

*I centri minori della Toscana nel Medioevo: Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Figline Valdarno, 23–24 ottobre, 2009.* Giuliano Pinto and Paolo Pirillo, eds.

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A recent article by Italian economic historian Guido Alfani links the fall from favor of rural studies in the second half of the twentieth century to the waning of Marxism (“Back to the Peasants,” *History Compass* 12.1 [2014]: 62). Alfani’s article is a call to action, arguing an urgent need for historians to redress the imbalance between the importance of peasants in early modern society and how small a proportion of studies are actually dedicated to them. Focusing on small to medium-sized towns and villages in Tuscany between the last decades of the thirteenth and the first half of the fifteenth century, in the midst of a Florentine historiography dominated by urban studies, this volume goes some way toward addressing this gap. The collection of ten essays, edited by Giuliano Pinto and Paolo Pirillo, is the product of a 2009 conference held in Figline Valdarno.

Conceptualized as a detailed study of the entire Tuscan territory, the contributors to this volume have divided up the territory primarily according to administrative divisions.

Beginning with an overview of the traditional Florentine *contado*, Pirillo's essay discusses the relative stability of this section of the Florentine territory — the result of a consolidated effort to create a network of strong, predominantly walled centers that governed the surrounding countryside. Pirillo discusses the deliberate way in which Florence used the new towns to stabilize the countryside by placing them in a dominant position over surrounding settlements and ensuring their market and trade activities were oriented toward Florence. The volume then proceeds to move systematically through the regions of Tuscany, describing the main settlements in each of the areas. An unfortunate last-minute withdrawal has meant that the final product does not include the region surrounding Lucca.

A number of essays in the collection focus almost exclusively on the demographic details pertinent to their region. Roberto Farinelli and Maria Ginatempo meticulously identify the main towns of Sienese Tuscany and the countryside surrounding Grosseto. Francesco Salvestrini takes this further by also looking at the economic and ecclesiastical structures in the stretch of land spanning from Volterra to Fiesole, concluding that the social complexity inherent in each of these communities makes it difficult to define them according to traditional categories of *borghi*, *centri minori*, or *quasi città*. These predominantly descriptive essays would appeal to readers looking for an introduction to the specific areas being described as well as those trying to gain a more detailed picture of the composition of the Florentine territory.

The most engaging of the essays in this volume go beyond a merely descriptive approach, exploring what is distinctive in the unique histories and social structures of these communities. Andrea Barlucchi is particularly successful in his treatment of the Apennine basin, where he identifies a number of occupational trends associated with each of the main settlements of Poppi, Anghiari, Bibbiena, and Sansepolcro. One example is the surprisingly high number of notaries emerging from the relatively isolated town of Poppi, which Barlucchi links to a strong tradition of legal education in the town. This vocational and economic differentiation led to each of these towns playing distinctive roles within their own region. The complexity of internal institutions is a theme picked up by Gabriele Taddei, who examines how these complexities in towns in the Val di Chiana played out in acts of submission to Florence.

This volume is a welcome contribution to an area of study that is crying out for scholarly attention, but there are a couple of obvious gaps in what is presented. First, while heavily demographic in focus, the inhabitants themselves are almost completely silent in these essays. The scant attention given to ecclesiastical structures is also surprising given the importance of parish and diocesan boundaries, which were also crucial to the development of local identity. While individual contributors have included some maps of their specific areas, the volume does not include a map of the entire territory under discussion, which makes it difficult for readers who might not be as

familiar with the region as the authors to understand how the areas are situated relative to one another.

Despite these omissions, this collection makes a significant contribution to our understanding of diversity across the territory. While sharing similar trajectories of development, each of these microregions was distinctive in its internal structures and economic differentiation. These differences impacted on the degree of autonomy that communities were able to establish, and on the way urban policy was developed. There is little doubt that we need more studies such as these in order to develop and nuance our understanding of rural communities and their place in early modern society.

Cecilia Hewlett, *Monash University*