

# Studio, Stato And State: The University of Florence and the Medici from Party Bosses to Grand Dukes

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It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of medieval Italian universities for the development of universities across the world. According to a recent study, ‘Bologna created the civic university, the model followed by all other Italian universities and, to some extent, universities in other parts of Europe and the world. It meant that city and university were bound together in the closest possible embrace.’<sup>1</sup> At the root of this relationship was money. In the 1220s the commune of Bologna began to pay salaries to professors of law. With the payment of salaries, the commune of Bologna gained control over the teaching body and this situation was replicated across the Italian peninsula during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup>

The close ties between universities and civil authorities have significant implications for historians of universities. We cannot understand the growth of universities without considering the political context in which they developed. This paper will consider one case-study: the University of Florence, the *Studio fiorentino*. Between 1434 and 1569 the *Studio fiorentino* was transformed from a communal to a grand ducal institution. This transformation was driven by the interdependence of the *Studio* and successive heads of the Medici family as they progressed from party bosses of the ruling republican regime (*stato*) to grand dukes of Tuscany.<sup>3</sup> This paper will discuss the changes in the structure and the functions of the *Studio*.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw major transformations in the structure of the *Studio fiorentino*. First, there was the increasing centralization of administrative control as the *Studio* fell under the direct personal rule of the Medici family. Secondly, Lorenzo de’ Medici turned the *Studio* from being the University of the city of Florence to being the University of the Florentine Republic, with bases in Florence and Pisa. This made the *Studio* the world’s first split-site university.

The functions of the *Studio fiorentino* were also transformed fundamentally during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Between 1434 and 1569 the purpose of the *Studio* was developed far beyond its cultural role. First, it is now clear that the Medici made the *Studio*

an important political powerbase. Secondly, the *Studio* was also given a major part in the relationship between Florence and the papacy.

During the last twenty years historians have at last begun to recognize the importance of the administrators appointed by the local civil authorities to run the Italian universities during the medieval and early modern periods. As Peter Denley has argued, 'The success of a university depended overwhelmingly on the ability of its administrators to woo, hire, and retain teachers of sufficient eminence to attract, in turn, a student population large enough to make operation of the *studio* worthwhile and the teachers happy to stay; and great energies went into these tasks.'<sup>4</sup>

From the foundation of the *Studio* in 1348 until its suspension in 1526, the executive of the Florentine commune usually elected boards of five to eight *ufficiali* to whom they delegated their authority over the *Studio* for a stated period of between one year and four years.<sup>5</sup> Following the reopening of the *Studio* in 1543, there was a radical reorganization of its administration. The day-to-day running of the *Studio* was placed in the hands of the *provveditore*. He reported to the *auditore dello studio*, a kind of minister of education who was the personal representative of Cosimo de' Medici, duke of Florence from 1537 and grand duke of Tuscany from 1569. Both the *provveditore* and the *auditore* were appointed by the duke/grand duke.<sup>6</sup>

Yet in fact Medicean control of the administration of the *Studio* had begun with the political triumph of Cosimo de' Medici ('il Vecchio') in 1434 and it had increased throughout the fifteenth century. Between 1426 and 1434 Florentine politics had become increasingly riven by factionalism. It is now clear that the *Studio* was an important focus of this factionalism. Eleven of the *ufficiali* who served during this period were involved with the conflict. Seven of these *ufficiali* were either members or supporters of the Medici family. On the opposing side there were four *ufficiali* who were to be exiled or otherwise punished following the return of Cosimo de' Medici from exile in 1434. The political importance of the *Studio* was shown clearly during the critical year of 1433 when the *ufficiali* included both a leader of the Medici party, Niccolò Valori, and one of the foremost opponents of the Medici, Giovanni Gianfigliuzzi.<sup>7</sup>

The factional divisions of the *ufficiali* were exacerbated by Francesco Filelfo, who taught rhetoric and poetry at the *Studio* between 1429 and 1434 and Dante in the cathedral between 1431 and 1434. Filelfo received his appointment at the *Studio* with the support of Palla Strozzi and Cosimo de' Medici. While Filelfo remained close to Palla, his relations

with Cosimo soon began to cool. The main motive for this estrangement was the support given by the Medici to Filelfo's rival, Carlo Marsuppini. Although Filelfo was replaced at the *Studio* by Marsuppini in October 1431, Filelfo was reinstated two months later and criticized his enemies fiercely in a public lecture held in the cathedral. According to one eye-witness, this oration caused the earth to quake. The conflict came to a head in May 1433, when Filelfo was attacked and his face was cut severely as he walked to the *Studio*. Filelfo saw the Medici as the prime movers behind the attack and it is unsurprising that when Cosimo was arrested in September 1433, Filelfo called for his execution. Following Cosimo's return from exile in October 1434, Filelfo fled to Siena.<sup>8</sup>

Fearful of further demagoguery, the Medici were quick to impose control on the *Studio*. The new board of *ufficiali* included three of Cosimo's closest supporters: Lorenzo de' Medici, Niccolò Niccoli, and Alamanno Salviati. Members of the Medici family tried to maintain control of the *Studio* throughout the period from 1434 to 1473. At first the supervision of the *Studio* was led by Lorenzo de' Medici, but he died in 1440 and his place was taken by Cosimo's son, Piero. Although Piero made the strongest commitment, he was not the only member of the Medici family to serve as an *ufficiale dello studio* during this period; his brother Giovanni served in the post from 1447 to 1448. The continuing personal interest of Cosimo in the *Studio* should not be overlooked either. At the start of a 1460 debate on the possible transfer of the *Studio* to Pisa, two speakers wished that both Piero and Cosimo should be consulted. Since this is one of only four references to Cosimo to be made in the advisory debates between 1454 and 1463, contemporaries knew that the *Studio* was close to Cosimo's heart. This was shown again in January 1461 when the Aretine ambassadors in Florence were authorized to approach Cosimo in the hope that the *Studio* would be transferred to Arezzo.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the leading figures of the Medici regime served as *ufficiali dello studio* themselves. The involvement of these men with the *Studio* can be established by comparing the *ufficiali* with those men who served as *accoppiatori*, the officials who administered the election of the executive of the Florentine commune. The *accoppiatori* possessed significant political power and Nicolai Rubinstein argues that they may be seen 'as "representative" of the inner circle of the régime.'<sup>10</sup> Between 1434 and 1473 eleven men served as *accoppiatori* before serving as *ufficiali dello studio*. Eight men served as *accoppiatori* while serving concurrently as *ufficiali dello studio*. Thirty-three men served as *accoppiatori* after serving as *ufficiali dello studio*.<sup>11</sup>

Medicean control of the administration of the *Studio* reached its apogee during the ascendancy of Lorenzo de' Medici. Lorenzo served as an *ufficiale dello studio* from 1473 to 1483, a length of service without precedent. As his latest biographer, F.W. Kent, points out, there are '...scores of carefully documented examples of Lorenzo's acting as the successful *maestro* of this, perhaps his pet, *bottega*.'<sup>12</sup> According to James Hankins, the *Studio* became '...the centerpiece of [Lorenzo's] literary and philosophical patronage...'<sup>13</sup>

It was Lorenzo who oversaw the most radical reorganization of the structure of the *Studio fiorentino*: its transformation from being the University of the city of Florence to being the University of the Florentine Republic with bases in Florence and Pisa. In December 1472 the legislature of the commune of Florence agreed that from November 1473 only grammar and rhetoric would be taught in Florence while all the other subjects would be taught in Pisa.<sup>14</sup> Paradoxically as the administrative control of the Medici over the *Studio* was further centralized, the *Studio* was decentralized geographically.

As with its structures, the functions of the *Studio fiorentino* were also transformed between 1434 and 1569. During the 1470s Lorenzo de' Medici turned the *Studio* into a political powerbase. There was a pressing need for such a powerbase. After the death of his father in 1469, opposition to the succession of Lorenzo had grown in Florence. By 1471 the duke of Milan was urging his ambassador in Florence to get Lorenzo to secure his position. Lorenzo hoped to achieve this goal through reforms of a series of major Florentine institutions. However, in 1472 these reforms failed to receive the necessary approval. Frustrated by this failure, Lorenzo's hopes of strengthening his position began to focus on the institution over which his family had maintained close control for nearly forty years, the *Studio fiorentino*. Significant powers over the Florentine taxation and judicial systems were given to the *ufficiali dello studio*. In 1475 the Florentine legislative councils agreed to allow the Florentine executive to appoint *ufficiali delle grazie* who would oversee the collection of outstanding taxes. The executive decided that the *ufficiali dello studio* would also act as the *ufficiali delle grazie*. This delegation of authority to the *ufficiali dello studio* was completely unprecedented. There can be no explanation for this other than that it was done at the will of Lorenzo. Since the *ufficiali delle grazie* were to decide who would pay outstanding taxes, the office would be particularly useful to Lorenzo as he developed his network of political patronage. At first the term of office of the *ufficiali delle grazie* was only six months. However, it was extended repeatedly until 1477. In that year the powers of the *ufficiali dello studio* were increased still further when the dominant legislative council decided to abolish

the ancient judicial office of the *capitano del popolo*. The *capitano* was to be replaced by ‘an excellent doctor’ who was to be appointed by the *ufficiali dello studio*.<sup>15</sup>

During Lorenzo’s ascendancy the *Studio fiorentino* was placed not only at the heart of Florentine political life but also at the centre of the Florentine relationship with the papacy. Since the 1420s the Florentine government had sought to gain access to ecclesiastical wealth by obtaining a licence from the pope to tax the clergy of the Florentine Republic for the benefit of the *Studio*. The importance of this issue cannot be exaggerated. According to Anthony Molho, ‘The entire question of the relations between the Papacy and Florence... revolves as much as anything around the issues of the rights of the Papacy and of the Florentine government to tax the clergy of the Florentine region...’<sup>16</sup>

Although Martin V approved a tax on behalf of the *Studio* in 1429, this tax was shortlived. It was only in the 1470s that papal licences began to be granted regularly. In July 1473 Lorenzo was informed of attempts to persuade the papacy to approve a tax for the benefit of the *Studio*. In December 1473 the Florentine ambassador in Rome, Matteo Palmieri, was ordered to ask the pope ‘for help from our priests in our public needs.’ However, it was not until January 1476 that Sixtus IV finally approved a tax on the clergy of the Florentine Republic which would raise 5,000 ducats annually for five years to pay towards the costs of the *Studio*. This privilege was renewed by Innocent VIII in 1487 and by Alexander VI in 1493 and 1498.<sup>17</sup>

Florentine efforts to gain access to ecclesiastical wealth by means of the *Studio* continued during the sixteenth century and again members of the Medici family played key roles. In 1516 Leo X approved the collection of taxes of 3,000 ducats a year for five years. In 1521 Leo renewed the privilege for a further five years but increased the sum to 5,000 ducats a year. This privilege was renewed for a further five years by Clement VII in 1525. However, from June to November 1526 the *Studio* was closed by plague. It was formally suspended by the *ufficiali dello studio* in December 1526. When the *Studio* reopened in 1543, Paul III approved a five-year tax at the personal request of Cosimo de’ Medici, the duke of Florence. Significantly, no fixed sum was specified. Instead the tax was to provide as much money as the *Studio* required. The privilege was renewed by Paul in 1548 and by Julius III in 1554, again at Cosimo’s personal request. Finally, in 1564 Pius IV made the privilege permanent so long as the *Studio* continued to operate.<sup>18</sup>

What lessons can we learn from the case of the *Studio fiorentino*? First, the development of a university needs to be studied in its political context. Secondly, the growth

of a university can be shaped as much by its administrators as by its professors and students and we must study the actions and motives of these administrators. Finally, the functions of a university can exceed its cultural role and we must be aware of these other possible uses.

## NOTES

1. Paul F. Grendler, "The University of Bologna, the city, and the papacy," *Renaissance Studies* 13 (1999), 475–85 (475–6).
2. Ibid., 475; Alan B. Cobban, "Elective Salaried Lectureships in the Universities of Southern Europe in the Pre-Reformation Era," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 67 (1985), 662–87.
3. For the definition of *stato*, see Nicolai Rubinstein, "Notes on the word *stato* in Florence before Machiavelli," in *Florilegium Historiae*, ed. J.G. Rowe and W.H. Stockdale (Toronto, 1971), 314–26.
4. Peter Denley, "The Social Function of Italian Renaissance Universities: Prospects for Research," *CRE Information* 62 (1983), 47–58 (50).
5. Jonathan Davies, *Florence and its University during the Early Renaissance* (Leiden and Boston, 1998), 10–12; Amando F. Verde, *Lo Studio fiorentino, 1473–1503: Ricerche e Documenti*, 5 vols. to date (Florence and Pistoia, 1973–), i, 263–6, 271–82; Armando F. Verde, "Il secondo periodo de Lo Studio fiorentino (1504–1528)," in *L'università e la sua storia: Origini, spazi istituzionali e pratiche didattiche dello Studium cittadino*, ed. Paolo Renzi (Siena, 1998), 105–31.
6. Danilo Marrara, "L'età medicea," in *Storia dell'Università di Pisa* (1 vol. to date; Pisa, 1993–), i, book 1, 79–187 (89–92); Giovanni Cascio Pratilli, *L'Università e il Principe: Gli Studi di Siena e di Pisa tra Rinascimento e Controriforma* (Florence, 1975), 128–31.
7. Davies, *Florence*, 80–1.
8. Ibid., 83–5.
9. Ibid., 86–7.
10. Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434–1494)* (Oxford, 1966), 134.
11. Davies, *Florence*, 87–8.
12. F.W. Kent, "Patron-Client Networks in Renaissance Florence and the Emergence of Lorenzo as 'Maestro della Bottega'," in *Lorenzo de' Medici: new perspectives*, ed. Bernard

Toscani (New York, 1993), 279–313 (292–3). For the documents, see Verde, *Lo Studio fiorentino*, i–v, passim.

13. James Hankins, “Lorenzo de’ Medici as a Patron of Philosophy,” *Rinascimento*, 2d ser., 34 (1994), 15–53 (16).

14. For the creation of the new institution, see *Statuti della Università e Studio fiorentino dell’anno MCCCLXXXVII seguiti da un’appendice di documenti dal MCCCXX al MCCCCLXXII* ed. Alessandro Gherardi, with an introduction by Carlo Morelli (Florence, 1881), 273–6; Armando F. Verde, “Aspetti della storia dello Studio fiorentino tra ’400 e ’500,” *Anazetesis* 2–3 (1980), 62–87 (74–6); Davies, *Florence*, 125–6, 131–5. On 20 June 1496 the *ufficiali dello studio* noted, ‘*Generale Studium Florentinae Reipublicae quod hactenus, quia in civitate Pissarum celebratum fuit, Pisanum Studium appellabatur.*’ This passage is quoted in Armando F. Verde, “Vita universitaria nello Studio della Repubblica fiorentina alla fine del Quattrocento,” in *Università e Società nei secoli XII–XVI* (Pistoia, 1982), 495–522 (495).

15. Davies, *Florence*, 131–2, 135–6.

16. Anthony Molho, “The Brancacci Chapel. Studies in its iconography and history,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 40 (1977), 50–98 (65 n. 53).

17. Davies, *Florence*, 74–7; Verde, *Lo Studio fiorentino*, v, 16.

18. *I documenti pontifici riguardanti l’Università di Pisa*, ed. C. Fedeli (Pisa, 1908), 115–56.