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## Review of Robin L. Thomas, *Architecture and Statecraft: Charles of Bourbon's Naples, 1734-1759*

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**Robin L. Thomas. *Architecture and Statecraft: Charles of Bourbon's Naples, 1734-1759*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013. 248 pp.**

In 1734, when Philip V of Spain invested his son Charles as the King of the Two Sicilies, the city of Naples became the capital of a resident monarch for the first time in two hundred years. As Robin Thomas clearly demonstrates, Charles of Bourbon and his ministers launched a series of building projects in order to improve and modernize the city, and to emphasize royal authority. Thomas argues that between 1734 and 1759, when Charles left to succeed his father as king of Spain, Naples became a “dynamic center of architectural innovation” (14). Very much in the tradition of John H. Elliott and Jonathan Brown’s celebrated work *A Palace for a King*, Thomas combines art history with solid archival research to demonstrate how architecture served as a prominent tool of statecraft in the early modern period. As Thomas argues, eighteenth-century Naples became “the capital where Caroline architecture most effectively built the city as well as the state” (176).

In his introduction, Thomas suggests that Charles never formulated a coherent, unified building program. Instead he and his ministers seized opportunities as they presented themselves; individual projects were shaped partly by royal design, partly by the city’s immediate needs (as well as the physical limitations of a crowded urban space). Reflecting the spirit of the Enlightenment, the building projects were often tied to royal policies of social and economic reform, while also imposing highly visible signs of state authority. The results displayed the influence of both Louis XIV and the Spanish Habsburgs, as befitted Charles’s royal lineage.

The first four main chapters focus on specific building projects. In each case Thomas analyzes architectural plans and compares them with the actual buildings, to demonstrate how initial designs often had to be altered to fit local conditions. He also establishes that Charles was often directly involved with the planning and financing of these projects. Chapter one, for example, describes Charles’s first major commission, a grand new opera house bearing the royal name: Teatro di San Carlo. Naples was already famous for its operas; Charles took advantage by grafting a new theater right onto his royal palace, thereby presenting opera as “an extension of the court” (30). The theater’s design emphasized the political hierarchy, featuring a double-sized royal box, surrounded by seats for the nobility. The new opera house thus conveyed a clear message about the new king’s domination over the Neapolitan elite.

Chapters two and three focus on more practical projects: the Reale Albergo dei Poveri (“Royal Shelter for the Poor”) and a new Cavalry Barracks. Both projects addressed pressing sociopolitical concerns – housing the poor and defending/policing the city – while simultaneously creating monumental statements of royal authority. Charles’s ambition to reshape Naples is particularly evident in the development of the magnificent piazza called the Foro Carolino, described in chapter four. It began with a commission for a new equestrian statue of Charles, but then Charles’s government decided to redesign the entire square surrounding the monument. The new plan called for shops and residences, symbolically linking economic prosperity with Charles’s image. The Foro Carolino thus became an “experiment of economic renewal and urban transformation” (142).

In chapter five, Thomas turns to a different kind of political propaganda, a monumental map of Naples. Known as the Duke of Noja Map (after Giovanni Carafa, Duke of Noja, a Neapolitan noble who sponsored it), it was first commissioned by the city government in 1754 but not finished until 1775. Designed on a grand scale (five meters wide), the map proudly features all of Charles’s new buildings, as well as the surrounding countryside. As Thomas argues, the map graphically displays Charles’s mastery over the city and its environs, and represents the “aggrandizement of royal achievements” (165). As Thomas points out in his conclusion, Charles would be less successful in his efforts to make his mark on Madrid, where the populace proved less willing to finance major building programs.

Overall, this book was a pleasure to read. It is a beautifully produced book, with the text presented in double columns, and supplemented by well over a hundred black-and-white illustrations. The writing is for the most part very clear, although occasionally, when discussing architecture, the author lapses into technical language that might baffle the non-specialist (e.g. references to “*piperno* quoining” and a “thickly massed astylar façade” (116)). The book might have benefitted from some discussion of the importance of rituals in the political life of Naples, especially given the recent publication of monographs on this subject by John A. Marino and Gabriel Gaurino. Apart from these quibbles, however, this is an excellent book.

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