



R. Burr Litchfield. *Florence Ducal Capital, 1530-1630*. New York: ACLS Humanities E-Book, 2008. 385 paragraphs. <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heh.90034>. No cost (e-book), ISBN 978-1-59740-706-9.

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Florence and Its Princes

“Cities change in time.” So R. Burr Litchfield modestly begins his latest, comprehensive, and monumental study of Medici ducal to grand ducal Florence during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. His study is a major (life’s work!) contribution to the social, economic, political, and cultural transformation of a city at the center of European historical developments during the Renaissance and early modern periods. The author once more modestly describes this book as an “elaboration” of his earlier groundbreaking work on the Medici court in Florence, *Emergence of a Bureaucracy: The Florentine Patricians 1530-1790* (1986). Together, that book and this volume bracket an ongoing illustrious scholarly career. Historiographically, this study is significant in several ways.

Early on, Litchfield recognized, based on his research in the indomitable Archivio di Stato and Biblioteca Nazionale, the crucial importance of the Medici ducal court for the way we understand Renaissance Florence. Today, we look back on Florence with Giorgio Vasari in hand. Vasari’s monumental “Biographies of the Artists” (1550, second expanded edition, 1568) was dedicated to his patron, Medici Duke Cosimo I, and presented a specifically Florentine periodization of the “Renaissance” in terms of late medieval (Cimabue to Giotto) to early Renaissance (Brunelleschi, Ghiberti, Donatello, Masaccio) to High Renaissance artistic and cultural developments (Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo), parallel to Petrarch and other Renaissance humanists. Modern historians often focus on the Florentine Republic (thirteenth through fifteenth centuries) and they see the Medici ducal court as evidence of the city’s “decline” and “decadence.” This post-World War II “liberal” view of the past parallels an old theory of “Mannerism” in art history as a decline of the Renaissance. Meanwhile, early modern studies often highlight the development of court culture and society (and specifically the marriage links between the Medici,

France, and the Habsburgs) as the beginnings of a development leading toward the eighteenth-century “Enlightenment.” At the heart of this narrative is a Renaissance debate about republics and principalities. In fact, there remains fundamental contradictions and difficult positionings between a modern prospective and progressive view of the Renaissance and a retrospective, teleological one; and the disciplines of history and art history. These tensions still gnaw at the center of Renaissance studies, between “medieval” and “modern” (Renaissance-generated) historical perspectives and fields of study.

Beyond his early focus on the development from republican civic Florence to the city of the grand ducal court, Litchfield is a historian who thinks and talks about the city. He interprets the city in terms of “spatial geographies.” This approach reminds one of French cultural theorist Henri Lefebvre’s classic work on “the social production of space” (*La production de l’espace*, 1974), and it is remarkable, even though it might seem commonsensical. Often historians write about Florence in terms of documents and other written narratives on military, religious, political, economic, social, and cultural events and developments, as though they did not occur in space. These are histories that reconstruct “reality” outside reality, without place, in no place. There are many notable exceptions to this. For instance, Gene Brucker’s classic *Renaissance Florence* (1969) begins with a chapter entitled “The Renaissance City” and ends with “Culture”—a historical trajectory of chapters situated in its urban and territorial landscape context. More recent studies of Florentine economics, politics, civic and ducal iconography, family histories, local neighborhoods, etc., are significantly rooted in their physical settings, while sometimes these settings are not analyzed as part of the argument. There is still quite a separation of history, urban history, and art history. Buildings and spaces (the visual and bodily) do not come together in the historical argument as

part of a “representation” and “environment” (then and now). This might also be true with Litchfield’s work, even though his main argument is a spatial shift of Renaissance Florence (the republic) from north of the Arno (the old urban center) to south of the Arno (Oltr’Arno, a late medieval incorporated trading suburb) during the sixteenth century. It still remains the case that while historians invoke the physical space they often do not interpret it visually, and art historians work from an idealist-based discipline of the “work of art” (the “masterpiece”) beyond context, “the work of art in and of itself” (Henri Focillon’s Hegelian “la vie des formes”), while these two disciplines continue to work toward each other in interpreting societies as a whole.

Methodologically, Litchfield’s studies work toward this disciplinary bridge as monumental examples of what you might call a material-based sociological (more than social and economic) history in their empirical, data and computer-driven foundations. Burr crunches numbers! And he does so impressively! The style and genre of writing are scientific and empirical from data to analytical conclusions, inductively reasoned. In his acknowledgements, Litchfield tellingly reveals that his interest in ducal Florence began with, on the one hand, Giorgio Spini’s seminal *Architettura e politica da Cosimo I a Ferdinando I* (1976), a collection of documentary and symbolic interpretations of the grand ducal city and Tuscan territory. On the other hand, Litchfield’s work (as he states) is indebted to David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber’s monumental, early computer-based studies of the *Catasto* tax records from 1427 through the fifteenth century and of Tuscan families. This began a turn from military-religious-political-social-economic to local family-neighborhood histories, public to private. Litchfield’s sources are three major censuses of 1551, conducted as part of the consolidation of Cosimo I’s ducal power; the *Decima* tax records on property (ducal fiscal policy) of 1561; and the census report after the devastating plague of 1630-33, recording the remains. Importantly, as Litchfield explains, these census records provide detailed information on population density, family structure (heads of family to servants, etc.), precise residential locations, and occupations beyond the cadastral records on wealth and property. They also serve as the basis for this exhaustive and comprehensive analysis of demographic, gender, neighborhood, class relations, and spatial-social trends across the city. In seven chapters, Litchfield comes to a series of illuminating (and often surprising) conclusions.

First, Cosimo I and Eleonora da Toledo began the shift in focus from the medieval civic center, the ancient

Roman military *castrum* grid city and medieval trading center, built over the ruins and trophy spoils of the pagan forum, to the Palazzo Pitti, in the radial medieval trading city beyond the Arno. The Palazzo Pitti was a merchant palace acquired by Eleonora’s immense Spanish Hapsburg dowry in 1550 and expanded as a grand ducal Florentine residence and court center. Adjacent to the Santo Spirito service quarter, it was a seigniorial villa that transformed a commercial city at the time of the ascendant Hapsburg world empire of the late Renaissance and Baroque periods over the next eighty years. Framed by the Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore and Palazzo Signoria, a medieval Latin civic separation of church and state to north and south of the Roman *castrum* grid, Cosimo and Eleonora moved into the Palazzo Signoria (renamed Palazzo Ducale) in 1540, beginning a redecoration of the apartments as a ducal palace for state ceremony. The former republican Grand Council Chamber (*Sala dei Cinquecento*) was transformed into an imperial audience hall with monumental throne dais and raised gilded Roman coffered ceiling with heroic *all’antica* battle paintings by Vasari and workshop in procession around the walls, over Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s unfinished remnants of 1503. These images represented Florence’s republican military history as culminating in the apotheosis (literally, a crowning) of duke and duchy overhead. As Felix Gilbert memorably wrote, Machiavelli’s republican *Discorsi* jostled with *Il Principe*, pointing to the unifying ruler of Italy and of a Mediterranean empire.

The title given to Cosimo I by the hand-picked Committee of Two Hundred in 1532 was Duca della Repubblica Fiorentina, a Suetonian-Augustan coronation as savior of the Roman Republic, a common rhetorical trope of monarchy. A new “spine” of Medici princely government ran down to the heart of the new Roman *cardo* (north-south axis), from the Palazzo Ducale, to the Loggia dei Priori (now the Loggia dei Lanzi—the fierce Hapsburg German guards), to Piazza Signoria (now Piazza Ducale with its foundational civic to ducal sculptural ensemble), down the perspectival ceremonial street to the Arno triumphal arch with its centralized temple museum (the Tribuna), above the craft guild state theater of the Uffizi with its *corridoio* (a secure overhead passage), to the Ponte Vecchio and the church of Santa Felicità (with its private ducal balcony), over the commercial city to the ducal palace-villa of seigniorial residence and representation, the Pitti Palace and the axial Boboli garden theater. The axial Via Maggio, lined with conservative rusticated Florentine palace fronts (in republican tradition) from Porta Romana in the south, and Palazzo Pitti with its grand

display piazza in front, became part of a triumphal Roman “Sacred Way” to the elegant Mannerist Ponte Santa Trinita of Ammannati (itself a triumphal arch across the Arno). This way continued to Piazza Santa Trinita with its freestanding triumphal column of ducal “Justice,” a gift from Pope Pius IV in 1560, from the Roman baths of Caracalla and part of triumphal entry monuments for the wedding of Habsburg Giovanna of Austria and Francesco de’ Medici in 1565. The Medici took over civic patron saint processions, such as the feast day of the nativity of St. John the Baptist (June 24), which circumscribed the sacred *pomerium* (boundary) of the Roman *castrum*, from the baptistery to Piazza Signoria, both sacred and political centers, redirecting it south to the Palazzo Pitti, Piazza San Felice, and Via Maggio to Via Tornabuoni, a luxury center.

Litchfield also documents the Medici promotion

of silk luxury manufacture (mulberry bushes and silk worms cultivated at the villas) during the sixteenth century, relating it to the decline of the wool trade due to cheap English imports. He describes the separation and reform of central guild trades, shops, and marketplaces, in the Roman Mercato Vecchio and in the new market. The book demonstrates how Florentine elites built palaces in a more spacious intermediary area around the center, in the medieval radial city, while the *popolo minuto* (poor workers) lived in speculative vernacular housing on the margins within the city walls: this amounted to a shift from previous historical models of heterogeneous neighborhoods to a concentric class city. In every way, Litchfield’s informative analysis illuminates ducal Florence in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, bringing it out of the shadow of Eric Cochrane’s *Florence in the Forgotten Centuries* (1973).

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