

Violence between legitimation and the symbolic dimension of power (central-northern Italy, 11th 12th centuries)

by Alessio Fiore

This article examines the transformation of local power structures in central-northern Italy during the 11th and 12th centuries, focusing on the dual role of violence as both a practical tool and a symbolic language of authority. It highlights how violence became central to the legitimation and self-representation of rural elites, marking a shift to more militarized forms of dominance. Beyond analyzing these established dynamics, the article opens new research avenues: it calls for a systematic comparison of how different political actors – rural lords, urban elites, and imperial authorities – used and represented violence, suggesting that their self-images and legitimizing discourses diverged in nuanced ways. Furthermore, the article proposes investigating the underexplored topic of sexual violence as a structural element of lordly power, emphasizing the need to understand its representation, social memory, and the mechanisms of its omission from our sources. These new directions aim to deepen our comprehension of the interplay between violence, power, and collective memory in medieval society.

L'articolo analizza la trasformazione delle strutture di potere locale nell'Italia centro-settentrionale tra i secoli XI e XII, soffermandosi sul ruolo duplice della violenza come strumento pratico e linguaggio simbolico dell'autorità. Il testo mostra come la violenza diventi centrale nella legittimazione e nell'autorappresentazione delle élite rurali, segnando il passaggio da forme di dominio ecclesiastico a modelli militarizzati. Oltre a ricostruire queste dinamiche, l'articolo propone nuove linee di ricerca: invita a un'analisi comparata e sistematica delle diverse modalità con cui attori politici – signori rurali, élite urbane, autorità imperiali – hanno esercitato e rappresentato la violenza, suggerendo che le loro immagini pubbliche e i loro discorsi di legittimazione differivano in modo significativo. Inoltre si indica la necessità di approfondire il tema

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poco esplorato della violenza sessuale come elemento strutturale del potere signorile, ponendo l'accento sulla sua rappresentazione, sulla memoria sociale e sui meccanismi di rimozione dalle fonti. Queste nuove prospettive mirano a chiarire più a fondo il rapporto tra violenza, potere e memoria collettiva nella società medievale.

Middle Ages, 11th-12th centuries, lordship, violence, sexual violence, collective memory.

Medioevo, secoli XI-XII, signoria, violenza, violenza sessuale, memoria collettiva.

In this chapter I will consider the transformation of the forms of representation and the expression of local power in the Italian countryside in the decades straddling the 1100s (and in the following period), focusing mainly on rural lordship. I will discuss some of the key features of this process, concentrating on violence. Insofar as it stands at the junction between concrete acts of power and the representations of that same power, violence provides a privileged vantage point for grasping these dynamics of change, as I hope to show in the following pages. To this end, in the first part of the text I will discuss, more or less briefly, some of the main lines of research that have emerged in recent years in relation to these issues, attempting above all to highlight the broad interpretive frameworks underlying the investigations. In the second part, I will move away from the already known and familiar paths in order to suggest some possible (and largely unexplored) lines of research that can be seen, at least in part, as developments of some of those discussed above.

1. *Languages of violence and socio-political discontinuity: an overview*

A first preliminary consideration concerns a general assessment of all the languages of power used in the Italian countryside. This is closely linked to the questions posed by the editors of the present volume, which aim to verify breaks and continuities in the delicate transition between the 11th and 12th centuries. Indeed, it is possible to detect a clear degree of discontinuity between the system of languages in use during the first half of the 11th century and those already active in the decades at the turn of the 1100s: a discontinuity linked to the general reorganisation of the structures of local power and the forms in which it was exercised, linked above all to the generalisation of territorial lordship, but also to the new forms of power exercised by urban communities in the countryside.¹ The clear change in social and political structures, with the disappearance of a system of power whose roots go back to the Carolingian period, corresponds to an overall reorganisation of the system of pre-existing political languages.² What took place was a genuine reconfigu-

¹ For an in-depth discussion of this issue, I will refer to Fiore, *The Seigneurial Transformation*; on cities, see Wickham, "The Feudal Revolution;" and Wickham, *Sleepwalking*.

² An important new investigation of this break, centred on the relationship between the royal leadership and local political actors and with a focus on political discourses, is Doublier, *Ein Reich ohne König?*

ration of the constellation of discourses, with some previously central ones losing their importance in favour of others that had hitherto played a secondary role in expressing and legitimising the power of the elites. From this point of view, we can see, for example, that the use of delegation by royal power – whose basic instrument was the royal charter, which was very important around 1000 – declined after 1080 and practically disappeared around 1100–20, while a language such as the pact (both between lords and between subjects and lords) acquired completely new significance.³ This change does not only concern the relevance of the various languages, however: we also witness an internal reconfiguration of the individual languages, which change and modify themselves in order to adapt to a profoundly new context. Within this complex system, I have chosen to focus my analysis on a specific language, that of violence, which I hope to show is crucial to understanding the phase in question from an ideological as well as a practical point of view. The localisation of power was a chaotic process, strongly marked by endemic warfare in the decades after 1080, and this affected the role of violence in the society of the Kingdom of Italy. As we shall see, violence stands precisely at the junction between discourses and practices of power, between legitimising languages and concrete actions. Violence was crucial not only for the affirmation of the new local powers in the decades around 1100, but also for their social reproduction in the period following the spread of this model of power. Seigneurial violence must be seen as a way for political actors to assert themselves politically against their neighbours and to preserve their autonomy, but also to re-define (sometimes abruptly) the power relations within the space they control in order to construct new and heavier forms of domination, and eventually to perpetuate this situation.⁴ In other words, political actors made structural use of violence against their competitors, but also against their subjects: a dual dimension of violence on which scholars have shed considerable light in recent years.⁵

In such a context, the ability to take independent military action, to manage organised violence, becomes the very criterion for the selection of autonomous political actors. In short, *domini loci* are such because they are able to mobilise armed forces in sufficient numbers to protect their possessions from their neighbours and to impose their power (by force) on their subjects. The centrality of the capacity for independent military action becomes very clear when we move away from the specific seigneurial context and consid-

³ The reference work on the crisis of royal legitimacy is now Doublier, *Ein Reich ohne König?*; on pacts, see Fiore, *The Seigneurial Transformation*, 178–98.

⁴ While my perspective will be mainly territorial, we must bear in mind that personal relationships within the seigneurial world also became more violent than in the past. After all, while territorial lordship is the most visible form of power, the role of personal forms of lordship – present also and above all in contexts in which the *dominatus loci* was less structured – can in no way be underestimated. On these issues see Carocci, “The Pervasiveness of Lordship.”

⁵ Collavini, “Sviluppo signorile;” Fiore, *The Seigneurial Transformation*, 226–47; Provero, “Le forche del priore.”

er the case of the Val di Scalve, which was studied by François Menant and Chris Wickham, among others.⁶ The valley's inhabitants, united in a compact valley community, took advantage of their military aptitude around 1100 not only to successfully defend themselves against the bishop of Bergamo's attempts to impose his lordship on the area, but even to subjugate some villages in the neighbouring valleys. In some ways, the inhabitants of the Val di Scalve actually seem to have been even more brutal and violent than the lords of the time, as we can see from a detailed *querimonia* which shows them in the role of villains, engaged in constant and bloody raids against their neighbours.⁷ It was precisely this aggressiveness that allowed them not only to maintain their autonomy from the powerful bishop of Bergamo's lordship, but also to impose their power on some neighbouring communities, thus creating an area of domination in the Alpine valleys of Lombardy for several decades. The capacity for autonomous military action on the part of a rural community was the key element that allowed it to be recognised as an independent political actor, even by the local lords.

Violence is thus an instrument of action, but also increasingly a fulcrum around which the legitimating identity of local power and its holders is structured. But while violence is crucial from a practical point of view, it also becomes central from the perspective of the representation of power and its holders, with a strong emphasis not only on the activity of warfare in the strict sense, but also on a whole range of violent practices carried out against one's enemies – but also, more generally, against low-status individuals; a topic to which I will return later. The emphasis on violence as an everyday practice is associated with a strong militarisation of the seigneurial group's identity. A fundamental sign of this, to which Simone Collavini has drawn attention, are the nicknames that many aristocrats proudly bear (Guerra, Pelavicino, Malaspina, Del Guasto) and which are linked to the semantic field of war and violence in general. These sobriquets are often so strong and connotative that they are passed on from father to son, becoming actual surnames over time.⁸ Onomastics is a fundamental window into the Italian aristocratic world's self-representation, and I will return to this specific point later, from different points of view. Another privileged vantage point for grasping this transformation is provided by certain monastic chronicles, such as those of Farfa, Subiaco, and San Michele della Chiusa.⁹ In texts such as these, which were written by monks to celebrate the virtues of their monasteries and rulers, we see that the abbots of the decades straddling the 1100s are often described as warriors, engaged in a series of continuous warlike activities, which for the

⁶ Menant, *Campagnes lombardes*, 493; Wickham, "Justice in the Kingdom of Italy," 239-49.

⁷ Lupo, *Codex Diplomaticus Bergomatis*, 775 (a. 1091).

⁸ Collavini, "Sviluppo signorile."

⁹ Morghen, *Chronicon sublacense*, 12-8; Gregorio di Catino, *Il Chronicon Farfense*, 230-2; Bethmann, *Vita Benedicti*. On this topic, see the discussion in Fiore, *The Seigneurial Transformation*, 242-5; Fiore, "Il ruolo degli abati."

chroniclers are not a cause for embarrassment, but rather for pride. In short, an abbot is a good abbot when he builds castles to counter his neighbours' ambitions, imposes his power on his subjects, and militarily defeats rival aristocrats at the cost of incessant military campaigns. This depiction of abbots and their action contrasts sharply with that typical of texts written only a few decades earlier, such as the *Chronicon* of Novalesa, and gives us a sense of the profound changes in the aristocratic fabric and in the elite's new relationship with organised violence.¹⁰

Within this identity-building perspective, one aspect that I consider crucial to understanding the new centrality of violence among political actors is the change in the forms of the petrification of local pre-eminence and their practical and legitimising function. Until at least 1060, we can observe a significant investment by lay elites in the construction and control of churches and monasteries (which in many ways were the fulcrums of local action), in the context of a public power that saw the church as one of its structural components. In the decades that followed, this kind of investment became much more limited (except in the cities and the territories most closely linked to them) and was abruptly replaced by a massive investment of resources in the construction of castles.¹¹ The latter became more numerous and more imposing, and were made of durable materials, specifically stone and brick. Building castles (or destroying them) became the preferred way of expressing, claiming, or contesting local power. The effectiveness of this strategy is also shown by the attitude of the subjects, for whom the presence of a castle was a crucial element in legitimising seigneurial claims.¹² From this perspective, the material structure of a castle can be seen as a way not only of monumentalising an existing local power, but also of aggressively asserting that power in a fluid and conflictual context. A castle is the representation of its holder's military capacity, so much so that the act of building a castle was perceived at the time as an unambiguously militaristic and aggressive action, akin to a military expedition. Indeed, several sources describe the building of a castle as being carried out by contingents of workers heavily escorted by *milites*.¹³ From a symbolic point of view, the role of stone towers in the new castles was fundamental. The tower gave the castle visibility, emphasising its overtly military nature, and had a strong impact on the local 'skyline', asserting control over the surrounding space.¹⁴ It is no coincidence that the most important lords invested in the construction of particularly tall and visually imposing towers in the centres where they resided. When the bishop of Ravenna transformed the small castle of Argenta into his main rural residence at the end of the 11th century, he built a gigantic tower there that made a strong impression

¹⁰ Alessio, *La Cronaca di Novalesa*, 338.

¹¹ Fiore, "Building the Feudal Revolution."

¹² As in the well-known case of Casciavola, not far from Pisa: see Petrucci, *Lettere originali*.

¹³ This is clear from the evidence analysed in Collavini, "Il principato vescovile."

¹⁴ I have discussed this topic in greater detail in Fiore, "Qui levat castellum."

on his contemporaries.¹⁵ Similarly, the Gherardeschi built a huge tower in Donoratico that dwarfed the old church that had previously occupied a central position in the original castle.¹⁶ A type of power that entrusted its material expression to towers and castles, such as the one that emerged from the late 11th century onwards, is clearly different in terms of its self-expression from the type of power typical of the previous phase, which expressed itself through the establishment of monasteries and churches.

Violence, however, as mentioned above, was not only directed outwards (against competitors), but also inwards, and was linked to the construction and social reproduction of local power by the lords. This also applies, albeit with some nuances, to urban communities, at least as far as their exercise of power over the countryside is concerned. In this regard, it seems useful to me to consider which traditional practices related to the language of violence were taken up and re-articulated in the new social and political context at the turn of the 1100s, as this brings out continuities and breaks very clearly. I wish to focus in particular on the use of physical violence to define power relations. Violence was already common in Carolingian and post-Carolingian times as a means of defining the relationship between *dominus* and *servi*, i.e. between masters and slaves. This was the most intense and strongest power relationship in the entire social and legal spectrum: significantly, the (not especially forbidden) dream of every Carolingian *potens* was to turn his free tenants into slaves. After all, the strongest possible form of control in the Carolingian social and juridical order was control over slaves. This relationship was symbolically marked precisely by physical violence: the possibility of freely inflicting violence on the body of a *servus* was what expressed the relationship and distinguished it from the relationship between a landowner and his tenants, which was far less marked and intense.¹⁷ In several cases, this possibility was translated into concrete actions aimed at publicly demonstrating the relationship of domination. The collective and public beating of *servi* at the end of *placita*, in which their legal status was recognised, should be interpreted in this sense. Similarly, in a legend that was widespread in the Susa Valley at the beginning of the 11th century, but which was much older, a master's act of taking possession of new local *servi* was sanctioned by a re-sounding slap (*colafus*) in the face.¹⁸

What seems interesting to me is that with the process of power transformation that began around 1100, this series of violent practices that were associated with the defining of servile status came to mark the relationship between the new lords and the communities over which they sought to impose their power, regardless of the personal status of their members, who were mostly free. Beatings, which on rare occasions could be so severe as to result

¹⁵ Deusdedit, "Libellus contra invasores," 330. Bernold of Konstanz, *Chronicon 1054-1100*, 533.

¹⁶ Bianchi, "Archeologia di un cantiere."

¹⁷ Devroey, *Puissants et misérables*, 307-10.

¹⁸ Alessio, *La cronaca di Novalesa*, 154-5.

in the death of the subject (as happened several times near Alba at the hands of the local bishop and one of his officers), became a means of marking not only the lord's dependence, but sometimes even the dependence of a rural community on an urban one, as some examples in the border area between the territories of Piacenza and Pavia show.¹⁹ This tendency was so strong that in Casciavola, the lords went so far as to beat the unborn during labour, before they had even emerged from the womb. What does all this mean? The power that the incipient new lords sought to impose on their incipient subjects (indeed on all their subjects, whatever their personal status) was meant to be as harsh and absolute as that of the Carolingian *potens* over his slaves. This is why the violence exercised upon their subjects was highly spectacular and had a strongly public, visible nature: it was an act of possession. This reading is also confirmed by lords' nicknames that specifically refer to the violence wreaked upon the weak as well as upon their subjects, such as Pelavicino (Skinstheneighbour), Manducalomini (Eatsmen), and Sforza (Rapes).

The fact that this control over bodies tended to be absolute, at least from the seigneurial perspective, is attested by the punishments inflicted on recalcitrant or rebellious subjects, which could occasionally be as severe as mutilation and death by torture.²⁰ From this point of view, even the seigneurial administration of justice itself could become an instrument for publicly reasserting absolute control over bodies, as Luigi Provero has shown in a recent essay based on some sources from the Susa Valley.²¹ The local lord, the prior of the monastery of Novalesa, turned punishment into a macabre and horrific spectacle: someone who had stolen a hive of bees was made to parade naked through the main street of the village with a beehive on his head while being whipped; another thief was forced to amputate his accomplice's foot; another still was led to the gallows, only to have the punishment changed to a (very hefty) fine at the last second – and so on and so forth, in a parade of practices imbued with obvious sadism.²² Beyond this lord's personal proclivities, however, what is structurally remarkable is that the punishment became a moment in which the lord spectacularly reaffirmed, before the entire community, his absolute control over the bodies of his subjects, who were virtually transformed into puppets at his complete disposal for staging sadistic fantasies of control.

Violence is thus a practice, but it is also a political discourse that seems to reflect the view of power relations that is most characteristic of the aristocratic world. This view is not the only one since, as mentioned at the beginning, lords also tend to use other discourses in their relations with other

¹⁹ Milano, *Il "Rigestum comunis Albe"*, doc. 179 (aa. 1200-1 c.), 285-8; on the villages between Pavia and Piacenza see the witnesses edited in Bollea, *Documenti degli archivi di Pavia*, nos. 45-58 (a. 1184), 72-193. On this last text see Opl, *Zwang und Willkür*.

²⁰ On the *Frangipane*, in this perspective see Carocci, "La signoria rurale."

²¹ Provero, "Le forche del priore."

²² Chiaudiano, *Le curie sabaude*, docc. 13-4 (1276), 90-7.

autonomous local political actors and their subjects, such as discourses based on pacts or fidelity, in order to construct a legitimising framework for their power.²³ But, as Simone Collavini has pointed out, the kind of violence that we can define as 'seigneurial' and that is linked to the exercise of power in the countryside has a structuring function. At least until the end of the 12th century, not only is it not concealed by ideological and rhetorical devices, as it will be later, but it is even complacently flaunted by those who exercise it, as shown by the 'bad' nicknames mentioned above, which emphasise precisely the most unpleasant dimension of violence, namely that exercised against the weak.²⁴ To some extent, the language of violence also serves to counterbalance the pact-based and reciprocal aspect of the relationship between subjects and rulers, as reflected by pacts and *sacramenta*. It ensures that the peasants do not forget their condition and status, helping to reaffirm and naturalise aristocratic dominance in the countryside in the subjects' eyes.

But the lords were not alone in exercising violence against their opponents and the peasants' bodies; assisting them were their warriors. If in the Carolingian age and the 10th century the strong dividing line within rural society had been between freemen and *servi*, and to a lesser extent between allodiaries and tenants, after the militarisation of society the main dividing line was instead between *milites* (mounted fighters) and actual peasants. The *milites*, who somehow became the lowest rung of the aristocratic world, were of very different social origins, sometimes even servile ones, but it was precisely the exercise of violence that brought together and united lords and 'knights', marking a very clear boundary between them and the villeins, i.e. between those who exercised violence (a veritable 'band of brothers') and those who suffered its consequences upon their bodies. Violence strengthened the cohesion of the world of the powerful (in the broadest sense of the word) and expressed their difference and (almost anthropological) superiority over the mass of the rural population.

I could, of course, continue by listing and briefly discussing some of the other lines of research that have been pursued in recent years, but I think that what has been said is quite sufficient, on the one hand, to verify the profound break in the role of violence at the turn of the 1100s, and on the other to delineate its new role in the reproduction and representation of rural power. Moreover, I do not want an overview of this kind to leave the reader with the impression that this is now a well-defined and perfectly known field of research, in which all that remains to be done is to work out the details. On the contrary, I believe that there are still many areas that need to be explored, in part or in full, in order to better understand the systemic role of violence in the Italian medieval countryside after 1100. I would therefore like to conclude

²³ I have discussed the complex interweaving of these discourses in Fiore, *The Seigneurial Transformation*, especially 250-3.

²⁴ Collavini, "Sviluppo signorile."

my overview by mentioning, purely by way of example, two of the many possible research paths into violence (and in particular its role as a nexus between practices and representations of power) that have yet to be explored, at least in part, and which I believe to be very promising.

2. *Languages of violence and political actors*

The first research path is related to the differing use of the language of violence and violent practices of power by different political actors during the 'long 12th century'. I believe it is important to systematically analyse how different political actors – i.e. local lords, the imperial authorities, and urban (and non-urban) communities – related to violence. Indeed, different profiles correspond to different attitudes towards the legitimation of the use of violence, but also towards the concrete ways in which power is exercised. A better understanding of these differences can, in my view, provide an excellent lens through which to view the different images that autonomous political actors have of themselves and seek to project to the outside world. So let us briefly compare the rural lordly elites with the urban elites, starting with onomastics. We have seen that among the former there is a widespread presence of onomastics linked to war (with names such as Monferrato, Guerra, and Guasto), but also, more generally, to the exercise of violence and oppression against the weak (Manducalomini, Sagittaclerico, Sforza, and Pelavicino). It is important to note that there is a partial overlap with the nicknames used by the urban elites of the time, who were elites of *milites* and sometimes owned castles.²⁵ Here, too, we find (although fewer in number) nicknames linked to warfare, such as Robacastello (Stoles-the-Castle) or Caschifellone (Let-the-Traitor-Die); nicknames linked to violence against the weak, and to the 'bad' behaviour typical of the rural lordly aristocracy, are (almost) completely absent. The onomastics of the urban elites of this period is thus entirely consistent with the highly militarised image of social eminence, which finds perfect correspondence in the militarisation of civic identity itself in the inscriptions and sculptures that adorn civic churches and city gates from this period.²⁶ Take, for example, the well-known representation of the urban community of Verona on the portal of San Zeno, dating from around 1130: the community is divided into knights and foot soldiers, united by the tutelary figure of the holy bishop, and as a whole is represented as an army.²⁷ The military dimension – with the exercise of violence that it entails – is central to defining the image of the urban political community and its members, but this image is

²⁵ On onomastic differences see Menant, "Une forme de distinction;" Wickham, *Sleepwalking into a New World*, 21–55.

²⁶ Fiore, "La pietrificazione."

²⁷ On the decoration of the portal, as well as the identity-defining role of the church of San Zeno, see the essays in Butturini and Pachera, *San Zeno Maggiore*.

formulated differently from that of the rural lords and their gangs. What is the relationship between this different mode of self-representation and the concrete practice of power? Let us try to answer this question by restricting our field of observation to the countryside, so as to be able to make a comparison with the rural lords, who have been better studied in this respect. When we look at narrative and documentary sources, we often get the impression that the power exercised by citizens in the countryside was less brutal. Urban consuls and *milites* seem to have exercised violence, but not in the same systematic and brutal way as the lords.²⁸ However, if we look more closely and turn to some (rare) sources that are more explicit on such matters, this opinion becomes much more problematic to support. Let us take, for example, an episode recounted by the Genoese chronicler Oberto in his *Annales*, dating back to 1169.²⁹ The chronicler tells us that at that time the inhabitants of several villages in the Genoese countryside stopped paying *census* and rent to the city's landlords, and even forcibly prevented them from visiting the parish churches where they owned property. This act obviously caused great concern among the urban elite, since it affected their economic interests. The elite's response was therefore particularly strong and decisive: the consuls led an expedition to restore justice by punishing the tenants. In recounting the events, the chronicler mentions not only confiscations and heavy fines, but also the fact that knights chopped off the hands and feet of the unruly rural tenants. He smugly remarks that after this punitive expedition, no one dared to refuse to pay their dues.³⁰ This is undoubtedly a rather exceptional testimony, but one that should be valued because it is perhaps representative of more widespread practices that were (perhaps) censored by communal observers who were more uncomfortable with violence (at least on an ideological level). In the light of testimonies such as these, in which brutality and its perception by those exercising it does not seem so different from that which was typical of the seigneurial world, one wonders whether its difference from that of the lords – at least as far as the practices of power in the countryside are concerned – was not so much in the way in which violence was exercised, but in the type of self-image that was intended to be conveyed.³¹ A systematic study from this specific perspective would therefore be needed to understand the relationship between the various actors who were operating in the rural

²⁸ As in the countryside between Pavia and Piacenza; see Bollea, *Documenti degli archivi di Pavia*, nos. 45-58 (a. 1184), 72-193.

²⁹ Belgrano, *Annali genovesi*, 219-21 (s.a. 1169).

³⁰ *Et factis coram omnibus consulibus hic inde multis clamoribus, inter multas vindictas, quas nominatim scribere non possumus, fecere quibusdam pedes quibusdam manus truncari, aliis rerum dampna intulerunt et quosdam in carcerem posuerunt et pecuniam ultra solidos mille adduxerunt in civitate; et hoc tantum terrorem intulit reliquis maleficientibus [...]. Unum quidem non decet nec etiam oportet nos silere, quod dicendo hos consules ad laudis maiora noscitur prouehere* (220-1).

³¹ See also Giovanni Codagnello, *Annales Placentini*, 1-3 (a chronicle); *Documenti degli archivi di Pavia*, nos. 45-8 (a. 1184), 72-193 (a long roll of testimonies).

context (and beyond), and thus grasp their relationship with violence and how this evolved over time (in both ideological and practical terms).

3. *Sexual violence and aristocratic power*

We now come to the second possible research avenue, which concerns peasant society as the victim of lordly violence. This is a line of research that I am personally exploring and which I will therefore discuss at some length. It is linked, on the one hand, to the problem of the representativeness of sources on violence, which I also mentioned earlier when discussing internal violence in village societies, and on the other to the relationship between bodies, control, and violence. The problem of the representativeness of sources is a classic one that historians face all the time. Obviously, the topic of violence is no exception, but it is necessary to understand the specific mechanisms of the distortion and obfuscation of reality that are at work, and the logic to which they respond. In order to do this, I would like to begin with a text from the first decades of the 12th century that has been mentioned several times in different contexts, but which Sante Bortolami and the other scholars who have mentioned it have considered to be exceptional: a curiosity to be remembered, but which, precisely because of its abnormality, is not worth discussing in depth.³² In my opinion, however, this is a source that can and should provide the starting point for investigating and discussing certain aspects of power relations that have so far remained outside the scope of investigation, namely those related to the specific aspects of the violence exercised by lords on the bodies not of their subjects in general, but specifically on women. The text in question is a *querimonia* concerning the *advocatus* of the cathedral chapter of Treviso and his misdeeds in the village of *Silvarosa* (present-day Salvarosa, near Castelfranco Veneto).³³ In addition to listing the (usual) seigneurial misdeeds, this source unusually lists acts of systematic sexual abuse against peasant women. I will quote the short passage in question literally: *Equos suos ponit per domos rusticorum a singulis rusticis per singulas noctes pas-cendos cum scutiferis suis. Et cum ipsi scutiferi violenter adulterent uxores rusticorum non curat advocatus nec inde iusticiam facit.*³⁴ It is this reference that makes this text so peculiar: rape is always absent from the list of 'seigneurial' acts of violence mentioned in witness statements and appears in very few *querimoniae*. In the Treviso text, on the other hand, rape is mentioned so systematically that it could almost be classified as a local *mala consuetudo*. In Salvarosa, the hospitality that peasants were expected to provide

³² See Cammarosano, *Italia medievale*, 126-7, which indeed does not discuss this specific point.

³³ The document is preserved in Archivio capitolare di Treviso, Rotoli senza data, sec. XII, *breve recordationis* (aa. 1100-35 c.); for a good transcription see Biscaro, "La polizia campestre," 51.

³⁴ Biscaro.

to the warriors/collaborators of their lord included not only a meal and a bed in their own homes, but also sexual access to their wives. Here, too, there is an obvious symbolic meaning behind the violence: everything belongs to the lord (and his cronies). Nothing the subject owns is really his, not even the women of his *domus*. In short, the only real limit to lordly impositions is the will of the lord himself.

A document such as this, with its routine dimension of brutality, nevertheless leads us to investigate more closely the role of sexual violence in the seigneurial context. If rape is such a defining act in this specific context, why does it not appear in other 'judicial' texts? In particular, to the best of my knowledge it never appears in the numerous and detailed collections of witness statements given at trials (mostly by peasants) that provide our main avenue for reconstructing local power practices from the mid-11th century onwards.³⁵ Is the Treviso document thus exceptional because it attests to a practice that was exceptional in its brutality, or rather because it is exceptional in that it is a written record of something that was far more common in practice?

I will try to sketch out a possible answer here, with the caveat that this is, however, an unfinished research project, and therefore the results must be seen as hypotheses that have yet to be fully verified. Firstly, references to sexual violence perpetrated by aristocrats against peasant women appear in other types of sources from the period: for example, in poetic texts produced in 'aristocratic' contexts, and thus expressing a lordly and chivalrous (in the broadest sense of the term) view of the subject, such as the so-called *pastourelles* composed in *langue d'oïl* and *langue d'oc* and also circulating in Italy.³⁶ These are poems in which a lone knight meets a low-status girl in an isolated place in the countryside (often a forest) and, after a lively dialogue, overcomes her initial protests and persuades her to have sexual intercourse with him: a very different outcome compared to contemporary poems in which the object of male attraction is a woman of the aristocracy. It is even more significant that in several *pastourelles* (a minority, but still a significant percentage), the act is consummated by force with the woman struggling to escape, meaning that it takes the form of actual rape. We find references to sexual violence in some *querimoniae* (one from Treviso, another from Umbria, and possibly one from Le Marche).³⁷ They also appear in seigneurial onomastics (with the nickname *Sforza*, i.e. 'rapes') – and, as we have seen, onomastics is 'realistic' and based on the concrete practices typical of the seigneurial aristocracy of the time. Moreover, rape is also mentioned in texts

³⁵ The first important series of witness statements on seigneurial rights is the one pertaining to Ostiglia, dating back to 1151: for this specific perspective, see Fiore, "Ostiglia around 1100." An important overview of witness statements from the late 12th and early 13th centuries is provided by Provero, *Le parole dei sudditi*.

³⁶ Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, 104–21.

³⁷ Hageneder, und Haidacher, *Die Register Innocenz' III.*, doc. 377 (a. 1198), 570–3 (Umbria); Gregory of Catino, *The Regest of Farfa*, doc. 1213 (aa. 1099–1119), 204–5 (Marche).

such as Andreas Cappellanus' very popular *De Amore*, which even goes so far as to say that, unlike courtly love, the way in which an aristocrat 'loves' peasant women can only be of an exclusively sexual nature, disregarding any form of consent on the woman's part: *Si vero et illarum te feminarum amor forte attraxerit [...] si locum inveneris opportunum, non differas assumere, quod petebas et violento potiri amplexu*.³⁸ Exactly the same reasoning informs the *pastourelles* just discussed.

Finally, if we move south of the borders of the kingdom of Italy, we find a document that allows us to shed further light on the spread of such practices. This is the charter of *franchise* issued in 1190 by the abbot of Montecassino to the large village of Pontecorvo, in southern Lazio.³⁹ The text is also concerned, through a series of prohibitions and rules, to limit the abuses of power exercised by the large community of local *milites* over the *populares* of the castle, and in particular over the (male and female) peasants who were personally dependent on each knight. Prominent among these prohibitions was the one that forbade a *miles* to *violenter corrumpere* a woman employed by him or to have sexual intercourse with the wife of one of his male employees.⁴⁰ If he did so, he would lose his personal *dominium* over those subjects. It is interesting to note that this prohibition appears in a whole series of regulations aimed precisely at limiting or prohibiting those forms of physical violence that were so widespread in the Kingdom of Italy's countryside, such as beatings inflicted *sine culpa*.⁴¹ Regulations such as these appear in an exceptionally revealing context with regard to local power practices, such as the charter of *franchise* of Pontecorvo, in which those issuing the grant sought to protect subjects of lower status from an intermediate power (the castle's *milites*) in order to prevent peasant discontent from causing internal problems in the most populous of the castles under the monastery's lordship. The rules thus tended to delineate a situation in which the *populares* enjoyed a special degree of protection, preventing (at least in theory) practices of power that must have been quite widespread elsewhere, including the sexual abuse of female subjects by lords and *milites*.

So why are rapes never mentioned in witness statements? One plausible answer is that in witness statements, the various witnesses (almost always men) were speaking in front of members of the local community. To say that one's wife, daughter, or sister had been raped would be humiliating (and more importantly, an insult to one's honour) and would require a violent form of retribution against the perpetrator (which did indeed happen among peasants). At the same time, to say that the wife/sister/daughter of another member of local society had been raped would be insulting to the latter, triggering

³⁸ Andrea Cappellano, *De Amore*, 235-6 (chapter entitled *De amore rusticorum*).

³⁹ Fabiani, *La Terra di S. Benedetto*, 427-8. On this text see Carocci, *Lordships of Southern Italy*, 279-81.

⁴⁰ Fabiani, 428.

⁴¹ Fabiani.

a series of relational problems. As is well known, clinical psychology teaches us that when faced with an event that is perceived as deeply destabilising, human beings set in motion a series of defensive mechanisms: rationalisation, reactive formation, repression, and denial, to mention the most common ones.⁴² These mechanisms operate not only at the individual level, but also, to varying degrees, at the collective level. It can therefore be assumed that rape was deliberately removed from village society's social memory and public discourse, of which witness depositions were key moments: in short, people pretended that rape had never happened because such an event was too destabilising for the local social order.⁴³ This is true of witness statements, as the recorded testimonies were given publicly, in front of other members of the local society; and it is also true of texts written at the request of those who had suffered violence, such as the well-known *querimonia* of Casciavola. By contrast, it does not apply to those (much rarer) texts that were not produced at the direct request of those who had suffered violence, such as the *querimonia* from Treviso mentioned above: a text that was not written at the behest of the inhabitants of Salvarosa, but of the canons of Treviso, who claimed jurisdiction over the village. To the best of my knowledge, the same is true of practically all the documentary sources that speak of rape by lords in the period we are considering.⁴⁴ This distortion, due to the very nature of the documentation, would turn a (plausibly) widespread phenomenon into a very sporadic and occasional one in the sources that have come down to us. Significantly, in later sources that are the expression of peasant societies and which speak of the (often systematic) rape of peasant women by lords, such acts are linked to uprisings against these same lords, such as the Tuchinaggio revolt in the Canavese area, or the revolt that (allegedly) led to the establishment of the commune of Cuneo in the 13th century, or again, outside Italy, the great Catalan revolt against serfdom in the early 15th century.⁴⁵ In short, rape was something that was only reported if one could also report the reaction that such an action 'was bound' to provoke from the men responsible for protecting (and thus controlling) the bodies of their wives, daughters, and sisters.⁴⁶

⁴² For an overview, see Lingiardi, e Madeddu, *I meccanismi di difesa*.

⁴³ On these dynamics, see Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting."

⁴⁴ Hageneder, und Haidacher, *Die Register Innocenz' III.*, doc. 377 (a. 1198), 570-3; and in Gregory of Catino, *Il Regesto di Farfa*, doc. 1213 (aa. 1099-1119), 204-5.

⁴⁵ Bordone, "Ius primae noctis." On the *ius primae noctis* in Catalonia, in the framework of the great peasant revolt, see Freedman, *The Origins of Peasant Servitude*, 193; and Lluch Bramon, "La servitud i el dia a dia." From our point of view, it is not important whether these are faithful accounts or mere narratives (perhaps based on some highly distorted actual memories); what is important is that they speak of such acts by linking them to a revolt – that is, that they are spoken of as acts that cannot be tolerated.

⁴⁶ With regard to men's control over the bodies of the female members of their families (particularly women) in the period after the 12th century, a useful point of observation relates to the mockery rituals associated with the so-called *charivari*, in which men who were beaten by their wives were (among other things) mocked and seen as a reversal of the 'natural' order in which men were expected to beat women and control their bodies. See Le Goff, *Le Charivari*.

This research path can obviously be useful for better interpreting the control exercised by lords over village society. Not only that, but by shedding light on the control that lords (and also male members of individual peasant families) claimed over female bodies, it can help us to better understand how local societies functioned between the 11th and 13th centuries, since women are unfortunately highly under-represented in the documentation available to us.⁴⁷

What I have briefly tried to formulate, however, are only a couple of the many possible examples of research avenues that are available, which in my opinion not only show that there is still much to be done in order to fully understand the role of violence in the Italian countryside in the High Middle Ages (and beyond). In short, not least on the basis of what has been discussed, I believe it is possible to argue that the field of violence and its relationship with local power in the High Middle Ages is a field of research that is far from saturated. In fact, I think it is essential to investigate it even further and in a better way, if we want to understand what power really meant for those who exercised it with their bodies and for those who suffered it with their bodies.

⁴⁷ This under-representation can have a very distorting effect, as shown by some (rather late) exceptions to these patterns; see Maire Vigueur, "Quand les femmes s'en mêlent."

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