Illustriousness in the Farmhouse Villa: Reading Virtue from a Flemish-Veronese Merchant Family’s History

Catherine Dewhirst

The Italian nobility has a long history tied to landownership, a dynamic example of which lies in the history of Verona from the late sixteenth century. Sweeping economic change, intellectual currents, agricultural policies, and the built heritage facilitated the rise in status of some mercantile families. Tracing the pressures facing a foreign merchant family emigrating to Venice and settling in Verona’s Valpolicella reveals the importance of social integration for the family’s members. Their farmhouse villa estate represents an enduring monument not only to the contemporary value of civic virtue but also to the construction of a noble identity.

A drawing of a farmhouse villa estate by Veronese architect Lodovico Perini, dating back to 1729\(^1\) embodies a negotiation of family identity from which wider intellectual and cultural currents and the maintenance of status can be discerned. (See Figure I.) Reflecting the perspective style developed by architectural theorist Sebastiano Serlio and suggesting the emulation of Palladian principles, the property, still extant, was situated in the village and ancient *comune* of San Pietro in Cariano, within the lush Valpolicella of the Adige Valley on the outskirts of Verona. Notably, Andrea Palladio had once spent some time in the village on commission to construct the Villa Sarego or Santa Sofia (c. 1565)\(^2\) and his name has been anecdotally associated with the Villa Acquistapace Dettoni Castellani – though this is unsubstantiated and undated. The villa and agricultural holdings depicted by Perini belonged to the Pulle family, having been bought by a Giovanni Pulle in 1632 shortly after the plague and one year after his marriage to an Angela Sbadacchia.\(^3\) Although there is little information about the proprietor,\(^4\) he is interesting for one

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\(^{3}\) *La villa nel veronese*, p. 125.

\(^{4}\) See Felice Pullè, *Pullè (1200-1931)* (Riccione: Tipografia Moderna, 1931), p. 74. This work represents the main source for this family’s history, which I have chosen to treat as oral family tradition for reasons I note later. The accent on the family name was added in 1790.
important reason. He managed to become ennobled within his lifetime despite
being the grandson of a Flemish merchant who had immigrated to Venice
sometime in the 1580s. The family’s farmhouse villa estate memorializes the
wider contemporary emphasis on civic virtue as well as the family’s need to align
with elite status, projected through the family name.

By this third generation, the Pulles represented one of the ‘newly rich
families’ of seventeenth-century Verona, attempting to align themselves socially
and politically with the _patriziato_. This is evident from Giovanni Pulle’s burial
place and tomb on his death in 1669. Named after Verona’s patron saint —
second to her chief patron saint, San Zeno – the chapel of San Pietro Martire,
attached to the city’s Dominican Basilica of Sant’ Anastasia, dates back to 1290.
Here, Giovanni Pulle’s sepulchre is ornately decorated by red and white
Veronese marble, including _fleur-de-lis_ and the engraving of ‘Comes Joannes de
Pullis’ [Comitis Joan de Pullis]. His wife was said to have joined him there on
her death ten years later. How did this foreign merchant family manage to climb
to such heights, a process representing only the first stage in securing a family’s
status? Although the study of the social transformation of commercial families
(famiglie mercantili) in this era is not new, what is curious is whether
contemporary ideas about nobility and material culture influenced their
aspirations. In this setting the farmhouse villa can symbolize broader trends and
negotiations for becoming _illustri_ (Latin, _illustris_), a term that had been gaining
currency from the 1560s onwards.

Analysis of commercial families in Venice and on the _terraferma_ initially
provides insight into the Republic’s international decline over the Italian
Renaissance despite the projection of illusion to the contrary. Venetian laws and
propaganda responded to broader market competition and threats of invasion,
cultivating wealth and allegiance as changing distinctions in the social orders
during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reveal. A Spanish

5 James Grubb, _Provincial Families of the Renaissance: Private and Public Life in the Veneto_ (Baltimore:

6 See Angelo Ventura, _Nobiltà e popolo nella società veneta del ’400 e ’500_ (Bari: Editori Laterza, 1964);
Giorgio Borelli, ‘Il problema della nobiltà: preliminai di una ricerca storica’, _Economia e storia_, 1
Marino Berengo, ‘Patriziato e nobiltà: il caso veronese’, _Rivista storica italiana_, 87.3 (1975), 493–
517; Grubb, _Provincial Families_; James Grubb, ‘When Myths Lose Power: Four Decades of

7 On the historiography and debates of the myths of Venice, see: Grubb, ‘When Myths Lose
Power’.
ambassador’s report, c. 1618, summarized the Republic’s people as ‘willing to contribute some of the proceeds of their labours to the state, for they are given to understand that these will be used for the defence of their prince, and hence of themselves as well’.\(^8\) Willing or not, three particular influences suggest the trajectories available to mercantile families with desires for social advancement, linked to the public demonstration of virtue.

Fiscal policies promoting agricultural investments quickened across the *terraferma* over the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as a result of food shortages, population increases, natural disasters, and war.\(^9\) Not irrelevant were the financial strains impacting on Venice’s maritime dominance with the axis of power having already started to shift in Genoa’s favour between 1550 and 1575, and towards Florence until the 1620s.\(^10\) Venice was also hit particularly hard by reversals in foreign trade due to the encroachment of the English, French, and Dutch into the international market.\(^11\) However, an intellectual culture, with the Aristotelian tradition, Renaissance Platonism, and classical humanism, also fuelled change.\(^12\) Mercantile families in Venice and the Veneto were not immune to the reassessment of theories of nobility. One element resonating with changes in conceptions of nobility from the fourteenth century is captured in the term, *virtù* (Latin, *virtus*), attractive to upwardly mobile families. And the printing of agricultural and architectural treatises revived such classical ideals over the period of turmoil. From the mid-sixteenth century, Europe-wide agricultural pressures instigated new interest in country villas across the Veneto landscape, which represented an investment (thus financial security), the expression of an aristocratic lifestyle of leisure (thus noble appearances), and economic production (thus civic virtue).\(^13\) This scenario has been criticized for its disproportional focus in


overlooking the peasantry labour force and because no economic prosperity was forthcoming. In the field of architectural history, however, Venice’s economic decline has been linked to a trend for late sixteenth-century country houses, used as summer residences, to become refined farmhouses in which proprietors were permanently domiciled by the seventeenth century due to a refedualization process.\(^15\)

Just as religious orders had reclaimed land over the fifteenth century, Venetian landed wealth increased across the *terraferma* in the next, driven by both the Republic’s vulnerability and the need for agriculture as commercial power swung from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic.\(^16\) Investment in agricultural estates and textiles proliferated after 1450, but especially from about 1570 to 1630.\(^17\) Nevertheless, this period has been described by S. J. Woolf as one of fluctuating ‘crises and recoveries’ because of the impact of broader economic instability.\(^18\) In this environment, the Pulle farmhouse villa estate, involving a mix of society and producing rustic agricultural messiness daily, made a public statement about civic purpose, buoyed by the family’s attempts to attain recognition as Veronese patricians. The San Pietro in Cariano property provides a remarkably consistent factor to this end.

Between the 1580s and 1830 there were ten generations of Pulles living mostly in greater Verona, including seven seemingly born in San Pietro in Cariano. Their agricultural farm and villa symbolized their need as much to articulate noble status as to project the family name. A discussion of this particular family speaks to anxieties about belonging. The decisions Giovanni Pulle made to integrate his family into the political structures of the day were influenced by wider social and cultural changes and values. Periods of instability often create opportunities for an elasticity in the social hierarchy. This can be gleaned indirectly from the Italian humanist discourse on nobility and from treatises reassessing the significance of the landscape and built heritage. An approach that takes these broad concepts into account intimates how regional, class, and gender identities and loyalty were both constructed and evolved around the concept of civic virtue. As Carlo Ginzburg argues, a ‘circularity’ of ideas took place in sixteenth century Italy with ‘a partial


\(^{17}\) Woolf, pp. 181–82, 198; Brian Pullan in *Venice: A Documentary History*, p. 166.

\(^{18}\) Woolf, p. 193.
convergence’ between elite and popular cultures.\textsuperscript{19} For foreign merchants in the Venetian context, Paolo Sarpi was conspicuous for his open learned discussions where ‘all sorts of virtuosi’ took part, ‘not onely of the nobility’ but including foreign mercantile men, described as ‘gallant and virtuous gentlemen [who] recount their Intelligences’.

Immigrating to the Venetian Republic not only offered trade opportunities, and possibly political refuge, for some literate foreign merchant families, but also exposed them to the contemporary ideology through which their family name and future could be secured. An examination of the Pulle family’s strategies offers an understanding of the ways mercantile families made sense of the vicissitudes of the Republic.

I. Fleeing the Flemish Lowlands

According to oral family tradition two merchant brothers, Jean and Nicolas de Pulle, fled the wars of religion in the 1580s from the city of Valenciennes during the Spanish assault of Phillip II because they were Calvinist.\textsuperscript{21} The family’s oral tradition states that, bringing with them silk worms and mulberry trees – and seemingly Jean’s infant son, Jacques – the exiled brothers became successful entrepreneurs in the Valpolicella, securing the wealth and status of the family for future generations to be counted amongst the patricians of Verona.\textsuperscript{22} Certainly, the Veronese chronicler Carlo Carinelli, who had dedicated his life to establishing the genealogy of the Veronese nobility, recorded how: ‘The authors of this Pulle family profess their origins to be Flemish, having settled in Verona a little before 1600…’ [‘Gli’Autori di questa Famiglia Pulle professarono l’origine sua de Fiandra, venero poco


\textsuperscript{21} It is not clear that the de Pulle brothers were Calvinist. Their Flemish genealogy is traceable through surname and coat-of-arms which are linked to contemporary families in the cities of Valenciennes and Lille in the province of Hainaut, Duchy of Brabant, but also to a family in Amsterdam, suggesting Protestant beliefs. See: J. B. Carpentier, \textit{Histoire généalogique de la noblesse des Pays Bas}, 2 vols (Du Cambresis, III, 1668), II, pp. 906–07; J. B. Rietstap, \textit{Armorial général}, 5 vols (Lyon: Société de Sauvegarde Historique 1950), III, pp. 476, 477; Henri Jougla de Morenas, \textit{Grand armorial de France}, 7 vols (Paris: Société du Grand Armorial de France, 1948), V, p. 363.

\textsuperscript{22} Pulè, p. 17. Verona, however, had been producing silk from the early 1400s (Luca Molà, \textit{The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), pp. 221–22).
avanti il 1600 in Verona…’].\(^{23}\) This family’s history was published in 1931 and provides a combination of well-documented facts, copies of archival letters, and hagiography. It therefore must be used with caution. However, remnants of the Pulle family’s strategies, which may be read from the scant signposts of Giovanni Pulle’s life, form part of a mnemonic reading by family descendants about their identity over time. For the period in question, Nicolas de Pulle slips from the records after arrival, but his brother, Jean, is noted as having gone directly to Verona while Jean’s son (Italianized to Giacomo and father of Giovanni Pulle) is tied directly to the city of Venice.\(^{24}\)

In Venice, where the de Pulle brothers first arrived, Flemish merchants stood out as a small but formidable group. Their community was more numerous here than elsewhere in Italy, not least because of their ubiquitousness in the traditional transcontinental and Levantine trade after 1590.\(^{25}\) In Venice, there was little concern for either Protestant or Catholic politics as every exterior influence underwent assimilation into a culture of Venetian pride and independence.\(^{26}\) The emphasis on “civic” Christianity helped to cultivate identity and a sense of place for mercantile and artisan classes in particular.\(^{27}\) Ugo Tucci mentions how foreign merchants quickly appropriated Venetian perspectives and behaviour.\(^{28}\) Many may have understood, as James Grubb states, that it was ‘antiquity, wealth, and virtù (especially civic-minded virtù)’ that qualified the Venetian nobility.\(^{29}\)

Some foreigners chose not to reside in their group quarters in Venice, instead taking up residency and citizenship.\(^{30}\) The regulations governing

\(^{23}\) Carlo Carinelli, _La verità nel suo centro riconosciuto nelle famiglie nobili e cittadine di Verona_ (Canonico Veronese, IV. ‘Pulle’, c. 1698), pp. 1631–32. Carinelli started his chronicle on 25 September 1658 and his last entry appeared on 1 June 1718 [typographical errors in original]. All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

\(^{24}\) There is no evidence in the Pulle history that Jean de Pulle went directly to Verona, but the assertion that he did might relate to the regulations for claiming noble status. Giacomo Pulle married a Margherita Scanagati and they had four children, one of whom was Giovanni Pulle. See Pulle, pp. 68, 71.


\(^{30}\) Pullan in _Venice: A Documentary History_, p. 325.
Venetian citizenship for mercantile and foreign families, decreed in 1552 and concretized by 1630, required fifteen years’ residency and taxation for those de intus (in Venice) and twenty-five years for those de extra with considerable leniency for duties on trade.\textsuperscript{31} The decree also required, ‘together with all their descendants, [the] renouncing of allegiance to every other city, with the firm intention of dying and living on through their descendants in this land’, an oath, and renewal every five years.\textsuperscript{32} Money and loyalty, then, constituted civic virtue in that they contributed to the physical prosperity and military potential supporting the state. Amongst other Italian cities the Flemish also had a strong commercial presence in Verona where, similarly, ennoblement required residency of at least twenty years while hereditary rights of descent took about two generations.\textsuperscript{33} Yet, noble patents did not equate to aristocratic status for members of the Veronese patriziato except in extraordinary circumstances like securing a role in civic governance.\textsuperscript{34} And, while trade was ‘respectable enough’ and did not prohibit successful upward mobility,\textsuperscript{35} such origins succumbed to some debate.

\section*{II. Foreign Merchant Aspirations and New Wealth}

Families like the Pulles formed what are termed ‘famiglie minori’ as opposed to the ‘grande famiglie veronesi’ or ‘grandi casati aristocratici’.\textsuperscript{36} The ancient dynastic families were recognizable to contemporaries by their names, civic responsibilities, and material outward signs like the way they dressed and where they lived. In contrast, men like Giovanni Pulle were outsiders by origin, found amongst the ranks of a nascent borghesia – an inchoate group even by the nineteenth century\textsuperscript{37} but one that encompassed famiglie mercantili and placed them slightly above artisans, tradesmen, and labourers by the fifteenth century. The threat such families posed was evident in an early attempt – all the same unsuccessful – to contain the display of female luxury in Verona by restricting the wardrobe to one garment of silk in a sumptuary law of 1441.\textsuperscript{38} Yet, what Woolf describes as the sixteenth century’s fluctuating

\textsuperscript{33} Brulez, \textit{Marchands flamands à Venise}, p. xxiv; Borelli, ‘Il problema’, p. 493.
\textsuperscript{34} Borelli, ‘Il problema’, p. 490; Berengo, ‘Patriziato e nobiltà’, p. 500.
\textsuperscript{35} Grubb, \textit{Provincial Families}, p. 175.
\textsuperscript{36} Berengo, pp. 495, 496, 498.
\textsuperscript{38} Grubb, \textit{Provincial Families}, p. 184.
economic circumstances, noted earlier, might have encouraged the aspirations of mercantile families.

Notions of patriciate, nobility, and citizenship differed dramatically from other parts of Europe in and across the Italian peninsula where profound regional variations could be found. Indeed, city-state circumstances dictated the acceptable hierarchy, which also oscillated in any given era over three centuries. Generally, in the Veneto, nobiltà referred to a hereditary title whereas patriziato signified participation in the Republic’s power structures and social status, which set its members apart. More specifically, in Verona, Marino Berengo states that the patriziato ‘referred to themselves first as citizens, then as nobles (at times from the 1400s, always from the 1500s onwards)’ [‘si son chiamati cittadini prima, nobili poi (talora dal Quattro, sempre dal Cinquecento in avanti)’]. Although the Venetian patriciate was built on mercantile roots, Verona’s elite allowed few exceptions into the ranks of what amounted to an aristocracy based on a feudal orientation. Angelo Ventura describes the discrimination against merchant families with such pretensions; they were judged as ‘base’, ‘the lowest’, and ‘sordid’ people because of their class. However, the consensus on restrictive access to the upper echelons has been contested in Grubb’s analysis of the private documents of minor and merchant Vicentine and Veronese families.

New wealth enabled a ‘broadening’ of the dominant class membership in fifteenth-century Verona where there were similarities with Vicenza. Focusing on the commercial Arnaldi family of Vicenza, Grubb argues that ‘[s]trict closure would have led to eventual class suicide’. Nevertheless, by the sixteenth century, the general view holds that ‘the gates slammed shut’ around the patriziato in Verona where the ‘ruthless persecution of upstarts’ took place. Even in the city on whose foundations commercial origins were applauded with ‘full civic dignity’, ‘the great era of the noble merchant’ came

41 Berengo, ‘Patriziato e nobiltà’, p. 494.
43 Ventura, Nobiltà e popolo, pp. 258–60.
44 Grubb, Provincial Families, p. 168.
45 Grubb, Provincial Families, p. 162.
46 Grubb, Provincial Families, p. 170.
under pressure at this time by Venice’s patriciate, divided on how to cope with applications from men of commerce within the broader economic crisis. This crisis was clearly more widespread as the numbers of European nobles declined from about 6500 in 1568 to 3400 in 1800. How, then, could a foreign mercantile family nurture hopes for being counted amongst the grande famiglie veronesi? Grubb points to the tendency of some families to achieve their goals, but at a slower pace, suggesting a reliance on opportunities. Tucci argues that mercantile men in Venice reinvented themselves. Obviously, personal wealth played a critical role. However, those ambitious or desperate enough absorbed some of the prevalent social and cultural prompts, such as the emphasis on values of individual talent and determination, of civic and political worth. The term virtù conveyed the necessary intellectual, physical, and moral fibre that separated the worldview of elites from non-elites. With little available evidence on the Pulle family, their transformation may be read from a confluence of the discourse on nobility, Venetian landownership policies, agricultural and architectural treatises, and the built heritage.

III. Nobility, Agricultural Value, and Landownership

The poet Dante Alighieri had challenged the ancient theory of nobility in his early fourteenth-century work, Convivio. Nobility was traditionally defined by the Aristotelian values of ‘ancestral wealth and fine manners’, but Dante repositioned the concept, emphasizing Aristotle’s discussion of ‘moral worth’. Indeed, Dante asserted that neither birth nor inherited wealth could determine true nobility; it was only attainable through an individual’s ‘vertute’. Dante’s true nobility could be measured more ‘by its effects than by its sources’ [,da li effetti che da’ principii’], by what followed, not by what preceded (II.IV, X, 6). Neither ancestral wealth nor generational time bestowed a presumption of nobility, only virtue did: ‘Nobility resides wherever virtue is, but virtue not wherever there is nobility’ [,È gentilezza dovunqu’ è vertute, ma non vertute ov’ella’] (II.V, ‘Canzone terza’, 101–02). The origins of nobility, he wrote, were ‘found in the soul; … it is like the seed

49 Grubb, Provincial Families, p. 169.
51 Dante Alighieri, Il Convivio (Firenze: Felice Le Monnier, [1303-1304] 1964), II.IV, ‘Canzone terza’, 101–02. Subsequent references to this work are given in-text.
of the divine virtue’ [‘ne l’anima è quella; … è a guisa di semente de la virtù divina’] (II.IV, XXI, 2). His interpretation reinvigorated ancient notions of ‘intellectual and moral virtues’ [‘le intelletuali e le morali virtudi’] through spiritual, emotional, and corporal responsibility (II.IV, XIX, 5). Just as Dante argued for the altruistic display of riches by giving generously and supporting essential services (see II.IV, XIII), wealth pooled in the right direction, in line with the notion of moral worth – education, civic projects, charities – might provide the steps towards noble recognition even if still limited. By the sixteenth century, Robert Tavernor states, education and the arts could manifest a classical sense of virtue as ‘excellence’ and ‘good action’ for ‘the benefit and enhancement of civic life’.52

Mercantile men were familiar with a sense of civic duty from their secular world dealings. Indeed, Tucci states that “moral and political virtue” … gave substance to trade as a highly specialized occupation and one of solid civic worth”.53 Emphasizing renewal and survival as motivating factors, Tucci explains how some members of the commercial sector donned ‘the colours of the nobility’; they adopted noble conduct, displayed noble values, and purchased noble titles from the spare change of their accumulated wealth, most of which was pooled into the Venetian state.54 Some, however, may also have been acquainted with Marcus Tullius Cicero’s De Officiis. Cicero had noted the importance of virtue and moral worth amongst the mercantile class when he wrote that those involved in ‘large scale trade’ [‘Mercatura … magna et copiosa’] and world imports were ‘not to be greatly disparaged’ [‘non est admodum vituperanda’], but were deserving of ‘the highest respect’ [‘contenta portius’] for their activities - ‘none more profitable’ [‘nihil uberius’] and ‘none more delightful’ [‘nihil dulcius’] than agricultural work.55 Renaissance intellectuals contributed in a similar way on this topic. Pietro Pomponazzi, for instance, wrote in his Tractatus de immortalitate animae how all people shared responsibility for the common utility and how all, not just the elite, should strive for moral virtue.56 Moreover, Benedetto Cotrugli, in his treatise, Della mercatura e del mercante perfetto, qualified commercial activity as a ‘dignified’ calling, ‘great, and sublime, and respected for much …’ [‘La

54 Tucci, p. 372.
dignità, & ufficitio del mercante e grande, & sublime, per molti rispetti …’], holding that mercantile honour could be secured by being motivated by need, not desire.57

IV. The Pulle Family’s Strategies

While there is no way of knowing what the Pulles read, the kind of literature above reflects debates about the worthiness of merchants. However, the measures that they took for integrating the family name into the fabric of Veronese society were testing. There were two obstacles that Giovanni Pulle faced. From the outset, as foreigners, his family would have struck strong resistance by local authorities, given that the rules were difficult enough for the wealthy native-born.58 Then, involvement in commercial firms, wholesale trade, and securing contracts signalled greater worth than did an association with retail trade.59 The Pulles’ assertion of nobility was based on honourable commerce, wealth, marriage alliances, and ties to the Church. Carinelli’s description of the family’s progression is telling:

… after some time, they took up trade in silk resulting in more than modest wealth for them, which they used to advance themselves to the status of nobles, giving up daughters who married noblemen, providing dowries corresponding to the status of their husbands, and being satisfied to receive from the gentlewomen of the nobility, who they married, dowries of insufficient means, in order to ennoble themselves. Giovanni then attained the title of count …60

That they were merchants of silk was auspicious. Sericulture and silk cloth manufacturing were of central importance to the economies of Renaissance Italy.61 Verona outstripped all other regions in the Veneto in silk production in 1608, rivalled closely by Vicenza.62 From Carinelli’s account, the benefits of

57 Benedetto Cotrugli Raugeo, Della mercatura et del mercante perfetto (Brescia: Alla Libraria del Bozzola [1573] 1602), pp. 124, 162; see also Tucci, p. 357.
58 Grubb, Provincial Families, p. 165.
59 Tucci, p. 347; Grubb, Provincial Families, p. 176.
60 Carinelli: ‘… doppo qualche tempo, s’impiegarono nel traffico della setta, col qual conseguite più che mediocri ricchezze, se ne servivo per avanzarsi alla condizione di Nobile, costituendo alle figliole ch’ammogliarono con Persone Nobili, costituendole doti corrispondenti alla conditio de Mariti e contentandosi di ricevere dalle Donne tolte in sua Casa, quando sono state nobili la condizione per Dote ripieghi e mezzitermini, per il più da nobilitarsi. Procurò poi Giovanni il titolo di Conte…” [typographical errors in original].
62 Molà, p. 235.
the Pulle family’s trade in silk were used strategically to invest in noble family alliances. Marriage was acknowledged as a method for establishing business and trade links. One view claims that it ‘neutralized competitors, cemented political alliances’, and allowed any family of mercantile origins to merge into the patrician class.63

Carinelli’s record, however, neglects those daughters sent to the convent, known to have been five Pulle women over two generations. The convent – regarded as a ‘cheap option’ – alleviated the financial burden on ambitious families while also reinforcing nobility and powerful friends.64 Jutta Gisela Sperling argues that enforced monachizations aided the declining patriciate as a ‘system of exchange’, providing both investments and loans for a family’s political advantage.65 The Pulle family’s decision to monachize some daughters effectively demonstrated loyalty to the Church – a loyalty that was calculated to guarantee patronage and protection in return – and to the patriziato. Moreover, ‘Episcopal investiture’ was a recognized step for minor or alien families seeking advancement in status; indeed it was considered ‘a last resort’.66

In 1649, eighteen years after Giovanni Pulle’s marriage, the Bishop of Verona made him feudatory of the parish of San Floriano, a frazione within the commune of San Pietro in Cariano.67 Notably, the commune’s local government had a high degree of autonomy from Verona’s administration.68 Bishops also tended to stem from ancient Veronese casati, potentially with several noble titles, so vassals were defined as ‘noble’ and a fief allowed the collection of tithes and the administration of various hamlets, two significant privileges in Verona.69 However, feudatory rights still equated to restricted access to the patriziato. So Giovanni Pulle went further. He turned to the other acceptable avenue available to non-ancient noble families – a neighbouring sovereign.70

65 Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1999), pp. 6, 237.
66 Grubb, Provincial Families, p. 177.
67 Cited in Pulle, p. 72.
69 Grubb, Provincial Families, pp. 177, 178.
70 Musgrave, p. 10.
And, on 12 June 1660 in Mantua, Carlo Gonzaga-Nevers II, Duke of Mantua decreed the title of ‘count’ to Giovanni Pulle with rights of descent.71

As feudatory and officially ennobled, Count Giovanni Pulle paved the way for his son to become Vicar of the *comune*.72 The legitimate son of eight surviving children, Count Lorenzo Pulle has also been described as a personal attendant [*scudiero*],73 signifying noble status and a military role. In fact, men of arms held one of two ‘entirely honourable’ professions (the other being law), which carried ‘some lustre’ for the family name.74 As Vicar, Count Lorenzo Pulle was essentially ‘a small claims judge’, his role being to administer neighbouring *frazione* meetings within the *comune*, to collect taxes which traditionally involved direct contact with the *Consiglio di Verona*, and to oversee civic projects like roads and the defence of rights and privileges, such as exemptions from feeding and securing foreign troops.75 This ‘civic element’ reinforced the Republic’s ideology and longevity, typically through art and architecture,76 but agriculture was no less important.

Piero de’ Crescenzi’s agricultural treatise, *Liber ruralium commodorum*, for instance, offered a manual on rural activities, guided by intellectuals of the past like Avicenna, and equating to a guidebook on maximizing a farming villa estate.77 De’ Crescenzi emphasized classical ideas, writing how ‘nothing is better than Agriculture, nothing more plentiful, more sweet, more dignified of the free man’ [*niuna è miglior dell’Agricoltura, niuna più abbondevole, niuna più dolce, e niuna più degna dell’uomo libero*]. To think along the lines of both usefulness and delight reflected a person’s ‘virtù’ in wisdom. Good health and abundant fields should guide the choice of estate.78 It is no surprise, with economic policy shifts, intellectual discourse, and practical guides, that the agricultural estate and farmhouse villa forged a potent agency for individual advancement and reflections of civic virtue.

71 Cited in Pulle, p. 68.
72 See Pulle, p. 36.
73 See Pulle, p. 20.
75 See Musgrave, pp. 15–16.
76 Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defence of Republican Liberty*, p. 133.
V. The Rise of Signorial Space

The concern for ‘signorial space’ emerged from the fifteenth-century concept of ‘the ideal city’ and ‘ideology of magnificence’ when the public display of wealth was considered virtuous. While the patronage of art and architecture helped to theorize the concept of magnificence, the greatness of the city stemmed from those within. Giovanni Botero’s treatise, *Cause della grandezza e magnificenza della città*, opens with the assertion that magnificence is based not on physical size and well-built walls, but rather on the number and power of the inhabitants. Although emphasizing Italians’ spending on and devotion to their cities, Botero described how the nobility:

… dwell magnificently in the villas, as is evident in the country-side of Florence, Venice and Genoa, which is full of buildings, and for both the worthiness of the materials and excellence of design, fit to honour a kingdom rather than a city.

The important point here is Botero’s acknowledgement of an interrelationship between the rural landscape and metropolitan identity.

Timely had been the appearance in 1596 of a Venetian treatise on the importance of earnings from the land, rather than through either warfare or ‘illicit’ trade. Plague outbreaks may have contributed, but farming gained increasing reverence from the sixteenth century, resulting in a growing link between the land and noble status, and clearing the path for rich merchants. Across Italy, agricultural land and palatial country dwellings constituted the...

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82 Botero, II, p. 341: ‘... habitino ancor essi magnificamente nelle ville, come si può veder ne’ contadi di Fiorenza, di Venetia, e di Genova, pieni di fabrice, e per nobilita di materia, e per eccellenza d’artificio, atte à far honore ad un Regno, nò che ad una Città’.


most secure economic investment for both new and old noble families, through which loans and a public career could demonstrate civic responsibility and loyalty. The push in the Veneto for land acquisition and cultivation, and the re-construction of the farmhouse villa symbolized similar ideals, reclaiming the classical sense of *otium* from the busy demands of *negotium*. In a sense, the city’s ‘magnificence’ mirrored the wealthy individual’s ‘splendour’ from the expenses invested in and meanings associated with the family’s private property.

What dignified the country estate was its utility and comfort. Here, from Palladio’s perspective, ‘gentlemen’ [*gentiluomo*] could engage in ‘the skill in farming’ (‘industria et arte dell’agricoltura’) – at once enriching the land and creating wealth – improve their physical health and revive the spirit from ‘the aggravations of the city’ (‘agitazioni della città’), and spend time in intellectual and spiritual pursuits, enjoying the soothing surrounding but mostly ‘their own virtue’ [*tutto lo lor vertù*] as men from the classical past had done. Twenty-eight years before his ennoblement Giovanni Pulle had bought the San Pietro in Cariano property from a marquis Fumanelli who owned another estate in San Floriano. Yet, twenty-one years later, Giovanni Pulle recorded in the *polizze d’estimo* that his land was ‘without family home’ even if the villa is said to date back to around 1594. This may be explained by hefty taxes and the need for ‘loyalty and vigilance’ amongst rural workers by keeping taxes down and shouldering their debts. However, within thirteen years of his father’s death, Count Lorenzo Pulle recorded possessing land ‘with family home’. The layout of the estate and the unaltered structure of the villa and other buildings reflect both functionality and the revival of the classical ideal of *otium*, captured by architectural theorists.

The scene was particularly fertile for an architectural revolution across the Veneto, where a revival of the *all’antica* manner in villa design and building occurred. After the discovery of Vitruvius’ first-century-BCE architectural treatise, around the time Verona was annexed by Venice, the farmhouse villa itself underwent a renaissance in the hands of a relatively small group of educated specialists. The manuscripts inspired Leon Battista Alberti to write the first modern architectural treatise on the ‘Vitruvian message’ and

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88 *La villa nel veronese*, p. 408; Personal communication by Roberto Marconi, grounds manager of the Villa Pullè-Galtarossa, 1998.
89 Berengo, pp. 501, 504; Grubb, *Provincial Families*, pp. 152, 179.
90 *La villa nel veronese*, p. 408.
set a new benchmark for architects. Classicizing the local farmhouse villa, architectural theorists started responding to local rural needs rather than simply reproducing the ancient Roman villa model. Four men stand out: the socially conscious Serlio with his various manuscripts; Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola with La regola delle cinque ordini dell’architettura (1562); Palladio with his unfinished I quattro libri dell’architettura (1570); and, contributing to Palladianism, Vincenzo Scamozzi with L’idea della architettura universale (1615). Their works provided models for even illiterate artisans, reflecting the classical concept of virtue and tapping into the contemporary theory of nobility. But, Palladio’s ingenuity dominates this narrative. He was ‘moved and inflamed’ [‘esercitato et inflammati’] by the ancient architecture of Rome amongst other places – by his ‘good studies of this quality of virtue’ [‘ottimi studi di questa qualità di virtù’] – and he recognized the importance of sharing one’s gifts ‘for the use also of others’ [‘ad utilità anco degli altri’].

The farmhouse villa had enjoyed a tradition on the terraferma, dating back to the early 1400s. Its reinvention suggests a renewed perspective about living quarters. Martin Kubelik highlights Palladio’s activities in the Veneto as being discernible through his ability to combine functionality for local needs with his ‘humanist ideals and classical architecture’. The nuances of this are clear in Palladio’s frequently quoted description of his client, the ‘magnificent’ [‘magnifico signor’] Leonardo Emo of Fanzolo, whose Trivigiano villa estate was not only constructed for productivity, but also to emulate serenity and beauty. The fusion of the vernacular with the monumental in Palladio’s constructions and renovations spread in influence across the Veneto and beyond for 200 years after his death, redefining signorial space.

93 Hale, p. 301.
96 Kubelik, p. 110.
Figure 1

Lodovico Perini, The farmhouse villa estate, c.1729.


Reproduced by kind permission of Professor Giorgio Borelli.
Figure 2

Villa Pullè-Galtarossa.

Reproduced by kind permission of Julie and Bruce Rivendell.
VI. The Pulle Family Villa and Estate

Buildings speak to practical and symbolic concerns. Alice Friedman explains their role as overlaid aspects of a system through which meaning is constituted.99 Perini’s 1729 depiction of the Pulles’ villa and estate convey the virtue of a public utility and the family’s elite aspirations. The design shows it was hidden from any passing traffic by a large exterior wall along the public road on which a contemporary stucco of the family coat-of-arms (stemma) above an arch is found today, emulating the great casati homes in Verona.100 Now sealed off, the entry through the arch led to the villa’s (palazzo’s) detached right wing, in which a mosaic of the Holy Family (dating unconfirmed) was housed. The ‘palazzo’ vista overlooks a double row of cypress trees in another field ['altri beni']. While not located in the centre of the estate, the villa’s elevated position nevertheless allowed surveillance beyond the boundaries of the estate and daily agricultural work within it. This suggests both prudence and the profit of good air, wind, and fresh water access, the latter said by de’ Crescenzi and Palladio to be advisable.101

Farmhouse villa estates in the Valpolicella tended to combine vines with mulberry trees along the boundaries of arable fields on which various crops were grown102 and the Pulle property was no different. When Count Lorenzo Pulle and his son, Count Antonio Pulle, tended the property, it was for cultivating silk and producing wine from 1669 if not earlier.103 Perini’s design outlines the general confines of the estate where the interior communal road ['strada comune'] leads to the edge of the Progno of Fumane and another track ['condotta'] allows transportation between distinct plots. Perini also details two arable fields ['caleselle'], one belonging to a Signor Leonardo, and two other sections of land, which point to ‘the classical coltura mista’ method, suitable for small crop growing in the region and considered the safest option.104 The bridge ['ponte'] reveals a stream and the arch ['capitello'] marks an entrance for silk workers to the original mulberry tree orchard ['brolo'], given the old mulberry tree still extant, an area considered

100 Berengo, ‘Patriziato e nobiltà’, p. 512.
101 De’ Crescenzi, Trattato della agricoltura, I–IV, pp. 6–20; Palladio, I quattro libri, II.XII, p. 143.
102 Musgrave, pp. 21–22.
104 Musgrave, Land and Economy in Baroque Italy pp. 22, 96.
by standards of the time as ‘the soul and delight of the property’ [‘l’anima e diporto della villa’].

Prominent in Perini’s design is the ‘case rusticali’ [vernacularized ‘Cà’], identified as separate from the estate. This marks a distinction between owners and workers, suggesting, as in Palladio’s day, how the villa had the potential to express the proprietor’s ‘magnificent and most noble soul’ [‘magnifico e di nobilissimo animo’]. Yet some features of the villa allowed a relaxing of social boundaries. Ramp entrances, porticoes (see Figure II), and dovecot towers typified the vernacular farmhouses with which Palladio worked and imparted operational and symbolic meanings. The ramp entrance was designed for drying grain or produce, its position oriented towards the sun. Porticoes denoted access to the household and, according to the contemporary architectural theorist Giuseppe Falcone, offered shelter from the weather for people, animals, and produce, for agricultural equipment, and for storage, as circumstances dictated. Dovecot towers were traditionally employed for both fertilizer and the dinner table, but often used as granaries and, in the instance of threat, for military defence. However, these features also hint at other meanings.

The structurally detached villa wings asserted a statement about hierarchical activities, as much utilitarian as aesthetic. Their separation from the structure of the palazzo punctuates the boundary around the family’s living space, reinforced by Perini’s description of it as belonging to signor Conte Pulle [‘sig.r Co: Pulle’]. Nevertheless, while the wings still provided access from the palazzo to the dovecots, the connotation is one of contemporary restrictions between the estate’s classes and in gender relations. For instance, at some time the tower of the palazzo’s left wing (looking out from the palazzo) was converted into a chapel dedicated to the popular Santa Lucia. We might understand this as a space adapted for the privacy of the family and possibly the family crypt. Yet we could equally conclude that it facilitated religious rituals for workers residing on the property. Although there is no way of knowing whether the palazzo housed an internal chapel for the family’s privileged use, the peripheral location of the Santa Lucia chapel at the edge of the villa’s structure and with direct access to the strada comune implies usage

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105 See Palladio, I quattro libri, II.XII, p. 143.
109 See Kuberlik, p. 95.
111 See La villa nel veronese, p. 410.
by those exterior to the noble family. Furthermore, as towers could also be adapted for military purposes – relevant to the late 1700s in connection with the Austrian and French invasions if not earlier – there is another sense in which they could be read. In this case, utilizing the towers for surveillance intimates a masculine space and one of power. The impression here is that something precious lay within the boundaries of the villa, worthy of defence from those who worked the fields or from the uninvited who lurked beyond the estate’s parameters.

There are similar connotations apparent in the structure of the palazzo itself. The interior and exterior speak to class and gender distinctions through both practical and symbolic purposes. For example, the interior was designed in the typical symmetrical tripartite manner over three levels for multi-household reasons. In the Veneto, there was a ‘service floor’ on the lower level, the ‘piano nobile’ for the proprietor’s family on the main level, and a granary acting as insulation as well as storage on the upper level. These levels could vary according to needs with the lower acting as a cellar and simultaneously as separate dining rooms or accommodation for female and male servants. The central space on the main level spanned the opposite ends of the front and rear of the building, flanked by smaller rooms on each side, for official and domestic activities, respectively. The loggias, leading from this level to the exterior front wall, are prominent and warned of an area off-limits to workers. Likewise, façade artwork, typically applied to the external walls of Venetian villas during their construction, expressed similar motives. Although the only extant photographs of the palazzo’s façade come from a later period when the villa had been sold to two subsequent families (the Monga family in about 1830 and later the Galtarossa family in about 1930), both recall the earlier sixteenth-century practice. We might therefore assume that the original artwork had been maintained. Classical female figures on the façade suggested the sense that ‘virtue resides within’ and reminded onlookers of the owner’s nobility and the palazzo’s representation of otium. Notably, above the loggias was a painted stemma, promoting the family name, noble past and identity. Statues of classical figures, adorning the entrance ramp in the extant photographs and somewhat visible in Perini’s design,

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112 Kuberlik, p. 102.
113 See Palladio, I quattro libri, II.XV, pp. 158, 162, 171.
reinforced a message about patriarchal protection over virtues like moral goodness, beauty, and modesty.

Thus, what was worth defending for the Pulles could be read from their farmhouse villa estate’s layout and structure, interior and exterior spaces, and artistic decorations. Here, the family’s civic contributions were discernable from the productive agricultural terrain and commercial activities that dominated the property. Here also, the architectural features reinforced class and gender hierarchies to comply with trends in noble status. And, here, medieval and classical artwork demonstrated an alliance with patrician ideals to help defuse any betrayal of the family’s foreign and merchant origins. Even if the revolution in architectural practice and building construction allowed families like the Pulles to articulate their civic worth for Veronese society, the farmhouse villa estate goes further in that it maps the foundations of the family’s sense of identity.

Mnemonic references from agricultural production and the built heritage suggest how *terraferma* families adapted to the vulnerabilities inherent in the Venetian Republic’s struggle to maintain international commercial dominance. Economic policies, humanist developments, and various treatises facilitated a changing cultural outlook, whereby the Church, female members and a neighbouring prince could aid mercantile families like the Pulles in demonstrating civic virtue and securing elite status. In this context, the farmhouse villa, while articulating citizen and patrician loyalty, was also self-serving. It represented a means for legitimizing the nobility of families and their names. Over time, the Pulles followed different trajectories in line with military careers, spanning Austrian hegemony, the Risorgimento, mass migration, and Fascism, during which they kept up with noble subscriptions. Etching his family name onto the Veronese landscape, Giovanni Pulle had put in place a nostalgic monument to Venetian republican ideals and to his descendants’ identity.

_School of Humanities and Communication_  
_The University of Southern Queensland_

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