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## THE COMMUNAL IDEOLOGY IN GIOVANNI VILLANI'S *NUOVA CRONICA*

### Abstract

The essay analyses the ideological message of Giovanni Villani's *Nuova Cronica*. Rather than a cohesive theory of good governance, the Florentine chronicler shows scattered images, and in the comments added to the events described he makes explicit what political virtues and inadequacies he considered crucial. Insofar as the earlier books seem to have been inspired by the Roman republican ethos and the Franciscan cult of paucity preached by Dante, he focuses in the final section mostly on the citizens' internal disposition: their expected attitude would be to hold the Commune in magnanimous love. Villani discerns between the virtues of citizens and those of the rulers, with whom discretion and prudence, rendering political practice efficient, is paramount; such prudence is easier to find with affluent burghers than good artisans. The superior value that ought to be sought through the citizens activities, in the area of policymaking and not only, is the grandeur of their Commune.

**Keywords:** *Nuova Cronica*, Giovanni Villani, political ideology, commune, *popolo*, good government, Florence

### I INTRODUCTION

The *Nuova Cronica* by Giovanni Villani (ca. 1275–1348)<sup>1</sup>, one of the major narrative sources for the general history of the former half of the fourteenth century, is a resource of information that has invariably been used an extremely great deal by historians since as far back as the fifteenth century (in the latter half of the fourteenth, it was visited by other Florence chroniclers<sup>2</sup>). Commencing with the history

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<sup>1</sup> Giovanni Villani, *Nuova cronica*, ed. Giuseppe Porta, 3 vols. (Parma, 1991–2) [hereinafter: GV].

<sup>2</sup> See Amedeo De Vincentiis, 'Scrittura e politica cittadina: la cronaca di Marchione di Coppo Stefani', *Rivista Storica Italiana*, 108 (1996), 2–9, <<http://rm.univr.it/>

of Noah and the Babel Tower, the *Nuova Cronica* was the first universal chronicle of Florence, with an ambition to narrate the history of the entire world. Two-thirds of the work deals with the history of its author's time; Villani reported on the history of his city from the standpoint of a committed citizen who several times held administrative and political offices. He moreover made use of the extensive network of mercantile contacts (himself being a member of the local bankers' guild) and enriched his chronicle with some 'noteworthy' pieces of information – mainly from Europe and, primarily, from countries strongly associated with Florence. The relationships were political, as with France, through its long-lasting alliance with the Neapolitan house of Anjou; economic – England supplied the city with quality wool, its major raw material; there moreover were important business partners, such as Flanders, where Villani himself spent several years of his youth in one of the branches of Florence banks.<sup>3</sup> Not only was he a responsive observer of political history but a meticulous accountant too. He would often note down the fluctuating prices of grain (like the others in his time<sup>4</sup>), precisely appraise the cost of Florence's alliance with the Anjou in its delicate moments; using the units of length, one tower, turret and gate after the other, he described the city's ramparts and defensive walls. We will revisit his monumental 'statistical fresco' of the late 1330s later on.

Historians have been dealing with *Nuova Cronica* as a text *in se*, and object of research since the 1920s, when Ernst Mehl in his book on Villani's worldview summarised him as a 'gothic man', describing his world as a theatre of Augustinian struggle between God and the Devil and an arena of the City of God's (the Church's) struggle with adversities.<sup>5</sup> Such reckoning triggered zestful criticism: in a review,

biblioteca/scaffale/Download/Autori\_D/RM-DeVincentiis-Marchionne.pdf> [Accessed: Nov. 30, 2015]. Renaissance historians such as Leonardo Bruni or Niccolò Machiavelli have made an extensive use of the data provided by Villani.

<sup>3</sup> Michele Luzzati, *Giovanni Villani e la compagnia dei Buonaccorsi* (Roma, 1971), 8–9.

<sup>4</sup> See Giuliano Pinto, *Il libro del biadaio. Carestie e annona a Firenze dalla metà del '200 al 1348* (Firenze, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> Ernst Mehl, *Weltanschauung des Giovanni Villani* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1927). Villani apparently took over the Augustinian vision from Orosius (whom he mentions amongst his sources) and through the intellectual influence continually exerted by St Augustine on the literary output well into the chronicler's time; cf. *ibidem*, 142–55, 180–3.

Federico Chabod<sup>6</sup> emphasised Villani's ideological schizophrenia. He namely pointed out that, on the one hand, the chronicler raved over splendour and exquisite entertainment, admiring outstanding but unorthodox personalities such as Frederick II of the Holy Roman Empire, resolutely positively valuing richness and profit-making, also on financial operations (all this being characteristic of the oncoming epoch); on the other hand, he would apply typically medieval moralism, decrying ostentatious prodigality, edacity, and avarice. Chabod believed that the figure of Villani ought to have been shown torn by these contradictory influences, not resolving, at any expense, the apparent prevalence of one outlook-related aspect over the other – an approach that Mehl's method prevented: the latter author preferred an insight into the individual threads and motifs in the subject catalogue of the chronicler's work compiled beforehand.

Villani also triggered attention as a historian, and this due to his serious approach to the sources he frequently quoted, and sometimes also mutually confronted, always positioning himself as a critical interlocutor.<sup>7</sup> Whilst the progress of his own historiographic narration deviated from the annalistic style, never becoming excessively literary, keeping a distanced tone most of the time and often discussing various contradicting interpretations of facts (with which this author stands out against his contemporaries), Louis Green has identified certain permanent mechanisms in Villani's arguing and reasoning. First of all, Villani neglected the long-spanning processes propelling history, perceiving the events occurring as stemming directly from the preceding events and from human passions or ardencies. Second, he would often refer to immediate action of God's will, whether

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<sup>6</sup> Federico Chabod, 'La "concezione del mondo" di Giovanni Villani', *Nuova Rivista Storica*, xiii (1929), 336–9; N. Carotti in his review published in *Rivista Storica Italiana*, xlvi (1931), 102–10, has come to a similar conclusion, with a much stronger emphasis put, for a change, on the Renaissance aspects of Villani's thought, with man perceived as an autonomous artisan of his own fortune. Raffaello Morghen proposed his view in the same, Burkhardt-inspired spirit; cf. Raffaello Morghen, 'La storiografia fiorentina del Trecento: Ricordano Malispini, Dino Compagni e Giovanni Villani', in *Libera cattedra di storia e civiltà fiorentina. Secoli vari: '300, '400, '500* (Firenze, 1958), vi, 69–93.

<sup>7</sup> Franca Ragone, *Giovanni Villani e i suoi continuatori. La scrittura delle cronache a Firenze nel Trecento* (Roma, 1998), 26–34. See also *eadem*, 'Le scritture parlate. Qualche ipotesi sulla redazione delle cronache volgari nel Trecento dopo l'edizione critica della *Nuova cronica* di Giovanni Villani', *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 149 (1991), 783–810.

to rescue the city from a disaster or to deprive the war strategists of reason, or – less frequently – to the counsel of ‘the enemy of humankind’. This Christian concept was, however, to conceal the (originally pagan) concept of the Wheel of Fortune, with moments of peak opulence and felicity usually heralding impending calamities.<sup>8</sup> For these reasons, according to Green, Villani cannot be regarded as a historian in the sense commonly ascribed to the term. Another major driver in Villani’s historical concept is the influence of the stars: considered a natural cause, it never cancels the free will of man, or the possibility of Divine intervention.<sup>9</sup>

Within the area of research into the cultural dimension of Villani’s work, I should like to take a closer look at this chronicler as a political ideologue. He may be seen as such based already on the chronicle’s ‘prologue’: as he declares, he has written his monumental work out of the need to commemorate the grandeur of his city, as he had seen it, in the vernacular (a rare approach still then in the Peninsula, save for Venice), so that “the ignorant and the learned may draw thence profit and delight ... and may it be delightful and useful to our citizens now and to come, and may it encourage them in virtue and in great actions to consider how they are descended from noble ancestors and from folk of worth”.<sup>10</sup>

His will to ‘educate’ was received welcomingly: what we know for certain is that the chronicle gained considerable authority amongst the contemporary readers. The large number of manuscripts (at least thirty-one) of the *Nuova Cronica* that have come down to us from the fourteenth century alone, with their modest form (paper codices,

<sup>8</sup> Louis Green, *Chronicle into History* (Cambridge, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Gherardo Ortalli, “‘Corso di natura’ o “Giudicio di Dio”. A proposito di G. Villani XI, 1–3’, *La Cultura*, XVII (1979), 212–34.

<sup>10</sup> GV, I:1; transl. by Rose E. Selfe, *Villani’s Chronicle; Being Selections from the First Nine Books of the Croniche Fiorentine* [hereinafter: *Villani’s Chronicle*], ed. Philip H. Wicksteed (London, 1906), <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33022/33022-h/33022-h.htm>> [Accessed: Sept. 30, 2015]. The numbering of the books in G. Porta’s edition I refer to herein differs from that in the previous editions, since this editor uses a manuscript where Book I is divided into two parts, with the resulting set of thirteen (instead of the previously standard twelve) books. Hence, the references to bibliographical items published before 1991 need being adjusted in reference to the most recent, and now canonical, edition (i.e.: Book I, 1–37 of before 1990 → Book I of the Porta edition; I:38–61 → II; II → III, III → IV, and so forth). Hence, columns XI:91–4 as quoted abundantly by earlier authors are presently XII:91–4.

mostly written in gothic cursive), has already been commented upon. This is indicative of the real popularity and attention enjoyed by this text, which was often reproduced at inconsiderable cost for those who were to own the copies (and whose signatures in the codices we can at times find today).<sup>11</sup> Within twenty-five years after Villani's death, a poetic recast of the chronicle, in triplet, was penned in 1373 by Antonio Pucci<sup>12</sup>; in the middle of the fifteenth century, Villani's progeny boasted themselves about their illustrious ancestor with an inscription on their tombstone slab at the Santissima Annunziata church.

Villani wrote his work in a period that proved critical to the Italian municipal republics: in the former half of the fourteenth century, many of these republics saw the power getting out of control of the broad group of affluent settled citizens and being taken over by one-man government of a *signore*, which was often informal and based on the *signore's* authority with the town's citizens.<sup>13</sup> The *signoria* had by then established itself as a political system in Lombardy, the cradle of the communal political arrangement; also Tuscany was the case, with its communes lasting the longest, but some cities quite frequently yielding to the hands of a *signore*. This domineering system of rule wielded by individuals was nonetheless denounced as 'tyrannous' in important texts of culture such as Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco at Siena's Palazzo Pubblico, known as *Buono e cattivo governo*<sup>14</sup> (the

<sup>11</sup> Ragone, 'Le scritture parlate', 805–7. For the authority of the chronicle, see Alessandro Barbero, 'Storia e politica fiorentina nella cronaca di Giovanni Villani', in Chiara Frugoni (ed.), *Il Villani illustrato. Firenze e l'Italia medievale nelle 253 immagini del ms. Chigiano L VIII 296 della Biblioteca Vaticana*, (Firenze, 2005), 14–16.

<sup>12</sup> Antonio Pucci, 'Centiloquio', in Ildefonso di San Luigi (ed.), *Delizie degli eruditi toscani* (Firenze, 1772), iii–vi.

<sup>13</sup> For extensive studies of the period, refer to: Philip Jones, *The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria* (Oxford, 1997); Lauro Martines, *Power and Imagination. City-States in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> For a resumé of this discussion, cf. Silvia Diacchiati, *Popolani e magnati. Società e politica nella Firenze del Duecento* (Spoleto, 2011), 321–3; see Andrea Zorzi, 'L'angoscia delle repubbliche. Il "timor" nell'Italia comunale degli anni trenta del Trecento', in Andrea Gamberini, Jean-Philippe Genet, and Andrea Zorzi (eds.), *The Languages of Political Society. Western Europe, 14th–17th Centuries* (Roma, 2011), 304–12, recently edited as 'The Anxiety of the Republics. "Timor" in Italy of the Communes during the 1330s', in Fabio Ricciardelli (ed.), *Emotions, Passions and Power in Renaissance Italy* (Amsterdam, 2015). The chronicle may be considered as one of the varied forms of political propaganda of the *popolo*, including the law (also, the statutes) and the paintings in public places, as well as the coats-of-arms

contents of which were doubtlessly dictated in detail by the commissioning party – the Nine heading the Siena commune). In the time of a ripe or even, as in many a nearby city, declining communal system, Villani joined the discussion on tyranny, unmasking its characteristics not only for one-man rule but also in oligarchic regime, not legitimised by the citizens' consent.<sup>15</sup> The chronicler watched the commune at its height, which enabled him to present the communal ideology in its most abundant and magnificent form.

The *Nuova Cronica*, especially certain of its fragments, has already been read as an ideological manifesto. Francesca Klein has compared the importance attached by Villani to the commune of Florence with that attributed to the Florentine territorial state by Leonardo Bruni. She pointed to the idea of politics, still remaining implicit in the fourteenth-century chronicler: the management of the commune was one of the activities of the locals, on a par with performing their various jobs.<sup>16</sup> In the fragments related to the establishment and construction of the city, Charles T. Davis identified an ideology that related the prestige of Florence to Rome, the city's political lot being associated with the Capetian dynasty, being the ancestors of the rulers of Naples.<sup>17</sup> Most recently, Alessandro Barbero investigated into Villani's political views<sup>18</sup>, while Francesco Salvestrini analysed chapters XII:91–4 [in Porta's numbering; see footnote 10] in terms of untypical commendation of the city, following the concept of Arsenio Frugoni; this same fragment was interpreted by Andrea Zorzi, in the context of Book XII as a whole, as a warning against misgovernment.<sup>19</sup>

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and celebrations. See Sergio Raveggi, 'Appunti sulle forme di propaganda nel conflitto tra magnati e popolani', in Paolo Cammarosano (ed.), *Le forme della propaganda politica nel Due e nel Trecento. Relazioni tenute al convegno internazionale organizzato dal Comitato di studi storici di Trieste, dall'École française de Rome, e dal Dipartimento di storia dell'Università degli studi di Trieste, Trieste, 2-5 marzo 1993* (Roma, 1994), 471–81.

<sup>15</sup> See Zorzi, 'Langoscia', 293–5.

<sup>16</sup> Francesca Klein, 'Considerazioni sull'ideologia della città di Firenze tra '300 e '400 (Giovanni Villani e Leonardo Bruni)', *Ricerche Storiche*, 10 (1980), 311–36.

<sup>17</sup> Charles T. Davis, 'Topographical and Historical Propaganda in Early Florentine Chronicles and in Villani', *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, 2 (1988), 41–51.

<sup>18</sup> Barbero, 'Storia e politica', 13–22.

<sup>19</sup> Francesco Salvestrini, 'Descrizioni e "laudes" a Firenze nel secolo XIV. Giovanni Villani, la "Florentie urbis et reipublice descriptio", Antonio Pucci, Lapo da Castiglionchio, Coluccio Salutati', in Franek Sznura (ed.) *Antica possessione con belli*

Otherwise, Villani is seen by some as a non-ideologue: in 1977, Maria Consiglia de Matteis argued that he should not be treated as “the major fourteenth-century Florentine chronicler” but rather, as a mere compiler and author of political reminiscences of his own life. This apparently made him unable to render a coherent ideology which would have come in reply to the unsatisfactory state of affairs, as an alternative political proposition. Such a status would put Villani on equal footing with Dino Compagni, both portrayed by the scholar as witnesses to the crisis of the local political system who were too strongly involved in recounting the occurrence to assume a critical distance. The reality they described was loved and hated by them – for what it ought to be like and for what it was in fact. Ten years earlier, Arsenio Frugoni parenthetically commented on “limitations of the attitude [in Villani] that was sentimentally involved but devoid of political invention”.<sup>20</sup>

True, the values professed by Villani do not make up a coherent system. It has to be remarked, though, that he lectures on the history to the readers and, commenting the course of the narrative, makes them memorise an event, occurrence, or situation as an *esempio*; typically, not really as an example to follow but as a detail shedding light on the logic of the turn of events, some characteristic feature of the Florentines, or an image of the period he finds worth to remember. The final section of the chronicle contains several fragments directly exhorting citizens to improve their attitude toward the commune. Hence, my understanding of Villani's communal ideology is twofold. First, as a presentation and substantiation of the grandness and splendour of his city; second, as an instruction about good governance, targeted at his fellow citizens and expressed not only in abstract terms but, primarily, through the literary images of good and bad society as depicted by the chronicler. It is image, social landscape of a defined historic moment that Villani uses most frequently to fulfil his didactical purpose. Added to that, outstanding historians of the subsequent

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*costumi. Due giornate di studio su Lapo da Castiglionchio il Vecchio* (Firenze, 2005), 207–12; Arsenio Frugoni, *G. Villani, 'Cronica'*, XI 94 (Roma, 2015); first published in *Bullettino dell'Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo*, 77 (1965).

<sup>20</sup> Maria C. De Matteis, 'La coscienza della crisi comunale nei cronisti del '300', in Gabriele Zanella (ed.), *Storici e storiografia del Medioevo italiano* (Ferrara, 1986), 272; first published as a chapter in eadem, *La teologia politica comunale di Remigio de' Girolami*, Bologna, 1977; Frugoni, *G. Villani, 'Cronica'*, 52.

periods, such as Bruni and Machiavelli, not only drew from Villani the dry information but oftentimes followed up his judgment of the moments recognised as key to the city's history. Hence, an attempt to define Villani's communal ideology may enable to better determine the genesis of what was to become the republican ideology.<sup>21</sup>

The present analysis has to deviate from the technique pursued by historians of ideas, who in search of the political ideology of their time, would, above all, investigate the rhetorical works and manuals for *podestàs* (usually of an earlier date than the *Cronica*, coming mostly from the thirteenth century) or the juridical treatises from the second half of the fourteenth century.<sup>22</sup> In its research of the written word, the proposed analysis also differs from studies on iconographic sources, among which the aforementioned study by Lorenzetti has attracted most attention. The events in the history of Florence before 1250, as they are shown by Villani, have to be quoted in the first place, since they form important points of reference for this author's ideology.

## II

### FLORENCE'S 'BLOOM AND DECAY': THE BACKGROUND OF *NUOVA CRONICA*

The development of Florence in Villani's lifetime was quite peculiar. The chronicler's young years, with the Jubilee Year pilgrimage to Rome in 1300, which reportedly inspired his writing about the history of Florence – was the time of the ascension of the city-state, permanently allied with the Kingdom of Naples, to the position of one of the Peninsula's leading political hubs and a financial and commercial power on a European scale. Villani says that his sojourn in the Sacred City

<sup>21</sup> On the same topic, see the analyses of Bruni's historical method and his political worldview as compared to that of Villani, being the main, even if never explicit, source of the first books of Bruni's *History of the Florentine People*: Gary Ianziti, *Writing History in Renaissance Italy. Leonardo Bruni and the Uses of the Past* (Cambridge MA and London, 2012), 120–11. Contrarily to the view of Ianziti, I find the ideological content of Villani (except for the Guelph ideology) repeated generally in the work of Bruni, but in a more coherent, systematic and rhetorically advanced form.

<sup>22</sup> Quentin Skinner, *Virtù rinascimentali* (Bologna, 2006), 26–42; cf. also *idem*, 'Machiavelli's *Discorsi* and the pre-humanist origins of republican ideas', in Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (eds.), *Machiavelli and Republicanism* (Cambridge, 1993), 123–33.



gave him an opportunity to see what the classic 'teachers of history' wrote about. The Rome of Lucan and Titus Livy was admirable and awesome:

But considering that our city of Florence, the daughter and creature of Rome, was rising, and had great things before her, whilst Rome was declining, it seemed to me fitting to collect in this volume and new chronicle all the deeds and beginnings of the city of Florence.<sup>23</sup>

It was the fast-growing importance of Florence that prompted Villani to write a history of the city of the proportions set by the classic masters of historiography.

In the chronicler's narration, Florence developed as, primarily, its *popolo* ('people') gained increasing control over the order of the commune, as opposed to the chaos caused by the dominance of magnate families (*grandi, magnati*) fostering a 'culture of conflict' (disposed to warfare, which is economically beneficial to this social stratum, and to conflicts, rivalries, and hatred amongst themselves).<sup>24</sup> Beginning with the decade of 1250–60, which I will cover at some length as a 'Golden Age', the *popolo* – a social group of free and working citizens paying their taxes in Florence and living a stable life there – started resolutely eradicating phenomena related to the privileges of the magnates, such as street fighting (being oftentimes part of a vendetta practiced within the common law) or disposal of communal property by individuals. Following the Ghibelline and, subsequently, Guelph aristocratic reaction, a six-member college of guild priors (*priori*) was appointed in 1282 (extended to eight members in 1342), which, together with the Standard-Bearer of Justice (*Gonfaloniere di Giustizia*), established itself as the commune's major office – the *signoria* – for several dozens of years. What it meant was that the top authority of the city was ever since to rest with member of guilds (mainly, of the seven mightiest and richest guilds). The adoption in 1293 of the very strict, and indeed durable, 'anti-magnate' laws – so-called *Ordinamenti di Giustizia* – crowned the process of taking over the control of the commune by the local *popolo*. These Ordinances of Justice laid down penalties for the powerful and wealthy (magnate

<sup>23</sup> GV, IX:36; *Villani's Chronicle*, VIII, 36.

<sup>24</sup> See Jean-Claude Maire Vigueur, *Cavalieri e cittadini. Guerra, conflitti e società nell'Italia comunale*, trans. Aldo Pasquali (Bologna, 2004), 388–406.

families were listed for the purpose), for verbal or physical insult of a member of the *popolo* and charging this group with collective responsibility within their families. In the later years, because of the attempts made by the potent to refute this legislation – the occurrences Villani describes with a cautionary purpose – additional offices were established to guarantee the rule of the *popolo* and persistence of the *Ordinamenti*.

The potency of Florence had an important financial and territorial aspect to it. First of all, the city minted the florins – Europe’s strongest gold currency. The dense network of Florentine commercial and financial representatives stretched across the continent, up to Flanders and much further eastward, to the Azov Sea. In spite of his passion to quantify, Villani described the local merchants as ‘innumerable’. The instances of expelling some Florentine merchants from France (and elsewhere), owing to their economically dominant position, or counterfeiting the florin by rulers elsewhere – all this being described in the chronicle – comes as a paradoxical confirmation of the international importance of Florentine merchants and currency.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the wars and financial transactions enabled Florence to expand its control over its surrounding territory, with its network of roads, castles, and residential clusters. From the chronicler’s perspective, the city’s territorial power was at its peak in the year 1336, as Florence entered into an alliance with Venice against Mastino della Scala, the aggressive ruler of Verona; Arezzo, endangered by the expansion of Mastino, entrusted Florence with control over its area. Writing about this moment probably in the mid-forties, nearing the end of his life, a conscious citizen for half a century then, Villani indicates the years 1336–8 as a point of reference and model to follow for the posterity.<sup>26</sup> The power of Florence in the Italian political arena is praised indeed (the city controlled a large territory, two cities and a number of lesser hubs),<sup>27</sup> as is its wealth (the annual tax collection, of 300,000 florins in aggregate, “would turn out to be a great thing to a kingdom”, the chronicler commented). This is not the case, though, with the exercise

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<sup>25</sup> GV, XII:94; X:278.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. GV, XII:91–4.

<sup>27</sup> Thus, Francesca Klein is not right when she states that Villani offers no concept of Florence’s territorial rule or preponderance. See *eadem*, ‘Considerazioni’, 323–4.

of power, as the same book offers quite a severe judgment of it (the 1330s saw also a decline of the writer's political activity).

The moment in question was soon followed by a thorough crisis.<sup>28</sup> The ever-growing power of Florence (as Villani saw it) began wobbling. The alliance with Venice, whose scale outran all the previous projects undertaken by Florence, ended up in a fiasco (1338); the attempt to cut Mastino della Scala out from the bridgeheads in Tuscany was followed by the commune's entanglement in a war with Pisa, with the eventual defeat of Florence (1341). Resulting from an overly risky crediting policy, Florence-based banking partnerships present across Europe started collapsing, which brought about a disaster to the city, its elite, whose position was heavily based upon finance, being affected by a deep crisis.<sup>29</sup> The owners of the strong and influential banks, hoping for protection against the creditors, entrusted the authority over the city, on a lifetime basis, to Count Walter of Brienne, an in-law of Robert, king of Naples (Walter was married to Robert's niece), titular Duke of Athens. Walter's rule lasted a year (1342–3). The count was eventually expelled, a revolt broke out in the city and its authority was dominated for a few years by lower-tier guilds that, in Villani's view, were utterly unprepared to govern. The end of the prince's rule marked moreover a decomposition of the long-reinforced territorial domination of Florence: its subordinate towns and minor hubs rose in revolt and declared independence. Six months before the count was banished (26 July 1343), Robert of Naples died, leaving the kingdom's throne without a male heir. In the following years, the succession conflict flared up among the Anjou family members (who had by then guaranteed Florence's position in Tuscany and in Italy)

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<sup>28</sup> Book XII (covering the earlier period, 1333–42) has also been recognised as extremely sombre and disturbing (cf. Zorzi, 'L'angoscia', 289–90). Yet, in my opinion, one finds Book XIII really coherent, in literary terms, as the one dealing with a pervasive crisis. It encompasses the period 1342–8, with disasters coming one after another, never interrupted by moments of satisfaction with success or by a proud description of the city – in contrast to the preceding book. In the critical edition, the two final books form one volume, based on the 'third prologue' to the chronicle that opens Book XII and summarises the occurrences covered by the thirteenth.

<sup>29</sup> The swollen wave of bankruptcies, which affected also the largest commercial and financial enterprises of Bardi and Peruzzi, appeared in 1343–5; Villani himself was put in prison in 1346 in connection with the collapse of the Buonacorsi company he was a member of; cf. Luzzati, *Giovanni Villani*, 51–61.

and Louis of Hungary was brought to Naples to fight his kinswoman, Queen Joanna I. 1346 saw a severe famine expanding over an area so vast that it was hard to find a place to import grain from. Two years later, a great pestilence unleashed, killing many, Villani among them; his narration stops at early 1348. Florence, always creeping to the heights, suffered a deep and most severe decay in the last years of its chronicler's life. The collapse extended to the entire world known to Villani's contemporaries, triggering an apocalyptic impression.

The chronicle begins in a climate of enthusiasm and ends with a premonition of a great disaster: in the last two books, written in the 1330s and 1340s, the author expresses this intuition in a direct manner. He uses extensive astrological arguments in support, noticing examples of bad signs not only in Florence but, as well, in Naples, in the Avignon Curia, which slid into ever-deepening conflict – and, finally, in the great earthquake of early 1348, which spread to southern Germany and the lands of Friuli. Referring to these signals, he exhorts his fellow citizens to repent, seeing these calamities as a Divine retribution and a predictor of a catastrophe that would go beyond any seen or conceivable.

The presentation of the two pillars supporting the communal Florence: its Guelph (pro-Anjou) political bias and the authority of *popolo*, is not idealised in the chronicle. In recounting the history of the communal and *popolo's* institutions as well as in reporting on the periods of the Anjou-run *signorias*<sup>30</sup>, Villani places a strong emphasis on the Guelph character of the good reforms carried out in Florence and on the necessity to collaborate with the Anjou, albeit this collaboration not always proved convenient to the city. Telling his story of the rule of the Duke of Athens, whom he clearly and unambiguously opposes, Villani suggests that King Robert was not satisfied with his kinsman's doings. And, albeit he does not glorify this ruler, or his predecessors, the specific rhetorical techniques he applies<sup>31</sup> help create a legend of an alliance and reciprocal loyalty of the dynasty

<sup>30</sup> Between 1267 and 1343, resulting from internal political crises or external threat, the commune of Florence four times entrusted the authority of the city to a Naples-related *signore*, who replaced for a formally predetermined period nonlocal rectors: a *podestà* and a 'captain of the *popolo*'. The first three *signores* were members of the House of Anjou, the fourth being Walter of Brienne, Robert the Wise's in-law.

<sup>31</sup> Worth quoting in this context is, primarily, Robert's letter to the Florentines after the flood of 1333 (GV, XII:3); a letter wherein Robert admonishes the Duke of Athens (GV, XIII:4); and, Florence's legation to Louis of Hungary (GV, XIII:109).

and the commune. He is different in this respect from his contemporary historiographer and diarist Dino Compagni, who much more strongly associates Guelphism with violence of the potent towards the *popolo* – the *popolo* being portrayed, in its primary pure form, as remaining uninvolved in the struggle of the parties.<sup>32</sup>

The *popolo*, the other pillar of Florentine policies, is many a time referred to by the chronicler in a fashion that is far from apologetic, with tints of grey (rather than black-and-white) added. While the occurrences accompanying the takeover of power by the *popolo* in the years 1250, 1282, and 1295 are markedly emphasised and described as expressly positive, marking the progress in the history of the city, the historian does not oppose the contribution of the *pacifici* ('peacefully-minded') magnates to policy-making and warns against excessive hauteur of the *popolo* who are willing to attribute to themselves the competencies of nobility, be it in the area of war. He scarifies the actions of the extremely democratic (given the thitherto-observed standards) government after 1343, accusing it – then again – of arrogance and incompetency.<sup>33</sup> Thus, Villani's political stance may be deemed moderate, in between aristocratism (represented by the magnates seeking to abolish the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia*) and democratism. The latter is criticised, in passing, already in the account on the First *Popolo* (1250), although the chronicler uses this particular period as a Golden Age legend and model of good governance. It is subject to severe overt criticism in the final book, for a change.

### III TEACHERS OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY IN VILLANI'S FLORENCE

Before passing to an analysis of the communal ideology as contained in the Villani work, we will take a look on the authors who had before then exerted the strongest impact on the citizens' – also, Villani's –

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<sup>32</sup> The work of Compagni was not published during the life of the author since it was a narration and apology of the history of White Party in the first years of fourteenth century. See Dino Compagni, *Cronica delle cose occorrenti nei tempi suoi*, ed. Gino Luzzato (Torino, 1968), I:4–5.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Marvin Becker, *Florence in Transition* (Baltimore, 1967), i, 181–4 for an interpretation of the changes in Villani's views on political participation of various groups.

habit of thought with respect to politics and commune. In spite of his excellent familiarity with literature, the classics and his contemporary authors<sup>34</sup>, Villani has not studied the liberal arts or the law. He probably did not have a first-hand acquaintance with Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, albeit he knew the figures and revered the former and venerated the latter.<sup>35</sup> Their ideas were, however, conveyed in the city's educated circles gathered around the Dominican study affiliated to the Santa Maria Novella cloister.<sup>36</sup> In naming the figures most influential for the political thought in Villani's Florence, Brunetto Latini and Dante Alighieri ought to be evoked in the first place. There also were Dominican thinkers temporarily staying at the Florence study, among whom I have chosen Remigio de' Girolami, as a political cogitator. These thinkers probably knew one another in person, their intellectual activity in Florence falling on the final years of the thirteenth century (*fra* Remigio being active into the 1310s).

Brunetto Latini, the oldest of the three, made his first contributions to current politics at the First *Popolo* time.<sup>37</sup> After the opening of the College of Priors in 1282, he held till his death the office of a notary (*dettatore*), responsible for handling the commune's correspondence with external entities – an early form of the Chancellor of the Republic office. In these late years of his life, his voice was still audible at meetings of the major colleges. His *Li livres dou Tresor*<sup>38</sup>,

<sup>34</sup> See Ragone, *Giovanni Villani*, 16–20.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. the column on St Thomas's canonisation: GV, X:218; a reference to the Philosopher's authority: XIII:43.

<sup>36</sup> For the intellectual climate in Florence at the beginning of the fourteenth century see George Holmes, 'The Emergence of an urban ideology at Florence c. 1250–1450', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 23 (1973), 116–121.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. GV, VII:73; *Villani's Chronicle*, VI:73; and, a study on the conjectured authorship of the paean in praise of Florence, featured on the former commune's palace: Diana Modesto, 'L'uomo (Brunetto), la città (palazzo del podestà) e il libro (la *Divina commedia*)', in *The City and the Book II* (Firenze, 2002), <<http://www.florin.ms/beth2.html>> [Accessed: Sept. 30, 2015].

<sup>38</sup> Brunetto Latini, *Li livres dou Tresor*, ed. Francis J. Carmody (Berkeley, 1948), <<http://www.florin.ms/tresor1.html>> [Accessed: Sept. 30, 2015] (hereinafter: *Tresor*). Interesting remarks about the manuscript tradition (and, consequently, reception) of *Tresor* in master thesis of David Napolitano, *Composition and Reception of Brunetto Latini's Li livres dou Tresor. The Price of a Medieval Bestseller* (Utrecht, 2010), 69–72, <<http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/179324>> [Accessed: Oct. 10, 2015].

an encyclopaedic *summa* Latini wrote when in France, deals with the history and description of the world, the issues of rhetoric and politics (the former conditioning the latter), making abundant use of the output of the classic authors such as Aristotle, Cicero, or Sallust, and popularising their ideas, even if in a fragmentary form.<sup>39</sup> It is there that he proposes the argument for superiority, from a city's viewpoint, of the communal system (with officials and rectors nominated by citizens for a determined term of office, the criterion of election being the citizens' benefit) over the monarchical system (where the ruler sells the offices having regard only to the maintenance of his own power and wealth).<sup>40</sup> Dante mentions Latini's name in *Comedia*, as his dear master and father in art<sup>41</sup>; Villani, the chronicler of Florence, enumerates his merits for the city in an obituary, naming Latini a great philosopher and master of the art of rhetoric, who has left significant works, also mentioning his office as a notary to the commune. Brunetto, according to Villani, was a teacher who had civilised the Florentines, taught them how to 'speak well' and to 'run the republic along the lines of [Aristotle's] *Politics*'.<sup>42</sup>

The other figure that is worth encountering is *fra* Remigio de' Girolami (d. 1319 or 1320). This outstanding member of the Dominican Order descended from a respected line of the Florentine *popolo* (his brother Salvi was one of the first priors, in 1282). During his formation as a monk in Paris, in 1268–72, he had an opportunity to meet St Thomas in person. After he took his final profession vows and holy orders, he returned to Florence, where he witnessed the important events: the peace mission of Cardinal Latino (1279/80) and, the mission's indirect result, the establishment of the College of Priors. While in Florence, he was several times the prior of the Santa Maria Novella (the seat of the study, the city's major school) as well as the preacher of the municipal priors – in critical moments such

<sup>39</sup> Francesco Mazzoni, 'Brunetto Latini', in *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/brunetto-latini\\_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/brunetto-latini_%28Enciclopedia-Dantesca%29/)> [Accessed: Sept. 30, 2015].

<sup>40</sup> Latini, *Tresor*, 392, III:73, 4–6.

<sup>41</sup> *Inferno*, XV.

<sup>42</sup> GV, IX:10, *Villani's Chronicle*, VIII:10. See also an ample interpretation of this passage in Enrico Artifoni, 'Repubblicanesimo comunale e democrazia moderna (in margine a Giovanni Villani, IX:10: "Sapere guidare e reggere la nostra Repubblica secondo la Politica")', *Bollettino Ronciniano*, 6 (2006), 21–33.

as the popular biennium, during which the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia* were launched (1293–5), to his resolute support, and during the civil war between the White and the Black Guelphs. He was a proponent of public peace, which he considered the highest value in the terrene life, the precondition and the purpose of common weal. He consequently remarked that both magnates and artisans had their present and required place within the community of citizens, and condemned the posterior divisions and fighting between the parties. In his treatises *De bono communi* and *De bono pacis*, fra Remigio argued that political community (commune) is the only place for humaneness to fulfil its potential, and that peace is valuable to the extent that it is worth waiving one's claims for personal justice (which, in the specific context of the 1300–4 civil war meant accepting the expropriations committed, at the price of the option to return to the native city). Interestingly, the outstanding preacher and his activities in Florence remain unmentioned by Villani, which possibly calls for elucidation.<sup>43</sup>

Dante, in his young years, might have had an opportunity to attend fra Remigio's lectures at the Florentine study; it is possible that he drew his concept of dual purpose of man, which he later expressed in *De monarchia*<sup>44</sup>: namely, worldly (living on the earth in freedom and peace, brought about by the emperor's reign) and eternal (salvation, achievable under the guidance of the pope).<sup>45</sup> Dante's views on politics – Florentine and world politics – were rather isolated: his Whites lost in the civil war, abandoned by Pope Boniface VIII; as a result, the poet spent the last twenty years of his life in exile. He advocated the idea for the emperor to resume the rule of the Roman capital and for the pope to quit the management of earthly affairs. Reminiscing Florence in *Comedia*, Dante expressed a resolutely elituristic stance: the First *Popolo* had apparently brought about permanent disorder (which is

<sup>43</sup> Villani does not specifically name any of the outstanding Florentine Dominican friars, except for leaders of great penance parades. The chronology of fra Remigio's life, his collected works (edited by Emilio Panella, OP), and a bulk of philological commentaries, see the website: <<http://www.smn.it/emiliopanella/remigio/index.htm>> [Accessed: Sept. 20, 2015].

<sup>44</sup> Charles T. Davis, 'Remigio de' Girolami and Dante: a Comparison of their Conceptions of Peace', *Studi Danteschi*, 36 (1959), 105. See also Ovidio Capitani, 'Cupidigia, avarizia, bonum comune in Dante Alighieri e in Remigio de' Girolami', in *idem, Da Dante a Bonifacio VIII* (Roma, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Dante Alighieri, *De Monarchia*, I:6, III:10.



evident, among other things, in the ephemeral nature of the adopted laws<sup>46</sup>) and hatred based on resentment. The poet also complained that nouveau-riche careerists arriving from the provinces were giving shape to the city. Yet, he was a decisive advocate of peace. As many before and many after him did, he lamented the legendary 1216 origin of the dispute between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines<sup>47</sup>, sincerely hating the mighty Corso Donati, the great adherent of the old regime and leader of the victorious Blacks. Villani approaches Dante as a figure of authority, possibly owing to the Florentines' general, and his own, admiration for *Comedia*. He penned the first known biographical note on Alighieri, entered in the rubric on his death, where he is described as "a great poet and philosopher, and a perfect rhetorician", whilst his impetuosity and conceit are rebuked.<sup>48</sup> When quoting Dante's verse, the chronicler calls him 'our poet', but always quotes fragments irrespective of the overall context, since the Dantean vision of political ideals, external affiliations and sociology of the urban milieu differs from that proposed by Villani.<sup>49</sup>

#### IV 'COMMUNE' AND 'TYRANNY': THE KEY NOTIONS OF VILLANI'S COMMUNAL IDEOLOGY

It is high time now to pass to the key notions and ideas used by Villani in his vision of politics. The crucial one, *comune* ('commune'), is, in its primary meaning, a common noun. Villani uses it (quite frequently) in this sense to describe the autonomous political organisation of the city. Contrary to the modern historiographic discourse, the terms *comune* and *signoria* are not opposed against each other. The commune-city, a politically independent entity, may entrust the rule also to an individual. As a political organisation, commune differs from principality or kingdom in that its authority is not independent and based upon the Roman Law, citizens always being an important point of reference – whether it is governed by magnates, the *popolo*, or a *signore*. The latter

<sup>46</sup> *Purgatorio*, VI, 139–144.

<sup>47</sup> *Paradiso*, XV–XVI, *Inferno*, XVI, 73–5.

<sup>48</sup> GV, X:136; *Villani's Chronicle*, IX:136. Citations from Dante: GV, XIII:19, 97, 118; a paraphrase without quoting the source: "maladetta e bramosa lupa", XIII:55.

<sup>49</sup> Villani's deep respect for Emperor Henry VII, despite the unfavourable political circumstances, might have nonetheless come from the Dantean inspiration.

is dependent on the citizens' consensus to a much greater extent than a king or prince would be. The notion of *comune* formed the thinking of Villani's contemporaries: the chronicler describes the republican Rome, subduing more and more areas, as a *comune*, whilst Brunetto Latini uses this same term to denote the Ciceronian *res publica*.<sup>50</sup>

The word *comune* can also function as an adjective: then, it primarily means 'common'/'shared'.<sup>51</sup> A good commune ought to be a common thing, its value not limited to the fact that it creates an environment for everybody to live (this being the Remigio de' Girolami's very basic argument): the body is co-run by all the citizens deemed worthy of it. Villani expresses this belief by using the adjective *comune* in political and institutional contexts, albeit the classical concept of *bene comune* appears a mere six times in the *Cronica*. "To reform the government and the authority in the city toward a commonality, so that sects be removed from amongst the citizens" ("*riformare la città di reggimento e signoria per modo comune, acciò che si levassono le sette tra' cittadini*") is a never completely achievable ideal.<sup>52</sup> Villani looks at the political body with the eyes of a representative of the *popolo* one has to keep watch so that the magnates may never seize the entire power – as, for instance, through nullifying the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia* – and never resume the oppression of the *popolo*: it is the *popolo*, after all, that ought to be given the decisive say on the city's affairs.

However, recurring signals of two other concerns expressed by Villani are easy to spot: first of all, magnates should not be completely excluded from ruling; there are fields such as war or diplomatic service where they are doubtlessly more capable and useful than the *popolani*.<sup>53</sup> There are many among them who have to their credit

<sup>50</sup> See Brunetto Latini, *Il Tesoretto*, <<http://www.florin.ms/Cicero.html>>, a Web edition by Julia Bolton Holloway, Aureo Anello Association, [I.i.] [Accessed: Sept. 20, 2015].

<sup>51</sup> Apart from the other meanings, such as 'ordinary', 'general'.

<sup>52</sup> GV, XI:109; italics mine. Also, refer to the positively appraised endeavours aimed at 'commonalising' the ruling colleges in order to keep peace in the city: GV, VIII:13, IX:40, XI:109.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. GV, VII:77, XII:134: "Yet, the larger error on the part of our Rectors was that he was entrusted with the royal standard, and that the army so large was not led by the appropriate leaders [*resp.*, dukes], there being no noble citizens to have taken care about it." ["Ma maggior fallo fu de' nostri rettori a darli la 'nsegna reale, e che si grande oste non capitanaro di sofficianti duci, e non vi furono di nobili cittadini a'ccui ne calesse."].

merits for the commune, and so, together with their families, deserve gratefulness (an important virtue – to be covered at some length further on below).<sup>54</sup> At last, envy may be unreasoning and lead to another danger: excessive openness to the lowest social strata, new and incompetent people, who should rather be concerned about minding their shops.<sup>55</sup> *Popolo minuto* – the plebeians – is treated by Villani with invariable suspiciousness. Thus, a ‘common’ government should embrace peacefully oriented [*pacifici/non tiranni*] magnates and wealthy burghers – the group which ought to be moderately open to new families who can join if they have attained the appropriate status. Sectarianism and clique rule should be watched out for.

A well-governed commune is one that enjoys sustainable laws, stable and purposeful institutions. The former ideal was never achieved, whether in Florence or in any other Italian communal city – except, perhaps, Venice. Whilst quoting Dante<sup>56</sup>, Villani complains that the laws enacted in an October cannot persist into mid-November. Speaking of the ruling circles in the 1330s, he criticises appointments of new high-ranking officials for security in the city: he believes that Florence has already developed a satisfactory institutional system, whose ‘reinforcement’ could only establish the rule of a given faction and suppress the potential resistance.<sup>57</sup> Contrary to the laws and institutions, whose durability should be ensured, officials should be offered short terms of office.<sup>58</sup> The appointment of extraordinary commissions (*balìa*), equipped with dictatorial rights, for any longer than six months would be excessively risky, implying the threat of ‘privatisation’ of the commune which would then start serving the interests of a single narrow group.<sup>59</sup> The chronicler names such privatisation tyranny, also when it comes to usurpation of the city’s authority by one faction.

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. GV, XIII 44.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. GV, XIII 20ff.

<sup>56</sup> GV, XIII:118; *Purgatorio*, VI:144; also, cf. GV, X:271.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. GV, X:76; XII:118.

<sup>58</sup> All the same, Villani did not protest against the practice of drawing the names of priors (among the selected candidates) to hold their office for several terms of office (more than six, at times), in advance (as a standard, a prior’s term lasted two months). This, however, should be interpreted in terms of his tolerance for solutions exceeding the general rules of the system but guaranteeing stability.

<sup>59</sup> GV, XII:129.

Let us pause at this notion and see how Villani actually understands it. A tyrant, in light of the period's thought, is one who wields an authority that is illegal (from a formal point of view) and arbitrary, rather than law-based: such was the view of Cicero, whereas Thomas Aquinas added that a tyrant's authority is exercised to the benefit of the ruler, rather than public weal.<sup>60</sup> Villani uses the term 'tyrant' only to denote (some of) the *signori* of Italian city-states; although medieval authors define, at times, a pope or an emperor in this way, Villani the chronicler and politician refrains from it.<sup>61</sup> The papal, imperial, and royal authority is legal and has its peculiar *sacrum* behind it: hence, it might be criticised but not challenged (Louis of Bavaria being an exception to the rule – with Villani's apparently legitimate belief that his rule was illegal). Hence, none of the Florence's *signori*, apart from Walter of Brienne, is called by Villani a 'tyrant', though he did not completely agree with their policies: two were kings of Naples and one was the heir to this kingdom's throne.

The communal authority, including the collegial, statute-based one, had no strong legitimisation behind it, and was recognised more on a *de facto* rather than *de iure* basis.<sup>62</sup> All the more important was it, then, to govern in line with the principles of justice – the notion that was theoretically explained, in the context of Florence as a commune, by Remigio de Girolami.<sup>63</sup>

Let us take a look now at the rule of Walter of Brienne, as a model for Villani to propose his idea of tyranny. There are two main motifs standing out in the narrative on Walter: first, the Duke of Athens was successful in destroying the institutions of commune, of the *popolo* and the guilds, depriving the priors and the Councils of their authority, degrading the *Ordiamenti di Giustizia*, abolishing the office of Standard-Bearer of the Militia – forces of municipal militia and of the self-defence of the *popolo*; the colours of the *popolo* featured on the Banner of Justice were subjected to the ancestral colours of Walter

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Giovanni Giorgini, 'Tirannide', in *Enciclopedia delle scienze sociali*, <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/tirannide\\_%28Enciclopedia\\_delle\\_sienze\\_sociali%29/>](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/tirannide_%28Enciclopedia_delle_sienze_sociali%29/>) [Accessed: Sept. 20, 2015].

<sup>61</sup> See Mehl, *Weltanschauung*, 101.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, *The Italian City-State*, 335–58.

<sup>63</sup> Remigio de' Girolami, *De bono communi*, 1302; *De bono pacis*, 1304, ed. Emilio Panella, <<http://www.e-theca.net/emiliopanella/remigio/index.htm>> [Accessed: Sept. 30, 2015].

himself and of the Anjou.<sup>64</sup> Second institutional change corresponded with social change: the duke “wheedled and dissembled” (*puttaneggiava e disimulava*)<sup>65</sup> in front of the *popolo* nominally preserving their privileges and symbols but in reality offering primacy to representatives of the lesser professions, redoubling the pretensions of plebeians, and deceiving them by his severe attitude towards transgressions committed by the potent. The *popolo* meant for this chronicler affluent and sapient burghers, well-rooted in the city, deserving to be active in politics. He perceived the duke’s actions as exciting the mob – always a risky business to social and political order.

Villani uses the word *tirannia*, and the akin terms, in a rather broad sense: to denote a *signoria* that is based on a sense of threat (in particular, the *tiranni di Lombardia*), or violence employed against other citizens by powerful families. At one point, the chronicler outright states, without charging any specific group, that all the Florentine citizens are blameful before God because of the “neighbours’ pride against one another as they are willing to control, tyrannise, and pillage” [“superbia l’uno vicino coll’altro in volere segnoreggiare e tiranneggiare e rapire”].<sup>66</sup> The overall decay of the *popolo* calls down God’s penalty (as the disastrous flood of 1333) and offers fertile soil for tyrannous rule. One more category of meanings of the word ‘tyranny’ covers the latter group.

Villani, namely, uses this term to denote groups of rulers operating within the normal institutional system. In specific, there was an oligarchic group in Florence who used procedural artifices to severely cut down the list of citizens potentially allotted as *priori*. The reform undertaken in 1339 to increase a group of the electable was thus meant to “remove the arrogance and tyranny from the governing citizens.”<sup>67</sup> Tyrannous, in the chronicler’s view, is also the creation

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<sup>64</sup> The transferral of the priors from the Palazzo della Signoria and the withdrawal of the banners of the *popolo* – the symbolic and political system-related symptoms of appearance of a tyrant in the city – are reported, with respect to the Duke of Athens, by Leonardo Bruni (*Istoria Fiorentina, tradotta in volgare da Donato Acciaiuoli* [Firenze, 1861], 330; <liberliber.it> [Accessed: Sept. 30, 2015]), and Niccolò Machiavelli (*Istorie fiorentine*, ed. Franco Gaeta [after the edition by Guido Mazzoni and Mario Casella, Milano, 1929, Milano, 1962], II:36).

<sup>65</sup> GV, XIII:8.

<sup>66</sup> GV, XII:2.

<sup>67</sup> GV, XII:106.

of the governing faction of new 'police' offices enabling it to control the city or facilitate the collection of excessive taxes. The notion of violence is strictly correlated in this context with abuse of public funds for private purposes (*baratteria*). Villani denounces the tyrant who, albeit his rule is collegial, poses a physical threat to those he governs and pillages them. It is thus apparent that norms and institutions are insufficient in themselves for good governance: they have to be completed with the virtue of those in power; with charity [*carità*] striving for common weal and peace. As Andrea Zorzi aptly points out, similarly to Lorenzetti in the fresco at the Palazzo Pubblico, Villani does not mutually oppose the two forms of government: commune against *signoria*, but rather, two methods of governance: a rule that builds common weal and a tyranny.<sup>68</sup>

## V

FLORENCE AND ITS CITIZENS: THE GOLDEN AGE MYTH  
AND A PICTURE OF DECAY

Villani does propose to his readers a model of ideal government and ideal citizens. These are portrayed in Book VII, in the chapters recounting the history of the popular decade of 1250–60.<sup>69</sup> The commune of the time was strong and efficient in handling its enemies, including the other cities within the nearby territory and the potent figures inside and outside of Florence. The citizens were honest with respect to the commune and resisted the enemies' attempts to be bribed, however large the sums offered were. The merits of these citizens were repaid with gratefulness.<sup>70</sup> Finally, the government was pitiless for anyone who wanted to appropriate a piece of public good, whatever the value of it.

Writing about his age, Villani creates a legend of the epoch, filling the entire chapter with extolling the simplicity of Florentine life 'in the time of the *popolo*. The citizens would not squander their money on ostentatious food, clothes, or other luxury goods; the maidens' dowries were reasonable. This section concludes with a lesson:

After such habits and plain customs then lived the Florentines, but they were true and trustworthy to one another and to their commonwealth,

<sup>68</sup> Zorzi, 'Langoscia', 312.

<sup>69</sup> GV, VII:39, 40, 42–3, 47–58, 61–3, 65, 67–9, 75, 77–78.

<sup>70</sup> For the incorruptibility as well as rewarding the merits, cf. GV, VII:62.

and with their simple life and poverty they did greater and more virtuous things than are done in our times with more luxury and with more riches.<sup>71</sup>

This ideal of plainness could sound odd when uttered by an author who otherwise took delight in describing the city's abundance, 'noble festivities', and luxury in all varieties. But in fact, a Dantean/Franciscan<sup>72</sup> and Roman/Republican inspiration is traceable in this passage; one audibly reverberating author is Sallust<sup>73</sup>, who was widely read in the educated circles of Italian communal cities and whom Villani mentions among his masters of historiographical art.<sup>74</sup> It has to be noted that the chronicler cannot avoid the tension between the First *Popolo* legend and the facts that deviate from the ideal picture of the period. There were two gravest such events: the sacrilegious execution of Beccheria of Pavia, Abbot of Vallombrosa, on a charge of intriguing with the Ghibellines (1258) and the unreasonable decision of the *popolani* to sally forth to a war with Siena, the concept against which the Florentine nobles protested: the final defeat in 1260 put an end to the rule of the *popolo*. Both occurrences were instances of vainglory, of which Villani accuses First *Popolo* – with all its advantages.

The chronicler does not propose a single narrative that would describe some specific moment of misrule. However, in much more a dispersed form, he accuses his fellow citizens (in the last two Books, XII and XIII) of shortcomings completely opposite to the virtues attributed to the society and its rulers in the years 1250–60. In the 1330s and 1340s, the Florentines have no regard to common weal, do not appreciate the merits and are ungrateful; they eat and drink immoderately and become famous for their extravagant spending on houses in the town and rural residences.<sup>75</sup> The rulers and the military

<sup>71</sup> GV, VII:69; *Villani's Chronicle*, VI:69.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *Paradiso*, XV:97, for the similarities between the two fragments cf. Raffaello Morghen, *Dante, il Villani e Ricordano Malispini* (Roma, 1921), 6; Charles T. Davis, *L'Italia di Dante* (Bologna, 1988), 113–18.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. Sallust, *De coniuratione Catilinae*, ed. Jared W. Scudder (Boston, 1900), 11, 13, 14; <<http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/sallust/catilina.html>> [Accessed: Oct. 5, 2015]. For the reminiscences in Villani's contemporaries, cf. Latini, *Tresor*, 299–301 (II:118).

<sup>74</sup> GV, IX:36.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. GV, XII:2: "... our sins, which are superabundant and disgusting to God: the haughtiness of one neighbour against the other, who is willing to rule, tyrannise, and attack, as well as the infinite greed and bad incomes of the Commune

leaders lack discernment and ability to anticipate, which concerns things fiscal and military alike. The complaint about ‘cursed parties’, reoccurring across the chronicle, does not refer at this point to the Guelphs and Ghibellines, the White and the Black: it is now used with respect to the factions ruling in the author’s own time as well as individual unceasingly brabbling citizens.

It is these defects that appear in contrast to the virtues of the First *Popolo*, which reflected the Roman republican ethos; but Villani pushes his accusations forward, making their purport quasi-religious in the final books. In his attempt to intellectually tackle the calamities affecting Florence one after the other, beginning with the cataclysmal flood of 1333, he repeatedly makes references to moral decay. In an attempt to move the citizens, he describes this tragic event with a vast amount of detail, from the first dramatic days when the city was being blusteringly flooded, thunders and lightning getting blended with the commotion of cries of despair and prayer, up to a grim description

from fraudulent trading and usury, which are flowing out from everywhere through the ardent jaundice amidst the brethren and neighbours; similarly, the vanity of women, and disarranged expenditures and ornaments; similarly, our disordered voraciousness and drunkenness, for the people of Florence are drinking more wine at the taverns of one parish than our ancestors used to drink across the town; again, through the disorderly lasciviousness of men and women; and, finally, the worst of all sins: ungratefulness and refusal to acknowledge that God has given us a great welfare and our might, with which we surpass all our neighbours ...” [“... i nostri peccati, i quali sono soperchi e dispiacevoli a Dio, sì di superbia l’uno vicino coll’altro in volere signoreggiare e tiranneggiare e rapire, e per la infinita avarizia e mali guadagni di Comune, di fare frodolenti mercatantie e usure, recati da tutte parti de l’ardente invidia l’uno fratello e vicino coll’altro; sì della vanagloria de le donne e disordinate spese e ornamenti; sì de la golosità nostra di mangiare e bere disordinato, che piùè vino si logora oggi in uno popolo di Firenze a taverne, che non soleano logorare li nostri antichi in tutta la città; sì per le disordinate lussurie delli uomini e delle donne; e sì per lo pessimo peccato della ingratitudine di non conoscere da Dio i nostri grandi beneficii e il nostro potente stato, soperchiando i vicini d’intorno”]. XII:94: “... there was not a citizen amongst those whoever had a demesne in the *contado* [suburban rural area], be it a *popolano*, or a magnate, who would not have at that time built, or been building, with great panoply, buildings that were much larger than those in the city; and, every inhabitant of the city sinned thereat with his disorderly expenditure, so they were regarded mad ...” [“... non era cittadino che non avesse possessione in contado, popolano o grande, che non avesse edificato od edificasse riccamente troppo maggiori edifici che in città; e ciascuno cittadino ci peccava in disordinate spese, onde erano tenuti matti ...”].



of the damages caused (all the city's bridges and several fragments of the walls collapsed) and financial losses, concluding with a diagnosis that the flood ought to be regarded as a penalty inflicted by God for the sins committed by the citizens, and with a call to repent.

Following the events described in Books XII and XIII, Villani remarks that Florence suffers because of scarce trust in, and charity [*carità*] toward the commune amongst the citizens. The lack of these virtues, theological as they are, causes that the quality of government in the city deteriorates in a natural way. Here is how the chronicler comments on the establishment in 1341 of a long-mandated *balia* devised to acquire or conquer Lucca:

Which was erroneous and dangerous to our Commune, as shall be demonstrated in a moment, when it comes to follow the course of affairs. ... May our successors beware of entrusting the boundless [*resp.* distorted] entitlements [*sformate balie*] to our citizens for a time this long. For in things old and new, experience has shown that this stands for death and humiliation to our Commune, for there is no belief or charity remaining in the citizens, particularly those governing, for them to preserve the republic; everybody is striving, in a variety of studied manners, for the benefit of himself or of his friends. And this is why our Commune has begun declining, as once the Romans did, who strove for their own benefit whilst neglecting the common weal.<sup>76</sup>

Villani further on quotes his own conversation with a fellow citizen who tries to understand the reason behind the punishments inflicted by God against the commune. The interlocutor cannot accept the fact that Pisa enjoys a larger success, although more charity and mercy [*carità*] is expressed in the alms collected on a daily basis in Florence than in the alms offered within a month in Pisa. Yet, the chronicler warns against such simplifying and mechanical understanding of charity, which cannot boil down to the money offered (although, in

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<sup>76</sup> GV, XII:129: "La qual cosa fu confusione e pericolo del nostro Comune, come si mosterrà apresso per loro processi. ... acciò che' nostri successori si guardino di dare le sformate balie a' nostri cittadini per lunghi tempi. Le quali per isperienza si manifesta per antico e per novello essere la morte e abassamento del nostro Comune, però che nulla fe' o carità era rimasa ne' cittadini, e spezialmente ne' reggenti, a conservare la republica; ma ciascuno alla sua singularità o di suoi amici per diversi studi o modi. E però cominciò ad andare al dichino il nostro Comune al modo di Romani, quando intesono alle loro singularità e llasciarono il bene comune."

actual fact, the alms remain a thin barrier still separating Florence from a final catastrophe). Charity should, first and foremost, be expressed in gratefulness toward God; then comes honesty and regard for the freedom of other cities – and, moreover, integrity and solidarity amongst citizens. The Pisans, united around their city, have developed these virtues to a greater extent than Florentines.<sup>77</sup> This is how the chronicler summarises, in the opening section of Book XIII, the entrustment of lifetime rule to Walter of Brienne:

Such was the way, and such was the treason, whereby the Duke of Athens appropriated for himself the liberty of our city and annihilated the *popolo* of Florence that had persisted for about fifty years in great freedom, powerfulness, and preponderance. And, whoever reads this, may he consider how God has, owing to our sins, within a short time, sent down and promised to our city many a calamity, such as flood, infertility and famine, pestilence, and failure in the battlefield, laughing-stock in war, no currency and bankruptcies of merchants, and insolvency; and, finally, replacement of liberty with tyrannous reign, and bondage. And therefore, for God's sake, my dearest citizens of to-day and to-morrow, let us rectify ourselves out of our vices. Let us have love and charity [*amore e carità*] around ourselves, so that we may please the Supreme Lord, and avoid lapsing into the ultimate judgement of his wrath, which he sufficiently clearly and expressly heralds to us through these menaces.<sup>78</sup>

In the 1330s and 1340s, Villani approaches his old age. Whereas in his young years, he watched Florence permanently growing in greatness and powerfulness, in his late years he comes to the conclusion that his mighty and ambitious city encountered more and more adversities, the factors acting from the inside and outside making it

<sup>77</sup> GV, XII:61.

<sup>78</sup> GV, XIII:3: “In questo modo e tradimento usurpò il duca d’Atene la libertà della nostra città, e annullò il popolo di Firenze ch’era durato intorno di L anni, in grande libertà, e stato, e signoria. E noti chi questo leggerà come Iddio per le nostre peccata in poco di tempo diede e promise alla nostra città tanti fragelli, come fu diluvio, carestie, fame, e mortalità, e sconfitte, vergogne d’imprese, perdimenti di sustanza di moneta, e fallimenti di mercatanti, e danni di credenza, e ultimamente di libertà recati a tirannica signoria e servaggio. E però, per Dio, carissimi cittadini presenti e futuri, correggiamo i nostri difetti. Abbiamo tra noi amore e carità, acciò che piacciamo all’Altissimo, e non ci rechiamo a l’ultimo giudizio della sua ira, come assai chiaro e aperto ci mostra per le sue visibili minacce: e questo basti a’ buoni intenditori.”

ever weaker. Did this intensified moralising, now with a religious tinge to it, result from his youthful 'dreams of puissance', and of surpassing the historical role of Rome, as confronted with the reality? This will possibly remain a hypothesis.

## VI SENSE AND EFFICACY: THE VIRTUES OF RULERS

Ideally, the virtues discussed so far ought to be shared by all the citizens. There are, however, certain characteristics or skills to be expected from exponents of the group running the commune. If Villani believed that people of a lower class did not qualify for joining the government, this was because he denied them these very skills.

In his 1295 sermon to the priors, Remigio dei Girolami thus specified the criteria of good rule: the decisions need being considered beforehand (for their fairness); actions should be taken unanimously, with regard to common, rather than particular, weal; once the decision has been made, one should act resolutely, rather than leaving the issue in abeyance.<sup>79</sup> Villani's assessment of the actions of those in power were similar, albeit he would often replace the criterion of justice with an opportunity for the undertaking to be a success.

In the first place, then, decisions should be taken by sapient and experienced people (hence, the aversion for plebeian rule), as was the case with the ten 'wise citizens-merchants' elected in 1336 in order to build a wartime budget.<sup>80</sup> The solution was commended, albeit as the chronicler's argument unfolds, he displays increasing distance toward excessive charging of citizens and increasing the public treasury's indebtedness.<sup>81</sup>

Efficiency and sagacity are necessary not only in external policies and in waging the war but also in political strives and intrigues inside the city. Villani describes two conspiracies of magnates against the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia*: one from 1323 and the other from 1340.<sup>82</sup> Both were discovered in good time, mobilising the *popolo* to fight; it however remained the authorities' responsibility to investigate

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<sup>79</sup> Diacciati, *Popolani e magnati*, 381.

<sup>80</sup> GV, XII:50.

<sup>81</sup> GV, XII:92.

<sup>82</sup> GV, X:219 and XII:119, respectively.

the affair and pass the verdicts: from demolition of the guilty men's houses, through to expulsion or capital punishment. In neither of the cases, no consequences were drawn as would otherwise have been appropriate with the treason; the number of those punished was limited or the degree of penalty diminished. In Villani's view, the rulers did a good thing in resisting the pressure from the radicals, as they protected the city against uproars whose effects would have been impossible to predict.<sup>83</sup>

The ideal of being driven by justice was best expressed in the legendary time of the First *Popolo*, one illustration of it being an episode depicting the citizens' equality under the law. One of the priors appropriated an abandoned old wicket which remained part of public good; when the misdeed was discovered, the perpetrator was sentenced for 1,000 liras of fine on charge of embezzlement.<sup>84</sup> Unfair steps taken by the rule of the *popolo* in the 1340s are criticised indignantly, in turn: this is the case when the clergy are equalised with the lay for criminal cases (by inclusion in the competencies of the commune's courts-of-law), whilst some citizens, mainly magnates, are deprived of estates that had once been granted to their families in recognition of their merits. Although certainly this indignation has utilitarian reasons behind it (the Church and the potent being powerful interlocutors; entering into conflicts with them is a risky business), it is worth noticing that there is no absolute contradiction between the ideal of equality before the law and privileges for the clergy, or recognition of historical merits of certain families. Underlying to these latter rules is recognition of the dignity of the social class (or estate) as well as gratefulness, or appreciation – the virtue of extreme importance to private and public relationships.

As it clearly follows from these examples, good rulers are such who are just and fair, and efficient, at the same time; such who do not tend to enclose themselves within a faction (thus being no 'tyrants') but stand united in the decisions being made; judicious but responding fast. Since these features not always go together, the First *Popolo* legend was the most appropriate form to display them clearly.

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<sup>83</sup> GV, X:219 and XII:119. Machiavelli offers a similar comment, as to the spirit, in his *Istorie Fiorentine* II:32. In Bruni's view, the schemers were dealt with overly inclemently.

<sup>84</sup> GV, VII:65.

Virtually all the political and military decisions presented in the chronicle, lauded or reprehended, are juxtaposed with these ideals. In his judgement of the events, Villani rarely applies all these criteria, which may be misleading to the reader. This is so because Villani the ideologue gives way to Villani the politician – the latter discerning how complex the problems are he is facing as an author. Let us also remark that Villani's Florence would not offer us a single example of a perfect politician: everyone of them had to face the temptation of a *hybris* or loyalty toward his party or faction, at the expense of common weal, with no-one ending up completely victorious.

## VII GRANDEUR OF THE CITY

In their ideological concepts, all the communal cities valued the greatness or grandeur [*grandezza*] of the city the most.<sup>85</sup> The rationale behind it was a venerable tradition (possibly, ancient Roman), wealth, monumental edifices, powerfulness and control over the territory; in a word, supremacy above the other cities in all areas possible. There is no coincidence in the fact that the word *grandezza* first appears in the *Cronica* with respect to Florence in the autobiographical description of the Jubilee Year pilgrimage to Rome, where the young banker is shown resolving to write a chronicle.<sup>86</sup> It is at this very moment that the city's uniqueness, strength, and vitality began to be unveiled more and more clearly and brightly. Villani endeavours to portray the unique character and quality of Florence in a variety of aspects. Compared to some other cities, Florence is not much old, but its history is strictly correlated with the fortunes of Rome; the chronicler believes that his home city will surpass the decrepit Eternal City, abandoned now by the Pope.<sup>87</sup> The form of *urbs* is in itself a token of

<sup>85</sup> Skinner, 'Machiavelli's *Discorsi*', 125–30.

<sup>86</sup> GV, IX:36. The dominance of Florence was shown, in an extremely explicit fashion, in a much earlier Latin poem, dating to the 1250s, inscribed on a stony board fixed on a wall of the Commune's first palace, today's Palazzo del Bargello; for its complete transcription, see Gabriella Garzella, 'L'edilizia pubblica comunale in Toscana', in *Magnati e popolani nell'Italia comunale. Quindicesimo convegno di studi, Pistoia, 15–18 maggio 1995* (Pistoia, 1997), 310.

<sup>87</sup> The tradition of referring to Florence as a daughter of Rome preceded the time of Villani; cf. Nicolai Rubinstein, 'The Beginnings of Political Thought in

grandeur: patterned on Rome in terms of the spatial layout of churches and public space, it is also implicit in the recurring mentions of the ramparts.<sup>88</sup>

Villani brings himself to offer the reader a detailed, though formally not fully original, description of his city, presenting – in the manner a professional statistician would do – a political, social, and economic ‘photograph’ of Florence of 1338 AD.<sup>89</sup> He quotes an exact recitation of tax proceeds from the specified areas of economic activity, a detailed picture of expenditure – from war-related expenses through to salaries of individual officials (except for public works, construction and maintenance of municipal infrastructure), estimates of the city’s population, and with reference to clergymen and dubbed knights, numbers of annual births, representatives of the guilds, workshops and enterprises, numbers of children and students attending all three levels of schooling, up to the quantities of grain and of various meat cuts or joints consumed. As regards territorial control, the Florence-controlled area, in those years, included Arezzo, Pistoia, Colle Val d’Elsa and their subordinate lands, plus a few fortalices of the *contado* of Lucca.<sup>90</sup> This proud description of the *grandezza e stato* – the ‘grandeur and state’ – of the city of Florence contrasts with the repeated reprimands to Florentines, accusations of misrule and warnings against Divine retribution, as first expressed in the opening passages of Book XII. Villani remarks that the purpose of this description is

that our posteriors may know in the future whether the possession and the mightiness of our city has increased or degenerated, so that the wise

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Florence. A Study in Mediaeval Historiography’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 5 (1942), 5–6, 18–26.

<sup>88</sup> GV, IV:2, V:8, V:16, VIII:99, X:10, 256. The ramparts/city walls was the conventional symbol of (the) city, as is portrayed in medieval iconography; cf. Chiara Frugoni, *Una lontana città. Sentimenti e immagini nel Medioevo* (Torino, 1983), 11.

<sup>89</sup> GV, XII:91–4, see a description of Milan dating to fifty-or-so years earlier: Bonvesin de la Riva, *Le meraviglie di Milano = De magnalibus urbis Mediolani*, ed. Angelo Paredi (Milano, 2010), 48–111. Villani is unique, though, due to the verified reliability of his data; the excerpt has been of great interest to historians of economy. The first to draw attention to the ideological meaning of the passage was Arsenio Frugoni, in his *G. Villani, ‘Cronica’*, XI, 94.

<sup>90</sup> GV, XII:91. Francesca Klein in her ‘Considerazioni ...’ unfairly remarks that Villani finds Florence’s control of Tuscan cities irrelevant.

and worthy citizens who in the future shall govern the city may, mindful of us and of the example of this Chronicle, strive for increasing its possession and its mightiness.<sup>91</sup>

Paradoxically, the grandness of Florence is also displayed when its citizens are bound to admit their tawdriness. Affluence and abounding with material and intellectual goods is not the only mark of this city. Florentines could however have been more certain of the sustainability, or longevity, of these goods, had they been grateful for them; had they realised their own littleness before God – the One who offers any and all goods, and with respect to the Commune, which is responsible for distribution and management of these goods (“si non est civis, non est homo”, as Remigio Dei Girolami put it in *De bono pacis*). Villani indicates that it has been in the moments of greatest welfare that ingratitude of the citizens led to perilous ‘novelties and upheavals’, such as civil wars<sup>92</sup>, floods<sup>93</sup>, or wartime failure.<sup>94</sup> Ingratitude yields envy and arrogance: if a man cannot accept that everything he has got has once been offered and given to him, then he considers himself an absolute proprietor, possessed with an ever-stronger acquisitiveness and lust for power (like the Dantean lust that is ‘never satisfied’<sup>95</sup> – the phrase Villani certainly carried in his mind<sup>96</sup>). And, conversely: gratefulness should beget generosity and profusion, disposition to share with the others what one has received.

As we have seen, alms is the most typical (though insufficient) sign of such a devout attitude. Of underlying importance is the grace of God, expressed in miracles, such as the one worked in 1292, with a series of miracle cures occurring before the icon of Our Lady at the Orsanmichele grain marketplace:

... there was a plenty of benefactions, alms, offerings, and legacies offered afterwards to the indigent, in excess of 6,000 liras per annum; and this has lasted so till our day; no goods have been purchased [by the Orsanmichele

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<sup>91</sup> GV, XII:94.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. GV, VI:9, IX:39.

<sup>93</sup> GV, XII:2.

<sup>94</sup> GV, XII:140.

<sup>95</sup> *Purgatorio*, XX:12.

<sup>96</sup> Villani makes a direct reference to the Dantean she-wolf in paraphrasing *Purgatorio*, XX:10 in GV, XIII:55.

fraternity], and there is a plenty of money continually flowing in, all of which is dispensed to the poor.<sup>97</sup>

Similarly, Villani memorialises the citizens who have proved extremely generous, in their lifetime or through inheritance they have left, some of whom died popularly reputed as saints.<sup>98</sup> These were laymen who performed ordinary professions and lived modest lives, never begging themselves.

Alms are extremely admirable when dispensed in the time of a famine. Villani describes a few times how his city demonstrated that in tough times it proved capable of feeding not only its own poor but also those coming from the whole of Tuscany.<sup>99</sup> His descriptions of hunger (primarily, the strikingly detailed account of the years 1346–7) are not meant to commemorate some private donors but rather, the efficiency and mercy of the commune, a body that cares about all its residents. The commune authorities, as Villani reports in detail, are capable of proposing an appropriate system of rationing so that nobody would suffer from shortage of bread, even if the bread be available in small quantities and made of lower-quality cereal grain. This author perfectly realises that it is not only a matter of goodwill but of preventing riots, too:

We have told so much of this matter in order to offer an example to our future citizens, so that they may know how to act and to protect themselves in the event that our city has fallen into a famine so sinister, so that the *popolo* may save themselves, as may be pleasing to God and to His glory, and that the city may incur no panic or rebellion whatsoever.<sup>100</sup>

Albeit public procurement of cereals from abroad and public rationing of bread potentially provoked excess and abuse, which Villani severely vilifies, the good citizens, ‘rich and compassionate’, those who

<sup>97</sup> GV, VIII 155: “...molti beneficij e limosine, per offerere e lasci fatti, ne seguirono a’ poveri, l’anno più di libbre VIIm; e seguissi a’ di nostri, senza acquistare nulla possessione, con troppa maggiore entrata, distribuendosi tutta a’ poveri.”

<sup>98</sup> GV, XI 163.176, XIII 36.

<sup>99</sup> GV, IX:68, X:186, XI:119, XII:114, and XIII:73. There is one instance of Florence taking advantage of support from its subordinate cities: GV, XII:1.

<sup>100</sup> GV, XI:119: “Avemo fatto sì lungo parlare sopra questa materia per dare esemplo a’ nostri cittadini che verranno d’averer argomento e riparo, quando in così pericolosa carestia incorresse la nostra città, acciò che si salvi il popolo al piacere e reverenza di Dio, e la città non incorra in pericolo di furore o rubellazione.”



give considerable alms during the hunger, could save the city from a severe judgment of God: thus, one finds pride prevail over shame in the chronicle.<sup>101</sup>

Nevertheless, Villani warns against hypocrisy: he reports on the unceasing cataclysm of epidemic and hunger in 1340, aggravated by a great fire, in spite of the propitiatory processions held at the time. Then, “those who governed the Commune, in order to satisfy the clergymen and to show some pity” (“quelli che reggeano il Comune, per conforto di religiosi per mostrare alcuna pietà”), selected a group of expelled and allowed them to return to the city (once they have paid the assigned fine), and resolved to distribute to the widows and orphans the “goods of the rebels” [*beni de' rubelli*] (which would have otherwise been confiscated by the Commune after the expulsion). Villani has already suggested that this was a showy act of mercy, but then he adds that “the grace and the mercifulness were not perfect, as would have pleased God” (“ma non fu perfetta la grazia e misericordia, che dovesse piacere a Dio”), since the beneficiaries had to pay a determined price for the goods accepted, “and thus, the calamities, owing to which our sins still continued for a long time, have not ceased to prevail” (“onde non ristettono a tanto le nostre pestilenze, che per le nostre peccata ne seguirono assai apresso”).<sup>102</sup>

Florence is a city of merchants – Villani the historian and chronicler being one of them. Albeit his *Cronica* covers political and military matters – such was the form of the genre he has chosen – we can at times discern the author's pride as a labouring man. He five times recounts the story of the local craftsmen resuming their daily activities in spite of the military defeats or unrests in the town, as if nothing had happened.<sup>103</sup> After the lost war for Lucca, in 1341, he comments thus:

[In spite of the initial dread,] the shops were opened and everybody, without the weaponry, resumed his [daily] affairs like they had done before, and there was no semblance of a battle having taken place or a defeat incurred; and the noble magnificence [*magnificenza*] of the citizens has thus come into sight.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>101</sup> GV, XI:119, XIII:73.

<sup>102</sup> GV, XII:114.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. GV, X:47, 74; XII:94, 136; XIII:17, 21.

<sup>104</sup> GV, XII:136: “... s'apersono le botteghe, e ciascuno disarmato intese a ffare i fatti suoi come prima, non parendo che battaglia o sconfitta fosse fatta; e in ciò per li cittadini si mostrò grande magnificenza”.

The tough situations: the need to deal with the indigent, famine, and warfare are thus the unique moments at which the peculiar grandness of the Commune may come into sight, based on mercifulness and fortitude. Apart from ameliorated social relationships and good repute, mercifulness in particular, as a virtue directly rooted in the gratitude toward God, can yield God's blessing and contribute to a diminished punishment for the sins committed by the citizens.

### VIII

#### GRANDNESS OF THE COMMUNE, GREATNESS OF THE CITIZENS

In analysing the appearances of the word *grandezza* in the *Nuova Cronica*, one can discern its three basic connotations: (i) territory, potency, area of influence, splendour of the city or its citizens (eleven such appearances for Florence and five for the other cities); (ii) size of an object (four instances); (iii) the power or authority of a person or group of persons (twelve).<sup>105</sup> Thirty-two instances, in total, is a rather small array, based on which no definite conclusions may be drawn; however, the fact that the chronicle's references to one's personal power outnumber those related to the might of Florence, is compelling. Personalities of varied calibre are described in this way: Cola di Rienzo is the only non-noble among them; there are several crowned heads. The Florentines in this sample are local magnates, at large; Antonio Adimari, an exponent of this group, is mentioned as doing service to the Commune. In case a 'grand' figure is no enemy to Florence, Villani would describe him with reserve. Of the sample in question, Adimari would be the only one to possibly be named 'good citizen' by this author.<sup>106</sup> It thence becomes evident that Villani would not encourage his fellow citizens to seek personal grandeur.

<sup>105</sup> Those described as 'great' ('grand') include: Catiline, Frederick II, Count Ugolino della Gherardesca, Marco Visconti (condottiere), Frederick the Handsome (the Fair) of the House of Habsburg, Bishop Tarlati d'Arezzo, Castruccio Castracani, John of Luxembourg, Florentine magnates, Antonio di Baldinaccio degli Adimari, Cola di Rienzo.

<sup>106</sup> Antonio di Baldinaccio, leader of a conspiracy against the Duke of Athens, was knighted during the revolt of 1343 and subsequently included (in the same year) in the *popolo* in reward for his merits after the reform of the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia*. He was sent as an envoy of the Florentine people to Louis of Anjou, king of Hungary, in December 1347.

Clearly, analysis of semantic field has its limits: in this particular case, it is blind to synonyms and meanings discernible or graspable based on the context. In case one should look in Villani for unique Florentine figures who would share the characteristics of grandeur attributed to Florence – famous, influential, and powerful – Giano della Bella and Corso Donati would be the only ones to meet these criteria. The former is described as a “man of significance, noble *popolano* since long, wealthy and mighty a man ... who was followed and advised by other *popolani*, wise and powerful ones.”<sup>107</sup> In 1293, he is presented since the beginning as the leader of the *popolo* who is forced by the circumstances to leave the city so as to prevent instigation of the civil war between the plebeians and the magnates. He was “wise but somewhat conceited a man”: his drive for ruling the *popolo* led him to coerced emigration from the city, which did not want a lord to run it. Villani admires Giano’s incorruptibility and commitment to common weal but also notices that he used the public judiciary for the sake of personal revenge. The story of his expulsion ends with a moral:

And note that this is a great example to those citizens which are to come, to beware of desiring to be lords over their fellow-citizens or too ambitious; but to be content with the common citizenship. For the very men which had aided him to rise, through envy betrayed him and plotted to abase him; and it has been seen and experienced truly in Florence in ancient and modern times, that whosoever has become leader of the people and of the masses has been cast down; forasmuch as the ungrateful people never give men their due reward.<sup>108</sup>

Insofar as Giano della Bella is presented accompanied by an anonymous entourage of “certain good men, artificers and merchants of Florence, who desired good life”, then Corso Donati, the leader of the Blacks faction in the first years of the fourteenth century, is surrounded by numerous comrades known to us by names. But he also stands out strongly amidst his milieu. He is one of the few Florentines featured in the chronicle whose utterances are quoted in direct discourse, as is the case with the speech he delivered during the battle of Campaldino, 1289, in which he opposes the commands in a proud

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<sup>107</sup> GV, IX:1.

<sup>108</sup> GV, IX:8; *Villani's Chronicle*, VIII:8.

and arrogant way.<sup>109</sup> Donati enjoyed great popularity in the city and probably had a considerable clientele there, from whom came those joining the ranks of the Blacks; and, he was nicknamed the 'Baron'. In the episodes where Corso is featured, he always demonstrates temerity and nonconformity with the rules superimposed by the Commune: he twice joins the street unrest, at first attempting to recapture from the *podestà* guard a prisoner led to his execution, and afterwards provoking anger amongst the crowd and, eventually, the expulsion of Giano della Bella.<sup>110</sup> The narrated history of his struggle for power in the course of the Blacks' rule finds that Corso's ambitions were not satisfied and that this man envied his party comrades.<sup>111</sup> Finally, there comes a story of his death, showing him, after his flight from the city, ineffectively try to bribe the Catalan soldiers to set him free; at this point, we can read about the surrender of an exhausted, abandoned, and defeated man:

M. Corso, *in fear* of coming into the hands of his enemies, and of being brought to justice by the people, being much afflicted with gout in his hands and feet, *let himself fall from his horse*. The said Catalans seeing him on the ground, one of them gave him a thrust with his lance in the throat, which was a mortal blow, and then left him there for dead.<sup>112</sup>

Della Bella and Donati are shown in the chronicle like some of the illustrious rulers, popes or 'tyrants' – Frederick II, Boniface VIII, or Castruccio Castracani. Villani describes their intentions, endeavours, and even emotions and hesitations – never portraying any other Florentine in the like 'intimate' fashion.

The spirit of the obituaries of some of the city's major intellectual and artistic personages is markedly different.<sup>113</sup> They were masters of their disciplines and arts, and have been memorialised as 'our citizens': their talents, some of them being men of genius, yielded

<sup>109</sup> GV, VIII:131.

<sup>110</sup> GV, VIII:114 and IX:8. Also, cf. Sergio Raveggi, *Corso Donati*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 41 (Roma, 1992); Marco Bicchierai, *6 ottobre 1308: la morte di Corso Donati*, <[http://www.storiadifirenze.org/static\\_site\\_20615/index-p=2774.html](http://www.storiadifirenze.org/static_site_20615/index-p=2774.html)> [Accessed: Oct. 5, 2015].

<sup>111</sup> GV, IX:68, 96.

<sup>112</sup> GV, IX:96; *Villani's Chronicle*, VIII, 96 (italics mine).

<sup>113</sup> Brunetto Latini: GV, IX:10; Guido Cavalcanti: IX:42; Dante: X:136; Dino da Firenze: XI:42; Giotto: XII:12.

fame and profit to the entire city, even if some were riotous mavericks (as in the case of Dante and Guido Cavalcanti). Their character, as portrayed by Villani, is a second-rank thing, albeit references to it are sometimes made. The aforesaid stories of deaths of 'saint men' have a similar function.

The virtue of good citizens is not spectacular: they ought to be credible, industrious and hardworking, generous (in what is superfluous, for they should be able to provide for themselves). Also the potent ones, who add to the urban landscape some colouration thanks to their 'noble entertainments', are accepted as long as they would not threaten 'the peaceful existence of the commune and the city' (*pacifico stato del comune e della città*); their "virtues of magnanimity and grateful largesse, a spring of benefactions" ("virtù della magnanimità e della grata liberalità, fontana di benefici")<sup>114</sup> defend and protect the commune. As Villani reminds, every citizen, in things small or great, should set as the goal for himself to enhance and preserve the grandeur of their city: not the citizen, but the Commune is due to be grand.

## IX CONCLUSION

Villani's ideology makes use of the concepts of political thought of his place and time: the notions of primacy of common weal and its underlying concord, the arguments in favour of a collegial government body which is to guarantee that the politics will favour and aid all the citizens, rather than some of them, are the pillars of the concept. The ideology under discussion moreover reflects the political pragmatics: the norms within the communal law meant to forestall corruption, such as short terms of office or institutional solutions preventing single families from taking charge of the city, or limiting the decision-making potential of a single college (the 'boundless *balias*'), are all echoed in the *Cronica*'s rhetoric. This theoretical and legal framework comes ahead of any situation-dependent attitudes of a politician: Villani opts for the rule of the *popolo*, although not for democracy. Hence, his glossary emphasises commonage and concertedness, with balanced exponents of all the groups admitted to the ruling team; even though he himself at times joined some of the long-termed *balias*

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<sup>114</sup> GV, XIII:44.

or 'sects', the latter being parties set up to control the rulers, like in the time of Robert the Wise's *signoria*.

Nevertheless, the divisions between the *grandi*, the *popolo* (the affluent *popolo grasso* and the well-off artisans – the only group enjoying full political rights – included among them) and the *popolo minuto* remain the major axis of conflict within the city. In Villani's perspective, the ideal worth of maintaining is the rule of 'mediocre people', threatened by the magnates attempting to overthrow the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia*, or by the plebeians claiming their undue power; there were moments when the locals could sense a tension foreshadowing a revolution, as the aspirations of one of the groups have risen dramatically due to weakened position of the *popolo*. Hence, a 'suspiciousness' intensifying at the time amidst the citizens (described, virtually synonymously, as *sospetto* or *gelosia*) signified a bad condition of the city; at the other extreme was the ideal of reciprocal trust, stemming from everybody's cooperation and contribution to the common good. Widespread suspiciousness may drive the people to 'rise up to disorder', with the situation coming out of control and threatening with perilous 'novelties' (*novità*). This means, in practice, that the *popolo*, as a legal category, ought to be a possibly large group. Any good citizen capable of assuming responsibility for public affairs ought to be included in the ranks of the *popolo* – and, through interblending with the *popolo*, enhance the greatness of the commune. Hence, numerous potent men are among potential members of this *popolo*.

The *Cronica*'s political universe consists of political realities different than commune: the papacy, the empire, and the kingdoms. Any legitimate authority is respected by Villani, in regard of the office itself, albeit this author many a time criticises certain concrete actions of those wielding the power. Yet, the communal Florence remains the salient point of reference for Villani: he is emotionally bound with Florence and has a profound sense of belonging to it. With the commune as the foremost value, how can the errors in its home or foreign policy decisions be explained? The ruling group in the late 1330s preserved the traditional offices of the *popolo* but launched a police regime; there followed the 'insane war for Lucca'; the Duke of Athens was granted a life *signoria* – to give but a handful of examples.

This issue is resolved by a distinction between the commune and the *popolo* of Florence. Villani perceives commune as a cultural

and political universe which, in a sense, begets and creates its citizens, providing them with an opportunity to become complete humans; in tough moments, mercifulness can be put at work. Gratitude and, consistently, devotion is owed to Florence-the-commune – with readiness to stand in its defence and to contribute to its development. The *popolo*, on its part, is simply a group of persons – though it is, no doubt, this very *popolo* who ought to govern the commune, as is shown by the First *Popolo* myth, the ideal of impersonal righteousness, the pre-eminence of decent institutions, and the incessant highlighting of the values behind the *Ordinamenti di Giustizia*. As human beings, these people are peccable: included in this particular social model, the notion of sin, or trespass, causes that the *popolo* as a whole – as well as its representatives and exponents – can be perceived as ‘nefarious’, ‘unrewarding’, and ‘conceited’.

Unfortunately, as Villani has demonstrated, in a direct or implied manner, it is in moments of peak welfare that citizens begin showing a bias for ingratitude and unforgiving rivalry leading to open violence. On the other hand, these citizens’ virtues: mercy and fortitude come into sight in crisis moments. After all, wealth and grandness – in terms of exterior splendour and comfortable, if not luxury, lifestyle – are seen by Villani as autotelic values, as is the virtue displayed by the citizens. The author cannot solve this aporia, and thence offers the reader a dual commendation of Florence: one referring to the First *Popolo*, who lived a modest life and stood out in virtue; and the other in the portrayal of Florence of 1336–8 AD: rich and glittering with colours but prone to wastefulness and escalation of war expenditure due to idle will to dominate, which also turns into economic oppression of the innocent people. (The stern admonishments to the citizens from 1333 or 1342 can be added here.) In parallel, Villani is convinced that the ever-severer calamities affecting the city have come as punishment for the moral corruption of its citizens: he employs moralism of this sort before the Great Contagion which made the intellectuals of all European countries face the question of punishment inflicted by God. What is the rationale behind this stance? Was it rooted in the association, from the chronicler’s young years, between increasing power of the city with the history of Rome? The citizens’ virtue did not keep pace with their wealth, and thence, possibly, the Florentine historian foretells an inevitable disaster, analogous to the fall of the Empire. What is the role, in this context, of the thought of Dante

Alighieri, whose Emperor-Messiah has not come to power in Italy? Even if this project had been a success, it could have turned deleterious for the Guelph Florence. In any case, these questions only leave room for guesswork and conjecture.

trans. Tristan Korecki

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