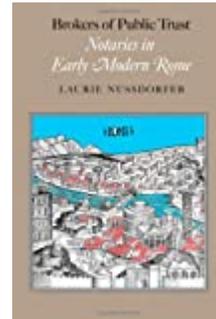


**Laurie Nussdorfer.** *Brokers of Public Trust: Notaries in Early Modern Rome.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. x + 354 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9204-2.



**Reviewed by** John Hunt (Utah Valley University)

**Published on** H-Italy (September, 2012)

**Commissioned by** Gregory Hanlon (Dalhousie University)

## Writing and Power in Baroque Rome

Early modern Rome saw a hubbub of social and economic activity that required legal documentation and verification in the hands of a body of professionally trained notaries. Scholars have mined the acts of the notaries—housed in the Archivio di Stato di Roma—to understand the social, economic, and religious life of early modern Rome. But few scholars have sought to study the profession itself or the lives of the notaries who staffed the various offices of the city. In this ambitious *longue durée* study of the notarial profession, Laurie Nussdorfer highlights the changing political and legal milieu in which notaries lived and worked from 1350 to 1650.

In each of the book's six chapters, she returns to the same theme of the growing power of the papacy over the notarial profession in Rome. The first great moment of transformation occurred with the papacy's definitive return from Avignon in 1420. Renaissance popes sought with little success to curtail the jurisdiction and authority of the municipal government and Capitoline notaries. However, the period from 1550 to 1650 witnessed the greatest gains for early modern popes who

realized many of the goals of their Renaissance predecessors. These goals translated first and foremost into holding the notaries to higher standards of documentation. This disciplinary thrust served both the interests of the papal state and the clients who used the services of the notaries. Nussdorfer takes her history to the pontificate of Clement XI (r. 1700-21) who promulgated far-reaching reforms and initiated inspections of notarial offices, which in essence were the conclusion of the goals of such popes as Sixtus V (r. 1585-90) and Urban VIII (r. 1623-44), who had an absolutist vision of papal authority.

Nussdorfer specifically studies the notaries attached to the municipal government of Rome called the Capitoline notaries, eponymously named after the Capitoline Hill where the civic government of Rome was located. These notaries served the civil tribunal of the Senator of Rome—a *podestà*-like figure who held court on the Capitoline Hill. The Capitoline officials and notaries as well had grown accustomed to a great deal of autonomy in the absence of the popes during the Avignon papacy and the confusion of the Great Schism. Upon their return to

Rome, popes sought to curtail the independence of Capitoline notaries and their college. These goals were not realized, however, until the pontificate of Sixtus V. In 1586, shortly after his ascension to the papal throne, Sixtus reduced the number of Capitoline notaries to thirty and made their offices venal. This turned out to be a mixed blessing. In the short term, it gave a select few a great deal of power. In the long term, it placed the notaries in the orbit of the papacy, reducing their ability to act independently and limiting the number of young notaries who could rise through the ranks. Under the name Thirty Capitoline Notaries, these offices survived well into the nineteenth century.

Although Nussdorfer concentrates on the growing power of the popes, her book contains many nuanced arguments. Her work can be repetitive, but it is very true that, in this case, the devil is in the details. One of the greatest strengths of her book is her explication of how notaries worked, how people made use of them, and how the state sought to regulate their profession. She takes issue with current arguments, such as that of Renata Ago, that the costs of employing notaries put them beyond the reach of most Romans by showing how the papacy sought to lower costs and how competition made the market accessible to most people. She uses a myriad of sources that include papal bulls, civic statutes, legal treatises, and notarial acts. However, her most innovative use of sources occurs in chapter 5 when she ex-

amines the census records of the Thirty Capitoline Notaries to discuss the notarial household, business partnerships, and the viability of the profession. She finds that most notaries did not own the physical offices where they worked, lived in large households, and barely scraped by a living (in contrast to the popular image of a comfortable bourgeois lifestyle).

The final chapter focuses on the reform efforts of the popes in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During this period, popes sought to rationalize and to make uniform the tangled legal jurisdictions of the city's various tribunals, abolished nepotism in government, cleared away fraudulent and sloppy notarial practices, and placed final regulations on notaries. These efforts culminated in the investigations and reforms of Clement XI of 1702-04.

Nussdorfer makes an important contribution, one that both fills a gap and will spur further research in the field—a fine testament to any book. Her book will be essential reading for anyone interested in Rome's notarial profession and in early modern legal culture in general. The only flaw in this book is her use of the term *âritualâ* to describe the act of rogating acts. This is an interesting idea that needs further explication. Does she mean simply that they were repetitive, public actions? Or did rogating acts have deeper social and cultural meaning and symbolism for early modern Romans?

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

**Citation:** John Hunt. Review of Nussdorfer, Laurie, *Brokers of Public Trust: Notaries in Early Modern Rome*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. September, 2012.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30278>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.