

## The Revolt of Ferrara and the Conspiracy against the Este, 1385: A New Document

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1385 was a momentous year in the history of Ferrara and the Este family. A savage popular revolt left a leading official ferociously killed, his body-parts strewn across the city, the judicial and fiscal records burned to ashes, and the Este regime so shaken that it quickly undertook the physical bolstering of its power with the construction of a castle that came to symbolise the city.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the popular revolt of May 1385 was followed in September by the discovery and repression of a conspiracy, as a result of which some of the plotters were executed by beheading or hanging. The purpose of this paper is to present a new document on the conspiracy and to re-open a debate about the relation between the conspiracy and the revolt.

The main source for both events is the local chronicle, the *Chronicon estense*.<sup>2</sup> This presents what is evidently a carefully constructed version of the events of the year 1385. The chronicler starts by reporting the military victories and territorial acquisitions achieved by the leading Este ruler, Niccolò II. It then begins its account of the revolt by attributing the blame to the Este official, Tommasino da Tortona: it was he who ‘envied’ the ‘tranquillity and concord’ existing between Niccolò and his subjects, and who held out the prospect of great gains (*emolumenta*) to be had from a revision of the direct tax system so as to include rents and liquid cash, as well as real property.<sup>3</sup> It was popular opposition to the iniquitous implementation of this tax revision that brought a crowd onto the piazza demanding Tommasino’s death. The chronicler then narrates Tommasino’s flight into the chancery, the crowd’s pursuit of him, his escape, the destruction of all the tax records in a bonfire on the piazza, the ransack of Tommasino’s house, the continued demand for ‘the traitor’ and his eventual surrender to the ‘furious’ mob by Niccolò. Only after Tommasino’s ‘spectacular’ death, described in detail by the chronicler, did the tumult subside. The following day the chronicle has a crowd gathered again on the piazza, petitioning Niccolò d’Este and his brother Alberto for amnesty, on the grounds that they had acted to conserve the rulers’ state

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<sup>1</sup> Essential narratives may be found in: A. Frizzi, *Memorie per la storia di Ferrara*, 2nd edn, 5 vols (Ferrara, 1850), III, 369–72.

<sup>2</sup> *Cronicon estense*, in *Rerum italicarum scriptores*, ed. L.A. Muratori (Milan, 1723–51), vol. XV, cols 509–511.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

and for the sake of peace: an argument Niccolò reportedly accepted. For the following months the chronicle has no entries, until it reports some fortification work in early September, followed by news on 10 September of the revelation of the conspiracy and the report of some of the punishments, which continued into October. The plot was disclosed, the chronicler reports, by one 'Franceschinus de Montilino': the plan was to bring a large number of *contadini* to Ferrara at night, to break open a gate for them to enter the city, to kill the military guards (*stipendiarii*), to course the city shouting 'Povelo, povelo, muora dacia e gabelle e li Marchesi', and to return the city to a popular regime. The final entry for the year, out of chronological sequence, says that on 29 September Niccolò d'Este began the building of the new castle.

The chronicle is carefully constructed because of the way that it represents and separates these two threats to the Este regime. In the first, the object of hatred is simply one evil official, and the crowd after the event persuasively presents its actions as directed at conserving not subverting the position of the Estensi. The participants in the revolt are nameless: they become a single body, the furious *populus*. Their actions are presented as marked by insatiable, uncontrollable appetite: they consume tax registers in a bonfire, they ransack the houses of the gabelle officials 'in the manner of brigands' (*more praedonum*), they literally devour the broken body of Tommasino. Like chronicle accounts of the near-contemporary revolt in England, the narrative 'obscures agency' and 'ignites violence as an impersonal force'.<sup>4</sup> Like the 'chivalric' version of the Jacquerie in France, the rebels are leaderless, nameless, an undifferentiated mass, and the account of their actions is dominated by a 'climate of terror'.<sup>5</sup> In the second event, conversely, the conspirators have a plan, their objective is to throw off Este rule, and the names of eighteen conspirators are given. The pardonable action of popular, unthinking fury is thus contrasted to the unpardonable premeditation of political revolution. In the revolt, it is the Este who are surprised and ill-prepared; in the conspiracy, it is the plotters who are surprised and overcome. The two accounts, of revolt and conspiracy, thus do different 'ideological work' (Steven Justice's phrase), though in both the Este are presented as the innocent victims ('justos et innocentes'), of Tommasino's trouble-making tax revisions or of the conspirators' political ambitions.

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<sup>4</sup> S. Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 205–06.

<sup>5</sup> M.-T. de Medeiros, *Jacques et chroniqueurs* (Paris, 1979), pp. 29–34.

The careful construction of the narrative by the *Chronicon estense* was also further revealed by John Law in an important study of the revolt nearly thirty years ago.<sup>6</sup> Using a report made to the Venetian *Collegio* on 6 May, by an unnamed Venetian official or informant, Law drew attention to aspects of the revolt that the *Chronicon estense* omitted: that Niccolò d'Este made a fruitless attempt to calm the crowd and that after Tommasino's death (the manner of which the informant does not dwell upon) the crowd requested that Niccolò delegate someone to receive their grievances, selecting twenty representatives to review and amend the number and rates of taxes.<sup>7</sup> Law joins this to the comment of the contemporary Vicentine chronicler, Custozza, that the Estensi lost all but nominal authority for two months, recovering lordship only by making 'immense promises' and cancelling many taxes. The *Chronicon estense*, by contrast, preserves the authority and reputation of Niccolò d'Este: first by passing over his failure to calm the crowd, then by avoiding any suggestion that Niccolò had to make concessions, even less that he had to negotiate with plebeian tribunes.

A connection between the revolt and the plot was first suggested by Antonio Frizzi, the first modern historian of Ferrara, who asserted that the disclosure of the plot was the result of 'the most secret investigations into the origins and authors of the sedition'.<sup>8</sup> He also claimed that it was the same Francesco de' Montelini who had begun to spread sedition during the controversial revision of the *estimo*.<sup>9</sup> There is no evidence for either assertion – except perhaps that of the very document published here.

This document is an incomplete copy of the judicial sentence pronounced by the *podestà* of Ferrara against four of the conspirators. It occupies one side of a folio in a register of the Ferrarese *contrada* (city-district) of San Romano: the other side is blank.<sup>10</sup> This sentence is the only judicial document in a register that contains legal deeds of property transactions completed by the officers of this city-district. The notary, Francesco Beltramino, claims to have found the document in a public register of the commune; what moved him to

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<sup>6</sup> J.E. Law, 'Popular unrest in Ferrara in 1385', in *The Renaissance in Ferrara and its European Horizons*, ed. J. Salmons (Cardiff and Ravenna, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 46–47.

<sup>8</sup> Frizzi, *Memorie per la storia di Ferrara*, III, p. 371: 'Non per questo però si omisero le più segrete inquisizioni circa l'origine e gli autori della sedizione'. Chiappini makes the connection in the same way: L. Chiappini, *Gli Estensi: Mille anni di storia* (Ferrara, 2001), p. 87.

<sup>9</sup> Frizzi, *Memorie per la storia di Ferrara*, III, pp. 369–70.

<sup>10</sup> 'Register of the Contrada of San Romano, Ferrara, 1317–1525', BL, Add. MS 38024, fol. 88.

copy it into this register is unclear. None of the four convicts inhabited this *contrada* (if their domiciles are given correctly). The immediately preceding and following documents date from 1387 and 1390, suggesting that the notary copied it between those years.

The sentence is pronounced by the *podestà* against four men, three of them notaries, the other the son of a *confeitor*: Dionisius de Grilis, Franciscus de Mantuano, Magister Johannes and Petrus de Archamino (to give their names in the Latin form used in the document). The document reports a series of conspiratorial conversations among some of the plotters, sometimes involving other men, including Pietro's brother Omodeo da Arcamino. Who was the author of this report? Judicial sentences usually repeated verbatim the text of indictments, which would be composed by the notary to the court either on the basis of information received, from victims or denouncers, or on the basis of confessions by detained (and possibly tortured) suspects. In this case, the information would seem to have come in part from Franceschino de' Montelini, who was a participant in some of the conversations, perhaps even their *provocateur*. Whether he was silently present in the other meetings is unclear; if not, the information may have come from the cooperation or torture of one of the other conspirators, perhaps Dionisio, who seems not to have been fully committed to the enterprise.

In the first of the reported conversations, Franceschino de' Montelini asserted, to a sceptical Dionisio de' Grilli, the need for action against the threats of discovery and punishment, and made claims about his own capacity to raise and direct four hundred foot soldiers ('pedites'). In the second, maestro Giovanni and Omodeo da Arcamino informed Dionisio that a day, time and place had been set for a popular uprising. In the third, Omodeo told Dionisio that he had been summoned by the investigating judge and was intending to make contact with the conspirators' aristocratic supporters. In the fourth, Omodeo responded to Dionisio's continuing doubts about the viability of the plot. And in the final conversation, between Franceschino and Omodeo, Giovanni, Dionisio and two others, Franceschino's questions draw from the conspirators their plans for an uprising on the very next day: this must have been the point at which Franceschino went to the authorities.

These reported conversations reveal the nature of the conspirators' plans and the identity of their contacts. The chronicle report (presumably itself based on reports of the trial record) has accurately presented the main outline of the planned insurrection – an irruption of *contadini* through a city gate, a massacre of Este guards, a raising of the *popolo* through anti-fiscal and anti-Estense slogans – but the sentence identifies specifically the areas of the *contado* which the conspirators hoped to mobilise, and the aristocratic allies they looked to

for assistance. It also shows how the plot evolved in a dynamic relation with the actions of Estensi and their officials. In the first reported conversation, Franceschino de' Montelini asks one of the conspirators, Dionisio, 'What should we do about those things being done against us with those armed troops arriving every day and those fortresses being built here?' And in September when another conspirator, Omodeo, was summoned by the *podestà*, his response was to leave the city for Valonga and to mobilise aristocratic supporters. It is this dynamic relation that suggests a connection between the plot and the earlier revolt: military reinforcement, castle-building, judicial investigation, were parts of a reassertion of Este power that itself generated further insurrectionary action.

The plot is characterised as an action of the suburbs and *contado* against the city, controlled by 'foreigners' (meaning foreign soldiers in Este employment). Franceschino boasted of having 'all those of *Borgo superiore*' at his disposal; *maestro* Giovanni and Omodeo assured a doubtful Dionisio that 'all those of San Luca and San Leonardo' would assemble at a certain gate, which one of the conspirators would ensure was broken open to enable them to enter. When summoned by the *podestà*, Omodeo said he would instead go into the *contado* and arrange for Niccolò Contrari and Albertino Turchi to assemble troops. In a more developed discussion among seven of the plotters, two of their number were to go into the *polesini* (of Coderete and Ferrara) to assemble and lead peasants to the city.

The reported conversations among the conspirators had three defining features. Evident first of all is the fear instilled by soldiers and castle-building and by news from Padua of the deaths of collaborators; and this fear seems to have impelled a sense of urgency or necessity to the plotters' plans. Second is the sense of boastful assurance that the plot could succeed: leaders claim that they had soldiers and *contadini* at their command, that they could raise up the *popolo*, that their plans and resources were in place, that a popular tumult, once started, would have an effective outcome. And third is the careful detailing of actions: one person to lead the peasants into the city, one to enlist noblemen, another to seize one of the gates; there were plans to erect a barricade and to target soldiers stationed in a specific part of the city. The trial record thus presents the threat as a potent one: the conspirators had urgency, they had revolutionary aims, they had confidence, they had followers, and they had precise tactical aims.

The identity of the apparent aristocratic sympathisers raises something of a puzzle. Though the Turchi family had a history of independence from the Estensi, the Contrari had not: indeed in these very years Mainardo Contrari was laying the ground for the spectacular rise of his son Ugucione, who became Niccolò III's trusted lieutenant in the early years of

the next century.<sup>11</sup> Were they known to harbour resentments against Niccolò II? It is the case that Albertino Turchi had surrendered some properties in 1381 in order for Niccolò's wife to be invested with them: had this been a forced transfer, creating a lasting resentment?<sup>12</sup>

In each sequence of conversations represented in the sentence, one of the conspirators, first Dionisio, then Francesco da Mantuano, plays the role of the sceptical questioner: when Franceschino de' Montelini reports a threat to their plans from the daily arrival of fresh troops, Dionisio answers 'And what is any of that to me? Let those who deserve hanging be hanged.' When Omodeo da Arcamino talks about the need to provoke a popular uprising, Dionisio asks 'How will you have the possibility to do that?' And when *maestro* Giovanni speaks of their intentions to raise up the *popolo* by shouting 'Long live the popolo and death to taxes and gabelles!', Francesco expostulates 'What stupidity is ruling you, for you don't have the power to do that!' These doubting questions would seem to be traces of the positioning of the accused under interrogation: they seek to minimise their involvement by drawing for themselves a sceptical role in the conspiratorial discussions. Such moments of reported stupidity seem to be a feature of indictments of conspiracy: the records of near contemporary plots in Arezzo provide further examples of the type.<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, this document adds to what Kate Lowe has called the 'documentary detritus' of conspiracies. Its fragmentary nature seems rather typical of the genre, as the record of conspiracy was suppressed along with conspiracy itself. It does, however, show that the punishment of plotters did not occur outside judicial process, even in a 'tyranny' at a time of internal unrest and challenge. It indicates the uncontrolled margins of Este power: suburbs, parts of the countryside, disaffected noblemen. It reveals the play of mutual suspicion, concealment and bravado among a group of ineffective insurrectionaries. It shows the continuing power, even in a city accustomed to signorial rule for over a century, of the words *libertas* and *popolo*: men of Ferrara still believed (wrongly, as it happened) that these could mobilise populace against rulers. And it allows a reconnection of rebellion and conspiracy, denied by the contemporary political record, confirming at the same time that record's partiality.

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<sup>11</sup> T. Dean, *Land and Power in late Medieval Ferrara: The Rule of the Este, 1350–1450* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 141.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>13</sup> 'Stulte, quomodo credis predicta . . .': L. Berti, 'La prima cospirazione degli Aretini contro il dominio di Firenze (1390)', *Archivio storico italiano*, 154 (1996): 495–521: 'Che mi dite voi? Siete voi uscito fuori della memoria . . .?' (p. 515); U. Pasqui, 'Una congiura per liberare Arezzo dalla dipendenza dei Fiorentini (1431)', *Archivio storico italiano*, ser. 5, 5 (1890): 3–19 (p. 16).

Hoc est exemplum cuiusdam condemnationis seu condemnationum corporalis vel coporalium repetarum per me Franciscum Beltraminum notarium in libro publico communis Ferrarie intitulado el magnano tenoris infrascripti videlicet

In dei nomine amen. Hec sunt condemnationes corporales et sententie condemnationum coporalium date late et in hiis scriptis sententialiter promulgate et pronunciate per nobilem et potentem militem dominum Andreasium de Cavalchabobus de Cremona honorabilem potestatem civitatis Ferrarie et districtus pro illustri et magnifico domino nostro domino Nicholao dei gratia marchioni Estensi pro sancta romana ecclesia civitatis Ferrarie vicario generali sub examine sapientis et discreti viri domini Guilelmi de Castelione aretino honorabilis iudicis ad maleficia civitatis Ferrarie deputati cum consensu et voluntate aliorum iudicum curie prefate domini potestatis currentibus annis domini nostri Jesu Christi millesimotrecentesimo octuagesimo quinto indictione octava Ferraria.

Nos Andreasius potestas supradictus infrascriptas condemnationes corporales contra infrascriptos homines et personas pro infrascriptis excessibus et delictis per ipsos commissis et perpetratis damus et perferrimus in hunc modum videlicet

Dionisium de Grilis notarium filium quondam Martini habitatorem Ferrarie in contrata Sancti Michaelis, Franciscum de Mantuano notarium filium quondam Antonii de Manthoano de contrata Gosmarie, Magistrum Johannem filium Magistri Bernardini confectoris de contrata Sancti Michaelis, Petrum de Archamino notarium filium quondam Antonii de Archamino de contrata Sancte Marie Nove, hic in fortiam nostram et communis Ferrarie, presentialiter constitutos ad hanc nostram sententiam de se audiendam homines seditiosos et predictores prefate domini nostri domini Nicolai dei gratia marchionis Estensis pro sancta romana ecclesia vicarii generalis civitatis Ferrarie ac etiam homines male condicionis vite et fame contra quos et quemlibet ipsorum processum est per inquisitionem per nos et nostram curiam contra ipsos formatam in eo, de eo et super eo quod fama publica precedente et multorum clamosa informatione refferente, non quidem a malivolis et suspectis personis sed potius honestis et fidedignis ad aures nostras et nostre curie ex auditu pervenit quod predicti Dionisius, Franciscus de Mantuano, Magister Johannes et Petrus et quilibet predictorum locis et tempore in dicta inquisitione contentis animo et intentione seditiones prodiciones et conspirationes et tractatus committendi perpetrandi et excipiendi et executioni mandandi ad invicem et cum aliis quorum nomina ad presens tacentur pro meliori habuerunt tractatum et colloquium infrascripta committendi per hunc modum, videlicet, Quod dictus

Dionisius dolose scienter et apensate spirtu [sic] diabolico instigatus deum per oculis non habendo sed potius inimicum humane nature dum Franceschinus de Montulinus notarius ivisset ad ipsum Dionisium et dixisset dicto Dyonisio ‘Quid debemus nos facere contra haec que contra nos aguntur in istis gentibus armigeris huc venentis et que quotodie huc veniunt et in istis fortiliciis que quotodie hic construuntur. Hec omnia vere aguntur ut suspendamur’. Et dictus Dyonisius respondit et dixit ‘Quid habeo ego agere in istis talibus. Qui digni sunt suspendio suspendantur.’ Et dictus Franceschinus dixit dicto Dionisio ‘Scio tibi dicere quod novissime apportate sunt littere de Padua super terminatione mortis omnium nostrum’. Item quod alias dictus Franceschinus multotiens dixit dicto Dyonisio quod oportebat omnino una die curri ad arma istam civitatem ut homines huius civitatis in libertate remanerent. Et quod ipse Franceschinus bene habebat ordinem ad predicta facienda. Et quod bene habebat ad sui petitionem bene quadraginta pedites et omnes illos de burgo superiori.

Item in eo, de eo et super eo quod Homodeus de Archamino dixit dicto Dionisio ‘Vide Dionisii est omnino necessarium quod concitemus rumorem in populo’. Et dictus Dyonisius dixit ei ‘Unde erit tibi possibilitas hoc faciendi’. Et dictus Homodeus respondit ‘Non cures de unde, bene habeo modos’.

Item in eo, de eo et super eo quod dictus magister Johannes magistri Bernardini confectoris et Homodeus predictus accesserunt ad predictum Dyonisium et dixerunt ei ‘Dionisii scias quod datus est ordo de faciendo rumorem in populo et hoc debet fieri tercia vel quarta hora noctis sequentis in quo rumore omnes forenses qui nobis inventi fuerint contradicere debebunt interfici. Quo rumore presenso ab illis de extra civitatem videlicet omnes illi di Sancto Lucha et de Sancto Leonardo trahent ad portam que est post domum magistri Bernardini confectoris. Et illorum de Sancto Lucha erit caput Guido Linguatius et Antonius Magnanus et quidam filius Stefani de Scotto’. Item, quod predictus magister Johannes in dicto colloquio dixit dicto Dionisio quod dederat ordinem de rompendo portam que est post domum sui patris.

Item in eo, de eo et super eo quod de presenti mense Septembris dictus Homodeus dixit dicto Dionisio ‘Ego sum citatus quod compaream coram iudicem maleficiorum. Ego non intendo ire ad eum, sed intendo statim recedere et ibo ad Valungam et dabo ordinem cum Nicholao de Contrariis ut adhuret gentes quantum poterit et veniat cum ipsa ad civitatem quarta hora noctis vel circa’. Et similiter dixit se iturum ad Albertinum Turchium et se dacturum secum similiter ordinem ut dicta hora nocte veniret ad civitatem.

Item in eo, de eo et super eo quod dum dictus Homodeus diceret dicto Dyonisio quod dicta negotia debebant de brevi expedire, dictus Dyonisius dixit eidem Homodeo ‘Quomodo

poterunt ista negotia sortiri effectum nisi quidam quorum nomina ad presens tacentur pro meliori assenciant'. Et dictus Homodeus dixit 'Ne cures. Incipiamus rumorem quod omnia habebunt bonum efectum'. Et dixit etiam dictus Homodeus dicto Dionisio quod filius Stefani de Scotto debebat rumpere unum ex pontibus qui sunt super itinere quo itur de Ferraria Bononiam adhoc ut gentes de Bononia non possent venire Ferrariam.

Item in eo, de eo et super eo quod dictus Francischus de Mantuano dolose scienter et apensate deum per oculis non habendo sed potius inimicum humane nature animo et intentione seditiones prodiciones et conspirationes et tractatus committendi perpetrandi et exequendi et executioni mandandi accesit ad domum Homodei de Archaminis in curtili cuius domus invenit dictum Homodeum, magistrum Johannem magistri Bernardini, Bonandinum straçarolum, Dionisium de Grilis et Johannem de Soldatis et Petrum de Archamino fratrem dicti Homodei, racionantes ad invicem super tractatu predicto noviter exequendo. Et magister Johannes predictus dicebat 'Nos ordinavimus quod in nocte sequenti clametur "Vivat populus et moriantur dacii et gabelle". Et tunc omnes de populo trahent. Et si forenses volent contradicere nobis attendamus contra illos ad posse nostrum'. Et dictus Francischus dixit 'Qualis stultitia in vobis regnat cum non habeatis potentiam hoc faciendi'. Et dictus magister Johannes respondit 'Ego bene habeo gentes sufficientes adhoc et si vultis ego statim ibo ad domum et me armabo et incipiam clamare et rumorem in populo concitare'. Et dictus Homodeus dixit 'Vide Francisce omnes hoc sciunt quod clamato "Vivat populus" omnes de populo current'. Et in dicto curtili datum et ordinatum fuit quod magister Johannes predictus debebat ire super pollicino Coderete ad choadunandi et conducendi omnem illam gentem quam poterit. Et dictus Bonandinus straçarolus debebat ire super policino Ferrarie ad illud idem faciendi et dictam gentem debebant conducere ad portam que est post domum dicti magistri Bernardini confectoris et illam portam frangere et per illam intrare civitatem. Et quando rustici intrassent civitatem levare rumorem dicendo 'Vivat populus'. Et cum hoc nomine 'Vivat populus' debebant ire ad ecclesiam Sancti Dominici et trabes et ligna ibi posita interponere ubi est puteus et incontinenti irruere in soldados ibi existentes et omnes ipsos interficere. Et similiter interficere omnes alios qui reperirentur trahere ad plateam.

Et in eo, de eo et super eo quod magister Johannes spirtu [sic] diabolico instigatus deum per oculis non habendo sed potius inimicum humane nature dolose, scienter et apensate animo et intentione seditiones prodiciones et conspirationes et tractatus committendi perpetrandi et excipiendi et executioni mandandi accesit ad plateam comunis Ferrarie in qua invenit Petrum de Archamino qui diu fuerat socius suus qui Petrus dixit eidem magistro Johanni 'Magister Johannes, audisti tu ea que aguntur per istum dominum.' Et dictus

