

An Example for Others

Public Execution and the Symbolism of Urban Space in Florence's Crisis

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Abstract

This thesis examines the Florentine Grand Council's use of public execution to demonstrate political power in the crisis of 1494-1512. Using the example of Antonio Rinaldeschi's execution for blasphemy in 1501, it explores how the Council appropriated humanist and republican symbolism and urban space to tighten their grip on the increasingly unstable and fractured republic.

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Dedicated to my grandfather, Bruce Mansfield (1926-2017), for bestowing me with a love of history that I will have for the rest of my life.

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Introduction

The transformation of Florence from the scion of humanist republicanism into a hereditary principality is a tale well told. The constitutional changes brought in 1532 that abolished the *Signoria* and elevated Alessandro de' Medici to the title of Duke provide a clear divide between the republican and ducal periods in the city's history, as well as a significant turning point in the broader history of Renaissance Italy. The long-awaited Medici ascendancy was the death knell for the republic, but Florence had been in a state of flux for almost four decades by the time of Alessandro's rise to dukedom. An equally defining moment for the republic and its legacy came in the period 1494-1512, when the Medici family were exiled from the city and the republican constitution was extensively reformed. This eighteen-year period offers a contained and concise insight into crisis: crisis of political vacuum, political philosophy, civic identity and practical theology, in a way that was existential in both spiritual and geopolitical contexts.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the ways that this short-lived republican government maintained its legitimacy through the exercise of power in this period. I believe that the republic compensated for political and theological instability and crisis by appropriating republican urban spaces for demonstrations of power, primarily executions, in a way that was incongruous to humanist republican values. I begin by investigating the events of July 1501, in which Florentine citizen Antonio Rinaldeschi was executed for blasphemy after drunkenly defacing a fresco of the Virgin Mary with horse dung. This example of an unusually harsh legal judgement on the part of the Grand Council offers a microcosmic view into the civic and religious instability of the period, and the republican government's need to cogently reinforce their own power and legitimacy. From there I will explore the broader social, political and theological context of that event, and investigate how the violence and

destabilisation of the city-state in the period 1494-98 radically altered its civic identity and philosophical worldview.

The History of Government in Florence

The history of Florence is a history of dialogue between people and power. Its transformation from a minor feudal commune in the thirteenth century to a republican monolith in just two hundred years underscores a unique evolution of political structure, demography and urban topography¹. Social mobility and exchange that superseded class boundaries were vital to the development of the republic, and political and mercantile factionalism was central to its society for the entire republican period. Politically active popular movements began to emerge in the city from as early as the twelfth century, in the form of loose merchants' associations that were formed almost entirely from areas of society that were traditionally excluded from the political sphere². From that time on, the people of the middling mercantile and artisanal classes, or *popolo*, came to hold more and more influence in Florentine politics. This came first in the form of the guilds, which grew to include representation for all kinds of urban professionals, rather than remaining the domain of merchants and bankers. From there they began to gain representation in matters of state, and by the middle of the thirteenth century, representatives of the *popolo* held significant communal offices in Florence and across Tuscany, in some places as many as half the civil administration³. Florence had been an oligarchic commune since the Middle Ages, but this rise in popular participation in government truly set it down the path of classical republicanism.

¹ John M. Najemy, *A History of Florence: 1200-1575* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing 2006) p. 3

² Andrea Zorzi, 'The Popolo', in John M. Najemy, ed., *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance: 1300-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 147

³ Zorzi, 'The Popolo', p. 148

The mechanism of executive authority was complex and changeable over the history of the Republic of Florence. In the early days of the feudal commune it was still notionally under the authority of the Holy Roman Empire, but this control had weakened over the Middle Ages, and the various city-states of northern Italy had all gained their independence by 1300⁴. Before that point the city was ruled by a council of twelve elected consuls, usually from either a mercantile or knightly family⁵. It was in this period, in c. 1192, when the election of a single *Podestà*, or chief executive, first occurred⁶. The makeup of these public committees widened after the popular movements of the thirteenth century, as the *popolo* and guilds gained more power in the government. Over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, power in government shifted frenetically between different political and mercantile factions, as members of government were nominated, elected or drawn by lot. Conflicts around political representation were frequent, and would on occasion erupt into violence, most notably in the *Ciompi* rebellion of 1378-82, where artisans and workers rose in revolt against the powerful guilds and mercantile elite⁷. By 1400 the government was made up of nearly 5700 available magisterial positions shared by 1350 families⁸.

From the late fourteenth century, there was a concerted effort to establish an ideological, philosophical republican self-image for the city-state. The humanist movement, as it came to be called, rested on a revival of classical Greek and Roman political philosophy that emphasised democratic and republican values, civic-mindedness and government by consent. Humanism encouraged civic nationalism, political engagement and pursuit of common interest, and provided a philosophical validation for limited secularisation of

⁴ John M. Najemy, 'Government and Governance', in John M. Najemy, ed., *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance: 1300-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 184

⁵ Najemy, *History of Florence*, p. 64

⁶ Najemy, *History of Florence*, p. 64

⁷ Gene A. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence: Society, Culture and Religion* (Aschaffenburg: Keip Verlag, 1994), p. 38

⁸ Najemy, 'Government and Governance', p. 186

government and the development of an urban society that valued mercantilism, traditionally something that was at odds with Catholic moral tradition⁹. The humanist movement was essential to the identity of the city, and the structure of its government from latter part of the fourteenth century until the establishment of the Medici Dukes in 1532. The movement was in part defined by Florence's geopolitical rivalries. Florence was constantly under threat from powerful despotic neighbours, such as the Duchy of Milan, the Kingdom of Naples and the Papal State, as well as expansionist interests from outside Italy, such as the Kingdom of France and the Holy Roman Empire. Humanism served to breed civic pride and establish republican legitimacy in the face of external threats, and encouraged the Florentine citizenry to believe their city exceptional to neighbouring despotic powers.

The humanist movement had far reaching consequences, and in many ways, came to define the Renaissance as a period. Humanism's impact was immense not just on society and politics, but on art, poetry, literature and, perhaps most significantly, on architecture. As well as utilising ancient Roman rhetoric for political purposes, the Florentine humanists celebrated the classical origins of the city, both actual and mythologised. Florence had been a Roman civic colony, founded in the later days of the republic¹⁰. This associated it with what the humanists considered to be the golden age of classical philosophy: the later republic and early imperial period, which included the lifetimes of Cato, Cicero, Livy and Seneca. The humanist virtues of republicanism came to be realised in the streets, squares and magisterial buildings of Florence, their varying prominence and relative positioning holding complex overt and subliminal meaning¹¹. Vast new building projects were undertaken between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries to accommodate both an explosion in population and greater demand for

⁹ Richard Mackenney, *Renaissances: The Cultures of Italy, c. 1300-c. 1600* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 139

¹⁰ Najemy, *History of Florence*, p. 3

¹¹ See chapter 1

governmental buildings, including the domineering palace of the *Podestà*, or *Bargello*, and the towering *Palazzo Vecchio*¹². New places for public congregation were modelled on the Roman forum, and enabled a physical manifestation of republican virtue in the topography of the city.

The humanist republic flourished in the fifteenth century, but the legitimacy of its claim to true republicanism waxed and waned. While the magistracy had always been something of a battleground between the city-state's wealthy families, the power and control gained by the Medici family from the 1430s onward approached despotic levels¹³. This period of Medici supremacy was one of relative peace for Florence, but until the 1490s, three generations of Medici men imposed their will on the republic, through both governmental and clandestine methods. In 1494, the whole Italian peninsula was thrown into chaos when an enormous French army marched south to invade the Kingdom of Naples. Although the French were nominally an ally of Florence, the army occupied the city for a period of two weeks in November of that year, putting great demand on the government and population of the city and implicitly threatening serious violence. For his perceived diplomatic blunders in his attempts to de-escalate the situation, *Gran Maestro* Piero de' Medici (1472-1503) was exiled from the city, putting the Medici rule on an eighteen-year hiatus. In the wake of the French occupation, a new constitutional reform was enacted on the city-state by the surviving government, largely made up of enemies of the Medici. These changes were overseen by the radical reformist preacher *fra* Girolamo Savonarola, who, with the help of a popular following gained from his charismatic sermons, became a kind of unofficial head of government for a short period and attempted to mould the republic to suit his apocalyptic

¹² Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Palazzo Vecchio, 1298-1532: Government, Architecture and Imagery in the Civic Palace of the Florentine Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 10

¹³ MacKenney, *Renaissances*, p. 81

prophecies. This period of crisis was short, but it had significant lasting consequences for the governmental system and civic identity of Florence.

The Historiographical Context of the Crisis

Florentine history in the period 1494-1530 is studied primarily for its transitional narrative. The wars and crises of the period are important for the role they play in the story of the Medici and their ascendancy, but are often passed over as self-contained areas of study themselves. The period of Medici exile from 1494-1512 is often presented as a turning point. It is a clean break in the narrative: either the end of the story of Florence as a humanist republic in the fifteenth century, or the beginning of the Medici rise to power of the 1530s¹⁴. When studied on their own, the events of the period can be overshadowed by the final years of Savonarola's life. This is understandable – the firebrand preacher is as charismatic and alluring in the historical record as he was at the pulpit – but studies of the period through lenses other than biography are relatively few. Alison Brown's *Medicean and Savonarolan Florence* captures the period skilfully for all its drastic shifts in cultural, political and religious consciousness¹⁵. Similarly, Roslyn Pesman Cooper's biographical *Piero Soderini and the Ruling Class of Renaissance Florence* provides a compelling study of the importance of the office of *Gonfaloniere di Giustizia* and reforms of the Grand Council after Savonarola's death¹⁶. For information about Savonarola and his transformative effects on popular worship in the city, Stefano Dall'Aglio's *Savonarola and Savonarolism* (translated by John Gagné) explores both the preacher's life and legacy in equal depth, providing bountiful insight into the far-reaching consequences of his millenarian movement¹⁷. For the

¹⁴Nicholas Scott Baker, 'For Reasons of State: Political Executions, Republicans and the Medici in Florence, 1480-1560', *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, 2009, p. 445

¹⁵ Alison Brown, *Medicean and Savonarolan Florence: The Interplay of Politics, Humanism and Religion* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011)

¹⁶ Roslyn Pesman Cooper, *Pier Soderini and the Ruling Class in Renaissance Florence* (Aschaffenburg, Keip Verlag, 2002)

¹⁷ Stefano Dall'Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, trans., John Gagné (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2010)

relations between power and urban space in the city, Marvin Trachtenburg's *Dominion of the Eye* is definitive, and provides a whole new vocabulary with which to explore and discuss the urban topography of Florence¹⁸. This is further informed by Nicolai Rubinstein's history of the *Palazzo Vecchio* and its associations with republicanism and republican government¹⁹. Lastly, it would be remiss to undertake an investigation of the fate of Antonio Rinaldeschi without reference to William J. Connell and Giles Constable's *Sacrilege and Redemption in Renaissance Florence*²⁰. Connell and Constable are thorough and convincing in their investigation of the religious context of Rinaldeschi's punishment, although in my opinion neglect to situate the incident sufficiently in the political crisis and the condition of the Grand Council.

In my first chapter, I will investigate Rinaldeschi's crime, trial and punishment, and the immediate implications of that event. Here I contextualise the legal and moral precedent surrounding gambling, drunkenness, profanity, suicide and blasphemy, and the Florentine republic's complex relationship with capital punishment. I will also explore the significance of the use of particular urban spaces, and how complex meaning can be created through the appropriation of public areas. Chapter two focuses on the concrete causes of the crisis itself, first from the immediate geopolitical standpoint, and then in the broader politico-philosophical context. In this chapter I consider the evolution of civic humanism in Florence, and how the violence of 1494 so deeply upset the city's political and philosophical identity and worldview. This chapter also investigates the condition of the Grand Council and the reasons why it behaved like it did in this period, with consideration to the political and philosophical changes it had undergone during the crisis. In chapter 3, I examine the events

¹⁸ Marvin Trachtenburg, *Dominion of the Eye: Urbanism, Art and Power in Early Modern Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

¹⁹ Rubinstein, *The Palazzo Vecchio, 1298-1532*

²⁰ William J. Connell and Giles Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption in Renaissance Florence: The Case of Antonio Rinaldeschi* (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2005)

of 1494-98, and how the republican magistracy was radically reformed in the absence of the Medici. This chapter focusses closely on Savonarola and his legacy, how he directly shaped the Grand Council during the final years of his life, and how his influence contributed to the instability of the period and the theological identity of the city after his death.

Chapter 1: Dice & Dung

The Crime and Punishment of Antonio Rinaldeschi



This unusual painting depicts the crime, arrest, trial and execution of Florentine gambler and blasphemer Antonio Rinaldeschi in 1501. Late one night in mid-July, Rinaldeschi lost some money and personal items gambling at a tavern named the *Fig Tree*. On his way home, drunk and frustrated at his losses, he took a handful of dry horse dung and threw it at an icon of the

Virgin Mary that decorated a small piazza outside the church of *S. Maria degli Alberighi*. Seemingly unexpectedly, the dung stuck to the icon, and he fled the city in a panic. Unbeknownst to the hapless blasphemer, his crime had been witnessed by a young boy who alerted the *Otto di Guardia* (Eight of Security), the magistracy for crime, justice and public order in Florence, and he was tracked to his hiding place outside the city walls. Rinaldeschi attempted suicide to avoid capture, but was unsuccessful, and was arrested by agents of the *Otto*. Brought before the *Podestà* (chief magistrate of Florence), Rinaldeschi confessed to his crime and was sentenced to death for blasphemy. He received confession and absolution from a priest, and was then led from his prison cell by the *Compagnia dei Neri* (Company of the Blacks), a lay confraternity that would comfort those condemned to death, and escort them to their execution. At one o'clock that night, Rinaldeschi was hanged from the window of the palace of the *Podestà*, or *Bargello*. This is the order of events as depicted in the painting, now hanging in the Stibbert Gallery in Florence, and corroborated in the Diary of Florentine apothecary and merchant Luca Landucci (1436-1516)²¹, the records of the *Compagnia dei Neri*²², and Rinaldeschi's sentencing from the *Otto*²³. There are some details that conflict between these accounts: Landucci mistakenly identifies the offending blasphemer as 'Rinaldo', possibly conflating his first and last names²⁴. The official account of the crime also claims that there were no witnesses, but Landucci mentions a boy having seen the incident and turning Rinaldeschi in to the *Otto*²⁵. Apart from these minor differences, the details of the story are quite well understood. This body of evidence draws a reasonably complete picture of the crime, and, if they are to be trusted, describe a very unusual incident indeed. In this

²¹ Luca Landucci, *A Florentine Diary from 1450 to 1516 by Luca Landucci Continued by an Anonymous Writer till 1542 with Notes by Iodoco del Badia*, translated by Alice de Rosen Jervis (London: J. M. Dent and Sons LTD, 1927), pp. 187-188

²² 'Second notice from records kept by the Company of the Blacks', translated by William J. Connell and Giles Constable, in Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption* p. 109

²³ 'The sentence of the Eight of Security against Antonio Rinaldeschi' translated by William J. Connell and Giles Constable, in Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 101

²⁴ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 187

²⁵ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 187

chapter, I will investigate the crime, trial and punishment of Rinaldeschi according to this order of events. I will begin by closely examining the crimes he is said to have committed in their legal and cultural context, and how in this particular incident they seem to have been taken much more seriously than they would have normally. I will also address the unusual nature of his execution itself, and the implications of having it held where, when and how it was.

The Moral and Legal Context of the Crime

The place of religious iconography in Renaissance Florence is complex, and changed somewhat over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is a notable trend in religious art of the period that the Virgin Mary is often more centrally and frequently depicted than Christ. For much of the fifteenth century, depictions of saints made up around 30% of paintings with a religious subject, whereas Christ was represented in only 18%²⁶. By the middle of the sixteenth century they had almost swapped; Christ was the subject of 26% of religious paintings, while saints were depicted in only 20% in 1539²⁷. The Virgin Mary, however, remained consistently depicted in slightly more than half of all religious paintings throughout the period²⁸. Representation of Mary was central to Christian iconography from as early as the sixth century, and she was frequently depicted both in scenes without Christ, and in Gospel scenes in which she did not traditionally appear²⁹. Mary was symbolic of humanity's salvation in much the same way as Christ, and central to humankind's relationship to God. She was contrasted with Eve; where Eve was weak to temptation, Mary was obedient to the word of God, and while Eve was mother to humanity and its wickedness, Mary was mother to salvation³⁰. Iconography of Mary was closely associated with thaumaturgy across Europe,

²⁶ Peter Burke, *Culture and Society in Renaissance Italy, 1420-1540* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1972), p. 147

²⁷ Burke, *Culture and Society*, p. 147

²⁸ Burke, *Culture and Society*, p. 147

²⁹ Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Western Art* (New York, Manchester: Hudson Hills Press, 2005), pp. 20-22

³⁰ Verdon, *Mary in Western Art*, pp. 23-24

and hers were some of the most coveted relics to the church³¹. However, the trouble Rinaldeschi faced for desecrating the fresco was disproportionate to Catholic veneration of iconography. Reverence toward icons was not necessarily demanded in Italian city-states, and images did not hold the same importance as relics did. Lay people exhibited varying levels of enthusiasm toward religious imagery, and there is even evidence of Jewish residents of Venice being allowed to destroy Christian imagery on their own property³². In this context, it is puzzling that the reaction to Rinaldeschi's crime was so extreme.

There is a divergence between Catholic doctrine and Renaissance popular belief when it comes to the religious significance of place and imagery. The iconic significance of both image and place were much more important in lay belief, sometimes to the extent that theological canon was directly contradicted³³. Catholic doctrine technically has no room for the veneration of holy places, which is considered a pagan tradition. Instead, connection with the holy is done through object and interaction; spaces such as churches and chapels could only become sacred through eucharistic ritual or association with a saint's relics³⁴. The Renaissance, however, saw a rise in the spiritual significance of both imagery and space to the lay Catholic. Images came to be imbued with thaumaturgical properties, and in turn the locations of these images came to be associated with sacredness as well³⁵. Cults that revered specific frescos, panels, sculptures and paintings steadily began to emerge in Florence from about 1292, when the *Madonna of Orsanmichele* attracted a following after reports of miraculous healing³⁶. They emerged slowly, at a rate of approximately one cult per ten to fifteen years, until the middle of the fifteenth century when they began to appear much more

³¹ Verdon, *Mary in Western Art*, p. 24

³² Edward Muir, "The Virgin on the Street Corner: The Place of the Sacred in Italian Cities", in John Jeffries Martin, ed., *The Renaissance: Italy and Abroad* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 283

³³ Muir, "The Virgin on the Street Corner", p. 282

³⁴ Muir, "The Virgin on the Street Corner", p. 284

³⁵ Megan Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 61

³⁶ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, pp. 39-40

frequently³⁷. By 1501, when Rinaldeschi committed his crime, new cults were appearing every two to five years, almost exclusively around crucifixes and icons of Mary.

Rinaldeschi's icon itself came to garner its own following after he defaced it, which is why the Stibbert painting was commissioned in the first place. What was popular amongst the laity had its effect on civil institution, and as the image cults became more popular and powerful they began to influence the secular government. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the most powerful image cults, those of the *SS. Annunziata* and the *Madonna of Impruneta*, were accepted by the communal regime to be offering some miraculous protection to the city³⁸. Although this was not reflected in civil law, it may offer some insight into the seriousness of Rinaldeschi's crime.

The documents of Rinaldeschi's trial make mention of his gambling, attempted suicide and blasphemy. Florentine legal stance on gambling was generally one of condemnation, but was much more flexible than with other crimes of morality. Although technically illegal, gambling was widespread in medieval and Renaissance Florence, and was generally tolerated amongst laymen³⁹. In fact, it was quite an important homosocial leisure activity, one of the few that allowed interaction between social classes⁴⁰. However, gambling was counted alongside drunkenness and prostitution as a generally illicit vice that would illustrate perceived social or moral illness in a person or group⁴¹. When counted toward a generally poor moral character it could be damning, as it appears to have done so in Rinaldeschi's trial. Much more serious was his attempted suicide – a sin in Catholic doctrine

³⁷ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, p. 40. These figures are broadly representative of the cults' emergence, but they would appear much more regularly in times of plague, flood and other periods of instability.

³⁸ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, p. 49

³⁹ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 36. The gendered terminology here is deliberate – gambling was primarily enjoyed amongst men exclusively.

⁴⁰ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, p. 102

⁴¹ Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1980), p. 51

and a crime against canon law⁴². It is his suicide attempt that seems in the wording of his sentence to have damned him the most:

Wishing therefore to punish the said Antonius for such a serious crime according to his offences, since no one should be lord of his limbs and of his own life, and in order that his punishment might be an example to others...he should be hanged with a rope from the windows of the palace of the lord *Podestà*...⁴³

The wording of the sentence suggests that while Rinaldeschi's crime was blasphemy, his attempted suicide counted heavily against him, and may have even tipped the scale toward execution. The history of legal reaction to attempted suicide is inconsistent. Although a violation of canon law, suicide is not illegal in Roman law, barring some exceptions (primarily military)⁴⁴. There are examples from across Europe in the late middle-ages and early Renaissance of people being let off or lightly punished for attempted suicide, often viewed with pity or light admonishment, or considered to be under the influence of spirits or the devil⁴⁵. Less than a year after the execution, Landucci records the suicide of a physician in a much more passive and blameless tone than he reserves for Rinaldeschi:

One Lorenzo Lorenzo, a physician, who was a lecturer at the *Studio* [University], and greatly esteemed, was prompted by the devil to throw himself into a well, and was drowned.⁴⁶

Although it was considered a heinous sin, there was little historical interest in punishing suicide survivors, especially with something as harsh as a death sentence. It is notable that although the sentencing emphasises the seriousness of the crime of attempted suicide, the fact that Rinaldeschi attempted suicide at all indicates that he was already deathly afraid of capture based on just his original crime. While it is unwise to speculate too much on the

⁴² Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 36

⁴³ 'The sentence of the Eight of Security against Antonio Rinaldeschi', in Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, pp. 102-103

⁴⁴ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 39

⁴⁵ Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages, Volume II: The Curse on Self Murder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 399-404

⁴⁶ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 193

man's motives for his attempted suicide (he may have preferred death to the shame of imprisonment, made his attempt out of guilt rather than fear, or simply not been in his right mind), it does suggest that he was more afraid of the *Otto* than precedent would suggest.

Although gambling counted against his character and his attempted suicide counted against his piety, the crime Rinaldeschi was officially punished for was blasphemy.

Considering whereas Antonius Iohannis di Rinaldeschis...had gambled in the city of Florence, in a tavern that is called "The Fig Tree", and had lost much silver coin, went out and along the way blasphemed himself and the name of the glorious virgin mother Mary, and used words that are best kept silent...with spirit and intention of committing and perpetrating another unspeakable and horrible crime, he gathered horse dung from the ground, and, guided by a diabolical force, he threw it at the face of said figure...⁴⁷

Blasphemy is a very broad term that covers a lot of different behaviours that have different connotations to religious society. The earliest legal definition of blasphemy was the propagation of unorthodox liturgical ideas⁴⁸. This had its roots in Roman law stipulations from eighth and ninth century Switzerland and western Germany, where mainstream Catholic society was still in competition with local pagan societies⁴⁹. This definition was in use throughout the Middle Ages and was interchangeable with heresy, which carried extreme judicial penalties including execution. Following the creation of papal and episcopal inquisitions in the thirteenth century and ensuing suppression of heretical movements, specific blasphemy laws with secular consequences emerged throughout Europe⁵⁰. The separation of blasphemy and heresy relaxed the punishment for the former, which came to be treated very inconsistently and unpredictably. Most blasphemy was verbal, and was largely interchangeable with more general profanity. Terms such as '*per l'amor di Dio*' (for the love

⁴⁷ 'The sentence of the Eight of Security against Antonio Rinaldeschi', in Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 102

⁴⁸ David Nash, *Blasphemy in the Christian World: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 44

⁴⁹ Floyd Seyward Lear, 'Blasphemy in the *Lex Romana Curiensis*', *Speculum* 6, No. 3 (July, 1931), p. 445-446

⁵⁰ Nash, *Blasphemy and the Christian World*, p. 46

of God), ‘*per questa Crose*’ (by this cross) or ‘*per diavol*’ (by the Devil) were in common usage in Venice and Tuscany and apparently went unpunished, as they were used liberally on stage⁵¹. It is likely that investigation and punishment of blasphemy often took intent and context into account, explaining how it was so tolerated in literature and performance; Dante, Chaucer, Venetian plays and the Mass parodies of Northern Europe employed blasphemous language without fear of punishment⁵². Similar to gambling and drinking, a tendency to blaspheme and swear counted toward a reputation as a person of low moral character and insufficient piety, but rarely constituted a crime in itself. If it was punished, it was usually as a form of libel rather than its own crime. Laws surrounding insult and libel were heavily class-based; insults against one’s social superiors were treated far more seriously than the other way around, and a verbal insult from man to God was often seen as the most extreme form of that crime⁵³.

Punishment for blasphemy was applied inconsistently, but sometimes harshly. If a case of blasphemy did make it to court, it would usually be treated as a wilful act of disrespect towards God, rather than a profane outburst or act of frustration⁵⁴. However, those found guilty would rarely have to do more than pay a small fine or wash out their mouth, or at worst, be whipped, forced into labour, exiled or have their tongue mutilated⁵⁵. These latter punishments were undoubtedly extreme, but the worst of them came about only after the Protestant Reformation, when blasphemy came to be reassociated with heresy, and even then, largely fell short of execution. Capital punishment was generally hypothetically associated with blasphemy. The Old Testament and Roman Law do both name execution as the accepted

⁵¹ Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 100

⁵² David Lawton, *Blasphemy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), p. 86

⁵³ Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, pp. 99-100

⁵⁴ Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, p. 101

⁵⁵ Burke, *Historical Anthropology*, p. 102-103

punishment for blasphemy and sacrilege (like heresy, sacrilege went through long periods of being interchangeable with blasphemy in legal and ecclesiastical writings)⁵⁶. Legal and philosophical writings on blasphemy from the sixteenth century onwards largely accept that execution was the preferred punishment, but even after the Reformation most conceded that this was rarely actually practical, some even proposing that blasphemy committed while angry or drunk should not count at all⁵⁷. Why then, is Rinaldeschi's case such an outlier? It is plausible that the physical nature of his crime counted against him. A physical action like throwing dung at an icon has a much more obvious and direct intent than general blasphemous profanity, and that seems to have been taken into account when blasphemy was brought to court. Those guilty of blasphemous action were punished harsher and more often than verbal blasphemers. In 1413, another unlucky gambler who attacked images of the Virgin Mary with a knife was sentenced to death by burning (later commuted to decapitation), but he had also been found guilty of incest⁵⁸. There are numerous examples throughout the fifteenth century of common people cursing at, breaking and otherwise defacing religious icons that had not answered their prayers with little or no punishment⁵⁹. The wording of Rinaldeschi's sentencing seems to suggest that it was the combination of verbal blasphemy, physical defacement, gambling and attempted suicide that doomed him, but even that was legally unprecedented. Even in the inconsistent history of legal punishment for blasphemy, Rinaldeschi's punishment is unusual in its severity.

Capital Punishment in Italy

It is plausible that the inconsistency of the courts' sentencing of capital punishment came from cultural anxiety around its legitimacy. Execution is threatened frequently in the

⁵⁶ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 38

⁵⁷ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 38

⁵⁸ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 40

⁵⁹ Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, pp. 119-121

Bible and Roman Law alike, but Northern Italian societies held a uniquely restrained attitude to its use. Humanist philosophy brought into question the state's supremacy over its subjects, and republican authority did not enjoy the justification of divine mandate that a king or emperor did⁶⁰. Religious artwork, in tending toward more lifelike portrayals of Christ's and saints' martyrdoms, brought up some uncomfortable associations for those who carried out torture and executions⁶¹. In 1786, the then Grand Duchy of Tuscany became the first modern state to abolish capital punishment, and the whole of Italy followed suit soon after its unification in the nineteenth century⁶². Executions were rare in Florence, and caused a small public stir when they did happen. In August of 1497, four years before Rinaldeschi's execution, five men were put to death for political agitation. In his record of the events, Landucci claims that:

...all Florence was sorry. Everyone marvelled that such a thing could be done; it was difficult to realise it. They were put to death on the same night, and I could not refrain from weeping when I saw that young Lorenzo [Tournabuoni] carried past the *Canto d'Tornaquinci* on a bier, shortly before dawn. And although they had asked for an appeal, and were told by the lawyers...that it could be made, it was not granted them; which seemed too cruel to such men as they were.⁶³

Landucci's reaction suggests that the execution was deemed cruel and unusual by the general population, all the more so by the fact that the five men were part of the Florentine social elite. There had been no execution of a nobleman in the city since the Pazzi conspiracy of 1481, and before that executions for crimes against the government were extremely rare⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, p. 19

⁶¹ Samuel Y. Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment: Art and Criminal Prosecution During the Florentine Renaissance* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 14

⁶² Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment*, p. 14. The use of capital punishment in Italy was briefly restored under the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* between 1926 and 1947, but was unilaterally re-abolished under the Italian Constitution of 1948.

⁶³ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, pp. 125-126

⁶⁴ Baker, 'For Reasons of State', p. 445

This unenthusiastic attitude to capital punishment dovetails with another tradition that grew in popularity over the fifteenth century: that of the lay confraternities. These were private clubs of wealthy laymen that oversaw various acts of piety and charity without the direct involvement of the church. One unusual activity that many of these organisations engaged in was that of the ‘comforting ritual’: they would prepare those condemned to death for their last rites, comfort them on their last night and escort them personally to their execution. By the time of Rinaldeschi’s execution these organisations were large and popular amongst the higher echelons of society. The *Compagnia dei Neri*, the largest confraternity in Florence and the one that comforted and accompanied Rinaldeschi, included Lorenzo “The Magnificent” de’ Medici in their number until he resigned in 1488⁶⁵. In comforting those condemned to death, the confraternities made a number of associations between the condemned criminal (or, as the Bolognese *Comforter’s Manual* instructed not to worry about, wrongfully convicted innocent) and Christ or a martyred saint⁶⁶. The comforting, last rites and viewing of the *tavolette* (a small religious icon used to obscure the vision of the condemned in their last moments) were designed to ensure their passage into heaven and absolve them of their sins. These rituals transformed public execution from a horrible and humiliating ordeal into the best death one could hope for: one where they knew its exact moment and could fully prepare their soul for absolution⁶⁷. The social purposes of these rituals are manifold and complex. Some historians argue that the comforting ritual is a form of social control whereby the acquiescence of the condemned (or even the innocent) is won through an appeal to their religious beliefs⁶⁸. In this interpretation, the ritual is entirely a tool

⁶⁵ Konrad Eisenbichler, ‘Lorenzo de’ Medici and the Confraternity of the Blacks in Florence’, *Fides et Historia* 26 (1994), p. 95

⁶⁶ Kathleen Falvey, ‘Scaffold and Stage: Comforting Rituals and Dramatic Traditions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy’, in Nicholas Terpstra, ed., *The Art of Executing Well: Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2008), p. 15

⁶⁷ Falvey, ‘Scaffold and Stage’, p. 16

⁶⁸ Nicholas Terpstra, ‘Piety and Punishment: The Lay Conforteria and Civic Justice in Sixteenth Century Bologna’, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22, no. 4 (1991), p. 680

of the state to maintain control and prevent potential dissent. This may be the case, but it presupposes a cynical manipulation of religious belief on the part of the governmental powers, who were no less devout than their common counterparts. If the governments took the ritual seriously for its devotional purposes, then it can be argued that the confraternities were a way to limit state control of public execution by groups of devout laymen on behalf of the church.

Confraternities in their various devotional activities became one of the most important representations of lay piety in the Renaissance, significant specifically because of their distinctness from the church⁶⁹. Key religious rituals that would traditionally fall under the purview of the clergy, often to do with death and burial, came to be performed by these lay confraternities⁷⁰. Often including members of the noble classes, the confraternities also became hotbeds for client-patron negotiation, specifically in regard to art and architecture⁷¹. In art and society, the influence of the confraternities represented an integration of the religious and the secular. In taking on ritualistic religious duties, patronising religious art and constructing chapels, altarpieces and cult objects, the confraternity members could become more familiar with religious doctrine and more personally invested in the sanctity of canon law. A comparison can be drawn here between the popularity of the lay confraternities and the emergence of image cults and iconography across northern Italy. Both represent religious movements that are quite independent from actual Catholic doctrine, but were hugely influential to the piety of the laity. Although there were strict limitations (anxiety around heresy permeated the discourse, especially after the Reformation), there was room for doctrinal disagreement between laity and clergy, such as on whether some criminals did not

⁶⁹ Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl, 'Introduction', in Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl, eds., *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy: Ritual, Spectacle, Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 1

⁷⁰ Wisch and Ahl, 'Introduction', p. 2

⁷¹ Wisch and Ahl, 'Introduction', pp. 2-3

deserve sacraments⁷². The confraternities that specialised in comforting and preparing condemned criminals for execution developed their own combination of classical humanist and doctrinal Catholic philosophy around death and capital punishment. The Bolognese confraternity, *Compagnia di S. Maria della Morte* (referred to colloquially as *Compagnia di Morte*, or the Company of Death) produced a manual for comforting the condemned, one volume written by a priest and the other by a lay confraternal brother⁷³. This second volume, written sixty or seventy years after the first (the authors are anonymous and the dates unknown), provides instructions on how to prepare a criminal's soul for absolution without relying too heavily on the specifics of Catholic doctrine, and advises the lay comforter to avoid or deflect specifically theological discussion⁷⁴.

The Hanging of the Condemned and Aggressive Use of Space

Beyond the unlikeliness of his sentence, Rinaldeschi's execution was unusual in itself. He was hanged, which was the typical form of execution for common criminals, but it was unusual for it to happen in the *Bargello*. The usual forum for a public execution was outside the city walls, where a scaffold could be set up and a large crowd gathered. This was on occasion commuted to the *Bargello*, but only when there was a fear of the crowd being too rowdy and turning into a lynch mob, or coming to the defence of the criminal to be executed⁷⁵. This was most common with those executed for political reasons, who would

⁷² Adriano Prosperi, 'Consolation or Condemnation: The Debates on Withholding Sacraments from Prisoners', in Nicholas Terpstra, ed., *The Art of Executing Well: Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2008), p. 104

⁷³ Nicholas Terpstra, 'Introduction: The Other Side of the Scaffold', in Nicholas Terpstra, ed., *The Art of Executing Well: Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2008), p. 2

⁷⁴ Anonymous, 'The Bologna Comforter's Manual Book 2', trans. Sheila Das, in Nicholas Terpstra ed., *The Art of Executing Well: Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2008), pp. 248-250

⁷⁵ Massimo Ferretti, 'In Your Face: Paintings for the Condemned in Renaissance Italy', in Nicholas Terpstra, ed., *The Art of Executing Well: Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy* (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2008), p. 81

either be put on macabre display like the Pazzi conspirators, or killed in secret⁷⁶. Amongst these political executions, beheading was by far the most common method, followed by hanging⁷⁷. It is most likely that Rinaldeschi's execution took place in the *Bargello* so as to avoid the crowd getting out of hand. The second of the two accounts in the records of the *Neri* claim that this was at Rinaldeschi's own request, but there is no evidence of this in the accounts of Landucci, the *Otto* or the Stibbert painting⁷⁸. The same record curiously refers to Rinaldeschi as a 'beater of his father', also a claim that is not corroborated elsewhere⁷⁹. Landucci's account does, however, give some indication of the popular sentiment around the execution:

During the night he was hung from the windows of the *Podestà*, and the next morning being the day of Santa Maria Maddalena, there was a double *festa*. All Florence came to see the figure of the Virgin, and when the bishop had removed the dirt, there was not an evening on which pounds of wax-tapers were not fastened before it, the veneration perpetually increasing.⁸⁰

Unlike with young Lorenzo Tournabuoni on his funerary bier four years earlier, Landucci shed no tears for Rinaldeschi. The 'double *festa*' came about because the chapel across the *Palazzo del Podestà* was dedicated to Saint Mary Magdalene, whose festival was held the next day at the *Podestà's* expense, in clear view of Rinaldeschi's hanging body⁸¹. It is clear that Rinaldeschi's crime was treated with disproportionate horror by the populace of Florence as well as the magistracy, and his execution was not just accepted, but celebrated.

⁷⁶ Baker, 'For Reasons of State', p. 447

⁷⁷ Baker, 'For Reasons of State', p. 447

⁷⁸ 'Second notice from records kept by the Company of the Blacks', in Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 109

⁷⁹ 'Second notice from records kept by the Company of the Blacks', in Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 109

⁸⁰ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, pp. 187-188

⁸¹ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 187 [author's footnote]

Different uses of urban space had significant social and cultural significance. The *Otto* may have had a practical excuse for executing Rinaldeschi and others in the *Bargello*, but the symbolism of the building held many implications. The *Bargello* was a symbol of power and legal authority, but it was also a symbol of republicanism. This symbolism came from the political importance and use of the structure, but it was also consciously built into the structures of the city. The civic humanist foundation of the Florentine Republic put a great deal of emphasis on the city's Roman heritage, and attempted to model the city on those republican values, both philosophically and physically⁸². The historically conscious Florentine would likely have seen the gridded pavements, straight streets and open public *piazza* as representative of their republican virtue and civil authority, in contrast to the winding medieval streets of Rome or Bologna⁸³. These features of urban topography that are typical of Tuscan city-states are not just a factor of population density that became iconic of republican societies through coincidence. Rather, they are the result of self-aware architectural agenda to move away from the stifling and tyrannical structure of the medieval autocracy. The concept of the city-state itself was something of an affront to the Catholic world order. In his *City of God Against the Pagans*, Saint Augustine of Hippo, whose philosophy became central to the worldview of medieval Europe, wrote about the place of the city in Christian society. To Augustine, the Eternal City was not Rome, the centre of civic life and political power in his lifetime, but the Christian Heaven. Society and political power in medieval Europe was oriented outside the cities, which were the stage for the pursuit of mercantile profit and other earthly vices⁸⁴. In a city under a monarchy or oligarchy, there was no use for a town hall or *piazza*, and if there was any large open communal space at all it

⁸² Trachtenburg, *Dominion of the Eye*, p. 253

⁸³ Trachtenburg, *Dominion of the Eye*, p. 253

⁸⁴ MacKenney, *Renaissances*, p. 139

would be connected to a church⁸⁵. It is in the interest of autocrats to discourage public assembly, and the existence of public spaces specifically for that purpose is a deliberate and meaningful statement of republicanism.

These notionally anti-autocratic symbols could still take on sinister implication, however. Civic symbolism in architecture and urban planning went hand-in-hand with overtly dominating and intimidating structures. The *Piazza della Signoria* is the quintessential republican space in Florence; the vast open square invited assemblages of thousands, enormous festivals, markets, and whatever else the public might use it for. However, it was also incomplete without the towering *Palazzo Vecchio*, a symbol of political supremacy that totally dominated the urban landscape. The *Palazzo* is an imposing structure on its own, built with black brick and bristling with crenellations, but its coupling with the *Piazza* adds a conscious perspectival element to its design. Through controlling the direction and distance from which the building could be viewed, the designer of the *Piazza* could control the gaze of the viewer, forcing a perspective of the *Palazzo* that emphasised its immense size, extravagance and authority⁸⁶. The smaller and more terraced buildings in amongst the city streets were designed in tandem with their environment as well. The compactness of the city forced a certain view of its tallest structures; the *Bargello* and buildings like it, the size of a city block, could only be viewed from up close, where they took up one's entire field of vision, or sometimes could not be viewed in their entirety at all⁸⁷. This imbued a structure with a commanding presence, even without bodies hanging from the windows. With the addition of a public execution, the symbolism of the building becomes even more dominating. The image presented is of a symbol of republican virtue and civic authority,

⁸⁵ Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 2

⁸⁶ Trachtenburg, *Dominion of the Eye*, p. 256

⁸⁷ Trachtenburg, *Dominion of the Eye*, p. 255

displaying the body of a man executed by a state that takes capital punishment seriously and uses it sparingly. In this circumstance, it reads as a disproportionately extreme statement to come from a simple act of drunken blasphemy.

The Painting: Depiction and Moralism

If Rinaldeschi's crime earned him both hanging and such vitriolic public hatred, his depiction in the Stibbert painting is surprisingly sympathetic. The painting was completed approximately one year after Rinaldeschi's execution, and has been ascribed to both painters Bartolommeo di Giovanni and Filippo di Lorenzo Dolciati⁸⁸. Neither painter was particularly well-known or prestigious, and whichever was responsible for this work did not earn themselves a robust commission from the image cult that patronised them. The comic-strip-like style of the painting was unusual for the period but not unique, and was sometimes employed when a complex narrative was the most important thing to convey. The symbolism in this particular painting portrays Rinaldeschi as misguided but not wicked, and seemingly penitent for his crime. The storyboard begins with the gambler leaving his last game with a demon whispering in his ear. The dice sit larger-than-life on the table directly in the centre of the panel, casting ominously long shadows as they reveal the unlucky numbers that caused Rinaldeschi to lose his last coin⁸⁹. The first three scenes, which depict Rinaldeschi committing his crime under the influence of the demon on his shoulder, are individually choreographed right to left, so as to be read against the natural direction of the panels⁹⁰. This switches in the fourth panel, in which the demon takes flight and Rinaldeschi begins his penance. The latter six panels of the painting depict the protagonist in humble and penitential poses, bowing, kneeling, casting his eyes either up to God, or down in shame. The

⁸⁸ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p 24

⁸⁹ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, p. 101

⁹⁰ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 24

penultimate panel shows an angel accompanying the hooded members of the *Neri* as they escort Rinaldeschi from his trial, and the final panel depicts two angels triumphing over two demons next to his hanging body. The discursive notes on the panels, likely added later, describe these events. In the painting Rinaldeschi finds penance, and, if not from Landucci and the people of Florence, forgiveness.

The chief antagonist in the painting is not Rinaldeschi himself, but rather the sins of gambling and drinking. The first three panels do not show a wicked man, but one under a foul influence; the demon goading him and the unintuitive direction of the action create a feeling of unnaturalness and corruption, but not evil. The following panels do not only illustrate his redemption and salvation, but create deliberate comparisons to Christ. The fourth panel of his arrest outside the city walls is an overt reference to Christ's arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the noose in his arms in the eighth panel mirrors the stations of the cross⁹¹. In the last panel, the wound from his attempted suicide is bleeding openly from Rinaldeschi's side, again a reference to Christ's wounds on the cross. The battling angels and demons in the last panel evoke the last judgement, the dominance of the angels implying the redemption of Rinaldeschi's soul⁹². As with the execution rituals performed by the lay confraternities, the executed criminal in this story is martyred and redeemed, and the ritualistic traditions of lay piety are enforced. The painting may take on a melancholic tone, but it still depicts a story of redemption rather than victimisation, and forgiveness instead of justification or apologism toward Rinaldeschi's behaviour. His punishment is not depicted as an undeserved one, and, considering the belief around the execution rituals and the art of dying, it is a good ending for him where he is allowed his ultimate redemption.

⁹¹ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 23

⁹² Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 23

Conclusion

The turn of the sixteenth century was a time of political and religious instability, and reactions to sin and crimes of morality were unusually tense. The response to Rinaldeschi's crime was extreme, but can be at least partially explained by the changing dynamic of lay piety and popular beliefs around images and iconography. The behaviour of the Grand Council is to be seen not as indicative of the typical religious sensibilities of the period, but as a measured response during a crisis period, and reflective of a destabilising shift in cultural worldview. Beyond that, we will have to explore the state of the Florentine magistracy at the time of Rinaldeschi's crime, and why the city may have felt the need to reinforce their authority through such a violent display. In their sentencing of Rinaldeschi, the *Otto* stipulate that his death is necessary for his crimes, and 'that his punishment might be an example for others'⁹³. This could be read, in a very general sense, to hold as a warning against sin and sacrilege, but it can also hold a more specific and directed meaning: the magistracy was powerful, legitimate, and in control. The decade leading up to Rinaldeschi's execution was one of violence, crisis and political instability, and the magistracy had reason to believe that it might lose control of its citizenry. In the next chapter, the political element of the instability will be addressed, which will further explain the actions of the Florentine magistracy in this period.

⁹³ 'The sentence of the Eight of Security against Antonio Rinaldeschi', in Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 103

Chapter 2: Blood & Ink

Civic Humanism and the Republic in Crisis



Figure 2. Francesco Granacci, *Entry of Charles VIII into Florence*, Galleria della Uffizi, Florence, 1518

The Florence Rinaldeschi was killed in was not the same city as when he was born. The decade 1490-1500 was a tumultuous and violent period for the city, during which its political and philosophical identity was irreversibly altered. The turn of the sixteenth century presents a complexity for historians of republican Florence. A generally accepted turning point in the city-state's institutional existence came in 1532, when it officially changed from a republic into a principality under the Medici⁹⁴. However, changes in republican philosophy were more gradual than that, and can be seen throughout the latter half of the fifteenth century. Perhaps

⁹⁴ Baker, 'For Reasons of State', p. 445

the most significant few years of this period began in 1494, when King Charles VIII of France marched through Italy on his way south to Naples. This put a spark to the kindling that was Italian city-state geopolitics, turning the delicate ecosystem of competing political powers into a battleground for competing French, Spanish and Imperial foreign interests. These ‘Italian Wars’ ravaged the peninsula over the following half-century. By 1509, Naples and Sicily were taken over by Spain, Venice lost most of its mainland territory to the Holy Roman Empire, and Milan was in the middle of a thirty-year conflict between Spain and France. In 1527, Rome was devastated by marauding Imperial troops, and by 1535, Piedmont and Savoy were annexed into France⁹⁵. Caught in the crossfire of these immense conflicts, Florence was plunged into chaos. Charles VIII entered the city on the 17th of November, and his forces occupied the city for just under two weeks. Less than a month earlier, the French army had defeated Neapolitan forces at Mordano, Romagna, where they had destroyed the fortress and committed a great massacre of the garrison⁹⁶. Word spread throughout the peninsula of the ‘cruelty of Mordano’; the invasion was not just a show of force, and the French were willing to commit gratuitous violence against those that stood in their way. This threat of violence hung over occupied Florence, and created a sense of great unease amongst the citizenry. His initial optimism quickly wearing off, Landucci wrote on the 22nd of November that:

The city was in great dread of being pillaged... The French seemed to be becoming more and more masters of the place; they did not allow the citizens to go about armed, day or night, but took away their weapons, and kept striking and stabbing them. No one ventured to speak or go out after Ave Maria (at 5 o’clock); and the French went out robbing in the night, their

⁹⁵ Kenneth R. Bartlett, *The Civilisation of the Italian Renaissance: A Sourcebook* (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1992), p. 379

⁹⁶ Alison Brown, ‘Rethinking the Renaissance in the Aftermath of Italy’s Crisis’, in John M. Najemy, ed., *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance: 1300-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 247

guards parading the city. Everyone was so discouraged and intimidated, that when they saw anyone carrying stones or gravel they went crazy and struck out.⁹⁷

Occupied Florence was an unprecedentedly violent and unstable place, and the governmental changes imposed in the wake of the invasion overturned the republican order of the city. The expulsion of the Medici ushered in the fractured rule of the Grand Council, the new popular government intended to revert the city to its pre-Medicean republican structure. This was the incarnation of Florentine Republican government, after going through a series of reforms over the 1490s, that sentenced Rinaldeschi to death in 1501.

The French occupation of Florence was significant for its violence and upheaval, but it also had myriad implications for the philosophical relationship between the citizenry and political power. Politics in the Florentine republic came out of a complex network of business relationships throughout the different classes of citizens in society⁹⁸. Social elites created a monopoly of power not by top-down governance by force, but by personal and familial ties of protection, friendship, marriage, obligation, dependence, business and patronage, and by the establishment of regional and factional groups and networks throughout the city⁹⁹. This system naturally created an oligarchic form of government, where the wealthiest and most privileged families rose to the top, where they could compete with each other for control of the city. The Florentine ecosystem was delicate, so when hit with something so sudden and destabilising as an invasion, the social order and patterns of control could be overturned. In a city-state that had its identity so completely interwoven with its specific form of government, such a political upheaval had devastating effects on the social and political fabric of the city.

⁹⁷ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, pp. 68-69

⁹⁸ John M. Najemy, 'The Dialogue of Power in Florentine Politics', in John Jeffries Martin, ed., *The Renaissance: Italy and Abroad* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 48

⁹⁹ Najemy, 'Dialogue of Power', p. 48

Many Florentines initially welcomed the French army, hoping for opportunities to unseat factional rivals. Landucci describes an initially enthusiastic welcome to the king:

[Charles] dismounted at the steps, and walked up to the high altar, there being so many torches that they made a double row from the door to the altar...he went with his barons and all his suite, amidst such tumultuous shouting of *Viva Francia* as was ever heard. Only think that all Florence was there...Everyone shouted, great and small, old and young, and all from their hearts, without flattery...there was no one who did not feel favourably disposed towards him.¹⁰⁰

The king's unwillingness to abide by any treaties or agreements in Florence's interest drastically dissipated the good will of the citizenry. Despite his status as a political ally of the republic, Charles' behaviour was unpredictable and the threat of violence became overwhelming. When the French army succeeded in taking Naples three months later, Florentines celebrated in the streets:

This news was proclaimed here with great rejoicing, with drums and fifes, and the shops were shut. There were many bonfires and lights on the towers, and other manifestations, to commemorate such a conquest.¹⁰¹

These celebrations were not an expression of genuine excitement, but rather self-aware anxiety. The festivities were an attempt to dissuade Charles from entering the city on his way back north, and avoid a sacking for a second time¹⁰². The records of Landucci and historian Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540) do not attempt to make a secret of that fact:

All the bells were rung as though it were a feast, and there were great demonstrations of happiness over this news, though as a matter of fact everyone was sick at heart. Our dependence on the king and the fact our fortresses were in his hands made this display necessary.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 66

¹⁰¹ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 83

¹⁰² Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, p. 186

¹⁰³ Francesco Guicciardini, *History of Florence*, quoted in Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, p. 186

All the city was united in its anxiety. Fear of invasion was still at the forefront of the collective consciousness, but that was only the beginning: the social fabric of the republic had been irreparably altered.

The Crisis in Context: Civic Humanism

To understand the significance of this upheaval to the Florentine republican tradition, one has to look back to the birth of the humanist republic a century earlier. This tradition had come out of the reaction to existential threat in the late fourteenth century, this time the expansionist interests of Duke Gian Galeazzo Visconti of Milan (1351-1402). The conflict between the Duchy of Milan and the Republic of Florence was mythologised even as it unfolded: Milan was a military juggernaut spreading death and destruction, it was the barbarian at the gates, and a symbol of terror and tyranny¹⁰⁴. In contrast, Florence was the David to Milan's Goliath: the last bastion of liberty and republican values in the face of the onslaught. This mythology reflected a surge in Florentine propagandistic literature that came to define its political identity for the next hundred years. Just as heaven was the 'City of God' as described by Augustine of Hippo in 426, Florence became the 'city of man'. The city, traditionally seen as a centre of worldly mercantilism and vice, was cast as a resurrection of the Roman Republic, a symbol of communal pride and civic virtue against monarchical and feudal tyranny¹⁰⁵. Humanist writers such as Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) and Leonardo Bruni (c.1370-1444) celebrated pre- and early-Imperial Roman philosophers such as Cicero and Seneca, insinuating that brilliance in philosophy was incompatible with the domination of empire¹⁰⁶. The Florentine humanists were not unique in being seduced by antiquity, nor were they the first (antique philosophy had been growing in popularity for at least a century

¹⁰⁴ MacKenney, *Renaissances*, p. 142

¹⁰⁵ MacKenney, *Renaissances*, p. 139

¹⁰⁶ Burke, *Culture and Society*, p. 269

already), but the philosophical tradition they developed defined the period of the Renaissance as it is currently understood, and brought civic pride and an early form of republican nationalism to the forefront of the political and philosophical consciousness of the period.

The humanist movement did not emerge from Florence alone. The first philosopher primarily associated with the movement was Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), the son of a Florentine exile, who grew up near the papal curia at Avignon¹⁰⁷. Petrarch's discovery of Cicero's personal correspondence in 1345 is considered a foundational point in the history of humanism. The influence of ancient philosophy on politics could be seen in Padua from the thirteenth century, but its impact on the Florentine republic from the late fourteenth century onward was of a unique character¹⁰⁸. The Florentine humanists were interested in explicitly political and philosophical works more than ancient plays, literature and poetry, and identified strongest with the more overtly political of the Roman philosophers such as Cicero. This enforced a political tradition structured around civic interaction, public debate and government by consent¹⁰⁹. By the time of the Visconti war, Florence had a strong self-image of republicanism and abhorrence of tyranny that could be easily exploited by republican propagandists. As important as the Visconti war to the development of the Florentine humanist self-image (although emphasised less by the humanist writers), was the *Ciompi* revolt of 1378-82. The humanists were more reluctant to take advantage of this dispute in their civic narrative, perhaps because of the level of factional violence, or because the Guelf/Ghibelline dichotomy emphasised class conflict and pitted the advocates of popular government against the Church¹¹⁰. Either way, a significant number of early humanists were

¹⁰⁷ Carol Everhart Quillen, 'Humanism and the Lure of Antiquity' in John M. Najemy, ed., *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance: 1300-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 40

¹⁰⁸ Quillen, 'Humanism', p. 38

¹⁰⁹ Quillen, 'Humanism', p. 39

¹¹⁰ Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, p. 38

involved in the revolt in some way, and the lasting consequences involved a tightening of the oligarchic nature of the republic and the dominance of noble families like the Medici¹¹¹.

It is of the utmost importance to remember that the writings of Bruni and the other humanists were first and foremost works of propaganda. It is possible for even the modern historian to be swayed by the rhetoric depicting Florence as the champion of liberty and egalitarianism in the face of Milanese tyranny. It is true that the Florentine humanists presented themselves as ideological about the preservation of republicanism and its superiority to monarchy and feudalism, but their works can also be read as a celebration of Florentine supremacy and imperialism. Contrary to their ‘David and Goliath’ narrative, Florence and Milan were actually quite comparable in military strength at the time of their war, and the humanist republic had its own expansionist ambitions in greater Tuscany¹¹². It can even be argued that treating rhetoricians such as Bruni and Salutati as committed ideologues is an anachronism, and that their own private beliefs about republicanism could be different to their public views, or even completely irrelevant¹¹³. Bruni himself, the most influential of the early humanists, was not even a native of Florence, but rather nearby Arezzo, and had spent his early political career in service to the Papacy¹¹⁴. All this is to say that it is reductive to take the humanist rhetoric at face value, and accept uncritically that the politico-philosophic essence of the Florentine Renaissance emerged from the Visconti crisis. A subtle distinction must be made: where historian Hans Baron cast Bruni and Salutati as progenitors of Renaissance thought, it would perhaps be more accurate to read them as the fathers of the Florentine self-image and civic nationalism that came to define the city’s

¹¹¹ Zorzi, ‘The Popolo’, p. 156

¹¹² James Hankins, ‘The “Baron Thesis”’, in John M. Najemy, ed., *Italy in the Age of the Renaissance: 1300-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 77

¹¹³ Hankins, ‘The “Baron Thesis”’, p. 80

¹¹⁴ Burke, *Culture and Society*, p. 269

political existence in the fifteenth century¹¹⁵. When read as a more self-aggrandising and propagandistic philosophy, the humanism of Bruni and Salutati can be seen as the framework of the city's political and philosophical identity until the Italian Wars.

The development and legacy of civic humanism is multi-faceted and disputed, but there are a few key points that are important to the crisis of 1494. Hand in hand with the concepts of civic nationalism and active citizenship was an ideological confidence in notions of reason, rationality and harmony, as well as limited secularism (but not necessarily diminished religiosity)¹¹⁶. Florence according to Bruni was a well-oiled machine, the brilliant epicentre of civilisation in an ordered world.

There is nothing here that is ill proportioned, nothing improper, nothing incongruous, nothing vague; everything occupies its proper place, which is not only clearly defined but also in right relation to all the other elements. Here are outstanding officials, outstanding magistrates, and outstanding judiciary, and outstanding social classes. These parts are so distinguished so as to serve the supreme power of Florence, just as the Roman tribunes used to serve the emperor.¹¹⁷

Florence to the early humanists was *supreme*. It was exceptional in its public order, social stability, governmental efficiency, military strength and the valour and virtue of its citizenry, but it was part of a predictable and well-ordered universe. Neither the Ciompi revolt nor the Visconti war proved devastating enough to destabilise the city-state, or do anything short of strengthening its identity as a paragon of civic order and republican virtue. Florence was the best place in the world to be, but Bruni's world was still a predictable and ordered place, free from fear of fragmentation, entropy or metaphysical destabilisation. This is in stark contrast

¹¹⁵ Burke, *Culture and Society*, p. 269

¹¹⁶ Brown, 'Rethinking the Renaissance', p. 248

¹¹⁷ Leonardo Bruni, 'Panegyric to the City of Florence', trans., Benjamin G. Kohl, in Benjamin G. Kohl and Ronald G. Witt, eds., *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), p. 169

with humanist writers a century later, after the events of 1494. Florence is still resplendent to the later humanists, but their world is not one of order but of the random hand of fortune.

If you consider the matter carefully, you cannot deny that Fortune has great power over human affairs. We see these affairs constantly being affected by fortuitous circumstances that men could neither foresee nor avoid. Although cleverness and care may accomplish many things, they are nevertheless not enough. Man also needs good fortune.¹¹⁸

So wrote Francesco Guicciardini, humanist historian and advisor to the Medici Dukes after 1530. Similarly, the humanist chancellor Bartolomeo Scala (1430-1497) wrote in 1496 that ‘fortune can overturn anything at will when it rages against us’¹¹⁹. The destabilising effects of the events of 1494 onward were not just political, but deeply philosophical, and shook the civic nationalism and republican identity of Florence to its very core.

The Crisis in Context: Authoritarianism

The important transitional step between the development of civic humanism with Bruni and Salutati and the crisis of 1494 is the rise of the Medici between 1434-94. In truth, the (notionally) egalitarian republic of the humanists barely lasted thirty years before Cosimo de’ Medici (1389-1464) returned from a year-long exile in Venice and almost instantly took over the city in a bloodless *coup d’état*¹²⁰. Florence under the Medici was a despotic regime in all but name, and the family worked tirelessly to maintain their legitimacy and power converse to the city’s constitutional values¹²¹. During Cosimo’s lifetime, the family’s de facto authority was so firm that his son Piero (1419-1469) could legislate from his sickbed, even when he did not hold public office¹²². Despite this affront to the foundational ideals of the

¹¹⁸ Francesco Guicciardini, ‘Selections from “Maxims and Reflections”’, trans., M. Dormandi, in Kenneth R. Bartlett, ed., *The Civilisation of the Italian Renaissance: A Sourcebook* (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1992), p. 385

¹¹⁹ Brown, ‘Rethinking the Renaissance’, p. 249

¹²⁰ MacKenney, *Renaissances*, p. 81

¹²¹ Nicholai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence Under the Medici: 1434-1494* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 205-206

¹²² MacKenney, *Renaissances*, p. 82

republic, the Medicean era was one of general stability and peace in the city. Through a vested interest in the maintenance of the peace and an organised clandestine propaganda network, the private interests of the Medici were strongly associated with the public good of the city, and vice-versa¹²³. Like many oligarchic or dictatorial powers throughout history, the Medici were accomplished in aligning the status quo and the nationalistic identity of the republic with their own private goals. While Florence notionally maintained the same humanist spirit that emerged at the turn of the fifteenth century, the Medici were hard at work eroding the republican and democratic ideals, specifically by reforming the republic's constitution to introduce a 'mixture of democratic and aristocratic ideals' by excluding rival families from office¹²⁴. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Florence continued as if there had been no upset to republican values whatsoever. Bruni himself survived the exiles of political enemies and potential agitators, maintaining his position as chancellor for ten years after Cosimo's return, until his death in 1444¹²⁵. His personal views on the matter are unknown, but Bruni was treated as an ally and friend of the Medici, flourishing in his political roles and publicly advocating for Medicean policy¹²⁶.

The period from Cosimo's death until the Medici exile in 1494 appears on the surface to have been a period of peace and cultural achievement in Florence, but evidence of a shift in humanist values is apparent. The 1450s and 60s, the middle decades of the Medicean oligarchy, were a period of political machination and conflict, but they were remarkably free of actual violence compared to the surrounding periods¹²⁷. The rise of Lorenzo the Magnificent, in comparison, was partly defined by the sudden and intense violence of the

¹²³ MacKenney, *Renaissances*, p. 83

¹²⁴ Nicholai Rubinstein, 'Florentine Constitutionalism and Medici Ascendancy in the Fifteenth Century', in Robert Black, ed., *Renaissance Thought: A Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 201

¹²⁵ Gary Ianziti, 'Leonardo Bruni, the Medici and the Florentine Histories', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (January, 2008), p. 2

¹²⁶ Ianziti, 'Leonardo Bruni', p. 3

¹²⁷ Baker, 'Reasons of State', p. 448

Pazzi conspiracy of 1478. In keeping with the reputation for benevolence and civic maintenance that the Medici had so carefully manufactured, the conspirators were set upon by the public even as the assassination attempt was carried out. Ringleader Jacopo de' Pazzi was decried as a traitor, and many of his fellow conspirators were killed in the street¹²⁸. Displaying none of the hesitation toward capital punishment that they would hold for later political executions, the people of Florence lusted for the blood of the conspirators. Many of the Pazzis' collaborators were hanged from the *Palazzo Vecchio*, and Jacopo himself was exhumed by children after his execution and thrown in the river Arno¹²⁹. After the conspiracy was another lull in the amount of state sanctioned violence until those executions decried by Landucci in 1497, after which there was a significant increase. From 1480 to 1560, sixty-two patrician-class men were executed in Florence *per lo stato* (for reasons of state), as recorded by the *Compagna dei Neri*¹³⁰. Of those sixty-two men executed, forty-seven were done so in private, mostly inside the courtyard of the *Bargello*. Hesitance to execute political rivals was a trend of the early humanist republic, and one maintained after the Medicean takeover, both powers preferring to exile rivals and agitators¹³¹. The Grand Council imposed after the expulsion of the Medici in 1494 proved itself much more eager to carry out executions, political and otherwise, in direct affront to both humanist tradition and Italian cultural values. This crisis period was defined by many kinds of violence, but the increase in state-sanctioned violence in the face of changing humanist values was perhaps most significant.

The Grand Council: The Republic in Crisis

The expulsion of the Medici did not reduce factionalism within the Florentine republic. The various reforms enacted under the influence of *fra* Girolamo Savonarola over

¹²⁸ Harold Acton, *The Pazzi Conspiracy: The Plot Against the Medici* (Southampton: The Camelot Press, 1979), p. 72

¹²⁹ Acton, *The Pazzi Conspiracy*, p. 73

¹³⁰ Baker, 'Reasons of State', p. 447

¹³¹ Baker, 'For Reasons of State', p. 449

the period 1494-98 only served to consolidate and strengthen similarly-minded factional groups, and reduce accountability and transparency within the magistracy¹³². Throughout the whole crisis period, the balance of power within the magistracy shifted back and forth between different factions, often to the benefit of the cadre of wealthy patricians known as the *grandi*¹³³. However, from its inception in 1494, the magistracy was somewhat fractured and confused in its design. Existential pressure was still immense, and internal disagreement constantly threatened the dominion of the government, even after the purge of Medici supporters. The constitution was written and re-written, first in an attempt to bring the city closer to a true republic after years of Medicean oligarchy, and then again in 1502 to impose a permanent constitutional head of government in the form of the *Gonfaloniere a vita* (Gonfalonier for life), Piero Soderini (1452-1522)¹³⁴. Although the imposition of a head of government ‘for life’ appears positively Caesarean in its anti-republican implications, it was still largely seen as a measure to provide stability to the republican magistracies and protect Florence from increasing external threats¹³⁵. Changes in governmental structure were so frequent that Landucci records the imposition of the *Gonfaloniere* apparently as an afterthought:

We heard that [the French] had retaken Arezzo, and that the chief citizens had gone away to Sienna and elsewhere. On the same day a vote was passed in the Grand Council that a *Doge* should be elected in the Venetian manner.¹³⁶

The *Gonfaloniere*'s power was not dictatorial; Soderini had little power granted to him that had not been granted to his predecessors and their two-month terms of office, and all proposed bills had to pass through two councils with at least a two-thirds majority to be put

¹³² See chapter 3.

¹³³ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 53

¹³⁴ Cooper, *Pier Soderini*, p. 71

¹³⁵ Cooper, *Pier Soderini*, p. 46

¹³⁶ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 199

into law¹³⁷. It appears that Soderini's role was to present a unified face for the Grand Council, so that the magistracy could at least appear to be united in its interests for the city-state in the face of its external threats.

The relative toothlessness of the position did not undercut its symbolic significance, however. In early 1503, Soderini moved his family into the *Palazzo Vecchio*, traditionally the office of the single-term *Gonfaloniere*, to some controversy. On the 19th of February, Landucci wrote:

The *Gonfaloniere's* wife, Madonna Argentina, went to the *Palagio de' Signori* [*Palazzo Vecchio*] to live, for the first time. It seemed a very new thing to see a woman inhabit the *Palagio*.¹³⁸

Landucci's measured disapproval underscores a very significant piece of symbolism. The *Gonfaloniere* was traditionally reserved quarters in the *Palazzo*, but they were quite modest, and generally intended for use as a private office during the *Gonfaloniere's* two-month term, rather than a permanent residence. Women were strictly forbidden from spending the night there, and Soderini's move to make a permanent residence there for himself and his family was met with much condemnation¹³⁹. Not content to simply live in the existing magistrate's quarters, Soderini oversaw extensive renovation of his wing of the *Palazzo*, combining his chambers with the Notary of the *Signoria* and the room of the *Dieci di Balìa*, installing a barred gate at the entrance to his quarters, and building a private rooftop garden¹⁴⁰. Soderini's behaviour was extremely bold; the installation of personal effects and cordoning off of his own private part of the magisterial building was approaching despotic in tone, much more overtly than anything the Medici had ever done. These actions were viewed with suspicion

¹³⁷ Cooper, *Pier Soderini*, p. 46

¹³⁸ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 203

¹³⁹ Rubinetein, *The Palazzo Vecchio*, p. 43

¹⁴⁰ Rubinetein, *The Palazzo Vecchio*, p. 44

and distaste, but nothing was so offensive to the Florentine citizenry as allowing the Palazzo to be, in the words of patrician and chronicler Marco Parenti (1449-1518), “filled with women”¹⁴¹. Women were believed to have no place in government, and allowing his wife and her retinue into the *Palazzo* was an extremely subversive move on Soderini’s part, inviting critics to accuse him of abuse of power and despotic tendencies. Despite the office’s relatively limited power, its establishment was an extreme move on the part of the magistracy, and the risks to the republican order were significant.

Soderini’s abuse of the traditional benefits of his office indicates a muddying of the symbolism of republican space. The actions of the *Gonfaloniere* were shocking and offensive for their audacity and insult to tradition, but if they were taken specifically as an affront to republicanism, nothing was to come of it¹⁴². A recurring trend in the behaviour of the Grand Council, and one that continued in the city into the Medici ascendancy and beyond, was to make lofty claims of devotion to liberty and republican virtue, while behaving in a way that did not reflect those values. Even after Florence abandoned republican government entirely in 1532, the Medici rulers maintained the brazenly hypocritical title of ‘Duke of the Florentine Republic’, and the word *Libertas* is proudly displayed in gold lettering on the *Palazzo Vecchio* to this day¹⁴³. This was a natural evolution of the image of the city presented by the early humanists, who specialised in a form of propaganda that emphasised Florence’s association with liberty in the face of foreign tyranny. In blurring the lines between public office and private residence in the *Palazzo*, Soderini’s behaviour mirrored that of a previous *Gonfaloniere*, Piero di Cosimo de’ Medici. Serving his term of office in 1461, Piero conducted much of his business from home, his mobility severely affected by gout. Like Soderini’s renovations, this was a departure from tradition and legal precedent, as the

¹⁴¹ Marco Parenti, *Istoria Fiorente*, in Rubinstein, *The Palazzo Vecchio*, p. 44

¹⁴² Rubinstein, *The Palazzo Vecchio*, p.

¹⁴³ Brown, *Medicean and Savonarolan Florence*, p. 230

intention of the *Palazzo* residence was to prevent the *Gonfaloniere* from having contact with citizens outside of public meetings¹⁴⁴. Piero confused the boundaries between public space and Medici space, associating both with the work of government, which was in turn was associated with the pursuit of liberty and the benefit of the republic. Whether or not Soderini was attempting to establish despotic power for himself, his behaviour shows that members of the Grand Council were becoming increasingly bold in their use of republican institution and symbolism.

The establishment of the office of *Gonfaloniere* represented a crisis measure for the republic, but it never managed to gain real weight as a government body and ultimately did little to preserve the stability of the Grand Council, which was deposed ten years later. What is significant, however, is the timeline of events. Soderini's office was established in the summer of 1502. Various constitutional reforms had been in the works since 1498, but the period 1499-1502 was a period of continued humiliation for the magistracy: tensions with France were still high, campaigns to recapture the recently independent city of Pisa were a failure, and Cesare Borgia, aspiring despot and son of the pope, was threatening the city with plans to create a central-Italian lordship for himself¹⁴⁵. Internally, the government was paralysed with factional disputes and money problems, and the rebellion of Arezzo in 1502 edged the republic closer to disaster. Right in the middle of this period of renewed crisis came the summer of 1501, when Rinaldeschi committed his crimes. The Grand Council was struggling for control over its own factional dissidents, the cities under its regional jurisdiction and its fate in its geopolitical context, it stands to reason that it would demonstrate what little actual authority it had where it could: its own citizens. There were no executions for 'reasons of state' after that of Tornabuoni and his companions in 1497 until

¹⁴⁴ Alison Brown, 'Piero's Infirmary and Political Power', in Andreas Beyer and Bruce Boucher, eds., *Piero de' Medici, "il Gottoso" (1416-1469): Kunst im Dienste der Mediceer* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993), p. 10

¹⁴⁵ Cooper, *Pier Soderini*, p. 46

after the Grand Council was deposed in 1512¹⁴⁶. There was a fine line between a demonstration of power and one of tyranny, and Landucci's reaction indicates that such a display was an overreach on the part of the magistracy. If the execution of political dissidents and plotters could be interpreted as tyrannical, then the government would have to prove their strength and legitimacy in other ways. Rinaldeschi's execution can be seen as a bipartisan demonstration: his crimes, while not extreme under legal precedent, were morally heinous, and offended the citizenry as much as or more than the law. Rinaldeschi presented the Grand Council with a unique opportunity: the chance to prove their power and will to punish dangerous citizens, to improve their public standing by executing a criminal they felt the citizenry would unilaterally condemn, and, by executing him within the city and displaying his body on the day of a *festa*, associating the structure of republican government with religious righteousness and moral good. Rinaldeschi, through his own rash action and misfortune, became a grizzly piece of propaganda for the flailing state.

Conclusion

Rinaldeschi's execution was a small release of the pressure of political crisis. Perhaps if he had committed his crimes ten, twenty or fifty years earlier, he would not have suffered the same fate, but in reality, he was unlucky enough to be a convenient patsy for the Grand Council to take advantage of for a much-needed popular demonstration. In chapter three, I will discuss *fra* Girolamo Savonarola's impact on the Grand Council and the heightening political tension, as well as his influence on popular religion, and why Rinaldeschi's behaviour was seen as much more severe in 1501 as it may have been at some other time.

¹⁴⁶ Baker, 'For Reasons of State', p. 460

Chapter 3: Bonfire & Brimstone

Girolamo Savonarola and the Spiritual Element of Crisis



Figure 3. Anonymous, *Execution of Savonarola and Two Followers in the Piazza of the Signoria, 23 May, 1498*. Florence, Museo di S. Marco, c. 1498

Four years before Charles VIII occupied Florence, a Ferrarese Dominican friar with a radical bent and a talent for provocative sermons made his home there. *Fra* Girolamo Savonarola's impact on the government and population of Florence was immense. He had an active and

obvious role in the governmental changes of 1494-98, and was instrumental in the creation of the Grand Council and the constitutional reforms that it brought. With that came a certain upset to the political order. Savonarola's position on the Council was nebulous and unofficial, and the amount of power he wielded was never properly defined. His efforts to mould the Council were done in service of a prophetic and religious goal rather than a political one, and so paid little heed to the long-term political consequences¹⁴⁷. As such, his actions added fuel to the fire of crisis in the city, and increased the levels of tension and instability after his death. Less easy to accurately trace is Savonarola's lasting effect on the culture of the city. While his many enemies were eventually successful in removing him from power and having him killed, his immense support did not vanish overnight, and his effect on the political and religious beliefs of much of Florence's lower classes was long lasting. This combination of political destabilisation and the changes in popular worship came to define the context in which Rinaldeschi was tried, and may be the reason his punishment was as severe as it was.

The Friar in Florence

His arrival to the city in 1490 was the second time Savonarola had been to Florence – he had served as lector of the Dominican convent of San Marco from 1482-84 – but this time he came not only as a preacher, but as a prophet¹⁴⁸. The reigning pope, Sixtus IV, died in August 1484, leaving a fractured Vatican and the threat of a Church schism. Savonarola, still serving as lector in Florence, saw this as the beginning of a metaphysical war that would result in a scourge of the Church¹⁴⁹. The friar left Florence to spread his message, cautiously at first, but then with all the contagious fervour that he became famous for. From 1484 until his return to Florence, Savonarola spread this message in a cycle of sermons throughout

¹⁴⁷ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 36

¹⁴⁸ Dall'Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, p. 14

¹⁴⁹ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, p. 36

Tuscany and Northern Italy¹⁵⁰. The friar continued spreading his message in Florence, and although his sermons on moral corruption and purification caused some small controversy amongst the clergy, his first two years in the city were largely uneventful. Over this time, he refined his message and honed his famously fervent and provocative style of speaking, making predictions that were increasingly violent in tone and millenarian in content¹⁵¹. These sermons earned Savonarola the attention of large crowds of laymen, and by 1491 had gained the attention of the clergy and nobility, after a successful cycle of Lenten sermons in the cathedral¹⁵². Lorenzo de' Medici was already aware of Savonarola by this time – he had arranged for the friar's return to the city as a favour for Count Giovanni Pico of Mirandola, who had been impressed by his sermons before he had left for Bologna in 1484 – but had seemingly been uninterested in the preacher until his sermons began to draw attention. In truth, it is difficult to gauge Lorenzo's interest in Savonarola's actions in the period 1490-91; contemporary biographers of Savonarola tended to cast the Medici as villains in the friar's story, and Lorenzo's initial invitation to Savonarola to return to Florence became a kind of ironic portent for the battles to come¹⁵³. If Lorenzo was made uncomfortable by Savonarola's conflation of political and religious issues, he did little to act on it, apparently not anticipating what a force the preacher was to become¹⁵⁴. Ultimately, the ideological divide between the two men was not strong enough for Lorenzo to make an enemy of Savonarola, and he requested it be the friar that gave him his last rites when he died in 1492¹⁵⁵.

Savonarola's return to Florence came at the height of Medici power before the crisis; in the years following the Pazzi conspiracy, Lorenzo had been steadily replacing the city-

¹⁵⁰ Dall'Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, p. 14

¹⁵¹ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, p. 67

¹⁵² Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 23

¹⁵³ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, p. 68

¹⁵⁴ Martines, *Fire in the City*, p. 27

¹⁵⁵ Martines, *Fire in the City*, p. 28

state's republican establishment with a de facto patrilineal principality, to an extent even greater than his family before him. The Council of Seventy, a notionally representative governmental body of Lorenzo's own design, was almost entirely loaded with Medicean partisans¹⁵⁶. In April 1492, never having retired from political life, Lorenzo died in his villa at Careggi. This happened a day after Savonarola made prophetic first use of a phrase that would become a mainstay in his sermons to come: *Ecce gladius Domini super terram cito et velociter* (Behold the sword of the Lord falling upon the earth quickly and swiftly)¹⁵⁷. Despite his far-reaching political machinations, Lorenzo left something of a power vacuum after his death. Legislation was quickly passed to ensure that Lorenzo's son Piero di Lorenzo would succeed him in all his official positions, but whether out of youth and political inexperience or plain mismanagement, the political situation rapidly declined over the first two years of Piero's rule¹⁵⁸. When his reckoning came in the form of the king of France, Piero fled the city, never to return, leaving Florence free of Medici rule until 1512. Piero, lacking the political acumen of his father, had shown himself to be a friend of the king of Naples, hurting his claim to neutrality in France's wars. This left him no room to bargain when negotiating with the French army¹⁵⁹. Fearing the military power Charles had at his disposal, Piero overcompensated, surrendering key fortresses and ports to the king on his march through northern Italy, making him look meek, and losing him support from within the city¹⁶⁰. With nowhere to turn, Piero's only hope was to escape, which was commuted to an official exile after he had left the city. Well and truly earning his eventual moniker, Piero 'the Unfortunate' de' Medici lived the next nine years on the run, eventually drowning in the Garigliano river after fighting on the losing side of a battle against the Spanish army there in 1503.

¹⁵⁶ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, p. 68

¹⁵⁷ Dall'Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, p. 16

¹⁵⁸ Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence*, p. 267

¹⁵⁹ Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence*, p. 268

¹⁶⁰ Martines, *Fire in the City*, p. 35

Charles' occupation of the city proved a turning point in Savonarola's life as well as Piero's. Savonarola's apocalyptic visions had predicted a mighty king who would sweep through Italy like a divine wind, bringing punishment from on high and beginning the scourge and subsequent reformation¹⁶¹ of the church. Charles appeared to meet the criteria for this agent of divinity, and became the *gladius domini* in Savonarola's eyes¹⁶². The friar made no secret of this, hastening to get the king on-side. It did not take long, according to Landucci, for the charismatic preacher to get the king's ear, and before long he was attempting to steer the invasion force outside of the city to spread their divine scourge to the rest of Italy:

It was said that *Fra* Girolamo of Ferrara, our famous preacher, had gone to the king and declared that he was not doing the will of God in stopping, and that he ought to leave. It was even said that he went a second time, when he saw that the king did not leave, and declared again that he was not following God's will, and that whatever evil should befall others would return on his head. It was thought that this was the cause of him leaving more speedily, because at that time the said *Fra* Girolamo was held to be a prophet and a man of holy life, both in Florence and throughout Italy.¹⁶³

Landucci may be exaggerating to claim that Savonarola was responsible for the king leaving Florence – he mentions favourable weather and broad geographical strategy as an afterthought, which likely informed the king's movements as much or more than the friar's counsel¹⁶⁴ – but this passage shows that Savonarola believed himself to be influencing geopolitical events on behalf of his millenarian prophecies, and that he had garnered significant fame and following, both from within Florence and elsewhere.

¹⁶¹ I use this term in its most general sense. I am not associating Savonarola with the Protestant reformation of the church in the sixteenth century.

¹⁶² Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology 1461/2-1498* (Leiden, Boston: Brill Publishing, 2008), p. 372

¹⁶³ Landucci, p. 72

¹⁶⁴ Landucci, p. 72

The Friar's Reforms

With the crisis period truly underway, Savonarola was able to really hit his stride. The exile of the Medici had plunged the city into chaos; the existing ecosystem of factionalism, patronage and political partisanship was turned on its head as the allies of the Medici, previously the most powerful and well-connected men in the city, became some of the most reviled. What unfolded in the days following Piero's exile was another bloodless *coup d'état*, this time against the Medici establishment. New councils were set up to dismantle the Medicean power structure, while others were barred from meeting out of fear of Medici loyalism. This latter group included the *Otto di Guardia* and the *Guerra dei Dieci* (Ten of War)¹⁶⁵. This reformation of government was difficult and messy, but these actions were still within the parameters of constitutionally justified crisis management. The actions of the councils remained within constitutional law, which worked to give the illusion of continuity of government over the next four years of Savonarolan political interference. Savonarola lacked the right to political participation, both as a foreigner and as a man of the church, but he became increasingly present in the political dealings of the city, first as ambassador to Charles, and then in various advisory roles in the government palace¹⁶⁶. This was controversial from the start. The friar received criticism for meddling in matters of state, but to him the ends always justified the means. The divine scourge had begun, and Florence had to be transformed into the vanguard of the spiritual awakening of Italy and all mankind¹⁶⁷. Savonarola had earned goodwill from those who believed him responsible for the king's mercy, which he turned into new following for his increasingly millenarian sermons¹⁶⁸. By

¹⁶⁵ Martines, *Fire in the City*, p. 61

¹⁶⁶ Alison Brown, 'Savonarola, Machiavelli and Moses: A Changing Model', in Peter Denley and Caroline Elam, eds., *Florence and Italy: Renaissance Studies in Honour of Nicolai Rubinstein* (Exeter: Short Run Press Ltd., 1988), p. 57

¹⁶⁷ Brown, 'Savonarola, Machiavelli and Moses', p. 58

¹⁶⁸ Martines, *Fire in the City*, p. 66

the beginning of 1495, Savonarola was drawing crowds of thousands; politicians and commoners alike were primed to face their salvation through the evangelism of the apocalypse prophet.

Because of his key role in the negotiations with the French, Savonarola was seen not only as a saviour of the city, but as a linchpin in the creation of the anti-Medici Grand Council¹⁶⁹. Despite his inability to hold any formal office, he became one of the most iconic figures of the government, visited personally by foreign ambassadors and intellectuals, and believed to be holding the fabric of the republic together with his sermons¹⁷⁰. The importance of his influence on the structure and behaviour of the government is key to understanding the anxiety and instability that plagued the Council after his death. As is always the case when investigating the actions of historical figures, it is difficult to understand and convey the importance of Savonarola's character. Through the combination of a well-honed talent for speaking and what must have been immense personal charisma, Savonarola had an almost uncanny ability to convince people of his beliefs, and influence public opinion. From records of his sermons, we can see a glimpse of his genius; his hold on evocative metaphor, variety of cadence and movement in and out of conversational dialogue show an exceptional talent for speaking. He also had a skill for catering the content of his sermons to particular audiences, employing appropriately personal images of home, public life and industry based on what would resonate most¹⁷¹. With such a set of talents, Savonarola's influence on the popular government was that of a cult of personality. He was able to influence lawmaking and council appointments and defame his political opponents at the same time, all towards the goal of the

¹⁶⁹ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, p. 374

¹⁷⁰ Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico and Savonarola*, p. 375-376

¹⁷¹ Donald Weinstein, 'The Art of Dying Well and Popular Piety in the Preaching and Thought of Girolamo Savonarola', in Marcel Tetel, Ronald G. Witt and Rona Goffen, eds., *Life and Death in Fifteenth Century Florence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), p. 98

transformation of Florence into the holy city he wanted it to become¹⁷². Despite his lack of official position, the Ferrarese friar quickly became the most powerful man in Florence.

Savonarola's reform of Florentine law was considerable. Factionalism and party loyalism were antithetical to the city he wanted to create, so he took steps to dismantle those structures within the republican government, and in Florentine daily life, instructing people to abandon old feuds, forgive their neighbours and banish party division from their lives¹⁷³. Under Savonarola's guiding hand, governmental councils were expanded tenfold so as to reduce the voting power of existing factions¹⁷⁴. Contrary to that intent, the reforms appear to have simply encouraged the growth of existing factions, as similar groups banded together to push certain agendas and platform certain individuals¹⁷⁵. It is tempting, from a modern standpoint, to impose a certain cynicism or ulterior motive onto Savonarola's behaviour. The twentieth century was partly defined by the ruinous effects that charismatic individuals can have on governmental institutions, and cults of personality are seen as directly antithetical to modern democracy, with good reason. Savonarola's interference in the popular government looks corrupt at best, and audaciously Caesarean at worst, but, as can be seen in its political history throughout the fifteenth century, the political structure of Florence was built entirely on nepotism, factionalism and personal relationships. There is no real reason to doubt Savonarola's republican ideology. His first priority was always the love of God and His message, but Savonarola's education and theological background was primarily informed by humanist philosophy, and he was genuinely concerned with the common good of the citizenry¹⁷⁶. To this end, he was concerned with the eradication of what he saw as the tyranny

¹⁷² Weinstein, *Savonarola*, p. 134

¹⁷³ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, p. 133

¹⁷⁴ Alison Brown, *Medicean and Savonarolan Florence: The Interplay of Politics, Humanism and Religion* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers n. v, 2011), p. 204

¹⁷⁵ Brown, *Medicean and Savonarolan Florence*, p. 204

¹⁷⁶ Martines, *Fire in the City*, p. 75

of the Medici, but also the betterment of society in favour of the poor. Savonarola famously hated greed, and maintained the mendicant traditions of his order by preaching humility and reservation. Through his political influence, this manifested as sweeping tax reform, reversal of the price-gouging on household goods, forced reduction in the cost of grain and an absolute ban on gifts for public officials¹⁷⁷. Savonarola was a powerful figure, instrumental to the creation of the popular government, but this level of influence and interference from the preacher ultimately proved to be unsustainable.

Excommunication and Execution

An important and oft-invoked episode in the Savonarolan affair was the infamous bonfire of vanities of 1497. This is often seen as a death knell of the Savonarolan regime, but can also be viewed as a microcosm of the friar's effect on popular worship and religious belief in the city. Disgusted at the display of hedonism and idolatry that was the Florentine *carnivale*, Savonarola invoked a tradition that had been employed only twice that century, and called for a burning of vanities in the *Piazza della Signoria*¹⁷⁸. In a massive wooden pyramid, Savonarola and his followers burned musical instruments, costumes, masks, mirrors and gambling equipment, as well as the paintings and sculptures of artists as notable as Donatello, and copies of the works of Petrarch, Dante and Boccaccio¹⁷⁹. This scene points to certain changes in Florentine society and popular belief that had arisen in only the past few years. Savonarola's message was one of general piety and moralism, and the sins he considered to be most fundamentally damaging were those of earthly pleasures: pride, lust and greed. Before the French invasion had elevated him into the role of political influencer, his primary targets had been those in governmental positions, whose greed and corruption he

¹⁷⁷ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, p. 135

¹⁷⁸ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, p. 218

¹⁷⁹ Weinstein, *Savonarola*, p. 218

believed to be a defining force in the city¹⁸⁰. As discussed in chapter one, Florentine culture was materialistic, and behaviour that Savonarola would consider avaricious was generally tolerated. However, the 1490s proved to be a decade of spiritual as well as earthly crisis, and Savonarola's impact on the religious fabric of the city had an effect that lasted long after his death. The bonfire of vanities showed itself to be a divisive event, a challenge to Florentine social order, but one that gained significant support amongst the populace.

This morning [after the bonfire] although it was carnival, *fra* Girolamo said mass in San Marco, and gave the sacrament with his hands to all his friars, and afterward to several thousand men and women, and then he came on to a pulpit outside the door of the church with the Host, and showing it to the people, blessed them...the lukewarm laughed and mocked, saying: "he is excommunicated, and he gives the communion to others", and certainly it seemed a mistake to me, although I had faith in him...¹⁸¹

Landucci, himself an apothecary and merchant whose livelihood depended on healthy mercantilism in the city, maintained faith in Savonarola even past his excommunication and the bonfire. Although his life and reign was soon to end, Savonarola's philosophy of temperance and moral reform would seep into the social and religious fabric of Florence and elsewhere for decades to come.

Like Rinaldeschi, Savonarola was publicly executed inside the city, on charges to do with religious misconduct. Whilst Rinaldeschi was charged with blasphemy, Savonarola and the two followers who joined him at the gallows received similarly vague charges of heresy and schismatic conduct¹⁸². Gallows were set up in the *Piazza della Signoria*, and the three friars were hanged, and their bodies burned at the stake in the same place as their bonfire of vanities had been the previous year. Savonarola's excommunication had damaged the

¹⁸⁰ Lorenzo Polizzotto, 'Savonarola and the Florentine Oligarchy', in Stella Fletcher and Christine Shaw, eds., *World of Savonarola: Italian Elites and Perceptions of Crisis* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), p. 56

¹⁸¹ Landucci, p. 131

¹⁸² Martines, *Fire in the City*, p. 273

confidence of his supporters, and the election of Piero Popoleschi, a pro-Medicean and opponent of Savonarola, as *Gonfaloniere* in 1498 had shifted opinion against him within the Grand Council¹⁸³. Even with the preacher's grip on Florence weakening, the Council had to tread carefully so as to not overreach. Rather than arrest him themselves, they took their cue from the Medici reaction to the Pazzi Conspiracy, and let anti-Savonarolan commoners do their work for them:

Everyone was arming himself, in fact; and a proclamation from the *Palagio* offered 1000 ducats to anyone who could capture *fra* Girolamo and deliver him up to the authorities. All Florence was in commotion, and none of the *Frate's* adherents dared to speak, or else they would have been killed.¹⁸⁴

Landucci reports fifteen to twenty deaths in the riot, and at least a hundred wounded¹⁸⁵.

Among the dead were Francesco Valori (1439-1498), member of the Council and political ally of Savonarola, killed on the orders of the *Signoria*¹⁸⁶. The friar was arrested and held in the *Palazzo Vecchio*, and, over the next several weeks, was tortured into confessing that his prophecies were a lie¹⁸⁷. Despite the anti-Savonarolan *Gonfaloniere*, the *Dieci* and *Otto* were both entirely made up of the preacher's supporters, and were summarily replaced, allowing for the death sentence to be passed¹⁸⁸.

Savonarola's execution was memorialised in a painting (figure 3), now residing in the collection of the *Museo di San Marco*, Florence. Although it is sometimes speculatively attributed to Francesco di Lorenzo Rossellini, the artist is not known for certain, nor is the exact date it was completed, although it was likely roughly contemporaneous with the events

¹⁸³ Dall'Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, p. 58

¹⁸⁴ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 137

¹⁸⁵ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 137

¹⁸⁶ Mark Jurdjevic, *Guardians of Republicanism: The Valori Family in the Florentine Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 45

¹⁸⁷ Martines, *Fire in the City*, p. 263

¹⁸⁸ Martines, *Fire in the City*, p. 246

it depicts¹⁸⁹. The blank banner at the top of the painting suggests that it was never completed at all, or that the artist had some message or description in mind that they decided not to include. Although it is not in the same comic-strip format as the depiction of Rinaldeschi's crime and execution, it does convey a similar linear narrative. The figures of Savonarola and his two followers, *fra Domenico da Pescia* and *fra Silvestro Maruffi*, can be seen receiving their last rites before the cross, being led to the scaffold by hooded men (whether they are executioners or confraternity brothers, it is unclear), and ultimately hanging at the top of the pyre. The hanging figures are the subject of the painting, but they are dwarfed by the square and buildings around them. The crenelated tower of the *Bargello* can be seen on the left-hand side, underneath the enormous dome of the *Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore*, both of which are overshadowed by the massive *Palazzo Vecchio*. The *Palazzo* draws the eye; its characteristic black bricks give it an entirely different colour palette to the rest of the city, and an incredibly sinister, domineering appearance. This appears to represent the supremacy of the republic over the dissidents, and reinforces the power, authority and legitimacy of the Grand Council. Unlike Rinaldeschi's, Savonarola's story is not presented as a redemption arc, but one of defeat, punishment and damnation.

The Friar's Legacy: Changes in Popular Worship

Savonarola's enemies had become too many both within the Grand Council and outside the city, but the preacher's death did not bring the stability that they might have hoped. The years following the execution involved a widespread and oftentimes bloody repression of the friar's legacy and cult, one that proved to be ultimately unsuccessful in banishing Savonarolism from the city¹⁹⁰. Numerous quirks of the preacher's agenda had

¹⁸⁹ Daniel Arasse, *Botticelli: From Lorenzo the Magnificent to Savonarola*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 218

¹⁹⁰ Dall'Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, p. 70

made their way into mainstream cultural consciousness, most notably an increased disdain for avaricious vices such as gambling, and an increased veneration of icons both religious and secular in content¹⁹¹. Savonarola's popular following had affected the religious topography of the city, and icons and frescos in public spaces came to be much more common¹⁹². As the Grand Council scrambled to maintain control in the absence of the friar, facets of the general population were slowly shifting their patterns of worship and belief in the Savonarolan model. The Council, itself often split between former Savonarolans and anti-Savonarolans, was torn between honouring the friar's legacy and suppressing it. Between 1498 and 1501, the Council emphasised the celebration of feast days for saints associated with St Francis, a rival order to Savonarola's Dominicans¹⁹³. Other millenarian preachers emerged and were suppressed, such as Pietro Bernadino, who attempted to create his own following in the style of Savonarola's before being burned at the stake in 1502¹⁹⁴. Popular image cults, which had been increasing in popularity for the better part of a century, began to emerge frequently as Savonarolan-style icon-veneration became more and more popular¹⁹⁵. The preachers influence over popular worship in Florence survived long after his death, and well into the sixteenth century. This influence survived even as the overt pro-/anti-Savonarolan factionalism dwindled in the city, and entered into the broader trends of Catholic popular worship in Italy.

Savonarola's legacy had its effect on the civic, as well as religious, identity of the city. The humanist city was, as can be seen in the humanist discourse of the fifteenth century, a body of ideology and morality as well as a physical environment. It is no coincidence that exile was the punishment of choice for many humanist governments throughout the 1400s.

¹⁹¹ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 57

¹⁹² Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 57

¹⁹³ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 56

¹⁹⁴ Dall'Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, p. 77

¹⁹⁵ Holmes, *The Miraculous Image in Renaissance Florence*, pp. 39-

Belonging to a city was a fundamental part of identity and personhood for the Renaissance Italian, both in the general sense of belonging to a place, and in the specific designation of citizenship, for those lucky enough to be eligible. The loss of citizenship was arguably as bad or worse than the loss of life. This is not just because of the measurable material loss of the political rights and financial options granted to citizens, but more fundamentally the loss of the metaphysical protection of the city and its patron saint, and the identity and humanity that came from citizenship¹⁹⁶. The humanist city was the city of man, and the wilderness was a place for beasts. Therefore, to lose citizenship of a city would cost a man part of his humanity, moving him down on the continuum between man and beast and potentially endangering his soul¹⁹⁷. Savonarola had proclaimed Florence to be the city of God, and Christ its king, but after his execution, his remaining followers became anxious that they would be held divinely responsible for his death, thus endangering the metaphysical legitimacy of the city and the protection that that offered¹⁹⁸. With the city itself at stake, the ideological conflict between pro- and anti-Savonarolan factions was at the forefront of the religious consciousness of the population, causing significant unrest and instability.

It was in this political and religious context that Rinaldeschi was executed. Although his crime was ostensibly minor, he could not have chosen a worse time to provoke the ire of both civic and religious institutions in the city. As well as his crimes against the social and religious order, the specific icon he defaced was of a sort that Savonarola had expressed favour for over more audacious and expensive imagery, which he believed held its own beauty in higher regard than that of God¹⁹⁹. On the political side of things, anti-Savonarolan sentiment was growing in the Grand Council, which had been legislating to disenfranchise

¹⁹⁶ Brown, *Medicean and Savonarolan Florence*, p. 178

¹⁹⁷ Brown, *Medicean and Savonarolan Florence*, p. 178

¹⁹⁸ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 57

¹⁹⁹ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 58

the pro-Savonarolan factions as well as encourage constitutional reform with the purpose of rolling back some of the preacher's reforms²⁰⁰. This was a delicate undertaking, as it was occurring at the same time as the rebellion of Pisa, and Arezzo was to follow a year later, so the Council was likely wary of fomenting a pro-Savonarolan rebellion within the city. Since Savonarolan sentiment was still at the forefront of political and religious sentiment, the republic's position was extremely unstable, and shows of force were a reliable way to both appease the public and demonstrate power. In defacing the *Madonna di Ricci*, Rinaldeschi simultaneously offended the order of the city by breaking the law, and the Savonarolan sensibilities of the populace in his immorality and blasphemy, ensuring that any action taken against him would be bipartisan in its reception. The readiness with which the violence against him was accepted, both in the Council and the population, indicates how strong the reactions were, and how deeply Savonarolan values were entrenched in the culture of the city. Furthermore, the fact that Rinaldeschi briefly attempted to seek refuge in a Franciscan convent suggests that the Savonarolan sentiment in society was strong and overt enough for him to anticipate violence before he was even caught²⁰¹.

Landucci, having distanced himself from Savonarola but never disavowing him entirely, shows nothing but disdain for Rinaldeschi, despite his usual sympathy for those facing the gallows. Indeed, the apothecary seems more interested in the defaced icon than the man killed for it:

All Florence came to see this figure of the Virgin, and when the bishop had removed the dirt, there was not an evening on which pounds of wax-tapers were not fastened before it, the veneration perpetually increasing. And in a few days innumerable images have been brought as votive offerings, as may be seen.²⁰²

²⁰⁰ Dall'Aglio, *Savonarola and Savonarolism*, pp. 75-76

²⁰¹ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 58

²⁰² Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, pp. 187-188

According to the records of the church of *S. Maria Alberighi*, this occurred as early as the morning after the execution²⁰³. The popularity of the cult, and the speed at which it emerged, further indicates Savonarola's influence. Furthermore, it hints at the popularity of the Grand Council's action against Rinaldeschi. The painting commissioned by the cult (figure 1) as well as vilifying Rinaldeschi's demonic influence rather than the man himself, does not represent his judge and executioners as anything but the righteous agents of God's justice. There is no indication of religious or ideological dispute between the cult (and its Savonarolan leanings) and the Council, which is depicted as both theologically justified and not inappropriately cruel in its treatment of the prisoner. Furthermore, that the cult can afford to commission both a painting and a new church built in 1508 reveals the power and spending capacity that these Savonarolan movements could muster, despite attempts to suppress them²⁰⁴. Although it had been three years since Savonarola's death, Rinaldeschi's execution was deep in the shadow of the prophet, and a microcosm of philosophical, political and spiritual crisis in Florence.

Conclusion

The Grand Council's actions in executing Rinaldeschi were not entirely down to the legacy of Savonarola, but they cannot be fully explained without his influence either. The preacher's radical manipulation of lay belief and religious practice in Florence partly defined the relationship between the Grand Council and the population of the city, and significantly changed the context in which Rinaldeschi's behaviour was received. It was this new condemnation of sins of excess and avarice that turned the execution from a disproportionate display of state violence into a calculated attempt to appease a dangerously resentful population.

²⁰³ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 63

²⁰⁴ Connell and Constable, *Sacrilege and Redemption*, p. 65

Conclusion

The crime, arrest, trial and punishment of Antonio Rinaldeschi was a relatively small and ultimately rather inconsequential display of power on the part of the Grand Council. The most important lasting consequence for those involved was the establishment of the cult around the image Rinaldeschi desecrated, and the public works that cult undertook. Landucci makes mention of them in July 1508, almost exactly seven years after the execution:

...the foundations of the *Nunziata de' Ricci* were begun; this church is also called *Santa Maria Alberighi*, and the veneration first began when dirt was thrown in the face of the image by the man who was hung for it.²⁰⁵

What is important about the killing of Rinaldeschi is not the immediate consequences, but the intent and method. The episode provides a unique insight into the way the Grand Council exercised power, its delicate authority within the city, and both its self-image and projected representation in the city-state. It grants an insight into the way the crisis period was experienced and dealt with on the political level, and how Renaissance-era government could interact with the population it governed. This reaction to crisis is an invaluable case study into the application of humanist philosophy to political reality, and where the self-interest of political agents and factional interests intersected with their responsibility to the governed, and their respect of the governmental institution. Finally, the execution and events around it sheds light on the ways that political values and ideologies change under the pressure of crisis, and how the republican institutions of the period were vulnerable to the influence of personalities and personal interests, whether it be the ambitious and nepotistic Medici, the ruthless and violent Charles VIII Valois, or the seductively persuasive Savonarola.

²⁰⁵ Landucci, *A Florentine Diary*, p. 229

Rinaldeschi, in his misfortune, provides a concise and fascinating microcosm into the cultural, spiritual and political reaction to crisis and instability in sixteenth-century Florence.

The behaviour of the Grand Council in this period provides an excellent case study for those that wish to view the period as a narrative of republican decline and rise in despotism in Florence. I chose to focus on execution as an area in which the Council seized opportunities to further their own projection of power and improve their public image, but examples in the period are numerous. Soderini's renovations of the *Palazzo Vecchio*, the dismissal of the pro-Savonarolan magistrates to ensure the friar's death sentence and the opportunistic assassination of Francesco Valori and his family are just a few instances of the increasingly autocratic behaviour the Council displayed in its attempts to maintain control during the crisis. The years 1494-1512 are fundamental to the study of power, violence and political and cultural change in Renaissance Italy, and grant a valuable opportunity to explore the limits of humanist republicanism and civic nationalism. This period also sets the stage for the return of the Medici and their rise to dukedom, the events of the early sixteenth century, and establishes the context for many famous works of art, architecture and writing, such as Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine chapel and Machiavelli's *The Prince*. By that time, Florence was the largest and wealthiest city in Italy, and one of the most populous in Europe. The political situation in Florence affected the entire peninsula, and so crises and upsets in the city-state had far-reaching consequences.

The intention of this thesis was to use the execution as a window into the patterns of political expression of power, reinforcement of legitimacy and compensation for crisis in Florence at the turn of the sixteenth century. I have also explored the use of politically and philosophically significant urban space for the expression of power, and how the appropriation of that symbolism illustrated the dilution of classical humanist philosophy and the subtle obfuscation of republican ideology. The utilisation of classical Roman architectural

style in the creation of the humanist city-state is an area well-covered, but its use in the decline of the republic has received less attention. Perhaps, given the propagandistic nature of the humanist treatises of Bruni and Salutati, there is no significant difference at all; just as the early humanists employed these symbols of republicanism to spuriously advance their own hawkish foreign policies, the Grand Council and Medici “Dukes of the Florentine Republic” appropriated republican rhetoric, ideology and symbolism to increase their own power and authority in the city. Whatever the case, the philosophical and ideological spirit of the city is built into its very form, and anyone wishing to understand the city must understand its geography and topography first. Florence’s is a geographical history as much as a political, philosophical, religious or cultural one, and must be studied holistically to be understood.

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