

Signorie in the Light of 21st-Century Historiography

Abstract

This article reflects on how the historiography of the 21st century has profoundly changed our knowledge of the *signorie* that arose in communal Italy. The rethinking has concerned not only the chronology of these lordships, which are now interpreted as a long-lasting phenomenon from the mid-13th to the early 15th century, with a decisive “seigneurial transformation” around 1330. The geography of the *signorie* can also be better articulated, thanks to the identification of significant experiences in central Italy and notable differences in exercising the *arbitrium* between the North-East and North-West. Compared to the prevailing interpretations in the 20th century, the institutional consistency (actually absent in many experiences of personal domination) and the coexistence with other powers occupying the urban political space, starting with the commune and the supra-local dominions of the Empire and Anjou, have also been differently framed. The social dimension of the *signoria* has also been outlined, as the important supporting role of the popular classes in various seigneurial experiences has been recognised.

1 Urban Lordships in the 21st Century

Historiographical interest in lordship in Italy reached its peak in a relatively short period of time. The debate was sparked by the renewed interest in Angevin rule in communal Italy, first through a study on Florence by Amedeo de Vincentiis and then by a volume on the Angevins edited by Rinaldo Comba (the proceedings of a 2005 conference, published in 2006).¹ Over the following years, this debate broadened into an overall revision of the

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1 Amedeo De Vincentiis, *Le signorie angioine a Firenze. Storiografia e prospettive*, in: *RM Rivista* 3,2 (2001) (URL: <https://serena.sharepress.it/index.php/rm/article/view/urn:nbn:it:unina-3259;25.6.2025>); Rinaldo Comba (Ed.), *Gli Angiò nell'Italia nord-occidentale (1259–1382)*, Milano 2006 (Testi e studi 195).

phenomenon of *signorie*. Various studies were published on *signorie* above and beyond the urban level as foreshadowing the “stato regionale”, down to the research – stemming from a PRIN project – coordinated in 2013 by Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur, Andrea Zorzi, and Paolo Grillo on “Signorie cittadine nell’Italia comunale, Tiranni e tirannide nel Trecento italiano e Signorie italiane e modelli monarchici”.² The volumes edited by these three scholars as part of a series especially devoted to communal and seigniorial Italy (“Italia comunale e signorile”), along with the prosopographic database of personal experiences that was published online (“Repertorio delle Esperienze Signorili Cittadine = RESCI”),³ constitute one of the latest, comprehensive team efforts made to newly address a topic that had flourished between the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th, but had long been neglected in republican Italy. Indeed, as I have tried to show elsewhere, republican historiography consciously sought to erase this topic.⁴ As is suggested by the title of the above-mentioned book series, as well as by the research interests of most of the authors involved in it, these studies have coincided with a reaffirmation of the topic of *signorie* within communal historiography, the field in which the first studies about it had been carried out.

In under a decade, we have thus witnessed huge steps forward in the investigation of this topic. The short yet intense period of study just described has wholly renewed our knowledge of experiences of personal rule: the idealised models rooted in 20th century

2 Riccardo Rao, *Signori di Popolo. Signoria e società comunale nell’Italia nord-occidentale, 1275–1330*, Milano 2012 (Studi e ricerche storiche 412) (also bringing together contributions published between 2007 and 2011); Giovanni Ciccaglioni, *Dal comune alla signoria? Lo spazio politico di Pisa nella prima metà del XIV secolo*, in: BISI 109 (2007), pp. 235–269; Massimo Vallerani, *La supplica al signore e il potere della misericordia*, in: QS 131 (2009), pp. 411–441; Federica Cengarle, *Le arenghe dei decreti viscontei (1330 ca.–1447). Alcune considerazioni*, in: Andrea Gamberini / Giuseppe Petralia (Eds.), *Linguaggi politici nell’Italia del Rinascimento*, Roma 2007 (I libri di Viella 71), pp. 55–87; ead., *La signoria di Azzone Visconti tra prassi, retorica e iconografia (1329–1339)*, in: Massimo Vallerani (Ed.), *Tecniche di potere nel tardo medioevo. Regimi comunali e signorie in Italia*, Roma 2010 (I libri di Viella 114), pp. 89–116; Paolo Grillo, *Un’egemonia sovraccittadina. La famiglia della Torre di Milano e le città lombarde (1259–1277)*, in: RSI 120 (2008), pp. 694–730; id., *Milano guelfa (1302–1310)*, Roma 2013 (Italia comunale e signorile 2); id. (Ed.), *Signorie italiane e modelli monarchici*, Roma 2013 (Italia comunale e signorile 4); Andrea Zorzi, *Le signorie cittadine in Italia (secoli XIII–XV)*, Milano 2010 (Il Medioevo attraverso i documenti); id. (Ed.), *Tiranni e tirannide nel Trecento italiano*, Roma 2013 (Italia comunale e signorile 5); Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur (Ed.), *Signorie cittadine nell’Italia comunale*, Roma 2013 (Italia comunale e signorile 1); Gian Maria Varanini (Ed.), *Enrico VII e il governo delle città italiane (1310–1313)* = RM Rivista 15,1 (2014) (URL: <https://serena.sharepress.it/index.php/rm/issue/view/381>; 10. 12. 2025).

3 URL: [http://www.italiacomunale.org/resci/\(10.12.2025\)](http://www.italiacomunale.org/resci/(10.12.2025)).

4 Rao, *Signori di Popolo* (see note 2), pp. 23–25.

debate have been abandoned for good in favour of complex reconstructions of a very different sort from earlier historiographical pictures.

2 Rethinking the Geography and Chronology of *Signorie*

First of all, historians have reassessed the geographical extension of the *signoria*, a phenomenon which is no longer confined to northern Italy today but has also been extended to central Italy. This is clearly illustrated by the volume on Tuscan *signorie* edited by Zorzi, as well as by the numerous central Italian cases listed in RESCI.⁵ What has further emerged is the heterogeneity of the forms of personal rule that swept through communal Italy: the North-West (including Piacenza and Parma), the North-East (at least down to Ferrara and Ravenna), and Tuscany and Umbria make up three areas, each with its own distinguishing features, in which *signorie* were developed. From this perspective, when it comes to defining the *signoria* it is necessary to downplay the role of *arbitrium* that has been assigned to it and which in the early 20th century – particularly on the basis of Ercole's and Picotti's studies – was regarded as a defining feature of lordship in general. The spread of *arbitrium* was not actually limited to *signorie*: Vallerani and Tanzini have shown that this practice was also a focus of legislative interest in republican cities in the Late Middle Ages.⁶ Furthermore, even when *arbitrium* is understood in its aspect specifically associated with lordship, as the possibility for a lord to disregard communal laws and govern in a state of exception by basing his actions on the idea of *plenitudo potestatis*, in relation to the late 13th and early 14th centuries it can only be found in the *signorie* of north-eastern Italy, such as those of the Scaligeri in Verona, the Este in Ferrara, the Bonacolsi in Mantua, and the Carrara in Padua. By contrast, in north-western Italy, but also in Tuscany, we find no traces of the granting of *arbitrium* in this period. Even *signorie* clearly governed by an aristocracy, such as those of Matteo Visconti in Milan and Giberto da Correggio in Parma, limited the *dominus'* field of action to the constitutional framework created by the people's commune, thereby safeguarding popular sovereignty. A revealing case in this respect is the renewal of Matteo Visconti's special title of *capitano del popolo* in 1295, when he was forced to swear an oath that he would respect the

5 Andrea Zorzi (Ed.), *Le signorie cittadine in Toscana. Esperienze di potere e forme di governo personale (secoli XIII–XV)*, Roma 2013 (*Italia comunale e signorile* 3).

6 Massimo Vallerani, *L'arbitrio negli statuti cittadini del Trecento. Note comparative*, pp. 117–147, and Lorenzo Tanzini, *Emergenza, eccezione, deroga. Tecniche e retoriche del potere nei comuni toscani del XIV secolo*, pp. 149–181, both published in: Vallerani (Ed.), *Tecniche* (see note 2).

statutes of the commune and the people. In other words, there existed many different institutional models of *signoria* and they were found across northern and central Italy.⁷

Among the breakthroughs made in the aforementioned historiographical period, we find a redefinition of the chronological framework of the *signoria*. The latter has come to be understood as a long-term phenomenon, extending from the mid 13th to the early 15th century: let us think of the Trinci's case, studied first by Tabacco and more recently by Delzant,⁸ but also of other experiences of personal rule over individual cities in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, particularly in central Italy, which cannot be understood within the context of the formation of regional states. The fact that, as we have seen, historiography on the communes has fostered a renewed interest in *signorie* has promoted a reassessment of late 13th and early 14th century experiences, now no longer regarded as conflicting with communal ones but rather as part of the social and institutional developments distinguishing popular communes. Similarly, the new historiography has sparked an interest in late *signorie*, centred on individual cities.

Furthermore, a specific turning point has been identified, namely the 1330s, which witnessed a marked acceleration in the development of *signorie*'s government institutions: I am referring to the so-called "seigneurial transformation" ("mutazione signorile"), which brought about a strengthening of many *signorie* in this period.⁹ The previous phase had been marked by an interplay between, on the one hand, popular claims, attempt to safeguard popular sovereignty, and the institutions of the popular commune and, on the other, forms of lordship. In the 1330s, by contrast, *signorie* broke away from this kind of support. This transition coincided with the acquisition of more solid institutional structures by the lords, a point to which I shall return. We witness a progressive formalisation of lordship, which acquired a dynastic form; and this also applies to those *signorie* which had emerged through popular support. In this period, numerous lords who had preferred to remain invisible to the communal authorities' eyes by preserving the communal statutes came out into the open, acquiring *arbitrium* and adopting forms of emergency rule. Although this process was not necessarily associated with an inversion

7 Concerning these aspects, cf. Riccardo Rao, *Le signorie di popolo*, in: Maire Vigueur (Ed.), *Signorie cittadine* (see note 2), pp. 173–189.

8 Giovanni Tabacco, *L'Italia delle Signorie*, in: *Signorie in Umbria tra Medioevo e il Rinascimento. L'esperienza dei Trinci*, Atti del Convegno (Foligno, 10–13 dicembre 1986), Perugia 1989, pp. 3–21; Jean-Baptiste Delzant, *Instaurator et fundator. Costruzione della signoria urbana e presenza monumentale del Comune (Italia centrale, fine del Medio Evo)*, in: *Bollettino della Deputazione di Storia patria per l'Umbria* 109 (2012), pp. 271–338.

9 Zorzi, *Le signorie cittadine in Italia* (see note 2).

of the lords' populist orientation, within a few decades it proved crucial to distance these political experiences from the social base that had hitherto supported them. In other words, these lordships became detached from the popular communes within which they had first developed, also from a constitutional perspective.¹⁰ A transformation of this kind can be found in the case of Taddeo Pepoli's lordship: whereas his father Romeo's "crypto-signoria" – to quote Massimo Giansante – had lacked any formal legitimation, in 1337 Taddeo was acclaimed as "generalis ac perpetuus conservator et gubernator comunis et populi Bononie," receiving sovereign-like powers, or at any rate those based on the possibility of making an exception to or disregarding municipal statutes.¹¹ The study of the transformation of lordship has made it possible to move beyond the established and rather mechanistic chronology – first developed by Ercole – according to which an evolution in *signorie* occurred through the transition from the bestowal of sovereignty on lords by communal councils to the legitimising of their power by higher authorities through imperial, pontifical, and Angevin vicariates. The last of these in particular were hardly considered at all for a considerable time, consistently with the little historiographical interest in the Angevins in central-northern Italy. More than being an inevitable outcome for *signorie*, vicariates should therefore be regarded as political added value for the lords.¹²

3 Redefining the *Signoria*

The very concept of *signoria* has been generally reassessed, on the one hand by broadening its semantic field and, on the other, by downplaying the opposition between it and what in the past were regarded as rival political experiences. As late as the early 2000s, the *signoria* was still seen as a phenomenon with a clearly defined institutional profile and standing in contrast to the commune, particularly the popular commune. Giovanni Tabacco defines it as follows: "the term 'signoria' ... acquires the specific meaning of an

10 Ibid., pp. 108–124; Rao, Signori di Popolo (see note 2), pp. 50–51, 128–135.

11 In addition to RESCI, Pepoli, Taddeo and Pepoli, Romeo, cf. Massimo Giansante, Romeo Pepoli. Patrimonio e potere a Bologna fra Comune e Signoria, in: QM 53 (2002), pp. 87–112; Guido Antonioli, "Conservator pacis et iustitie". La signoria di Taddeo Pepoli a Bologna (1337–1347), Bologna 2004 (Bologna medievale ieri e oggi 3); Vallerani, La supplica (see note 2).

12 On vicariates as political added value, cf. Pierangelo Schiera, Legittimità, disciplina, istituzioni. Tre presupposti per la nascita dello Stato moderno, in: id./Giorgio Chittolini/Anthony Molho (Eds.), Origini dello Stato. Processi di formazione statale in Italia fra medioevo ed età moderna, Bologna 1994 (Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico. Quaderni 39), pp. 17–48.

exceptional communal magistracy, superimposed upon the ordinary bodies of the urban commune and for the most part destined to develop into a principality.¹³

The narrative about the alleged opposition between the *signoria* and the popular commune constitutes a historiographical build-up that begins with Chabod and with the rejection in the mid-20th century of the historiographical interpretations developed in the Fascist period, particularly by Ercole, who identified the exception granted by communal councils as the origin of lordships.¹⁴ Conversely, the recent phase of historiographical renewal undermined this approach: *signorie*, particularly early ones, were found to have frequently operated in the shadows of popular communes, often in harmony with them and with their claims.¹⁵

From this perspective, the *signoria* must be interpreted as a category describing a particular form of power rather than as an institutional category. This is not to say that the power in question did not shape government institutions, of course: it means that the presence or absence of a *signoria* cannot be measured only according to institutional parameters, for otherwise it would be impossible to make sense of the lists of *domini* in early 14th century chronicles, which often include figures who never held any exceptional offices. Over-classification – reflected by the choice to apply the label of ‘lords’ only to individuals who meet very specific institutional parameters – risks proving foreign to the logic governing *signorie* in the period in question. The strategy adopted by *signorie* was not so much to seek legitimation (an element stressed by historical-juridical studies in the early 20th century) as to maintain a degree of institutional invisibility by anchoring their governance and decision-making in a system of relations that bound them to the popular commune. Upon closer inspection, we find that the same capacity to act in a discrete way within the boundaries of the communal system by seeking the support of the people also characterises the attempt to acquire leadership made by some leaders of urban factions, such as the Suardi in Bergamo, the Solaris in Asti, the *de Brayda* in Alba, and the Doria, Spinola, and Fieschi in Genoa.¹⁶ In the Ligurian city, the need to incorporate personal and family leadership roles into the ‘normal’ dialectic of the commune is reflected by the creation of the office of Captain of the Commune and the People, which was established by Guglielmo Boccanegra as early as 1259 and restored in 1270, during a

13 Giovanni Tabacco, *Profilo di storia del medioevo latino-germanico*, Torino 1996, p. 124 (URL: <http://www.rmoa.unina.it/view/creators/Tabacco=3AGiovanni=3A=3A.html>; 10. 12. 2025).

14 Cf. Riccardo Rao, *Dal comune alla signoria. Eclissi e successo di due temi storiografici in età fascista*, in: Paola Salvatori (Ed.), *Il fascismo e la storia*, Pisa 2020, pp. 73–110.

15 Cf. id., *Signori di Popolo* (see note 2).

16 Cf. id., *Le signorie di popolo* (see note 7).

popular uprising.¹⁷ From the very first surviving mentions of it, this office was assigned to members of powerful families capable of acting as leaders of the *populus*. It thus served as a means for these political actors to make the urban government more hierarchical without losing their function of representing the community's interests. Most Captains of the Commune and the People came from the ranks of the four leading families involved in the conflict between factions. While references related to the Grimaldi and Fieschi are more sporadic (Gaspare Grimaldi and Carlo Fieschi served as Captains in 1317–1318), the office in question is extensively documented in the case of the Spinola and Doria, who ever since the 1270 uprising had given their support to the popular faction in order to achieve hegemony in the city: the office of Captain was assigned to Oberto (1270–1291) and Opizzo Spinola (1306–1310), and to Oberto (1270–1285), Corrado (1285–1291, 1296–1297), and Bernabò Doria (1306–1308).¹⁸ The office of Captain of the Commune and the People was institutionalised within the framework of the municipal statutes: this change to the commune's political structure made it possible to combine the hegemonic aspirations of certain families, particularly the Doria, with the urban demand that this step be taken as part of the political project of a popular commune and in keeping with the popular faction's aims.

Especially before the so-called “lordly transformation”, then, the *signoria* did not really express itself through specific institutional forms: sometimes it was absorbed into existing communal magistracies, including ordinary ones, which in such a way neutralised its subversive potential; at other times it remained completely invisible to the communal authorities' eyes. Besides, the period which witnessed the rise of *domini* was marked by a crucial development: the weakening of public institutions, which ceased being the sole forces shaping the political arena in the sense that they became increasingly unable to control political processes. Significantly, while the earliest *signorie* – for example, that of Giberto da Gente in Parma – are characterised by the frequent use of already existing leadership positions within the commune (e. g. the office of *podestà* or Captain of the People), mostly through the repeated bestowing of these magistracies on the same person for several years, and by the presence of individuals who were not necessarily involved in the network of urban factions, the *signorie* which emerged only a few decades later

17 Cf. the relevant entries in the RESCI.

18 RESCI, *ad indicem*. Opizzo Spinola in particular was able to centralise this office in 1309 by taking advantage of a popular uprising against his associate Bernabò Doria and having himself appointed “capitano generale del comune e del popolo” (Vittorio Poggi, *Series rectorum Reipublice Genuensis*, in: *Leges Genuenses*, ed. by id./Cornelio Desimoni/Luigi Tommaso Belgrano, Torino 1901 (*Historiae patriae monumenta* 18), col. 977–1113, here col. 1076–1077).

were often established without being institutionalised and almost exclusively involved the leaders of *partes*. In the mid 13th century, a supporter of the popular faction could only achieve certain political objectives through the communal institutions. By the end of the century, the latter were no longer as effective a means to meet citizens' demands. Politics now increasingly took place outside the institutional framework. As the forces shaping the urban arena, starting from lordship, often lacked institutional concreteness, there was "limited space" for the commune, to use a concept developed by Norberto Bobbio and which can certainly be applied to the solutions adopted by lords in this period: the markedly popular colouring of communal councils no longer made them a means to control urban politics.¹⁹

Likewise, the role of the monarchy – which seemed to have played an independent, isolated role vis-à-vis the dynamic rise of lordship – has been reassessed by emphasising sovereigns' ability to become lords and the influence of the Empire and the Angevins on various *signorie*: the influence of royal models – to quote the title of Grillo's book – has now come to be acknowledged, not least thanks to the flourishing of studies on the Empire and the Angevins in this period.²⁰

The term "encapsulated" has often been used to describe a political space that, while serving as a field of conflict between different forms of power seeking to occupy it in the most pervasive possible way, also includes Chinese box-like solutions, whereby different powers coexist on different levels.²¹ The very reinterpretation of Brunetto Latini, whose work has come to be regarded as mediating between the world of *signorie* and that of communes rather than as a political manifesto of the popular commune, must be

19 Norberto Bobbio, *Il futuro della democrazia. Il comune denominatore di tutte le questioni politicamente rilevanti*, Torino 1984, p. 15.

20 Grillo, *Signorie italiane* (see note 2). In addition to the aforementioned Comba, *Gli Angiò* (see note 1), among other recent volumes on the Angevins in communal Italy I will refer to are Riccardo Rao (Ed.), *Les grands officiers dans les territoires angevins – I grandi ufficiali nei territori angioini*, Roma 2016 (Collection de l'École française de Rome 518); Pierluigi Terenzi, *Gli Angiò in Italia centrale. Potere e relazioni politiche in Toscana e nelle terre della Chiesa (1263–1335)*, Roma 2019 (*Italia comunale e signorile* 13).

21 Zorzi, *Le signorie cittadine in Italia* (see note 2), p. 25. On the issue of urban political space, cf. id., *Lo spazio politico delle città comunali e signorili italiane. Una prima approssimazione*, in Giancarlo Andenna/Nicolangelo D'Acunto/Elisabetta Filippini (Eds.), *Spazio e mobilità nella 'societas christiana'. Spazio, identità, alterità (secoli X–XIII)*, Milano 2017 (*Le settimane internazionali della Mendola n. s. 5*), pp. 167–186. Grillo, too, speaks of "signorie encapsulate": Paolo Grillo, *Fra alleanze e rivolte. Il contrastato dominio dei Della Torre su Lodi (1259–1277)*, in Andrea Gamberini/Marta Luigina Mangini (Ed.), *Flos Studiorum. Saggi di storia e di diplomazia per Giuliana Albini*, Milano 2020 (*Quaderni degli Studi di Storia Medioevale e di Diplomatica* 3), pp. 179–192.

envisaged within the framework of the paradigm shift that has toned down the opposition between commune and *signoria*.²²

The various forms of power in cities often operated on three rather than two levels, however, namely: the people, hegemonic families, and supra-local authorities pursuing the integration of cities into broader regional areas. The case of Vercelli in the early decades of the 14th century (1290–1335) sheds light on the complex range of possible configurations. On the highest level, Vercelli's gradual integration into a broader regional framework went hand-in-hand with the rise of the *signorie* of the Visconti, Angevins, the Empire, and the Monferrato. The presence of these great *signorie* did not prevent the emergence on the local level of the *signorie* of the pro-Angevin Avogadro and the pro-Visconti Tizzoni. These different experiences all reflect the capacity of such dynasties to act in harmony with municipal institutions, in several cases by filling the commune's coffers (but also extensively drawing upon them) and by promoting policies benefiting the commune. Compared to other centres in northern-central Italy, in Vercelli the elites vying for political predominance were able to concentrate decision-making power into their own hands, leaving less political leeway for the rest of the urban population. This hegemony was still expressed within the boundaries of the commune's constitution, however. In Vercelli's case, it is also possible to trace the survival of a tradition of respect for the institutions and of representation of citizens' social claims. Throughout the period under scrutiny, the popular classes pursued communal policies that, far from being exclusively intended to serve family balances, focused on more general demands, particularly as regards the range of urban taxes, control over the local territory, and the preservation of the main institutions. In other words, in Vercelli we find at least three levels coexisting throughout the period under scrutiny: supra-local lords, local lords, and the popular commune.²³

The focus on the role played by the Angevins and the Empire in the recent historiography on *signorie* has also entailed a renewed interest in the large Guelph and Ghibelline networks as channels for the circulation of political models, thus reflecting a different approach compared to the landmark studies by Marco Gentile, who chiefly focused on factions as an instrument of governance.²⁴ Recent studies have instead drawn upon the

22 For an up-to-date reconstruction of the debate, cf. David Napolitano, Brunetto Latini's *Politica*. A Political Rewriting of Giovanni da Viterbo's *De Regimine Civitatum*, in: *RM Rivista* 19 (2018), pp. 189–209 (URL: <https://serena.sharepress.it/index.php/rm/article/view/5403>; 10.12.2025).

23 Rao, *Signori di Popolo* (see note 2), pp. 145–178.

24 Marco Gentile (Ed.), *Guelfi e Ghibellini nell'Italia del Rinascimento*, Roma 2005 (I libri di Viella 52).

insight reached by Louis Green, who in 1986, when exploring the case of Lucca in the first half of the 14th century, stressed the essential role played by the interplay of Guelph and imperial forces – particularly Henry VII, Louis the Bavarian, and Charles IV – in promoting “the transition from communes to regional principalities” in Lombardy and Tuscany.²⁵ Significantly, the new studies on *signorie* took supra-local powers such as the Angevins as their starting point. However, in Grillo’s research on Guelph Milan we find something more, namely the attribution of contrasting political ideals, even on the policy level, to these different networks.²⁶ Grillo identifies a special consonance between Guelphism and the popular commune, networks of cities, or even – as Andrea Zorzi has recently noted – the very idea of liberty.²⁷

Be that as it may, in considering the relationship between lords and major supra-local networks it is necessary to consider not only the role which the latter played in the creation of *signorie*, but also the role which *signorie* acquired within such networks. This aspect emerges, for example, from the considerable scholarship devoted to Henry VII, and from which it is possible to infer that the acquisition of the title of vicar by northern Italian lords was more than just a means of legitimation: it also entailed the position of an officer, which came with public and jurisdictional duties that bound the vicars-lords to the authorities bestowing such an office on them. Particularly revealing in this respect are the provisions governing the acquisition of the title of vicar by Matteo Visconti in 1311, which laid out his duties towards the Empire.²⁸

4 Rethinking the Social Dimension of the *Signoria*

What has also been redefined is the relationship between *signorie* and social mobility in Italy in the late 13th and early 14th centuries.²⁹ A crucial role has been played by studies,

25 Louis Green, Castruccio Castracani. A Study on the Origins and Character of a Fourteenth-Century Italian Despotism, Oxford 1986, p. 12.

26 Grillo, Milano guelfa (see note 2).

27 Andrea Zorzi (Ed.), La libertà nelle città comunali e signorili italiane, Roma 2020 (Italia comunale e signorile 14).

28 Riccardo Rao, L’oro dei tiranni. I vicariati venali di Enrico VII e la signoria cittadina nell’Italia padana, in: Varanini (Ed.), Enrico VII (see note 2), pp. 89–105.

29 As far as recent studies on social mobility are concerned, I will refer to the project on this topic coordinated by Sandro Carocci and which has led to three volumes on La mobilità sociale nel medioevo italiano.

such as those by Federico Del Tredici, revealing the socially dynamic character of urban societies and the vigour of popular forms of political representation in late 14th and early 15th century Lombardy; until a few decades ago, the rise of lordships in this region was instead associated with the ossification of social structures.³⁰ The category of “representation” is a crucial one to understand the enduring relationship between social dynamics and political constructs embodied by *signorie*.³¹

The *signoria* must be interpreted as a different way of offering political solutions – also in terms of the acknowledgement of social mobility – to deal with the evolution and hierarchisation of late medieval societies, compared for example to the anti-magnate legislation introduced by popular communes in many central Italian cities. Let us briefly consider the case of the Beccaria’s *signoria* in Pavia to see how the construction of political domination here coherently reflected the city’s social structure and the development of the people’s political ideals.

In the late 13th and early 14th centuries, Pavia had a wealthy, vigorous, and articulated *populus*, which – unlike in Piacenza and Asti, for instance – continued to include merchants and money-lenders. The city had a well-structured artisan class: the most distinguished craftsmen would mingle with small tradesmen and the latter, in turn, would interact with the most prominent popular family. The elite was broad and still rooted in workshop and manufacturing activities (so much so that some of the leading urban families, such as the Avvocati, Bastoni, Canevari, and Lanari, continued to be identified by referring to professional qualifications typical of the artisan world, suggesting that they were still engaged in entrepreneurial activities in such sectors and were still members of the relevant guilds). A broad elite of this sort acted as a glue for local society, preventing the kind of separation between the interests of major families and those of minor ones that was becoming increasingly common elsewhere.³² The lineages in question succeeded in preserving social cohesiveness in Pavia under the Beccaria’s rule by continuing to share urban economic activities with the people and using credit lending as a way to ensure a solid bond with the artisan classes in the city and the peasant population in the countryside.³³

30 Federico Del Tredici, La popolarità dei partiti. Fazioni, popolo e mobilità sociale in Lombardia, XIV–XV secolo, in Andrea Gamberini (Ed.), La mobilità sociale nel medioevo italiano, vol. 2: Stato e istituzioni, secoli XIV–XV, Milano 2017 (I libri di Viella 234), pp. 305–334.

31 Cf. Riccardo Rao, Il sistema politico pavese durante la signoria dei Beccaria (1315–1356). “Élite” e pluralismo, in: MEFROM 119 (2007), pp. 151–187.

32 Ibid.

33 For a similar endurance of political classes of popular origin in some Tuscan cities, cf. Alma Poloni, Fisionomia sociale e identità politica dei gruppi dirigenti popolari nella seconda metà del

The most significant social rift was still between the nobility, which was largely rooted in the countryside, and the people, which instead sought to affirm itself in the city.

In the extended period of the Beccaria's hegemony, which almost uninterrupted spans seventy years from 1290 to 1356, it is possible to identify a popular political project which was not incompatible with this dominant lineage's desire for personal and dynastic affirmation.³⁴ Over the years the Beccaria continued to emphasise their connection to the people, but this grew weaker, from the 1340s onwards, following the establishment of a regime that more closely resembled a form of lordship, in line with the forms of governance that were then becoming established in northern Italy; in the same period, in the wake of certain institutional changes, the group of families that had hitherto constituted the apex of the popular political class, and which had actually emerged from the *populus's* ranks, gradually lost its capacity to effectively uphold the people's claims, thereby increasingly taking the form of a ruling elite.

In the last decades of the 13th century, particularly through Manfredo Beccaria's influence, this family had provided a highly effective contribution to the establishment of a populist government, representing the claims of a cohesive people and uniting more or less wealthy classes. After repeatedly filling the office of Captain of the People, in 1282 the Beccaria succeeded in representing both the artisan classes and the merchant ones with one member of the family, Manfredo, acting as "potestas Populi et Mercadantie" and another, Uberto, as "potestas et ancianum paraticorum." On the one hand, this seems to reveal a polarising of interests between the higher strata within the people and the lower ones. On the other, it reflects an enduring capacity to find a middle ground through the election of members of the same family at the head of the organisations representing the two sections.³⁵ The Beccarias' unifying project was reinforced over the following years. In 1285 and 1287, Manfredo was appointed *potestas populi et mercadancie*. In March 1289, he was referred to as *potestas populi*, in August of the same year only as *potestas collegii et artis notariorum*, and in 1290 as *potestas populi, mercandie et collegii notariorum*. Despite these nuances, which can at least partly be attributed to the different sensibilities of the notaries drawing up these official documents, what emerges is Manfredo's desire to act

Duecento. Spunti di riflessione su un tema classico della storiografia comunalistica italiana, in: Società e storia 110 (2005), pp. 799–821.

34 Cf. Rao, Signori di Popolo (see note 2).

35 Archivio di Stato di Milano, Archivio Diplomatico, Pergamene, m. 633, doc. dated 1282, September.

as the leader of the people as a whole, a leader capable of bringing together merchants and artisans, in addition to the powerful notaries' guild.³⁶

This process reached its culmination with the statutes drafted in 1295 for the *Universitas mercadantie*, or *Mercanzia*, a body established in those same years, probably on Manfredo's own initiative. Regulations such as those calling for the armed mobilisation of merchants and guilds in the event of brawls, also envisaging the possibility of exacting vengeance upon those who had offended members of the *Universitas*, must be viewed within the context of the climate of violent confrontation between the *populus* and *milites* in the last decade of the 13th century.³⁷ When newly examined from this perspective, which continues to be neglected by the historiography on Pavia, the collection of laws governing the *Mercanzia* would seem to explicitly affirm the adherence of the various social strata, including the merchants and craftsmen, to the Beccarias' popular government.

It emerges that the *Mercanzia's* leadership was represented by heterogeneous sectors that were particularly active in the urban economy in the 14th century: merchants, money-lenders, and *pelliparii* (furriers). Significantly, in a prescription probably formulated in 1295, the *Mercanzia* is identified as an extension of the *Societas negociatorum, campsororum et pellipariorum*, to which the other urban guilds would be bound by an oath, maintaining a subordinate position with respect to it (the guilds already mentioned were later joined by those of the apothecaries, smiths, and silversmiths, which confirms the growing weight of such activities in the 14th-century economy). In the late 13th century, it was these three professions that led the *populus* in its confrontation with the *milites*. The establishment of the *Mercanzia*, under the influence of Manfredo Beccaria's government, marked the leadership of money-lenders, merchants, and furriers, but also served to uphold the interests of the other guilds, which supported its measures against the aristocrats. In many respects, the level of social mobility in *signorie* is therefore comparable to that in republican cities.

The rise of *signorie* in the 14th century must therefore be viewed within the framework of the complex and dynamic social mobility that marked the whole century, par-

36 For more detailed references, cf. Riccardo Rao, *Credito, diversificazione, integrazione regionale e mercato locale a Pavia prima della Peste (1290–1361)*, in: Bruno Figliuolo (Ed.), *Centri di produzione, scambio e distribuzione nell'Italia centrosettentrionale. Secoli XIII–XIV*, Udine 2018 (Tracce. Itinerari di ricerca), pp. 41–75; and id., the “famiglia Beccaria” entry in the RESCI.

37 “Breve Mercadantie mercatorum Papie”. La più antica legislazione mercantile pavese: 1295, ed. by Renata Crotti Pasi/Carla Maria Cantù, Pavia 1995, § 199, pp. 292–295. This regulation was probably introduced in Manfredo's time, as is suggested by the presence of the *podestà* of the *Mercanzia*, an office typical of his mandate.

ticularly through the rise of new classes and the consolidation of middle-class and immigrant families, which went hand-in-hand with the commercial integration of many areas of Italy.³⁸

5 The Future of the *Signoria*. Lines of Research

After the overview volumes of 2013, quite understandably there has been somewhat of a slow-down in the investigation of this topic. Notwithstanding some detailed research on significant examples of lordship that had been largely neglected – such as Maddalena Moglia's study of the Pelavicino family – no rethinking of the new paradigms has occurred³⁹. Overall, it seems to me that the most original contributions are certain attempts that have been made to link the interpretation of the *signoria* to the growing interest in Cultural Studies, which has swept through medieval scholarship in recent times, in Italy and beyond. What I have in mind here are especially Patrick Boucheron's studies on Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Good Government* fresco and the recent volume – edited by Andrea Zorzi – “La libertà nelle città comunali e signorili italiane,” which nevertheless focuses not just on *signorie* but also on the age of communes and of the regional state.⁴⁰

Moving towards a conclusion, I will touch upon certain aspects of the recent debate on the *signoria* by also considering how certain historiographical strands that have surfaced in the last few years may be seen to open up new paths, allowing historians to further investigate the *signoria* in a fruitful way.

1) The first perspective concerns studies on political languages, which have flourished in Italy in recent years, starting from Andrea Gamberini's work.⁴¹ I believe it would be interesting to further reflect on tyranny in the light of the vocabulary used in the sources by systematically cataloguing the terms used to describe *signorie*. For instance, a polarity can certainly be found between tyranny and natural rule. The sources – including both documentary and narrative ones – are relatively consistent in the use of the word *tyrannus*,

38 With regard to this point, I will refer to Alma Poloni's contribution to the present volume.

39 Maddalena Moglia, *Il marchese e le città. Le signorie di Oberto Pelavicino*, Milano 2020 (Scritti di storia 10).

40 Patrick Boucheron, *Conjurer la peur: Sienne, 1338. Essai sur la force politique des images*, Paris 2013; Zorzi (Ed.), *La libertà* (see note 27).

41 Andrea Gamberini, *Lo stato visconteo. Linguaggi politici e dinamiche costituzionali*, Milano 2005 (Studi e ricerche storiche 351); id./Giuseppe Petralia (Eds.), *Linguaggi politici nell'Italia del Rinascimento, Atti del Convegno (Pisa, 9–11 Novembre 2006)*, Roma 2007 (I libri di Viella 71).

which is employed to describe any *dominus* lacking legitimacy: in the eyes of those who use the term, there may be various reasons for this lack of legitimacy, ranging from the absence of institutional acknowledgement to self-assertion without consent; but, generally speaking, the word is used in an ideological way, against political opponents. For example, the Hohenstaufen are described as tyrants in an addition made to the *Tresor* after the Battle of Tagliacozzo, perhaps by Brunetto Latini himself, but in any case displaying marked pro-Angevin overtones.⁴² By contrast, the 14th century witnessed the spread of the title *dominus naturalis*, investigated by Federica Cengarle. This term is applied to several *signorie* (for example, the Visconti and the Monferrato) and possibly means the opposite of ‘tyrant’.⁴³

2) An important contribution to our understanding of such regimes may be provided by the prosopography related to officers, as has been the case with the *Europange* database in relation to the Angevins⁴⁴. We now have a database of over 8 000 officers in the service of the Angevin dynasty, which also bears witness to the recruitment of several urban lords. This enables us to interpret the Angevins’ patronage relations with several northern Italian lineages, but also the role of such relations with respect to certain families’ rise to power and the shaping of local aristocracies. As an example, one might mention the Angevins’ knighting of the De Alice family in Alessandria or the numerous offices bestowed on the Della Torre of Milan, particularly during their period of exile.⁴⁵ In other words, as with the study of *podestà* in Italian communes coordinated by Maire Vigueur for the purpose of interpreting 12th and 13th century communal society, the prosopographies of late 13th and 14th century officers appointed by lords can provide an important tool to interpret social self-assertion in *signorie*.⁴⁶ In this respect, I believe it would be worth further conducting the prosopographical investigation of staff in the service of imperial domains, starting from the *signorie* of the Visconti and

42 This passage is certainly Angevin in character and must have been produced within the milieu of major officers in Tuscany, but its attribution to Brunetto Latini remains disputed: for an overview of the debate, cf. Napolitano, Brunetto Latini’s *Politica* (see note 22).

43 Cengarle, *Le arenghe* (see note 2).

44 URL: [http://base.angevine-europe.huma-num.fr/prosopange/\(10.12.2025\)](http://base.angevine-europe.huma-num.fr/prosopange/(10.12.2025)).

45 On the decorating of Bonifacio Guasco de Alice, cf. Guglielmo Schiavina, *Annales Alexandrini*, Torino 1863 (*Historiae patria monumenta* 11, *Scriptores* 4), col. 305.

46 Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur (Ed.), *I podestà dell’Italia comunale. Parte I. Reclutamento e circolazione degli ufficiali forestieri (fine XIII sec. – metà XIV sec.)*, 2 vols., Roma 2000 (Collection de l’École française de Rome 268; *Nuovi studi storici* 51).

Scaligeri. For example, the Visconti extensively employed the lords of northern Italian cities as *podestà*.⁴⁷

3) Finally, I should mention the economy of the *signorie*. In this regard, the studies on the economy of rural lordships in the 14th and 15th centuries coordinated by Sandro Carocci might prove extremely useful from a methodological perspective.⁴⁸ Carocci's research only indirectly touches upon *signorie*; however, his classification of the economy of lordships can help us reflect on a key aspect of *signorie* which remains largely under-investigated – namely, resources. In the case of *signorie*, this entails the study of at least two defining aspects: on the one hand, the weight of taxation and of the commons; on the other, the weight of the vast landed patrimonies managed by lords in the countryside.⁴⁹ For instance, the Visconti's creation of parks and their appropriation of the commons are actions that had specific political overtones, as did the property reappraisals – a strong point for popular governments – that characterised the rise of certain *signorie*: in Pavia, for instance, the issue was raised by Giacomo Bussolari's short-lived, populist personal rule between 1356 and 1359.⁵⁰

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47 Paolo Grillo, Istituzioni e personale politico sotto la dominazione viscontea (1335–1402), in: Alessandro Barbero / Rinaldo Comba (Eds.), Vercelli nel secolo XIV, Atti del quinto congresso storico vercellese (Vercelli, 28–30 novembre 2008), Vercelli 2010, pp. 79–115.

48 Sandro Carocci, La signoria rurale nel XIV–XV secolo. Per ripensare l'Italia tardomedievale, Progetto PRIN 2015.

49 Already Sestan had realised that the patrimonial presence of urban lords in the countryside played a crucial role: Ernesto Sestan, Le origini delle signorie cittadine. Un problema storico esaurito?, in: Giorgio Chittolini (Ed.), La crisi degli ordinamenti comunali e le origini dello stato del Rinascimento, Bologna 1979 (Istituzioni e società nella storia d'Italia 2), pp. 53–75. This insight was vigorously taken up by British historians (Philip Jones, The Italian City-State from Commune to Signoria, Oxford 1997; Trevor Dean, Land and Power in Late Medieval Ferrara. The Rule of the Este, 1350–1450, Cambridge 2002 [Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought 4,7]) in the context of an attempt to downplay the social and popular aspects of the *signoria*, but overall it has not been developed much in relation to more specific investigations.

50 Cf. Riccardo Rao, Predicare i valori repubblicani in tempo di signorie. L'umanesimo repubblicano e popolare del frate agostiniano Giacomo Bussolari (Pavia, 1356–1359), in: Provence Historique 256 (2014), pp. 473–497; id., Giacomo Bussolari e la libertà di Pavia (1355–1359), in: Zorzi (Ed.), La libertà (see note 27), pp. 177–200.