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NOBLES AND KNIGHTS

Robert Stacey

THE thirteenth century was an era of growing population, extensive land clearance, expanding towns and rapid social mobility. Governments grew more powerful and legal systems more complex. Distinctions of legal and social rank also became more elaborate. All these developments affected the aristocracy of thirteenth-century Europe, but none will serve to define the aristocracy itself as a group within society. Rather, the aristocracy of thirteenth-century Europe defined itself by its self-conscious adherence to a European-wide set of common cultural values and assumptions embodied in the cult of chivalric knighthood. Before we discuss how the aristocracy changed, we must first know who they were. It is with chivalry, therefore, that we must begin.

By the end of the twelfth century, the ideology of *chevalerie* had gained widespread acceptance among the mounted, heavily armoured warriors of western Europe. Contemporaries were increasingly aware that together these *chevaliers* could be conceived of as constituting a distinctive order within society. Like the other orders of late twelfth-century society, this *ordo militaris* comprised a very wide range of social ranks, from kings and emperors at the top, down to the landless warriors who in turn shaded off into the ranks of the wealthier peasantry. Chivalric ideology did not originate with the great lords, and in the empire particularly they were latecomers to it. But by the last decades of the twelfth century it was these great lords who, through their patronage of tournaments, heraldry and literature, fostered a notion of *chevalerie* as a social order which bound together men of such otherwise disparate status in life, and who, by identifying themselves with it, identified *chevalerie* with true *noblesse*. Not all the men called *milites* in Latin sources were noble in the year 1200, and not all nobles would have been flattered to be called *milites* or even *chevaliers*. But by 1200, nearly everywhere in Europe, those who fought in heavy armour while mounted on horseback shared in a common ideology of chivalry which associated them in some manner with kings and princes, and distinguished them

utterly from peasants, from whom some at least would on any other grounds have been entirely indistinguishable.

Chivalry was thus established by 1200 as the self-conscious ideology by which the aristocracy of thirteenth-century Europe would define itself and its boundaries. By emphasising qualities of loyalty, generosity, military prowess and courtly style as constituent elements in true nobility, chivalry facilitated the incorporation of the *chevaliers* into the ranks of an aristocracy to which many had not been born. This was no small thing in a society as socially mobile as that of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe, and helps to explain why thirteenth-century commentators were so tenacious in their efforts to devise schemes of social classification that justified the essential unity of the *chevaliers* as an aristocratic order, yet acknowledged the enormous differences in wealth, power and status that differentiated the mounted retainer from his lord, and that in many areas continued to divide the ancient families of noble lineage from the knightly families who had risen in their service. We must not mistake such prescriptive schemas for descriptive reportage, however. The elaborate hierarchical gradations of noble rank enshrined in the German *Heerschildordnung*, in Eike von Repgow's *Sachsenspiegel* (c. 1225) or the later *Schwabenspiegel* (c. 1270), or in Alfonso X's *Siete partidas* (c. 1260), reflect some of the ways contemporaries thought about their world, but they tell us little about the real complexities of thirteenth-century aristocratic social structures. Nor will any single 'model' for aristocratic social change be equally valid for all of Europe. Regional, even local, variation is everywhere apparent. In a very general way, however, the association of chivalric ideology with the greatest lords of the age raised the prestige of knighthood in thirteenth-century society, while raising also the requirements of descent, status and display necessary to enter into and sustain it. As a result, the number of men who took up formal knighthood declined in most areas, more rapidly as the century proceeded. This process of social elevation and exclusion had begun already by the end of the twelfth century, and continued into the fourteenth. By 1300, however, nearly everywhere in Europe, it had transformed the meaning of knighthood. *Chevalerie* began the century as the ideology of an *ordo*; the *chevaliers* ended the century as a social class, reduced in numbers, but now securely installed in the lower ranks of the nobility.

This transformation occurred first and most clearly in northern and central France, where chivalric ideology struck its earliest and deepest roots, and where the growing power of the crown fostered the development during the thirteenth century of clear criteria for noble status. Here, the unfree mounted warriors who could still be found in parts of Flanders, Champagne, Berry and the Paris basin in the first half of the twelfth century were gone by 1200. By about 1250 the *milites* were widely recognised as *domini*, extracting revenues from

their dependent peasantry, living in fortified houses and addressed indifferently with counts and dukes as 'lord', *messire*. When French contemporaries sought to express the quality these *domini* shared, they spoke usually of *gentillesse*, 'gentility', a flexible concept which combined knightly descent with an aristocratic style of life and behaviour. *Nobilitas* was more controversial. It is true that in southern Burgundy *nobiles* and *milites* were interchangeable terms by 1100. But elsewhere *nobilitas* was ascribed indifferently to all *milites* in the formal language of charter witness lists only from the late thirteenth century on, as intermarriage between the knights and the pre-1150 aristocracy at last began to displace the endogamous traditions of these ancient noble families. As the standard descriptive term for this emerging class of lords, however, *noblesse* triumphed over *gentillesse* only around 1300, as 'nobility' in France achieved a distinct legal status conveying specific fiscal, judicial and military immunities to its possessor.

In practice, however, definitions of nobility in northern and central France were worked out on a case-by-case basis throughout the thirteenth century, when someone – a royal official, or sometimes another noble – had reason to challenge someone else's claim to noble status. Such cases became increasingly common from the mid-thirteenth century on, as restrictive taxes were imposed on fiefhold property sold to 'non-nobles'. Genealogical descent, possession of existing lordships or fiefs, style of life and local reputation were all relevant to determining 'nobility', although lineage became an increasingly important criterion as the century progressed. As the king's power to tax non-nobles grew, the *parlement* of Paris emerged as the normal tribunal which adjudicated claims by families aspiring to the tax exemptions accorded those of noble rank. The development of royal patents of ennoblement under Philip the Fair marks a further stage in the emergence in France of a notion of nobility as a legal rank defined by royally sanctioned privilege. So too do the Leagues of 1314–15 in their elaboration and defence of nobility as a heritable legal status possessed by a social class. It was not until the last half of the fourteenth century, however, that criteria of nobility were fully established in law, that knightly descent or a patent of nobility became the *sine qua non* of noble status, and that derogation from nobility became a matter of legal consequence. These developments were well advanced by 1300, but they were far from irreversible.

The legal unity of the French nobility was the product of royal fiscal and judicial policy. It did not reflect the structural realities of aristocratic society. Great disparities of wealth and power separated the simple knights from the great lords in 1200. The gulf grew larger as the century progressed. Lordships multiplied rapidly in the first decades of the century, some with rights of low justice, but others with no jurisdictional revenues beyond their rents. At the same time, the claims of the king and a few other great territorial lords to a monopoly of banal authority were depriving many long-established lords of

their rights to impose tolls and taxes and to exercise high justice within their localities. The result was a marked levelling of seigneurial authority in the countryside. As inflation ate away the value of fixed rents, however, especially after 1270, only the great lords who had retained their banal privileges were able to compensate for their declining agricultural income by increasing their jurisdictional revenues. Lesser lords were increasingly unable to keep up with the rising contemporary standards for an appropriately noble style of life. By 1300 there are clear signs of crisis amongst the numerous petty lords of areas like Picardy and Flanders.

Some knights responded by entering the service of greater lords or of the king, and those who prospered were sometimes able to re-establish their positions from the proceeds of office holding. Marriages with prosperous burghers or peasants were another route to survival and to continuing social mobility. Others moved to the towns and branched out into commerce, a phenomenon well known in southern Europe, but more widespread in northern Europe than is often realised. The prejudices that declared commerce incompatible with nobility were still taking shape when the thirteenth century ended. They did not become legally enforceable until the end of the fourteenth century, and even then, only in France, Castile and parts of east central Europe. In the thirteenth century, commerce remained an avenue of opportunity open even to the greatest lords throughout western Europe.

Lords threatened by the declining real value of fixed rents cut costs where they could; and from the mid-thirteenth century on, we find growing numbers of lesser knights' sons in France failing to take up knighthood, remaining instead as *armigeri*, *damoiseau*, 'squires'. By 1250, more than half the fief holders in Forez were unknighthed squires, while in the Mâconnais the undubbed sons of knights made up more than half the aristocracy. In Picardy, dubbing remained customary until about 1270, but squires multiplied rapidly thereafter in all but the greatest families. The ranks of squires were further increased by the fact that thirteenth-century French knightly families frequently divided their estates amongst all their children, or at least all their sons, rather than concentrating their inheritances in the hands of a single heir. Customs varied by region, and in areas like the Beauvaisis and the Vexin, primogeniture was carefully preserved. But in most areas, partible inheritance had long been practised by the greatest aristocratic lineages even where customary law might appear to dictate otherwise. As the knights became more firmly a part of this aristocratic elite, they adopted its succession practices also. In thirteenth-century Champagne primogeniture was actually prohibited with respect to fiefs. Elsewhere, as with Picardy, changes in inheritance customs can be traced only by their results. The results, however, were clear: a markedly increased number of small lordships, whose holders proved especially vulnerable to the eco-

conomic difficulties of the later thirteenth century; fragmentation of the great estates, which facilitated their acquisition by the crown or other lords; and high extinction rates among aristocratic lineages. In Forez, 66 of the 215 aristocratic families disappeared during the thirteenth century. In Picardy, only twelve of the fifty greatest families in 1190 survived in the male line to 1290; but they had been joined in the meantime by no less than sixty-four other families who had risen into aristocratic ranks.

By 1300, the *chevaliers* of France were securely a part of the nobility, and their privileged legal status was increasingly seen as heritable even by their undubbed descendants. As a social class, however, the nobility itself was still in flux, and would remain so. By 1300, the wealthiest men in France were merchants, not nobles; and although newly constructed distinctions of legal rank might retard the merchants' entrance into the ranks of the nobility, they could do little to counteract the changing balance of economic power between them.

Patterns of change among the English aristocracy were broadly similar to those of northern France. Here too the years between 1180 and 1240 were the critical ones for the assimilation of local knightly families into the ranks of the *domini*. It is in these years too that it became fashionable for the greatest lords to style themselves as *milites*, a chivalric acknowledgement of the common values that united them with the often landless knights who comprised their retinues. More clearly than in France, however, the rising status of the knights in England rested on the massive transfer of land from tenants-in-chief to their knightly followers which took place in the century prior to 1180. Such transfers may have purchased loyalty initially, but as these heritable grants were passed down to children and grandchildren, the links which bound knightly tenants to their honorial lords became increasingly attenuated. In Ireland and on the Welsh marches, continuing colonisation and military necessity preserved these links rather longer. But in England itself, the tenurial security provided by royal justice combined with the increasing value of their landed resources to render most shire knights substantially independent of lordly control by about 1225. Thereafter, great lords who aspired to control the localities generally had to achieve this in partnership with local knightly families, offering fees, offices and patronage at court in return for their service and support. Always, however, the power of the king and his agents stood as a potential counterweight to such territorial ambitions. As a result, the shire knights emerged in the thirteenth century as a distinctive political group, whose independence from both the king and the great lords can be traced in parliamentary negotiations from the late 1260s onward.

Notwithstanding the knights' developing role in parliament as spokesmen for 'the commons', knights themselves were securely a part of the English aristocracy, increasingly so as their numbers diminished from perhaps 3,000 in

1200 to around 1,100 in the early fourteenth century. The rising costs of aristocratic display, the administrative burdens imposed on shire knights by the crown and the desire to avoid personal summonses to military service all played a role in the rapid decline of knightly numbers in the countryside. From the 1240s on, kings responded by periodically attempting to coerce all £15, £20 or £40 freeholders to accept knighthood. Exemptions were easily purchased, and so the policy had little effect on the overall numbers of knights, but it did help to keep open the lower boundary of the English aristocracy to the rapidly growing number of squires. As in France, the landed wealth and local reputation of these thirteenth-century squires were sufficient to rank them among the gentle-born, although in England it was not until the fourteenth century that the squires moved fully into aristocratic ranks by taking up heraldic insignia. In England, however, gentility never gave way to nobility as the characteristic quality of this aristocracy, because in England nobility never became a term of legal art. From the thirteenth century on, the English 'nobility' enjoyed no exemptions from royal taxation, no judicial rights of consequence beyond their manorial courts and no privileges in legal procedure beyond a right to be tried by their peers, a guarantee provided to all free men by Magna Carta, but which came to mean that lords summoned personally to parliament should be tried only by the king himself or by their lordly 'peers' in parliament. In some respects, for example in their freedom to sell fiefhold property, the great lords of late thirteenth-century England were even more tightly bound by legal restrictions than were lesser men because they were more likely to hold their lands directly from the crown.

The absence of a legally privileged nobility from thirteenth-century England is conventionally seen as a sign of the overwhelming power of the English crown. It may also reflect the enormous prosperity of these great lords. Direct exploitation of their estates made them the beneficiaries of the rising prices for agricultural produce which characterised the century. Their continuing connections with towns and trade provided them with markets for their produce and substantial cash incomes from markets, tolls and fairs. Some, like the earls of Arundel and Pembroke, engaged in trade directly, especially with Ireland and the Low Countries, sometimes even with their own ships. Others developed urban property, especially in London, or founded new towns. Nowhere were the lines between the aristocracy and the townsmen clearly drawn. Knights and townsmen sat together in thirteenth-century parliaments as the representatives of shires and boroughs; the ruling oligarchies in the towns were often drawn from country families; while the men of London and the Cinque Ports were conventionally addressed as 'barons'. Tax burdens on the aristocracy were light until the 1290s, and the stability of the English currency lessened the impact of inflation on their fixed rents, which made up a

far smaller proportion of their incomes anyway than for the lords of northern France.

Among the knights and squires, stability was somewhat less than it was among the greatest families. In the shires, the improvident and the unlucky disappeared, and new families took their place, rising through royal favour, administrative service, trade, land purchase, marriage and successful litigation. Political miscalculations could be disastrous, and in the wake of the mid-century civil wars, an extraordinary redistribution of landed resources took place within aristocratic ranks. But the structure of the aristocracy itself did not change dramatically. No systematic crisis overtook the English aristocracy of the sort we see by 1300 in northern France. In France, the construction of a noble class in law was in part a response to the nobility's own perception of threat. In England, where no such threats materialised, no legally protected nobility emerged.

In the German-speaking lands of the empire, by contrast, it was free knights who were rare by 1200; by 1300 in many areas they had disappeared altogether as a distinguishable group within aristocratic society. The ranks of the *chevalerie* were instead filled by the legally unfree *ministeriales*, whose military and political influence and aristocratic style of life corresponded fully to those of their knightly counterparts in France, but whose legal status continued in principle to distinguish them from the free nobility until the fourteenth century. In the early twelfth century, when a distinctive *ordo ministerialis* took shape in Germany, the ministerials' unfreedom had involved three principal restrictions on their conduct: they could not alienate their lands except to other ministerials of the same lord; they could not do homage to or hold fiefs from any other lord without their personal lord's permission; and they could not marry outside the lordship, again without their lord's permission. By 1200, these restrictions on alienation of lands, homage and on multiple fief holding had already largely broken down, and were even further relaxed in the troubled years between 1197 and 1218. Werner von Bolanden, imperial ministerial under Frederick Barbarossa, held land from more than forty different lords in addition to Barbarossa; and in practice, especially in areas like the Rhineland, ministerials by 1200 were freely alienating their property through sales, donations and sub-infeudations, subject only to a customary requirement that they recompense their lord for his 'loss' with lands of equal value. Despite their legal unfreedom, ministerials were thus in practice freer by 1200 in their ability to alienate feudal property by sale or gift than were the knights of northern France or England, and continued to be so until the end of the thirteenth century. Their rights of inheritance were also firmly secured in local custom, so much so that on occasion free men voluntarily took on ministerial status apparently so as to safeguard the succession of their estates.

Nor were the restrictions on their marital freedom unusual when compared to customs elsewhere in northern Europe, at least prior to the late twelfth century. Thereafter, however, we note a change. Whereas in northern France and England seigneurial control over knightly marriage increasingly broke down from the mid-twelfth century on, in Germany this legal limitation was preserved; and although in fact a great many thirteenth-century ministerials did marry outside their lordships without their lord's permission, a ministerial who did so had no legal defence if his lord chose later to make an issue of his unsanctioned marriage by confiscating his fiefs. Indeed, as the principalities of late thirteenth-century Germany assumed more precisely defined boundaries, restrictions on ministerial marriages were sometimes applied with even greater rigour by lords like the archbishop of Salzburg, struggling to assert and maintain the territorial integrity of his *terra*, and anxious not to lose control of valuable ministerial inheritances through marriages with dependants of competing lords.

Like their knightly counterparts elsewhere, the ministerials rose in the world through the service of greater lords. Their unfree status derived from their role as vassals in a seigneurial *familia*, but the services they performed were the honourable ones of fighting on horseback, office holding and administration; and as ties of vassalage spread during the twelfth century to encompass free knights, counts and even dukes, traditional equations of 'nobility' with 'freedom' became increasingly irrelevant to the realities of aristocratic German life. As ministerials acquired fiefs, they also began to acquire the heraldic insignia linked with fief holding. As with the other knights of thirteenth-century Europe, the assimilation of the German ministerials into the ranks of the aristocracy was marked by their adoption of heritable armorial bearings. In Germany, the arms borne by ministerials in the thirteenth century were often derived from the arms of their principal lord, symbolising their unfreedom, but emphasising their potentially ennobling proximity to the upper ranks of the 'free' aristocracy. The standing of ministerials in the thirteenth century was a complex mixture of both these elements.

Despite great disparities in wealth and social standing, ministerials in the twelfth century were widely perceived by contemporaries as constituting a single and distinctive order within German society. In the thirteenth century, however, this unity broke down. The most powerful ministerial families, those holding fiefs of many lords, in possession of castles and exercising seigneurial authority in the countryside, had already begun to style themselves as *nobiles* in the twelfth century. And although such claims would not be generally accepted in aristocratic society until the fourteenth century, they were addressed as *domini* from about 1200 on in common with the free nobility. Free knights continued to enter the ranks of the ministerials throughout the thirteenth century, especially in areas where strong princes were successfully consolidating their

authority. Elsewhere, the most powerful ministerials were beginning to establish a *de facto* independence from their lords, a development hastened in areas where the extinction of comital or ducal lineages left them without a personal lord altogether. After 1254, the extinction of the Staufer emperors released a new flood of lordless imperial ministerials into German society. By the end of the thirteenth century, the greatest ministerial families had merged with the remaining free nobility of the countryside, to constitute in areas like Austria, Styria and the Rhineland an 'estate of lords' (*Herrenstand*). The majority of lesser ministerials, however, either attached themselves to other lords and merged with their own retainers to constitute an 'estate of knights', the late medieval *Ritterstand*, or else dropped back into the ranks of the peasantry. Above them both, of course, stood the *Reichsfürstenstand*, the estate of imperial princes, whose ranks were defined by a series of royal edicts between 1180 and 1237, with continuing adjustments thereafter. Not every region witnessed this split between knights and lords; and in areas where a single prince predominated, like Salzburg, or in the expanding areas of eastern settlement, like Brandenburg, Mecklenburg and Meissen where an 'old' nobility had never existed, only a single lordly estate of knighthood formed.

Regional peculiarities should not obscure the general phenomenon, however. Like the knights of England and northern France, the German ministerials by 1300 had risen into the ranks of the hereditary nobility, dividing as they did so into an upper and a lower stratum. Except in a few outlying areas like Guelders and Zutphen, where ministerials survived until the sixteenth century, they shed the remaining vestiges of their unfreedom during the fourteenth century. As with the free nobility, the thirteenth-century prosperity of the *ministeriales* which enabled them to rise rested on three main props: their possession of landed wealth, acquired as fiefs and through purchase, but vastly increased through internal colonisation and land reclamation; their control over castles; and their connections with towns, where many twelfth-century ministerial families were installed by their lords as administrators. The result, especially in the old settlement areas of Swabia, Franconia, northern Bavaria and the Rhineland, was the emergence during the thirteenth century of a very important urban nobility, living in fortified townhouses, engaging in commerce, but closely associated with the nobility of the surrounding countryside. As it was in northern Italy, the Low Countries and north-eastern France, chivalry in late medieval Germany was as much an urban enthusiasm as a rural one. Everywhere in western Europe, however, it remained the distinctive ideology of an increasingly self-conscious noble class.

Against this background, the often-alleged distinctiveness of the urban-dwelling, commercially oriented nobility of northern and central Italy loses

much of its force. Long-standing relationships of vassalage and service between the nobility of the countryside and the administrators and merchants of the towns had created an important urban nobility in the Italian towns by 1100. These links between town and *contado* were further strengthened by the involvement of the rural nobility in urban commercial ventures, and by the efforts of the new communal governments to encourage the nobility of the *contado* to reside in the towns. Not all agreed to do so, and throughout the thirteenth century about half the rural nobility resisted any significant connection with commerce or the communes. By the thirteenth century, however, the communes themselves were dominated by closely integrated patriciates drawn from both the landed nobility of the countryside and the wealthy merchants and moneylenders of the towns. These urban magnates lived in fortified towers in the city while drawing much of their wealth from rural property. They maintained networks of clients and kin throughout the *contado*, and lived by a code of honour and vendetta that by the 1240s posed a serious challenge to political stability. But what principally distinguished them from their fellow citizens was their self-conscious allegiance to the cult of chivalry, the French origins of which paradoxically increased its importance in Italy as a marker of aristocratic solidarity. Even more markedly than elsewhere in Europe, chivalry in northern and central Italy defined and unified an elite of extraordinarily disparate social origins around a common set of aristocratic cultural values.

In most Italian cities, mounted military service was compulsory for all male citizens above a set level of wealth. The incessant warfare that characterised thirteenth-century Italian life thus helped to maintain knighthood as a means of entry into aristocratic society open even to former serfs. It was thus not mounted military service itself, but rather the full ceremonial trappings of chivalric knighthood that came to distinguish the merely wealthy from the truly noble families among the thirteenth-century urban patriciate. Dubbing to knighthood became the accepted ritual by which a family proclaimed its magnate status, and remained so until the 1330s, despite the efforts of several communal governments (most famously Florence) from the 1280s on to limit the power of magnate families by banning dubbed knights and their lineages from political office. Throughout the century, however, it remained possible for new families to enter the patriciate by adopting the chivalric values of the urban nobility. The social narrowing of knightly ranks visible elsewhere in Europe during the thirteenth century appears clearly in Italy only in the fourteenth, when it coincided with a general 'refeudalisation' of rural society and, in Tuscany, with an economic crisis for the lesser nobility.

In southern Italy, by contrast, chivalry was less often an urban phenomenon, and knighthood more often restricted to the descendants of knights. Urban life itself was far less developed, and the structures of rural lordship were more

securely in the hands of a territorialised nobility. In northern Italy, the growth of property taxes during the thirteenth century reduced the fiscal privileges attendant upon nobility, making nobility more than ever a matter of values and style. In the south, however, the opposite occurred. Tax exemptions on feudal property became more securely established, and a growing prejudice against noble involvement in commerce increased the economic dependence of the nobility on their estates. Inheritance customs differed also, indivisibility in the south preserving the integrity of powerful noble lordships, while the partible inheritance customs of the north acted to dissolve them.

The closest parallels with northern Italian knighthood during the thirteenth century were thus not with the south, but with Spain. In Castile, an ancient nobility defined by heritable fiscal privileges, descent and knightly service existed by the eleventh century, divided into a small group of *ricos hombres* (from Gothic *reiks*, meaning 'powerful'), and a much larger group of lesser *hidalgos* or *infanzones*. In the north the *hidalgos* remained a largely rural group. The word *hidalgo* was itself derived from *fijo d'alguno*, 'son of somebody'. In central and southern Castile, however, kings recruited mounted troops and settlers for the *Reconquista* by offering the privileges of *hidalguía* to any frontier townsman who fought on his own horse with knightly arms. In theory, the knightly status and attendant tax exemptions of these *caballeros villanos* did not pass automatically to their descendants; status was to this extent strictly dependent upon service, and so distinct from *hidalguía*, which was heritable. In practice, however, mounted service in frontier towns was obligatory for all males wealthy enough to sustain its requirements; and since horses, arms and wealth were heritable, the distinctions between *hidalgo* and *caballero* families in the towns became increasingly blurred. By the early thirteenth century, an effectively hereditary group of *caballeros villanos* dominated most towns, along with a much smaller group of urban *hidalgos*. Their mounted service secured for them the largest share of the booty from raids and conquests, while their monopoly of local offices guaranteed them the lion's share of the tax revenues from the surrounding countryside. Their dominance was further encouraged by the efforts of Ferdinand III and Alfonso X to fuse these two groups into a single, closed urban aristocracy of 'knights by lineage' (*caballeros de linaje*), by increasing their tax exemptions, relaxing military service requirements and insisting that they alone could hold urban offices and represent their towns in the *cortes*.

The rich opportunities for plunder and conquest offered by the *Reconquista* made mounted military service a continuing avenue for social advancement within the towns, particularly during the first half of the century. After mid-century, however, we find a growing insistence in Castile on the necessity of a knightly lineage to true nobility (*hidalguía*). This was partly a matter of maintaining urban tax rolls, but it also reflected developments within Castilian

society: lessening military opportunity as the Reconquista came to an end; the declining economic position of the *hidalgos*, especially in the north where they were most numerous; and the growing power and wealth of the urban patriciate, composed largely of *caballeros villanos*, but in Andalusia comprising also merchants whose status as *caballeros* was dependent on their wealth. Alfonso X's very deliberate efforts, through sumptuary legislation, court ceremonial and the *Siete partidas*, to define chivalric values, to identify them with true nobility, and to focus them on his court, were attempts to construct a cultural unity for this new Castilian nobility he sought to promote. His success is apparent in the cult of the Cid, the particular hero of the *caballeros villanos*, who emerged by 1300 as the pre-eminent chivalric hero for the entire Castilian nobility as well. By 1300, the *caballeros villanos* were securely a part of a hereditary nobility that would thereafter define itself increasingly strictly by birth and lineage. In the late medieval *cortes*, this knightly nobility would sit together as a single estate.

Social change amongst the Aragonese aristocracy was much less marked. The small group of *ricos hombres* in Aragon proper remained fairly stable throughout the thirteenth century, tightening their grip on their dependent tenants, and increasingly assertive of their independence from the crown. Neither they nor the larger group of lesser nobles (*infanzones*) profited much from King James I's conquests of Majorca and Valencia, while the non-heritability of their tenancies appeared even more unjust when contrasted with the heritable fiefs of Catalonia. The towns of Aragon grew markedly in the first half of the century, but remained too small to accommodate the ambitions of more than a few families of urban knights. Knighthood in Aragon therefore remained an almost exclusively noble enterprise, notwithstanding the presence of a few *caballeros villanos* along the twelfth-century borderlands. Divisions between the greater and lesser nobility are reflected in the Aragonese *cortes*, in which these two groups sat in separate estates. Their mutual alienation from the crown grew steadily, however, producing in 1265 at Ejea and in the 1283 Union a co-operative defence of the tax exemptions and judicial privileges that characterised their joint nobility.

In Catalonia, by contrast, the ancient nobility of counts and viscounts declined dramatically during the twelfth century. In their place arose a much larger group of castellans (hence, perhaps, the very name 'Catalonia'), whose noble status was well enough established by 1200 to allow invidious comparisons between the true nobility of counts and castellans, and the pretensions of an *arriviste* group of knights who had risen as the agents of the crown's expanding authority in the last few decades of the century. The conquests of King James I brought new opportunities to all three groups; but what really transformed thirteenth-century Catalan society was the explosive growth of the city of Barcelona. Like the great cities of northern Italy, Barcelona was controlled

by a tightly knit patriciate of 'honourable citizens', here drawn overwhelmingly from the city itself. But despite important differences in family structure between the urban patriciate and the rural nobility, some noble families, such as the Moncada, did participate in the urban development of Barcelona and the commercial expansion of the Catalan empire. Even more importantly, both the Barcelonan patriciate and the rural nobility shared in the common cultural and political world of the Catalan court, acting together as lenders, office holders and emissaries in the interests of the count-kings. One of the consequences of such co-operation around the court was intermarriage between merchant and noble families, which remained common throughout the century and helped in turn to promote the remarkable social mobility apparent at almost every rank of thirteenth-century Catalan society. Knighthood may have been less common among the 'honourable citizens' of Barcelona than it was among their Italian counterparts, but the example of Ramon Llull suggests that chivalric knighthood was indeed an aspiration among patrician families, perhaps especially in the new world of conquered Majorca. We know too little as yet about the cultural life of either the rural nobility or the urban elites of Catalonia to determine with confidence the extent to which a common chivalric culture defined and united them. But in a culture so cosmopolitan as that of thirteenth-century Catalonia, it would be surprising indeed if chivalric values did not in some measure contribute, as they did nearly everywhere else in Europe, to the process by which a socially diverse aristocracy of barons, knights and urban magnates became a noble class.

CHAPTER I (b)

URBAN SOCIETY

Steven A. Epstein

THE line between urban and rural society, the small town and the big village, is a fine one and traditionally depends on whether or not a majority of the population supported itself other than by fishing, farming, mining or tending herds. In the past, there has been a tendency to identify towns solely by their legal status; this is not entirely satisfactory. Some unusual villages contained 1,000 people; a small town might not have much more. Thousands of small market towns existed across Europe and fulfilled the vital local functions of providing a place where people could exchange goods and supplies, repair their farm implements, have their children baptised or attend a fair. At around 5,000 people (in more densely settled regions) a city assumed certain features more characteristic of urban society, but in Scandinavia or eastern Europe even smaller places were impressive in local terms. A symbiotic relationship existed between all cities and their countrysides; any contrast between urban and rural society runs the risk of posing a false dichotomy. Arbitrary chronology is also a problem; the years 1198 and 1300 do not mark any decisive events affecting urban society across Europe.

Europe in the thirteenth century remained an overwhelmingly rural society, and so cities were still distinctive islands in a sea of villages and hamlets. The theme of urban societies must not turn these cities into generic types. Important regional differences must not be obscured, and nor should these places be rendered so typical as to conceal the process of change. On the most basic level, western Europe had more cities than the east, but this century marks the rise of some newly significant places as distant as Moscow. Many of Europe's largest cities dotted the Mediterranean from Gibraltar to the Bosphorus, but a similar band of newer towns followed the sea coast from the English Channel to the Gulf of Finland. Differences in climate and geography account for some special features of urban life; the canals of Venice do not freeze; the steep roofs in Bergen do not resemble the tiled ones in Valencia; rainfall would help to clean the streets of London but not Palermo; some

marshy areas, like the Maremma near Pisa, remained so malarial as to stifle successful urban life near them. Different physical appearances of cities help to mark regional flavours; the Mediterranean city does not look like one in the Low Countries. Yet some features of life cut across boundaries of space and weather. Walls or water surrounded most thirteenth-century cities. In every Christian city the biggest building was generally a church, almost invariably either a partially completed Gothic cathedral or a Romanesque basilica. A rough line from the Baltic to the Mediterranean fixed, from east to west, whether the language of the Mass in that church was Greek or Latin, whether the people looked to Constantinople or Rome for spiritual guidance. And of course Jews everywhere and Muslims in Spain and Sicily followed their own religious practices, in synagogues and mosques that did not tend to thrive where Christians ruled.

The thirteenth century witnessed a rapid growth of population, and this increase fuelled an expansion of Europe's cities. No census or reliable estimate of population survives for any thirteenth-century city.¹ Some contemporary figures provide a basis for guessing the size of the population. Tax lists give the number of households; military service yields the number of men capable of bearing arms; city walls may define the main inhabited area. These more or less reliable figures generally require a multiplier – average household size, gender and age distribution in the population, people per hectare – to produce the hypothetical figures. Small differences in the number of people per household or how many people can fit into an urban hectare can lead to great differences in the gross numbers. More useful are simple orders of magnitude – from a few thousand to 100,000 covers the range. Since the larger cities were generally dangerous and unhealthy places, infant mortality was high and hence much of the increase in urban population resulted not so much from city people reproducing themselves as from people migrating from the countryside or small towns. By 1200 the vast majority of Europe's cities already existed in some form, and in the following century these places would mostly continue to expand, while a few notable new towns like Stratford-upon-Avon were founded by enterprising lords. In the east, places like Vienna, Prague and Warsaw serve as examples of rapid growth from more obscure origins. On the Iberian frontier traditional Muslim cities such as Valencia, Seville, Córdoba and Ciutat de Mallorca were reborn, in some cases with a new population, as Christian centres of social and economic life.

The giant city of Europe was Paris, at about 200,000 people by 1300; Venice and Florence reached a population of around 100,000, a ceiling of sorts in medieval society, probably set by the problems of transporting food to such

¹ Russell (1972), pp. 25–9.

huge centres. In the next rank are cities like Cologne, Milan, Bruges, Genoa and London, with populations of half or more that of Florence and Venice. Two areas of Europe, northern Italy, and the Low Countries and lower Rhineland, had more sizeable cities by region than the rest of Europe. Constantinople, probably the largest city in Europe in 1200, wrecked by the Fourth Crusade in 1204 and badly ruled by a French dynasty for most of the century, was by 1300 a shadow of its former self. Three other cities, Rome, Naples and Palermo, still giants or nearly so for most of the thirteenth century, drew much of their strength from their role as centres of government. Many other places, like Pavia or some small ports on the southern English coast, did not grow very much in the century and are not so much examples of failures as they are witnesses to the success of their neighbours. The case of Buda and Pest, each developing on its bank of the Danube, highlights two important features of urban growth: the importance of being at a geographical point where roads intersect or the method of transport altered; a substantial town generally precluded another one in the vicinity (in this example the Danube defined the limit). Port cities are clear examples of places thriving on necessary changes in transport. But the expansion of cities requires a closer look at some individual cases.

Capital cities of national monarchies, like London or Paris, or of important lordships, like Cologne or Munich (capital of Bavaria from 1255), highlight the advantages of having a royal, episcopal or ducal household and bureaucracy present at times, but the peripatetic kings of Aragon, for example, did not remain in one place long enough to make Saragossa into a great capital. A city's size also benefited from having an important bishop, as did Lincoln and Rouen, or a university, like Bologna and Oxford. The most important bishop of all, the pope, ruled a city that was also the leading goal of pilgrimage in Europe, but other places like Santiago de Compostela and Canterbury also benefited economically from pilgrimages. These special characteristics, being a capital or a holy place, can account for a city's existence, but by themselves they no longer guaranteed substantial growth.

Cities also served as regional centres of production, distribution and consumption. Port cities illustrate how these factors fostered growth. Venice's fleet enabled it to draw upon food supplies from as far away as Crete, and the city supplied, from sources as far away as Egypt, cotton and spices to another hinterland in southern Germany. Profiting from sea and river links, Venice became great through trade, but also led the way in manufacturing on a massive scale a complex and labour-intensive product: the medieval galley. Venice used its position and its naval power to establish by the late thirteenth century mastery over much of the Adriatic and Aegean, but other towns such as Marseilles, Genoa, Barcelona, Pisa, Bremen and Lübeck, and smaller ports like

Dublin and Lisbon, also served large regions by collecting and distributing the products of the city's own region, as well as the goods of more distant ones. Foodstuffs and wool were the most distinctive products. Every city acted as a magnet for people who drove cattle and pigs along the roads or brought grain in carts or barges to a centre of consumption. Bordeaux thrived on the local production of wine and other places did so through the collection of wheat from a fertile countryside. The cities that consolidated supplies of food in turn enabled the classic manufacturing towns to thrive. In the thirteenth century the leading industry of Europe, and alongside wool one of its great items of trade, was woollen cloth. Florence, Bruges, Ypres, Ghent and others were major cloth-manufacturing towns, while at the same time serving as regional centres of distribution. Masters and artisans weaving wool into cloth required many people in their home towns and other places to manage the difficult logistics of keeping them supplied with food and wool. England and the Spanish kingdoms exported wool and enabled weavers in the Low Countries and Italy to make a living.

The developing interconnections of medieval cities, principally through trade but also from migration of artisans, help to explain this rapid increase in size in the thirteenth century. Cities were magnets for people and food. Immigration depended on as well as fostered the decline of serfdom in the rural areas – another sign of the dynamic relationship between city and countryside. Migration from rural areas filled up new neighbourhoods, uprooted people from their primordial kinship networks, and hence also forced people at times to rely upon impersonal urban institutions for help. The food trade required wider use of another distinctive urban product – coins – and hence more cash filtered into agricultural, livestock-rearing and fishing regions. The crucial point is that no one planned this growth or its consequences. Hence people everywhere had to react to the challenges of unforeseen growth. These changes in turn led to competition and specialisation in cities.

Successful cities continued to grow in this century by meeting the challenges of creating and defending their physical space. One great problem was urban infrastructure; larger cities required new walls to protect the suburbs and faubourgs that grew up around the older centres. Town maps reveal the new urban sprawl, which on old sites in the west often still had a Roman grid at the centre, as at Florence. Larger ports and bridges were required to handle the increasing volume of transport. The spiritual needs of these larger cities demanded more and bigger churches. Increases in walls and harbour size punctuated the rhythm of growth. Immense building projects of the thirteenth century – the cathedrals, walls, bridges and harbour moles – resulted in enormous expenditure that was a tribute to the prosperity, patience and piety of urban people.

The city also played a distinctive role in marginalising certain groups of people. Because cities were, in Richard Sennett's words, 'a milieu in which strangers were likely to meet', thirteenth-century townspeople began to insist that certain 'undesirable persons' – Muslims, Jews, lepers, prostitutes – identify themselves to the unwary public.² Distinctive clothing, badges and bells helped urban people to recognise and to avoid strangers and also to keep these undesirables out of respectable neighbourhoods. In Avignon and Arles, prostitutes were not allowed to wear veils – that Mediterranean badge of respectable modesty.³ By the end of the thirteenth century areas were set aside for Jews in some cities, for example the closely regulated *Call* of Mallorca. Clothing and veils marked men and women, and the long tradition of special clothes for specific trades and professions is an urban legacy. These cities contained the first anonymous crowds in medieval Europe, but also some fresh signs of personal expression intended to establish a social identity. Funerals designed by the deceased, family burial chapels or crypts, the increasing use of surnames, sumptuary laws and other aspects of city life testify to the desire of some to carve out a familial or personal space even though such opportunities were limited to the better sort.

The typical thirteenth-century city was a cluster of neighbourhoods organised along craft or professional lines, common rural origins or membership in some sort of urban group or religious minority. Street names in some cases still preserve the names of crafts that dominated particular neighbourhoods: in 1285 the prostitutes of Montpellier were directed to live on what earned the name The Hot Street; the gold trade of Florence has been on the Ponte Vecchio for more than seven centuries.⁴ Although most urban development was unplanned, 'dirty' trades like slaughtering, tanning and fulling cloth tended to be located on the outskirts of town or at least downstream from sources of drinking water. Thus James I of Aragon obliged Jewish dyers to move their workshops to the edges of Barcelona. Cities with extensive metal-working industries endured the sound of hammering at the forge during daylight hours and frequently into the night. The location of various trades in particular parts of cities meant that urban parishes, which themselves helped to define neighbourhoods, often included a high proportion of people in the same craft or business. These urban neighbourhoods, particularly in the 'old city', tended to include a mix of people from all social levels. A rare account of a neighbourhood meeting in Bergamo in 1292 reveals people concerned at such humble but important matters as the condition of their fountain.⁵ Ideas about public money and property involved ordinary people at the grassroots. The

² Sennett (1977), p. 48.

³ Otis (1985), pp. 18, 161.

⁴ Otis (1985), p. 26.

⁵ Little (1988), pp. 158–72.

neighbourhood around the church of San Matteo in Genoa is an example of vertical social stratification with its small parish church in the centre of a cluster of fortified towers. (These towers, famous examples of which survive in Bologna and San Gimignano, were typical of cities in which land was at a premium or civic strife endemic: Genoa was an example of both.) In this neighbourhood lived the Doria clan, powerful nobles, and their allies and dependants. The family drew on two sources of strength, the Scrivia valley north of the city and the area of the Riviera to the east of the city near San Fruttuoso. Migrants from these areas tended to settle in San Matteo. Buildings three or four storeys tall mimicked the vertical social organisation of the quarter: poorer folk on the noisy, gloomy bottom floors and alleyways, the more exalted on the upper floors paid higher rents.⁶ This social mixture helped to foster an urban paternalism in which wealthy and powerful people looked out for the interests of their wards, quarters and neighbourhoods.

Perhaps the most distinctive, and relatively recent, feature of urban society was the large number of people who supported themselves through wage labour.⁷ Casual labourers, journeymen and women, and apprentices worked in small shops and some large enterprises like shipyards for masters who had frequently organised themselves into guilds. A variety of vernacular terms (*métier*, *gild*, *arte*, *Zunft*) conceal a general pattern of corporate organisation so characteristic of medieval society. Urban men and women had to support themselves in some way, and for most the daily wage, paid on the payday of the six-day week, Saturday, was the method by which many lived or simply survived. Coinage, the rise of markets and the division of labour helped to foster an increasingly specialised economy. Paris had at least a hundred different guilds organised according to some very specific trades: for example only a university town could support an organised, if small, craft devoted to making book clasps.⁸ The thirteenth century witnesses the rise and elaboration of guilds across Europe. The system of apprenticeship helped young boys and girls to acquire some vocational education, often at no expense to their parents, while supplying extra hands to some thriving entrepreneurs in the trades. Once the apprentice completed the term, the majority faced a life of journeyman status, especially in those trades in which capital requirements for operating a shop meant that most people would have to spend a lifetime working for others. At the top of the hierarchy stood the masters, usually independent entrepreneurs but still in a sense working for their customers, or in the case of the building trades, working for the king, city government or the Church. Being a master was no guarantee of security. Accidents, illness or the decline of a

⁶ Grossi Bianchi and Poggi (1980), pp. 76–7.

⁷ Epstein (1991), pp. 3–9.

⁸ Lespinasse and Bonnardot (1879).

trade might bring individuals or entire groups into unemployment or poverty. Much work remained outside this system, but everywhere in western Europe the guild system of employment was a distinctive feature of social and economic life, particularly in the manufacturing towns and centres of distribution. Guilds existed in the port towns as well, but tended to be weakened by trade and the competition it introduced into local economies.

Much medieval work depended on daylight, so cities began to stir at day-break. Church bells helped to define the working day, and sundials were a ubiquitous if occasionally confusing (on cloudy days) feature of thirteenth-century towns. Some work was seasonal. The sailing seasons dominated the pace of urban work along the Baltic and North Seas, and in parts of the Mediterranean, and seafaring took thousands of men away from their towns for months at a time. Nearly every day bread was baked in the great ovens scattered across the city, firewood and other necessities hawked in the streets, vats of urine emptied. In Paris and other northern cities town criers shouted out the price of wine in taverns every day (except on Good Friday or when the monarch or a member of his family happened to die).⁹ Some neighbourhoods were dominated by the clatter of the loom or the newly prominent cotton and silk industries and the smells on some streets advertised the trades practised there. Wine and ale were consumed in enormous quantities and served as a means of temporary escape from the drudgeries of daily life.

In the midst of all this noisy artisan activity other urban groups functioned as well. The merchants, that mixed bag of nobles who moved into town from the countryside and interested themselves in trade, as well as the proverbial self-made men, struck deals, and exchanged money at rudimentary banks; these new institutions first appeared in Italian cities like Florence, Lucca, Piacenza and Siena, and then in the north. The daily round of religious observances in the urban churches and monasteries found a new expression in the growing number of the distinctively urban Franciscan and Dominican convents. As night fell, some work continued and crime increased; candles were expensive and firelight rather dim. Night watchmen kept a vigil on the dark and dangerous streets. Sundays and church feasts, by the thirteenth century amounting to some seventy or eighty days a year, provided some rest and enjoyment for those who could afford it, but for the many paid by the day, they were unpaid holidays. The richness and variety of urban life attracted bored nobles, religious innovators, runaway serfs and paupers alike.

Although the principal theme of thirteenth-century urban society is, in most places, the challenge of population growth, perhaps the most decisive changes in urban society reflect what responses were made to the problems of growth;

⁹ Lespinasse and Bonnardot (1879), p. 23.