The Permanence of Jacob Burckhardt: "The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy" and Contemporary Studies of the Italian Renaissance Court*

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In a magisterial study of Renaissance historiography, The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation, published in 1948, Wallace K. Ferguson noted with some astonishment the tenacity with which Burckhardt's view of the age had maintained its supremacy. Attacks on The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1860) had been numerous, vigorous, and often justified; the medievalists, the nationalists from northern Europe, the historians of science, and others had revealed errors of detail and sins of omission as well as limitations of sympathy and understanding regarding Burckhardt's masterpiece. Nevertheless, no more satisfying synthetic view had emerged, although Ferguson remained hopeful that one might soon appear. More than thirty years later, the general picture of Renaissance historiography has changed little. From the same quarters come the same objections to this or that detail in Burckhardt's thesis, but attempts at a fresh synthesis of the material he covered—Italian "civilization" from about 1300 to

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¹Wallace K. Ferguson, The Renaissance in Historical Thought: Five Centuries of Interpretation (Cambridge, Mass., 1948), 390-397.

about 1600—have resulted in generalizations more dubious than his own or so timid as to be of little interest. Indeed, the most recent survey of the literature on the period, Denys Hay's "Historians and the Renaissance during the Last Twenty-Five Years" (1979), begins with an echo of Ferguson's astonishment: "Anyone who considers the problem of the historiography of the Renaissance during the last twenty to thirty years will be amazed at the resistance to criticism demonstrated by the categories that were defined by Jacob Burckhardt. The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy appeared in Basel in 1860. More than a century later, the fundamental features of its portrait of the Renaissance have not been effectively challenged."2 According to Hay, Burckhardt's influence is stronger than ever, although often unacknowledged: whether they realize it or not, most historians of Renaissance culture during the last three decades have been elaborating "the fundamental features" of the portrait that Burckhardt established—basically the broad themes that unify the six sections into which The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy is divided: "The State as a Work of Art," "The Development of the Individual," "The Revival of Antiquity," "The Discovery of the World and of Man," "Society and Festivals" (the disintegration of class distinctions; the impulse to make all life a work of art) and "Morality and Religion" (the spread of secularism).

These guiding ideas in the Burckhardtian conception of the Renaissance retain their vitality because of their power to organize and put into historical perspective large segments of our knowledge about the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries in Italy. Hundreds of books and articles every year testify to the accuracy of Hay's judgment that "the permanence of the principal categories created by Burckhardt no longer seems in danger." Among publica-

²Denys Hay, "Storici e Rinascimento negli ultimi venticinque anni," in *Il Rinascimento: Interpretazioni e Problemi* (Rome-Bari, 1979), 3. Hay's article appeared in Italian. The English translation of the passage cited is my own; the original Italian follows: 'Chiunque affronti il problema della storiografia degli ultimi ventitrent'anni sul Rinascimento resta stupito dalla resistenza alle critiche dimostrata dalle categorie definite da Jacob Burckhardt. *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* uscì a Basilea nel 1860. Oltre un secolo dopo, il quadro del Rinascimento ivi delineato non è praticamente messo in dubbio nei suoi tratti fondamentali."

³Hay, 13. ". . . la permanenza delle principali categorie create da Burckhardt non sembra più in pericolo." Cf. Karl J. Weintraub, *Visions of Culture* (Chicago, 1966), 157-158; and J.H. Hexter, *On Historians* (London, 1979), 4-5.

tions of the last two decades, the following, whose titles alone announce their place within the Burckhardtian legacy, serve as examples of Hay's point: Werner Gundersleimer's Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism (1973), Joan Gadol's Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance (1969), Roberto Weiss's The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity (1969), and Paul Lawrence Rose's The Italian Renaissance of Mathematics: Studies on Humanists and Mathematics from Petrarch to Galileo (1975). As these titles suggest, however, most specialized studies in the Renaissance limit themselves mainly to the context of only one or two of Burckhardt's leading ideas—e.g., to showing how the Este of Ferrara developed an "art" of ruling or to presenting Alberti as an example of the Renaissance cultivation of individual excellence. What have been lacking are studies that reflect the analytic and explanatory power of Burckhardt's picture as a whole. He saw the elements of the Renaissance that he isolated in the various parts of his book not as discrete and static facets of a crystallized moment of history, but as dynamic forces in a complex cultural development. His description of the pattern of that development deserves recognition both for its subtlety in itself and for its usefulness as a tool of historical diagnosis. Indeed, the real genius of The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy cannot be grasped except as a whole. The individual categories lose much of their validity when they are isolated, and the true reason for Burckhardt's permanence comes to light only when all the pieces of his picture are seen within the pattern of the whole. Only then can we understand why Burckhardt's analysis provides an explanatory tool far more valuable than any of the attacks that have been leveled at it.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first to describe briefly the pattern of development that gives life to Burckhardt's picture of the Renaissance by putting into proper perspective its different components; second, to demonstrate the validity and usefulness of Burckhardt's perception by bringing it to bear on a topic of great interest in recent Renaissance historiography: the Italian Renaissance court. In discussing the ways in which Burckhardt links the various aspects of Renaissance civilization, we shall see that we can distinguish both a basic pattern of causal relationships running throughout the book, and a secondary array of nuances and qualifications that lend flexibility to the basic pattern without obscuring it. In discussing recent research on the court, we shall

discover how Burckhardt provides a necessary framework for the various and specialized labors of scholars who often appear quite unconscious of any debt to the great pioneer who first provided a reasonable territory on which they have securely settled.

Critics of The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy have not always kept in mind the limitations of scope that its title clearly announces. Burckhardt's aim is not to define a European Renaissance, but only an Italian one. As is well known, Burckhardt argues that what happened in Italy between 1300 and 1600 formed the basis for a peculiarly modern civilization throughout Europe, but his book does not pretend to analyze that civilization beyond its beginnings in Italy. Furthermore, he does not claim to be describing everything of importance even in Italy. The word "civilization" indicates his focus, which is on characteristic ways of thinking and feeling, on what he calls "a great intellectual process," rather than on, say, the economy of the building trade or the development of banking in Renaissance Florence, although both building and banking were inevitably touched, sooner or later, by broad transformations of thought and sensibility.6 His focus on civilization, moreover, leads Burckhardt to talk more about princes, poets, and humanists than about shipwrights, bakers, or peasants; he does not ignore the common man, but unlike some modern historians, he clearly thinks that civilizational changes flow from above, that they originate in and

⁴Werner L. Gundersheimer, Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism (Princeton, 1973); Joan Gadol, Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the Early Renaissance (Chicago, 1969); Roberto Weiss, The Renaissance Discovery of Classical Antiquity (Oxford, 1969); Paul Lawrence Rose, The Italian Renaissance of Mathematics: Studies on Humanists and Mathematics from Petrarch to Galileo (Geneva, 1975).

⁵On Burckhardt's sense of the Italian Renaissance's seminal importance for modern civilization, and on his sense of the limits of his own work, see *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy: An Essay* (London, 1944), 1-2, 81, 104-105, 171-173, 261-262. This edition, which will be referred to hereafter as *Civilization*, reprints S.G.C. Middlemore's standard translation, first published in 1878.

⁶See Civilization, 1; "a great intellectual process" is Middlemore's rendering of "ein grosses geistiges Kontinuum," and he uses "civilization" to translate Burckhardt's "Kultur." Cf. Jacob Burckhardt, Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien (Vienna, n.d.), 1, which will be referred to hereafter as Kultur. On Burckhardt's conception of civilization and the history of civilization see Weintraub, 158-160.

are most fully expressed by the most powerful and best educated classes. In his presentation of the civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, he begins with political men. According to his analysis, the roots of that civilization are to be found mainly not in economic or social conditions nor even in intellectual or religious developments, but in the peculiar political conditions that gave rise to a new type of political leader in fourteenth-century Italy:

The struggle between the Popes and the Hohenstaufens left Italy in a political condition which differed essentially from that of other countries of the West. While in France, Spain, and England the feudal system was so organized that at the close of its existence it was naturally transformed into a unified monarchy, and while in Germany it helped to maintain, at least outwardly, the unity of the Empire, Italy had shaken it off almost entirely. The Emperors of the fourteenth century, even in the most favorable case, were no longer received and respected as feudal lords, but as possible leaders and supporters of powers already in existence; while the Papacy, with its creatures and allies, was strong enough to hinder national unity in the future, but not strong enough itself to bring about that unity.⁷

Traditional sources of power and legitimacy counted for little, and the way was opened for the rise of states and men whose security depended not upon their claims to any kind of legitimacy, but entirely upon their own virtù. Burckhardt mentions Frederick II and his government of southern Italy and Sicily in the thirteenth century as a harbinger of the new age, but Frederick was himself the Emperor and thus possessed to an eminent degree the kind of legitimacy missing in the merely Italian rulers who flourished later. The Gonzaga of Mantua, the Este of Ferrara, the Montefeltro of Urbino, the Visconte and the Sforza of Milan, as well as the leading families of republican Florence and Venice, are for Burckhardt the proper examples of the political situation in Renaissance Italy.

⁷Civilization, 2; and Kultur, 1-2.

⁸Civilization, 2-3.

From this situation and from the rise of rulers like these flowed more or less directly, according to Burckhardt, the salient features of Renaissance civilization. Because a Niccolo III d'Este, a Federigo da Montefeltro, or a Cosimo de'Medici (the Elder) depended almost entirely on their own personal qualities rather than on the matrix of feudal loyalty, they tended to become acutely and intelligently selfconscious. To succeed in a very unstable political situation, they needed to know themselves and the world around them, to develop their faculties of mind, spirit, and body to the highest possible degree, and to put them to use in the struggle to rule. Thus political exigency gave a powerful stimulus to the development of new and more efficient ways of ruling—to the conception of the state as a work of art—and to the development of individual excellence among men of high political position. But princes and leaders of republics, even those endowed with the greatest virtù, were not selfsufficient: they needed around them men of general virtù as well as men of specialized excellence who could serve the state in a variety of ways from giving political counsel and leading armies to educating the young of the court or city, designing public buildings, and composing Latin orations. Great condottieri such as Colleone and Gattamelata, the line of distinguished humanist chancellors in Florence, teachers like Vittorino da Feltre and Guarino da Verona, artists and literary men, Alberti and Mantegna, Castiglione, and Ariosto belong in this category. In searching for such men, Renaissance princes and republics in Italy did not limit themselves to any particular class but took talent wherever it could be found. In this way, the cultivation of excellence became a value throughout society which encouraged the view that talent and achievement should count more than birth or class in determining one's place in life. Any attempt to evaluate Burckhardt must take into account that for him the cultivation of excellence lay at the heart of the individualism of Renaissance Italy and inspired its assault on the older notion of class. Sometimes, it is true, he writes as though he equated individualism with the more modern respect for mere eccentricity or interest in the particular workings of every man's psyche, and surely there is a historical connection between what Burckhardt discerned in the revolutionary aspirations and achievements of an Alberti or a Vittorino and later doctrines of originality. Nevertheless, the majority of Burckhardt's pages on the development of the individual

and the equalization of classes emphasize the opening of careers to talents and the consequent striving for excellence.9

Such developments derived in large part as Burckhardt claimed they did, from the exhaustion of papal authority and led to a growing spirit of secularism was inevitable. In fact, a long chapter of The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy discusses the way in which the Church itself became increasingly secularized from the "Babylonian captivity" at Avignon and the Great Schism (1309-1417) well into the sixteenth century. 10 The new men, even when they served the Church, thought of themselves as independent of it, and moved freely from service under the popes to service with secular princes or republics, and back again. Furthermore, Burckhardt argues, the spirit of considering politics without preconceptions, with an eye to making the state a work of art, bred a rationalism that spread—into science, engineering, statistics, medicine, art, and the other activities discussed as aspects of the discovery of the world and man in Renaissance Italy. Finally a rationalism detached from religion became a value in itself, leading in some cases to scepticism and irreligion. All these developments, according to Burckhardt, provide the necessary background for understanding the special vigor that informed the revival of antiquity in Renaissance Italy. That revival was not the cause of the Italian Renaissance, but more precisely the available means through which the new culture could express itself. Medieval models were felt to be inappropriate by men who were more or less cut off from the traditional sanctions of feudalism. The memory of classical antiquity, which Burckhardt was well aware had remained powerful in Italy throughout the Renaissance, offered the only alternative image of civilization available. 11 That classical models were free from certain limitations placed on thought and action by medieval Christian thought was, of course, an attraction for men who stressed their own independent virtù and who needed, like most individualists, a polemical weapon to use against their immediate ancestors.

⁹Civilization, 80-103. See especially 85: "The fifteenth century is, above all, that of the many-sided men." Cf. Kultur, 80: "Das 15. Jahrhundert ist zunächst vorzüglich dasjenige der vielseitigen Menschen."

¹⁰Civilization, 64-79.

¹¹Civilization, 104-106.

To this general pattern of Italian Renaissance civilization, beginning in certain political conditions and developing therefrom, Burckhardt added many nuances and qualifications. He knew that history cannot be reduced to rigid patterns, and in many ways The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy is deliberately tentative—"an essay in the strictest sense of the word," as he says in the opening sentence. 12 Therefore, although he insists on the crucial importance of Italian political conditions, he also points out that they were "not the only . . . reason for the early development of the Italian."13 Economic conditions never had for Burckhardt the importance that has been attributed to them since his time, but he did not ignore them. It did not occur to him that the great and characteristic achievements of the Renaissance could be understood as in any essential way the result of wealth, for in itself the possession of money does not dispose men to use it in one way rather than another; at the same time the book's many references to the wealth of princes and republics make plain Burckhardt's awareness that without money a high culture cannot exist. He also discusses at several points the influence of commerce on the development of Renaissance science and technology. 14 Geography, climate, the influence of foreign examples, and the history of Italy in the Middle Ages figure among the factors that he advances to account for "the early development of the Italian."15 Burckhardt also makes the reader aware of the paradoxes that inevitably complicate any historical scheme of causes and effects: elements that first come to light as effects soon become themselves causes, sometimes with apparently contradictory effects. For example, the individualism fostered initially by the dissolution of feudal values became eventually not only a cause of further decay of those values but also the motive behind the Italian Renaissance's "insane passion for titles," a belated attempt to revive some aspects of feudalism as a way of giv-

ing a kind of permanence to the acheivements of one's individuality. ¹⁶ The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy conveys the sense of nuance and flexibility that befits a true essay. At the same time, Burckhardt never allows his basic pattern to founder under the weight of qualifications. The qualifications remain subordinate to the main picture and are meant to strengthen rather than obscure it. The result is a conception of the civilization of Italy during approximately three centuries that possesses an extraordinary explanatory power. Taken as a whole, and not as a collection of fragmentary elements or categories, this rather old-fashioned conception is capable of organizing and putting into perspective the diverse results of the most up-to-date, specialized historical research.

A thorough demonstration of the value of this conception with all its subtlety and qualifications would require a book summarizing and synthesizing all that we know about the Renaissance from the research of thousands of scholars in many different fields. Such a book may eventually appear and would be of immense value even if its synthesis were, as I believe it would be, essentially a reaffirmation of Burckhardt's, but the limits of this essay are more modest. In what follows, I shall try to suggest the general value of Burckhardt's structure by applying it to contemporary scholarship in one field only: the Italian Renaissance court. This topic provides an appropriate test for Burckhardt's view. In its most obvious manifestations—that is, as a gathering of retainers around a sovereign and as a building or buildings designed to house this gathering and its activities—the court obviously falls within the sphere of civilization that Burckhardt undertook to explain, yet it is not an institution that he isolated for special attention. Of course The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy contains many references to courts, but the focus of the discussion of the state as a work of art falls on the broad features of cities and dynasties rather than on courts as such, and elsewhere the court figures mainly in brief examples designed to support general points. Since Burckhardt, a great deal of information about Renaissance courts in Italy has accumulated. From studies of particular princes, of political and social developments, of patterns of patronage, of intellectual history, and related matters, it has become increasingly clear that the courts of the Italian Renaissance

¹²Civilization, 1. Cf. Kultur, 1: "Im wahren Sinne des Wortes führt diese Schrift den Titel eines blossen Versuches."

¹³Civilization, 81. Cf. Kultur, 76.

¹⁴Civilization, 50-52, 176-178.

¹⁵Civilization, 42-43, 45, 104-106, 171-172, 174, 176.

¹⁶Civilization, 220-222.

represent the earliest examples of a new type of European court—a type of court that differs from the medieval, feudal type in the kinds of courtiers it supported, the functions it fulfilled, the buildings it inhabited, and the general style of its operation. Recently, an effort has been made to coordinate the research on this new type of court. In 1975, an international group based in Italy, the Centro Studi "Europa delle Corti," was formed with the express purpose of moving towards a more adequate general understanding of the court throughout Europe from the fourteenth through the seventeenth centuries. 17 Under this group's aegis a number of valuable studies devoted to Italian courts have appeared, but no new synthesis has yet emerged. 18 In fact, the evidence of the studies sponsored thus far by the Centro Studi "Europa delle Corti," as well as those published elsewhere in the last decade or so, indicates that a new synthesis in unneeded. The pattern described in The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy remains adequate. Few recent students of the Renaissance court in Italy give more than a perfunctory reference to Burckhardt's book; none seems to have studied it carefully as a whole. As a result, they are apparently unaware of the extent to which Burckhardt laid the groundwork for their specialized researches and provided a historical framework which puts those studies into perspective.

At the origin of Burckhardt's pattern of cultural development in Renaissance Italy lies the rise of new political orders—both princely and republican—in the vacuum left by the decay of feudal loyalties. As Burckhardt indicated, the feudal system in Italy depended upon a delicate balance of power among three main elements: the noble families with their inherited lands and powers, the Church, and the more or less independent communes whose rights for the most part

¹⁷On the founding of this group and its aims, see the introductory essays by Carlo Ossola and Eugenio Battisti in *Le Corti Farnesiane de Parma e Piacenza (1545-1622)*, 1, ed. Marzio A. Romani (Rome, 1978), xxxix-1v.

¹⁸Among the more ambitious publications supported by the Centro Studi "Europa delle Corti" are the two volumes devoted to Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* and its influence, and the three volumes on Ferrara under the Este: *La corte e il* "Cortegiano," 1, ed. Carolo Ossola; 2, ed. Adriano Prosperi (Rome, 1980); *La corte e lo spazio: Ferrara Estense*, 3 vols., eds. Giuseppe Papagno and Amedeo Quondam (Rome, 1982).

were established by imperial grant. 19 When this system began to crumble under the stress of constant strife between Pope and Emperor, Guelf and Ghibelline, great families such as the Gonzaga, the Este, the Montefeltro, and the Visconti found opportunities to usurp rule in the communes and in the surrounding countryside. Some, like the Gonzaga, rose to lordship for the first time; others, like the Este, Montefeltro, and Visconti, extended positions of power obtained earlier.²⁰ From the beginning of this period of usurpation and expansion, these men perceived, some more quickly and clearly than others, that their courts were natural centers of power that could be used to impose centralized rule upon both city and country at home, and could become bulwarks against external threats as well—against the pretensions of neighbors and the resurgence of papal or imperial interference. The growth of centralized government in the territorial states of northern Italy and in the Kingdom of Naples during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries has been much studied, although a great deal of archival work remains to be done, even on major centers like Mantua, Ferrara, and Milan.²¹ One fact that emerges clearly is that much of the new machinery of centralized government was at first located in the court. As administrative and judicial offices proliferated, they were typically placed under the supervision of the prince's most trusted

¹⁹Civilization, 2. For a modern discussion of the political situation in medieval Italy, see Raoul Manselli's contributions to Comuni e Signorie: istituzioni, società e lotte per l'egemonia, vol. 4 in Storia d'Italia, ed. Giuseppe Galasso (Turin, 1981), 61-134, 179-263.

²⁰The evidence brought forward in this essay will come from the courts of these families and from a few others like them. The examples are intended to be characteristic of Italian courts during the period 1300-1600, and so certain courts, although of great interest in themselves, have been omitted, most notably, the Medici court at Florence and those of the Doges at Venice and the Popes at Rome. Although the Medici had begun to keep a kind of court by the middle of the fifteenth century, the fact that until 1530 they were not, strictly speaking, princes but rather citizens of a republic makes their court a special case. Uncharacteristic too are the republican courts of the Doges and the ecclesiastical courts of the Popes. The relationship of modern scholarship on these courts to Burckhardt's pattern of Renaissance civilization requires separate study.

²¹See the contributions (with excellent bibliographies) to *Comuni e Signorie* by Ovidio Capitani, 137-175; Antonio Ivan Pini, 451-587; and Giorgio Chittolini, 591-676.

advisors and servants, members of his own household, and the space needed was found within the palace. The very effective system of taxation that Gian Galeazzo Visconti devised for Milan was supervised by a steadily increasing number of offices within the castle at Pavia, Gian Galeazzo's favorite residence. The gold that was collected throughout his state was stored in the castle itself, in strong boxes whose keys were entrusted to three different courtiers. Similar arrangements obtained in other courts.22 Even the elaborate state archives that constitute one of the most striking monuments to the Italian Renaissance prince's desire to give order and rationality to his rule were preserved in carefully arranged rooms within the walls that housed the prince, his family, and his courtiers.²³ As offices multiplied and the need for space increased, the courts of the Italian Renaissance became much larger and more complex than their medieval predecessors. One has only to visit the ducal palaces of Mantua and Ferrara and note how they grew from their relatively simple medieval nuclei into the imposing complexes that one sees today to discover a vivid architectural symbol of the Renaissance state as a work of art.24

The second part of Burckhardt's thesis about the development of Renaissance culture—that the rise of new political orders gave a stimulus to the general cultivation of individual excellence and to the notion that individual worth should count more than birth—can also be documented from recent studies of the court. Most obviously, of course, the Renaissance court provided a means of expression for the prince's own individual tastes, policies, and sense of personal grandeur. The courtiers whom he gathered owed their positions directly to him, or at least to his sense of their merits and usefulness rather than to inherited position. Records of the courtiers active at the Gonzaga and Este courts from the thirteenth through the sixteenth centuries present a clear pattern. In the early years, as these

families consolidated their power, their courts tended to be dominated by the close relatives and trusted collaborators. When the narrow circle opened it was to admit serviceable men of talent, including humanists, poets, architects, artists, and musicians from all social classes and all over Italy, and indeed other parts of Europe. Such men might be of noble birth or come from important and longestablished Mantuan or Ferrarese families, but these factors had only secondary importance at court; what counted was personal ability to serve. 25 Indeed the court became a principal weapon in the prince's efforts to impose his will upon his subjects, and especially upon the old landed nobility with pretensions to feudal rights and powers. In their campaigns to destroy the feudalism of the remote mountains of the Garfagnana, for example, the Este did not hesitate to make full use of the resources of the brilliant court they had built around them at Ferrara. Even Ludovico Ariosto, whom one might have expected to find reserved for quite different tasks, was pressed into service as a governor of that troubled region.26 Research on other courts reveals the same principle of selection at work. In the strongly feudal south, Alfonso the Magnanimous had special incentives to make his court a weapon of personal power and prestige. Although his position as King of Aragon gave Alfonso a base of power unavailable to a Gonzaga or an Este, nevertheless he was a new prince in Italy, a usurper in spite of the fact that Queen Giovanna had at one point declared him her heir, and opposed by most of the barons of the kingdom. Consequently the politics that Alfonso adopted resembled in many ways those of new princes in the north. At his court, he gathered a host of foreigners, Italians from all parts of the peninsula, Spaniards from Aragon and elsewhere, and other unattached men, who formed a nucleus into which the feudal

²²Francesco Cognasso, I Visconti (Varese, 1966), 341-343.

²³See, for example, Angelo Spaggiari, "Rapporti politico-amministrativi fra corte e periferia negli archivi dello 'stato' estense" in *La corte e lo spazio*, 1. 93-106.

²⁴On the ducal palace at Mantua, see Giovanni Paccagnini, Il palazzo ducale di Mantova (Turin, 1969). On the palace at Ferrara, see Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism, 58-59, 249-253.

²⁵See, for example, Mario Vaini, "Economia e società a Mantova dal Trecento al Cinquecento" in *La Corte e il "Cortegiano*," 2. 275-284; and Marco Cattini and Marzio A. Romani, "Le corti parallelle: Per una tipologia delle corti padane dal XIII al XVI secolo" in *La Corte e lo spazio*, 1. 47-82 (includes a useful bibliography).

²⁶See, for example, Giorgio Chittolini, "Il particolarismo signorile e feudale in Emilia fra Quattro e Cinquecento," in *Il Rinascimento nelle corti padane: Società e cultura*, ed. Paolo Rossi et al. (Bari, 1977), 23-52; and Piero Ugolini, "Percorsi di terra, percorsi d'acqua e sistema territoriale" in *La corte e lo spazio*, 1. 153 161.

barons of the realm were admitted only cautiously and only when their loyalty and merit were unimpeachable.²⁷

Behind this collection of the prince's own men stood physical environment, buildings, gardens, and parks, that also reflected the ruler's image. The passion in Renaissance Italy for building and rebuilding palaces, and for decorating and redecorating their walls and ceilings, has attracted considerable attention recently. In Ferrara, the Este gradually established a vast network of elegant city palaces and rural "delizie" extending from the city itself and its immediate environs all the way to the Adriatic. Each Este prince, at least from Niccolo IV (1383-1441) through Alfonso II (1527-1587), made an effort to reshape or extend this network according to his own tastes and ideas.²⁸ With the same passion for imposing themselves on the physical as well as the human fabric of their courts, generations of Gonzagas continually transformed the medieval core of the Palazzo Ducale at Mantua, covering the frescoes of their ancestors with new ones of their own, layer upon layer, and adding new wing upon new wing, new cortile upon new cortile, until they had created a fabulous labyrinth of over five hundred rooms reflecting in a kind of archaeological puzzle the aesthetic history of a long line of strong-willed men and women.²⁹ Federigo da Montefeltro's rebuilding of the palace at Urbino and the celebrated library that he brought together there illustrate the same point, as do the building projects of the Aragonese line in Naples: the great triumphal arch of the Castel Nuovo and the palaces of Poggioreale and La Duchesca.30

²⁷Alan Ryder, The Kingdom of Naples under Alfonso the Magnanimous: The Making of a Modern State (Oxford, 1976), 54-90. Cf. George L. Hersey, The Aragonese Arch at Naples (1443-1475) (New Haven, 1973), 12-13.

²⁸Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism, 248-271. Cf. Marzia Pieri, "La scena pastorale" in La corte e lo spazio, 2. 499-500.

²⁹Paccagnini's *Il palazzo ducale di Mantova* provides the only full account of the gradual creation of this building.

³⁰On the palace at Urbino, see V.P. Rotondi, *Il palazzo ducale di Urbino*, 2 vols. (Urbino, 1950). On Aragonese courtly architecture, see Hersey, *The Aragonese Arch at Naples (1443-1475)* and *Alfonso II and the Artistic Renewal of Naples (1485-1495)* (New Haven, 1969), especially 58-75.

Obviously medieval princes also built and tried to fill their courts with loyal men. However, the freedom with which Italian princes of the Renaissance disregarded class, made their courts centers of antifeudal policy, and it turned everything around them, including paint and stone, into expressions of themselves. This finds few parallels in the middle ages. Charlemagne's enterprises in Aachen and Frederick II's at Palermo are exceptions rather than the rule, but during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, the princes of nearly every small court in Italy fit Burckhardt's pattern.

One might expect to find that these courts, which so strikingly reflected the dominant personalities of their princes, would have little room for the more general development of individual excellence that Burckhardt identified as an essential category of Renaissance civilization. Indeed, as Burckhardt was well aware, many courts of the Italian Renaissance were scenes of thorough despotism. More typically, however, they seem to have given remarkable scope to the individuality of at least certain kinds of courtiers. Political freedom was, of course, always limited, but political sagacity was generally highly valued, as were many kinds of intellectual, literary, and artistic virtues—mainly, but by no means only, useful kinds. In his chapter on "The Perfecting of the Individual," Burckhardt chooses as his example of the highest individual development in the Renaissance—"l'uomo universale, who belonged to Italy alone"—Leon Battista Alberti, a man whose genius flourished not only in republican Florence and at Rome but also in the courts of Mantua, Ferrara, Rimini, and Urbino. 31 As the most recent full studies of Alberti's life and work point out, princes like Leonello d'Este and Federigo da Montefeltro considered themselves Alberti's friends as well as his patrons and encouraged him to pursue freely his many-sided endeavors which included most of the fields mentioned by Burckhardt in his discussion of "the discovery of the world and man" during the Italian Renaissance.32 Other courts supported not only art, literature, and humanistic learning, but also medical studies and various kinds of technological research—especially work in military technology and various kinds

³¹Civilization, 85-87. Cf. Kultur, 79.

³²See Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Mcn of the Early Renaissance, especially 7-9, 95, 118, 218; and Franco Borsi, Leon Battista Alberti (Milan, 1975), especially 15, 19-21.

of engineering. It is well known that when Leonardo da Vinci successfully recommended himself to the service of Ludovico il Moro of Milan, he stressed his skill as a master of military technology.³³ The Este and Gonzaga welcomed the greatest poets of the age—among them Ariosto and Tasso—and also employed the engineers who directed the vast projects of drainage and flood control along the Po.³⁴ Even Sigismondo Malatesta, the very image of a Renaissance tyrant (although much of his reputation for evil rests upon the unsubstantiated testimony of his enemies), brought to his court, entertained, and made use of a surprising number of the great individuals whose names represent the highest level of Renaissance civilization—among them, Brunelleschi, Piero della Francesca, and Alberti.³⁵

Although undoubtedly an ideal portrait, Castiglione's Book of the Courtier gives an impression of life at court that appears to be essentially true to the conditions at many Italian Renaissance courts. Castiglione's courtiers must respect a relatively strict pattern of decorum, and certain topics and activities—open attacks on the court itself, for example—are clearly unacceptable. Within these limits, however, a remarkable degree of personal and intellectual freedom flourishes: even a debate over the relative merits of republics and monarchies can be entertained without any sense that conformity of opinion must be imposed. Under the benign influence of a strong sense of decorum, the court of Urbino portrayed by Castiglione is confident enough to encourage the social and intellec-

³³Martin Kemp, Leonardo da Vinci: The Marvelous Works of Nature and Man (London, 1981), 78-79.

³⁴See, for example, Ugolini, "Percorsi di terra, percorsi d'acqua e sistema territoriale" in *La corte e lo spazio*, 127-165; Giulio Supino, "L'ingegneria idraulica durante el Rinascimento gonzaghesco" in *Mantova e i Gonzaga nella civiltà del Rinascimento* (Mantua, 1977), 429-452. Cf. Jean Delumeau, *La Civilization de la Renaissance* (Paris, 1967), 173-228. Needless to say, the courts were not centers of pure science but rather of technology. In this, they reflected the general tendency of the Renaissance and of modernity as a whole to value the usefulness of knowledge rather than knowledge in itself.

³⁵P.G. Jones, *The Malatesta of Rimini and the Papal State: A Political History* (Cambridge, England, 1974), 176-239; and the recent volume on Rimini in the series "Le città nella storia d'Italia": Grazia Gobbi and Paolo Sica, *Rimini* (Rome-Bari, 1982), 55-68.

tual independence of such diverse characters as Pietro Bembo, Ottaviano Fregoso, and Gaspare Pallavicino. Of course, the darker picture drawn by the anti-courtly writers who followed Castiglione must not be discounted, but *The Courtier*'s image appears more characteristic of the period in which Castiglione wrote (the early sixteenth century) than the venomous wit of an Aretino or the melancholy irony of a Tasso.³⁶

Burckhardt suggested that the principal reason of the Italian Renaissance prince's willingness to tolerate and even foster other strong men was his need for them: counselors and condottieri organized and defended his state. Beyond this obvious motive, however, Burckhardt discerned a more subtle one: through fostering excellence of a certain kind—especially literary and artistic excellence—the prince could win for himself a surrogate legitimacy. Modern scholarship has offered no explanation that is more convincing. On the contrary, the emphasis that recent art historians have placed on the political motives of courtly patronage confirms Burckhardt's insight, as do recent studies of the function of humanists and poets at court. Renaissance princes were mindful of Petrarch's advice to Francesco di Carrara, lord of Padua: rulers should support art and learning because they can thus enhance their reputations as rulers and perhaps achieve a fame akin to that of the great rulers of antiquity.37 When Leonello d'Este employed Alberti and other artists to erect a triumphal arch surmounted by a bronze equestrian statue of his father, Borso d'Este, at one of the entrances to the palace in Ferrara, he affirmed the legitimacy of his family's rule by associating his father with the Roman emperors to whom triumphal arches and equestrian statues had been raised, and by himself im-

³⁶Cf. Lina Bolzoni, "Il segretario neoplatonico" in *La Corte e il "Cortegiano*," 2. 133-169; and Cesare Vasoli, "Il cortigiano, il diplomatico, e il principe: Intellettuali e potere nell'Italia del Cinquecento" in *La Corte e il "Cortegiano*," 2. 173-193. See also Pietro Aretino, *Ragionamento delle corti* (Lanciano, 1914); and Torquato Tasso, *Il Malpiglio overo de la corte*, available (with English translation) in Carnes Lord and Dain A. Trafton, *Tasso's Dialogues* (Berkeley-Los Angeles, 1983), 151-191.

³⁷The letter containing this advice, dated 28 November 1373, has been published with an Italian translation by Giuseppe Fracassetti: Lettera di Francesco Petrarca al Magnifico Francesco da Carrara Signore de Padova: Delle senili lib. XIV epist. 1: Sui doveri del principe (Padua, 1922). Cf. Cecil H. Clough, "Federico da Montefeltro's Patronage of the Arts, 1468-1482" in The Duchy of the Urbino in the Renaissance (London, 1981), Chapter 8.

itating the magnificence of an Augustus or a Hadrian.³⁸ By this and other acts of patronage, Leonello won for himself the justification of his rule that the humanist Angelo Decembrio accords him in the dialogue *Politia Literaria*. Extending the humanist theme that nobility depends upon virtue not birth, Decembrio argues that the only legitimate ruler is the rational and just ruler. He concludes that Leonello, whose patronage of humanists and artists proves his rationality and sense of justice, is an embodiment of legitmate rule.³⁹

In expressing the greatness of the new princes, in lending them glory and thus a kind of legitimacy, artists and men of letters in Italian courts from the fourteenth century on turned more and more frequently to classical models. The equestrian statue of Borso, Decembrio's praise of Leonello as a kind of philosopher king, the triumphal arch of the Castel Nuovo at Naples, and other works of courtly art already mentioned, announce their links with antiquity unmistakably. To these examples might be added many others: Mantegna's noble figures in the Camera degli Sposi at Mantua, the decorative scheme of the Casino built for Vespasiano Gonzaga at Sabbioneta, the passages in which an Ariosto or a Tasso celebrated an Este or a Gonzaga prince in language full of Homeric or Virgilian echoes. 40 Burckhardt considered the revival of antiquity not as a cause of the Renaissance, but as a means by which the new age asserted its break with the past. The disintegration of the feudal world, and the rise of a new order with new values, occurred independently of the revival of antiquity, which had long been a feature of European culture, but the new order, still not fully formed, discovered useful models in antiquity and thus gave new impetus to its revival. What we now know about Italian courts of the period confirms this analysis. A similar pattern can be discerned more or less clearly in every court. The princely families, the Gon-

zaga, the Este, the Montefeltro, the Visconti, and the Sforza who came to power or extended and consolidated power in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, first had to concern themselves with immediate and practical matters, with making their courts effective centers of anti-feudal power to which men of virtù from all backgrounds would be attracted. Only after they began to feel a degree of security, and then only gradually, did they concern themselves with the creation of a new courtly style in art and letters. Thus, typically, the artistic and literary styles of most Italian courts retained important Gothic elements well into the fifteenth century, and these elements did not disappear entirely even in the sixteenth century, as the courtly taste for chivalric epics illustrates. Still, even the medieval material gradually became informed by the spirit of classical models—the Pisanello frescoes in the Palazzo Ducale at Mantua (probably painted in the late 1440's), for example, or the poetry of Boiardo (1441?-1494)41—and by the middle of the fifteenth century the new classicizing mode appears to be dominant in most Italian courts. It is even possible to identify the princes who are the first in each line to distinguish themselves as fully developed Maecenases of the new style: among the Gonzaga, Ludovico II (ruled 1444-1478), the patron of Alberti and Pisanello; among the Este, Leonello (ruled 1441-1450), pupil of Guarino, friend of Alberti and Decembrio; among the Montefeltro, the great Federigo (ruled 1444-1482); among the Sforza, Francesco I (ruled 1450-1466), rebuilder of the ducal castle and protector of Filelfo and other humanists.42

Only with the reigns of these princes was the pattern of Italian

³⁸On equestrian monuments in the Renaissance, see John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture* (London-New York, 1971), 52-60.

³⁹Ferrara: The Style of a Renaissance Despotism, 104-120. Cf. Albano Biondi, "Angelo Decembrio e la cultura del principe" in La corte e lo spazio, 2. 637-657.

⁴⁰On the Camera degli Sposi, see *Il palazzo ducale de Mantova* 64-80. On the Gallery of Antiquities at Sabbioneta, see K.W. Forster, "From 'Rocca' to 'Civitas': Urban Planning at Sabbioneta," *L'Arte*, N.S. 2 (1969), no. 5, 5-40, especially 27-33.

⁴¹On the Pisanello frescoes in Mantua, see Giovanni Paccagnini, Pisanello e il ciclo cavalleresco di Mantova (Milan, 1972); and by the same author "Note sulla formazione e la tecnica del ciclo cavalleresco dalla 'Sala del Pisanello'" in Mantova e i Gonzaga nella civiltà del Rinascimento, 191-215. On Boiardo, see Storia della letteratura italiana, ed. Emilio Cecchi and Natalino Sapegno (Milan, 1966), 3. 574-580.

⁴²Giuseppe Coniglio, *I Gonzaga* (Varese, 1967), 52-89. Howard Burns, "The Gonzaga and Renaissance Architecture" in *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, Catalogue of an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, ed. David Chambers and Jane Martineau (London, 1981), 28-31. Luciano Chiappini, *Gli Estensi* (Varese, 1967), 103-118. Gino Francheschini, *I Montefeltro* (Varese, 1970), 430-544. Clough, "Federigo da Montefeltro's Patronage of the Arts, 1468-1482." Caterina Santoro, *Gli Sforza* (Varese, 1968), 14-100, especially 91-100.

Renaissance civilization as described by Burckhardt fully realized at court. Only when all the historical currents that he identified were present and working together were Italian courts transformed into something significantly new. Every age can furnish examples of new princes, and long before the fourteenth century, new princes often turned their courts into instruments of centralized power, used them to undermine existing class structure, and opened them to the advancement of individuals of talent from all backgrounds. Furthermore, as we have already seen, the revival of antiquity had been encouraged in a number of courts as well as elsewhere throughout the Middle Ages. Only in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, did all of these elements combine in Italy to produce not just an isolated court but a dominant type of court with characteristics and a style quite different from those of the typical medieval court. The period of the high Renaissance at court, the period of fulfillment of Burckhardt's pattern, beginning with figures like Ludovico II Gonzaga, Leonello d'Este, Federigo da Montefeltro, and Francesco I Sforza, lasted hardly a century in even the most fortunate of courts. By the middle of the sixteenth century the Renaissance pattern in all its fruitfulness had begun to dissolve everywhere. Princely lines in which a spirit of individualism had been encouraged by the political situation of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, had reached the limits of expansion, found themselves confronted by a more or less stable political situation dominated by interests outside Italy, and they settled down to try to preserve the status quo.43 In the process a new class structure perhaps even more rigid than feudalism had ever been and without its healthy ties to land and its system of decentralized power, came into being. Ceremony and etiquette became more and more elaborate at court.44 Admiration for antiquity, initially an expression of the search for something higher and better, hardened into a

⁴³On the political conditions in Italy in the late fifteenth and in the sixteenth centuries, see Franco Gaeta, *Il rinascimento e la riforma (1378-1598)*, Vol. 9, part 1, *Nuova storia universale dei popoli e delle civiltà* (Turin, 1976), 99-167, 604-636. Cf. Antonio Archi, *Il tramonto dei principati in Italia* (Rocca San Casciano, 1962), 9-31.

⁴⁴On the creation of a new nobility dependent on the court and on the tendency for the court to become increasingly ceremonial, see "Le corti parallele" in *La corte e lo spazio*, 75-78; and Alberto Tenenti, "La corte nella storia dell'Europa moderna (1300-1700)," in *Le corti farnesiane di Parma e Piacenza* (1545-1622), xiv-xv. These

conventional attitude. Conformity rather than the cultivation of excellence set the tone. And to the courtier of Castiglione succeeded the courtier of Tasso, for whom "dissimulation is one of the most important virtues." To the courts of Leonello d'Este and Ludovico II Gonzaga, which could be harsh, but where men of learning and talent were nevertheless treated as friends, succeeded the courts of Alfonso II d'Este (ruled 1559-1597) and Guglielmo Gonzaga (ruled 1550-1582), where fear of the Inquisition cast a shadow over discussion, and where the splendor and formality that surrounded the prince kept all men at a distance. As the pattern of Renaissance civilization that Burckhardt defines disintegrated, a new type of Italian court began to appear—the type of court that we associate with the absolutism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—and new courtly styles—the styles that we call mannerism and baroque. The styles that we call mannerism and baroque.

That The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy enables us to make sense of what happens to Italian courts at the end of the Renaissance as well as at the beginning, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as well as earlier, confirms the value of

essays err by suggesting that the strengthening of class structures testifies to the medieval nature of the sixteenth-century Italian court. Outside Naples, there were no sixteenth-century noblemen either at court or elsewhere who could rival a prince. There were neither barons of the realm nor *Frondeurs* who could plot to overthrow or limit the power of a Gonzaga or an Este, and in Naples the involvement of great nobles like the Prince of Salerno in uprisings such as that of 1547 represents one of the last assertions of real independence by elements of an old, truly feudal nobility; *Il rinascimento e la riforma*, 611-612. For vivid evidence of the elaborate lengths to which courtly ceremony could go in the sixteenth century, see Roy Strong, *Splendour at Court: Renaissance Spectacle and Illusion* (London, 1973); and *Il potere e lo spazio: La scene del principe*, the catalogue of the exhibition "Firenze e la Toscana dei Medici nell'Europa del Cinquecento" (Florence, 1980).

⁴⁵Tasso's Dialogues, 181.

⁴⁶On the court of Alfonzo II d'Este, see *Gli Estensi*, 265-315, 367-369; *Tasso's Dialogues*, 3-6; on that of Guglielmo Gonzaga, *I Gonzaga*, 319-362, especially 350-352.

⁴⁷On the general significance of these styles, see John Shearman, *Mannerism* (New York, 1967); John Martin, *Baroque* (New York, 1977). On mannerism and baroque as styles of political absolutism, see Michael Levey, *Painting at Court* (New York, 1971), 81-149; and *Splendour at Court*, 169-212.

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Burckhardt's formulation. Of course, there remain exceptions to that formulation even within the limits of the history of Renaissance Italian courts. Some courts, even in the period of the high Renaissance, fit the pattern less well than those that have been stressed in this essay, and probably none of them can be wholly explained in Burckhardt's terms. Above all, a sense of something inexplicable and truly mysterious strikes the historian who scrutinizes and attempts to understand the transformations that occur in an institution like the court in Italy over the nearly three centuries that we call the Renaissance. Exactly what happens, and why, eludes us. Something in every historical process must, as Burckhardt puts it, "forever remain a mystery to our eyes, since we can but know this or that of the forces at work in it, never all of them together." 48 Nevertheless, within the limits of what men can know, Burckhardt's understanding of the Renaissance provides a general pattern that is consistent with the specialized research of contemporary historians, and it gives scope and significance to their work which they themselves do not provide. His is still the best synthesis that we have, and one that we badly need. Historical research whose pursuit of the particular detail is unleavened by any sense of larger pattern, soon becomes little more than a dead end and deadly antiquarianism.

⁴⁸Civilization, 281. Cf. Kultur, 263.