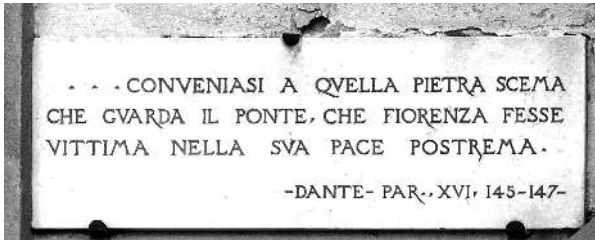
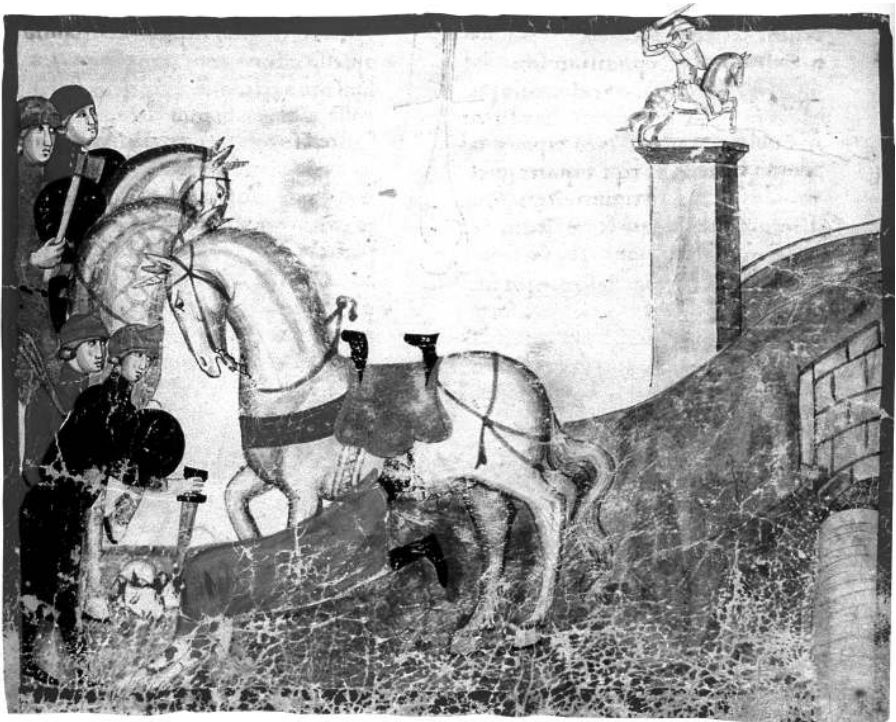


## INTRODUCTION

Even the most casual stroll through the streets of Florence may lead to the Ponte Vecchio, where today, at the northern entrance, one finds a plaque (Figure I.1) inscribed with these verses from Dante's *Comedy* (*Paradiso*, 16.145–147): "... conveniasi a quella pietra scema/ che guarda il ponte, che Fiorenza fesse/ vittima nella sua pace postrema" ("it was fitting that Florence, in her last peace, should offer a victim to that mutilated stone which guards the bridge").<sup>1</sup> The quotation illustrates that when history intersects with physical space it imbues the place with collective memory.<sup>2</sup> In this instance, the events occurred in 1215: the Florentine knight Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti broke a marriage covenant with the Amidei family.<sup>3</sup> His decision to marry instead a woman from the more noble Donati family brought great dishonor not just to the immediate family but to the entire powerful clan to which the Amidei belonged. The violence that ensued marked the starting point for the long-standing hostility between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, factions that represented, respectively, the Buondelmonti and the Amidei. Buondelmonte was murdered at the head of the Ponte Vecchio, near the column bearing an equestrian statue. According to local belief, this statue was an ancient representation of Mars, Roman god of war and pre-Christian patron of Florence, and had once formed part of the ancient Temple of Mars (Figure I.2).<sup>4</sup> Until its disappearance into the waters of the Arno in the flood of 1333, this statue of Mars was believed to avenge Florentines, plunging them into numerous dissensions (Dante, *Inferno* 13.143–150).<sup>5</sup> For Florentines, among them, the



1.1. Plaque with Dante's verses on Ponte Vecchio, Florence. Photo by author



1.2. Artist unknown, *Assassination of Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti*, Villani, *The New Chronicle*, miniature, 14th century. Vatican: Biblioteca Vaticana, L VIII 296, fol.70r. © 2021 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, reproduced by permission of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, with all rights reserved

chronicler Giovanni Villani (c. 1275–1348), the statue stood as testimony to the Roman origins of their city (*The New Chronicle* [*La nuova cronica*] 2.5), as well as to the Buondelmonte tragedy, the manifestation of Florence's violent internal strife.<sup>6</sup> Later authors who had never seen the equestrian statue, among them, Leonardo Bruni (c. 1370–1444), did not mention the statue in relation to Florence's ancient history. When narrating Buondelmonte's story, however, Bruni (*History of the Florentine People* [*Historiae Florentini populi*] 2.108) did draw attention to the exact site where the murder took place and the statue that once stood there, as an omen of the city's misfortunes.<sup>7</sup> Even today, when

both the statue and the confrontation between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines have receded into history, the imposition of the literary text onto this urban space ensures the “maintenance of collective memory.”<sup>8</sup> Dante’s verses vividly recreate the historical context of events that occurred in the early thirteenth century and, by reference to the statue of Mars, allude to the city’s ancient Roman foundation.

The present study considers in depth the contexts and symbols of the public spaces and monuments of Florence and the messages they conveyed. It addresses the fundamental question: How was the urban image of Florence exploited to create the myth of the city, reclaiming the city’s ancient distinguished origins, and announcing its role in the contemporary world? The book concentrates on the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, focusing on the unofficial leadership of the Medici in the period 1434–1492. The structure of the book reflects one of its fundamental arguments – the centrality of lineage in the mind of the Florentines of the time.

## AN IDEA OF LINEAGE

The emergence of Florence as an autonomous city-state began in the twelfth century.<sup>9</sup> The young Florentine Republic, whose rather small community was economically weaker than that of other cities, had, by the middle of the thirteenth century, rapidly developed its political power, with an eye to regional dominion. The leaders of the rising commune hailed from ancient noble families, owners of estates like the Uberti and Buondelmonti, as well as non-nobles who had recently moved to Florence, among them, the Medici.<sup>10</sup> In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Florentine society was marked by factional rivalry between the Ghibellines, that is, primarily ancient Florentine feudal noblemen who supported the Holy Roman Empire, and the Guelphs, nobles and merchants who supported the Papacy and the French kings.<sup>11</sup> However, living in the same neighborhood and belonging to the same confraternities and guilds were among main factors that influenced family alliances and party affiliations.<sup>12</sup> In the wake of numerous disputes, vendettas, victories, and defeats, by the end of the thirteenth century, many Ghibelline families had left the city, allowing the Guelphs to gain dominion.

Guelph–Ghibelline conflicts marked another division in Florentine society of the time, that between the old established elite (*magnati* or *grandi*) and the growing power of the *popolo*, who formed the majority in professional guilds, many of whom were actively engaged in trade and industry.<sup>13</sup> The sympathetic recital of the story of Buondelmonte in the anonymous chronicle written at the turn of the fourteenth century (the so-called *Chronicle of Pseudo Brunetto Latini*) expresses the author’s critical view of the old order and the political style that fostered unrest, the violent vendettas and feuds; in so

doing, the author revealed the emergence of the new social norms promoted by the *popolo*.<sup>14</sup>

One distinguishing feature of fourteenth-century Florentine society of particular relevance to this study is the growing importance of family lineage – name, origins, and history.<sup>15</sup> The deliberate use of family names to indicate contemporary ties of blood, as well as lines of ancestry, began as early as 1210 and increased throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> Numerous family chronicles – for example, the memoirs of Donato Velutti (1367–1370) and Giovanni di Paolo Morelli (1393–1411), and the *ricordanze*, that is, records of family properties and trade activities as well as genealogies – attest to this new emphasis. Discussing the social and emotional context of Florence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, John Najemy writes: “Pride in the name and the need to preserve an exact record of ancestors generated the idea that families had histories; genealogical reconstructions produced narratives linking the generations.”<sup>17</sup> Family names were useful not only to recreate the lineage; in the mobile Florentine society marked by various inner conflicts (among them, Guelph–Ghibelline opposition and *popolo* revolts), names indicated public and political identity and social status, and created a web of social connections. Giovanni Ciappelli argues convincingly that the significant number of family memoirs in Florence, as compared to other contemporary city-states, was a response to the special needs of Florentine society, characterized by political, social, and economic mobility.<sup>18</sup> In Venice, for example, family social status remained fairly constant, whereas Florentine society was more dynamic, with less rigidly defined boundaries between nobles and *popolo*. Some families felt the need to promote themselves socially and politically; they recorded their lineage, highlighted their predecessors’ achievements, and even invented for themselves mythical origins and glorious histories.

Just as the genre of family chronicle emerged in the thirteenth century, so did the historical chronicles of Florence. The earliest surviving city chronicle, *Chronica de origine civitatis*, dating roughly to the time of the Buondelmonte saga (c. 1200–1230), begins with the founding of the colony the ancient Romans named Florentia.<sup>19</sup> The idea of origins, ancestors, genealogical links, and continuity throughout the generations was applied to the city. Just as the family chroniclers recorded information about as many of their ancestors as possible, attributing to them various remarkable traits, including longevity of 120 years, so the city chroniclers narrated the ancient and glorious origins of Florence, adding miraculous elements of legend.<sup>20</sup> Personal histories became incorporated into civic history. Just as the antiquity of one’s family contributed to a Florentine’s representation of self, and could influence his contemporary political career, so the history and antiquity of Florence attested to the achievements that justified the city’s reputation, and thereby promoted its

political and cultural identity.<sup>21</sup> Evidence provided by the written sources and visual arts reveals that Florentines produced a mythical genealogy for their city: Florence as the descendant of, and successor to, such ancient cities as Athens, Troy, Rome, and Jerusalem.

The city's descent from, revival of, and superiority to the legendary cities of Rome and Jerusalem formed part of the civic self-expression and urban history which, particularly after the eleventh century, became prominent in several Italian city-states, among them, Venice, Pisa, and Florence.<sup>22</sup> Chronicles and eulogies proclaimed the ancient foundation of their cities by Trojans and Romans and also attested to the more contemporary patronage of Christian saints. The city was viewed as the descendant of ancient Rome, and the citizens aspired to recreate its political, cultural, and artistic achievements, as well as to make the city a spiritual and religious center, on the order of Jerusalem. In such ancient Tuscan cities as Pisa and Florence – which were in fact founded in ancient times and which, in the Late Middle Ages, participated in the Crusades – urban space and architecture was modelled on Rome and Jerusalem, stressing associations with both cities.<sup>23</sup> In the case of Florence, the creation of the city myth is particularly striking. The number of written texts (poems, novels, missives, chronicles, etc.) that stress ancient origins and architectural achievements is much higher in Florence than in other cities, and some of these texts place a unique emphasis on the city's association with ancient Athens. Another factor is the reputation and influence of prominent Florentine authors – the *tre corone* Dante (c. 1265–1321), Petrarch (1304–1374), and Boccaccio (1313–1375) – and artists Giotto (c. 1267–1337), Brunelleschi (1377–1446), Donatello (c. 1386–1466), and Masaccio (1401–1428).<sup>24</sup> Let us dwell for a moment on this last point, which contributes to the fuller comprehension of the idea of the associations of Florence with legendary historical cities as part of the formulation of the city's myth.

Giovanni Boccaccio, Dante's first biographer, stressed that even though Dante was exiled from Florence and never permitted to return, he nonetheless always identified himself as Florentine and retained a filial love for his homeland:

In truth, however ungrateful and insolent you [Florence] were towards him, he always as a son held you in reverence, and never would deprive you of the honor that should come to you through his works, as you deprived him of your citizenship. Although his exile was long, he always called himself a Florentine, and desired to be so called. He always preferred you to every other city. He always loved you.<sup>25</sup>

According to Boccaccio, Dante's immortal fame was to the eternal credit of Florence. In the course of the fifteenth century, the Florentine humanists Leonardo Bruni (1436), Giannozzo Manetti (1440), and Cristoforo Landino

(1481) dedicated biographies to the poet, who became a personality of national significance.<sup>26</sup> The reputation of Florence, as it was formulated from the early fourteenth century, stood out from that of other cities precisely because it was supported by Dante's genius.

For his part, Dante emphasized the artistic fame of another Florentine master, Giotto (*Purgatorio* 11.95). Petrarch recommended to his friend Giovanni Mandelli that he make certain to see, on his way to the Holy Land, Giotto's frescoes in the Castelnuovo in Naples (*Itinerary to the Sepulchre of Our Lord Jesus Christ [Itinerarium ad sepulcrum domini nostri Iehesu Christi]* 10.2): "If you disembark, don't miss visiting the king's chapel, in which the greatest painter of our times, my countryman, has left great monuments of his skill and his genius."<sup>27</sup> Boccaccio praises Giotto's artistic genius for imitating nature (*Decameron* 6.5), as did another Florentine novelist, Franco Sacchetti (c. 1335–c. 1400; *Trecentonovelle* 63, 75, and 136).<sup>28</sup> Chroniclers also pay tribute to the artistic achievements that made legends of their countrymen. Giovanni Villani writes of the eminent Florentines who were his contemporaries, among them, Dante (*Chronicle* 10.136) and Giotto (*Chronicle* 12.12).<sup>29</sup> His nephew, Filippo Villani, glorifies the achievements of Florentine artists, especially Giotto (albeit, rating them as inferior to poets).<sup>30</sup> Among the influential figures of fourteenth-century Florence, the most famous heroes are not the valiant warriors, the righteous men, the religious or political leaders, but the poets, writers, and artists inspired by humanistic culture.

I believe that the unique association of Florence with Athens was stimulated by this cultivation of learned Florentine writers and artists. As Florentine humanists explored the wealth of intellectual and artistic culture in ancient Athens, they became more inspired by the achievements of the ancient Greeks; they strove to recreate and even to surpass those achievements in their own Florence.

#### URBAN IMAGE OF FLORENCE

In Florence it was Dante who played a crucial role in formulating the image of his city.<sup>31</sup> Dante praises Florence first and foremost in the *Comedy* – as Christian Bec notes, he praises not the citizens, but the city.<sup>32</sup> For Dante, Florence is both the beginning, the place of his roots and his birth, and the end, the place to which he will return from his exile forever as an immortal poet. Dante underscores the ancient Roman past of Florence and describes, though fragmentarily, its topography, making particular mention of its buildings: the baptistery (*Inferno* 19.17–18, *Paradiso* 15.134, *Paradiso* 25.9), the Mercato Vecchio (*Paradiso* 16.121), the Badia Fiorentina, located within the ancient Roman walls (*Paradiso* 15.97–99); that is, Dante not only praises the abstract idea of Florence but also celebrates the concrete, physical city. This theme is

further elaborated in the work of Dante’s admirer, Boccaccio. In the *Decameron*, written between 1349 and 1353, characters already move through the easily recognizable topography of Florence. Boccaccio places in more detailed relief the urban surroundings and particular buildings of Florence as compared to the other cities of Italy where the stories unfold. For example, in novella 6.9, the protagonist Guido Cavalcanti exits the Or San Michele, proceeding to San Giovanni along Corso degli Adimari, while in novella 2.5, the protagonist Andreuccio roams the city of Naples which, though well-known to Boccaccio, is described without specifics of streets or buildings.

An impressive view of Florence forms part of the treatise *On the World and Religious Life* (*De seculo et religione*), written in 1381–1382 by the Florentine chancellor Coluccio Salutati (1331–1406):

Let us ascend the hill on the Arno’s left bank consecrated by the pious blood of San Miniato or the twin-peaked mountain of ancient Faesulae, or one of the surrounding ridges whence our Florence may be seen in its entirety, in all its winding curves. Let us ascend, I pray, and let us observe the walls threatening the sky, the turrets in the stars, the enormous temples, and the immense palaces.<sup>33</sup>

Salutati continues with the description of the gradual ruin and eventual collapse of the beautiful, but earthly, and therefore doomed, Florentine buildings – the Palazzo del Popolo and even the cathedral share this fate. The late fourteenth-century reader, however, already has in mind certain impressive vistas, not least because visual representations of the city of Florence had appeared earlier in the century and in public settings. Among such early surviving depictions is the Bigallo fresco of the *Madonna of Mercy* (Figures I.3 and I.4), which in 1342 adorned an open loggia in the Compagnia della Misericordia residence, located on the Piazza San Giovanni.<sup>34</sup> This painting shows a majestic figure of the Madonna of Mercy protecting the citizens and the city of Florence, all depicted in detail at her feet. Florence is encircled by walls designed by Arnolfo di Cambio, with an inscription “*civitas florenti[a]e*” (“the city of Florence”) flanking the fortified portal. Among the many houses, high church towers, and civic palaces, one recognizes the unfinished marble façade of Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral, with Giotto’s bell tower still under construction to its right, the Palazzo dei Priori (known as Palazzo Vecchio from 1565), the Palazzo del Podestà (known as the Bargello after 1574), the Badia Fiorentina, the churches of Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce. The baptistery of San Giovanni, in reality rather a small building compared to these ecclesiastical and civic buildings, is here given prominence by its imposing dimensions and frontal location. Both Salutati and the artist of the Bigallo fresco portray the entirety of Florence as seen from above. The fresco commemorates the construction of the splendid Florentine buildings as



1.3. School of Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna of Mercy*, fresco, 1342. Florence: Bigallo. © 2021. Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo. Color version available online.

works in progress. Even Salutati, as he describes their future destruction, first pays tribute to the city's architectural achievements.

Praise of the contemporary urban image of Florence was taken up by Leonardo Bruni, Salutati's pupil and friend, who discusses it at some length





1.4. School of Bernardo Daddi, *Madonna of the Mercy*, fresco, 1342 (detail). Florence: Bigallo. © 2021. Photo Scala, Florence – courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali e del Turismo

in the first part of his *Panegyric to the City of Florence* (*Laudatio florentinae urbis*; 1403–1404).<sup>35</sup> According to Bruni, two achievements distinguish Florence from other contemporary cities: its “unparalleled cleanliness” and its magnificent architecture. While “every other city is so dirty that the filth created during the night is seen in the early morning by the population and trampled under foot in the streets,” in Florence there is nothing “disgusting to the eye, offensive to the nose, or filthy under foot.”<sup>36</sup> Bruni continues “if we are looking for contemporary architecture, there is surely nothing more splendid and magnificent than Florence’s new buildings” and turns to the architectural image of Florence, its public spaces and buildings as well as private houses and villas.<sup>37</sup> Bruni examines the urban image of Florence for political ends – to proclaim the superiority of this most modern and beautiful city and to legitimize its dominion. Architectural achievements become a touchstone for the greatness of the Florentine people. At the sight of Florentine architecture, one “immediately comes to believe that Florence is indeed worthy of attaining dominion and rule over the entire world.”<sup>38</sup> For the same reasons, in the second part of the *Panegyric*, Bruni develops the idea that Florence was founded by ancient Romans: “your founder is the Roman people – the lord and conquer of the entire world.”<sup>39</sup>

Although Bruni’s political vision of Florence as a New Rome has been studied in depth,<sup>40</sup> the prominent role of architecture in this vision has not been an object of a thorough study. Salutati and Bruni were emblematic of the humanists, leading citizens, patrons of art and artists, who created a broad and rich vision of Florence as a distinguished city; the political aspect was only one among other aspects of this vision.<sup>41</sup>

Urban settings – real physical buildings, city views of Florence commemorated by contemporaries in numerous rhetorical descriptions and paintings, and imaginary architecture incorporated into those representations – were key

elements in the construction of the image of Florence as a distinguished city, that is, the political, civic, cultural, and spiritual leader of its time, comparable to the Athens of Pericles, the Rome of Augustus, and Jerusalem at the time of Jesus (which contains also the allusion to the future celestial Jerusalem). In the course of this study, I consider Florentine cityscapes, real and imaginary, as forming part of the city's mythic genealogy, the promotion of Florence as a reincarnation of the glorious cities of the past: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem.

#### FLORENCE AS A CITY AND THE IDEA OF FLORENCE

The Renaissance concept of the city was inspired by the Platonic tenet that an urban settlement was the earthly projection of the celestial, or divine, model.<sup>42</sup> According to Plato (*Laws* 4.713b), the model was most fully embodied in the mythological past, “in the time of Cronos,” when the polis was distinguished by “a most prosperous government and settlement, on which the best of the States now existing is modelled.”<sup>43</sup> This city, forming part of the legendary Golden Age (*Laws* 4.713e), became the ideal to be imitated. Plato's *idea* of the city is a mental image, an *ideal* prototype that exists eternally.<sup>44</sup> No earthly embodiment can hope to achieve the ideal, but the closer that creation approximates the idea of the city, the closer it approaches perfection. Florentine humanists in the fifteenth century strove to comprehend the complex *idea* of the city and to approximate that idea in their own city of Florence. It was this humanistic desire for an ideal Florence which, by definition, was unattainable.

The term *city* embraces two concepts: a community of people, contained within a particular social and political structure, and the architectural manifestation of the social and political order that exists within the urban setting. Both concepts are dynamic entities that interact with each other, affect and enrich each other. The social order of the ideal city is reflected in the perfect architectural model. When Brunni, in his *Panegyric*, praises the civil institutions and law of Florence, its liberty and republicanism, and the civic virtues of its citizens (inherited from the ancient Romans who, as Brunni believed, founded this *urbis*), he describes Florence as an ideal city-state, destined for glory and dominion. Brunni also dedicates many passages of praise for the beauty of Florence's architecture and surroundings.<sup>45</sup> At the center of this ideal Florence, Brunni places the Palazzo dei Priori, the civic symbol of the Florentine republic (“... this palace is so immense that it must house the men who are appointed to govern the state”<sup>46</sup>), and inspects “with [his] own eyes ... the domes of the basilicas.”<sup>47</sup> However, the city he describes is his own personal creation: the Palazzo dei Priori was not then located in the very center of the city, nor, at the time, were there any domed basilicas in Florence. The “domes of the basilicas” may refer to the Holy Sepulcher church in Jerusalem,