CHAPTER 1

Out of the Ashes
The Rise of the Communes and Florence in the Age of Dante

Chapter 1 • Out of the Ashes

It happened only recently, and you heard it yourself. Rome, the mistress of the world shivered, crushed with fear, at the sound of the blaring trumpets and the howling of the Goths. Where, then, was the nobility? Where were the certain and distinct ranks of dignity? Everyone was mingled together and shaken with fear; every household had its grief and an all-pervading terror gripped us. Slave and noble were one. The same spectre of death stalked before us all.1

LETTER OF PELAGIUS, 410 CE

My voice sticks in my throat; and, as I dictate, sobs choke my utterance.
The City which had taken the whole world was itself taken.

JEROME, LETTER TO PRINCIPIA, 412 CE

The grandeur that was Rome

Rome had seemed invincible. For 800 years, no invading force had entered the city walls. Rather, for centuries, vanquished enemy soldiers were paraded beneath her triumphal arches, while tribute from distant lands poured into her treasury. With over a million inhabitants at its height, the metropolis was the marvel of the ancient world. Her many magnificent villas dominating the seven hills, the Coliseum that held 50,000 people for sporting and theater events, and above all, the Roman Forum were spoken of with awe from Scotland to Samarkand. With its gleaming marble temples, towering monuments, sculptures, and public buildings, the Forum was the epicenter of power and crossroads for peoples from around the world.

The people who built this city were determined and resourceful. Around 750 BCE a tribe began settling the area known as Latium, hence the name “Latin” for the language they spoke. Their village was located on a rather unpromising patch of land surrounded by seven hills snaked through by the Tiber River; the people named it after their legendary founder Romulus, and they became known as Romans. While Romulus was a mythical figure whom they recognized as their own and held as their first king, most of the kings who ruled for the next 200 years were outsiders. Romans fiercely resented these kings, and eventually around 500 BCE they overthrew the monarchy. In its place the Romans established a constitution, unique for its time, presided over by elected officials, known as senators and consuls, who passed legislation within a political structure based on a set of checks and balances. The name they gave to the state was the res publica (the republic), literally meaning the “public thing.” Though never a true democracy, but rather an oligarchy controlled by influential families, the Republic was successful because it was run with a sense of rigid military discipline, under which every Roman was compelled to contribute to the public good.

During the tumultuous first century BCE, the republican government collapsed and gave way to rule by one man, an emperor. Though there were periodic attempts to

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re-establish the Republic, from this point on Rome was ruled by emperors and its vast political and cultural network became known as the Roman Empire. The Senate remained intact; however, its function became largely symbolic, rubber-stamping the decisions of the emperor who acted essentially as a dictator. The Romans had long dominated the Italian Peninsula and established colonies abroad, but under the empire, Rome was able to expand its influence even further. By the third century CE the Roman Empire encompassed almost all of Europe, including Britain; the Mediterranean; all the lands of North Africa; Egypt; and much of the Middle East, as far as present-day Iraq. Individual Romans amassed vast fortunes by exploiting these territories, and Roman control was assured by the military presence of its well-disciplined legions. Distinct advantages came with Roman colonization; wherever Romans went, they built roads, aqueducts, theaters, and baths, bringing with them their customs and laws. The Latin language was spoken from one end of the empire to the other, and its rich written culture, encompassing literature, history, natural sciences, and philosophy, was everywhere studied and admired. Perhaps most important, Roman military presence brought stability to war-torn regions, making it possible to enjoy the so-called *pax romana* (Roman peace).

Despite such benefits, people in Roman-occupied lands resented ever-increasing taxes imposed by a distant, impersonal imperial authority, as well as the widespread corruption and profiteering of local officials. There were frequent uprisings against the Roman forces in the colonies, and the empire became increasingly incapable of governing its immense territories. In particular, Roman forces never managed to subdue the restless, warlike tribes known as the Goths, who lived in the region of modern-day Germany. After years of emperors’ broken promises and abuses at the hands of Roman officials, armed warriors and masses of hungry, ragged people descended from northern Europe toward the capital of the empire. When one summer day in 410 CE, under the leadership of Alaric, the Goths broke through the city walls and sacked Rome, the world was shocked. Jerome (c. 340–420 CE) summed up the general feeling of despair at such great destruction: “If Rome can perish, what can be safe?”

**The spread of Christianity**

Though things would never be the same, Rome did not in fact perish. The Goths who sacked Rome did not actually damage it greatly compared with the devastation and carnage that the invading troops of Charles V would inflict on Rome a thousand years later (see Chapter 12). The Goths looted, taking away precious metals and treasures and destroying some pagan statuary in the process; but the invading “barbarians” by and large did not commit atrocities and left the city largely intact; these invaders were Christians and respected Rome as a sacred site. The Christian faith, which had begun in the Roman colony of Judea in the first century CE gradually spread throughout the empire, by this time reaching even the remote forests north of the Danube. The days of the official persecutions of Christians had ended nearly a century earlier, among the worst those ordered by the Emperors Nero (64 CE), Decius (249–251 CE), and Diocletian (303–311 CE), but by the time the Emperor Constantine converted in 313 CE, declaring official toleration of the religion, Christianity can be said to have triumphed.
How can we account for the stunning success of this new religion? The late antique world was swarming with cults and exotic religious practices, yet Christianity stood out from the rest. Christianity not only offered anyone, regardless of his or her sex, ethnic background, or social position, personal salvation in the afterlife, but also extended material help in this world. Christians practiced charity, providing assistance to widows, orphans, and the poor in their community. In a vast impersonal system such as the Roman Empire, without regular safety nets for the poor, this aspect of Christianity was obviously appealing. Equally appealing was the idea of a caring God, who did not demand burnt offerings or sacrifices made at a temple, but was concerned with intimate matters of each human’s soul. This was especially irresistible in an era in which pagan religious practices had become so ritualized and arcane that they had lost their meaning for many.

The bloody Roman persecutions of Christians were largely political acts, used to single out Christians as scapegoats for the many troubles that beset the empire, rather than the reflection of a general hostility to the new faith in Rome. As opposed to the elite, average Romans did not feel threatened by a creed that taught that all were equal in the eyes of a single, compassionate Creator. Whereas official avenues for advancement were closed to all but the upper echelon of Roman society, the portals of Heaven would welcome even cobbler and slaves. Gradually, Romans had become Christians. And precisely because there had been official persecutions in the city of Rome, believers venerated the many Christians killed there as martyrs and saints. The very fact that so much blood of these early Christians was spilled in Rome, sanctifying the ground itself, gave the city yet another claim to preeminence. Not only had Rome been the capital of the empire, it was also now the capital of the Christian faith in the West.

By the fifth century CE, much of Europe was Christian, but that was all that unified the fractured, de-centralized continent in the years following the invasion of Rome. In 455 CE, yet another barbarian tribe, the Vandals, had sacked the city; and after Romulus Augustus, the last Roman emperor, was deposed in 476 CE, the formal organization of the empire vanished. Not only had political and economic stability disappeared, but the actual physical infrastructure of the continent was shattered. The roads, of which the Romans were once so proud, became overgrown with weeds and unsafe to travel, as bandits prowled the countryside. City-dwellers, who once would have taken refuge within city walls, fled to the countryside as cities became indefensible. They put themselves under the protection of powerful lords who ruled from heavily fortified country estates.

The church, too, provided security and organization for frightened, defenseless peoples. As in its earliest days, Christianity was not only a set of beliefs, but also a community of believers, which provided social assistance. To guide laypeople there was a structure of clergy, consisting of a variety of priests and deacons, and above all of them stood the bishop. In each region the principal city had a bishop, and his power often rivaled or surpassed that of secular overlords. One of the most important, the Bishop of Rome, came to be known as the pope. Whereas today we think of figures such as priests and bishops as individuals with only spiritual authority, possessing little or no influence in the secular world, in this period there was no such clear division between secular and temporal powers. Bishops effectively wielded great political power, while lords often exerted influence over church matters.
The empire returns?

After nearly four centuries of fragmentation, a powerful secular leader arose who was able to unite all of Europe for a time. Charlemagne (742–814 CE, the descendent of Frankish kings, who inherited the lands of Francia (present-day France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, and portions of Germany) viewed himself as successor to the emperors of ancient Rome. Like a Roman emperor, he waged incessant war, increasing the borders of his territories in all directions until the Carolingian empire stretched 800 miles from east to west. From his court in Aachen he commissioned building and artistic projects, issued laws, and received ambassadors from as far away as Constantinople and Baghdad.

However, there were some important differences between this emperor and those of antiquity. Though he understood Latin and Greek, Charlemagne could neither read nor write. He proudly wore Frankish trousers and personally supervised his entire empire, galloping back and forth on horseback. He commanded no standing army; rather his subjects had to be mobilized for each campaign, providing their own weapons. Most important, his central role was that of champion and defender of the Holy Roman Church. Early on, Charlemagne established close ties with the pope in Rome, thereby legitimizing his territorial ambitions in Europe in the name of Christendom. The pope benefited from this relationship, because without military support the papacy was all too vulnerable. Pope Leo III, who placed the imperial crown on Charlemagne’s head on Christmas Day in the year 800 CE, had been in danger of his life and forced to flee Rome just the year before. Furthermore, by choosing the defender for his church and bestowing a crown on him, the pope increased his own power, effectively placing himself above the emperor. Though the Carolingian dynasty was short-lived, the uneasy relationship created between pope and emperor, with its ensuing debate over the separate realms of church and state would endure in Europe for centuries.

After Charlemagne’s death, the empire he had forged swiftly disintegrated due to internal discord as well as increasing pressure from attacking Magyar tribes from the east, Vikings from the north, and Arabs from the south. In 843 Charlemagne’s grandsons split the empire three ways. One received the western portion that would become France, another, the eastern portion that would become Germany. The third was given the “Middle Kingdom” and the title of emperor, ruling over a portion of Germany as well as the Italian Peninsula—in 774, Charlemagne had invaded the northern Italian Kingdom of the Lombards, adding Italy to his domain—over the course of the following centuries, the Holy Roman Emperor, as he came to be called, would figure significantly in the fortunes of Italy.

The Commercial Revolution

It was not until the so-called Commercial Revolution, which began around 1000 CE, that Europe would begin to recover, and it was in the northern Italian territories of the Empire that dynamic change took place. When we think of the Middle Ages we think of the lords and ladies in the courts of northern Europe and the peasants who plowed their fields. The great castles of England and France come to mind. Italy also had its lords, castles, and peasants working the land, but in significant ways it developed very differently from the rest of medieval Europe, under conditions especially favorable to
economic growth. For unlike most of the rest of Europe, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the Italian Peninsula still had around forty inhabited cities, located on former Roman sites. Though these cities were greatly depopulated compared with ancient times, they were lively centers of commerce. Whereas in other parts of Europe people had to depend on regular fairs or traveling peddlers for their goods, the vibrant little Italian cities were like year-round fairs for their inhabitants. This was because in spite of dangers on the roads, there was constant trade and travel through Italy.

Rome’s location in the heart of the Italian peninsula was decisive, as the church affected all aspects of cultural, political, and economic life in Italy over these centuries. In economic terms, the church brought business to Italy. Whether on their way to Rome or to the Holy Land on pilgrimage or crusade, medieval travelers passed through Italy. People and goods flowed through the Italian Peninsula by land, along the pilgrimage route of the Via Francigena, or went through the ports of Genoa, Pisa, and Venice. Thriving communities of merchants trading goods, and craftsmen manufacturing products for export developed. Inns sprang up to cater to travelers, and the feeding and clothing of these foreigners further stimulated local economies. The population of Italian cities doubled between the tenth and fourteenth centuries as people increasingly moved from the country into towns, where economic opportunities abounded.

**Communal governments sprout up in Italy**

Just as their cities’ economies expanded, so too did their political clout, and gradually city-dwellers in Italy began to form organizations known as communes. A commune was not so much the city itself, as the association of individuals who lived there gathered together through common interests to govern themselves. In the very earliest phase in the growth of the communes (c. 1080–1140), aristocrats dominated these organizations, banding together to enact civic legislation. The members of these early communes called themselves consuls, taking the same name as the patrician representatives in the ancient Roman Republic. Though these communes were not broad-based democracies in any sense, Italian citizens were forging for themselves a unique form of representative government that did not exist anywhere else in Europe at the time.

Though they were largely self-governing, the Italian communes were not independent, but subjects of a distant monarch. The emperors in Germany who had jurisdiction over the Italian peninsula occasionally visited their territories south of Alps, but they generally preferred to govern through agents. This was a workable arrangement in which communes paid their taxes and in return received a measure of autonomy, but the growing conflict between the emperor and the pope complicated the political situation. As protectors of the faith, the emperors felt entitled to give out church offices and lands in Italy to favored vassals. The popes, on the other hand, claimed that not only ecclesiastical offices, but much of the Italian Peninsula itself belonged to the church, citing the so-called Donation of Constantine (see Chapter 7). Emperor Henry IV (1050–1106) and Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085) disagreed openly over who had the right to invest (literally “to dress” in his official garb or appoint) the archbishop of Milan. The Investiture Conflict was officially settled in 1122, when it was agreed that the two powers were equivalent. The pope argued that there were two swords; the emperor wielded a temporal sword, the pope a spiritual sword. Imperial claims on the Italian peninsula, however, were hardly resolved with a metaphor.
Matters came to a head in the twelfth century when Henry’s great-grandson, the Emperor Frederick I “Barbarossa” (r. 1152–1190) insisted on his supreme control over Italy. Barbarossa had difficulties ruling the Italian city-states; the men he put in charge often spoke only German and were unpopular because of their insensitivity to local customs. By 1167 most northern Italian cities had joined in the Lombard League (see Map 1.1).
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Chapter 6) with Pope Alexander III (r. 1159–1181) against the emperor, defeating him at the Battle of Legnano in 1176. The Peace of Constance (1183) set the stage for the independence of the Italian communes. The citizens agreed to swear an oath of allegiance to the emperor, continuing to pay taxes to him, while being allowed to elect their own consuls, govern their own counties, and make their own local laws. From this point on, the Holy Roman Emperor was ruler of Italy in little more than name alone.

**Tensions between magnates and popolo**

The image of determined little city-states banded together in a struggle against the emperor presents in many ways an unrealistic image of solidarity and cooperation that in fact rarely, if ever, existed. Nobles, knights, or magnates, as they are most frequently referred to in documents from this period, were constantly fighting with one another. Fierce blood feuds like the one depicted in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* were common. Italian cities suffered from incessant violence between powerful clans, as they and their thugs menaced one another and passerbys in the streets. And, they fought not only on the ground; from the mid-twelfth century, the magnate clans had filled Italian cities with their towers, from which they waged battles with one another. The oppressive effect these immense constructions once had on residents can be felt today in the Tuscan town of San Gimignano, which still bristles with towers.

Eventually a group of citizens stood up to the dangerously uncivil behavior of the magnates. Known as the *popolo*, these city-dwellers earned their living through trade, banking, or crafts. Though the word *popolo* comes from the same root as the English word people, it does not mean “the people” in the sense of “the masses,” but indicates all city-dwellers who were not members of the arrogant, warlike nobility. The more prosperous were known as the *popolo grasso* (fat people), and the poorest, such as cloth workers and leather tanners, as the *popolo minuto* or (little people). Groups of these citizens had begun to form individual trade guilds toward the end of the twelfth century, and as they became more and more prosperous the guilds banded together against their common enemies, the magnates. Throughout Italy armed companies of the *popolo* rose up to defend themselves.

Their rebellion against the nobles, however, ought not to be romanticized. The leaders of the *popolo* were no Robin Hoods, rising up to fight injustice to give to the poor. Rather, they recognized that civic unrest interfered with business; private quarrels between local thugs only made city streets unsafe and were in no one’s best interests. Moreover, the richest of the merchant class now outstripped the wealth of the landed nobility, giving them greater political power. The origins of powerful banking families such as the Florentine Bardi, Peruzzi, and Medici were from the *popolo*. Indeed, as we will see, there was much conflict within the *popolo* between the less politically powerful lower guilds and the wealthy influential upper guilds, all of whom nevertheless participated in city government.

**The age of the popular commune, 1200–1290**

The Duecento was the golden age of the *popolo*. Throughout the peninsula, popular regimes had succeeded in overthrowing the ruling elite. As the *popolo* gained in power
and experience, the citizens experimented with various ways of governing their re-
publics. From the outset they wanted a form of representational government and recog-
nized the need to have a central executive figure to direct their corporate interests. But
who should lead them? If one powerful citizen were chosen, this could lead to factional
fighting within the city, or worse. If that person became too powerful he might make
himself signore (see Chapter 6), become a tyrant, and destroy the commonwealth alto-
gether. Thus, most communes during this period decided upon a podestà as the chief ex-
ecutive. The podestà was always an outsider, the citizen of another commune, as long as
it was a distant one. He was a respected nobleman, often trained in law, who was hired
for six months to two years, varying by city. He brought with him a team of notaries,
police, and administrative assistants. The podestà was well paid, but always accountable
to the city council and subject to strict audits when he left office.

The first government ruled entirely by the popolo was in Florence, the so-called
Primo Popolo of 1250. One of its first decrees was to lop off the tops of all towers over 96
feet high. The extent to which they were successful can be seen in Florence today where
very few towers stand out, whereas once the skyline was crowded with over a hundred
of them, some as high as 230 feet. By the 1290s when the popolo was firmly established,
the Florentine priors approved the building of their new headquarters, the Palazzo dei
Priori (now called the Palazzo Vecchio), which with its solid fortress-like appearance
projected an image of stability and strength. Where once there had been scores of indi-
vidual towers, now the single, enormous campanile, or bell tower, would dominate the
skyline of Florence, representing the power of the Republic.

The new regime did not stop with symbolic gestures against the former ruling
class. It now officially excluded members of magnate clans from participation in city
politics and applied severe penalties to any misbehavior. In Florence, for example, the
Ordinances of Justice were passed in 1293, in which magnates were prohibited
from joining guilds and holding civic offices. A new office was created, called the
standardbearer of justice (gonfaloniere di giustizia) specifically to enforce these
regulations.

The popolo enacted other laws that reflected their own, rather than the magnates’
interests. Tax legislation was a central issue in popular communes. Whereas before ver-
sions of a hearth tax predominated, that is, each household or hearth paid an equal
amount, this was now replaced by a graduated tax. An income and property tax was in-
troduced, taxing each household proportional to its wealth. The exemptions formerly
enjoyed by the nobility were done away with. And now that violent crime was being
systematically prosecuted, criminal law grew and developed.

Structural changes were made in the organization of city government as well. The
office of the podestà was replaced by that of the capitano del popolo. The role of the capitano
del popolo was very similar to that of the podestà; his term was short (six months to a
year), and he had to know law to pass judgments. Significantly, he controlled an armed
citizen militia, and in times of emergency he set the city bells clanging in a general call
to arms. The capitano was answerable to a city council of twelve elders (anziani, later
known as priori or priors). They were members of upper guilds who were elected for
six-month terms of office, and who, to pass laws, had to have the approval of legislative
committees. Though the numbers of the members of these councils, their names and
terms of office, varied by commune, by the end of the century not only Florence but
most Italian city-states had adopted this system of government.
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A “pullulation of little powers”

By the Duecento, central and northern Italy was made up of dozens of these city-states, dynamic centers of commercial and cultural energy. The Italian Peninsula was dotted with these tiny city-republics, each proudly self-governed, each eyeing the other with suspicion and ever on the lookout for an opportunity to conquer its neighbor. From the very earliest time of their foundation, this “pullulation of little powers,”2 in the words of one historian, warred not only against one another, but with the people in their surrounding countryside or contado. It seems absurd to us today to imagine a “Republic of New York City” declaring war on a “Republic of New Jersey,” or a “Republic of Oakland” sending ambassadors to a “Republic of Berkeley,” in alliance against San Francisco, but these were precisely the kinds of situations the Italian city-states found themselves in during the thirteenth century, except of course that most of the cities had populations between only 10,000 and 40,000.

The allegiances of these city-states in the thirteenth century became polarized around the Guelf and Ghibelline political parties. The Guelfs, named after the Welf family, who were dukes of Bavaria, supported the pope. The Ghibellines were supporters of the emperor, and the name derives from the castle of Waibling, which belonged to the emperor. There is a colorful story related by the chronicler Dino Compagni (c. 1260–1324), who gives a somewhat different version of the origins of Guelf and Ghibelline factions in Florence in 1215:

In Florence a young, noble citizen by the name of Buondelmonte de’ Buondelmonti had promised to marry the daughter of Oderigo Giantruffetti. He was going by the home of the Donati, when a gentlewoman by the name of Madonna Aldruda, the wife of Messer Forteguerra Donati, who had two very lovely daughters, was on the balcony and saw him. She was standing there and called to him, pointing to one of these daughters: “Who have you taken for a wife? I’ve been saving this one for you!”

Compagni goes on to explain that the young man married the daughter of Donati and the jilted girl’s family was so enraged that they began a feud that spread throughout all of Italy.

Though it is improbable that hostilities throughout the peninsula were ignited because of a thwarted love affair, this passage does indicate that there was more than political ideology involved in the Guelf/Ghibelline conflict. Class divisions cannot totally account for the discord either; though Guelfs tended to be more prominent in banking and commerce and Ghibellines were more likely to be associated with landed wealth, both essentially came from same class. Economic interests as well as traditional clan allegiances played probably the most important part in determining which side people would belong to. Those whose business benefited from a strong connection with the papacy naturally sided with the Guelf party; thus, the Florentine bankers who lent vast sums to the pope were devoted Guelf adherents. On the other hand, those who resided

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in cities such as Pisa, whose leading family the Gambacorti, derived their authority from the emperor and thus sided with the Ghibellines.

Further complicating the political situation was that, with the victory of one party over another, the losers would be exiled from their city. The exiles would go to a nearby city that was in the hands of their faction, plotting and preparing to return and regain power. If exiled Florentine Ghibellines rallied in Pisa, for instance, Pisa became the de facto enemy of Florence; hostilities would be declared and war between the two cities became a certainty. Allegiances were formed and broken with alarming rapidity; the only certainty was constant strife. Even when the Florentine Guelfs eventually crushed the Ghibellines at the Battle of Campaldino in 1289, there was to be no peace. The Florentine Guelfs then broke into two factions, known as the Whites and the Blacks, who proceeded to fight each other with a ferocity equal to that with which the Guelfs had formerly fought the Ghibellines.

## Population of Italian cities c. 1300

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population Range</th>
<th>Cities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>80,000–100,000</td>
<td>Florence, Genoa, Milan, Venice</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 50,000</td>
<td>Bologna, Brescia, Genoa, Naples, Palermo, Pisa, Siena, Verona,</td>
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<tr>
<td>20,000–40,000</td>
<td>Agrigento, Ancona, Ascoli, Barletta, Catania, Cremona, Fano, Lucera, Lucca, Mantua, Melfi, Messina, Padua, Parma, Pavia, Perugia, Piacenza, Rome, Salerno, Siracusa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. 10,000</td>
<td>Alessandria, Aversa, Arezzo, Asti, Bari, Bergamo, Bitonto, Brindisi, Capua, Catania, Cesena, Chieri, Chioggia, Como, Cortona, Crema, Fabriano, Faenza, Ferrara, Fermo, Forlì, Gubbio, Imola, Modena, Monopoli, Orvieto, Pistoia, Prato, Ravenna, Recanati, Reggio, Rimini, Savona, Spoletto, Taranto, Todi, Trani, Trapani, Treviso, Vercelli, Vicenza, Viterbo, Volterra</td>
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### Florentines, the “fifth element of the world”

If Florence was remarkable for its violent politics, it was equally renowned for its vigorous economy. Among all the communes, the most stunning economic growth took place in Florence. Around the middle of the thirteenth century, it was an important center of trade and banking, but its population was only around 45,000. By 1300, Florence had become one of the largest, most important cities in Europe, with a population of around 100,000, making it, along with Paris, Venice, Genoa, and Milan, one of the five most populous cities in Europe. Its commercial and financial interests extended to England, Constantinople, and beyond. Pope Boniface VIII was so impressed with how widely Florentines traveled that he allegedly once exclaimed: “Florentines are the fifth element of the world!” Like earth, air, water, and fire, Florentines seemed to be everywhere. Indeed, it is tempting to attribute their success to the enterprising spirit of the Florentines themselves, for the city would seem to have little to recommend itself as a future metropolis. It is located inland, with inconvenient access to the sea, and was not on the main pilgrimage route, the Via Francigena. The Arno River, which runs through the city, is so shallow that it is hardly navigable, and the city is subject to periodic catastrophic flooding.
The Arno, however, did prove to be a source of profit to Florentines, as it provided the plentiful water the textile industry needed for the dying of cloth. For this reason, wool-finishing and silk industries developed early in Florence. Demand for Florentine cloth soon outstripped the raw materials available in the region, and Florentine merchants ranged always farther away to buy their wool, purchasing much of it in England. The initiative and willingness to embark on long-distance trade that would characterize Florentine business endeavors also created a need for ways of transferring money to far-away lands, and so international banking developed. In 1252 the florin was minted, the first gold coin produced in large amounts in Western Europe since Carolingian times. Like the Florentines who minted it, the florin rapidly began to be circulated everywhere; within several years it was to be found not only all over Tuscany, but throughout Italy, at the fairs in Champagne, and as far away as the Levant. When other governments began to mint coins, they imitated the size, weight, purity, and sometimes even the design of the Florentine coin. Rivalled only by the Venetian ducat, which was introduced in 1284, by the end of the thirteenth century the florin became the standard currency for international commercial and financial markets throughout Europe and the Mediterranean.

Florence was a boom town by the second half of the Duecento. The city walls, built in 1072, had to be expanded in 1172 to enclose an area three times the size; then in 1284, building was begun on walls that would enclose eight times the original size of the city. These years saw the beginning of many building projects; the landmarks that a visitor in Florence to this day recognizes were initiated during this time. The Dominican monastery of Santa Maria Novella was begun in 1279 and the Franciscan monastery of Santa Croce expanded in 1295. The plan for Santa Maria del Fiore (the Duomo) was made in 1294, and work began two years later. Across from it, the Baptistery of San Giovanni was completely renovated in the 1290s.

**Dante Alighieri, Florentine poet and political exile**

This was the world that the poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) grew up in. He lived through a time of great conflict and change, which he vividly describes in his masterpiece the *Divine Comedy*. Born into a genteel, but not wealthy, family, Dante was nevertheless raised and educated along with the elite of Florentine society, reading classical Latin authors, attending lectures on theology at the Dominican school at Santa Maria Novella, and listening to Provençal troubadour love songs. He had a precociously romantic nature and fell in love at age nine with a little girl his own age. Her name was Beatrice, and she would remain at the center of his poetry his whole life.

Dante’s interests, however, were not entirely engrossed in love and poetic pursuits; he was a fascinated observer of the world around him and was passionate about politics. Nor was he content to be a bystander to political events, but actively took part in city government. By this time the Ghibellines had been defeated, and Dante is said to have belonged to the party of the White Guelfs; indeed, he held public office between 1295 and 1300, serving as *priore* while the Whites were in power. Dante was on an ambassadorial mission to Rome in 1301 when the Black Guelfs took over control of Florence, having swiftly executed or exiled the remaining members of the Whites. Dante was condemned, in absentia, first to exile and then to death.
Dante never returned to Florence. Exile became a central theme of his poetry, and he could never write of Florence without expressing either fierce anger or intense nostalgia. The proud former citizen of the Florentine Republic wandered from place to place for the rest of his life relying on the hospitality of the mighty. Dante came to know, in his own words, “how salty is the bread of others and how hard it is to go up and down their stairs.” Dante died in exile in Ravenna in 1321, already recognized throughout Italy as the greatest writer of his day.

The *Divine Comedy*, the first masterpiece of Italian literature

Dante’s masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, is famous both for its content and for its vigorous poetic language. Dante was the first poet to choose to write in *volgare*, in Italian vernacular, or more precisely in Tuscan vernacular. There was as yet no formal Italian language, no Italian grammars or dictionaries; indeed, at this time there was no single vernacular Italian language, but many versions. A traveler going from one region to another, sometimes even from one town to the next, would have had a difficult time understanding the local tongues. Learned people communicated in Latin, and though popular songs, legends, and poetry existed in *volgare*, it was a radical move for Dante to write a serious work in the language spoken in Tuscany.

Dante’s genius was in sounding all the registers of the Tuscan dialect, from the very roughest street slang to the most sublime expressions of divine love. And when there were no words to express exactly what he meant, he created them. Like Shakespeare, more than 200 years later, Dante enriched his language with hundreds of colorful new words and expressions. The Italian language spoken and studied today is the direct descendent of Dante’s elaboration of the spoken Florentine dialect of his day.

Dante envisioned a poem on a grand scale that would explain the place of humankind in the cosmos and represent man’s dilemma on earth: his difficult choices between good and evil and his paradoxical striving for perfect love in an imperfect world. It is a narrative poem of 14,233 lines, composed in the interlocking rhyme scheme known as *terza rima*. The poem is divided into three books, each describing a realm of the afterlife according to contemporary Christian theology: *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Heaven). The story is told in the first person, as Dante/the pilgrim is lost in a forest of doubt and confusion, unable to scale the mountain representing virtue. Tempted by sin, Dante’s soul is in danger, causing Beatrice to send the Roman poet Virgil (70–19 BCE) to guide him first through Hell, then through Purgatory. In the final book Dante visits Heaven, where he at last encounters Beatrice.

In the *Inferno*, the poet employs all his invention and fantasy to punish evil-doers in horrible, yet imaginative ways. Dante devises a system of *contrapasso*, in which to paraphrase Gilbert and Sullivan, the “punishment fits the crime.” The lustful, who were carried away by passion on earth, in the afterlife are incessantly blown and battered by powerful winds. The suicides, who had willfully stripped themselves of their earthly lives, are turned into trees, from which branches are painfully ripped off. Flatterers who once spewed disgustingly false praise are immersed in pools of excrement.
“Those brand new people and their sudden earnings”

Although it is obviously impossible to give an idea in English of the sheer beauty of the sound of Dante’s poetry, the content of the *Divine Comedy* communicates directly. Dante closely observed the world around him, and his critical gaze missed nothing. Witness to the unprecedented economic boom that was taking place in Florence during his lifetime, he denounced “those brand new people and their sudden earnings” who “have brought to Florence excess and arrogance.” He was disgusted with the unheard-of opulence of rich Florentines. Many sumptuary laws were introduced at this time to reduce the extravagance of dress among the wealthy, while the amount of money spent on dowries and lavish wedding banquets skyrocketed. In the *Comedy*, Dante condemns what he considers the immoral, decadent atmosphere in Florence. He compares Florence of his day with that of his great-great grandfather: “Florence within her ancient circle of walls, from which the bells still ring the hours, was at peace, modest and sober. They did not wear golden chains, crowns or embroidered dresses, nor belts that attracted more attention than the wearer. Fathers were not frightened at the birth of a daughter, as dowries were not yet beyond measure.”

Dante does not stop here with his condemnation. He places many prominent Florentines in Hell both for their greedy accumulation of wealth and for their squandering of it, and especially for moneylending. Usury, as it was called, was a sin according to the church, yet if banks never lent money at interest, there would be no banking. As we know, banking flourished in Florence, the moneylender sitting at his counter or banco (hence the term “bank” in English) was a common sight in the city, so Dante’s Hell is full of Florentines. “Be joyous, Florence, “the poet exclaims,” you are great indeed, for over sea and land you beat your wings; through every part of Hell your name extends!”

**Mendicant friars praised and corrupt popes punished**

Dante’s depiction of the wealth of his contemporaries is real enough, and so was its corollary: poverty. The very poorest Florentines lived in urban squalor. From the earliest days of the wool industry, the Arno had been used for cleansing dyes from cloth and dumping both household and industrial waste byproducts. The poorest Florentines lived in daily contact with these noxious fumes and filth. Where was Christian charity, when fellow Florentines were allowed to live in these conditions? This was a city where the words of Saint Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226) still rang out in the air. The son of the wealthy Umbrian cloth merchant, Pietro Bernardone, Francesco (Francis), was horrified by the greedy consumerism he saw around him and rejected the accumulation of material goods. Walking barefooted, begging for food, Francesco and his disciples practiced absolute poverty. *Il Poverello* (the little pauper) as he came to be called, had preached on these very streets, where enormous fortunes were amassed off the labor of others.

The Franciscans became enormously popular, as did the other important mendicant order created at the same time, the Dominicans. They were known as mendicants (from the Latin *mendicans* meaning “to beg”), because the friars renounced material possessions, living only on charity. Their popularity with the laity was due less to a discomfort with wealth per se—for indeed most people wanted to become wealthy—but as a reaction to the widespread corruption among the clergy. Bejewed, richly dressed bishops were losing their credibility with the faithful. Here Dante gives voice to the outrage people felt, for instance, at greedy popes who sold church offices, a practice known as simony. These popes appointed bishops and other clerics not for their spirituality, but
on the basis of how much money candidates could pay. Dante and Virgil walk past a simonist buried upside down, with legs flailing in the air; this is Pope Nicholas III (1216–1277), who was famous for selling church offices. The pope calls out: “Is that you standing there, Boniface?” meaning Pope Boniface VIII (c. 1235–1303). After Dante identifies himself, Nicholas recognizes his mistake, but expresses his assurance that both Boniface and his successor Pope Clement V (1264–1314) will be coming to join him soon. Thus, in one stroke, the author has condemned three popes to Hell.

**Dante on the separate powers of church and state**

It is often confusing to modern sensibilities how a person could so openly criticize the most powerful figure in the Catholic Church and “get away with it.” Though obviously no pope would have been pleased to be consigned to Dante’s literary Hell, we must keep in mind that the period of the vast spy network of the Roman Inquisition (see Chapter 15), which held the Italian populace in its iron grip, would not come into being until several centuries later. Equally confounding to today’s readers of the *Commedia* is Dante’s attitude toward religion. Though he lashed out at the church, Dante was a devout Christian. He wanted to see the church return to a purer, less worldly form of religion; specifically, he believed the pope should renounce all temporal power. Harking back to the Investiture Conflict, this was still a burning issue in Dante’s day. Indeed, Boniface VIII, one of the simonists Dante condemns to Hell, was a forceful pope who envisioned vast control for himself over all of Europe (see Chapter 4).

The need to wrest political control from the papacy was taken up by Marsilius of Padua (Marsilio dei Mainardi c. 1275–1343), who virulently blamed the popes for all of Italy’s political troubles. In his 1324 treatise *Defensor pacis*, Marsilio used classical models to argue in favor of a separation of powers of church and state, although unlike Dante, the Paduan was optimistic about self-government among city-states. As he grew older, Dante became convinced that the only solution for the incessant discord in Italy was to have the entire peninsula, indeed all of Europe united under one monarch, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII of Luxembourg (c. 1275–1313). Dante expounded these views at length in his political treatise *De monarchia* (On Monarchy c. 1314). Long gone were his republican ideals; he no longer had faith in the ability of citizens to govern themselves. He ridiculed Florence’s ever-changing legislation, sarcastically comparing the politically troubled city to an invalid:

> How often, over time, have you changed your laws, money, offices, and customs, changing and revising your citizens . . . you resemble a sick woman, who cannot be comforted in her feather-bed, but constantly tosses and turns to relieve her pain.

Though Dante’s shift from staunch republican to reactionary monarchist seems like a step back, he was actually anticipating the political direction that Florence would take 200 years later. It is also important to remember that he felt driven to this stance by the violent factionalism around him. A strong authority figure could be counted on at least to maintain law and order. Dante reserves the lowest levels of the *Inferno* for those who disturb the peace and sow discord. The deepest part of the pit is for traitors, and to describe these most vile sinners, the poet lets loose some of his most powerful language. Dante’s poetic style becomes increasingly brutal and realistic as his journey takes him to
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the lowest reaches of Hell. The characters brawl, sling insults at one another, and make obscene gestures. His writing reaches such a pitch of naturalism here that you can almost hear echoes of the streets of Florence of his day. When toward the very bottom pit, Dante meets a traitor to the Guelf party, he grabs the man by the scruff of the neck, shouting: “Tell me your name or I’ll rip every hair from your head!”

An explosion of naturalism in art—Giotto Di Bondone

“Before Cimabue was the top, now Giotto is all the rage . . . .”

With these words, Dante sums up the revolution in art that was being created by his contemporary, Giotto di Bondone (c. 1266–1337), who pioneered naturalism in painting. Giotto had broken away from the style of his predecessor, Cimabue (c. 1240–1302), who painted intensely expressive figures, but stylized in the older Byzantine manner, with heads stiffly encircled with halos made of gold leaf. Giotto’s figures, on the other hand, breathe life. At times they dance with joy, musicians swaying to the music, trumpeters puffing out their cheeks. At other times his characters express intolerable sorrow, as in his Death of Saint Francis (Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence), in which the mourners surrounding Saint Francis’s deathbed look like their faces will split with grief.

In addition to movement, his forms have weight, unlike earlier paintings in which figures sometimes seem to float in space. In contrast to the two-dimensional, flat figures of earlier paintings, Giotto’s men and women have very real, solid bodies. In his Ognissanti Madonna (Uffizi Gallery, Florence), the infant Jesus holds up his chubby little hand in benediction, against the background of his mother’s swelling breasts and solid thigh; one knows that her feet are planted firmly on the ground.

Dante and Giotto may have met while Giotto was working on his frescos for the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, as both men were there at the same time. Even if the two never met, however, the scope of their work and scale of their visions are comparable. The chapel (also known as the Arena Chapel) was built by Enrico Scrovegni, the son of a wealthy moneylender whom Dante had placed with the usurers in the Inferno. As a kind of spiritual money laundering scheme, Scrovegni hired Giotto, already recognized as the greatest living painter, to decorate its walls with biblical scenes. Giotto’s Last Judgment is a powerful, vivid depiction of the last day, when according to Scripture the dead will rise up and be judged. God presides, as the elect are led to Heaven (Giotto’s patron is featured prominently among these) and the damned are grotesquely tortured. At the bottom of the fresco sits an immense, bloated, hairy Satan, crushing and devouring sinners.

Though the vision of his Last Judgment is a dark one, Giotto, like Dante, knew how to represent all the registers of the human condition. In the same chapel, Giotto depicts an aged Saint Anne painfully bent in homage to Mary, who gazes compassionately at the older woman, embracing, as well as supporting her, with her arms. In the scene of the Wedding at Cana, in which Jesus miraculously produced plentiful wine, Giotto playfully includes in a corner a well-fed citizen, one of those “brand-new men” so odious to Dante. The man stares off vaguely into the distance, unconcerned with the miraculous event happening around him; instead, he placidly guzzles wine, surrounded by jugs as round and bulging as his belly. Though we look at his paintings today and notice “medieval” aspects, such as lack of spatial perspective in The Expulsion of Joachim from the Temple (Scrovegni Chapel, Padua), Giotto’s fresh use of color, his figures’ dramatic
gestures, and realistic emotions were entirely new and would lead the way to even greater artistic innovations.

**Sculptural innovators—Nicola, Giovanni, and Andrea Pisano**

In addition to painting, Giotto also worked as an architect, designing the Campanile (bell tower) beside the cathedral in Florence. At this time there were not always clear distinctions among expertise in fields of painting, sculpture, architecture, and engineering. Arnolfo di Cambio (c. 1240–1302) was a gifted sculptor who also designed the Basilica of Santa Croce, the Palazzo Vecchio, as well as the circuit of walls around Florence. As we will see, throughout the Renaissance, men of genius were recognized as valuable resources and their talents employed in various artistic, literary, and engineering enterprises. Giotto began work on the Campanile in 1334, working on it until his death in 1337, after which he was replaced with the goldsmith and sculptor Andrea Pisano (Andrea d’Ugolino da Pontedera c. 1295–1348) who also cast the bronze doors of the Baptistry (1330).

The graceful simplicity of Andrea Pisano’s sculptures in stone and his realistic, yet stylized reliefs on the Baptistry doors followed in the tradition of the great innovators in sculpture during the Duecento and early Trecento, who came from the Tuscan city of Pisa. Nicola Pisano (c. 1220–1284) and his son Giovanni (c. 1250–1314) created works that at once incorporated elements of ancient Roman statuary and infused new realism into the Gothic style of sculpture of their day. For the marble pulpits in the Pisan Baptistery, Giovanni Pisano drew inspiration directly from classical figures on Roman sarcophagi, which to this day can be viewed in Pisa. In his *Adoration of the Magi* (Baptistry, Pisa) the Madonna sits nobly upright, gazing into the distance, with the features and bearing of a Roman goddess. This trend of artists, especially sculptors harkening back to the ancient world for inspiration, would become one of the key elements of Renaissance art.

The realism the Pisanos introduced in sculpture can be seen vividly in Giovanni Pisano’s *Madonna and Child* (Museo dell’ Opera del Duomo, Pisa), often referred to as the *Madonna of the Conversation* because of the way Mary twists her head toward her child and raptly listens to what he appears to be explaining to her. The representation of the *Massacre of the Innocents* on the pulpit (Sant’Andrea, Pistoia) sculpted by Giovanni Pisano vibrates with pathos. In the upper corner, Herod coldly commands his soldiers to murder the male infants as the mothers watch on hopelessly. Several women cower in the corner as a soldier wrenches a child from his mother; another woman covers her eyes as a soldier, who is holding the baby by the feet like a slab of meat, raises his sword to slice down. In the lower front corner a mother reclines on the ground, gazing lovingly at her child, whose neck is bent in a grotesque angle like a broken doll.

**Considerations—“Medieval” or “Renaissance”?**

Though the events described in this chapter took place before the period generally referred to as the Renaissance, they are crucial for understanding the cultural innovations that would develop later. The story of the rise and fall of Ancient Rome is important not only because it helps us understand the creation of medieval Europe, but also because the events that took place many centuries earlier on Italian soil formed a legacy for
future generations. Renaissance Italians could never forget the grandeur of their past; they self-consciously looked back to ancient Rome, measuring themselves against Cicero, Seneca, and Livy. Ancient Rome is the “re” in “renaissance.”

Renaissance Italians compared not only contemporary arts and literature but also their political structures to that of Ancient Rome. The question of how a state is best governed, whether through democracy or by an individual, whether emperor, lord, or prince—is one that Renaissance Italians debated continuously. In this light, the political backdrop of communal Italy is fundamental, because it was there that Italians first experimented with an innovative form of representative government while the rest of Europe was still immersed in feudalism. Moreover, the vigorous debate taking place in the Italian communes over the separate realms of church and state, ideas expressed by Dante and by his even more radical contemporary Marsilius of Padua, heralded a new belief in the legitimacy of secular government.

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is often considered the perfect synthesis of the medieval world view, incorporating the theology of Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Augustine with the philosophy of Aristotle. He presents us with a severe and inflexible system of judgment ordered by a merciless God. In some ways his masterpiece is like a towering Gothic cathedral, complex, intricate, embellished with monstrous gargoyles. Coined by the sixteenth-century artist and historian Giorgio Vasari (see Chapter 13), the term alone, which refers to the Gothic invaders from the north, conjures up dark, medieval images. However, there is another way to look at Dante’s work. The sheer breadth of his vision and the scope of his monumental undertaking look forward to the achievements of Michelangelo, who 200 years later would cover the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel with his equally vast vision of man’s place in the universe. The vigor of Dante’s language, his poetic naturalism, and artistic daring place him at the threshold of a new, exciting period in the history of Western Europe.

**Resources**

**BOOKS**


Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969). This history focuses on the city during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries providing a lively overview of economic, political, religious, and cultural developments, with maps and illustrations.


Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy* (New York, Random House, 1980). An exploration of the political, social, and cultural context of the Italian Renaissance; the early chapters trace the growth of Italian communes in some detail, illustrated.

John Najemy, *A History of Florence 1200–1575* (Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2006). The most comprehensive survey of Florentine history from the dawn of the commune, focusing especially on political events and institutions. Good background reading for the *Divine Comedy* is Najemy’s essay “Dante and Florence” in
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INTERNET

Digital Dante—http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/new/. Contains the full text of Dante’s Comedy in several different translations as well as articles, illustrations, and other works by Dante.

The World of Dante—http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/dante/. Encyclopedic information on Dante’s Inferno in a searchable database including many interactive features, notably Botticelli’s chart of the Inferno.

Princeton Dante Project—http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/. In addition to full text of the Comedy, there are audio recitations of the poem in Italian, essays, maps, charts, and many useful links.

University of Texas Dante Worlds—http://dante-worlds.laits.utexas.edu/index.html. Vivid graphics and summaries of the content of the Comedy.

The Online Library of Liberty—http://oll.libertyfund.org. Dante’s De Monarchia in English Language translation.

La Scultura Italiana—http://www.scultura-italiana.com. Although this site is exclusively in Italian, it is a very accessible site with all the major works of the Pisano family represented.

MEDIA

“Brother Sun, Sister Moon” 1972 film directed by Franco Zeffirelli captures the atmosphere of mercantile society in Umbria c. 1200, workers in wool dying shop, rich fabrics, and the romance of Franciscan ideals.

“Tutto Dante” recited in Italian by actor Roberto Benigni; this DVD set of The Divine Comedy is spellbinding, even if you know no Italian.