Million on Bornstein and Gaffuri and Maxson, 'Languages of Power in Italy (1300-1600)'

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Originally gathered at the 2010 Renaissance Society of America conference in Venice, Italy, the contributors to Languages of Power in Italy (1300-1600) have created an excellent introduction to the myriad ways northern Italians acquired and maintained social, political, religious, and economic power during the Renaissance. With fifteen chapters divided into three parts and covering only 243 pages, bibliographies included, this collection will prove a concise but useful text for early modern Italianists interested in the premodern state and/or the exercise (but not experience) of power. The chapters all have strong and clear arguments, which are reinforced by lucid prose, surely testaments to the effective editorship of Daniel Bornstein, Laura Gaffuri, and Brian Jeffrey Maxson. Due to the wide temporal and topical approach of the authors, this volume will prove useful to experts in the field and graduate students alike for many years to come.

“Words of Power,” the first part of the volume, opens with Blythe Alice Raviola who demonstrates the importance of maps in the development of Italian states. Indeed, in places as small as Masserano in Piedmont, citizens began the process of state building by creating and discussing maps. This process placed the citizens of small territories in the cartographic imagination of Europe and distinguished them from neighboring powers that might otherwise claim their lands. In the following chapter, Elizabeth Horodowich uses Marin Sanudo’s diary to describe how power manifested itself along class boundaries in sixteenth-century Venice. Horodowich convincingly argues that politicians and other social and political elites relied on oratory prowess to reaffirm their preeminence and authority while those not in power used blasphemy, insults, and expletives to directly oppose those in power (who passed legislation banning such language) and self-fashion on their own terms. Maria Grazia Nico Ottaviani, in chapter 3, offers a reading of noblewomen’s correspondence with their politically exiled husbands to reveal that many Italian noblewomen ran family businesses and kept interests in the well-being of their state. These endeavors suggest that women used formal diplomacy and personal language in the pursuit of power. Concluding the first part, Carlo Taviani encourages us to think about the private side of territorial power as he explores the justifications for and criticisms of Genoa’s decision to allow the Casa di San Giorgio to privatize many of the state’s holdings, chief among them Corsica.

In part 2, “Picturing Power,” the authors consider artistic and visual representation as reinforcements of state and personal power. Guido Cariboni, for instance, traces the Visconti family’s
rise to power in Milan through the patronage of Bishop Ottone, who combined his religious authority with contemporary conceptions of peace, fellowship, freedom, and the common good by commissioning histories and chronicles with those virtues and his piety at the core. Jessamyn Conrad turns to art, specifically two masterpieces from fourteenth-century Siena by Duccio and Simone Martini, as representative of Siene power related to martial success over Florence and divinely ordained authority. Paolo Evangelisti, too, writes on the connection between divinity and state power. In particular, he focuses on the Franciscan Bernardino da Feltre who used his sermons to reinforce republic virtues, such as the civic good, the pursuit of wealth, and the importance of justice in addition to preaching the Christian faith. This chapter shows how the mendicant movements of the early modern period also contributed to ideas underlying early state formation. Federica Cengarle, in a masterful essay, traces how princes usurped civic authority traditionally ascribed to the populus of northern Italy. She demonstrates how, at first, magistrates claimed the power to draft and pass laws as representatives of the people who voted them into the office before princes later usurped these magisterial powers and established themselves in a seat of unmatched authority within the state. Brian Jeffrey Maxson closes the second part by describing the nuances of Italian diplomacy and uses the example of Florene to show the intricacies and complexity of acting as a state on the international stage in the Renaissance world.

Corinne Wieben opens part 3, “Religion, Power, and the State,” with a study of Vitae of Verdina da Castelfiorentino to show how the cult of Verdiana served as a communal cornerstone and source of power for the citizens of Castelfiorentino in their judicial and economic disputes with the bishops of Florence. Cecilia Iannella follows with a chapter on the importance of civic cults to local identities and power, as seen in fourteenth-century Pisa. She argues that the Pisan ruler Pietro Gambacorta turned to the acquisition and veneration of relics from Saint Restituta and Guglelmo di Malavalle to increase his own power and prestige in the wake of a military victory over the city’s former doge and an outbreak of the plague, respectively. Laura Gaffuri continues on the link between religion and statehood as she reveals the extent of hermeneutical tradition over the process of state formation in the late Middle Ages and early modern periods. Gaffuri reveals that Christian intellectuals were sought out by princes and communes (especially by members of the House of Savoy) as “experts of significare,” or people who could provide arguments on behalf of political powers. Paolo Cozzo remains with the House of Savoy in his chapter, writing that the family used patronage of sacred spaces, such as the shrine that housed the Shroud, to display their piety and reinforce their authority in the region. Nicholas Scott Baker explores the potentially disastrous effects of the themes presented up to this point in the collection by turning to the popular turmoil in Florence sparked by the Dominican Fra Girolamo Savonarola. He argues that when the people elected Christ as king of Florence in the period of non-Medicinere rule between 1527 and 1530, they gave up their republicanism for a zealous ideal and thus left it up to divine power to maintain their freedom rather than actively preparing to preserve it themselves. And, at last, Franco Motta closes the book with his chapter on Catholic forms of power during the Counter-Reformation. With implications reaching today, Motta suggests that the Reformation and the subsequent controversies of faith in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe led the pope to assume uncontestable authority in matters of faith. Led by Robert Bellarmine and followed by his fellow Jesuits, the doctrine that the pope, not scripture, could look after the souls of Catholics emerged, a doctrine practiced but not confirmed until the seventeenth century. If anyone should have doubted the importance of studying the nature of power in Renaissance Italy, let those doubts end here, like the book, with Motta.
Regarding the chapters themselves, I can find nothing to fault. I do, however, have reservations about the title, which suggests that the volume treats the entire Italian Peninsula. It is, truly, a study of power in northern Italy. Florence, Venice, and Milan receive the most attention, with only fleeting references to Genoa, Piedmont, Rome, and Naples. If we are to speak of power in Renaissance Italy then surely we should consider in depth the papal monarchy, not just the post-Reformation curia, as well as the Angevin kingdom of Naples and the Holy Roman Empire. The latter two powers sparked the debate between imperial and monarchical powers, a topic that many authors hint at but never fully engage with here. I hesitate to make these observations, though, because the volume already covers so much that to ask it to do more would make it significantly longer than the other entries in Brepols’s Early European Research series. Ultimately, I recommend this book highly and only hope that this reignites the study of the state in premodern Europe.


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