Possession of lands and fortresses was integral to the identity of the military nobility, to their own sense of who they were and to others’ sense of who they were as well. Individuals could be accounted members of the military nobility while holding no lands or castles, but a man would struggle to maintain that status if all his family had lost theirs. On the other hand, ownership of a landed estate, even one with fortifications, would not in itself qualify a family to be considered *signori di castelli*. A rich merchant, a member of a civic nobility, could buy an estate with a castle and his son could go off to be a soldier, but the estates could be sold and the son return to take up the family business without the family losing their status. If the lands and castles of a family of military nobility were permanently lost to them by the fortunes of war or sale or confiscation, the family risked falling into oblivion, unless one or more of its members managed to retrieve the family fortunes and establish another base elsewhere. Many of the estates of the military nobility might yield comparatively little income, but could still be prized because of their strategic position, or the fighting men they could supply. The military resources of these estates were an intrinsic part of their worth to their lords. Men who inherited only a fraction of an estate would cling to it, and maintain their right to live there rather than sell out and make what could well be a better living elsewhere. Identification with, and attachment to, estates was strengthened and deepened where the family felt they were truly lords of the lands and the people, independent of any superior, prince or republic.

The precise legal status of an estate – whether it was an alod, owned outright, a long-term leasehold or a fief – did not necessarily determine how strong the sense of lordship of the individual or family who possessed it would be. Some leaseholds had been in place for several generations, for centuries. If they were held of a religious institution, the original lease might well have been a disguised sale or grant or *post facto* legitimation of an act of usurpation in any case, in order to get round the canonical prohibition of the sale of church lands. Fiefs generally brought with them the delegation or grant of powers of government, of taxation and the administration of justice, that endowed the fiefholder with much greater authority over the people who lived on them than the owner of an alod would generally have. Imperial fiefs, when the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor in Italy was weak, were *de facto* independent states, however miniscule.
Given the piecemeal way in which the patrimonies of many noble families had been built up, sometimes over several centuries — by purchase, grants, forcible seizure, inheritance from maternal kin or collateral lines of the lineage, and dowries coming into the family — confusion, genuine or contrived, over the exact legal status of a particular estate, or the patrimony as a whole, was not surprising. Financial or political pressures, or the fortunes of war could lead to the loss of lands which might then be recovered on different terms. Acknowledgement of changes made under one set of circumstances might be disavowed under another, but leave grounds for legal dispute and conflicting claims to rights over lands.

Borgo Fornari, which dominated the Valle Scrivia and hence one of the routes between the duchy of Milan and the republic of Genoa, was an example of the ambiguities that could arise. It had been included in the investiture with the Valle Scrivia and much of the Val Borbera granted to Opizzino Spinola by the Emperor Henry VII in 1313. Opizzino already possessed these lands, and the Imperial investiture served principally to strengthen his title to them.¹ In the early fifteenth century, Troilo Spinola sold Borgo Fornari to Genoa, to the disgust of his family who ostracized him for alienating so important a place in the middle of their lands. Shortly after it was one of the places taken by the duke of Milan, Filippo Maria Visconti, during a war against Genoa, and in order to have the help of the Spinola in his plans to take Genoa for himself, the duke invested them with it in fief in 1421. After the Genoese revolt against Visconti in late December 1435, the Spinola received a fresh grant of Borgo Fornari as part of their agreement with the new republican government.² By 1447, the behaviour of the Spinola who held Borgo Fornari, Caroccio di Oddone, was so disruptive that the doge, Giano Campofregoso began to lay plans to take it from him. Getting wind of this, other Spinola agreed to buy it from Caroccio, and to forestall any dispute about this transaction, they asked the Genoese government to ratify the sale. The Genoese wanted some recognition of their sovereignty over the place in return, but the Spinola refused, arguing it was an Imperial fief. Enquiries were made, and the Genoese concluded that in fact they had no rights over Borgo Fornari, and gave their approval to the sale without any conditions.³

When there were no grounds for disputing to which state, if any, an estate appertained, there could still be doubts about its legal status. When Girolamo Orsini da Bracciano murdered his half-brother Napoleone in 1534, papal

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³ ASGenoa, AS 537, ff. 160v-161r, 166r-168v, 175r-176r.