

**Small-Scale Diplomacy in Late Fifteenth-Century Italy:
Gentil Virginio Orsini and His Ambassadors
(1480s-1490s)**

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Small-Scale Diplomacy in Late Fifteenth-Century Italy: Gentil Virginio Orsini and His Ambassadors (1480s-1490s)

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This article focuses on the diplomatic activities of the Roman baron Gentil Virginio Orsini during the final decades of the fifteenth century. Through an analysis of the missions carried out by his ambassadors, documented by a body of unpublished sources, the article explores the strategies through which a minor political figure managed to carve out a role within the broader diplomatic environment of Renaissance Italy. The article explores how Orsini used diplomacy as a practical means by which to wield political influence in the wider world of Italian politics.

Il saggio si concentra sull'attività diplomatica del barone romano Gentil Virginio Orsini durante le ultime decadi del XV secolo. Attraverso l'analisi delle missioni condotte dai suoi ambasciatori, ampiamente testimoniate da un corpus inedito di fonti, si è inteso esplorare le strategie attraverso le quali una figura politica di minor calibro come l'Orsini è riuscita a ritagliarsi un ruolo nei diversi contesti politici che caratterizzavano l'Italia del tempo. In questo sistema, il ricorso alla diplomazia si configurò come un pratico strumento per il consolidamento dell'autonomia politica del barone, capace di estendere la propria influenza nell'ampio scenario politico italiano.

Renaissance, Fifteenth Century, Italy, Gentil Virginio Orsini, Diplomacy, Network.

Rinascimento, secolo XV, Italia, Gentil Virginio Orsini, diplomazia, network.

1. Introduction

In the fifteenth century, the Italian political system was characterized by a widespread diplomatic network that connected different polities in a variety of ways. Major and minor powers with varying degrees of legitimacy utilized practices of confrontation and negotiation within a diplomatic framework to prevent war and limit conflicts.¹ In such a system, the political arena con-

¹ For a general framework on Italian Renaissance diplomacy, see Senatore, «*Uno mundo de carta*»; Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*.

sisted of a wide range of polities from powerful states such as the duchy of Milan, the Papal States, the kingdom of Naples, and the republics of Venice and Florence to minor political entities such as smaller republics, communities, powerful women, feudal lords, and *condottieri*.²

This paper examines the diplomatic activities of one of these smaller entities, that of the Roman baron Gentil Virginio Orsini (1434-97) from the 1480s to the 1490s. Although many scholars have convincingly recognized the pivotal role of the Roman barons within the political context of the Papal States and beyond, the specific diplomatic practices of the Roman barons has not yet received attention.³ Moreover, Virginio Orsini's diplomatic activities offer the opportunity to advance our understanding of how a politically marginal figure, in this case, a minor lord with undefined power and questionable sovereignty could use diplomacy strategically to carve out a meaningful role within the complex, ever-shifting landscape of Italian Renaissance politics.⁴

In the period under discussion, Virginio Orsini was an experienced *condottiere* and a charismatic leader whose power rested on a number of key elements. As an Orsini, he benefited from belonging to one of the most powerful and numerous baronial lineages of the Papal States that possessed extensive lands and castles. Moreover, like some other Roman baronial families such as branches of the Colonna and Caetani, Virginio's branch of Bracciano also held fiefdoms in the kingdom of Naples; this made him both a subject of the papacy and a vassal of the Aragonese king of Naples.⁵ After the death of his father, Napoleone, in 1480, Virginio officially entered the Italian political arena and, as the only male heir, inherited the entire estates of the Bracciano branch. His influence in the peninsula political system grew significantly during the Neapolitan Barons' War (1485-6), in which he was appointed Captain General of the troops of the League of Florence, Milan, and Naples.⁶ After the war ended, he pursued shrewd dynastic politics that led him to arrange two important marriages. The first, in 1486, was that of his son Gian Giordano to Maria of Aragon, an illegitimate daughter of Ferdinand of Aragon, king of Naples (1458-94); the second, in 1487, was of his niece, Alfonsina Orsini, daughter of his uncle Roberto (d.

² On the Italian political system, see Fubini, *Italia quattrocentesca*; Gamberini and Lazzarini, *The Italian Renaissance States*.

³ Carocci, *Baroni di Roma*; de Vincentiis, "La sopravvivenza come potere;" Shaw, *The political role*; Serio, *Una gloriosa sconfitta*; Shaw, "The Roman barons and the popes." Recently, Loek Luiten challenged the traditional idea of a constant conflict between the popes and the barons, highlighting the importance of their diplomatic role in supporting the restoration of the papacy after the Great Schism, particularly in relation to the Crown of Naples, a perspective that requires further investigation: Luiten, "In support of Pontifical Power."

⁴ *Practices of Diplomacy*; Moeglin and Péquignot, *Diplomatie. Beyond ambassadors*; Storti, *Opportune innovazioni*; Lazzarini, *Constructing and de-constructing diplomacy*. Some case-studies, partially assimilated to the experience of Virginio Orsini are those of the other Italian *condottieri*: Ferente, *La sfortuna*; Covini, "Guerra e relazioni diplomatiche."

⁵ For a reconstruction of the life and politics of Virginio Orsini, see Camilli, "Orsini d'Aragona, Gentil Virginio;" Camilli, "The State of the Condottiere." Specifically on the Orsini family, see Allegrezza, *Organizzazione del potere*; Shaw, *The political role*.

⁶ Shaw, "Lorenzo de' Medici and Virginio Orsini," 36.

1479) to Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici.⁷ It was precisely during these years – from the end of the Barons' War until his death – that Virginio began to participate in Italian politics through a highly structured, sophisticated diplomatic corps.

Clearly Virginio was not the only member of his family to rely on diplomatic activities. As a noble family with a large number of ecclesiastics and laymen holding important positions, many Orsini occasionally employed diplomatic envoys for both short or longer missions. Yet, unfortunately, these activities may only be detected through scattered sources that make it quite difficult to offer an overview.⁸ Conversely, almost three hundred dispatches – among the more than a thousand missives he received from 1480 to 1497 – document Virginio's diplomatic activities.⁹ These documents allow us to reconstruct the essential features of his diplomatic approach, which was markedly different from that of his relatives, both in practice and in scale. From the second half of the 1480s, Virginio slowly created a structured diplomatic network, embodied by a small group of trusted men who skillfully operated within the Italian peninsula as his diplomats.

Whether the development of Virginio's diplomatic corps can be identified as symptomatic of the growth of his political role or whether the exact opposite is true, it is difficult to say. On the one hand, Virginio's political stature grew in no small measure because of his political and dynastic links with the king of Naples and Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-92), making him an essential player in the fragile balance of power following the Barons' War. On the other hand, his diplomatic activism increased his ability to influence Italian politics. In spite of the ambiguity of his position – as a subject of both the pope and the king of Naples, he was not entirely autonomous – Virginio's diplomatic activities were key to his political legitimation. It took him time to find the right format, but it was through the strategic placement of his men that Virginio achieved and consolidated his role, both within Italian political environments and also in relation to other members of his lineage. Clearly not every time, nor in every place were his envoys welcomed or well-regarded, and their diplomatic practices had to be adjusted to different political contexts, each of which must be considered case-by-case, although they shared characteristics that I outline here.¹⁰

⁷ On Gian Giordano's wedding, see Camilli, "The State of the Condottiere," 255; on Alfonsina's wedding, see Brown, *Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici*, 52-70.

⁸ Giovanni Antonio Orsini del Balzo had his ambassador at the Neapolitan court who was named Gracchetta: Abulafia, "Signorial power," 185; Arzito Arziti, who can be identified as one of the diplomats in the service of Niccolò Orsini, count of Pitigliano, had already been in the service of his father Aldobrandino at least by 1455: Banchi, "La guerra de' Senesi," 193. In the spring of 1472 Napoleone Orsini sent two men, Dionisio and Santi, to Mantua to negotiate and settle certain affairs with the Marchese Ludovico Gonzaga: Napoleone Orsini to Ludovico Gonzaga, Bracciano, 17 May 1472: Archivio di Stato di Mantova, *Archivio Gonzaga*, box 844, fol. 272r.

⁹ All the letters – largely unpublished – are preserved in Archivio Storico Capitolino (hereafter ASC), Archivio Orsini (hereafter AO), Serie I, vols. 101-2.

¹⁰ On the connection between the emergence of stable diplomatic representation and the political need for legitimation, see especially Fubini, "Classe dirigente," 124-6; Fubini, "Diplomacy and Government."

First and foremost, Virginio's diplomatic personnel answered only to him, and only on rare occasions – strictly upon his specific instructions – did they operate on behalf of other members of the Orsini family. From the end of the Barons' War, however, Virginio's diplomatic activities increased in order to control the autonomous initiatives of some of his relatives, even to the extent of excluding them from the political arena. This was partly a result of a general attitude within the family. As Christine Shaw has noted, it is true that all members of the Orsini family, regardless of their specific branch, considered themselves to belong to a single lineage, but every member also thought of himself as an independent individual, pursuing personal politics and aims.¹¹

Furthermore, some shared aspects of Virginio's diplomatic personnel emerge. Not only the dispatches, but also other sources provide valuable details on the profiles and careers of those men who, generally speaking, held diplomatic positions on behalf of the baron. This multifaceted group can be divided into two categories related to their functions. On the one hand, a small circle of individuals (five or six at most) operated in four major cities – Milan, Florence, Naples, and Rome – carrying out tasks that are similar to those of a regularly accredited ambassador. Alongside this exclusive circle, a larger group of men, often operating in parallel, played a less defined and inevitably more nuanced diplomatic role. Despite clear differences in their roles and profiles, almost all of them came from the Orsini territories and were, as such, Virginio's subjects. Secondly, all of them – without exception – had previously served his father and uncles in administrative roles, often acting as chancellors or secretaries. A final element to consider is the position of Virginio's ambassadors along a scale of marginality and centrality, that is, their agency and capacity to access the inner circles of diplomacy, precisely at a time when they were becoming increasingly exclusive. As we shall see, each political context required a different approach. However, their missions did not differ substantially from those of high-ranking envoys, as their appointment focused on the three main tasks of representation, negotiation, and information-gathering.¹² Operating as middle-ranking diplomats and serving a master whose legitimacy was far from clear-cut, their ambiguous position was often their greatest challenge. Gaining access to private audiences and obtaining reliable information depended on daily persistence, although this was only true in certain contexts, where for one reason or another, their recognition as official envoys and representatives was more complex. Nevertheless, thanks to their master's strategic dynastic alliances, they could generally rely on the support of friendly fellow ambassadors, such as those from Florence and Naples. This relationship often eased the practical side of their missions: from gathering trustworthy information to gaining acceptance within the diplomatic arena.

¹¹ Shaw, *The political role*, 74; for the many branches in which the lineage was divided in the fifteenth century, see Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 17-48.

¹² On these three functions, see Lazzarini, "Renaissance diplomacy," 430-2; Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 69-119. On information gathering, see *Information and Government*.

2. *At the Court of Naples*

As noted previously, besides the pope, the Orsini of Bracciano were also subjects of the kingdom of Naples, although they were relatively recent vassals. At the end of the war of succession to the Neapolitan throne (1458-65), as a reward for political and military support provided by Cardinal Latino Orsini and his brothers Napoleone and Roberto, Ferdinand of Aragon had assigned the two counties of Tagliacozzo and Albe, in Abruzzo, to the Bracciano branch.¹³ At that point the Orsini became close allies of the king, yet, for some reason, around 1471, the king's attitude to the Bracciano Orsini changed. Over the course of the 1470s, King Ferdinand repeatedly threatened the Orsini with the annulment of their rights to the Abruzzese fiefs. With the death of Napoleone in 1480, the threat materialized, and the king deprived Virginio of his hereditary rights to the counties. As a final insult, the king assigned them instead to the rival Colonna family.¹⁴

Shortly afterwards, Virginio Orsini joined the papal and Venetian forces against the coalition of the kingdom of Naples, Florence, Milan, and the duchy of Ferrara in the War of Ferrara (1482-4) to seek restitution of his Abruzzese lands from the king by force of arms.¹⁵ This strategy was successful and in December 1482 Ferdinand of Aragon returned the territories to Virginio, which led to a complete repacification between the king and the Orsini. As a symbol of their renewed alliance, the king gave the hand of one of his daughters to Gian Giordano, Virginio's male heir.¹⁶

In December 1484, Virginio sent Santi Vetoli from Corcumello, the most trusted man within Virginio's retinue, as a personal envoy to the court of Naples. Prior to 1484, there is no evidence of anyone representing his interests there, but the baron may have found this solution as a better way to manage his relationship to his sovereign. Despite having made peace with him, precedents had demonstrated the unpredictability of King Ferdinand's moves, so Virginio likely felt the need to monitor the actions and the economic and fiscal relations with the Crown more closely.

Santi Vetoli hailed from an ancient noble family of the Marsica region, although as early as the fourteenth century, it was no longer at its peak. In 1453, Santi married Tuccia de Ponte, who also belonged to a family of ancient

¹³ Camilli, "Gli Orsini tra Roma e Napoli." In general, on the war, see Galasso, *Il Regno di Napoli*, 625-65; Storti, «*El buen marinero*».

¹⁴ On the relationship between the Orsini and the king in the 1470s, see Bischetti, *Il debito del sangue*, 80-114; two charters granting the counties to the Colonna are in the Biblioteca di Santa Scolastica (hereafter BSS), Archivio Colonna, III BB, 6,2, and 36,28. On the Colonna family, see Rehberg, "Etsi prudens paterfamilias;" Serio, *Una gloriosa sconfitta*.

¹⁵ On the War of Ferrara in general, see De Pinto, *La Guerra di Ferrara*.

¹⁶ The agreement was a part of the peace treaty between the pope and the League of Florence, Milan, Naples, and the duke of Ferrara. For the peace treaty, signed in Rome on December 12, 1484, see Medici, *Lettere*, VII, 481-98, especially at 490.

origin that had dominated the Marsica since the twelfth century.¹⁷ The couple had only one child, Baldassarre, who was educated at the expense of the Orsini family in the 1480s.¹⁸ It is unclear what positions Santi had held before embarking on a diplomatic career, but several references in his letters to the good memory of Virginio's uncle, Roberto Orsini, suggest that he had served the family for a long time.¹⁹

When Santi first arrived in Naples, he was not meant to stay there for long. He had been sent to get the formal concession of the counties of Tagliacozzo and Albe, promised by the king two years earlier in the peace treaty of Rome, and to make the necessary arrangements for Virginio's imminent arrival at the Neapolitan court.²⁰ He ended up staying for more than a year. Virginio continued to postpone and ultimately cancelled his trip to Naples altogether, likely due to the clashes of the Orsini with the Colonna family in the Papal States. Santi thus found himself reluctantly managing the burdens arising from the fiscal reforms implemented by Ferdinand of Aragon, which also regarded Virginio's fiefs. He was present during the first phases of the Barons' Conspiracy, as well as the war that ensued, and thus found himself in a seemingly never-ending mission (*sine die*).²¹

Santi had probably been chosen for the mission to Naples solely on the basis of the great trust that Virginio placed in him, but he himself knew that he was not the right man for tasks at hand. He had little knowledge of the Neapolitan court: he felt out of place and was aware that he lacked the necessary experience to handle a delicate political situation such as that which preceded the Barons' War. With little concern for his own reputation, he ended his first dispatch to Virginio by asking him to "send a man one month before your arrival, and let him be a practical man."²² This request was repeated just a month later, as his frustration grew with a mission he perceived as ill-suited to his skills.²³ As the months passed, his situation at court became more delicate, and his relations with Virginio more severely strained. One episode ex-

¹⁷ For the Ponte family, see Brogi, *La Marsica*, 227-36; Allegrezza, *Organizzazione del potere*, 61 and 97; Carocci, "Le origini della signoria Orsini su Tagliacozzo," 109. Tuccia was the sister of Giovanni Battista *de Pontibus*, Bishop of Bitonto since 1484: Eubel, *Hierarchia*, 2, 109.

¹⁸ In a letter sent by Baldassarre to his father Santi, dated 15 December 1482, Baldassarre asked his father to urge the Orsini to pay his teacher. See Baldassarre Vetoli to Santi *de Vetulis* di Corcumello, Gallese, 15 December 1482 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 294, no. 3, fol. 1r.

¹⁹ See e. g. Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Naples, 13 January 1485. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 39, fol. 1r.

²⁰ During the audience with the king, Santi also sounded out Ferdinand's intentions regarding the marriage between Gian Giordano and a daughter of the king, whose hand had been pledged as early as two years before: Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Naples, 14 December 1484, in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 12, fols. 1r-2r.

²¹ On the Neapolitan Barons' conspiracy, see Scarton, "La congiura dei baroni."

²² Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Naples, 14 December 1484, in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 12, fol. 1v: *La Signoria Vostra non manchi di mandare uno homo un mese prima la vostra venuta e che sia homo pratico a Napoli*. All translations are the author's.

²³ Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Naples, 13 January 1485, in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 39, fol. 1v.

emphasizes how difficult Santi's situation was, but also the trivial missteps of a diplomatic system still in the making.

At one point, Santi, without his Lord's permission, wrote a letter to Francesco di Castello, one of his closest friends and at that time also Virginio's ambassador to Rome, that contained information that should have been secret and confidential. Santi had heard rumors spreading in the Neapolitan court regarding the Orsini family and their strained relationship with Pope Innocent VIII (1484-92). As a result, on January 27, Santi received a written reprimand from his Lord for breaching proper ambassadorial rules, albeit unwittingly. Virginio reprimanded Santi for two reasons. On the one hand, as an ambassador, he was not supposed to share information to anyone other than his master; on the other, his actions were entirely outside the scope of his duties, which, at that moment, were limited to communicating solely with Ferdinand and Alfonso of Aragon.²⁴ Even with his customary deference, Santi firmly rejected his Lord's accusations. He would have avoided communication with anyone other than the king and his son, but he could not resist defending the usefulness of sharing information between two loyal ambassadors:

since I wrote to Ser Francesco that the word here in Naples is that the Orsini are banned from Rome, I wrote to him as a man who was doing your business and as one servant of his Lord does with another.²⁵

In July, Santi became increasingly insistent in his request to bring his uncomfortable mission to an end, but only after many months did Virginio agree to his request.²⁶ In January 1487, the baron identified the new ambassador at the Neapolitan court as Antonello Sinibaldi, from Scandriglia.²⁷ He was the epitome of the practical man (*homo pratico*) that Santi had sought and eagerly awaited for months, and once he had settled in Naples, Sinibaldi ended up staying there until 1494, playing the fundamental role of liaison between his Lord and the Crown.²⁸

²⁴ An exclusive communication with no one but their rulers was one of the golden rules an ambassador had to follow: Figliuolo and Senatore, "Per un ritratto del buon ambasciatore," Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 74-5.

²⁵ Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Naples, 6 February 1485, in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 38, fol. 1r: *perché io abbia scripto a ser Francesesco che qui se dice che li Ursini non possono intrare in Roma, io l'ò scripto a lui como a homo che facea vostre facenne e como fa l'uno homo dello Signore con l'altro.*

²⁶ Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, 5 July 1485, in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 62, fols. 1r-2r, cit. fol. 2r: "My request to send a more fitting man here to Naples is being ignored by Your Lordship. I beg you, my Lord, not to force me to stay here. [...] Forgive me, but if you do not allow me to return to Your Lordship, I will retire to Bitonto for a while; then, if you wish, I will come back to Naples with the Devil in my heart". (*Signore, Vostra Signoria non me risponne de mandare uno che abbia a stare qui. Vi supplico non me ce fate stare in forza. [...] Io mi scuso, non possenno vignire da Vostra Signoria, io me nne andarò a Bitonta (sic), poi tornarò a Napoli con trentamila diavoli, se pure volete ch'el ce torne.*)

²⁷ Formerly belonging to the Farfa abbey, the Scandriglia castle was bought by Francesco Orsini, progenitor of the Gravina branch, in 1431. See Lattanzio, "Abbazia di Farfa," 739-40.

²⁸ His last existing dispatch, written to Virginio with Marco di Bracciano, is dated on 5 March 1494. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 102, no. 696, fol. 1r.

In Naples, Antonello not only displayed an acute awareness of the inner workings of the Court, but also demonstrated his administrative and political abilities. During the early months of his mission on behalf of Virginio, Antonello managed the delicate transfer of the grant of the lands of Orso Orsini (d. 1479), the former duke of Ascoli, confiscated from his heirs by the king into the hands of Giulio, Niccolò, Organtino, and Paolo Orsini.²⁹ When the war ended, Virginio moved to Naples for a while and sent Antonello to Nola, where he was by early January 1487. Subsequently, at the end of February, he was recalled to Naples, where he assisted Virginio in negotiating the marriage of Alfonsina Orsini and Piero de' Medici.³⁰

What had made Sinibaldi the right man for the Neapolitan court? Before starting his ambassadorial career, he had been in the service of the Orsini family for quite some time, at least since 1450, working as a notary and a procurator for both Latino and Napoleone.³¹ After their deaths, he entered the service of Virginio, for whom he carried out an initial diplomatic mission between February and October 1485 in Rome. It seems there were no significant differences between Santi and Antonello: they were both long-serving, skillful men, loyal to the Orsini family. Yet it is likely that Antonello was already acquainted with the Aragonese family, notably with cardinal Giovanni of Aragon, whom he assisted in Rome during his final illness caused by the plague.³² It was probably Antonello's connection with the Aragonese that sealed his appointment at the Neapolitan court, for the king's trust added efficacy to his mandate and provided stability to his position. Throughout Antonello's lengthy mission, the king repeatedly used him to deliver verbal messages to Virginio. The extensive mandate he seemed to possess allowed him to move at will within the Court. Antonello's dispatches, although few in number, also attest to a close confidence with the duke of Calabria, with whom he conferred almost daily. From 1489, he was often joined by Marco di Bracciano, another of Virginio's chancellors, in his various duties on behalf of his master, both related to diplomatic activities and to the management of economic affairs.³³

²⁹ This redistribution was part of the agreement between the Crown and the Orsini that king Ferdinand had signed to secure their military support during the Barons' War. On Orso Orsini, see Tufano: Senatore, "Nella corte e nella vita;" Tufano, *Una famiglia*, particularly 74-5 for the circumstances of the confiscation.

³⁰ Rucellai, *Corrispondenza*, 156-9, 176-7 and 180-5.

³¹ Lattanzio, "Abbazia di Farfa," 742. In 1464, Antonello held the office of Lieutenant of Tagliacozzo. See his register in ASC, AO, Serie II, box 2376, fasc. 4. Two instruments, drawn up by Antonello in 1453, are in ASC, AO, Serie I, Pergamene., II.A.14,050a-b.

³² Antonello Sinibaldi to Virginio Orsini, Naples, 15 October 1485. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 18, fol. 1r: "He asked me to visit him every day, at least once" (*dicome che omne die vada a vedere una volta*). On the death of the Cardinal, see Scarton, "La congiura dei baroni," 224. On this plague, see Nuciforo, "Roma 1485." Following the death of Giovanni of Aragon, which occurred in Rome on 17 October 1485, King Ferdinand clearly shows his benevolence and appreciation for Antonello because in October he granted one of Antonello's sons, Mario, the prebend of the abbey of San Liberatore alla Maiella: see, Medici, *Lettere*, X, 165; Rucellai, *Corrispondenza*, 251-2.

³³ Marco di Bracciano was occasionally used as a diplomatic agent in other locations. On his missions at the Neapolitan court Marco, see Valori-Vettori, *Corrispondenza*, 394, 421-2; Nasi, *Corrispondenza*, 286; Figliuolo, "Corrispondenza di Giovanni Pontano," 224-5.

3. *The Long Mission of Santi di Corcumello in Florence*

In January 1487, after his mission in Naples, Santi di Corcumello was sent by Virginio to Florence as his diplomat. From previous correspondence between Lorenzo the Magnificent and the Orsini, we know that there had been no permanent Orsini diplomats in Florence before this date. Numerous letters among various members of the Orsini family suggest that until the first half of the 1480s the Orsini – particularly the *condottieri* – preferred to rely on occasional missions of their secretaries or military servants in which they delivered oral messages to both Lorenzo de' Medici and the Signoria.³⁴

But at the end of the Barons' War, the political situation required a different approach, and it seems that it was indeed Virginio, rather than his relatives, who recognized that a change was necessary and an open line of communication with Lorenzo de' Medici more profitable.

As many scholars have pointed out, the Barons' War represented a turning point in Lorenzo the Magnificent's politics by which he aimed to reconcile with the papacy. In this regard, Lorenzo sought to establish a dynastic bond with Innocent VIII, which he finally concluded on 25 February 1487 when his daughter Maddalena married Franceschetto Cibo, the pope's illegitimate son.³⁵ In an effort to provide his new son-in-law with an estate in Cerveteri, Lorenzo realized that he needed the good favor of Virginio. The lands in question were close to the lands of the Bracciano branch, and thus Virginio's approval was required.³⁶

Furthermore, Lorenzo attributed to Virginio's political position a valuable diplomatic role in controlling the quarrel between the king of Naples and the pope, which the war had not brought to an end. Having recently engaged in a conflict with the pope, which brought his branch of the family to the brink of ruin, Virginio was as determined as Lorenzo to prevent the rekindling of armed hostilities between his two sovereigns. In this regard, the diplomatic role that Virginio could play in defusing a new conflict was of great importance to Lorenzo.³⁷

However, Lorenzo's need to simplify relations with various members of the Orsini family in a unilateral way may also have played a role in promoting Virginio as head for the Orsini house. Since Lorenzo had married

³⁴ Thirty-five letters, sent by various members of the Orsini family to announce the dispatch of men entrusted with delivering oral messages to Lorenzo, are kept in ASF, MAP.

³⁵ On the turning point in Lorenzo's politics, see Bullard, *Lorenzo il Magnifico*; Medici, *Lettere*, X, particularly 481-92 for the wedding. More recently, see also Ippolita Maria Sforza, *Lettere*, 365-6.

³⁶ Shaw, "Lorenzo de' Medici and Virginio Orsini," 37-8; Medici, *Lettere*, X, 284-9, 314; Shaw, *The political role*, 199-200.

³⁷ The treaty, signed on 11 August 1486, put an end to the war, but not to the quarrel between the king and Innocent VIII, whose relations continued to remain tense for several years. For the evolution of the quarrel and the role of Lorenzo de' Medici in it, see Medici, *Lettere*, X-XII; XV-XVIII.

Clarice, in long ago 1468, he had never been able to control his relatives' tentacular politics, especially because of the absence of a hierarchy within *la casa Ursina*. As Christine Shaw has pointed out, the close association of Lorenzo with Virginio drove another prominent member of the family, Niccolò, count of Pitigliano, to an ever increasing envy that finally spoiled the cousins' relationship. But other members of the family were also unhappy about Lorenzo and Virginio's connection, particularly Virginio's cousins from the Monterotondo branch: Cardinal Giovanni Battista, the Florentine archbishop Rinaldo, and, surprisingly, also Lorenzo's wife, Clarice.³⁸ In this light, Virginio established his own representative to reside permanently in Florence and to act only on his behalf; this also guaranteed a reliable channel of communication and an exclusive political relationship with Lorenzo and the Florentine Republic.

We do not know exactly when Santi di Corcumello's mission in Florence began, but he was clearly there by January 1487 when he began writing dispatches.³⁹ Before that time, Santi had already met Lorenzo, by November 1485 at the latest, when Virginio sent him to Florence as his procurator in order to conclude a *condotta* with the Republic and the duchy of Milan for Virginio, Giulio, and Vicino Orsini.⁴⁰ This, as well as Virginio's key role in Florentine politics, was crucial to smoothing Santi's way as diplomatic representative. From the very start of his mission, he easily gained audiences with the Florentine Otto di Pratica and similarly with Lorenzo, whom he started to meet frequently, perhaps even every day.

Over the course of several months since his arrival in the city, Santi had gradually earned the trust and esteem of Lorenzo de' Medici as a valuable political interlocutor. Lorenzo considered Santi to be a man of a serious, frank demeanor whose loyalty towards Virginio he appreciated so much that he soon started to consider Santi's presence in Florence indispensable.⁴¹ It is no wonder then that when in September 1487 Santi contemplated leaving Florence temporarily to attend his son's wedding, Lorenzo would not agree to let him go.⁴² Lorenzo subsequently exerted ever more direct influence over Santi's movements. Throughout his long mission in Florence, Santi tended to leave the city only when Lorenzo de' Medici tasked him with a mission that required him to travel to Virginio to convey, by word of mouth, information too sensitive to be entrusted to the written word.⁴³

³⁸ Specifically on the quarrel with Niccolò Orsini, see Shaw, "Lorenzo de' Medici and Niccolò Orsini," 262-71; for the others, see Medici, *Lettere*, XII, 30-1, 102, 157-61.

³⁹ See his first dispatch: Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Firenze, 14 January 1487, in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 174.

⁴⁰ For this *condotta*, see Bischetti, *Il debito del sangue*, 287-303 and 505-14; for the role of Santi, see also Shaw, "Lorenzo de' Medici and Virginio Orsini," 34-5.

⁴¹ For Lorenzo's judgment, see Medici, *Lettere*, XI, 495; Medici, *Lettere*, XVII, 132.

⁴² Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Florence, 29 September 1487, in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 200, fol. 1r.

⁴³ For two examples of these trips, see Medici, *Lettere*, X, 363-4, and Medici, *Lettere*, XVIII, 25.

Meanwhile, Santi's daily, face-to-face talks with Lorenzo allowed him to gain a deeper understanding of his character. In the early stages of his mission, he candidly admitted that he had not yet fully understood "the nature" of Lorenzo and was reluctant, for example, to show him a letter he thought might annoy him.⁴⁴ A year later, however, his understanding had matured considerably. In a dispatch dated 5 October 1488, he wrote to Virginio that when Lorenzo was trying to avoid an issue by speaking in vague and general terms, it was best to avoid insisting and allow him the time he needed to formulate a clear response "because when he wants to tell me something, he does not mince his words."⁴⁵

Among the diverse responsibilities entrusted to Santi, the maintenance of diplomatic relations with Lorenzo was of paramount importance. Yet his mandate encompassed a broader spectrum of duties, including the management of Virginio's affairs with the Medici bank, gathering information regarding Florentine domestic and foreign policies, and detecting the diplomatic missions undertaken by chancellors and agents sent by other members of the Orsini family, as well as those sent by the other Roman barons. This last aspect is particularly important to understand the steady growth of Virginio's standing among his relatives and other Roman barons. Increasingly in the second half of the fifteenth century, Florence had become one of the most important diplomatic centers in the peninsula.⁴⁶ It was also a way-station for almost anyone who was travelling between central and northern Italy. As Santi was constantly there, literally no one could stop in Florence without his finding out. On 19 January 1487, Santi informed his lord of the arrival in Florence of a chancellor of the Roman baron Nicola Caetani, an obstinate adversary of Virginio. In the same dispatch, he reported the stopover in Florence of an envoy sent by Prospero and Giovanni Colonna to Verona, where he would meet Bernardo Massimi, a Roman client of the Colonna family.⁴⁷

Over the course of the year, Santi's appointment in Florence became more and more useful to Virginio, particularly because of his uninterrupted dialogue with Lorenzo de' Medici. Santi's meetings with him – in streets, squares, secret venues, or in the Medici palace of Via Larga – represented the crux of Santi's mission to Florence. It is therefore unsurprising that even after the summer of 1489, when Virginio relinquished his *condotta* with the Florentine republic, he continued to maintain Santi as a permanent diplomatic representative in Florence. Contrary to his experience in Naples, Santi waited patiently to ask his lord if and when his mission in Florence would end. On receiving Virginio's reply, Santi understood that he would need to stay there

⁴⁴ Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Florence, 13 October 1487. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 173, fol. 1r. On the attention paid by ambassadors to the "nature" of their interlocutors, see Lazzarini, "La scrittura dell'ambasciatore," 34.

⁴⁵ Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Florence, 5 October 1488. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 254, fol. 1r: *ché quando vole dirme una cosa non la mena in tante pratiche*.

⁴⁶ Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 170-3.

⁴⁷ Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Florence, 19 January 1487. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 170, fols. 1v-2r.

indefinitely, or in Santi's own words "until the Day of Judgment, that is, as long as Your Lordship sees fit".⁴⁸

In fact, Santi continued to carry out his mission even after Lorenzo's death (8 April 1492) and for the following two years in which Piero de' Medici took his father's place as leader of the Florentine Republic.⁴⁹ Over time, and in a completely reciprocal manner, the city of Florence had fostered a strong political bond with Virginio Orsini – a bond which was eventually extended to Santi. On 23 February 1489 Santi wrote to his lord that Florence, not Rome, was "the city in which everybody loves you".⁵⁰

It is not surprising then that Florence itself provided the backdrop to the fascinating evolution of Santi's role over many years. While Virginio's position vis à vis Italian political entities was always characterized by a certain ambiguity in terms of power and legitimation, Santi's position as his diplomatic representative gradually acquired a certain level of formality and a degree of officiality. This process had taken years, but finally Florence proved to be the right – and perhaps the only – environment in which one of Virginio's diplomats gained a sort of official recognition, which came directly from his peers. In the city's bewilderment following the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent, Santi had a private audience with his son Piero de' Medici, who was stepping into his father's role quietly and with little fuss – Santi assured his Lord – "and with such good grace ... that it would be hard to explain".⁵¹ Unexpectedly, on the same day he was asked by the other ambassadors to join them in another visit to the young Piero "because they wanted me to go together with them, in the name of their lords; first the Neapolitan ambassador spoke, then that of the duchy of Milan, and afterwards the rest of us according to our rank".⁵² Thus, in this more official, ritualized framework, Santi had his second audience with Piero, decidedly superfluous considering that the previous one must have taken place just a few hours earlier. Whatever the hierarchical order that Santi had to follow, the formal setting in which this second audience took place must be read not only as a symbol of the importance of Virginio's support for the new order, but also as the inclusion of his man in the inner circle of the major ambassadors.⁵³

⁴⁸ Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Florence, 21 July 1490. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 102, no. 220, fol. 1r: *insino allo dì del Ioditio, id est quanto piacerà a Vostra Signoria*. On 5 September 1489, Virginio entered the service of the king of Naples as his captain general: Camilli, "The state of the Condottiere," 157-8.

⁴⁹ On Piero's leading years, see Brown, *Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici*, 149-227.

⁵⁰ Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Florence, 23 February 1489. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 102, no. 145, fol. 2r: *questo è lo paese de ongni persona che v'ama*.

⁵¹ Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Florence, 10 April 1492. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 102, no. 145, fol. 1r: *con tanta quiete e con tante bone demonstrationi e boni effecti ... che più non se porria dire*.

⁵² Santi di Corcumello to Virginio Orsini, Florence, 10 April 1492. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 102, no. 145, fol. 1r: *ché volsoro che andasse insemi con loro. Quanno lo visitarono per parte delli loro signori, e prima messer Marino parlò e poi Milano e poi per hordine tucti nui altri*.

⁵³ In general, on the rituals of diplomacy, see Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 146-66; Fletcher, "Trasgressione e interpretazione delle regole."

4. *The Flip Side of the Coin: The Failed Mission of Francesco di Castello at the Court of Milan*

Yet Virginio's diplomatic envoys were not welcome everywhere. The recognition of their role represented an implicit recognition of Virginio's political standing. This mirroring had a positive impact on the missions of Santi di Corcumello to Florence and Antonello Sinibaldi to Naples, whereas the opposite is true regarding the mission of Francesco di Luca Feriani from Città di Castello to Milan. His tenure in that city, which began in July 1487 and ended unsuccessfully after a mere eight months, reveals the flip side of the coin. The purpose of Feriani's mission was twofold: to recover the arrears due to Virginio from the *condotta* that would expire in November and was shared by Florence and Milan, and then to negotiate a new military contract.⁵⁴

Due to various factors, the diplomatic mission assigned to Francesco was far from straightforward and demanded a significant blend of shrewdness and expertise. At that time, the duchy of Milan was run by Ludovico Sforza, better known as *il Moro*, whose young nephew Gian Galeazzo Maria Sforza had been under his tutelage since 1480.⁵⁵ Even during the Barons' War, in which the role of the Orsini had been fundamental, Ludovico was never well-disposed towards them, nor was he happy about Virginio's close links with the king of Naples and Lorenzo de' Medici. When the war ended, the situation worsened, as Ludovico was becoming openly hostile to Virginio's political collaboration with Ferdinand of Aragon. Moreover, Francesco went to Milan to manage a delicate issue which involved not only Virginio, but also Paolo, Organtino, and Giulio, and, to an even greater extent, Lorenzo de' Medici. In December 1486, when Virginio found it impossible to obtain the payment of his arrears from Milan in the short term, he had convinced Lorenzo to accept his credit towards the duchy, credit which would then be deducted from the numerous debts Virginio had contracted with the Medici bank. The sum was around 24,000 ducats, and Ludovico Sforza was also indebted to Virginio for other expenses that Virginio had anticipated out of his own pocket during the Barons' War to finance the military campaign.⁵⁶

On his first attempt to retrieve the money in February 1487, Virginio had sent another of his faithful men, Giorgio Santacroce, to the court in Milan, but his mission was a complete failure. Virginio may have thought that a man with a higher profile would have had a better chance of success. In terms of stature, Francesco di Castello, at that time, would undoubtedly have ap-

⁵⁴ For the terms of the Orsini's *condotta*, see ASF, Dieci di Balìa, *Deliberazioni, condotte e stanziamenti*, box 30, fols. 113r-118v.

⁵⁵ On Ludovico Maria Sforza, see Covini, *Ludovico Maria Sforza*.

⁵⁶ For the details of this operation, see Medici, *Lettere*, X, 48, 156. Virginio was also indebted with other Florentine Banks, such as that of Rucellai and Torelli, as reveals a letter that Olivieri di Bordella, another agent of Virginio, wrote to him from Florence, where he was sent in February 1487 to handle various economic affairs of his Lord. See Olivieri di Bordella to Virginio Orsini, Florence, 3 Florence 1487. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 137.

peared to be the most suitable candidate for the mission, as he was an experienced diplomat with extensive legal knowledge. Born perhaps around 1440, he had had a long, honorable career in the service of cardinal Latino Orsini and, thanks to him, had held various prestigious offices in the Curia and in the administration of the Papal States. In the early 1460s he had already entered Latino's service as his personal chancellor, acting in Rome as his notary. He then held various offices in the administration of the Umbrian cities of Todi and Foligno. On 17 September 1471, Sixtus IV appointed him abbreviator of the Chancellery. He returned to Rome permanently in 1482 and taught at the *Studium Urbis*.⁵⁷ Among Virginio's diplomats, Francesco was the only one who came from outside Orsini lands, and Francesco's loyalty to the Guelf party was possibly the main reason for his recruitment.⁵⁸ Almost certainly appreciated in the curial environment for his erudition and political experience, between December 1484 and January 1485 he had carried out a brief diplomatic mission in Rome on Virginio's behalf when he was replaced by Antonello Sinibaldi in February of that year.⁵⁹ Given the previous failure of Giorgio Santacrocce's diplomatic mission, Virginio likely wagered that a figure with a high profile such as Francesco di Castello's would be received more favorably. Lorenzo de' Medici too hoped for a resolution of the matter. On 29 June 1487, in preparation for Francesco's arrival at the Milanese court, he wrote to the Florentine ambassador in Milan, Piero Alamanni, to inform him that Francesco was being sent by Virginio "to clarify these matters thoroughly" and urged Alamanni to "ascertain the sentiments of Lord Ludovico towards Lord Virginio and the other Orsini family members".⁶⁰

When Francesco arrived, he had an initial, very short audience with Ludovico that would also prove to be the last. In an unfamiliar setting such as the Milanese court, Alamanni was Francesco's only ally so Francesco immediately began to follow his movements in a futile attempt to secure an audience with Ludovico Sforza and to gain access to the essential information he needed to carry out his mission successfully. Alamanni himself, however, had confessed to Lorenzo that he had serious doubts about the success of the mis-

⁵⁷ For a profile of Francesco di Castello, see Jaitner-Hahner, *Città di Castello*, 126-31. Two instruments, drawn up by Francesco di Castello in 1476 and 1477 are in ASC, AO, Serie I, Pergamene, II.A.18,66, and in University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, *Orsini Family Papers*, box 186, folder 1.

⁵⁸ In the second half of the fifteenth century, Città di Castello – dominated by the Vitelli family – was a Guelf 'bastion' in central Italy. As we shall see, Francesco used to refer to himself as a Guelf (*guelfo*) and it should not be forgotten that the Orsini were generally recognized as the leaders of the Guelf party, both in Latium and in Umbria. For the Guelf and Ghibelline factions in the Papal States, see Shaw, "The Roman barons and the Guelf and Ghibelline factions."

⁵⁹ On his mission in Rome, only four dispatches to Virginio, reporting his audiences with the pope, are conserved. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, nos. 11, 14, 10 and 7, dated from December 1484 to January 1485.

⁶⁰ Lorenzo de' Medici to Piero Alamanni Medici, Florence, 29 June 1487, in Medici, *Lettere*, X, 380: *per chiarire bene queste cose; intendere bene l'animo del Signor Lodovico verso el Signor Virginio et gl'altri di casa.*

sion. Indeed, it appeared that Francesco di Castello's arrival in Milan had further hardened Ludovico's resolve to refuse payment of the arrears and to reject the idea of a new *condotta* for the Orsini. As early as 14 July, Ludovico had had a heated discussion with Alamanni regarding the matter of Virginio's salary arrears, after which the Florentine orator bluntly confessed to Lorenzo that the "Orsini will never be on good terms with this man".⁶¹ Furthermore, in August, Ludovico Sforza suffered from an ailment that persisted until October and provided him with the perfect pretext for postponing resolution of the Orsini matter.⁶²

From that point forward, it became impossible for Alamanni even to approach Ludovico, and Francesco realized that until the Florentine ambassador secured an audience, he too would be unable to do so.⁶³ As the weeks went by, Francesco's frustration grew. He saw no way to overcome the obstacle and felt uncomfortable in a court that he described to Virginio as a "weird labyrinth" in which he was never sure how he could or should behave.⁶⁴ Francesco noted the same frustration in Alamanni, whose position had worsened since he had arrived. Ludovico was well aware that, other matters aside, Alamanni had been tasked with getting a clear response to the Orsini question. By then, Francesco had begun to see the mission as a sort of "hunt," in which he and Alamanni, like horses, were running "at trot and gallop, as needed, but the problem is that our words are falling on deaf ears."⁶⁵ When almost four months after Francesco's arrival, Alamanni managed to have a brief, informal conversation with Ludovico regarding the Orsini matter, the weakness of Francesco's position as his lord's representative became crystal clear, as he himself reported to Virginio that "although I was in the same chamber, I neither could, nor should approach to hear what they were saying".⁶⁶ On October 12, Ludovico Sforza finally broke his silence regarding the renewal of the *condotta*, setting the terms at 20,000 ducats, a 50% reduction from the Orsini's previous peacetime stipend.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Piero Alamanni to Lorenzo de' Medici, Milan, 14 July 1487. Medici, *Lettere*, X, 428: *li Orsini non aranno mai buono asecto con costui*.

⁶² On Ludovico's illness, see Covini, *Ludovico Maria Sforza*, 101-4.

⁶³ Francesco di Castello to Virginio Orsini, Milan, 10 September 1487. inASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 130, fol. 1r: "till the Florentine ambassador has an audience with Lord Lodovico, no resolution can be hoped for" (*finché l'ambasator fiorentino non parla luy al Signor Lodovico, non si può sperare havere alcuna resolutione*).

⁶⁴ Francesco di Castello to Virginio Orsini, Milan, 10 September 1487 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 130, fol. 1r: *uno strano laberinto*.

⁶⁵ Francesco di Castello to Virginio Orsini, Milan, 8 October 1487 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 218, fol. 1v: *perochè ciaschuno di noy ci ven de trotto et de galoppo, secondo el bisogno ricerca, ma el male è che nos surdo narravimus fabulam*". See also the frustration expressed by Lorenzo the Magnificent, in Medici, *Lettere*, XI, 284-8.

⁶⁶ Francesco di Castello to Virginio Orsini, Milan, 10 October 1487 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 169, fol. 1v: *ché, quantuncha io fussi nela medesima sala o camera, non però possevo né dovevo acostarmi per intender quello loro dicevano*.

⁶⁷ Francesco di Castello to Virginio Orsini, Milan, 13 October 1487 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no 190, fol. 1r; Medici, *Lettere*, XI, 297-8.

This development marked a reversal of fortunes for Francesco, though hardly an improvement. Whereas previously he had awaited Sforza's decision on the arrears of Virginio's salary and a conclusion regarding new *condotte* for the Orsini, he now faced the silence of Virginio and his cousins, who remained noncommittal about the new proposal for over a month. In the last dispatch we have from his mission, dated 20 November 1487 and written in his customary elegant style, Francesco expresses his growing irritation at the silence of the Orsini *condottieri*:

I am here just like the Holy Fathers in Limbo, when they were waiting for the Savior to free them. I am beset by uncertainty, unsure of what to do or how to respond to those who incessantly ask me about the decision reached by Your Lordships.⁶⁸

At the same time, Francesco quickly exposed the underhand, extortionist tactics of Ludovico Sforza, as he realized that a potential rejection of the new agreement would unfairly delay Virginio's recovery of his outstanding arrears. Going beyond his mandate, he decided to voice his opinion on the Sforza proposal – perhaps with the aim of bringing his uncomfortable mission to a swift end – by advising Virginio to accept the offer, as “it would be better to bend a little than to break completely.”⁶⁹

Nor was frustration Francesco's only problem. In November (1487) he also faced a dangerous situation that revealed how far removed his position was from that of the fully accredited ambassador. Between September and November, some of the Milanese Ghibellines, growing increasingly resentful of Ludovico il Moro, had conspired to eliminate him and possibly replace him with his brother, Cardinal Ascanio Maria Sforza. This situation rekindled the strife between the Guelf and the Ghibelline factions in Milan.⁷⁰ While the tension built up in the city and at court, Francesco experienced moments of sheer terror. As a well-known Guelph – like his Lord Virginio – Francesco feared to be attacked and plundered for a second time in his life. In fact, the conflicts reminded him of what had happened in Rome in December 1485, when his home and those of the Orsini, had been burnt down by the fury of the Colonna family's Ghibelline supporters during the first phases of the Barons' War. His lack of recognition as an official ambassador further exacerbated his fears, as his person was not covered by the *ius gentium* enjoyed by all ambassadors.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Francesco di Castello to Virginio Orsini, Milan, 20 November 1487 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 131, fol. 1r: *Io sto come staviano li sancti padri delo nelo limbo, quando aspectavano el Salvatore che neli cavasse. Sto suspeso et ambiguo, né so che farmi, né che respondere ad chi continuo me domanda che resolutione àno facto le Vostre Signorie.*

⁶⁹ Francesco di Castello to Virginio Orsini, Milan, 20 November 1487 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 131, fol. 1r: *saria meglo piegarsi in qualche parte che rompersi in tutto.*

⁷⁰ On this episode, see Pellegrini, *Ascanio Maria Sforza*, 227-38; Covini, *Ludovico Maria Sforza*, 101-14.

⁷¹ Francesco wrote to Virginio that “being in a precarious position, I fully expected to be plundered once more for being a Guelph, just I was two years past, precicely what I stood in need of, and a fine refreshment” (*Io, che so aventurato, aspectavo ancora esser sachegiato per guelfo un'altra volta, come fui hora doi anni, che era apunto el mio bisogno et um buono refrescha-*

Francesco's mission officially ended in February 1488, when, following Lorenzo de' Medici's advice, he took his leave of Ludovico Sforza.⁷² His last existing dispatch, written on 20 November 1487, proved to be his very last, as he disappears entirely from Virginio's correspondence after this mission. He concluded his dispatch with a veiled judgment on the Moro's behavior, perhaps intending to encapsulate in the space of an anecdote the strange atmosphere that had pervaded the Milanese court under his regency:

Lord Ludovico has not yet escaped the weakness in his hands, which tremble somewhat, and, as I hear, he raises them to his head with difficulty, so that he cannot remove his cap. For this reason, he has had his hair cut short, and has had the same done to many of his servants against their will.⁷³

Having been in the service of the Orsini family for almost thirty years, after this mission Francesco took his leave and returned to his hometown for good; whether this was his own choice or that of his master – perhaps displeased over the failure of his last mission – we do not know. He entered the service of Città di Castello's leading family, the Vitelli, and involved himself in public life until his death in 1516.⁷⁴

5. *The Challenges of the Roman Diplomatic Environment*

The practice adopted by Virginio in Naples, Florence, and Milan was impossible to replicate in Rome. At that time, the city had clearly emerged as “the nerve center of the Italian diplomatic system”, making its political environment particularly complex. The Curia – undoubtedly the largest court in Italy – was crowded with prelates and cardinals from across Europe, while the city itself was teeming with ambassadors from every corner of the world, navigating a daily deluge of news.⁷⁵ While in the other cities the diplomatic missions were entrusted by Virginio to a single envoy responsible for handling all the everyday tasks, in Rome a multitude of diplomatic agents oper-

mento). Francesco di Castello to Virginio Orsini, Milan, 20 November 1487. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 131, fol. 1v. On the destruction of Monte Giordano, see the dispatch of the Florentine ambassador in Rome Guidantonio Vespucci to Dieci di Balìa, Rome, 2 December 1485. ASF, Dieci di Balìa, *Responsive*, box 35, fol. 230r; Pontani, *Diario*, 51. On the *ius gentium*, which guaranteed diplomatic immunity to ambassadors, see Queller, *The office of ambassador*, 175-208; Fubini, “L'ambasciatore nel XV secolo;” Becker, “L'inviolabilità de l'ambassadeur.”

⁷² Medici, *Lettere*, XII, 12.

⁷³ Francesco di Castello to Virginio Orsini, Milan, 20 November 1487 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 131, fol. 1v. Lorenzo de' Medici was no less disturbed by Ludovico Sforza's cruel attitude. See Medici, *Lettere*, XVIII, 179.

⁷⁴ On his death, see Jaitner-Hahner, *Città di Castello nel Quattrocento*, 131.

⁷⁵ For the centrality of Rome in the European diplomatic system, see Mattingly, *Renaissance diplomacy*, 99-100 (99 for the quotation); Ilardi, *Fifteenth-Century Diplomatic Documents*, 89; Prodi, *Il sovrano pontefice*, 311-2. More recently, see Fletcher, *Diplomacy in Renaissance Rome*, 102-7; Lazzarini, “Early Renaissance Diplomacy;” Chittolini, “The papacy and the Italian states,” 473-6; *Roma centro della diplomazia*.

ated simultaneously, enlarging the field of protagonists to one with an extraordinarily wide range of features and degrees of status. This resulted in the presence of multiple representatives, each with a defined role and a specific mandate, but operating as a body with more or less formal contours within a complex interplay of ‘public’ and ‘private’ affairs.⁷⁶ Two examples will clarify this particular approach. In February 1485, when Virginio was engaged in negotiations with Innocent VIII for a new *condotta* with the Church, at least four of his diplomats were operating in Rome: Francesco di Castello, to deal directly with the pontiff; Antonello Sinibaldi, with an identical mandate but independently of Francesco; Oliviero di Bordella, who had arrived in Rome after a trip to Naples where he had met Santi di Corcumello; and finally Bartolomeo di Bracciano, a resident diplomatic agent in Rome since at least 1484.⁷⁷ In October 1486, when Santi Vittorini di Torri – another trustworthy servant of the Orsini family with extensive experience in diplomatic missions – was sent to Rome by Virginio to facilitate the Orsini’s return to a complete peace with the pope after the Barons’ War, he found Giorgio Santacroce already there, carrying out a specific task entrusted to him by the baron.⁷⁸

After the Barons’ War, Virginio preferred to stay in his castle at Bracciano, where he personally received ambassadors sent by both Lorenzo de’ Medici and Ferdinand of Aragon.⁷⁹ Conversely, in Rome, just a few dozen miles away, a group of diplomats carried out a multitude of functions: from securing constant representation and regular information-gathering, to having audiences with the pope and other curial personalities for political and administrative matters, from looking after Virginio’s economic affairs, to monitoring the political movements of the prelates of the Orsini house residing in the city.

It is through this latter aspect that we may reach a better understanding of Virginio’s approach to diplomacy and its use as a tool for the marginalization of his relatives within elite political spheres. A similar approach was also adopted elsewhere – no envoy of Niccolò Orsini could set foot in Florence without Santi di Corcumello being aware of it, and the same occurred regularly in the Neapolitan court – but it is in Rome that the corrosive character of Virginio’s diplomacy towards the political agency of the other members of the family is most evident. Proceeding with due precaution, it is also possible to trace the beginning of this new trend back to February 1485. As already mentioned, one of Virginio’s representatives in Rome at that time was Antonello Sinibaldi, who on the twenty-sixth informed his Lord that after he had had

⁷⁶ On this aspect, see Senatore, «*Uno mundo de carta*», 76-83.

⁷⁷ See their various dispatches written from December 1484 to February 1485. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 1, nos. 7, 10-1, 14-5, 28, 32, 61 and 84.

⁷⁸ Santi Vittorini to Virginio Orsini, Rome, 6 October 1486. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 102, fol. 1r.

⁷⁹ For various missions sent to the baron from Ferdinand and Alfonso, see Figliuolo, “Corrispondenza di Giovanni Pontano,” 228-30, 232-3; Rucellai, *Corrispondenza*; in 1487, Bartolomeo Ugolini was sent to Bracciano for some time by Lorenzo de’ Medici. Medici, *Lettere*, XI, 246.

an audience with Innocent VIII on the nineteenth, the pope had summoned him for a second audience, at which he desired the joint presence of Paolo Orsini, the most loyal of Virginio's cousins. Immediately after this summons, however, Virginio sent a chancellor to Antonello with the specific instruction that whenever he had an audience with the pope, he must always be alone. Meeting Paolo on his way to join him for the audience, Antonello informed him of the change of plan:

I told him that I had changed my mind and that when I spoke to His Holiness about the affairs of Your Lordship, I should be alone, as Your Lordship had ordered it; therefore, I would go alone and without company.

Paolo's surprised, bitter reaction ("he was very upset and protested to me that I had not told him anything about the audience I had had with the pope") clearly highlights the fact that this was a new format, that of excluding other family members. Virginio then followed this model without exception.⁸⁰

Despite this, Virginio could not entirely exclude his relatives from the Roman negotiating arena. In a city like Rome, where information and mediation were crucial, the privileged channels offered by family prelates within the Curia were indispensable.

However, Virginio needed to find the right man: someone loyal, trustworthy, and, most of all, no threat to his authority. Neither the family cardinal Giovanni Battista Orsini, nor Rinaldo Orsini, brother of Clarice and archbishop of Florence, could ever have fit that bill as both were on poor terms with Virginio. He recognized in another of his cousins, Orso Orsini, Bishop of Teano, the qualities of perfect intermediary between himself and the Curia. Orso was an experienced politician, well-regarded by the pope, and well-connected within the Curia's inner circle of power; above all, he would never pose a threat to Virginio's authority, as his hopes for the cardinalate were as futile as those of his cousin Rinaldo, and his strained relationship with his brother, Cardinal Giovanni Battista, reassured Virginio that he would carry out his role with little risk of his playing a double game.⁸¹ Nevertheless, Virginio's preference for Orso as his primary interlocutor in Rome did not result in the total exclusion of other family members from diplomatic affairs. Occasionally, but strictly under his direct orders, other members of the Orsini family could be, and were, called upon to assist his envoys in diplomatic negotiations.⁸²

⁸⁰ Antonello Sinibaldi to Virginio Orsini, Rome, 26 February 1485. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 28, fol. 1r: *Dissi che io aveva mutato proposito, che con Nostro Signore, quando io li parlava de faccende de Vostra Illustrissima Signoria, non ce volea compagno alcuno, perché per Vostra Illustrissima Signoria non me era stato ordinato et però io lo voleva fare solum et non volea se lli havesse ad impaciare altri. Halo hauto multo per male et dictome che io ho parlato con ipso poi che hebi odientia da Nostro Signore et non li ho referito delli XX parti l'una de quello che Nostro Signore me dixè.*

⁸¹ On the career of Orso Orsini, see Bischetti, *Il debito del sangue*.

⁸² In June 1488, when Santi Vittorini di Torri had to leave Rome for a while, Paolo Orsini spoke with the pope on behalf of Virginio. See Bartolomeo di Bracciano di Virginio, Rome, 2 June

Worthy of note is the diversification of Virginio's intelligence-gathering channels. Compared to the ambassadors of the great Italian powers, the freedom of movement of Virginio's men was significantly limited. While this did not automatically translate into extreme forms of marginalization, we should acknowledge that certain environments, such as public consistories, were off-limits to them.⁸³ Nevertheless, in Rome and in the Curia, Virginio's diplomatic personnel could count on a significant network of friends and allies of their lord, which included the Florentine and Neapolitan ambassadors. Thus, when the Bishop of Teano was unsuccessful, fresh news was gathered through the Florentine ambassador Giovanni Lanfredini, a particularly valued figure for Virginio, not least for his ties to both Lorenzo de' Medici and the king of Naples. Similarly, the Neapolitan ambassador Antonio d'Alessandro often played a fundamental role, as in January 1491, when he had reported in detail to Bartolomeo di Bracciano on a public consistory in which the Turkish threat was discussed, as well as on a private audience he had attended with the Milanese and Florentine orators.⁸⁴

Virginio's diplomats in Rome could also count on some members of Pope Innocent's inner circle of counsellors. This was composed of both friends and enemies of Virginio, so while the baron's men were well aware of the need to avoid Niccolò Bucciardi Cibo – the dreaded Bishop of Cosenza, who had never concealed his animosity towards the Orsini – they could fill their dispatches with information gathered from the Guelph friends who populated the Curia: the papal treasurer Falcone Sinibaldi, but also Obietto and Urbano Fieschi, respectively apostolic protonotary and Bishop of Frejus. Occasionally, assistance could even come from Domenico Doria, captain of the Papal Guard, from cardinals who were friends of the family, but also from persons who had always been close to the pope, such as Girolamo Calagrano, one of the pope's personal attendants (*cubiculario*) who was frequently mentioned in the dispatches. Most of all, they could count on Franceschetto, who, thanks to his close kinship with Lorenzo de' Medici, had become the most reliable source of information on everything that happened around Innocent VIII.⁸⁵

1488. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 226, fols. 1r-v. In May 1490, Giovanni Battista Orsini joined forces with Virginio in an effort to persuade the pope not to retain the Colonna *condottieri* in his service: De Boüard, "Lettres de Rome," 284-7.

⁸³ Oliviero di Bordella, one of Virginio's military servants who was frequently employed for short and semi-official diplomatic missions to Florence, Naples, and Rome, was aware that obtaining reliable information in that city was a very difficult task. Oliviero di Bordella to Virginio Orsini, Rome, 4 February 1485. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 61, fol. 1r: "I am here as a sounding board: I can only write what I hear at third and fourth hand, whether true or not. However, I do not want Your Lordship to be kept in the dark, so I will strive to acquire other information first hand" (*io sto qui per una cornamusa, tanto posso scrivere quanto sento dal terzo et dal quarto, o vero o non vero. Non voglio però ne resti la Signoria Vostra nollo senta. Dell'altre cose me sforzarò toccharle con mano*).

⁸⁴ De Boüard, "Lettres de Rome," 300-1; Scarton, *Giovanni Lanfredini*.

⁸⁵ On the inner circle of Pope Innocent VIII, see Medici, *Lettere*, XII. On Girolamo Calagrano, see Zapperi, "Calagrano, Girolamo." On the animosity of Niccolò Bucciardi Cibo, nephew of the

Virginio's envoys generally did not face significant hurdles in obtaining an audience with the pope. However, when such obstacles did arise, it was precisely the diversity of curial friendships that enabled them to prevail. For instance, on 24 May 1485, when unable to secure an audience through Girolamo Calegrano, Antonello Sinibaldi decided to go through the pope's personal physician because he thought he would have a better chance.⁸⁶ In October 1490, during one of the many serious illnesses that afflicted the ailing pope, Santi di Torri was denied an audience by Franceschetto Cibo. After a heated discussion, he did not hesitate to seek for an alternative, once again through Calegrano.⁸⁷

But there was another peculiar aspect that helped Virginio's men overcome the difficulties of the Roman political context, that is, their constant geographical mobility. Their dispatches reveal a constant flow of communication between Rome and the nearby castles where Virginio resided – not only Bracciano, but also, occasionally, Vicovaro and Campagnano – which were just a few hours ride from the city. These constant comings and goings undoubtedly facilitated immediate communication: the baron's instructions were promptly delivered to his agents, and Virginio could receive his ambassadors' dispatches without delay. Moreover, particularly sensitive messages could be delivered orally, and it was not uncommon for the entire process to be completed within a single day.⁸⁸

6. *Small-Scale Diplomacy: An Open Field for Research*

The case of Virginio Orsini and his diplomatic activities go beyond the mere dichotomy between official and unofficial diplomacy. As we have seen, the question of officiality was certainly not irrelevant, yet the reception granted to his ambassadors depended more on the recognition and acceptance of Virginio's political role than on the formal acknowledgment of his independent sovereignty. Thus, the 'ritualized inclusion' of Santi di Corcumello in the inner circle of high-ranking diplomats in Florence and the ease with which Antonello Sinibaldi moved in the Neapolitan court stand in stark contrast

pope and Bishop of Cosenza, see Bartolomeo di Bracciano to Virginio Orsini, Rome, 20 December 1486 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 109, fol. 1r.

⁸⁶ Antonello Sinibaldi to Virginio Orsini, Rome, 24 May 1485 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 71, fol. 1r.

⁸⁷ Santi di Torri to Virginio Orsini, Rome, 29 October 1490 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 102, no. 225, fol. 1r.

⁸⁸ For instance, on 9 September 1487, the Florentine ambassador in Rome Giovanni Lanfredini, wrote a brief letter to Virginio listing a series of matters that would be conveyed to him orally by Giorgio Santacroce. Giovanni Lanfredini to Virginio Orsini, Rome, 9 September 1487. ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 127. Again, in October 1488, Lanfredini delivered a bundle of letters addressed to Virginio to Bartolomeo di Bracciano, who handed them over to the Roman Niccolò Caffarelli, who was just on his way to Bracciano to confer personally with Virginio. Bartolomeo di Bracciano to Virginio Orsini, Rome, 8 October 1487 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 156.

to the experience of Francesco di Castello, an unwelcome guest at a court governed by a prince politically hostile to Virginio. In this sense, his rejection – albeit indirect – shows that diplomacy could also be a field of exclusion.

At the same time, Virginio's political role grew in parallel with the development of his diplomatic machinery. After his death in 1497, that system did not collapse: rather, it was inherited by his son Gian Giordano (ca. 1460-1517), and, after him, by his widow Felice della Rovere (1483-1536), daughter of Pope Julius II (1503-13), whom he married after the death of Maria of Aragon. As guardian of her sons and daughters, Felice took control of the lands and castles of the Bracciano branch. From Vicovaro, where she usually resided, she managed her political and economic affairs through a network of envoys sent to the courts of Rome, France, and Spain. This system, though reshaped for her personal needs, was probably perceived as the most effective way to handle the multiplicity of interests involving the family.⁸⁹

Virginio Orsini's case is unlikely to have been unique. In the fifteenth century, members of the Colonna family tasked their servants and clients with missions inside Italian and European courts.⁹⁰ On 10 February 1481, Fabrizio de Stasis, sent to Rome by Galeotto Manfredi of Faenza for a short mission, wrote to his lord suggesting he prolong his mission indefinitely and with an adequate salary to follow what by then had become a customary practice for other lords of Romagna.⁹¹

As a minor lord in a multifaceted context, Virginio Orsini was not a part of the high-ranking polities, yet his profile barely fits the entities who practiced non-state diplomacy. Nor can the diplomacy practiced by the Italian *condottieri*, such as that of Iacopo Piccinino, studied by Serena Ferente, be totally assimilated to his case since Virginio was not a *condottiere senza stato*, but rather a minor lord with undisputed possession of lands and castles whose military activity was instrumental in the construction of his political role within the Italian system. The case of Virginio Orsini shows how diplomatic practice was shaped by differences in power, recognition, and access. It highlights not only the shared structural patterns that defined diplomatic interac-

⁸⁹ On Felice della Rovere, see Murphy, *Pope's daughter*; on her diplomacy, see Visceglia, *Donne dei Papi*, 48-50.

⁹⁰ E. g. in 12 May 1484, Paolo de Pusanis from Capranica made his last will, before leaving for France on behalf of Cardinal Colonna. BSS, Archivio Colonna, III BB, 55,3. At the end of March 1485, two men was sent by the Colonna in the court of Naples to discuss some political and economic affair with the king. Santi di Coreumello to Virginio Orsini, Naples, 30 March 1485 in ASC, AO, Serie I, vol. 101, no. 35, fol. 1r.

⁹¹ Fabrizio de Stasis to Galeotto Manfredi, Rome, 10 February 1481. ASF, MAP, XCVI, no. 125: "So that Your Lordship may understand how the other vicars do: the Lord of Rimini always has a man here in Rome, and even when he used to be in Tuscany as a Florentine soldier; the Lord of Pesaro, that could count on the Neapolitan ambassadors, and most of all on ser Leonardo Botta, always had a chancellor here, and now he has two, and he maintains them very well" (*et a ciò Vostra Signoria intenda el governo de li altri vicarii, el Signore de Arimine sempre ne tene uno qui in Roma, et mentre etiam fu in Toscana lo tenne, che era soldato de' Fiorentini. Il Signore de Pesaro qual ha li oratori regii che po dire siano padre e precipue messer Leonardo Botta li ho sempre trovato qualche cancelliere et in presentaliter gli n'ha doi et hognoratamente li tiene*).

tion, but also the specific constraints arising from each actor's position within the political system. Virginio's experience is all the more significant given the tendency in the second half of the fifteenth century to progressively limit the diplomatic game to an inner circle of major players.⁹²

For Virginio – and likely for other minor lords as well – political affirmation required more than dynastic strategies and shifting alliances: it relied on the adoption of common diplomatic practices that enabled these connections to operate effectively across different contexts. In this way, diplomacy functioned as the connective tissue between status, recognition, and influence. Certainly, the system Virginio built was far from perfect and did not always succeed. It required constant adaptation to shifting contexts and environments, and it managed to find its way into the narrow openings left by a political arena that was becoming increasingly closed, though never completely sealed.

⁹² Lazzarini, *Communication and conflict*, 156-66.

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