FARNESE
Pomp, Power and Politics in Renaissance Italy

«L’ERMA» di BRETSCHNEIDER
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BY
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ROME MMVII
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for this book goes back in time and is in some ways connected with my earlier studies of the Rome of Pope Sixtus V. Many of Sixtus V's initiatives seem to have been inspired by his predecessor, Pope Paul III. Consequently I became interested in the career and history of Paul III and his family - the Farneses, the way in which they acquired their power and the manner in which they used and kept it.

I also found it interesting to try to re-evaluate the Farnese pope and his family, because his and the family's reputation in Protestant Denmark and Northern Europe as a whole was and is the worst possible. Luther and Calvin both called him the Antichrist, even the Devil himself. But also in Catholic Italy and Southern Europe the Farnese family and Paul III were severely criticized from the very beginning. One might ask if this heavy and lengthy criticism from a modern point of view is reasonable and if it perhaps is time to reconsider the whole Farnese achievement.

As stated in the introduction, the modern literature on the Farneses is so overwhelming that one could ask whether my project really was worthwhile. My answer to this is in the first place that their archives are so full of still unused material (I could only dream of having had much more time in the archives in Parma and in Naples) and in the second place and most important: I have noticed a lacuna in the literature in which the family history as a whole is taken up. The latest 30 years of in-depth Farnese-publications have concentrated either on the papal, Roman and Lazial part of the story or on the Farnese duchies of Parma-Piacenza. My intention with the book has been to try to fill in this gap between the two separate directions of research and to give an all-over description and analysis of the family's achievements - with special regard to their contribution to and use of culture, architecture and art on their way to - and in possession of - power and influence.¹

My thanks go to the Italian archives, libraries and museums and their staffs, where I have always been kindly received and serviced. Among those, special mention should be made of The Vatican Library, the Bibliotheca and the Fototeca Hertziana in Rome, the Archivio di Stato in Parma and the Archivio di Stato in Naples.

Also the parallel Danish institutions: the Royal Library, “Danmarks Kunstbibliotek” (the Danish National Art Library) and the National Museum (all in Copenhagen) have been of great help and have provided some very important illustrations.

Among the many colleagues and friends who have helped me during my research I mention from my own university: Professor Ulf Hedetoft, Head of the Department for History, International & Social Studies, and his predecessor Søren Dosenrode who both took a great interest in my project, Kirsten Bach Larsen who generously helped me with the illustrations, Eva Hal-

¹ The writing of the manuscript was initiated in 2001, finished in 2004 in Danish and translated into English in 2005. Consequently scientific literature after 2002-2003 has not been taken into consideration.
lund who took great efforts supplying me with literature from abroad and
finally my secretary Ellen Nyrup who took the greatest care in establishing
and revising the manuscript. Finally my gratitude for the interest and sup-
port shown during the period of research and writing go to all my colleagues
at the Institute for History.

Outside the university, I thank my translator, Professor W. Glyn Jones for
a perfect partnership, chief restorer Henrik Bjerre, The National Museum of
Art in Copenhagen for many good discussions and finally Professor Mar-
ianne Pade, the University of Aarhus and the lecturer Christian Kvium for
help with translations of texts from Latin.

Among my Italian colleagues and friends I should like to mention Dr.
Paola Scavizzi, Rome, the architectural historian Professor Bruno Adorni,
Parma and Professor Giuseppe Bertini, Parma, also for permission to use il-
lustrations from their publications. Dr. Christine Riebesell, Head of the Fo-
totec Hertziana, Rome should also be mentioned for kind and efficient help
and advice.

It is especially a pleasure for me to express my gratitude to the artist and
art history-school director Rodolfo Faina, who as an inhabitant in the “Farn-
eseland” in Northern Lazio (Capodimonte) showed great interest in my
studies and who introduced me to many important local persons and insti-
tutions and at the same time was a generous friend and host when I visited the
Lago di Bolsena Region.

The Danish Institute in Rome and its present director Erik Bach and assis-
tant director Birgit Tang have taken great interest in my work and accepted
my book to be published in the series Analecta Romana Instituti Danish as a
Supplementum volume.

Finally my thanks go to my wife Gertrud Gamrath, my constant compan-
ion in Italy and Rome for her never ending inspiration to, support of and
care for my Italian studies

HELGE GAMRATH
Aalborg University
September 2006

Cordial thanks for financial support go to:
The Augustinus Foundation
The Bergia Foundation
The Carlsberg Foundation
The Helmsiern-rosencroneske Stiftelse
The Ny Carlsberg Foundation
The Rectorate of the University of Aalborg
I. INTRODUCTION: OBJECTIVE, CONCEPTS, METHOD AND LITERATURE

IN MEDIAS RES

In the beautiful, undulating volcanic landscape to the north of Rome -- northern Lazio -- there stands a fantastic palace, Caprarola, from the 16th century. It has princely or royal dimensions and stands high above the little town of the same name. Officially, this building is called the Villa Farnese at Caprarola. It was built between 1558 and 1575 by Cardinal Alessandro Farnese the Younger (1520-1589). The architect was one of the greatest talents of the day, Giacomo Baruzzi da Vignola, and most of the magnificent rooms in the interior were decorated by the leading painters of the time, including the brothers Taddeo and Federico Zuccari (Fig. 1).

The building of this magnificent edifice can without any exaggeration be called an outstanding visiting card for the Farnese dynasty, which had its roots in northern Lazio. For in the space of 100 years, the family had had a fabulous social career. As late as the beginning of the 15th century, the family had been unknown beyond the immediate locality, consisting merely of minor landowners and farmers who especially possessed land in and around the small towns to the west of Lake Bolsena (see map Fig. 13).

A GLIMPSE OF THE HISTORY OF THE FARNESE FAMILY

According to family records from its zenith in the 16th century, the family could trace its ancestry back to the Lombards -- indeed even a Cappodician (Asia Minor) origin was suggested -- and by the early Middle Ages it played an important role in central Italy as a military family or even as condottieri and to a certain extent also as local authority officials in larger cities nearby. But a closer examination of the family history soon makes such myths turn pale. In brief, in 1400 the family was quite insignificant and was clearly overshadowed by the old land-owning nobility of upper Lazio.

Only when we come to Ranuccio Farnese the Elder (d. 1450), who was a condottiere, is the family a well-established family of local landowners, but now starts a period of marriage into older and more important local families. Several of the family members also made careers as condottieri but still at a modest level. The crucial figure in the family is Alessandro the Elder (b. 1468) who turns away from a military career and takes a humanist and legal education which takes him to the Curia in Rome. Here he makes a rapid career, becoming the favourite of Pope Alexander VI Borgia, and being created cardinal at the age of 25. When, after waiting for forty years, he becomes Pope in 1534 under the name of Paul III (Fig. 2), his family has its historical opportunity and Paul III follows a traditional but effective nepotistic policy of placing children and grandchildren in important posts in and outside the Curia. The duchy of Castro (within the Papal States and close to the old family possessions in upper Lazio) is established in 1537 for his son Pierluigi who also becomes a papal gonfaloniere (commander). His oldest grandson...
Alessandro becomes a cardinal and the next oldest Ottavio is given the small duchy of Camerino within the territory of the Papal States.

1545 becomes a crucial year in which the son Pierluigi is appointed duke of the northernmost provinces of the Papal States, Parma and Piacenza. In 1547 the Farnese family experiences a catastrophe in that Pierluigi is assassinated at Piacenza after disputes with the local nobility and the imperial governor of Milan. The province of Piacenza is lost, and Paul III dies in the middle of the crisis in 1549. Meanwhile, Pierluigi’s son Ottavio retains Parma by force and in 1556 Ottavio and his heirs are recognized by the Spanish King Philip II as dukes of both Parma and Piacenza, although on strict conditions. However, this heralds a phase of reconstruction and consolidation, and Ot-
tavio (d. 1586) determinedly and single-mindedly builds up his ducal power; his son Alessandro (d. 1593) marries a Portuguese princess and personally serves as Philip II's statholder in the rebellious Spanish Netherlands where he gains military and political fame on a European level (Fig. 3). On the domestic front his father Ottavio and his son Ranuccio (d. 1622) are the builders of the duchy (in terms of law, administration and finances). By 1630 Farnese power both within and outside the boundaries of the duchy is a fact, although disputes with the Pope in the 1640s lead to the loss of the duchy of Castro. By the time the male line dies out in 1731, the last female member of the family has already carved herself a fine career and is married to the heir to the Spanish throne. So from 1732 Parma and Piacenza are governed by the Spanish Bourbons from Naples. During the Napoleonic era the two duchies experience attacks, abolition and integration with other Italian provinces, but are re-established after the congress of Vienna in 1814. With the Italian Risorgimento in the 1850s Parma and Piacenza become ordinary provinces in the new Kingdom of Italy, and the remains of the Bourbon-Parma family still exist today though in watered down versions.

AIMS AND APPROACHES

The object of the following account is to analyse this process more fully and to discover how it was possible for such a relatively new, upstart family to experience such a career as this. We shall analyse the objectives and the means they employ in this quite unique example of political ambition and determination in a world that in the sixteenth century was undergoing radical change – from the medieval decentralised feudal system to the emergence of the modern state. We shall consider the family history from about 1450, but naturally first and foremost the age of Paul III (1534-1549) when the crucial breakthroughs became possible. However, the work of the first four dukes of Parma and Piacenza to construct a modern princely state in political, administrative, economic and financial senses (1545-1630) will also be
considered in depth. There might be disagreement as to whether the final date of 1630 is appropriate, but the idea is to examine the emergence of a family dynasty, and, as will be seen, it can be maintained that by 1630 establishment and consolidation has taken place and that it is consequently possible to take stock of developments so far.

One of the principle motives for this study is, however, to analyse and evaluate the family’s use of contemporary humanist and Renaissance culture, most especially as it found visual expression in art, architecture and ceremonial in the work of building up and legitimising itself as a ruling dynasty and creating a modern ducal state with a capital city, royal residence and a dignified external and visible court life. Where the other rulers in northern and central Italy had built up their princely status over many generations, the Farneses were in fact new in 1537, when the small duchy of Castro was established, and in 1545 they had only limited experience when serious moves were made to establish the far more important duchies of Parma and Piacenza. So the Farneses were upstarts and had to achieve what other ducal states and families had attained over many years. So the second part of the problem
is to examine and demonstrate how great an importance this manifestation in
the broad sense played for the creation of a dynasty and the construction of a
duchy like that of the Farneses.

**FAMILIA, DYNASTY, STATE**

The following are a few reflections on concepts and methods.

With regards to the concept of *familia* it can be said that an important
antecedent to the new ruling families or dynasties as they became, must in re-
ality be found into the medieval concepts of clan, *familia* or house. Irrespec-
tive of whether these families developed into crowned heads or continued as
noble families, the background is the same, that is to say agriculture, the
amalgamation of estates and warfare except on a higher level and ever more
extensively. During the late Middle Ages a trend can be perceived towards
splitting up the old clans into narrower and more distinct family groupings.
These narrower family groupings consisted of real blood relatives who had
widely different positions – political, social and financial – in society, but
were held together precisely by the common family name, whether it was
called *familia, casa* or *corte*. The *familia* also included a further group of ad-
visers, servants and other employees. A few researchers have a rather playfully
christened concept of *raison d'état* (that is to say the separation of the state
as an autonomous political unit which appears in the sixteenth century) as
*ragion di famiglia*.

To a quite special extent, the families that achieved a true princely status
were aware of the new potential in the nascent humanism and Renaissance in
so far as there here was a variety of instruments and means that could prom-
ote the family in a different and more modern world that centred on the in-
cipient concept of the state both in an organisational form (centralisation,
power of the state, taxation, bureaucracy and permanent military forces) and
in the manifestation of power (architecture, painting, sculpture, town plan-
ning, the building of capital cities and seats for the reigning monarchs).

In this connection it was inevitable that the family’s quite special back-
grounds and policies should be presented and demonstrated in a kind of my-
thology that could justify and legitimise their political and social rise.

**THE THEORY OF MAGNIFICENZA**

The construction of a special culture of the ruler and the court in expen-
sive and visible frameworks also forms part of the raising and legitimatisation
of the rulers’ ever-growing position of power in the state. The theory of con-
spicuous consumption as formulated more than a hundred years ago by Ch.
Weblen, or the exhibition of *magnificenza* as the phenomenon can more ade-
quately be called using the Italian expression, has been discussed and sum-
marised for instance by Peter Burke, who points out that it is primarily a
question of a communication of power, wealth and competition.

A more precise definition of *magnificenza* or conspicuous consumption in-
eludes the visual exercise of power: elegant settings (architecture and town planning), symbols (statues, paintings, illustrations) and actions (ceremonies/rites).

We know this (un-)holy trinity from all historical epochs: In ancient Babylon, in ancient Rome and in Nazi Germany we see this manifestation of power by means of building, visual art and ceremonial.

In the Middle Ages it was the Catholic Church that almost ensured a monopoly of this use of magnificenza, represented by (1) the building of churches, (2) their sumptuous interiors (altarpieces, frescoes, costly reliquaries etc.) and (3) the attendant ceremonies, primarily the Catholic Mass. The medieval princes and the feudal nobility had their castles and estates and naturally various social mores (including tournaments and feasts), but life was first and foremost characterised by battle and defence (my home is my castle) on account of the decentralised and feudal basic structure of society. More splendid palatial architecture, a widespread tradition for painting and an elaborate ceremonial were mainly alien to these groups prior to the fifteenth century.

When the 11th-century Italian cities started prospering, they were the first to demonstrate a connection between the power of the leading strata of the population and the architecture, decoration and ceremonial of the city community. These initiatives were usually realised in interplay with the local church, but they nevertheless suggested a first serious alternative to a dominant Church. The transformation of the small municipalities into increasingly temporal states under the emerging signori truly betokened a breach in the monopoly hitherto held by the Church. And precisely in the 15th century, this course of development became especially interesting because the humanists openly discussed magnificenza and manifestation. In their dissertations, the humanists formulated points of view and demands on the manifestations that the temporal powers could and should employ. As it is put in modern terms by Richard Krautheimer, there was in the case of architecture: “a vision of the social function and mission of architecture. The aim was to create worthy frameworks for the worthy actions of worthy people”. Architecture was naturally joined by the visual arts – painting and sculpture. Among the many elements in the manifestation of modern princely power, we repeatedly find a capital city, a royal residence, a park with a summer residence, a court theatre, a court chapel, statues of the ruling dynasty’s leading members in a public space, a family mausoleum, and indoors there would be paintings and sculpture with motifs taken from classical, biblical and dynastic history.

To this we can finally add the outward ritualisation of power as expressed in public events, entratas, the reception of distinguished guests and special days or events relating to the old city authority, the state or the ruling dynasty such as jubilees, coronations, births, baptisms, weddings and funerals. A late 16th-century theorist, Arnoldus Clapmarius, gives a good impression of the concepts of the time and a precise formulation of the idea behind the great processions and ceremonial court events by commenting that the mentality and understanding of the population are particularly influenced through the eye, thus emphasising the manifestation of princely power in the truest sense of the word.
INSPIRATION AND LITERATURE

As for literature on the visual presentation of the state power (magnificenza), let it at first be pointed out that the studies by Roy Strong and Bonner Mitchell have been an especially important source of inspiration. To this, naturally, must be added the fact that many historians of culture, architecture and art specialising in Italy, Rome and the Farnese family, such as Lauro Martines, André Chastel, Charles Stinger, Clare Robertson, Julian Klemann, Loren Partridge, Bruno Adorni, Giuseppe Bertini, Ingeborg Walter and Roberato Zapperi have dug deep in the material and produced important studies to which this book is profoundly indebted.

There is an extensively, indeed disturbingly extensive specialist literature on the Farnese family. On account of the well-developed Italian tradition for written documents in the period of humanism and the Renaissance, the amount of archival material is quite overwhelming. Although the Farnese archives were harshly treated during the family’s later history, leading to their being scattered among many different archives, for instance the Roman State Archives, the Vatican Archives and Library, the Naples State Archives and libraries and archives in Parma and Piacenza, an enormous amount of source material has been preserved. A good part of this has been published, but there is nevertheless still a large amount of unpublished material that has never been systematically examined.

Among the major works on the family, G. Drei’s I Farnese, 1954 despite its age still stands out as a solid presentation of the general and political history of the Farneses, while the more recent E. Nasalli Rocca, 1969 especially is useful in the field of personal biography. The family’s most important profiles each have their own biographers: P. Capasso: Paolo III, I–II, 1924, L. van der Essen: Alexandre Farnèse I-V, 1932–35 and most recently Clare Robertson: Il gran Cardinale (Cardinal Alessandro (d. 1589)), 1992. There are no actual monographs or biographies on Duke Ottavio (d. 1586) and Duke Ranuccio I (d. 1622), but a number of studies of aspects of these two dukes’ times make up for that (see notes to Chs. VI and VIII). As always, L. von Pastor: Geschichte der Päpste, vols. IV–VI, 1956–57 is a good classical lexical tool.
II. THE GENERAL ITALIAN HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

We first need an account of the political, economic and social background to the emergence of the princely families (i signori) and thus also for the remarkable career of the Farnese family. In producing this, we delve further back into the history of Italy. After the fall of the West Roman Empire (5th-6th century AD), this ancient, powerful and culture-bearing area of Europe became the object of numerous foreign invasions and conquests by Germanic kings, chieftains and indeed by entire peoples. Feudalism, characterised by great landowners and decentralisation, became established. During these so-called Dark Ages, the idea of Roman imperial power and the Roman Empire was nevertheless not entirely forgotten and indeed, the East Roman Byzantine Empire continued to exist. The heritage from Rome also survived in Western Europe and it was revived in 800 when the Frankish king, Charlemagne, was crowned Emperor in Rome. In 963 the Frankish Empire was replaced by the Holy Roman Empire. However, the man claiming to be Christ's successor on earth, the Pope in Rome, reacted against this distant power, and during the period 1070-1300, these two “giants” fought each other for the control of all Europe – dominance in Italy being the most relevant in the present context.

While this determined struggle was taking place, a completely new European phenomenon arose: the 12th-century Italian city and city state represented by municipalities such as Milan, Pavia, Verona, Venice, Bologna, Florence, Siena and Perugia.

In formal terms, these new city states, which felt themselves to be revivals of the Roman civitates, were on the side of either the Emperor or the Pope in the long-lasting struggle between regnum and sacerdotium (Ghibellines contra Guelphs). But most of all they signified a breach with the dominant feudal landowner system, and in time these city states increased their political and economic power. It is no exaggeration to say that these new, economic, commercial and political units in reality became independent, and in this first urbanised area of Europe, the cities became the developmental avant garde of the Continent. Strongest were the new city states in Northern Italy, but their presence was a fact as far down as central Italy. So in Italy, the large feudal landowners who dominated the rest of Europe encountered fierce competition from the newly arisen city states which became most fully developed there. During the Middle Ages, Italy was by far the most urbanised region in Europe. Thus, around 1300, Milan was probably the largest city in Europe with a population of about 200,000 inhabitants, followed by Venice, Genoa and Florence, each with about 100,000 inhabitants; a list of the ten biggest European cities, would include only Paris (with ca. 80,000 inhabitants), Ghent (50,000) and Arras (20,000) outside Italy.

In production, commerce and finance, these powerful city states set the financial and economic agendas in Europe and made goods and capital available to the rest of Europe. However, like the rest of the Continent they suf-
pered severely from the plague, the Black Death, which devastated the continent for decades from 1348, as a result of which between a third and half of the population died. Partly as a consequence of this, the city states underwent enormous social, political and economic changes. The old municipal authorities and their leaders (consuls, priors) and the representative assemblies were no longer up to the task, and a new kind of leader gradually started taking over as virtual rulers. The new Italian signori families in the individual city states had started in posts as administrators, brokers or judges (for instance as podestà or capittano del popolo), whose original functions were limited both with respect to duration (normally one year) and authority, but as time passed, these new officials had ousted the old councils and citizens’ assemblies and assumed all power in the city state. These signori such as the Visconti family (from 1450 the Sforza family) in Milan, the Gonzagas in Mantua, the Este family at Ferrara and the Scaligeris in Verona gradually made themselves into hereditary sole rulers and gradually acquired – against suitable payment either to the Pope or the Emperor, who in terms of real power were mere shadow rulers in Italy – titles such as margraves, counts or – best of all – dukes of their territories. In doing so, as signori they moved up into the princely category and thereby sought to create for themselves the legitimacy that kings and other princes in the rest of Europe had had for centuries (Fig. 4).

This development was, however, not uniform and did not apply to all the city states, in that states like Florence, Siena and Venice were still formally republics, although under the Medicis from 1435-1493 Florence experienced a political situation reminiscent of that in a state governed by signori. Finally, to the south, there was the Kingdom of Naples, which for centuries had been ruled by foreign (now Aragon) dynasties.

A completely different situation obtained with regard to the Papal States, which on account of the popes’ residence in Avignon in southern France 1309-1377 and the great schism 1378-1417 had more or less been faced with dissolution. The position of Rome vis-à-vis the various elements in this remarkable state had already beforehand not been particularly strong, and now it meant that hereditary signori had gradually emerged within the territories of the Papal States. Examples are the Malatesta family at Rimini, the Montefeltros at Urbino and Gubbio, the Bentivoglios at Bologna and the Baglionis at Perugia – and in reality the Este at Ferrara, although the link only consisted of an almost automatic papal approval of the accession of a new ruler. It can thus be said that the trend was the same as in the non-papal states in northern Italy, all of which had moved towards a stronger central government and princely rule. When the Papal States once more had the Pope back in Rome as sole Pope from 1420 an increasingly strong papal and curial centralism was established after the middle of the 15th century, which time after time came into conflict with the smaller principalities within the area of the Papal States, for instance the conflict between Pope Pius II and the Malatesta family in the 1460s. During the second half of the 15th century, meanwhile, the Papal States were still a curious hybrid of centralism and old-fashioned feudalism. But from the time of Pope Alexander VI Borgia and Julius II around 1500, a strong new move towards centralisation took place.
in the Papal States – entirely in line with moves towards the powerful prince-
ly state in the rest of Europe.

Around 1400, the Milan of the Viscontis was undergoing rapid expansion
and gradually coming to dominate most of northern Italy and the Po Valley
and also threatening to gain control of central Italy (Florence, Siena, Papal
territory etc.). This persuaded the lagoon republic of Venice to interfere and
for the first time in its history to establish control over an area on the main-
land. The consequence was a long series of wars between Milan on the one
hand and Venice/Florence on the other. Many of the larger and not least the
smaller signori could make great profits by acting as condottieri and in turn
entering into alliances with or offering military support (with professional
mercenaries) to one or other of the two parties. These internal Italian wars,
which marked the first half of the 15th century, also brought in the Papal
States and the Kingdom of Naples and gradually came to be felt as an enor-
mous burden on the incipient general economical and cultural upturn after the Black Death. In 1454, the five largest Italian states – Milan, Venice, Florence, the Papal States and Naples – did in fact agree on a major settlement (the Peace of Lodi), which created a league (an alliance of the participants), froze the boundaries between the individual states and ensured this by the establishment of what evolved into permanent diplomatic representation with ambassadors exchanged between the states. The Lodi system also offered smaller states such as Savoy, Mantua and Ferrara the possibility of participating. In reality, this represented the creation of classical, modern European diplomacy, which in the following centuries spread throughout the entire continent of Europe. From 1454 and for the following 40 years, the league was active, and the age was on the whole characterised by peace (with a few exceptions such as the Pazzi conspiracy against Florence in the 1470s and the Ferrara war in the 1480s). All in all, however, the system worked until 1494 (Fig. 5a & 5b).

The violent, internal Italian conflicts before 1454 turned out to be nothing at all compared with what followed in the way of external attacks in Italy, beginning with the invasion by the King of France in 1494, based on a hereditary claim on Naples. The large French military force (which among other things included the mobile cannon) totally overthrew the Italian political and military system. The French marched straight through all intermediate states (Milan, Florence, the Papal States), which either surrendered or declared themselves neutral, and the King of France actually reached Naples within a very short space of time. The age of dynasties and the era of a more centralised state were also rapidly evolving in the rest of Europe, and the resources that the recently unified France and the new united Spain and other central European states had at their disposal could only have been opposed by a united or unified Italy.

The French intervention persuaded Spain and the Habsburgs of the Holy Roman Empire also to intervene in the situation on the Italian peninsula. The entire period from 1494 to 1559 has by later ages been called the age of the Italian wars, and during this period wave after wave of French or Habsburg invasions descended on Italy.

Italian politicians and observers even at that time complained at the political fragmentation that made the peninsula impossible to defend against the foreign great powers. But in terms of realpolitik, the individual Italian states tried to exploit the French-Habsburg rivalry to their own advantage. The first to try had been Ludovico Sforza (il Moro) in Milan 1493-94, but with a catastrophic result. Shortly afterwards, the Papal States made an attempt, and at the beginning of the 16th century, by playing on the French-Habsburg rivalry, the militarily astute Pope Julius II (d. 1513) was able considerably to extend the territory of the Papal States towards the north so that large areas of the Po Valley (Bologna and Parma and Piacenza) came under the control of the Papal States. Officially, the policy was formulated on the basis of slogans such as “the freedom of Italy” and “out with the barbarians”, but the words were directed at the French, who had formerly been allied to Julius II. Despite several apparently papal successes, the other party, the Habsburgs, was growing more powerful – not least after King Charles, who via inheritance and marriage had united the Habsburg territories with
Fig. 5a & 5b. In 1474, the Danish King Christian I made a diplomatic visit to Italy, which took him all the way to Rome. During his journey through the northern Italian states, the Sforzas entrusted him with the task of persuading the Emperor to invest them with a royal title, but without success. On the other hand, because kings were so rare in this area, the visit by the Danish king was celebrated wherever he went, and in Rome, Mantua and Malpaga his visit was commemorated in fresco decorations. Christian I's journey to Italy in the 1470s is examined in a broader context by the Danish historian Stephen T. Christensen, and a publication is under way of the many frescoes with Christian I as the central figure that were made in Italy after his visit, underlining the importance of the Danish royal visit. The paintings show (a) the king's arrival at the castle of the Venetian condottiere Bartolomeo Colleoni, Malpaga and (b) a banquet to the king's honour within the castle. Castle of Malpaga (from C. Fumagalli 1893).