

NOVI CIVES: THE FRESCOBALDI AND THE FLORENTINE REPUBLIC

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Dante would not have approved of the Frescobaldi. They came to Florence from the Val de Pesa about 1200, they joined in the city's factional strife with relish, and they made a great deal of money. In many ways they typified that group the poet so resented, the *novi cives* who rose to power and supplanted the older Florentine families.¹ In their early rise as international merchants and bankers for example the Frescobaldi family typified those "new citizens" whom Dante so deeply resented.

Davidsohn dates their rise to commercial prominence to around 1240. By that time, they were already represented in the Lana, the Calimala, and the Cambio, the three most important guilds in the city.² Shortly thereafter, they began to take an active role in Florentine politics. In 1252, the year the first gold florin was minted, Lamberto Frescobaldi was elected to the Anziani. In that busy year, Lamberto was occupied with two major building projects: the first Palazzo Frescobaldi, as a private citizen, and a new bridge across the Arno in his capacity as a member of the council. Built to provide access from the quarter of Santo Spirito to the heart of the city, the Ponte Santa Trinita conveniently linked Lamberto's new palazzo with the family's shops and warehouses on the opposite bank.³ The Frescobaldi had arrived.

The family remained active in Florentine politics and diplomacy under both the Primo Popolo and the republic. Rainerius Frescobaldi, one of the signatories of the treaty of peace between Florence, Lucca, Postoja, and Prato, was elected to the Anziani in 1255.⁴ Ghino Frescobaldi was among the ambassadors sent to Pope Innocent IV in 1258 and was chosen as prior in 1285.⁵ Berto, the *capo famiglia* of one of the most successful branches of the family, was part of the embassy to Genoa in the same year and of another sent to Boniface VIII in the crucial year of 1300.⁶

The wealth and power of the family derived from its commercial success. Next to the Riccardi of Lucca, the Frescobaldi were the earliest great merchant-banking family of Italy.⁷ Like most of their contemporaries, the Frescobaldi diversified their companies, combining trade, especially in cloth and wool, with banking. I say "companies" because at various times there were a number of Frescobaldi companies operating simultaneously and often in competition with one another. The family's practice, one common in the *dugento* and *trecento*, was to limit partnerships to short periods

with the option of renewal at the end of the agreement. This produced a bewildering pattern of forming and re-forming companies which might or might not be composed of the same set of partners.

Each of the Frescobaldi companies was centralized, i.e. local operations were simply branches of the parent company. Shares were held by family members and a minority of outsiders in proportion to the capital they had contributed.⁸ Their commercial and banking interests were widespread. In addition to Florence, the Frescobaldi were active in Naples, Padua, Ferrara, Avignon, London, Paris, Bruges, and the Tyrol.

The Frescobaldi companies which have attracted scholarly attention thus far are those which operated in England during the last years of Edward I's reign and the first decade of Edward II's. Originally, there were two, the Frescobaldi Bianchi, headed by Giovanni "Chiocciola" Frescobaldi (Sir John Friscobald in English records) and the Frescobaldi Neri. Eventually, a company headed by Berto Frescobaldi, but managed in England by his sons Amerigo and Bettino, supplanted its family rivals in the English market.⁹

Edward I's need for funds to finance his campaigns in Wales and Scotland and to pursue his continental ambitions led him to turn to the Italian merchants in England for money. Many loans were secured in an apparently impromptu if not irregular fashion: the king summoned the representatives of the various companies and demanded that they contribute specified sums or face the royal wrath. Forced loans or pretended fines were merely part of the cost of doing business in England. Eventually, however, a more orderly procedure was devised. An individual company was selected to advance large sums to the king in return for royal concessions and the promise of eventual repayment.

The Riccardi of Lucca were the first to become "bankers to the crown." When even their considerable resources were exhausted in 1294, there was a temporary return to the rather haphazard methods of the past until the Frescobaldi replaced them in 1299.¹⁰ Enjoying Edward I's favor, the family soon became extremely powerful in England, acquiring offices and lands and collecting a number of ecclesiastical benefices. Davidsohn says that they "put all the other Florentine companies in the shade" and calls them the "Frescobaldi omnipotenti."¹¹ To repay the loans they made the king the Florentine bankers were assigned various sources of revenue: the customs duties on wool (their own was shipped duty free), the profits of the royal silver mines in Devon and the mint, and the receipts of the French county of Ponthieu. Amerigo, Berto's eldest son, became constable of Bordeaux, and Ugolino Ugolini, a relative, served first

as receiver of Ponthieu and later as Amerigo's deputy in Bordeaux.¹²

Although these arrangements proved satisfactory for Edward I and his son, they presented two serious problems. These diverse sources of revenue did not repay the total loans made by the Frescobaldi to the crown, and assigning revenues in this way reduced royal income. When the Ordainers came to power in 1310, they attacked the Frescobaldi with a vengeance, seeing in these foreign merchants the personification of the decadence and corruption they were determined to uproot. The Frescobaldi were stripped of their offices and privileges. Their lands and goods were confiscated. Even their account books and correspondence were impounded. Amerigo and Bettino slipped quietly out of the country, leaving behind their hired factors and their bastard brother, Piero, to cope with this sudden change of fortune. By about 1312, they had all returned to Florence where they tried to avoid total collapse.

Richard Kaeuper is convinced that their struggle was in vain: "individual members of the company may have salvaged some wealth, and other members of the family continued to carry on mercantile and banking operations. But the company which had served Edward I and Edward II was ruined [by 1315]."¹³ The evidence of contemporary chronicles and of documents preserved in the *Archivio di Stato* suggests that the fate of the Frescobaldi may not have been so grim. It is certainly not so clear.

The archives of the Frescobaldi family at Poggio a Remole near Florence contain at least one reference that supports Kaeuper's conclusion. The *Archivio Portatile*, a sort of calendar of documents relating to the family, notes under the year 1316 that "Amerigo, Filippo, Buonaccorso, Simone, and Otto, sons of Messer Berto Frescobaldi, are bankrupt, and among their creditors is Messer Tegghia di Neri di Lamberto."¹⁴ In the *Archivio di Stato*, however, I have not found any evidence of the sort of legal turmoil the collapse of so important a company would have caused. Neither the *Provisioni* nor the *Libri Fabarum* show that creditors were attempting to collect whatever they could from a failing company or that the Frescobaldi were appealing to the commune to forestall such efforts.

There is one interesting, if ambiguous, document relating to the Frescobaldi in the *Archivio di Stato*: a book cover made by a thrifty notary from an old piece of parchment.¹⁵ On the inside surface is an account of the testimony given before him by Berto Frescobaldi, Amerigo and Bettino his sons, and Bernardo, son of Paniccia Frescobaldi, that their factor in France, Bertolo Davanzati, has absconded with funds amounting to 20,000 gold florins. This document is clearly dated 21 November 1315. First the collapse of

their English enterprise and now this! Was it the faithlessness of their agent in France that at last drove Berto's company into bankruptcy? How is it that this company, supposed by Kaeuper to be bankrupt already, had so much to lose to a dishonest factor? Could this, instead of being what it seems, in fact be a fourteenth-century way of diverting funds?

Davidsohn, relying on the chronicle of Donato Velluti, a relative by marriage of the Frescobaldi, concludes that, "While one branch of the family was ruined, another managed to salvage a considerable fortune from the Anglo-Aquitanian shipwreck."¹⁶ According to Velluti, Amerigo was shrewd enough to avert complete disaster. Just how he could have done so is the problem. The Frescobaldi managed to get a considerable percentage of their movables from England to Florence in spite of the efforts of the Ordainers to sequester everything. They used letters of credit drawn on other banks, channeled money and goods through friends, and in some cases simply evaded the authorities. Some five hundred pounds worth of gold and silver plate was smuggled out in a bale of wool.¹⁷ Perhaps we have simply not given the Frescobaldi enough credit for determination and shrewdness in dealing with the crisis. Unfortunately, the available documents merely leave one to speculate.

There is some indication that the Frescobaldi followed the pattern Brucker sees among Florentine merchants in general after 1350 and placed some of their capital in safer investments: land and the *monte*.¹⁸ Certainly the English adventure left a bitter taste in their mouths. Giovanni, a poet as well as a banker, composed a sonnet entitled, "Ricordo per chi passa in Inghilterra."

Wear dark colors, be humble.
Be dull in appearance, but subtle in your actions.
Woe to the Englishman who tries to reel you in. . .
Pay on time. Be courteous in collecting:
Showing that need is driving you to the grave.
Make no more demands than you are entitled to. . .
Stick together with men of your own nation,
And see to it that your doors are well bolted early.¹⁹

This remarkable family, which produced ports, politicians, and astute businessmen was capable of the most senseless violence. Besides the occasions on which they were cited for arson or assault on others, the Frescobaldi had an intra-family vendetta of their own, "a rabid conflict" that "ended in blood."²⁰ Lambertuccio Frescobaldi had deposited with Berto a large sum, about 100,000 *lire* "a fiorino."

When the former died in 1304, his heirs were unable to recover this money, although their attempts spanned the next three decades.²¹ Finally, Thomasso di Lipaccio, a nephew of Lambertuccio and a thoroughly bad character who had been exiled and condemned to death for treason during the war with Castruccio Castricani, resorted to the age old solution for his frustration: vengeance. He attacked Filippo de Berto, a priest of San Piero di Mercato in the Val d'Este. Filippo fled his assailant, but stopping only long enough to collect a servant along the way galloped straight to Florence where, priest or no, he tried to kill Thomasso's relative, Simone de Taddeo. His blow glanced off Simone's helmet, but the faithful servant finished his master's work with a lance. In revenge, Simone di Lipaccio attacked another Simone, the son of Berto, and succeeded in wounding him with his sword. With Raymond de Roover, we need to remind ourselves to avoid the mistaken assumption that "rational business conduct was incompatible with the survival of feudal traditions."²² The Frescobaldi were medieval nobles, with all that implies of violent and undisciplined behavior, as well as Florentine merchants.

Even though they were relative newcomers to the city, the Frescobaldi had been quickly assimilated into the aristocracy of Florence. Becker notes that by the 1280s it was extremely difficult to differentiate between the city's old *magnati* and their more recent counterparts.²³ His thesis is certainly borne out by the history of the Frescobaldi. When, in 1281, the Florentine required certain magnate families to post bonds as a check on their notoriously lawless behavior, the Frescobaldi were among them. Likewise, they fell under the provisions of the Ordinances of Justice of 1293 which banned aristocrats from major public office. In fact, they took the lead in resisting these laws. "The Bardi and the Frescobaldi appealed to their fellow magnates to avenge insults, real or imagined, and to overthrow the signory which enforced the ordinances."²⁴

Becker insists that although the *magnati* may have had socioeconomic ties to the *populani grassi*, they were legally different and that they were seen as such and acted as such. Here the Frescobaldi seem to depart from the pattern he has postulated. For them the difference seems to have been a purely formal one. They had ties--marriage and business connections--in both directions, and they used those ties whenever and however they could. Among the families of the *populani grassi* with whom the Frescobaldi formed marriage connections were the Altoviti, the Antellesi, the Capponi, the Cocchi, the Guadagni, the Mancini, the Velluti, and the Vittori.²⁵ These ties were useful to the family in both commerce and politics, and they tend to blur the distinction between one level of the

Florentine patriciate and the other.

In fact, magnate families like the Frescobaldi continued to play a significant role in Florentine politics even after the passage of the Ordinances. Important in this process was the informal influence they possessed because of their personal ties to important non-magnate families. The lists of Florentine officials in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries are replete with Frescobaldi relatives and business partners. Of equal importance was the correlation between wealth, specifically the ability to make large loans to the commune, and political influence. In 1295, for example, Ghino and Lambertuccio Frescobaldi were assigned 12,000 *lire* by the commune as their share of a *prestanza* of 60,000 *lire*.²⁶

Their role in the guilds of Florence gave them power as well. Since greater guilds controlled the smaller ones, they were able to manipulate the government. Even though they were magnates, the Frescobaldi, the Bardi, and other merchant-bankers were able to establish a policy which "successfully identified the well-being of the commune with their own prosperity." In spite of the efforts to limit their political role in the republic, numerous exceptions were made to allow individual magnates to hold office and even to escape the legal penalties for serious crimes.²⁷

From the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century the names of the Frescobaldi occur frequently in Florentine politics, either among the supporters of the government or among the opposition, sometimes on both sides. Berto Frescobaldi was a bitter personal enemy of Giano della Bella and opposed the popular regime of the 1290s. According to Dino Compagni, he was the leader of a group of magnates who met in the church of San Jacopo not far from the Palazzo Frescobaldi in 1294 to plot a coup against Giano. Compagni says that Berto urged a slaughter of Giano's supporters, "without taking thought for friends or enemies," but a wiser strategy of divide and rule prevailed. Giano was driven from power in the following year.²⁸

In the struggle between the Blacks and Whites, different breaches of the family took different courses. Compagni notes with disapproval that Berto supported the Cerchi, leaders of the White faction because they had loaned him 12,000 florins. When the moment of truth came he proved fickle. Lambertuccio and Tegghia were among the Black Guelfs, perhaps because Berto was at least nominally on the opposite side. Tegghia took an especially active role in the opposition to Corso Donati's leadership of the Blacks. Apparently it was he who led his *famiglia*, that is his servants and neighborhood clients as well as his immediate relatives, to the defense of the

signoria when they were attacked by Donati and his followers in 1304. He later became one of the leaders of the Blacks after Donati's murder in 1308.²⁹

One must remember that the Ordinances did not ban magnates from all political offices. They served as tax farmers and supervisors of the *gabelles*, as diplomats to the papal curia and the courts of England, France, and Naples, and on all sorts of special councils such as the Twelve Good Men. In fact, they advised the signory on virtually every matter of importance, especially those which concerned the republic's finances.³⁰ The Frescobaldi had furnished since the 1270s *podestis*, captains, and castellans for the Florentine *contado* and for communities outside it. In 1279, Frescus or Frescobaldus was *podesta* of Cremona. In 1290-1291, he was *podesta* of San Gimignano and held the same office again in 1297-1298. He served in the same capacity in Prato in 1293 and as captain of Orvieto in 1299. Bardo had been *podesta* there two years previously, and Lambertuccio had held the same office in Prato from 1290 through 1291. Guidonis Frescobaldi was appointed captain of Colle Val d'Elsa by the Florentines in 1311. Throughout the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, Frescobaldi connections such as the Velluti and Guadagni figure prominently in the lists of priors and *gonfaloniers*.³¹

In spite of the financial reverses and family strife of the early fourteenth century, the Frescobaldi continued to be active in the politics of the republic as long as it survived. If anything, they were more active in the second half of the century than before. *Manoscritti* 534, a list of magnates holding office in Florence, shows that the Frescobaldi were ubiquitous in the minor offices from mid-century onward. From two to five are listed for every year from 1349 to 1358 for example. They served as castellans in the *contado*, as commissioners to review the *monte*, and as officers of the various *gabelles*, particularly the *gabelle* on wine.³²

It was their penchant for politics on the grander scale, especially when public policy seemed likely to affect their financial interests, that kept the Frescobaldi involved in Florence's internecine strife. When the Florentine policy of expansionism, together with floods, crop failures, and disease, threatened to destroy the city and its great commercial families in 1340, the Frescobaldi were coleaders with the Bardi of a coup aimed at putting the merchant-bankers in power.³³ Though their attempt failed, Becker warns us not to dismiss it as merely another effort by the magnates to throw off communal restraints or as a grab for power to replace one dominant group with another. He writes:

The rebellion. . . was an effort to reorient foreign affairs by extracting the republic from its burdensome system of alliances, as well as to forestall economic catastrophe and salvage something of their banking fortunes. . . A distinction must be made between a resentment of communal authority *per se*, and an attempt to employ it for rational ends.³⁴

Exiled afterwards, they were able to come back only with the rise of Walter of Brienne, the Duke of Athens, in 1342. Like some other magnate families, the Frescobaldi were able to profit both from his rise and his fall, trimming skillfully to suit the prevailing wind. Bernardo Frescobaldi the younger served Brienne as *podesta* and castellan, and after the duke was overthrown, he was chosen as one of the magistrates of the temporary government that followed.³⁵

Less than twenty years after their return from exile, the Frescobaldi were participants in another abortive coup in 1360, and again suffered temporary banishment.³⁶ By this time, one can hardly class them as *novi cives*. A century at the heart of the political and economic life of the republic--winning and losing fortunes, holding office and wielding political influence from behind the scenes, fighting in Florence's wars and in her street brawls--had made the family a fixture of the aristocratic establishment.

In an impassioned speech delivered during the republic's last years and recorded by Giovanni Cavalcanti, Rinaldo degli Albizzi denounced the rise of "artisans and citizens of low condition" and called for an end to the restrictions imposed on the magnates. "Who can deny," he asked, "the right of a Bardi to be superior. . . to the son of Salvestro the baker. . . [or of] a Frescobaldi to hold civic office in place of a Stuppino?"³⁷ The answer to his question carries one beyond the limits of this essay and into another era of Florentine history. As a part of the aristocratic faction that gained power in 1433 and banned Cosimo d'Medici, the Frescobaldi suffered a similar fate when the Medici returned in triumph.³⁸ For those singled out as enemies, including the Frescobaldi, the republic, or at least their participation in it, was over.

NOTES

¹*Inferno* 16. 73-75, "new people and quick profits," and *Paradiso* 16, Cacciaguida on the "mongrelization" of the Florentine citizenry. Ironically, Dino Frescobaldi, who is regarded as a poet of

the *dolce stile nuovo*, is credited by Boccaccio with having rescued the earliest cantos of the *Divine Comedy* and sent them to Dante in his exile. Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Life of Dante in The Earliest Lives of Dante*, trans. James R. Smith (New York: Russell, 1901) pp. 63-64. See Charles T. Davis, "Il buon tempo antico," *Dante's Italy and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984) pp. 71-93.

²Robert Davidsohn, *Storia de Firenze*, trans. Giovanni Batista Klein, 8 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1956) 6: 256-257. Cf. Frescobaldi Archives, Poggio a Remole, *Archivio Portabile*, under the year 1235 concerning their membership in the Lana and the Calimala.

³Robert Davidsohn, *Forschungen zur Geschichte von Florenz* (Berlin: 1900) 4: 107, and *Storia* 2: 567, 643 and 3: 125. The Palazzo Frescobaldi housed Charles of Anjou in 1273 and Charles of Valois in 1301. See Dino Campagni, *The Chronicle of Dino Campagni*, trans. Else C. M. Benecke and A. G. Ferrers Howell (London: J. M. Dent, 1906) 9. 94, and Armando Saporì, *La Compagnia dei Frescobaldi in Inghilterra*, Biblioteca storia toscana 10 (Florence: 1947) 3 note 1.

⁴ASF, *Manoscritti* 534, no pagination. Davidsohn, *Forschungen* 4: 109 and *Storia*, 2: 643-644.

⁵ASF, *Tratte* 393. Saporì, *Frescobaldi* 3 note 1. Davidsohn, *Forschungen* 4: 137 and *Storia* 2: 658. Marvin B. Becker, "The Novi Cives and Florentine Politics, 1343-1382," *Medieval Studies* 24 (1962) 40. "Diplomatic missions were staffed almost exclusively by the most renowned patricians since these men were the best harbingers of the city's prestige."

⁶Davidsohn, *Storia* 4: 190. Nicola Ottokar, *Il Comune di Firenze all' fine del Dugento* (Turin: Einaudi, 1962) 141. Concerning the favor shown the family by Boniface VIII, see *Storia* 6: 591 and *Forschungen* 3: 285.

⁷See Richard Kaeuper, *Bankers to the Crown: the Riccardi of Lucca and Edward I* (Princeton: Princeton Up, 1973).

⁸Raymond de Roover, *Money, Banking and Credit in Medieval Bruges* (Cambridge, Mass.: Medieval Academy of America, 1948) 31.

⁹Richard Kaeuper, "The Frescobaldi of Florence and the English Crown," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History* 10 (1973): 45-95. Davidsohn, *Storia* 6: 368-370.

¹⁰Kaeuper, "Frescobaldi," 53-54.

¹¹Davidsohn, *Storia* 4: 581 and 6: 715.

¹²Margaret Wade Labarge, *Gascony: England's First Colony* (London: Hamilton, 1980) pp. 103-104. Labarge condemns these appointments as detrimental to sound administration in Gascony.

¹³Kaeuper, "Frescobaldi," p. 92.

- ¹⁴Archivio Portabile, no pagination.
- ¹⁵ASF, *Adespote: Coperte di libri*, 21 November 1315.
- ¹⁶Davidsohn, *Storia* 4: 581 and 6: 404 citing Donato Velluti, *Cronica Domestica* pp. 37 and 86.
- ¹⁷Sapori, *Frescobaldi* pp. 70-71.
- ¹⁸Gene Brucker, *Florentine Politics and Society* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962) p. 26.
- ¹⁹L. S. Peruzzi, *Storia del Commercio* (Florence: 1868), pp. 153-154 gives the full text. Translations are printed in Robert S. Lopez and Irving W. Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World* (New York: Columbia UP, 1955) pp. 423-424 and in Eve Borsook, *The Companion Guide to Florence* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1983), p. 186.
- ²⁰Davidsohn, *Storia* 6: 370. Concerning their violence towards others, see 4: 615-616 and 7: 462.
- ²¹Donato Velluti, *La Cronica Domestica di Messer Donato Velluti* (Florence: Sansoni, 1914) pp. 86-87. Davidsohn, *Storia* 4: 373 and 6: 370.
- ²²Raymond de Roover, "The Story of the Alberti Company of Florence," *Business History Review* 32 (Spring 1958): 18. For the story of the vendetta, see Davidsohn, *Storia* 4: 994-995 and 7: 12 and 734. Lambertuccio's company was forced to suspend payments to their own creditors shortly after his death. See *Storia* 6: 369.
- ²³Marvin B. Becker, "The Republican City-State in Florence: An Inquiry into its Origin and Survival," *Speculum* 35 (January 1960): 40-41.
- ²⁴Marvin B. Becker, *Florence in Transition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967) 1: 6-8 and 27. Cf. Ottokar, p. 38.
- ²⁵Velluti, tav. 3, cited in Brucker *Florentine Politics*, p. 153, note 18.
- ²⁶ASF, *Provvisioni* V, fol. 125 and 132 verso. Davidsohn, *Forschungen* p. 55. Becker, *Florence in Transition*, p. 97.
- ²⁷Becker, *Florence in Transition* p. 111. Davidsohn, *Storia* 6: 185.
- ²⁸Compagni 1: 15. Davidsohn, *Storia* 3: 617-618 and 720. This despite kinship between Giano della Bella and the Frescobaldi and the participation of Caruccio del Verre, one of his closest allies, in a Frescobaldi company. See Davidsohn, *Storia* 6: 368.
- ²⁹Compagni 1: 22; 2: 22 and 26; 3: 3, 8, 20, and 37. Davidsohn, *Storia* 3: 634 and 4: 365.
- ³⁰Giovanni Villani, *Cronica di Giovanni Villani* (Florence: 1823) 9: 128. Davidsohn, *Storia* 4: 893 and 5: 403 citing ASF *Provvisioni* XVIII, fol. 50 verso: "I sei appartenevano alle primarie

casate fiorentine: Frescobaldi, Spini, della Tosa, Bordoni, Manetti, Bastari." See Becker, *Florence in Transition* p. 96.

³¹ASF, *Provvisioni XIV*, fol. 91 verso. *Tratte* 393. Davidsohn, *Forschungen* 2: 197 and 235; 4: 563, 568, and 570. *Storia* 4: 570 and 6: 86-87.

³²ASF, *Manoscritti* 534. The family remains a producer of wines from the Chianti Ruffina region, and their labels assert that they have been "Viticoltori fiorentini sin dall' anno 1300."

³³ASF, *Carte de Frescobaldi*, no. 14. Becker, *Florence in Transition* pp. 97 and 191.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 120.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 157, 171, and 175.

³⁶Brucker, *Florentine Politics* p. 185.

³⁷Gene Brucker, *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) pp. 473-474 citing Giovanni Cavalcanti, *Istorie fiorentine* 3. 2. 46-54.

³⁸Dale Kent, *The Rise of the Medici: Faction in Florence 1426-1434* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978) p. 148.