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**THE INTERMITTENCE OF NECESSITY:
JEWISH MONEYLENDING
IN QUATTROCENTO FLORENCE**

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University Honors and College Scholars Senior Project

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At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Florentine law forbade Jews from lending money within the city, *contado*, or any other region in the Florentine domain. By the middle of the fifteenth century, Jewish moneylending in Florence was not only legal, but also deemed “necessary” by the government. Yet by the close of the century, Jewish moneylenders were, once again, forbidden in Florence.

There is little scholarship that directly addresses the issue of Jewish moneylending in Renaissance Florence; for the most part, when discussed, it is a tangential issue, rather than the main focus of the work. The purpose of this paper is to prove that Jewish moneylending in Quattrocento Florence was characterized first and foremost by economic necessity. During periods when their capital resources were needed, Jewish moneylenders were allowed into areas under Florentine jurisdiction. When their financial services were not economically necessary for the Florentine state, Jewish moneylenders were forbidden.

Jewish expulsions occurred all over Europe at the end of the fifteenth century. Perhaps this study, when examined alongside other similar studies dealing with other areas of Europe, will be useful to historians to compare and contrast the various expulsions of Jews during this period and explain why some were more pervasive and lasted hundreds of years, while others were relatively brief.

In Florence there were three types of lending institutions: great banks (*banchi grossi*), small banks (*banchi a minuto*), and pawnshops (*banchi di pegno* or *banchi a pannello*).¹ Pawnshops were recognizable by a red hanging in the doorway, and their

¹ Raymond de Roover, *The Rise and Decline of the Medici Bank, 1397-1494* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), 14.

operators were branded as manifest usurers.² It was in this financial sector that Jewish moneylenders operated in Florence.

² Manifest usurers had no defense for their usury. Other violators of the Church usury laws had found ways to defend their usurious practices, most commonly asserting that interest was due to offset any financial risk involved. Pawnbrokering transactions involved no element of risk; therefore, pawnbrokers were manifest usurers. For a detailed treatment of this matter, see *Ibid.*, 10-14.

THE ABSENCE OF NECESSITY

In January of 1406, the communal government of Florence prohibited all Jewish moneylending activities. The legislation declared:

Considering that Jews or Hebrews are enemies of the cross, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of all Christians, and that they engage in usury against the command of Holy Church [sic]...[the priors] have decreed that no Hebrew or Jew...shall be allowed...to lend money at usury...in the city, *contado*, or district of Florence, or in any city, region, or place under the jurisdiction of the Commune of Florence, under penalty of 1,000 florins.¹

Historian Anthony Molho has characterized this law as a “moral precept.”² On the surface, Molho’s characterization seems fitting. The first part of the law is saturated with explicitly religious terms, asserting the general animosity between Jews and Christians and condemning Jewish usurers for their violation of Christian law. However, a deeper examination reveals several factors that call into question Molho’s morality label.

The first factor is the timing of the legislation. 1406 was, at best, arbitrary timing for a morally-based ban on Jewish moneylending. On the other hand, 1402 would have been a perfect time for such a ban. During 1402, the Visconti crisis was at its height. Florence found herself isolated diplomatically and militarily. One by one her allies had fallen to Duke Giangaleazzo Visconti of Milan, either through coup, purchase, or occupation. Florence was threatened with economic strangulation after the Duke annexed Pisa. As a landlocked commercial power, Florence’s

¹ U. Cassuto, *Gli ebrei a Firenze nell’età del Rinascimento* (Florence, 1918), 362-65, as quoted in Gene Brucker, ed., *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study* (New York, 1971), 240-41.

² Anthony Molho, *Florentine Public Finances in the Early Renaissance, 1400-1433* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 37.

economy was dependent upon the use of Pisan ports for access to the Mediterranean Sea. After Giangaleazzo's purchase of Pisa, one Florentine diplomat lamented, "This is very bad news for us. The tyrant has established a foothold in Tuscany and will soon do the same in Siena, so that the fire is at the door. Never before have we had so powerful a *signore* for a neighbor."³ In April of 1402, Visconti placed a ban on Florentine trade in Pisa.⁴ When Bologna fell to the Duke in June of the same year, the stage was set for a final confrontation.⁵

Florence, with no allies or sea outlets, was in a desperate situation. Conspirators supporting the Duke had infiltrated the Florentine contado.⁶ Because of its military inferiority to the forces of the Duke, Florence had no choice but to adopt a defensive strategy, though many feared such a posture "since the enemy will know that he can assault us with impunity [because] he will not be attacked."⁷ In the meantime, the Florentine government worked hard at two tasks. The first was to shore up the psychological disposition of the home front. Between 1399 and 1427, thirty-four larger than life-size statues of prophets and saints were commissioned in Florence, and many of these have been associated with the Visconti crisis.⁸ Strenuously seeking the support of the Roman pope was the second task. Florentine

³ *Archivio di Stato, Prato; Archivio Datini*, 1063, unpaginated, letters of Datini to Majorca, 15 Feb. and 15 March 1399, as quoted in Gene Brucker, *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence* (Princeton, 1977), 169.

⁴ D. M. Bueno de Mesquita, *Giangaleazzo Visconti, Duke of Milan (1351-1402): A Study in the Political Career of an Italian Despot* (Cambridge, 1941), 285.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶ David Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia: The Social History of an Italian Town, 1200-1430* (New Haven, 1967), 206.

⁷ Brucker, *The Civic World*, 179.

⁸ Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York, 1979), 251-52. Perhaps the most notable of these Visconti-related statues is Donatello's *St. George*. The Visconti family crest featured a giant serpent, and St. George was the dragon slayer. Martines cautions, however, that historians such as Hans Baron have perhaps overly stressed the novelty of such practices in Renaissance Italy.

diplomats went to Rome to appeal to Pope Boniface IX.⁹ As the Florentines pulled out all the stops to woo papal support, would it not have been the perfect time for a morally-based ban on Jewish lending? After all, Florence was desperate for papal backing, not only for the diplomatic momentum that would result from such an alliance, but also for the military forces of the papal army. Nevertheless, the Florentine envoys were not able to broker a papal pact. Giangaleazzo Visconti was poised to destroy Florence and establish his Italic kingdom. He is said to have even ordered a crown and royal robes for his coronation.¹⁰ However, the situation was defused when Giangaleazzo unexpectedly died of the plague in September of 1402.¹¹

Molho's morality label on the 1406 prohibition becomes less convincing when the major events surrounding it are examined. The prohibition coincided perfectly with the Florentine conquest of Pisa in 1406.¹² As previously mentioned, Pisa was the key to Florentine access to the Mediterranean Sea and thus access to maritime trade, the lifeblood of her commercial economy. In addition to increased commercial revenue, the conquest of Pisa also boosted tax revenue; once brought under Florentine dominion, the city of Pisa and its inhabitants were taxed very heavily. In 1408, Pisa paid 200,000 lire into the treasury of the Florentine commune, and during these years it "was a source of substantial profit" for Florence.¹³ In 1431, an Aretine rebel referring to this exploitation sought to "escape such heavy taxes" and not end up like

⁹ Brucker, *The Civic World*, 175.

¹⁰ Bueno de Mesquita, 310.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 297.

¹² Following Giangaleazzo Visconti's death, his empire was liquidated by the papacy and the other major city-states of Italy.

¹³ Marvin Becker, "Economic Change and the Emerging Florentine Territorial State," *Studies in the Renaissance*, 13 (1966), 37.

the Pisans, “whose goods have been robbed.”¹⁴ If 1406 was a questionable time for a ban on Jewish moneylending based on morality, it was the ideal time for an economically motivated ban. With the conquest of Pisa and the subsequent promise of restored trade revenues as well as substantial tax assessments, the Commune of Florence found itself in an economic position that *allowed* it to ban Jewish moneylending.¹⁵ The city of Florence simply did not need the liquid capital that Jewish bankers offered.

The second factor challenging Molho’s morality label is the ambiguity of such a moral argument against Jewish usury. It could be argued that Jewish moneylending was actually morally preferable to Christian manifest usury. In fact, this line of thinking was the norm rather than the exception. Historian Armando Saponi has concisely summarized this opinion, pointing out that, in the minds of Florentines, “certainly [the Jews] could not be any more damned than they already were, and once damned it was just as well that they be allowed to exercise a function necessary to the growth of the economy.”¹⁶ Better for a hell-bound Jew to sin than for a Florentine Christian to enter onto the pathway to destruction. Many ecclesiastics explicitly condemned Christian manifest usurers as “worse than the Jews...for the Jews do not lend at usury to their brothers.”¹⁷ There were a number of Christian pawnbrokers in

¹⁴ Ubaldo Pasqui, “Una congiura per liberare Arezzo dalla dipendenza dei Fiorentini (1431),” *Archivio Storico Italiano*, ser. 5, LV (1890), 16, as quoted in Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 44.

¹⁵ Import and export duties on all items entering or exiting the Florentine domain were an important part of the *gabelle* system, one of the principal sources of communal revenue. Pisa, as Florence’s key port, was thus a major addition to Florentine finances via this *gabelle* system, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

¹⁶ Armando Saponi, “The Physiognomy of the Florentine Merchant,” in *Social and Economic Foundations of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Anthony Molho (New York, 1969), 69.

¹⁷ Jacques de Vitry, Sermon “Ad Status,” no. 58, 14, as quoted in Jacques Le Goff, *Your Money or Your Life: Economy and Religion in the Middle Ages*, trans. Patricia Ranum (New York, 1990), 37-38.

Florence at this time, and the government openly allowed these manifest usurers to ply their trade in the city and *contado*. Christian pawnbrokers paid an annual “fine” for “the detestable sin of usury.” But because of this fine, they were “to be free and absolved from any further censure, penalty, or exaction.”¹⁸ This fine was, in essence, a licensing fee to allow the practice of manifest usury.

Why then would the government of Florence issue a general ban against Jewish usurers imbued with moral overtones when it was licensing Christians to practice the same trade? The ambiguity inherent in the morality argument against Jewish lending was precisely what made it so attractive to the Florentine *Signoria*; it made the law easily reversible, giving the government some political agility on the matter. At this point, the government had an economic incentive in its preference of Christian usury over Jewish usury. Both Christian and Jewish pawnbrokers paid the *gabella degli feneratori*, the licensing “fine” to practice their trade. However, because Jews were considered foreigners, they were exempt from all taxes imposed by the Florentine government.¹⁹ Christian pawnbrokers, on the other hand, were not, so the government was able to generate tax revenue from their usurious profits, making them economically preferable to Jewish moneylenders.

Some ecclesiastics were even frequent customers of Jewish pawnshops, such as in Pistoia. See Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia*, 161.

¹⁸ Alfred Doren, *Studien aus der Florentiner Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, Vol. II, *Das Florentiner Zunftwesen vom 14. bis zum 16. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 1908), 789-90 as quoted in de Roover, 14. For example, once this fine was introduced, victims of usurious contracts could no longer sue for damages in ecclesiastical courts. See Becker, 19.

¹⁹ Anthony Molho, “A Note on Jewish Moneylenders in Tuscany in the Late Trecento and Early Quattrocento,” in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Hans Baron*, ed. Anthony Molho and John A. Tedeschi (Dekalb, Ill., 1971), 103-05. Some evidence here even suggests that the Christian manifest usurers paid a larger *gabella degli feneratori* than the Jewish pawnbrokers. This evidence, however, is not sufficient to make a generalization.

The third and most convincing factor that calls into question Molho's characterization of the ban is that whenever and wherever this "moral" law and communal economics ran counter to one another, the ban was rescinded. Between 1406 and 1410, at least nine localities within the Florentine dominion petitioned and were granted permission to allow Jewish pawnbrokers into their territory.²⁰ These subject territories petitioned that, unless Jewish lenders were allowed into their cities, they would be unable to pay their taxes to Florence or their commerce-related debts. In 1407, of the 48,000 florins in taxes assessed upon the city of Pisa by the Florentine government, only 5500 florins had been collected within thirteen months of the assessment.²¹

Of these petitioning localities, Jewish pawnbroking in the territory of Arezzo is perhaps the best documented. In March of 1399, the Aretine communal council evaluated the petition of Gaius, a Jewish pawnbroker who wished to settle there and practice his trade. In April of that same year, Gaius' petition was approved with one important caveat: the communal government of Arezzo and its citizens would not be responsible for his defense if Florentine authorities decided to impose any laws or sanctions on him or his entourage.²² Because Arezzo was a subject city, the *Signoria* of Florence had to ratify the agreement, which it did on April 28, 1399.²³

The terms set forth in the agreement fell into two categories. The first set of terms regulated the business activities of Gaius and his entourage. Gaius was authorized to operate a pawnshop in Arezzo for twenty years. He was allowed to

²⁰ Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 39. Pistoia, Volterra, Cortona, Pisa, Arezzo, and Empoli were among the petitioning territories.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

²² Molho, "A Note on Jewish Moneylenders," 101.

²³ *Ibid.*, 102.

accept any pawn from any person, and pawns not redeemed within thirteen months and three days of their deposit became property of the pawnbroker.²⁴ The maximum rate of interest to be charged was set at thirty percent.²⁵ The second set of terms set forth the personal and legal status of the Jews vis-à-vis civil authorities. Gaius' account books could be used as legal evidence in communal court. City authorities were to legally treat them like other citizens. They could freely congregate in their synagogues and could purchase any type of land, and because they were considered foreigners, they were exempt from all taxes imposed by the Florentine or Aretine governments.²⁶ The Florentine government added to the terms that neither Gaius nor his associates could be forced to wear the yellow mark.²⁷ To demonstrate its willingness to abide by the terms, the Aretine officials posted a surety of 1000 florins. In the case of a breach of the terms, 500 florins were to be awarded to Gaius, with the other 500 going to the magistrate overseeing the case.²⁸

Little record exists of Gaius once he settled in Arezzo. Nine men accompanied him as his business associates. Gaius paid the annual *gabella degli feneratori*.²⁹ Little else is known about him except that his twenty-year contract was cut short by the general ban on Jewish lending issued in 1406 by Florentine officials. Gaius was forced to flee Arezzo following the ban, and he never came back.³⁰ Like so many other subject communities, Arezzo very vocally protested the ban on the

²⁴ The Florentine *Signoria* initially challenged these terms, requesting that Gaius not be allowed to accept stolen property as pawns. However, Gaius and the Aretine government proved inflexible on the matter, and the Florentine officials eventually gave in.

²⁵ Ibid., 102-03.

²⁶ Ibid., 103.

²⁷ Ibid., 103. This yellow mark was set forth by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1216 to distinguish Jews from Christians and will be discussed in detail in a later portion of the paper.

²⁸ Ibid., 104.

²⁹ Ibid., 104-05.

³⁰ Ibid., 105.

grounds that they could not afford to pay their taxes to Florence without Jewish moneylenders in their city. They needed the liquid wealth of Jewish bankers to meet their annual tax assessments. Forced to choose between the ban or tax revenues, Florentine officials chose the latter and granted Arezzo's petition. Less than a week after the Aretine petition was granted, another Jew, Salomon Lucci, was granted permission by both Aretine and Florentine officials to open up a pawnshop in Arezzo.³¹ Salomon had requested and was granted all of the privileges of his predecessor.³² Clearly in Arezzo, as well as the other successfully petitioning localities under Florentine jurisdiction, the economic interests of the mother city easily trumped the supposed morality of the 1406 prohibition, resulting in its repeal.³³

Molho's "moral" characterization of the 1406 ban is highly questionable. The Florentine government was licensing Christian pawnbrokers to perform the same function as Jewish moneylenders and was receiving financial benefits from their usurious practices through taxation of their profits. Though degrees of moral idealism and anti-Semitism no doubt contributed to the legislation, the defining characteristic of the ban seems to have been economics. Rather than communicating, "No Jewish moneylending because it is morally wrong," the actions of the government conveyed the attitude, "No Jewish moneylending unless it is financially beneficial to the Commune of Florence." After the conquest of Pisa in 1406, Jewish moneylending was not economically necessary in the city of Florence, thus the ban

³¹ Ibid., 106.

³² It is interesting that two of Salomon's business associates in Arezzo had also been among Gaius' nine-man entourage.

³³ There is no evidence of any such petition being rejected by the government of Florence.

was enforced. In areas of the domain where Jewish moneylenders were necessary for the inhabitants to pay their taxes to the Florentine government, the ban was lifted.

THE ONSET OF NECESSITY

By June of 1430 the economic necessity that had earlier ushered in the Jews in certain areas of the *contado* had made its way into Florence. The Florentine government ruled:

So that the poor people of Florence are not ruined, particularly in this time of pestilence, by such exorbitant rates as are being charged by those who engage in usury, and so that when necessity impels them, they may provide for their needs with a lighter charge [of interest], and desiring to admit Jews into the city, the lord priors...have decreed the following...Until September 15, the lord priors...[with their colleges] may authorize any Jew or Jews to engage in usury in the city of Florence...with the following limitation, that the *Signoria* and colleges may not permit...any Jew or Hebrew to charge a higher rate of interest than [20 percent per year].¹

The plague of 1430 struck at a time when communal finances were at a breaking point. Desperate for capital to alleviate the crisis, the city of Florence reversed its former stance and allowed Jewish moneylenders into the city.

There were three principal sources of income for the Commune of Florence. The first was direct taxation of the *contado* and subject cities. The second was *gabelles*, or indirect taxes, assessed on the consumption of certain goods (usually everyday commodities), as well as imports. The third was forced loans on the city's inhabitants, and occasionally on clerics.² In the eyes of the government, the two former sources were preferable to the third.³ Direct taxation on urban capital and real

¹ U. Cassuto, *Gli ebrei a Firenze nell'età del Rinascimento*, 362-65, as quoted in Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 241.

² Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 22.

³ This was for a variety of reasons. Two principal reasons were the protection of the city's economic resources as well as pacification of the city's elites, who could muster up much louder political grumbles than the poor and distant *contadini*.

estate was done only when it had to be done, and communal leaders, if forced to raise communal revenue, preferred to increase the tax burden on the *contado*.⁴

Throughout the Trecento, taxes levied on the *contado* remained fairly constant, between 75,000 and 85,000 florins annually.⁵ However, in the early Quattrocento, the tax burden of Florence's subject territories increased dramatically. By 1402, the *contado* was contributing 140,000 florins annually, and by 1409 their annual contribution had risen to 154,000 florins.⁶ As Florence raised taxes on the *contado* again and again, the *contadini* became unable to pay and were forced to seek loans from two primary sources—the large banking houses of Florence and manifest usurers.⁷

Strozza di Russo de' Strozzi, a Florentine banker, lent 18,000 florins to five localities of the *contado* at rates exceeding twelve percent. Over the years, he collected more than 17,000 florins *in interest alone* on these loans.⁸ Castiglione Fiorentino, in 1411, owed back taxes of 4,200 florins, though its annual assessment was only 900 florins, and owed 1,550 florins in loans to Florentine bankers.⁹ In 1420, Pisan officials borrowed 15,400 florins from three Florentine bankers so that they could pay the taxes owed.¹⁰

⁴ Becker, 36. Here as well as hereafter, "urban" refers specifically to the city of Florence, and not to any of her subject cities. *Contado*, here as well as hereafter, refers not to the countryside around Florence, but rather any area under Florentine jurisdiction outside the urban center.

⁵ Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 28-30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28-30, 37. Much of this increase was to pay for the war with Giangaleazzo Visconti. Also, the 1409 number reflects the recent conquest of Pisa and her subsequent taxation.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40. Of those 1,550 florins owed to bankers, 800 florins were borrowed from Antonio Davanzati at 12% interest, and 750 florins were from the bank of Luigi Guicciardini's sons at 16% interest.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

Contadini of the middling and lower ranks were typically unable to secure credit from the Florentine banking houses and had to resort to manifest usurers to pay their tax assessments. Manifest usury was widespread in the *contado*. While rates offered by Christian manifest usurers were usually around twenty percent, they could easily climb to as high as fifty percent.¹¹ Substantial rate hikes were especially common during times of crisis, when the demand for pawn-secured loans far surpassed the supply. Such rapacious interest rates were the principal reason why these areas sought Florentine permission to allow Jewish pawnbrokering. Jewish lenders were more closely regulated, and legal statutes capped the interest rates they could charge. Thus, *contadini* were able to secure much better terms in their loans with Jewish lenders.

As this tax burden on the subject territories increased, wealthier inhabitants of the *contado* moved to the city to avoid it.¹² This further contributed to the diminishing population of the *contado*, which was already suffering decline due to plague and war. In 1427, the Pisan population stood at 7,106, less than one-fifth of its late thirteenth century size. From 1384 to 1427, the population of Arezzo dropped over thirty percent.¹³ Pistoia's population did the same.¹⁴ Two legislative measures sought to slow the depopulation of the *contado*. The first offered tax exemptions of ten to twenty years to workers from other parts of the Italian peninsula willing to resettle in the Florentine *contado*. The second offered amnesty and a protracted debt

¹¹ Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia*, 140-41.

¹² Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 30-31. Though citizens paid more taxes, they at least saw some of the political and economic benefits of the tax revenue.

¹³ Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy* (Baltimore, 1992), 5.

¹⁴ Herlihy, *Medieval and Renaissance Pistoia*, 69.

repayment period to debtors from Florence if they would settle in the depleted districts surrounding the mother city.¹⁵ Though they may have helped, these measures by no means remedied the depopulation of the *contado*. Florentine authorities simply raised the tax rate to make up the financial difference. As a result, by 1412 members of the *contado* were paying quadruple the taxes per capita that had been assessed throughout the Trecento.¹⁶

The migration of the wealthy to the city, coupled with a general decline in population and increase in taxes, resulted in “monetary famine” in the *contado*.¹⁷ In 1419, the government of Florence appointed a five-man commission to investigate the problem. The commission’s conclusions resulted in a new edict: local legislatures and authorities were no longer allowed to tax their subjects; all fiscal matters were to come through the Florentine legislative body.¹⁸ This measure was also ineffective in solving the problem. Between 1404 and 1427, the total value of *contado* patrimonies fell from 3,300,358 florins to 1,681,500 florins.¹⁹

The *contado* had reached its economic breaking point. There were uprisings inspired by the issue of taxation. In 1429 there was a revolt in Volterra; in 1431 there was a rebellion in Arezzo.²⁰ There the leader of the uprising urged his fellow Aretines to fight to retain “that bit of honor and the few goods that we have been able to preserve.”²¹ Clearly, the economy of the *contado* could be pressed no further.

¹⁵ Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷ David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their Families: A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven, 1985), 106.

¹⁸ Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 42-44.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

²¹ Ubaldo Pasqui, “Una congiura per liberare Arezzo dalla dipendenza dei Fiorentini (1431),” *Archivio Storico Italiano*, ser. 5, LV (1890), 16, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 44.

The second source of government income was the indirect taxation via the *gabelles*. Goods taxed were usually inelastic commodities such as grain, bread, meat, wine, and fruit. The *gabelle* system also included a Florentine monopoly on salt, as well as import and export duties on all items entering or exiting the Florentine domain. *Gabelle* rates had increased substantially during the Trecento. The *gabelle* on salt had tripled. The *gabelle* rate on wine had increased five-fold, and that of olive oil had increased almost eight-fold.²² The rates increased even more during the Visconti crisis. A decree of 1402 raised *gabelle* rates considerably. The measure was supposed to be temporary, but the rates were never brought back down. The indirect taxation rates during the first half of the Quattrocento were the highest in Florentine history.²³ The *gabelle* system, like the taxation of the *contado*, was operating at, if not above, its maximum economic capacity.

By the mid-1420s, these economic problems had moved concentrically inward toward the city of Florence. The previously mentioned economic factors combined with expensive military campaigns to produce “immense deficit” in the Florentine budget.²⁴ Deficit spending had always been a regular part of Florentine fiscal policy. In 1416 the deficit was 58,141 florins; in 1419 it was 98,166. By 1426, it was 682,662.²⁵ With no other choice, Florence resorted to increasing the financial burden of the city’s inhabitants and the clergy through forced loans. From 1424 to 1433, the sums of forced loans in Florence were significantly larger than they had ever been

²² Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 48-51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 60. Much of the huge spike in the deficit was due to expenditures on mercenary armies carrying out Florence’s expensive military campaigns against Milan and later Lucca.

before. Ecclesiastical taxes were also increased.²⁶ The economic condition of the city was now, like all other financial sources of the Florentine domain, at a breaking point.

Masaccio's *Tribute Money* is an artistic commentary on these "time[s] of acute fiscal distress."²⁷ The painting depicts the Biblical story of Christ's arrival in Capernaum, from the gospel of Matthew. Masaccio works the three main scenes of the story into the painting. In the center, the tax collector makes his request, with Jesus immediately instructing Peter on where the necessary money is to be found. Peter catching the fish and extracting the coin from its mouth is shown on the left, and to the right, he pays the assessment to the tax collector. The painting has been called "a sermon on paying to the state what is the state's."²⁸

In 1430, at the height of its financial crisis, Florence suffered an outbreak of the plague. Historian Carol Menning has attributed the city's allowance of Jewish moneylenders in 1430 to this outbreak.²⁹ This point can hardly be disputed, for the law itself says "particularly in this time of pestilence." However, further explanation is needed in light of the fact that the severity of the 1430 outbreak, compared to other plague-stricken years, received little to no attention from contemporaries. When recording the major plague outbreaks of the century, Archbishop Antoninus failed to mention 1430. Filippo Rinuccini, when doing the same, noted the plague of 1400, the "minor" 1411 plague, and the severe outbreak of 1417.³⁰ Thus, if the 1430 outbreak

²⁶ Ibid., 57-58.

²⁷ Martines, 254.

²⁸ Ibid., 254.

²⁹ Carol Bresnahan Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy: The Monte di Pietà of Florence* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1993), 16.

³⁰ Ann G. Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, 1986), 62.

was much less severe than others, then what other factors contributed to the “necessity” for Jewish lending?

Florentines identified the “desperate poor” as a group that caused disorder.³¹ After the Ciompi Rebellion of 1378, when rioters briefly took over the government, a general fear of popular unrest pervaded the minds of the middle and upper classes.³² This general fear of the *populo minuto* was amplified during episodes of pestilence. Plague outbreaks, usually accompanied by famine, caused a dramatic increase in both the numbers of “desperate poor” as well as the fears of this group. During an outbreak in 1383, one chronicler felt that the *populo minuto* were stirring up rebellion.³³ In 1400 during an outbreak, chronicler Giovanni Morelli wrote, “If the poor man sees that [you have plenty and he is in want], he will curse you and will rob you and burn your house if he can, and all of the *populo minuto* will want to harm you, which is very dangerous. God guard our city from their government!”³⁴ The social situation during the 1417 outbreak seemed even more perilous. Bartolomeo Valori noted that “the poor earn nothing and they are dying like dogs.”³⁵ In the same year, one government official went even further, arguing since “the poor are in a very bad condition...[and] since not all [the desperate poor] are quiet...in order to instill fear into some, foot soldiers should be hired” to patrol and protect the city.³⁶

³¹ David Herlihy, “Some Psychological and Social Roots of Violence in the Tuscan Cities,” in *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities, 1200-1500*, ed. Lauro Martines (Berkeley, 1972), 140.

³² Gene A. Brucker, “The Florentine *Populo Minuto* and its Political Role, 1340-1450,” in *Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities*, 180. According to Brucker, the demands of the Ciompi included: their own workers’ guild (and thus, representation in the guild government), an end to forced loans and the funded debt, an imposition of a graduated, direct income tax, and better treatment of debtors.

³³ Carmichael, 100.

³⁴ As quoted in Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 24.

³⁵ Brucker, “The Florentine *Populo Minuto* and its Political Role,” 172-74.

³⁶ *Archivio di Stato, Firenze* (hereafter ASF), *Consulte e Pratiche*, 43, fols. 150v-153v, as quoted in Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 230.

During these previous outbreaks of plague, the finances of the Florentine government were in sufficient order, and certain measures of relief were provided for the afflicted poor. Between 1399 and 1406, a period spanning the major outbreak of 1400, the number of households assessed forced loans in the city was cut in half, reflecting a communal decision to assess fewer forced loans to poorer families.³⁷ Around the 1417 outbreak, the government abolished the wine *gabelle* in an effort to relieve some of the misery of the poor.³⁸ In 1417, a government official asserted, “The poor should be subsidized with public funds since they are dying of hunger. God will be pleased and their evil thoughts will disappear.”³⁹

By the late 1420s, the Florentine economy was at its breaking point and could no longer afford substantial relief efforts for the poor. One poor Florentine lamented, “They count even the mouthfuls of food we eat at home. It is not as if they wish to leave me my necessities, but they deny me even these, so that they will lead me and my family to dishonor and sin.”⁴⁰ In August of 1426, a tax official’s house was set on fire by members of the *populo minuto*.⁴¹ By 1427, fifteen percent of Florentine households owned nothing.⁴² Masaccio’s *St. Peter Healing with His Shadow* is a haunting reflection of “the wretched,” or *miserabili*, in Florence at this time.⁴³

³⁷ Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 68.

³⁸ Brucker, *The Civic World*, 224.

³⁹ ASF, *Consulte e Pratiche*, 43, fols. 150v-153v, as quoted in Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 230.

⁴⁰ Giovanni Cavalcanti, *Istorie fiorentine*, ed. Guido di Pino (Milan, 1944), 15, as quoted in Molho, *Florentine Public Finances*, 82.

⁴¹ Ibid., 108.

⁴² Herlihy, “Some Psychological and Social Roots of Violence in the Tuscan Cities,” 108.

⁴³ Martines, 255. Martines interestingly points out that perhaps Masaccio’s works were too starkly realistic for many Florentines to handle. He never attracted the steady stream of commissions necessary to be a financially solvent artist and died poor and debt-ridden.

When plague broke out in 1430, the Florentine economy was simply not sound enough to fund much of a relief effort for the “desperate poor.” All three major elements of the economy—the taxation of the *contado*, the *gabelle* system, and the system of forced loans on the urban population—were at or beyond their financial breaking point. The rapacious interest rates and expensive military campaigns of the previous three decades had taken their toll. Facing a potentially explosive social situation, the government voted to allow Jewish moneylenders into the city to alleviate the desperation of the “desperate poor.” Florentine jurist Paolo di Castro wrote that Jewish lending was “necessary and health-giving.”⁴⁴

Though the city of Florence extended an invitation to Jewish moneylenders in 1430, none accepted the offer. No clear evidence exists explaining why Jewish lenders refused the offer, but two reasonable causes can be gathered. First, they were skeptical of the temporary nature of the invitation. The authorization was only valid for about three months.⁴⁵ With such a lack of guarantee, why would Jewish lenders be inclined to relocate? Second, they would have been direct competitors of Christian pawnbrokers, and “these [Christian] usurers were especially hostile to the Jews, who were...formidable rivals.”⁴⁶ Licensed to ply their trade via the *gabella degli feneratori*, these Christian usurers formed a “cartel” with a monopoly on pawnbrokering within the city of Florence.⁴⁷ Jewish lenders were also at an economic disadvantage in competing with these Christian “cartels.” In addition to

⁴⁴ ASF, Miscellanea repubblicana, busta I, inserta 37, 12 June 1430, as quoted in Carol Bresnahan Menning, “The Monte’s ‘Monte’: The Early Supporters of Florence’s Monte di Pietà,” *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23 (Winter 1992), 662.

⁴⁵ Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 240-41. The offer was extended on June 12, 1430, and was to expire on September 15 of that year.

⁴⁶ Le Goff, 37.

⁴⁷ Becker, 20.

anti-Semitism driving away customers, Jewish lenders faced tax laws that afforded financial advantages to those who borrowed from Christians. Tax-paying debtors were not allowed to declare as deductions any debts to Jews.⁴⁸

When plague broke out again in 1437, Florentine authorities could no longer afford such a half-hearted invitation to the Jews.⁴⁹ In that year, the *Signoria* did not renew Christian pawnbrokering privileges, transferring the monopoly of pawnbrokering from Christians to Jews.⁵⁰ Many Jewish moneylenders accepted this offer and came to Florence to set up their pawnshops. The economic necessity of Jewish lending had infiltrated the city.

⁴⁸ Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 15.

⁴⁹ Carmichael, 63.

⁵⁰ Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 16.

THE EVOLUTION OF NECESSITY

The coupling of fiscal and plague crises explains why Jewish moneylenders were admitted into the city in the 1430s. It does not explain, however, why Jewish pawnbroking privileges continued to be renewed until the end of the century. There were broader, more extensive reasons why Jewish lending was promoted and perpetuated for the remainder of the Quattrocento. Richard Trexler has pointed out that in Florence “citizenship, more than merely a legal condition, was one’s acceptance into the world of obligations.”¹ In *The Rise of the Medici*, Dale Kent exposed these networks of obligation that characterized Florentine politics and society during the first four decades of the Quattrocento. The perpetuation of Jewish moneylending strikingly corresponds to the erosion of these networks as the Medici unofficially took control of the government from 1434 until the end of the century.

The political scene of the early Quattrocento was characterized first and foremost by factionalism. The mechanisms of Florentine government were set up specifically to prevent official political factionalism. Yet, as Kent argues, they ironically contributed to the growth of unofficial factions.² Because it was difficult to manipulate Florence’s republican government, powerful families built private webs of obligation that could be played upon when needed to promote their political interests. These networks penetrated every level of society, from wealthy patrician families to merchants to the *popolo minuto*. By the 1420s, Florentine society was polarized along factional lines. Cosimo de’Medici led one faction, which included many of the

¹ Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1980), 157.

² Dale Kent, *The Rise of the Medici: Faction in Florence, 1426-1434* (Oxford, 1978).

“new men” from “new money” merchant families.³ The opposing faction was led by Rinaldo degli Albizzi and included the patrician families who resented the rise of wealthy “new men” like the Medici. During this period of intense factionalism, it was very dangerous to blatantly show off one’s wealth and doing so made one an easy target for the opposing faction. The chronicler Giovanni Morelli’s attitude about wealth was quite common. He warned,

Don’t advertise the fact that you are rich. Instead, do the contrary...If you are worth 10,000 florins, you should maintain a standard of living as though you possessed 5,000. You should demonstrate this in your speech, the clothes which you and your family wear, your food, your servants and horses. And don’t reveal your true worth to anyone.⁴

Faction patrons bestowed financial favors on their clients in exchange for support, often, but not always, political in nature. Financial favors most commonly entailed assistance in the payment of taxes.⁵ Legislation of 1404, reiterated in a similar bill in 1421, limited public office to those who were able to pay their tax assessments for twenty or more years.⁶ This legislation fueled the growth of factionalism, since faction leaders had a vested interest in their *amici*, or political friends, being able to pay their taxes and remain eligible for political office. If any Medicean *amici* fell behind in their communal taxes, it was understood that the Medici would settle the debt for them. Twenty-five of the Medicean *amici* submitted

³ The annual tax assessments of Giovanni di Bicci de’Medici, Cosimo’s father, serve as a testament to the speed at which the Medici family accumulated its wealth. In 1396, he was assessed 14 florins; in 1403, 150 florins; in 1413, 260 florins; and in 1427, 397 florins (a general increase in taxes due to the fiscal crisis is also reflected in these numbers). See de Roover, 48.

⁴ *La Cronica di Giovanni Morelli*, 268-270, as quoted in Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 23.

⁵ They did take other forms as well, such as inclusion in lucrative business dealings or rental of domestic or commercial property at artificially low rates.

⁶ Julius Kirshner, “Paolo di Castro on *Cives Ex Privilegio*: A Controversy Over the Legal Qualifications for Public Office in Early Fifteenth-Century Florence,” in *Renaissance Studies in Honor of Hans Baron*, 263-64.

tax reports in which their deductions and obligations exceeded their assets (thus, they were in debt), and thirty-nine *amici* named the Medici as their personal creditors, some for very substantial sums.⁷ For example, Bartolomeo Orlandini, facing the prospect of being added to the communal debtors' list, wrote to the Medici, "I beg you to get me out of this shameful situation in order that God may grant you the honour which you and your friends desire."⁸ There is record of Rinaldo degli Albizzi performing a similar favor for Bernardo Guadagni.⁹ Faction leaders also used these tax loans to recruit new *amici*, allowing them to avoid the shame of the debtors' list in exchange for their political allegiance in the future.

These networks were not limited to gentlemen in the political sphere. Often, Cosimo de' Medici offered assistance to individuals who, in return, could only offer their personal loyalty.¹⁰ He allowed many poor individuals to live free of charge in rental houses that he owned. An unknown artisan wrote to Cosimo, "Never have I wished for anything more in life than to take shelter under the wing of your power and authority...I shall say no more except that while I live, as I have been, so shall I always be completely faithful to you."¹¹ Another man of humble station, unable to afford a dowry for his daughter, petitioned Cosimo for assistance. In exchange he promised, "My sons and I will pledge ourselves in any way you wish...to serve

⁷ Dale Kent, 79-80.

⁸ *ASF, Medici avanti il Principato* (hereafter *MAP*), V, 14, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁰ Such allegiance from the lower classes, however, could be very important during times of unrest, and it is not beyond reason to assume that some of these members of the *populo minuto* were retained in the Medicean sphere as strong-arms and enforcers.

¹¹ *ASF, MAP*, XIII, 27, 31 July 1434, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 86.

you...For the moment there is nothing more to say, except that if ever I can do anything to please you, you may put this to the proof.”¹²

After 1434, when the Medici unofficially took over the government and exiled many of their strongest enemies, factionalism ended as a major force in Florentine society.¹³ As Kent points out, “paradoxically...Medici government came near in practice to resolving this eternal conflict simply because its dominance precluded the creation of effective opposition parties.”¹⁴ The Medici instigated the creation of two new governmental bodies that effectively narrowed the circle of power in Florence—an electoral committee, which determined the pool of eligible candidates for all offices, and the Council of the Hundred, which assumed important powers over elections, mercenary contracts, and taxation formerly controlled by the Councils of the People and the Commune.¹⁵ Through the control of these two bodies, mostly via patronage networks, the Medici controlled the entire Florentine government, becoming the unofficial heads of state.

Along with Medicean dominance came a change in the way other members of society spent their money. The patterns of patronage among patrician families shifted, and the politically motivated networks of obligation broke down. Attitudes about wealth and conspicuous consumption also changed. Both changes contributed to a growing void in moneylending within Florence that the perpetuation of Jewish lending helped to fill.

¹² ASF, MAP, V, 642, 31 July 1434, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 81.

¹³ This paper will not outline the chain of events in 1434 that resulted in Medicean dominance of the government. Dale Kent's *The Rise of the Medici* is an outstanding account of these events.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁵ L. F. Marks, “The Financial Oligarchy in Florence Under Lorenzo,” in *Italian Renaissance Studies*, ed. E. F. Jacob (New York, 1960), 123-24.

The faction-driven networks of obligation that characterized Florentine society during the first three decades of the Quattrocento were based on reciprocity—the obligor being able to do something useful for the obligee. After 1434 patrician families and other wealthy Florentines who were opponents of the Medici were essentially locked out of political power. With the political motivation absent after 1434, their networks of obligation broke down.¹⁶ These families looked for new ways to assert their superiority over other “lesser” Florentines. Attitudes about wealth were no longer inhibited by the specter of factionalism. In contrast to the former attitude about wealth quoted by Giovanni Morelli, in 1473 Giovanni Rucellai wrote, “It’s generally said, and I agree with it, that earning and spending are among the greatest pleasures...and I really think that it is even more pleasurable to spend than to earn.... These things give me considerable pleasure because they serve...the commemoration of myself.”¹⁷ No longer able to distinguish themselves politically, these families now sought to more distinctively distinguish themselves through conspicuous consumption.

In no area of Florentine life were these changes more evident than in building. In the early Quattrocento, the general attitude was “one must honor a house on account of its master, not the master for his house.”¹⁸ After 1440, remodeling of old homes and the building of new ones burgeoned.¹⁹ In 1470, Benedetto Dei wrote that

¹⁶ In many cases, important patrons were exiled from the city, effectively dissolving their entire networks.

¹⁷ Giovanni Rucellai, memoir dated 1473, *Zibaldone*, [26], I, 121-22, as quoted in Alison Brown, *The Renaissance*, 2nd ed., Seminar Studies in History, ed. Clive Emsley and Gordon Martel (Harlow, England, 1999), 114.

¹⁸ Matteo Palmieri, *Della vita civile*, ed. F. Battaglia (Bologna, 1944), 164, as quoted in F. W. Kent, “‘Piu superba de quella de Lorenzo’: Courtly and Family Interest in the Building of Filippo Strozzi’s Palace,” *Renaissance Quarterly*, 30 (Autumn, 1977), 322-23.

¹⁹ Martines, 272.

thirty palaces were built during his lifetime. Another writer noted thirty-five additional palaces worthy of mention and added that anyone wishing to count them all “would have too much to do.”²⁰ The attitude about these buildings is summed up in a letter written to Filippo Strozzi, commending him for “the great and magnificent building that you are putting up [to the] honor and glory...and the exaltation of the house [of Strozzi],” quite a contrasting attitude from the early Quattrocento. From the middle of the fifteenth century onward, many masters were, indeed, honored for their houses, rather than the other way around.

There was an element of frustrated retribution in the building programs of many patrician families. F. W. Kent’s exposure of family letters regarding the building of the Strozzi palace has shed light on this fact. One family member gains much pleasure from the fact that “it will be more splendid than Lorenzo’s.”²¹ One senses that the magnificence of Filippo Strozzi’s palace somehow made up for the exile of so many of his kin as part of the Medicean takeover. Filippo Strozzi’s megalomania, hemmed in by Medicean political dominance, found expression in the building of his palace. The same could be said for Strozzi family pride and honor in general. Magnificently outbuilding the Medici was their way of getting even with them.²²

Building patterns also reflected changing social ideas. The new Strozzi palace occupied an area once shared by a social variety of inhabitants—a patrician family (the Strozzi), living alongside a carpenter, a turner, a stonecarver, a farrier, a baker, a

²⁰ Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History* (Baltimore, 1980), 15.

²¹ ASF, Carte Stroziane, ser. 3, 139, fol. 10v, as quoted in F. W. Kent, 315.

²² Ibid., 311-23.

butcher, a dealer in old iron, and a shoemaker.²³ In the earlier Quattrocento, this “constant interpenetration of patrician and artisan life” was useful for the patron-client webs of obligation that powerful families wove. By the middle and latter parts of the century this “interpenetration” was no longer useful and, thus, no longer desirable for the upper classes. This change is reflected in the treatise on architecture written in 1452 by philosopher, architect, and artist Leon Battista Alberti. Alberti wrote that wealthy homes should be withdrawn to “protect patrons from being unduly disturbed by the persistent flattery of well-wishers...[and] to avoid being continually plagued by common people.”²⁴ Alberti’s statement carries with it the implication that “common people” were, in general, no longer the clients of these wealthy patrons. Alberti also wrote, “Wealthy citizens are happier in more spacious surroundings and would readily accept being excluded...[from] the stalls and the town-center workshops, [for] that rabble...will be less of a risk and less of a nuisance if they do not mix with the important citizens.”²⁵ The “rabble” that had played a role in the unofficial channels of power of these wealthy families were, after the Medicean takeover, “a risk” and “a nuisance.”²⁶

While those locked out of power lavished themselves with luxury, those in power, the Medici, sought to solidify public support of their regime through spending.

²³ Richard A. Goldthwaite, “The Building of the Strozzi Palace: The Construction Industry in Renaissance Florence,” in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, Vol. 10, ed. William M. Bowsky (Lincoln, Neb., 1973), 112.

²⁴ Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 126.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁶ Luca Landucci, in his diary, complained about the building of this period in his diary, writing, “They were continually tearing down houses...so that there were difficulties for anyone passing through these streets...and the rest of us artisans were forever engulfed in dust and bothered by people [stopping to watch the building].” See Goldthwaite, “The Building of the Strozzi Palace,” 114; Alamanno Rinuccini, writing in 1462, noted some of the problems associated with the dislocation of lower classes of people to build these palaces. See Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence*, 17.

In 1436, Cosimo de' Medici began offering massive charitable support outside of his quarter of the city, stepping on the toes of other formerly powerful families as he sought to consume their patronage networks by spreading his own over the entire city.²⁷ Later in the Quattrocento, Marsilio Ficino wrote to Lorenzo de' Medici, "God himself is for sale. But with what coin can he be bought?...At the price of generous charity."²⁸ In 1457, no household besides the Medici paid over 200 florins in taxes. Only two other households paid over 100 florins in taxes, and only eight paid between fifty and 100 florins. The Medici paid almost 600 florins!²⁹ And they were quick to remind Florentines of their contribution to the city. In his *Memorial*, Lorenzo wrote

I find that from 1434 till now we have spent large sums of money, as appear in a small quarto note-book of the said year to the end of 1471. Incredible are the sums written down. They amount to 663,755 florins for alms, buildings, and taxes, let alone other expenses. But I do not regret this, for though many would consider it better to have a part of that sum in their purse, I consider that it gave great honour to our State, and I think the money was well expended, and am well pleased.³⁰

The charitable institutions of Florence were for the "worthy poor."³¹ This group included orphans, widows, the physically handicapped, and the mentally disturbed.³² The able-bodied poor were viewed with contempt, based on the teaching of Florentine Archbishop Antonino (1446-59), who stressed that idleness led to vice

²⁷ Martines, 241-42.

²⁸ Marsilio Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* (London, 1975), 1: 116-117, as quoted in Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 22.

²⁹ de Roover, 29-31.

³⁰ Lorenzo de' Medici, "Memorial," as quoted in Peter Elmer, Nick Webb, and Roberta Wood, *The Renaissance in Europe: An Anthology* (New Haven, 2000), 221.

³¹ Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 12.

³² Richard C. Trexler, "Charity and the Defense of Urban Elites in the Italian Communes," in *The Rich, the Well Born, and the Powerful: Elites and Upper Classes in History*, ed. Frederic Cople Jaher (Chicago, 1973), 68.

of all types.³³ The “unworthy” poor resorted to usurers for financial relief and can be divided into two groups: the needy *populo minuto* and the shamed poor.

The needy urban *populo minuto*, mostly made up of poor handworkers and dayworkers, were those who could not provide food and shelter if adversity struck. This group had always been common clientele of Jewish moneylenders, and it was this group for whom the Florentine government sought relief when Jewish lenders were invited to the city during the plague outbreaks of 1430 and 1437. Jewish pawnbrokers became even more important to these workers in the later Quattrocento, when cloth factories, the main industry in Florence, began paying workers in kind, rather than in cash.³⁴ This practice enabled the merchant owners of the factories to conserve their liquid wealth, but it forced the workers to make a trip to the pawnshop every time they got paid in order to convert their bolt of cloth into money.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Florentine government was fearful of unrest among the *populo minuto* ever since the Ciompi Rebellion in 1378. The patron-client moneylending networks discussed earlier in this chapter had involved all levels of society and had helped to diffuse class tension in the early Quattrocento. But with the erosion of these relationships and the class-antagonistic attitudes and spending habits that replaced them, Jewish lending became an important part of the government’s efforts to appease the lower classes. Desperation was most commonly the catalyst for social unrest among the *populo minuto*. Jewish moneylending provided consumption loans to this group, obviating any sense of desperation, and allowing the upper classes to pursue honor and grandeur.

³³ Ibid., 68.

³⁴ Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 48-49.

The shamed poor were a rather new group that resorted to Jewish pawnbrokers for their credit needs. The shamed poor were not really poor in the conventional sense, for they were not lacking in material possessions.³⁵ Rather, they were gentlemen debtors, wealthier individuals who had simply spent beyond their means. In the early Quattrocento, this group had been an integral part of the networks of obligation. Gentlemen debtors had gone to men like Cosimo de' Medici or Rinaldo degli Albizzi to have their debts relieved in exchange for political support. It was primarily from this group of men that the faction leaders had drawn men into their ranks.

After 1434, the Medici unofficially controlled the entire government, and factionalism ceased to exist as a major force in Florentine society. As the networks of obligation broke down, gentlemen debtors increasingly found themselves without creditors. Having spent beyond their means, they resorted to pawnshops to convert material possessions into liquid wealth to settle their debts. Florentine chronicler Giovanni Cambi noted that many of "the things [the Jewish pawnbrokers] possessed belonged to poor Florentine gentlemen."³⁶

There was apparently quite a market for such exchanges. Despite the law that confined pawnbrokering to Jews after 1437, Bindaccio de' Cerchi, a local banker, engaged in extralegal, "high-level pawnbrokering...providing a service for the liquidation of capital tied up in luxury items."³⁷ In the early years of his bank this

³⁵ Trexler, "Charity and the Defense of Urban Elites in the Italian Communes," 84.

³⁶ U. Cassuto, *Gli ebrei a Firenze nell'età del Rinascimento*, 370-1, as quoted in Trexler, "Charity and the Defense of Urban Elites in the Italian Communes," 84.

³⁷ Richard A. Goldthwaite, "Local Banking in Renaissance Florence," *Journal of European Economic History*, 14 (1985), 39. De' Cerchi opened the bank sometime between 1470 and 1472. He gave it the name "Bindaccio and Partners," though it was owned and operated by him alone.

was a very big part of Cerchi's business. In October of 1476, his inventory of valuables totaled over 300 florins, and included jewels and jewelry, belts, gloves, knives, and forks. This illegal activity was highly risky, though, and Cerchi soon stopped participating in this type of business.³⁸ Cerchi closed his bank and retired in his mid-thirties, living the remainder of his life as a rentier off the investment of his banking earnings.³⁹ It can be fairly assumed that avarice compelled Cerchi to engage in this type of illicit pawnbrokering, but it is unclear why his clients were inclined to break the law when Jewish pawnshops were perfectly legal outlets for this type of business. Perhaps a trip to a Jewish pawnshop was too socially shameful for some gentlemen to bear, or maybe Jewish pawnshops did not keep the necessary cash reserves on hand to pawn some of the high-priced luxury items. The answer has yet to be proven. Nevertheless, the account of this local banker illustrates that there was a substantial demand for creditors to the shamed poor.

Jewish moneylending was initially allowed in Florence in the 1430s as a short-term economic expedient to the problems brought about by financial crisis coupled with outbreaks of pestilence. The Medicean takeover of the Florentine government in 1434 changed the political and social landscape of the city. The economic niche of Jewish moneylending grew substantially as the former faction-driven networks of obligation were abandoned for more materialistic, conspicuous forms of patronage. In the middle and latter Quattrocento, Jewish pawnbrokers lent money to the lesser sorts in society, as well as gentlemen debtors whose credit needs

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 29. During the last years of the bank, the "pawn" inventory averaged ten florins or less.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

had, earlier in the century, been satisfied by faction leaders. Jewish moneylenders had become an integral part of the Florentine economy.

THE DEVOLUTION OF NECESSITY

Certain elements of Florentine society resented the presence of Jews in the city. The Observant Franciscans were the most vocal protestors of Jewish moneylending. Interestingly, these ecclesiastics attacked the Jews not as religious enemies, but rather as economic enemies. Instead of preaching to the souls of Florentines, they appealed to their purses, emphasizing that Jews impoverished Christians. Aware of the important economic role that Jewish lenders played in the city, Observant Franciscans sought to purge the city of Jewish usury by advocating for an institution, the Monte di Pietà, meant to replace the economic function of the Jews.

The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 required that all Jews be marked from Christians by a special sign. Before San Bernardino of Siena and the Observant Franciscans began preaching for its enforcement in the middle of the fifteenth century, this marking had made very little progress in Italian cities.¹ San Bernardino's insistence led to Florence's institution of the sign in 1439.² Florentine officials, who had simply put it on the books to appease Bernardino, largely ignored this law. However, outraged at this lax enforcement, Bernardino called for the drafting of a stricter law in 1446, which required that all Jews except moneylenders wear a large yellow 'O' on their clothing or be fined 100 florins.³ This law was

¹ Diane Owen Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs: Ear-Rings, Jews and Franciscan Rhetoric in the Italian Renaissance City," *Past and Present*, Aug. 1986, 17.

² *Ibid.*, 20. He was the driving force behind its institution in Padua in 1430, in Perugia in 1432, and in Siena in 1439 as well.

³ Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 25. It is unclear why moneylenders were exempt from this law. Perhaps Florentine officials were wary of scaring them out of the city altogether.

enforced, at least initially, while San Bernardino was in the city. In April of 1446 a Jew was thrown into prison for failing to wear the badge. He was a converted Christian and the Archbishop even intervened on his behalf, but this did not satisfy San Bernardino and the Franciscans, who insisted he pay the fine. Friends of the man posted bond, and rather than pay the fine or wear the sign, he fled the city.⁴ As soon as Bernardino and his fellow Observants left the city, enforcement of the law once again declined.⁵

Observant preaching by Franciscans against the Jews intensified in the second half of the Quattrocento. Perhaps Jews, once marked, were easier targets for preaching. One Observant Florentine calculated that a Jew “having begun at the outset with a sum of one hundred lire, this capital increased with usury over the course of fifty years to a total of 49,792,556 lire, seven grossi, and seven denari.” In this way, he argued, the Jews have “drawn from the city and its territories an infinite treasure.”⁶ Observant friar Giacomo della Marca preached that women’s desire for fancy clothing and jewelry made them accomplices of the Jews, arguing that female materialism and vanity impoverished Christian families by forcing them “to pawn to the Jews for ten [soldi] a garment that he will resell for thirty. And so it is never redeemed and the garment is lost. Whence the Jews became rich and Christians paupers.”⁷

⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁵ One example of how Jews were socially integrated into Florentine society was their participation in the feast of St. John festivities in 1454. During a parade when the confraternities presented edifices, the Jewish community sponsored and presented the Moses float. See Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, 256.

⁶ ASF, Monte di Pietà (hereafter MP) 1, 2r, as quoted in Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 24. This sum was calculated at thirty percent annual interest.

⁷ S. Jacobus, *Sermones Dominicales*, i., 116, as quoted in Hughes, 28.

In 1463 the Florentine government passed a new law regarding the marking of Jews. This law extended the sign to moneylenders as well but reduced the fine by seventy-five percent.⁸ In this way, those who did not wish to wear the sign could simply pay the fine, resulting in satisfaction for the Jew and revenue for the government. Another part of the legislation, added “to prevent any large concentration of Jews in Florence, or a greater number than is *necessary*,” limited the Florentine Jewish community to seventy. Jews not included in this “community of seventy” were not allowed to stay in Florence for longer than five days on a single visit and could not return to the city within a period of one month. This addition was “drawn up with the consent of the abovenamed [sic] Jews and in particular, in accordance with the wishes of the heads of the community, who have desired [to make] their future life and business activity...less subject to opprobrium.”⁹ Clearly the leaders of the Florentine Jewish community wanted more control over what kinds of Jews were allowed in Florence, and these concerns were directly related to the anti-Semitic preaching of the Observants. The established Jewish community wanted to make itself less subject to criticism by keeping out Jewish criminals, Jewish vagabonds, and Jewish loan sharks.

In the later Quattrocento, Observant Franciscans challenged the necessity of Jewish moneylending by offering an alternative. They sought to “provide the most basic necessities for the poor classes” by establishing a Monte di Pietà, a municipal

⁸ Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 25.

⁹ U. Cassuto, *Gli ebrei a Firenze nell'età del Rinascimento*, 372-76, as quoted in Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 241-43.

pawnshop that charged a light rate of interest.¹⁰ No longer economically necessary, the Jews could then be expelled. Most Dominicans initially opposed the idea of a Monte di Pietà because of the interest that it charged, which they argued was wrong whether well-intentioned or not. Franciscans countered with the claim that the low interest was acceptable so the poor could avoid the higher rates and further impoverishment caused by the Jews and so that the establishment could be self-sufficient in the payment of its operating expenses.¹¹

The connection between the establishment of the Monte di Pietà and the expulsion of the Jews was real, as evidenced in the morality play “The Tale of Agnolo the Jew.” In the play two Jewish usurers, Samuello and Isac, meet in the street. Samuello says

Isac, I am disturbed deep in my heart....
I have felt a knife stab me;
I have heard one Brother Picciuolo preach.
He has said—I tell you the truth—
That loans will be ended, and a Monte di Pietà built....
He says and reaffirms that it would be good
To send us out right away from this land.¹²

The plot of the play revolves around the issue of charity versus usury and Jewish greed. A converted Jewish wife prays for the conversion of Agnolo, her husband. He has forty lire to invest, and his wife says, “Give it to my God, and without any doubt / he will return it to you a hundredfold.”¹³ Agnolo gives some to a poor widow and some to a poor man with ten kids. He regrets it, until he visits a Christian church,

¹⁰ G. Annibaldi, “I Banchi degli ebrei ed il Monte di Pietà di Jesi,” *Picenum Seraphicum*, 9 (1972), 89-90, as quoted in Menning, “The Monte’s ‘Monte’,” 663.

¹¹ Menning, “The Monte’s ‘Monte’,” 664.

¹² “Storia di Agnolo Ebreo,” in Mario Bonfantini, ed., *Le Sacre Rappresentazioni Italiane: Raccolta di testi dal secolo XIII al secolo XVI* (Milan, 1942), 572-73, as quoted in Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 26.

¹³ “Storia di Agnolo Ebreo,” 576, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 26.

where he finds a silver denaro. On his way home he buys a fish from a street vendor. While Agnolo is still haggling with the vendor over the price of the fish, his wife takes it home, where she finds a jewel inside of it. Agnolo then sells the jewel for 200 ducats and, impressed with God's repayment, Agnolo converts to Christianity. "The Tale of Agnolo the Jew" presents usury and charity as mutually exclusive activities.¹⁴ It characterizes Jews as haggling and greedy and questions the sincerity of Jewish converts. Agnolo's conversion was based primarily on greed, not faith. The play conveys the economic enmity of the Jews to society and reveals the true intent of the Monte di Pietà—"to send [the Jews] out right away."

The first Tuscan Monte di Pietà was established in Siena, San Bernardino's home, in 1472. In 1476 one was set up in Prato, very near to Florence.¹⁵ In 1478, a pontifical delegation went to Florence to meet with Lorenzo de' Medici, in an attempt to work out a plan for levying new taxes on Florentine Jews.¹⁶ As with proposals to establish a Monte di Pietà, this plan for new Jewish taxes was met with Lorenzo's "quiet but effective opposition."¹⁷

In 1484, Bernardino da Feltre embarked on a "one-man crusade" against what he thought was the worst sin of his day—usury.¹⁸ Da Feltre challenged those who defended usury as useful and necessary by preaching for the establishment of a Monte di Pietà to replace Jewish moneylending. During a Lenten sermon in 1488, da Feltre

¹⁴ In fact, many Christian usurers did restitution for their sins through charitable donations or bequests.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁷ Menning, "The Monte's 'Monte'," 664. Perhaps this unvoiced defiance had something to do with papal participation in the attempt on Lorenzo's life, known as the Pazzi conspiracy, which occurred later that year. In the attack, Lorenzo was only wounded, but his brother was killed. Lorenzo used the assassination plot as an opportunity to further consolidate Medicean power in Florence. After the conspiracy, Medicean rule was much more visible and heavy-handed than the "hidden despotism" of previous years.

¹⁸ Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 32-3.

preached to a crowd of Florentines. On many prior occasions, Bernardino da Feltre had preached for the establishment of a Monte di Pietà in Florence so that Jews would “not suck the blood of Christians by engaging in usury in this city and *contado*.” During this sermon, “he urged children and youths to come to his sermons...[and] serve as his soldiers.”¹⁹ Every morning they were to go to the chapel and pray for the expulsion of the Jews.

The audience was stirred to a riotous frenzy by the sermon. Upon its conclusion, between two and three thousand impassioned young “soldiers” were “stirred up against the Jews...and many...went to the house of a Jew called Manullino, who practiced lending at the Vacca, and they wanted to kill him and sack his pawnshop.”²⁰ Police officials finally “subdued the tumult.” The *Signoria* and the Eight on Security, unable to tolerate the instigation of such social unrest, “expelled [Bernardino da Feltre] and forbade him to return again to preach in the city.”²¹ Upon da Feltre’s banishment, the pious Luca Landucci wrote

This seemed to the people, who wished to live like Christians, a bad prognostic for us, because he was considered a saint. And it was not long before ill fortune overtook some of these Eight: one of them broke his neck by falling from his horse, another this thing, another that. Among the others, the one who had gone in person to drive Fra Bernardino away...died insane in the hospital. Thus it seems the matter ended ill. God save us!”²²

By the early 1490s the anti-Semitic message of the Observants was taking hold in the city. In 1493 a young Spanish Jew was accused of damaging the marble

¹⁹ *Ricordanze di Tribaldo de’ Rossi; Delizie degli eruditi toscani*, ed. Ildefonso di San Luigi, XXIII, 238-40, as quoted in Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 248.

²⁰ Luca Landucci, *Diario fiorentino dal 1450 al 1516* (Florence, 1883), 12 March 1487, as quoted in Menning, “The Monte’s ‘Monte,’” 663.

²¹ *Ricordanze di Tribaldo de’ Rossi*, 238-40, as quoted in Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 249.

²² Luca Landucci, 51-52, as quoted in Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 35.

image of the Virgin at Orsanmichele. After eight rounds of torture, the boy confessed to the crime, and “the entire population of Florence ran to see this.” He was sentenced to die by Florentine officials. “Transported in a cart, he was to have one hand amputated in front of the Virgin at S. Onofrio, and the other outside S. Maria in Campo, and his eyes plucked out at Orsanmichele.” However, during transport the boy was seized from the cart by a mob. Stones were thrown, and the executioner and his assistants fled the scene. The mob then “stoned him to death...and dragged his body through the streets of Florence, beating the corpse with clubs.”²³

The push for a Monte di Pietà in Florence gained considerable energy when Savonarola, Florence’s most recognizable ecclesiastic, broke ranks with his fellow Dominicans and began advocating its establishment. He argued that Jewish moneylending had become an unfortunate substitute for good Christian charity and challenged the motives behind the charitable activities that were going on at the time. In a sermon on charity, Savonarola preached

If I were to say to you, give me ten ducats to give to a poor man, you would not do it; but if I say to you, spend a hundred on a chapel here in San Marco, you’ll do it so that you can put up your coat of arms, and you’ll do it, not for the honor of God, but for your own honor.²⁴

In 1494 the French army of King Charles VIII invaded the Italian peninsula, seemingly fulfilling many of Savonarola’s apocalyptic prophecies. The Florentine people, unhappy with the weak stance taken against the French movements through

²³ *Ricordanze di Tribaldo de’ Rossi*, 283-85, as quoted in Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 249-50.

²⁴ Savonarola, *Predica 18*, 182, as quoted in Menning, *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy*, 40.

Tuscany, expelled the Medici and set up a popular republican government.²⁵ This chain of events proved to be the catalyst for the Monte di Pietà of Florence.

In December of 1495, the Florentine government passed a provision calling for the creation of a Monte di Pietà in Florence. The same provision called for the expulsion of the Jews, giving them one year to wind up their affairs and leave the city. The law said that usury was “a raging pestilence...already borne in our city...for about seventy years, [brought] by the perfidious Hebrew sect, the enemies of God.”²⁶ The characterization of the Jews as “enemies of God” was a mirror image of the 1406 ban that called them “enemies of the cross.”

Despite the religious condemnation of the law, it is clear that leaders were unwilling to expel the Jews until the Monte di Pietà was operating and the economic function of the Jews was sufficiently replaced. The *Formatori* of men given the task to set up the Monte di Pietà noted, “At the outset, all difficulties of a [charitable] institution arise from its not having a [sufficient] quantity of money.”²⁷ The *Formatori* had trouble finding anyone who “was willing to [financially] serve or help the monte.” The problem was compounded in 1496, when a plague outbreak and grain shortage threatened the subsistence of the poor. Though Jews were still in the city, they were forbidden to engage in any new lending. The *Formatori* was forced to take the early donations and give them “to the poor in the recent times of need.”²⁸

²⁵ Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, Historical Cities Series, ed. Norman F. Cantor (New York, 1969), 267.

²⁶ ASF, Miscellanea Repubblicana, busta I, ins. 37, December 28, 1495, as quoted in Menning, “The Monte’s ‘Monte’,” 664-65. The law ignores the fact that from 1406 until 1430, Christians had exclusive rights to manifest usury in the city of Florence.

²⁷ ASF, MP 1, “Legge prima circa l’ordinare il Monte di Pietà,” 3r, as quoted in Ibid., 665.

²⁸ ASF, MP 721, Libro di debitori e creditori, 13a-b, as quoted in Ibid., 668.

To make up this sum, a 1496 law declared that all remaining Jews were to “be required, within eighty days, to lend without any profit or interest to our Commune 6,000 florins...in cash.” Realizing that there was no incentive for the Jews, who would simply flee, the law stated that those who lent the money “may stay and live in the city, *contado*, and *distretto* of Florence for the stated time of three years.”²⁹ There is no record of any such payments, and the outlook of the Florentine Monte di Pietà was dismal. However, a stroke of good luck saved the institution. In 1494, with Florence in political upheaval, the Pisans had revolted. In 1498 a law was passed that allowed goods confiscated from Pisan rebels to be sold, with the proceeds going to the Monte di Pietà of Florence. Within the first year, over 6000 florins were directed into the coffers of the Monte di Pietà. With the necessary capital now in place, the Florentine Monte di Pietà became fully operational, and the remaining Jews of Florence were expelled.³⁰

Ecclesiastics in the late Quattrocento pushed for the expulsion of the Jews of Florence. These ecclesiastics did not emphasize the religious enmity of the Jews. Rather, they outlined the *economic* damages Jews had inflicted upon the city’s *financial* resources. They challenged the necessity of their presence by offering an economic alternative—the Monte di Pietà. This charitable pawnshop was to meet the moneylending needs of the city, allowing for the expulsion of the Jews. Once this institution was financially afloat, the Jews were no longer economically necessary and were expelled.

²⁹ ASF, Miscellanea repubblicana, busta I, ins. 37, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 674-75.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 673.

Jewish moneylending in Quattrocento Florence was characterized first and foremost by economic necessity. In 1406, economic circumstances permitted the government to ban Jewish moneylending. The conquest of Pisa in that year was a tremendous boost to the Florentine economy, stimulating commercial trade and increasing communal revenue. Jewish moneylenders were not needed. In fact, communal economics, in most cases, favored their absence, since the revenues of Christian pawnbrokers were subject to taxation, while Jewish profits were not. In areas of the domain where communal economics and the ban ran counter to one another, the law was quickly repealed.

From 1430 to 1495, Jewish lending was economically necessary, initially as a social solution for plague crisis, but gradually as a replacement for the private lending networks that were breaking down. The erosion of these networks carved out a larger niche in the economy for Jewish moneylenders. They rendered their services to the lower classes, as well as the “shamed poor,” whose financial problems had, earlier in the century, been relieved by patron-creditors.

In the late Quattrocento, Observant ecclesiastics targeted Jews not as religious enemies, but as economic enemies of Florentine Christians. They challenged the economic necessity of Jewish moneylenders by offering an alternative, the Monte di Pietà, meant to replace the economic function of the Jews. In 1495 the Monte di Pietà of Florence was established, and in 1498 it became operational. No longer economically necessary for the city, the Jewish moneylenders of Florence were, once again, expelled.

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