

## Introduction

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*Andrea Gamberini and Isabella Lazzarini*

Renaissance Italy and its political cultures are a fundamental but controversial topic of Western historiography on the late medieval and early modern state: the political, economic and cultural innovations introduced both by civic humanism and by Renaissance political thought from Marsilio da Padova to Machiavelli, the merchants' and bankers' networks and empirical culture, the rather mythicised artistic, literary and cultural achievements, from Giotto to Michelangelo, from Petrarch to Ariosto, have been considered ever since as some of the most significant steps towards 'modernity'. On the other hand, the concrete political weakness of the Italian peninsula pulled it out of the mainstream leading towards the so-called modern state, leaving to the Italian republics, principalities and political actors only a marginal role in the evolution of the modern European political identity in the crucial period between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Thus, the Renaissance and Italy, achievements and failures, are deeply linked in a double knot whose components did not precisely overlap and whose combination still provides room for investigation to the community of political, social and cultural historians of Western civilisation.

### ***The Italian Renaissance State: two reasons for a title***

Deeply conscious of this apparent paradox, we have devised the present volume to meet two main aims. The first is to provide a synthesis of current Italian research on the political history of Italy, taking into account both a general survey of the transformation and features of Italian kingdoms, principalities, feudal and ecclesiastical *signorie* and republics from the fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries, and a wide range of key themes that were common to the political experience of all these states.

Secondly, these pages have the ambition to raise once again the theme of the Italian Renaissance with a declared emphasis on politics. Although a great deal of specialised and non-specialised work has been published

on these topics, the Italian Renaissance – perhaps better, Renaissance Italy – seems to deserve some sort of reinterpretation *sub specie politicae*, that is, as a founding moment in which political languages, practices and tools – together with political and governmental forms and institutions – grew and proved to be pivotal not just for Italy and its supposed singularity, but rather for the European continent as a whole. Thus, referring to the Renaissance as mainly a political phenomenon shows that the term can define and designate a complex concept of polity and political society. It is no longer limited – or not just limited – to a somewhat technical designation such as ‘regional’ or ‘territorial’ state, but is instead a more open-ended concept of structures of authority and power, of frames and patterns of politics.

### Historiographical premises

The most recent historical debate in Italy still deals with the elusive puzzle of both the strength and the weakness of the Italian Renaissance political system. In order to put the Italian case study back into the European debate about the origins of the state, Italian scholars have had – and partially still have – to face two different but equally heavily weighted ‘grand narratives’. Chronologically, the first of them to appear is what textbooks often refer to as ‘the Italy of the cities’: being built up during the nineteenth century in order to provide a legitimate historical ideology for the foundation of the newly acquired national identity, its stability is still mostly unchallenged.<sup>1</sup> The second narrative centres on Chabod’s model of a ‘Renaissance state’ made by officials and institutions, which in the 1950s provided the first overall reading of late medieval–early modern Italy in order to draw a possible ‘Italian way’ to what was then usually defined the ‘modern’ state.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In 2004, John M. Najemy was still assuming that this was the nature of Renaissance Italy, devoting one paragraph of his ‘Introduction’ to the volume of the short Oxford history of Italy between 1300 and 1550 to ‘A world of cities’, in J. M. Najemy (ed.), *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance, 1300–1550* (Oxford University Press, 2004), 3. On this ‘grand narrative’, see A. Gamberini, ‘Principe, comunità e territori nel ducato di Milano. Spunti per una rilettura’, *Quaderni Storici* 43 (2008), 243–65, now also in *Oltre le città. Assetti territoriali e culture aristocratiche nella Lombardia del tardo medioevo* (Rome: Viella, 2009), 29–51.

<sup>2</sup> F. Chabod, ‘Y a-t-il un État de la Renaissance?’ (1956), now in F. Chabod, *Scritti sul Rinascimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), 604–23. To follow the development of this debate, see G. Chittolini, A. Molho and P. Schiera (eds.), *Origini dello stato. Processi di formazione statale in Italia fra Medioevo ed Età Moderna* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994; English version, J. Kirshner (ed.), *The Origins of the State in Italy: 1300–1600* (University of Chicago Press, 1996)).

In the following decades, two turning points proved to be crucial to start moving forward from those ‘grand narratives’. In the 1970s Elena Fasano Guarini and Giorgio Chittolini introduced into the Italian historiographical framework the dualist view of politics they borrowed from German constitutional history (von Gierke, Hintze, Brunner).<sup>3</sup> Both Fasano and Chittolini underlined that the polity developed a more effective regulatory policy not by absorbing or eliminating the scattered and various territorial powers deeply rooted throughout the country, but rather under the aegis of reciprocal pacts and agreements. The prince and the dominant city indeed exercised a discontinuous power over the territories submitted to their formal authority, directly dominating a fraction of them, but mostly ruling the complicated mixture of overlapping institutions that formed their dominions by mediating among different territorial bodies (be they rural communities, lords, subject cities or ‘small states’).<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, the debate on the origin of the state became lively all over Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, and some challenging research programmes within the frameworks of both the European Science Foundation<sup>5</sup> and the CNRS,<sup>6</sup> as well as a conference held in Chicago in 1993,<sup>7</sup> also provided important landmarks for Italian historiography.

Thus, in 1996, a conference devoted to the Florentine territorial state (in Italian, *Lo stato territoriale fiorentino (secoli XIV–XV). Ricerche, linguaggi, confronti*, translated into English, with a meaningful shift, as

<sup>3</sup> The three volumes of E. Rotelli and P. Schiera (eds.), *Lo stato moderno* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1971–4), represented for Italian scholars a turning point in the crossing of these various historiographical traditions.

<sup>4</sup> G. Chittolini, *La formazione dello stato regionale e le istituzioni del contado* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979) (contributions appeared between 1976 and 1979), and ‘Introduzione’, in G. Chittolini (ed.), *La crisi degli ordinamenti comunali e le origini dello stato del Rinascimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1979), vii–xl; E. Fasano Guarini, ‘Introduzione’, in E. Fasano Guarini (ed.), *Potere e società negli stati regionali italiani del ‘500 e ‘600* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1978), 8–47. They resumed their respective theoretical approaches in G. Chittolini, ‘Il “privato”, il “pubblico”, lo stato’, in Chittolini, Molho and Schiera (eds.), *Origini*, 553–90, and E. Fasano Guarini, ‘Centro e periferia, accentrimento e particolarismi. Dicotomia sostanza degli Stati in età moderna?’, *ibid.*, 147–76.

<sup>5</sup> See the collection: *The Origins of the Modern State in Europe, 13th to 18th Centuries*, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994–9).

<sup>6</sup> J.-Ph. Genet and B. Vincent (eds.), *État et église dans la genèse de l’état moderne* (Madrid: Casa de Velasquez, 1986); J.-Ph. Genet (ed.), *Genèse de l’état moderne. Prélèvement et redistribution* (Paris: CNRS, 1987); N. Coulet and J.-Ph. Genet (eds.), *L’état moderne. Le droit, l’espace et les formes de l’état* (Paris: CNRS, 1990); J.-Ph. Genet (ed.), *L’état moderne. Genèse. Bilans et perspectives* (Paris: CNRS, 1990). But see also J.-Ph. Genet (ed.), *Culture et idéologie dans la genèse de l’état moderne* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Kirshner (ed.), *The Origins*.

*Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power*)<sup>8</sup> offered the opportunity to summarise some lines of research that were already at work here and there, orienting the analysis towards practices of power, factions and client networks, and informal relationships of influence and authority, of grace or service, and focusing the investigation on a whole world of various social bodies and political actors. Thus, the dynamic of state-building and governmental growth in late medieval Italy was more pactist than authoritarian, more reciprocal than vertical. In addition, it involved not only formalised forms of government and institutions, differing merely in scale and purpose, but also actors and practices that did not derive from the public sphere, for example, aristocratic clients or factions. This informal world faced the institutions, forming with them the *unicum* of politics.

### Main themes

Firmly rooted in these questions, the following contributions witness a further historiographical evolution, multiplying the perspectives and approaching the more traditional themes in the light of a finer and more comprehensive concept of political power both pluralistic and enclosed by the prevailing institutional, ideological, discursive and communicative frameworks of the time. Freed by the long-lasting idea of the crucial role of cities as the trademark and cornerstone of the political history of Italy, the attention both to a broader range of political players (a real ‘geography of power’)<sup>9</sup> and to a wider multiplicity of available languages and practices allows the historian to investigate more effectively state-building in Renaissance Italy as a process generated – as summarised by John Watts in a more general framework – by ‘pressure from below as well as design from above’.<sup>10</sup>

Given these premises, the volume considers Italy as a whole, aiming to avoid the mostly unconscious assumption that Renaissance Italy comes down to Florence, or Venice, or even Milan. The peninsula provides in fact a wide assortment of political entities that varied greatly in size, form

<sup>8</sup> A. Zorzi and W. Connell (eds.), *Lo stato territoriale fiorentino (secoli XIV–XV). Ricerche, linguaggi, confronti* (Pisa: Pacini, 2002; published in English as W. Connell and A. Zorzi (eds.), *Florentine Tuscany: Structures and Practices of Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2000)).

<sup>9</sup> Fasano Guarini, ‘Centro e periferia’, 156.

<sup>10</sup> J. Watts, *The Making of Politics: Europe, 1300–1500* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 425. See also W. Blockmans, A. Holenstein and J. Mathieu (eds.), *Empowering Interactions: Political Cultures and the Emergence of the State in Europe 1300–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

and power. All these territories and powers mutually acted together – not necessarily as perfectly integrated parts of a whole – and shared a huge range of political and ideological tools that they used creatively.

To this mosaic of territories and polities corresponds an even wider array of institutional and constitutional experiments: the political actors were not only ‘states’ whose authority was legally defined, but also all those that enjoyed even a fraction of political agency and expressed any sort of political culture. The ‘state’ to which the title refers thus is not reduced solely to duchies, kingdoms, republics, that is, the formal framework of authority and power: the emphasis lies instead on the mutual action of all the different political forces and the complex pattern of their negotiations. Change in political and institutional forms – and the substantial political and governmental growth of this age – may be driven by anybody in political society, and may arise from below or externally as well as from above or internally, according to the assumption that every political actor could elaborate and use creatively his/her own political logic.

This argument also implies that the range of themes and patterns considered in this volume will try to offer an account of the very different fields now investigated by Italian contemporary research on politics: the intersection of cities, rural communities, fiefs, lords and factions; the interweaving of politically and culturally different languages and practices of power; the creation of a shared communication network connecting powers and individuals; the development of a sophisticated system of public records, preserving a written memory in some sort of new political *ordre du discours*; the rise of new social orders based on increasingly rigid distinctions; the gender dimensions of politics and their problematic approaches to late medieval and early modern Italy; and so on. The overall time-scale will vary accordingly.

Dealing with such a definite emphasis on politics, the book will perhaps present the reader with some surprising absences: for instance, no contribution is devoted to humanism or art; but this list could be endless. Again, if some of the contributions do reciprocally relate one to another in harmony, not all of them will present the same – apparently reassuring – uniformity of thinking, and this is perhaps healthy.

### Structure of the book

The book is divided into two sections. The first will provide an account of the political and social structure of the various Italian states, presenting an analytic survey of their history and nature in order to emphasise the complexity and variety of the Italian world and to try to provide a

meaningful insight into the sometimes frantic and volatile sequence of events and institutional changes.

The second section will focus on structures and patterns, aiming to reveal the consonances and divergences of political languages and ideas, practices of power, territorial and non-territorial networks, governmental strategies and documentary growth. In this section, the aim of the book is to present the most recent and innovative Italian approach to a wide range of relevant topics on state-building, based both on a sophisticated analysis of the sources and on an updated view of traditional and less traditional historiographical fields such as the history of political and institutional frameworks, the history of medieval and early modern political thought, and the history of written communication as a cultural and a social fact. Each part brings together a wide thematic range of concise essays, with minimal footnotes and a carefully selected bibliography, both in English and in Italian, in order to enable English-language readers to follow up the main topics, but also to give them the opportunity for further reading if required.

### **Acknowledgements**

We have benefited from the help of many people in working on this book. First of all, we are most grateful to all the friends and colleagues who improved the hard task of translating by offering – as Anglophones as well as historians – their precious advice: Frances Andrews, Stephen Bowd, Sam Cohn, Bill Connell, Trevor Dean, John Law and Christine Shaw. Moreover, our efforts have been greatly enhanced by Karen Anderson Howes, who copy-edited the volume. Special thanks also go to Edoardo Rossetti for the map. We have also been helped by a number of institutions, without whose support this book would not have been possible: we feel we owe a great debt to Enrico Decleva, Rettore of the University of Milan, and Giovanni Cannata, Rettore of the University of Molise; to Elio Franzini, former Preside of the Facoltà di Lettere, Milan, and Paolo Mauriello, Preside of the Facoltà di Scienze umane, storiche e sociali, Molise; to Grado Giovanni Merlo, Direttore of the Dipartimento di Scienze della storia e della documentazione storica, Milan, and Giorgio Patrizi, Direttore of the Dipartimento di Scienze umane, storiche e sociali, Molise.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-01012-3 - The Italian Renaissance State  
Edited by Andrea Gamberini and Isabella Lazzarini  
Excerpt  
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*Part I*

The Italian states

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# 1 The kingdom of Sicily

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*Fabrizio Titone*

## Introduction

The success of monarchical power in late medieval Sicily saw several different stages, characterised by different outcomes in the confrontation between king and country. The causes of these transformations in the political geography, as well as the differences and the institutional and economic elements of continuity and rupture, specifically over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, will be examined in this chapter.

Following the Aragonese conquest of 1282, a non-vertical relationship between king and country gradually took shape, in which the monarch acted as a co-ordinating force over different political actors endowed with jurisdiction. The establishment of a strong royal role was a gradual, and not always linear, process. It involved significant revisions to the initial ways of co-ordinating the different political forces, as experimented with by the kings. The absorption of Sicily into the crown of Aragon fostered an important circulation of different political cultures, without, however, obstructing the growth and development of distinctive experiences, favoured by the complete autonomy acquired by the region in 1296 and maintained until 1412.

The historiographic debate on late medieval Sicily has long been dominated by an interpretative model that has identified the baronage as uniquely capable of confronting the crown and influencing its actions, and has also judged that the island's economy was largely agricultural and chiefly grain-producing. This depiction of the role of the barons in particular derives from a reconstruction with origins in the studies of Rosario Gregorio (1805),<sup>1</sup> and which has long been upheld in successive studies. Among the more recent findings within this approach, and the most noteworthy, I should mention Henri Bresc's significant research, which has also allowed for a broadening of the analysis in many directions. Indeed, this scholar confirmed the lack of development of the

<sup>1</sup> Gregorio, *Considerazioni sopra la storia*.

Sicilian economy, linked to international relations, and the predominant role of the baronage, as well as its strong continuity from the end of the fourteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

Although dominant, this has not been the only interpretative model. A proposal that does not match the analytical paradigms outlined, and one which predates Bresc's, can be seen in the work of Illuminato Peri, with specific reference to the outcomes of the relationships between king and country, economic dynamism in the cities, and demographic calculations. In particular, a primary and important recognition emerges of the existence of different political actors in Sicily.<sup>3</sup> Stephan Epstein's research subsequently defined a new interpretative paradigm for Sicily, particularly highlighting economic characteristics which contradict the argument that the island was underdeveloped with a 'colonial' economy.<sup>4</sup> The image of the kingdom outlined by this and other research reveals a new attention to the urban world and the nature of the economy. Furthermore, it generally highlights an interweaving of common elements and specific characteristics in comparison with contemporary countries, and particularly the dominions of the crown of Aragon.<sup>5</sup>

### Aragonese success and the role of the *universitates*

The kingdom of Sicily's position on the European political landscape changed drastically in the second half of the thirteenth century. The investiture of Sicily to Charles of Anjou by pope Urban IV in 1264 and his victory, in 1266, over king Manfred, son of Frederick II of

<sup>2</sup> Bresc, *Un monde*, which stands out for, among other things, its extraordinary analysis of notarial documentation. With regard to the nature of the Sicilian economy, Bresc's analysis was partially anticipated by other research, in particular that of Aymard, 'Il commercio dei grani'; and Abulafia, *The Two Italies*. It should be noted that, with regard to the Aragonese era, Abulafia recently emphasised economic, cultural and political contact rather than distinctions between north and south in Italy: Abulafia, 'Signorial power'.

<sup>3</sup> The first of Peri's studies which differentiates itself from the then prevailing paradigms dates back to 1956 ('Rinaldo'); this work was later republished in his book *Villani e cavalieri*. With regard to an initial recognition of more political individuals, see also Moscati, *Per una storia della Sicilia*.

<sup>4</sup> Epstein, *An Island*.

<sup>5</sup> See Mineo, *Nobiltà*, with reference to the composition and possible reconfigurations of the political elites; and Titone, *Governments*, with regard to institutions and urban societies. It should be stressed that the recent interest in the urban milieu is characterised by very different research in terms of both findings and methodology; compare Titone, *Governments*, and Pace, *Il governo dei gentiluomini*. With regard to earlier work on the urban milieu, Baviera Albanese's important article, 'Studio introduttivo', should be mentioned. For the royal role, particularly under Martin I, see Corrao, *Governare*.