

Building Family Identity

The Orsini Castle of Bracciano from
Fiefdom to Duchy (1470–1698)



Paolo Alei and Max Grossman (eds)

COURT CULTURES OF
THE MIDDLE AGES
AND RENAISSANCE

Peter Lang

The Orsini of Bracciano were among the most powerful and influential *signori di castelli* of early modern Italy, controlling a vast domain that stretched from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the mountains of Abruzzo. This book explores the construction and decoration of their principal headquarters north of Rome between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as the careers and artistic patronage of its leaders, who included captains, condottieri, cardinals and urban aristocrats. The castle is one of the largest in Latium and was once a centre of courtly culture and diplomacy, hosting princes, kings and popes. Today it boasts many beautifully preserved artworks of the Renaissance era, including frescos by Antoniazio Romano and the Zuccari brothers.

The contributors to this study investigate the castle as a visual expression of the family identity of its builders. They trace its evolution from the fortified capital of a large fiefdom at the dawn of the age of artillery to the palatial residence of a ducal dynasty in the aftermath of the Italian Wars. Richly illustrated with numerous historic and new photographs, this book analyses a fascinating and mostly neglected facet of early modern Italian culture: the artistic patronage of seigniorial clans.

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We proudly dedicate this work to the late Manlio Alei, who had a generous spirit and a full heart and lived his entire life in northern Latium, in the lands of the Orsini. May his memory be a blessing.

Introduction

[...] nobilissima vetustateque familia, cuius originem et genus si quis recensere voluerit, non orationem sed longam scribere historiam. Habuit haec domus amplissima in rebus bellicis felicissimos duces, gravissimos ecclesiae antistites, quamplurimos Cardinales et pontifices maximos et quod omnium est praecipuum ecclesiam romanam summa observantia et fide semper est prosecuta.¹

The simultaneous construction of a family identity and a monumental castle by one of the most powerful baronial clans of Renaissance Italy, the Orsini of Bracciano, is the primary focus of our investigation. From their rise to prominence in the second half of the fifteenth century, when they consolidated their possessions north of Rome and erected their great stronghold on Lake Bracciano, through the decline and dissolution of their territorial state in the late seventeenth century, their architectural and artistic patronage closely mirrored their family aspirations and socio-political strategies (see Figure 0.1).

The castle was begun in the 1470s by Napoleone, the veritable founder of the Bracciano branch of the Orsini. He appears, together with his brothers, as one of the holy kings in the *Adoration of the Magi* attributed to Lorenzo da Viterbo in the Palace of Tagliacozzo (see Figure 0.2).²

- 1 “Ioannis Gatti Paraesulis Caphaluden, Oratio quam habuit in funere Latini Card. Ursini in Aede Sancti Salvatoris Romae” (Biblioteca Vat. Lat., 5626, cc. 71–86), in Sandro Corradini, “Note sul Cardinale Latino Orsini fondatore di S. Salvatore in Lauro ed il suo elogio funebre,” in *Sisto IV: le arti a Roma nel primo rinascimento. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi*, ed. Fabio Benzi (Rome: Associazione Culturale Shakespeare and Company 2, 2000), 132.
- 2 On the identification of one of the Magi as Napoleone Orsini, see Gerardo de Simone, “Per Lorenzo da Viterbo, dal Palazzo Orsini di Tagliacozzo alla



Figure 0.1. Castle of Bracciano, general view. Photo by Fabio Baroni.

After Napoleone's death in 1480, the castle was continued by his son Gentil Virginio, who brought the edifice to completion by the time of his own death in 1497. Its construction framed the critical period between the Pazzi Conspiracy and the start of the Italian Wars, which would radically change the geopolitical dynamic of the entire peninsula. Once completed, its grand halls and courtyard were the site of many diplomatic and historic events, as the Orsini were active participants in the strategic alliances and military conflicts of the era. The architectural modifications and decorative additions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially under

Cappella Mazzatosta di Viterbo," *Predella* 30 (2011), 37 and n. 58; also Daniela Del Pesco, "Eroi e Virtù. Due cicli di affreschi per gli Orsini a Tagliacozzo," in *Tagliacozzo e la Marsica in età angioina e aragonese. Aspetti di vita artistica, civile e religiosa. Atti del convegno, Tagliacozzo, sabato 25 maggio 2002, Teatro Talia*, ed. Franco Salvatori (Tagliacozzo: Comune di Tagliacozzo, 2003) (Rome, 2003), 157, n. 6; and Maria Pia Fina, *Il Palazzo Orsini di Tagliacozzo e la sua decorazione* (L'Aquila: Grafiche Cellini, 2004), 77.

the patronage of Gian Giordano, Felice della Rovere, Paolo Giordano, Virginio and Paolo Giordano II, transformed the fortress into a palatial manor which assumed the character of a *locus amoenus*, imbued with the mnemonic power of the family's glorious past.



Figure 0.2. Attr. Lorenzo da Viterbo, *Adoration of the Magi with the Orsini Family*, c. 1464–1467. Fresco. Palazzo Ducale, Tagliacozzo. Photo by Elisabetta Mori.

During the more than two centuries of their rule, the Orsini succeeded in crafting a large and cohesive state, which in 1560 was elevated to a duchy. Their dominion lay mostly within the Kingdom of Naples and the Papal States and extended from the Tyrrhenian coast of Latium to the region of Abruzzo, beyond the Apennines and toward the Adriatic. Stefania Camilli has shown that at the end of the fifteenth century the Orsini possessed a vast territory that encompassed much of the ancient network of Roman roads and incorporated the feudal social structures of the Middle Ages (see Figure 0.3). Yet it was developed in such a way that its economy, which relied upon farming, cattle, mining and other industries, thrived during the Renaissance and survived well into the modern era.

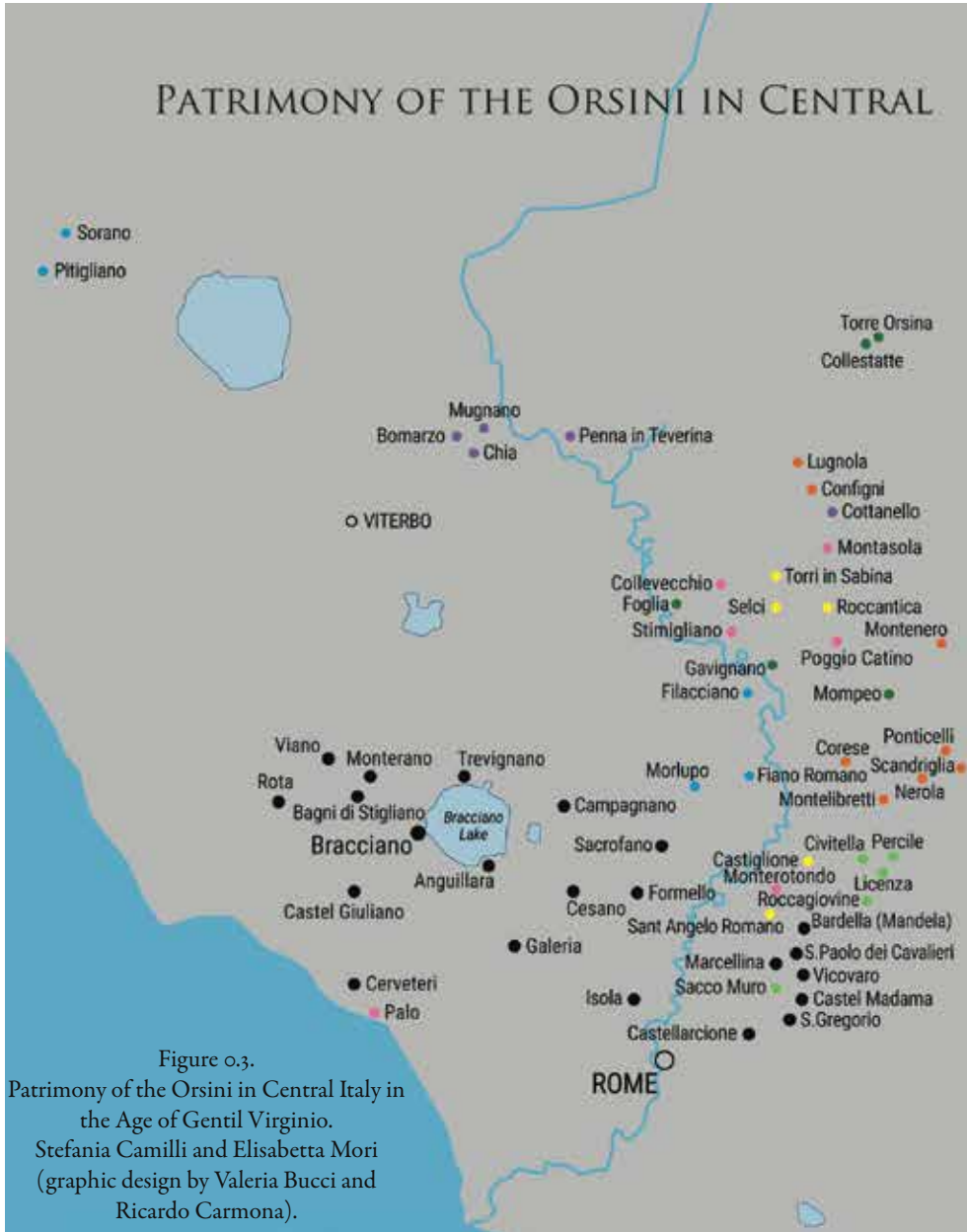
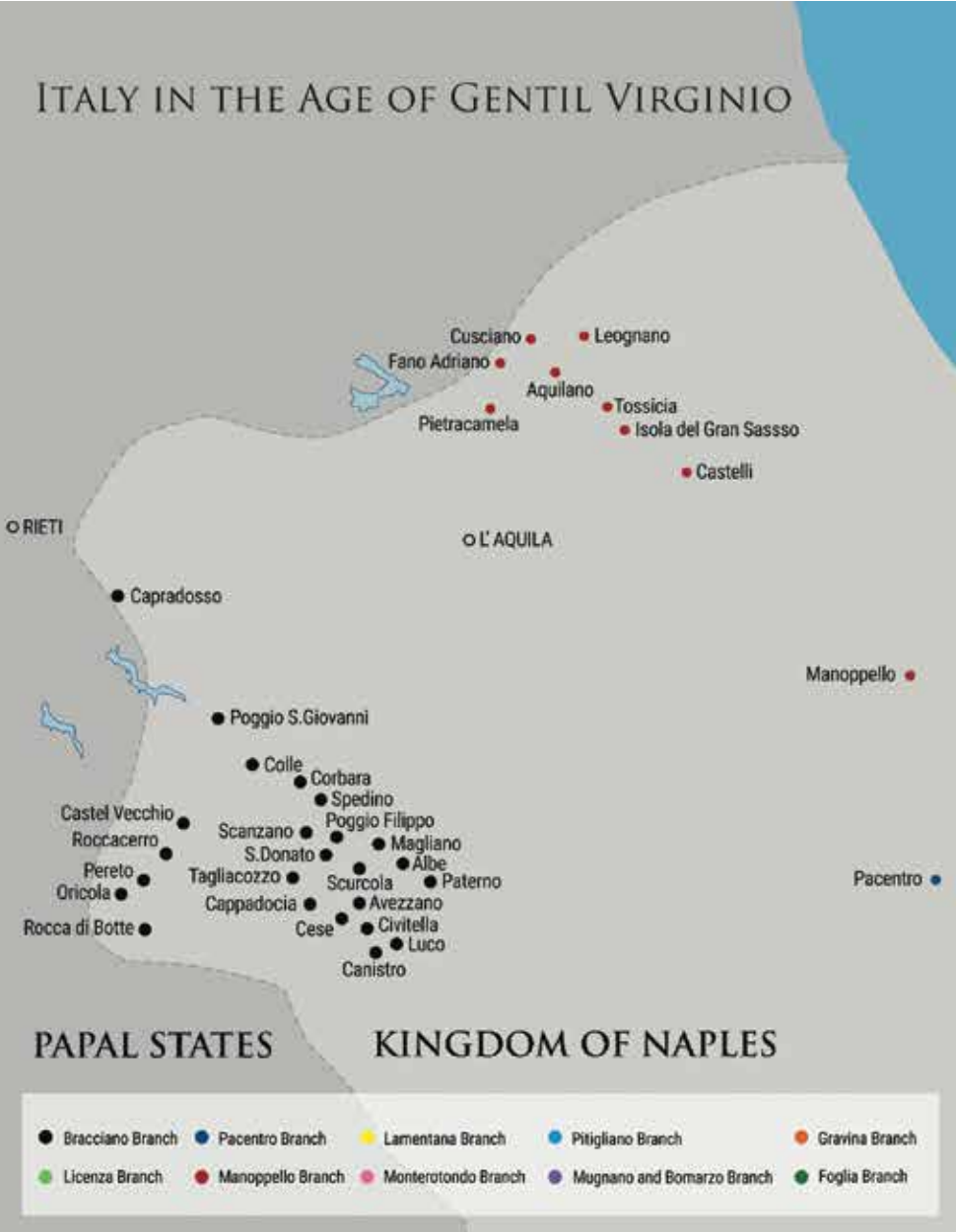


Figure 0.3.
Patrimony of the Orsini in Central Italy in
the Age of Gentil Virginio.
Stefania Camilli and Elisabetta Mori
(graphic design by Valeria Bucci and
Ricardo Carmona).

ITALY IN THE AGE OF GENTIL VIRGINIO



Just as their castle was nearing completion, the Orsini were convulsed by the political turmoil sparked by the descent into Italy of King Charles VIII of France, who was hosted in Bracciano in 1494, and by the attack on the castle by the army of the Borgias in 1496. This was the moment when Pope Alexander VI challenged the power of the baronial families and Bracciano entered into the realm of the Italian Wars. Meanwhile, the Orsini, who had traditionally relied upon *condotte* [military commands] as a major source of revenue, were called upon less frequently by the European powers, since the major wars were increasingly fought on battlefields outside Italy.³ In time, the family was forced to rely more upon their landed wealth than military services, and they eventually sank into debt.⁴ The financial crisis reached a peak in 1696, when Flavio Orsini sold the castle to Livio Odescalchi. Two years later, the death of Flavio precipitated the extinction of the dynasty.

The Re-emergence of Orsini Studies

In his oration following the death of Cardinal Latino Orsini in 1477 (cited above), Giovanni Gatti, in the presence of the Orsini captains and ecclesiastics inside the church of San Salvatore in Lauro, claimed that it was impossible to describe the Orsini family in a sermon, for it required a long *historia*. Since Latino's time, there have been several publications on this *nobilissima familia*. From the 1565 book by Francesco Sansovino to contemporary works, the complex history of the Orsini of Bracciano and their patronage has become progressively clearer.

3 Rainer Wohlfeil, "Esercito e società nella prima età moderna (secoli e XVI e XVII)," in *Militari e società civile nell'Europa dell'età moderna (secoli XVI e XVII)*, eds Claudio Donati and Bernhard R. Kroener (Bologna: Il Molino, 2007), 197–209; Barbara Furlotti, *A Renaissance Baron and his Possessions. Paolo Giordano I Orsini, Duke of Bracciano (1541–1585)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2012), 24.

4 *Ibid.*, 17–21.

Yet only in the last several decades have scholars begun to realise the true significance of the family and its achievements. Pompeo Litta's nineteenth-century study is an important compilation of primary source material and is considered to be a starting point for modern exploration of the topic,⁵ but his accuracy has been questioned in recent years. In the mid-twentieth century, Gustavo Brigante Colonna's book on the Orsini generated new interest in the family, but the lack of documentation makes it difficult to identify the sources of his information.⁶ More recently, historians Franca Allegrezza, Sandro Carocci and Christine Shaw aimed for a deeper and more precise understanding of the family and its history.⁷ In her 1983 dissertation on the Orsini, Shaw lamented the general lack of scholarship on baronial families and a certain confusion and historical prejudice regarding even the basic facts; whereas in her last book, published in 2015, she claims that the role of the *signori di castelli* (a term she uses to define the manifold identity of baronial families) was better understood.⁸ These efforts culminated in the publi-

- 5 Pompeo Litta, "Orsini di Roma," *Famiglie celebri italiane*, vol. 7 (Milan: Ferrario, 1844–1850), pt 2, fasc. 62. This was followed by studies such as Fedele Savio, "Le tre famiglie Orsini di Monterotondo, di Marino e di Manoppello," in *Bollettino della Società Umbra di Storia Patria* 2 (1896), 89–112; Cesare De Cupis, *Regesto degli Orsini specialmente per quanto si riferisce al loro dominio feudale negli Abruzzi e dei conti Anguillara ...* (Sulmona: Colaprete, 1903); and Vincenzo Celletti, *Gli Orsini di Bracciano. Glorie, tragedie e fastosità della casa patrizia più interessante della Roma dei secoli XV, XVI e XVII* (Rome: Palombi, 1963).
- 6 Gustavo Brigante Colonna, *Gli Orsini* (Milan: Ceschina, 1955).
- 7 Franca Allegrezza, *Organizzazione del potere e dinamiche familiari. Gli Orsini dal Duecento agli inizi del Quattrocento*, ser. *Nuovi studi storici* 44 (Rome: Istituto storico per il Medioevo, 1998); Sandro Carocci, *Baroni di Roma. Dominazioni signorili e lignaggi aristocratici nel Duecento e nel primo Trecento*, ser. *Nuovi studi storici* 23 (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 1993).
- 8 Christine Shaw, "The Political Role of the Orsini Family in the Papal States, c. 1480–1534," DPhil diss. (University of Oxford, 1983), published (and henceforth cited) as *The Political Role of the Orsini Family from Sixtus IV to Clement VIII. Barons and Factions in the Papal States*, ser. *Nuovi studi storici* 73 (Rome: Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo, 2007); eadem, *Barons and Castellans. The Military Nobility of Renaissance Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

cation of a comprehensive family genealogy by Elisabetta Mori in 2016, *L'Archivio Orsini. La famiglia, la storia, l'inventario*.⁹ Very soon, a thorough study of the Orsini family in the early modern era will be published by Adriano Amendola, *Gli Orsini e le arti in età moderna. Collezionare opera, collezionare idee*.¹⁰

In addition to these excellent general studies, scholars have begun to open other avenues of research into the Orsini clan. Francesca Laura Sigismondi advanced our knowledge of the Duchy of Bracciano and its political and legal structure.¹¹ Stefania Camilli studied the historical, cultural and diplomatic context of Gentil Virginio, assessing his self-fashioning within the context of the sophisticated humanist culture of his time.¹² Mori restored the reputations of both Paolo Giordano and his wife Isabella de' Medici, who for centuries had been historiographical victims of diplomatic machination and literary falsification.¹³ Caroline Murphy investigated both Isabella and another famous Orsini wife, Felice della Rovere.¹⁴ Barbara Furlotti's studies have re-evaluated the history and significance of Paolo Giordano while exploring the concept of baronial identity and material culture.¹⁵ Adriano Amendola has published extensively on the collections of the Orsini family, especially those of Lelio Orsini and Paolo Giordano II, and has thoroughly researched

9 Elisabetta Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini. La famiglia, la storia, l'inventario* (Rome: Viella, 2016).

10 Adriano Amendola, *Gli Orsini e le arti in età moderna. Collezionare opere, collezionare idee* (Milan: Skira, 2019).

11 Francesca Laura Sigismondi, *Lo stato degli Orsini. Statuti e diritto proprio nel Ducato di Bracciano* (Rome: Viella, 2003).

12 Stefania Camilli, "Gentil Virginio Orsini. Un barone condottiero del Quattrocento," tesi di dottorato (Università degli Studi di Firenze, 2012).

13 Elisabetta Mori, *L'onore perduto di Isabella de' Medici* (Milan: Garzanti, 2011). Mori uses original documents to exonerate Isabella de' Medici, formerly seen as an adulterous woman who was assassinated by her husband. Mori is currently writing a book on the letters of Isabella de' Medici and Paolo Giordano.

14 Caroline P. Murphy, *The Pope's Daughter: The Extraordinary Life of Felice delle Rovere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); eadem, *Isabella de' Medici: The Glorious Life and Tragic End of a Renaissance Princess* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

15 Furlotti, *A Renaissance Baron and his Possessions*.

the bronze medallions with Orsini portraits that are in the collection of the Capitoline Museums in Rome.¹⁶ Carla Benocci, Guendalina Ajello Mahler and Kristin Triff analysed the role of art, architecture and collections within the context of Orsini patronage in Renaissance and Baroque Rome.¹⁷ Augusto Santocchi's on-line publications have produced valuable new information on the Orsini of Bracciano. *Forum Clodii*, a cultural association in Bracciano, has expanded our knowledge of the region through several specialised studies.¹⁸ In spite of these advances, as Gatti suggested above, writing about the history of the Orsini is a long and, perhaps, infinite task and there are many areas that are still unexplored.

The contributions of Mori during her long tenure as supervisor of the Archivio Capitolino in Rome have been pivotal, in particular her effort to reorganise the Orsini Archive. Also important was the recent restructuring of the Orsini Family Papers in Los Angeles by Ajello Mahler. The improvements to these archives have made it easier for scholars of the Orsini to examine the primary sources and advance their research. As a result, there has been a wave of new scholarly activity, resulting in a series of three specialised conferences: *The Orsini, a Roman Baronial Family in Context*, Los Angeles (2007); *Early Modern Rome 2*, Rome and Bracciano (2013); and *Gli Orsini e Savelli nella Roma dei*

16 Adriano Amendola, *La collezione del principe Lelio Orsini nel palazzo di Piazza Navona a Roma* (Rome: Campisano, 2013); idem, "Paolo Giordano II Orsini collezionista di disegni. Novità su Paul Bril, Bartholomeus Breenbergh, Simon Vouet, Francesco Salviati e altri antichi maestri," *Bollettino d'arte* 22–3 (2014), 135–50; idem, *Ritratti di bronzo. Il Medagliere Orsini dei Musei Capitolini di Roma* (Rome: De Luca Editori d'Arte, 2017).

17 Carla Benocci, *Paolo Giordano II Orsini nei ritratti di Bernini, Boselli, Leoni e Kornmann* (Rome: De Luca, 2006); Guendalina Ajello Mahler, "The Orsini Family Papers at the University of California, Los Angeles. Property Administration, Political Strategy and Architectural Legacy," *Viator* 39, no. 2 (2008), 297–321; Kristin A. Triff, *The Orsini Palace at Monte Giordano: Patronage and Public Image in Renaissance Rome* (Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers, forthcoming).

18 <<https://www.forumclodii.org>>.

papi, Salerno, Chieti and Rome (2016). In addition, the Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medioevo, directed by Massimo Miglio, and Roma nel Rinascimento, have produced important investigations of the Tuscia region and the Orsini family in the early modern period. At this point, there is an active community of dedicated Orsini scholars from all over the world that is working to deepen our knowledge of the family and its significance.

The present study stems primarily from the 2013 symposium hosted in both the Archivio Capitolino in Rome and the Castle of Bracciano, and sponsored by the University of California in Rome and the Fondazione Livio IV Odescalchi. This was the first gathering of Orsini scholars in Bracciano since 1981, when Anna Cavallaro, Almamaria Mignosi Tantillo and Rosella Siligato completed their pioneering analysis of the architecture and frescos of the castle.¹⁹ Before that time, the only important study of the fortified complex was the brief, yet informative, work published by Luigi Borsari in 1895, immediately following the restorations by Raffaello Ogetti for Baldassarre Odescalchi.²⁰

Princess Maria della Pace Odescalchi, the primary supporter of our research, continues the patronage of her family, who acquired the Bracciano residence from the Orsini more than three centuries ago. She has opened it to the public and dedicated herself to preserving the memory of the Orsini, restoring both the architecture and paintings, and supporting scholarly studies of the history of the family and its patronage. Thanks in large part to her, the Castle of Bracciano is today the best preserved monument of the Orsini family in Italy: an architectural jewel with a fascinating museum, perched high above a lake in the countryside north of Rome.

19 Anna Cavallaro, Almamaria Mignosi Tantillo and Rosella Siligato, eds, *Bracciano e gli Orsini nel '400. Tramonto di un progetto feudale*, exhibition catalogue, Castello Odescalchi, Bracciano, 27 June–27 August 1981, ser. *Quattrocento a Roma e nel Lazio* 4 (Rome: De Luca, 1981).

20 Luigi Borsari and Raffaele Ogetti, *Il Castello di Bracciano: guida storico-artistica* (Rome: Edoardo Perino, 1895; Bracciano: Tuga, 2014).

The Genesis and Rise of the Orsini Family

The Orsini were among the major baronial clans (which included the Colonna, Savelli, Caetani, Conti and Anguillara) that gravitated in and around Rome.²¹ As Roman barons belonging to the Guelph faction, the Orsini were closely associated with the Eternal City, but they always emphasised that their origins could be traced to provincial towns. They were a highly ramified family with several branches exercising power, mainly within the Papal States and the Kingdom of Naples,²² yet they were also present in other regions of Italy and beyond. In the early modern period, the most powerful Orsini lines were centred in Tagliacozzo, Bracciano, Monterotondo, San Gemini, Pitigliano, Manoppello, Nola and Gravina. They were *signori di castelli*. That is, they belonged to a landed military nobility whose wealth derived from agriculture, taxation and military services; hence, fortified castles in the *campagna*, close to major transit roads, became the true symbols of their power. The Orsini acquired land through a variety of means: inheritance (through paternal and sometimes maternal kin), papal and royal grants, military victories and strategic marriages. At times they relinquished property temporarily, as when others were made custodians of their possessions, and sometimes permanently, as a consequence of confiscation, military defeat or sales of assets.

The Orsini were especially known for their military prowess and they often maintained standing armies or, in any case, had the means to raise them quickly. Their leaders served as generals and condottieri not only for the popes and the kings of Naples, but also for other Italian sovereigns. In addition to *condotte* and lucrative territories, they were offered offices and titles, such as Captain of the Church or Senator of the Campidoglio of Rome. Some were given membership of the Order of the Ermine or privileged positions among the Aragonese nobility of Naples.

21 The best studies on the origin and development of the Roman baronial aristocracies are Allegrezza, *Organizzazione del potere*; and Carocci, *Baroni di Roma*.

22 Shaw, *Barons and Castellans*, 62–3.

The traditional criteria defining the various categories of nobility (landed, military, civic and ecclesiastical) and the distinction between aristocratic and mercantile wealth were somewhat blurred in the case of the Orsini of Bracciano. Although they built a stronghold 40 kilometres north-west of Saint Peter's Basilica, where they controlled a vast territory, they had a strong economic interest in the centre of Rome. There they lived in various palaces while many members of the family held clerical offices, including several who attained the rank of cardinal. Thus, like so many other Roman baronial clans, they defied traditional categorisation. They were military captains possessing territories, condottieri, officials of the Curia, and urban aristocrats.

It is difficult to determine the precise genesis of the Orsini since, like many other families who prospered in early modern Italy, they propagated foundation legends in the tradition of the *origo*. Sansovino recorded a myth of the family's origin which likely circulated long before he wrote his book in the sixteenth century. He claimed that the ancient founder of the clan was a certain Orso, who hailed from a region beyond the Danube and had been breastfed by a she-bear, much like Romulus and Remus, founders of Rome, who had been suckled by a she-wolf.²³

In the early fifteenth century, the Orsini emphasised their Roman ancestry through the many ancient epigraphs they assembled in their Roman palaces, especially at Montegiordano in the time of Cardinal Giordano (d. 1438). The epigraph citing Ursus Alus and his wife Vituria must have been a major catalyst in the discussion of their *romanitas* – so much so that its text was later inscribed on the palace of the Orsini in Nola.²⁴ Yet it was after the death of Gentil Virginio that the family's classical origins were reinvented in the *Arctologus*: an erudite discussion about the myth of the bear.²⁵ Giovan Battista Cantalicio dedicated *De*

23 Francesco Sansovino, *L'Historia di Casa Orsina* (Venice: Bernardino & Filippo Stagnini, 1565), 5–6.

24 See the note in Bianca de Divitis in "Histantartsi" (1 April 2017), <<http://db.histantartsi.eu/web/rest/Iscrizione/4>>.

25 Giovan Battista Cantalicio, *De Ursinae familie origine et eiusdem clarissimis duabus: Arctologus* (n.d.), Biblioteca Nazionale, Naples, ms. V.E.41. See the note by

Ursinae familiae origine to Gian Giordano Orsini and, indirectly, to Gentil Virginio, between 1510 and 1515. In the text, the transformation of the word “bear” from the Latin *ursus* to the Greek *arctos* shifts the geographical and historical context of the Orsini of Bracciano to a more remote time, to the age of ancient Greece. Indeed, Cantalicio related the myth of the Orsini to the catasterism of the Bear in Arcadia. The nymph Calisto, daughter of King Lycon, seduced by Jupiter disguised as Artemis, conceived Arcas. Out of jealousy, Juno transformed Calisto into a she-bear while Zeus made Arcas king of Arcadia. Failing to recognise his mother, Arcas was about to kill her when Jupiter also transformed him into a bear. In a final catasterism, both mother and son were banished to the constellations of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor.

In reality, the Orsini came to power much later than the time of the she-bear, toward the end of the twelfth century, as a consequence of an egregious act of papal nepotism.²⁶ The family descended from the “Boboni,” which was a branch of the “Boveschi” line. Orso of Bobone made his fortune when his uncle, Cardinal Giacinto of Pietro Bobone, was elected pope as Celestine III in 1191. The pontiff assigned him the fief of Vicovaro and two other *castra* in the area of the Anio Valley.²⁷ During a quarrel in 1203–1204 between the Boboni and Innocent III, the successor of Celestine, the family attained such a high status that they assumed a new name: *filiis Ursi*. Starting in the 1260s, members of the household appeared in documents as *Ursinis*, *de Ursinis*, or *Ursinos*.²⁸ By then the Boboni descendants, assisted by ties of kinship with the popes and motivated by economic interests, began to acquire properties that had formerly belonged to monasteries, speculating that castrense revenues accompanied by demographic growth would

Lorenzo Miletta in *Histantartsi* (2 April 2017): <<http://db.histantartsi.eu/web/rest/Manoscritto/40>>.

26 Carocci, *Baroni di Roma*, 27.

27 The other two fiefs were Burdella and Cantalupo, near modern-day Mandela. Franca Allegrezza, “The Orsini in the Tiburtine Region and in the Licenza Valley (XII–XV centuries),” in Jane Crawford, Monica de Simone, and Bernard Frischer, eds, *The Horace’s Villa Project, 1997–2003* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2006), 327–33.

28 Carocci, *Baroni di Roma*, 387.

be profitable.²⁹ The establishment of castles with agricultural estates was slowly changing the socio-political landscape of Central Italy and setting the stage for the rise of the *filiis Ursi*.³⁰

In the second half of the thirteenth century, two brothers, Napoleone and Matteo Rosso, sons of Giangaetano of Orso of Bobone, began to form two separate lines.³¹ Napoleone's family expanded beyond Vicovaro and eventually settled in the Campo de' Fiori in Rome and in Tagliacozzo in Marsica. The acquisition by marriage of Tagliacozzo enabled the Orsini to establish a foothold within the Kingdom of Naples very early, during the reign of the last of the Swabians. The geographical locations of Vicovaro and Tagliacozzo along the Valeria, within the Papal States and the Kingdom of Naples respectively, solidly anchored the Orsini within the territories of the two Italian powers.³²

The line of Matteo Rosso started with a few scattered possessions, but their pervasive presence in Rome led to the nomination of several senators and cardinals, and the election of Pope Nicholas III Orsini (1277–1280).³³

29 Allegrezza, "The Orsini in the Tiburtine Region," 328.

30 "These changes had redefined the environment, creating an agricultural space in concentric rings of land which became progressively less productive further from the inhabited center. Outside the walls, the land was subjected to intensive cultivation. First were vegetable plots and orchards, or, rather, vegetable plots with orchards pressed in around the walls of the *castrum*. There followed the more specialized, intensive planting areas, *ferraginalia*, destined for the cultivation of barley, spelt and legumes, as well as hemp, which needed systematic irrigation rather than frequent manuring. In the flatter and more recently ploughed-up land, there was extensive cultivation of cereal crops. Areas of natural meadow, alternating with vineyards, both self-supporting and trained onto trees for support, occupied a place between the *cultum* and the *incultum*. The woods were used for the raising of pigs in a semi-wild state, and obviously supplied wood for heating, building and for the making of utensils. The woodlands, the pastures, and, during the winter, even parts of the cultivated area itself, served as a huge and varied terrain for hunting, with game both large and small." *Ibid.*, 331.

31 Carocci, *Baroni di Roma*, 387–400.

32 Allegrezza, "The Orsini in the Tiburtine Region," 330.

33 Franca Allegrezza, "Matteo Rosso Orsini," *Federiciana* (Rome: Treccani, 2005), <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/matteo-rosso-orsini_\(Federiciana\)>](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/matteo-rosso-orsini_(Federiciana)>).

His papacy did not last long but the influence in the Roman Church of Cardinal Matteo Rosso, nephew of the pope, was crucially important for the family.³⁴ The men of this lineage rapidly conquered strategic castles north and south of Rome and eventually established an Orsini line at Montegiordano, in the centre of the Eternal City.³⁵

As for the Orsini of Bracciano, one may trace their origins to the mid-fourteenth century, when a certain Giordano, son of Poncello Orsini, began laying a path for future generations. Giordano was a senator in the Campidoglio, where in 1341 he and Orso dell'Anguillara famously awarded the *laurea* to Petrarch. He was also protector of the Tuscia region, where he commanded the papal army against the prefects of Vico, who at the time governed the small *borgo* of Bracciano. Giordano's grandson Giovanni continued his family's politics of expansion and consolidation with his marriage to the Neapolitan noblewoman Bartolomea Spinelli. This strategic alliance enabled him to reinforce his interests in the Kingdom of Naples. His wife gave birth to six children: Francesco, Giordano, Orso, Carlo, Perna and Costanza.³⁶

By 1400, generations of Orsini had successfully developed an effective system of family strategies, which sometimes shifted among the various branches of the clan. The boundaries defining their socio-political roles were often blurred. They were captains with vast territories to control and exploit, condottieri at the service of lords and princes throughout Italy, cardinals with high positions in the Curia, bishops in prestigious abbeys, as well as merchants and entrepreneurs. Their interests in Rome and Naples led them to establish headquarters in both cities and satellite castles with corollary possessions throughout their rural territories. The Orsini were *signori di castelli*, and regardless of whether individual branches or members were closely related, they collectively accumulated power and strove to expand their web of influence.

34 Paola Pavan, "Matteo Rosso Orsini," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 79 (Rome: Treccani, 2013), <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/matteo-rosso-orsini_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/matteo-rosso-orsini_(Dizionario-Biografico))>.

35 The name "del Monte," which appears several times in association with this line of the Orsini, may derive from Montegiordano. Litta, *Famiglie celebri italiane*, Table 5.

36 Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 36–7, 39.

The Commonwealth of the Orsini

The Orsini became increasingly conscious of the potential to expand their power, as the four sons of Giovanni – Francesco, Giordano, Orso and Carlo – sought to acquire important positions at the critical moment when Ladislaus of Durazzo and Louis II of Anjou were both laying claim to the throne of Naples, and the pro-Angevin Pope Martin V Colonna (1417–1431) was preparing to re-establish the papacy in Rome following the Avignon Captivity.³⁷ The best documented of the four men, the condottiere Francesco and Cardinal Giordano, threw their support behind the Angevin king and the Colonna pope, who emerged victoriously from the crisis. Probably as a result of their loyalty, Francesco received in fief and acquired ownership of lands in Latium (around the Clodia, Cassia, Flaminia and Salaria) and in Apulia, becoming both Prefect of Rome and Lord of Gravina and strengthening his control in Central and Southern Italy. Meanwhile, Giordano ascended to the Curia, as he was appointed Cardinal of Santa Sabina and Bishop of Farfa.

To better understand the future connection between the Orsini and Tuscia, it is important to remember that Bracciano was confirmed as a vicariate of the Orsini at least twice under Martin V, in 1417 and in 1419, with specific mention of Francesco, Carlo and Orso.³⁸ In 1427 Francesco and his brothers began their acquisition of the castle and its surrounding lands – an incremental process that would eventually lead to their total ownership of the territory.³⁹

37 Sigismondi, *Lo stato degli Orsini*, 14–16; Carlo Calisse, “I Prefetti di Vico,” *Archivio della Società Romana di storia patria* 10 (1887), 1–136, 353–594.

38 Augusto Santocchi found a copy of the 1419 papal bull, which was signed in Bologna, 11 September 1415, in the Odescalchi Archives (Archivio di Stato di Roma, *Fondo Odescalchi*, 7G10), cited in his *Bracciano ai tempi della visita apostolica del 1574* (Bracciano: Vecchiarelli, 2013), 74, n. 62. For the concession of Martin V in 1417, see De Cupis, *Regesto degli Orsini*, 412; and the 1419 renewal in Archivio Storico Capitolino, Archivio Orsini (henceforth AO), I, vol. 479c, ff. 21–30v, cited by Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 24.

39 AO, I, *Perg.* II.A.13, 050, 30 November 1427, also *Perg.* II.A.14, 001, 23 February 1428, cited by Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 24–5.

It was at about that time that the Orsini lines of Bracciano and Gravina began to develop a broader scheme for the expansion of power in Italy, signalling the presence of their clan on separate geopolitical axes. Carlo, followed by his sons, seems to have cultivated Orsini interests in and around Rome, where members of the family, including several cardinals, worked to improve their relationship with the popes. Meanwhile, Francesco, while overseeing his properties in Rome, increasingly pursued his interests within the circle of the Neapolitan sovereigns, becoming Duke of Gravina and successfully exploiting the transition from the Angevin to the Aragonese dynasties in Southern Italy. In his *De Ursinae familiae origine*, Cantalicio, with purely rhetorical praise, claimed that Francesco and Carlo Orsini had heroically defeated the enemies of Pope Eugene IV, allowing the pope to return to Rome from Florence in 1434.⁴⁰ Of course, Cantalicio was writing at the dawn of the sixteenth century, when the two brothers (founders of the Orsini of Bracciano and Gravina, respectively) were described with an aura of legend, rooted in the Guelph tradition. Their brother Orso helped the Aragona take over Naples, where he became chancellor and developed a profitable relationship between his family and the successors to the house of Anjou.⁴¹ Thus, a clear north-south strategy, the foundation of which had been laid over the course of generations, began to emerge and solidify.

The acquisition and leasing of real estate was an essential component of the family's strategy and an important manifestation of its authority and prestige. As the family implemented its geopolitical plans in Central and Southern Italy, they started to embrace certain types of property ownership and management in the cities and towns under their control. In Rome, as Ajello Mahler has demonstrated, they often employed a form of long-term rental contract, the *emphyteusis*, and they sometimes insisted on the right to repurchase property after its sale, the so-called

40 Eleonora Perna, "Gli Orsini di Bracciano tra realtà storica e trasfigurazione letteraria nel II libro dell'Arctologus di Giovambattista Valentini, detto il Cantalicio," *Studi Rinascimentali* 16 (2018), 41–50.

41 *Ibid.*, 25, n. 53.

pactum redimendi.⁴² Francesco built his residence in Piazza di Pasquino (near Piazza Navona) and it bore the inscription “Francisci de Ursinis urbis praefecti filiorumq[ue].”⁴³ Cardinal Gian Giordano occupied the monumental palace of Montegiordano, where he conducted diplomacy with the popes and gathered humanists and artists. He received revenues from numerous monasteries, extending from Lyon to Trau in Dalmatia, and his Roman palace was decorated by Masolino da Panicale.⁴⁴ Carlo, the father of the next generation of the Orsini of Bracciano, is hardly documented, except for the fact that he served Venice, most likely as a condottiere.⁴⁵ Without a doubt, these well-planned family strategies greatly benefitted future generations of Orsini.

In the mid-fifteenth century, thanks to a complex matrix of practices that regulated testaments and inheritances as well as purchasing and selling within the Orsini family, the four male children of Carlo became the beneficiaries of an enormous patrimony consisting of lands, palaces and other forms of wealth.⁴⁶ Francesco died in 1456 and his children continued the branch of the Orsini of Gravina, retaining their possessions in Southern Italy and the palace at Piazza Pasquino.⁴⁷ Although Carlo must have been

42 Ajello Mahler, “The Orsini Family Papers.”

43 Carlo Pietrangeli, “Palazzo Orsini a Pasquino e Palazzo Braschi,” *Capitolium* 4, no. 41 (1966), 241–64.

44 Annelies Amberger, *Giordano Orsini. Uomini famosi in Rom. Helden der Weltgeschichte im Frühhumanismus* (Deutscher Kunstverlag: München-Berlin, 2003).

45 Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 18.

46 AO, I, *Perg.* II.A.14, 063, 14 June 1438: “Testamento del card. Giordano Orsini, vescovo di Sabina, il quale vuole essere sepolto nella basilica di S. Pietro. Lascia vari legati, i suoi paramenti sagri, tutta la sua biblioteca e il denaro necessario per fabbricare un edificio per custodirla, tutto a beneficio della basilica di S. Pietro. Vuole che vi siano addetti due beneficiati con un assegno annuo sulle rendite del monastero di S. Biagio della Pagnotta. Istituisce eredi Orso Orsini, suo fratello, ed i figli di Carlo, suoi nepoti, a parti eguali, ma colla preferenza dei maschi ed in mancanza di questi nomina eredi le femmine purché si congiungano in matrimonio con qualcuno della casa Orsini.” Cited by Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 31.

47 Francesco Orsini married Margherita della Marra and Ilaria Scillato. Both women were part of the Southern Italian nobility that contributed to the ascent to power of Francesco Orsini in the Kingdom of Naples. Francesco did not have male children

quite young when he died, he had probably married twice.⁴⁸ His children would have inherited most of the Orsini territories that their father, uncles and more distant relatives had acquired.⁴⁹ Francesco had guaranteed a dowry for Carlo's daughters Costanza, Maddalena, Paola, Bartolomea and Elena, while his sons Roberto, Napoleone, Latino and Giovanni received a large inheritance that would guarantee the power of the family for more than two centuries. The lord of Tagliacozzo, Giovanni Antonio Orsini, who also died in 1456 without male children, had ensured in his testament that Tagliacozzo, Albe and Vicovaro, among other lands, would be left to the children of Carlo.⁵⁰ Gentile Orsini of Campo de' Fiori bequeathed to them several buildings around the Piazza Campo de' Fiori and lands to the east and north of Rome, effectively expanding the territory of Bracciano.⁵¹ The latter had already been made a vicariate by the pope, and the sons of Carlo became heirs to the old *rocca* that the prefects of Vico had built on the west side of the lake. Thus, the Orsini made sure that most of their

from these two wives but had six sons from a Roman woman named Pascarella. These children acquired the Palace of Piazza Pasquino and became the Orsini of Gravina. *Ibid.*, 28–9.

- 48 Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 26. See also the chapter by Stefania Camilli in this volume.
- 49 According to Litta, Carlo had married Paola, sister of Giannantonio Orsini of Tagliacozzo, who left his lands in Marsica to the sons of her sister. This would explain the relationship of Carlo's sons with Tagliacozzo and Vicovaro in Marsica. Litta, *Famiglie celebri italiane*, Table 19. Mori, however, recently revised the marriage of Carlo, for there is a certain Geronima. The only documents that speak about her assert that she was the mother of the children of Carlo, but possibly only Napoleone, Roberto and Paola, who are mentioned as her *pupilli*. Bertoldo, Latino, Giovanni, Maddalena, Costanza, Bartolomea and Elena could have been children of another woman, who could have been the "Paola" cited by Litta. Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 27.
- 50 Franca Allegrezza, "Formazione, dispersione e conservazione di un fondo archivistico privato: il fondo di diplomatico dell'archivio Orsini tra medioevo ed età moderna," *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria* 114 (1991), 84–91. Several members of the Orsini family died in 1456, the year of a terrible earthquake in the Kingdom of Naples. See Bruno Figliolo, *Il terremoto del 1456*, 2 vols (Altavilla Silentina: Studi Storici Meridionali, 1988).
- 51 Mori explains that the inheritance of the Campo de' Fiori property is rather unclear. It could have passed through the Orsini of Tagliacozzo before it was given to the Orsini of Bracciano. *L'Archivio Orsini*, 43–4. For a thorough study of this particular property transfer of inheritance, see the chapter by Stefania Camilli in this volume.

accumulated lands and wealth would be concentrated within the hands of a single branch so as to maintain the power and unity of the family. Their century-long strategic plan would soon to come to fruition and enable them to dominate the politics of Renaissance Rome.

No other Orsini had male children of such a high status as those of Carlo: two captains, Roberto and Napoleone; and two ecclesiastics, Latino and Giovanni. Even his daughters reached a high social standing. Maddalena married Giacomo Orsini of Monterotondo, strengthening the connection with the Sabina branch, and gave birth to Clarice, who married Lorenzo the Magnificent in 1469. Elena's son, Cosma Migliorati Orsini, had a terrific career during the papacy of Sixtus IV. He took over the Abbey of Farfa (upon his uncle's resignation) and received the red hat with the titular churches of San Sisto and, later, Saints Nereus and Achilleus.⁵²

The four sons of Carlo acquired conspicuous positions and lived in splendid palaces. Latino (d. 1477), the *camerarius* of Sixtus IV who had crowned Ferdinand of Aragon on behalf of Pope Pius II in 1458, occupied the palace at Montegiordano, which stood on an axis with San Salvatore in Lauro (see Figure 10.2). The cardinal rebuilt and embellished the church, where the sermon by Gatti would be delivered at his funeral.⁵³ His fortified and beautifully decorated Roman palace became a powerful Orsini stronghold and stood near the strategically critical bridge of Castel Sant'Angelo, which connected the Campus Martius to the Vatican. Giovanni (d. 1478), who was Abbot of Farfa and Bishop of Trani, possessed the palace of Vicovaro, near the utopian mausoleum and iconic symbol of the family, the Tempietto, dedicated to Saint James, protector of the *ursina progenie* (see Figure 0.4).⁵⁴ Roberto (d. 1479) transformed the palace of Tagliacozzo into the sumptuous headquarters of his court (see Figure 0.5). The interior was

52 Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 42.

53 Corradini, "Note sul Cardinale Latino Orsini," 132.

54 See Alberto Crielesi, "Il Tempietto di San Giacomo dagli Orsini ai Bolognetti. Storia e vicende artistiche con note di archivio sui restauri tra Settecento e Novecento," in *Il Tempietto di San Giacomo e la Chiesa di San Pietro a Vicovaro. Restauri e studi interdisciplinari tra architetture e paesaggi*, ed. Stefania Cancellieri (Rome: Gangemi, 2014), 85–102.

decorated by Lorenzo da Viterbo and other artists.⁵⁵ Napoleone (d. 1480), who was appointed Captain of the Church, relocated north of Rome and started construction of the present Castle of Bracciano (see Figure 0.6).



Figure 0.4. Attr. Mastro Simone, Giovanni da Capodistria and Giovanni Dalmata, Tempietto di San Giacomo, Vicovaro, c. 1448–1477. Photo by Marco Fiorani.

55 Claudia Conforti, “La residenza dei Signori di Tagliacozzo,” in *Tagliacozzo e la Marsica in età angioia e aragonese. Aspetti di vita artistica, civile e religiosa. Atti del convegno, Tagliacozzo, sabato 25 maggio 2002, Teatro Talia*, ed. 3 Franco Salvatori (Rome: 2003), 129–54; de Simone, “Per Lorenzo da Viterbo,” 29–79.



Figure 0.5. Palazzo Orsini-Colonna, Tagliacozzo. Photo by Marco Fiorani.



Figure 0.6. Castle of Bracciano, general view from the west. Photo by Marco Fiorani.

Napoleone's aim was to create a large strategic fortress that would also serve as a visual status symbol for the new line of the Orsini, which by then controlled an extensive territory on the edge of Tuscia. The castle was also a statement of the close relationship between the Orsini and Pope Sixtus IV, thanks in part to the diplomatic negotiations of Cardinal Latino Orsini in Rome. In his chapter in this volume, Paolo Alei explores the career of Napoleone and the expansion of the medieval Rocca dei Vico into the greatest baronial edifice of Renaissance Latium. He argues that Napoleone employed architects and sculptors who were associated with the *renovatio urbis* of Sixtus IV.

As a matter of strategy, Napoleone and his three brothers established their residences along precise geopolitical vectors. Vicovaro (Giovanni) and Tagliacozzo (Roberto) on the Via Valeria continued to serve as the principal gateways to Rome and Naples respectively; Bracciano (Napoleone) on the Via Clodia had become an ideal base for establishing a strong relationship not only with papal Rome, for this seems to have been the aim of the Orsini cardinal (Latino) in Montegiordano, but also with the communities surrounding Lake Bracciano, the port of Civitavecchia, the alum mines of Tolfa, the cities of Viterbo, Perugia, Spoleto and Siena, and the Medici in Florence. It is no wonder that the family conflict between the Orsini of Pitigliano and the Orsini of Bracciano began at the moment when the latter started to extend their influence into Tuscany.⁵⁶

Within its constellation of territories and other possessions, extending like tentacles along the ancient Roman transit routes, the episcopal sees of Trani in Apulia and Farfa in Latium played a critical role in expanding the family's power during the quattrocento. It appears likely that these religious fiefs were well integrated within the political and diplomatic networks of the Orsini signiors of both Gravina and Bracciano. The Benedictine monastery of Farfa, at the centre of the Sabina and not far from the territory of Monterotondo, had become a cardinalate *in commendam* that was controlled by the Orsini of Bracciano for almost the entire fifteenth century and much of the sixteenth century (see

56 Shaw, *The Political Role of the Orsini*, 19.

Figure 0.7).⁵⁷ Cardinal Giordano Orsini administered the Sabine abbey from 1420 to 1436, followed by Giovanni, who was also Archbishop of Trani. In 1477 it passed to Cardinal Latino, who bequeathed it to Cosmo Migliorati Orsini just before he died. Cosmo held the property until 1481. The last Orsini cardinal of the quattrocento to administer Farfa was Giovanni Battista of Monterotondo, who was killed by Pope Alexander VI in 1503, at the moment when the Orsini possessions were under assault by the Borgia.⁵⁸ Besides its religious and political importance, Farfa in Sabina, situated between Tuscia and Marsica, together with Monterotondo, served to reinforce the fortified barrier that the Orsini were creating along and in close proximity to the Roman consular roads in Latium and Abruzzo.



Figure 0.7. Abbey of S. Maria, Farfa, general view. Foto Scala, Florence, kb17600.

- 57 On the administration of Farfa, see Marino Marini, *Serie cronologica degli abati del monastero di Farfa. Dissertazione epistolare* (Rome: Giunchi e Menicanti, 1836), 28; also Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 42.
- 58 In the sixteenth century, the Orsini government in Farfa was sporadic, unlike in the previous century. *Ibid.*

Thus, Rome, Vicovaro, Tagliacozzo and then Bracciano rapidly evolved into critical strategic hubs within a geopolitical matrix. They were integral nodes of a very active diplomatic project which placed the Orsini at the centre of Italian politics. The visits of ambassadors, humanists, popes, kings and members of the Medici became increasingly common; and Bracciano soon assumed its rightful place within the family's territorial system. Taken as a whole, the Orsini domain was not just an agricultural estate, but the arterial system of the greater Renaissance chessboard, where war and peace opened passageways for trade, commerce and the expansion of power. Sansovino, in his *Historia di Casa Orsina*, wrote of the birth of an Orsini *paterno stato*, especially at the time of Napoleone, in the years around 1470. Through political privileges, marriage, acquisition and war, the clan came to occupy an immense region "from the Tyrrhenian coast to Lake Fucino in Marsica."⁵⁹

In spite of major wars, internal disputes, power struggles and external interference, especially from the papacy and Kingdom of Naples, the Orsini seem to have formed a co-operative network among the disparate branches of the family. The territorial core of the Orsini of Bracciano consisted of Tuscia and Marsica, which lay at the extremes of a bipolar state whose centre was Sabina, an area belonging partially to the Orsini of Monterotondo. To the north were situated other branches of the Orsini, such as those of San Gemini and Pitigliano. To the east were the Orsini of Manoppello. To the west was Rome, where the Orsini cardinal resided at his residence in Montegiordano. To the south, there were branches of the clan in Gravina, Nola and Naples, among other towns.

Many of the Orsini family lines were geographically very far removed from the original lineage. There were apparently appendages or surrogates named "Orsini" not only in Southern and Northern Italy, but also in France, Greece, Dalmatia, Germany, Bohemia and Austria.⁶⁰ As Mori

59 Sansovino, *L'Historia di Casa Orsina*, 66.

60 Petr Maťa, "The false Orsini from over the Alps: Negotiating aristocratic identity in late medieval and early modern Europe," *Römische Historische Mitteilungen* 55 (2013),

explains, the Orsini were scattered throughout Europe during the early modern period and not all of them were closely related. At least some may have been linked by distant genealogical affinity, or merely for political or economic reasons.⁶¹

In summary, one could say that the Orsini had established a sort of “commonwealth” which extended far beyond the borders of their original territories – an international web of relatives and kinsmen who were linked together over vast distances. It is true that the separate Orsini families typically pursued their own interests and, at times, were in conflict with one another, yet one gains the impression that they were all well aware of their common origin and that there was a general spirit of collaboration whose aim was the acquisition of territory, wealth and power. The Orsini count Nicola da Pitigliano aptly wrote to Cardinal Gianbattista in 1495, just as the clan was reaching the peak of its influence: “We are the beautiful and good Orsini family and we will be revered as long as we remain united.”⁶²

The Orsini estates were in close proximity to those of other baronial families, especially the Colonna, who, Ghibellines by tradition, had similar aims to the Guelph Orsini. Analysing the geographical distribution of the baronial families in Central Italy, one observes that the Colonna occupied the territory between the two Orsini “segments” (Rome-Abruzzo and Naples-Apulia). The Orsini and Colonna clans were locked in a constant game of chess in which they strategised and interacted, especially around the perimeters of their territories, along the Valeria (between the Papal States and the Kingdom of Naples) and

155–218; Louis Batiffol, “L’origine italienne des Juvenel des Ursins,” *Bibliothèque de l’École des Chartes* 54, no. 1 (1893), 693–717; Alain de Boüard and Charles Hirschauer, “Les Jouvenel des Ursins et les Orsini,” *Mélanges d’archéologie et d’histoire* 32, no. 1 (1912), 49–67. For the Bohemian family of the Rosenbergs, Jaroslav Pánek, “I Rožmberk e la Chiesa,” *Bollettino dell’Istituto Storico Ceco di Roma* 8 (2012), 58.

61 Mori, *L’Archivio Orsini*, 16.

62 “Noi semo bella et bona famiglia de casa Ursina et tanto siremo estimati quante teneremo insieme,” AO, b. 308, c. 3, 15 August 1495, cited by Shaw, *The Political Role of the Orsini*, 74.

within the urban fabric of Rome.⁶³ In the Eternal City, the palace of the Orsini at Montegiordano and the palace of the Colonna at Santi Apostoli were their main urban and ecclesiastical representational buildings. These exhibited both palatial and military characteristics and were the political and diplomatic theatres where armistices were signed, marriages were celebrated and, at times, battles were fought. Even though there were periods of collaboration between the two clans, they were more often opponents than allies. Machiavelli aptly described their relationship in *The Prince*: “The Roman barons, divided into the two factions of the Orsini and Colonnese, always had cause for discord; standing with their weapons in their hands before the very face of the pontiff, they kept the papacy weak and unwarlike.”⁶⁴

Gentil Virginio Orsini

The power of the Orsini gained momentum when Gentil Virginio (c. 1445–1497), son of Napoleone, inherited Bracciano in 1480, along with most of the assets of his uncles. Meanwhile, the condottiere Paolo Orsini, who was the natural son of Cardinal Latino, inherited the castle of Mentana, giving birth to yet another family branch known as “Lamentana.”⁶⁵ Gentil Virginio continued the strategic work of his father, cementing a strong alliance with the pope and his nephew Girolamo Riario against the rival Colonna family. By opening a dialogue with the Medici, he positioned his family to become the intermediary agents between Florence to the north and the papacy and the Kingdom of Naples to the south, especially in the aftermath of the Pazzi Conspiracy,

63 Stefania Camilli, “Gli Orsini tra Roma e Napoli: il pontificato di Pio II (1458–1464),” *Bollettino dell’Istituto storico italiano per il Medio Evo* 109, no. 1 (2007), 351–99.

64 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe*, in *Machiavelli, the Chief Works and Others*, trans. Allan Gilbert (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), I, 45.

65 Shaw, *The Political Role of the Orsini*, 74.

when alliances and enmities among these powers generated constant diplomatic activity. Gentil Virginio's influence was so pervasive that he attracted the attention of the King of France, Charles VIII, who sojourned in Bracciano in 1494; and his power in Rome and greater Italy was such that he came to be perceived as a serious threat by his detractors, particularly the papacy.

The pontificates of Sixtus IV and Innocent VIII, who had been generally reliable allies of the Orsini, were followed by the reign of a reactionary pope. Alexander VI wanted not only to curb the power of the barons, but he specifically aimed to create a Borgia state within Tuscia at the expense of the Orsini. The acquisition of Nepi and, later, the construction of the fortress of Civita Castellana, designed by Sangallo, were ominous signs that the Borgia intended to impose their authority between Rome and Viterbo (see Figure 0.8). In 1496 the papal army attacked and completely destroyed Trevignano. Bartolomea Orsini, Gentil Virginio's sister, and her husband, the condottiere Bartolomeo d'Alviano, soon found themselves besieged within the castle of Bracciano.⁶⁶ Thanks to their well-prepared defence, which relied heavily upon the latest innovations in military engineering, they repelled the Borgia and saved the Orsini family from an agonising defeat. Nevertheless, Gentil Virginio was imprisoned in the Castel dell'Ovo in Naples, where he died in 1497. His critical mistake had been his explicit support of the King of France.⁶⁷ Thus, the ascendancy of the Bracciano line was arrested by the hostile agenda of the Borgia pope, the untimely death of Gentil Virginio, and the Italian Wars that followed.

66 Carlo Piolla Caselli, *Il vero ruolo di Bartolomea Orsini a Bracciano*, ser. *Donne del Lago Sabatino* 1 (2016), <<http://www.lagosabatino.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/bartolomea.pdf>>.

67 Christine Shaw, "The Roman Barons and the French Descent into Italy," in *The French Descent into Renaissance Italy, 1494–1495: Antecedents and Effects*, ed. David Abulafia (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1995), 249–62.



Figure 0.8. Antonio da Sangallo the Elder,
 Rocca of Pope Alexander VI Borgia, Civita Castellana, c. 1499–1503.
 Folco Quilici for Fratelli Alinari, Florence (1975), no. QFA-S-032605–00LZ.

By the end of the quattrocento, the Orsini had significantly reinforced their positions and extended their territorial control north-west, to Cerveteri, and south-east, to Avezzano, effectively completing a great fortified barrier between the Italian powers to the north – Siena, Florence, and Urbino – and Rome and Naples to south.⁶⁸ The Orsini had thus succeeded in establish-

68 The “barrier” included, from west to east, Cerveteri, Bracciano, Monterotondo, Vicovaro, Tagliacozzo, Albe, Scurcola and Avezzano. The Orsini succeeded in dominating long stretches of the Aurelia, Clodia, Cassia, Flaminia, Salaria, Nomentana, Tiburtina and Valeria. See Shaw, *The Political Role of the Orsini*, 36–7. Between 1472 and 1534 the Orsini had 126 separate properties, *castelli* and *tenute*; also Giulio

ing a large and powerful state *within* the domain of both the pope and the Neapolitan king. In particular, the acquisition of the territory of Cerveteri (including the small Arrone River connecting Lake Bracciano to the sea), with the earlier consent of Innocent VIII, alarmed the Borgia since it threatened to block papal access to the port of Civitavecchia and their northern possessions; and this ultimately sparked the war that resulted in Gentil Virginio's demise.

The cultural context of Gentil Virginio has recently been reconstructed by Camilli, who also explores the consolidation of the Orsini state and the history, politics and diplomacy of the family.⁶⁹ Although he maintained contacts with the Academy of Pontano in Naples, especially with the humanists Altilio and Albino, Gentil Virginio must have been closer to the humanistic culture of Rome. He never became a major patron of Pomponius Leto, yet he remained in communication throughout his life with some of the intellectuals of the Accademia Romana. Following in the steps of his father, he completed the Castle of Bracciano according to a strategy of fashioning intended to project the ideals of *magnificenza*. His correspondence with Antoniazzo Romano, Francesco di Giorgio Martini and Antonio del Pollaiuolo leaves no doubt that Gentil Virginio was a great patron of the arts.

Paul Gwynne focuses on the fashioning of Gentil Virginio as a Roman general by the itinerant poet Johannes Michael Nagonius. Max Grossman argues on both archaeological and technical grounds that Francesco di Giorgio Martini likely played a role in upgrading the castle's fortifications and designing the circuit of anti-artillery ramparts that surround the *borgo* of Bracciano. Anna Cavallaro discusses the diplomatic meeting between Piero de' Medici and Gentil Virginio and the military parade of the Orsini, as depicted in the fresco by Antoniazzo Romano in the Castle of Bracciano. In addition, she analyses a painted frieze representing women engaged in various courtly pastimes. The Orsini women played a pivotal role in the family and were viewed as important assets, not only because of their profitable marriages, but also because of their governance of Bracciano and other territories – especially when their fathers or husbands were involved in wars, diplomatic missions, or after they died.

Silvestrelli and Mario Zocca, *Città, castelli e terre della regione romana: ricerche di storia medioevale e moderna sino all'anno 1800*, 2 vols (Rome: Bonsignore, 1940).

69 Stefania Camilli, "Gentil Virginio Orsini."

The Italian Wars and their Aftermath

The passage from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century ushered in a period of metamorphosis and crisis for the Roman baronial clans.⁷⁰ Popes changed from one election to another and the fortunes of the Orsini often depended on which family occupied the Holy See. More significantly, the Italian Wars, which began with the descent of Charles VIII into Italy in 1494, increasingly subjected the Orsini and other clans to the whims and actions of foreign powers, especially the kings of France and Spain, and the Holy Roman Emperor.⁷¹ The reorganisation of the Italian states and the rising supremacy of the Spanish on the peninsula brought about dramatic changes for the Orsini.

Gentil Virginio's two sons, Gian Giordano and Carlo, serve as useful paradigms for studying the effects of these changes on the Orsini family.⁷² Gian Giordano (d. 1517) supported the French crown starting in the early cinquecento, and this cost him the good will of the Spanish when they succeeded to power in Italy. By the mid-sixteenth century, the Colonna, who had supported the King of Spain and the Holy Roman Emperor, eclipsed the Orsini.⁷³ Consequently, the Colonna were able to place many of their men in eminent positions in the course of the sixteenth century, and they were given important commands at the Battle of Lepanto (1571).

Gian Giordano inherited Bracciano at the moment when Tagliacozzo was given by the King of Naples to the Colonna family. His two marriages may be understood as diplomatic efforts intended to compensate for his loss of power. His first marriage, to Maria Cecilia d'Aragona, the daughter

70 Giampiero Brunelli, "Prima maestro che scolare. Nobiltà romana e carriera militare nel Cinquecento e Seicento," in *La nobiltà romana in età moderna. Profili istituzionali e pratiche sociali*, ed. Maria Antonietta Visceglia (Rome: Carroci, 2001), 89–132; idem, *Soldati del Papa. Politica militare nello Stato della Chiesa (1560–1644)* (Rome: Carroci, 2003).

71 Christine Shaw, "Alexander VI, Cesare Borgia and the Orsini," *European Studies Review* 11 (1981), 1–23.

72 Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 48.

73 Shaw, *The Political Role of the Orsini*, 17.

of the King of Naples, yielded him three children: Napoleone, Carlotta and Francesca. His second marriage was to Felice della Rovere (d. 1536), daughter of Pope Julius II, in 1506. She gave him four more children: Girolamo, Francesco, Giulia and Clarice.⁷⁴

While these two marriages enabled Gian Giordano to maintain his family's traditional relationship with Naples and Rome, his loyalty to the King of France remained steadfast throughout his life. He supported both the descent into Italy of Louis XII in 1501 and the Italian politics of his successor, Francis I. In fact, Gian Giordano visited the French court more than once and even lived for a time in the city of Blois. Whereas his first son, Napoleone, grandson of the King of Naples, stayed faithful to the French crown, Girolamo, grandson of Julius II, instead entered the service of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. While her husband was abroad, Felice della Rovere Orsini became the de facto governor of the state of Bracciano and continued to embellish the palaces of Palo, Bracciano and Vicovaro.⁷⁵ Cavallaro is currently researching a cycle of frescos in the *Sala Felice della Rovere* (previously called the *Sala delle Armi*) in the Castle of Bracciano, which depict the daughter of Pope Julius II as an intellectual and patron of the arts (see Figure 0.9).⁷⁶

Tragically, the two stepbrothers, Napoleone and Girolamo, developed a deep hatred for one another. Part of the reason may have been that Napoleone did not inherit Bracciano as he had expected; he was Gian Giordano's first-born son but was passed over for Girolamo. At one point, Napoleone imprisoned Felice della Rovere and her children, including Girolamo, in the Castle of Vicovaro. For his outrageous actions, he was duly excommunicated by Pope Clement VII.

74 Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 50.

75 Murphy, *The Pope's Daughter*; eadem, "Felice della Rovere and the Castello at Palo," in *Patronage and Dynasty: The Rise of the della Rovere in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Ian Verstegen (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2007), 111–22.

76 Anna Cavallaro presented her research on this topic at the conference *Early Modern Rome 3* on 7 October 2017 in the Castle of Bracciano. See her article, "Felice Della Rovere a Bracciano: un ritratto inedito e un intervento del pittore viterbese Pastura," *RR/Roma nel Rinascimento* (2017) (Rome: Roma nel Rinascimento, 2017), 325–37.



Figure 0.9. Attr. Antonio del Massaro (called Pastura),
panel with Felice Orsini della Rovere, early sixteenth century. Fresco.
Sala di Felice della Rovere, Castle of Bracciano. Claudia Primangeli, Focus On Photo.

Napoleone was a creature of the Italian Wars, so much so that he was considered “among the most refined gentlemen” in France but was known as a “coarse and violent bandit” in Italy.⁷⁷ On 17 February 1534, as he was

77 Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 53.

travelling to Naples for the marriage of his sister Giulia, he was killed by his stepbrother. Girolamo was indicted for his crime, and after the confiscation of his wealth (including Bracciano), the death penalty seemed imminent. Clement died, however, and the following pope, Paul III Farnese, returned Bracciano to the Orsini in 1535 and gave his niece Francesca, daughter of Costanza Farnese and Bosio Sforza di Santaflora, to Girolamo in marriage.⁷⁸ Felice della Rovere, who was an astute diplomat for her family, must have manoeuvred skilfully in order to achieve this fortunate outcome.

When Girolamo died in 1540, Bracciano was again under the rule of a woman, the now widowed Francesca Orsini Sforza di Santaflora.⁷⁹ Much as Girolamo succeeded Gian Giordano, Francesca succeeded Felice in the administration of Bracciano. Francesca's first daughter was baptised by Cardinal Ippolito d'Este with the name Felice. Paolo Giordano was born soon after, in January 1541, two months after his father's tragic death.

Paolo Giordano (1541–1585), son of Girolamo Orsini and Francesca Sforza di Santaflora, was the great-grandson of the two greatest popes of the first half of the cinquecento: Julius II and Paul III. He was also a cousin of Alessandro Farnese. Moreover, he was heir to Bracciano, Montegiordano and Campo de' Fiori and of a family tradition of friendship with the papacy, the kingdoms of Naples and France, and the Holy Roman Empire.

When Francesca died in 1548, her brother Cardinal Guido Ascanio Sforza di Santaflora became tutor to the young Paolo Giordano and administrator of Bracciano. The fact that Santaflora was the cardinal chamberlain of Paul III facilitated the reacquisition of lost properties, the reinstatement of key jurisdictions, and the emergence of new economic opportunities throughout the Orsini territories. Yet there were also challenges, including mounting debts and unresolved dowries.⁸⁰

78 It is important to note that there had already been another Orsini-Farnese marriage some years earlier. Pierluigi Farnese, the brother of Costanza, married Girolama Orsini of Pitigliano, who gave birth to Alessandro Farnese. The latter would become one of the most powerful cardinals of the Italian Renaissance.

79 Mori, *L'onore perduto*, 20–30.

80 Ibid., 33–42.



Figure 0.10. Giovanni Maria Butcheri, *Sacra Conversazione with Members of the Family of Cosimo I de' Medici*, 1575. Oil on canvas. Museo del Cenacolo di Andrea del Sarto, Florence. Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence, inv. no. 634800.

Though marriages had been a cause of financial stress for the Orsini, they also made them a fortune. Felice Orsini married Marcantonio Colonna, the captain of the Battle of Lepanto, in 1553 and Paolo Giordano married Isabella de' Medici, the daughter of Duke Cosimo I, in 1558 (see Figures 6.2 and 12.3). Giovanni Maria Butteri painted a *Sacra Conversazione* with Members of the Family of Cosimo I de' Medici, in which Paolo Giordano, possibly the patron, is depicted on the right side of the painting as a warrior saint and Isabella appears seated on the ground as Saint Catherine (see Figure 0.10). Clearly this painting shows that Paolo Giordano was embraced as a member of the Medici family.

The Duchy of Bracciano

On 9 October 1560, Pope Pius IV (Giovan Angelo Medici of Marignano) elevated the myriad territories and possessions of the Orsini, which the ancestors of Paolo Giordano had strategically acquired and linked together in the region between Latium and Abruzzo, to the rank of duchy.⁸¹ Although the geographical image decorating the Atlas Maior by Joan Blaeu was drafted later and represents mainly the northern portion of the state, it is one of the best official representations of the territory, which had a surface area of 900 square kilometres and a population of approximately 8,000 inhabitants (see Figure 0.11).⁸² It lay within and was subordinate to the Papal States but with power and influence on par with Ferrara and Urbino. From that moment onward, the formal titles of Paolo Giordano and his wife Isabella were “Duke” and “Duchess” and their son became the Marquis of Anguillara. The duke now possessed a title that was higher in rank than that of “baron,” which had derived from the culture of the late Middle Ages and was by then ambiguous and unimpressive.

81 The papal bull is found in AO, perg. II, A, 25, 023. On the foundation of the Duchy of Bracciano, Mori, *L'Onore perduto*, 86–93.

82 Ibid., 354, n. 22.

The recent marriage of Paolo and Isabella, the entry of Cosimo I into Siena in September 1560, and the latter's triumphal visit to Rome two months later attested to the strong political bond between the papacy and the Medici. Pius IV belonged to the Medici of Milan, who were unconnected to those of Florence; but the service of Gian Giacomo, the condottiere brother of the pope, to the Florentine Medici had definitively established a friendship between the two families, when Giovan Angelo was still a cardinal.⁸³

The ducal nomination should be read as an homage by the pope to the Duke of Florence that ultimately served to augment the status of Paolo Giordano, his wife and his sons. In spite of the elevation, Cosimo never permitted Isabella to stay for long in the castles or Roman palaces of the Orsini. Even though Paolo Giordano had his fortified residence in Bracciano restored by Nanni di Baccio Bigio and, later, by Giacomo del Duca, and its interiors decorated by none other than the Zuccari, Cosimo insisted that the Duke and Duchess of Bracciano reside in his sumptuous palace in the Via Larga in Florence.

The new duchy, with its jurisdictional capital in the castle above the homonymous lake, extended from the small port of Palo on the Tyrrhenian Sea to the lands beyond Vicovaro. Paolo Giordano controlled Bracciano, Anguillara, Trevignano, Campagnano, Galera, Formello, Sacrofano, Monterano, Isola, Palo, Cerveteri, Vicovaro, Cantalupo, Bardella, Saracinesco and San Gregorio, among many other estates, but he spent most of his time in Rome and Florence.⁸⁴ The duke was responsible for the maintenance of the road network and mail stations, public health and the building of hospitals, the administration of justice through a system of tribunals, regulating the finances of his estates, and providing bakeries, butchers, mills and oil for his subjects. As Mori explains, the duchy had special jurisdiction over *jus pascendi*, *coquendi panem*, *jus venandi* and *jus piscandi*.⁸⁵

83 Flavio Rurale, "Pio IV," *Enciclopedia dei Papi* (Rome: Treccani, 2000), <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pio-iv_\(Enciclopedia-dei-Papi\)>](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pio-iv_(Enciclopedia-dei-Papi)>).

84 Mori, *L'Archivio Orsini*, 62.

85 *Ibid.*, 65.