside the sphere of preeminence, and must be regarded as a lower fringe of the aristocracy. This is true especially if one considers their position from the point of view of those who lived in the same communities as themselves, and if one looks at them through the eyes of those simple *rustici*, to whom undoubtedly their militarised lifestyle and the privileges they enjoyed conferred an aura of aristocratic prestige.<sup>3</sup>

The knights who lived in the countryside of central and northern Italy have not been the object of monographs such as those carried out by Stefano Gasparri and Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur on the urban *militia*, nor do there exist investigations

1. For a general description of the characteristics of this group, see Sandro Carocci, *Signorie di Mezzogiorno. Società rurali, poteri aristocratici e monarchia (XII-XIII secolo)*, Rome, Viella, 2014, pp. 237-251; Jean Pierre Delumeau, *Arezzo. Espace et sociétés, 715-1230*, 2 voll., Rome, École Française de Rome, 1996, pp. 451 and ff.; Alessio Fiore, *Signori e sudditi. Strutture e pratiche del potere signorile in area umbro-marchigiana (secoli XI-XIII)*, Spoleto, CISAM, 2010, pp. 286-292; Hagen Keller, *Signori e vassalli nell'Italia delle città*, Turin, UTET, 1995, pp. 56-67; François Menant, *Campagnes lombardes au Moyen Age. L'économie et la société rurales dans la région de Bergame, de Crémone et de Brescia du X<sup>e</sup> au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Rome, École Française de Rome, 1993, pp. 664-666.

2. Examples of these different positions, relating to the same territory (that of Arezzo), may be found in Chris Wickham, *The Mountains and the City: The Tuscan Apennines in the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, chapter X and in Delumeau, *Arezzo*, pp. 456-461.

3. See Carocci, *Signorie di Mezzogiorno*, pp. 234-235 and Delumeau, *Arezzo*, p. 457.

of a scope comparable to that of Sandro Carocci's work on the *milites* in his study on southern Italy lordships.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the vast majority of research on the rural aristocracy has spotlighted especially the powerful comital families, or at most the castle-holding lords; consequently, information regarding the simple and more modest *milites* must be sought – sometimes it would be more accurate to say unearthed – from within the pages that many historians have devoted to rural societies in more general studies. Usually, little attention has been paid in these studies to economic aspects, which are, of course, crucial to any correct understanding of social mobility.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, a lively discussion on the juridical delimitations of the social hierarchies – and on the concept of nobility – has often brought to consider the question of possible transitions from one social level to another, in particular from the lower to the military and aristocratic groups.

On the basis of these arguments, I will divide this essay into two parts: the first will focus on the permeability of this social tier from below, and on the processes of differentiation within the wider group of the rural elites;<sup>6</sup> the second will examine the upward pull: in other words the aspirations the *milites* entertained of becoming *domini loci*, acquiring portions of castles and formal seigneurial powers.

### 1. *Mobility from below: from rustici to milites*

#### *In the shadow of the lords*

It goes almost without saying that carrying out armed activities on horseback, whether or not within a feudo-vassalic relationship, was one of the busiest ways for upward social mobility. Military activities were largely the province of those who were, at various levels and with various functions, dependent on rural lords.

Within the process of accessing the ranks of the *militia*, especial importance was assigned to service as a squire. This category included armed men on horseback who were differentiated from actual *milites* both by their equipage and by the fact they mounted a rouncey rather than a destrier; usually they assisted a *miles* both in and out of battle. Squires were usually recruited from among the

4. Stefano Gasparri, *I milites cittadini. Studi sulla cavalleria in Italia*, Rome, Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 1992; Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur, *Cavaliere e cittadini. Guerra, conflitti e società nell'Italia comunale*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2004; Carocci, *Signorie di Mezzogiorno*, in particular chapter 6.

5. See Mario Nobili, "Piccola nobiltà di campagna fra autarchia e mercato nei secoli XI-XIII: un modello e una breve ricognizione storiografica", *Quaderni storici*, 123 (2006), pp. 703-727.

6. There has been much historiographic interest in these issues over the last few decades, see Laurent Feller, "L'historiographie des élites rurales", in *L'historiographie des élites dans le haut Moyen Âge*, ed. by Régine Le Jan, Paris, Lamop, 2003 (<http://lamop.univ-paris1.fr/lamop/LAMOP/elites/feller.pdf>); *Les élites rurales dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Jessenne and François Menant, Toulouse, Presses universitaires du Mirail, 2007; *Élites rurales méditerranéennes, V<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècles*, ed. by Christophe Picard, Laurent Feller and Michel Kaplan, *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen Âge*, 124/2 (2012) [<https://mefrm.revues.org/741?lang=it>].

ablest and strongest youths coming from peasant families, and ultimately became clearly separated from the simple *rustici* through military practice on horseback, closeness to the local lord (for whom they often carried out tasks that required trust) as well as through their lifestyle, which bore various similarities to that of the knights.<sup>7</sup>

Research on Piedmont and Veneto has, moreover, demonstrated the wide and capillary distribution of other feudal typologies closely connected with the chivalric military sphere. Those who held these fiefs were engaged in order to supply (though not necessarily personally) the service of one man mounted on a destrier (*feudum equi*), or on a rouncey (*feudum ronzini*) to be used principally as support. Also widespread were other kinds of “rouncey fiefs” or “horse fiefs”, which involved only the upkeep and the delivery of the animal.<sup>8</sup>

Generally, both the *scutiferi* and those who held *feuda equi* or *runcini*, belonged to the elite of rural society and often possessed estates, which, far from being modest, were sometimes well above the norm.<sup>9</sup> In many cases these rustics possessed estates of notable size, sometimes exacting tithes and owning buildings within the *castelli*, and sometimes enjoying certain privileges that were typical of the military stratum (for example the right to freely exploit the woods). Most importantly, they occupied a dominant position within village societies and had for some time adopted a militarised lifestyle that gave rise to great ambiguity from the point of view of their neighbours, as may well be seen in the contradictory nature of the statements regarding them within the judicial records. Here we find figures such as Bonzagnino da Parona, the holder of a prosperous “horse fief”, who in the last quarter of the twelfth century proudly declared that he did not belong to the *masnada* of San Zeno of Verona, held his own against the monastery’s *advocatus*, and was referred to as *dominus* by his sons (one of whom gained access to the rank of notary).<sup>10</sup> Another such case were the brothers Bongiovanni and Ottone, well-off rustics who owned substantial property, including even a church, in different villages. In 1211 a case was opened against them because the bishop of Ivrea considered their fief to be a conditional *de roncino* fief, while they claimed to have held it for a long time *gentiliter*, stating that their ancestors

7. As regards squires, the seminal essay is François Menant, “Gli scudieri (scutiferi), vassalli rurali dell’Italia del Nord nel XII secolo”, in François Menant, *Lombardia feudale. Studi sull’aristocrazia padana nei secoli X-XIII*, Milan, Vita e pensiero, 1992, pp. 277-293.

8. See Alessandro Barbero, “Vassalli nobili e cavalieri fra città e campagna. Un processo nella diocesi di Ivrea all’inizio del Duecento”, *Studi medievali*, 33 (1992), pp. 619-644, and especially Bruno Castiglioni, *L’altro feudalesimo. Vassallaggio, servizio e selezione sociale in area veneta nei secoli XI-XIII*, Venice, Deputazione di storia patria per le Venezie, 2010, which at p. 210 highlights how, out of the 380 feudal relationships counted in Veneto, at least 80 were fiefs that performed horse service.

9. See Castiglioni, *L’altro feudalesimo*, pp. 127, 221, 226, 237-238 and Menant, *Gli scudieri*, pp. 287-288. For Tuscany, see a document that lists the taxes owed to the lord of the castle of Pernina in Valdarno: the four dependents who provided horse services were exempted from paying the rent and two of them held two *mansi* instead of only one like the others (Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Diplomatico, Luco di Mugello*, sec. XII).

10. Castiglioni, *L’altro feudalesimo*, pp. 127-129.

had been noble, and declaring that they were prepared to serve the bishop with weapons and warhorses, that is as actual *milites*.<sup>11</sup>

Research carried out in the Veneto area, in particular regarding the abundant documentation on the vassals of the bishop of Padua in the area of La Saccisica, have furthermore proved that one kind of equestrian service was especially common. This was a collective hereditary investiture, conferred on a number of people – often extended family groups – whose responsibility it was to supply a *miles* equipped to serve as an escort on the occasions when bishops or other important members of the clergy were travelling down to Rome (these were known as *feudi* “*di colmello*”). In some cases those who held these fiefs were exempt from payment of the *fodrum*, probably administered low justice to their dependent farmers, and, according to some sources, were not subject to the direct jurisdiction of the bishop, but to that of the *curia vassallorum*.<sup>12</sup> It therefore appears evident that the men in charge of the escorts to Rome occupied a privileged position in local society, and that they enjoyed privileges very similar to those of the *milites*, like having access to seats of power and attend prestigious meetings. From this group there also came a good number of episcopal administrators (*gastalds*, tithing collectors), as well as representatives of rural communes. All the above-mentioned factors endowed them with particular social importance. On the basis of what is known about the lives of these figures and their families through the first decades of the thirteenth century, one sees how some of them climbed so far up the social ladder as to adopt the title of *domini* and move to the city, where they took on the clear-cut role of urban notables.<sup>13</sup>

In theory, the case of the *masnadiери* was different, since their juridical state limited their freedom and their lords furnished them entirely or in part with weapons and horses.<sup>14</sup> In actual fact, however, many cases show that their closeness to the lords allowed the men of the *masnada* to exert significant influence on the affairs of the signoria, and sometimes even to mingle seamlessly with the lower aristocracy. The case of Ambrogio Grassi is an excellent example. A *masnadiero*

11. Barbero, “Vassalli nobili”.

12. Sante Bortolami, “«Colmellum, colonellum»: realtà sociali e dinamismo territoriale dietro un fossile del vocabolario medievale del Veneto”, in *Istituzioni, società e potere nella Marca Trevigiana e Veronese (secoli XIII-XIV). Sulle tracce di G.B. Verci*, ed. by Gherardo Ortalli and Michael Knapton, Rome, Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 1988, pp. 221-234; Andrea Castagnetti, *Regno, signoria vescovile, arimanni e vassalli nella Saccisica dalla tarda età longobarda all’età comunale*, Verona, Libreria universitaria, 1997; Castiglioni, *L’altro feudalesimo*, pp. 256-304.

13. See the cases of Enrico di Dainisio, of the *da Pigna* and of the descendants of Egidiolo da Curcio: Gerard Rippe, *Padoue et son contado (X<sup>e</sup>-XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle). Société et pouvoirs*, Rome, École Française de Rome, 2003, p. 231 and Castiglioni, *L’altro feudalesimo*, pp. 302-304.

14. For the *masnadiери*: Piero Brancoli Busdraghi, “«Masnada» e «boni homines» come strumento di dominio delle signorie rurali in Toscana (secoli XI-XIII)”, in *Strutture e trasformazioni della signoria rurale nei secoli X-XIII*, ed. by Gherard Dilcher and Cinzio Violante, Bologna, il Mulino, 1996, pp. 287-342; François Menant, “Élites rurales serviles au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: autour d’Ambroise Grassi, homo de maxinata de S. Giulia de Brescia”, in “*Puer Apuliae*”. *Mélanges offerts à Jean-Marie Martin*, ed. by Errico Cuozzo et al., Paris, Centre de recherche d’histoire et civilisation de Bysance - Collège de France, 2009, pp. 185-197; Rippe, *Padoue*, pp. 443-453.

of the monastery of S. Giulia of Brescia, he was gastald and right-hand man to the abess – who put him in charge of delicate missions – and was occasionally referred to by the title of *dominus*.<sup>15</sup> A rich gallery of characters illustrate the situation in Tuscany: Ughetto da Sarna, who started out as a servant at the monastery of S. Fiora in Arezzo, later became a *masnadiero*, and finally a *miles* in the city;<sup>16</sup> Mugnaio da Poppi was a *homo comitis*, who later became a squire and finally a *miles* for the Guidi family;<sup>17</sup> Guglielmo di Faloppa and his sons, well-off rustics who were squires to but also friends of one of their lords, the Siense aristocrat Dono;<sup>18</sup> Grifone da Galiga, a *masnadiero* for the Guidi Counts, whose son Guido was a prosperous landowner in possession of dependant *homines*: in 1231 he swore fealty to the bishop of Florence side by side with the *crème de la crème* of the episcopal clientele.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, within the variegated universe of the men who depended on the *domini loci*, there were numerous people of humble origins who succeeded in accumulating a certain amount of wealth, obtained weapons and horses, adopted a military lifestyle and had brilliant careers as knights. Carrying out military work, in itself, brought new economic incomes: this came, for example, from looting and pillaging and the division of the booty, but also from the waiving of certain obligations or services. This is proved by the tax exemptions enjoyed by the owners of *feuda equi* in Veneto, and it is worthwhile noting that not just the *milites*, but even the simple *masnadierei* were sometimes exonerated from the payment of the taxes that weighed heavily on all other rustics.<sup>20</sup>

In the countryside, therefore, even in areas that were more rigidly subjected to the network of feudal ties (apparently stricter in that they made a clear-cut juridical distinction between *rustici* and *milites*),<sup>21</sup> access to the social group of knights appears to have been in practice relatively simple for those who had initiative and

15. Menant, “Élites rurales” and Menant, *Campagnes*, pp. 697-701 for other similar cases.

16. Giovanni Tabacco, “Nobiltà e potere ad Arezzo in età comunale”, *Studi medievali*, 17 (1976), pp. 41-79 and Delumeau, *Arezzo*, pp. 942-943, 1203-1204.

17. Veronica Bagnai Losacco, *La disputa di Rosano (1203/4-1209)*. Edizione e studio introduttivo dei documenti, Pisa, Pisa University Press 2010, I, n. 18, p. 23.

18. Paolo Cammarosano, *Abbadia a Isola. Un monastero toscano nell'età romanica*. Con un'edizione dei documenti, 953-1215, Castelfiorentino, Società storica della Valdelsa, 1993, pp. 138-148.

19. Bagnai Losacco, *La disputa di Rosano*, n. 56, p. 47; Giovanni Lami, *Sanctae Ecclesiae Florentinae Monumenta*, 3 vols., Florentia, Ex typographio Deiparae ab Angelo salutatae, 1758, II, pp. 911-912 and pp. 925-927; Renzo Nelli, *Signoria ecclesiastica e proprietà cittadina. Monte di Croce tra XIII e XIV secolo*, Pontassieve, Comune di Pontassieve, 1985, pp. 30 and 57.

20. In the oath which the people of Figline swore to the Tuscan League in 1198, both the *milites* and the *masnadierei* were exempt from the payment of 26 *denari* for family: Pietro Santini, *Documenti dell'antica costituzione del Comune di Firenze*, Florence, G.P. Vieusseux, 1895, docs. 23-25. This explains the very high number (as many as 148 out of the 166 who swore the oath) of those who asked to be put down as *masnadierei*: see Johan Plesner, *L'emigrazione dalla campagna alla città libera di Firenze nel XIII secolo*, Florence, Papafava, 1979, pp. 82-83.

21. As is well-known, such rigidity of demarcation has been forcefully argued, especially by Keller, *Signori e vassalli*.

economic independence. This was not unlike what has been observed to have been taking place in contemporary urban societies.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, therefore, the growth in the ranks of the urban *militia* was paralleled by the systematic expansion of the stratum of the rural *milites* who depended on the lords and exerted military functions at various levels. The expansion of both urban and rural militias was clearly fuelled by the increasing conflict between the several actors on the political chessboard of central and southern Italy. In rural areas, moreover, very clear is the pervasive diffusion of violence at the micro-local level. This phenomenon, most visible from the middle of the twelfth century onward, was a crucial tool in the hands of the *signori*, serving both to reinforce the success of their rule and to appropriate resources.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to military service on horseback, the other main route for those seeking social ascent within the lordship was to carry out administrative duties for the lords. Carrying out these duties – for example collecting the *censi* and reparting the *datium* among the peasants, being responsible for the warehouses and the seigneurial mills, organising the services, administering low justice, and so forth – meant receiving a stipend, or a reward and/or a portion of the lord's income, but it also meant exemption from certain dues.<sup>24</sup> All were forms of remuneration that allowed the officials working for the lord to accumulate capital, which could then be invested in the purchase of land or in other activities, and in the acquisition of military equipment. A variety of sources, in fact, make it clear that almost all the officials of the *domini* enjoyed an albeit minimal aura of military affiliation.<sup>25</sup>

There are numerous examples of figures hailing from humble origins – sometimes even from the personal dependency as *servi* – who, between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century, through their careers as officials, acquired estates, both allodial and feudal, from their lords. The wealth and prestige these men achieved was such that they could become part of the highest echelons of their local communities, and sometimes also participate in the feudal *curiae*. They could serve as knights, enjoy certain privileges that normally belonged exclusively to the *milites*, and even adopt the titles of *miles* or *dominus* (for themselves or for their sons), thus blending with the lower ranks of the aristocracy.<sup>26</sup>

22. Maire Vigueur, *Cavalieri e cittadini*.

23. In general see Alessio Fiore, “«Bonus et malus usus». Potere, consenso e coercizione nelle campagne signorili dell'Italia centro-settentrionale (secoli XI-XII)”, *Quaderni storici*, 45 (2010), pp. 501-532. For Tuscany, see Maria Elena Cortese, *L'aristocrazia toscana. Sette secoli (VI-XII)*, Spoleto, CISAM, 2017, chapter VI.

24. Simone M. Collavini, “La condizione giuridica dei rustici/villani nei secoli XI-XII. Alcune considerazioni a partire dalle fonti toscane”, in *La signoria rurale in Italia nel medioevo*, ed. by Cinzio Violante and Maria Luisa Ceccarelli, Pisa, ETS, 2006, pp. 331-384: 380; Simone M. Collavini, “Signoria ed élites rurali (Toscana, 1080-1225 c.)”, in *Élites rurales méditerranéennes*, notes 9-18 and corresponding text.

25. See the argument put forward by Collavini, “Signoria ed élites”, notes 32-35 and corresponding text; for a clear example see the case of Ambrogio Grassi: above, note 15.

26. Brancoli Busdraghi, “Masnada”, pp. 316-317; Dario Canzian, *Oderzo medievale. Castello e territorio*, Trieste, Lint Editoriale, 1995, pp. 30, 53-54, 72-77, 86-100; Castiglioni, *L'altro feudalesimo*, pp. 334-350; Collavini, “La condizione”, pp. 375-377; Collavini, “Signoria ed élites”; Menant, *Campagnes*, p. 700; Rippe, *Padoue*, pp. 200-201.

It is interesting to note that it was not just the better-known administrative roles (such as that of gastald) that could open up these pathways, but also certain specialised crafts – especially that of the blacksmith<sup>27</sup> – or positions in domestic service, such as senechal, cup-bearer and even cellar/pantry master at the court of a lord.<sup>28</sup> One particularly relevant example is the da Costa family, personal cup-bearers and seneschals to the bishop of Vicenza, who from the middle of the thirteenth century onwards served as *milites* in the bishop's army, were entrusted with the honour of leading the bishop's horse in processions through the city, and very probably came to hold a small castle-based lordship.<sup>29</sup>

Generally speaking, as has been observed, the type of social ascent achieved by those working in administrative and domestic services in central and northern Italy is not comparable to that achieved by those working in administrative positions in the Transalpine area.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, there is no doubt that careers opened up within the lordships for *servi* or dependents, which afforded great opportunities to accumulate lands and come into contact with the upper hierarchies of power – both indispensable elements for the social ascent of rustics – but also, as I will now show, to gain access to resources that could be used in economic activities that lay outside the immediate context of the seigneurial lordships.

### *Beyond the lordship*

More or less up to the last quarter of the twelfth century, all the observable processes of rural social mobility pivoted on service to the lords. Change came immediately afterwards, however, when demographic and productive development as well as the growing complexity of the economic context began to offer the rural elites new possibilities for gain and investment. These new opportunities afforded much swifter access to social promotion than had hitherto been possible: the commercialisation of agricultural products (first and foremost grain), artisanal activities, forms of exchange and the practice of credit.

Unfortunately, we do not at present have any clear insight into this change as little scholarly work has been done on its economic aspects and on its relationship with the commercial and monetary economy. There is, for instance, ample evidence of the widespread practice of loans by members of the rural elites, but few actual reconstructions of exemplary stories. We should mention here the family of the blacksmith Giannello, whose son Gianni, in 1204, was owed as much as 270 lire by the abbey of Passignano, and whose grandson Tolosano, in 1233, was referred to as a “noble” knight.<sup>31</sup> Another interesting case are the Scodagata, who were in the

27. To give just one example: Plesner, *L'emigrazione*, pp. 89 ff. on the blacksmith Giannello di Passignano.

28. Rippe, *Padoue*, pp. 200-201: the da Canevaro, cellar-masters to the bishop of Padua. Castiglioni, *L'altro feudalesimo*, pp. 172 ff.: Villanello Scodagata and his sons, who were in charge of transporting wine for the bishop of Padua. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195: the family of Manfredino di Giovanni Bulza.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 194-196.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 350.

31. See above, note 27.

service of the bishop of Padua, performing military functions on horseback, but also in charge of the wine supplies; as a reward for these services they were allowed to keep the wine that remained at the bottom of the barrels (a product that could easily be sold) as well as to cut wood in the bishop's allodial woods, which they could place on the market.<sup>32</sup> Another example are the Della Foresta: they had originally been tenants of the lords of a castle in Valdarno, but later, as they were creditors of the same lords, they became the owners of lands which they had previously held under lease. After setting up a significant allodial estate, they left their place of origin and gradually moved towards Figline, a *borgo* in the Valdarno, which already from the early twelfth century had shown signs of expansion, thanks to a port on the Arno and the existence of a busy road along the river. Here, in 1198, Giovanni di Peruzzo della Foresta was sworn in as *masnaderius* and here in 1249 we find as many as three members of the family – Napoleone, Iacopo and Guido *Francesese* – who are referred to as *domini* and *milites* in the imperial camp of Frederick of Antioch. It is not known how they obtained the title, but Guido's nickname may well point to his involvement in those forms of international commerce that led his family – who by the end of the thirteenth century were already called *Franzese* – to become the favoured bankers and moneylenders to the king of France.<sup>33</sup> The ascent of the *Franzese* family was probably an exceptional success story, but other families of *masnadiere* and *milites* from Figline also gravitated around or lived near the *forum*, where the extraordinarily rapid development of the grain market, especially in the first half of the thirteenth century, furnished them with the means to move into the city and later to enter a more international commercial circuit.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore the new opportunities for social mobility opened up by commerce and credit should not be seen as alternatives to the pathways described above, as the rural elites that developed in the shadow of the lords played a fundamental role in these new scenarios. Furthermore, their activities were in no way different from those of the families belonging to the aristocracy. It is certain, for example, that in the Florentine area numerous members of castle-holding aristocratic families were actively engaged in credit activities, at least to the same extent as the best known families in the city itself.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, it has for some time been clear that adherence to the values of the *militia* in no way excluded participation in other sources of enrichment.<sup>36</sup>

Lastly, the consolidation of the city communes' power over ever wider areas of the countryside, opened up to the members of the rural elites a further and more

32. Castiglioni, *L'altro feudalesimo*, pp. 172-177.

33. Paolo Pirillo, *Famiglia e mobilità sociale nella Toscana medievale. I Franzese della Foresta da Figline Valdarno (secoli XII-XV)*, Florence, Opus Libri, 1992. On the development of Figline: Chris Wickham, "Ecclesiastical Dispute and Lay Community: Figline Valdarno in the Twelfth Century", *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen Âge*, 108 (1996), pp. 7-93.

34. See below.

35. Maria Elena Cortese, "I destini di un gruppo dominante: la media aristocrazia del territorio fiorentino nei secoli XII-XIII?", in *La mobilità sociale nel Medioevo italiano. 4. Cambiamento economico e dinamiche sociali (secoli XII-XV)*, ed. by Simone M. Collavini and Giuseppe Petralia, Rome, Viella, forthcoming.

36. Maire Vigueur, *Cavaliere e cittadini*.



direct channel to access military status: the upkeep of horses and the military service within the communes themselves. This was a well-documented practice in Tuscany as can be seen in the 1223 list of knights in Passignano: in this small castle, in fact, there were five knights, one of whom was defined as a nobleman,<sup>37</sup> while the other four were listed as being in charge of the horses furnished by the comune of Florence. The city, therefore, absorbed into the group of the *milites* those well-off families from the surrounding rural areas who were in a position to maintain a horse. As may be gathered from the personal stories outlined above, this group even included those who did not hail from aristocratic backgrounds, and indeed had been previously in a relationship of personal dependence on local lords. The bond with the commune, moreover, encouraged contacts between these families and Florence, where as a matter of fact, three of the four knights of Passignano moved in the first half of the thirteenth century – a move that marked the beginning of brilliant careers and an active participation in urban political life.<sup>38</sup>

## 2. *The upward mobility of the milites*

### *The knights' sources of income*

What sources of income – in addition to the revenue deriving from the direct management of their lands, from the rents and from the land market – distinguished the *milites* from other rural land owners and notables? What exactly afforded them that “extra chance” both for internal mobility within the group and for attempts to further ascend the social ladder?

In the first place, naturally, must be mentioned all activities connected with war, which in rural contexts appear similar to those activities that have been thoroughly examined in relation to the urban *militia*.<sup>39</sup> The most frequent cases regard compensation for horses and weapons lost in battle (*emendatio*), which could be paid either by the local communities – as at Gambassi, in Valdelsa, where in 1227 the manner of such reimbursements was subjected to precise regulations, evidently drawn up to avoid abuse<sup>40</sup> – or by the local lords, as may be seen in certain examples from Veneto and regarding the *milites* in the service of the barons of Lazio.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, it is precisely the sources concerning the baronial lordships of Lazio that reveal how the supplying of horses and reimbursing their

37. Tolosano, the already mentioned grandson of the blacksmith Giannello; see above notes 27 and 31.

38. Plesner, *L'emigrazione*, pp. 87-103, 133-139.

39. Maire Vigueur, *Cavalieri e cittadini*, chapter 2.

40. Antonella Duccini, *Il castello di Gambassi. Territorio, società, istituzioni (secoli X-XIII)*, Castelfiorentino, Società Storica della Valdelsa, 1998, pp. 163-165.

41. Andrea Castagnetti, “Da Verona a Ravenna per Vicenza, Padova, Trento e Ferrara”, in *La vassallità maggiore del Regno Italico. I «capitanei» nei secoli XI-XII*, ed. by Andrea Castagnetti, Rome, Viella, 2001, pp. 345-491: p. 427; Castiglioni, *L'altro feudalesimo*, p. 251; Sandro Carocci, *Baroni di Roma. Dominazioni signorili e lignaggi aristocratici nel Duecento e nel primo Trecento*, Rome, École Française de Rome, 1993, pp. 248-249, in particular note 6.

loss constituted a heavy financial burden for the lords, so much so that often payment was greatly procrastinated, and special systems were often devised to avoid or curtail payment.

Other traditional sources of income were war booty, ransom for prisoners, and certain stipends and donatives, to finance which the *domini* occasionally levied one-off taxes.<sup>42</sup> Of especial importance, however, seems to have been mercenary activity conducted outside the lord's land; this constituted a potential source of significant wealth,<sup>43</sup> especially when it was on the payroll of urban communes during the period of intercity warfare.<sup>44</sup> Even though there is a shortage of quantitative data, and our understanding of incomes deriving from war-related activities is still far from complete, it may generally be inferred that such incomes were significant, and that they were directly linked to the intense conflicts in central and northern (but not southern) Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>45</sup> To all this should be added the privileges that belonged to the *milites* as repayment for their military service: exemptions from the payment of the *fodrum*, the *colta*, the *focaticum* and the *datium* are all well attested;<sup>46</sup> besides they could enjoy privileged use of common lands (in particular woods) compared to simple *rustici*,<sup>47</sup> or had privileges in the tillage of uncultivated lands.<sup>48</sup>

If we now move on from the more specifically military sphere to the revenues that could derive from sharing with the higher levels of the aristocracy certain forms of power and control over men and lands, we observe that in certain cases could be assigned to *milites* some sources of income that normally appertained

42. On the pay of seigneurial armies, see Fiore, *Signori e sudditi*, pp. 316-317. On war booty, see, for example, Carocci, *Baroni*, p. 248.

43. For data on the payment they received for these services see Fiore, *Signori e sudditi*, pp. 316-317.

44. Examples may be found in Carocci, *Baroni*, p. 249; Silvia Coazzin, *Liberi domini totius castris: l'aristocrazia rurale "minore" nel Senese e nella Toscana meridionale. Forme di egemonia, assetto sociale e patrimoniale di lignaggi, famiglie e gruppi consortili di castello (secc. XI-XIV)*, Doctoral Dissertation in Medieval History, Università degli Studi di Firenze, 2005, pp. 193, 385-388; Simone M. Collavini, "Le basi economiche e materiali della signoria guidinga (1075 c.-1230 c.)", in *La lunga storia di una stirpe comitale. I conti Guidi tra Romagna e Toscana*, ed. by Federico Canaccini, Florence, Olschki, 2009, pp. 315-348: 343; Maire Vigueur, *Cavalieri e cittadini*, pp. 126 ff.

45. For the different situation in southern Italy, see Carocci, *Signorie di mezzogiorno*, p. 250.

46. Renato Bordone, "Relazioni personali e «stratificazione sociale» nel territorio dell'antico comitato di Bredulo: «domini», «milites», «pagenses»", *Bollettino della Società per gli studi storici, archeologici ed artistici della provincia di Cuneo*, 85 (1981), pp. 315-323: 317; Carocci, *Baroni*, p. 251; Collavini, "La condizione", p. 365; Coazzin, *Liberi domini*, pp. 294, 309, 407; Duccini, *Il castello*, pp. 274-277; Fiore, "Bonus et malus", p. 509; Gasparri, *I milites*, pp. 100-101. See also above note 20.

47. Among the many possible examples, see Bordone, "Relazioni personali", p. 317; Castiglioni, *L'altro feudalesimo*, p. 177; Menant, *Campagnes*, p. 282; Mario Nobili, "Per lo studio della «società feudale» lunigianese: «milites», «castellani» e «vasalli» nei secoli XI-XIII", *Archivio storico italiano*, 165 (2007), pp. 423-448; Riccardo Rao, *Comunia. Le risorse collettive nel Piemonte comunale*, Milan, LED Edizioni universitarie, 2008, pp. 160 ff.

48. Menant, *Campagnes*, p. 222.

to the local lords.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, in the case of extremely fragmented lordships, it is extremely difficult to distinguish the *milites*, who held parts of seigniorial rights, from the original and now impoverished *domini castri*, in that they exerted the power of command in condominium with them.<sup>50</sup> In some areas, even the collection of tithes could yield a significant income, that could gather considerable amounts of agricultural products. The importance of tithes was, nevertheless, extremely variable from zone to zone: while they impacted little in the Tuscany of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, they exerted great influence on the finances of the *milites* in Lombardy, an area that in all probability, however, is a limit case.<sup>51</sup>

There can be no doubt, moreover, that in central Italy – this aspect has not been well studied for northern Italy – a widespread and distinctive feature of rural knights was that they possessed men who were bound to them through a particularly heavy form of personal dependence (*homines, manentes, coloni* etc.).<sup>52</sup> From these groups of men, who were burdened with a whole set of more or less arbitrary taxations and services, the knights arguably derived both important revenues and a strong influence over local society. This also enabled them to reaffirm their common identity with the higher ranks of the aristocracy and their superiority of status over the rest of the rural community. The fact of owning families of farmers bound by this type of personal dependency was crucially important and corresponds closely with the situation one finds in southern Italy. Here the number of *villani* possessed constituted the main unit of measurement for estimating the knights' estates, and everything seems to point to the fact that precisely from the *villani* the knights obtained distinctly higher revenues than those coming from the lands they administered directly or from those leased out to independent peasants.<sup>53</sup>

As with the other rural notables, we must finally consider the possibilities of enrichment deriving from new commercial and credit-related activities, which

49. Rippe, *Padoue*, p. 319: *milites* of Urbana collecting the *colta*. Nobili, "Per lo studio", pp. 429-430: *milites* of Sarzana collecting part of the revenues from administration of justice.

50. For the diffusion of forms of joint lordship exerted by very large groups, see Simone M. Collavini, "Formes de coseigneurie dans l'espace toscan. Réflexions préliminaires à partir de quelques exemples en Maremme (fin XII<sup>e</sup>-XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle)", *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Moyen Âge*, 122/1 (2010), pp. 35-54; Alfio Cortonesi, *Terre e signori nel Lazio medioevale. Un'economia rurale nei secoli XIII-XIV*, Naples, Liguori, 1988, p. 187, which gives examples dating from the middle of the thirteenth century.

51. Keller, *Signori e vassalli*, pp. 63-65: Keller has calculated that for some families of *valvassori* in the area of Velate the income from tithes could be as much as 7 *lire* a year. See also Castiglioni, *L'altro feudalesimo*, pp. 204-205, for the tithes and the *novalia* in the *beneficia militum* of the church of Padua. For the different situation in Tuscany, see Simone M. Collavini, "La dîme dans le système de prélèvement seigneurial en Italie: réflexions à partir du cas toscan", in *La dîme, l'Église et la société féodale*, ed. by Michel Lauwers, Turnhout, Brepols, 2012, pp. 281-308.

52. Simone M. Collavini, "Il « servaggio » in Toscana nel XII e XIII secolo: alcuni sondaggi nella documentazione diplomatica", *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Moyen Âge-Temps Modernes*, 112 (2000), pp. 775-801; Collavini, "La condizione giuridica"; Fiore, *Signori e sudditi*, pp. 263-286.

53. Carocci, *Signorie di Mezzogiorno*, pp. 247-263.

underwent great expansion starting from the last quarter of the twelfth century. Once again, it should be stated that our knowledge of this field is limited, the main setback being the lack of groundwork and of prosopographical studies illuminating the finer details of this aspect. There is no doubt, however, that during this phase of demographic growth and productive development, with an increase in the exchange of goods and in the circulation of money, activities connected with credit and commerce were added to incomes deriving from war and land owning, which was similar to what was happening in the case of the city *militia*.<sup>54</sup>

One must consider in the first place the large numbers of *milites* in populous rural communities with an already well differentiated society, in particular those communities that were situated in strategic sites for commerce at important stopping points on rivers or roads. Such favourable situations afforded the inhabitants opportunities to accumulate monetary resources far superior to those of villages based exclusively on agriculture, and therefore constituted a driving force for social mobility. One need only think of the new boroughs in Lombardy, where there was a large number of *milites* (Soncino, Orzivecchi, Lazise, Pizzighettone, Treviglio, even Crema etc.),<sup>55</sup> or once again turn to the well-documented case of Figline. Here the *milites* hailing from the entourage of the Attingi and the Guidi played an absolutely central role in the birth of this rural commune at the end of the twelfth century. These families had long been part of the military elite and, undoubtedly, their wealth had been originally founded on land ownership; nevertheless, they were in an excellent position to take advantage of the trade that developed around the local *forum*, as is attested in some cases already during the 1220s (Tienzi), while for other families it would be clearly visible from the second half of the century onwards (Benzi).<sup>56</sup>

It is therefore incontestable that the transition towards social physiognomies characterised not just by military activity or seigneurial rights undoubtedly started in the rural areas – it did not, in other words, have an urban DNA. It was probably the principal factor of mobility within the rural *militia*, and in time it created increasing disparity amongst the few rich families and the mass of other *milites* who enjoyed only relative wealth and whose resources were barely sufficient to maintain their status as knights.

#### *Pathways of upward mobility in country areas*

While continuing to keep the spotlight on rural areas, we should now examine in what ways the social leap from simple *milites* to castle *domini* could actually be attempted.

Sources point to certain routes that illustrate this process particularly well. First, this position could be reached by carrying out especially important tasks

54. Maire Vigueur, *Cavalieri e cittadini*, pp. 319 ff.

55. Menant, *Campagnes*, pp. 490 ff. and François Menant, “La féodalité italienne entre XI<sup>e</sup> et XII<sup>e</sup> siècles”, in *Il feudalesimo nell’alto Medioevo*, Spoleto, CISAM, 2000, pp. 346-387: pp. 375-377 for the early case of Guastalla.

56. Wickham, *Dispute*, pp. 34-37.

within the widest seigneurial lordships of the region, and even more so by reaching a position where they could perform governmental functions within local communities. This is what happened in Gambassi and probably also in other castles of the Valdelsa, which at the beginning of the twelfth century appear to have been entrusted to the management of families of *milites* belonging to the *entourage* of the counts Cadolingi. They found themselves, in a certain sense, in the right place at the right time: in fact their success was certainly made easier by the exceptional circumstances following the extinction of the Cadolingi themselves in 1113. The possessions of both the *masnadierei* and the *milites* were protected by the express wish of the last count, Ugo III, and later some of the families of *milites* who owned allodial property and jurisdictional rights within the castelli of the counts, made these the basis for their own lineage of local *lambardi* or *domini*, and managed to maintain forms of independence from the power of the bishop of Volterra, who had come into possession of many of these castles, albeit often only in name.<sup>57</sup>

But most of all, the fragmentation of many lordships, which was determined by the dynamic economic context and an increase in population, enabled many to acquire even small portions of castles and seigneurial rights that were now widely available on the market. This state of affairs is very clearly depicted by the case of the so-called *fili Pagani*, a family of *boni homines* with dozens of dependents, who very clearly belonged to the militarised elite stratum, and who enjoyed particular prestige in the Archiano valley, in the Casentino. In the first half of the twelfth century, their aspiration to achieve the social position of owners of the castle came into sharp focus; they pursued this aim both by renting from the monastery of Prataglia portions of the castle of Soci, and through relationships with local aristocratic families. After 1160, moreover, they tried to take advantage of the weakness of the abbey of Prataglia and sought to establish a local lordship over one of the villages that depended on the monastery.<sup>58</sup> This was conflict on a local scale: like many other episodes of violence recorded during this period, was aimed at imposing power over men and lands, especially in those areas where estates had undergone a considerable fragmentation, encouraging competition among the various lords and offering innumerable opportunities for quarrels and disputes.<sup>59</sup> The plans entertained by the *fili Pagani*, however, failed: after the intervention of the bishop of Arezzo in help to the monastery of Prataglia, their descendents remained local notables and did not become the aristocratic co-owners of the above-mentioned *castra*.

57. Duccini, *Il castello*, pp. 114-115, 119 ff.: see especially the rise of the family of Enrico di Villano, perhaps originally a rustic (his patronymic may well be indicative) and later a *bonus homo* in the entourage of the Cadolingi. In 1129 documents show him as the owner of some portions of the *castello* of Gambassi (as well as of other *castra*). By donating these portions to the bishop of Volterra, he became part of the bishop's clientele and maintained a leading role in the *castello*.

58. Delumeau, *Arezzo*, pp. 455-455, 1073-1074, 1092 and Wickham, *The mountain*, chapter XI.

59. See Cortese, *L'aristocrazia toscana*, chapter VI.

The clash I have described was certainly not an isolated episode, and forms part of a more general picture, which saw, from the second half of the twelfth century onwards, both an increase in the importance of *milites* to their lords, and in various cases, the explosion of open conflict. The same document that describes the misdeeds of the *filii Pagani*, also mentions among the *malefactores* a certain Giuseppe di Marciano, a militarised local notable, who had turned this episcopal castle, once it had passed into the hands of Prataglia, into his power base. Giuseppe had used violence to occupy not only numerous estates belonging to the abbey, but also the central tower of Marciano, evidently driven by the purpose of taking over the *castrum*.<sup>60</sup> Also in the Casentino, it is worth mentioning the war between Count Guido Guerra VII and the *milites casentinenses* towards the middle of the 1190s.<sup>61</sup>

Echoes of similar situations come from many other areas.<sup>62</sup> These episodes show that there were clashes to determine who should exert jurisdiction over lands and the people who inhabited them not just between cities, bishops and major aristocratic families, but also between ambitious castle lords and minor *milites*. Overall, one detects a diffuse aspiration on the part of the lower military aristocracy to create independent private lordships and to achieve ownership of portions of castles, by whatever means were effective, whether peaceful or not. Such an aspiration could be held at bay within the major lordships (as in the case of the Cadolingi and the bishop of Volterra) or it could encounter obstacles that generated bitter conflicts (as happened in Casentino and elsewhere).

A clear archaeological evidence of this trend is, in my opinion, to be seen in the wide dissemination of towers and fortified buildings – not part of a castle – both within rural villages and isolated in the countryside.<sup>63</sup> The earliest phase of this phenomenon still remains largely to be investigated, but I believe that exactly the earliest flowering of these types of buildings (datable to the period between the end of the twelfth- and the beginning of the thirteenth century), should be seen as being closely connected with the development of this particularly dynamic social group when it was still dependent on the castle *domini*. Documentary references may be found in the interesting documentation relating to certain centres in Veneto (Cerea, Porto di Legnago, Bionde, Vigasio) examined by Castagnetti. Ownership of a tower or *casa forte*, a building that displayed clear military features in its architecture, probably constituted first and foremost a sort of *status symbol*, the mark of social ascent that set its owners

60. Wickham, *The mountain*, pp. 343-344.

61. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, *Diplomatico, Vallombrosa*, 1199 settembre 4 (in fact datable between 1189 and 1195). Bagnai Losacco, *La disputa di Rosano*, I, n. 17, p. 23 and n. 22, p. 25.

62. For example, see Andrea Castagnetti, '*Ut nullus incipiat hedificare forticiam*'. *Comune veronese e signorie rurali nell'età di Federico I*, Verona, Libreria universitaria editrice, 1984, pp. 25 ff., and Fiore, *Signori e sudditi*, pp. 184-187.

63. *Motte, torri e caseforti nelle campagne medievali (secoli XII-XV)*. *Omaggio ad Aldo A. Settia*, ed. by Rinaldo Comba, Francesco Panero and Giuliano Pinto, Cherasco, Centro Internazionale di Studi sugli Insediamenti Medioevali, 2007.

apart from the stratum of simple *rustici*; it was therefore a tool to reinforce the prestige of a certain family, and to protect it as well as its local clientele in the event of danger.<sup>64</sup> This was not all, however: as is clarified by certain legal disputes, the actual physical construction of towers and other, more or less rudimentary, fortified buildings could be deployed as a means to lay claim to the same type of military power as that normally associated with castles. It took on, that is, a jurisdictional and political significance, and was clearly aimed at carving out “islands” of power within larger seigneurial districts. It should not therefore surprise us that such attempts were vigorously opposed by the more prominent lords for as long as they had the means to do so.<sup>65</sup>

### 3. Conclusions

One of the issues on which scholars have focused most is whether or not a clear-cut and immovable demarcation line existed between the knights and the wealthiest portion of the *rustici*. Historians have often wondered, in other words, whether, from as early as the central period of the Middle Ages a juridically closed military order had been constituted which separated the aristocracy from the rest of the social body, and impeded any extension to the lower classes of the military *status* and the prerogatives annexed to it.

Answers to these questions have been widely divergent. For the Po region, the major work of Hagen Keller, who privileged a “feudal approach” in his reading of society, has long been influential: Keller argued that the elites were divided into defined strata and emphasised the elements of rigidity that feudo-vassalic relationships injected into the structuring of the dominant classes and the construction of their identity, thus suggesting that there was a limited degree of mobility.<sup>66</sup> In those areas with stronger feudal features, moreover, scholars have often sought to clearly distinguish the type of social ascent possible in rural areas from that achievable in urban contexts. In the former only a change in the juridical status of their fiefs would have allowed the *rustici* to avoid the obligations that went hand in hand with their condition and thus to access the privileged position of the *milites*; in the latter, much greater opportunities arose to gain wealth, thereby making this social leap much easier.<sup>67</sup>

Later studies, however, began to describe rural society in northern Italy as much more fluid and layered, with less rigid stratifications and more nuanced differences between the various levels.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, with regard to those areas where feudal bonds had been less widespread and where the role they had played in determining social status had been weaker (in particular in Tuscany), scholarship

64. Castagnetti, *Ut nullus*, pp. 41-44, 48-51 for the cases of Cerea and Porto di Legnago.

65. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52 (Bionde); pp. 54 ff. (Vigasio).

66. Keller, *Signori e vassalli, passim*, in particular pp. 67-78, 136-147, 326-328.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 78; Barbero, *Vassalli nobili*.

68. See the studies by Bortolami, Canzian, Castagnetti, Castiglioni, Menant, and Rippe cited in the preceding notes.

has for some time placed at our disposal sufficient evidence to state that even within the seigneurial system there existed significant mobility and fluidity.<sup>69</sup>

I will now state my own considerations on this issue. As I have tried to prove in the preceding pages, it is almost impossible to trace rigid hierarchies within rural societies. Consequently, in these cases, I view the choice to adopt ideal types or precise delimitations of rank as having an essentially conventional value. In all the contexts which I have mentioned, it may be observed that often, in the actual circumstances of everyday life, it may well have been debatable whether a man or a family belonged to the group of the *rustici* or to that of the *milites*. Here no substantial regional differences are observable, even where, in theory, there were more distinct juridical demarcations ratified by feudal models. It is principally legal sources from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that allow us to observe the many channels through which mobility between social levels could take place, both within the context of service to the lords and outside the bounds of relationships with the lordships. Nor should we consider it to be an indication of a possible hampering of mobility that such legal proceedings often had negative outcomes: these are documents from church archives, which, as was so often the case, retained those judicial acts whose verdict was in their own favour, while we are arguably unaware of many positive verdicts pronounced in favour of their dependents.

Obviously, as is always the case in any analysis regarding this period, there is the question of how representative individual cases are, whether, that is, the sum of the single cases is indicative of structural rather than individual upward or downward mobility. Nevertheless, for the earliest periods (between 1150 and 1230-40) we may base our argument on the quantity and frequency in the sources of such situations, and on the repetition of similar directions of social movement. From the data examined in this paper, therefore, it should appear evident that in the rural areas of central and northern Italy between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries no level of society was rendered inaccessible by unsurmountable barriers, and there were myriad cases of – prevalently upward – social mobility which followed a variety of different paths.

In rural areas as well as in the cities, we therefore witness a constant expansion of military prerogatives among the lower classes, and access to the minor and lower aristocracy was something one could aspire to until well into the thirteenth century. The rural knights, in fact, formed a large and growing group, as may be gleaned from their capillary distribution throughout the countryside. But there is more: where it is possible to have quantitative data, it has been calculated that in some large *castra* the *milites* could represent up to 5-10% of the population, or even more, as happened, for example, in certain new towns which on account of their strategic function needed a particularly strong defence apparatus.<sup>70</sup>

69. Elements pointing in this direction are already clear in Plesner, *L'emigrazione* and in Tabacco, "Nobiltà e potere". More recently, see especially the studies by Cammarosano, Wickham and Collavini cited in the preceding notes.

70. Quantitative data and calculations of percentages relating to the twelfth century and the first half of the thirteenth can be found in Sante Bortolami, "Los barons ab cui el estava: feudalità e politica nella Marca trevigiana ai tempi di Sordello", *Cultura neolatina*, 60 (2000)



While these numbers are not comparable to those calculated by Maire Vigueur for the contemporary urban communes (between 10 and 15%), it is nevertheless undoubtable that in many boroughs and *castra* the *milites* constituted a large portion of the population.

As we have already seen in relation to the vast increase in personal relationships aimed at obtaining lower-ranking military service (squires, *masnadiers* etc.), it is worthwhile pointing out once again that this expansion of the *milites* was the outcome of the increasingly important role played by warfare in the period of escalating conflicts between the twelfth and the thirteenth century (clashes between the pope and the emperor, wars among cities, fighting between the urban communes and the major rural lords, and widespread microconflicts among local aristocrats of middle and lower status). From the beginning of the thirteenth century, this enlargement of the stratum of the *milites*, was, moreover, facilitated not just by the rise of the more enterprising members of the rural elites, but also by a form of “downward mobility” detectable among many families of the aristocracy, who had been impoverished by alienations and inheritance splits, and now owned only partial rights even over minuscule portions of a *castrum*.

The diverse origins of the knights and the different possible channels for social mobility within the rural *militia* meant that, as a social group, it had extremely variable features in terms of wealth and prestige.<sup>71</sup> Although they all shared a military physiognomy, as it were, enjoying strong personal ties with the upper levels of the aristocracy, and possessing a certain number of peasant families over whom they exerted personal lordship, the majority of knights were forced to maintain their status through the revenues of war-related activities, and only a few succeeded in achieving anything close to the economic resources and political leverage of the castle lords. This upward mobility was pursued with various, more or less conflictual, means. The impression one gains, however, is that this latter form of social ascent was more difficult and more exposed to the risk of failure, both because getting into the game of competing with the castle lords required significant resources, and because the more powerful lords often vigorously opposed the attempt by the *milites* to render themselves independent.

The period of greatest dynamism in rural society appears to be that between 1150 and 1230/40, when the rural seigneurial lordships still had considerable needs as regards military and administrative services and at the same time the expansion of commerce, credit and productive activities offered new opportunities. This enabled new social groups to emerge and facilitated social advancement within

pp. 1-43: 12-13; Maire Vigueur, *Cavaliere*, pp. 274-275; Menant, *Campagnes*, pp. 282, 490 ff.; Giuliano Pinto, “Bourgeoisie de village et différenciations sociales dans les campagnes de l’Italie communale (XIII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle)”, in *Les élites rurales*, pp. 91-110. Also interesting is what the sources tell us about the very large number of *milites* in the service of the Guidi Counts (Brancoli Busdraghi, “Masnada”, note 59 and Collavini, “Le basi economiche”) and of the barons of Lazio (Carocci, *Baroni*, pp. 248 and ff. and Gasparri, *I milites*, p. 20).

71. For a parallel case see the description of the assets of the southern *milites* in Carocci, *Signorie di Mezzogiorno*, pp. 246 ff.

substantially rural areas. Instead, as one moves forward into the thirteenth century, one gets the strong impression that geographical mobility – at least to one of the larger rural boroughs, where the more important markets were held, or to the cities – also became increasingly indispensable in order to progress swiftly along these paths of social mobility and to reach really striking successes. Though much research remains to be done in order to accurately paint this particular portrait.

(Trans. Sylvia Greenup)