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THE SHORT OXFORD
HISTORY OF ITALY

Italy in the Age of
the Renaissance
1300–1550

Edited by

John M. Najemy

Italy in the Age of the Renaissance 1300–1550

John M. Najemy

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Short Oxford History of Italy

Italy in the Age of the Renaissance

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General Editor: John A. Davis

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1300–1550

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General Editor's Preface

Over the last three decades historians have begun to interpret Europe's past in new ways. In part this reflects changes within Europe itself, the declining importance of the individual European states in an increasingly global world, the moves towards closer political and economic integration amongst the European states, and Europe's rapidly changing relations with the non-European world. It also reflects broader intellectual changes rooted in the experience of the twentieth century that have brought new fields of historical inquiry into prominence and have radically changed the ways in which historians approach the past.

The new *Short Oxford History of Europe* series, of which this *Short Oxford History of Italy* is part, offers an important and timely opportunity to explore how the histories of the contemporary European national communities are being rewritten. Covering a chronological span from late antiquity to the present, the *Short Oxford History of Italy* is organized in seven volumes, to which over seventy specialists in different fields and periods of Italian history have contributed. Each volume provides clear and concise accounts of how each period of Italy's history is currently being redefined, and their collective purpose is to show how an older perspective that reduced Italy's past to the quest of a nation for statehood and independence has now been displaced by different and new perspectives.

The fact that Italy's history has long been dominated by the modern nation-state and its origins simply reflects one particular variant on a pattern evident throughout Europe. When from the eighteenth century onwards Italian writers turned to the past to retrace the origins of their nation and its quest for independent nationhood, they were doing the same as their counterparts elsewhere in Europe. But their search for the nation imposed a periodization on Italy's past that has survived to the present, even if the original intent has been lost or redefined. Focusing their attention on those periods—the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the *Risorgimento*—that seemed to anticipate the modern, they carefully averted their gaze from those that did not, the Dark Ages, and the centuries of foreign occupation and conquest after the Sack of Rome in 1527.

Paradoxically, this search for unity segmented Italy's past both chronologically and geographically, since those regions (notably the South) deemed to have contributed less to the quest for nationhood were also ignored. It also accentuated the discontinuities of Italian history caused by foreign conquest and invasion, so that Italy's successive rebirths—the Renaissance and the *Risorgimento*—came to symbolize all that was distinctive and exceptional in Italian history. Fascism then carried the cycle of triumph and disaster forward into the twentieth century, thereby adding to the conviction that Italy's history was exceptional, the belief that it was in some essential sense also deeply flawed. Post-war historians redrew Italy's past in bleaker terms, but used the same retrospective logic as before to link Fascism to failings deeply rooted in Italy's recent and more distant past.

Seen from the end of the twentieth century this heavily retrospective reasoning appears anachronistic and inadequate. But although these older perspectives continue to find an afterlife in countless textbooks, they have been displaced by a more contemporary awareness that in both the present and the past the different European national communities have no single history, but instead many different histories.

The volumes in the *Short Oxford History of Italy* will show how Italy's history too is being rethought in these terms. Its new histories are being constructed around the political, cultural, religious, and economic institutions from which Italy's history has drawn continuities that have outlasted changing fortunes of foreign conquest and invasion. In each period their focus is the peoples and societies that have inhabited the Italian peninsula, on the ways in which political organization, economic activity, social identities, and organization were shaped in the contexts and meanings of their own age.

These perspectives make possible a more comparative history, one that shows more clearly how Italy's history has been distinctive without being exceptional. They also enable us to write a history of Italians that is fuller and more continuous, recovering the previously 'forgotten' centuries and geographical regions while revising our understanding of those that are more familiar. In each period Italy's many different histories can also be positioned more closely in the constantly changing European and Mediterranean worlds of which Italians have always been part.

John A. Davis

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John M. Najemy

Cornell University

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Introduction: Italy and the Renaissance

John M. Najemy

Italian history between 1300 and 1550 is ineluctably tied to the Renaissance. Yet each is in a sense larger than the other. Italy's history encompasses more than the cultural Renaissance, and the Renaissance similarly extends beyond Italy in its ramifications and influences. But neither can be understood without the other. The chronological parameters of this volume coincide with a broad definition of the Renaissance in Italy, and one of our purposes is to raise the question of how the one is related to the other. In introducing the politics, society, religion, culture, economy, and intellectual history of Italy in these centuries, we seek to depict the environment in which the Renaissance occurred and some of its chief manifestations. But this is a history of Italy in the period of the Renaissance, not a history of the Renaissance. Knowing however that many readers will come to these pages from an interest in the Renaissance, it seems appropriate in this introduction to sketch a broad interpretation of the larger connections between Italian history and the Renaissance over these two and a half centuries.

The period encompasses a particular phase in the history of Italy's relationship to the rest of Europe: one of relative autonomy between two eras in which Italian politics and culture were heavily conditioned by influences from outside the peninsula, before 1300 from Germany and France, and after 1530 from Spain. North-central Italy was part of the Holy Roman Empire, and from the mid twelfth to the mid thirteenth century, Italian history was dominated by the ambitions, first of Emperor Frederick I ('Barbarossa') Hohenstaufen, who

waged a thirty years' war from the 1150s to the 1180s to subdue the cities of northern Italy, and then by his grandson Frederick II, born in Italy and based in Sicily, who repeated the effort on a more grandiose scale between the 1220s and the 1250s. The dynasty's final defeat in the 1260s put an end to a century-long struggle that profoundly affected Italian society by dividing its cities and elites into warring camps of pro-imperial Ghibellines and anti-imperial, pro-papal Guelfs. The opposition was led by the papacy, which forged a coalition of Guelf parties in central and northern Italy with Charles of Anjou, brother of Louis IX of France. With loans advanced by Florentine Guelf bankers, Charles assembled an army, crushed the Hohenstaufen at Benevento in 1266, and created the Angevin kingdom of Sicily and Naples. Charles's power extended to the centre and north through the network of Guelf parties, and for the next generation Italian politics and culture developed in an Angevin–French orbit.

After the 1282 revolt in Sicily (the 'Sicilian Vespers') against French rule, Charles and his successors retreated from wider ambitions to concentrate on the kingdom of Naples, and under Robert (r. 1309–43) Angevin rule gradually ceased to be a foreign implant. By the 1330s France itself was engulfed in war with England and turned its attention away from Italy. Imperial power faded as well. In 1310–13 Emperor Henry VII tried to revive imperial claims in Italy, but he was no match for the combined forces of the Angevins and the Guelf cities, now at the peak of their wealth and power. His failure made it evident that the empire was no longer a serious factor in Italy. Even the popes left Italy. In 1309, a French pope, Clement V, transferred the papacy from turbulent Rome to Avignon in what is today the south of France. For nearly seventy years French popes governed the Church from outside Italy. After about 1310, therefore, Italy was freer to give shape and direction to its social, political, and intellectual life than it had previously been. Autonomy was of course not isolation. Cultural and economic ties with the rest of Europe and the Mediterranean never abated. If anything, they intensified, but now on terms decided as much by the Italians as by their neighbours. The only major intrusion of foreign power into Italy between the Angevins in the 1260s and the crisis that opened in 1494 occurred again in the South. In the 1430s Alfonso of Aragon invaded the Neapolitan kingdom and by 1442 replaced the Angevins. But the new dynasty soon became integrated into the Italian political and cultural

world. The relative freedom from foreign influences provides one justification for treating these two centuries as a discrete phase of Italian history.

At the other end of the period, between 1494 and the middle of the sixteenth century, Italy's political independence collapsed under a seemingly endless succession of foreign invasions. France and Spain, asserting conflicting dynastic claims to portions of Italy, contended for supremacy on the peninsula in a long and costly struggle that divided the Italians, ultimately took Naples and Milan into the Spanish empire, and established Spanish hegemony even in places, like Tuscany, that remained nominally independent. In the mid sixteenth century, the Church undertook a radical restructuring of its relationship to lay society that gave it far more power in Italy than ever before. These developments changed Italy in profound and lasting ways that also transformed the cultural Renaissance whose contours had been moulded by the autonomy of the preceding two centuries.

A world of cities

Autonomy meant more than the simple absence of foreign armies and princes. It also ensured the survival of the multiplicity of political entities that is the most characteristic feature of Italy's political life in the Renaissance. Contemporaries and modern historians were and are divided in assessing this reality. Some decried Italy's political fragmentation as the cause of endemic conflicts in what could and should have been a united province under imperial overlordship; others celebrated the preservation of the vital and distinct cultures of the city-states. Just after 1300, Dante condemned the self-declared autonomy of the cities as a debilitating failure to recognize the only legitimate sovereignty, that of the empire. A century later, Florentine humanists lauded the preservation of 'liberty' in Florence's resistance to the expansionist 'tyranny' of Milan. Still another century later, Machiavelli blamed the Church for keeping Italy divided. However varied the judgements about the existence of so many self-governing entities, it was a reality that nothing came close to changing, not even the expansionist tendencies of the fifteenth-century territorial states. Even as smaller cities were absorbed into these regional states, local

autonomies, institutions, laws, jurisdictions, religious observances, civic rituals, and a fierce sense of local pride and dignity persisted. Modern observers who assume the nation state as the obvious goal of progressive politics typically see these local autonomies as somehow backward, as the expression of an exaggerated provincialism that prevented Italy's emergence as a 'modern' state. But such assumptions obscure the understanding that most contemporaries had of the political culture of Renaissance Italy, in particular the aspirations and values associated with the 'free' city.

By 1300 the independence of Italy's many cities made them workshops of politics and government, engines of wealth, and innovative centres of culture as no European cities had been since antiquity. The north and centre were home to a remarkable number of cities that counted among Europe's largest. Before the plagues drastically reduced populations beginning with the Black Death of 1348, Italy had four of Europe's five largest cities (Venice, Milan, Genoa, and Florence), all with populations over 100,000, and several dozen cities between 20,000 and 50,000, several as large as any (except Paris) in northern Europe. Their de facto independence from superior powers meant that each city was a political battleground, a locus for the exercise and contestation of power, in which more was at stake in the control of its government and economy, not only for its own inhabitants, but also for its hinterland (*contado*), than would have been the case had they been governed by a larger sovereign authority. Each city embodied a civic identity, tradition, and historical memory whose distinctiveness was jealously safeguarded. Even small cities loomed large, both as sites of power and as 'states of mind',¹ or collective consciousness. Italians identified themselves as the children or artifacts of their cities. In Dante's *Purgatorio* (v.133–4), a Siennese woman identifies herself only with her given name and her city: 'I am Pia; Siena made me.' Italians of this age were more likely to identify with those who lived centuries earlier in their own cities than with contemporaries even fifty miles away. Again in the *Purgatorio* (vi.70–81), Dante dramatizes the profound bonds linking inhabitants of the same city across a divide of many centuries when he and Virgil, who was born in Mantua, meet the thirteenth-century Mantuan poet

¹ 'La città come stato d'animo', in R. S. Lopez and M. Berengo, *Intervista sulla città medievale* (Bari, 1984), p. 3.

Sordello, who asks the two wayfarers whence they come. Virgil manages to utter only the word ‘Mantua’ before Sordello, knowing nothing else about him, rises, embraces Virgil, and proclaims ‘O Mantuan, I am Sordello, from your own city.’ The mere fact of being Mantuan suffices to establish a common identity, before names are spoken, across the thirteen centuries that separated Dante from ancient Italy. Dante comments that the ‘sweet sound’ of the name ‘of his city’ prompts Sordello to give such warm welcome to his ‘fellow-citizen’. The idea that cities generated and preserved identities was not new in the Italy of 1300, but the political autonomy of the next two centuries kept it alive and powerful and made Italians even more self-consciously aware of it.

This was a culture that idealized cities, citizens, and the norms of civility that emerged from assumptions about cities. In this respect it was unlike any European culture since antiquity. The ‘civilizing process’ was under way in and through Italy’s cities long before it was translated to Europe’s courts. Praise of cities as the incubators of a superior civility and the unique locus in which citizens could fulfil their intellectual and ethical potential pervaded Italian culture from Dante to Machiavelli. Panegyrics to cities were legion. In *On the Marvels of the City of Milan* of 1288, Bonvesin da la Riva sang the praises of Milan’s population, wealth, social services, the prosperity and productivity of the surrounding territories, and the ‘dignity’ of its people: ‘on festive days, one looks at the merry crowds of dignified men, both of the nobility and of the people’, and ‘the comely gatherings . . . of [married] ladies and [unmarried] virgins going back and forth or standing on the doorsteps [of their homes], as dignified as if they were daughters of kings.’² A famous visual analogue to Bonvesin’s praise of Milan is the depiction of the effects of good government in Siena by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the 1330s: idealized representations of the city’s splendid architecture, its myriad trades and economic activities, teachers instructing students, and young people dancing. The chronicler Giovanni Villani likewise inserted into his massive civic-history of Florence a celebration of the city’s great wealth and the ways it served the common good through education, hospital services, and the distribution of wages paid to thousands of workers

² *De magnalibus Mediolani*, ed. M. Corti (Milan, 1974), p. 104; trans. R. S. Lopez and I. W. Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World* (New York, 1968), p. 69.

in the textile industry. Even Dante, despite his passionate belief in the divinely instituted empire, has his ancestor Cacciaguida speak lyrically (*Paradiso* xv.130–2) of having been born in ‘so peaceful, so fine a community of citizens, such a devoted citizenry, such a sweet dwelling’.

Humanists praised free cities as moral civic spheres in which the virtues could be perfected. In 1377 the Florentine chancellor Coluccio Salutati urged the people of Bologna to reject papal rule and embrace a republic, in which ‘merchants and guildsmen’ would take turns in office, as the only form of government in which liberty, peace, equality, and justice could be realized. Leonardo Bruni, also a chancellor, made the Florentines the perfect heirs of Rome in his *Panegyric to the City of Florence* of c.1406, and in Milan the humanist Pier Candido Decembrio countered Bruni’s claims for Florence in his own *Panegyric of the City of the Milanese* of 1435–6. The praises of Naples were sung in 1471 by a courtier, Loise de Rosa, who underscored the excellence of the city’s nobility, its hospitals, schools, and churches; and he was followed by others, including the humanist Giovanni Pontano, who lauded Naples for producing so many learned men. In his *Florentine Histories* of the 1520s, Machiavelli made the physical city itself a repository of memory and an agent in the preservation of liberty. In relating how the Florentines invited the foreign nobleman Walter of Brienne to assume the reins of government in the military and fiscal emergency of the 1340s, and how they quickly became alarmed by his attempt to make himself permanent lord of Florence, Machiavelli conveys the protests of the Florentines in a long invented speech spoken to Brienne by an elected official who tries to persuade him that his ambition will necessarily fail because of the love of liberty that cities inspire and protect: ‘It is most certain that time does not suffice to suppress the desire for liberty, because in cities one often sees it resurrected by those who have never known it’, either because of the memory of it left by their fathers, or because, ‘even if their fathers do not recall it, the public buildings, the offices of the magistrates, the banners of free institutions will recall it.’³ Public buildings and insignia here become the bearers and preservers of collective historical memory.

³ *Istorie fiorentine* ii.34, in Niccolò Machiavelli, *Tutte le opere*, ed. M. Martelli (Florence, 1971), p. 682. My translation.

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