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Italy before Italy

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Does Italy have *a* history before unification? Located at the heart of the Mediterranean, the peninsula gives the impression of being a cultural *koiné* but is in fact characterized by political, economic, and social diversity.

Reviewed: Jean Boutier, Sandro Landi, and Jean-Claude Waquet, eds., *Le temps des Italies. XIIe-XIXe siècle* (The Time of Italies: The Twelfth to the Nineteenth Centuries), Paris, École Française de Rome, Passés/Composés, 2023, 756 p., 29€.

Can one write the history of Italy *before Italy?* Located at the heart of the Mediterranean, the peninsula presented itself for centuries as a kind of cultural *koiné* that appears to be homogeneous while in fact being characterized by political, economic, and social diversity that is difficult to describe.

On March 17, 1861, in the Palazzo Carignano in Turin, Victor Emmanuel II proclaimed the birth of the Italian Kingdom. As a result, many authors, of whom the most famous was Benedetto Croce, have maintained that it is impossible to speak of Italian history before that date. How then are we to handle the long communal period or the Italian Renaissance? Is it appropriate to speak of "Italy" before unification? And if so, how? This issue lies at the center of rich historiographical debates, and it is these questions that the volume's editors seek to address. Should one focus on single cities (or, at a later period, single regional states), or should one prioritize narratives covering the long term? Opting for the latter approach, a somewhat dated historiography proposed, in a federating spirit, a narrative that presented the twelfth

to the nineteenth centuries as paving the way for unification, which it considered a necessary end.

Avoiding a national narrative

Yet terms like "*Italia*" and "*Italiani*" were frequently used by princes, diplomats, intellectuals, poets, and chroniclers throughout the period between the end of the *Regnum Italicum* and unification. In fact, "*Italia*" is probably Europe's oldest place name. Polybius used it to refer to the southern part of the peninsula, and Virgil spoke of it in *The Aeneid.* To cite only well-known examples, consider Dante's tirade in the *Divine Comedy (Purgatorio* 6, 76): "*ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello*" ("ah servile Italy, grief's hostelry"); or poem 128 of Petrarca's *Il Canzoniere*; or Francesco Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia.*

Does this evidence mean that these centuries tell the tale of a nation-state-in-waiting? The story of a "people" with a unique language and culture, anticipating unification? Of course not. We know that, in the period the volume considers, the peninsula consisted of multiple entities, some large, some small, with varying degrees of autonomy, of different sizes, and which, over time, underwent change--even full-scale metamorphoses.

The stakes of this volume, which covers a long period, are thus considerable. By transcending the cognitive dissonance of the national narrative, it seeks to tell the similar-yet-different story of these territories, without forcing them into a plot that, according to a teleological interpretation, would make them part of a single story. The book seeks to provide "a history that is shared, but not yet unique" (p. 12-14) of a space consisting of "multiple identities" (p. 64). Hence the use of the plural in the title: "Italies." Revealing intersections and specificities, the book also seeks to enrich our knowledge of a field that has already been abundantly researched.

Multiple levels

Over more than 700 pages divided into thematic chapters, whose content cannot be quickly summarized, the volume presents institutional actors (temporal and

spiritual authorities), complex political mechanisms (communes, republics, signorias in the north and center, stable monarchies in the south), and symbolic constructs (philosophy, literature, and iconography). Through multiple historiographical perspectives, the contributors examine the diplomatic, institutional, demographic, and economic dynamics that emerged in the peninsula's territories, shifting the focus from central locations to marginal spaces then turning back, or looking beyond the Alpes and the sea to downplay and delimit "Italianness" (p. 206 and p. 221-224). Though the volume appears to pay special attention to the communal age and the early modern period, there are essays on later periods, too.

The book's interest lies in the three different levels it considers: the peninsular, the local, and the global. Part one explores whether it is even relevant to use Italy as an analytical framework when examining political thought, art, law, and other topics over a long period. It considers the circulation of knowledge and information, as well as artistic production and manufacturing. Part two addresses human relationships, both within the family and in the public spaces in which power was wielded. It also examines the urban phenomenon, the birth and preservation of territorial networks between cities, and rural landholding models (large properties in the south, sharecropping in the north). Finally, part three assigns particular importance to the concept of "universality," understood in a religious sense, and relations with the sea and the Ottoman world.

Macrohistory meets microhistory

In this volume, macrohistory stands side-by-side microhistory. Chapters dealing with economic relations and military conflicts between the peninsula, France, the Empire, and Spain can be found alongside an essay devoted to the trial of three Tuscan priests who were investigated in connection with violent acts, showing how the judicial and inquisitorial apparatus evolved in the thirteenth century (Arnaud Fossier, chap. 16). Another essay considers how a statistical analysis of the social background of ducal attendants in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany between 1559 and 1630 mirrors the diplomatic context of the rest of the peninsula and Europe during the same period (Hélène Chauvineau, chapter 17). The volume addresses in a similar way another key topic concerning the peninsula's states: the Roman papacy's theocratic ambitions. Following the creation, in response to Lutheranism, of the Roman Inquisition and the Sacred Congregation of the Index, the struggle against heresy

during the Tridentine period took the form of a system of capillary supervision, extending from bishops to priests, and sedentary inquisitors in the largest cities. Yet this attempt to control consciences, which was deemed necessary to achieve "Tridentine discipline," was not lacking in contradictions and absurdities: it resulted in a surveillance system based on denunciation, a lack of normative and jurisdictional uniformity, and dissimulation.

Political and cultural laboratories

An idea to which the volume frequently returns is that the territories of the Italian peninsula were genuine *laboratories*--that is, centers of vigorous political, diplomatic, and legal thought (see, for example, chapters 10, 11, 15, and 30). Moreover, during the Middle Ages as well as the early modern period, Tuscany is often seen as the preferred observation point, and its civic system is considered, in the central and northern peninsula, a model of social organization.

What developed in medieval Italy was a form of "urban self-government" that underwent constant transformation (p. 237). In the twelfth century, the cathedral cities of the northern and central peninsula became communes. In the next century, merchant podestàs, appointed for several month term, replaced consuls. Councils added more and more members, as citizens demanded representation and the right to participate in civic life. The *popolo* entered the public stage, posing a serious challenge to the urban nobility. Internal conflicts between factions and lineages and wars of expansion fought between neighboring towns intensified, resulting in a rebirth of juridical knowledge and the law.

At the dawn of the early modern period, as centralized political authority over wider geographic areas became the norm elsewhere in Europe, most of the peninsula's cities became principalities, while in the south, monarchies took hold. The volume could have paid closer attention to the south--the kingdoms and later viceregencies of Naples and Sicily--though exhaustivity, of course, is impossible.

Under foreign yoke?

In the Italy of princes and signorias, the historiography recognizes that, despite the territorial fragmentation, there existed a "shared context for constructing a dynastic ideology" (p. 318). From the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis to the eighteenth century, some 40% of the Italian population was subject to the King of Spain and, until the middle of the *Seicento*, the constant recourse to marriage alliances, squabbles over rank, and the quest for prestigious titles on the part of princely dynasties demonstrate how these dynastic leaders sought to assert their power and ensure a geopolitical balance of power on the peninsula. Similarly, the leading noble families (particularly in Sicily and Naples) made matrimonial choices that gave rise to a transnational elite with a complex identity--all under the watchful eye of Spanish overlords (Albane Cogné, chapter 22). Furthermore, prejudices and *Antispagnolismo* sentiment, which emerged in opposition to Spain in the sixteenth century, was appropriated in the nineteenth century as the newly united state's negative foundational myth. Meanwhile, Turkey's status as the peninsula's primary enemy--which had terrorized the peninsula's inhabitants--came to an end and was replaced by Austria, after Vienna imposed its *plenipotenz.*

In any case, it was not until the twentieth century that historiographical interpretation proposed a different vision of what the historian Giuseppe Galasso called "foreign preponderance," making it possible to see the Italian peninsula in the period that followed the *pax hispanica* as a subsystem of the larger Spanish imperial system (p. 415-417). Furthermore, concerning the peninsula's complex relations with other states, readers will find interest in the passages devoted to war, influences, and alliances at the European level between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as well as those devoted to the conflicts, exchanges, and "co-presences" with the Ottoman Empire. Since the terrifying conquest of Otranto in 1480-1481 and for centuries after, the specter of a Turkish invasion haunted the "Italians," even though rapprochements, economic treaties, and even alliances with the Sublime Porte had long been commonplace.

Finally, it is worth noting that this volume, though scholarly, is accessible to a wide public. It offers many--and very useful--illustrative maps and the decision to provide, after each essay, "iconic images" (paintings, sculptures, and architecture) makes it possible to present Italian art in all its richness and diversity, across time and space, without limits or boundaries (p. 19-20). Moreover, the fact that the volume is organized around multiple temporalities--the essays are not arranged chronologically--partakes in the editors' choice to acknowledge the complexity of the topic and allows readers to dip in and out of it, depending on their tastes and interests.

The volume's goal--"to make it possible to grasp the complexity of an historical object that has sufficient unity to make it the focus of a collective investigation and enough diversity to be irreducible to a harmonious order or a single plot line" (p. 18)--has been achieved.

Further reading:

- *Florence et la Toscane, XIVe-XIXe siècles, Les dynamiques d'un État italien*, Jean Boutier, Sandro Landi and Olivier Rouchon, eds., Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004
- *Les guerres d'Italie. Un conflit européen*, Didier Le Fur ed., Paris, Passés Composés, 2022
- David Abulafia, *I regni del Mediterraneo occidentale dal 1200 al 1500*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2001
- Giuseppe Galasso, *Dalla "libertà d'Italia" alle "preponderanze straniere"*, Rome, Ed. di Storia e Letteratura, 2016
- Laura Fournier-Finocchiaro, *Giosuè Carducci et la construction de la nation italienne*, Caen, Cahiers de Transalpina, Presses universitaires de Caen, 2006.

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