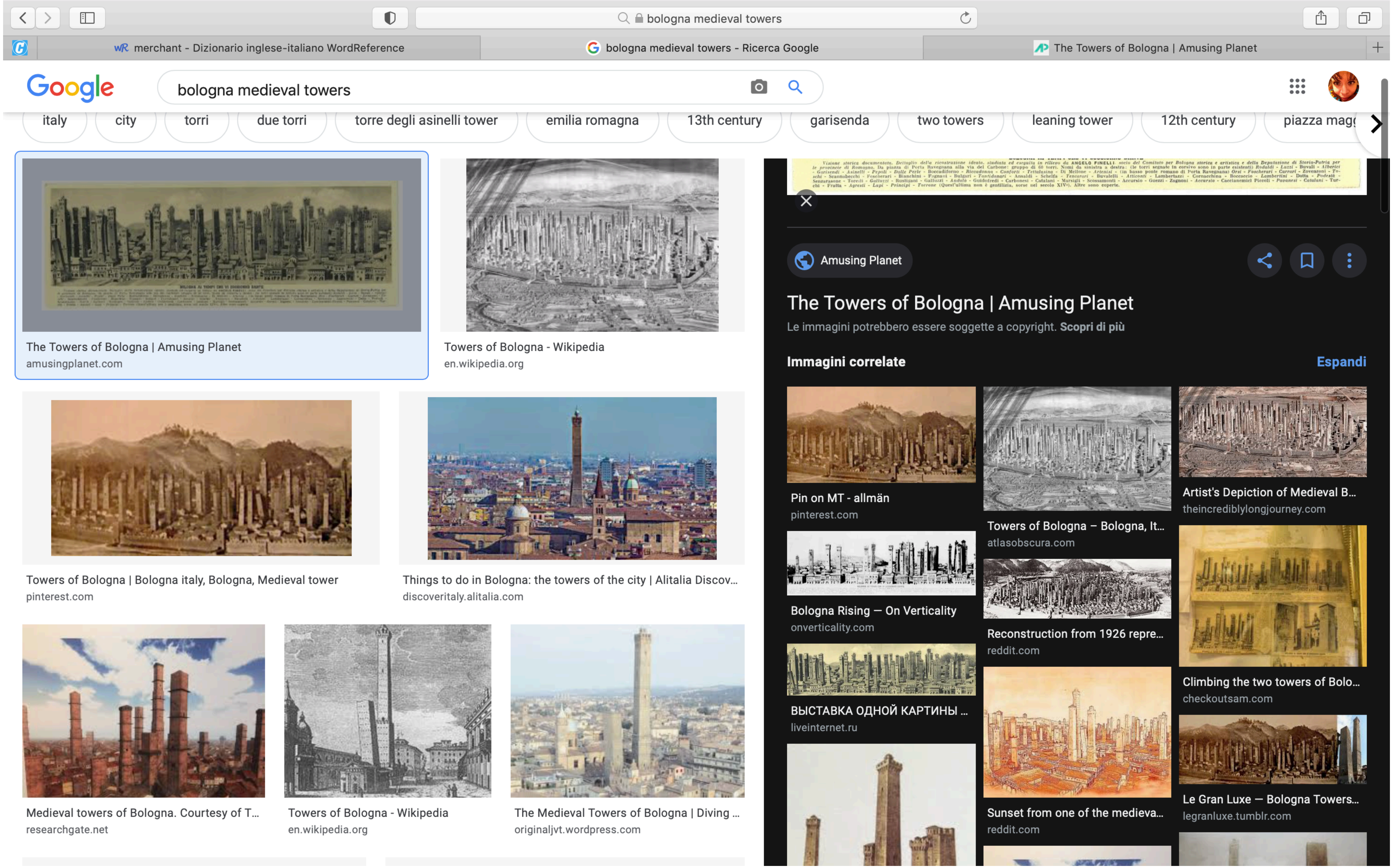
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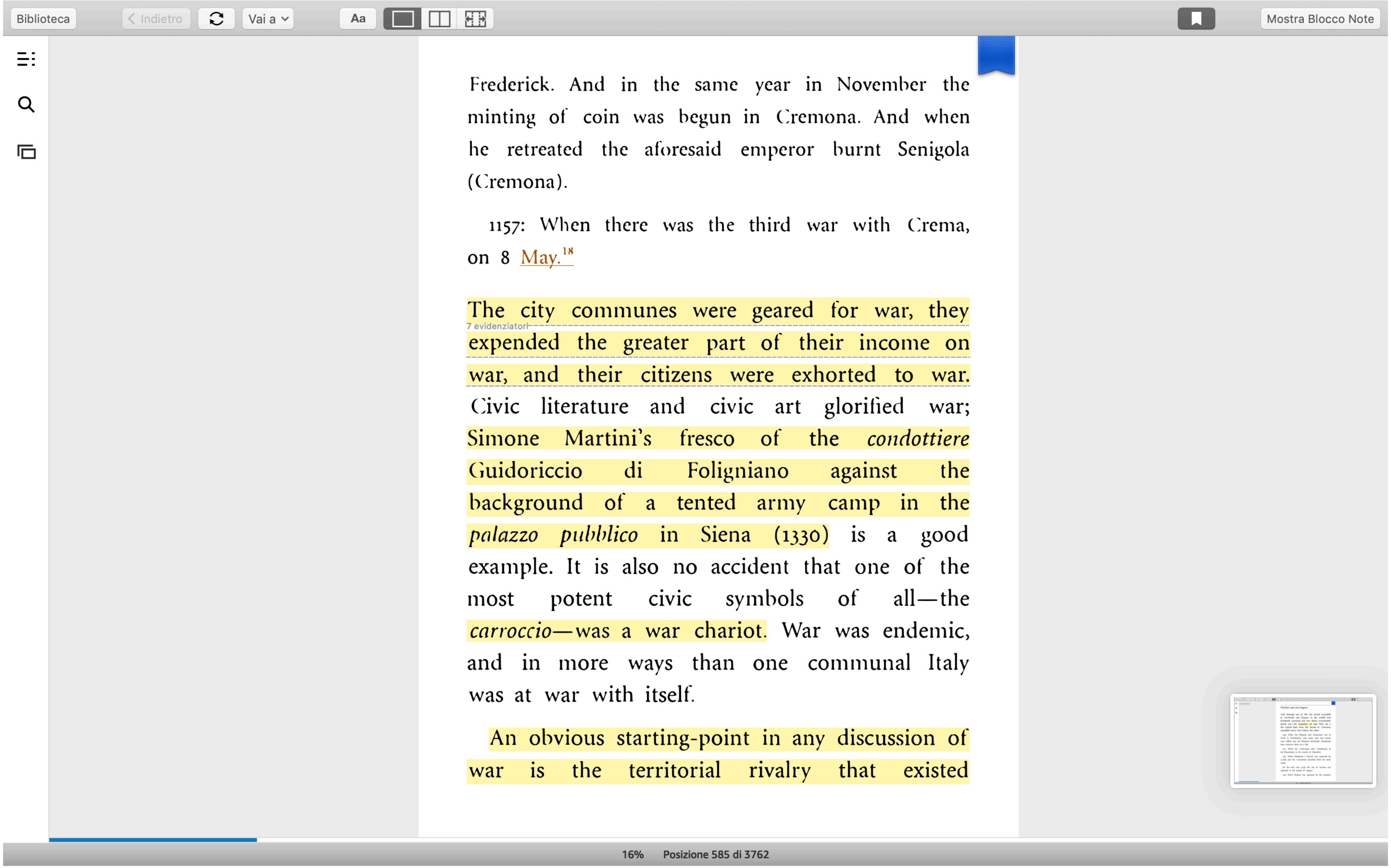
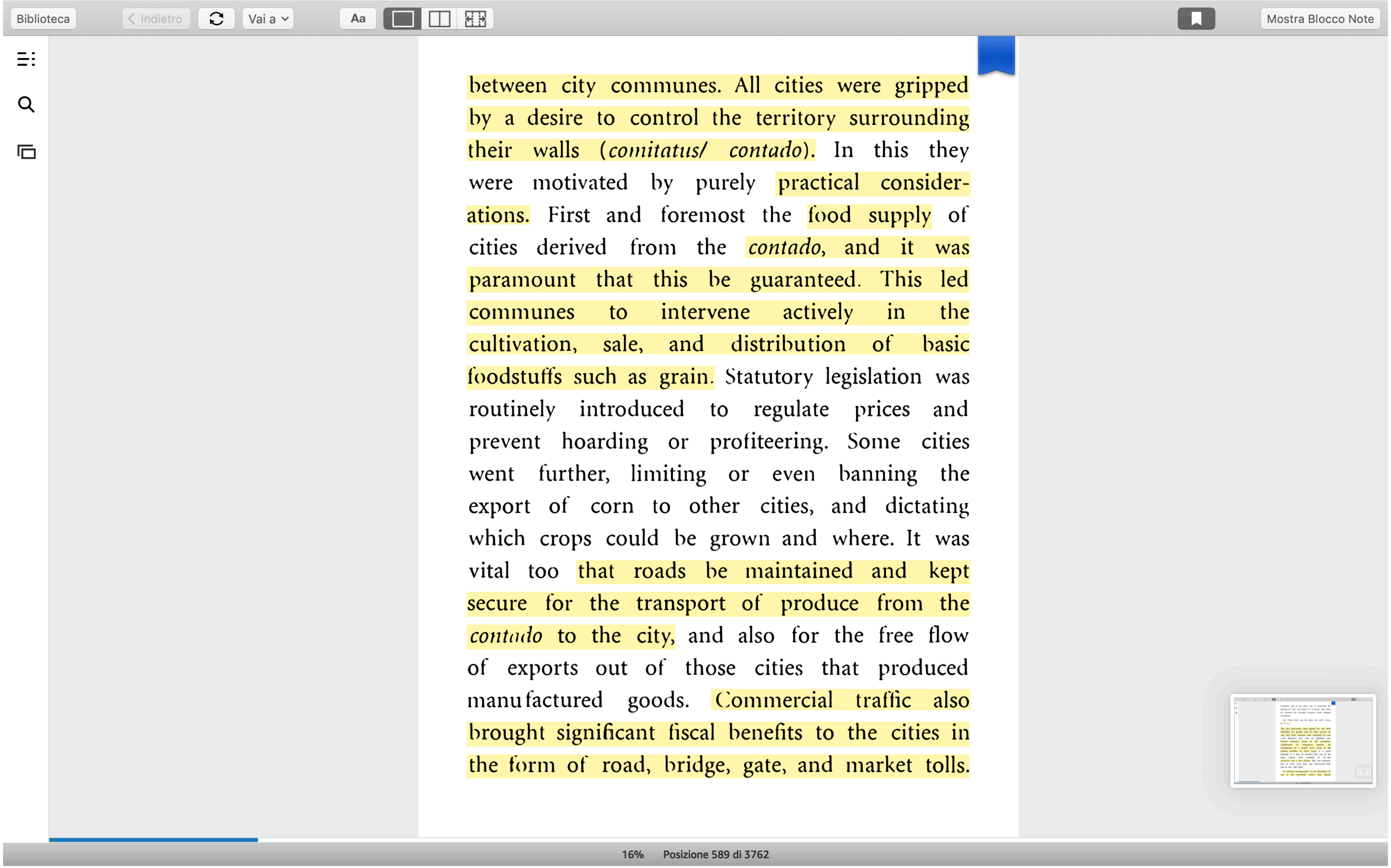


Frederick. And in the same year in November the minting of coin was begun in Cremona. And when he retreated the aforesaid emperor burnt Senigola (Cremona).

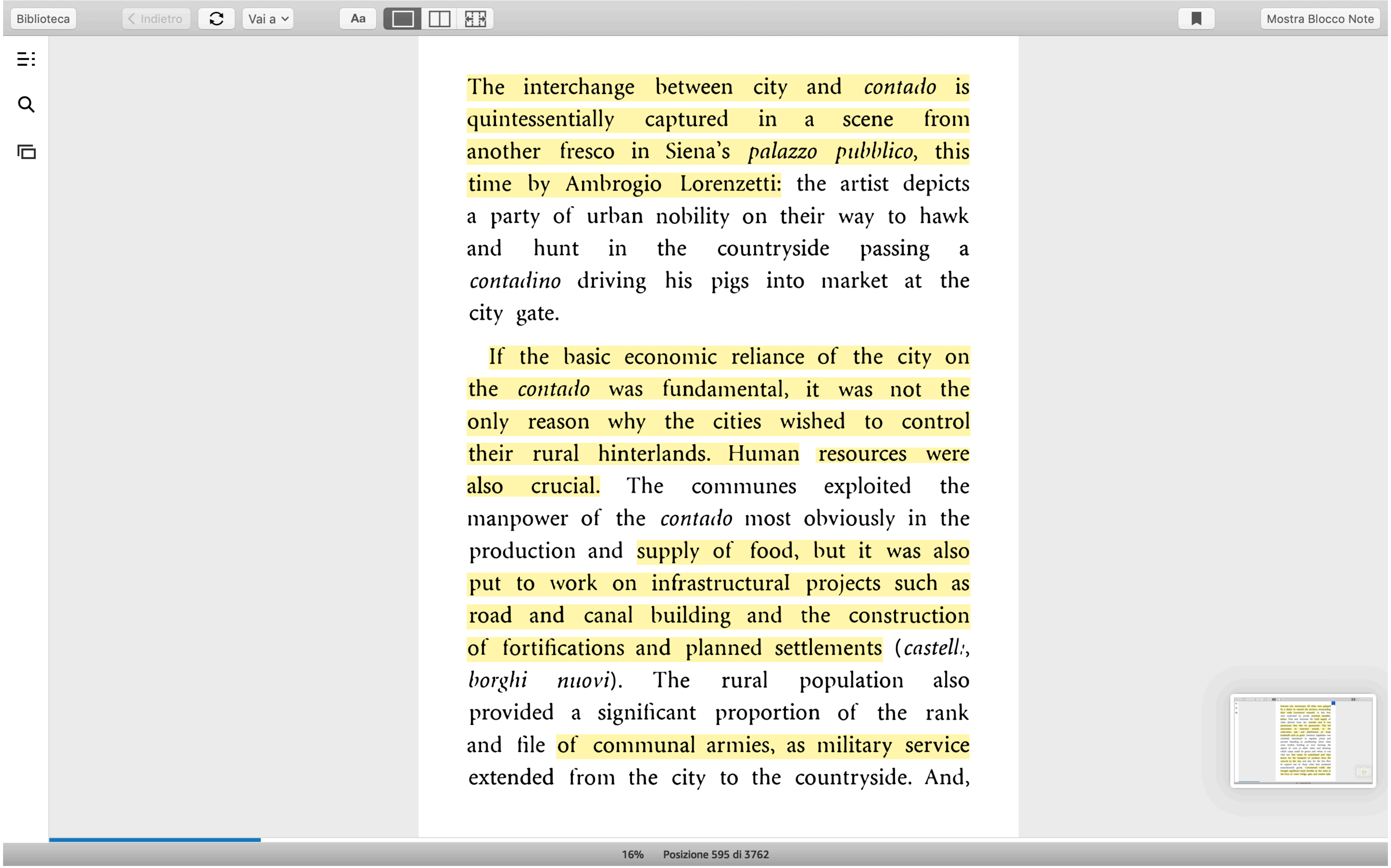
1157: When there was the third war with Crema, on 8 May.[18]

The city communes were geared for war, they expended the greater part of their income on war, and their citizens were exhorted to war. Civic literature and civic art glorified war; Simone Martini's fresco of the *condottiere* Guidoriccio di Foligniano against the background of a tented army camp in the *palazzo pubblico* in Siena (1330) is a good example. It is also no accident that one of the most potent civic symbols of all—the *carroccio*—was a war chariot. War was endemic, and in more ways than one communal Italy was at war with itself.

An obvious starting-point in any discussion of war is the territorial rivalry that existed

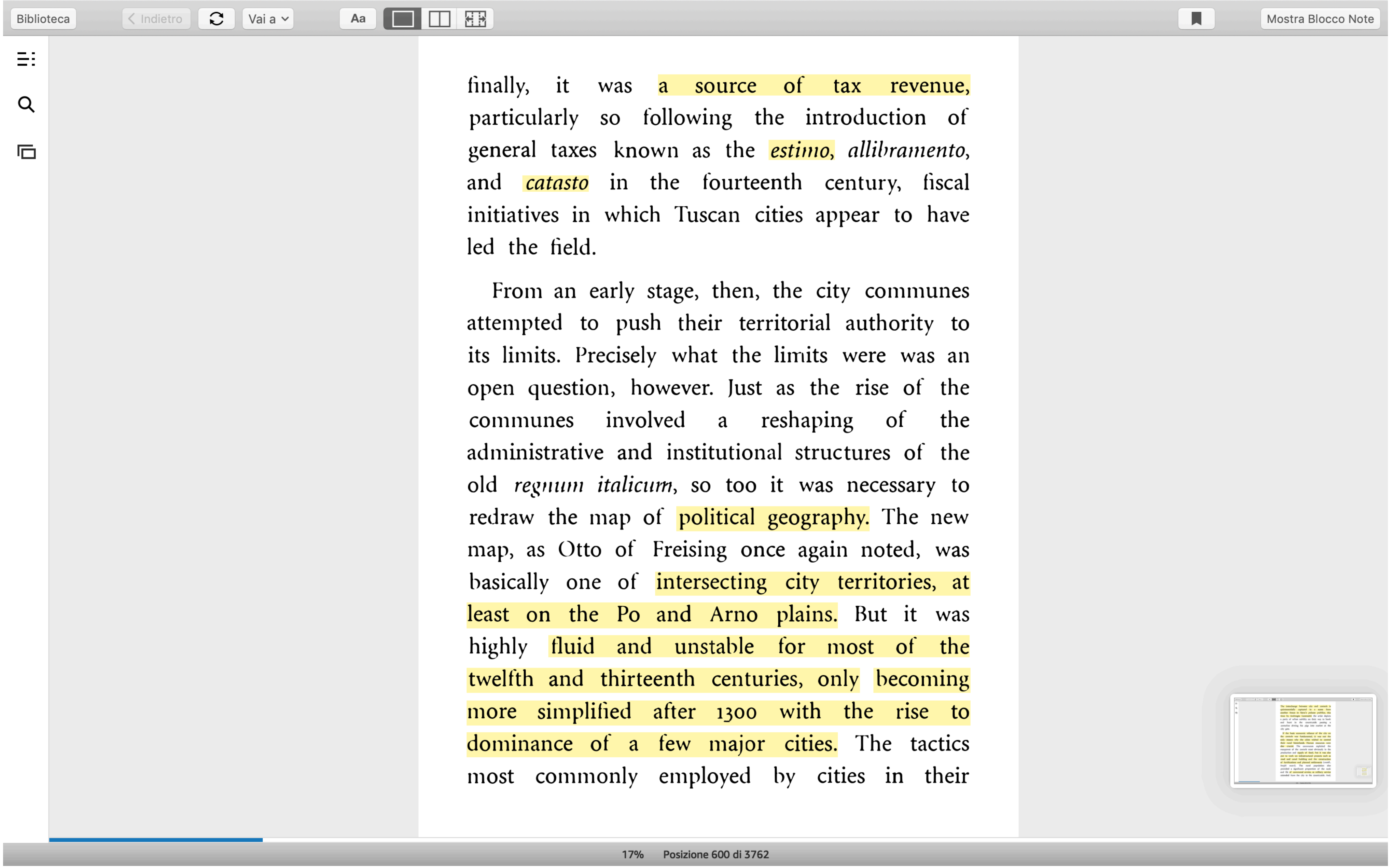


between city communes. All cities were gripped by a desire to control the territory surrounding their walls (*comitatus/ contado*). In this they were motivated by purely practical considerations. First and foremost the food supply of cities derived from the *contado*, and it was paramount that this be guaranteed. This led communes to intervene actively in the cultivation, sale, and distribution of basic foodstuffs such as grain. Statutory legislation was routinely introduced to regulate prices and prevent hoarding or profiteering. Some cities went further, limiting or even banning the export of corn to other cities, and dictating which crops could be grown and where. It was vital too that roads be maintained and kept secure for the transport of produce from the *contado* to the city, and also for the free flow of exports out of those cities that produced manufactured goods. Commercial traffic also brought significant fiscal benefits to the cities in the form of road, bridge, gate, and market tolls.



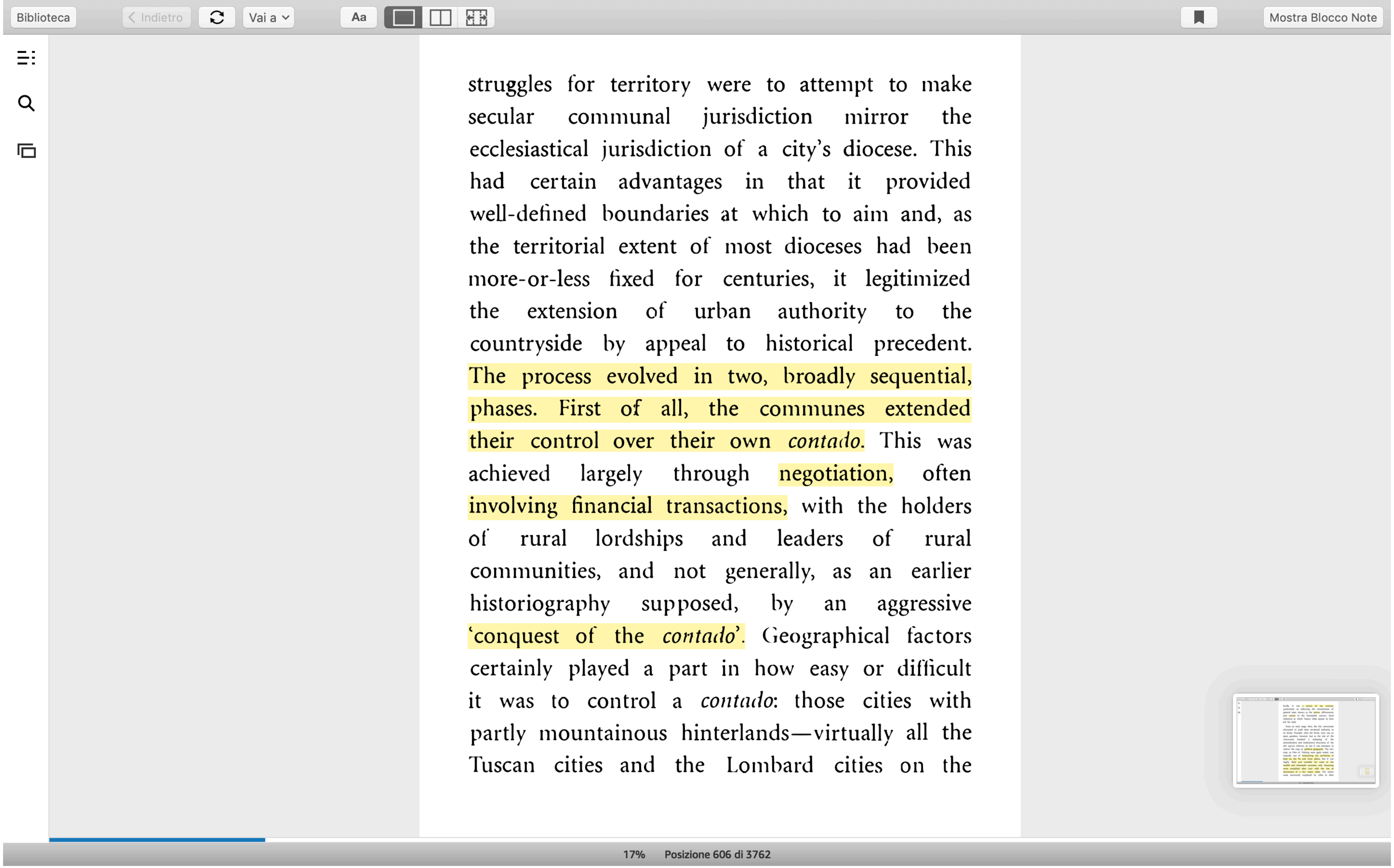
The interchange between city and *contado* is quintessentially captured in a scene from another fresco in Siena's *palazzo pubblico*, this time by Ambrogio Lorenzetti: the artist depicts a party of urban nobility on their way to hawk and hunt in the countryside passing a *contadino* driving his pigs into market at the city gate.

If the basic economic reliance of the city on the *contado* was fundamental, it was not the only reason why the cities wished to control their rural hinterlands. Human resources were also crucial. The communes exploited the manpower of the *contado* most obviously in the production and supply of food, but it was also put to work on infrastructural projects such as road and canal building and the construction of fortifications and planned settlements (*castelli*, *borghi nuovi*). The rural population also provided a significant proportion of the rank and file of communal armies, as military service extended from the city to the countryside. And,

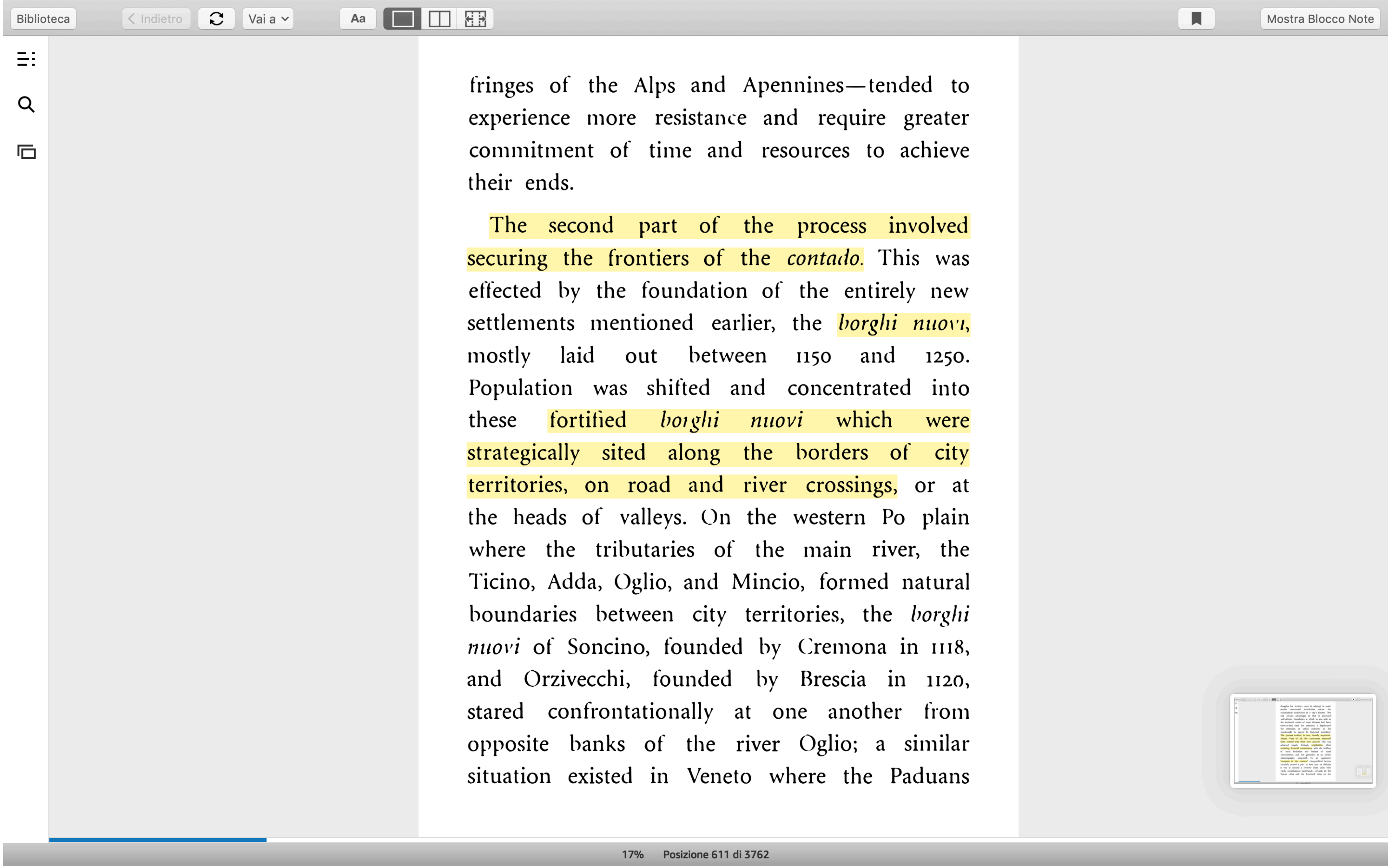


finally, it was a source of tax revenue, particularly so following the introduction of general taxes known as the *estimo*, *allibramento*, and *catasto* in the fourteenth century, fiscal initiatives in which Tuscan cities appear to have led the field.

From an early stage, then, the city communes attempted to push their territorial authority to its limits. Precisely what the limits were was an open question, however. Just as the rise of the communes involved a reshaping of the administrative and institutional structures of the old *regnum italicum*, so too it was necessary to redraw the map of political geography. The new map, as Otto of Freising once again noted, was basically one of intersecting city territories, at least on the Po and Arno plains. But it was highly fluid and unstable for most of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, only becoming more simplified after 1300 with the rise to dominance of a few major cities. The tactics most commonly employed by cities in their

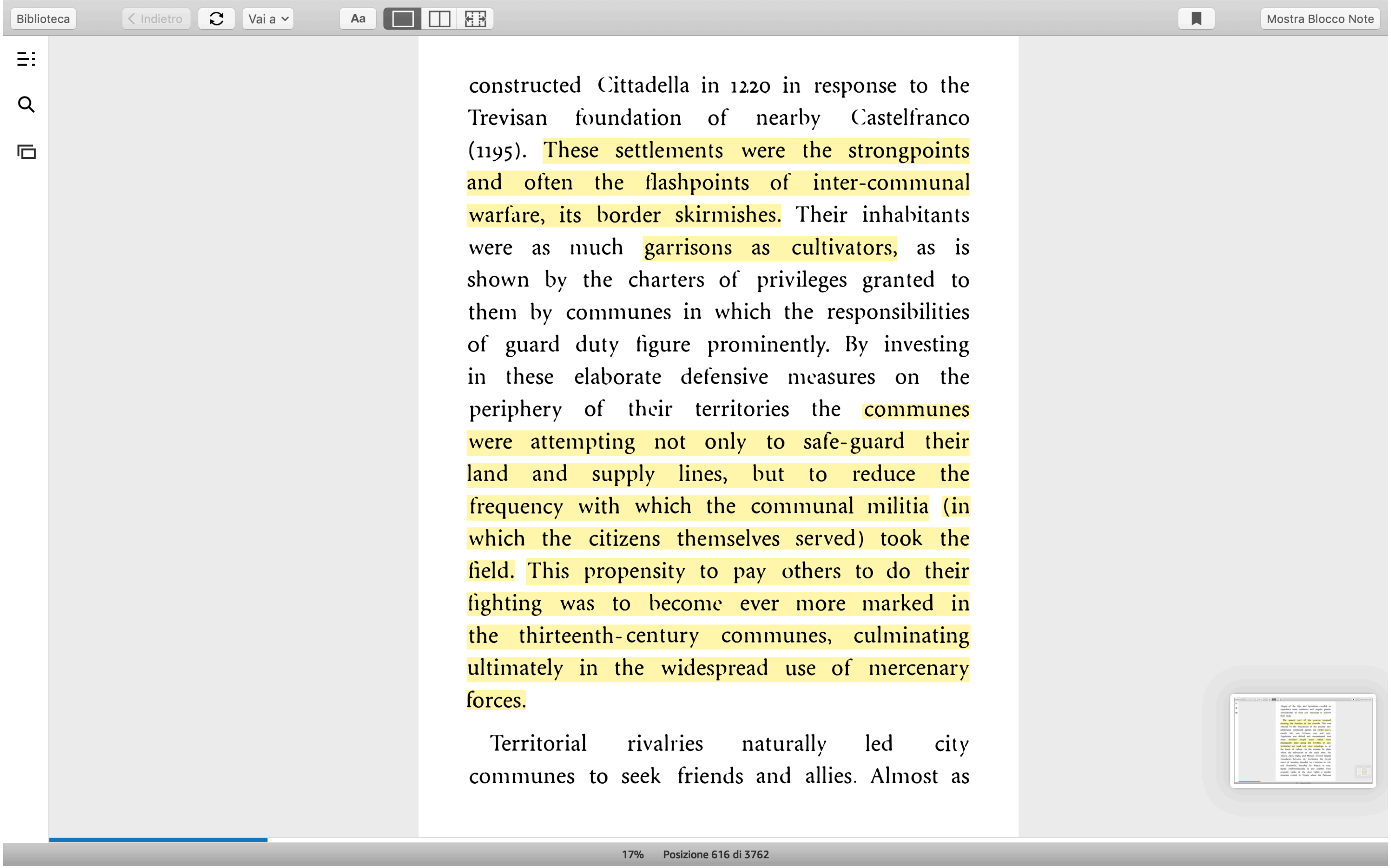


struggles for territory were to attempt to make secular communal jurisdiction mirror the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of a city's diocese. This had certain advantages in that it provided well-defined boundaries at which to aim and, as the territorial extent of most dioceses had been more-or-less fixed for centuries, it legitimized the extension of urban authority to the countryside by appeal to historical precedent. The process evolved in two, broadly sequential, phases. First of all, the communes extended their control over their own *contado*. This was achieved largely through negotiation, often involving financial transactions, with the holders of rural lordships and leaders of rural communities, and not generally, as an earlier historiography supposed, by an aggressive 'conquest of the *contado*'. Geographical factors certainly played a part in how easy or difficult it was to control a *contado*: those cities with partly mountainous hinterlands—virtually all the Tuscan cities and the Lombard cities on the



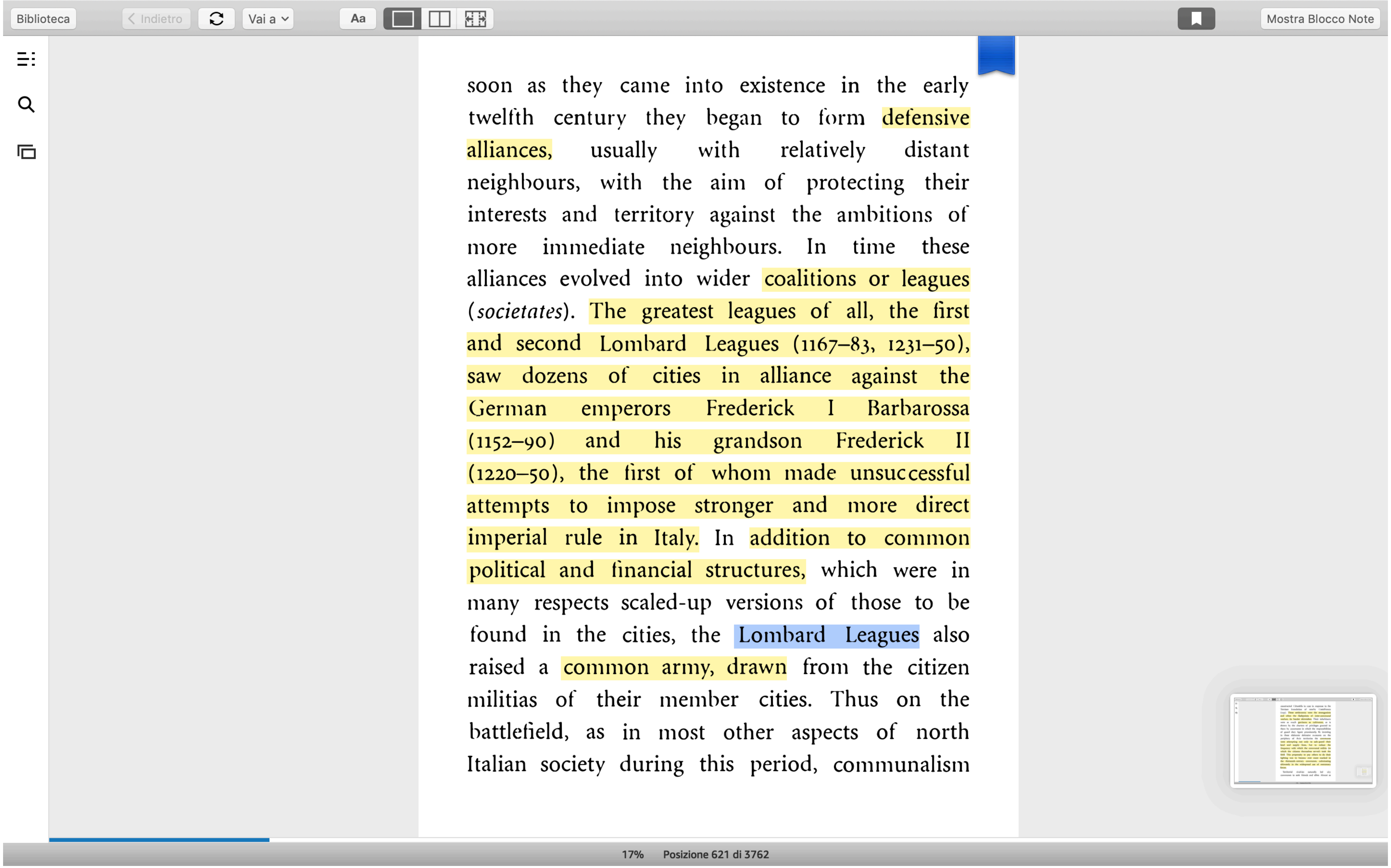
fringes of the Alps and Apennines—tended to experience more resistance and require greater commitment of time and resources to achieve their ends.

The second part of the process involved securing the frontiers of the *contado*. This was effected by the foundation of the entirely new settlements mentioned earlier, the *borghi nuovi*, mostly laid out between 1150 and 1250. Population was shifted and concentrated into these fortified *borghi nuovi* which were strategically sited along the borders of city territories, on road and river crossings, or at the heads of valleys. On the western Po plain where the tributaries of the main river, the Ticino, Adda, Oglio, and Mincio, formed natural boundaries between city territories, the *borghi nuovi* of Soncino, founded by Cremona in 1118, and Orzivecchi, founded by Brescia in 1120, stared confrontationally at one another from opposite banks of the river Oglio; a similar situation existed in Veneto where the Paduans

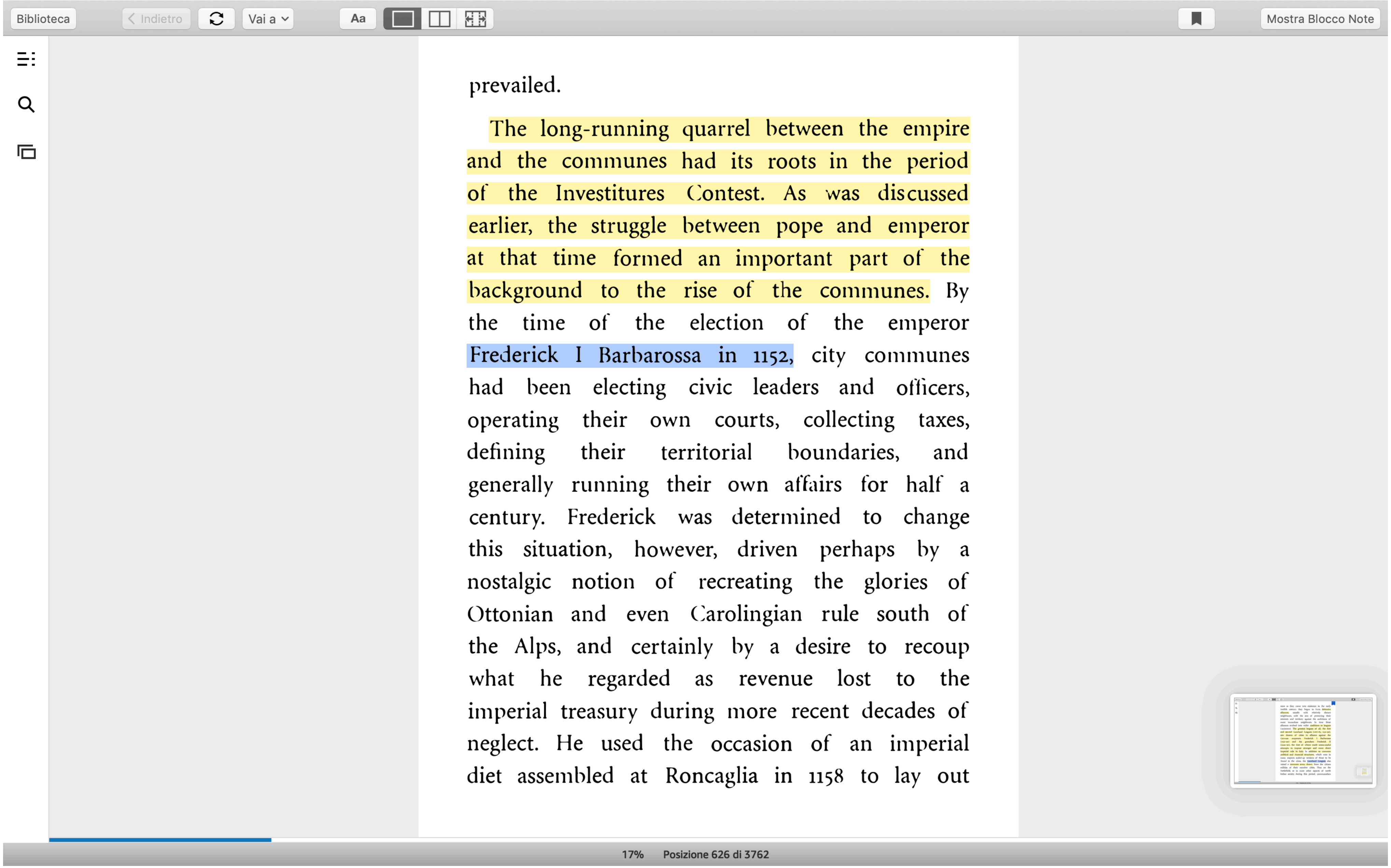


constructed Cittadella in 1220 in response to the Trevisan foundation of nearby Castelfranco (1195). These settlements were the strongpoints and often the flashpoints of inter-communal warfare, its border skirmishes. Their inhabitants were as much garrisons as cultivators, as is shown by the charters of privileges granted to them by communes in which the responsibilities of guard duty figure prominently. By investing in these elaborate defensive measures on the periphery of their territories the communes were attempting not only to safe-guard their land and supply lines, but to reduce the frequency with which the communal militia (in which the citizens themselves served) took the field. This propensity to pay others to do their fighting was to become ever more marked in the thirteenth-century communes, culminating ultimately in the widespread use of mercenary forces.

Territorial rivalries naturally led city communes to seek friends and allies. Almost as

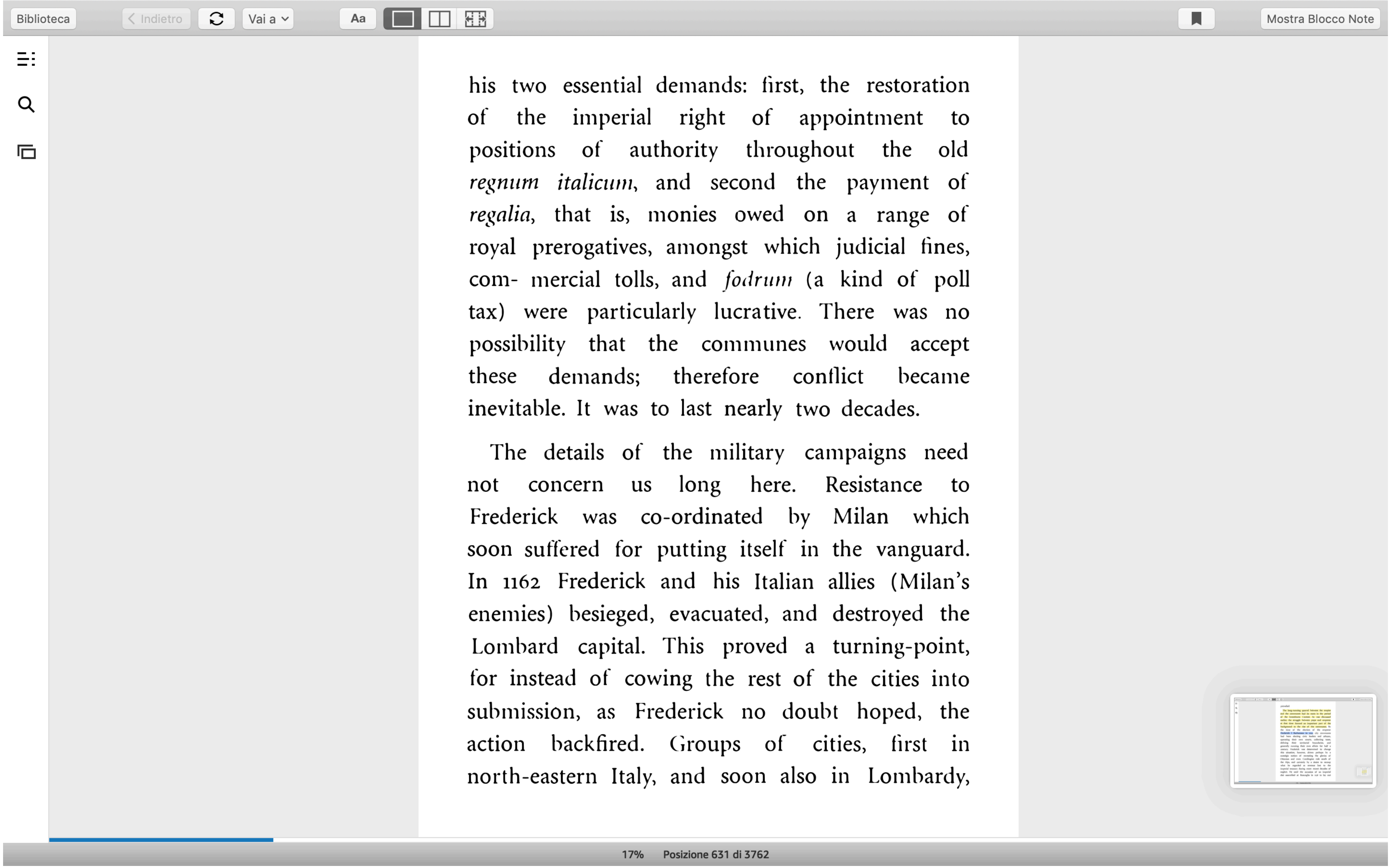


soon as they came into existence in the early twelfth century they began to form defensive alliances, usually with relatively distant neighbours, with the aim of protecting their interests and territory against the ambitions of more immediate neighbours. In time these alliances evolved into wider coalitions or leagues (*societates*). The greatest leagues of all, the first and second Lombard Leagues (1167–83, 1231–50), saw dozens of cities in alliance against the German emperors Frederick I Barbarossa (1152–90) and his grandson Frederick II (1220–50), the first of whom made unsuccessful attempts to impose stronger and more direct imperial rule in Italy. In addition to common political and financial structures, which were in many respects scaled-up versions of those to be found in the cities, the Lombard Leagues also raised a common army, drawn from the citizen militias of their member cities. Thus on the battlefield, as in most other aspects of north Italian society during this period, communalism



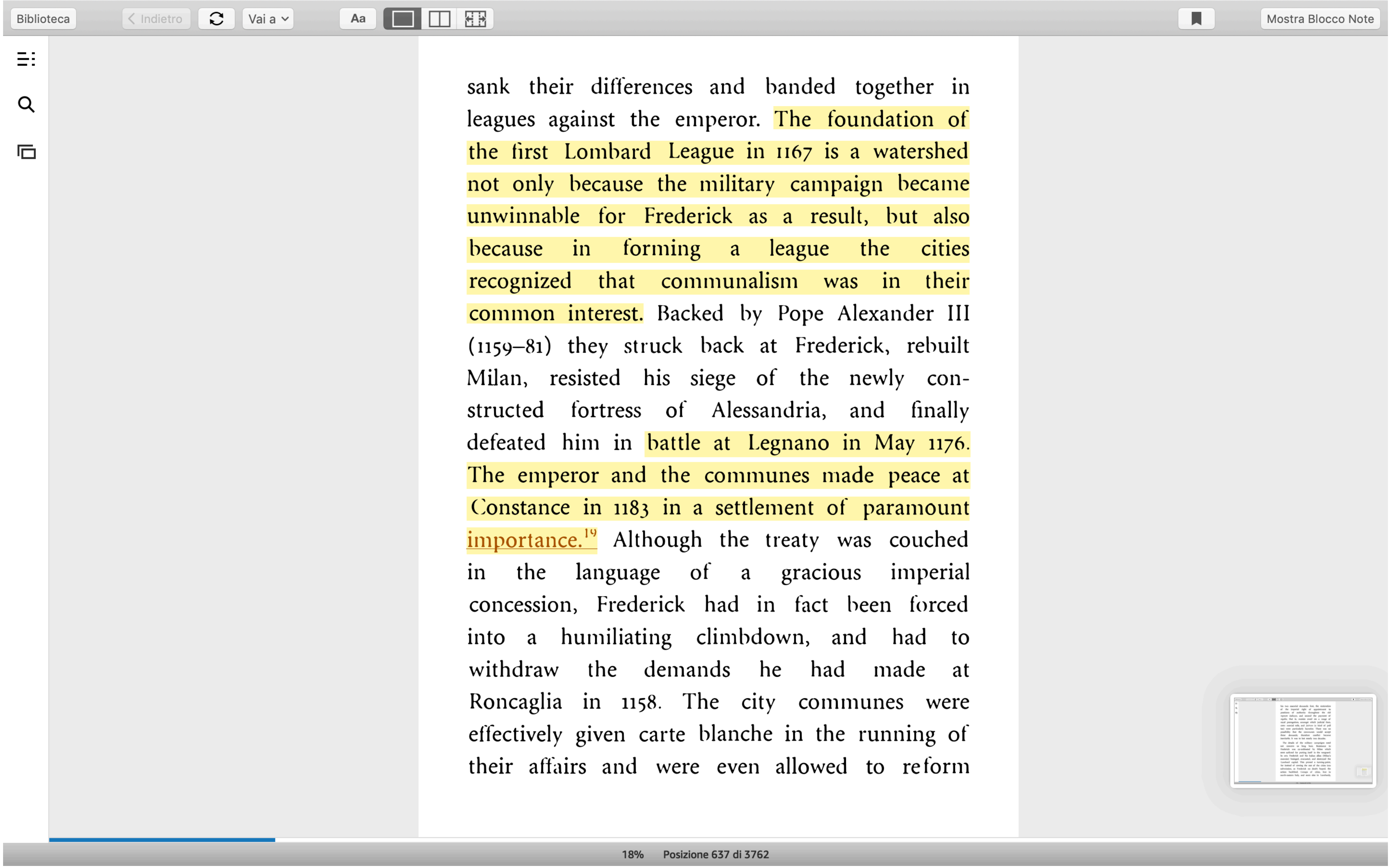
prevailed.

The long-running quarrel between the empire and the communes had its roots in the period of the Investitures Contest. As was discussed earlier, the struggle between pope and emperor at that time formed an important part of the background to the rise of the communes. By the time of the election of the emperor Frederick I Barbarossa in 1152, city communes had been electing civic leaders and officers, operating their own courts, collecting taxes, defining their territorial boundaries, and generally running their own affairs for half a century. Frederick was determined to change this situation, however, driven perhaps by a nostalgic notion of recreating the glories of Ottonian and even Carolingian rule south of the Alps, and certainly by a desire to recoup what he regarded as revenue lost to the imperial treasury during more recent decades of neglect. He used the occasion of an imperial diet assembled at Roncaglia in 1158 to lay out

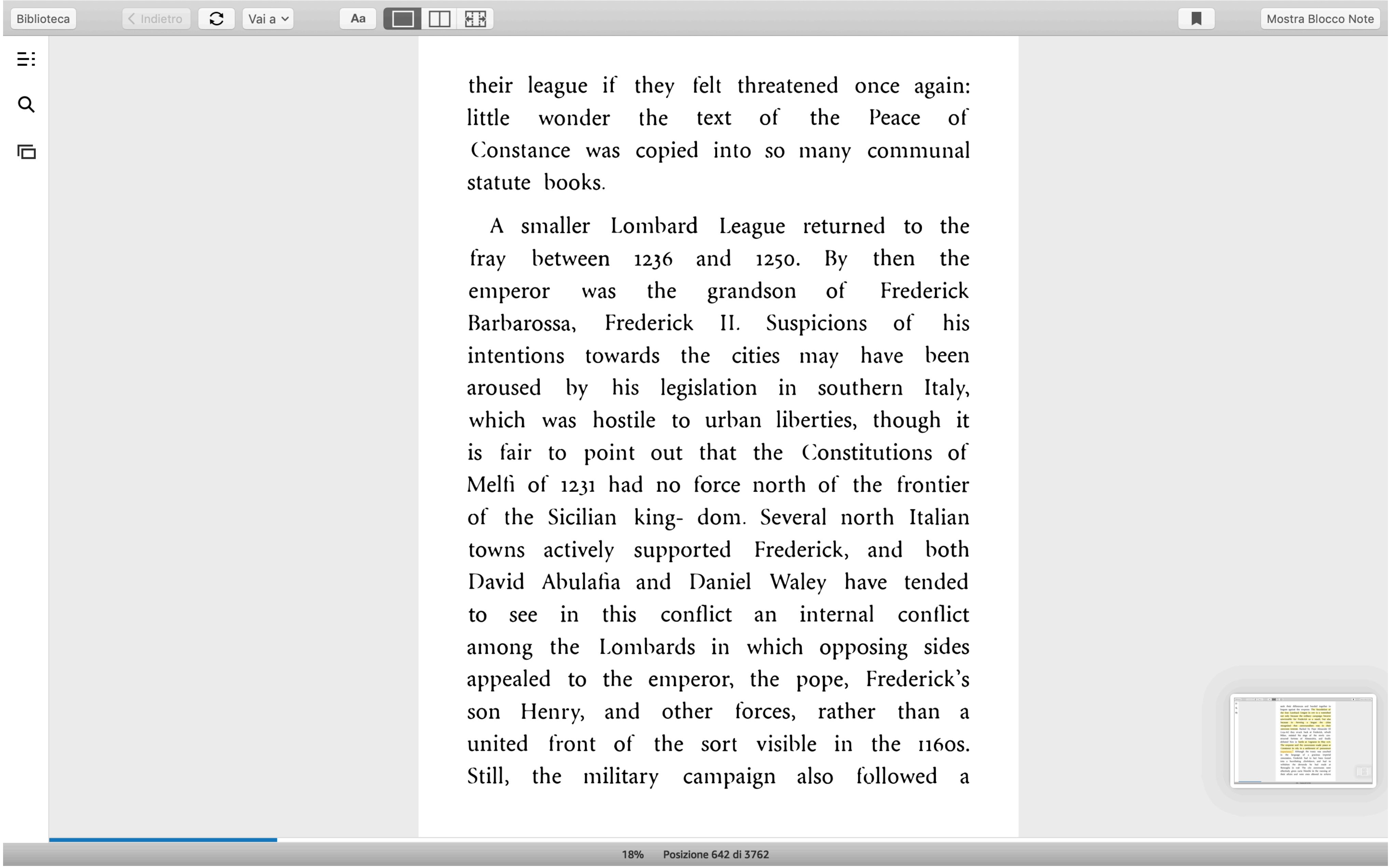


his two essential demands: first, the restoration of the imperial right of appointment to positions of authority throughout the old *regnum italicum*, and second the payment of *regalia*, that is, monies owed on a range of royal prerogatives, amongst which judicial fines, com- mercial tolls, and *fodrum* (a kind of poll tax) were particularly lucrative. There was no possibility that the communes would accept these demands; therefore conflict became inevitable. It was to last nearly two decades.

The details of the military campaigns need not concern us long here. Resistance to Frederick was co-ordinated by Milan which soon suffered for putting itself in the vanguard. In 1162 Frederick and his Italian allies (Milan's enemies) besieged, evacuated, and destroyed the Lombard capital. This proved a turning-point, for instead of cowing the rest of the cities into submission, as Frederick no doubt hoped, the action backfired. Groups of cities, first in north-eastern Italy, and soon also in Lombardy,

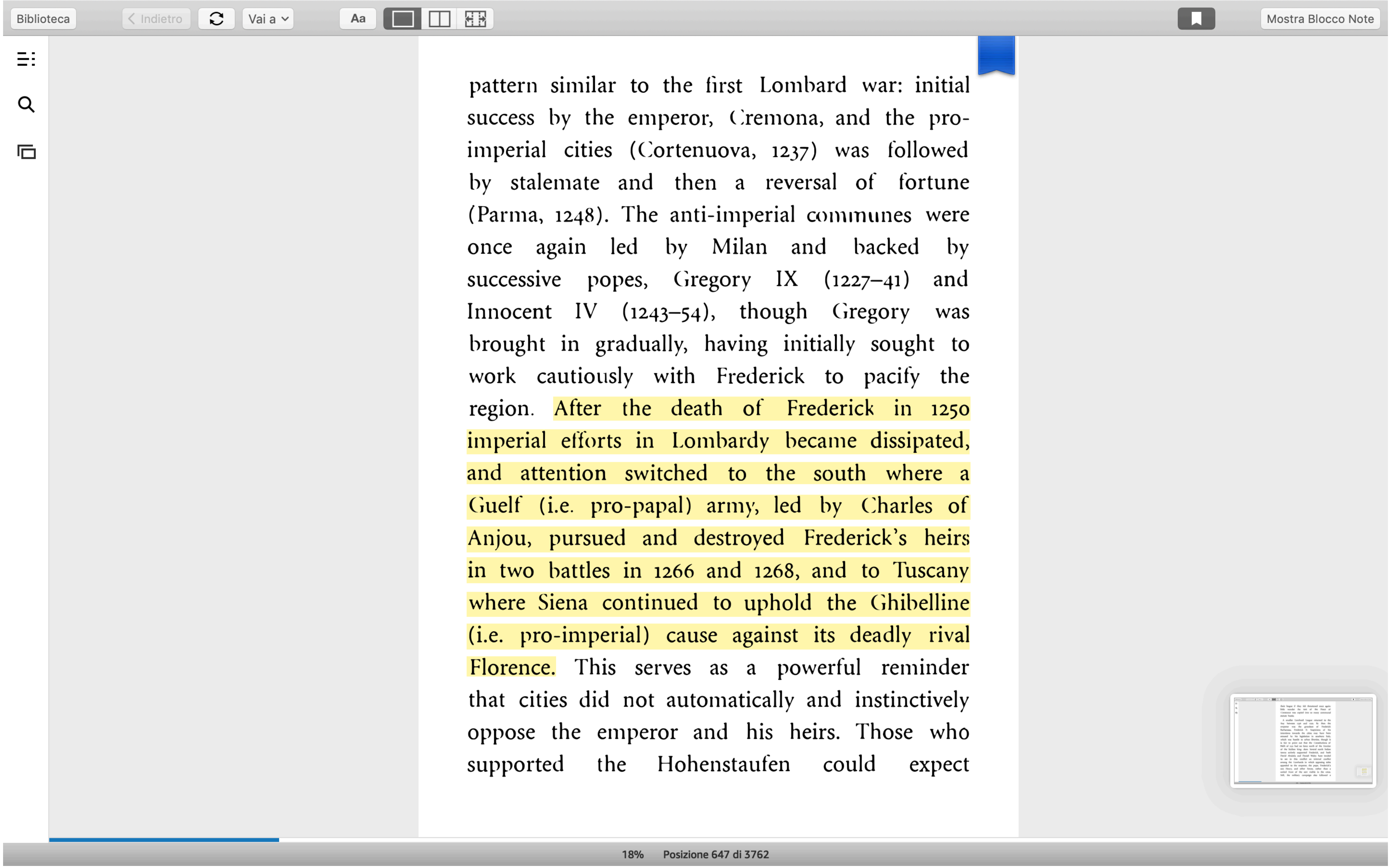


sank their differences and banded together in leagues against the emperor. The foundation of the first Lombard League in 1167 is a watershed not only because the military campaign became unwinnable for Frederick as a result, but also because in forming a league the cities recognized that communalism was in their common interest. Backed by Pope Alexander III (1159–81) they struck back at Frederick, rebuilt Milan, resisted his siege of the newly constructed fortress of Alessandria, and finally defeated him in battle at Legnano in May 1176. The emperor and the communes made peace at Constance in 1183 in a settlement of paramount importance.[19] Although the treaty was couched in the language of a gracious imperial concession, Frederick had in fact been forced into a humiliating climbdown, and had to withdraw the demands he had made at Roncaglia in 1158. The city communes were effectively given carte blanche in the running of their affairs and were even allowed to reform

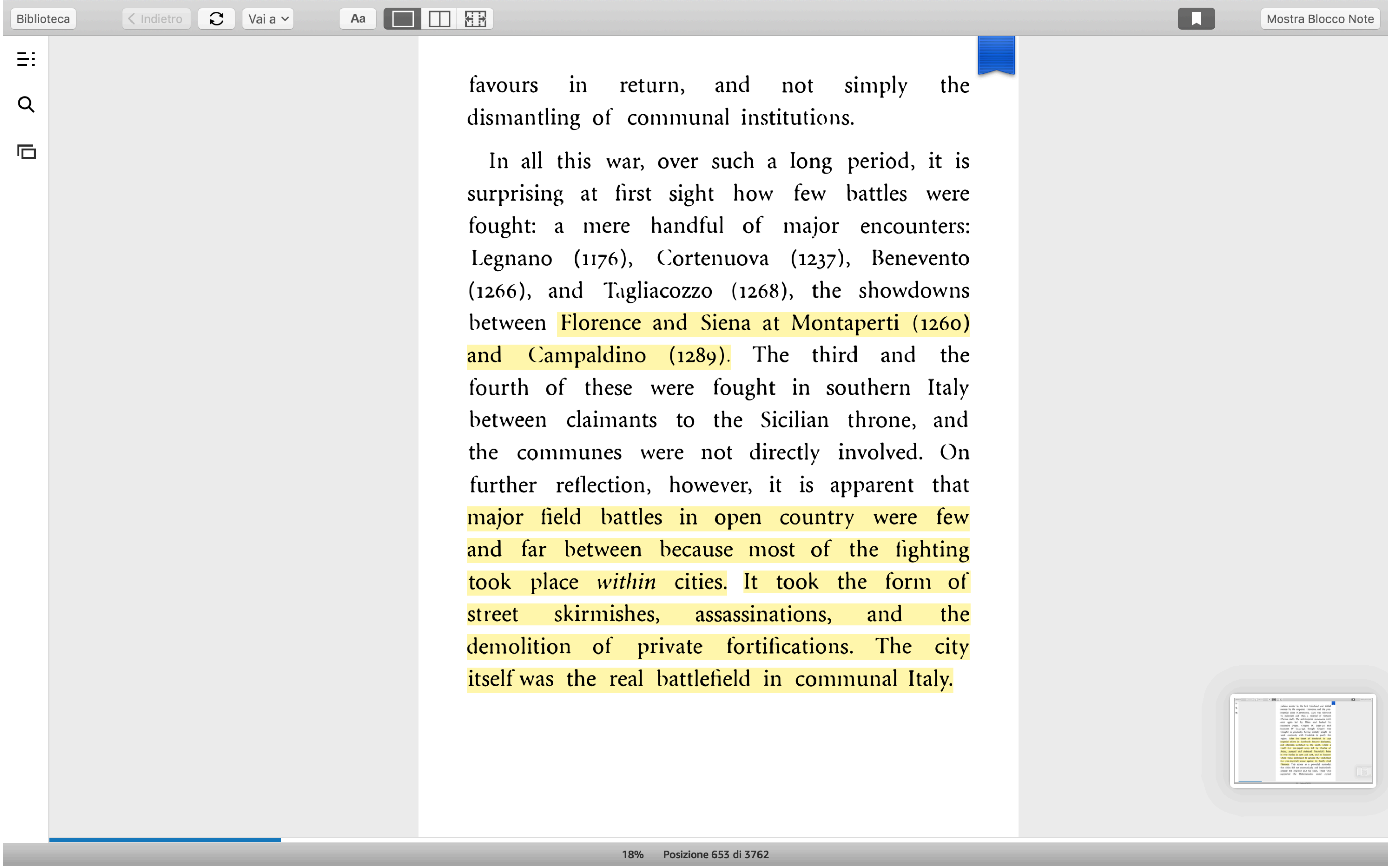


their league if they felt threatened once again: little wonder the text of the Peace of Constance was copied into so many communal statute books.

A smaller Lombard League returned to the fray between 1236 and 1250. By then the emperor was the grandson of Frederick Barbarossa, Frederick II. Suspicions of his intentions towards the cities may have been aroused by his legislation in southern Italy, which was hostile to urban liberties, though it is fair to point out that the Constitutions of Melfi of 1231 had no force north of the frontier of the Sicilian king- dom. Several north Italian towns actively supported Frederick, and both David Abulafia and Daniel Waley have tended to see in this conflict an internal conflict among the Lombards in which opposing sides appealed to the emperor, the pope, Frederick's son Henry, and other forces, rather than a united front of the sort visible in the 1160s. Still, the military campaign also followed a

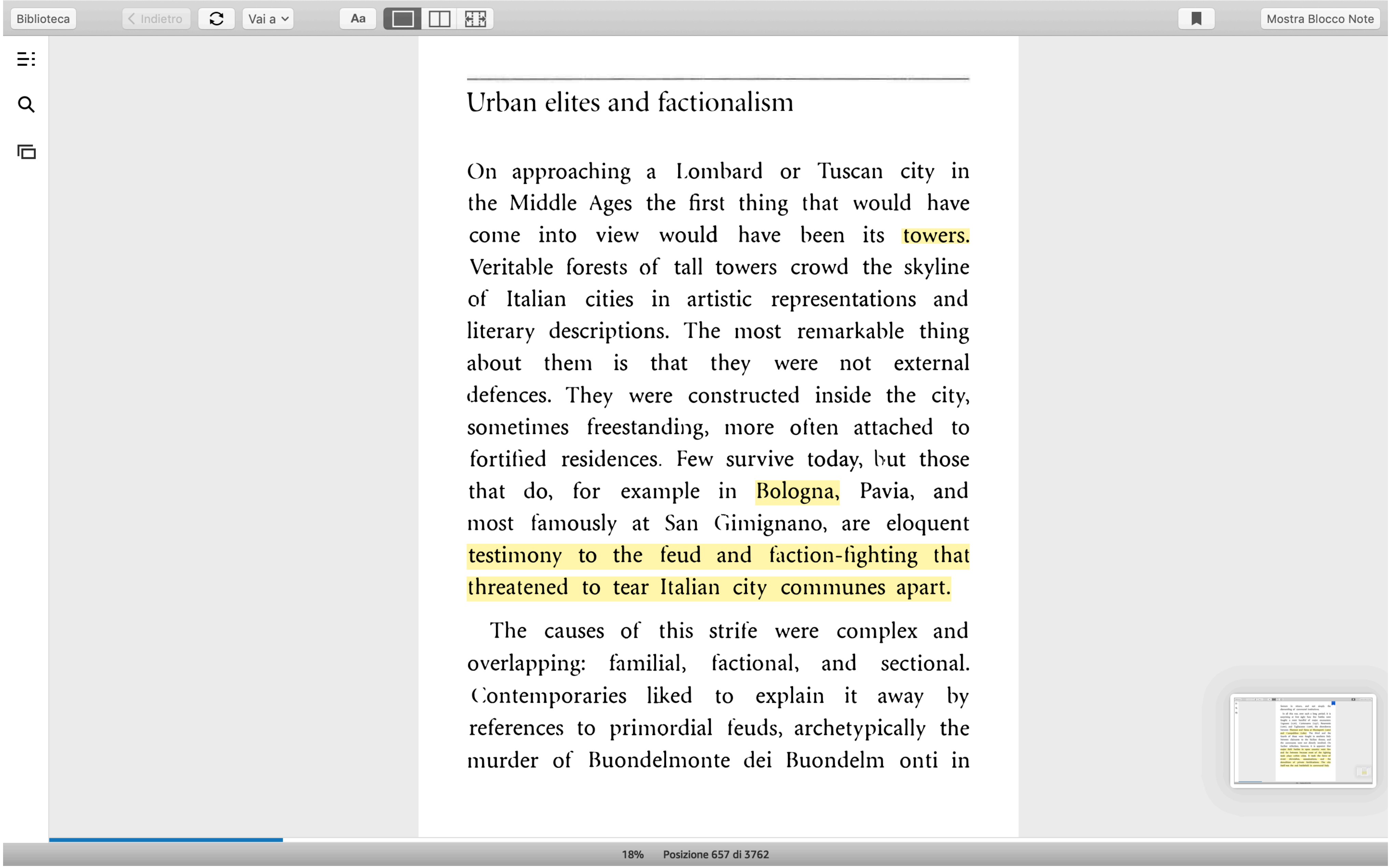


pattern similar to the first Lombard war: initial success by the emperor, Cremona, and the pro-imperial cities (Cortenuova, 1237) was followed by stalemate and then a reversal of fortune (Parma, 1248). The anti-imperial communes were once again led by Milan and backed by successive popes, Gregory IX (1227–41) and Innocent IV (1243–54), though Gregory was brought in gradually, having initially sought to work cautiously with Frederick to pacify the region. After the death of Frederick in 1250 imperial efforts in Lombardy became dissipated, and attention switched to the south where a Guelf (i.e. pro-papal) army, led by Charles of Anjou, pursued and destroyed Frederick's heirs in two battles in 1266 and 1268, and to Tuscany where Siena continued to uphold the Ghibelline (i.e. pro-imperial) cause against its deadly rival Florence. This serves as a powerful reminder that cities did not automatically and instinctively oppose the emperor and his heirs. Those who supported the Hohenstaufen could expect



favours in return, and not simply the dismantling of communal institutions.

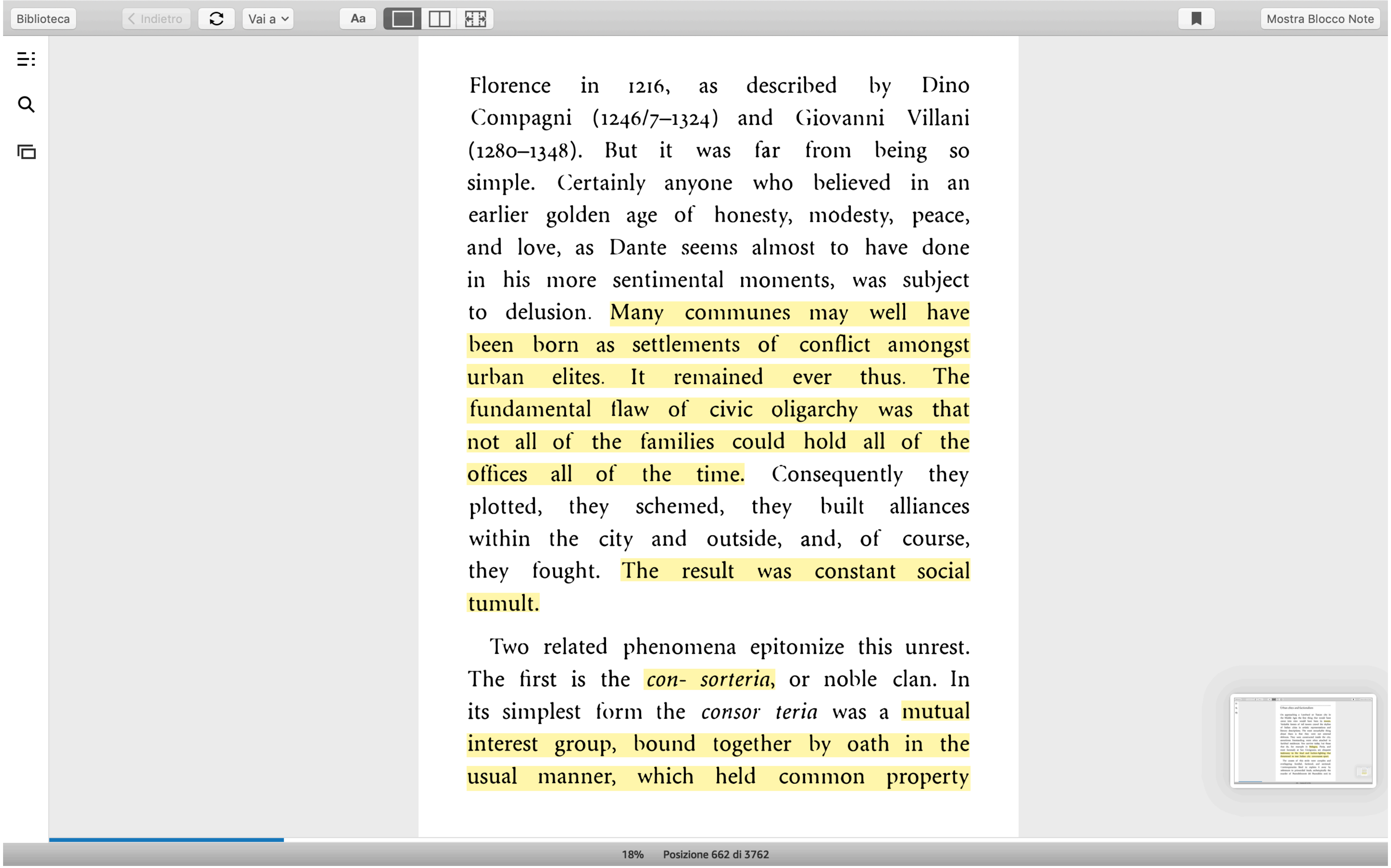
In all this war, over such a long period, it is surprising at first sight how few battles were fought: a mere handful of major encounters: Legnano (1176), Cortenuova (1237), Benevento (1266), and Tagliacozzo (1268), the showdowns between Florence and Siena at Montaperti (1260) and Campaldino (1289). The third and the fourth of these were fought in southern Italy between claimants to the Sicilian throne, and the communes were not directly involved. On further reflection, however, it is apparent that major field battles in open country were few and far between because most of the fighting took place *within* cities. It took the form of street skirmishes, assassinations, and the demolition of private fortifications. The city itself was the real battlefield in communal Italy.



Urban elites and factionalism

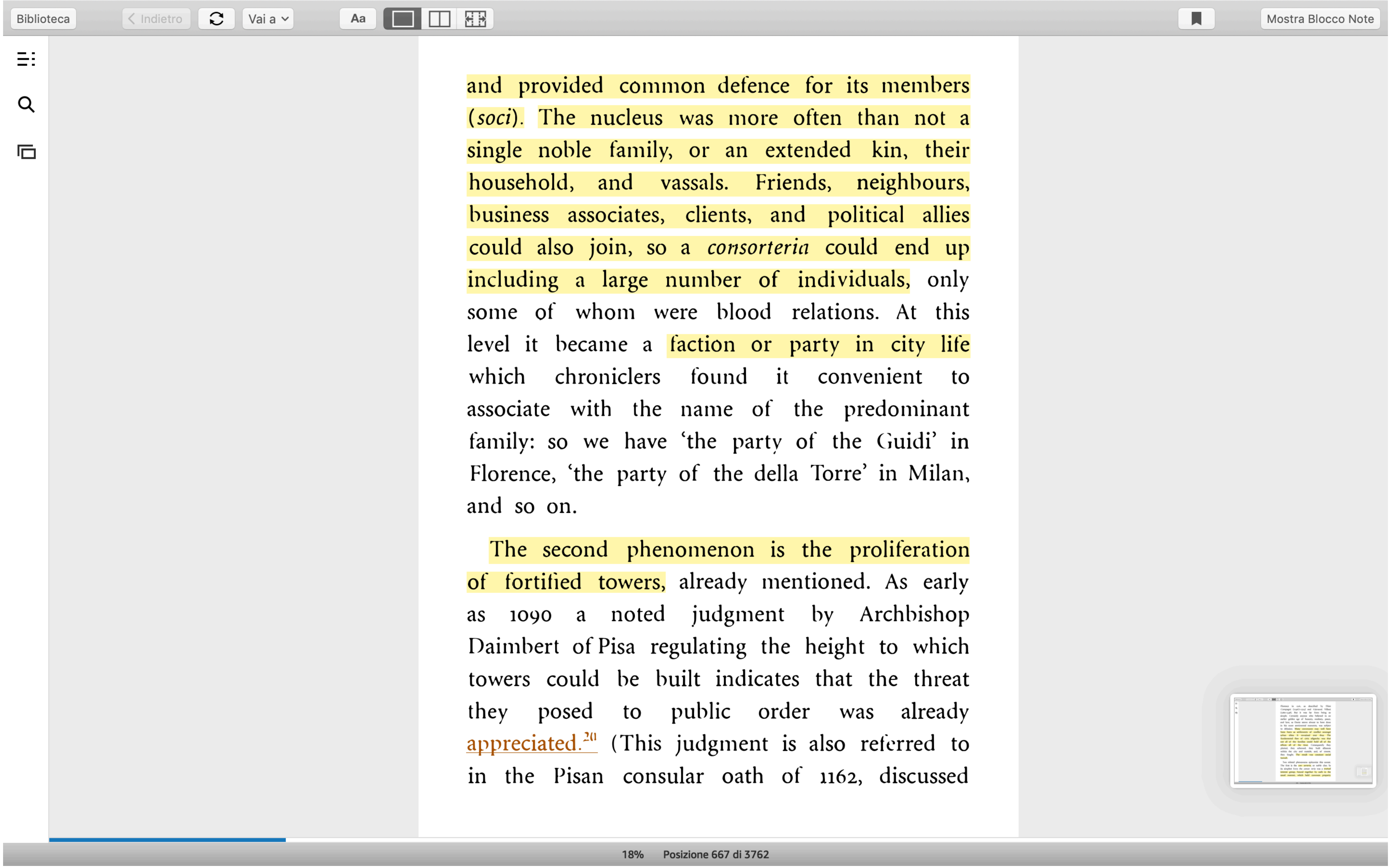
On approaching a Lombard or Tuscan city in the Middle Ages the first thing that would have come into view would have been its towers. Veritable forests of tall towers crowd the skyline of Italian cities in artistic representations and literary descriptions. The most remarkable thing about them is that they were not external defences. They were constructed inside the city, sometimes freestanding, more often attached to fortified residences. Few survive today, but those that do, for example in Bologna, Pavia, and most famously at San Gimignano, are eloquent testimony to the feud and faction-fighting that threatened to tear Italian city communes apart.

The causes of this strife were complex and overlapping: familial, factional, and sectional. Contemporaries liked to explain it away by references to primordial feuds, archetypically the murder of Buondelmonte dei Buondelmonti in



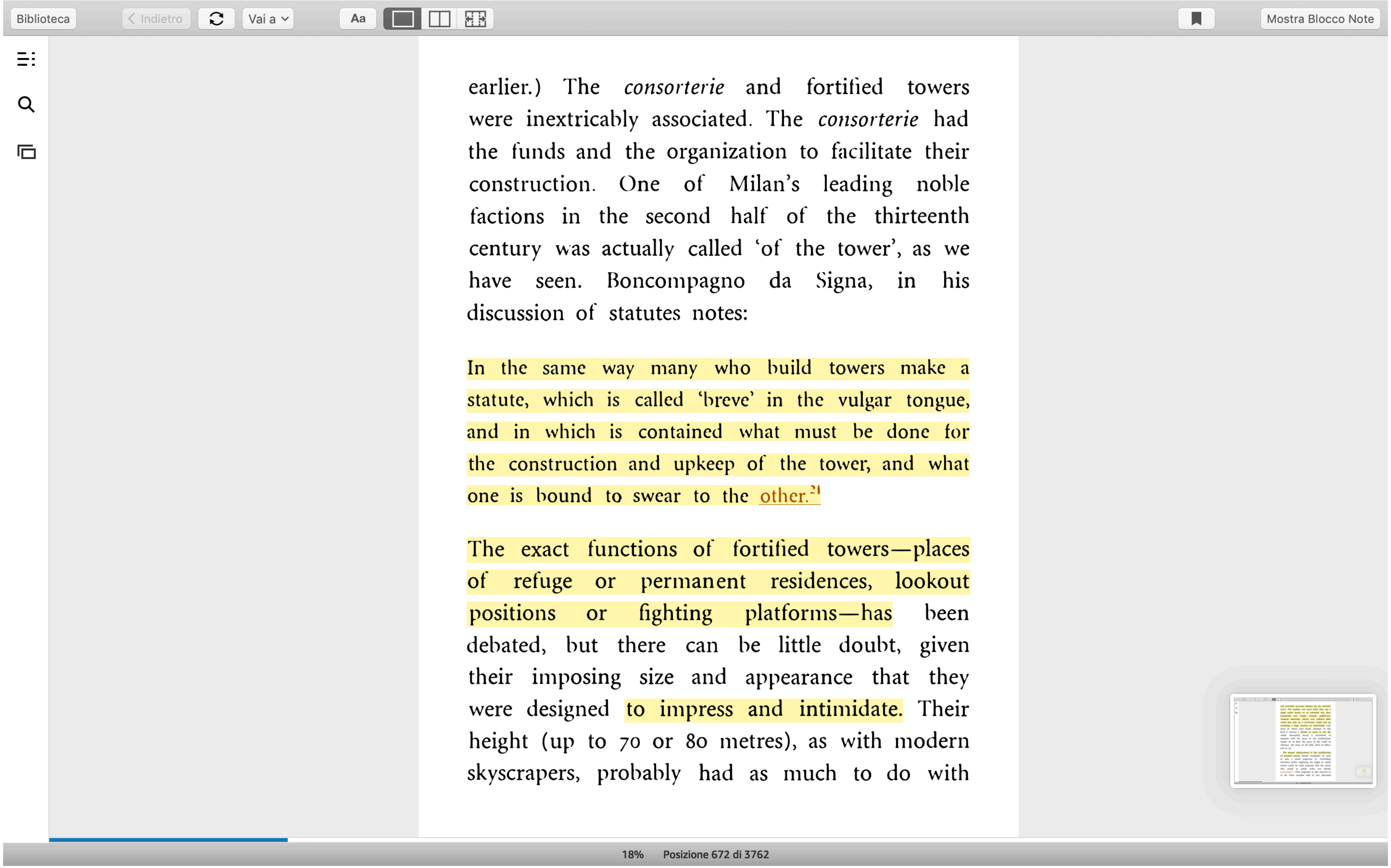
Florence in 1216, as described by Dino Compagni (1246/7–1324) and Giovanni Villani (1280–1348). But it was far from being so simple. Certainly anyone who believed in an earlier golden age of honesty, modesty, peace, and love, as Dante seems almost to have done in his more sentimental moments, was subject to delusion. Many communes may well have been born as settlements of conflict amongst urban elites. It remained ever thus. The fundamental flaw of civic oligarchy was that not all of the families could hold all of the offices all of the time. Consequently they plotted, they schemed, they built alliances within the city and outside, and, of course, they fought. The result was constant social tumult.

Two related phenomena epitomize this unrest. The first is the *con- sorteria*, or noble clan. In its simplest form the *consor teria* was a mutual interest group, bound together by oath in the usual manner, which held common property



and provided common defence for its members (*soci*). The nucleus was more often than not a single noble family, or an extended kin, their household, and vassals. Friends, neighbours, business associates, clients, and political allies could also join, so a *consorteria* could end up including a large number of individuals, only some of whom were blood relations. At this level it became a faction or party in city life which chroniclers found it convenient to associate with the name of the predominant family: so we have ‘the party of the Guidi’ in Florence, ‘the party of the della Torre’ in Milan, and so on.

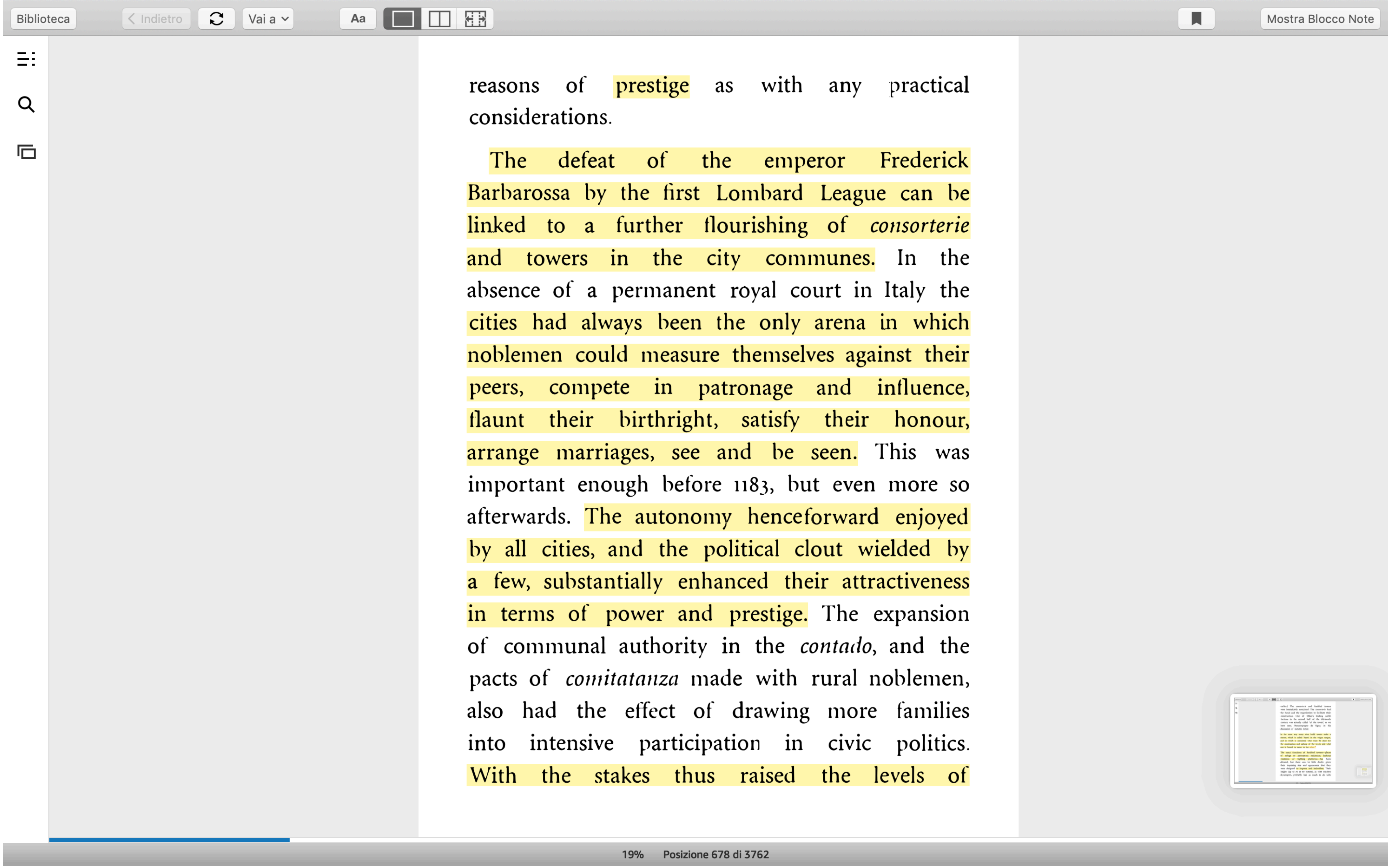
The second phenomenon is the proliferation of fortified towers, already mentioned. As early as 1090 a noted judgment by Archbishop Daimbert of Pisa regulating the height to which towers could be built indicates that the threat they posed to public order was already appreciated.[20] (This judgment is also referred to in the Pisan consular oath of 1162, discussed



earlier.) The *consorterie* and fortified towers were inextricably associated. The *consorterie* had the funds and the organization to facilitate their construction. One of Milan's leading noble factions in the second half of the thirteenth century was actually called 'of the tower', as we have seen. Boncompagno da Signa, in his discussion of statutes notes:

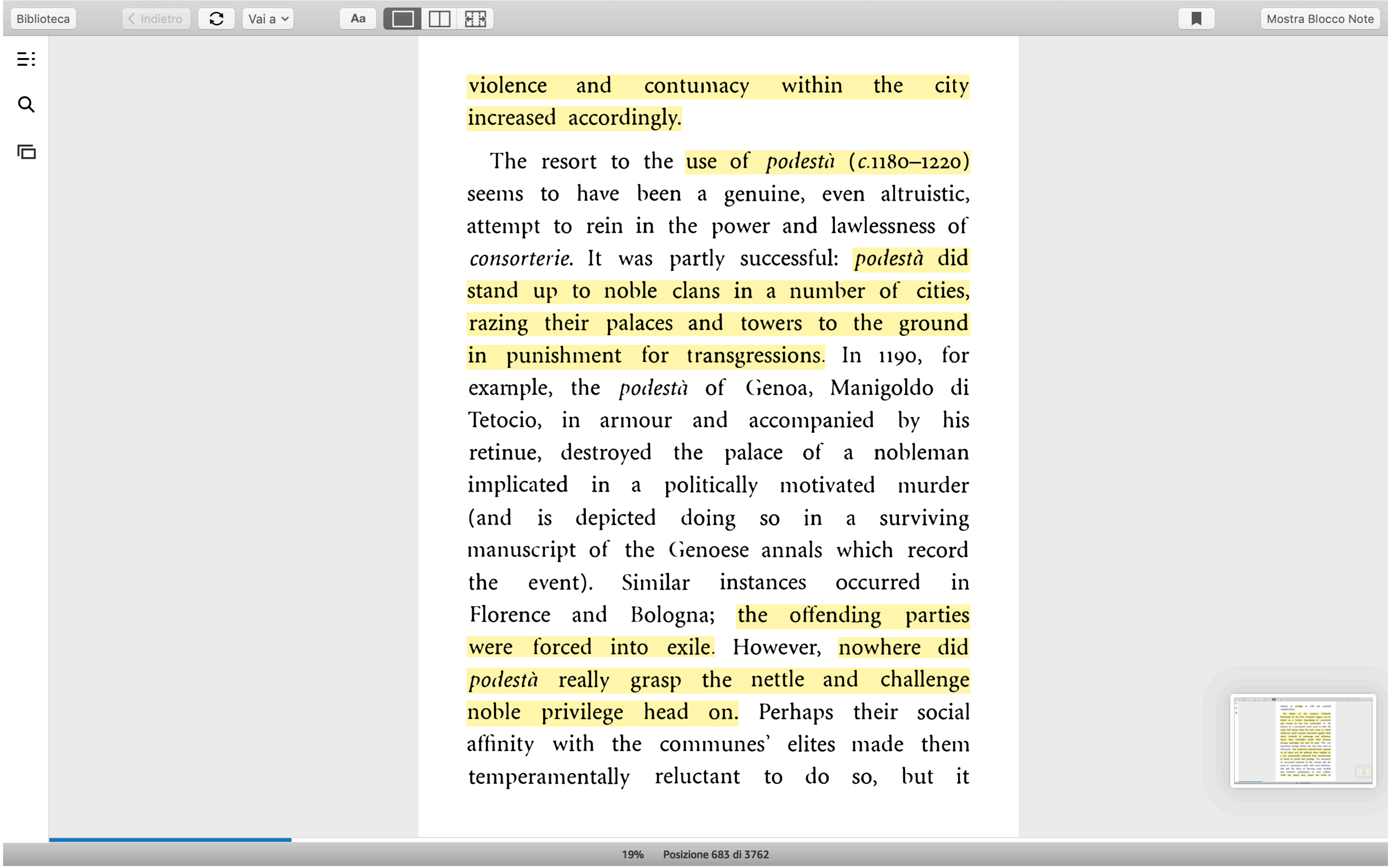
> In the same way many who build towers make a statute, which is called 'breve' in the vulgar tongue, and in which is contained what must be done for the construction and upkeep of the tower, and what one is bound to swear to the other.[21]

The exact functions of fortified towers—places of refuge or permanent residences, lookout positions or fighting platforms—has been debated, but there can be little doubt, given their imposing size and appearance that they were designed to impress and intimidate. Their height (up to 70 or 80 metres), as with modern skyscrapers, probably had as much to do with



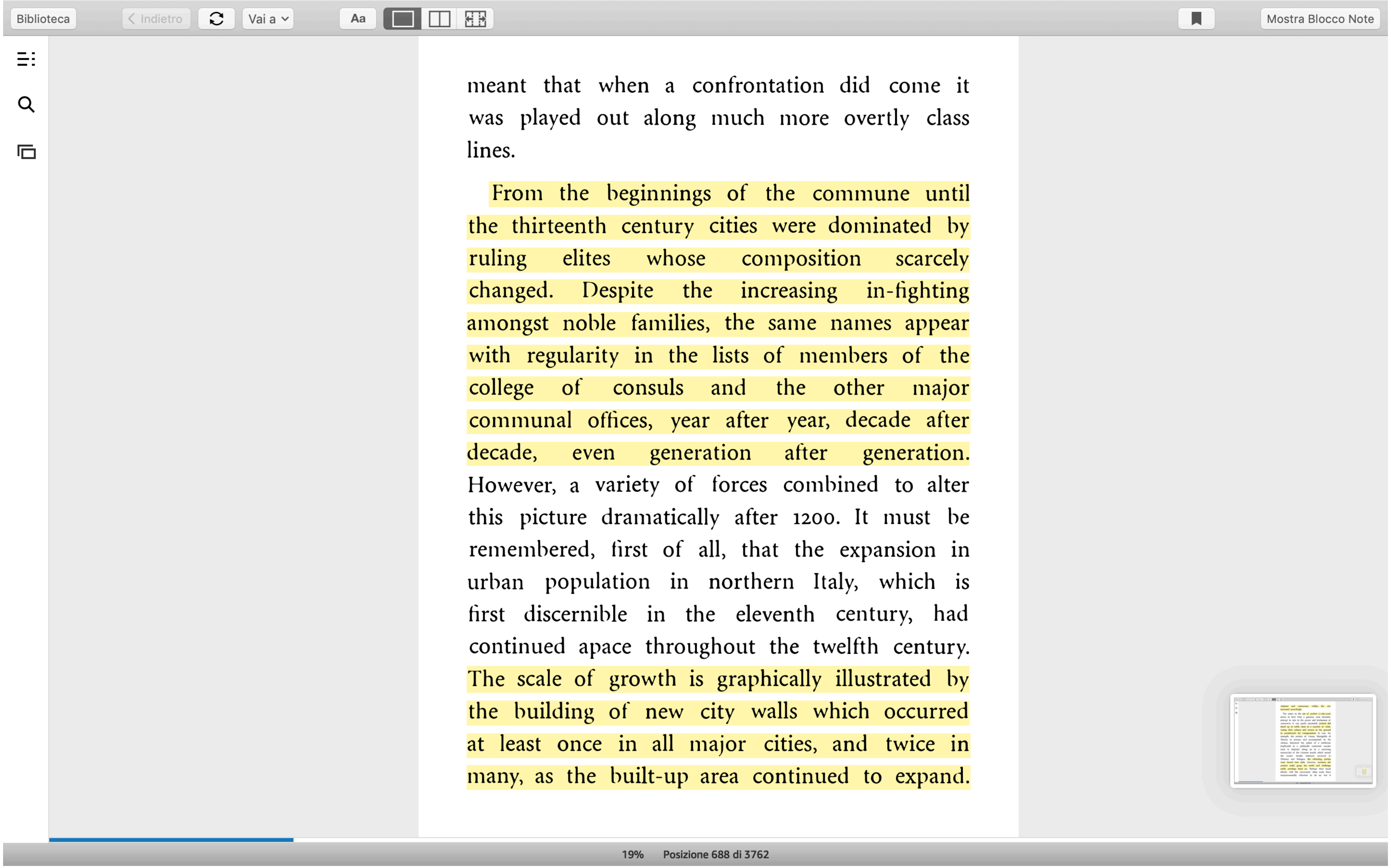
reasons of prestige as with any practical considerations.

The defeat of the emperor Frederick Barbarossa by the first Lombard League can be linked to a further flourishing of *consorterie* and towers in the city communes. In the absence of a permanent royal court in Italy the cities had always been the only arena in which noblemen could measure themselves against their peers, compete in patronage and influence, flaunt their birthright, satisfy their honour, arrange marriages, see and be seen. This was important enough before 1183, but even more so afterwards. The autonomy henceforward enjoyed by all cities, and the political clout wielded by a few, substantially enhanced their attractiveness in terms of power and prestige. The expansion of communal authority in the *contado*, and the pacts of *comitatanza* made with rural noblemen, also had the effect of drawing more families into intensive participation in civic politics. With the stakes thus raised the levels of



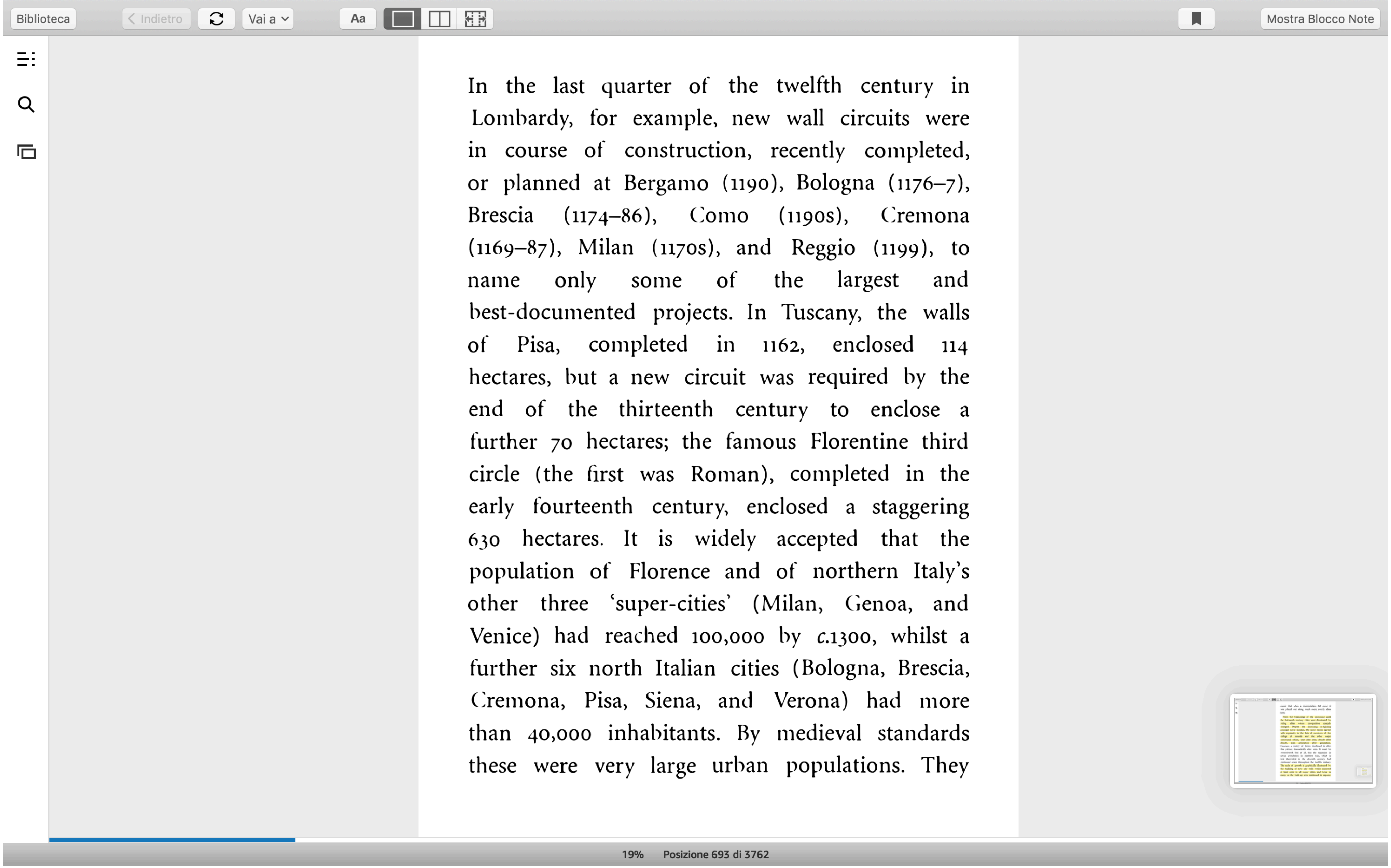
violence and contumacy within the city increased accordingly.

The resort to the use of *podestà* (*c.*1180–1220) seems to have been a genuine, even altruistic, attempt to rein in the power and lawlessness of *consorterie*. It was partly successful: *podestà* did stand up to noble clans in a number of cities, razing their palaces and towers to the ground in punishment for transgressions. In 1190, for example, the *podestà* of Genoa, Manigoldo di Tetocio, in armour and accompanied by his retinue, destroyed the palace of a nobleman implicated in a politically motivated murder (and is depicted doing so in a surviving manuscript of the Genoese annals which record the event). Similar instances occurred in Florence and Bologna; the offending parties were forced into exile. However, nowhere did *podestà* really grasp the nettle and challenge noble privilege head on. Perhaps their social affinity with the communes' elites made them temperamentally reluctant to do so, but it

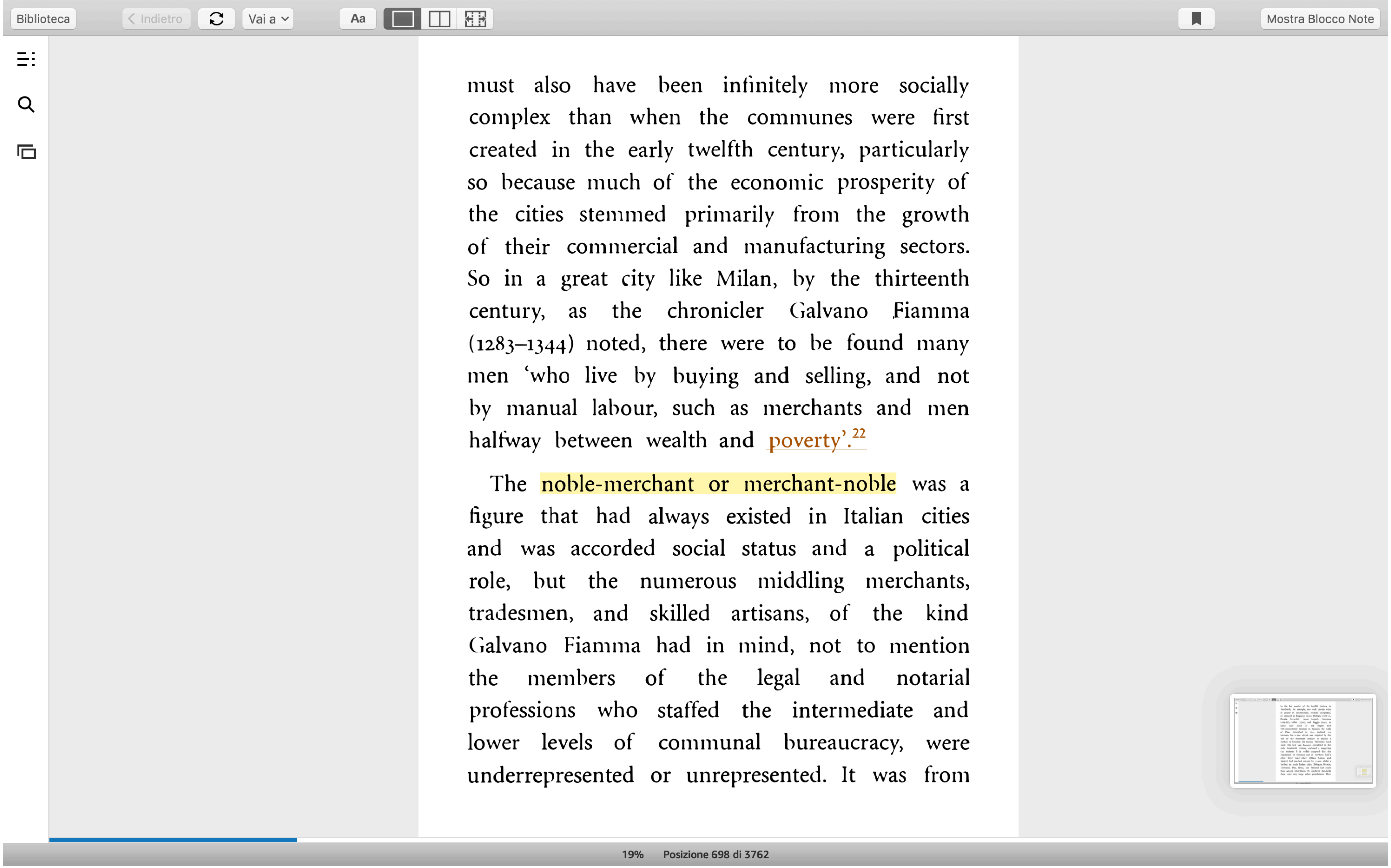


meant that when a confrontation did come it was played out along much more overtly class lines.

From the beginnings of the commune until the thirteenth century cities were dominated by ruling elites whose composition scarcely changed. Despite the increasing in-fighting amongst noble families, the same names appear with regularity in the lists of members of the college of consuls and the other major communal offices, year after year, decade after decade, even generation after generation. However, a variety of forces combined to alter this picture dramatically after 1200. It must be remembered, first of all, that the expansion in urban population in northern Italy, which is first discernible in the eleventh century, had continued apace throughout the twelfth century. The scale of growth is graphically illustrated by the building of new city walls which occurred at least once in all major cities, and twice in many, as the built-up area continued to expand.

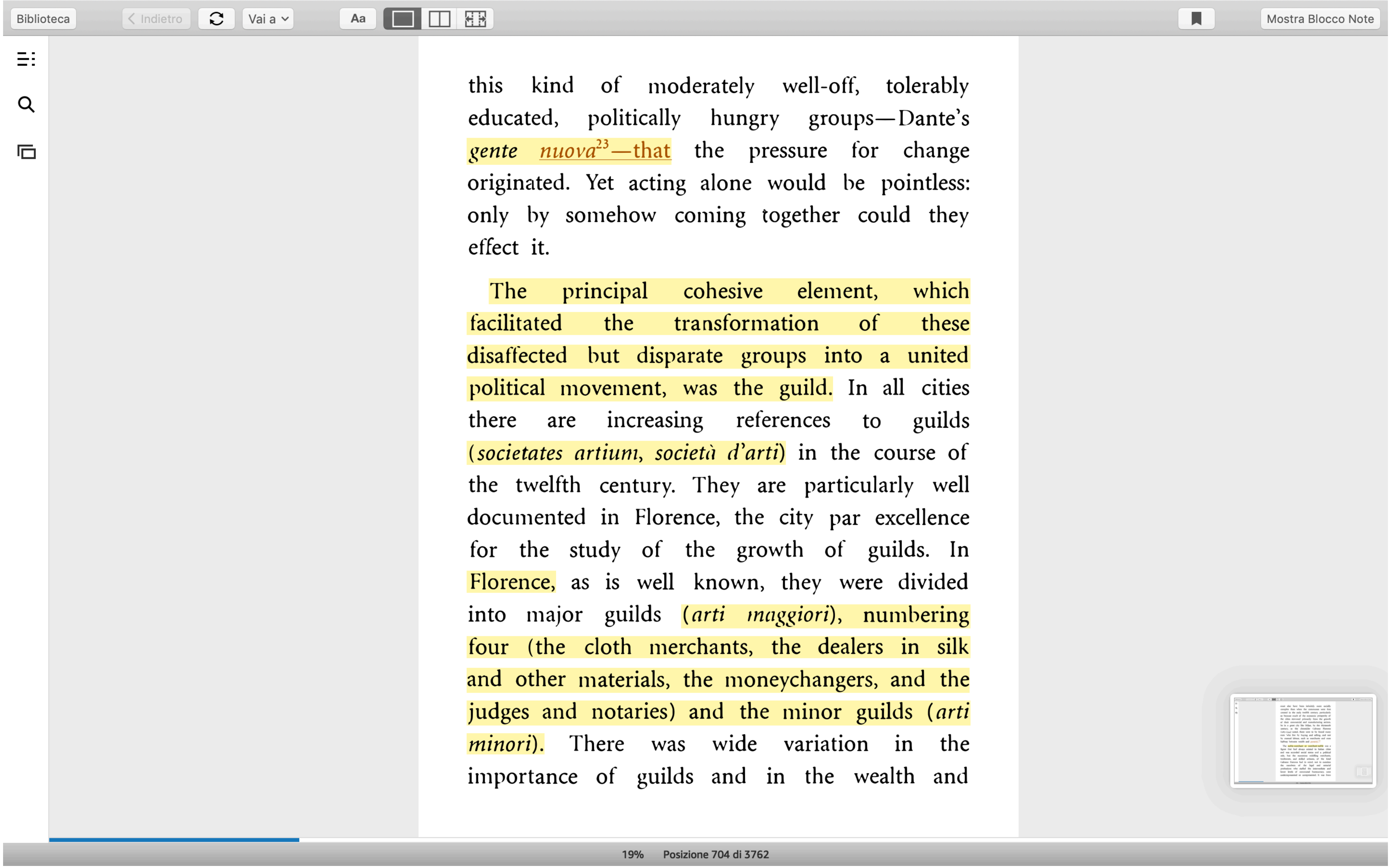


In the last quarter of the twelfth century in Lombardy, for example, new wall circuits were in course of construction, recently completed, or planned at Bergamo (1190), Bologna (1176–7), Brescia (1174–86), Como (1190s), Cremona (1169–87), Milan (1170s), and Reggio (1199), to name only some of the largest and best-documented projects. In Tuscany, the walls of Pisa, completed in 1162, enclosed 114 hectares, but a new circuit was required by the end of the thirteenth century to enclose a further 70 hectares; the famous Florentine third circle (the first was Roman), completed in the early fourteenth century, enclosed a staggering 630 hectares. It is widely accepted that the population of Florence and of northern Italy's other three 'super-cities' (Milan, Genoa, and Venice) had reached 100,000 by *c.*1300, whilst a further six north Italian cities (Bologna, Brescia, Cremona, Pisa, Siena, and Verona) had more than 40,000 inhabitants. By medieval standards these were very large urban populations. They



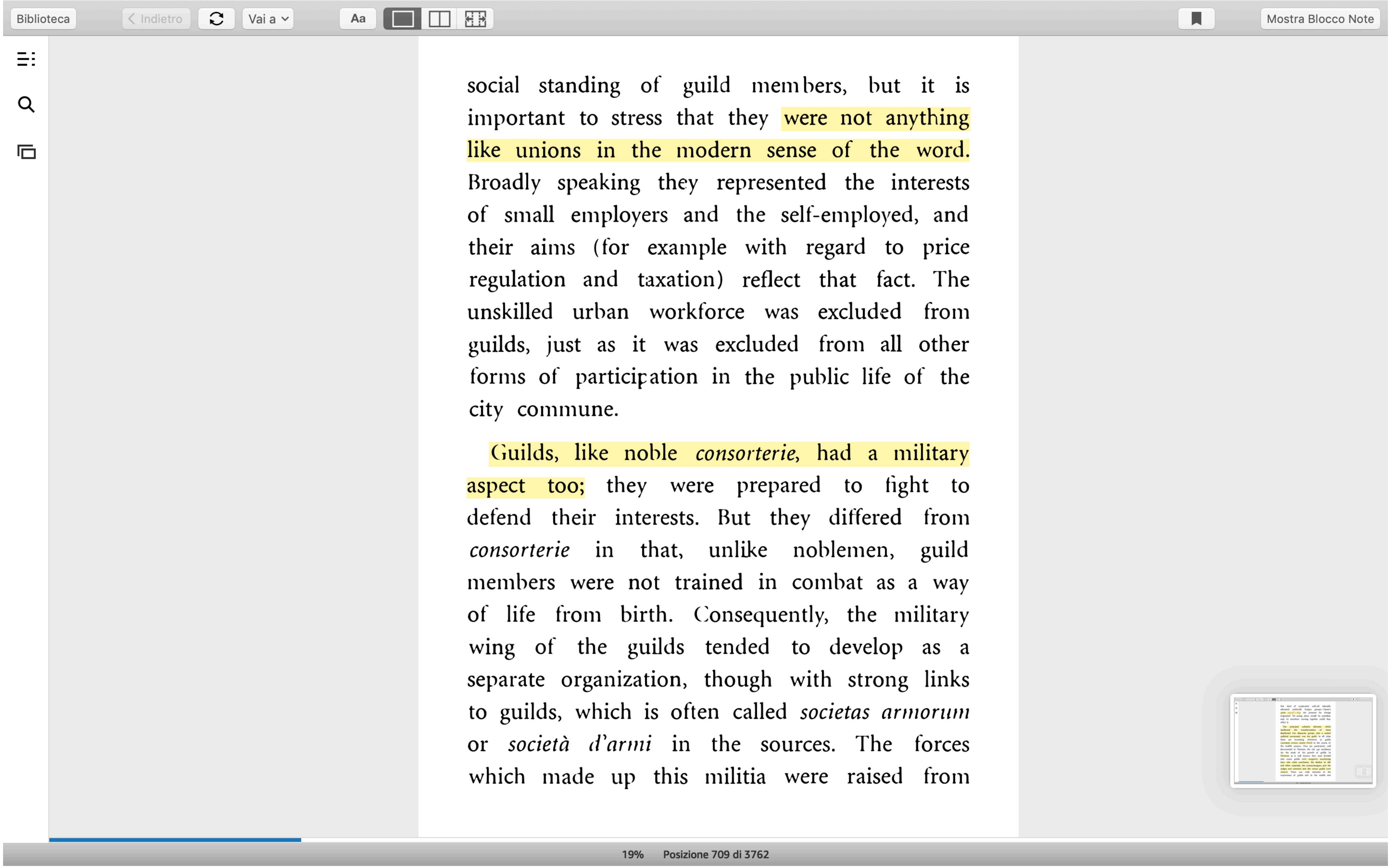
must also have been infinitely more socially complex than when the communes were first created in the early twelfth century, particularly so because much of the economic prosperity of the cities stemmed primarily from the growth of their commercial and manufacturing sectors. So in a great city like Milan, by the thirteenth century, as the chronicler Galvano Fiamma (1283–1344) noted, there were to be found many men 'who live by buying and selling, and not by manual labour, such as merchants and men halfway between wealth and poverty'.[22]

The noble-merchant or merchant-noble was a figure that had always existed in Italian cities and was accorded social status and a political role, but the numerous middling merchants, tradesmen, and skilled artisans, of the kind Galvano Fiamma had in mind, not to mention the members of the legal and notarial professions who staffed the intermediate and lower levels of communal bureaucracy, were underrepresented or unrepresented. It was from



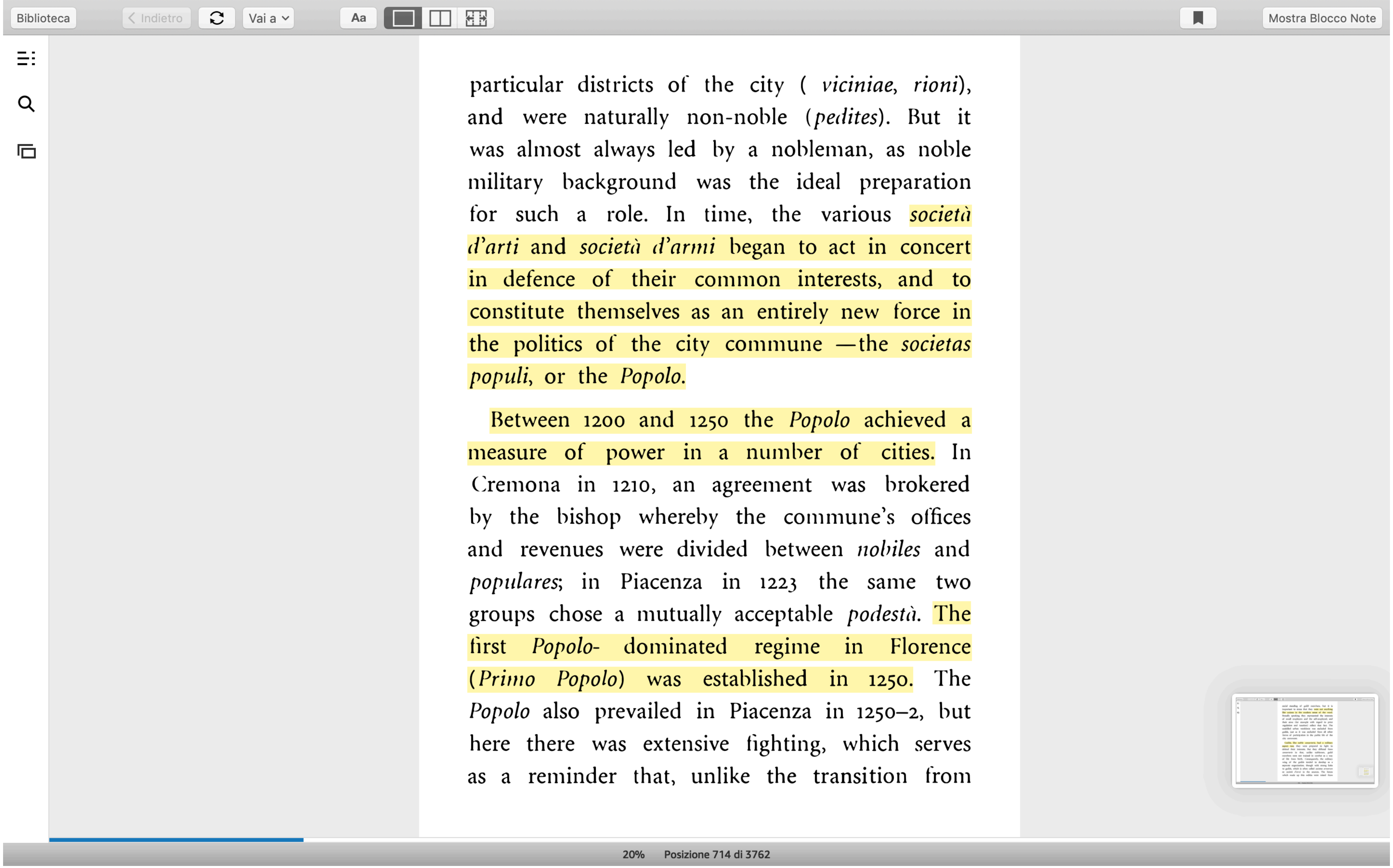
this kind of moderately well-off, tolerably educated, politically hungry groups—Dante's *gente nuova*[23]—that the pressure for change originated. Yet acting alone would be pointless: only by somehow coming together could they effect it.

The principal cohesive element, which facilitated the transformation of these disaffected but disparate groups into a united political movement, was the guild. In all cities there are increasing references to guilds (*societates artium, società d'arti*) in the course of the twelfth century. They are particularly well documented in Florence, the city par excellence for the study of the growth of guilds. In Florence, as is well known, they were divided into major guilds (*arti maggiori*), numbering four (the cloth merchants, the dealers in silk and other materials, the moneychangers, and the judges and notaries) and the minor guilds (*arti minori*). There was wide variation in the importance of guilds and in the wealth and



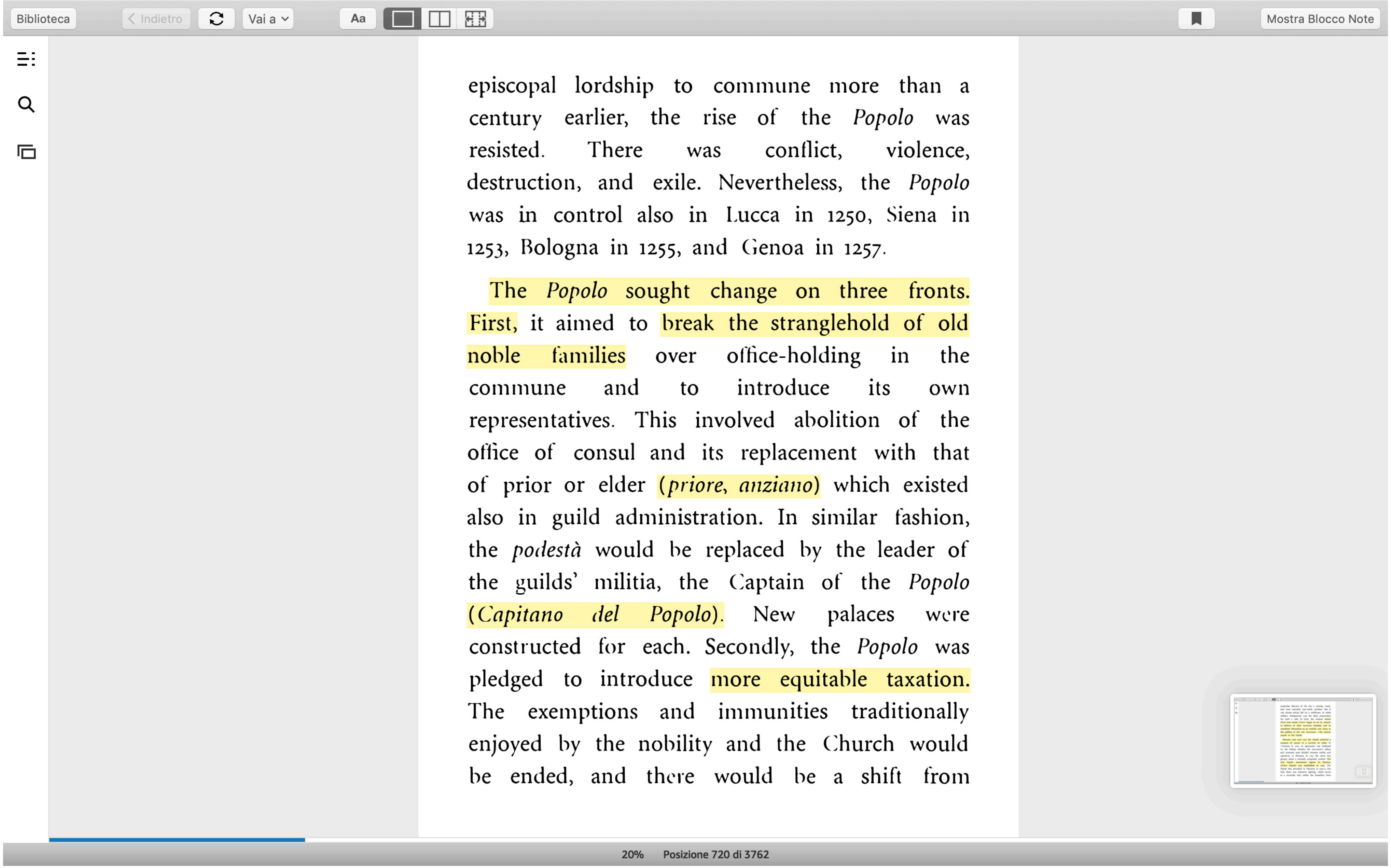
social standing of guild members, but it is important to stress that they were not anything like unions in the modern sense of the word. Broadly speaking they represented the interests of small employers and the self-employed, and their aims (for example with regard to price regulation and taxation) reflect that fact. The unskilled urban workforce was excluded from guilds, just as it was excluded from all other forms of participation in the public life of the city commune.

Guilds, like noble *consorterie*, had a military aspect too; they were prepared to fight to defend their interests. But they differed from *consorterie* in that, unlike noblemen, guild members were not trained in combat as a way of life from birth. Consequently, the military wing of the guilds tended to develop as a separate organization, though with strong links to guilds, which is often called *societas armorum* or *società d'armi* in the sources. The forces which made up this militia were raised from



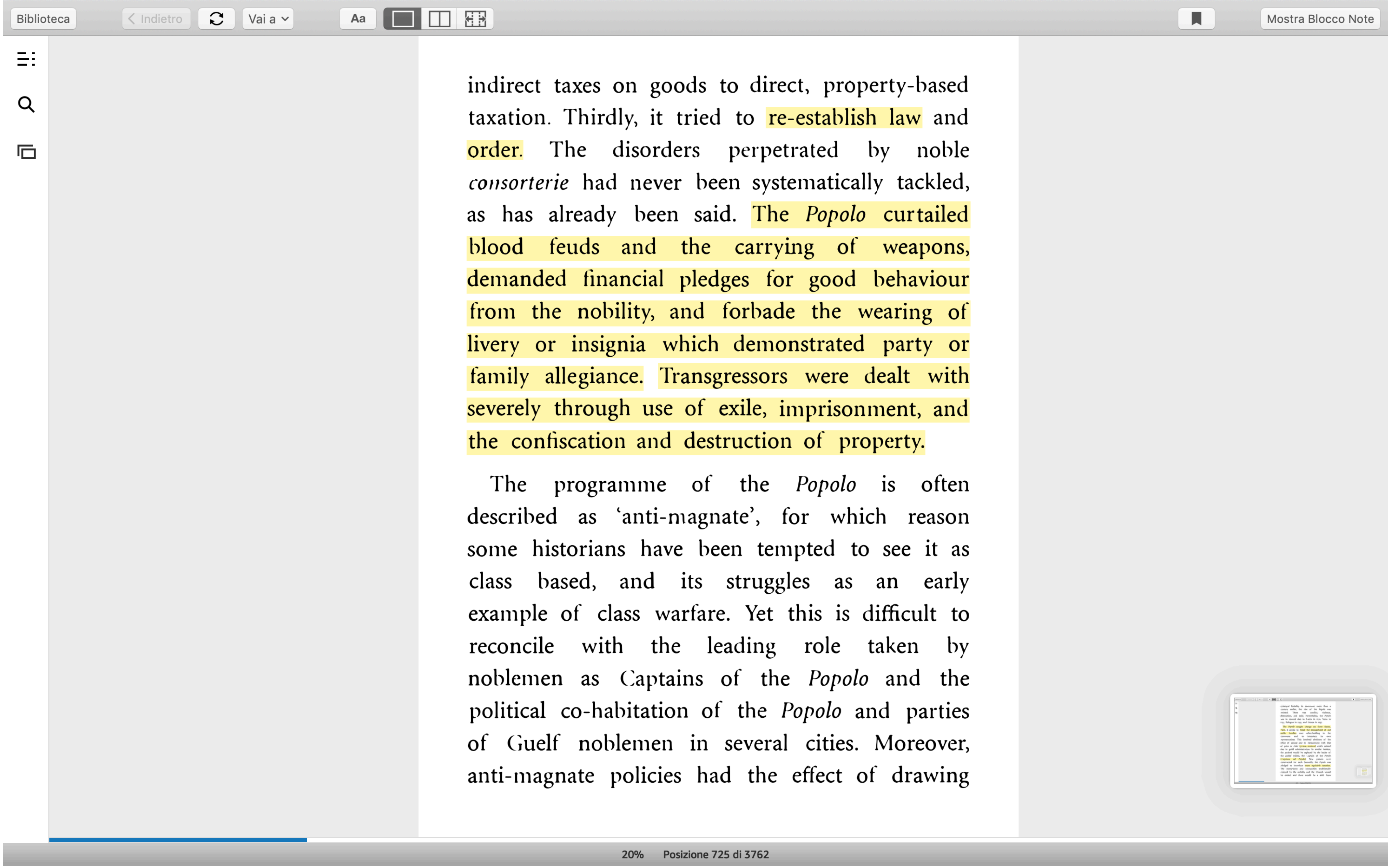
particular districts of the city (*viciniae*, *rioni*), and were naturally non-noble (*pedites*). But it was almost always led by a nobleman, as noble military background was the ideal preparation for such a role. In time, the various *società d'arti* and *società d'armi* began to act in concert in defence of their common interests, and to constitute themselves as an entirely new force in the politics of the city commune —the *societas populi*, or the *Popolo*.

Between 1200 and 1250 the *Popolo* achieved a measure of power in a number of cities. In Cremona in 1210, an agreement was brokered by the bishop whereby the commune's offices and revenues were divided between *nobiles* and *populares*; in Piacenza in 1223 the same two groups chose a mutually acceptable *podestà*. The first *Popolo*- dominated regime in Florence (*Primo Popolo*) was established in 1250. The *Popolo* also prevailed in Piacenza in 1250–2, but here there was extensive fighting, which serves as a reminder that, unlike the transition from



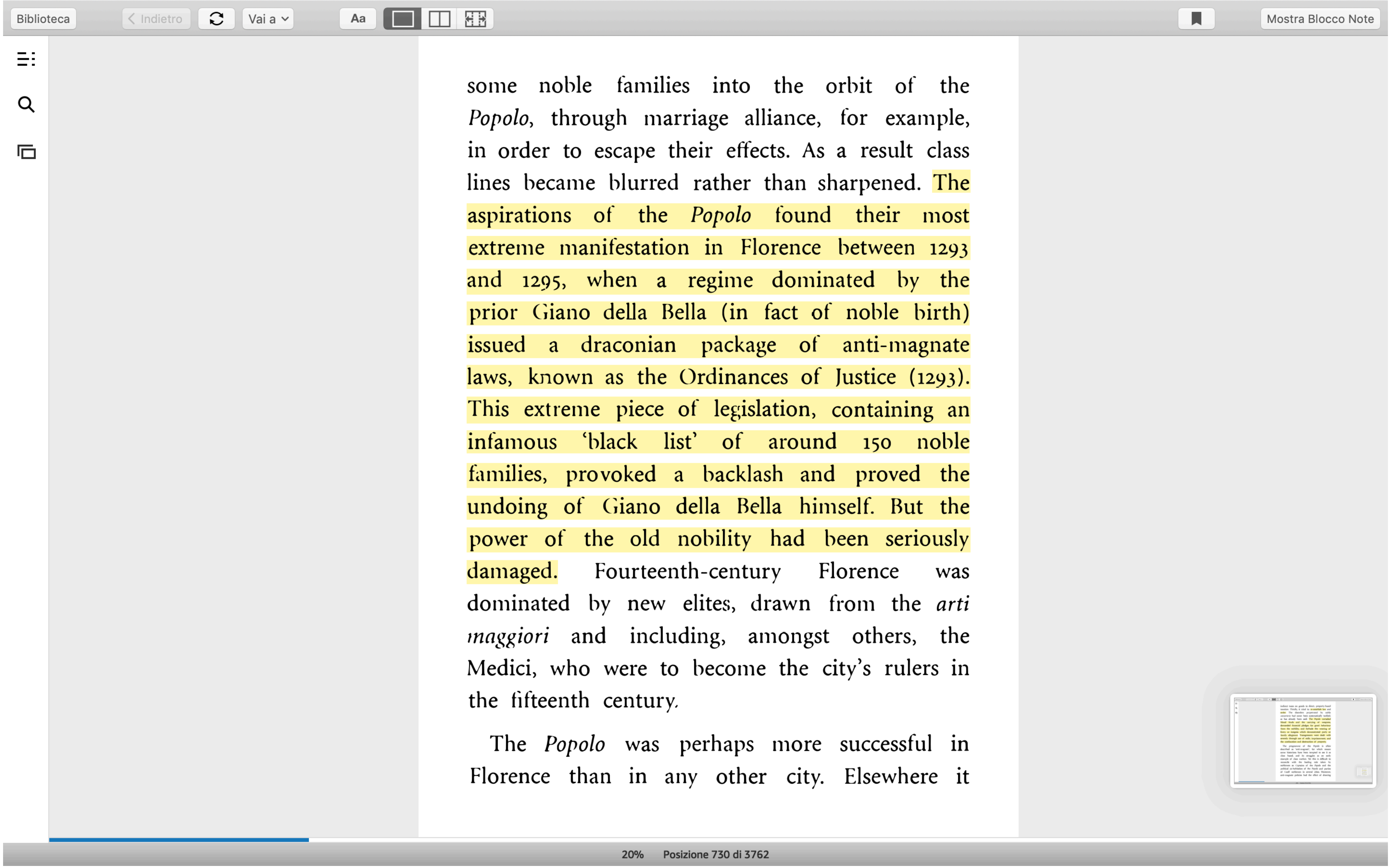
episcopal lordship to commune more than a century earlier, the rise of the *Popolo* was resisted. There was conflict, violence, destruction, and exile. Nevertheless, the *Popolo* was in control also in Lucca in 1250, Siena in 1253, Bologna in 1255, and Genoa in 1257.

The *Popolo* sought change on three fronts. First, it aimed to break the stranglehold of old noble families over office-holding in the commune and to introduce its own representatives. This involved abolition of the office of consul and its replacement with that of prior or elder (*priore, anziano*) which existed also in guild administration. In similar fashion, the *podestà* would be replaced by the leader of the guilds' militia, the Captain of the *Popolo* (*Capitano del Popolo*). New palaces were constructed for each. Secondly, the *Popolo* was pledged to introduce more equitable taxation. The exemptions and immunities traditionally enjoyed by the nobility and the Church would be ended, and there would be a shift from



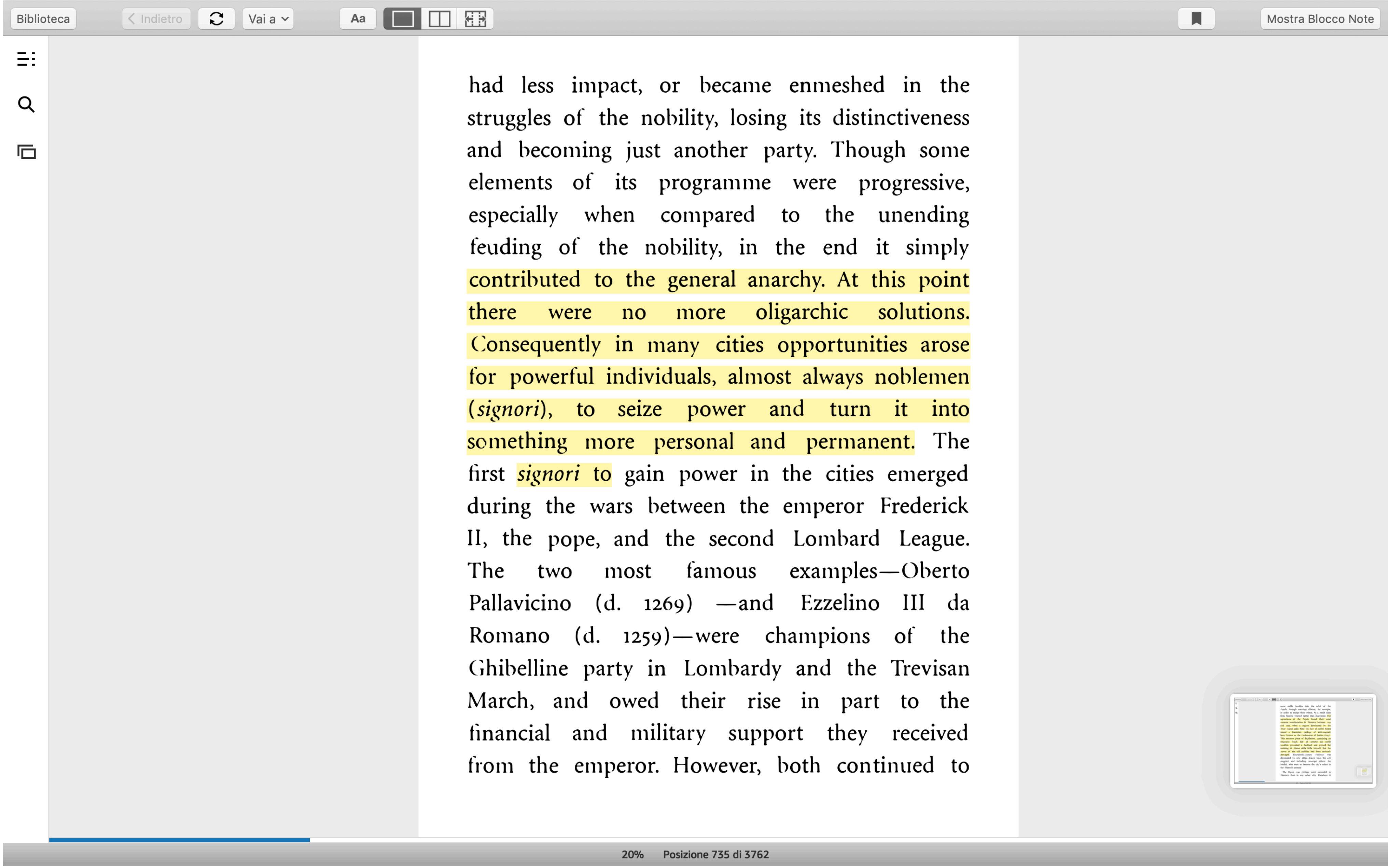
indirect taxes on goods to direct, property-based taxation. Thirdly, it tried to re-establish law and order. The disorders perpetrated by noble *consorterie* had never been systematically tackled, as has already been said. The *Popolo* curtailed blood feuds and the carrying of weapons, demanded financial pledges for good behaviour from the nobility, and forbade the wearing of livery or insignia which demonstrated party or family allegiance. Transgressors were dealt with severely through use of exile, imprisonment, and the confiscation and destruction of property.

The programme of the *Popolo* is often described as 'anti-magnate', for which reason some historians have been tempted to see it as class based, and its struggles as an early example of class warfare. Yet this is difficult to reconcile with the leading role taken by noblemen as Captains of the *Popolo* and the political co-habitation of the *Popolo* and parties of Guelf noblemen in several cities. Moreover, anti-magnate policies had the effect of drawing

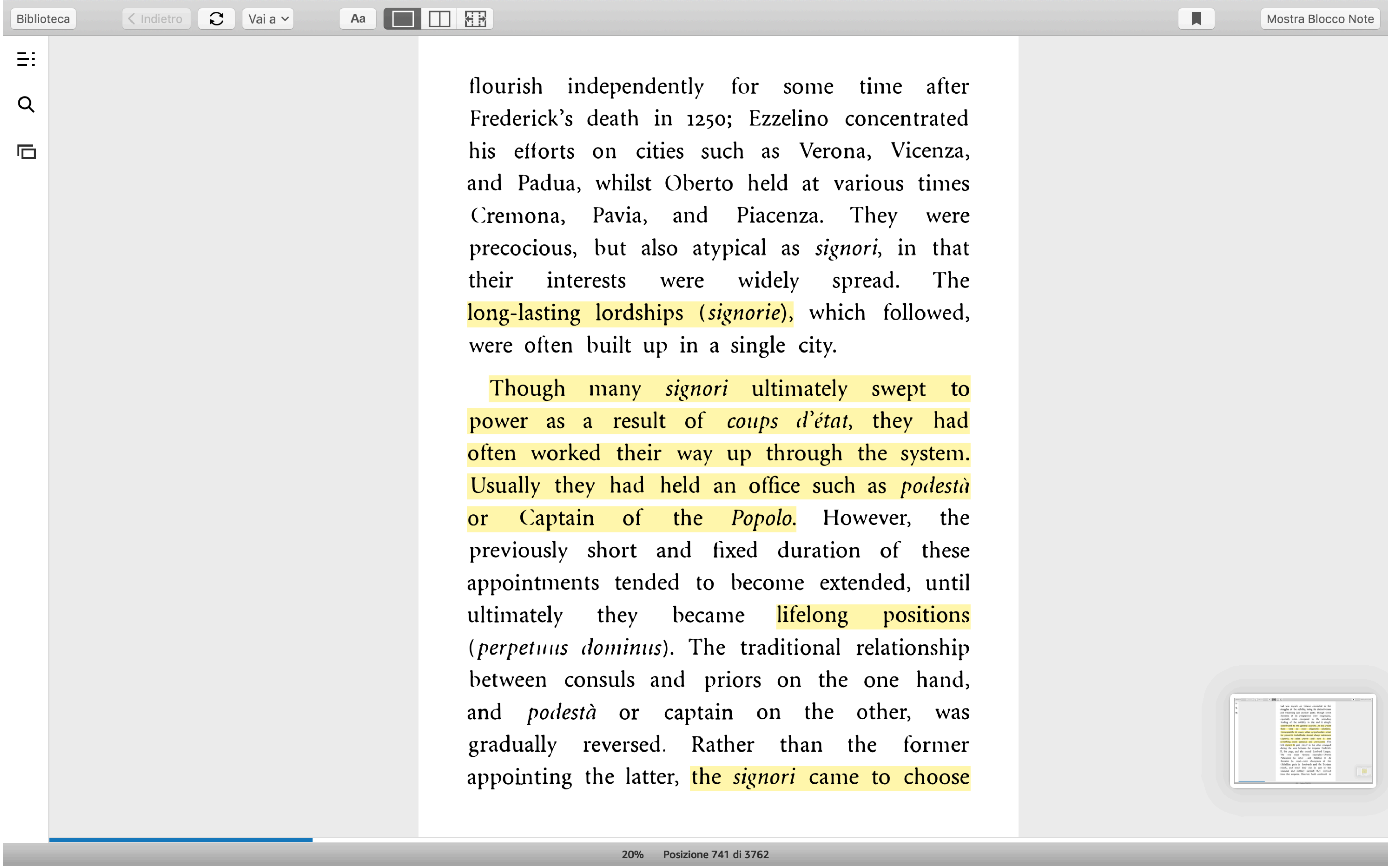


some noble families into the orbit of the *Popolo*, through marriage alliance, for example, in order to escape their effects. As a result class lines became blurred rather than sharpened. The aspirations of the *Popolo* found their most extreme manifestation in Florence between 1293 and 1295, when a regime dominated by the prior Giano della Bella (in fact of noble birth) issued a draconian package of anti-magnate laws, known as the Ordinances of Justice (1293). This extreme piece of legislation, containing an infamous 'black list' of around 150 noble families, provoked a backlash and proved the undoing of Giano della Bella himself. But the power of the old nobility had been seriously damaged. Fourteenth-century Florence was dominated by new elites, drawn from the *arti maggiori* and including, amongst others, the Medici, who were to become the city's rulers in the fifteenth century.

The *Popolo* was perhaps more successful in Florence than in any other city. Elsewhere it

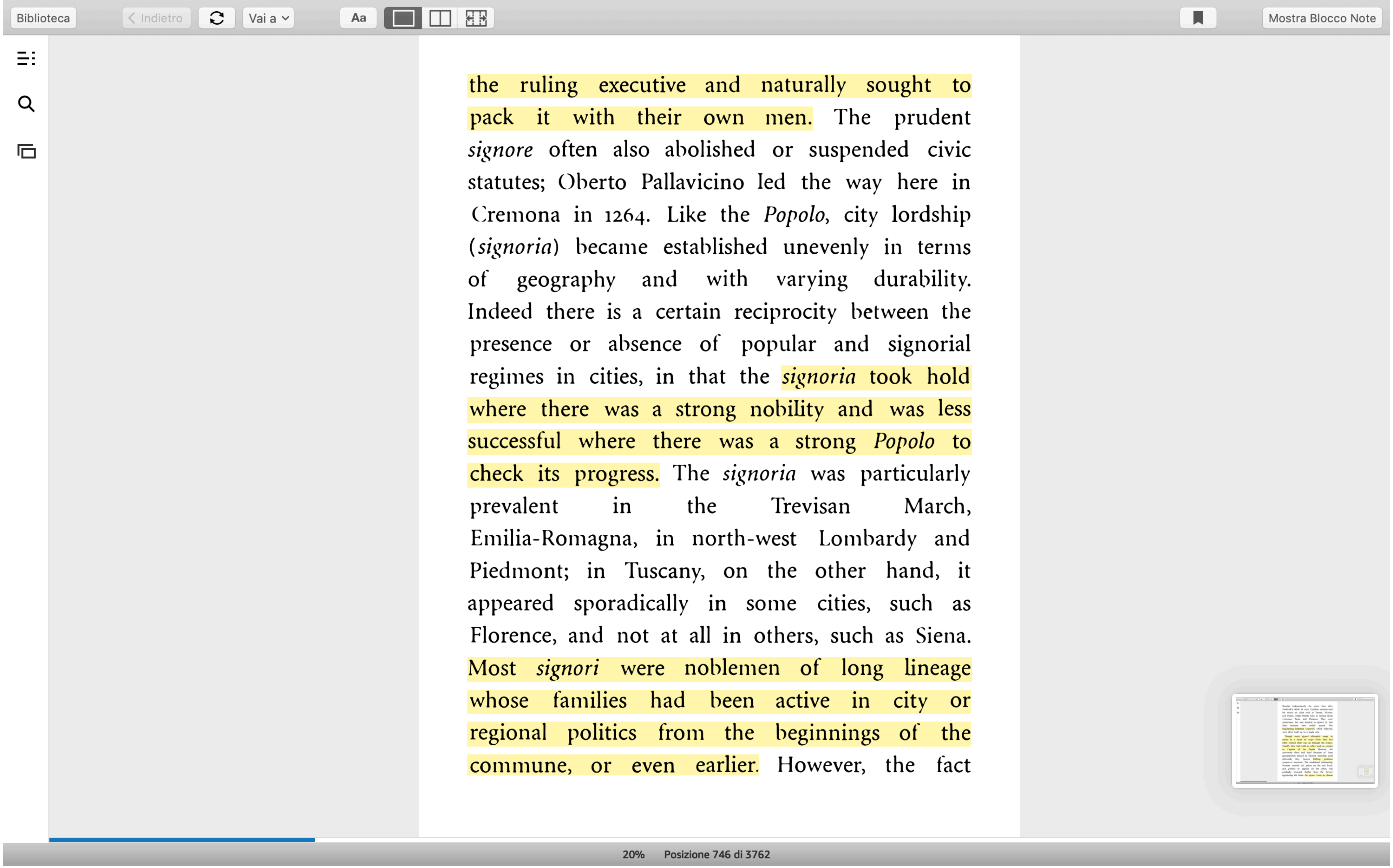


had less impact, or became enmeshed in the struggles of the nobility, losing its distinctiveness and becoming just another party. Though some elements of its programme were progressive, especially when compared to the unending feuding of the nobility, in the end it simply contributed to the general anarchy. At this point there were no more oligarchic solutions. Consequently in many cities opportunities arose for powerful individuals, almost always noblemen (*signori*), to seize power and turn it into something more personal and permanent. The first *signori* to gain power in the cities emerged during the wars between the emperor Frederick II, the pope, and the second Lombard League. The two most famous examples—Oberto Pallavicino (d. 1269) —and Ezzelino III da Romano (d. 1259)—were champions of the Ghibelline party in Lombardy and the Trevisan March, and owed their rise in part to the financial and military support they received from the emperor. However, both continued to

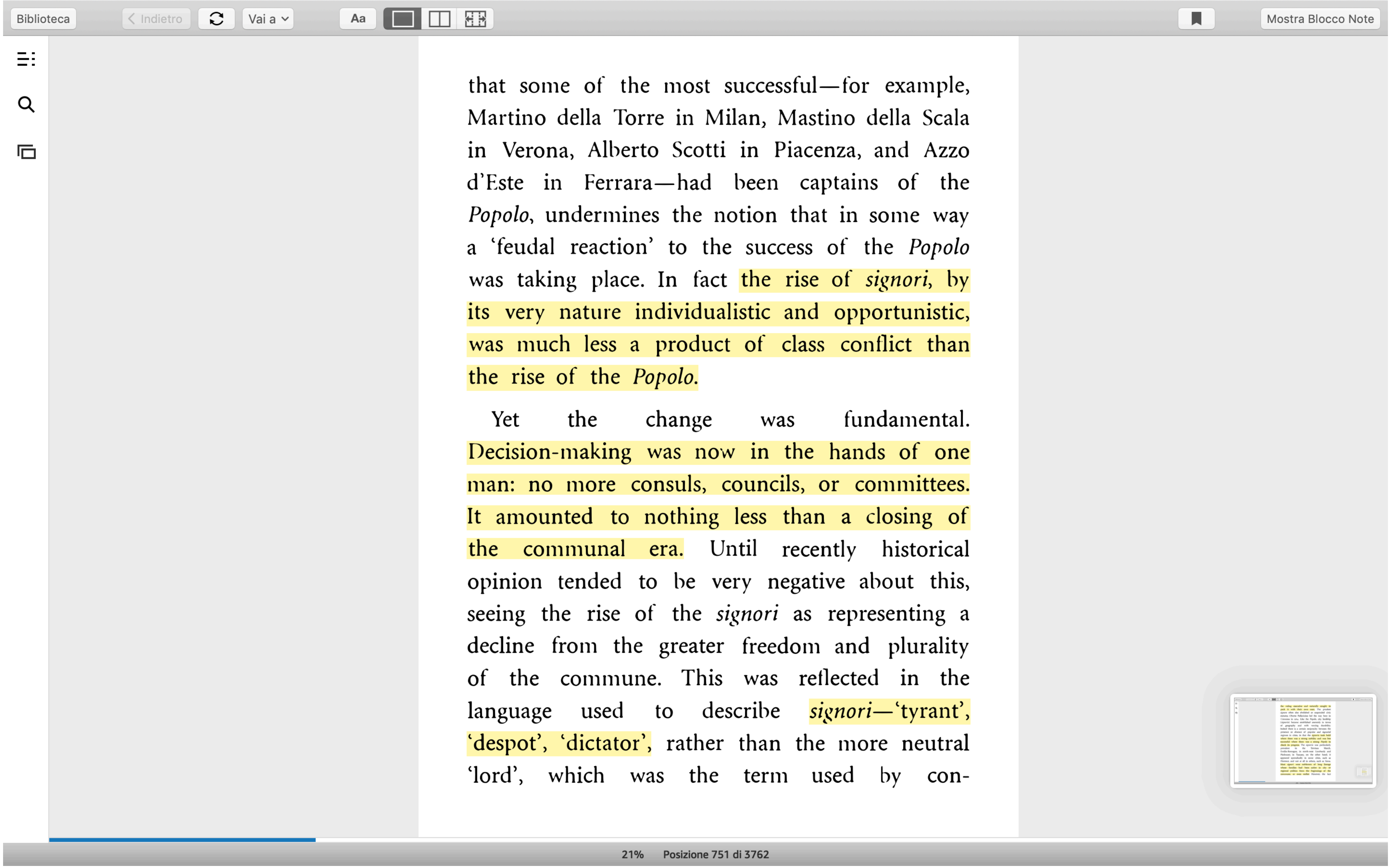


flourish independently for some time after Frederick's death in 1250; Ezzelino concentrated his efforts on cities such as Verona, Vicenza, and Padua, whilst Oberto held at various times Cremona, Pavia, and Piacenza. They were precocious, but also atypical as *signori*, in that their interests were widely spread. The long-lasting lordships (*signorie*), which followed, were often built up in a single city.

Though many *signori* ultimately swept to power as a result of *coups d'état*, they had often worked their way up through the system. Usually they had held an office such as *podestà* or Captain of the *Popolo*. However, the previously short and fixed duration of these appointments tended to become extended, until ultimately they became lifelong positions (*perpetuus dominus*). The traditional relationship between consuls and priors on the one hand, and *podestà* or captain on the other, was gradually reversed. Rather than the former appointing the latter, the *signori* came to choose

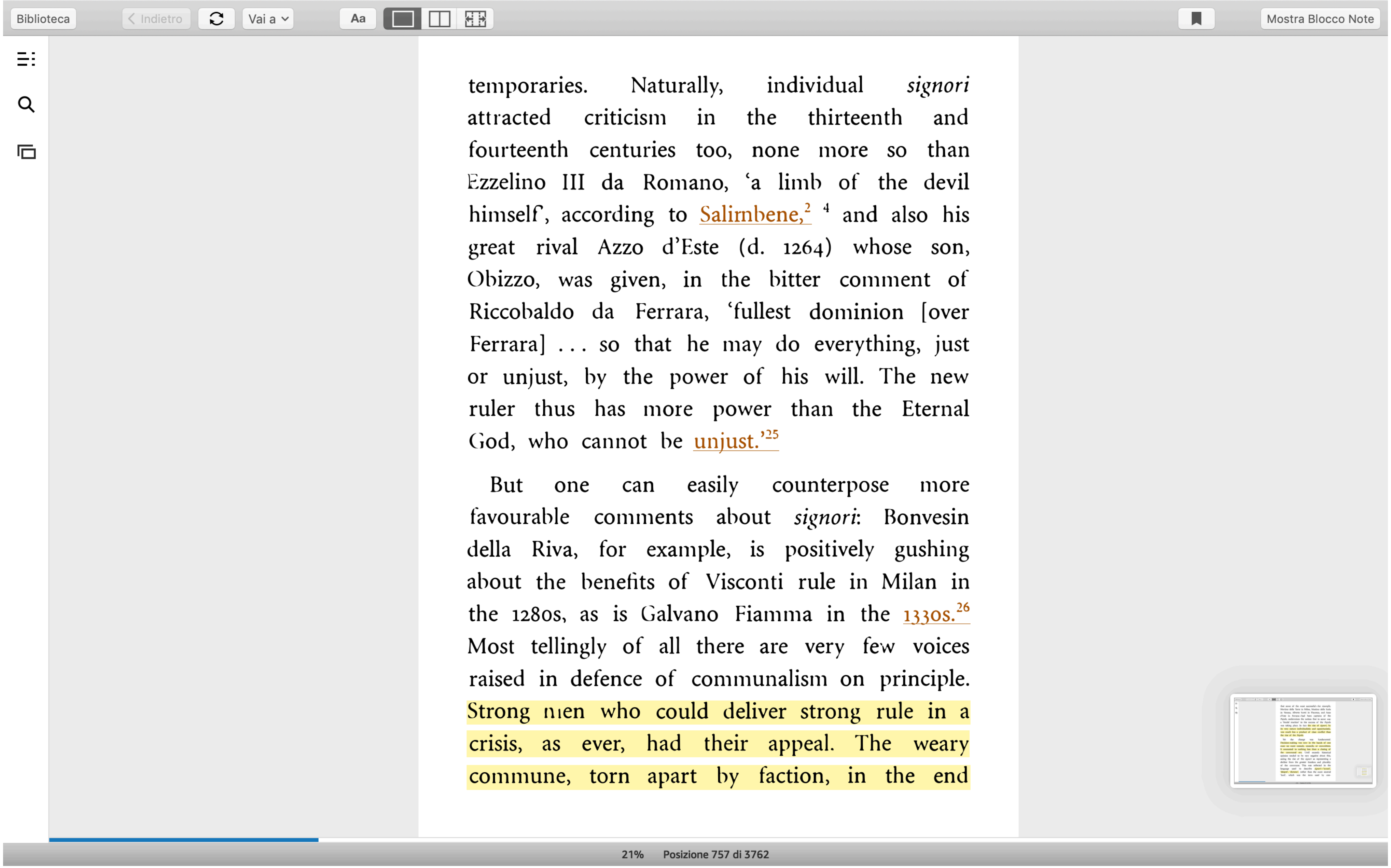


the ruling executive and naturally sought to pack it with their own men. The prudent *signore* often also abolished or suspended civic statutes; Oberto Pallavicino led the way here in Cremona in 1264. Like the *Popolo*, city lordship (*signoria*) became established unevenly in terms of geography and with varying durability. Indeed there is a certain reciprocity between the presence or absence of popular and signorial regimes in cities, in that the *signoria* took hold where there was a strong nobility and was less successful where there was a strong *Popolo* to check its progress. The *signoria* was particularly prevalent in the Trevisan March, Emilia-Romagna, in north-west Lombardy and Piedmont; in Tuscany, on the other hand, it appeared sporadically in some cities, such as Florence, and not at all in others, such as Siena. Most *signori* were noblemen of long lineage whose families had been active in city or regional politics from the beginnings of the commune, or even earlier. However, the fact



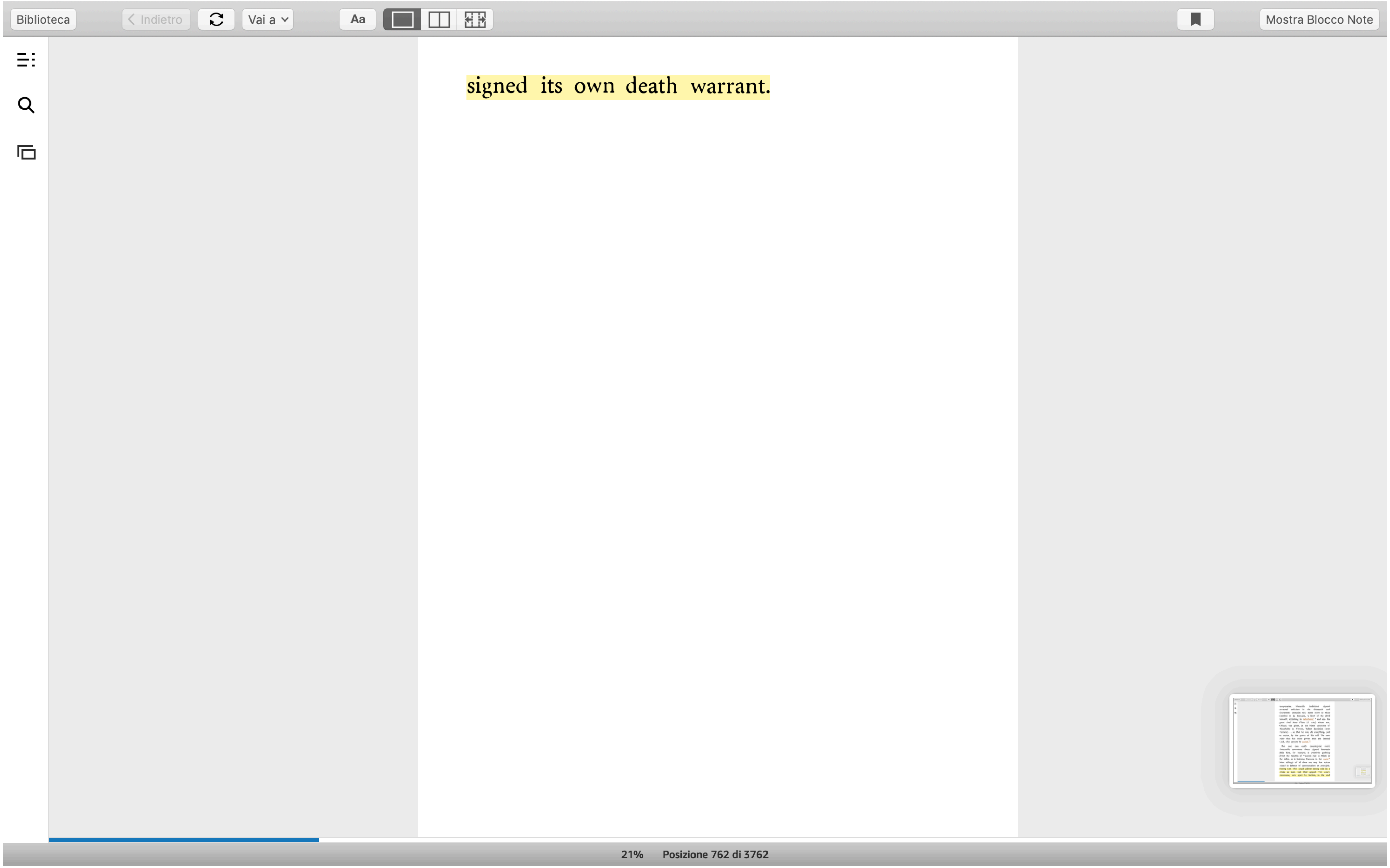
that some of the most successful—for example, Martino della Torre in Milan, Mastino della Scala in Verona, Alberto Scotti in Piacenza, and Azzo d'Este in Ferrara—had been captains of the *Popolo*, undermines the notion that in some way a 'feudal reaction' to the success of the *Popolo* was taking place. In fact the rise of *signori*, by its very nature individualistic and opportunistic, was much less a product of class conflict than the rise of the *Popolo*.

Yet the change was fundamental. Decision-making was now in the hands of one man: no more consuls, councils, or committees. It amounted to nothing less than a closing of the communal era. Until recently historical opinion tended to be very negative about this, seeing the rise of the *signori* as representing a decline from the greater freedom and plurality of the commune. This was reflected in the language used to describe *signori*—'tyrant', 'despot', 'dictator', rather than the more neutral 'lord', which was the term used by con-



temporaries. Naturally, individual *signori* attracted criticism in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries too, none more so than Ezzelino III da Romano, ‘a limb of the devil himself’, according to Salimbene,[24] and also his great rival Azzo d’Este (d. 1264) whose son, Obizzo, was given, in the bitter comment of Riccobaldo da Ferrara, ‘fullest dominion [over Ferrara] . . . so that he may do everything, just or unjust, by the power of his will. The new ruler thus has more power than the Eternal God, who cannot be unjust.’[25]

But one can easily counterpose more favourable comments about *signori*: Bonvesin della Riva, for example, is positively gushing about the benefits of Visconti rule in Milan in the 1280s, as is Galvano Fiamma in the 1330s.[26] Most tellingly of all there are very few voices raised in defence of communalism on principle. Strong men who could deliver strong rule in a crisis, as ever, had their appeal. The weary commune, torn apart by faction, in the end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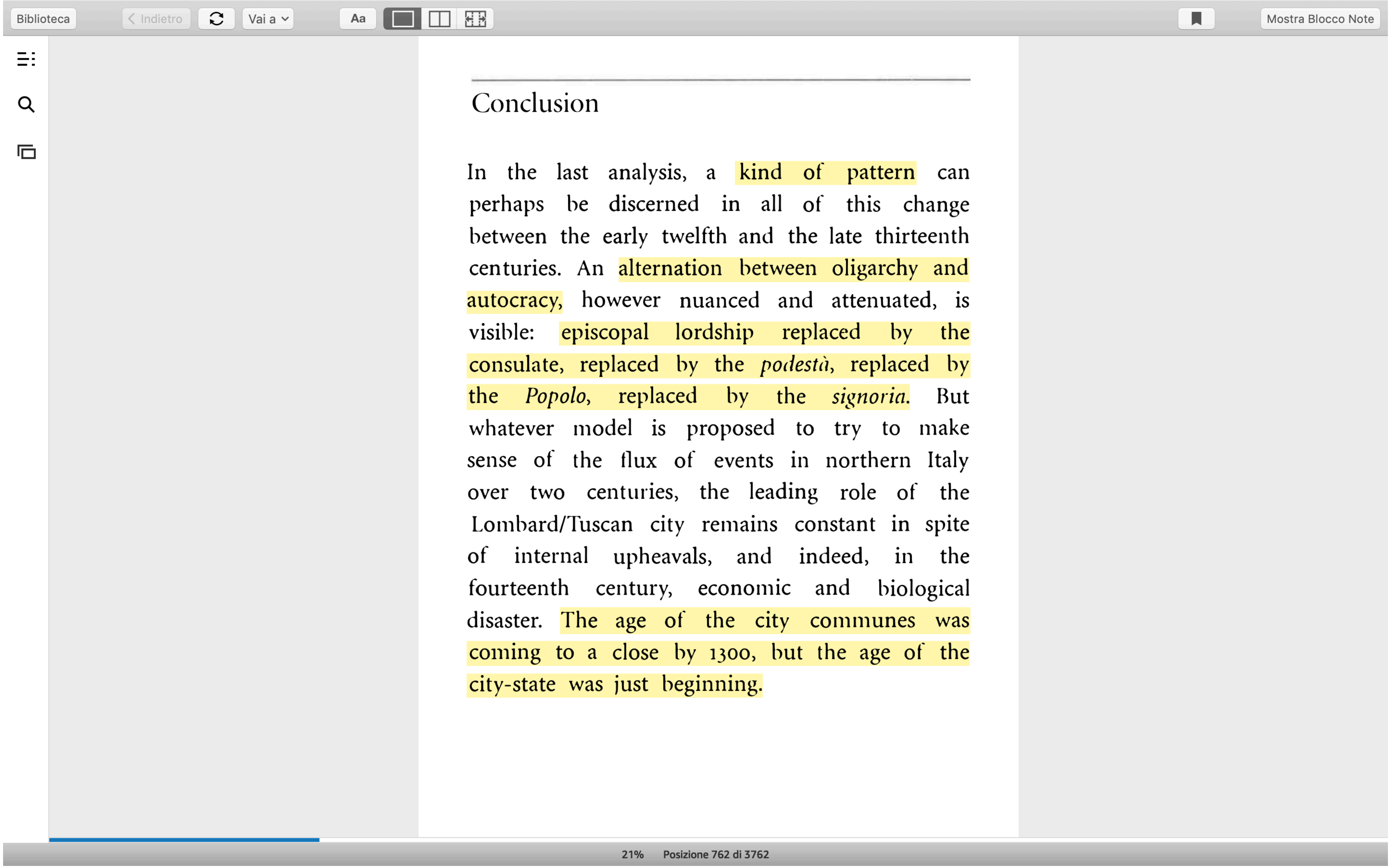
signed its own death warrant.



Conclusion

In the last analysis, a kind of pattern can perhaps be discerned in all of this change between the early twelfth and the late thirteenth centuries. An alternation between oligarchy and autocracy, however nuanced and attenuated, is visible: episcopal lordship replaced by the consulate, replaced by the *podestà*, replaced by the *Popolo*, replaced by the *signoria*. But whatever model is proposed to try to make sense of the flux of events in northern Italy over two centuries, the leading role of the Lombard/Tuscan city remains constant in spite of internal upheavals, and indeed, in the fourteenth century, economic and biological disaster. The age of the city communes was coming to a close by 1300, but the age of the city-state was just beginning.