

9 The feudal principalities: the west (Monferrato, Saluzzo, Savoy and Savoy-Acaia)

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Introduction: the importance of a definition

In the late Middle Ages most of the territory making up modern Piedmont was controlled by three princely dynasties: the counts of Savoy (dukes from 1416), the marquises of Monferrato and the marquises of Saluzzo.¹ The Savoy dynasty, which also ruled over vast possessions on the other side of the Alps, was undoubtedly the strongest: between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, its domains underwent a period of steady expansion, while, in contrast, the marquiseate of Saluzzo shrank considerably and that of Monferrato struggled to defend its possessions. However, the Savoy state was itself squeezed between two far more powerful rivals: the kingdom of France and the Visconti-Sforza state. These curbed its expansion and created the political circumstances in which both marquisesates were able to survive.

There is a technical justification for defining these states as feudal principalities. Count Umberto, the founder of the house of Savoy, and marquis Aleramo, the antecedent of both the Monferrato and Saluzzo lineages, were public officials working in the kingdom of Burgundy and the Italic kingdom, respectively, during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Their successors continued to recognise feudal loyalty to the emperor: this was still true in 1530, when the duke of Savoy, Carlo II, took precedence as the most senior imperial prince at Charles V's coronation in Bologna. All three dynasties came from what were essentially rural roots; as counts and marquises, they were accustomed to governing the territory through feudal investitures to families of vassals. They used

¹ A fourth dynasty, the princes of Acaia, was founded in the late thirteenth century through an agreement between count Amedeo V of Savoy and his cousin, Filippo, in which the latter was granted a prerogative over most of the territories ruled by the Savoy in Piedmont. However, the Acaia remained a cadet branch, subordinate to the main dynasty, which severely punished its occasional attempts to implement an independent political line and, when the last prince of Acaia died in 1418, duke Amedeo VIII reabsorbed the principality into the Savoy state.

feudal investiture with greater juridical awareness, were stricter in controlling its forms, and showed less of a tendency to experiment than other Italian potentates.²

These circumstances justify the use of the category of feudal principalities, provided that it is clear that it is not exhaustive. The relationship between the prince and the territory he controlled was far from being exclusively feudal: equally importantly, a number of towns and villages swore loyalty to the prince and acknowledged him as their *dominus* without feudal intermediaries. Therefore, this definition does not imply any absolute distinction between these principalities and their neighbouring Italian states. Indeed, over time, the long struggle between the Savoy state and the Visconti emphasised their similarities: the Visconti dynasty learned to make more widespread and confident use of feudal practices and relied less on urban *contadi* as the organisational backbone of its territory;³ in turn, the dukes of Savoy learned to wage war using professional Italian *condottieri*, rather than relying on recruiting men-at-arms through vassals and community levies, as they had done before.⁴

Lastly, in terms of typology, the uniqueness of the Savoy state lay in its bipartite nature, part French and part Italian; while the marquisesates of Monferrato and, above all, Saluzzo can be classified as 'small states' whose princes survived in the fifteenth century by offering their services as *condottieri* to their more powerful neighbours. However, apart from these differences, all three come under the general heading of princely state, or *état princier*.⁵

The structure of the territory

A distinguishing factor of the territories governed by the Piedmontese principalities was the presence of numerous small towns, mostly without a *contado*, and a dense network of rural communities. The pattern of

rural settlement took the form of villages, grouped around a parish church and dominated by the seigneurial castle. The spread of the *appodamentata*, essentially a fifteenth- and sixteenth-century phenomenon, did not undermine this network of village communities, all of which were robustly organised and capable of obtaining franchises or statutes through continuous political dialogue with the lords. Contrary to the situation in the rest of northern and central Italy, few of these farming communities depended on a city. By far the greater proportion were controlled by noble families, whether rural magnates or even urban nobility, and much more rarely by a bishop or monastery; others depended directly on the prince and were governed by an official representative.

The aggregate number of communities making up a state was not fixed: it was enough for a noble family or a community to decide to change loyalty, for whatever reason, and the boundaries would change. This resulted in a certain degree of territorial discontinuity because the outcome of negotiations, and the pressures exerted on various individual subjects, could lead to different results. Communities and lords who recognised the sovereignty of one or other prince would frequently alternate, above all along the borders or in areas of friction between one state and another. In the Canavese, where for years the loyalty of the local nobility was disputed between Monferrato and the Savoy, the matter was finally resolved in 1389 through the arbitration of Gian Galeazzo Visconti when he assigned the homage of some nobles to the marquises. However, the solution did not always respect geographical constraints, with the result that some villages, albeit completely surrounded by Savoy possessions, became part of the marquiseate and remained so until 1630. Instead, in the Biellese and Vercellese, areas that were contested by the Savoy and Visconti for over half a century, there were even *villae mixtae*, in which some inhabitants were under the jurisdiction of the Savoy, and others under the Visconti.

This did not mean, of course, that the frontiers were not well defined. The inhabitants of any given area would have known precisely what jurisdiction they came under. But there were no linear frontiers, based on geographical features and easily shown on a map. Perhaps the first example of the need for rationalisation, where acquired rights were sacrificed in order to obtain a more clearly defined linear frontier, was the case of Vercelli: in an agreement of 1427 duke Amedeo VIII of Savoy ceded to Filippo Maria Visconti a number of localities on the east bank of the Sesia which Vercelli had always claimed as part of its own district. In this way, the river became the frontier between the two states. But any cartographical representation of a principality

² Castelnouvo, 'Omaggio, feudo e signoria'; Del Bo, *Uomini e strutture*, 37-45.

³ Cengante, *Immagine di potere*. For the distinction between principalities 'with a feudal base' and those 'with an urban base', see Chittolini, 'I principati italiani', and Varanini, 'Governi principeschi e modello cittadino'.

⁴ Barbero, 'L'organizzazione militare'. On the organisation of war, in general, which will not be discussed further in this chapter, see, for Savoy, Castelnouvo, 'Les marchaux en Savoie'; Barbero, 'I soldati del principe'; Biolzi, *Avec le fer et la flamme*. For Monferrato, see Setia, 'Sott inobediens et refusés servir'.

⁵ Savy, 'Gli stati italiani del XV secolo'; Gentile and Savy (eds.), *Noblesse et états princiers*. The marquiseate of Saluzzo in the Quattrocento included about seventy communities, some held in fief by around twenty vassals (Barbero, 'Appannaggi, infuedazioni, riacquisti'); the marquiseate of Monferrato had 110 vassals with 170 enfeoffed communities, many fewer under direct lordship (Del Bo, *Uomini e strutture*, 42, 45).

in this period should, in general, portray a hotchpotch of communal territories rather than a single homogeneous territory.

The nature of relations between each community and the prince constitutes one of the key matrices for the organisation of the state. Administrative documents distinguish between *communitates domini*, whether domain or direct lordships, and *terre nobilitium*, feudal or mediated. The latter belonged to the state as a result of the homage paid to the prince by the local lord, while the former depended on the prince because of bilateral agreements that were technically not feudal at all and, in most cases, had been negotiated more or less freely. Of all three principalities, Monferrato could certainly claim a higher proportion of vassalistic relationships, with more than 110 families of vassals by the late fifteenth century, while it had fewer domain lands;⁶ in the Savoy territories, on the other hand, the influence of the powerful feudal aristocracy was offset by the importance of the communities under the prince's direct lordship.

There was no fixed separation between mediated and unmediated localities, because a prince could decide to alienate crown lands to create new fiefs. This policy was systematically implemented by the marquises of Saluzzo, who formed feudal appanages for various cadet branches of the dynasty in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and alienated an Alpine valley on each occasion.⁷ However, generally speaking, investitures of domain lands were a limited phenomenon: many communities that depended directly on the prince held privileges that guaranteed their non-alienability, and a large proportion of land remained under direct control. Contrary to the situation in southern Italy, towns had never been assigned in fief to vassals. Although unwritten, this rule was so widely applied that it leaves no doubt as to the strong leverage applied by towns when negotiating submission to the prince.

Taking precisely this aspect as a starting point – the contractual capacity of local communities in their relations with central power – we can analyse the bipartite nature between domain communities and enfeoffed communities still further. Among the former we find communities that had depended on the prince from time immemorial, or had become subordinate without negotiating preferential conditions, granting him full overlordship and undertaking to pay tributes solely in exchange for protection; and stronger communities, both urban and rural, which had obtained franchises at the time of submission and

therefore enjoyed a degree of power-sharing, retaining a quota of the fines and even controlling the fortifications. Among the *terre nobilitium*, on the other hand, were places whose lord was a vassal to the count, and who therefore had received the investiture and held the entire jurisdiction in fief, and others, albeit much rarer, where investiture only granted the local lord rents, honours and seigneurial rights, while the prince reserved all or part of the jurisdiction.

Then there were localities whose jurisdiction lay in the hands of bishops or monasteries, which technically, at the start of our period, cannot be regarded as part of the state, but which became so, *de facto*, to the extent that the prince could hand out benefices and intervene to curb the jurisdictional monopolies held by the ecclesiastical authority. Lastly, there were rural localities that depended on an urban centre that, in turn, was subject to the prince; this was a category whose limited diffusion highlighted a marked difference between these feudal principalities and their more powerful neighbour, the Visconti-Sforza state. It was often the case that a number of immediately adjacent villages were regarded as being dependent on a town, and indeed there were also castles in the countryside that controlled several villages. But it was quite rare for the submission of a small urban community to bring an entire, ready-structured *contado* in miniature under the prince's dominion, this *contado* constituting in itself one of the elements of the state. Such cases appeared to be decidedly secondary in the structure of the feudal principalities: while *terre separate* (separate lands) appeared to be an administrative exception elsewhere, here they were the rule. In conclusion, at least six different forms of dependence can be identified binding a locality to the ruling house with the result that its territory was deemed part of the state.

Alongside these juridical distinctions, the administrative structure of the princely states was influenced by both geographical and historical factors. Built up through the gradual expansion that brought increasingly vast territories under its control, at different stages and using varying juridical forms, the Savoy state, or rather the half that lay *citra montes* (on this side of the mountains), was seen by its administrators as comprising various heterogeneous sectors. The accounts detailing subsidies granted in the fifteenth century by the *patria Pedemontium* follow a repetitive format: first of all, there was the *terra vetus*, the lower Susa valley and the Lanzo valleys, home to the first territories of the Italic kingdom that the Savoy's forebears had inherited by the late eleventh century (this was the only area to form a *balivato*, following the usual pattern in the dynasty's transalpine domains). Then came the *terra principatus*, or the lands that formed the appanage granted to the

⁶ Del Bo, *Uomini e strutture*, 38, 42, 45.

⁷ Barbero, 'Appannaggi, infanzadazioni, riacquisti'. The custom was rarer in Savoy and Monferrato: Del Bo, *Uomini e strutture*, 196.

Acaia princes until 1418. Then there were the *lancee spezate Pedemontis*, namely those towns, Cuneo, Chieri and Mondovì, subjugated only during the fourteenth century: since they contributed a reasonably sized *contado* and enjoyed extensive tax exemptions, they were therefore calculated separately. The possessions of the Canavese nobility, who were obliged, not without difficulty, to pay homage to the Savoy during the fourteenth century, were also regarded as a separate entity. Lastly, there were the *terre ultra Duriam*, also known as the *terre Lombardie patrie ducalis*, the result of a recent push towards the Sesia river, which at times were administered by a captain-general appointed specifically for this area, and which in particular included the *capitanato* of Santhà, the *podesteria* of Biella and what remained of the vast urban district of Vercelli.⁸

The internal structure of the marquissate of Monferrato appears to have been dictated instead more by geography than historical events. When the parliament of vassals and communities met in 1305 to decide who would inherit the legacy of marquis Giovanni I, who had died with no male heir, it listed, with no particular qualification, the representatives of the localities that made up Monferrato, and still do so today. The list then went on to include the representatives of the lands *de ultra Burnidam*, beyond the Bormida; *de ultra Tanagrùm*, beyond the Tanaro; and finally, for the lands *a Pado circa et de Canapicio et Val de Maris*, which included the communities on the far side of the Po that had been taken from the Vercellese and the nobles of the Canavese and the lower Lanzo valley, where the marquis had to compete for homage against the count of Savoy. A charter from emperor Sigismund dated 1414 refers to an older territorial division, one that had not existed for centuries, which identifies the marquissate with the two counties of Acquesana – based on the episcopal city of Acqui – and the Canavese; the former included all the localities, jurisdictions and homages held by the marquis *in toto territorio circa Tanagrùm deversus ripariam maris*, and *ultra Tanagrùm deversus Pedemontem et Astam*, and therefore using the Tanaro river as the main reference point for an internal division of the area, to which the localities *in Canapino et toto territorio ultra Padum*⁹ were added later.

The local offices

Each community, whether urban or rural, was governed by a local executive authority based in the castle, which maintained public order,

collected fines and tributes, and approved the drafting of statutes, save in cases where it shared part of these responsibilities and profits with the communal bodies. In the *terre nobilium*, the lord himself, or a *podestà* or castellan appointed by him, held these powers, above all in those all too frequent situations where the lordship was not vested in a single individual but in a consortile. In domain communities these same functions were delegated to an official appointed by the prince, who was almost always called a castellan in rural situations, while in towns he was known by a variety of names: *vicario*, *podestà* or *capitano*. Depending on the situation, and above all in the more complex urban situations, he was flanked by receivers, tax collectors or *clavari*, who were responsible for managing the finances and accounts, and by judges of the first instance. Directly above these local officials were the prince and his council; in the Savoy state, however, given that the ruler was more often than not on the far side of the Alps, his role was filled by a *capitaneus Pedemontium*, or later by a lieutenant-general, an office of considerable political stature whose functions ceased as soon as the prince crossed back over the mountains.

The local functionaries were appointed using letters patent, remained in office at the prince's pleasure, and were paid a stipend. They had to provide detailed accounts for all revenues and expenditure; in the case of the Savoy, their accounts were always audited, albeit sometimes many years later, by the Audit Chamber (Camera dei Conti) based in the castle of Chambéry. However, the appointment of a castellan was a very different matter in political terms from the appointment of a public civil servant in a modern state. It was always the outcome of personal relations between the prince and a man who had many different ways of obtaining the post. When the official was the prince's vassal, as was often the case, it is reasonable to assume that trust played an important role in the choice; but it is also true that every official had to pay an advance when he took possession of the post and it was therefore difficult to remove him without settling this debt. In some instances, offices were awarded directly as security for a large sum lent to financiers who were not even native to the country.¹⁰

In other cases, which became increasingly frequent over time, offices were obtained through cash advances and political recommendations from men with shared local interests, who owned or were seeking to create a seigneurial domain, if it was in a rural setting, or a hegemonic position among the urban notables. Public office became a stepping

⁸ Barbero, 'La struttura amministrativa', 10–12.

⁹ Bozzola, *Parlamento del Monferrato*, 3–5; Moriondo, *Monumenta Aquisana*, 83–7.

¹⁰ On this and what follows, see Barbero, 'La struttura amministrativa', 26–30, and Barbero, 'La venalità degli uffici'.

stone to achieve this purpose: Ribaldino Beccuti, a doctor in law, Turin's richest citizen and head of the city's most aristocratic family, held the post of judge of Turin without a break from 1499 to 1533. Over time it also became increasingly common to find that a community obtained the right to present a list of candidates from which the prince would then choose the official. In these cases, the official would then act as a broker between local interests and central government requirements, rather than the latter's representative. The network of offices spread across the territory should therefore not be thought of as a passive instrument at the prince's disposal, but rather as an area of constant negotiation between the prince and the elites, in which each party had something to gain.

The mechanism of loans backed by offices did not yet count as full-blown venality, at least for the highest offices with real political influence; the swarming ranks of minor offices (tax collectors, toll collectors, secretaries in the local courts) were instead regularly farmed out to speculators, much like a *gabella* would be farmed out. Officials managed the appointment of their own deputies in the same way; the tendency for the most influential figures at court to accumulate offices resulted in an increasingly widespread presence of these 'farmers' (*appaltatori*), who exercised the office in practice and pocketed the revenues after having paid an agreed portion to the office-holder. To start with, however, these were purely private agreements but, by the middle of the fifteenth century, they had become so widespread that the prince had to intervene. An attempt was made to regulate the practice in the duchy of Savoy by responding to the generalised complaints from the lowest tiers about the absenteeism of officials and the robbery of their substitutes. Then, in response to a specific request made in 1478 by the Three Estates, it was decided that the prince would appoint the deputies himself. This resulted in a real duplication of territorial offices whereby in practice an office-holder enjoyed only the title and a pension, while his deputy negotiated the terms of appointment directly with the duke.

The widespread presence of these deputies turned the mechanism of office-backed loans into an explicit and organised venal system that anticipated that of the *ancien régime*: candidates were no longer asked for a *prestanza* (loan), but rather a *censo* (bond), which for the most important offices could amount to thousands of *forini* in exchange the holder would retain not only the agreed remuneration, but also all the other revenues generated by the office. Territorial offices, which from the outset were relied on by the great aristocratic families as a means of confirming their own local political influence, offered an attractive route that enabled men capable of managing money to rise

through the social ranks. While on paper the network of offices continued to be the main channel through which the duke or marquises imposed their authority locally, in practice the early decades of the sixteenth century led to a sort of 'capitalisation' of offices which were managed indefinitely by real committees of local notables.

The institutions of central government

The main decision-making and judicial body of each state was the prince's council, an extension of the ancient vassallic court.¹¹ This body varied in composition since the prince could convene whomever he wanted; the rank of *consiliarius domini* was granted widely, reducing the office largely to an honorary title, while in practice meetings were regularly attended by a select group of leading figures: a few powerful vassals, a bishop or abbot, the financial office-holders and the highest-ranking courtiers. Jurists became an increasingly stable addition to the council, and they were responsible for preparing the cases brought before the council in its capacity as the supreme tribunal. Although tied to the person of the prince, the council could also be convened and take decisions in his absence, give orders in his name and operate to all purposes as a government. In this case it was chaired by the chancellor, the keeper of the seals, a post that was becoming increasingly less technical and more political, given the growing size of the duchy of Savoy and the frequent absences of the prince. Whether held by a great baron, an ecclesiastical figure or a jurist, the post of chancellor of Savoy in the fifteenth century can be regarded as the foremost state office. Appointments were carefully scrutinised; candidates were a focus for lobbying by neighbouring powers, as well as attracting fierce competition between rival factions: in 1462 chancellor Giacomo di Valperga was sentenced to death in a mock trial and drowned in Lake Geneva on charges of attempting to bring the duchy under French rule.

The dual functions of the council, governing the state and acting as an appeal court, became more distinct over time as the judicial procedure became increasingly complex and codified. Those council members who were graduates met to discuss legal affairs separately from the politicians, so occasionally two separate council meetings are recorded on the same day, but in different venues and with different participants. Towards the end of our period the judicial section started to need a permanent seat where its documents could be housed. The jurists in the

¹¹ For a summary, see Barbero, 'La struttura amministrativa'; Castelnovo, 'Quei offices'; Del Bo, *Uomini e strutture*; Grillo, 'I gentiluomini'.

council became increasingly established in Turin, which was also home to the Studio, the university from which most had graduated; at this point, even if the council remained formally united, contemporary records habitually draw the distinction between the Secret or State Council, and the Council of Justice, with its own president. In Monferrato the council separated into two parts at the end of the fifteenth century, following the constitution of the Senate of Casale based in the small city that acted as the state capital; the minute marquisate of Saluzzo had a single council right to the end.

The greater complexity of the Savoy state led to a further division of the council, this time on a territorial basis. A second council had already been formed in the fourteenth century to supervise legal affairs beyond the Alps: this was comprised solely of jurists and was known as the Council of Chambéry. In turn, the captains and later lieutenant-generals, who had operated in Piedmont since the late fourteenth century, set up their own council, which became a permanent body based in Turin during the fifteenth century, known as the Cismontane Council. Unlike the Council of Chambéry, the Cismontane Council was, to all effects, a replica of the supreme ducal council and was vested with political as well as judicial prerogatives. Moreover, during the frequent emergencies of the late fifteenth century, it acted as a real governing body. By the early sixteenth century the duke of Savoy's council had therefore been divided into four distinct branches; the small nucleus of politicians who assisted the prince in the decision-making process were flanked by a preponderant number of jurists, most of whom resided permanently in Turin, the *de facto* state capital.¹²

Therefore, from the late fifteenth century on, the multiplication of councils and their graduate members marked the emergence of a new power base. The offices of *collaterale*, procurator fiscal and, above all, president of one of these councils were among the most prestigious in the state. Although they were often held by members of the leading aristocratic families, the fact that they were open only to graduates made them an important channel of upward social mobility. The arrival of new men who held major state offices as a result of their own legal qualifications was also a feature of the marquisates of Monferrato and Saluzzo, but on a more limited scale given that there the councils had not multiplied: one or more vicars-general flanked by two or three doctors, holding posts of *collaterale* or simply councillors, sum up the juridical

¹² Barbero, 'Un governo per il Piemonte'. On the role of capital played by Turin, see Barbero, 'Il mutamento dei rapporti'.

and political responsibilities granted in the duchy of Savoy to a multiplicity of councils and their presidents.¹³

Another office which became gradually more complex and formalised grew up over time around those responsible for producing documentation. From the fourteenth century onwards all the princes used a body of notaries who went by the title of *secretarius domini*, or also chancellor (*cancelliere*) in Monferrato, following Italian custom. These notaries were also allowed to provide services to private clients, and therefore they were not exclusively public officials. However, they kept special registers for government documents, and these began to form an embryonic archive. During the fifteenth century there was a clear trend for princes to retain secretaries for their sole use; the number of these posts was fixed by special ordinances from time to time and rose steadily. This resulted in the creation of a real governing body, known as the secretariat in the duchy of Savoy, or more usually the chancery in the marquisates. Both had their own rooms in the prince's residence and their own internal hierarchy.

A first secretary appeared sometime in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, a direct forerunner of the secretaries of state under the *ancien régime*. This was not only an executive figure, but also an influential minister through whose hands passed much of the business of government, while, below the secretaries, who were now the holders of enormously prestigious offices involved in political decisions and diplomatic negotiations, were a growing number of scribes and assistants. Like the council, the secretariat became an important rung on the ladder of power and upward social mobility, and its composition was a sensitive political matter and the subject of public debate. Attempts at reform were frequent in the duchy of Savoy, as were conflicts between the duke and the Piedmontese parliament: the estates pressed for an increased number of secretaries, as well as the separation between those following the duke and those based with the local councils, while, in contrast, the ruler attempted to reduce their number and keep them concentrated in a single body.¹⁴

The development of financial offices was much more chaotic. In general, all officials and all government bodies were authorised to collect and spend on the prince's behalf, and they therefore kept their own accounts, albeit minimised to a list of revenue and expenditure, with

¹³ Del Bo, *Uomini e strutture*, 150-6; Gentile, 'Le carriere di Galeazzo e Francesco Cavassa'.

¹⁴ Barbero, 'La struttura amministrativa', 38-41; Castelnuovo, 'Cancellieri e segretari'; Castelnuovo, *Ufficiali e gentiluomini*, 109-13; Del Bo, *Uomini e strutture*, 97-122.

their respective descriptions. From the late thirteenth century the prince was flanked by receivers, whose task was simply to collect the balances paid by the various officials and to keep cash on hand. Towards the middle of the fourteenth century, as revenues – including extraordinary revenues – expanded, treasurers appeared in both Savoy and Monferrato who managed significantly larger cash flows, yet they continued to be based on the same principle as all the other officials: they received income of all kinds and spent monies for various purposes, in accordance with instructions received from the prince.

There was more than one treasurer, and the fact that in the duchy one of them held the post of treasurer-general of Savoy should not lead us to overestimate the rationalisation of the system. The fact that both extraordinary expenditure, in the event of war, and extraordinary revenues, linked to the granting of subsidies by the Three Estates, played an important role in the balance sheets of the time encouraged the creation of *ad hoc* receivers and treasurers: for example, each military campaign of any importance was managed, in financial terms, by a war treasurer; each subsidy was collected by a receiver appointed for the purpose, and all of these officials recorded revenues and outlays in their books that never reached the accounts of the treasurer-general. In short, the situation that Beatrice Del Bo rightly defined as the 'promiscuity of responsibilities',¹⁵ held by financial officials was never resolved and consequently, among other results, it was impossible to forecast budgets, or even to obtain a clear idea of revenue and expenditure.

Inevitably, this led to the burgeoning use of credit, a race in which the treasurers themselves were among the front runners. As far as the prince was concerned, the treasurer was still obliged to keep the necessary cash on hand whatever the circumstances, which meant that if the coffers were empty he had to advance his own. Therefore, treasury offices were always held by financiers with solid cash positions, in a spiralling overlap between public and private interests that guaranteed huge profits to the office-holders, but at the price of enormous personal risk. It was no surprise, therefore, that during the middle years of the fifteenth century, when the duchy of Savoy was embroiled in a disastrous war against Milan and it suddenly realised how dramatically short of cash it was, various reform projects were put forward by these financiers highlighting the deficiencies of the system. It was suggested that the treasurer-general should remain in office for at least six years, in order to provide the necessary continuity; that only he could collect subsidies and donations;

that all other financial officials should be appointed by him and report to him; that the duke should not collect any direct revenues; and furthermore that the duke could not oblige the treasurer to honour his instructions for payment unless there was sufficient liquidity. These proposals were widely discussed at court but, for the most part, were never implemented. Instead the government created a new office, a general of finances, whose remit was to think up new ways of making money.¹⁶

The finance officials were also responsible for auditing the accounts submitted at more or less regular intervals by the various governmental bodies and by local officials. In the marquisate of Monferrato, the audit seems to have been carried out sometimes by the treasurers, at other times by the secretaries or the masters of revenues, a generic figure with broadly similar responsibilities. It was some time before a *cancelleria delle entrate* (chancery of revenues) was set up. In the Savoy state, on the other hand, from the late thirteenth century the Camera dei Conti was one of the most important administrative bodies and guaranteed the complete centralisation of the audit process. Accounts were often submitted late and audits could drag on for years; disputes were not easily resolved and there were cases where the heirs of officials finally received payment of outstanding sums decades after they had been due. However, the activity of the chamber, with its staff of auditors managed by a president, a structure clearly distinct from the treasury, was undoubtedly one of the key strengths of the Savoy state. It did not augur well that the expansion of directly farmed offices in the late fifteenth century translated into a drastic reorganisation of the auditing process, given that the *appaltatori* now managed their own revenues and expenditure and were responsible for paying the duke only the agreed *censo*.¹⁷

The production and preservation of government records by all the offices described above are particularly well illustrated in the case of the Savoy state, the largest of all three and the only one to survive until the unification of Italy. Indeed, its archival collections continued, without a break, to form part of the archives for the court and the chamber throughout the *ancien régime*. Today, the largest *fondi* in the State Archive of Turin are those that were produced by the secretariats, known as *protocolli dei notai ducali e camerali* (registers of the notaries to the duke and chamber, 468 volumes, fourteenth–early sixteenth centuries) and the *conti dei ricevitori e tesoriere generali di Savoia* (accounts compiled

¹⁶ Barbero, 'Progetti di riforma'; Barbero, 'L'organizzazione militare', 88–92; Castelnuovo, 'Quels offices'; Del Bo, *Lommini e strutture*, 177–98.

¹⁷ Barbero, 'La struttura amministrativa', 41–5; Demotz, 'Une clé de la réussite'; Del Bo, *Lommini e strutture*, 5–26, 64, 108.

¹⁵ Del Bo, *Lommini e strutture*, 180–1, 195.

by the auditors and treasurer-generals of Savoy, 152 volumes covering the period 1297-1500). However, the most unusual source, in view of its direct links to the territory, is unquestionably the castellans' accounts, namely the hundreds of parchment rolls from the *castellanie* that were audited and then archived by the Camera dei Conti. While sources for administrative and accounting history abound, very few offer a more narrative slant, such as diplomatic correspondence and letters of remission.¹⁸

Documentation for the marquises of Saluzzo and Monferrato has survived in rather more patchy form, primarily because both territories ceased to exist as independent states in the sixteenth century. The former was absorbed into the Savoy duchy after a short-lived personal union with France; the latter was annexed to the duchy of Mantua under Gonzaga rule, before also joining the Savoy state in 1708. In both instances, the documentation finally converged in the State Archive of Turin, but not before it had been moved, selected and reordered, thereby destroying the original organisation. In any event, the analysis of the surviving documentation shows that the output was smaller and less rigidly structured than the records of the Savoy administration.¹⁹

Courtiers and officials

A common constraint in all historical work on late medieval states is the difficulty of distinguishing between the court in the specific sense of the term, namely the personnel assigned to the domestic service of the prince and his family, and the court understood, more generally, as a bureaucratic organisation made up of the officials employed by the prince who constitute the central state government. The custom of using this wider definition of the court, rather than confining it to merely describing the hierarchy of household officials and servants, runs the risk of underestimating the importance and specificity of the latter, which became increasingly complex and acquired even more pronounced political significance during the late Middle Ages. This confusion can be justified only by the fact that many noblemen simultaneously held posts both in the court hierarchy and in the government; therefore, the distinction becomes secondary in the case of sociological research and prosopographical studies of political groups.²⁰

¹⁸ Castelnovo and Andennatten, 'Produzione documentaria e conservazione archivistica'.

¹⁹ Del Bo, *Comiti e strutture*, 17-31; Grillo, 'Comunità e signori', 223.

²⁰ I will not discuss the historiography of the court on this occasion; readers should refer to Barbero, 'Corti e storiografia'; Barbero, 'La storia ufficiale'; Castelnovo, 'Nobles des champs ou nobles de cour?'; or, for questions of ritual and heraldry, to Gentile, *Riti ed emblemi*.

The Savoy court was the largest of the three and was divided into a number of separate 'services' or units.²¹ The first, and most important, was the ducal household, which was also known as the *hôtel*; run by the masters of the household (*maggiordomi*), it included gentlemen who served the prince in the official capacity of ducal equeries (*scudieri*), as well as subordinate kitchen and dining-hall staff. The second unit was the chamber which was run by the chamberlains and included, among other offices, those responsible for the duke's body, such as doctors and barbers. The third unit was the stable which was run by the stable equeries who managed the grooms (*palafrenieri*), the stableboys (*stallieri*) and the whole hunting retinue. The ducal chapel and the company of archers were separate units. Moreover, this structure was not fixed and the balance between the various units altered at different times. For example, in the early sixteenth century there was clearly a trend to bring the officials of the chamber under the control of the master of the household, and therefore to see the chamber as part of the *hôtel*. Another relatively important variable was the size of the court assigned to the duchess, a question that also depended on political factors. For example, the household assigned to Beatrice of Portugal, who married Carlo II in 1521, reflected her own status as a king's daughter: her court cost as much as her husband's. It is revealing in this sense that the numerous Portuguese courtiers in her retinue received higher salaries than the locals, and that the women were paid more than the men.²²

During the period in question it is evident that the numbers of court officials, and their relative stipends, tended to rise: this meant that the court assumed an increasingly important role in the process of binding the nobility to the prince, to use Elias's concept – or, as it is more usually put today, it became a place for negotiation and exchange between the prince and the elites. Some offices acquired purely honorary status, such as the chamberlain who was comparable to the post of ducal councillor; others, like the key post of master of the household (*maggiordomo*), who could sign payment instructions for the largest of all the units within the court, multiplied in number, to the extent that it was necessary to appoint a *grand maître d'hôtel* to whom all the others reported. This inflation of court officials also meant that, by the early sixteenth century, 'shifts' were introduced whereby officials were required to serve three months a year (*quartieri*). This became typical of all

²¹ Bianchi and Gentile (eds.), *L'affermarsi della corte sabauda*; Barbero, 'La corte ducale sotto Carlo II'.

²² Barbero and Brero, 'Genre et nationalité'.

ancien régime courts: for example, of the sixty equerries who held office under duke Carlo II, only fifteen served during a given quarter.

The courts of the marquises of Monferrato and Saluzzo were structured along the same lines, but with less ambitious propagandistic aims and a more modest structure: there were never more than eleven equerries in Monferrato, while, before its expansion in the late fifteenth century, the tiny court at Saluzzo was reduced to a single *maggiordomo* and five *scudieri*, at most. The marquiseate courts also lacked any division into separate units, which tended to be replaced by a single hierarchical organisation. In Monferrato, the *scudieri* were at the bottom, then the *camerieri* or chamber courtiers, and the *maggiordomo* at the top. In the late fifteenth century there was a change in terminology, mirroring that found at the Sforza court, whereby the *scudieri* became known as *aulici*, and the *maggiordomo* was called the *siniscalco*; moreover, the appearance of a *primo siniscalco* and a *primo cameriere* was a sign of further hierarchisation. However, all were gentlemen, even if at the court of the Saluzzo the *scudieri* were often foreign aristocrats because there were so few local nobility. This would have been inconceivable at the Savoy court where, if anything, the main issue was to maintain a balance between the traditionally more numerous Savoyard nobility and the Piedmontese.²³

For these reasons the court was not only a place of negotiation and confrontation between the prince and the nobles, but also of competition and at times even conflict between the factions.²⁴ In this regard, an analysis of the court, in the narrower sense of the term, can be expanded to include the governing elite, namely those men who had no compunction in combining the posts of ducal chamberlain or *maggiordomo* with territorial offices or those in central government. The research done by Guido Castelnuovo has illustrated the dynamics of this relatively stable, but not sclerotic political society in which there was competition, but not antagonism, between the feudal elite, on the one hand, and the urban and professional elite on the other. The judicial offices were often held by the graduate members of leading noble families, while the holders of the top financial offices passed in a single generation from money-changers in the *bottega di cambio*, to the feudal nobility. The pathways of social mobility passed through the sale of deputyships and offices, but they regularly culminated with the acquisition of lordships; the number of posts that could guarantee power and wealth, while at the same time requiring more technical financial, and, above all, notarial and juridical

qualifications, grew over time, yet the political society remained one. In the same way that there was no opposition between centre and periphery, the same people held both local and central offices. If anything, purely local interests coalesced around the deputyships, and the latter's growing importance after the middle of the fifteenth century also pointed to a dislocation between the central institutions, in which by now offices resembled court appointments, and the local institutions over which central control had become increasingly slack.²⁵

Relations with the country: statutes and assemblies of the Three Estates

The importance of the communities in the Piedmontese principalities can also be gauged from the wealth of local statutory legislation. As the product of bargaining between the community and the local lord, or directly between the community and the prince in those instances of direct lordship, statutes could not be amended unilaterally. Therefore, for centuries they regulated the framework of everyday life. A particular community could pass from being enfeoffed to being a domain territory, or even pass from one ruler to another, without any change whatsoever to its statutes, unless the community itself wished to make alterations in order to obtain more favourable conditions. Not all communities possessed statutes; many rural localities only achieved them over the years, while others had to make do with more limited immunities and privileges, and many never obtained them, remaining in complete subjection to the lord's power. However, where such statutes existed, they could not be infringed.²⁶

The obligation to respect local statutes represents the principal limit to legislative activity undertaken by princes from the late fourteenth century and, above all, during the fifteenth century. The most notable result of these efforts were the *Decreta Sabaudie Ducalia* issued by Amedeo VIII of Savoy in 1430 and those passed a century later by duke Carlo II, although their application remained limited due to the French invasion of 1536. On the contrary, the marquises of Monferrato approved collections of decrees that were less unified and ambitious, while the marquises of Saluzzo issued only isolated edicts. The area of

²⁵ Castelnuovo, 'Quels offices? Castelnuovo, *Ufficiali e gentiluomini*; for Monferrato, see Del Bo, *Uomini e strutture*, for Saluzzo, see Grillo, 'I gentiluomini'.

²⁶ These rural statutes and autonomous communal rights have been recently analysed, above all for the marquises of Saluzzo: Grillo, 'Comunità e signori', 212–22, and Mongiano, 'Predecessorum statuta'.

²³ Grillo, 'I gentiluomini'; Gentile, 'Il cerimoniale'; Del Bo, *Uomini e strutture*, 76–88, 212–13.

²⁴ Barbero, 'Le fazioni nobiliari'. On the clash between the Piedmontese and Savoyard factions, see Martin, *Savoiardi e Piemontesi*; Barbero, 'Savoiardi e Piemontesi'.

greatest innovation was in justice, detailing the procedures used by the appeal courts and extending their responsibilities. These courts represented the main lever available to governments in order to expand their own area of intervention and undermine local autonomy, whether seigneurial or communal. But the Savoy *Decreta* went beyond these procedural aspects. The dukes tried to outline an organised vision of state administration in which they laid out the responsibilities and personnel required in all the component offices; moreover, they devised methods of regulating society, aimed at promoting moral conduct and consolidating social hierarchies, in line with the general trends of society between the late Middle Ages and the early modern period.²⁷

Another arena of dialogue between the prince and the country was at the assembly of the estates. As mentioned earlier, the first occasion when the vassals and communities of an entire principality met to deliberate was at the parliament of Monferrato in 1305, which was convened after marquis Giovanni I had died without heirs. On that occasion the marquisate was offered to his nephew, the Greek prince Theodoros Palaeologus. After that, assemblies of the estates met frequently in the marquisate, in the principality of Acaia and in the Savoy state where separate meetings were held for the Savoy *partria* and the *partria Pedemontium*. Joint meetings involving the whole duchy were more rare. The main role of these assemblies was to authorise the extraordinary contributions demanded by the prince on a variety of occasions; this meant that the government had to explain its intentions to the country and also justify the size of the sums requested. The large number of communities, not only urban, which depended directly on the prince meant that leading members of the peasant farming communities also attended the assemblies, giving them a particularly broad nature.

At times of emergency, like those experienced by the duchy of Savoy on various occasions in the latter half of the fifteenth century, the assembly took on proper governmental functions: it intervened in the struggles between ruling princes, and guided ducal foreign policy. A respected councillor and ducal captain, Luigi Tagliandi, commented to the Sforza ambassador, Gioan Bianco, in 1476: 'although they [the Piedmontese] have a prince, nevertheless, in every important case, it is the Three Estates which deliberate, make decisions and govern this country'. These meetings were therefore important opportunities for open public political debate, a testbed for the prince's leadership and

²⁷ Comba, 'Il progetto di una società'; Patriarca, *La riforma legislativa*; Del Bo, *Tomini e strutture*, 143-9; Grillo, 'Comunità e signori', 224 and note; Mongiano, '*Predecessorum suorum*', 101-4.

his government, as well as a considerable curb on their freedom of action. For example, the assembly's reluctance to authorise payments to maintain permanent military forces was undoubtedly damaging to the credibility of duke Carlo II in the dramatic events of the Italian Wars.²⁸ It is no surprise that the refusal to continue to summon the parliament and to impose new taxes without asking for the country's approval were among the most significant measures – together with traumatic shows of strength, like the unilateral decision taken by the duke of Mantua not to recognise the privileges of the commune of Casale and to abolish its communal council²⁹ – that allowed the princes of the middle and late sixteenth century to move towards absolute rule by radically altering the power structure on which the political life of these feudal principalities had previously been based.

Conclusion

Anyone who studies the evolution of public administration cannot fail to note the artificiality of the traditional periodisation which imposes a clean break at the end of the fifteenth or start of the sixteenth century. In practice, instead, it is clear that, in this regard, the four centuries from the Trecento to Seicento form a relatively compact period during which the organigram of state institutions, the organisation of taxation and warfare, the internal dynamics of the office-holding class, the princely ideology and the theatre of court all undergo a remarkable evolution, while remaining within a system of shared reference points. It is no coincidence that the traditional view, which sees the Savoy state being completely rebuilt on new foundations laid during the reign of Emanuele Filiberto (1559-80) has been largely corrected by recent research: many of the structural innovations attributed to this duke – ranging from the choice of Turin as his capital to the introduction of *servizio a quartier*, or quarterly shifts for courtiers, and the creation of a rural militia – had already been established by his predecessors, or at least were based on political and cultural conditions that had emerged in earlier decades.

At the same time, an analysis of the Piedmontese principalities highlights the concentration of particularly significant changes between the second half of the fifteenth century and the middle of the sixteenth. In the case of the Savoy state, the most studied of all three and the only one

²⁸ On the activities of these assemblies, see Koenigsberger, 'The Parliament of Piedmont'; but, above all, the vast collection of documents assembled by Tallone, *Parlamento sabardo* (cited here, vol. V, 180) and Bozzola, *Parlamento del Monferrato*.

²⁹ Ravioia, *Il Monferrato gonzaghesco*.

to survive as an independent state after the Italian Wars, the principal changes can undoubtedly be identified as the expansion of the farming out of public offices and their patrimonialisation, the abolition of the assemblies of the Three Estates immediately after Emanuele Filiberto's return, and a far-reaching reorganisation of the production of records. Indeed, during the course of the sixteenth century, the latter resulted in the abolition of the main series of documents produced by the public administration during the previous two centuries, and their replacement with new forms characterised, among other aspects, by the use of the vernacular instead of Latin. Therefore, while there is no justification, when using a more extended periodisation, for continuing to contrast the 'late medieval' state with the 'early modern' state – as if the Quattrocento princes, court, officials and offices had more in common, paradoxically, with Charlemagne than with the *Roi Soleil* – a closer analysis of the period from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries does reveal sufficiently uniform traits to justify the notion of a 'Renaissance state' put forward by this volume.