

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION—THE ITALIAN STATES IN 1494.

THE extraordinary change which revolutionised the character of Italian life and history in the course of the sixteenth century is not a phenomenon which can easily be referred to the ordinary course of national evolution, but requires a much wider and more elaborate explanation. Italy had once been the centre of European affairs; all that was most striking and vital in history was a part of her history; and though, since the thirteenth century, the gradual growth of independent nations had removed the centre of interest from Italy, which did not follow the general tendency, yet the remarkable activity and intensity of her social and political life seemed to increase rather than diminish, to reach indeed a culminating point towards the end of the fifteenth century. How was it then that a people so intellectual, vivacious, individual, so instinct with character and with genius, immediately collapsed before the attack of foreigners at a far lower stage of civilisation, and fell into a degradation, a "death in life," so complete as that which enveloped it when the following century had but half run its course? The fact was that the extreme complexity of Italian life, its exuberant florescence, its almost extravagant energy, gave an appearance of strength which was absolutely illusory. There was a weakness

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69867-3 - Italy: From 1494 to 1790
Mrs H. M. Vernon
Excerpt
[More information](#)

2 *The Italian States in 1494* [PT. I

hidden at the root, a want of moral and physical stamina in the nation, which was in reality due to exhaustion. It had lived too hard, using up all its resources, and had no reserve of force to fall back upon when the strain came. Degeneration set in with a rapidity which has no parallel in national history. Men who had seen Florence at the height of her prosperity in Lorenzo de' Medici's lifetime, and had shared in the tolerant philosophical speculation and the free and brilliant life of his circle, lived to see the city starved out by a non-descript rabble which called itself an Imperial army, and knew what it was to fear the Inquisition and the spies of the Grand Duke Cosimo.

Most fatal of all her shortcomings was the national tendency to disintegration, which rendered Italy helpless before the new nations of the sixteenth century. France, England and Spain had severed themselves from the cosmopolitanism of the Middle Ages, and at the same time were uniting the scattered elements of feudal life into a national system under a national head. Even in Germany, where the divergences were still profound, the precedence of the Austrian House gave a semblance of unity which was not wholly delusive. But in Italy such cohesion seemed impossible. In the fourteenth century there had been prospects of it, as for example under the Houses of Neapolitan Angevins and Milanese Visconti, but in the fifteenth a balance was established between the States, which rendered it impossible for any one of them to become master of the others. The practical disappearance of the feudal system, which gave at least a nominal coherence to society, the vague acknowledgment of an Imperial overlordship which helped to preclude any other, the violent local jealousies which to this day prevent the real unity of Italy, the extraordinarily divergent types of character, to a great extent due to divergence of origin, all tended to keep Italy a group of independent States; yet these difficulties would not have been insuperable had it not been for the existence in the midst of

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69867-3 - Italy: From 1494 to 1790
 Mrs H. M. Vernon
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

CH. I] *The Italian States in 1494* 3

Italy of the Papacy, which could not absorb and would not be absorbed. Indeed Machiavelli went to the root of the matter when he declared that it was the Papacy which had always kept Italy divided and still continued to do so.

The Papacy acted amongst the Italian States as one of themselves, taking part in their petty politics, and striving by intrigue or small conquests to add to its share of territory. It had neither the material resources nor the continuity of policy necessary for the subjugation of the rest, yet against it the wave of conquest beat in vain. Even if the conqueror were so devoid of the religious scruples of his day as seriously to intend to destroy the Temporal Power in his own favour, it would have been impossible for him in the long run to act against the public opinion of Europe, which was certain to take the form of armed intervention for the rescue of the Holy See. The Papacy had always found a friend in need, a Charlemagne against the Lombards, a Charles of Anjou against the Hohenstaufen. What neither Lombard nor Hohenstaufen could do, what Charles V with his vast power shrank from doing, and what no later potentate until Napoleon dared to do, could hardly be accomplished by one amongst a mutually jealous group of little princes and republics. Nor indeed, though greedy States might scheme to swallow their neighbours, was there any general idea amongst the higher class of minds, from the time of Dante to that of Machiavelli, that any such union was necessary, or even desirable. To them the idea of liberty was curiously perverted; it meant, to be the citizen of a town which, either corporately or in the person of its prince, ruled others; and not to be citizen of such a town meant slavery. It mattered little if the prince were a tyrant and ruled atrociously; it was far better, if one were a Milanese, to be governed by the worst of the native Visconti, than to fall under the beneficent, but "foreign" rule of Venice.

Nor were the Italians disunited only at home; they were equally so in the face of transalpine interference. There

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69867-3 - Italy: From 1494 to 1790
Mrs H. M. Vernon
Excerpt
[More information](#)

seemed to be no corporate sense uniting Italian to Italian against Frenchman or German, but rather a tendency, for which the Papacy had set the example, to call in extraneous aid in local wars. Throughout the fifteenth century, France was almost a sixth power in the Italian system, especially when for two several periods Genoa was actually a French Protectorate. The position of France on the Italian frontier, and the diplomatic genius of Louis XI, who in this respect was more Italian than the Italians, partly accounted for this; but it was still more due to the French dynastic claims upon two Italian States. The House of Anjou had by will devolved to the Royal House of France its old claim to the Kingdom of Naples; and the House of Orleans considered itself the legitimate successor of the Visconti in the Duchy of Milan. Hence the other Italian States could hold these claims as threats over the heads of the *de facto* rulers, the House of Aragon in Naples, the Sforza in Milan. Each State in turn, except Naples, had deliberately invited French intervention, and on one occasion a French army had actually taken part in an Italian war. Florence, which had an old and sincere attachment to France, cemented by their close commercial relations, could always count upon her as an ally; but the great Medici learned the danger of the invasion of Italy by a powerful military State, and were clever enough to keep France at arm's length while not forfeiting her friendship. But when in 1492 Lorenzo de' Medici died, there was no wise head left to take his place as leader in Italian politics, and mutual jealousies were certain soon to lead to an appeal to France. At the same time the French King, Charles VIII, was young, restless, full of dreams of chivalric enterprise, of distant conquests, even of Crusades. With this spirit the French nobles were completely in sympathy; their pugnacity, repressed at home under the monarchy, had to find vent abroad; a young, lusty and united nation was ready to pounce upon the rich spoils of Italy, and in Italy there was neither strength nor unity to resist it.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69867-3 - Italy: From 1494 to 1790
Mrs H. M. Vernon
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CH. I] *The Italian States in 1494* 5

In order to understand the subsequent history it is necessary to form an idea of the different States which composed Italy, and of their characters and politics. This idea can only be obtained with the aid of a careful study of the map. It will be observed how much the possibilities of foreign invasion depended on the attitude of the States which held the Italian side of the mountain passes, through which access could be obtained to the country. And again it should be noticed how the mountain system of Italy itself divides the country, and how that to advance from north to south it is necessary to pass through a long tract of hilly and broken country, with torrential rivers, stretching along the east coast through Romagna, the March and the Abruzzi, or to cross the Apennines into Genoa, Tuscany or Umbria. And, since Umbria is also hilly and difficult, Tuscany in fact commands the best routes southwards. It might also be noted that the rivers, being, especially in winter, rapid and turbulent, act rather as barriers than as water-ways, with the sole exception of the Po.

The map dated 1494 shows Italy divided into five principal States, Venice, Milan, Florence, the Papacy, and the Kingdom of Naples. Venice was decidedly the most powerful; her extensive Eastern possessions gave her prestige, and her great wealth, gained in foreign commerce, provided her with the sinews of war. Her subjects in her mainland possessions, which she called "Terra Ferma" in contradistinction to her over-sea dominions, were contented under her just and liberal government and, not having for centuries known independence, greatly preferred her rule to any other. The lower classes within the city were satisfied with prosperity and good government, and enjoyed their share of the splendid, brilliant life of the city, with its constant succession of fêtes and spectacular displays.

The character of the Venetians was more stable and self-controlled than that of most Italians, and the government

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69867-3 - Italy: From 1494 to 1790
Mrs H. M. Vernon
Excerpt
[More information](#)

6 *The Italian States in 1494* [PT. I

reflected the people ; it was persistent, reserved, self-confident, dignified. The great passion of the citizens was loyalty to the State, which they served with whole-hearted devotion ; and she was able to draw on the most able and intelligent for her statesmen, diplomats and naval commanders. Amongst the shifting Italian governments her constitution was remarkably stable, and it was one of the few institutions which survived the upheavals of the early sixteenth century. It was strictly aristocratic, the nobles alone having any share in the government ; yet their number was large, and the higher posts in the State were not limited to a clique but circulated freely amongst the most able, so that few of the disadvantages of an oligarchy were experienced. The whole body of nobles formed the Grand Council, whose business it was to elect to nearly all the State offices. The Senate, with a hundred and sixty members, was the chief legislative body, and had also the direction of foreign policy. The College, which acted as a kind of Cabinet, contained committees for all executive functions, prepared business for the larger Councils and executed their decisions. At the head were the Doge and the six Ducal Councillors, who took part *ex officio* in all the Councils ; but the Doge himself had become, by successive limitations of his power, a very constitutional sovereign, hardly indeed more than a dignified impersonation of the Majesty of Venice. Outside the regular hierarchy of the constitution was the Council of Ten, a body appointed with a view to the swift and secret despatch of such public business as suffered from the publicity and slowness of the ordinary Councils. Accordingly, urgent questions of foreign policy and serious criminal cases, especially those involving treason, fell into its hands ; and, though in reality neither illegal nor oppressive in its methods, its summary and silent action caused it to be regarded with a kind of superstitious terror. It kept good order within the city, and enabled the State to obtain in foreign policy the advantages of a single ruler, decision, vigour and promptness.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69867-3 - Italy: From 1494 to 1790
Mrs H. M. Vernon
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CH. I] *The Italian States in 1494* 7

Yet Venice was not without weaknesses of her own, and the general degradation of Italian character had not failed to reach her. Her nobles were beginning to live more for luxury and less for duty, and preferred spending the wealth of their merchant fathers to acquiring new riches by commercial enterprise. At the same time her commerce was losing ground under the pressure of competition with other trading States. Florence, Marseilles, and Antwerp vied with her for the trade of the near East, and, when in 1486 the Portuguese discovered the route to India by the Cape of Good Hope, the main line of traffic with the further East was diverted from the Mediterranean, with its dangers of the overland route and the pirates; before long Dutch shippers encroached on the carrying trade of Venice. The advance of the Turks along the Mediterranean coasts threatened more and more to swamp her colonial Empire, and she had to face them without any aid from Europe. The Porte had already seized the Morea and Negropont, and was rapidly improving its fleet, building it up out of the swarm of pirate ships which began to infest the Mediterranean, with a view to becoming a first-rate sea-power. At the same time the success of Venice in augmenting her mainland territory exposed her to the bitter jealousy of her neighbours. All her possessions west of Lake Garda had once formed part of the Duchy of Milan; the strip of land, with the fortress of Peschiera, which formed the connection between her possessions west and east of Garda, had belonged to Mantua. The Polesina of Rovigo she had conquered only a short time since from Ferrara; Ravenna and Cervia were properly Papal fiefs; in Friuli the Empire and the Austrian House had claims. Venice might have self-interested allies, but she had no friends; she was rather proud of her splendid isolation, but it led to her future ruin. It was the jealousy with which she was regarded that made an Italian Crusade against the Turks so impossible. In such a Crusade Venice must lead, but no Italian power would loyally serve under her; indeed

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69867-3 - Italy: From 1494 to 1790
 Mrs H. M. Vernon
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

the other States looked on not displeased to see her lose her Eastern outposts, seemingly oblivious of the fact that her losses brought the Eastern peril nearer and nearer to their own shores.

The Duchy of Milan was a State of an entirely different character: the government was frankly a tyranny, though the general prosperity following the long years of peace and the fairly moderate rule of the Sforza Dukes caused the people to acquiesce with tolerable contentment. Francesco Sforza (1450) was a soldier of adventure, a "Condottiere," who conquered the Dukedom in spite of the keen opposition of Venice and of Milan itself; and, although it was properly an Imperial fief, held it regardless of the refusal of the Emperor to recognize him. Galeazzo (1466) was assassinated by nobles on account of a private grievance; and the third Duke, Gian Galeazzo (1476), succeeded to the Duchy as a child. The real government was in the hands of his uncle, Lodovico, "il Moro" as he was called, a man of entire unscrupulousness and of great abilities, but who, to his own ultimate ruin, had an exaggerated belief in his cleverness. He fancied that he could make tools of everybody, including the King of France and the Emperor, and planned schemes of ambition, the first step towards which must be to wrest the Duchy from his feeble nephew. He was aided by a clever and ambitious wife, Beatrice d'Este. Her cousin, Isabella of Naples, was the wife of the young Duke, and Beatrice would never rest while Isabella took precedence of herself. The cause of Isabella and her husband was naturally that of Isabella's family, the royal House of Naples, and it was this question, which was to a certain extent a woman's quarrel, that finally brought on the crisis in Italian history. Meanwhile, Lodovico could command the resources of the Duchy, which was rich in prosperous commercial towns and in fertile plain-lands, and commanded the southern outlets of the Swiss passes, the Simplon, S. Gothard and Splügen. It was however ill-defended from France, since the western passes

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-69867-3 - Italy: From 1494 to 1790
Mrs H. M. Vernon
Excerpt
[More information](#)

CH. I] *The Italian States in 1494* 9

were held by the Dukes of Savoy as lords of Piedmont, and they could admit the French whether Milan liked it or not. Hitherto these Dukes, who were purely feudal lords, with but limited control over their own States, had taken little part in Italian politics. Their ambition lay towards the west, and they appeared rather French than Italian. Piedmont also had long been insignificant, as the appanage of a younger branch of the House of Savoy; but it was now re-united to the Duchy, and, under a strong ruler, might easily become important. But in 1494 the Duke was a minor, and his mother and guardian was wholly under French influence.

Florence was a State of a wholly different type, and much more complex. Republican in form, with all the machinery of a democratic government, it was in reality wholly dominated by the Medici, a wealthy burgher family, whose rule was none the less absolute for being indirect. They held no official position, but disposed of all the offices, and directed the policy of the State. They had the support of a powerful clique, whose fortune was bound up in their own, and their position, as leaders in the financial world, not only in Italy, but in all Europe, brought all the trading interests in the town into line with theirs, while greatly increasing its importance and prosperity. The lower classes were attached to them on account of their generosity, lavish expenditure on fêtes, and employment of labour. Their popularity was increased by their unostentatious manners and their liberal patronage of Arts and Literature. They were real connoisseurs, and Lorenzo had considerable literary ability, so that they took a representative place among the Florentines, whose chief interests were wealth and culture. Their skill in foreign policy had given both Cosimo (1434) and Lorenzo (1469) great influence in Italy, and had raised Florence to the position of arbiter in Italian affairs. Towards the end of his life Lorenzo held all the complicated threads of foreign policy in his own hands.

The strength of Florence lay in the wit and versatility of

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-69867-3 - Italy: From 1494 to 1790
 Mrs H. M. Vernon
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

her citizens, in her commercial position as the city of great bankers, above all in the cleverness of the Medici. Yet the Florentine character had been weakened since Dante's day by ease and luxury; the very charm of her cultivated society, with its high aesthetic and literary development, showed her lack of strenuous qualities, and the old spirit of freedom had been replaced by sycophancy. A great danger lay in the distaste with which the dominance of Florence was regarded by her subject towns, most of which had been free republics before she deprived them of their liberties. Another source of weakness was the dislike borne to the Medici by a section of the citizens, especially those whose families had belonged to the oligarchy which they replaced. This had long been crushed into submission, but was roused to activity when, on Lorenzo's death in 1492, his place was taken by his totally incompetent son, Piero. Piero offended everyone's susceptibilities by trying to play the tyrant, while the most faithful adherents of the Medici were disgusted by his idleness and vanity. He was little fitted to take the helm of Italian affairs from his father's hand and steer Italy through the coming dangers.

We might have expected to find the Papacy, if not ruling, yet leading Italy, and indeed in earlier periods it had done so. But the gradual degeneration of the Roman Church is a subject which hardly comes within our present scope, except in its most obvious effects, viz. the degradation of the character of the Popes and their consequent loss of influence. The Popes of the fifteenth century, having deliberately crushed the earlier efforts of Christendom towards reform, set themselves, with curious short-sightedness, to the purely secular aim of building up a temporal State. Sixtus IV (1471), who made his family—the Della Rovere—Italian Princes, might indeed have intended that they should be dependent on, and subserve the glory of, the Roman Church; his successors' aims were purely personal, and devoted to the aggrandisement of their relations. Innocent VIII (1484) frankly acknowledged his son, but had