

The politics of the Italian Renaissance State Italian scholarship for non-Italians

Review of: *The Italian Renaissance State*, A. Gamberini & I. Lazzarini (eds), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 634 p., ISBN: 9781107010123, € 100,00.

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The mere mention of the Italian Renaissance conjures up images of artistic brilliance, from Giotto to Michelangelo, and humanistic effort, from Petrarch to Machiavelli. In their co-authored introduction the editors, Andrea Gamberini (University of Milan) and Isabella Lazzarini (University of Molise), underline, however, that their collection of twenty-four contributions will focus exclusively on the political aspects of Renaissance Italy. Their aim is to reinterpret the Italian Renaissance ‘as a founding moment in which political languages, practices and tools – together with political and governmental forms and institutions – grew and proved to be pivotal not just for Italy and its supposed singularity, but rather for the European continent as a whole’ (p. 2). It is essential for the prospective reader to keep this self-imposed limitation in mind.

Within the confines of this field of research the editors have managed to assemble a ‘dream team’ of mostly Italian scholars, including both rising stars and established household names, such as Alessandro Barbero, Sandro Carocci, Giorgio Chittolini, and Gian Maria Varanini. Thanks to the efforts of no less than eight translators, albeit of varying competence, the editors have succeeded in their overall objective of making this important Italian scholarship accessible to an English-reading public.

Naturally, it is impossible to list each of the twenty-four contributions within the confines of this book review, let alone discuss them in any detail. Instead I opt to provide a general overview and appreciation of the collection as a whole.

The editors have distributed the twenty-four contributions almost evenly over two main sections. The first part on ‘Italian states’ consists of eleven contributions (pp. 7-236) and covers the many ‘Italies’ that characterize the Italian peninsula and its islands during this period, as represented on the only map included in this collection (p. xiv). More precisely, the chronological scope runs from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries, with some flashbacks to the late thirteenth century and an occasional foray into the later sixteenth century. These eleven analytical essays discuss in detail the transformations and features of this complex mosaic, consisting of a few

remaining republics (e.g. Florence and Siena), important feudal principalities (e.g. Lombardy under the Visconti and Sforza or the Este in Ferrara), three kingdoms (Sicily, Naples, and Sardinia and Corsica), and the Papal States. The different accounts of the political and social structure of these Italian regimes thoroughly examine the nature and degree of institutional and constitutional experimentation discernible in these regions during this period and repeatedly underline the composite and contractual character of these political structures as their main characteristic. More precisely, they identify the presence of different political players, both on a local and supra-local level, and their complex negotiations as the driving force behind the succession of institutional changes witnessed in these areas. These contributions also highlight the wide range of political and ideological tools used in this context (see, for example, the discussion of the Medicean ‘politics of magnificence’ in Florence (pp. 99-101)).

The thirteen contributions that constitute the second section on ‘Themes and perspectives’ (pp. 237-514) provide the perfect counterbalance to the first. In contrast to the regional and analytical essays of the first part they offer an in-depth thematic synthesis of the central lines of research which have occupied scholars over the last decades, such as the reinvigorated interest in rural communities, the close connection between public written records and political power, or the plurality of conflict resolution systems, from a pan-Italian perspective.

Each contribution takes up approximately twenty pages, with footnotes kept to a minimum. The presentation of the material is, therefore, highly condensed and sometimes presupposes a certain familiarity with the topic from its readership. Although readers who have enjoyed first-hand familiarity with Italian scholarship on the covered topics may find the contributions not always as innovative as claimed in the introduction, the essays do provide a valuable and trustworthy synthesis of the state of the art within each sub-field. Thanks to the essay-specific bibliographies, which cover almost one hundred pages (pp. 515-599) and are, once more, predominantly focused on Italian scholarship, these contributions also function as useful reference tools for further, more specialized reading.

To conclude, I can fully subscribe to the Oxbridge ‘seal of approval’ printed on the dust jacket. This collection of essays deserves to be the first port of call for those students and scholars who have an interest in the Italian Renaissance, but are less familiar with the political framework of Renaissance Italy. It is not only useful for those interested in a particular region or theme, but it is also helpful to those who want to avoid the pitfalls of an often overly fragmented historiography.

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