

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89520-0 - The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento

Guido Ruggiero

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: THE END OF THE
WORLD AND ITS REBIRTH (*RINASCITA*)
AS THE RINASCIMENTO

The End of the World

Did the world end in 1260? Was there an Apocalypse that we have forgotten seven and a half centuries later? Certainly if that were the case it would be convenient for a book that considers an Italian Renaissance or, as it is called in Italian, a Rinascimento, a rebirth (a *rinascita*) of the world in Italy that began at about that time and continued on through the last decades of the sixteenth century. Perhaps surprisingly, one thing is clear: in the middle of the thirteenth century many people were expecting the world to end. And we are not talking about those on the margins of society or the typical fringe groups that today we associate with prophecies of impending doom, but rather emperors and popes, kings, nobles, powerful clerics and merchants, as well as rural priests, peasants, and denizens of the dark alleys and warrens that often typified the Italian cityscapes of the day.

Perhaps the best place to start is with Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202), an Italian preacher and prophet who, although virtually forgotten today, enjoyed great popularity in his time. In fact, he was so popular that no less than two popes encouraged him to write down his prophecies, which spread quickly not just through the learned world of theologians and church leaders, but also through the more general culture – especially that of the rapidly growing and prospering cities of Italy. At the heart of Joachim's prophecy was a discovery he had made while studying that mysterious section of the Bible known as the Book of Revelations. There, following a long tradition of allegorical reading, he found a concealed deeper truth: a hidden third gospel to go along with the Old Testament and the New – the Everlasting Gospel.

Like many others, Joachim believed that the Old Testament was the book given by God the Father to organize and guide humans in the first age of the world: from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden to the

coming of Christ. This had been an age dominated by a wrathful and vengeful God, punishing humans for the first sin of Eve and Adam. But a new age began with the life and suffering of Christ, a new order of the world and a new relationship with God. The New Testament was the new gospel for that new age that was ushered in by Christ's life and death to save humanity: an age of love, a return of grace, and the birth of the Church of Rome that Christ and his disciples established. Crucially, however, that second age literally ended one world and began another – the whole order of reality was changed with Christ's life and death. A world of suffering and despair before the wrathful God of the Old Testament ended, and it was followed by a radically new world watched over by a loving God, fully human and fully divine, Christ.

But, significantly, the Christian view of God was Trinitarian: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If there had been an age of the Father/Old Testament and if Joachim was living in the age of the Son/Christ/New Testament, it was logical to assume that there would be a third age of the Holy Spirit and a new third gospel. That age, as revealed in the hidden Everlasting Gospel, like the age of the Son, would be radically different from what had gone before. Once again one world would end and a new one would be born, ruled over by the Holy Spirit. In that age the Church of Rome and Christ's vicar on earth, the pope, both of which were temporary institutions for creating a Christian society in the second age, would be replaced by the direct rule of the Holy Spirit. In fact, all institutions and governments would fall away, unnecessary as humanity would live in perfect harmony with God via the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus the Trinitarian promise would be fulfilled. And the last age would be one of peace and perfection awaiting the Last Judgment and the end of time.

What changed this radical but not immediately threatening vision into a prophecy with teeth were Joachim's calculations, based on the Bible, that the first age, from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden until the birth of Christ, had lasted 1,260 years. As he expected that each age would be of the same length, that meant that things were about to get exciting because the year 1260, or 1,260 years after Christ's birth, should signal the end of an age and a world and the beginning of something completely new. To make this more interesting and perhaps a little less strange and unlikely, Joachim found in the Book of Revelations a series of signs that would signal that the last days were at hand. Among the most significant there would be: a unification of all religions under the umbrella of Christianity, so that all could enter the Age of the Spirit; a rapid growth of a new order of preachers with a new leader to lead the way into the new age; and in the last days

of the old age, the reign of the Antichrist that would destroy secular society and the Church. For with perfect symmetry, in the name of ultimate evil, the Antichrist would perpetrate the ultimate good, by preparing the ground for the end of the Christian era and the last age of the Holy Spirit.

All this would be only mildly amusing were it not for one troubling fact. After Joachim's death in 1202, many came to believe that his prophecies were coming true. And, significantly, they seemed to be coming true more clearly in the Italian peninsula, especially in the north, where literally dozens of little city-states in the thirteenth century prospered, struggled, and appeared to many to be on the verge of a new age and world order. In those cities a traditional medieval order, typified by what might be labeled the Great Social Divide – where society seemed to be essentially divided between a hereditary nobility and the rest – had been radically and often violently challenged by new social classes, new social and cultural values, and new wealth. In essence the power of an old nobility had been challenged and, at least in the larger cities, pretty well limited by new groupings of merchant/banker/artisan powers who usually called themselves the *Popolo* (the People).

The struggles between the *Popolo* and the older nobility were often violent and bloody and frequently meant that when one group won power, the other was exiled from the city or worse. Also, of course, some nobles deserted their peers – after all, there was a long medieval tradition of tension and fighting among noble clans – to join the *Popolo*, and in turn some members of those merchant/banker/artisan groupings were also prepared to abandon their peers in an attempt to grab power in alliance with the older nobility or merely to ape their aristocratic ways. The result was messy and violent, but usually seen at the time as pitting the *Popolo* of a city and their new wealth and power based on commercial and artisanal activities against the nobility and their more rural landed wealth. Prophecies like those of Joachim, with their prediction that these changes signaled the end of the world, thus found a wide swath of the population ready to give them credit. This was especially true because these negative novelties promised a better last age, preordained by God, where the Great Social Divide would be wiped out and replaced by a unified populace led by the Holy Spirit.

Thus when a humble preacher from the little Italian town of Assisi who would become Saint Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226) founded a new preaching order (quickly labeled the Franciscans) and preached what seemed to most a new and more spiritual vision of Christianity, it was soon seen as a confirmation of Joachim's prophecies of a new leader and new order leading the way to the end. But even before that was recognized, Francis's preaching caught the imagination of a wide range of the population because it had

a deep resonance with the spiritual problems created by the burgeoning wealth of the cities of Italy. Preaching a spiritual life of poverty to the poor peasants of medieval Europe made little sense and had little to offer. When virtually everyone was poor, it did not seem like an impressive sign of spirituality to be poor; it seemed merely normal. But in a society where people were accumulating impressive wealth, seemingly in opposition to the poverty that Christ had preached and that the Bible endorsed, a new preacher and a new order that promoted poverty and called for a more spiritual life had real relevance, hitting at the heart of the changes that worried people, even many of the newly rich.

Francis dramatically stripped off his clothes in the main church of his hometown of Assisi to go naked as God made him – literally with no belongings – into the world and demonstrated his rejection of all property. His followers in turn wandering the cities of Italy in rags, begging their way without material possessions, were potent symbols. In a world powerfully attuned to such signs, they demonstrated the spirituality that came with a denial of worldly goods in the name of living a Christlike life of poverty. In fact, Francis's preaching was so extreme and potentially revolutionary that the leaders of the Church forced him and his followers to moderate their calls for poverty and to dress in clothing that at least covered their nakedness. They eventually settled on the brown robes similar to those still worn by Franciscans, belted with a knotted rope that suggested a commitment to the vow of poverty that remained central to the order. A number of Francis's followers, however, were not happy with such compromises, and a splinter group developed called the Spirituals – again perfectly named for Joachim's prophecy of the coming age of the Spirit. By the end of the century they were declared heretics for their commitment to complete poverty and a spiritual life. Significantly, a number of the Spirituals, when they discovered the parallel between their teachings and Joachim's prophesies, combined the two to preach the impending end of the world with success in the cities of Italy.

As if this were not enough, Francis himself seemed to have begun to fulfill yet another prophecy of Joachim. For not only did he preach Christianity to the birds and animals, he also set out to convert the pagans, actually petitioning the pope to go to the Holy Land to convert Muslims. He eventually made it to Egypt in 1219 with a crusading army and reportedly entered the Muslim camp to try to win converts. And if Francis was the prophesized new leader, right on time a candidate for the Antichrist appeared, the Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250, emperor 1220–1250). He, of course, did not see himself as such. Officially elected emperor by German electors following

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-89520-0 - The Renaissance in Italy: A Social and Cultural History of the Rinascimento

Guido Ruggiero

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

medieval tradition in 1220, he was much more a Mediterranean, born and raised in southern Italy. Most of his life he lived there, balancing effectively a rich rural nobility with newer urban centered merchant wealth and supporting an impressive and vibrant court.

As emperor, and thus theoretically ruler of all the West, Frederick saw himself as the ideal leader to bring peace and order (and taxation to fill his treasury) to the cities of Italy, especially the rich but tumultuous cities of the north. In fact, many cities of the north supported him in the hope that he would deliver peace and order. Others, however, were not so enthusiastic about his attempts to dominate the peninsula. Their resistance was supported by a series of popes, who saw themselves in competition with emperors for power in Italy. For the moment this long story can be made quite short: to the struggles for power in the cities of the north, Frederick brought a new series of wars in which he squared off against local powers usually aligned with the papacy – making them frequently seem to be wars against the papacy itself. In sum, much as Joachim had predicted, here was a ruler who with one victory after another seemed to be slowly but surely destroying the papacy and the Church and fulfilling the requirements of an Antichrist, ending the reign of the Church of Rome and the papacy to clear the way for the Last Age.

Was the Second Age of Christ and the New Testament coming to an end? Was the Age of the Spirit at hand? Everything seemed to point in that direction at midcentury. The Franciscans, especially their more spiritual wing, were preaching a new, more spiritual world; an Antichrist was ravaging the old Church; and the cities of northern Italy were in turmoil. Change was rife, and an old world order seemed to be dissolving in chaos and violence, just as Joachim had prophesized.

But as Frederick's victories mounted, and as the last days seemed evermore nigh, Frederick II, not the Antichrist but just a powerful emperor, died suddenly in 1250 as mere men are wont to do. Some, unwilling to give up on him as the Antichrist, claimed that he was buried along the Rhine waiting for the call to begin the true last age. Some of the Franciscan Spirituals continued Joachim's prophecies into the fourteenth century and beyond, seeing themselves as preparing the way for that last age still to come. In fact, Joachim's prophecies endured, often emerging in times of crisis or influencing religious enthusiasms that featured world-changing visions. Ultimately, true to the strangeness of his prophecy, even some of the Nazi propagandists who preached their own last age – an age of the third and last millennium, the Third Reich – still claimed in the last century that Frederick was waiting to be called to usher in their final age.

Of course, it might seem obvious that the world did not really end in 1260 as Joachim had promised. A good historian would certainly admit that it did not, yet in a way that is at the heart of this book, I would suggest that one world did end around the middle of the thirteenth century in Italy, and another was born. What has been labeled misleadingly the Middle Ages, a rural feudal world dominated by a nobility whose wealth was based on land and a medieval church whose economic roots were similarly rural, was largely superseded in Italy by a new age often labeled the Italian Renaissance. The change did not occur in a day or a year or ever completely, for the nobility continued and even the urban world of Renaissance Italy was highly reliant on the rural world that surrounded it and supplied many of its basic needs. Moreover, its culture and traditions drew heavily on medieval precedents.

And of course, this new age was not the age that Joachim had predicted: poverty did not replace wealth, and churches and governments did not wither away as humanity came to embrace the peace and harmony of the Holy Spirit. Rather, ironically in the north of the Italian peninsula and slowly elsewhere, wealth and material goods came to power as never before, and more urban-based churches and governments flourished. And obviously Joachim's promise of an age of peace and harmony remained unfulfilled. But still I would suggest that the many signs that his followers saw as indicating the imminent fulfillment of his prophecy were in a way correct, for they signaled the end of one world and the start of a new age. The culture and society of that strangely new/old/reborn age is the story of this book.

Time and Rebirth: The Rinascimento a New/Old Age

For all its strangeness to modern eyes, Joachim's prophesy was perhaps most strange to contemporaries for a claim that would go largely unnoted today – that this third age would be a *new* age and a better one because it was *new*. One of the deep differences that sets modern society and culture off from most others is that it tends to accept without question that the new is good. The premodern world, by contrast, had a deep suspicion of change and the new. In fact, in many ways it was enough to label a thing new or a change as an innovation to ensure that it would be seen as wrong and rejected. At one level there is a profound logic in this, for if one looks at the world around us, all things do seem to break down with time and change; thus, from that perspective, change over time, and the new, imply decay. In the best of worlds, then, the ideal would be to hold things as they are or, better yet, to return to their beginnings before change and decay set in, that is, return to when they were first made.

How did this vision of time come to change? This is a complex and perhaps ultimately unanswerable question, but historians usually posit two very broad cultural factors. The first was a general acceptance of a Christian vision of time, which saw it as moving forward positively from a low point with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden to the Last Judgment, when the world would end with the saved living happily ever after with God. The second key factor in this vision was the idea of progress itself, which to a large extent was merely the secularization of the Christian promise that in God's plan for the world, as time passed, things would improve. What both progress and the Christian vision of God's unfolding plan for humanity implied was that time was linear and going somewhere positive, and that meant ultimately that change and the new were good.

But many things in the premodern world and daily life contradicted this vision of linear time and the new. In fact, many still do today as we live in a culture where we tend to overlook the fundamental contradiction between a linear vision of time and a circular vision that we use interchangeably to understand change. Certainly a circular vision of time seemed natural in premodern times. Perhaps most significantly, along with the way things seem to decay with time, the cycles of the seasons and the rotations of the heavens, along with the repeating sequences of time – years, months, days, hours, and so on – all literally turn on the idea that time repeats and thus is circular, not linear. The mechanical clock, invented in the fourteenth century in Italy, is a mechanized version of such a circular vision of time. The first clocks used circular gearing to reproduce the circular motions of the heavens, which were seen as directly creating circular time. In this mimicking of the very nature of the heavens, and time, mechanical clocks seemed to have almost a magical dimension. And, in fact, they were often used in magic, before they were adopted by natural philosophers to measure time in ways that would lead to the development of what we label modern science – a particularly effective offshoot of earlier natural magic.

Although Joachim built his predictions on a linear vision of time dating from the birth of Christ in order to predict the end of the world in 1260, most of his contemporaries still had not adopted the habit of dating from the birth of Christ. In the Middle Ages dates normally were recorded using a cyclical calendar based on the ancient Roman measure of time, the fifteen-year cycle known as the indiction. These cycles were often keyed to the rule of emperors, popes, or local rulers, and just as years and weeks represented time as repeating and circular, so too indictions represented longer periods of time as circular. It was only in the fourteenth century that the more linear vision of time associated with dating from the birth of Christ began to

catch on more generally, and even then documents often were dated both in indications and from the birth of Christ.

The central point, however, is that time remained more circular than linear until the modern world, which meant that the new was seen almost unquestionably as negative and wrong. Change, in this way of seeing time, meant one of two things, either positively returning to the beginning when things were done or made correctly, or negative decay and movement away from good beginnings. The result was that those who benefited from or saw as positive the changes of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries found it difficult to represent them as new and positive. They tended to portray and conceptualize the changes that they wished to present as good not as new, then, but rather as re-turns (going back to the first turn of the cycle of time when things were as they should be); re-forms (going back to the first, correct form of things); re-renewals (going back to when things were new and first put together correctly, thus undoing the damage of time and decay); or, although the term was used less often, re-births (going back to when things first came into being). All these “re” words stressed that the changes they described were not to something new but rather a return to something old and better, because time was circular and the first times of things were the best times.

For culture, society, and even government that meant that positive change was portrayed as going back – return, renewal, reform, rebirth – to ancient, better, first times. In the first-time culture of ancient Rome, most pertinently, society and government in Italy had functioned as they should and were perceived as having been virtually perfect, a golden age of peace, prosperity, and happiness. For spiritual life and Christian salvation, change also needed to be presented as going back to the first time of Christ and the Church. Positive personal change often aimed at literally going back to imitate Christ’s life itself, much as Saint Francis had preached. In fact, Francis claimed to have literally re-formed his own body and thus developed the stigmata of Christ, the wounds that Christ suffered in his passion on the Cross – an impressive personal re-forming. The Church also portrayed positive institutional change as going back to the first Church of Christ’s disciples and the Church Fathers. Once again the affirmative terms were “return,” “renewal,” “reform,” and “rebirth.”

And significantly, for all these “re” words the crucial first times were often closely associated with the early days of the Roman Empire, when both that empire and the first Christian Church were born. For the flourishing cities of the Italian peninsula, especially the cities of the center and north, such a return to a glorious past was especially attractive because their citizens felt

that they were occupying the same spaces, both physical and spiritual, as their forebearers of those superior first times. Frequently, in fact, they lived among the ruins and with the relics of that first Christian and imperial time – the very landscape of Italy was alive with vivid recollections of that more perfect past. Local memories, ruins of ancient Roman buildings, and relics of the martyrs and founders of Christianity (often still working miracles that attested to their potency), all supported by oral and written traditions that recalled superior first times, served as a constant reminder of those glorious first days. And thus they were everywhere available for rethinking the dangers and fears of change or the new as instead positive reforms, returns, or rebirths of a better, more perfect time, what we might call a Rinascimento.

Italy and the Rinascimento

The term more commonly used in English to label the period, the Italian Renaissance, has a number of problems that the Italian term Rinascimento avoids. First, of course, there was no Italy in a modern sense in the thirteenth century or across the period usually labeled the Italian Renaissance. The center and north of Italy in the second half of the thirteenth century were divided into dozens of little city-states, all with their own strong local traditions, loyalties, and local dialects, fiercely defended. Yet for virtually all of those little cities the business of governance was carried out in a common language, a late medieval Latin that was understood by lawyers, notaries, and bureaucrats and by the university-trained in general, as well as by a number of artisans and men of lower status. A significant portion of what was perceived as the more serious literature of the day was also written in Latin, including most prescriptive and philosophical works, religious texts, and even local chronicles. Thus, in a way, a Latin culture that was seen as rooted in a common Roman and Christian past was shared among the cities of the center and north. Of course, that Latin culture was shared more widely throughout the rest of Europe as well, but once again the cities of Italy had a special relationship with that language as they saw it as the language of their own special Roman heritage and first times.

At the level of the language that everyone spoke, however, things were more complex. Local dialects were the norm, and at times they could vary virtually from neighborhood to neighborhood. More pertinently, someone from Venice would have had some trouble understanding a person from Rome or Florence and even more trouble understanding someone from Naples or further south. But the key here is “some trouble,” because it was widely agreed that in most cities the local dialects were just that, dialects of a

language or at least an imagined language that was Italian. Thus Dante could write his famed poem *The Divine Comedy* in a Tuscan dialect of Italian, and although it was attacked for not being written in the learned language of Latin, it also came to be seen as a foundational work for Italian as a language that could be understood by a more general populace in an Italian cultural zone.

In fact, Dante wrote an important work on the importance of Italian (in Latin, ironically), *De vulgari eloquentia*, to convince the intellectual elites of his day that behind the many dialects of the Italian peninsula there stood a primal Italian language that informed and unified them, a topic that he had also explored in an earlier work in Italian, the *Convivio*. Although there appear to be some significant differences in their arguments, the two works agreed that this more general shared Italian language was based on shared historical and cultural experiences at least among the cities of northern and central Italy. At some moments it seemed as if Dante was referring to a language that still needed to be developed, at others it seemed as if he was referring to his own use of the language that would pull forth this underlying unifying language.

Later in the fourteenth century the famous poet Francesco Petrarca, even as he advocated writing a purer, more classical Latin, wrote his love poetry in a Tuscan dialect that he and his admirers again saw as foundational for Italian as a language. Less well known but equally indicative of this development of an Italian culture, based on the local dialects of what was not yet one language, was the decision of many poets in the north of Italy at the end of the thirteenth century to write their poetry in their own dialects rather than in Latin. In sum, for all their local loyalties, the denizens of the cities of northern Italy were beginning to see their culture and society as somehow different in terms of a still largely imagined common language, Italian.

Another measure of a developing sense of *Italianità* has been suggested by those who study the medieval Italian trading cities that sent out groups of their citizens, primarily merchants, to live in the Islamic world and in northern Europe. In both instances these merchants were treated as outsiders and identified with their homeland as Italians. In Islamic lands their separation was usually more rigorous, with their living and working conditions strictly regulated – at least in theory – often in terms that saw them as a particular people. In northern Europe regulations and limitations were usually less strict, but Italian bankers and traders were again definitely seen as outsiders and often labeled Italian. Thus although the trading and banking cities of Italy were frequently involved in intercity competition that at times spilled