

Highlands and Lowlands in Late Medieval Tuscany¹

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On first perception, comparison of lowlanders' prejudices against their highland neighbours in Tuscany and Scotland suggests that these same stereotypes may have been universal throughout Western Europe during the late middle ages and early modern period. From Fordun's chronicle to Enlightenment Scotland, the highlander was depicted as ignorant, brutish, impoverished, violent—in short not far removed from the animals they grazed. As Fernand Braudel² and Giovanni Cherubini³ have shown, Italian sources from chronicles to humanist commentary were rich in mocking condemnation of their highlanders, both in their sylvan settings and when they ventured down to the cities in search of work.

One Tuscan source yet to be examined for such urban views of mountain people is the story (*novella*) by the Sieneese notary Gentile Sermini written about the time of the plague of 1424. More than a

¹The materials for this essay come largely from my *Creating the Florentine State: Peasants and Rebellion, 1348–1434* (Cambridge 1999).

²See his *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds, 2 vols. (New York 1972–3) (published originally in French in 1949) i, 41–60.

³Cherubini has written numerous articles on the Tuscan mountains; among these, see 'Appunti sul brigantaggio in Italia alla fine del medioevo', in *Studi di storia medievale e moderna per Ernesto Sestan*, 2 vols. (Florence 1980) i, 103–33; 'La "civiltà" del castagno in Italia alla fine del Medioevo', *Archeologia Medievale* 8 (1981) 247–80; *Una comunità dell'Appennino dal XIII al XV secolo: Montecoronaro dalla signoria dell'abbazia del Trivio al Dominio di Firenze* (Florence 1972); 'Paesaggio agrario, insediamenti e attività silo-pastorali sulla montagna toscano-romagnola alla fine del medioevo', in *Fra Tevere, Arno e Appennino. Valli, comunità, signori* (Florence 1992), 39–69; 'Risorse, paesaggio ed utilizzazione agricola del territorio della Toscana sud-occidentale nei secoli XIV–XV', in *Civiltà ed economia agricola in Toscana nei secc. XIII–XIV: Problemi della vita delle campagne nel tardo medioevo* (Pistoia 1981), 91–115; 'San Godenzo nei suoi statuti quattrocenteschi', in *Fra Tevere, Arno e Appennino*, 145–65; 'La società dell'Appennino settentrionale (secoli XIII–XV)', in *Signori, contadini, borghesi: Ricerche sulla società italiana del basso medioevo* (Florence 1974), 130–1.

story, it is a primitive ethnography of the mountain people south of Siena, probably Monte Amiata.⁴ To escape the plague, Sermini fled to the supposedly more salubrious air of the mountains where he visited an old friend, the village's parish priest, Ser Cecco from the city of Perugia. There Sermini lived with the villagers and described their habits and manners. However, unlike the modern anthropologist (at least in principle), he made no attempt to study these people in their own terms, to shed the prejudices of his own culture. Part of Sermini's scorn for these people is that they knew nothing of the city and its *mores*, and therefore talked, dressed, and acted in an uncivilised manner. He mocks their speech and crude language and includes in his *novella* an ode to the mountain villagers, which is a cacophony of animal noises. He ends his treatment of each subject, be it mountain hair style or cuisine, with the same refrain: 'little separated these men from the beasts they governed'. In fact, they became indistinguishable. His mountain hosts were oily and unwashed; the stench of warmed feet was enough to cause one to commit suicide or kill one's brother. Further fetid smells came out of their mouths from the disgusting, bitter things they ate—garlic, leeks, and radishes. Their hair was oily and beards shorn only twice a year with 'scissors for castrating [sheep]', which left them appearing like the billy goats they bred. They were clothed badly, possessing only a single pair of worn-out underwear, and shod even worse. Their hovels were dark, dirty, and oily, filled with the fumes of their animals and the stench of human manure. These highlanders were greedy and ready to cheat at every opportunity on the halves they owed their landlords.

Some of the most striking passages of this account concern the mountain villagers' religious practices and attitudes—their fear of crossing the threshold of the church, and when they did, their screams of joy at particularly solemn points in the mass, and their anguish and torment at the more celebratory moments. Their pounding of their chests, yanking of their hair, hands shoved down their mouths, raised

⁴*Le Novelle di Gentile Sermini da Siena*, ed. F. Vigo (Livorno 1874), 169–81 (XII, 'L'autore e ser Cecco da Perugia').

arms and bellows and alienation from their parish priest suggests that Christ may not have reached the mountains of fifteenth-century Tuscany. Sermini concludes his account by lamenting that it would have been better to have died in the 1424 plague in civilized Siena 'than to have died a thousand times every day' with these beasts of the mountains who had never seen a city.⁵

While students of Scottish history are beginning to read educated lowlanders' descriptions of highlanders with considerable caution, more as a source about lowland mentality than about highland ethnography,⁶ historians of the Mediterranean and of Italy have been less chary, reading stories and interpreting urban slurs and commentary on their Mediterranean highlanders more or less at face value. For Braudel, mountain communities were poor, self-sufficient, and egalitarian without sharp contrasts in the distribution of wealth. They were the backward and patriarchal refuge of outlaws, harbouring 'rough men, clumsy, stocky, and close-fisted'.⁷ Along with other niceties of urban culture, religion was here slow to penetrate. 'Sorcerers, witchcraft, primitive magic, and black masses were the flowerings of an ancient cultural subconscious'.⁸ Not only does Braudel's mountain civilization extend across the Mediterranean's vast basin and two continents without significant differences, it is also a near-timeless construct, reaching back to a Biblical pre-history and forward to the nineteenth century. Yet, despite Braudel's importance as the leader of a second generation of French historians centred around the journal *Les Annales*—known for its sociological modeling and quantification—he never sought to substantiate any of these conclusions with archival sources or quantitative evidence; instead he based his judgments solely on literary images, largely taken from elite urban authors.

Later, the historian of Tuscany Giovanni Cherubini went beyond such fragments to investigate the social structure of mountain

⁵I have elaborated on the religious aspects of Sermini's *novella* in 'Piety and religious practice in the rural dependencies of Renaissance Florence', *EHR* 114 (1999) 1121–42.

⁶See the first and second essays in this collection.

⁷Braudel, *The Mediterranean* i, 46.

⁸*Ibid.*, 37.

communities. His panoramic surveys of mountain ecology and society extend from Monte Amiata in the southernmost corner of Tuscany to the mountains of Romagna on the southern watershed of the Po valley. Based on the remarkable tax record, the *catasto* of 1428–9, his analysis shows wide discrepancies in the social structure across the Florentine Apennines from the ‘dry mountains’ of the Casentino in the southeast, where the poor⁹ constituted 88.4 percent of taxpayers, to the Pistoiese mountains in the northwest, where its percentage fell by nearly half (46.2 percent). Here, those of middling wealth—the ‘mediani’—approached the poor in number (40.8 percent). But despite this wide range in wealth and its distribution, Cherubini chose not to challenge Braudel’s paradigm¹⁰ and instead dismissed the variations: ‘the presence of a few conspicuously wealthy individuals does not change the overall picture in which mountain egalitarianism is distinguished from the proletarianized peasants of the hills and plains’.¹¹ Yet he never supplied the figures to compare this ‘mountain egalitarianism’ with holdings lower down.¹²

I

Unlike the historian of Scotland for the late medieval and early modern periods, the historian of Tuscany has vast archival sources to test the veracity of contemporaries’ descriptions of their highland neighbours.

⁹Cherubini utilizes the categories of property-holding devised by Conti from the 1427 *catasto* (see *La formazione della struttura agraria moderna nel contado fiorentino* ii, 2 (Rome 1965), 243–5), which defines ‘the poor’ as property-holders with taxable wealth between 1 and 50 florins as opposed to the *miserabili* without any taxable property.

¹⁰See his *Una comunità*, 170: ‘Una cosa pare comunque sicura: l’ “equalitarismo” sociale che distingue la montagna rispetto alle pianure dominate dalle città pare anche qui provato.’

¹¹Cherubini, ‘La società dell’Appennino’, ‘Qualche considerazione’, and *Una comunità dell’Appennino*, 127 and 170.

¹²At times Cherubini describes the mountain villagers as desperately impoverished; see for instance his ‘Appunti sul brigantaggio’, esp. 121. From the eighth to the thirteenth century, Chris Wickham has found that while estates may have been smaller in the mountains, ‘no backward egalitarian pastoralists’ filled the mountains of the Garfagnana; C. Wickham, ‘Economic and social institutions in Northern Tuscany in the eighth century’, in *Istituzioni ecclesiastiche della Toscana medievale*, ed. C. Wickham, M. Ronzani, Y. Milo, and A. Spicciani (Galatina 1980), 7–34, at 12.

In particular, numerous and detailed tax registers permit us to compare the social structure of mountain hamlets with villages in the hills or plains and to test whether these structures formed a *histoire immobile*. They also allow us to go beyond the usual binary division of city v. countryside. The distribution of wealth in the communities of Florence's hinterland do not show an egalitarianism founded in poverty or that the highlanders' 'poverty', either relative to the plainsmen or in absolute terms, remained relatively constant over time. Instead, from the earliest surviving tax records in the 1360s and 1370s, mountain peasants possessed property of values equal to those in the plains, and the distribution of this property within their communities was no more equal than that found in the lowlands and hills. However, with increasing warfare (largely centred in the mountains) and the decision of the Florentine elites to impose an increasingly disproportionate burden of their escalating taxation on highlanders to fight the wars against Milan, mountain communities became severely impoverished vis-à-vis the lowlands by the last decade of the fourteenth century. But it was tax policy and not the ruggedness of the mountain ecology that brought on this poverty, ultimately causing these peasants to flee their homelands and to migrate across the borders into the territories of Bologna, Modena, and sometimes further afield.¹³

Moreover, after the wars with Milan and successful peasant resistance in the mountains to Florentine taxation, Florence changed its tax policy and with it the highlanders began once again to prosper. By the 1460s their wealth had increased seven-fold since the military crisis of 1400; they had become the wealthiest peasants within the *contado* of Florence, on average twice as wealthy as peasants in the plains living near the city of Florence.

Furthermore, the tax records allow us to venture beyond notions of wealth and poverty in the countryside. While literacy cannot be easily gleaned from the archival records for country people before the eighteenth century, to a certain degree numeracy can be estimated. The Florentine tax records (*estimi*) of 1371 are the first records I know in

¹³For the statistics to substantiate these conclusions, see Cohn, *Creating the Florentine State*, chs. 2 and 3.

Europe to list ages of all household members. In this survey the extent of age rounding was extreme, but over time rural numeracy rapidly improved. As measured by the reporting and rounding of ages to ten- or five-year clusters, no significant differences separated those from the mountains, plains, or suburbs next to Florence's city walls in 1371, except that mountain dwellers were even slightly more numerate than those in the plains and nearer the city. By 1487, however, the numeracy of highlanders had improved. Now they were as numerate as the urban population of Prato.¹⁴ This stands to reason, since those in the mountains dealt directly and daily in market exchanges, selling their animals and engaging in interregional business networks. They were forced to deal with numbers as part of their daily survival.¹⁵ By contrast, increasingly through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries urban investors acquired lands in the plains near Florence, and placed them under the *mezzadria* system (sharecropping contracts) in which urban agents kept the accounts. And while Prato was a bustling mercantile town at the end of the fourteenth century, a hundred years later it was little more than a rural market centre.

Another indirect source that historians have recently employed to study the diffusion of religious and cultural leanings has been changes in given names.¹⁶ But historians have yet to dissect the Florentine

¹⁴In 1371, 242 of 287 (84 percent) who reported their ages rounded them in the plains, while 175 of 215 (81 percent) did so in the mountains. In 1487 those from the city of Prato rounded their ages in 35 percent (37 of 106) and those in the mountains in 39 percent (142 of 363) of cases. Even if this reporting depended solely on the notary (which is hard to imagine), it would nonetheless reflect changes in the local intelligentsia, which at least before 1427 depended on local notaries.

¹⁵Federigo Melis, 'Momenti dell'economia del Casentino nei secoli XIV e XV', in Melis, *Industria e commercio nella Toscana medievale*, ed. Bruno Dini (Florence 1989), 192–211, at 192.

¹⁶See Charles la Roncière, 'L'influence des franciscains dans la campagne de Florence au XI^e siècle (1280–1360)', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome: Moyen âge-Temps modernes*, 87 no.1 (1975) 27–103, esp. 28, and 'Orientations pastorales du clergé, fin du XIII^e–XIV^e siècle: le témoignage de l'onomastisme toscane', in *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres. Comptes-rendus des séances de l'année, 1983 janvier-mars* (Paris 1983), 43–65; David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*, ed. with intro. by Samuel K. Cohn Jr. (Cambridge, MA. 1997), 75–8, and 'The Josephine Waters Bennett Lecture: Tuscan names, 1200–1530', *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988) 561–83.

territory into different zones or even to compare the city with its hinterland. Did mountain villagers retain their German and good-luck names such as Bonaguido or Dietisalvi longer than those in the plains? Was the impact of the Franciscans and Dominicans stronger in the plains with a rise in saints' names such as Francesco, Domenico, Antonio and the like, as well as a new vogue for older Christian names such as Giovanni?

Over the relatively short period 1365 to 1427, the naming practices do not suggest that the mountain dwellers of the Mugello or even distant places on the edge of Tuscany were isolated pockets cut off from or resistant to religious practices and piety emanating from the city. True, the earliest surviving *estimi* show the spread of Christian names in the mountain communes lagging behind the towns and the plains. While in the town of Prato and plains of Sesto the proportion of Christian names hovered around half in 1365, only 40 percent of first names in the mountain communes of Mangona and Montecucoli were Christian, and the percentage declined further north towards the Futa pass. As late as 1394, the number of saints' names in San Martino a Castro was less than a third of all first names.

But by the *catasto* of 1427, a remarkable uniformity in naming practices had swept across much of the Florentine state. In Prato, Sesto, Mangona, Montecucoli, and Castro, the number of Christian names comprised two-thirds of the first names of household heads. The percentage of Christian names in Mangona now even exceeded that of the city of Prato, and a place as far removed and as high up as Verghereto (at over 800 metres) attained roughly the same level of Christian first names as Sesto less than ten kilometers from Florence.¹⁷

Despite the constraints of notarial formulae and the presence of clerics at the bedside,¹⁸ last wills and testaments reveal the number and

¹⁷For a fuller discussion of these methods and conclusions, see Cohn, *Creating the Florentine State*, 39–40.

¹⁸For discussion of the pitfalls and possibilities of using testaments for assessing changes in mentality, see E. Le Roy Ladurie, 'Chaunu, Lebrun, Vovelle: the new history of death', in *idem, The Territory of the Historian*, trans. Ben and Siân Reynolds (Hassocks 1979) (originally published in French, 1973), 273–84; Samuel K. Cohn Jr., *The Cult of*

array of pious choices peasants made during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Although the survival of notarial books for the mountains was low compared with the plains near Florence, I have been able to collect sixty-four testaments of mountain dwellers north of Florence from the Mugello village of Sant'Agata (341m) to Bruscoli (765m) on the border of Bologna, and a second sample east of Florence in the Aretine highlands around Caprese (653m). To draw comparisons I have relied on samples taken from the massive records left by the Mazzetti family, who worked the parishes just west of the Florentine city walls in the region of Sesto, from the parishes of Quarto to Campi within a five-mile radius of Florence.

Despite what Sermini and humanists such as the Florentine Poggio Bracciolini¹⁹ may have suggested about mountain piety, the highlanders of fifteenth-century Florence appear from their testaments to have been more conventionally pious than those in the plains close to the city. Half of those from the plains (sixteen of thirty-two testators) left no pious bequests at all (after the requisite five to twenty *soldi* to the Cathedral of Santa Reparata and its sacristy).²⁰ By contrast, only five (of sixty-four) of those from the Florentine mountains refrained from giving something to the church or a recognized and institutionalized pious cause.

Nor do these differences emerge from differences in wealth. With few exceptions rural tenants with little landed property or other goods drew up these testaments; rarely did their legacies exceed five itemized bequests to both pious and non-pious beneficiaries. In fact, those who left nothing to charitable causes were not necessarily the poorest testators. The non-pious bequests in plainsmen's wills which

Remembrance: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy (Baltimore 1992), 11–17.

¹⁹See *Facezie di Poggio Bracciolini*, 2nd edn. (Rome 1885), which poked fun at the mountain people who resided in the Pratomagno above Terranuova, Poggio's birthplace.

²⁰It should not be assumed that this seeming rural detachment from the church (in comparison to that seen in urban wills) was the norm in late-medieval Europe. In mostly rural Forez (southern France) only 3 percent of testators left nothing to the church; see Marguerite Gonon, *Les Institutions et la société en Forez au XIVe siècle d'après les testaments* (Mâcon 1960), 60.

bequeathed nothing to the church reveal substantial, even wealthy peasants with landed property and movables.²¹

To be sure, the wills do not allow us to observe church services and to witness whether or not mountain men rammed their fists down their throats and sang out without any idea of what was going on in the service or, as Poggio scoffs in one his stories, did not even know when Easter fell.²² Nonetheless, the wills suggest that mountain piety was less flamboyant and egotistical than the growing 'Renaissance' piety of the cities. By the last quarter of the fourteenth century it was common for artisans and shopkeepers in Florence and Arezzo to leave concrete memorials for the preservation of their names and the memory of their ancestors in the form of burial tombs, paintings, and chapel foundations.²³ Urban testators could express such desires with legacies of as little as ten *lire*, well within the range of the expenditures found in these country wills. But those in the mountains seldom made any such concrete efforts to preserve their memories in works of art or even in contributions earmarked for specific building repairs to churches or hospitals.

Such urban legacies for works of art and chapels were made not only for the preservation of testators' own names and memories but, as importantly, for the memory and exaltation of their ancestors and family lineages.²⁴ Recent medieval historians of France, from Douai to Avignon, have assumed that the veneration of the ancestors had begun to vanish from urban wills in France and elsewhere in Western Europe by the thirteenth century or by the Black Death at the very latest, and

²¹See, for instance, Archivio di Stato, Firenze, Notarile Antecosimiano [not. antecos.], 13527, no pagination [np], document no. 44 (1417.ix.4); np, no.12 (1409.v.21); np, no.16 (1413.v.7); np, no.16; np, no.18 (1413.iii.4); np, no.28 (1417.vii.3); np, no.38 (1417.ix.4); np, no.59 (1420.ii.1). I have developed this argument further in my 'Piety and religious practice', 1121–42.

²²Bracciolini, *Facezie*, 20–1 (XI, 'Di un prete ignorava il giorno della solennità delle Palme').

²³See Cohn, *Cult of Remembrance*, chs. 6, 7, and 8; and *idem*, 'Piété et commande d'oeuvres d'art après la peste noire', *Annales. Histoire Sciences Sociales* 51 (1996) 553–71.

²⁴See my discussion of these testamentary commissions in Cohn, *Cult of Remembrance*, 242–3.

afterwards crop up only in backward and marginal rural areas.²⁵ But in Florentine Tuscany no such transition is seen. Instead, urban testators after 1348 and into the Quattrocento Renaissance turned in the opposite direction: increasingly, their last gifts concentrated on building, decorating, and maintaining communal family vaults and chapels, where priests were left property to pray for the souls of these testators' ancestors with perpetual masses. At the same time, testators in the mountains shunned any such concrete efforts to preserve their own memories or to recall those of their forbears.

This absence of 'pious egoism'²⁶ and ancestral veneration from rural wills did not result from a lack of funds or landed property. In place of demands for concrete works of art, improvements to church fabrics, and the foundation of family chapels to celebrate themselves and their lineages, mountain peasants (along with those further down the slopes) often left sizeable gifts of property, from several strips of land to entire farms (*poderi*) for the more ephemeral matter of the health of their souls alone, to be celebrated in masses at their funerals or soon afterwards, but rarely in perpetuity with complex cycles and flamboyant demands for different coloured waxes, candles, and torches of varying sizes.²⁷

Despite differences in mobility and social networks between highlanders and plainsmen, the parish church dominated the spiritual worlds of both groups in the *contadi* of Florence and Arezzo. Almost all these rural testators who specified a pious bequest gave something to

²⁵See Jean-Pierre Deregnacourt, 'Autour de la mort à Douai: attitudes, pratiques et croyances, 1250/1500', 2 vols. Thèse de troisième cycle (Université Charles de Gaulle, Lille, 1993) i, 137–41; 'L'élection de sépulture d'après les testaments douaisiens (1295–1500)', *Revue du Nord* 65 (1983), 343–52, at 351; Jacques Chiffolleau, *La Comptabilité de l'au-delà: Les hommes, la mort et la religion dans la région d'Avignon à la fin du Moyen Age (vers 1320–vers 1480)* (Rome 1980), esp. 206–7; and more generally, Michel Lauwers, *La mémoire des ancêtres, le souci des morts: Morts, rites et société au moyen âge* (Paris 1997), esp. 498–9. Also, see my 'The place of the dead in Flanders and Tuscany: towards a comparative history of the Black Death', in *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, edd. Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall (Cambridge 2000), 17–43.

²⁶So labeled by Deregnacourt, 'Autour de la mort à Douai' i, 63–5.

²⁷See Cohn, 'Piety and religious practice'.

their own parish church or priest, and second in importance came the parish lay confraternity. The parish in the mountains, however, appears to have been a more vibrant centre of life, both spiritual and secular, than in the plains. Mountain people gave more often to their parishes, and unlike in the plains still possessed the *ius patronatus* of their churches. As a result of these peasants' right to elect their own priests, outsiders like the urban Ser Cecco in Sermini's account (who came even from a different territorial state from his host highlanders) were unheard of, at least in the mountains north of Florence, where notarial records of parish elections survive. Instead, mountain priests came from nearby parishes within the same mountains. No doubt the newly elected had connections with the parishioners whose communities they came to officiate, spoke with similar dialects and possessed similar manners.²⁸ By contrast, in the plains and lower hills, where the rights of election had rested within the hands of Florentine patricians or urban churches for a century if not more, the newly appointed priests came from outside. They moved to these villages either from lesser positions within the city of Florence or from larger market towns such as Empoli in the *contado*.²⁹

In addition, the parish appears stronger in the mountains than in the plains as a centre of village life beyond its religious functions. 'At the sound of their church bells', as the notarized convocations begin, mountain people regularly congregated in their parishes to carry out a wide range of social and civic business such as settlements of disputes with other parishes,³⁰ revisions of village statutes,³¹ discussions of civic

²⁸See for instance, not. antecos., 858, 18v–19r (1368.v.27); 19r–v (1368.v.20); 21v–22r (1368.xi.28); 792, 206v (1434.i.2).

²⁹Not. antecos., 13521, 33v (1373.ix.16); 792, 48v–50v. Charles la Roncière, 'Dans la campagne Florentine au xiv^e siècle: les communautés et leurs curés', in *Histoire vécue du peuple chrétien*, ed. J. Delumeau (Toulouse 1976), 281–314, at 291–2, claims that during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries parish priests in both the hills and plains came from villages either in or near the churches where they officiated.

³⁰See for instance the case when twenty-four men of San Giovanni a Cornachiaia met to settle a dispute and to initiate other matters not spelled out in the notary's rough draft; Not. antecos., 6599, 39r–40r (1440.x.30).

³¹See the numerous acts of submission in the *Provvisioni* registers and their transcriptions

issues and the initiation of litigation,³² the appointment of advisors to the parish or commune,³³ and most frequently the election of their own lay syndics.³⁴ Among other things, these syndics negotiated with the city of Florence on matters such as tax relief and indebtedness, and, at least until 1427, decided how their taxes were to be apportioned within the community.³⁵

This corporate identity based on the commune or parish can also be detected in the local statutes, and again was more marked in the mountains. Unlike the statutes of the city and plains, which limited the number of neighbours allowed to take part in funerals, local statutes for the mountains required the opposite—a full turnout. On the death of any neighbour over the age of 14, at least one member of the household in the parish or commune had to ‘honour the body’ of his neighbour, accompanying it from the home to the parish church, or else face a fine of from 5s to 10s.³⁶ Finally, in the mountains the parish church appears in the statutes as the point of organization for raising the hue and cry, and the meeting place for the commune and its councilors.³⁷ In the mountains north of Florence, ‘crossing the threshold’ of their own parish churches certainly was no mystery, as Sermini alleged had been the case in the mountains south of Siena.

in *I Capitoli del Comune di Firenze*, ed. Cesare Guasti, 2 vols. (Florence 1886).

³²Not. antecos., 858, 16r–17r (1368.v.5).

³³Not. antecos., 858, 6r (1366.v.4).

³⁴For the mountain commune of Montecuccoli, see not. antecos., 792, 99r (1431.viii.4) and 155r (1432.iii.1); for Montecarelli, see *ibid.*, 124r (1431.ii.14); for Casaglia ‘a pie d’alpe’ see *ibid.*, 157r (1432.iii.4); for San Giovanni a Firenzuola, see *ibid.*, 6599, 52v–53r; for Caburaccio, *ibid.*, 66v–67r; San Martino a Castro, *ibid.*, 73r; San Biagio a Petriolo, *ibid.*, 1502, 31r–v. The election of village syndics also took place in the plains; see for instance *ibid.*, 13534, 130v–31r, for San Cresci a Campi; and 13533, np (1365.v.25), np (1366.v.3), and np (1367.v.9) for Sesto.

³⁵Not. antecos., 13522, np (1365.vii.27); np (1365.viii.10); 1502, 31r–v; and 10423, np, no.6 (1414.iii.5).

³⁶Archivio di Stato Firenze, Statuti della comunità 420 Mangona (1416), c. 79, 42v; 7 Piancaldoli (1419), 2v; and 447 Montagna Fiorentina (1396), c. 29, 26r–v.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 7, 2v; 447, c. 34, 19v. Mountain statutes required one member per household to attend these meetings under the threat of 3s fine. I have not found similar statutes for the plains.

II

From the specification of ages, evidence of names, and testimony from last wills and testaments, Florentine highlanders do not easily fit a model of a backward, non-Christian people, distinct from those further down the hills, as contemporaries from the cities charged and historians of the Mediterranean and Tuscany have assumed ever since.³⁸ Yet the stereotypes of highlanders in Scotland and in Tuscany were not exactly the same. While Fordun and others feared the highlander and his bellicose nature, no such fear flows from Sermini's pen. By his account, the worst offense committed by his highland hosts was talking about trivial matters in the presence of a man as important as himself. Nor was this absence simply an oversight peculiar to Sermini; contemporary Florentines, such as the story-teller Franco Sacchetti and the humanist Poggio Bracciolini ridiculed their highlanders for their stupidity and primitive religion but, along with other Florentine writers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, gave no hint that these men and women could have been ferocious opponents to Florentine republican rule. The patrician diarist Buonaccorso Pitti,³⁹ the military commander Jacopo Salviati,⁴⁰ and the chronicler, Gregorio Dati,⁴¹ went further, praising the mountain men of the Mugello and the Casentino for their loyalty during the wars with Milan at the beginning of the fifteenth century, and their supposed appreciation of Florence's rule as effective, just, and benign.

Yet behind this praise was another reality revealed in the archival records. Far from being passive or rallying in defense of Florence's army and its ideals of Republicanism against Milanese 'tyranny' in the

³⁸Even la Roncière, presently our best authority on the life, customs, and religion of those from the Florentine *contado*, assumes (without presenting any evidence) that 'the quality of religious life was certainly inferior in the mountain zones of the Apennines and the Chianti' (la Roncière, 'Dans la campagne florentine', 309–10) and that it was more 'ritualistic and magical' (*ibid.*, 312).

³⁹*Ricordi*, in *Mercanti Scrittori. Ricordi nella Firenze tra medioevo e rinascimento*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan 1986), 341–503.

⁴⁰*Cronica, o memorie di Jacopo Salviati dall'anno 1398 al 1411*, in *Delizie degli Eruditi Toscani*, ed. Fr. Ildefonso di San Luigi (Florence 1784), vol. xviii, 175–381.

⁴¹*L'Istoria di Firenze di Gregorio Dati dal 1380 al 1405*, ed. Luigi Pratesi (Norcia 1902).

opening years of the fifteenth century, mountain peasants across northern and eastern crests of the Florentine territory rose up against their Florentine rulers. The judicial records and decrees (*provvisioni*) passed by Florence's highest legislative bodies show that thousands of peasants not only supported the Milanese troops but also assumed leadership roles and plotted strategy for the occupation of Florentine strongholds in the mountains. In addition, they built new fortifications on mountaintops, organized raiding parties across the highlands of the Alpi Fiorentine, Podere Fiorentino, and Mugello, and on several occasions besieged Florentine towns such as Palazzuolo and Florence's principal fortified town in the north, Firenzuola.⁴² These records, moreover, show a seemingly remarkable fact in pre-industrial social history: instead of being slaughtered, the highland peasants were victorious.⁴³ Between 1402 and 1404, following their armed insurrections across the Florentine Alps, Mugello, Casentino, and Valdambra, the ringleaders negotiated with the Florentine town councillors, who dropped the highlanders' death sentences adjudicated by the law courts in the previous years and in their place offered lifetime tax cuts, rights to carry arms, and sinecures in the Florentine government along with military power and rights to decide who could emigrate into their communities. In addition, the highlanders negotiated favourable terms for their villages, gaining exemptions from all taxes of up to fifteen years. More fundamentally, as a consequence of these successes, Florence's need to placate its subjects along the sensitive mountain frontiers, and its need to stop the flow of its mountain peasants migrating across the borders, resulted in the Florentine urban elites changing their tax system from a mosaic of unequal rates that by 1400 were six times higher in the mountains than

⁴²See Cohn, *Creating the Florentine State*, chs. 4–6.

⁴³Since completing this essay, I have investigated social protest across Europe more broadly during the later middle ages and have found that peasant and urban revolts of the lower classes succeeded far more often than would be suspected from the sociological claims about 'pre-industrial' revolt; see my *Lust for Liberty: the Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200–1425* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

in the plains, to a new 'universal' tax which charged all subjects within the Florentine *contado* according to the same principles and rates.⁴⁴

Why then did the story-tellers and chroniclers refrain from branding their mountain peasants as bellicose and beastly aggressive? Here we can only speak for Florentine Tuscany. First, historians in other areas of Italy have yet to uncover widespread peasant insurrection; in recent years they have even questioned whether the peasant movements in fourteenth-century Angevin Sicily and Naples can rightly be called 'real and true peasant rebellion'.⁴⁵ To what extent similar outbreaks of peasant insurrection characterized late medieval Italy will have to await further archival study into the judicial and legislative records of other city-states. Second, the mouthpieces of Florentine ideology, from urban poets and story-tellers to humanist scholars, may have been caught in a particularly embarrassing bind, especially at the end of the fifteenth century, when these poets and humanists proclaimed that Florence was the last hope of republican liberty in city-state Italy.⁴⁶

Such self-imposed silence can be sensed in the writings of the poet and story-teller Franco Sacchetti. In addition to his poems which heaped humorous abuse on the habits of peasants from mountains and plains, Sacchetti was a bureaucrat and judge, who spent much of his career on the outposts of the Florentine territory as a *podestà*, *vicarius*, and captain for the Florentine state, passing sentences on mundane criminal acts and advising Florence on policy regarding its territory. The incident that certainly would have proved the most troubling for him during his long career must have occurred when he was captain of the newly annexed mountainous territory of the Romagna, stationed at the market village or town of Rocca di San Casciano on the furthestmost north-east mountain frontiers of the Florentine territory.

⁴⁴Cohn, *Creating the Florentine State*, chs. 7–9.

⁴⁵See the essays in *Protesta e rivolta contadina nell'Italia medievale*, ed. G. Cherubini, in *Annali dell'Istituto 'Alcide Cervi'*, no. 16 (1994).

⁴⁶On this struggle and its ideology, see Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Princeton 1955; revised edn. in one vol., 1966); and Antonio Lanza, *Firenze contro Milano: Gli intellettuali fiorentini nelle guerre con i Visconti (1390–1440)* (Rome 1991).

In 1398 the Romagnol villagers of the Rocca di San Casciano rebelled, claiming that Florence had acted tyrannically by illegally reclaiming from them their rights to sell their bread gabelles granted to them with their submission to the Florentine Republic in 1382. The Florentine judge challenged these claims and further condemned two of the ringleaders to death, branding them as ‘tyrants’. This peculiar charge for a criminal proceeding arose not from the ringleaders’ acts of conspiracy and plans to wrest control of their village from Florentine dominion with the aid of their former feudal lords, but from their secular blasphemy in daring to call republican Florence itself a tyranny. Further, by turning to their former feudal lords to ‘liberate’ them from the ‘tyranny’ of Florentine republicanism, these men and their village followers had insulted Florentine ideology and its crusading claims, since the early fourteenth century, that the republic had freed these and other mountainous districts from the yoke and oppression of feudal tyranny.⁴⁷ The judgment and sentence of Florence’s captain did not, however, prevail. Instead, the ringleaders escaped, and two months later, with war beginning to mount along the mountainous northern and eastern borders, the village petitioned Florence’s highest councils. Not only was Sacchetti’s sentence overruled; the village won a five-year exemption from all taxes.⁴⁸

The judge, Franco Sacchetti,⁴⁹ Florence’s most important writer of stories since Giovanni Boccaccio, left no literary traces of this case. Instead, in the year of the revolt he wrote a long poem on his experiences as Capitano of the province, decrying the torments of war and praising peace, but without any mention of the civil strife in which he adjudicated or the social discontent then brewing within the

⁴⁷I have elaborated on this case with two different interpretations in Cohn, *Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore 1996), 122–3, and in Cohn, *Creating the Florentine State*, 152–3.

⁴⁸Archivio di Stato, Firenze, Provvisioni registri, reg. 88, 50v–51v (1399.iv.29).

⁴⁹On Sacchetti’s political career, see *La Letteratura italiana: Gli Autori, Dizionario bibliografico e Indici*, ed. Giorgio Inglese, 2 vols. (Turin 1990–1) ii, 1558–9; John Larner, *The Lords of Romagna: Romagnol Society and the Origins of the Signorie* (New York 1963), 162–4; and *Storia della letteratura italiana*, ed. Enrico Malato, 9 vols. to date (Rome 1995–) ii, *Il Trecento*, 894–901.

Romagna Fiorentina and the mountains of Florence's northeastern borders.⁵⁰ While Sacchetti's *Il Trecentonovelle* revelled in the satire of peasants, mocking them for their animal manners and poverty, rebellion by Florence's supposedly faithful subjects was not a subject he cared to breach.

Florence's principal chronicler of the war between Florence and Milan at the turn of the fifteenth century was the merchant historian Gregorio Dati. His version of events was the first to pitch Florence as the last bastion of republican liberty against the Milanese tyranny of Giangaleazzo Visconti.⁵¹ In making this propagandistic argument, Dati went beyond silence to resolve the potential contradiction and embarrassment of Florence's own subjects revolting against its taxes and rule, simply rewriting the history of Florence's highlands Mel Gibson-style. Chapter 54 is entitled: 'How the troops of the Duke came into the *contado* of Florence, but were not able to achieve anything by it'. Instead of admitting escalating taxes, depopulation, peasant misery and ultimately their assistance to the Milanese troops and rebellion, he describes 'the marvelous fortifications' that the Florentines maintained along their mountainous borders and the fierceness of its numerous peasant defenders; 'each peasant', according to Dati, 'was the equal of two foreign invaders'.⁵²

From Scipione Ammirato, the elder at the end of the sixteenth century⁵³ to Hans Baron and Antonio Lanzi in the second half of the twentieth century, Dati's version of events has prevailed over the counter-story that can be read from the archival records. As a consequence, historians have perpetuated a myth of Florence as the champion of republican liberty whose message rang from the battlefields against Milanese tyranny. Through the writings of Leonardo Bruni and Niccolò Machiavelli, the lessons and inspiration drawn from

⁵⁰Canzone distesa di Franco Sachetti, fatta a Portico di Romagna, dove era capitano per lo Comune di Firenze, anno MCCCCLXXXVIII, in Lanza, *Firenze contro Milano*, 175–7; and Sacchetti, *I libro delle Rime*, ed. Franco Agno (Florence 1990), 456–60.

⁵¹On Dati's importance for Florentine historiography, see Baron, *The Crisis*, 168–72.

⁵²Dati, *L'Istoria*, 49–50.

⁵³*Istorie fiorentine con l'aggiunte di Scipione il Giovane* (Florence 1848).

this conflict ultimately became the seedbed of modern British republicanism in the seventeenth century.⁵⁴ But beneath this titanic struggle in the history of ideas another struggle for liberty actually raged in the mountains of northern Tuscany at the beginning of the fifteenth century, one which saw peasants as the victors over unequal and oppressive taxation at the hands of their urban republican lords. Evidently, it was a story about which the Florentine *literati* did not wish to joke.

⁵⁴See Baron, *The Crisis*, esp. 443–62 (Epilogue); and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton 1975).