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Brege, Brian. Tuscany in the Age of Empire

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Brege, Brian.

Tuscany in the Age of Empire.

I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. Pp. 520 + 4 tables. ISBN 978-0-6742-5134-2 (hardcover) US\$55.

This book argues that the Grand Duchy of Tuscany played an active role in European empires between roughly 1560 and 1620. The Medici grand dukes, especially Grand Duke Ferdinando I in the early seventeenth century, had high imperial ambitions, even as their efforts proved unsuccessful. Tuscany participated in empire indirectly, by providing finance, by seeking to expand the role of Tuscans and Tuscan cities, and by encouraging the imperial ventures of others. They also directly, although briefly, challenged parts of the Ottoman Empire. Brian Brege's book presents a wealth of new archival documentation about the imperial efforts of the early modern Medici grand dukes.

Brege argues that the Grand Dukes Cosimo I, Francesco I, and especially Ferdinando I each sought to push Tuscany into an active role in early modern imperialism. Brege organizes the claim around an introduction, eight chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction situates the book's findings into a diverse range of historiographies from Florentine studies to scholarship on China and the Americas. Chapter 1 shows how the Medici grand dukes sought to influence the broader Spanish Empire through financial assistance. In chapter 2, Brege argues that the grand dukes tried to capitalize on that kind of influence through proposals to mediate the Portuguese pepper trade; to establish a direct role in the sugar trade in Brazil; and to become formal partners in other areas of Portuguese overseas trade. Although the Habsburgs happily took Medici money, none of these other initiatives met with success. From the 1590s, Brege demonstrates, in chapter 3, how the Medici grand dukes attempted similar sorts of initiatives with the Dutch and the English. In those cases, northern European powers and the Medici worked together through the port of Livorno, but the risk of offending the Habsburgs prevented further agreements. The middle chapters turn towards showing how global ambitions impacted the city of Florence itself. In chapter 4, Brege uses the case studies of Filippo Sassetti and Francesco Carletti to reveal how Florentines were able to position themselves in the empires of others and then use their position to collect information and facilitate the transfer of cultural objects, exotic animals, and plants to grand

ducal Florence. The housing, use, and display of those objects in Florence is at the centre of chapter 5. There, Brege highlights how the Medici grand dukes could display and distribute international things to enhance their capital and their reputation. The last part of the book focuses on the ways that Tuscans under the grand dukes pursued aggressive actions against the Ottoman Empire in North Africa and the Middle East. In chapter 6, Brege charts the vacillating economic and military relations between Tuscany and North Africa, with a particular emphasis on slavery. Chapter 7 shows how, in 1606 and 1607, the Medici grand dukes plotted to support a Syrian rebel by helping to legitimize his court, seeking allies for him, and offering him military assistance. The final chapter turns to similar sorts of efforts to negotiate alliances with the Safavids. Ultimately, none of these initiatives were effective at harming Ottoman power or increasing the Tuscan presence in Ottoman lands.

This book provides a wealth of new archival information for specialists of early modern Europe to ponder and to include in their own studies about empire. Brege exhaustively demonstrates that the Medici grand dukes had imperial ambitions even as they usually failed to make those ambitions a reality. At times the book assumes a sharp break between the Medici grand dukes and the earlier republic, but the focus of the evidence on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries makes it unclear how sharp that break might have been. Certainly, Grand Ducal Tuscany of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a much stronger state apparatus than what existed during the Florentine Republic; the Grand Duchy was enmeshed in trans-European networks to a much greater degree than the Florentine Republic had been; and other European powers possessed empires that simply did not exist during the Trecento and Quattrocento. Yet recent scholarship has convincingly shown that the Florentine Republic before 1530 had always been aggressively expansionist, while Florentine mercantile influence already stretched across Europe and beyond by the late medieval period.

Relatedly, the book emphasizes the agency of the Medici grand dukes in promoting Tuscany within the imperialism of the early modern period. But the book also seems to reveal that the grand dukes repeatedly looked at long-shot possibilities that ultimately failed to gain much tangible support from other powers. Thus, does this new archival evidence change current conceptions of Tuscany in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or does it mostly uphold the image of a Grand Duchy whose geographical and political position limited

its involvement and manoeuvrability on the international stage? Were the grand dukes unusually ambitious and aggressive, or were they trying the sorts of things that the republic had tried, but within the different and broader contexts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries?

Tuscany in the Age of Empire offers a wealth of new archival information that helps illuminate how one smaller political power existed within the empires of others and sought to expand its own influence. It offers much for specialists of early modern Europe to debate and helps fill out Tuscany's role in empire during the period.

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