



From Medieval Corporatism to Civic Humanism: Merchant and Guild Culture in Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Florence

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JOSEPH F. STANLEY

“FROM MEDIEVAL CORPORATISM TO CIVIC HUMANISM:
MERCHANT AND GUILD CULTURE IN FOURTEENTH- AND
FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENCE”

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Abstract

This dissertation presents a study of culture and politics in the city of Florence between the fourteenth and early fifteenth century. It questions the long-held assumption that the years around 1400, commonly referred to as the age of “civic humanism,” ushered in a new era of unbridled classicism and the reign of a powerful merchant oligarchy. This dissertation instead maintains that many of the cultural and political changes that scholars associate with the early Quattrocento had their roots firmly entrenched in the preceding century. In particular, this study argues that certain elements of medieval culture, notably the intellectual attitudes and preoccupations of the merchant of the Middle Ages, endured and continued to find expression in the Florentine Quattrocento. It also contends that the rise of the “Albizzean” oligarchy constitutes the revival of an oligarchic program that surfaced throughout the fourteenth century under the banner of guild corporatism.

In emphasizing the cultural linkages between the Trecento and Quattrocento, this dissertation’s first chapter provides a textual analysis of the largely overlooked documentary corpus of the commercial handbook, or *pratica della mercatura*. A close reading of the twelve surviving manuals shows the high degree to which the patterns of thought and intellectual concerns of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century merchant persisted into the following century. These connections are most explicit in the merchant’s understanding of time, commercial ethics, cosmology, and nautical training. Indeed, a thorough investigation of Goro Dati’s fifteenth-century handbook, *La Sfera* (c. 1435), shows that the author relied entirely on conventional source material in its composition.

The remaining chapters of the dissertation shift to the Florentine political structure and underscore the strong links between Trecento “corporatism” and Quattrocento “oligarchy.” Rather than strictly provide an institutional survey of Florentine politics, however, these chapters chart these political developments through the artistic patronage of the city’s guilds. Chapter Two

examines the patterns of guild patronage at the shrine of Orsanmichele in the mid-fourteenth century and argues that the artistic commissions sponsored by the guilds were charged with political meaning. These commissions, however, were by no means exclusive manifestations of guild corporatism, but rather underscore the conflicting political values cultivated by the broad sociopolitical spectrum of the guild federation. This analysis shows that a number of projects commissioned by the major guilds in the fourth and fifth decades of the Trecento, for instance, point to the notable presence of a merchant oligarchy whose social profile and political machinations share remarkable similarities with the regime that would assume power half a century later.

The third chapter continues to explore guild patronage at Orsanmichele during the ascension of the Albizzean oligarchy (1382–1429). It maintains that the oligarchs from the major guilds continued to use the visual arts to communicate their political resurgence and further emphasizes the parallels between this regime and its “corporate” forebear. This chapter also reveals that the ruling oligarchy, through enacted legislation, forced the minor guilds to partake in Orsanmichele’s decoration in the years after 1382. These coercive acts are construed as calculated efforts made by the regime to foster civic solidarity amongst the rank-and-file while disguising the new political hierarchy. These visual efforts – referred to in this study as the visual language of civic humanism – offer deeper insights into the long-term stability of the post-1382 oligarchy.

The fourth chapter supplies a thorough iconographical reading of the recently restored frescoes found in the Audience Hall of the judges’ and notaries’ guild. The intrinsic features of the chamber’s décor in the context of the mid-fourteenth century provide compelling visual evidence that major guildsmen continued to harbour strong oligarchic convictions during the most prominent years of guild corporatism (1343–82). Following the collapse of the guild republic in 1382, however, the judges and notaries – many of whom were important members of the Albizzean regime – asserted their oligarchic ties more forthrightly, particularly in a classically inspired “men of letters” cycle. Given the public nature of the hall, this chapter argues that the oligarchs from the major guilds once again located and promoted the new socio-political hierarchy within the all-embracing visual language of civic humanism.

This dissertation, thus, not only underlines the enduring features of Trecento culture and politics, it also contributes to the larger historiography of civic humanism. In particular, it builds upon recent studies that maintain that the cultural tastes of the civic humanists were closely tied to the preservation of oligarchic authority. This study contends that these cultural expressions, however, were not merely restricted to the literary output of humanist statesmen; they also had a powerful visual dimension. The final two chapters reveal that the artistic patronage of the major guilds was far more layered and

sophisticated than has been hitherto believed and suggest that these urban strategies bore great influence on the patronal activity of the Medici.

(The PDF of the thesis is now available on the author's web page at <https://providence.academia.edu/JoeStanley>)