Provincial Families of the Renaissance

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Defining the Patriciate

The Arnaldi entered the fifteenth century respectable but outside the Vicentine civic elite: they had been notaries in past generations and had owned some property, but had never been noteworthy in public affairs. Andrea Arnaldi, however, secured political access and eventual election to high office. He and brother Tommaso grew rich: in 1453 their assessment of ten lire ranked in the wealthiest one percent of tax households. The brothers gained investiture as episcopal vassals. In the second generation, Gaspare II was elected to the leading civic magistracy and built a substantial palace in the new Renaissance style. Cousin Silvestro, styled nobilis vir in most documents, married into the old feudal nobility and found spouses for his children in the great house of the Thiene. Within a century, the Arnaldi had joined the local patriciate.

A working definition of the patriciate—a restricted body of families monopolizing high municipal office, possessing great and honorable wealth, and eventually effecting “aristocratic transformation”¹—would hold true for other cities in the Veneto, and indeed for most cities in northern and central Italy. For the later sixteenth century that definition would not be hard to sustain. By that time, councils were usually formally closed and highly resistant to newcomers; their seats were passed down by hereditary succession. By then, too, nobles possessed fabulous genealogies, reams of
documents, and unimpeachable titles to ratify their standing. After 1575 the Arnaldi were papal cavalieri, and traced their origins from the mythic Germanic warrior Arnaldus.

For the fifteenth century, however, “patriciate” remains a term of convenience, a piece of historiographic shorthand. It is not entirely satisfactory, since in every case save Venice boundaries were indistinct. Armando Sapori, for one, wished the term driven from the lexicon, since it does not reflect contemporary usage, means different things to different people, and lacks sufficient precision to be useful. Few have followed his lead, however. Most historians of most cities perceive a consistent leadership group and a movement toward a consolidated elite on the basis of prosopography: in membership lists of inner councils and embassies, the same names appear over and over, from generation to generation. Still, unable to give firm definition to bodies that were not formally isolated, historians have resorted to generic labels such as ceto dirigente, gruppo oligarchico, or ceto dominante. Even Sapori acknowledged exclusion and coherence, and commonly spoke of the dirigenti del Comune.

Some cities, it is true, possessed lines of demarcation between the powerful and the powerless, but even these tended to lose effective meaning. From at least 1277, with a matriculation list established a century later, Milan had a formally constituted body of nobles that controlled cathedral benefices. Visconti and Sforza rulers, however, had their own favorites, and the proportion of benefices that went to ceto members declined from 93 percent in the fourteenth century to 29 percent in the sixteenth century. Moreover, matriculated nobles sought ecclesiastical, not municipal office. In any case, numerous Milanese merchants acquired noble status by other means. In Siena, to take another example, five formalized factions (monti) taken together constituted a “definitely privileged body” that controlled public office. Still, matriculation in each monte was open and not hereditary, and Mario Ascheri concludes that the effective political leadership was both composite in membership and growing in size until 1493.

Closer to home, Treviso’s College of Nobles supplied town councillors and higher officers. But places in the college were elective rather than strictly hereditary; anyway the college’s significance declined after the council was abolished in 1407. Vicenza, too, once possessed a corporation of nobles, the coetus nobilium, but that body dissolved in the thirteenth century; as early as 1213 a “Description of noble families” listed a generous proportion of popolares maiores, popolares de medio, and popolares minores among the nobles. Vicenza has also been held up as an example of precocious aristocratization
since after 1311 seats in its Great Council were restricted to current holders, their heirs, and assigns. Even then, however, the political class was far from closed: only a quarter of families represented in the 1314 council were still active in 1346, and two-thirds of those holding seats in 1337 disappeared from public life within nine years.\footnote{Florence, again, provides a standard by which the experiences of other cities can be measured. Throughout many permutations the municipal constitution remained, on paper, open; elections by lot and the obligatory presence of guildsmen ensured that common folk regularly obtained places at least on lesser magistracies. In consequence Nicolai Rubinstein, charting the ways in which electoral commissions effectively excluded those unacceptable to controlling factions, discerned substantial continuity of families in highest offices and so accepted the notion of a patriciate, but he also noted the constant admission of new families and expressed doubts about the possibility of charting anything more than a de facto and highly permeable leadership. Accepting his overall conclusions but also his reservations regarding membership, many successors avoid typological rigor and use descriptives in the loosest possible sense—oligarchy, aristocracy, patriciate, “cadre of prominent citizens,” “inner circle,” “traditional ruling elite,” “political class,” and the like.\footnote{Prosopography reveals who the privileged few were, but, in the absence of firm principles of demarcation, simple identification may be as far as the issue can be pushed. As was the case in cities as varied as Padua and Lucca,\footnote{formation of a \textit{governo stretto} was effected by collusion rather than by normative exclusion, and was far from absolute. But if principles of patrician membership and separation remained informal and permeability remained constant, the entire notion of a municipal elite dissolves into impression. Historians can hardly impose clarity where none existed. Contemporaries, no less, were unwilling or unable to articulate criteria of rank. Managers of the Quattrocento had a hierarchic view of society, but chose not to draw precise lines. That councillors and officials should be chosen from among the “best and most respectable” citizens (“de melioribus et praestantioribus”), that testimony or a petition to bear arms or the seriousness of a crime should be evaluated according to an individual’s \textit{conditio} or \textit{qualitas}, acknowledged stratification but left determination of the individual’s standing to on-site evaluators such as judges and electors. Those who set the rules, operating within ostensibly open political systems, either did not wish to risk the shocks of imposing formal demarcation or did not find consistent boundaries. Writers of the time shared their reluctance. Several Paduans produced col-}}
lective family chronicles which, while aspiring to trace all the city’s important lineages, declined to indicate criteria for inclusion. Giovanni da Nono set the model early in the Trecento, declaring an intent to trace the “origins of some citizens of Padua, both noble and ignoble.” He preferred the noble, among whom he ranked his own house, but included some descended from notaries, millers, usurers, innkeepers, tailors, and even rustics, paupers, and people of “vile condition.” The bland “some citizens” of his title sidestepped the problem of defining membership in Padua’s elite; copying and imitation of his chronicle left the problem open throughout the Quattrocento and beyond.12

The Vicentine Battista Pagliarini was even more catholic. He found precedent in a simple list of 165 families;13 research in private and civic archives allowed him to expand the number to nearly three hundred and to provide copious historical commentary. He also pinned a more precise, socially descriptive label to his survey: “On the noble citizens of our city.” But Pagliarini was not sure what constituted nobility. Listing patrician families in descending order of importance, he had no problem with the top ranks: high municipal office, great deeds, antiquity of lineage, imperial title, and leadership of the patria were unassailable markers of prominence. Toward the bottom, though, some families were “now descended into agriculture and manual labor” or “of lowest condition.” He did not, on that account, omit suspect lineages from the list.14 Faced with an uncertain lower edge to the local elite, he opted for inclusion rather than risk insulting those whose claims might yet stick.

In the past generation two historians in particular have addressed issues of permeability and closure. In 1978 Philip Jones’ “Legend of the Bourgeoisie” attacked the traditional assimilationist position, which posited composite patriciates of upper merchants and feudal nobles, as well as its Braudelian corollary of the “betrayal of the bourgeoisie,” which held that the later medieval Italian commercial elite broke ranks, abandoned trade for land, intermarried with the ancient nobility, and made common cause with former enemies in a true aristocracy. Jones denied that capitalism ever wrought fundamental changes in Italian society, or that capitalists ever constituted a distinct class or successfully seized power at the head of the medieval popolo. Neatly turning the venerable topos of the “conquest of the contado” on its head, he argued that the later Middle Ages saw the advance of rural and agricultural interests at the expense of trade and finance. The traditional nobility, never completely pushed from power, reaffirmed its an-
cient authority. Like Braudel, Jones attempted to demonstrate Italy's failed transition from feudalism to capitalism and consequent decadence; unlike Braudel, he so downgraded the achievements of merchants that no significant passage into nobility would have been possible.¹⁵

Slightly earlier, and from a different point of view, Marino Berengo denied assimilation in the Veneto. He acknowledged that elsewhere in Italy families of mercantile origins earlier acquired political power and by the Quattro-Cinquecento successfully claimed noble status. In Verona, though, ruling classes uniformly derived from an ancient feudal nobility. A few newly rich families did make it onto councils, but were never amalgamated with great aristocratic houses. By the sixteenth century the old nobility had closed its ranks even more firmly and now ruthlessly resisted the claims of upstarts.¹⁶

For the purposes of the case study, these revisionist models converge. To Jones, the Stoppi and the Arnaldi would have been too weak to hope for advance; to Berengo, they would have stood little chance of vaulting the barriers to aristocracy. Yet both families did rise from obscurity (and, in the case of the Stoppi, from the ranks of recent immigrants) into full membership in their cities' elites. Were they among the handful of lucky families, the exceptions that prove the rule?

A core of powerful families indeed dominated municipal councils in each city in the Veneto at every juncture between 1200 and 1600—but they were not always the same families. As bare chronicles of the early period give way to more saturated lists of officeholders, it is evident that turnover was both consistent and massive. A few grand dynasties recur, but they were always flanked by newcomers. The surplus nobility of neighboring cities could only partially supply recruits; the rest came from the upper ranks of commoners. Positing continuity of elites is not the same as positing continuity within elites.

Biology alone required permeability and forestalled closure of patriciates. E. A. Wrigley once estimated that in a "stationary preindustrial society" 20 percent of couples would have no surviving children, and 20 percent be survived only by daughters, such that male-descent lineages would invariably suffer a 40 percent extinction rate.¹⁷ Empirical study confirms his expectations. Recurrent epidemic also eliminated many families. Low numbers of surviving children—in Florence, well below the replacement rate—doomed others and forced social mobility. Using good data from the Lyonnaise, Lorcin calculated that, of all families mentioned before 1340, fewer than 20 percent
survived into the late fifteenth century. The situation in the Veneto could not have been much different.

The patrimonial strategies of the upper ranks made them especially vulnerable to extinction and/or social climbing. Limiting marriage of sons worked against survival; it will be recalled that only 60 percent of Venetian patrician males married. The Arnaldi, after two experiments of this sort, barely survived the fifteenth century. The nobility of Lyon put 31 percent of daughters into convents but only 23 percent of sons, and the resulting shortage of girls in the aristocratic marriage pool forced many young men to marry down. If patricians in the Veneto at all resembled their Florentine counterparts—who sent many more daughters than sons into religion—the situation would have been much the same.

Patricians were also more susceptible than commoners to political upheavals. Ezzelino da Romano decimated elites in all Veneto cities in the first half of the Dugento. When Vicentine Ghibellines several times failed to throw off Paduan lordship later in the century, many suffered death or exile. The della Scala of Verona broke Guelph partisans in Vicenza and Padua, and the Visconti in turn excluded Scaligeri and Carrarese partisans. Mighty Paduans such as the Dalesmanini, Scrovegni, and Bibi fell to Carrarese persecution. Debt, often imposed for political vengeance, forced many Paduans of note to cede their lands and leave the public arena during the Trecento. Repression of anti-Venetian revolts in the early Quattrocento removed a further section of Padua’s notables.

Due to a combination of infertility, disease, execution, and exile, seven of ten Vicentine “noble houses” listed in 1259 were no longer on the scene two centuries later. An anonymous chronicle from around 1400 noted that the twelve original comitial families in Vicenza “are all extinct, such that there remains hardly any memory of them.” At the end of the fifteenth century Pagliarini borrowed the phrase as title for his account of family losses, counting over four hundred surnames that had died out within memory of his documents; fewer than three hundred worthy families were extant. Vicenza, with five changes of regime in two centuries, may have suffered unusually severe patrician decimation, but the overall conclusion that “aristocratic extinction rates were often high” seems to hold true for the region generally.

Changes of ruler brought new houses to the fore. Signorial favorites arrived as governors and put down roots; loyal natives from formerly obscure families—the Thiene in Vicenza are a good example—were coopted into signorial administrations and acquired permanent prominence. Further, all
cities encouraged immigration to offset depopulation, and several newcomers arrived with or eventually achieved prominence. One of the themes of Pagliarini’s prosopographical study, in fact, was the degree to which much of Vicenza’s upper crust was relatively recent. A half century of Paduan domination brought in the Conti, Ovetari, Brusomini, Ferreti, Litolfi, Polcastri, and the chronicler’s own family. The Nogarola, Bevilaqua, Sarego, Cavalli, Borselli, and Fracanzani arrived during the next half century, under Veronese control. Visconti rule introduced the Anguissola, Cavalcabo, Monza, Nievo, Muzani, Soardi, and Roma. Reggio Emilia contributed the Angiolelli, Ghellini, Gislardi, Sesso, and Macchiavelli; Tuscany, the Pigafetta, Baldanucci, della Zoga, Provinciali, and Saraceni; the Romagna, the Faella, Zuffatti, Scarrioti, Cerrati, and Tosò.25

The municipal elite of 1400 was very different in membership from its predecessors a century or two before. Even then, although mortality crises abated and Venetian rulers declined political persecution, wholesale change in the Vicentine patriciate did not cease. Infertility, incapacity, and misfiring marital strategies continued to take a toll. Several cases of Quattrocento mobility into the patriciate cast further doubt on extreme assertions of a “closed aristocratic caste.” The Arnaldi made it into the top ranks, as did their Ferramosca kinsmen, the Braschi, the Volpi, and the newly arrived Trento. Some families that came to the city in previous centuries but were not then prominent also rose into the oligarchy—the Nievo, Pigafetta, Macchiavelli, Zugliano, and Monza come to mind. Strict closure would have led to eventual class suicide, and patricians were too smart and too protective of long-term interests to adopt such a policy.

Political Elites

The Arnaldi had held seats on Vicenza’s Great Council in the Trecento,26 but that fact alone means little. Many councillors were not exalted—a majority lacked family names, and several exercised humble occupations—and, as seen above, turnover was massive even in the quarter century between extant council lists. The Arnaldi were not then prominent, as they had not been previously: chronicles by Maurisio, Smereglo, Ferreto, Conforto da Costozza, and Antonio Godi, which detailed the city’s public life in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, do not mention them.

The situation changed dramatically during the Quattrocento. In 1426, eighteen-year-old Andrea Arnaldi succeeded his late maternal grandfather Antonio Zugliano on the council. Just shy of his twentieth birthday, he was
elected notary to Vicenza's College of Notaries, and quickly rose to serve as syndic, councillor, and gastaldis of the college. In 1439 he was elected to manage the commune's church of San Vincenzo, and served at least two more terms in the following decade. A year before his death, Andrea won election to the elite Council of One Hundred. In 1482 nephew Gaspare II served as communal deputy, the chief magistracy in the municipal hierarchy. He and kinsmen may have held other posts: scanty public archives provide no lists of officeholders for the period. When records become regular (in 1510) the Arnaldi were holding four seats on the Great Council. In the next decades they were territorial vicars, governing small towns in the hinterland. The job must have been uncomfortable and was certainly badly paid, but it marked acceptance into inner circles and served as threshold to high municipal careers thereafter.

Their experience stands in opposition to a historiographic consensus of a progressive restriction of access to political office throughout the Veneto. In the classic statement of that thesis, Angelo Ventura argued for passage from "broad government" in the communal era to a "rigid aristocratic arrangement" in the early modern period. Trecento signori reversed a previous trend toward "democratic broadening," pushed popular corporations such as guilds from power, promoted smaller and exclusive councils, and denied the mass of citizens a share in government. Venetian dominion, in turn, accelerated "crystallization" of political elites and "reconstitution of hierarchic structures," and stripped the vestigial traces of popular representation of real authority.

Some details of Ventura's interpretation have been challenged. Historians of Verona, for example, deny a Venetian role in the emergence of a political elite: initiative for constriction was purely local, and effective replacement of a Great Council (of five hundred) by a Council of Fifty predated 1405 although it was only formalized in that year. In the dominion as a whole, Venetian governors, in fact, frequently intervened to prevent constriction of municipal structures. Responding to complaints that Vicenza's eight deputies were too powerful, the Republic in 1422 flanked them with a new Council of One Hundred. Nine years later the doge blocked the Vicentine oligarchy's attempt to replace councils of one hundred and forty with a single body of forty councillors. The Senate in 1446 forced an increase in Paduan council membership from sixty to one hundred. In 1455 the Senate ordered enlargement of the Veronese electorate, and in 1461 the Council of Ten ordered its governors in Verona to select twenty members of the local Council of Fifty because many able and loyal citizens had been excluded. Veronese patricians
effected moderation of the former order and revocation of the latter, further indication that the impetus to exclusion came from native forces rather than the capital.  

Still, the Venetian role aside, research confirms Ventura's overall thesis of the constriction of the political base. The Veronese case is particularly clear. Already by the mid-Trecento a Council of Twelve held real power, and the Great Council of Six Hundred was soon moribund. Corporate representatives, once dominant in central magistracies, lost real power and finally, around 1390, were replaced by twelve deputies. Around that latter date the Twelve (actually seventy-two, with six bimonthly panels of twelve members) began to coopt fifty citizens as a zonta, which in 1405 replaced the Great Council. Councillors simply passed from one body to the next in alternate years—in a sampling of electoral lists, some 88 percent to 100 percent of members of the Fifty were drawn from the outgoing Seventy-Two, and 88 percent to 98 percent of the Seventy-Two were outgoing or former members of the Fifty—leading Varanini to acknowledge "the extreme compactness and stability of the ruling class which held administrative power in the city."

The Vicentine case presents variants that are both precocious and (apparently) conservative. Vicentines were involved early in formalizing mechanisms that turned nominally elective office into personal patrimony. Statutes of 1264 specified election of councillors from among the "best and brightest men" of the city; 1311 statutes, followed substantially in 1339 and 1425 revisions, reserved seats in the Great Council to the heirs and assigns of current councillors. Vicenza may have been the first city to perceive office as property, but Padua and Bergamo were not far behind in allowing outgoing councillors to select their successors. Outright assignment made a mockery of the notion of civic councils as assemblies of the most talented and committed citizens. Silvestro Arnaldi, for example, inherited the paternal seat a few weeks shy of his fifth birthday, and his son Andrea II entered the Great Council at the age of seventeen.

The Vicentine constitution was, on paper, backward in continuing to assign a major role to guilds and colleges. The thirteen corporations that provided a Council of Anziani received automatic seats on the Great Council, and the Anziani held a high-sounding charge to assist the podestà, act for the utility of the commune, and preserve civic prerogatives and honor. Still, the Anziani were given no means to enforce that jurisdiction, suggesting a largely symbolic or ceremonial role. Four of the guilds that named Anziani—the Judges, Cloth Merchants, Notaries, and Wool Merchants—were controlled by the wealthy and powerful, and scarcely provided a voice for the popolo.
Further, a member of the College of Judges presided over the Anziani, and assumed their task of registering membership in the Great Council. Anyway the council is not known to have met during the Quattrocento. In 1520 a delegation of popolani complained that guild officials were excluded from meetings of the Great Council.\textsuperscript{35} 

Vicenza was also behind the times in its retention of a Great Council. Verona’s Five Hundred was replaced by the Fifty in 1405, and Treviso’s large council by six provveditori two years later. The Paduan council, once among the largest and most broadly based in the region, shrank to sixty members before the Venetian Senate raised the number to a hundred; a few deputies held day-to-day authority. Brescians reduced their municipal council from five hundred to seventy-two members.\textsuperscript{36} Vicenza’s Great Council, on the other hand, expanded from a nominal five hundred in 1425 to an actual 626 in 1510.

But Vicentines were abreast of the times in vesting executive power in smaller and more exclusive bodies. The eight deputies and the Council of One Hundred drafted legislation, supervised charitable bequests, set taxes, managed communal property, revised statutes, heard petitions for citizenship, elected fiscal officers, and appointed ambassadors. Because the deputies and One Hundred elected the following year’s One Hundred, which in turn elected that year’s pool of forty-eight from which the eight deputies were drawn for two-month terms, important citizens could simply shuttle between elite panels. The Great Council basically ratified laws already approved by higher bodies, and made appointments to lesser offices.\textsuperscript{37}

Shifting power from councils of many hundreds to councils of a few dozen, and eliminating guilds from serious tasks, did not itself close off political access to the middling and lower sorts. Veneto constitutions did not erect explicit barriers between the powerful and the disenfranchised. Local notables could, however, adopt strategies to restrict if not prevent upward mobility. One was to tighten up the rules for acquiring citizenship, to keep rustics and foreigners from gaining that minimum prerequisite for political access. In 1425 petitions for Vicentine citizenship required hearing by eight commissioners; within sixty years the rules changed to require additional approval by rectors, deputies, and five separate sessions of executive councils. Not surprisingly, grants of citizenship dropped off sharply. At the same time, authorities challenged the standing of those who had acquired citizenship but refused to adopt mores appropriate to civil life. The Venetian Senate in 1448 summed up several decades of local laws requiring urban residency with a decree that stripped the citizenship of those who practiced a rural trade or
refused to reside in the city; in 1500 the central government made universal a Paduan ordinance denying citizenship to anyone working the land “with his own hands.”

Nor could those who still managed to acquire citizenship hope for easy political access. Vicentine councils in 1437 passed an ordinance blocking immigrants from holding top positions for thirty years after acquisition of citizenship. Brescians were even more hostile to newcomers: a 1488 law declared that no citizen could hold office unless he or his forebears had paid taxes from 1426 or 1439. Both rules stopped short of outright exclusion, but delay and discrimination served notice that outsiders were not welcome.

Membership in municipal councils closely mirrored cities’ economic elites. By the time estimi become available to measure the wealth of the politically active, the humble had been pushed from councils. Lanaro Sartori concludes that artisans were well represented in Veronese councils in 1406–8, but had largely disappeared by the later 1420s. Once again, elites effected exclusion in an informal manner. The constitution of Verona, for example, continued to insist on proportional representation by the “less,” the “middling,” and the “great,” as defined by tax assessment. The system hardly guaranteed that councils reflect the actual distribution of wealth in the city, however, since the top threshold for minores was set so high (three lire) that some very rich citizens qualified for the seats reserved for the “less.” Varanini’s comparison of the 1407–9 councils with the city’s 1409 assessment reveals that 99.4 percent of councillors had more than one lire of estimo, which put them in the top 29 percent of the population. Around 87 percent of councillors were assessed over two lire, which ranked them in the richest 14 percent of the citizenry. Ventura’s calculations for 1495 councils reveal a similar coincidence of wealth and political standing. Two-thirds of councillors were still drawn from the “middling” and the “great,” with their assessments placing them among the city’s richest 6 percent. Three-quarters of all councillors were estimated over two lire, which ranked them in the wealthiest 9 percent of assessed households. Ventura notes, as well, that less well-off councillors generally came from families whose other households received high assessments: the rich were merely granting positions to needy kin.

The Vicentine counterpart of these elite councils, a Council of One Hundred whose membership is known only from a 1453 list, would appear at face value to be more economically variegated (see appendix, table 7.1). While the two cities had about the same proportion of citizens assessed above two lire (9 percent to 14 percent in Verona, 11.7 percent in Vicenza), the propor-
tion of councillors falling into that category was considerably lower in Vicenza (63 percent) than in Verona (77 percent to 87 percent). But Vicentines were not, in fact, more inclined to permit entry by the middling and poor. Rather, systems of assessment were slightly different. Verona measured the relative wealth of all citizens, while Vicentine assessors assigned estimi until they reached a quota of 2,500 lire; the poorer half of Vicenza's households did not appear on the rolls. So Verona's councillors are measured against the taxing population as a whole, while Vicenza's councillors are measured only against the wealthier half of the population.

In all likelihood, then, Vicentine inner councils were drawn from just as wealthy strata as their Veronese equivalents. The mean assessment of the members of the 1453 Vicentine Council of One Hundred was 4.4 lire, which falls in the 96th percentile of overall assessed wealth; the median was 2.5 lire, which falls in the 91st percentile. By another reckoning, 90 percent of Vicentine councillors ranked in the top quarter of estimated wealth, and half ranked in the top decile. Only 5 percent received the lowest assessment, which was assigned to over half of the taxing population.

Vicenza's Great Council also drew from the city's economic elite. Councillors' mean estimo ranked in the 90th percentile of assessed citizens, and the median estimo in the 82nd percentile. Members of the Great Council, as we would expect, were less wealthy than were those on the more important Council of One Hundred (see appendix, tables 7.1–3). Mean and median assessments of the smaller council were twice those of the greater. Some 10 percent of the Hundred were very wealthy (estimo over lire 10), compared with 3.3 percent of the Great Council. Only 39.6 percent of the larger body were assessed at or above lire 2, compared with 62.9 percent of the Hundred. On the low end, 8.6 percent of the Hundred were rated under one lire, but over a third on the Great Council were. The percentage of the Hundred given the lowest possible assessment (4.9 percent) is under half that of the Great Council (11.3 percent).

A number of little families and virtual unknowns crept into the municipal councils. Some councillors in Vicenza in 1510—the Pietrobelli, dalla Banca, delle Canove, Capasanti, Bussioni, and Mantegna—were so minor that they were not counted in Pagliarini's contemporary list of notables, even though Pagliarini strained hard for inclusion. Percolation into the council was, in fact, a regular event: even as the 1510 list was being prepared, two seats changed hands.

Veneto cities indeed saw consolidation of political classes in the Quattro-
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cento, but there is no need to exaggerate exclusion. The Paduan council, described as the “monopoly of a restricted group of families,” experienced at least one phase of “modest opening” in the mid-Quattrocento. Newcomers had to be admitted simply to keep up numbers, since 41 percent of council families dropped out of public life in the 1372–1446 period. In like measure Varanini argues for the “aristocratization of governing bodies and the institutional consolidation of the ruling class’s predominance” in Verona, but acknowledges that thirty-four of 131 conciliar families in the later Trecento disappeared from the political scene soon after 1405, and offers examples of several families—the Saibante, Miniscalchi, Emilei, Giusti, dal Borgo, and Fregoso—who entered councils over the course of the Quattrocento. The Trivelli, inactive in the Trecento, consistently appeared in councils after 1407, and the immigrant Stoppi joined them after midcentury.

Even within the charmed circle of the patriciate it is possible to point to a broadening of the Veronese political base in the fifteenth century. After 1408 a commission of 24 citizens, which included the 12 deputies, directly elected the councils of Fifty and Seventy-Two. Statutes of 1450 changed the system. Henceforth a similar commission (now composed of the current 12-man muda of the Seventy-Two, 6 members of the Fifty, and 6 others) instead elected a pool of citizens eligible for office; from that pool were drawn the 122 councillors for the following year. Further modification in 1456 allowed all 122 current councillors to determine the body of those eligible for the next year’s council seats. The electing group, that is, was to increase fivefold. This in fact happened: the average yearly number of electors was about 20 in the 1450–56 period, but rose to 93 in 1457 and exceeded 100 after 1481 (see appendix, table 7.4). More significantly, the number of candidates for eligibility scrutinies also rose dramatically, from 225 annually in the 1450–56 period to 311 annually in the 1500–1509 period. Expansion of the pool of candidates reduced chances that any one aspirant would be elected and hence actually secure a seat: 54 percent of candidates were selected as eligible for councils in the mid-Quattrocento, but only 39 percent in the early Cinquecento.

Vote totals indicate a contentious political process, with a growing proportion of candidates rejected in the first scrutiny. After 1457 the rejection rate was so high that a second ballot was usually held to attain a sufficient number of eligibles, and by the early Cinquecento as many as five scrutinies were sometimes needed. Few candidates were elected in the first attempts: the young gained experience in several futile bids before they were deemed ready for inclusion. Even established families did not find election to munici-
pal councils a mere formality. Verità Verità, for example, lost eight elections before joining councils in 1466.

Eligibility scrutinies, then, belie any image of cozy collusion between insiders. Electors looked for qualified individuals, and did not grant blanket favors to preferred families: Antonio di Benedetto Verità failed in every election between 1481 and 1488, while his brother Giacomo passed with huge majorities. Individuals’ vote totals often changed sharply from year to year as their popularity rose and fell. Election one year did not guarantee success the next: Girolamo Fracastoro lost nine times in his apprenticeship, then alternately won, lost, won, lost twice, and finally won eleven times. Memori­alist Bonaventura Bovi won seven elections, then lost four. Many, despite a good last name, never secured election to the pool of eligibles: Giacomo di Michele Verità failed thirteen times in the 1495–1507 period, then apparently gave up the effort. Winners were usually wealthy, but the wealthy were not always winners: Giovanni Poeta Verità, from an offshoot line, received tax assessments averaging twenty lire, which ranked him among the city’s richest citizens, but he failed in seventeen of twenty elections, and in thirty-one scrutinies his sons never won eligibility for councils. Ancient and proud lineages such as the Fracastoro and Verità did not enjoy a higher success rate than did newer and relatively humble houses such as the dal Bovo and Bovi; none of the four families that produced memoirs placed more than two-thirds of their candidates on councils (see appendix, table 7.5).

The thesis of Vicenza’s ”ruling class, now become an aristocracy” through ”rigid caste exclusiveness,” likewise does not hold strictly true. Statutes of 1311, restricting Great Council seats to the heirs and assigns of current councillors, actually cut both ways. The law allowed patricians to keep seats within their families, but also allowed councillors to assign positions to outsiders without subjecting their assigns to the risk of a general council election. The modest Arnaldi joined, thanks to grandfather Antonio Zugliano; so did the Feramosca and immigrants such as the Monza, Trento, Anguis­sola, Soardi, and Cavalcabo.

It is true that in Vicenza, as in Verona and Padua, major offices remained in the hands of long prominent lineages. Varanini’s intuition, that Veronese newcomers might rise to just below the level of the very great, may fairly be extended to its neighbor. But even that inner barrier, between traditional oligarchs and the main body of the patriciate, was far from impermeable. The Arnaldi, Feramosca, and Trento made it through, even if they required a half century of seasoning after joining the Great Council: by 1500 they
were scarcely distinguishable from the da Porto, Trissino, Thiene, Loschi, and Bissari.

Perhaps they made it just in time. By all accounts, the gates slammed shut in the Cinquecento, though the political prosopography of that century is still in infancy and may yet provide some surprises. In Vicenza, for example, councils in 1567 forbade entry to those whose families had not been citizens for a full century, and to those stained by their own or their parents' manual trade. Few outsiders could qualify after that date. Verona's aristocrats, for their part, undertook ruthless persecution of upstarts who claimed seats in councils. 49 But overt political closure was still in the future when the Arnaldi and a few colleagues would begin their rise to the top.

Patriciate into Nobility

At the outset of the fifteenth century the Arnaldi were simple citizens, and at its completion they were nobles—at least, that is what the redactors of notarial documents perceived. They provided aristocratic title rarely in the 1430s, commonly in the 1460s, and almost unanimously in the 1490s (see appendix, table 7.6). Still, Arnaldi status changed very slowly (over eighty years and two full generations). Documentation at best provides incidents that pushed the family along the path: acquisition of a council seat in 1426, investiture with an episcopal fief in 1452, accumulation of a great fortune at least by 1453, election to high civic office in 1453 and the highest office by 1482, retirement from the active notariate and retail trade. No definite moment of ennoblement, no single threshold, moved the family from cives to nobiles vires. The long passage from commoner to aristocrat status suggests that the Arnaldi and their notaries held no one standard for nobility.

The stakes were high: nobility offered the one means by which a loosely defined patriciate could obtain status recognition, indelible superiority, legitimation of prestige, and distinction from the unprivileged. In practice, however, definitions and criteria of nobility were nearly as imprecise as those of the patriciate itself. Theory did not offer much certainty—or, rather, different theories supported and denigrated a variety of claims. Taken as a whole, these can be grouped into a rough hierarchy. As we move down the scale, claims were weaker and denials more fierce—but no qualification could be dismissed altogether.

Counts palatine and imperial knights held the only unimpeachable claim to nobility. Jurists said so, following Bartolus: "Nobility is a quality conferred by princely authority, by which an individual is shown to rank above hon-
est plebeans.” Indeed, said Bartolus and his followers, “if a man lives for a thousand years filled with all virtues and the prince loves him greatly, he still remains plebean until there is conferred upon him some rank or nobility by which he is distinguished from plebeans.”

Doubtless society could have functioned perfectly well without counts’ vestigial imperial jurisdiction (the capacity to create notaries and legitimate bastards) and the emperor himself held no real authority in Italy. But would-be nobles needed an unambiguous seal on their standing and so, during the half dozen imperial passages of the Quattrocento, they fawned over the emperor in hopes of obtaining safe title. They flattered him outrageously as “head of all the lands of the globe, chief of all human affairs,” and the “sole light of the world,” and they hoped that he would still unite Christendom and conquer the enemies of the faith. The patrician-led communes of Verona and Vicenza greeted emperors with flags, festoons, baldachins, musicians, speeches, and parades, and even Venetians, despite their professed immunity from imperial authority, sponsored lavish ceremonies of welcome; Andrea Arnaldi admired one such magnum gaudium in 1452. An ill-paid professor might sneer at a figure like Frederick III, noting that “writers have made little mention of him, since he has left little worth remembering,” but patricians knew that the emperor had important symbolic capital to distribute. Fortunate in securing recognition (or reconfirmation) were the Nogarola, Campagna, Lavagnoli, Cavalli, Spolverini, Malaspina, dalla Riva, Giusti, Guagnini, Pellegrini, Salerno, Bevilaqua, dal Verme, Montanari, Cipriani, and da Faenza in Verona, and the Ragona, Pagello, Manelmi, Thiene, da Porto, Valmarana, Loschi, Cerrati, Serego, Chiericati, Poiana, Garzatori, Trissino, and Sesso in Vicenza.

Many patricians, unable to vaunt an imperial privilege, looked farther down the hierarchy of qualifications and found confirmation of their status in knighthood. Here would-be aristocrats could exploit ambiguous terminology. Eques was a clear enough title, signifying imperial concession. A companion term, miles, was far from synonymous and far from straightforward. Milites aureati were also imperial grantees and hence unquestionably noble, but simple milites owed their title to purely local usage. Communes had long claimed the right to grant knighthood, and though the shift to mercenary forces made citizen cavalry obsolete the practice continued as a means of bestowing civic reward.

Were all knights equally noble? Emilio Cristiani finds no practical difference between imperial/feudal milites and communal milites in Pisa, as these “pretty indeterminate categories” first blurred and then converged. Amelio
Tagliaferri observes that the personal descriptive *miles* disappeared from Veronese tax rolls because all *milites* passed into the rank of true nobles and no longer required qualification by title.\(^5\) Contemporaries, though, refused to allow amalgamation. As early as the twelfth century Otto of Freising scorned communal knights as being of inferior condition, even practitioners of manual trades. The stories of Boccaccio, Sacchetti, and others made the figure of the fat merchant with borrowed sword and ill-fitting armor, sitting unsteadily on a scrawny horse, a favorite target for ridicule. Satirists had good material to work with: Florentine knights of the Trecento included a four-year-old boy, a dying man, and a corpse, and the base Ciompi in one day created seventy-seven knights, including a spicer, grain dealers, a carder, a wineseller, and a baker.\(^5\)\(^6\)

Lawyers put disregard for the communal knighthood on a systematic footing. They could not here rely on Bartolus, who endorsed the principle that communes could grant office or rank (*dignitas*), which itself conferred nobility, but then left the issue of whether the *militia* so qualified to local usage.\(^5\)\(^7\) Left to their own devices, jurists offered a strict definition: a true *miles* was willing to risk death to defend the fatherland. On that basis, said Padua’s Michele Savonarola, those who wore the insignia of knighthood, without any martial skills, did not merit the title. Verona’s Cristofaro Lanfranchini went further, blasting those descended from “really vile parents” who girded themselves with swords, kept horses and servants and hunting birds, and then claimed nobility without exercise of arms;\(^5\)\(^8\) “our knights are dedicated more to commerce or agriculture or private business. They stand daily in the squares and shops and practice quite vile occupations, and there are many who do not know how to put on armor.” Unless they desisted from trade or cultivation, and gave themselves over to arms, they should not enjoy the privileges of the *militia*. Anyway, declared Lanfranchini and Ludovico Bolognini, the communal knighthood was an office, not a rank, and implied no nobility.\(^5\)\(^9\) Verona’s Bartolomeo Cipolla, more irenic, simply omitted knighthood from his list of the twenty-six possible qualifications for nobility. Furthermore, communal knighthood, unlike its feudal/military cousin, did not confer indefinitely transmissible title. When rank derived from an individual’s appointment or election to office, said Bartolus, that rank lapsed with his great-grandson. He left a loophole, admitting that the nobility of office indeed passed to descendants by custom “in some parts of Italy.” His successors were not so generous, and argued for a general disqualification.\(^6\)\(^0\)

Aspiring aristocrats might find support in a third source of nobility—communal office. Looking to Roman usage, Bartolus had sanctioned the notion
that participation in councils or high office might automatically confer rank (*dignitas*), which itself ennobled. Cipolla suggested that those with high office in the *res publica*, or those born of an ancient lineage whose ancestors had held high office, could licitly claim nobility.\(^{61}\) Councillors, for their part, seized upon Bartolus's oblique connection of Roman titles to nobility and began to style themselves *clarissimi* (for consuls), *spectabiles, illustres*, or *egregii* (for deputies and ambassadors), and *providi* or *prudentes vires* (for lesser offices).

There were, however, flaws to the claims of a conciliar or officeholding elite. Roman titles may have resonated powerfully, but they were self-proclaimed and honorific, not grounded in legal distinctions. More seriously, the issue of inheritance of title posed a problem for those who saw office as a springboard to perpetual aristocracy, since Bartolus's statement that the nobility of a *dignitas* could not be transmitted beyond the great-grandson still stood. Some of his other comments, however, offered comfort. He spoke, for example, of “a boy born of a noble, who immediately is noble” even without himself holding office, and here too custom “in some parts of Italy” had admitted “all descendants” to nobility. A century later Cipolla admitted the heritability of ancestral rank without qualifications: five of his twenty-six standards of nobility hinged upon descent from those with high office, and he did not mention lapse of title.\(^{62}\)

Still, those inactive or unsuccessful in municipal politics could not borrow their forebears’ prestige indefinitely, and they could not recycle bygone titles without some accomplishment of their own. Furthermore, it was all very well to claim nobility for councillors in cities like Verona, which elected only a hundred or so in any given year. Admitting the principle for the Great Council of Vicenza, though, raised the possibility of a seriously diluted nobility, because numbers were great (over six hundred members) and because the right of alienation allowed newcomers easy access. Battista Pagliarini, for one, doubted an intrinsic correlation of the political class and aristocracy. Of the 191 families on the council in 1510, only 156 (82 percent) appeared in his list of noble houses. On the other side of the coin, he listed 271 noble families, but only 58 percent of them held council seats. Acknowledging these disabilities, patriciates monopolizing offices and councils did not go so far as to put Bartolus's principle into law: only in the Cinquecento did commentators explicitly connect a council seat and nobility.\(^{63}\)

A fourth source of nobility might be professional knowledge. Lawyers, with vested professional interest, seized eagerly upon the Roman law tag that “knowledge ennobles a man” ("*scientia nobilitet hominem*”) because it conferred a high sort of *virtus*. The principle could apply to physicians and, per-
haps, to those trained in letters: when Verona’s Spinetta Malaspina established a hospital for “poor nobles” in 1372, he extended eligibility to those qualified by any scientia. Jurists, however, reserved special standing for their own sort of knowledge. They also repeated Bartolus’s conclusion that a law professor reading for twenty years was automatically ranked as a count. Nor were lawyers hurt by the bruising side debates on which type of nobility was to be preferred—lawyers versus physicians, doctors versus knights—simply because lawyers did most of the writing and did not give their opponents much of a hearing.

The legal profession offered practical advantage to would-be nobles. It was open to those with sufficient funds and talent to obtain professional education; hence upwardly mobile families such as Verona’s Pindemonte and Verità and Vicenza’s Arnaldi, Feramosca, and Repeta sent children to university. Still, the status value of scientia had a drawback for the lineage as a whole: the lawyer’s nobility was personal and could not pass to offspring who did not enter the profession. As a practical disadvantage, the Vicentine college accepted, on average, fewer than two new members annually.

Notaries, too, had specialized knowledge and sought to parlay their scientia into nobility. The Trevisan college staked that claim as early as 1395. Its counterpart in Vicenza forbade admission of those whose fathers practiced manual or “barbarian” trades, lest the honor and nobilitas of the profession be stained by those unfit “in nobility and learning.” Verona’s college recalled that the notariate had always been sought by the most noble citizens. They faced an uphill battle, however. Bartolus had flatly declared that “the notariate is not a rank” and thus nobility was not annexed to it. “The work of writers,” sneered Ludovico Bolognini, “is a really vile thing.” No citizen could fail to notice notaries such as Vicenza’s Scroffa, who tramped from village to village recording miserable transactions. If a college accepted infants for membership, as it did for several Arnaldi, how seriously could anyone take its members’ claims to nobilitas scientiae? The Arnaldi, declining a risky claim, retired from the notariate before they consistently claimed nobility.

Another qualification for nobility was simple wealth. As Pagliarini noted of the Fiocardi family, “Although earlier they were simple citizens, now they are numbered among nobles because of the enormous wealth which they possess.” He was right about their riches—Fiocardi households ranked second in the city in the 1453 and 1477 estimi—but his definition of wealth as sole criterion for nobility would have appalled commentators. Dante in the Convivio rejected outright the emperor Frederick II’s assertion (from Aristotle’s
Politics) that wealth plus ancient good habits (boni antiqui mores) conferred nobility. Some followers added the neo-stoic notion that poverty might be a positive factor, freeing the individual from material distraction and eliminating the stain of “sordid earnings.” Bartolus was inclined to agree. He repeated the comment from Aristotle’s Ethics that wealth contributed to happiness and the cultivation of magnanimity, which was a virtue; hence wealth contributed to nobility itself. But he also endorsed Dante’s position that wealth was at best a “remote cause” of nobility. Quattrocento humanists and jurists, at best, assigned wealth a very low priority in determination of nobility: material resources could assist virtue by promoting otium for study, or contribution to the patria, or liberality and charity, but had only accessory value and by themselves had no standing.

Even if wealth might contribute to nobility, it had to be of the right sort. Baldus denied nobility to those living by “manual trades,” Bartolus denied rank to those trading in artes vilissimas, and both were quoted with approval. To Lanfranchini, commerce, agriculture, and “vile arts” disqualified individuals for knighthood. Humanists respected the accessory value of inherited wealth, but Poggio drew upon Cicero’s polemic against the “sordid gain” and cupidity of merchants to denigrate those who themselves acquired riches. Acting on widespread prejudice, Verona’s College of Notaries created a special and privileged category for those whose fathers had not practiced a trade. The Vicentine college poured scorn on the ignobility of notaries imbued with “bad ways” from their fathers’ “mechanical and abject arts and barbarian trades,” and sought to purge rusticos et villes from its ranks. Treviso’s College of Nobles excluded those whose father or uncle was a countryman or had exercised a mechanical trade. Bartolus’s more generous interpretation, that the stain of rusticitas could be purged within a generation or two, and that a rustic’s children or grandchildren could indeed be counted noble “as we see daily,” was studiously ignored.

The problem was that nearly all patricians had to work for a living. Equal inheritance by males fragmented family patrimonies, dowries and taxes constantly drained liquidity, and land rents were insufficient to keep up appearances. Few, however, could rely on the two professions that were, by common consent, entirely honorable: arms and the law. Most Veneto patricians/nobles were active in trade. By itself this did not disqualify someone from the nobility: investment in a holding company or management of a wholesale operation was respectable enough. But in the Veneto, lacking great trading companies, the line between detached management and active man-
agement, or between wholesale and retail, was difficult to draw. Jurists, otherwise scrupulous in definitions, chose not to address the problem of which occupation was vile and which was not.

On the everyday level, enrollment in a guild whose trade might or might not be manual did not necessarily disqualify nobility: four of the early Verità entered the Veronese goldsmiths' guild, with no damage to the lineage. Nor did the earlier Arnaldi and Feramosca cease to be styled nobiles or egregios vires even when standing in their cloth shops. Their claims to nobility were, however, vulnerable as long as their hands were close to merchandise. The second generation, quicker to claim nobility and thus more sensitive to potential criticism, found it safer to retire to trade that could be maintained by contracts alone. Silvestro Arnaldi kept up the wholesale end of the business, and usury, but he gave up the shop and the draper's trade. Several documents find him in other people's shops, or in the tavern of the Ox, or in the open air: he deemed it better to suffer muddy boots and boorish company than be perceived as a shopkeeper.

A sixth criterion for nobility, descent and antiquity of lineage, derived from Aristotle's perception of moral development. Noble actions repeatedly performed became habit, then second nature; nature could be transmitted to offspring; and performance of good actions across several generations could reinforce or consolidate that nature. Given Aristotle's stature it is not surprising that few authors dismissed the position altogether, but none save the Venetian aristocrat Francesco Barbaro accepted it without reservation. For Dante, in the Convivio, personal nobility or virtù could not be transmissible, rendering issues of descent and antiquity moot. Elsewhere, in the Monarchia, he distinguished between individually achieved nobility (nobilitas proprium), which he took from Juvenal, and nobility derived from ancestors (nobilitas maiorum), which echoed Aristotle; he preferred the former but did not reject the latter. The other great authority, Bartolus, was also ambivalent. His insistence that nobility had to be conferred by princely authority demanded a personal nobility, and his insistence that nobility derived from descent (ex progenie) lapsed with the great-grandson denied long-term heritability, but elsewhere he validated local custom that permitted the nobility of "all descendants."

In the Quattrocento, the sic et contra format of humanist dialogues and jurists' treatises allowed writers to present both ethical/personal and hereditary/lineage qualifications without absolutely endorsing either. Those who aspired to synthesis could fall back on Baldus, who accepted nobility through ancestry when combined with personal virtus, and on Bartolus, who endorsed
those who claimed their parents' nobility as long as they themselves lived in a *virtuosus* manner: "When a noble son is born of noble parents and lives virtuously, he shall be deemed noble according to all [authorities]; but when there is born a reprobate son who has bad ways, thereby he is infamous and so loses nobility." This allowed hereditary nobility, which would support the lineage, but not simple nobility of blood, which turned nobility into a mere byproduct of reproduction. It was tidy, sensible, and useful. Still, even Bartolus's *via media* left practical issues unresolved. What qualified ancestors as sufficiently great to pass on nobility, how long did it take to establish *antiquitas*, and how eminent did descendants have to be? Surely the ancestral "virtue, fame, glory, power, high offices, wealth, and clientage" required by Salutati set too high a standard, and surely the decade or two proposed by Bartolus was insufficient.

For would-be aristocrats such as the Arnaldi, whose archive stretched back only to 1300 and whose forebears were at best notaries, argument from ancestry provided a thin claim only. For most of Vicenza's notables, Battista Pagliarini, too, had little to offer. Sometimes he found a document or fable that located a great deed or an ancestor two or three centuries past, but more commonly he found scant backing for eminence and long descent. The Rusticelli, to take a typical example, were "ancient and noble citizens," but Pagliarini found only three names from the mid-Trecento. If the Revesi "shone with antiquity and noble blood, and produced men of wealth and friendships and noble marriages," Pagliarini offered only a single physician of 1370 as proof. He tried hard—he gave the Arnaldi several ancestors who were not, in fact, part of the lineage—but his prosopography could not stand up to cursory scrutiny. In most cases he simply gave up the attempt, styling a family *antiqua* without dates and *nobilis* without explanation.

For many, like the Arnaldi, who possessed several claims to noble status but found no firm ground in any, episcopal investiture provided a qualification of last resort. By ancient tradition, backed by centuries of diplomas (some forged), the bishop of Vicenza was duke, count, and marquess; his vassals were by definition noble.

On 17 September 1452, Andrea and Tommaso Arnaldi entered the bishop's audience hall and, on bended knee, declared readiness to swear fidelity and vassalage to the bishop. His lieutenant agreed to the request and invested them with a golden ring; they gave their oath. In return they were invested with a fief once held by Giovanni Volpe. The brothers then repeated the procedure, and received investiture of another fief once held by Antonio Cozzi. The fiefs were insubstantial—the right to collect tithes in the hamlets of Nu-
voloedo and Porcileto, and the right to put overseers in Porcileto—but they mattered less than infeudation itself. The Arnaldi held the title in sufficient regard to seek reinvestiture with every change of generation.83 Their Veronese counterparts, for whom tithes were significant portions of patrimonies, regarded episcopal fiefs as important enough to warrant furious opposition to Bishop Ermalao Barbaro's efforts to regain control over them.84

The title was safer than most. Seldom mentioned in polemics or treatises, episcopal investiture was not burdened with theoretical disqualifications. Praxis overrode the few that remained. Sticklers such as Baldus had said that those who did not actually rule counties and marquisates should not be called counts and marquesses.85 Common opinion, however, still regarded the bishop of Vicenza as duke, count, and marquess: chroniclers recalled that fact, the commune sponsored tableaux vivantes to impress it upon the citizenry,86 and documents of investiture mentioned it incessantly. Baldus had said that "Nobility is not born in the blinking of an eye. Only an ancient fief makes for nobility, not a new one,"87 but if the Arnaldi's investiture was recent, their fiefs were ancient. And it mattered little that the ceremony fell short of strict standards for establishing a feudal relationship, since the Arnaldi never performed the act of homage: in the words of fellow citizen Daniele dall'Aqua, fidelitas was the same as homage.88

Even then, in 1452, the Arnaldi were not consistently styled nobiles. No single event made them noble. Over the years they stockpiled potential qualifications, adding claim to claim, until the cumulative power of these requisites reached critical mass. Nobility itself was too fluid to permit any clearer understanding.

Noble Is as Noble Does

The single point of consensus in the debate over nobility was the ultimate sanction of public opinion (fama). A noble was one generally deemed noble. This was inherent in the humanist argument for virtù as primary qualification: in the absence of a moral tribunal, only public acknowledgment of a noble soul sealed nobility. The figure of Lorenzo de' Medici, in Poggio's dialogue, appealed to "what the crowd holds, which has the greatest authority in matters of this sort." Cristoforo Landino agreed.89 Bartolus, who otherwise insisted on definite concession by a superior authority, admitted that an individual could be deemed noble simply because "he is called or considered noble." The quality of nobility that makes a person distinct from plebeians, he
noted, should be understood “according to our common understanding” or “according to our customs,” and always required public acceptance.90

The crowd might accept something other than formal title. If a noble had to act nobly, the opposite equation might hold true: sustained noble manners could lead to public acknowledgment of nobility. Bartolus thought so: a generation or two of worthy living could purge the stain of rusticitas. Giovanni Conversini listed mores among the primary qualifications for nobility. Cristoforo Lanfranchini, complaining of wool merchants who bought the trappings of knighthood and unworthily claimed its status, tacitly admitted that many successfully did so. So did later aristocrats in Verona, blasting those who simply assumed honorific titles and waited a few years until pretended eminence was generally accepted.91

Patriciates required networks of clients, patrons, and allies. Venetian nobles plotted in and out of councils, buying and trading votes and forming factions that resisted attempts to curb electioneering. On the neighborhood level, they used gifts and bequests to build relationships that translated into favors, protection, or support. Public office and entry of underage sons to the Great Council were among the prizes; so were the judicial concessions (gratiae) needed to get the errant out of hot water.92 Florentine moralists stressed the necessity of choosing and keeping friends; ricordanze exhaustively recorded co-parentage and marriage alliances, and bitterly recalled the penalties—harsh tax assessments and sentences of exile—which resulted when enemies gained power. Florentine archives are filled with letters of recommendation and supplication, memoirs tracing friendships, betrayals, and vendettas, and treatises extolling amicitia.93

Patricians in the Veneto certainly knew the mechanisms and the imperatives for utilitarian exchanges. The early Arnaldi adopted a strategy of residential and occupational endogamy, coupled with commensurate dowries, to consolidate horizontal alliances. Later, more ambitious generations preferred neighborhood exogamy and asymmetrical dowries to secure linkages with greater families. Throughout, the family carefully chose co-parents to establish both horizontal and vertical connections that complemented, but did not duplicate, those made by marriage. They cultivated affines, who proved especially useful as mediators, executors, and witnesses. For all families, long-term tolerance of tenant debt reflects strategies for building networks of supporters in the countryside. Veronese patricians had rural employees listed in urban tax rolls—whereby they would pay lower taxes—which had the same effect.
Turbulent municipal politics equally demanded strong friendships. If Venetian magistrates now held supreme authority, that fact only heightened competition for the routine administrative posts that remained to natives. In the urban communes of Vicenza and Padua, if we give credence to official complaints, favoritism and personal influence were all-determining. Councillors stuffed ballot boxes to elect friends and hid enemies' ballots. Corrupt voting for rural vicars put the names of "ignoble and unsuitable" citizens into electoral purses and excluded those "of good condition and reputation."94 Judges and high-ranking fiscal magistrates were regularly accused of extortion and misuse of office; Vicenza's deputies complained of the "insolence" of officials who ignored their orders. Litigants in civil suits adopted the "bad and enormously corrupt custom" of enlisting the services of powerful citizens "through money, friendship or kinship" to intimidate judges. The mighty Jacopo Muzani beat up inferiors yet went scot-free because friends and relatives sat on criminal courts. To combat what he perceived as endemic factionalism, the Vicentine humanist Ognibene da Lonigo wrote a lengthy and sad plea for "the unity and concord of citizens."95 In Verona, increasingly contentious eligibility scrutinies likewise required patricians to cultivate friends, protectors, and dependents, lest they suffer political oblivion.

It might be said, and not just facetiously, that the Arnaldi finally arrived at the pinnacle of Vicentine society when they started fighting with the mighty Bissari family. When they were simple citizens, and even when documents began to call them nobles with some regularity, the Arnaldi had resolved disputes in a peaceful manner: they arbitrated conflicts with top-ranking patricians Biagio Angioletti or Tebaldo Loschi, and sought recourse against patrician debtors in civic tribunals.96 In the summer of 1502, however, Silvestro Arnaldi and his son Andrea brawled with the noble Francesco Bissari and his two sons, with wounds inflicted on both sides. At the podesta's exhortation the Arnaldi and Bissari made formal peace, but soon drew arms once more. Again the podesta stepped in, and the five shook hands and kissed, swore never to offend each other or the other's servants and followers, and promised hefty payments—a thousand ducats for verbal insults and three thousand for injurious deeds—for future infractions. This peace was to be "perpetual, pure, simple, sincere and irrevocable," but apparently broke down within two years: each side petitioned the Venetian Council of Ten for ratification of the earlier truce.97

If the Arnaldi felt they had to prove themselves by taking on a top clan, they chose a fine opponent. The Bissari had been prominent for centuries,
and had proven their mettle in a series of plots and feuds. In the Quattrocento the family produced the distinguished jurist-orator Matteo Bissari, and retained the ancient privilege of leading the bishop's horse in processions. The family was large and rich, with at least ten households and eight seats on the city's Great Council; Francesco Bissari's estimo ranked him among the wealthiest 4 percent of city households. Pagliarini listed the Bissari second in the hierarchy of Vicentine nobility. By any standard the Bissari were old blood and far more important than the Arnaldi, but Silvestro and Andrea fought them to a draw.

Fighting was serious business for the upper ranks. It would be impossible to prove that they were more violent than other groups, but they had long enjoyed that image. A "reputation for violence, excessive power put into the service of particular interests and not the common good" had stimulated antimagnate laws in the later thirteenth century. Trecento Florentine chronicles associated organized violence with the grandi, humanists associated wealth with contempt for law, and the figure of the noble predator became a literary commonplace. A perceived patrician predilection for aggression, vendetta, hot temper, arrogance, and bloodshed was not, of course, a product of mere thuggery. Honor was a primary qualification for nobility, fully as strong as any title conferred by an external authority, and the imperative of personal and family honor had to override civic norms for pacification. "Everyone in the house must take up arms in the attack," said Baldus, "for an injury to one discolors the whole house."

In the Quattrocento, the great houses of the Veneto fought without pause. In Verona, Andrea d'Arco murdered Enrico Dal Brolo in 1464–65; a decade later Francesco Bollani and Leonardo Malaspina were more creative, hiring a leading artist to paint obscene images and figures of cuckolds on the walls of Cristofaro Sagramoso's house. About the same time the Venetian Senate proceeded against members of the Maffei, da Vico, Brenzone, and Lazise families, who gathered their "servants and associates" to kill Bartolomeo Verari. At the end of the century the Council of Ten sent an envoy to investigate and prosecute "many things which disturb the peace of our state," particularly the misdeeds of Pietro Salerno. Padua's Camposampiero and Dotti gathered private armies for ambush and slaughter, which did not end when Antonio Dotti was cut down by his own sons. In Friuli, the long conflict between the Savorgnan and della Torre drew toward ghastly climax in civil war after 1509.

Silvestro Arnaldi, consciously or not, participated in a long Vicentine tradition of patrician feuding. Upper-class blood flowed without cease: Antonio
Angiolelli was cut down by Cristofano Vivaro and Cristoforo Nievo in 1414; Nicolo Braschi was killed by unknowns in the main square in the 1430s. The saintly Lorenzo Giustianiani refused the bishopric of Vicenza in 1433, in part because of the “daily disputes of the noble and powerful” in the city. The situation failed to improve: a sampling of the documentation shows Marco Nievo struck down by Andrea Pagello in 1460; Cristoforo Barbarano wounded by Leonello Nievo in 1473; Francesco Pagello accused of assaulting the podestà’s vicar, and various Merzari accused of killing Bernardino da Porto two decades later; Giovanni Loschi murdered by Leonardo Trissino, Girolamo Traversi killed by unknowns, and Leonardo Fabri victim to Antonio Nicolo Loschi, all in 1494; Gregorio Nievo wounded by Gianpiero Barbarano in 1503; and Marco Gallo attacked by Francesco Volpe the next year. Giacomo Trento barely escaped the army of his son-in-law Leonardo Trissino in 1502; three months later he was warned not to pursue his own quarrel with Sebastiano Pagello; two years after that someone threw a spear from the window of his house in an attempt to kill Ludovico Aimerico.103

These perpetrators and victims were all born into the great families of the city. While the cases are known because miscreants were prosecuted, either penalties were not severe or pardons and commutations of sentences were easily obtained. Exile proved nearly impossible to enforce: in 1494 Giacomo Poiana, banished from the Venetian dominion, operated in an “audacious and factious manner” from his Vicentine stronghold.104 Guilty parties suffered no lasting disabilities. They certainly did not suffer shame and the obloquy of fellow citizens: Leonardo Malaspina went on to high office in Verona, Giacomo Trento served as communal deputy and ambassador in the midst of his quarrels, and Jacopo Muzani entered Pagliarini’s pantheon of worthies despite his depredations.

Venetian magistrates did what they could, taking the worst offenses into the courts of the capital, ordering potentially factious patricians to desist, and arranging peace among families which, like the Arnaldi and Bissari, agreed to reconciliation. They passed law after law against bearing arms, and tinkered constantly with the law of exile. But local governors had sorely limited resources; one of their only remedies, in fact, was to lift the ban of an exile who returned to kill another outlaw, which only compounded cycles of violence. Moreover, central magistracies frequently overruled outright intervention in the interests of preserving subjects’ judicial autonomies, which allowed local private influence to mitigate penalties, and they undercut their own efforts by licensing patricians to bear arms.105 Despite good intentions, Venetians only put a damper on intrapatriciate violence and rarely prevented
the first outbreak of any one conflict. The habit of fighting was too deeply ingrained, too necessary to maintenance of honor, and too obvious a means of self-assertion.

Two Arnaldi palaces of the Quattrocento are extant. The first has been dated to around 1440; in that year, Andrea Arnaldi undertook major construction (or reconstruction), making payment for floor planking, an inlaid chest, a small wardrobe, a wooden grate, and a staircase. The facade is well preserved, with a portal and two lines of windows framed in the elaborate tracery of the Venetian Gothic style. The palace is not as large and grand as those of longtime nobles such as the Schio, Valmarana, and Thiene, but still is substantial, freestanding, and strongly individualized compared to the anonymous structures of ordinary citizens. As did older and greater clans, the Arnaldi broke with local tradition and did not provide an external arcade to shelter shops or passers-by: the sheer facade, with barred ground-floor windows and massive portal, kept the public well removed. While the Arnaldi drew up wills and (very occasionally) contracts within the palace, they never used it to store merchandise or meet customers, and reserved domestic space for family and intimates. The palace seems well suited to the first Arnaldi generation, assertive and slightly aloof but far from arrogant.

The next generation found the dwelling inadequate. We can only surmise the cause of their dissatisfaction. The Gothic passed out of fashion, and Arnaldi now inclined to call themselves noble may have wished to declare refinement through new architectural styles. They may have demanded more personal space and privacy than had their fathers and mothers: later patrician palaces in Vicenza were invariably larger than their antecedents. Whatever the reason, at some point in the 1476–89 period Gaspare II and Girolamo hired Lorenzo da Bologna to build a new palace. Lorenzo was the leading architect in the city, “engineer” of the cathedral and the new shrine on Monte Berico, and designer of important family burial chapels, the apse of the Santa Corona, and the new church of S. Rocco. He also erected palaces for great families such as the Valmarana, da Porto, and Thiene. Simply putting him on the job set the Arnaldi in the top ranks of patrons. His project for the Arnaldi did not completely reject its Gothic predecessor: the two shared a common wall, and Lorenzo’s facade offered a mirror image of window and door placements. The rooms of the new palace, however, were considerably higher and the windows more massive than those of the original. Later Arnaldi asked for continuity with the dwelling of their ancestors, but also for a grander statement of their own standing.
Evidence for decoration of either palace is scarce. It may, however, be possible to draw an analogy with the palace of Verona’s Aleardi family, who were similarly well-to-do but not preeminent socially and whose dwelling in 1407 likewise consisted of basement, ground floor, upper floor of “principal apartments,” and attic. An inventory described its furnishings in nearly three hundred lots, some—a chest with towels and linen, three cushions, seven handtowels—combining several items: interior spaces were fully supplied, even crowded. Painted blanket racks, rugs, and devotional images suggest that the Aleardi sought elaborate decoration in addition to comfort. Bedrooms clearly demarcated from common living spaces afforded some measure of personal privacy, though the family slept two or more to a room.108

There are hints that in the Veneto, albeit not on the scale of Florence, patrician demand for luxury goods was growing. Elegant ceramics from Bassano and Padua began to reach markets in considerable volume. In Veronese tax rolls, the number of silk workers and goldsmiths doubled, the number of hatmakers rose from zero to seventy-seven, painters tripled their ranks, and those in the paper and book trade more than quadrupled. Much luxury production was destined for export, but some must have passed into the big new palaces. The wealthy also filled their houses with servants: the overall average per household doubled, but patricians hired most of the increase. Herlihy concludes that “the rich were enjoying a more elegant, comfortable and perhaps refined life in 1502 than they had in 1425.”110

There is also evidence of sumptuary legislation, which is difficult to use but may have indicative value. Paduans would not have passed laws against women’s clothes and ornaments if wealthy families did not actually buy such fineries, and constant reenactment of the laws indicates that the wealthy went on buying them, regarding fines as a kind of luxury tax. In 1441 Veronese councils passed a law against women owning more than one silk garment, justifying the move on moral grounds but possibly aiming to protect the city’s wool industry. However, an expanded attack on women’s luxuries in 1446—the ordinance ran to twenty-two detailed clauses—was soon rescinded because, councillors admitted, it could not be enforced. Venetians would not have passed eight major laws in the 1450–1500 period to prevent the immobilization of precious metals, had there not been strong demand for jewelry and cloths of gold and silver; and they would not have passed eight laws if the wealthy had respected the first.111