Introduction
Histories of the Future

The future began in Italy around the year 1500. Between the last decades of the fifteenth century and the early decades of the sixteenth century, a new concept of futurity crystallized in the culture of the Italian city-states, taking shape in a wide variety of texts and images. Specifically, Renaissance Italians began to conceive of the future as an unknown and unknowable time-yet-to-come. What tomorrow or next week, next month, next year, or even the next one hundred years held was unknown and, therefore, open to the influence of human agency and random chance. The unknowability of the future held out the promise of opportunity and potential as well as the risk of loss and disaster. This conception of the future, as both unknown and unknowable, stood in contrast to the teachings of the Latin Church, in which time-yet-to-come was revealed in outline, even while it remained obscure in timing.

Of course, it would be absurd to state that the future actually took shape for the first time in European imaginations in the sixteenth century. Ideas about time-yet-to-come were at the heart of Christianity. Looking further back, some mythologies of pre-Christian Europe – Teutonic stories of the twilight of the gods most famously – had ideas or narratives about the shape of the future. Throughout the premodern period, moreover, prophesies, visions, dreams, and astrological practice all made claims to reveal, and have knowledge of, time-yet-to-come. Beyond the metaphysical, Europeans in the centuries prior to 1500 clearly possessed a practical, prudential sense of the future. They wrote wills and testaments, entered into contracts and charters, made charitable donations and endowments; in other words, they planned for the future.[1]

[1] On the variety of ways that premodern Europeans interacted with the future, see the essays collected in Andrea Brady and Emily Butterworth, eds., *The Uses of the Future in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2010), especially Peter Burke's foreword (ix–xx) and the editors' introduction (1–18); J. A. Burrow and Ian P. Wei, eds., *Medieval Futures: Attitudes to the Future in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000), especially Jean-Claude Schmitt, "Appropriating the Future"; and Brent D. Shaw, "Did Romans Have a Future?," *Journal of Roman Studies* 109 (2019).

If the turn of the sixteenth century did not witness the discovery of the future, sui generis and for the first time, it did witness a significant transformation in the way that Italians thought about and perceived time-yet-to-come. The eschatological sense of time of the Latin Church encouraged believers to focus on eternity (timelessness) and on the present, at the expense of the future and the past. It conceived of time as cyclical yet also inexorable in its movement toward a preordained end point. The time of ecclesiastical doctrine, of liturgy, and of Scripture was boundless but not endless. The unknown time-yet-to-come of the new futurity instead related to a sense of time as fractured and compartmentalized, consisting of unique and unrepeatable moments. Time in this conception could be bound by human ingenuity or will but had no apparent end point. Each discrete moment would be followed by another.[2] The new idea of the future was a constitutive component of this emergent sense of time.

More significant, the idea that the future was unknown and unknowable was a new concept in European understandings of time, which emerged for the first time in the decades around 1500. The Church taught that the framework of the future was known through revelation. So too, prophesy, visions, and astrology all operated on an understanding that time-yet-to-come was knowable, even if the details remained obscure. The fundamental assumption of all predictive arts is that knowledge of the future is power. They promise that, once known, the future can be altered or at least accommodated. Similarly, the practical, prudential operations of medieval Europeans – in making preparations for the future through a variety of legal forms – were undertaken on the basis of an understanding that time-yet-to-come could be shaped and even constructed. In making wills and testaments, in signing charters and contracts, premodern Europeans operated with a proleptic sense of the future. They anticipated that tomorrow would be just like today, that it would it operate by the same rules, principles, and values as the present. The mundane future might be obscure and contingent, therefore, but it

[2] On medieval Christian notions of time and the emergence of a different conception of time in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, see Simona Cohen, *Transformations of Time and Temporality in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 39–49; Florence Buttay-Jutier, *Fortuna: Usages politiques d'une allégorie morale à la Renaissance* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2008), 130–38; Jacques Le Goff, *Time, Work, and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 29–42; and Schmitt, "Appropriating the Future." For broader, more theoretical considerations of how human conceptions of time evolve and change, see David Christian, "History and Time," *Australian Journal of History and Politics* 57, no. 3 (2011); Norbert Elias, *Time: An Essay*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); E. R. Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: Athlone Press, 1966), 124–36.

was knowable, in broad outline at least. Around 1500, by contrast, Renaissance Italians instead began to conceive of the future as unknowable, to consider that tomorrow might in fact be completely different from today and operate by different rules, values, and principles.

A key distinction in thinking about the history of the future, then, needs to be made between the future-as-known (in all its various manifestations, from the mundane to the metaphysical) and the future-as-unknown. Jean-Claude Schmitt has recently articulated this as the difference, in the medieval imagination, between *futura* (the plural of the Latin *futurum*) and *avenir* (time-to-come).[3] While the former is known in outline at least, the latter remains entirely obscure. The latter conception, I argue, emerged first around the turn of the sixteenth century in Italy and is the focus of this book.

Since the delineation by Jacques Le Goff between "Church's time" and "merchants' time" – as two distinct temporalities operating in the later Middle Ages – scholars of premodernity have understood that Europeans inhabited a world with complex timing. However, a tendency toward treating these as two fixed, binary opposites has obscured the full complexity of the picture. Some recent studies, in contrast, have emphasized the way that Europeans in the medieval and early modern periods operated with and within multiple temporalities that existed under these two broad categories, including natural rhythms, artificial structures imposed by guilds or other corporate groups, ecclesiastical and secular ritual calendars, and categories such as old and new.[4]

The emergence of the future as unknown time-yet-to-come added another temporality to the already complex notions of time within which Renaissance Italians operated. It did not result in the displacement of the eschatological future of Christianity. Neither did the conception of time as compartmentalized and subject to human will extinguish the theological understanding of time as a fluid sweep from Creation toward the Last Judgment. Instead of one temporality replacing another, they intertwined and coexisted. The new concept of the future, as it emerged in

[3] Schmitt, "Appropriating the Future," 6.

[4] See the very different but equally enlightening arguments of Matthew Champion, *The Fullness of Time: Temporalities in the Fifteenth-Century Low Countries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), esp. 1–63; Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), esp. 7–19. Several of the contributions to Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, ed., *Gendered Temporalities in the Early Modern World* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), highlight the multiplicity of premodern conceptions of time. See those by Alisha Rankin and Elizabeth Cohen in particular. See also the much briefer speculations and critique of binary rigidity in Nick Wilding, "Galileo and the Stain of Time," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011).

Renaissance Italy, constituted a significant addition to this plurality, while also laying the foundations for the modern sense of time and timing. The future began in Italy around 1500 because, around the turn of the sixteenth century, Italians began to imagine time-yet-to-come in a way that appears more familiar to twenty-first-century conceptions than the soteriological, divinatory, or anticipatory notions of the Middle Ages.

The choice of 1500 as the keystone in my argument, the date around which change coalesced, may appear somewhat arbitrary. I should emphasize that I am in no way suggesting an abrupt shift, akin to turning on the lights in a darkened room. Italians did not wake up in 1501 with a fully formed conception of time-yet-to-come as unknown and unknowable. As I hope will become clear, the transformation in ideas about futurity occurred over several decades, hesitatingly, and via complex paths. The place of 1500 in this process emerged from the archival data and sources themselves as my research proceeded. Ideas and images of the future began to shift in the second half of the fifteenth century and, as will be analyzed in much greater detail through the text, began to crystallize in the decades immediately on either side of the turn of the century through the convergence of three factors in particular – the European encounter with the Americas, the onset of the Italian Wars, and impact of Epicurean physics – in conjunction with longer-term shifts in mercantile culture. *Around 1500* is a shorthand way of expressing a complex process of extended change that bridged the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.[5]

In this book, I present the first extended analysis of how Renaissance Italians thought about the future, and how their ideas about time-yet-to-come changed between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[6] In so

[5] Given my focus on futurity, it is worth noting that 1500 also enjoyed a particular prominence in millennial anticipation in the European imagination and that a culture of vernacular prophecy flourished in Italy in these same decades: see Ottavia Niccoli, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990). The coincidence of this with the development of the new futurity endorses the emphasis on the years around 1500 as a point in time in which Italians were particularly concerned with and sensitive to temporality.

[6] Schmitt, "Appropriating the Future," identifies a "breaking point" in the way that Europeans thought about the future in the sixteenth century but does not offer an explanation for this occurrence. Maia Wellington Gahtan, "Notions of Past and Future in Italian Renaissance Arts and Letters," in *Symbols of Time in the History of Art*, ed. Christian Heck and Kristen Lippencot (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), suggests that some different ideas about the future were emerging in the sixteenth century. Jessyn Kelly has analyzed the visualization of chance and future contingency in Northern Renaissance art and culture, "Renaissance Futures: Chance, Prediction, and Play in Northern European Visual Culture" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2011), while J. K. Barret has explored articulations of the future as uncertain in English Renaissance

doing, my argument reveals the ways in which some of the long-standing historiographical narratives of the Renaissance – about secularization and the origins of modernity in Europe – are more complex than either their telling or their refutation would suggest. Just as historians now reject simplistic linear chronologies, which posit the Renaissance as a significant break from the medieval past, so too narratives that emphasize only continuity between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance should be resisted. Continuing either of these dichotomous viewpoints is neither productive nor helpful for historical understanding.[7]

As with 1500, my use of *Renaissance* requires some explanation. Long a significant way station in traditional narratives of western European history, the concept has in recent decades come under scrutiny and deserved criticism. I am using the concept here quite deliberately because of both these factors, not in spite of them. The idea of the Renaissance is profoundly entangled with European notions of temporality, particularly with ideas about progress and modernity.[8] I use it in an attempt to reappropriate it from these earlier ideas, as well as from more recent arguments that it is nothing but a hollow label, and to suggest how it might profitably fit into a different understanding of the history of European temporalities.

In Italy, at least, the label *Renaissance* can justifiably and appropriately be used to discuss the convergence and interconnections between a cultural movement, a political moment, and a commercial flourishing, born of the particular historico-cultural, geopolitical, and economic natures of the peninsula, which unfolded roughly from the mid-fourteenth to the late sixteenth century. Inspired by the material remnants of antiquity that surrounded them, artists and intellectuals looked to the classical past for models and inspiration for the amelioration of contemporary society and culture. In search of legitimacy, the governors of the Italian city-states similarly turned to antiquity for justifications and defenses of their existence in a Europe of emperors, popes, and emergent national monarchies. The cultural movement benefited the aspirations of these Italian rulers but should never be reduced simply to a material

literature, *Untold Futures: Time and Literary Culture in Renaissance England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016). The approaches and methods of these last two scholars, while different from my own, offer arguments that complement the one I offer here by highlighting the particular sensitivity to time and futurity that emerged during the Renaissance.

[7] Stefan Hanß, "The Fetish of Accuracy: Perspectives on Early Modern Time(s)," *Past and Present*, no. 243 (2019), offers a similar critique.

[8] I discuss this in more detail in the Conclusion. See also Nicholas Scott Baker, "A Twenty-First Century Renaissance," *I Tatti Studies: Essays in the Renaissance* 22, no. 2 (2019).

expression of political forces. The convergence on the peninsula of a rich commercial network that connected Italy and Europe to the rest of the Afro-Eurasian land mass in these centuries made possible, at least in part, both the autonomy of the city-states and the productivity of their authors and artists. From the second half of the sixteenth century, the establishment of an uneasy Spanish hegemony following the end of the Italian Wars, the creation of the Tridentine Church, and the gradual eclipse of the importance of the Mediterranean for European commerce by the Atlantic ended the political moment of the Renaissance and curtailed the connections and wealth that had helped to fuel its artistic productivity. The cultural movement, however, had an enduring influence, and developed into new forms across Europe and eventually European colonies in the Americas and Asia.

In my analysis, the Renaissance emerges as a period in Italy's history when time mattered, when a greater consciousness and concern about the passing of time manifested in the Italian imagination. The idea that the Renaissance witnessed the construction of a new idea of the past is long established and, indeed, central to the entire concept of cultural rebirth associated with the period. I argue in the following chapters that the Renaissance also experienced the invention of a new idea of the future. As I demonstrate, the awareness of time and the development of a new concept of time-yet-to-come manifested itself in a variety of ways that problematize and complicate any straightforward attempts to categorize the period.

In particular, while the Renaissance did not produce the modern European sense of temporality in a dramatic rupture from the medieval, it certainly prepared the ground for the hardening of categories such as progress, linearity, and civilization that would eventually characterize the perception of such a break. The story of how that particular modernism developed and how it became co-opted into European projects of empire-building and Enlightenment is not the work of this book. My intention instead is to demonstrate how multiple notions of time and temporality cohered in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian culture, some of which – the unknown time-yet-to-come in particular – laid foundations that made possible the eventual development of modernist European time. Futile debates about whether the Renaissance was modern or not miss the true complexity of the period.

Futurity had posed an intellectual and theological problem for western European Christianity throughout the Middle Ages. The New Testament clearly asserted that the form of the future was known – in the second coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead – and the Latin Church taught that these statements were unassailable truths.

However, Aristotle, the second pillar of medieval intellectual life, had written that any statement about time yet-to-come was contingent, in that neither the truth nor the falsity of the claim could be proven until the future event actually occurred. As a result of this contradiction, the question of future contingency became an important one for scholastic debate and discussion.

No consensus or satisfactory solution to the myriad of subsequent, related problems emerged between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The two most consistent strands of thought both emphasized the ultimate knowability and truth of the future. The first argued that because God existed in eternity (and so outside time), everything occurred simultaneously in the present for him, but added that because divine foreknowledge involved simple, subsequent necessity and not coercion, it did not trouble contingency. This line of argumentation asserted that even if no choice actually existed, human beings chose freely because God exercised neither force nor constraint on their actions. The second line of thinking argued that God knows equally well what he does know and also what he does not know. It held that because knowing and not-knowing are identical for God, future contingency was not affected by divine foreknowledge. By this logic, a claim about tomorrow can be contingent because God can know equally that it is true and that it is not true; only time will reveal to humanity which is the case.[9] At the end of the fourteenth century, therefore, the fundamental Christian conception of the future held that the time-yet-to-come was known to God even if it remained largely obscure to humanity. Moreover, the soteriology of the Latin Church encouraged believers to focus not on questions about the future but rather on the present and on the eternity that awaited them.

Outside scholastic theological debates, in both the learned and popular cultures of early Renaissance Italy, considerations of the problem of future contingency were largely framed through the figure of *fortuna*. The preference of Renaissance authors and artists to use *fortuna* as the vehicle for considering the nature of time-yet-to-come reflects the fact that the allegorical was a central mode of thought in the intellectual and cultural life of Italy between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Ernst Cassirer pointed out, several decades ago, the use of allegory in Renaissance thought was not merely a rhetorical choice or an aesthetic preference for embodied forms to clothe abstract concepts but rather a

[9] Calvin Normore, "Future Contingents," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100–1600*, ed. Norma Kretzmann et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). See also Champion, *The Fullness of Time*, 69–75.

key structure in the way that ideas were processed and considered.[10] It was the principal vehicle used by Renaissance authors and artists for the communication of complex ideas in a manner that was simultaneously intellectually sophisticated, subtle, and playful. Allegorical form worked on multiple levels in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian culture, engaging a deep heritage of classical and Christian ideas and conveying this efficiently and effectively in a single figure. Allegory bridged the space between the cultural memory of the viewer, reader, or listener and the creativity of the author or artist.[11] *Fortuna* cast in the form of the homonymous Roman deity provided the perfect figure for discussing and imagining the passage of time, particularly the appearance of chance and unexpected events, that is to say, the contingency of the future.

In Christian Europe, the classical goddess Fortuna – with her sphere, rudder, and cornucopia – transformed into a regal woman presiding over a relentlessly turning wheel.[12] Conceived as an agent of Providence, she became the moral educator of humanity. The inevitable rise and decline of all upon her wheel reminded mortals of the fleeting nature of earthly success in comparison with the eternal rewards promised by Christian theology. In this way the figure of *fortuna* explained the role of chance and the unexpected in a universe governed by divine omniscience, and also acted as a caution against trusting too much in the prudential sense of the future that tomorrow would be identical to today, providing an understanding for why it might be different than anticipated.

The contingency of future events could thus be explained and integrated within the eschatological time of the Church via the figure of *fortuna*, understood as servant of divine will. Providence and *fortuna* constituted the principal vocabulary of futurity in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and the two terms operated independently yet inseparably. The former described the consistent unfolding of time toward its predetermined, if obscure end. The latter provided an explanation for the irruption of the unanticipated and seemingly random in this inexorable sweep, in a manner that did not contradict divine foreknowledge of the future.

[10] Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 74.

[11] Lina Bolzoni, *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press*, trans. Jeremy Parzen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

[12] Throughout the book, I will distinguish the more general, allegorical figure of *fortuna* from the clearly embodied Roman deity, Fortuna. While the former encompasses the latter, as the following chapters will demonstrate, the meanings attached to the figure of *fortuna* extended beyond the literary invocation and imagination of the goddess.

In this book, I examine how these two key terms for understanding the future were disentangled and how the figure of *fortuna* came to bear new meanings, over the course of several decades between the mid-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries. Uncovering how the figure of *fortuna* increasingly lost its connection with a Christian ethical-instructional impetus, I trace the paths by which new guises, new significations, and new associations cohered around it in the cultural spaces where religion, morality, wealth, commerce, and time converged. These were never broad, smooth avenues but rather circuitous, often hesitant, and dog-legged crosscuts. I have not uncovered a linear progression from one temporality to another. Instead, my analysis reveals the messy, complicated ways in which the concept of the future, as unknown time yet-to-come, emerged, as one more temporality experienced in sixteenth-century Italy. As a result of these processes, the figure of *fortuna* ceased to work as an allegory that made sense of the contingency of future events in a divinely governed universe and instead began to emphasize and embody the very uncertainty and unknowability of tomorrow.

The prominence of the figure of *fortuna* in Renaissance thought – so extensive that one recent study labeled it a "banality" – has resulted in a rich literature on its form and appearance. These studies have principally considered its usage as a metaphor or allegory for the instability of human experience. Two significant contributions advanced this idea to argue that it represented or captured the more ephemeral concept of the spirit or creative energy of the Renaissance, while a handful of analyses have suggested that as a representation of variability it served principally as a political allegory.[13] An acknowledgment of the passage of time and,

[13] For interpretations of *fortuna* as a Renaissance allegory for human experience, mostly focused on the term's appearance in literary and philosophical works, see Vincenzo Cioffari, "The Function of Fortune in Dante, Boccaccio and Machiavelli," *Italica* 24, no. 1 (1947); Roberto Esposito, "Fortuna e politica all'origine della filosofia italiana," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011); Thomas Flanagan, "The Concept of *Fortuna* in Machiavelli," in *The Political Calculus: Essays on Machiavelli's Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Parel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972); Iiro Kajanto, "Fortuna in the Works of Poggio Bracciolini," *Arctos: Acta philologica fennica* 20 (1986); Frederick Kiefer, "The Conflation of Fortuna and Occasio in Renaissance Thought and Iconography," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 9, no. 1 (1979); Cary J. Nederman, "Amazing Grace: Fortune, God, and Free Will in Machiavelli's Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999); Achille Olivieri, "'Dio' e 'fortuna' nelle *Lettere storiche* di Luigi da Porto," *Studi veneziani* 13 (1971); Howard R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature* (London: Frank Cass & Co, 1967); Mario Santoro, *Fortuna, ragione e prudenza nella civiltà letteraria del Cinquecento* (2nd ed.) (Naples: Liguori, 1978); and Francesco Tateo, "L'Alberti fra il Petrarca e il Pontano: La metafora della fortuna," *Albertiana* 10 (2007). The classic work on *fortuna* as expressing the spirit and energy of the Renaissance is Aby Warburg's 1907 essay on Francesco Sassetti, reprinted in Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European*

especially, of the unexpected turn of events in human experience underlies all these interpretations. However, only one previous study has explicitly recognized that *fortuna* served principally as an allegory of time during the Renaissance. While a handful of other scholars have considered the significant connection between the figure of *fortuna* and conceptions of time, they directed their focus elsewhere.[14]

In this book, building most obviously on the considerations of these latter scholars, I argue that the figure of *fortuna* served principally as an allegory for the contingent nature of the future and that the meanings of this allegory changed significantly between the late fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries. In doing so, however, I have eschewed a systematic genealogy of the appearance of *fortuna* in words and images in Renaissance Italian culture. Not only would such a labor be prohibitively extensive and frankly dull for the reader, it would also needlessly repeat an existing body scholarship.

Beyond the literature on *fortuna* in the Renaissance, I also build on the growing body of scholarship on the history of temporality. Time lies at the center of the disciplinary practice of history. It is the defining dimension on which historical analysis rests. For this reason, it remains a slippery and elusive concept to subject to analysis itself. The analytic nomenclature for talking about time in historical practice and the relationships between past, present, and future in historical scholarship tend to fold back on themselves. In the face of these challenges, the collected essays of the German historian Reinhart Koselleck offer a useful analytical framework for thinking about time in history. In particular, his work provides a conceptual language for thinking about the history of the future. Koselleck proposed that *experience* and *expectation* constitute a pair of meta-historical epistemological categories, which are inseparable

Renaissance, ed. Julia Bloomfield et al., trans. Caroline Beamish, David Britt, and Carol Lanham (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 222–62; but Kiefer also expresses the sentiment. For interpretations of *fortuna* as a political allegory in the Renaissance, see Buttay-Jutier, *Fortuna*; Giuliano Procacci, "La 'fortuna' nella realtà politica e sociale del primo Cinquecento," *Belfagor* 6 (1951); and Edgar Wind, "Platonic Tyranny and the Renaissance Fortuna: On Ficino's Reading of Laws IV, 709 A-712A," in *De artibus opuscula XL: Essays in Honour of Erwn Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York: New York University Press, 1961). Buttay-Jutier identifies *fortuna* as "une banalité" in the Renaissance imagination.

[14] Rudolf Wittkower, "Chance, Time and Virtue," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1, no. 4 (1938); Kiefer, "The Conflation of Fortuna and Occasio"; and Buttay-Jutier, *Fortuna*, 130–38, recognize the connections between time and *fortuna* but their analytic focus lies elsewhere. Cohen, *Transformations of Time*, 199–243, analyzes the iconographical conflation of *fortuna* and *kairos* identified by Kiefer in greater length and detail, but her analytic focus lies on time in general rather than on time-yet-to-come.