

Florence, a Masterpiece of the Commercial Revolution

THE FOUR ITALIAN cities of Milan, Venice, Genoa, and Florence far outstripped all other European business centers during the Commercial Revolution.⁸⁴ Milan's

given in the 'Ambrosian Excerpts' of the same work) for reasons pointed out by Novati, p. 113, note 1. Note that Bonvesino after citing the figure in regard to salt, which he can obtain from a reliable source, declines to evaluate the figure of pepper imports, which cannot be calculated with any precision.

⁸⁰ *Generales nundine.*

⁸¹ *Forum comune.*

⁸² *Fera.*

⁸³ The writer goes on to say that 'spiritual goods' are as plentiful as temporal, and lists saints, good archbishops, relics, and other blessings of Milan.

⁸⁴ In Western Europe only Paris had a larger population—probably well above 200,000—but it could not compare with the four great Italian cities in economic importance, political autonomy, or size of the bourgeois class. In these respects Ghent, Bruges, and other Flemish towns came closer to Italian business centers.

greatness was connected to some extent with its tradition as an ancient metropolis of the Roman Empire and as a leading archbishopric in the early Middle Ages. In the twelfth century the city already was both the political and economic head of Lombardy. Venice began its career after the collapse of the Roman government in the West, but it had already left behind all other maritime powers in Western Europe before the tenth century. At this period Genoa was barely lifting its head after a long period of decline and distress, but the First Crusade found the city advancing by leaps and bounds. Florence, on the other hand, did not stand out among Tuscan towns before the twelfth century. The city grew from mediocrity to splendor in many fields—artistic, political, economic—in barely more than a century and a half. Milan, Venice, and Genoa surpassed Florence in one or another aspect of commercial life, but probably none of them witnessed so complete a triumph of the bourgeoisie over the nobility. Thus the description of Florence by Giovanni Villani, a famous chronicler and a merchant by profession, is particularly valuable (Document 27). The reliability of Villani's figures, challenged more than once, can now be regarded as definitely established.⁸⁵

Genoese and Venetian chroniclers also give detailed information on economic matters, but they supply no general picture comparable to those of Bonvesino and Villani. One has to wait until the fifteenth century to find a statistical survey of Venetian economy set forth in a speech of the doge Tommaso Mocenigo.⁸⁶ Of Genoa we have only the lively but hardly accurate description of a vernacular poet, but we can measure the commercial growth of the city in the later thirteenth century, its richest period, by comparing figures of the taxes derived from maritime trade. According to extant data, the value of wares imported and exported by sea and subject to tax increased more than four-fold from 1274 to 1293. It has been calculated that the peak figure of 1293 represents a value almost ten times as high as the exports by sea from Lübeck, the leading Hanseatic port, in 1368, the year in which the trade of Lübeck reached its highest figure.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ See especially A. Saporì, 'L'attendibilità di alcune testimonianze cronistiche dell'economia medievale,' *Archivio Storico Italiano*, ser. 7, XII (1929), 19-30, republished in his *Studi di storia economica medievale*, 2d ed., pp. 127-35. Excerpts from Villani were published in translation by R. E. Sells, *Selections from the First Nine Books of the Croniche Fiorentine* (London, 1896). The passage we have selected was not translated by Sells. E. Mehl, *Die Weltanschauung des Giovanni Villani*, is of slight value. The very recent essay of E. Fiumi, 'La demografia fiorentina nelle pagine di Giovanni Villani,' *Archivio Storico Italiano*, CVIII (1950), 78-158, does not substantially impair the validity of Villani's figures.

⁸⁶ There is an excerpt from Mocenigo's speech in English under the title, 'Resources of Venice,' in *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History* (University of Pennsylvania, Department of History, Philadelphia, 1896), Vol. III, Part 2, pp. 11-14. See also G. Luzzatto, 'Sull'attendibilità di alcune statistiche economiche medievali,' *Giornale degli Economisti*, ser. 4, LXIX (1929), 122-34.

⁸⁷ See Lopez in *Cambridge Economic History*, II, 314-15. Consult also Document 207, which is an excerpt from a poem written in the Genoese vernacular.

Giovanni Villani, *The Chronicle of Giovanni Villani*, Book XI, Chap. xciv
From the Italian⁸⁸

Florence [with reference to the years 1336-1338]

MORE ON THE GREATNESS AND STATE AND MAGNIFICENCE
OF THE COMMUNE OF FLORENCE

Since we have spoken about the income and expenditure of the Commune of Florence in this period, I think it is fitting to mention this and other great features of our city, so that our descendants in days to come may be aware of any rise, stability,⁸⁹ and decline in condition and power that our city may undergo, and also so that, through the wise and able citizens who at the time shall be in charge of its government, [our descendants] may endeavor to advance it in condition and power, seeing our record and example in this chronicle. We find after careful investigation that in this period there were in Florence about 25,000 men from the ages of fifteen to seventy fit to bear arms, all citizens. And among them were 1,500 noble and powerful citizens who as magnates⁹⁰ gave security to the Commune. There were in Florence also some seventy-five full-dress knights. To be sure, we find that before the second popular government now in power was formed there were more than 250 knights; but from the time that the people began to rule,⁹¹ the magnates no longer had the status and authority enjoyed earlier, and hence few persons were knighted. From the amount of bread constantly needed for the city, it was estimated that in Florence there were some 90,000 mouths divided among men, women, and children, as can readily be grasped [from what we shall say] later;⁹² and it was reckoned that in the city there were always about 1,500 foreigners, transients, and soldiers, not including in the total the citizens who were clerics and cloistered monks and nuns, of whom we shall speak later. It was reckoned that in this period there were some 80,000 men

⁸⁸ *Cronica di Giovanni Villani*, ed. Magheri, VI, 183-87. This is the most recent edition of the chronicle, but it is far from satisfactory. Another edition, *Istorie fiorentine di Giovanni Villani*, ed. 'Classici Italiani,' VII, 201-06, has also been helpful in places. A critical edition of Villani is still an unsatisfied want.

⁸⁹ The word *stare*, which we have translated 'stability,' is found only in the *Classici Italiani* edition.

⁹⁰ The legislation against the nobility required magnates to put up bail with the Commune.

⁹¹ *Poichè 'l popolo fu*, literally, 'after the people was.' 'People,' of course, means commoners or bourgeoisie as opposed to magnates or patriciate (*grandi*).

⁹² *Classici Italiani: come si potrà comprendere appresso*. The Magheri edition has *come si potrà comprendere*, which has little meaning in this context.

in the territory and district of Florence. From the rector who baptized the infants—since he deposited a black bean for every male baptized in San Giovanni and a white bean for every female in order to ascertain their number—we find that at this period there were from 5,500 to 6,000 baptisms every year, the males usually outnumbering the females by 300 to 500. We find that the boys and girls learning to read [numbered] from 8,000 to 10,000, the children learning the abacus and algorism from 1,000 to 1,200, and those learning grammar and logic in four large schools from 550 to 600.

We find that the churches then in Florence and in the suburbs, including the abbeys and the churches of friars, were 110, among which were 57 parishes with congregations, 5 abbeys with two priors and some 80 monks each, 24 nunneries with some 500 women, 10 orders of friars, 30 hospitals with more than 1,000 beds to receive the poor and the sick, and from 250 to 300 chaplain priests.

The workshops of the *Arte della Lana*⁹³ were 200 or more, and they made from 70,000 to 80,000 pieces of cloth, which were worth more than 1,200,000 gold florins. And a good third [of this sum] remained in the land as [the reward] of labor, without counting the profit of the entrepreneurs. And more than 30,000 persons lived by it. [To be sure,] we find that some thirty years earlier there were 300 workshops or thereabouts, and they made more than 100,000 pieces of cloth yearly; but these cloths were coarser and one half less valuable, because at that time English wool was not imported and they did not know, as they did later, how to work it.

The *fondachi* of the *Arte di Calimala*,⁹⁴ dealing in French and Transalpine cloth, were some twenty, and they imported yearly more than 10,000 pieces of cloth, worth 300,000 gold florins. And all these were sold in Florence, without counting those which were reexported from Florence.

The banks of money-changers were about eighty. The gold coins which were struck amounted to some 350,000 gold florins and at times 400,000 [yearly]. And as for deniers of four petty each, about 20,000 pounds of them were struck yearly.

The association⁹⁵ of judges was composed of some eighty members; the notaries were some six hundred; physicians and surgical doctors, some sixty; shops of dealers in spices, some hundred.

Merchants and mercers were a large number; the shops of shoemakers, slipper makers, and wooden-shoe makers were so numerous they could not be

⁹³ The guild of wool merchants and entrepreneurs in the woolen industry.

⁹⁴ The guild of importers, refinishers, and sellers of Transalpine cloth. Their name is derived from Calle Mala, the 'bad street,' where their shops were located.

⁹⁵ *Collegio* was similar to but not quite identical with an *arte* or guild.

counted. There were some three hundred persons and more who went to do business out of Florence,⁹⁶ and [so did] many other masters in many crafts, and stone and carpentry masters.

There were then in Florence 146 bakeries. And from the [amount of the] tax on grinding and through [information furnished by] the bakers we find that the city within the walls needed 140 *moggia*⁹⁷ of grain every day. By this one can estimate how much was needed yearly, not to mention the fact that the larger part of the rich, noble, and well-to-do citizens with their families spent four months a year in the country, and some of them a still longer period.

We also find that in the year 1280, when the city was in a good and happy condition, it needed some 800 *moggia* of grain a week.⁹⁸

Through [the amount of] the tax at the gates we find that some 55,000 *cogna* of wine entered Florence yearly, and in times of plenty about 10,000 *cogna* more.

Every year the city consumed about 4,000 oxen and calves, 60,000 mutton and sheep, 20,000 she-goats and he-goats, 30,000 pigs.

During the month of July 4,000 *some* of melons came through Porta San Friano, and they were all distributed in the city. . . .⁹⁹

[Florence] within the walls was well built, with many beautiful houses, and at that period people kept building with improved techniques to obtain comfort and richness by importing designs of every kind of improvement. [They built] parish churches and churches of friars of every order, and splendid monasteries. And besides this, there was no citizen, whether commoner or magnate, who had not built or was not building in the country a large and rich estate with a very costly mansion and with fine buildings, much better than those in the city—and in this they all were committing sin, and they were called crazy on account of their wild expenses. And yet, this was such a wonderful sight that when foreigners, not accustomed to [cities like] Florence, came from abroad, they usually believed that all of the costly buildings and beautiful palaces which surrounded the city for three miles were part of the city in the manner of Rome¹⁰⁰—not to mention the costly

⁹⁶ These were the factors or agents of the companies of merchant bankers which had branches abroad.

⁹⁷ *Gabella della macinatura*. The *moggio* was a dry measure equal to 16.59 + bushels.

⁹⁸ Here Villani refers to an earlier period, when Florence was not as large as it was in 1336–1338, the period to which the other figures refer.

⁹⁹ We omit here a description of the different magistracies having jurisdiction in the city. Their large number seemed to Villani another proof of the greatness of Florence.

¹⁰⁰ It would seem that Villani compares the suburbs of Florence with those of Rome. Elsewhere (III, 52, Magheri edition) he says that 'Florence, the daughter and creature of Rome, was on the

palaces with towers, courts, and walled gardens farther distant, which would have been called castles in any other country. To sum up, it was estimated that within a six-mile radius around the city there were more than twice as many rich and noble mansions as in Florence.

A North African City at Its Medieval Zenith

TO CONCLUDE our contrast we ought to compare an African city at its zenith with the Italian centers we have just observed. The period will have to be about one century earlier because the Muslim world as a whole seems to have reached its fullest economic development in or before the twelfth century. Fez, founded in the ninth century and therefore having a cycle of development about as long as that of the Commercial Revolution in Western Europe, will furnish a fair comparison if we view it in the best years of the Almohad domination, that is, the reigns of al-Mansur (1184-1199) and of al-Nasir (1199-1213).

Unfortunately, the description of Fez that follows is unreliable as regards statistical data. To be sure, the fact that it was inserted in a work of the fourteenth century does not alter its value as a contemporary document, since the author, probably one Ibn Abi Zar' of Fez, is known to have written his book by juxtaposing notes he had taken from earlier writers without the slightest attempt at correcting even obvious contradictions among his authorities.¹⁰¹ But Muslim writers with a very few exceptions are utterly heedless of statistical accuracy. In this particular case exaggeration is manifest; probably the figures ought to be cut by one half or even three fourths. Nevertheless, the description of districts, shops, and markets in Fez is a valuable document.

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Ibn Abi Zar' (?), *The Pleasant Garden of Cards and Information about the Kings of the Maghrib and the History of the City of Fez*¹⁰²

Fez [fourteenth century, after earlier sources]

In the time of the Almoravids and of the Almohads the city of Fez attained a degree of prosperity, happiness, comfort, and peace such as no other town in the Maghrib has ever enjoyed. The number of mosques in the time of al-Mansur, the Almohad [1184-1199], and of his son al-Nasir

increase and destined to do great things, even as Rome was in her decline. . . . Rome was the standard term of comparison for many ambitious medieval cities: see W. Hammer, 'The Concept of the New or Second Rome in the Middle Ages,' *Speculum*, XIX (1944), 50-62.

¹⁰¹ Gautier, *L'Islamisation de l'Afrique du Nord*, pp. 37-52, gives a colorful, if slightly over-critical, characterization of the work. Its title, literally 'The Garden of Cards,' probably means merely 'the collection of filing cards.' See also the description of Cordoba by al-Maqqari in P. de Gayangos y Arce, *The History of the Mohammedan Dynasties in Spain*, I, 207ff.; but al-Maqqari was a seventeenth-century writer and his description of a tenth-century town can hardly be regarded as a contemporary document.

¹⁰² We have used the Spanish translation by A. Huici: Ali ibn Abd Allah ibn Abi Zar al Fast, *El Cartás; noticias de los reyes del Mogreb e historia de la ciudad de Fez*, pp. 44-45.