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Review of “A Provincial Elite in Early
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Benadusi

Laurie Nussdorfer
Wesleyan University, lnussdorfer@wesleyan.edu



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Author(s): Laurie Nussdorfer

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Reviews

Giovanna Benadusi. *A Provincial Elite in Early Modern Tuscany: Family and Power in the Creation of the State.* (The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science.) Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. xiii + 259 pp. \$45. ISBN: 0-8018-5248-X.

Anyone who recalls Louis XIV's Versailles will have no difficulty agreeing with Giovanna Benadusi that early modern state formation is a social as well as an institutional and political process. The novelty of her book is to make this claim not from the viewpoint of a court or capital but from that of a hilltop town in an isolated valley in central Italy. The River Arno originates in this beautiful region, the Casentino, some forty-five miles east of Florence; the valley is almost completely enclosed by mountains but, despite its seclusion, was home in the late middle ages to a lord and a hardworking rural population. Poppi (pop. 1,450) was, if not the largest, the most strategically located of the Casentino's handful of settlements, having grown up in the thirteenth century around the walls of the castle of the local counts. It serves as the unlikely but rewarding vehicle for Benadusi's exploration of social and political change in early modern Europe, in a story relating how rural families contributed to the consolidation of the regional state in Tuscany and how the preferences of the state influenced the strategies of such families. Benadusi's readers follow two vectors across the centuries, one tracing the path of relations between Poppi and her conqueror the republic of Florence, later transformed into the grand duchy of Tuscany, and one marking out the itinerary of a group of about thirty village families who struggle to get and keep the greatest share of local power and wealth over three centuries. Benadusi argues persuasively that these two vectors are profoundly interrelated.

First, the state vector. Annexation by Florence in 1440 gave the small wool producers and artisans of Poppi their first political institutions at the same time that it confirmed the lords' earlier choice of this spot as the site from whence to rule the valley. Respecting the strategic logic of the counts who had built their castle on this hill, the central government in Florence placed its officials in Poppi rather than in one of the larger villages of the Casentino. By 1600 Poppi's local officeholders had weathered the centralizing pressures of the Medici dukes who replaced the Florentine republic in the 1530s and had lost some powers, but not without finding new ways to remain big fish in the small pond that was theirs. By 1700 their pond was much wider, for with grand ducal encouragement they filled the officer ranks of the new provincial militia of the Casentino. Over three centuries the powers at the center had first provided the village with local institutions and a dominant administrative role in the valley, then curtailed (without eliminating) local officials' authority, and finally encouraged participation in provincial institutions crucial to the maintenance of the central regime.

Next, the family vector. Having come late to "commune" status, a small group of Poppi families took no more than fifty years to catch on to the benefits of monopolizing civic offices. From that position of power these families crafted strategies for marriages and property acquisition that slowly brought most of the land in the valley into their hands. In the seventeenth century, buffeted by the collapse of the wool trade and the decimation of their offspring by plague, these top families demonstrated remarkable agility in staying on top. They married their children outside of Poppi, sought commissions in the provincial militia and university degrees in Pisa, and did everything to hold onto and increase their lands (including letting daughters inherit it). Their relentless drive for status, wealth, and power produced victims, notably the new class of sharecropping peasants who had lost their land. But Benadusi shows convincingly that this drive gave solid support to the grand dukes, knitting together by family ties, common careers, and shared values a provincial elite loyal to the central state, which firmly upheld its local domination.

LAURIE NUSSDORFER

Wesleyan University

Nicolai Rubinstein. *The Palazzo Vecchio, 1298-1532: Government, Architecture, and Imagery in the Civic Palace of the Florentine Republic*. (Oxford-Warburg Studies, General Editors: Denys Hay and J.B. Trapp.) Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. 61 pls. + xvii + 154 pp. \$79. ISBN: 0-1992-0602-3.

Florentine chronicles are filled with stories about the rivalry between the hardworking, civic-minded patriots known as *popolani*, and the aristocratic, vendetta-loving bullies known as *magnati*, and the history of Florentine republicanism in particular is essentially the story, in its mythical version at least, of the *popolani* putting the *magnati* in their place. One is reminded of the story told by Giovanni Villani of how the commune, around the turn of the fourteenth century, decided to build the tower of its new town hall on top of the pre-existing family tower of one great family (the Foraboschi) and to convert the site of the demolished houses of another (the Uberti) into a public square so that this exiled magnate family's houses would never be rebuilt. Whereas the skyline of medieval Florence had been dominated by those private family towers, giant phallic symbols erected by the magnates to show off their family pride, the skyline of republican Florence would be dominated by the public symbols of a proud commune, the *cupola* of the Duomo and the magnificent tower of the Palazzo della Signoria. Taller, by statutory regulation, than any private tower in Florence, the tower of the Palazzo della Signoria (which came to be called Palazzo Vecchio centuries later) would become the very symbol of the Florentine Republic.

Nicolai Rubinstein has produced an elegant book about the architectural history of the Palazzo Vecchio. Presented in three parts — part one explains how political events and constitutional changes shaped the architectural history of the palace; part two considers the ideologies and politics behind its interior