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## THE OUTLAW AND THE COMET OF 1618

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article, based on relatively extensive archival material from the Venetian State Archives, reconstructs the complex figure of the seventeenth-century outlaw Giuseppe Rossetti of Vicenza, whose life and deeds illuminate the cultural, social, and political tensions of early modern Venetian society. Through judicial and notarial sources, local chronicles, and contemporary testimonies, the study explores the transformation of traditional banditry into the phenomenon of outlawry, revealing how concepts of honor, enmity, and justice were negotiated within and beyond the jurisdiction of the Republic of Venice. Rossetti's story, closely intertwined with the violent rivalries between the Capra and da Porto noble families, also reflects the broader crisis of an aristocratic order challenged by emerging social groups and new assertions of personal autonomy. The parallel between the outlaw's life and the appearance of the comet of 1618, perceived as a portent of turmoil, underscores the symbolic link between celestial and human disorder, offering insight into the mental and moral landscape of seventeenth-century Italy.*

*Keywords:* banditry, outlawry, honor, enmity, Venetian Republic, Giuseppe Rossetti, comet of 1618

## IL FUORILEGGE E LA COMETA DELL'ANNO 1618

**SINTESI**

*L'articolo ricostruisce la figura complessa del fuorilegge seicentesco Giuseppe Rossetti di Vicenza, la cui vicenda biografica riflette le tensioni culturali, sociali e politiche dell'età moderna veneziana. Attraverso fonti giudiziarie e notarili, cronache locali e testimonianze coeve, lo studio analizza la trasformazione del tradizionale banditismo nel fenomeno del banditismo "fuori legge", mettendo in luce le dinamiche dell'onore, dell'inimicizia e della giustizia nella società della Serenissima. La storia di Rossetti – strettamente legata alle rivalità violente fra le famiglie nobili Capra e da Porto – evidenzia*

*la crisi dell'ordine aristocratico e l'emergere di nuovi gruppi sociali desiderosi di affermare la propria autonomia. Il parallelismo tra la vita del bandito e la comparsa della cometa del 1618, interpretata come presagio di sconvolgimenti, rivelava l'intreccio simbolico tra disordine celeste e umano, offrendo una chiave di lettura originale del clima mentale e morale del Seicento italiano.*

*Parole chiave: banditismo, fuorilegge, onore, inimicizia, Repubblica di Venezia, Giuseppe Rossetti, cometa del 1618*

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

For centuries, banditry was inextricably linked to the punishment of banishment: a sentence that reflected long-established and ancient jurisdictional structures, but also the conflicts between rival groups and kinship networks.

However, the phenomenon of banditry, often ambiguously understood as synonymous with criminality, is primarily traced in judicial sources, which in the decades between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries recorded above all the transition from the traditional figure of the *bandito* to that of the true outlaw. In fact, there were many famous bandits who, with their exploits, were prosecuted during that turbulent period by the magistrates of the Serenissima, who were particularly committed to ensuring social and economic stability.

The concept of fame, which often accompanied the criminal deeds of outlaws, revealed above all the concern of Venetian political authorities to contain a widespread phenomenon—prevalent throughout the Italian peninsula—prompting them to adopt extraordinary repressive measures, which, starting in the 1580s, did not hesitate to resort to private violence. This violence immediately proved to be highly effective, as it was able to tap into the deeply rooted phenomenon of feuds and enmities, which were widespread across much of society (Povolo, 2022, 933–972).

The social dimension and the profile characterizing the outlaw, no longer merely an expression of traditional banditry, where the punishment of banishment primarily served to restore peace between conflicting groups—often also revealed the popular support he enjoyed among the humblest sections of the population (Povolo, 2011).

1 This paper is the result of research carried out in the project J6-4603 *Facing Foreigners Between the Medieval and Early Modern Period in the North Adriatic Towns*, funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS) in 2022–25.

It can further be added that certain outlaw figures, which began to emerge following the transformations affecting seventeenth-century banditry, also originated in the crisis of the traditional estate-based society, which was being challenged—and at times directly confronted—by highly assertive social groups. For these groups, the issue of wealth had become dominant. These were social strata generally reluctant to accept a subordinate position and eager to play a more active political role (Maravall, 1984, 143 ff.).

The outlaw discussed in these pages fully embodies the cultural and social dynamics that shaped seventeenth-century banditry and the diverse jurisdictional contexts in which it developed. His figure can rightly be seen as a representative image of the new and, in certain respects, irrepressible social tensions—tensions no longer contained within the traditional framework of enmity.

The study of banditry can thus serve as a litmus test for the cultural and political transformations that marked medieval and early modern society—complex and seemingly contradictory transformations that can be fully grasped through an in-depth analysis of case studies approached from an interdisciplinary perspective.

The events that marked the life of Giuseppe Rossetti can, in certain respects, be regarded as an interpretive paradigm of the new social and political climate that found its most significant expressions in the Mediterranean world during the seventeenth century.

#### A CASE STUDY: THE OUTLAW GIUSEPPE ROSSETTI

The figure of that outlaw, as he emerged from the pages of a local chronicler, first caught my attention through a description—emotionally charged and stripped of all nuance—that, in the early seventeenth century, set him squarely within the fierce and deep-rooted rivalries of the city of Vicenza. It was, without question, a contrived image, for the labels of *bravo* and “hired assassin” so freely attached to him were at odds with the very deeds attributed to him and with the manner in which they were carried out.

I felt an irresistible pull to piece together his life story, placing it within the broader social and political world I had examined on other occasions. It became a kind of personal challenge—one constantly at odds with a version of events shaped by other, less impartial motives. The obstacles were considerable. Even the judicial records of the various Venetian magistracies, whose aim was to remove a man they considered undeniably dangerous, offered their own skewed perspectives. And yet, beneath this seemingly unanimous chorus, there were faint but discernible traces of other possibilities: a more layered, more complex portrait of the outlaw than the one preserved in the chronicler’s pages.

The research presented in this essay thus navigated the shoals of a reticent documentary record and, of course, contended with the numerous archival gaps that historians typically encounter when sketching a biography, but above all when reconstructing a *narrative plot* clearly focused on the *traces* left not so much by the

subject himself, but by those who took an interest in him in various capacities.<sup>2</sup> As will be seen, the choice of this narrative plot lay chiefly in outlining the character of an outlaw who was quite atypical in the varied world of seventeenth-century banditry (cf., e.g., Casals, 2019; Vidali, 2017). In some cases, this figure even paradoxically evoked the image of the social bandit described by Eric Hobsbawm in his paradigmatic work (Hobsbawm, 2001). Alternatively, it resembled that of the *homo sacer*, condemned by the political system to be expelled from his original context, yet rejected by the outlaw, who asserts a sense of personal honor clearly in contrast with the dominant values upheld by his adversaries.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, I set out to tackle such a thorny topic, aiming also to reconstruct the family context from which such a complex personality had emerged. In this case, the notarial sources proved to be a rich source of valuable information. It was quite likely that the outlaw's strong personality stemmed from his maternal family, from his grandfather, a merchant and entrepreneur, whose business was clearly aimed at the broader European scope. He undoubtedly belonged to a world no longer inclined to play a subordinate role in relation to the traditional hierarchies of honor and power.

These pages are, in fact, a preliminary outline of the outlaw's life, in particular because the research did not extend to the political and social spheres in which he lived and operated, both during his time on the run and when he definitively abandoned the social context in which he had worked during his early years of activity. Further investigation would be highly desirable, if only to shed light on the unexpected return of his son after his death. This return hints at surprising and unimaginable scenarios during a period of hiding, living outside any rules dictated by the law.

## THE COMET OF NOVEMBER 1618

The three comets that appeared in various parts of the globe in 1618 provoked admiration, astonishment, and worry among those who had the opportunity to observe them (Sargent, 2007, 110–112). Their appearance in the European skies, however, reignited a debate that had already gained significant momentum following the appearance of a comet in 1577 which contributed to challenging the established

2 Paul Veyne, in this regard, refers to *plots*, meaning narrative paths constructed through sequences of events in which the historian actively engages with his imagination, but never with the presumption of filling the gaps that inevitably characterize the narrative itself (Veyne, 1984, 31–46).

3 As noted regarding Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*: "To be excluded from the law is to be denied the rights and privileges the law offers, including the protection it offers against certain forms of violence. The violence to which *homo sacer* is exposed by its exclusion from the legal order is not the normalized violence that is achieved through the systematic articulation of the law, but the arbitrary violence of sovereign decision, which decides when the law does and does not apply. That violence cannot be sanctioned, because it takes place in an anomic space outside the law" (McQuillan, 2015, 128). Regarding the *homo sacer*, I also refer to Knoll & Šejvl (2010).



Fig. 1: Title page of the text by Scipione Chiaramonti published in 1619, in which the author focuses on the comet that appeared between November and December of 1618.

Aristotelian cosmology centered on the earthly nature of such phenomenon (Hellman, 1944, 314–317). Thanks in part to the aid of new observational instruments, the scientific discussion from the final decades of the sixteenth century had for the most part moved toward accepting the celestial origin of comets (Yeomans, 1991, 51–68).

Despite advances in the scientific understanding, the ancient belief linking the appearance of comets to prodigious or ominous events persisted,<sup>4</sup> fueling collective fears and anxieties across nearly all social strata (Marzari, 1577; Hellman, 1944, 261–266; Preto, 1994, 215–216). The appearance of the third comet, from the end of November 1618 into January of the following year, only intensified those fears which had evidently been simmering in various social contexts in the previous years (Chiaromonti, 1619). Just as had happened in previous centuries, some observers did not hesitate to warn of the dire portents predicted by the sudden and striking appearance of these celestial bodies (Granada & Boner, 2022, 1–15).

From the pages of his chronicle, the Vicentine Silvestro Castellini noted with evident concern the appearance of the comet that graced the skies of the city in late November 1618. The conflict between the Venetians and the Austrian Habsburgs had just come to an end, promising a long-awaited peace. But the chronicler observed:

*while the people hoped that this peace would bring some tranquility, they were quite disturbed by the frightening comet that appeared at the end of November, fearing new misfortunes. In particular, they noticed that the comet had such characteristics that it almost seemed like a portent of things to come. In fact, the comet, with its long and eerie tail, was seen to appear around 4 in the night from the east, with its tail stretching towards Germany, lasting throughout the night until it was consumed by the sunlight. It was visible for about 15 days, amid extreme cold, and then disappeared with the dampness and rains that followed.<sup>5</sup>* (Castellini, 1822, 189–190)

The negative influence of the celestial body manifested both towards the city and “other peoples,” but its sudden appearance provided Castellini with the opportunity to reflect on the strong tensions that were shaping the city’s social life.

<sup>4</sup> A true turning point would not occur until the end of the seventeenth century (Schechner, 1997, 124–129).

<sup>5</sup> [M]entre speravano i popoli per questa pace di godere qualche tranquillità furono alquanto turbati dalla spaventevole cometa apparsa sul finire del mese di novembre sospettando nuovi mali, massime che vedevano in essa qualità tali che ne erano quasi una dimostrazione; poiché essa cometa con coda lunghissima e squalida vedevasi comparire circa le 4 ore della notte dalla parte di levante e stendendo la coda verso la Germania durava tutta la notte fino che dalla luce del sole veniva consumata. Si fece vedere per 15 giorni circa con eccessivo freddo, e venne a consumarsi colla umidità e colle pioggie che seguirono (Castellini, 1822, 189–190). As is well known, Castellini’s chronicle (1576–1630) was published posthumously in several volumes between 1783 and 1822. As has been suggested, the text contained an open critique of certain behaviors of the Vicentine ruling class (Benzoni, 1978, 761–762); however, it is much more likely that its publication was discouraged due to the explicit pages in which the author did not fail to highlight the intrusion of Venice into the local power system.

The Vicentine chronicler had already openly denounced the existing conflicts between the various social groups, but the appearance of the comet seemed to him to be the inevitable outcome of a long neglected divine prophecy:

*It wasn't long before the harmful influences of the aforementioned comet began to show themselves in the city of Vicenza [...] as the peace and tranquility that had long been maintained among the citizens were disrupted. The sole cause was the ambition and pride of two families, the Capra and the Porti, both noble, ancient, and rich in followers, favors, and alliances.*<sup>6</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 190)

A matter of precedence between members of the two influential families, both military leaders of the Republic, led to a violent gunfight that resulted in the death of Count Gabriele da Porto. The inevitable legal and judicial process, which prompted the Venetian authorities to ban those primarily responsible, did not yield any substantial results: “However, the tranquility continued to be disturbed, as the city remained divided into two factions, favoring one side or the other.”<sup>7</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 194).

In the continuation of his narrative the Vicentine chronicler did not hide his real concerns:

*The hatred and enmity between the Capra and Porti families had not yet ceased; on the contrary, they continued to grow, with both sides using every means possible to start new quarrels and plot new acts of revenge, employing large numbers of killers hired who were maintained at great expense, in order to deprive each other of life.*<sup>8</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 195–196)

## GIUSEPPE ROSSETTI: BRAVO AND HIRED ASSASSIN

The conflict that involved the leading families of the Vicentine aristocracy in 1619 gave Silvestro Castellini the opportunity to address the subject closest to his heart. A person whom he had no hesitation in expressing his revulsion for seemed to move unscrupulously between the two factions for personal gain:

6 *Non passò gran tempo che della detta cometa cominciarono a mostrarsi i maligni influssi verso la città di Vicenza [...] poiché si venne a rompere quella pace e quiete che per lungo tempo erasi mantenuta tra i cittadini. Sola causa ne fu l'ambizione e la superbia di due famiglie, dei Capra cioè, e dei Porti, ambedue nobili, antiche e ricche di seguito, di favori, e di aderenze* (Castellini, 1822, 190).

7 *La quiete però continuò ad essere turbata, perché la città rimase come divisa in due partiti, favorendo chi una parte e chi l'altra* (Castellini, 1822, 194).

8 *Gli odj e le inimicizie fra Capra e Porti non erano cessati ancora, ed anzi andavano più crescendo usandosi ogni via da una parte e dall'altra per introdur nuove querele e macchinare nuove vendette col mezzo di sicari che in numero si mantenevano con gran spesa, onde privarsi l'un l'altro di vita* (Castellini, 1822, 195–196).

*Among them, one of the most notorious was Iseppo Rossetti, a man of plebeian origin, the son of a cobbler. This man had become very bold and insolent thanks to the favor of the Porti and Capra families, whom he used to commit serious crimes. Now, after the aforementioned discord, having lost the friendship and favor of the Capra family and their supporters, he had declared himself a fierce defender of the Porti faction. He was solicited in various ways, both with money and promises, and even more driven by the extraordinary favors offered by many Venetian, Veronese, and Brescian gentlemen, who either used his services or were waiting for the opportunity to do so. Thus, he took such courage that, after assembling a good number of wicked men and bandits, he would walk openly through the city, waiting for the chance to unleash his cruelty on someone.<sup>9</sup>* (Castellini, 1822, 196)

Although Castellini immediately emphasized his humble origins and his tendency to take advantage of the animosity dividing the city's aristocratic class,<sup>10</sup> Giuseppe Rossetti appeared to be a man who could hardly be assimilated to the common throng of *bravi* willing to commit any crime if ordered to do so. In fact, he was a man who not only enjoyed protection and favors, but also gathered around him a large number of bandits, pursuing his own strategy of conflict.

## A CITY IN TENSION

But who was Giuseppe Rossetti really? As we will have the opportunity to examine at length, his personal and family biography reveals a man far removed from the extremely negative profile drawn by the Vicentine chronicler. However, this profile, along with the emphasis on the irreparable rift that had affected the city's aristocracy can be understood in light of the description that Silvestro Castellini had previously provided of the local society.

The bitter conflict that had arisen between the Republic of Venice and the Austrian Habsburgs gave him the opportunity to outline the political and social reality of the city. He identified three distinct social groups (*stati*) in the year 1616. The first social group (*primo stato*), towards which he did not hide his sympathies, was made up of the aristocracy, who held power and public reputation, even though

<sup>9</sup> *Fra costoro uno de' più famosi fu Iseppo Rossetti, uomo plebeo, figlio di un calzolajo. Costui erasi fatto molto animoso ed insolente pel favore dei Porti e dei Capra, del cui mezzo si servivano a commettere gravissime scelleratezze. Ora dopo le enunziate discordie levato essendosi dall'amicizia e dal favore dei Capra e loro aderenti, si era dichiarato difensore acerrimo della parte de' Porti, dai quali in varj modi e con danari e con promesse sollecitato, e più ancora spinto dai favori estraordinari che gli prestavano molti gentiluomini veneziani, veronesi e bresciani, che della sua opera si servivano od aspettavano occasione di servirsi, prese tanto animo che, fatta scelta di buon numero d'uomini scellerati e banditi, camminava pubblicamente per la città, aspettando occasione di sfogare contro alcuno la sua crudeltà* (Castellini, 1822, 196).

<sup>10</sup> Castellini's observations were taken up again, without significant variations (Zanazzo, 1966–1967, 274–275).

they had lost much of their former prestige<sup>11</sup> due to their extravagant lifestyle and cruelty. Similarly, the second social group (*secondo stato*), consisted of the *cittadini* or citizens—those who, despite their humble origins, had ascended the social ladder, imitating the haughty attitudes of the first class (Castellini, 1822, 182–183).

It was, however, of the third social group (*terzo stato*)—that of merchants and artisans<sup>12</sup>—that Silvestro Castellini made the most interesting observations, which most likely explain the considerable attention he would later dedicate to the figure of Giuseppe Rossetti, placing him singularly within the violent conflict that divided the Vicentine nobility in the following years:

*Even this one was too mired in vice, because in both their lifestyle and dress, they sought not only to compete with but to surpass the first and second social groups. To this end, they had no qualms about deceiving and defrauding anyone who dealt with them, so that in their duplicitous pursuit of money, they did not refrain from using every possible form of insolence.*<sup>13</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 183)

An extremely negative judgment, which seemed to attribute to this diverse category of *parvenus* the responsibility for the irreparable rift affecting the city's ruling class:

*And from this it followed that they were hated and despised by the other social classes, so much so that, to tell the truth, very few of them balanced their wealth with their expenses, acknowledged their modest status, sought to elevate themselves through virtues, and managed their affairs with sincerity.*<sup>14</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 184)

11 “But it seems that during this period, most of them had become tainted, due to the excessive favor they granted to the wicked, with the result that they were driven to commit ever more crimes. Moreover, with their excessive spending on their lifestyle and clothing, they became unable to pay their debts and wages, and as a result, they aroused the hatred of the people.” A negative judgment that was nonetheless tempered by the consideration the chronicler had for the local nobility: “Even among the nobles and the people, there was a great diversity of opinions. The people, naturally ignorant, judged only what was happening in the present without ever considering the future consequences. In contrast, the nobles, more prudent and wise, educated by the memory of past events and comparing them with the current ones, predicted grave calamities” (Castellini, 1822, 183–184).

12 “The merchants and artisans of the city who practiced their profession within the walls, for the benefit of the inhabitants, all of whom were called by the name of the people” (Castellini, 1822, 182).

13 *Ancor questo era ingolfato ne' vizj, perché si nel vivere che nel vestire pretendevano, non dico correre, ma superare il primo stato e il secondo, e per questo effetto non tralasciavano modo alcuno di defraudare e d'ingannare chiunque con essi negoziava, in maniera che tirando a sé danari con ogni doppiezza non si trattenevano dall'usare tutte le insolenze possibili* (Castellini, 1822, 183).

14 *E da ciò ne veniva ch'erano dagli altri ordini odiati e vilipesi: sicché a dir tutto pochissimi erano fra essi quelli che contrappesassero le loro facoltà colle spese, che conoscessero il loro mediocre stato, procurassero d'innalzarsi colle virtù, e con sincerità esercitassero i loro negozi* (Castellini, 1822, 184).

The Vicentine chronicler outlined a real conflict between the two opposing hierarchies of honor and wealth.<sup>15</sup> It was a conflict that seemed to be exacerbated by members of the third social group (merchants and artisans), who, in his view, were trapped in selfishness and personal gain, and incapable of using their wealth to acquire the virtues that would have facilitated their social ascent and acceptance by the privileged classes.

These observations seemed to justify the pages he dedicated to the conflict within the aristocracy and, above all, to the hired assassin (*sicario*) who had infiltrated the opposing factions for personal gain. The connection between the tensions dividing the most prominent members of the ruling class and the role played by Giuseppe Rossetti is even more understandable when one delves into the biography of the man who would become a famous and uncatchable outlaw.

### THE FAMILIES OF GIUSEPPE ROSSETTI

The marriage between Messer Gaspare Rossetti and Laura Costantini was celebrated on Tuesday, April 22, 1586, in the small church next to the ancient hospice of the Proti in Vicenza. The license granted by the episcopal vicar stipulated that the bans be published only once, in the Church of San Paolo, where the bride had lived for some years after puberty, and in the Cathedral, where she was residing at the time (ACVI, *Registri Cattedrale*, 2/1168).

The choice of the Church of the Proti was not entirely coincidental, as Laura's father, Ippolito Costantini, had likely moved around the mid-1570s to an ancient palace directly opposite the entrance of the hospice.<sup>16</sup> Shortly thereafter, in December 1585, he had purchased another palace next to the one in which he resided.<sup>17</sup>

In the marriage registry, Gaspare is listed with the surname "Busa known as Rossetti" (*Busa detto Rossetti*), son of Messer "Iseppo cordovan merchant" (*mercante di cordevani*). He was a merchant who operated in the sector of the so-called *cuori d'oro*, i.e., leather (hides) primarily used as precious upholstery, painted and embroi-

<sup>15</sup> For observations on the two hierarchies, cf. Casey (1989, 101–108). Diane Owen Hughes clearly highlighted the tensions between the two hierarchies, as Renaissance society "had an ideology of orders, but was in practice governed by money which could alter position and rank" (Hughes, 1983, 96–99; cf. 1978, 262–296). For the specific Vicentine context, cf. Povolo (1997, 287–288).

<sup>16</sup> The deed of sale for the palace located *ex opposito hospitalis de Prothis*, has not survived, but in a subsequent notarial deed, drafted on December 4, 1576, it is explicitly stated that the Vicentine merchant had purchased it from the three brothers Pellegrino, Ippolito, and Marco Aurelio Cereda on February 11, 1574 (ASVI, *Notai di Vicenza*, busta 8073, February 4, 1576).

<sup>17</sup> ASVI, *Notai di Vicenza*, busta 7833, 1 dic. 1576. The deed of sale between Piero Manolessi and the Arrigoni brothers for the palace that Ippolito would later purchase in 1585, in which it is stated that he also owns the adjoining palace (ASVI, *Notai di Vicenza*, busta 8670, December 7, 1585). The two merchant brothers Arrigoni sell to Ippolito Costantini the palace they had purchased in 1576.

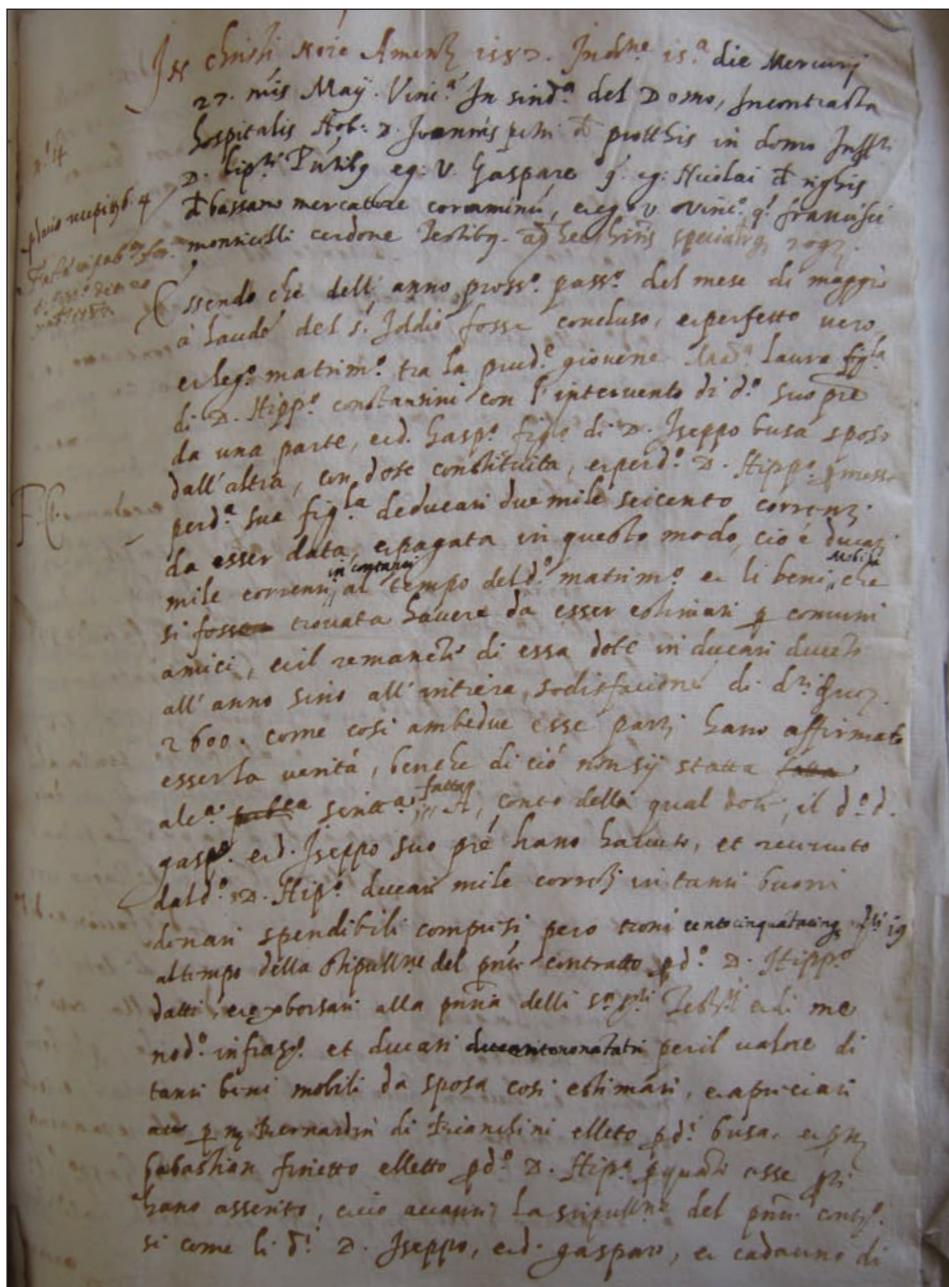


Fig. 2: Registration of the dowry granted on May 27, 1587, by Ippolito Costantini to his daughter Laura, who married Gaspare Rossetti in May 1586 (photo: Claudio Povolo).

dered with gold and silver.<sup>18</sup> According to tax records from 1563, Bortolameo Busa, the great-grandfather of the outlaw, owned three shops in the center of the city on Contrà della Catena (Battilotti, 1980, 128). In his will, drafted in 1576, Bartolomeo established a *fideicommissum* (an entail) between his three sons, Giuseppe, Vicenzo, and Paolo. In addition to the shops, he appears to have owned several properties in the fields of Lisiera and in the Borgo of Lisiera, just outside the city walls. Among the many provisions, he also attested that his son Giuseppe Sr (the grandfather of the future outlaw) had received more than 4,500 ducats from him, and therefore, only bequeathed him only a few possessions in the Lisiera district (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8002, March 31, 1576).<sup>19</sup> A family of artisans, therefore, dedicated to leatherworking, but also involved in the profitable trade of cordovans or *cuori d'oro*.<sup>20</sup> And, most likely, the division of assets, supported by an entail, is purely indicative, both with regard to the artisan and mercantile activity and the family house. The three shops were in fact assigned to Paolo, the youngest son, while Vicenzo received the family home in Borgo di Lisiera, located outside the city walls, along with twenty-seven fields and an orchard. Since we know that Giuseppe Sr and his family also lived in this residence after Bortolamio's death, it is likely that a fraternal brotherhood supported the artisanal work of the three brothers, as well as ensured for all of them the ancient family residence.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, in his will, drafted in 1615, Vicenzo bequeaths all his assets to his grandchildren Tommaso, the son of Paolo, and Bortolamio and Giuseppe Jr, the sons of Gaspare.<sup>22</sup>

18 An example of the flourishing and profitable activity of the family is evidenced by the notarial deed in which the three brothers Giuseppe, Paolo, and Vicenzo Busa, sons of Bartolomeo, purchase a quantity of hides from Madonna Lucrezia Garbinato for the significant sum of 1,478 ducats. The deed is executed "in the shop of the undersigned heirs." In the subsequent detailed inventory of the purchased goods, various types of cordovans are mentioned: *sciutti, della Gianina, roani* etc. (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 742). Both deeds were executed on June 17, 1578. Giuseppe Busa, as will be recalled, is the paternal grandfather of Giuseppe Rossetti. For more on the production of cordovans, cf. Contadini (1986, 231–250).

19 From the confiscation deed executed in 1621 by the Avogaria di comun against Giuseppe Rossetti, it appears that in the Borgo of Lisiera the outlaw owned "a country house with terraces and a very large courtyard, surrounded by a wall, with a dovecote and adjacent a small piece of land cultivated as a meadow and with vineyards, also surrounded by a wall, which may be about three fields in size" (ASV, Avogaria di comun, busta 2773, May 27, 1621).

20 Laura Costantini received a significant dowry of 2,600 ducats (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8671, May 27, 1587). In the same deed, it is stated that Laura "has moved to the house of her husband previously mentioned". In his will, drafted in 1591, Giuseppe Sr referred to as "merchant and cittadino or citizen of Vicenza", states that he had assigned a dowry of two thousand ducats to his daughter Francesca, who had married Francesco Targa (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8671, June 4, 1591).

21 In his first will, drafted in 1591, Giuseppe Rossetti senior attests that he resides in his house located "in Contrà delle Gazzole, with the palace of the most illustrious *mr podestà* (chief magistrate) behind it." In his second will, drafted in 1614, as will be seen, to help his outlawed grandson, he attests that he resides "in the Borgo di Lisiera, outside the walls of the city of Vicenza, in the ground-floor room of the house of the undersigned testator" (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8671, June 4, 1591; busta 8816, November 25, 1614). And in the church of Santa Lucia, located just outside the city walls, the Rossetti family had a burial site, as he stipulates in this second will: "I wish for my body to be buried in the church of Santa Lucia, in the tomb of our family".

22 Giuseppe will thus obtain the house located in Borgo di Lisiera, which, as will be seen, would be confiscated in 1621 (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 9340, 4 September, 1615).

In the numerous notarial acts in which he appears, Ippolito Costantini is described as a “merchant and citizen” (*mercante e cittadino*). Since he is not listed in the 1563 town’s tax register (Battilotti, 1980), it is highly likely that he had recently moved to the city of Vicenza<sup>23</sup> and was part of those families from the Como area and the Grisons who were active in the silk trade across various European markets (Demo, 2012, 45).

It is certain that Ippolito Costantini operated with a broad commercial perspective. His first daughter, Diana, had married Bernardino Giulino in May 1579, a silk merchant from Piuro in the Grisons who had settled in the city several years earlier. The marriage produced four children, but was tragically cut short by Bernardino’s early death. He made his will in May 1591, just one day before his death, naming his father-in-law Ippolito and the merchant Giovan Maria Mora as commissioners of his estate.<sup>24</sup> A few years earlier, as part of the dowry settlement, Bernardino had transferred to his daughter and son-in-law a palace that he had purchased the previous year from the Arrigoni brothers.<sup>25</sup> In March 1593, Diana Costantini entered into a second marriage, this time to the silk merchant Baldissera Minaù from Antwerp in the Spanish Netherlands.<sup>26</sup> As a silk merchant and an

23 In the parish of San Paolo, as stated in the marriage registration of Laura Costantini. This parish was near the parish of Catena, where the Rossetti family owned their shops.

24 ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8764, May 6, 1591. Bernardino remembers his two daughters, Maddalena and Vicenza, ensuring that they would receive a proper dowry at the appropriate time, and he names his two sons, Giovan Battista and Antonio, as his heirs.

25 ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8671, February 20, 1586: “A walled house, covered, with a solarium and a courtyard located in this city, in the district of the Hospital of the Noble Protì, facing the public road in front, with on one side the heirs of the late Zorzo Travaglio, and on the other side the heirs of the late Messer Battista Bagozzo and Messer Antonio Maria Tasca, and the said *dominus* Ippolito on the other side [...] which house the said *dominus* Ippolito purchased from *dominus* Giovan Pietro and the brother of the Arrigoni.” The couple will live in the house next to Ippolito Costantini. In the subsequent division deed drawn up after Ippolito’s death, it is mentioned that starting in 1593, his son Giovan Battista was sent to learn the art of commerce in Augsburg, Germany, and in Lyon, France (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8789, January 21, 1609). The deed also recalls that Bernardino Giulino’s death which occurred on May 7, 1591, the day after his will was made. In the same division deed, it is stated that after Bernardino’s death, Diana and her children were to move in with Ippolito, while the palace he had granted to the couple would be sold to Francesco Targa, the son-in-law of Giuseppe Busa, grandfather of the outlaw.

26 ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8671, March 18, 1593: the granting of Diana’s dowry to Menaù. The deed also references a sum of money granted by Ippolito to his son-in-law to attend the Frankfurt fair. The marriage was registered in the cathedral on January 7, 1593, but was celebrated at the home of Ippolito Costantini “silk merchant” and in the presence of, among others, *domino* Alessandro Mora “silk merchant”: “I, Priest Iseppo Nalini, curate of this Cathedral, have celebrated the marriage by words of present consent and according to the rite of the Holy Roman Church and the provisions of our Most Illustrious and Reverend Monsignor, between Messer Baldissera, son of *dominus* Enrico Menaù from the city of Cologne in Germany, residing in this city of Vicenza for more than twenty years and now in the aforementioned parish of San Michele, and Madonna Diana, daughter of *dominus* Ippolito Costantini, from our parish of the Cathedral” (ACVI, Registri Cattedrale, busta 3/1169).



*Fig. 3: Vicenza, Contrà Proti. The two houses purchased in the 1570s and 1580s by Ippolito Costantini, grandfather of the outlaw Giuseppe Rossetti (photo: Claudio Povolo).*

entrepreneur, Ippolito Costantini was active throughout Europe. Although aimed at different economic contexts, the marriages of his two daughters are indicative of the social profile of a man whom documentary sources of the time refer to as a “merchant and citizen” (*mercante e cittadino*) of Vicenza.

The marriage between Gaspare Rossetti and Laura Costantini represented a sort of bond, if not an alliance, between two families belonging to that third social group, which Silvestro Castellini placed in open conflict with other social classes, and whose members were not inclined to use their wealth in order to integrate into the traditional hierarchies of honor. While the Busa/Rossetti family was mainly known for its thriving artisanal and mercantile activities linked to leather processing, Ippolito Costantini’s family had achieved a prominent European status through the silk trade.

## THE EARLY YEARS

We have a record of Giuseppe Rossetti’s baptism performed on March 29, 1594:

*A son of Signore Rossetti and Signora Laura, his wife, was baptized and was given the name Giuseppe. The godfather was Mr. Gaspare Cincone, and the godmother was Mrs. Achillea, wife of Mr. Fabio Rinaldi, both from the same parish.<sup>27</sup> (ACVI, Registri di Santa Lucia, busta 45/1211)*

Those two titles of *signore* and *signora* attest to the distinctive social position of the two parents. Giuseppe Rossetti was therefore not a commoner *uomo plebeo*, at least not according to the traditional social categories, which sixteenth-century society itself considered outdated or, at best, inadequate to express its complexity. Certainly, Silvestro Castellini showed animosity and hostility when he referred to him as the “son of a cobbler” (*figlio di un calzolaio*).

While the data concerning the two families are such as to put Castellini’s narrative into perspective, it is even more difficult to construct a biography which inevitably has to rely on judicial sources or, in any case, on the account of a chronicler who, as has been ascertained, is completely biased in his assessments of the man who would become a famous outlaw by becoming involved in the bitter conflict among the nobility.

27 *Fu battezzato un figlio del signor Rossetti e della signora Laura sua moglie e gli fu posto nome Giuseppe. Il compare fu messer Gaspare Cincone, la comare fu la signora Achillea moglie del signor Fabio Rinaldi, tutti e due della parrocchia* (ACVI, Registri di Santa Lucia, busta 45/1211). Despite the many gaps, the baptisms of Lucia (August 29, 1589) and Ippolito (February 21, 1595) are also recorded (ACVI, Registri di Santa Lucia, busta 45/1211). The couple also had another son, Bortolamio, as confirmed by his burial registration on June 23, 1618 (ACVI, Registri di Santa Lucia, buste 45/1211, 46/1212). As will be seen, despite the numerous gaps in the canonical registers, it has been possible in some cases to obtain demographic data by referring to the information provided by notarial deeds.

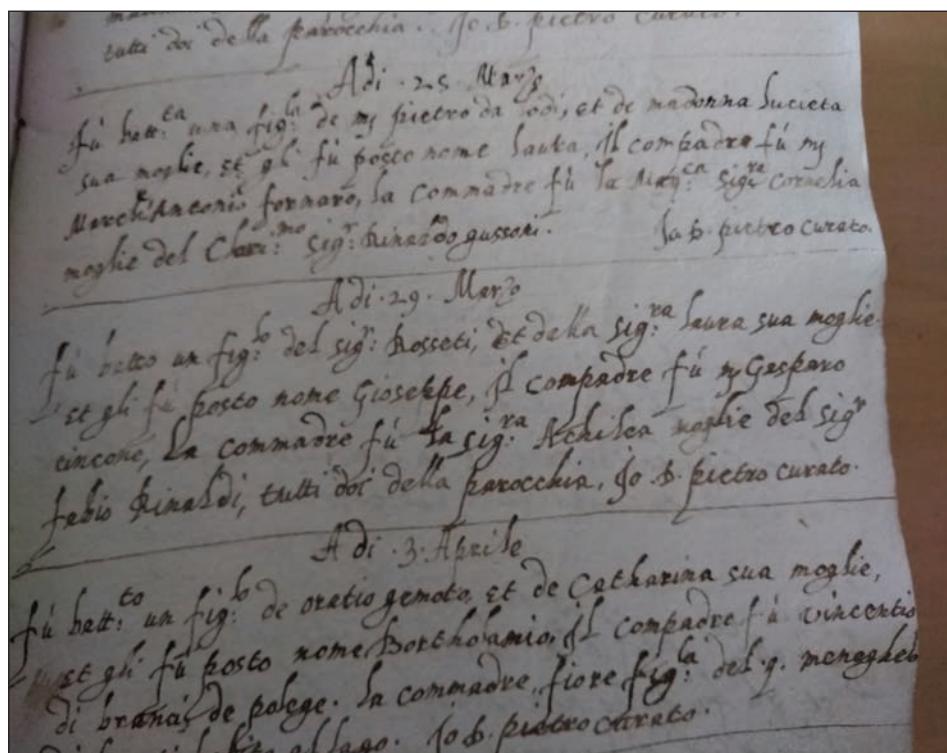


Fig. 4: Baptismal certificate of Giuseppe Rossetti, administered on March 29, 1594, at the Cathedral of Vicenza (photo: Claudio Povolo).

While the process of deconstructing the sources, as will be seen, reveals the actual dynamics of the events in which Giuseppe Rossetti was involved, the greatest difficulties in overcoming this task stem from the fact that the documentation is often insufficient to reveal the context in which the events he was accused of took place.

It is reasonable to assume that his personality was probably shaped by the cultural influence of his maternal grandfather and the social relationships that the latter had forged outside the local context. The intolerance he showed on several occasions towards the power of the nobility may perhaps have been influenced by a personality that was not subjugated to the logic of aristocratic power, as was probably the case with Ippolito Costantini. Although, as will be examined, certain events involving him a few years after the death of his maternal grandfather, certainly played a significant role.

Ippolito Costantini died in 1608 “after a long illness” (*dopo lunga malattia*) without bothering to draft a will: a choice that was complex and difficult,

which would have required careful and meticulous research to define the rights of the various heirs.<sup>28</sup>

Where did Ippolito spend his final days of life? Likely, in the palace he had purchased in 1574, where, after Bernardino Giulino's death, he welcomed his daughter Diana and her children.<sup>29</sup> In the divisions carried out between 1608 and 1610, it was emphasized that his grandchildren, Costantino and Vicenza, cared for their grandfather during his illness. However, it cannot be ruled out that in the last months of his life, Ippolito may have been taken in by his daughter Laura in the family home in Borgo di Lisiera.<sup>30</sup> If this hypothesis is true, as seems likely, Giuseppe Rossetti would have had the chance to live alongside his maternal grandfather in his final months.

## THE BANISHMENT AND THE WAR IN FRIULI

In April 1613, Giuseppe Rossetti was banished from the entire state with the alternative being the death penalty. The trial was initially conducted by the *consolato*, the city tribunal, but was later transferred by the Council of Ten to the Praetorian Court of Padua. The charge was murder in a case of enmity, which was quite common at the time, with the main protagonists being Giovan Battista Rossi, one of his men, a *bravo*, and Massimiano Banca. The sentence was harsh, especially since the incident was described as a premeditated assault on the victim, Tommaso Tavola, who was attacked:

*not far from his home and having discovered them, he took long strides to save himself in the house of his workers, but they followed him, and when*

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28 As evidenced by the detailed list of accounts attached to the divisions. Some notarial acts indicate that Ippolito died between March and July of 1608 (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8788, March 26, and July 26, 1608). The assets were divided between Laura Costantini on one side and Diana's children on the other. The palace where Ippolito resided was allocated to Laura and her son Giuseppe: "A house in Vicenza, in Contrà dei Protì, facing the public road in front, and behind onto Cordellina, with *dominus* Francesco Targa on one side and Andrea Salesà on the other". There are no indications of the year of Diana's death.

29 In the division deed, all the children born to Diana from her two marriages are mentioned: from her marriage to Bernardino Giulino, she had Giovan Battista, Costantino, and Vicenza; while her daughter Maddalena had married Domenico Mantovani. From her second marriage to Baldassare Minaù, Diana had Ippolito and Laura. The neighboring palace which Ippolito had transferred to Giulino as part of Diana's dowry, would be recovered by him and later sold to Francesco Targa, the son-in-law of Iseppo Busa, the grandfather of the future outlaw.

30 The divisions took place with the assistance of mediators between 1608 and 1610, and the deed was notarized on December 29, 1610 "at the house of *dominus* Iseppo Busa, father-in-law of the undersigned Mrs. Laura" (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, buste 8789, 8791). The hypothesis that Ippolito spent the final period of his life hosted in Borgo di Lisiera by his daughter Laura also seems to be supported by the burial deed of Anna "who has always been at the house of the late Mag. Ippolito Costantini, 60 years old". She was buried on March 5, 1616, in the church of Santa Lucia, in the Rossetti family tomb (ACVI, Santa Lucia, Registri sepolture, busta 46/1212).

*they reached him, they fired several shots at him from their arquebuses, one of which struck him so severely in the back of the head that he immediately fell to the ground near the courtyard and passed away.*<sup>31</sup> (ASPD, Sentenze della Corte pretoria, busta 3/1, cc. 3–4, 20–21)

Most likely, it was a full-fledged shootout between rival groups, where violence was an everyday occurrence (Povolo, 2022; Carroll, 2023). The sentence, however, stipulated that any potential release from the ban could only be granted upon the payment of one thousand ducats *in solidum* to the relatives of the victim.<sup>32</sup>

Giuseppe Rossetti had not yet reached twenty years of age when the sentence of banishment was issued against him. He was forced to leave his family and the places where he was born and raised. If he returned to the territories from which he had been banned, he could be killed with impunity. This very dangerous situation prompted his grandfather, Giuseppe Sr, to modify the will he had drawn up a few years earlier:

*And because his grandson Signor Iseppo, son of the late Signor Gaspare, his son, finds himself under banishment, he orders, commands, and wills that he be assisted with regard to the banishment in which he is involved; and for this purpose he wills and grants permission to his heirs to be able to pledge or even alienate, in any manner and with the least possible loss, as many of his goods and inheritances as may be necessary—but always from the whole and undivided body of his estate.*<sup>33</sup> (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8816, November 25, 1614)

In reality, the extraordinary nature of the events that unfolded in the 1610s came to the aid of the young outlaw, offering him a sudden and unexpected way out. In 1615, a bitter conflict broke out between Venice and the Austrian Habsburgs: a conflict that went down in history as the Uskok War or War of Gradisca (*Guerra di Gradisca*), which lasted until the end of 1617 (Gaddi & Zannini, 2008). The Republic deemed it useful to employ all those who had been sentenced to banishment, and in April 1616, it established a judiciary

31 [N]on molto discosto dalla sua casa e quelli avendo scoperti, procurò con lunghi passi salvarsi in casa dei suoi lavoratori, ma essendo da essi seguitato, giuntili vicini gli spararono contro alquante archibugiate, da una delle quali restò di dietro la testa così gravemente ferito che subito caduto a terra vicino al detto cortile passò ad altra vita (ASPD, Sentenze della Corte Pretoria, busta 3/1, cc. 3–4, 20–21).

32 On January 9, 1619, it is noted that Giuseppe Rossetti had already paid his portion of the one thousand ducats stipulated by the 1613 sentence, while Giovan Battista Rossi, the other defendant, proceeded to pay his share (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 936, January 9, 1619).

33 *E perché il signor Iseppo suo nipote, che fu figlio del quondam signor Gaspare suo figliolo si trova bandito, ordina, comanda e vuole che sia aiutato dal bando nel quale si ritrova e per tal causa vuole e dà licenza ai suoi eredi di poter obbligare ossia alienare con ogni modo e con quel manco danno che sia possibile tanti dei suoi beni e eredità che siano però di tutto il mucchio e di tutto il corpo della sua eredità* (ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8816, November 25, 1614).

called the Officers for the Liberation of Outlaws (*Deputati alla liberazione dei banditi*), tasked with examining the petitions of all those willing to offer their military service in exchange for their release (ASV, Senato, Terra, filza 217, April 14, 1616).<sup>34</sup>

Giuseppe Rossetti submitted his petition to the Officers on July 7, 1616, and it was accepted a few days later (ASPD, Sentenze della Corte Pretoria, busta 3/1, c. 3v).<sup>35</sup> From that date, his banishment was suspended, and most likely, in the same days, he moved to Friuli to serve in the Venetian army. On March 7, 1619, his banishment was officially lifted, but it is likely that he had already returned to his hometown and to the family home sometime prior.<sup>36</sup> And perhaps he had the chance to again see his mother, Laura Costantini, who died in those very days (ACVI, Registri di Santa Lucia, busta 46/1212).<sup>37</sup>

The time spent in Friuli undoubtedly shaped the character of the young Rossetti, as is likely given the events that, starting from the early months of 1619, would see him as the formidable and undisputed protagonist in a series of conflicts between the various noble factions. From that point on, his activities come to us through the dispatches of the governors (*rettori*) and the chronicle of Silvestro Castellini. These sources are unquestionably valuable but are mostly lacking in contextual references and are certainly inclined to portray the young man with the negative traits by which he would later be remembered.

## THE NARRATIVE OF SILVESTRO CASTELLINI

Silvestro Castellini painted Giuseppe Rossetti, the son of a shoemaker, as a ruthless hitman who profited from the intense rivalry between the two factions of the Capra and da Porto families. He portrayed Rossetti as someone who enjoyed

34 Regarding this magistracy and the related documentation that has only partially come down to us, cf. Da Mosto (1937, 106).

35 The annotation placed next to the banishment sentence.

36 In a declaration drafted by Baldissera Menaù on January 17, 1618, and included in the confiscation process of 1621, Bortolamio, who would die a few months later, provides testimony that clearly reveals the temperament of Giuseppe Rossetti. This statement likely sheds light on Rossetti's character, behaviors, or actions, offering a perspective on his nature and his possible involvement in events leading up to the confiscation process: "Since Mr. Giuseppe Rossetti is involved in two legal cases, one for the death of the late Mr. Alfonso Pigafetta, and the other for the incident that took place in the square with Mr. Count Ascanio Bissaro, for which, should there be any condemnations, banishments, or other expenses arising from these cases, Mr. Bortolamio, his brother, firmly promises to contribute whatever is necessary for his half and portion, as these cases arose while they were still together and in joint ownership of assets. And this statement will have the same value as a public deed and will be signed by both of the Rossetti brothers" (ASV, Avogaria di comun, busta 2773, unnumbered carta).

37 On December 1, 1618, it is recorded in the burial register: "Mrs. Laura Rossetti, wife of the late Gaspare Rossetti, about 50 years old, passed away and was buried in the church in a tomb, cared for by don Anastasio". The release from the banishment is noted next to the 1613 sentence (ASPD, Sentenze della Corte Pretoria, busta 3/1, c. 4).

the protection of both mainland and Venetian gentlemen, who did not hesitate to call upon him to assert their authority. Castellini, however, focused primarily on narrating the grave bloodshed that took place in the heart of the city, following a dispute over precedence between members of the two main noble families. Count Onorio Capra and several members of the da Porto family had confronted one another with their respective retinues, each claiming for himself the prerogative of precedence, which both believed to be rightfully theirs on the basis of honorary military titles bestowed by Venice. The murder of Count Gabriele da Porto led to the intervention of the Council of Ten and the banishment of Onorio Capra, who promptly sought refuge with the Duke of Parma. However, it was clear that the tensions between the two factions were set to persist, as Castellini observed, not hiding his own fears about the ongoing conflict:

*The hostilities and enmities between the Capra and Porti families had not yet ceased; on the contrary, they were growing more intense, with both sides using every possible means to instigate new disputes and plot new revenge through hired killers, who were maintained at great expense, with the aim of taking each other's lives.<sup>38</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 195–196)*

According to the Vicentine chronicler, Giuseppe Rossetti seized the opportunity to insert himself into the bitter conflict. Initially, he had fought on the side of the Capra family, but he would later become a staunch follower of the rival faction. Castellini, not without falling into some obvious contradictions, focused on the murder that would mark the outlaw's career:

*Not long after, in the contrada [city quarter] of Riale, where Rossetti lived, Annibale Thiene, passing by with only one companion, confronted him with his followers, knocking him to the ground and wounding him. When he was taken home, he barely had time to confess and shortly afterward died in the prime of his youth. This occurred on Holy Saturday, without the true cause of this betrayal ever being revealed, as Rossetti had previously been his friend and accomplice in many acts of violence and crimes.<sup>39</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 196)*

38 *Gli odj e le inimicizie fra Capra e Porti non erano cessati ancora, ed anzi più crescendo usandosi ogni via da una parte e dall'altra per introdur nuove querele e macchinar nuove vendette col mezzo di sicari, che in numero si mantenevano con grave spesa, onde privarsi l'un l'altro la vita* (Castellini, 1822, 195–196).

39 *Né andò molto tempo che nella contrada di Riale, dove aveva il Rossetti la sua abitazione, passando Annibale Thiene in compagnia d'un solo, uscito coi suoi satelliti lo stramazzò a terra e lo ferì, di modo che portato a casa ebbe appena il tempo di confessarsi e poco dopo morì nel fiore di sua gioventù. Ciò avvenne in giorno di sabbato santo, senza che siasi potuto rilevare mai la vera causa di tale tradimento, essendo stato per lo avanti il Rossetti amico e complice con lui di non poche violenze e scelleratezze* (Castellini, 1822, 195–196).

The killing of Annibale Thiene took place on Holy Saturday, April 10, 1621. Two years had passed since the violent confrontation that led to the death of Count Gabriele da Porto. However, Silvestro Castellini, even though he could not identify the cause of Annibale Thiene's death, seemed to draw an obvious connection between this event and the ongoing rivalry between the two factions of the da Porto and Capra families. The bold figure of this common man, *plebeo*, appeared to be justified by the conflict among the reckless and arrogant nobility, inclined to use his skills as a *bravo*.

In reality, things were not exactly so.

#### THE ACCOUNT OF THE GOVERNORS OF VICENZA

On March 1, 1619, the two governors of Vicenza wrote to the heads of the Council of Ten informing them of a grave murder committed in the city, with the aggravating factors of premeditation and ambush. It was a rather frequent occurrence at the time, but in requesting permission to proceed under the inquisitorial procedure of the Council of Ten, they emphasized that some of the perpetrators were connected by familial and friendly ties to others involved in the crime. The incident had aroused deep alarm, and they feared "its dangerous consequences" (*le sue pericolose conseguenze*).

The two political representatives, however, could not have imagined how what had occurred would directly disrupt the city's delicate balance. It is therefore fitting to reproduce their detailed report:

*There was enmity between Valerio Della Negra and Marcantonio Contin, citizens of this city, due to a rivalry over a woman whom both desired to marry. According to what is said, yesterday the woman sent for Contin, telling him to come to her alone. After speaking with her, as he was returning, Contin was followed by Valerio, who had been hiding in the same house, along with four other men. When they saw him on a small boat crossing to the other shore, they fired arquebuses at him. As soon as he arrived, he was attacked by another group of men, with new shots from arquebuses, so that, caught in the middle and hearing the two parties saying to each other "kill him, kill him," he sought refuge in a nearby boat. Although he asked them to spare his life, he was treated so badly that, after the night, he died.<sup>40</sup>* (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 10).

40 *Passava disgusto fra Valerio Della Negra e Marcantonio Contin, cittadini or citizens di questa città per occasione di rivalità di donna, che l'uno e l'altro la desideravano in moglie. La qual promessa, per quanto si dice, al Negra mandò ieri a chiamare il Contin, facendogli sapere che andasse da lei da solo. Questi andato e avuto seco ragionamento, mentre se ne ritornava, fu da esso Valerio, che nascosto nella stessa casa si trovava, seguitato, accompagnato da altri quattro. E vedutolo in un burchiello che se ne passava all'altra riva gli spararono delle archibugiate. Ove, appena giunto fu assalito da un'altra mano di uomini, con nuovo sparo di archibugiate, in maniera che tolto in mezzo e dicendo l'una all'altra parte "ammazzalo, ammazzalo", si ridusse per salvarsi in una barca ivi attaccata, nella quale seguitato da parte di questi, tutto che loro domandasse la vita, fu così malamente trattato che la notte passata ha terminato la sua vita* (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 10).

The killing of Marcantonio Contin, just a few days later, gave the governors the opportunity to associate the rivalry between the two noble factions with the figure of Giuseppe Rossetti. For several months, Giulio Barbarano, the son-in-law of Count Antonio da Porto, had initiated hostilities against the Capra family. The order for a home isolation (*sequestro*) issued to the main members of both factions was of little use, as both sides had a large following of supporters:

*The leader of these is a certain Iseppo Rossetti, a more formidable character than other young troublemakers and soldiers, who [is not] distinguished by bloodline or great esteem; who, living in the house of Giulio Barbarano and walking boldly through the city with a large crowd of his followers, with short arquebuses, albeit cautiously hidden, behaves in a manner that is obvious to us, but not so easy to justify, provoking and irritating the supporters of the opposing side.<sup>41</sup> (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 10.)*

The governors also added that Rossetti felt motivated to adopt a blatantly provocative attitude:

*Yet yesterday, being deeply grieved and filled with furious anger over the death of Marcantonio Contin, one of his followers, whom we mentioned to your most illustrious excellencies the other day, Rossetti and his gang provoked a particular person, considering his position and rank very prominent, under the assumption that he was an ally of his adversaries. Had he not acted with prudence, undoubtedly some serious disorder would have occurred.<sup>42</sup> (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 11).*

The two political representatives recalled how Rossetti had been released from a serious ban and had been tried three times by the same captain “for various excesses” (*per diversi eccessi*). They had therefore prudently ordered that he be placed under house arrest, but with the intention of ordering him to leave the city

41 *Capo di questi è un Iseppo Rossetti, soggetto più tosto di seguito d'altri facinorosi e armigeri giovani, che [non è] per sangue, né per facoltà di molta stima; il quale, abitando nella propria casa del Barbarano e camminando arditamente per la città con gran caterva di suoi satelliti, con archibugi corti, sebbene cautamente nascosti, se ne va con modi a noi manifesti, ma non così facili da giustificare, provocando e irritando gli aderenti della contraria parte* (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 10).

42 *E pur ieri, essendo restato detto Rossetti non solo grandemente addolorato, ma ripieno di rabbioso furore per la morte di Marcantonio Contin, uno dei suoi seguaci, che l'altro giorno rappresentassimo a vostre eccellenze illustrissime, diede con la sua setta tal provocazione a soggetto e per propria condizione e per il grado che tiene molto eminente, con supposizione che sia amico dei suoi avversari, che se non avesse esercitato la sua prudenza sarebbe senza dubbio successo qualche notabile disordine* (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 11).

and the surrounding area: “that if he continued, even if he were confined within the city or the territory, always being stirred by seditious thoughts, he would have polluted every good rule with new bands of wicked men”<sup>43</sup> (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 10).

On March 27, 1619, the governors (*rettori*) informed the Capi of Council of Ten that Rossetti had been expelled, but the tensions between the two factions had not eased at all and, if anything, they tended to express themselves through other means:

*Each side took advantage of the slightest opportunity to openly protect other individuals involved in conflicts, such as Valerio Della Negra and his accomplices, who killed the late Marcantonio Contin, as we reported with the utmost respect to your illustrious excellencies, who then delegated the case to the illustrious office of the Avogaria, protected by the Capra family, just as Iseppo Rossetti, who sought revenge for Contin's death, is supported by the same Barbarano and the da Porto families.*<sup>44</sup> (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 14)

The account given by the governors of Vicenza differed in certain aspects from that presented by Silvestro Castellini, as Iseppo Rossetti was described as the protagonist of a personal conflict that had arisen to avenge the death of his friend Marcantonio Contin. He believed that not only Valerio Della Negra, but also some members of the Vicentine nobility, were responsible for killing Contin.

We know that in the summer of 1619, he was in Udine, from where he wrote to his uncle Francesco Targa to thank him for taking care of the sale of the house located in Contrà Proti, which had once belonged to his maternal grandfather and then passed to him through his mother.<sup>45</sup>

Giuseppe Rossetti suddenly reappeared in Vicenza in the spring of 1621. On March 26, the Heads of the Council of Ten wrote to the rectors that he was in the “habit of frequenting the house of Count Giulio Barbarano” (*solito praticare in*

43 [C]he quando continuasse egli, benché sequestrato nella città ovvero nel territorio, essendo sempre agitato da sediziosi pensieri, farebbe con nuove sette di uomini ribaldi contaminare ogni buona regola (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 10).

44 [V]alendosi ciascuna di esse parti di ogni piccola occasione di proteggere con fazioni scopertissime altri soggetti che si trovano in rissa, sì come sono Valerio Della Negra e complici che ammazzarono il quondam Marcantonio Contin, come ne fu dato da noi riverentissimo conto a vostre eccellenze illustrissime, che poi hanno delegato il caso all'ufficio illustrissimo dell'Avogaria, protetti dai Capra, sì come Iseppo Rossetti soprascritto che ha impugnato la vendetta di esso Contin, vien favorito dal medesimo Barbarano e dai da Porto (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 14).

45 ASVI, Notai di Vicenza, busta 8804, July 15, 1619. It is likely that the sale of the house once owned by Ippolito Costantini was motivated by the fear of a possible confiscation in the event of a future banishment sentence. Iseppo Rossetti could not dispose of the house located in Borgo Santa Lucia because it was subject to a *fideicommissum*.

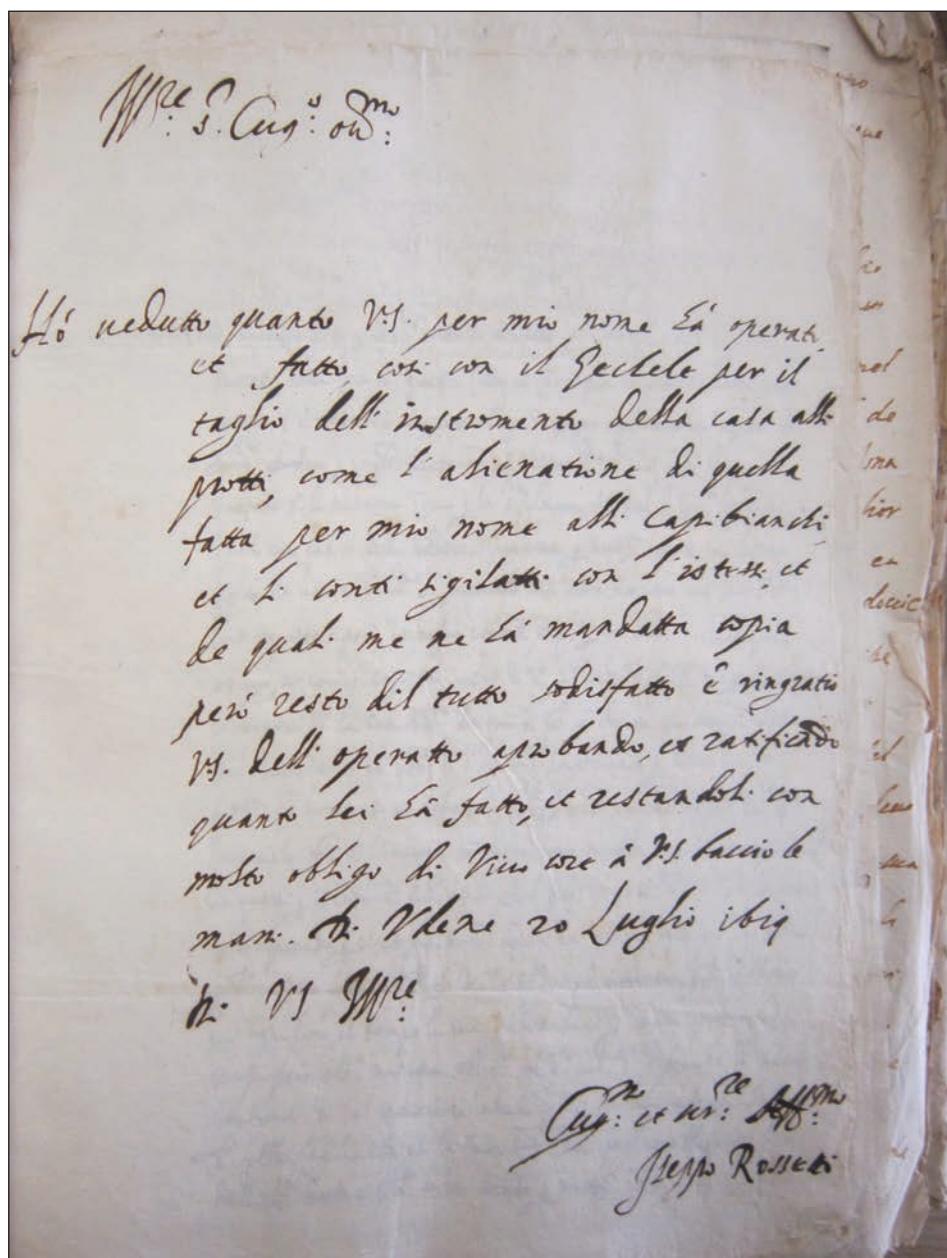


Fig. 5: Letter from Giuseppe Rossetti written in Udine on July 20, 1619, in which he approves the actions of his uncle Francesco Targa in the sale of the house in Contrà dei Proti, which had once belonged to his maternal grandfather Ippolito Costantini (photo: Claudio Povolo).

*casa del conte Giulio Barbarano*) and that they should proceed with his arrest. Evidently, they suspected that he might cause some disorder in the city, and there was already the expulsion order from the city that had been issued against him two years earlier. However, the measure proved unsuccessful, as they wrote on April 3, attributing the failure to various reasons “either due to negligence, or disloyalty, or cowardice” (*o per negligenza, o per infedeltà o per viltà*) (ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere criminali, filza 6). Terms that, in any case, indicate the particular profile of a man who had already assumed a prominent identity.

As mentioned earlier, just a few days later, Giuseppe Rossetti, accompanied by several soldiers, killed Count Annibale Thiene in Contrà Riale in Vicenza. Not unlike Silvestro Castellini, they highlighted the dynamics of the ambush and the complicity involved. However, the investigation initiated by the Council of Ten offers new, though sporadic, insights. A domestic worker from the palace where Rossetti had stayed testified about what had happened on that day. Specifically, when asked about what had led Rossetti to attack Thiene, the woman replied:

*I've heard it said that it was because of a young woman named Gatta, with whom both were in love [...]; and also because of Valerio Dalla Negra, who was wounded by Rossetti with a gunshot to the arm; and Count Annibale took him from his house to ensure his safety and brought him to his own, where he had him treated and then took him to Padua.*<sup>46</sup> (ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, filza 227, fol.73)

A true act of revenge, ultimately. The attack was meticulously described in the proclamation (*proclama*) through which Rossetti and thirteen other defendants were summoned to defend themselves against the charges. Rossetti's companions were mostly armed soldiers (*corazza*), likely veterans of the Gradisca War, and they certainly did not fear sudden attacks. The governors (*rettori*) added:

*with a horrible cry, he fell to the ground and was wounded in the sides by two pistol shots by the other two executioners, who then left. Although they were frightened by the commotion in the city and the sound of the bells, they paid little attention and, walking slowly, made their way to Anconetta, a place not far from the city, where, mounted on horseback, they went off towards Valstagna.*<sup>47</sup> (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere criminali, filza 6, May 27, 1621)

46 *Ho sentito a dire che era per occasione di una giovane Gatta alla quale tutti e due facevano l'amore [...]; e anche per occasione di Valerio Dalla Negra, quale fu ferito da detto Rossetti con una archibugiata in un braccio; e il detto conte Annibale lo levò dalla sua casa per assicurarlo e lo condusse nella sua; e fattolo guarire lo condusse a Padova* (ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, filza 227, fol. 73).

47 *[Q]ual con orribile strido caduto a terra fu dagli altri due carnefici compagni ferito di due pistolate nei fianchi, e partirono. Quali, se ben fugati dal moto della città e dal suono delle campane, poco curandosi, a passo lento si ridussero all'Anconetta, luogo poco distante dalla città, dove montati a cavallo se ne andarono in Valstagna* (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere criminali, filza 6, May 27, 1621).



Fig. 6: Vicenza, entrance to Contrà Riale, where the ambush organized by Giuseppe Rossetti and his companions against Count Annibale Thiene took place (photo: Claudio Povolo).

As often happened, the crime was recounted without any nuance, emphasizing the negative aspects of the attack and the ferocious behavior of the perpetrators. However, in this instance, the personality of Giuseppe Rossetti vividly emerges from the very words of the governors:

*Iseppo, proud of his deed, unwilling to allow anyone to deplore such an act, dared to return on the night of the 25th of the same month of April with a large group of hired killers, among whom was the aforementioned Francesco Romanello,<sup>48</sup> and posted many hand-written placards around the city, challenging anyone who disagreed, specifying the time and place of the challenge.<sup>49</sup> (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere criminali, filza 6, May 27, 1621)*

<sup>48</sup> Romanelli is described in the proclamation as “lieutenant from the cavalry company of the Malatesta,” and among those who participated in the killing of Thiene, there are four soldiers on horseback from Monferrato.

<sup>49</sup> *Il qual Iseppo, glorioso del fatto, non patendo che alcuno deplorasse queta operazione, ardì tanto che ritornato la notte del 25 del medesimo mese di aprile, con numerosa compagnia di sicari, tra i quali vi era il predetto Francesco Romanello, affisse per diversi luoghi della città molti cartelli di propria mano, sfidando con luogo e tempo quelli che avessero tale opinione* (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere criminali, filza 6, May 27, 1621).

It was a veritable challenge directed at the city and, above all, at those noble families whose attitude had facilitated or encouraged the killing of his friend. And, most likely, it was also the assertion of a concept of honor tied to courage and military valor.

## RAIDS

From this moment, we know from the dispatches of the governors that Giuseppe Rossetti was moving between Verona, Valstagna, and the principality of Bozzolo. The general superintendent in the mainland was ordered to capture or kill him (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 227, fol. 87; Consiglio dei dieci, Criminali, filza 48, June 7, 1621).

The printed sentence pronounced against him on June 14, 1621, sealed his reputation and, indirectly, his status as a true outlaw (ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Criminali, filza 48, June 14, 1621). And from that moment on, a true manhunt began. There were even those who offered, in exchange for a reward, to personally eliminate him.<sup>50</sup>

The frequent incursions of the outlaw into the Vicentino indicate that the state of tension which culminated in the killing of Annibale Thiene had by no means diminished. On July 31, 1621, the governors wrote to the Heads of the Council of Ten that Rossetti: “came the day before yesterday to this territory with twelve followers on horseback, and although we had him followed by our agents and a group of soldiers, we were unable to find him. He stayed briefly with one gentleman and then with another, but they immediately reported him to the authorities”<sup>51</sup> (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Dispacci dei rettori, filza 227, fol. 93).

In his chronicle, Silvestro Castellini recalled the severe penalties stipulated in the sentence of banishment pronounced against Rossetti and the confiscation of his house in the Borgo di Santa Lucia. But, most importantly, he emphasized the: “severe penalties for anyone who had assisted him, either with money, favors, letters, or in other ways to try to save him, and also offering large rewards to anyone who captured him, alive or dead. This was attempted in various ways and with many traps by the brothers and other members of the Thiene family, but without success”<sup>52</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 197).

50 For example, a certain Giovanni Saluzzo from Brescia (ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Comuni, filza 333, July 5, 1621).

51 [È] venuto ieri l’altro in questo territorio con dodici seguaci a cavallo e sebbene l’abbiamo fatto seguire dai nostri ministri e da una banda di cappelletti non ci è riuscito di trovarlo, per fermarsi egli poco spazio ora da questo, ora da quell’altro gentiluomo che immediatamente però lo hanno denunciato alla giustizia (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Dispacci dei rettori, filza 227, fol. 93).

52 “[G]ravissime pene a chi l’avesse ajutato, o con danari o con favori o con lettere o in altri modi avesse procurato di salvarlo e prometendo ancora grandissimi premj a chi preso lo avesse vivo o morto; la qual cosa fu in diverse maniere e con molte insidie tentata, ma senza effetto, dai fratelli e dagli altri della famiglia Thiene (Castellini, 1822, 197). But the chronicler also added: “Despite this, the Portis, Marquis Rangone, and other Venetian nobles, in defiance of the harsh sentence handed down against him, made every effort to get him to safety, provide him with money and other things necessary for his sustenance and that of his companions, negotiating with various lords and princes of Italy. In the end, after being rejected by many, he was welcomed and protected in Bozzolo by the lords of that place” (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, filza 199, fol. 60).

In reality, the sentence only heightened Giuseppe Rossetti's hostility towards the Thiene family. A significant event in this regard is the episode reported by the governors (*rettori*) of Verona in May 1622. Having entered the inn owned by the Thiene family in Torri, located on the border between the Vicenza and Verona territories, the outlaw and his companions killed the innkeeper and then

*they broke the cupboards, the chests, the windows, and the inn's sign [...] and, having forced the door of the cellar open with the help of a certain Iseppo, the innkeeper's servant, they beat him until he removed the spigots from all the wine barrels, of which there were many, letting it spill across the cellar floor. And mounting their horses to leave, they said: "Go and report and say that it was Iseppo Rossetti, Marcon, and their companions".<sup>53</sup>* (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, filza 199, fol. 60)

Both the Vicentine chronicler and the dispatches from the governors record further crimes attributed to Rossetti in the summer of the following year, allegedly incited by supposed protectors or at the request of his companions.<sup>54</sup> Silvestro Castellini did not fail to note the widespread state of tension within certain sectors of the Vicentine nobility: "These events caused great fear in others who, for various reasons, considered themselves his enemies. As a result, they were forced to take refuge in safe places, arrange for guards, and fortify their homes in order to defend themselves against his attacks, as did Alessandro Sesso, Sebastiano di Schio, Silvano Cogolo, and Alvise Monza"<sup>55</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 198).

The "son of the cobbler" (*figlio del calzolaio*), who became an outlaw, was therefore feared by several members of the local nobility. This aspect suggests that it is unlikely that Giuseppe Rossetti's actions were simply and strategically tied to the long-standing enmities dividing the city's ruling class. The strong

53 [R]uppero le credenze, le casse, le finestre, l'insegna dell'osteria [...]; e fatta aprire la porta della caneva ad un Iseppo servitore di detto oste lo astrinsero con fianconate a cavar fuori la spina di tutte le botti del vino che erano in buona quantità, lasciando andare quello per la caneva. E montato a cavallo nel partir dissero: "andate a denunciare e dite che son Iseppo Rossetti e Marcon con compagni" (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, filza 199, fol. 60).

54 As in the case of the two nobles Giovanni and Bortolamio Arnaldi, who, according to Castellini, were killed at the behest of the Count of Sarego over a boundary dispute. Castellini then added, "then claiming to have done it to avenge some insults suffered by some of his friends." There was also the murder of a member of the Grazia di Cologna family, carried out at the request of Giovan Battista Stanga, a companion of the bandit (Castellini, 1822, 198; ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Criminali, filza 49, June 28, 1622; Consiglio dei dieci, Comuni, filza 339, July 20, 1622).

55 Questi fatti eccitarono grandi timori in altri che di lui per altre cause si stimavano nemici, ond'è che sforzati si videro a ripararsi in luoghi sicuri, a provvedersi di guardie ed a fortificare le loro case in modo di potersi opporre alle insidie di costui, come hanno fatto Alessandro Sesso, Sebastiano di Schio, Silvano Cogolo, Alvise Monza (Castellini, 1822, 198).

tensions between the opposing groups obviously fueled mutual distrust and fear of an outlaw who, on more than one occasion, had shown that he was unwilling to tolerate any humiliation.<sup>56</sup>

This state of affairs culminated in the murder of Roberto Thiene, another member of the local nobility. The trial, conducted on the basis of information provided by the governors of Vicenza on November 14, 1622, highlighted the true audacity of the outlaw. Departing from the Borgo di Santa Lucia at dawn with a dozen men, Giuseppe Rossetti entered the city and took position in a house in Contrà Pozzo Rosso, directly across from Count Roberto Thiene's residence. During the morning he waited for Thiene to come out onto the balcony of his house and shot him to death with two arquebus shots. He then killed the man who lived in that house. The group then left the city through some unguarded entrances within the walls, retrieving the horses left in the Borgo di Santa Lucia, showing "signs of great joy" (*segni di molta allegrezza*) (ASV, Collegio, Comunicate del Consiglio dei dieci, filza 12, November 14, 1622).

Silvestro Castellini obviously recalled the episode that had deeply affected the city and did not fail to observe: "Rossetti, having left the house where he had been that night with his followers, went without any opposition to meet his companions who were waiting for him in the Borgo di Pusterla. Together, mounted on horseback, they departed for Bozzolo, where they took refuge to ensure their safety"<sup>57</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 200).

Adding significantly:

*Despite the order of the Magistrates, which required the municipalities to rise up at the sound of the bell and pursue the bandits, no one moved. And this was not so much because of the natural hatred that peasants and common folk have towards the nobility, but rather due to the kindness and courtesy with which he was accustomed to treat them.*<sup>58</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 200)

Castellini revealed, without grasping the contradiction, the strong support enjoyed by the outlaw among the population of the city and the territory.

However, the outlaw's frequent raids had alerted his many enemies and prompted the repressive action of the Venetian authorities, who were determined to settle the score with a man who was a source of intense social tension.

56 For example, in September 1622, Clelia Thiene, the mother of Annibale who was killed by Rossetti, reported "the assignment of a large provision by powerful people to Iseppo Rossetti, the outlaw" (ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Criminali, filza 49, September 3, 1622).

57 Rossetti, uscito dalla casa dove era stato in quella notte insieme colli suoi satelliti, andò senza contrasto alcuno a ritrovare i suoi compagni che lo aspettavano nel Borgo di Pusterla e tutti insieme, montati a cavallo partirono Bozzolo dove si ridussero a salvamento (Castellini, 1822, 200).

58 Ad onta che per comandamento dei Magistrati dovessero i comuni al comparire dei banditi sollevarsi al suono di campana e inseguirli. Ma non vi fu alcuno che si movesse, e ciò non tanto per l'odio naturale che i plebei e i villani portano ai Nobili, quanto per l'amorevolezza e cortesia con la quale costui soleva trattarli (Castellini, 1822, 200).



*Fig. 7: Vicenza, intersection of Corso Fogazzaro and Corso Palladio, where Palazzo Thiene stood. Behind it, in the current Galleria del Pozzo Rosso, was the house where Giuseppe Rossetti and his companions hid to plan the ambush against Count Roberto Thiene (photo: Claudio Povolo).*

## THE AMBUSH

Indicated by Castellini as a supposed protector of Rossetti, the Marquis Giulio Rangoni had, in fact, been conspiring for a long time to definitively eliminate the famous outlaw.<sup>59</sup> Driven in this goal both by the large bounties on his head and the rewards promised by his enemies and opponents, and perhaps even more so by the ambition to gain the favor and support of the Venetian authorities, the Marquis finally decided to organize a real ambush, which, due to the cunning and dexterity employed, was on par with other, similar strategies so widespread at the time (Preto, 2010, 329–359).

There are several accounts of this episode, and analyzing their content and presentation is essential in order to grasp its cultural and emotional dimension, especially since, surprisingly, we also have a version from the outlaw himself.

59 Cf. the testimony of the outlaw himself, reported below.

Silvestro Castellini did not fail to mention in his chronicle the details of an ambush, of which someone in Vicenza had probably got wind of, although his account is marked by several inaccuracies. He recalled that the Capra, the Thiene, and other families who feared Giuseppe Rossetti's audacity and desperation (*l'audacia e la disperazione*) never stopped hunting him down. Seizing the opportunity created by the enmity between the outlaw and Marquis Rangoni, they persuaded the latter to organize the ambush and deception that were meant to lead to his elimination:

*To this end, after violently occupying the house of a bandit nobleman from Brescia and a friend of Rossetti, he was forced to write a letter to Rossetti, inviting him to come immediately to him to discuss urgent matters. Rossetti, who trusted his friend and suspected no trap, set off without hesitation. Upon arriving at the house, after giving the usual signals, he and his companions were let in. But suddenly, as the satellites of the marquis emerged from all sides, a volley of gunshots was fired at them.<sup>60</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 201)*

Silvestro Castellini then continued, attributing to the outlaw the foresight that would ultimately save him: “Rossetti, realizing he had been betrayed, managed to escape in time, despite being injured, and take refuge that same night in Bozzolo but without most of his companions, who had been severely wounded, killed, or scattered as a result of this event”<sup>61</sup> (Castellini, 1822, 201).

The ambush took place in the area of Molinello, in the *podesteria* of Asola (Brescia), during the night between February 7 and 8, 1623. In a more detailed account, a Brescian chronicler recalled what had happened:<sup>62</sup>

*At night, at five o'clock, on the Asolano, at a place called the molinazzo, there was a series of arquebus shots fired from the house of Signor Nicolò Durante, by Marquis Rangone and many of his supporters against the famous bandit Rossetti from Vicenza. Rossetti had been lured to Molinello by a trap set by Marquis Rangoni, who had forced Mr. Viviano Bresciano, a close friend of Rossetti and also a bandit, to write him a letter under the pretext that he was waiting for him in that place to discuss important matters. When he arrived on*

60 *A tale effetto, occupata violentemente la casa di un nobile bresciano bandito e amico del Rossetti, lo costrinse per forza di scrivere al detto Rossetti e d'invitarlo a portarsi sollecitamente da lui che aveva affari importanti da trattare. Rossetti, che credeva all'amico, né temeva dell'insidia tramata s'avviò a quella volta prontamente e, giunto alla casa, dati i soliti contrassegni, fu introdotto coi suoi, quando ecco che usciti da ogni parte i satelliti del Marchese, fu sparata contro di essi una salva di archibugiate* (Castellini, 1822, 201).

61 *Il Rossetti accortosi del tradimento fu in tempo, sebbene ferito di salvarsi colla fuga e di ridursi quella notte stessa in Bozzolo, privo però d'una gran parte de' suoi compagni, per questo fatto malamente feriti, o morti, o dispersi* (Castellini, 1822, 201).

62 Although referring to a different date (February 9, 1623), as will be seen, the ambush actually took place during the night between February 7 and 8, 1623.

*the spot, together with his companions, they were fired upon by 40 arquebuses. Rossetti was slightly wounded, one of his comrades died, and three prisoners were wounded [...] and Rossetti managed to save himself and took refuge in Bozzolo.<sup>63</sup> (Guerini, 1939, 170–171)*



Fig. 8: Molinello di sotto (Brescia). Palazzo Durante, where on the night between February 7 and 8, 1623, the ambush against Giuseppe Rossetti and his companions took place (photo: Claudio Povolo).

The two accounts came from chroniclers who were evidently reporting in their writings news and information that had spread following the events that took place,

63 *Di notte alle ore cinque, sull'Asolano, ad un luogo detto il molinazzo seguono una mano d'archibugiate, sbarrate dalla casa del signor Nicolò Durante dal marchese Rangone ed infiniti altri suoi aderenti contro il Rossetti vicentino, bandito famosissimo, collà ridotto da una lettera mandatagli da Bozzolo, fatta per assassinamento del detto Rossetti dal signor Viviano bresciano, anch'esso bandito, amicissimo di detto Rossetti, sotto pretesto che a questo luogo l'aspettasse per suoi grandi interessi; onde venutovi subito quando nella corte, insieme con li suoi che seco aveva e per smontare li vengono sbarrate da 40 archibugiate, da quali restò ferito ma puoco ed uno de' suoi morto con tre prigionieri feriti [...]; ed il detto Rossetti si salva in Bozzolo* (Guerini, 1930, 170–171).

but which undoubtedly benefited from the version of the facts that the outlaw himself had promptly spread in order to publicly denounce the behavior of Marquis Rangoni.

The account of those institutionally responsible for governing the territory was clearly different, such as the *podestà* (chief magistrate) of Asola, Brescia, who wrote to the heads of the Council of Ten the following day to inform them what had happened:

*Last night, around five o'clock, Giuseppe Rossetti, a notorious bandit, went to the house of Lady Giulia Duranti, a woman from Brescia, located in the village of Molinello, under the jurisdiction of this municipality. He was accompanied by six men, all of whom entered the courtyard. As they tried to enter the hallway, they were confronted by the Marquis Rangone and his men, who were there in considerable numbers. The outlaws were hit by several arquebuses, and as a result, one of them was killed and three others were wounded. Rossetti, along with two of his men, managed to escape.<sup>64</sup> (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 28, February 16, 1623; Consiglio dei dieci, Criminali, reg. 49, February 14, 1622 mv)*

The *podestà* reported on the incident, providing essential yet precise information, although he did not mention the letter that had been used to lure the outlaw into the trap cleverly devised by Marquis Rangoni.

Even more detailed was the report from the governors of Brescia, who, referencing the news that had spread, but especially based on the interrogation of the three bandits who had been captured, wrote to the Heads of the Council of Ten on February 20, 1623:

*The Marquis Rangone, after traveling through much of this territory for several days with a company of 50 to 60 horsemen, went to Calzo, where he met Pietro Viviani, a Brescian bandit and trusted friend of Rossetti, and had him write a letter to Bozzolo, asking him to meet him at a certain place called Molinello, near Asola, under the pretext of wanting to talk. Rossetti, not*

<sup>64</sup> *Questa notte passata, circa le cinque ore, essendo andato Giuseppe Rossetti bandito famoso alla casa della signora Giulia Duranti bresciana, posta nella contrada del Molinello, giurisdizione di questa podesteria, accompagnato da sei uomini, quali tutti entrati nella corte, mentre volessero entrar nell'andito, gli furono sparate dal signor marchese Rangone e suoi uomini, che ivi in buon numero si trovavano, molte archibugiate, dalle quali uno restò morto e tre feriti, essendosi il Rossetti con due altri salvati* (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 57, February 8, 1623). In reality, the *nunzio* of the city of Brescia protested directly to the Capi that the *podestà*, in such a serious case, had not written directly to the Venetian governors (ASV, Capi del Consiglio dei dieci, Lettere dei rettori, busta 28, February 16, 1623; Consiglio dei dieci, Criminali, reg. 49, February 14, 1622 mv). The city of Brescia sent a *podestà* to Asola, with the task of governing the city according to the city's statutes (cf. Bernoni, 1870, 120–123, 152–154).

*suspecting any trick, went to the isolated location, ten miles from Bozzolo, and arrived there at five o'clock with six men. After dismounting and entering the courtyard, they were immediately attacked, fired at by many arquebus shots, resulting in one of his men dying, three others being wounded and arrested, while Rossetti, slightly injured, managed to flee to Bozzolo with two of his companions.<sup>65</sup> (ASV, Collegio, Comunicate del Consiglio dei dieci, filza 13, February 20, febbraio 1623)*

As they would later add, Rangoni moved with a large company of bandits, fully aware that his actions would not only go unchallenged, but would also be encouraged. The violence he intended to exert was fully legitimized by the Venetian political institutions.

## THE OUTLAW'S MANIFESTO

Surprisingly, we also have the outlaw's version of the ambush. A version that, explicitly taking the form of a manifesto, surely spread and had an impact on a world that, more or less subtly, adhered to concepts of honor and social distinctions.<sup>66</sup> Giuseppe Rossetti's main goal was not so much, and not only, to provide a truthful account of the events that took place, but rather to denounce the dishonorable behavior of Giulio Rangoni.<sup>67</sup> After recounting the supposed letter from his friend inviting him to come to that remote location in the Brescia area, he eventually focused on the night when the ambush occurred:

*Upon receiving it, in order not to fail my duty to my friends, I immediately went to the indicated place with six companions and arrived there at five o'clock in the night between February 7 and 8. Upon arrival, I knocked at the door of the house, and it was open. Once inside, the door was immediately locked, and while I was waiting to be warmly greeted by a friend, I was greeted with the term murderer with two or three volleys of arquebus fire. However, of all those who fired, no one dared*

65 *Il marchese Rangone, dopo aver transitato gran parte di questo territorio per molti giorni con una compagnia di 50 in 60 cavalli, andò a Calzo, dove levò Pietro Viviani bresciano, bandito amico confidente del Rossetti e gli fece scrivere una lettera a Bozzolo, che lo dovesse venire a ritrovare a certo luogo detto il Molinello, sotto Asola, con finta di volergli parlare. Il Rossetti, non stimando che vi fosse inganno, andò a quel luogo deserto, da Bozzolo dieci miglia, dove capitò alle cinque ore con sei uomini e entrati nel cortile, smontati da cavallo, gli furono immediatamente sparate molte archibugiate, dalle quali uno di loro restò morto, tre feriti, che sono gli arrestati, e il Rossetti ferito leggermente con due altri se ne fuggì a Bozzolo* (ASV, Collegio, Comunicate del Consiglio dei dieci, filza 13, February 20, 1623).

66 It is quite likely that the *manifesto* was intended for publication, although no copies have been found.

67 As can be inferred from the precise references to the Marquis's previous attempts to kill him, which are systematically outlined by the outlaw in his *Manifesto* (Rossetti, 1623).

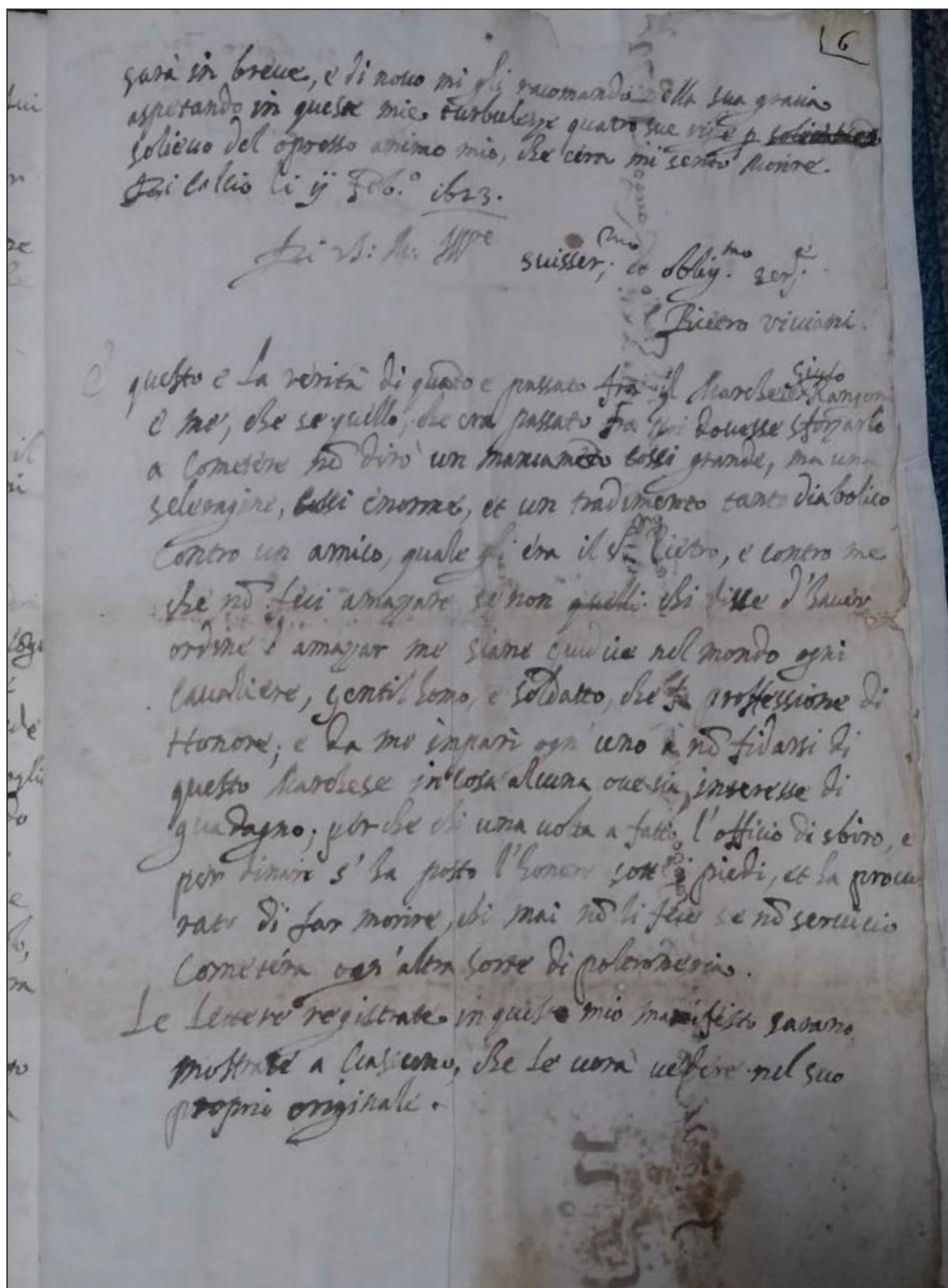


Fig. 9: Concluding page of the Manifesto written by Giuseppe Rossetti against Marquis Giulio Rangoni, 1623 (photo: Maria Luigia De Gregorio).

*to come outside, even though I, badly wounded by two arquebuses, took some time to leave the courtyard. To do so, I had to cross a wide and deep ditch filled with water, just as did three others who were with me.*<sup>68</sup> (Manifesto, 1623, 4–5)

On February 11, his friend Pietro Viviani sent him a letter revealing how the marquis, escorted by thirty armed men, had threatened him, forcing him to write the letter that had led him to come to Molinello. After fully recounting the content of the letter, the outlaw concluded his *manifesto* by revealing the true nature of Marquis Rangoni:

*And this is the truth about what happened between Marquis Giulio Rangoni and me: if what transpired between us should lead him to commit, I won't say such a great misdeed, but such an enormous wickedness and such a diabolical betrayal against a friend like Signor Pietro and against me, who did not kill anyone except those who claimed to have orders to kill me, let every knight, gentleman, and soldier who professes honor be the judge of it. And let everyone learn from me not to trust this marquis in anything, especially when there is a profit to be made, because anyone who has once acted as a constable and, for money, has trampled on honor and tried to have killed someone who has done nothing but serve him, will commit every other kind of cowardice.*<sup>69</sup> (Manifesto, 1623, 6)

68 *Alla ricevuta della quale, per non mancare al debito degli amici, subito passai al detto luogo con sei meco e vi arrivai alle ore cinque di notte fra il 7 e l'8 di febbraio. Giunto ivi e battuto alla porta della casa mi fu aperto e subito entrato fu riserrata la porta e, mentre aspettavo di essere accolto caramente da un amico, fui con termine di assassino accolto in mezzo da due o tre salve d'archibugiate; ma però de' tanti che spararono non fu persona che si risolvesse ad uscire fuori, con tutto che io malamente ferito di due archibugiate stessi un pezzo a levarmi fuori dalla corte, dove mi trovavo e mi convenisse traversare nell'uscire un largo e profondo fosso pieno d'acqua, come fecero altri tre che erano meco* (Rossetti, 1623, ff. 4–5). Rossetti continued by observing: "In the morning, the marquis handed over to justice the three who remained and completed the task, certifying to the world the purpose behind my death and how he conducted himself in his actions."

69 *E questa è la verità di quanto è passato fra il marchese Giulio Rangoni e me, che se quello che era passato fra noi dovesse sforzarlo a commettere, non dirò un mancamento così grande, ma una scelleraggine così enorme e un tradimento tanto diabolico contro un amico quale gli era il signor Pietro e contro me, che non feci ammazzare se non chi disse d'aver ordine d'ammazzare me, ne sia giudice nel mondo ogni cavaliere, gentiluomo e soldato che fa professione d'onore. E da me impari ognuno a non fidarsi di questo marchese in cosa alcuna, ove sia interesse di guadagno, perché chi una volta ha fatto l'ufficio di sbirro e per denaro si ha posto l'onore sotto i piedi e ha procurato di far morire chi mai non gli fece se non servizio, commetterà ogni altra sorte di poltroneria* (Rossetti, 1623, fol. 6). The manifesto concluded with the following statement: "The letters recorded in this manifesto of mine will be shown to anyone who wishes to see them in their original form"

A true claim of personal honor in contrast to the much-lauded display of honor linked to status, to which certain sectors of the military aristocracy adhered.<sup>70</sup> Through his *manifesto*, Giuseppe Rossetti also aimed to publicize the truth of the events that the banishment decrees pronounced against him either ignored or distorted, thus shaping his image as a *famous bandit* (*bandito famoso*).

In reality, the failed ambush of February 1623 led the outlaw to abandon frequent raids in his hometown and seek safer shores. The governors of Vicenza and Verona no longer reported his presence. However, there were those, like marquis Rangoni, who, at least seemingly, gave the impression of not having settled accounts with the famous outlaw.<sup>71</sup>

In the banishment decree pronounced against Giuseppe Rossetti and two of the men who had repeatedly accompanied him in those years, the following significant addition was made: “If the aforementioned bandits are found under the protection of any prince and this becomes known, they can and must, if the Council deems it appropriate, be handed over to that prince under whose protection they are found”<sup>72</sup> (ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Criminali, filza 50, April 26, 1623).

Giuseppe Rossetti had certainly taken refuge in Bozzolo. In 1624, a certain Giovan Battista Sizzo, who claimed to be his companion, offered the State Inquisitors to arrange his killing in exchange for having his banishment lifted. Despite an initial show of goodwill from the supreme judiciary and the safe conduct granted to him, the proposal proved to be unrealistic, and Sizzo was subsequently prosecuted for some crimes he had committed.<sup>73</sup>

No further information is available about Giuseppe Rossetti, except for a later, yet surprising, account reported by Father Francesco Barbarano in his *Historia ecclesiastica*. In listing the most famous Vicentini for military valor (*Vicentini più celebri per valor militare*), he includes the well-known outlaw without any mention of his previous activities: “Iseppo Rossetti was given com-

70 As Julian Pitt-Rivers observed some years ago, when addressing the emblematic figure of El Cid Campeador “the well-born are supposed to possess by inheritance the appropriate character and sentiments which will be seen in their conduct, but when it is asserted they do not, as in the case of the Cid’s antagonists [...], the concept of honor faces an ambiguity which can only be resolved by an appeal to some tribunal, the ‘fount of honor’, public opinion, the monarch, or the ordeal of the judicial combat which implied a direct appeal to God”. If political power denies such access, taking on this responsibility, it falls into criticism “which arose from the conflict inherent in the notion, such as the public opinion which regarded the honor of rustics as more worthy than that of the courtiers” (Pitt-Rivers, 1977, 2–3).

71 “We send you a copy signed by Marquis Giulio Rangone, who informs you to proceed with the extermination of said Iseppo Rossetti, in accordance with our desire and with what is just to do against such a wicked and villainous man” (ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Criminali, filza 49, February 20, 1623). And they ordered them not to take action against the marquis, even though he had been roaming the Brescia area for many days “with such a large company of horsemen [...], having discovered that he had with him many famous bandits from this state” (ASV, Collegio, Comunicate del Consiglio dei dieci, filza 13, February 20, 1623).

72 *Ritrovandosi i suddetti banditi nello stato di alcun principe e avendosene notizia possano e debbano, sempre che parerà a questo Consiglio, essere addimandati a quel tale principe nello stato del quale si fossero ritrovati* (ASV, Consiglio dei dieci, Criminali, filza 50, April 26, 1623). It was nonetheless added that this passage should not have been included in the printed decree.

73 Regarding Sizzo (also called Sic or Veronese) and his attempts to eliminate Rossetti, cf. ASV, Collegio, Comunicate del Consiglio dei dieci, filza 13, anno 1623: January 4 mv, March 23, July 29; Consiglio dei dieci, Secrete, filza 36: February 21 mv., March 27, June 3, September 13, September 26, October 5, October 11–13.

mand of 100 cavalrymen by Duke Carlo of Mantua, whom he served with great loyalty. Being highly favored by that Most Serene Prince, he settled in Mantua, where he died in 1644”<sup>74</sup> (Barbarano, 1760, 402).

Giuseppe Rossetti therefore served under Charles I of Gonzaga-Nevers and was certainly involved in the War of the Mantuan Succession, which culminated in the sack of the city by the *Landsknechts*. Francesco Barbarano places his death in 1644, at the age of 50.

In March 1654, the outlaw’s son first appeared in Vicenza and then in Venice, at the office of the Avogaria di Comun, to claim possession of the assets confiscated in 1621 and placed under *fideicommissum* first by Bortolamio Rossetti in 1576 and later by Giuseppe Rossetti senior in 1614. The confiscation of assets subject to the *fideicommissum* lasted only for the lifetime of a person declared to be an outlaw.

The son of Giuseppe Rossetti was named Ferrante Rossetti,<sup>75</sup> a name that unmistakably revealed the new persona the outlaw had acquired within the Gonzaga domain.

Apart from the brief and overlooked mention by Father Francesco Barbarano, we have received a vivid and controversial account of Giuseppe Rossetti from the chronicler Silvestro Castellini, who associated him with the appearance of the comet that, in the autumn of 1618, was seen in the Earth’s hemisphere, arousing fear and anxiety. And like a comet, Giuseppe Rossetti stirred a sense of the structural weakness of aristocratic society, deeply divided within itself and increasingly incapable of resisting the interference of the dominant political center. It is perhaps no coincidence that the chronicler closely followed his frequent raids and exploits, which—much like the comet’s repeated appearances—were perceived as omens of misfortune and disaster.

It is likely that Castellini was unaware of Rossetti’s later exploits during the turbulent events of the War of the Mantuan Succession, although that brief mention by Father Francesco Barbarano suggests that the new reputation Giuseppe Rossetti had achieved was certainly known in Vicenza. It was a reputation that would see him take his place among the most renowned Vicentines for his military valor.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Figures 2 and 5 are published with permission from the State Archive of Vicenza. Figure 4 is published with permission from the Diocesan Archive of Vicenza. Thanks to Francesco Da Schio for granting access to the consultation and publication (Figure 9) of the Manifesto of Giuseppe Rossetti (year 1623).

<sup>74</sup> Iseppo Rossetti, *hebbe il comando di 100 corazze dal Duca di Mantova Carlo, quale servi con ogni fedeltà; essendo molto accarezzato da quel Serenissimo, ivi s’acciò, dove anco morì del 1644* (Barbarano, 1760, 402). The work of Father Cappuccino Barbarano de’ Mironi, divided into six books, was published in several editions. The fourth volume, which contains the valuable note referring to Rossetti, was only released in the eighteenth century.

<sup>75</sup> ASV, Avogaria di comun, busta 2773: the process of the confiscation of Giuseppe Rossetti’s properties took place in May 1621. The reference to the outlaw’s son can be found on an unnumbered page.

## BANDIT IN KOMET LETA 1618

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## POVZETEK

Članek na podlagi razmeroma obsežnega gradiva iz Beneškega državnega arhiva obravnava pojav razbojništva in banditizma v pozmem 16. in zgodnjem 17. stoletju, s posebnim poudarkom na primeru Giuseppeja Rossettija iz Vicenze. Na podlagi sodnih in notarskih virov ter kronik analizira družbene, kulturne in pravne razmere v Beneški republiki, kjer se je tradicionalni banditizem, povezan s kaznijo izgona, preoblikoval v bolj kompleksen pojav izobčenstva. Ta sprememba razkriva napetosti med starimi plemiškimi strukturami oblasti in novimi družbenimi skupinami, ki so si prizadevale za gospodarski in politični vpliv.

V ospredju je osebnost Giuseppeja Rossettija, potomca meščanske trgovske družine, ki je bil leta 1613 zaradi umora izgnan iz beneške države. Po udeležbi v uskoški vojni (1615–1617) je dobil dovoljenje za vrnitev, a se je kmalu zapletel v spopade med plemiškima rodbinama Capra in da Porto. Sodna poročila in zapisi mestnih uradnikov prikazujejo njegovo vpletjenost v dolgotrajna krvna maščevanja, ki so odražali razklanost vicentinske družbe. Rossettijeva dejanja so bila pogosto povezana z vprašanji časti, maščevanja in osebne načelnosti – značilnostmi kulture časa, v katerem so zasebni konflikti pogosto presegali moč javnih institucij.

Kronist Silvestro Castellini ga je v svojih zapisih označil za brava in morilca, vendar iz drugih virov izhaja podoba človeka, ki je utelešal odpor do plemiškega nadzora in deloval v okviru širših družbenih sprememb. Njegovo življenje je natančno dokumentirano: od mladostnih let in družinskih povezav prek obdobja izgnanstva do povratka v Vicenzo ter vrste nasilnih dogodkov, ki so dosegli vrhunc z umorom grofa Annibala Thiena leta 1621. Po razglasitvi nove kazni in zaplembi premoženja je Rossetti pobegnil na ozemlje Mantove, kjer je nadaljeval vojaško kariero in umrl leta 1644. Njegov sin Ferrante je pozneje v Benetkah zahteval vračilo zaplenjenega premoženja. Pomemben simbolni element članka je povezava med življenjem izobčenca in pojavom kometa novembra 1618, ki je bil v Evropi razumljen kot zlovešč znak nemirov in Božjega opozorila. Tako kot je komet na nebu vzbujal strah in slutnjo katastrof, je tudi Rossetti v družbenem prostoru deloval kot znamenje krhkosti obstoječega reda. Njegova zgodba tako presega okvir posameznikove biografije in razkriva preplet časti, sovražnosti in moči, ki je zaznamoval politično in moralno krajino zgodnje novoveške Italije.

*Ključne besede: banditizem, izobčenec, Beneška republika, Vicenza, čast, sovražnost, družbeni konflikti, Giuseppe Rossetti, komet 1618*

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