

Mattia Viale

*The estimi of the Republic of Venice as a resource
for studying social mobility in rural areas**

1. Introduction

In recent years, the investigation of economic inequality during the pre-industrial era has captured the attention of an increasing number of scholars. Over two decades of dedicated research in this field has yielded a rich collection of studies that trace the long-term evolution of economic disparities across various European cities and regions

and even beyond (Coşgel 2008; Coşgel and Ergene 2012; Saito 2015; Lindert and Williamson 2016). This body of work covers a range of focal points, from the root causes of inequality (Alfani and Ryckbosch 2016; Milanovic 2018) and the interplay between income and consumption (Hoffman et al. 2002; Hanus 2013) to the impact of economic imbalances on social structures and institutional systems (Alfani and Murphy 2017). Despite this breadth of enquiry, the interrelationship between economic inequality and social mobility has yet to be thoroughly explored, marking a critical gap in our knowledge.¹ Addressing this gap is crucial; while economic inequality is somewhat of a given, enhancing social mobility offers a pathway to ameliorating the negative effects associated with unequal access to resources. Conversely, a dearth of social mobility reinforces social hierarchies, intensifying the detrimental impacts of inequality.

To advance this area of study, we draw on the data and methodologies developed through the “SMITE-Social Mobility and Inequality across Italy and Europe, 1300-1800” project, supported by the European Research Council. Our goal is to enrich the current literature by focusing on social mobility trends within the rural areas of the Republic of Venice during the early modern era. In particular, our analysis highlights the tax registers (*estimi*) of rural communities in the Vicenza territory as invaluable resources for such investigations. The community of San Vito between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries serves as a case study in our analysis. Through this lens, we aim not only to contribute to the broader discourse on economic inequality and

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¹ For the case of Italy, the topic of social mobility has mostly been explored in studies focusing on the contemporary era, particularly the post-World War II period (Schizzerotto and Marzadro 2008; Barone and Guetto 2020; Acciari, Polo, and Violante 2022). Research on the pre-industrial period, however, has been much scarcer. Available studies have primarily concentrated on either the nineteenth century (Gozzini 1984; Allegra 2000; Freschi and Martinez 2024) or the medieval age (Collavini and Petralia 2016; Tanzini and Tognetti 2016).

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social mobility but also to showcase the nuanced dynamics at play within rural societies of the period.

2. The territory of Vicenza

Located in the heart of the Venetian mainland, Vicenza and its surrounding area, known as the *Vicentino*, stretch longitudinally from the plains to the Dolomites. Positioned between Padua and Verona, two major centres in northeast Italy, Vicenza's development during the late Middle Ages was significantly influenced by its geographic context (Demo and Bianchi 2014, 73-96). Subject to Paduan rule throughout the thirteenth century, Vicenza came under the control of Verona's ruling dynasty, the Scaligeri, in 1312 (Varanini 2003, 291-294; 2010). Despite this political subordination,² there was no decay in local institutions or deterioration in the socio-economic fabric of the city. Instead, particularly in the Veronese era, Vicenza's urban elites fortified the governmental framework, the city underwent significant demographic growth (Castagnetti 1990), and local industries embarked on a trajectory of robust expansion.³

The demographic, social, and economic development of Vicenza was not confined to the city's boundaries but also proliferated across the surrounding territory. Vicenza's extended period of subordination to neighbouring powers, which curtailed its dominion over adjacent areas, inadvertently fostered the prosperity of rural communities. By the mid-thirteenth century, the region boasted over 200 rural towns and villages (Bortolami 2012). Over time, some communities evolved complex governance systems, securing significant levels of autonomy from Vicenza (Knapton 1984). Particularly in the foothills, communities leveraged the region's rich natural resources to bolster economic growth, enabling the emergence of wealthy families who subsequently integrated into the city's oligarchic elite.

In 1404, during a significant territorial expansion that led Venice to enlarge its domains throughout the entire northeastern portion of the Italian peninsula, Vicenza and its surrounding territory were absorbed into the Republic of Venice. Venice organised its new Italian state in a federal manner, exerting its power in a subdued fashion (Zamperetti 1989, 87). It indeed confirmed Vicenza's central role in relation to its rural district (*contado*) while leaving untouched all the privileges (fiscal and jurisdictional) that the rural communities had gained between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries under the previous regimes (Zamperetti 1987; 1991).⁴ This situation remained unchanged for at least a century and a half. By the mid-sixteenth

² Vicenza experienced only a brief interlude as an autonomous municipality between 1259 and 1266; indeed, some historians do not hesitate to describe it as a 'satellite city' (Cracco 1988).

³ The conjuncture of the fourteenth century was crucial for the establishment of a significant wool industry in subsequent periods (Demo 2001; 2013).

⁴ Venice adopted this approach not only in Vicenza but also across all the territories it annexed during the early modern period (Ventura 1964). Moreover, the recognition of privileges acquired under previous rulers was not unique to the Venetian government. This approach was common among many states forming between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with perhaps the sole exception of the Florentine state (Chittolini 1979).

century, the circumstances had undergone a radical transformation. On the one hand, the severe crisis resulting from the War of the League of Cambrai (1508-1516) brought with it a costly project to reconstruct the Republic's defensive system, which required improvements to the tax collection system and an increase in the revenue generated (Knapton 1984). On the other hand, between the 1540s and 1570s, the Republic lost its commercial outposts in Apulia, then Cyprus, and several bases along the Albanian coast – strategic points for trade with the Levant – which compelled Venice to focus more keenly on its mainland possessions to maintain its maritime empire (Zamperetti 1991). These developments prompted the Venetian authorities to abandon the previous, rather lenient, system in favour of establishing a more structured power framework. This shift entailed a significant recalibration of Venice's political strategies. The change was particularly evident, as the Venetian authorities started to engage directly with the rural elites, a strategic move aimed at ensuring a greater capacity for action and influence over the territory (Maifreda 2002, 63-69).⁵ To facilitate this deeper involvement, specific magistracies governed by local elites were established.⁶ A prime example of this new administrative framework was the formation of the *Corpo Territoriale*.⁷ Starting in 1550, this entity became a pivotal administrative body for the governance of the rural district of Vicenza, marking a significant shift from Venice's previous reliance on provincial city elites as intermediaries in rural affairs. Despite resistance from the Vicenza nobility (Zamperetti 1989, 90-91), the *Corpo Territoriale* gradually carved out a significant role in centre-periphery relations. This evolution led, among other things, to the development of an administrative and political architecture that achieved substantial autonomy in the imposition and collection of taxes.

A final, noteworthy observation is the fact that despite the *Corpi Territoriali* emerging during a period of economic expansion and reflecting the renewed economic strength of the *contado*, the living conditions of the peasants worsened significantly over time due to the increased economic presence of the Venetian

⁵ This attitude was prevalent in much of the mainland, in both the provinces of Veneto and Lombardy, affecting areas where the *contado* was historically more active and politically assertive, as well as those areas where the inhabitants of the countryside had been more oppressed by the city elites. (Varanini 1980; Knapton 1984; Rossini 1994; Zamperetti 1987; Maifreda 2002).

⁶ In the same period, similar dynamics are also found in Spanish Lombardy. With the land register ordered by Charles V, the prerogatives of the urban elites were greatly reduced, while there was a simultaneous recognition of the demands coming from the territory (Porqueddu 1980; Vigo 1986; Chittolini 1983; Zappa 1991).

⁷ According to an alternative view, the creation of the *Corpo Territoriale* was less a Venetian initiative to secure a privileged interlocutor in regional governance and more a product of the rural "bourgeoisie", who sought to align their rising social status with political influence. Wealthy rural families, unable to penetrate the noble elite of the provincial city, encouraged the establishment of an independent institution. This would allow them to complement their economic prominence with political authority, enabling direct interaction with Venice's central government while bypassing Vicenza (Povolo 2010). These two perspectives – the top-down view of the *Corpo Territoriale* as a Venetian initiative and the bottom-up view of it as a project driven by the rural elite – are not mutually exclusive. It is plausible that Venice, aiming to strengthen its control over the territory, capitalised on the rural bourgeoisie's desire for legitimisation, thereby supporting the formation of the *Corpo Territoriale*.

patricians in the Mainland. By the fifteenth century, favourable price trends and increased demand for agricultural goods had prompted many Venetian nobles to increase their investments in the mainland, seizing land from local farmers and landowners. In this context, the *Corpi* did not appear to be very combative in defending the peasants or in attempting to improve their conditions. This emphasises that the *Corpi Territoriali* were not an expression of the rural world in its entirety but primarily represented and defended the interests of a class of landowners, professionals, and affluent merchants who had a greater interest (in addition to the means and the cultural and political capacity) to express their own demands (Del Torre 1986, 46; Zamperetti 1987, 298; Maifreda 2002, 68-69).

3. The Venetian tax system

In the Republic of Venice, tax imposition was a structured annual process. The central government in Venice first determined the total revenue expected from the Mainland provinces. This sum was then divided among the three administrative entities that constituted these territories (both socially and economically): the city, the rural district, and the clergy. Each of these entities, in turn, divided its assigned share among its constituents (Ventura, 1964; Knapton 1981). Due to the autonomy it had achieved, the *Corpo Territoriale* had the ability to decide how to distribute its share of taxes among the various municipalities within its jurisdiction, free from interference by the rulers or the elites of Vicenza. Moreover, the municipalities had the discretion to decide on the distribution of their own tax share among the local taxpayers (Knapton 1984; Pezzolo 1985a).

To determine the allocation of tax shares among various property owners, a tax register (*libro d'estimo*) was created in every municipality. Periodically, landowners were required to submit a certificate on which they self-declared the extent of their landholdings. These declarations were subsequently reviewed, recorded in the tax register, and followed by the valuation process. Each parcel of land, whether owned or leased, underwent assessment and was assigned an estimated value. These values were determined using parameters discussed and decided upon by the governing bodies of the community (Ongaro 2019). The sum of these values determined the *quota d'estimo* for a household, essentially a coefficient indicating a household's economic capacity. The principle was straightforward: the higher the *quota d'estimo* value, the wealthier the family, and, correspondingly, the greater the tax burden they were required to bear.

As previously mentioned, the parameters for taxing real estate properties were determined within each community. Consequently, local representatives aimed to establish property valuation systems that were most beneficial to their residents. For instance, in a community where leased lands were more common than owned lands, the tax rate for the former was lower than that for the latter. The reverse was also true: in municipalities where most families owned the lands they farmed, the tax rate for owned lands was more advantageous than that for leased lands. Taxation was not limited to lands; it also extended to people. Some areas decided to create a fixed taxable base for each family, while others chose to tax only the head of the family

and male children (the latter proportionally based on age) or opted not to include the personal component in their calculations. Given the wide latitude for discretion, specific communities could decide to tax certain specific elements. Thus, among the hundreds of tax registers of the *Corpo Territoriale* of Vicenza, we find even communities imposing specific rates on working animals, mill wheels, saws for timber processing, and paper mill looms (Pezzolo 1985b).

The fact that the rural communities within the Vicenza territory, united under the *Corpo Territoriale*, had such extensive autonomy in managing their fiscal affairs ensured that each community guarded its own tax registers with great diligence. Consequently, today, the archive of *libri d'estimo* from the communities in the Vicenza territory stands as one of the most substantial and complete collections of the Venetian Republic.⁸

4. Sources and methods

Among the hundreds of records that constitute the *Estimo* archive of the Vicenza territory, now preserved at the State Archive of Vicenza, we find several registers of particular value for analysing economic inequalities and social mobility. As mentioned earlier, the communities within this territory had considerable autonomy over the management of their *estimi*. This autonomy extended not only to deciding what to tax and at what rate for various types of properties but also to the frequency with which the valuations were updated. Reviewing the registers, we find communities that opted to update their tax records every two or three years, some that waited at least five years, and others that drafted a new valuation after a decade. Yet, the most valuable for our analysis are those that adopted a kind of rolling procedure in which the registers were constantly kept up to date. Instead of compiling a new register from scratch after a few years, some communities preferred to continue using the same register, correcting it annually to note new properties purchased, those sold, and those held on lease. This system offers exceptionally detailed and accurate data collection, enabling us to reconstruct the economic history of every single household within a community with remarkable precision. Furthermore, it allows us to trace the internal economic dynamics of a community with a high degree of specificity and detail. Therefore, for our analysis of social mobility in the rural communities of the Republic of Venice, we relied precisely on those communities in the territory of Vicenza that feature registers with annual corrections. From these sources, it is indeed possible to trace, year by year, the evolution of changes in wealth, providing insights into how wealth was distributed and exchanged over time among the various households that comprised a community.

⁸ The series of tax registers from rural communities alone consists of more than a thousand volumes, covering a time span (albeit quite variable depending on the community) from the second quarter of the fifteenth century to the first decade of the nineteenth century.

The methodology employed is that developed within the SMITE project,⁹ hence based on mobility matrices. The initial step of the method is to gather data on the *quote d'estimo* (which is a coefficient indicating the economic capacity of a household calculated on the number and quality of assets owned) for each household for all the years in which it appears “active.” This is followed by ranking the households according to their wealth level, thereby dividing the entire population into quintiles of wealth. This then allows the calculation of how many households manage to ascend to higher quintiles (thus exhibiting upward mobility) and how many descend to a lower quintile (indicating downward mobility) from one year to the next. The sum of these two measures (upward mobility and downward mobility) yields the total mobility. Essentially, we calculate the percentage of households that become (relatively) wealthier, the percentage of households that become poorer, and a value that illustrates the proportion of households experiencing changes in their wealth status.

In the case of Vicenza, the quality of the sources particularly supports precise analyses, yielding data that allow for an exceptionally accurate examination of economic dynamics. To demonstrate the potential of these sources for studying social mobility, we have chosen to utilise the case study of San Vito between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Located in the affluent foothill region and with a population of around a thousand people, San Vito emerged as one of the main contributors to the territorial budget in the early modern period (Knapton 1981, 395). However, more than its economic standing, we chose San Vito as a case study due to the wealth of preserved fiscal documentation with yearly corrections. The *estimi* of this community include annual data covering a span from 1541 to 1665.¹⁰

5. Social mobility in the territory of Vicenza: The case of San Vito

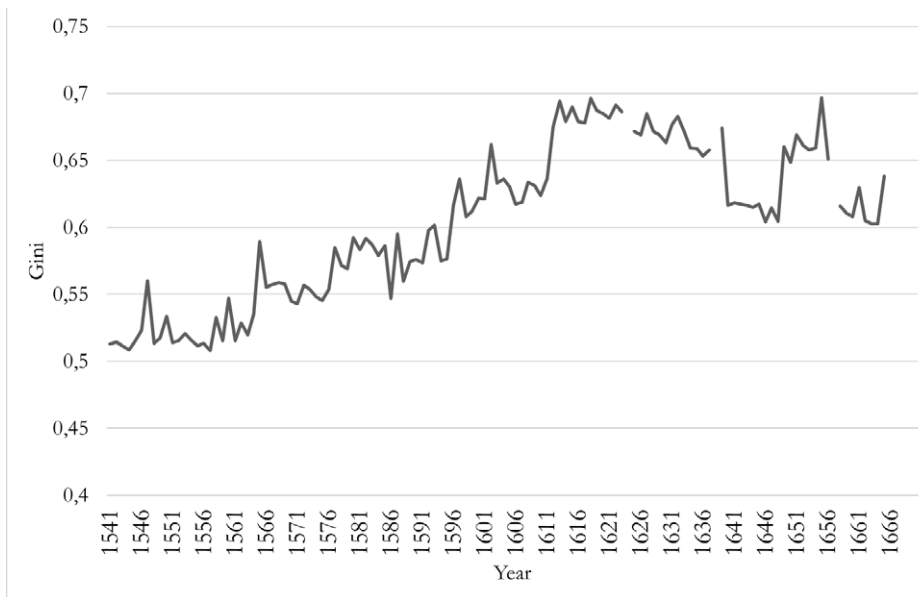
Although our study mainly centres on social mobility, it is essential to begin by delving into the dynamics of social inequality. The high level of detail provided by the valuation records from the Vicenza territory enables precise monitoring of changes in wealth concentration within various communities on a year-to-year basis. Overall, an analysis of the data from the San Vito registers (Graph 1) reveals that the transition from the sixteenth century to the seventeenth century is characterised by a marked increase in inequalities. This period can be divided into three distinct phases: an initial phase of significant inequality growth, followed by a period of stabilisation with minimal changes, and finally, a phase where inequalities started to decline. Specifically, we note a gradual yet notable escalation in economic disparities from the 1540s to the 1610s, followed by two decades of relative stability, and then a period of diminishing inequalities. The beginning of this reduction phase coincided with, and was likely precipitated by, the plague of 1630. The high mortality rates of the

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the methodology developed by SMITE, please refer to the contribution of Francesco Ammannati in this volume.

¹⁰ The *estimi* analysed in the next pages can be found in: Archivio di Stato di Vicenza, *Estimo*, bb. 1347, 1348, 1349, 1350, 1351, 1352; Archivio Storico Comunale di San Vito di Leguzzano, *Estimo*, B2-II.

epidemic significantly thinned the mainland population, leading to a partial redistribution of wealth. These trends in economic disparity are in close agreement with recent research on the Venetian mainland (Alfani and Di Tullio 2019).

Graph 1. **Trend in economic inequality in San Vito, 1541-1665 (Gini index)**



We now turn our attention to the evolution of social mobility dynamics within this specific context. First, as shown in Graph 2, we can appreciate the economic dynamism that permeated the community of San Vito. Every year, numerous households acquired new properties, and equally, many sold or disposed of some of their possessions. Thus, this finding is far from the stereotypical image of rural communities as static and mired in severe poverty. Each household, according to its needs and necessities, continuously sold, bought, or rented portions of land. These ongoing adjustments in landholdings were essential for peasant families to perpetuate their economic strategies and achieve their goals based on their family's labour capacity. The varying consumption needs of a family at different stages of its existence necessitated changes in its economic activities – expanding when the family grew in size and contracting when it decreased. This led to an intense circulation of property, as peasants acquired or relinquished land to balance their household resources with their requirements (Čajanov 1988; 1991). Such adjustments resulted in frequent movements in inequality, both upward and downward, as shifts in property ownership redistributed wealth within the community.

While the short-term picture appears somewhat reassuring and optimistic, the long-term outlook is far less so. As demonstrated in the century under consideration,

there was a slight trend towards increasingly limited social mobility (more apparent if we disregard the mobility peak after 1630, which was due to an exogenous shock that does appear to have permanently affected the underlying trend: see below). Whether in periods of rising inequalities, times of stagnation, or those of declining disparities, social mobility tended to decrease, signalling a society that gradually became more rigid.

Graph 2. **Trend in social mobility in San Vito, 1541-1665**

(data smoothed by a 5-year moving average)

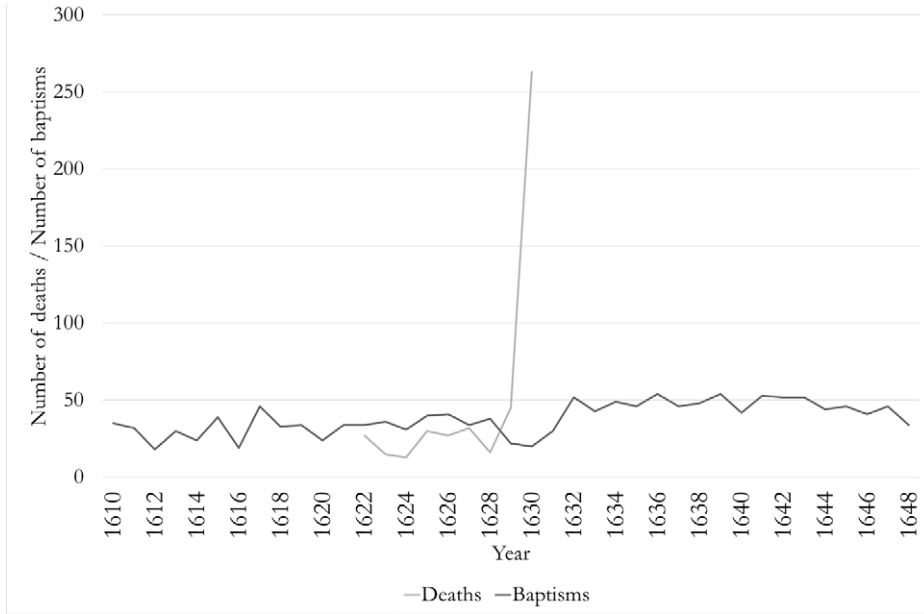


As is well known, the plague of 1630 struck the Italian peninsula with severe ferocity, affecting both cities and rural areas. In terms of mortality and intensity, this pandemic event is the only one that can somewhat be compared to the Black Death. The parish records of San Vito provide a particularly vivid depiction of the harshness with which the plague hit this locality.¹¹ In the years immediately preceding the plague, San Vito reported a death toll ranging from approximately 15-30 individuals. However, with the onset of the plague, this figure soared to over 260. The impact of the plague on birth rates is also noteworthy, as evidenced by the number of baptisms between 1630 and 1631, which fell by at least a third compared to previous years

¹¹ Archivio Diocesano di Vicenza (ADVi), *Parrocchia dei Santi Vito, Modesto e Crescenza di San Vito di Leguzzano, Registri dei morti*, b. 1; ADVi, *Parrocchia dei Santi Vito, Modesto e Crescenza di San Vito di Leguzzano, Registri dei battesimi*, bb. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

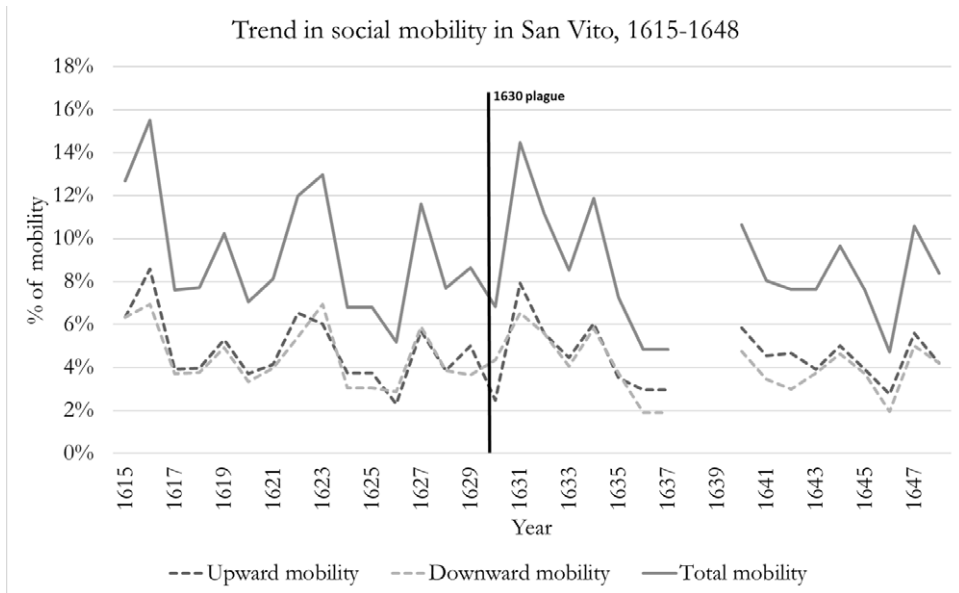
(Graph 3). The demographic decline’s effects are further evident from the *estimi*: the number of recorded households dropped from about 260 to 237 within a five-year span, only to begin increasing again towards the end of the decade.

Graph 3. Number of baptisms and deaths in San Vito, 1610-1648



What was the effect of this severe mortality crisis on the internal economic dynamics of society? As mentioned earlier, the plague of 1630 is likely at the root of the process of mitigating economic inequalities, which is observable starting in the 1630s. However, the effects on social mobility were not as beneficial. As shown in Graph 4, the plague caused an increase in social mobility in San Vito. This increase, however, was of overall limited intensity and, more importantly, short-lived: within just a few years, mobility began to decline again, continuing the trend that had begun in the course of the sixteenth century.

Graph 4. Trend in social mobility in San Vito, 1615-1648



6. Concluding remarks

In this study, we describe the wealth of sources that the Vicenza territory offers for studying inequalities and social mobility in pre-industrial rural areas. Due to Vicenza's unique political development, its rural communities were able to prosper significantly, starting from the Middle Ages, securing substantial autonomy from the city's control and its ruling elites. This autonomy was largely maintained even after Vicenza and the *Vicentino* fell under Venetian rule, as Venice preserved pre-existing balances while constructing its mainland state. Consequently, the rural communities continued to develop, becoming increasingly credible partners for Venice in managing territorial affairs. In the first half of the sixteenth century, when Venice was compelled to strengthen its presence on the Mainland following the challenging circumstances of the Italian Wars and the loss of strategic portions of its empire in the Eastern Mediterranean, it chose to engage directly with local communities. This approach led to the establishment of institutions representing rural areas, exemplified by the creation of the *Corpo Territoriale* in 1550. The fiscal domain was the primary area of this engagement, granting rural communities considerable autonomy in their tax systems and collection methods at both the district and community levels. This led to each community meticulously creating and maintaining its own tax registers (*estimi*). Among the thousands of registers produced, many of which still exist today at the State Archive of Vicenza, those managed with a rolling procedure, in which the composition of the assets of various taxpayers was updated year by year, are of particular interest for the study of inequalities and social mobility. These sources are particularly valuable for this type of study because they provide highly accurate data

on the year-to-year status of various households within a community, as demonstrated by the case study of San Vito.

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