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Gaining Power. Rural Elites in Northern Italy during the Early Modern Period

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Abstract

This article analyses the increasing socio-economic segmentation of rural society in Northern Italy in the early modern era. With a synthesis of the historiography on the Italian countryside plus original archival research, we reconstruct the political role and the socio-economic basis of rural elites in the State of Milan and in the Republic of Venice. We argue that, in general, the growing importance and the establishment of the rural elites were the result of more and more exclusive management of the commons, the concentration of landed property, and a near monopoly in local manufacturing and the local credit market.

1. Introduction

This article examines the changing characteristics of rural elites in northern Italy during the early modern period, a time of fundamental change also in the Italian peninsula more generally, both socio-economically and politically. To mention the most important novelties, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw (i) the continuous spread of "capitalistic" agriculture in some areas of the Po Valley, (ii) a process of economic reconversion, with the diffusion of manufactures in the countryside, and (iii) a redefinition of the ancient privileges of towns in rural areas and the devolution or the conquest of some Italian states by more powerful European countries. Given all these developments, our goal is to understand how

the role and characteristics of rural elites changed with the passage from medieval to early modern times. To better understand the different dynamics and the plurality of situations, we focus, in particular, on the State of Milan, which became an important part of the Habsburg dominions, and on the Republic of Venice, one of the few independent states in Italy.

The study of the differing characteristics of European rural elites has achieved greater visibility in recent years. Under the influence of Marxist ideology, scholars had long considered rural society as a socially and economically uniform and inert body. Following this idea, the only part of pre-industrial society that could be considered dynamic was urban centres, where nobles and the bourgeoisie shared political and economic power, albeit often in conflict. Starting in the 1980s historians began to revise this monolithic representation and focused on the inner stratification of rural communities, no longer seen as a single, unified whole[1]. A sizeable international group of historians began to focus on rural elites, promoting comparative analysis to establish similarities and differences in time and space[2]. Year after year, this first meant a number of works on specific geographic areas[3], in addition to conferences and book series (especially the CORN series, *Comparative Rural History of the North Sea*,

[1] It is impossible to summarise the different approaches and the vast historiographical production here. See M. Della Misericordia's recent synthesis, *The Rural Communities*, in A. Gamberini and I. Lazzarini (eds.), *The Italian Renaissance State*, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 261-283.

[2] F. Aparisi Romero and V. Royo Pérez, "Fractures in the Community: A Historiographical Review", in F. Aparisi Romero and V. Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants. Rural Elites and Economic Differentiation in Pre-Modern Europe*, Valencia, 2014, pp. 21-36. In Italy, micro-history has already promoted something similar, particularly because of the research of Giovanni Levi. See, in particular, G. Levi, *L'eredità immateriale. Carriera di un esorcista nel Piemonte del Seicento*, Turin, 1985, and P. Lanaro (ed.), *Microstoria: a venticinque anni da L'eredità immateriale*, Milan, 2011.

[3] The Low Countries and England are certainly the areas most studied. See P. Hoppenbrouwers and J.L. Van Zanden (eds.), *Peasants Into Farmers? The Transformation of Rural Economy and Society in the Low Countries in Light of the Brenner Debate*, Turnhout, 2001; B. Van Bavel, *Manors and Markets. Economy and Society in the Low Countries, 500-1600*, Oxford, 2010; P. Schofield, *Peasant and community in Medieval England, 1200-1500*, New York, 2003.

edited by Brepols). In 2005, one of the *Journées Internationales d'Histoire de l'Abbaye de Flaran* debated the study of rural elites in Europe in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. In 2011, the topic was at the centre of a workshop for young scholars at the University of Valencia. Both meetings resulted in the publication of collective books designed to relate the discussion on single geographic areas to the broader European context[4]. The numerous sessions on this topic at the biennial conferences of the European Rural History Organization are another clear demonstration of the renewed interest in this topic and its "supra-nationality."[5]

These meetings, publications, and conferences indicate the steps that have characterised the study of rural elites in Europe. The "discovery" of this social class has been followed by efforts at the comparative approach. Most recently scholars have sought to finally define a chronology of social and economic stratification in rural areas, often through consecutive backdating[6].

In the course of this scholarly journey, research on rural elites has dealt with various topics, achieving a rather satisfying characterisation of this part of rural society in medieval and early modern Europe at least in some specific case studies. Scholars have underlined the political role played by the richest families in the countryside. Given their participation in the management of rural communities, they were fundamental intermediaries between individuals and the state authorities, in particular for tax collection[7] and

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[4] F. Menant and J.-P. Jessenne, *Les élites rurales dans l'Europe médiévale et moderne*, Toulouse, 2007; Aparisi Romero and Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants*.

[5] In 2010, Tim Soens, Erik Thoen, Eline Van Onacker, and Kristof Dombrecht coordinated the panel *Rural Elites, Local Power And Rural Capitalism: State of the Art and Perspectives for Comparative Research*. The title of the session itself suggested the necessity of fixing a starting point (historiographical and of perspective) for a new field of research. In 2013, Soens and Thoen again proposed the panel *Rural Elites: Towards a Comparative History of Rural Elites in Pre-Modern Europe,* and in 2015 Piet Van Cruyningen, Van Onacker, and Dombrecht coordinated the session *Rural Elites in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*.

[6] C. Dyer, "Conclusions", in Aparisi Romero and Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants*, pp. 250-251.

[7] G. Chittolini, *La formazione dello stato regionale e le istituzioni del contado. Secoli XIV-XV*,

the administration of justice; moreover, in a way they also controlled the local public offices. Mayors, governors, and officials responsible for surveys of private and common properties, etc., were frequently members of the richest families in the community[8]. The consequence was to strengthen the power and prestige of these families within the communities and to further and protect their economic interests[9]. This is particularly clear from these families' role in the management of the commons. Their choices were often decisive in preserving or, on the contrary, over-exploiting the resources[10].

The influence of rural elites within and outside the communities has been established, but it remains to see how these families were able to strengthen their position in the countryside. Historians, using

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Turin, 1979; G. Del Torre, *Venezia e la terraferma dopo la guerra di Cambrai: fiscalità e amministrazione 1515-1530*, Milan, 1986; S. Zamperetti, "I 'sinedri dolosi': la formazione e lo sviluppo dei corpi territoriali nello stato regionale veneto tra '500 e '600", in *Rivista Storica Italiana*, no. 2, 1987, pp. 269-320; T. Soens and E. Thoen, 'The Origins of Leasehold in the Former County of Flanders", in B. Van Bavel and P. Schofield (eds.), *The Development of Leasehold in Northwestern Europe c. 1200-1600*, Turnhout, 2009, pp. 31-56; E.C. Colombo, *Giochi di luoghi. Il territorio lombardo nel Seicento*, Milan, 2008.

[8] M. Di Tullio, *The Wealth of Communities. War, Resources and Cooperation in Renaissance Lombardy*, Farnham, 2014; Id., "Cooperating in Time of Crisis. War, Commons, and Inequality in Renaissance Lombardy", in *The Economic History Review*, no. 71/1, 2008, pp. 82-105.

[9] M. Müller, "Communal Structures, Lordship and Peasant Agency in Thirteenth Century and Fourteenth Century Medieval England: Some Comparative Observations", in Aparisi Romero and Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants*, pp. 69-86; V. Royo Pérez, "Manifestations of Difference: Conflicts of Interests in Rural Valencia During the Late Middle Ages", in Aparisi Romero and Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants*, pp. 87-110 (pp. 91, 96-101); E. Van Onacker, "Leaders of the Pack: A Typology of Village Elites in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century Campine Area", in Aparisi Romero and Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants*, pp. 189-216 (pp. 203-211).

[10] T. De Moor, L. Shaw-Taylor and P. Warde (eds.), *The Management of Common Land in North West Europe, c. 1500-1850*, Turnhout, 2002; J.M. Lana Berasain, "From Equilibrium to Equity. The Survival of the Commons in the Ebro Basin: Navarra From the 15th to the 20th Centuries", in *International Journal of the Commons*, no. 2/2, 2008, pp. 162-191; G. Alfani and R. Rao (eds.), *La gestione delle risorse collettive. Italia settentrionale, secoli XII-XVIII*, Milan, 2011; Royo Pérez, "Manifestations of Difference", pp. 92-96; Van Onacker, "Leaders of the Pack", pp. 197-200; M. De Keyzer, "The Common Denominator: Regulation of the Community of Users of Common Waste Lands Within the Campine Area During the 16th Century", in Aparisi Romero and Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants*, pp. 217-245; Ead., *Inclusive Commons and the Sustainability of Peasant Communities in the Medieval Low Countries*, Abingdon, 2018.

the Gini coefficient, have proposed mainly economic interpretations, emphasising the growing polarisation of wealth over the centuries[11] and positing that economic pre-eminence was at the root of political control, which, in turn, fuelled further economic gains[12]. Wealth was accumulated in various ways: through the control of the land, often coupled with improvement of productive processes and more pronounced orientation to the market[13]. The economy, of course, was rarely based on a single sector. Agricultural investments were often coupled with other investments that introduced proto-industrial, manufacturing, and trading activities to the countryside[14]. Similarly, the credit market played a crucial role. Through loans, the more affluent peasants could invest in manufacturing and agricultural activities, but credit was also an economical means for diversifying investments. The credit market created and maintained vertical and horizontal networks, within and outside the communities[15]. This

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[11] P. Hudson, *History by Numbers: An Introduction to Quantitative Approaches*, London, 2000. The Research Project *EINITE, Economic Inequality Across Italy and Europe, 1300-1800*, led by Guido Alfani, is an interesting example. G. Alfani, "Economic Inequality in Northwestern Italy: A Long-Term View (Fourteenth to Eighteenth Centuries)", in *The Journal of Economic History*, no. 75/4, 2015, pp. 1058-1096; G. Alfani and F. Ammannati, "Long-Term Trends in Economic Inequality: The Case of the Florentine State, ca. 1300-1800", in *Economic History Review*, no. 70/4, 2017, pp. 1072-1102; G. Alfani and M. Di Tullio, *The Lion's Share. Inequality and the Rise of the Fiscal State in Preindustrial Europe*, Cambridge, 2019.

[12] Dyer, "Conclusions", pp. 251-255.

[13] E. Thoen, "A 'Commercial Survival Economy' in Evolution. The Flemish Countryside and the Transition to Capitalism (Middle Ages – 19th Century)", in Hoppenbrouwers and Van Zanden (eds.), *Peasants into Farmers?*, pp. 102-157; B. Van Bavel, "Land, lease and agriculture: The Transition of the Rural Economy in the Dutch River Area From the Fourteenth to the Sixteenth Century", in *Past & Present*, no. 172, 2001, pp. 3-43; Van Bavel, *Manors and Markets*; B. Van Bavel and P. Hoppenbrouwers (eds.), *Landholding and Land Transfer in the North Sea Area (Late Middle Ages-19th Century)*, Turnhout, 2004; B. Van Bavel and R. Hoyle (eds.), *Social Relations: Property and Power*, Turnhout, 2010; Müller, "Communal Structures", pp. 73-79; L. Vervaet, "Lease Holding in Late Medieval Flanders: Towards Concentration and Engrossment? The Estates of the St. John's Hospital of Bruges", in Aparisi Romero and Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants*, pp. 111-138; Van Onacker, "Leaders of the Pack".

[14] C. Dyer, *A Country Merchant, 1495-1520: Trading and Farming at the End of the Middle Ages*, Oxford-New York, 2012; Van Onacker, "Leaders of the Pack".

[15] For a general overview on this see P. Schofield and T. Lambrecht (eds.), *Credit and the*

kind of investment, coupled with specific professional activities, linked the prestige to earnings. Here, the office of notary is the most indicative case; it was profitable and, at the same time, saved information that was decisive for a family's presence in the market, especially the credit market[16].

The extremely complex dynamics summarised here differ from one geographical area to another[17]. The coastal and the inland areas of the Low Countries are an interesting case, as they were characterised by the emergence of two specific types of rural elite during the early modern period: one characterised by so-called *coqs de village*, the other by the appearance of the "true independent peasants."[18] This differentiation was not exclusive to the Low Countries, but it was characteristic of certain geographical areas and social categories, as is demonstrated, for example, in the analysis of the Muslim and Christian elites in the Kingdom of Valencia.[19]

Rural Economy in North Western Europe, c. 1200-c. 1850, Turnhout, 2009. Lombardy is an interesting case study in the Italian peninsula, analysed in Di Tullio, *The Wealth of Communities*, pp. 111-116.

[16] T. Lambrecht, "Rural Credit and the Market for Annuities in Eighteenth-Century Flanders", in Schofield and Lambrecht (eds.), *Credit and the Rural Economy*, pp. 89-94 (pp. 75-98); P. Van Cruyningen, "Credit and Agriculture in the Netherlands, Eighteenth-Nineteenth Centuries", in Schofield and Lambrecht (eds.), *Credit and the Rural Economy*, pp. 99-108 (p. 103); G. Béaur, "Credit and Land in Eighteenth-Century France", in Schofield and Lambrecht (eds.), *Credit and the Rural Economy*, pp. 153-168 (pp. 162-165); F. Aparisi Romero, "The Notarial Profession as a Means of Social Promotion Amongst Rural Elites in the Midland of the Kingdom of Valencia during the Later Middle Ages", in Aparisi Romero and Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants*, pp. 139-162.

[17] Müller, "Communal Structures", pp. 69-71.

[18] Thoen, "A 'Commercial Survival Economy'"; E. Thoen, "'Social Agrosystems' as an Economic Concept to Explain Regional Differences. An Essay Taking the Former County of Flanders as an Example (Middle Ages-19th Century)", in Van Bavel and Hoppenbrouwers, *Landholding and Land Transfer*, pp. 47-66; Van Bavel, "Land, Lease and Agriculture"; Van Bavel, *Manors and Markets*; Van Bavel and Hoppenbrouwers, *Land-Holding and Land Transfer*; T. Soens and E. Thoen, "The Origins of Leasehold in the Former County of Flanders", in Van Bavel and Schofield (eds.), *The Development of Leasehold*, pp. 31-56; E. Thoen and T. Soens (eds.), "Credit in Rural Flanders, c. 1250-c. 1600: Its Variety and Significance", in Schofield and Lambrecht (eds.), *Credit and the Rural Economy*, pp. 19-38; Vervaet, "Lease Holding in Late Medieval Flanders"; Van Onacker, "Leaders of the Pack"; De Keyzer, "The Common Denominator".

[19] V. Baydal Sala and F. Esquilache Martí, "Exploitation and Differentiation: Economic

What caused these differences? First, the ecological and environmental factors were linked to the different productivity of the soil. Further, specific economic developments produced more or less polarisation of wealth (or different processes). Proximity to or distance from an urban centre could also affect the development of specific types of rural elite. The role assigned to them by the public authorities was of equal importance. The individual characteristics varied from state to state, from region to region, and from province to province, and they also varied over time, creating differences from area to area.

The point of this kind of historical analysis is to inflect and seek to explain the differences. It is also interesting to analyse, in a way not done very frequently until now, how the elites interacted with other social elements (urban and rural), which were the networks and, at the same time, also the source of conflict. Another area for research could be the way in which social mobility was realised in rural areas. A comparative perspective is essential, given the foregoing considerations on the specific regional characterisation of the rural elites. This is why the case of the North of Italy should be studied in the broader European context; and all the more so considering that for the Italian peninsula in the early modern period the analysis of the elements characterising rural elites in Europe, as reported above, has been insufficient and fragmentary.

2. The political role

Historians have noted the emergence of significant economic and social stratification in the countryside of Northern Italy starting from the fifteenth century.[20] The common phenomenon of steady po-

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and Social Stratification in the Rural Muslim Communities of the Kingdom of Valencia, 13th-16th Centuries", in Aparisi Romero and Royo Pérez (eds.), *Beyond Lords and Peasants*, pp. 37-68.

[20] A. Ventura, *Nobiltà e popolo nella società veneta del '400 e '500*, Bari, 1964; Chittolini, *La formazione dello stato regionale*.

larisation of wealth, a topic analysed in the following pages, led to the progressive closing of the councils of the communities. The process had different traits from area to area, but the general outcome was the rise of rural oligarchies.[21] This meant, first, that just a few families controlled the community administration through management of public offices and common-pool resources and, additionally, through the acquisition of inheritance rights.[22] For example, in Schio, in the northern part of the *contado* of Vicenza in 1493, a council of 32 members was established that, as in other communities of the Republic of Venice, gradually assumed the functions of the General Council of the community.[23] In the sixteenth century, similar councils (with a diverse set of members depending on the population of each village) were functioning in the other communities we have studied, including the Brescian Bedizzole and Gavardo.[24] Moving west, to give another example, throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the general council of Caravaggio, in the eastern part of the State of Milan, was kept constantly under control as the richest local family (the Secco family) and its faction gained greater power. The state authorities repeatedly imposed changes in the rules for the election and composition of the general council, but the primacy of the Seccos was not affected, until eventually the most influential members decided autonomously to move to Milan to pursue a new career

[21] Del Torre, *Venezia e la terraferma*; Colombo, *Giochi di luoghi*; M. Knapton, "The Terraferma State", in E. Dursteler (ed.), *A Companion to Venetian History. 1400-1797*, Leiden-Boston, 2013, pp. 85-124.
[22] Alfani and Rao (eds.), *La gestione delle risorse collettive*; G. Ongaro, "Protecting the Commons: Self-Governance and State Intervention in the Italian States during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", in *Continuity and Change*, no. 31/3, 2016, pp. 311-334; G. Bonan, "Beni comuni: alcuni percorsi storiografici", in *Passato e Presente*, no. 96, 2015, pp. 97-115; D. Cristoferi, "Da usi civici a beni comuni: gli studi sulla proprietà collettiva nella medievistica e nella modernistica italiana e le principali tendenze internazionali", in *Studi Storici*, no. 57/3, 2016, pp. 577-604.
[23] Archivio Storico Comunale di Schio (hereafter ACSc), busta (hereafter b.) 1, fascicolo (hereafter fasc.) 2, folio (hereafter f.) verso (hereafter v.) 96.
[24] Archivio Storico Comunale di Bedizzole (hereafter ACBe), b. 3, registro (hereafter reg). 1; b. 3, reg. 2; b. 4, reg. 1; b. 4, reg. 2; Archivio Storico Comunale di Gavardo (hereafter ACGv), bb. 24-68.

in the city magistracy.[25] This was certainly also a consequence of the new "position" of the State of Milan, which had become the province of a global empire with the multiplication of the centres of power.

The concentration of political power is a general phenomenon with specific aspects; on the one hand, through the elitist management of the offices, powerful families could determine how to use the commons. Public use could be preserved, or else they could be rented to private parties.[26] On the other hand, the role played by rural elites within the communities often resulted in the usurpation of common properties, sometimes their outright privatisation.

In the Republic of Venice, this phenomenon equally damaged the municipal properties (the so-called *beni comuni*) and the state properties, at the disposal of the same communities since the birth of the Mainland Dominion (the so-called *beni comunali*).[27] The direct consequences of this exclusive management of public offices, and hence the public budget, for the local finances and the commons was their mutual depletion. The increasing costs borne by communities over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (particularly at the beginning of the latter) worsened the situation. Debt became an endemic plague, inducing the Venetian and Milanese state authorities to intervene and castigate thefts, abuses, and the general "mismanagement" of the communities.[28]

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[25] Archivio di Stato di Milano (hereafter ASMi), Comuni, b. 17, 22/04/1490; Missive, reg. 199, f. 68 v., 28/03/1495, f. 158 r. 14/04/1495; Notarile, b. 5985, 18/07/1512; Senato. Deleghe per comunità e corpi, b. 12, 10/03/1531, 27/09/1533.

[26] G. Ongaro, *Pro bono et utilitate Comunis Scledi. Equilibri familiari e magistrature Comunali a Schio tra il XV e il XVI secolo*, unpublished M.Sc. Thesis, Università Ca' Foscari, Venice, 2011; Di Tullio, *The Wealth of Communities*, pp. 73-95.

[27] On the beni comunali see M. Pitteri, "La politica veneziana dei beni comunali (1496-1797)", in *Studi Veneziani*, no. 10, 1985, pp. 57-80; S. Barbacetto, *"La più gelosa delle pubbliche regalie": i "beni communali" della Repubblica veneta tra dominio della signoria e diritti delle comunità, secoli XV-XVIII*, Venice, 2008.

[28] I. Pederzani, *Venezia e lo "Stado de Terraferma". Il governo delle comunità nel territorio bergamasco (secc. XV-XVIII)*, Milan, 1992; A. Rossini, *Le campagne bresciane nel Cinquecento. Territorio, fisco, società*, Milan, 1994; G. De Luca, "'La terra non fu mai madregna": crescita ed evoluzione del sistema agrario", in *Storia economica e sociale di Bergamo*, vol. III, Aldo de Maddalena, Marzio A. Romani, Marco Cattini (eds.), *Il tempo della Serenis-*

In the Republic of Venice and the State of Milan, the local role played by the families of the rural elite was linked to a similar political effort at the district or provincial level, with the objective of superseding the cities' mediation in relationships with state officials. This meant the recurrent dispatch to Venice and Milan of heralds assigned to submit petitions (especially fiscal and juridical) to the central authorities.[29] This element is important in clearly evidencing the political and not only economic weight attained by rural elites. Starting in the sixteenth century they were able to present themselves as interlocutors *vis-à-vis* the state authorities; in this sense the Italian wars of the sixteenth century represented a turning point. The elites' new role went beyond the boundaries of the community to achieve a provincial dimension, leading to the formation of the *Congregazioni di Contado* and the *Corpi Territoriali*. These were representative institutions for a single province, formed towards the end of the fifteenth or in the early sixteenth century. Thus as the economic and political power of rural elites strengthened, they won formal recognition from the States around the middle of the sixteenth century.[30]

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sima: un Seicento in controtendenza, Bergamo, 2000, pp. 21-81; G. Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali e proprietà contadina. Il caso veronese tra Sei e Settecento*, Milan, 2002; Colombo, *Giochi di luoghi*; Di Tullio, *The Wealth of Communities*.

[29] G. Cozzi (ed.), *Stato, società e giustizia nella Repubblica Veneta, sec. XV-XVIII*, Rome, 1981; Del Torre, *Venezia e la terraferma*; M. Knapton, "Venezia e la terraferma, 1509-1797: istituzioni, politiche e pratiche di governo, rapporti di potere, cultura politica", in *Ateneo Veneto*, no. 9/I, 2010, pp. 103-136.

[30] On the origins of the Corpi Territoriali in the Republic of Venice see Zamperetti, "I 'sinedri dolosi'" and more specifically on the province of Vicenza, see S. Zamperetti, "Per una storia delle istituzioni rurali nella terraferma veneta: il contado vicentino nei secoli XVI e XVII", in G. Cozzi (ed.), *Stato, Società e Giustizia*, vol. II, pp. 61-131; S. Zamperetti, "Aspetti e problemi delle comunità del territorio vicentino durante il XVI secolo nell'ambito dei rapporti citta-contado nello stato regionale veneto", in C. Povolo (ed.), *Lisiera: immagini, documenti e problemi per la storia di una comunità veneta: strutture, congiunture, episodi*, Lisiera, 1981, pp. 503-532; M. Knapton, "Il Territorio vicentino nello stato veneto del '500 e primo '600: nuovi equilibri politici e fiscali", in G. Cracco and M. Knapton (eds.), *Dentro lo "Stado Italico". Venezia e la Terraferma tra Quattro e Cinquecento*, Trento, 1984, pp. 33-115. For the province of Brescia see Rossini, *Le campagne bresciane*; for Bergamo, Pederzani, *Venezia e lo "Stado de Terraferma"*; for Verona, Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali*; for Padua, L. Favaretto, *L'istituzione informale. Il Territorio padovano dal Quattrocento al Cinquecento*, Milan, 1998; for Treviso, G. Del Torre, *Il Trevigiano nei*

Originally, these institutions sought to limit the privileges of the cities and other areas in favour of the rural communities of a province. Over the years, however, they lost this "conflictual" function and became the new referents for the state in the administration of the territories. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries they were responsible for the management of the fiscal and military structures in addition to other specific functions like the provision of grain and the control of smuggling.[31] The richest rural families were aware of their bargaining power and, to a certain extent, of the process of redefinition of the equilibria within the state, especially considering that the *Congregazioni di Contado* or the *Corpi Territoriali* frequently supported their petitions by appealing to documents produced by the rural institutions of other provinces. These institutions became the arena of power struggles among families and communities, with different interests and purposes. In other words, these new institutions were the field where the political role of rural elites emerged, although they did not monopolise charges and offices. This is all the more important considering the fundamental role of the *Congregazioni di Contado* and the *Corpi Territoriali* in the division of the financial burden between the cities, the countryside, the so-called *Terre separate*,[32] and the clergy as well as between the various

secoli XV e XVI. L'assetto amministrativo e il sistema fiscale, Venice, 1990; and for Belluno, F. Vendramini, *Le comunità rurali bellunesi (secoli XV-XVI)*, Belluno, 1979; R. Bragaggia, "Il corpo territoriale bellunese nel '500-'600", in *Studi Veneziani*, no. 45, 2003, pp. 43-90. About the Congregazioni di Contado see E. Verga, "La Congregazione del Ducato e l'amministrazione dell'antica provincia di Milano (1561-1759)", in *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, no. 8, 1895, pp. 383-407; the monographic issue of the review *Studi Bresciani* (1983); Colombo, *Giochi di luoghi*.

[31] M. Rizzo, *Alloggiamenti militari e riforme fiscali nella Lombardia spagnola fra Cinque e Seicento*, Milan, 2001; D. Maffi, *Il baluardo della corona: guerra, esercito, finanze e società nella Lombardia Seicentesca, 1630-1660*, Florence, 2007; A. Buono, *Esercito, istituzioni, territorio: alloggiamenti militari e case herme nello Stato di Milano (sec. XVI e XVII)*, Florence, 2009; Knapton, "The Terraferma"; G. Ongaro, *Peasants and Soldiers. The Management of the Venetian Military Structure in the Mainland Dominion Between the 16th and 17th Centuries*, London-New York, 2017.

[32] The *Terre separate* were non-urban communities or districts that managed to evade the control of the city over their *contado*, negotiating fiscal (and other) matters directly with the prince or the Fiscal Chamber. G. Chittolini, "Le terre separate nel Ducato di Milano in età sforzesca", in *Milano nell'età di Ludovico il Moro*, Milan, 1983, pp. 115-128.

communities within a province.[33] Moreover, they managed various contracts, including military contracts. In this sense, the intervention – especially during the seventeenth century – of the Venetian authorities and, to a lesser extent, the Lombard authorities, was intended to restore the "good management" of the communities and involved the *Corpi Territoriali* and the *Congregazioni di Contado*. Traditionally, scholars viewed this active role of the community as evidence of the administrative incapacity of the State at the local level, but it can also be seen as a sign of the ability of local institutions and families to maintain the control of "their" territory. Recent studies on the Republic of Venice and the State of Milan demonstrate that military contracts were often obtained by rural merchants, artisans, and notables, making it clear that this capacity for intervention was coupled with substantial economic interests in managing these fields. State interests and local interests, that is, converged.[34]

3. Economic importance

The political role played by this wealthy part of rural society draws on – and is, in turn, strengthened by – the elite's economic importance. Wealth consisted of different components, with specific characterisations from one area to another, and often with significant differences even within short distances. In a large number of cases, however, investment in land was crucial.

Both in the Republic of Venice and in the State of Milan, during the sixteenth century, the country properties of wealthy townd-wellers (noble and non-noble) were extended. The population

[33] Del Torre, *Venezia e la terraferma*; Knapton, "The Terraferma"; M. Di Tullio, "L'estimo di Carlo V (1543-1599) e il perticato del 1558. Per un riesame delle riforme fiscali nello stato di Milano del secondo Cinquecento", in *Società e Storia*, no. 131, 2011, pp. 1-35.
[34] A. Buono, "Guerra, élites locali e monarchia nella Lombardia del Seicento. Per un'interpretazione in chiave di compromesso di interessi", in *Società e Storia*, no. 123, 2009, pp. 3-30; A. Buono, M. Di Tullio and M. Rizzo, "Per una storia economica e istituzionale degli alloggiamenti militari in Lombardia tra XV e XVII secolo", in *Storia Economica*, no. 1, 2016, pp. 187-218; Ongaro, *Peasants and Soldiers*.

growth of this period led to rising grain prices and consequently a dynamic land market. At the same time, manufacturing activity in Northern Italy suffered a severe slowdown or, at least, a significant process of reconversion.[35] In the Republic of Venice, this did not prompt the sort of "modernisation" of farming or the evolution of agrarian contracts and structures that was evident in Lombardy, but starting in the 1570s, the growth of investment ensured the self-sufficiency in grain of the Mainland Dominion and the city of Venice.[36] It is undeniable that in the Venetian and Lombard provinces the main buyers of land, especially the more fertile terrains, were townd-wellers.[37] This does not mean that the peasants were excluded from land ownership. Especially in the piedmont areas,[38] urban penetration was less effective because of the greater distance from the cities and, mainly, because of the insufficient soil fertility. The main consequence of this characterisation of the fields was that rural families had freedom to make investment choices, but also that wealth could not derive exclusively from the land. Another important conse-

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[35] D. Beltrami, *Forze di lavoro e proprietà fondiarie nelle campagne venete dei secoli XVI e XVIII,* Venice-Rome, 1961; M. Berengo, *L'agricoltura veneta dalla caduta della Repubblica all'Unità*, Milan, 1963; A. Ventura, "Considerazioni sull'agricoltura veneta e sull'accumulazione originaria del capitale nei secoli XVI e XVII", in *Agricoltura e sviluppo del capitalismo*, Rome, 1968, pp. 674-722; V. Beonio-Brocchieri, *"Piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo". Famiglie e mestieri nel Ducato di Milano in età spagnola*, Milan, 2000; P. Lanaro (ed.), *At the Centre of the Old World: Trade and Manufacturing in Venice and the Venetian Mainland (1400-1800)*, Toronto, 2006; M. Knapton, "Le campagne trevigiane: i frutti di una ricerca", in *Società e Storia*, no. 130, 2010, pp. 771-800; A. Zannini, "Sempre più agricola, sempre più regionale. L'economia della Repubblica di Venezia da Agnadello al Lombardo Veneto (1509-1817)", in *Ateneo Veneto*, no. 9/I, 2010, pp. 137-171; L. Pezzolo, "La storia agraria veneta. Risultati, ipotesi e prospettive", in *Archivio Veneto*, no. 142, 2011, pp. 79-110.

[36] Zannini, "Sempre più agricola", p. 145

[37] G. Chittolini, "La pianura irrigua lombarda fra Quattrocento e Cinquecento", in *Annali dell'Istituto Alcide Cervi*, no. 10, 1989, pp. 207-221; E. Roveda, *Uomini, Terre e acque. Studi sull'agricoltura della "Bassa lombarda" tra XV e XVII secolo*, Milan, 2012; G. Alfani, "Back to the Peasants: New Insights into the Economic, Social, and Demographic History of Northern Italian Rural Populations During the Early Modern Period", in *History Compass*, no. 12/1, 2014, 62-71.

[38] With the exception of the province of Verona, where the presence of the *cittadini* was widespread in all the countryside (Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali*, pp. 17, 25-33, 68-70).

quence was the growth of medium-sized and large communities – sometimes with several thousand inhabitants, the so-called *quasi città* – with strong rural elites.[39] With the economic crisis of the decades straddling the turn of the seventeenth century, the appropriation of land by the nobles and the *cittadini* (the inhabitants of the city with full political and civil rights) slowed but never ceased entirely. The plague of 1630 resulted in a general collapse of grain prices, while land become more readily available (with a consequent decrease in its monetary value) and high mortality drove labour costs up. All these factors made land an unattractive investment compared with the previous century, at least until the mid-1600s.[40] However, the *cittadini* continued to purchase land, although at a slower pace. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, there was growth in rural land ownership with specific trajectories from province to province. In brief, two particular phenomena characterised the post-plague period: first, rural elites took advantage of the faster demographic recovery of the countryside and the low land prices, together with the above-mentioned phenomenon of debt, to increase their property holdings.[41] Second, there was sharp polarisation of agricultural wealth as the landholdings of the rural elites expanded.[42] As an example, in the case of the community of San Vito di Leguzzano, in the plain area of the province of Vicenza, comparison of the tax surveys dated 1539 and 1649 shows that the poorest peasantry had increased by 5%, while 2% of the population reached levels of wealth simply not found in previous decades. At the same time, the "middle-wealth" peasantry (who became poorer) dimin-

[39] G. Chittolini, "'Quasi città'. Borghi e terre in area lombarda alla fine del medioevo", in *Società e Storia*, no. 47, 1990, pp. 3-26; Beonio-Brocchieri, "Piazza universale".
[40] Beltrami, *Forze di lavoro*, pp. 10-20; Ventura, "Considerazioni sull'agricoltura", pp. 550-552; L. Faccini, *La Lombardia fra 600 e 700. Riconversione economica e mutamenti sociali*, Milan, 1988.
[41] Faccini, *La Lombardia; Maifreda, Rappresentanze rurali*, pp. 130-131.
[42] Beltrami, *Forze di lavoro*, p. 19; Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali*, p. 188; Pederzani, *Venezia e lo "Stado de Terraferma"*, p. 269; De Luca, "'La terra non fu mai madregna'", p. 50.

ished by 5%, while the wealthiest peasantry in 1539 (who became richer) increased by 2%. If we look at the causes of the enrichment (or impoverishment), changes in the ownership of land and farms are apparent.[43]

In Lombardy, owing to the concentration of landholding, there was an increase in the numbers of wealthy tenants, the so-called *fittabili*, who leased large farms for long periods (9 years or more) for cash rental. The origin of their wealth is still under debate, but it is likely that it derived from manufacturing and trade in the towns or by taking up the occupation of transhumant cattle breeders between the Alps and the lowlands (the so-called *Bergamini*). Unlike the traditional framers (a sort of sharecropper), the *fittabili* produced farm products for rural or urban markets and were interested in structural and infrastructural investment (waterworks, farm buildings, and so on).[44] Moreover, they promoted a sort of "rational" division of labour in the countryside and integrated cropping with animal husbandry, foster business diversification. Sporadically, these tenants became larger landowners themselves, but almost always they played a central role in the local context, forming important economic dynasties.[45]

Manufacturing and trade also constituted important areas in

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[43] Archivio Storico Comunale di San Vito di Leguzzano (hereafter ACSv), b. 2/II; Archivio di Stato di Vicenza (hereafter ASVi), Estimo, b. 1347.

[44] This was facilitated by the spread of the so-called *ad meliorandum* lease, which guaranteed a discount on the amount of the lease corresponding to the structural improvements made by the tenant in agreement with the owner.

[45] C.M. Cipolla, "Per la storia delle terre della 'bassa' lombarda", in *Studi in onore di Armano Sapori*, Milan, 1957, vol. I, pp. 665-672; A. De Maddalena, "Contributo sulla storia dell'agricoltura della bassa lombarda. Appunti sulla possessione di Belgioioso (sec. XVI-XVIII)", in *Archivio Storico Lombardo*, no. VIII/8, 1958, pp. 165-183; G. Chittolini, "Alle origini delle 'grandi aziende' della bassa lombarda", in *Quaderni Storici*, no. 39, 1978, pp. 828-844; E. Roveda, "Una grande possessione lodigiana dei Trivulzio fra Cinquecento e Settecento", in M. Mirri (ed.), *Ricerche di storia moderna*, Pisa, 1979, vol. II, pp. 25-140; L. Chiappa Mauri, "Riflessioni sulle campagne lombarde del Quattro-Cinquecento", in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, no. 1-2, 1985, pp. 123-130; L. Cafagna, "La 'rivoluzione agraria' in Lombardia", in Id., *Dualismo e sviluppo nella storia d'Italia*, Venice, 1989, pp. 31-112.

which rural elites strengthened their base of wealth. As in agriculture, here too investments had different traits from area to area, albeit with some common trends. First, the rural elites certainly stepped up their investments in manufacturing increasingly between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Venetian and Lombard economies were engaged in a "ruralisation"[46] centred mainly on manufacturing; the consequence of this process was the expansion of urban capital through the countryside and the reinvigoration of existing rural proto-industrial districts.[47] If the location of the productive farming areas was linked significantly to geomorphology, the same can be said of manufacturing. From the fifteenth century, and especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth, manufacturing grew mainly in the piedmont areas for several different reasons. First, as in the case of agriculture, distance from the cities allowed greater freedom for investment and led to the growth of a rural class of entrepreneurs. Urban initiatives did not obscure their force. Just as important, the piedmont areas enjoyed important environmental benefits such as resources (especially wood and metals) and the opportunity to use watermills for the fulling of cloth, paper mills, and foundries. Antonio Razzante from Santorso (in the piedmont area of the province of Vicenza) is a typical example of rural entrepreneurship. Looking at his account books (dated 1550-1574), we can see that he invested in the production of woolen textiles and raw silk in peasants' houses and sold the products to urban mer-

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[46] R.P. Corritore, "Il processo di 'ruralizzazione' in Italia nei secoli XVII-XVIII. Verso una regionalizzazione", in *Rivista di storia economica*, no. 10, 1993, pp. 353-386; Zannini, "Sempre più agricola", p. 168.

[47] A. De Maddalena, *Dalla città al borgo. Avvio di una metamorfosi economica e sociale nella Lombardia spagnola*, Milan, 1982; D. Sella, *L'economia lombarda durante la dominazione spagnola*, Bologna, 1982; L. Mocarelli, "Manufacturing Activities in Venetian Lombardy: Production Specialization and the Making of a Regional Market (17th and 18th Centuries)", in Lanaro (ed.), *At the Centre of the Old World*, pp. 317-342; F. Vianello, "Rural Manufactures and Pattern of Economic Specialization: Cases from the Venetian Mainland", in Lanaro (ed.), *At the Centre of the Old World*, pp. 343-366; E. Demo, *Mercanti di Terraferma. Uomini, merci e capitali nell'Europa del Cinquecento*, Milan, 2012; Id., "Industry and Production in the Venetian Terraferma (15th-18th Centuries)", in Dursteler (ed.), *A Companion*, pp. 291-318.

chants. In addition, he invested substantially in the mining and manufacture of kaolin, which he then sold in Venice and across Italy.[48] He also owned farms and woodlands and traded and collaborated with many members of elite families from the nearby villages, who owned carding machines and full structures for wool manufacturing, merchandise depots, and so on.

There were also manufacturing activities in the plain, but with different features; they were mainly domestic activities that supplemented agricultural incomes without reaching the proto-industrial levels of the piedmont areas.[49] Apart from these areas, the valleys had pronounced manufacturing traits; the key factors were distance from cities, lack of arable land, and low farm productivity. These areas developed specific economies based on livestock, particularly sheep, and characterised by transhumance; wool manufacturing; and the extraction and processing of metals.[50] In these and other sectors such as wood trade[51] and brick production, the rural elites of the piedmont and mountain areas expressed their entrepreneurial skills. This made them wealthy enough to acquire urban status.

The role of specific professions in determining when rural elites appeared depends on their economic or political symbolism. Once again, this is a transversal issue that often went beyond structural differences and involved the Venetian and the Lombard provinces. Certainly, the professional classes were not the same in all communities. Quoting Paola Lanaro on the province of Verona (remarks that can be extended to the rest of the Republic and to Lombardy), whereas "in the large communities […] artisans – carpenters, smiths,

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[48] ACSc, *Congregazione di Carità*, b. 18, reg. 1550-1574.

[49] S. Ciriacono, "Protoindustria, lavoro a domicilio e sviluppo economico nelle campagne venete in epoca moderna", in *Quaderni Storici*, 18, 1983, pp. 57-80; Beonio-Brocchieri, "Piazza universale"; Faccini, *La Lombardia*.

[50] R. Vergani, "La produzione del ferro nell'area veneta alpina (secoli XII-XVI). Un bilancio provvisorio", in P. Brauenstein (ed.), *La sidérurgie Alpine en Italie (XIIe-XVIIe siécle)*, Rome, 2001, pp. 71-90; Id., *Miniere e società nella montagna del passato. Alpi Venete, secoli XIII-XIX*, Sommacampagna, 2003.

[51] K. Occhi, *Boschi e Mercanti. Traffici di legname tra la Contea del Tirolo e la Repubblica di Venezia (secoli XVI-XVII)*, Bologna, 2006.

tailors and so on – and barbers, bakers, innkeepers […], doctors, notaries and teachers" constituted the "social and political elite", in "the small villages […] the social structure was 'skeletal'".[52] Therefore, a rural elite that invested in land, trade, and manufacturing and that undertook specific professional careers was found only in the larger and more important communities. As Lanaro observes, such occupations as carpenter, smith, baker, or innkeeper assumed a specific economic weight. Furthermore, in the most highly developed communities, the boundary between artisan and entrepreneur was indistinct. The creation of provincial rural representative institutions benefitted these professionals and enabled investment in profitable sectors. To take military contracts as an example, the billeting of troops, contracts for supplies, enrolment and training of the rural militia, production of saltpetre, and so on were all investment opportunities.[53]

In the communities where urban properties were prevalent, as in the province of Verona, specific professions could be used by local elites to take advantage of the presence of the *cittadini* and to gain pre-eminence within their community. In these areas, like the *fittabili* in Lombardy, agents, farmers, and *gastaldi*, who managed the land in the place of urban owners, were often the wealthiest inhabitants of the small rural communities of the plain. Other professions coupled their economic weight with the political efforts of rural elites, such as public officers (for example, conservators of the fodder or the fields, but also doctors and teachers), positions that were sometimes more financially advantageous.[54] The rural elites also monopolised other offices, forming the so-called "bureaucratic-administrative"

[52] P. Lanaro, "Il mondo contadino nel Cinquecento: ceti e famiglie nelle campagne veronesi", in G. Borelli (ed.), *Uomini e civiltà agraria in territorio veronese*, Verona, 1982, pp. 309-344 (p. 313).
[53] On this topic, see Buono, *Esercito, istituzioni, territorio*; Id., "Guerra, élites locali e monarchia"; Buono, Di Tullio and Rizzo, "Per una storia economica"; Ongaro, *Peasants and Soldiers*.
[54] F. Vecchiato, "Il mondo contadino nel Seicento", in Borelli (ed.), *Uomini e civiltà agraria*, pp. 347-394 (pp. 385-387); Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali*, pp. 53-55.

group, not only – and often not even mainly – for the salaries but also for the chance to directly manage key sectors of the local economy (taxes, commons, cadastral surveys, etc.). This is why the rural elites directed the "second and third generations to the study of law, and in particular, notary studies."[55] This remark refers to the province of Verona, but there are numerous comparable examples for Brescia,[56] Vicenza,[57] and the other Venetian and Lombard provinces. Where a notary was present, he was inevitably from a family of the local elite. Many motivational factors persuaded these families to direct their sons to study law. First was the symbolic value linked to the promotion of the family name, perhaps even towards "urban" recognition. Second, the notary profession was certainly profitable from both the strictly economic and the relational point of view, helping the family to forge networks (political and economic) within the communities. Another element too needs to be considered. The new role played by this social class within the Venetian State and the State of Milan from the sixteenth century, through the rural representative institutions, required skilled personnel, who could manage rural organisations and, as a consequence, the communities. At the same time, members of rural communities needed juridical skills to present themselves as direct representatives before the state authorities. Briefly, they had to be able to submit petitions to the central offices, engage in lawsuits with the cities, and convey their intentions to the central offices. It is easy to see the importance of law for these rural elites, particularly from the sixteenth century, when the need for specific instruments and competences became increasingly pressing.[58]

[55] Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali*, p. 69.
[56] Rossini, *Le campagne bresciane*, p. 107; M. Berengo, "Introduzione", in Camillo Tarello, *Ricordo d'agricoltura*, Turin, 1975, pp. XVII-XLV (p. XXIII).
[57] Ongaro, "Pro bono et utilitate".
[58] Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali*, p. 70.

4. Rural elites and the credit market

This overview of the economic role of rural elites cannot neglect the credit market. The concession of loans and the drafting of *censi* and *livelli*[59] were practices that typically involved urban elites and urban religious institutions. Almost everywhere, the expansion of cities into the countryside benefitted from the substantial debt incurred by the rural communities, especially in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The city lenders took advantage of rural insolvency to appropriate private land and commons.[60] Despite the urban pre-eminence, the role played by rural elites in the credit market should not be underestimated, although the aims were different and the extent of the intervention varied from province to province. We would like to emphasise the role of the private parties' lending to communities more than agreements between private lenders themselves. This is because, as Pederzani notes about the province

[59] On these particular types of credit instrument in the Venetian Mainland Dominion during the early modern period, see G. Corazzol, *Fitti e livelli a grano: un aspetto del credito rurale nel Veneto del '500*, Milan, 1979; Id., *Livelli stipulati a Venezia nel 1591: studio storico*, Pisa, 1986; G. Belotti, "Censi e livelli: le strutture del credito fondiario in epoca veneziana", in G. Brentegnani and C. Stella (eds.), *Cultura, arte ed artisti in Franciacorta: seconda biennale di Franciacorta*, atti del Convegno, Brescia, 1993, pp. 43-108; M. Lorenzini, *Credito e notai: capitali per l'economia veronese del secondo Seicento*, Bologna, 2016. On Lombardy see Faccini, *La Lombardia*; Colombo, *Giochi di luoghi*; Di Tullio, *The Wealth of Communities*.

[60] M. Cattini, "Congiuntura economica e pressione fiscale in una comunità del basso modenese (Finale 1560-1660). Verifica di un modello interpretativo", in A. Guarducci (ed.), *Prodotto lordo e finanza pubblica (sec. XIII-XIX)*, Florence, 1977, pp. 170-210; Id., *I contadini di San Felice. Metamorfosi di un mondo rurale nell'Emilia dell'età moderna*, Turin, 1984; G. Cherubini, "La proprietà fondiaria nei secoli XV-XVI nella storiografia italiana", in *Società e Storia*, no. 1, 1978, pp. 9-33; J.M. Ferraro, "Feudal-Patrician Investments in the Bresciano and the Politics of the Estimo, 1426-1641", in *Studi Veneziani*, no. VII, 1983, pp. 31-57; Id., "Proprietà terriera e potere nello Stato veneto: la nobiltà bresciana del '400-'500", in Cracco and Knapton (eds.), *Dentro lo "Stado Italico"*, pp. 159-182; E. Roveda, "I beni comunali di Abbiategrasso fra '400 e '500", in *Nuova Rivista Storica*, no. V-VI, 1985, pp. 477-502; L. Pezzolo, "Dal contado alla comunità: finanze e prelievo fiscale nel Vicentino (secoli XVI-XVIII)", in Claudio Povolo (ed.), *Dueville: storia di una comunità del passato*, Vicenza, 1985, pp. 381-428 (p. 396); Belotti, "Censi e livelli"; Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali*, pp. 195-212; Alfani and Rao (eds.), *La gestione delle risorse collettive*; Di Tullio, *The Wealth of Communities*; Id., "Cooperating in Time of Crisis".

of Bergamo, "the interference of private capital in the public sphere […] became in these years [the sixteenth century] an instrument of real predominance on the community."[61] Therefore, for the elites, credit represented a profitable investment in the short term (thanks to interest earnings) and in the medium-to-long term (with appropriation of the mortgaged properties), and it strengthened their economic and political predominance within the community. The anticipation of payments in the name of the local community was a characteristic element of the functioning of the commune, not only in the *ancien régime*. When salaries needed to be paid, a procurator was nominated, the state taxes were collected, and so on; the treasurer (or the *Massaro*, as he was called in the communities of the Republic of Venice) rarely used communal money. More often, a member of the rural elite paid the amount required in advance, out-of-pocket, often offsetting it against taxes due. This was not a traumatic practice for the local public economy, in that usually every two months (or more; each community had its own procedure) the *Massaro* was charged with refunding the officers who had advanced payment.[62] However, when a major economic commitment was involved, a community would resort to loans and, flanked by urban and religious lenders, the families of rural elites borrowed the money in exchange for interest, often pledging the commons as security. This was a general phenomenon, though its specific features might differ by province and area, and it depended on the financial needs of the communities, the availability of money from rural elites, and above all on the presence (or absence) of urban lenders. For example, in the province of Verona, as Maifreda points out, where the presence of the *cittadini* was widespread, we find rural actors in the credit market only in the biggest centres of the medium-low plains that were less associated with urban predominance.[63] In the valleys

[61] Pederzani, *Venezia e lo "Stado de Terraferma"*, p. 205.
[62] Pederzani, *Venezia e lo "Stado de Terraferma"*, pp. 226-228, 232, 239, 273; Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali*; Di Tullio, *The Wealth of Communities*, pp. 111-113.
[63] Maifreda, *Rappresentanze rurali*, p. 264.

of the province of Brescia, quite far from the city, by contrast, the rural elites certainly played a larger role, as in the communities of the Venetian piedmont area. In Bedizzole, a medium-large centre in the province of Brescia, during the first half of the seventeenth century, when the province incurred heavy military expenses, the community needed credit; and apart from the *cittadini* and ecclesiastic institutions, there were also many rural lenders. The community received 85,500 lire in loans between 1620 and 1650 and almost half came from families in Bedizzole itself. In the province of Vicenza, there was an analogous situation. During the plague of the seventeenth century and at times when the economic commitments were substantial owing to troops or other military expenses, the rural communities of the piedmont area appealed for local credit from private and rural confraternities.[64] The role of the rural confraternities is another interesting element for analysis. Important credit instruments could make a difference when expenditure was substantial; they could guarantee the resilience of the local economic system.[65] The historical literature on this topic for the Republic of Venice is almost non-existent, but it is easy to imagine that here too, as in Lombardy, the role of these secular institutions was fundamental. Similarly, the development of the *Monti di Pietà* (pledge or pawn banks) in the biggest rural communities during the sixteenth century[66] stemmed from the need to create a credit market independent of Jewish and urban lenders.[67] Moreover, apart from the role played

[64] Ongaro, *Peasants and Soldiers*, pp. 112-113, 117-118, 142-144.
[65] D. Zardin, "Le confraternite in Italia settentrionale fra XV e XVIII secolo", in *Società e Storia*, no. 35, 1987, pp. 81-137; M. Gazzini (ed.), *Studi confraternali: orientamenti, problemi, testimonianze*, Florence, 2009; D. D'Andrea, "Charity and Confraternities", in Dursteler (ed.), *A Companion*, pp. 421-447; Di Tullio, *The Wealth of Communities*, pp. 117-127.
[66] G. Barbieri, "Origine ed evoluzione storica dei Monti di Pietà in Italia", in *Economia e Credito*, no. 3, 1961, pp. 3-14; P. Lanaro, "L'attività di prestito dei Monti di Pietà in terraferma veneta: legalità e illeciti tra Quattrocento e primo Seicento", in *Studi storici Luigi Simeoni*, no. 33, 1983, pp. 161-177; D. Montanari (ed.), *Monti di Pietà e presenza ebraica in Italia (secoli XV-XVIII)*, Rome, 1999.
[67] G. Ongaro, "Per uno studio sulla presenza ebraica a Schio nella seconda metà del XV secolo", in *Numero Unico*, Schio, 2011.

in support of the public economy, the *Monti* were fundamental to guarantee, especially in the manufacturing centres of the piedmont area, credit for the expansion of proto-industrial activities and, more generally, for economic investment by the rural elites.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, let us summarise the most important of the factors discussed above. The first element is the multifaceted nature of rural elites, with characteristics that differ by state, region, province, and single community. Nevertheless, there are some common characteristics: (i) the tendency to concentrate the management of local public offices in a few households; (ii) the conflict with other local institutions such as cities and separate areas; and (iii) the ambition to became the new referents for the state at local level, through the creation of the *Corpi Territoriali* and the *Congregazioni di Contado*. The specific characteristics of the rural elites related essentially to geopolitical factors, first and foremost the size of the local community. It may seem to be obvious, but social stratification – as gauged, say, by the richest classes' share of wealth and their contractual power within rural provincial institutions – was greater in the *quasi città* with a population of 2,000 to 4,000. A second crucial element was the community's distance from the referent urban centre and the latter's relative importance. Near the cities, usually located near a fertile plain, the penetration of urban capital impeded the growth of strong rural elites, except for those directly subjected to urban families (as in the province of Verona or in the lowlands of Milan and Lodi). There were exceptions, such as the province of Crema, the Lomellina, the Geradadda, and Treviso, where the presence of several cities close to one another and with contrasting interests stimulated the growth of rural communities with active elites. Distance from the city was a positive factor, because it tended to reduce urban investment and often also meant the rural community was near a state border. This enabled the communities to play a more important

military and trading role.[68] In addition to the geographical characterisation of each area, the last crucial factor, related to those set out in previous sections, was economic specialisation. In some areas the rural elite founded its wealth mainly on investment in agriculture livestock, while in others, especially in the mountain and piedmont areas, wealth derived from manufacturing and from metal mining and processing. Very briefly, we can say that the most important rural centres, with the richest rural elites, were those with the strongest proto-industrial features. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was these communities that gave rise to the families that monopolised the rural representative institutions, contracts and in general the political and economic life of the countryside in Northern Italy, albeit in continuing dialectic with the urban and the state elites. This was possible thanks to the demographic weight of the area, which accounted for half the entire population of the Italian peninsula, with a population density of 35-45 per square kilometre. Villages in the piedmont area reached populations of 3,000-4,000, meaning the presence of consumers, labour force, and capital.[69] Finally, the cities, though distant enough to impede "economic conquest", were not so far away as to prevent rural and urban entrepreneurs from cooperating through trade in raw materials and finished products, or the formation of companies for the production and marketing of textiles, mining, or other manufacturing activities.

[68] W. Panciera (ed.), *Questioni di confine e terre di frontiera in area veneta. Secoli XVI-XVIII*, Milan, 2009.

[69] For a recent overview, see G. Alfani, "La popolazione dell'Italia settentrionale nel XV e XVI secolo: scenari regionali e macro-regionali", in G. Alfani, A. Carbone, B. Del Bo and R. Rao (eds.), *La popolazione italiana del Quattrocento e Cinquecento*, Udine, 2016, pp. 19-40; M. Di Tullio, "Popolazione, mestieri e mobilità del lavoro, nella Lombardia del Cinquecento", in Alfani, Carbone, Del Bo and Rao (eds.), *La popolazione italiana*, pp. 99-114.

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