

A Brief History of Patronage

One of the defining characteristics of Florentine society throughout the centuries was a deeply-rooted system of patronage networks. Galileo benefitted from the patronage of both the Marchese del Monte and the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo II de Medici, in his lifelong career as a mathematician, scientist, and inventor.

Patronage was practiced as a social institution throughout early modern Europe, probably peaking in importance between the 14th and 17th centuries. It is nearly impossible, however, to determine a specific origin of the tradition. In fact, "Cicero thought that the origins of Roman *clientela* were so ancient that it must have been brought to Rome by Romulus himself." ¹ By nature, it developed very gradually over long periods of time as different families and individuals rose and diminished in prominence in their respective corners of the continent.

In Florence, early patronage was associated with the church, which was a result of the powerful episcopal political influence in central Italy. The ownership of land determined one's importance, and the church was one of the largest single property-holders in Italy. By the 11th century, bishops were competing with wealthy rural families to become the "patrons" of local land-owners. Despite this rampant political parlaying on the part of church officials, the rise of Italian patronage has actually been attributed by some to the generosity inherent in Catholicism.

Whatever its roots, it became firmly institutionalized in Florentine life. As Biagioli describes it, patronage was not an "option." It was the key to social status, and, in Florence, there was an *absolute* social hierarchy. A career and social mobility were impossible apart from being involved in a network of patronage relationships. Even the working poor found themselves a part of this complicated web in their labor under Florence's multitude of patron-driven ².

Patronage is most commonly associated with artists and the arts in general, but, as with the case of Galileo, it extended to academia and the sciences. *Notability* and *credibility* went hand-in-hand, particularly for the scientist. Working under an increasingly prominent noble made one an increasingly credible thinker, or respectable craftsman. (Hence, Galileo sought the patronage of the Grand Duke.) Perhaps the best example of this patron-reputation linkage is Michaelangelo, whose patron was the Pope himself (Julius II). By the time of his death, he had been practically raised to a level of divinity among Florentine artists.

The social standing of the patron also benefitted from the arrangement. Sponsoring several clients indicated substantial wealth and an interest in the community. Especially accomplished clients brought to their patrons added prestige. In the academic hierarchy, the most prestigious patrons tended not to identify with clients from the "lower" disciplines (mathematics and the natural sciences), which further illustrates the remarkable accomplishments of Galileo. Ironically, patrons tended to distance themselves publicly from their clients as much as possible,

so as not to give the appearance of relying on their patrons for their status.

The end of academic patronage, at least in the sciences, can be loosely dated to 1682. In that year, King Louis XIV of France founded the Academie des Sciences, which brought to Western science a new reliance on experimentation. The credibility of research became dependent on the success of experiments rather than on the notability of a scientist's patron.

Other forms of patronage have persisted into the late twentieth century and continue to be a characteristic, though much less formal, element of southern European society.

Footnotes

1. Biagioli, Mario. *Galileo, Courtier*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. p.15
2. *ibid.* p.16

Sources

Biagioli, Mario. *Galileo, Courtier*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Dameron, George W. *Episcopal Power and Florentine Society, 1000-1320*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

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