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THE DECLINE OF THE FLORENTINE REPUBLIC
FROM THE INVASION OF HENRY VII
TO THE DICTATORSHIP OF WALTER OF BRIENNE

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From the time of the invasion of Henry VII to the establishment of the dictatorship of Walter of Brienne (1311 to 1342), there was a significant change in the Florentine pattern of political organization. This change was not confined exclusively to the City of the Red Lily, but was general throughout Northern Italy. The commune, the medieval political form, was declining. The *Principate* was emerging as the dominant governmental form. The simple dictatorship (the proto-fascism of the Renaissance) displaced the complex communal organization of the Middle Ages. Each of the several classes and political parties of Florence demonstrated an incapacity for governing. The orders of the fourteenth century each tried to establish a government. The nobles, the guildsmen, the artisans, and workers each failed like their mythical ancestors--the Romans of the last days of the Republic--to establish a stable government. They were unable to solve the problems which threatened the continuation of Republican life.¹

Pasquale Villari writes: "We have only to draw a comparison between the *Divine Comedy* and the *Decameron* to instantly perceive how deep was the change a few years had wrought in the spirit of Florence and of all Italy."² This shift, according to Villari, is one from the medieval to the modern "weltanschauung." This transition is paralleled by a political shift from commune to dictatorship. Alfred von Martin and Saponi, both believe that the cultural and political aspects are inexorably bound together.³ However, two pieces of literature are not sufficient evidence to support this contention.

Caggese, the greatest of the modern historians of Florence, believes that the period from Dante to Boccaccio demonstrates "how little control men have over events."⁴ The political and cultural changes during this period were caused by a "strange and inexorable destiny" which pressed on all parties and classes. The authorities are agreed that there was a significant change. It would be something less than valid methodology to accept "destiny" as the causal force.⁵ Are there any more concrete reasons for the change? The answer to this question will be the chief concern of this paper.

At the beginning of the fourteenth century the Italian communal republics seemed secure. Florence had been under the rule of the greater guilds for almost 20 years.⁶ The Empire, the greatest threat to the Republic of Florence, had declined immeasurably from the days of Frederick II (1250). The Papacy had lost a great deal of its secular power and was virtually a prisoner of the French King.⁷ With the decline of these two forces one would expect the republic of the Red Lily and the other Northern Italian towns to emerge as self-constituted, republican states. Why was it that the converse of this occurred?

The late Middle Ages witnessed the triumph of the commune of Florence over feudal nobles. A republic of wealthy merchants and guildsmen supplanted the aristocracy. The City of the Baptist was a commercial and manufacturing town.⁸ Who was better prepared to maintain that level of prosperity--even increase it--than the *haute bourgeoisie*?

Instead of peace, trade and security at the moment of its triumph, with its old enemies lying prostrate, the city was beset with civil war, depression and dictatorship. How can the decline of Florence's political institutions be explained? Why did the old pattern break at the "apogee" of its apparent political success?

The prosperity of Florence, at the end of the thirteenth century, was predicated on the wool industry. Fundamental to the wool industry were agrarian conditions. It was essential to the woolen guild (*arte di lana*) that there

be an improvement of the breeding of sheep and an improvement of pasture land.⁹ After 1293, the control of the government came into the hands of the wealthy families. These powerful merchants exhibited little concern for the state of agriculture and animal husbandry. What is even more significant, they were actually contemptuous of the plight of the sheep raisers. As a result, there was very little opportunity for the Florentines to compete with the higher quality wool production of the Low Counties and England. Giovanni Villani, historian and man of finance, noted that in 1308, there were 300 factories in Florence producing 100,000 pieces of wool cloth each year. But the cloth was "coarser" and of only half the value, having no intermixture of English wool, which indeed they had not yet learned to dress. By 1338, there were only 200 factories turning out from 70,000 to 80,000 pieces of cloth each year. There was a decline in production of from 20 to 30 per cent over a 30-year period.¹⁰

The Wool Guild and Guild of Calimala (dressers of foreign cloth) were the chief organizations of producers in early fourteenth century Florence. Both were in a difficult position during this period. Italy was unable to provide them with raw materials. In addition their northern competitors were cutting into their markets. Villani makes no mention of the Silk Guild in his minute survey of Florentine industry in 1338. Professor Villari assumes that the Guild must have made little progress during that period.¹¹ As the woolen industry began to decline, Florence began to concentrate its energies on the silk industry. The markets which had been lost to woolen manufacturers were being reconquered by the silk manufacturers. However, the expansion of the manufacture of delicate gold and silver brocades did not occur until the beginning of the fifteenth century. There was a period of almost 100 years during which the two principal industries declined with no other industry to compensate for the economic losses.

In the matter of banking, we witness a similar decline during the first half of the fourteenth century.¹² Stemming from their commercial relations with the markets of the East, large amounts of specie found their way into the hands of Florentine bankers.¹³ The development of letters of exchange (*lettere di cambio*), the shares of the public debt (*luoghi del Monte*) and the evolution of branch banking were all symptoms of the advance of finance capitalism in Florence.¹⁴ In 1338 the Guild of Money-changers maintained about 80 money-changers' stalls. Florence coined about 350,000 to 400,000 gold florins.¹⁵

The solvency of the Florentine banking system was dealt a serious blow in 1339. On May 6, Edward III of England suspended payment of his debts to the two largest and most powerful financial houses, the Bardi and the Peruzzi. The loss was about three times the total annual revenue of the Republic.¹⁶

The decline of the wool industry and the bankruptcy of the money-changers between 1339 and 1342 were serious factors in destroying the commune. However, it was in the area of foreign affairs that the Republican constitution of the medieval commune suffered its deepest hurt. Communal institutions were incompatible with the Florentine imperial ventures of the fourteenth century. The commune was organized on a bourgeois base. The burghers had united against the nobles and broken their power. When they took over the government, they did not have the military power to pursue imperialistic ventures. Military expansion had to be carried out by mercenaries. Citizen armies made up of the bourgeoisie were less than ineffectual against their well-armed feudal opponents. Warfare in the fourteenth century required a lifetime of training and practice.¹⁷

The military history of the period was begun by the invasions of Henry VII.¹⁸ Florence joined with Robert, King of Naples, and the burghers granted him lordship of the city.¹⁹ The failure of Henry to break the resistance of the Florentines and his untimely death, removed the threat of the Germans from the banks of the Arno.²⁰

The imperial party had lost a chief ("*un condottiero ispirato dalla divinità*"), but they had not lost hope of carrying on the war. Under Ugucione della Faggiuola and then Castruccio Castracani the enemies of the city of the Red Lily began to gain the upper hand. The burghers and their allies were defeated at Montecatini in August of 1315.²¹ Ten years later, the Republic was defeated at the battle of Altopascio.²² So great was the fear of the merchants for the safety of the city, that they offered Charles, the son of their ally, the King of Naples, lordship over their city. He agreed to provide the military power

requisite for their security and survival.²³ His dictatorship in itself is not significant. He did little to change the power relationships in Tuscany. What is significant is the breakdown of the old communal pattern. The old Republican constitution was adequate for ruling an isolated, prosperous medieval community. It was not suitable for governing a state fighting for markets and survival.

The next 15 years of Florentine history were directed towards one purpose--the conquest of the city of Lucca. Villani and many others believed this policy to be foolish.²⁴ They felt it had been engineered by the Florentine capitalists who drove the Republic to this acquisition under the pressure of private interests of state. It seems doubtful that the Medici, Strozzi, Peruzzi, Albizzi, Mozzi, etc., consciously betrayed their state. Rather they failed to gain the city of Lucca because they did not have the experience to conduct a prolonged war.²⁵

Not only were their imperialistic ventures doomed to failure, but in October of 1341, the city of Lucca fell into the hands of the loathed Pisans.²⁶ The merchants had not only lost the prize to the city, and Dante prayed the raging Arno might inundate and drown every man and mouse,²⁷ but also they had contracted a debt of 800,000 golden florins. The merchants were bankrupt by Edward's repudiation of his debt. The wool industry had declined. And now the city treasury was empty.²⁸

The danger of Henry VII's invasion had brought on Robert of Naples' lordship over the city.²⁹ The threat of Castruccio had occasioned the dictatorship of the Duke of Calabria.³⁰ Finally the capture of Lucca by Pisa, caused the dictatorship of the Duke of Athens. Evidently the external politics brought about sinister repercussions in the internal affairs of the Republic. Dictatorship, while it is the form of government least compatible with medieval communal institutions, appeared to be the only one in accord with the realizations of the objectives of Florentine imperialism.³¹

Dictatorship was supported by all groups in the society.³² No group manifested faith in republican institutions in this time of crises. There was no opposition to the dictatorship of the Duke of Athens.³³ There had been equally little opposition to establishing a *Signoria* in the past. The threat of Pisa, or Henry VII, or Castruccio, quickly broke the citizens' loyalty to "liberal institutions." Safety and self-interest were of more significance than abstract principles of government.³⁴ The Commune was incapable of solving the complex foreign and domestic problems. Perhaps a foreign dictator could succeed where the domestic oligarchy had failed. Caggese and Saporì both suggest that the most fundamental reason for the decline of republican institutions, was moral.³⁵ We witness the decline of the communal morality. The minds of the Florentines are enclosed; they are invaded with a sense of indefinable disgust, of languor, of prostration and pessimism.³⁶ As a sanguine expectation for a solution to the problems disappeared, so in direct proportion did the traditional morality of the classes.³⁷ These conjectures cannot be proven by the historian--they can only be suggested. In the face of military and financial bankruptcy, we assume the emergence of the morality of Proto-Fascism! The destruction of the feudal economy, law and culture by the artisans, speculators and workers, had been going on since the eleventh century. The end of the old morality and emergence of the new, does not appear as definitive as the two historians have suggested. It may be a factor. Guelph versus Ghibelline, civil war between the nobles and the *haute bourgeoisie*, the papacy of Boniface VIII, and the failure of the invasion of Henry VII, had undoubtedly disillusioned more Florentines than Petrarch and Dante.³⁸

More significant perhaps than the decline of the old morality is the decline of the medieval state. Through the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, the Commune began to lose its original quality. Conflicts between various groups had no theoretical basis. Parties offered neither a program aiming toward stability nor toward a new society. The state was controlled by the strong, who were motivated by a hatred and a desire for revenge against the weak. Laws and elections were used to expell numerous citizens. The exiles and rebels were then willing to resort to any means to overthrow the state. The dominant groups and the exiles became ever more partisan. Neither group was concerned with the interests of society. Each group tried to turn the situation to its own advantage. This was especially true of the nobles. They hated and

despised the Ordinances of Justice which curtailed their power in the state.³⁹ They bided their time until the attention of the government was diverted by some foreign threat. Then they would establish a government to their liking. Other groups were anxious to subvert the state. The state appointed special police to serve to check the Ghibellines.⁴⁰ The division between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines had created two Republics, two communes, and two societies. Special courts had to be established to administer the property of certain of the rebels.⁴¹ In 1316, King Robert of Naples, sent a vicar to Florence. He was to be given power for 8 years to dissolve the enmity between citizens.⁴² Not only did the vicar fail to dispel hatred between citizens but he had to face the redoubled enmity of the citizenry against his master, King Robert.⁴³

Equally as decisive was the hatred of the little people (*popolo minuto*) against their social and economic superiors.⁴⁴ The people were continuously in arms because they were afraid of the armed magnates and exerted great pressure on the state.⁴⁵ The heavy taxes fell on the *popolo minuto* and they were seriously dissatisfied. They were infuriated by a foreign policy which cost them so many of their hard-earned florins. They, along with the other groups, were willing and anxious to support a dictatorship. For to them, a dictatorship might prove to be the only way out--economically and politically--of the dilemma in which they found themselves.

The history of the city during the fourteenth century, demonstrated the instability of political institutions. Economic and social shifts occasioned political changes. It was not until the fifteenth century that political stability was achieved. Perhaps this was due less to the Medici than to the permanence of the social and economic fabric.

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²Pasquale Villari. *The Two First Centuries of Florentine History*. page VII, London, 1908.

³K. M. Setton. *Some Recent Views of the Italian Renaissance*. pages 10-11, Report of the Canadian Historical Association, 1947; A. Saponi, *La Crisi Delle Compagnie Mercantile Die Bardi E Dei Peruzzi* (Florence, 1926).

⁴Romolo Caggese. *Firenze Dalla Decadenza Di Rome Al Risorgimento D'Italia*. volume 2, Florence, page 74; 1913.

⁵*Loc. cit.*

⁶N. Ottokar, *Il Comune di Firenze alla Fine del Dugento* (Florence, 1926).

⁷G. Levi, *Bonifazio VIII e le sue Relazioni col Comune di Firenze* (Rome, 1882).

⁸N. Ottokar, *op. cit.*, p. 25; R. Caggese, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 484; G. Salvemini, *Magnati e Popolani in Firenze dal 1280 al 1295* (Florence, 1899).

⁹P. Villari, *op. cit.*, p. 269; A. Saponi, *Una Compagnia di Calimala ai Primi del Trecento* (Florence, 1932); G. Villani, *op. Cit.*, XI, 92,93. A. Doren, *Die Florentiner Wollentuchindustrie* (Stuttgart, 1901).

¹⁰G. Villani, *op. cit.*, XI, 94.

¹¹P. Villari, *op. cit.*, p. 323; A. Doren, *Das Florentiner Zunftwesen* (Stuttgart, 1908).

¹²A. Saponi, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

¹³O. Meltzing, *Das Bankhaus der Medici und seine Vorlaufer* (Jena, 1906), p. 74.

¹⁴G. Villani, *op. cit.*, XI, 88; XII, 55.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, XI, 54.

¹⁶E. Russel, *The Societies of the Bardi and Peruzzi*. page 227, ed. G. Unwin, Finance and Trade under Edward III (Manchester, 1918); W. Rhodes, *The Italian Bankers in England and Their Loans to Edward I and Edward II*, Historical Essays by Members of the Owens College Manchester (London, 1902), p. 139; A. Saponi, *op. cit.*, p. 58; G. Villani, *op. cit.*, XI, 88.

¹⁷G. Villani, *op. cit.*, IV, 7; VI, 43. E. Ricotti, *Storia delle Compagnie di Ventura in Italia* (Milan, 1929), 3 vols.; R. Davidsohn, *Geschichte von Florenz* (Berlin, 1927), volume 4, Ch. 3.

¹⁸Dino Compagni, *op. cit.*, III, 24; *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae*, ed. Paget Toynbee (Oxford, 1920); *Epistola V*, pp. 46-62; *Purgatorio* (Temple Classics), VI, 76ff.

- ¹⁹G. Villani, *op. cit.*, IX, 31;
- ²⁰*Acta Henrici VII*, ed. Bonaini (Florence, 1877), volume II, n. 365, pages 278-279. G. Villani, *op. cit.*, VIII, 120; IX, 31; Dino Compagni, *op. cit.*, III, 35.
- ²¹*Acta Aragonesia*, II, n. 261, p. 552; Stefani, *op. cit.*, r. 304.
- ²²G. Villani, *op. cit.*, IX, 304-306.
- ²³G. Degli Azzì, *La Dimora Di Carlo Duca Di Calabria A Firenze*, Archivio Storico Italiano, Series 5, volume XLII, 1908, page 45-83; 259-304.
- ²⁴G. Villani, *op. cit.*, XI, 130; *Storie Pistoiesi* (Castello, 1907), 100, page 174; N. Machiavelli, *Istorie Fiorentine* (Florence, 1927), II, 33.
- ²⁵C. Paoli. *Della Signoria di Gualtieri VI Duca d'Atene in Firenze*. Giornale Storico degli Archivi Toscani, volume VI, page 85; 1862.
- ²⁶G. Villani, *op. cit.*, XI, 135.
- ²⁷*Inferno* (Temple Classics), XXXIII, 80-84.
- ²⁸C. Paoli, *op. cit.*, *The Sum Given Is 400,000 Golden Florins Plus Expenses for the Pisan War*, page 87.
- ²⁹*Acta Henrici*, VII, II, n 108ff., p. 87ff. G. Villani, *op. cit.*, IX, 31.
- ³⁰G. Villani, *op. cit.*, IX, 304-306.
- ³¹R. Caggese, *op. cit.*, II, p. 117.
- ³²C. Paoli, *op. cit.*, doc. 82, pp. 209-210.
- ³³G. Villani, *op. cit.*, XII, 3. N. Machiavelli, *op. cit.*, II, 3.
- ³⁴F. Schevill. *History of Florence*, page 219, New York, 1936.
- ³⁵R. Caggese, *op. cit.*, II, p. 122; A Saponi, *op. cit.*, p. XIII.
- ³⁶R. Caggese, *op. cit.*, II, p. 123.
- ³⁷A. Saponi, *loc. cit.*
- ³⁸*Inferno*, (Temple Classics), III, 106-108; *Paradise*, (Temple Classics), XXVII, 55-60; *The Sonnets, Triumphs and Other Poems of Petrarch*, (Bohn Library), (London, 1897), p. 136. Alfred von Martin, *Sociology of the Renaissance*, trans. by W. Luetkens (London, 1944), pp. IX-X.
- ³⁹G. Salvemini, *op. cit.*, p. 390; R. Davidsohn, *op. cit.*, chaps. 6-7.
- ⁴⁰G. Villani, *op. cit.*, IX, 76.
- ⁴¹*Acta Henrici*, VII, II, n. 108, p. 87-88.
- ⁴²*Provvisioni*, XV, c. 11, 3.
- ⁴³*Provvisioni*, XV, c. 90, 11.
- ⁴⁴G. Villani, *op. cit.*, IX, 3; Dino Compagni, *op. cit.*, III, 40.
- ⁴⁵*Provvisioni*, XV, c. 91-92.