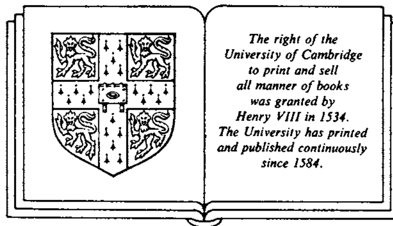
Feuding, conflict and banditry in nineteenth-century Corsica

Stephen Wilson



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Corsica in the nineteenth century

I

Corsica is the third largest Mediterranean island after Sicily and Sardinia. It measures just over 50 miles from east to west and just over 100 from north to south and is situated at about 50 miles from the present Italian and at about 100 from the present French coast. The landscape is dominated by two mountain chains, one smaller of schist in the north-east, the other much larger of granite in the south-west. The average altitude is 1,864 feet, and the highest peak, Monte Cinto, reaches 8,890 feet within 20 miles of the sea.[1]

If nature has made Corsica on this grand scale, she has by the same token made it poor. Less than a third of the territory of the island was cultivated through the nineteenth century. Of the remainder, some 20 per cent was forest and some 50 per cent maquis, natural pasture or waste.[2] The most important timber tree was the Corsican pine (*laricio*), which grows to 150–160 feet and is found at altitudes of over 3,000 feet, together with beech and fir. Maritime pine, found at lower levels, was tapped extensively for resin. Below 1,500 feet there was holm oak, used for charcoal, firewood and tannin, and cork oak. The roots of tree-heather were grubbed up for pipe wood. There were also important chestnut plantations, to which we will return. Though the forests were exploited in these ways, they were difficult of access, even after special roads had been built in the second half of the century, and they were the object of dispute between the State and local communities, attached to their grazing and use rights and opposed therefore to long-term commercial concessions.[3]

For many visitors and for homesick exiles, like Napoleon, the typical Corsican terrain was the maquis or scrub, which ranged from dense shrubbery reaching 10 or 15 feet to open heathland. The former was made up, as Maupassant described it in 1881, 'of evergreen oaks, junipers, arbutus, lentisks, broom, alaterns, tree-heathers, bays, myrtles and box, all intermingled and matted together with clematis, giant bracken, honeysuckle, rock roses, rosemary, lavender and brambles'. The more open maquis was usually produced by regeneration after fires. Many of the plants mentioned are aromatic, lending the maquis a characteristic scent. A few could be used for fuel, fodder, bedding and other

purposes, but otherwise this land served only for rough pasture and for hunting small birds, which was a favourite male pursuit.[4]

The most naturally fertile part of the island was the alluvial plain running down the eastern coast, but much of the land in this and other coastal areas required draining before it could be cultivated. Plans were made in the mid-nineteenth century to drain the marshes around Calvi in the Balagna, around San-Fiorenzo in the Nebbio, and at the mouth of the Golo to the south of Bastia, but only the last had been accomplished by the time of the First World War.[5] The undrained marshes were ideal breeding places for malarial mosquitoes and all the coastal plains were for this reason avoided as places to live, though people descended from the hill and mountain villages on a temporary seasonal basis. Malaria was the main single cause of exemption from military service in Corsica, affecting up to a quarter of the young men in some districts. Effective treatment and prevention were not available until after 1900 and malaria was only eradicated in the late 1940s.[6]

The nature of the terrain meant extreme regional diversity within the island. Three main climatic zones may be distinguished: first, a mountain zone of high forests and Alpine pasture, with heavy precipitation and long winters; secondly, an intermediate zone (between 2,000 and 5,000 feet), with moderate though irregular rainfall and short winters; and thirdly, a maritime zone, with long dry summers.[7] The valleys which fast-flowing rivers or torrents cut through the mountain chains were shut off from each other by high cols blocked by snow in winter and by narrow impassable gorges. The island was thus a cluster of isolated micro-regions (*pievi*) with distinct customs and dialects.[8] From the end of the Middle Ages a broader political and cultural divide emerged between the north-east and the south-west. In the former, the *Terra qua dai Monti*, communal institutions had been established, Genoese rule later was direct, and Italian commercial and cultural contacts were evident. In the latter, the *Terra la dai Monti*, seigneurial rule had persisted, Genoese rule had been indirect, and external influences very limited. For a while during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, this division had been reflected by the existence of two Corsican departments, the Golo and Liamone, an arrangement revived in 1975.[9] The *Terra qua dai Monti* contained the most densely populated and economically developed parts of the island: the Capo Corso, the Casinca and the Castagniccia. Also in the north, forming the hinterland of Calvi and Isola-Rossa, was the 'prosperous and well-cultivated' Balagna.[10]

The geographical isolation arising from natural barriers was only gradually mitigated in the course of the nineteenth century. No proper carriage roads existed in 1800, except perhaps that between Bastia and Corte, which Paoli had established as his capital. This road was not continued to Ajaccio until 1827. By the middle of the nineteenth century, these and the other three towns, Bonifacio, Calvi and Sartène, were linked by road, and the building of secondary and by-roads to villages, and of forest roads had been started; 3,500 kilometres in the former and 500 in the latter category had been built by 1870. However, road-building in Corsica was a formidably difficult task, and the majority of villages were still without roads and reliant upon mule-tracks at the end of the century.[11] Even when roads had been built, transportation remained poorly organized and

very slow. The overnight journey by coach from Ajaccio to Bastia took eight hours in 1870, the journey from Sartène to Bonifacio six hours. At about the same date, however, it took Saint-Germain three hours to get from Santa-Lucia-di-Tallano to Levie, a distance of just over 5 miles, and four hours to get from Muro to Belgodère, a distance of 13 miles.[12] Railway building began in 1876, and some 185 miles had been completed by the end of the century. Again, the terrain was most unfavourable – the Ajaccio–Bastia line of just under 100 miles had 37 tunnels (one 2½ miles long), 28 viaducts, 31 bridges and 180 cuttings – and further obstacles were provided by local obstructionism and graft.[13] Corsica has no navigable rivers, and sea transport between ports in the island hardly existed, save in the Capo Corso.[14]

The isolation of villages and *pievi* was never total. A fairly well-developed system of inter-regional barter existed. Oil merchants from the Balagna, for example, travelled all over the island, exchanging their wares for local products. Cheese merchants from Asco went to the Capo Corso and the Castagniccia. The last-named region provided much of Corsica with chestnut flour and also with wooden and leather articles. Other regions traded in a grain surplus or in livestock.[15] Twenty or more annual fairs were held – for example, the San Pancrazio horse fair at Ajaccio and the autumn fair at Casamaccioli in the Niolo.[16]

The population of Corsica more significantly was not wholly sedentary by the start of the nineteenth century. Most villages were situated in the intermediate zone, but many of them also possessed territory in the high mountains and on the plain. As Robiquet explained in 1835, 'the cereal fields [of the mountain villages] are usually situated on the coastal plains, at a great distance from the villages. The inhabitants go down to plough and sow these lands and then return to their villages, going back again for the harvest.' Very often this involved a full-scale migration. Saint-Germain wrote that the people of Palneca 'went down in October to the plains, taking their utensils, their furniture with them, followed by their wives and children'. Of 242 villages replying to a questionnaire in 1829, 156 had a coastal satellite, where part of the population went in winter.[17] Temporary settlements were formed on the plains, their names sometimes indicating the mother village to which they were linked: Ghisoni-Ghisonaccia; Bastelica-Bastelicaccia. The pressure of rising population in the first half or two-thirds of the century tended to make these settlements more permanent. People spent longer periods of time on the coast, perhaps planting olives and vines there and building proper houses. The inhabitants of Zerubia were said around 1850 'to spend nine months of the year in the hamlets of Caldarello and Pianottole near Figari'.[18] And this process of sedentarization was reflected by the elevation of coastal settlements into fully fledged communes. So, for example, Sotta hived off administratively from Serra-Sorbollano in 1835; Afa from Bocognano in 1857; Monaccia from Aullène in 1867; and Ghisonaccia and Bastelicaccia became independent in 1861 and 1866 respectively.[19] This did not mean, however, that ties were severed with villages of origin. Much of the territory of the erstwhile satellites still belonged either collectively or in private ownership to those living in their home villages. So in 1882 nearly all the land in the newly established communes of Manso and Galeria belonged to the five mountain villages of the Niolo from which they had sprung. Most of the land at Sotta continued to be owned by a few

important families from Serra-di-Scopamène. Again, there were strong matrimonial alliances between Manso and Galeria and the Niolo villages, while the people of Sotta were still registering their births and voting at Serra in the 1930s. Most important in this context, the population of the new coastal villages continued to migrate back to the mountains during the summer. Nearly all the inhabitants of Sotta, for example, left with their families at the end of June after harvest, taking their belongings in carts and on mule-back. They returned briefly in mid-September to harvest the vines, went back to Serra to harvest the chestnuts, and then returned to Sotta for the winter. The people of Conca departed from this common pattern by forming a new summer settlement at the Col di Bavella.[20] It was also customary for those citizens of Ajaccio and Bastia who could afford to do so, to move to *villeggiature* in the hills away from the heat.[21]

Towns were relatively unimportant, and only 17 per cent of the population lived in them in 1851, after a period of considerable urban growth. Bastia was the largest town with a population of around 8,000 at the end of the eighteenth century, rising to 30,000 in 1911. The administrative capital, Ajaccio, grew over the same time from around 4,000 to 19,000. Calvi, Corte and Sartène were much smaller. Only Corte and Sartène were situated inland, and only Bastia had any real significance as a commercial centre.[22] Industry was correspondingly undeveloped. Rural crafts were important in some districts, notably the Castagniccia, and there was some expansion during the nineteenth century in the preparation and processing of local agricultural products and raw materials (soap-making, milling, tanning, textiles, cork, marble). Antimony, silver and iron were mined but only for brief periods and in small quantities.[23]

Visitors, government officials and local people who had been educated abroad often regarded Corsica in the nineteenth century as 'uncivilized' or 'savage'.[24] Over the centuries the island had been governed by a series of invading powers, who had rarely extended their influence beyond the coastal towns and their hinterlands. From the late Middle Ages, the dominant sovereign power was the city-state of Genoa. A successful insurrectionary movement beginning in 1729 led to the establishment in 1755 of an independent Corsican government under the leadership of Pasquale Paoli. Genoa, however, ceded Corsica to France in 1768, and French rule was gradually established from that date, despite the turmoil of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period.[25] It should nevertheless be stressed that at the start of the nineteenth century the effectiveness of state authority was extremely limited, particularly in the interior. French culture was also largely alien. Until the 1850s, if not later, the bulk of the population did not understand French. Interpreters were provided in the courts, and registers of births, marriages and deaths and official correspondence were still kept or carried on in Italian. A variety of local dialects existed, related to ancient Tuscan, and these remained and remain the mother-tongue of Corsicans, though by the end of the century French was established as the official and primary written language.[26] Schools were an important vehicle for the spread of French language and culture. Corsicans showed an early interest in primary schooling for boys, realizing its vocational potential. Secondary schooling and primary schooling for girls did not develop to the same extent.[27]

II

Nineteenth-century Corsica, therefore, was a predominantly rural society of a traditional kind. The economy was one in which villagers used a variety of types of land over a wide area, combining agriculture, arboriculture, horticulture and pastoralism in different proportions. At the start of the century, at Sisco in the Capo Corso, for example, only 16 per cent of the land was cultivated and at Asco 24 per cent, while at Castellare-di-Casinca the proportion was 68 per cent. Again, the proportion of the population classified as herdsmen varied from 100 per cent at Conca to less than 10 per cent at Rospigliani. Although the interests of herdsmen and cultivators were to some extent conflicting, it is important to stress that their activities were essentially complementary.[28]

We have seen that villages, situated most often between the high mountains and the plains, possessed territory or rights in territory in both these locations as well as in the vicinity of the main settlement. Land was divided into a number of categories or zones and its use was subject to a range of collective controls. Gardens or *orti* were situated in or very close to the village. These were usually privately owned and were intensively cultivated with spade or hoe to produce vegetables, fruit, and maize for poultry. This required watering, and irrigation was organized on a collective basis.[29] Fields, in which cereals were grown (wheat, barley, rye, oats and millet), were situated further from the village, and often at a considerable distance on the coast. Gardens and fields were often only roughly enclosed, with dry hedges of brambles, gorse or thorn. Some fields were continuously cultivated on a two-year rotation or with longer periods of fallow to retain fertility and moisture; others were used on a more casual basis. Here the maquis would be cut down and burned over (*diceppu*), and a crop taken for up to three years. After three to ten years, such land might be reused. Fallow land was ploughed three times annually and manured by pasturing livestock on it. Land under cultivation was sown in late autumn and harvesting was done in June or July.[30] Two types of plough were used in the island, the most common being unchanged since Roman times. Both were light and home-made and scratched rather than turned the soil. Ploughs were usually drawn by oxen, harnessed with simple throttle yokes, though other animals were used. Oxen were often hired out to cultivators by herdsmen from mountain villages.[31] Yields in these circumstances were low, ranging from under 5:1 on poor mountain soil to 20–30:1 on the plains. The average yield for wheat in the 1890s was 9:1 and for barley 12:1.[32] Grain was made into flour in archaic water-driven mills with horizontal wheels.[33]

We have referred to the ways in which the forests and maquis were exploited, but trees were also cultivated. Of these the most important was the chestnut, grown in 1846 in 300 out of 355 villages in the island. Chestnuts were most common in the Castagniccia, but became important during the nineteenth century in other areas: the south, the Cruzzini and the Vico region. In the Castagniccia, over half the cultivated land in all villages was devoted to chestnuts at the start of the century, and in some of them the proportion approached 100 per cent. Chestnuts were made into flour, which was either mixed with rye flour to make bread or used on its own in a great variety of ways. Chestnuts were a crucial

complement to the island's grain crop and remained a staple element of the local diet until the time of the First World War. Young chestnut plants require watering, and harvesting is difficult and labour intensive, but otherwise the trees need little attention, leaving time for artisanal and other occupations.[34] Chestnuts were usually privately owned, but they were often planted on land in collective ownership and sometimes on private land belonging to others.[35] Olive cultivation like that of chestnuts was well-established by the start of the nineteenth century, and was particularly important in the Balagna, the Nebbio and the Bonifacio regions. We have seen that there was a significant internal trade in olive oil, but oil was also exported, though it was not of high quality. The olives were left to fall off the trees at the end of the year, and they were pressed more often than not in primitive twist or lever presses.[36] Vines were grown in many parts of the island, and some wine was produced on a commercial basis.[37] Other fruit trees were grown, especially in the Balagna and the Capo Corso. These included mulberries in the first half of the century, in association with sericulture,[38] and citrons in the second, which were exported to make candied peel.[39] Arboriculture on any scale required capital and the ability to wait many years for a crop, which meant that it was the province *par excellence* of the private landowner or notable.[40]

Livestock was kept on land around the village and also on more distant pastures. No stabling was provided and artificial meadows were almost unknown. Asses, mules and horses were used as draught or carrying animals in about equal numbers (10–12,000 in each category at the end of the nineteenth century). Oxen, we have seen, were generally used for ploughing, and 50–60,000 cattle of all kinds were kept.[41] Pigs provided an important supplement to the diet and numbers rose to about 100,000 by the end of the century. They grazed at will, especially in oak or chestnut groves and were killed with much ceremony at Christmas time. Their flesh was preserved in the form of hams, brawns and sausages.[42] Far more important than all these for the rural economy were sheep and goats. There were over 400,000 of the former and well over 200,000 of the latter by the 1890s. A few were kept in and around the villages but most were fed and managed by a system of extensive transhumance that complemented the cultivation of cereals and other crops.

Flocks were taken down to the coast in September or October, spending the winter there. In May or June, when the coastal pasture was exhausted and when the summer heats began, they were led back to the mountains, spending a short time in the vicinity of the village before proceeding to the high Alpine pastures. Flocks from particular villages followed traditional routes, trajectories ranging from 5 to 30 miles. Flocks from Bastelica, for example, spent the winter near Ajaccio and the summer on Monte Renoso. From Asco, sheep went down via Olmi-Cappella to the Speloncato district in the Balagna, while goats went via the Col of San-Colombano to the Agriates 'desert', and both returned to the high mountains surrounding the village. Flocks and herds from the Niolo travelled longer distances to the Balagna, the coastal region between Porto and Calvi, and even to the Castagniccia and the Casinca.[43] Very often, as at Bastelica, Palneca or Asco, transhumance involved the migration of whole families, but in parts at least of the Niolo only the men accompanied the flocks and herds, forming

'companies' under a leader or *capu pastore*.[44] Herdsmen and their families lived in dry-stone huts at shielings in the mountains. Accommodation on the plain was usually less substantially built of earth and straw, though, as we have seen, satellite villages developed from these settlements.[45]

The main pastoral products were wool and milk, the latter being made into cheese of various kinds. Most characteristic was *brocciu*, a soft cooked cheese, made usually from a mixture of sheeps' and goats' milk.[46] Flocks and herds were managed and owned in a variety of ways. Sometimes herdsmen owned their livestock on a family basis. Additionally, they might care for other animals for a fee, or more often for a half-share of their produce and offspring. Other herdsmen worked entirely for employers or for village communities.[47] Herdsmen almost never owned their pasture. The high mountain pasture was common land, as was some coastal grazing. Elsewhere, pasture was privately owned and was taken on lease, usually on an annual basis. Outside herdsmen also leased common grazing in lowland villages.[48] These arrangements were related to some extent to the relative importance of pastoralism in the rural economy. In the Niolo, Asco and the upper Taravo valley, for example, pastoralism was the predominant activity, but elsewhere, at Bastelica, or in the Ortolo and Rizzanese valleys in the south, it was difficult to separate agriculture from pastoralism. In the first milieu, it is possible to talk of a distinct class of herdsmen, but in the second different members of the same family would be involved in cultivation, arboriculture and livestock rearing. Villages leasing pasture to outsiders, for example in the Casinca, usually had no important flocks of their own.[49]

We have referred to collective controls over land use. Traditionally, the village lands were divided into three parts, the *presa* used for cultivation, the *circolo* used for arboriculture, and the pasture. Sometimes shares (*lenze*) in the *presa* were periodically distributed among heads of families, but more often families claimed plots within the designated area by clearing the land and roughly enclosing it. They then retained rights in such land so long as they continued to cultivate it. Times for ploughing and for harvesting cereals, chestnuts, grapes and olives were also communally regulated, as was irrigation and the guarding of fields and gardens against straying livestock. This system remained in operation in central and northern Corsica until the end of the nineteenth century, even where land had become private property.[50]

This last process was a comparatively recent development. At the end of the nineteenth century, 28 per cent of all land in Corsica was still common land. There was considerable variation within the island in this respect. In the Niolo, the Corte region, the upper valleys generally, and even parts of the Capo Corso, two-thirds or three-quarters of the land might be common. On the coast, in the Balagna and the Nebbio, the proportion was much less, and some villages in the Castagniccia and the Casinca had no common land at all.[51] A number of distinctions should be made among different categories of land in collective ownership. Some land did not belong to any particular community or *pieve* and people from over a wide area might use it for cultivation or pasture. People from some twenty villages, for example, used the plain of Taravo. Some land belonged to *pievi* and it was not unusual for two or more villages to share rights in particular territories. Zerubia and Aullène, for example, shared coastal lands in the south; Ota, Evisa

and other villages shared territory around the Gulf of Porto. Most commonly, individual villages had their common lands, but it was possible for land to belong to hamlets or parts of villages, an arrangement found at Bastelica. It was also possible for rights in common land to be restricted to old or aboriginal families, as at Fozzano.[52] Here a further distinction should be made between land that belonged to the village as a corporate entity and that might be leased out *en bloc*, and land which anyone might use if he needed it. Land here was regarded in the same light as other common assets, such as water, timber and fuel supply from the forests, or facilities such as threshing floors. Access to them was open to all who belonged to the community.[53]

Land formally in private ownership was often not free from collective restraints. Much private land was held in indivision by families. Well over a third of the land in Corsica came into this category in 1962.[54] Also, as we have noted, even when land was not common, it was subject to common regulation. The most obvious manifestation of this was the custom of *vaine pâture*, whereby the flocks of the whole village (or sometimes of outsiders) were turned on to the fields after harvest. The French authorities had discouraged this practice from the end of the eighteenth century and a law of 1854 abolished it, but it survived in many villages.[55] The authorities also encouraged the partition of common lands. This had some effect on the plain, but very little in the interior.[56] Equally if not more effective in turning the tide slowly against collective and in favour of private property was the centuries-old process of usurpation of common land by local notables.[57]

Most families in Corsica owned some land, and small-scale property predominated, especially in the north. According to the Agricultural Enquiry of 1867, 93 per cent of rural properties were under 15 hectares in extent. At Castellare-di-Casinca in 1914, over 90 per cent of landowners had less than 5 hectares; while at Stazzona in the Castagniccia only 2 out of a total of 151 estates exceeded 7 hectares.[58] At the same time and related to this, estates were divided into tiny parcels. The 2,957 hectares in private ownership in the canton of San-Martino in 1867 were made up of 22,611 parcels. At Sisco, an estate of just under 4 hectares was divided in 1861 into 114 parcels.[59] Here it should be emphasized that land was regarded as family and not individual property – hence the importance of indivision; also that small landowners had access in addition to common land.[60]

Large-scale property did exist, particularly in the south. Big estates comprised 11 per cent of all Corsican land in 1867, and 38 per cent of land at Porto-Vecchio and 42 per cent of land at Levie fell into this category. By the 1880s, most of the best coastal land of Serra-di-Scopamène and Sorbollano belonged to noble families or *principali*. At Omessa in the Nebbio, estates of over 60 hectares were already common at the start of the nineteenth century, and noble and bourgeois families from Bastia owned big estates on the plain of Casinca. Some estates were very large indeed, for example the Pozzo di Borgo domain to the north of Ajaccio (1,000 hectares) and the Roccaserra estates in the Sartenais (1,500 hectares), but these were mainly rough pasture or waste.[61]

Most Corsican families worked their own land, but various modes of indirect exploitation existed, particularly but not exclusively on large estates. Cultivable land or pasture might be leased out for a year or more, and day-labourers might

be hired. More common was some kind of share-cropping arrangement. Patin de La Fizelière described how this worked in La Rocca at the end of the eighteenth century: 'The landowner provides the land, the seed, the oxen and implements; and the "companion", as he is known, who is often a relative, gives only his work, ploughing and harvesting; they share the crop equally.' Elsewhere, the share-cropper (*colono*) might have to provide his own oxen, or again might be provided with a house by an important landowner in return for doing odd jobs and becoming his master's client.[62]

The traditional agro-pastoral system remained in being through the nineteenth century, though important changes did occur which heralded its ultimate collapse. First, the expansion of population stimulated a big increase in the amount of land under cereal cultivation. In the half-century between 1825 and 1875 the territory devoted to cereals in the island tripled to a maximum of just under 75,000 hectares. In many villages, the increase was even more marked. At Serra-di-Scopamène, for example, the amount of land under cultivation rose from 9 per cent at the end of the eighteenth century to 59 per cent in the 1880s, while at Sisco in the Capo Corso the amount rose from 16 to 67 per cent in 1861. As this indicates, cereal production was increased not by introducing improved methods or achieving higher yields but simply by extending existing methods to more land. Such land was usually of poor quality or difficult to use or both. Terracing of hillsides to make flat surfaces was at its apogee in the third quarter of the century.[63] Some new crops were introduced with government encouragement, notably hemp and linen, potatoes and tobacco, but none was really successful.[64]

Arboriculture also enjoyed a period of expansion and even prosperity in the nineteenth century. The area under vines doubled between 1780 and 1867. Olive-growing spread to all parts of the island and reached a maximum extension of 18,000 hectares around 1875. Chestnuts spread similarly and reached their maximum extension at about the same time.[65]

The area of land under cultivation could only expand at the expense of grazing land, and pastoralism suffered or adapted accordingly. We have seen that *vaine pâture* was officially abolished, and the practice of taking flocks and herds from the territory of one village to that of another (*libre parcours*) was also curtailed. Grazing became more strictly controlled. The number of animals per family head allowed on village pastures was limited, and flocks belonging to outsiders were often banned, unless the owners paid a fee. Legal restrictions, the influence of cultivators and population pressure combined to change patterns of transhumance in some areas. There was a tendency towards sedentarization, with herdsmen spending more time at the coast and using summer pastures closer to hand rather than returning to the mountains. Coastal settlements, we have seen, became proper villages. Traditional pastoralism had depended on the maintenance of common lands and was linked to the general extensive system of land use. From the end of the nineteenth century a more 'modern', commercial pastoralism developed, that was increasingly independent of both.[66]

By this time, however, a general crisis had developed in the Corsican economy. Between 1875 and the First World War, the area under cereal cultivation dropped from 75,000 to 15,000 hectares or below, and in some areas the fall was

even more drastic. At Serra-di-Scopamène the amount of cultivated land was 1,188 hectares in 1889, but only 227 in 1914. There were 25 pairs of oxen in the village in 1830, but only one in 1914. At Sisco, only 30 per cent of the land was under cultivation by the time of the war, and terrace cultivation had been abandoned.[67] Arboriculture suffered in the same way. Vines had been badly hit by disease in the late 1860s and again by phylloxera in the 1880s. Some replanting took place in selected areas, but this was not ultimately successful in the face of North African and Italian competition.[68] Olive-growing also ran into trouble from the 1870s. Corsican oil was not saleable abroad for culinary purposes, and other vegetable oils and mineral oil were increasingly used for soap-making and lighting.[69] The area planted with chestnuts was about halved between 1850 and 1910. The internal and external markets for chestnuts and chestnut flour collapsed. Trees were felled in great numbers from about 1885 to make tannin but this destructive procedure also ceased to be viable after a while.[70] Not only did the small surpluses generated by the Corsican economy cease to be marketable, but, more grave, it came to cost less to import flour and other foodstuffs into the island than to produce them at home in the traditional laborious way.

At the same time, there was a dramatic change in the island's demography. Between 1780 and 1880, the population doubled from about 140,000 to a maximum of around 280,000. The rise was most rapid between 1825 and 1855 and varied of course from region to region.[71] Most rural areas were overpopulated in terms of their resources by the middle of the century, but densities differed widely, being related again to available resources. The average maximum population density was just over 30 inhabitants per square kilometre, but in the Castagniccia the average was over 50, in the upper Balagna 66 and in the Nebbio over 100. Some villages in these regions had even higher figures. By contrast, in the Niolo and other mainly pastoral regions, the density was lower than average. At Antisanti, for example, it was less than 20. Existing population densities affected the pattern of population decrease that came at the end of the nineteenth century. The Castagniccia reached its demographic maximum in 1851, but population growth continued strongly in the Sartenais well into the 1890s. The distribution of population in the island in fact became more even, and there was some movement of population to the towns.[72] But the most marked phenomenon was emigration. Since medieval times, men had left the island to become soldiers, priests, bureaucrats, merchants, and this traditional pattern continued.[73] Corsicans were prominent in France's nineteenth-century colonial and overseas expansion.[74] The late nineteenth- and twentieth-century exodus was different, however, both in scale and pace. Perhaps 385 people left Corsica every year between 1841 and 1880; in the decade before the First World War this figure was close to 2,000, rising to 6,000 in the 1930s. After the war, moreover, women joined men in leaving the island in large numbers. The overall fall in population took place in effect despite a continuing natural demographic surplus.[75]

III

The structure of Corsican rural society matched that of the local economy, though it was influenced, too, by external factors, notably the existence of towns

and of a developing state apparatus. Where private property was important, an upper or ruling class was established. Two main patterns of stratification are evident here, according to Ravis-Giordani. First was the 'noble' type, 'characterized less by any differentiation in wealth, which need not have been very great, and more by the closed nature of the dominant class', achieved via strict endogamy. This type was found primarily in the Sartenais but also in parts of the Balagna. The Sartenais was a region where nobles or would-be nobles were thick on the ground at the end of the eighteenth century. Patin de La Fizelière counted 120 noble heads of family in the town of Sartène alone. The formal loss of feudal rights in 1789 did little to diminish the real power in the south of families like the Susini, the Ortoli, the Roccaserra and the Colonna, at least before the end of the nineteenth century when their political influence was on the wane. As we have seen, the important families in the south owned very large amounts of land. These were not always economically productive but provided the basis for maintaining a following of clients. In the Balagna, latifundia were used more frequently for agriculture and arboriculture. At Belgodere, for example, the censuses of 1851 and 1911 indicate a mass of agricultural workers employed by three noble families, and a similar situation existed at Ville-di-Paraso and at Speloncato.[76]

The second type of stratification was that of 'notables'. Here power was not hereditary or 'acquired once and for all; it had to be retained through constant efforts'. Wealth lay in land, as in the former category, but derived also from commerce, the liberal professions and state service. Social mobility was greater and there was more room for successful talent to rise. This type was found in the Vico and Corte regions, parts of the Balagna, the Capo Corso, the Nebbio, the Casinca, the Castagniccia, the Cinarca and the Cruzzini. Some of the most important of all Corsican families, those which achieved power at national level in France, fit into this category, for example, the Sebastiani, originally from La Porta in the Castagniccia, the Casabianca from the Casinca, or the Arrighi from Corte.[77]

In areas such as the Niolo, the Fiumorbo or the Venaco region, where common lands were predominant, stratification was correspondingly undeveloped. Wealth and power could not be founded there on the accumulation of private property. It was possible, however, for a stratum of 'bosses' to emerge within this egalitarian economic context. Their power was directly related to the size of their families and their ability to use physical force, but also to their skill in manipulating the political process. Control of the mayorship and thus of access to communal rights was a crucial instrument here. The power of such families was usually wholly local, though a few, like the Abbatucci from Zicavo, did achieve wider prominence.[78]

By comparison with élites in continental France, most Corsican upper-class families were poor. In 1828, only one elector paid over 500 francs in direct taxes, while only five persons in the whole island reached the property qualification to stand for election to the Chamber of Deputies in 1839. Again, during the period of limited suffrage before 1848, the number of qualified electors never reached 50.[79] There is no doubt, however, about the reality and the visibility of this top stratum of Corsican society. First, contemporaries used the special terms *jo*, *scio*,