



# FLORENCE

**T**he history of Florence is visible from above. The narrow, canyon-like lanes which delight the visitor on the ground with surprise glimpses of Duomo and Palazzo show up, in an aerial view, as dark lines amid the jumble of red-tiled roofs. Buildings have come and gone for 2,000 years – replaced and improved in times of prosperity, allowed to decay in times of difficulty – but they have done so in a piecemeal fashion, always keeping to the line of the streets on which they stood. The result is that the street plan of the distant past has remained long after everything else has gone.

In an aerial photograph, the centre of the city is seen to comprise square blocks formed into a well-defined rectangle. This is the original Roman town, laid out to an imperial plan that owes its origins to the design of a legionary camp. Roman Florence was built in the time of the emperors as an overspill town for the nearby ancient hilltop settlement of Fiesole. Its military precision was chosen more out of tradition than necessity, but it set a stylistic tone which future ages perpetuated, usually because they had to. Warfare and violence would never be far from Florence in succeeding centuries.

Only the later upgrade of the church of Santa Reparata to a cathedral (which happened in Dante's lifetime) has occasioned a significant distortion of the imperial rectangle in the top right-hand (north-eastern) corner. Just to the west of its centre the open space of the forum is still visible. The Roman marketplace continued as a medieval and, later, a renaissance one. It was known from the time of Dante and before as the Old Market to

distinguish it from the New Market, a medieval addition a few blocks to the south.

The Roman city prospered. Residential and commercial building soon expanded beyond the walls. Mass entertainment and spectacle were the inevitable companions of Roman prosperity and soon the appropriate venues were constructed nearby. Almost incredibly, the oval outline of an ancient amphitheatre is still preserved in the street plan to the south-east of the original city.

Florence is a natural survivor. It rode out the difficult period of European history which followed the fall of the Roman Empire, sometimes called the Dark Ages, and appeared alive and well in the Middle Ages at the centre of the lucrative international woollen garment trade. By the twelfth century it had expanded again to four times the size of its Roman ancestor and new walls were necessary. These were built in the 1180s, about a century before Dante's birth. This time they were aligned with the river bank, not with the points of the compass in the Roman style. They also enclosed a triangle of land on the other side of the Arno river to the south – the Oltrarno.

Most of the churches, museums and palaces that are visited by tourists today lie within these walls. The exceptions are the great churches that belong to the two mendicant orders of friars: the Dominicans and the Franciscans. These orders were founded after the walls were built. They were monasticism's response to the changes in society that took place at the beginning of the thirteenth century as final vestiges of the old feudal system gave way to a more urban, cash-based style of living. The Franciscans (in the church of Santa Croce to the east) and the Dominicans (in Santa Maria Novella to the west) practised a new form of monasticism which involved leaving the monastery to preach and teach among the people of the town. Around their churches, outside the walls, new residential and trade areas blossomed, mainly to accommodate the ever-growing number of people involved in the processing, dyeing, spinning and weaving of wool.

Prosperity is usually obtained and held through military might. In the case of Florence the access to the sea, which was vital for the wool trade, had to be defended. As a consequence Florence was almost constantly engaged in wars with her neighbouring city states. The city could not afford to have significant commercial areas left outside its fortifications and accordingly – at about the time that Dante was having his vision of Beatrice and the Lord of Love – work was begun on yet another set of walls. They increased the area of the city five fold, were 46ft high and 7ft thick, and took longer than his lifetime to build. These walls defined the defensible limits of the city for the entire period of the

## Florence



Renaissance and after. Large sections of them survive to this day and almost every road out of town has one of their massive watchtowers situated on a traffic island at its starting point. They still represent the limit of the area which contains everything that makes Florence a unique city.

The building of the walls was a long and expensive project which in one way or another must have affected everybody in the city. But the lives of the citizens of Florence were touched by armed conflict in a much more direct way. The city of Dante was very different from the home of Italian high culture, art and fine shoes that we visit today. On the contrary, it would not be too much of an exaggeration to compare his Florence, not with today's living museum, but

with Baghdad in the twenty-first century. Dante's city was rife with constant factional dispute, criss-crossed by invisible demarcation lines of hatred and vendetta. Rival gangs fought in the street; fragile alliances came and went; different systems of government were tried and failed; abduction and torture were commonplace.

Dante's family, the Alighieri, were part of the minor aristocracy. They owned small estates in the apron of countryside surrounding the city which was counted as part of the commune and whose produce was used exclusively to supply the town. In his later work Dante is very proud of his noble ancestors, one of whom is given a large role in the *Comedy*, but the family was not really part of the grand old aristocracy, known as the magnati. The Alighieri estates were not vast enough to provide sufficient income and therefore power which that name would imply. They made a living in part from the rents from their property but also from trade and commerce. In the patchy records of this period members of the family, including Dante and his brother, are recorded as being involved in the buying and selling of houses and operating the machinery of loans, interest and repayments which that involved.

The Alighieri were therefore part aristocrat and part merchant and, as such, they straddled one of the major fault lines of Florentine society: the conflict between the nobility and the guilds. These two groups interacted like a couple stuck in an unhappy and abusive relationship: constantly competing, bickering and squabbling yet bound to each other by mutual need.

The merchants had from time immemorial (some said from the time of the Romans) organised themselves into guilds: self-governing units based very loosely upon the type of trade in which their members were involved – wool merchants, silk merchants, doctors and apothecaries, dealers in fur, notaries, money-changers, etc. But guilds were, by this time, much more than trade associations. They had become a political entity which was effectively an arm of government, ruled by an elected committee (whose members were called priors); they even had their own armed enforcers presided over by a Captain of the Guard. The faction of the guilds is often referred to by chroniclers and historians as the Popolo (the People). This does not mean they were in some way the precursors of a popular democratic party. The broad mass of humanity referred to in later ages as 'the people' (as in 'People's Republic' or even 'We the People') did not have a voice and indeed they hardly feature at all in late medieval history. The guilds were an elite interest group. They were popular only in the sense that they were a little closer to the people than their rival elite group, the nobles.

## Florence

The nobles were organised as a counterbalancing power base. Their political organisation was headed by an official known as the Podestà (the Power) and they had no difficulty in finding armed support if they needed it. The young men of each family were trained in warfare and the families were also responsible for raising an army in times of dispute with neighbour states.

The potential for conflict between these two groups is obvious: they were both struggling for control of the same city. The enmity between them was ingrained in their culture in a way which is almost universal: nobles regarded tradesmen as venal and vulgar while merchants regarded the nobility as arrogant and headstrong. On the other hand, neither could survive without the other. The merchants needed the military power of the aristocracy to protect the city and keep open its all-important lines of communication with the coastal ports. The nobility needed the merchants to ensure the continuing financial prosperity of the city. Aristocratic rule is by its nature capricious, depending as it does on the will of one man (it almost always was) who has been invested with an unhealthy amount of power to which he probably believes he has a God-given right. Such a system does not make for economic stability. Who will lend money to a despot who might at any minute engage in some ill-advised military adventure or who might simply refuse to pay his creditors and invite them to try to do something about it if they think they are hard enough?

Merchants, by contrast, have every reason to act together to produce a stable economic system where money can be lent securely at appropriate interest rates. Florentine merchants excelled at this. The city had a tradition of reliable banking practices, such as careful bookkeeping and meticulous record-taking. They were also natural diplomats, at home in foreign countries, always giving the impression of a safe pair of hands with whom one would be happy to do business. They had insinuated themselves into so many different areas outside their own city that Pope Boniface VIII once famously called them the fifth element.<sup>a</sup> It is thanks to the merchants, not the nobility, that the great buildings of Florence were built and that ultimately it was to become (about a hundred years after Dante) the powerhouse of the Italian Renaissance.

The attempt to reconcile these two competing arms of government is the major theme of the political history of Florence for the century before and

a There is, of course, an unattractive side to this quality: deviousness and duplicity. To this day in French, to describe somebody as '*un Florentin*' is not to imply their financial probity but to suggest that they are slick and smooth-talking to the point of dishonesty.

after the life of Dante. The Florentines made repeated attempts – all ultimately unsuccessful – to produce a fair, or at any rate workable, method of getting them to act together and avoid catastrophic conflict.<sup>b</sup>

The division between merchant and aristocratic classes was destructive enough but in Florence conflicts were never that simple. This division was overlaid by an even more deeply rooted one: that between individual families. The family was the social and legal unit of the city. Official documents note the family origins of citizens in the old Roman style, not with a surname as such but by specifying the clan from which they came: Bocca degli Abati, Farinata degli Uberti, etc. One member of a family could, in certain circumstances, be held legally responsible for the misdeeds of another, a principle of which the natural result was to induce Florentines to rate family ties above the rule of law.

The prominence of family divisions made it virtually impossible to find a suitable leader. Any candidate from one family would inevitably be unacceptable to several others. An ingenious and elegant solution to this problem was found. The podestà, who led the noble faction and had been, until the rise of the guilds, the sole ruler of Florence, was never allowed to be a Florentine. He would be brought in from another Italian town on a one-year contract. This visiting podestà would not be subject to the instant, unconsidered detestation of rival families and his rulings would therefore, in theory, be less prone to blind prejudice. There were strict controls on the foreign visitor, designed to shield him from the temptations of bribery. He was paid appropriately for his duties but his accounting was required to be transparent: he was audited on his first day in office and again on his last. Any profit over and above his agreed honorarium was summarily confiscated. The idea was not unique to Florence. It certainly worked quite well in a number of other Italian cities and records show that Florence in her time had taken a podestà from almost every other town in Italy. In our times there is no country that voluntarily imports foreign political leaders in this way, but a similar practice is followed by European football clubs where it is quite common for a manager to be brought in from another country if they have shown particular skill or if, for some reason, there is no qualified home-grown candidate who wants the job.

b This struggle continued for another 150 years until it was resolved, after a fashion, when total power was appropriated by a family of bankers with exceptional political acuity called the Medici.

## Florence

Just as Florence from the air shows the history of its defences against outsiders, at street level its family-based social structure and the violence that went with it are still evident. Florence's buildings reveal it as a hard city. Its streets are not pretty. They are lined with large, forbidding fortified palaces, the lower part of whose outer walls are 'rusticated' or left rough-hewn so as not to show the marks of passing riots. The few exterior windows the buildings do have are protected by heavy-duty, permanent metal grilles. Typically, an entire extended family of aunts, grandparents and cousins lived within one palazzo. In the event of trouble on the street, they had only to close their vast iron-bound doors and wait for the disturbance to blow over.

In the thirteenth century those families that could afford it added a tall defensive tower to their palace. They could be up to 30m in height (that was the maximum, limited by city ordinance). Their purpose was partly to demonstrate the wealth and power of the family and also to afford ample views of any developing situation outside the palace. This gave the young men of the family the opportunity to join in the fray by loosing deadly bolts into the streets below from the latest hi-tech weapon, the crossbow. Families that could not afford a tower of their own would club together with their neighbours to build a joint one with access from each of their respective palazzi. In Florence today about a dozen towers survive in various states of decay, but contemporary accounts suggest that there were as many as 150 in Dante's day.

Its prosperity in the Middle Ages meant that Florence's street plan was fully formed well before the advent of the Renaissance, with its clear ideas about elegant urban planning. For this reason it does not have any of the stylish piazzas enjoyed by other Tuscan towns. The largest open space in central Florence was and still is quite close to the site of Dante's house, just to the south of the line of the old Roman walls. Rather than being a triumph of civilised town planning, this piazza exists as a monument to the destructive tidal flow of internecine conflict.

The area was once the site of a complex of houses and palaces belonging to an aristocratic family called the Uberti. In the decades before Dante's birth there had been two brief periods when the aristocratic faction gained an upper hand to such an extent that it was able to rule the city directly, excluding the merchant class from power. These periods were made possible because the aristocratic rule was being underwritten by military support from outside Florence. On each occasion, in the wake of victory the nobility confiscated the goods and destroyed the houses of their enemies. The New Market was constructed on one of the resulting vacant sites. In the euphoria of one victory, some noblemen even suggested that the beautiful and ancient

baptistery be demolished because of its populist associations. Fortunately this view did not prevail. The anti-merchant putsches seem to have been led by the Uberti family whose arrogance was proverbial (in Dante's Hell one of their number pops up out of his grave to give a lengthy tirade. He is still insufferably disdainful). During these periods of uncontested rule, the detailed records of committees' decisions and debates that so characterise civic life in Florence all stop. There was no need for debate; the city was being ruled by decree.

But the fortunes of war take away just as they give and, in the year of Dante's birth, foreign backing was withdrawn resulting in the collapse of the aristocratic government. In true Florentine style the cycle of violence was perpetuated. This time it was the Uberti palaces that were razed to the ground. The Council of Priors decreed that they should never be rebuilt. The area which they occupied remained a rubble-strewn vacant lot for all of Dante's life. Today the site is bordered by an elegant Renaissance loggia, the world-famous Uffizzi art gallery, the iconic Palazzo Vecchio, which features on a million postcards, and a replica of Michelangelo's statue of David. It is the principal tourist venue of the city, called the Piazza dell Signoria, and it remains to this day – just as the commune of Florence intended – entirely empty of buildings.