



The Beast Reports from Rome

BY MIKE SAMUDA (ISSUE NO. 61/2007 / JULY 26, 2007)

The Medici Archives

A letter written from Rome on 5 June 1540 by Rosso di Filippo de Medici (also known as 'The Best') to his distant relative Cosimo I

You should know that Pavoncino has finally returned and has marvellous stories from France, Flanders and Spain about the manner with which he was treated by the kings and nobles of these countries [...] The siege in Perugia is still in effect [...] The heat wave arrived on May 20 and on June 1st; this forced me to remove my boots and put away my winter jacket [...] I am enjoying the fresco with my wife and we are giving each other disembowelling kisses; her mouth is so overwhelming that I seriously think that a tarantula has bitten her underneath the bellybutton. [...] The city has been invaded by grasshoppers, flies, horseflies, and snakes. Mosquitoes have devastated the harvest, have fallen into drinks and are floating in soups. They left only after Pope Paul III had excommunicated them all.

In the first five years of his rule, 1537 to 1542, **Cosimo I** was particularly attentive to any news from **Rome**. His ambassadors and agents, using a network of spies and informers, reported with meticulous accuracy on the political, diplomatic, social and day-to-day gossip of the Eternal City. Cosimo was barely 18 when he 'took office' as the Duke of Florence. The city was recovering from a severe economic depression and the young ruler had commenced his reign by enforcing a repressive regime. His authoritarian rule sent a large number of political opponents fleeing from Florence to take refuge in Rome, where it was safer to express their dissent against the young Duke's harsh rule. The disgruntled Florentine exiles had the support of the rapacious and nepotistic **Pope Paul III** who could not be considered an ally of the Medici family.

Ambassadors and agents reported back to Florence in a regular stream of letters and intelligence summaries. The letters followed a format: urgent matters such as war news, diplomatic issues and political conspiracies were described first. Updates on local current affairs were next in precedence. The letters would often end in gossip, personal requests and an account of the correspondent's state of health.

The smooth transition from public to very private matters is clearly demonstrated in **Rosso di Filippo de' Medici's** letter from Rome to Cosimo I. '**Bestiale**' Medici and his wife, **Nanna di Simone Rondinelli**, had moved to Rome some time after 1534 and had quickly established themselves in the higher spheres of Roman Society. In this extract 'the Beast' first informs the young Duke Cosimo of reports from France, Spain and Flanders and describes the latest developments of Pope Paul III's campaign in Perugia.

He then provides a graphic account of a heat wave and the invasion of the Eternal City by hordes of insects and reptiles. Not surprisingly, the Beast has not been wearing his boots and heavy jacket: Was anybody wearing winter clothes in the midst of a Roman heat wave? Why should the Beast consider it appropriate for Duke Cosimo to know in graphic detail of his open-air embrace with Nanna? Could Rome really have been plagued simultaneously with horseflies, snakes, mosquitoes, flies and grasshoppers? Would Cosimo be pleased to learn that the various calamities came to end following the Pope's request for divine intervention?

The list of incidents and facts are so extravagant that it is almost certain that the Beast was using a **prearranged code**, which was not uncommon in the correspondence of Florentine agents reporting from Rome. The bite of a tarantula, strange creatures floating in soup and the need for God to intervene may well have communicated a very different and secret message to the young ruler who read this letter in Florence.