

Spring 2020

# The Medici and a Florentine Plutocracy in the Quattrocento

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# THE MEDICI AND A FLORENTINE PLUTOCRACY IN THE QUATTROCENTO

by

ROBERT DALTON BRYANT

(Under the Direction of Kathleen M. Comerford)

## ABSTRACT

This study examines how the economic elite of Florence, Italy during the fifteenth century exerted political control over the Republic of Florence. Several powerful families influenced the domestic and foreign policies of Florence. However, one Florentine family among the ruling class was more effective at using their wealth to obtain political power. As this work demonstrates, the Medici family was able to control the republican Florentine government as a de facto plutocracy. Chapter two focuses on how the Medici successfully used civic humanism and artistic endeavors to justify and project their power throughout the Italian world. Focusing on contemporary demographic, literary, and legal sources, including the *Tratte of Office Holders, 1282–1532* and the *Catasto of 1427* in chapter three, this thesis illustrates how the Medici, in particular Cosimo *Pater Patriae* (Father of the Fatherland) and his grandson Lorenzo, manipulated the Republic of Florence to maintain their control over the Florentine government. Chapter three details the manipulative practices of Cosimo de' Medici and Lorenzo de' Medici that highlight the Florentine government's lack of republican values. Finally, chapter four utilizes the *Catasto of 1427* to illustrate who the plutocratic class was and shows how the Medici used their wealth more effectively. The example given in chapter four is how the Medici used their wealth to influence religious appointments in the Catholic Church.

INDEX WORDS: Plutocracy, Cosimo de' Medici, Lorenzo de' Medici, Quattrocento, Republic of Florence, Civic Humanism, *Catasto of 1427*, Electoral Manipulation, Leonardo Bruni

THE MEDICI AND A FLORENTINE PLUTOCRACY IN THE QUATTROCENTO

by

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B.S., East Tennessee State University, 2018

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

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May 2020

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents, Shelba Jean Brigman and Edward Nathan Brigman Sr. Their love provided comfort throughout my life. Their wisdom instilled in me the confidence to accomplish any task. Their memory serves as a reminder to enjoy life and never be afraid to be yourself. I love you  
Granny and Papa.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor Dr. Kathleen M. Comerford. Without her expertise and assistance, I could not have accomplished this task. I would also like to thank Dr. Jeffrey D. Burson and Dr. Juanjuan Peng, who were members on my thesis committee. Their comments and suggestions greatly improved my finished thesis. Dr. Alan Downs helped me create my thesis proposal and make this entire project possible, for which I am grateful. Finally, I would like to thank every other professor, peer, and university staff who aided me in one way or another. Your support did not go unnoticed.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The economic elite of a society has a vested interest in the political proceedings of the domain in which they live. This concern arose among the wealthy because of the effect governments and political entities can have on their moneymaking enterprises. However, given the right set of circumstances, that personal stake in society can evolve into considerable influence or even outright control over the political process. During the fifteenth century, the wealthiest individuals of Florence, Italy, exhibited significant influence over their political body, the Republic of Florence. The fifteenth-century Florentine economic elite was able to exact so much political control that they created a plutocracy over the supposedly republican government. Among the wealthiest of members of Florentine society during the Quattrocento was one family that was able to use its wealth and status to manipulate the republican government more effectively than any other. This family, the Medici, exemplified the Florentine plutocracy through their domination of Florence's political landscape, beginning with their ascension to power in 1434.

The family's domination of Florentine society can be attributed to several important factors. However, none of their success could have been possible without the vast wealth accumulated from the Medici banking empire. Arguably better than most of their contemporaries, the Medici understood and exploited the value of civic humanistic works and artistic endeavors in order to increase their political influence. In addition, the family was able to expertly exploit the Florentine political system to further consolidate their political control. This included the republican governmental processes, like elections that were vulnerable to manipulation by entities such as the Medici. The three chapters of this thesis will focus on each of the factors contributing to the Medici's ability to control the Republic of Florence. In doing so, this thesis will illustrate that the Republic of Florence was, in fact, a plutocracy that the Medici family was able to rule through their projection of power, political exploitation, and strategically invested wealth.

Some of the terms used throughout the work have either obscure definitions, multiple meanings, or meanings that have changed over time. Because of the fluid nature of these terms' definitions, it is

necessary to establish precise meanings of the terms so they can be used effectively in the work's lines of argumentation without the risk of misinterpretation. The first of these terms that is crucial to the overall work and requires a clear definition is plutocracy. The word plutocracy can be defined as "a government in which the wealthy rule and govern," or as a reference to any particular wealthy group that "control[s] or influence[s]" a governmental body.<sup>1</sup> Both of these definitions accurately represents how the term is used throughout this work and offers a concise description of the activities of those at the helm of the Republic of Florence during the fifteenth century. The application of the term plutocracy to this government is arguably anachronistic. Yet, the origin of the term can be traced back to ancient Greece and historians such as Xenophon, who used the term to describe such governments.<sup>2</sup>

A term that scholars often use to describe the government of Florence during the Quattrocento is oligarchy. This word does not provide the best historical interpretation of the nature of the Republic of Florence during this time. In its simplest terms, an oligarchy is a "government ruled by a small group of powerful people."<sup>3</sup> As Niccolò Machiavelli asserts in his *Discourses on Livy* (1531), a government ruled by a small group is an evolution of the aristocracy.<sup>4</sup> Mark Jurdjevic refers to this evolution in the

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Mohn, "Plutocracy," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2019), accessed March 3, 2020, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=ers&AN=119214114>.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey A. Winters, *Oligarchy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Mohn, "Plutocracy," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 11.

Republic of Florence's governmental ideology during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as "oligarchic republicanism."<sup>5</sup> The question that needs to be asked when describing this small group is, how did they obtain their power and with what power did they rule? As the thesis will demonstrate, an essential characteristic of those in control of the Republic of Florence during the fifteenth century was their wealth and how they were able to utilize it for political ends. Due to the importance of wealth in describing the ruling class of Florence during the fifteenth century, plutocracy is the more apt term to describe the elite few who controlled the Republic of Florence.

The next important word that requires clarification is republic. Given that this political form of government has existed in one form or another dating back to the ancient Greek city-states, its usage can be quite vague unless explicitly defined.<sup>6</sup> As Quentin Skinner asserted in his first volume of *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, a republic in fifteenth-century Florentine terms can be defined as a government "where the citizens, the townspeople and the community select their own" rulers instead of one where rulers are forced upon the people like monarchies.<sup>7</sup> This definition highlights the difference between the ability to choose a leader through an election process versus the absence of that ability. J. G.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1999): 996. doi:10.2307/2901833.

<sup>6</sup> "Republicanism," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2019), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=ers&AN=133861016>.

<sup>7</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 42.

A. Pocock says in *The Machiavellian Moment* that for the Florentine republican ideal to succeed, its citizens must actively participate in the governmental system (*vivere civile*).<sup>8</sup>

However, this description can lead one to draw the wrong conclusion as to what the participation in government meant in fifteenth-century Florence. The participation of the electorate in the Republic of Florence cannot be conflated with that of modern-day republics like that United States. For example, in Florence during the fifteenth century, citizenship was defined in relation to guild membership, which required one to be proficient at a trade. As a result, only an estimated five thousand citizens (out of a population of 50,000 to 70,000) could participate in Florence’s political process during the Quattrocento.<sup>9</sup> This connection to guild membership essentially meant that a very small portion of the population was able to select their chosen leaders, from which an even smaller group would actually fill one of those leadership positions. As Yves Sintomer points out, the Republic of Florence was “not self-government by all,” but instead government in which power was consolidated among a few select individuals.<sup>10</sup> While

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<sup>8</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 56–57.

<sup>9</sup> Yves Sintomer. “Random Selection, Republican Self-Government, and Deliberative Democracy,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 17, no. 3 (September 2010), 476. doi:10.1111/j.1467–8675.2010.00607.x.; Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 521.

<sup>10</sup> Yves Sintomer, “Random Selection, Republican Self–Government, and Deliberative Democracy,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 17, no. 3 (September 2010): 476, doi:10.1111/j.1467–8675.2010.00607.x.

this republican government did not represent all of the people of Florence and was flawed in other ways that the thesis will discuss, republics were still seen by humanists as preferable to tyranny, and therefore worth defending.<sup>11</sup>

The last term which needs further clarification is civic humanism, which can be defined in a simplified form as an intellectual movement that valued ideals like political freedoms and civic participation in a representative government. While civic humanism will be described more in-depth later on in the thesis, there is a large controversy surrounding the term, which is too broad in scope to be comprehensively covered in this introduction. Nevertheless, the term's controversy should be addressed because of civic humanism's importance to this thesis. Hans Baron, the historian who introduced the term, came to a conclusion in *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny* that has come under scrutiny by subsequent academics.<sup>12</sup> When describing the philosophical basis of who the civic humanists were, as well as the origin of the movement, Baron insisted that the formation of civic humanism occurred in Florence in 1402.<sup>13</sup> However, this specific time and place Baron attributed to the beginning of civic humanism has since been challenged in the academic community. A large group of reputable scholars, including Nicolai Rubinstein and Quentin

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<sup>11</sup> Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume 1*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, Rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

<sup>13</sup> James Hankins, "The 'Baron Thesis' after Forty Years and Some Recent Studies of Leonardo Bruni," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 56, no. 2 (1995): 315, doi:10.2307/2709840.

Skinner, cited evidence revealing that characteristics Baron attributed to civic humanists occurred in different Italian city-states before 1402.<sup>14</sup>

Despite these issues, the term is still used today in historical examinations of the Italian Renaissance. This is because the dating Hans Baron used in his argumentation may have had issues, but not all the conclusions he reached regarding civic humanism were problematic. As a professor of history at Cornell University John M. Najemy asserts, “recent work has by and large confirmed Baron’s view[s]” on civic humanism’s “distinctive” cultural and political perspective as well as its overall influence on the Italian Renaissance.<sup>15</sup> James Hankins echoed this sentiment by stating that Baron’s view on “civic humanism retains a core of validity,” and for this reason, the term is still used in current academic literature.<sup>16</sup>

Both Najemy and Hankins assert that despite his research flaws, Baron’s analysis of what he coined as civic humanism still has value in historical research. While there has been a significant advancement in the study of the civic humanists and a disregard for Baron’s periodization errors, much of the current research focusing on civic humanism stems from Baron’s work in the twentieth century. This

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<sup>14</sup> Hankins, “The ‘Baron Thesis’ after Forty Years and Some Recent Studies of Leonardo Bruni,” 315–316.

<sup>15</sup> John M. Najemy, review of *In Search of Florentine Civic Humanism: Essays on the Transition from Medieval to Modern Thought* by Hans Baron, *Renaissance Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1992): 341, doi:10.2307/2862752.

<sup>16</sup> Hankins, “The ‘Baron Thesis’ after Forty Years and Some Recent Studies of Leonardo Bruni,” 330.

brief explanation is necessary because this work contains a chapter that heavily references current works on the subject of civic humanism and proper care must be taken to avoid the issues that plagued the work of Hans Baron. It should be noted that the sentiment about the active public life was a key characteristic of the republican political philosophy of civic humanism.<sup>17</sup> This, as well as how civic humanism was used by the economic elite, is why the term so crucial to the overall argument of the thesis.

The second chapter of this work, titled *Civic Humanism and the Arts*, focuses on the Medici family's utilization of civic humanistic literature and artistic endeavors that facilitated their control over Florentine society during the Quattrocento. First, civic humanist literature that supported the rule of the Medici, like Leonardo Bruni's *History of the Florentine People* (1442), is examined in detail.<sup>18</sup> Further context regarding ways in which the works of humanists such as Bruni, and the manner by which elites like the Medici used such works to justify their rule, can be found in the works of Quentin Skinner.<sup>19</sup> Bruni's work was used by the elite ruling class of fifteenth-century Florence to justify the limitations placed on the size of the electorate, particularly after the Ciompi Revolt. In addition to Bruni's own work, secondary sources such as Yves Winter's "Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising" will

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<sup>17</sup> Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, 1390–1460* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People. Memoirs*, trans. by James Hankins, Vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume 2, Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

be used to bolster the argument of the chapter by establishing how the Ciompi Revolt changed the face of Florentine politics in the fifteenth century.<sup>20</sup> This chapter then explores how Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici used art to project their political power not only to citizens but also to other political leaders. This includes the use of Dale V. Kent's work *Cosimo De' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre* and to accomplish the same goal for Lorenzo, the works of F.W. Kent show how he used architecture to project power. The third chapter, entitled Politics and Medici Manipulation, highlights the institutional structures governing the Republic of Florence during the Quattrocento and the ways the Medici were able to manipulate these structures for their own gain. To understand how the Florentine government could be used by a powerful family like the Medici, the thesis will detail how parts of the system of government functioned, and the areas that were most vulnerable to manipulation. For example, the process by which government officials were elected required a random selection from leather pouches called *borse*, which had procedural steps that could manipulate the outcome.<sup>21</sup>

Through the examination of the Medici's manipulation of the elections of the republican government during the fifteenth century, this thesis will demonstrate how the family under Cosimo, and later Lorenzo, was able to consolidate so much political power. The Medici family's accumulation of political power supports the overall assertion that the Republic of Florence was, in fact, subject to plutocratic rule during the Quattrocento. To illustrate how the Medici family participated in the Republic of Florence, the *Tratte of Office Holders* database compiled by professors in conjunction with Brown

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<sup>20</sup> Yves Winter, "Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising," *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (2012): 737, accessed March 4, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Yves Sintomer, "Random Selection, Republican Self-Government, and Deliberative Democracy," 476, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8675.2010.00607.x.



University will demonstrate what political offices the family held.<sup>22</sup> The fourth chapter of the thesis, *The Economic Reality of the Plutocracy*, will consist of an assessment of who comprised the plutocracy of fifteenth-century Florence as well as an analysis of the Medici bank and how they used their wealth to control Florentine society.

For information regarding the general economic reality of Florence during the fifteenth century, Richard Goldthwaite's *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* will be consulted.<sup>23</sup> To properly establish a plutocratic ruling class, there must be an accurate evaluation of the wealth of the elite members of Florence during the Quattrocento. This plutocratic class will be defined using a variety of sources, including the *Catasto* of 1427, which provides tax records from Florence during the early fifteenth century.<sup>24</sup> This particular tax record was chosen because it provides the most panoramic and varied assessment of the Florentine citizens' wealth in relation to later Florentine *catasto* tax records.<sup>25</sup> As

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<sup>22</sup> Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online Tratte of Office Holders, 1282–1532. Machine readable data file. Edited by David Herlihy, R. Burr Litchfield, Anthony Molho, and Roberto Barducci. (Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence, R. I., 2002.)

<sup>23</sup> Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. [Machine readable data file based on D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Census and Property Survey of Florentine Domains in the Province of Tuscany, 1427–1480*.] Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Richard Goldthwaite asserted, the *Catasto* of 1427 is “the most thorough economic survey of any European city before the nineteenth century.”<sup>26</sup> Combined with its online availability, this tax record has a depth of economic information that is ideal for the purpose of this research.

Richard Goldthwaite’s *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: A Study of Four Families* provides another source that examines the wealth of four private families across generations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>27</sup> The Medici Bank, which provided the financial backing for the Medici political domination of the Quattrocento, clearly illustrates the connection between wealth and political control among the plutocracy. Raymond de Roover’s works offer insight into the structure of the enterprise that allowed for the Medici’s wealth.<sup>28</sup> These sources help establish how the Medici obtained their great wealth, and how the Medici chose to use their wealth to buy influence in the church. Use of these sources helps explain why the family was able to rule over the Republic of Florence. Indeed, the Medici’s influence within the Catholic Church can be traced to the papacy itself, as the family served as the Pope’s

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<sup>26</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, xiv.

<sup>27</sup> Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: a Study of Four Families* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

<sup>28</sup> Raymond de Roover, *The Medici Bank: Its Organization, Management, Operations, and Decline* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1948); and Raymond De Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank: 1397–1494* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

bankers during their political dominance over Florence.<sup>29</sup> The Medici infiltration into religious matters such as these illustrates another way the family used their wealth to gain societal control.

Through the use of these and other sources, this thesis demonstrates that fifteenth-century Florence did not have a republican government but instead had a plutocracy. Not only was the city-state of Florence a plutocracy, but this plutocracy masquerading as a republic was controlled by the Medici banking family during most of the Quattrocento. However, this feat could not have been accomplished without the realization of several crucial components of the Medici's strategy for societal control in the fifteenth century. This includes the use of civic humanism as well as artistic endeavors to garner political influence, their manipulation of important processes and institutions governing the Republic of Florence, and their amassing of great wealth via the vast banking empire of the Medici family. Each of these points is discussed at length in their respective chapters to support the overall conclusion: the Medici ruled over fifteenth-century Florence as plutocratic rulers and not as paragons of republican virtue.

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<sup>29</sup> George Holmes, "How the Medici Became the Pope's Bankers," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

## CHAPTER 2

## CIVIC HUMANISM AND THE ARTS

Civic humanism had an inescapable effect on the political landscape of the Republic of Florence during the Quattrocento. This political philosophy advocated for the preservation of republics through active participation in the government and utilization of the larger humanist movement's principles. The Republic of Florence (1115–1532) was a government influenced by humanism, as is revealed through an examination of the wealthy citizens involved in that government. However, the plutocratic domination that the Medici banking family exerted over the republican government in the mid-to-late fifteenth century leads to questions regarding the commitment of the civic humanists to preserving republics. The civic humanist belief in safeguarding republics coexisted in a complicated relationship with the practice of ceding greater representative power to that of a plutocracy. This neglect of an ideal that was so important to their philosophy can be connected to the power and influence of the Medici family beginning in 1434.<sup>1</sup>

Arguably the most important patriarch in the history of the banking family, Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), was able to use not only his financial power but also his contemporary civic humanists and their political philosophy to help make himself the most important man in Florence during his time. While Cosimo certainly had a genuine interest in their work, his patronage of these humanists served another, more public purpose: creating an image of himself as a powerful individual who could lead Florence as a scholarly politician. Cosimo and his son Lorenzo de' Medici (1449–1492), as well as the rest of the plutocratic elite, also used the patronage of artistic endeavors to solidify their image of power. Whether it was paintings, sculpture, or even monumental architecture, Renaissance Florentine patronage of the arts offered elite families the opportunity to project their power to an audience. The Medici were able to use

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<sup>1</sup> Cecilia M. Ady, *Lorenzo Dei Medici and Renaissance Italy* (London: English Universities Press, 1970), 9.

their artistic patronage to convey the image of virtuous humanist leaders who were clearly in control of Florence during the Quattrocento, whatever their legal status might have actually been. Ultimately, the Medici family's control over the Republic of Florence cannot be properly understood without examining the use of art, the patronage of art, and the employment of civic humanism to project their "social status."<sup>2</sup>

The philosophical concept of civic humanism is initially difficult to define outside of merely referring to it as the "application of humanism in a public or semipublic situation."<sup>3</sup> To understand this philosophy and how it contributed to the political landscape of fifteenth-century Florence, it is necessary to understand what the humanists of the time aimed to achieve. While there are slight variations in the ideas presented by individual civic humanists, the scholars Quentin Skinner and J. G. A. Pocock have identified a clear system of intellectual principles that these learned individuals believed should be used in political engagement. The work that individuals such as Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) and Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) created not only sheds light on this political ideology but also helps frame what civic humanism was, and how the political elite used it during the Quattrocento.

One of the more pervasive ideas in Florentine civic humanism during the fifteenth century was the notion that republican forms of government were volatile in nature and needed to be guarded against nefarious forces. This notion was no mere philosophical conjecture for the Florentines in the late fourteenth and fifteenth century; it had tangible implications. For instance, humanist Leonardo Bruni

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Maxson, *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 84.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

recounts in his work *History of the Florentine People* (1442) the events of the Visconti-led Milanese invasion, which devastated “the countryside around Florence” in 1351.<sup>4</sup>

In this instance, the militaristic Duchy of Milan posed a clear threat to the republican city-state of Florence, and control of Florence was crucial to the Milanese goal of uniting the peninsula under Visconti control. The very fact that Florence’s government was republican in nature made Bruni argue that its preservation meant a net result of greater freedom for humanity. Bruni would contend that Florence was “the defender of Tuscan liberty” from tyrannical threats like Milan.<sup>5</sup> This veneration could be interpreted to mean Bruni believed that republican institutions, like the one in his native Florence, were without fault and benefitted all of humanity. However, his writings suggest that he understood the flaws within republics, like the factionalism of political groups and corruption, but thought that despite all these factors, it presented the best form of governance.<sup>6</sup> Bruni’s *History* reaffirms the Florentine civic humanist ideal of protecting republican forms of government. This staunch defense of republicanism was crafted by a master rhetorician.<sup>7</sup> This does not mean Leonardo Bruni intended his argument to be deceptive; instead, it was a polished argument presented with sound logic.

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<sup>4</sup> Gary Ianziti, “Leonardo Bruni, the Medici, and Florentine Histories,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 1 (2008), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Mikael Hörnqvist, “The Two Myths of Civic Humanism,” in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2000, 117.

<sup>6</sup> Donald J. Wilcox, *The Development of Florentine Humanist Historiography in the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 72.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Field, “Leonardo Bruni, Florentine Traitor? Bruni, the Medici, and an Aretine Conspiracy of 1437,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1998): 1110, doi:10.2307/2901962

Another manner by which a republic can be attacked is from within, as the members of the Florentine city-state did when they disagreed over the issue of proper representation. The fourteenth-century event that attacked Florence's republican government from within and changed the city-state's political future is called the Ciompi Revolt (1378–1382). While this particular worker's rebellion has many complex details, it can be summarized as a group of "hired, propertyless workers" in the wool (and other) guilds who fought for greater representation utilizing violent actions.<sup>8</sup> This major labor dispute had clear political implications for the Republic of Florence in terms of who would be allowed to hold public office in the government. If a non-guildsman could hold elected office, then residents would play a larger role in the governmental process instead of the stranglehold the elite of Florence had on the city-state's political fate. These individuals who sought greater representation managed to install a "revolutionary regime" for a brief time, which ultimately fell.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, this instilled concern in the ruling Florentine elites about the power of the lower classes.<sup>10</sup>

It might seem odd that a failed, short-lived government would cause such powerful families in Florentine politics to be afraid of losing their command over the government. However, seeing this potential regime's success with the backing of the people in Florence, the city's elite families' fear of losing their power was indeed warranted. The laborers' demands seemed to the elite individuals in control

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<sup>8</sup> Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 136; Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Florentine History*, trans. Ninian Hill Thomson, (London: Archibald Constable and Co. Limited, 1906), 187–188.

<sup>9</sup> Yves Winter, "Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising," *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (2012): 737.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

of Florence to be an effort to disrupt “the social order.”<sup>11</sup> Whether or not this accurately depicts the demands of this worker’s rebellion is of no consequence, because the issue is the perception of the ruling class of Florence at the time of the revolt. This ruling class is the same group that regained power after the brief tenure of the regime established by the revolt ended. This fear of losing power explains why these laborers were ultimately “excluded from government,” and why the new guilds that the revolutionary government installed were disbanded, once the elite regained control.<sup>12</sup>

While there is extensive scholarship on the Ciompi Revolt, one way the historical record shows that the elite of Florence considered this political revolt very dangerous and important is through humanistic writings. There was quick and decisive action taken in response to the revolt, like the government’s effort to quell the riots and keep “the city united.”<sup>13</sup> Reflecting on the events of 1378–1382 in *History of the Florentine People*, Leonardo Bruni disparaged the Ciompi Revolt as a misguided and immoral rebellion on the part of the workers.<sup>14</sup> Bruni’s unfavorable retelling of the events of the revolt can be understood as the voices of the Florentine elite not only because he had wealthy patrons financially supporting him but also because of his own high social standing. For instance, in his work *History of the*

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond De Roover, “Labour Conditions in Florence Around 1400: Theory, Policy and Reality,” in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 309.

<sup>12</sup> Martines, *Power and Imagination*, 137.

<sup>13</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Florentine History*, trans. Ninian Hill Thomson, (London: Archibald Constable and Co. Limited, 1906), 191.

<sup>14</sup> Winter, “Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising,” 737.



*Florentine People*, Bruni describes those behind the revolt as “impoverished criminals” who sought “plunder, slaughter, and the exile of citizens.”<sup>15</sup> This reiterates the fact that the Ciompi Revolt greatly affected the perspective of the elite ruling class on representation in the republican government. From Bruni’s perspective, this incident shifted the style of republican government in the fifteenth century to a more centralized form of control in which a few individuals had a large portion of power.

Leonardo Bruni stated that this Trecento revolt was a challenge to the stability of the Republic of Florence; he described these rebelling workers in the language of fear and derision. By attributing the motive of revenge against the “tradition[al] elite” to these individuals, Bruni portrayed their actions as dangerous to the strength of the Republic of Florence.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Bruni was one of the most important humanists of his time who “paved the way” for the work of other humanists, including translations of ancient texts.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Bruni’s thoughts on this subject should be considered important among the views of fifteenth-century humanists. The lens through which Bruni viewed the republican government is a demonstration of how Italian humanists generally thought about republican governments. His concerns about the integrity of such governments were echoed by contemporaries and later Florentines, including Niccolò Machiavelli.

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<sup>15</sup> Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People. Memoirs*, trans. by James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.

<sup>16</sup> John M. Najemy, “Civic humanism and Florentine politics,” in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, eds. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2000, 85–86.

<sup>17</sup> Andrea Rizzi, “Leonardo Bruni and the Shimmering Facets of Languages in Early Quattrocento Florence,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 16, no. 1/2 (2013): 243–244, doi:10.1086/673417.

As Machiavelli asserted in *Il Principe* (1532) and *Discorsi sopra la Prima Deca di Tito Livio* (1531), every individual and group needs to “be kept entirely free from subjection” if the goal is to prevent the collapse of the republic.<sup>18</sup> As with many concepts Machiavelli conveyed, this statement provides an insight into politics that seems obvious in hindsight. He understood that if anyone felt slighted within a republican form of government, those individuals would potentially seek to rebalance said government. The remedy that the “father of modern political science” offers is another idea prevalent in the political philosophy of civic humanism: engagement in the republican process. For “personal liberty” to be protected, Machiavelli states in *Discorsi*, it is necessary to put forth one’s efforts to the “*bene commune*, the common good or public interest.”<sup>19</sup> Essentially, without service to the public, a republic will fall.

An example of the negative consequences of citizens being taken out of the process of a republic in this manner can be seen in the ways civic humanists describe the fall of the Roman Republic. For example, Leonardo Bruni’s *Eulogy* (1403–1404) laments the loss of Roman citizens’ ability “to take part in the business of government,” which signals the nations fall from prominence “into the tyranny of the Empire.”<sup>20</sup> In the true spirit of humanist thought, examples from classical antiquity inform Bruni’s knowledge of the republics of his time. The fate of republican governments that eliminate citizen representation, he postulates, will be the same as the Roman Empire. To make his case, Bruni left out the great heights and successes of the empire, while highlighting the rule of such infamous leaders as “the

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<sup>18</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics: Volume 2, Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 163.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>20</sup> Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume 1: The Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 83.

loathsome Caligula.”<sup>21</sup> Famously, Caligula was a Roman emperor whose everyday deviant behavior included sexual crimes as well as “torture and executions” with no just cause.<sup>22</sup> The overarching theme which Bruni conveyed in *Eulogy* is that as citizen participation decreases, the possibility of horrors like Caligula’s rule becomes inevitable.

To avoid such degradation of republics requires citizen participation in government. Fifteenth-century humanists developed a concise understanding of this idea. This concept of “active citizenship” encompasses the moral obligation expressed within civic humanistic literature while also expressing the desire for greater “freedom [in] one’s city.”<sup>23</sup> This idea of actively engaging in the civic process of political discourse and governance is at the core of the beliefs of civic humanists. It propelled them to take action with their knowledge instead of hoarding it, as they accused the scholastics of doing. This concept of involving oneself in civic matters, also known as *vivere civile*, expressed knowledge practically in a manner that “the contemplative man” could only understand theoretically.<sup>24</sup> This coincides with the humanist belief in the active life, the *vita activa*. This debate between scholastics and humanists perhaps best highlights the humanistic belief in civic engagement. If there is no “practical use in social and political life” for a philosophical notion, then regardless of its content, such philosophical beliefs does

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<sup>21</sup> Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Aloys Winterling, Paul Psounis, Glenn W. Most, and Deborah Lucas Schneider, *Caligula: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Holly Hamilton-Bleakley, James Tully, and Annabel S. Brett, *Rethinking The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 43.

<sup>24</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 64–65.

not offer anything to the betterment of political reality.<sup>25</sup> As Coluccio Salutati (former Chancellor of Florence from 1375) said in a 1398 letter to Peregrino Zambecari the Chancellor of Bologna, “the contemplative life” may be more pleasant for one’s self, but the *vita activa* is “an exercise in virtue.”<sup>26</sup>

Civic humanism was the dominant political philosophy in fifteenth-century Florence. It included a strong emphasis on the volatility of republics, and on the moral responsibility citizens had to participate in a republic for the protection and freedom of its people. Perhaps not particularly intuitive is how members of the Medici family used the political philosophy of civic humanism to advance their political ambitions and consolidate what would eventually be the Medici plutocracy. Their aptitude for this form of political advancement proved to be a major contributing factor to the success of their family in Florentine society. A strong sense of civic engagement and the desire to protect republican values does not immediately seem in line with the style of rule the Medici would use during the fifteenth century.

However, the family was able to use their knowledge of humanism to strengthen and justify their plutocratic control over Florence. Cosimo’s patronage of multiple humanists helped him create the correct appearance of a ruler who was a powerful friend to humanism. From a public relations viewpoint, it allowed him to project himself as a strong and virtuous leader. In turn, this contributed to a larger projection of power: utilizing the ideas of civic humanism and humanism as a whole, Cosimo de’ Medici was able to use his patronage of humanists to create an image that greatly aided in his family’s political dominance over the Republic of Florence. During the fifteenth century, in its most basic form, patronage

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<sup>25</sup> Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 106.

<sup>26</sup> Coluccio Salutati, *Letter to Peregrino Zambecari*, ed. Kenneth R. Bartlett, *The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance: A Sourcebook* (Lexington, Mass: D.C. Heath, 1992), 81.

meant a social network that allowed artists with “connections to powerful patrons” to fund and complete their work.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps the Medici most beloved by humanists and adept at using the ideology to his advantage was Cosimo. There is perhaps no greater indicator of how humanists viewed Cosimo than the great praise they gave him after his death when they and the Florentine citizens posthumously bestowed upon him the title of “*Pater Patriae* of Florence.”<sup>28</sup> It is natural and even expected to honor a great leader with a title after his death, but because civic humanists greatly valued republican ideals, praising a ruler who limited the republic initially appears to be peculiar. However, since Cosimo’s actions directly benefited these humanists as well as their work, they ignored some actions that they would normally have criticized in favor of praising his pro-humanist actions.

While Cosimo was prolific in his accomplishments and received much adulation, he was praised for reasons that can be defined as entirely humanistic. For his “recovering and translating of classical texts,” humanist scholars Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) commended Cosimo for his commitment to their political philosophy.<sup>29</sup> Such advancements in literary humanism highlight the clear humanist interest of Cosimo de’ Medici. Patronage for such literary endeavors was essential for humanists like Bruni and Bracciolini to fund their work, which affected their view of Cosimo. Part of Cosimo’s overall appeal was his professed humility, which can help endear a person to any group. For

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<sup>27</sup> Paul D. McLean, *The Art of the Network: Strategic Interaction and Patronage in Renaissance Florence* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Alison M. Brown, “The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo De’ Medici, Pater Patriae,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 24, no. 3/4 (1961): 186, doi:10.2307/750795.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

instance, his frequent attendance at Santa Maria degli Angeli, a church whose creation was funded by the Medici in 1434, where “humanist discussions” were held, made himself part of the humanist community.<sup>30</sup> Simple acts like interacting with his neighbors as an equal, instead of as the de facto leader of Florence, by discussing humanist topics like education, art, and civic participation, certainly helped ingratiate Cosimo with the humanists. The humanist community’s praise would go as far as to compare Cosimo to a Roman statesman of old, fueled by “patriotism and republican pride.”<sup>31</sup> Given the Renaissance veneration of classical antiquity, this comparison does underscore the level admiration Cosimo managed to gather during a lifetime.

Another reason Cosimo gained so much admiration from the humanist community during his lifetime was his patronage of new humanist works. The Medici household established a diverse “network of patronage and friendship” that had some of the most important creators of the humanistic art and literature in Florence.<sup>32</sup> The establishment of this network was vital to the livelihood of many artists and financed the development of large amounts of Renaissance art. During the Quattrocento in Florence, the Medici had essentially a monopoly in “the dispensation of favors” to these artists.<sup>33</sup> One of the humanists he greatly aided in his work was Niccolò de’ Niccoli (1364–1437). Cosimo assisted Niccoli in finding

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<sup>30</sup> Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, 1390-1460* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 70.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>32</sup> Dale V. Kent, *Cosimo De’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

rare books, by taking responsibility for loans the humanist took out at the Medici bank, and even covering all financial debts for him when escaping the 1420 plague.<sup>34</sup> The backing of humanistic ventures (and individuals) like these partially explains why so many humanists praised Cosimo. This patronage also showed Cosimo's business savvy that allowed him to see tangible value in these investments, understanding that patronage served as a boon to his public relations. It should be noted that the financial resources of the Medici Bank that Cosimo extended to Niccolò Niccoli were also given to other humanist patrons.<sup>35</sup>

Cosimo de' Medici's life and career demonstrated his deep interest in civic humanism outside mere patronage. The most obvious of these connections is how useful such knowledge could be to an individual in his position of political power, particularly when it came to skills in rhetoric. While giving a speech in 1448, Cosimo used his well-honed rhetorical skills by making a persuasive argument that additional taxes were necessary for the defense of "liberty."<sup>36</sup> This skill of persuasion is formally known as rhetoric and is one of the five subjects included in the *studia humanitatis* that lies at the basis of all humanistic efforts.<sup>37</sup> By exhibiting the skills of an accomplished rhetorician, Cosimo would have impressed Florentine humanists with his persuasive speeches.

During the fifteenth century, civic humanism lauded the virtues of the republican government of Florence and its superiority over tyrannical governments like the Duchy of Milan. While these simple

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<sup>34</sup> "From Vespasiano's *Lives*," in Bartlett, ed., *The Civilization of the Italian Renaissance*, 90-91.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, "The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo De' Medici, Pater Patriae," 206.

<sup>36</sup> Alison Brown, "De-masking Renaissance republicanism," in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2000, 189.

<sup>37</sup> Maxson. *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence*, 2.

descriptions of the political philosophy are applicable, they fail to illustrate civic humanism's nuance. However, it can be argued that in the aftermath of the Ciompi revolt, "Leonardo Bruni and his humanist contemporaries" established an intellectual argument that the proper form of Florentine government was what Mark Jurdjevic has called "oligarchic republicanism."<sup>38</sup> Earlier scholars argued that large swaths of Quattrocento Florence seemed to run contrary to the city-state's overall political philosophy. Hans Baron's argument about the strength of fifteenth-century "civic humanism" faces a pressing challenge in the form of oligarchical Medici rule.<sup>39</sup> Baron's explanation for the existence of the Medici oligarchy/plutocracy leaves a lot to be desired.

However, these Bruni-led humanists were not the only part of the community that was advocating for a more oligarchical style rule instead of the republicanism of the fourteenth century. The *ottimati* or aristocracy also created a "strain of humanistic ideas" that supported the developing "oligarchy."<sup>40</sup> The political sphere in fifteenth-century Florence was evolving its beliefs on what precisely constituted a republican government. They showed signs of accepting more authoritarian behavior and not rejecting it as corrosive to the Republic of Florence. Any individuals within the group at large could devise a rationale to justify Cosimo de' Medici's rise to political power simply by using the vast and "rich ideology" of humanism.<sup>41</sup> Especially remembering the humanistic skills of rhetoric and debate, it is easily

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<sup>38</sup> Mark Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1999): 996. doi:10.2307/2901833.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 997.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 999.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 999.



conceivable that several reasonable-sounding explanations for relenting to oligarchical republicanism were the best move for Florence.

However, the use of civic humanist thought by the Medici to justify their control of the Republic of Florence was not indefensible. Civic humanists could argue that they did not change their position and state that “oligarchies are still republics” that cannot be equated with tyranny.<sup>42</sup> The oligarchic, or (as this work asserts) plutocratic Florentine government of the fifteenth century theoretically operated under the principles of a republican government with fewer and wealthier representatives. This philosophical change from the veneration of republican style government to the allowance of a more oligarchical rule can be seen in Leonardo Bruni’s *History of the Florentine People*. For example, Bruni’s description of the banishment of Benedetto Alberti (d. 1388), who advocated for wider citizen involvement in government, depicts a regime trying to prevent a threat to their power in the name of “firmness and security.”<sup>43</sup>

Bruni’s *History of the Florentine People* did not have the same appeal to “populism,” or political ideas focused on the people, that his earlier works had, and it spoke more favorably of the Medici regime, likely due to Cosimo’s decision to elevate him “to the *reggimento* (aristocratic/noble families).”<sup>44</sup> This *quid pro quo* style of interaction not only illustrates the influence Cosimo de’ Medici exerted over the humanist movement, but it also shows the civic humanists’ transition in thought from advocating for a

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<sup>42</sup> William J. Connell, “The Republican Idea,” in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2000, 25.

<sup>43</sup> Ianziti, “Leonardo Bruni, the Medici, and Florentine Histories,” 16; Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, 79–81.

<sup>44</sup> James Hankins, “Rhetoric, History, and Ideology: The Civic Panegyrics of Leonardo Bruni,” in *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections*, ed. James Hankins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2000, 175.

republican Florence to condoning a more oligarchical style of government. From a purely cynical viewpoint, these learned individuals changed their principles to gain favor with Florence's ruling family. At best, the civic humanist who gained something from Cosimo either through patronage or otherwise felt his support of their work was a validation of their ideas.

Cosimo's patronage of humanists like Brunni should be recognized for its contribution to the Medici family and their image of power in Florence. However, it was by no means the only form of patronage that the Medici participated in. Throughout the fifteenth century, Cosimo and his son Lorenzo the Magnificent used artistic patronage to project their family's power. Through paintings, sculptures, and monumental architecture, the Medici family utilized the rich artistic production of Florence during the Quattrocento to their advantage. In creating this image of their banking family as powerful yet virtuous leaders of Florence, the Medici were able to effectively use this creation to help support their plutocratic rule during much of the fifteenth century. Cosimo and Lorenzo were by no means the only individuals who understood the power art could have in the projection of power. However, their use of the medium is key to understanding their rule of Florence.

Of the forms of artistic patronage that helped project the powerful image of the Medici family, the building of monumental architectural structures was among the most important. This can be seen in the construction of the church of Santa Maria degli Angeli which, along with San Lorenzo, offered the family two prominent houses of worship near both their family residence and the center of Florence to illustrate their wealth and power.<sup>45</sup> Cosimo de' Medici spent "very large sums of money" on monumental structures at a time when building such massive projects was not in vogue.<sup>46</sup> A business-oriented family

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<sup>45</sup> R. Burr Litchfield, *Online Gazetteer of Sixteenth Century Florence*.

*Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG*: Brown University, Providence, R.I., 2006.

<sup>46</sup> A. D. Fraser Jenkins, "Cosimo De' Medici's Patronage of Architecture and the Theory of Magnificence," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33 (1970): 162, doi:10.2307/750894.

such as the Medici would not needlessly spend money on expensive ventures like the building of large structures without the belief that it would benefit them in some manner. For example, the rebuilding of the eleventh-century church of San Lorenzo with the aid of famed architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) served the purpose of asserting the family’s power and association with the church in Florence.<sup>47</sup> While Cosimo’s spending on architectural projects could be seen as a show of power, the man who would become the Archbishop of Ragusa and friend of Cosimo, Timoteo Maffei (1415–1470), described him as a “magnificent man.”<sup>48</sup> In this context, the adjective describes the great and virtuous actions of an individual of the plutocratic ruling class.

One example of monumental architecture that Cosimo de’ Medici created that was able to project the family’s power and influence was his personal palace. This palazzo, situated in central Florence, serves as a prime example of a structure that expressed “the patron’s interests” to any who saw it while also setting a standard of excellence among other private residences of the Quattrocento’s elite.<sup>49</sup> Both the Medici palace and the family’s favorite church (San Lorenzo) portrayed the power Cosimo and his banking family had, but each in a different way. The reconstruction of the local church associates the Medici with the power of the church and the power of God to the parishioners. The Medici palace and its contents, on the other hand, conveyed Cosimo’s humanist interests. While there could be a concern that such a projection of power could send the wrong message, in context with Cosimo’s other patronage efforts, the use of monumental architecture provided a positive image for the Medici family.

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<sup>47</sup> Kent, *Cosimo De’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre*, 186.

<sup>48</sup> Fraser Jenkins, “Cosimo De’ Medici’s Patronage of Architecture and the Theory of Magnificence,” 165.

<sup>49</sup> Kent, *Cosimo De’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre*, 220, 228.

Throughout much of the fifteenth century, Lorenzo continued the connection between his family and the church of San Lorenzo by adding to his grandfather Cosimo's work. This was no small investment either: Lorenzo furthered the building's reconstruction with a financial contribution of "6,570 florins in the period 1477–81."<sup>50</sup> A banking family with as much capital as the Medici could produce this amount of money, but it was not a trivial sum. According to the *Catasto* of 1427, which provides tax records for Florence from that year, only 137 households had "10,000 florins or more in total assessment."<sup>51</sup> Based on these statistics, Lorenzo made a massive investment in this architectural project because he felt it was an important projection of power.

As much as the Medici palace constructed by Cosimo de' Medici projected his power as well as his personal interests, so too did the Poggio a Caiano villa for Lorenzo. By 1473, Lorenzo de' Medici purchased the villa on which he would spend considerable amounts of capital, to rebuild it as an image of his power.<sup>52</sup> The time this project took to complete served to make the villa a showcase of who Lorenzo

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<sup>50</sup> F. W. Kent, *Lorenzo De' Medici and the Art of Magnificence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 63.

<sup>51</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. [Machine readable data file based on D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Census and Property Survey of Florentine Domains in the Province of Tuscany, 1427-1480.*] Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002.

<sup>52</sup> F. W. Kent, "Lorenzo De' Medici's Acquisition of Poggio a Caiano in 1474 and an Early Reference to His Architectural Expertise," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 42 (1979): 251–257, doi:10.2307/751099.

was and what interests he had. This villa demonstrated his love for ancient architecture, and his grandiose building project conveyed the image that he deserved a royal palace.<sup>53</sup> Whoever would visit this private residence of Lorenzo de' Medici would be keenly aware of the power and influence the owner of the house possessed. Experiencing the space alone allows any visitor to understand the immense wealth the Medici had in a more tangibly way than merely knowing of their banking empire. Along with the personal touches that Lorenzo added to his villa, it made a clear statement that he and his family are among the preeminent elites in the region.

Medici projections of power did not consist merely of grand architectural structures but also included works of art like paintings and sculptures. One example of such a work of art was Donatello's bronze *David* and *Judith and Holofernes* statues that were a fixture in "outdoor spaces of the Medici Palace in Florence for about thirty years."<sup>54</sup> For a work of art to be displayed so notably at the Medici palace, suggests some importance, but it served a greater purpose. The giant-slayer David had been coopted to "a new political role...as a defender of Florence" and the city-state's "republican government."<sup>55</sup> This is a bold adoption of the republic's ideal by a single-family. First, *David's* placement in the Medici palace asserts that they are the sole defenders of Florence against the threat of tyranny by associating David's fight against tyranny with Goliath. Second, the sculpture being housed within the residence suggests a blatant control over a supposed representative government like the Republic of

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<sup>53</sup> Kent, *Lorenzo De' Medici and the Art of Magnificence*, 143.

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Blake McHam, "Donatello's Bronze David and Judith as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence," *Art Bulletin* 83, no. 1 (2001), 32, doi:10.2307/3177189.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Florence. This suggestion of control is also taking place only several hundred meters away from the seat of Florence's government, the Palazzo della *Signoria*.<sup>56</sup>

Donatello's other work displayed at the Medici palace was *Judith and Holofernes*, a statue that represented Judith "rallying...for liberty against the evils of tyrannical rule."<sup>57</sup> While this message does reiterate the symbolic meaning of the *David* sculpture, it also provides a more virtuous and feminine figure in this battle against tyranny: the widow Judith's execution of Holofernes, the Assyrian general trying to destroy the city of Bethulia, is a depiction of courage in defense of one's home and pride in that home. Together, these sculptures provided the Medici family with "an antityrannical" symbol that could be seen in the "public space of their palace's courtyard."<sup>58</sup> While not all parts of the palace were for public consumption, these courtyards could be seen by any resident of Florence or perhaps even a visitor to the city-state. Upon viewing these beautiful sculptures with the grand palace as a backdrop, even the casual observer could draw several conclusions. The Medici had immense wealth and influence because of that wealth, but the projection of their goals invokes civic humanist thought, not just financial success. The audience should conclude that this banking family will protect the Republic of Florence from the threats of tyranny and will do so in a virtuous manner. Artistic projections of power used in this manner not only made people believe that the Medici have great political power but were also meant to reassure the people that the family would not misuse it.

Perhaps the best example of the Medici family's use of art as a projection of power can be found in the chapel within the Medici palace. The chapel had various artistic features, but the frescos provide

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<sup>56</sup> McHam, "Donatello's Bronze David and Judith," 34.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

particularly useful imagery. The art in the chapel had the “chief theme” of “the Journey of the Magi” that contained frescos by Benozzo Gozzoli (1421–1497), associating the Medici with the fortune and “regal power” of the Magi.<sup>59</sup> Such an association with biblical figures in the story of Jesus’s birth who also had political and economic power only served to bolster the image of the Medici. This artistic depiction appeals to the political power of the wise kings and the power related to the most powerful figure in Christianity, Jesus Christ.

Would a projection of power be a worthwhile investment in such a space where very few individuals would see the artistic work? Yes, because the use of art such as this would be witnessed by figures like the Duke of Milan, Galeazzo Maria Sforza (1444–1476), when visiting Cosimo de’ Medici in 1459, went to the chapel and described it as an opulent decorated “earthly paradise.”<sup>60</sup> Note that a duke of a powerful Italian state would visit Cosimo’s residence for a private meeting. This illustrates what kind of power Cosimo wielded in fifteenth-century Italian politics. The Medici used art to create an image and a perception of power to the entire city-state of Florence, including the few who were admitted inside the private realm of the family, and to visiting dignitaries. An image of this nature had clear advantages and helped the family’s control over the Republic of Florence during the fifteenth century. However, projecting that same perception of power to fellow elites like Sforza could arguably be more important in so far as dealing with powerful Italian figures.

During the fifteenth century, the Medici family under the leadership of Cosimo and Lorenzo were able to use the vast pool of artistic talent to provide imagery that conveyed the power they wanted others to believe they had. They did so not only through visual mediums like architecture or sculpture but also by using the political philosophy of civic humanism. In the latter part of the fourteenth century and throughout the Quattrocento, civic humanism was the premier philosophical perspective on how to

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<sup>59</sup> Kent, *Cosimo De’ Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron’s Oeuvre*, 305.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

administrate republican governments correctly. Civic humanists, who believed republics to be susceptible to corruption, aimed to protect the core mechanisms of this form of representative government against entities that historically had harmed them. While civic humanists argued that citizens had a moral obligation to participate in republics and safeguard the government from degradation, these beliefs could also be used to justify a plutocracy in practice. The Medici understood this notion and utilized it to justify their political dominance during the Quattrocento.

This utilization of civic humanism and its principles to support the Medici rule had clear ideological contradictions that could be seen as irreconcilable. However, civic humanists like Leonardo Bruni used the very principles, which advocated for a republican government to justify the Medici's plutocratic dominance of the Republic of Florence. A dramatic shift in belief such as this seems to be explained purely by the monetary gain or advantageous positions offered by leaders like Cosimo de' Medici. There is evidence (for example, in the works of Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini) that suggests that humanists believed Cosimo de' Medici to have been a beneficial ruler, but such accolades could have merely been repayment for his support of their livelihood.

The Republic of Florence was controlled by the Medici for much of the fifteenth century in part because the family was able to use philosophical and artistic movements happening in their city-state to their advantage. While certainly both Cosimo and Lorenzo had personal interests in civic humanism or Renaissance art, they none the less understood how to use these entities to create an image of power for the Medici. This projection of power required the creation of an intricate network of Florentine patronage with an investment of capital that could easily be considered a fortune by the standards of the fifteenth century. The importance the Medici placed on the use of civic humanism and artistic endeavors towards buttressing their image should be reflected in the examination of the family's rule over Florence during the Quattrocento.



## CHAPTER 3

### POLITICS AND MEDICI MANIPULATION

In the fifteenth century, Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici were able to exert control over the Republic of Florence's governmental systems. Such influence over the Italian city-state helps demonstrate the plutocratic rule over Florence during the Quattrocento despite the pretense of the government's republican nature. True, the success of the Medici's regime would not be possible without capitalizing on a few moments that were politically advantageous, and that required more great timing than anything. However, the banking family was able to exert so much influence because the systems of governance that existed in the Republic of Florence were not secure against manipulation from talented and well-connected political operatives. The electoral process was a particular target of interest for the Medici during the Quattrocento; influencing it allowed the family to assert control beyond that normally afforded a republican majority. This electoral manipulation, among other factors this chapter will examine, allowed the Medici family to govern the Republic of Florence as a plutocracy.

To properly understand this exploitation of Florentine civic institutions during the fifteenth century, there must first be an examination of some events that occurred in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This includes developments like the transition away from the aristocratically ran government and the events of the Ciompi Revolt, which drastically changed representation in the Republic of Florence. In the absence of this context, the Florentine political landscape of the fifteenth century may appear to have logical contradictions because of the great complexities created by the previous centuries. One aspect that is important to understand is how a power vacuum developed in the Florentine government during the thirteenth century that allowed certain families to dominate the Republic of Florence during the fifteenth century. Laws like the 1293 Ordinances of Justice helped put limitations on the magnates or ruling class of Florence. For instance, Ordinance IX states that a magnate would be

punished for taking the property of a member of the *popolo grasso* (wealthy guild/mercantile class).<sup>1</sup> The *popolo grasso* found fault in the governing style of the aristocracy of Florence and created statutes like this based on their experiences. Over the course of years, these statutes helped a group of “merchants, bankers, and tradesmen” replace the traditional “noblemen” and create a new ruling class of the Republic of Florence.<sup>2</sup>

These members of Florentine society saw fault in the city-state’s aristocratic leadership and managed to replace it with individuals of non-noble ancestry to rule in their stead. This change meant excluding some nobles from holding elected office, but those who were excluded constituted a small minority of the overall noble population, and others were still able to hold “the highest municipal positions.”<sup>3</sup> So while this displacement was important, it did not eliminate the aristocratic presence from the Florentine political stage. Actions of this nature made rule by the elite families of the *popolo grasso* possible during the Quattrocento by establishing the precedent that new families could enter the Florentine ruling class. In addition, there could be a displacement of those in control of the government,

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<sup>1</sup> “Gli Ordinamenti Di Giustizia Del Comune E Popolo Di Firenze Compilati Nel 1293 E Nuovamente Pubblicati Da Francesco Bonaini, Soprintendente Al R. Archivio Di Stato Sopra L'abbozzo Che Si Conserva Nel Medesimo Archivio.” *Archivio Storico Italiano* 1, no. 1 (1855): 23; See Franco Cardini, ed. *Ordinamenti di giustizia, 1293-1993* (Florence: SP 44, 1993) for a modern printing.

<sup>2</sup> Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, 1390-1460* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “Nobles or Pariahs? The Exclusion of Florentine Magnates from the Thirteenth to the Fifteenth Centuries,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 2 (1997): 216. Accessed January 1, 2020.

as happened to both the Albizzi and the Medici during the fifteenth century. Thus, while the Ordinances themselves were not the mechanism for removing powerful families like the Albizzi from power, the idea of removing those in control from power to allow for new rulers persisted. The Albizzi, whose regime over Florence lasted from 1382 to 1434, ultimately failed because of Cosimo de' Medici's return from exile in 1434.<sup>4</sup>

The most critical incident that contributed to the Florentine political landscape of the fifteenth century was the events of the Ciompi Revolt (1378–1382). Many complex factors led to the revolt of the Florentine textile workers, but ultimately this social conflict resulted in these rebels replacing the “governing elites” with a short-lived revolutionary government.<sup>5</sup> Those in power and the rebels had completely different perspectives on the cause of this violent revolt. To those ruling elites, this revolt was nothing but an attempt by the peasants to upset “the social order” of Florence.<sup>6</sup> However, those in rebellion argued that they were fighting for greater representation within the Republic of Florence<sup>7</sup> This

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<sup>4</sup> Gene A Brucker, *Living on the Edge in Leonardo's Florence: Selected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 93; “Albizzi family,” in *Thames & Hudson Dictionary of the Italian Renaissance*, edited by J. R. Hale, Thames & Hudson, 2006, <https://tinyurl.com/y9ssa6js>.

<sup>5</sup> Yves Winter, “Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising,” *Political Theory* 40, no. 6 (2012): 736–737.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond De Roover, “Labour Conditions in Florence Around 1400: Theory, Policy and Reality,” in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 309.

<sup>7</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Florentine History*, trans. Ninian Hill Thomson, (London: Archibald Constable and Co. Limited, 1906), 198.

meant allowing non-guildsmen into the electoral process, which threatened the Florentine elites' control of the government. While this attempted realignment of the Florentine political landscape was unsuccessful, the threat of the masses demanding greater representation became an ever-present fear in the minds of the elite ruling class.<sup>8</sup>

In the Quattrocento, the government of Florence consisted of various bodies, with the number of councils varying, depending on the stage in the republic's development and on what additional legislative committees had been added to address certain issues. It is important to understand how the republican government functioned to highlight the areas in which it was susceptible to manipulation. The two main types of government positions either dealt directly with legislation or provided support for legislative activities. For example, the *Signoria*, which consisted of nine members who served two-month terms, would initiate legislation with consultation from various government officials called "Gonfaloniere" (banner bearers).<sup>9</sup> The *Signoria*, the *Sedici Gonfalonieri* (Sixteen Standard Bearers), and the *Dodici Buonuomini* (Twelve Good Men) combined to form the body called the *Tre Maggiori* (Three Major), which consisted of the "three highest executive positions" and were the main parts of the governmental body.<sup>10</sup> The *Tre Maggiori* had varying powers over the government throughout the fifteenth century and

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<sup>8</sup> Winter, "Plebeian Politics: Machiavelli and the Ciompi Uprising," 737.

<sup>9</sup> Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online Tratte of Office Holders, 1282–1532. Machine readable data file. Edited by David Herlihy, R. Burr Litchfield, Anthony Molho, and Roberto Barducci. (Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence, R. I., 2002.) Accessed January 2, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 6.

had varying responsibilities. Another crucial position in the fifteenth-century Florentine government was the priorate, which was the principal executive body of the state. It had eight members, including the *Gonfaloniere della Giustizia* or Banner Bearer of Justice whose primary role was described as “maintaining public order” through leading the city’s security forces.<sup>11</sup>

In this period, the total number of citizens that were even included in the process of forming a government in Florence numbered around five thousand.<sup>12</sup> This was by no means a large portion of the Florentine population. For instance, in the first half of the sixteenth century, Florence had between 50,000 and 70,000 people living in the city.<sup>13</sup> So, only ten percent of the population was eligible for office and not all of those who were eligible sought to serve in the government. Thus, the Republic of Florence’s government was an exclusive group. It can be surmised that a government formed in this manner would be more likely to serve this exclusive group’s interests.

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<sup>11</sup> L. De Angelis, “La classe dirigeante de Florence au tournant du 14<sup>e</sup> et 15<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Revue française de science politique*, vol. 64, no. 6, 1123-1137. 2014, accessed January 1, 2020, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-revue-francaise-de-science-politique-2014-6-page-1123.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> Yves Sintomer, “Random Selection, Republican Self-Government, and Deliberative Democracy,” *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 17, no. 3 (2010): 476, doi:10.1111/j.1467-8675.2010.00607.x.

<sup>13</sup> Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 521.

The early Florentine republic required that individuals who were eligible for office must be an active guild member who was formally enrolled in the association and working in that guild's trade.<sup>14</sup> Even among eligible candidates who could hold a governmental office, there was a further screening process for elected positions within the Florentine government. This bureaucratic procedure, called *squittino* (scrutiny), demanded officeholders meet specific qualifications, like age requirements, limitations on consecutive elections, and having no suspicion of nepotism.<sup>15</sup> Only then were these citizens allowed to enter in various elections for government positions "every five years" after 1415.<sup>16</sup> Because of this separation between those who were eligible for election and those who made it through the scrutiny of an elected position, officeholders were an even more exclusive group. As with many things in Florentine politics, the scrutiny of eligible citizens was tied to the guild system. This system created a "very limited elite" group that was based on allegiance or partisanship to the guilds that made someone far more likely to be elected.<sup>17</sup> Such a system could be correctly described as an oligarchy instead of a republic.

After the scrutiny process, the Republic of Florence's *Signoria* had another unique and potentially susceptible step to elect municipal officials. The names of potential candidates who had been scrutinized

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<sup>14</sup> [Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online Tratte of Office Holders, 1282-1532.](#) (Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence, R. I., 2002.)

<sup>15</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 5–6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Alison Brown, "Florence, Renaissance and Early Modern State: Reappraisals," *The Journal of Modern History* 56, no. 2 (1984): 288.

were written on pieces of paper that were put in leather pouches (*borse*) and drawn randomly by officials called the *accopiatori*, whose original job was simply to fill the pouches.<sup>18</sup> That term has no direct translation into English; in a modern translation, it means coupler, but the historical definition of *accopiatori* is a “municipal magistrate in charge of ballots.”<sup>19</sup>

The *accopiatori* system is an interesting aspect of the Republic of Florence’s government because of its intended duty, the group’s actions, and its ability to manipulate the *Signoria*. Essentially, this step in the selection process was designed or intended to create a random choice among individuals who have been previously designated as worthy of holding public office. Even after that step, there was another part of the process that sought to eliminate unqualified individuals, a measure which took into consideration unpaid taxes, their criminal background, and if they or “a parent held a similar position.”<sup>20</sup> This entire process was designed to have the appearance of checks and balances, but in fact, included areas in which manipulation of the electoral process appears at first glance to be relatively easy. However, this depended heavily on the standing of an individual’s family among the Florentine political community.

Another exercise of the *accopiatori*’s power dealt with the elections themselves. During this same period, from 1434–1441, the *accopiatori* decided which “eligible citizens...[were] present for sortition”

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<sup>18</sup> Sintomer, “Random Selection, Republican Self–Government, and Deliberative Democracy,” 474.

<sup>19</sup> *Opera Del Vocabolario Italiano Istituto Del Consiglio Nazionale Delle Ricerche*, s.v. “accopiatori.” Accessed January 25, 2020. <http://www.ovi.cnr.it/index.php/en/il-vocabolario-2>.

<sup>20</sup> Sintomer, “Random Selection, Republican Self–Government, and Deliberative Democracy,” 474.

and even set how many names were put up for sortition in *Signoria* elections.<sup>21</sup> Simply, sortition is the process of drawing lots to elect an official. Technically, the selection of the *Signoria* was random, but the odds were created in such a way that candidates who were preferable to the individual in charge could be expected to win. These particular manipulations of the Florentine constitution just happened to coincide with Cosimo de' Medici's political ascendancy, which was characterized by governmental manipulations and electoral controls.<sup>22</sup> In 1434, Cosimo was elected to the office, established in the 1293 Ordinances of Justice III, as *Vexilliferi iustitie*, of *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* and in 1435, he was elected to the *Buonumini*, both positions in the *Tre Maggiori*.<sup>23</sup> While there is no direct evidence that Cosimo instructed the *accoppiatori* to interject themselves in the election process, it seems a likely conclusion: it would explain how he was able to exert so much political influence over the republican government.

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<sup>21</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein, "Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth-century," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 446.

<sup>23</sup> Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online Tratte of Office Holders, 1282-1532. (Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence, R. I., 2002.); "Gli Ordinamenti Di Giustizia Del Comune E Popolo Di Firenze Compilati Nel 1293 E Nuovamente Pubblicati Da Francesco Bonaini, Soprintendente Al R. Archivio Di Stato Sopra L'abbozzo Che Si Conserva Nel Medesimo Archivio." *Archivio Storico Italiano* 1, no. 1 (1855): 23; See Franco Cardini, ed. *Ordinamenti di giustizia, 1293-1993* (Florence: SP 44, 1993) for a modern printing.



As has been demonstrated by the actions of the *accoppiatori*, the sortition process was heavily manipulated. There are numerous situations where the sortition process took place, but results were ignored or thrown out: “the office was not given to the first citizen whose name was drawn,” even if he was eligible, and “the drawing of names would continue until” the designated number of candidates had been pulled from the *borse*.<sup>24</sup> The Medici’s political interference throughout the fifteenth century appeared to contradict the design of the electoral process. The disregard for the procedure of sortition or the elimination of the procedure altogether suggests the manipulation of elections. One example of the constitutional procedure for sortition being violated occurred during the latter part of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s control over Florence (1483–1494) when individuals being elected to the *Signoria* were allowed to nominate familial “substitutions” for their office.<sup>25</sup> The system established in fifteenth-century Florence had many ways to circumvent the intended result of the election. Manipulation, particularly when it comes to sortition, was fairly easy. At least theoretically, the fair election of officials to government positions is a necessary component of a republic. In this sense, the Medici led Republic of Florence was not republican.

The Republic of Florence also had mechanisms in place that would allow the rules and regulations of the government to be circumvented in special circumstances. This “Florentine custom” involved the government calling an advisory meeting or *pratiche* of influential and wealthy citizens who could vote to give special powers or *baliae* to the government for a short period of time.<sup>26</sup> Essentially, if

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<sup>24</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 378.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

<sup>26</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein, “Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth-century,” in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, 454.

some issue came up that needed to be addressed but did not fall under the jurisdiction of any particular body of government, those in the economic elite could vote to enact those powers to address said issue. These special grants of power varied greatly depending on the situation at hand. For instance, the *balia* had the power to recall Cosimo from exile in 1434 and gave special electoral authority the *accoppiatori*, which was a characteristic of the Medici regime throughout the fifteenth century.<sup>27</sup>

Certainly, there are scenarios in the course of governmental affairs that call for special powers, like the Republic of Florence's practice of *balia*, and those powers could have been used responsibly. For instance, the *balia* did provide “certain advantages in time[s] of war” because it could address a specific issue without dealing with the normal governmental channels, which is a beneficial option for a government.<sup>28</sup> However, the use of special powers was in conflict with the function of the republican systems in the Florentine government, even transforming the nature of the Republic of Florence altogether. Some of these conflicts include appointing “councillors for three years,” which went outside the traditional power of the *balia*, “determin[ing] the next scrutinies,” and the passing of tax legislation that led to the institution being threatened with elimination.<sup>29</sup>

These problems were particularly an issue while Cosimo de' Medici was in power and went outside the Florentine Republic's constitutional procedure. Each one of these extraconstitutional powers

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<sup>27</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein, “Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth-century,” in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, 454.

<sup>28</sup> Andrea Zorzi, “The ‘material constitution’ of the Florentine Dominion,” in *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*, eds. William J. Connell and Andrea Zorzi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20.

<sup>29</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 82, 85–86.

could easily be manipulated by a major political figure like Cosimo if his desired governmental outcomes were not being achieved through traditional channels. Even though alleged misuse was brought forward in July 1447, the *Signoria*, which included Cosimo de' Medici, was unable to create "a limitation of the *Balia*'s powers."<sup>30</sup> The outcome of this decision benefited a government influenced by an individual like Cosimo because he could now achieve objectives the *Signoria* could not or would not accomplish. Ultimately, the *balia* represents a government mechanism that could be shaped to suit the needs of a given situation and could also be used to bypass the traditional legislative process.

Having gained some further understanding of how Florentine institutional structures and governing bodies were susceptible to manipulation, a more informed examination of how the Medici influenced the government in the fifteenth century is possible. Cosimo de' Medici's influence and power in the Republic of Florence was not a secret. Both non-Florentines and citizens of Florence described him as the city's "Pater Patriae."<sup>31</sup> A title that means "Father of the Country" is not given to an individual if they do not have considerable power and influence over some of the governmental institutions. Such influence over Florentine politics was not at all guaranteed during the Quattrocento. For instance, Cosimo was exiled from Florence on multiple occasions, including in September 1433, before the Medici regime assumed control over the city-state.<sup>32</sup> However, Cosimo had allies within the government that paved the way for his political comeback. After his return to Florence, thanks to the help of the *Signoria*, most of

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<sup>30</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Alison M. Brown, "The Humanist Portrait of Cosimo De' Medici, Pater Patriae," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 24, no. 3/4 (1961): 191, doi:10.2307/750795.

<sup>32</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 1.

“the Albizzi party” who had been responsible for his exile were exiled themselves as Cosimo ascended to political power by 1434.<sup>33</sup>

Within over four years, Cosimo had managed to accumulate the most political power of any individual in Florence.<sup>34</sup> This accomplishment had no official title and could have been argued to be antithetical to the ideals of the Republic of Florence. Nevertheless, Cosimo became the sole ruler of Florence with the momentum of his conflicts with the Albizzi.<sup>35</sup> To achieve this political domination requires not only political savviness but a deep understanding of how the Republic of Florence works on a systematic level. To have one individual, supported by a faction, who decides the fate of representative government questions the validity of said representative government.

In that vein, Cosimo de' Medici developed a strategy for acquiring political power that took advantage of the vulnerabilities of the Florentine institutions and procedures detailed at the beginning of this chapter. In part, this strategy consisted of weakening the government of the commune by filling offices with those who were personally loyal to the Medici, and in this way, the Medici family soon achieved political dominance.<sup>36</sup> Given how easily the processes of the Florentine government were

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<sup>33</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 1–2, 11–13.

<sup>34</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein, “Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth-century,” in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, 446.

<sup>35</sup> Sverre Bagge, “Actors and Structures in Machiavelli’s *Istorie Fiorentine*,” *Quaderni d’Italianistica: Official Journal of the Canadian Society for Italian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2007): 62.

<sup>36</sup> Andrea Zorzi, “The ‘material constitution’ of the Florentine dominion,” in *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*, 20.

manipulated and the existence of special powers that can confer great political power on some officials, such a strategy could certainly be accomplished. Ultimately, Cosimo and the Medici's manipulation of the elections of government officials and the packing of the government with Medici sympathizers created a strong political regime in the Quattrocento.<sup>37</sup> The exploitation of governmental processes by the ruling class to achieve their desired goal does not highlight Florence's republican nature during the fifteenth century. The knowledge of Medicean election tampering suggests the degradation of the Florentine republican government into a plutocratic regime.

Filling the offices in the Republic of Florence with partisan politicians who were sympathetic to the Medici cause was not the only means of directly affecting the government. Throughout the fifteenth century, no decade saw fewer than five elections of a Medici to the *Tre Maggiori*.<sup>38</sup> This electoral dominance saw two decades (the 1430s and 1480s) that exceeded single-digit elections.<sup>39</sup> This illustrates the concerted effort by Cosimo and later his grandson Lorenzo de' Medici to have their family in important government positions. During this time, there is even a noticeable presence of the Medici among the guild consuls; one unsurprising fact is their heavy influence in the guild for bankers and moneychangers, the *Arte del Cambio*.<sup>40</sup> Essentially, every level of government was either infiltrated by

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<sup>37</sup> Mark Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1999): 997, doi:10.2307/2901833.

<sup>38</sup> Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online Tratte of Office Holders, 1282–1532. (Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence, R. I., 2002.) Accessed January 4, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

the Medici or those who sided with them. If all of these individuals answered to one strong leader, like Cosimo or later Lorenzo, then control of the government becomes a more feasible task.

Even with the controlling political approach of Cosimo de' Medici, he attempted to create amicable relationships with other political operatives. "Cosimo and the other members of the Medici family" portrayed themselves as individuals who would grant favors to other influential people.<sup>41</sup> These types of actions fostered beneficial relationships because if people of prominence ask someone else for a favor, it must be a difficult task to complete. Being considered the individual who can grant impossible wishes is advantageous for both parties involved. For instance, the *podestà* of the city of Prato, Piero di Salvestro Ainaridi (in office between 1434–1464), quickly granted a request of the Pater Patriae of Florence because he "wanted to do something to please" him.<sup>42</sup> Because Cosimo was known as a gracious patron who could grant individuals favors, people would go out of their way to get in his good graces so that one day when they did ask him for a favor, he might be more inclined to acquiesce. These types of political relationships can be very useful in maintaining control of an entire government like Cosimo and the Medici did throughout the Quattrocento.

Cosimo's grandson, Lorenzo, became the custodian of the Medici enterprise after his father Piero de' Medici (1416–1469) died after a turbulent reign in which the family's dominance of Florence had been challenged by France, Venice, and internal political pressures.<sup>43</sup> Lorenzo claimed the seat of power

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<sup>41</sup> Laura De Angelis, "Territorial offices and officeholders," in *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*, eds. William J. Connell and Andrea Zorzi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 177.

<sup>42</sup> Laura De Angelis, "Territorial offices and officeholders," in *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*, 177–78.

<sup>43</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 200.

at a time of political turmoil and depleted assets from the Medici Bank due to mismanagement after the death of Cosimo.<sup>44</sup> Given the unfavorable conditions, manipulating the Republic of Florence would be difficult. In response to this crisis, Lorenzo decided to take lessons in governance from his successful predecessors. For instance, Lorenzo adopted “the Medici policy” of addressing partisan rivalries by putting himself in the role of the “supreme mediator.”<sup>45</sup> Instead of creating more enemies, who were not already taking issue with the Medici regime’s control of Florence, he decided to take the position of the peacemaker. Such a role created a good perception and allowed for easier political relationships during his tenure as de facto leader of Florence.

Lorenzo did not stay behind the scenes as much as Cosimo did during his reign over the Florentine government. On six different occasions, Lorenzo held office in the *Tre Maggiori* between 1454 and 1482.<sup>46</sup> Although this might seem like simple governmental participation on his part, the manipulation of the electoral systems by the Medici dashes that notion. Perhaps Cosimo preferred to tamper with the constitutional processes of government in a less obvious manner than Lorenzo, but the results were the same. While Lorenzo continued these practices, which allowed the Medici regime to gain power under Cosimo, he took actions like the creation of the Council of Seventy (1480), which expanded

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<sup>44</sup> Raymond de Roover, “The Medici Bank Organization and Management,” *The Journal of Economic History* 6, no. 1 (1946): 33.

<sup>45</sup> Andrea Zorzi, “The ‘material constitution’ of the Florentine dominion,” in *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*, 27–28.

<sup>46</sup> Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online Tratte of Office Holders, 1282–1532. (Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence, R. I., 2002.) Accessed January 5, 2020.

the power of the family's influence over Florence. These actions led to the regime being perceived as overtly "oligarchical," but ultimately allowed Lorenzo to achieve the necessary "electoral controls" through the *accoppiatori* to better secure his power in 1470–1471.<sup>47</sup>

The kinds of power Lorenzo de' Medici gained through these and other internal political battles are best illustrated through a brief examination of the story of the Besalú brothers. In 1486, the two Besalú Brothers, who were merchant bankers, fled to Florence from the Kingdom of Naples because of their business association with an enemy of Naples.<sup>48</sup> Certainly, there is a clear motive for the brothers to go to Florence, but Lorenzo's reason to defend the merchant bankers is not immediately clear unless this incident benefited the Medici. The Besalú Brothers had considerable information about mercantile business across the Italian Peninsula, including "activities in the grain trade."<sup>49</sup> This information was valuable to the Medici, whose banking empire could take as much valuable information as possible. Despite the heated diplomatic exchange over the Besalú brothers and their monetary debt, Lorenzo de' Medici worked behind the scenes to defend the Besalú brothers. This resulted in the arbitration of the matter that forced the King of Naples, Ferdinand I (1423-1494), to pay the brothers the money they were owed "in Florence."<sup>50</sup> The political maneuvering to accomplish this impressive feat is not the main focus of this analysis. The fact that Lorenzo chose to defend these two merchant bankers from the might of the

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<sup>47</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 205, 207.

<sup>48</sup> Lorenz Böniger, "Politics, Trade and Toleration in Renaissance Florence: Lorenzo De' Medici and the Besalú Brothers," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 9 (2001): 144–145, 147, doi:10.2307/4603723.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 154–155.



Kingdom of Naples using the Florentine government illustrates how much unilateral control he had over the Republic of Florence.

While the Medici regime certainly fostered enemies since the family's ascension in 1434, the decades of power and minority suppression reached a violent climax in the spring of 1478. In April of that year, the Medici regime was challenged with an "unsuccessful attempt on Lorenzo's life" by the Pazzi family and their co-conspirators that resulted in the death of his younger brother Guiliano.<sup>51</sup> Previous challenges to the Medicean dominance over the Republic of Florence were merely political in nature, and not an attempt to take someone's life. This signified a tipping point that changed the future of the Florentine political scene. After the events of the Pazzi Conspiracy, "the republican political culture of consensus" began to deteriorate as challenges to dominate political entities would no longer be isolated to "the electoral cycle."<sup>52</sup> The Medici responded decisively to this violent act of opposition.

First, the authorities caught and punished the conspirators, extinguishing their dream of a popular uprising.<sup>53</sup> Even in the aftermath of the attempted assassination, the government still sided with and followed the orders of the Medici. This maintenance of the political status quo can be attributed to the strength of the family's political machine. Understandably, Lorenzo grew increasingly wary and fearful in the wake of the deadly attack on his family, deciding to change the constitution of Florence to maintain

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<sup>51</sup> Nicolai Rubinstein, "Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth-century," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, 461.

<sup>52</sup> Nicholas Scott Baker, "For Reasons of State: Political Executions, Republicanism, and the Medici in Florence, 1480–1560," *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2009): 457, doi:10.1086/599867.

<sup>53</sup> Lauro Martines, *April Blood: Florence and the Plot Against the Medici* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 184–187.

the Medici family's rule.<sup>54</sup> This reaction would be the most overt example of the Medici's control over the Republic of Florence. The men Lorenzo nominated to the Council of Seventy were a group of sympathetic officeholders who served as an official representation of the Medici's control over the city-state of Florence.<sup>55</sup> Until this point, Lorenzo and Cosimo had exercised immense influence over the governmental proceedings of the Florentine Republic but had done so by manipulating the existing institutions. However, with the creation of this council, Lorenzo's manipulation of the Republic of Florence is blatant and explicitly not republican in nature. These fundamental "reforms" marginalized the *Signoria's* role in the Republic of Florence and signified further degradation of the republican government under the Medici.<sup>56</sup>

During the fifteenth century, the Republic of Florence's systems of government did not adequately protect the integrity of the Florentine constitution, and the chief manipulation of these systems was perpetrated by the Medici. The primary argument of the overall work is that the government of Florence was not a republic but instead a plutocracy. While the economic aspect of this proposition will be discussed in a later chapter, the republican nature of Florence has been brought into question in this chapter by examining evidence of the Medici's aristocratic style of controlling the city-state's political

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<sup>54</sup> Kenneth R Bartlett, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance*, (North York, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 110.

<sup>55</sup> Bartlett, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance*, 110.

<sup>56</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 223, 230–232.

institutions.<sup>57</sup> However, the banking family, particularly under Cosimo, did not always forcibly exert their will so much as exploit the governmental processes that remained vulnerable to these types of actions.

The practice of sortition, which consisted of drawing candidate names by lot from a leather pouch (*borse*), involved steps in the electoral process that were vulnerable to nefarious interference. As was seen with the *accoppiatori*, who were originally tasked with merely filling the *borse*, this governmental entity gained powers not detailed in the Florentine bylaws and became instruments of the Medici dominance during the Quattrocento. Without the involvement of the *accoppiatori* in the electoral process, Cosimo de' Medici would not have had as much control and influence over the Republic of Florence as he did from 1434–1464. These special powers or *balie* granted to these civic institutions had little restrictions in some cases and Cosimo was able to use this to his advantage.

Both Cosimo and Lorenzo exhibited far more control over the Florentine government than any political office they held warranted, and this control contradicted the city-state's republican ideals. One important method of acquiring power, started by Cosimo and continued by Lorenzo, was filling the government with Medici sympathizers to make it easier to exact their will over the Republic of Florence. The Medici leaders also created a perception that they were individuals who could grant any favor as long as this relationship was reciprocal. Whatever political issues arose, the Medici either portrayed themselves as mediators above the petty squabbles of Florentine politics or as strong leaders willing to stand up to outside political adversaries like the Kingdom of Naples. Lorenzo was even able to take the tragic events of the Pazzi Conspiracy and consolidate immense political power that was monarchical in nature.

Any examination of the family's actions after their ascension in 1434 leads to the same conclusion; the Medici exacted influence and control that far exceeded the bounds of a republican official. There was a clear effort by their regime to pervert the electoral process to their advantage. By creating a

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<sup>57</sup> Damir Grubisa, "Forms of Government in the Renaissance: Uniqueness of the Dubrovnik Model," *Politicka Misao: Croatian Political Science Review* 47, no. 5 (2010): 165.

near consensus among the governmental bodies, through un-republican means, the Medici were able to maintain control over the Republic of Florence and push their political agenda until 1494. These political machinations worked in concert with the family's artistic patronage and were supported by the Medici bank's economic activities.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE ECONOMIC REALITY OF THE PLUTOCRACY

Fifteenth-century Florentine society was, in part, characterized by the influence and power the economic elite wielded over the government. The Medici used their banking empire to exercise great influence within this plutocratic ruling class. To most effectively examine how these wealthy citizens formed a plutocracy over Florence, it is important to not only understand the economic reality of the city-state during the Quattrocento, but also to discern which of these influential individuals comprised this ruling class, and how they acquired their wealth. Analyzing the Florentine banking industry (particularly the Medici) or mercantile ventures is important to understand the Florentine economy, and to understand the private interests of the plutocrats. This knowledge can then be used to explain the conditions of the economic elite in relation to the larger Florentine economy.

In Quattrocento Florence, there were no sharp delineations that definitively put one wealthy family in the economic or political elite. In retrospect, historians can identify the most economically powerful families in part by using sources like the *Catasto* of 1427, which is available in a searchable database online.<sup>1</sup> The *Catasto* was a system of assessing land that allowed for efficient taxation.<sup>2</sup> A deeper statistical analysis of those exceedingly wealthy Florentine citizens who also held public office will differentiate between those who were in the economic elite and those who were not. This analysis includes focusing on the Medici family and the great wealth they were able to amass through their

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<sup>1</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. [Machine readable data file based on D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Census and Property Survey of Florentine Domains in the Province of Tuscany, 1427–1480.*] Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002. Accessed March 3, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

international banking empire. Making a connection between the economically privileged and the systems of the Republic of Florence is crucial in providing evidence of a plutocracy during the fifteenth century. This information will not only establish the economic reality of Florence during the fifteenth century but will also show which individuals comprised the economic elite that influenced the Florentine government during the Quattrocento.

The Florentine economy that existed during the fifteenth century was the result of a combination of complex factors that created the unique fiscal situation in the Tuscan city-state. The Florentine economy was not isolated to the city walls but extended into the surrounding area. This network of over a thousand communities known as the *contado* existed under a Florentine-run “fiscal system,” which fell under the jurisdiction of the city-state’s efficient tax system, the *Catasto*, by 1428.<sup>3</sup> However, this process of establishing “uniform laws and taxation” was an accumulative one that began in the 1340s when Florence began uniting its jurisdictional control over these adjacent communities.<sup>4</sup> This financial infrastructure does not account for the city-state’s international monetary interactions and their effect on the economy. However, it does demonstrate that Florence’s economy was influenced by the territorial dominance the city-state had over the surrounding area and that neighboring areas contributed to the taxation the city collected.

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<sup>3</sup> Guido Alfani and Francesco Ammannati, “Long-Term Trends in Economic Inequality: The Case of the Florentine State, c. 1300–1800,” *Economic History Review* 70, no. 4 (2017): 1074–1075. Doi:10.1111/I.12471.

<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Jean Emigh, “Economic Interests and Sectoral Relations: The Undevelopment of Capitalism in Fifteenth-Century Tuscany,” *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 5 (2003): 1080, doi:10.1086/375199.

From the tenth to the fourteenth century, European-wide economic growth spurred on by international trading, which increased wealth, urbanization, and economic activity in cities like Florence.<sup>5</sup> While centuries of an economic uptick preceding the Quattrocento have a bearing on the city-state's economy during that century, the fourteenth century saw a transformative societal event that had a great effect on Florence's economy. This transformative event was known as the Black Death (1347–1353) and it devastated the population of the European continent. It hit the Italian peninsula the hardest, recording “a fall in urbanization that was greater than that of other European states.”<sup>6</sup> A sharp population decline of this magnitude placed an economic strain on the city's ability to produce because of the absence of workers. However, by 1450, Florence's population and urbanization had recovered from the horrors of the Black Death that Marchionne di Coppo Stefani (1336–1385) had described initially in 1348.<sup>7</sup>

Such a rapid demographic change affected the economic production and consumption of the Italian urban centers during the first half of the Quattrocento but did not characterize the entire century. During the second half of the fifteenth century, an economic rebound included both an increase in population and urbanization, accompanied by the development of new industries, including firearms and

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<sup>5</sup> Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 3, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Paolo Malanima, “Italy in the Renaissance: A Leading Economy in the European Context, 1350–1550,” *Economic History Review* 71, no. 1 (2018): 9, doi:10.1111/ehr.12650.

<sup>7</sup> Marchione di Coppo Stefani, *Cronaca fiorentina*, *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* Vol. 30, ed. Niccolo Rodolico (Citta di Castello: Tipi dell'Editore, 1903-13), trans by Duane Osheim, accessed January 25, 2020, <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/osheim/marchione.html>.

printing, as well as banking across the peninsula that included Florence and its surrounding area.<sup>8</sup> This illustrates Florence's dynamic societal and economic situation during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. These aspects of the Florentine economy, as well as the related subjects of population and urbanization, demonstrate how rapidly a city can change during a brief time of its history.

The devastation that the Black Death brought to Florence did not have solely negative effects on the city-state's economy. The rapid change observed in population and urbanization led to a rebound trend affecting Tuscany's income inequality. After the Black Death, there was "a period of decline in economic inequality," which partially rebounded by the latter part of the fourteenth century.<sup>9</sup> This economic rebound is one way the Black Death provided some beneficial outcomes to those workers who managed to survive. From 1348 through roughly 1460, "the unskilled manual laborer," one whose various duties relied on human strength, was far better off than his counterpart before 1348 because he experienced an increase in wages due to the effects of the decreased population: the labor shortage created competition for workers and inflated their salaries.<sup>10</sup> Modern scholars like Richard Goldthwaite have access to many records concerning the Florentine construction industry, which means that construction is a good reference point for comparisons to skilled workers, like stonemasons or other tradesmen.<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>8</sup> Malanima, "Italy in the Renaissance: A Leading Economy in the European Context, 1350–1550," 10.

<sup>9</sup> Guido Alfani, and Francesco Ammannati, "Long-Term Trends in Economic Inequality: The Case of the Florentine State, c. 1300–1800," 1079.

<sup>10</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 362–64.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 362–363.



year 1460 is a good cutoff point for examining unskilled manual laborers in the Quattrocento because after this point, wages reflect a slow return to pre-1348 numbers.<sup>12</sup>

However, this increase in wages was not limited to that of unskilled, non-guild workers. Skilled workers also saw their wages increase and laborers, in general, did not have to work as much as they previously had to because of the access to higher wages.<sup>13</sup> This supports Goldthwaite's claim that, from the time of the plague's appearance in Florence in 1348 to around 1460, workers were generally better off than they had been previously.<sup>14</sup> Discussing the fiscal reality of the other parts of society is important because not only does it contextualize the wealth of the plutocratic members, but also various factors in an economic system are often related to one another.

Another contributing factor to Florence's economic situation during the fifteenth century was the "unprecedented military activity" that ravaged the Italian peninsula from 1350 to 1450.<sup>15</sup> One military conflict on its own can disrupt the normal patterns of an economic environment, let alone multiple conflicts like Florence's war with Pisa (1362–1364) or the four clashes with Milan that Florence had

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<sup>12</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 362–363.

<sup>13</sup> Malanima, "Italy in the Renaissance: A Leading Economy in the European Context, 1350–1550," 12.

<sup>14</sup> Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 344.

<sup>15</sup> William P. Caferro, "Warfare and Economy in Renaissance Italy, 1350-1450," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 39, no. 2 (2008): 169, doi:10.1162/jinh.2008.39.2.167.

during this hundred-year period.<sup>16</sup> Florentine politicians like Marchionne di Coppo Stefani thought about the concept of war in economic terms. It is important to note that war has a negative effect on the economy not only because of the cost of the undertaking but the adverse effect it has on trade markets.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, if a city-state won a conflict, it could see positive economic consequences like the “indemnity of 100,000 florins” that Florence received in 1364 after their conflict with Pisa.<sup>18</sup> To put this amount into perspective, 100,000 florins is “greater than the capital formation of the Medici bank in its heyday,” and higher than the estimated yearly revenue for the city of Pisa at the time.<sup>19</sup> This period of increased military activity went beyond territorial concerns and became economic actions that could provide a great advantage to a city-state or a great financial loss. While there are certainly plenty of financial repercussions from these conflicts, there were those in Italian society that benefitted. For instance, merchants in the cloth industry gained wealth from the soldiers buying their products, and bankers could collect fees for “transferring soldiers’ money home by means of bills of exchange.”<sup>20</sup>

This concentration of wealth that the elites of Florence gained from military conflicts was only compounded by international factors like commercial trade. Certain wealthy parties, like the guilds and

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<sup>16</sup> Caferro, “Warfare and Economy in Renaissance Italy, 1350-1450,” 173.

<sup>17</sup> Gene A. Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society: 1343–1378*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 315.

<sup>18</sup> Caferro, “Warfare and Economy in Renaissance Italy, 1350-1450,” 175.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 202–03.

merchants, were able to take advantage of the fact that “more money was being spent on luxury goods” during this period because of the wage increase, the greater consumer culture, and the population decrease.<sup>21</sup> While the term consumer culture might be traditionally applied to more modern history, the nature of the Florentine consumers purchasing of luxury goods as part of a larger societal trend means it is a useful consideration. This trend is illustrated in the overall optimism that Florence had about their current economic situation, which had improved since the fourteenth century.<sup>22</sup> A large part of this system of wealth accumulation was the city-state’s relationship with the Middle East. During the early part of the fifteenth century, Florence developed networks that exchanged goods with the Levant on the eastern border of the Mediterranean.<sup>23</sup> The establishment of this mutually beneficial commercial network allowed for merchants to not only have a supply of the materials needed to create luxury goods but also a market where domestic goods like woolen textiles could be traded.<sup>24</sup> The international mercantile market contributed to the economic environment that often benefited the wealthy. Given the right set of circumstances, elite individuals had the opportunity to amass great wealth during the Quattrocento.

The question becomes, who were these elite individuals that amassed such wealth in this economic climate during the Quattrocento? Many of these individuals who were involved in mercantile

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<sup>21</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence*, 30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Francisco Apellániz, “Florentine Networks in the Middle East in the Early Renaissance,” *Mediterranean Historical Review* 30, no. 2 (2015): 126, doi:10.1080/09518967.2015.1117202.

<sup>24</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 39.

endeavors were also involved in the banking industry of Florence. This can make distinguishing the two separate enterprises difficult. Because individuals within the fifteenth-century Florentine banking industry had such immense wealth and influence in society, they should be examined in detail. The *banchi grossi*, the largest banking enterprises in fifteenth-century Florence, “were traders as well as bankers” who dealt with manners of international trade in addition to their other financial interests.<sup>25</sup> This trade involved the thriving textile industry in Florence, as well as “trade in bills of exchange (*cambium per literas*),” which would settle international trade accounts in these mercantile ventures.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to give examples of the economic elite to be able to determine the composition of the group as a whole. One such family that fits the model of wealthy merchant bankers with diversified financial interests and societal influence was the Strozzi. Analysis of the primary line of the family tree headed by Simone di Filippo di Leonardo Strozzi (d. 1424) clearly shows that a family-owned wool manufacturing company provided considerable wealth to the family and remained a source of wealth for the Strozzi throughout the fifteenth century.<sup>27</sup> For instance, Simone received “a share of 1,000 florins” from the capital of the company in 1398.<sup>28</sup> When this is considered with the family’s other sources of income, their overall wealth becomes apparent. These included “insurance contracts” on the protection of

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<sup>25</sup> Raymond de Roover, *The Medici Bank: Its Organization, Management, Operations, and Decline*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1948), 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: A Study of Four Families* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 36–41.

<sup>28</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 36.

shipped goods as well as international commercial endeavors and “banking activities” that made the family one of the wealthiest in fifteenth-century Florence.<sup>29</sup> An example of their wealth can be seen in the *Catasto* of 1427. In 1427, Matteo di Simone Strozzi had a total net worth of 5,614 florins, which when compared to the mean net worth of 325 florins (among those who had assessed wealth), demonstrates the family’s great wealth.<sup>30</sup> The Strozzi family’s wealth is even further highlighted by the individual with the greatest wealth recorded on the *Catasto* of 1427, Palla Nofri Strozzi (1372–1462), whose total net worth was recorded as 162,906 florins.<sup>31</sup>

However, this wealth grew even further under Filippo di Matteo Strozzi. Between 1471 and 1492, Filippo amassed 116, 255 florins (starting with 31, 649 in 1471) through his various business dealings, taking into account not only his personal property but all of his assets.<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that roughly “half of Filippo’s estate—52,428 florins—was in cash.”<sup>33</sup> Access to large amounts of liquid assets illustrates the level of wealth the Strozzi achieved: access to liquid assets shows that their finances were

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<sup>29</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 42, 48.

<sup>30</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002. Accessed February 6, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 60.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

flexible and could be reinvested fairly easily. This wealth was also in the hands of an individual with powerful connections to political figures that gave him considerable influence in fifteenth-century Florence. Filippo “gained considerable influence at the court of King Ferdinand I (1423–1494)” of Naples by lending Ferdinand money, which allowed him to aid Lorenzo de’ Medici when Florence had a dispute with the Kingdom of Naples.<sup>34</sup> Having such substantial wealth, as well as access to political operatives, supports the claim that those among the Florentine economic elite influenced the political process because of their wealth.

Another example of a family among the economic elite of Florence during the fifteenth century was the Guicciardini. As one of the preeminent families in the history of early modern Florence, the Guicciardini used their great wealth (in part gained from silk manufacturing) to project political power and prosperity in the form of a towered residence in the Oltrarno section of the city.<sup>35</sup> Symbols of traditional aristocratic power like a towered residence also provided an illustration of the great wealth that accompanied their political power. Another symbol of aristocratic power the Guicciardini displayed was large palazzos, like the one Jacopo di Piero Guicciardini (1422–1490) purchased in 1482 near the area where “his family had traditionally resided.”<sup>36</sup> The abundance of financial assets in the Guicciardini family is clearly presented in the records of the *Catasto* of 1427.<sup>37</sup> This extensive level of wealth needs to

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<sup>34</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 56–7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>37</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002. Accessed February 6, 2020.

be put in context to the rest of the 1427 Florentine tax records. In comparison to the mean net worth of only 325 florins, and even to someone in the elite like Matteo di Simone Strozzi with a net worth of 5,614 florins, this wealth is staggering by comparison. Among the tax records for that year, only “137 households in Florence (1.4%)” were assessed at or above the net worth level of these members Guicciardini family.<sup>38</sup> While other members of the family did not achieve that level of wealth, the Guicciardini was still considered to be in the upper bracket of the Florentine economy because their income was above 1,305 florins.<sup>39</sup> The *Catasto* of 1427 divided the citizens assessed into quintiles based on the total wealth. Of the 8,349 households with wealth, “the lowest quintile had 1–65 florins”, the second quintile ranged from 66–103 florins, the third quintile ranged from 204–501 florins, the fourth quintile ranged from 502–1,304 florins, and the last quintile ranged from 1,305–162,906 florins.<sup>40</sup>

Another characteristic of this family was their heavy involvement in Florentine politics throughout the fifteenth century. This participation in politics is illustrated by the extensive political career of Luigi di Piero Guicciardini (1407–1487) who held many different offices from 1437 to 1487.<sup>41</sup> These offices included *podestà* of Milan (1449–1451), *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* (1457), membership in

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<sup>38</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002. Accessed February 6, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 120–21.

the *balìa* (1452), and *accoppiatore* (1475).<sup>42</sup> However impressive this prolific political resume may be, the Guicciardini did not exert their political power as well as the Medici. As discussed in the chapter on politics, the Medici family were able to amass immense political control over the Republic of Florence. For example, Cosimo was in control of the Florentine political landscape after his rise to power in 1434.<sup>43</sup> However, both Luigi di Piero Guicciardini and his brother Jacopo di Piero Guicciardini served in governmental positions that the Medici controlled.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, the Medici were able to translate their wealth into political power more effectively than any other member wealthy family in Florence, including the Guicciardini.

The patterns of wealth among the fifteenth-century economic elite allow us to understand patterns within the larger Florentine economy. For example, the financial records of the Gondi and Capponi mercantile families in fifteenth-century Florence show a marked increase in their wealth. In the *Catasto* of 1427, Leonardo di Leonardo di Simone Gondi (1400–1449) had an assessed wealth of 1,831 florins.<sup>45</sup> A member of the same family, Giuliano di Leonardo (1421–1501), had one workshop worth 4,000 florins

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<sup>42</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 120–21.

<sup>43</sup> Cecilia M. Ady, *Lorenzo Dei Medici and Renaissance Italy* (London: English Universities Press, 1970), 9.

<sup>44</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 118.

<sup>45</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002. Accessed February 7, 2020.



(1457).<sup>46</sup> While this is not indicative of every member of the Gondi family, it does illustrate an increase of wealth among Florentine elites during the fifteenth century. The same pattern can be seen from a son and father of the Capponi family who, in 1427 and 1457 respectively, saw an increase of total wealth from 6,720 florins to 14,489 florins.<sup>47</sup> This trend not only further illustrates the wealth of the families that constituted the economic elite but also demonstrates an increase in wealth among elite families between 1420 and 1460.

The question then arises, why would these wealthy individuals seek to gain positions in the Florentine government? It should be noted that the desire to hold political office was not entirely financially motivated. A traditional patrician family like the Guicciardini seemed to have a sense of *noblesse oblige* (responsibility of the aristocracy to the lower classes) towards the city of Florence.<sup>48</sup> The prestige and power that political offices offered also contributed to the desire of the wealthy to seek political office.<sup>49</sup> However, there were opportunities to acquire wealth via governmental positions in the fifteenth-century Florentine government. There are examples of such personal enrichment, but this particular area of research is surprisingly sparse of specific instances. There needs to be further exploration of this topic by the academic community like Richard Goldthwaite attempted to do in his work *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*.<sup>50</sup> However, more historians who study Florentine political

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<sup>46</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 161.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 512–13.

history, like John M. Najemy and Nicholas Scott Baker, need to examine this area of research because of how impactful these economic factors were on political matters.

It should be noted that governmental positions often offered salaries for performing the duties of the office itself. For instance, in 1483, Lorenzo de' Medici held the position of Chamberlain of Naples, which earned him "lucrative emoluments" or payments.<sup>51</sup> The potential payments for these types of positions had to be massive to be lucrative and advantageous for Lorenzo de' Medici. Certain political offices had designated salaries, but particular positions were more sought after because of their potential for "additional profits by rendering special services and collecting commissions on fines."<sup>52</sup> Aside from direct financial benefits, an individual in such a position could garner business for their private enterprises. The Medici family were able to use their roles as Florentine diplomats to advertise their banks in other Italian city-states like Rome and Milan.<sup>53</sup> While these actions provided the Medici with a financial advantage, some members of the ruling elite did not find governmental offices as lucrative. For example, Neri Capponi (1388–1457) seems to have chosen to invest his wealth in projects that did not require "vigilant attention" because his service on the Medicean led *balia* took up too much of his time.<sup>54</sup> At least in this specific instance, political commitments could limit the amount of wealth a plutocratic

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<sup>51</sup> Cecilia M. Ady, *Lorenzo Dei Medici and Renaissance Italy* (London: English Universities Press, 1970), 42.

<sup>52</sup> Laura De Angelis, "Territorial Offices and Officeholders," in *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*, eds. William J. Connell and Andrea Zorzi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 171.

<sup>53</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 429.

<sup>54</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 193.

elite could amass. The case of Neri Capponi also highlights the Medici's ability to more successfully acquire money through their political positions than other families like the Capponi.

The fifteenth-century Florentine family among the economic elite that influenced and manipulated the Republic of Florence most effectively was the Medici. The family's history as merchant bankers can be traced back to the thirteenth century and the Medici gained "considerable wealth" in Florentine society by the fourteenth century.<sup>55</sup> Like many of the families among the economic elite, the Medici had multiple means of accumulating wealth. For instance, the Medici family were "partners" in "silk and woolen industries in Florence" and had connections to the guilds that controlled these industries.<sup>56</sup> However, the entity that proved most profitable for the family was the Medici Bank that was founded in 1397 by Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (1360–1429).<sup>57</sup> This banking business was structured to minimize the financial risk to the family while maintaining profitability.

Each branch of the bank "was a separate legal" entity whose profit would funnel to the main branch of the bank so that the overall business would not suffer greatly if a particular branch failed.<sup>58</sup> In other terms, the bank was run using "partnership agreements" that place the onus on the junior partner to

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<sup>55</sup> G. F Young, *The Medici*, (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1913), 19–20.

<sup>56</sup> Ady, *Lorenzo Dei Medici and Renaissance Italy*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Raymond De Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank: 1397–1494*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 3.

<sup>58</sup> Roover, *The Medici Bank: Its Organization, Management, Operations, and Decline*, 6–7.

correctly administer the bank branch, while the “senior partners retained all the power.”<sup>59</sup> This banking empire, whose system is similar to that of a limited liability company, allowed the Medici to amass substantial wealth as well as maintain a large amount of control over the bank. They did this through several means of control, including retaining the ability to remove branch managers from their position and “owning at least 50 per cent of the capital.”<sup>60</sup> According to the *Catasto* of 1427, Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici’s total assessed worth was 91,089 florins, which put him in the top 1.4% among the heads of households in Florence.<sup>61</sup>

Under Cosimo de’ Medici, the Medici Bank would maintain the structure and administration implemented by his father Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici. This administrative style allowed the bank to reach its apex in scope and profitability under Cosimo, coinciding with the family’s ascent in political power.<sup>62</sup> There were many factors that led to the bank reaching such prominence under Cosimo’s administration. Unlike the administration of the bank under Lorenzo, Cosimo “maintained close control over the management” of the entire enterprise.<sup>63</sup> His attention to detail in the directing of the Medici Bank

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<sup>59</sup> Roover, *The Medici Bank: Its Organization, Management, Operations, and Decline*, 13–4.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

<sup>61</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002. Accessed March 3, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Ady, *Lorenzo Dei Medici and Renaissance Italy*, 36.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

greatly benefited the business. One major factor that explains the bank's rise was gaining the papacy as a banking client, thanks to the ascension of John XXIII (Baldassarre Cossa; 1370–1419), regarded by the Catholics as an Antipope, in May of 1410. Cossa's connection to the Medici was an "old friendship" with Giovanni.<sup>64</sup> This relationship, which was the catalyst that allowed the Medici Bank to handle the money of the papacy, illustrates the access that the wealthy had in fifteenth-century Florence. Had the Medici not been able to lend the then cardinal money (a cardinal whose title they might have bought in 1402), they would not have been in such a position to become the papal bankers in 1410.<sup>65</sup>

The working association the Medici secured with the papacy helped ensure the financial successes seen under Cosimo. The papal account meant that the Medici Bank would be managing accounts of tens of thousands of florins (which increased their commission) and during Cosimo de' Medici's administrative reign over the bank, the "branch at the Curia was the most profitable" of his various business dealings.<sup>66</sup> For instance, between 1420 and 1435, the papal account represented "63 percent of all profits" made on an international basis and supplied aid to other branches of the Medici Bank who "encountered problems."<sup>67</sup> For a wealthy family with a thriving banking business, the most profitable account of that business needs to provide substantial wealth to the venture. This provides

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<sup>64</sup> George Holmes, "How the Medici Became the Pope's Bankers," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 362, 365.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 362-63.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 369–79.

<sup>67</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 250.

context into the massive monetary gain the papal bankers offered. The “fortune in papal business” was comprised of not only managing the papal accounts but also establishing “an important base for” textile trade.<sup>68</sup> Despite the wealth the papacy afforded the banking family, the diversified financial interests of the merchant banker applied to the Medici family as well.

These families constituted a clear economic elite within Florence. Did they then use that wealth to influence their society? In other words, was Florence in the Quattrocento truly a plutocracy controlled by a small group of extraordinarily rich families? The Medici were able to exert more influence than families like the Guicciardini because they used their money more effectively in the purchasing of political and societal influence. The political power both Luigi di Piero Guicciardini and Jacopo di Piero Guicciardini attained did not surpass the Medici’s political influence in Florence. However, the Medici’s superiority in purchasing societal influence is not limited to the Florentine political realm. For example, the Medici used their wealth, accrued largely from their banking enterprise, to purchase power in the religious sphere of Florentine society. The Medici aimed at “cultivating clients within the Florentine church” through various methods, including patronage to increase “their influence and prestige.”<sup>69</sup> Because the Catholic Church was so important to the fabric of Florentine society, exerting dominance in the religious sphere along with the family’s dominance over the government, would mean greater overall influence. The Medici’s desire to enter into the religious sphere by using their family’s wealth manifested itself in surprising ways. For instance, because the Medici were the bankers of the papacy, formal papal bulls of episcopal appointments went through the bank’s infrastructure so the prospective member could

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<sup>68</sup> Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, 34–5.

<sup>69</sup> David S. Peterson, “State-building, Church Reform and the Politics of Legitimacy in Florence, 1375–1460,” in *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*, eds. William J. Connell and Andrea Zorzi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 140.

pay the Medici the “dues” the candidate owed.<sup>70</sup> The prospective candidate would have to pay these dues or fees to the church in order to get a position such as bishop, which went through the Medici Bank during their tenure as the papal bankers.<sup>71</sup> This system allowed for the preferential treatment of certain individuals. For instance, the Medici allowed Thomas Kemp to pay his fees in London before another individual who had the backing of the King of England, aiding him in securing the bishopric of London in 1448.<sup>72</sup> This incident illustrates how the wealth of the Medici banking family had enough influence to help decide a seat of religious power in another country.

Incidents like the Kemp case in London could also be seen in Tuscany during the fifteenth century. When Cosimo was head of the family, his distant relative, Filippo de’ Medici (1426–1474) was appointed bishop of Arezzo in 1457 and archbishop of Pisa in 1461.<sup>73</sup> If the Medici family under Cosimo was willing to secure a religious position for a non-relative in another country, the notion that they would do the same for a member of the Medici is easy to believe. The involvement of Cosimo in this selection becomes more probable when it is revealed that he wanted his relative to obtain the bishopric in the

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<sup>70</sup> Ady, *Lorenzo Dei Medici and Renaissance Italy*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> Will Durant, *The Renaissance: A History of Civilization in Italy from 1304–1576 A.D.*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011, 58.

<sup>72</sup> Ady, *Lorenzo Dei Medici and Renaissance Italy*, 37.

<sup>73</sup> David M. Cheney, “The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church,” Catholic-Hierarchy. Accessed February 7, 2020. <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/>.

Tuscan city of Arezzo, despite Filippo's inability to obtain the appointment.<sup>74</sup> While the political influence of Cosimo in Florence during this time cannot be discounted, the Medici family's wealth and patronage of the church were also at play in the city of Arezzo.

Another instance of the Medici family attempting to use their wealth to insert a family member in a prominent church position occurred in Florence in 1445. What the Medici understood about Florence was that the wealthy governed the poor and this religious position offered the family an additional "sphere of authority."<sup>75</sup> With that sentiment in mind, Cosimo lobbied the Pope Eugenius IV (1382–1447—r. 1431–47) to get his "his second cousin, Donato de' Medici" appointed to the archbishopric of Florence.<sup>76</sup> Taking into account that the Medici were papal bankers, their wealth and banking empire played a role in the pope's considerations of possibly placing the Medici clergyman in the position of archbishop. Also, after the Council of Basel deposed Pope Eugenius IV on January 25, 1439, Cosimo was the pope's "Florentine host."<sup>77</sup> This personal relationship could have offered Cosimo a more advantageous

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<sup>74</sup> Robert Black, "Arezzo, the Medici and the Florentine regime," in *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*, eds. William J. Connell and Andrea Zorzi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 297.

<sup>75</sup> David Spencer Peterson, "Archbishop Antoninus: Florence and the Church in the Earlier Fifteenth-century (Italy)," (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1985), 39.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>77</sup> Riccardo Fubini, and Sarah-Louise Raillard, "Cosimo De' Medici's Regime: His Rise to Power (1434)," *Revue Française De Science Politique (English Edition)* 64, no. 6 (2014): 81, accessed March 11, 2020.



negotiating position. While this attempt at influencing the choice through economic pressure failed when St. Antonio Forciloni or Antonino Pierozzi (1389–1459) was made the Archbishop of Firenze in 1446, one of the new archbishop’s “Principal Co-Consecrators” (those assisting in the special ceremonial consecration for that particular individual) was, in fact, Donato de’ Medici.<sup>78</sup> While the intended goal of getting a Medici in the seat of Archbishop of Firenze was not fully successful, the authority and legitimacy that the office offered were at least associated with the banking family. Within the Catholic Church, the consecration of an official church position like archbishop is a recognition of one’s authority.<sup>79</sup>

During the fifteenth century, Florence had a unique economic environment that allowed the economic elite of the city-state to thrive and exert great influence over society. The characteristics of this economic ruling class take shape through analysis of tax records and accounts on the affluence of certain families. This economic environment was made possible, in part, because of the dramatic demographic change in Florence caused by the Black Death as well as the constant warfare that characterized the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The decrease in population led to an increase in wages for a large portion of the city’s workforce. Increased wages for fewer days of work allowed these individuals to purchase luxury goods that the economic elite (merchant bankers) trafficked in. As Richard Goldthwaite

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<sup>78</sup> Cheney, “The Hierarchy of the Catholic Church,” February 7, 2020. <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/>

<sup>79</sup> Augustin Joseph Schulte, “Consecration,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. Charles G. Herbermann et al. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908), accessed February 8, 2020. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/>.

surmised in *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: A Study of Four Families*, “the prosperity in Florence had always been rooted in business.”<sup>80</sup>

The elite group of merchant bankers not only traded goods on an international level but also participated in the banking industry. These often-intertwined financial enterprises can explain the great wealth disparity the *Catasto* of 1427 illustrates. Families like the Strozzi, Guicciardini, and others reinforced the notion of income inequality in the Florentine Quattrocento and helped shape the plutocratic ruling class. The Medici exemplified a wealthy family that was not only a part of the plutocracy of Florence but also a family that was able to exercise their influence over society. The Medici’s “enormous wealth” and societal influence can be tied heavily to their banking empire, which supported their dominance over Florence during much of the fifteenth century.<sup>81</sup> Their wielding of economic influence is demonstrated in the Medici’s attempts to use the financial power to manipulate the appointment of religious positions. The totality of the Medici family’s economic history during the Quattrocento illustrates how a plutocracy can acquire wealth and use it to gain societal authority outside of political control. Along with the examples of other wealthy merchant banker families, this explains how the plutocracy that presided over the Republic of Florence attained and used wealth during the fifteenth century.

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<sup>80</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 237.

<sup>81</sup> Dale Kent, *The Rise of the Medici: Faction in Florence, 1426–1434* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 29.

## CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

During the fifteenth century, the Republic of Florence was governed under plutocratic rule and in control of this plutocracy was the Medici banking family. The notion that a plutocracy, in which a few wealthy individuals controlled Florence, existed under the guise of a republic demonstrates the vulnerabilities of the fifteenth-century Florentine system of government. Further analysis of Florence's political situation during the Quattrocento and the methods the Medici family used to secure their political dominance, details how these vulnerabilities were manipulated. Informed by the events of the workers' rebellion known as Ciompi Revolt (1378–1382), this political reality led to the Florentine government being controlled by a small group of elite citizens.<sup>1</sup> This limited pool of electable government officials offered an immense opportunity for such elite individuals to influence Florence during the Quattrocento. The preeminent family among the plutocracy that reigned over Florence was the Medici.

This Medici application of plutocratic control over the Republic of Florence began with Cosimo de' Medici's ascension to political power in 1434.<sup>2</sup> While the family's consolidation of power consisted of tangible political appointments, it was also greatly aided by their employment of civic humanist

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<sup>1</sup> Gene Brucker, "The Ciompi Revolution," in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 314.

<sup>2</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Florentine History*, trans. Ninian Hill Thomson, (London: Archibald Constable and Co. Limited, 1906), 282–288; Sverre Bagge, "Actors and Structures in Machiavelli's *Istorie Fiorentine*," *Quaderni d'Italianistica: Official Journal of the Canadian Society for Italian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2007): 62.

literature and other artistic endeavors.<sup>3</sup> This use of art and civic humanist philosophy allowed the Medici family to expand their level of control throughout Florentine society during the fifteenth century. The Medici were firmly established among the plutocratic ruling class of Florence with the vast financial wealth their family accumulated through their international banking enterprise (as seen in the *Catasto* of 1427).<sup>4</sup>

As chapter two demonstrated, the Medici's appropriation of civic humanist literature, like that of Leonardo Bruni, was used to justify the family's plutocratic style of rule. Bruni's interpretation of Florentine history was so well-liked by the Medici, that Cosimo kept a copy of *History of the Florentine People* (1442) "among his most precious books."<sup>5</sup> There was a clear association between the two parties and a concerted attempt on Bruni's part to achieve a favorability with the Medici regime. This can be inferred by reading Bruni's dedication in his Latin translation of *Economics* (1420) and his use of the

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<sup>3</sup> Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online Tratte of Office Holders, 1282–1532. Machine readable data file. Edited by David Herlihy, R. Burr Litchfield, Anthony Molho, and Roberto Barducci. (Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence, R. I., 2002.); Cecilia M. Ady, *Lorenzo Dei Medici and Renaissance Italy* (London: English Universities Press, 1970), 9–10.

<sup>4</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. [Machine readable data file based on D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Census and Property Survey of Florentine Domains in the Province of Tuscany, 1427-1480.*] Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Gary Ianziti, "Leonardo Bruni, the Medici, and Florentine Histories," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 1 (January 2008), 10; Dale V. Kent, *Cosimo De' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 36.

Medici Bank's services.<sup>6</sup> By using this historical record to put their style of rule in a favorable light, the family legitimized their reign through the authority of Brunni's work. However, this was not the only means by which the family was able to project their authority in Florence.

Both Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici were able to use their vast patronage networks to acquire various forms of art to project the family's socio-political power. Their patronage included massive architectural projects like the Medici palace built by Cosimo and the Poggio a Caiano villa built by Lorenzo.<sup>7</sup> These massive building projects offered an opportunity to convey the power and prestige that the Medici obtained through their ascension of the Florentine plutocracy. Not only did the sheer scale of these structures convey the family's power to any citizen that laid eyes on it, but those special individuals who witnessed the inside of the residences were treated to a unique display of power. For example, the audience Cosimo held at the chapel within the Medici palace illustrated this private projection of power.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Arthur Field, "Leonardo Brunni, Florentine Traitor? Brunni, the Medici, and an Aretine Conspiracy of 1437," *Renaissance Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1998): 1110. doi:10.2307/2901962; Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, 1390-1460* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 119.

<sup>7</sup> A. D. Fraser Jenkins, "Cosimo De' Medici's Patronage of Architecture and the Theory of Magnificence," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33 (1970): 162. doi:10.2307/750894; F. W. Kent, "Lorenzo De' Medici's Acquisition of Poggio a Caiano in 1474 and an Early Reference to His Architectural Expertise," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 42 (1979): 251-257. doi:10.2307/751099.

<sup>8</sup> Kent, *Cosimo De' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre*, 305-306.

The evidence in chapter three supported the claim that the Republic of Florence's systems of government during the Quattrocento did not adequately protect the integrity of the Florentine constitution, and the primary party responsible for this manipulation was the Medici. The Medici controlled Florentine government, particularly under Cosimo, and was able to exploit the governmental procedures that were not robust enough to prevent such manipulation. For example, the practice of sortition to elect government officials was exploited by the Medici because the process was easily susceptible to tampering.<sup>9</sup> These manipulations of the electoral processes during the fifteenth century helped amass and maintain the Medici control over the Florentine political landscape.

Many aspects of both Cosimo and Lorenzo's actions were anti-republican in nature and further contributed to the assertion that a fifteenth-century Florentine plutocracy existed. One such behavior the Medici exhibited throughout the Quattrocento that supports this assertion was the filling of government offices with partisans who would manipulate the Republic of Florence's republican processes.<sup>10</sup> This allowed the Medici's plutocratic control over Florence to appear republican in nature while the banking family was still able to maintain immense control over the Florentine government. The *Tratte of Office Holders* showed that the Medici themselves also maintained a large presence in the offices of the Florentine government during much of the fifteenth century.<sup>11</sup> The family's successful plutocratic reign

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<sup>9</sup> See Part One of Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Mark Jurdjevic, "Civic Humanism and the Rise of the Medici," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1999): 997. doi:10.2307/2901833.

<sup>11</sup> Florentine Renaissance Resources, Online *Tratte of Office Holders, 1282-1532*. Machine readable data file. Edited by David Herlihy, R. Burr Litchfield, Anthony Molho, and Roberto Barducci. (Florentine Renaissance Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence, R. I., 2002.)

over the Republic of Florence also exploited the power that the majority holds in a representative government.

The fourth chapter demonstrated not only who comprised the plutocracy of Florence but how the most influential family in the plutocracy, the Medici, used their wealth to facilitate their political dominance and garner control in Florence's religious domain. Through the examination of tax records and sources such as Richard Goldthwaite's *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: A Study of Four Families*, the plutocratic characteristics of fifteenth-century Florence take shape.<sup>12</sup> While the more traditional aristocrats of Europe were not as "amorphous" a group as the Florentine ruling class, the chapter on economics effectively illustrates the financial characteristics of the plutocracy.<sup>13</sup>

Although the sources studied in this thesis show that the Medici were not the wealthiest among the economic elite, the overall argument demonstrates that the Medici proved the most adept at using their wealth to obtain socio-political power. Another example of how the Medici effectively transformed their wealth into power within Florentine society is their involvement in the religious sphere. Understanding the level of influence the church had in society during the fifteenth century spurred the Medici to use their connections as papal bankers to manipulate the appointment of religious officials in the Catholic

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<sup>12</sup> *Online Catasto of 1427*. Version 1.3. Edited by David Herlihy, Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, R. Burr Litchfield and Anthony Molho. [Machine readable data file based on D. Herlihy and C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Census and Property Survey of Florentine Domains in the Province of Tuscany, 1427-1480*.] Florentine Resources/STG: Brown University, Providence. R.I., 2002; Richard A. Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence: A Study of Four Families* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

<sup>13</sup> Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence*, 273.

Church.<sup>14</sup> These attempts to intervene in the affairs of the church illustrate yet another way the Medici sought to accumulate more control and influence over Florentine society. The repeated efforts to accomplish this goal, as demonstrated in the overall work, is one reason why this banking family was able to rule the Republic of Florence for a large part of the Quattrocento.

Given the totality of the evidence that this work presents, the Medici family were able to rule the Florentine plutocracy because of their great wealth, their political deployment of the arts and civic humanist literature, and their ability to exploit the political institutions of the Republic of Florence. Nevertheless, their success cannot be entirely attributed to circumstances. The Medici family during the Quattrocento did not succeed without skilled leadership. Cosimo was able to take the Medici Bank that his father started, and lead the enterprise to the most profitable time in its history.<sup>15</sup> Both he and Lorenzo were able therefore to effectively put their vast wealth to work in manipulating the Republic of Florence in order to amass political power by, among other things, tampering with the election processes.<sup>16</sup>

These were not the actions of unskilled political operatives who lack skill and experience. However, it was not with skill alone that the Medici became the most important family in fifteenth-century Florence. In Machiavellian terms, the Medici were able to exercise their *virtù* in ways similar to

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<sup>14</sup> George Holmes, “How the Medici Became the Pope’s Bankers,” in *Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

<sup>15</sup> Ady, *Lorenzo Dei Medici and Renaissance Italy*, 36.

<sup>16</sup> Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: (1434 to 1494)*, 205, 207.



that of Cesare Borgia in Chapter VII of *the Prince* (1513).<sup>17</sup> While these descriptions of the Medici were on some level designed to ingratiate Machiavelli to the new leaders of the family, the events of the Medici's political dominance can be effectively analyzed by the terminology of *the Prince*. Throughout their reign over Florence, the Medici found themselves in situations with favorable *Fortuna* and took advantage of it. Certain situations, such as Lorenzo's success after the death of his father Piero de' Medici, illustrated the Machiavellian idea that someone with enough *virtù* "could overcome the destabilizing power of fortune."<sup>18</sup> The Medici's ability had a role in their success but it still cannot entirely account for their plutocracy that ruled over the Republic of Florence during the Quattrocento. While it is important to acknowledge the ability of the Medici family in social, economic, and political arenas, factors outside of their control contributed to their overall success atop the Florentine plutocracy. As the overall work has shown, the Medici family were the most adept members of the plutocratic ruling class at amassing power with fifteenth-century Florentine society.

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<sup>17</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli, Peter E. Bondanella, and Mark Musa, *The Portable Machiavelli* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 67–69.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Jurđjevic, "Virtue, Fortune, and Blame in Machiavelli's Life and *The Prince*," *Social Research* 81, no. 1 (2014): 9, doi:10.1353/sor.2014.0004.

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