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On the Trial and Execution of Uguccione della Badia: A Conspiracy in Estense Ferrara?*

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In 1460 Uguccione della Badia, long-time secretary and chancellor of Borso d'Este, ruler of Ferrara, (1450-1471), was tried and executed for plotting to assassinate his lord. While historians of Ferrara have noted this event, they have not agreed about its significance. Using various texts and contexts, this study compares Uguccione's plot to other Italian conspiracies, explores the charges against Uguccione, offers explanations for his arrest, and suggests what the matter reveals about the nature of the Estense polity under Borso. Relevant features include the role of bastardy, rebellion, capital punishment, the chancery, foreign policy, and issues of succession particular to the regime. The threats to Estensi rulers were more serious, vigilance more intense, and Borso's skill in deflecting dangers more accomplished, than previously thought.

Nel 1460 Uguccione Della Badia, antico segretario e cancelliere di Borso d'Este signore di Ferrara (1450-1471), fu processato e giustiziato per avere partecipato a una congiura ordita per assassinare il suo signore. Gli storici di Ferrara hanno analizzato questo evento ma non sono concordi sul suo significato. Mediante vari testi e contesti, questo studio compara la congiura di Uguccione ad altre cospirazioni dell'Italia del tempo, analizza le accuse rivolte al Della Badia, propone spiegazioni circa il suo arresto e considera la vicenda come punto di osservazione sulla natura della politica estense al tempo di Borso. Aspetti rilevanti sono il ruolo dei dinasti di nascita illegittima, le ribellioni, la pena capitale, il ruolo della cancelleria e della politica estera, e la peculiare forma di successione del regime. Rispetto a quanto si è finora ritenuto, le minacce ai signori estensi appaiono più serie, più attenta la vigilanza e più efficace la capacità di Borso di parare i pericoli che lo attorniavano.

Middle Ages; 15th century; Ferrara; Borso d'Este; conspiracy; assassination; bastardy.

Medioevo; secolo XV; Ferrara; Borso d'Este; congiure; assassinio; bastardi.

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1. *Introduction and Methodology*

In June 1460 Uguccione della Badia, knight, secretary, chancellor, and long-time servant of Duke Borso d'Este, was executed in the middle of the night. This tidbit is mentioned by nearly every prominent historian of Borso's rule in Ferrara, though no one can quite agree on its meaning and significance. The reasons for this are many. The sources are few, the arrest, trial, and execution were conducted with unusual haste and secrecy, and the punishment seems to exceed the nature of the crime. Most of all, the chancellor's demise, for decades a faithful and honored bureaucrat, is puzzling, especially given Borso's intense cultivation of the image of a just and benevolent ruler. Determining the significance of Uguccione's downfall is fraught with challenges but has the potential to reveal facets of the Estense polity and Borso's rule on a microhistorical level. This entails several things, a reduction of scale, intense detail, the role of agency, and an admission of doubt, that a high level of certitude will never be achieved due to the lack of documentation¹.

The Estensi were a family of Germanic origins traceable to the tenth century. They settled in the Euganean hills at Este in northeastern Italy. By the end of the twelfth century, they styled themselves "Marchesi d'Este" and began to contest control of Ferrara as members of the Guelf party. In 1240 they took permanent control of the city. Around the same time, they became champions of the church as papal vicars in the wars against Ezzelino da Romano. They expanded their control to both Modena and Reggio. The chaos of the fourteenth century imposed many vagaries on the family and its possessions. Niccolò III (r. 1393-1441) restored the integrity of the "terre Estensi," and introduced elements of the Renaissance into Ferrarese culture when he invited the humanist pedagogue Guarino da Verona to settle in Ferrara. Niccolò was succeeded by three of his sons which provided great continuity over the fifteenth century. It was the middle son, Borso (r. 1450-1471) who secured the *de jure* status of the dynasty when he was installed as duke of the imperial fiefs, Modena and Reggio in 1452 and as duke of Ferrara from the pope in 1471.

Carlo Ginzburg has suggested that there are three kinds of sources, fake, authentic and unreliable, and authentic and reliable². There is no reason to doubt the authenticity *per se* of the *Processus agitatus contra Ugutionem de Abbatia*, the documented trial of Uguccione. However, its function in the inquisitorial system was not to lay out impartially the evidence or to record an adversarial process of prosecution and defense, but to document the accused's presumed guilt. Therefore, it would not be reasonable to accept the *processus* without subjecting it to intense scrutiny, and this leads to another of Ginzburg's observations, that sources are always more or less ambiguous and «the range of possible meanings can be narrowed down by checking context», of

¹ Cohen, *The Macrohistory of Microhistory*, pp. 53-73.

² Ginzburg, *The Judge and the Historian*, p. 83.

which there are many, requiring an «intricate network of paths»³. Ginzburg's arguments are about maneuvering through the epistemological challenges of incomplete and biased records, to discern the meaning of historical events. This is usually more a winding path than a direct road. A compensatory strategy can be implemented by exploring multiple sources and perspectives, but the results are still often more possibilities than truths.

In Uguccione's case, there are four of these paths, used to scrutinize the *processus*, keeping in mind another of Ginzburg's points, that historians supply arguments not proofs⁴. They are the 1) historiographical, 2) legal, 3) conspiratorial, and 4) domestic and foreign political paths. But first it is well to look at the *Diario ferrarese* that offers a cogent summary of events.

Eodem millesimo, a dì XXVIII de magio, a hore XXII, in Ferrara, lo illustrissimo signore duca Borso, una cum il conte Lorenzo, suo principal homo et compagno, e messer Antonio da Coregio, Signore de Coregio, metete in Castelvechio lo spectabile cavaliere messer Ugutione da l'Abbadia, cancelero segretario del prefacto duca, a lo qualle fu opposto che, per non havere revelato al prefacto duca che Piedro Polio figliolo de Seraphino di Bondenari da Ferrara, suo conpadre, sei volte ge havea dicto che volea amazare il prefacto duca (la qualle revelatione non havea facto messer Ugutione al Signore, perche existimava Piedro Pollo puocho savio); imperzò Piedro Pollo predicto lo acusò lui al prefacto signore che ge havea prestatato orecchie. Et a dì XII de zugno, de nocte, che fu la vigilia de sancto Antonio da Padua, al dicto messer Ugutione ge fu taiato la testa in lo dicto castello. E li executuri furno messer Benedetto da Luca, doctore, iudice di iustizia del prefacto duca, et Antonio Sandelo da Ferrara, colletrale del prefacto duca. Et la roba del dicto messer Ugutione, tunc morto ch'el fu, foe donata via tuta⁵.

The essence of the diarist's account is that Uguccione's crime was for "listening", or more accurately for merely listening and not taking any action to inform the authorities of Bondenari's plot. In his account, technically Ugucione was not guilty of treason but of failing to report treasonous activity, though as will be seen, this distinction was not made by most commentators. This has perplexed historians, the lack of proportionality between the crime, "listening", and the punishment, death. Then there is the secrecy of the affair, the execution at night in the Castelvechio, just as public executions were be-

³ Ginzburg, *Representing the Enemy*, p. 30.

⁴ Ginzburg, *The Judge and Historian*, p. 80.

⁵ *Diario ferrarese*, p. 43: «On 28 May 1460, at the hour of 22, in Ferrara, the illustrious lord Duke Borso, one with Count Lorenzo [Strozzi], his first man and companion, and Messer Antonio da Correggio, Lord of Correggio, imprisoned in the Castelvechio the esteemed knight Messer Ugucione da l'Abbadia, chancellor-secretary of the aforesaid duke, who was arrested for not having revealed to the aforesaid duke that Pier Paolo, son of Serafino di Bondenari of Ferrara, his godfather, six times having said that he wanted to kill the aforesaid duke (and who claimed that he did not inform the lord Borso because he had determined that Pier Paolo was without reason); for that reason the previously mentioned Pietro Paolo accused him to the aforesaid lord that he had listened [to him]. And on the twelfth of June, at night, on the vigil of the feast of Saint Anthony of Padua, the said Messer Ugucione had his head chopped off in the said castle. And the executors [of the verdict] were Messer Benedetto da Lucca, doctor [of law], judge of justice of the aforesaid duke, and Antonio Sandelo of Ferrara, magistrate of the aforesaid duke. And the goods of the said Messer Ugucione, upon his death, were all given away».

coming the norm. Finally, the confiscation and redistribution of Uguccione's considerable assets to courtiers, suggests to some historians another conspiracy of sorts, to seize his wealth. In fact, the diarist does conclude with a detailed accounting of the distribution of Uguccione's considerable assets, the imprisonment of his sons, and the identity of his wife. Just a few lines below, the diarist added: on the thirteenth of June, after the execution of Messer Uguccione, the duke gave to Mario [della Badia] all the remaining possessions and goods that his father possessed, so that he could pay all of his father's debts which were estimated to be about 1,600 lire di bolognini. Whether the plot was a bit of court intrigue or a matter of *laesae maiestatis* makes all the difference in determining its significance. Following Ginzburg, the first task is to subject the *processus* to a series of contexts to discern its true meaning and significance.

2. Context: The Historiography

The modern Ferrarese historiography, taken in chronological order, picks up from the anonymous diarist's account, adding a few bits and pieces and usually some sort of judgment, if only implied. The most important informant is Antonio Frizzi, who supplies vital information that no other author mentions, but without always citing his sources. First, he provides a motive for Pier Paolo di Serafin Bondinari's denunciation of Uguccione, that he was being pressed by the ducal camera to repay a debt he owed on a duty that had been leased to him; second, that he recruited a certain Rizzo da Parino who with 30 assassins would aid the plot; and third, that Pier Paolo was not executed as a reward for revealing the plot, while, fourth, in April of the next year a certain "Piombino da la Badia" was arrested, quartered, and his body publicly exhibited in a similar plot to assassinate Borso⁶. While not offering an explicit judgment, Frizzi proceeds as if he considered Uguccione guilty. It is important to note that there is nothing particularly political in Frizzi's account, no hint of regime change, just a personal desire to avoid financial ruin.

Giuseppe Pardi's account is most intriguing, for his study of Borso's rule, written more than a century ago, is still the most authoritative. It was thoroughly revisionist, an attack on the judgments of Giovan Battista Pigna and Ludovico Antonio Muratori, that Borso was the most popular and virtuous Estense ruler, presiding over a golden age. Despite his hostility, Pardi exonerates Borso injecting into the affair two important ideas: that it was probably a courtly plot against Uguccione, inspired by jealousy of his wealth and influence; and that Borso either went along with it or was deceived, probably the last. Thus, for Pardi Uguccione is not only not guilty, but he also denies that a conspiracy to assassinate Borso really existed, thereby rendering it insignif-

⁶ Frizzi, *Memorie per la storia di Ferrara*, IV, pp. 39-40 and Mazzi, *Esecuzioni capitali*, p. 6.

icant and a bit puzzling⁷. Edmund Gardiner picks up on the idea of corrupt and avaricious officials at court but associates them with Borso's legendary concern for justice. «The duke coupled his lavishness in rewarding with an unbending severity in punishing». While not analyzing this idea nor opining openly, Gardiner associate Uguccione with «aristocratic offenders», implying his guilt⁸. Luciano Chiappini writes that «Too evident is the discrepancy between the accusation and the sentence not to think that there was a shady plot («losco intrigo») by whoever inserted themselves in the business to appropriate a rich patrimony with the deception and the silent complicity and a «leaving alone» on the part of the prince». Echoing Pardi, Uguccione is not guilty, while Borso is more complicit, and the whole affair is easily dismissed⁹. Of all the modern historians, Werner Gundersheimer is the most explicit in judging Uguccione innocent and denying the existence of a true conspiracy, that the «hapless secretary's defense» was «against this obviously contrived charge». Finally, Marco Folin makes no clear judgment of Uguccione's guilt, embedding his arrest in an administrative history of the Estensi chancery, which turns out to be an important clue to the episode¹⁰. Neither Giovan Battista Pigna (1530-1575) nor Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672-1750), nor the more contemporary Alfonso Lazzari, mention the Uguccione episode, perhaps because they all shared a partiality for the Estensi and see the episode as potentially damning to Borso's reputation as a just prince. Most surprising, perhaps, is Trevor Dean's failure to mention Uguccione in his very extensive research into criminality and justice in Renaissance Ferrara. Most likely he too dismissed Uguccione's conspiracy as contrived.

The shallowness of the historiography, tending to dismiss the evidence, is in turn connected to something still larger, the relationship of Uguccione's plot to contemporary Italian conspiracies. This will be examined in detail below. It is sufficient here to point out what the conspiracy was not, and there is no better example to do that than the Pazzi conspiracy against Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici. The *de facto* status of Lorenzo as head of the Florentine government and his indefatigable letter writing has provided a treasure of letters and diplomatic dispatches. The Pazzi evoked an ideological justification for their conspiracy, the restoration of Florentine liberty corrupted by Medici tyranny. The complicity of Pope Sixtus IV and Ferdinand I (Ferrante) of Naples rendered the conspiracy a pan-Italian affair. The famous journey of Lorenzo to Naples redirected Italian diplomacy, leading to the War of Ferrara (1482-1484) and the assassinations of Girolamo Riario, lord of Imola and Forlì, and Galeotto Manfredi, lord of Faenza¹¹. The account of the Pazzi plot by Poliziano was a significant humanist treatise. None of these macro-factors

⁷ Pardi, *Borso d'Este, Duca di Ferrara*, pp. 31-32.

⁸ Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara*, p. 81.

⁹ Chiappini, *Gli Estensi*, p. 154.

¹⁰ Folin, *Rinascimento estense*, pp. 157-160.

¹¹ Pellegrini, *Congiure di Romagna*.

were significantly present in Uguccone's plot, a much more local and singular affair. The one Ferrarese historian who recognized the impact of conspiracies on domestic politics is Gundersheimer, who suggested that Uguccone's execution reveals more about «maintaining the absolute fidelity of associates than about social unrest in Ferrara»¹². By arguing for the security of Estense rule, Gundersheimer also highlights the political nature of the conspiracy, redirecting attention from Uguccone's guilt or innocence to the nature of the Estense polity. This is a fruitful path to explore, but first the account of Uguccone's trial, the most extensive record available, needs close examination.

3. *Text: The Processus contra Ugutionem*

The *Processus agitatus contra Ugutionem de Abbatia* is an inquisitorial document that requires significant deciphering¹³. The legal process began with the complaint, the denunciation of Uguccone della Badia by Pier Paolo dei Bondenari, followed by the interrogation, but only after he and the accused, had been arrested, incarcerated, and probably tortured¹⁴. The *processus* claims to know what was in Uguccone's heart as it compiles evidence of his guilt. It is divided into four basic sections: 1) Introductions of the jurists in charge. These are Benedetto da Lucca, counselor of justice, and Antonio Sandelo, official of the ducal *spenderia*. They would have been handpicked for the occasion. 2) Description of the crime and evidence of guilt. This is presented in the form of a dialogue between the accused, Uguccone della Badia, and his accuser Pier Paolo dei Bondenari, in the vernacular, Ferrarese dialect, connected by formulaic notarial Latin. The dialogue is in fact rather monologic because Uguccone is not granted a free and equal voice, although there is language suggesting that he was given the opportunity to defend himself. 3) A summary of the evidence; and 4) The sentence. According to the *Diario ferrarese* Uguccone was arrested on 28 May, his trial began on 2 June 1460 and ended on 10 June. He was executed on 12 June. Justice, if anything, was swift.

In stilted and repetitive prose, the *processus* establishes the legitimacy of its procedure by emphasizing the openness of the court and the absolute truth of his guilt, based on his own admission of guilt.

¹² Gundersheimer, *Ferrara, the Style of a Renaissance Despotism*, p. 178.

¹³ The manuscript is found in the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria, Modena. The *Catalogo dei manoscritti italiani* catalogues the manuscript as a.F.6.10. It is bound together with approximately forty other miscellaneous manuscripts and numbered "DCCXXXVIII". Its catalog title is *Condanna di Uguccone dalla Badia fatta dal duca Borso. 1460*. The title at the beginning of the manuscript itself is *Processus agitatus contra Ugutionem de Abbatia*. The pagination runs from 92r to 107r. At the bottom of the list of titles is «codex chartac(eo), in folio, saeculi partim XVII et partim XVIII». This presumably pertains to all the manuscripts bound together. Multiple attempts to get more information on the manuscript from Biblioteca Estense staff were unanswered.

¹⁴ T. Cohen, *Tracking Conversation in the Italian Courts*, pp. 142-143, and E. Cohen, *She Said, He Said*, pp. 416-417.

Et sic immediate ex decreto dictorum dominorum iudicum deputatorum et sedentium pro tribunali in dicto loco ut supra, lecta fuit et vulgarizata dicta inquisitio dicto domino Ugutioni ut supra coram prefatis dominis iudicibus pro constituto praesenti audienti et intelligenti per me Joannem de Castello notarium infrascriptum de verbo ad verbum et intellecta per ipsum ipse dominus Ugutio non vi necque metu sed ut meram veritatem fateatur sponte dictae inquisitioni respondendo dixit et confessus fuit omnia et singula contenta, descripta, et narrata in dicta inquisitione vera fuisse et esse et ea omnia facta, commissa, pensata, ordinata ac perpetrata fuerunt per eum, modis, locis, et temporibus ac animo <et> intentione predictis de quibus in dicta inquisitione continetur et scriptum est, singula suis singulis congruis referendo¹⁵.

The *processus* confirms the anonymous diarist's account of "listening" in greatly expanded and repetitive language:

dominum Ugutionem de Abbatia natum quondam Nicolai, civem Ferrarensem de contrata Sancti Romani, de nece eiusdem divi principis nostri auditorem silentiarum [silentiosum?] atque tractatorem atque ordinatorem in ruinam illustris domus Estensis et in sui quietissimi et sanctissimi status turbationem super excessibus, criminibus et delictis infrascriptis cogitatis, tentatis, perpetratis ac commissis per ipsum dominum Ugutionem cum infrascriptis nominandis, videlicet...¹⁶.

Uguccone's guilt is magnified, depicting him as hateful and ungrateful despite the generous benefits bestowed on him by Borso, extending to Borso's ancestors, particularly his father and brother, presumably, Niccolò III (1393-1441) and his son Leonello (1441-1450).

Dominus Ugutio non habens Deum ante oculos eius, sequens vestigia Inimici humani generis, ingratus atque immemor multiplicium beneficiorum quae ab illustri domo Estensi a sua tenera etate per successus temporum usque in presens receperat, et perseverans in odio, quo professus est se semper insequutum ipsum illustrissimum dominum Borsium, dando operam ut poneret illum extra gratiam illustrium et sui memoriae praecessorum suorum tam genitoris quam fratris, de anno presenti et mense decembris in aula nobilium palatii residentiae domini nostri egregii dedit audientiam Petro Paulo Saraphinii de Bondenariis dicente ipsi domino Ugutioni et versus ipsum dominum Ugutionem hec verba, videlicet...¹⁷.

¹⁵ *Processus agitatus contra Ugutionem de Abbatia*, ff. 98v-99r: «And so immediately upon the decree of the said lord justices, delegated and sitting in open court in the said place, (as previously mentioned) the investigation was read and translated into the vernacular by me the undersigned notary Giovanni de Castello, for [the benefit of] the said Lord Uguccone (as previously mentioned), in the presence of the aforementioned lord justices. Uguccone, according to the law, was present, hearing and understanding, and when [the inquisition] had been understood word for word by himself, the Lord Uguccone himself not by force or dread, but to voluntarily admit the absolute truth, responding to the said indictment, the Lord Uguccone said and confessed that each and every thing contained, described, and related in the said inquisition was and continued to be true; and all those things were done, committed, thought out, ordered and perpetrated by him, willfully and intentionally, in the aforementioned manners, places, and times, each one of which is contained and written in the said inquisition with a one-to-one correspondence».

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 93v: «Uguccone d'Abbatia, son of Nicholas deceased, Ferrarese citizen, from the contrada of San Romano concerning the murder of our divine prince, listening silently and managing and ordering the ruin of the illustrious house of Este, and the disturbances of its very peaceful and holy status, concerning the excesses and crimes and misdeeds written, thought, attempted, perpetrated and committed by Uguccone himself as written and named below».

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, f. 94r: «The lord Uguccone not having God before his eyes, following in the footsteps of the Enemy [Satan] of the human race, ungrateful and forgetful of the multiple bene-

Meanwhile, the dialogic evidence subtly shifts. At first the initiative is in the hands of Pier Paolo who recruits Uguccione to assassinate Borso, and who says, «I myself have dreamed that you and I would make a new lord». To this Uguccione replies, «Questa debbe essere stata una collera malenconica», and he tells Pier Paolo to be quiet or else he will personally report him to the authorities in the Castelveccchio¹⁸. Gradually though, Uguccione who at first listens to Pier Paolo's plotting silently («et ipsa omnia tacuit»), little by little takes control of the dialogue and plot «mala malis addenda» («adding evil to evils»). The processus never accepts the validity of the argument in the *Diario ferrarese* that Pier Paolo was mentally incompetent and harmless («Pietro Pollo puocho savio»).

Uguccione asks Pier Paolo what he can contribute, and he responds: «Io ho tanti parenti, che ogni gran male gli pareva piccolo et ancora tanti amici ch'io ne haveria vinticinque et anche cinquanta a fare ogni male». They discuss renting a stable or house where the plotters could meet, «dreto in la via di Sant'Anna, che è una via occulta per la mia stalla, che de notte potria tuore quante persone io voria in casa, ch'io non seria veduto»¹⁹. While Pier Paolo hesitates, renting might be too costly, Uguccione gives Pier Paolo the go-ahead, saying «Et dictus dominus Ugutio respondit: 'Affittala pure, che se la ci bisognerà gie la toremo bene'». This is especially important for the protection of some hired assassins who cannot arrive at the safe house except by cover of night («Messere, io havevo rispetto che voi havete Ludovico da Para et degli altri amici assai che non potevano venire se non de note et sarà bon viduto»)²⁰.

Uguccione then begins a crucial section as he speculates on finding a new lord to replace the assassinated Borso d' Este. Uguccione asks Pier Paolo: «Who do you think is better loved by the people than these lords»²¹? And Pier Paolo responds, «It seems to me that the brothers of the lord are much better viewed by the people». And Uguccione agrees: «It seems to me in truth that

fits received from the illustrious house of Este from his tender age until the present time, and persevering in hatred, whereby he admitted that he had always pursued with hostile intent the very illustrious Lord Borso, making an effort to place him [Borso] outside of the grace toward his [Borso's] own illustrious predecessors and the predecessors of his memory, whether father or brother in the present year and the month of December in the hall of the noble of the palace residence of our egregious lords, gave license to Peter Paul Saraphinii of Bondenariis when he spoke to the lord Ugutio himself and charged him with these words, namely...».

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, f. 94r: «This must be a melancholic anger».

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, ff. 95r-95v: «I have many relatives such that every great evil will seem small and yet many friends so that I have twenty-five or fifty to do every evil»; «a hidden street by my stable such that in the night many persons as I want can be in my house without being seen».

²⁰ *Ibidem*, f. 95v: «rent it then, so that if we need it we can return safely»; *ibidem*, f. 104r: «Sir, I have respect for you and have Ludovico da Parra and many other friends who cannot come except by night and evening well seen».

²¹ *Ibidem*, f. 96r: «Dominus Ugutio dixit versus dominum Petrum Paulum: "Che te pare essere meglio amato dal popolo di questi signori?" et dictus Petrus Paulus eidem domino Ugutioni respondit: "Me pare che questi fratelli del signore siano molto ben veduti dal popolo", et dictus dominus Ugutio ipsi Petro Paulo respondit: "A me pare che in verità il popolo veda molto volentieri il signor Nicolò", loquendo de domino Nicolao Estensi, "et parmi che molto el sia amato"».

the people may see very willingly the lord Niccolò», speaking of Niccolò di Leonello d'Este, «and it seems to me that he is much loved». It is at this point that Pier Paolo pledges himself and his relatives and friends to Uguccione as patron: «Messer, I beg you if something is done, you will want to use me so that I will not be left aside, seeing that you have neither relatives nor friends who would do what I and mine will do for you, and having people around you that you can trust»²². Uguccione replies: «take my hand, I promise you on my faith as a just knight that if anything is done you will be the first called, and you may be certain that I will not set you aside in such a way so that you will have usefulness and honor»²³. Pier Paolo's remarks suggest a Uguccione alienated and isolated within the administration and courtly circles while forging a close patron-client bond with him.

The dialogue that follows turns into a series of accusations punctuated by the formula «mala malis addenda» to indicate that Uguccione was no mere silent listener but over and over an active participant in the conspiracy. This culminates with the two agreeing to attack Borso early in the morning in the main square: «El se poria far così a bon hora, ch'el non pareva troppa gente, et quando se corresse in piazza cridare “Viva il tale, l'è morto il duca Borso, chiamemo el tale per signore”, niuno s'impazzaria»²⁴. The idea to attack Borso publicly in the “piazza grande”, may have been intended to highlight Borso's imposture as a just ruler at the very center of public space, Borso as usurper.

The processus concludes with a summary of the case.

Et predicta omnia et singula suprascripta singula suis singulis debite referendo facta, tractata, machinata, ordinata gesta commissa et perpetrata fuerunt per dictum dominum Ugutionum, modis formis et temporibus ac animo et intentione quibus super et in dicta inquisitione contentis. Et quia ea singula suprascripta nobis constat vera fuisse et esse per veram et legitimam confessionem in iudicio coram nobis sponte factam per dictum dominum Ugutionem, cui datus et assignatus fuit terminus per nos iam elapsus ad omnes suas defensiones et probationes faciendum, si quas facere volebat, et nullas fecit nec alius pro eo, prout de predictis omnibus plene constat et apparet in actis Joannis de Castello notarii present[is] Ferrariensis²⁵.

²² *Ibidem*, f. 96v: «Messer vi prego se covelle si fa, voi me vogliate adoperare et ch'io non sii lasciato da canto, che vedreste che non havete né parenti né amici che faccia quello per voi che farò io et li miei, et havrete persone appresso di voi che voi ve ne potete fidare».

²³ *Ibidem*, f. 104r.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, f. 103r: «And Petrus Paulus replied and said: “If we are able to do so early, there won't be too many people [there] and if we run into the piazza crying Viva so-and-so, Duke Borso is dead, let us call so-and-so as lord, no one will be disturbed”».

²⁵ *Ibidem*, f. 105r: «And all things previously said, and each thing above written (by duly referencing each one to the other), were done, handled, devised, ordered, conducted, committed, and perpetrated by the said Lord Ugutio by methods, forms, and at times with animus and intent. And with these contained above and in the said inquisition, and because each one of the above written charges is established by us to have been and to be true, through true and legitimate confession made in the trial before us of his own accord by the indicted Lord Ugutio, to whom there has been granted and assigned by us a deadline, which has now elapsed, for making all his evidences and proofs (if he wanted to make any) and he has made none, nor did anyone else on his behalf, and so all the above charges are fully established and appear in the acts at hand of the notary Giovanni de Castello of Ferrara».

Finally, there is the court's sentence,

iure et forma quibus magis et melius de iure possumus et debemus condemnamus dictum dominum Ugutionem ad amputationem capitis, et quod caput eius ab umero dividatur, ita et taliter quod moriatur et anima eius a corpore separatur et omnia eius bona camere predictae Illustrissimi domini nostri publicamus et confiscamus [...] in his scriptis sententialiter condemnamus²⁶.

These are the "facts". Uguccione was guilty not only of listening silently to Pier Paolo's desire to assassinate Borso, he also actively participated in the plot, «mala malis addenda» («adding evil to evils»), in effect taking charge of it. His goal was to replace Borso with his nephew Niccolò di Leonello, which, in the eyes of the court, would destroy the House of Este, disturb the peace and well-being of the state, acting out of hatred for the prince. Of course, these are only "facts" in the sense of things recorded, judgments made, and sentence pronounced, based on the hearsay of Pier Paolo, the original plotter, and Uguccione's confession, the "official" account of *what* happened (but not particularly *why* it did).

A few issues emerge. The *processus* never exceeds its identity as a legal document. Its language is flat, repetitive, and portentous. There is no dialogue between Uguccione and the inquisitors, none of the fascinating interplay in many microhistorical studies, studies in dialogue between popular and elite cultures. Indeed, not only were Uguccione and the judges from the same social and cultural milieu, as chancellor he no doubt knew the judges personally, being colleagues in service to the duke. Moreover, there are several missing elements, the first being a lack of motivation, nothing much more than Uguccione's inclination toward evil and a lack of gratitude for past favors. He perseveres in hatred, his motives are personal, with little mention of political grievance against Borso as tyrant. The second is a lack of means to accomplish a successful coup d'état. The plotters consist of Uguccione, Pier Paolo and perhaps thirty or more hired assassins. When Niccolò di Leonello launched his coup in 1476 he had with him some 650 men and it failed. The third is a lack of purpose. There is no great political issue at stake, the alleged conspirators simply want to replace one member of the dynasty with another. The emotional center of the conspiracy is not hatred but love. Which prince is loved more? If there had been a political purpose, it most likely would have been connected to the question of Borso's illegitimacy and illegal succession. But Niccolò was himself the son of a bastard. If a legitimate heir was the goal, Ercole would have been the obvious choice. These omissions render the *processus* wanting, explaining

²⁶ *Ibidem*, f. 105v: «By the law and form and more than that and better than that, we can and ought to condemn by divine law the said lord Uguccione to the amputation of his head and that his head be separated from his shoulders, in such a way that he perishes, and his soul be separated from his body, and we seize and confiscate all his possessions and goods to the ducal camera. So, by this official judgment, we condemn him».

why some historians have dismissed the charges against Uguccione as fabricated and preordained. But this raises other questions. Why would Borso have executed such a long-standing, faithful, and important member of his administration for listening to some vague talk of a coup without significant domestic or foreign support? Perhaps the judges felt that they did not need to document more evidence or argument, but history demands a fuller examination of the alleged plot if it is to be taken seriously, and that can only be found by returning to the clarifying contexts.

4. Context: Angelo Gambiglioni and the Law

If the *Processus agitatus contra Ugutionem de Abbatia* is lacking in motivation, means, and purpose, is it in line with the usual practices of jurisprudence of the time? Was the trial conducted based on established law²⁷? One complication is that each Italian state had its own legal code. Many commentators held that *laesae maiestatis* could only be prosecuted in the city of Rome or when it involved the emperor²⁸. These restrictions are probably why the term was not used in the *processus*. The best legal authority was the influential *Tractatus de maleficiis* by Angelo Gambiglioni. First published in 1438, revised many times thereafter, the definitive version was printed in Mantua in 1472. Many editions followed through the end of the sixteenth century. Gambiglioni was invited to Ferrara by Leonello d'Este where he taught law at the University of Ferrara. He died there in 1461, as the legal commentator most closely connected to the Estense capital and court²⁹.

Gambiglioni held that someone, who had «simple knowledge» («simplicem scientiam») of a treasonous crime, was also guilty, and anyone, who had a suspicion of a such a plot, had the obligation to report it immediately. Capital punishment, the normal sentence for treason, served as a deterrent as were public executions for all to see («ut publice videatur ab omnibus»). Those guilty of treason had their possessions automatically confiscated. Not only were the convicted deprived of their assets, but their male heirs were prohibited from inheriting as well and were exiled («quod nudus debeat exulare»). All these provisions in Gambiglioni's commentary align with the *Diario ferrarese's* account and were rigorously applied both in Uguccione's trial and the enforcement of the sentence by the ducal authorities. From the standpoint of legal procedure, the trial was a rather careful application of the judicial process as defined by the authoritative Gambiglioni. The trial – the appointment of special judges, the indictment, guilt by listening, failure to report, the recitation of evidence, the confiscation of goods, confinement of

²⁷ Saletti, *Criminal Justice in the Mid Fifteenth Century*, p. 1.

²⁸ Fredona, *Baldus de Ubaldis*, pp. 152-153 and Cavallar, *Laesa maiestas in Renaissance Luc-ca*, p. 168.

²⁹ D. and P. Maffei, *Angelo Gambiglioni giureconsulto*, pp. 20-34. See Appendix.

his sons, the sentence and execution – all reflected the recommended best practices of the time.

The two legal principles most relevant to Uguccone defense, the obligation to denounce crimes and the insanity plea, were concepts that had developed over the course of the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries³⁰. In the *processus*, they appear initially in Uguccone's threat to turn over Pier Paolo to the authorities, and his defense that Pier Paolo was deranged («collera malenconica») but they fade soon enough and the transcript reads more and more like a classic assassination plot, where to meet, who to involve, where and when to strike, as the evidence is accumulated. The rhetoric of the document, the words of Uguccone are a series of self-incriminating statements, his individual voice thoroughly repressed in favor of a series of powerful repetitions that take the form of sententious cognate participles, «facta, tractata, machinata, ordinata», that amplify Uguccone's guilt. Then there is the repeated phrase «not content with the aforesaid but adding evil to evils and continuing and persisting in his worst intentions» («non contentus predictis sed mala malis addendo et in suo pessimo proposito perseverando et persistendo») to drive home Uguccone's evil nature and persistent acts of criminal malevolence. In the end, the *processus* reads like a modern-day indictment, a rhetoric of accusation with supporting evidence, that recommends appropriate capital punishment commensurate with Uguccone's personal turpitude and Borso's generosity betrayed.

The *processus* delineates the “facts” of Uguccone's guilt, but those facts lead us back to its ambiguity and reliability. Anchored in mainstream legal opinion and inquisitorial practice, it does what it was meant to do. Its treatment of conspiracy as a collaborative political offense, that of Pier Paolo and Uguccone, its emphasis on violence, the hiring of assassins, the convocation of a special tribunal of judges, the formulas of interrogation, their repetition, the probable use of torture, all render the document technically authentic³¹. Borso made a concerted effort to treat Uguccone's conspiracy with the full force of the law as practiced in the inquisitorial system. But is the *processus* reliable? Do we accept the reconstruction of the facts by the judges as true? The inquisitorial process does not prove guilt so much as assert it, at least to our modern eyes, for its evidence is constructed around the accusations of one man denied by the other, and a confession likely induced through torture or its threat. But if we are guilty of imposing the present on the past, given our penchant for modern neutral evidence, perhaps the historiography is guilty of the opposite. Pardi and Chiappini in particular construct a prince who is an avatar for an avaricious court that conspires to fill its coffers and that of its cronies, an easy solution but an investigative dead end. One of Ginzburg's most intriguing observations is that «false conspiracies always conceal real

³⁰ Dean, *Crime and Justice*, p. 18 and Ruggiero, *Excusable Murder*, pp. 109-110.

³¹ Lowe, *Conspiracy and its Prosecution in Italy*, pp. 35-37.

ones»³². It may be that Pardi and Chiappini have done just that. Other more useful paths of clarification need to be followed beginning with the role of conspiracy itself in fifteenth century Italy.

5. *Contexts: Age of Conspiracies; the Pio Conspiracy; Microhistory*

The assassinations of Girolamo Riario and Galeotto Manfredi in 1488 led some to observe that a new type of war had been introduced in Italy, a new age of conspiracy³³. Was Uguccione's plot a part of this new age? Riccardo Fubini used the term «l'età delle congiure», in an essay collected under the title «Italia quattrocentesca», perhaps giving the impression that the entire fifteenth century was a time of violent plots against public figures. The essence of Fubini's argument is actually found in another essay in the same collection, a political crisis of dynastic legitimacy linked to the formation of new apparatuses of power and centralized executive authority³⁴. Focused on Florence and Milan, with the Pazzi conspiracy (1478) and the assassination of Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1476) as evidence, he outlined Medici manipulation of Florentine republican institutions and Sforza illegitimacy, as the emperor, Frederick III, refused to recognize their claim to the title of duke of Milan³⁵. But the reasoning that he and others have put forward does not correlate well with the Estense territory in some fundamental ways. If the Sforza were considered illegitimate usurpers, the opposite was the case for Borso, who had been installed as duke of Modena and Reggio by the same Emperor Frederick III in 1452. If the Medici and Sforza together experience three assassinations and five separate depositions, at the same approximate time four Estense dukes succeeded and ruled continuously for one hundred and twenty-six years (1471-1597).

Attempts to construct broader conspiracy models are even more problematic. They often link conspiracies to the French invasion of 1494 (the source of those Medici and Sforza depositions), producing a periodization from ca. 1500 to ca. 1550. For example, K. Lowe creates a conspiracy profile of violence, often with ideological-classical allusions opposing tyranny, a desire to return to a pre-invasion Italy, led by the young. But Uguccione della Badia was a middle-aged bureaucrat who committed no acts of violence, promoted no political realignment save the substitution of one Estense for another. There was no longing for a past golden age. Such a desire did develop but after Bor-

³² Ginzburg, *Representing the Enemy*, p. 46.

³³ Pellegrini, *Congiure di Romagna*, p. 111 and note 40.

³⁴ Fubini, *L'età delle congiure*, pp. 220-252 and Fubini, *Congiure e stato nel secolo XV*, pp. 141-157.

³⁵ Fubini, *Congiure e stato nel secolo XV*, p. 147: «ma, come è noto, Federico III d'Asburgo avrebbe poi tenacemente rifiutato il riconoscimento alla nuova dinastia degli Sforza (...) nell'ambito delle lotte per l'egemonia europea, che si venivano ormai combattendo sul suolo italiano».

so's reign, after the war with Venice and the French invasion, and then it was Borso's rule that was seen as a golden period of peace and prosperity³⁶. It is Renaud Villard who brings the «age of conspiracy» to its logical conclusion, when he created an enormous generalization of central and northern Italian conspiracies from ca. 1470 to ca. 1600. One of his key theses, to which he devotes an entire chapter, are conspiracies hatched in response to newly conceptualized tyrants, greedy, cruel, and licentious princes, just the description befitting the assassinated Galeazzo Maria Sforza and just the opposite of the image cultivated by Borso d'Este³⁷.

It is Isabella Lazzarini who most incisively disassembles Villard's thesis. She does this with her own «age of conspiracy», beginning in 1476 with Niccolò di Leonello's plot against Ercole. She specifically notes how strikingly calm were the previous two decades, absent conspiracies («plus frappante qu'elle arrive après deux décennies de calme apparent»), almost exactly the time of Borso's rule.

Renaud Villard, dans son étude récente sur les conjurations italiennes, a repéré environ 70 épisodes de conjurations ou de complots, réussis, tentés, imaginés, dans l'Italie du Nord et du Centre dans les années 1380-1600: néanmoins, leur distribution chronologique et géographique, leur nature et leur taux de succès semblent défier tout effort de systématisation, à moins de procéder à une analyse si fine des événements que la recherche devient une performance de détective, et toute conjuration un cas de figure singulier³⁸.

She proposes to neither «classer les conjurations princières ou de modéliser leur nature et leurs caractères, ni de dresser une liste complète de ces crimes politiques ou d'essayer d'en donner des définitions précises»³⁹. In other words, the comparative nature of the «age of conspiracy» is limited by the diversity of the Italian states, the dynamic changes imposed on them by the French-Imperial rivalry, all within a later chronology decades after the Uguccione conspiracy. So, if the goal is to clarify the *processus* through comparative conspiracies, the result is an Uguccionian conspiracy that lacks the chronology and the prime characteristics of the generalized conspiracy model. The obvious solution is to find a conspiracy model closer in time and space that would provide a better basis for comparison, and that is the Pio conspiracy of 1469.

³⁶ Muratori, *Delle antichità Estensi*, II, p. 227, tells the following story: «E ne dura ancora la dolce memoria; perciocché succeduti poi tempi scabrosi di guerre, ed altre disavventure, il Popolo ricordevole delle delizie godute sotto Borso, Principe sì studioso della pace e felicità de' suoi Sudditi, andava dicendo "Non è più il tempo del Duca Borso", il che passò dipoi in proverbio, celebre anche oggidì per tutta Italia» («And the sweet memory still lasts; because after some difficult times of wars and other misfortunes, the people remembering the delights enjoyed under Borso, a prince so zealous for the peace and happiness of his subjects, went on saying: "It is no longer the time of Duke Borso", which became a proverb, one still famous today throughout Italy»).

³⁷ Villard, *Du bien commun au mal nécessaire*, chapter two: «Le tyran, du mauvais prince à l'esclave du désir».

³⁸ Lazzarini, *L'âge des conjurations*, p. 314.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 315.

At the center of the Pio conspiracy was politics, first politics between states. Borso's close relations with Venice led him to join the Colleonic war, where Venice "released" from service its military commander, Bartolomeo Colleoni, to covertly support a group of prominent Florentine exiles led by Angelo Acciaiuoli, Dietisalvi Neroni, Luca Pitti, and Niccolò Soderini against Piero de' Medici. Ferrara had long sheltered exiled members of the Florentine Strozzi family, Lorenzo Strozzi being one of Borso's closest companions⁴⁰. This culminated in the battle of Molinella (1467), a bloody standoff with the "League" of Florence, Milan, and Naples. In the meantime, Borso's firmest desire was to gain the title of duke of Ferrara, and he ingratiated himself to Pope Paul II (1464-1471) by supporting his efforts to wrest control of Rimini from the Malatesta⁴¹.

Amidst these broader political events came the trigger of local politics from the lords of Carpi, just north of Modena, a conflict between Pio cousins⁴². There was deep enmity between Giovanni Ludovico, his brothers, and their cousins Marco and Leonello, who were both strong supporters of Borso. Marco had served with Colleoni at Molinella. At his death, Galasso Pio had left his seven sons under the protection of Borso who had promised to marry Galasso's niece, Bianca Pio, to Galeotto Pico della Mirandola, but who instead married him to his sister Bianca d'Este, earning the enmity of Giovanni Ludovico Pio. These were two *principotti* families, a half dozen local signorial families such as the Boiardi and Rangoni, feudatories who had become dependent on the Estensi over the past century. Not only had the alienated Giovanni Ludovico turned to Galeazzo Maria Sforza for support, but he had also married Oranta Orsini, the sister of Clarice, the wife of Lorenzo de' Medici, thus linking his disaffection with Borso to the "League" eager to revenge the Colleonic war. Finally, Giovanni Ludovico's sister, Marsibilia, was married to Taddeo Manfredi, lord of Imola, another of Borso's enemies. He sent his trusted servant, Andrea da Varenana, to Milan to secure the support of Galeazzo Maria, who, in turn, sent his chancellor, Giovanni Antonio da Figino, to Carpi to finalize the conspiracy against Borso.

The plot itself was to assassinate Borso with the collusion of his brother Ercole, who would succeed him, receive an annual stipend of 50,000 ducats, and the command of 6,000 horse. On 17 July 1469 Giovanni Ludovico, da Varenana, and Figino presented Ercole with their terms, who pretended to accept while informing Borso of the plot. On 21 July an armed force of 400 descended on Carpi and arrested Pio and da Varenana, who were tried and beheaded in a spectacular public execution, while Giovanni Antonio da Figino was released to the duke of Milan. Meanwhile, a few days later the other

⁴⁰ Fabbri, *Da Firenze a Ferrara*.

⁴¹ Tristano, *The Statecraft of Borso d'Este*, pp. 241-289.

⁴² The principal sources for the Pio conspiracy are the *Diario Ferrarese*, Carlo da San Giorgio, *La congiura dei Pio* (see references below), and the convenient summary in Chiappini, *Gi Estensi*, pp. 154-157.

six Pio brothers, save one who escaped, were arrested and incarcerated for several years. These political intricacies were greatly reduced in Ugucione's conspiracy.

Finally, the sources of the Pio conspiracy reflected the nature of the prince very differently from the generalized model. If Lorenzo de' Medici undermined Florentine liberty and if Galeazzo Maria Sforza was the serial seducer of other men's wives, a rapist, capable of unspeakable cruelty, Borso was the paragon of virtue. The *Diario ferrarese* narrates the conspiracy over a long six pages in the modern edition⁴³. It is everything that the *processus* was not, a narrative of political events both local and peninsular. A second narrative, the «Congiura contro il duca Borso d' Este» by Carlo da San Giorgio, is also everything that the *processus* was not, though in a very different way, not the flat and repetitive legal language of the *processus* but a dramatic battle between good and evil, an «abominable sin against our illustrious lords and the celebrated House of Este» («abominevole peccato verso i nostri illustri Signori de la inclita Casa da Este»). San Giorgio outlines the life of Giovanni Ludovico Pio, «non Pio ma Impio», whose youthful evil inclinations worsen over time. Proud, insolent, cowardly, vainglorious, and gluttonous, he lacked all the virtue («nulla virtù veramente havea») that Ercole enjoyed so abundantly, Borso even more so⁴⁴.

If Villard's systematized conspiracies were promoted by a new tyrant, a prince as slave to vice, a man of desire, appetite, and debauchery, libidinous, and miserly, Borso was the ultimate continent prince⁴⁵. «Niuna virtù, secondo il mio iudicio, veramente in uno signore più degna essere puote, che la continencia», says San Giorgio («No virtue, in my judgment, is more truly worthy of a prince than continence»).

Questo da lui studiosamente è fatto a ciò intiegramente et castamente virginal vita facia. Nel suo mangiare et bere in tanto è costumato et temperato, che molte fiate più tosto cum fame cha satolo da la tavula se parte. Questo signore non per ira, non per odio, non per pacia, non per insolencia, non per invidia, non per superbia, non per pompa se move. In lui veramente è summa bontà, summa integrità, et di cadauno buono et santo homo la similitudine⁴⁶.

⁴³ *Diario ferrarese*, pp. 61-66, which covers Pico fraternal strife, Borso repairing relations with Milan, the reorganization of the ducal Consiglio Secreto, Ercole joining the papal siege of Rimini, and a peace treaty between the pope, Borso, and the League.

⁴⁴ Carlo da San Giorgio, *La congiura dei Pio*, pp. 381, 383.

⁴⁵ Villard, *Du bien commun*, chapter 2. This is not to suggest that Borso did not have serious character flaws and that others were not aware of them. No one was more perceptive and critical of Borso than Pope Pius II. He made a long list of Borso's vices. They included his garrulosity, love of flattery, extravagance, his blandishments mixed with lies, insincerity, and belief in astrology. But none of these vices correspond closely to the one listed by Villard. Pius did state that Borso's reputation outside of the Estense territory was dreadful but that he enjoyed popular acclaim among his subjects. This may be the effect of Borso's domestic policy of peace and prosperity and a foreign policy of considerable deception: Pius II, *Commentaries*, book 2, chapter 40, pp. 361-365; book 3, chapter 21, pp. 83-87.

⁴⁶ Carlo da San Giorgio, *La congiura dei Pio*, p. 386.

The *Diario ferrarese* closes its account of the Pio conspiracy with a similar description of Borso's virtue:

Et dicto duca Borso mai non tolse moglie et fu il più magnanimo Signore che fusse mai et liberalissimo in donare a chi ge domandava; et sempre andava vestito de panno d'oro arrizado, così in villa come in terra, a sparaviero et stare in casa: et tenea grande Corte⁴⁷.

Sergio Bertelli, following Machiavelli, cites three causes of conspiracy, blood, property, and honor⁴⁸. All three are missing from Uguccione's conspiracy. So too is the moral turpitude of the prince, Villar's prince of desire, the dynasty's instability, and the complexities of political and marital alliances found in the Pio conspiracy. Uguccione's conspiracy appears anomalous. Comparing Uguccione's conspiracy to assassinate Borso d'Este with other, later Italian conspiracies reveals significant differences but also clues to unraveling its significance.

The method to reconcile an anomalous Uguccionian conspiracy with Italian conspiracies in general is found in Ginzburg's concept of the evidential paradigm and the importance of the "individual". The codes by which the historian expresses himself remain intrinsically individualizing and like the physician's, «historical knowledge is indirect, presumptive, conjectural»⁴⁹. Hence the relative value of the "individualized" Pio conspiracy, reduced in scale, not generalized, not macrohistorical. So, the second clue is a microhistorical methodology, focused not on grand theory but on unique event, an atypical conspiracy, the execution of a long-trusted official, who was neither young nor violent, against a prince who was not debauched⁵⁰. From a legal perspective, one embraced by the historiography, dyadic answers of guilty or not guilty short-circuit deeper investigation. Meanwhile, a microhistorical approach, where things may not be as they first seem, can take us to more imaginative but conjectural conclusions. Conspiracies operate within systems that are normative yet often also contradictory, individuals are agents who can negotiate freely, but also within certain structural constraints. The one element that all the other conspiracies contain, that is noticeably absent in Uguccione's, at least as presented in the *processus*, is politics. All treasonous conspiracies are political constructs and therefore politics is the key determining the nature and significance of Uguccione's conspiracy, first domestic then foreign.

⁴⁷ *Diario ferrarese*, p. 66.

⁴⁸ Bertelli, *Le congiure*, pp. 243-256.

⁴⁹ Ginzburg, *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*, p. 106.

⁵⁰ This section is largely based on Levi, *Microhistory and the Recovery of Complexity*, pp. 121-132.

6. *Five Fundamental Political Structures*

There are five fundamental political structures that contextualize and explain Uguccione's execution and its significance: bastardy, rebellion, capital punishment, developments in the chancery, and the testament of Niccolò III. Examining them reveals the unique foundational structure of the Estense state, already two hundred years old, and the forces within which Uguccione and Borso operated as agents.

Typical of despotic states, this macro-stability disguised particular moments of instability dependent on a number of internal and external factors such as the age of the ruler or the intervention of other states. Constant vigilance was required. Most Italian states lacked a strong hereditary principle rooted in the sacral northern monarchies. Over the centuries Estensi sons succeeded fathers, brothers followed brothers, sometimes ruling together, sometimes in contention with kin. In Ferrara many of those contending relatives were illegitimate offspring. Most extraordinary, there were seven consecutive rulers from 1352 to 1471 who were illegitimate, Obizzo III, Aldobrandino III, Niccolò II, Alberto, Niccolò III, Leonello, and Borso⁵¹. This so shocked Pope Pius II that he composed an entire section of his *Commentaries* around the concept of "Estensium spurcitia" (Estensi filth). «Here is an extraordinary fact about the family: within recent memory no legitimate son has ever inherited the title; fortune has smiled so much more on the children of the mistresses than on those of the wives. It is a circumstance contrary not only to Christian teaching but to the law of almost every nation»⁵². Estense exceptionalism.

There were two distinct patterns of crime in fifteenth-century Ferrara, theft (295), homicide (181), theft and homicide (65), on the one hand and treason (41), on the other⁵³. Crimes of property (theft) and persons (homicide) were steady, declining slightly over the last half of the fifteenth century. They were rooted in socio-economic and cultural causes of poverty, greed, and honor. The pattern of the political crime of treason was different, irregular, and related to the extraordinary prominence of Estense bastardy. There were executions for treason, during eleven of the sixty years from the rule of Leonello to that of Ercole⁵⁴.

In Ferrara's Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea there is a document, a list «Rebels of the very serene house of Este»⁵⁵. It is a late copy, badly organized,

⁵¹ Essential are Saletti, *Powerful Bastards* and Bestor, *Bastardy and Legitimacy*.

⁵² Pius II, *Commentaries*, Book II, chapter 39, pp. 359-361.

⁵³ Mazzi, *Esecuzioni capitali*, p. 18, chart, total capital crimes 1441-1577.

⁵⁴ For example, there were clusters of executions in 1476 with Niccolò di Leonello's attempted coup and in 1482 with the advent of war with Venice: Gundersheimer, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 112-113. Lauro Martines has suggested that per capita executions were higher in republican Florence than in despotic Ferrara: Martines, *April Blood*, pp. 144-145.

⁵⁵ *Ribelli della serenissima casa d'Este, con suoi, nomi, cognomi, anni, ecc. dal 1287 al 1509*, ms. Ferrara, Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea, Collezione Antonelli, 50, unpaginated, and identified in the catalog as of the seventeenth century. Dott.ssa Mirna Bonazza of the Biblioteca Ariostea, Ferrara, kindly answered my question: «l'unità inventariale 50 della Collezione Antonelli di fatto comprende due esemplari: l'uno è la trascrizione dell'altro. Quindi si tratta di due copie.

indeed not organized at all in any discernible way, mostly names, places of origin, with bits and pieces of other information scattered here and there. The author must have discerned the frequency of treasonous activity during the mid to late medieval period, perhaps planning but never completing an organization of the material. Imposing a chronology on the list, the earliest date is 1273 and the latest is 1509. It contains more than 280 names of rebels. They include notable families such as the Contrari, Roberti, Costabili, Zoboli (Giocoli), Pii da Carpi, while others are clearly of the *popolo*, but most are obscure. Uguccione's name appears identified as «cavaliere e segretario del Duca Borso». While hardly scientific, the list includes eighteen instances of rebellion in the turbulent fourteenth century, and twelve in the fifteenth, suggesting that while the numbers decreased rebellion continued to be a potential threat to Estensi lords. This inchoate list in the Biblioteca Ariostea can be further analyzed by recalling some of the grand conclusions about the Ferrarese state made by Werner Gundersheimer. His major claim is that, in the fifteenth century, the political and social structure of Ferrara was «sound enough to weather all but the most serious political uprisings without any real strain». Second, that the most serious violent attempts against the Ferrarese authorities «came neither from townspeople nor outside enemies, but from rival claimants within the family»⁵⁶. Third, that the Uguccione episode was about «maintaining the absolute fidelity of associates [rather] than about social unrest in Ferrara». These precepts, augmented a bit, can be turned into an instrument of analysis, summarized in this table.

Number	Types of Threats	Examples of Threats
1	Estense Family	Alberto I/Obizzo di Aldobrandino (1388); Niccolò III/Azzo di Francesco (1393); Ercole I/Niccolò di Leonello (1476)
2	Feudatories	Pio of Carpi (Pio conspiracy, 1469)
3	“Associates” – non-noble administrators	Tommaso da Tortona (May 1385); Giacomo Giglioli (1434); Uguccione della Badia (1460); Gregorio Zampan- te (1496)
4	Social Unrest	The post-Tommaso da Tortona episode (September 1385)
5	Outside Power	War of Ferrara (1482-1484); Italian wars 1494-1559; de- volution of Ferrara to papacy (Clement VIII, 1597/8);

These categories are not mutually exclusive. So, the Pio conspiracy (type 2) included the support of Florence, Milan, and Naples (type 5). The War of Ferrara waged by Venice and Pope Sixtus IV is the best example of a threat

Sulla camicia ottocentesca Giuseppe Antonelli scrive: “Era nella Costabiliana ora presso di me per acquisto fatto dal libraio Rocchi nel 1857 (...). La Biblioteca del marchese Costabili fu venduta all'asta dopo la metà dell'Ottocento (...). Troviamo tracce della stessa nella biblioteca privata di Giuseppe Antonelli (...) Alla morte di Antonelli, nel 1884, la sua biblioteca fu acquistata dalla Municipalità per la Biblioteca Pubblica (non ancora Ariostea)”».

⁵⁶ Gundersheimer, *Crime and Punishment*, pp. 122 and 128.

from outside powers. It nearly succeeded in taking Ferrara and led to the loss of the Polesine da Rovigo. A new instability was introduced in 1494 with the intervention of the northern powers. The devolution of Ferrara in 1597-1598 is outside the chronological scope of this inquiry and technically Clement VIII was not an outside power, Ferrara being a papal fief, but it was the only permanently successful attack on Estensi rule in Ferrara itself.

The late fourteenth century was particularly disruptive. Alberto d'Este (1388-1393) foiled an attack by his nephew, Obizzo, son of Aldobrandino III whose head and that of his mother Beatrice was chopped off «per tradimento»⁵⁷. Meanwhile, one of the other conspirators was dragged by horses and then hanged, another was burned alive, still another was tortured with red-hot pincers, suspended with chains, and then abandoned without burial. The brutality of the punishment to this familial threat reflected the perceived seriousness of challenges by Estense kin, for they always had a modicum of legitimacy and as feudatories were themselves men at arms with armed followers. The next rebellion was an attack by Azzo di Francesco on Niccolò III in 1393, who suffered two weaknesses, he was illegitimate and a mere ten years old. This was no simple house-rebellion as Azzo had gathered the support of many of the princes of the Romagna, including Obizzo and Pietro da Polenta, lords of Ravenna, Cecco degli Ordellaffi, lord of Forlì, and Giovanni da Barbiano, count of Cuneo among others, another reminder that family rebellion often had access to outside support, especially from the Romagna lords (threats 1 and 5). Those who were captured were «all hanged in the Piazza», («tutti impiccati in Piazza»)⁵⁸.

Gundersheimer's conclusion that the most serious violent attempts against the Ferrarese authorities came from «rival claimants within the family» rings true⁵⁹. The key factor was the sheer number of contending male members generated by rampant illegitimacy. The two rulers most responsible were Obizzo III (1317-1352) who fathered eleven illegitimate children three of whom succeeded, and Niccolò III (1393-1441) who fostered at least twenty-four, two of whom ruled. Large numbers of male heirs felt that the principal heir's succession was dubious and that their claim was as good as any, within a political culture that lacked a strong tradition of legitimate succession.

Type three threats were nearly as frequent as familial ones and more dangerous than they might at first seem. The «rebellion» of Tommaso da Tortona was really a brutal sacrifice or a popular deflection. By the 1370s the flooding of the Po, plague, and famine placed the people in a state of near starvation and increased taxation pushed them to the brink. On 3 May 1385 a mob gathered shouting «Long live the Marquis and Death to Tommasin the Traitor», («viva il Marchese e muoia Tommasin traditore») referring to the chancellor

⁵⁷ *Ribelli della serenissima casa d'Este*, unpaginated, under «1388»: «Alberto d'Este Signore di Ferrara fece tagliare la testa a Obizzo suo nepote per tradimento».

⁵⁸ Frizzi, *Memorie*, vol. 3, pp. 376-377 and pp. 399-405.

⁵⁹ Gundersheimer, *Crime and Punishment*, p. 122.

of Niccolò II “the Lame.” Tommaso had worked his way up to the top of the marquisal government and was its most visible leader. Fearing for his life, the marquis Niccolò did not hesitate long before pushing Tommaso out the door whereupon the crowd beat and beheaded him, tearing out and eating his liver and heart, burning his body and leaving the rest to be eaten by dogs and birds. Such a display of organized mass popular dissent was unusual in Ferrara and the people and/or the chronicler were keen to make clear that the rebellion was not against the marquis but his servant. It has been said that Niccolò took the threat so seriously, that he immediately began planning the construction of an impregnable castle in the heart of the city dedicated to Saint Michael and ultimately known as the Castelveccchio, but this is not quite accurate.

While the *Chronicon Estense* specifically quotes the rioters supporting Niccolò II in May 1385, it also records a more serious uprising a few months later. In this case the *Chronicon* cites a threat, that included not only the despised taxes and duties but the marquis as well («muora daci e gabelle et li Marchesi»). The chronicle adds that the insurrectionists were intending to reduce the city to a popular regime («dictam civitatem ad regimen Populare reducere intendebant»). This was a type 4 rebellion. The list of rebels supports this and includes an Antonio Scotto, baker (*foraro*), Giovanni Soldani, notary, and no less than eight ragmen (*strazaroli*)⁶⁰. Furthermore, it is not after the May attack that Niccolò decided to build the Castelveccchio but following the more popular and dangerous attack in September⁶¹.

The Estensi understood three things, that intrafamilial strife (type 1), which could be serious, especially if supported by outside powers (type 5) could also usually be managed; they were threats of personnel and not agents of regime change. Even the Pio conspiracy (type 2) merely aimed at replacing Borso with his brother, Ercole. Second, popular rebellion, (type 4) though uncommon, posed the greater threat to the very nature of signorial rule and required forceful response. Finally, that “associates,” that is the highest-ranking administrators of the government, could play a key intermediary role in popular repression (popular deflection), but also presented a potential threat of their own.

From 1405 to 1421 Giacomo Giglioli, the scion of a prominent Ferrarese family, was Niccolò III’s long-time secretary and chancellor. The marquis enriched him while Giglioli had helped himself to so many privileges and donations of land that the *Diario ferrarese* valued his wealth at an astounding two hundred thousand ducats. His opposition to Niccolò’s decision to choose Leonello as heir over the legitimate Ercole seems to have been his undoing and it may have been that Giglioli contacted Ludovico di Saluzzo, Ercole’s uncle,

⁶⁰ *Ribelli della serenissima casa d’Este*, ms., unpaginated, under “1385.” Also, *Chronicon Estense*, col. 511.

⁶¹ *Chronicon Estense*, coll. 511-512: «Die Veneris XXIX Septembris Dominus Nicholaus Estensis Marchio fecit initiari castrum per ipsum ordinatum juxta portam Leonis facendo poni primum lapidem cum magna solemnitate».

in the matter⁶². A servant who had accumulated power and wealth, who opposed his lord's decision, especially a familial one, and who may have sought the support of a foreign power were too much for Niccolò to tolerate. They were warning signs that the chancellor had become a danger and needed to be eliminated, a precedent that was not forgotten in Borso's day. Giglioli was arrested, imprisoned, and hanged himself, well positioned to understand that he would likely suffer an even more gruesome fate, his assets confiscated.

In 1496 Gregorio Zampante, former podestà and captain of justice, was assassinated. One of Ercole's most trusted officials, a few years earlier the duke had attended the baptism of Gregorio's son, Ercole. The murder was a direct affront to the duke and while Zampante was honorably buried there was no violent response from the government, because thanks to his savage repression he was so despised that upon his murder, the people ran into the streets with such joy in revenge for the cruelties he had inflicted on them. In the end, his murder was tolerated as another popular deflection⁶³.

Gundersheimer's conclusion that in the fifteenth century the political and social structure of Ferrara was sound enough to endure unrest, while correct should be qualified in two ways. First, the rebellions in the late Trecento were the most serious as they combined threats from within the dynasty, from below, and from outside Estense territory. Second, they fostered in the Quattrocento a constant vigilance, suspicion, and harsh reaction, just that of Borso's response to Uguccione's conspiracy, a product of political memory⁶⁴. The Quattrocento also saw the stabilization of both the papacy and Ferrara with the return of the popes from Avignon and the majority of Niccolò III. Public justice outpaced private vendetta, criminal law became an essential instrument of governance, and new judicial procedures based on accusation in the inquisitorial system were introduced⁶⁵. Capital punishment was regularized, Ferrara's first public executioner was hired in 1453 with a fixed salary⁶⁶. The executioner and the prince were powerful symbols of social order and the power of authority, instruments of legal violence or mercy. Executions that had been performed outside the city walls to avoid contaminating communal spaces, took place in front of the Palazzo di Giustizia or Castelvechio, moving permanently to the heart of the city, the *piazza grande*, in 1481⁶⁷. Beginning in the last quarter of the fourteenth century and continuing through the first half of the fifteenth, the chancery became increasingly important and better organized, as the principal organ of political direction and coordination for

⁶² *Diario ferrarese*, p. 20; Folini, *Rinascimento estense*, pp. 157-158; Chiappini, *Gli Estensi*, pp. 117-118; Gundersheimer, *Ferrara, the Style of a Renaissance Despotism*, pp. 84-85.

⁶³ Zambotti, *Diario Ferrarese*, p. 210 on baptism, p. 262 on assassination. Also, Chambers and Dean, *Clean Hands and Rough Justice*, pp. 153-167, especially p. 155.

⁶⁴ Gundersheimer, *Crime and punishment*, p. 128.

⁶⁵ Zorzi, *Rituali e cerimoniali penali*, p. 144.

⁶⁶ Guerra, *Legal Homicide*, p. 280.

⁶⁷ Mazzi, *Esecuzioni capitali*, pp. 42-43. Mazzi's book contains a long introduction and then a transcription of *Il libro dei giustiziati* itself. Citations by title and date are to the *libro*.

the entire government apparatus, a process that accelerated upon Borso's accession to ducal status⁶⁸. A chancery hierarchy was clarified, the referendarius at the top followed by the chancellor and secretaries. Uguccione would have been second in authority to the referendarius Lodovico Casella and like Giacomo Giglioli an important and powerful figure in government.

While the legal and administrative structures steadied, a destabilizing trigger was created in 1441 with Niccolò III's death, whose testament named Leonello his heir and whose successor in turn was to be his own legitimate male heir, then his natural offspring, and finally Ercole and Sigismondo. Borso was not mentioned⁶⁹. Borso's succession then was a violation of Niccolò's will, the last triumph of bastardy, and the victory of practical politics over primogeniture and legal succession. It prompted Pius II's sardonic response that [Leonello] «was succeeded by Borso his brother by the same mother, and not by his son; the boy's claims were ignored either because he was legitimately born or because he was a minor»⁷⁰. This was a potential rallying point for those opposed to Borso's rule, especially the adherents of Niccolò di Leonello who viewed him as the legitimate heir to his father. As someone who had served both Niccolò III and Leonello, Uguccione della Badia stood at the center of these seditious forces, asserting his judgment in the *processus* that Niccolò di Leonello was better loved.

In conclusion, conspiracy and rebellion in the Estense territory had five different political sources in various combinations that were persistent threats requiring constant vigilance and which produced violent responses. But the threats were almost never existential, only seeking to replace one Estense prince with another. Overall, the conspiracies of the late fourteenth century became less frequent in the fifteenth. Uguccione's conspiracy was not without precedent and as a type 3 threat it was typically reduced in violence, only the thirty-odd assassins hired by Pier Paolo da Bondenari. In the broader context of Italian conspiracies, though, there was an absence of support from an outside power. But as Ginzburg suggested things may not have been quite as they seemed.

7. A Consideration of New Evidence

Besides the omission of politics and the role of foreign states in the *processus*, there were other aspects in Uguccione's conspiracy that are intriguing. For example, the role of Lorenzo Strozzi, Borso's favorite, for he and Antonio da Correggio were the ones who arrested Uguccione, a task normally left to lower functionaries. Marco Savonarola wrote, «And this I found in an annal;

⁶⁸ Folin, *Rinascimento Estense*, pp. 156-157 and Ascari, *Casella, Ludovico*.

⁶⁹ Covini, *Este, Niccolò*.

⁷⁰ Pius II, *Commentaries*, Book II, chapter 39, p. 361.

this man [Pier Paolo Bondenari] was induced by a Count Lorenzo to declare the affair to Duke Borso in order to remove Uguccione from his office»⁷¹. It is unclear what Strozzi's motivations were, but the detention and incarceration of the chancellor in the Castelvechio had to have been with Borso's knowledge and consent⁷². To return to the chronology of the «age of conspiracy» and to sustain that Borso's *signoria* was a point of transition from the medieval to the early modern, consider capital punishment, what Adriano Prosperi referred to as a «great machine» of social control. Similarly, the creation of «Companies of Justice» (*Compagnie di giustizia*), lay people whose function was not only to facilitate the final passage of the condemned from life to death but also to pacify the consciences of the spectators, short circuit the desire for revenge, and to promote satisfaction that justice had been served. Andrea Zorzi refers to the Companies as new assets of signorial power which developed as a «fundamental function to sustain the stability of the regime»⁷³. Deciding to abandon these safeguards of public control would not have been taken lightly and suggest both that they had not yet been fully established and that the duke did not hesitate to suspend them. Mazzi suggests that private executions protected the image of the prince, prevented the loss of public confidence in established authority, and reduced the risk of popular reaction. The «private» intervention of Strozzi suggests something retrograde, outside of regular public authority, another aspect of a regime in transition⁷⁴.

Secret executions were not unheard of indeed they seem to be linked especially to crimes within the ruling family. Ugo and Parisina d'Este in 1425 and Niccolò di Leonello in 1476 are the most famous examples and therein lie an intriguing clue⁷⁵. Both Zorzi and Guerra note how the late medieval public executions replaced earlier «Germanic-privatistic» practice. During the early Middle Ages when society was organized tribally around the nucleus of the family or clan, the death penalty, inflicted for particularly savage crimes, was carried out in private⁷⁶. The Germanic origin of the Estensi, their prac-

⁷¹ Savonarola, *Memorie di Ferrara*, ms., f. 19r: «E questo l'ho trovato in uno annali, costui fu spinto da un Conte Lorenzo accusar il fatto al Duca Borso per levare Uguccion del suo ufittio».

⁷² Saletti, *Criminal Justice*, p. 1, cites an unpublished history of Ferrara by Ugo Caleffini in which Borso himself accompanied Uguccione to prison in the Castelvechio.

⁷³ Prosperi, *Esecuzioni capitali*, p. 179; Zorzi, *Rituali e cerimoniali penali*, pp. 154-155.

⁷⁴ The topic of the intermediate or mixed nature of Borso's style of rule is altogether beyond the scope of this study. Consider though the helpful insight by Folin, *Rinascimento estense*, p. XI: «Negli stati italiani di antico regime è assai raro incontrare iniziative di trasformazione radicale degli ordinamenti pubblici nella loro globalità. Di solito, ci si trova di fronte a operazioni isolate, seppur potenzialmente incisive, per lo più non coordinate fra loro: piccoli aggiustamenti circoscritti a singoli ambiti politico-amministrativi, spesso introdotti in via eccezionale come provvedimenti d'urgenza e solo in seguito accreditati come riforme permanenti dell'edificio statale – più per inerzia che in base a chiare volontà d'indirizzo. Ad ogni momento della loro storia gli apparati istituzionali non si presentano come sistemi uniformi, organici, articolati per funzioni definite secondo un coerente disegno d'insieme; essi sembrano piuttosto aggregati compositi e discordi, frutto di stratificazioni empiriche introdotte sotto il premere delle contingenze».

⁷⁵ On Ugo and Parisina, *Diario ferrarese*, p. 17; on Niccolò, Zambotti, *Diario ferrarese*, p. 19.

⁷⁶ Zorzi, *Rituali e cerimoniali penali*, p. 141 and Guerra, *Legal Homicide*, p. 270.

tice of Lombard inheritance laws, has been well established⁷⁷. Is it possible that when it came especially to family matters, the Estensi continued the old Germanic custom of private execution? The idea of Borsian private justice is not so far-fetched, given the case of Cristino Bevilacqua⁷⁸. Immediately following the account of Uguccione's demise, the *Diario ferrarese* relates the banishment of Bevilacqua and his sons. The Bevilacqua, a prominent Ferrarese family, were apparently counterfeiting Venetian ducats, normally a capital offense, and Borso was forced by the Venetian authorities to ban Bevilacqua and his sons "in perpetuity". But they all returned to Ferrara less than a year later, none the worse for their crime, another sort of "private" justice, adjusted to the benefit of a favored family.

But given the mixed nature of Borso rule, it is also possible to turn the other way to institutional, public justice. The trial and execution of Uguccione had potentially serious consequences. Less than a year after Uguccione's execution, "Piombino da la Badia," a relative of Uguccione, was executed with great violence. He was decapitated, then split in two, one half placed at "Punta San Zorzo" where the Po di Primaro and Volano split and the legendary site of Ferrara's first cathedral, the other half at Castel Tedaldo in sight of a tenth-century castle and on some gallows. These special sites and the horrific image of a bifurcated body sent a chilling message to anyone who contemplated treasonous revenge for Uguccione⁷⁹. In 1483 a Francesco della Badia was hanged from a merlon of the Castelvechio, «per traditore». He may have been Uguccione's son⁸⁰. Since the chancellor's execution was sure to create the potential for more conspiracies of revenge, Uguccione must have been perceived as a serious threat, or else something had provoked Borso to send Strozzi to make the arrest and to set up the legal process. Uguccione had served the Estensi for more than twenty years. He successfully navigated the successions of Leonello and Borso. In 1452 he was one of about a dozen courtiers who were dubbed knights by the emperor Frederick III, surely reflecting Borso's good will⁸¹. It is very unlikely that Borso would have allowed the elimination of an innocent and faithful servant or that he was unaware of some courtly intrigue that would destroy his second ranking official in the ducal administration.

⁷⁷ Chiappini, *Gli Estensi*, pp. 12-13.

⁷⁸ *Diario ferrarese*, p. 43: «Eodem millesimo, a dì VIII de Dicembre, messer Christino Francesco Bivilacqua, cavaliere et gentilhomo ferrarexe, have bando perpetuo, una con tutti suoi figlioli e quanti ne descenderano mai de loro, da le terre del prefacto duca Borso; e questo a complacencia de la Signoria de Venetia; et così se partirno tuti da Ferrara, dopoi ritornorno per gratia». Tiburzio Bartoli suggested that the Bevilacqua returned the very next year: *Annali antichi della città di Ferrara*, ms., f. 31r.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 106 (*Il libro dei giustiziati*, 16 April 1461). Mazzi identifies Piombino as kin to Uguccione.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 115 (*Il libro dei giustiziati*, 20 October 1483). The *Diario ferrarese* identifies Uguccione's sons as Mario and Francesco, p. 43. If it was Uguccione's son, he may have struck after twenty-three years because 1483 was in the midst of the war with Venice when Estense rule was particularly precarious.

⁸¹ *Diario ferrarese*, p. 36.

The prosecution was likely the result of a personal sense of betrayal of Borso's good will as recorded in the *processus*. In the end, Borso's response was a peculiar mixture of the public and private, a trial that scrupulously adhered to the appearance of blind, institutional justice undermined by secrecy and nocturnal execution. These elements are also present in the final piece of the puzzle, the heretofore missing element of the complicity of foreign states typical of conspiracies.

Uguccione was the son of Niccolò della Badia, who served as chancellor under Niccolò III, becoming the marquis' trusted administrator. Della Badia was sent on a mission to Milan in 1424 and he received several exemptions and investitures of land. He died some time before 1438 when Uguccione inherited his father's position as chancellor. On 19 September 1448 Leonello d'Este conferred Ferrarese citizenship on Uguccione, «spectabilem et egregium consiliarium nostrum»⁸². Uguccione was also sent on an important mission to Milan. According to Muratori, Francesco Sforza attempted to enlist Leonello as an ally by proposing the marriage of Niccolò di Leonello to one of his daughters by Bianca Maria Visconti. And so Muratori cites a directive dated 5 December 1448 in Ferrara, in which Leonello gave to Uguccione and Alberico Maletti the authority to establish an alliance with Francesco Sforza⁸³. Borso disliked Sforza deriding him as a «persona de ville sangue et conditione». He reversed Niccolò III's and Leonello's tilt toward Milan for an alliance with Venice, Milan's bitter enemy⁸⁴. It is here that the threats within the Estense polity merge with foreign policy, personal loyalty, and historical memory and that together offer the best explanation for Uguccione's execution. Uguccione was a creature of Leonello d'Este and the *processus* has him replacing Borso with Leonello's son, Niccolò. Like Giglioli, Uguccione supported a legitimate Estense heir loyal to Niccolò III's testament, and he had a record of supporting a Milanese alliance. These may have been sufficient to raise suspicion of Uguccione's loyalty, and this brings us to the Bolognese evidence.

The *Cronica di Bologna* contains a lengthy account of Uguccione's arrest including information not included in the Ferrarese chronicles, specifics down to the time of day that Uguccione and Pier Paolo were arrested, the latter's motivation to plot against Borso, and the ducal camera's demand for repayment of a duty he had purchased. It is the source for Frizzi's account

⁸² Bertoni, *Guarino da Verona*, pp. 42-43. On investitures of land, Dean, *Land and Power*, p. 59, note 163, p. 91, note 104, p. 92.

⁸³ Muratori, *Delle antichità Estensi*, II, p. 205. «Trattò ancora per tirare nel suo partito il marchese Lionello con offerire in moglie di Niccolò figliuolo d'esso marchese una figliuola sua, natagli da Bianca Maria Fsua consorte; e però esiste un mandato di Lionello, fatto adì V di dicembre del 1448, in Ferrara, con cui dà facultà ad Uguccione dalla Badia e ad Alberico Maletti di stabilir Lega, e di conchiudere la suddetta parentela con esso conte Francesco». The possibility that Borso suspected Uguccione as an agent of Francesco Sforza might have been the most alarming suspicion.

⁸⁴ Matarrese, *Sulla lingua volgare della diplomazia Estense*, pp. 51-77, especially p. 69 and Tristano, «*Lo amore de li subditi*». *The Statecraft of Borso d'Este*, pp. 241-289.

of Uguccione's arrest. The chronicle records that Borso had promised Pier Paolo's father Serafino that he would not prosecute his son if he revealed his accomplices. It also refers to Uguccione, «who, having been examined a few times in the Castelvechio of Ferrara, confessed that it was true that he wanted to consent to the death of the Marquis Borso». This allusion to «examined a few times» («ch'esaminato alquante volte») is probably a euphemism for torture. It would certainly explain Uguccione's willingness to confess his guilt, referenced in the *processus*⁸⁵. It is surprising that a Bolognese chronicle would have this much information on the execution of a Ferrarese official. Was there some sort of special Bolognese connection or interest in Uguccione? Another anonymous chronicle, a "Cronaca generale," offers some intriguing and crucial evidence in the affirmative.

In response to discord («dischordia») between Ferrara and Bologna over their border, especially at the strategic site of Molinella, Borso sent Uguccione to negotiate the best border possible («Et qual messer Ugocione haveva intermissione dal signore duca di metere li dite confine piu in la che fusse possibile»)⁸⁶. Instead, Uguccione accepted a bribe («una bona suma de dinari»), and pleased the Bolognese by placing the border where they wanted it («Et lui compiacete li Bolognesi di metere la confina dove volseno»). And so Uguccione returned to Ferrara and reported to the duke how much he had accomplished, but immediately the duke was told how the boundary ought to have been adjoined in relation to the tower of the place. But since Messer Uguccione had accepted a great amount of money from Bologna, he allowed the border to be placed as it pleased the Bolognese⁸⁷.

And Uguccione «haveva tenuto occulto uno che voleva amazare sua excellentia. Et subito il signore duca gie fece metere le mane adoso et confesò come lui haveva habuto gran quantitate di dinari dali bolognesi» («having hidden that he wished to kill his excellency, [and upon Borso learning of the plot] immediately the lord duke laid his hands on him and made him confess that he had taken a great deal of money from the Bolognese»). And so, we return to where we began, with Uguccione's godfather, Pier Paolo Bondenari, who revealed: «lui gie haveva dito che lo haveva deliberato del amazare il duca Borso. Et che lui asai lo haveva ripreso ma che lui pensava chel dito suo compare dicesse tal parole cusì mateschamente per che lui lo haveva per persona piu presto mato che savio. Et che per questo lui non lo haveva revelato a sua excellentia»⁸⁸.

⁸⁵ *Cronica di Bologna*, col. 734.

⁸⁶ Molinella was a strategic village, a crossing-place for the Po di Primaro and obligatory customs point, and therefore an important source of income. It was also a passageway for bandits and those fleeing Bolognese and Ferrarese territories.

⁸⁷ *Cronaca generale*, ff. 160v-161r. The reference to "tore" seems to be to the Torre della Galeazza, the oldest part of the castle at Molinella. See note 93.

⁸⁸ *Cronaca generale*, f. 161r: «his intention and said that he had considered killing duke Borso. And that he had repeated it very often, but that he thought that his godfather said words that were from such a mixed-up mind, that he was a person more insane than wise. And for that reason, he did not reveal the plot to his excellency».

Pardi dismissed the chronicle as a fabrication by Uguccone's enemies and it does erroneously report that Uguccone was publicly executed in the main square⁸⁹. But why would a fabrication by Uguccone's enemies get that wrong, and why would they put together a chronicle so crudely written?

The *Cronaca generale* provides other hints for the rupture between Uguccone and Borso. The first was Borso's affection for Uguccone, «et molto amato da sua excellentia et gie haveva una grandissima fede in lui quasi piu che in niuno altro» («who was greatly loved by his excellency and who had great faith in him, almost more than in any other person»). This correlates with the section of the *processus* that notes Uguccone's egregious lack of gratitude⁹⁰. But the second, crucial clue was the intimation that Uguccone was Leonello's secretary («il quale era stato segretario del marchese Lionelo»), that his loyalty was primarily to Borso's brother and to his son Niccolò.

Discord between Borso and Bologna continued to be a serious problem, and a year later (1461) a minor revolution erupted in Bologna. Cherubino Ghirardacci's *Historia di Bologna* explains,

Li Centani et quei della Pieve si ribellano a Bologna, volendosi da se medesimi governare sotto della città. Di che sdegnato il senato bolognese, a dì primo di maggio [1461], il venerdì, fa bandire che niuno di dette castella debba né possa comparire sul territorio bolognese sotto pena di 100 ducati, et parimente che niuno del contà di Bologna possa passare a Cento né alla Pieve sotto la medesima pena, et danno il termine agli ribellati di concordarsi insino alli 25 del detto mese; perché, passato detto tempo, s'intenda di haversi a eseguire il bando, et chi sarà trovato et ucciso suo sia il danno⁹¹.

The Cronica di Bologna continues:

Ma cominciò il primo di maggio, perocché eglino ebbero quel termine, se sí volevano accordare co' reggimenti di Bologna. Per questa cagione alquante famiglie si partirono da i detti castelli; ma gli uomini di quelli mandarono a Roma dal cardinale di Bologna, che teneva i detti xcastelli, perché egli provvedesse a tale commandamento. Non ebbero buona risposta. Andarono 'a Ferrara dal marchese Borso, e offersero di dargli i detti castelli. La quale offerta egli non volle accettare, dicendo, ch'essi erano della Chiesa. Ma diede loro alquanti fanti sotto nome del cardinal di Bologna. Nota, che questa discordia fu rimessa al duca di Milano, e per tre volte andarono ambasciatori da Bologna alla sua Signoria. Dove che il Papa diede un certo laudo, che non piacque al cardinale, né agli uomini de' detti castelli, cioè a quei che reggevano, il qual laudo non vollero ratificare. Ma i reggimenti di Bologna ratificarono. In questo istante il duca di Milano si ammalò di una grave malattia. Dissesi pubblicamente ch'era morto, e per questa cagione rimase sospesa tal discordia⁹².

⁸⁹ Pardi, *Borso d'Este, Duca di Ferrara*, p. 32, note 1.

⁹⁰ See note 17 and references to Uguccone's ingratitude in the *processus*.

⁹¹ Ghirardacci, *Historia di Bologna*, pp. 174-175. «The Centani and those of Pieve rebelled against Bologna, wanting to govern themselves under the city. To which the indignant Bolognese Senate, on Friday the first day of May [1461], announced that no one from these towns should or may appear in the Bolognese territory under penalty of 100 ducats, and likewise that no one of the county of Bologna may pass to Cento or to Pieve under the same punishment, and gave the rebellion until the 25th of the said month to come to terms; because, after that time, it is understood that the decree will be carried out, and whoever will be found will be killed, as punishment».

⁹² *Cronica di Bologna*, col. 737: «But beginning with the first of May, since that was the deadline, they wanted to agree with the government of Bologna. For this reason, many families depar-

Clearly the Centani and Pievese had good reason to think that Borso would come to their aid because of his conflict with the Bolognese. Indeed, the dispute continued with a series of cross-border raids in 1471: «Borso marchese di Ferrara ha fatto distruggere il mulino della Galeazza nel territorio bolognese perché apparteneva al conte Guidone Pepoli. I Bolognesi con l'intenzione di vendicare quest'affronto, hanno invaso il modenese distruggendo diverse case, al che Borso ha fatto radere la Galeazza al suolo»⁹³. The dispute continued into the reign of Ercole I, not being finally resolved until 1474⁹⁴.

If the evidence of Uguccione's guilt is circumstantial, the conflict between Borso and the Bolognese was real and entrusting a border dispute to the long-time chancellor was entirely plausible. The circumstances of Uguccione's treason are arrayed in multiple layers of deception, treason, insecurity and suspicion, the duplicity of Italian politics, the memory of a past chancellor's deceit, and the conviction that Borso was a rational actor, who did things for good reason. Bologna provides the missing foreign state component so typical of Italian conspiracies. Together, all these elements provide plausible access into the world of conspiracy and the actions of Borso d'Este and Uguccione della Badia.

8. Conclusion

Two of Ginzburg's comments continue to hover over this study. The first is that even false conspiracies may reveal real ones; the second is that sources are always more or less ambiguous and that their possible meanings can be narrowed by checking context. Regarding the last, it seems that here at least the opposite is true. The source, the *processus*, is not ambiguous at all about Uguccione's guilt. Motivated by hate, disloyalty, and ingratitude, Uguc-

ted from the said towns, but the men were sent to Rome to the Cardinal of Bologna, who held these towns, because he could provide for such an order. But he did not offer a good response, so, they went to Ferrara to the Marchese Borso, and offered to give him the said towns, who did not want to accept the offer, saying that they belonged to the Church. But he gave them several infantry under the name of the Cardinal of Bologna. Note, that this discord was remitted to the Duke of Milan, and three times ambassadors from Bologna went to his Lordship in Milan. Whereupon the Pope issued a certain adjudication, which the Cardinal did not like, neither did the men of the aforesaid towns, that is the governors of the city. They did not want to ratify the arbitration. But the rulers of Bologna did ratify it. At this moment the Duke of Milan fell ill with a serious sickness. And it was publicly announced that he was dead, and for this reason this discord remained suspended». The cardinal of Bologna was Filippo da Sarzana, see T. Costa, *Bologna, anno per anno*, no page numbers, under the year 1462: «È venuto a Bologna Filippo da Sarzana, vescovo di Bologna e cardinale, per mettere pace tra Bologna e quelli di Cento e della Pieve».

⁹³ «Borso Marquis of Ferrara had the Galeazza mill destroyed in the Bologna area because it belonged to Count Guidone Pepoli. The Bolognese, with the intention of avenging this offense, invaded the Modena area by destroying several houses, at which time Borso had the Galeazza razed to the ground». This was a strategic castle built by the Pepoli at Galeazza in the later fourteenth century: Costa, *Bologna, anno per anno*, no page numbers, under the year 1471.

⁹⁴ Ady, *The Bentivoglio of Bologna*, p. 67.

cione della Badia failed to report the conspiracy of Pier Paolo Bondenari to assassinate Borso d'Este, indeed joined him to take command of the plot. To which Borso responded with all due process in a trial conducted by two expert jurists in conformity with the law as interpreted by the learned Gambiglioni. The contexts, in fact, beginning with the historiography, inject nothing but ambiguity into the trial's certitude. Was Uguccione in fact guilty? Was the conspiracy outlined in the *processus* false? Were the accusations a mere ploy to confiscate Uguccione's property? Did Borso know? But with ambiguity comes historical insight, or at least questions.

Borso chose a high-stakes public legal process, not in the verdict, but with the possibility that Uguccione's execution would generate vengeful attempts on his life, as did indeed occur. Many years earlier, Borso's father, Niccolò III, summarily executed his son Ugo and wife Parisina for their carnal knowledge⁹⁵. Thirty-five years later Borso acted within the strict confines of the law, and this brings us back to Fubini, who noted signs of «the transformation and progress of the conception of the state, and with it of its regulating powers», something achieved precociously but incompletely in Ferrara⁹⁶. In turn, Uguccione's trial was an odd combination of the public and private, the legal and the personal. Ginzburg recalls the richness of anomalous cases, individualized, producing historical knowledge that is indirect, presumptive, conjectural. To state things more broadly and theoretically, there are macro and micro factors at play⁹⁷. Uguccione della Badia's demise is the story of a microhistorical Ferrarese experience. Its chronology, the instability of the 1380s and 1390s, on the one hand, and that of "1500," the War of Ferrara, the French invasion of 1494, the Italian wars, the occupation of Modena and Reggio by Julius II, on the other, do not conform to the elements of the «era of conspiracy» model. In between these periods lay the conspiracy of Uguccione and Pier Paolo that occurred at an unusual moment, a time of peace and stability, the peace of Lodi (1454), a time where none of the later macro-factors were seriously operational. This was when Borso enjoyed the security to treat Uguccione's plot through regular legal means, when the repercussions of the Colleonic war, the revenge of Milan, Florence, and Naples, the intricate resentments and marriage alliances of the Pio conspiracy were still years away, and when those five fundamental political structures were fully in play. The usual primary threat, from within the ruling family, was low, Niccolò, still young at twenty-two, and Ercole and Sigismondo had been away in Naples since 1445.

Both Uguccione and Borso maneuvered, each in his own way, within those fundamental structures. Muratori's explained the brothers' stay in Naples, «that Ercole and Sigismondo, his legitimate Brothers, would go to that

⁹⁵ *Diario ferrarese*, p. 17.

⁹⁶ Fubini, *Congiure e stato nel secolo XV*, p. 147, «il segno del trasformarsi e del progredire della concezione dello Stato, e con esso dei suoi poteri regolativi».

⁹⁷ Ginzburg, *Our Words and Theirs*, pp. 114-115.

court and city to learn the military arts, and because Lionello who was always afraid, so that the people one day would not move in their [the brothers] favor». ⁹⁸ The security that allowed Borso to rely on the law was tempered by a historical memory of fear of Estense kin and disloyal servants. This psychological state is one of the most salient features operational within the fundamental structures. It personalized threats and promoted harsh reprisals. The fall of a long-time but venal secretary had precedent in the career of Giacomo Giglioli and predisposed Borso to be vigilant and suspicious of Uguccione's loyalties especially given his patronage by Leonello. Any hint of a threat needed to be met with violent force. That high Ferrarese officials profited financially from their office is not surprising and seems to have been tolerated by Estensi rulers. Uguccione's debt, mentioned in the *Diario ferrarese*, suggests that despite his wealth he might have been living a style that was beyond his means, leading him to accept a bribe from the Bolognese ⁹⁹. Meanwhile, there was always another Estense claimant somewhere nearby such that any conspiracy could tap into a ready family replacement. For that reason, one needed to act with prudence and Uguccione's initial mistake was not taking Bondenari's threats to kill Borso seriously. Perhaps Uguccione was a little too self-confident of his position and power.

The question is if false, what real conspiracy was revealed? The notion that Uguccione's arrest was a mere ploy to confiscate his wealth is not plausible. For Borso's most intimate companions to attempt to destroy one of his most loved and trusted officials, who the *Cronaca generale* called «molto amato» and with whom he had «una grandissima fede» would have been too risky, nor is it feasible that Borso would have been unaware that such a conspiracy was in progress. There must have been a trigger to explain Borso's turn against his chancellor. The Bologna account is the most plausible. But the moment one grasps onto something certain, reasons for doubt emerge. The *Chronica di Bologna* contains a little dialogue between Uguccione, Pier Paolo, and «Rizzo di Parino». «And they sent for a friend of theirs, called Rizzo di Parino, who was residing stationed in Casumaro, to whom they said: In what way would you be with us with 50 men? He said: I am prepared to furnish you with 50, with 100, and with 200 men, to do whatever you will command me, as long as I do not do anything that is against my lord» ¹⁰⁰. Who was this Rizzo di Parino? Of him we know nothing. What was he doing in Casumaro, a place suspicious-

⁹⁸ Muratori, *Delle antichità Estensi*, II, p. 203: «che Ercole e Sigismondo, suoi Fratelli legittimi, passassero a quel la Corte e Città per apprendere l'arti militari, ed anche perché Lionello temeva sempre, che il Popolo un dì non li movesse in loro favore».

⁹⁹ Uguccione was indeed a very wealthy man. Savonarola, *Memorie di Ferrara*, f. 19r: «Uguccione della Badia 1460, questo fu segretario di Leonello a di Borso consigliere e cavagliero, et era ricco più di 70 mille scudi». *Diario ferrarese*, p. 43, valued Uguccione's estate at 80,000 Lire.

¹⁰⁰ *Chronica di Bologna*, p. 734: «E aveano mandato per uno loro amico, chiamato Rizzo di Parino, che dimorava di stanza in Casumaro, al quale dissero: Che modo avresti tu di essere con noi con 50 uomini? Egli disse: Io sono apparecchiato con 50, con 100, e con 200, di far quello, che mi comanderete, purchè io non faccia cosa, che sia contra il mio Signore».

ly strategic, located exactly at the border between the provinces of Ferrara and Modena? How could he raise two hundred men at arms? Why was he not prosecuted? What did he mean by not doing anything against his lord? Wasn't his lord Borso d'Este and could he not have understood what those one or two hundred men were meant to do, or was he referring to Niccolò di Leonello as his lord? Was there another part of the conspiracy, more plotters at the border between Ferrara and Modena? One thing is certain, whether or when there was a later "era of conspiracy," these sorts of questions must have been difficult to answer even at the time, shrouded in secrecy, and anyone who didn't act within «una età di circospezione» was certainly foolish.

Appendix

Key Citations from Angelo Gambiglioni's *Tractatus de Maleficiis*¹⁰¹:

1. *Simple Knowledge of a Plot Is Treason*, f. 131v: «Crimen laesae maiestatis an committatur per illum qui in simplicem scientiam incidit». («Whether the crime of treason is to be committed by a person who has incurred simple knowledge»).
2. *Knowledge of a Plot Must Be Reported Immediately*, 132r: «vel notitiam habuit de aliquo tractatu contra suum Principem vel contra rempublicam, illico debet revelare, et revelans statim premium consequitur». («or if he had knowledge of any plot against his prince or republic, he must give it immediately, and the revealer obtains a reward»).
3. *The Enormity of the Crime of Treason Requires Not Only Those Who Commit It to Be Punished but Also the Male Heirs*, f. 133r: «Et notandum est tales filii non tantum ex testamento, sed nec intestato sunt aliquo modo capaces, imo ab omni successione sunt alieni» («And it is to be noted that such sons not only by reason of a testament but even if intestate are not in any way capable of inheriting, but are alienated from all succession»).
4. *The Exercise of Treasonous Activity Leads to the Deprivation of Assets*, f. 133r: «Crimen laesae maiestatis quamprimum quis tractare incipit, statim perdit administrationem rerum suarum, et omnis alienatio interim facta est ipso iure nulla». («As soon as you begin to treat any crime of treason, it immediately destroys the management of his affairs, and in the meantime no alienation was made by the law itself»).
5. *The Goods of the Condemned Are Not Confiscated Except in the Case of the Crime of Treason*, f. 252v: «tamen hodie bona damnatorum regulariter non intelliguntur confiscata, quamvis quis sit ad mortem danatus, nisi expresse in sententia capitali etiam bona publicentur, nisi in crimine laesae maiestatis» («however, at this day, the goods of the condemned are not normally understood to be confiscated, although a person has been sentenced to death, unless expressly stated in a capital sentence that the goods are to be confiscated, except in the case of a crime of treason»).
6. *The Practice of Public Capital Punishment as Deterrent*, f. 244r: «Practica ducendi condemnatos per loca publica et consueta est introducta ut ab

¹⁰¹ All references are from Angelo Gambiglioni, *De maleficiis tractatus*. Most helpful is the paraphrase and commentary of Zordan, *Il diritto e la procedura criminale*.

omnibus videantur (...) ista practica fuit introducta ut publice videatur ab omnibus ut multis crassantibus locus fit exemplo». («The practice of leading the condemned through public and customary places has been introduced in order to be seen by all (...) This practice was introduced in order that it might be seen by all in the public as an example to the many gathered»).

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