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Enemy at the Gates: Self-defense Strategies and Measures Taken by the Rural Communities of the Visconti State in the 14th Century

El enemigo ante las puertas: estrategias y medidas de autodefensa tomadas por las comunidades rurales del estado de los Visconti en el siglo XIV

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Abstract: An enemy's approach was a fairly common and extremely dangerous occurrence for both urban and rural residents during the Middle Ages and beyond. To limit the damage that the enemies could inflict on the territory the lords, the officers of the Visconti, the authorities of the cities and the communities of the countryside devised a series of measures. The most common were the rise of guards and garrisons in city fortifications, castles and settlements in the countryside; nevertheless, they also used stratagems such as sound signals, smoke or spies to monitor the approach of enemies and prepare the necessary countermeasures. It is a fairly broad topic that has not been investigated, at least in the Italian context., For convenience, this article will examine and analyse the information collected within the communities controlled by the Visconti in the fourteenth century.

Keywords: Medieval warfare; Medieval arms; Duchy of Milan; War studies; Medieval History.

Resumen: En la Edad Media, y no sólo, la aproximación de un ejército enemigo era para los habitantes de las ciudades y del campo un suceso bastante frecuente y muy peligroso. Por esta razón, los señores, los oficiales de los Visconti, las autoridades de las ciudades y las comunidades rurarles idearon una serie de medidas para limitar el daño que los enemigos podían infligir al

territorio. La más común era disponer guardias y guarniciones en fortificaciones urbanas, castillos y asentamientos rurales, pero también utilizaban estratagemas como señales sonoras, de humo o espías mediante los cuales era posible vigilar la aproximación de los enemigos y preparar las contramedidas necesarias. Es un tema muy amplio y no investigado, al menos en el contexto italiano, que aquí, por comodidad, examinaremos analizando la información recogida dentro de las comunidades controladas por los Visconti en el siglo XIV.
Palabras clave: Guerra medieval; Armas medievales; Ducado de Milán; Estudios de guerra; Historia medieval.

Summary: Include article sections.

INTRODUCCIÓN

In 1362, during the war between the Visconti, lords of Milan, and Giovanni II, marquis of Monferrato, the *podestà* of Pavia ordered the municipal authorities of Voghera to set up guards and increase the vigilance on the fortifications of the small town because the English mercenaries hired by the marquis had entered the nearby village of Castelnuovo Scrivia by surprise.[1] The White Company, this was the name given to these fighters, had recently come to Italy and, according to the chronicler Pietro Azario, distinguished itself from other groups of mercenaries operating in the peninsula both for the skills in combat and for the brutality with which it plundered the places it conquered or, simply, crossed.[2]

Also, according to the Azario, Castelnuovo Scrivia had to undergo three months of occupation by the mercenaries of the White Company, during which its inhabitants suffered all sorts of violence and abuse by mercenaries, in addition to the robbery of everything they owned. Of course, as it has been observed, it is not always easy to understand if such brutal actions – often described harshly by Azario and other contemporary chroniclers – happened exactly as the chronicler told us or if his story is not in some way exaggerated.[3]

[1] Petro Azario, *Liber Gestorum in Lombardia*, ed. Francesco Cognasso, (Bologna, Zanichelli, 1926), 158.
[2] Gian Maria Varanini, "Il Mercenariato", in *Guerre ed eserciti nel Medioevo*, ed. Paolo Grillo, Aldo A. Settia (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018), 261-262. William Caferro, *John Hawkwood. An English mercenary in Fourteenth-Century Italy*, (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 47-50.
[3] Paolo Grillo, *Cavalieri e popolo in armi. Le istituzioni militari nell'Italia medievale*, (Bari, Laterza, 2008), 148-159.

Recent research has shown that, in the same period, the war had a limited impact on the economic and social life of Lombardy, and its effects, unlike in other areas of Italy, were not devastating. We have no evidence of changes in landscape and population, nor have we seen the spread of castles in rural areas. More concretely, the population of the cities and, above all, of the countryside, the most exposed to looting and acts of violence committed by the military, were able to adopt, instead, systems to limit the effects of the devastations made by the companies.[4]

As we have seen, in 1362, the dangerous approach of the White Company to the territory around Voghera pushed the *podestà* of Pavia to order the commune of Voghera to increase the surveillance on the walls, on the gates and on the surroundings of the village not to be caught, like the men of Castelnuovo Scrivia, surprised by the feared enemies.[5]

This was not an isolated case, as we will highlight in the following pages, carefully guarding the fortified structures that defended cities and villages was certainly not the only expedient put in place by the local authorities during such moments of crisis. Thanks to tricks used in part in previous years – such as sound signals, smoke or the engagement of spies – it was possible to monitor the approach of enemies and prepare the necessary countermeasures. It is a very vast subject and not properly inv estigated at least in the Italian context, which here, we wi ll examine focusing on the information collected within the territories controlled by the Visconti in the fourteenth century.

It should also be emphasized that the decades under examination were marked by profound changes in the political and administrative organization of the territory controlled by the Lombard dynasty. During the time of Luchino Visconti and Archbishop Giovanni (1339–1354), the dominion was still strongly characterized by the diarchic relationship between the lord and the cities, to the extent that the "Visconti state" has been compared to a constellation of city-states, each of which retained its own individuality.[6]

The situation, however, changed under the rule of Bernabò and Galeazzo II Visconti, who jointly governed the vast territory under their dynasty (which

[4] Paolo Grillo, "«Pace, pace, morte ai dazi e alle gabelle». Il peso della guerra nella Lombardia del primo Trecento", in *La Congiuntura del primo Trecento in Lombardia (1290-1360)*, ed. Paolo Grillo, François Menant (Rome: École Française de Rome, 2019), 86-90.

[5] Archivio Storico Civico di Voghera, Archivio Comunale, Sezione Antica, Registrum Litterarum, I, 263.

[6] Paolo Grillo, "*La fenice comunale. Le città lombarde alla morte di Gian Galeazzo Visconti"*, *Storica* 53 (2012), 43-44.

included eastern Piedmont, much of present-day Emilia, and all of Lombardy, with the exception of Mantua). In fact, while Bernabò (who was entrusted with the eastern part of the dominion) had created an almost "delegated" system of government — entrusting cities or territories to his sons and wife and streamlining the curia domini — in the western part of the Visconti territory, Galeazzo II concentrated greater control over the cities, although he granted considerable powers to his counselors, who often replaced him in many decisions.[7] Similarly, Gian Galeazzo Visconti, who in 1395 obtained the title of Duke of Milan from Emperor Wenceslaus IV of Bohemia, imposed further limits on the autonomy of the cities and communities subject to his rule.[8]

Throughout the Middle Ages, and beyond, the military action to which the armies were most frequently destined was the raids (*guasto*) of the opposing territory.[9] A type of operation that had not much material consequence – given that some crops, such as vineyards or fruit trees, even if cut, could grow again in a few years— but rather psychological effects on the peasant society.[10] As it has been shown, the devastation could have serious repercussions on agricultural production during the season in which it occurred, but the damage was hardly permanent. Indeed, it was difficult for the army to destroy large cultivated areas: the harvest could be eliminated by fire, but only when the cereals were ripe, while the vines, like many fruit trees, could hardly be set on fire and they had to be uprooted plant by plant to be made unproductive, which was too long and difficult for the troops in action. Clearly, fire was the main destructive technique since it allowed the rapid annihilation of ripe crops and of entire settlements which, at that time,

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[7] Andrea Gamberini*, La legittimità contesa. Costruzione statale e culture politiche (Lombardia, XII-XV sec.)*, (Roma: Viella, 2016), 125-140.

[8] Federica Cengarle, "A proposito di dominio naturale: echi europei nel discorso per l'incoronazione ducale di Gian Galeazzo Visconti (1395)", *Reti Medievali-Rivis*ta 21 (2020), 1-26; Federica Cengarle, "I Visconti ed il titolo ducale: qualche riflessione", in *La naissance du Duché de Savoie (1416),* ed. Laurent Ripart, Christian Guilleré, Pascal Vuillemin (Chambéry, Presses Universitaires Université Savoie Mont Blac, 2020), 95-105.

[9] Michael Prestwich, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages. The English Experience*, (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1996), 198.

[10] Aldo A. Settia, *Rapine, assedi, battaglie. La guerra nel Medioevo*, (Bari, Laterza, 2002), 20-28; Claude Gaier, *Art et organisation militaires dans la principauté de Liége et dans le comet de Looz au Moyen Age*, (Bruxelles, Palais des Académies, 1968), 214; Ekaitz Etxeberria Gallastegi, *Fazer la guerra. Estrategia y táctica militar en la Castilla del siglo XV*, (Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2022), 147-158.

consisted of many houses made of wood or with a thatched roof. The aim of the attackers was the devastation of the enemy's territory through the annihilation of its economic resources and the spread of terror among the inhabitants until their surrender.[11]

But if the raids were undoubtedly the worst danger that ran the inhabitants of the countryside –included citizens, nobles or bourgeois, who own land and farms outside the walls of cities –, it was certainly not the only form of violence and looting by men in arms against property and people living in rural areas. An army, great or small, to remain in efficiency had – and, we might say, still has – the need to be constantly supplied with both food for men and for horses and other animals intended for the towing of wagons, both of wood for lighting fires for cooking and, during the winter, for heating. However, although since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Italian cities had developed good logistic systems,[12] they were still not so efficient to allow continuous shipments of supplies, and this emerged more clearly when the contingent pushed into the heart of the enemy territory, thus extending the distance from its operational bases.[13] It often happened then that the lack of supplies induced men to plundering aimed at sustaining the army – an action, in some respects, more "peaceful", since the armed men would often limit themselves through threats rather than actual violence or destruction, to demanding from peasants and townspeople only what was necessary for their survival.

Faced with such dangers, as soon as you had the certainty that the enemy forces were approaching, the first measure adopted by the authorities of the cities was to order the rural populations to transport inside the cities and fortified places food and animals so as not to make them fall into the hands of opponents and to take away from them a safe source of livelihood both economic (they could sell the loot) and material, in case the enemy intended to supply their men by exploiting the resources offered by the occupied country.

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[11] Fabio Bargigia, "«Ita quod arbor viva non remaneat»: devastazioni del territorio e prassi ossidionale nell'Italia dei comuni", *Reti Medievali-Rivi*sta 8 (2007), 8-10; Stephen R. Morillo, Battle Seeking: the Contexts and Limits of Vegetian Strategy, *Journal of Medieval Military History* 1 (2002), 21-42; John B. Gillingham, In Defense of Vegetian Warfare, *Journal of Medieval Military History* 2 (2003), 149-158.

[12] Fabio Bargigia, *Gli eserciti nell'Italia comunale. Organizzazione e logistica (1180-1320)*, (Milano, Unicopli, 2010), 183-215.

[13] Fabio Romanoni, "Pane, vino e carri: logistica e vettovagliamento nello stato visconteo trecentesco", *Nuova Antologia Militare* 5 2 (January 2021): 19-20.

In July 1371, during the war between the Count of Savoy and the Visconti, the Podestà di Bra (then under the control of Galeazzo II Visconti) ordered that all the food stored in the farms be brought inside the small town.[14] Similarly, in 1392, the captain of the border, the *podestà* and the captain of Reggio Emilia informed some *castellani* of the Apennines of Reggio that their territory risked being invaded by enemies and that therefore they would have to arrange their subjects and their possessions in fortified places.[15] Similar orders, always addressed to the inhabitants of the territory of Reggio Emilia, were issued by Gian Galeazzo Visconti in 1397 during the war against the Gonzaga and their allies.[16] However, even the passage of friendly troops could inflict considerable damage on the inhabitants of the countryside. In September 1401, the *podestà* of Pavia ordered men from some localities in Lomellina and Oltrepò Pavese to bring all their grain and provisions into fortified places, in orderto prevent them from being taken by Facino Cane and by the men of his company, who were then at the service of the Duke of Milan.[17]

The lack of communication to rural communities regarding the passage of armed groups through their territory could have devastating consequences, as the municipal authorities of Reggio Emilia experienced in 1387. On that occasion, they asked Gian Galeazzo Visconti to be exempted from delivering wheat to the city garrison, as they had not been informed in advance of the passage of some of the lord's mercenary contingents. These troops had looted cereals and wine from the district's peasants, raped several women and killed several men, causing damage estimated by the authorities at several thousand florins.[18]

In some cases, orders even called for the destruction by fire of all goods and foodstuffs that, perhaps due to haste, could not be secured within a fortified place. This was precisely what Giovanni Visconti stipulated in a letter sent in 1354 to the *podestà* and the captain of Brescia, in which he

[14] Archivio Storico Comune di Bra, Ordinati Originali, n. 275, Years: 1371-1390, 105.
[15] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1392, 6.
[16] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1397.
[17] Archivio Storico Civico di Pavia, Archivio Comunale Parte Antica, Lettere Ducali, Fondo Lettere Ducali, 10, 66.
[18] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Registri Decreti e Lettere, 638, 37-38.

informed them of the approach of Fra' Moriale's company.[19] Two years later, in 1356, the same was done by the *podestà* of Fidenza, warning him of the advance of the forces of the league organized by various Italian lords against the Visconti.[20] Many years later, in 1401, upon the arrival of Rupert of the Palatinate, King of the Romans, and his army, an officer of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, Galeazzo de Pegiis, wrote to the *Podestà*, the consuls and the men of Romano di Lombardia, ordering them to bring cereals, animals and hay inside the village walls, specifying that any hay deposited in the farms that could not be secured was to be set on fire.[21]

Of course, it was an extreme measure, and one that could undoubtedly cause significant economic losses to the owners of the foodstuffs or hay that were burned. However, it inflicted even greater harm on the attacker, who was thus deprived of the opportunity to benefit from those resources. In 1390, the Florentines and their allies, then at war with Gian Galeazzo Visconti, deployed a large army, which, led by John Hawkwood, advanced from Padua toward Vicenza, Verona and other areas under Visconti control. Yet, after only a few months, a shortage of supplies forced the allies to abandon their offensive. The same strategy was attempted once again the following year, when, still under the command of the English leader, the forces of Florence and its allies pushed forward as far as the Adda river, even threatening Milan itself. But once again, problems in logistics and the impossibility of foraging within the enemy territory— because, as reported by the Paduan chronicler Gatari, Gian Galeazzo had ordered that all provisions either be secured within cities and fortified places or be set on fire – brought hunger to the attacker's camp. So severe was the lack of food that some soldiers were forced to slaughter their own horses to feed themselves and, before long, John Hawkwood was compelled to retreat.[22]

Once the enemy was sighted or, at least when its proximity was known, the general response – both in the cities and in the countryside – was to take refuge inside fortified places, also carrying goods, agricultural supplies and livestock. However, greater problems could arise if the enemy's attack occurred during the harvest season, as hastily abandoning rural areas could

[19] Biblioteca Trivulziana di Milano, Cod. 1511, 34-44.
[20] Archivio di Stato di Parma, Feudi, Raccolta Pincolini, 23.
[21] Archivio Storico di Romano di Lombardia, Sezione Antico Regime, Liber Literarum 1, 108.
[22] Fabio Romanoni, "«E la gente di Francia malaccorta, tratta con arte ove la rete è tesa». La battaglia di Alessandria del 1391: il trionfo di Iacopo Dal Verme", *Bollettino Storico-Bibliografico Subalpino* 120, no. 2 (2022): 254.

risk leaving the year's agricultural production in the hands of opponents. In such cases, the urgency of harvesting or gathering crops often led municipal authorities to request that the lord and his officers send soldiers to escort field workers, ensuring the continuation of agricultural operations despite the looming threat of attack.

In July 1391, while the territory of Reggio Emilia was constantly subjected to raids by the opponents of Gian Galeazzo Visconti – so that, for safety, some city gates had been closed – the commune, along with the officers of the lord, decided that the harvest would be organized by opening, in turn, a different gate of the city. Heralds were to inform the inhabitants of each gate of the city when it was opened and, on the appointed day, the peasants, with their chariots and animals, would leave the city to harvest the cereals escorted by a contingent of soldiers.[23]

Similar stocks could also be arranged to supply the city with agricultural goods., In October of the same year, also because of the war, both citizens and aristocrats of Reggio Emilia who owned farms near Correggio were forced to gather in Correggio the agricultural produce from their estates.,As a result, the lord's officers organized a convoy of wagons and oxen escorted by military forces, to transport these goods to Reggio Emilia.[24]

In this type of operation, the Hungarian mercenary knights recruited by Gian Galeazzo Visconti were particularly skilled. They were likely lighter than other cavalry contingents present in the army of the lord of Milan and, perhaps, even armed with arches. In June 1391, some bands of enemies had terrorized the areas around the villages of Gesso and Rivalta, capturing farmers and stealing oxen, to the point that no one dared venture outside the fortified places to harvest grain. As a result, the municipal authorities requested that Captain Marco da Marliano, along with his Hungarian knights stationed in Montecchio Emilia, be sent to those regions to ensure the harvest could proceed safely. A few months later, during the harvest season, the town of Reggio Emilia made a similar request to Gian Galeazzo's officers, asking that the Hungarian knights in Montecchio Emilia accompany the workers involved in the grain collection. They explained that the German mercenary

[23] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Provvigioni, 1391-1392, 59.

[24] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1391.

cavalry originally tasked with this job had proven ineffective, as they were unfamiliar with the local roads and unable to properly escort the peasants.[25]

The presence of a good supply of soldiers could protect the peasants from enemy raids, but it was certainly not possible in case of war to send troops to garrison all the agricultural areas controlled by the Visconti. For this reason, despite this being prohibited by the laws enacted by the cities and by the decrees issued by the lords of Milan, citizens and peasants were often allowed to travel or go to work armed. Generally it is believed that during the fourteenth century the inhabitants of Italian cities and countryside had gradually stopped taking part in armies and conflicts, but, as recent studies have shown, this must be greatly reduced. The armies of the states of northern Italy were formed mainly by mercenaries, very often, at least until the middle of the fourteenth century, foreigners, but contingents of infantry and crossbowmen were also required by the lords to the cities and communities of the countryside. For this reason, many citizens and peasants had at least one basic military training.[26]

Already in 1355 the inhabitants of Brescia who owned gardens and vineyards outside Porta Santo Stefano had obtained from the mayor the license to go to grow them armed[27] and in 1373, during the war against the Pope, the podestà of Reggio Emilia asked Ambrogio Visconti, the city's captain, that the inhabitants of the city and the countryside be allowed to arm themselves with bows and arrows, ad modum anglicum, in order to defend themselves from the enemy.[28] In 1387, following some looting and robberies practiced by some bands of mercenaries hired by Gian Galeazzo Visconti to

[25] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1391; Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Carteggi, Carteggio degli Anziani, 1391. On the Hungarian mercenaries, see: Stephan Selzer, *Deutsche Söldner im Italien des Trecento*, (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2001), 41-42; Guido Guerri dall'Oro, "Les Mercenaires dans les Campagnes Napolitaines de Louis le Grand Roi de Hongrie, 1347-1350", in *Mercenaries and Paid Men. The Mercenary Identity in the Middle Ages*, ed. John France, (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), 75-77.

[26] Fabio Romanoni, "Tra sperimentazione e continuità: gli obblighi militari nello stato visconteo trecentesco", *Società e Storia* 148, no. 2 (2015), 225-230.

[27] Biblioteca Trivulziana di Milano, Cod. 1511, 49.

[28] *Repertorio diplomatico visconteo: documenti dal 1262 al 1402, II, 1363-1385*, (Hoepli, Milano, 1918), doc. 1874, 219. It should be noted that, although the famous English longbow was not widely used in Italy, craftsmen capable of producing "English" bows and arrows are nonetheless documented in Milan and Florence in the final decades of the fourteenth century; see: Fabio Romanoni, "Armi, equipaggiamenti, tecnologie," in *Guerre ed eserciti nel medioevo*, ed. Paolo Grillo, Aldo A. Settia, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018), 180.

damage some villages in the territory of Reggio Emilia, the lord allowed the inhabitants of these places to go around armed.[29] Similar requests were sent to the lord by the commune of Reggio Emilia in 1390 and 1392, when the councillors of the commune wrote to Gian Galeazzo Visconti stating that, because of the war, many were the inhabitants of the city and of the territory of Reggio Emilia who had weapons to defend themselves from enemies during their raids. Weapons both defensive and offensive, necessary to be able to defend themselves, so much so that the same commune asked the lord that, for all the duration of the war, not only was allowed to the inhabitants of the territory hold weapons and turn armed, but the laws prohibiting their possession were also suspended and all trials against men caught in possession of weapons blocked. These requests were granted by Gian Galeazzo Visconti, at least until the war lasted.[30]

On other occasions it was the same municipal authorities to equip villages of the territory with weapons or private to be able to better defend themselves from enemy raids or even just from the passage of groups of mercenaries hired by the lord of Milan. The town of Vercelli, between 1399 and 1400, gave 200 quarrels to the community of Caresana, 100 to that of Salasco, 65 to Casaleggio and 60 to Nibbione and Villata, while the community of Villa di Sali received, along with 100 quarrels, also 5 *cazafrusti*,[31] weapons formed by a wooden rod even more than a meter long to which was attached a sling in fabric or leather that allowed you to throw stones at a reasonable distance.[32]

The same needs were also felt by some aristocrats, who received, in the same years, from the commune arms, as Riccardo Tizzoni, who received 200 quarrels, or Antonio Avogadro di Collobiano who, along with 200 quarrels, received from the commune even seven pounds of powder for the bombards.[33] In all likelihood, a few crossbowmen were enough to keep band of looters away from castles and villages equipped with some defensive structures. Along with crossbows, the men of the countryside could also rely more rudimentary weapons, like the *Cazafrusti*, which remained effective for

[29] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Registri, Decreti e Lettere, 638, 37-38.
[30] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1390, 77; Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Carteggi, Carteggio degli Anziani, 1391-1392.
[31] Archivio Storico del Comune di Vercelli, Libri Bollette, 1399-1400, 43-45.
[32] Giovanni Coppola, Mario Merlo, "Il fustibalo. Storia illustrata di un'arma lanciatoia medievale dimenticata", *Nuova Antologia Militare* 5, no. 17 (2024), 147-150.
[33] Archivio Storico del Comune di Vercelli, Libri Bollette, 1399-1400, 43-45.

defensive purposes. Additionally, at least one of the two aristocrats could use firearms to defend their castles and villages.

But how could local authorities monitor the movements of the enemies and determine their proximity? First of foremost, as in earlier times, through the use of spies, as was the case in the town of Reggio Emilia in 1391, during the war between Gian Galeazzo, the Florentines, the Bolognese and their allies. The territory of Reggio was, at that time, in the unfortunate position of being the southwestern border of the Visconti land, completely open to any enemy incursion. For this reason, from the outset, the mayor of the city hired spies *pro novis explorandis de motibus et condicionibus inimicorum.*[34] These agents were often provided with horses, enabling them to travel great distances and track movements of opposing forces. Between 1372 and 1373, Borgo San Donnino (now Fidenza) sent horsemen on several occasions to observe the movements of the forces of the anti-Visconti league, which was active not far from the town. This was done, so that the inhabitants of the small town *propter ignorancia de adventu dictorum inimicorum danpnum paterentur.*[35]

Generally, several horsemen were tasked with patrolling the area surrounding the village for several days. For example, in January 1373, the municipal authorities employed three horsemen for this purpose; in September of the same year two mares were shod *pro querendo de motibus inimicoru*m. These scouts were provided with registers to record the movements of enemy forces and to write, to the municipal authorities. This implies that the horsemen – or at least some of them -, were literate. In July 1373, a horseman equipped with a mare, was given a notebook, the pages of which could be used to write messages informing the authorities of approaching threats.[36] Similarly, in 1391, the commune of Reggio Emilia decreed that three or four experienced horsemen were to be hired for the duration of the war. Their duty was to patrol city's territory and report any enemy activity.[37] This was a widespread practice. Inn the same year, the town of Vercelli also employed several spies – including a woman— all provided with horses. They were responsible for tracking the movements of the army

[34] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio degli Anziani, 1391.
[35] Archivio di Stato di Parma, Feudi, Raccolta Pincolini, Busta 24.
[36] Archivio di Stato di Parma, Feudi, Raccolta Pincolini, Busta 24.
[37] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio degli Anziani, 1391.

of the Count of Armagnac, who had been hired by the Florentines in their conflict against Gian Galeazzo Visconti, and for delivering letters.[38]

Regularly sending out two or more horsemen to scout for enemies seems to have produced positive results. In June 1391 the mayor and the captain of Reggio wrote to the Visconti, to the captain and the *podestà* of Parma and the vicar of Brescello, informing them that their horseman had managed to intercept a large contingent of enemy knights that had entered the territory of Reggio. The enemy was so close that even the city's tower watchmen (*turrexani*) could see them in the distance.[39]

In addition to spies and horsemen, long-established methods for monitoring enemy movements from a distance were also in use. Among these, perhaps the most common—exemplified by the aforementioned incident—was the use of sentinels, often referred to as *turrexani*, who were stationed atop towers or fortifications and tasked with maintaining a constant watch over the surrounding area.

These towers were not confined to cities, castles, or villages; they were also widely dispersed across the countryside, often referred to as *bastite*, *bicocche*, or *battifredi.*[40] Examples include those mentioned in the 1370 statutes of Casale Monferrato,[41] or the one recorded in 1392 at Mancasale near Reggio Emilia, which was guarded by two custodians. Constructed in masonry or wood, these structures played a key role in territorial surveillance.[42] In May 1390, during the war between the Visconti and Florence, Bologna, the Carraresi and their allies, the territory of Reggio Emilia suffered numerous enemy raids. To counter this, Gian Galeazzo Visconti instructed the city's mayor to build wooden towers (*bicocche*) at strategic points in the countryside and to man them with a sufficient number

[38] Romanoni, "«E la gente di Francia»", 253-254.
[39] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1391, 27.
[40] Aldo A. Settia, L'illusione della sicurezza. Fortificazioni di rifugio nell'Italia medievale, "ricetti", "bastite", "cortine", (Vercelli, Società Storica Vercellese, 2001), 109-125.
[41] Aldo A. Settia, "Sviluppo e struttura di un borgo medievale: Casale Monferrato", in Gli statuti di Casale Monferrato del XIV secolo, ed. Patrizia Cancian (Alessandria, Società di Storia, Arte e Archeologia, 1978), 86-88.
[42] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Provvigioni, 1391-1392, 6-7.

of sentinels.[43] Upon spotting enemy forces, the guards were to promptly alert the local population using visual signals, enabling peasants to retreat to the safety of castles, the city or fortified villages. To ensure that the custodians remained at their posts of surveillance, the municipal authorities often ordered that they be locked inside the towers during their shifts. This practice is explicitly mentioned in the statutes of Casale Monferrato. Similarly, in 1390, the commune of Reggio Emilia decreed that, until the Bolognese forces withdrew from the city's territory, three *turrexani* had to be confined within the communal tower *i*. From its height, these men were to maintain constant surveillance of the the city's surroundings. Access to the tower was strictly limited to the custodians and those with explicit authorization from the mayor and a certain Giacomino *Magnanus*, who was responsible for operating the tower clock. The *Turrexani* could only leave their post to obtain food, and even this operation was tightly regulated: only one of the three men was allowed to descend at a time, while the others remained on duty.[44]

If, from the top of towers, it was possible to maintain a certain degree of surveillance over a broad portion of the surrounding territory, such vigilance would have been of little use if the sentinels had no means of communicating the enemy's approach through visual and acoustic signals. These signalling systems – employed by humans since antiquity – were already regulated by many Italian communes as early as the thirteenth century, and numerous examples of their use have come down to us.[45] On 24 August 1370, Speronollo da Concorezzo, *Podestà* of Pavia, wrote to the castellans and communities of the Pavia territory, informing them that Ottone of Brunswick, a relative of Giovanni II, Marquis of Monferrato, was advancing with the intent to attack the Visconti army besieging Casale Monferrato and to invade Pavia's territory. He therefore ordered the castles and fortifications to be guarded with the utmost vigilance, and prescribed that specific signals be used upon sighting enemy troops: smoke during the day, and fires at nightfall.[46]

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[43] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1390, 78.
[44] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Provvigioni, 1390.
[45] Alberto Monti, "Segnalazioni ottico-sonore nell'ambito della rete di fortificazioni comunali bolognesi in base agli statuti cittadini del 1454", in *Cultura cittadina e documentazione: formazione e circolazione di modelli, atti del convegno, Bologna 12 – 13 ottobre 2006*, ed. Anna Laura Trombetti Budriesi (Bologna: Clueb, 2009), 182-184.
[46] Archivio Storico Civico di Voghera, Archivio Comunale, Sezione Antica, Registrum Litterarum, I, 263.

Similar warning systems are well documented in other territories under Visconti control. For instance, in 1391, during the war against Bologna, the mayor and captain of Reggio instructed the local castles to prepare two lanterns for signalling enemy movements. If the enemy forces spotted were small only one lantern was to be kept lit for at least half an hour. If the enemy contingent was larger both lanterns were to be used – one kept stationary, and the other raised and lowered repeatedly. During daylight hours, the signals relied on smoke: a single column indicated a large enemy force, while two columns signalled a smaller group. Lanterns and smoke were also used to indicate whether a fortified structure had been besieged or captured.[47]

Comparable measures had been adopted earlier. In 1357, the municipal authorities of Bra required the watchman stationed in the village tower to alert the population of approaching enemies. This could be done at night with lanterns, or a burning basket raised aloft, and during the day with smoke signals.[48] In some cases, long cotton or hemp wicks coated in tallow were used for illumination, as recorded in Fidenza in 1372[49] and again in Reggio Emilia in 1391.[50]

These visual signals were primarily intended for those working in the fields surrounding e cities, castles or fortified villages. In 1390, Gian Galeazzo Visconti instructed the *podestà* of Reggio Emilia to ensure that towerguards promptly signalled enemy movements, allowing those in the countryside enough time to seek refuge within fortifications.[51]

Unfortunately, we do not know exactly how far such signals could travel – a distance that could, however, be drastically reduced by adverse weather conditions, especially fog, which is common in the plains. An undated document from Cremona (we only know that it was produced on November 23), likely from the mid-fifteenth century, recounts that the castellan of Oltrepò Cremonese, who had been ordered to climb the Torrazzo of Cremona to communicate with the guards in Pizzighettone using light signals, was

[47] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1391.
[48] Archivio Storico Comune di Bra, Ordinati Originali, n. 274, Years: 1356-1360, 57-60.
[49] Archivio di Stato di Parma, Feudi, Raccolta Pincolini, Busta 24
[50] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Provvigioni, 1391-1392, 38.
[51] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1390, 78.

unable to carry out the task due to thick fog. He noted that, "if the keepers of Pizzighettone had made signals, he would not have been able to see them."[52]

Sound signals, primarily produced by bells, were certainly less affected by weather than optical ones. These acoustic warnings had already been widely used in Italy at least since the twelfth century, particularly for mobilizing knights and infantry.[53] In 1383, the treasurer of the commune of Vercelli paid a group of constables for keeping several sentries stationed atop the city gate towers, the tasked with monitoring the area outside the walls and signaling the approach of enemy knights by striking the bells as many times as the number of incoming horsemen.[54] Similarly, in 1391, the bell atop the tower of Reggio Emilia was repaired to ensure, that, in the event of an attack, its sound could alert the citizens working outside the city walls.[55] That December the mayor and the captain of Reggio Emilia wrote to the mayor of Brescello, informing him that the infantry and cavalry from Bologna – then at war against Gian Galeazzo Visconti— had entered the territory of Reggio Emilia. As a precaution, guards were needed to watch from the village fortifications and alert peasants to enemy's arrival with shouting and bell ringing.[56]

Such practices were common in other regions as well. For example, in fourteenth-century in France during the Hundred Years' War, bell towers in rural areas served the same function as towers and other fortifications towers. Young boys were stationed there to signal the arrival of hostile forces by sounding horns or ringing bells.[57] Throughout the 14th century, the English devised a system of coastal surveillance along the shores of Hampshire, employing hilltop beacons and the bell towers of coastal churches—whose

[52] Nadia Covini, "Oltre il castello medievale: fortificazioni, terre murate e apparati difensivi del territorio cremonese nel Quattrocento", in *Storia di Cremona. Il Quattrocento. Cremona nel ducato di Milano (1395-1535)*, ed. Giorgio Chittolini (Azzano San Paolo: Bolis, 2008), 92

[53] Aldo A. Settia, "«Quando con trombe e quando con campane!»: segnali militari nelle città dell'Italia comunale, in *Dal fuoco all'aria. Tecniche, significati e prassi nell'uso delle campane dal Medioevo all'età Moderna*, ed. Fabio Redi, Giovanna Petrella (Pisa: Pacini, 2007), 603-612.

[54] Archivio Storico del Comune di Vercelli, Libri Bollette e Mandati, 1381-1384.

[55] Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Provvigioni, 1391-1392, 74.

[56]Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia, Archivio del Comune di Reggio, Carteggi, Carteggio del Reggimento, 1391.

[57] Nicholas Wright, *Knights and peasants. The Hundred Years War in the French countryside* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), 102-104.

peals served as warnings—to guard against raids by the French fleet.[58] In contrast, the use of such warning instruments – aside from bells – seems to have been limited in the territories controlled by the Visconti, at least during the fourteenth century.

Although records do mention the rural fortifications such as *ricetti* (small fortified areas used in medieval villages or castles to store agricultural products, livestock, and tools),[59] these were primarily intended to protect farmers from raids. However, it was more common in Visconti territory to rely on spies or watchtowers to monitor enemy movements. These towers could transmit information across distances using sounds, light or smoke signals. Once enemy forces were nearby, the strategy typically involved moving people, animals and crops into the safety of cities, castles or fortified structures.

If these raids continued over time, armed escorts were organized to allow peasants to gather crops or complete harvest, with both rural and urban populations allowed to take up arma. These strategies – combined with a powerful military organization – enabled the Visconti-controlled territories to withstand the prolonged wars of the 14th century more effectively, and with less damage, than other parts of Italy, such as the central regions

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[58] Michael Hughes, "The Fourteenth-Century French Raids on Hampshire and the Isle of Wight", in *Arms, armies and fortifications in the Hundred Years War*, ed. Anne Curry, Michael Hughes (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1994), 140-141.
[59] Settia, *L'illusione della sicurezza*, 33-95.

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