# SIX

## THE REPUBLIC OF FLORENCE

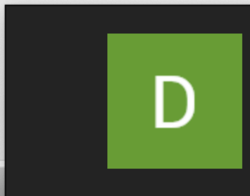
IT WAS NOT an accident that Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio were Florentine and that Florence has been called by a great many historians "the cradle of the Renaissance." The relationship between the development of Florence—a guild republic dominated by a class of wealthy, cosmopolitan merchants—and the principles of Renaissance humanism must be investigated in detail. To do so, it is necessary first to see how and why Florence began its rise to spectacular wealth and influence during the Middle Ages and how these

factors provided a platform on which the Renaissance as a cultural and intellectual movement could be constructed.

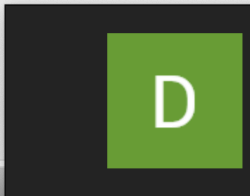
## FLORENCE: GOVERNMENT AND ECONOMY

To a great extent, the background of Florence in the Renaissance is the history of the development of the Italian mercantile and financial capitalism that accounted for the remarkable wealth of Florence and of the merchant patriciate who institutionalized the values of the Renaissance. This merchant elite, having grown rich, challenged older authorities for control of the city's government and, once successful, turned the state into a vehicle for the promotion of their economic

interests to the exclusion of their previous masters, the Tuscan nobility and their urban allies. How did this capitalism begin, and why was Italy the leader in this period of economic change? Part of the answer is geographical, the result of the peninsula's position between the eastern Mediterranean and western Europe. But the other part of the answer is political, the result of Italy's fragmentation after the collapse of Rome. Free from the interference of the pope or emperor, adhering often only to the broad and shifting allegiances of Guelf or Ghibelline, individual cities evaded the restrictive trade practices that hampered northern European commerce. Even such restrictions as the official church ban on usury could be circumvented, and the protective guild practices of many northern cities were relaxed. And, with the pope and emperor often being far away and needing to seek support from allies on



the peninsula, the heavy hand of royal taxation was lighter and the often extortionate actions of rural magnates were controlled. Political and mercantile freedom and the flexibility and control needed for large capital accumulations permitted a revolution in commerce and trade, a revolution that was restricted, at least initially, to Italy. What we can see, then, is that by about 1300, the great Italian mercantile cities had most of the essential techniques of capitalist business activity in place. New forms of business association and new methods of credit and exchange, as well as more complex relationships between finance and industrial production, were developed to serve both the Italian and the European markets, reinforced by the complex demands of the Crusades and refined in the highly competitive world of the Italian states.



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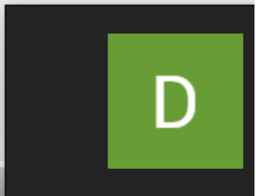
For example, new forms of business association became necessary when emerging opportunities required more capital than a single merchant could realize or when the complexities of trade required shared responsibility. A legally binding mechanism was needed when several traders were involved in long-distance trade in which one would travel abroad as a resident factor, another would superintend the transport, and a third would arrange its resale. Add to this both the constant appetite for more capital to take advantage of the growing luxury market and the opportunity to travel greater distances or purchase in greater quantity. Few individual merchants or even extended families could risk much of their fortune on such ventures, so instruments for the pooling of capital had to be invented. Instruments like the *commenda* appeared, which specified both who would invest what and the rate of return for



an individual voyage. Also, merchants in need of capital would take money from even small investors at interest, promising a fixed rate of return. This capital would then either be used to finance mercantile adventures or be lent to others to pursue economic opportunities. In short, merchant organizations and mercantile families—and these were initially often one and the same—developed into banks as well as trading houses, making money available to those who lacked the capital to fulfill their ambitions but whose plans offered the hope of substantial return on investment.

The growing interrelation between commerce and industry in early Renaissance Florence was also of critical importance in understanding the enormous wealth of the city and its merchants—as well as the enormous size of the city, which, before the Black Death of 1348, had about 75,000

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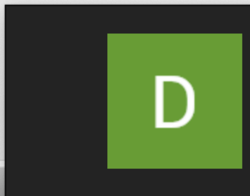
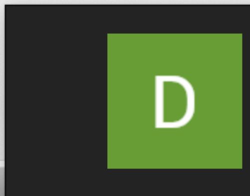
inhabitants. The capitalist exploitation of industrial manufacturing on such a scale was peculiar almost to Florence. In other Italian cities with huge industrial complexes, such as Milan with its great armaments industry, manufacturing was controlled by artisan guilds and remained restrictive, even when large amounts of capital were required, as with goldsmiths, for example. In Florence, though, the great merchants controlled the importation of the raw material, the export of the finished product, and the actual production especially within the city's industrial giant: wool working and the textile trade. The reasons for this control are complex but help explain Florence's remarkable wealth. For some time, Florence, as a leading Guelf state with the necessary expertise, resources, and connections throughout Europe, made significant profits collecting papal dues and transferring the money to Rome. In an age



when "First Fruits" (the first year's income) and "Tenths" (10 per cent of annual income) were paid by newly appointed bishops and abbots and when huge sums were given to help finance the Crusades, the resulting amount of money involved was considerable. Furthermore, the stability of the Florentine coinage, the florin, after it was introduced in 1252, reinforced the role of the city in international trade.

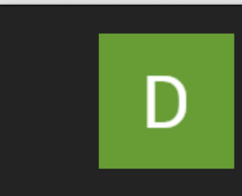
The great profits to be made, and the wide network of commercial connections established by Florentine merchants, opened new opportunities for intelligent, farsighted Florentines. For example, English wool was the best in Europe and was widely sought after. A good deal of the pope's money came from monasteries or ecclesiastical estates in England, estates that typically engaged in large-scale sheep farming. As, in theory, a papal fief, England also owed the special tax to the pope



known as “Peter’s Pence.” Observing this, the Florentines offered to accept such dues in wool, saving the Church the cost of realizing wool into cash. The Florentine merchants then shipped the wool to Italy and used their own capital in Florence to support an industry to turn the wool into high-quality finished cloth, which was then re-exported north to European markets. It was in part this mercantile access to English—and, later, Spanish—wool that built the great Florentine wool trade, despite the observation that the city was geographically unfit for it in so many ways, not having a secure year-round source of water power (the Arno is reduced to a slow-moving stream in the summer months) and not being on the sea or on a major trade route. The industry was built, instead, by Florentine commercial connections and skill.

In addition to supplying the raw material and the capital, the merchants controlled the labor force, making the vast majority of wool workers, or *ciompi*, subject to the merchant guilds, rather than to representation of their own. In part, this was because of the wide division of labor required by textile manufacturing, but in essence it was because the merchant elite controlled all aspects of the industry and controlled the government as well, turning the state into a vehicle to further their interests. The production of high-quality woolen cloth thus became the city's dominant industry. In the early fourteenth century, Giovanni Villani (d. 1348) estimated that about one-third of the population—about 25,000 people—was directly or indirectly involved in the manufacture of woolen cloth. In 1338, Florence produced 70–80,000 pieces of cloth with a value of more than one million florins.

**Figure 6.1** The Florentine Florin. The Florin was introduced in 1252 and was used as the currency of Florence until 1523. The republic scrupulously regulated the gold content of the coin, thus rendering it a reliable, stable international medium of exchange. Consequently, Florentine merchants benefited in their trading and banking enterprises, as did the city's economy.



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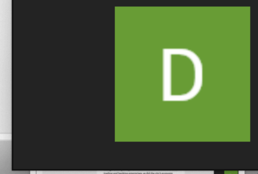
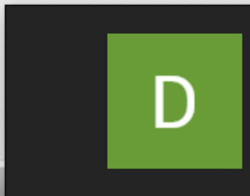


The symbol of the commune (the *giglio*, or lily) and its Latin name (Florentia) appear on the reverse of the coin. An image of John the Baptist, patron saint of Florence, appears on the obverse.

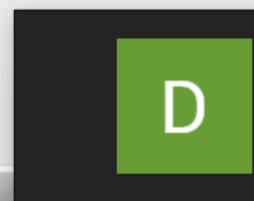
The great merchant-industrialists' control over this industry was well illustrated by the fact that the two major guilds responsible for the textile industry, the *Arte della Lana*, or cloth manufacturers, and the *Calimala*, or finished cloth dealers, were not traditional medieval guilds of master workmen but, rather, cartels of the most powerful international financiers with interests in cloth. The guilds were used to maintain monopolies, pressure the communal government to adopt legislation in their favor, and, especially, to control the workers economically and politically. The merchant industrialists kept ownership and control of the industry, from the importation of raw wool to the export of finished cloth.

These economic conditions were the background to the Renaissance in Florence. The innovations in business practices, the new methods of credit and exchange, and the interdependence of commerce and industry in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries created a class that was quite new in the context of medieval society: merchant patricians who were urban, lay, leisured, cosmopolitan, educated, powerful, and very, very rich. It was this class that combined the ideals developed and spread by Petrarch and expressed in Florence by humanist statesmen, such as the chancellor Coluccio Salutati. To these mercantile patricians, the aristocratic culture of northern Europe, to which the Tuscan nobility subscribed as a caste mark, was foreign, indeed hostile. Warfare was not noble, but dangerous because it interfered with trade; skill in arms was secondary to skill in languages, law, accounting, and math-





ematics, since the former talent did nothing to aid one's business, while the latter skills added to one's wealth and influence. The humane, anthropocentric principles of Petrarch, then, appealed more to these men, and they embraced them enthusiastically. Equally, the Franciscan or even apostolic respect for poverty and the abnegation of the earthly life in favor of a life of solitude and prayer was seen as useful only to those who had chosen a monastic or clerical life. Secular wisdom and experience in the things of this world were much more attractive to merchants who saw their ambitions and opportunities in secular terms.



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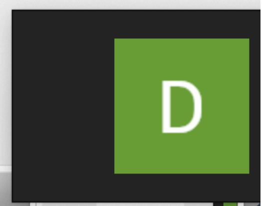
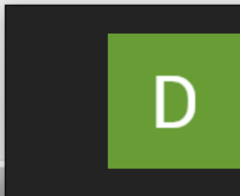


**Figure 6.2** Florence, the Palace of the Wool Guild. This imposing structure was completed in 1308 and is connected to the church of Orsanmichele. The importance of the wool trade is illustrated by the size of this building and the attached tower, reflecting the public authority of this *arte maggiore*, or "greater guild." Note the square crenellation along the top of the tower. This indicates the republic's Guelf allegiance. Ghibelline cities featured notched crenellation.

Furthermore, these new principles, in conjunction with enormous wealth, new instruments of patronage, and new concepts of elite behavior—in addition to a good measure of humanist idealism—motivated such men to patronize the arts, beautify their leisured lives, and build palaces for their splendor and commodity rather than for their defensive capabilities. This class of merchant patrician was the vanguard of the Florentine Renaissance at the end of the fourteenth century, its sustenance in the fifteenth century, and, after the rekindling of the rural, aristocratic, princely



values following the collapse of the republic in the sixteenth century, the cause of its demise. The great names and families of the Florentine Renaissance are the families of the bankers and the industrialists—the Medici, Strozzi, Pazzi, and Rucellai, among others, a group constituting perhaps three per cent of the population of the city who, through intermarriage, interlocking business partnerships, political alliances, and patronage, dominated the government, society, and culture of the city throughout our period. It was they who bankrolled the Florentine Renaissance. It was their taste that maintained its excellence. And it was their monopoly on political power that turned the state itself into a mechanism not only for their own benefit and profit, but also for the institutionalization of the Renaissance on a lavish, civic scale, turning the state into a work of art

and turning the city of Florence into a vast store-house of art as well.

It is necessary now to see in more detail how this class of elite, wealthy, powerful merchants took control of the administration of the city and came to dominate its culture and institutionalize their values in Florence. Humanism became the dominant ideology of this class, and its practitioners represented another group of elite citizens, close to the mercantile and political leaders of the commune and often their official voice, as we have seen illustrated in the career and writings of Leonardo Bruni.

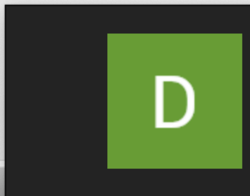
## THE FLORENTINE REPUBLIC

The history of the Florentine Republic and its economy during the Renaissance is not a simple progression. The development of both the commune and its wealth went through various stages and alterations between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, stages that, although extremely complex in themselves, must be reduced to a relatively simple scheme.

During the late Middle Ages, that is in Italy before about 1300, the commune of Florence was dominated by the largely rural Tuscan nobility, or *magnati*, a feudal class of landed magnates, descended from the knights of the Middle Ages who had fought in the continuous warfare between pope and emperor and between states. (Many of these men had been ennobled by the Holy Roman Empire and were in fact of German extraction, although acculturated as Italians for centuries.) To this magnate class of truly feudal nobles in

the northern European sense must be added the *grandi*, or wealthy, ancient, urban families, usually enriched originally by trade, who threw in their lot—both political and psychological—with the nobility, accepting their values, codes, ideals, practices, and children in marriage. What characterized this class of *magnati*, and to a certain extent the *grandi*, was their violence, propensity for family feuds, and generally antisocial behavior.

Besides the violence inherent in a group trained to do little else but fight and addicted to feuding, the further division of Guelf and Ghibelline exacerbated an already tense situation. Some *magnati* and *grandi* were Guelf, others were Ghibelline, and they set about murdering one another because of this division. After the battle of Montaperti (1260), the Ghibellines seized power in Florence and exiled the Guelf families; but in 1267 the banished Guelfs returned—backed by a



French army—and threw out their oppressors, exiling them in perpetuity, confiscating their property, and despoiling them of all civil and political rights. To ensure the political purity of the city thereafter, the successful Guelfs formed the *Parte Guelfa* (Guelf Party), an extrapolitical organization of the richest and most powerful *magnati* and *grandi*, designed to influence the government of the commune in their own interests.

As the Florentines knew, the Guelf victory was more than a military success. The Guelfs, as the papal party, had great influence with the Holy See. Hence the *Parte* turned Florence into the leading pro-papal state in central Italy, and, in return, the city acquired the favor of being chosen as a centre for papal banking and tax collecting, operations that we have seen helped build the city's mercantile and industrial economies. However, this very success caused increasing social frag-

mentation. As the city became ever more wealthy during the thirteenth century, a new class quickly developed: rich merchants and entrepreneurs not born of the old *magnati* or *grandi* families, rather men whose wealth was considerable—even spectacular—but very recent. This new class was properly termed the *popolo grasso*, or "fat people." The *popolo grasso* had little in common with the values or ambitions of the old Tuscan nobility or with the great *grandi* families, who were almost indistinct from the magnates by this time. Consequently, they were incensed at being ruled by these old families, often to the detriment of their commercial ambitions, and they were determined to get a place in government commensurate with their wealth and with their growing place as the dominant economic group in the commune, the payers of the highest taxes, the

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employers of the most people, and the class with increasingly the most liquid wealth.

Similarly, just below this new class of capitalists were the lesser tradesmen, often economically dependent upon the great financiers but still possessing prosperity and ambition. If the *magnati* and the *grandi* were odious to the rich financiers of the *popolo grasso*, they were doubly so to these lesser middle-class vintners, ironworkers, dyers, and stretching-shed operators who subcontracted a large portion of the wool industry. Also, this poorer bourgeois class shared a common fear of the tens of thousands of totally impoverished unskilled workers, the *ciompi*, who labored in their factories. Disenfranchised, possessing no property, education, or hope, these *ciompi* and their families were viewed in the same way as the Spartans viewed the Helots: their employers feared that the despised and oppressed poor

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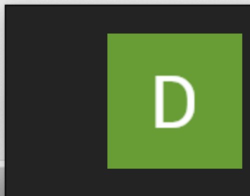
who produced their wealth would in time rise to extract vengeance and seek redress. Thus both the rich merchants and the small shopkeepers felt the need to keep these workers carefully controlled, a perspective not shared by the dominant aristocrats who lived in great fortresses in town, surmounted by enormous towers, and who traveled about heavily armed, followed by a band of equally armed retainers who were, in reality, hired thugs usually recruited from their rural estates.

Obviously, the power structure had to be realigned to express the new realities of Florentine life; and some kind of order had to be imposed upon the city in which the feuding nobles carried on their vendettas and behaved lawlessly, all to the detriment of trade. That change began about 1280.





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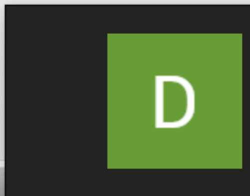
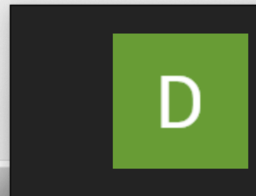
In 1279, the pope decided to impose some order on the political chaos of Florence in particular, and Tuscany in general, where Guelfs and Ghibellines were still murdering one another with consistent relish. The pope, Nicholas III, sent his nephew, Cardinal Latino (d. 1294), to restore order. In 1280, Florence was literally exploding with its new wealth and increased opportunities. The population, attracted to the city by these growing prospects, numbered at least 45,000, and the economic power of the great merchants increased even more with the concomitant increase in property values and the attendant building boom. Latino promulgated a constitution in which power remained in the hands of the old aristocrats, but he equally allowed for the entry of rich merchants into the government because of his obsession with the Guelf–Ghibelline distinction. These new men were manifestly good



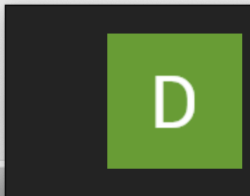
Guelfs, and therefore they deserved some representation in the commune. Their admission into government was the beginning of the Florentine bourgeois revolution.

In 1282, the greater guilds were permitted to send representatives, or priors, to speak on their behalf. During that year, these priors—educated, sophisticated merchants that they were—began to concentrate more and more of the executive authority of the government in their hands so that in the following year, 1283, they in effect staged a coup by promulgating a new constitution to replace Latino's simple-minded scheme and institutionalized the priors as the executive organ of government.

For the entire length of time that Florence remained a republic, the priors, nominated originally from among the seven greater guilds,



were the executive power, a committee that represented the commercial wealth of the city. Guildsmen chose the priors from among themselves, that is, from among men matriculated in the *arti maggiori*, the greater guilds. The guilds were not craft but merchant guilds, cartels representing key spheres of influence and the new rising social class of merchants and professionals. The dominance of cloth and clothing was evident in the presence of three guilds based on textiles: *Calimala* (dealers who finished and dyed imported cloth), *Lana* (manufacturers who traded in raw wool), and *Por' San' Maria,* (silk merchants and weavers—so named from the street in which they had their shops, the Porta Santa Maria). The importance of long-distance trade was manifest in the guilds of *Pellicciai* (traders in fur pelts), *Speziali* (physicians and apothecaries, including spice merchants), and *Cambio* (bankers and

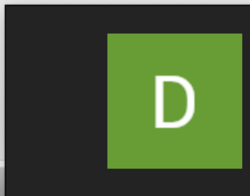


money-changers). Finally, there was the greater guild of the *Giudici e Notai* (judges, lawyers, and notaries), a guild that reflected the continual need for notarized legal documents in commerce: the law follows trade. The bourgeois revolution of 1283 restructured only the executive of the commune; the other elements of Florentine government remained. For example, the *podestà*, the chief of police and military commander, always a foreigner appointed for only one year to minimize the chance of his using his military power to subvert the state, remained in place, as did the two councils, the greater and the lesser, both of which were dominated by *magnati* and *grandi*. However, the *podestà* was now subject directly to the priors.

There were six priors originally, serving a term of only two months. They, together with the heads of the *arti maggiori* and representatives of the six wards (*sesti*) of Florence, chose their suc-

cessors. To solidify their new authority against the increasing hostility of the old aristocrats who were beginning to realize that they had lost control of the city, the guilds were further organized on a military basis as a bourgeois militia, under the command of a captain. In short, what was quickly developing was a form of guild republicanism designed to control the state in the interests of the *arti maggiori*.

This semi-revolution lasted a decade, during which time Florence continued to expand economically and militarily, winning, for example, the battle of Campaldino, in which Dante fought, and, ideologically, liberating all of the serfs in the Florentine *contado* (the rural territory surrounding a city) in the same year, 1289. However, the old aristocrats were becoming impossible. Enraged by their own stupidity, full of *bragadoccio* and violence after the battle of Campaldino and

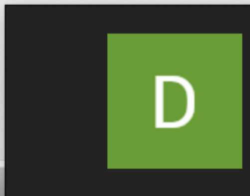


believing—partly correctly—that the liberation of the serfs in their feudal estates was a measure designed to weaken their power base and provide a fluid labor force for the expanding cloth industry, the *magnati* became even more violent, making the streets unsafe by fighting pitched battles in town. Something had to be done, and on 18 January 1293 something was. Led by a renegade nobleman, Giano della Bella, the Ordinances of Justice were passed, an act that completed the bourgeois revolution and gave the republic the basic shape it was to have until its extinction over two hundred years later, defining the political framework of the Renaissance in Florence.

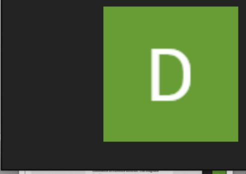
Under the Ordinances of Justice, the control of the government by the seven guilds was strengthened by the addition of fourteen new guilds. Five were the *arti medie*, that is, the intermediate guilds, while nine others were designated lesser

guilds. Thus there were now twenty-one recognized guilds in the city, all of which had the right to be represented in government, although the guildsmen themselves remained divided into seven *arti maggiori* and fourteen *arti minori*. Further constitutional changes were also of great importance. An eighth prior was added with the special title of the Standard Bearer of Justice, *gonfaloniere di giustizia*, whose job it was to execute sentences imposed by the *podestà* on lawless nobles; and he was given a thousand soldiers to help him carry out this task. Later, a ninth prior was admitted to this collective executive committee.

The motivation for establishing the office of the *gonfaloniere di giustizia* was a decision by the new communal government to curb those aristocratic thugs who had been making life and commerce in Florence difficult. The magnate families were put under special restraints. Lists



were drawn up to include all magnate families, perhaps 150 altogether, of which about seventy-two were *grandi*, that is, living in the city and originally of old mercantile wealth. Altogether this list of magnates comprised about a thousand adult male citizens. Each of these magnates had to swear a special oath to the new government that he and all his kin would keep the peace and post a bond to do so. If a nobleman failed to pay, his kin were responsible. And if any magnate committed murder (a crime previously common and seldom prosecuted) he would now incur the death penalty, confiscation of property, and the razing of the family palaces. Also, no magnates could be elected as priors, and they could not sit on the council of the captain; and even if already a guildsman, a noble could not hold any guild office. In short, the magnates were disenfran-



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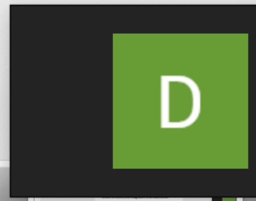
chised, stripped of political authority, and placed on parole as a class.

| Arti Maggiori (7) | Arti Minori (14) | |
|---|---|---|
| | ***Intermediate Guilds*** | ***Lesser Guilds*** |
| Judges and Notaries | Butchers | Vintners |
| Cloth dealers | Blacksmiths | Innkeepers |
| Wool manufacturers | Shoemakers | Retailers of provisions |
| Bankers and Money-changers | Builders and Masons | Tanners |
| Silk merchants | Clothiers | Armorers |
| Physicians and Apothecaries | | Ironworkers |
| Furriers | | Saddlers and Harness-makers |
| | | Woodworkers |
| | | Bakers |

**Table 6.1** The Guilds of Florence
This table of the guilds shows how they were ranked within the three main categories. The rank order remained remarkably stable throughout the period of the republic with only minor variations dependent on changes in economic and political conditions.



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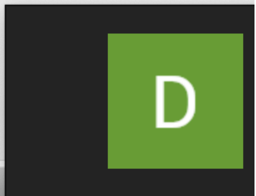
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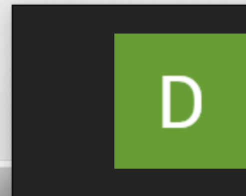
**Figure 6.3** San Gimignano. An important town in the Middle Ages, San Gimignano was later dominated by Florence. Because the center of economic and political power shifted to Florence, there was little change in the urban topography. Consequently this small town is one of the few in Italy that has preserved many of its towers. From this we have an impression of how Florence must have looked before 1293.

The Ordinances of Justice also decreed that the great towers attached to the fortress-houses of the *grandi* and *magnati* had to be pulled down to a certain height. These towers, functioning like castles, had made the nobles invulnerable and thus outside the law. With their destruction, Florence no longer was a spiky city of noble towers, but a bourgeois city of commercial activity, now dominated totally by a merchant patriciate. To symbolize this revolution, the commune commissioned Arnolfo di Cambio (c. 1240–c. 1310) to build the Palazzo della Signoria, now the Palazzo



Vecchio, with a high tower to represent the humbling of the private power of the magnates and the establishment of the collective authority of the merchant patricians in power. These changes, then, gave Florence its political character until the very end of our period. They also gave it the basic architectural shape it enjoyed throughout the Renaissance and even today, where the towers crowning the city are those of the commune or Church, that is, the collective population, and not those of the nobility, which boasted power in private hands.

This is not to say that the republic did not change during the ensuing two hundred years. The first crisis occurred when the magnates fought back. The *Parte Guelfa*, that extra-constitutional organization of largely *magnati* and *grandi* families, was bitterly divided between the reactionary forces violently opposed to the

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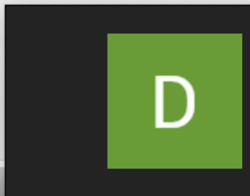
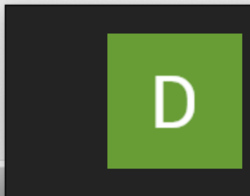
Ordinances of Justice, called the Blacks (led by the most unrepentant and aristocratic rural feudal families), and the Whites, who tended to be *grandi* with large mercantile investments and close contact with the new patriciate, and were often new men themselves, admitted to the *Parte Guelfa* after Latino's 1280 constitution. The Whites can be described as liberals, desiring the admission of new men and generally favoring the basic intent, if not always the concrete measures, of the Ordinances. In 1302, this division broke out into open warfare: the Blacks staged a violent and successful coup, aided by an army sent by Pope Boniface VIII, who had anticipated a more direct role in Tuscan affairs. There followed the Florentine equivalent of the reign of terror, in which many hundreds of white Guelf families, including those of Dante and Petrarch, were banished, their property confiscated, and their liberal

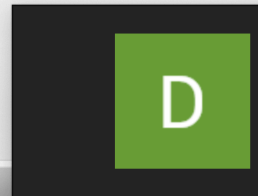


policies reversed. However, not even this reactionary revolution dared repeal the Ordinances that had given political authority to the powerful new class of greater and lesser guildsmen; only the most draconian measures were not strictly enforced.

Even before their ultimate collapse several decades later, the conservatives guiding the city after 1302 did not enjoy a stable rule. Under their command, Florence embarked upon a series of costly and unsuccessful wars against its Tuscan neighbors: Pisa, Siena, and Lucca. Unnerved by constant military failure and weakened economically by their own ineptitude and the exorbitant cost of mercenary warfare, the aristocratic *signoria* sought ways of overcoming their problems. One solution, and an example of the selfishness of this group, was to avoid paying sufficient taxes to finance the wars that their expansionist, mil-



itaristic policies had caused. To accomplish this they instituted the system of *prestanze*, or forced loans, in lieu of taxes. Each citizen owning property was assessed at a certain percentage, and this amount was owed to the commune; however, the money was not viewed as a transfer of tax from citizen to state, but was treated as a loan, on which interest was paid. In this way, the aristocrats financed their wars and kept some of their capital, at least on paper, maintained a small but steady income from the *prestanze*, and established the important psychological connection between the fiscal well-being of the commune and their own economic position.



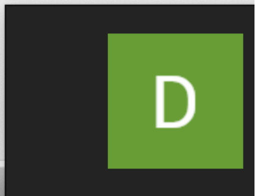





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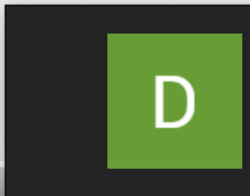
**Figure 6.4** Florence, Palazzo della Signoria (Palazzo Vecchio). The Palazzo della Signoria was designed by Arnolfo di Cambio. Begun after the Ordinances of Justice at the end of the thirteenth century, it was completed at the beginning of the fourteenth, although it was much altered during the period of the Medici monarchy, particularly the interior. The palazzo provided the council chambers, meeting rooms, and residences for the nine priors during their terms of office. These were the *signoria* for whom the palace was named (although it became known as the "Palazzo Vecchio" when Duke Cosimo de'Medici moved in the sixteenth century to the Palazzo Pitti). It was and remains to this day the town hall of Florence.

In addition, the aristocrats attempted to abdicate political and military responsibility during bad times. In 1313, for example, they invited King Robert of Naples (r. 1309–43), head of the Italian Guelfs, to rule Florence as *signore*, a prince. Luckily, his own affairs were in turmoil and he was unable to leave Naples. The same maneuver was tried again in 1325 when Robert's son, Charles,



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duke of Calabria (1298–1328), was offered the city. This royal prince actually came, and, to everyone's surprise—especially the aristocracy that invited him—began to rule energetically. One of his first efforts was to try to stop the ruling faction from not paying taxes, which they did first through the *prestanze* and second by rigging the assessment rolls so that their names did not appear at all or registered as far less wealthy than they really were. When Duke Charles needed money, he intended to get it from anyone. Hence, in 1326, he established the *estimo*, or direct tax on wealth that all solvent citizens had to pay. The rich oligarchs were alienated; they staged riots and tried to form an alliance with those lesser guildsmen whom they considered their social inferiors and whom they had kept out of the highest offices of government for years. Luckily, the *signore*, Charles of Calabria, died young in

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1328. Had he not, Florence would very likely have developed into a principality, and the republican constitution, so favorable to humanism and the Renaissance, would have been short lived, as similar republican governments were throughout Italy.

Ironically, the alliance between the *grandi* and the lesser guildsmen against Charles required that the oligarchs give more authority to the fourteen lesser guilds. This was done by establishing a new method of choosing the priors that was more dependent on lot than nomination by the seven greater guilds. A complex system of lists of eligible citizens was devised that theoretically made the highest office of prior open to any guildsman who paid taxes and who was neither a felon nor bankrupt. However, either because the elections were fixed, or because of pure bad luck, most of the priors remained aristocrats. This system



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functioned until 1342 when yet another *signore*, a French adventurer, Walter VI of Brienne (c. 1304–56), duke of Athens, a relation of the Neapolitan Guelfs, was established as ruler. Walter lasted only a short time before he was removed in 1343 by a popular rebellion.

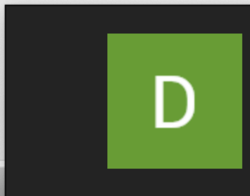
As with the period after the overthrow of the regime built by Charles of Calabria, the time after the expulsion of Walter of Brienne demanded a reassessment of the communal government. The commune was not only paralyzed but insolvent, for 1343 also saw the beginnings of the failure of two of Florence's greatest banks—those of the Bardi and of the Peruzzi—and, as a result, the collapse of the fortunes of the ruling conservatives who had, linked by marriage and kin to these conglomerates, entrusted those banks with their liquid assets. Consequently, many of the ruling class found themselves financially impover-

ished, and with their money went their political authority. Thus there began an experiment in wider government, indeed the most democratic government supported by the fairest taxation policies that Florence had yet seen. The office of prior (of which by this point there were nine to be elected) was open to all guildsmen; in fact, the 1343 arrangements required that at least six priors come from the fourteen less powerful *arti minori*, or craft guilds.

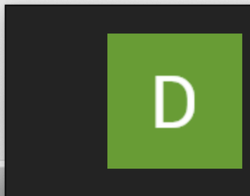
This government of 1343 was truly remarkable in that it was civically minded and less selfishly motivated than those of the aristocrats who had previously held power. Most importantly, the new regime saw the need to put Florence back in a secure fiscal position. Therefore, they united all outstanding public debts into a single publicly funded national debt, or *monte*. To service this debt, bonds were issued that bore an

assured interest rate of five per cent per annum. These *monte* shares were negotiable and traded at varying rates, depending on the political and economic situation of the city. In other words, the finances of Florence were turned into a joint-stock company. This measure brought all citizens with any disposable capital directly into the political system as shareholders. Hence their deep concern with policy, whether promoting peace or war, stability or adventurism, since such things directly influenced the value of their paper wealth. Civic humanism certainly articulated the close relationship between citizen and state; but *monte* shares cemented it.

The second important institution was the re-enactment and enforcement of the *divieto*. This measure was designed to break up the influence of families whose extended kin structure could dominate the government. It excluded all mem-



bers of any family represented in important communal offices; for example, if a Medici were elected prior, no other Medici might hold any important position. Hence the control of the *signoria* by the old aristocratic families declined, and more and more newly rich lesser guildsmen, as well as poorer greater guildsmen, entered the *signoria* in positions of authority. Once again, the aristocrats found themselves in a weaker position. The alliance of *magnati* and *grandi* had been carefully re-established during the period between 1302 and 1343, not through contravention of the Ordinances of Justice but through a legal faction that skirted it. Supported by a sympathetic communal government, the leaders of which were closely related by marriage, interest, and aristocratic psychology to the old nobility, the disenfranchised *magnati* had simply legally changed their names and denied any kinship with those 150



families excluded from government by the 1293 Ordinances. In this way, they were again able to enter the *signoria.* The bourgeois revolt of 1343, however, had once again put these patricians on the defensive through the *divieto* and out of actual control of the commune. But the setback was temporary. They simply waited for an opportunity to reassert their influence.

This opportunity came after 1378, following the revolt of the *ciompi*, the unskilled woolworkers. This popular rebellion had been initially successful: it gave the poorest elements in the city a taste of power and actually broadened the franchise dramatically through the creation of several new guilds, such as the tailors and dyers. Most significant, though, was the creation of the unskilled *arte del popolo di dio*—the guild of the people of God, or the *ciompi.* The property owners, especially the guildsmen of the *arti minori*,

were terrified since they had the most to lose: most of their assets were invested in endangered property, buildings, workshops, homes, and warehouses in the city, all easy targets during social upheaval. More afraid of the workers than of the aristocrats, the lesser guildsmen threw in their lot with the *arti maggiori* and overthrew the very democratic regime of the *ciompi* in 1381, executing its leaders. They re-established the old, closed aristocratic government and reinforced it through the subtle manipulation of the republican constitution. The pre-1343 status quo had been restored, although now perhaps with more sympathy and similarity of conviction, at least in politics and economics, between the great merchants of the *arti maggiori* and the prosperous tradesmen of the *arti minori*.

For the next fifty years, this is how the city was governed. This was also the period of the estab-

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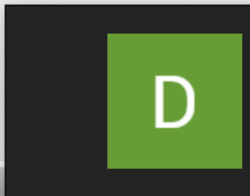
lishment of humanist values and Renaissance ideals in Florence. The government had achieved a measure of political stability. The interest on *monte* stocks provided a secure dividend income for most citizens and allowed for flexibility in public finance. And the complexities of institutions like the *monte*, the administration of the subject territories, and the operation of the chancery bureaucratized the government. No longer was it simply the preserve of aristocratic merchant politicians; it was also the realm of the professional civil servant, usually a humanist who applied his learning to the service of the state. The catasto of 1427 reflected the adoption of innovative fiscal policy. It was essentially an income and wealth tax not unlike those imposed today. Each citizen listed assets and liabilities and was taxed accordingly. Similarly, as we have seen, the *Monte delle doti* was introduced in 1425

to assist families in providing dowries for their daughters.

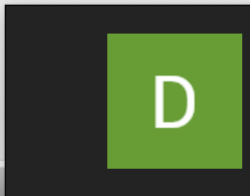
These years also saw the great period of the myth of Florence, vitalized by the ideology of civic humanism. The long wars (1385–1402) against Milan ended with the famous death of Giangaleazzo Visconti in 1402, an event interpreted as the result of the city's republican virtue. Pisa was finally captured (1406), giving Florence a direct outlet to the sea for the first time. Similarly, all of the rest of Tuscany except Siena and Lucca was brought under Florentine domination, turning the republic into one of the five great territorial states in Italy. Therefore, not only the effect of civic humanism, but also the political events of the first part of the fifteenth century reinforced Florence's self-confidence, wealth, and republicanism. The city was successful, and civic



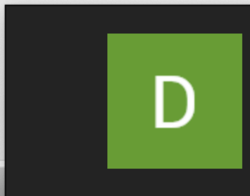
humanism as expounded by Leonardo Bruni provided an ideology for that success.

## THE RISE OF THE MEDICI

Ironically, the years after the suppression of the *ciompi* revolt were also a period of increasingly restricted government. The victory of the property-owning guildsmen and the willingness of the *arti minori* to acquiesce to the ambitions of the most influential and richest members of the *arti maggiori* resulted in an oligarchic regime that worked to keep power concentrated in the hands of a few rich and long-established families, very much to the exclusion of lesser guildsmen. Opposed to this oligarchy was Cosimo de'Medici (1389–1464), head of the powerful Medici bank and the



richest man in Florence. Cosimo had become the spokesman for the popular faction representing the lesser guildsmen and others opposed to the oligarchy led by the patrician Rinaldo degli Albizzi (1370–1442). By 1433 the tensions in the city had grown acute. An unsuccessful war against Lucca (1429–33) had cost enormous amounts of money and had produced only humiliation. Fearing the growing popularity of Cosimo, the Albizzi oligarchy spread rumors that the Medici were in fact working with Florence's enemies and in 1433 manipulated the *signoria* to exile Cosimo from Florence. Cosimo's absence from the city lasted only until 1434, however, as the economic and political failures of the regime occasioned a popular reaction to the oligarchy. Albizzi and his fellow oligarchs were themselves exiled or neutralized, and Cosimo returned in triumph, thus beginning sixty years of Medici hegemony.



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The victory of Cosimo and the Medici faction changed the nature of the Florentine republic; but Cosimo wisely respected the constitution of the republic and the city's commitment to republicanism. His influence, therefore, was subtle and managed discreetly to ensure that the pride and ambitions of the political elite were not compromised. Rather than exercise power openly, Cosimo manipulated the electoral process by controlling the *accoppiatori*, the committee that determined eligibility for office. In this way the Medici could govern the republic behind the scenes and the traditional rotation of magistracies would continue to operate. Moreover, Cosimo did not flaunt his power but held office only when chosen; he dressed soberly, like the wealthy banker he was, and respected the institutions of the state. The only public celebration of his position was the building of the huge Palazzo Medici, designed by

the architect Michelozzo Michelozzi (1396–72). Cosimo also used his wealth to patronize art and building, making Florence an increasingly beautiful city. When he died in 1464 he was sincerely mourned and recognized with the title of *pater patriae* (father of his fatherland), the inscription that still identifies his tomb in the church of San Lorenzo, which he had rebuilt by the brilliant Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446), the architect of the dome on Florence's cathedral.

There could be no clearer indication of the solidity of Florence's acceptance of the hegemony of the Medici than the seamless assumption of power of Cosimo's son, Piero (1416–69), on Cosimo's death in 1464. Piero was a very different man from his father. He had been raised more like a prince than a banker. And, despite an excellent humanist education and the example of his father's success, he appeared haughty and aloof

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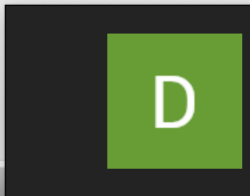
rather than a popular politician. Part of this was the result of his suffering terribly from gout, a disease that limited his mobility, caused leading citizens to visit the Palazzo Medici for political business, and even led to his having to be occasionally carried in a litter because of the pain of walking. His short period of control of the city (1464–69) had already begun to generate serious opposition as reflected in a major plot against him and his family. Nevertheless, when he died there was no question but that his eldest son, Lorenzo, later named *il magnifico* (the magnificent), would succeed him. With that young man's assumption of power, Florence entered the brilliant Laurentian age.

Lorenzo de'Medici (1449–92) was a remarkable man. Splendidly educated by the best humanist scholars, a natural poet and brilliant patron of art and learning, and possessed of a common

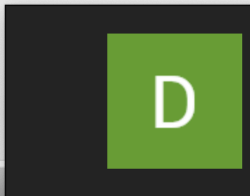


touch that endeared him to all classes of citizens, Lorenzo has given his name to one of Florence's most celebrated moments. He did have failings, however: he had no interest in the family bank, and so it declined greatly during his life, reducing his ability to use his private resources to support the public purse; he was inexperienced at the beginning of his rule, allowing, for example, the terrible sack of Volterra in 1472 by mercenary soldiers employed by Florence to control the alum deposits needed for the fulling of wool. Later in his life he used public funds for private purposes and began to manipulate even the *monte delle doti*, the state dowry fund. But, in general, his exercise of power was gentle and benign, even if not all Florentines agreed.

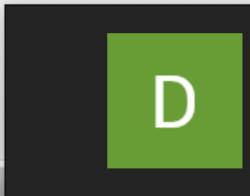
Lorenzo's greatest challenge resulted from an altercation with Pope Sixtus IV della Rovere (r. 1471–84). This nepotistic pontiff wanted to

install his nephew, Girolamo Riario (1443–88), as ruler of the city of Imola, and so Lorenzo, as the head of the Medici bank and hence papal financier, was asked to extend the money to achieve this. Lorenzo, distrusting the ambitions of the papacy, refused. Sixtus was furious and transferred the papal account to the bank of the Medici's enemies, the Pazzi, an ancient, rich, and powerful clan opposed to the Medici hegemony. This resulted in an alliance emerging between the Pazzi, Girolamo Riario, and others who had become alienated from the Medici, including the archbishop of Pisa who, as a political opponent, was not permitted to take possession of his see and kept in Florence almost as a prisoner by Lorenzo.

The result was the Pazzi Conspiracy of 1478. An elaborate plan was devised to kill Lorenzo and his younger brother, Giuliano (b. 1453), and to dis-



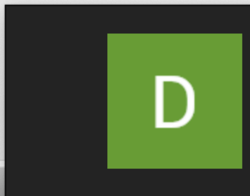
lodge the Medici faction from power and replace it with the Pazzi, supported by the Riario and the pope. After several failed schemes, it was finally decided to murder the brothers during mass in the cathedral at Easter. The signal was to be the ringing of the bell at the elevation of the host during mass. Only then could the conspirators be certain that both Medici would be together and unarmed. However, the moment chosen for the assassination so frightened one of the professional killers hired by the Pazzi—despite the pope's offer of a pardon in advance—that a substitute had to be quickly found. So, when the bell sounded and the assassins struck, Lorenzo was only wounded, although Giuliano was killed. Lorenzo's friends carried him into the sacristy and locked the doors, sucking his wound in case the knife had been poisoned.



Immediately the Pazzi and their supporters rode through the city shouting *Libertà, Libertà* (Liberty), and the archbishop of Pisa, in full ceremonial robes, went with others to the Palazzo della Signoria to demand a new government. When news spread through the city of the attempt on Lorenzo and the murder of the popular Giuliano, the city shouted down the conspirators with cries of *palle, palle* (literally "Balls," the symbol of Medici from their coat of arms). The *signoria* put ropes around the necks of the archbishop and his accomplices and threw them from the windows of the palace, leaving them to hang outside as symbols of the city's loyalty to the Medici.

The failure of the Pazzi Conspiracy and the murder of the archbishop of Pisa drove Pope Sixtus to declare war on Lorenzo—not Florence—and put an interdict on the city. He demanded

that his vassal, the king of Naples, lead an army against Florence to punish the Medici: thus began the War of the Pazzi Conspiracy (1478–80). Florence had made no preparations for war, and the city was in great danger and suffered from hunger and the economic catastrophe that the interdict occasioned. Still, there was no thought of surrendering Lorenzo. However, in an act of great courage and diplomacy, in 1480 Lorenzo left Florence for Naples, the capital of the king threatening his territory. In Naples, over many weeks of negotiation, Lorenzo convinced the king that it was in his best interest to make peace with Florence and distrust the ambitions of the papacy. In this way the war ended with a separate peace between Florence and Naples, and Lorenzo was secure in his authority. Pope Sixtus had no alternative but to end hostilities, seeing no hope of punishing the Medici.



The effect of the Pazzi Conspiracy on Florence was, nevertheless, significant. Lorenzo's personality changed into one of suspicion and fear. Unlike before, he began to travel with armed guards and never altogether lost the melancholy caused by the murder of his much-loved younger brother. To ensure Medici rule in those dangerous times, Lorenzo also changed the constitution. He created the Council of Seventy in 1480, the members of which were to be nominated first by him and its vacancies filled by the Council itself. It was a clear instrument of Medici control; no longer was the exercise of power to be discreet and subtle; it was now clear and institutionalized. Lorenzo had become ruler of Florence. Although patronage continued and Lorenzo remained the center of what was obviously developing as a kind of court, Florence was changing as well. The events of the Pazzi Conspiracy and the growing tensions

within Italy and Europe diminished the luster of humanism and cultural patronage by the time of Lorenzo's last illness and ultimate death in 1492. Moreover, Lorenzo's eldest son, Piero (1472–1503), was obviously incompetent and unable to navigate the complex challenges emerging in Italy and across the Alps. This was the period of the rise of Girolamo Savonarola (see Chapter Eleven) and the apocalyptic challenge to the humanist principles and ideas that had animated the Renaissance in Florence.

## FURTHER READING

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Brucker, Gene A. *Renaissance Florence*. Berkeley: UCLA Press, 1983.