

The Art of Decapitation:  
Medici Power, Prestige, and Propaganda

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On Easter of 1478, the sun set on the face of the Palazzo della Signoria, the light sinking slowly below the naked bodies of Jacopo de' Pazzi, his nephew Francesco de' Pazzi, and the Archbishop of Pisa, Francesco Salviati, the leaders behind the attack on Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici and his brother, Giuliano de' Medici, earlier that morning. After his brother has been stabbed to death in the Duomo, Lorenzo the Magnificent, who had narrowly escaped, dealt with the conspirators swiftly, hanging them from the Signoria. The city of Florence rallied to the side of the surviving Medici even though capital punishment, especially on the scale carried out in 1478, represented an aberration in the expected function of Florentine criminal justice. Despite the deviation from common practice, the imagery of capital punishment, specifically decapitation, was prominent within Florentine art and public life. The execution of the Pazzi conspirators functioned as a public spectacle, one that asserted Medici power and endurance, much like the imagery of capital punishment did both before and after the Pazzi Conspiracy. Leonardo da Vinci's famous sketch of one of the conspirators, Bernardo Baroncelli, captured the themes of capital punishment, public justice, and Medici power in the Renaissance.

The Medici family exploited the widespread presence of decapitation imagery within Florence, both in art and other civic functions, such as the Festival of Saint John, and the understanding of capital punishment that existed within the Florentine conscience. Over time the Medici fostered a new rhetoric of decapitation that inherently tied themselves to Florence and associated the family with legitimate leadership and authority. The public visual of decapitation imagery within Florence so deeply served as a method of ingraining the Medici in the mind of Florentines that the assault on Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici had been an assault on Florence. The Medici response that followed, despite it being a drastic deviation in Florentine criminal

punishment, was justified in the eyes of the Florentine citizens who rallied to the side of the Medici family, precisely because it aligned with the rhetoric that the family fostered.

This paper will consider the mutual relationship of Florentine justice and punishment with the rhetoric of decapitation in Florence that the Medici began to appropriate and develop at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Representations of beheading in Florentine sculpture from the early fourteenth century to the Medici dukedom established in the mid 1500s serves as a mode of this analysis, largely due to the public nature of sculptural commissions, which were often visible to the public even when commissioned privately. Serving as a tool of political justification as the Medici asserted power and authority, the control over the imagery of capital punishment influenced public reception and facilitated public acceptance as Medici power become more centralized.

The importance of social and civic understandings of the Renaissance has been cemented into the field's historiography as early as Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860), which sought to capture the very culture of the Renaissance, encompassing its art, wealth, politics, religion, and the foundations of society.<sup>1</sup> From Burckhardt's consideration of specific Italian states and their rulers came obvious dedication to Florentine society, and there emerged scholarship dedicated to the city's development, politics, culture, and art. Burckhardt's specific mention of the Medici, and his examination of their importance in the political development of Florence, introduced the family as a point of necessary consideration when examining Florentine politics, society, and economics.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* 8<sup>th</sup> edition, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: George Alen & Unwin LTD. Press, 1921). Burckhardt dedicates an entire chapter of his *Civilization* on society and festivals, and particularly considers the Florentines as perfectors of Italian Renaissance festivals. Burckhardt's consideration, of course, opens the door to specific consideration of the development of Florence, but also of the study of Florence, her most popular festival, and public life.

<sup>2</sup> It is also important to note that while Burckhardt does not focus upon the Medici as art patrons in his *Civilization*, he does include a short acknowledgment of the Medici in their connection to public spectacle and ritual behavior,

Subsequent scholarship inherited and propagated Burkhardt's consideration of the Medici, integrating them into Florentine history and positioning them as worthy of note in the history of the Italian Renaissance, and particularly Renaissance art due to the family's extensive art patronage.<sup>3</sup> Even before Burkhardt's consideration of *Kultur* and the later scholarship on Medici patronage, Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives* paid particular attention to the works of his native Florence.<sup>4</sup> While Vasari's work does not particularly consider the political context of specific pieces, his note of placement and movement of certain works within the city does serve as a precedent for later art history scholarship that examines the implications of Florence's political atmosphere on the commission, creation, and placement of pieces.<sup>5</sup>

The Renaissance was born in Florence with Giotto, nursed with Masaccio, raised with Donatello, Verrocchio, and Botticelli, and brought to maturity with Michelangelo, and thus the artistic works of Florence were given precedence in the scholarship of Renaissance art. Attention was necessarily paid to the great artistic accomplishments of Florence during the Renaissance, such as Brunelleschi's Dome and, of course, the first freestanding male nude since antiquity, Donatello's bronze *David*, likely completed in the 1440s. The Medici were key players in

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which is further considered in subsequent scholarship, when he mentions Lorenzo di Piero's representation of Paulus Æmilius in a Florentine festival, p. 423.

<sup>3</sup> The importance of the Medici to Florence in the Quattrocento was mentioned by Burkhardt. The scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s saw the development of specific Medici historiography, rather than the Medici as just figureheads for Florentine Renaissance historiography.

See, Rubinstein's *The Government of Florence under the Medici* (1966) and Schevill's *The Medici* (1949).

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, trans. Julia Conway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Having studied with Ippolito and Alessandro de' Medici, and later being befriended and patronized by Cosimo I de' Medici, Vasari's own connection to the Medici family undoubtedly had an impact on the encomium that is Vasari's *The Lives*. The fact that Vasari specifically details pieces being Medici commissions, such his mention of Donatello and Michelozzo's commission by Cosimo di Bicci for the tomb of Baldassare Cossa (Antipope John XXIII) in the Baptistry of Saint John, integrates the Medici into discussions of Florentine art at the very inception of art history (149).

<sup>5</sup> One must consider Vasari's milieu when writing his *The Lives*, in that he occasionally lacks the more robust understanding of specific pieces as Renaissance art historians now know due to continued research. For example, while Vasari does consider the movement of Donatello's bronze *David* (though his chronology is slightly off), he considers Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* as a sculpture intended for the Signoria and specifies an original placement in the Loggia, rather than understanding the *Judith* to be a Medici commission that was housed in the Palazzo Medici until after the Medici were ousted in 1494.

Florentine art and politics, and they used both to advance their purposes. The use of Davidian imagery by the Medici solidified the giant-slayer within the iconography of Florence and inherently tied David to understandings of capital punishment within the visual culture of the city, due to the imagery of decapitation that accompanied early depictions of David.

There is a general lack of consensus in regard to Donatello's bronze *David*, with scholars continuing to postulate even the date of completion. In earlier years there existed discourse on the perceived homoerotic undertones of Donatello's bronze and whether the iconography of Donatello's work is more aptly defined in civic or religious understandings.<sup>6</sup> The civic understanding that has come to be accepted, which is largely due to the admission of the bronze being a Medici commission, has led to further exploration into the Medici connection, with consideration being given to placement, intended symbology, political influence, and the effect of war and peace.<sup>7</sup> From the scholarship surrounding Donatello's bronze *David*, and the pendant piece that is his *Judith and Holofernes*, which was likely completed in the mid- to late 1450s, there necessarily developed discussion of the theme of decapitation, especially due to the gravity of the subject given its relation to the patron saint of Florence, Saint John the Baptist. Richard

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Weller, "A Reassessment in Historiography and Gender: Donatello's Bronze *David* in the Twenty-First Century," *Artibus et Historiae* Vol. 33, No. 65 (2012): 43-77. Weller's assessment of the *David*'s historiography focuses on specific opinions as they have developed in the scholarship over the years, though he primarily focuses on the discourse surrounding the perceived homoeroticism in the bronze, beginning with H.W. Janson's assertion of Donatello's homosexuality. Some scholarship continues to conceptualize about the perceived homoeroticism, but the scholarship has largely concurred that the *David* had a thoroughly civic intention.

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Blake McHam, 'Donatello's Bronze *David* and *Judith* as Metaphors of Medici Rule in Florence', *Art Bulletin* 83/1 (March 2001), 32-47 particularly explores the setting of Donatello's sculptures and the symbolic connotations that the Medici were attempted to develop around themselves and within Florence. McHam supports the general consensus of art historians that the overarching rhetoric of the subject matter was an attempt by the Medici to liken themselves to just rule and place themselves within the position of power as dedicated defenders of Florentine liberty. Christine Sperling, 'Donatello's Bronze "David" and the Demands of Medici Politics', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 134, No. 1069 (April 1992): 218-24 focuses primarily on defining the political background and inspiration for Donatello's *David*. Sperling supports the idea that the sculpture reflected the Milanese conflict and the Medici victory over the Visconti. Roger J. Crum, "Severing the Neck of Pride: Donatello's "Judith and Holofernes" and the Recollection of Albizzi Shame in Medicean Florence", *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 22, No. 44 (2001): 23-9 interprets Donatello's *Judith* within the confines of Medici politics and the bubbling political atmosphere of Florence, and specifically focuses on the Medici's intent of memorializing one of their original victories and the fall of the Albizzi that brought them to power within the city.

Trexler's *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* reflected on public life in Florence and specifically considered the importance of time and place in relation to visual culture and how they affected public reception.<sup>8</sup> It became necessary then to examine the theme of decapitation not just in relation to subject and context, but in implication and public salience.

Due to Saint John the Baptist's presence within Florence, the iconography of Saint John and his social presence within the city has been longstanding within the historiography of Florence. Richard Trexler's consideration of the Festival of San Giovanni as a reflection of ritual and communal behavior, with emphasis placed on time, place, and manner, firmly encompassed the Medici into scholarship on Saint John the Baptist's importance in Florence.<sup>9</sup> Further extending the Medici connection with Saint John, especially in the visual realm, Heidi Chrétien's book, *The Festival of San Giovanni: Imagery and Political Power in Renaissance Florence*, explores how the Festival was utilized by the Medici to further integrate themselves into the public conscience of the city.<sup>10</sup> The appropriation of Davidian imagery by the Medici functioned in a similar way. Allie Terry was one of the first to consider the Medici appropriation of both the decapitation rhetoric as it related to David and Saint John the Baptist.<sup>11</sup> While Saint John the Baptist existed in a thoroughly religious setting, the way in which the Festival of San Giovanni became ingrained in Florentine existence allowed for some degree of civic appropriation, similar

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<sup>8</sup> Richard Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980). Trexler's methodology is clearly shown in his intimate detailing of the layout, function, and importance of the Festival of San Giovanni, and necessarily, the importance of Saint John the Baptist in the operation and understanding of the city and the public.

<sup>9</sup> Trexler details just how Saint John the Baptist, and his Festival, came to permeate the foundations of the city, and became intertwined with the communal function of Florence, of which the Medici also influenced.

<sup>10</sup> Heidi Chrétien, *The Festival of San Giovanni: Imagery and Political Power in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1994) details the history of the Festival of San Giovanni and discusses the intricacies of the festival with its different events and its development over time. Chrétien considers how the importance of Saint John developed within Florence and particularly how the traits of Saint John came to align with those the Florentines idealized and became important for the definition of Florentine power. Her consideration of the Medici and their impact and influence on the festival is important in considering how the Medici integrated themselves not just into the city's politics and economics but in the foundations of Florentine culture.

<sup>11</sup> Allie Terry, "Donatello's Decapitations and the Rhetoric of Beheading in Medicean Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 23, no. 5 (2009): 609-638.

to the Donatello's bronze *David*. The imagery of capital punishment in Florence existed in two realms, civic and religious, encompassing all aspects of Florentine society.

In 1985, drawing on Trexler's contributions to the field of Renaissance study, Samuel Edgerton wed the theme of decapitation with public understandings of crime and punishment in his book, *Pictures and Punishment: Art and Criminal Prosecution during the Florentine Renaissance*.<sup>12</sup> Edgerton considers particularly the juxtaposition between the cruelty of Florentine criminal justice and the way in which Florentine art appealed to the Christian conscience. The theme of capital punishment and the subject of Renaissance art, such as it often represented the martyrdom of saints and, of course, Jesus Christ, represented a complex relationship. Edgerton explores how Florentine authorities sought to reconcile the public with capital punishment. The endeavor by Florentine authorities to convince the public to accept and understand capital punishment is of particular note when examining how the rhetoric of decapitation shifted as the iconography of David became popularized by political and social authorities.

Edgerton examined the theme of decapitation in relation to public understandings, and other scholars of Florentine art, specifically Donatello's bronzes, honed in on the Medici for context in detailing the political significance and intention of specific pieces. Drawing upon Edgerton's consideration of the decapitation rhetoric in Florence, Allie Terry links Edgerton's consideration of art and decapitation with the established connection between Medici politics and artistic commissions. Terry's article focuses more upon the rhetoric of decapitation in regard to the associations which the Medici fostered politically and socially within Florence, rather than upon the institutions of punishment and justice. Through her emphasis on the visual culture, she

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<sup>12</sup> Samuel Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment: Art and Criminal Prosecution during the Florentine Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

necessarily draws upon the Donatello's bronze *David* and *Judith* and also includes discussions of the familial association that the Medici fostered with Saint John the Baptist.<sup>13</sup>

The study of decapitation in Florentine art necessarily considers Medici influence politically, but the scholarship is not nearly as robust regarding the institutions of crime and punishment. While Samuel Edgerton's *Pictures and Punishment* did explore the connection between Florentine Renaissance art and the Florentine justice system, he largely omits discussions of the Medici. As the Medici dominated Florentine politics, they must be considering in discussion of Florentine criminal justice, especially within the subject of the shifting dynamic of exile and execution.<sup>14</sup> As Nicholas Scott Baker argues, preference for exile stemmed from 1382 when inclusion and communal approval became favored talking points of the Florentine government, which served as a shield while the new government consolidated power. The dynamic of exile and execution as a trait of Florentine criminal justice offers a deeper understanding of how the imagery of capital punishment within Florentine art functioned and how that imagery was exploited by the Medici. Due to the early existence of the decapitation theme within Florentine art, with Saint John, and then civically with David, the artistic depictions, especially Medici commissions, that began to shape the preexisting rhetoric of decapitation are also vitally important in considerations of crime and punishment within Florence. The imagery of decapitation represented a visual culture that partnered with political

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<sup>13</sup> Allie Terry, "Donatello's Decapitations and the Rhetoric of Beheading in Medicean Florence," *Renaissance Studies* 23, no. 5 (2009): 609-638. Terry uses both discussion of the iconography of David and Saint John in her analysis. She considers the Festival of San Giovanni, its importance to the city, and the Medici appropriation and alteration of different aspects of the festival as metric for Medici rule in Florence being particularly relevant in not only establishing the Medici connection with decapitation, but also in illustrating the depth with which Medici influence reached.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Scott Baker, "For Reasons of State: Political Executions, Republicanism, and the Medici in Florence, 1480-1560," *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2009): 444-78 explores this as he examines the political change that is reflected when the shifting understandings of criminal punishment are considered.



action to express, support, and spread a specific understanding of capital punishment, and particularly, Medici power.

Punishment is a direct reflection of power, of the law-abiding over the criminal, of the ruling elite over the common man, and in 1382, the new regime that established itself in Florence used a shift in punishment to symbolize a shift in power away from the guild-based government installed in the aftermath of the Ciompi Revolt, and into the hands of the oligarchy headed by the Albizzi family.<sup>15</sup> To distinguish themselves from the earlier regimes and power in Florence, the Albizzi gave preference to exile as a form of punishment, creating distance between government and execution. The Albizzi popularization of exile was not just for political reasons, but more importantly, for social and civic objectives. The shift was used to create a distinct separation in the Florentine political timeline and highlights the new regime as different from those that came earlier. It was used to strengthen the validity of Albizzi rule and used as justification for the new oligarchy. Drawing on the patron saint of the city, the new regime used the imagery of Saint John the Baptist's murder to highlight the link between decapitation, tyranny, and injustice, suggesting that the early regimes were illegitimate and tyrannical. Exile, presented as a humane and just form of punishment, was used to justify political power, while artistic commissions were used to highlight the brutality, injustice, and tyranny that could be associated with capital punishment.

While the iconography of Saint John the Baptist continued to support the rhetoric of the act of decapitation as unjust and tyrannical, the rhetoric surrounding decapitation necessitated some level of altercation as Florence was drawn into war with Milan and then Pisa in the early fifteenth century. The biblical figure of David was the perfect figure to incorporate the image of

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<sup>15</sup> Baker, "For Reasons of State," 449.

decapitation with a new rhetoric: that of the understanding of justified tyrannicide, especially during a time of war in which violence against oppressors was appealing to all Florentines, who wanted to defend Florentine republicanism. Donatello's marble *David*, commissioned by the Signoria and completed in 1409, embodied the idea of the triumph of the small and brave against the strong; of republicanism over tyranny; of liberty over oppression. Such themes greatly appealed to Florentines who had just witnessed Milanese encroachment into Tuscany a few years prior, victory over Pisa, and were, in 1409, experiencing conflict with Naples.<sup>16</sup> At the time Donatello completed his marble *David*, unrest was still tangible in the city due to the conflict with Naples, but Florence had just seen victory. The stone laid against Goliath's head thus represented Florentine success in felling the city of Pisa in 1406. As David had been aided by the hand of God, so too had Florence been protected when Gian Galeazzo Visconti was called to the grave in 1402 during his blockade of the city.

When the Signoria had Donatello's marble installed in August of 1416 in the Palazzo della Signoria, it was clear that the image of the prophet was a reflection of contemporary politics.<sup>17</sup> As the marble head of Goliath laid at the feet of the triumphant David, so had Florence emerged victorious against Milan, Pisa, and Naples in the decade prior. By mettle and divine providence, Florentine liberty and power would endure during a time of heightened strain with Rome.<sup>18</sup> The connotation of David the giant-slayer with Florentine liberty had solidified in the

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<sup>16</sup> Bonnie A. Bennett and David G. Wilkens, *Donatello* (Mt. Kisco: Moyer Bell Limited, 1984), 66.

<sup>17</sup> Further indicative of the sculpture's connection to Florentine politics, Donatello's marble was placed before a blue backdrop that was decorated with Florentine flowers, and the pedestal that it rested on had a thoroughly civic verse attached to it that espoused Florentine liberty and patriotism, see Adrian W.B. Randolph, *Engaging Symbols: Gender, Politics, and Public Art in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>18</sup> The installation of Donatello's marble *David* at the Signoria in 1416 occurred during a time of strain for all of Christendom, but Florence had particularly reason to feel uneasy about the dealings in Rome. Florence was one of the numerous territories to have acknowledged John XXIII as Pope rather than Gregory XII during the latter years of the Western Schism. The installation of the marble occurred between the deaths of John XXIII's and Gregory XII and the election of Martin V by the Council of Constance in 1417.



Fig. 1 Donatello, *David*, marble, Bargello, Florence (Photo: Miguel Hermoso Cuesta/ Smart History)

mind of the ruling elite, and it would not be long before all of Florence understood what the image of the future king came to represent.

The rhetoric of decapitation was solidifying in the civic mind and encompassed a connotation of justified tyrannicide as the Medici family was emerging as the preeminent power in Florence, socially, politically, and economically. After Cosimo de' Medici had been exiled to Venice by Rinaldo degli Albizzi in 1433, it took less than a year for the Medici patriarch to be invited back due to unrest in the city. Many Florentines attributed the unrest in the city to the action of elected officials, who had come into office on the feast day of Saint John the Baptist's execution. The unrest was viewed as their patron saint's anger for not protecting the Medici family from their political enemies.<sup>19</sup> Due to Saint John's status as patron saint of the city, devotion between the Medici and Saint John was already fostered even prior to the establishment of a political connection in 1434. As early as 1402, the connection between the Medici and Saint John was established when Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici sat on the committee that awarded Lorenzo Ghiberti the commission for the bronze doors of the Baptistry, but it was not until after the Medici returned from exile in 1434 that the connection with the Baptist began to manifest in a particular devotion to the cult of Saint John's martyrdom.<sup>20</sup> In the wake of Cosimo's return, the family had firmly connected themselves with the decapitation theme and Saint John as a symbol of injustice. As the Signoria instilled the figure of David as a new state symbol and shifted the rhetoric of decapitation to encompass a civic understanding of Florentine liberty, the Medici also began to foster a shift in the rhetoric of decapitation as it had been originally adopted into their familial symbolism. Rather than allowing the figure of David to represent simply a figure of Florentine liberty, the Medici appropriated the figure of the giant-slayer to represent a symbol of themselves as defenders of the city.

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<sup>19</sup> Terry, "Donatello's Decapitations," 616.

<sup>20</sup> Terry, "Donatello's Decapitations," 617. Allie Terry also notes that Cosimo was connected to the Baptistry, when he played an integral role in the commission of Michelozzo and Donatello for the tomb of the Antipope John XXIII, located inside the Baptistry of Saint John.

Returning from exile in the mid-1430s, the Medici solidified and consolidated their power in Florence in order to avoid retribution by their political enemies and firmly establish themselves in the city. Cosimo de' Medici had the perfect opportunity when he was welcomed back to the city with open arms. Using a pincer movement of art and politics, Cosimo was able to avoid talk of the usurpation of power while also establishing his family as the preeminent power in the city. Maintaining the exile precedent set by the Albizzi, the Medici drew upon the earlier justification by considering themselves a continuation of the government established in 1382. They also showed their strength and influence by the sheer number of exiles that followed Cosimo's return. Compared to the eleven exiles of 1433, which included eight Medici, an act spearheaded by Rinaldo degli Albizzi, there were 118 individuals, who included Medici enemies such as the Albizzi, Strozzi, and Castellani, exiled in 1434 following Cosimo's return from Venice.<sup>21</sup> It is also important to note that while the Medici did maintain an early preference for exile, there was also a spike in executions during the few years following Cosimo's return, with a large increase occurring in 1436 with nineteen executions, sixteen of which were beheadings.<sup>22</sup> Having shown their strength, the Medici also highlighted themselves as the new rulers of the city by commissioning Donatello for a second *David* that was placed inside the Medici Palazzo. The new *David*, a bronze sculpture, was also the first freestanding male nude since antiquity.<sup>23</sup> In the same moment, the Medici portrayed themselves as the inheritors of classical authority and, by the bronze's placement, alluded to the notion that the Palazzo Medici represented the new home of Florentine politics.

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<sup>21</sup> Alison Brown, "Insiders and Outsiders: the Changing Boundaries of Exile," in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 344.

<sup>22</sup> Edgerton, "Book of the Executed in Florence: 1420-1574," in *Pictures and Punishment: Art and Criminal Prosecution during the Florentine Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 234.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Blake McHam, *Looking at Italian Renaissance Sculpture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 232.

With Donatello's bronze, the Medici appropriated the decapitation symbol and firmly established Medici authority. There is much debate over the exact date Donatello completed his bronze masterwork; some scholars place the bronze as early as 1430 and others as late as 1460, but there is little doubt that it was commissioned by Cosimo following his return from Venice in 1434.<sup>24</sup> The bronze *David* supported a rhetoric of the Medici as defenders of Florence and her ideals. Hostilities against Florence were renewed by Filippo Maria Visconti in the early 1420s, and Rinaldo degli Albizzi emerged as the most outspoken supporter of an offensive, expansionist strategy against Milan. The Medici remained conservative, favoring diplomacy over a war with the Visconti.<sup>25</sup> Even when peace was finally struck in 1429, tensions remained high, and it was clear that the militaristic approach favored by the Albizzi and their faction had been the wrong course of action for Florence to take. After Cosimo de' Medici returned from Venice, he not only returned the favor of exile to Rinaldo degli Albizzi and his supporters but also used the very same sculptures that represented the solidification of Medici power to put their shame on display. Unlike Donatello's marble, the bronze *David* depicted Goliath's decapitated head wearing a helmet rendered in the Milanese style, which of course recalled the war with Milan, and the peace which the Medici brokered. Situated in the confines of the Palazzo Medici and able to be looked upon by the Medici patriarch and his family and supporters, the bronze could have been visible from the courtyard to those passing on the street outside the Palazzo.<sup>26</sup> It was clear that

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<sup>24</sup> McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David*", 34.

<sup>25</sup> Randolph, *Engaging Symbols*, 64.

<sup>26</sup> McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David*," 32.



Fig. 2 Donatello, *David*, bronze, Bargello, Florence (Photo: Steven Zucker/ Smart History)

the head of Goliath symbolized the fall of the Albizzi, and specifically the cause of their downfall. Florence had emerged victorious against Milan, and the Medici had emerged victorious against their most outspoken enemies.

The Medici continued to favor exile as a form of punishment as it presented themselves as a continuation of the government that had succeeded decades earlier in establishing a clear justification for rule and had solidified through shaping the public consensus. While the Medici did hold control over Florentine politics and ruled in all but name, they shielded themselves by presenting themselves as defenders of Florentine liberty and republicanism. Despite that, there were moments of clear Medici extremism as they worked to justify and defend their position in Florence and maintain power against opposing forces both within the confines of the city and abroad. Since Gian Galeazzo Visconti began his encroachment into Tuscany in 1402, Milan had been troublesome for Florence, with intermittent periods of war and peace that lasted until 1450 when Francesco Sforza established himself as Duke of Milan. Cosimo de' Medici was quick to strike an alliance with Milan, but opposition challenged the Milanese-Florentine alliance. In 1450, there was immediate increase in Florentine executions, which could possibly be attributed as a Medici response to display domestic power against those who opposed the alliance with Milan.<sup>27</sup> The 1450s proved to be turbulent for the Medici, as disunity plagued the party and Medici opposition was becoming increasingly vocal. The Medici responded in the two-fold way that had already been illustrated to be a successful strategy. Accompanied by Medici political threats and acts of criminal punishment to assert dominance, Donatello was commissioned for a

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<sup>27</sup> Edgerton, "Book of the Executed", 235. Florentine execution rates remained relatively low during the later years of the Wars in Lombardy, but in 1450, they jumped to seven executions compared to the prior year's four. 1451-1452 also saw a continued increase, with eight executions. It is undecided whether this spike was the response of a Medici defense of their new allies, but it is worthy of note that the alliance between Florence and Milan was not unanimously favored within Florentine politics. The Milanese-Florentine alliance was a result of wars that were a flashpoint of the political crisis in 1458 in which the Medici did resort to execution accompanied by a huge spike in exiles. The spike in 1450 could very well have been simply an earlier response of the Medici suppressing their political enemies that was mirrored, on a much larger scale, in 1458.



second Medici bronze, and in the late 1450s, the towering *Judith and Holofernes* was completed and placed in the garden of the Palazzo Medici.<sup>28</sup>

Donatello's earlier *David* had clearly positioned the Medici as leaders of Florence and defenders of her civic ideals while highlighting Albizzi defeat, both against the Medici, and militarily in Rinaldo's defeat against Milan. The bronze *Judith* would once again recollect Albizzi defeat, using it as a warning against those who continued to challenge Medici power and authority, especially in relation to the Peace of Lodi. Though the Milanese-Florentine alliance had been struck, the duchy continued to be a thorn in the side of Cosimo de' Medici as anti-Medici partisans continued to oppose the alliance. Donatello's *Judith* was commissioned as both warning and an attempt to discredit the anti-Medici partisans by drawing on Rinaldo degli Albizzi's continued failure. After Rinaldo degli Albizzi was exiled from Florence in 1434, he turned to Milan and there convinced Filippo Maria Visconti to take up his father's arms again and invade Florence once more. Albizzi and Visconti incorrectly predicted that Florence would rally against the Medici, and at the Battle of Anghiari in 1440, Milan was soundly defeated.<sup>29</sup> It was a clear indication to those who opposed the Milanese alliance that the Medici had been and continued to be correct when it came to dealing with the question of Milan. Coupled with the decapitation rhetoric, the Medici once again portrayed themselves as defenders of Florentine liberty by using the figure of Judith as she slayed the enemy of her people.

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<sup>28</sup> McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David*," 33. The scholarship surrounding Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* generally places the sculpture as being completed around the mid to late 1450s. Roger Crum argues specifically for a mid-1450s completion in which the sculpture was used to symbolize the Medici as a unifying force within Florentine politics and to pass posthumous judgment upon the Albizzi; Roger J. Crum, "Severing the Neck of Pride: Donatello's 'Judith and Holofernes' and the Recollection of Albizzi Shame in Medicean Florence," *Artibus et Historiae* 22, no. 44 (2001): 23-29.

<sup>29</sup> Gene Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age, 1138-1737* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 253.



Fig. 3 Donatello, *Judith and Holofernes*, bronze, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence (Photo: Sailko/ Smart History)

The theme of justified tyrannicide had already been established in Donatello's earlier depictions of David, but it was through the *Judith* that that theme of morally acceptable and

justifiable execution was strengthened and became more tangible within the rhetoric of decapitation that the Medici employed. The implication of Donatello's *Judith* was clear, especially as it was accompanied by Medici threats of force, that those who opposed the Medici, would fail, again and again, as the Albizzi had. Donatello's bronze *David* had been a symbol of Medici victory over the Albizzi, but the obvious theme of the sculpture was of course, Florentine victory over Milan, and the role of the Medici in defending Florence and her ideals. Unlike the *David*, Donatello's bronze *Judith* was not representative of a Florentine victory over foreign enemies but was thoroughly symbolic of the continued triumph of the Medici over their political opponents. The fact that the *Judith* was placed in the garden of the Palazzo Medici, closer to the heart of the palace and accessible only to a select few is further indicative of this.<sup>30</sup>

The recollection of Albizzi defeat in Donatello's bronze *Judith and Holofernes* is obvious, and for a clear purpose. In all but name, Milan had been vanquished, and with it, time and again, so had the Albizzi. Wrapping the *Judith* in the similar themes as the bronze *David* before it, an inscription on the base of the sculpture reads, "Kingdoms fall through luxury, cities rise through virtues. Behold the neck of pride severed by the hand of humility".<sup>31</sup> The text calls on the theme of Florentine republicanism and liberty that the Medici had integrated into the rhetoric of decapitation, as well as the themes of justified tyrannicide and the moral justification of the Medici.

As Roger Crum illustrates, the inscription also exposes the subject of the Albizzi defeat. After allying himself with Filippo Maria Visconti, the Signoria denounced Rinaldo degli Albizzi as a criminal and an enemy of the state, ordering his portrait be painted on the Bargello with an

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<sup>30</sup> McHam, "Donatello's Bronze *David*," 32.

<sup>31</sup> McHam, "Donatello's bronze *David*," 36.

accompanying inscription that read “I am ruthless Rinaldo, a proud knight.”<sup>32</sup> The moral theme of the inscription, with Judith as a figure of humility being representative of the Medici, served as a justification of Medici actions and attempted to further strengthen the image of the Medici as defenders of Florentine liberty. The tumultuous years of the 1450s culminated in the political crisis of 1458, which saw drastic action by the Medici to unify the party and silence opposition.

Donatello’s *Judith*, drawing on the decapitation rhetoric that linked the Medici as just rulers of Florence and defenders of liberty, was a warning to those who continued to oppose the Medici. The *Judith* also recalled Albizzi shame to illustrate that the Medici would deal with Florence’s enemies, whether they be domestic or foreign. Judith has her arm raised, sword in hand, ready to deliver a second blow that will finally sever the gashed neck of Holofernes, much like the second Medici victory over the Albizzi. Cut down with a second swing, Rinaldo degli Albizzi fell with his pride after defeat by the Medici. It was clear to those who walked in the garden of the Palazzo Medici, that those who reared their head once more would be struck down, brutally and unapologetically.

Donatello’s bronze *Judith* served as a backdrop to Medici political action, much like the earlier Medici *David* had. The Medici faced severe opposition, which was exacerbated by disunity that plagued the Medici party, in the 1450s. Though the Milanese-Florentine alliance had been struck and then formally organized with the Peace of Lodi, the families of Florence still had to shoulder the cost of war in the years prior. Numerous families were bankrupted by taxes and forced to sell their properties, which were then bought at negligible rates by friends of the

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<sup>32</sup> Roger J. Crum, “Severing the Neck of Pride: Donatello’s ‘Judith and Holofernes’ and the Recollection of Albizzi Shame in Medicean Florence,” *Artibus et Historiae* 22, no. 44 (2001), 24. Crum argues that Donatello’s *Judith* recalls Albizzi’s shame in order to give more credence to the depiction as an image of Medici unity, though it seems more intentionally meant as a symbol of Medici dominance and capability.

Medici.<sup>33</sup> When anti-Medici partisans openly called for reform, Cosimo de' Medici acted swiftly, calling a popular assembly that was dominated by his supporters, who voted to convene an emergency council to deal with the political threat. The response of the council was to assert Medici dominance and curb the power of the Medici's political enemies.

In 1457 there had been a slight uptake in executions from the prior year's three to nine, and then in 1458 it further increased to twelve.<sup>34</sup> More drastic was the increase in exiles, which rose to nearly eighty in 1458 after the emergency council elected to exile numerous members of prominent Florentine families who had not allied themselves with the Medici.<sup>35</sup> The recurring theme of Albizzi defeat was highlighted in Donatello's *Judith*, as in his bronze *David*, with the symbolic representation of the second stroke Judith prepares to take against the dying figure of Holofernes. The position of Judith also represented Medici inclination to firmly deal with their enemies. Many of the exiles of 1458 were from families who had had members exiled following Cosimo's return in 1434, such as the Baldovinetti, Bardi, Brancacci, Castellani, and particularly the Peruzzi and Strozzi.<sup>36</sup> The Strozzi family were one of the largest threats to Medici power, and in 1434, the branch under Palla di Nofri was exiled due to collusion with the Albizzi in 1433. The Medici used the vote of 1458 to further exile members of the Strozzi family, particularly members of the Loso branch of the family, in an attempt to curb any remaining power.<sup>37</sup>

Donatello's *Judith* was an obvious assertion of Medici power, accompanied by the clear political

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<sup>33</sup> Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age*, 253. It is noted that "the Serragli, Baroncelli, Mancini, Vespucci, and Gianni were all ruined."

<sup>34</sup> Edgerton, "Book of the Executed," 235.

<sup>35</sup> Brown, "Insiders and Outsiders," 346.

<sup>36</sup> Brown, *Appendix* in "Insiders and Outsiders."

<sup>37</sup> Ann Crabb, *The Strozzi of Florence: Widowhood and Family Solidarity in the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), Appendix, Table A.4 for Strozzi family tree. See Brown, *Appendix* in "Insiders and Outsiders" for exile information. The bulk of the Strozzi branch under Palla di Nofri was exiled in 1434, including Messer Palla di Nofri and three of his sons. Matteo di Simone de' Strozzi, third cousin once removed of Messer Palla di Nofri, was also exiled in 1434, but his three sons were not exiled until 1458.

action of the aging Medici patriarch. The family, using the rhetoric of decapitation to justify such drastic action, had thoroughly affirmed their position of influence in Florentine governance and reasserted themselves as the power of Florence. If the Medici were defenders of Florentine liberty, then the slaying of Medici enemies was the justified protection of Florentine freedom.

In the summer of 1464, the *Pater Patriae* died in the Careggi Medici villa nestled in the hills of Tuscany. Cosimo's son, Piero, succeeded him, and it would not be long until anti-Medici partisans rose again in an attempt to curb the power of the new, weak Medici patriarch. The coup of 1466, lead by the Poggio party under Luca Pitti, attempted to usurp power from the Medici but was unsuccessful, largely due to the action of Piero's son, Lorenzo, later known as the Magnificent.<sup>38</sup> Around the same time as the coup, Verrocchio's bronze *David*, representing another piece in the string of sculptural commissions that followed attempts on Medici power that asserted Medici legitimacy, was completed for the Medici.<sup>39</sup> Once again, the figure of David was chosen, further encompassing the giant-slayer into the familial symbolism of the Medici. Just as with Donatello's earlier work, Verrocchio's *David* is shown in the aftermath of the slaying of Goliath, with the giant's head sitting between David's feet as a trophy. Like Donatello's *David*, Verrocchio's bronze stands in contrapposto, and though the two boys are nearly identical in positioning, there is a stark contrast in both their figures and expressions.

Donatello's earlier *David* had been an early Medici commission, representing Albizzi defeat, but also the humble Florentine victory over Milan, which still posed a threat to Tuscany. Verrocchio's youth is self-assured, a slight smirk on his face that alludes to a sense of self-

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<sup>38</sup> Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age*, 254. There is still debate on what the true intention was of the conspirators of the 1466 coup: some argue that the conspirators wanted to expel the Medici from Florence and return the city to a government keeping with republican ideals, while others argue that Luca Pitti wanted to install himself as dictator, even others argue that it was a conspiracy by Venice to disrupt Florentine government. No matter the true intention, the coup was undoubtedly an act to limit Medici power.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew Butterfield, "New Evidence for the Iconography of David in the Quattrocento Florence," in *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* Vol. 6 (1995): 115.



Fig. 4 Verrocchio, *David*, bronze, Bargello, Florence (Photo: Smart History)

confidence that would befit the Medici in the mid- to late 1460s. Verrocchio's *David*, made for the Medici around 1465, could very well have been made in the wake of the coup. Even if it predated the attempt, the self-assurance in David's expression would be applicable to the Medici.



While he was weakened with gout, Piero's succession in 1464 was unchallenged, and he had several adult children to protect the family. Lorenzo and Giuliano were both strong, social men who served the family through diplomatic missions and had long been groomed to inherit the Medici bank. Bianca and Lucrezia "Nannina" de' Medici had already wed, Guglielmo de' Pazzi and Bernardo Rucellai respectively, to heal strained relationships and reinforce Medici power within Florence. As David had been a chosen inheritor of God's favor when he slayed Goliath, Piero was inheritor of Florence.

The *David* could also have been a testament to the Medici position after 1466. A political coup had failed, largely due to action by Lorenzo, which itself illustrated the capability and strength of the young Medici heir, peace was still strong with Milan, and the family continued to maintain connections with the Curia and the Apostolic Camera.<sup>40</sup> While Verrocchio's depiction of David is slightly different, more self-assured than humble, as was Donatello's *David* and *Judith*, the accompanying Medici political response was also different, much more conservative than it was in 1434 and 1458. Unlike in the prior instances, execution rates actually lowered in the wake of the Pitti coup, dropping from five executions in 1465 to two in the next year.<sup>41</sup> The Medici response to the coup was also characterized by some degree of mercy, as Piero elected to pardon several of the conspirators, including Luca Pitti and Piero's cousin, Pierfrancesco de' Medici.<sup>42</sup> While execution rates remained low, there was a sudden uptake in exiles, which dramatically increased to nearly fifty in 1466, in the aftermath of the coup.<sup>43</sup> The majority of

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<sup>40</sup> The Medici contract with the Vatican's treasury would later be terminated after Lorenzo di Piero refused to finance the purchase of Imola by Pope Sixtus IV after having his own deal with Galeazzo Maria Sforza undercut by Sixtus. The papal accounts were then negotiated with other banks in Florence, with the Pazzi financing much of the cost for the papal purchase of Imola, which marked one of the instigations of the Pazzi Conspiracy.

<sup>41</sup> Edgerton, "Book of the Executed", 235.

<sup>42</sup> Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age*, 254. Both Luca Pitti and Pierfrancesco de' Medici would both come to faithfully serve the Medici family after Piero's pardon.

<sup>43</sup> Brown, "Insiders and Outsiders," 346.



those exiled were members of the Neroni and Soderini families, with at least twenty-three members of the Neroni family being expelled from Florence. Whether by involvement in the coup or due to some other reason, remaining members of the Strozzi family were also exiled the year after. In 1467, Palla di Nofri's son, Giovanfrancesco was formally exiled, as well as his four sons.<sup>44</sup> Though there was not an increase in executions as there had been in early years of political strain, Verrocchio's *David* still worked to shape the decapitation rhetoric that the Medici fostered.

Whether the self-assurance in the face Verrocchio's *David* represented Medici confidence after a successful succession or Medici victory and perseverance after yet again defeating their political enemies, the image of David was a marker of continued Medici dominance. Piero was confident enough in his decision, and in the power of his family, to allow the main conspirators of the Pitti Coup to walk free, though his clemency could have been a direct response to the intention of the coup. Rather than assert Medici power through increased executions, which would only highlight Medici tyranny in a moment of increased calls for political reform, Piero played the kind and benevolent leader, allowing the symbolism of another Medici commission to speak for the lengths Medici power reached. Though Piero had acted with a degree of mercy, Verrocchio's *David* drew on the decapitation symbol as it came to encompass justified tyrannicide and overt political action in defense of Florence. The earlier Medici *David* highlighted Albizzi defeat and asserted the Medici as rulers of Florence. Donatello's *Judith* was a clear illustration of Medici capability, especially when it came to dealing with political threats. The lack of executions, but the drastic increase in exiles, would have drawn on the political legitimization of the early fifteenth century and dissuaded talk of outright tyranny. Verrocchio's

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<sup>44</sup> Brown, *Appendix* in "Insiders and Outsiders."

*David* did draw on the existing rhetoric of decapitation that illustrated the extent of Medici power and the willingness to resort to capital punishment, as guised in the defense of Florentine republicanism and liberty.

The continued use of Davidian iconography by the Medici also further strengthened the civic and overtly political imagery of the giant-slayer. Donatello's bronze *David* had been a clear act of appropriation by the Medici as they adopted the civic symbol from the Signoria and used it to place themselves and the Palazzo Medici as the seat of Florentine politics and power. Verrocchio's bronze further asserted the Medici as legitimate rulers of Florence and was strengthened even more when Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici sold the bronze to the Signoria in 1476.<sup>45</sup> While it would seem to place the Signoria as the proper home of the David imagery, and the placement of Verrocchio's bronze outside the Signoria did highlight the marble *David* there, it represented a direct connection between the Palazzo Medici and the Palazzo della Signoria. Donatello's bronze *David* remained in the Medici courtyard, retaining the theme of Medici power and also alluding to Medici authority and legitimacy due to the sheer impressiveness of the sculpture as the first freestanding bronze of the age. The selling of the Verrocchio could also have functioned in a similar action as Piero's pardons had a decade earlier, dissuading any developing connotation of the Medici as tyrants. Due to the Medici use of Florentine Davidian imagery, the sale of the Verrocchio could also have been a clear assertion of increasing Medici power under Lorenzo il Magnifico.

Indeed, unlike his father's attempts to dissuade any discussion of tyranny, Lorenzo showed a preference for direct action from the very beginning of his reign. Succeeding Piero in December of 1469, the following year was marked by a sudden uptake in executions, raising

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<sup>45</sup> McHam, *Looking at Italian*, 91.

from one in 1469, to eleven in 1470. Seven of the executions of 1470 were hangings, a dark precedent that fed into the rhetoric of decapitation continuing to be fostered by the Medici. The public understanding of capital punishment and decapitation had originally developed through Saint John, on the grounds of the injustice and tyranny of capital punishment and shifted with the Davidian imagery to represent justified tyrannicide and the defense of Florence. The decapitation rhetoric had come to portray the Medici as saviors of Florence and drew upon the civic theme of duty and legitimization. The Medici would have been hesitant to sully the prominent theme of decapitation with acts in clear opposition to the rhetoric it espoused. Preference was given to hanging as capital punishment slowly became more obtrusive within Florence under the reign of Lorenzo. Execution rates remained high throughout Lorenzo's reign, marked by only a few inconsistent years of lower rates, such as 1471 which saw two executions, and 1474 which saw three. During Lorenzo's reign from 1469 to 1492, the average annual rate of execution was 9.5, higher than that of any other Medici heads of Florence until Cardinal Giulio de' Medici's control of the city.<sup>46</sup>

The rhetoric of decapitation that the Medici fostered through visual means insulated the family as much as it intimidated their enemies, engraining the Medici into the very function of Florentine society. When Giuliano de' Medici was murdered, and Lorenzo injured during the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478, nearly all of Florence rallied to the family's side. Justice and vengeance were exacted as much by the mob through looting and pillaging as was through direct political action in the Signoria against the conspirators. The sacrilege of the act by Francesco de'

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<sup>46</sup> The one execution of 1469 was not included in this calculation due to Lorenzo's succession in December of that year, making it inconsequential to Lorenzo's reign. The average rate of 9.3 does include the outlying maximum of 1479, when there were forty executions in response to the Pazzi Conspiracy. When the number of executions for 1479 is calculated with ten, a common rate during Lorenzo's reign, rather than forty, the average rate drops to 7.75, which is lower than the average rate during both the reign of Savonarola and Piero Soderini, though is higher than any other Medici reign until Alessandro.

Pazzi and Bernardo Baroncelli, who murdered Giuliano in the Duomo as the consecrated host was lifted, on Easter Sunday, undoubtedly incensed the crowd.<sup>47</sup> In the wake of the Conspiracy, Florence was given to madness and chaos. Family arms were struck, manhunts ensued to capture Jacopo de' Pazzi and Bernardo Baroncelli, among other conspirators, and bodies were hanged and left to rot outside the Palazzo della Signoria. Francesco de' Pazzi was dragged through the city, stripped naked, and hanged from the Signoria beside the naked body of Francesco Salviati, Archbishop of Pisa. After Jacopo de' Pazzi was finally cut down from the Signoria and buried, it did not take long for a group to desecrate his grave, dig up his body, reattach the noose he had been hanged with, drag his body through the streets of Florence, use his head as a door knocker at the Palazzo Pazzi, and then ultimately dump his body in the Arno.<sup>48</sup> Whether it was viewed as further justice of simply vengeance, the act by the public to desecrate Jacopo de' Pazzi's corpse and grave reflected of the understandings of capital punishment that had become engrained in the city. In the eyes of the public, Jacopo was not just the orchestrator of a murder, but a traitor against Florence. Exiles immediately spiked in the aftermath of the conspiracy, reaching around thirty, before trailing off dramatically in the following years.<sup>49</sup> The rate of executions immediately increased, reaching forty in 1479, and thereafter remained consistently high for nearly all of Lorenzo's reign.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Angelo Poliziano, "The Pazzi Conspiracy," trans. Giuseppe Mazzotta, in *Images of Quattrocento Florence: Selected Writings in Literature, History, and Art*, ed. Stefano Ugo Baldassarri and Arielle Saiber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 100. Giuliano was stabbed nineteen times during the course of the assault. Lorenzo was injured during an attack but managed to seek refuge in the sacristy.

<sup>48</sup> Poliziano, "The Pazzi Conspiracy," 100.

<sup>49</sup> Brown, "Insiders and Outsiders," 346. Guglielmo de' Pazzi, husband to Bianca de' Medici, Lorenzo's eldest sister, was included in the exiles of 1478, despite not being involved in the conspiracy and having sought shelter from his brother-in-law, illustrating the extreme extent to which punishment and retribution went in the aftermath of the conspiracy, involving anyone in the family of the conspirators or somewhat associated. According to Poliziano, Guglielmo and his children were sent into exile between five and twenty miles outside Florence.

<sup>50</sup> Edgerton, "Book of the Executed", 236. The only significantly low year of exiles during Lorenzo's reign was in 1489, and whether worthy of note or not, was the year after Lorenzo's wife, Clarice Orsini, died.

As the Medici resorted to capital punishment, preference was given to hanging, possibly in an attempt to salvage and protect the existing decapitation rhetoric that had been nursed for so long. Of course, the rhetoric of decapitation that espoused a message of justified tyrannicide would have befitted a response to the Pazzi Conspiracy, but the method of execution in the wake of the attack was less characterized by proper Florentine justice and more so by lynching. Between 1478 and 1481, when the last of the conspirators were executed, 80% of executions that occurred were carried out by hanging.<sup>51</sup> As Albizzi defeat and shame had been recollected in Donatello's earlier bronze *David* and *Judith*, Lorenzo sought to further humiliate the conspirators and represent Medici perseverance by commissioning Botticelli for a series of frescoes that depicted the hanging bodies of Jacopo de' Pazzi, his nephew Francesco de' Pazzi, and Archbishop Francesco Salviati. The frescoes no longer survive, having been destroyed in 1494 after the Medici were expelled from Florence. While not made for the Medici, Leonardo da Vinci's sketch of Bernardo Baroncelli hanging from the Bargello illustrated the quick justice, rather revenge, exacted against the conspirators. While Baroncelli had managed to escape Florence after murdering Giuliano, he was captured and returned to the city in 1479, and there executed while still wearing the Turkish robes acquired in Constantinople. The greatest artists of the Renaissance understood the relationship between power, justice, and art.

When the Medici were ousted from the city in 1494, execution rates began to steadily increase through both the reigns of Savonarola and Piero Soderini, and preference for hanging gradually rose. Through Piero's reign, 39% of executions were carried out through hanging,

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<sup>51</sup> Edgerton, "Book of the Executed," 236. All of the executions of 1478 were carried out by hanging.



Fig. 5 Leonardo da Vinci, *Hanging of Bernardo di Bandino Baroncelli*, ink on paper, Bonnat, Bayonne.

which increased to 58% under Savonarola, and then 61% under Soderini.<sup>52</sup> The early half of Soderini's reign saw years of significant execution rates, though those numbers tapered off

<sup>52</sup> Calculated from Edgerton, "Book of the Executed."



Fig. 6 Michelangelo, *David*, marble, dell'Accademia, Florence (Photo: Smart History)

dramatically after 1505. It is worthy of note that Michelangelo's marble *David* was completed and placed outside the Palazzo Vecchio in 1504. Davidian imagery endured within Florence, and without the inclusion of the theme of decapitation, the sculpture firmly repositioned the Signoria as the seat of power within Florence. The Medici had been expelled, liberty had triumphed over

tyranny, and the eyes of the pristine figure of David cast a warning to Rome, a challenge to never return. The figure of David stands alone, preparing for his battle, gazing at the absent Goliath, which firmly positioned the Medici as no longer defenders of Florentine liberty, but her enemies. Execution rates remained significantly low throughout the final years of Soderini's leadership, before they spiked once more in 1512 when the Medici returned to Florence.

Executions rose to fourteen following the Medici return, though markedly they remained relatively low until 1520, the year after power over the city shifted to Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, the illegitimate son of Giuliano, who had been murdered decades prior by Francesco de' Pazzi and Bernardo Baroncelli. Executions rates rose to eighteen in 1520, dropped significantly in the following year, then spiked once more in 1522 and 1523, the result of significant disorder for the Medici. Pope Leo X, the second son of Lorenzo il Magnifico, had died in 1521, leaving the throne of Saint Peter open for claiming, and in 1522, a conspiracy was hatched against Cardinal Giulio de' Medici. The attempted coup was carried out by those who resented the Medici return to Florence and the consolidation of power that clearly indicated an end to the republic. After the failure of the conspirators, Giulio continued to rule Florence until he was elected pope in 1523, after which Ippolito de' Medici, grandson of Lorenzo di Piero, ruled in his stead.<sup>53</sup> The conspirators against Giulio were regarded as traitors and enemies of the state, and executed.<sup>54</sup> Ippolito would rule in Florence until 1527, when the Medici were once again ousted from the city. From 1512 through the second Medici exile in 1527, execution rates steadily increased, and though there was a slight preference for hanging, the means of execution remained largely parallel with one another.

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<sup>53</sup> Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age*, 256. Brucker notes that the conspirators against Cardinal Giulio de' Medici were Jacopo de' Diaccete, Luigi Alamanni, Zanobi Buondelmonti, and Antonio Brucioli.

<sup>54</sup> Edgerton, "Book of the Executed," 237. There were a total of twenty-two executions between 1522 and 1523.



The republican period from 1527 to 1530 saw a continued increase in executions, with preference clearly being given to hanging, except for overtly political executions, which were almost always carried out through beheading from 1481 to 1555.<sup>55</sup> During the last republican period, Medici insignia were struck from houses and Florence imposed taxes on church property, much to the frustration of the papacy.<sup>56</sup> The preference given for hanging in this specific period could have been in direct response to the Medici rhetoric in the decades earlier. The Medici had become associated with the decapitation theme within Florence, in relation to both Saint John the Baptist and the iconography of David. The influence of the social consciousness of Florence became so engrained with the Florentine justice system that it could be possible that in the mind of the new authorities, even acts of decapitation become reminiscent of the Medici. Of course, when the Medici returned in 1530, after a protracted siege, there were twenty-three executions, nine of which were carried out through beheading. Every beheading that year was an overtly political execution, while criminal justice was relegated to hanging.<sup>57</sup> After 1530, however, there is no significant link between political executions and method of execution, so whether that act of reserving decapitation for political executions was intentional or not is unclear.

After Alessandro de' Medici was made Duke of the Florentine Republic in 1532, there was a dramatic rise in executions, from ten to thirty in 1533.<sup>58</sup> It is also important to note that with Alessandro's appointment as Duke, the Signoria was also dissolved. Throughout Alessandro's reign, execution rates remained high, averaging nineteen from 1530 to 1537, nearly twice what every other period of leadership averaged, other than the religious regime between

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<sup>55</sup> Baker, "For Reasons of State," Appendix, 471. Hangings made up 66% of executions from 1527 to 1529, the highest of any leadership period of Florence.

<sup>56</sup> Brucker, *Florence: The Golden Age*, 257. Giulio de' Medici, Pope Clement VII, was Pope until 1534.

<sup>57</sup> Comparison between Baker, Appendix and Edgerton, "Book of the Executed."

<sup>58</sup> Edgerton, "Book of the Executed," 237. There is no significant disparity between hanging and beheading during any of Alessandro's reign from 1530 to 1537.

1527 and 1530. With the end of the republic and consolidation of power, the rhetoric of decapitation being fostered through visual means no longer needed to justify Medici action and authority. It has been noted that most overtly political executions between 1481 and 1560 occurred outside of public viewing, with most being carried out in the courtyard of the Bargello.<sup>59</sup> However, there is also a distinct shift that must be noted. During the reigns of Alessandro and Cosimo I, political executions more often were carried out in the Piazza della Signoria, the Piazza di S. Apollinare, or the Piazza S. Pulinari.<sup>60</sup> Not only had the Medici forgone any rejection of capital punishment, but as the principality was formed, the act became palpable within Florentine society.

In 1537, the first Duke of the Florentine Republic was assassinated, though anti-Medici factions failed to rise, and Medici supporters managed to ensure that Cosimo succeeded him.<sup>61</sup> There was an immediate spike in executions following the assassination, rising to twenty-eight from the prior year's thirteen.<sup>62</sup> Executions throughout Cosimo's reign remained relatively low, with only a few inconsistent years of higher rates, such as in 1540 when there was a spike of 23 executions. Overall, for the duration of Cosimo's reign from 1537 to 1574, the average rate of execution was eight, the lowest rate for a period of leadership since Lorenzo II's rule in the 1510s. Unlike during the reigns of his predecessors, the difference of execution during Cosimo's reign was virtually nonexistent, as hangings and beheadings were nearly identical in their frequency. Cosimo's reign did see more frequent public executions, especially those that were overtly political. The rhetoric of beheading in Florence was shifting, becoming more prominent

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<sup>59</sup> Baker, "For Reasons of State," 446-47.

<sup>60</sup> Baker, Appendix, 473.

<sup>61</sup> Lorenzo di Piero was Cosimo's great-grandfather through Cosimo's mother. Cosimo was also a descendent of Lorenzo di Bicci through his father's side.

<sup>62</sup> Edgerton, "Book of the Executed," 237. The twenty-eight executions of 1537 would be the highest amount during the nearly four decades of Cosimo's reign.

just as Medici power became conspicuous, and Cosimo I, like his namesake before him, used sculptural commissions to further develop the rhetoric of decapitation in Florence to firmly centralize Medici power.

Begun in 1545 and revealed in 1554, Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* served a thoroughly political function, drawing on the other sculptures in the Piazza della Signoria, including Donatello's *Judith and Holofernes* and Michelangelo's *David*.<sup>63</sup> Reviving the medium that had died in Florence, Cellini drew on Donatello's bronze *Judith*, choosing to cast in bronze to celebrate himself and assert the power of his patron, Cosimo I, who had commissioned the piece. Michelangelo's marble *David*, completed during the leadership of Piero Soderini and having a firmly anti-Medici connotation, seems to be turned to stone by Cellini's bronze, prioritizing the bronze Medici works within the square. The public placement of the sculpture in the Loggia recalled earlier assertions of Medici power, though it clearly indicated that the Signoria was home to Medici authority, rather than the earlier suggestion through Donatello's bronze *David* that the Palazzo Medici was the home of Florentine politics. The need for insinuations was no longer. Medici power was absolute. The base that the sculpture sits on further asserts this, as the bronze rests and melds over the edges of a marble pillar, asserting the grandeur and importance of the bronze pieces over the marble medium favored by anti-Medici governments. Like all the other sculptures in the Piazza, Cellini's sculpture drew on and shaped the existing rhetoric of decapitation that had firmly come to represent Medici power.

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<sup>63</sup> Michael Cole, "Cellini's Blood," in *The Art Bulletin* 81, no. 2 (1999), 215.



Fig. 7 Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, bronze, Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence (Photo: Smart History)

Cosimo I specifically commissioned the piece for the Piazza della Signoria and specified the subject of Perseus with the head of Medusa and the bronze medium.<sup>64</sup> The subject itself

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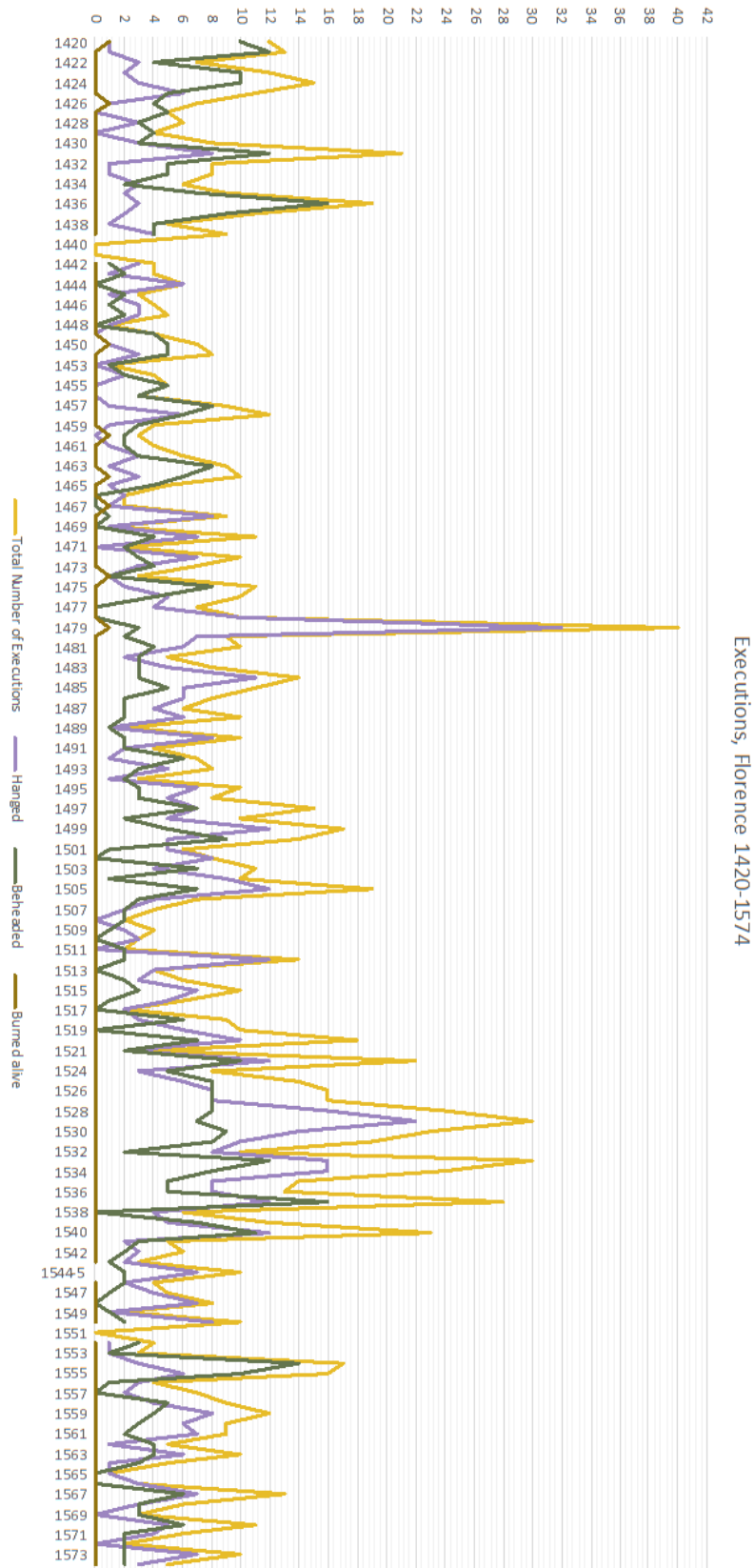
<sup>64</sup> Cole, "Cellini's Blood," 215.

asserts Medici dominance, much like Donatello's earlier *Judith* and the Medici  *Davids* had, but unlike the earlier commissions, Cosimo specifically chose a classical subject, reaching beyond biblical figures for legitimization and towards the authority of the ancient world. The figure of Perseus holds the head of Medusa before him, raised high. He still stands over her dead body, triumphant, much like the earlier  *Davids* had. The medium and the design were all reminiscent of earlier Medici power. The continued presence of the theme of decapitation, especially as Florentine justice had shifted in the century prior, was used to further assert Medici dominance and draw the rhetoric away from any theme of Florentine liberty and justified tyrannicide. Exile had been the defining characteristic of the first half of the fifteenth century, a time when the Medici had need to portray themselves as defenders of liberty and Florence's republican ideals. As Florence morphed into a dukedom, exile represented the very antithesis to the princely authority that Medici rulers exercised over state, and thus was not simply ineffectual but also actively worked against the rhetoric being espoused by the new Dukes of Florence. Capital punishment and decapitation functioned as a legitimate form of criminal justice during Cosimo's reign, asserting the power of the state and thus the power of himself within Florence to conquer his enemies, and even turn them to stone if need be.

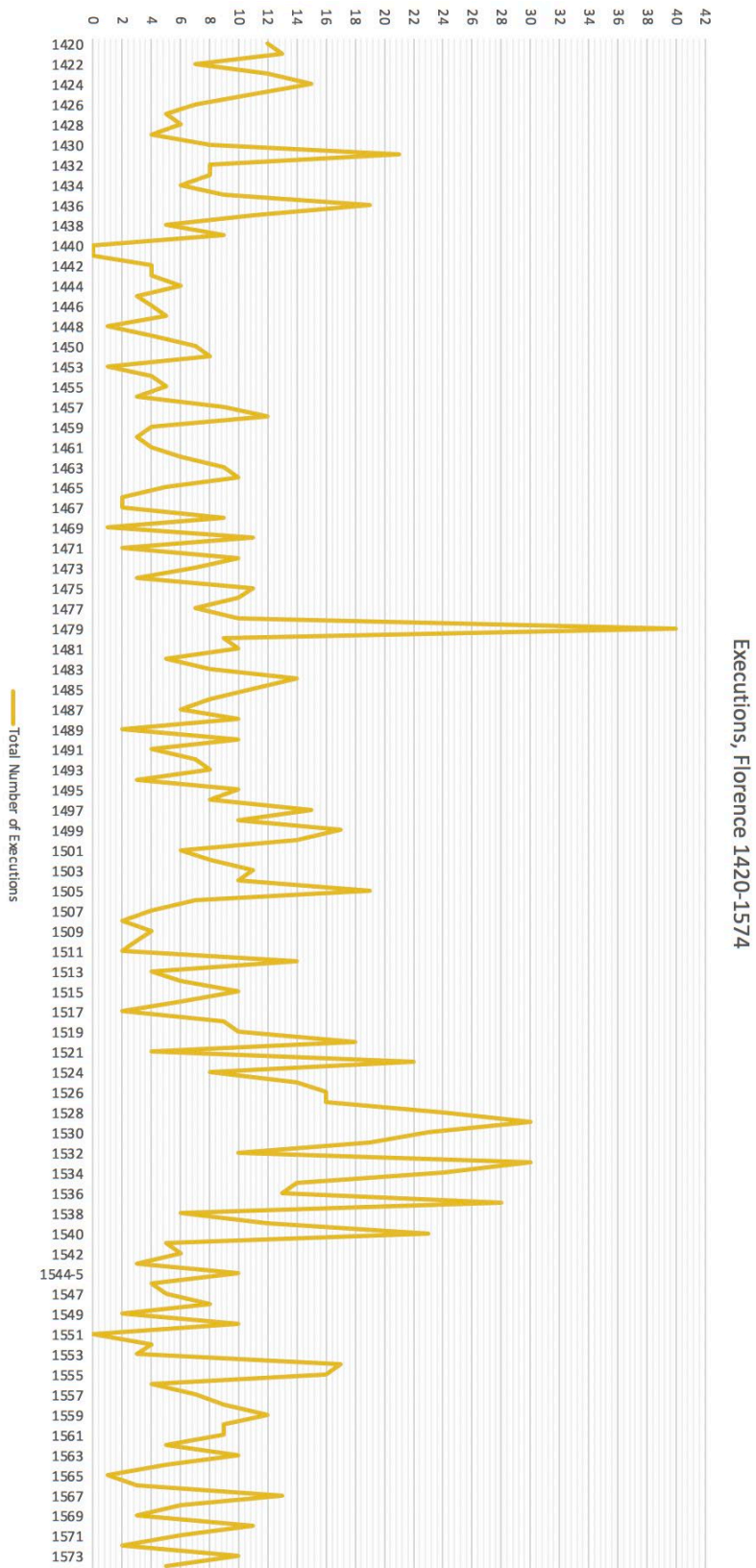
Medici artistic patronage and political power is often studied separately in two eras: prior to and after 1494. The Medici age and its artistic patronage, however, must be considered as a continuum, as evidenced by the imagery that the Medici employed from the early fifteenth century and continued to use in the centuries after. As the Medici came to power, they became inseparable from Florentine understandings and institutions and developed a particular connection with and influence on Florentine practices of justice. This influence can be examined by the rhetoric of decapitation that the Medici appropriated, fostered, and shaped through

sculptural commissions. The original shift of Florentine punishment away from execution and to exile in the early fourteenth century served as a flashpoint for the decapitation rhetoric within the city that the Medici exploited for their own benefit. The Medici linked themselves with preexisting depictions of decapitation in art through artistic commission, and therefore began the process of dismantling the rhetoric of beheading as a symbol of injustice, and rather as a representation of the Medici as just rulers of the city and agents of Florentine liberty and unity. As Medici power waxed and waned, the preference for exile as the favored form of criminal punishment also shifted. As Medici authority began to truly dominate Florentine politics, capital punishment was used to assert power. The rhetoric of decapitation as a just act was employed as a political tool of justification for the family as they attempted to retain power in Florence and maintain control over the public consensus. Through visual means, the Medici controlled the public reception of capital punishment, and was thus able to use it to their own benefit, engraining themselves into the very mind and function of Florence.

Appendix A  
Rates of Execution, Florence, 1420-1574

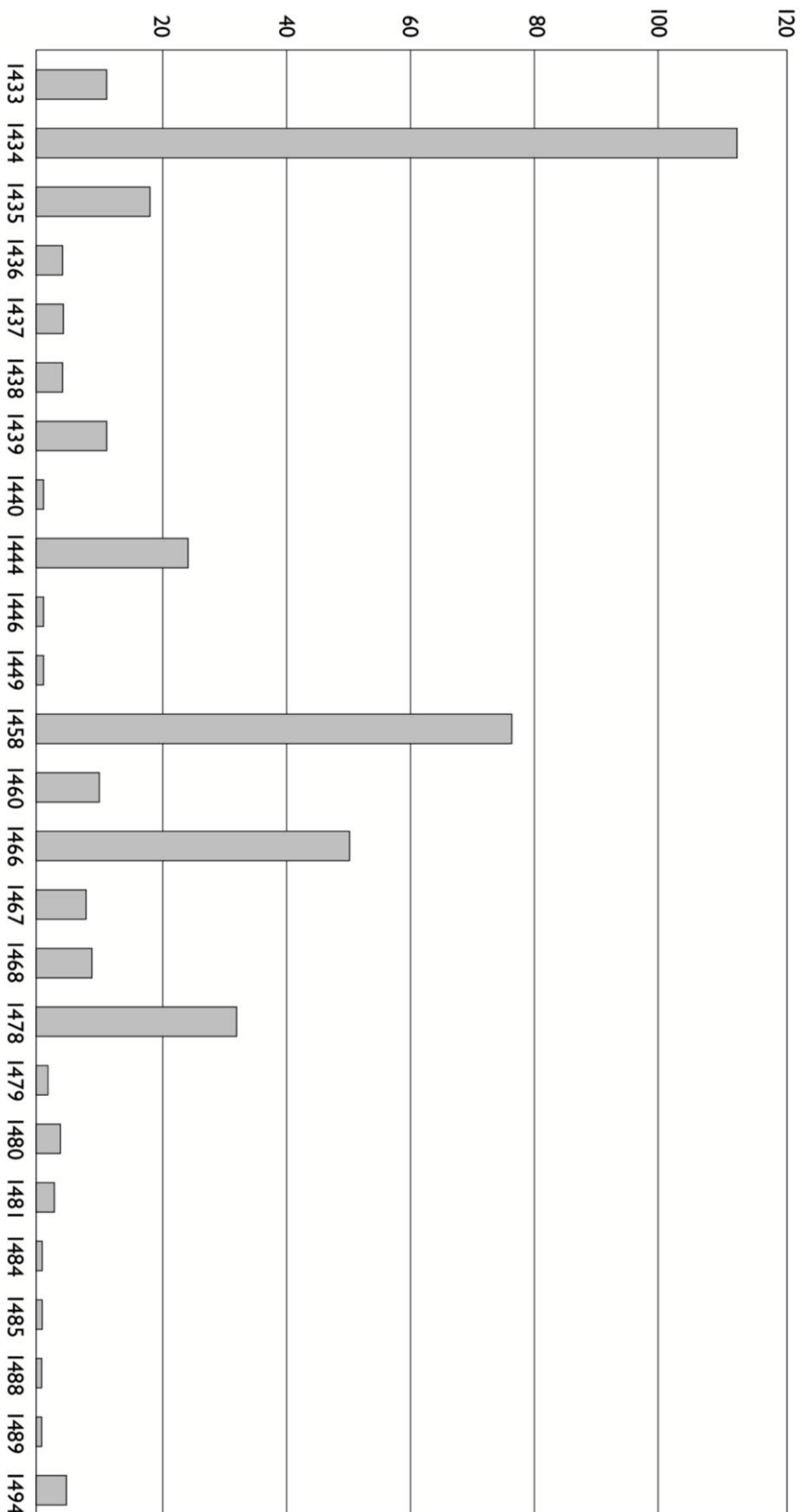


Appendix C  
Rates of Execution, Florence, 1420-1574





Appendix B  
Number of Exiles, 1433-1494



\*Figure 14.1 from Alison Brown, "Insiders and Outsiders: the Changing Boundaries of Exile," in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, edited by William J. Connell, 337-383 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

Appendix C  
Illustrations

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## Medici Rulers of Florence

Giovanni di Bicci, 1360-1429

Wed Piccarda Bueri

Father of Cosimo, Lorenzo “the Elder” and others

Cosimo di Bicci, 1389-1464

Reign 1434-1464

Wed Contessina de’ Bardi

Father of Piero and others

Piero di Cosimo “the Gouty”, 1416-1469

Reign 1464-1469

Wed Lucrezia Tornabuoni

Father of Bianca, Lucrezia, Lorenzo, Giuliano, and others

Lorenzo di Piero “the Magnificent”, 1449-1492

Reign 1469-1492

Wed Clarice Orsini

Father of Piero, Giovanni, Giuliano, and others

Piero di Lorenzo “the Unfortunate”, 1472-1503

Reign 1492-1494

Wed Alfonsina Orsini

Father of Lorenzo II and others

Giuliano di Lorenzo, 1479-1516

Reign 1513-1516

Wed Filiberta of Savoy

Father of Ippolito [illegitimate]

Lorenzo II di Piero, 1492-1519

Reign 1516-1519

Wed Madeleine de la Tour d’Auvergne

Father of Alessandro [illegitimate] and others

Clement VII [Giulio di Giuliano], 1478-1534

Reign 1519-1523

Nephew of Lorenzo “the Magnificent”

Ippolito di Giuliano, 1511-1535

Reign 1523-1527

Illegitimate grandson of Lorenzo “the Magnificent”

Alessandro di Lorenzo II “il Moro”, 1510-1537

Reign 1532-1537

Wed Margaret of Parma

Father of several [illegitimate]

Cosimo II, 1519-1574

Reign 1537-1569 [Grand Duke of Tuscany from 1569-1574]

Wed Eleanor of Toleso [died 1562] and Camilla Martelli

Father of several

Great-great grandson of Lorenzo di Bicci “the Elder”

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