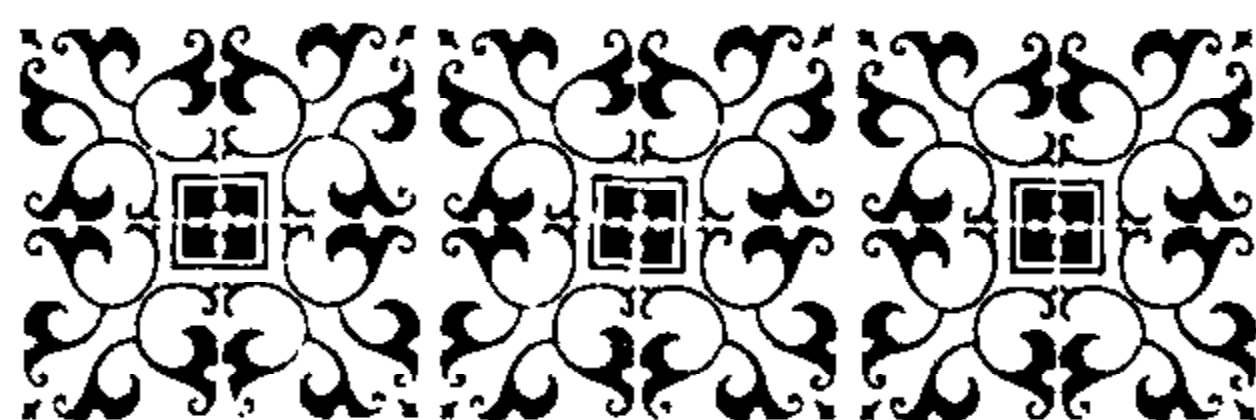


THE POPE, HIS BANKER, AND VENICE

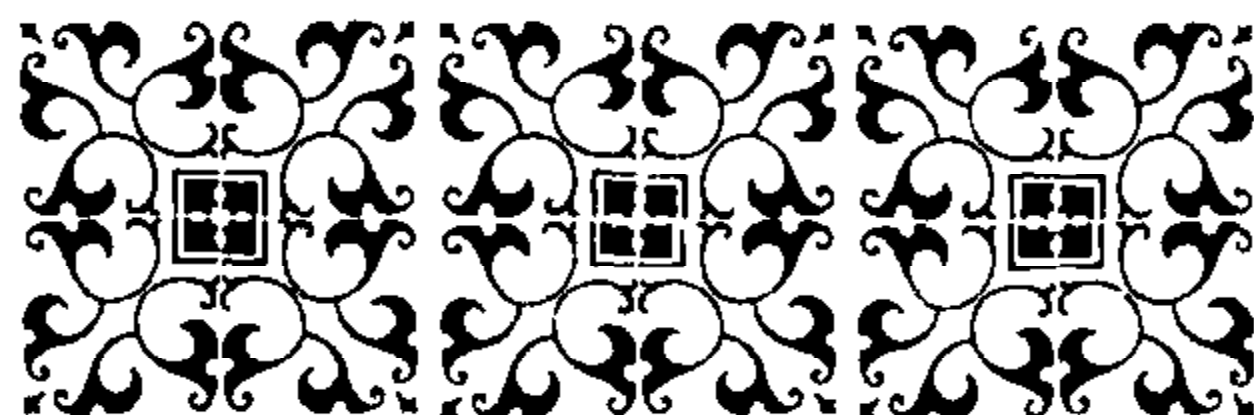


FELIX GILBERT

A vivid account of men, money, and
states in the High Renaissance



THE POPE,
HIS BANKER,
AND VENICE



FELIX GILBERT

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Acknowledgments

The research that resulted in the composition of this book began when, in the course of a study on the impact of the War of the League of Cambrai on the political and social life of Venice, I came upon a series of documents on loan negotiations between the Venetian government and the wealthy banker Agostino Chigi. These documents had much to say about the diplomacy and financial policy of the Renaissance. I came to realize that the story connected with these documents could be fully elucidated only by research extending beyond Venice into the archives and libraries of Rome and other Italian cities. As it turned out, the story led far beyond the scope of my original project, and required separate treatment.

As in earlier work on Italian Renaissance history, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Italian archivists and librarians. I would like to express my thanks to the directors, archivists, and librarians of the Archivio di Stato, the Biblioteca Marciana, and the Biblioteca Correr in Venice; and in particular I would like to mention the advice I received from the Direttrice of the Archivio di Stato, Dr. Maria Francesca Tiepolo. In Rome I worked in the Archivio di Stato, in the Biblioteca Vaticana, and in the Archivio Segreto Vaticano; my special thanks are due to the Viceprefetto of the Biblioteca Vaticana, Monsignor Ruyschaert. I also worked, although only briefly, in the Archivi di Stato of Florence and Siena; my work in Siena was facilitated by information I received from Professor Giuliano Catino of the University of Siena. As on previous occasions, Dr. Gino Corti helped me with his great knowledge of Italian archives, and I used copies he had

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THE PAPAL STATES AND THE REPUBLIC OF VENICE, EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY



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Venice in the War of the League of Cambrai

THE HALL of the Doge's palace, where the Venetian Senate assembled, is adorned by a large painting of Palma Giovane's celebrating the victory of Venice over the League of Cambrai. Sansovino's *Venetia città nobilissima*, the celebrated sixteenth-century guidebook to the historic monuments and art treasures of Venice, gives the following description of this painting: "In the center stands the Doge Leonardo Loredan and next to him Venezia and her lion. Venezia draws a rapier against another young woman, clad in a coat of mail, a helmet on her head, riding a bull; she represents Europe and holds a shield on which are depicted the coats-of-arms of the princes allied against Venice. In the corner of the painting, two other figures can be seen: Peace and Plenty, which will flourish under the Doge's wise reign. Hovering above are two personifications of Victory, holding wreaths of olives in their hands. Padua is outlined on the horizon because it was the first city that Venice reconquered on the terra firma."¹

The War of the League of Cambrai—named after the town in the Netherlands where in 1508 the alliance against Venice was concluded—lasted from 1509 to 1517.² The painting is suggestive of a situation that existed for only four or five months in the year 1509: Venice was standing alone against the most powerful states of Europe—France, Germany, England, Spain, and the Pope, who used not only his armies but also his spiritual weapon of excommunication. In these early months of the war, the possession of Padua was crucial. After the disastrous defeat of the Venetian army at Agnadello on May 14, 1509, Venice lost all its

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widespread possessions on the terra firma, and the nadir of Venetian power was reached when even Padua—whose conquest in 1405 had signified the beginning of Venetian expansion over the terra firma—fell to the enemy early in June 1509. Thus the reconquest of Padua by a surprise attack on July 17, six weeks after it had been lost, was considered a turning point, signifying that Venice would rise again. In the following months Padua withstood a siege by Maximilian, the German king, and most of the terra firma was back in Venetian hands when military operations ceased with the approach of winter. Venice had survived. Yet the war dragged on, and Venice continued to pass through periods of great danger. The campaign in the summer of 1510 was almost a repetition of what had happened in 1509: the terra firma again was lost although, this time, Padua was held. In one essential fact, however, the situation was different from that of the preceding year: Venice was no longer isolated.

Immediately after the defeat at Agnadello, the Venetians had made a strong effort to break up the alliance that had been formed against them, and this effort was bearing fruit. It seemed to the Venetians that their best hope lay in trying to bring about a change in the attitude of Pope Julius II. To show their goodwill, they handed over to papal representatives the towns in the Romagna which they had occupied after the downfall of Cesare Borgia's rule in 1503—that move had angered the Pope because he claimed these areas as part of the papal states. The surrender of these territories to papal authority was followed by the appointment of ambassadors who went to Rome to beg the Pope to lift the excommunication of Venice and to sue for peace. At first, the Pope was unyielding, but he could not fail to see that the continued existence of Venice as a power was an absolute necessity in order to prevent France from gaining complete control over northern Italy. Furthermore the Pope saw in the reconquest of Padua and in the successful defense of the city against Maximilian's attack an indication that Venice still had resources that might be of great value in a struggle against France. So, in Febru-

ary 1510, after long and difficult negotiations in which Venice was forced to accept stringent conditions, the excommunication was lifted and peace was reestablished between the Pope and Venice.

Thus, in the midsummer of 1510, when the Venetians again were hard pressed and had lost much of the terra firma, the Pope intervened. Swiss Landsknechte, hired by the Pope, moved against the French from the north, and papal troops moved against Ferrara, the French king's most loyal ally and Venice's neighbor and old enemy. These maneuvers were of limited success. Venice gained breathing space, but Verona and a good part of the terra firma remained in French hands. The intervention of the Landsknechte brought no relief; after a brief advance, they withdrew. Ferrara proved to be too strongly defended. Nevertheless, military cooperation between Venice and the Pope had now been established and grew stronger in the following months. The Pope, impatient with the lack of progress during the summer campaign, insisted on prosecuting the war against Ferrara during the winter, and he himself went to Bologna and then, to give the campaign impetus, on to the troops operating against Ferrara. Again Ferrara proved to be beyond reach, but the papal army surrounded Mirandola, a mountain fortress protecting the road to the French headquarters in Milan. In this operation, the papal troops were supported by one part of the Venetian army; the other half of the army was stationed further north guarding against advances of French troops from the west and of German troops from the north. This was the precarious situation in February 1511 when our story begins. The French had been rather passive during the winter, but it could be expected that, with the coming of spring, the customary time for the beginning of a new campaign, they would take the initiative in a new offensive.

P AINTINGS in public buildings commemorate the great moments and the heroic deeds of the past; they are intended

to encourage the viewer to reflect on events that demonstrate the value of strength and courage. But wars are more than a series of armed clashes. Military operations are only one part of a complex web of diplomatic negotiations, administrative regulations, and economic measures. During the Italian Renaissance, the diplomatic and political aspects of war were frequently more decisive than military operations, and the War of the League of Cambrai is a typical example of this, its outcome being finally decided by changes in alliances and power groups, by the capacity of rulers to mobilize their resources rather than by campaigns and battles. Palma's painting in the ducal palace commemorating Venice's victory in the war hangs over the door leading from the hall in which the Senate met to the room of the Collegio. Although it is unlikely that this spot was consciously chosen, it is strangely meaningful: the direction of affairs during the war fell to the two assemblies whose meeting halls were connected by that door.³

The Collegio was the most authoritative body in the Venetian structure of councils and magistracies; when we talk about actions of the "Venetian government," we are referring to decisions of the Collegio. The Collegio had increased in size over the centuries, and by the early sixteenth century it had twenty-six members. The most ancient component of the Collegio consisted of the Doge and his counselors—one from each of the six districts (*sestiere*) into which Venice was divided. Later the Collegio was enlarged by the addition of the three heads of the Quarantia, which was the forty-man appeals court in criminal and civil cases. A further addition was the sixteen "Wise Men," members of the Council of Savi, who, by the time of the War of the League of Cambrai, were probably the most important element in the Collegio. They had different administrative functions and, accordingly, were unequal in their influence. Five of the Savi, usually young nobles, still inexperienced in government affairs, were in charge of navy supplies and supervised trade and over-

seas colonies; they were called Savi ai Ordini. Five other members of the Council of Savi, called Savi di Terra Firma, administered the Venetian possessions in northern Italy, organized the army, and directed the financial agencies. The most powerful members of the Council of Savi were, as their name indicates, the six Savi Grandi. They had the overall control over the execution of policy decisions.

Usually in the mornings, the full Collegio assembled, discussed whatever new information had come in, and decided on the measures to be taken. Then the Savi were commissioned to issue the required orders and to draft the necessary replies and instructions. If foreign affairs demanded action that had to be handled with particular discretion or urgency, they were sometimes entrusted to the heads of the Council of Ten (the Dieci), originally a magistracy in charge of internal security, but which in the sixteenth century began to extend its functions into the areas of foreign policy and finance.

In the next stage of the policy-making process, the Pregadi—or the Senate, as this assembly was officially styled—were consulted and could make their weight felt. The measures the Savi prepared, including all the instructions to Venetian ambassadors abroad, had to be submitted for approval to the Pregadi. When they were considered to be particularly important and it was feared that they might encounter strong opposition in the Pregadi, they were presented in the name of the entire Collegio. Usually, however, they were proposed in the name of the Council of Savi or of that group of the Savi in whose fields of competence the suggested measure fell. This did not mean that these proposals had not been approved by the entire Collegio and did not have its authority behind them.

The manner by which a political decision was reached has two notable features: proposals were never made by an individual, but in the name of an agency or council, and it was understood that behind them stood the authority of the entire government.

It was considered important to give the appearance of unity and a common will.

This impression is deceptive; in reality, differences of opinion and sharp tensions existed among the Venetian political leaders. They are not easy to discover or define because of a tendency toward concealment. Nevertheless, there are various indications of their existence in the sources. A Savio might propose an amendment to an instruction which suggests that he is in favor of a different approach. In the documents presented to the Pregadi, all proposals carried in the left margin the names of their sponsors; sometimes a Savio placed after his name a short remark that he does not agree with this particular proposal; sometimes an important member of the Collegio, whose concern with the subject matter under discussion is known, is noted as absent. In pursuing such instances of counterproposals, disapprovals, or absences over a stretch of time, a picture of conflicts and of groupings emerges. Sometimes such hints can be substantiated through statements in the two great diaries that cover the period of the War of the League of Cambrai—those of Marino Sanudo⁴ and Girolamo Priuli.⁵ Insofar as attempts to penetrate the harmonious surface of Venetian politics are concerned, these diarists complement each other. Priuli is quite frank in outlining differing and opposing views, but is too discreet to affix names to them; Sanudo enjoyed reporting the clashes among leading personalities, but is rather vague in describing the arguments. Only at critical moments can we recognize how differences over issues are entangled with clashes between personalities. Much about the conflicts and tensions in Venetian politics and their connection with personal rivalries remains in the dark.

The extent of the power over Venetian politics which the Collegio and Pregadi possessed during the War of the League of Cambrai becomes more clear when the functions and activities of these two bodies are compared with those of the most famous and usually highest-ranked institution of the Venetian government: the Great Council (Maggior Consiglio). Certainly, sover-

VENICE IN THE WAR

eighty rested with the Great Council; every Venetian noble above the age of twenty-five belonged to it, and at the time of the War of the League of Cambrai it had more than 2500 members, something like 10 percent of the male population of the city in the same age group.⁶ Since its "closing"⁷ early in the fourteenth century, the membership of the Great Council had more than doubled, and the increase in size reduced its effectiveness and influence. It was clumsy to manage, and impossible to handle in weekly meetings the incessant stream of business with thoroughness, dispatch, and secrecy. It remained a firm rule that approval by the Great Council was needed for any changes that concerned the Venetian constitutional structure and the relations among the various government agencies and councils; this competence ensured the Great Council's embodiment of Venetian sovereignty and guardian of the Venetian political tradition. Its active participation in the conduct of politics centered on its right to elect important officials: the main officials of the city of Venice, the various governors and administrators in the towns of the terra firma and of Venice's overseas possessions, the members of the Pregadi, the Quarantia, the Council of Ten, and the Doge.

This description might convey the impression of the Great Council's firm grip over the entire governmental apparatus. But this would be misleading. Only a limited number of nobles had the qualifications fitting them to hold the office of counselor or member of the Ten. Also, the dependence of the Pregadi on the Great Council was more apparent than real. The Pregadi consisted of 150 to 200 men;⁸ a good number of them were high officials who, because of the office they held, were entitled to attend the meetings of the Pregadi but without the right to vote. The bulk of the Pregadi were the 120 members whom the Great Council elected annually during the months of August and September. Still, the Great Council had free choice only in a nominal way; it had become customary to reelect those who had been in the Pregadi in the preceding year. Some changes took place: those members who died had to be replaced, and vacancies were

created when members of the Pregadi received appointments or were chosen for missions that took them away from Venice. Sometimes the Great Council did assert its right of free choice. When there was a military defeat or when Venice was forced to conclude a humiliating agreement, those who were considered to have been the chief advocates of the policy that led to failure were not reelected. But this was rare, and exclusion from the Pregadi was usually only temporary. Members of the Pregadi could feel they belonged to a body that was not responsible to any other council, and that they were entitled to determine and conduct whatever policies they wanted.

During the War of the League of Cambrai, the political role of the Great Council diminished. With the loss of the terra firma, the number of government positions filled by election to the Great Council was sharply reduced. The financial advantages of holding positions on the terra firma made their possession very attractive—not so much for the rich leading citizens as for the greater numbers of “poor nobles.” When enemy occupation removed the need for election by the Great Council to these positions, many nobles lost interest in its proceedings and, during the war, meetings were poorly attended. Moreover, wartime exigencies unavoidably shifted the weight of leadership to the Senate. The war required daily attendance to business and quick decisions, and although the distribution of the great majority of government offices was in the hands of the Great Council, those that were of particular importance for the conduct of war were not. First of all the Council of Savi was regarded as a committee of the Senate, and so its members were elected by the Pregadi. The Pregadi also elected the diplomatic representatives of the Venetian government; their activities were crucial for the conduct of the war. But the Pregadi also elected the men who had chief responsibility for the military operations: the provveditori. For the duration of their appointment they stayed with the troops, in close contact with the condottiere. It was their responsibility to act as intermediaries between the Collegio and the

condottiere, to transmit to the condottiere the instructions of the Venetian government and to report to the government about the military situation and operational plans. To be a provveditore in a successful campaign could be the steppingstone to the highest office; for instance, Gritti, one of the most efficient provveditori in the War of the League of Cambrai, later was elected Doge. It was also a risky position because the provveditore was frequently held responsible for failure or defeat. Finally, the Pregadi had a decisive say in what, at the time, was characterized as "the sinews of war": finances—they had to pass on proposals to levy new taxes.

The most important decisions in wartime were made in the Collegio and, particularly, in the Council of Savi; the Pregadi gave the final stamp. However, fundamental reexamination and reconsideration of an issue almost never took place in the deliberations of the Pregadi. The members of the Collegio, particularly the Savi Grandi, led the discussion in the Pregadi. They had the right to speak first, and as a matter of fact it was rare for senators who did not belong to the Collegio or to the Council of Ten or who did not hold a high official position even to address the Senate.

Nevertheless, the Collegio and the Savi were not executive agencies in contrast to a "deliberative" or "legislative" Senate. In all these bodies—actually even in the Great Council—the executive, deliberative, and legislative functions, which we are now accustomed to separate, were combined.

This system might seem to have invited temptation for a few, by dominating the Savi and Pregadi, to take control of the government and exclude the rest of the nobility from power. But institutional arrangements existed which were intended to prevent the consolidation of power in the hands of a small group. The most important precaution was the rotation of offices: the term of office was strictly limited. Average tenure of office was six months. A man whose term had ended could not be elected to the same office again until as many months had passed as he had