

Communes and Despots in Medieval and Renaissance Italy

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This splendid volume of essays addresses the late Philip Jones's seminal contribution to the historiography of late medieval and early Renaissance Italy, and takes its title directly from his most well-known and influential article on the subject. Both the topic and the timing of this publication are propitious. Although it is no exaggeration to say that Jones revolutionised scholarly views of the relationship between communes and 'despotisms', the editors rightly point out that the challenge presented by Jones's work on this topic 'has never been fully enough answered' and that 'debates over liberty and tyranny' have recently been usurped by 'less ideological, more "fashionable"' questions (p. xvii). As such, the essays in this collection serve not only to mark the achievements of an outstanding scholar whose passing has impoverished the study of history, but also to provide a timely reminder of a fruitful and important field of study.

In 1965, Jones published 'Communes and despots: the city state in late-medieval Italy'.⁽¹⁾ Reprinted as the first chapter in this volume, this essay offered an entirely new understanding of Italian politics in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. In contrast to earlier scholars' tendency to distinguish sharply between self-governing communes and 'despotic' *signorie*, Jones questioned the ease with which such a dichotomy was indulged and drew attention to the often remarkable similarities which communal and despotic regimes shared.

As Jones recognised, perhaps the most compelling reason for distinguishing between communal and despotic regimes can be found in the political literature of the period. Particularly during the war with Milan in 1402, humanists in Florence developed 'a specifically Florentine folk-lore of republicanism', and, in contrasting 'the sturdy democratic virtues of the Florentine business class' with the lordly nature of the

Visconti *signoria*, drew the battle lines for the intellectual conflict which consumed later generations (p. 5). Indeed, throughout the 'literary war' which raged between the 14th and 16th centuries, the communal rhetoric of liberty stood opposed to the 'despotic' rhetoric of 'order, peace and unity'.

But such rhetoric is perhaps deceptive. On the one hand, the apparently clear distinction between republicanism and monarchism which stood at the centre of Hans Baron's research on civic humanism tends to break down under closer analysis, and it is to this issue that Robert Black's paper turns.⁽²⁾ Despite a slight superficiality and a tendency to oversimplification (especially in the case of Coluccio Salutati and Marsilius of Padua), Black's survey of Italian and Transalpine political thought demonstrates that while monarchism and republicanism each enjoyed a vogue, 'contemporary experience' and 'an often extensive knowledge of history' made political relativism a common position (p. 59). While Egidio Colonna and Coluccio Salutati lauded monarchy, and Brunetto Latini, Ptolemy of Lucca, and Marsilius of Padua embraced an '[u]nqualified republicanism', Black points out that Bartolus of Sassoferrato, Girolamo Savonarola, and Niccolò Machiavelli adopted more relativistic approaches, and omitted to endorse any one form of government as an ideal. Although Black's argument would have been greatly strengthened with more nuanced discussion of particular figures – the contrast between Coluccio Salutati's *De tyranno* (1400) and his earlier defence of republicanism is, for example, completely ignored, while Marsilius of Padua's imperialism and ecclesiology are totally overlooked – his article nevertheless illustrates the danger of believing that the political literature of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance was dominated by the mutual opposition of communal government and despotic rule.

On the other hand, the stark opposition between communes and 'despotisms' suggested by political literature does not seem to have corresponded to political reality to quite the extent that one might suppose. High-flown rhetoric did not always find expression in action. 'Constitutional differences were', Jones observed, 'no bar to common action by despotisms and republics' (p. 5), and it is striking that such crucial concepts as *libertà* were often flexible enough to sustain a multiplicity of different – and even contradictory – meanings. As Christine Shaw shows in her detailed study of Renaissance Genoa, *libertà* was used at various times to signify a freedom from dependence on a foreign lord, a constitution headed by a Doge, and a regime in which there was no Doge at all. The situation often appears paradoxical to modern eyes. In 1457, Doge Pietro Campofregoso described the absence of a doge as a 'stato di libertà', and in 1547, the Spanish ambassador, Gómez Suárez de Figueroa noted that the Genoese attachment to their *libertad* made them profoundly unwilling to accept Charles V 'como absoluto señor' (p.178). But, in 1395, Doge Agostino Adorno argued that by submitting the city to the lordship of the king of France, the Genoese could maintain their *libertà* (p. 178), and in 1488, an envoy sent to Duke Giangaleazzo Maria Sforza was instructed to submit to Milanese rule by affirming that Genoa wished to live 'in pure and free *libertà* under the tutelage of the duke' (p. 185).

Most strikingly of all, however, is the fact that the political realities of both communes and 'despotisms' seem to have belied their names. Although Leonardo Bruni was able to praise republican Florence as a 'most prudent city' that was 'harmonised in all its parts' in 1403–4 ⁽³⁾, Jones astutely observed that 'communal government, thought sometimes called *democratia*, knew nothing of manhood suffrage' (p. 6). Indeed, '[d]espite all constitutional checks and balances, power in the Italian clung obstinately to wealth, and through all revolutions of political and economic regime, oligarchy in fact or law, was the predominant form of government' (p. 6).

Observing that the term *popolo* described a 'party', but never the people as a whole, Jones stressed that 'popular' regimes were consistently dominated by a restricted cabal of the wealthiest members of the most prestigious guilds, and ultimately failed to restrain the power of the magnates. This issue is taken up to great effect by two of the papers in this volume, each of which extends and develops Jones' original point in an extremely revealing manner.

In the first, Daniel Waley uses an analysis of the use of sortition (choice by lot) to investigate the 'constitutional procedures of an oligarchy' (p. 27). Perhaps unsurprisingly given the varied patterns of development in Northern Italy, the selection of communal officers was an often complicated process, and

officials could be chosen by nomination or election in any number of stages. Just one of the many processes which were employed, sortition could be used either to elect an officer directly, or to select electors who would subsequently choose from among candidates. As Waley observes, sortition was not always accorded the same role in each commune in which it was used, and no fewer than 29 different methods of election were employed in a sample of 16 communal regimes (pp. 28–9). But what is striking about the use of sortition among the communes which Waley examines is the extent to which it could counterbalance the tendency to restrict office-holding to a narrow and static group within an oligarchy. Although Jones was undoubtedly correct to highlight the oligarchic character of the communes, Waley shows that ‘the cautious use of sortition in the selection of electors to office should be seen as a technique for achieving a certain degree of democracy within an oligarchic regime’ and served to ‘spread political power within the body of oligarchs’ (p. 32). Despite avoiding any form of suffrage, sortition allowed the communes to limit the dangers inherent to the dominance of a wealthy oligarchy.

In the second, Carol Lansing contends that the failure of popular regimes to contain the influence of the *grandi* was not so much a matter of error as of calculated judgement. Despite the profusion of anti-magnate legislation in the communes during the late 13th and 14th centuries, disenfranchised nobles gradually returned to positions of political influence. As Lansing argues, the communes seem to have recognised that nobles were essential to effective government: anti-magnate legislation sought not to exclude magnates completely, but to move magnate conflict from the streets into the courtroom. At the same time, the demonization of the magnates in the rhetoric of communal statutes served to legitimise the autonomous authority of the commune itself (pp. 36–8). Of course, this is not to say that the nobles did not commit the violent outrages which the statutes were officially designed to tackle, but Lansing convincingly uses the records of denunciations made by country dwellers to the Florentine Executor of the Ordinances of Justice to demonstrate that the continuity of such violence was part of a calculated strategy (pp. 38–45). Challenging the interpretation of Christiane Klaphish-Zuber, Lansing suggests that ‘magnate violence could be a way to reinforce informal lordship’ (p. 40), and that the use of rape, arson, and physical assault was an effective way ‘to dominate a rural population’ (p. 45), in a manner which was arguably to the benefit of the commune itself.

If the communes were far from being either republican or democratic, the ‘despotisms’ were, Jones argued, similarly far from being tyrannical regimes (p. 6). Indeed, as the late Benjamin Kohl argues in a typically rich and nuanced paper, the very idea of the ‘despot’ is misplaced in the context of the Italian *signorie*. Although the Greek word *despotes* (known principally from Aristotle’s *Politics*) and its Latin cognate *despoticus* were familiar to Italian writers by the 14th century, and were used by William of Ockham and Marsilius of Padua, Kohl observes that term ‘despot’ – with its connotation of dominion over slaves – was never used to describe *signori*. The identification of the Italian *signorie* with despotism seems instead to have been a consequence of 19th-century scholarship: anachronistically superimposing contemporary value judgements on Renaissance politics, John Addington Symonds’ *Renaissance in Italy: The Age of the Despots* (London, 1875) and Samuel G. C. Middlemore’s translation of Jacob Burckhardt’s *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (4), inaccurately and misleadingly ‘made the despot a standard image of, and the usual term for, the Italian Renaissance prince for the next century, at least in the world of English language scholarship’ (p. 69).

The suggestion that the *signori* should be thought of more as lords than as despots is significant. Their lordship was, at root, consensual. As Jones observed, the transition from early communal government to *signoria* was at first ‘a natural development from the plenitude of power ... with which the great majority of despots had been invested at an early stage’ (p. 17). In Padua, for example, factional warfare and the imminent danger of Veronese invasion obliged the commune to choose Giacomo il Grande da Carrara as the city’s ‘Defensor, Protector et Gubernator populi paduani, et civitatis et districtus, et in eis habitantium Capitaneus generalis’ on 25 July 1318, and thus opened the door to the establishment of the Carrara *signoria* that was to last for the better part of a century.(5) Having thus acquired power, it initially behaved *signori* to preserve the machinery of communal government, and to work towards gaining popular support for their rule. For some considerable time, therefore, ‘[n]ot only did the name and corporate notion of the commune

survive, the communal constitution also persisted, with its magistrates and councils, through which, with varying degrees of freedom, the subordinate community continued to elect officials, enact laws, and raise and administer taxes' (p. 15).

As John Law suggests in an interesting paper, Francesco Ercole's notion of 'diarchy' is useful in explaining the delicate balance of power between *signorie* and communal institutions.⁽⁶⁾ In the Malatesta 'state', 'the commune continued to have an administrative role' (p. 171), and the power-sharing arrangement which was established in Camerino in particular seems only to have been brought to an end when the city fell to Cesare Borgia in July 1502. The practice of 'diarchy' is similarly evident in other cities discussed in this volume. In Mantua, for example, the Gonzaga *signori* were perhaps more concerned to retain communal structures than the citizens themselves. In a rich and revealing contribution, David Chambers demonstrates that the Gonzagas created a multiplicity of new councils to oversee hospitals and mercantile affairs, and continued to summon the Council of Four Hundred until 1419, even when declining interest obliged them to impose stiff fines for non-attendance. The impression of a deep concern for the preservation of communal appearances is hard to ignore. So too, David Abulafia demonstrates that the government of Piombino in the fifteenth century 'as a cooperative effort between the Appiano family and the town councils that made up the *signore*'s dominion' (p. 147).

Even in those *signoria* in which communal institutions declined, it appears that a concerted effort was made to stress the justice and equity of an essentially consensual *signore*. Although Paolo Guinigi – *signore* of Lucca 1400-30 – was inclined to speak of 'his' subjects and 'his' city, Christine Meek demonstrates that clemency and respect were an integral to his rule. While being questioned in connection with an abortive coup in 1407, for example, Iacopo Viviani recounted that he had rebutted an impudent inquiry from one of the leading conspirators by pointing out that 'you would not find three people in Lucca ready to plot against Guinigi, and proceeded to explain that the citizens liked the fact that the *signore* 'kept his hands off their purses ... would not hear of any indecencies over women ... and had never up to that point been cruel, but on the contrary extremely merciful' (p. 133). Intriguingly, Meek's thorough examination of the evidence suggests that Viviani's testimony was accurate.

Despite its merits, however, the preservation of an appearance of 'diarchy' had a limited lifespan and the *signori* gradually dispensed with their ties to the communal past. On occasions, as Jones noted, this was achieved by moving towards heredity, by *signori* 'associating heirs with the government' (p. 17). This could, however, have its dangers and, as Alison Brown demonstrates, a study of Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici's early years helps to explain the difficulties which he faced on succeeding his father as *de facto* ruler of Florence. For the most part, *signori* consolidated their position at the expense of communal institutions by seeking 'from the nominal overlord, emperor or pope, the title of temporal vicar, or later of margrave or duke, which conferred an independent warrant for the exercise of power' (p. 17). As Jane Black shows, this was certainly the course of action favoured by Giangaleazzo Visconti, who was invested as an imperial prince and duke of Milan in 1395.

As Black demonstrates, however, the security which *signori* gained in divesting their position of its links to popular election did not necessarily entail the destruction of communal institutions *per se*. Even after Giangaleazzo Visconti was created duke of Milan, 'the bulk of local government continued to be based on the traditional system of communal statutes, *podestà* and councils, all now strictly controlled by the duke' (p.130). Although some instruments of communal government were deployed in pursuit of ends that were not always obviously 'public' in nature – as in the case of the use of forced labour in Florentine territory under the Medici, examined by Suzanne Butters – the hereditary *signori* and their families often acted in a manner which was more sensitive to the needs of citizens than the communes had been. In her study of the Lake of Fucecchio, for example, Catherine Kovesi shows that contemporary denunciations of Alfonsina Orsini de' Medici's greed and imperiousness belied the reality of her approach: indeed, Alfonsina's decision to purchase and then drain the lake did much less damage than had been done to the Fucecchio basin than had been caused by either the Florentine Republic or Cosimo I de' Medici (p. 247).

If this volume does much to add depth to Jones's contention that the communes and 'despotisms' of late

medieval and early Renaissance Italy were more similar than had previously been thought, one of its great strengths is that it also gives space to papers which push beyond the limits of Jones's original argument, and examines the implications of his thesis for a number of other fields of study. In a particularly interesting – and delightfully personal – contribution that will be of considerable value to scholars working on the growth of Italian *studi*, Peter Denley examines the question of how developments in Italian universities fitted with the political changes which Jones's article explored. Similarly, in a typically rich and lively paper, the late George Holmes places Giovanni Bellini's *The Feast of the Gods* against the background of sexual intrigue at the Estense court in Ferrara, and highlights the fact that the reception of secular art was shaped by 'the individual lives of princes and princesses' to an extent that was without parallel in the Italian republics (p. 291).

A more unsympathetic critic might perhaps be forgiven that this volume occasionally shades off into a conventional *Festschrift* in such a manner that one or two contributions are of less relevance to the title subject than might otherwise have been the case. Julian Gardner's study of mendicant great churches in the 14th century and Trevor Dean's self-confessedly 'unusual' treatment of Jones's incipits, in particular, lie at some remove from the central theme of the book, and the most demanding reader could regard them as distracting. To indulge such criticism would, however, be pedantic and unjust, and would ignore the degree to which such contributions add richness and variety to an already outstanding collection.

In conclusion, the editors are to be congratulated for having produced a remarkable volume that students of Italian history will undoubtedly find invaluable. There are few aspects of Jones's understanding of communes and 'despotisms' that are left unaddressed, and it is to the credit of this work that its contributors so consistently push at the boundaries of the *maestro's* argument. Modest as he was about his own publications, Jones could perhaps not have wished for a better celebration of his work.

Notes

1. P. J. Jones, 'Communes and despots: the city state in late-medieval Italy,' *TRHS* 5th ser., vol. 15 (1965), 71–95. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. H. Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (2 vols., Princeton, NJ, 1955). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Leonardo Bruni, *Laudatio florentinae urbis*, IV: 'hec prudentissima civitas ita omnes sui partes moderata est'; text in H. Baron, *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni. Studies in Humanistic and Political Literature* (Chicago, IL and London, 1968), pp. 232–63, here p. 259, ll. 1-2. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London, 1878). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. On Giacomo's election, see B. G. Kohl, *Padua under the Carrara, 1318–1405* (Baltimore, MD and London, 1998), pp. 39–42. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. F. Ercole, *Dal commune al principato. Saggi sulla storia del diritto pubblico del rinascimento italiano* (Florence, 1929), pp. 53–118. [Back to \(6\)](#)

The authors are very happy with this review, and have no further comment to make.

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