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## Notes on the Ferrarese court in the later Middle Ages

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Court studies have proliferated in recent years, yet, as has been observed, much that passes for study of the court is nothing of the kind;<sup>1</sup> and many of the ideas in circulation regarding courts, despite their frequent assertion, have altogether lacked precise demonstration. Thus the notion that the court dominated the local economy and society – ‘no private fortune could prosper outside its control’ – or the (contrary) claim that the court was cut off from local society or the various long-term transformations in the role of the court that are perceived (by some historians) on the basis of secondary sources of questionable adequacy.<sup>2</sup>

Two assumptions in particular may easily go unexamined: first, that the court can be studied as a single phenomenon; and secondly, that it had, or came to have, a leading role in the myriad activities that it is claimed to have engaged in. As regards the first, insufficient attention seems to have been paid to the fact that the court lacked consistency of membership and activity: it moved around, its personnel changed, it assembled and dispersed without ever having a fixed corporate identity. ‘Court patronage’ is often the patronage of specific members of the court. As regards the second, the problem is that even to identify the court is not to demonstrate its importance. Recent discussion of this problem as regards the English royal court in the later Middle Ages has produced some interesting results.<sup>3</sup> It is pointed out that people were not courtiers all the time: they had their own personal or professional status, family interests, property and so on, which would variously affect their behaviour. Those who worked for the court also had other employers and patrons, and so-called ‘court style’ was only the local style of the area where the court happened to reside. There was little consistency or distinctive identity to the court as cultural patron. If there can be such doubts over the role of the court in one of its natural homes, among the northern monarchies, should historians of Renaissance Italy use the word so freely? What follows, while not intended as more than a partial statement,

I am grateful to Dr Philip Jones for his comments on a draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> J. Larner, ‘Europe of the courts’, *J Mod Hist*, 55 (1983), 669, 672.

<sup>2</sup> M. Cattini and M. A. Romani, ‘Le corti parallele: per una tipologia delle corti padane dal XIII al XVI secolo’, in *La corte e lo spazio: Ferrara estense*, ed. G. Papagno and A. Quondam (Rome, 1982); cf. Larner, ‘Courts’, 673.

<sup>3</sup> *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. V. A. Scattergood (London, 1983).

provides some indications of the place of the court in the *signorie* of northern Italy, those of the Visconti, della Scala, da Carrara and, especially, the Este of Ferrara.

If some contemporary observers are to be believed, the court provided leadership only in vice. Dante, discussing the word *cortesìa* in the *Convivio* (II, x, 7-8) observed that

common folk should not be deceived by this word into thinking that courtesy is nothing but largesse, for largesse is a special, not general, courtesy . . . And because in courts in former times, virtues and good behaviour were practised (whereas today the opposite is true) the word was derived from the courts and to say courtesy was as much as to say the usage of the courts. If today this word was taken from the courts, especially those of Italy, it would mean nothing other than foulness.

In seeing courtesy as something other than largesse, Dante was not only aligning it with his concept of nobility of virtue, but also attempting to preserve the original concept of *cortesìa* as used by the French and Italian troubadors.<sup>4</sup> However, Dante's obvious awareness that the term had commonly come to mean only liberality is amply confirmed in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century usage (as we shall see). The same lament for lost courtly virtue was made by Boccaccio: he interrupts the story of Ermino Avarizia (*Decameron*, I, 8) to deliver an attack on contemporary *uomini di corte*, 'who are better called asses, brought up in the filth of all the wickedness of the basest of men, rather than in the courts'. Boccaccio goes on to claim that such men had used to pacify noble quarrels, negotiate marriages and alliances and divert and entertain the courts with their 'belli motti e leggiadri', but that now they spread gossip, sow discord, abuse men in public and debase noble minds through flattery. In both Dante and Boccaccio there is of course a strong element of the *buon tempo antico* topos, a way of making idealistic moral points by contrasting an invented and pure historical past with the sullied present. But disdain for the contemporary court was common. It was already ancient in Dante's day<sup>5</sup> and is found both in Sacchetti, who makes numerous moralizing asides on the nature of *signori* and their *uomini di corte* (court entertainers),<sup>6</sup> and among the court entertainers themselves: Antonio Beccari makes the grimly humorous complaint that 'obbedienza di stare a signore' is worse than the pains of love or toothache, while Francesco di Vannozzo

<sup>4</sup> A. Vallone, *La 'cortesìa' dai provenzali a Dante* (Palermo, 1950); A. J. Denomy, 'Courtly love and courtliness', *Speculum*, 28 (1953); J. Larner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch, 1216-1380* (London, 1980), 93-102.

<sup>5</sup> Larner, 'Courts', 674; E. Levi, *Francesco di Vannozzo e la lirica nelle corti lombarde durante la seconda metà del secolo XIV* (Florence, 1908), 164 n. 2. Both refer to the earliest examples of the genre as English. Cf. C. S. Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness* (Philadelphia, Pa, 1985), 55, 152-4.

<sup>6</sup> F. Sacchetti, *Il trecentonovelle*, 4, 6, 9, 10, 27, 33, etc.

complains of his sufferings and likens court life to that of birds in a gilded cage.<sup>7</sup>

But where were these thirteenth- and fourteenth-century courts? What had they done to attract such allegations of viciousness? Except among nostalgic *litterati*, the contemporary Italian court does not seem to have attracted much attention. Even in the *Decameron*, the court as a setting for the stories is almost invariably royal and often foreign, not Italian. In the chronicles, the courts most often mentioned are those of popes and emperors, not of Italian *signori*. Nevertheless, some chronicles do occasionally provide revealing glimpses of lordly courts. Ezzelino da Romano, the 'tyrant' of Padua and Verona in the mid-thirteenth century, clearly had a court according to Rolandino Patavino. Rolandino refers to it several times as being at Verona, where 'there were at that time many noble knights from Padua and elsewhere for Ezzelino's security and in order that his court should appear fuller and more honoured'. And among the court personnel whom Rolandino mentions are the *sescalcus*, who prevented access to Ezzelino while he was at table; a *domicellus* 'who served him in bed'; a *socius* (the same?) who was with Ezzelino all the time and slept in the same room; and a 'virum de corte, cantatorem scilicet'.<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps significant that the latter, the 'man of court', is the only member of Ezzelino's staff to be associated so explicitly to the court, for this seems to reflect a common understanding of court life. It is the *uomini di corte* who seem largely responsible for the courts' wicked reputation among the *litterati*, for the 'man of court' was not just a singer (*cantator*), but a specialist in quickfire, mocking banter which intimidated ordinary mortals. The *Decameron* and *Trecentonovelle* provide plentiful examples of this, but it is clear already in remarks made by Rolandino's near contemporary, fra Salimbene, who refers to the lasciviousness, vanity and slanders of 'ioculatores et histrionum' and 'of those who are called knights of the court'. Salimbene also attributes Ezzelino's counterpart in Emilia, Uberto da Pallavicino, with a court and connects it specifically with spending on food (a connection of some significance, as we shall see). Indeed, Salimbene explicitly associates court expenditure with the 'appetitus dominandi' and the provision of fine meals with the forging of political bonds.<sup>9</sup> Thus, although these thirteenth-century 'tyrannies' have been distinguished by historians from the *signorie* proper, it does seem that they already betrayed many of the elements of the 'Renaissance' court: imported knights, controlled access, favoured *soci* who served the

<sup>7</sup> G. Bottoni, *Saggio di rime inedite di maestro Antonio Beccari* (Ferrara, 1878), 18; Levi, *Vanno*, 36.

<sup>8</sup> *Rolandini patavini Cronica in factis et circa facta Marchie Trivixane*, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, ser. 2 [= *RIS*], VIII/1, 60, 72, 96, 102, 103, 104, 106, 107, 136, 154.

<sup>9</sup> *Cronica fratris Salimbene de Adam ordinis minorum*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, *Scriptores*, XXXII (Hanover and Leipzig, 1905-13), 344-5, 425-6, 587-8.

bedchamber, entertainers who offended outsiders and the provision of banquets.

Later thirteenth- and fourteenth-century evidence brings us a clearer picture. The chronicler Guglielmo Cortusi visited the della Scala lords of Verona in 1336 as a member of a Paduan embassy and listed those who 'were in the court in Verona'. The list confirms that the range of personnel found in Renaissance courts was present already: foreign ambassadors, relatives of the della Scala family, numerous aristocrats from northern Italy (members of the Rossi, Pio, Fogliani, etc.), exiles from other cities and the sons of other Italian lords (in this case those of Castruccio Castracani, deceased).<sup>10</sup> Evidence from Ferrara is more fragmentary, but an assault on Obizzo d'Este in 1288 took place 'while he was dining in his palace where many of his court were';<sup>11</sup> some men described as 'de curia' appear among Este vassals in the late thirteenth century;<sup>12</sup> and Azzo VIII's will of 1308 orders debts to court food-suppliers to be paid off.<sup>13</sup>

Not all lords had courts, however (at least according to the chronicles). Galeazzo Visconti, impoverished by the expense of acquiring the lordship of Milan, could not afford to hold a court and even tried to ruin Cangrande della Scala's when he visited Milan.<sup>14</sup> Bernabo Visconti, abandoning his immediate predecessor's practice and rejecting Fazio degli Uberti's advice to spend, held no court and liked to dine with just a handful of vicars and counsellors.<sup>15</sup> His brother, Galeazzo II, failed to do even that.<sup>16</sup> Mastino della Scala's son, Cansignorio, disbanded the court too, a radical departure from the outstanding expenditure of Cangrande, 'of whose court there was then in Italy no equal'.<sup>17</sup> But what did the chronicler mean by the claim that these rulers held no court? For there is other evidence which makes clear that these lords were not without their *domicelli*, their *familiares* and *camerarii*, their counsellors and officials and that they too could mount *magnificas curias* on occasion (e.g. Galeazzo Visconti in 1360, Bernabo in 1364).<sup>18</sup> Bernabo proposed to hold

<sup>10</sup> *Guillelmi de Cortusi Chronica de novitatibus Padue et Lombardie*, RIS<sup>2</sup> XI/5, 73-4.

<sup>11</sup> *Chronicon estense*, RIS xv, col. 340.

<sup>12</sup> A. L. Trombetti Budriesi, 'Vassalli e feudi a Ferrara e nel Ferrarese dall'età precomunale alla signoria estense', *Atti e Memorie della Deputazione Ferrarese di Storia Patria* [= *AMF*], ser. 3, 28 (1980), nos. 117, 120, 125, 127.

<sup>13</sup> A. Gaudenzi, 'Il testamento di Azzo VIII d'Este e la pace del 1326 tra Modena e Bologna', in *Miscellanea Tassoniana* (Bologna, 1908), 109.

<sup>14</sup> *Pietri Azari Liber gestarum in Lombardia*, RIS<sup>2</sup> XVI/4, 28.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 146. For the advice to Bernabo to follow the example of 'sir valorissimi / che furono larghi e magni ne lo spendere': Fazio degli Uberti, *Il Dittamondo e le rime*, ed. G. Corsi (Bari, 1952), II, 43-4.

<sup>16</sup> Azari, *Liber*, 153.

<sup>17</sup> 'Excessit . . . ceteros italicos in expendendo, continue curiam suam prodigaliter tenens, provisiones infinitas proceribus italicis, etiam teutonicis, dabant, cuius curia deinde nulla in Italia similis fuit nec provisiones coequales': *ibid.*, 167.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 147, 151, 153, 155, 158, 166; L. Osio, *Documenti diplomatici tratti dagli archivi milanesi* (Milan, 1864), I, 136, 149, 153, 155, 239.

a tournament 'in our court' in 1380 and invited knights from Mantua.<sup>19</sup> Bernabo, indeed, had a high literary reputation as a patron of jesters and versifiers: 'buffoni, giocolari ed altre genti / della tua corte erano i bei signori' recalled a famous funerary lament.<sup>20</sup> And it was at Bernabo's 'molto onorata e magnifica corte' that the *buffone* Dolcibene learned not to take his newly conferred knighthood too seriously.<sup>21</sup> So why should Azari claim that these rulers had no court? It might be argued that what we have here is a distinction between court and household: every lord had his household (*famigliari, camerlengi*), but not every lord had a court. Unfortunately, we know too little about Italian aristocratic households to hazard such an interpretation. What we do know is that Azari is consistent in identifying two features of the non-courtly ruler: a failure to eat in large company, i.e. an absence of commensality; and the curtailment or cancelling of fees and pensions (*provisiones*) to nobles who would presumably have frequented the court. Thus Bernabo Visconti is contrasted to Luchino and to Archbishop Giovanni Visconti who 'held courts liberally, giving meals to all their officers and courtiers and many more nobles of Milan and Lombardy'.<sup>22</sup> Galeazzo Visconti economized on both meals and pensions: 'pensions which he used to give to his own subjects ceased and those to foreigners he reduced as much as possible'.<sup>23</sup> Cangrande II della Scala terminated Mastino's lavish pensions, neglected his *provisionati* and took up enclosed residence in the castle, coming out only at night to visit prostitutes. No wonder his brother and 'many former courtiers' rebelled.<sup>24</sup> Economies of this sort could be counter-productive.<sup>25</sup> 'Larghezza fa cortese', as one court poet declared.

It was also the holding of a 'continuous court' that seems unusual in the fourteenth century. This was what so impressed the chroniclers about Cangrande della Scala, who was equalled by few in the fourteenth century, perhaps only by Archbishop Giovanni Visconti, who 'it is said' had over 600 men in his *familia* and held 'continuous feasts', or by Francesco I da Carrara, whose magnificence, according to Giovanni da Prato, would need the eloquence of a Livy to describe.<sup>26</sup> Continuous courts in the fourteenth century were a luxury of the exceptionally well-provided prince. The more frequent contemporary use of the term 'court' denoted an

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* I, 218.

<sup>20</sup> Levi, *Vannozzo*, 238-47; *Lamenti storici dei secoli XIV, XV e XVI*, ed. A. Medin and L. Frati (Bologna, 1887-94), I, 187.

<sup>21</sup> Giovanni Gherardi da Prato, *Il Paradiso degli Alberti*, ed. A. Lanza (Rome, 1975), 201-8.

<sup>22</sup> Azari, *Liber*, 64, 146; *Gualvanei de la Flamma Opusculum de rebus gestis ab Azone, Luchino et Johanne de Vicecomitibus*, *RIS*<sup>2</sup> XI/4, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Azari, *Liber*, 153.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 170-2.

<sup>25</sup> Example of Ghiberto 'de Gente' in Salimbene, *Cronica*, 447-8; cf. the poem which has the imprisoned Bernabo Visconti ruefully asking what had become of the gifts ('li cortexie e grandi doni') of horses, falcons, jewels and cash that he had made to lords and townsmen all over Italy: *Lamenti*, I, 175.

<sup>26</sup> Flamma, *Opusculum*, 48-9; *Paradiso degli Alberti*, 65-6.

event, not an institution: specifically, the festivities and celebrations that attended dynastic or diplomatic successes (births, marriages, peace treaties, visits of foreign dignitaries). On such occasions, chroniclers would note that 'there was a great *curia*' or 'a beautiful *curia* was held', using the word almost synonymously with *gaudium* or *festivitas*.<sup>27</sup> Chroniclers were often proud of the scale, colourfulness and drawing-power of these costly events. According to their descriptions, these courts (*corti bandite*) certainly involved much that we think of as 'courtly': lavish reception of foreign dignitaries, display of precious objects and clothes, the presence of many women, jousting and tourneying, the erection of tents and grandstands, gift-giving, gaming and dancing, the creation of knights. But all this was occasional, not permanent. And it also took place in republics.<sup>28</sup> However, in the last decades of the fourteenth century, the word *curia* to denote such events seems to have fallen out of usage: courts were no longer special occasions, but fixed institutions and places. The looser sense of court, as entourage, now prevailed, with a stronger institutional content or with attachment to a specific palace. In Ferrara, although there are references to the Este *curia* from the later thirteenth century, it is only from around 1400 that references appear specifically to court officials (*expensor curie*, *pincerna curie*, *officium ciborum curie*: note the prominence again of spending and eating) and to men around the Este as 'noblemen of the court' (*nobiles curie*) or *curiales*.<sup>29</sup> This coincided with an expansion of the court's location and functions: the offices of the Este chancery and camera (exchequer) moved into the Este palace from premises on the main piazza; there was a spurt in Este palace building in Ferrara and its suburbs (Schifanoia, Belfiore, Paradiso).<sup>30</sup> Was this expansion of the court assisted by such noted features of later medieval government as greater princely spending and increasing dependence of the aristocracy on the rewards of government service?

<sup>27</sup> Examples are numerous from the last decades of the thirteenth century: Salimbene, *Cronica*, 511-12; *Chronicon estense*, cols. 342-3, 348, 351, 380, 384-5, 389, 398, 402, 403, 404, 409, 424, 453-4, 461, 463, 467, 492, 507, 518-19; *Chronicon veronense*, *RIS* VIII, cols. 630, 632, 643-4, 645-6; *Chronicon parmense*, *RIS*<sup>2</sup> XVIII/9, 68-9; *Corpus chronicorum bononiensium*, *RIS*<sup>2</sup> XVII/1, 283-4; *Annales veteres mutinenses*, *RIS* XI, col. 75; Cortusi, *Chronica*, 55, 56, 68, 115, 117, 132; etc. See also P. J. Jones, 'Economia e società nell'Italia medievale: il mito della borghesia', in *idem*, *Economia e società nell'Italia medievale* (Turin, 1980), 153 n. 239; J. Lerner, 'Chivalric culture in the age of Dante', *Renaiss Stud*, 2 (1988), 123-4.

<sup>28</sup> *Cronica di Giovanni Villani*, ed. F. Gherardi Dragomanni (Florence, 1845), I, 421 (1283); *Alle bocche della piazza. Diario di anonimo fiorentino (1382-1401)*, ed. A. Molho and F. Sznura (Florence, 1986), 80 (1388).

<sup>29</sup> Archivio di Stato, Modena [= ASM], *Camera ducale*, 'Catastri delle Investiture', reg. N, fols. 463, 472, 482, 529, 576; *Notai camerale ferraresi*, J. Delayto, fol. 62<sup>v</sup>. Hitherto, members of the entourage were more frequently described by other generic terms (*familiars*, *domicelli*, *consocii*) or more precise titles indicating function (*camerarii*, *consiliarii*, etc.).

<sup>30</sup> T. Dean, *Land and Power in Late Medieval Ferrara: The Rule of the Este 1350-1450* (Cambridge, 1987), 22-3, 70-1.

Just as celebratory *curie* had attracted knights and nobles from far and wide, so too did the more fixed and institutional courts of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. This can be illustrated from membership of the Este court, which contained intimates (*consocii, nobiles curie, commensales*) sometimes from Ferrara, more usually from outside;<sup>31</sup> *provisionati* from all the cities of Emilia and from Venice and Florence;<sup>32</sup> *familiars* from Ferrara, from nearby small towns (Argenta, Bondeno, Lendinara), neighbouring cities (Bologna, Modena) and further afield (Parma, Cremona, Treviso, Rimini, Foligno, Germany);<sup>33</sup> *camerlengi* especially from Rovigo and its territory; legal advisers (*iudices curie, vicarii*) from many cities of northern Italy (but not from Ferrara);<sup>34</sup> seneschals (*pincerne*) sometimes from the territorial nobility, sometimes from local families;<sup>35</sup> treasurers from Tuscany;<sup>36</sup> hawkers from Verona and Padua;<sup>37</sup> a piper from Germany (via Padua);<sup>38</sup> a stable-master from Verona;<sup>39</sup> a cook from Como.<sup>40</sup> Though it is not possible to calculate precisely the balance between native and foreign presence at court, it is at least clear that foreign elements were present at all levels and especially in top advisory roles and in financial office. How and why did the Este recruit so widely? Many, especially those with particular skills, possibly came to Ferrara on recommendation. A good number came from Este territories to the north and east of Ferrara (the Polesine di Rovigo, Adria). Young noblemen might be placed at court to be brought up as companions of the prince (thus Feltrino Boiardo in the late fourteenth century). But for the rest, we are left ignorant of whether the Este actively sought them out (as Ercole d'Este later did for his singers and musicians)<sup>41</sup> or whether the court was open to hangers-on and fortune-seekers (as the *novellieri* would like us to believe).<sup>42</sup> But in all this, we should avoid the notion that the court was closed to local (Ferrarese) society. Nor should we assume that, despite some evidence for curial dynasties, there was not

<sup>31</sup> ASM, *Catastri*, reg. N, fols. 425, 474, 539, 552, 565, 572.

<sup>32</sup> ASM, *Catastri*, reg. H, fols. 24, 581, 610, 612, 616, 625; reg. N, fols. 13, 48, 60, 61, 67, 95, 106, 114, 160, 267; *Notai camerale*, A. Cavaleria, fols. 5, 16, 98<sup>v</sup>; F. Taiapetri, B, fol. 11<sup>v</sup>; J. Sanvitale, fols. 1, 2, 56, 60; B. Mella, fol. 112.

<sup>33</sup> ASM, *Notai camerale*, A. Cavaleria, fols. 9<sup>v</sup>, 16, 28, 35, 132; F. Taiapetri, B, fol. 29; J. Sanvitale, fols. 67, 80, 90, 96, 100; R. Codegorio, fol. 20; *Catastri*, reg. H, fols. 13, 20, 31, 38, 39, 76, 79, 138, 171, 186, 604; reg. N, fols. 21, 28, 87, 93, 95, 101, 110, 151, 170, 178, 184, 222, 230, 379.

<sup>34</sup> ASM, *Catastri*, reg. H, fols. 397, 635; reg. N, fols. 80, 92, 101, 224, 298, 537; *Notai camerale*, F. Sale, fols. 61<sup>v</sup>, 71<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> ASM, *Catastri*, reg. H, fol. 398; reg. N, fols. 51, 57, 81, 96, 109, 110, 131, 249, 425, 472, 576; reg. R, fol. 275.

<sup>36</sup> ASM, *Notai camerale*, P. Fabro, fol. 41; N. Camarlengo, fol. 30; Dean, *Land and Power*, 70, 77, 136, 139.

<sup>37</sup> ASM, *Catastri*, reg. N, fols. 227, 236, 276.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* reg. N, fol. 297.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* reg. N, fol. 183; reg. L, fol. 86.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* reg. N, fol. 102.

<sup>41</sup> L. Lockwood, *Music in Renaissance Ferrara 1400-1505* (Oxford, 1984).

<sup>42</sup> *Decam.*, II, 6, 8, 9.

a high turnover of staff and familiars (many of whom are recorded only a few times in Este documents). The reliance on outsiders reflects partly the inability of Ferrara to provide experts of sufficient quality or number in areas vital to government of a regional state (thus lawyers, financiers, professional soldiers). It also served obvious political ends: overawing the local populace; giving the Este the air of employers of national (or international) significance; forging links in the chain of patronage and favour.

Equally important perhaps were notions of liberality and magnificence. As Dante noted, liberality and courtesy were confused. In common usage, *curialis* was synonymous with *largus*, *curialitas* with *liberalitas*.<sup>43</sup> 'Courtesy is almost the same thing as nobility of manners . . . He who is courteous is liberal because he gives promptly.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, so deeply and exclusively had the language of courtesy become associated with liberality that (as we have seen) rulers who failed to spend could be described as lacking a court. Magnificence was expected of a lord: few words recur so frequently to describe a lord's spending. Fourteenth-century lords needed no lesson from Florentine humanists on the value of magnificence, even in building.<sup>45</sup> The practice of liberality was central to the *signorie*: their administrative registers are so full of grants of land, money and immunity, of dispensations from the laws, pardons for offences, trading licences and tax-farms that their government at times seems to consist of nothing else, even if they might claim that public utility was served by their liberality to private individuals.<sup>46</sup>

What then of the claim that the court came to dominate local society? It is true that in Ferrara a number of initiatives were taken which expressed the Este lords' growing sense of responsibility for their subjects' welfare: the founding of the university in 1391, the relaxation in the same year of oppressive church landlordism (the *Bolla Bonifaciana*), the creation of the Ospedale di S. Anna in the 1440s, Ercole d'Este's regular distribution of alms are all well known.<sup>47</sup> But it could be argued in each of these cases that the principal agent was not the court, but the Este themselves (assisted in some cases by the local commune). A different initiative

<sup>43</sup> From many examples: Salimbene, *Cronica*, 241, 636-7; Cortusi, *Chronica*, 85; *Decam.*, x, 5, 9; *Viaggio a Gerusalemme di Nicolo da Este*, ed. G. Ghinassi, in *Collezione di opere inedite o rare*, 1 (Turin, 1861), 119.

<sup>44</sup> Filippo di Bergamo, quoted in Ducange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis*, s.v. *Curialis* (4).

<sup>45</sup> See description of Azzo Visconti's 'duo opera magnifica', viz. his palace and chapel: Flamma, *Opusculum*, 16; and M. Plant, 'Patronage in the circle of the Carrara family: Padua 1337-1405', in *Patronage, Art and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. F. W. Kent and P. Simons (Oxford, 1987). Cf. A. D. Fraser Jenkins, 'Cosimo de' Medici's patronage of architecture and the theory of magnificence', *J Warburg C.*, 33 (1970).

<sup>46</sup> Dean, *Land and Power*, 154.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 44-5; A. Frizzi, *Memorie per la storia di Ferrara*, 2nd edn (Ferrara, 1847-50), III, 382-6, 495-6; R. G. Brown, 'The politics of magnificence in Ferrara, 1450-1505', D. Phil. thesis (University of Edinburgh, 1982), 26, 369-71, 373-4; A. Franceschini, 'Il sapore del sale. Ricerche sulla assistenza ospedaliera nel secolo XV in una città di punta: Ferrara', *AMF*, ser. 4, 1 (1981), ch. 3.

which might have a better claim to representing action by the court was the creation in the 1410s of a princely council, which also had special jurisdiction in widows' and orphans' cases.<sup>48</sup> Here, as we shall see, we would on the surface seem to have involvement by members of the court and action reaching deep into Ferrarese society. The Este had, of course, had *counsellors* for many decades, but the only formal *council* hitherto had been a regency council set up for Niccolo III's minority in the 1390s; but this had not outlasted Niccolo's coming of age.<sup>49</sup> After a few years, however, a permanent council was constituted, with fixed membership, fixed seating arrangements and delegated judicial powers. In its membership, the council brought together the heads of all the institutions that had formed around the Este in the course of the fourteenth century and which formed the 'institutional' court: the secretary and *referendario* (from the chancery), the two *fattori generali* (from the camera or exchequer), the master-chamberlain, the official in charge of armed forces, the vicar-general (legal counsel) and the *Giudice de' Savi* (president of the communal council). In addition, the council included two noblemen close to Niccolo d'Este and related to him by marriage and two high-ranking clergymen.<sup>50</sup>

The need for a formal council, in an age when proper consultation distinguished the just ruler from the tyrant, hardly needs comment (save to ponder why it should be created at this particular moment); but why endow it with specific additional jurisdiction in widows' and orphans' cases? Part of the answer might be that this represents part of the long-drawn-out transfer of communal functions to the Este administration: the provision of proxies for those unable to conduct their own business at law (women, minors, etc.) and the special treatment of their cases had been a routine function of the commune's legal establishment. Like other *signori*, the Este were slowly dismantling the communal institutions that they had inherited. Widows and orphans were also, however, highly conventional objects of charity. It was formulaic that anyone in a public position should help and protect them; tyranny was commonly described in

<sup>48</sup> F. Valenti, 'I consigli di governo presso gli Estensi dalle origini alla devoluzione di Ferrara', in *Studi in onore di R. Filangieri* (Naples, 1959), II, 22-3. The only surviving decree regarding the council (9 Mar. 1425: ASM, *Cancellaria*, 'Leggi e Decreti', reg. B IV, fol. 116) confirms and expands its powers. The original constitution presumably fell in the years for which chancery registers are lacking (1410-18). Already in 1418, the communal council ordered that 'questiones pupillorum et viduarum vertantur coram consilio domini Marchionis et debeant cognoscere summarie, simpliciter et de plano': Archivio comunale, Ferrara, *Deliberazioni dei Dodici Savi*, Libro C, fol. 20 (13 Jan. 1418).

<sup>49</sup> Valenti, 'Consigli', 21; Dean, *Land and Power*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> The full list of councillors in 1425: the archbishop of Ravenna (Tommaso Perondoli), Ugucione Contrari, bishop of Cervia (Paolo da Rimini), Bartolomeo Mella, Alberto Sale, Jacopo Zilioli, Bertolino and Paolo Barbalunga, Guglielmo Avogario, Niccolo da Montegranaro, Gabriele Pengaglia and Alberto Bonacossi; to whom were added Leonello d'Este (1425), Floriano di San Pietro (1431) and Troilo Boncompagni (1432): ASM, *Leggi e decreti*, reg. B IV, fol. 116.

terms of their oppression.<sup>51</sup> Governments everywhere and at all times can be found making special provisions for widows and orphans and claiming them as a protected category.<sup>52</sup> The Este initiative put them in august company. Borso d'Este was later to declare that the care of children and orphans belonged 'especially' to the 'good prince and lord' and even had himself depicted in an act of justice towards a widow and her fatherless child.<sup>53</sup> Thus in arrogating to themselves and to their new council this particular jurisdiction, the Este were drawing on two of the strongest legitimizing claims of medieval governments: protection of *miserabiles* and a regular, visible form of consultation.

Greater protection of widows and orphans was clearly also prompted by the outbreak of plague in Ferrara in 1417, during which one chronicler records that a hundred people died each day.<sup>54</sup> It is known that high epidemic mortality created opportunities, among the widowed families and orphaned minors, for speculators and profiteers and that action to protect inheritances and legitimate title to property was common in the wake of outbreaks of plague.<sup>55</sup> But after the plague crisis in Ferrara, the new council continued to exercise its special jurisdiction: increasing provision for widows and orphans was common at the time, for example the creation of new, large hospitals specifically for them (the Innocenti in Florence, of course, being the most famous). It is clear also that the new council's jurisdiction was answering a real need: references to its actions abound, proving that it was actively and frequently appealed to. Between 1425 and 1433, the council can be found enforcing debts to widows, protecting their dowry rights, ensuring the fulfilment of legacies, hearing disputes between widows and their sons and authorizing them to enter into contracts of various sorts. As regards orphans, the council authorized transfers of property and divisions of inheritances, altered testamentary arrangements for guardianship and enforced debts.<sup>56</sup> Nor did this exhaust

<sup>51</sup> Fazio degli Uberti, *Il Dittamondo*, II, 44; M. Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, Conn. and London, 1984), 16; C. Pecorella, *Studi sul notariato a Piacenza nel secolo XIII* (Milan, 1968), 15-16; Rolandino, *Cronica*, 103, 145; Medin, *Lamenti*, I, 172; etc.

<sup>52</sup> N. Tamassia, 'L'alta tutela dell'antico re germanico', *Arch Giuridico*, 94 (1925); A. Pertile, *Storia del diritto italiano*, III (Turin, 1894), 398-400; L. J. Macfarlane, *William Elphinstone and the Kingdom of Scotland 1431-1514* (Aberdeen, 1985), 112; etc. In Florence a new magistracy was created in 1393: F. Morandini, 'Statuti e ordinamenti dell'Ufficio dei pupilli e adulti nel periodo della Repubblica fiorentina (1388-1534)', *Arch Stor I*, 113 (1955), 522.

<sup>53</sup> A. F. Gori, *Symbolae litterariae*, VIII (Florence, 1751), 183. The lower zone of the month of March in the *Sala dei mesi* of the Palazzo Schifanoia shows Borso d'Este, below the inscription 'IVSTITIA', about to attend to the petition of a widow (apparently) and her child: P. d'Ancona, *The Schifanoia Months at Ferrara* (Milan, 1954), 18.

<sup>54</sup> Frizzi, *Ferrara*, III, 447; *Diario ferrarese dall'anno 1409 sino al 1502*, RIS<sup>2</sup> xxiv/7, 15.

<sup>55</sup> G. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (New York and London, 1969), 113-14; A. B. Falsini, 'Firenze dopo il 1348. Le conseguenze della peste nera', *Arch Stor I*, 129 (1971), 449-61; Morandini, 'Ufficio dei pupilli', 522; J. Henderson, 'The parish and the poor in Florence at the time of the Black Death: the case of S. Frediano', *Continuity and Change*, 3 (1988), 264-5.

<sup>56</sup> In the same years, it dealt with wool-guild business, reviewed criminal sentences, advised on petitions, settled a tithe dispute, arbitrated between foreigners in Ferrara are sorted out complicated property disputes: ASM, *Notai camerali*, D. Dulcini, A. fol. 19<sup>v</sup>; B. fol. 22; C. Lardi, A. fols.

the council's activities.<sup>57</sup> The council thus acted as a channel for a special kind of giving – supplying the authority and protection lacking to disadvantaged groups in Ferrarese society.

But how 'courtly' was the council? It might be instructive to examine the background of the most prominent councillor, the one present at most of its meetings, the archbishop of Ravenna, Tommaso Perondoli. He came from a minor Florentine banking family that had settled in Ferrara in the mid-fourteenth century and had become archbishop in 1411, with Este backing.<sup>58</sup> His family had already provided a succession of officials in most branches of Este administration: Jacopo was an Este *factor* in the 1330s; his son, Andrea was a *factor* in the 1370s, then *fattore generale*, 1382–91; one of Andrea's two sons, Niccolo, served as a judge in Modena and was later *Giudice de' Savi* in Ferrara (1404–15).<sup>59</sup> Andrea's other son was Tommaso: he was a canon in Ferrara from as early as 1389, a student in Bologna in the 1390s, archpriest of a *contado* parish around 1400, then vicar of the university chancellor, of the bishop of Ferrara and of the abbot of Nonantola.<sup>60</sup> Though assiduous as a councillor and active in recovering his church's property, he nevertheless did use his position to assist his kinsmen, persuading Niccolo d'Este to write off their debts to the Este *camera*.<sup>61</sup> Tommaso Perondoli thus came from an administrative, not a courtly, family; he appears in the records as a churchman and councillor (one mindful of the needs of his family, as well as those of his church and of the disadvantaged). It is not easy to see him as a courtier, nor as an agent of the court's control of local society.

Nevertheless, the Perondoli were one of a number of families whom the Este employed and promoted *en bloc* both in and out of court. The Roberti from Reggio had been another prominent example in the late fourteenth century, providing a bishop of Ferrara, a series of counsellors, a wife for one of the Este and so on.<sup>62</sup> The Ariosti, Barbalungi, Montanari, Novelli, Pendaglia, Sacrati and Sala are further instances of such

83<sup>v</sup>–84; Archivio di Stato, Ferrara, *Archivio notarile*, D. Dulcini, acts of 17 Nov. 1422, 17 Feb. 1423, 2 Mar. 1423, 8 Mar. 1423, 30 June 1423; F. Valenza, acts of 3 Apr. 1425, 18 Jan. 1426, 30 Jan. 1426, 16 Nov. 1426, 27 Feb. 1427, 23 Aug. 1427, 5 Sept. 1427, etc.; R. Vescovi, acts of 19 Dec. 1426, 13 Aug. 1427, 14 Oct. 1427, 17 Aug. 1428, 23 Dec. 1432, 27 Mar. 1433, 2 Dec. 1433, 22 Apr. 1433; G. Fiesso, acts of 16 May 1430, 10 June 1430, etc.

<sup>57</sup> ASM, *Cancellaria*, 'Leggi e decreti', reg. B iv, fols. 129<sup>v</sup>–130<sup>v</sup>, 152<sup>v</sup>, 155<sup>v</sup>, 169, 184<sup>v</sup>–185.

<sup>58</sup> Dean, *Land and Power*, 43, 139, 140.

<sup>59</sup> ASM, *Notai camerati*, P. Fabro, fols. 8, 23, 31, 41, 92<sup>v</sup>, 108, 146<sup>v</sup>; F. Taiapetri, B, fol. 14; Z. Coadi, fols. 15, 40; Archivio comunale, Ferrara, *Deliberazioni*, B, *passim*; E. P. Vicini, 'I podestà di Modena dal 1336 al 1796', *Atti e Memorie della Deputazione di Storia Patria per le antiche provincie modenesi*, ser. 5, 10 (1917), 202, 207, 211.

<sup>60</sup> G. Pardi, 'Lo studio di Ferrara nei secoli XV e XVI', *AMF*, 14 (1903), 203; A. Franceschini, 'Notizia di privilegi dottorali ferraresi', *AMF*, ser. 3, 19 (1975), 73; C. Piana, *Nuovi documenti sull'università di Bologna e sul Collegio di Spagna* (Bologna, 1976), I, 371, 407, 410; ASM, *Notai camerati*, P. Bononia, fol. 93<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>61</sup> ASM, *Notai camerati*, D. Dulcini, A, fols. 59<sup>v</sup>, 71<sup>v</sup>, 73, 86<sup>v</sup>; C, fol. 80<sup>v</sup>; A. Villa, fol. 54<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>62</sup> Dean, *Land and Power*, 85–6, 163–4.

families, who combined major office in church and state with tax-farms and territorial office. At lower levels, we find families such as the Silvestri, Carri and Boioni, who filled posts in court and palace over a number of generations.<sup>63</sup> Over all these families, both the dynasts and the short-stayers, the Este presided with a mixture of expansive indulgence and sudden severity. Sacchetti's verdict, that no good came to those who stayed too long with lords, as the great gains would be offset by the even greater risks, was certainly borne out in Niccolo III's swift destruction of former intimates such as Jacopo Giglioli, Dante da Castiglione and Niccolo Bergamino.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, many families held on to their profits and Niccolo allegedly dismissed proposals for household economies with the claim that there was plenty of room under his wings for petty swindlers and embezzlers ('*lassa stare li poveretti sotto le ale de l'aquila mia*').<sup>65</sup>

This image, of the eagle's outspread wings protecting its voracious dependants, suggests a final way of looking at the court, namely in terms of paternalism. Niccolo III, like Cosimo de' Medici, became known as *pater patriae*.<sup>66</sup> He also furnished dowries for women (especially his wife's *domicelle*)<sup>67</sup> and acted as spiritual godfather.<sup>68</sup> But this use of family imagery in political relationships was, of course, common and already had a long history. According to Rolandino, Ezzelino da Romano justified his political purges on the grounds that he was a *paterfamilias* cleaning out his house.<sup>69</sup> Cortusi has Jacopo da Carrara accepting the lordship of Padua 'only in order that he might provide for the *patria* like a father'.<sup>70</sup> He also describes Cangrande della Scala distributing 'beautiful gifts to the Paduan nobles, with whom he was familiar, like a father'.<sup>71</sup> Bartolus observed that 'the rulers of cities are styled fathers of their subjects'.<sup>72</sup> Venice presumed to act the father to its princely neighbours.<sup>73</sup> Fatherhood

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 144-5; ASM, *Camera ducale*, 'Catastri delle Investiture', reg. H, fols. 186, 218, 613, 635; reg. N, fols. 28, 58, 65, 80, 104, 224, 537; *Notai camerati*, N. Delaito, fol. 10; J. Sanvitale, fols. 25-6; M. Benintendi, fol. 72; F. Sale, fols. 61<sup>v</sup>, 77<sup>v</sup>, 82.

<sup>64</sup> Dean, *Land and Power*, 83, 136. Dante da Castiglione was charged with embezzling 100,000 ducats: ASM, *Cancellaria*, 'Leggi e decreti', reg. B IV, fol. 53 (28 Feb. 1421). For revocation of gifts to Niccolo Bergamino: ASM, *Notai camerati*, A. Villa, fols 38, 56<sup>v</sup>, 65.

<sup>65</sup> *Facezie di Lodovico Carbone ferrarese*, ed. A. Salza (Livorno, 1900), 68-9.

<sup>66</sup> W. Gundersheimer, *Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism* (Princeton, NJ, 1973), 67-9; A. Brown, 'The humanist portrait of Cosimo de' Medici, *pater patriae*', *J Warburg C*, 24 (1961); A. Molho, 'Cosimo de' Medici: *pater patriae* or *padrino*?', *Stanford It*, 1 (1979).

<sup>67</sup> ASM, *Notai camerati*, D. Dulcini, D, fols. 49<sup>v</sup>, 82<sup>v</sup>, 104, 133<sup>v</sup>, 136<sup>v</sup>; *Cancellaria*, 'Leggi e decreti', reg. B II, fol. 298.

<sup>68</sup> *Viaggio a Gerusalemme*, 137; *Viaggio de S. Antonio de Viena in Franza*, in *RIS*<sup>2</sup> xx/2, 57. See also ASM, *Notai camerati*, P. Bononia, fols. 15, 27; J. Pelizari, fol. 64; P. Sardi, A, fol. 59.

<sup>69</sup> Rolandino, *Cronica*, 90.

<sup>70</sup> Cortusi, *Chronica*, 28.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* 55; and see pp. 58, 84-5.

<sup>72</sup> 'Bartolo on the conflict of laws', trans. J. A. C. Smith, *Am J Legal Hist*, 14 (1970), 263.

<sup>73</sup> T. Dean, 'Venetian economic hegemony: the case of Ferrara, 1200-1500', *Stud Venez*, n.s., 12 (1986), 52-3.

was thus, like liberality, a key theme used by governments everywhere (except in Florence, of course, which preferred to be a mother to its children; though note the possible Medici cultivation of the imagery of fatherhood).<sup>74</sup> And it was fatherhood and liberality together that made the courtly ruler; as we have seen, princely rule consisted largely in giving, dispensing and selling, while the prince's authority was likened to that of a father. It was courtliness-as-liberality, combined with the patronage and commanding authority of the lord-as-father, that allowed *princely* control of local society. The *court* was only one arena within which that control was exercised.

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<sup>74</sup> R. C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York & London, 1980), 425-7.