

Chapter 4

Land and Landownership

The Field System and the Use of Land

Although Pertosa is one of the least densely populated communes in the province of Matera, the amount of land available for cultivation is relatively small. Almost two-thirds of its territory is forest and semi-wooded pasture, of which 2,500 hectares are owned by the state forestry commission and a further 1,100 hectares by the commune. All the forest is used as pasture for animals, although that administered by the commune and the state is open only to cows and oxen and only in certain seasons. Even on private woodland there are legal restrictions on the numbers and types of animals allowed.

The next largest category of land is arable, which amounts to 2,360 hectares. Rather more than half is devoted to cereal cultivation: hard wheat, barley and maize; the remainder is equally divided between vegetable crops: beans, lentils, peas, potatoes and onions, and fallow. In Pertosa there is no fixed rotation of crops. The commonest arrangement is a two year cycle alternating wheat with broad beans. However, a rotation of wheat, wheat, fallow or wheat, barley, fallow is not uncommon. In the gardens on the outskirts of the village tomatoes, peppers, marrows and fruit are grown in small quantities. Olives and grapes are the two remaining crops of any importance.

None of these crops is particularly successful, the average yield of wheat, for example, being about seven times the quantity sown. Maize is the most successful of the cereals, but, since its bread-making qualities are not appreciated locally, it rarely constitutes more than a small percentage of the total cereal acreage. Olives and grapes are susceptible to frost, and since Pertosa is in the mountains, both frequently fail.

The most striking feature of the field system in Pertosa is the fragmentation of land. There are 2,114 separate properties, and well over half of them are of less than half a hectare. If one excludes land belonging to public corporations, the average size of holdings in the village is little more than two hectares.¹

Fragmentation is greatest in a narrow strip of territory which extends for about a mile on three sides of the village. Most peasants own one or more plots in this area which they use as gardens. These gardens are often as small as one-eighth of an acre and are rarely bigger than one hectare. For the most part they are worked and, indeed, owned by women. Because they are so near to the village, most women can find time to cultivate them for a few hours each day without neglecting their household duties. Garden land is highly prized and readily saleable. Indeed, one of the reasons why it is so fragmented is that peasants who are in debt often prefer to sell an olive tree or a vineyard rather than accept a loan at a high rate of interest. Thus, there are many gardens in Pertosa in which the soil belongs to one family and the ownership of the olive trees growing in them is divided between a number of different proprietors.

In the rest of the territory of Pertosa there are two quite distinct field systems: on the one hand, there are about sixty *masserie*, self-contained farms in the English sense of the term, on the other, there are considerable tracts of land which are split up into small plots each with separate owners. This dual system is very largely the heritage of the nineteenth century feudal and ecclesiastical land settlements. Most of the larger *masserie* are on land which was granted in full ownership to the ex-feudal lord after 1806. Many of the smaller farms originally belonged to the church or the commune and were brought or usurped by the gentry in the nineteenth century. The plot system is mostly confined to areas which were granted on permanent copyholds in 1817. In part, however, it is the result of the division of a few small estates which were sold to emigrants who returned to the village at the end of the last century.

In Pertosa, there are three main ways of running a *masseria*. First, it can be worked directly by the owner either with his own family labour or with the help of a manager and hired farmhands. Secondly, the farm as a whole can be rented or given in *mezzadria*. Thirdly, the individual fields which comprise the *masseria* can be divided into plots and rented to peasant families. Before discussing the relative advantages of these methods, it is worthwhile giving a few examples.

The farm of Felice Di Persio at Monacella is one of the few remaining examples of estates worked directly by upper class owners. Monacella, which was originally part of the feudal demesne, was brought by the uncle of the present owner in 1898. It is one of the largest farms in Pertosa and covers some 235 hectares. Forty hectares are classified in the *catasto* as arable, and the rest is permanent pasture. The *masseria* is mainly used for stock breeding and Di Persio keeps large herds of cows, sheep and goats. Although he

produces some cheese and *ricotta* (buttermilk curd), his animals are usually sold as one-year-olds at the autumn sales to wholesalers from Bari and Naples. Di Persio supervises the farm himself and lives there for most of the year. Manual work, however, is performed by four *salarati* (workers with annual contracts) and their families. In busy seasons, for example during the grain harvest, he also employs a small number of day labourers.

Nowadays, Di Persio works only about one-third of his arable land. Formerly, the whole 40 hectares was sown with grain and vegetables, but since about 1955 he has found it increasingly unprofitable to produce these crops and has gradually reduced the acreage under arable cultivation. Indeed, the only reason why he still grows some wheat is that his *salarati* are mostly paid in kind. Thus his *vaccaro* (cowherd) is paid in the following way:

40,000 lira a year

42 tomoli (17 quintals) of grain a year

1 litre of olive oil a month

1 kilogram of salt a month

2 cheeses a month

The right to cultivate three acres of arable land

The right to keep a small number of animals and fowl.

In addition, Di Persio agreed to help him obtain family allowances for his children, and is expected to act as intermediary with the state bureaucracy should the occasion arise. Although *salarati* have security of tenure and are quite well paid, for reasons I have already discussed in Chapter 2, few Pertosini are willing to take a job which necessitates living permanently in the countryside. In fact, there was quite a high turnover of employees at Monacella, and in recent years Di Persio has had increasing difficulty in finding labour.

By far the commonest type of *masseria* is that owned by the prosperous peasant who works his land directly with labour supplied by his own immediate family. Indeed, slightly more than one-half of the farms in Pertosa are run in this way. With very few exceptions, they are small, ranging from twenty to fifty acres. Today, these *masserie* are used for raising animals: sheep, goats, and to a lesser extent, cows. Although their owners usually reserve a few acres for the production of sufficient wheat and vegetables to meet household needs, they depend for cash income on selling their animals at the autumn fair.

A typical example of a farm of this sort is the *Masseria U Pozzo*. *U Pozzo* was originally part of the estates of a minor religious order which was suppressed at the end of the eighteenth century. It was bought by the *Amodios*, the richest family in *Pertosa*, and remained in their possession until they went bankrupt in 1917. Six years later, it was brought by the father of the present owners with money he had earned as an emigrant in the United States. On his death, it was inherited by his two daughters, one of whom now works the farm with the aid of her husband and seven children.

U Pozzo is a holding of twenty acres, of which three are used to produce grain and vegetables. The remainder is under grass and supports a flock of thirty sheep and a few cows. In addition, there is a small olive plantation and a vineyard. The grain, olive and grape harvests are divided equally between the two sisters; the profit from animal sales goes to the family which works the land. Although a small quantity of grain is grown, the husband of one of the owners recognises that it is an unprofitable crop. According to his calculations in 1965, it cost him 20,000 lira a quintal to produce, when the market price for hard wheat was about 10,000 lira a quintal. He told me that he continued to produce it only because he did not have to pay labouring costs.

In *Pertosa*, there were eleven *masserie* which were rented in 1965. Mostly they were of medium size (between fifty and one hundred acres) and, with two exceptions, they belonged to members of the gentry. Traditionally, tenants paid rents in kind and were expected to make a series of gifts to the owner several times a year;² nowadays, they are invariably paid in cash after the harvest has been gathered at the end of July. Tenancy contracts vary from one to six years. These farms are run in much the same way as the *Masseria U Pozzo*. All are rented by peasant families who use them primarily for raising animals. With a single exception, the labour force consists of the tenant and his wife and children, although occasionally hired labour is used in peak seasons.

The owners of larger farms (over 100 acres) usually prefer share-cropping tenancies. The form of contract varies slightly according to whether they intend to produce arable crops or rear animals. In the first case, the owner provides the land and half the seed and fertiliser; the crop is equally divided at the beginning of August.³ In the second, the *padrone* supplies land and usually most of the animals; the *mezzadro* gives his time and labour. At the end of the year, the offspring are divided equally between them.

At the present time most *mezzadria* contracts are of the second type. Thus, for example, *Fazzano*, one of the largest and most fertile estates in *Pertosa*, is now almost exclusively devoted to stock-breeding. It has been

given in *mezzadria* to three peasants who use it as winter pasture for the herds of one of the wealthiest landowners in the village. Although Fazzano contains more than 250 acres of first class arable land, most of it is now uncultivated.

The practice of dividing up the fields of a *masseria* and granting tenancies to peasants has now virtually disappeared, since landlords are no longer able to find people who are willing to accept land on these terms. Many of the larger *masserie* are situated in outlying districts, and few peasants are prepared to spend many hours travelling to distant plots when they have other possibilities of obtaining work. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and, again, after the end of the Second World War, it was one of the commonest methods of running large farms. But it was only profitable in periods of acute land scarcity when peasants were willing to suffer considerable personal inconvenience and pay high rents in the hope of obtaining sufficient land to feed their families.

In the last decade there has been a striking change in the way in which the larger *masserie* are worked. Traditionally, upper class landowners had to choose between renting fragmented plots or working their farms directly: today, neither of these methods is really feasible, and the choice lies between *mezzadria* and leasing the entire estate. The traditional system depended on land shortage amongst peasants, and the availability of a cheap and plentiful labour force. Since land was of poor quality, grain production was only profitable if labour costs were cut to the minimum. Rent-racking could only be made to pay as long as demand for land was far in excess of supply.

The choice between direct administration and fragmentation of estates was largely determined by the amount of time the owner was prepared to spend on farm management, and by whether he lived permanently in the village. Many members of the gentry followed professional careers which took them out of Pertosa. Some of them were willing to entrust the administration of their *masserie* to farm managers, but most chose to employ a rent collector, since they believed that it was far more difficult for him to cheat them.

Similar considerations affect the present-day choice between renting and share-cropping tenancies. Generally speaking, landowners who live in the village prefer the latter which, provided they supervise the *mezzadro*, is usually the more profitable contract. Those with extra-village careers endeavour to rent their land, although in the last few years there has been a growing tendency for them to sell out their holdings.

The other important change in recent years has been the gradual conversion from arable to pasture. Large scale cereal cultivation is now no longer practised on the *masserie* and it persists only on scattered peasant plots.

Peasant smallholders find it difficult to change the type of cultivation, since their holdings are too small and too widely dispersed to enable them to raise animals. Grain requires relatively little attention and is, perhaps, the only crop which can be cultivated by people who spend most of the year outside the village. But even peasants are now planting less grain than in the past. Many of them argue that it is no longer profitable, and marginal and distant holdings are slowly being abandoned.

Inheritance and the Fragmentation of Holdings

Pertosini recognise two sets of rules governing the transmission of property: the Italian civil code and local custom. These rules differ in detail and emphasis, but the threat of legal sanctions is usually enough to ensure that in any particular case there is not too much divergence between them.

Italian law provides for the equal division of property between all heirs. Testamentary disposition is generally restricted to one-third of the entire estate, and there are also limits to the extent to which a person can dispose of his family patrimony during his own lifetime. A woman's rights to property are those of a legal minor: the dowry she bring into marriage is controlled and administered by her husband; on his death, she enjoys only usufructuary rights to his estates. Furthermore, there is a strong legal presumption that most property transactions within the family take place at the death of its head. Fathers are entitled to endow their children during their lifetime, but such transactions are only recognised by the law if they are drawn up in the correct contractual form and registered with a public notary.

In dealing with questions about the transmission of rights to property, peasants and artisans in Pertosa draw a sharp distinction between houses and land. Ideally houses are used to endow daughters, land is divided between sons. The stage in the life cycle at which transmission occurs is also different for the two sexes. On marriage, daughters should receive a trousseau, a house and a small plot of garden land, and the dowry is said to extinguish future rights to the family patrimony. The common practice is for brothers to postpone setting up independent households until their sisters are safely married. They are also expected to contribute to the dowry and wedding expenses. Indeed, most men argue that this contribution serves to 'buy out' the shares of their sisters and co-heirs. On the other hand, sons must usually await the death of their father before inheriting portions of the family estate. Often, a young man is given a small plot of arable when he marries, but most fathers are unwilling to relinquish control until they become too old to work their lands, which legally remain in their possession until they die.

This pattern of inheritance has a number of important legal, social and economic consequences. In the first place, since marriage contracts are rarely registered, there is no real possibility of legal redress if, on the death of the household head, a daughter's husband claims a share of the family lands. Indeed, in my experience, most quarrels about land in Pertosa were between brothers-in-law, and they were invariably disputes about whether a wife's dowry was of equal value to her brothers' portions of the estate. Secondly, the transmission of houses through women largely determines the structure of the neighbourhood. Since all Pertosini aspire to buy dowry houses for their daughters in the area in which they live, neighbourhoods are dominated by closely related clusters of female kin. A third consequence of the inheritance system is that fathers have far more authority over adult sons than over married daughters. At marriage, sexual rights and duties over daughters pass to their husbands. It is not inappropriate that their property rights should be transferred at the same time. By retaining control over land, parents have some assurance that their sons will provide them with comfort, aid and economic support when they grow old. Fourthly, the exclusion of women from the inheritance of land helps to maintain family holdings intact, and is one of the main peasant stratagems for avoiding the fragmentation and scattering of land which would result if the laws of partible inheritance were rigorously and consistently applied.

Amongst the upper class the pattern of inheritance is somewhat different, but at least as far as the conservation of property is concerned, it is similar in its effects. In Chapter 3, I described some of the ways in which the nineteenth century gentry tried to avoid dividing their estates. Although nowadays younger sons are no longer expected not to marry, other mechanisms have been evolved which seek to achieve very much the same result. The distinction between houses and land is of little use to the gentry, since their estates are worth very much more than their houses in the village. Nevertheless, they normally try to ensure that whenever possible only males inherit land. The incidence of unmarried females is higher amongst gentry families than in any other social class in the village. Upper class fathers are usually prepared to mortgage their estates in order to provide their daughters with a cash dowry which is the full equivalent of their share of the patrimony. Moreover, there are still some echoes of the system of primogeniture in Pertosa. I heard of two recent cases in which wealthy landowners decided to leave the dispoñibile to their eldest sons on the grounds that this was the most appropriate method of retaining property in the main branch of the family.

In the present century the gentry have been far less successful in maintaining family patrimonies intact than they were in the last. Two of the largest estates in the village are now divided between a score of heirs, and some of the smaller *masserie* have also been sub-divided. Nevertheless, it is probably true that for the younger generation hegemony over land is far less important than it was for their fathers. Most of them have professional careers outside the village, and the rents they derive from land in Pertosa are no more than a secondary source of income. As rentiers, they are relatively unconcerned about the effects of dividing family estates.

The extreme fragmentation of land, which characterises many peasant societies, has often been attributed to the system of bilateral inheritance.⁴ But although there are many examples of fragmentation in Pertosa which are clearly economically absurd (I was told, for instance, of a man who owned three-two hundred and eightieths of a two acre plot), it is by no means clear that it is the rules of inheritance which are the primary causal factor in this process. In Pul Eliya, Leach maintains that systems of bilateral inheritance only lead to fragmentation in situations of acute land shortage,⁵ and this argument seems also to apply to Pertosa. In the years of land-plenty at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the gentry had no real difficulty in keeping estates intact. The division and scattering of holdings only became a problem when economic conditions got worse.

Similarly, it is easy to exaggerate the dire consequences of fragmentation. The classic model of the southern Italian peasant spending longer walking to and from his many scattered plots than in actually cultivating them,⁶ misrepresents the working conditions of most Pertosini. Many of the really small holdings are gardens which are cultivated by women in their spare time. Although it is sometimes a nuisance to have, say, tomatoes and beans in one plot and olives in another, they are never more than a few minutes walk from the centre of the village. The fragmentation and scattering of arable holdings presents more serious difficulties, but, since there is a market for land, they are often resolvable. Pertosini display none of the attachment to family lands which is said to characterise many peasants. If they inherit a plot which is inconvenient or unprofitable, they usually sell it.

Land and Class Relations

Pertosa not only has relatively little cultivable land, but most of it is owned by a small upper class. In Chapter 3, I described the way in which a score of gentry families came to hold the greater part of the economic resources of the commune in the nineteenth century. Even today, their control over land remains virtually unchallenged.

Unfortunately, neither the 1947 I.N.E.A. survey nor the agricultural census for 1961 give details of property distribution by social class. According to my own, rather approximate calculations, in 1964 19 gentry families (32 households) owned between 60% and 70% of the cultivable land in the village, and three families alone held almost one-half of this amount. Almost all the large and most of the medium size *masserie* were in their possession. Moreover, the economic power of the gentry was not confined within the boundaries of the commune. Thus, for example, in 1951⁷ the two richest landowners in Pertosa had holdings of about 1,000 hectares within the village, but owned nearly 2,500 hectares in three neighbouring communes.

Table 4: Land distribution in Pertosa in 1947⁸

Size of holding	Number of holdings	Total extension (in hectares)	Percentage
Less than 0.5h.	1,255	224	2.6
From 0.5 - 2h.	550	553	6.4
From 2 - 5h.	172	547	6.4
From 5 - 10h.	54	382	4.4
From 10 - 25h.	54	790	9.1
From 25 - 50h.	15	481	5.5
From 50 - 100h.	5	323	3.6
From 100 - 200h.	3	469	5.3
From 200 - 500h.	4	1,127	12.8
From 500 - 1,000h.	1	732	8.4
More than 1,000h.	1	3,113	35.5
Total	2,114	8,741	100.0

Table 4 shows the distribution of land in Pertosa in 1947. Well over one half of the holdings are of less than half a hectare, and more than 90% are of less than five hectares. Most of these small properties belong to peasants, and they amount to about 15% of the total land area of Pertosa. Property ownership is widely diffused.⁹ Most peasant families own some land, but it is rarely enough to meet their needs. They are compelled, therefore, to take on extra holdings or to seek employment elsewhere. Until very recently those who remained in the village were forced into a relationships of dependency on the gentry who control these resources.

The economic and social dominance of the gentry can best be illustrated by examining briefly the way in which they ran their estates in the immediate post-war years. Perhaps the wealthiest landowners in this period were the three brothers Martino. In Pertosa they owned three large *masserie* and a number of scattered fields (together about 270 hectares); and in two nearby communes, estates amounting to 1,100 hectares. In addition, they owned about 150 peasant houses in the village, and a large and fertile olive plantation. In 1951 the Martinos are said to have employed about 80 full time *salarati* and at peak seasons some 300 Pertosini worked on their estates. Moreover, most of one of their *masserie* in Pertosa was divided into plots and given in *mezzadria* to about 40 families.

The Martinos were by no means exceptional. There were two other families of similar economic standing, and a score of smaller landowners who provided some work and land. With minor exceptions, none of them invested capital in improving or modernising their estates. They had little incentive to do so, since labour was cheap and plentiful and they had no difficulty in renting land.

But the ownership of land conferred power on the gentry only so long as peasants had no alternative sources of employment and livelihood. The growth of emigration has both deprived them of their labour force and compelled them to change the way in which they run their estates. Most of the older and middle generations of peasants have worked for or rented lands from upper class families at some stage in their lives: for the young, however, stories about ill-treatment and harsh working conditions on the *masserie* are rapidly becoming part of the traditional folklore.

Notes to Chapter 4

- 1 INEA, 1947, *Lucania e Calabria*, p. 52.
- 2 For example, first fruits and vegetables, chickens and eggs at Easter, pigs at Christmas.
- 3 In 1965 a new law was passed fixing the division at 52% and 48% in favour of the *mezzadro*.
- 4 See for example Wittofgel (1964: 79-81).
- 5 Leach (1961: 142-3).
- 6 Banfield (1958: 50).
- 7 I.e., before land reform. Under the land reform scheme, no land was confiscated in Pertosa. Two local landowners, however, lost part of their estates in neighbouring communes.

8 INEA, 1947, *Lucania e Calabria*, p. 18.

9 According to the INEA survey, in 1947 there were 6,838 landowners in Pertosa. This figure, however, is considerably inflated, since it was arrived at by taking each property registered in the *catasto* and then counting the number of owners. People who owned more than one property were counted several times and the heirs of undivided estates (which are listed separately in the *catasto*) were also included.