

# VIRTUS

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## *I signori di castelli*

The Italian military nobility of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries

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Christine Shaw, *Barons and castellans. The military nobility of Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2015, 284 p., index)

*Baron and castellans* is the first comparative study on the Italian military nobility during the Renaissance. It focuses primarily on families from three regions: Liguria, the papal lands and the kingdom of Naples from the mid-fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, although families from other regions in Italy, such as Friuli or Sicily, are also included in the comparison. The Italian barons and castellans, known as *signori di castelli*, or lords of castles, are analysed in numerous ways: their place in political society, military resources, possessions of lands and fortresses, presence in cities, honours, participation in factionalism and private wars, life in arms, and, lastly, their allegiances and rebellions during the Quattrocento and the Italian Wars.

The core aim of Shaw is to show the importance of the landed nobility in the various territories on the Italian peninsula; land ownership formed a fundamental element of the social and political elites. Landed nobility should not be understood as a land-buying civic aristocracy, but as proper noble families and clans who owned fortress, castles, estates and military retinues. Military careers were natural for these noblemen. Studies on medieval and Renaissance Italy usually focus on cities and urban classes of bankers, merchants and lawyers, but with this new perspective Shaw extends the focus to a military nobility that moved between cities, princely courts and the countryside.

The first chapter demonstrates the diversity among the members of the Italian nobilities – characterised as a military nobility, rather than a court or service nobility. As their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, they only had in common that their power was founded

on the possession of land, defended by fortresses in their territories. Shaw lists a number of peculiarities of the Italian castle lords. First of all, many of them were part of families that divided their estates and lordships between male heirs. This inheritance practice resulted in family clans with several branches, the greater part of whose members were comparatively poor. Furthermore, the lords, including the impoverished among them, exercised the high jurisdiction in their territories, either because they held this privilege as an imperial fief, or because other authorities were weak, for example, in the case of republics or princedoms. The power base of the majority of the castle lords was centred upon territorial lordships: a central node in local political networks, as well as the basis for their military weight. Some of the lords had important military careers as professional captains or (mercenary) soldiers. Few of them would think that their fortunes, or territorial possessions, resulted from princely favour. Finally, the noble lordships were possessed in their own right, and not indirectly as part of a political system, because the most powerful lords did not receive their lordships from princes as honours or rewards for their duties as counsellors or fighters. This is, probably, the most important element that distinguished the Italian lords from military nobilities elsewhere in Europe. For Shaw, Italian barons and castellans were above all lords of castles, *signori di castelli*.

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The possession of land and fortresses is the focus of the second chapter, in which the author analyses this important characteristic of the lords in Italy. She emphasises that this element was fully part of the identity of the military nobility, reminding them of who and what they were. In fact, if a family lost its properties because of war, sale or confiscation, its members could fall into disgrace. The legal status of territorial possessions is also explored by Shaw, who comes to the conclusion that the legal status of a property did not determine the power or status of its owners. The legal status of estates varied between allodial land, fiefs, long-term leaseholds and outright ownership. Barons and castellans generally obtained little wealth from their estates, with the exception of a small minority. For the Italian military nobility, the real significance of landed property were the jurisdictional powers it granted: the control over and loyalty of the people living in their lordships. Shaw argues that the relationship between the *signori di castelli* and their estates remained unaltered in this period, also during the mid-sixteenth, after the Italian Wars.

The third chapter analyses the presence of the landed military nobility in cities. Many recent studies present new views about the role of noblemen in urban society, contesting the long historiographical tradition which places the nobility outside urban life. Machiavelli's idea of the nobility as a force that oppressed civic realities is giving way to a more positive evaluation of the impact of the nobility on urban communities. Yet, the position of castle lords in cities was ambivalent, particularly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They were, on the one hand, involved in trade and banking of towns; they held properties within the urban walls; they built up networks of clients and 'friends' in cities and towns. On the other hand, nobles remained a social group standing apart from the citizenry. More clearly than in the previous centuries, the Renaissance barons and castellans aspired to become lords of towns, or to serve cities and towns as *condottieri*. Furthermore, they could act as leaders of urban political factions. Noble lords who failed to become a *signori* of a town showed no interest in other urban offices, but exerted influence through clients and factions.

Shaw elaborates on the topic of political factions and private wars in the fourth chapter. In the fifteenth century, a strong link existed between noble families and local political factions. Factions that were not connected to barons or castellans were mainly made up by local urban notables and their clients. When instead a powerful family controlled and headed a faction, it strengthened its cohesion. Noble families were a stronger focus of loyalty than local notables. As leaders of factions, noble families could have different relations with their clients and 'friends'. Lords could provide administrative and military offices for members of the faction. They were also called upon for support in case of legal proceedings or political conflicts. Finally, lords sometimes acted as intermediaries between, on the one hand, central authorities or more often urban communities and, on the other, members of their factions for the benefit of all. The goodwill of 'friends' was important for receiving support when needed. The military nobility depended on their clients in various fields: politics, war, legal conflicts, and so on.

220 For barons and castellans, military traditions and activities were a basic element of their family identity, as is explained in the fifth chapter. Estates owned by noble lords (ladies do not figure prominently in this study) were always characterised by the presence of at least one fortress. Furthermore, their power was based on the number of men who could be recruited to fight for them. Many members of noble families made careers as warlords (*condottieri*), professional mercenaries hired by princes, while others used their military strength to defend or advance their interests in private wars.

It should be emphasised that Shaw presents very detailed series of examples in each chapter, which illustrates the scope and rigour of her research. Case studies are analysed for the various territorial entities on the Italian peninsula, each of which was characterised by different forms of government and political realities, resulting in different relationships between landed, military nobility and local communities or central authorities.

In the last two chapters more examples are used to illustrate the allegiances and rebellions of the castle lords in the mid-fifteenth century and during the Italian Wars. In the earlier period, allegiances and rebellions were directed to or against major powers: princes, cities, and even more powerful nobles. The military nobility could be employed by these powers as *condottieri*, or act as their political protégés as an *aderente*, *raccomandato*, vassal or subject. In any case, allegiances and rebellions by barons and castellans were instigated by their personal interests and the potential profitable outcomes, although the dynamics of local politics, factionalism and loyalties played an important role too. During the Italian Wars, important changes occurred according to Shaw; in this period, the kings of France and Spain and the Holy Roman Emperors became major powers on peninsula, whose influence affected the position of the castle lords. Shaw argues that ties with these new powers was particularly of importance for the landed nobility from the Kingdom of Naples and from Lombardy, as these two areas were the main centres of dispute between the foreign forces. Accepting a foreign prince as lord did, however, not always guarantee the benefits that barons and castellans might have hoped for.

The concluding remarks focus on the changes that occurred after the Italian Wars. The changing role of the military nobility is analysed for each territory. The main conclusion is that in the mid-fifteenth century, it was not yet necessary for noblemen to learn how to be-



The castle of Torrechiara at Langhirano, in Emilia Romagna, Italy (*photo by Fabio Macor; it.wikipedia.org*)

have at princely courts, but it became a necessary skill a century later, due to the presence of the French, Spanish and Imperial courts in Italy. What remained the same, though, was the significant power of the Italian barons and castellans as a landed, military nobility.

*Barons and castellans* is an important book, because it offers – for the first time – a systematic comparative analysis of the lords of castles from the different parts of the Italian peninsula. Furthermore, Shaw draws some comparisons with developments elsewhere in Europe. The study provides a wide range of information, seeking to be complete as possible about ever topic. Obviously, at some points the analysis could still be extended by delving even deeper into the sources. However, this book provides a balanced overview and synthesis. Shaw’s concluding remarks about the typical peculiarities of the Italian lords of castles are to the point. The absence of a real sovereign or central power, in particular, entailed that noble lordships often were not directly part of a political system. With the arrival of foreign powers on the peninsula after the Italian Wars, it also became necessary for noble lords to adapt their behaviour to the norms of the princely courts.

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