

Expansion of public credit permitted these states to achieve extraordinary eminence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Any judgment concerning the inability of north Italy to retain this prominence in the sixteenth century must reckon with the peculiar economic circumstances that promoted the earlier flourishing of public credit. The ability of Spain and France to command greater resources to make warfare a statal activity and to provision large standing armies was manifested at a time when the credit structure of north Italy could least sustain a comparable effort. For two centuries the Italian cities had incurred budgetary deficits truly exceptional in pre-modern history. Their military role as powers in Europe had been aggrandized, but except for Venice, whose resources were substantial, none possessed revenues ample enough to underwrite continued large-scale military operations.

If I suggest that the credit system in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did not favor impulses toward unification, then the thread of my generalizations may be stretched to the limit. Yet, without a secular ruler of inordinate prestige the likely road to unification in north Italy would be dominance by a single state. Milan was, of course, the logical contender for the role. Commanding more resources than her neighbors, she was to be checked by the ability of a smaller state (Florence) to expand its credit and thereby to wage war on equal terms. Indeed, governmental borrowing is exceedingly relevant when attempting to explain the parity of military capacity obtaining among the several states. In the fifteenth century, this encouraged an equilibrium that forestalled the dominance of one over the others. Ironically, this was the era most favorable to unification, since with massive intervention by foreign powers after 1494 it was less likely. Once military and tax reforms were installed in France and a standing army established, the propitious days had passed. The unification of Spain also darkened the hour for sixteenth-century Italy.

Lastly, it remains to repeat a disclaimer: My search was for factors common to the experience of several Italian city-states. Had my interest been in making distinctions as to differences in social and institutional forms, I would have stressed such features as the incidence of social mobility, transformations in clan structures, alterations in private modes of economic organization, and so on. Instead, an attempt has been made to construct pragmatic definitions applicable to the experience of several Italian states and to place them within a general matrix.

Social Mobility in Florence

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The economic expansion from approximately the year 1000 brought to Europe a rebirth of urban life, particularly notable in such regions as northern Italy or Flanders. The economic crisis of the closing Middle Ages (fourteenth and fifteenth

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centuries) does not seem to have influenced the proportion of the population living in towns. In Tuscany, for example, about a quarter of the population continued to live in cities during the last two hundred years of the Middle-Ages.

How did the presence of a large urban sector affect patterns of replacement and mobility in medieval society? The rich data from the Florentine Catasto of 1427 can give us partial but suggestive answers. Table 1 shows the distribution of minors, young adults, and older adults according to residence in the city of Florence, in the small cities (Pisa, Pistoia, Arezzo, Prato, and Volterra), and the surrounding rural areas.

The most remarkable result which emerges from Table 1 is the success with which the population of the city of Florence was maintaining its members. There is apparent no replacement deficit, in the sense of a smaller portion of minor children in comparison with that of adults, in the Florentine urban population, and only a minuscule deficit can be observed in the small cities. To be sure, the countryside included many stricken areas, such as the high mountains, and the global replacement ratios cannot be considered representative of the prosperous rural areas. Still, cities have a long-standing reputation for being, in comparison with rural areas, poor producers of children; this is not apparent in the Florentine domains in 1427.

However, to gain a better grasp of the patterns of replacement present in Tuscan society, we must take a closer look at our data. Did welfare, for example, have a different impact upon replacement in the cities than in the rural areas? Table 2 illustrates the distribution of minors, young adults, and older adults, according to four wealth categories, exclusively for the households of the city of Florence.

If the results of Table 2, for the city of Florence, are compared with those for the entire population of the Florentine dominions, then it becomes evident that the

TABLE 1 Residence and Age Distributions in Tuscany, 1427

Ages:	Residence			Total
	Florence	Small Cities	Countryside	
0-17				
Persons	15671	9930	81692	107293
Percent	14.6	9.3	76.1	100.0
18-47				
Persons	13230	8793	69547	91570
Percent	14.5	9.6	75.9	100.0
48-99				
Persons	7083	6543	47013	60639
Percent	11.7	10.8	77.5	100.0
Totals	35984	25266	198252	259502
Percent	13.9	9.7	76.4	100.0
Ratio: Minor/young adult	1.18	1.13	1.17	1.17

Note: Only persons with stated age are included.

TABLE 2 Welfare and Age Distributions at Florence, 1427

Ages:	Assessment (Florins)				Total
	0	1-100	101-400	Over 400	
0-17					
Persons	1713	2564	2969	8425	15671
Percent	10.9	16.4	19.0	53.7	100.0
18-47					
Persons	1635	2566	2770	6259	13230
Percent	12.3	19.4	20.9	47.3	99.9
48-99					
Persons	7095	1581	1788	2619	7083
Percent	15.5	22.3	25.3	36.8	99.9
Total	4443	6711	7527	17303	35984
Ratio: Minor/young adult	1.05	1.00	1.07	1.34	1.18

Note: Only persons with stated age are included.

poorer households of the urban population were conspicuously less successful than poorer families generally in rearing children. With "minor-young adult" ratios of 1.07 and less for the three lowest categories of assessed wealth (Table 2), those segments of the urban population were clearly not maintaining their numbers through natural increase. The apparent success of the city in rearing children was exclusively the success of its richer families, those with more than 400 florins of assessed wealth.

The influence of residence upon replacement seems, therefore, to have been strongest among, and indeed limited to, the poor and the lower middle classes. Table 3 cross-tabulates residence and age distributions for Florence, the small cities, and the countryside, but only for those persons found in households assessed at 400 or fewer florins.

Table 3, which incidentally surveys about 87 per cent of the inhabitants of the Florentine dominions, confirms that urban residence interfered with reproduction and replacement, but only at the lower levels of the social scale. (The assessment level between 300 and 400 florins would, however, include many artisans and shopkeepers in the city, who would have to be described as "middle class" in their social position.) The patrician families, in spite of their urban residence, continued to support large numbers of children in their households. (The median age of the population resident in households with more than 400 florins of assessment was 18, and for those with 400 or fewer florins it was 26. The rich households, in other words, were prolific in the numbers of children they were supporting. As servants were not registered in the Catasto, the children were all the products of the natural reproduction of the rich families.) On the assumption that the size of the population and its residential distribution were constant over time, then about 10 percent of the middle and lower classes of the urban population would have to be recruited by means other than natural reproduction and replacement. The replacement deficit of these groups

TABLE 3 Residence and Age Distributions in Tuscany, 1427 (Households Assessed at 400 or Fewer Florins)

Ages:	Residence			Total
	Florence	Small Cities	Countryside	
0-17				
Persons	7246	7416	77492	92154
Percent	7.9	8.0	84.1	100.0
18-47				
Persons	6971	6785	66412	80168
Percent	8.7	8.5	82.8	100.0
48-99				
Persons	4474	5469	45156	55099
Percent	8.1	9.9	82.0	100.0
Total	18691	19670	189060	227421
Percent	8.2	8.7	83.1	100.0
Ratio: Minor/young adult	1.04	1.09	1.17	1.14

Note: Only persons with stated age are included.

could be overcome either by encouraging immigration from the more prolific countryside, or by absorbing persons from the higher and more prolific urban social strata. The patrician families were, however, likely to resist this second alternative.

Two principal conclusions flow from our data. The threat of losing status, which particularly pressed the lower but still propertied classes in the countryside, reached into much higher social levels in the city. The urban patriciate had to find careers for its plentiful children, or watch them sink to lower social positions. Many, but clearly not all, of the patrician sons and daughters could enter upon ecclesiastical careers or join religious orders. Many more had to make their way in a highly competitive world. Contemporaries were quite aware of the pressures working upon the patrician families. A historian of Florence, Goro Dati, who appears in the Catasto, offered this striking account of the behavior of the Florentines in the face of demographic pressures:

... the city of Florence is placed by nature in a rugged and sterile location which cannot give a livelihood to the inhabitants, in spite of all their efforts. However, they have multiplied greatly because of the temperate air, which is very generative in that locale. For that reason, for some time back it has been necessary for the Florentines, because they have multiplied in number, to seek their livelihood through enterprises. Therefore, they have departed from their territory to search through other lands, provinces and countries, where one or another has seen an opportunity to profit for a time, to make a fortune, and to return to Florence. . . . For some time now it has seemed that they were born for this, so large is the number (in accordance with what the generative air produces) of those who go through the world in their youth and make profit and

acquire experience, daring (*virtù*), good manners and treasure. All of them together constitute a community of so large a number of valiant and wealthy men which has no equal in the world.

Goro Dati was clearly not describing the humbler inhabitants of Florence, few of whom wandered great distances through the world, few of whom made fortunes. He described the life style of the patricians. Still, in his estimation that demographic pressures demanded that the sons even of the privileged assume and maintain an entrepreneurial stance, he now confirms what data from the Catasto also reveal.

The second conclusion from our data is that the replacement deficit from the middle and low classes of urban society engendered a recruitment of new men, partially from other cities, but pre-eminently from the villages and small towns of the countryside. Numerous men of talent responded to the call, and they especially filled the ranks of artisans, notaries, and government servants—careers where skill counted more than capital. Many great literary figures of Renaissance Florence came from rural or small-town origins—Boccaccio, Coluccio Salutati, Leonardo Bruni, Poggio Bracciolini, Marsilio Ficino, Angelo Poliziano, and others. Many artists were of similar derivation—Giotto, Masaccio, Leonardo da Vinci, Desiderio da Settignano, and more. Few of these gifted immigrants penetrated in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries into the ranks of the patriciate. One ominous result of this mass recruitment of talented men was that it introduced them into society at levels—the middle urban classes—where their own reproduction was hampered. Ultimately, massive immigration may have been destructive of talented lines and wasteful of human capital. But in the short run, these gifted newcomers were given an opportunity to display their skills, and Florentine culture was immeasurably richer for it.

These, then, are the principal conclusions which our considerations of social mobility in the Middle Ages suggest. Because of differences in rates of replacement across the social spectrum, families in favored positions produced more heirs and successors than those on the less advantaged levels of society. The dominant trend of social mobility in this traditional society was therefore consistently downward. Still, markedly different results could follow, which pre-eminently reflected the economic conditions of the period. In the stagnant epoch of the early Middle Ages, the privileged tended to lose position, while some few lucky or talented persons gained it. The overall result was a shuffling of status; in consequence, juridical differences, notably between slave and free, were progressively obliterated. The economic take-off from the year 1000 enabled those facing a threat of losing status to assume the function of entrepreneurs. They had powerful incentives, and enough property, to be both willing and able to gamble upon their talents. Conditions of urban life heightened pressures on the privileged, requiring them under penalty of loss of status to keep their sons in an entrepreneurial stance. Also, in increasing the difficulties of reproduction for the city poor, urban conditions forced a continuous recruitment of new men from the countryside, to which the talented and the motivated were especially prone to respond. The pressures upon the rich, the opportunities offered to the talented poor, combined to lend to the late medieval and Renaissance town its creative vitality. In sum, medieval society, rural and urban, presents dynamic patterns of social movement, which historians are only today coming to appreciate and study.

The Urban Territory of a Florentine Merchant, 1400

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Parenti, amici, vicini [kinsmen, friends, neighbors]: these three words are constantly found closely associated in the thoughts of Tuscans of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Around 1400 a man like Giovanni Morelli will often use them to express the many relatives and associates on which an individual could rely; to be betrayed or abandoned by them signified to him ruin and poverty. With Morelli as with his contemporaries, kinship, friendship, and neighborliness are thus almost always evaluated in terms of their social utility. The same viewpoint will serve here to analyze the composition, the range, and the role of this "personal group" centered on a given individual; in particular, I shall try to determine whether the blood relationship is the dominant constituent of these ties. If we can define the criteria for the recruitment or exclusion of these persons—persons who permitted the individual to play his social role to the full—it should clarify the functions ideally assigned to kinship and to alliance, as well as the functions that these two sorts of ties (or their substitutes) really fulfilled. Some aspects of this problem may be clarified by examining one particular case.

A Florentine merchant, Lapo di Giovanni Niccolini dei Sirigatti, kept a *Libro degli affari proprii di casa* [Book of Domestic Affairs] from 1379 to 1421. Like other Florentine *ricordanze* [diaries], it evokes the pell-mell of daily life, notes the people Lapo encountered, and describes their dealings. In its conception and organization this book is by no means especially original; to the contrary, it is marked by the dryness of its observations and information. Lapo states his intention to record the "events of the house . . . all notations and memoranda and every thing that pertains to me"—all that regards him, then, and those close to him, members of his "chasa" [house]. (Lapo's spelling) As with so many other examples of this private literature, Lapo's book recounts day by day the events that affected the number or the status of the members of the household and the acquisitions, transfers, or exchanges of goods that influenced its wealth. In this way he records a great number of relatives, both consanguineal and affinal, and others connected with him in all sorts of ways. A further interest of his book is that the author, like many of his contemporaries, indulges late in life in the preparation of an annotated genealogical introduction designed to prove the antiquity and reinforce the social status of his lineage.

The Niccolini were a family relatively new to Florence, distinguishing themselves, toward the beginning of the fourteenth century, from the older lineage of the Sirigatti from Passignano, certain members of which had already arrived in the city by that time. Lapo's immediate ancestors were soon honored with municipal offices.

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