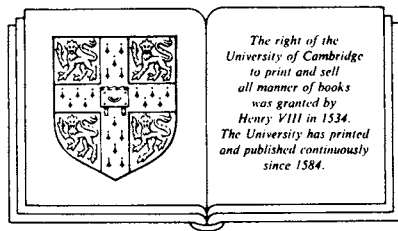


LAND AND POWER IN
LATE MEDIEVAL
FERRARA

The Rule of the Este, 1350–1450

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

FEUDALISM: NORTH AND SOUTH

A strange inversion is currently taking place in the historiography of medieval Europe. For a long time, the political history of northern Europe was dominated by a feudal version of history: historians wrote confidently of a 'feudal system', of 'feudal society' and of 'feudal monarchy'. What they meant by the use of these terms was that society was organised by feudal bonds and that feudalism defined political and social structures. Homage, fealty and feudal service were the ubiquitous signs of a true 'system' which embraced almost the whole of society (from princes to peasants) and nearly all social activity (warfare and political action, agriculture and social discipline). Only towns and trade remained isolated from the system's comprehensiveness. The situation in Italy was always different, as we shall see, but the historiography of feudalism has for some time seemed to be moving in different directions north and south of the Alps. While in northern Europe historians have been reducing the significance of feudalism, even propounding the rewriting of medieval history without it,¹ Italian historians have been revising their medieval history specifically to include it.² In northern Europe, decades of social history have taught us the importance of other, non-feudal social bonds, such as kinship, lordship and community, to the point where feudo-vassalic bonds have faded into the background. Feudalism is no longer on such

¹ E. Brown, 'The tyranny of a construct: feudalism and historians of medieval Europe', *AHR*, 79 (1974); S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900-1300* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 9, 220-3, 259; W. H. Dunham, review of B. D. Lyon, *From Fief to Indenture*, in *Speculum*, 33 (1958), 304.

² G. Tabacco, review of H. Keller, *Adelsherrschaft und städtische Gesellschaft in Oberitalien*, in *RSI*, 93 (1981), 852-5; G. Tabacco, 'Fief et seigneurie dans l'Italie communale', *MA*, 75 (1969); *Structures féodales et féodalisme dans l'occident méditerranéen (Xe-XIIIe siècles)*, in *Collection de l'Ecole française de Rome*, 44 (1980); and review by S. Gasparri in *Studi storici*, 22 (1981).

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historians' agenda,³ and the vocabulary of feudalism is dismissed as 'meaningless' and 'unhelpful in understanding medieval society'.⁴ In northern Europe, it is now a textbook statement that 'feudalism' was not the basis of royal or princely power and that it is utterly inadequate to describe society as 'feudal'.⁵ But in Italy, it has for some time been accepted as commonplace that 'feudalism' played an important, indeed underrated, part in the history of *signorie*, both urban and rural.⁶ More recently, those works which have attempted to provide a firmer feudal dimension to Italian medieval history have attracted great attention.⁷ In particular, there has been a confident reaction against the dominance of a 'classical model' of feudalism imported from France and against vigorous old prejudices which dismissed Italian feudalism as superficial and of no account because confined to the countryside. A process of what is awkwardly called 'historiographical decolonization' is now well in progress and interest in feudalism is robustly continuing.⁸

What can explain this divergence? Leaving aside the continuing use of feudalism in a socio-economic sense,⁹ it is certainly not the case that the term 'feudalism' is differently understood north and south of the Alps: whether dismissing or embracing it, historians

³ B. Guenée, 'Les tendances actuelles de l'histoire politique du moyen âge français', *Politique et histoire au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1981).

⁴ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, p. 9.

⁵ E. M. Hallam, *Capetian France 987-1328* (London, 1980), pp. 17-18, 94-7, 169-73; Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, p. 277; Guenée, 'Les tendances actuelles', pp. 187-9.

⁶ D. Waley, *The Italian City-Republics* (2nd edn, London, 1978), pp. 128-33; J. Lerner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch 1216-1380* (London, 1980), pp. 137-9.

⁷ See note 2 and also: G. Chittolini, 'Infeudazioni e politica feudale nel ducato visconteo-sforzesco', *QS*, 19 (1972); P. J. Jones, 'Economia e società nell'Italia medievale: la leggenda della borghesia', in *Storia d'Italia Einaudi, Annali*, vol. 1 (Turin, 1978); S. Polica, 'Basso Medioevo e Rinascimento: "rifeudalizzazione" e "transizione"', *BISI*, 88 (1979); C. Mozzarelli and P. Malanima, 'A proposito degli "Annali" della "Storia d'Italia": Dal feudalesimo al capitalismo', *Società e Storia*, 7 (1980); M. Nobili, 'L'equazione città antica - città comunale ed il "mancato sviluppo italiano" nel saggio di Philip Jones', *Società e Storia*, 10 (1980); R. Bordone, 'Tema cittadino e "ritorno alla terra" nella storiografia comunale recente', *QS*, 52 (1983).

⁸ *Structures féodales* and review by Gasparri (see note 2); C. M. de la Rioncière, 'Fidélités, patronages, clientèles dans le contado florentin au XIV siècle. Les seigneuries féodales, le cas des comtes Guidi', *Ricerche Storiche*, 15 (1985).

⁹ B. Figliuolo, in a review of *Structures féodales* (*Archivio storico per le provincie napoletane*, s. 3, 20 (1981)), usefully distinguishes between *feodalità*, the ensemble of feudo-vassalic bonds, and *feodalismo*, the socio-economic 'system', a distinction which would seem to have much to commend it, were it not for the unfamiliarity of the English word 'feudality'.

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are, by and large, talking about the same thing. Although much of the criticism has been directed at obvious targets, such as the ideas of a 'feudal pyramid' or of 'feudal society', both Italian and northern European historians ultimately have in mind feudo-vassalic bonds, in which fiefs are granted by lords, under the peculiar terms of feudal custom, in return for homage, fealty and service. The divergence seems, rather, to derive from different historiographical traditions and their revision in both cases. In northern Europe, mainstream historiography was for long focused on feudal relationships, on feudal service and on feudal disputes. Bound up with this were ideas of government and hierarchy which stressed the vertical structure of society and the formal acts (homage, investiture) by which that structure was created. To the revisionists, that picture now looks artificial. From Duby's study of the Mâconnais onwards, it has been argued that we have to look outside the formal political structure in order to understand the relationships that bound medieval society together. Most recently, it has been advanced that medieval society was a vast collection of groups or 'collectivities' and that it is the solidarities within these groups that are the key to understanding that society: in such an interpretation, it is claimed, feudalism has no place.¹⁰

In Italy, by contrast, it was precisely the (presumed) 'non-feudal' aspects of medieval history that for long drew much attention: the high levels of urbanisation and of commercial/industrial activity and wealth; cities under republican rule (Florence, Venice etc.); and a culture which it is easy to interpret as 'bourgeois'. It has, however, been shown that the emphasis placed on these was disproportionate and that it is questionable how 'non-feudal' they really were.¹¹ This radical revision of basic interpretations, as it affects feudalism, need be only briefly outlined here. According to an older orthodoxy, a 'feudal age' in Italy was presented as coming to an end in the early twelfth century, succumbing to the attacks of allegedly merchant-dominated communes, which challenged the powers of the feudal nobility in the interests of commercial convenience and profit. Castles were seized, nobles forced to reside in the cities and the 'feudal economy' undermined. In the thirteenth century, the guilds and artisans, grouped together as the *popolo*, heightened this attack

¹⁰ G. Duby, *La société aux XIe et XIIe siècles dans la région mâconnaise* (Paris, 1953); S. Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*.

¹¹ P. J. Jones, 'Economia e società nell'Italia medievale: il mito della borghesia', in P. J. Jones, *Economia e società nell'Italia medievale* (Turin, 1980), *passim*.

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on noble privilege and lawlessness by passing laws against unruly 'magnates' and the means by which they fomented unrest. Among the instruments of noble power that were attacked was the fief: prohibitions were issued on the granting of fiefs, on the wearing of devices (which advertised vassalic dependence) and on the drafting of vassals into the city in support of nobles' political pretensions.¹² Because these 'anti-magnate' campaigns were seen as largely successful, feudalism came to be disregarded after the twelfth century. Feudalism was pushed to the margins of Italian historiography, as it was indeed in the geographical margins alone that it was recognised as surviving, on the peripheries of the emergent regional states of the fourteenth century and in the hill-country of Emilia and Romagna.¹³ Fourteenth-century feudalism in Italy was for long dismissed as a mere 'relic', and the feudatories solely as creatures of the countryside, obstacles to state control – 'feudatories' in the historian's vocabulary came to denote troublesome rural lords, irredeemable backwoodsmen.¹⁴

That Italian medieval history is not to be written in terms of a conflict between cities and feudalism is now a commonplace and the re-evaluation of the social and political importance of landed society has gone a long way ('the return to the land').¹⁵ This has invested all aspects of medieval Italian history, from agrarian organisation, agriculture and trade to the political structure of the countryside and culture. The large presence of the non-mercantile aristocracy, the continuing reality of magnate power and the crucial importance of a

¹² G. Fasoli, 'Ricerche sulla legislazione antimagnatizia nei comuni dell'alta e media Italia', *RSDI*, 12 (1939).

¹³ J. Heers, *Le clan familial au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1974), pp. 43–5, 181; G. Cherubini, *Una comunità dell'Appennino dal XIII al XV secolo* (Florence, 1972), p. 133; F. Ercole, 'Impero e papato nel diritto pubblico del Rinascimento', in his *Dal comune al principato* (Florence, 1929), p. 313; S. Bertelli, *Il potere oligarchico nello stato-città medievale*, (Florence, 1978), pp. 25–32; and cf. G. Chittolini, *La formazione dello stato regionale e le istituzioni del contado* (Turin, 1979), p. x.

¹⁴ A. Palmieri, 'Feudatari e popolo della montagna bolognese (periodo comunale)', *AMRo*, s. 4, 4 (1913–14), 407–8; A. Palmieri, *La montagna bolognese del medio evo* (Bologna, 1929), pp. 13, 46, 252, 455–6; N. Tamassia, *La famiglia italiana nei secoli decimoquinto e decimosesto* (1910), p. 14; U. Petronio, 'Giurisdizioni feudali e ideologia giuridica nel ducato di Milano', *QS*, 26 (1974), 399; G. Fasoli, 'Lineamenti di politica e di legislazione feudale veneziana in terraferma', *RSDI*, 25 (1952), 62–3; G. Fasoli, 'Legislazione antimagnatizia', pp. 152ff, 166, 242–3; G. Magni, *Il tramonto del feudo lombardo* (Milan, 1937), pp. 65, 108ff; J. K. Laurent, 'Feudalismo e signoria', *ASI*, 137 (1979), 174–5; D. M. Bueno de Mesquita, 'Ludovico Sforza and his vassals', in *Italian Renaissance Studies*, ed. E. F. Jacob (London, 1960); cf. Chittolini, 'Infeudazioni', now in *La formazione*, p. 36.

¹⁵ Jones, 'Mito', p. 5 and *passim*.

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feudal aristocracy that was also urban have been recognised.¹⁶ Too often, nobles were portrayed as 'losing' their 'feudal' character on transferring residence into the city;¹⁷ but, as the 'anti-magnate' and 'anti-feudal' legislation shows only too clearly, feudal clientage, along with fortified houses, aristocratic lawlessness and fights for power, were all imported from the countryside into the town. And most towns ended by appointing a feudal lord as *signore*. The 'feudal age' obviously did not draw to a close in the twelfth century: the power of feudal lords endured, alongside, when not in charge of, the city communes;¹⁸ fiefs cannot be confined geographically to peripheral or mountainous regions;¹⁹ all the earlier *signori* were feudal lords and, as will be seen in the case of Ferrara, feudal bonds could be used to support urban *signoria*. The presence of the fief in the city is now widely accepted and older assumptions regarding the chronology and significance of feudalism in Italy have been revised.²⁰

Feudal lordship is thus seen to have a reality in Italy which runs counter to the trend in northern Europe to minimise its significance or to write as if fiefs and vassals had never existed. The total

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 6–15, 51–64, 74–5, 123; E. Cristiani, *Nobiltà e popolo nel comune di Pisa*, (Naples, 1962); Petronio, 'Giurisdizioni', p. 399; P. J. Jones, 'Communes and despots: the city-state in late medieval Italy', *TRHS*, 15 (1965), 75–8; G. Luzzatto, 'Tramonto e sopravvivenza del feudalesimo nei comuni italiani del Medio Evo', *SM*, s. 3, 3 (1962), 411; E. Fiumi, *Storia economica e sociale di San Gimignano*, (Florence, 1961), pp. 45–51; C. Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy* (London, 1981), pp. 86–8, 176.

¹⁷ A. Ventura, *Nobiltà e popolo nella società veneta del '400 e '500* (Bari, 1964), p. 108; E. Guidoni, 'Residenza, casa e proprietà nei patti tra feudalità e comuni', in *Structures féodales*; cf. Cristiani, *Nobiltà e popolo*, pp. 70–1.

¹⁸ Tabacco, 'Fief', p. 212; E. Sestan, 'Le origini delle signorie cittadine: un problema storico esaurito?', in his *Italia medievale* (Naples, 1968), pp. 209–10; Jones, 'Mito', pp. 111–12, 121; G. Fasoli, 'Città e feudalità', in *Structures féodales*, pp. 371–2.

¹⁹ That the fief persisted in vast parts of the countryside is commonly asserted: Ercole, 'Impero e papato', p. 313; Luzzatto, 'Tramonto', p. 418; Ventura, *Nobiltà e popolo*, pp. 7, 108; E. Fiumi, 'Fioritura e decadenza dell'economia fiorentina', *ASI*, 115 (1957), 420, 428; Fasoli, 'Città e feudalità', pp. 373–5; D. Waley, 'The army of the Florentine republic from the twelfth to the fourteenth century', in *Florentine Studies*, ed. N. Rubinstein (London, 1968), pp. 93–4.

²⁰ 'Il n'y a pas un modèle féodal. Il n'existe que des espèces locales qu'il faut prendre et comprendre pour elle-mêmes': P. Toubert, *Les structures du Latium médiéval* (Rome, 1973), p. 1136; G. Rippe, 'Feudum sine fidelitate. Formes féodales et structures sociales dans la région de Padoue à l'époque de la première commune (1131–1236)', *MEFR*, 87 (1975), 189; Tabacco, 'Fief', pp. 6–9, 13–19, 25–8, 35, 215–16; *Structures féodales*, pp. 241, 520, 526; Jones, 'Mito', pp. 4–5; G. Chittolini, 'Città e contado nella tarda età comunale', *NRS*, 53 (1969). Cf. Duby, *La société . . . mâconnaise*, pp. 186–8, 192, 195; T. Evergates, *Feudal Society in the Bailliage of Troyes under the Counts of Champagne 1152–1284* (Baltimore, 1975), pp. 62–3, 80–2, 90, 120.

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repudiation of feudal vocabulary is surely an unnecessarily extreme position. It is obviously undeniable that the space given to 'feudalism' in the past was excessive and that the word had a currency that went far beyond its usefulness. But this does not mean that we need go beyond merely reducing feudalism to its only useful meaning: the practice of granting fiefs in return for fealty and service and a political structure incorporating (though not necessarily based on) feudo-vassallic bonds. Against this view, it can of course be argued, from both ends of the Middle Ages, that the period when real lord-man relations coincided with the structures that are reconstructed from feudal records was in fact a brief one, that such coincidence as there was was never total and that the real object of study should not be 'feudalism', but lordship and the practical realities of leadership and authority. That feudal bonds are only part of the picture is, again, undeniable, but it is to establish precisely how large that part is, in one medieval state, that this book is directed. For in Italy at the end of the Middle Ages, it is clear that rulers did conceive of relationships with their territorial nobilities in feudal terms. As Chittolini has amply demonstrated, the Dukes of Milan in the fifteenth century were insisting anew on the feudal dependence of their rural nobles (feudal service, subjection to feudal law, etc.). Fiefs formed a major part of the structure of authority: it was as a papal fief that the Este sought to hold Ferrara and it was in fief that they held Reggio from the Dukes of Milan (after 1421). These were clearly not inherited, arcane relationships, of no relevance to the way that rulers thought of their position relative to other rulers: they both created and expressed ideas of territorial and political hierarchy.

BASTARD FEUDALISM AND REFEUDALISATION

Another sign of the divide separating Italian and northern European historiographies is the absence in Italy of debate over the precise nature of late-medieval feudalism and over the emergence of non- or post-feudal bonds in political society.²¹ In essence, that debate has focused on the separation of political relationships of alliance and dependence from land and the tenure of land. Although the whole

²¹ B. D. Lyon, *From Fief to Indenture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 252-3 and the bibliography there; C. Carpenter, 'The Beauchamp affinity: a study of bastard feudalism at work', *EHR*, 95 (1980); P. S. Lewis, 'Decayed and non-feudalism in later medieval France', *BIHR*, 37 (1964); J. Wormald, *Lords and Men in Scotland: Bonds of Manrent, 1442-1603* (Edinburgh, 1985), ch. 1.

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structure of land-holding in return for homage, fealty and service remained nominally intact, it had by 1500 long parted company with the realities of lordship. The alienability of fiefs and the development of a land market eroded the element of personal dependence; homage and fealty were vitiated by multiple lordship; service was commuted, neglected or refused. All that was left (in England at least) was a formal structure in law and the lord's claim to certain 'incidents' (relief, marriage, wardship). As landed feudalism lost its close functional relationship with political groupings, so real social and political relations were created and defined by other forms of bond or contract – ones which gave to the dependant not land in hereditage, but a pension or a promise of protection by the lord, both of which could be more easily revoked.

Such bonds took many different forms: bonds of manrent in Scotland, indentures of retinue in England, *alliances* in parts of France and, as we shall see, *accomandigia* in Italy. Whether such contracts may or may not be called 'feudal' has attracted much attention and debate, suggesting to one recent commentator that the major concern of historians has been over the appropriateness of a mere label, to the exclusion of deeper and fuller study of medieval political and social structures.²² Part of the difficulty is that there are clear problems with the suggested transition from 'feudal' to 'non-feudal' (or 'bastard-feudal') society. Nowhere was the transition clear-cut. First of all, of course, personal dependence was eroded from the earliest times, as fiefs were transmitted to the sons (or other relatives) of the first recipients and as the recipients tried to absorb fiefs into their private patrimonies.²³ On the other hand, landed fiefs long continued to be granted by rulers to their intimates in reward or expectation of service. Secondly, the transition from landed fiefs to money 'fees' was blurred by the existence of money fiefs (*fief-rentes*) alongside ordinary fiefs: in France, we are told, non-feudal bonds evolved quietly out of decayed money fiefs. Thirdly, the separation of political relations from the structure of land tenure was not total: in England, pensions to a lord's local retainers (some of whom would also be his tenants) might be assigned on the revenues of the local manor;²⁴ and generally in late medieval Europe, it is easy

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

²³ F. L. Ganshof, *Feudalism* (3rd edn, London, 1964), pp. 37, 44–6.

²⁴ A. J. Pollard, 'The Richmondshire community of gentry during the Wars of the Roses', in *Patronage, Pedigree and Power in Later Medieval England*, ed. C. Ross (Gloucester, 1979), pp. 52–4; N. Saul, *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 69–82.

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enough to find examples of fief-holding serving as the basis of military forces or duties deployed or required by lords.²⁵ And although the new types of bond do look like other, non-feudal contracts (of friendship, brotherhood or alliance),²⁶ they nevertheless used a feudal vocabulary and both the type of relationship created and the loyalty and service expected look very feudal too.²⁷ It might in fact be argued that all that the new contracts achieved was to restore to lords the flexibility in attaching and dismissing supporters, in shaping and controlling their entourage, that they had enjoyed before the development of a feudal land law which protected tenants' rights. In England, the transition to more flexible relations between lords and men has been held responsible for the collapse of political solidarities in the later fifteenth century, despite the fact that flexibility in recruiting and mobilising military forces through fees and friendship was certainly available, to the king at least, in earlier (and less disturbed) centuries.²⁸ 'Bastard feudalism', it might be argued, was more akin to earlier feudalism than the thirteenth-century model from which it was supposed to have degenerated.

This raises the possibility of dissolving the period of late-medieval feudalism into the long pre-industrial history of political relations between lords and men. In this case, historical enquiry is directed away from the question of feudalism and towards the specific political structures of different societies. The problem is then that we still have to make sense of fiefs and of the obligations that they created or reflected. Fiefs did, after all, greatly exercise the minds of late medieval (and early modern) rulers and their officials – in the issuing of charters, the compiling of registers of holdings and services, the writing of books of feudal law. If, as suggested above, there was not a clear point when all this activity passed into the area of legal fiction, of redundancy at a practical level, then we still have to assess, for each local society, the significance of fiefs and of feudal

²⁵ P. S. Lewis, *Later Medieval France: The Polity* (London, 1968), p. 198; C. T. Allmand, *Lancastrian Normandy 1415–50* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 52ff; M. E. James, 'The first earl of Cumberland (1493–1542) and the decline of northern feudalism', *Northern History*, 1 (1966), 48–50; A. Scufflaire, *Les fiefs directs des comtes de Hainaut de 1349 à 1504* (Brussels, 1978), pp. 158–77; but cf. R. Vaughan, *Charles the Bold* (London, 1973), pp. 218–19.

²⁶ Wormald, *Bonds of Manrent*, pp. 35–41; M. H. Keen, 'Brotherhood in arms', *History*, 47 (1962); G. Leseur, *Histoire de Gaston IV, comte de Foix*, ed. H. Courteault (2 vols., Paris, 1893–6), vol. 2, pp. 308–9.

²⁷ Dunham, review of Lyon, pp. 302–4; but cf. Wormald, *Bonds of Manrent*, pp. 14–33.

²⁸ R. L. Storey, *The End of the House of Lancaster* (London, 1966), pp. 9–17; J. O. Prestwich, 'The military household of the Norman kings', *EHR*, 96 (1981).

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bonds. This, in general terms, is one of the objects of this book.

As we shall see, there is in late medieval Italy a parallel to the 'new feudalisms' of northern Europe. But this 'refeudalisation' has a much wider meaning in current Italian historiography than 'bastard feudalism' has in England. On one level, it refers to the revived use by Italian states of the feudal grant of land to attach men, often military commanders, to their service or to define a territorial and political relationship. But this specific and technical meaning is only a part of a much broader trend which is perceived in later medieval Italy – a trend away from the innovative social and economic effects of the commercial revolution of the preceding centuries. 'Refeudalisation' meant the shift of capital from trade to land, the advance of aristocratic values and the undoing of the achievements of economic and urban growth. These technical and general meanings obviously harmonise: a revival of landed feudalism calls into question the extent of the commercialisation of land-ownership and land-tenure in the preceding period. On a broader level still, refeudalisation is one answer to the problem of Italy's failure to develop economically in the early modern period (the *manicato sviluppo*). Why, as one historian has put it, was Italy the 'first economic power of the fourteenth century, but the last of the eighteenth'?²⁹

Interest in this problem has been stimulated by the publication in 1978 of the first volume of *Annali* annexed to the Einaudi *Storia d'Italia* (entitled *Dal Feudalesimo al Capitalismo*). The obvious implications of the title parallel similar debates in England on the transition from feudalism to capitalism.³⁰ Discussion of the complex issues would be out of place here, but suffice it to say that part of the debate in Italy has focused on the nature of the Italian city-states and on the scale and incidence of social and political change brought about by economic growth. The achievements of (some of) the city-states in terms of wealth creation, republican government, social mobility and the development of an urban culture are impressive and undeniable.³¹ The question is whether all this was 'capitalistic' and modern in some sense or still dominated by aristocratic values and demands. In support of the latter view, it has been argued that the greatest commercial profits came from providing luxury goods and services to a small, aristocratic market, while the bulk of trade in

²⁹ Nobili, 'L'equazione', p. 891.

³⁰ *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, ed. R. H. Hilton (London, 1978); *The Brenner Debate*, ed. T. H. Aston (Cambridge, 1985).

³¹ P. J. Jones, 'La storia economica', in *Storia d'Italia Einaudi*, vol. 2 (Turin, 1974).

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volume was in basic commodities, mainly agricultural; that bourgeois culture was in fact permeated and led by aristocratic and chivalric values; and that republican government, for many cities, was short-lived and turbulent.³² Rather than being progressive states pointing towards modernity, the Italian cities were conservative, looking backwards to classical antiquity.³³

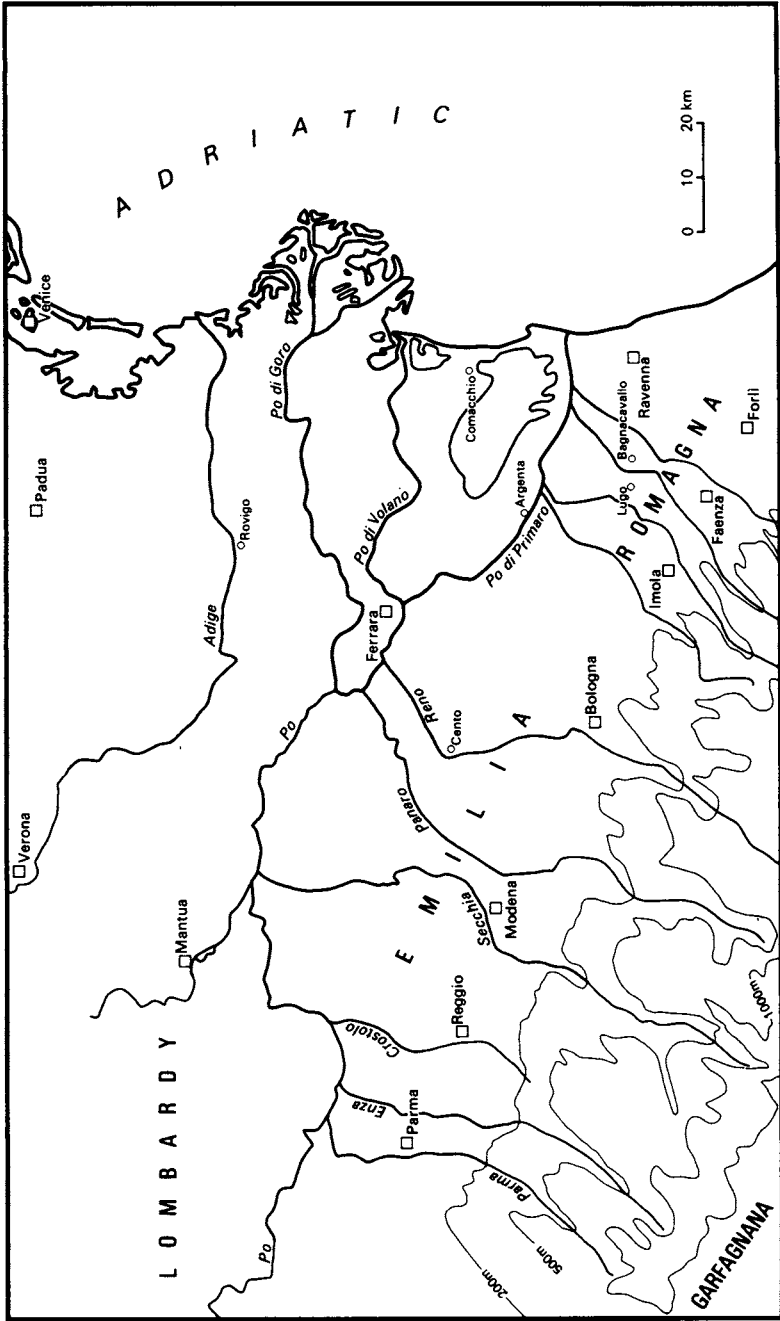
FERRARA AND THE ESTE

In all this, Ferrara is important because of its eccentricity: the first city of north and central Italy to produce a stable *signoria*; a city where feudo-vassalic bonds had a continuing presence and importance; and an urban economy which failed to generate the social and political framework typical of cities of its size and economic function.³⁴ Although the economic history of Ferrara awaits modern study, the conventional account would see a firm connection between Ferrara's socio-economic and its political structures, both in the conditions which generated *signoria* and in the reinforcement of those conditions after the establishment of the Este as *signori* in the mid-thirteenth century. Both economic and political feudalism, *feudalismo* and *feudalità*, seem to lie at the origins of *signoria* in Ferrara and both were, it is argued, reinforced by the Este after 1240. There are, however, problems here. The nature of Ferrara's economy in the century before the Este *signoria* and the precise nature of its failure is an intriguing puzzle. It is claimed that, in the quickening of economic exchanges from the eleventh century onwards, Ferrara had become a prosperous centre of distribution owing to its geographical location: not far from the coast, between Bologna and Venice, and commanding the zone where the Po divided into several branches. Ferrara was thus at the point of contact between interior and maritime trade and apparently rivalled Venice for the transit traffic from the Adriatic, its two annual fairs possibly attracting merchants from all over Italy. However, and here lies the paradox, a mercantile aristocracy failed to develop in Ferrara;³⁵ the guilds were not politically active nor at all prominent;³⁶ and there was no

³² Jones, 'Mito'. ³³ Nobili, 'L'equazione'. ³⁴ Sestan, 'Origini'.

³⁵ *Statuta Ferrariae de anno 1287*, ed. W. Montorsi (Ferrara, 1955), pp. lxxxviii-ix; Sestan, 'Origini', pp. 201-2; F. Bocchi, 'Patti e rappresaglie fra Bologna e Ferrara dal 1193 al 1255', *AMRo*, 23 (1972), 74; A. L. Trombetti Budriesi, 'Vassalli e feudi a Ferrara e nel Ferrarese dall'età precomunale alla signoria estense', *AMF*, s. 3, 28 (1980), 22-3, 229; Jones, 'Mito', p. 29.

³⁶ A. Sitta, 'Le università delle arti a Ferrara dal secolo XII al XVIII', *AMF*, 8 (1896).



Map 1 General map of north-east Italy

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organised *popolo* and consequently no popular, 'anti-magnate' or 'anti-feudal' legislation.³⁷ It may of course be that either or both parts of the paradox are falsely stated: that Ferrarese commercial prosperity has been exaggerated or that merchants and guilds were more prominent than has been thought (or than the evidence allows us to see), but as yet the paradox stands.³⁸ Similar problems attend the alleged reinforcement of this failure to develop after 1240: it is usually noted that it was the Este who allowed Venice to stifle Ferrara's trade and to divert it to Venice, in return for Venetian political support in the installation of the *signoria*.³⁹ But how full and secure Venetian economic domination turned out to be is open to question,⁴⁰ and the Este seem before long to have favoured and protected Ferrarese traders against Venetians. There are thus complex problems surrounding the question of 'economic feudalism' at Ferrara and its value as an explanation for the rise of *signoria*. No such problems surround the question of 'political feudalism': as we shall see, its role is clear in Ferrara's swift and straightforward transition from aristocracy to *signoria*.⁴¹

In other respects too, Ferrara was perhaps atypical. As elsewhere in Byzantine Italy in the eighth to tenth centuries, the nobility had remained urban and rural lordships based on castles had failed to develop. Power remained concentrated in the city and in the courts (*curie*) of the major churches (especially the Archbishopric of Ravenna), not dispersed in large rural possessions organised around a castle. Although noble patrimonies did develop in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the firm hold on power of the regional lords (the Canossa) and of the churches of Rome and Ravenna impeded the construction of rural lordships.⁴² One reason for this was perhaps

³⁷ Fasoli, 'Legislazione antimagnatizia', pp. 107-8; *Statuta Ferrariae*, pp. lxxix, lxxxvii-ix; Sestan, 'Origini', pp. 204-6; Jones, 'Mito', pp. 140, 146.

³⁸ T. Dean, 'Venetian economic hegemony: the case of Ferrara, 1200-1500', *Studi Veneziani*, forthcoming; G. Zanella, *Riccobaldo e dintorni* (Ferrara, 1980), pp. 82-3.

³⁹ B. Ghetti, *I patti tra Venezia e Ferrara dal 1191 al 1313*, (Rome, 1907), pp. 88-126; R. Cessi, *La repubblica di Venezia e il problema adriatico* (Naples, 1953), pp. 42, 56-7, 60-2, 67-8, 75-6.

⁴⁰ Dean, 'Venetian economic hegemony'.

⁴¹ Sestan, 'Origini', pp. 204-5; Jones, 'Storia economica', p. 1798; A. Castagnetti, 'Enti ecclesiastici, Canossa, Estensi, famiglie signorili e vassalatiche a Verona e Ferrara', in *Structures féodales*, p. 412; A. Castagnetti, *Società e politica a Ferrara dall'età postcarolingia alla signoria estense* (Bologna, 1985), ch. 9; Trombetti, 'Vassalli', pp. 67-77. Whether the Torelli supremacy, or that of the Estensi before 1264, may be considered *signoria* is questioned by Zanella, *Riccobaldo*, p. 89.

⁴² A. Castagnetti, *L'organizzazione del territorio rurale nel Medioevo* (Turin, 1979), pp. 208, 211-12, 218-22, 227; A. Castagnetti, 'Enti', pp. 399-411; Trombetti,

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geographical: contemporaries and later historians have noted the absence of large numbers of castles in the Ferrarese *contado*. In a flat region, much of which was below sea-level and covered, permanently or seasonally, by marsh and crossed by rivers liable to flood, the number of fortifiable positions was not great and the environment dictated a very different type of military architecture.⁴³ Consequently, the consular commune, which developed in a union of town and bishop against Ravenna, faced no 'nest of petty lords' in the *contado* against which it had to struggle to establish its dominance.⁴⁴ The scene was therefore set for the polarisation of power in the late twelfth century between two city families and their supporters: the Torelli and the Adelardi (soon to be replaced by the Estensi). Despite their large landed possessions, other noble families apparently did not have the military bases in the *contado* to challenge the domination of these two families, nor to prevent the early establishment of *signoria*.⁴⁵

It was the 1180s which saw the first development of a substantial Este interest in Ferrara. This family of marquises (*marchesi*) had in preceding centuries held wide lands throughout north and central Italy. But from the second half of the twelfth century, they had taken up residence at Este in the Padovano (from then they were known as the *marchesi d'Este*), supported by their large landed possessions in the southern Padovano and in the area to the north of Ferrara (the *Polesine di Rovigo*).⁴⁶ In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, their interests and ambitions were not limited to a single city, but extended across the *Marca Trevigiana*. Here they were active as political and military leaders of the faction which took their name

'Vassalli', pp. 17–20; A. Vasina, 'Il territorio ferrarese nell'alto medioevo', in *Insedimenti nel ferrarese* (Florence, 1976), pp. 85ff.

⁴³ 'Non sunt magna castra in dicto comitatu, ymo modica, sed sunt ville . . .': A. Theiner, *Codex diplomaticus Domini temporalis Sanctae Sedis* (3 vols., Rome, 1861–2), vol. 2, p. 538; Castagnetti, *L'organizzazione*, p. 231; Vasina, 'Territorio', p. 89. No noble families at Ferrara derived their name from a castle in the *contado*: Castagnetti, 'Enti', pp. 399–400.

⁴⁴ L. Simeoni, 'L'azione del comune nel comitato', in *Verona e il suo territorio*, vol. 2 (Verona, 1954), p. 318; L. Simeoni, 'Il comune rurale nel territorio veronese', *NAV*, 42 (1921), 184; Jones, 'Mito', pp. 14–15, 125–6.

⁴⁵ Sestan, 'Origini', pp. 207–9; Bertelli, *Il potere oligarchico*, pp. 52–3; Trombetti, 'Vassalli', pp. 8–9; Castagnetti, 'Enti', p. 411.

⁴⁶ E. Zorzi, *Il territorio padovano nel periodo di trapasso da comitato a comune* (Venice, 1929), pp. 162–84; I. Alessi, *Ricerche storico-critiche delle antichità di Este*, vol. 1 (Padua, 1776), pp. 524–97. For the narrative sections that follow: *Chronicon Estense*, *RIS*, 15; Jacobus de Delayto, *Annales Estenses*, *RIS*, 18; L. A. Muratori, *Delle Antichità Estensi ed Italiane* (2 vols., Modena, 1717–40); A. Frizzi, *Memorie per la storia di Ferrara* (2nd edn, Ferrara, 1847–8).

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(the *pars Marchionis*). However, when the last of the Adelardi died without male heirs, the Estensi intervened in Ferrara, taking over their lands and assuming the leadership of Adelardi supporters. This marked a substantial shift in the direction of Este ambitions and was followed in time by a slow withdrawal from the *Marca*: in the late thirteenth century, the Este acquisition of Modena and Reggio in Emilia led to a relaxation of Este control in the Polesine and by 1500 both the Polesine and Este lands in the Padovano had been surrendered to Venice.⁴⁷

THE COURSE OF EVENTS, 1200–1393

For some years, the Estensi and Torelli seem to have accepted positions of equal eminence and power in Ferrara. Members of both families served as *podestà* and there were some years of concord. But the rivalry for supremacy soon led to open conflict, which was played out on the larger stage of opposing alliances within north-east Italy. Two decades of repeated disputes between Estensi and Torelli left Salinguerra Torelli in control of Ferrara from 1224. But Salinguerra's alliance with Emperor Frederick II in 1236 led to the formation of a powerful league against him of Venice, Bologna, the Estensi and the papal legate. These were the forces which besieged and took Ferrara in 1240, expelling Salinguerra and allowing the installation of an Este lordship.⁴⁸ From this date, Este control of Ferrara continued, with minor interruptions, until 1597. No other *signoria*, established so early, lasted so long.

For the first decades, Azzo d'Este's power remained informal and was challenged at times by noble opposition and conspiracy (1251, 1261, 1270). But Azzo carefully advanced his power and that of his supporters: lands were taken from political opponents and from the Church and redistributed, as we shall see; nobles who had supported Salinguerra were won over with fiefs. Consequently, on Azzo's death in 1264, the *signoria* was formalised for his grandson (Obizzo II). This event was carefully stage-managed: the city was cleared of

⁴⁷ A. L. Trombetti Budriesi, 'Beni estensi nel Padovano: da un codice di Albertino Mussato del 1293', *SM*, s. 3, 21 (1980), 168–70; V. Lazzarini, 'Beni carraresi e proprietari veneziani', in *Studi in onore di Gino Luzzatto* (Milan, 1949), vol. 1, p. 277; R. Gallo, 'Una famiglia patrizia, i Pisani ed i palazzi di S. Stefano e di Stra', *AV*, s. 5, 24–5 (1944), 72.

⁴⁸ G. Marchetti Longhi, 'La legazione in Lombardia di Gregorio da Monte Longo', *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria*, 36 (1913); P. Rocca, 'Filippo, vescovo di Ferrara, arcivescovo di Ravenna', *AMF*, s. 3, 2 (1966), 17–60.