

*L'Italia delle civitates: Grandi e piccoli centri fra Medioevo e Rinascimento.*

Giorgio Chittolini.

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This collection, which compiles some of Giorgio Chittolini's important and challenging works on Italian urban history into an easily accessible book, features eleven essays written between 1980 and 2015, and originally published in different edited volumes.

Although the essays examine a variety of themes, a clear common focus emerges throughout the work: the unique features of Northern and Central Italian cities within the European context between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. Chittolini analyzes the ways in which, since the rise of the communes in the twelfth century, Italian cities were defined by the presence of a bishopric, and the inclusion and control of a rural *contado* whose extension often coincided with the diocese. The territory that surrounded the city was perceived as an integral part of the urban whole, a source of supplies and wealth necessary for its existence. Together they formed an organism in which the city was frequently represented as the head and the *contado* as the limbs. For this reason Italian travelers had difficulties defining urban centers beyond the Alps and rarely applied the term *civitas* to describe them. Most German and French cities, even the largest and most prosperous, did not host a bishop, or they lacked control over a *contado*. In the German context, for example, Italian diplomats were puzzled by the fact that, despite their wealth and military power, cities lacked any political power in the rural areas outside their walls. German urban elites based their wealth on trade but lacked real estate and therefore social prestige and stability.

Chittolini argues convincingly that the structures of the urban commune characterized Italian cities even after the original city-states were absorbed by larger regional entities in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Even when the old concept of *civitas* partially faded and the focus of political thought and practice turned to the rising principalities, the prerogatives of self-government and control over the *contado* by individual cities remained strong. While subject to the capital city, the seat of the new regional state's administration, the lesser cities maintained their identities and privileges. The prince was recognized as lord by each city, but the administrative geography of the new regional states reflected the former maps, with the old communes as provinces. As well, lords now needed new legitimization, usually in the form of an imperial title, to establish their control over the new state formations.

The resilience of this urban model and the strength of the territorial organization of the cities of Northern and Central Italy can explain why the process of concentration of population, economic activities, and wealth in a few great metropolises progressed so slowly in this area. Demographic stability characterized the period between 1500 and 1700, and the urban hierarchy did not record any substantial change. Chittolini suggests that, because of this peculiar urban configuration, the historiography on European urbanization based on network analysis has neglected the areas of Northern and Central Italy. In these models, the city is usually seen as an isolated entity, a sum of demographic and economic energies, functioning as market center and service provider. The complexity of the Italian urban centers, which included citizens but also residents of the *contado*, manufacturing, and agriculture, and were organized in a system of structured and independent urban territories with their own administrations and jurisdictions, makes the application of econometric and statistical models rather problematic.

Chittolini also discusses the strong interdependence between civic and religious spaces and rituals. In Italian cities the local churches were strictly ingrained in the social fabric and were considered by the urban patriciates as essential institutions with which to consolidate their power and privileges. This aspect explains the lack of strong anticlerical and anti-Roman movements in Italy. Civic values permeated urban cults and devotions, and the result was a sort of civic religion in which the love for God was also love for the community, and charity was a civic responsibility. Ceremonies like the processions for the city's patron saint, organized also in the rural communities, reaffirmed the ties and the subjection of the *contado* to the city.

While many of the ideas discussed in these essays — groundbreaking at the time of their original publication — have been by now absorbed into mainstream historiography, the importance of this volume cannot be overstated as it represents one of the most complete and arguably most valuable works on Northern Italian urban structures and identities between the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

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