Alick M. McLean

Prato: Architecture, Piety, and Political Identity in a Tuscan City-State


With this well-produced book, Alick McLean provides a much-needed study of the urban development and architectural history of the key institutional buildings of one of Tuscany’s lesser-known city-states. Between 1351 and 1992 Prato was under the administrative control of its nearby neighbor, Florence; this is perhaps the main reason why this interesting small city has been so easily overlooked as a marginal dependent in the hinterland of that paradigmatic central Italian city. The author’s strategy for dealing with the overbearing presence of Florence is to make a strength out of a weakness. In the
preface, McLean speaks of the “typicalness” of Prato (viii), identifying it as broadly representative of a swath of similarly diminutive city-states of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries and suggesting that the in-depth study of one will offer a comparative frame for a better understanding of the others. Another ambition of the book is to trace a long history of Prato’s urban development from the first documentary references at the end of the tenth century to its subjectification to Florence in 1351. While the latter objective is carefully achieved through the chronological sequencing of chapters that chronicle the phases of development in relation to changing institutional arrangements, the former is rather forgotten, as McLean seems rather to overlook comparisons to other “centri minori” in favor of a predominance of Florentine referencing.

Set within the fertile Arno valley and upon the Roman agricultural centuriated grid, the nascent Prato had no antique origins but appears to have developed around a fortified site close to a tributary of the Arno (the Bisenzio river) and a religious vanguard of the bishopric of Pistoia established around the church of Santo Stefano. It is this church, and its development over three centuries as an architectural structure and also as a key institution in Prato’s religious and political life, that is at the heart of this book and fills the bulk of its nine chapters. With few architectural traces of the earliest church, the author makes use of beautifully produced plans and maps to restore the scale of the original building and its location within the early urban fabric in chapter three. The following chapter tackles the early building history of the extant church, introducing the stonemason Carboncetto, at work on the church in the 1160s, and continuing with Guido da Lucca into the early thirteenth century.

Assessing these developments, and the masons who oversaw them, McLean highlights Pistoia and Florence as the principal poles for comparison, but seems unwilling to set out whether cultural, stylistic, and political alignment with the latter may have offered a strategy for disenfranchisement from the diocesan authority of Pistoia (58–75). Such struggles were not untypical of the period, and characterized relations for example, along the borders between the Arezzo and Siena dioceses. Furthermore, as scholars since Wolfgang Braunfels have noted, it was in this context of rivalries within and between religious hierarchies that nascent municipal and civic institutions gradually established alternative secular sites of power that led to the establishment of the city-state. Thus, chapter five inevitably turns to the “early communal regime,” and traces the early architectural expression of these in Prato, while also briefly touching on one of the most outstanding monuments of the medieval city, the Imperial Palace, built over the site of the magnate Alberti fortified enclave, and completed in its extant fortified form for Frederick II in the 1240s.

While the author notes the analogies between the secular sites of civic government palazzi with such imperial prototypes, the overwhelming narrative thrust of the book is toward the religious hegemony ultimately exercised through the parish or pieve of Santo Stefano. It is to this that chapter six returns, to discuss in greater detail the interventions on Santo Stefano by Guido da Lucca, which included substantial reconstruction of the nave as well as the erection of the fine bell tower, and the dramatic clearance of an open space (“platea”) around it in the mid-thirteenth century, in part at the expense of the noble Levaldini and Dagomari properties. This phase of anti-magnate retrenchment was followed, as in so many cities, by the rise of the mendicant orders, with its centrifugal impact on the expanding fabric of later thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century cities. Attempts to re-centralize devotion around Santo Stefano followed, marching hand in hand with the rising visibility of the city commune, which took shape around the Piazza del Comune (chapter eight). To this end can be read the rapid development from 1276 of the cult of the Sacred Belt (the cintola), and the elaborate civic ritual devotion to it, which directly affected the design of the church where it was housed, and the square where it was annually displayed.

As McLean notes at the outset, the broad brushstrokes of this narrative are essentially “ordinary,” as indeed was the city’s ultimate fall to a powerful neighbor. However, for a book that is so much concerned with the central place of Prato’s religious institutions in the city’s urban development, it is perhaps justifiable to call on Aby Warburg’s well-known dictum that “God is in the details.” McLean carefully maps out the chronological sequencing of institutional give and take that formed the backdrop to the rise and demise of the city commune of Prato, and sets the history of the pieve of Santo Stefano clearly into that context. However, much seems to be lost along the way. It is surprising to find so few named individuals in what is a largely institutional narrative; by ignoring the names of key players in Santo Stefano and the Commune’s hierarchies it is impossible to hypothesize connections that linked or divided these, or to go beyond generalized observations regarding such issues as the shifts in power relations among them, or their dealings with the masons and builders that shaped the city and made its monumental architecture.

Within the broader field of architectural history for this period, it is also unusual to find so little discussion of the rituals and ceremonies (with the exception of the later emergence of the Sacred Belt discussed in the final chapter) that provide a means of interpreting the forms and uses of religious architecture beyond its formal characteristics. Finally, for a book that sets out to consider the “identity” of a city-state, the focus on the pieve is contextualized too little within urban development as a whole, and in particular the ascendency of the commune; the rise of Prato’s civic independence undermined the central authority of its church but also provided the impetus for its architectural expansion and increasingly prominent civic religious ritual.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, this is a valuable contribution to the field and again serves to illustrate how rich the documentary sources and extant architecture are for centers that historians have all too often tended to overlook. Excellent plans and maps as well as a useful timeline and glossary are valuable additions to what is a fine study that will be of lasting interest to specialist and general reader alike.

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