

“Trades” and “Social Membership” into the Context of Feudal Friulian Society during Late Middle Ages (13th Century-1511)

Marco Sicuro

Stradalta Historical Association of Gonars

It is a very hard job for historians to keep themselves neutrals in front of the events they find during their studies. It is also difficult to notice the correlations among the different times of the history without falling in anachronistic mistakes. In fact, it is well-known that a historian must be wise and rational when he finds those correlations, because every society has its own characteristics, structures, and mentality. This brief essay focuses on the social structures in a north eastern italic region, which is called Friuli, between the 12th and 16th centuries. In the above mentioned centuries, it is possible to notice an evolution from a feudal ecclesiastical principality, ruled by prince-patriarchs, ecclesiastical institutions and nobility, to a more fluid and dynamic constitution formed by new classes which rose up in times of urban and economic development. But this development struggles to delete the old system, which persisted until the end of 18th century with the arrival of Napoleon. The transition from the Patriarch's power to Venice's dominion seems to have created two main consequences: by one hand a more bureaucratic and modern structure of the State, by the other hand a consolidation of the old connections between patrons and clients, consequence of the “modern” feudal system that consolidated its roots in the Late Middle Ages centuries.

Keywords: Medieval History, Early Modern Period, History of Friuli, Cruel Fat Thursday, History of Society, Patronage System

The constitutional form of friulian land called *Patria del Friuli* was a Patriarchate, an ecclesiastical principality¹ where the bishops were both princes of the Holy Roman Empire and metropolitans.² After the emperor's confirmation of their power in 1077, during the 12th century, the patriarchs started to create a feudal society, giving a slight amount of their rights, prerogatives, and lands to others lords, abbots, and ecclesiastical institutions like churches' chapters, which formed with their representatives the patriarch's court called *curia*.³

The whole friulian territory was predominantly rural, with a great number of villages and castles, some of them built very closely to each other, especially during the Hungarian invasions of 10th century. The majority of population, made by peasants who worked lands and fields for their owners—with a little number of

Marco Sicuro, freelance professional researcher, President of Associazione storico culturale “Stradalta” di Gonars (trans. Stradalta Historical Association of Gonars), Master's Degree in Historical Studies from the Middle Ages to the Modern Times (trans. Studi storici dal Medioevo all'età Contemporanea), Doctor of Medieval History, University of Udine, Italy; main research field: History of Institutions, History of Friuli, History of Franciscan Order, History of Medieval Economic Thought, and History of Monti di Pietà (the first ethical bank institutions and pawn shops of the modern Italy).

The following essay was taken from a paper delivered in occasion of the 9th Edition of the International World Youth Forum “Right to Dialogue” (September 30-October 2, 2016, Trieste—*Department of Legal, Language, Interpreting and Translation Studies, University of Trieste*), organized by the Association *Poesia e Solidarietà* of Trieste. The Forum concerned the topic of “Histories, Cultures, Rights.” Special thanks to Prof. Gabriella Valera for allowing me to be part of this Forum.

artisans—stood in poverty conditions. Endemic diseases such as *malaria* forced a big number of people to abandon the low countryside, and so also the capital city of Aquileia became not to bigger than a village. This is the reason why patriarchs moved on other “cities” and made them new capitals for their principality, such as Cividale (12th century) and Udine (13th century). Those conditions had always been a peculiar character of friulian lands during the medieval and modern period.⁴

The birth of a primitive middle class started in the 13th century, when patriarchs tried to develop the poor economic conditions of their domain introducing some merchant companies from Tuscany and Lombardy (13th-14th centuries).⁵ Another condition linked to this evolution concerned the patriarch’s will of opposing some civic communities, which spread out at the end of 12th century, to the majority of nobles who dominated the Parliament, the mean friulian assembly born in 1231.⁶

The most important community which obtained the *privilege of bourgeoisie* in 1248 was Udine, but almost other eleven communities—which took the form of urban neighborhoods (*borghi*) and small towns in the 13th century—developed a middle class formed by artisans, little merchants, moneylenders, notables, notaries, and so on.⁷ This social change is also clear into the vision of Tommasino of Cerlaria, a priest who lived at patriarch Wolfger of Erla’s court, who wrote a text of moral literature, the *Welscher Gast* (trans. *the Romance Stranger*, 1215-1216), describing the contradictions of his times and the rise of civic middle class.⁸

Regarding the composition of the friulian society of 14th-16th centuries, during both the patriarchal period (1077-1420) or the 1st century of the venetian one (1420-1520), we can notice how the social structure was crossed by an enormously number of clientage bonds and relationships. Vertical bonds between patrons and clients or fathers and sons, horizontal ones among friends, siblings and neighbors, credit or economic relationships between citizens of the same or different land, or citizens and peasants of the countryside.⁹

When Venice conquered the region in 1420, it replaced the patriarch with a less-powerful administrator called *Luogotenente* (trans. *Liutenant*), it added some new institutions, promising the members of aristocracy that their liberties, rights, and *consuetudines* (trans. *common law*) would be respected.¹⁰ However, Venice did not eliminate old institutions as the Parliament, so it made this system less effective than the patriarch’s one. As Edward Muir argues,

Friulian and Udinese institutions failed to function efficiently. They created an oppressive burden of vested interests in which every obscure office and every procedure were the privileged rights of someone; moreover, institutions worked against one another, furthering rather than resolving conflicts. As a result, non-institutional relationships comprised the real life of the society. [...] groups might temporarily form along class lines, but these could easily decompose and recompose into clientage groups or factions.¹¹ (1998, 27)

Considering those kinds of social ties, we must focus the attention on Confraternities’ brotherhood relationships.¹² Those associations sprang up in Friuli since the middle of 13th century and spread to several towns and villages. They had a devotional (e.g., the confraternity of *Holy Spirit*) or ethnic character (e.g. confraternities of *Alemanni* and *Slavs*), and some of them also formed their organization around a common participation of men in a trade activity (e.g., confraternities of *backsmiths*, *furriers*, *butchers*, *barbers*, *shoemakers*, and so on).¹³ These groups were characterized by an internal organization, which found place in the drafting of statutory rubrics, which regulated the various craft activities, charity, and assistance among members or towards strangers (especially when a confraternity funded a hospital). Being a member of those associations, a person could obtain a few number of civic rights, protection, help, or credit by the others, and religious care during his life and after death (with the believer’s prayers).¹⁴

During the low middle ages, a man had some ways to be involved in the society. All those ways were related to some social reputation's factors, such as practicing a particular kind of trade, being a member of religious' or trade's groups as Arts, Guilds, or confraternities (groups which sometimes could rise to the government of a city), having social and economic partnerships with nobles, merchants, and notables or being their client, and the most important of all, belonging legally to a country with the right of citizenship. Poor people, a category that included a large number of different human models, without any kind of participation in civic life and juridical representation in tribunals, were considered marginalized and potentially dangerous for the civic order. For example sometimes, peasants, and countrymen were considered by cities' inhabitants as inferior or subordinate people, both on the cultural and social side.¹⁵

However, and this is important, not every job was included into the list of “honorable” professions, and it depended on circumstances, on the motives, and on the person involved. First of all, the Church, during its long existence, had always tried to regulate society's rules, especially those concerning topics such as social reputation and the linked categorization of sins, the difference between natural and civil Right, the general utility of things to the society's common good, and the difference between “licit” and “illicit” trades. As Jacques Le Goff argues, “Certain of these trades... were unreservedly condemned... while others incurred condemnation only in certain cases” (1980, 58).¹⁶ Old taboos of blood, impurity, or money (considered sometimes as the “devil's dirt”), mixed together with the Christian mentality and ideological conceptions. E.g., during the early middle age, some trades as usury and prostitution were condemned, professions as innkeepers, butchers, jongleurs, mountebanks, magicians, alchemists, doctors, surgeons, soldiers, pimps, notaries, merchants, and so on were considered deeply immoral for their low condition and for some other theological reasons.¹⁷

However, as P. Ricoeur underlines (quoting Jacques Le Goff),

To understand evolutions in the estimations of work it is not enough to look into the theology of work, but instead one must be attuned, at the deep level of mores, to the shifting frontier between licit and illicit jobs, the continually diminishing list of forbidden or unacceptable professions, and changes in attitudes with respect to manual labour.¹⁸ (1999, 82; 1992)

In fact, certain prohibitions were related to time and some condemnations attached to particular places. During the early middle age, the cultural mindset was strongly influenced by the Church, who kept culture and education's monopoly (having a good education was a privilege of a limited number of people). The Western society was essentially rural and it,

held in contempt any activity not directly linked to the land, practically without exception... Between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries, however, the context changed. An economic and social revolution took place in the Christian West, of which urban expansion was the most striking symptom and the division of labor the most important characteristic. New trades came into being or developed, new professional categories made their appearance or grew more substantial, and new socio-professional groups, strong in numbers and by virtue of their roles, demanded and won esteem and even a prestige appropriate to their strength.¹⁹

E.g., some professional figures as merchants, jurists, and notaries became so strong due to their utility of the cities' common good conceptions, so they could compare their strength with ancient nobles, taking part into civic councils and managing the culture and the affairs of the cities.²⁰

Aristocrats could also take part of these groups and associations, but the most relevant way that nobles had to manage relationships among the society, was the convergence of friendship and patronage ties with

economic transactions, and this can be noticed on documents when a noble traded with or lent money and goods to his colleagues and clients. Some connectors between aristocrats and peasants or artisans could be the notaries, merchants, clergymen, or the *decani* (the heads of villages and urban neighborhoods). Every friulian aristocratic family had those kinds of clientage networks, but the most “popular” of those—the Savorgnan family—had built a stronger and more widespread patronage system than the others, as they could control more than 5000 men at the beginning of 16th century.²¹

This social system revealed all its dangerous consequences between the first and second decade of 16th century, when the most powerful states of Europe, like the kingdoms of France and Spain, the Papacy, the Holy Roman Empire, and some northern Italy’s principalities joined the forces in order to fight Venice and its political expansionism. In 1509, the French troops defeated the Venetian army at Agnadello. More than 12 cities of Venetian *Terraferma*, with their ruling classes, which were submitted by Venice during the 15th century, opened their gates to the enemy. The Republic was nearly closed to collapse definitively. For a long time, Historiography has underlined the difference among nobles and the rest of population, like common folk, artisans, and middle class. The first, especially in the great majority of *Terraferma* cities, were supposed to disagree with Venice ruling. The second have been considered faithful, loyal, and close to their Capital city. We must consider the existence of factions inside civic realities. E.g., each faction could have its opinions about Venice or the Holy Roman Empire. One example could be Verona, which more than a score of its nobles rose in past times due to their relationships with the Empire.²²

On February 1511, during the last days of carnival, a popular revolt took place in the “land” of Udine. A huge crowd of peasants and city artisans, with a thousand militiamen, assaulted the friulian nobles’ palaces and houses, burning and looting all that they found out. After three days of rioting, those men had been killed between 25 and 50 nobles with their retainers, dismembering their corpses and feeding the animals with their flesh. After the massacre, the “butchers” suited the murdered nobles’ clothes, and celebrated the carnival party, everyone acting the role of the person who had killed. As the massacre’s news spread into the countryside, peasants of near and far villages assaulted the rural castles of the same feudal lords, who were rumored to be in league with the enemy and the German emperor Maximilian I of Hapsburg.

This event is known as “Cruel Fat Thursday” (translation of the vernacular idiom *Crudel zobia grassa*), and it is considered by historians as the most damaging popular revolt in Renaissance Italy and at the same time as the “bloody backwash from a tidal wave of vendetta violence among the nobles who dominated the affairs of the region.”²³

All the nobles who were killed in those three days-massacre (the noble *Strumieri* faction), were all avowed enemies of the militia captain Antonio Savorgnan, a nobleman enormously popular because of his good social, economic, and patronage relationships with artisan workers and associations (brotherhoods, confraternities), peasants and villagers, and civic middle class. It is supposed that Antonio’s retainers played a relevant role in organizing people for the riot. Antonio, leader of the popular *Zambarlani* faction, was influential in Udine as Venetian magistrates considered him fully loyal towards Venice.²⁴

The sequence of events is clearly described in Gregorio Amaseo’s *Historia*, written in some diaries in the years following the fact. Although this document is our mean source, we must pay attention on the author’s “neutral” vision. Gregorio was an Antonio’s partisan until he abandoned him for his bad knowing of Latin prose composition and his love affair with a nun. So, we cannot find a good portrait of Antonio inside the *Historia* (he is nicknamed as *Judah Iscariota*, *Mohammed*, traitor, villain), as well we cannot find a neutral one of the

people who took his parts. In fact, nobles are always described as the true victims of the vendetta violence, and as people full of civic virtues. By the other side, we cannot find differences between peasants and the civic lower middle class of artisans and workers, because they are all painted as evils and wicked people.

This description of events is conditioned by the vision of Gregorio. Nevertheless his anger towards Antonio, the chronicle shows us a vision of a cultured man (despite his ability with Latin language) who took part of the upper civic classes, in a period—the 16th century—where the concept of nobility acquired some new characteristics.²⁵ To take part of the “civic” aristocracy, it was fundamental not to exercise any trades characterized by manual labor. Only a few professions could be compatible with the participation in civic councils (unless a minority of popular representatives were allowed in the assembly): humanistic, medical, juridical professions and—dependently on various urban cases—the merchant and banker profession.²⁶

Notes

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1. Bellabarba M. (2012), 197-219.
 2. Herbermann (1913): “Metropolitan.” The definition of *Metropolitan* can be found in this website: [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_\(1913\)/Metropolitan](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Metropolitan). For a complete picture of the feudal society see Bloch M. (2010), 551.
 3. Cammarosano P./Degrassi D./De Vitt F. (1988), 143.
 4. Cammarosano (1985), 122; Bianco (1994), 220.
 5. Davide M. (2008), 471; Cfr. Davide M. (2003), 639-68.
 6. For informations about the Friulian Parliament: Leicht (1917-1925), 540; Casella (2012), 448. For a brief synthesis about the evolution of local powers: Zacchigna (2004), 91-113.
 7. Cammarosano P./Degrassi D./De Vitt F. (1988), 355-86; The udinese *privilege of bourgeoisie* is edited in Joppi (1898), 180.
 8. Del Zotto C. (2003), 205-31.
 9. This picture is given by Zacchigna M. (2007), 257.
 10. Paschini P. (1954), 339-55; Cfr. Trebbi (1998), 429.
 11. Muir E. (1998), cit. 27.
 12. For an overview of the history of confraternities Cfr. Pini A. I. (1986), 314.
 13. Cammarosano P./Degrassi D./De Vitt F. (1988), 227-32; 257-65.
 14. Mattaloni C. (1991), 47-78.
 15. Todeschini G. (2007), 309.
 16. Le Goff J. (1980), cit. 58.
 17. Le Goff J. (1980), 384.
 18. Ricoeur (1999), cit. 82; Cfr. Applebaum (1992) for a general overview.
 19. Le Goff J. (1980), cit. 62.
 20. For a history of oligarchies see Bertelli S. (1978), 176.
 21. Zacchigna M. (2007), 257; Muir E. (1998), 208; Casella L. (2003), 368; Davide M. (2008), 471.
 22. Lane F. C. (1991), 265-91; Cfr. Gullino G. (2011), 367, and Sartori P. L. (1992), 302.
 23. Muir E. (1998), cit. XIX-XX of the Introduction. Even though the factional strife among nobles, patriarch, and nobles, and between nobles and urban communities did not have the same characteristics of the *Strumiero* and *Zambarlani* strife, the Late Medieval period in friulian lands (13th-14th centuries) is characterized by an evident sequence of war events among the parts of the Patriarchal State. This can be clearly noticed by the lecture of the local chronicles, e.g., D’Ongaro J. (1856), 18 and Tambara G. (1902-1905), 112.
 24. We can distinguish two factional divisions: the first, called the *Strumiero* faction, had been composed by a majority of nobles and citizens and high patricians of Udine. This faction shaped the relations among its members with political and marriage bonds or economic interests. By the other side, we can find the *Zambarlani* faction, composed by city artisans, the low middle class of Udine, and a high number of peasants of the rural countryside, which joined the faction during the last decade of the 15th century. At the head of this faction, there was a noble family of Udine, the Savorgnan, and a few number of client nobles and patricians of Antonio Savorgnan, the head of the family. At the end of 15th century, a series of Turkish raids in the lands of Friuli killed more than ten thousand men and left towns, villages, and crops devastated. The dramatic drop in agricultural prices left the peasants in poor conditions. As a consequence of that terrible events, Venice increased fiscal taxation, work obligations, and rural billets for mercenaries and the feudal lords tried to earn more income from their agrarian holdings. On the contrary, Antonio Savorgnan became enormously popular due to his advocacy for the poor of Udine and the peasants of his own land possessions.

He became also the captain of the popular militia, offering the peasants and men which joined in the opportunity to become soldiers in defense of their villages and houses.

25. Muir E. (1998), 208; The chronicle is edited in Bianco F. (2010), 205. What is important to say is that local clientage bonds were the obvious consequence of a failed State where Venice did not have an efficient bureaucracy to completely control this vast territory.

26. Donati C. (1988), 402. Cfr. Bertelli S. (1978), Ventura A. (1964), and Sartori P. L. (1992).

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