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4.2.4 'Faciendo sette et sedicion': Architecture and Conflict in Sixteenth-century Verona

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ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of the War of the League of Cambrai (1508-17), the cityscape of Verona underwent a remarkable change. The war years had taken a heavy toll on the city, killing thousands of inhabitants and damaging large parts of the medieval structures, which made extensive restoration activities necessary and at the same time created opportunities to experiment with architecture. In the postwar period the Veronese elite were eager to adopt the latest fashions from papal Rome, hiring Michele Sanmicheli (1487/8-1559), who was trained in the environment of Bramante and the Da Sangallo family, as their architect of choice. Historians have ascribed to Sanmicheli a fundamental role in the flourishing of the arts in Verona, but remain reticent about the reasons of his sudden success from the late 1520s onwards. In this paper his buildings will be addressed from the point of view of his patrons by linking his private commissions in Verona to the power vacuum that ensued from the war, which resulted in repeated confrontations between two rivaling clans. Why did these power struggles prompt Sanmicheli's patrons to build? And how did these buildings fit into their strategies to take control of the Veronese institutions? Also, why did they prefer Sanmicheli for their projects? Two case-studies, the city residences of the Bevilacqua and Lavezzola families, will serve as illustrations of the relationship between architecture and power, and show how closely connected architecture and conflict were in sixteenth-century Verona.

KEYWORD

Verona, Michele Sanmicheli, politics, residential architecture

In sixteenth-century Verona conflict is at the heart of developments in areas as diverse as art, religion and politics. In this paper I will address the connection between architecture and conflict in a time of fundamental changes. The period under discussion is the aftermath of the War of the League of Cambrai (1508-17), when the cityscape of Verona underwent a remarkable change. The war had taken a heavy toll on the Veronese community, killing thousands of inhabitants and damaging large parts of the medieval city. This made extensive restoration activities necessary and at the same time created opportunities to experiment with new trends in architecture. The Veronese elite were eager to adopt the latest fashions from papal Rome, hiring Michele Sanmicheli (1487/8-1559), who was trained in the environment of Bramante and the Da Sangallo family, as their architect of choice. I will follow up on a suggestion the distinguished architectural historian Howard Burns made more than twenty years ago at a conference devoted to Sanmicheli, a suggestion which since has not received the attention it merits.¹ His contribution can be summarized as follows. Sanmicheli, a Verona native, had been an architect who worked in his hometown on an exclusive basis for families that were allied to one of its powerful factions, the so-called Bevilacqua clan. Its members – connected through kinship, friendship, and mutual interests – were known for their loyalty to Venice. This stood in sharp contrast to their antagonists, the adherents of the Nogarola clan, who were regarded with a suspicious eye by the Venetian authorities for their close ties to the imperial court of the Habsburg family. Suggesting a connection between Sanmicheli's architecture on the one hand and the presence of faction rivalry in Verona on the other is suggesting a relationship between architecture, politics and social identity in a way that turns the architect into an active agent instead of regarding him as a mere bystander to the conflict. Still, the question how all these different elements precisely relate is difficult to assess when little is known about the rivalry that kept Verona in its thrall for most of the sixteenth century. It is therefore necessary to investigate how Burns' thesis holds up when confronting it with historical data that provide an insight into the origins and objectives of the Bevilacqua and Nogarola factions, and see if this might reveal something about the motives of the families associated with the Bevilacqua clan for hiring Sanmicheli. Did these buildings contribute to their cause; and if so, in what way? To put it differently, if Sanmicheli's patrons were indeed involved in the confrontations between the two rivaling factions, what would this mean for our perception of these objects? Therefore I will address these issues by having a closer look at two residences Sanmicheli designed for families which according to Burns belonged to the Bevilacqua clan, namely the Bevilacqua and Lavezzola families. I will approach these buildings mainly

from the perspective of Sanmicheli's patrons. Patronage is often applied within architectural history only in the sense of *mecenatismo*, the Italian word for patronage in a cultural sense. But in sixteenth-century Verona the demarcation lines of modern-day scholarship did not exist and it is important to regard Sanmicheli's patrons not only as members of a cultural elite, but also as families with obvious political interests that were inextricably intertwined with their economic affairs. To improve their fortunes, families of different means, social standing, and access to power collaborated with each other, a mechanism of reciprocity in which political support was exchanged for favours and tokens of respect. It would be wrong to ignore this form of personal patronage, referred to as *clientelismo*, since architecture was a major means of social and self-definition. There were no clear distinctions between *clientelismo* and *mecenatismo* then; patrons, artists, clients, friends: people might assume different roles at different times, but they were all part of the same network of personal bonds, which were so effective in creating enduring commitments from which everyone could benefit. Having introduced the methodological framework of this paper, I will now continue with a discussion of Sanmicheli's residences.

In Verona five *palazzi* have been attributed to Sanmicheli. These are, in chronological order, Palazzo Canossa, Palazzo Bevilacqua, Palazzo Lavezzola, Palazzo degli Honorij, and Palazzo Della Torre.² Our knowledge about these buildings is based on either stylistic characteristics or indirect evidence, such as requests for renovation filed to the city council and notaries acts in which property was acquired. The uncertain chronology of these palaces notwithstanding, the importance of the buildings is self-evident. Palazzo Bevilacqua and Palazzo Lavezzola are the first private residences in Verona to feature facades entirely produced in stone in a city that was renowned for its tradition of facades decorated with colorful fresco paintings. Sanmicheli was thus the first to break with this tradition, exploring the sculptural qualities of a feature that till then was nothing more but a flat surface. Moreover, Sanmicheli's residences were the first in the Republic of Venice to be modeled after contemporary examples in Rome, specifically Bramante's innovative Palazzo Caprini of ca. 1510.

Palazzo Bevilacqua, a horizontally laid-out structure with strong vertical accents, is seven bays wide and two stories high. The ground floor is separated from the first floor by a balcony, which runs along the entire length of the facade, while the first floor is topped by a monumental entablature. The ground floor is rusticated to emphasize the impenetrability of the edifice, while the loggia on the *piano nobile* is open and festive. The building is characterized by a strong antiquarian nature; for instance, the keystones

of the arched windows on the ground floor are busts of roman emperors, and the half-columns on the first floor deliberately recall the columns of the nearby Porta Borsari, a city-gate from the first century AD when Verona was still a Roman colony. Because the ground plan of the building is asymmetrical – with the entrance at the second bay on the left – and because four more keystones with busts of roman emperors have been preserved, it is assumed that Palazzo Bevilacqua has never been completed. This seems to be confirmed by a supplication in which the Bevilacqua family requests the city council for consent to both expand their residence and appropriate some public ground after they bought the neighbor's house, the residence of the Lodrone family, in order to finish it according to the original design. That design would mirror the present ground plan to create a house with two inner courtyards, but – instead of a total width of eleven bays as you might expect – it would count a total of fifteen bays.³ The chroniclers of the Bevilacqua family, Antonio Frizzi and Valerio Seta, list Antonio and Gregorio Bevilacqua as patrons of the building, which led some architectural historians to believe the design must date from after the death of their eldest brother Gianfrancesco in 1549.⁴ Most architectural historians think, however, that it should be dated somewhere in the early 1530s as it bears a close resemblance to Margherita Pellegrini's chapel at San Bernardino in Verona, the only private commission by Sanmicheli in Verona that is securely documented, which dates from 1528.⁵

Palazzo Lavezzola, a horizontally laid-out structure similar to Palazzo Bevilacqua but with a perfectly symmetrical facade, is also seven bays wide and two stories high. Although there are clear parallels to be drawn with Palazzo Bevilacqua, its use of ornaments is much more restrained and less playful. Nonetheless, the facade remains imposing with its rusticated ground floor, a *piano nobile* with large arched windows and theater masks for keystones, the bays separated by fluted half-columns on pedestals which carry an impressive entablature. Here, too, it is difficult to produce a timeline for the construction process of the building. As a result various suggestions have been made ranging from the late 1520s to the early 1550s. A supplication filed by Nicolò and Gianfrancesco Lavezzola in 1536, in which they ask permission from the Veronese council to start restructuring some old houses, might serve as an indication that a design for the new palace was already in the works by that time, and most architectural historians date the design of Palazzo Lavezzola sometime in the early to middle 1530s.⁶

Having briefly sketched an overview of Palazzo Bevilacqua and Palazzo Lavezzola's exteriors and their dating, it is now time to see how these buildings relate to the social and political context of sixteenth-century Verona, a time of conflict and power struggle, as we will see.

It is not without huge regret that we need to inform Your Excellency about something that according to our judgment is of great importance and of the utmost importance regarding our current affairs. It seems that since a few days in this city certain old enmities between two parties have resuscitated of a sort that we'd be really surprised if these would not result into some great inconvenience and damage to matters important to Your Excellency and in particular to this city.⁷

Thus starts the letter written in February 1525 with great urgency by Paolo Nani and Marco Gabriele, the administrators of Verona, which they sent to their superiors of the Council of Ten in Venice about confrontations in the streets of the Scaliger city, a situation of rapidly increasing tension between rivaling clans that could and would escalate quickly if not addressed with immediate and adequate measures. Although no blood had been spilled yet – not even a punch had been thrown, the administrators inform their superiors – Venice should not underestimate the severity of the problem. For each faction had between fifty and sixty armed men out on the streets, trying to provoke each other into violent responses. What made matters complicated was that men belonging to different armies stood side by side, while those who usually fought together were now at opposite ends from each other.⁸ But the administrators' fear was not limited to the present situation only for it extended to the possibility that soon everyone in Verona would be caught up in the violent quarrels of the clans:

They come together during the day and at night at their houses, bringing together large crowds, forming sects and causing uproar, which in few days actually will lead to some big scandal if these gatherings are not restricted, and will then divide the whole area in two [...].⁹

One of the main causes of concern was that members of the opposing clans were in fact also related to each other, which could lead to a vicious cycle of revenge. According to Nani and Gabriele, it was therefore important to quiet things down, forge a truce, and make peace, for which they requested the assistance of their superiors in Venice. For the time being, they put all the main culprits under house-arrest.

Who were these culprits? The administrators of Verona added to their letters a list of the most prominent adherents of the two rivaling factions, which included various members of the Bevilacqua and Nogarola families, after whom these clans were named.¹⁰ The origins of the confrontations about which the administrators wrote their letters, however, lies not with the leaders but with their followers, ranging from petty insults to downright

murder. But the cause of their adverse relationship lies deeper and the animosity between them kept smoldering over the decades as various reports of subsequent administrators reveal. In 1558 *podestà* Gabriele Morosini wrote about recurring cases in which justice was obstructed, pointing his finger at members of the Bevilacqua and Nogarola clans, who remained unpunished.¹¹ And in 1566 *podestà* Alvise Grimani wrote to his superiors in Venice about how much these families valued 'the honours and offices of the citizens of Verona', remarking he could nothing but observe 'thousands of hand weapons on the piazza and in the streets, carried by servants who come to accompany their masters to their houses'.¹² The remarks by Grimani affirm that the confrontations between the Bevilacqua and Nogarola clans in February 1525 had not been incidents, but were related to the power struggle in the Veronese institutions that ensued after the War of the League of Cambrai ended, something that becomes more evident when we have a closer look at the seat distribution in the city council of Verona. The distribution of these seats was a time-consuming affair which took place every year at the end of December during a complicated voting process. Fortunately, the results of these elections have been preserved for the first half of the sixteenth century in two different types of documents. First, the city council acts (*Atti del Consiglio*) list for each year which individuals were allotted a seat. Second, some registers in a private archive (*Archivio Lando*) hold the exact vote count each elective councilor received during the ballot for the years up to 1552. From these documents we can gather a picture of the seat distribution among members of the Bevilacqua and Nogarola clans, and also of their popularity.¹³ A quick glance learns that the Nogarola family was much more powerful than the Bevilacqua family, the former easily receiving enough votes each time to be elected as councilors while the latter sometimes struggled and failed to win a seat. For instance, if we look at the years around the turn of the century we see that Galeazzo Nogarola, both head of the Nogarola family and faction, gets elected again and again with major support, often surpassing one hundred votes. His antagonist Giovanni Bevilacqua, both head of the Bevilacqua family and clan, had a far less steady supporters base. His grandson Gianfrancesco – eldest brother of troublemakers Antonio and Gregorio – had similar difficulty in getting elected as representative. In fact, during the 1520s he never succeeded in obtaining a city council seat, even if he had occupied one before. Only during the 1530s did he overcome this. The election outcomes of the Lavezzola family, clients and close friends of the Bevilacqua family, show a similar development.¹⁴ Their fortune seems to be connected with that of their patrons and friends as they too struggled to get elected in the 1520s and only overcoming this during the early 1530s. What changed?

For the Lavezzola family, the end of the War of the League of Cambrai meant access to a city council seat, by far the highest marker of social discernment in sixteenth-century Verona, which had been very difficult to obtain and even more difficult to keep.¹⁵ After the death of Albertino Lavezzola, who was the first of his family to be a member of the city council, his sons Gianfrancesco and Niccolò struggled to replace him. Yet two strategies to keep the Lavezzola family at the apex of society proved highly effective. The first was associating themselves with the powerful Bevilacqua family, becoming friends and long-time allies; the second was acquiring plots of land at the riverbank in order to build a residence worthy of the newly acquired status. The Lavezzola brothers filed their request to restructure some old houses into their permanent residence during Gianfrancesco's first term as representative. In the years thereafter, when the Lavezzola residence was under construction and slowly began to make its mark on the cityscape and the people of Verona, we see the Lavezzola brothers become fixtures in both the city council and the highest echelon of society.

This relationship between architecture and politics is perhaps even more evident when we take a closer look at the Bevilacqua family. During the 1520s they struggled to obtain a city council seat, which is remarkable as they were among the highest-standing families in town. Although the reasons for their failure are unknown, we may assume the Nogarola faction was very successful in frustrating their ambitions. Yet the decision to restructure their residence into a magnificent palazzo according to the latest trends in architecture proved right for more than one reason. In 1532 the Bevilacqua family overcame whatever prevented them from obtaining a city council seat and they never faced a similar powerlessness again. More importantly, the brand new façade of Palazzo Bevilacqua was both a claim to and a manifestation of power, showing off a type of authority that was unprecedented for a private family in Verona, with a grand balcony overseeing the street and a long row of benches running along the plinth of the building to provide a waiting area for the family's clients. Who, then, was the main addressee of this exuberantly decorated façade? It might not be surprising that its main audience was the family who lived right across the street, the Nogarola family, their antagonists.

To conclude, the 1520s proved politically difficult for the members of the Bevilacqua clan, but these were also the years leading up to a period of perhaps their greatest successes. As the power basis of the Bevilacqua faction grew and stabilized, members of this clan hired Michele Sanmicheli to design and execute the most ornate *palazzi* of Verona, on a par only with his projects for the Republic of Venice. Palazzo Lavezzola's austere

look equals that of the Porta Palio in Verona, whereas Palazzo Bevilacqua, already reminiscent of the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice, would almost have been as large had it been finished according to the original design. It seems as if these families wanted to make a statement – to manifest themselves in the boldest way they could, and this is exactly what they did.

1 Howard Burns, “*Vasti desiderij e gran pensieri*: i palazzi veronesi di Michele Sanmicheli,” in Howard Burns et al. (eds.), *Michele Sanmicheli: Architettura, linguaggio e cultura artistica nel Cinquecento* (Milan: Electa, 1995), 54-79.

2 Cf. Paul Davies and David Hemsoll, *Michele Sanmicheli* (Milan: Electa, 2004), 355-6, 361-2, 374-5.

3 Paul Davies and David Hemsoll, “Palazzo Bevilacqua e la tipologia del palazzo veronese,” *Annali di Architettura* 3 (1991), 58-69. The facade is 23,6 m long. It would have been more than 50 m had it been completed according to the description of Gregorio Bevilacqua in his supplication to the city council, Archivio di Stato di Verona (hereafter ASVr), Antico Archivio del Comune (hereafter AAC), Atti del Consiglio (hereafter AC), registro 86, f. 100 (April 26, 1564).

4 Antonio Frizzi, *Memorie storiche della nobile famiglia Bevilacqua* (Parma, 1779), 111; Valerio Seta, *Compendio storico dell'origine, discendenza, attioni, et accasamenti della famiglia Bevilacqua* (Ferrara, 1606), 255.

5 Cf. Davies and Hemsoll, *Michele Sanmicheli*, 356-7.

6 ASVr, AAC, AC, registro 76, f. 77 (28 December 1536).

7 ‘Non senza grandissimo despiacer ne occorre significar ad vré’ ex.tie Cosa che p Judicio nro e’ di grandissima Importancia maxime p le’ occorrentie’ pñte. Par che da alcuni giorni In qua siano sussitate’ due

parte In questa Cita p certe Inimicitie vecchie d Sorte che dubitamo grandemente habi ad seguir qualche grande Inconveniente si con damno dle cose d v. Ex.tie Come in d particolari di questa Cita’, Nani and Gabriele in their letter of February 4, 1525 to the Heads of the Council of X in Venice. Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV), Capi del Consiglio di Dieci (CCX), Dispacci (lettere) dei rettori e pubblici rappresentanti (Dispacci), busta 192, n. 109-10.

8 Ibidem.
9 ‘Reducendussi Il giorno et notte In le lor Case con grande adunation di gente faciendo sette et sedicion, che veramente se non se remedia In pochi giorni seguira qualche gran scandalo, et scorrendo qualche giorno tuta la terra sara in due parte [...]’. ASV, CCX, Dispacci, busta 192, 109-10.

10 According to this list, the Nogarola clan are Spinetta Malaspina, Alessandro Nogarola, Leonardo Nogarola, Pietro Alighieri, Marco Guarienti, Pase Guarienti, Tebaldo Lavagnoli, Filippo Guiotto, Giacomo Pindemonte, and Bonifacio Pindemonte; the Bevilacqua clan are Antonio Bevilacqua, Gregorio Bevilacqua, Giambattista della Torre, Raimondo della Torre, Girolamo Campagna, Gerardo Boldieri, Gregorio Boldieri, Antonio Pellegrini, Giovanni Bevilacqua Lazise, and Galeotto Bevilacqua Lazise. ASV, CCX, Dispacci, busta 192, 111-12.

11 ‘Della consolaria posso dire che alle fiatte per dipendentie, parentele e fationi essendo quella divisa Città in due parti, per il più Nogaroli et Bevilacqua, ella possa le-

giermente in alcuni casi et però Vostra Celitudine spesso ode che molti diffidando di essi dimandano delegation all’Avogaria nelli casi criminali’, Gabriele Morosini, August 4, 1558, reproduced in *Podestaria e Capitano di Verona* (Milano: Giuffrè, 1977), 18. 12 ‘[...] ma non si puòte però fuggir che non vi fussero milla arma di hasta su la piazza et per le strade, portate da servitori venuti per accompagnar i patroni a casa’, *podestà* Alvise Grimani, 16 September 1566, reproduced ibidem, 40.

13 The maximum amount of votes each elective councilor could receive was 122 and one needed a total of approximately 70 votes to get elected to the city council (depending on how many councilors were

present during the election). Between the years 1494 and 1516 each representative served a one-year term; from 1519 onwards councilors served four-year terms, after which they had to vacate one year. All data presented here was pulled from ASVr; Archivi privati, Archivio Lando, processi, reg. 5-7.

14 Cf. Burns, “*Vasti desiderij e gran pensieri*”, 69; Davies and Hemsoll, *Michele Sanmicheli*, (2004), 34.

15 Paola Lanaro, “‘Essere famiglia di consiglio’: social closure and economic change in the Veronese patriciate of the sixteenth century,” *Renaissance Studies* 8 (1994), 428-38.