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Published on H-Italy (August, 2014)

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To the many studies of political culture in the Medici dominated Florentine republic of the fifteenth century, and the Medici duchy of the sixteenth century, Nicholas Scott Baker adds a well-written and solidly researched narrative of the transition between these two epochs in the period circa 1480-1550. This was an active and turbulent period in Florentine history. It included the creation of the restricted council of seventy by Lorenzo il Magnifico in 1480, the expulsion of his successor Piero de’ Medici at the time of the French invasion of Italy in 1494, and the establishment of the large and inclusive Consiglio Maggiore that same year. It was during this era that Florentines witnessed the period of influence of Savonarola circa 1490-98, the period of Soderini as gonfaloniere in 1502-12, and the Medici restoration of 1512 with abolition of the Consiglio Maggiore and restoration of elements from the time of Lorenzo (the councils of seventy and one hundred). This period also included two Medici popes (Leo X and Clement VII); the revolution of 1527 and restoration of the Consiglio Maggiore; the siege of Florence by the army of Charles V and the city’s surrender in 1530; the second Medici restoration for Alessandro de’ Medici as “leader” (“duce”) of the republic; the new constitution of 1532 that abolished the Signoria and instituted a senate of forty-eight and council of two hundred; the assassination of Alessandro in 1537; and finally the succession of a distant Medici cousin, Cosimo I de’ Medici, who consolidated the new duchy in the period that followed. Baker bases his treatment on existing studies and on two sources less commonly used: letters of members of the office-holding class (particularly letters of members of the Strozzi and Guicciardini families, and writings of Francesco di Piero Guicciardini) and works of art that reflect the political situation (particularly by Ghirlandaio, Gozzoli, Michelangelo, Piero di Cosimo, Pontormo, Bronzino, and Salviati).

His detailed exposition presents a fresh and engaging picture of this period. He focuses on the development of opinion in the patrician office-holding class. His thesis is that a transition from the aims of more egalitarian civic republicanism...
of the fifteenth century to the aim of defense of
the independence of Florence (and its office-hold-
ing class) was accomplished by and in favor of the
Medici well before the defeat of 1530 and the new
constitution of 1532. The contrast (in modern lan-
guage) between a liberal democratic regime and
an aristocratic monarchical regime was less sharp
than current Anglo-American historians have
tended to imagine. There was much more contin-
uity through the transition than is sometimes re-
alized. The letters and artwork used reveal the
elite’s engaged and developing discussion of con-
temporary politics, diplomacy, and constitutional
choices for the city, and the symbolism involved.

Baker is scrupulous about details, although
some well-known features of the story are
skipped. For instance, there was a famous soccer
(calcio) match in Piazza Santa Croce in February
1530 played out in full sight of Charles V’s besieg-
ing army (trumpeters were stationed on the roof
of the church to attract its attention). This detail
would fit well into Baker’s civic republican theme.
The match was celebrated later, and when com-
memoratively reenacted in 1930, it incidentally
contributed to the popularity of one of Florence’s
current summer tourist attractions: the Calcio in
Costume. Cosimo I added a more aristocratic
coach race in Piazza Santa Maria Novella to the
calcio matches, which under the duchy were
played by patricians and became court spectacles.

Baker’s study ends abruptly in 1549. It may be
that he thinks the transition of the office-holding
class from republican citizens into ducal courtiers
was sufficiently established by then, although
most of the new features of the ducal court
emerged after the war that led to the conquest of
Siena in 1557. Plots of republican exiles to assassi-
nate the duke continued through the Sienese War
and then with protection of Catherine de’ Medici
in France; the last plot, the Pucci conspiracy, was
in 1572. As duke, Cosimo had moved from Palazzo
Medici to the Palazzo della Signoria in 1540. The
large remodeling of Palazzo Pitti, the new main
ducal palace south of the Arno, began in 1561; the
new ducal order of Knights of St. Stephen ap-
peared in 1562; and the court then grew in size
with the attraction of non-Florentine nobles, al-
though Florentine patricians also soon appeared
in the court rolls, and several received ducal fi-
efs. It was not until Cosimo’s successors that Florence
truly became a “court society.”

Two appendices of the book specify more con-
cretely the membership of what Baker calls the
“office holding class” throughout. The first pro-
vides a list of 555 surnames of family lineages
identified from various sources to represent this
class circa 1500. Although Baker avoids any statis-
tical analysis of what he holds was a shifting
group, one can tell from this list which were old
and which new families, which were frequently
priors and which more peripheral members, and
which were still present at the time of the forma-
tion of the duchy. However, few of these names
appear individually in the narrative. The second
appendix displays the detailed office-holding ex-
perience of eighteen individuals from fifteen elite
families who are mentioned frequently in the
text: the Albizzi, Altoviti, Antinori, Buondelmonte,
Cambi, Guicciardini, Lanfredini, Malegonnelli,
Martelli, De’ Medici, De’ Nerli, Del Nero, Portinari,
Strozzi, and Della Stufa. One can imagine their ex-
perience expanded to the larger group. In short,
with a few limitations, this book is a valuable con-
tribution to Florentine historiography and it is
well worth reading by anyone interested in the
development of the Florentine Renaissance.