**Reading: The Medici Family**

The Medici family were the most powerful citizens of Florence, leaders of the largest bank in Europe, and through strategic marriage alliances, joined many of Europe's royal families.

The founder of the family fortunes was Giovanni di Bicci de Medici (1360-1429). Under his leadership, the family bank blossomed, and he soon became the richest man in Florence. Banking was a relative innovation during the period, and the Medici were its most successful practitioners. Giovanni's son, Cosimo (1389-1464), called Cosimo the Elder, succeeded him as leader of the bank. Though nominally an ordinary Florentine citizen, Cosimo skillfully manipulated Florence's political institutions to his family's benefit, using his wealth and connections to pack the governmental bodies with Medici supporters, until he was all but official ruler of Florence.

His son Piero (1416-1469) briefly succeeded him, but it was Piero's son Lorenzo (1449-1492), called Lorenzo the Magnificent, who presided over the Medici golden age and, by extension, the golden age of Florence. He earned his nickname by spending lavishly on artistic and architectural projects to beautify Florence and on splendid public festivals to entertain its citizens. Like his father and grandfather, he maintained control of Florence by making sure that his supporters were appointed to key positions in the government, so that he remained technically an ordinary citizen while living like a prince. In 1478, he survived an assassination attempt by the Pazzi, a rival banking family supported by his enemy, Pope Sixtus IV. He was attacked as he attended church services at the cathedral of Florence. His brother Giovanni was killed, but Lorenzo suffered only minor wounds. The conspirators were hunted down and vengefully executed; the noted artist Sandro Boticelli commemorated the executions in a series of murals. A war with Sixtus followed, in which Lorenzo turned for help to the French and finally ended the war with a dramatic personal visit to the Pope's chief ally, Ferrante of Naples. Subsequently, Lorenzo's position was completely secure, and he became an important stabilizing influence on the Italian states, maintaining a network of formal alliances and friendly personal relationships which helped to keep the peace on the Italian peninsula. Unfortunately, he also neglected management of the family bank, which suffered huge losses near the end of his lifetime. Lorenzo's lavish spending and competition from younger rival banks sapped the family fortune, but the family's influence and reputation remained.

Lorenzo's son Piero the Unfortunate (1472-1503) succeeded him as acknowledged ruler of Florence, but proved as unpopular as his father had been popular. When Charles VIII of France invaded Italy in 1494, Piero initially denied him passage through Florentine territory. But as Charles' army approached the city, Piero panicked. He went to the French camp and surrendered Florence to Charles without a struggle. Already disenchanted with Piero and outraged by his concessions to the French, the Florentines rebelled. A democratic faction led by Friar Girolamo Savonarola drove the Medici out of the city and declared it a republic. The Medici would not return until the fall of the next republic, in which Machiavelli served as secretary, in 1512.

The Medici rose to power through their immense wealth and their skill in arranging alliances rather than through military conquest, making them unique among Italian princes of their time. In particular, they systematically married into almost all the great royal families of Europe. Lorenzo the Magnificent's granddaughter Catherine de Medici (1519-1589) became queen mother of France. The Medici also produced two popes, Leo X and Clement VII, who focused their attention on promoting the family's power and influence.