

Women and The Wool Guild

DECIMA 1561, the Tiratoi, and Women in the Wool Industry

Jonah Shallit

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In his prior analysis of institutional landholders in the 1561 *Richerche*, Daniel Jamison noted that none of the main institutional landholders “disposed of significant portions of their property gratis besides the Arte della Lana, which parceled out eight properties to the headmen and employees of its fulling mills (*tiratoi*).”¹⁰ However, a deeper look at those eight properties, given to workers of the *Tiratoi*, offers a microhistorical glimpse at the economic opportunities for women, even in formal industry and management; *not all the ‘headmen’ of the tiratoi are, in fact, men.*

Prior scholarship has discussed the role of women in the Florentine economy, particularly in the textile industry, where women were increasingly present in the 16th century. Judith Brown notes that “by 1604, 62 percent of weavers and 40 percent of all wool workers were women.”¹¹ The textile industry was an anomaly in this sense, employing far more women than other sectors of the Florentine economy. However, prior scholarship has concluded that while women were represented in the wool industry, that representation was limited to extremely menial and low-ranking positions. In Richard Goldthwaite’s *Economy of Renaissance Florence*, he is dismissive of the possibility of higher ranking roles for women: “In the wool industry they did all the spinning, some weaving, and little else.” He continues that “most of these women worked inside their homes to supplement the income of the household” and “hence they too worked on the margins of the market.”¹²

The *Decima* database and the 1561 census offer a means of testing those notions of women’s roles in industry on a microhistorical level. The census gives detailed records of households and occupations which, coupled with geolocation on the Buonsignori map provide detailed data on specific individuals and families of different social strata. My analysis will examine two exceptions to Goldthwaite’s assessment, looking at women in the 1561 database who managed to avoid the margins of Florentine industry. In doing so, I hope to use a very specific analysis to raise broader issues of the barriers to women in the Florentine economy, and the ways in which those barriers could be overcome.

The *DECIMA* database is also an interesting means of testing Goldthwaite’s claim because he phrases the exclusion of women from industry in terms of *physical space*: describing women as remaining inside their homes, and in the margins of the market. The mapping component of *DECIMA* allows for an assessment not only of women’s formal roles in the Florentine economy, but their visibility as well. Placed onto the Buonsignori map, the *DECIMA* data show the degree of female exclusion in terms of physical space, in what physical parts of the city women were allowed to control.

In the 1561 records, 157 properties are listed as ‘held by service’ indicating a gratis lease of property by an institution to an individual for their employment. Examples include the aforementioned housing for employees of the *tiratoi*, or rooms for gate guards. These gratis grants of property offer a detailed look into a small subsection of Florentine em-

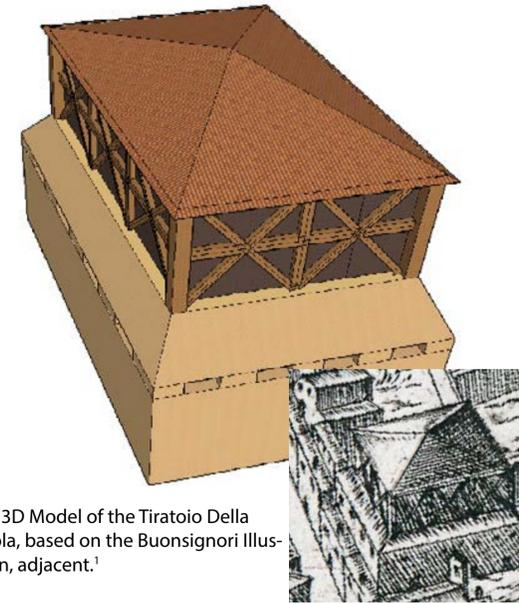


Fig 1. 3D Model of the Tiratoio Della Pergola, based on the Buonsignori Illustration, adjacent.¹

ployment— for tenants living in a property ‘held by service,’ we can be certain of their employment, and, importantly, their employer— the institution that granted the property. Of these 157 properties listed as ‘held by service,’ only 5 (3%) have female tenants as the primary occupant (compared to women being the primary tenants in 14% of holdings, across all ownership types). This underrepresentation is understandable, given Goldthwaite’s analysis of women in Florentine industry. Women would be unlikely to gain the formal employment status which would be necessary for gratis housing granted by an institution, being primarily relegated informal work and the margins of industry.

However, that dismissal overlooks the 5 notable exceptions of ‘held by service’ housing granted to women. One is granted by the Monasterio di S. Orsola to Mona Bartolomea, *serva di Monache* (handmaid of the nuns). The other two grants by an institution, rather than an individual, are both by the Arte Della Lana. This in itself is notable, there are eight ‘held by service’ properties owned by the Arte Della Lana; so of the eight properties parceled out “to the headmen and employees of its fulling mills,” two are parceled out to women. In other words, 25% of the Arte Della Lana’s ‘held by service’ grants are to women, compared to the baseline value of 3% ‘held by service grants’ to women across the database.

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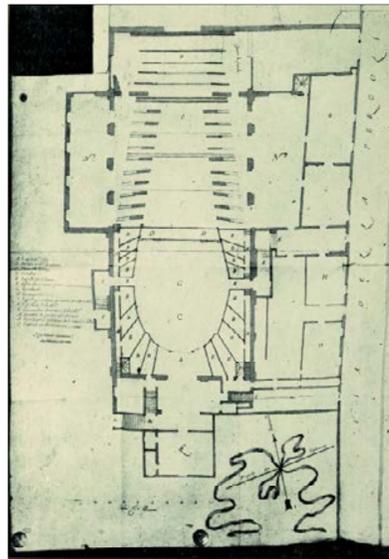


Fig 2. The original plans for the Teatro Della Pergola, constructed in place of the Tiratoio Della Pergola, demolished in 1652. The plans are the source of the dimensions used in Fig. 1.²



Fig 3. Fabio Borbottoni’s painting of the Tiratoio Delle Grazie in Florence, dating to the 19th Century.³⁻⁻

The Tiratoi

The *Tiratoi* were gigantic structures in which wool was stretched or tented, in order to be cleaned and thickened before sale. At the time of the Buonsignori Map (1584) and the 1561 census, there were four major *Tiratoi* in the city: the *Tiratoio degli Angeli* (fig 4), the *Tiratoio dell’Uccello*, the *Tiratoio della Pergola* (fig 1), and the *Tiratoio Delle Grazie* (fig 3). All were owned by the Arte Della Lana, and processed wool from all the manufacturers in the city.

The *Tiratoi* were one of the most visible signs of the Florentine wool industry, as “most of the other finishers — burlers, nappers or teaslers, shearmen, and menders — apparently worked at home or in their own

workshops.”⁸ Goldthwaite highlights the *tiratoi* as major landmarks, “besides mills along the riverbanks, tenter sheds [*tiratoi*] were the only industrial buildings that had a distinct architectural identity on the urban scene.” He continues that “to anyone looking over the cityscape at the time, they alone revealed something about the industrial life of the city.”⁹

As the wool industry declined in the 17th century, the *tiratoi* fell into disuse and were eventually destroyed; none remain in Florence today. The *Tiratoio della Pergola* (fig 1) was demolished in 1652 in order to build a theatre. The dimensions of those theatre plans, executed in the space once occupied by the *Tiratoio*, give an approximate measurement of the *Tiratoio della Pergola*’s huge size: roughly 100x165 meters in length and width.

The Arte Della Lana

In 1561, the Florentine economy was dominated by the wool industry. Between 1560 and 1569, the wool industry employed 60,000 Florentines, mostly menial spinners and weavers.⁵ For the most part, the wool industry operated as a large number of small, separate firms. The Wool Guild (The Arte Della Lana) was the regulatory body of the wool industry, but it also assisted the industry in tasks which would be difficult for single firms, for example in maintaining warehouses and tenter sheds— the *tiratoi*.⁶

The 1561 census reflects the wool guild’s power even in terms of the residential cityscape. The Arte Della Lana appears as the tenth largest institutional landholder in the city, owning 46 residential holdings and collecting 620 *scudi* in rent.⁷ Most of these residential holdings were rented *a pigione*, not necessarily to members of the wool industry, creating an additional source of income and presence for the guild.

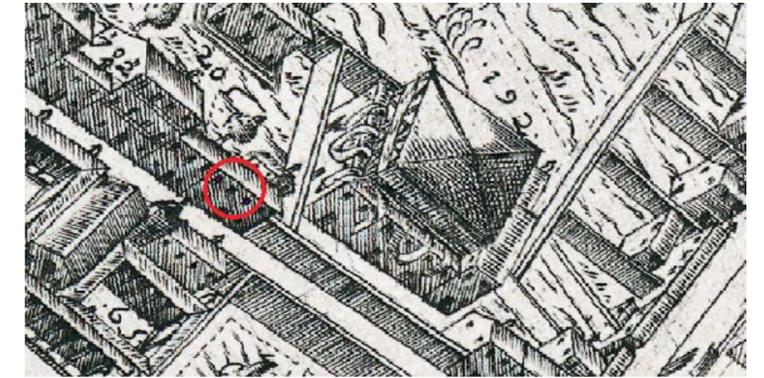


Fig 4. The locations of the Arte Della Lana’s two ‘held by service’ holdings held by women, adjacent to the *Tiratoio Degli Angeli* on Via Degli Alfani⁴

The Women of the Tiratoio Degli Angeli

These two ‘held by service’ holdings with women as primary tenants are, in fact, adjacent to one another, as well as to the *Tiratoio Degli Angeli* on Via Degli Alfani. The first primary tenant is a *Mona Marcetta, donna fu di Lionardo Santini, compagno et conductore di detto fratorio* [sic], who lives there with 2 male and three other female residents. (‘Fratorio’ being presumably a misreading of *Tiratoio*; there is no *Fratorio* nearby.) She is not listed explicitly as ‘vedove,’ (widow) unlike some women in the 1561 census, but she is listed as *donna fu* (formerly), and her husband *Lionardo* does not appear elsewhere in the 1551 or 1561 censuses. Her husband’s family, the Santini, are heavily involved in the Florentine wool trade, often as *tiratoiaio*. A *Francesco di Piero Santini* runs the nearby *Tiratoio della Pergola*. A few buildings down from *Mona Marcetta* lives another Santini man, *Antonio*, also in a property owned by the Arte Della Lana. However, *Antonio* is not listed as the *conductore* of the *Tiratoio*. I argue the most likely explanation is that she is a widow, and after her husband’s death has taken over his role in the *Tiratoio*. Her occupation is listed vaguely as ‘compagno,’ but in the context of her late husband *Lionardo*, ‘compagno et conductore di dette fratorio [sic]’ it is clear she has taken over her husband’s work in the *Tiratoio*.

The presence of the second woman, also living in a ‘held by service’ casa adjacent, *Mona Baccia*, offers even stronger evidence for this hypothesis. *Mona Baccia* is listed as *donna fu d’ Antonio Nimani, gia conductore di det-*

to fratorio [sic]. Once again, although not explicitly listed as *vedove*, she is once again ‘*donna fu*,’ and her husband is ‘*gia*’ (previously) *conductore*. Similarly, the husband makes no other appearance in either the 1551 or 1561 census. *Mona Baccia*’s employment is listed as ‘*conductore*’— a designation that would be meaningless without careful examination. By visualizing Florence, it becomes clear that as *Mona Baccia* lives adjacent to the *Tiratoio degli Angeli*, and in light of her late husband’s occupation, *Mona Baccia is the conductore of the Tiratoio Degli Angeli*, which she runs with another woman, *Mona Marcetta*. Unlike all the other *tiratoi* on the Buonsignori map, the *tiratoio degli Angeli* is the only one which does not have a nearby man listed as *conductore* or *tiratoiaio*.

The 1561 *DECIMA* database offers a fascinating glimpse into a small moment of female economic empowerment that might otherwise be overlooked by modern examinations: by all indications the *Tiratoio degli Angeli*, one of the most visible and recognizable symbols of the wool industry in Florence, is managed by two women in 1561. This microhistorical snapshot also works to rebut some earlier conceptions of women’s involvement in the Florentine economy. While most Florentine women were clearly on the margins of industry, some were in fact highly visible in vital formal roles. In “Women and Industry in Florence,” Judith Brown argues against some prior scholarship, to state that for women “marriage and employment were not necessarily inversely related.”¹³ The women of the *Tiratoio degli Angeli* support Brown’s argument; they have escaped the margins of the Florentine economy through their deceased husbands.

