

Italy in the High Middle Ages 1150–1309

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The Europe of the High Middle Ages (1150–1309) was principally divided between the Latin-speaking peoples and the Germanic peoples.¹ Although the latter had once invaded and momentarily subjected the Latins, the attraction of the latter's originally Mediterranean culture had conquered the invaders. The universal language of western Europe had become Latin. Despite the importance of the Germanic peoples, there is no doubt that Latin and its derivatives so dominated the cultural life of Europe that, if one were obliged to find a single adjective with which to qualify the word 'Europe' for this period, one would choose 'Latin,' and describe the whole as 'Latin Europe.'

France and Italy led Europe during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.² This may seem strange. Their cultural and military preeminence and their capacity to influence other parts of western Europe seem odd when their internal constitutions are examined. During the twelfth century French law spread far beyond her frontiers, yet France herself boasted no monarchy or state comparable to that of Plantagenet England, Norman southern Italy, or even the declining German Empire. The typical Italian state that produced Europe's common law (*ius commune*) and published its most elaborate statutes was an urban republic, tiny when compared to the states of Spain, to England, and to Germany's provinces, not to speak of Empire.

But the size of political units was not the principal criterion of inventiveness or importance in this period. In spite of the Hohenstaufen revival, the German Empire had been irreparably weakened by the alliance of the Roman Church, the German nobility and the Italian towns. The success of the Capetian monarchy, the basic victories of the Roman Church, the fundamental rise of Italian commercial and industrial power, and the vast emigration of Frenchmen and of French culture grounded the predominance or

leadership of France and Italy during the high middle ages. It was in France and Italy and the parts of Europe hard against their frontiers that the institutions most characteristic of the medieval epoch reached the peak of their development.

The harmony of northern and Mediterranean power typical of the high middle ages was instanced by the amicable relationship of France and Italy. Both combined in the crusades to penetrate the Near East.

The French and the Italians did not advance by means of their own power and wealth alone. They were also blessed by a happy circumstance. Their leadership was relatively easily accepted because their principal neighbours were busy expanding Europe's frontiers. The Spaniards fought Islam to the south. The English were busy at home and along their Celtic fringe. The Germans moved eastwards against the Slavs. Latin Europe's centre therefore profited from the fact that the powers and peoples on the periphery looked outside the Latin world for advancement, not within.³

Italian fleets swept the Mediterranean and Italians joined the French in the settlement of that sea's eastern shores. In the Fourth Crusade of 1204, when Constantinople fell and the Latin Empire was established in Greece and the Aegean, territory was given to the Venetians who had provided the fleet. This gave them the upper hand in Bosporan and Greek commerce. The Piedmontese house of Monferrato was granted the major fief of the new Latin emperor, the kingdom of Thessalonica. More lasting was the settlement of Italians along the coasts of the Mediterranean and Black Sea cities or quarters of cities, enjoying the privilege of extraterritoriality. Some of these *fondachi*, like Genoa's Pera, a suburb of Constantinople, soon became self-governing communities. The fastest route to China ran from the Genoese towns in the Crimea-Azov region of the Black Sea, across the Caspian Sea by Genoese vessel, and thence through Tartary. Writing early in the fourteenth century, Francis di Balducci Pegolotti, a director of the Bardi firm of Florence, reported that the route to Peking was quite safe. Italians were also busy in Iran, then in the control of a friendly Mongol khanate. In 1321–24 a Dominican missionary observed that Genoese merchants sailed their own vessels from the Persian Gulf to India and Ceylon.⁴

If Italy's maritime enterprise ruled the eastern Mediterranean by the end of the twelfth century, the next hundred years saw its rise in the western part of that sea and its penetration into the Atlantic as far north as Bruges in the period between 1271 and 1317.⁵ The spread of the Italian merchant-bankers and money lenders beyond the Alps was

a notable characteristic of the thirteenth-century economy. The tallage roll of 1292 tells us that Lombards were the wealthiest inhabitants of Paris. In fact, two Italians had taxable incomes nearly twice that of the richest French patrician clan, that of the Marcel. By 1291 resident Lombards paid the French Crown a revenue twice that paid by the Jews.⁶ The Lombard was for a long time necessary to the economies and to the rulers of the west. (Italians were called Lombards in northern Europe.)

A further stimulus to Italian enterprise was the close connection of the Italian, especially Tuscan, merchant-bankers with the Church. The Tuscans became to principal collectors and creditors of the Popes. A partial schedule of papal collections published by Martin IV (1281–85) shows this clearly. Tuscany and Liguria were assigned to the Buonsignori of Siena. England, Scotland, and most of Germany and Slavonia were given to eight Florentine houses. Portugal and parts of Spain went to three firms at Pistoia and Lucca. The humble Squarcialupi of Lucca drew the consolation prize, the northern islands, including Greenland, where hides, whalebone and similar commodities substituted for money.⁷

The popes and townfolk of Italy stood together against the German emperors. Not only was liberty to be gained from this alliance, but also profit. By 1200, during the pontificate of Innocent III, Rome was the diplomatic capital of the Latin west, and by 1300 western princes were well advised to retain ambassadors at the papal court, of whom many, if not most, were also officers of the Italian merchant-banking houses, especially Florentines. Playing on the classical division of Europe into the four great nations of the French, Germans, Italians and Spaniards, Boniface VIII once looked around his court and observed that the Florentines truly constituted a fifth nation.⁸

The papacy itself was closely bound to Italy. From the death of the Englishman Adrian IV in 1159 until the accession of Urban IV in 1261, the popes were all Italians and so were most of the curial personnel. Italian participation in the life of the Church was not limited, however, to administrative direction or to profit. Two of the four larger mendicant orders of the thirteenth century were Italian in origin, including the Franciscan, the largest of all. Again, if the French seemed to exemplify the intellectual life with their University of Paris, the penetration of that institution's faculty of theology by the mendicant orders was initially an Italian invasion. The first Dominican to teach there was Roland of Cremona, and the names of Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas speak for themselves.⁹

Although the popular cliché assigned the Empire to the Germans and the Church to the Italians and the University to the French, the Italians were not without their own intellectual specialties. Italians were preeminent in medicine. Besides, if France had philosophy, Italy had law. Italians were best known for studies in law in Bologna and other centres.

By modernizing Roman law, Italian professors created the most influential common law (*ius commune*) of the medieval period. Indicative of Italian leadership in legal studies was the growing authority of Italian jurists in expounding and creating canon law, the other great *ius commune*. By the mid-twelfth century the great canonists learned their business in Italy. These learned studies were firmly based upon practical legislative and judicial experience. The statutes and codes of Italy's urban republics and other states constitute the largest and most articulated body of constitutional material to be found anywhere in western Europe during this period.

Italian arms were generally employed at home to weaken the traditional power of the German Empire in the peninsula. Although imperial suzerainty never wholly disappeared, it gradually faded to a point in political theory, admittedly significant in polemics, as is instanced in Dante's *De monarchia*, but relatively unimportant in the practical politics of Italian states and urban republics. As the jurists recognized, these little states admitted "no superiors in the world."¹¹ Their decisive victories over transalpine power were won in the late twelfth century.

Italians were proud of their newly won liberty, and their freedom was the quality that impressed the foreigners who observed them. James of Vitry described the Italians as being sober but talkative,

circumspect in council, diligent and zealous in managing their government, prescient and tenacious about future matters, refusing to be subject to others, defending before all else their liberty, issuing their own laws and customs under one common captain whom they elect, and observing them faithfully.¹²

Lombardy, Liguria, Tuscany and adjacent territories constituted the most heavily urbanized region of the Latin west. There lay Venice, the west's largest town, with a population of about 90,000 in 1338. Milan appears to have been of almost the same magnitude, Genoa and Florence somewhat smaller. The patriotic chronicler John Villani estimated Florence's population at 90,000 before the plague. Pisa had 50,000 in 1315. What makes Italy impressive is that a large number of towns ranging in population from 10,000 to 30,000 were

located in a rather small area. Other than Florence and Pisa, for example, Tuscany boasted no less than four towns in this range—Siena, Lucca, Pistoia and Arezzo—and similar statistics can be derived from other areas in Lombardy. This contrasted sharply with the rest of the Mediterranean area, where occasional large cities like Naples and Palermo (50,000 inhabitants) and the ancient metropolises of Alexandria and Constantinople were the focus of the economic life of regions not notable for other important centres.¹³

Population figures for the decades around 1300 indicate a population in western Europe that was not to be materially surpassed until the agricultural and industrial revolutions of modern times. Italy boasted about eight million of which about two and a half million were in southern Italy and Sicily. England supported around three million. The area within the frontiers of modern France probably contained about twenty million.

A lively and growing commerce was accompanied by improvements in transportation. The first Italian voyages to Flanders and northern waters are recorded in 1277, and by about 1314 regular sailings to Flanders and England of great galleys from Genoa and Venice were scheduled. (Italian sailors and captains began to take service in Spain and France and to encourage the diffusion of Mediterranean maritime law.) In good weather the whole length of the Mediterranean from west to east could be traversed in one to two months. Only great cities or ports like Genoa and Venice were commercially active the year round.

In the early 1300s the papal couriers, largely borrowed from the Tuscan merchant-banking firms, counted five days from Avignon to Paris, eight to Bruges, thirteen to Venice and ten to Valencia. In short, all Europe could be informed of an event within about a month.¹⁴

By the late 1200s dual citizenship, although usually limited to non-political rights, was not only common in Italy but was also known in most of France and Flanders and in parts of Germany. Closely related to it was the right of domicile, of which the most famous example was the Lombard Privilege. Although Italians, or Lombards, as the rest of the Latins called them, had begun to settle in France early in the 1200s, the privilege itself did not develop until the latter half of the century. In Germany the oldest Lombard Privilege was that of Trier in 1262. By about 1325 most Rhenish, Swiss and south German towns had accorded Italians this residence right.¹⁵

The majority of Italians who lived in the high middle ages never heard the word 'Italy.' It was a country in which only the literate

lived. Consciousness of its meaning arose from three sources: the classics, xenophobia, and exile.¹⁶ The study of classical literature gave the idea of the old Roman province, praises of *Italia* from the Latin poets, and a belief that the peninsula formed a territory with natural boundaries. These learned insights could blend easily with an antipathy towards non-Italians, towards peoples whose language could not be understood and whose soldiers devastated native fields and towns in some claim to lordship over them. From the time of Gregory VII (1073–85) the Papacy had appealed to “all Italians” against the pretensions of the German emperors, and some communes had answered with a call for “Italian liberty” in their resistance to a foreign lord. The Lombard communes came together “for the honour and freedom of Italy and for the’ preservation of the dignity of the Roman Church.” In the later thirteenth century the cry of “Italy” was raised again by the Hohenstaufen Manfred against French popes and princes.

It was from outside Italy that the word found the strongest response, among merchants and exiles. In an alien world and without the protection of their cities’ laws, Florentines, Venetians, Genoese, and Milanese were likely to draw together and to find in one another men whose minds and habits were less strange, men with whom it was sometimes necessary to form working alliances and with whom, perhaps, the pleasures of nostalgia could be shared. Brunetto Latini, forced in 1260 to take refuge from the Ghibelline rulers of Florence, had gone to France and there had written of French as being the most delightful of all languages. Yet on his return to his native city he expressed his new consciousness of nationality in the lapidary judgment: “Italy is a better country than France.” In his chronicle, Giovanni Villani, who had spent six years as an agent of the Peruzzi bank at Bruges, found it normal to write of a city faction-leader as being a man of the greatest renown, not in Florence or Tuscany or Christianity, but *in Italia*. Above all, it was from the circle of Italians resident at Avignon that Petrarch drew his intense consciousness of Italy and his hatred of foreigners.

The exile from his native town who stayed in Italy might, like Dante in his search for a common literary language, find there some unity: “very simple standards of manners, dress, and speech by which our actions as *Latini* are weighed and measured.” The close interdependence of town and countryside in the peninsula, the frequency with which nobles engaged in trade, the high level of urban literacy and education, all contrasted strongly with anything found north of the Alps. Elements of cohesion could be seen too in the

common legal culture, even in the provincial alliances of city factions, and, certainly, in the interchange of officials, such as *podestà*, among different communes.¹⁸

The Rhinelander Alexander of Roes reflects an ethnic consciousness in his belief that Italians were ruled by the love of acquisition (*amor habendi*), Germans by that of ruling (*amor dominandi*), and Frenchmen by the love of knowing (*amor sciendi*). He held that their natural qualities determined the different kinds of government: in Italy the people rule, in Germany the soldiery, and in France the clergy.¹⁹

The arts in Italy, although under transalpine and French influence, were beginning to evolve independently. Among the influences that stimulated Italian artists were, first, their hostility to the Germans who had ruled them for so long, and then, after the honeymoon years of the thirteenth century, their reaction against the French. Cimabue (1240-1302) found inspiration in the Byzantine tradition, but began the movement towards greater realism which culminated in the Renaissance. Cimabue, the discoverer and teacher of Giotto, is the first in the long line of great Italian painters. Cimabue, a Florentine, helped establish his city as one of the principal art centres of the west. The architect Arnolfo di Cambio (1240-1302), who designed the Florence Cathedral, the Palazzo Vecchio, and Santa Croce, ranks as one of the greatest architects of the Middle Ages, as well as a distinguished sculptor. Giotto di Bondone, later the official architect for the republic of Florence, was a well-known painter and sculptor by 1300. Giotto is regarded as the founder of the central tradition of western painting because his work broke free from the stylizations of Byzantine art, introducing new ideals of naturalism and creating a convincing sense of pictorial space. His work inspired both Masaccio and Michelangelo. Undoubtedly the greatest sculptor of his day in the Italian Gothic tradition, Giovanni Pisano (1250-1320) made innovations that pointed the way to Renaissance sculptural ideals. He inaugurated a return to the cultural models of classical antiquity that would last for several centuries.

From about 1250 we can speak of "Italian" art whereas before this the various regional styles each with its inter-European affinities had insufficient characteristics in common to be so identified.²⁰ The great architecture of Tuscany, the monumental sculpture of Pisano, the works of the Roman mosaicists, and the paintings of the Assisi school all appeared together about this time. They were all reactions from the powerful Gothic and Byzantine influences which had

dominated the first half of the century. During this period the originality of Italian artistic genius began to assert itself.

Ilam Rachum's assessment of 15th and 16th century Italy would in large measure hold true for Italy in the high middle ages:

It does not happen often in history, that a nation assumes an overwhelming cultural preponderance in a defined civilization, though it does not lead in the arena of international politics. During the 15th and 16th centuries Italians revolutionized European arts, letters and fashions. What they accomplished in painting, sculpture and architecture became the foundation upon which the modern world was built...they initiated trends and frequently provided the most decisive examples; they were second to no other nation in the sciences, and excelled in most fields which required practical knowledge. At the same time Italy was the battlefield for other nations, and its internal division was deepened by foreign domination. Not until the 19th century were the Italians able to achieve political unity, and not until far into the 20th did they realize that the lack of military might was not perhaps a national failure after all.²¹

- 1 John H. Mundy, *Europe in the Middle Ages 1150–1309*. (London: Longman, 1973) is taken as the norm for defining the dates of this period.
- 2 John H. Mundy, *Europe in the High Middle Ages 1150–1309*, p. 42.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 65. Genoese factories or depots were established at Antioch, Tortosa, Arsuf, Caesarea, Acre, Apamea, Laodicea, Beirut, Tyre and Jaffa. They had colonies in the Aegean islands of Lemnos, Mytilene, Enos and Chios; they had the strongest position at Cyprus, while in the Black Sea, which became their distinctive sphere, the Genoese built up a colonial empire. Owing to the jealousy of Milan, Genoese merchants were largely shut out from enterprise in Lombardy and Germany; consequently, they were quick to carry their trade to the fairs of Provence, Champagne and the Low Countries. See W. Gordon East, *An Historical Geography of Europe* (London: Methuen, 1967, p 312).
- 5 Genoa was the first of the Mediterranean cities to begin, by means of its galleys and by way of 'the Great Sea of Darkness,' organized voyages with the Channel ports of Bruges and London. See W. Gordon East, *An Historical Geography*, p. 312.
- 6 John H. Mundy, *Europe in the High Middle Ages*, pp. 158–9.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 158. Around 1300 the merchants of Lucca had consulates in Paris, London, Bruges, Rome, Naples, Venice, Genoa, Avignon and Montpellier.
- 8 *Ibid.* p., 52. Lucca's merchants and financiers vied with those of Florence. The Bonsignori and the Ricciardi Company of Lucca may be regarded as Europe's most powerful international merchant-banking

enterprises of the later thirteenth century, according to R. Keuper, *Bankers to the Crown: The Ricciardi of Lucca and Edward I* (Princeton, 1973) and Thomas W. Blomquist and Maureen F. Mazzaoui, eds. *The "Other Tuscany": Essays in the History of Lucca, Pisa and Siena during the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Centuries* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications of Western Michigan University, 1994, p. 9).

- 9 Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1160), a thoroughly Gallicized Italian, became bishop of Paris in 1159. His *Four Books of Sentences* (1155–58) became the principal theological work taught in medieval schools and universities.
- 10 The Hohenstaufen emperor Frederick II (1212–50), at home in Latin, Byzantine, Arabic, Norman, French and Lombard culture, was a dynamic pioneer of every creative intellectual movement. It was in his court, as Dante believed, that Italian speech was first systematically developed in literary forms. Major Italian poetry came to life under his patronage. He also sponsored translations of Arabic philosophical treatises (particularly those going back to Aristotle) and Arabic mathematical treatises. He enlarged Salerno's medical school, as well as establishing a zoological collection. But his principal learned foundation was the University of Naples (1224), the first state university in Christian Europe, to which he entrusted a virtual monopoly of learning in many fields. See Michael Grant, *The Civilization of Europe* (New York: Mentor+Plume Books, 1970, pp. 140–41.)
- 11 John H. Mundy, *op. cit.* p. 51 attributes this phrase to the French jurist Dubois without indicating the source.
- 12 *Historia orientalis* 67, in Douai 1596, P. 124.
- 13 John H. Mundy, *op. cit.*, p. 120. Paris was northern Europe's greatest city. Capital of the Latin west's intellectual life and of her most prepotent state, her population rose to about 80,000 in 1328.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 128–30.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 16 John Larner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch 1216–1380* (London/New York: Longman, 1991 4th Impression, pp. 1–2
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Memoriale 15* in *Monumenta Germaniae Historia. Staatschriften* I, i, p. 107.
- 20 Harold Osborne, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 596.
- 21 Ilam Rachum, *The Renaissance: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (London: Octopus Books, 1979), p. 256.