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Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

This inquiry begins with a discussion of Florentine *paideia* in the late Middle Ages. The use of the term “*paideia*” owes much to the writings of Werner Jaeger, especially his first volume, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* (New York, 1945). Although the term cannot be translated literally or even very meaningfully by a single English equivalent, I have used it to mean a consciously pursued ideal, not an anthropological concept. Thus *paideia* encompasses the personal and collective goals of education, including therefore the ideals of the society. It is also employed to suggest the relationship between these aspirations and ideals on the one hand and political styles of ruling and being ruled on the other.

In the text I have used such expressions as “casual *paideia*” and “gentle *paideia*” to indicate the easy-going *laissez-faire* rule of a secure urban patriciate, as well as to describe the hortatory, admonitory quality pervading much of the literature and art of the communal polis until the early 1340’s. The era was characterized by the confidence or at least the hope that men could be persuaded by example and rhetoric to follow the dictates of reason in their quest for the highest good. It was through appeals to the better nature of the patrician citizen and not by coercion of law that justice was to prevail. Only in time of crisis would the consistent implementation of legal norms be championed. The most frequent problem for the political man of the early *trecento* was how to minimize citizen sacrifice and leave personal, ecclesiastical, and corporate immunities and liberties intact.

By contrast, “stern *paideia*” saw the polis exercising tight controls over the countryside during the late *trecento* so that additional revenues might be extracted. In the early 1380’s “extraordinary” imposts were levied on rural property which very soon became a regular feature of the Florentine tributary system. Tax rates that in the early *trecento* averaged

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only ten soldi per lira now doubled and tripled, while the communal intake even quadrupled. What had been a light burden was well on the way to becoming a rugged, persistent program. Originally such imposts had accounted for only about 10 per cent of the communal intake, but by the early fifteenth century the figure veered between 40 and 50 per cent of total tax revenue.¹ Comparable patterns of rigor can be discerned in the rule of subject cities and allied territories, where communal policy was dictated increasingly by budgetary deficits and the pressing need to underwrite the inflated credit structure. Within only a few years taxes in these areas doubled.

Persistent and expanding costs of warfare as well as the inordinate pressure of trying to meet escalating carrying charges on a burgeoning public debt had a relentless effect upon the style of politics and the tone of public life. In the first decade and a half of the fourteenth century, when the income of the republic was about 300,000 florins, the public debt (*Monte*) was between 47,500 and 50,000 florins. Carrying charges were a few thousand florins. By the late fourteenth century the public debt stood at 3,000,000 florins, and carrying charges approached 200,000 florins; the treasury was in arrears some 300,000 florins a year. Thus in addition to warfare, the maintenance of citizen confidence in the fiscal reliability of the polis was a monumental problem for Florentine rulers. Moreover, during these years the increase in forced citizen loans (*prestanze*) was staggering. The annual figure sometimes exceeded 1,000,000 florins. Such an assumption of fiscal liability on the part of the government was revolutionary and awesome.

The problem of finding fiscal support for this inflated credit structure compelled those in power not to overlook any potential source of revenue. That their quest met with some degree of success is attested to by the fact that the value of shares in the public debt did not decline appreciably between the 1380's and the 1430's.

This search for revenue led to the integration of Florentine territory, the rise of empire, and a strenuous program of mercantilism. Yet growth of the public debt and large-scale warfare did much permanently to destroy the gentle regime. Nor were these the only forces undermining the rule and hopeful culture of late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Florence. The reactions of an entrenched patriciate as well as the emergence of the "new citizens" also was to weaken the easy rule.

¹ Cf. M. Becker, "Changing Patterns of Florentine Public Finance in the Late Fourteenth and Early Fifteenth Centuries." To be published in the *Archivio Storico Italiano*.

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The patriciate was composed of affluent commoners, members of the elite of the city's great guilds (*popolani grassi*), and magnates. The term "magnate" first appeared in a public document of 1281 and designated a specific category of citizens required by law to post security for their good behavior.² This cautionary measure came as a result of a general pacification of the city bravely initiated by the Pope's representative, Cardinal Latino. In 1280 His Holiness was vitally interested in establishing concord among the feuding factions and contending orders in Florence. Rome stood much in need of Florentine support if the papacy was to realize its grand north Italian political objectives, and as long as the pontiff's great Guelf ally was torn by internecine strife, Florence would be less than useful to him. The need for public order and the concern for the good of the commonwealth rather than for private interests were not only persistent themes of such great preachers as Cardinal Latino but lay also at the heart of the thirteenth-century classical revival; indeed it is entirely fitting that Cicero's and Aristotle's political teachings should have been incorporated into the civic humanism of the medieval commune. The message prompting men to maintain a well-ordered state peopled with a law-abiding citizenry was also proclaimed by communal artists whose frescoes praising "buon governo" were soon to adorn the walls of the many town halls of Tuscany.

The legislation of 1281 differed markedly from its medieval predecessors in two respects. First, it required a magnate to post a money bond to be confiscated in case of a serious breach of the law instead of waiting for a crime to be committed before assessing the penalty. Second, it required a certain segment of the citizenry to take an oath of peace instead of the traditional medieval device of calling upon men to exchange the kiss of peace in the Cathedral. Cardinal Latino's program was directed towards the pacification of long-standing and fierce quarrels, especially among the *grandi* and *possenti* of such aristocratic families as the Adimari, Donati, Pazzi, and Tosinghi. It was these clans from the highest echelons of the patriciate whose lawless behavior the Cardinal and the commune were

² N. Rubinstein, "La prima legge sul sodamento," *Archivio Storico Italiano*, LXXXVIII (1935), 161–72. As a recent study has indicated, it is difficult to keep a legal and political category separate from the social concept of *nobilitas*; the two are often confused in the documents. In speaking about Padua, J. Hyde states that "the overmighty subjects of the Paduan commune are described as *magnates*, *potentiores* or *male ablati*. Generally, these were defined as powerful men who were not members of the political organisation of the *popolo*, but occasionally the statutes are more precise and list by name the persons falling within their scope." For other materials germane to the Florentine experience, see his *Padua in the Age of Dante* (New York: 1966), pp. 57–90.

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determined to check. The persistence of “broils, discords,” and even “great wars” among these *consorterie* encouraged the chief magistracy of the republic to designate as magnates the feuding families of the Adimari, Bardi, Buondelmonti, Bostichi, Cavalcanti, Donati, Foraboschi, Frescobaldi, Gherardini, Giondonati, Malespini, Manieri, Mozzi, Pazzi, Rossi, Tornaquinci, Tosinghi, and Visdomini. “Guerre et scandala” perpetrated by these magnates are to be a recurring motif in the annals of the city, and the aforementioned families were singled out by the Florentine chroniclers as most prone to respond to the vendetta. Although the contentions of a Giovanni Villani or a Dino Compagni cannot be accepted uncritically, the fact remains that only one of the long list of fierce and lawless families mentioned in their chronicles was to escape the harsh restraints imposed by the Ordinances of Justice in late 1293. Perhaps that family—the Falconieri, whose proclivity for the blood feud was as pronounced as any clan in Florence—evaded its rigors because they had supported Giano della Bella, who led the popular revolution that year. Thus the term “magnate” came to be applied to many of the city’s leading families who between 1281 and 1293 chronically practiced the time-honored and customary act of private vengeance. When the Ordinances of Justice were drawn up and amended, between 1293 and 1295, it would seem that those clans legally designated as magnate were those most susceptible to the blandishments of violence.

Later, when a great banking family such as the Bardi was classified as magnate, it differed not at all socioeconomically from its high-born, affluent peers the Acciaiuoli or the Peruzzi. Yet distinctions did exist. Although they did exercise much political power, magnate clans were formally barred from the honor of sitting in the priorate or its two advisory colleges (the Twelve and the Gonfalonieri). More disquieting to the magnates was their extended liability for the crimes of too numerous kinsmen. Recent scholarship has arrived at the conclusion that since certain magnates had interests in common with *popolani grassi*, class distinctions were meaningless.³ It presumes that a rationally organized

³ Marc Bloch’s treatment of the French nobility suggests that this cadre was being transformed into a legal class during the later Middle Ages. We find “what had long been by mere convention a hereditary vocation” being changed “into a legalized and jealously-guarded privilege. . . .” Cf. *Feudal Society*, trans. L. Manyon (Chicago: 1961), I, 322. According to Bloch it became increasingly difficult to pass into the ranks of the French nobility after the twelfth century. Moreover, there was a marked tendency to associate the term “nobility” with the exercise of specific juridical prerogatives. For an assessment of recent literature on this theme, see Georges Duby, “Une enquête à poursuivre: la noblesse dans la France,” *Revue Historique*, CCXXVI (1961), 1–22. The north

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and highly efficient society existed which in turn produced an integrated culture where men were guided in critical matters by reason rather than emotion. But the facts of *trecento* experience belie such an oversimplified hypothesis: despite the high degree of economic and social cooperation between magnates and *popolani*, violence and discord were endemic to the former. It was easier for oligarchs to agree upon matters of economic policy than upon renunciation of the vendetta by a particular magnate clan or the desirability of compelling warring *consorterie* to exchange the kiss of peace and post sizable security.

Although no study of the patrimonies of the Florentine elite will disclose significant differences between the magnates and the affluent commoners, other distinctions did exist. The Bardi and Frescobaldi were considered magnates because they were required by law to post security for their continued good behavior. To the juridical mentality of the *trecento*, status at law was a mode of demarcation and a source of identity. Repeatedly chroniclers insisted that Florence was divided into three classes: magnates, *popolani grassi*, and *il popolo minuto*. Identity depended upon membership in certain legally constructed orders. For example, legal personality was bestowed only on guildsmen who were matriculated in a specific corporation juridically accredited by the commune. It is no more necessary to mention the legal distinctions between master, apprentice, and journeyman than to enumerate the gradations between the orders of clergy. Law was a psychological category, and a scrupulous regard for legality pervaded the political milieu. When *il popolo minuto* wished to change their status, they petitioned the signory for the right to found a new legal order, the artisan corporation.

Thus magnates were not a socioeconomic class but rather a juridical cadre, and this classification had an absolute relevance in the eyes of their contemporaries. The patriciate was divided juridically, and no amount of

Italian situation was not comparable, since there had been extensive interpenetration between noble and commoner and many new clans had risen to the top echelons of communal society. Social mobility was pronounced and economic distinctions tended to blur from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. Cf. G. Luzzatto, *Studi di storia economica veneziana* (Padua: 1954), pp. 125-65; E. Christiani, *Nobiltà e popolo nel comune di Pisa* (Naples: 1962), pp. 129-34. To argue, however, that because of this socioeconomic interpretation the north Italian urban patriciate achieved homogeneity would be fallacious. See Jacques Heers's incisive discussion of "Le divorce entre les deux aristocraties est très net," in *Gènes au XV^e siècle* (Paris: 1961), pp. 511-62; M. Rabozzi, "Lotte in Novara fra antica e nobiltà," *Bollettino Storico per la provincia di Novara*, I, (1948), 5-20. No study comparable to that of Heers's exists for Florence. Cf. E. Fiumi, "Fioritura e decadenza del' economia fiorentina," *Archivio Storico Italiano*, CXVI (1958), 443-509.

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socioeconomic cohesion should cause us to overlook this fact. Modern scholarship that tends to neglect this penchant for legality, so deeply imbedded in the Florentine mentality, presents a rational view of social change and human motivation based upon a compatibility of economic interests. Such a description cannot account for the persistence of anti-social behavior among magnates or their political antagonism. Mutual suspicion and distrust between magnates and *popolani* were much in evidence in 1340. The Bardi and Frescobaldi appealed to their fellow magnates to avenge insults, real or imagined, and to overthrow the signory who enforced the Ordinances. The chroniclers of Florence, *popolani* all, saw the lawless magnates bent upon destroying the political order of the city. They came to believe that these nobles were seized with an inordinate ambition to dominate public life. If their opinions were oversimplifications of complex interaction between the two top echelons of Florentine society, they should nevertheless not be discounted, since their convictions bore influence. Yet these selfsame chroniclers believed that the best qualities of *popolani* and magnates could be harmoniously combined and that even the most lawless magnates might be won over to the side of the polis through an education in civic concern and awareness rather than through coercion and punishment. Indeed, it was just this hopeful expectation that was at the base of the communal paideia in late medieval Florence.