

Lucca versus Florence 1430

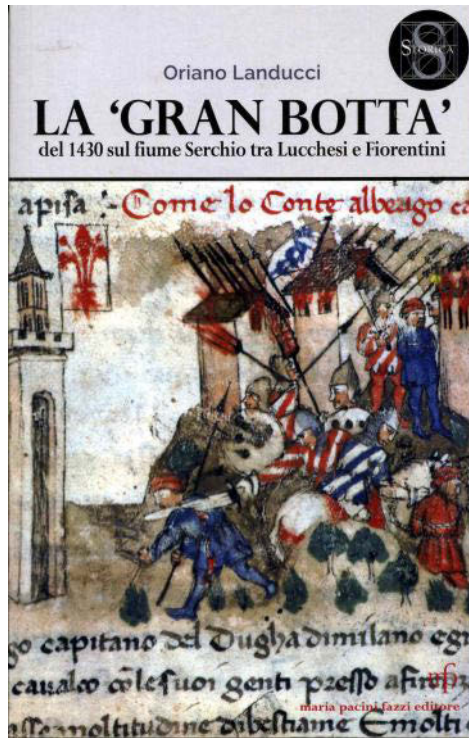
History has long been written from the perspective of “great events” and “great men”, men such as Paolo Guinigi, who ruled Lucca in the period, roughly speaking, from 1400 to 1430. Lucca's walls protected a rich and noble mercantile and banking class, already well-known for their success in the silk trade, especially. Outside the walls lay the *contada*, the extended community which embraced farms, pastures, and mountain lands, all providing valuable resources to the urban core.

When we begin contemplating the life of the ordinary populace, those without great power and influence, who are battered by historical forces such as plague, famine, droughts, and floods, speculation must take the place of history books. Yet this speculation may teach us as much as does History written with a capital H. Certainly it gives fodder for stories and fantasy, as well as philosophical considerations.

In 1430 Lucca was attacked by the Florentines, purportedly in the name of liberty. Paolo Guinigi, considered a despot by the Florentines, tried to create alliances to protect Lucca's territory from the invaders. The walls might have protected the city itself, but the people and territory outside the walls were much more vulnerable.

In this historical novel, Oriano Landucci, current president of the Fondazione Banca del Monte di Lucca, combines historical fact with fictional imagination to project us into the dramatic situation. The narrative begins with the Ozzeri River flooding the farmland of Sant'Angelo in Campo, to the west of Lucca. Andrea di Landuccio, a young farmboy, closely observes the water as it swirls through a canal. In this way, he is able to predict the flood and save the *contadini* from disaster.

Years later, Andrea joins Paolo Guinigi's army as they prepare to face the Florentine attackers. When Andrea learns of the Florentine architect Filippo Brunelleschi's (together with Donatello,



Michelozzi, and Ghiberti) project to turn the waters of the Serchio River against Lucca, specifically at Porta dei Borghi, he devises a plan to change the course of the water. Instead of battering down the city gate and flooding the town, the water flows around the town, flooding the Florentine camp between Lunata and Antraccoli, east of town. The Lucchese victory was a *gran botta* (big whack) against the powerful Florentines, one that remains in memory.

Floods are not new to this part of Tuscany, and in fact even in recent days I have heard locals express their fear of the Serchio overflowing its banks.

This book, published by Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore last year, opens a window on the past, and is filled with local idioms and details of political and domestic life. The narrative technique of dividing the story into sessions by the fireside, set in 1741, when nephew Sante Landucci listens to his grandfather (of the same name) telling the deeds of their illustrious ancestor Andrea di Landuccio, is a well-known technique; still the image is evocative. The author is himself a native of Sant'Andrea

in Campo, adding another layer to the historical tapestry.

Those who prefer their history straight, not mixed with fictional imagination, might not want to make the effort to read these 300+ pages, especially as the book is written in Italian. There are plenty of history books about Lucca and Tuscany, even in English, and much to read on internet. Still, this book could be good company during the winter evenings ahead, ten chapters to work through calmly, taking you 600 years into the past.

As the author wisely reminds us on the first page, *L'unico modo per far vivere la memoria è tramandarla* (the only way to keep memory alive is to pass it on).

– by Norma Jean Bishop

The book's cover image is an illustration from the *Chronicles* of Giovanni Sercambi (1368-1424)

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