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A Proposition: Minting and the Public Sphere in Preindustrial Italy

Abstract

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas famously argued that social institutions that allow for open and rational debate between people generate public opinion. Within that domain the public sphere is constituted. This essay builds on work undertaken in recent years that has upheld Habermas's central assertions, but challenged his temporal scheme, showing that public spheres existed in early modern Europe. Suggesting that nascent elements of the public sphere can be found in the interstices of institutional power, this paper brings scrutiny to several mints in Italy and the late medieval and Renaissance method of making coins. The essay argues that the process of coining and the edifices used to make coins were part of negotiations about money. The monetary system itself enabled shifting chains of association and fostered spaces that helped to generate what might be thought of as a public sphere. A change in the mode of architecture used for later mint buildings implies that creating coins became a process hidden by monumental architecture, thus invoking Georg Simmel's conception of secrecy and undermining ability of the mint to act as a locus for the generation of the public sphere.

Keywords

Renaissance Architecture, Public Sphere, Money, Mints, Zecca