Fragments of Renaissance schools on the banks of the Po River

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1. Inclusion and free admission in private and public schools

Paul Grendler, in his book Schooling in Renaissance Italy, stated that the Italian educational structure «assumed definite form by 1300 and did not change until the late sixteenth century»\(^1\).

However, a vast variety of political forms existing in late medieval and early modern Italy was reflected in the functioning and government of the educational institutions which communities and lordships accommodated. To a certain extent, a school reflected the political order and physiognomy of the community in which it found itself and, of which, it was the expression; this was the case as much in the towns as in the villages and rural lands. This article will consider in particular, though not exclusively, some smaller centers located in the lower Po Valley, near the banks of the longest river in Italy, on the border between the Renaissance States of Mantua and Ferrara.

\(^1\) P. Grendler, Schooling in Renaissance Italy. Literacy and Learning 1300-1600, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 3.
A first distinction concerns the public or private nature of the institution\(^2\). A school can be defined as private when it is established and financed by one or more members of the community or by the local nobleman.

When private, a school could be founded for small or large groups of individuals, like, for example, the children of those who stipulated the practice with the master. An example of this is the case of Montecuccolo, where, in 1484, the master Pomponio Tribraco received a conduct from three men of note of that place, among whom Giacomo Albinelli, the local *podestà*, who represented the Counts of Montecuccolo. It is written that Tribraco was employed to «ammaestrare nel leggere e nello scrivere 20 scolari tutti residenti in Montecuccolo, dei quali 4 figli dell’Albinelli, 5 di Melchiorre, uno di ser Raimondo e gli altri di cospicue famiglie del luogo, come i Ricci, i Montesani, i Bonvicini»\(^3\). In this case we find a consortium of families who take on the master for their own children, excluding from instruction the children of other men in the community.

A different form of the private school is observed when those who stipulate the practice with the master then open the school to the children of other men in the community, either free of charge or upon payment of a duty. Similar cases have been observed by Federico Del Tredici in the rural territory of Milan, where we find examples of *consortia* comparable to the case of Montecuccolo, but with the possibility for the teacher to admit pupils without limitation of number and free of charge\(^4\).


\(^4\) Cfr. F. Del Tredici, «Maestri per il contado. Istruzione primaria e
The second typology of school that can be encountered, both in the Emilian area and the rest of Italy, between the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, is of a public nature. The definition of public education, however, requires clarification. In the communities of the Quattro-Cinquecento this definition did not indicate a scholastic model which was systematically and freely available to all. Instead, it merely implied a communal management of the institution. In most cases the authority entrusted with the management of the school institute on behalf of the citizenry was, in fact, the town council.

The role covered by the town council could oscillate though, depending on circumstances. For example, during the second half of the 16th century the council of Correggio delegated the task of finding a master of *umane littere* and engaging him to keep school to some of its representatives, without assuming the financial obligation tied to the salary. The school was open to whomsoever in the community that wished to attend but the master’s salary was at the expense of the scholars, to the tune of six *scudi* a year for each student, to be paid in advance at the beginning of each semester. The obligations inherent to the collaboration between the master and the council were fixed in the

società locale nelle campagne milanesi (secolo XV)», in *Medioevo dei poteri. Studi di storia per Giorgio Chittolini*, a cura di M. N. Covini, M. Della Misericordia, A. Gamberini, F. Somai, Roma, Viella, 2012, pp. 275-300. A similar case can be found in the county of Novellara, where, however, the local school was not established by the community, or its notables, but by the Gonzaga counts themselves, who left the oldest existing evidence of scholastic activity in this place (1503); Cfr. D. Salomoni, *Le scuole di una comunità emiliana nel Rinascimento tra religione e politica. Il caso di Novellara*, in «Educazione. Giornale di pedagogia critica», V, 2 (2016), pp. 17-42; ASCNo (Archivio Storico Comunale di Novellara), Fondo rogiti e scritture, busta 2 (1496-1505), May 28th, 1503.

employment contract, with specific aspects and clauses which will be discussed subsequently. Presently, it is sufficient to underline the reduced role of the council of Correggio in the management of the school with respect to other communities such as Carpi or Guastalla. Indeed, in these towns there is documentary evidence that the town council took on all the obligations, including the financial ones, connected to the presence of a master and the management of the school.

With regard to the public dimension of the school it is possible to reflect further. As was first outlined, the fact remains that the public nature of the school in the humanistic age concerned the community size of its government and not its openness to students in virtue of a recognised right. Among the authorities charged with the direction of schools, with a certain frequency, it is possible to trace a sensibility which is inclined to the maximum inclusion of individuals that are moved by either the desire or the need to acquire an instruction. Indeed, within the resolutions produced by the community councils with regard to scholastic matters, among the obligations undersigned by the masters employed, there is a fairly regular recurrence of the commitment to support a group of poor scholars who were unable to pay for their own education. The number of these varied and generally depended upon the community’s resources and ability to cover the expense. Despite this, one of the constants of the Renaissance educational system between the 15th and 16th centuries is the presence of students able to access free public instruction.

In 1586, for example, we find the men of the town council of Guastalla intent upon the assumption of a ma-

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ster «affinché insegnasse la Grammatica ai fanciulli […] contentandosi di quegli onesti pagamenti che si potranno retribuire dagli scolari senza però pretendere cosa alcuna dai veramente poveri»\(^7\). Looking beyond the usual dry register of the arrangement, the implications of this commitment are profound. The wording of the resolution seems to reverberate from a source that is six-hundred years older. In the 10\(^{th}\) century Constitutions of Attone, Bishop of Vercelli, indeed, it was established that the parish masters «nihil ab eis pretii pro hac re exigant ne aliquid ab eis accipiant excepto quod eis parentes caritatis studio, sua voluntate obtuerint»\(^8\). The extreme chronological distance between the two sources leaves unchanged a message which is expressed with almost exactly the same wording. The historical path of the theme of freedom of education in scholastic institutions fluctuates but it recurs. Schoolrooms, in every epoch or in every place, were not always open to the “veramente poveri” [\textit{sic} truly poors]. The Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period saw, however, the gradual re-affirmation of the principles of free education according to the same terms of the High Middle Ages, as demonstrated. In the 14\(^{th}\) century, yet again, most of the known grammar schools required the students to pay a duty. It was in the 15\(^{th}\) and 16\(^{th}\) centuries that an inversion of this tendency began to manifest itself\(^9\).

Returning to the Emilian area, in the resolutions of the town council of Carpi, one can read that in August 1550, among those commitments to which the Scandia-

\(^7\) BMGu (Biblioteca Maldotti di Guastalla), Registri delle delibere del Consiglio comunale di Guastalla, February 1\(^{st}\), 1586.
nese master Giovanni Tito de’ Ganzarini was bound there was «dover insegnare almeno a 10 scolari gratis, approvati dal consiglio per miserabili»¹⁰. Again, in January 1568, the master of grammar Girolamo Mariani was hired with the duty of «insegnare gratuitamente a quei fanciulli poveri che frequentano la scuola»¹¹. Also in March 1582, again in Carpi, the master of arithmetic, Giovanni Antonio da Rubiera, was approved on condition that he took into his school «due fanciulli gratis scelti dalla comunità»¹². In Brescello, the Estense governor Massimiliano Montecuccoli wrote a letter to the Ducal Chamber in 1596 to inform of the justified dismissal of the school-master, Girolamo Cavalieri da Parma, «perché accoglieva solo 12 scolari». Later in the same letter Montecuccoli continues writing that the school «anzichè limitata nel numero sia fatta per tutti»¹³.

The sources cited are arranged in proximity to the chronological sequence *ad quem* of the research. In the communities outside of the town context, as a matter of fact, most of the standard sources of government which allow continuity of observation of the dynamics of public life typically begin during the 16th century. Nevertheless, the inclusive management of the schools of which they provide us with testimony are integrated into the ways of ancient practice, as seen in the above cited source from the 10th century. Between the Quattrocento and the Cinquecento, the practice of free access to school for the poor, if not for all at least for as many as the community could af-

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¹⁰ ASCCa (Archivio Storico Comunale di Carpi), Fondo Archivio Guaitoli, busta 246, Manuscript of Luca Tornini, Storia di Carpi, II, 407-408.

¹¹ ASCCa, Fondo Archivio Guaitoli, Libro dei partiti della comunità, Volume I (1538-1564), January 9th, 1568.


ford, began its capillary extension. Further to the ancient Christian roots, the diffusion of this custom was probably sustained by some important and influential pedagogical experience.

In the Quattrocento one of the most significant examples of this inclination was offered by the well-known humanist master, Vittorino Rambaldoni of Feltre. In 1422, before his time in the Mantua area, he already held a *contubernium* (boarding school) in Venice where «accettava mercede soltanto dai ricchi per servirsene a vantaggio dei meno abbienti che riteneva inclinati allo studio»\(^1^4\). Vittorino’s biographer, Francesco Prendilacqua, informs us that the master from Feltre, during the course of his pedagogical activity in Mantua, lasting over twenty-years, «spesso ne istruiva ed alimentava settanta [scolari] in un medesimo tempo, senz’alcuna mercede»\(^1^5\). It is possible to object that the school run by Vittorino was not a public school, held by a town council, but a private school, held at court, and that, as such, it is an example which is not applicable in this context. However, it is the great value of Vittorino’s educational experience which makes his pedagogical ideal into a model which is capable of influencing and shaping those schools also in the public sphere.

The fundamental principle held by the master from Feltre was that the same opportunities should be available for personal development of the pupils’ gifts and talents, regardless of whether they were rich or poor\(^1^6\). In the context of the expansion of the role of *publicus*, even in those


lesser centres, the activity of certain pedagogues, such as Vittorino of Feltre and Guarino of Verona, contributed to the affirmation of a scholastic model aimed to the responsibility towards the social duties of each individual\(^{17}\). As written by Woodward, it was «principio della scuola di Mantova che l’educazione umanistica dovesse porre le basi della preparazione a tutte le migliori professioni\(^{18}\). Therefore, those schools, informed of the example of Vittorino, trained public servants and helped diffuse the concept that, with an adequate education, even poor individuals could develop their aptitudes and be of service to the whole community.

Certainly, a school institution oriented to the *utilitas rei publicae*, based upon the awareness that the education of the young *pro communi utilitate* and instrumental to civil cohabitation, was not invented by Vittorino. Starting from the 14\(^{th}\) century, many small and medium-sized Italian communities also equipped themselves with masters paid for by the town council\(^{19}\). The importance of the pedagogical experience of Vittorino lies in the synthesis of free-access and public good which he succeeded in expressing. In the Emilian area, the network of political and cultural contacts of the Gonzaga family also contributed to the spread of the Mantuan educational model.


2. Notes on some case studies. Correggio, Carpi, Sabbioneta, Viadana and Brescello

In Correggio, for example, the town council and the lords of the community seem to have reached a united form of school management. Here, also the town council played a very important role in the procedures for the employment of school-masters. Unlike the cases of Guastalla and Reggio Emilia\(^{20}\), where the members of the assembly acted collectively, in Correggio certain members of the council were specifically designated to the task. They were the “Priore” and “Provvisore” of the council, assisted by some of the so-called Ancients, if need be. In 1598, for example, for the assumption of the master Giovanni Domenico Candido da Castrovillari, we find record of a meeting

between the Priore, Federico Donati, the vice-Provvisore, Francesco Burgoni and the Ancient, Giovanni Bernardi. The master, who is indicated as already being resident in Correggio for some time while being in origin a native of Calabria, was employed to hold a school of humanities in the community teaching to «fanciulli e giovani».

The peculiar aspect of the situation in Correggio, however, lies in the fact that the representatives of the community did not act simply on the strength of their mandate of delegation but had to be licensed to this ends by the lord, at that time Count Camillo da Correggio. Among the factors which determined this arrangement of the roles of the representatives for the assumption of a master, it is possible to identify the fact that, in Correggio, it was not the community which sustained the school financially, as happened in contrast in Guastalla or in Reggio Emilia. The town council of Correggio acted more as a guarantor than as an employer. The council undertook to guarantee a fixed number of scholars who frequented the school regularly. In the case of any students withdrawing from school, the council would have had to replace them with new students. The master was paid by the students themselves to the tune of six scudi a year each. In 1598, when the contract was stipulated with master Giovanni Domenico, the community undertook to provide 28 students for a total of 168 scudi. The town council of Correggio, however, does not appear to have been a good guarantor. There are documents written by the Calabrian master which record frequent late payment of his salary, on the part of the students, and the slow reaction on the part of the council institution to remedy the shortcoming.

22 BCCo (Biblioteca Comunale di Correggio), Archivio Memorie Patrie, busta 56, Public education, September 10th, 1598.
24 BCCo, Archivio Memorie Patrie, busta 56, Public education.
It is thanks to this circumstance that one of the more characteristic aspects of the government of the schools in Correggio emerges. At the end of his three year mandate, in 1601, Candido stipulates his new contract with the Count instead of stipulating it with the council, maintaining the same functions exercised until that moment. This transfer would allow the master to benefit from improved guarantee of payment, being able to count on the nobleman’s custom’s house to collect the duty from the scholar’s fathers. In this way, under the direct dependency of the Count, the master saw that a guaranteed payment upfront to the amount of 90 scudi was paid on the first of April and a further 90 scudi on the first of October.

The transfer of the assumption of the master from the council to the nobleman appears as a normal circumstance in the local context, and did not provoke protests or tension; in Guastalla a similar transfer would have been unthinkable. Probably this kind of oscillation was not new in Correggio, but rather the norm. In a notarial act dating back to 1485, as a matter of fact, is written that «Borso, Galeazzo e Nicolò signori di Correggio accettano in professio di Grammatica» the master Pellegrino Villani with a conduct lasting five years. In this case the conduct is again assigned to the master from the lords of Correggio. However, in two other deeds produced in the central decades of the 15th century we find two masters assumed by the community council, respectively Filippo Fondi in 1467 and Leonardo da Sarzana in 1471.

26 Ibidem.
27 BCCo, Archivio Memorie Patricie, busta 56, Public education, Giovanni Dalinieri’s deed, March 10th, 1485.
28 BCCo, Ibid, Cristoforo Bottoni Seniore and Jacopo Balbi’s deeds, May 22th, 1467; October 18th, 1471.
Another interesting case of school government being shared between the town council and the lords is represented by Carpi. The community of Carpi was held by lords, the Pio dynasty, who paid particular attention to cultural politics and to the value of education. Nevertheless, unlike the case of Novellara\textsuperscript{29}, the town council and the men of Carpi were not insensitive to this aspect of public life. The concurrence of two authorities which were active and interested in the educational sphere meant that in Carpi these two branches of public life found themselves acting together in more than one case, or in parallel, and not in substitution of each other, as in Correggio. Some masters employed by the princes as private tutors were requested to hold public lessons, while some teachers employed by the council were asked to give service in the castle of the Pio dynasty. For example, the Franciscan, Graziano da Brescia, who was active for the whole of the second half of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century, was engaged as master to Alberto Pio in 1501, but he was soon called to hold public lessons within the walls of the practicing convent of San Nicolò di Carpi\textsuperscript{30}.

Furthermore, in Carpi, a particular situation of three-way co-management of the educational institutions came about. If, in the cases previously described, the management of the school oscillated between the lord of the feud, or the prince of state, and the community, in the case of Carpi these three figures appear all together at a certain time. As a matter of fact, in 1499, half of the feud of Carpi was ceded from Giberto III Pio to Ercole I d’Este in exchange for the dominion of Sassuolo. The feud of Carpi, therefore, found itself under the dominion of Alberto III


Pio and Ercole I d’Este, both of whom owned half of it. The Duke of Ferrara did not abdicate his faculty to intervene in the affairs of the community, including those in the educational sphere. Among the items of *Spesa necessaria del duca* of 1499, indeed, the salaries of two schoolmasters in Carpi are included for a total of 51 Imperial Lira\(^{31}\).

It is interesting to investigate this source in more detail, in order to be able to understand in greater depth certain aspects of the role of scholastic teaching and of the figure of the school-master, from the perspective of a princely political authority within the establishment of the dominion. The list of *Spesa necessaria* contained items of non-deductible expenditure which was destined to pay the men appointed to public office. The role of master was increasingly defined as that of a public official and always less as an option which could be suspended from the balance in case of emergency.

Much time would have to pass before the governing institutions of Emilia, whether municipal or of the regional states, would include the expenses tied to education in their balance sheets permanently. However, in this sense, a glimpse is afforded of the importance the Estense prince gave to the institutionalisation of the school.

Another interesting case is offered by the Lombard settlement of Sabbioneta, which, during the whole of the 15th century and the first decades of the 16th century, was a small burgh near to the banks of the Po, in conflict with floods and the marshes, like all the shore-line communities of that area. The etymology of the name itself testifies to

an origin of conflict with the natural elements, deriving from *sabulo, sablonis*, a terrain composed principally of high-quality sand. In the central decades of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, the small burgh was re-founded by a member from a cadet branch of the Gonzaga family, Vespasiano, whose ancestor, Gianfrancesco, a son of Ludovico III Marquis of Mantua, inherited Sabbioneta in 1478\textsuperscript{32}. The re-founding of Sabbioneta represents one of the most significant cases of urban renaissance inspired by Vitruvian principles. What’s more, the promoter of the re-founding, Vespasiano, educated at the court of Spain as a Page to the then Prince Philip, wished to transfer in his “*capitale*” the knowledge tied to the world of Platonism and the esoteric, accumulated during a life which had oscillated between studies and the battlefield. The Duke of Sabbioneta had indeed received a complete education; he had studied

la storia, le lettere italiane, latine e greche; s’addestrò nella poesia non trascurando le matematiche, l’arte della guerra e i diporti cavaliereschi. Studiò con diletto e con passione, e a questi studi dovette l’esser divenuto buon verseggiatore, scrittore preciso, abile architetto e prode generale. Da questi studi aiutanti la naturale inclinazione dell’animo, trasse egli il gusto del bello e il mecenatismo che lo distinse e lo rese caro al mondo delle lettere\textsuperscript{33}.

Vespasiano’s aim was to perfectly and ideally recreate a miniature Rome, in which to condense the principles of philosophy and the military, in which to fuse the Utopian visions of Thomas More while anticipating the military genius of Vauban. As a matter of fact, using his own design projects, Vespasiano Gonzaga had presided over the construction of the Spanish forts of Pamplona, Fuenterrabía, San Sebastián, Peñíscola and Orano. It was


in this framework of bastions and ravelins that the compendium of a treatise of military art in masonry appeared. Vespasiano constructed a Ducal Palace, a Palazzo of Delights known as “il Giardino” [The Garden], an armoury, a gallery of ancient statues with frescoes by Giulio Romano and Bernardino Campi, the Olimpico theatre, a library, a mint and a Jewish letterpress. This attention to culture made the settlement worthy of the sobriquet “Piccola Atene” [Little Athens] and, obviously, in this little Athens the school could not have anything other than an important role.

It is not known if a municipal public school existed in Sabbioneta in the 15th century, though it is fair to suppose so. Indeed, in the 1400’s the settlement exhibited all the characteristics of social and economic stratification which distinguished the larger boroughs and lands considered previously, in which the presence of educational institutions, which were either public or open to the community, was an affirmed fact at this point. With the rooting of the Gonzaga’s lordship from the start of the 16th century – and, in parallel, the increase in the interference of the dynasty in the affairs of the community – it is reasonable to retain that a shared management, between the nobles and the community, of the school in Sabbioneta, along the lines of that already outlined in Correggio, was reached.

However, the earliest mentions of a school in Sabbioneta is dated 1550 when Vespasiano called to his “capitale” two masters: Federico de’ Marchi and Rodolfo da Zurigo. The latter in particular brought the teaching of Greek to Sabbioneta and had an important role in the foundation of the Jewish letterpress; Vespasiano attended his lessons in person34. Successively, in 1562, Vespasiano called Mario Nizzoli, a master from Brescello, as a public reader of Latin and Greek letters, after his various posi-

Nizzoli was one of the most important Italian scholars of Cicero and Aristotle and his thinking would later give Leibniz one of the bases for the study of *calculus ratiocinator* as a universal philosophical language. As a testimonial to how much the presence of the master from Brescello was desired in Sabbioneta, the amount the Duke of Sabbioneta was willing to pay for his salary, at 300 scudi a year, is telling.

The presence of Nizzoli in Sabbioneta gives some further information about the institutional nature of the local schools. In the sources he is indicated as “letitore pubblico” [public reader], which would mean the lessons he held were open to the community. This aspect seems to be comforted by a cry from Vespasiano Gonzaga in which inhabitants of the domain were forbidden to «metter fuori di casa alcuno suo figliolo per attendere alle lettere di humanità in altro loco che nel studio nostro di Sabbioneta in pena di scudi duecento d’oro». Added to this obligation, those students who came from outside were exempt from every duty and tax, in confirmation of the will of Vespasiano to make of Sabbioneta a popular scholastic destination which was attended by external students. A late document, from the first decade of the Seicento, conserved in the Historic Archives of the Parish of Sabbioneta, informs us that, active at that time in Sabbioneta there were three maestri pubblici stipendiati dalla comunità, che insegnano l’aritmetica e dagli primi elementi della grammatica fino all’umanità inclusivamente a comodo dei fanciulli non solo di questa parrocchia ma ancora delle vicine parrocchie di Ponteterra, Villa

36 Ibid., p. 355.
Pasquali, Breda Cisoni e Commessaggio di qua dal ponte, solamente componenti il comune di Sabbioneta\textsuperscript{39}.

The source is interesting for helping us to understand the evolution and functioning of the schools in Sabbioneta, for two reasons. In the first place it finally shows the role of the community in the functioning and the financing of the schools. Furthermore, this is the only source left which, in Sabbioneta, makes explicit reference to the direct intervention of the municipality. Upon the passing of Vespasiano, in 1591, the illuminated motivation of the promoter of this great cultural season was lacking, and the small state was dismembered, according to the lines of the convention stipulated, between Pirro Gonzaga, Count of San Martino, and Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua\textsuperscript{40}. At that moment, the community must have seen an increase in its responsibility towards the management of the school which had been the Duke’s until then\textsuperscript{41}.

Secondly, it can be seen how in a half-century, from 1562 to 1610, the attempt on the part of Vespasiano Gonzaga to turn Sabbioneta into an attractive center for external students was only a partial success. As a matter of fact, this minor settlement only became a reference point for the rural villages within a closely confined circle of its vicinity in the educational sphere, but it didn’t manage to carve out an attractive role beyond the confines of the small state. It can be seen that the three masters covered the various disciplines of knowledge from Mathematics to Letters, dispensing their service to the inhabitants of the communal territory. However, once Mario Nizzoli had left to return to his home-town of Brescello for the last months of his

\textsuperscript{39} ASPSab (Archivio Storico Parrocchiale di Sabbioneta), Pastoral visits 1609-1984, 1D, State of Sabbioneta Parish, 1610 c. 2v.
\textsuperscript{40} Cfr. G. Coniglio, \textit{I Gonzaga}, cit., p. 498.
\textsuperscript{41} Cfr. G. Sartori (a cura di), \textit{La cronaca di Ludovico Messirotti}, Sabbioneta, Edizioni Pro Loco, 2013.
life, Duke Vespasiano died, so in every aspect, including the scholastic, Sabbioneta was a city born and finished with its prince\textsuperscript{42}.

As mentioned, the land which gave birth to Mario Nizzoli, at the end of the Quattrocento, was not distant from Sabbioneta; only 17 kilometres separated the Gonzaghesca town from that of Brescello, nestling on the banks of the Po and positioned on a strip of land on the boundary between the territories of Parma, Reggio Emilia, Mantua and Cremona. The community of Brescello has ancient origins. The settlement was founded in 190 b.c. as a Roman colony, bordering in the South with the municipality of \textit{Regium Lepidi}, and it was to become an important commercial port along the central portion of the Po River.

Around the year of birth of Nizzoli, Brescello was at the center of a confederation of communities which were located around it’s circumference: Gualtieri, Boretto and Lentigione. Each community expressed its representatives who held a position on a communal council where questions of a reciprocal interest were discussed, the government of schools was likely to be among these\textsuperscript{43}. As a matter of fact, there is no direct documentation regarding the government of the schools of Brescello between the 15\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} centuries but it is possible, even in this case, to elaborate some indirect hypotheses on the basis of other information.

In the first place it is reasonable to hypothesise that, in the period under consideration, the management of the school in Brescello was centralised with respect to the other communities within the confederation, as in the model


\textsuperscript{43} ASRe (Archivio di Stato di Reggio Emilia), Fondo Comune di Brescello, Archivio Antico, \textit{Commissions of the community} (1503-1666).
described previously for Sabbioneta. The other municipalities of the union, as a matter of fact, only began to benefit from a wider margin of administrative autonomy from the middle of the 17th century. Only at this time did the councils of the villages begin to produce registers containing their deliberations and decisions concerning the local publicus. Among the matters to be debated were problems related to the educational institutions which, during the first half of the 1600’s, had passed from the general council of the communal confederation of Brescello to the individual community. In the case of Boretto, for example, the first written evidence relative to the existence of a school dates to 1641, the same year in which the locally held records began and the municipality gained its first taste of autonomy in government.

The communal confederation was not dissolved, the community of Boretto took part in it as a hamlet until 1860. In 1641, yet again, the masters chosen by the representatives of Boretto had to be approved in Brescello, though not by the council of the confederation but by the Estense Governor, present in representation of the Dukes of Ferrara since 1479, when Brescello passed from the state of the Sforza to the Este’s. On the basis of this reasoning, during the 1400’s and 1500’s, it is possible to hypothesise a germinal centralized state organisation of the schools of Brescello, based on what we saw in the case of Carpi. On the 6th of May, 1518 during the conferment of a degree in Arts and Medicine, the school master of Brescello, «magister Sigismundus gramatice professor», was present to confirm the presence of an educational institution in the town.

44 BMGu, Registri dei consigli della comunità di Boretto, I, (1641-1678), March 18th, 1641.
45 Cfr. A. Mori, Il passaggio di Brescello e Castelnuovo Sotto e loro pertinenze dallo stato di Milano a quello di Ferrara nel 1479, Guastalla, Arti grafiche Soncini, 1938.
It is highly likely that, during the course of the High Middle Ages, an important role was played, in the scholastic sphere, by the monastery of San Genesio, founded in the territory of Brescello by Atto di Canossa in 968. A peculiarity of Brescello, undoubtedly, lies in the fact that, in the second half of the 1500’s, the monastery still held an active role in the management of the local school. Again in 1596 we know that it was a «frate agente dell’abbazia» appointed to find the masters for the school46.

Half-way between Sabbioneta and Brescello lies the community of Viadana. This settlement, since the mid-twelfth century, was subject to the dominion of the Cavalcabò, a noble family originating from Cremona, and entered the Mantuan state under its Marquis from 1415, in whose orbit it remained until most recent times. Viadana, therefore, at the beginning of the 1400’s lost its physiognomy as the center of a small set of rural states, like Sabbioneta, maintaining, in any case, an ample communal territory, like both Brescello and Sabbioneta. Similarly, in the case of Viadana, only a few sources remain which help us to understand the scholastic structure of the community.

The oldest available document which relates to the schools of Viadana dates back to 1471. It concerns a petition sent by the 12 men of the local communal council to the Marquis of Mantua from whom they request the authorisation to nominate a functionary to replace their preceding, defunct, Notary. In the petition it can be read that the nomination falls upon a person «addottrinata»; it was the intention of the council of Viadana «farne accrescere lo animo da fare valenti homeni de nostri filioli», in other

46 ASMo (Archivio di Stato di Modena), Fondo Comunità, Brescello Ecclesiastico, Correspondence of the governor Massimiliano Montecuccoli, March 1596.
words: a school master. The source adds a further detail, specifying that the need to have at their disposal a qualified person who was capable of practising a teaching role was given by the presence in the territory of Viadana of «circha scolari 300». The data regarding the number of students would seem to lead towards a school placed in the center of the vast municipality of Viadana, as in the cases analysed in Sabbioneta and Brescello, to which the scholars of numerous rural villages converged. The boundaries of the municipality of Viadana extended, in the 1400’s, for about 100 square kilometres, approximately the present size of the district.

The first direct confirmation of the presence of municipal schools in Viadana is given by a later source, dating back to 1530. A Ducal decree of that year grants an exemption from the payment of taxes to masters who had gone to exercise their profession in the settlement, which confirms a chronic lack of teachers in the community. Indeed, Viadana seemed a place more likely to “export” masters of humanities, than a reality which could attract them. The presence of the neighbouring court of Mantua, Sabbioneta, Guastalla or Novellara, where the nobles were ready to invest in the presence of good masters in their territories, must have had an influence on this aspect. In this perspective, master Pietro Marcheselli, from Viadana, chose to go and teach in the more prestigious and profitable “school market” of Mantua rather than his na-

47 ASMn (Archivio di Stato di Mantova), Fondo Archivio Gonzaga, Orders and regulations, privileges, elections, taxes, community disputes, copialettere, February 12th, 1471.
48 Ibidem.
tive Viadana, more or less at the same period in time as the former sources cited, in the last decades of the 15th century. It seems that only in the second half of the 16th century, the presence of salaried masters, employed by the municipality, becomes continuous. It is plausible to believe that the growth of agricultural income, permitted by the reclamation of cultivable lands, had increased the margins of expenditure of the community. In this period, two masters coming from Parma, Filippo and Guglielmo Husman, a master from Mantua, Anteo della Torre, together with other teachers such as the poet, Alessandro Battaglia are noted.

One final characteristic of the educational situation of Viadana between the 15th and 16th century is given, like the case of Brescello, by the coexistence of municipal schools with religious schools. The Franciscan and Augustinian orders were present in the territory of Viadana, sharing the students with the community school, even though it is not clear under which criteria. What is certain is that these schools were not only destined to religious scholars but were open to those men of the community who had asked to be admitted. The Augustinian school opened and closed its annual educational activities with a series of poetical orations held in the presence of noteworthy members of the community and the library of the convent was open to the public. The Augustinian school in Viadana was specialised in the teaching of Letters, Natural Sciences and Mathematics, while the Franciscan school was

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52 Cfr. A. Parazzi, Origini e vicende di Viadana e suo distretto, cit., p. 76.
53 Ibid, pp. 76-77.
more oriented towards the study of Philosophy and Theology\textsuperscript{54}.

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\textsuperscript{54} Ibidem.


