

Stephen D. Bowd. *Venice's Most Loyal City: Civic Identity in Renaissance Brescia*.

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The title and subtitle of Stephen Bowd's study of Brescia in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century promise both too much and too little. Too little because the book is in fact a deeply informed, wide-ranging account of the city's first century under Venetian rule; too much because "civic identity" shifts meaning and sometimes disappears as Bowd proceeds through searching treatments of Brescia's political structure and ruling class, its religious currents and the social tensions they nourished, cultural controversies that put Brescia at odds with Venice, and the upheavals resulting from Brescia's front-line location in the war waged by the anti-Venetian coalition of European powers in the League of Cambrai.

Bowd's declared aim is to explain Brescia's role in the Cambrai War (1508–17) and his strategy is to parse the city's civic identity vis-à-vis Venice in the decades leading up to the war. He begins by characterizing Venice's *terraferma* state as "no more than an aggregation of communities in bilateral agreement with Venice: a fluid and 'polycentric reality'" (13, quoting Claudio Povo). As the most populous, prosperous, and strategically important city in the Venetian state, Brescia, according to Bowd, molded a distinctive civic identity that blended local customs and conflicts with the weighty presence of Venetian rule. Sorting out the elements of this construct occupies most of the book and gives it its ethnographically inflected structure.

On Bowd's showing Brescians held a largely benevolent view of the Venetian overlordship established in 1426, priding themselves as "loyal sons and daughters" of fatherly Venice or, to vary the metaphor, the only one of virginal Brescia's many suitors to which she yielded (43). The bond between the two cities found cultural expression in Venetians' participation in Brescian civic ritual and in the side-by-side display of Venetian and Brescian symbols in the Piazza della Loggia. On a more practical level, Bowd follows Venice's mediating role between Brescia and its *territorio* and examines Brescia's efforts, largely unavailing, to influence Venice's appointments to benefices in the Brescian church. Other aspects of religion also come in for extensive treatment, for example, a tug-of-war between the city government and Dominicans over funeral processions, on which the Council tried to impose sumptuary limits and which the Dominicans encouraged in order to maximize contributions from mourners. He devotes an entire chapter to this "funerary fracas," expanding his account into learned discussions of the theology of almsgiving, relations between the living and the dead, and Christian humanist debates over wealth and its connections with honor and piety. On this matter and on what he calls "civic puritanism," including campaigns against sumptuary excess and prostitution, Bowd displays command of impressively wide-ranging scholarship.

Yet Venice's involvement in many of these issues hovers at the margins of Bowd's account. Indeed, its impact on Brescian civic identity remains uncertain. The uncertainty is fed by the absence of a precise definition of that often-invoked term.

In his chapter on “Jewish Life,” for example, Bowd refers to “the Jewish contribution to Brescian civic identity” but then states that “Jewish life was highly precarious and uncertain throughout this period as Venetian and Brescian desires, prejudices, and priorities clashed” (158). This chapter is illuminating on Jewish life in Brescia, but it unfolds with Venice protecting Jews throughout its domain, Christian Brescia seeking to expel them, and Brescian Jews themselves clinging precariously to Venetian protection amid local intolerance. Brescia’s civic identity as Venice’s most loyal city is hard to discern in this multidimensional encounter. Bowd’s treatment of witchcraft in Brescia’s hinterland similarly recounts jurisdictional jockeying, this time between the Venetian Council of Ten, the Holy See, and the Venetian patriarch, and involving as well the Brescian government’s reach in the rural Bresciano, where Venice also sought to impose its own authority. Bowd’s account is learned and lucid and well documented, but once again civic identity is difficult to sort out in this crowded context.

Bowd’s tracking of the persistently evolving composition of Brescia’s governing elite, examining the interests and claims of the various aspirants to membership, further fragments the notions of civic identity and Brescians’ attitudes toward their Venetian overlords. The differences are clearly displayed in Bowd’s detailed account of the French occupation during the War of Cambrai. For the elite, the interruption of Venetian rule meant regaining privileges and power, but it reciprocally deprived the lower classes, especially in the countryside, of a restraining hand on feudal exploitation. This differentiation by class in attitudes toward Venice is mirrored by situational differences. On some issues, like the *Dominante*’s oversight over rector’s authority, Brescians appreciated what Bowd concludes was the “sensitivity” and “pragmatism” of Venetian rule (232). But on others, like ecclesiastical appointments or attitudes toward Jews, Venice’s policies thwarted local interests. Nevertheless, although Brescian civic identity and loyalty to Venice remain slippery concepts, Bowd’s account of the city’s first century as a Venetian possession stands as a thorough, informative, and illuminating example of political ethnography.

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