

## BOOK REVIEWS

WICKHAM, CHRIS. *Sleepwalking into a New World: The Emergence of Italian City Communes in the Twelfth Century*. Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) [etc.], 2015. xi, 305 pp. Maps. \$29.95; £19.95. doi: 10.1017/S0020859016000092

The origins of the Italian communes in the Middle Ages have long been debated in Italian and international historiography. In the twentieth century, Italian scholars focused on the importance of early urban autonomy, arguing that, at least in part, it saved the peninsula from the chaos of the disintegration of the Kingdom of Italy (*Regnum Italiae*), from foreign domination, and, in particular, that it gave birth to the kind of society that would later develop the civic culture of the Renaissance. Important studies on the topic were carried out during crucial moments of the formation of the contemporary Italian state, which brought communal Italy directly into the political debate. More recently, nationalist political movements have used medieval urban autonomy as a symbol of the renewed necessity for northern Italian independence. Wickham's book does not address those particular debates, the author preferring to maintain a distance from the "dogmatic" views that, according to him, have directed Italian research so far. Instead, the book relies more on the studies of other scholars who, in their different ways, have addressed the social composition of the urban classes that gave life to the new political system that started to emerge in the twelfth century.

Wickham proposes to deal with the issue from a different point of view, for his aim is to analyse the very moment communal society appeared for the first time. His purpose is to understand the outlook typical of the first office holders of the communes and, more generally, of the "communal man". To do so, Wickham studies three cases in closer detail, those of Milan, Pisa, and Rome. Chosen for the availability of sources – in particular, judicial and diplomatic records as well as more narrative accounts – those three cases are dealt with following a roughly similar structure. The sources used are explained, the political context outlined, early mentioning of consuls or assemblies highlighted, hegemonic families identified, and the role of military and juridical culture analysed. These three chapters, which form the core of the book, are preceded by an introduction in which the historiography is presented mainly by comparing Italian scholars to their international colleagues, with the latter generally appearing in a more favourable light. Here, Wickham anticipates some of the main ideas that reappear later in cases studied in more detail, such as the informality of the early communal institutions, or the reasons behind the exclusion of certain cities. The book closes with a final chapter that revisits some general arguments and considers other Italian cities. Those other cities are addressed by region or territory and show a recognizable general regional trend, with several of them (for which there is more literature available) compared among themselves to highlight developments in each location according to local peculiarities.

Chapters two to four treat the three case studies by beginning in the north and moving southwards, with first Milan, then Pisa, and finally Rome. As might be expected, given their different locations, sizes, economic, and political contexts, the three cities reveal a good number of differences among them. Milan, for example, was characterized by slower detachment of the communal institutions from the bishop, with the first consuls, or civic representatives, even being part of his entourage, as was the general assembly. A change

from that pattern can be observed for the period between 1110 and 1130, when new “medium elite” families (p. 50), characterized by a stronger juridical Roman culture, took over civic government and crystallized the new communal institutions. For Rome, Wickham argues that, particularly in the period mentioned, the contrast between the aristocratic milieu and the new elite was quite strong, basing his assessment on the poor participation of the old noble class in the infant *Comune* (pp. 38–39). Pisa developed differently again, and the author underlines the stability of its situation and the continuous hegemony of the urban elites in its government. That stability remained because the city’s archbishop was less dominant (pp. 97–98), and it led to an early crystallization of the commune in the Tuscan city, which was already in place at the end of the eleventh century. Such stability also meant that juridical experts very rarely achieved the top positions inside urban institutions (p. 157). Rome, by contrast, experienced a very divergent development, since the *Comune* there developed from a total rupture from the “papal aristocracy”. The “medium elite” families (p. 151), once marginalized from the Vatican’s court in c.1140, decided to take the city’s destiny into their own hands and, using the prior experience garnered by other cities, founded a fully working Roman commune in 1143.

This book can claim the merit of analysing the early development of the communal institutions as an overall process, comparing cities that so far have been considered totally different, and scarcely even comparable. Wickham highlights the differences and similarities in the three cases, shedding light on some of the different ways cities were able to innovate and build novel structures of government, and the reasons why they could. The archival and bibliographical work behind the text is impressive, and Wickham’s consistent approach to his case studies helps the reader grasp the issues at stake and follow the more abstract considerations of the argument, which always stays closely connected to the sources used.

The three cases include a thorough analysis of political and social contexts. Rome is evidently the city the author knows best, and the sequence of events that characterized the political situation there is convincingly explained. The same applies for the social context, which is outlined very precisely not only for Rome but for Milan and Pisa, too, reflecting Wickham’s well-known alertness to social-historical questions. At the same time, though with the exception of Rome, it remains true that the economic context (pp. 138–140) is often somewhat obscure. If it is true, as the author states, that for Milan few studies are available on the subject, still an economic outline could have proved useful for Pisa, where a great deal of work has been done on individual families (p. 69). Despite mention of the importance of trade to the Tuscan port city (pp. 69–70, 89, 108), no account is taken of its effect in the formation of the *Comune*, on the stability of the city, and in limiting the power of the archbishop – many of whom were, in any case, foreigners. Also, the continued, or discontinued, presence of certain families in the communal institutions may be explained by the vagaries of their commercial fortunes. Pisa, together with Genoa, is mentioned as one of the earliest cases of communal formalization; yet, the question of the extent to which commercial development had to do with it remains underexplored. After all, the economy, too, (together with the cities’ external relations and the needs of building a new political system) is an important factor in understanding the dynamics leading towards a stronger role for law and, consequently, more importance for Roman law and those with expertise in it.

The dramatic change that characterized the period – in less than a century almost all cities in northern and central Italy developed communal systems – is further analysed by Wickham in light of the views and outlooks of the actors involved: “[W]hat did they think they were doing?” (p. 6) Wickham’s aim, as already mentioned, is to assess how aware those mediaeval men were of the implications of their actions. He concludes that in the cases of

Milan and Pisa, where development was gradual, there was no awareness of the genuine innovations of the period: the actors simply did not realize the medium- to long-term consequences of what they did. In Rome, however, since the *Comune* was established from one day to the next as an act of rupture, senators were much more aware of the innovation they were bringing to the city. Of course, it is difficult to prove conclusively that contemporaries had any notion of “innovation” in relation to the novelties introduced, particularly when certain kinds of source are lacking (*memoriae*, etc.). Thus, arguing as Wickham does that Pisans, for instance, were unable in 1075 to foresee the eventual changes in the form of government that fully crystallized in 1115 (p. 95), while the Romans were more aware, can be regarded either as overly obvious – for not even today is it possible to estimate the reach of an action unless one supposes a perfect economic, political, and social model to be at work – or too uncertain to be asserted as confidently as Wickham does. The two modes of establishing a commune were different: Rome established its *Comune* by adopting the “full package” from other experiences, while Milan and Pisa worked out their own systems. Alternatively, the juridical, and to a certain extent historical, education of several of the men who set up the communes might suggest that they did indeed have some awareness, some idea of how politics should work, and that they took the necessary time to elaborate and organize such new models, being simultaneously anxious to maintain the social order.

Wickham’s book is an extremely well-structured analysis of the early stages of Italian communal formation. The author offers a different way of understanding the process, by looking more closely at the social and cultural side, and his book will challenge Italian and international scholars to examine other cases in depth.

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NEWMAN, SIMON P. *A New World of Labor. The Development of Plantation Slavery in the British Atlantic.* [The Early Modern Americas.] University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia 2013. viii, 327 pp. Ill. £36.00.  
doi: 10.1017/S0020859016000109

The central subject of *A New World of Labor* is the relationship of different modes of African slavery to white free and unfree labour in the Caribbean and West Africa, and, to some extent, North America, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its particular focus is on Barbados, the first British colony to organize a new, brutally extractive slave regime c.1640–1680, and on Cape Coast Castle, the key British slave factory on the Gold Coast, where the balance of power lay more in African hands, and where more benign forms of indigenous African slavery persisted into the nineteenth century. While rigorously comparative, it is also a connective history that, on the one hand, examines the relationship between coercive management of labour in sixteenth-century England and white and black forced labour in Barbados in the 1640s; on the other hand, it shows how slave legislation, ideology, and practices from Barbados diffused to Jamaica, the Leewards, and, ultimately, North America.