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**Review of Bartlett, K. (2018) Florence in the age of the medici and Savonarola 1464–1494: a short history with documents**

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**Kenneth Bartlett, *Florence in the Age of the Medici and Savonarola 1464–1494: A Short History with Documents. Passages: Key Moments in History*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2018. Pp. xv + 176, 12 illustrations.**

There are books for which a one-sentence review would suffice. In the case of Kenneth Bartlett's thin and economical book (it costs less than \$20) on Florence under the Medici and Savonarola, this sentence could be the following: "This is a fantastic tool for the university classroom, and a concise, very well-written overview of the fifteenth century in Florence." The author is to be congratulated, and the book can be recommended wholeheartedly to all students and readers who are looking for a short but reliable introduction to one of the most intriguing periods in Florentine history.

Bartlett's book consists of two major parts: the first one treats three topics (and in a mere 76 pages!). "Florence before the Medici" is a succinct summary of the political developments in late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Florence, which through several crises led to the pointed and powerful republican ethos of the city (1–13). In "The Medici Hegemony (1434–1494)" (14–51), Bartlett dates the beginning of the Medicean period to Cosimo's return from his Venetian exile. He therefore leaves out a more detailed treatment of Cosimo's ascending years and "the intellectual struggle for Florence" in the years preceding the exile, to which Arthur Field has recently dedicated a monograph (not listed in Bartlett's bibliography, probably because it appeared too late).<sup>1</sup> Bartlett's Cosimo turns out to be a truly positive figure, "not an easy man to dislike" (23), who ingeniously developed his own influence without offending the other leading families too much (perhaps Bartlett is influenced a little too much by the pro-Cosimo propaganda of that time—if one reads the portrayal by Pius II, printed in the section of primary sources, one gets a more nuanced picture of a man of monarchical grandeur). Lorenzo is portrayed as slightly more problematic: the intellectually progressive "Magnifico" who paid less attention to the more conservative feelings of some of his fellow citizens when developing his ideal of a new golden age in Florentine art, philosophy, and literature, thus alienating the Medici "from the popular base it once enjoyed" (74) and giving space to figures such as Savonarola, who filled the gap. The chapter entitled "Savonarola and Florence, the New Jerusalem (1494–1498)" (52–68) deals with only four years, but these years showed the thin ice on which Lorenzo's ideal humanistic city was

constructed. According to Bartlett, Savonarola's success was neither strange nor surprising, as the Dominican preacher was very much rooted in Florentine culture. On the one hand, the author stresses the popularity of apocalyptic thought in fifteenth-century culture, especially the renowned interest in the writings of the twelfth-century mystic theologian Joachim of Fiore; on the other hand, he argues that Florence, according to Savonarola a new Jerusalem, received similar glorification in the early Quattrocento panegyric by Leonardo Bruni, who shaped Florence as the new and true Rome. Bartlett concludes that Savonarola had a message that was "in reality very mainstream but delivered by a voice from outside the old centres of power" (75). The afterword (69–76) presents a crisp summary of why the fifteenth century in Florence still matters today. It raises questions about how many sacrifices by individuals are necessary for the political stability of a state, and about how much political movements attempting to unite republican and monarchic traits ultimately depend on their leader's charisma. One can feel the engaged academic teacher in these pages: the themes could have sprung directly from a class on the *Quattrocento fiorentino*.

The longer second part (77–166) offers thirty-two excerpts of contemporary sources (including letters, historiography, diaries, sermons, and poetry), which illustrate and broaden what is touched on in the first part. Bartlett avoids choosing only the most obvious texts: no excerpts of Bruni's *History of the Florentine People* (his *Laudatio Florentinae urbis* is present, though) or of Pico's *Oratio de hominis dignitate*; instead, one finds the fascinating letter by Lorenzo's mother Lucrezia Tornabuoni to her husband Piero about Lorenzo's future wife Clarice Orsini, and a passage from Antonio Peruzzi's *Summa theologica*.

Together, these two parts offer a wide panorama of the major historical developments and their major political players without ever indulging in too much detail; the reader never loses track of the overarching development. Bartlett's style is helpful in this: he writes fluently, clearly, and to the point. It is obvious that the author had to make drastic choices about what to include and what to exclude. And it is equally obvious that not every reader will agree with his choices. This reviewer, for example, would have liked to read more accounts of Cosimo's literary patronage and about the role historiographers, orators, and (later during his "reign") poets played in the construction and legitimization of his outstanding political authority. Names like Carlo Marsuppini, Cristoforo Landino, Matteo Palmieri, Leon Battista Alberti, and Poggio Bracciolini are largely missing, and even the most influential representative of Florentine humanism in the early Quattrocento, Leonardo Bruni,

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is mentioned only very briefly on a few occasions on the pages that are dedicated to Cosimo—he returns more prominently in the part on Savonarola. When it comes to the Laurentian era, Bartlett rightly stresses that Lorenzo's charisma assured that he was quickly accepted as new head of the Medici and thereby, de facto, also of the city. But he could also have mentioned the writers' manifold attempts at propaganda during these years to support his claims to power: Bartolomeo Scala's *Collections Cosmianae*, a fascinating document promoting dynastic claims, or literary works like Naldo Naldi's bucolic poetry, in which the Medici are transformed into rulers and divinely inspired protectors of humanistic culture in the image of Augustus. Bartlett has more affinity with philosophy and the arts (as, for example, demonstrated by his illuminating remark that Lorenzo was a less important patron of painters than Cosimo because his major interest lay in gems and architecture).

Two final points of criticism. Firstly, why is the time frame in the book's title given as "1464–1498" and not, as chapters 2 and 3 of the first part would suggest, "1434–1498" (the title hints at an exclusion of Cosimo's era, which, however, is treated in the book and even presented as the foundation on which the later development, including Savonarola's success, rests)? And secondly, although it is welcome that Bartlett has included well-chosen figures to illustrate his main points, it is a pity that the splendid paintings by Gozzoli and Ghirlandaio and the painted bust of Lorenzo by Verrocchio are reproduced only in black and white (though that might be explained by the book's low price). On the other hand, the glossary of the most important political terms of the time is a very useful tool. The book does not have an index—but given its brevity and its clear structure it might not need one.

In sum: this is a book that can be recommended to any interested reader. It will be especially useful in teaching the various contexts of Renaissance Florence. It stresses how delicate the balance between power and interests was, illustrating particularly the ideological dichotomy between a secular humanism and strict Christianity, and how easily that dichotomy could lead to disbalance and trouble—a situation Cosimo de' Medici learned to orchestrate perfectly in his attempt to concentrate power on his family. Additionally, the book also illustrates how strong republican ideology, which was so powerfully developed in the late Trecento and early Quattrocento, remained until the end of Savonarola's reign. Savonarola's own words (quoted on 142, as part of his *Treatise on Florentine Government*) nicely illustrate the special position Florence took with regard to this: "A solitary rule, monarchy, is the most perfect form of rule, yet it is not ideal for the Florentine people."

## Note

1. A. Field, *The Intellectual Struggle for Florence: Humanists and the Beginnings of the Medici Regime, 1420–1440* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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