

GEORGE HOLMES

FLORENCE, ROME AND THE ORIGINS OF THE RENAISSANCE



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RENAISSANCE

GEORGE HOLMES

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FLORENCE, ROME AND THE
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TO ANNE

PREFACE

THE Italian Renaissance is sometimes thought to begin with the blossoming of classical scholarship under the aegis of Salutati and Chrysoloras in early fifteenth-century Florence. A period, however, which excludes the innovations of Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, Giotto and Giovanni Pisano leaves out the origins of the prolonged outpouring of art and thought which the word 'Renaissance' evokes in our minds. The enrichment of artistic and philosophical conceptions which we owe to the Tuscan imagination runs in a line, interrupted but not broken and always standing out from the general development of European civilization, from the late thirteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. I have, therefore, ventured to apply the idea of the Renaissance to the lifetime of Dante, 1265 to 1321, when Tuscan creativity first appeared.

I have aimed in this book to put the major developments of the literary and visual arts in a more general historical setting which includes their political and economic environment. I do not imagine, of course, that they can be explained in this way. The historical explanation of artistic creativity is always imperfect, even when the sources for it are very much better than they are in the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, there are reasons why the enterprise seems to be worth attempting. Tuscany in the age of Dante is the place and time when the arts began to emerge as a separate area of activity independent of ecclesiastical or secular domination. The ultimate result of this movement, which we see in the work of painters and novelists centuries later, is a notable feature of European civilization, arguably as important as science or the nation state. If the beginning is to be seen in perspective it has to be seen in both literature and the visual arts, which develop with a striking simultaneity around 1300. And for the historical imagination, it is tempting to try to see artistic change against the background of the social circumstances in which the artists lived. I have tried, therefore, to write about this episode in the history of painting and poetry as part of the history of Tuscany, adding a rather strong emphasis on the relations between the Tuscans and the papal court, which is essential to the story of the arts.

Apart from the inherent difficulties of writing history of this kind, I am also conscious of the amateurism which is the fate of a writer who attempts to embrace a number of widely different kinds of human activity, each of which has attracted the lifelong specialization of the experts. To attempt, even to a very limited extent, to see significant events of the distant past in a meaningful perspective in which different aspects of society are related, the historian must

accept his deplorable ignorance in many of the fields with which he deals and hope that the result of his work will have a certain interest even though it will often seem to the truly knowledgeable to lack precision. There is a pleasure to be gained from the most exact investigation of particular episodes, but if this book has any value it is of a different kind: it is deliberately an attempt at synthesis.

The civilization of Tuscany and the papal court in the period around 1300 has been studied in its different aspects by very varied groups of historians during the last hundred years. The international character of the scholarship in this part of Italian history has been so marked as to make it different from the history of France, Germany, or England. I have learnt a great deal not only from the Italian elucidators of Dante and of Florentine society but also from the French editors of the papal registers and the German art historians. The wealth of international interest in the field means that it is in some ways a particularly rich area of study. My relatively few footnotes give an inadequate impression of the debts I owe to earlier writers, and I could name a number of scholars whose works have been inspiring. Among them is one name that must be singled out for special mention: Robert Davidsohn, whose history of Florence down to the early fourteenth century, published between 1896 and 1927, is still the most elaborate study of a medieval or Renaissance city ever undertaken, and also the fullest account of the international politics of Tuscany during the period it covers. Davidsohn's knowledge of the Tuscan sources remains quite unsurpassed. I occasionally make specific reference to his book, but its scholarship stands unmentioned behind all I have written about political and social history.

It is impossible to aspire to an understanding of the history of this subject without spending time in the churches and art galleries and the extraordinarily rich archives of the Tuscan cities and of Rome. This requires financial support for which I am greatly indebted to the Leverhulme Foundation, the British Academy, the History Faculty of Oxford University, and St Catherine's College. I should like also to express my gratitude for the help given to me by the staffs of the Archivio di Stato and Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, the Archivio di Stato, Siena, the Archivio Segreto Vaticano, the Bodleian Library and the libraries of the Ashmolean Museum and the Taylorian Institution. Finally, I should like to thank two colleagues learned in specialized fields who read three of the chapters for me: Joanna Cannon (Chs 6 and 9) and David Robey (Ch. 5). They are not responsible for views that have been retained in spite of their scrutiny.

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Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*!

BAUDELAIRE

Il fallait que ces Vertus et ces Vices de Padoue eussent en eux
bien de la réalité puisqu'ils m'apparaissaient comme aussi
vivants que la servante enceinte, et qu'elle-même ne me
semblait pas beaucoup moins allégorique.

PROUST

In Dante dwells the whole spirit of the Renaissance. I love
Dante almost as much as the Bible. He is my spiritual food,
the rest is ballast.

JOYCE

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PART I

Tuscany and the High Medieval Papacy

I

Guelf Ascendancy, 1265–1277

IN 1300, the year of the great indulgence instituted by Pope Boniface VIII, Giovanni Villani, the future chronicler of Florence, went to Rome as a pilgrim and, 'beholding the great and ancient things' at Rome, conceived the idea of imitating the work of the historians of the classical city.

But considering that our city of Florence, the daughter and creature of Rome, was rising, and had great things before her, whilst Rome was declining, it seemed to me fitting to collect in this volume and new chronicle all the deeds and beginnings of the city of Florence, in so far as it has been possible for me to find and gather them together . . . and thus in the year 1300, having returned from Rome, I began to compile this book.¹

The chronology of Villani's composition of his chronicle presents difficult problems, and modern commentators have doubted whether this romantic recollection of 1300 is true. But the impressions it records are an accurate reflection of how a Florentine would have seen the two cities a few years after 1300, when Rome had been reduced to comparative insignificance by the papal settlement in France. Florence had long been regarded as the 'daughter of Rome', founded by Romans in the first century B.C. and drawing its political virtues from the civilization of the creators of the greatest of empires. The remains of the Colosseum towered over a vast settlement whose ancient grandeur was evident in its ruins, but from which the life had fled. Rome was not a centre of commerce or industry, and after 1304 it was not even the ecclesiastical capital of Europe; it was the home of symbolic vestiges, haunted by the recollection of a greatness far beyond that of any modern city. Florence, on the other hand, was a city with no civilized past but an apparently infinite capacity for expansion fed by its industrial workshops and its mastery of international finance.

In the late thirteenth century the balance had been different. Medieval Rome was the creation of the popes, and its administrative importance resulted from the simultaneous emergence in the thirteenth century of the papal state, which gave the papacy control over substantial parts of Central Italy, and the unified Western church. The papal court drew into Rome vast tributes from all over Europe to fill the exchequers of the pope and the cardinals, and attracted the ambassadors of kings and innumerable postulants

¹ G. Villani, *Cronica*, VIII. xxxvi. (I have used the version printed in *Croniche di Giovanni, Matteo e Filippo Villani*, i, Trieste, 1857.)

for ecclesiastical privileges. The year of the Indulgence of 1300 was the summit of medieval Rome's command of Europe, after an extremely chequered political history. There had been long periods when the popes were driven out of Rome, to Orvieto or Viterbo. But there were also periods, like the pontificates of Nicholas III and Boniface VIII, when they were settled at Rome, and when the revenues of popes and cardinals were channelled into the city and used in part to rebuild its churches and palaces and to embellish them in a manner appropriate to a great capital. Most of that work has vanished in the decay of the Avignon period and the rebuilding of the late Renaissance, but down to 1304 it must have impressed a visitor in the way that the more lasting creations of the Renaissance and baroque papacy do today.

The history of civilization in Florence, whose citizens gave Renaissance conceptions their first and sudden birth soon after 1300, is thus inseparable from the history of Rome, the contrasting and balancing wielder of political and aesthetic authority before 1304. The importance of this symbiosis does not result only from the fact that Florentines could never think of political or ecclesiastical theories without invoking the Rome of the distant past—the home of the republic and the Caesars, and of the expansion of Christianity—but also from Rome's practical importance in the late thirteenth century. At that time Rome had been a centre of artistic patronage at least as important as Florence, a great instigator of original ideas in the new visual arts. It had been the home of the ecclesiastical finance on which many of the richest Florentine merchants depended for much of their wealth. It had been the chief centre of political power in central Italy, and the promoter of the *coup d'état* which led to Dante's exile in 1301. After 1304, power and wealth left Rome for more than half a century. But to understand the dramatic creations of Dante and Giotto one must look at Tuscany during the earlier part of their lives against the background of its relationship with the authorities of the city of Rome.

In the mid-thirteenth century the most prominent inhabitants of the Tuscan towns—Florence, Siena, Lucca, Pistoia, and lesser places—were divided into sharply antagonistic groups of Guelfs and Ghibellines. The origins of these divisions are not to be found in the support for Papacy and Empire which the enthusiasts professed. At Florence the Guelf–Ghibelline conflict was traditionally thought to be derived from a dispute which arose in 1215 when Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti was murdered by the Amidei after jilting a bride from that family. As a result of this dispute, powerful clans—such as the Buondelmonti and Donati on the Guelf side and the Amidei and Uberti on the Ghibelline—joined together in close friendships and violent feuds. As reported by the chroniclers this episode is no doubt lifted into unjustified prominence from among the many causes which produced friendship and feud within the wealthy groups, but its fame reflects the realities of city life. Living side by side in the narrow streets, forced to marry their not-far-distant

neighbours, anxious to maintain their honour, accustomed to fighting, able to draw on support from many members of a *consorteria* (a loosely connected but wide group of families bearing the same name), it is not surprising that the gentry of the towns were both intensely friendly and intensely quarrelsome. Their violent disputes arose out of the permanent circumstances of their ordinary lives and took on only accidentally the colouring of large political issues. Not only the causes but also the extreme results of Guelf–Ghibelline conflict are best explained as manifestations of the society in which they arose. Men were expelled from the city permanently in large numbers—as the Guelfs were from Florence in 1260 and the Ghibellines in 1267—because bloodshed made it impossible to live close to enemies. The properties the exiles left behind were seized or destroyed. Sometimes a community that had caused exceptional resentment by its persistent enmity was wiped out by the razing of all its buildings, as the Florentines destroyed Semifonte in 1202 and Poggibonsi in 1270. The ferocity of city-state society leaves permanent marks of indelible bitterness both within cities and between them.

In recent years historians have emphasized more strongly than before that the medieval Italian cities are not to be equated with the bourgeois cities of Northern Europe. They were not ‘boroughs’ formed by merchants for the purpose of ensuring commercial freedom and independence, but the homes of landowners whose property was often in the country and whose family customs were indistinguishable from those of the rural aristocracy. Though the cities of thirteenth-century Tuscany derived much of their wealth and political importance from industry and trade, and the commercial supremacy of the Tuscans over the whole of Europe is the feature of their way of life which seems most prominent, this was a recent economic growth grafted onto an ancient system of social customs which retained its dominance over families and their rivalries. The commune, the political system of republican government, was not the original framework of the city but a complex structure imposed upon city life by the citizens in a desperate and often unsuccessful attempt to contain the conflicts arising from the rivalry of families and classes, and to make a tolerably peaceful life possible in spite of the social instincts militating against it. We have also to take account in Italy of the importance of the family clan or *consorteria*, which often acted as a unit in disputes with other *consorterie*. The clan is again a social feature which distinguishes Italian society from the smaller families of both town and country which are characteristic of Northern Europe.²

The Guelf–Ghibelline conflict came to dominate the political life of Tuscany in the thirteenth century, partly because of the absence of effective political control in Central Italy; monarchy, as it was known to the subjects of

² P. Jones, ‘Economia e società nell’Italia medievale: il mito della borghesia’ in his *Economia e società nell’Italia medievale* (Turin, 1980); J. Heers, *Le Clan familial au moyen âge* (Paris, 1974); J. Larner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch 1216–1380* (London, 1980), chs 4–7.