

I MEDICI IN RETE

Ricerca e progettualità scientifica a proposito dell'archivio Mediceo avanti il Principato

James Beck

COSIMO'S FOUR SLAVES

From time to time, as an unreconstructed aficionado of archival research, I devote a block of time to seeking fresh notices or documentary confirmation concerning diverse arguments which I am currently addressing. Recently I returned to a study of Masaccio (again), in a situation where the documentary evidence for his activities in Florence is negligible. This lacuna is especially evident for the frescoes of the Brancacci Chapel, where not a single indication has surfaced to provide even the slightest hint of the circumstances surrounding their execution not to mention the division of labour between Masaccio and Masolino. Recognising that scholars have been scouring the archives for such notices for several centuries, I concluded that the usual avenues of research would probably not offer much by way of new data, so I sought less obvious avenues.

As happens frequently, as archive-oriented individuals know well, the trail of a particular problem often leads to little gems which, while not related to the problem at hand, can be rewarding to scholarship. I choose to dip into the vast holdings of the *Carte Stroziane*. These fascinating accumulations, which have also been combed by scholars over the years, contain a mixture of digests, copies and transcriptions, as well as original manuscripts, giving some likelihood that notices found there could have been overlooked.

I ran across a gathering which consists of a ricordo of Piero di Cosimo di Bicci de' Medici related to the death of his father. It begins, following a list of family members he knew personally, with a reference to the conduct of various services held in Cosimo's memory. Chronology alone prohibits finding anything for Masaccio here but I did entertain the hope that perhaps Masaccio's one-time artistic guide, mentor and friend could have and even should have been mentioned. After all Donatello was an intimate of Cosimo and possibly a relative of his wife Contessina (who was a Bardi like the sculptor Donato). To be sure, the Pater Patriae not only arranged a substantial gift for Donatello as a kind of pension, but provided that he should be buried along side him in the crypt of San Lorenzo. But at these obsequies, no mention of Donatello was found. Instead an unexpected foursome were present, as will be demonstrated shortly.

A portion of the document contains an inventory of objects which had formerly belonged to Piero's father, including gems, ivories, medals and books. An interest in Medici inventories has been demonstrated since the 19th century¹. The attention of

1) E. Muntz, *Les collections des Médicis au xve siècle*, Paris-London, 1888.

historians of book collecting and of libraries were also attracted to such inventories². Given the situation, I assumed that “my” document was known, and so it was. In an authoritative modern publication of the Medici Inventories, Marco Spallanzani has offered highly reliable transcriptions, and in one of them, the identical inventory may be found. In fact the *Strozzi* version I consulted is less complete in its coverage so we must assume that there were losses or, more properly, that this version is a large fragment. To be sure, it was known to scholars including Spallanzani, who in his brief introduction pointed out that “his” version, MAP, CLXIII, cc. 60-68³, is the original and that “my” version, *Strozzi*, I, 10, cc. 4-16v, was made “poco dopo la stessura del originale.” According to Ames-Lewis, the author of an impressive study of Piero’s book collection, the *Strozzi* should be regarded as a later copy in a fragmentary state of the original inventory and is consequently irrelevant, he says, “casting no light on the situation in Piero de’ Medici’s lifetime.” Spallanzani makes reference to yet another more complete copy, which is now again housed in the Casa Buonarroti, after a long stay at the Laurenziana⁴.

Presumably because their interest exclusively in the inventory aspects of the document, neither Ames-Lewis nor Spallanzani published it in its entirety, which in fact lists the diverse costs of the obsequies conducted by the family as well as testimonial letters about Cosimo from dignitaries.

What both Ames-Lewis and Spallanzani have taken to be a copy is not a copy at all, but an original *stessura* written, I suggest, by Piero himself. The *Strozzi* text is more cursively set down, revealing greater spontaneity as well as telltale pentimenti, in distinction to the more formally presented *MAP* version which was probably prepared by the scribe as the official version (that “libro coperto di quioio nero”)⁵. Once the new, more elegant and readable redaction had been prepared, apparently the “original” draft” termed “Libro Segnato A5” was no longer of particular value, was disbursed, and found its way to the Strozzi collection.

An entry, found both in the *Strozzi* original and in the final *MAP* version as well as in the Buonarroti copy contains an element which was as surprising to me as it was disconcerting, although not published by modern scholars. There is a list of braccia of cloth that was used by participants in the funeral services, and paid for by the Medici family. In this list allocations of ten braccia of cloth appear beside each

2) More recently see F. Ames-Lewis, *The Library and the Manuscripts of Piero di Cosimo de’ Medici*, New York and London, 1984, with an excellent bibliography.

3) M. Spallanzani, *Inventari Medicei, 1417-1465: Giovanni di Bicci, Cosimo e Lorenzo di Giovanni, Piero di Cosimo*, Florence: SPES, 1996, pp. 139ff.

4) *Archivio Buonarroti*, n.151. It begins with fol. 2, meaning that fol. 1 of this copy probably prepared in the 17th century, is also incomplete.

5) *Bonarroti* appears to be a copy of *MAP*.

of the names of four women, who are identified collectively as “slaves” (schiave): “Chateruccia, Cristina, Catrina Zita”⁶.

Mention of slaves, who presumably had served Cosimo and his household came as something of a surprise, although the existence of slavery in fourteenth and fifteenth century Florence is hardly a secret. But, I could not hide my disappointment that one of our cultural heroes, a man of unchallenged ability, learning, and humanity, a handsome and tall man (“grande e bello huomo”), who had an unprecedented memory, an individual of high culture, a patron of the arts of unparalleled scope, a collector of antiquities, had owned slaves. In other words, that a cultural hero like the Pater Patriae (and Thomas Jefferson three centuries later) with his “grandissima prudentia” should have participated in such a disgraceful activity, however widely it may have been practised in his day, was a disappointing realisation.

Cosimo, to be sure, was supposed to have had relations with a slave woman which resulted in the birth of a son, Carlo de’ Medici, who was to have a distinguished career as a prelate, mainly in Prato. Carlo’s mother may have been a slave named Maddalena, who is said to have been purchased by Cosimo in Venice in 1427 as “sanam et integram de persona et de omnibus et singulis suis membris,” —at least the assumption has been made by Cosimo’s biographer, Fabroni⁷. So the appearance of female slaves in the household of the Pater Patriae cannot be regarded with total surprise, although the woman was referred euphemistically as a servant by another of Cosimo’s biographers⁸. Carlo, it should not be forgotten, was present at the services held for his father, along with his half brother Piero, and other members of the family.

That the *Strozzi* is the primary source, incomplete as it now is, rather than a copy of *MAP* is confirmed by textual differences between them. For example in the section which pertains to the present contribution: *Strozzi* has “Chateruccia;”

6) ASF, *Carte Strozzi*, I, 10.

7) Cited in G. Pieraccini, *La Stirpe de’ Medici di Cafaggiolo*, I, Florence, 1924 (Nardini Editore. Florence, 1986) p. 90. There is no reason whatsoever to doubt that Cosimo had purchased this slave woman who was then 22 years of age. There is also the possibility that the attribution that the Circassian woman was the mother of Cosimo’s child was an excuse for an out of wedlock relationship with a Florentine woman, apparently an explanation that was sometimes used to save embarrassment. Ironically, Carlo de’ Medici, effectively Lorenzo de’ Medici’s uncle, outlived il Magnifico by almost two months. For Carlo’s letters, see V. Rossi, “L’indole e gli studi di Giovanni di Cosimo de’ Medici,” *Rendiconti della R. Accademia dei Lincei*, 1893, serie. V, vol. II, fasc. I, pp. 130ff.

For the purchase of a Slave in Venice on 2 October 1445 who was about 18 years old and who was called Caterucia and was described as being described as about 18 years old and was Circasse “et di pelo nero.” She was purchased by Giovan Francesco di Messer Palla Strozzi. In ASF, *Carte Strozzi*, II, xvi bis, fol. 4v. Mention of slaves is found in the Libro di debitori e creditor di Simone di Filippo di Messer Leonardo degli Strozzi, 1420-1425, fols. 3 e 6v.

8) K. D. Ewart, *Cosimo de’ Medici*, London, 1899, p. 203.

MAP has "Cateruccia"⁹. Still more indicative of the relation between the two is found in a reference to a cameo with a head of Hadrian in relief, which is given in *Stroziane* as "di hadrianne" while in *MAP* it appears as "d'adriano." I suggest that it is very difficult to imagine a situation in which the "copyist" made such eccentric modifications of the text he was "copying." Also evidence in favor of *Stroziane* being the original is the fact that there are corrections of amounts in which 30 becomes 20 and 50 becomes 40. Besides while there are convenient subtotals of sums, they are not present in the "copy." That *Stroziane* stops abruptly in the middle of the book list of histories indicates its fragmentary state.

The notice of the four slave women escaped special attention by modern writers because the inventory portion of the document had attracted the most attention. Is it really unpublished? The fact is that Fabroni in his appendix has this portion of the document transcribed, although as "Caterina, Crestina, Caterina, Tita," so if there are some problems with the names, the impact was there for the asking¹⁰. So I suppose my find is not much of a find in the strictest sense, but since it has never been considered, the value of primary research remains, and the presence of Medici slaves in the mid Fifteenth century requires recognition.

The most impressive study of slavery in Florence during Cosimos' time is that of Iris Origo published in 1955, which is actually heavily dependent upon a trailblazing saggio by Agostino ZANELLI published in 1885¹¹.

As a codetta to my brief presentation, one might have another look at the fresco representing the Journey of the Magi by Benozzo Gozzoli for the Chapel in the Medici Palace, which has been sparkingly cleaned just a few years ago¹². In it the three Kings, as tradition would have it, represent the three parts of the world, Asia,

9) Buonarroti has her as "Caterina."

10) Fabroni, II, p. 257. I cannot resist a reference to an old refrain of my friend Professor Creighton Gilbert who has maintained that while it might be worth while to do original archival searching, there is a vast amount which has been published which has never been properly evaluated. As it happens, R. De Roover (*The rise and decline of the Medici Bank, 1397-1494*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963; New York, W.W. Norton, 1966, p.152 and note 52) makes a fascinating reference to slaves (ASF, MAP, filza 82, no. 182, fol. 595; *Catasto* of 1457, Leon d'Oro) presumably the same ones discussed in this paper. There are listed directly after some evaluations of mules and other animals. Three of the four are named in this section which immediately precedes the *Bocche*: "Caterina, Cristina, Caterina, [the fourth is blank]." Their ages are listed as 45, 40, 24, and 35 respectively, and their collective value is listed as 120 florins, a sum which corresponds to the values widely found.

11) I. Origo, *The Domestic Enemy: The Eastern Slaves in Tuscany in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, in "Speculum", XXX, n. 3 (July, 1955), pp. 321-366; A. ZANELLI, *Le schiave orientali a Firenze nei secoli XIV e XV*, Firenze 1885, pp. 1-115.

12) Ed. by. C. Acidini Luchinat, *I Restauri nel Palazzo Medici Richard. Rinascimento e Barocco*. Milan, 1992.

Africa and Europe. In fact the brown face of the majestic king with a fine beard would suggest that he be identified as be Baldassarre from Africa. (On the other hand the youngest of the kings, Gaspare would represent Asia, but he has no Asian features.) There is a another black man in the picture, one that has decidedly African facial features. He may be regarded as a servant or guard, since he holds a large bow and is located in a zone close to the presumptive images of Cosimo and Piero di Cosimo, this one certainly properly identified. Who was this man, presented with considerable personal dignity? Was he another of the unnamed slaves belonging to the household, one who is not specifically listed in the obsequies? In the efforts to identify the various personalities of the Medici court this distinctive figure seems to have been largely ignored as has the issue of slavery in Renaissance Florence.