

Architecture, Opportunity, and  
Conflict in Eighteenth-Century Sicily

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# Architecture, Opportunity, and Conflict in Eighteenth-Century Sicily

*Rebuilding after Natural Disaster*

*Martin Nixon*

Amsterdam University Press

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This book is dedicated to my parents, John and June Nixon, who were my first teachers.



Fig. 0.1. Detail of the facade of the Palazzo Massa di San Demetrio, Catania. Alonso de Benedetto. Begun 1694.

# Introduction

## The Val di Noto Rebuilding: Disaster and Opportunity



Fig. 0.2. Balconies of the Palazzo Nicolaci, Noto. Architect unknown. 1737.

In January 1693, one of Italy's most powerful recorded earthquakes struck the Val di Noto area of south-eastern Sicily.<sup>1</sup> There were two shocks, one on 9 January and another on 11 January. The earthquake killed approximately 60,000 people, slightly more than one in five of an estimated population of

<sup>1</sup> Sicily was divided into three areas known as *vali*. *Val* probably derives from the Arabic *waliya*, or administrative region. The Val di Noto covers the present provinces of Catania, Syracuse, Ragusa, and parts of Caltanissetta and Enna.



Fig. 0.3. Map of the Val di Noto area of south-eastern Sicily. Image from Open Street Maps. <https://www.openstreetmap.org/#map=9/37.3068/14.3193>

around 260,000. Some eyewitnesses described the horror as God's visitation on the people, with portents appearing before the earthquakes.<sup>2</sup> Connecting the earthquake with divine castigation, the author of one report to the

2 The estimated number of deaths range between approximately 50,000 and 70,000. Eyewitness accounts include Burgos (1693), Bonaiuto (1694), Bottone (1695), Guglielmini (1695), Privitera (1695), and Tortora (1712). See also the bibliography in Caruso, Perra, and Trigilia (1994): 109–119. On portents, Vincenzo Bonaiuto mentions a great flame or bright light in the sky on the evening before the first earthquake on the ninth of January. On the following day, the air was dark and yellow, presaging the second earthquake of the eleventh of January. Bonaiuto (1694): 3–4.

Spanish king, Sicily's colonial ruler, claimed that 'the processions and bitter penitences being made have no parallel anywhere in the world'.<sup>3</sup>

Around 60 towns were affected overall. Catania, the area's largest city, lost over 80 per cent of its population. Of the other large towns, Ragusa lost half its population and Syracuse and Noto lost a quarter. Catania and Noto were completely destroyed, and Ragusa, Syracuse, and Modica suffered significant damage. Medium-sized towns, such as Avola and Scicli, and many smaller centres were also left in ruins.<sup>4</sup> Looking back on these events 70 years later, Arcangelo Leanti's *Lo stato presente della Sicilia* (Palermo, 1761), a compendium on the history and geography of the island, concludes:

The horrible earthquake of 1693 was without any doubt the biggest and will always be the most memorable in the annals of this island. It resulted in the great tremor, and especially in the Val di Noto the ruin of many cities and lands, to the number of 60, and the deaths of 70,000 people.<sup>5</sup>

Rebuilding after earthquakes is part of the history of many Sicilian towns, but the reconstruction of so many centres after 1693 was a major architectural undertaking.<sup>6</sup> The amount of new construction is comparable to such projects as Saint Petersburg, built between 1703 and the 1720s, or the rebuilding of Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake.<sup>7</sup> The Val di Noto reconstruction resulted in hundreds of new buildings and townscapes, and completely new locations for eight towns.<sup>8</sup> Its effects continued far into the eighteenth century. Many buildings rebuilt after 1693, such as the Palazzo Biscari in Catania, the Palazzo Nicolaci in Noto, or the cathedral of Modica, were only completed 60 or more years later. Although eight of the rebuilt towns

3 *Relación de los considerables daños que han causado los temblores en el Reyno de Sicilia los días 9 y 11 del mes de enero en 1693* in Tobriner (1982): 226.

4 The report to the Spanish king *Relación de los considerables daños que han causado los temblores en el Reyno de Sicilia los días 9 y 11 del mes de enero en 1693* lists the affected towns. Archivo General de Simancas, Estado 3507, no. 14, 11 January 1693. Huet reports over 50 towns affected. Huet in Nocera, ed. (1983): 15. Tobriner estimates the population in 1693 as 261,085 and the total fatalities as 59,700 Tobriner (1982): 207.

5 Leanti (1761), vol.1: 6.

6 In the century before 1693, there was an earthquake in Modica in 1613. In 1669, a major eruption of Etna covered areas of Catania with lava. Boscarino (1997): 35.

7 'Taken together, the reconstruction of the cities of the Val di Noto constitutes one of the most impressive achievements of urban planning in early modern Europe.' Neil (1998): 471. Nonetheless, as will be noted in this introduction, the rebuilding should not be seen as a centrally planned project.

8 Stefano Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 38. Boscarino (1997): 43.

are part of a UNESCO heritage area, the remarkable architecture resulting from this rebuilding is little known outside Sicily.<sup>9</sup>

The research for this book began from thinking about the scale of this rebuilding of so many towns and how little-known it was outside Sicily. It soon became clear, however, that although the amount of rebuilding made it seem as though it was one of the largest architectural projects of the eighteenth century, there was no overall programme. Each town and each patron rebuilt separately, and there is no evidence of collaboration between the towns.<sup>10</sup> The Spanish government's policy of maintaining a system of defensive garrisons around Sicily against a possible attack from the Ottomans or from European rivals such as France provides the only situation where the towns were considered in relation to each other.<sup>11</sup> Each town has its own history of coercion, compromise, rivalry, and opportunity, and there is no standard urban layout that the rebuilt towns followed.

Of the 57 affected towns listed in Stephen Tobriner's study of Noto, 24 towns now have a grid layout, Avola and Grammichele have a hexagonal plan, and the remaining 31 have no geometric layout.<sup>12</sup> There was no blueprint or adaptable modular system for the rebuilding. An irregular layout for post-earthquake street plans, such as in Modica or Ragusa Ibla, means that the rebuilding mainly replicated the pre-earthquake street plan, although in towns such as Vittoria a grid layout existed before the earthquake anyway. Rather than an exercise in purportedly rational and centralised 'Enlightenment era' urban planning, the crisis of the rebuilding was shaped not only by the urgency of re-establishing order but also by local opportunism and ambition.

9 In 2002, Noto, Modica, Caltagirone, Militello Val di Catania, Palazzolo Acreide, Scicli, Ragusa, and the historical centre of Catania were chosen to form the UNESCO *Late Baroque Towns of the Val di Noto* world heritage site. See the proposal for UNESCO inclusion by the *Centro Internazionale di Studi sul Barocco* (undated).

10 Stephen Tobriner notes: 'Never once do the documents record efforts of citizens from one city coming to the aid of another, more stricken, community'. (1982): 207.

11 For example, the new town of Avola was fortified. The new town of nearby Noto was not, because Avola would defend it. Overall, it is more accurate to talk not of reconstruction but of separate reconstructions in the Val di Noto. On the Ottoman threat, see Koenigsburger (1997) 61–64 and Trigilia in Fagiolo and Trigilia, eds. (1987): 146–147. The threat to Sicily from Spain's European rivals is shown by the land and sea battles fought against France when France supported the 1674 Messina uprising. Mack Smith (1968): 226–230. Stefano Piazza calls the rebuilding 'a constellation of micro-stories'. 'This vast territory contains in reality a constellation of micro-stories generated both by the experiences of personality, education and different orientations, and by the unfolding of an artistic debate within urban centres possessing deep cultural roots and their own creative energies.' Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 29.

12 Tobriner (1982): 207.

This book includes a discussion of geometrically planned towns and symmetrical aristocratic palace facades but does not interpret this architecture in terms of some kind of spirit of rational Enlightenment—or, by contrast, as evidence of a Rococo or *ancien régime* decadence. Instead, the central focus is on how the rebuilding enabled and validated its patrons' ambitions across changing circumstances, and how new forms of architecture might perpetuate the same political and economic inequalities.<sup>13</sup> In her recent book on contemporary urbanism and her hopes for the rebuilding of Syrian towns after the current tragedy, Marwa Al Sabouni poses the important question: 'What does a building or city give, and to whom? What does it take, and from whom?'<sup>14</sup> These questions underlie the writing in this book. Cities and buildings are not a passive outcome of supposedly impersonal historical or stylistic processes. They are at the same time objects and agents of transformation, and their construction is of course driven forward by those who position themselves to benefit from it.

I do not attempt to discuss all of the towns, nor do I attempt an overarching chronology of the entire rebuilding.<sup>15</sup> Instead, I employ five case studies to discuss architecture's role in negotiating and maintaining aristocratic status. The Val di Noto rebuilding took place within a fundamentally unequal feudal political system, but this system was not static. Families could rise and fall, and merchants and government officials could buy their way into the aristocracy. The eighteenth-century rebuilding in Sicily saw uprisings and invasions, changes of colonial ruler, famine, riots, earthquakes, pestilence, the threat of pirates and slavery, and the continued decline of the Mediterranean as a centre of European economic and political power. The case studies in this book allow different ways into the complication and contingency of the time, and into how the architecture of the rebuilding operated within the self-presentation, ambitions, and fears of its patrons.

13 The intentions of patrons are in any case unknowable, and any search for intentionality is itself problematic. Michel Foucault argues that an analysis 'should refrain from posing the labyrinthine and unanswerable question: "Who then has power and what has he in his mind? What is the aim of someone who possesses power?"' and instead look at how material outcomes maintain or change power relations. Foucault (1980): 97.

14 Al Sabouni (2021): 77–78.

15 Scholars have already established a chronology of the rebuilding of many towns. See Muti, ed. (2008), Giuffrè (2007), and Boscarino (1997) for general surveys. See Dato (1983) and Aymard and Giarrizzo, eds. (2007) on Catania; Tobriner (1982) and Dufour and Raymond (1990) on Noto; Flaccavento (1982), Flaccavento, Nifosi, and Nobile (1997), and Nifosi (1997) on Ragusa; Nifosi (1998) and Barone (1998) on Scicli; Dufour and Raymond (1993) and Gringeri Pantano (1996) on Avola; and Cantone (1998) on Grammichele.

The case studies are linked by the broad themes of opportunity and conflict. In the re-siting and re-creation of Avola and Grammichele into hexagonal towns discussed in the first case study, we see the assertion of autocracy and a reestablishment of aristocratic power after the chaos of the earthquake. In the rebuilding of Noto, there are complicated aristocratic alliances and family connections. In Scicli and Ragusa, the new architecture can be related to local aristocratic rivalry and also to fear of the Other in the form of Muslim slavers or an uprising by the general populace. In the Palazzo Biscari in Catania, the ballroom is central to the maintenance and performance of aristocratic distinction. In the palaces of Ragusa, there is the celebration of luxury and the fear of the famished mob. In all of these cases, I show how architecture was central to the status and ambitions of its patrons as well as being essential to the family's public face.

The case studies include most of the principal towns in the Val di Noto and the commissions of aristocrats of different ranks. I discuss the architecture from the level of a whole town to parts of a town, single buildings, and parts of buildings and their decoration. Chapter One serves as an orientation to the time and place of the Val di Noto rebuilding. Chapter Two, on Avola and Grammichele, works on a large scale to consider urbanism in the creation of two entirely new towns. Chapter Three discusses the main square of Noto and its palace facades, and Chapters Four, Five, and Six discuss parts of palaces in Catania, Scicli, and Ragusa. These different scales allow an investigation into the rebuilding on a broad level of urbanism as well as a discussion of the distinctive ornament of the Val di Noto architecture. Three chapters focus on the commissions of three of Sicily's most powerful families; the Aragona Pignatelli, patrons of Avola; the Carafa Branciforte, patrons of Grammichele; and the Paternò Castello of Catania. The other chapters focus on aristocrats who competed for political influence in Noto, Scicli, and Ragusa.<sup>16</sup>

The first chapter provides an introduction for the reader before moving on to the architectural case studies. At the time of the 1693 earthquake, Sicily was a Spanish possession, but in the subsequent 50 years it passed through Savoyard, Austrian, and Bourbon rule. The Sicilian aristocracy provided some political continuity against this background of changing rulers, but there was always the fear of new wars and of insurgency resulting from famine. This first chapter discusses the political system within which

16 In the 1620s, the Moncada Aragona Paternò, the Branciforte, and the Tagliaviva Aragona had respectively 48,088, circa 30,000, and 23,240 vassals. These were the highest numbers in Sicily. Piazza (2005) a: 11–12.

the colonial viceroy and the aristocracy worked and gives an overview of Sicily's agricultural economy and the various sub-areas of the Val di Noto at the time of the earthquake. It also outlines the government response to the earthquake and government attempts to coordinate the rebuilding. This aims to provide context and introduce some important themes before the reader turns to the case studies.

Chapter Two, the first of the case studies, focuses on the unusual hexagonal layouts of Avola and Grammichele, the only hexagonal towns in Italy. In these locations, the feudal owners rebuilt an entire town on a new location and according to a purportedly rational layout. The towns reasserted the patron's dominance after the breakdown of law and order immediately following the earthquake. The geometric layouts associate the patrons with Enlightenment ideas of rational town planning but can also be read as stamps on the landscape—monuments to despotic governance where, especially in the case of Grammichele, the seemingly rational geometric design is essentially arbitrary.

Chapter Three discusses the shifting alliances that affected the rebuilding of Noto and then focuses on the facade of the Palazzo Nicolaci in Noto. During the eighteenth century, the merchant Nicolaci family acquired both noble status and land for a large palace rivalling those of the more established families. Their palace facade's deployment of elaborate zoomorphic balcony corbel decoration or *mensole* makes it markedly different from other facades in Noto. The facade's strangeness defies the conventional architectural vocabulary. A focus on this facade allows a discussion of the distinctive ornament of eighteenth-century Val di Noto architecture and how palace facades operated within aristocratic competition and assumptions around ornament, luxury, and restraint.

Chapter Four moves to the interior of a palace to discuss the ballroom of the Palazzo Biscari in Catania, the residence of the city's most powerful family. Among the palaces that include ballrooms, this palace has the largest and most lavishly decorated one. This chapter analyses the Palazzo Biscari ballroom in terms of lightness and noble distinction. The ballroom's liquid and reflecting decoration and its materials of gold, glass, and stucco are refined and delicate. I then investigate how ballrooms, dance, and the training of aristocratic bodies maintained distinction through lightness and refinement. Rather than seeing the ballroom as an empty shell, I attempt to repopulate it by discussing the entertainments and dances it enabled.

Chapter Five focuses on the disconcerting facade sculpture of the Palazzo Beneventano in Scicli in order to investigate how this facade challenges expectations that decoration should beautify. On the Palazzo Beneventano,

monstrous faces snarl from below the balconies. Lower down, there are heads of Turks, or 'Moors'. Canonical architectural decoration transforms into imagery of violence and fear. The absence of documentation on this palace creates further challenges but also opens up opportunities for other ways to read the facade. I do not promote a single reading for the decoration, but I relate it to violence and fear of the Other.

Chapter Six moves to the Palazzo Cosentini and Palazzo La Rocca in Ragusa. From below the palace balconies, sculptures of musicians, revellers, and shabby, fanged figures look down. The sculptures evoke abundance, humour, and pleasure, but there is also ugliness and famine. This decoration, with its repertoire of stock figures, suggests an iconological system but continually escapes it. Distinctive to the area around Ragusa and Modica, this sculpture appears to both celebrate and parody the desires of the populace. The chapter is, in a sense, a counter to Chapter Four on ballrooms and aristocratic distinction. Instead of discussing how aristocrats maintained distinction, I consider what they might fear and what they might want to exclude from their palaces and ballrooms.

The ideas for this book are indebted to important new discussions within the history of seventeenth and eighteenth-century architecture. My approach is informed by Helen Hills' work on how investment in certain forms of architecture maintains and furthers the financial and political interests of an alliance or network of patrons. These relationships between architecture, social status, and political power underlie my thinking in all of the chapters in this book.<sup>17</sup> Chandra Mukerji's analysis of territorial transformation in the palace of Versailles, where landscape architecture enables the creation of new physical and symbolic environments, is important for my work on Avola, Grammichele, and Noto, and Martha Pollak's study of connections between town planning, ideal cities, and military architecture is very relevant for the urbanism of Avola and Grammichele.<sup>18</sup>

Mediterranean piracy is an important topic in my chapter on the Palazzo Beneventano in Scicli. Slavery and piracy across the shores of the

17 In her work on Neapolitan convents, Hills describes architecture as 'the product and shaper of broader social forces, in relation to meaning and power'. She adds: 'here I seek to expose architectural patronage and form as not necessarily arising from given specific historical, material and religious conditions, but as necessary for, or useful to, certain groups of people, always politically and socially motivated, intent on ensuring that they were not obscured by rival aristocrats, religious orders or convents in the specific and changing—often uncomfortable and awkward—historical circumstances in which they found themselves. Architecture thus assumed urgent political purpose and consequence.' Hills (2004): 5.

18 Mukerji (2010, 1997, 1984). Pollak (1991).

Mediterranean is an area that is now receiving more attention, particularly in the work of Daniel Hershenson.<sup>19</sup> There is still little new research on rebuilding after natural disasters that opens up ways to discuss architecture. For example, the *Wounded Cities* volume edited by Marco Folin and Monica Preti discusses cities and natural disasters, but its focus on representations of these disasters does not relate to the arguments of my book.<sup>20</sup>

Ornament has become the subject of renewed investigation within architectural history, and the enigmatic, ambiguous decoration of the Val di Noto architecture is an important topic in this book.<sup>21</sup> The strangeness of some Sicilian decoration, its deviation from canonical laws, and its perceived lack of restraint led to condemnation from many of the eighteenth-century writers who were the first to describe Sicilian architecture. Visiting Catania in the late 1770s, Henry Swinburne reports ornamental profusion and bad taste.<sup>22</sup> Richard Payne Knight, another eighteenth-century English visitor to Catania, describes the sea-facing facade of the Palazzo Biscari as 'barbarous'. This facade includes androgynous figures and profuse vegetal ornament, whereas the part of the palace Payne Knight prefers is in a more classicising style.<sup>23</sup>

For these foreign Grand Tourists arriving in the Val di Noto to view classical antiquities, Sicilian facade decoration lacked Winckelmann's 'noble simplicity'.<sup>24</sup> Such assumptions persisted for a long time in art history. The architecture of the era conventionally categorised as 'late baroque' or 'rococo' suffers from connotations of theatricality, decadence, and the grotesque. Ornament carries associations of extravagance and excess.<sup>25</sup>

19 Hershenson (2018).

20 Folin and Preti (2015).

21 Hammeken and Hansen, eds. (2019), Necipoğlu and Payne, eds. (2016), Burroughs (2002), Payne (1999).

22 On the Catania Cathedral, Swinburne writes: 'It has suffered so much by earthquakes, that little of the original structure remains, and the modern parts have hardly anything, except their materials, to recommend them. The other religious edifices of the city are profusely ornamented, but in a bad taste'. Swinburne (1783), vol. 4: 135.

23 'The Prince's Palace is a great irregular building, the ancient part of it in the barbarous taste of the Sicilians, charged with monstrous figures, and unnatural ornaments, but the part which he has built himself is simple, regular and elegant.' Payne Knight (1986): 54. Journal written April–June 1777.

24 Winckelmann in Preziosi, ed. (1998): 31. On his visit to Catania in the 1780s, Dominic Vivant Denon argues: 'It is truly a shame that the great expenses confronted by its rich inhabitants were not directed with better taste: if, instead of great palaces and immense churches of a pompous and complicated architecture, a noble and simple style were chosen, Catania would have been one of the most splendid cities of the Kingdom of Naples.' Vivant Denon. Italian translation in Mozzillo, Vallet, and Mascoli, eds. (1979): 192–193.

25 On associations of rococo with arbitrary and bizarre forms, see Hills (2007a and b, 2015, 2019). On the term 'Baroque' and its art-historical fortune, see Hills, ed. (2011): 11–36 and Millon, ed. (1999):

The Sicilian ornament's enigmatic profusion, the difficulty of matching this imagery to established iconography, and the frequent problem of even putting a name to the strange forms and creatures may also be one of the reasons why architectural historians shied away from it for a long time.<sup>26</sup> However, important new scholarship is now engaging more with architectural ornament. The anthology *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, edited by Alina Payne and Gülrü Necipoğlu, places ornament centre stage, and includes a global focus. However, the chapters are fairly short and do not consider ornament within the politics of the time. The recent volume *Ornament and Monstrosity in Early Modern Art*, edited by Chris Hammeken and Maria Hansen, is also part of a new focus on ornament.<sup>27</sup> Its chapters usefully place ornament within the tradition of *groteschi*, an aspect of architecture from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries that has received little attention previously.

My approach to ornament is perhaps more speculative and more related to ideas of ambiguity, aporia, and material affect. I analyse the ornament closely in terms of how it questions distinctions of architectural member, sculpture, and ornament as well as distinctions between human, animal, plant, and architectural member. The facades have a flowering, breathing life. Classical orders jostle with hybrid human, animal, and plant forms. The decoration becomes both architectural member and representation of strange life forms. Capitals, modillions, and other canonical facade elements metamorphosise into hybrid creatures that shift between categories. Much of the ornament presents a subversive challenge to ideas of classical decorum and architectural taxonomy.

I have analysed closely a range of interesting contemporary texts. My approach to the hexagonal urbanism of Grammichele is strongly influenced

19–31. On eighteenth-century French ornament, Katie Scott argues: 'Eighteenth-century French decorative arts labour under a double indictment: by their place of destination [the fact that the ornament is found on furniture and interiors, the domestic space] and by the structures of hereditary privilege and habits of extravagance that under the *ancien régime* gave them life.' Scott (2005): 137.

26 Carlo Cresti and Oscar Spadola published the only book-length studies of the Val di Noto *mensole* and *mascheroni*. Cresti's work mainly comprises photographs of the balconies. Much of the text consists of citations from Sicilian literary figures. These create a poetic mood, but there is no analysis. Spadola's study of balconies in Ragusa has greater depth and includes short profiles on many of the palaces, with information on patrons and dates. There is frequent citation of Sicilian architectural historians such as Salvatore Boscarino, Giuseppe Bellafiore, and Giuseppe Salonia. There are also many quotations from the Sicilian dialect poet Domenico Tempio. The quotations from Tempio, adjacent to photographs and drawings of the *mensole*, promote a reading of the balconies as concerned with sensual pleasures. Cresti (2003), Spadola (1982).

27 Hammeken and Hansen, eds. (2019); Necipoğlu and Payne, eds. (2016).

by my reading of the work of Carlo Maria Carafa, the patron of Grammichele. Carlo Maria published at least nine books from his own printing press, and these have received little attention from scholars of Grammichele's architecture. The books mainly deal with the science of meridians and sundials but also with how a Christian prince should rule. Carlo Maria's ideas are autocratic and religiously conservative. This problematises his more common casting as a figure of progressive Enlightenment, as I discuss in the chapter.

The chapter on the Palazzo Biscari ballroom draws on a range of sources including contemporary manuals on dance, warfare, fencing, and aristocratic comportment, as well as descriptions of festivities and the writings of eighteenth-century visitors to Sicily such as Goethe, Patrick Brydon, Baron von Riedesel, and Richard Payne Knight. The chapter on Scicli and the Palazzo Beneventano includes reports by similar eighteenth-century travellers of the threat of piracy and also draws on Antonino Mongitore's *Della Sicilia ricercata nelle cose più memorabili* (1742). Mongitore's strange descriptions of natural monstrosities and portents resonate with the sometimes monstrous and abundant ornament of the Sicilian facades. In the chapter on Ragusa, I relate themes of luxury and poverty in the palace ornament to the work of the Sicilian dialect poet Domenico Tempio, whose poem *La Carestia* on the Catania famine at the end of the eighteenth century describes both the hunger of the populace and the violence they can unleash on the aristocracy.

Finally, there is the question of terminology. Discussions of eighteenth-century architecture often involve the terms Baroque and rococo. Helen Hills' edited volume *Rethinking the Baroque* and Louis Zamora and Monica Kaup's *Baroque New Worlds* are among recent works that discuss the usefulness of the term Baroque.<sup>28</sup> I have decided to use the term only when quoting others. Although discussions such as those in Hills and Zamora and Kaup work to move us away from this, the term 'Baroque' is still often associated with the Council of Trent, the Counter-Reformation, and the architectural commissions of Rome by seventeenth-century popes as well as associations of 'the theatrical'. However, eighteenth-century Italy is chronologically far from the Council of Trent, and the Counter-Reformation has little or no relevance to its architecture. The term 'Baroque' also assigns predetermined generic attributes to seventeenth and eighteenth-century architecture. By avoiding this term, I hope to discuss the architecture of the Val di Noto rebuilding without recourse to the frequent tropes.<sup>29</sup>

28 Hills (2011), Zamora and Kaup (2010).

29 See Hills (2011, 2015, 2019).

In addition, there is the problem of ‘Italy’ and ‘Italian’ in discussing a period when Italy did not exist as a nation. In contrast to the discussion above on ‘Baroque’, where I have tried to avoid generic categories that did not exist at the time, I have chosen to use expressions such as ‘the rest of Italy’ and ‘Italian’ instead of circumlocutions such as ‘and all of the other Italian-speaking areas’ or ‘and all of Sicily and the Italian peninsular’. These circumlocutions can become particularly cumbersome if one sets out to always avoid the word ‘Italian’. Although Italy did not exist as a single nation in the eighteenth century, there is a sense of unity in that by this time almost all publications and archive documents—from Sicily in the south to the Alpine borders in the north—were written in the same form of standard Italian rather than in dialect or Latin or other languages.

In conclusion, architecture in southern Italy has so often been relegated to a minor, idiosyncratic story that falls outside any important story of European—or even of Italian—art, even though southern Italy comprises a large part of Italy’s land mass. Scholars from outside the area generally ignore its architecture or reduce it to a postscript. Surveys of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Italian architecture that include the Val di Noto architecture often present it as a ‘late’ or regional variant of a Roman mainstream, albeit one that is distinctive and inventive.<sup>30</sup> The tendency to describe Sicilian architecture as a provincial variant of ideas from Rome or elsewhere, where Sicilian architects always modify and react to what is generated outside the island, is part of a broader separation of southern Italy from a putative European mainstream.<sup>31</sup> Although the fact that this

30 Rudolph Wittkower’s large survey of Italian baroque devotes 24 out of 329 pages and 11 out of 200 to the south. Wittkower (1999): 82, 197–199, 212, 230–234, 258–267, 300–303, 305–306. John Varriano gives 34 pages out of 293. Varriano (1986): 5–6, 261–294. John Rupert Martin briefly mentions the palace of Caserta only. Martin (1977): 193. *The Larousse Encyclopedia of Renaissance and Baroque Art* devotes just over 3 pages of a total of 411 to southern Italy. Huyghe, ed. (1968). On Sicily, Wittkower notes: ‘Sicilian Baroque would deserve closer attention than it can here be given.’ Wittkower (1999): 27–28. Matteucci refers to Sicilian architecture’s ‘exceptional creativity’ and its ‘*genius loci*’. Matteucci (1988): 162–189, Blunt, ed. (1978): 92–103.

31 See Jonathan Morris on *meridionalismo*, history writing describing southern Italy in terms of what the region lacks compared to northern Italy. Lumley and Morris (1997): 1–19. Marco Rosario Nobile notes: ‘Southern Europe and the south of Italy in particular, so the argument goes, display their condition of backwardness not only by a structural “delay” in responding to innovations but also by excessive, clumsy and picturesque re-elaboration of the original artistic processes initiated and developed with much greater accuracy and coherence in the major capital cities. Consequently, the “dialects” (as opposed to languages) of these peripheral areas suffer from a lack of theoretical discipline and a constant (though often cryptic) permeability to other cultures (such as those of North Africa) or to vernacular traditions that certify their marginal status.’ Nobile (2016): 262. On the marginalisation of southern Italy, Baroque, and ornament, see also Hills (2019).

architecture is ignored does not in itself justify this book, I hope that it will help towards a broader picture of architecture in Italy.

Footnote abbreviations for archives are ASC (Archivio di Stato di Catania), ASM (Archivio di Stato di Ragusa, Sezione Modica), ASN (Archivio di Stato di Siracusa, Sezione Noto), ASNAP (Archivio di Stato di Napoli), ASP (Archivio di Stato di Palermo). All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. All images are my own photographs unless otherwise stated.



# 1. Sicily as a Colonial Possession c. 1600–1750: Subordination and Resistance

**Abstract:** This chapter presents some important aspects of the politics and economics of eighteenth-century Sicily in order to orientate the reader before moving to the architectural case studies in the chapters that follow. At the time of the 1693 earthquake, Sicily was ruled from Iberia for 400 years, but in the subsequent 50 years it passed through Savoyard, Austrian, and Bourbon rule. The changing foreign dynasties appointed their own viceroys to rule the island, but the aristocratic families were the real power at the local level. The aristocrats maintained their control, but there was always the fear of foreign invasion and of insurgency resulting from famine. The post-earthquake rebuilding took place against a background of aristocratic dominance but also of insecurity and opportunism.

**Keywords:** Spanish Empire, Southern Italy, Sicilian history, Sicilian architects, European aristocracy, Val di Noto rebuilding.

## Sicily's Agricultural Economy at the Time of the 1693 Earthquake

This chapter will present some important aspects of the politics and economics of Sicily at the time of the earthquake. This is intended to orient the reader before moving to the architectural case studies in the following chapters. The chapter discusses Sicily's role as a colony and the political dominance of the Sicilian aristocracy, after which it outlines the actions of government representatives in the initial rebuilding following the earthquake. This provides some of the local context within which the architecture discussed in the case studies operates.

At the time of the 1693 earthquake, Sicily was a Spanish colony, although within two decades the Spanish lost possession of the island and by 1734 the island had passed through the rule of Savoy, Austria, and the Bourbons of

Naples.<sup>1</sup> Sicily was a colony whose political fate was strongly influenced by the shifting alliances between European powers and which could be traded according to peace treaties and marriage alliances decided elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> The Sicilian nobility had to adapt to these changes in order to maintain their own position, but the foreign rulers also needed aristocratic support for their rule and thus mainly preferred to leave existing social and economic hierarchies intact. The result was a continuous negotiation of relations between the colonial power and the aristocrats.

For the Spanish crown in 1693, Sicily provided two main benefits. One was strategic. Possession of the island facilitated control of the central Mediterranean against the Ottoman Empire and acted as a forward bastion to protect the Spanish coast from attack from the east. The second benefit was economic. The almost continuous warfare between European powers in this period and the increasing court spending on palaces and entertainments created ever-rising costs for rulers.<sup>3</sup> Sicily provided material and soldiers for its rulers' wars as well as income through the *donativi*. These were supposedly voluntary annual donations that the Sicilian aristocrats sent to Spain but which were effectively a tax in the form of money or agricultural produce, particularly grain.<sup>4</sup>

Regarding the economic basis of Sicily's wealth, wheat was the main export until the nineteenth century, followed by other agricultural products

1 Iberian rule in Sicily began in 1282 when Peter III of Aragon conquered the island. Spain ruled from 1503 to 1701, then there was a confused period of French and Spanish rivalry during the War of the Spanish Succession. The House of Savoy ruled from 1713 to 1720, then Austria until 1734, and finally the Neapolitan Bourbons until Italian unification in 1861.

2 At the start of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1701, Sicily became technically the property of France. Where previously the island had sent soldiers and taxes to support the Spanish Habsburgs against the French Bourbons, the situation was now reversed. 'When the news of the King's [Charles II of Spain] death reached Palermo, the [Spanish] Viceroy summoned the nobility and the consuls of the guilds and asked them to wait until he knew what Charles had decided for their future [...] When the late King's testament was finally published, Spain and Sicily found themselves simply bequeathed like so much personal property, bequeathed moreover out of the Habsburg family to a grandson of King Louis.' Mack Smith (1968): 237.

3 Spain fought in the Thirty Years' War from 1618–1648 and a war with France that continued to 1659, and wars in the Low Countries. In the War of the Grand Alliance (1688–97), Spain sent troops from Southern Italy to the Low Countries. Four years later the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714) began, followed by the War of the Quadruple Alliance (1718–1720), where Spanish soldiers fought in Sicily against the Austrians and the British. In the War of the Polish Succession (1733–38), Spanish and Austrians fought in southern Italy. Between 1741 and 1747 there were battles in northern Italy linked to the War of the Austrian Succession.

4 On the *donativi*, see Mack Smith (1986): 126, 130–132. Maurice Aymard calculates grain revenue from the 1593–1594 tax census at 1–1.2 million *salme*. Eighty-four noble families retained 300,000 *salme* of this sum, with the Spanish exchequer receiving the rest. Around two-thirds of the total income therefore went to Spain. Aymard (1975): 21–22.

such as vegetable oils, fish, wine, and silk.<sup>5</sup> The island produced several varieties of wheat that grew well with little rain. Their hardness made them difficult to mill, but their durability was suited for long-distance export on ships or storage against famine.<sup>6</sup> Grain was certainly important, but there can be a tendency to portray Sicilian agriculture in this period as consisting almost exclusively of monocultural *latifundia*-type estates, whereas in fact it was much more varied.<sup>7</sup>

Eighteenth-century Sicilian authors often present the island as a place of agricultural abundance rich in wheat, fruit, wine, and other produce. Vito Amico's compendium on Sicily, *Lexicon Topographicum Siculum* (Catania, 1757), cites many classical writers to support his presentation of Sicily as the abode of Ceres, the goddess of wheat and of the mysterious forces that make the harvest grow.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Antonino Mongitore's *Della Sicilia Ricercata* (Palermo, 1742) celebrates the island's agricultural produce and the connection with Ceres:

Her fertile breast, with the natural abundance that it produces, not only fully nourishes its own inhabitants, but every year supplies many things to other provinces, such as grain, oil, silk, wine, honey, manna, almonds and more, in great number; to the number of 60 or more different types, according to the report of the Commercial Tribunal. The ancient poets

5 The Swiss traveller Jean-Marie De La Plathière, visiting in the 1770s, reports that Sicily's main exports were 'all types of grain, linseed and olive oil, almonds, pistachio and other nuts, manna (a medicinal resin), sumac, tartar, salted tuna and anchovies, wine, and silk'. De La Plathière (17, vol. 3: 390). 'As for economic functions, Sicily was the system's granary and a leading producer of silk.' Musi in Dandelot and Marino (2007): 86. For Southern Italy overall, imports into Marseilles in 1781 show grain as the fourth largest income generator, after olive oil, Puglian wool, and silk. Galanti (1788), vol. 2: 362–365. Denis Mack Smith writes: 'Everything in Sicily in the last resort refers back to agriculture. Agriculture provided the raw material for whatever commerce and industry existed. It provided most of the taxes and far the greater proportion of all personal incomes. It was a factor in foreign policy, as well as providing the basic cause of every political revolt for centuries. Every Viceroy found questions of land tenure, wheat exports, domestic food supplies and possible harvest failures to be inescapable matters of daily preoccupation.' Mack Smith (1968): 181.

6 Mack Smith (1968): 22.

7 Mack Smith (1968): 98–99, 174, Davies (1978), and Cancila (1983) focus mainly on Sicily as a wheat producer.

8 Amico quotes Pindar, Homer, Ovid, Strabo Diodorus Siculus, Tullio, and Verres. Amico (1855 edition) vol. 1: 21. Amico's work, published in Catania in 1757, is a compendium on Sicily's geography, history, and economy. Much of its two volumes consists of descriptions of all of the principal towns. Giocchino di Marzo gives some biographical information on Amico in his introduction to Amico (1855): vol. 1: 7–9.

said, regarding its fecundity, that here was born Ceres, to whom we attribute the invention of grain, and the custom of making bread.<sup>9</sup>

The Val di Noto area of south-eastern Sicily can itself be divided into sub-areas. The eastern part is dominated by Mount Etna and the Plain of Catania, one of the few extensive areas of flat land in Sicily. The Plain of Catania and Etna's volcanic slopes have long been an important producer of fruit, vegetables, oil, wine, and almonds.<sup>10</sup> This area is also the source of a distinctive dark volcanic stone used in the local architecture. South of Catania there is a coastal plain that extends past Augusta and Syracuse and includes the hexagonal towns of Avola and Noto. This zone consisted of orchards, vineyards, and sugar plantations as well as wheat fields.<sup>11</sup> The type of stone also changes here. Many of the towns are built in a honey-coloured limestone, although Syracuse is also the site of the *latomie* or quarries of white limestone famous since antiquity.

The Iblean Plateau, an upland area of limestone gorges that provide soft stone for carving, covers much of the rest of the Val di Noto. It was part of the Contea di Modica, Sicily's largest fief, which operated almost as a state within a state.<sup>12</sup> At the time of the earthquake, wheat was the area's most important export, as it was in most of Sicily, but the area also produced olives, carobs, and the famous honey and beeswax noted by the Greeks. The streams and gorges allowed for water mills, and there were fields of dry-stone walls where small farmers grew wheat and raised cattle, in contrast to the shepherd

9 Mongitore (1981 edition): 3.

10 In the 1770s Jean-Marie De La Plathière lists wheat, barley, beans, liquorice, pistachios, and wine. De La Plathière (1780), vol. 3: 234–235.

11 De La Plathière (1780), vol. 3: 145–148 describes the fertility of the area around Syracuse. I discuss the sugar industry around Avola in Chapter One.

12 The diploma of feudal power Frederick III conferred on Bernardo Cabrera stated: *sicut ego in regno meo et tu in comitato tuo* (As I am in my kingdom, so you are in your county). Belgiorno (1990): 15. Colombo (2003): 164 writes: 'The County of Modica forms [an] enclave within the Val di Noto, and which includes the cities of Modica, Scicli and Ragusa, as well as the small towns of Chiaramonte, Monterosso and Vittoria, and the port of Pozzallo. The Count, who resides in Spain [at the time of the earthquake], is represented in Modica by a Governor.' At the time of the earthquake, the Henríquez-Cabrera ruled the Contea. The Contea was originally created for the Chiaramonte family in 1296. The Henríquez-Cabrera obtained it in 1481 during the Aragonese conquest of Sicily. The Spanish crown confiscated it in 1702 when Giovanni Tommaso Henríquez-Cabrera supported Austria in the War of the Spanish Succession. It then passed to the Savoy, then the Austrians, who returned it to the Henríquez-Cabrera in 1720. It was owned by the Alvarez and the Fitz-Stuart families and lost its separate status after the Bourbon abolition of feudalism in 1816. See also Ingana (2007–2008): 29, Menichella (2004): 219, Caruso and Perra (1994): 19, Belgiorno (1990): 15.

economy of other upland areas of Sicily.<sup>13</sup> Modica, the area's largest town in the eighteenth century, was important as a centre for sericulture and sugar.<sup>14</sup>

The greater extent of land tenure by emphyteusis made the Contea di Modica different from many other parts of Sicily. In the system of emphyteusis, farmers renewed their contracts on the land every one or two years or took contracts on new plots but had to develop the land. Although the farmers faced the risk that their contract would be given to another, there was more incentive for them to improve the land that they worked, as they took a share of its income rather than being paid a wage.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the agricultural workers in many other parts of Sicily were sharecroppers or wage labourers hired as needed.

The Sicilian and Spanish economies went into decline from the middle of the seventeenth century. This was compounded by conspicuous consumption on the part of the aristocracy and an increase in the number of nobles.<sup>16</sup> Spain's slow economic decline is outside the scope of this book but is linked to the huge cost of the many wars it fought as well as the rise of military and commercial rivals such as France, Holland, and Britain. Sicily's wheat exports and its sugar industry faced competition from the Americas. Wheat production in any case was unpredictable, with a high risk of failed harvests due to pests, drought, or floods. The large fields of wheat in some parts of Sicily allowed for fewer alternative sources of food or employment if the harvest failed. This could lead to food riots in the towns, and then starvation and disease.<sup>17</sup>

## The Sicilian Bracci and Aristocratic Dominance

All four successive governments—the Spanish, the House of Savoy, the Austrians, and the Bourbons—appointed a viceroy in Palermo, who governed

13 The area exported 12,000 *salme* of wheat a year, mainly to Malta. Colombo (2003): 164. De La Plathière (1780), vol. 3: 149 also mentions the production of fruit, sugar, tobacco, capers, herbs, cotton, and rice.

14 For Sicilian sericulture, see Laudani (1989) and Platania (1920). For sugar, see Sipione (1968): 43–52.

15 Flaccavento, Nifosi, and Nobile (1997): 35–36. As aristocrats became more indebted in the eighteenth century, in 1752 the government allowed the cancellation of emphyteusis contracts in many parts of Sicily so that landowners could switch to the more profitable *gabella* system. Mack Smith (1968): 278–279. I discuss *gabella* lease holding later in this chapter.

16 Mack Smith (1968): 207.

17 'The practice of monoculture resulted in there being no alternative food and often no alternative employment. Since the bulk of taxation fell on cereals, not only was the revenue imperilled on a bad year, but food prices might rise to the point beyond which men would risk attacking the grain pits and so perhaps touch off a major revolt.' Mack Smith (1968): 212.

Sicily in the name of the colonial ruler. Viceroyalty rarely ruled for more than six years and were accompanied by the important post of *consulitore*. The *consulitore*, who could not be Sicilian, was both adviser and a channel for reporting to the foreign king on the viceroy's actions.<sup>18</sup> The colonial rulers also relied on the support of the Sicilian nobles.<sup>19</sup> High-ranking families such as the Branciforte, the Paternò Castello, the Carafa, and the Pignatelli retained their positions throughout the regime changes of the eighteenth century. Marriage between Sicilian and Spanish families further integrated the Sicilian nobility into Spanish rule, and it was not unusual for Sicilian aristocrats to have relatives and agents in Madrid to promote their interests.<sup>20</sup> The existing political system in Sicily was mainly left intact as long as it supplied the occupier's needs. The foreign rulers governed through the Sicilian barons and supported them against possible insurrection by their tenants and servants.<sup>21</sup>

However, one needs to resist a simplified reading where all aristocrats renounced political influence in return for undisturbed jurisdiction in their fiefs. The nobility was not a single entity.<sup>22</sup> There were alliances and rivalries between and within families, and big differences in income and social status. High-ranking families such as the Carafa, the Branciforte, and the Pignatelli owned large estates in Sicily and elsewhere. Other families, such as the Paternò Castello in Catania, dominated a city and its surroundings;

18 Benigno (2007): 30.

19 Most viceroys in the Spanish period were Spanish nobles, although Ettore Pignatelli e Carafa was the first viceroy of Spanish-ruled Sicily in 1516. Spanish nobles retained some influence over the position of viceroy when Sicily changed rulers. Both viceroys in the Austrian period, Joaquín Fernández de Portocarrero (1722–1728) and Cristoforo Fernández de Cordoba (1728–1734), were Spanish. The Spanish José Carillo de Albornoz (1734–1737) was the first viceroy under the Bourbons.

20 Many Sicilian families, such as the princes of Butera and Castelvetro, and the dukes of Terranova, also had Spanish connections due to descent from Catalan and Aragonese families during the Aragonese occupation of Sicily. Benigno (2007): 31.

21 'The feudal aristocracy could most easily guarantee order, stability, and compliance with Spain's needs, and therefore its economic and special privileges were preserved.' Astarita (1992): 204. 'Successive Spanish administrators realized that the cheapest way to hold the island with only a small garrison was to introduce few changes and as little challenge as possible to local susceptibilities and privileges.' Mack Smith (1968): 120–121.

22 Domenico Ligresti divides the Sicilian families into four groups: the older, pre-Spanish noble families whose titles go back to the Svevi or Normans, the families of Spanish origin, newer nobles from mainland Italy, and newer nobles from within Sicily. Ligresti (1992): 72. Muti (2007): 286. Marco Nobile emphasises diversity within the Sicilian nobility: 'If we wish to escape from a slippery, fantastic dimension, classist or vaguely anthropological, not even a wash of philology is enough, which on its own should already sweep away the idea of monolithic and compact aristocratic society that remains intact over centuries.' Nobile in Piazza (2005b): 7.

while still others, such as the Landolina and Trigona in Noto, controlled the town government in smaller towns.<sup>23</sup> Not all nobles cooperated with the rulers. For example, the high-ranking Luigi Moncada, Prince of Paternò, resented the lack of government posts for Sicilian nobles and joined a group of aristocrats connected with the pro-French Messina uprising of 1648.<sup>24</sup>

The Spanish maintained the Sicilian parliament and its traditional division into the three *bracci*, or branches. These were the *braccio militare* or aristocrats, the *ecclesiastico* or bishops, and the *demaniale* or representatives of the towns owned by the crown.<sup>25</sup> The aristocrats had the greatest number of parliamentary seats and, if united, would always dominate. The parliament functioned mainly as a forum to negotiate taxes, obligations, and the *donativi*.<sup>26</sup> This could often be a *quid pro quo*, where the aristocrats agreed to higher taxes in return for greater legal or political freedoms or immunity from certain other taxes.

The aristocrats' power came from their dominance of the parliament, the income from their lands, their immunity from many taxes, and from fines, confiscations, and monopolies on facilities such as mills that their vassals had to use.<sup>27</sup> A law known as the *mero et mixtum imperium* allowed nobles to buy the right to legal jurisdiction over their vassals, including the rights to fine and imprison and in some cases to order capital punishment.<sup>28</sup> In return for these privileges, they were expected to provide their part of the *donativo* and, in accordance with their original feudal status as knights, to supply and lead soldiers in the ruler's wars. By the eighteenth century, this military service could be converted into a payment.<sup>29</sup> As well as ruling their fiefs, the aristocracy usually dominated the government-owned *demaniale*

23 Muti (2007): 288.

24 Benigno (2007): 24 and 39–41.

25 In the Spanish period, around forty *città demaniali* (including Palermo, Catania, and Messina) were ruled by the crown. All of the other fiefs belonged to aristocrats, and a small number to the church. Menichella (2002): 9.

26 Verdirame (1905): 105–118.

27 Maurice Aymard's research on the Pignatelli of Avola in the sixteenth century includes income from taxes on notaries and other officials, and taxes on products sold in their domains such as cheese, oil, wine, and bread. Aymard (1972): 39–41.

28 This law raised money for the Crown. In Avola, Giovanni d'Aragona bought the *mero et mixtum imperium* title in 1455. In 1507 his descendant Carlo d'Aragona paid the Crown 3,000 *ducati* to make this right hereditary, but there was a clause that the Crown could still buy it back. In 1511, Carlo paid a further 2,000 *ducati* to remove this clause, thereby making the law the permanent right of the Pignatelli. Gringeri Pantano (1996): 31. Archivio di Stato di Napoli (ASNAP) Scaffo IV, Avola, gruppo II, vol. 2 (3994) f. 538, ASNAP Scaffo IV, Avola, gruppo II, vol. 1 (3993) ff. 25–28, ASNAP Scaffo IV, Avola, gruppo II, vol. 3 (3995) ff. 485–491.

29 Mack Smith (1968): 144.

towns. They monopolised the important posts of *giurati*, or city councillors, and the *capitano di giustizia* responsible for law and order.<sup>30</sup>

The Crown's creation and sale of new titles increased the aristocracy's influence as their numbers grew, but for more established families this social fluidity and arrival of new aristocrats could be a threat.<sup>31</sup> The Spanish policy of rewarding favourites or raising funds through creating titles enabled new families and merchants to purchase noble status. There was a formidable growth in new titles in Sicily in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Between 1556 and 1598, Philip II of Spain granted 16 new Sicilian titles. This reached 165 in Philip IV's reign (1621–1665) and fell to 74 in the reign of Charles II (1665–1700). At the end of the sixteenth century, Sicily had 1 prince, 2 dukes, 1 marquis, and 21 counts, but 200 years later there were 142 princes, 1,500 dukes and barons, and 788 marquises.<sup>32</sup>

The barons benefitted from a system that had elements of both feudalism and capitalism. They enjoyed feudal rights such as legal jurisdiction in their lands and obeisance from their vassals, but they also employed their vassals in a money economy. From the sixteenth century, many nobles subcontracted their feuds to *gabellotti*, investors who bought the rights to all income from the land for a period of usually three to six years. Even though in years of very good harvests the aristocrats would earn more if they had not subcontracted, the *gabella* system ensured a predictable income. Additionally, the *gabellotti* did the work of overseeing the feuds and selling the grain, usually to merchants from outside Sicily, who shipped it to Naples, Livorno, Genoa, or other ports.<sup>33</sup>

It seems that most nobles preferred a safe income, letting the *gabellotti* risk a failed harvest or other disaster.<sup>34</sup> Leaving the mechanisms of producing

30 See Chapter Two on Noto for how aristocratic families dominated a *demaniale* town.

31 'The need to maintain their position and distinctiveness at a time when, at least in parts of western Europe, wealth and influence were becoming more accessible to ever-larger non-noble groups was an increasing problem for those already established within the nobility.' Lukowski (2003): viii.

32 The ruler's endless expenses in warfare and patronage were the main reasons for the increasing sale of Sicilian titles. D'Avenia (2006): 267–269. Jerzy Lukowski argues that the commercialisation of noble titles began in sixteenth-century France, and then spread throughout Europe. Louis XIV of France sold 500 titles in 1696 and a further 200 in 1704 to fund wars. Philip V of Spain established over 200 new titles to reward those who had served him. In Austria, Joseph II and Maria Theresa also sold patents of nobility. Lukowski (2003): 22–25.

33 Mack Smith (1968): 279–281.

34 The agricultural experimentation found in countries such as Britain and Holland in the eighteenth century may be an exception. The historian Jerzy Lukowski argues that, for many parts of Europe, 'great landowners were safer, and more sensible, to cling on to what they had, rather than to undertake expensive and dubious improvements and innovative investments.' Lukowski (2003): 72.

and exporting the harvest to *gabbellotti*, brokers, and shipping merchants from outside Sicily minimised the nobles' risk. The nobles took payment for the grain in advance. Whether the grain was actually produced or whether it reached a buyer outside Sicily did not affect this income. In any case, there were also conventions against aristocrats engaging in commerce too openly, as this reduced them to the lower level of merchant. It could also suggest a need to earn money, implying perhaps that the family's existing wealth was insufficient.<sup>35</sup>

An aristocratic family's funds needed to appear natural, stable, and inexhaustible. The family palace was the biggest expense. It had to accommodate the family and their servants—plus, in many cases, apartments for the cadet families and their servants. A high-ranking family might have several residences, with the principal one in Palermo, close to the viceroy's court. The important families spent heavily on clothing, carriages, and the number of servants. There were banquets, balls, fireworks, and gambling sessions. Even though sumptuary laws attempted to limit the baron's potential to accumulate debt, expenditure was sometimes conspicuously high.<sup>36</sup> The Duke of Terranova once lost in a single night's gambling a sum greater than the island's total tax revenue in wheat exports, and the Bishop of Agrigento spent three times this amount to buy the feudal rights for Agrigento and Licata.<sup>37</sup> Writing in the eighteenth century, Arcangiolo Leanti comments:

The nobles in the largest cities, and in particular in Palermo where the viceroy and the magistrates reside, show off bizarrely with all kinds of clothes, household furnishings, *Berline*, *Birocci* and other types of carriages of the finest taste; in servants' livery and in everything else belonging to luxury; and it seems that nowadays this is extending beyond the limits to every type of person.<sup>38</sup>

The rulers derived political benefit from the nobility's need for lavish expenditure. For the higher aristocrats, spending on palaces and entertainments

35 Conventions against aristocratic commerce varied across Europe but were particularly strong in Spain, and this may have affected the Sicilian nobility. See Astarita (1992): 4. '[...] [conventions against participating in trade or finance] were strictest in Spain where, by the seventeenth century, reformers had identified this as one of the main causes of Spain's economic decline'.

36 Mack Smith (1968): 158.

37 Mack Smith (1968): 207. There is also the list in the *Museo delle Carte* in Noto of over 30 new pieces of jewellery ordered in 1731 by the Marchesa of Castellucia in Noto for the entertainments connected to the visit to Palermo of Austrian emperor Charles VI.

38 Leanti (1761), vol. 1: 25.

and their desire to be near the viceroy in Palermo allowed a form of political control similar to that established in seventeenth-century France by Louis XIV. In her study of Versailles, Chandra Mukerji describes how competitive display and the requirement that nobles spend most of their time attending on the king at Versailles prevented them from accumulating separate wealth and power. This system reduced the higher nobility, in Mukerji's words, to 'dressed-up actors in the king's political performances' who were 'economically and socially dependent on the court through conspicuous waste of their wealth and the need to buy offices'.<sup>39</sup> The minor Sicilian nobility escaped this to some extent, but they had little influence outside their local towns anyway.

### Local Opportunism and the Inability of the Government to Coordinate the Rebuilding

Within a week of the 1693 earthquake, the viceroy appointed a small group led by the Sicilian Giuseppe Lanza, Duke of Camastra, to oversee the rebuilding.<sup>40</sup> Camastra had already proven himself a loyal servant who could act in a crisis. In the 1670s, he helped suppress the anti-Spanish uprising in Messina as well as two garrison revolts in Syracuse. In 1682, his reward was the prestigious honour of Key to the Bedchamber of the King of Spain. In the same year, he gained experience of rebuilding after a disaster when a landslide destroyed his fief of Santo Stefano di Camastra in north-east Sicily. Joining Camastra in the group of appointees were the *Procuratore* Prince of Santa Flavia, the *Consigliere* Don Antonio Ybañes, and the architect Angelo Italia.<sup>41</sup> Carlos Grunembergh, a Flemish adviser on military fortifications, was also a member of the group to ensure that the rebuilding accorded with defensive needs.<sup>42</sup>

39 Mukerji (1997): 113.

40 'On 19 January 1693, a week after the earthquake, the viceroy nominated two *vicari generali* to oversee the rebuilding. The prince of Aragon was originally to oversee the Val di Noto, and Camastra was to oversee the Val Demone. When the prince of Aragon became ill, Camastra took over the whole project'. Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 36.

41 Tobriner (1982): 27–28, Boscarino (1997): 78. See also the entry on Camastra in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (1974) online edition.

42 Tobriner (1982): 28. 'As a military engineer Carlos de Grunembergh was used to working with expediency in wartime and the same applied in the case of [...] an earthquake. He knew how to [...] harness skills and ensure that work was carried swiftly in the most urgent issues; clearing away the rubble, creating new roads [...], constructing temporary buildings before the final versions.' Giuffrè, 2007: 20. In 1681, Grunembergh designed the new citadel of Messina after the city's rebellion in 1674. Dufour and Raymond (1987): 14–15.

Overall, the rebuilding was determined more by local rivalries and opportunism—or by the decisions of the feudal owners or their agents—than by any centralised government programme. The rebuilding of the government-owned *demaniale* towns was often more contested than the baronial ones, as there were competing aristocratic alliances rather than a single landowner.<sup>43</sup> In many *demaniale* towns, the most influential local aristocrats were the *de facto* rulers, and the government could not impose its will.

Most towns were rebuilt on the existing site, sometimes using a new layout, sometimes recreating the pre-earthquake one. Again, there was no centrally enforced consistency. Eight towns (Noto, Avola, Grammichele, Giarratana, Ferla, Sortino, Buscemi, and Lentini) were rebuilt—or perhaps it is better to say relocated—on completely new sites according to geometric street layouts, and four towns (Militello, Ispica, Scicli, and Palazzolo Acreide) moved the centre to an adjacent lower site. Ragusa is an interesting case where a new, alternative town was built adjacent to the existing one, with a different cathedral and patron saint, creating two rival versions of what was originally one town.<sup>44</sup> Catania, the largest city in Val di Noto, was rebuilt according to a geometric street plan. The two large towns of Syracuse and Modica were rebuilt mainly according to the existing street plan.

The rebuilding of many towns according to a geometric grid should not be seen as some kind of triumph of putative enlightened rationalism. A central argument of this book is that the rebuilding was the result of contesting individuals, networks, and interest groups. There are no ‘ideal cities’ or ‘natural orders’. In a disaster, some people are still able to benefit from the changed circumstances. The disaster may remove rivals or open other opportunities. The supposedly ideal planned city may appear to derive from universal rules of geometry and harmony, but these layouts are not symptoms or creators of some enlightened social harmony. Conflict, coercion, and the production of wealth and poverty continued.

It is also important to note that the geometric layouts only extended to the main streets along the sides of each city block or *isolato*. The architects mapped out the *isolati*, but the arrangement of buildings within many of the blocks was unplanned. The plan did not consider such things as where people might need courtyards or open spaces for such activities as drying clothes. Once inside many *isolati*, the grid breaks down as the townspeople created irregular courtyards. The streets become meandering alleyways

43 Dufour and Raymond (1987): 22.

44 Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 38. Boscarino (1997): 43.

that sometimes end abruptly. Noto, often celebrated for its geometrical harmony, is a clear case of this.<sup>45</sup> Maps of Avola and Grammichele show that these irregular streets cover much more of the towns' surface than the geometric main streets and squares.<sup>46</sup>

The area within the *isolati*, where most of the population live, becomes invisible, hidden behind the lines of larger houses and ecclesiastical buildings that face the main streets. The main streets and squares are what a visitor will first see. The inhabitants' creation of a different architecture within the blocks means that two cities are interlaid. Describing this situation in Catania, Giuseppe Dato uses the term 'hegemonic city' for the more visible city of the main streets and squares and the term 'subaltern city' for the spaces inhabited by most of the populace.<sup>47</sup> The nobles' desire to ensure an unambiguous separation from the surrounding population meant not only that palaces had separate entrances, stairways, and corridors to minimise contact between servants and masters, but also that the population were hidden in separate, unplanned areas within the putative ideal city.

### The Architects of the Val di Noto: Conflicts between Architects and Stonemasons

Almost all of the architects involved in the Val di Noto rebuilding were Sicilian.<sup>48</sup> For many buildings, the architects are unknown. Archival sources usually refer to contracts or payments only, so for the known architects it is difficult to construct any kind of biography much beyond a timeline of commissions or to learn anything of their views on architecture.<sup>49</sup> Most architects worked in one area of the island, such as Giovan Battista Vaccarini in Catania, or Rosario Gagliardi, Paolo Labisi, and Vincenzo Sinatra in an area between Noto and Ragusa. Employing an outside architect could be more expensive for patrons and might create conflict with local architects. The local architects participated in the town's life and were connected to the networks of patronage and commissions. They would have been known for previous work and could

45 Fianchino, ed. (1979): 37–52, and Tobriner (1982): 73–75 refer to this aspect of Noto.

46 Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 77 and 83.

47 Dato (1983): 57.

48 The Ukrainian Stefano Ittar, who worked in Catania, was the only non-Sicilian architect working in Sicily in the eighteenth century.

49 There are monographs on Gagliardi and Vaccarini. For Gagliardi, see Nobile and Bares, eds. (2013), Germano (1985), Di Blasi and Genovese (1972). For Vaccarini, see Magnano di San Lio (2008). On Labisi, see Tobriner (1982): 179–198, Nobile (2005 b), Bares (2015).

source the necessary artisans and materials, and there would be more chance of redress if there were problems after the building work.

Most of the Val di Noto architects were locally trained, often through their membership of religious institutions, although images from international treatises and pattern books were an important source of architectural ideas.<sup>50</sup> Sicilian architects, mainly based in Palermo, also produced treatises.<sup>51</sup> Among the Val di Noto architects, there are unpublished manuscripts by Paolo Labisi and possibly Rosario Gagliardi. Labisi's *La Scienza dell'Architettura Civile* from 1773 is a practical manual on construction, with recommendations for different building types such as houses, convents, and churches, or parts of a building such as storerooms, kitchens, and cisterns. There are also sections on such practical subjects as land quality, air, water, and surveying.<sup>52</sup> Gagliardi's work consists of drawings for imaginary architecture. He possibly intended to publish these as a treatise, in order to strengthen his status as an architect rather than artisan.

Master masons with practical training collaborated or competed with the architects, carrying out much of the post-earthquake reconstruction. Printed

50 For example, ecclesiastical connections allowed Vaccarini to study in Rome. Giuffrè (2007): 104, 108.

51 On treatises in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Sicilian collections, see Di Fede and Scaduto (2007) 207–209, 213–218, 221–223, Nobile and Bares, eds. (2014), Piazza, ed. (2014). 'Buildings, books and period accounts make clear that the architects active in Sicily in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were deeply immersed in the international culture of books and prints printed images. They were frequently authors of books and pamphlets. [...] Inventories discovered in the archives show that architects' libraries were well stocked with treatises published in Italy and included selections from France, Germany and the Netherlands. The libraries of the Jesuits, Dominicans and other religious orders as well as those of architecturally inclined elites like the principe di Biscari, the principe di Torremuzza and Carlo Maria Ventimiglia would have been available to many architects.' Neil (2007): 14. Sicilian treatises include Paolo Amato's *La Nuova Pratica di Prospettiva* (Palermo 1733), Giovan Biagio Amico's *L'Architetto Pratico* (Palermo, 1726 and 1750), Tommaso Maria Napoli's *Utriusque Architecturae Compendium* (Rome, 1688), and Benedetto Maria Castrone's *Breve ristretto delli cinq. Ordini dell'architettura secondo le regole di Iacomo Barozzio da Vignola, Andrea Palladio, e Vincenzo Scamozzi...* (Calascibetta, 1714). Works on military architecture include Santo Ayelo's *Istruzione di artiglieri* (Palermo, 1656), Giacomo Masò's *Corso matematico* (Palermo, 1661), and *Trattato dell'architettura militare defensiva et offensiva* (unpublished manuscript), and Tommaso Maria Napoli's *Breve trattato dell'architettura militare moderna, cavato da piu insigni autori* (Palermo, 1722). There were also illustrations of designs for pageants held in Palermo, such as Pietro Maggio's *Le Guerre Festive* (Palermo, 1680), printed for the marriage of Charles II of Spain and Maria Luisa Bourbon; Pietro Vitale's *La Felicità in Trono* (Palermo, 1714) for the coronation of Vittorio Amadeo of Savoy and Anne of Orleans; and Pietro La Placa's *La Reggia in Triunfo* (Palermo, 1736) for the coronation Charles III of Bourbon.

52 Labisi's manuscript is in the Biblioteca Comunale, Noto. Gagliardi's designs are in the Mazza Collection, Noto. Some drawings are reproduced in Germano (1985) and Di Blasi and Genovese (1972).

treatises without much text and consisting mainly of images made architectural ideas and new styles accessible to stonemasons and engineers who could not read but who could look at drawings of facades and decorative details and understand how they would be made. This helped them compete with the architects.<sup>53</sup> There was also movement between the worlds of *architetti* and masons and foremen. After the earthquake, there was a need to rebuild quickly, and some masons supervised all of a project without the presence of an architect. In Noto, for example, both Rosario Gagliardi and Vincenzo Sinatra began as artisans. Gagliardi first worked as a carpenter. His nephew Sinatra began as a stonecutter and then worked as a foreman for Gagliardi.<sup>54</sup> Gagliardi became chief architect of Noto, a fact that his rival Paolo Labisi opposed. Labisi resented the way that Gagliardi and his protégé Sinatra were considered architects but did not have a literary and theoretical education.<sup>55</sup>

The stonemasons played an important role in the creation of the distinctive decoration that is an important focus of this book. The case studies will further discuss the dialogue between architects and masons in the facades that merge decoration from canonical treatises such as those by Serlio and Vignola with the distinctive *mascheroni* and *mensole* carvings.<sup>56</sup> The distinctive decoration of the Val di Noto rebuilding involves tension and fusion between the canonical treatise designs and the inventiveness, wit, and skill of the Sicilian architects and masons.

## Conclusion

Although eighteenth-century Sicily can be described as a feudal society in the sense that all of the land was owned by the monarch, the nobility, or

53 See Heuer (2009): 4. See Krämer (1993): 131 and Payne (1999): 27 on the proliferation of treatises consisting mainly of images. On competition with architects, Marco Nobile writes: 'the architects, who were not trained in the workshop but had an initial theoretical training, understood the need for a separation from the artisanal world, which used the same sources and operated as competition'. Nobile (2007): 12. The rebuilding of the church of San Giorgio in Modica illustrates this conflict between architects and stonemasons. In 1761, the stonemasons rejected the architect Paolo Labisi's plan for the facade, arguing that it was structurally unsafe. It is unclear how much of the design was eventually modified, but in 1762 the stonemasons Paolo Cultraro and Michele Alessandra took over the rebuilding of the church. See ASM, notaio A. Calvo, 271-14, 11 December 1761, Nobile (2005): 32, Piazza (2008): 158.

54 Tobriner (1982): 143 and 172.

55 Tobriner (1982): 184.

56 There were dynasties of stonemasons such as the Mazza and the Cultraro. Nobile (2000): 16–25. Paolo Nifosi has identified many works by the Cultraro workshop from 1702 to 1778. Nifosi (1985) and (1997): 53–59.

the church, and the main source of crown and aristocratic income was from feudal dues, this was not a static society. As well as the increasing number of newly ennobled families who competed with the established families for land and government positions, there was also the long background process of the economic decline of Spain and the increasing economic dominance of France and later Britain. The Sicilian aristocrats exported agricultural produce and by the time of the 1693 earthquake were moving from Spanish styles to French styles in areas such as interior architecture, furniture, dress, and food. This relationship with French styles became more established as the eighteenth century went on.

The earthquake of 1693 and other earthquakes in Sicily in the eighteenth century, as well as wars, the threat of the Ottoman navy and later of North African pirates, and the dangers of famine, insurgency, and revolution all contributed to a sense of uncertainty and shifting fortunes. The earthquake came at a time of rivalries between different parts of towns, families, and religious confraternities, leading to conflict and opportunism in the rebuilding. The unequal power relations, where many of the population remained vassals and servants and where the aristocrats and clergy maintained their privileges and secured for themselves the squares and straight streets for their architecture, relegating the majority of the people to narrow streets hidden behind the prestigious buildings, meant that this was not an architecture of ‘the Enlightenment’, if by that we mean equality and progress for all citizens.

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## 2. The Hexagonal Towns of Avola and Grammichele: Urbanism, Fortification, and Coercion

**Abstract:** Avola and Grammichele are the only hexagonal towns in Italy and are usually presented in the scholarship in terms of ideal, treatise-derived planned cities. This chapter acknowledges the importance of treatises on fortified geometric towns but disputes the recourse to a putative neutral and ideal geometry as generator of architecture. Instead, it argues that after the earthquake, the patrons of Avola and Grammichele implicated geometry in a forceful material and symbolic transformation of their feudal subjects' environment. The towns are not an exercise in a purportedly rational architecture. Their geometry disembodies the person of the aristocratic rulers and hides their assertion of power behind seemingly neutral and harmonious layouts.

**Keywords:** Italian architecture, military architecture, geometric towns, territoriality, European urbanism.

### The Enigma of Avola and Grammichele

The remarkable towns of Avola and Grammichele are the only two hexagonal towns in Italy (Figs. 2.1 and 2.2).<sup>1</sup> The original hill towns were both completely destroyed in the 1693 earthquake. Avola lost 500 of its population of 6,225, and Occhiolà, which was renamed Grammichele, lost approximately half of its 2,900 people.<sup>2</sup> The towns were rebuilt—or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that their populations were relocated to completely

1 There are other Italian towns with a polygonal outline, such as the octagonal Palmanova, built in the Veneto region in 1593.

2 The information on the extent of the destruction and estimated population figures is from Tobriner (1982): 207.

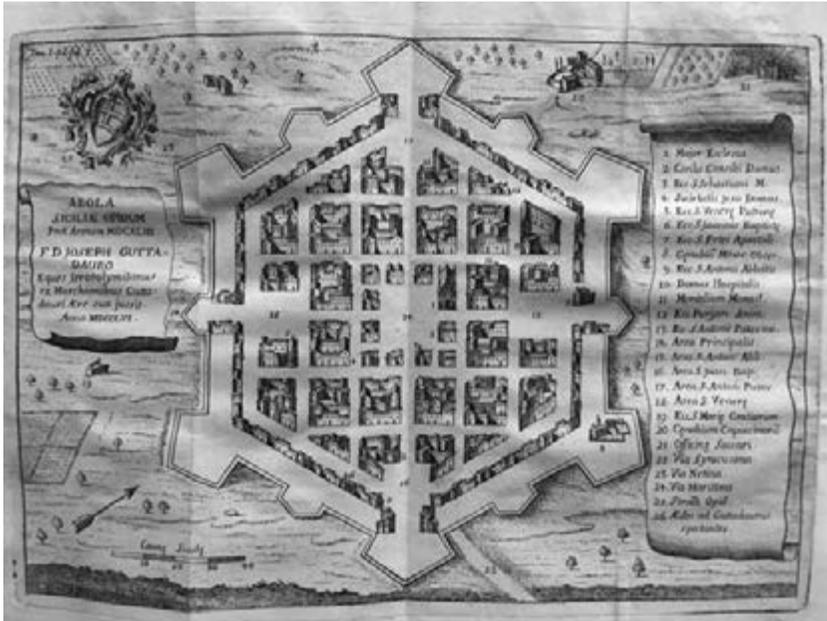


Fig. 2.1. Map of the new town of Avola by Giuseppe Guttadauro in Vito Amico's *Lexicon Topographicum Siculum* of 1756. Town layout designed by Angelo Italia, 1693. Image courtesy of the Biblioteca Regionale della Sicilia Alberto Bombace, Palermo.



Fig. 2.2. Painting of the new town of Grammichele. Unknown artist. Eighteenth century. *Galleria dei Feudi*, Palazzo Butera, Palermo. Town layout designed by Carlo Maria Carafa and Michele la Ferla, 1693. Image courtesy of Melo Minnella.

new towns on lower sites and on flat land that allowed for the geometric street layouts. For the citizens of old Avola, the location they were moved to retained the same name, whereas for the people of Occhiolà, even the name was new. The towns' hexagonal, post-earthquake sites are just 55km apart in a straight line, and the rebuilding of both towns began at a very similar time, within four months after the earthquake.<sup>3</sup>

Although Avola and Grammichele had different patrons and architects, the similarities in outline, location, and time of building suggest some kind of strong correlation or coordination between the two building projects. However, no evidence has emerged to show any communication between the towns' patrons and architects.<sup>4</sup> On the question of correlation between these hexagonal projects, this aspect of the towns remains an enigma, but there are also important differences between them, both in terms of their layouts and in how they might be placed within a history of geometric urbanism that began in Europe from the fifteenth century and later spread to European colonies.

In the absence of any contemporary documentation on the patrons' choice of the hexagonal layout or of any evidence so far of relevant connections between the patrons or their architects, I argue that the hexagons of Avola and Grammichele can be read separately. An important distinction between the towns is that after the earthquake, the new Avola was to remain within the Sicily-wide system of fortifications. Avola was an aristocratic fief, but the viceregal government had a stake in how it was to be rebuilt.<sup>5</sup> This was not the case for Grammichele, which was rebuilt entirely according to the personal interests of Carlo Maria Carafa, where the town became a form of experiment or exercise in the landowner's wishes. I read Avola

3 Two documents of 28 February 1693 record payments for transporting stone to Avola. Archivio di Stato di Napoli (ASNAP) Scaffo IV, Avola, gruppo I, vol. 39 (3946) ff. 37 and 38. Another document includes payment for workers assisting Angelo Italia in laying out the street plan, which they completed on 21 March 1693. ASNAP Scaffo IV, Avola, gruppo I, vol. 39 (3946) f. 51 r and v. Gringeri Pantano (1997): 226–229 and 230–231 reproduces these documents. For Grammichele, Centorbi's eyewitness account records Carlo Maria Carafa's arrival at the new site on 18 April to lay the foundation stone. See Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 14.

4 There is a marriage between Nicolo' Placido Branciforte (c. 1670–1723) and Stefania Ventimiglia e Pignatelli (c. 1675–1749). Their first daughter Caterina Branciforte was born in 1691, so the marriage took place presumably before the 1693 earthquake. However, the principal Sicilian families frequently intermarried, and this marriage in itself—and from different branches of the families of the patrons of Avola and Grammichele—is not enough to suggest any relevant connection between the two patrons. Gaetani (1754), vol 2: 17, and Maggiore (undated): 4.

5 The old hill town of Avola possessed a castle from at least the thirteenth century. Gringeri Pantano (1997): 23. Occhiolà, the town that became Grammichele, was also fortified. Cantone, ed. (2002): 13.

within the context of fortified geometric towns, whereas Grammichele is a more capricious project that was much more dependent on its patron's philosophical and scientific interests and his self-presentation as a proponent of a purportedly rational order.

Both towns were relatively small, but their owners were from two of southern Italy's highest-ranking families, with wealth and influence based on connections to the royal court in Madrid and on the agricultural resources of their many fiefs. Avola belonged to Nicolò Pignatelli Aragona Cortés, Duke of Monteleone and Terranova (1648–1730).<sup>6</sup> At the time of the earthquake, the Pignatelli's family links also extended to Rome, as Antonio Pignatelli (Innocent XII) was Pope from 1691 to 1700. Avola was one of many fiefs that Nicolò Pignatelli owned in Spain and southern Italy. Through his marriage to Giovanna Aragona Cortés, Nicolò Pignatelli gained a connection to the Aragona Cortés, descendants of Hernán Cortés, conqueror of Mexico, who held fiefs in Spain and Mexico.<sup>7</sup> When the earthquake occurred, he was resident in Spain, where his status as a *Grande de España*—nobles who were generally entrusted with the most important offices—put him into the highest-ranking category of the Spanish aristocracy.

Carlo Maria Carafa Branciforte (1651–1695), patron of Grammichele, was Prince of Butera, the foremost noble title in Sicily, and held thirteen other landed titles in Sicily as well as fiefs in Calabria.<sup>8</sup> He had kinship links to the main branch of the Carafa in Naples and the Colonna family in Rome.

6 See the online Treccani *Enciclopedia Italiana* (1935) and *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* – Vol. 15 (1972) [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pignatelli\\_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/pignatelli_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/) [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-maria-carafa-branciforte-principe-di-butera\\_\(Dizionario\\_Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-maria-carafa-branciforte-principe-di-butera_(Dizionario_Biografico)/)

7 Mango de Casalgerardo lists the family's fiefs, and their title of princes of the Holy Roman Empire acquired through the marriage to Giovanna Aragona Cortés. Mango de Casalgerardo (1912). Entry on the Pignatelli. Available online: [www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mago/paimontisi.htm](http://www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mago/paimontisi.htm) Aymard (1972): 30.

8 Biagio Aldimari, in the Branciforte entry in his *Memorie storiche di diverse famiglie nobili, così napoletane come forastieri*, published in Naples in 1691, lists Carlo Maria's titles as Prince of Butera, Prince of Pietrapertina, Prince of Leonfonte, Prince of Licordia, Prince of Villanova, Prince of Niscemi, Duke of San Giovanni, Marquis of Militello, Marquis of Barrafranca, Count of Cammarata, Count of Mazzarino, Count of Raccuja, Baron of Fiume di Nisi, and Baron of Occhiolà. Aldimari (1691): 34. Francesco Benigno also refers to the title of Prince of Butera as the highest-ranking Sicilian noble title. Benigno in Dandelot and Marino (2007): 31. On the government appointments the Carafa Branciforte held, see the entry under Branciforte in Mango de Casalgerardo (1912). The connection with the Colonna family is through the marriage of Federico Colonna with Margherita Branciforte in 1624 or 1625. See the entry under Federico Colonna in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (1982), vol. 27. ([treccani.it/enciclopedia/federico-colonna\\_Dizionario-Biografico](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/federico-colonna_Dizionario-Biografico/)).

From the fifteenth century onwards, members of the Carafa Branciforte were appointed to high posts in the Spanish government, including *grande de España*, *stratigò* of Messina, and *capitano di giustizia* of Palermo.

The Spanish crown ceremonially recognised Carlo Maria as a loyal supporter in 1674 when the citizens of Messina, supported by the French, revolted against Spanish rule. Carlo Maria provided soldiers at his own expense to prevent the French capturing the town of Melilli. In 1683, he represented the Spanish king at the *omaggio della chinea* in Rome, an annual tribute paid to the Pope by Sicily's rulers since the time of the Normans.<sup>9</sup> Although an act of protocol, it shows that Madrid and the viceroy included Carlo Maria among the Sicilian aristocrats whose loyalty to Spain needed to be publicly rewarded. He was also the author of several books that combined his interests in religious order, political order, and astronomy, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Regarding ways of reading the layouts of Avola and Grammichele, there is an important phenomenon in Sicily—which began around 100 years before the earthquake and continued into the seventeenth century—of creating new geometrically planned towns, where aristocrats gained the right to construct new agricultural areas and towns on unused land. These centres are often referred to as *licentiae populandi* towns. The *licentia populandi*, or 'permission/licence to populate', was issued by the Sicilian viceroy's government and permitted construction of a new agrarian town. In 1505, Sicily had 158 recorded centres of population. By 1747, this had more than doubled to 327. Much of this was due to the *licentiae populandi* policy.<sup>10</sup>

However, although Avola and Grammichele were new towns created by aristocrats, they have little else in common with the *licentiae populandi* programme. *Licentiae populandi* towns such as Bolognetta (founded 1610), Altavilla Milicia (1621), Aliminusa (1635), and Palma di Montechiaro (1637) were located mainly outside the Val di Noto in the centre and the western half of Sicily, where population was low. They were built on a simple, barracks-like grid system, which is generally the fastest way to create a town.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, the street layouts of Avola and Grammichele are much more elaborate. Their hexagons involve issues of measurement, symmetry,

9 See the online Treccani *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (1972), vol. 5. (Treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-maria-carafa).

10 'This phenomenon, arising in the mid-sixteenth century, peaked between 1583 and 1653, with the foundation of 88 new communities, and another 30 between 1654 and 1714'. Muti, ed. (2008): 266. See also Boscarino (1997): 63, Pinzarrone (2010), Benigno (1985), Davies (1978), and Aymard (1978).

11 Boscarino (1997): 69.

and novelty that go beyond the need for the fastest way to rebuild. The restoration of order and economic productivity were certainly a priority after the 1693 earthquake, but if the patrons of Avola and Grammichele aimed solely to rebuild as quickly as possible, then a simple grid layout would probably have been chosen.<sup>12</sup> The *licentiae populandi* towns do not involve the same attention to novelty and overt design. In Avola and Grammichele, more was at stake than just economic recovery.

## Disorder and Challenge after the Earthquake

The symmetrical ground plans of Avola and Grammichele suggest order and stasis, but the process of rebuilding these towns—and many others—began from chaos and disorder. In the days immediately following the earthquake, the rule of law broke down in many Val di Noto towns, including Avola and Grammichele. Survival took precedence, and people were no longer afraid to take the landowners' property. The inhabitants of Avola attacked the surrounding sugar fields, eating the cane or using the straw for shelter, and the soldiers guarding the plantations and storehouses could not, or would not, prevent this.<sup>13</sup> An officer's report of 13 January, two days after the second tremor, relates how the population, enraged by hunger, broke

12 Lilian Dufour and Henri Raymond argue that financial considerations were the principal factors in the rebuilding of Avola and Grammichele, but this avoids engaging with the issue of the hexagonal layouts: 'It is necessary, as a response to this hypothesis, that there is no certain Enlightenment spirit nor any particular social design in the plan of Avola, and neither is there in that of Grammichele, and that the only recognisable aim in the plan is one due to the need to house the population rapidly and to please the feudal owners and officials who saw in the move an occasion for profit.' Dufour and Raymond (1993): 48–49.

13 Avola's economy was unusual at the time of the earthquake because it included Sicily's last remaining sugar plantations. Between 1540 and 1640, the town's sugar revenue increased fivefold, but cheaper sugar from the large slave plantations of the Americas meant that by the 1680s all of the Sicilian plantations except those of Avola had closed. The Pignatelli retained their plantations into the eighteenth century. A report written to Nicolò Pignatelli's agents one or two years before the earthquake argues that without the plantations Avola's population would leave or become destitute and turn to crime. During the eighteenth century, however, the Pignatelli diversified cultivation away from sugar. The sugar territory was divided into areas to be sublet in emphyteusis, where many of the smallholders planted vines. On the demise of sugar in Avola, Dominique Vivant Denon describes a visit to the plantations in 1778. By 1792, Paolo Balsamo reports that no more sugar was grown. Gringeri Pantano (1997): 46, 48, 50, 151. The report on retaining the sugar workers is Archivio di Stato di Napoli (ASNAP), Archivio Pignatelli, Scaffo IV, Avola, gruppo II, vol. 56 (4049) ff. 123–125. The text is reproduced in Gringeri Pantano (1996): 222–223. See also Aymard (1975): 23–24.

into the warehouses to take the produce stored there. The soldiers then went to the sugar fields, where they saw people tearing out of the ground what was legally the landowner's property:

Maddened by hunger, they removed the sugar, honey and wheat and, having been reprimanded by the soldiers and their children sent away, we [the soldiers] came to protect the owners' property [...] Moreover, they [other soldiers] declared that, having been unable to solve the problem at the sugar factory, they went to the sugar fields which the people had torn up, some to alleviate their hunger and some to use the straw to make a hut to live in, without being able to do anything to alleviate the rage of the people or the wretchedness of the situation.<sup>14</sup>

These disorders spread beyond Avola. The report goes on to describe how strangers from neighbouring areas arrived to eat the sugar cane or to use it for temporary buildings. The feudal vassals were desperate enough to sack the fields and storehouses of the landowners, and to move into different areas in search of food and shelter.

In order to maintain a story of continuous loyalty from their subjects, the Pignatelli later denied this lawlessness. Nine months after these events, the inhabitants were presented as loyal and obedient. A document of 9 September 1693 from the Spanish king to the Viceroy, based on Nicolò Pignatelli's testimony, describes Avola's inhabitants as 'attentive and obedient vassals' who carried out the rebuilding according to their superiors' wishes. The loss of baronial control was made to disappear from the narrative.<sup>15</sup>

Resistance to the Pignatelli's orders continued, however. In April 1694, one year after the beginning of the new town, reports to the Pignatelli's agents stated that people were not rebuilding according to the street plan.

14 Report to the governor of Avola, 13 January 1693. AS NAP, Archivio Pignatelli, Avola, gruppo II, vol. 56 (4049) ff. 34–35. The document is reproduced in Dufour and Raymond (1993): 120–121 and in part in Gringeri Pantano (1996): 224.

15 'Because of the consequences that could follow if we moved those people of six thousand souls of such good disposition who have done things with the permission and approval of their superiors and with such good faith and legality as attentive and obedient vassals, distinguishing themselves from every other baronial territory that suffered in this way, so that everyone who has seen the new town has praised to the maximum the care and diligence of these people'. The Ministros de la Junta ruled that for defensive reasons no new town could be built within two *miglia* of the sea. Avola was slightly over one *miglia* from the coast. This letter from the king, however, orders that the site for the new Avola should not be changed. ASN, Archivio Pignatelli, Avola, Scaffo IV, vol. 38 (3944) ff. 129–132. The Spanish original is reproduced in Tobriner (1982): 230 and in Italian translation in Gringeri Pantano (1996): 234–236.

Some were starting to ‘fabbricare a capriccio’ (build at whim). The return in June of Antonio Vella, assistant to Avola’s architectural designer Angelo Italia, shows the Pignatelli’s need to reassert the geometric layout, which by this point had also become a physical manifestation of the landowner’s orders and which therefore had to be followed.<sup>16</sup>

There was analogous disorder and resistance in Grammichele. The *Veridica relatione*, an anonymous eyewitness account of the effects of the earthquake in Occhiolà, the hill town that was rebuilt as Grammichele on a new site, relates a breakdown of order perhaps analogous to what happened in Avola: ‘One saw in that time that obedience was lost for many, pity had been banished and ingratitude reigned [...] friendship was completely lost’.<sup>17</sup> As in Avola, there seems to be no sense that the authorities could be trusted to provide assistance.

After order was restored, Carlo Maria Carafa arrived in April 1693 for the new town’s foundation ceremony.<sup>18</sup> As a reassertion of his power, he marked the landscape not only with the new hexagonal town but literally with his body. At the foundation ceremony, he laid a stone inscribed with the time and date of the beginning of the work, and placed the first bricks, which were silver-plated.<sup>19</sup> He then ceremonially walked around the hexagonal perimeter, the presence and movement of his body another form of assertion of control over the territory.<sup>20</sup>

Carlo Maria succeeded in making the people of the hill town of Occhiolà build and inhabit a space that was completely new and whose design he determined. He even changed the town’s name to Grammichele, as he had a personal attachment to the Archangel Michael. In Occhiolà, the patron saints were Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Saint Nicholas of Bari. In Grammichele, Saint Nicholas was replaced by the Archangel Michael. The new town’s inhabitants also found themselves living in one of six *sestieri* or an adjoining rectangular *borgo*, each named after a particular saint.<sup>21</sup> The

16 ASNAP, Archivio Pignatelli, Scaffo IV, gruppo I, vol. 39 (3969) f. 300, Referred to in Gringeri Pantano (1996): 118. Archivio di Stato di Noto (ASN), Sezione Avola, notaio A. Tavana, vol. 2032. f. 643. Partially reproduced in Gringeri Pantano (1997): 242.

17 Anonymous of Occhiolà (1693). Cited in Scacciante (2012): 13.

18 Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 14.

19 Scacciante (2012): 14–15.

20 Di Resa (1997): 329. Some resistance continued. Some inhabitants later took more land than allocated but then did not build on it or left houses unfinished, preventing others from building. In April 1756, the new Prince of Butera ruled that everyone with building permission needed to complete within three years. Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 120–122 provide a French translation of this document.

21 On Grammichele’s patron saints, see Scacciante (2012): 36. Scacciante (2012): 18 lists the *sestieri* and attached *borghi*.

new flatter and lower sites of Avola and Grammichele produced economic benefit, and in Grammichele, a more profound transformation resulted in a town whose layout, local areas, and name were changed.

### **Avola and Reversing the Ideal City: Geometric Architecture in the Service of Warfare**

The name of Avola is related to the ancient Iblea, a name now used for the broader Iblean Plateau area of south-east Sicily. The Iblean region has long been famous for its honey. It is mentioned by Strabo, Virgil, and other Classical authors, and its fame extended to Shakespeare's England.<sup>22</sup> The connection between productive bees, the architecture of hexagons, and Avola is tantalising because bees are present on Avola's coat of arms. Although no image or description has come to light of the arms before the creation of the hexagonal town in 1693, it is likely that the bees were on the arms of the old hill town. Before the 1860s, the arms showed a cross, bees, and three hills. After 1860, the hills were removed, presumably because they no longer related to the new hexagonal town on flat land.<sup>23</sup>

There is also an interesting reference to hexagons in Book 7 of Alberti's canonical *De re aedificatoria* (Florence, 1486). Alberti writes:

It is obvious from all that is fashioned, produced, or created under her influence, that nature delights primarily in the circle. Need I mention the earth, the stars, the animals, their nests and so on, all of which she has made circular? We notice that nature also delights in the hexagon. For bees, hornets, and insects of every kind have learned to build the cells of their hives entirely out of hexagons.<sup>24</sup>

Alberti does not expand on this, however. In his discussion, the circle is pre-eminent, but the hexagon is also important, especially as part of the

22 'The Chalcidians founded Naxos, and the Dorians Megara, which was at first called Hybla. These cities no longer exist, but the name of Hybla survives on account of the Hyblæan honey.' Strabo (1903) Book VI, Section II. 'Here, as of old, your neighbour's bordering hedge, that feasts with willow-flower the Hybla bees, shall oft with gentle murmur lull to sleep.' Virgil, Eclogue 1. In *Julius Caesar*, Cassius says to Anthony: 'Anthony, the posture of your blows is yet unknown. But for your words, they rob the Hybla bees and leave them honeyless.' Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 5, Scene 1, Lines 34–35.

23 Gringeri Pantano (1987): 26.

24 Alberti (1988): 196.

architecture of bees, and perhaps because its outline comes close to the circle. However, the hexagon is rare in visible nature as well as in architectural ground plans and street layouts. If the hexagon is so natural and self-evident, then this raises the question of why many more hexagonal towns were not built. There may also be a temptation to try to relate the hexagon of Avola to metaphors of its inhabitants as productive bees producing the sweetness of economic prosperity, but as research currently stands, these ideas are too hypothetical—and perhaps also too literal—for a useful analysis of the town's architecture.

Avola and Grammichele can, however, be placed within the history of overtly geometric urbanism that developed in European architectural treatises from the sixteenth century. In these works, geometry and measurement are the starting points for architecture. Many sixteenth and seventeenth-century treatises present geometrical drawing as fundamental to the architect's initial training and often begin with chapters on drawing shapes and angles.<sup>25</sup>

The equation of geometrically planned towns with the putatively rational accords with Descartes' analogy of architecture and philosophical method. Descartes uses the analogy of city planning to argue that the most perfect concept or artefact is one created by a single mind:

This is also the case with those ancient cities, that in the beginning were no more than villages and have become, through the passage of time, great conurbations; when compared to orderly towns that an engineer designs without constraints on an empty plain, they are usually so badly laid out that, even though their buildings viewed separately often display as much if not more artistic merit as those of orderly towns, yet if one takes into consideration the way they are disposed, a tall one here, a low one there, and the way they cause the streets to wind and change level, they look more like the product of chance than of the will of men applying their reason.<sup>26</sup>

Descartes does not expand on why an empty plain is better, but it suggests the blank sheet of paper for the architect's plan. Without the encumbrance

25 Vignola's *Architettura* (1562) begins with a description of the architectural orders and their proportions. Most of the plates show how to draw architectural members geometrically. Many other writers, such as Juan Caramuel de Lobkowitz, Christian Wolff, and the Sicilian Giovanni Biagio Amico, include mathematical tables and figures for proportions. Vignola (1562), Caramuel de Lobkowitz (1678), Wolff (1752), Amico (1726).

26 Descartes (2006): 12. Originally 1637. Martha Pollak refers to the same passage in a discussion of connections between military architecture, urbanism, and mathematics. Pollak (1991): 12. Part of this passage is also quoted in Kostof (1991): 72.

of existing buildings or natural features, the architect is free to plot any geometric lines and angles. The plan emanating unhindered from a single designer's mind purportedly proves the operation of reason.<sup>27</sup>

However, the appearance of town plans in treatises also coincides with changes in warfare that created the need for cities with stronger fortifications. The ideal cities presented in such treatises as Pietro Cataneo's *I quattro primi libri di architettura* (Venice, 1567), Francesco De' Marchi's *Della architettura militare* (Brescia, 1599), and Vincenzo Scamozzi's *Dell'idea dell'architettura Universale* (Venice, 1615) are often fortified, replete with bastions and inclines calculated according to new knowledge about ballistics and angles of fire. Changes in warfare, particularly a move to larger armies and the increased use of gunpowder and more powerful cannons from the late fifteenth century, required a response in fortifications. New defences employed large earthworks to deflect or absorb cannon fire and systems of concentric walls and ditches to give greater defensive strength than just a single wall. Polygonal perimeters minimised the length of walls in proportion to the area they enclosed and allowed firepower to be concentrated on specific sections of the defences if the attackers were massing there.<sup>28</sup>

Architecture's militarisation through the new technology of gunpowder and fortifications made architects, engineers, and geometers important in warfare.<sup>29</sup> The 'ideal city' becomes a military instrument for controlling territory and geometry's association with harmony becomes reversed. In the military treatises and fortified towns that were designed from the sixteenth century, geometry serves warfare. In an engraving in Juan Caramuel Lobkowitz's *Architectura Civil* (Vigevano, 1678), geometric diagrams float above the scene of the siege like Platonic templates that

27 The association of geometrically planned towns and scientific or Enlightenment reason is pursued in much of the literature on Avola and Grammichele. For example, Salvatore Boscarino writes: 'Carafa and his collaborators, by means of the geometric form, wanted to impose pure reason, which in the end subjugated the abstraction of the idea to planning needs and the perception of the landscape, and ended by producing an overall urbanistic system rationalized by means of geometry, which was the only one known and appreciated at the time.' Boscarino (1997): 87. See also Giuffrè (1969), Tobriner (1985), Dufour and Raymond (1987) and (1993), Gringeri Pantano (1996), Cantone (1998), and Scacciantè (2012).

28 On the technology of bastions and polygonal perimeters, see Daumas, ed. (1969): 464 and 494.

29 'Since many civil architects practiced as military architects until the middle of the eighteenth century, there was a continual exchange of influence between military and civic design. This manifested itself through the adoption of the hallmarks of military design—regularity, uniformity, austerity—for the planning of parts of cities, or even of entire cities'. Pollak (1991): 5.

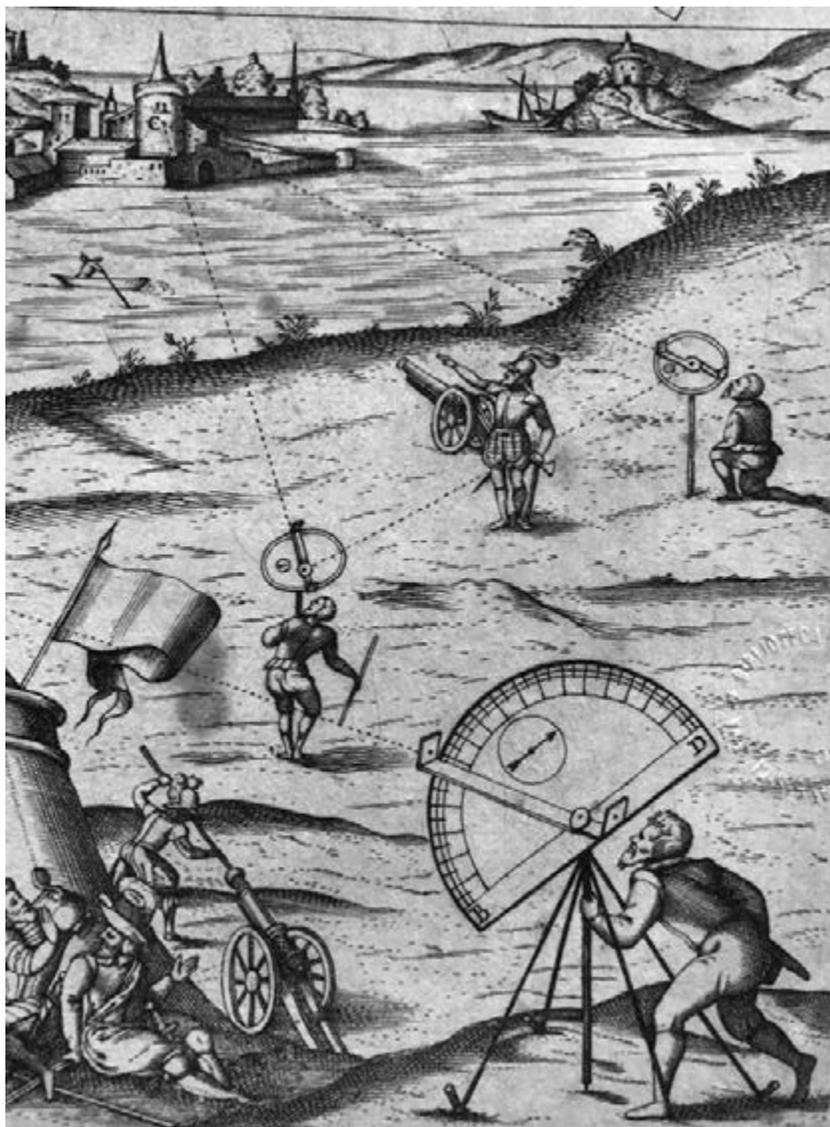


Fig. 2.3. Juan Caramuel Lobkowitz, *Architectura Civil*, 1678. Detail of Volume III, Part Two, Plate 4. Image courtesy of the Biblioteca Regionale della Sicilia Alberto Bombace, Palermo.

determine the reality of the conflict taking place below (Fig. 2.3). The city under attack is fortified with bastions angled to minimise the effect of canons. In the foreground, military engineers use instruments to measure firing angles. Two triangulation instruments determine the distance to the tower marked 'C' across the river. Instead of employing geometry as part of some kind of utopian, ideal city where all citizens enjoy benevolent

rule, fortified geometric towns are machines for warfare and territorial control.<sup>30</sup>

Many of the treatises on sieges and fortification produced from the sixteenth century onwards circulated in Sicily, and Avola operates within this move towards cities with more complex geometric fortifications.<sup>31</sup> For its rebuilding, the viceroy's representatives chose the architect and Jesuit priest Angelo Italia (1628–1701). Italia is important in the early phase of the Val di Noto rebuilding, as he also devised the plans for the rebuilding of Noto and Lentini.<sup>32</sup> On his visit to Avola, Italia was accompanied by the Royal Engineer and fortifications adviser Carlos de Grunembergh. This was because Avola was to defend its section of the coast, including the new town of Noto, built nearby but without defences. Avola's *sindaco* (mayor) and judge were to be chosen by Nicolò Pignatelli, but the *capitano delle armi*, the official responsible for defence, was to be chosen by the government.<sup>33</sup>

Avola was provided with the most modern defences, which although no longer extant can be seen in Guttadauro's image of 1756, where there are six main bastions at the corners of the hexagon and smaller ones between (Fig. 2.1).<sup>34</sup> Avola's hexagon therefore became part of an

30 Martha Pollak's work on the transformation of seventeenth-century Turin by the dukes of Savoy is useful with regard to Avola. She discusses the connection between the city conceived as a single form and the concurrent appearance of treatise designs for citadels and fortified cities. Pollak (1991): 5, 13–14.

31 Federica Scibilia lists treatises held in Sicilian libraries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including those by Niccolò Tartaglia (Venice, 1562), Galasso Alghisi, (Venice, 1570), Bonaiuto Lorini (Venice, 1597), Pietro Sardi (Venice, 1618), and Nicolaus Goldmann (Leiden, 1643). Scibilia in Di Fede and Scaduto, eds. (2007): 61–62.

32 Tobriner (1985): 61. The anonymous chronicler of the manuscript *Del nuovo risorgimento e costruzione della città di Noto, nel sito dove al presente si trova, dopo l'orribile tremuoto dell'anno 1693, accaduto in tutta Sicilia*, a history of Noto written after 1727, reports that Angelo Italia took the design from 'a book of city plans'. Anonymous. (After 1727). This text is reproduced in Puglisi, 1871–1901: 3–14, Gallo, 1964: 116–124, Dufour and Raymond, 1990: 123–127.

33 Amico (1855): 116.

34 A document in the Pignatelli Archive in the Archivio di Stato in Naples records the construction of Avola's defences. ASN, Archivio Pignatelli, vol. 4049, f. 199. *Relazione di quanto si è operato nella nuova città di Avola dal giorno del terremoto a questa parte*. Cited in Dufour and Raymond (1987): 17 and n. 28. The document is undated, but Dufour and Raymond date it to approximately 1694. On the fortifications of Avola, see Boscarino (1997): 83–85 and Tobriner (1985): 77. Francesca Gringeri Pantano describes Avola as both ideal city and fortress: 'In designing Avola the architect-engineer wanted to synthesise, due to coinciding aesthetic and practical needs, the planning schemes of the 'ideal city' with the needs expressed by the patrons and dictated by the historical moment and the seismic emergency. The plan of Avola, conceived at the end of the seventeenth century, cannot therefore be considered [...] only a passive response to the urbanistic conception of the Renaissance. This is proved by the realisation of the fortification

island-wide defensive plan. De Grunembergh's presence attests to this, as does the viceregal intervention in the rebuilding of a *baroniale* rather than *demaniale* town. The town's internal affairs were left to the Pignatelli, but its military officer was independent of the baron and reported to the government.

### Grammichele and Reversing the Ideal City: Geometric Architecture in the Service of Absolutism

Whereas Avola's unusual hexagonal layout can be read in terms of military architecture, the layout of Grammichele seems particularly arbitrary. The fact that it was not a fortified town makes its hexagonal outline ostensibly more purposeless and puzzling. Its arbitrariness attests to Carlo Maria Carafa's ability to make this territorial transformation. It was a new layout created at the whim of the landowner, with no purpose that could benefit its inhabitants. This transformation of the landscape calls to mind Chandra Mukerji's description of the garden at Vaux-le-Vicomte as a 'territorial garden, a dramatic display of spatial order'.<sup>35</sup>

Grammichele's design is strongly linked to the ideas of cosmic and political order found in Carlo Maria's religious and political writing. Carlo Maria was the town's designer as well as patron. He chose Michele Da Ferla, a little-known architect and priest, to carry out his design.<sup>36</sup> In his eyewitness account, Mario Centorbi records Carlo Maria drawing the street plan of the new town on the ground.<sup>37</sup>

Carlo Maria was a prolific author. He is known to have written at least nine books, all published on his printing press at Mazzarino.<sup>38</sup> These works

walls which, as the documents show, were made and used for the defence of the city.' Gringeri Pantano (1997): 104.

35 Mukerji (1997): 27.

36 Interestingly, Angelo Italia, designer of Avola, worked on commissions for Carlo Maria Carafa during the 1680s, including the *chiesa madre* and Jesuit College in Mazzarino, the town where Carlo Maria often resided. Italia visited Mazzarino, in 1679, 1685, 1688, and 1692. However, he was not chosen for the rebuilding of Grammichele. ARSI, vol. 35, ff. 81 and 92. See also Menichella, (2002): 54–55, and Dufour and Raymond (1987): 14. On the Jesuit College in Mazzarino, see Amico (1757), vol. 2: 69.

37 On the drawing of the ground plan, see the quotation from Centorbi (1694) in Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 14.

38 These are *Istruzione cristiana per i principi e regnanti cavata dalla scrittura Sacra...*, (1687), *L'Idiota volgarizzato* (1688), *Hebdomada mariana sive meditationes et preces ad beatissimam semper virginem Mariam* (1688), *Il sistema sphaerae solaris* (1688), *Exemplar horologium solarium*

give instruction in religion, politics, meridians, and planetary movements. *L'Idiota volgarizzato* (Mazzarino, 1688), *Hebdomada mariana sive meditationes* (Mazzarino, 1688), and *Il camino sicuro del cielo* (Mazzarino, 1689) are concerned most directly with prayer and the religious life.<sup>39</sup> *Istruzione cristiana per i principi e regnanti cavata dalla scrittura Sacra* (Mazzarino, 1687), *L'ambasciatore politico cristiano* (Mazzarino, 1690), and *Scrutinio politico contro la falsa ragione di Stato di N. Machiavelli* (Mazzarino, 1692) discuss politics and statecraft. *Il sistema sphaerae solaris* (Mazzarino, 1688) and *Exemplar horologium solarium civilium* (Mazzarino, 1689) deal with sundials and planetary astronomy.

Earlier scholarship usually presents Carlo Maria Carafa as a ruler pursuing disinterested scientific knowledge. This scholarship conflates Grammichele's hexagonal layout and Carlo Maria Carafa's interest in such areas as meridians into a vision of a patron following putatively disinterested scientific research.<sup>40</sup> Carlo Maria's books such as *Il sistema sphaerae solaris* and *Exemplar horologium solarium civilium* do describe planets and meridians, but the centrality of God in Carlo Maria's writing, and his framing of the relationship between the prince and his subjects, undermine assumptions of secularism and disinterested knowledge.

On the relationship between religion and science, Carlo Maria argues in *Istruzione cristiana* that theology is the prime area of instruction for any prince. Any study of science will always be less important:

Theology has the prime position amongst all the sciences, by having as its object the supreme God, of this must the prince be instructed, in order to know the giver of every good, to admire, and to imitate with the reading of

*civilium* (1689), *Il camino sicuro del cielo...* (1689), *L'ambasciatore politico cristiano...* (1690), *Scrutinio politico contro la falsa ragion di Stato di N. Machiavelli* (1692), and *Opere Politiche Cristiane* (1692), a three-volume compendium of the earlier *Istruzione cristiana*, *L'ambasciatore politico cristiano* and *Scrutinio politico*.

39 *L'Idiota Volgarizzato* is a translation of a manuscript of 1381 by Reverend D.R. Giordani, a French Augustinian canon and abbot of Biturix, although Carlo Maria records in the page after the index that his Italian version is via the 1630 Latin publication by the Jesuit Padre Teofilo Rainaudo. In order to show humility, the writer calls himself 'Idiot'.

40 Maria Giuffrè writes: 'a contemporary source tells us that Carlo Maria Carafa Branciforte, Prince of Butera "excelled in all the arts and sciences, and was admired amongst his equals, and revered throughout Italy".' Unfortunately, she does not give the source of this quotation. On Grammichele, she writes: 'it proclaims the vision of its learned designer, a man of letters and a writer, who founded a printing works at Mazzarino'. Giuffrè (2007): 28. See also Di Resa (1997): 328 and Boscarino (1997): 87. Unlike other scholars of the Val di Noto rebuilding, Dufour, Huet and Raymond note the problem with associating Carlo Maria Carafa too strongly with secular science or utopian ideas. Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 17–18.

the sacred scripture the great and infinite virtue, work, applications and rules that are required in order to govern well, and in a Christian way.<sup>41</sup>

On almost every page of the first volume of *Istruzione cristiana*, there are long quotations from Old Testament prophets and kings such as Samuel, Saul, David, Ezekiel, and Solomon.<sup>42</sup> Religious conviction and submission to scripture come first. There is no Enlightenment-inspired forming of conclusions based on scientific demonstration.

Carlo Maria goes on to recommend that the prince should always keep death in mind. These arguments do not show a spirit of secularisation or some kind of emergence from fear of God into an age ruled by mathematics and science:

Let the sepulchre be your bedroom, O princes, and the skull your mirror, because in these you will understand the true science of ruling yourselves and ruling the people, the politics of preserving states, the way to administer justice, the record of how you should be, and the thought of how you should live. Adam, the first prince of the world, would lose kingship of the universe because he believed in the *nequaquam moriemini*, that he would never die, and the sepulchre, reminding you that you are mortal, will fix on your shoulders the funereal purple.<sup>43</sup>

Carlo Maria Carafa's works promote an ordered universe that does not admit variance from divine laws and where Biblical stories of rulers are a guide for princes of his own time. The ruler is superior to his subjects, but the subjects will not obey a ruler who does not obey God.<sup>44</sup> Carlo Maria argues that it is against nature if the people command. For the prince to obey the people is as monstrous and unnatural as if the foot carried out

41 Carafa (1687): 23.

42 The many examples of Old Testament quotations include, just in the first pages, Deuteronomy 17 on page 2, Nathan speaking to David on page 3, a quotation from Psalm 26 on page 4, the fate of King Sedecia who didn't listen to prophets on page 5, and Ezekiel, 38 on page 7. Carafa (1687).

43 Carafa (1687): 8.

44 'The first thing you must do, O princes, is to have always the fear of God in front of your eyes, to rule and govern the subjects well, having to remember that if you are superior to the populace, you are subject to God; the people will not obey you if you do not obey God. Besides, you will be inferior to every most vile plebeian, if you do not declare yourselves subject to the supreme monarch.' Carlo Maria also writes: 'The prince must learn from this, that neither the size of states nor the amount of riches, nor the multitude of vassals, nor the glory of victories, nor the magnificence of triumphs can render him venerable, if he does not fear God.' Carafa (1687): 2 and 3.

the function of the head, and the head the function of the foot.<sup>45</sup> In this assertion of hierarchy and the divine right of princes, the people—referred to as *popolaccio*, a word with a pejorative connotation—are always inclined to the worst. They are cast as unruly children. They are less sophisticated than the prince. Their tendency to evil means they need the prince's rule in order to prevent 'monstrosities'.

Carlo Maria Carafa's assertions of the primacy of hierarchical order underpins his interest in the science of meridians and sundials. In his writing, the sun symbolises rulers, around which the subjects revolve like planets, illuminated by the ruler's light.<sup>46</sup> The sun moves in predetermined lines across the sky. The prince must follow the divine order as the sun and planets do. The curse of a disordered people is God's revenge when a prince does not follow the divine regulations, which are also manifest in the sundial's regularity:

As a sign that a prince lives rightly, he [God] shows us a clock. A prince could not with a less expressive means think of life than with a sundial; because if that which is regulated by the movement of the sun regulates the actions of mortals, these, if they are not aware of the prime and supreme rule of operating correctly, which is God, will never be able to rule well, nor govern the actions of their subjects.<sup>47</sup>

The connection between this interest in meridians and sundials and Carlo Maria's design for his new town of Grammichele is a suggestive one. Salvatore Scacciantè posits a connection between the ground plan, solar movements, and clocks. He reads the town as a metaphorical clock or sundial. The main streets radiate from the central piazza like the sun's rays. The raised sword of the statue, possibly of Saint Michael, that

45 'He must, with the authority given to him by God, make the people operate according to his will, and not operate according to the will of the people, perverting the order of governments, and destroying the rules of good politics, which for the governance of states is necessary. Besides, as in the physical body of a man it would be an insupportable monstrosity if the foot wanted to carry out the office of the head, and the head the functions of the foot, so a worse monstrosity it would be if, in the mystic body of the state, the small people commanded, and the king obeyed. From such monstrosities nothing could be born except dangerous inconveniences to the public, and inevitable ruin to states; it being so true that it is a feature of the rabble to always incline to the worst.' Carafa (1687): 15.

46 'He [God] proposes to you your symbol, and according to your merit he delineates you with the rays of the sun in the form of light.' Carafa (1692): 1.

47 Carafa (1687): 4 and 5.

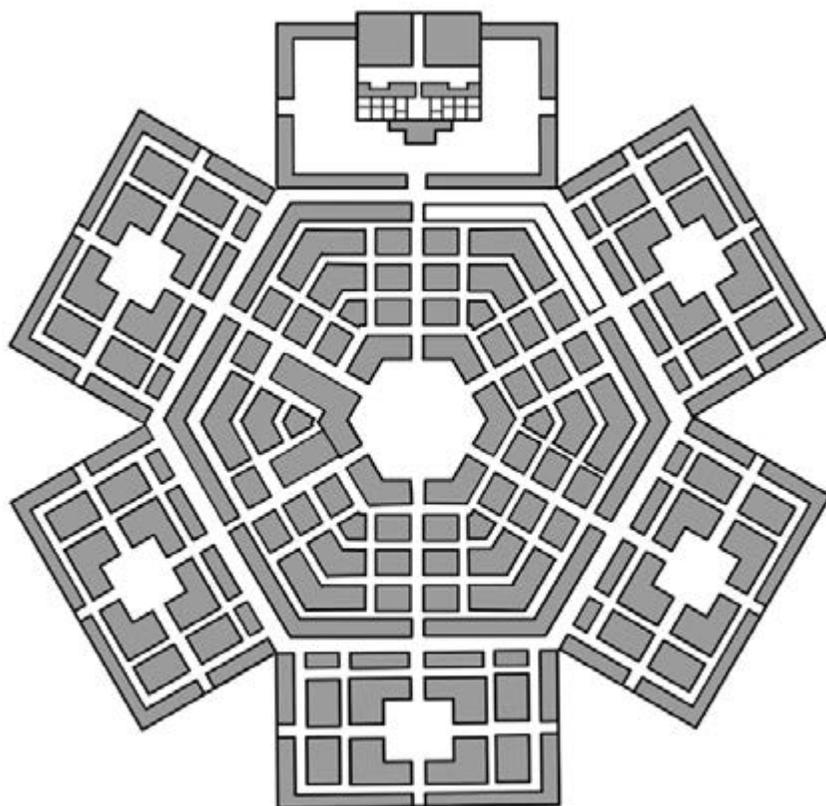


Fig. 2.4. Plan of Grammichele. Layout Attributed to Carlo Maria Carafa and the architect Michele da Ferla, 1693. Image by John Nixon.

once occupied the square functioned as a sundial.<sup>48</sup> The rectangle for the prince's palace is in the southwest, more or less in the position of the sun at midday.

In this hypothesis, Grammichele's central hexagon resembles a clock. The plan that Michele da Ferla copied onto the slate from Carlo Carafa's drawing, now in the Palazzo Comunale in Grammichele, is oriented with the palace at the top of the clock, at midday (Fig. 2.4). The palace is the first and last rectangle in a clockwise rotation around the hexagons. Each corner of the hexagon plus the points where a road bisects each edge of the hexagon add up to twelve and can be read like the twelve hours of a clock.

48 Scacciante hypothesises that the statue was of Saint Michael. Scacciante (2012): 61.

Multiples of six, particularly the numbers 12 and 60, occur frequently when counting the streets and *isolati* of Grammichele.<sup>49</sup> The hexagonal perimeter does not cause this, as a perimeter does not necessarily determine the number of streets or *isolati* within it. There are 12 separate areas in Grammichele: the six *sestieri* within the central hexagon and the six outer rectangles. Each of the central *sestieri* has ten *isolati*, making a total of 60 *isolati* for the entire central hexagon. Each of the five outer rectangles, discounting the one for the palace, contains 12 *isolati*. This makes a total of 60 *isolati* for the outer rectangles. In the entire plan, there are 120 *isolati* plus the rectangle for the prince's palace.

Scacciante's interesting and important observations do not investigate geometry and mathematics further. However, like the descriptions of the sun in Carlo Maria's writings on meridians, the reading of Grammichele as a sundial relates to the operation of divine law through geometry. It is noteworthy in this model that God works directly through mathematical laws rather than through Church liturgy. Geometry's dominance can also be seen in the location of Grammichele's principal church. For all of Carlo Maria Carafa's emphasis on religion, the *chiesa madre* is displaced to one of the sides of the hexagonal central piazza. It is not in the symbolic centre of Grammichele. Neither is the prince's palace, which is outside the hexagon, far from the centre.<sup>50</sup> Ecclesiastic and aristocratic power seem to defer to the open geometric space of the hexagonal central piazza.

The central piazze of both Avola and Grammichele are very large spaces. They are excessively big in relation to the surrounding streets—or to any other spaces in the town. In place of the smaller, less regular areas of the pre-earthquake street layouts, the inhabitants of Avola and Grammichele encountered these new, clearly delineated spaces at the centre of their town. The piazze are monuments to geometry. In both sites, the square becomes part of the purportedly 'empty space' that architecture is believed to shape and order. In Grammichele, the large hexagonal centre mirrors the hexagonal outline. Centre and periphery follow the same order, the same geometrical shape. Grammichele's overt artificiality manifests Carlo Maria Carafa's concern for technical power and control of geometry. The environment is reformed in line with his ideas on geometry as the essential tool for princes to control the population.

49 Scacciante (2012): 17. Scacciante references Giuseppe Palermo's monograph on Grammichele *La città perfetta* (Grammichele, 2011).

50 Like many medieval citadels, which were at the edge of the town, the palace may be on the town's edge to make it more difficult to surround—and easier to escape from—in the event of a popular uprising.

The last word should go to Carlo Maria's treatise on governance, where he emphasises geometry as the tool for rulers:

In the end, mathematics is the proper science for the prince, as implicit within it is the way to fortify, to defend and to capture fortresses. It is through, and with, numbers and space that one organises an army, has knowledge of nature and the inclinations of the people, the time to carry out or leave a project, [knows] the distances, heights and boundaries of the kingdom, and of places, and the true method to render the king well-instructed in those things pertaining to warfare.<sup>51</sup>

In this vision, geometry is proper to the prince because it makes a ruler 'well-instructed in those things pertaining to warfare'. Princes can defend and destroy fortresses, quantify and delineate the territory that they control, and mark its borders. Mathematics and geometry let the ruler 'know the inclinations of the people'. Carlo Maria Carafa does not make clear how this happens, but geometry is not neutral—it produces outcomes necessary for the ruler's power.

### Order and Abundance: Eighteenth-Century Representations of the Towns

The landowners of Avola and Grammichele were preoccupied with maintaining both the productivity and the population level of their fiefs. A prosperous territory gave economic benefits and also legitimised the rulers, signalling that their rule brought abundance to the inhabitants.<sup>52</sup> In the decade before the earthquake, Carlo Maria Carafa stressed the centrality of abundant food supply and agricultural labour in his *Istruzione cristiana per i principi e regnanti cavata dalla scrittura sacra* (*Christian Education for Princes and*

51 Carafa (1689): 24.

52 See Chandra Mukerji on the connection between productive land and moral legitimacy for seventeenth-century rulers: 'Land and its proper management for the restoration of Eden (in Christian humanist terms for both Protestants and Catholics) provided a conceptual rationale for creating a more perfect built environment and stimulated the search for techniques of land management and improvement that served as the practical bases for the mission. The result was cultural justification for engineering the environment and using natural resources more systematically for social and political effect. Doing this well was considered a mark of good leadership, and so territorial management became both a tool and measure of political legitimacy for the modern state.' Mukerji (2002): 1–2.

*Rulers derived from the Holy Scripture*, Mazzarino, 1687), a work advising princes on good governance:

Abundance is maintained by making sure that the lands are worked, and if there is a shortage of people, make them come from elsewhere, giving them exemptions and economic freedoms, by keeping the granaries always full, and not relaxing when there are good harvests, and not imposing many taxes on consumable goods.<sup>53</sup>

Carlo Maria emphasises the prince's need for a plentiful supply of workers. Agricultural workers had little political power, but they did have freedom of movement. Land was an aristocrat's capital, but land was useless without the workers who knew how to create and maintain the wheat fields, orchards, vineyards, and other sources of revenue. If taxes on food and other products were too high, people might move elsewhere.

In contrast to modern scholarship on Avola and Grammichele, most eighteenth-century descriptions of the towns do not view them in terms of ground plans and geometry.<sup>54</sup> The words 'hexagon' or 'hexagonal' rarely appear. The writers sometimes refer to the street layouts as beautiful or harmonious, but they do not describe the towns as if seen from above. Instead, their descriptions are eulogies to the barons' good governance and enlightened planning. They stress the orderliness of the towns and the prosperity of their surrounding land.

Unusually for visitors to Sicily, at the end of the 1770s the French traveller Jean Houel visited Grammichele and Occhiolà, the ruined site of the pre-earthquake town that was relocated and renamed Grammichele. He made no reference to Grammichele's hexagonal plan. Most of his description focused on the antiquities he found at Occhiolà, but he mentioned the beauty of Grammichele's location, the industriousness of its workers, and the scarcity of beggars.<sup>55</sup> He described the town as well-sited, prosperous,

53 Carafa (1687): 80.

54 More travellers wrote accounts of Avola than of Grammichele. Avola was near Syracuse, one of the principal sites in Sicily for antiquities, whereas Grammichele was further inland and not near places that eighteenth-century travellers usually visited. The eighteenth-century accounts include Amico (1757), Von Riedesel (1771), Houel (1785), Vivant Denon (1788).

55 'It was levelled from top to bottom in 1693 by an earthquake. The lord of this land prohibited rebuilding in the same location; he had the new town placed on a beautiful plain to the south, which is only a *mille* long and adorned with beautiful fountains. He gave it the name Grammichele [...] they are very hardworking in this town, men, women and children all work in the countryside. One also finds few beggars'. Houel (1785), vol. 2: 57.

and orderly. All of the population spent its time working. The implication is that their orderliness and disciplined labour brought them economic benefits.

In a description of his visit to Avola in 1767, the Prussian diplomat and antiquarian Joseph Von Riedesel reported that Avola is 'singularly made', 'on a high altitude but very gracious, the town's streets have the same regularity in a smaller way as those of Turin in the larger'.<sup>56</sup> He likened Avola to a smaller Turin, a city that underwent a major transformation in the seventeenth century. Turin was rebuilt on a regular grid plan, with a new citadel and elaborate fortifications.<sup>57</sup> By comparing Avola to Turin, Von Riedesel made Avola a provincial emanation of the larger and earlier Turin. The implication is that both towns partake of a similar modernity and putative rational planning. Jean Houel, who visited a decade or so after Von Riedesel, related how the citizens rebuilt Avola closer to the sea, where they created a well-sited and regularly built town.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to traveller's accounts, an undated report from the office of the Spanish king to the Sicilian viceroy entitled *Relatione di quanto si è operato nella nuova città di Avola dal giorno del terremoto n gennaio 1693 a questa parte*, probably written in 1693 or 1694, mentions the beauty of Avola's new site and the reports of visitors from nearby towns coming to see the new city taking shape.<sup>59</sup> The writer does not elaborate on why Avola

56 Von Riedesel (1821 Italian translation): 53. 'It is built on a very high plain, but very beautiful, its streets have the same regularity on a small scale as Turin has on a large scale.'

57 Martha Pollak analyses Turin's seventeenth-century transformation. She quotes the praise of the eighteenth-century travellers Charles de Brosses, Thomas Nugent, Charles-Nicholas Cochin, and Joseph Jérôme de La Lande for Turin's straight streets and symmetrical layouts. Charles de Brosse, *Lettres historiques et critiques sur l'Italie* (Paris, 1739), vol. 3: 382–383, Thomas Nugent, *The Grand Tour: or a Journey through the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and France* (London, 1778), vol. 3: 170, 174, Charles-Nicholas Cochin, *Voyage d'Italie* (Paris, 1758), vol. 1: 30, Joseph Jérôme de La Lande, *Voyage en Italie fait dans les années 1765 et 1766* (Paris, 1769), vol. 1: 50. Quoted in Pollak (1991): 1–2.

58 'The inhabitants have transferred to a plain at the foot of this mountain a mile from the sea, where they have a much more temperate climate and a town which is well situated and built regularly'. Houel (1785), vol. 3: 120–121.

59 'And because the site of the said city is in the middle of the road named by the County of Modica, a continuous route between a good part of the Val di Noto towns. Your excellency cannot imagine the admiration that the beautiful site brings to all of the people who pass, and there are many gentlemen from the nearby towns who have come there to enjoy the beautiful vista that is a marvel to all and is the envy of the surrounding lands and cities.' Letter from the office of the king of Spain to the Sicilian viceroy. ASNAP. Archivio Pignatelli, Scaffo IV, gruppo II, vol. 56 (4049) ff. 119–200. Undated but probably 1693 or 1694. The full text is reproduced in Gringeri Pantano (1996): 237–238.

is the envy of the surrounding towns, but the reference to the site's beauty suggests that the location is beautiful, not the street plan. The new city is on a 'bellissima amena e molto larga pianura' (very beautiful, pleasant and wide plain) that can be traversed 30 to 40 *miglie* in a carriage. In addition, the report mentions the defensive walls and ditches built around the new site, and the rocky beach that makes it difficult for 'corsali' (pirates) to disembark.<sup>60</sup> As with most other accounts, there is no mention of the hexagon. Eighteenth-century writers emphasised the well-chosen sites that produced order and prosperity.<sup>61</sup>

Vito Amico's account differs from others by describing Avola and Grammichele's street layouts in geometrical terms. In the section on Avola, he includes Giuseppe Guttadauro's ground plan (Fig. 2.1). Avola is the only small town whose plan is included in the book, implying Amico's interest in its geometrical layout. He reports:

Avola shows itself a hexagonal figure, with a very large square piazza in the centre and four smaller ones in the middle of the southern and northern sides and the eastern and western angles, where the four largest streets finish in the central square. Two streets also lead from each side and render the site of the city extremely elegant and comfortable for the inhabitants, because being turned towards the solstices, they are sheltered by the shadows of the buildings from the heat, and are less susceptible to cold and to winds. At the corners and the sides of the hexagon there are forts, but still unfinished, to which are attached four principal gates, which correspond to the four cardinal points.<sup>62</sup>

Guttadauro's engraving shows Avola's street layout from directly above but renders the buildings in bird's-eye view (Fig. 2.1). On the left of the image,

60 ASNAP. Archivio Pignatelli, Scaffo IV, gruppo II, vol. 56 (4049) ff. 119–200.

61 Along with orderliness, visitors cited the towns' agricultural products and the commercial benefits this brings. Dominique Vivant Denon, who visited Avola in 1778, writes: 'This city, which stood formerly on a hill, boasted of being the Hybla Major, so celebrated for its honey; but so many towns lay claim to the ancient title of Hybla, or there were really so many cities of that name, that it is impossible to decide anything on the subject. I have myself met with three; this we are speaking of, Hybla Megara near Melilli, and Paternò in the vicinity of Aetna. Avola having been destroyed by the earthquake of 1693, the inhabitants rebuilt it more commodiously in the plain, in a fruitful territory, luxuriant in corn and fruits, and principally in almonds, a considerable article of commerce. The houses still prove, by being extremely low, the dread entertained of earthquakes; the streets are wide and regular'. Vivant Denon (1789): 368–369.

62 Amico (1855 edition), vol. 1: 115.

the town's coat of arms and a scroll giving the engraving's author and date appear. To the right, there is a numbered key to the religious buildings and main *piazze*. Fields surround the town, and in the top right there are the orchards of the Capuchin monastery (No. 20 on the map) and a building for sugar production (No. 21).

The image emphasises the perimeter. The edge of the fortifications clearly separates the town from the surrounding countryside. Like the transfer of geometric forms to the earth shown in Giovan Biagio Amico's *L'architetto pratico* and the engraving of Grammichele discussed earlier, the town appears almost to have landed in the countryside. Defiant of the surrounding topography, it is an architectural design overtly imposed on the landscape. As on an architect's plan, the space the town occupies can be measured with the scale at the bottom left of the image. Land can be parcelled, divided, and allocated to owners. The image also emphasises completeness. However, Amico reports that the fortifications of the town were still incomplete, although Guttadauro shows them as finished, with their bastions at each point of the hexagonal perimeter.<sup>63</sup>

Amico's entry on Grammichele includes a similar description in geometric terms. He refers to the town as a 'novello, elegantissimo paese' (a novel and very elegant town), and describes how the patron Carlo Maria Carafa ordered the town's layout:

He ordered the formation of a hexagonal piazza from each side of which extend streets that finish in six smaller *piazze* composed of right angles. The buildings and the four intermediate streets that divide the town correspond to the hexagon, but where the smaller squares begin, they form parallelograms.<sup>64</sup>

Amico presents Grammichele in the language of geometry. There are hexagons, parallelograms, and right angles. From the hexagon of the central *piazza*, streets extend out to finish in six rectangular *piazze*. The buildings and the streets 'correspond to the hexagon'. The hexagons and the streets fix, organise, and divide up the town. In Grammichele, Carlo Maria 'ordered the formation of a hexagonal *piazza*'. In this statement, geometrical order and political order operate together. From the orders of the ruler, an ordered and orderly town is apparently created.

63 Ibid. Quoted above.

64 Amico (1885 edition), vol. 1: 543.

## Inequality Inside the Hexagons: Urbanism and Social Differences in Avola and Grammichele

A town plan such as Guttadauro's plan of Avola shows measurements and proportions but will not show distinctions in the urban environment such as public and private areas, and desirable and less desirable locations. Viewed from above as street plans, Avola and Grammichele appear as uniform entities, but from the beginning of the rebuilding, distinctions of wealth and status operated. An undated report entitled *Relatione di quanto si è operato nella nuova città di Avola dal giorno del terremoto n gennaio 1693 a questa parte* mentions the temporary wooden cabins first provided for the population, but their cost varied, from 5 *onze* for the poorest citizens to 50 *onze* for the richer.<sup>65</sup>

Clear economic distinctions continued in Avola into the eighteenth century. A 1737 document giving guidelines for payments to the town's sugar workers reveals income differences.<sup>66</sup> The workers are divided into *operai giornalieri*, hired on a daily basis, and *salarati*, who generally receive their salary annually. The pay could vary for day workers who did the same job. For example, the daily pay for *piantinari* (planters) was between 8 and 15 *tari* depending on age and the amount they planted. This contrasts with *acqualori*, who received the equivalent of 50 *tari*, or *asinari*, who received 48 *tari*.<sup>67</sup>

There are comparable demarcations of status in Grammichele. The original eighteenth-century town plan included a parallelogram marked for the prince's palace at the top.<sup>68</sup> This parallelogram is the prince's private space. Prince Carlo Maria Carafa controlled all of Grammichele's land, but one section was marked in a different way. Like Avola, Grammichele appears homogeneous when treated as a ground plan, but the area for the palace

65 'During all of this, all of the citizens moved to the said new site to build their wooden cabins, which up to now reach the number of 2,000; they are of 50, 30, 20 *onze*, and the least of the poor 5 *onze* of expenditure. Therefore, your excellency can appreciate the great expenditure made in setting up these cabins'. Undated document, ASNAP Scaffo IV, Avola, gruppo II, vol. 56 (4049) ff. 119–200. Reproduced in Gringeri Pantano (1997): 237–238.

66 ASNAP, Scaffo IV, Avola, gruppo I, vol. 47 (3954) ff. 328r–331r. Reproduced in Gringeri Pantano (1997): 256–257. Francesca Gringeri Pantano lists many of the job titles relating to Avola's sugar plantations. It is difficult to identify what some of these posts are; 'The particular nomenclature of the trades and the utensils does not always allow their meaning to be understood.' Gringeri Pantano (1997): 46. Pages 43–56 recount the history of sugar in Avola.

67 20 *grani* made 1 *tari*. Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 107–108 and Luminati (1988): viii.

68 The palace area is actually in the southwest of the town. It is not known if the palace and its compound were ever built.

takes on a different legal and social identity to other parts of the town such as the public spaces of the piazza or the streets.

The palace occupies a literally and symbolically superior position at the top of the picture. With the exception of the palace rectangle and the irregular *isolato* of the *Chiesa Madre* directly to the west of the main square in Figure 2.4, the rest of the town appears a homogeneous entity. The buildings and streets endlessly mirror each other. Like a beehive, the inhabitants come and go from their uniform cells, their labour ordered by the rule of the sovereign.

Grammichele's hierarchical social divisions operated in the allocation of rebuilding plots.<sup>69</sup> The religious organisations chose their plots first, then the aristocrats, and finally the rest of the population. The 1714 *rivelo*, or tax assessment, shows that the wealthier citizens lived in the two adjacent *sestieri* of L'Angelo Custode and San Rocco, where the houses were larger and the population density lower.<sup>70</sup> The *rivelo* also shows 80% of the population as smallholders owning a house and land measuring below 1.5 *tumuli*. Ten per cent of the people possessed neither a house nor land. Five per cent were artisans possessing a shop and tools necessary for their work, and three per cent owned property worth 100 *onze* or more. This was a large sum considering that most houses were valued between 4 *onze* 1 *tari* and 8 *onze* 2 *tari*. The members of this group were accountants, doctors, or *gabelloti* who bought the rights to income from certain taxes or land.<sup>71</sup>

Investigating the towns only as ground plans therefore reads them as unchanging geometric diagrams. The planning of these geometric layouts conceives the city as more like a clockwork machine than an organism. In its regularity and consistency, the seemingly permanent forms of the grid plan imply that the layout would remain stable and unchanging. The straight lines and regular, predictable streets present an order close to the formations of military regiments. Like armies marching or soldiers on parade ground drills, the new towns' *isolati* are massed in uniform alignments along the same axis. The fixity of the town's plan means that any small change upsets the prince's order. To vary from it is to disregard or subvert both the geometric and the political order. It means going against not only

69 Pagnano (1998): 4.

70 Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 101–103.

71 Dufour, Huet, and Raymond, in their analysis of the *rivelo*, emphasise social homogeneity: 'In summary, Grammichele presents itself as a town with a very homogenous population, where there appear only a few rich people who accumulate economic and cultural wealth, and power.' Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 101–102, 106.

the apparently natural and logical laws of geometry but also the hierarchy of social relations.

A different aspect to the two towns can be seen inside the *isolati*. The built environment of the two towns is not as regular as the ground plans and images discussed so far. When following the streets along the main grid, there is predictability in terms of orientation. One can see that the blocks repeat into the distance, and there are parallel and transversal streets. The buildings around the outer sides of the blocks create a form of regular wall, but within the blocks the grid system breaks down. In many towns, there are irregular spaces and courtyards inside the blocks. The streets change direction or come to dead ends.

The different layouts within the *isolati* show that a large amount of the surface of Avola—as well as Grammichele and other Val di Noto towns—falls outside the architects' grid plan. The irregular courtyards and the houses of the inhabitants make up much more of the surface area of the towns than the geometrically planned main streets and squares. The area within the *isolati* was invisible to the architects, however. How the houses were built inside the blocks was not considered in the conception of the town plan. Neither is the architecture inside the blocks normally shown in depictions of the Val di Noto towns.

In the case of Avola, Dufour and Raymond note that the design of the town did not consider the likely plot size of the average house. The outlines of the *isolati* were mapped out, but the way that buildings were to be arranged within them was left unplanned. This led to the subdivision of the *isolati* into housing plots of irregular size and shape. The town plan did not allow for such things as light to permeate all of the plots. Neither did it include areas where the inhabitants could carry out activities such as drying clothes. This meant that when they built their houses within the *isolati*, the townspeople created internal courtyards. The inhabitants' creation of a different architecture within—and in many ways contrary to—the planned grid also took place in the other Val di Noto towns.

These layouts only work as street plans and viewing them gives no sense of the towns' architecture or of physically moving through these environments. Once inside the towns, most of the streets are quite narrow, and even though there are few buildings of more than three storeys, their height compared to the relative narrowness of the streets creates a labyrinthine feel, with blind corners and narrow pavements. The streets do not give the same sense of logic and harmony as the plans, and it is impossible to get a sense of the hexagon from inside the streets. In Grammichele, the central hexagonal piazza feels like an overly large, barren area. Car use in the twentieth century necessitated the addition of narrow pavements, further

destroying any sense of communal space. The narrow, grid-like streets of mainly nineteenth and early twentieth-century buildings, where balconies are the only open space, make the street-level experience of Avola and Grammichele similar to very many other small towns throughout Sicily.

## Conclusion

Avola and Grammichele are not exercises in putatively rational, Enlightenment-inspired planning where geometry is a disinterested, universal set of axioms. This chapter has argued that the geometrically planned towns were mechanisms of control and the maintenance of aristocratic power. They reasserted the landowner's control of the territory after the earthquake. The overtly artificial character of their street layouts and hexagonal perimeters are like brands on the landscape.

Territorial transformation is a tool and a measure of the landowners' putative superiority. The hexagonal towns allowed Nicolò Pignatelli and Carlo Maria Carafa to use ideal geometry to justify dominance through putative superior knowledge emanating from higher laws. Many of the architectural treatises of the time, and the political writing of Carlo Maria Carafa, present geometric laws as natural and divine. Analysing the towns and their patrons in terms of power relations and territoriality shows how geometry and architecture are not disembodied. In Avola and Grammichele, the seemingly ideal or disinterested geometrical forms operated within a system of absolutism and coercion.

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### 3. The Palaces of Noto: Ornament, Order, and Opportunism

**Abstract:** The fortified hill town of Noto was rebuilt after the 1693 earthquake on a new flat site with streets lined with classicising facades whose understated ornament exudes moderation and harmony. However, this elegant new town was the result of bitter discord and opportunism as aristocratic factions secured sites for their palaces. The chapter focuses first on Noto's main square, where the leading aristocrats repositioned themselves with new palaces and tried to marginalise the locations of rivals. Then it discusses the palace facades as part of an aristocratic family's urban presence, in particular the Palazzo Nicolaci, built by a merchant family whose palace, with its defiant flowering ornament and enigmatic sculpture, challenges the understated facades of the town's older aristocracy.

**Keywords:** rebuilding of Noto, eighteenth-century palaces, architectural facades, architectural ornament, European urbanism, Southern Italy.

#### 'An Archipelago of Different Powers': Contested Power Relations in the Rebuilding of Noto

Noto is often described as the most beautiful of the UNESCO-listed towns of the Val di Noto in Sicily. Designed by Angelo Italia, architect of the hexagonal town of nearby Avola, its principal streets are lined with elegant palace and church facades of honey-coloured stone whose delicate and understated ornament exudes moderation and harmony.<sup>1</sup> Cesare Brandi describes Noto as 'a garden of stone' with a completely planned urbanism. John Ide, visiting in the

<sup>1</sup> Italia created the design for the new Noto within two years of the earthquake, although his original design has never been found. Giuseppe Asmundo, the official who oversaw the rebuilding of Noto, cites Angelo Italia as Noto's architect in his 1698 letter to the viceroy. The letter mainly covers the two years and two months that Asmundo lived in Noto. He reports: 'Four deputies were elected, noble and clerical, for the construction of the town according to



1950s, entitled his description *Noto, the Perfect Baroque City*. Noto is 'a vision of restrained and harmonious Baroque architecture'. Ide compares the town to the aristocratic residences of Würzburg and Nymphenburg, locating Noto within a network of refined culture and quoting a description of the town as 'one of the finest achievements of the age which produced Mozart and Tiepolo'.<sup>2</sup> Studies by Tobriner and Canale describe Noto in terms of scenography, an eighteenth-century architectural programme that places buildings and streets in relation to each other so that a town is experienced as a series of views.<sup>3</sup>

However, the new Noto emerged from a process of discord and opportunism as aristocratic factions secured sites for their new palaces. The energy spent on acquiring these sites shows how central the palace was for aristocratic status and how important the palace's location was in a town with many rival families at a time of great change and crisis caused by the earthquake. Although Noto was a *demaniale* or government-controlled town rather than a *baroniale* town that was the fiefdom of a single aristocrat, the real decisions in Noto were made by the *giurati* or town councillors, who were always from the town's many local aristocratic families. The seemingly harmonious new town is therefore the result of contest, negotiation, and opportunism. Stephen Tobriner's important work on Noto also shows how the new town was a result of conflict and contest. One of this chapter's aims is to discuss how this aristocratic competition continued to play out in the location and decoration of Noto's palaces.

Like Avola and Grammichele, old Noto was a hill town, built on a site that allowed natural defence and fresh air. Old Noto was one of the larger towns of the Val di Noto and lost around a quarter of its population of 12,000 in the earthquake.<sup>4</sup> The town was enclosed within large defensive

the design by Brother Angelo Italia, Jesuit and engineer.' Archivio di Stato di Palermo (ASP), Real Segreteria, Incartamenti 2462, 28 August 1698, f. 4.

2 Brandi (1979): 79. Ide (1958): 11. The quotation from Douglas Sladen on the age of Mozart and Tiepolo is in Ide (1958): 15. This quotation is also cited in Tobriner (1982): 11. André Chastel compares Noto to Turin, Lisbon, and Rennes. Chastel in Fianchino, ed. (1979): 17–28. Stephen Tobriner makes comparisons with towns including Carouge, Lisbon, Turin, and Nancy and the designs of Cataneo and Scamozzi. Tobriner (1982): 12–13, 63–64, and 102–108.

3 '[t]he balanced piazzas and symmetrical positioning of churches created the order into which the excitement of Baroque scenographic effects could be injected'. Tobriner (1982): 203. Cleofò Canale's monograph on Noto includes maps that highlight the town's geometric urbanism and show regular geometrical relationships between the principal buildings. Canale (1976), Chastel (1979): 22.

4 Tobriner (1982): 207. The earthquake killed one in four of Noto's population. See Giuseppe Asmundo's report in ASP, Real Segreteria, Incartamenti 2468, 28 August 1698, f. 8. See also Bonaiuto (1693): 10, Madonna and Trigilia, eds. (1992): 169, Tobriner (1982): 207. The earliest history is from August 1712 by Padre Filippo Tortora. The original manuscript's location is unknown. Francesco Balsamo used a nineteenth-century copy for his edition, see Balsamo (1972). Part of Balsamo's edition is in Di Blasi (1981): 83, and Dufour and Raymond (1990): 122–123. See also

walls. An eighteenth-century engraving that is believed to be a copy of a lost pre-earthquake image shows the town with its irregular outline on its hilltop site (Fig. 3.2). From the castle in the western part of the town, a main street snakes along the ridge to a central square. Space for building is constrained by the shape of the hilltop site and the town walls.

Scholars have narrated the rebuilding's complex chronology, but I will summarise the main points here.<sup>5</sup> Correspondence between government officials in Palermo and various actors in Noto's rebuilding shows that government representatives often responded to events initiated by one of the conflicting groups in Noto. The frequent changes in rulings on where the town should be rebuilt meant that the viceroy and his officials were unable to impose their orders. After ten years of conflict over where to rebuild, the officials often seemed to refuse to overturn—and therefore in effect sanctioned—what was already happening in the town.

The central protagonists in the early phase of the rebuilding are Baron Giuseppe Asmundo, a High Court judge in Palermo with a strong record of state service who was appointed to oversee Noto's rebuilding; Baron Antonino Impellizzeri, a local noble who always opposed any move to a new site; and a group of local aristocrats led by members of the Landolina family, who saw advantage in a new site. Asmundo was one of the group of officials headed by the Duke of Camastra that arrived in the Val di Noto in February 1693, six weeks after the earthquake.<sup>6</sup> In June 1693, Camastra

Tobriner (1982): 208 n. There are two anonymous histories from later in the eighteenth century. One is an undated history of the 1693 and 1727 earthquakes. Text in Gallo, (1964): 116–126. Original manuscript location unknown. The other is entitled *San Corrado*. Manuscript in the collection of Netinese historian Francesco Genovesi. See also Tobriner (1982): 208 n.

5 The principal narratives for the rebuilding are Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977), Tobriner (1982), Raymond (1983), Dufour and Raymond (1990). For archival sources, Baron Giuseppe Asmundo was the first main protagonist to write an account of the events. ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462, 28 August 1698. The Netinese noble Baron Antonino Impellizzeri wrote his account in October 1698. Archivio di Stato di Noto (ASN), Consigli Civici, vol. 616. 11 October 1698. Text in Gallo, (1969): 191–197, and Dufour and Raymond (1990): 96–98. In May 1699, Bishop Asdrubale Termini and the engineer Giuseppe Formenti wrote a further account. Archivio General de Simancas, S.P. 1234, 24 May 1699 and ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462, 24 May 1699. Text in Gallo, (1968) 40–43, and Dufour and Raymond (1990): 100–106. There is also a letter to the viceroy of 1 September 1699 from Corrado Bellofiore, a Noto priest, requesting financial help to the people and religious institutions of Noto. ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 1708. Text in Gallo (1967): 43–44.

6 Asmundo was a judge in the *Regia Gran Corte*, the highest civil and criminal court in Sicily. See Cancila (2008): 489–490. There is no report on why Camastra left Asmundo in charge of Noto. It could be because Camastra needed to move to other parts of the Val di Noto to oversee the

passed supervision of Noto to Asmundo.<sup>7</sup> Asmundo reports that he stayed in Noto for two and a half years, living in a cabin exposed to the rigours of the seasons and dedicating himself to the project of rebuilding.<sup>8</sup>

To summarise the main conflicts in Noto, four days after the second earthquake on 15 January, the town council voted to rebuild on the existing hilltown site. By the time Camastra's group of officials arrived on 24 February, this had changed, and the majority of the council wanted to rebuild on a new site.<sup>9</sup> The reasons for this change are undocumented. It is possible that by this point, more nobles had seen how they could take advantage of a new, flat site to build larger palaces in a more modern style—or had been persuaded of this by those pushing for a new site. It is also possible that clearing the rubble and rebuilding on the old hilltop site was now realised to be too difficult or expensive, and it would be easier to start anew on a lower site.

The preferred new town location was in an area below the old Noto known as the Pianazzo. The site allowed for a new city on flat land nearer the main coast road, open to breezes, and far enough from the potentially malarial zone of the nearby river Asinaro. The majority of the non-nobles, who were against moving to the Pianazzo in any case, preferred the lower area nearer to the water supply of the Asinaro. Most of their fields were also below the steep escarpment of the Pianazzo, making access to the town more difficult for the people who worked them. The richer inhabitants continued to press for the higher area, and demarcations for this new site were marked out. Some citizens ignored this and began building on the lower area (Fig. 3.3).<sup>10</sup> After further disagreement over where this new site would be, Camastra ordered rebuilding on the Pianazzo.<sup>11</sup>

In the next stage of reversed decisions, more citizens built on the lower area. In June 1693, Baron Asmundo moved the relics of the patron saint Conrad to a building on the lower area.<sup>12</sup> By July, 600 temporary dwellings

rebuilding of all of the towns. It may also be because he didn't have time to become embroiled in Noto's fractious local politics. See Tobriner (1982): 27–28.

7 'Because the Netinese were not unanimous in their endorsement of re-siting on the feudo of the Meti, government authorities had to prod them to leave the old site of Noto Antica. The Duke of Camastra, perhaps foreseeing oncoming complications, wisely left at this point, leaving the deteriorating situation to Judge Giuseppe Asmundo, Commissary General, who implemented the evacuation of the old site'. Tobriner (1982): 43. Tobriner n.1 footnotes Tortora (1891): 36, Gallo (1964): 118, Gallo (1970): 79.

8 ASP, Real Segreteria, Incartamenti 2462, 28 August 1698, f. 4.

9 Dufour, Huet, and Raymond (1977): 13.

10 Tobriner (1982): 43–45.

11 Tobriner (1982): 36–37.

12 Anonymous author (after 1727) in Gallo (1964): 118. Tobriner (1982): 43 and n 209.



Fig. 3.3. Noto extends upwards in layers. The cathedral facade with the escarpment of the upper town behind.

now clustered around this building.<sup>13</sup> It is unclear why Asmundo moved the relics to the lower site. Tobriner hypothesises that because so many people were rebuilding there, Asmundo decided to force the issue and endorse the lower site.<sup>14</sup> This is plausible, as plague had now killed around 3,000 of the 8,000 earthquake survivors. Many inhabitants decided to leave Noto and settle elsewhere. By the end of the summer, the population had dropped to 4,000.<sup>15</sup> The nobles were in danger of losing workers. The population had agreed not to rebuild on the old site, but their hostility to the higher Pianazzo and the outbreak of plague may have persuaded Asmundo and others to make some concessions.

13 Gallo (1964): 68–90. Tobriner (1982): 45. An anonymous historian of Noto reports that the transfer was carried out to mark the permanent abandoning of the old town. A procession carried the relics from the old town to the site of the new. Anonymous author (after 1727) in Gallo (1964): 118.

14 Tobriner (1982): 44. Stefano Piazza believes that Asmundo's decision to halt the procession of the relics on the lower area may be interpreted as a weakness, where Asmundo gave in to the wishes of the majority of the inhabitants, or of his recognition that it was necessary to compromise and follow the majority. Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 166.

15 This figure is from the anonymous author (after 1727) in Gallo (1964): 116–117. On the lack of planning, Tobriner writes: '[s]ite preparation and planning were haphazard at best because Asmundo and Camastra had misjudged the difficulty of laying out a city on the Meti [...] The unhealthiness of the slope and the diseases that were threatening, combined with disastrous planning on the part of Asmundo and Camastra, precipitated an epidemic which killed as many as 3,000 of Noto's citizens, understandably dampening enthusiasm for the new site.' Tobriner (1982): 45.

Asmundo's transfer of the relics seemed to confirm that the new town would be built below the Pianazzo, sealing the matter. Five years after the earthquake, however, disagreement continued. Most of the population had now moved to the new site, but a group led by Baron Antonino Impellizzeri, who had always opposed the new site, continued to press for rebuilding on the site of old Noto. In October 1698, a referendum of all male citizens was called.<sup>16</sup> Of the 757 voters, 484—including the majority of the poorer citizens—wanted to return to the old site. A group of aristocrats managed to block this, and building continued on the new site.<sup>17</sup>

To reach a final decision, in the spring of 1699 the viceroy sent another group of officials led by Asdrubale Termini, the Bishop of Syracuse, and including the engineer Giuseppe Formenti. Termini privately interviewed all 33 Netinese nobles, except two who were absent, plus the heads of the ten main religious institutions on whether to stay on the new site or to return to old Noto.<sup>18</sup> Nineteen nobles voted to remain on the new site and twelve to return to old Noto. Six religious heads voted to remain on the new site, one to return to the old site, and three were indifferent.<sup>19</sup>

Although the majority of Noto's nobles and leading clergy voted for the new site, in his report to the viceroy Termini now recommended returning to the old site.<sup>20</sup> He based this on Formenti's view that the old city had healthier air, a better water supply, abundant stone for rebuilding, and could be better defended.<sup>21</sup> Termini then banned all further public discussion of the matter, reporting that the people should wait 'with blind obedience' for the viceroy's decision.<sup>22</sup> By this point, however, too many inhabitants had

16 Tobriner (1982): 47.

17 See the figures in Gallo (1970): 9. Tobriner writes: 'the preponderance of votes favouring a return to the old city came from the lowest classes of the population. Small landowners and day labourers, identifying themselves as *uomini di campagna* (farmers) or *popoli minuti* (the low-wage earners), voted 249 to 44 to return to the old site. A majority of the workers and artisans also endorsed the old site. But the clergy, nobles, doctors, lawyers, notaries and pharmacists voted as a solid block for the new site.' Tobriner (1982): 47.

18 ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462. 24 May 1699.

19 ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462. 24 May 1699, ff. 5-7.

20 'The transport of the new city to the old site, under the following conditions, is the assurance of the royal servant and the public good.' ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462. 24 May 1699, f.

23. The conditions are that the road to the old site is repaired and the water supply is re-established first, the rubble in the town cleared, and financial help is given for transport of materials and buildings. See also Tobriner (1982): 49-50.

21 ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462, 24 May 1699, ff. 15-20.

22 'Because, being already allowed to vent all of their own sentiments and being given every polite hearing, they must, with blind obedience, without further consideration and having examined all the points and arguments, accept the orders which, from Your Excellency's high

invested money and work into the new site. In 1700, the viceroy decreed that the inhabitants could either stay where they were or return to the old site.<sup>23</sup> This ruling essentially meant that the government abdicated control. In 1702, a delegation led by Cardinal Giudice, Archbishop of Monreale, visited Noto and declared the new site the official one.<sup>24</sup> Once again, this declaration seems a reaction to the *de facto* situation. The citizens with influence in Noto always determined the rebuilding, not the viceroy and his officials.

### Antonino Impellizzeri Against ‘the Faction of Asmundo’

Marriage connections made between Baron Asmundo and the Landolina-Deodato family of Noto were also significant in the final location of the new town. In 1694, Maria Landolina married Adamo Asmundo, Baron Asmundo’s nephew. In 1696, Asmundo himself married Costanza Deodato-Landolina, Maria Landolina’s mother, further strengthening his connections with the Landolina.<sup>25</sup> Antonino Impellizzeri, leader of the rival aristocratic faction who wanted to return to the old site, complained of an alliance between Asmundo and the Landolina.<sup>26</sup> In a letter of 1698 to the viceroy, Impellizzeri argues that the new site resulted from collusion between Asmundo and his relatives:

Therefore, one has written to your Majesty (may God save him) and your Excellency [the viceroy] that the people regret having to remain here more months and want to return immediately, that they never wanted to come here, so this is not a change of mind because they did not come voluntarily but were forced, as I said above, and so it must be reported. Now what I have understood from the public is that Signor Asmundo and his relatives that are here want to continue the work done so far, and want to keep the new town that they have brought about.<sup>27</sup>

and profound understanding, will be final and binding.’ ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462, 24 May 1699, f. 22.

23 Tobriner (1982): 50–51.

24 Anonymous author (after 1727) in Gallo (1964): 119. See also Tobriner (1982): 49–50.

25 See Luminati in Susan, ed. (2009): 32. Luminati gives Costanza’s surname as Deodato, although she is from the Landolina-Deodato line. The marriage document of Maria Landolina and Adamo Astuto is in ASN, notaio Giuseppe Catalano, 1693–1694, vol. 7298, 9 May 1694.

26 Report to the viceroy by Don Antonino Impellizzeri. Archivio di Stato di Noto (ASN), Consigli Civici, vol. 616. 11 October 1698. Text in Dufour and Raymond (1990): 96–98.

27 ASN, Consigli Civici, vol. 616. 11 October 1698. Quotation from Dufour and Raymond (1990): 97.

Impellizzeri asserts that the majority of the citizens want to return to the old site 'except those from the faction of Asmundo who are supporting the [new] project'.<sup>28</sup> The group he describes as 'the faction of Asmundo' forced the change on the population.

Impellizzeri's attack on Asmundo, a high-ranking official appointed by the viceroy, may have resulted from personal enmity with Camastra and Asmundo. When the earthquake struck, Impellizzeri was Noto's *Capitano Generale*, responsible for law and order. He was to prevent looting and supervise the fair reallocation of the earthquake victims' property.<sup>29</sup> Tobriner argues that Impellizzeri abused this position by confiscating for himself the land of owners who were now dead. Camastra and Asmundo prosecuted Impellizzeri, leading to his rift with Asmundo and Asmundo's allies.<sup>30</sup> In the rebuilding of Noto, a factional split appears between family alliances linked to Impellizzeri on one side, and Asmundo and Costanza Deodato-Landolina on the other.

The aristocratic rivalries are not simply between those with one broader family and another. Different branches of the Landolina and the Impellizzeri had different allegiances.<sup>31</sup> Of the 33 nobles Asdrubale Termini interviewed in his 1699 visit, 16 were Landolina, but the voting was based on marriage connections rather than surname. Eight members of the Landolina family supported the new site, but eight wanted to return to the old. In Termini's list, Impellizzeri is the most frequent surname after Landolina. Of the five Impellizzeri, three voted to return to the old site, one for the new site, and one was absent.<sup>32</sup> Research by Michele Luminati shows that relatives of Costanzo Deodato-Landolina, who was married to Asmundo, voted for the new site.<sup>33</sup>

28 Impellizzeri in Dufour and Raymond (1990): 97.

29 Impellizzeri in Dufour and Raymond (1990): 96.

30 'Impellizzeri had a vendetta against Camastra and Asmundo, who had taken him to court for alleged irregularities concerning confiscation of property after the earthquake.' Tobriner (1982): 29. Tobriner's note 23 on the same page refers to Gallo (1970): 78–79.

31 Stephen Tobriner implies that the Landolina family operated as a single group in favour of the new site, whereas the situation is more complicated. Tobriner (1982): 39.

32 ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462, 24 May 1699: ff. 5–7. Text in Dufour and Raymond (1990): 101–102.

33 The aristocrats in favour of the new site, Antonino Impellizzeri's 'faction of Asmundo', include a Bartolomeo Deodato, who could be either Costanza Deodato's father or her nephew of the same name, Costanza's two brothers Pietro Deodato Baron of Frigintini and Rinaldo Deodato Baron of Burgio, and Giovanni Filippo Landolina, father of Costanza's first husband. ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462, ff. 5–6. See also the family trees in Luminati (1995): Plates 6/1 and 6/2.

Asmundo's new relatives had created marriage connections with the senior decision-maker in the rebuilding. In his 1698 report to the viceroy, Asmundo argued in favour of the new site. He reported that the old site was unsafe. The earthquake had opened chasms where a horse and rider recently met their deaths. The risk of further collapses so frightened the inhabitants that they preferred to abandon their jewellery or money to robbers rather than re-enter their ruined houses. A further advantage of the new site regards nearby Avola, originally a hilltown like Noto, but which was being rebuilt near the coast road, linked to the ports of Syracuse and Augusta. If Noto, a *demaniale* town paying taxes to the crown could also relocate near the coast road, then some of this commercial benefit would also go to the government, not just to the owners of baronial Avola.<sup>34</sup>

Asmundo anticipated the fact that Noto's new site, like Avola's, was nearer to the coast, risking attack from the sea. He argued that the three-mile distance is far away enough, that the shallow coastline impeded seaborne landing, and that an escarpment between the new site and the sea created a natural fortress wall.<sup>35</sup> He also referred to the air and winds on the new site, an important consideration in architectural manuals since Vitruvius. On the new site, there was always the problem of malaria—literally 'bad air'—from the river Asinaro and the surrounding rice fields. Asmundo reported that he drained the surrounding rice fields, and he then praised the new site's air.<sup>36</sup>

In October 1698, Antonino Impellizzeri wrote a counterclaim to Asmundo's report. First, he argued that old Noto's fortifications protected the town from invasion and plague, and reinforced the important nearby port of Syracuse. Second, many buildings at the old site, including cisterns and mills, were still intact. Rebuilding was therefore easier, and the water supply was already in place. Impellizzeri's final argument was simple: 'because the ancients were wiser'—a claim he did not elaborate upon. The inference is that ancient people chose Noto's site and the town prospered, which must have meant that the original site was the right choice, for any disadvantages

34 ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462, 28 August 1698, ff. 3–4.

35 ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462, 28 August 1698, ff. 5–6.

36 ASP, Real Segretaria, Incartamenti 2462, 28 August 1698, f. 7. Vitruvius asserts that unhealthy vapours emanate in marshlands from the bodies of noxious animals. The sun heats these vapours and wind blows them towards a town. In the first volume of his treatise *L'architettura pratica* (Palermo, 1726), Giovan Biagio Amico quotes Vitruvius and elaborates, affirming that bad air brings diseases and healthy air gives the people good complexion and stature. Vitruvius (2009): 20, and Amico (1726): 27–28. Amico quotes Vitruvius on the importance of air for an architectural site.

would have become apparent long ago.<sup>37</sup> Impellizzeri's letter, however, was a last, failed attempt against the *fait accompli* of Giuseppe Asmundo and Costanza Landolina-Deodato and her relatives.

## Palaces and Zones of Visibility and Prestige in the New Noto

In *Lexicon Topographicum Siculum* (Catania, 1757), Vito Amico praises Noto's wide and straight streets and majestic architecture: 'Here then rises Noto in wide and straight streets, magnificent in its buildings and second to few in Sicily'. Amico reports that Noto is a flourishing town at the centre of a productive agricultural zone.<sup>38</sup> Arcangelo Leanti, Amico's contemporary and author of *Lo stato presente della Sicilia* (Palermo, 1761), a similar compendium of Sicily, supports this vision of agricultural plenty. Like the descriptions of Avola and Grammichele discussed in the previous chapter, Noto and its surrounding area is presented as a place of order and productivity. The adjacent fields are abundant in wheat, wine, honey, and livestock.<sup>39</sup> After the disaster of the 1693 earthquake, the new town with its planned streets and attractive buildings was reported to be a success.

Noto therefore appeared on the surface to be an aristocratic utopia in the sense used by Charles Burroughs.<sup>40</sup> In Noto, the three main squares, connected by the central Corso, can be read as a continuous aristocratic

37 ASN, Consigli Civici, vol. 616. Text in Dufour and Raymond (1990), 96–98.

38 Quotation from Giocchino di Marzo's Italian translation of Amico's text. Amico (1855): 216. 'Noto is much richer than the other towns of Sicily in its territory and number of fields. Its agricultural area consists of 78 large feuds and 22 allodial properties and is 70 *miglia* round.' Amico (1757), vol. 2: 220.

39 Around Noto, 'the fields are very fertile, and rich, where there is an abundance of wheat, wine, honey, and much livestock'. Leanti (1761): 117. In a similar vein, the anonymous eighteenth-century author of *Del nuovo risorgimento e costruzione della città di Noto* writes: 'Its streets run perfectly directly from east to west, and from north to south [...] The buildings, besides the solidity that they retain, are of a perfect architecture. They harmonise majestically due to their delicate white stone, suitable for the most delicate small architectural members, with which they are dressed and ornamented.' *Del nuovo risorgimento e costruzione della città di Noto*. Anonymous history of Noto written after 1703 now in the Biblioteca Comunale di Noto. Text reproduced in Gallo (1964): 122.

40 Burroughs uses this term to describe aristocratic urban enclaves such as the Strada Nuova in Genoa that arose in Italy from the sixteenth century, and where only the presence of aristocrats and their residences are visible. The Strada Nuova is 'an aristocratic utopia repressing all visible evidence of ancillary or subordinate populations and their functions...' Burroughs (2002): 5–6.

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**Key**


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|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Cathedral.                         | 15. Church of S. Antonio Abbate.          |
| 2. Palazzo Landolina.                 | 16. Monastery of S. Domenico.             |
| 3. Palazzo Trigona.                   | 17. Monastery of Padri Crociferi.         |
| 4. Palazzo Nicolaci.                  | 18. Palazzo Battaglia.                    |
| 5. Convent of SS Salvatore.           | 19. Church of S. Michele Arcangelo.       |
| 6. Monastery of S. Francis of Assisi. | 20. Monastery of S. Maria del Carmelo.    |
| 7. Convent of S. Chiara.              | 21. Palazzo Rau della Ferla.              |
| 8. Palazzo Ducezio (Town Hall).       | 22. Church of S. Spirito.                 |
| 9. Church of SS. Trinità.             | 23. Convent of S. Maria dell'Arco.        |
| 10. Jesuit Seminary and College.      | 24. Church of S. Maria del Purgatorio.    |
| 11. Church of Montevergine.           | 25. Palazzo Astuto.                       |
| 12. Convent of Montevergine.          | 26. Buildings owned by Buongiorno family. |
| 13. Oratory of S. Filippo Neri.       | 27. Palazzo Zappata.                      |
| 14. Palazzo Di Lorenzo.               |   |
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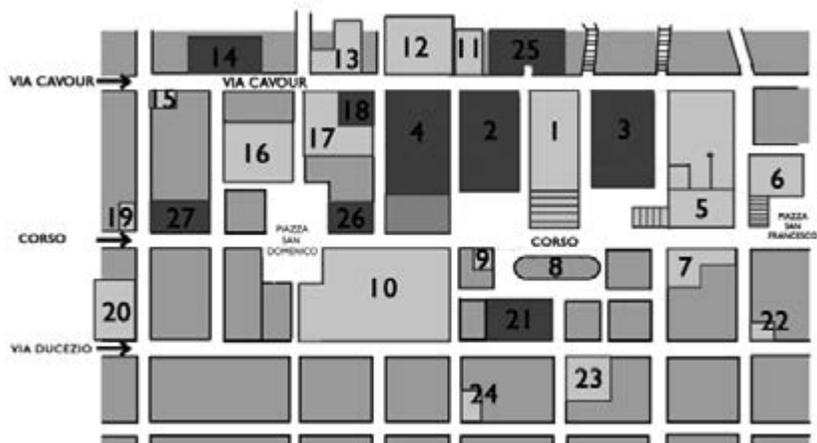


Fig. 3.4. The central area of Noto. Image by John Nixon.

enclave. The main noble residences, churches, and monastic buildings face onto these streets and squares. The spaces occupied by the rest of the population remain hidden within the city blocks.

During the first decade of the eighteenth century, two new urban areas took shape.<sup>41</sup> The lower area, with the cathedral and main Corso, became the most prestigious area. The higher Pianazzo became a secondary area, separated from the lower zone by the escarpment and reached by steps or winding streets on the town's eastern and western edges. Aristocratic

<sup>41</sup> See Stephen Tobriner's map of the 1712 street layout superimposed over the current street layout. Tobriner (1982): 59.

and ecclesiastical buildings were concentrated in the lower area, with the cathedral square in the middle (Fig. 3.4). Via Cavour emerges as a site for some important buildings, but its narrowness makes it secondary to the Corso. The Corso divides the town's centre. Most important buildings are located along it, or to its north. There are very few prestigious buildings more than one block south of the Corso. On the prestigious northern side, the land slopes gently upwards, making the buildings literally rise up above those to the south. This also improves drainage and allows for a south-facing facade, permitting more daylight to enter the *piano nobile* and to illuminate the facade decoration.

The Palazzo Nicolaci, Palazzo Landolina, and Palazzo Trigona are all located close to each other in the prestigious area near the cathedral. The Palazzo Landolina and the Palazzo Trigona face the main square on either side of the cathedral. By contrast, the Palazzo Nicolaci is in the first narrow street to the west of the Palazzo Landolina, much less visible from the cathedral square or the main Corso.<sup>42</sup>

### 'Cool Control' and Self-Control in Noto's Palace Facades

Noto's churches and palaces mainly deployed understated, classicising facades that line the new town's straight streets and squares. On this restraint in Noto's architectural decoration, Stephen Tobriner writes:

Noto's architecture keeps ornament in check. The city has a hauntingly classical character that contradicts one's expectations of a provincial Sicilian city. [...] Although these elements of southern Italian ornament [caryatids, *putti* heads, and other anthropomorphic forms] appear in Noto, they are always circumscribed and delimited; the overall effect remains one which has the quality of cool control.<sup>43</sup>

Most Noto's palaces exude the 'cool control' that Tobriner argues is a defining feature of the town's architecture. The Landolina, Impellizzeri, Trigona, Astuto, and Rau palaces have received very little scholarly attention, and little documentation has been found. Their facades can be read in terms of the assertion of aristocratic distinction and self-control. There is seemingly

<sup>42</sup> The Palazzo Nicolaci is also known as the Palazzo Villadorata because the Nicolaci acquired the title of Prince of Villadorata in 1774.

<sup>43</sup> Tobriner (1982): 125–126.



Fig. 3.5. The Palazzo Landolina in the main square in Noto. The cathedral facade is to the right of the picture. The other three facades are from different building programmes of the Palazzo Landolina.

little to surprise us. Energy is diffused evenly across the surface. No elements jump forward. These facades are self-effacing in their regularity and lack of individual features to catch the eye. There is order and understatement. There are no *mascheroni*, strange bodies, or other anthropomorphic or zoomorphic forms or individualistic ideas of the owners. They appear to give little away.

Turning first to the Palazzo Landolina, the centre of Noto's dominant family at the time of the rebuilding, the main facade occupies the shorter south side of its *isolato*, facing onto the cathedral square. The alignment of the facades of the palace and the cathedral creates a visual continuity between the two buildings (Fig. 3.5). The architect and the dates of building phases are unknown.<sup>44</sup> The date of 1734 appears on the main portal keystone. In the nineteenth century, another building programme extended the palace westwards to create new apartments for Ferdinand II Bourbon's visit to Noto as the Landolina's guest. This western extension employs giant order pilasters and exaggerated differences between the smaller lower storey and larger *piano nobile* windows.<sup>45</sup> The third storey of the main part of the palace may also have been added in the nineteenth century.

44 In 1949, the palace was given to the Bishopric of Noto. Balsamo (2013): 196. The aristocratic Landolina family name is now extinct.

45 The information on Ferdinand II is from a message to the author by Mercedes Bares.



Fig. 3.6. South facade of the Palazzo Landolina di Sant'Alfano. Completed 1748. Architect unknown.

The Palazzo Landolina's non-zoomorphic and relatively unornamented classicising decoration suggests control and self-effacement. There does not appear to be much that is challenging in this facade. Nothing bursts out or creates incongruity. There is some rhythm in the back and forward movement of cornices and pilasters, but the facade's overall effect is flat and grid-like. It avoids incident or emotion. The lack of incident creates a curtain or mask. It presents a smooth continuity, as if we do not need to look for a long time.

The predominance of straight lines and the facade's grid-like effect suggests the world of mathematics and perfect forms. The facade evokes what Charles Burroughs calls 'the Platonist-Pythagorean conception of an architecture grounded in transcendent formal values, an integral and orderly classicism resonat[ing] with an integral and orderly imagined wider world'.<sup>46</sup> The legible outlines of the pilasters and windows of the Palazzo Landolina facade, devoid of ambiguous ornament, assert Platonic forms. There is some density and complexity of decoration in the closely repeated corbels of the second-storey cornice, but the overall effect is calm legibility.

46 Burroughs (2002): 6.



Fig. 3.7. Palazzo Impellizzeri. Unknown architect. 1752.

Other Noto palaces show a similar restrained classicism. The Palazzo Impellizzeri, dating from 1752, is the only aristocratic residence in the upper Pianazzo area. (Fig. 3.7).<sup>47</sup> It is possible that Baron Antonino Impellizzeri, who led the initial resistance to Noto's new site, chose a location for his palace away from the other nobles on what could become an alternative power centre, rising above the cathedral square, but none of the other families followed him. His palace facade avoids zoomorphic decoration and employs austere Doric pilasters. Rusticated pilasters cover much of the lower storey, creating a strong sense of fortification. On the second storey, these pilasters continue in a lighter form without rustication. The different cornices for the second and third storeys suggest that, like the Palazzo Landolina, the Palazzo Impellizzeri originally had two storeys, with the third storey added in the nineteenth century. The Palazzo Landolina and the Palazzo Impellizzeri facades employ single-storey pilasters. Any decorative detail is small, such as the modillion-like forms below the Palazzo Impellizzeri's first storey, and with richer but still canonical ornament only in the cornices.

47 The date of 1752 is on the arch inside the entrance hall. The Palazzo Impellizzeri is one of the largest in Noto, with 48 rooms. Balsamo (2013): 196.



Fig. 3.8. North facade of the Palazzo Trigona, Noto. Bernardo Labisi, 1790s. Image courtesy of Maria Mercedes Bares.

The facades of the other three important Netinese palaces, those of the Trigona, Astuto, and Rau, date from the mid to late eighteenth century. They display the restraint of the Palazzo Landolina and Palazzo Impellizzeri, but depart more from the canonical classical orders. All of their facades deploy giant order pilasters, separate balconies for each window, with curving and plant-like ornament around the windows, and lower-storey window cornices that often flow into the balcony above.

The palace of the Trigona, one of the oldest Netinese families, occupies the other side of the cathedral from the Palazzo Landolina.<sup>48</sup> Its main facade now faces north on the narrower Via Cavour, but the main facade originally faced south onto the main square (Fig. 3.8). The palace's construction history is complicated. The date of 1747 appears on a vault in the lower storey, and

48 The Trigona are first recorded in Sicily in 1239. Spreti (1928–35), vol. VII: 7 cited in Parisi, ed. (1986): 11. See also the online edition of Mango de Casalgerardo (1912).

there was a delivery of 2,000 tiles to Gaspare Trigona in March 1749.<sup>49</sup> A palace on the site appears to the right of the cathedral on Paolo Labisi's drawing of Noto from the 1750s. This palace is very different to the current one. It faces onto the cathedral square, the opposite orientation to the existing palace, and deploys a central bay with a triangular pediment that comes forward from the rest of the facade.

If Labisi's drawing is correct, then this facade was demolished, probably as part of a large project commissioned by Bernardo Trigona at the end of the eighteenth century. In his will of March 1791, Bernardo ordered his heir Vincenzo Maria to complete the building within three years of Bernardo's death. Bernardo repeated this order later in the will, describing the building as 'essa mia casa nuova' (this, my new house). This project created the current palace. In his will, Bernardo Trigona referred to a new commission involving two floors (a *quarto nobile* and *quarto medio*), and 'officine', which usually means shops or workshops to rent out. In 1791, he also contracted the stonemasons Giuseppe Musco and Francesco di Tommaso and the glazier Aloisio Morello for work on the palace.<sup>50</sup>

Bernardo's project moved the entire palace back to create a large space between it and the cathedral square. This large open area, at what is now the back of the palace, suggests that there was once a garden or driveway, now covered by buildings, facing onto the cathedral square (Fig. 3.9). This is similar to aristocratic villas from the latter part of the eighteenth century at Bagheria near Palermo, such as Villa Palagonia and Villa Valguarnera, which employed large circular or horseshoe driveways. The space in front of the Palazzo Trigona may have emulated these villas. It gave the Trigona the only palace in Noto set back in a large garden with a curved driveway. In 1855, the Trigona sold the southern part of this plot to the diocese for the Bishop's Palace.<sup>51</sup>

The Palazzo Trigona's north facade is elegant and restrained (Fig. 3.8). The widely spaced giant order pilasters and modillions on the second-storey cornice create a slow rhythm. Representations of creatures or plants are uncommon. The cherub's head supporting the saint on the north-west corner of the second storey and the giant pilasters' floral capitals are exceptional and used sparingly. Sinuous forms such as the scrolls on the sides of the upper part of the second-storey

49 On the vault, see Nobile (2013): 47. For the other information, see Hofer (2015): 91.

50 ASN, notaio Nicolò Astuto junior, vol. 8371, 23 March 1791, ff. 287r–304v. The contract with Giuseppe Musco and Francesco di Tommaso is ASN, Notaio Nicolò Astuto junior, vol. 8371,15 August 1791, ff. 527r and v. The contract with Aloisio Morello is ASN, Notaio Nicolò Astuto junior, vol. 8371,16 April 1791, ff. 349r–350r. Stephen Tobriner notes the date of 1781 over the entrance, so some of the building was completed then. Tobriner (1982): 244.

51 ASN, notaio Felice Valvo, Atto 8 February 1855. Cited in Balsamo (2013): 197.



Fig. 3.9. South facade of the Palazzo Trigona, Noto. 1790s. The photograph shows the curved walls of the driveway and an open area now covered with trees and smaller buildings.

windows, or the curved balconies below, suggest the slow expansion and contraction of plant growth rather than more sudden movements.<sup>52</sup>

The Palazzo Trigona facade has some similarities with the Palazzo Astuto, almost directly opposite on Via Cavour (Fig. 3.10). This street runs along the lower town's highest point, just below the escarpment that separates the lower town from the upper Pianazzo. Via Cavour is narrow and runs behind the cathedral square, however, hiding its palaces. The Astuto had a location for their palace that was less visible than the area around the cathedral square. The construction dates and architects of the palace are unknown. Stephen Tobriner argues that the palace was built in the second half of the eighteenth century. Stylistic similarities with the Palazzo Trigona support this.<sup>53</sup>

The Palazzo Astuto facade deploys giant order superimposed pilasters, with superimposed pilasters for the portal. The lower-window cornice moulding continues upwards to link with the balcony of the window above. As on the Palazzo Trigona, the upper and lower windows are different in their decoration but connected by the fluid, rising cornice of the lower

52 Marco Nobile compares the Palazzo Trigona's portal to images in Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena's *Architetture e prospettive* (Paris and Augsburg, 1740). Nobile (2010): 388.

53 Tobriner (1982): 244.



Fig. 3.10. Palazzo Astuto. Date and architect unknown.

window. The upper windows have a more rigid, geometric quality, whereas the mouldings above the lower windows are looser. They generate forwards and outwards from the wall, suggesting wood worked with a lathe. Delicate hanging garlands adorn the upper storey windows, and strange capital-like motifs halfway up the giant pilasters suggest garlands or sheaves of wheat. All of this decoration is unobtrusive and kept to small areas.

The Palazzo Rau della Ferla is the last of the major Noto palaces this chapter will discuss (Figs. 3.11 and 3.12). As with most other palaces, the architects and construction dates are currently unknown. The Palazzo Rau is the only palace south of the Corso, although only one street back. Like the Palazzo Nicolaci, Palazzo Impellizzeri, and Palazzo Astuto, it has a long two-storey facade of six bays plus the central portal bay. Its small, outwardly curving balconies and finely carved decoration are similar to the Palazzo Trigona and Palazzo Astuto. There are giant pilasters at either end of the facade, but a large amount of the surface consists of the open space of the wall, giving a light, uncomplicated effect. Small, finely carved garlands and scrolls appear to hang from the window and door frames. The lower window cornice rises in a curving, fluid form, linking the lower and upper windows into a single unit. This decoration suggests a date in the second half of the eighteenth century.



Fig. 3.11. Facade of the Palazzo Rau della Ferla. Architect and date unknown.

Unlike the layered pilasters of the Palazzo Trigona and Palazzo Astuto portals, the Palazzo Rau's portal employs heavy, square rusticated columns backed by pilasters on the outer sides (Fig. 3.12). The strap-like rustication suggests Serlio's engravings for rustic portals in the *Libro Estraordinario* (Venice, 1584).<sup>54</sup> In Serlio's designs, the banded forms act like belts or metal hoops that lock the columns or pilasters onto the facade. On the Palazzo Rau, these rusticated portal pilasters contrast markedly with the gentle and delicate forms on the other openings of the facade. The volutes on either side of the bottom of the upper-storey windows uncurl slowly, like plant roots. A finely carved leaf or flower form grows out of the volute and touches the moulding of the window. At the top of the window, smaller volutes and plant forms uncurl downwards, mirroring the larger volutes below. Everything apart from the rusticated portal is understated and restrained.

The facades of these palaces—the Palazzo Nicolaci aside—show that Noto's aristocrats avoided the *mensole* and *mascherone* decoration common in other towns such as Modica, Ragusa, Scicli, and Catania. In Noto, the established families preferred ornament that suggested restraint and conformity to canonical architectural forms.

54 Serlio (1584). Plates I, IV, and V utilise this strap-like rustication.



Fig. 3.12. Part of the central portal and bay of the Palazzo Rau della Ferla.

### **The Challenge and Ambition of the Nicolaci Family**

The Palazzo Nicolaci became a centrepiece of the Nicolaci's power and wealth in the new Noto. From their position as tuna merchants in the old town, the post-earthquake rebuilding coincided with their rise into the aristocracy and their architectural competition with the established families. The palace's location near the cathedral allowed the Nicolaci to compete

architecturally with the Landolina, Trigona, Astuto, Impellizzeri, and Di Lorenzo—the principal Noto families.

The commercialisation of fiefs, where land-carrying noble titles were bought and sold, enabled the Nicolaci's fast ascent. This social fluidity, where merchants could buy their way into the aristocracy, contributed to the insecurity of status and to rivalry among aristocrats. The Nicolaci's entry into the aristocracy began in 1701, when Maria Landolina put the family fief of Bonfalà up for auction. This fief carried with it the title of Baron.<sup>55</sup> For 5,250 *onze*, it went to Corradino Nicolaci, a sixteen-year-old from a family whose interests included the profitable *tonnare* or tuna processing plants of nearby Marzamemi and Vendicari.<sup>56</sup> The Nicolaci had been close to entering the Noto aristocracy for several generations. Female members had married nobles, allowing connections with aristocratic families, but it did not give the family a title.<sup>57</sup>

Acquiring Bonfalà put the male line of the Nicolaci family into the aristocracy.<sup>58</sup> Attaining a noble title for Corradino was one of the first steps in their rise in the new Noto. In 1710, Corradino married Dorotea Bellia, a noblewoman from Palermo, gaining another title as Baron of Canemi

55 Maria Landolina inherited Bonfalà after her husband Carlo Landolina died in the 1694 plague following the earthquake. She remarried Adamo Asmundo and moved to Catania. Eleanora Nicolaci suggests that financial difficulties led to the Bonfalà sale. Nicolaci (2013): 65. Bonfalà was bought for Corradino Nicolaci in his mother's name, as he was under 18. ASN, Atti dell'Università, vol. 616, ff. 355r–355v. See also Luminati (2009): 33. The main sources on the post-earthquake history of the Nicolaci family are the volumes of the notai in the Archivio di Stato di Noto. These are: notaio Marcello Argento (for the period 1693–1698), Francesco Maria Costa (period 1695–1708), Gaspare Leone (1705–1719), Ignatio Pintaldo (1704–1725), Nicolò Astuto (1720–1762), Vincenzo Labisi (1760–1774). This information is from Savarino (1994–1995): 2.

56 The Nicolaci paid an annual fee or *gabella* to the plants' feudal owners in order to operate and take the income from the tuna plants. Their involvement in tuna processing began in the sixteenth century. In 1584, Nicolò Giacomo Nicolaci and others took the *gabella* for the Capo Passero *tonnara*. ASN, notaio Francesco Giantommaso, vol. 6662, ff. 694r–699r. In 1588, the Nicolaci formed a company with Baron Pipi of Noto to manage the Vendicari *tonnara*. ASN, notaio Francesco Giantommaso, vol. 6671, ff. 383 r–v. See also Nicolaci (2013): 35. By 1689, these *tonnare* produced an annual income of 1200 *onze*. Luminati (1988–1989): 138.

57 In 1681, Francesca Nicolaci married Matteo Salonia Barone del Patro. In 1693, Annafelice Nicolaci married Barone di S Giorgio Giuseppe Guizzardi. In 1695, Margherita Nicolaci married the Barone della Spina. In 1699, Saveria Nicolaci married Don Sebastiano di Riera. See Nicolaci (2013): 42–44.

58 Corradino formally assumed his new title of Baron of Bonfalà a year later. ASP, Protonotaro del Regno, Processo d'Investitura vol. 7237, busta 1640. In Sicily, *principe* (prince) was the highest noble title. This was followed by *duca* (duke), *marchese* (marquis), *conte* (count), and *barone* (baron).

through Dorotea's dowry.<sup>59</sup> On his death, Corradino left 12,000 *onze* worth of objects, jewels, and paintings.<sup>60</sup> This was in addition to the money from the *tonnare* and the potential capital that could be released from the sale of lands owned.

As the eighteenth century progressed, the Nicolaci bought more fiefs. By 1774, they owned five more, including Villadorata, which carried the highest-ranking Sicilian title of prince.<sup>61</sup> Acquiring Villadorata now put the Nicolaci on a par with the much more established Landolina family. The Landolina were one of the oldest noble families in Noto but only rose to the highest level of aristocracy when they bought the title of Principe of Cuba Reale in 1744.<sup>62</sup> The Nicolaci's rise was complete in 1789 when Corrado Nicolaci built a palace in Palermo, at the centre of Sicilian power.

Initially, the Nicolaci were not welcomed by Noto's aristocracy. A letter of 1710 from Noto's *giurati* to the *Protonotaro del regno*, the official responsible for confirming public appointments, shows the hostility of some Netinese aristocrats towards this family of tuna factory operators.<sup>63</sup> The letter contested the *Protonotaro's* ruling that Corradino Nicolaci was now eligible for any public office in Noto, including appointment as one of the governing *giurati*. The *giurati* asserted that these posts were always held by 'noble persons in conformity with privileges observed through inveterate custom'. This strongly suggests they mean the aristocratic families of the old, pre-earthquake Noto.<sup>64</sup> They argue that because Corradino acquired nobility rather than being born into it, he was not eligible for public office in Noto.<sup>65</sup>

59 Nicolaci (2013): 71.

60 ASN, notaio Natale Marotta, *Minutae Actorum 1727–1728*, vol. 7451, ff. 1449r–1484 v.

61 Santanimo e Patro, Spinagallo e Ricalcaccia, Gisira e Gisirotta di Pagano, Ogliaastro, and Villadorata. See Spreti (1931): 822, and Nicolaci (2013): 108. The document for the acquisition of Villadorata is ASP, *Protonotaro del Regno*, Processo d'investitura 9598, busta no. 1679.

62 See the online entry for the Landolina in Mango de Casalgeraldo (1912). [www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mango/lamantia.htm](http://www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mango/lamantia.htm). The Landolina are first recorded in the area of Avola in 1149. Amico (1855): 116, Palazzolo Gravina, (1875): 229. On the civic posts they occupied in Noto before the earthquake, see Parisi (1986–1987): 256.

63 The letter's authors are Bartolomeo Deodato, Giuseppe Maria di Lorenzo, Tommaso Impelizzeri, and Vincenzo Giarratana. ASN, *Atti dell'Università*, vol. 616, ff. 355r–355v. 25 March 1710. A brief description of the *Protonotaro del Regno's* role is on the *Sistema archivistico nazionali* website. [san.beniculturali.it/web/san/dettaglio-soggetto-produttore?id=55222](http://san.beniculturali.it/web/san/dettaglio-soggetto-produttore?id=55222)

64 ASN, *Atti dell'Università*, vol. 616: f. 355r. 25 March 1710.

65 The full passage reads 'Because neither Don Corradino Nicolaci nor his late father or ancestors were of noble birth, and had never served as *giurati*, we find that the said Don Corradino first baron, having bought the fief of Bonfalà, the noble fiefs of this territory, treated with the proper decorum, as well as the noble offices of this city, have always been administered and conferred in noble persons in conformity with privileges observed through

Fifty years later, Padre Giacinto da San Gaetano's funeral oration for Corradino Nicolaci's son Giacomo, *Orazione funebre-accademica di Don Jacopo Maria Nicolacy e Bellia* (Syracuse, 1761), shows the Nicolaci's transformation from outsiders to illustrious members of the Noto aristocracy. The oration was made in the name of 'Signor Duca Reggente Don Domenico Landolina, Consigliere nell'Aggiunta di Sicilia in Napoli' (Councillor of the Sicilian deputation in Naples).<sup>66</sup> A high-ranking member of the Landolina—and Sicilian representative to the Bourbon king—was now leading a Nicolaci funeral oration.

The oration is a public and hyperbolic affirmation of Giacomo Nicolaci's nobility. Giacinto di San Gaetano emphasises Giacomo Nicolaci's status by listing his titles.<sup>67</sup> He singles out Giacomo Nicolaci's creation of the *Accademia dei Trasformati*, a learned society which he argues made Noto famous:

Where justly employed in bringing it [the academy] to beautiful study by a clear light, to come together from all sides, should praise him as a hero, whose merits have made famous this his native city, which they consecrate obsequiously to him, who is celebrated for the ancient nobility of his ancestors, and through who the city now fortunately receives singular glory and splendour.<sup>68</sup>

Earlier in the century, some of the Netinese aristocracy protested that Corradino Nicolaci was not worthy to serve on the town council. Fifty years later, his son gave the city glory and splendour. Corradino, as Giacomo's father, became a virtuous exemplar, although only his aristocratic wife received the adjective 'noble': '[Giacomo Nicolaci] is nourished in piety by both his famous parent Don Corradino Nicolaci, whose singular bright virtue and lively nature must be what we remember, and by the noble mother Donna Dorotea Bellia, who was the example of the honourable matrons of this noble

inveterate custom, and we believe the said Don Corradino does not have the necessary requisites to be conferred as a *giurato* of this city.' ASN, Atti dell'Università, vol. 616, ff. 355r–355v. 25 March 1710.

66 The Giunta di Sicilia was instituted by Charles of Bourbon. It comprised mainly of Sicilian nobles and advised the Bourbon monarch on Sicilian affairs. Stefano Piazza notes that its powers balanced those of the Sicilian viceroy. Piazza (2009): 309. See also Da San Gaetano (1761): 1.

67 'Principe dell'Accademia de' Trasformati in Noto, Barone di Bonfalà, Prato, Gisira, e Gisirota di Pagano, Calcaccia, Ricalcaccia, Spinagallo, Agliastro, Gisira d'Agosta, Grani, ecc'. Da San Gaetano (1761): 1.

68 Da San Gaetano (1761): 4.

land'.<sup>69</sup> On his death, Giacomo Nicolaci, who unlike his father was born into the aristocracy, became 'the best example of a Christian gentleman' and 'the very model of a citizen of Noto'.<sup>70</sup>

From the start of the rebuilding of Noto, the Nicolaci bought up small houses and plots on what would become the site for their palace.<sup>71</sup> Corradino Nicolaci's mother Eleanora, who bought the fief of Bonfalà for him in 1701, began the process in April 1696 by buying a plot adjacent to her house and to that of her stepson Pietro.<sup>72</sup> In 1716, Corradino bought the site of 'the deceased Pietro Nicolaci' in order to 'make something magnificent'. At that point, the plot still consisted of *barrache* (temporary houses). In 1739, Corradino's son Giacomo bought the houses of the Cannarella family using the Law of Toledo and Maqueda.<sup>73</sup> This law allowed nobles who owned part of a city block to buy out the remaining properties for only eight per cent of the rental value. The justification was that this allowed the construction of large palaces, thus adding to a city's beauty.<sup>74</sup>

Although acquisitions for the site of the Palazzo Nicolaci are documented, there are problems in identifying the architects and construction phases. Giacomo Nicolaci, head of the family from 1738 to his death in 1760, was the principal patron. Between 1733 and 1736, he had stone blocks transported from a nearby quarry he owned and from the ruined old Noto.<sup>75</sup> The keystone

69 Da San Gaetano (1761): 10.

70 Da San Gaetano (1761): 8.

71 Michele Luminati notes that the Nicolaci's acquisition of titles, and land for a palace, go hand in hand: 'This process of 'territorial' expansion, culminating in the building of the present palace, occurs in step with the rise and social consolidation of the Nicolaci family, who express their most important representation with Giacomo Nicolaci.' Luminati (2009): 36.

72 The property was bought from the priest Vincenzo Ragusa for 29 *onze* and 2 *tari* ASN, notaio Francesco Maria Costa, *Minutae Actorum*, 1695–1696, vol. 7343 ff. 271r–274v. See also Nicolaci (2013): 64–65.

73 The 1716 and 1739 purchases are recorded in the will of Giacomo Nicolaci. ASN, notaio Vincenzo Labisi, *Minutae Actorum* 1760–1761, vol. 7819, ff. 269r. The acquisition record for Pietro Nicolaci's property is ASN, Ignazio Pintaldo, IX index of 1716, 20 January 1716. See also Nicolaci (2013): 99.

74 In a message to this author, Francesco Benigno posited that the law of Toledo and Maqueda was from two different laws issued by the viceroys Garcia Alvarez de Toledo y Osorio, viceroy 1565–1568, and Antonio Cardenas, Duke of Maqueda, viceroy 1598–1601. See *Pragmaticarum Regni Siciliae Novissima Collectio* (1635–1658). On the law's application in Palermo, Antonio Cottone and Silvia Pennisi report: 'The privilege qualified as an exceptional law dictated by public necessity and utility, and permanently favouring the ornament and decorum of Palermo and allowing large scale expropriations, where the expropriated area can be paid with an amount calculated at 8% of the rental value. It also contained clauses rewarding those who bought and constructed quickly.' Cottone and Pennisi (2001): 19.

75 Luminati (2009): 43.

inside the palace portal records a date of 1737, so this stone may have been for the first phase of building. In 1739, the *capomastro* Vincenzo Sinatra bought '2,000 cantoni d'intaglio' (2,000 pieces of stone for carving) for delivery to the Palazzo Nicolaci.<sup>76</sup> This is in the same year as Giacomo's use of the Law of Toledo and Maqueda to buy the Cannarella land. It is possible, therefore, that one part of the palace was completed in 1737, and then Vincenzo Sinatra oversaw an extension in 1739. By the 1750s, a map of Noto by the architect Paolo Labisi shows the palace as completed.<sup>77</sup>

The Nicolaci now owned a large palace in Noto's centre, but it did not enjoy the same prominent visibility as the Landolina and Trigona palaces. The Palazzo Landolina and two smaller buildings block the Palazzo Nicolaci from the Corso and the cathedral square. The long east side became the main facade but is only fully visible by walking up the narrow street separating the Palazzo Nicolaci and Palazzo Landolina. The Nicolaci obtained their palace, but other palaces push it out of view.

### The Palazzo Nicolaci Facade: Aporia, Transformation, and Wonder

Many writers on architecture associate profuse and complex ornament with negative values of luxury and excess. In the 1950s, Jonathan Ide reads the intricate decoration on the Palazzo Nicolaci facade as a deviation from the purportedly moderate and reasonable norms of a classical architectural canon:

The simple main entrance is framed between Ionic columns supporting a classic although richly decorated entablature. Also, the ground floor windows are fairly conservative. However, the second-floor balconies with their bulging iron grilles are supported by the most outrageously fantastic corbels possible to imagine. Each group of five brackets is composed of different figures including nymphs, Moors, Chinamen, cherubim, and lions. The great windows above are crowned by broken cornices supported by female heads. Happily, the architect knew when to call a halt to richness and the cornice of the building is very light and devoid of carving.<sup>78</sup>

76 ASN, notaio Vincenzo Astuto, vol. anni 1738–1739, 19 May 1739. See also Di Blasi (1982): 52.

77 Tobriner dates the map between 1750 and 1760. An inscription shows that it belonged to Giacomo Nicolaci, who died in 1760. It is now in a private collection. Tobriner (1982): 66 and 213, no. 10.

78 Ide (1958): 14–15.

In Ide's argument, the portal has rich decoration, but its Ionic columns and 'classic' entablature keep it within the bounds of architectural normality. The corbels or *mensole*, however, are 'outrageous'. Ide's observation that the architect of the Palazzo Nicolaci knew 'when to call a halt to richness' by restraining this decoration on most of the facade suggests that the use of ornament risks the architect falling into excess. It also implies that this ornamental excess reveals an architect or patron's lack of personal self-control.

Alberti argues in *De Re Aedificatoria* (Florence, 1486) that excessive ornament on one part of the facade, such as Ide sees in the *mensole* of the Palazzo Nicolaci, disrupts a facade's harmony. Instead, ornament should be equally distributed:

The parts ought to be so composed that their overall harmony contributes to the honour and grace of the whole work, and that effort is not expended in adorning one part at the expense of all the rest, but that the harmony is such that the building appears a single, integral and well-composed body, rather than a collection of extraneous and unrelated parts.<sup>79</sup>

The restrained facades of most Netinese palaces, with their evenly deployed classical members and small-scale scroll-like ornament, follow Alberti's rule that ornament should not be conspicuously concentrated in certain parts of the building. They also follow Alberti's prescription that all citizens, including the rich, should not show extravagance:

I notice that the most prudent and modest of our ancestors much preferred frugality and parsimony in building as in any other matter, public or private, judging that all extravagance on the part of the citizen ought to be prevented and checked, and that both admonitions and laws were issued to this end with the utmost vigour and persistence.<sup>80</sup>

Alberti associates ornament with luxury and waste. He allows ornament in the form of the classical orders and admits some licence in how decoration is used, but within limits. He does not define these limits, but by implication they are the proportions for buildings and classical orders that he sets out in *De Re Aedificatoria*. Restraint is the central rule.<sup>81</sup> Over-elaborate

79 Alberti (1988): 23–24.

80 Alberti (1988): 291.

81 'The severest restraint is called for, for the ornament to private buildings, therefore, although a certain license is often possible. For instance, the whole shaft of a column may be over slender,

decoration on buildings could provoke envy or accusations of egotism and the flaunting of wealth. Ornament has the potential to create political discord by marking economic inequality.<sup>82</sup>

The control and balance of the Netinese facades suggest control and balance as personal traits of the building's owners and as necessary to maintain political power. Tempering excessive consumption purportedly shows modesty and self-control. In his manual for princes *Opere Politiche Cristiane* (Mazzarino, 1692), Carlo Maria Carafa includes a chapter entitled *Il Principe temperi il lusso, e le pompe* ('The prince must moderate luxury and pomp'). He writes: 'Especially for sovereigns, who must reform by example their vassals' excesses, it is necessary to kick away superfluity, because the intolerable luxury of rulers is perhaps one of the principal causes of the people's grievances.'<sup>83</sup>

Carlo Maria argues that modesty is more than just the exercise of a noble virtue. It is a tool for preserving a ruler's political power. Like Alberti, he urges rulers to avoid accusations of luxury. By implication, the discontent of a population aggrieved by a ruler's 'intolerable luxury' could lead to rebellion and a desire for a change of ruler. Carlo Maria Carafa goes on to prescribe that a prince must set an example of moderation to his vassals, including what he describes as 'arrogance in building'. This arrogance was what had ruined earlier empires.<sup>84</sup>

Simplicity and moderation extended to clothing and lack of ornament: 'by his own hand, God gave to Adam a clothing of skin, without any ornament, to show that the prince, who is God's successor in command, must dress without any pomp, nor change matter into many forms invented for mere

or too retracted at its entasis perhaps, compared to what is strictly permissible in public buildings, yet it should not be faulted or condemned, provided the work is not malformed or distorted.' Alberti (1988): 293. Alberti's proportions for the architectural orders are in Book VII, Sections 6–15. In Book VIII, Sections 3–10, he discusses proportions for different building types. Alberti (1988): 200–238 and 249–290.

82 'I would rather the private houses of the wealthy were wanting in things that might contribute to their ornament, than have the more modest and thrifty accuse them of luxury in any way.' Alberti (1988): 292.

83 Carafa (1692). Book One: 87. Book One of *Opere Politiche Cristiane* is a reprint of Carlo Maria Carafa's earlier *Istruzione Cristiana per i Principi e Regnanti* (Mazzarino, 1687).

84 'The prince must therefore restrain the pomp and luxuries of his subjects, these were enough to ruin the first kings of the world, while magnificence of the table, splendour of dress and arrogance in building, surpassing their real power, come in consequence to ruin the foundations for the preservation of states.' Carlo Maria does not explain which 'first kings of the world' he refers to, but the phrase calls to mind the pagan empires of the Bible, such as Egypt or Babylon. Carafa (1692): 88.

vanity or caprice'.<sup>85</sup> If ornament is a building's metaphorical clothing, it must be modest. An ideal building will be naked, like the perfect body God made for Adam. Other writers continue this metaphor of naked and clothed buildings. In a description of his visit to Catania in the 1760s, Johann Von Riedesel conflates nobility with simplicity and nudity. On the rebuilding projects of Prince Ignazio Paternò Castello, he writes: 'Under his care, the streets that needed to be remade were in part, and by now will be, created according to a practical plan that creates a perfect balance in the facades of the houses; these facades are in beautiful antique style, with a noble simplicity and naked of ornament.'<sup>86</sup>

Ornament has been considered less worthy of analysis because it is a dressing to the purportedly more essential 'structure' of a building.<sup>87</sup> Alberti also makes decoration threatening due to its connection with sensual pleasure. Because he links ornament and embellishment, ornament functions only to please the eye. On this perceived threat, Wigley argues: 'the threat of ornament is its sensuality, which distracts the proper eye. The risk of ornament is an impropriety in which the sensuality of the body confuses the mind that seeks to control it.'<sup>88</sup> Associations of ornament with luxury and excess, clothing and femininity run through Alberti, Von Riedesel's eighteenth-century observations on Catania, and Ide and Tobriner's twentieth-century descriptions of Noto. The contrast between the Palazzo Nicolaci facade and the facades of the other Noto palaces foregrounds how these assumptions operate.

85 Carafa (1692): 87–88.

86 Von Riedesel (1821): 70–71. Riedesel's reference to 'noble simplicity' evokes the 'noble simplicity and quiet grandeur' that Johann Winckelmann saw in Classical Greek sculpture. Winckelmann (1755) quoted in Preziosi, ed. (1998): 30. Riedesel appears not to notice the *mascheroni* and other profuse ornament of Catanese palaces such as the Palazzo Massa, Palazzo Manganelli, or the Benedictine Monastery. On the casting of architectural ornament as clothing, Mark Wigley examines Alberti's assumption that a building has an abstract 'body' determined by geometric rules, to which is added the 'clothing' of ornament: 'Alberti's text begins with its well-known division of architecture into "lineaments", which derive from the mind, and "matter", which derives from nature. The lineaments are the order of lines that prescribes the "appropriate place" for the building and all its parts. Formulated in the masculine mind of the architect, this geometric order controls the feminine body of the building that has been appropriated from Mother Nature.' Wigley in Colomina, ed. (1992): 353.

87 'Beauty is some inherent property, to be found suffused all through the body of that which may be called beautiful; whereas ornament, rather than being inherent, has the character of something attached or additional.' Alberti (1988): 156. Ornament's casting as feminine is also part of a distinction that relegates arts such as weaving and sewing to the realm of 'applied arts'. See the discussion in Wigley in Colomina, ed. (1992): 372.

88 Wigley in Colomina, ed. (1992): 355.

The Palazzo Nicolaci's exuberant facade is defiant and provocative. Unable to claim a position on the main square, the palace's long facade covers most of one side of its narrow street. Unlike the Palazzo Landolina and Trigona, which did not originally have balconies, the facade's six balconies and their elaborate decoration protrude into the space above the street and look towards the rival palaces of the more established Landolina and Trigona families.

This decoration is worth taking seriously. It is more than *capriccio* or *fantasia*. The facade's profuse ornament and defiantly zoomorphic sculpture question the separation of architecture, sculpture, and ornament. As with much Val di Noto *mensole* carving, it is difficult to relate it to decoration from outside Sicily. Although some of its imagery of religious figures, mermaid-sirens, young men becoming lions, and winged horses could be related to the cavalieresque and the training of an aristocratic prince, the sculpture is essentially aporetic. Refusing to be bound to stable explanations, aporetic works are 'works whose subjects are not easily identifiable' or which destabilise interpretation and 'intentionally throw elements from different iconographic systems together'.<sup>89</sup>

To discuss the facade in more detail, I have numbered the balconies from one to six, beginning from the left of the facade. Reading horizontally, the *mensole* at each end of the facade (Balconies 1 and 6) include the faces of young men. The two middle balconies on each side of the portal (Balconies 2 and 5) show winged animals (winged horses or winged lions). The two balconies flanking the portal (Balconies 3 and 4) show winged male and winged female figures respectively.

The decoration consists of hybrid, transforming creatures. On Balcony Six, the lowest part of each *mensola* begins as a scroll-like modillion that quickly transforms into faces of older men (Fig. 3.13). The men's beards metamorphosise between human hair, foliage, and a lion's mane. The hair over the forehead becomes an acanthus leaf, although still suggesting a lion's mane. Above the ancone, the *mensola* transforms again. It becomes a head that is part lion and part young man. Reading horizontally in either direction across this upper line of *mascheroni*, the young man transforms into a lion as the viewer's eye moves to the centre and then transforms back to a young man as the heads move outwards again. The youth on the far left is tenser than the one on the far right. His teeth hint at the lion transformation. The

89 Nagel and Pericolo's discussion in Nagel and Pericolo, eds. (2010): 2–3 informs my conception of aporia. The quotations are from page 2.



Fig. 3.13. Palazzo Nicolaci, Balcony Six.



Fig. 3.14. Palazzo Nicolaci. Window of Balcony Six.

lion-youths seem to be looking at something that is approaching, some in rapture and some in fear.

Above the window of Balcony Six, a face with vegetal and leonine features watches, half submerged in the foliage (Fig. 3.14). This being is created from many of the elements that can be found elsewhere on the balcony: male faces, lions, vegetation, volutes, and forms rippled by wind. Nearby, two ambiguous

owl-like heads support the entablature above the window. They are angelic but also perched and bird-like. In terms of architectural elements, they are modillions but also *mascheroni* and caryatids. These modillions, the leonine faces, and the garlands have some similarity to the second order of Giulio Lasso's *Quattro Canti* of 1608 in Palermo, but these kinds of connections are purely speculative. Essentially, there is a repertoire of ornamental forms that mutates in various ways through Sicilian architecture.<sup>90</sup>

Various creatures in a process of becoming inhabit the other balconies. On Balcony Three, all the *mensole* except the central one consist of winged male figures (Fig. 3.15). Their long beards and emaciated bodies suggest ascetic prophets or the four evangelists. They allude to religion in a way that the hybrid man-lion faces allude to the training of a young prince, but they evade a stable textual referent. In the centre of the line of cherub heads, there is a monstrous male face. His face is composed of nameable parts such as eyes, a nose, and lips. All parts of the face that are less easily labelled, such as temples or areas of the upper or lower cheek, disappear. Many of these nameable elements are shifting into forms that suggest vegetation or seaweed. There are transitions of taxonomies such as furrows of the lower forehead resembling both veined skin and leaf veins.

Only the *mensole* of Balcony Four depict female figures (Fig. 3.16). They are winged like their male counterparts of Balcony Three flanking the other side of the portal. Their upper bodies are naked but then transform into foliage. The central figure and the two outer ones merge into cornucopia-like lower *mensole*. Female figures are uncommon in the Val di Noto *mensole* sculpture. Where they appear, they are always young women. The *mascheroni* that watch and guard within the facades are always male. A female *mascherone*, if it existed, might suggest Medusa or a deformation of an idealised female beauty. Female figures cannot be monsters. Unlike the male figures of the facades, they do not question or threaten the viewer.

The Palazzo Nicolaci challenges the 'cool control' that for Tobriner characterises the other Noto palaces. Its sculpture commands our attention. It takes architectural elements such as volutes and consoles and remakes them into unexpected forms. From below the balconies, part-human, part-animal creatures emerge. Winged horses, angel-sirens, young men who transform into lions, old men who transform into plants, and other strange creatures inhabit the facade. Some of them observe us ironically or suspiciously. Others are locked in fear or rapture. Above the second storey windows and below the balconies, faces lurk in the foliage. These figures are more

90 See Di Fede and Scaduto (2011) for a discussion of the *Quattro Canti*.



Fig. 3.15. Palazzo Nicolaci, Balcony Three.



Fig. 3.16. Palazzo Nicolaci. *Mensole* of Balcony Four.

hidden, remaining cautiously close to the building. The Palazzo Nicolaci's aporetic facade suggests an enigmatic narrative whose meaning is always just out of reach. Alongside the enigma, the decoration also suggests a

delight in strangeness and transformation and bodily wonders, of dreams and possibilities.

### **Conclusion: Aristocratic Competition and Contesting Facades**

Like the geometric outlines of Avola and Grammichele discussed in an earlier chapter, the balance and harmony that scholars see in Noto's urbanism is the result of political coercion, although unlike Avola and Grammichele, Noto's new town was achieved through the political exertions of a group of aristocrats rather than a single feudal owner. The town resulted more from these exertions than from simply the application of purportedly neutral ideal town plans. The earthquake allowed the nobles to reconfigure the town to their advantage, creating larger palaces in a new location near the coast road that would bring economic benefit, and an urbanism of straight streets and regular squares that associated the nobility with modernity and putative rationalism.

Palace facades also relate to how nobles presented themselves. Most palaces in Noto deploy classical facades where ornamental understatement and conformity to canonical precepts support aristocratic distinction. These facades exude restraint and self-control, qualities that by implication extended to the palace's patrons. In contrast, the Palazzo Nicolaci deploys exuberant, enigmatic decoration. Scholars often attempt to tame such facades by subsuming some decorative elements into templates from architectural treatises and relegating the remainder to a local tradition assumed unworthy of analysis.<sup>91</sup> The Palazzo Nicolaci confounds these expectations. Its balconies and windows deploy beings that make strange transitions and experience rapture or terror. Its transforming, hybrid creatures issue a challenge to the stability and decorum that the palaces of rival families evoke.

Noto's architecture is unusual in mainly banishing the zoomorphic decoration common in other Val di Noto towns. The Palazzo Nicolaci is an anomaly. It is the only Netinese palace facade that includes hybrid decoration which transforms the more canonical architectural elements. The facade's decoration slips between the borders of architecture, sculpture, and decoration. Its imagery mutates between taxonomies of architectural component, human, animal, plant, or other, undefinable forms.

91 Tobriner (1982): 126.

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## Dissertations

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## 4. The Palazzo Biscari in Catania: Lightness, Refinement, and Distinction

**Abstract:** This chapter discusses the ballroom of the Palazzo Biscari in Catania in terms of its centrality to noble distinction. The ballroom's liquid and reflecting decoration, and its materials of gold, glass, and stucco, are refined and delicate, like the lightness and delicacy that aristocrats putatively possessed. Ballrooms, dance, and the training of aristocratic bodies allowed the nobility to maintain distinction through a similar lightness and refinement. This relates to Pierre Bourdieu's work on habitus, social class, and self-fashioning. Rather than discussing the ballroom as an empty shell, the chapter attempts to repopulate it by investigating the entertainments and dances it enabled, and the way dancing and the ballroom were essential to the realisation of aristocratic habitus and what could be called 'the work of aristocracy'.

**Keywords:** ballrooms, history of dance, eighteenth-century aristocracy, ornament and material affect, architecture and material affect.

### Placing the Ballroom at the Centre

The Palazzo Biscari, built by the Paternò Castello family, princes of Biscari, is situated in the dark grey streets of Catania's historical centre. At the palace's centre, the ballroom is a place of surprising opulence (Fig. 4.1). Light reflects from elegant gold frames, mirrors, tiles, and paintings. The ballroom once hosted large numbers of guests, but the bodies that occupied it and the entertainments that took place can only be imagined. The empty room evokes aristocratic dancers enveloped in a world of luxury and swirling golden energy. Its slightly worn and faded decoration sends signals from a vanished world.

One can imagine the room filled with guests. Some of them converse; they flutter their fans nervously and turn their heads to observe other groups. If



Fig. 4.1. The ballroom of the Palazzo Biscari. Completed 1772.

the ball is in summer, a breeze might blow in from the adjacent sea-facing terrace. The musicians begin to play. The energised shapes of the decoration echo the dancers' flickering, changing reflections in the mirrors around the ballroom and the flashes of light from their silk clothes. The dancing nobles are illuminated and reproduced by the mirrors. They monitor themselves and others in the mirrors and under the light of the chandeliers.

In addition to the ballroom, the Palazzo Biscari contained a theatre, a library, a museum of antiquities and mineralogy, a collection of armour, a room of chinoiserie, a room decorated with painted birds, and a room incorporating floor tiles from a Roman bath.<sup>1</sup> There are eighteenth-century chairs and consoles, portraits of the Biscari family, and painted maps of their fiefs. The palace was the site of the antiquarian society the *Accademia degli Etnei* and was a stop on the Grand Tour for international diplomats and writers.<sup>2</sup>

1 See Librando (1971) for a description of the palace, and Guzzetta (2001) on the museum. For the ballroom's completion date of 1772, see Librando (1971): 79.

2 Accounts by eighteenth and early nineteenth-century visitors to the palace include Von Riedesel (1771), Brydone (1773), Vivant Denon (1780), Houel (1782–1787), Balsamo (1811), Wright-Vaughan (1811), and Goethe (1816–1817).

Rather than pursuing all of these aspects of the palace, this chapter takes the ballroom as its centre. It investigates the ways that dancing, social interactions, and the training of the body produced and sustained aristocratic status and rank. Instead of reading the ballroom in terms of chronological building phases or stylistic labels, or taking it for granted as a standard feature of eighteenth-century palaces, I investigate how the ballroom—often the largest space in a palace and the most lavishly decorated—enabled aristocratic distinction.<sup>3</sup> Existing literature on the palace does not consider this question. The small number of references to the palace and the ballroom excavate chronology or briefly describe the decoration, but they take the ballroom itself for granted.<sup>4</sup>

I read dance, and ways of greeting and conversing in the ballroom, as part of the aristocratised *habitus* of the body.<sup>5</sup> Instead of reducing the ballroom to a component of the Palazzo Biscari, this chapter makes it a starting point for investigations into the maintenance of nobility. Noble status needs to be continually produced through materials, behaviour, and adaptation. Dancing at balls is one of the requirements for nobility and is a way that noble status is produced. The ballroom is therefore more than a container for entertainment or for the mere display of wealth through conspicuous consumption. With its dances and dancers, its etiquette and its intricate decoration, the ballroom generates and enables status and distinction.

This distinction is produced in the Palazzo Biscari primarily through lightness and adroitness. The chapter will show how the light, the refined, and the delicate was preferred over what was deemed heavy or fixed. I bring together the decoration of the ballroom, its materials, and the dances that took place there. This is not only to metaphorically reactivate the ballroom, to return its materials and bodies to the centre of the palace, but also to investigate how lightness in bodies and materials was implicated in aristocratic distinction.

There are very few studies on the Palazzo Biscari or the other palaces of Catania. The existing studies work from a combination of archival data, with little analysis and formalist descriptions that place the palaces into stylistic categories. Vito Librando's useful 1965 study of the Palazzo Biscari documents

3 Vito Librando has in any case documented the palace's building phases of 1693–1707, 1726, 1739–1744, 1752–1757, and 1760–1786. Librando (1971): 49, 50, 55, 58–61, 69, 74–80. Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 135–138.

4 See Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 135–138, Guzzetta (2001): 12–13, Boscarino (1997): 233–236, Librando (1971).

5 On *habitus*, see Bourdieu (2010), 59, 165–166, and (1990): 54.

building phases, patrons, and architects.<sup>6</sup> Librando took measurements of the palace, produced elevations and ground plans, and established a useful chronology.

References to the Palazzo Biscari in the scholarship often search for hypothetical architectural sources originating outside Sicily. Anthony Blunt gives a short description of the ballroom and the oval musicians' gallery above it, positing a German or Venetian source for its woodcarving and stucco decoration.<sup>7</sup> Blunt praises the ballroom's decoration as distinctive and 'without parallel in Sicily', but his speculation that this must be the work of north-European artisans reinforces the idea of Sicily as dependent on external sources for its most arresting or skilfully executed architecture. Domenico Ligresti's article on the inventory of the palace's library, and Gaetano Calabrese's catalogue of the Biscari archive with a chronology of the Paternò Castello family from 1403 to 1886, provide important groundwork for studies of the Palazzo Biscari but remain essentially empirical.<sup>8</sup>

### Ignazio Paternò Castello and 'The Great Temple of Hospitality and Generosity'

The Paternò Castello's new palace, rebuilt and expanded after the earthquake, operates within the family's expanding dominance of Catania in the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> This accumulation of power culminated in the

6 Librando (1971): 45–90.

7 'The decoration of the *salone* and the staircase is apparently without parallel in Sicily, or indeed in Southern Italy. It consists of panels of thick Rococo stucco, lovingly worked with a wooden tool, a technique which recalls late Bavarian works like the Kaisersaal at Nymphenburg or certain rooms in Venetian palaces. One can only suppose that the Principe di Biscari, who had contacts all over Europe, must have brought workmen from the north to execute the decoration of this fantastic room.' 'The architect in charge of the palace was Francesco Battaglia and he is probably responsible for the general design of the *salone* and the exquisite staircase, but the stucco is quite alien to his manner or that of any other local architect. To find analogies one would have to look as far north as the Veneto or even over the Alps to Austria and Bavaria.' Blunt (1968): 22 and note next to plate 41.

8 Ligresti (1976 and 1977) and Calabrese (2012).

9 After the 1693 earthquake, Catania was completely rebuilt. It was one of the cities that suffered the highest number of casualties and the greatest destruction. Stephen Tobriner estimates the total fatalities as 16,000 in a population of 18,914, almost 90% of the inhabitants. (Tobriner, 1982): 207. A report to the King of Spain on the day of the second earthquake reads: 'The city of Catania is left like the palm of a hand, without the walls that look out to sea, having buried beneath its ruined 16 souls.' Archivo General de Simancas, Estado 3507, no. 4, 11 January 1693. The text is reproduced in Tobriner (1982): 226, doc. 1.

architectural projects of Ignazio Paternò Castello, who commissioned the palace's ballroom, theatre, and museum and positioned the palace as a centre for international visitors.

The Princes of Biscari were the highest-ranking branch of the Paternò Castello, a long-established family in Catania.<sup>10</sup> The Paternò Castello held governing positions in Catania before the earthquake, but after 1693 their presence increased. Only certain noble families were eligible for annual election to the city's eight governing positions. The Paternò Castello and other Paternò family branches increased the number of posts they held in the city government during the eighteenth century. Between 1693 and 1743, they held 33% of senatorial posts, compared to 5% in the 50 years earlier. This increase is due partly to deaths from the earthquake, which reduced the number of eligible families from 60 to 29, but by the 1740s, 50 years after the earthquake, the Paternò Castello and related family branches still appear frequently in lists of the city governors.<sup>11</sup>

The Paternò Castello were the only noble family permitted to rebuild on the old city walls after the 1693 earthquake.<sup>12</sup> This was a prime location overlooking the sea. The rebuilding plan for Catania divided the city into a western part, where plots were valued at 13.10 *onze per tumulo*, and the area nearer the sea, with plots valued at 20 *onze per tumulo*.<sup>13</sup> As they increased their representation in the city's government during the eighteenth century,

10 The Paternò traced their ancestry in Sicily to a knight who arrived with King Roger in the eleventh century. The Castello are first recorded owning fiefs in Sicily in the fifteenth century. The family had several branches. The Paternò Castello acquired the title of Princes of Biscari in 1633. Mango di Casalgerardo (1912). Entry under Castelli. Available at [regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mango/casas/htm](http://regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mango/casas/htm). See also the Treccani *Enciclopedia Italiana di scienze, lettere ed arti*. 1937 edition online at [treccani.it/enciclopedia/paterno\\_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/](http://treccani.it/enciclopedia/paterno_%28Enciclopedia-Italiana%29/). See also Calabrese (2012): 1–9. Mango di Casalgerardo (1912). Entry on the Paternò family. Available online: [regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mango/patane.htm](http://regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mango/patane.htm)

11 Eight officials governed Catania. The *patrizio* was the most senior. The *capitano di giustizia* was responsible for law and order, and there were six *senatori*. The lists of the eight post holders starting in 1413 include a member of the extended Paternò family for most years. By the first half of the eighteenth century there is often more than one in each year. D'Urso and Lanzafame (2012): 116. Gaetani (1759): 285–333. On the figures for 1740, see Calogero (2009): 21, quoted in D'Urso and Lanzafame (2012): 116.

12 The Duke of Camastra, the government official responsible for the Val di Noto rebuilding, granted the permission in March 1694. Librando (1971): 48. no.10. Librando cites a document of 31 March 1695 in Archivio di Stato di Catania (ASC), Archivio Biscari, Scritture diverse, *Atti originali e litigiosi con il barone Raddusa per la casa*, vol. 9, f. 246. See also Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 135. The Paternò Castello already owned a palace on part of this site, just inside the defensive wall. Librando (1971): 47–48.

13 Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 124.

the princes of Biscari worked over three generations to expand the palace by occupying more of the adjacent land. Through a series of acquisitions, the palace grew to occupy an entire, large *isolato*.<sup>14</sup>

Ignazio Paternò Castello's elaborate funeral on 1 September 1786 sealed his memory as Catania's premier citizen.<sup>15</sup> The archaeological projects he funded in Catania, his antiquities collection, and his correspondence with nobles and antiquarians around Europe linked him to an international elite of classical scholars and archaeologists.<sup>16</sup> He published two books on archaeology—*Discorso accademico sopra un'antica iscrizione trovata nel Teatro della città di Catania* (Catania, 1771) and *Viaggio per tutte le antichità della Sicilia* (Naples, 1781), an account of the classical sites he visited. From 1744, the Palazzo Biscari became the meeting place for the *Accademia degli Etnei* or *Aetnorum Academia*, a learned society that Ignazio founded.<sup>17</sup> Between 1752 and 1757, he built a museum in the palace with ten rooms, three galleries, and a central atrium. Here members of the *Accademia degli*

14 Three successive princes of Biscari commissioned the eighteenth-century rebuilding of the palace. Ignazio, third prince of Biscari, began work in 1695. The priest Consalvo Scaglia, acting on Ignazio's behalf, bought adjacent plots between 1696 and 1699 that allowed the palace to be expanded. ASC, *Scritture casa*, 27 January 1696, f. 27, *Scritture casa*, 27 August 1699, f. 35. During this period the Biscari received permission to incorporate a section of public road into the palace's *isolato*. ASC, notaio Carlo Lo Monaco, 15 February 1702, Vol.364, f. 321. Librando (1971): 48–49. Further areas were added in June 1704 through a donation from the baron of Sigona and acquisition of land from the heirs of Don Francesco Saverio Paternò Castello. ASC, *Scritture casa*, 5 June 1704, f. 81 and 29 June 1704, f. 73. See Librando (1971): 49 and 50, no.19. notaio Carlo Lo Monaco, 15 February 1702, vol. 364, f. 321. Librando (1971): 48–49. Vincenzo the fourth prince continued the building. Ignazio the fifth prince of Biscari commissioned a further, extensive expansion to the east. See Librando (1971): 48–49 and Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 135.

15 Writing 43 years later, the historian Francesco Ferrara describes the funeral as a day of public mourning, where the senators, guilds, religious groups, and others filed through the streets. 'That day was a day of public sadness. Almost all of the people, together in companies or congregations, the religious from all of the monasteries, the two chapters of the cathedral and from the collegiata, the roads department, the silk guild, and finally the senate in all its pomp accompanied the corpse through the streets to the Carmelite church, which imposed on all the duty to shed tears over the memory of a hero of the homeland, great friend of humanity, literary figure and patron of the learned.' Ferrara (1829): 257.

16 The volume ASC, Archivio Biscari, Corrispondenza Diversa, Vvol. 1074/P contains many letters written to Ignazio Paternò Castello. These include letters of recommendation from the British ambassador to Naples William Hamilton for English visitors to Sicily. ASC, Archivio Biscari, Corrispondenza Diversa, vol. 1074/P, f. 5. r and v. There are also letters to Ignazio Paternò Castello in vol. 1098/P *Lettere del Vicerè. Gran Maestro e cospicue persone* and in vol. 1104 bis/P *Corrispondenze antiche, scientifiche*. Calabrese (2010): 517–521 lists all of these letters' writers.

17 Ferrara (1829): 234–235.

*Etnei* and foreign visitors could study his collections of antique statues and medallions, minerals, lava, shells, coral, and dried sea creatures.<sup>18</sup>

Giovanni Ardizzone, in his *Elogio d'Ignazio Paternò Castello Principe di Biscari* (Catania, 1787), describes the palace as 'the great temple of Ignazio Paternò Castello's hospitality and generosity'.<sup>19</sup> Ignazio's funeral elegy by his librarian Giuseppe Buda, entitled *Varj componimenti dell'Accademia degli Etnei per la morte di Ignazio Paternò Castello Principe di Biscari* (Catania, 1787), lists 30 illustrious visitors to the palace, including William Hamilton and Patrick Brydon from England, Baron von Riedesel, Frederick Muenther, the Prussian Minister Loesch, a governor of Jamaica, the Comte de Borch, Count and Countess Potoski, Prince Poniatowki of Poland, Count Czernischew of Russia, Baron Elsesheim of Sweden, and Count Neni, Imperial Minister of Flanders.<sup>20</sup> Other visitors include Goethe, the French antiquarians Jean Houel and the Abbé Saint Non, and the English writers John Dryden Junior, Henry Swinburne, and Thomas Wright Vaughan.<sup>21</sup>

The palace was therefore important to Ignazio's position as Catania's most prominent citizen. His learned society and museum enabled his position as a participant in international aristocratic networks of archaeological scholarship. The ballroom, as will be seen, produced distinction through its refined materials and the aristocratic skills of dancing and polite conversation.

## The Ballroom: Permanence, Lightness, Distinction

Francesco Milizia, in *Principii di architettura civile* (Venice, 1785), recommends that ballrooms be a palace's largest room. The best shape is circular, elliptical, or polygonal. The ballroom should be decorated with crystal glass mirrors and marble, with the mirrors and lamps placed between the pilasters. Once the mirrors, lamps, and marble orders are in place, the ballroom will be suitable for all events, with no need for additional decoration.<sup>22</sup>

18 Ferrara (1829): 560, Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 135. The museum's contents are now in Catania's Museo Castello Ursino.

19 'His house, which is not of small appearance, was a great temple of hospitality, and of generosity. Here came gentlemen and literati from almost all of the world; and it was the object of their admiration, and their pens.' Ardizzone (1787): 19.

20 See Agnello, G. in Various Authors (1787): 72–74.

21 Goethe (1790), Houel (1785), Saint Non (1781), Dryden (1999), Swinburne (1783–1785), Wright Vaughan (1811).

22 'The ballroom should be one of the largest rooms, with an elevated balcony for the orchestra, and with staircases around it to hold a greater number of spectators. Its most convenient form is circular, elliptical or polygonal.' Milizia (1785), vol. 2: 108. 'The best decoration for this room



Fig. 4.2. Ceiling of the Palazzo Biscari ballroom. *Triumph of the Paternò family*. Fresco by Sebastiano Lo Monaco and stucco attributed to Gioacchino Gianforma and Ignazio Mazzeo. 1770s.



Fig. 4.3. East side of the Palazzo Biscari ballroom. The alcove for the *letto di parata* or presentation bed.

The Palazzo Biscari ballroom anticipates these recommendations. It is the largest room and is rectangular but with rounded corners at the east end and hexagonal corners at the west, giving an effect close to an oval plan. On the south side, doors give access to the private sections of the palace. On the north, doors open onto a gallery that leads to a sea-facing balcony. Above the tiled floor, in the centre of the elaborate ceiling decoration, there is an oval gallery and above this a cupola with lantern windows and a frescoed ceiling (Fig. 4.2).

The ballroom was completed in time for the 1772 marriage celebration of Ignazio Paternò Castello's heir Vincenzo. The room was important in assisting the family's networks of power and social status in Catania.<sup>23</sup> It was also the site for the presentation of the family heir. The western end incorporates an *alcove nobile* for the *letto di parata* or presentation bed that showed the mother and new-born baby (Fig. 4.3).<sup>24</sup> Portraits of the prince and princess of Biscari on either side of the alcove as well as the family arms above reinforce the alcove's association with dynastic lineage. The ballroom was also the site for the later lying-in-state of Ignazio Paternò Castello's body.

Instead of treating the ballroom as an example of a purportedly generic rococo style, this section investigates the specificity of the ballroom's materials and how they are deployed. My discussion is informed by Helen Hills' term 'affective material productivity'. Writing on seventeenth-century architecture, Hills argues that historians should pay attention to materials in terms of the emotional or suggestive affect they produce.<sup>25</sup> This means asking how the Palazzo Biscari ballroom's decoration and materials combine

is crystal glass in mirrors, sheets, or chandeliers between architectural orders of the most beautiful marble. Once these ornaments are installed, there is no need to disorder the house on the occasion of any spectacle.' Milizia (1785), vol. 2: 108.

23 Vincenzo Paternò Castello married in June 1772, but the 'festino' celebrating this was held in the following year. Librando cites ASC, Archivio Biscari, Libro Maestro VIII f. 265 for a payment in February 1773 for Vincenzo Paternò Castello's 'festino'. Librando (1971): 79.n.104. See also Calabrese (2012): 699.

24 Librando (1971): 80.n. 106 describes the alcove as 'The alcova nobile, where, on the occasion of births, the "letto di parata" [display bed] was set up'. The alcove and the Biscari arms are also referred to in Bennett (2010): 16 and 21–22. On the *letto di parata* in eighteenth-century Palermitan palaces, Stefano Piazza writes: 'In reality the room with the *letto di parata* was already established as an ulterior indication of social status and therefore we also find it adjacent to the ballroom in important residences.' Piazza does not substantiate how the *letto di parata* furthered social status. Piazza (2005b): 192.

25 'To look at these buildings today in terms of their affective material productivity, even if they can only be articulated incompletely, is to ask historians to undertake the kind of visual work that they are seldom accustomed to. It means staying the customary hastiness that sees architecture as mere insubstantiation of idea and instead—while resisting the urge to interpret

to produce refinement and lightness. What is aristocratic in the ballroom is light and fleeting.<sup>26</sup> Swirling ceiling decoration, shining mirrors, reflections around marble consoles, glass chandeliers, and gilded wooden mouldings create the effect of fire or liquid gold running around the ballroom. Wealth in the form of gold literally circulates around the ballroom.<sup>27</sup>

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction is important in reading the ballroom's materials in terms of social distinction. Bourdieu argues that distinction is embodied in materials, where lightness is assumed to be aristocratic and refined and where heaviness is associated with coarseness.<sup>28</sup> In this system of oppositions, materials and possessions occupy positions on a scale between light and heavy. Lightness might also imply something that is 'high', elevated, and sublime. The intelligent and the superior are 'brilliant', like the light reflecting from mirrors and chandeliers.

This aristocratic lightness is implicit in the delicate flickering shapes and intricate silhouettes of the Palazzo Biscari ballroom decoration. The lower parts of the ballroom walls are painted to look like swirling marble. Above the *trompe l'oeil* marble, panels of painted birds and flowers suggest silk painting or embroidery. The combination of birds and flowers resonates with the eighteenth-century fashion for *chinoiserie*. The birds themselves are small and light and can ascend to the sky with their delicate wings.

architecture as merely the sum of its parts—requires a willingness to inquire into the materiality of aspects of architecture and objects which yield “nothing’ to see’.” Hills (2012): 5.

26 On eighteenth-century decoration, Schoenberger and Soehner remark: ‘At the moment of the apogee of rococo art, the decoration, following the general modifications of that style, sheds any element of heaviness.’ Schoenberger and Soehner, eds. (1971): 92

27 Over four and a half years, Ignazio spent the rough equivalent of three years of his total income on the extension that included the ballroom. Librando (1971): 79, reports: ‘A total in the accounts tells us that 3,686 *onze* were spent between February 1769 and August 1773: a considerable sum allocated for the decoration of the ballroom.’ Librando (1971): 79.n. cites ASC, Archivio Biscari, Libro Maestro VII, ff. 284, 392, and Libro Maestro VIII, ff. 211 and 282. Ignazio's tax record for 1751 gives a net total income of 1,232 *onze* 3 *tari*. ASC, Archivio Biscari, 1255/P, f. 246r.

28 It is useful to quote Bourdieu's definition at length: ‘All the agents in a given social formation share a set of basic perceptual schemes, which receive the beginnings of objectification in the pairs of antagonistic adjectives commonly used to classify and qualify persons or objects in the most varied areas of practice. The network of oppositions between high (sublime, elevated, pure) and low (vulgar, low, modest), spiritual and material, fine (refined, elegant) and coarse (heavy, fat, crude, brutal), light (subtle, lively, sharp, adroit) and heavy (slow, thick, blunt, laborious, clumsy), free and forced, broad and narrow, or, in another dimension, between unique (rare, different, distinguished, exclusive, exceptional, singular, novel) and common (ordinary, banal, commonplace, trivial, routine), brilliant (intelligent) and dull (obscure, grey, mediocre) is the matrix of all the commonplaces which find such ready acceptance because behind them lies the whole social order. The network has its ultimate source in the opposition between the “élite” of the dominant and the “mass” of the dominated, a contingent, disorganized multiplicity, interchangeable and innumerable, existing only statistically.’ Bourdieu (2010): 470–471.



Fig. 4.4. Mirror in the Palazzo Biscari ballroom.

The ballroom's stucco and woodcarving are charged with fleeting, complexly outlined shapes that ripple across the surface or rise and fall like waves or music. They have an unresolved quality. Ornament becomes energy. The exact form that the wave and flame-like shapes will take seems irregular and unpredictable. Around the edges of the larger shapes, there are always smaller versions, continually born from the larger ones, like fractal patterns. On this restless energy in eighteenth-century interior decoration, Mariana van Rensselaer, in an essay entitled *Rococo* from 1879, writes: 'Not a straight line, not a regular edge, not a single repetition, not a particle of symmetry is allowed. Above all there is no rest, no base, no centre, no appearance of careful planning, of deliberate design: all is changeful, unpremeditated, liquid.'<sup>29</sup>

In the ceiling decoration, possibly the work of Gioacchino Gianforma and Ignazio Mazzeo, the outlines of the lighter stucco parts seem to burn at the edges, but the colour scheme resists any sense of heat (Fig. 4.2).<sup>30</sup> The restless lines suggest surging energy, but their white, blue, and peach colours have a calming and cool effect. These pastel colours, like cake icing or sorbet, contrast with the heat and energy of the forms. The chromatic

<sup>29</sup> Van Rensselaer (1879): 295.

<sup>30</sup> Librando posits that the stucco is by Gioacchino Gianforma and Ignazio Mazzeo due to their documented presence in Catania at the Abbazia dei Benedettini. Librando (1971): 80.

coolness in the middle of teeming ornamental energy creates some respite from the swirling, undulating decoration.

Antonio Pepe's gilded wooden decoration gives great attention to detail around mirrors and doors, particularly in carved and gilded wooden frames with layered cornices and small cartouche features (Fig. 4.4).<sup>31</sup> The flame-like forms around the mirrors and door frames are smaller versions of the ceiling's wave-like energy. The energy writhes around the frames of the doors and mirrors but then dissipates into smaller and smaller fractal forms. There are delicate irregular shapes that sometimes mutate away from flame forms into shapes suggesting leaves or tendrils.

### Gold and Glass: Liquidity and Transformation

The ballroom's refined materials of gold and glass are obtained through transformation. The materials are refined in two senses: refined because in their material circulation they are considered to be elevated, rare, precious, and aristocratic; and refined in their complex processes of manufacture that require transformation of the coarse, impure, and heavy to arrive at the purified substance.

Gold is the material of noble distinction *par excellence*. In *Della Fisica Sotterranea* (Naples, 1730), Giacinto Gimma compares it to the sun. He associates it with purity and virtue:

Gold is said to be the sun of chemicals. It is found in subterranean mines, in the grit of springs, in rivers, in sand and in rocks. It is a true metal, completely perfect. It does not decay, nor can it be corrupted by fire, neither can any part become burnt, as Fallopio says, neither can it be tainted by rust. When rubbed it does not leave any black or yellow mark as almost all metals do, as affirms Berenguccio. It has no odour, or taste, nor is it poisonous to eat, like some others, but is often a medicine to some illnesses, also by its great perfection and beauty, it is a universal opinion that gold gives great jovial virtue to men.<sup>32</sup>

31 Librando (1971): 80. ASC, Archivio Biscari, Libro Mastro V, f. 273 records a payment in 1741 to Antonio Pepe for tables and over-door pictures. ASC, Archivio Biscari, Libro Maestro III, records a payment to Salvatore Dicide from Palermo for gilding.

32 Gimma (1730), vol. 2: 98. Gabriele Fallopio was a sixteenth-century writer on medicine and anatomy. Vannoccio Biringuccio was the author of *De la pirotechnia* (Venice, 1540), a treatise on metalworking.

Gimma describes gold as immaculate. It cannot rust or be stained. It is pure because its material qualities in the Aristotelian sense, such as odour or taste, are few.<sup>33</sup> Its immaculate nature can be linked to the putatively perfect qualities of the aristocrat. Gimma describes gold as the ‘sun of the chemicals’ around which the other metals revolve like planets. It is like a king who bestows his sun-like warmth on his subjects who revolve around him. Gimma describes gold as possessing ‘virtù giovevoli’ (jovial virtues). This relates it to Jove or Jupiter, the king of the gods, as well as to ‘jovial’ in the sense of well-being and happiness.

Like mirrors, gold reflects the chandeliers’ light. In her study of material effect in sixteenth-century French palaces, Rebecca Zorach describes the liquid quality of gold decoration and its shimmering and reflecting quality: ‘Gold possesses not only liquidity but a kind of (false) liveliness or animation. Shine implies movement; gold threads in tapestry or clothing would have shimmered as they moved or caught the light of candles or torches, making inanimate objects appear animate.’<sup>34</sup> The movement and reflections of shining materials such as gold give a sense of movement like water or fire. The effects of gold surfaces also correspond to Bourdieu’s material binaries discussed earlier. Polished, light reflective surfaces, fleeting reflections, and lightness are materials of distinction. They contrast with less refined, coarse, dull, and heavy materials.

Gold is not carved like wood or stone. Like glass, it can be melted and made into a liquid. It can be moulded and hammered.<sup>35</sup> It can cover any surface. In the Palazzo Biscari ballroom, Antonio Pepe and his workshop carved the wooden door and mirror frames into intricate patterns. The complexity of the three-dimensional forms of the carved wooden surfaces, the smoothness of their gold surfaces, and the way the gold is now worn suggests that the artists used a varnish made from powdered gold rather than sheets of finely hammered gold leaf.<sup>36</sup>

As with most prestigious materials in Sicily, gold was imported, with the Spanish Americas as Europe’s main gold supplier.<sup>37</sup> Sicilian aristocrats

33 Aristotle *Categories* Section 5 in Barnes, ed. (1984): 10–11.

34 Zorach (2005): 195.

35 In his *Natural History*, Pliny describes gold’s malleability: ‘Nor is any other material more malleable or able to be divided into more portions, seeing that an ounce of gold can be beaten out into 750 or more leaves four inches square.’ Pliny (1949–54). Book 33. Section XIX.

36 For gold leaf, Angelo Guidotti’s *Nuovo trattato di qualsivoglia sorte di vernice* (Bologna, 1764), a manual contemporary with the creation of the Palazzo Biscari ballroom, describes how ammoniac was used to fix gold to any surface. Guidotti (1764): 26–27.

37 Gimma uses ‘India’ to refer to the Spanish Americas: ‘This great abundance of gold, which is found in India, has certainly been marvellous, and in Colao, a province, we find the walls of the Temple of the Sun completely covered with gold plates, and there were similar temples

greatly prized imported luxuries such as gold, silk, and mirrors. In the 1770s, the decade the Palazzo Biscari ballroom was completed, the English visitor Henry Swinburne reports that luxury items were imported, often transhipped through Naples rather than directly to Sicily from the producing country. Swinburne criticises the Sicilian aristocracy: 'Almost every article received into these kingdoms may more properly said to be called in by artificial wants and the caprices of luxury, than to supply the real call of necessity.' Sicilian exports consist of 'the raw unmanufactured produce of the soil', principally grain.<sup>38</sup>

Glass for mirrors and chandeliers is another material of distinction in the Palazzo Biscari ballroom. Mirrors line the bays between the doors on the two long sides of the ballroom, and there are smaller mirrors at the ends of the room. Glass was among the luxurious foreign products that wealthy Sicilians imported. In 1761, Arcangelo Leanti reports that Sicily imported crystal glass from Venice and Bohemia.<sup>39</sup> Venetian glass was still prized in Europe in the eighteenth century, but outside Italy it faced competition from England, France, and Central Europe. Venice continued to supply an Italian market, however.<sup>40</sup>

Glassmaking involves refining, purifying, and clarifying. Glass can be made into any shape and in any colour but is itself colourless and formless until poured or moulded. It can be a flat mirror, its surface like a still lake, or it can take the rounded tubular forms of glasses or chandeliers.<sup>41</sup> It is

in other places in Peru.' 'The greatest abundance of gold seems to be found in India, whence other metals and riches come.' Gimma (1730), vol. 2: 107 and 117. 'The mines of Potosí and Peru make these lucid signs shine when seen, where our luxury acquires bright splendour.' Scuderi (1818): 63.

38 Swinburne describes Sicily as 'still the never-failing granary of Europe'. Swinburne (1790), vol. 4: 198–200. Writing on the Sicilian economy in 1818, the economist Salvatore Scuderi notes the continued preference for foreign luxury items: 'In Sicily there has been the custom of prizing foreign manufactures than the national [products], especially luxurious ones. This custom, which comes from nowhere else but the vanity to show off what is foreign, and from the frivolity of finding precious what is marked with the manufacturing stamp of foreign industry, sets a great obstacle to the trade of our manufactures.' Scuderi (1818): 89.

39 Leanti includes 'sets of Venetian and Bohemian crystal' in his list of Sicilian imports. Leanti (1761): 220.

40 For example, Frederik IV of Denmark was given 'several hundred pieces' of glass when he visited Venice between 1708 and 1709. He created a special display room for the glass in Rosenborg Castle. Liefkes, ed. (1997): 48. Graham Child writes: 'Glass making in Venice during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries turned to a domestic market which catered for the ruling and bourgeois classes and satisfied the growing tourist trade.' Child (1990): 29.

41 Glass chandeliers appeared in European palaces from 1720 and, like mirrors, became essential items for the grand palace ballrooms. Liefkes, ed. (1997): 96.

precious because it is delicate and fragile.<sup>42</sup> Jean Hadicquer de Blancourt's *Les Secrets de l'Art de la Verrerie* (Paris, 1697), translated into English as *The Art of Glass. Shewing how to make all sorts of glass, crystal and enamel* (London, 1699), categorises glass as a perfect metal. Like gold, glass resists corrosion. It is created from silica and other elements that come from the earth, the same place that produces metals. Glass is moulded by fire, like metals. Only very powerful fire can destroy it:

We have asserted in our book, that glass is a perfect metal, since it will bear the utmost force of its fire as well as gold: And that there is but one sort of fire, more puissant than the vulgar, that can consume it: but here we will take notice, that there are two ways to make glass, and that it may be made more or less fixed, which is the least beautiful and least transparent, resists everything: no preparation of mercury, nor any species of aqua-fortis, can dissolve it, nor the most subtle poisons, or highest corrosives, arrive any further than to break it. The less fixed, on the contrary, which is the most clear and transparent, as that of Venice, is less capable of resistance, being composed of a more purified salt.<sup>43</sup>

Hadicquer de Blancourt treats glass as a material with a noble essence. His writing has an alchemical quality. He asserts that liquid and volatile states allow transmutation: 'It is not with common gross matters that philosophers work, nor can they bring anything to perfection, before they have converted their matters into fluid, volatile, and spiritual substances, such as they were before their coagulations.'<sup>44</sup> In Hadicquer de Blancourt's description, glassmaking uses fire to liberate a fluid and volatile material from its coagulation as silica. He then presents glassmaking as a secret transmutation leading to a putatively higher form of matter:

Glass has something in it so beautiful to the sight, and its transparency is so agreeable, that it is no wonder we find it by several, and even in the Holy Scripture itself, compared not only to gold, the most perfect of all

42 Pliny the Elder comments on this connection between luxury and fragility. He describes how cups of gold and silver were discarded in favour of crystal: 'Afterwards these were flung aside and began to be held of no account, when there was an excess of gold and silver. Out of the same earth we dug supplies of fluorspar and crystal, things which their mere fragility rendered costly. It came to be deemed the proof of wealth, the true glory of luxury, to possess something that might be absolutely destroyed in a moment.' Pliny the Elder (1949–1954): Book 23. Section II.

43 Hadicquer de Blancourt (Paris, 1697). English translation of 1699: page 3 of preface.

44 Ibid.: 11.

metals, but also to things far higher and more spiritual. They are mysteries of deeper consequences, than at first we imagine, since by them we are informed, that vitrification gives a better being, or nobler nature.<sup>45</sup>

Although glass is forged in the heat of fire, the final product is clear and reflective like ice. Hadicquer de Blancourt makes this connection between glass and ice:

The name of glass, which the French, Germans and English have given it, seems to be taken from its resembling or approaching somewhat in its colour to azure, or sky-colour. The word *glass* also seems to be derived from its resemblance to ice (from glaciers), while fire does much the same thing in glass, as the frost in the water: thus, all glass looks like frozen water.<sup>46</sup>

Sparkling, reflective wall surfaces were once produced in palaces through colourful and intricately patterned tapestries of silk thread. By the latter part of the seventeenth century, large mirrors now replaced tapestries in palace corridors and other expanses of wall.<sup>47</sup> Innovations in glass technology allowed for mirrors such as those in the Palazzo Biscari that had a brighter, clearer reflective surface than the earlier mirrors made of polished sheets of metal or marble. In the fifteenth century, the Venetians developed *cristallo*, a clear and colourless glass. The technique uses a silica compound and a very pure form of soda derived from distilled ashes of marine plants. In the sixteenth century, sheets of very thin tin or silver were fixed to the back of the glass using mercury. This process was known as ‘silvering’.<sup>48</sup> In the eighteenth century, Giacinto Gimma describes these newer tin-backed mirrors as an ‘*invenzione moderna*’.<sup>49</sup>

45 Ibid.: page 3 of preface. On pp. 7–8, Hadicquer de Blancourt cites John: 20.18 on the Heavenly City made of gold as clear as glass, and Job: 28.17 where God’s wisdom is greater than gold or crystal.

46 Hadicquer de Blancourt (Paris, 1697). English translation of 1699: 6. Isidore of Seville connects glass’s Latin word *vitrum*—precursor of the Italian *vetro*—to *visus* or ‘sight’, because anything contained in glass is visible. Barney, Lewis, Beach, and Berghof, eds. (2006): 328.

47 ‘In the sixteenth century, both steel and glass mirrors were used. But glass triumphed in the seventeenth century, most notably at Versailles, where 306 panels gave the illusion of eighteen huge, solid mirrors. At the end of the century, two-thirds of Parisian households owned a mirror. In the eighteenth century, the object invaded household décor, encroaching on the domain of tapestries.’ Jean Delumeau in the preface to Melchior Bonnet (2001): ix–x.

48 Hadicquer de Blancourt (Paris, 1697). English translation of 1699: 344.

49 On the older, polished metal mirrors, Hadicquer de Blancourt writes: ‘we already noted in the first chapter, that ‘tis about two hundred years since the invention of looking-glasses, and also

Mirrors emphasise the people in the room as subjects who create the event, and as objects observed by themselves and others as they appear and disappear in the flashing movement of the mirrors. As subjects, guests are visually presented to themselves. Mirrors realise and make public the desire to look at oneself as well as the awareness that one is the object of others' gaze. This self-regarding can be for monitoring appearance. In their reflections, the nobility could check that their postures and gestures were correct. They could see in the mirrors what others around them were doing. They could see how their dancing and their appearance and movements compared to those of others.

Orlando Figes points out this connection between mirrors and aristocratic posture and gesture. Although Figes is discussing aristocratic entertainments in Russia, the importance of mirrors in salons and ballrooms applies to Sicilian palaces such as the Palazzo Biscari. Figes notes how the mirrors of the ballroom allowed the nobility to monitor themselves:

Etiquette demanded that they hold themselves and act in the directed form: the way they walked and stood, the way they entered or left a room, the way they sat and held their hands, the way they smiled or nodded their heads—every pose and gesture was carefully scripted. Hence in the ballroom and reception hall the walls were lined with mirrors for the *beau monde* to observe their performance.<sup>50</sup>

Hadicquer de Blancourt argues that this potential for self-evaluation and self-correction is a positive attribute of the mirror:

Among all the excellencies of the art, none comes near this, nothing can be finer, or admit of greater admiration, than to see that all of the actions of the beholder, are so justly and lively represented in these glasses, that he has an opportunity of discovering what is to be valued on him, and correcting what's amiss; these truths are too apparent for any to disprove; for the experience of them are at this day to be made as easily by the meanest as the greatest persons.<sup>51</sup>

how they were found out: Before these the ladies made use of steel, or copper, or well-polished marble mirrors, these have been in use for many ages.' Hadicquer de Blancourt (Paris, 1697). English translation (1699): 339. The quotation from Gimma is Gimma (1730): 322.

<sup>50</sup> Figes (2002): 140–141.

<sup>51</sup> Hadicquer de Blancourt (Paris, 1697). English translation of 1699: 340.

For Hadicquer de Blancourt, distinguished people should control the body and its presentation. The mirror can help a person decide which parts of their physical appearance to maintain and emphasise and which to hide or modify. The great increase in the availability of mirrors by the eighteenth century aided the nobility in practising dance steps or other aristocratic activities such as fencing or bowing and curtseying. In palace ballrooms such as the Palazzo Biscari, the mirror is a material of refinement and distinction, an instrument for monitoring and modifying one's own body, and an instrument for observing the bodies of others.

### **Lightening the Aristocratic Body: 'Dance which Gives Grace to the Advantages We Receive from Nature'**

This section discusses the importance of dance for eighteenth-century aristocrats such as the Paternò Castello in maintaining aristocratic distinction. At balls, nobles performed with and for each other. This public performance extended to the highest social levels, including monarchs and their families. A painting attributed to Martin van Meytens shows the young Marie Antoinette of Austria and her brother dancing (Fig. 4.5). The royal children have learnt a ballet and are performing it for the adults' approval. Young women are on one side, young men on the other. All those present are under scrutiny. The children's bodies appear stiff and mechanical. Their faces show concentration, although perhaps the boy looks less comfortable and fluid. The children need to remember all of the dance movements. There is a sense of not wanting to make a mistake under the public gaze. There is display of learning and perhaps fear of not making the dance appear natural.

Dance was a skill that aristocrats needed to produce in a seemingly natural way. This relates to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*.<sup>52</sup> *Habitus* as theorised by Bourdieu comprises the many social behaviours that lack overtly stated rules. It includes both an individual's social practices and the way that individuals grade or calibrate their practices to the practices

52 Bourdieu defines *habitus* thus: 'The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively "regulated" and "regular" without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor.' Bourdieu (2010): 59.



Fig. 4.5. School of Martin van Meytens. *The Children of Maria Theresa at the Performance of the Ballet 'Il trionfo d'amore' by von Gaßmann*. 1765. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, Gemäldegalerie. Image copyright KHM-Museumsverband.

of others. These behaviours can be changed and adapted and often seem so natural or self-evident as to be unworthy of discussion. Their apparent naturalness reinforces the apparent naturalness of such divisions as class

and gender. Dance is learnt through formal training, but *habitus* includes all movements, tastes, habits, and ways of classifying that are often acquired informally and seem natural. These ways of doing and categorising are powerful because they are unquestioned. They enable and 'prove' such social categories as class and gender.<sup>53</sup>

The ballroom was central for the performance of social distinction that was part of the work of aristocracy. On the importance of balls and ballrooms in the social life of the Catanian nobility, the English traveller Thomas Wright Vaughan, in a letter written from the city in April 1810, notes the frequency of dances among the local aristocracy: 'You would be much amused at the fancy dances which are frequent throughout Sicily, particularly at Catania: where the noblesse, who they calculate at three hundred, have a weekly ball, and, by constantly dancing together, have arrived at great perfection in the performance.'<sup>54</sup>

Wright Vaughan's rather condescending description gives an idea of the size and frequency of the balls in Catania. The nobles were 'constantly dancing together'. He does not elaborate on why the reader would find the dances amusing, although 'fancy dances' implies that he found these events overly elaborate. Dancing was an entertainment but was also a performance that the nobles of Catania needed to perfect. It was a way of producing and maintaining inclusion in a shared elite culture—and therefore by implication excluding those who could not participate.

The importance of perfecting and displaying the ability to dance is revealed in the postures of many eighteenth-century portraits depicting the subject's feet in a dance position. In the Palazzo Biscari's second salon, a full-length portrait shows Vincenzo Paternò Castello in a pose that echoes Hyacinthe Rigaud's 1701 portrait of Louis XIV (Figs. 4.6 and 4.7).<sup>55</sup> In Rigaud's painting, Louis is showing his dancing legs. His feet are in the fourth position

53 Bourdieu (1990): 54, and Bourdieu (2010) 165–166. Bourdieu (2010): 64 quotes the Chevalier de Méré's *De la conversation* (Paris, 1677). 'I would have a man know everything and yet, by his manner of speaking, not be convicted of having studied.'

54 Wright Vaughan (1811): xlvi.

55 Chandra Mukerji reads the Rigaud portrait as showing the ageing Louis XIV's elegance and physical fitness, and his imposition of dancing upon the court: 'The importance of ballet to this culture of the courtier under Louis XIV cannot be overestimated. The king appointed a court ballet-master to ensure that nobles had dancing lessons, and he elevated the dance as an art form by setting up an Academy of Dance. The results were palpable. Many of the prints depicting gentlemen of the period, whether they showed men standing in the garden or engaging in war, presented them in ballet positions with their toes pointed out and their hands held in a graceful line.' Mukerji (1997): 241.

of the five positions of French ballet.<sup>56</sup> His left leg is forward, his right hand resting on a cane. His feet are pointed outward. He shows balance and poise. The cane and the high heels of his shoes reduce the amount of contact his body has with the ground, furthering the impression of lightness.

Vincenzo Paternò Castello is painted in a similar pose, in three-quarter profile, although the position is reversed compared to the Rigaud portrait. His right foot is forward. His right hand is on his hip, sweeping back his coat to show more of his legs, his left hand rests on a cane. His feet point outwards. Unlike the portrait of Louis XIV, Vincenzo Paternò Castello does not have a sword. The books and pen on the table, and the balcony and palace behind him, suggest the administrator and builder rather than the warrior. Many eighteenth-century portraits show their sitters in one of the dance positions, with out-turned feet. Out-turned feet in particular became a marker of distinction, and parallel or inward-turned feet a mark of rusticity.<sup>57</sup>

Aristocratic men learnt dancing, riding, and fencing within a system of bodily comportment that involved pointed toes, delicate balance, and the self-conscious control of arms and hands.<sup>58</sup> This body control aimed to produce lightness, adroitness, and fleeting, springing movements. Bodily lightness relates to Bourdieu's distinction in lightness of materials

56 Bouffard (2012): 168, cites JoLynn Edwards, who notes the correspondence between Louis' position and the fourth position described in Pierre Rameau's treatise *Le maître à danser*. Edwards (1987): 219.

57 Mickaël Bouffard notes: 'European portraitists, in fact, made such extensive use of these five positions that, by the eighteenth century, they had become as much a commonplace of swagger portraiture as the column and drapery we almost systematically find in the background of this type of portrait.' Bouffard's article discusses many of these portraits. Bouffard (2012): 170. On the body and distinction: 'The extremely sophisticated postures of seventeenth and eighteenth-century portraiture reflect painters' preoccupation with lending distinction to persons of quality through the language of all parts of the body. These preoccupations were also those of a culture of civility and politeness that looked to exterior signs for sound testimonies of a person's soul and birth. These signs could only be provided by one's appearance, and thus the body was the vehicle of distinction *par excellence*.' Bouffard (2012): 167. On turned out feet: 'In daily life, a nimble body and good manners were among the most important guarantees of social advancement. There can be no doubt that the outward turn of the feet was perceived as a sign of nobility. Conversely, feet kept parallel or turned inward conveyed grotesqueness or rusticity and, consequently, excluded an individual from the company of the elite.' Bouffard (2012): 184.

58 Chandra Mukerji writes: 'Aristocratic men fill their days with physical activities that would render them good soldiers, graceful courtiers, and elegant dancers. These physical attributes were taken as marks of their "natural" virtue and social superiority. These codified forms of body control helped to produce a distinctive posture, movement, and set of gestures identified with the French aristocracy.' Mukerji (1997): 241. Roy Strong argues: 'the ballet emerged as the epitome in microcosm of a correctly ordered body politic'. Strong (1981): 14 quoted in Zorach (2005): 224.



Fig. 4.6. Portrait of Vincenzo Paternò Castello in the second salon of the Palazzo Biscari.

discussed earlier. Refined materials imply that impurities have been removed and desired properties accentuated. Refinement and lightness in bodily movement have the same implication. Dance training removes the heavier, baser traits of physical movement. It refines the actions of the aristocratic body.

Eighteenth-century dance manuals stress dance's importance as an accomplishment that aristocrats must master. In *Trattato del Ballo Nobile*



Fig. 4.7. Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XIV of France*. 1701. (Image from Wikimedia Public Domain. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait\\_of\\_Louis\\_XIV#/media/File:Louis\\_XIV\\_of\\_France.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Louis_XIV#/media/File:Louis_XIV_of_France.jpg)).

*di Giambatista Dufort indirizzato all'eccellenza delle Signore Dame e de' Signori Cavalieri Napoletani* (Naples, 1728), Giambatista Dufort argues that the ability to dance well confers many benefits, including social distinction, admiration from others, moderation in bodily movement, and physical

health. Skill in this ‘noble pursuit’ not only distinguishes the dancer from others but is necessary for people of distinction.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the Neapolitan dancer and dance master Gennaro Magri, in *Trattato teorico-prattico di ballo* (Naples, 1779), argues that dancing well is not only pleasurable but also gives grace and poise to many other aristocratic activities. In Magri’s text, the skills of dancing extend outwards to other aristocratic social necessities. Magri uses the verb *contenersi*—to control, or literally to contain, oneself.<sup>60</sup> The training of dance in moderating outward signs of emotion extends to social situations such as conversing or receiving guests. It contributes to aristocrats’ self-presentation as superior because they appear to have mastery of their emotions.

Dance not only makes a person admired and distinguished but also perfects the body. Pierre Rameau, dance master at the Spanish court and author of *Le maître à danser* (Paris, 1725), emphasises how dance strengthens and reinforces natural physical grace and masks imperfections of posture and movement:

It is dance which gives grace to the advantages we receive from nature, in regulating all of the movements of the body, and affirming them in their correct positions: and if dance does not efface completely the defects we carry from birth, it reduces them, or hides them. This sole definition is enough to show its usefulness, and to excite the desire to master it.<sup>61</sup>

Both Rameau and Dufort argue for dance training as an activity that not only gives pleasure but also improves nature. Dance accentuates or reduces existing traits, even if it cannot create what is not originally present nor completely remove what nature determines. Magri also argues that dance

59 ‘And in truth there is nothing in this more magnificent, and which gives more delight, than the festival of the ball, in which those who can dance perfectly make themselves admired, and distinguished from the rest. This noble pursuit, not being so violent, but moderate, as well as being necessary for people of distinction, serves equally to those who need it, to remain in good health and to exercise the body.’ Dufort (1728): Unnumbered pages 5–6 of *Avviso a chi Legge* section.

60 ‘Not only delight, as some others believe, is the objective of this pleasurable faculty; but the utility that can be gained is more than sweet; I dare to say that it makes itself necessary and important for a gentleman. The way to present oneself in a conversation, to receive people at home with politeness, how to control oneself in a discussion, and recognise people with greetings and respect, are all things that one learns from dance.’ Magri (1779), vol. 1: 13. This resonates with a part of Dufour’s treatise quoted earlier, where Dufour conceives of dance as ‘this noble exercise, being not violent, but tempered’. Dufort (1728): Unnumbered pages 5–6 of *Avviso a chi Legge* section.

61 Rameau (1725): ix. Later in the eighteenth century, Charles Compan in his *Dictionnaire de Danse* (Paris, 1787) repeats Rameau’s sentences, unattributed and with small changes of wording. Compan (1787): viii. On Rameau and the Spanish court, see Allanbrook and Hilton (1992): 144.

refines nature, but he reads dance less as a corrective than a return to a purportedly more original state.<sup>62</sup> This claim presents dance not as an education towards new ways of controlling the body but as a reverse training, a process of undoing the accretion of bad physical habits to reveal the body's essential, divinely endowed symmetry. This original symmetry is Platonic or Edenic but becomes weakened or lost through wrong habit. Dancing in the right way brings the dancers closer to humanity's supposed original and purer state. The physical grace and self-control associated with nobility, which dance perfects, is by implication part of humanity's Edenic and putatively more perfect nature.

### Dance in the Staging of Politically Meaningful Hierarchies

Dancing at balls, both with other aristocrats and for the ruler in allegorical court balls, was political. The ballroom was an instrument where courtiers showed allegiance to their ruler. It was a site for the enactment and assertion of differences of gender and of social rank, of marriage arrangements and erotic encounters. The protocol for entering and leaving the room, and for greeting others, varied according to gender and to the hierarchy of aristocratic rank. Dance manuals, including those by Rameau and Magri, and etiquette manuals such as the Chevalier de Méré's *Discours de la Conversation* (Paris, 1677), laid out this protocol.<sup>63</sup>

For Louis XIV of France, dancing was serious. With his *Lettre patente du Roy pour l'établissement de l'académie Royale de danse en la ville de Paris* of 1661, Louis inaugurated the *Académie Royale de Danse*.<sup>64</sup> The academy determined conventions of dancing for French aristocrats. In the *Lettre patente*, Louis proclaims dancing as respectable and necessary, essential for forming the aristocratic body:

Know that the art of dance has always been recognised as one of the most respectable and necessary to train the body, and gives it the best

62 'Not only this, it also gives to the body parts a beautiful disposition, which from dance is given to our body to provide it with a new symmetry: but it only makes more disposed and well placed that thing itself which the human body had from nature.' Magri (1779), vol. 1: 13.

63 Rameau (1725), Magri (1779).

64 Louis XIV (1661). On the importance of dance for Louis XIV, Chandra Mukerji writes: 'The importance of ballet to this culture of the courtier under Louis XIV cannot be overestimated. The king appointed a court ballet-master to ensure that the nobles had dancing lessons, and he elevated the dance as an art form by setting up an Academy of dance.' Mukerji (1997): 241.

and most natural posture in all sorts of exercises, among others that of arms, and is therefore the most advantageous and useful for our nobility, and for others who have the honour to approach us, not only in times of war in our armies, but also in times of peace in the entertainments of our dances. However, during the disorder and confusion of the last wars, there was introduced in the said art, as in all the others, such a great number of abuses capable of leading them to irreparable ruin, that many people through the ignorance and inability that they had installed in this art of dance, managed to show this publicly.<sup>65</sup>

Louis connects skills in dancing to skill with weapons, and essentially orders the aristocracy to improve in both. In Rigaud's portrait, Louis lifts his robe to display his dancing legs and the conspicuous sword in its jewelled scabbard. The king dances and is by implication also able to fight with the sword. Louis' message to the nobles is that their bodies will serve him by fighting in his armies and by dancing at the balls that he provides. His new dance academy will correct what he sees as defects in the aristocrats' dancing. It will standardise not only their dancing at balls but, as will be seen, many other aspects of their public behaviour.

At a ball, dancers followed the systematised steps that dance masters showed in their manuals and dance lessons. The dances subordinated the individual dancer into a larger group where all the members followed prescribed and learnt movements. Chandra Mukerji notes this connection between choreography and military manuals such as Alain Mallet's *Les Travaux de Mars ou l'Art de la Guerre* (Paris, 1684). Mallet's treatise brings out a shared concern with timing, rhythm, formation, and footwork in military manoeuvres and dancing. On drilling soldiers, Mallet observes that the new recruit must learn 'tous les temps et mesures que l'on observe dans le régiment' (all of the timings and measurements that are observed in the regiment).<sup>66</sup> These measurements include always marching and

65 Louis XIV (1661): 3–4.

66 'The dancers or soldiers were not supposed to act as trained individuals, but formed members of a group that could act as a political force, whether showing grace in a public ballet or prowess in battle. They submitted themselves to common formations, ways of moving, and relations to one another. The dances and military formations depicted in books of the period, significantly enough, presented generic turns for dances, marching formations, ballet positions for the hands and feet, or ways of holding weapons. These strategies/choreographies ordered the bodies of aristocratic men into politically meaningful forms; these techniques yielded French aristocratic men who were visible and subservient members of court society and military life.' Mukerji (1997): 245. Mukerji includes illustrations from Mallet but does not discuss the text. Mukerji (1997): 12, 44, 47, 53, 54, 57, 58, 90, 243, 246.

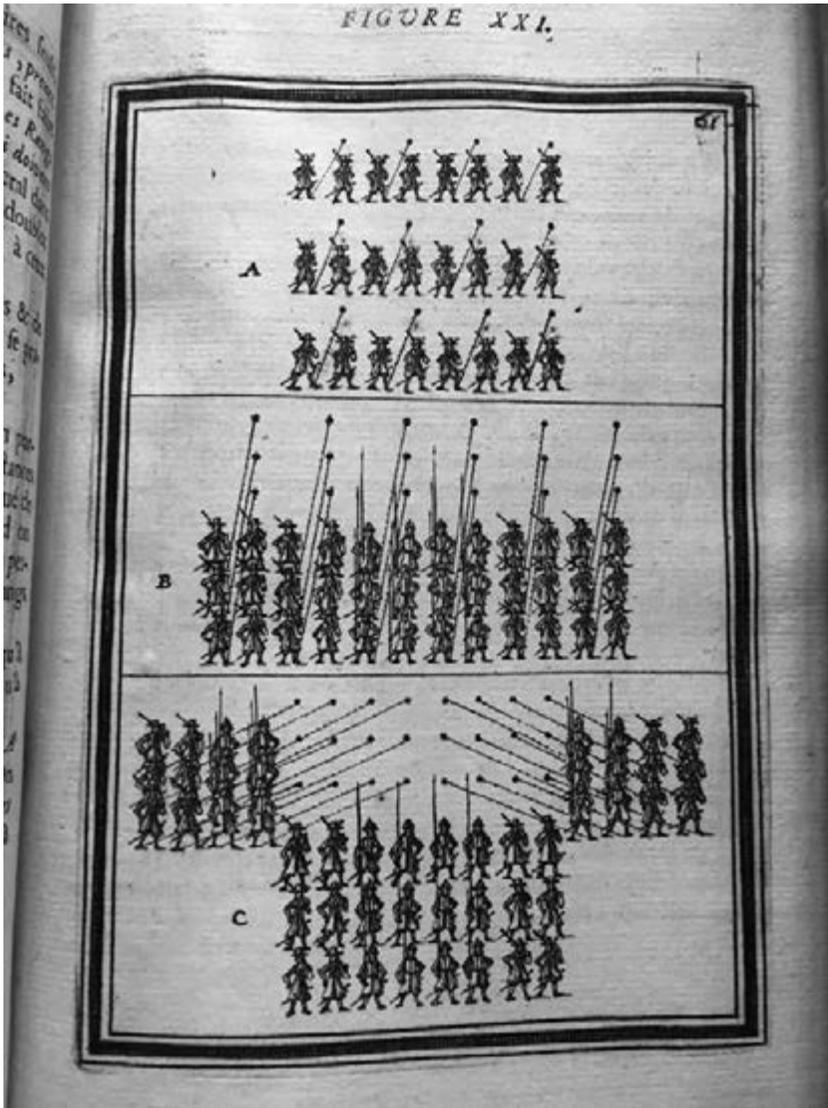


Fig. 4.8. Alain Mallet. *Les Travaux de Mars ou l'Art de la Guerre*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1684). Volume 3, page 23. Image courtesy of the Biblioteca Regionale della Sicilia Alberto Bombace, Palermo.

turning with the left foot first, and keeping one foot of distance between the feet when marching. The soldier must always align his shoulders with the shoulders of the man to his left. When the battalion halts, he must use the front of his right foot to align himself with the feet of the soldier to his right. Mallet gives other rules on the spaces between soldiers. When under cannon fire, the distance between ranks (rows) and files (columns)

should be six feet. In infantry combat, this distance should be one and a half feet.<sup>67</sup>

The imposition of geometry extends from the arrangements of large numbers of troops down to the movements of each individual. Mallet advises that the ranks and files must always be perfectly straight. This is so important that the commander must ensure very strict observance, with sergeants to enforce this.<sup>68</sup> In Mallet's manual, there is a concern with symmetry and with beauty. He shows how battalions can change direction and form themselves into squares, rectangles, hexagons, octagons, and crosses (Fig. 4.8). The number of ranks and files changed according to numerical formula through *douplements*, or manoeuvres for doubling. Wherever possible, there had to be an even number of ranks and files: 'For ease of manoeuvres and the beauty of the exercise, it is necessary, as far as possible, that the ranks and files are in even numbers.'<sup>69</sup> The individual becomes part of a greater unit. The soldiers' ordering and the results of their training are clearly visible. The implication is that an entity ordered by geometry and training is superior.

Geometry and measurement continue in military treaties into the eighteenth century. Philippe-Henri de Grimoard's *Essai Théorique et Pratique sur les Batailles* (Paris, 1775) gives measurements for distances between squadrons in battle formation.<sup>70</sup> Le Roy De Bosroger's *Principes de L'art de la Guerre* (Paris, 1779), published in the same decade that the Palazzo Biscari ballroom was finished, shows the drills that all soldiers need to learn. In De Bosroger's words, soldiers need to be 'broken in', like animals for training. He describes their movements as mechanical, implying that after training, any soldier will perform them automatically.<sup>71</sup>

Aristocrats commanded troops in war and showed subservience by dancing for the ruler in allegorical dances that assigned particular virtues to the ruler.<sup>72</sup> Sicilian aristocrats performed these allegorical balls at the

67 Mallet (1684), vol. 3: 16–17.

68 'For a battalion to be well trained, it must have parallel lines between the files as well as the ranks. This is something that the commanding officer must be very particular in making observed, as well as keeping the ranks and files straight; the sergeants who he will place between the aisles will assist greatly in this.' Mallet (1684), vol. 3: 16.

69 Mallet (1684), vol. 3: 16, 22, 28–47.

70 De Grimoard (1775): 23–24.

71 'Turn right, turn left, form into ranks, double them, redouble them, observe distances, align themselves, march forward, or divide into quarters, these are simple and purely mechanical movements, which each soldier needs to be trained into.' De Bosroger (1779), vol 1: 79–80.

72 'Dance in the serious or noble style had two aspects for the French courtiers. They performed social dances in the ballroom, where it was usual for only one couple to dance at a time, and

viceroy's court in Palermo. Pietro La Placa's *Relazione delle pompe festive seguite in Palermo capital della Sicilia nella celebrità delle regie nozze di Carlo Borbone re di Sicilia e di Napoli, con Maria Amalia principessa di Polonia e di Sassonia* (Palermo, 1736) describes the celebrations in Palermo for the wedding of Charles Bourbon and Maria Amalia of Saxony:

Having enjoyed the harmony of that serenade, the celebration was crowned with a concert ball, and other imaginative dances done by the ladies, and gentlemen, each one making sure to pursue with joy the communal happiness in the presence of the most excellent Viceroy, who with his joyous and generous hospitality provided spirit to the vivacity of the nobility.<sup>73</sup>

La Placa emphasises 'comuni allegrezze' (communal happiness) and the viceroy's generosity, but the entertainments also involved ordering and subservience. On day one of the celebrations, there is a ball in the hall of the viceroy's palace where portraits of earlier Sicilian kings and viceroys look down upon the guests. The engraving of this event by Antonio Bova shows couples dancing in a circle. The viceroy watches, seated on a large chair with his feet on a cushion. Behind the viceroy a line of women watch, and behind them stand a line of men. The viceroy is sitting further forward than the other spectators; none of the other chairs are aligned with his. The seating partly follows Rameau's rules for the ceremonial at a royal ball.<sup>74</sup>

On the evening of the second day, there is another carefully staged dance. The nobles first listen to a *serenata* or choral work praising the royal couple; then aristocratic dancers perform a ball alluding to the royal wedding. In La Placa's description, the dances alternate between those performed by women and those performed by men. The nobles are also free to wander all night through parts of the palace, listening to choirs singing in different rooms and refreshed by iced, sugared drinks.<sup>75</sup>

theatrical dances in court entertainments. In the latter the content of the dances approximated those composed for the ballroom, but the costumes were elaborate and symbolic of the dancers' roles.' Hilton (1981): 3.

<sup>73</sup> La Placa (1736): 31.

<sup>74</sup> La Placa (1736) Image between pages 31 and 32. See <https://archive.org/details/relazione-dellepoomlapl/page/30/mode/2up>. Bova's engraving does not include the circle or oval of fixed wooden seats that Rameau prescribes, within which only high-ranking nobles are admitted, but it shows men seated behind women, as in Rameau's treatise. Rameau (1725): 49–50.

<sup>75</sup> 'Now that singing the abovementioned serenata was finished, there followed the instruments which gave spirit to a concert ball by four ladies, and four gentlemen, which alluded to the royal wedding. In the meantime, the choir repeated with festive echo the finale of the serenata, upon

As in the decoration of the Palazzo Biscari ballroom, there is lightness and impermanence. La Placa emphasises the bright illumination and praises the vivacity and ingenuity of the festivity ('il brio, la gala, ed il genio').<sup>76</sup> The spectacle, with all its preparation, is for a short time only. Decorations such as the large portraits of the royal couple on the canopy-like apparatus, the specially prepared allegory of the concert ball with its dances and music, and even the ice in the pyramids of sorbet-like dessert that the nobles eat are all ephemeral.

The festivity's floating, ephemeral nature, with its decorations, refreshments, and choirs echoing from different rooms, enmeshes with the seriousness of political and social hierarchies. One such hierarchy involves gender. The dance manuals inscribe gender difference in the etiquette and movements of the ball. Illustrations of the dance positions in the treatises mainly show men. For example, of the 44 images of the dance positions in Rameau's *Le maître à danser*, three show women dancing with men, and only four show women alone. Rameau uses male figures to illustrate movements that both sexes will follow, such as the five feet positions. The long skirts that women wore meant that male figures showed the leg positions more clearly, but overall there were more movements for men—such as how to take off a hat or present the hand for dancing—than there were for women.<sup>77</sup>

Gennaro Magri advises on how men and women should enter a ball or 'conversazione'. Men must enter the room holding their hat in the left hand. The right hand will be to shake a man's hand, or to hold a woman's hand to kiss. When a gentleman is three steps away from someone he wants to bow to, he puts his right foot forward and starts to bow, moving the left foot level with the right as he continues the bow. The depth of the bow depends on whom he is saluting. The section of Rameau's *Le maître à danser* entitled *De la manière d'ôter son chapeau et de le remettre* ('On the manner of taking off one's hat and putting it back on') exemplifies this attention to precise

which music the movements of the dance were based; so the nobles were entertained until six at night, served by unceasing refreshments of water, and pyramids of sugared ice, in other continuous dances alternating with ladies and gentlemen, admiring themselves for all the vivacity, festivity and ingenuity with which they celebrated with beautiful solemnity. In the other rooms of the palace there were various musical choirs, that served to delight those who wanted to stay.' La Placa (1736): 68.

76 'When the evening arrived, all of the nobility gathered in the senate palace, where all its rooms were splendidly adorned with rare tapestries and illuminated with enormous pieces of silver and many lights.' La Placa (1736): 57.

77 Rameau (1725).

detail. Rameau includes a diagram of the head and arm positions, and a line showing how the hand and hat should move.<sup>78</sup>

The performance of aristocratic distinction by men involves movements that are controlled and martial. The movements' mechanical stiffness, with measurements such as lifting the right arm first to the level of the shoulder, suggests the military drills discussed earlier. The man removes the hat with the right hand, the same one he uses for the sword.

When a woman enters a room, Gennaro Magri advises that she should have her hands crossed above the waist, with the right hand on top. If she is carrying a fan, she should hold it between her index and middle finger. When she is one foot away from a person she wants to greet, she should move her left foot back and curtsey, bending the knees but always keeping the back straight.<sup>79</sup> Rameau's *Le Maître à Danser* includes a chapter entitled *De la manière dont les demoiselles doivent marcher, et celle de se bien présenter* (On the manner in which young women should walk, and how to present themselves well).<sup>80</sup> He advises that when walking, a woman 'will have the head straight, the shoulders low and the arms held back accompanying well the body, but bent, and holding the hands one behind the other and holding a fan, but above all without affectation'.<sup>81</sup>

Rameau recommends that young women practice these movements in a mirror.<sup>82</sup> It does not come easily but needs practice. The gender-specific ways of moving must appear natural rather than artificial. The procedure for men to remove their hats, and the other movements in the dance treatises, is part of what Judith Butler calls 'the gendered stylisation of the body'. Butler argues that there is no 'internal essence' of gender. Instead, it is socially produced.<sup>83</sup> Rameau warns of the consequences of not maintaining the posture he describes. If the woman keeps her head and body straight, without affectation, she will be seen as a 'Demoiselle d'un grand air'.<sup>84</sup> If

78 'The body being posed following the rules prescribed above, if you want to greet someone, lift the right arm to the height of the shoulder, as shown in the first figure 1, with the hand open, 2. Then bend the elbow to take your hat, which makes a semi-circle, following the words [in the diagram], bend the elbow, the hat follows the movement from the elbow itself.' Rameau (1725): 24–25. For the image, see <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8623292z/f71.item.r=Pierre%20Rameau.zoom>

79 Magri (1779), vol. 2: 46–47.

80 Rameau (1725): 38–42.

81 *Ibid.*: 42.

82 *Ibid.*: 39.

83 'The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylisation of the body.' Butler (2007): xv.

84 Rameau (1725): 40.

she moves her head ‘negligently’, she will appear nonchalant. If her head is forward, she will seem indolent; if lowered, she will be seen as introspective or disreputable.<sup>85</sup> Maintenance of the prescribed posture therefore enacts the purportedly natural qualities associated with a certain gender and class.

Rameau focuses on nonchalance, indolence, and introspection as negative qualities in young women. These qualities involve separation from expectations around aristocratic social interaction. In Rameau’s description, moving the head nonchalantly perhaps implies informality or a lack of respect for others. Holding the head forward, Rameau’s ‘indolent’ posture, can imply laziness, whereas holding the head back and up makes a person appear more alert. Appearing introspective suggests disassociation from social expectations, as the introspective person will not be focussed on interacting with others at balls and other social events. By following Rameau’s prescribed movements instead, the young woman will appear aristocratic (‘d’un grand air’).

Dance therefore not only distinguished aristocrats from others but was implicated in political hierarchies of rank and gender among aristocrats. Aristocrats performed for the ruler by dancing in allegorical balls at which the audience were seated according to divisions of social rank and gender. Theatrical performances, and balls where aristocrats danced with each other, were mechanisms where the nobility outwardly subordinated their individuality to the prescribed—and standardised—movements of dance, posture greeting, and leave-taking that operated as soon as they entered the palace where the ball was held.

### ‘The Languid Eye’: Controlling the Emotions

Control of the body includes control of emotions. In his treatise on social interaction, *Discours de la Conversation* (Paris, 1677), the Chevalier de Méré gives advice to an imaginary or undisclosed female reader on how to converse. He advises that the voice should be controlled. Strong emotion and loud laughter are to be avoided:

It is necessary that the movements of the soul [emotions] are moderated in conversation: and as one does well to keep away as much as one can

<sup>85</sup> ‘If she lets it move negligently, she will be seen as nonchalant; if she lets it fall forward, indolent, finally if she lowers it, a daydreamer or someone disreputable, and many others that I won’t detail in order not to be verbose.’ Rameau (1725): 40.

everything that makes us sad or sombre, it seems to me also that excessive laughter is out of place; and that in the majority of conversations one should not raise or lower the voice except within a certain average which depends on the subject and the circumstances. Pleasantry is strongly in fashion, but one avoids laughter when talking about pleasant things.<sup>86</sup>

The Chevalier de Méré does not explain his recommendation that the voice and the display of emotions be controlled. On the perception of emotions, Juergen Schlaeger argues that control of certain emotions was becoming less valued throughout Europe in the latter part of the eighteenth century, in favour of notions of sincerity and authenticity of feeling. Emotions could still be seen as threatening, however, because they were believed to be opposed to the action of reason.<sup>87</sup>

Certain parts of the body—particularly the face, eyes, and hands—show emotions easily when uncontrolled. Gennaro Magri describes how these body parts must appear when dancing the minuet: ‘The minuet needs a hidden mastery, which corresponds to grace that must be studied to give a good appearance. It needs the languid eye, laughing mouth, luxurious lifestyle, innocent hands and ambitious feet.’<sup>88</sup> Magri argues that the ‘languid eye’ shows humility. It also presents a certain form of diffidence, signalling that dancers have no amorous intentions towards their dance partner. The dances required eye contact, but it is inappropriate for the eyes to show real interest in the partner. The ‘languid eye’ diffuses the potentially erotic and scandalous energy that could exist between couples dancing together.<sup>89</sup>

86 Chevalier de Méré (1692): 57.

87 Schlaeger writes: ‘The eighteenth century saw a gradual weakening of the defences against the emotions.’ He adds, however: ‘[Emotions] were perceived as part of the animal i.e., lower side of human nature and as such as shapeless and unwieldy, as disruptive of rational thought, obstructive to moral conduct, as difficult to investigate and hard to control. Their relationship with representation was, therefore, if it was at all admitted, highly regulated. Elaborate systems of mental and perceptual discipline and the regulation of the emotional aspect of verbal expression in rhetoric were to guarantee that emotions remained subservient and secondary to reason, that the dominance of mind over body was preserved.’ Schlaeger in Schlaeger and Stedman, eds. (1999): 9.

88 Magri (1779), vol. 2: 27–28.

89 ‘The languid eye demonstrates humility, which must be maintained in the minuet; because if the eye is fixed too much on its object, with this it will seem that you are distracted by concentration, if the eyes seem smiling there could fall the suspicion that there is some secret amorous intelligence between the dancers, having the eyes melancholic would be against the nature of the dance; therefore it is best to keep them languid, upon which no suspicion can fall.’ Magri (1779), vol. 2: 27.



Fig. 4.9. Antoine-Jean Duclos, *Le Bal Paré. The Evening dress ball at the House of Monsieur Villemorien Fila*. 1774. Engraving after a painting by Augustin de l'Aubin. Image edited from <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.3089.html>Open Access Policy.

Overall, the facial expression should be bland, masking emotion and thoughts. The ostensible equanimity towards all dance partners that the face presents makes the apparently pleasurable activity of dancing regimented. Individual emotion must be subordinated to the mechanisms of the ball. The mouth should form a laughing gesture to show the joy of dancing with that partner. ‘Innocent’ hands show the natural simplicity of the dance. The movement of the hands is to be of an artificiality that appears natural, so that ‘nature is mixed and fused with art’. A ‘maestria nascosta’ (hidden mastery) will control the body.<sup>90</sup>

No images of the entertainments in the Palazzo Biscari ballroom have been found. Antoine-Jean Duclos’ etching *Le Bal Paré. The Evening dress ball at the House of Monsieur Villemorien Fila*, from the same decade that the Palazzo Biscari ballroom was built, depicts a French aristocratic ball. It gives a sense of what entertainments at the Palazzo Biscari—with chandeliers,

90 ‘The innocent hands, with which one shows the simplicity of the dance, come from nature itself: but their natural behaviour must be accompanied by a movement which although artificial, must be such that the artifice appears natural, and nature becomes mixed and fused with art.’ Magri (1779), vol. 2: 28.



Fig. 4.10. Detail of Antoine-Jean Duclos, *Le Bal Paré. The Evening dress ball at the House of Monsieur Villemorien Fila*. Image edited from <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.3089.html> Open Access Policy.

mirrors, nobles following French fashions, and the movements of the dance—may have been like (Fig. 4.9).

A detail of the engraving gives a sense of the ‘hidden mastery’ that Magri recommends (Fig. 4.10). The dancers’ movements convey fleeting lightness—Bourdieu’s ‘subtle, lively, sharp and adroit’ qualities, which contrast with the laborious and clumsy.<sup>91</sup> In the engraving, the men’s legs, with the right leg raised and the foot slightly back, and the body lifted on the ball of the left foot, show the dance’s light, springing quality. The women’s legs are hidden, but one foot of the woman on the right of the picture points lightly forward from under her dress. The feet never completely rest on the floor. Contact with the ground is minimal. The dancers circulate in constant motion like the reflections of their silk costumes and the mirrors and chandeliers behind them.

Despite the complicated foot positions, the twisting torsos, the changing intertwining of hands and arms, and the movement around the ballroom in time to the music, the faces of the dancers show calm pleasure. Their mouths are partly smiling, as Magri prescribes. They maintain eye contact, showing concentration on and interest in their partner, but the eyes are languid. The uniform, unchanging facial expressions signal bland

91 Bourdieu (470–471).

pleasure in the dance, absence of real emotion, and therefore control of the emotions.

On this masking of emotions, Eric McKee refers to *complaisance*, a sense of confident ease:

Thus, according to eighteenth-century commentators on the dance, the two most important aesthetic attributes of the minuet are natural grace and noble simplicity. These two qualities were joined together in a physical and mental attitude of self-assured nonchalance – what dancing manuals often referred to as ‘complaisance’.<sup>92</sup>

To demonstrate *complaisance*, dancers worked towards what McKee describes as ‘floating weightlessness’: ‘Complaisance in the physical realm is characterised by suave and relaxed body motions, the look of floating weightlessness, and controlled vitality. Dancing masters sharply criticized any signs of exuberance, excess of body motions, gestures of strength and shows of virtuosity.’<sup>93</sup> Aristocratic dancing was expected to evoke lightness and ascension, as against the heaviness and solidity that Bourdieu posits as opposite, but lightness and verve was to be underpinned by self-control. The complaisant dancer needed to perform the dance steps with practised ease. Displaying too much virtuosity or exertion could undermine the idea of aristocratic distinction as natural and the notion that aristocrats automatically have this practised ease.

### Ordering the Ballroom: The *Maestro di Ballo*

An engraving of 1745 by Jacques-Philippe Les Bas of a painting by Philippe Canot shows the *maestro di ballo* in the process of instructing a young girl (Fig. 4.11).<sup>94</sup> The master’s head is straight. He points his right foot forward in the dance position he will demonstrate. His left hand holds the *pochette*, a small violin-like instrument used to mark the tempo and the melody of the dance that the students practise. His right hand holds the bow of the

92 McKee (2005): 389.

93 McKee (2005): 390.

94 The poem below the image reads: ‘Able master of this art, so beloved of youth, | are you not in love’s employ, | such that young Iris will have the power one day | To submit all hearts to sweet slavery? Ah, but your talents are superfluous to fulfilling this aim: Unadorned by this supplementary grace, by the sole beauty of her natural self, all those who see her will soon be subdued. Moraine’.



specialised dance master.<sup>95</sup> A *maestro di ballo* taught dance and sometimes organised the music and sequence of dances for the balls. During a ball, the *maestro* directed the guests and musicians, deciding the dancers' starting places and ensuring that the ball followed a progression of different dances.<sup>96</sup> Magri devotes a chapter of his treatise to this aspect of the dance master's duties.

At the Palazzo Biscari, the *maestro di ballo* was the highest paid teacher. His salary was slightly lower than those of the *maestro di cappella* (chapel master) and the *maestro di casa* (housekeeper) but higher than the *maestro di scherma* (fencing master), *maestro di violino* (violin master), and *maestro di scuola* (schoolmaster). In the ledgers of 1780–1785, the *maestro di ballo* received 24 *tari* per month. This was a little less than the 30 *tari* paid to the *maestro di cappella* and the *maestro di casa*. The violin teacher received 15 *tari*. The schoolmaster and the fencing master both received 12 *tari*.<sup>97</sup>

The *maestro di ballo* also needed to be an expert on manners, etiquette, and self-presentation.<sup>98</sup> His job of training young aristocrats in manners

95 'Teaching this act of knightly politeness falls to the dance master, who must give rules to his disciple, and not wait until the young person learns the ability, for example from his parents.' Magri (1779), vol. 2: 46. The first volume of Magri's treatise discusses ballet, or dance performed for aristocratic spectators. The second volume discusses ballroom dancing.

96 'Finding himself in a public masked ball, the master must, being prepared to distribute the positions, lay out everything according to the size of the room and the number of people taking part in the festivity.' Magri (1779), vol. 2: 43.

97 ASC, Archivio Biscari, vol. 1179/P: ff. 517r–544v. These volumes are records of all monthly expenses for the prince of Biscari. The payments to the *maestro di cappella* and *maestro di casa* are listed as 1 *onza*. 1 *onza* was 30 *tari*. From 1786, however, the wages for the *maestro di cappella* are halved from 1 *onza* (30 *tari*) to 15 *tari*. ASC, Archivio Biscari, vol. 1179/P: f. 581r. For Sicilian currency, see Luminati (1988): viii. Ignazio Paternò Castello employed Vincenzo Tobia Bellini, grandfather of the composer Vincenzo Bellini, as music teacher for his grandchildren. ASC Archivio Biscari, vol. 1179, fasc. 15, c 175r, c 235v for payments to Vincenzo Tobia Bellini. The Treccani Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani reports: 'He chose Bellini as chapel master of his house and entrusted him with the musical education of his grandson Roberto, compensating him with an allowance.' [treccani.it/enciclopedia/vincenzo-tobia-nicola-bellini\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://treccani.it/enciclopedia/vincenzo-tobia-nicola-bellini_(Dizionario-Biografico)/) See also De Luca (2012): 67 and 68.

98 Mickaël Bouffard writes: 'Because he was considered an expert in the body and how to control or move it gracefully, the dancing master was held up as an authority on all things having to do with presenting oneself, even outside the context of a ball. Therefore, we should not be surprised to read in the article on "Manners" in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* that "our dancing masters are professors of manners".' Bouffard (2012): 177. The quotation from Diderot and D'Alembert is from *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 1751–1782), vol. 10: 35. On the same page, Bouffard reiterates the importance of French masters: 'French dancing masters, having colonized the cities and courts of Europe, were in great part responsible for making good manners in Europe uniform.'

and posture and directing the nobles in dance makes the *maestro di ballo* an ambiguous figure. He is not of noble birth, and yet his knowledge is necessary to train nobles in purportedly natural aristocratic posture and body movements. When the *maestro di ballo* is directing nobles in a ball, Magri warns of the potential problems that could arise from this very public reversal of status. The controlling and ordering of the aristocrats, if done by a commoner, needs to be exercised very carefully. There is the risk of offence and going against the social hierarchy if a *maestro di ballo* gives explicit, public orders to an aristocrat. Magri advises the dance master to play a more indirect role in aristocratic balls. There should be *cavalieri direttori*, gentlemen chosen by the host to oversee the festivities or to assist the *maestro di ballo* in arranging the guests into the lines and starting places for each dance. This means the aristocrats are seen to order themselves.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to ordering music and dances for the *cavalieri direttori* to direct, the *maestro di ballo* was expected to teach the dances that were fashionable. In eighteenth-century Italy, the two most popular dances were the minuet and the *contraddanze* (contredance). The minuet originated in the seventeenth century and remained popular throughout the eighteenth century. Usually only two people danced it, with the other guests watching. The presence of only two dancers made it easier for the viewers to appreciate and appraise the elaborate movements of the dancers as they moved across the ballroom.<sup>100</sup>

In order to perform the dance, the two dancers first bowed or curtsied to the person presiding over the ball. Then they moved away from each other through the minuet steps until they were at diagonally opposite corners of the ballroom. After this, they moved in opposite directions back across the room to finish in opposite corners again, following an imaginary line that was often in the form of a 'z'. After a certain number of repetitions, the dancers joined their right hands when they passed in the middle of

99 'If, however, it is a ball for ladies and knights, and even if a masked ball, the *Maestro di Ballo* does not have to decide the places of the dances and manage the correct ruling. Firstly, because it won't be necessary as all nobles know how to organise themselves: secondly, if the *Maestro* takes up this inspection, he could cause some affront.' Magri (1779), vol. 2: 45.

100 Meredith Ellis Little in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* notes: 'Minuets in various styles remained among the most popular dance forms of aristocratic Europe throughout the eighteenth century, exerting a continuing influence on stylized dance music.' On its origins, she writes: 'though the origin of the minuet is unknown, it was danced in the court of Louis XIV at least by the 1660s'. Sadie, ed. (2001), vol. 16: 740–744. 'Because the ballroom floor was not crowded with many dancers, the beautiful and usually symmetrical spatial patterns could be seen to advantage by all. Equally visible to the audience was the quality of the dancers.' Hilton (1981): 11.

the room. After more repetitions they joined the left hands and turned a circle before continuing to their respective corners. The dance ended with the dancers passing in the middle, joining right and left hands and making several circles.<sup>101</sup>

Small, delicate steps that the dancers made while following a fixed route across the floor characterized the minuet. The many possible variations of the steps as the dancers moved through the overall 'z' form contributed to the dance's popularity.<sup>102</sup> On the need for the minuet to appear natural, Wendy Hilton writes: 'In upper-class society, learning the minuet was considered to be essential. Its study enabled young persons to develop the impressive yet unostentatious air which would distinguish them in society. No action in everyday formal life was left to chance, yet the ultimate aim was to appear supremely natural.'<sup>103</sup> The dance also emphasised social hierarchy: 'The minuet was an epitome of the aristocratic *danse à deux*, designed to be performed by one couple at a time in order of social precedence.'<sup>104</sup>

Contredance derived from English country dancing but sometimes employed the same steps as the minuet.<sup>105</sup> This dance style increased in popularity in France and Italy during the eighteenth century. Magri promotes himself as an inventor of new contredances that were popular at the court of Ferdinand IV in Naples.<sup>106</sup> In his treatise, 38 of the 92 pages

101 Sadie, ed. (2001), vol. 16: 741. On the importance of the Z figure, Gianbattista Dufour notes that extra steps could be added to the minuets in his treatise, but the Z figure must always be preserved. Dufour (1728): 150.

102 Meredith Ellis Little writes: 'One reason for the minuet's remarkable longevity may have been the considerable variety of steps it could absorb into the basic pattern.' She also notes that 'the name "*menuet*" may derive from the French "*menu*" (slender, small), referring to the extremely small steps of the dance.' She adds: 'The attention of both dancers and spectators was directed to the seemingly effortless performance of minuet step-units, each consisting of four tiny steps in 6/4 time set in counter rhythm to two bars of music in 3/4 and, secondarily, to the movement of the dancers in prescribed floor patterns.' Sadie, ed. (2001), vol. 16: 742 and 740.

103 Allanbrook and Hilton (1992): 144.

104 Ibid. See also McKee (2005): 420, on dancing the minuet in order of precedence at the Viennese court.

105 Raoul-Auger Feuillet, author of a widely circulated dance manual *Recueil de Contredances mises en Chorégraphie* (Paris, 1706), describes the dances he will demonstrate as the most beautiful, and the most commonly danced in England: 'the English are its first inventors, all of the English contredances found in this collection are original pieces chosen as among the most beautiful, and the most followed and established of those that are danced in that country.' Feuillet (1706): First page of preface. 'Minuet steps were adapted into the *contredanse*, for example, creating a set of dances for two or four couples using repetitive step patterns and a variety of floor designs.' Sadie, ed. (2001), vol. 16: 742.

106 'At the festivals on the very happy part of our most clement sovereign, it has been my honour to direct and invent *contraddanze*.' Magri (1779), vol. 2: 4.

in volume two are devoted to contredance, while 20 are on minuets. He includes steps and diagrams for performing 39 different variations, and promises that each year he will bring out a new volume of more contredances.<sup>107</sup>

Contredance's freedom and novelty made it popular with young people.<sup>108</sup> It permitted more flexibility in dance steps as, in contrast to the minuet, the steps are not necessarily fixed. Magri explains that in dances for a prescribed number of dancers, certain steps are 'obbligati' (obligatory), but in dances for an indeterminate number, the dancers move in a pattern, but the precise foot movements cannot be prescribed.<sup>109</sup> As well as less rigidly prescribed dance steps, contredance allowed a much greater variety of partners than the minuet. Unlike the minuet, where dancers face each other either as a pair or in lines that change in a slower and more predictable sequence, in contredance the dancers circle round each other, linking hands briefly as they then twist away into the orbit of the next partner. There is spinning energy and a variety of partners. Holding hands or linking arms permitted more fleeting interaction between different dancers and was potentially more flirtatious.

The treatises include detailed descriptions and elaborate diagrams for these dances. These diagrams show the ballroom in plan view and employ a system of notation for the movements of the feet, head, and arms as the dancers move across the ballroom. Geometric order can be read into the contredance diagrams in Gennaro Magri's treatise as well as complication and control, where dancers and musical notes are in strict coordination. His plate 37 shows how couples change partners during a particular dance (Fig. 4.12).<sup>110</sup> The diagram highlights these movements' complicated symmetry. The dances unfold over time and move through the ballroom space, but the diagrams present an underlying order that always produces ideal symmetrical shapes, like the motions of planets, even if the dancers are unaware of them.

107 Magri (1779), vol. 2: 7. Magri did not publish any more volumes on dance.

108 'Its gaiety and the novelty of its democratically progressive pattern appealed to the younger generation, so that French dancing masters were soon composing dances in the English style.' See the entry under *Contredanse* by Freda Burford and Anne Daye in Sadie, ed. (2001), vol. 6: 374.

109 'This type of *contraddanze* is composed of a few regulated figures, and not of regulated and precise steps. But not for this, that the steps are not regulated, are all permitted to dance, but only those who can, and must, know what dance is.' Magri (1779), vol. 2: 36–37.

110 'Many of the contredances were for four couples, based on the French square dance called the *Cotillon*. 'The contredanse (as a *cotillon* for four couples) reached its most highly developed form in the mid-eighteenth century.' Sadie, ed. (2001): 374.

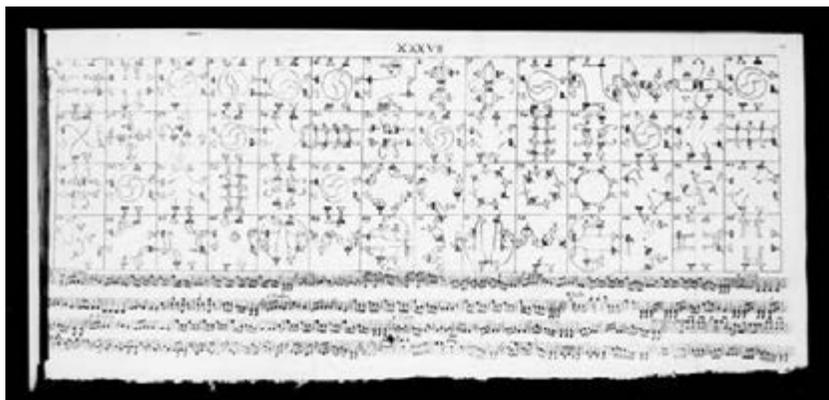


Fig. 4.12. Gennaro Magri. *Trattato teorico-prattico di ballo* (Naples, 1779). Plate XXXVII. Image retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/12012085/>.

An analogous combination of springing dance steps, precise body movements, and geometric symmetry can be seen in the diagrams in Rameau's dance treatise *Abbrégé de la Nouvelle Méthode* (Paris, 1725). Rameau includes eight diagrams showing steps to a piece of music entitled *La Mariée de Rolant* (Fig. 4.13). In his notation, the half circle with the single bar shows the beginning point for the man's steps; the double bar is for the woman's. The steps for the man are on the left, and those for the woman on the right.<sup>111</sup> The dancers begin from the bottom of the page. Although the man and woman's movements are almost identical, small variations in the symbols—for example at the very beginning of the dance—show differences in hand or foot movements.

In Rameau's diagram, the dance becomes a trace of the dancers' route as they move across the ballroom. The notations suggest musical notes, but there is a springing elegance and calligraphic flourish to the curves. The swirls are held in place, however, by the underlying straight line, which keeps them swirling and springing but always within geometric order. This resonates with the decoration such as in the Palazzo Biscari ballroom, where swirling movements insinuate around door and mirror frames. In both the dance diagrams and the ballroom decoration, curving, jumping forms suggest lightness and sparkling energy. The springing, energetic ballroom decoration, with its flourishes and elaborate outlines, accords with the springing lightness that the aristocratic dancers aspired to, but it is underpinned by a putative universality and rational order and hierarchy.

111 Rameau (1725): 4.

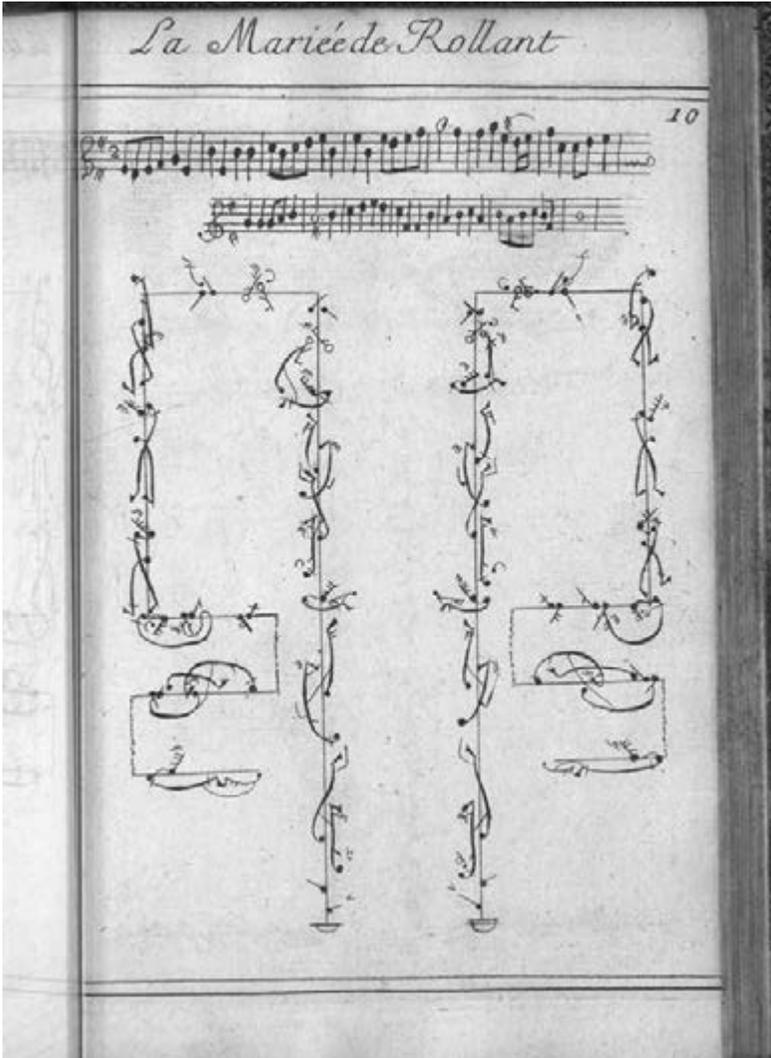


Fig. 4.13. Pierre Rameau. Music and dance steps for *La Mariée de Rolant* in *Abbrégé de la Nouvelle Méthode* (Paris, 1725): Part II. Plate 10. Image retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/12010694/>.

### Conclusion: The Ballroom and the Work of Aristocracy

The ballroom was essential to the princes of Biscari, but not simply as a site for innocent entertainment or for conspicuous consumption. The ballroom was also central to bodily training, and that training's performance was necessary for aristocratic status. It activated behaviours where the seemingly natural on the one hand and the mannered and artificial on the other

were interwoven. Through dance manuals, practice, and the employment of dance masters, the Sicilian aristocracy disciplined their bodies into movements that produced springing lightness and that masked emotion through cultivating languid nonchalance.

Springing lightness also relates to the ballroom decoration's affect. Refined materials of gold and glass suggest smoothness, purity, and the transformation of what is base and heavy into what is flowing, liquid, and sparkling. Swirling stucco decoration produces ascent and lightness. Ascending layers of decoration culminate in the ceiling fresco. The nobility needed to show that their status was innate and inborn. Discourses that assume the existence of a superior grace justified the aristocracy's privileges. Forms of dress, speech, and movement were presented and maintained as superior to others. In the ballroom, all of these come together. Like the economic and political power they held, training made these habits appear as the nobility's birth right. The ballroom, through its enabling and maintaining of exclusivity, is central to the work of aristocracy.

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## Dissertations

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Fig. 5.1. The Palazzo Beneventano, Scicli. Architect unknown. Second half of the eighteenth century. Upper-storey balcony of the east facade.

## 5. The Palazzo Beneventano in Scicli: Trauma and Violence

**Abstract:** The disconcerting facade sculpture of the Palazzo Beneventano in Scicli challenges expectations that decoration should beautify. Canonical classical decoration transforms into imagery of violence and fear. Monstrous faces snarl from below the balconies, and lower down there are heads of ‘Turks’ or ‘Moors’ which seem imprisoned within the building. The chapter does not promote a single reading for the decoration but relates it to the violent history of rival confraternities and aristocratic factions within Scicli, and fear of the Other. Scicli is one of Europe’s most southerly towns, and even into the nineteenth century there was fear of raids by North African pirates and slavers. The facade can be read in terms of this confluence of local rivalry and broader fear.

**Keywords:** Mediterranean slavery, Mediterranean piracy, Italy and the Muslim world, architecture and ornament, representations of Muslims in early Modern Europe, architecture and rivalry.

### Violent Decoration

In their entry for the 1754 *Encyclopédie*, Diderot and D’Alembert give two important principles that decoration must follow: ‘Of these four types [the decoration for facades, apartments, gardens, and theatres], that of facades is without exception the one that most taxes art’s precepts. Architecture and sculpture compete equally for the [facades’] embellishment, but the latter must be absolutely subordinated to the former.’<sup>1</sup> Diderot and D’Alembert argue firstly that decoration should embellish. In their definition, facade decoration makes a palace noble, beautiful, and redolent of luxury. Secondly, decoration arises from the cooperation of sculpture and architecture. They

1 Diderot and D’Alembert (1754), vol. 4: 702.



Fig. 5.2. Head of a 'Moor' on the facade of the Palazzo Beneventano.

see sculpture and architecture as distinct, but sculpture must remain subservient to architecture.

The Palazzo Beneventano in Scicli, believed to date from the 1760s, confounds these assumptions.<sup>2</sup> On the palace's east facade there is sculpture of unsettling, hybrid forms.<sup>3</sup> The decoration emanates an insistent sense of trauma and sadism. Monstrous fanged faces snap and snarl at the viewer from the *mensole* of the upper windows (Fig. 5.1). Above the lower portals of the same facade, there are grimacing heads of 'Turks' or 'Moors' (Fig. 5.2) They are not as overtly threatening as the *mensole* carvings of the balcony, but there is disquiet and aggression in their caricature-like quality. They appear unaware of the viewer. Imprisoned in the lower part of the building, they look up towards the owner's rooms in anticipation, captivity, or fear.

Below the coat of arms on the corner of the building facing towards the main piazza, there are more images of a non-Christian Other. Two heads presumably representing Africans, with chains and slave collars, shout for

2 Nifosi (1997a): 159.

3 The palace is not orientated on an exact north-south axis. The facade oriented east-south-east I have called the east facade for simplicity's sake. For similar reasons I have labelled the other facades south and west facade.



Fig. 5.3. Sculpture below the coat of arms on the corner of the east and south facades, Palazzo Beneventano.

help or moan in pain (Fig. 5.3). These sculpted heads, lacking bodies and with their chains and collars, evoke sadism and violence. Like the head of the Turkish or North African man, they also diminish and ridicule their subject through caricatured features and an expression of fear, perhaps to make them less threatening.

Further startling images of sadistic violence appear on the two outer *mensole* of the upper windows on the east facade (Fig. 5.4). Although heavily eroded by rainwater, the *mensola* includes a *mascherone* of a male face with an iron bracket hammered into its mouth. It is likely that the *mascherone* on the other side of the *mensola*, although even more eroded, included a similar face with open mouth and iron bar. The iron bar emerges belt-like from the sides of the *mensola*. It goes across the cheeks and into the mouth of the grimacing face. There is a sadistic attention to detail in the sculptural transformation of the stone into a cast-iron strap that retains the bends and buckles from hammer blows into the mouth.

This facade of the Palazzo Beneventano challenges the assumptions of Diderot and D'Alembert—and others—that decoration should be subservient and beautiful. 'Violent decoration' seems an unlikely term, but it is apt for the Palazzo Beneventano. Some of the ornament on this palace is not predictable or pleasing. Neither is it subordinate to, or an addition to,



Fig. 5.4. Lower part of the *mensole* of the upper window of the Palazzo Beneventano east facade. Ros Drinkwater. Alamy Stock Photo. E2442R.

something else called ‘architecture’. The facade sculpture is as much part of the building as any other element.

This chapter focuses on facade decoration in terms of what is included, and also what is implied. I read the Palazzo Beneventano facade as evoking unspoken anxieties, fears, and desires. The facade evokes violence and makes us confront evocations of the Other.<sup>4</sup> The Other is conceived as something part human and part bestial in the upper *mensole* of the palace facade, or as diminished and enslaved in the heads of the Africans and Moors. The howling, tortured sculpture conveys a trauma not found in architectural treatises. It confronts us with difficult and troubling questions of domination and control, fear and pain. The facade creatures’ tormented existence

4 In her study of convent architecture in Naples, Helen Hills refers to this resonance between architecture and the desires and fears of architects and patrons. ‘[Invisible City] investigates the relationship between the architecture of female aristocratic convents in early modern Naples and the bodies they were built to house, seeking to link architectural discourse not simply to that of social hierarchy and exclusivity, but to the anxieties and unspoken fears circulating in the shadows of these discourses.’ Hills (2004): 4.

challenges the order that is often read into eighteenth-century Sicilian towns. There is ambiguity and chaos. There seems little of the Enlightenment here. Instead, there is pessimism and nightmare.

As with many other Val di Noto palaces, very little is known about the Palazzo Beneventano. A recently found document records a payment by Don Carmelo Beneventano in 1752 for gold work inside his palace, suggesting an approximate date of completion.<sup>5</sup> Although there are serious limitations to 'explaining' architecture through documents, the shortage of documentation for the Palazzo Beneventano creates difficulties in studying this palace. It also creates a challenge to find new interpretative strategies for these enigmatic and ignored facades. This chapter reads the Palazzo Beneventano in terms of how it problematises expectations of ornament. The strange transformations question boundaries between nightmare and waking, fear and control. The creatures of the upper balconies bring to mind Christopher Heuer's words on monstrous ornament: 'the forms [criticised by Vitruvius] were all the more threatening for what they presumed about mankind's bestial side, humanity's interconnectedness to all levels of beings'.<sup>6</sup> This connection between ornament and the savage and repressed informs my approach in this chapter.

## The Palazzo Beneventano and Aporia

The degree of ferocity in the Palazzo Beneventano's east facade is unusual in the Val di Noto. Its violence is far from the balance and harmony usually associated with facades that also deploy classical cornice and pilasters, such as the Palazzo Landolina and Palazzo Impellizzeri in Noto discussed in an earlier chapter. Attempts to explain the Palazzo Beneventano's decoration in terms of adaptations of ideas from treatises do not go far. At first sight, there seem to be parallels with the grotesque heads and strap-like ornament in Sebastiano Serlio's *Libro Estraordinario* (Lyon, 1551) or in treatises including Hans Vredeman de Vries' *Den Eersten Boeck* (Antwerp, 1565) and *Scenographie* (Antwerp, 1560), or Wendel Dietterlin's *Architectura* (Nuremberg, 1598). However, the degree of violence implicit in some of the Palazzo Beneventano decoration makes it very different.<sup>7</sup>

5 Pellegrino, F. *Palazzo Beneventano e il suo mistero* [www.ragusanews.com/2016/10/02/cultura/](http://www.ragusanews.com/2016/10/02/cultura/) referred to in Militello (2019): 111. n. 23. The document is dated 22 December 1752. The hypothesis of this date for the palace assumes that a new palace or facade was not created later.

6 Heuer (2009): 112. See also Vitruvius (1999), vol. 5: 3–4.

7 Vredeman de Vries (1565), Dietterlin (1598).



Fig. 5.5. Sebastiano Serlio. *Libro Estrordinario* (Lyon, 1551). Plate XX. Image courtesy of the Biblioteca Regionale della Sicilia Alberto Bombace, Palermo.

Serlio's illustrations for the *Libro Estrordinario* emphasise the weight and roughness of stone. In many of the plates, straps or belts emerge from the stonework to bind columns to the rest of the building. In Plate

XV, broad horizontal straps constrain Ionic columns. The rustication of the stone crosses into the straps, creating ambiguity between solid stone and something buckling and flexible. In Plate XX, *telemones* whose headdress suggests that they are Moors are first imprisoned within a basket structure and then bound down by straps growing from the masonry (Fig. 5.5). These *telemones* do not support the building—they are the building's prisoners.

Some of Serlio's plates produce disquiet and others suggest brutality, but the straps holding down the Palazzo Beneventano *mascheroni* are of a different level of violence. The bands that bind the *mascherone* in Figure 5.4 to the facade may show a form of cynical quotation from Serlio or other treatises, but the aggression of the iron strap rammed into the figure's mouth is of a different order altogether. In Serlio's Plate XX, the *telemones* are imprisoned within the basket and the masonry straps, but there is no violent assault on their bodies analogous to the hammered bar in the mouth of the *mascherone* of Figure 5.4.

As with much of the Val di Noto decoration, the Palazzo Beneventano sculpture cannot therefore be read simply as adaptations of treatise images. Neither can it be relegated to a generic architectural category of 'grotesques'. Studies on grotesques often present them in terms of *capriccio*, play, and marginalia.<sup>8</sup> The Palazzo Beneventano *mensole* do not have this sense of playfulness and of relegation to the margins. Instead, they are imprisoned within the building's facade but are also an essential part of it. They loom out of the building, but they cannot be free of it. They cannot become fully formed creatures. Additionally, the designs in Serlio's *Libro Estraordinario*, and the later grotesques, are usually associated with gardens and rural retreats.<sup>9</sup> The *mensole* of the Palazzo Beneventano and other Val di Noto palaces are in the towns. They are not Serlio's rustic gateways. Treatises and classical *grotteschi* do not somehow 'cause' the Palazzo Beneventano decoration.

Imagery of Turks and Moors is uncommon in the eighteenth-century Val di Noto buildings. It appears on the facade of the Palazzo Bertini in

8 For example, Katie Scott reads a destructive playfulness in eighteenth-century French designs by Androuet de Cerceau, Jean Marriette, and others: 'Monkeys and men [and other creatures in the decoration] are not so much framed by strapwork and scrolls as actively engaged with them. They are shown in the process of transforming the imperial acanthus and the majestic pedestal into material proper to their sport, and in so doing they seem, almost literally, to work at the destruction of their ornamental universe.' Scott (1996): 129.

9 Scholars trace the grotesques' origins to strange decoration discovered in buried Roman palaces during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Heuer (2009): 110 and Scott (1996): n.288 Footnote.



Fig. 5.6. *Mascherone* on the facade of the Palazzo Bertini, Ragusa. Eighteenth century. Architect unknown. Sergio Nogueira/Alamy Stock Photo number 2F8CYCH.



Fig. 5.7. *Mascheroni* on the portal of the Palazzo Napolino Tomasi Rossi, Modica. Eighteenth century. Architect unknown.

Ragusa, of unknown date and architect.<sup>10</sup> Over each of the palace's three second-storey windows, there is the head of a turbaned man (Fig. 5.6). The facade on one side of the portal is no longer extant, suggesting there may originally have been six windows. This decoration does not have the menace of the Palazzo Beneventano, but similarities in the two facades, such as the turbaned heads and carved portal frame and window above the sculpted heads, are strong.

Many of the Val di Noto *mascheroni* induce a sense of disquiet, but it is rarely as overtly threatening as the sculpture of the Palazzo Beneventano. Whilst there is no such thing as the typical Val di Noto facade, most *mascheroni* imply a weak sense of threat. The Palazzo Napolino Tomasi Rossi in Modica deploys hostile creatures, but the *mascheroni* on the portal's keystone are more indicative of the usually weakened aggression of most Val di Noto *mascheroni* (Fig. 5.7). The two faces are partially but not completely human. Their lolling tongues and frowning, heavily ridged eyes are threatening and bestial, but this is limited. There is a canine quality. Unlike in the Palazzo Beneventano, there is more a sense of a guard dog that could be won over and brought under control. These *mascheroni* are also tied together and hang from the keystone, emphasising that they are only masks.

## Two Faces of the Palazzo Beneventano

The Palazzo Beneventano occupies a central location on the lower part of a slope close to Scicli's main square. The palace's spatial relationship to the surrounding urbanism has changed since the eighteenth century. Although mainly surrounded by narrow side streets, the palace's entrance was once on the town's main thoroughfare (Fig. 5.8).<sup>11</sup> The lowering of the road in the nineteenth century also changed the proportions of the facade, making it appear higher than at the time of building. The narrow street that passes the aggressive sculpture of the east facade originally consisted of steps, slowing the pace of passers-by who might look at the facade decoration.<sup>12</sup>

10 Don Eusebio Floridaia commissioned the palace in the later eighteenth century and sold it to Antonio Bertini in the nineteenth century. Spadola (1982): 22. The portals of the Palazzo Beneventano and Palazzo Bertini are also similar. Salvatore Boscarino has noted the similarity. Future archival finds on the architects and dates of one palace may help with similar information for the other. Boscarino (1997). 1982 edition: 224.

11 Cataudella (1970): 89.

12 A photograph in Nifosì (1985): 107 shows the east facade with steps where the road now is.



Fig. 5.8. Southeast corner of the Palazzo Beneventano.

This section investigates the striking contrast between the monstrous east facade and the other two extant facades. Paolo Nifosì hypothesises that all of the facades date from between 1760 and 1780.<sup>13</sup> This is convinc-

13 On the balcony decoration, Nifosì writes: 'The tympanum in the form of an omega, for example, can be found in the side portals of the facade of the church of San Giorgio in Modica, whose date, for the first order, can be connected to the sixties of the eighteenth century. The

ing, as architectural features such as the main portal and the decoration of the window cornices are similar to other Sicilian buildings dated to this period. Nifosì suggests that the stonemasons Pietro Cultraro, Mario Mormina, and Girolamo Iacinto were the sculptors of the *mensole*. This group of stonemasons frequently worked together. There is evidence that they worked on other buildings in Scicli at this time but no evidence of their involvement with the Palazzo Beneventano.<sup>14</sup>

The original building probably covered all or most of its *isolato*, but one half of the building was demolished, probably in the nineteenth century, to construct the adjacent buildings. The east and west facades now end abruptly, and the eighteenth-century north facade no longer exists. On the west facade, the main portal is no longer in the centre of the facade. The size of this portal suggests that this was once the main facade. The abrupt termination of the upper-storey cornice makes it look as if the facade has been sawn in half. The opposite east facade is also incomplete. The south facade is the only one that is complete.

Some parts of these facades are heavily eroded, such as the south facade's three upper balconies. This facade's contrasting decoration is particularly marked in the upper-storey windows, whose cornices include angelic young male heads (Fig. 5.9). Their faces are contented and serene. Gently moving scrolls and foliage surround them. At the top of the cornice, opening leaves suggest growth and prosperity. In contrast, the creatures of the eroded *mensole* below the balcony of the same window snarl and grimace. One has a lolling animal tongue.

On the more malevolent east facade, the counterpart of the serene male heads above the south facade's windows consists of a scallop shell and volutes that metamorphosise into a monstrous face (Fig. 5.10). Partly submerged within the building, its head protrudes outside the window frame moulding. The creature's buckled and squashed mouth and nose operate both as facial features and as scrolls that press together. The mouth disappears in one sense but also looks like it could swallow a smaller creature. The closed mouth makes the reptile-like animal look as if it is breathing through its nose or wants to stay silent. It watches with wary, deep-set eyes. Its suspicious,

corner pilaster capitals come close to those of the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Ragusa, which can also be referenced to the sixties of the eighteenth century.' Nifosì (1997a): 159.

14 'Pietro, who also designed some other palaces (Palazzo Salonia, now demolished) and the church of Santa Maria la Piazza (demolished) could be the author of these beautiful sculptures. The master masons Mario Mormina and Girolamo Iacinto could also have participated in the work.' Nifosì (1997a): 159. Nifosì reiterates this argument in Nifosì (1997d): 39.



Fig. 5.9. South facade of the Palazzo Beneventano. Detail of the window above the central portal.

hostile expression transforms the conventional scallop-shell decoration into a living presence that seems able to move into or out of the building.

At the corner where the south and east facades meet, combinations of decoration further juxtapose benevolence and cruelty. This southeast corner projects towards the main piazza. It is the first part of the palace that a person coming along the narrow street from Scicli's main piazza sees. Two heavily ornamented giant order composite pilasters meet at the juncture



Fig. 5.10. Scroll decoration on the upper window of the east facade of the Palazzo Beneventano.

of the two facades. The pilasters' rustication suggests shields, reptilian scales, or the plates of an armoured animal. The armoured decoration, like the threatening guardian-like figures on other parts of the facades, conveys resistance to intruders. On the upper part of the southeast corner, scroll-like foliage decoration surrounds the Beneventano coat of arms. Below, the disquiet and violence resume. The two screaming or shouting African-caricature heads appear chained to a classical volute and scallop shell.

A statue of Saint Joseph with the infant Jesus stands on a modillion where the two pilasters meet (Fig. 5.11). The statue contrasts with the Africans, Moors, and demonic *mensole*. Saint Joseph is one of Scicli's patron saints.<sup>15</sup> On the statue's base, there are two small angelic faces. They are *mascheroni* but of a delicacy and small scale not found elsewhere on the building. Before the nineteenth-century lowering of the road, the statue would have seemed lower on the building. Its base started just above the height of a door. Saint Joseph was closer and more visible to passers-by. The statue's location at a meeting of streets and visibility to people coming from the main piazza

<sup>15</sup> At the *Cavalcata di San Giuseppe* held every March, decorated horses and riders traverse the town to commemorate the holy family's flight into Egypt.



Fig. 5.11. Statue of Saint Joseph with the infant Christ. Palazzo Beneventano.

give it a benign presence watching over a junction. The saint's missing two right-hand fingers bless people walking past.

Saint Joseph and Jesus are the only complete—and completely human—figures on the Palazzo Beneventano facade. Joseph is the only standing figure. He is depicted as subject to conventional forces of the physical world such as gravity, balance, and movement of air. Wind blows around his robes. His left arm, leg, and hip support the baby Jesus' weight. He looks down at

the people that his right arm blesses. In contrast, all the other creatures on the facade operate outside these physical constraints. They are partially imprisoned in the building, with incomplete bodies. Their lack of wholeness makes them disturbing and uncanny. They are not representations of any real or mythical creatures. They cannot be related to any known texts, and the laws or processes that metaphorically bind them are less predictable.

The statue of Saint Joseph and Jesus evokes tenderness and redemption. It is a respite from the violence of the east facade, but its gentleness and recognizable iconography are incongruous with much of the other decoration. The angelic figures on parts of the palace, and the monsters and non-Christians on others, could be read in terms of Heaven and Hell. This is not to limit the decoration by suggesting one reading as the purported key or answer. However, the howling demons and the heretic Moors and chained Africans are in torment. They may already be in hell, or are aware of their punishment, or can see it arriving. In contrast, the angelic heads are serene—in heaven or looking to heaven. In its juxtaposition of violent torment with peace and repose, the facade ornament goes beyond the more common definitions of decoration.

### Strange Bodies: Prodigies and Portents

The strange, transforming beings in the facade sculpture of palaces such as the Palazzo Beneventano have resonances with Antonino Mongitore's *Della Sicilia Ricercata* (Palermo, 1742). Mongitore was a Jesuit priest and canon of Palermo cathedral who published a wide range of works on Sicilian history and geography. In *Della Sicilia Ricercata*, he praises the island's natural wonders. His descriptions of prodigies and transformations portray a Sicily of marvels and of disquiet. The marvels are exceptions that question rules of reason and of science, generated by what Mongitore calls 'forces of nature'. In his text, these forces are present in the island of Sicily itself. The miraculous and marvellous is bound to happen there.<sup>16</sup>

Mongitore describes Sicily as a cornucopia rich in fruit, animals, minerals, gems, fish, and other gifts of nature.<sup>17</sup> The chapters of the first volume

16 'Some of the strange things that are found in this work may seem impossible to some people, and they may rush to condemn them as fabulous or superstitious. But anyone who considers the admirable forces of nature or, to put it better, the prodigious works of the author of nature, and who reflects seriously with the light of Philosophy, which supports it, will not run hurriedly to include them among fanciful notions.' Mongitore (1981): 6.

17 Ibid.: 3.



Fig. 5.12. Sculpture on the garden wall of the Villa Palagonia, Bagheria. c. 1751–1772. Sculptor unknown. Possibly Rosario L'Avvocato.

group these marvels into prodigious living beings, starting with humans and then moving to animals. Mongitore describes biological wonders that occurred in Sicily. He usually gives a date and a place for these miraculous occurrences but sometimes cites ancient authors. There are descriptions of strange bodies such as conjoined twins and triplets, both human and animal. There is a baby with three heads, another with three hands, another with three heads, three chests, six arms, and six legs.<sup>18</sup>

These conjoined twins and triplets are mixed with accounts of human and animal hybrids such as a baby born with a horse's head, or a girl with hands and feet like a duck. There are women who give birth to rabbits, toads, or octopuses; a baby born in the form of a cat, although with human hands; a baby with a mule's genitals; a half-man, half-lion; a half-woman, half-monkey; and a calf with a human face but with a single eye.<sup>19</sup>

Massimo Ganci notes that Mongitore's descriptions involve bodies that contradict and overcome restrictions of taxonomies and putative normality.<sup>20</sup> Ganci affirms Mongitore's celebration of the miraculous but risks subsuming

18 *Ibid.*: 19.

19 *Ibid.*: 16–20, 140.

20 'Mongitore spends time on illustrating this reality of the marvellous and the unexpected. He describes "monstrous" aspects, whether human or bestial, the exceptional abilities of certain individuals capable of overcoming obstacles that other human beings would never manage to do, or the ability to eat enormous quantities of food.' Introduction by Massimo Ganci in Mongitore (1981): vii.

the interest in strange bodies into a general idea of an irrational undercurrent running through Sicilian culture.<sup>21</sup> His link between Mongitore and the Villa Palagonia at Bagheria near Palermo is interesting, however. Between 1751 and 1772, Ferdinando Francesco Gravina, Prince of Palagonia, commissioned strange hybrid sculptures for the garden walls and one of its gates (Fig. 5.12).<sup>22</sup> These creatures resonate with Mongitore's descriptions. The sculptures include demonic figures with wings and tails, a woman with three breasts and a horse's head attached to the side of her own head, and a dragon with a face growing from its chest.<sup>23</sup>

Although Mongitore describes strange events, the universe he presents in *Della Sicilia Ricercata* is not one of fragmentation and randomness. It is disconcerting and sometimes frightening, but there is also sympathy between things. There is mutuality and connection between phenomena that seem different but that can give rise to each other. Mongitore's form of causality suggests James Frazer's early-twentieth-century definition of sympathetic magic, where 'an effect resembles its cause'.<sup>24</sup> There is harmonious interaction between elements, humours, stars, bodies, and materials.

Mongitore posits an explanation for some of the phenomena he describes. Many of the hybrid human-animal births are generated by something fearful the pregnant mother sees. In a case from 1701, a muleteer's wife,

21 'Mongitore's *Della Sicilia Ricercata*, together with the Villa Palagonia, can be read as Sicilian examples of that thread of the irrational that winds from the high medieval era to Romanticism. The thread was not interrupted by the Renaissance, and neither will it be interrupted by the Age of Enlightenment.' Ganci in Mongitore (1981): xiv. Ganci's alignment of Mongitore with the Villa Palagonia suggests that both partake of a Sicilian tradition that operates against an international programme of supposedly rational enlightenment. While the Villa Palagonia and the Palazzo Beneventano do show that Sicilian architecture was more than just a copy of treatise architecture, Ganci's binary between the local and idiosyncratic on one side and the international and rational on the other risks placing the Sicilian decoration in a tradition that runs in the background to a supposedly more important and rational artistic lineage periodised as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.

22 The Villa Palagonia was commissioned c. 1715 and built in several phases throughout the eighteenth century. Tommaso Maria Napoli designed the villa but Agostino Daidone implemented the construction. Between 1751 and 1772 Rosario L'Avvocato worked on the palace. He may be the sculptor of the garden statues. Zalapì (2004): 152. See also the Villa Palagonia official website [www.villapalagonia.it/storia/storia.html](http://www.villapalagonia.it/storia/storia.html). Tommaso Maria Napoli began the Villa Valguarnera in 1714, but Salvatore Boscarino suggests Giovanni Battista Cascione Vaccarini and Vittorio Fiorelli built the curved arcade between 1761 and 1785. Boscarino (1997): 228.

23 Jean Marie Roland De La Plathière, visiting in the 1770s, writes: '[The villa] announces itself from afar, by the strange prodigality and huge excess of everything that the most bizarre spirit and the most baroque imagination has been able to engender of hideous monstrosities.' De La Plathière (1780), vol. 2: 378–379.

24 Frazer (1993): 11.

frightened by a horse, gave birth to a baby with four legs and a horse's head.<sup>25</sup> In other cases, something experienced manifests itself later as a birthmark or other bodily feature, such as the macabre story of a girl born with a red face and 'twisted mouth and neck', caused when her pregnant mother watched a public hanging.<sup>26</sup> Powerful emotions, particularly fear, become the causes for these changes in the body of the unborn child. Mongitore reports that the influence of the imagination is strong, particularly in women about to conceive.<sup>27</sup> In all of Mongitore's strange events, there is a powerful sense that all things are interconnected and can affect each other. Trauma and emotional shock can affect unborn children, such as in the stories of pregnant mothers. Trauma can be passed to another generation and result in bodily mutations.

The sculpture of the Palazzo Beneventano facade is enigmatic and complex. It contrasts the violent and tormented demons and Africans and Moors with singing, angelic heads and the beneficence of Saint Joseph with Jesus. Some of this sculpture can be located in an interest in mutations and strange bodies that does not partake of an Enlightenment drive towards framing nature as a predictable mechanism. Instead, it posits that the world is mysterious, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. Other elements of the facade can be read within insecurity and fear of violence, as the next section will discuss.

## Urban Rivalries in Scicli

The trauma and violence on the Palazzo Beneventano facade can also be related to the insecurity and potential for violence in Scicli during the eighteenth century. Although some political and economic factors in Scicli, such as religious and family rivalries, also occur in towns where the menacing decoration of the Palazzo Beneventano is not present, Scicli's history of conflicts between confraternities, and the issue of slavery and possible attack from North Africa, suggest a state of insecurity that resonates with the Palazzo Beneventano facade.<sup>28</sup>

25 Mongitore (1981): 16.

26 Mongitore (1981): 10.

27 Ibid.

28 For example, rivalry between families was important in the rebuilding of Noto. Conflict between religious confraternities marked Modica, Ragusa, and Palazzolo Acreide, but menacing decoration is less common in these towns. On the risk of invasion, and the conflicts within Scicli, see Barone (1998): 56–58, 92–104 and Cataudella (1970): 87–88.

Religious and family rivalries divided Scicli's population in the seventeenth century. Saint's day processions sometimes led to violent conflicts involving clergy as well as members of lay confraternities.<sup>29</sup> The strongest rivalry in Scicli, which divided the population into two opposed groups, was between the confraternities of the church of Santa Maria la Nova (known as the *marianisti*) and the church of Saint Bartholomew (the *bartolari*). The *marianisti* argued that only they could use the title of *arciconfraternità*, as theirs was the older church. This would make them senior over the rival *bartolari*.<sup>30</sup>

Processions on feasts such as Christmas, Easter, the Immaculate Conception, and Saint Paul often resulted in violence between the two groups. To prevent this, the *giurati* ordered that the confraternities could not hold simultaneous processions. This led to one group celebrating the Immacolata on 8 December and the other on the following Sunday. There were also two feasts of the Addolorata—one on Palm Sunday and the other on Easter Tuesday.<sup>31</sup> The processions and their followers also had to keep within geographical limits. Violence could erupt if one group moved outside its boundaries. The historian Bartolo Cataudella writes: 'In a procession with the saint's statue for Christmas or Easter or the Immaculate Conception, there were fist and stick fights every time the reliquary float's bearers infringed by one *palm* their agreed limits and invaded the territory assigned to the rival church.'<sup>32</sup>

Other conflicts include the discord between the Jesuits and the Capuchins, and the 50-year lawsuit the church of San Matteo pursued against the church of Santa Maria la Piazza, where San Matteo argued that Santa Maria should be its dependent church.<sup>33</sup> These rivalries continued but became less violent after the eighteenth century. Paolo Balsamo, visiting in 1808, reported: 'the town is now at peace, since the tremendous disputes and animosities between the rival parishes have subsided. There are still

29 Barone (1988): 15 and 92–104. There are similarities with other towns of the old Contea di Modica area. Modica was divided between the followers of Saint George and Saint Peter, Palazzo Acreide between followers of Saint Sebastian and Saint Paul, and Ragusa between followers of Saint George and Saint John the Baptist. See Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 155–156, 185–186, 197–198, Caruso and Perra (1994), Flaccavento, Nifosi, and Nobile (1997), Flaccavento (1982), Nifosi (1988).

30 Cataudella (1970): 249.

31 Rak (1989): 58.

32 Cataudella (1970): 250.

33 The will of the benefactor Giuseppe Miccichè ruled that the Jesuits had to donate towards constructing the Capuchin monastery. The Jesuits refused to pay. Cataudella reports a Jesuit saying that the Capuchins would easier receive 'a punch in the face than money for building' but gives no documentary support. Cataudella (1970): 250.

discontents, however, and parties and factions amongst the leading people, which cannot fail to influence the public morals.<sup>34</sup>

The *marianisti* Beneventano of Scicli were implicated in these conflicts.<sup>35</sup> There is very little documentation on this family before the nineteenth century. They were among Scicli's nobility before the 1693 earthquake and were a branch of a wider lineage that included the Beneventano of Lentini and the Beneventano del Bosco of Syracuse. The Scicli Beneventano are recorded amongst Scicli's nobility in the eighteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Members of the Beneventano were prominent among the *marianisti* and served as *rettori* of the church of Santa Maria la Nova. Their allies were the fellow *marianisti* Spadaro and La Rocca families.<sup>37</sup>

Mario Pluchinotta's unpublished 1936 transcription of an undated, possibly late-nineteenth-century manuscript entitled *Notizie su alcune comunità religiose di Scicli* by a historian named Valdigne, includes an account of a conflict between the *marianisto* Baron Carmelo Beneventano and the *bartolaro* Baron Francesco di Paola Penna that provides one reading of the Palazzo Beneventano's demonic east facade.<sup>38</sup> Pluchinotta relates that in the second half of the eighteenth century, Carmelo Beneventano and Francesco Penna were rival claimants to the estate of Giovanni Grimaldi, head of one of the Contea di Modica's richest families.<sup>39</sup> Francesco Penna

34 Balsamo (1809): 129.

35 Barone (1998): 220.

36 On the Beneventano name, see Mango de Casalgeraldo (1912). Entry under Beneventano. [www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mango/belmonte.htm](http://www.regione.sicilia.it/beniculturali/bibliotecacentrale/mango/belmonte.htm). See also Militello (2019): 111. In February 1693, a request to the viceroy for aid after the earthquake mentions the recent death of Don Guglielmo Beneventano, an important person in the town. ASM, Archivio della Contea, vol. XIII di Cautele, 24 February 1693: 640v. Antonino Carioti's map of Scicli from the 1740s lists the town's principal churches and palaces and includes the Beneventano among the town's noble families. Carioti's map is reproduced in Militello (1997): 307.

37 Barone refers to these families in 1828 as 'il grande trittico della ricchezza marianista' (the great trio of Marian wealth). Barone (1998): 220.

38 Pluchinotta (1936), MS. Nifosì (1985): 19 summarises the story. Paolo Nifosì related in a message to this author that the story of the conflict between Carmelo Beneventano and Francesco Penna is in a note that Pluchinotta added to his transcription of an undated manuscript entitled *Notizie su alcune comunità religiose di Scicli*, possibly written in the late nineteenth century by an author named Valdigne. The locations of the Valdigne and Pluchinotta manuscripts are unknown. The Pluchinotta manuscript may be in the collection of the heirs of the Pluchinotta-La Rocca referred to in Militello (2008): 19–20.

39 The Beneventano claim to the legacy of Giovanni Grimaldi was based on the marriage between Francesca Beneventano and Girolamo Grimaldi in 1682. The Penna claim also came from marriage to the Grimaldi. Archivio di Stato di Modica (ASM), Archivio Grimaldi, vol. 17, Causa Calamezza-Grimaldi 1768–1798. f. 27 and ASM notaio Giorgio Fratantonio. vol. 1674–1667, 10 December 1762, ff. 887v–897r.

won the legal battle, but Carmelo Beneventano remained hostile after the case was closed.

This leads to two stories about the Penna family. Pluchinotta relates that one of Francesco Penna's ancestors was captured as a slave by North African pirates and ransomed. Paolo Nifosì argues that Carmelo Beneventano was the patron of the Palazzo Beneventano and that he included the heads of Moors as reference to the enslavement of Francesco Penna's ancestor. A second story suggests that Penna was descended from a slave who was actually owned by the Beneventano.<sup>40</sup> These accounts, even if needing more documental support, resonate with the operation of slavery in Scicli's history.

### The Palazzo Beneventano and the Edge of Europe: Pirates and Slavery

One of the disturbing aspects of the Palazzo Beneventano facade is the inclusion of African and 'Moorish' heads. They bring into play institutions of slavery and a fear of Islam that were central to economies on both sides of the Mediterranean and beyond.<sup>41</sup> Scicli is one of the most southerly points of Europe, close to North Africa, and was a *sergenzia* or capital of one of Sicily's military districts.<sup>42</sup> In the eighteenth century, these military districts and their system of coastal defences guarded against a possible attack from areas including North Africa. The possibility of a Turkish invasion of Italy became less likely after their naval defeat at Lepanto in 1571, but the danger from North African pirates remained.<sup>43</sup>

The Mediterranean's north-south division along religious lines in this period made the African shore unknown to most Europeans, but there is a history of slave raiding and ransoming of hostages between these coasts. Between 1530 and 1780, one million to a million and a quarter Christian Europeans were enslaved by North African corsairs, and a similar number

40 On the possible capture of one of Penna's ancestors, see Nifosì (1985): 19. On the Penna connection with slaves, a series of documents from 1790 recounts an attempt to block Ignazio Penna's accession to the *Lingua d'Italia dell'Ordine Gerosolimitano* due to descent from a slave owned by the Beneventano family. Militello (2019): 116.

41 See the recent work of Daniel Hershenzon on cross-Mediterranean slavery in this period. Hershenzon (2018).

42 Militello (2012): 151.

43 'Once the fear of a Turkish military conquest had abated, the real problem in the seventeenth century became the raids of Barbary pirates, who sacked coastal towns and threatened to reduce their unprotected populations to slavery.' Benigno (2007): 28.

of North Africans were captured by European ships. These slaves might become domestic servants, although galley slaves were also in high demand. Some Barbary pirate captains were Europeans who had themselves been captured as slaves and converted to Islam.<sup>44</sup> The Sciclitani were at risk of capture by North African pirates, but there were also slave markets in Scicli. Slaves in Scicli who fled but were recaptured were branded with the letter 'F', which may be for *fuggiasco* or *fuggitivo* (fugitive). There was a tradition in the town for slaves' male descendants to wear a single gold earring.<sup>45</sup>

The danger from slave raiders was certainly present in the eighteenth century. On a journey between Cape Passaro (the south-eastern point of Sicily, 50km from Scicli) and Malta in 1700-1701, John Dryden describes the crew's concern at the appearance of an unknown ship. As the ship came nearer, the crew saw that it was British, but their consternation shows the fear of slavers.<sup>46</sup> In the 1770s, Jean Marie Roland De La Plathière reports that 'one trembles in these seas, more even than those on the other side of Sicily, due to encountering the Barbary pirates'. The pirates may just board, steal what they want, and leave, but any contact with them led to quarantine for the boarded ship's crew when they reach port.<sup>47</sup>

The danger persisted into the nineteenth century. In a letter of 1810, the English visitor Thomas Wright Vaughan reports: 'the exposed, or rather unguarded, state of all the southern coast of Sicily, is really dreadful; for perhaps you are not aware that they are as much exposed to the ravages of the pirates from Barbary, and the horrors of slavery, as they were in former days from the attacks of those barbarians; between whom, and the Sicilians, a constant war is kept alive'. He claims that slavers captured 200 people in 1810. The abolition of the slave trade, and the rising power of European navies from the middle of the nineteenth century, greatly reduced the threat of the Barbary pirates.<sup>48</sup>

Although Sicilians and North Africans were enemies, there were channels of contact for freeing slaves. Raids might be carried out for slaves to sell or

44 Rotman (2014): 274. Militello (2019): 107.

45 Cataudella (1970): 88–89. On the same pages, Cataudella cites Italia (1940): 366 on the branding of runaway slaves. The Scicli slave market is mentioned in Militello (2019): 110.

46 Dryden (1999): 28.

47 De La Plathière (1780), vol. 2: 322–323. On quarantine, Wright Vaughan (1811): lxiii mentions that the ship *Bella Teresa* was refused entry at a port in Sicily because there was a quarantine on any crew that had contact with North Africa. Bread was delivered to the ship, but it had to keep out of the harbour and no one was allowed ashore. Even with no evidence of plague, there was a belief in the contaminating influence of the infidel.

48 Wright Vaughan (1811): lx and lxiv. Rotman (2014): 275.

to ransom to their families. The ransom could be more than the captives' value as slaves.<sup>49</sup> Religious orders such as the Trinitarians, founded in 1198, and Pedro Nolasco's Order of Our Lady of Mercy, founded in the thirteenth century, devoted themselves to freeing Christians who had been captured by the Turks or North Africans.<sup>50</sup> In Sicily, the confraternity of Saint Paul in Trapani was dedicated to raising funds to rescue slaves, and part of the Busacca fund, a charity existing in Scicli since the sixteenth century, provided 20 *onze* a year for rescuing slaves. The area in Scicli known as the Pozzo della Micencia was a site for the exchange of slaves between Christians and Muslims.<sup>51</sup>

Slave raiding and conflicts with Islam entered the imagery of European art. This imagery often took the form of the defeated Muslim, the vanquished enemy.<sup>52</sup> Imagery of defeated Muslims asserted Christianity's strength and God's favour at Lepanto. It also neutralised fears, showing that the threat was controllable. In Scicli, the annual feast of the Madonna delle Milizie in May commemorates the Normans' defence of the town against the Moors in 1091. According to the legend, the Virgin appeared on horseback, armed with a sword, and led the Christians to victory.<sup>53</sup> The statue of the Madonna delle Milizie is kept in the cathedral of Saint Ignatius. It depicts the Madonna on a horse trampling the two figures of an armed 'Moor' and an African. On the festival day, the people re-enact the battle, with the statue of the Madonna delle Milizie appearing at a key moment to turn the battle in favour of the Christians.<sup>54</sup>

49 Rotman (2014): 274.

50 Massing in McGrath and Massing, eds. (2012): 90–91.

51 On the Pozzo della Micencia, see Militello (2019): 110. Militello refers to a manuscript in Biblioteche Riunite Civica e Ursino Recupero in Catania, Fondo Manoscritti, Civ. Ms. A 19 n.34 and 35. On the confraternity of Saint Paul, see De La Plathière (1780), vol. 2: 402. On the Busacca fund, see Barone, (1998): 13, 14, 168. In his will of 1565, the merchant Pietro di Lorenzo, also known as Busacca, bequeathed annual sums for charitable purposes such as freeing slaves, alms for the poor, and dowries for poor women. By the later eighteenth century, the Kingdom of Naples may have officially discouraged the paying of ransoms to buy back slaves, perhaps to stamp out this kidnapping trade, but some ignored this and returned slaves to North Africa for a fee by passing them off as corpses or saying they had escaped. De La Plathière (1780), vol. 3: 367.

52 'After the victory of Lepanto, hailed as a Christian triumph over Islam, slaves and humbled captives in European art were often represented as "Moors" (African Muslims as well as Turks), part of a widespread anti-Ottoman theme which coloured the iconography of slavery in Mediterranean areas for almost two centuries.' McGrath in McGrath and Massing, eds. (2012): ix.

53 Cataudella (1970): 112–113. The festival dates from 1736, when Pope Clement VII sanctioned the miracle. Militello (2012): 162.

54 Nifosi, (1997): 159 briefly mentions a connection between this festival and the Palazzo Beneventano sculpture.

On the Palazzo Beneventano facade, the Moors and Africans are captive and defeated. The heads of the two Africans are held captive below the family shield, with heavy collars around their necks (Fig. 5.4). Their heads have no bodies capable of attack. They shout or grimace but cannot move. The collar and chains mark their slave status. In the eighteenth century, slaves generally only wore collars if they worked in sight of aristocratic society. From her analysis of European images of African slaves, Elizabeth McGrath concludes that the slave collar 'appears not so much in the punitive context of sugar mills and plantations of the colonies, but in high class domestic settings'.<sup>55</sup> Where slaves interacted with aristocrats as domestic servants, including in Sicily, the collar emphasised their status as the family's property.

The collar and chain neutralise the perceived threat of the Africans on the facade by punishing and enslaving them. The turbaned Moor on the lower windows is made unthreatening through ridicule (Fig. 5.3). He is an older, overweight man. There is something of the buffoon about him, and nothing of malevolence or intelligence. His eyes roll and his tongue lolls. He has fangs, but he seems unlikely to attack. He does not snarl or threaten like many of the other images on the facade. He does not even appear aware of the viewer's presence. He looks up, perhaps to the second floor where the master lives, or to the divine retribution that is his fate for heresy. The patron of the palace has conquered the threat of the Other. It is present but cannot harm the palace's inhabitants or the people of the town.

Anguish and aggression are still present on the facade, however. In addition to *mascherone* that evoke varying degrees of aggression, many Val di Noto palaces such as the Palazzo Beneventano deploy balconies with distinctive *ringhiere* or ironwork that suggest cages, bars, spikes, weapons, and hooks. The Sicilian iron balconies expand outwards in smooth curves like a breeze or a wave. The ironwork partly envelops the person looking out on the balcony, and its outward undulation makes the balcony more difficult to climb. At the corners there is often sharp, pointed decoration, and hooks and pointed flowers could tear into the body of a person climbing over. Loops on the upper handrail face outwards. They join the vertical bars to the horizontal frame but can also confuse a hand in the dark gripping the balcony from outside.

The *ringhiere* protect the palaces symbolically and literally. The literature, seeking to match stone carving with motifs from printed treatises, overlooks this ironwork. The *ringhiere* are elegant, curling, aggressive, and blade-like.

55 McGrath in McGrath and Massing, eds. (2012): 14. See also Militello (2019): 107 on the wearing of chains by Sicilian slaves.

They often deploy multiple sharp edges and points extending outwards. This decoration does not just imply or represent violence and defence. It is both decorative and,—with its sharp metal—potentially physically violent.

### Conclusion: Haunted Facades

The Palazzo Beneventano *mensole* and *mascheroni* present a challenge. They inhabit the facades like a hallucination. Sometimes the creatures seem to lurk within the facade. At other times they burst out, transforming the facade and breaking the boundaries of the frame of classical architectural members that attempt to contain them. The three extant facades or parts of facades switch between disquieting demons and reassuring, tranquil singing heads. The violent imagery on parts of the facade subverts canonical conventions of architectural decoration and evokes a sense of aggression and of resistance to authority. Decoration can adorn, but it also has other effects. In some cases, the decoration shows pain and anguish; elsewhere there is angelic music or the earthly joys of life. It can partake of the benign and the reassuring, but it can also disquiet and threaten in its evocation of potential violence.

The indeterminate aggression that can be read in some Sicilian facade decoration, manifest in extreme form in the Palazzo Beneventano, evokes forces that cannot be fully understood or controlled. Some of this anxiety derives from the namelessness of the fearful monsters, the absence of an iconographic tradition to contain them. Aggression is mixed with fear in the Palazzo Beneventano decoration. Fanged faces on the facades appear ready to jump like guard dogs at passers-by. Rusticated decoration on the corner pilasters includes large, pointed stone bosses that suggest shields or the armour of a monstrous creature. Balconies have hooks and spiked flowers. The decoration makes the palace seem fortified against attack. It also suggests a latent malevolent power that resides in the palace and which is also associated with the palace's inhabitants.

The strange sculpture shows a disquieting metamorphosis. Carolyn Walker-Bynum argues that metamorphosis resists order. It implies that the world is fluid rather than static:

The man who becomes a wolf (metamorphosis) can be seen as revealing his rapacity; satyrs, chimeras or mermaids (hybrids) can be understood as depicting lust, hypocrisy, or the insubstantiality of love. On the other hand, both hybrid and metamorphosis can be destabilisings of expectations.

Both can suggest that the world, either in process or in the instant, is disordered and fluid, with the horror and wonder of uncontrolled potency or violated boundaries.<sup>56</sup>

The Palazzo Beneventano facade shows the world as uncertain, but it controls the demons of imagination:—both the terrifying monsters and slavers, and the slaves and the poor who might rise up. The Moors and Africans of the facade are now slaves of the building. They snarl and lunge but cannot break free. Some of them pull against their chains but can never free themselves from the building that imprisons them. The frightening nature of the demons and the enslaved humans who have been made demonic, their potential aggression, and the difficulty in controlling them affirm the power and ferocity of the owner. The facade attests that the Beneventano conjured them but also captured them and set them in their place. Their hybridity suggests that they may mutate again, however—that their owners cannot completely control their creations.

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56 Walker-Bynum (2001): 31.

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Fig. 6.1. *Mensole* sculpture on the facade of the Palazzo La Rocca, Ragusa. c. 1760–1780. Artists unknown.

## 6. The Palaces of Ragusa: Abundance, Famine, and the Grotesque

**Abstract:** Palace facades in the south-eastern Sicilian towns of Scicli, Modica, and Ragusa employ distinctive sculpture that suggests an iconological reading whilst continually eluding it. On the Palazzo Cosentini and the Palazzo La Rocca in Ragusa, musicians, revellers, and grinning, louche figures watch from below the balconies. The sculpture seems to mock, puzzle, or delight the passer-by. It can be celebratory and humorous, full of abundance and pleasure, but there is also ugliness, poverty, and hunger. Its depiction of the populace as louche and buffoonish has parallels with the characters of eighteenth-century *commedia dell'arte* and grotesque dance, where the supposed sensuousness and lack of sophistication of the poor is set against the grace and self-control of the aristocracy.

**Keywords:** architectural ornament, Sicilian palaces, eighteenth-century architecture, architecture and dance, *commedia dell'arte*, Southern Italy.

### Facades and the Strange Mirror of the Poor

Many Val di Noto palace facades deploy complex aporic decoration, but the palaces in the Contea di Modica towns of Scicli, Modica, and Ragusa have a distinctive sculptural repertoire that suggests a localised iconography but remains enigmatic. On the facades of the Palazzo Cosentini and the Palazzo La Rocca in Ragusa, musicians, revellers, and louche, grinning figures watch from below the balconies (Fig. 6.1). The carvings are sometimes close enough to street level for the passer-by to reach up and touch. They inhabit the palace but interact with the street outside, housed within the stone but seemingly always aware of the life that passes before them. Some motifs reproduce and mutate across different facades as the *mensole* emulate and compete with each other. There is music, dissipation, and the fleeting, sensual joys of life, but there is also ugliness, poverty, and famine.

Other parts of the facades, such as the windows and portals, deploy a decoration more in dialogue with designs from international treatises, but the *mensole* carvings have little of a clearly religious or classical tradition.<sup>1</sup> The balconies are reserved for a different kind of sculpture. Many of these palace facades therefore have both a classical face and another, more defiantly local one.

This sculpture could be read as a leftover from an earlier, medieval tradition of marginalia and gargoyles, a persistent idiosyncratic wart on a classical face. However, medieval marginalia can often still be related iconographically to textual references. For example, in his analysis of manuscript marginalia, Michael Camille identified many iconological references, often to the text in whose margins the images appear.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Christa Grössinger's study of English misericords discusses misericord sculpture in terms of an established iconography including Biblical references, pattern books, folk tales, and popular linguistic expressions.<sup>3</sup> This approach does not work for Sicilian facade decoration. The facades cannot be matched to literary texts or folk tales. More tellingly, the labour invested in the Sicilian facade sculptures, and their size and prominence, makes them unlike marginalia. A new palace facade was an important undertaking for a noble family, and these strange images would remain on the facade for a long time. For their patrons, they were central to the facade, not marginal.

Although the decoration cannot be matched to a documented iconological system, it has its repertoire of characters. There is the bespectacled man, sometimes with fangs and a dishevelled hat; there are the flute and mandolin players; people holding cornucopia; women holding babies; cavaliers; and tradesmen with wine barrels. There is little overt reference to aristocratic power. The stock imagery of dynastic history, with its lions, dragons, shields, and flags, is absent. The facades sometimes depict young, aristocratic-looking men, but they are often surrounded by images of servants and entertainers. They mainly depict people who are unintelligent and ruled by their emotions.

1 For example, Charles D'Aviler's *Cours d'Architecture* (Paris, 1738) or Ferdinando Galli Bibiena's *Architettura e prospettiva* (Paris and Augsburg, 1740).

2 These include the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux or Peter of Celle, folk tales such as the riddle of the hare or the knight and the snail, or daily events such as the beggar-atlantes in Amiens cathedral and the people who begged outside cathedrals. Camille (1992): 19, 32–36, 58–61, and 63–64.

3 Grössinger (1997) gives examples of sayings and popular tales such as *Reynard the Fox* and the riddle of the clever daughter (pages 15–17, 68, 103). The sections in Part Two on Christian iconology, the bestiary, and courtly romances are on pages 126–130, 135–143, and 148–153.

Characters such as those in Fig. 6.1 exude the opposite of the aristocratic virtues of health, delicacy, and self-control.

The musicians and carousers on the facades reference aristocratic status obliquely, suggesting the wealth and leisure required to hold banquets and hire musicians. The sculpture might caricature conspicuous consumption. It could relate to a popular idea of life inside the mansion, with its endless banqueting and its cornucopia of food and musicians for hire. If the palace exterior somehow parodies the life inside, then this raises troubling questions. Does the deployment of these surprising or humorous images suggest that the wealthy citizens wanted to show some kind of empathy with the rest of the populace? Does the imagery refer to the way the aristocracy think the populace see them?

Much that produced aristocratic distinction, such as riding in carriages or only socialising with other aristocrats, and of course the possession of a palace itself, involved a marked separation from the majority of the population. However, many *mensole* carvings suggest that the richer citizens wanted to surprise and entertain their fellow citizens through the carvings they commissioned. In place of classical iconography, the decoration deploys references that all of the community could enjoy. The patrons may have been attempting a form of rapport with the life in the street.

The facade itself is the division between the palace's exclusive private interior and the street. The decoration on the inward wall, which for the *piano nobile* includes the walls of the drawing rooms and bedrooms, is very different from that facing outwards. The interiors were part of the aristocrats' separate world, where they performed the conversation, music, and dance that enabled social distinction. In contrast, the facades are like masks. Instead of depicting themselves or their family history on their facades, the palace owners reflect figures from the popular imagination—musicians, tradesmen, beggars, imaginary creatures—back onto the street.

The facades thus create a strange dialogue with what is outside. This chapter will discuss how the socially 'higher' and 'lower' are always spying on each other, always renegotiating their positions. Each one parodies and mimics the other. It is an unequal relationship, however, as the economically lower remains subordinate. At the centre of this chapter is the problem of how the poor could be shown on palace facades in this way. Were the sculptures of these rough and unenlightened characters there for the poorer citizens to laugh at, or did it make them feel content that they weren't as abject, ugly, and uncontrolled as the *mensole* figures? Did they recognise in the sculpture a depiction of themselves that they wanted to escape from? Are the *mensole* mocking the people, or are they trying to be in collusion somehow?

Finally, the decoration and activities inside the palace associated the aristocrat with a putative natural grace. This grace was part of aristocratic distinction, and the emotional, uncontrolled figures on the *mensole* were its opposite. In other words, this chapter is concerned not so much with what the palace produced and enabled but with the joys and sorrows of the people that the palace was trying to keep out.

### The La Rocca and the Cosentini: Old and New Families in the Rebuilding of Ragusa

Ragusa was part of the Contea di Modica, a large fiefdom that covered the Iblean uplands and adjacent coast. Many Contea towns were divided between two rival groups of citizens. Each group occupied their own part of town, identified with a certain saint, and had their own feast days and procession routes. In Ragusa, the *sangiorgiari* followed Saint George, and the *sangiovan-nari* followed Saint John the Baptist. The rivalry between the two groups was strong. The procession routes for the respective feast days were heavily regulated. If a procession moved into rival territory, there could be violence.<sup>4</sup>

This division in Ragusa began in the eleventh century, when Calabrian settlers arrived with Godfred the Norman and established themselves outside the city walls. They were first known as the *cosentini*, after the Calabrian town of Cosenza. Their area became the *quartiere* of Saint John the Baptist, and they became the *sangiovan-nari*.<sup>5</sup> The area later became known as *Gli Archi* (The Arches). The rival *sangiorgiari* were the established population who lived within the old city walls, including the aristocrats and the networks of workers dependent on them.<sup>6</sup> The *sangiorgiari* dominated the town's politics, as only they could become *sindaco* (mayor) and *giurati*.<sup>7</sup>

This relationship was changed after the 1693 earthquake, which was severe in Ragusa, killing around half of the population of 9,946.<sup>8</sup> The existing rivalry led to a disagreement on how to rebuild. The *sangiorgiari* nobles

4 In 1690 in Modica, a similar confrontation between the followers of the churches of Saint Peter and Saint George led to the excommunication of around 20 people, including the priest of Saint Peter. Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 156. A boundary marker showing the border between the jurisdiction of Modica's two cathedrals is still visible.

5 Caruso and Perra (1994): 14.

6 The name 'Gli Archi' came from the arches of an old aqueduct. Flaccavento, Guadenzia in Nobile, ed. (1997): 100. Piazza in Muti, ed. (2008): 197. See also Caruso and Perra (1994): 15.

7 Morana (1997): 86.

8 Spadola (1982): 77.

essentially wanted to replicate the town on its existing site. This would facilitate a return to the *status quo ante*, where these same nobles retained their economic and social pre-eminence. Some *sangiovannari*, meanwhile, saw the opportunity to construct a new town on higher land overlooking the old site. This promised opportunities. A new town would need new *giurati* and new power structures and administration. It would also allow larger plots for a palace or a commercial venture.<sup>9</sup> Separate urban jurisdictions meant citizens might start anew and perhaps extricate themselves from financial penalties and commitments imposed by the administration of the old Ragusa.<sup>10</sup>

The result was the creation of two rival adjacent Ragusas, with rival cathedrals of Saint George and Saint John the Baptist. The rebuilt old town of the *sangiorgiari* became known as Ragusa Ibla. Most of this area consists of narrow streets mainly recreating the pre-earthquake layout, confined on its ridge by steep gorges on three sides, unable to expand. As with other towns such as Noto, Scicli, Avola, and Grammichele, the old hilltop site, once useful for defence, now hindered economic development. The new area of the *sangiovannari* became known as Ragusa Alta. It was built on a grid plan on flatter land with better communications to Pozzallo, the area's main port.

The split in Ragusa was complicated by a third group. Some *sangiovannari* refused to move to the new area and stayed in their old area of Gli Archi.<sup>11</sup> Ragusa thus became three districts: the original town of Ragusa Ibla, the new area of Ragusa Alta, and Gli Archi, which became an intermediate zone. In 1695, the bishop recognised the two ecclesiastical districts of Ragusa Ibla and Ragusa Alta but included Gli Archi within Ragusa Ibla. During the next 20 years, there was a complicated sequence of changes where the government reversed its position several times on whether or not the towns should reunite.<sup>12</sup> In 1703, the two Ragusas were unified, with the city government including the three areas of Ragusa Ibla, Gli Archi, and Ragusa Alta, but weighted in favour of Ragusa Ibla.<sup>13</sup> Ragusa Ibla hosted the council chamber, and the *capitano di giustizia* and two of the town's four *giurati* also came from there.<sup>14</sup>

The La Rocca and Cosentini palaces were built in the same two decades between 1760 and 1780. Their facade decoration has many similarities,

9 Morana (1997): 87.

10 See *ibid.*: 86–87.

11 *Ibid.*: 87.

12 Spadola (1982): 77.

13 Flaccavento, Guadenzia, in Nobile, ed. (1997): 102. Spadola (1982): 77.

14 Flaccavento, Guadenzia, in Nobile, ed. (1997): 102.



Fig. 6.2. The Palazzo Cosentini, Ragusa, showing the statue of San Francesco di Paola and the steps leading up to Ragusa Alta.

even though the families were from opposite sides of the town's division. The La Rocca were an established Ragusa Ibla family, a branch of a family that had held government posts in Messina since the fifteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

15 Mango de Casalgerardo (1912). Online edition [www.bibliotecaregionesiciliana.it/mango/riso.htm](http://www.bibliotecaregionesiciliana.it/mango/riso.htm) Mango records that the La Rocca arrived in Sicily in the thirteenth century. Palizzolo

After the 1693 earthquake, Don Saverio La Rocca built a palace on the site of houses that the La Rocca owned. The palace's location close to the cathedral of Saint George, where the La Rocca have a chapel, emphasises the family's link with the centre of the *sangioorgiari* cult of the older Ragusa families.<sup>16</sup>

The Cosentini family, in contrast, only attained wealth and aristocratic status in the eighteenth century. Their palace is in Gli Archi, the zone of the original Calabrian settlers, at an intermediate point between the old and new Ragusas. The fact that the Cosentini did not move to the new Ragusa site with the other *sangioiannari* merchants suggests that they were neither part of this group nor part of the older Ragusa Ibla nobility. On the south-west corner of their palace, a statue of the Calabrian saint San Francesco di Paola references the family's Calabrian origins and a connection with commerce, as he is also the patron of street vendors (Fig. 6.2).<sup>17</sup>

Like the Nicolaci in Noto after the earthquake, the Cosentini were able to benefit from the rebuilding by gradually buying up enough plots for their palace. In 1694, one year after the earthquake, the brothers Giuseppe and Vincenzo Cosentini bought some houses adjacent to the church of Santa Maria dell'Itria, on the site of the future palace, and they bought more houses the following year. In 1755, the family's fortunes improved further when Raffaele Cosentini married the wealthy Santa Donzelli. Santa Donzelli's uncle Giambattista Donzelli was chaplain of Santa Maria dell'Itria.<sup>18</sup>

Baron Raffaele Cosentini and his son Giuseppe completed the palace in the 1760s.<sup>19</sup> The family further affirmed their link to the Santa Maria dell'Itria with a private corridor connecting the palace to the church, making the palace and the church a nucleus of Cosentini territory. The Cosentini also funded some rebuilding of the church, including the Cappella del Crocefisso in 1741, where they had their own altar.<sup>20</sup>

Gravina (1875): 326 records a date of 1391.

16 On the La Rocca palace, see <http://www.terraiblea.it/palazzo-la-rocca.html> and Spadola (1982): 52–53.

17 Spadola (1982): 153.

18 On the Palazzo Cosentini, see <http://www.terraiblea.it/palazzo-cosentini.html>.

19 A contract of 20 December 1767 gives an order for stone to finish the palace. <http://www.terraiblea.it/palazzo-cosentini.html>. Paolo Nifosì has hypothesised a date between 1760 and 1780 for the Palazzo Cosentini and the Palazzo La Rocca. Flaccavento, Nifosì, and Nobile (1997): 79.

20 Spadola (1982): 77, Gangi (1982): 23.

## The Palazzo Cosentini and La Rocca Balconies: Pleasure and Poverty

All four Palazzo Cosentini balconies with carved *mensole* figures are on the upper floor; one is on the south side above the steps, and three on the longer west facade (Figs. 6.3–6.6). Oscar Spadola has named the single balcony on the south side the Balcony of Evil Speech (*balcone della maldicenza*), the balcony on the left part of the facade the Balcony of the Storyteller (*balcone del cantastorie*), the central balcony the Balcony of Wellbeing (*balcone del benessere*), and that on the right the Balcony of the Gentleman (*balcone del gentiluomo*).<sup>21</sup> I have labelled them South Balcony, then Balcony One, Two, and Three.

Like the Palazzo Nicolaci in Noto, each balcony has five *mensole* with lower *mascheroni* of a metamorphosing animal, human, and vegetal nature. These creatures are fanged and monstrous. The central *mascherone* is often different from those on either side. On the South Balcony it shows a bespectacled figure; on others it is a young man or a masked man or a Moor. The lower *mascheroni* of the South Balcony have animals in their mouths. One has a scorpion, others have snakes, mice, or frogs. These suggest the idea of something indecent in the mouth, of indecencies that might be spoken.<sup>22</sup> The central *mascherone* is an ugly, bespectacled face. The sculptures above the vegetal masks show more human characters. They seem to have the potential to rise above the demons below.

The upper figures along the balconies often suggest fecundity and abundance. On the South Balcony, a man holds a cornucopia, a woman feeds a baby, and a hooded nurse holds a wrapped baby. On Balcony Two, there is another man with a cornucopia and another with fruit around his neck. On Balcony Three, a man holding a wine barrel and a woman exposing her breasts could suggest something between abundance or sensual pleasure.

The presence of five images on each balcony suggests a reading in terms of the five senses,<sup>23</sup> and Balcony One comes tantalisingly close to such a reading. Moving from left to right, a figure with his finger to his mouth could be tasting something, then there is a flute player, then a figure with a basket and his finger to his nose, then a lute player, then a nobleman looking out

21 Montana (2008):16. *Maldicenza* is difficult to translate into English. It can mean *malicious speech, slander, cursing, or bad language*.

22 Montana (2008):18.

23 There are allegories of the senses in seventeenth-century Dutch painting. In Lubin Baugin's painting *The Five Senses* of 1630, taste is represented by food or wine, hearing by musical instruments, smell and sight by flowers, and silk represents touch. Martin (1977): 97.



Fig. 6.3. Palazzo Cosentini. The South Balcony.



Fig. 6.4. Palazzo Cosentini. Balcony One.

(Fig. 6.4). Four of the senses are present, but why are there two musicians, unless the hands of the lute player represent the missing sense of touch? There is not quite enough to make this convincing. On Balcony Three, the bespectacled figure relates to sight, the woman with the feather could represent touch, and the man with fruit around his neck could represent taste or smell—but again, on its own this is insufficient.

Oscar Spadola points out that whereas eighteenth-century interior decoration represents the heavens and shows ascension, such as in the Palazzo



Fig. 6.5. Palazzo Cosentini. Balcony Two.



Fig. 6.6. Palazzo Cosentini. Balcony Three.



Fig. 6.7. Palazzo La Rocca. Balcony One.

Biscari ballroom, the *mensole* often show the mundane, the terrible, and the damned, although this can still be interspersed with singing angels, *putti*, and other innocent figures. The creatures in damnation are condemned to hold up the balconies, like telemones or the vanquished demons of the Palazzo Beneventano in Scicli.<sup>24</sup> A reading of heaven and hell seems to open a juxtaposition of the saved and the damned on the balconies, but it is difficult to move this further. Other systems, such as the seasons, cardinal sins, stages of life, or virtues suggest themselves but, as with all iconological schema, cannot be sustained without the textual evidence lacking in much Val di Noto decoration. The *mensole* retain their enigma.

The Palazzo La Rocca in the upper town of Ragusa Ibla has seven balconies of three *mensole* each. In popular usage, the balconies have been given names. Reading across the facade from right to left, there is the Balcony of the Cherubs, the Balcony of the Telamone, the Balcony of the Cupids, the Balcony of the Maidservant, the Balcony of the Mandolinist, the Balcony of the Flautist, and the Balcony of the Cavalier.<sup>25</sup> I have chosen only to assign numbers. Only Balcony One has a separate register of lower *mascheroni* and

24 'The grand paintings live amongst the stormy clouds, in high skies. In the *mensole* there is a descent "to the infernal", amongst the damned [...], fantastic creatures which a magic spell seems to have changed into monstrous supporting elements. They belong to the purgatory of this life, condemned, in the hell of this life, to support the weight of the balconies.' Spadola (1982): 7.

25 The balcony names are given on <http://www.ibla.it/pages/24-palazzo-la-rocca-sant-ippolito>



6.8. Palazzo La Rocca. Balcony Two.



Fig. 6.9. Palazzo La Rocca. Balcony Three.

then *mensole* above (Fig. 6.7). All of the other balconies have the *mensole* only. The images are more human; only Balcony Four has the vegetal faces.

Some of the imagery is similar to that of the Palazzo Cosentini. On Balcony One, there is a cavalier and other male figures with a wine bottle and a barrel; on Balcony Two a flautist and a man with fruit around his neck; and on Balcony Three a lute player (Figs. 6.7–6.9). These all suggest



Fig. 6.10. Palazzo La Rocca. Balcony Five. Also known as *Balcone degli amorini* (cupids who embrace).



Fig. 6.11. Palazzo La Rocca. Balcony Six.

aristocratic pleasures and feasting with music. There are images of fertility and childbirth but also the strange presence of the abject, bespectacled man on Balcony One and a poverty-stricken figure with a bandage over one eye on Balcony Three. There is an African slave with ropes on Balcony Six (Fig. 6.11). Again, the balcony imagery looks like it could be all read together, but there is something elusive. In amongst the *putti* and musicians, the images of aristocratic ease, the bespectacled figure is fanged, and there

are the hand positions of the two outer figures on Balcony One that suggest the Italian hand-to-chin gesture of insult or lack of concern. Again, an easy narrative or iconological match is elusive.

### The Mensole, Grotesque Bodies, and Commedia dell'Arte

Some elements of the Sicilian *mensole* carvings, such as the faces made from leaves and plants, suggest the vegetal ornament found in the treatises of Johan Vredeman de Vries and Wendel Dietterlin. These designs spread throughout Europe from the late sixteenth century.<sup>26</sup> In Sicily, this decoration is found in wood carving such as the sacristy of Enna cathedral of 1573, or in engravings of temporary decorations for royal events, such as Vitale's *La felicità in trono* published for the wedding of Vittorio Amadeo of Savoy and Anna of Orleans.<sup>27</sup> The ornament often incorporates human forms, which suggest herms or nature spirits. Vegetal decoration bursts out around the architecture. Tendrils twist around columns and architraves. The relationship between the scaffold created by the architecture and the foliage of ornament resembles a trellis and vine.

This ornament shows the fruits of agricultural work and the bounty of nature. There are vines, grapes, and flowers among the masks and figures. Intertwined roots add to the sense of fertility. The decoration depicts the contents of a cornucopia, a Garden of Eden, a dream of harvest plenty. However, the *mensole* carvings of the Palazzo Cosentini and the Palazzo La Rocca are not as overwhelmed by and intertwined within the decoration. They are larger and more independent. Perhaps more importantly, the vegetal decoration illustrated in the architectural treatises does not include recognisable characters such as musicians, singers, and tradesmen, and neither does it have the hostility and anxiety that can sometimes be seen on the Sicilian facades.

However, the low-life figures of the Sicilian *mensole* could relate to the carnival and fairground imagery that became more popular in the eighteenth century. There was an increasing aristocratic interest in carnivals and popular culture, and this manifests in certain forms of ornament.<sup>28</sup> The

26 'By the 1580s, these books of florid, bulbous designs could be found as far afield as Riga and cut out and pasted into print albums in Sicily and Spain.' Heuer (2009): 100. For an example of this kind of decoration, see page 183 of *Architecture* by Wendel Dietterlin, Nuremberg, 1598. Image from Heidelberg Digital Library. <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.1607#0189>.

27 Vitale (1714). See Garofalo (2007): 35 for the Enna sacristy.

28 Katie Scott refers to French elite interest in fairgrounds and 'the bawdy, outlandish and satiric quality of the comedies performed there'. She adds, 'The incorporation of new, specifically

European nobility enjoyed entertainments such as clowns and acrobats as much as other citizens. Rich and poor in larger towns mixed together at the comedy theatre and at carnivals, festivals, and fairs.<sup>29</sup> In Sicily there were travelling entertainers, cardsharps, and herbal healers known as *giravoli* ('wanderers') who appeared at carnivals.<sup>30</sup>

Fairs, carnivals, and masquerades were sites where boundaries between social classes, and between licit and illicit, became temporarily blurred. The normal rules were often suspended or in some cases reversed.<sup>31</sup> There was mixing and mimicry between rich and poor. They could be an opportunity for forms of cross-dressing where the aristocrats dressed as servants, and vice versa. For example, at the carnival of Scicli, some citizens dressed as members of the poorest classes.<sup>32</sup>

The use of masks moved across carnivals, masque balls, and commedia dell'arte. *Commedia dell'arte*, or more fully *Commedia dell'arte all'improvviso*, with its masked figures, low-life figures, and often strange humour, resonates strongly with the *mensole* sculpture. The commedia involves stock characters of unknown origins, and the body is often shown in a grotesque form. Commedia began in sixteenth-century Italy, probably in the north, and spread throughout Europe.<sup>33</sup> In the original commedia, the actors improvised around the characters and storylines from *canovacci*, published texts outlining popular plots. Each character's traits and costume were fixed, but the actors needed to work out the dialogue, movements, and other dramatic elements.<sup>34</sup>

Commedia might also include Sicilian characters who resemble the bespectacled *mensole* figures of the balconies. Francesco Bertelli's *Il*

popular or "low" motifs into the grotesque was accomplished not without consequence or meaning. The iconographic range of the genre expanded, but more importantly, the expansion to include acrobats, minstrels, monkeys and other fairground fodder was accompanied by a correspondingly greater interaction between the ornamental and figurative elements [...] The imagery of the fair thus tended to break down the last, provisional certainties of the classical grotesque.' Scott (1996): 129.

29 In the 1770s the comedy theatre in Messina had a VIP lodge on the ground floor, as was common throughout Italy. The first four or five rows of seats were paid annually; the rest were for single tickets or soldiers, who did not pay. There were boxes for foreign consuls, the viceroy, and the governor. De la Plathière (1780), vol. 3: 292. See also Burke (1978): 24–25.

30 Burke (1978):100. On *giravoli*, see p.113.

31 Burke (1978): 178.

32 Rak (1989): 58.

33 The first recorded commedia was at Mantua in 1568. Rudlin and Crick (2001): 1 and 3.

34 Rudin and Crick argue that the commedia became more scripted in the seventeenth century. Rudlin and Crick (2001): 1. Scripted plays derived from commedia include Molière's *Les Fourberies de Scapin* (1671) and Goldoni's *Il servitore di due padroni* (1743).

*carnevale italiano mascherato; que si veggono in figura varie invention di capricii* (Venice, 1642) has a costume for Sicilians with spectacles and large noses.<sup>35</sup> They resemble the plague doctors who wore protective glasses and a beak-like protuberance over the nose containing purifying spices to cover the smell of the infected patients and to keep their faces away from that of the doctor. The *'dottore'* character in commedia is usually a false intellectual and pedant, and often bespectacled.<sup>36</sup>

Sicily also had its own form of commedia. In Palermo, there was a form in dialect known as *Vastasata*. This term derives from a word meaning an uncouth man. As with commedia elsewhere, the Sicilian actors used *canovacci* outlining the story but improvised the dialogue.<sup>37</sup> A character known as *Peppe Nappa* developed in the Sicilian plays. He is a servant. Like the Neapolitan *Pulcinella*, his main characteristics are hunger and laziness, although unlike *Pulcinella* he does not usually wear a mask.

Commedia depicts a world of hunger and unequal power relations, where there is resistance to authority. Scott McGehee relates commedia to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'grotesque realism'. Commedia challenges any attempt to idealise social relations or to present social hierarchies as static or justifiable.<sup>38</sup> The characters are often buffoonish, sly, or pompous and entirely self-serving. Each one has a distinctive mask, mannerisms, and voice. Like the *mascheroni* of the Sicilian facades, each character often shows a dominant motivation or emotional state. They can be misers (Pantalone), braggarts (Scaramouche), or sly, sensual, and eternally hungry such as the enigmatic *Pulcinella*. They can be obsequious to those in power but are essentially dissimulating and selfish. They exhibit no idealism. They are usually ruled by immediate reactions to changing circumstances only.

The actor Avner Eisenberg emphasises the characters' hungry and troubled nature, and the absence of idealism in the tragic and desire-driven world

35 Francesco Bertelli, *Il carnevale italiano mascherato; que si veggono in figura varie invention di capricii* (Venice, 1642). Illustration five. The image can be viewed on Getty Research Institute <https://archive.org/details/ilcarnevaleitalioobert/page/n15/mode/2up>.

36 Burke (1978): 159.

37 See the online Treccani Italian dictionary. [treccani.it/vocabolario/vastaso/](http://treccani.it/vocabolario/vastaso/) On *canovacci*, see Cucinotta (1996): 124.

38 'Bakhtin characterizes this play between the socially coded body and the natural or "universal" body as a carnivalesque vision of the world that is artistically expressed as "grotesque realism". For Bakhtin, grotesque realism, of which Commedia is a prime example, is characterised by an inversion of stable hierarchies, the dissolution of conceptual boundaries, the degradation or materialisation of all that is high, spiritual, ideal and abstract; distinguished overall by "a celebration of the relativity of the symbolic order".' McGehee in Chaffee and Crick, eds. (2015):



Fig. 6.12. Giandomenico Tiepolo, *Pulcinella in Love*. 1791–1793. Detail. Museum of Ca' Rezzonico, Venice. Image from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ca%27\\_Rezzonico\\_-\\_Pulcinella\\_innamorato\\_by\\_Giandomenico\\_Tiepolo.jpg#/media/File:Ca'\\_Rezzonico\\_-\\_Pulcinella\\_innamorato\\_by\\_Giandomenico\\_Tiepolo.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ca%27_Rezzonico_-_Pulcinella_innamorato_by_Giandomenico_Tiepolo.jpg#/media/File:Ca'_Rezzonico_-_Pulcinella_innamorato_by_Giandomenico_Tiepolo.jpg)

that they inhabit: 'The Commedia characters are not trying to be funny. There is a world of life and death decisions, crime and punishment, war and peace, and hunger. There is always hunger, not just for food but also for wealth, sex, and power.'<sup>39</sup>

Giandomenico Tiepolo depicts this world of hunger, desire, and grotesque bodies in his series of Pulcinella frescoes, painted between 1759 and 1797 (Figs. 6.12 and 6.13).<sup>40</sup> Although not for public display, the paintings engage with the popular Pulcinella character. Pulcinella is a single character in commedia, but Tiepolo sometimes depicts large groups of 'pulcinelle'. Pulcinella becomes plural; he becomes a strange tribe or population. In the fresco *Pulcinella in Love*, a pulcinella grasps a woman who is also wearing a form of pulcinella costume (Fig. 6.13). His hand is clasped onto her breast. The woman curls her foot near to that of the pulcinella. She waves a fan like an aristocratic lady and her other hand holds a bacchanalian garland of flowers.

The dance of the two characters parodies the conventions of polite interaction described in the dancing manuals for training aristocrats. The other pulcinelle in the background are lost in their own revels, oblivious to

39 Eisenberg in Chaffee and Crick, eds. (2015): xiii.

40 Museum of Ca' Rezzonico website. [www.carezzonico.visitmuve.it](http://www.carezzonico.visitmuve.it). Giandomenico Tiepolo was the son of the more famous Gianbattista Tiepolo.



Fig. 6.13. Giandomenico Tiepolo, *Pulcinella and the Acrobats*. 1791–1793. Museum of Ca' Rezzonico, Venice. Image from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ca%27\\_Rezzonico\\_-\\_Il\\_ca-sotto\\_dei\\_saltimbanchi\\_by\\_Giandomenico\\_Tiepolo.jpg#/media/File:Ca'\\_Rezzonico\\_-\\_Il\\_ca-sotto\\_dei\\_saltimbanchi\\_by\\_Giandomenico\\_Tiepolo.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ca%27_Rezzonico_-_Il_ca-sotto_dei_saltimbanchi_by_Giandomenico_Tiepolo.jpg#/media/File:Ca'_Rezzonico_-_Il_ca-sotto_dei_saltimbanchi_by_Giandomenico_Tiepolo.jpg)

the clumsy and drunken dance of the man and the woman. They dance in a spontaneous, unskilled, skipping fashion. Their lack of corporal restraint is exhibited in their unselfconscious dancing, their large bellies, and the wine bottles held up like trophies.

In *Pulcinella and the Acrobats*, the scene is also disorderly (Fig. 6.13). Spectators are corralled into a basic wooden structure with no seats. A pulcinella near the acrobats holds up a smaller pulcinella. The pulcinella

can reproduce but cannot rise out of their grotesque state. Two men perform contorted, inelegant somersaults, exposing the legs and stocking of one of them. Silk ruffs on the wrists of their shirts unsuccessfully attempt elegance. The acrobats' naked torsos and flailing legs are a disconcerting vision of the body. Their lack of individuality dehumanizes them as they perform their handstands for money. It is very far from the self-conscious, measured performances of the aristocratic ballroom and the dance manuals by Rameau and others. Unlike in the ballroom, the body here becomes debased.

The grotesque, anti-aristocratic bodies of *commedia* operate even more strongly in a spectacle usually called *balletto grottesco*.<sup>41</sup> These dances originated as comic interludes within a longer programme of different ballets but then became complete works in themselves. They incorporated the *commedia* characters in performances without dialogue. Buffoonish dancers perform seemingly clumsy but also skilfully contorted dances that counteract classical forms. The focus was on the movements of the body in dance rather than a ballet with a narrative.

The choreographer and dancer Gregorio Lambranzi's *Nuova e curiosa scuola dei balli theatricali* (Nuremberg, 1716) includes descriptions and images of *balletto grottesco*. Unlike the fixed motions of aristocratic dance described in the treatises, Lambranzi's dances—like *commedia*—can be improvised.<sup>42</sup> Lambranzi emphasises that the dances must be grotesque. The body must move in ways that are eccentric and ridiculous:

The lively and burlesque types represented in numbers 23 to 49, such as Scaramouch, Harlequin and the like, must be expressed in the eccentric style of dancing; and with, of course, ridiculous and comic positions suited to the peculiar characteristics of each. Hence it would be quite out of place for a Scaramouch, Harlequin or Purricinella to dance a *Menuet*, *Courande*, *Sarabande* or *Entrée*, since each has his own droll and quaint *pas*. Thus, Scaramouch dances his long, unformed and heavy imitation such as the *pas de scaramouche*.<sup>43</sup>

As in *commedia*, each character has their own dance, mood, and ways of moving. Lambranzi's Plate 35 shows the dances' overtly clumsy, inelegant nature. The character Scapino and his unnamed wife are in costumes of

41 Franko (2015): 4. Magri uses *serio*, *mezzo carattere*, and *grottesco* for three principal categories of dance. Harris-Warrick and Brown (2005): 6–7.

42 De Moroda (1928): 15.

43 De Moroda (1928): 16. This passage is also quoted in Hertz (1999): 140.

broad, contrasting stripes. They bump their buttocks together, back to back. There is no dialogue or eye contact. Other dancers wear grotesque costumes. Similarly, in Plate 45, the character Narcisino of Malemberg arrives with orange peel for eyes and a pumpkin on his nose, and performs a complicated, frog-like dance.<sup>44</sup>

The characters come onto the stage, dance, and then exit. There is no explanation. The dances are comic but deadpan and unsettling. There is skill, but it is a skill that rejects classical ballet. There is both nihilism and a celebration of an alternative form of bodily agility and display of the body to that of the ballroom. Mark Franko argues that the subversive nature of these dances interweaves itself into the space of the more classical and canonical dance forms. In *balletto grottesco*, the subversive occupies the same space as the more prestigious culture but is repressed. It bursts out between gaps in the dominant culture.<sup>45</sup> The strange mixture of ambiguity, nihilism, and repressed or marginalised bodies and emotions that operates in the grotesque dances has interesting resonances in the Val di Noto palace facades.

## Violence and Resistance

The Val di Noto palaces often face directly onto narrow streets, with a height of only two or three stories and no surrounding walls or other features to set them back from the street. For these palaces, the *mensole* decoration may complement the symbolic role of the rustication and other forms of fortified solidity found on some palace facades. The facade is therefore involved in keeping outsiders away, both physically and symbolically.

The tradespeople and servants depicted on the Ragusa *mensole* become both apotropaic protectors of the buildings, and people who are mocked or belittled. The servants that a palace owner might employ to help protect the building were also recruited from the economically disadvantaged. The servants are necessary but need to be kept at a distance and under control. Aristocrats might simultaneously disdain but also be completely reliant

44 De Moroda (1928): 26 and 26 n.2. Plate 35 can be viewed on <https://giornaledelladanza.com/storia-della-danza-alla-riscoperta-di-balletti-dimenticati-di-flavia-pappacena-2/>. Plate 40 can be viewed on <https://danceinhistory.com/tag/gregorio-lambranzi/>.

45 'Despite the *dénouements* of most ballets, alternative forces imposed themselves within the fabric of these works to a degree that could not be ignored. Such forces embedded within the spectacle constituted its "oppressed" memory and, in this sense, repressed meaning.' Franko (2015): xvi.



Fig. 6.14. Micco Spadaro. *The Murder of Don Giuseppe Carafa*. 1647. Museo di San Martino, Naples. Image from Alamy Stock Photo. Image 2E5G39M.

on the servants and workers. What would happen if these servants turned on their masters?

This was more than just an imaginary fear. The Sicilian nobility had reason to fear the population. Besides the breakdown of order that could follow earthquakes, such as the looting that occurred in towns such as Avola and Grammichele, the frequent bread shortages—and profiteering and hoarding by some richer people during these shortages—meant that there was always a possibility that the people might turn on the nobles. Between 1646 and 1647, bread shortages sparked violent uprisings in Messina, Palermo, Sciacca, Agrigento, and Catania. In the eighteenth century, there were riots in Palermo (1703, 1707, 1718, and 1773) and Catania (1798), where there was also a state of famine. In these uprisings, the people looted aristocratic property and, in some cases, killed nobles who did not flee.<sup>46</sup>

The potential effects of this popular violence are depicted in Micco Spadaro's painting of the 1647 Masaniello uprising in Naples (Fig. 6.14). The painting evokes the danger that was always present for the aristocracy. A fish seller named Tommaso Aniello, or Masaniello, led the uprising. Masaniello controlled Naples for a month before being murdered, but the upheavals

46 Mack Smith (1968): 212–215, 238–240, 251, 309. Ferrara (1829): 235 and 252.

lasted four months and sparked revolts in other towns. In the painting, ragged-clothed rioters drag bodies across the square and behead them. The head of the nobleman Giuseppe Carafa is displayed on a pike. When the rebellions were crushed, the heads of the leaders were displayed as a warning and a reassertion of aristocratic control.<sup>47</sup> When the people turned on the nobility, looting and burning their property, terror and violence was meted out in return.

Henry Swinburne describes the riots in Palermo in 1773 sparked by the death of the Prince of Cassaro, a popular magistrate who used his own money to purchase bread for the city during a shortage. A rumour spread that Cassaro was murdered on the orders of the Viceroy Marquis Foliani. In their fury, the people burnt and looted the houses of the rich, and the Viceroy fled. Swinburne reports:

Intoxicated with their victory over government, the rebels broke through all bounds; the property of the rich was plundered or burnt, victuals were seized and consumed unpaid for, and every sturdy villain appropriated to his own use whatever came in his way that suited his purpose. Universal anarchy prevailed, though a junta of the most active among the factious attempted to assert a kind of authority over the populace; they devised plans for destroying the nobility and officers of the revenue, and assuming to themselves the power and titles of viceroy, praetor, captain of justice.<sup>48</sup>

After four days of riots, the *maestranze* or organisations of tradesmen and merchants restored order. They arrested the leaders of the rebellion, whose decapitated heads were put on public display.<sup>49</sup>

In Catania, spectres of famine and revolution permeate the work of the dialect poet Domenico Tempio. His poems deal with what the dances and conversation of the ballroom elide, with what the aristocratic palaces want to keep out. Tempio was writing at the end of the eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth, later than the building of most of the Val di Noto palaces, but the social inequality and prevalent poverty of the time was similar. His sometimes obscene pornographic work describes a society of desperation and poverty. These poems, written when social

47 See Astarita (2005): 112–118. Michelangelo Cerquozzi and Viviano Codazzi's painting of 1648 *The Revolt of Masaniello on 7 July 1648* shows the disorder in Naples as the populace pillage the markets.

48 Swinburne (1790), vol. 3: 311.

49 Ibid.

resentment and injustice exploded in the French Revolution, conjure up the aristocracy's nightmares, and the dreams and fury of the poor.

Tempio's *La Carestia* describes the riots in Catania after the 1798 famine.<sup>50</sup> Bad harvests in 1763 and 1773 affected the city's bread supply, but the 1798 shortage generated serious violence.<sup>51</sup> There was a poor harvest in 1797, and although the 1798 harvest was better, grain stocks were still low. Bakers made the loaves of bread smaller but didn't reduce the price. On the night of 24 June, the people filled the cathedral square, demanding that the loaves be made larger so that they could feed their families. The following day, these gatherings became a riot. The historian of Catania Francesco Ferrara recalls seeing these events as a child:

On the 25<sup>th</sup> they set fire to the mayor's residence, entered the council chamber, tore the seats to pieces, and threw the senator's benches out of the windows. Others stuck bread on the end of sticks, and the crowd roared throughout the whole city, and filled every place with horror and tumult. In the evening they took hold of all of the bread shops, throwing the bread in the air, and finally in the street of the Carmine they sacked the rice storehouse.<sup>52</sup>

Ferrara recounts how those who took rice from the warehouse were themselves attacked and robbed by others in a complete breakdown of law and order. The riot was only calmed when the servants of the Prince of Biscari fixed notices around the city declaring that the prince would buy all of the remaining grain and use it to make bigger loaves.<sup>53</sup>

The following year there were more disturbances. In the period before Carnival, scarcity of both work and food—combined with news of an uprising in Naples—created a climate of tension in Catania. Fearing that the Carnival would become a riot against the rulers, attempts were made to curtail the celebrations. Ferrara describes the atmosphere of conspiracy and uncertainty:

A misplaced zeal made some clergy preach against the upcoming carnival: On the morning of 2 February 1799 notices appeared which imprudently warned the populace not to wear masks, and against social gatherings.

50 *La Carestia* was written in 1821 but published posthumously in 1848.

51 Ferrara (1829): 235 and 252.

52 Ferrara (1829): 261–262.

53 *Ibid.*: 262. The Prince of Biscari at the time was Vincenzo Paternò Castello.

These notices produced general confusion among the good people and created bad intentions. Some people made a secret group. On the Tuesday of the carnival, they planned to attack the most important and richest houses in the city, foment massacres and deaths, and assemble an armed force.<sup>54</sup>

The city government placed soldiers around the city and, according to Ferrara, this prevented an uprising, for the time being. The people could see that during the 1798 famine, grain was still available for those who could buy it, but it was expensive. The Prince of Biscari supported the populace when he intervened to procure grain and make the loaves bigger, but he only did this when there was a rebellion. These events showed that the hunger of the poor only mattered when it affected the security of the aristocracy.

Tempio describes the famine in the poem *La Carestia*. The skeletal bodies of the poor are pushed into view for inspection:

Hunger had hollowed with its gouge the jaws of these miserable, half-naked beggars. It had sculpted them expertly, with a sharp file and hard chest and ribs. With its rough point, hunger's large ugly scalpel emptied the stomach from the kidneys to the bone. Then, to complete its miserable creation, it sliced with a carpenter's plane around the ankles and shins.<sup>55</sup>

Tempio goes on to describe the nobility as pigs who benefit from the people's misery. His country is an evil mechanism that allows the rich to flourish and the poor to die.<sup>56</sup>

It is significant, however, that Tempio's work was accepted—and sometimes celebrated—by some powerful nobles. Vincenzo Percolla, in his biography of people from Catania, recounts an anecdote that Domenico Caracciolo, Sicilian viceroy between 1781 and 1786, quoted Tempio's poems to an archbishop.<sup>57</sup> Tempio's work celebrates licentiousness, vulgarity, and the

54 Ibid.: 263.

55 Tempio (1967), vol.1: 16. Canto 1 Verses 409-424. Italian translation of the Sicilian dialect from Monzone (2013): 589–560.

56 'I don't doubt that this nobility is a damned race, these pigs grow fat on our misfortune.' Tempio (1967): 161. Canto V, verses 897-900. 'Ah, barbaric homeland, evil instrument, for which the rich exist and the beggar perishes.' Tempio (1967): Canto IX, Verses 781-784. Italian translations from Monzone (2013): 647 and 71–72.

57 Percolla (1842): 351, Clarenza (1839). Vincenzo Clarenza's *Lettera del cavaliere Vincenzo Cordaro a Sua Eccellenza il Principe di Biscari sopra la vita ed opere di Domenico Tempio*, published in the *Giornale del Gabinetto Letterario dell'Accademia di Gioenia di Catania* in 1839, includes a eulogy to Tempio and a discussion of his poetry.

struggles and tragedies of the poor. He writes in the everyday dialect of his city rather than in academic Italian, but his poetry displays his knowledge of canonical literature such as Livy, Horace, Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, and Tasso. He wrote in 'all meters and all chords', using poetic forms such as the ode, dithyramb, and idyll, and wrote poems that parodied these earlier poets.<sup>58</sup>

Like the Val di Noto facades, Tempio's poems incorporate the supposedly lower culture within the framework of classicism. His bawdy poems written in Sicilian dialect use the metre of classical poets. There is a dance between two worlds. The putative untutored body of the poor is accommodated and incorporated into the more canonical and purportedly refined elements. There is a tension between the two. One world cannot completely cancel out the other.

### Conclusion: Refinement and Debasement

Paolo Mattia Doria's *La vita civile con un trattato della educazione del principe* (Naples, 1729) gives a long list of philosophers who argue that the people are like a body. This body needs to be controlled by the ruler, who Doria compares to a mind:

They say that the populace is necessary for the republic, in the same way that the parts of the body obey the rule of the mind. They say that if things are not in the right place, that if the members want to move without the mind's command, which rules and governs them, then there will occur those disorders which, in republics and principalities, we often observe.<sup>59</sup>

Doria then refers to Plato's argument that rulers should be philosophers. Order is determined by the actions of the ruler. The implication is that the populace cannot rule themselves, although bad rulers are also to blame for disorder. If the mind was believed to rule the body, then control of the body implies the ability of the mind to dominate it. There is a fear of the untrained body, or a body ruled by the untrained mind. If the aristocracy portray themselves as controlled and graceful, they portray the poor as the opposite. The untrained

58 The parodies include an unnamed poem Percolla described as a Sapphic ode ('ode saffica') which is an imitation of the poem *Jam satis terries nivis* by Horace, and a poem on wine which references *Bacco in Toscana* by the seventeenth-century poet Francesco Redi. Percolla (1842): 349–351.

59 Doria (1729): 4. Doria's list of philosophers runs from Greeks such as Solon and Lycurgus to more contemporary writers such as Bacon and Richelieu.

body and mind of the poor leers at the viewer from the facades of the palaces in Ragusa discussed earlier. The shabby figures on the Ragusa facades, and the grotesque dancers of carnivals and popular entertainments, are what the world inside the aristocratic palaces wanted to keep out.

Are the debased images of the Ragusa palace *mensole* or the buffoonish dances of *balletto grottesco* mocking the submission and poverty of the populace? Such an overt statement of social difference may not have been possible. Instead, the aim may have been to divert the sense of social difference, to convert it into something more harmless, or inevitable. On the *mensole* in Ragusa, Spadola writes:

The satirical content and the expressive hilarity certainly do not represent the glorification of corporations and guilds which, at one time, decorated the medieval churches but, like the floors engraved with the crushed enemies of the pharaoh, are subject to the same, mainly mocking idea, with allusions to the ridicule of a servile class which does not make history.<sup>60</sup>

I do not wish to equate the aristocratic ballroom with the practice of a self-conscious decorum only, or the entertainments of the less privileged with behaviour that is always uncontrolled. I want to show that the two worlds are in a constant dialogue with each other. They define themselves against each other. The two systems—one of which involves the aristocratic habitus of the body, with its dancing and fencing, and the other system which, in different ways, includes the ribald and subversive world of Domenico Tempio, commedia, and *balletto grottesco*—appear parallel but are symbiotic. The aristocratic body tries to distinguish itself from the ribald and grotesque. As the aristocracy works to establish itself as superior and to suggest that poverty is due to the people's lack of grace and self-control, the grotesque often works in a different way but reinforces the same tropes and justifications for social inequality.

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60 Spadola (1982): 8.

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# Conclusion

## Architecture and the Naturalisation of Power

In this book I have adopted a materialist approach to engage with the complexity of the Val di Noto rebuilding. Instead of presenting the towns as principally exercises in putatively rational and harmonious baroque planning, I examined how different architectural commissions in the Val di Noto—hexagonal urban layouts, palace facades and their decoration, and the palace interior of the ballroom—tied with the interests, insecurities, and fears of their aristocratic patrons.

Chapter Two examined how the hexagonal towns of Avola and Grammichele operated in remaking territory. Treatises such as those by Leon Battista Alberti and Giovan Biagio Amico promote geometry as architecture's principal generator. Although scholars of Early Modern European architecture such as Martha Pollak implicate geometry within fortifications and military power, they still present geometry as an uncomplicated, universal set of rational laws. In contrast, I analysed the hexagonal layouts and the reshaped environment in terms of territorialisation rather than as simple exercises in ideal urbanism. The feudal status of Avola and Grammichele's owners was justified by claims to noble lineage, but after the earthquake, their dominance of the territory was reasserted in their ability to create of the hexagonal layouts.

In Avola and Grammichele, the purportedly universal truth and rationality of the exercise of geometry supported the barons' claim to superiority. The towns' overtly geometric urbanism associated their rulers with access to the supposedly rational. It masked unequal power relations between the absentee barons and the towns' inhabitants. Carlo Maria Carafa's writing on rulership evokes universal laws to justify this feudal system. His writing seeks to naturalise this dominance, emphasising the prince's place at the political centre, supported by divine order and ideal mathematics. The employment of an 'ideal order'—supposedly inscribed in the cosmos through geometry—gives the barons a claim to a putative universal and superior truth.

Chapter Three discussed family alliances and rivalries in the rebuilding of Noto and related this to marginality and effects of restraint and luxury in the town's palace facades. The changes of decision in Noto's rebuilding create a complex narrative, but these changes reveal that there was often resistance to imposed decisions. The government was not able to impose its decisions from afar. Noto's aristocrats frequently ignored official rulings such as Asdrubale

Termini's recommendation to return to the old site. The populace also ignored the nobility's preference for the higher part of Noto's new site and rebuilt on the lower part that became the town centre. From this confusion of competing forces, the alliance between Giuseppe Asmundo and a faction of the Landolina family was critical in determining the town's new site.

The rebuilding of Noto also facilitated the transformation of the Nicolaci, who rose to become one of Noto's richest aristocratic families by the middle of the eighteenth century. The Nicolaci were not among the nobles and heads of religious institutions that voted on Noto's new site, but once the new site became established, they took advantage of the sale of fiefs to enter the nobility and bought more land for their palace. As a merchant family with capital, they used this capital to establish themselves as one of the town's most prominent families. This culminated in their ornate palace facade and the funeral oration of its patron Giacomo Nicolaci, now feted as a noble citizen by the same families who had earlier attempted to block his father's accession to the town council.

The Palazzo Nicolaci's profuse ornament can be read in terms of marginality and strange bodily transformations, in contrast to the ornament of the other palaces which produces an effect of restraint and self-control. Analysing the Palazzo Nicolaci ornament closely reveals its various forms of ambiguity. There are hybrid, metamorphosing creatures and ornament that operates on the borders of architecture and sculpture, and which shifts between architectural member and animal or plant form.

A palace was key to noble status, and the ballroom enabled many of the aristocratic activities that took place in the palace. The scholarship on the Val di Noto has paid very little attention to interiors and interior decoration, focussing almost exclusively on town planning and building facades. In Chapter Four, I read the sparking, fluid decoration in the Palazzo Biscari's ballroom in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction and his analysis of how the light and refined are privileged against the solid and heavy. In the Palazzo Biscari, lightness extends from the ballroom's materials—the shining gold and glass, the swirling stucco decoration, the frescos of apotheosis—to the physical lightness and springing movements that dancers were expected to achieve.

Eighteenth-century manuals on dance and physical training—including Pierre Rameau's *Le maître à danser* (1725) and Gennaro Magri's *Trattato teorico-prattico di ballo* (1779)—emphasise dance training's contribution to an aristocrat's overall physical poise and distinction. This poise—and control of parts of the body such as facial expression—were made to appear as part of a lightness produced as apparently natural. The ballroom was therefore

much more than a place of entertainment and conspicuous consumption. It was a place associated with bodily discipline and with managing the show of emotions in social interactions.

The last two chapters examined enigmatic facade sculpture that resists standard iconological interpretations. These chapters also contest the relegation of ornament as secondary to a purportedly essential architectural 'structure'. The unsettling facade sculpture of the Palazzo Beneventano in Scicli resonates with readings of aristocratic anxiety over slave raiding and social unrest. I related the implied violence in the facade sculpture to urban rivalries between *bartolari* and *marianisti* families in Scicli, and to the many conflicts between religious groups including the Jesuits and Capuchins. The representations of Moors and African slaves on the facade can be read in terms of Scicli's history of slave trading and foreign raiders, and the festival of the Madonna delle Milizie, which enacts a battle between Christians and Moors. The Palazzo Beneventano facade is also an interesting example of how ornament does not always seek the beautiful.

The facade sculpture of the Palazzo Cosentini and the Palazzo La Rocca in Ragusa allows an exploration of stereotypes of the non-aristocratic populace on whom the aristocracy depended. Situated at the meeting point of the palace and the street, this decoration involves a strange combination of abundance, joy, and celebration with ugliness, poverty, and the grotesque. Commissioned by aristocrats, the sculpture has a carnivalesque quality that can be related to popular entertainments, particularly the characters of *commedia dell'arte*. Rather than relegating the decoration to a world of marginalia and gargoyles, I investigate what happens if we relate the sculpture to the aristocratic fear of the populace.

The populace were the aristocrats' Other, the purportedly unrefined masses whose behaviour displayed the opposite of aristocratic refinement and self-control. This world of carnivals and popular entertainments had a potentially subversive quality and was enjoyed by all classes including the nobility. The depiction of the populace on the Ragusa palaces and in entertainments such as *Commedia dell'Arte* is humorous but also reflects an image of the people back at themselves. This image represents the people as incapable of noble or supposedly higher aspirations. Instead, they are shown as interested only in immediate pleasures. Imagining the people as moved by simple pleasures and as buffoonish might tame and explain them, mitigating the ever-present aristocratic fear that they might lose control over their servants.

The book analysed ways that aristocratic power was manifest and maintained, and how architecture is implicated in this. In the case studies of the

hexagonal towns and the Palazzo Biscari ballroom, I related architecture to how aristocratic dominance was supported on one level through putatively rational urbanism, and on a different level through lightness and the trained body of the ballroom. In my discussion of Sicilian palace facades, I related the decoration to hybridity, excess, restraint, aggression, and the grotesque. My intention was to engage with how architecture enabled aristocratic power and to resist a reading of the buildings as simply exemplars of established art historical styles. My hope is that this will contribute to readings of eighteenth-century architecture and to studies of the cultural heritage of Southern Italy, as well as to broader readings of what architecture excludes or promotes.

# Glossary

<i>Baroniale</i>	Town or territory owned by a noble family
<i>Braccianti</i>	Agricultural workers hired for a fixed term only
<i>Burgisi</i>	Smallholders who are paid to cultivate an area of land for a one- or two-year cycle
<i>Capitano di giustizia</i> or <i>Capitano generale</i>	Town official responsible for law and order
<i>Capomastro / Capomaestro</i>	Building site foreman or master mason
<i>Caricatore</i>	Agricultural storehouse, usually for grain
<i>Donativi</i>	Annual amounts of money and agricultural produce that the Sicilian nobility had to send to the Spanish occupiers
<i>Dammuso</i>	Ceiling vault. Also, rooms in a palace's lower floor rented out as shops or used for storage
<i>Demaniale</i>	Town or territory owned by the crown
<i>Gabella</i>	A tax. Also, a subcontract to profits from land or other commercial enterprises
<i>Gabelloto</i>	Person who has paid to manage and take profit from an aristocrat's land
<i>Giurato</i>	Member of a town's governing body
<i>Isolato</i>	Town block
<i>Licentia Populandi</i>	Licence allowing an aristocrat to establish a town and agricultural plantations on new land
<i>Mensola</i>	Corbel supporting a balcony
<i>Mascherone</i>	Mask-like decoration
<i>Mero e Misto Imperio</i>	An aristocrat's right to legal jurisdiction over the inhabitants of his land
<i>Notaio</i>	Notary
<i>Protonotaro del Regno</i>	Government official in charge of official appointments and confirming noble titles
<i>Ringhiera</i>	Iron balcony railing
<i>Rivelo</i>	Tax assessment of every town. Carried out approximately every 10 years

<i>Scalpellino</i>	Stonecutter or stone carver
<i>Sindaco</i>	Mayor of a town
<i>Sopraporta</i>	Decoration or painting above a door and framed or included within the door mouldings
<i>Tonnara</i>	Tuna processing plant

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