

Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna and the Social World of Florentine Printing, ca. 1470–1493. By Lorenz Böninger. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021. 224 pp. Appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$49.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-25113-7.

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Reviewed by Robert Fredona

An independent scholar, Lorenz Böninger is best known as the talented editor of two volumes (*Lettere XV* and *XVI*), covering the period from March 1489 to February 1490, in the slowly unfolding but prestigious project to publish the vast correspondence of Lorenzo de' Medici. Deserving of equal if not greater praise is Böninger's monograph *Die deutsche Einwanderung nach Florenz im Spätmittelalter* (2006) (German Immigration to Florence in the late Middle Ages), a masterful study of central European immigration to late medieval Florence and of immigrant solidarity based on extensive research in confraternity and fiscal records. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the present study is an economic biography of one such immigrant, the printer Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna, originally from Wroclaw (formerly Breslau) in present-day Poland.

A comparatively short book, comprising a little over one hundred pages of text excluding notes and appendixes, *Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna and the Social World of Florentine Printing, ca. 1470–1493*—handsomely published in Harvard University Press's increasingly important I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History series—more than makes up for its brevity with its richness. To the extent that Niccolò di Lorenzo is known, if at all, beyond the tightly circumscribed and technical confines of the history of early Italian printing, he is known as the printer of the *editiones principes* of the humanist Cristoforo Landino's commentary on Dante's *Divine Comedy* and of Leon Battista Alberti's *De re aedificatoria*, the monumental treatise on classical architecture printed more than a decade after Alberti's death. As the book's title suggests, though, Böninger's interests lie less in the history of the book or of printing than in the “social world” of Florentine printers in the first two decades of printing in the city.

Böninger's use of the phrase “social world” in his title is presumably a tacit reference to Lauro Martines's groundbreaking early masterpiece, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, 1390–1460* (1963). If so, it is more than fitting. Where Martines plumbed the Florentine archives to explore the class or social position of eleven humanists on the basis of their participation in public life, family backgrounds, marriages, and fortunes, Böninger embeds Niccolò di Lorenzo and other early Florentine printers and humanists in the city's debt and credit economy. Early

on, Böniger explicitly rejects once-fashionable approaches that sought “proto-capitalist” forms in the Renaissance and in the early printing industry, but he nonetheless provides a richly contextualized portrait of a premodern entrepreneur, one assuredly of interest to inquisitive business historians.

With minor exceptions Böniger eschews the kind of physical and typographical details that mark the work of today’s most scrupulous bibliographers, and at the same time he largely steers clear of the techniques and style, ever so popular, of the history of erudition. Tellingly, the words “credit” and “debt,” in an economic sense, appear nowhere in Anthony Grafton’s excellent and endlessly readable recent collection *Inky Fingers: The Making of Books in Early Modern Europe* (2020), but they resound across the pages of Böniger’s book because, as he argues, they dictated the logics of printing as a business and delineated the contours of the social and economic networks surrounding it. Among the highlights of *Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna*, then, is Böniger’s discussion of the relationship between printers and wool merchants in Florence. Not only did the latter receive and sell books, but abundant and lower-quality woolen cloths (*panni di garbo*) served as a cash substitute and thus an important alternative medium of exchange in the printing industry, while contracts *a termine* (with full payment postponed) for the sale of such woolens allowed printers to deal with earlier debts and cover the running costs of print, not least the purchase of paper and wages for the *garzoni* employed in the city’s printshops.

The “new art” of printing arrived in Florence around 1470 and Böniger has uncovered fresh archival details about the first years of print in the city, going beyond the familiar story of Bernardo Cennini, but his chief if not single-minded focus is on the vicissitudes of the career of Niccolò di Lorenzo, who rapidly became Florence’s most prolific printer: his days as a *donzello* at the Mercanzia (Florence’s commercial court), his apprenticeship under Giovanni di Piero da Magonza, his presentation as a “master printer” and partnership with Cappone Capponi, his institutional and private printing commissions, his work on Landino’s Dante commentary (which ended up being supplanted on the book market by a finer Brescian edition), and the complicated legal wranglings around the vernacular publication of Gregory the Great’s *Moralia* on the book of Job.

Böniger claims, and not tendentiously, that “the economical factors of printing . . . have never been dealt with in a more than impressionistic way” (p. 3). For the earliest decades of print in Florence, this is no longer true. Böniger’s approach is as detailed as earlier approaches were impressionistic, and *Niccolò di Lorenzo della Magna* sheds crisp and important new light on topics such as the supply of paper; the nature

of dispute resolution at the Mercanzia and of the disputes among printers, stationers, booksellers, and wool manufacturers; partnerships and joint ventures in the printing industry; the market for books in Florence; printing on commission; the relationship of the “new art” to the established guild structure, and many others. If this concise and diligent economic biography has one flaw, it is precisely that Böninger too often refuses to stray from the archival data he has unearthed to paint a richer (if necessarily more impressionistic) picture of the political and especially intellectual milieu in which Niccolò di Lorenzo lived and worked—what he calls at one point the “shared . . . cultural background” of the protagonists of the new art of printing (p. 29).

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Quantitative Studies of the Renaissance Florentine Economy and Society. *By Richard T. Lindholm.* London: Anthem Press, 2017. 350 pp. Illustrations, glossary, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$115.00. ISBN: 978-1-78308-636-8.

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#### Reviewed by Francesca Trivellato

This book is not structured around a specific historical question. Rather, it covers key topics concerning economic and demographic changes in Florentine society from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, each one arguably chosen depending on the availability of data in the secondary sources. Richard Lindholm broaches several themes: the relationship between the seasonality of plague mortality and interest rates (chapter 1); fluctuations of the interest rates on the public debt (chapter 2); wealth distribution by household conditional on occupation (chapter 3); economic segregation or integration by neighborhood (chapter 4); the homeownership rate across the city (chapter 5); the life cycle of personal wealth accumulation (chapter 6); the predominance of large or small firms in the woolen industry (chapter 7); women’s labor participation and compensation levels (chapter 8); and the form and size of business enterprise (chapter 9).

In spite of this fragmented structure, the volume’s coherence stems not only from its application of modern economic theory to the past but also from its overall view that “Renaissance urban capitalism was well developed even if there are questions about rural capitalism” (p. 198).