

Alessio Assonitis, Brian Sandberg, eds.. *The Grand Ducal Medici and Their Archive*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2016. 222 pp. \$111.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-909400-34-4.

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With the end of the Florentine Republic and the establishment of the Medici grand duchy, the history of the Florentine archives from 1532 onward became subject to a course of renewal. In the following decades, Cosimo I de' Medici initiated a policy of controlling and centralizing the archives. He reformed and assumed control of the archives of the Camera del Comune by the end of the 1560s. In addition, he created a central notarial archive in the oratory of Orsanmichele, and then seized control of filing, consulting, and copying all contracts. He also was conscious of the importance of controlling diplomacy, as he, and the rest of the family after him, stimulated and controlled bureaucracy in general. Cosimo therefore put under control and reorganized the Florentine chancery by creating different archives: a deposit archive called Segreteria vecchia and another one for current affairs relating to the Secretariat in Palazzo Pitti.

As a result of this policy, a new type of archive originated in Florence—the collection of papers now known as Archivio Mediceo del Principato an archive that served both as a family and a state repository, and that was completely different from the old archives of the commune, which served strictly as a repository for official documents. These practices had a direct impact on the material shape of this archive. The new nature

and miscellaneous origins of the papers produced by the secretaries directly under the orders of Cosimo resulted in mixed files of correspondence, with letters from ambassadors filed together with many others without any apparent order.[1] Under Cosimo's successors then, this archive came to contain an increasingly varied and diverse administrative, political, and financial correspondence, in combination with private documentation pertaining to the different family members.

The Archivio Mediceo del Principato is not only a new kind of archive; it also provides evidence also of the explosion of documentary production connected to it during the years of Cosimo and his successors. A simple overview of the archival series of the collection reveals a huge quantity of papers, up to three million letters amassed over two hundred years. This huge correspondence, originating from the court of the Medici, also gives us a clear indication of the management and use of archives of diplomatic correspondence by Cosimo and his successors as tools of information. As studies by Jacob Soll, Filippo de Vivo, and other scholars have shown, all over Italy and Europe with the growth of diplomacy we see a growing tendency to create networks of information available to government and courts. The Medici ambassadors, thus, were regularly sending dispatches which touched upon a variety

of political, military, cultural, and economic topics.

However, if on the one hand the archive of the Medici after the establishment of the duchy must be considered as a sort of an “arsenal” for the authorities, in keeping with the interpretation of contemporary monarchical archives traditionally given by scholars such as Robert-Henri Bautier,[2] on the other hand, it is also a product of the court society of the time, shaped by the professional and cultural interests and relations of actual people, each with their own personal needs and ambitions.[3] This book leads us to the discovery of an archive that is the precise expression of this culture of simultaneously individual and state affairs at the time of the Medici.

In the last years, the Medici Archive Project has been researching this enormous collection, which, given the complexity of its composition, had been less studied as a whole than other Florentine archival series. Its online platform, BIA, provides scholars from all over the world with a huge trove of documentary material, amounting to over 350,000 digitized and/or transcribed letters. Sailing across this *mare magnum* of papers gives us a clear picture of the vastness and ramifications of such a network, which provided the Medici rule with a powerful tool for collecting information.

The same team of the Medici Archive Project contributed to this volume, with each author devoting a chapter to a specific topic based on his/her own research in the collection of the Mediceo del Principato. Each contribution thus helps us navigate the sea of history in the making, from the picturesque episodes pertaining to family members, to the formalities of the European courts of the time, to the diplomatic affairs and the conduct of wars and governance. The result reveals both the humanity and emotions of real people and the complexity of the processes of circulation of ideas and information at the court of the Medici.

For instance, while Stefano Dall’Aglio gives us insights on “The Story of Lorenzino de’ Medici’s Assassination” by revealing it as a “Revenge of the Emperor,” Sheila Barker explains how the Medici women had a role in the circulation of medical knowledge in her chapter, entitled “Medical Culture and the Women of the Medici Grand Ducal Court.” At the same time, the essay by Alessio Assonitis, “Searching for Cosimo’s Books,” uncovers new details of the personality and culture of Cosimo I through an analysis of his library. Cosimo’s additions to the bibliotheca inherited from his ancestors evinces a great interest for the new vernacular literature, as documented by the large collection of poetry, prose, and drama in vernacular. The duke’s care for his books is manifested in the correspondence with his secretaries, which reveals both his personality as an enthusiastic bibliophile fearing for the dispersal of his books and his will to control the lending of documents to historians such as Varchi and Adriani. Cosimo’s correspondence about his library thus illuminates the processes that inspired his intellectual curiosity and informed his artistic taste, as well as elucidates the mechanisms which regulated the political life of a sixteenth-century court.

Some other essays also touch upon topics that, by using little-known documentary material of the Mediceo del Principato, shed new light on the role of women at the time of the Medici. Elena Brizio, for instance, focuses on the political crises in Siena during the decades that preceded the collapse of the republic and its incorporation into the Florentine state. In her essay, “Political Meddling in Women’s Lives: Siennese and Florentine Solutions in Difficult Times (1490-1560),” the author gives us a clue of the crises which affected the personal lives of Siennese women of the time who were forced into exile in Montalcino, after the Florentine and the imperial forces conquered the city in 1555. Likewise, with his essay on “Sofonisba Anguissola, Francesco de’ Medici and Chiappino Vitelli: A Lady-in-waiting, a Prince and a General at the Spanish Court,” Maurizio Arfaioni

offers an unusual glimpse into the private life of a female artist, divided between a prince and military leader of the time.

Lia Markey's chapter, "The Riches of the Indies: Francesco and Ferdinando de' Medici and the Americas," gives us another example of the wide geopolitical context that the Medici archive offers to today's scholars. This essay gives us a clear idea of what the image of America could be in the mind of a sixteenth-century prince. By focusing on archival material highlighted by the Medici Archive Project's members, it discloses new and lesser known aspects of the fascination of the Medici with the New World. The correspondence of Francesco de' Medici reveals that he was engaged in collecting naturalia from the Americas. His younger brother, Ferdinando I, on the other hand, was less interested in the natural world and more in objects shaped by humans, such as the feather miters which in the following century attracted the interest of many other courts of the time, and that as a result are now in various art collections.

Moving from Cosimo to the later Medici, Lisa Kaborycha's chapter, " 'What News Abroad?': Florentine *Avvisi* from London, 1614-1622," and Nicholas Brownlee's essay, "A Medici Agent's Newsletters to Florence during the Leghorn Crisis of 1653," show further examples of the network of information that characterized an early seventeenth-century European court like the Medici. The vivid and tragic story of "Donna Livia's New Clothes," by Brendan Dooley, gives us a hint of the real life of a courtesan and concubine of the seventeenth century. The relationship of a persona to things and the objects that he or she possessed reveals aspects of the personality and their own deepest needs and ambitions.

To conclude, this book gives us precious new insights into the extraordinary material preserved in the archive of the Medici, and testifies to the exceptional effort by the Medici Archive Project to disclose to us this little-known world of

papers. I recently conducted research in the field and highly appreciate the work done by this team of scholars. While the majority of these essays provides a remarkable new picture of the variety of the contents of this archive, it perhaps would have been worthwhile to dedicate more space to both the processes of the Mediceo del Principato's formation and to its specific functions as a documentary repository, especially with regard to a general history of archives in early modern Europe. However, this volume must be celebrated as an important step toward a better understanding of one of the most important archival collections of that age. It especially shows the extraordinary importance that the creation of the online database (BIA) of the Medici Archive Project has had for the work of historians of early modern Tuscany as well as for scholars working on the history of information, gender, society, and the court of the *ancien régime*.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, F. de Vivo, A. Guidi, and A. Silvestri, eds., *Fonti per la storia degli archivi degli antichi stati italiani*, vol. 24 (Rome: Ministero dei beni e delle attività culturali e del turismo, Direzione generale degli archivi, 2016), 13, 103, 117, and 132.

[2]. Robert H. Bautier, "La Phase cruciale de l'histoire des archives: la constitution des dépôts d'archives et la naissance de l'archivistique (XVIe-début du XIXe siècle)," *Archivum* 18 (1968): 139-149.

[3]. See, for example, Filippo de Vivo, "Cœur de l'État, lieu de tension. Le tournant archivistique vu de Venise (XVe-XVIIe siècle)," *Annales HSS*, 3 (2013): 699-728, esp. 702-703.

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