H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bertrand Forclaz. *La famille Borghese et ses fiefs: l'autorité négociée dans l'État pontifical d'Ancien Régime.* Rome: École française de Rome, 2006. viii + 418 pp. No price listed, ISBN 978-2-7283-0550-6.

Reviewed by Caroline Castiglione (Department of Italian Studies Brown University)
Published on H-Italy (November, 2009)
Commissioned by Gregory Hanlon

Late Roman Feudalism

This learned and thoroughly researched book offers a multifaceted examination of noble jurisdiction in the early modern Roman countryside. Through original research and a well-organized presentation of his findings, Bertrand Forclaz makes a remarkable contribution to our understanding of noble administration of justice and of noble interventions in the governing of the communes in Latium, the rural region surrounding the capital of the Papal States. The study specifically focuses on the administration of the Borghese family, the greatest early modern landowners of Rome. Seigneurial jurisdiction is richly documented in the family's vast archives, through which Forclaz examines key problems in rural politics, the policing of crime, the administration of justice, and the parameters of seigneurial authority, issues which we only now are beginning to understand for central and southern Italy in the early modern period. Amidst the flurry of recent interest in these topics, Forclaz's contribution is certainly worthy of high praise and a wide readership both below and beyond the Alps.

In the face of the abundance of the Borghese archives, the author obviously had to make some judicious research choices. Since the Borghese family had as many as thirty-three fiefs, Forclaz wisely limited himself to four important ones: Norma; Montefortino (today called Artena); Palombara; Canemorto (today called Orvinio). These represent areas of Latium where the Borghese owned considerable territory, specifically southern Latium and the Sabina. The author also cites liberally from evidence beyond these four fiefs. The book is about the seventeenth century, specifically it is a synchronic study of the how aristocratic power functioned in the second half of the seventeenth century. Thus its eighteenth-century excursions are less persuasive, and while they suggest the profound political changes underway in eighteenth-century villages, they cannot explain them.

These minor limitations are much more than overcome by the depth of the analysis of the seventeenth-century materials, through which Forclaz sustains an argument that is intriguing and substantive. He thoroughly examines the negotiated forms of authority on the part of the Borghese family, specifically the dynamic between the family, its representatives in the fiefs, and its "vassals," as they were called in the seventeenth century. His research is particularly critical for the rural history of central Italy, which, until the path-breaking work of Renata Ago in the early 1980s, had received little scrutiny and even less so from a political point of view.

A number of historians have attempted to chart the political trajectory of the Papal States, debating whether, as Paolo Prodi insisted, its politics were more successfully centralizing (and a model for other European states) or whether, as Mario Caravale asserted, the Papal States remained a patchwork of compromises between a variety of local polities and the representatives of papal power. Forclaz sides with those who underscore the strength of seigneurial power around Rome, noting that papal nepotism helped to reinforce aristocratic reach into the countryside. The great aristocratic families like the Borghese clung to their jurisidictional authority, especially in the administration of justice and the monitoring of the affairs of communal governments. Within this larger set of historiographical debates, as well as in the more focused issues related to rural society and justice, Forclaz offers a very wide reading in the secondary literature, especially the Italian-, French-, and German-language literature on these themes. He strives to present a balanced overview to the reader and it often bolsters his readings of the primary evidence. While one might quibble with his characterization of the contributions of microhistory, for instance, or find that two competing historiographical schools can only be brought together with difficulty, his attention to these matters is critical to the book's re-

visionist orientation. Readers will find observations of interest in Forclaz's synthesis of various fields.

How far could seigneiurial authority extend in the face of competition from the papal government and indifference (bordering on hostility) from the villagers? These problems are carefully considered throughout the monograph. The first half of the book analyzes the institutions and personnel of seigneurial power in the countryside, especially in the matter of seigneurial justice. The second part of the book considers how noble jurisdiction intersected at the village level with problems of local conflict, competing jurisdictions, and recalcitrant villagers. The book is thoughtfully organized and readers can easily navigate among the topics and grasp Forclaz's interpretive conclusions for each category of inquiry.

Chapters 3 and 4 stand out as particularly original in light of other recent contributions to the field. Chapter 3 (on the rural governors) provides a detailed and nuanced overview of the background, obligations, and difficult career trajectories of these Borghese appointees who were charged with the administration of day-to-day justice in the fiefs. If, as Forclaz and other scholars including myself have claimed, power in the countryside was negotiated, the governors were at the center of those negotiations. A village wish-list of their necessary qualities suggests how hard a capable individual might be to find: "a governor needs wisdom, moral rectitude, nobility, privilege, poetry, and some schooling is also required" (p.129). As Forclaz carefully documents, the vast majority of the governors were doctors of civil and canon law from villages or small towns in the Papal States. About their poetic skills Forclaz evidently found little testimony, but their activities are well documented in his book. They had the thankless task of intervening in village controversies that spilled over into criminal behavior. As the governors frequently complained, villagers often melted away when they sought their cooperation. Hostility toward governors was common and their death at the hand of the locals was rare but not unknown.

Chapter 4 analyzes how village justice functioned, noting both its civil and its criminal aspects. Although a new papal family, the Borghese enjoyed for the most part the same jurisdictional rights as had their medieval predecessors from whom they had purchased their territories. This included the death penalty, although it was rarely applied. The Borghese aims in administering justice were grand and "buona giustizia" necessitated the protection of the weak. It was difficult for the Borghese to deliver on these promises when a "crime" impinged on what the Borghese regarded as their seigneurial privileges. Forclaz ably demonstrates in this chapter how much seigneurial justice was about conflict resolution, whether that involved enforcing the clauses of contracts; settling violence over disputes involving honor, women, or livestock; and preventing the recourse to vendetta as a resolution to the stresses and strains of rural life. While the villagers complained frequently about the governors, they also voluntarily sought the intervention of seigneurial tribunals as a way of resolving differences and reclaiming honor. The supplications to the prince for justice underscored the sometimes crucial role the seigneurial lord might play in remaking the lives of the condemned. In Forclaz's analysis, women were key to this latter process, going all the way to Rome if necessary to intervene on behalf of their condemned relatives.

In the second half of the book Forclaz tackles the thorny problem of competing jurisdictions and competing institutions. The Borghese had quite a tangle of controversies over borders, clerical immunities, and recalcitrant villagers who sometimes clung to their communal leaders more than to the lord's authority. That these matters could take a while to resolve is an understatement–one border dispute lasted 160 years. Local killers (including a few priests) exploited competing tribunals (such as the governor of Rome). Notorious bandits such as the elusive "Doctor Pizzolo" escaped prosecution by the Borghese and fled to the protection of the ambassador of France, in Rome. With competing ecclesiastical authorities and disgruntled neighboring lords the Borghese employed a number of strategies. Forclaz concludes that since aristocrats leaned on their aristocratic neighbors for various forms of cooperation, it was scarcely worth it for the Borghese to alienate their peers. Negotiation was a better tool.

When Forclaz brings the analysis closer to the level of the villagers, he insists that certain frameworks remain rather constant. One of these features is the client network of the Borghese, centered on their governors and clerics they appointed to benefices controlled by the noble family. Forclaz is able to show systematically the way power connected patron to client between city and country. Hitherto many of us had only our favorite anecdotes, but Forclaz brings the evidence together persuasively and puts it into sharp relief in chapter 6.

This Borghese network supposedly competed with local powerful families who dominated the communal government's offices and attempted to wrest control of village affairs from Borghese clients (i.e., the governors and their followers). Forclaz offers a series of short case stud-