

**Paper presented at the
3rd Meeting of the European Network on the Theory and Practice of Biography ENTPB
Biography as a Problem: New Perspectives
25-26 February 2011 – Florence, European University Institute**

Work in progress. Please do not quote or cite without the author's permission

A European identity: Ottavio Piccolomini (1599-1656), soldier, courtier, patron

Alessandra Becucci, European University Institute

The study of the cultural patronage of Ottavio Piccolomini Pieri d'Aragona (1599-1656), Italian nobleman and soldier in the Habsburg army, as a key to understand the construction of his socio-political persona and his self fashioning¹ as a soldier and a courtier at the Imperial court, accounts for the possibility to study an early modern life course in a transnational perspective.

While the concept of self-fashioning as related to cultural patronage has been the object of several investigations, the study of early modern cultural investments made by Seventeenth century career soldiers has only been occasionally touched upon. As an Italian nobleman living the most of his life out of the native country, as a young pike bearer reaching the highest echelons of the imperial military hierarchy and court society, born a Sienese duke and dead an Imperial prince, Ottavio Piccolomini's features differentiate him from the better known typologies of art patrons, mainly by reason of the military activity, and the mobility related to it, marking his entire life².

When taking into consideration the peculiarities of his case, it is possible to try and reassess some of the ideas and conclusions drawn about Early modern cultural patronage, such as the definition of 'art patron' itself. Processes of emulation/adoption/reception/rejection in the cultural transfers and in the choice or in the commission of artworks, the definition of the role mediators and agents had in the acquisition and the circulation of artworks and the relevance of their social role when performing the agency function, the idea that the acquisition of artworks exclusively depended on the patron's will and taste, regardless for the conditions imposed by the context, and, related to this, the alternate successfulness of cultural investments, are but some of the issues that Piccolomini's vicissitude allows to consider. While his activity can certainly be

¹ Defined by Stephen Greenblatt, *The Renaissance Self-fashioning. From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago&London, 1980, as the process of constructing one's identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards.

² Jacques Revel, Jean Claude Passeron (eds.), *Penser par cas*, Paris, 2005

included within the framework of aristocratic cultural practices, the peculiarities of the specific case provide a chance to overcome the problem of a unique perspective focusing either on the stylistic analysis of the artwork's formal aspects, on the economic element, related to the production and commercialization process, or on the social dimension, considering the relation between society and artistic production. In fact, Piccolomini's cultural patronage yields a reflection on the multi-faceted and context depending dimension of a complex phenomenon such as patronage is, as emphasized since already in 1987 by Francis W. Kent, Patricia Simons and John C. Eade, when calling for an interdisciplinary twist to approach a broader and more precise comprehension of the phenomenon³.

Because of the peculiarities of the character himself, Ottavio Piccolomini allows to look into discontinuities and differences with respect to the typical images of patrons (rulers, noble men and women, religious authorities) enriching the picture of cultural patronage as a common way of expression and communication of shared values, a required feature, of the European nobility of the Early Modern time, embedded in their way of living.

While considering the trajectory of one life, the biographical approach allows on one hand to focus on processes and practices more than on structures and institutions⁴ and, on the other, enhances the social context, providing “a better understanding as to how single persons shape the conditions of their lives through their interplay with other individuals and through the ways of doing and thinking shared with their group”⁵.

Ottavio Piccolomini was born in 1599 the third son of Violante Gerini, daughter to one of the most distinguished Florentine families, and Silvio Piccolomini, Sieneese and Florentine patrician, intimate of the Medici grand ducal court in Florence, Chamberlain of the Grand duke of Tuscany and the educator of the duke's first born. Scion of the highest Tuscan nobility, Ottavio could count on an uncommonly rich cultural background. While both his father and his elder brother, Enea, were amongst Galileo Galilei's close friends, Piccolomini could claim amongst his ancestors pope Pius II Piccolomini (1405-1464), the humanist from Siena, known for his love for the arts and his political and diplomatic skills, pope Pius III Piccolomini (1439-1503), patron of the Piccolomini library in the cathedral of Siena, and Alessandro Piccolomini (1508-

³ Patricia Simons F. W. Kent, J. C. Eade (eds), *Patronage, art, and society in Renaissance Italy*, Canberra, New York, 1987; Patricia Lee Rubin, Giovanni Ciappelli (eds), *Art, Memory, and Family in Renaissance Florence*, Cambridge, 2000.

⁴ Osvaldo Raggio, *Storia di una passione. Cultura aristocratica e collezionismo alla fine dell'Ancien Régime*, Venezia, 2000.

⁵ Willem Frijhoff, *The Improbable Biography. Uncommon Sources, a Moving Identity, a Plural Story ?*, in Volker R. Berghahn, Simone Lässig (eds), *Biography between structure and agency. Central European Lives in International Historiography*, New York-Oxford, 2008, pp. 215-233.

1579), literary man, philosopher, scientist and author of the first modern celestial Atlas (*Delle stelle fisse*, 1543).

The martial tradition of the family was also strong and had reached the highest recognition in Ottavio's father service for the Medici family. As responsible for the arsenal of the Tuscan army and Constable of the military order of Saint Stephen, Silvio's fame had grown enough to be celebrated by Michel de Montaigne in the Journal of this Travel to Italy. In his father's footsteps, and following the destiny of a third born nobleman, Ottavio received a military education and his career started in the service of the Spanish crown in the Milanese region, where he arrived a sixteen years old pike-bearer. He later followed his brother, as captain of chivalry in the Tuscan Regiment that the grand duke of Tuscany had sent in assistance to the Emperor facing the Bohemian insurrections, and participated to the Battle of the White Mountain (1620) and to the Battle of Lutzen (1632). His career had a boost after the elimination of the alleged traitor, and his former commander, general Albrecht von Wallenstein (1583-1634), following which Piccolomini was rewarded with money and with the bohemian fief of Náchod. In the following years he was able to rise within the military hierarchy and for his merit in the battle of Thioville (1639) he was given back the duchy of Amalfi, lost by the family centuries earlier, and granted the access to the Imperial Privy Council. In the 1640s he served in the Spanish Low Countries and in Spain, where he obtained the title of Grandee of Spain and the Order of the Golden Fleece, and came later back in the Imperial service, achieving the highest diplomatic rank with the appointment as Imperial envoy at the conference for the ratification of the peace of Westphalia (1649). Two years later, upon retiring from the active military career and marrying Maria Franziska Benigna von Sachsen Lauenburg, daughter to one of his fellow commanders, he moved to Nachod, seldom returning to Vienna, where he died heirless in 1656.

Mobility, as consequent from the military activity, is the standpoint for the biographical approach in this study, as a tool to reconnect different analytical levels. The focus on Piccolomini's moving while opening the analysis on a European scale, instead of limiting it to a particular area as it has been done so far in the most of the literature on artistic patronage, allows to focus on one single life experience, to analyze the different modes of acquisition, the motivations related to them and the networks created and exploited in the process and to try and find comparisons for his practices, so to arrive at a broader comprehension of the use of culture for the socio-political self-promotion of a Seventeenth century career soldier.

The definition of mobility in Piccolomini's case is twofold. Besides the frequent physical displacements on duty, in relation both to military campaigns and to more or less formal diplomatic missions, Piccolomini's career deployed through several steps. While it does not seem appropriate to speak about social mobility in reference to military aristocracy, nevertheless it has to be noticed that a young nobleman's career in the Habsburg army often implied a change of status, not only within the military hierarchy, but, in relation to it, also in the ambit of the court, young European nobleman entering the military service as pike bearers to climb the highest echelons of the court society.

The reconstruction of his cultural investments' complexity is therefore tied to the understanding of adaptation processes related both to his several displacements across Europe and to the requirements of his various representational needs, changing together with his status as a courtier and Imperial servant. The cultural capital inherited through the rich cultural family background enabled him to accumulate more cultural capital, to be used both for the maintenance of the family's – and his own – reputation in the foreign land where he operated and for the accumulation of prestige to be spent and/or converted into social currency for his advancement and promotion, eventually getting a return in economic terms⁶.

As Daniel Roche writes, mobility orientates practices and representations⁷.

Piccolomini's movement through different geo-political spaces by reason of his military and diplomatic activity – from Tuscany to Spain first, later to northern Italy, to the territories of the Habsburg empire and to Spain again, then to the Spanish Low Countries and, allegedly, to England – naturally triggered processes of adjustment and adaptation: not only from presenting someone with the right gift according to the rank of the person and costumes of the place, to giving or demanding precedence on public occasions, to the adoption of German speaking secretaries to deal with the right address of courtesy when writing to the several personalities he was connected to, but also in the choice of the cultural investment to make, the choice of artworks more suitable to represent him and the choice of artists and craftsmen working for him.

He therefore:

- maintained connections with artists active both for the Florentine court he was coming from and for the Imperial in Vienna or the archducal in Innsbruck, so to have in his service someone that had also worked or was working for his original patrons, the Medici family, and his present patrons, the Habsburgs

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *The forms of capital*, in J. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York, 1986, 241-258 (first ed. German, 1983).

⁷ Daniel Roche, *Humeurs vagabondes. De la Circulation des hommes et de l'utilité des voyages*, Paris, 2003.

- tried to get in touch with artists active for other noblemen in the place where he was operating, either through other noblemen's or his own mediators' suggestion
- tried to get involved in the co-patronizing of artworks or buildings together with other patrons he knew, or was dependent from, so to enter the same cultural environment, adapting to the others' patronage policies

His mobility forcefully entailed the use of networks of agents on which to rely as for the retrieval of information, the connection with artists, the supervision and the practical aspects of the commission, the payment and the shipping of artworks.

Piccolomini himself was an agent, both at the beginning of the career, when, while in Italy, he tried to find artists to work for his commander in chief, Albrecht von Wallenstein, and when, already with a position at the court, his own most important agent and informer asked him to deliver some boxes to the archduchess Claudia de' Medici, during one of his displacement from Nurnberg to Innsbruck.

The focus in this network activity has to be identified in the function of agency more than in a specific professional profile⁸, so that members of the family, secretaries, Piccolomini's own patrons, artists working for him and artists working for other patrons are part of the web of contacts that he uses, often providing him with art pieces as well as with political information, representing him during his absences from the court or taking care of the maintenance of his household and of his reputation.

But the process of shaping of an Italian nobleman's socio-political persona at the Habsburgs court was not flawless. Despite the knowledge of etiquette, ceremonials, title and precedence rights both seconded by the family education and active in the maintenance of the family reputation itself, the construction of the public persona had to be continuously negotiated, as well as his identity, socially constructed. All of Piccolomini's socio-military achievements within the Habsburg ambit took place, in fact, alongside the maintenance of a Sieneese origin, a Tuscan allegiance, an Italian identity, as well as of his being noble, catholic, foreigner, third-born, warrior etc.

Identity, is, in fact, one of the several issues to be considered in relation to the choice of the biographical approach. If one's identity is constructed by the portfolio of ties to others to whom

⁸ Marika Keblusek, Hans Cools, Badeloch Noldus (eds), *Your Humble Servant. Agents in Early Modern Europe*, Hilversum, 2005.

one associates, the personhood has to be made out of a number of different identities, adopted in different interactional settings, with a certain degree of ambiguity⁹.

For Piccolomini, more than for other of his peer noblemen that could represent themselves in person, getting connected was essential, autonomy of decision without connection corresponded, in fact, to isolation, resulting for him in a marginal role at the court, accompanied by the physical marginality of the bohemian fief of Náchod, assigned to him by the emperor.

Part of his travelling identity, though, was made of the capital he brought along when leaving Tuscany, and was expressed in a name – Piccolomini – that had been long and well known in the Habsburg territories, thanks to the diplomatic activity and literary production of his most famous ancestor, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, later pope Pius II, for the emperor Friedrich III (1415-1493) before than for the military activity of his father Silvio and of his elder brother Enea in the Low Countries, Bohemia and Transylvania.

As Renata Ago wrote, familiar ethics imposed to the individual to make a contribution to the honor and the social recognition of the family. It is a duty to act so to enhance one's own prestige and, therefore, the one of the family¹⁰.

The biographical illusion denounced by Pierre Bourdieu expresses itself also through the name, “l’attestation visible de l’identité de son porteur à travers les temps et les espaces sociaux, le fondement de l’unité de ses manifestations successives et de la possibilité socialment reconnue de totaliser ces manifestations dans les enregistrements officiels”, but also “la forme *par excellence* de l’imposition arbitraire”, useless to describe properties and convey information about that which it names, because “toutes les descriptions seraient valbles seulement dans les limites d’un stade pu d’un espace”¹¹.

This illusion, as an ensemble of characteristics permanently defining the essence of a ‘self’ that exists before the history¹², as well as the flattening down of the identity to any specific situation, as according to the symbolic interactionism¹³, observed by Loriga¹⁴, are amongst the risks of the biographical narrative.

⁹ Paul D. McLean, *The art of the network: strategic interaction and patronage in Renaissance Florence*, Durham, 2008

¹⁰ Renata Ago, *Giochi di squadra: uomini e donne nelle famiglie nobili del XVII secolo*, in *Signori, patrizi e cavalieri nell’età moderna*, a cura di M.A. Visceglia, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1992, pp.256-264,

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *L’illusion biographique*, «Actes de la recherche en Sciences Sociales», 62-63 (June 1986), pp. 69-72.

¹² Bourdieu, 1986.

¹³ Richard C. Trexler, *Introduction*, in Richard C. Trexler (ed.), *Persons in groups. Social behavior as Identity Formation and Renaissance Europe*, Binghamton, New York, 1985; Ronald F. E. Weissman, *Reconstructing Renaissance Sociology: The ‘Chicago School’ and the Study of Renaissance Society*, ibidem.

¹⁴ Sabina Loriga, *Soldati. L’istituzione militare nel Piemonte del Settecento* Venezia, 1992; eadem, *Biographical and Historical Writing in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Transition to Modernity Colloquium, The MacMillan Center, Yale University, 2008.

How to integrate in the narrative the processual character of identity/identities? And how to integrate its specific temporality ?

If, as according to Bourdieu, “les événements biographiques se définissent comme autant de placements et de déplacements dans l’espace social, c’est-à-dire, plus précisément, dans les différents états successifs de la structure de la distribution des différentes espèces de capital qui sont en jeu dans le champ considéré” and “le sens des mouvements conduisant d’une position à une autre (...) se définit, de toute évidence, dans la relation objective entre le sens et la valeur au moment considéré des ces positions au sein d’un espace orienté”¹⁵, the description of the human ability to exist in different fields appears problematic in the biographic narration because of the tendency to adopt a single point of view, a single identity for the individual, a single field of action. The exclusion from the cultural field of all the producers whose main activity is developed in fields other than the cultural one, may, in a certain way, account for the critic’s negligence in reference to the cultural interests of Ottavio Piccolomini, whose historiographical existence has been for a long time exclusively legitimated in the field of military history.

If only considering Ottavio Piccolomini Pieri d’Aragona’s titles, as duke of Amalfi, colonel, captain, field marshal, commander in chief of the Spanish and Imperial army, Imperial count and prince, knight of the Order of Saint Stephen, of the Order of Malta and of the Golden Fleece, it would be already possible to write several biographies, with different focuses of inquiry and with a plurality of approaches, as well as several histories could be written with reference to the different aspects of his vicissitude.

Trying to avoid the creation of a fictitious image of his life as a linear progression, developed around a few significant events, the effort is twofold in the use of different dimensional scales related one to the other¹⁶ – to insert Piccolomini in a system of relations that changes according to chronological, geographical and social variables – and in registering the elements of discontinuity in the course of his life and activity, that, though difficult to grasp, bring back the narration to a certainly less deterministic dimension¹⁷: failures in the sponsoring of his artists at the Imperial court, loss of commissions, complaints and legal actions of artists and craftsman against him because of his insolvency are part of the dynamics of Piccolomini’s cultural action.

¹⁵ Bourdieu, 1986.

¹⁶ Jacques Revel (ed), *Jeux d’échelles: la micro-analyse à l’expérience*, Paris, 1996.

¹⁷ Sabina Loriga, *La biographie comme problème*, in J. Revel, *Jeux d’échelles*, Paris, 1996, pp. 201-226 and Ian Kershaw, *Biography and the Historian. Opportunities and constraints*, in Volker R. Berghahn, Simone Lässig (eds.), *Biography between Structure and Agency. Central European Lives in International Historiography*, New York, 2008, pp. 27-39.

Piccolomini's identity as a patron was constructed not only in different places, but by the movement between those places, shaped in transition by the circulation and networks of people and things, his space being defined by his mobility. These (social) relationships, more than the individual Piccolomini or the groups he is usually associated with – Seventeenth-century military enterprisers, foreign-born Italian noblemen in Vienna etc. – has therefore to be taken as the unit of analysis. The difficulty lies in the description of the individual's dependence on his relation with society and of how an individual participate of the society being unique, the process of connection being the core of the problem.

Given that networks, practices, ideas, institutions connect places, a possible attempt for the restitution of Piccolomini's complex identity, may be done through the description of these networks, and through the analysis of their connective space, while considering the diachronical dimension of their existence, in order to avoid the risk of a situational reconstruction.

Even acknowledging that the closer the analysis gets to the individual the less representative terms can be found for him or her, the context, and the interplay micro – macro, seem necessary to get around the rhetoric problem, the temptation to analyze a life as a destiny, or to twist the sources to get closer to the subject¹⁸. Before the interpretive level, the selection process of the sources is in fact strictly related to the play with scales, as it is level that determines the relevance of a document¹⁹. In this respect, bearing in mind that the reality inferable from the sources is an image, and that the 'reconstructable' is a matter of expression²⁰ – regardless of the means (written, visual or material) – and it therefore is mediated by the rhetoric, the 'failing' character of some of Piccolomini's cultural investments seems to provide a tool to get around the teleological temptation in the reconstruction of his vicissitude.

No claim is made here for Piccolomini's representativeness of any of the groups he is ascribed to (career military, foreign-born noblemen at the Habsburg court, Italians, Tuscans, Siennese, third-born aristocrat, ranking marshal, informal diplomat, urban gentlemen, courtier), with reference to the use he makes of his cultural patronage for his self-fashioning, as an individual, if not reducible to one single allegiance or affiliation, cannot explain one group. And yet, if the

¹⁸ On the dangers of relativism in the biographical narrative, Sabina Loriga, *Le petit x: de la biographie à l'histoire*, Paris, 2010; on the 'circularity' in the interpretation of the sources, Carlo Ginzburg, *Miti, Emblemi, Spie*, Torino, 1986; about the distance to be kept with the object of study, Jill Lepore, *Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography*, «The Journal of American History», 88, 1, June 2001, pp. 129-144.

¹⁹ Jacques Revel, *L'histoire au ras du sol*, in Giovanni Levi, *Le pouvoir au village. Histoire d'un axorciste dans le Piémont du XVIIe siècle*, Paris, 1985; Étienne Anheim, Enrico Castelli Gattinara, *Jeux d'échelles. Une histoire internationale*, «Revue de synthèse», 130, ser. 6, 4, 2009, pp. 661-677.

²⁰ Anthony J. La Vopa, *Fichte: The self and the calling of philosophy, 1762-1799*, Cambridge, 2001.

analysis of the micro level is necessary to avoid the assumption of a preexistent picture²¹, a vicissitude cannot be understood exclusively on the basis of its singularities²².

To what extent one individual life course, with its choices, accidents, chances, decisions taken according to the moment's situation, can be representative of others, for how many common traits one might individuate ? To what extent 'cosmopolitan' accent in Piccolomini's cultural investments was a characteristic shared by others, and was it part of the necessary background to be a successful member of the court?

A comparative study, including other figures of 'military entrepreneurs' seems to be necessary to move around this issue and, on the other hand, to try and find more terms of contextualization.

But in this respect the difficulty in Piccolomini's case is the lack of studies on other fellow military enterprisers from the point of view of cultural patronage, which does not allow comparisons to facilitate the play between analytical and synthetic level. It is not possible to juxtaposed Piccolomini's micro level with any other, nor confront it against a set of characteristic of the social group of military enterprisers, to shed some fresh insights through the analysis of the differences and discontinuities. An assessment based on the study of the cultural patronage activity of personalities sharing traits with him, might bring light to the differentiated cultural practices and modalities of a group - the military entrepreneurs of the Seventeenth century – that is usually seen as extremely homogeneous, and eventually result in the conclusion that his vicissitude was more typical than exceptional. Or, differently, that his case was, to use an expression coined by Edoardo Grendi, an '*eccezionale normale*'²³.

Despite the fact Piccolomini's vicissitude is not the life of an unknown²⁴, and that it is possible to rely on personal and indirect evidence – their abovementioned rhetorical quality left aside – the history of the private life of an individual remains an enigma, the reason and dynamics of her/his choices – in terms of art, culture and self representation through it, as far as I am concern – included. The emotional core remains unknown and unknowable.

If biography is "le lieu idéal pour vérifier le caractère interstitiel (...) de la liberté dont disposent les agents, comme pour observer la façon dont fonctionnent concrètement des systèmes

²¹ Raggio, 2000.

²² Giovanni Levi, *Les usages de la biographie*, «Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales», 1989, 44, 6, pp. 1325-1336.

²³ Edoardo Grendi, *Micro-analisi e storia sociale*, «Quaderni storici», XII, 35, agosto, 1977, pp. 506-520.

²⁴ Alain Corbin, *Le monde retrouvé de Louis- François Pinagot, sur les traces d'un inconnu, 1798-1876*, Paris, 1998.

normatifs, qui ne sont jamais exempts de contradictions”²⁵, Ottavio Piccolomini’s vicissitude, observed from a so far unexplored point of view such as the one of artistic patronage and of the interest for the arts, will bring elements of novelty in a field of study which is, instead, already very much investigated, such as the one of cultural *patronage* and might account as one of the ways in which a life can be recounted.

Alessandra Becucci, 2011©

Work in progress. Please do not quote or cite without the author’s permission

²⁵ Giovanni Levi , *Les usages de la biographie*, 1989.