



# The Art of Decapitation

## Medici Power, Prestige, and Propaganda



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### Abstract

The martyrdom of the patron saint of Florence, Saint John the Baptist, ensured that a rhetoric of decapitation existed within the city prior even to the rise of the Medici and the establishment of the oligarchic republic in 1382. As the city was drawn into war in the early 1400s, the rhetoric of decapitation expanded beyond a religious sense and came to incorporate imagery of David as the Giant-Slayer within a civic understanding. The Medici family, the preeminent power of Florentine politics and Italian Renaissance art patronage, sought through artistic commissions to appropriate the rhetoric of decapitation that existed in Florence to portray themselves as symbols of Florentine liberty and to justify their power. As the rhetoric associated with decapitation imagery within Florence shifted, the Medici began to use capital punishment to further assert their power. Due to the integration of the Medici within Florence and with the rhetoric of decapitation, they were able to control the public reception of capital punishment and therefore continue the justification of their rule as Florence shifted away from a republic and to a principality.

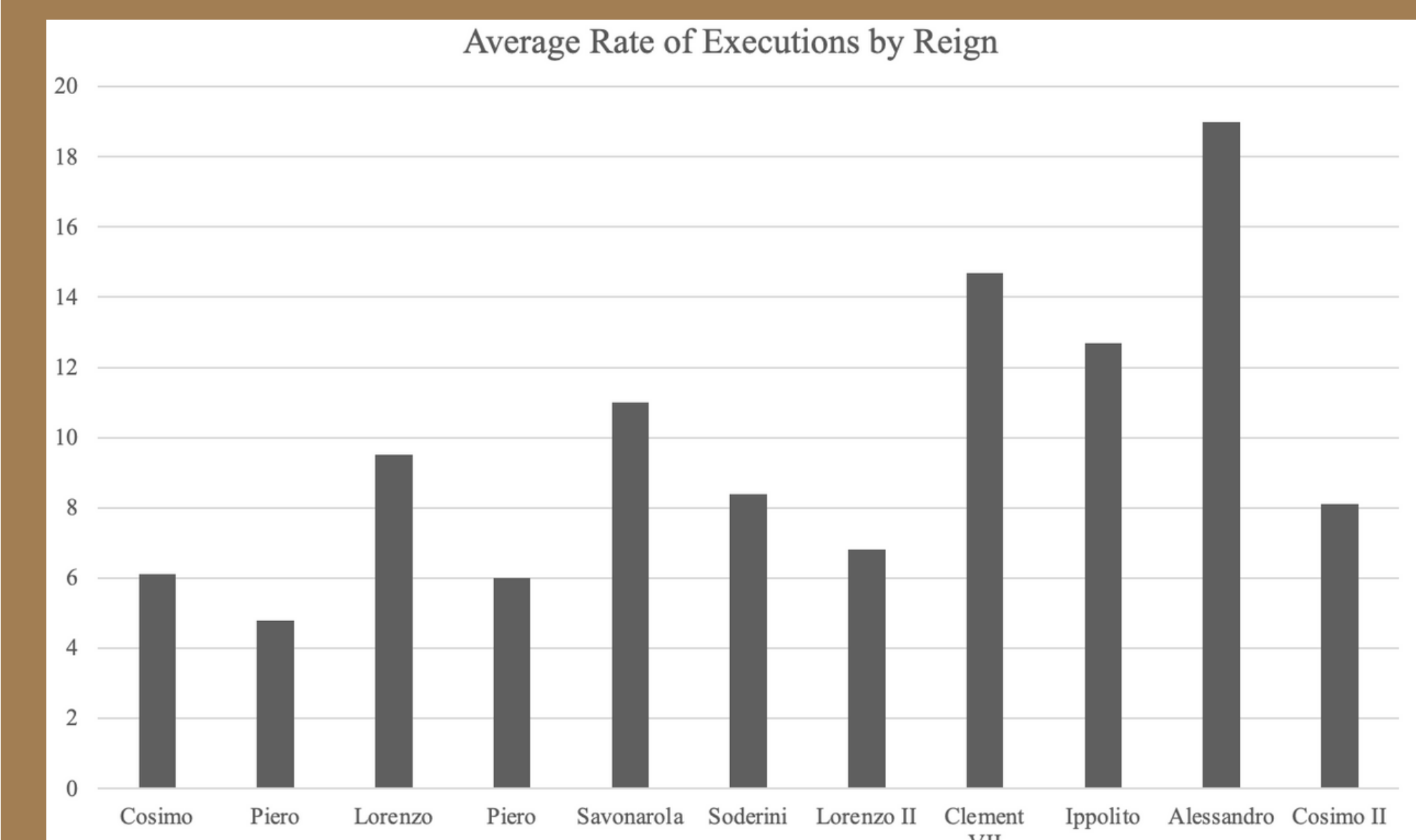
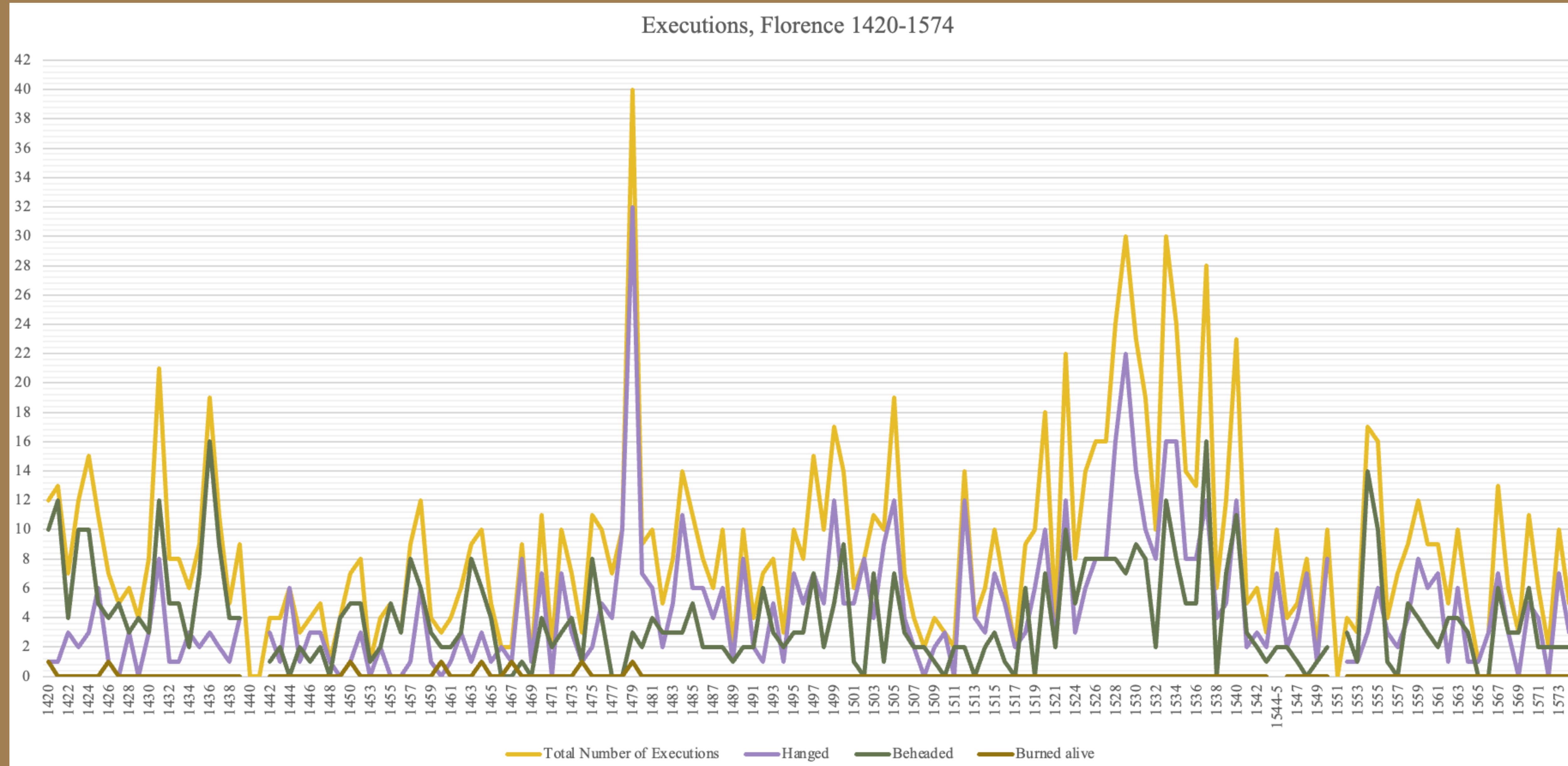
### Method

Prior to the reigns of Alessandro and Cosimo II, most overtly political executions were carried out in the courtyard of the Bargello, away from the public eye. By focusing on depictions of beheading in Florentine sculpture, it is possible to consider the intended impact on public consciousness, as sculptures were often visible to the public. By conflating Medici commissions with historical records, it is possible to illustrate the method in which the Medici integrated themselves into the Florentine conscience.



### The Bronze Medium in Florence

Donatello's David was the first freestanding nude male since antiquity and also the first unsupported bronze of the Renaissance. The choice for a bronze in the appropriation of Davidian imagery from the Signoria was a clear assertion of Medici power, wealth, and influence. Despite the family's early preference for bronze, the medium didn't become overtly political until the reign of Cosimo II, when he commissioned Cellini for the bronze *Perseus*. Placed in the Piazza della Signoria, the *Perseus* stood opposite other Medici bronzes and particularly Michelangelo's marble *David*, which was commissioned under an anti-Medici government. Seeming to turn Michelangelo's masterpiece to stone, the bronze *Perseus* was a clear assertion of Medici power.



### Exile and Execution

After coming to power in 1382, the Albizzi used a preference for exile to distinguish themselves from earlier governments. Drawing on imagery of Saint John's martyrdom, the rhetoric of decapitation became connotated with injustice and tyranny. When the Medici came to power, they continued to favor exile while slowly shifting the public's perception of capital punishment, which they would later employ as a political tool.



### The Medici Family of Florence

The Medici rose to recognition in the late 1300s, but it wasn't until 1434 when they came to be the preeminent power in Florence. Returning from exile, Cosimo exiled political enemies of his family and asserted Medici power by commissioning Donatello for his bronze *David*. The family would continue to favor exile until the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478, when Lorenzo's brother, Giuliano, was murdered. The resulting bloodshed numbered at least fifty executions. Florence rallied to the side of the Medici, marking an early indication of success in the Medici's influence on the changing rhetoric of decapitation.



### Conclusion

By linking themselves with preexisting depictions of decapitation, the Medici were able to dismantle the rhetoric of decapitation as a symbol of injustice. Using the rhetoric of decapitation that espoused Florentine liberty, the Medici portrayed themselves as legitimate rulers of the city, allowing them to later employ capital punishment to strengthen their hold on power as Florence became a principality.

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