ITALIA NOVA: RENAISSANCE HISTORIANS
AND THE FRAMING AND REFRAMING OF AN ITALIAN HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

ROBERT AIDAN POLICELLI: Italia nova: Renaissance Historians and the Framing and Reframing of an Italian History
(Under the direction of Melissa M. Bullard)

This dissertation examines a set of largely forgotten fifteenth- and sixteenth-century histories and demonstrates how their authors constructed an intertextual dialogue about the peninsula’s past and wrestled with issues of a national identity long before the existence of a national state. It thus sheds new light on the extensive and ongoing debate about the premodern origins of modern national identities. This dissertation also reorients some fundamental aspects of the Italian Renaissance by querying the dominant regional approach to the period and by challenging conventional wisdom about the supposed realism of Machiavelli’s political and historical thought.

Benedict Anderson and others have highlighted the ways that unified narratives begot unified national identities through modern media, but peninsular writers have been reflecting on the meaning of Italia and its history since antiquity, never through centralized discourses, but through regionally inflected, contested narratives. This dissertation shows that during the Renaissance Italian writers thought about the peninsula’s past more often and more critically than ever before. Spurred on initially by Italy’s economic and cultural preeminence in the fifteenth century and then, later, by the devastation wrought by four decades of invasions and political crises beginning in 1494, Italian writers laid the foundation for a dialogical model of national identity and history that still exists in Italy—and elsewhere—today.
To Kelly and my dad.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

I. *Italia antica*: Ancient Origins of an Idea ......................................................... 34

II. *Libertas Italicae* in the Trecento ................................................................. 72

III. *Italia nova*: Dark Ages and New Ages in the Quattrocento ..................... 112

IV. *La Virtù Italica*: Italy in Crisis, 1494-1513 .............................................. 152

V. *Italia misera*: A New Italian History ............................................................. 197

VI. *Libertas Ecclesiae, Libertas Italicae* in the Cinquecento ......................... 243

VII. *Questa Nostra Italia*: Church Histories of Italy after 1550 ................... 287

Conclusion .................................................................................................................... 329

Bibliography ............................................................................................................. 332
Introduction

The Vatican Gallery of Maps

Every year thousands of tourists make their way from the Vatican Museums to the Sistine Chapel and, on the way, pass through a long corridor decorated with huge maps depicting Italy and its regions. The Vatican Gallery of Maps, commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) and executed by Egnazio Danti (1536-1586), confirms something that nobody would deny: that sixteenth-century Italy was a geographical expression. But the maps represent more than just Italy’s geography; they also represent its history. Embedded in the topography of each region are illustrations of historical episodes. Above the gallery’s entrance are two maps, Italia antica (ancient Italy) and Italia nova (modern Italy). Overlooking both of those maps are images of famous historians who wrote about the peninsula. Thus the artists and patrons behind the Gallery of Maps paid homage to both Italian history and a historiographical tradition that took Italy as its subject. Indeed, for centuries historians had been writing about the peninsula’s past, and in the hundred and fifty years preceding the gallery’s completion they had done so in greater numbers and in greater depth than ever before. The Vatican maps attest to the importance of Italian history in the Renaissance. This dissertation explores the development, structure, themes, and significances of that often overlooked historiographical tradition.
The Problem of Italian History

Open just about any book that considers the broad sweep of Italian history, and you will likely find prefatory remarks on the so-called “problem of Italian history,” what Italian scholars refer to as the question of the “unità della storia d’Italia.”1 Italy, it seems, resists coherent historical narratives. Geography, regionalism, and a late-developing nation-state are the interrelated reasons that historians often cite when describing the “problem” of rendering a history of the peninsula.

The Italian peninsula is bordered on three sides by the Tyrrhenian, Adriatic, and Mediterranean seas and, on the fourth, by the Alps. These natural contours create the impression of a defined and coherent geographical space. Italy’s internal geography, however, suggests just the opposite. For example, the Apennine mountains run down the peninsula’s center, like a spine, posing a serious obstacle to east-west travel, especially in the premodern period. The divide between the north and south of the peninsula is even deeper. At the extreme north of Italy are the snowy Alps; Turin and Geneva are only one

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1 Benedetto Croce seems to have been the first historian to label what he called the question of the unità della storia d’Italia in Benedetto Croce, “Recenti controversie intorno all’unità della storia d’Italia” in Proceedings of the British Academy (XXII) 1936, 57-68. Also see Ernesto Sestan, “Per la storia di un’idea storiografica: L’idea di una unità della storia italiana” in Rivista Storica Italiana (62) 1950, 180-198. The English phrase, “the problem of Italian history,” was coined in the essay (originally published in 1961) by Denys Hay in The Italian Renaissance in its Historical Background (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 26-57, which remains perhaps the most succinct description of the “problem.” But the idea behind the “problem of Italian history” permeates general histories of Italy. See for example, Christopher Duggan, A Concise History of Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), xiii-xiv and 1-30; Claudia Baldoli, A History of Italy (New York: Palgrave, 2009), xiv-xix; Reinhold Schuman, Italy in the Last Fifteen Hundred Years (New York: Lanham, 1992), xxv; Nicholas Doumanis, Italy (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-25 and Girolamo Arnaldi, L’Italia e i suoi invasori (Bari: Laterza, 2004), vii-ix. Also see the ambitious, multivolume histories of Italy, edited in Italy, that begin with a discussion of the difficulties of rendering a coherent narrative of the peninsula’s past. See, Storia d’Italia vol. 1 (of 17), Ruggiero Romano and Corrado Vivanti, eds. (Turin: Einaudi, 1972), xvii-xxvi and Giuseppe Galasso, “L’Italia come problema storiografico” in Storia d’Italia vol. 1 (of 22), ed. Giuseppe Galasso (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1979-), 1-193.
hundred and fifty miles apart. At the extreme south are the while sands and clear blue waters of Puglia and Sicily; Sicily and Tunisia are separated by less than one hundred miles of ocean. Historians have often attributed the regionalism exhibited by Italian communities, which have sometimes been isolated even from their closest neighbors, to such quirks of geography.

Historians invariably mention Italy’s regionalism as a primary obstacle to interpreting and writing about an Italian past. Under the rule of ancient Rome and, much later, under the Italian national state, Italian communities had a common political structure binding them together. For the rest of its history, the peninsula was politically fragmented. From the collapse of the Roman empire down to the late sixteenth century, Italian cities defended their autonomy bitterly and, often, violently. Over the centuries, most Italians tended to identify themselves primarily on a local level, at least until political unification in 1870, and in many ways, they still do today.²

Finally, Italy’s relatively late creation of a national state has led historians to judge the interpretation and writing of premodern Italian history as particularly problematic. In the absence of an Italian political state, what forms the subject of the historian’s analysis? In 1936 the influential Italian historian Benedetto Croce stated that “Italian history began in 1860, with the construction of an Italian state comprising all or almost all of the population contained within the geographical borders of the country.”³

² There are innumerable books on the precariousness of Italian identity since unification. I have found the most useful to be Ernesto Galli della Loggia, L’identità italiana (Bologna: Mulino, 1998).

³ Croce, “Recenti controversie,” 57: storia d’Italia cominci nel 1860, dalla costituzione di uno Stato italiano comprendente tutte o quasi tutte le populazioni chiuse nei confini geografici del paese. Croce’s position was apparently controversial for the time and place—fascist Italy—where, Croce intimates (on the same page) the suggestion that Italian history was not always unitary could become a matter of interest to the police.
Later, in 1964, Croce wrote a history of Italian historiography, beginning it only in the nineteenth century.⁴ Outside of Italian scholarship, Denys Hay has commented, in an oft-cited line, that “the basic problem of Italian history is that before the nineteenth century there is no Italian history.”⁵ According to this line of thought, Italy did not really exist until the 1860s; before that it was nothing more than a “geographical expression,” and a divisive one at that.

Modern historians do, of course, also acknowledge that there were some historical factors common to all premodern Italians, including a well-defined land mass, a proliferation of urban centers, certain cultural traditions, a language (which included pronounced dialects), a religion, some common historical experiences, and some common historical memories. But, for most of Italian history, diversity rather than unity characterized what it meant to be Italian. In the early fourteenth century, for example, Dante recognized the existence of a common Italian culture in his De vulgari eloquentia (c. 1305), a treatise in Latin about the virtues of Italian dialects and the need for an Italian language. Dante thought of Italy, “that beautiful land where sì is heard,” as a geographical, linguistic, and historical entity.⁶ Yet he never lost sight of the impact of localism, that is, the preponderance of multiple and relative perspectives within the peninsula about its language and past. He presented Italy as a defined linguistic space⁷ split into almost infinitesimal subunits.⁸

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⁵ Hay, The Italian Renaissance, 27.
⁶ Inferno, XXXIII.80: del bel paese là dove ’l si suona.
⁷ He imagined Italia as extending from the Alps to Calabria and inclusive of Sicily, but not Sardegna. De vulgari eloquentia, I.9 in Dante Alighieri, Opere Minori ed. Giorgio Barberi Squarotti et al. (Turin: U.T.E.T, 1983), 428. Because he was looking at T-O maps that place Jerusalem at the world’s center, the
There are, then, some serious issues for the historian attempting to write about the broad sweep of Italian history. As Hay has put it, “how may the historian dealing with Italy prior to 1800 discuss regions, towns, families—where real power lay—within some kind of framework which will not impose on them a quite factitious homogeneity?”

This dissertation examines the idea of Italia in premodern Italian historiography and argues that the decades at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century were particularly decisive for the long-term development of an Italian historical discourse about Italy. The “problem of Italian history” serves as an important backdrop for the chapters that follow. The assumption behind that “problem”—that Italian history before the nineteenth century contains a fundamental non sequitur—has led modern historians to undervalue or even ignore premodern conceptions of Italia, of Italian identity, and of Italian history. This study explores those conceptions, their origins, and their impact.

The following chapters argue that the ideas of Italia and of Italian history were never really fixed in premodern history-writing. Rather, Italian writers reflected on the meanings of those concepts in diverse ways, and they developed a sustained, intertextual dialogue that unfolded through time and, sometimes, space. Their representations of the peninsula’s past were almost without exception strongly informed by regional biases. Yet...

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8 Dante, *De vulgari eloquentia* I.9 and I.10, especially I.9 in which Dante marvels how not only Italians from the right side of the peninsula (in Pisa) speak differently from those on the left (in Padua), how inhabitants from nearby cities, such as Milan and Verona, speak differently from one another, but “even more extraordinary, members of the same civic community, such as the Bolognesi of Borgo San Felice and those of Strada Maggiore, speak in different ways,” *De vulgari eloquentia*, I.9, 414: et quod mirabilius est, sub eadem civilitate morantes, ut Bonoienses Burgi Sancti Felicis et Bonoienses Strate Maioris.

for these premodern historians, local affiliations and the absence of a centralized Italian
state did not preclude writing about Italian history; while regionalism and political
disunity are recurring themes in premodern narratives of Italy’s past, Italia is nonetheless
routinely invoked. It is true that throughout the premodern period, only a small core of
intellectuals ever really thought critically about the nature of Italia and its history. Yet the
same was also true at the moment of Italian unification, and even after, when one of those
intellectuals, Massimo D’Azeglio, commented “Italy is made; still to be made are the
Italians.”

The misleading premise behind the notion of the “problem of Italian history” is
that Italian history requires an actual “Italia,” a national state, to provide coherency for
what is otherwise a conglomeration of smaller entities too diverse to constitute a common
history. Croce admitted that premodern writers had evoked an Italia, but he dismissed
those instances as “rhetorical flourishes” (fiori rettorici) referring to something that did
not exist in reality, that should be considered mere poetry. Yet for many premodern
historians, Italy was real, even if politically fragmented, and possessed a history of its
own.

The “problem of Italian history” lingers, surprisingly perhaps, in current historical
scholarship. Croce wrote on the unità della storia d’Italia in the 1930s. Since then
theories on nationhood and national identities have largely transcended older definitions
that associated nations and their identities with coherent and unified understandings of

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10 Quoted in Giuseppe Galasso, Italia nazione difficile (Florence: Monnier, 1994), 1.

11 Croce, “Recenti controversie,” 64, also see 58 and 68.
what it meant to be a resident of a given nation.\textsuperscript{12} Italy and its identity, however, remain, in the words of the Italian scholar Ernesto Galli della Loggia, “a prisoner of a comparative mechanism” that passes negative judgment on Italy’s supposed “absence” of national identity by contrasting it with the seeming coherency of the English and French national models.\textsuperscript{13} That “comparative mechanism” affects the ways in which scholars view not only contemporary Italian national identity, but also the premodern development of that identity. Studies of the idea of Italia during the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries suffer in particular because in those centuries other European states—France, Spain, and England—were becoming ever more centralized, progressing in the direction of modern nationhood, while the Italian peninsula remained decidedly fragmented.

\textbf{Italia and Italian History in Renaissance Studies}

The Renaissance idea of Italia and Renaissance conceptions of Italian history are often overlooked in modern scholarship. Several related reasons help to explain why modern historians of the Renaissance tend to undervalue or ignore those subjects.

Modern Italian Renaissance studies began with the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897) and his hugely influential, \textit{The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy} (1860). In that work, Burckhardt notes essential differences between the Renaissance city-states, especially in regard to their political structures. But, overall, he treats the Renaissance as an explicitly Italian phenomenon. The aspects that define his

\textsuperscript{12} See below, “Methods and Theory.”

\textsuperscript{13} Galli della Loggia, \textit{L’identità italiana}, 113-116: Nel campo della statualità e della politica soprattutto l’identità italiana è prigioniera di un meccanismo comparativistico... dominato dal modello anglo-francese, e in tale comparazione ripartire la peggio.
vision of the Renaissance—a secular world view, the triumph of individualism, love of antiquity, and an understanding of the “state as a work of art”—were, according to his interpretation, pan-Italian experiences. He wrote of an “Italian mind,” an “Italian spirit,” and the “genius of the Italian people.”  

Burckhardt was influenced by his teacher, Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), and his essentializing sense of the nation as manifestation of the genius of its people.  

Burckhardt came to admire in particular the city-state model of Renaissance Italy, but he also thought of the Renaissance as a movement arising because of the particular nature of an Italian volksgeist.  

Burckhardt’s often monolithic portrayal of the Italian Renaissance is one of many aspects of his work that later scholars reacted against, beginning in the mid-twentieth century. In the view of some of Burckhardt’s critics, the founding vision of the Italian Renaissance had elided important cultural and social differences that were keys for understanding the different experiences of the peninsula’s city-states. Thus, in part as a corrective to Burckhardt’s generalizations about a common Italian Renaissance experience, more recent scholarship has accentuated local differences within the “cultures” of the Italian “Renaissances.”

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17 Such is the premise of the title of Richard Mackenney, Renaissances: the Cultures of Italy, c. 1300-c. 1600 (New York: Macmillan, 2004).
In any case, the premodern Italian states were independent entities and modern Italian Renaissance studies have generally conformed to the political divisions of the peninsula during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Since the 1960s, due in a large part to the influence of Hans Baron’s *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (1955), American and English historians have paid particular attention to Florentine civic history, not only because of that city’s fascinating republican experiments and because many American scholars have assumed that Renaissance Florence was a key conduit in the transmission of the republican values and rhetoric that eventually manifested themselves in the political system of the United States, but also because beginning in the fourteenth century Florentines wrote about their history and political experiences—and preserved what they wrote—more than any other Italian community. Meanwhile, modern Italian historians also tend to examine the Renaissance on regional levels. Traditionally they have focused in particular on the nature of the state in Renaissance Italy, the transitions from *comune* to *signorie*, and the development of large, regional states.\(^1\)

Florence does not now dominate modern Renaissance studies to the same extent as it did a few decades ago,\(^2\) but even as scholars extend their gaze beyond that city, their studies remain mostly regional. Venetian studies, like Renaissance Venice itself, tend to look outward to the east and the overseas trading interests in the Adriatic and eastern Mediterranean. Recent studies of Renaissance Rome and the papal states, like the Holy See, generally consider the multiple contexts of Rome, Italy, and universal

\(^1\) A work that represents Italian interests in the Renaissance state is *Origini dello stato: processi di formazione statale in Italia fra medioevo ed età moderna* Giorgio Chittolini, Anthony Molho, Pierangelo Schiera, eds. (Bologna: il Mulino, 1994); also see the comments by Edward Muir, “The Italian Renaissance in America,” *The American Historical Review* 100 (4), 1995: 1114-1116.

\(^2\) See the comments about the “decentralization of Renaissance historiography away from Florence” in Muir, “Italian Renaissance in America,” 1115-1118.
Christendom, but they tend to emphasize either the culture in Rome or papal foreign policies and, in any case, do not consider Renaissance perceptions of an Italian past in any sustained manner. The Kingdom of Naples (the “Regno,” whose sway in the Renaissance extended over most of the Mezzogiorno) has traditionally received less attention than its northern city-state neighbors, but lately historians such as David Abulafia have made convincing arguments about the ways that the Regno were politically and culturally integrated with the rest of the peninsula. And there are of course other, smaller regional lenses through which modern observers view the Renaissance in Italy. But the ways that Renaissance thinkers conceived of Italian history has not been thoroughly studied, in part because of the predominantly regional nature of modern Renaissance research.

Not all modern historical studies of Renaissance Italy are limited to a single region. Humanism, religion, and exile represent just some of the topics that modern historians have considered in an Italian context. Art historians have recently taken the

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22 There are many important works on Italian humanism that transcend local analysis, but a recent essay by Carol Quillen, “Humanism and the Lure of Antiquity” in Najemy, 2004, 37-58, is particularly worth noting here because it examines the fluid movement of humanists between peninsular urban centers and the commonality of certain humanist ideas and practices throughout the peninsula. On religion see the review of recent works by David Peterson, “Out of the Margins: Religion and the Church in Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* (53) 2000, 835-879. On exile, see Randolph Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth: the
lead in noting the fluidity of local peninsular identities during the Renaissance. Stephen Campbell and Stephen Milner, for example, have applied to the city-states the process of “cultural translation” by which a “self-consciously distinct group. . .articulates itself in relation to another in an act of self-definition which may involve an assimilation and refashioning of an ‘other.’”23 Yet Renaissance senses of an Italian past or an Italian identity have not found a place in any of those subfields.

Studies of Italian Renaissance historiography would seem the most obvious platform for considering fifteenth- and sixteenth-century conceptions of an Italian past. But here, too, historians have tended to conduct regionally focused studies. Florence attracts the most attention because of its prolific tradition of history-writing; because it was the home of Leonardo Bruni, the consensus progenitor of the “new historiography” that subsequently characterized pragmatic Renaissance history-writing; and because that city’s historians had a perennially precarious state for the setting and subject their work.24 Historians have recently added to our understanding of history-writing in other Renaissance urban centers, particularly Naples, Milan, and Rome;25 however the historical works written in those cities during the Renaissance represent what has been called “the very historical principle which has made the isolated case study more typical

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than the synthetic overview in recent scholarship on the Italian Renaissance: the impulse towards competitive differentiation and individualization among Italian states and social groups.26

Most studies on Renaissance history-writing tend to focus on a specific city or regional states and thus naturally attempt to place the historical works under study in the contexts of specific states’ political histories and intellectual milieus.27 Although there is nothing misleading about that approach per se, it categorizes Renaissance historical writing in a way that does not easily accommodate historical writings with a broader, peninsular scope.

Works that consider Italian Renaissance historiography in a way that transcends the local sometimes mention the ways that writers of that period conceived of an Italian past, but such treatments cast narrow nets and, in any case, do not attempt to synthesize the range of Renaissance Italian ideas about the peninsula’s history. Felix Gilbert mentions historical conceptions of an Italian past in two of his works, but they are limited to defined chronological periods.28 Eric Cochrane’s twenty-page chapter “National History” in his encyclopedic Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance

26 Campbell and Milner, 1. This passage appears in the context of a discussion of Italian Renaissance art, culture, and identities, but I think also applies to Renaissance historical writing and modern views of it.


(1981) contains useful information but does not draw any broader conclusions about the importance of premodern history-writing about Italy. Other historians have considered the idea of Italia in Renaissance historiography, but only in short studies with limited scopes. Recently, the most promising analysis of Renaissance ideas of Italia and its past has come from the Italian scholar Riccardo Fubini in an article on Quattro and Cinquecento ideas of Italia. He usefully emphasizes the fact that “to locate a non-generic [Renaissance] concept of Italia it is necessary to recognize and distinguish the variety of lenses through which Renaissance writers observed that concept.” But this comment simply suggests an area for further research.

There is a fundamental irony behind the pervasive rationale that has led to the general exclusion of Renaissance conceptions of Italia and of Italian history from modern Renaissance studies. The phenomenon that began as a reaction against Burckhardt’s imposition of nineteenth-century, essentializing views of nationhood on the history of the Italy during the Renaissance later adopted and imposed equally essentializing views of nationhood on the history of Italy during the Renaissance. Modern historians of the Renaissance somehow still evaluate political development by the standard of progress towards a centralized nation and a coherent national identity. Fubini has described this tendency among modern Italian scholars to observe the Renaissance idea of Italia anachronistically, within a modern nation-state paradigm, as the result of

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the tenacious spirit of the Risorgimento…that identifies the story of Italy with that of political unification or, rather, in the opposite sense, with the absence of unification….which perpetuates the [assumption of] incompatibility, and from there, incomprehension [of the idea of Italia] in the Renaissance.\textsuperscript{32}

But most modern historians of the Renaissance, not just Italians, are guilty of such comparisons. They tend to see Renaissance \textit{campanilismo} (localism: literally, loyalty to one’s bell tower) as negating any meaningful sense of being Italian. As a result, modern historians have created a false dichotomy that was unknown to Renaissance writers, especially Renaissance historians.

This facet of modern Renaissance scholarship is mostly evidenced by the absence of certain kinds of studies and the continuing emphasis on local identities. Yet there are also some explicit indications that current historians of the Renaissance see prevailing localism as a reason to disregard premodern conceptions of Italia and Italian identity (and, by implication, Italian history). For example, Gene Brucker, a leading historian of the Renaissance, has commented not only that Italian identity was essentially nonexistent during the Renaissance but that because of persistent regionalism, it remains elusive. In Brucker’s words, if, some day, “the inhabitants of Lombardy and Sicily feel that they are brothers, that they belong to the same community, then the terminus of that long and torturous route to unification will have been reached.”\textsuperscript{33} Brucker presents Italian identity as yet unformed, a dream still waiting to be realized in the distant future. Brucker is not alone among modern scholars in assuming that Italy can only become a true nation with a real national identity when it achieves internal coherency. According to such a

\textsuperscript{32} Fubini, “L’idea d’Italia fra Quattro e Cinquecento,” 53-4.

perspective, notions of Italia during the Renaissance, when the peninsula was even more divided than it is today, could not possibly hold any meaning worthy of historical analysis, then or now.

Other modern historians of the Renaissance, especially social historians, have explicitly dismissed Italia as a valid category of historical analysis on the grounds that most people living on the peninsula during that period had, at most, a dim conception of a common Italian identity. In the words of Edward Muir, early modern Italia was “a dream that has been given far more credit as an idea than it deserves, an idea far more ephemeral than the persistence of local and regional identities.”

Muir assumes that people in the Renaissance had the same dichotomous conception of local and larger forms of identity that predominate today; they did not. He also overlooks Renaissance intellectuals as a group and thus ignores the fact that, in their writings, Italia predominates.

The dismissive stance adopted by Muir, Brucker, and others toward the Renaissance idea of Italia is untenable at minimum because the idea had such a strong presence in Renaissance literature. This dissertation does not attempt a comprehensive overview of the many functions of Italia in Renaissance literature; it presents a sample of Renaissance writers who rendered narratives of an Italian past. Even the small group addressed here makes clear that Italia and its history were important concepts at the time. But they were also ambiguous concepts. Italia never attained any kind of widely accepted definition during the Renaissance, and historians disagreed on the basic structure of Italian history—when it began and who it involved. In this sense, modern historians

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34 As quoted by Brucker, “From Campanilismo to Nationhood,” 64. Lauro Martines Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 111-113 has similarly dismissed Italia as having hardly any real significance during the Renaissance.
including Muir are correct insofar as they indicate the ambiguity behind the idea of Italia during the Renaissance. Croce, too, was accurate enough in insisting that the term *Italia* in the Renaissance had no equivalent in fact. But, as this dissertation demonstrates, ambiguity is not the same as irrelevance.

While comprehensive studies of Italian Renaissance conceptions of an Italian past are lacking, modern historians have long been quick to highlight several famous evocations of Italia by some of the most well-known premodern Italian writers. Such isolated treatments of Renaissance ideas of Italia and its past, however, generally obstruct an accurate and complete appreciation of those conceptions in premodern peninsular culture.

Dante (1265-1321), Petrarch (1304-1374), Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527), and Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540) are the four premodern writers whose thoughts on Italy receive frequent mention by modern observers. But modern scholars’ treatments of those writers’ considerations of Italia are usually limited to those writers’ immediate contexts. As giants of Italian literature, all four are immensely important for the long-term development of a peninsular discourse about Italian history, and all four feature in the following chapters. But their interpretations of Italian history are most significant when viewed within the much broader conversation about Italia and its past that unfolded over the centuries between Dante and Guicciardini. That such a conversation existed is this dissertation’s central argument.

**Argument**
This dissertation makes no pretense to comprehensiveness in regard to the Renaissance idea of Italia. Italia permeated peninsular literature from Dante forward, primarily as a geographical reference and a cultural marker. I have left aside the kind of important questions about the meaning of Italian culture and identity that Dante was already suggesting in the early fourteenth century when he reflected on the fact “that there are some simple signs, in the manner of speaking, of dressing, and of acting that one can recognize as Italian. . .the most noble of which are not specific to any one city in Italy, but are common to all of them.” Poetry, the visual arts, and foreign perceptions of Italians are all valuable entrance points for understanding the various functions of the idea of Italia in Renaissance thought but they do not, for the most part, appear in this dissertation. This dissertation focuses on a particular part of the Renaissance idea of Italia, the idea of an Italian past.

In the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries, despite pronounced regionalism and political fragmentation, Italia was an important concept for many writers and in various ways beyond just as a geographical expression. For a number of Renaissance writers, Italia was a historical entity, that is, a geographical space with a shared historical experience. The Italian states of the Renaissance shared one common historical memory in that most of them had, in one form or another been a part of the ancient Roman empire. Yet there was nothing completely agreed-upon among Renaissance narratives of an Italian history. Some writers questioned the seemingly

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35 Dante, De vulgari eloquentia, I.xvi.4: in quantum ut hominess latini agimus, quadem habemus simplicissima signa et morum et habituum et locutionis, quibus latine actiones ponderantur et mensurantur. Que quidem nobilissima sunt earum que Latinorum sunt actiones, hec nullius civitates Ytaliae propria sunt, et in omnibus comunia sunt.

36 See Chapter One.
obvious commonality of an ancient Roman inheritance. Given the peninsula’s regional diversity and precarious political environment during the Renaissance, it should not surprise that historical thinkers during that period approached the concept of a peninsular past from different perspectives, in different ways, and for different reasons. Even within individual cities, it is often difficult to discern any defined or consistent schools of thought about the nature of Italian history—in Florence, for example, Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) and his pupil and successor as the city’s chancellor, Leonardo Bruni (1369-1444), shared many perspectives on politics and on writing, but they rendered decidedly different versions of peninsular history.37 Italian Renaissance conceptions of a peninsular past were diverse and, especially when viewed in isolation from one another, seemingly unrelated. This dissertation refers to Renaissance “Italian history” because Renaissance writers also referred to the *storia d’Italia*. However, Renaissance historians of Italy rarely made clear exactly what geographical space comprised the “Italy” of their histories; although some did define that space, including Flavio Biondo (1392-1463) and Leandro Alberti (1479-1552).

Yet many of the historical narratives of Italy written on the peninsula during the Renaissance *do* fit together. This dissertation’s central argument is that in premodern Italy certain writers concerned themselves with the notion that the residents of the peninsula had a common history and that those writers posited narratives of Italian history that were informed to varying degrees by the works of predecessors or contemporaries who were also engaged with the general subject of Italian history. They conducted a centuries’-long intertextual conversation about the meaning and nature of

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37 See Chapters Two and Three.
Italy’s past. That conversation reached new heights—in terms of productivity and depth of analysis—between the mid-fifteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries. What had been before that period, primarily a diachronic conversation became also a synchronic one as contemporaries carried on dialogues with one another, through personal letters and more formal treatises, about the history of the peninsula.

The foreign invasions that wracked Italy between 1494 and the 1530s and stripped almost all the peninsular states of their autonomy\(^{38}\) served to intensify the Renaissance conversation about Italian history. The invasions also changed the content of the conversation. Before the invasions began, Renaissance historians such as Leonardo Bruni and Flavio Biondo constructed Italian historical narratives that emphasized a common ancient Roman inheritance and celebrated the revival of classical culture. During and after the invasions, however, historians such as Francesco Vettori (1474-1539) and Francesco Guicciardini reshaped those narratives by ignoring the concept of a shared Roman past and instead underscoring the common factor of subjugation.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Renaissance conversation about Italian history is that it did not really contend with what modern historians have called the “problem of Italian history”—the absence of a centralized state and the persistence of strong regional identities. Rather, Renaissance writers conceived of and discussed the peninsula’s past in ways that accommodated those very “problems,” often integrating them into their broader constructions of an Italian historical narrative. It is in this sense more than any other that Renaissance discourses on the peninsula’s past are crucial for the broad sweep of Italian history. Renaissance historians provided a dialogical structure

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\(^{38}\) The exceptions were Venice and the Papacy.
based on multiple viewpoints and much of the broad thematic content that characterized later discourses on Italian history, including those that took place just before and during Italy’s national unification, the Risorgimento in the late nineteenth century.³⁹

The Renaissance conversation about Italy’s past was characterized by an acute diversity of perspectives. One reason for this may have been the absence of centralized leadership on the peninsula; historical narratives of Spain, France, and England could adopt their respective monarchies as their primary subjects. Germany was made up of autonomous states but was overseen by the Holy Roman Emperor.⁴⁰ But a more conspicuous reason why Renaissance discourses on Italian history were ambiguous, diverse, and yet also interconnected within a common conversation is the general emphasis during that period on dialogical constructions of truth.⁴¹

Renaissance narratives of Italian history depended largely on the immediate political context in which individual writers lived, their own political allegiances, where they were born, where they lived, their individual conceptions of history-writing, the books they read, the patronage they enjoyed, and the patronage they hoped to yet enjoy, among other myriad factors, many of which were common and remain common to historians generally. Because of the peninsula’s regional diversity and the vagueness

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⁴⁰ For an extended comparison of the premodern origins of Germany and Italy (and France), see Ernesto Sestan, Stato e nazione nell’alto medioevo: ricerche sulle origini nazionali in Francia, Italia, Germania (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1994).

behind the idea of Italia generally, comparing one or more contemporary histories of Italy can initially seem akin to comparing apples and oranges. The histories considered in this dissertation, though, are all connected by a common thread—the narratives in one way or another depend on some or all of the others, a fact that is more often than not attested to by the writers themselves through explicit references.

The histories examined in the following chapters are also connected by recurring themes, each of which is explained in depth in the following chapters: libertas Italae, the liberty of Italy, which was a rallying cry used for political purposes as well as a historiographical theme, most often with reference to an outside “other”; Italia misera, miserable Italy, a lament that generally underscores the peninsula’s universally woeful condition, the result of either external invasions, internal divisiveness, or both; the Church as prime obstructor of Italian unity; the Church as champion of Italian freedom; the common cultural and political inheritance of ancient Rome; and ancient Rome as the enemy of ancient Italian liberties all appear in premodern histories with regularity. It is important to note that these themes are generally just that—they rarely function as primary arguments.

While the general argument of this dissertation is about the existence of a premodern, intertextual conversation about Italian history that flourished in important ways during the Renaissance and especially during the period of foreign invasion that began in 1494, the following chapters also contain two other arguments that are significant to the Renaissance specifically.

No Renaissance writer is more associated with that period’s conception of Italia and its past than Niccolò Machiavelli. In the last chapter of The Prince, the “Exhortation
to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians,” the author famously calls upon the Medici clan, then leaders of Florence and the papacy, to unite Italian forces under one flag and to then expel the French and Spanish from the peninsula. He supports that call to arms with an argument about the strength of Italian virtù, that is, Italian military prowess, which he understood to be a direct inheritance from the ancient Romans and, thus a powerful force. In that way, the chapter contains not only a conception of Italia but also of its past because its argument assumes a direct continuity between the ancient Romans and sixteenth-century Italians.  

Beginning with the architects of the Risorgimento in the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a tendency to read the “Exhortation” as, in effect, a plea for national unity and to cast Machiavelli as something of a national prophet. More recently, scholars have debated the meaning of that chapter: it is more emotional and religiously charged than anything that comes before it in The Prince and it suggests an idea that was, even in its time, unrealistic. Thus scholars have wondered if the supposed progenitor of modern political realism was, perhaps, not serious about, or, at least, writing ironically, in the “Exhortation.”

This dissertation sheds new light on those interpretive issues surrounding the “Exhortation” by examining the ideas contained in that chapter within the broader context of the Renaissance conversation about Italian history. The fact that The Prince is read so much more often than any other of Machiavelli’s writings and the fact that the

42 See Chapter Four.

43 Carlo Curcio, Machiavelli nel Risorgimento (Milan: Giuffré, 1953) and, on more recent interpretations of Machiavelli’s role in Risorgimento thought, see Maurizio Viroli, Machiavelli (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 148.

44 The specifics of this scholarly debate are detailed in Chapter Four.
“Exhortation” is probably the most analyzed chapter of that work\(^{45}\) has produced a set of misguided assumptions about the nature of that important writer’s conception of Italia and its past. Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* within a specific intellectual context that included sustained debates about the nature of Italy’s past with his most frequent interlocutor and someone who, as John Najemy has proved, exerted a profound influence on Machiavelli’s thinking around the time that he composed *The Prince*, another Florentine historian and statesman, Francesco Vettori.\(^{46}\)

Perhaps because there are so many unresolved issues regarding the “Exhortation,” scholars have failed to explore fully Machiavelli’s interpretations of Italia and its past in his many other writings, including his personal letters to Vettori. Moreover, in focusing almost exclusively on that one chapter from *The Prince*, which was composed in 1512, scholars fail to appreciate how Machiavelli’s thinking about Italia changed—or not—in response to the peninsula’s drastically declining situation up until his death, just after the Sack of Rome, in 1527.

This dissertation examines Machiavelli’s conceptions of Italia and of Italian history in most of his major works between 1512 and 1527 and with respect to the broader discourses on Italian history during those years. Machiavelli’s thinking about Italia was exceptional for its time, but not in the ways generally assumed, that is, as ahead of its time and looking forward to modernity and the Italian national state. Rather, Machiavelli approached the ideas of Italia and Italian history in a way that recalled his fourteenth-century predecessors, Dante and Petrarch, in that he took seriously nebulous

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ideas about an intrinsic ancient Romanness that persisted in the military capabilities of contemporary Italians. Such an interpretation of the peninsula’s past did stand out in its immediate intellectual climate, but only because most other thinkers, even those in Machiavelli’s Florentine circle of friends, were considering issues of Italian history in much more concrete and practical terms.

The “Exhortation” is in fact representative in many ways of Machiavelli’s broader thinking about Italia. The sense of Italia posited in the last chapter of The Prince recurred in many of Machiavelli’s later writings, despite sweeping changes to the peninsula’s political terrain since 1512. Machiavelli meant what he wrote in the famous conclusion to The Prince, but his conception of Italia did not look forward to modernity. Rather, it looked back to older, less pragmatic approaches to Italia and its past.

The second argument about the Italian Renaissance addresses the chronology of the period. This has been a notoriously difficult subject for a period of European history whose very existence has been questioned, initially by medievalists and then, more recently, by early modernists. Traditionall, the Renaissance—in the sense of a cultural movement, at least—has been seen by modern historians to have begun with Petrarch, who identified his own age as one experiencing a revival of classical culture and thus distinct from the “middle” period that had come before. But that marker has also been queried by many historians, beginning as early as the fifteenth century in the discussions between the historians Flavio Biondo and Leonardo Bruni. The end of the Renaissance


48 See Chapter Two.

49 See Chapter Three.
has been even harder to identify. Historians with a political focus tend to point to the 1527 Sack of Rome, a travesty that signaled the effective subjugation of the peninsula by Hapsburg Spain, while historians more interested in the cultural aspects of the Renaissance identify the continuation of artistic production into the subsequent decades, which they in fact refer to as the “High Renaissance,” the locus of which was Counter-Reformation Rome.\footnote{Historians of Renaissance Rome have been particularly vocal about this unresolved issue of periodization, see in particular the lively discussion throughout in Gouwens, \textit{Remembering the Renaissance}, but especially in pp. 4 and 172-175.}

The Renaissance conversation about Italian history has a chronology of its own. Between the early fourteenth and late sixteenth centuries there were important shifts in the ways that historians thought and wrote about history generally. There were also drastic changes in the peninsula’s political environment. Both the changes in historiographical models and in the peninsula’s political context affected how peninsular writers portrayed an Italian past. In the middle of the fifteenth century, writers such as Flavio Biondo and Leonardo Bruni could confidently celebrate Italian preeminence in cultural and political senses. Less than a century later, in the context of ongoing invasions, writers including Machiavelli and Vettori struggled to understand the nature of an exposed, weakened Italia. The invasions represent a crucial turning point in the Renaissance conversation about Italian history. During and after the \textit{calamità}, ancient Rome faded from most histories of Italia, which were increasingly focused on recent events. Around the time of the invasions in other words, writers defined Italia less in terms of an ancient Roman heritage and more in terms of the wars that had just devastated it. Finally, in the decades that followed the subjugation of the peninsula,
writers such as Girolamo Borgia (1475-1550) and Leandro Alberti, who were associated with the Church, took the lead in writing about Italian history, and they put forth narratives of the peninsula’s past that emphasized in varying ways a fallen Italia that could yet be redeemed by the institution of the papacy.

Thus this study of the Renaissance conversation about Italia and its past supports a chronology for the Renaissance that extends past 1527 and on down to the last third of that century. There is a tendency among modern scholars to view Guicciardini and his *Storia d’Italia* (composed up to the author’s death in 1540 but not published until 1561) as the culmination of Renaissance history-writing, after which point, in the words of Benedetto Croce, “histories written about Italian life…take the form of accounts of incidents of meanness, stupidity, sorrow and horror rather poorly relieved on occasions by a laugh of derision or a smile of irony.”51 Guicciardini, though, was hardly the last interlocutor in the Renaissance conversation about Italian history. Rather, his work was one of many produced in the wake of the Sack of Rome. After 1527, even before Guicciardini’s work first appeared, there was a shift from Florence to Rome, where clerics, monks, and bishops, including Borgia and Alberti, took the lead in the production of Italian historical narratives.

**Theoretical Implications**

Because intense regionalism defined the peninsula for most of its history, scholars largely exclude Italy from their conversations about premodern European paths to nationhood and instead focus on the more centralized examples of France and England.

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This dissertation challenges such received notions about the early origins of nations by demonstrating some of the ways that Renaissance Italian historians presaged the peninsula’s future national development by building an identity discourse that accommodated regional biases, ideological differences, and political leanings. Benedict Anderson and others may have justly highlighted the ways in which centralized narratives begot centralized national identities, but as Italy proves, such identities are not necessary for the formation of a national state. Italy’s model of identity, characterized by competing voices, seems particularly relevant in our age of shifting national populations and multivocal national identities.

This study assumes a connection between historical writing and the formation of collective identities. In composing histories with a peninsular scope, Renaissance historians were positing a common past for a regionally divided population. The particular importance of that fact, on a theoretical level, is that the common past that they proposed was never coherent, or unified. It was, rather, a fluid and dynamic common history that premodern writers reformulated through a continual process of dialogical reconstruction. Thus the nature of Renaissance historical discourses about Italy hold particular significance in the historical development of Italian identity, which—then, and at the moment of unification, and, according to many, still today—has been characterized by unfixed and diverse meanings.

Such ambiguity, of course, is true of most, if not all, national identities, especially in the recent contexts of globalization and migration. The work of Homi Bhabha among others has rejected the plausibility of coherent, overarching narratives of national identity.

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and has instead focused on the ways that contested narratives represent and, in fact, define the nature of most nations’ identities.53 One would be hard-pressed to deny that any national identity is anything more than a dialogical construct, informed by multiple and always-shifting perspectives. It seems safe to assume that there “is no such thing as one national identity,” that “identities are discursively constructed according to audience, setting, topic and substantive content” and that “national identities are therefore malleable, fragile, and, frequently, ambivalent and diffuse.”54 Modern scholarship, however, offers few examples of premodern identities that were “malleable, fragile, and, frequently, ambivalent.”

This dissertation thus offers a premodern perspective on the modern issue of national identities. Although scholarship about national identities usually begins with reference to the late eighteenth century, this dissertation demonstrates that the construction of such identities has important roots in premodern Italy.55 Insofar as premodern historical narratives about Italia were comprised of a wide variety of perspectives and interpretations about an entity that existed primarily as an idea rather


than as a centralized state (unlike in France, Spain, and England), premodern conceptions of the idea of Europe is perhaps the most comparable area of study.\(^{56}\) Anthony Smith has done more than any other scholar to underscore the premodern origins of national identities.\(^{57}\) The premise behind much of Smith’s work is that, although nations themselves might be strictly modern inventions, their identities most often have much earlier origins. Scholarship on the premodern origins of national identities could benefit from a better understanding of the Italian example. At least since the Social War (c. 90 BC), there have been residents of the peninsula who have identified themselves as Italian.\(^{58}\) And yet, throughout the centuries’ long development of Italian identities, the peninsula was almost always politically fragmented and regionally diverse, thus accommodating a range of perspectives about what it meant to be Italian. In this way, Italy’s premodern identity seems especially appropriate and instructive for analyses of the ways in which contested narratives define modern national identities.

### Organization

The following chapters trace the development of an interconnected conversation about Italian history that was carried out by peninsular writers both diachronically through related texts and also synchronically through personal letters as well as formal treatises. The dissertation progresses chronologically.

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58 See Chapter One.
The premodern conversation among peninsular writers about Italia and its past had its origins in antiquity, and that period is the focus of Chapter One. Since our earliest records, the idea of Italia was ambiguous and malleable. Different Greek and Roman writers appropriated that concept for a variety of purposes. For ancient Roman writers, Italia was important only relative to Rome, and therefore the idea that Italy had its own history, independent of Roman history, was never really entertained. Nevertheless, ancient Roman historians’ interpretations of Italy’s place in Roman history were important, later, when their writings became key touchstones for Renaissance writers, not only for their thinking about Italia and its shared ancient past, but also for their thinking about historical writing generally.

Chapter Two addresses the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance down to the beginning of the fifteenth century. In the centuries after ancient Rome’s collapse, the Italian peninsula suffered waves of external invasions, but many of the urban centers founded during antiquity survived, and by the eleventh century numerous urban centers became prosperous again. Although this dissertation does not seek a comprehensive view of medieval and early Renaissance conceptions of Italia, it does address the two most influential, those of Dante and Petrarch. Italia was a crucial concept in both of those writers’ works, and their different interpretations of Italy’s common Roman inheritance set the stage for subsequent conceptions of Italian history. Just after Petrarch in the fourteenth century, for instance, the Florentine chancellor Coluccio Salutati adopted many of Petrarch’s modes of writing about Italia and reformulated them for use in highly political, propagandistic tracts, many of which included narratives of the peninsula’s past but from a distinctly Florentine perspective.
By the mid-fifteenth century, historical writing on the peninsula was underwent a critical revival and the Renaissance conversation about Italia and its past took on a synchronic dimension for the first time. Chapter Three examines a contemporary dialogue about Italian history that was carried out by two of the most important peninsular historians of that century, Leonardo Bruni and Flavio Biondo. Bruni is seen by many modern historians as having pioneered a new, more pragmatic, source-based form of history-writing, while Biondo holds a particularly crucial place in the historiography of Italy because he, in essence, devoted his entire literary career to writing historical works that in one way or another adopted the peninsula as their primary geographical frame. Bruni and Biondo developed narratives of Italy’s past distinct from each other’s and they even reflected on the idea of an Italian historical narrative per se. Although different, their narratives captured the optimism of the peninsula’s intellectual elite, which mostly derived from their recognition of Italy as the seat of a rapidly spreading revival of classical education, texts, and practices. That optimism led to a general structure for narratives of Italian history: both Bruni and Biondo emphasized a common classical past and highlighted their contemporary Italy as the triumphant culmination of Italian history.

Such celebratory versions of Italy’s past are particularly important because, in the decades that followed, that narrative structure fell apart almost entirely. Chapter Four begins with the first wave of the calamità d’Italia, the 1494 invasion by the French King Charles VIII, and focuses on the subsequent two decades, during which time Florentine statesmen took the lead in producing histories of the peninsula. In particular, Chapter Four features Machiavelli’s conceptions of Italia and Italian history developed in response to the invasions and subsequent political crises. Although this chapter places
Machiavelli’s thinking about those themes in a broader intellectual context, it also makes a specific argument59 about the nature of Machiavelli’s approach to the ideas of Italia and Italian history. After his death in the sixteenth century, and ever since, his writings have been hugely influential. He thus represents an especially important voice in the Renaissance conversation about Italia and Italian history.

Machiavelli also took part in perhaps the most sustained synchronic dialogue during the Renaissance about Italian history. That dialogue is the focus of Chapter Five. Machiavelli and his most frequent interlocutor, Francesco Vettori, approached Italy and its past in distinct ways, and like Bruni and Biondo, the two Florentines discussed their differences explicitly. Their dialogue is important in several respects: it places Machiavelli’s ideas in the contemporary intellectual climate in which they were formed and thus helps us to arrive at a more complete understanding of his thinking about Italia; it represents the dialogical nature of the Renaissance construction of an Italian past generally; and it indicates an important transition in the ways that the peninsula’s thinkers were approaching Italian history. Machiavelli—like Dante, Petrarch, Salutati, Bruni, and Biondo before him—thought of Italia and its past primarily in terms of a defining connection to ancient Rome. In contrast, Vettori—and almost all the historians of Italy that came after him—wrote Italian history in ways divorced from the ancient Roman past. Vettori and others understood the years of invasions to have fundamentally changed the nature of Italia. According to men like Vettori and, later, Francesco Guicciardini, history-writing was more important than ever in that changed world as a means of understanding the causes of such sudden and sweeping changes and as an avenue for speculating on

59 See above, “Argument.”
what those changes meant for the future. For such historiographical endeavors, the
lessons and examples of ancient Rome were of little use.

The histories examined in Chapters Six and Seven were mostly written around the
middle of the sixteenth century, and thus from post-calamità perspectives. Historians
then recognized the reality of the peninsula’s subjugation by foreign powers. Another
important shift occurred during those decades, as the locus for historical writing about
Italy moved in essence from Florence to Counter-Reformation Rome. There was no
single Church perspective or approach to writing histories of the peninsula, however.
Chapters Six and Seven demonstrate how even after the political subjugation of the
peninsula, the Renaissance conversation about Italian history—characterized by a
dynamic dialogical process and accommodating of varied perspectives—persisted. That
conversation culminated with the 1580s construction of the Vatican Gallery of Maps, a
visual representation of both Italia and its history that reflected and immortalized the
decades of dialogue that had preceded it.
Italia Riunita

In the last four days of 1870 the city of Rome experienced the most destructive flooding of the Tiber in the modern era.\footnote{For an account of the flood see Gregory Aldrete, \textit{Floods of the Tiber in Ancient Rome} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 245-248.} The timing was particularly unfortunate—Rome had only just become the capital of the recently unified Italian national state. On December 31, King Vittorio Emanuele II traveled from the provisional capital in Florence and made his first official visit to Roma capitale, intending both to survey the damage of the natural disaster and to commemorate the city’s new status. With the latter agenda in mind, the king made an official visit to the Campidoglio, Michelangelo’s Renaissance piazza located on the Capitoline Hill, once the symbolic center of ancient Rome. A small ceremony took place there.

Overlooking the remains of the ancient Forum, the king and some government officials paid tribute to the new nation and its capital. The symbolic value of the event was captured eloquently on a coin (see fig. 1) minted to celebrate the occasion: “Immortalizing in the magnificent surroundings of the Campidoglio the memory of a
reunited Italy.”

Centered beneath those words are Romulus, Remus, and the she-wolf. This was not only a commemoration of contemporary events—the formation of the Italian national state—but also of the distant past and the enduring “memory” of antiquity, when Italy had been united under Roman rule. After centuries of political fragmentation and subjugation by foreign rulers, Italia was “riunita,” returned to the unified form it supposedly took in antiquity. One of the first actions of the unified Italian national state was to identify with a concept of ancient Roman Italy.

Not only in the late nineteenth century but throughout the peninsula’s history, the idea of an ancient, unified Italia has served as a sort of touchstone in Italian political discourses, taking on different shapes and fulfilling different agendas in various historical periods. For Giuseppe Mazzini and the architects of the Risorgimento, for instance, ancient Italia was a romantic ideal, the precursor to the national state. For Benito Mussolini it was a symbol of the supposedly inherent military strength and imperial character of the Italian people. The act of refiguring the idea of ancient Italia, however, predates the modern period. As we will see, Renaissance historians were particularly active in constructing and reconstructing connections between their contemporary Italy and that of antiquity. It might generally be said of the concept of classical Italia, then, that it has fallen to us through a series of filters that have reshaped its meaning according to the distinct concerns of various historical periods.

Before moving to the main objective of this dissertation, which is to chart the nature of Italy in Renaissance historical discourse, it is necessary to gain some broad understanding of the idea of Italy in classical sources. With that background, later

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2 See Figure 1: il giorno XXXI dicembre MDCCCLXX eternando nei fasti del Campidoglio la memoria d’Italia riunita.
chapters will consider the extent to which Renaissance thinkers were continuing
discursive structures begun in antiquity, modifying them, or inventing entirely new ones.
Was there an Italia *unita* in antiquity similar to that which individuals in subsequent
centuries referred? Did the peninsula’s ancient inhabitants have a sense of belonging to a
common Italic community? How did the idea of Italia resonate in their thinking and
writing?

Roman Italy and ancient Italian identity have been the focus of many recent
studies that explore the topic from a variety of perspectives, including the archeological
evidence of pre-Roman Italian tribes, the Roman conquest of Italy, the cultural process of
“Romanization,” the political elements of incorporation, the interrelated complexities of
ancient Italian and Roman identities, and the causes and effects of the Social War
between Rome and its Italian allies. There is little consensus. Modern historians even
contest one another on the validity and meanings of some of the most basic terms of their
research, above all, “Romanization.” There are also certain problems of interpretation

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3 For a useful, succinct summary of these issues see Emilio Gabba, “Alcune considerazioni su una identità

4 On pre-Roman Italian tribes see, Joshua Whatmough, *The Foundations of Roman Italy* (London:
Methuen, 1992). On the Roman conquest of Italy, see Jean-Michel David, *The Roman Conquest of Italy*
most recently, E.T. Salmom, *The Making of Roman Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982);
Mario Torelli, *Tota Italia: Essays in the Cultural Formation of Roman Italy* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999);
aspect of incorporation, see especially two chapters in the *Cambridge Ancient History* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1970-), Emilio Gabba, “Rome and Italy in the Second-Century BC” (Vol. 8,
On ancient Italian and Roman identities, see Emma Dench, *Romulus’ Asylum: Roman Identities from the
Age of Alexander to the Age of Hadrian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). On the Social war, see
most recently, Salmon; Arthur Keaveney, *Rome and the Unification of Italy* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press,
1987); and Henrik Mouritsen, *Italian Unification: A Study in Ancient and Modern Historiography*

5 The debate essentially revolves around the linearity and diffusion of “Romanization” during ancient
times. On the one hand, some scholars argue that, after the Second Punic War Italian communities became
inherent in modern observers’ attempts to understand the ancient valences of an idea such as Italia—the temptation to impose modern ideas of the nation-state on the classical world has tended to creep into some scholars’ work on the subject. For the purpose of this chapter—which is to uncover the status of the term Italia in the classical sources that were later available to early modern readers—those unsettled questions may be left aside in favor of a focus on two primary issues: the origins and development of the term Italia and the extent to which Roman identity included any sense at all of being Italian.

As some modern scholars of ancient Rome have noted, it is important to consider ancient ideas of Italia as independent from modern expectations of unification. While it is true that under Roman rule the peninsula experienced an organizational and political unity unmatched until 1870, it is also true that the ancient Roman authors later read by medieval and Renaissance historians were not primarily, if at all, concerned with the degree to which Italia actually formed a unified entity. Their conceptions could be both unitary, characterizing Italy as some kind of whole, and fragmented, emphasizing the increasingly Roman in their cultural practices, institutional structures, and self-identities, and that the Social War was a culmination of this process in the sense that the Italian peoples felt themselves “Roman,” and wanted the legal designations and rights associated therein—then, after the Social War, as one of those scholars writes, “no longer did Italians strive to be Romans…they were Romans,” Keaveney, *Unification of Italy*, xiii. This position is held by Keaveney and Salmon among others (see a summary of the debate in the preface to the second edition of Keaveney, *Unification of Italy*, vii-xiii). On the other hand, some contend that Italian communities maintained their individual identities and carefully guarded their distinctive cultural elements even after the Social War, and consequently, they see “Romanization” as developing nonlinearly. That is, they see the Social War not simply a fight to become “Roman,” but also as a struggle for independence—for those scholars, the issues of Italic and Roman identities are much more murky and difficult to unveil because, according to them, the entire idea of linear Romanization is inseparable from the one-sided ancient Roman histories that initially presented it. Adherents to this point of view include Dench, *Romulus’ Asylum*, particularly, 165-7, Mouritsen, *Italian Unification*, and Torelli, *Tota Italia.*


See Dench, *Romulus’ Asylum*, 152-221.
essential diversity of the peninsula. After the Social War, unitary conceptions of Italia rose in prominence, but mostly as politically useful rhetorical constructions—an ideal espoused Cicero and Augustus, among others. In less politicized writings, Italia always made more sense to Roman writers as a single entity comprising diverse pieces, separate from Rome but with a unique status. If nothing else, variety characterized ancient Roman interpretations of Italia. The politically unified ancient Italian peninsula bore little resemblance to the modern unified nation. What ultimately, and more profoundly, connects ancient Italia with its subsequent iterations is the recognition by some classical writers of the peninsula as a coherent entity defined primarily by its plurality and variety.

**Etymologies and Geographies**

The multivalent nature of ancient Italia can be seen even in the earliest attempts to explain its etymological origins and geographical scope. Much later, in the mid-fifteenth century, the historian Biondo Flavio would note that “Italy has acquired at different times a variety of names,” and indeed this fluidity of meaning has origins as far back as the writings of Thucydides.

Thucydides thought “Italia” to have derived from King Italus, who reigned in the southwest corner of the peninsula well before the Greeks settled there. Other historians, included Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Strabo subscribed to that explanation, but only speculatively as they also offered other possibilities.

Writing in the late first century BC, Dionysius of Halicarnassus provided perhaps the most comprehensive treatment of possible derivations for “Italia.” He thought King

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8 Thucydides 6.2.
Italus the likely source, but was open to alternative explanations. One of these involved the Oenotrians, whom Dionysius thought were among the first Greek colonists to settle on the Italian peninsula. “Oenotria” initially referred to the area they occupied in extreme southern Italy, encompassing parts of modern Puglia, Basilicata, and Calabria. Over time, as with all of the possible derivations for “Italia,” writers referenced “Oenotria” in a way that extended beyond its initial geographical meaning.

The most compelling possible derivation (to Dionysius) involved Hercules (unintentionally) tracing the outlines of half the peninsula and Sicily before naming the area:

But Hellanicus of Lesbos says that when Hercules was driving Geryon's cattle to Argos and was come to Italy, a calf escaped from the herd and in its flight wandered the whole length of the coast and then, swimming across the intervening strait of the sea, came into Sicily. Hercules, following the calf, inquired of the inhabitants wherever he came if anyone had seen it anywhere, and when the people of the island, who understood but little Greek and used their own speech when indicating the animal, called it vitulus (the name by which it is still known), he, in memory of the calf, called all the country it had wandered over Vitulia. And it is no wonder that the name has been changed in the course of time to its present form, since many Greek names, too, have met with a similar fate. But whether, as Antiochus says, the country took this name from a ruler, which perhaps is more probable, or, as Hellanicus believes, from the bull, yet this at least is evident from both their accounts, that in Hercules' time, or a little earlier, it received this name. Before that it had been called Hesperia and Ausonia by the Greeks and Saturnia by the natives, as I have already stated.

Writing in the first century BC, in a section of the De res rustica devoted to cattle, Marcus Terentius Varro left out King Italus and instead offered an exclusively bovine list of possible etymological origins for the peninsula’s name:

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9 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities 1.11-13.

10 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities 1.35 (Loeb translation).
for the cow should be in the highest esteem among cattle, and especially in Italy, which is supposed to have derived its name from the word for oxen. For the ancient Greeks, according to Timaeus, called bulls *itali*, and the name Italy was bestowed because of the number and beauty of its cattle, and the great number of calves. Others say it is so named from the fact that Hercules chased hither from Sicily a noble bull which was called *italus*.¹¹

In the first century AD, Strabo agreed with Dionysius of Halicarnassus that King Italus probably determined the name “Italia,” but Strabo also provided insight into one of the terms only mentioned by Dionysius, “Ausonia.” That word, Greek in origin, referred to the Ausones as a people who occupied territory in southern Latium and northern Campania when Greek colonists first arrived there.¹² The term “Ausonia” originally referred to that specific area. Yet, Virgil, writing around the same time as Strabo used “Ausonia” interchangeably with “Italian” throughout Book XII of the *Aeneid*. Centuries later, Italian poets including Dante used the term to evoke primordial, pre-Roman Italy.

Just as its semantic origins were and are unclear, so, too, was the geographical scope of Italia unfixed and elastic in ancient writings before the second century BC. In the mid-fifth century, “Italia” referred to the southernmost area of the peninsula, the tip of the “toe,” but by about 450 it included the area inhabited by the Bruttii (that is, slightly more inland and to the north), and by around 400, Thucydides referred to Lucania, near modern Potenza in northern Basilicata, as part of Italy throughout his history.

By the time Polybius wrote his *Histories* (c. 140 BC), “Italia” referred, in a geographical sense, to the whole peninsula up to the Alps. In a legal sense, though, for another century at least, the Romans considered Italia’s geographical boundary to extend only as far north as the Rubicon river, beyond which lay the province of Cisalpine Gaul.

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¹¹ Varro *De re rustica* 3.5 (Loeb translation).

¹² Strabo, *Geography* V.4.3.
This was the case when Julius Caesar crossed the river in 49 BC, bringing his army into Rome’s Italian heartland. Less than a decade later, in 42 BC, Augustus incorporated Cisalpine Gaul into Italia.

While seemingly a coherent geographical entity—a peninsula bordered on three sides by sea and on the fourth by a mountain chain—Italy proved difficult to represent. For his part, Polybius thought that it was shaped like a sharp triangle.\(^\text{13}\) About a century later, Strabo corrected his predecessor’s assertion regarding Italy’s shape, while also acknowledging that Polybius’ mistake was somewhat understandable given the awkward shape of the Apennine peninsula.\(^\text{14}\)

Besides helping to crystallize the geographical contours of Italy, Strabo also delineated the importance of the name “Italia” and, in particular, the historical and political values it held for the Romans who had conquered the peninsula. He notes how, first, the area that Italia described grew,

for the ancients used to call only Oenotria Italy, although it extended from the Strait of Sicily only as far as the Gulfs of Tarentum and Poseidonia, but the name of Italy prevailed and advanced even as far as the foothills of the Alps, and also took in, not only those parts of Ligustica which extend from the boundaries of Tyrrhenia as far as the Varus River and the sea there, but also those parts of Istria which extend as far as Pola. One might guess that it was because of their prosperity that the people who were the first to be named Italians imparted the name to the neighboring peoples,

\(^{13}\) Polybius Histories 2.14 (Loeb translation): “Italy as a whole has the shape of a triangle of which the one or eastern side is bounded by the Ionian Strait and then continuously by the Adriatic Gulf, the next side, that turned to the south and west, by the Sicilian and Tyrrenhenian Seas. The apex of the triangle, formed by the meeting of these two sides, is the southernmost cape of Italy known as Cocynthus and separating the Ionian Strait from the Sicilian Sea. The remaining or northern and inland side of the triangle is bounded continuously by the chain of the Alps.”

\(^{14}\) Strabo Geography 5.1.2 (Loeb translation): “Now it is not easy geometrically to outline what is now Italy, as a whole, by means of a single figure, and yet they say it is a triangular promontory extending towards the south and the winter-risings of the sun, with its vertex at the Strait of Sicily, and with the Alps as its base…the description given by these writers, it is inadequate…one might call the figure "four-sided" rather than "three-sided," but in no sense whatever a "triangle," except by an abuse of the term. It is better, however, to confess that the representation of non-geometrical figures is not easy to describe.”
and then received further increments in this way until the time of the Roman conquest.\textsuperscript{15}

Then, after Roman hegemony extended throughout the peninsula from bottom to top, Rome appropriated the word \textit{Italia} as well as the right to redefine its constituent parts:

At some late time or other after the Romans had shared with the Italiotes the equality of civil rights, they decided to allow the same honour both to the Cisalpine Galatae and to the Heneti, and to call all of them Italiotes as well as Romans, and, further, to send forth many colonies amongst them, some earlier and some later, than which it is not easy to call any other set of colonies better.\textsuperscript{16}

In Strabo’s description, the familiar, modern contours of Italy begin to emerge. From his perspective, Italy was composed of a diverse mixture of peoples, and at times, Strabo also refers to interactions between two agents: on the one hand, Rome and, on the other, Italia.

Such, indeed, is the size and such the character of Italy. And while I have already mentioned many things which have caused the Romans at the present time to be exalted to so great a height, I shall now indicate the most important things [Italy isolated like an island; its position relative to the Alps]...Its length extends from north to south, generally speaking, and Sicily counts as an addition to its length, already so great...Further, since it lies intermediate between the largest races on the one hand, and Greece and the best parts of Libya on the other, it not only is naturally well-suited to hegemony, because it surpasses the countries that surround it both in the valor of its people and in size, but also can easily avail itself of their services, because it is close to them... I must add to my account of Italy a summary account also of the Romans who took possession of it and equipped it as a base of operations for the universal hegemony...As for Italy itself, though it has often been torn by factions, at least since it has been under the Romans, and as for Rome itself, they have been prevented by the excellence of their form of government and of their rulers from proceeding too far in the ways of error and corruption. But it were a difficult thing to administer so great a dominion otherwise than by turning it over to one man, as to a father.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15} Strabo \textit{Geography} 5.1.1.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 5.1.1.

\textsuperscript{17} Strabo \textit{Geography} VI.4.1-2.
Italy is here presented as a sort of historical actor whose agricultural abundance and geographical position (among other advantages) assist Rome in its imperial expansion. Thus, the peninsula appears as a unitary entity only in reference to its relationship to Rome, playing the role of a dependent and represented metaphorically in Strabo’s terms as the son to the father.

From Allies to Citizens

Emilio Gabba has recently noted how, in the decades following the war with Hannibal, the Roman perception of Italia began to crystallize in some new ways. Hannibal’s invasion and presence on the peninsula forced both Romans and their Italian allies to reflect on the nature of their relationship. Many of the Italian communities once allied with Rome defected to Hannibal’s side. Even before the war’s conclusion, Rome undertook swift and exacting measures against the defecting communities. In this context, we can see why many Romans—and Polybius—viewed Italia as a proprietary political space held together only by Roman military and political superiority. As Gabba points out, “the fact that from the second century BC onwards an ideology of Italy was emerging and developing, an ideology that was to reach its peak in the age of Augustus, does not mean either that Roman policy was directed towards forming any kind of Italian unity or that this was ever actually achieved in ancient times.”

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19 Gabba, “Rome and Italy in Second-Century BC,” 210, which also speaks to the difficulty of understanding ancient Italia independent of any modern notions of the nation.
For Romans in the period of the Second Punic War, in fact, *Italia* and *Italians* might have been useful shorthands for a geographical area and for the constellation of tribes and settlements that inhabited that area. Practically, however, Rome dealt with each Italian community on an individual basis, a policy that explicitly prevented communities from brokering arrangements among themselves and independent of Rome. Before the waves of defections during the war with Hannibal, the Romans had effectively used citizenship as a reward for members of Italian communities that had proved loyal and had provided troops when called upon to do so. After Hannibal, though, Rome became less generous with the dispensation of citizenship status, to the frustration of its Italian allies, who continued to contribute large segments of their male populations to Roman armies.

The issue of Roman citizenship in ancient Italy poses something of an interpretive problem for modern observers, especially regarding the question of Italian identity. The most glaring obstacle is the lack of surviving writings from the perspectives of non-Roman Italians. The dominant Roman narrative is the only surviving one, leaving modern historians divided over issues such as the Social War: was it indeed a war fought by Italian communities desperate to become “Roman” as Roman historians portrayed it, or was it more of a fight for independence from Roman rule or for a power-sharing scenario between the allies and Rome as some modern historians have suggested? In any case, from studying the evolving legal designations it is difficult to deduce any substantial sense of Italian peoples’ self-perceptions or the extent to which they thought of themselves more or less in terms of their Roman, tribal, or Italian identities. There are, though, some ways in which Rome’s granting of citizenship to the Italian communities
sheds light on the changes that occurred in ancient Roman perceptions of Italia and in Roman identity itself as it related to Italia.

Most modern scholars consider Rome’s victory over Hannibal and his Italian allies as the moment in which Rome’s hegemony over the Apennine Peninsula was confirmed. Before that war, and after it, Italian communities were bound to Rome by individually construed agreements that hinged most crucially on contributions of men to the Roman army. In this way, by the early 100s BC, the Italian tribes and cities were linked not with one another but on an individual basis through Rome—so any early concept of Italy would only have existed from a Roman perspective and, even then, only in terms of a loose conglomeration of communities.20

By 91 BC many Italian communities felt that the ever-increasing burden of providing troops for the defense of the Roman state merited legal incorporation—or, perhaps, as some modern historians including Mouritsen argue, independence.21 Ever since the Second Punic War, the Roman state had been reluctant to grant Italian communities citizenship. When the Social War broke out (from socius, ally), “Italia” became a rallying point in the rebels’ rhetoric. It featured on a coin minted by the allies (see fig. 2), which depicted a bull pouncing on and devouring a wolf, the symbol of Rome. It is unclear if the bull was an ancient symbol of Italia or one created for that

20 In the words of Gabba, “Rome and Italy in Second-Century BC,” 210: “From Rome’s point of view, this concept of Italy is linked with the complex of political and military relations with her allies, the socii italic i. It is only in relation to the predominant partner, that is to say Rome, that they are seen as a group and thus bear this title. Naturally this did not involve any desire on the part of Rome to standardize the position of her Italian allies on a political, legal or administrative plane; even less did it foreshadow the conscious creation of a national Romano Italian state.”

21 Again, Gabba, “Rome and Italy in Second-Century BC,” 243: “The sacrifices made by the Italians in the creation of that empire had been far greater than those of the Romans themselves; as Velleuuius was to say, they had borne arms in defence and could no longer be excluded and despised as foreigners.”

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occasion, although in the decades following the war Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Varro, and Strabo would all cite archaic references to Italia as *Vitalia*, or, “cattle-country.”

During the Social War, the Italian allies also renamed their capital city, which had been called Corfinium, Italica. Another coin (see fig. 3) minted by the allies depicts eight armed men swearing an oath and is labeled “Italia.” By this point in Roman history, some members of the communities of Italy began to develop the iconography and terminology of a separate identity, even if that identity was defined primarily—and only temporarily—in opposition to Rome.

The importance of the idea of Italia in the context of the Social War is not completely clear. We know it was a part of the Romans’ political rhetoric as a term to describe the peninsular tribes, but the extent to which the term resonated among the allies is not clear, except for the evidence provided by the coins and the renaming of Corfinium. Two centuries earlier, in 295 BC, Etruscans, Umbrians, and Samnites had joined together to (unsuccessfully) attempt to check Roman expansion in at the massive battle of Sentinum. It may be possible that “Italia” took on meaning among the earlier peninsular tribes in response to the common Roman threat, but there is no surviving evidence to support such an interpretation. It is equally possible that the “Italia” rhetoric of the allies during the Social War was adopted, ironically, from Roman discourse. None of this means, however, that this cooperation between some Italian communities served to

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22 See above in this chapter.

23 Strabo *Geography* V.4.2.
collapse the wide range of cultural, linguistic, and even religious distinctions that marked first-century BC peninsular peoples.²⁴

The Romans suppressed the rebellion, but it was a hard-fought conflict that lingered in Rome’s collective memory for the next two generations at least. through the civil wars. Within five years of the outbreak of the conflict, most of the inhabitants of the central and southern peninsula were granted citizenship anyway, although the extent to which this marked a turning point in the process of Romanization—speeding up the cultural homogenization of the Italians—or a mere legal change through which local cultural dynamics persisted remains a point of debate among modern historians. Some years later, in 81 BC, Sulla extended the citizenship boundary further north to the rivers Arno and Rubicon.

Following the Social War, “Italia” appears in Roman literature and political writings in a relatively uncomfortable and self-conscious mode; Roman writers had to balance memories of a brutal conflict with the new realities of incorporation. Emma Dench alludes to this phenomenon when she points to the “difficulty of incorporating Italy after the Social War: Italy was actively having to be written into Roman histories.”²⁵ Efforts were also made on the part of Rome to represent Rome and Italia as separate but cooperative entities. A coin (see fig. 4) probably minted around 70 BC, less than two decades after the Social War, and labels Italia and Roma shaking hands: Italia holds a cornucopia representing her abundance, while Roma is heavily armed, her foot resting on

²⁴ Crawford, “Rome and Italy,” 414-415 explains some aspects of the “variegated picture” of the Italian allies.

²⁵ Dench, Romulus’ Asylum, 23.
Figure 1. *Italia riunita*, 1870. Source: www.cronologia.leonardo.it.

Figure 2. A coin minted by the allies during the Social War depicting the bull of Italia attacking the wolf of Rome. The coin is at the British Museum. Images of it and information about it can be found at www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/cm/s/silver_denarii_of_the_roman_so.aspx.
Figure 3. Allies during the Social War swearing an oath. Source: www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/cm/s/silver_denarii_of_the_roman_so.aspx.

Figure 4. Italia and Roma shaking hands. Issued by Q. Fufius Calenus and P. Mucius Cordus. An image of the coin can be found at http://www.aeqvitas.com/tntest/tn_barr.jpg.
top of a globe. The image imparts the vision of two distinct entities at peace precisely because of the power and dominance of Rome.

Viewing Italia through the lens of Rome became the dominant mode of representation in surviving writings (which, are, of course, mostly from a Roman perspective). Ancient interpreters of the idea of Italia left an enduring mark on its meaning and a Rome-centered view of Italy has persisted far beyond the classical period. Strong echoes of a dependent, bifurcated relationship were sounded centuries after the Social War, at the New Year’s eve ceremony of 1870, which sought to confirm modern Italian unity through the memory of ancient Roman domination of the peninsula.

**Tota Italia**

After the Social War, Italy was increasingly incorporated into Roman political rhetoric in both exclusionary and inclusionary ways. Surviving sources from the late republic and Augustan periods include a recurring phrase, *tota Italia*, all Italy. The phrase indicates the contemporary relevance of the idea of a coherent Italia. Underscoring this point is the fact that *tota Italia* appears frequently in political rhetoric. For example, in the *Commentariolum petitionis*, Cicero’s brother advised the would-be consul to

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26 See Dench, 188.

27 Mario Torelli uses this phrase as representative of the Italian-wide consensus supposedly achieved by Augustus’ regime and as the starting point for his essays on the formation of Roman Italy, see Torelli, *Tota Italia*, 1-4. Andrea Giardina, *L’Italia romana: storie di un’identità incompiuta* (Rome: Laterza, 1997), 71-74, interprets Augustus’ “celebration” of *tota Italia* as an “aporia that emerges above all out of the variety of modes in which writers of that time understood the relationship between *italicità*, *romanità*, and Trojan origins” (74, translation mine).
envison Italia as an undivided political unit, urging him to “comprehend in your mind and memory the whole of Italy [totam Italiam].”

Looking back on the early years of his rule in his Res gestae (c. 10 AD), Augustus declared that, “tota Italia swore allegiance to me.” The details of that oath—who exactly it involved, whether or not it was compulsory, and how it took place—are unclear, although we do know that it took place around the end of 33 BC, when the triumvirate between Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus dissolved and Octavian needed to secure the loyalty of Roman citizens in Italy for himself rather than his opponent, Antony. Reflecting on that event decades later, Augustus projected pride in having received the respect of tota Italia, which was a theme that he may have adopted after reading Julius Caesar’s (his posthumously adoptive father) de Bello Civili (c. 48 BC), in which Caesar repeatedly portrays tota Italia according him respect just after his crossing of the Rubicon.

During his reign, Augustus divided the peninsula into eleven official regions. There were few tangible effects of that reorganization, in part a reflection of the fact that the Romans did not assign regional or provincial governors in Italy. Thus, a century after the Social War, Augustus exerted a particular effort to include as part of his legacy the union of Italy and Rome under his leadership.

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28 Quintus Cicero, Commentariolum petitionis 8.


31 Cooley, Res gestae, 216 notes this connection. See Caesar, de Bello Civili, I.9.4 and I.35.1, for example.

32 Dench, Romulus’ Asylum, 200-1, mentions the minimal practical impact of the reorganization, but makes an exception for Pliny the Elder’s use of Augustus’ divisions of the peninsula as an organizing frame for his Natural History.
*Tota Italia* appeared most often in public political texts and generally in connection with some sort of moral theme; the phrase encompassed an extension of Roman values and political life.\(^{33}\) *Tota Italia* seems to have been more a device of persuasive rhetoric—an indication of Roman ideals and hopes that indirectly involved the peninsula—than proof that certain Roman writers actually thought of Italia and Rome as an integrated, unified entity.

In 44–43 BC, in the *Philippics*, Cicero used *tota Italia* as a vehicle of inspiration:

> will you not rather, now that the opportunity is offered to you, now that you have generals ready, and the minds of the soldiers eager for the service, and all the Roman people unanimous; and all Italy excited with the desire to recover its liberty,—will you not, I say, avail yourself of the kindness of the immortal gods?\(^{34}\)

He also employed the term as an amplification and confirmation of the moral justification of Octavian’s fight against Antony: “but Caesar, though many years younger, armed veterans who were now eager to rest; he has embraced that cause which was most agreeable to the senate, to the people, to all Italy,—in short, to gods and men.”\(^{35}\)

For such rhetorical constructions to have had evocative effects, some sort of coherent and unified idea of Italia must have resonated with Romans of the first century. Yet, even so, there is little evidence to support the notion that anyone on the peninsula, Roman or otherwise, thought of themselves as “Italian.” Cicero captured some of the

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34 Cicero *Philippics* speech 3, 13.32.

35 Cicero, *Philippics* speech 5, 16.44.
tensions involved in identifying oneself as both Roman and from the Italian countryside in an imagined dialogue with his interlocutor Atticus.

A: but what did you really mean by the statement you made a while ago, that this place, by which I understand you to refer to Arpinum, is your own fatherland? Have you then two fatherlands? Or is our common fatherland the only one? Perhaps you think that the wise Cato’s fatherland was not Rome but Tusculum? M: Surely I think that he and all natives of Italian towns have two fatherlands, one by nature and the other by citizenship. Cato, for example, though born in Tusculum, received citizenship in Rome, and so, as he was a Tusculan by birth and a Roman by citizenship, had one fatherland which was the place of his birth, and another by law…so we consider both the place where we were born our fatherland, and also the city into which we have been adopted. But that fatherland must stand first in our affection in which the name of republic signifies the common citizenship of all of us. For her it is our duty to die, to her to give ourselves entirely, to place on her altar, and, as it were, to dedicate to her service, all that we posses. But the fatherland which was our parent is not much less dear to us than the one which adopted us. Thus I shall never deny that my fatherland is here, though my other fatherland is greater and included this one within it [and so every native of an Italian town] has [two] citizenships but thinks of them as one citizenship.36

Cicero makes plain the pull of local identities versus the Roman ones. Significantly, the category of “Italian” identity is not an option. Although the notion of an unified Italia may not have been clearly delineated or even really conceived, it did exist as a trope in Cicero’s and Augustus’ literary repertoires. The same can be said of Livy.

Writing Italia into the Roman Past

For Livy (59 BC-17 AD), Italia was an evocative yet ambiguous concept. Livy’s record of events after 167 BC is lost, so our understanding of his conception of Italia is necessarily incomplete. Writing in the late republic and principate, Livy was only a generation removed from the trauma of the Social War. Thus, in his history of Rome ab

36 Cicero, De legibus 2.5 (Loeb translation).
urbe condita—the historical work from that period that has had the most influential legacy—Italia appears as a crucial component of Roman power and even identity, but also represents a point of unresolved tension in Roman historical thought. This fundamental ambiguity shows itself particularly in Livy’s account of Hannibal’s invasion of the peninsula.

Hannibal’s eleven-year presence in Italy brought to the surface tensions between Rome and her peninsular allies, as many communities defected to Hannibal in the hopes of gaining greater autonomy. One of the wealthier cities to secede was Capua, in Campania, which agreed to terms with Hannibal shortly after his massive victory over the Romans at the battle of Cannae in 216 BC. Just before their secession, Capuan ambassadors visited one of the Roman consuls, Varro, who, in words formulated by Livy, exhorted them to “remember the past,” in particular Rome’s assistance to their city both in adjudicating domestic disputes and in waging a long and difficult war against Capua’s enemy, the Samnites.37 Significantly, Varro also appeals to a sort of shared identity between the Romans and the Capuans based on citizenship:

> remember too that when you submitted we granted you just terms, allowed you to keep your own laws, and finally—this before the disaster at Cannae, was assuredly the greatest privilege—gave many of you a share in Roman citizenship. In consequence, men of Campania, you ought to feel that you have a share in the calamity which has befallen us; that it is your country as well as ours which calls for protection.38

But even if none of the Capuans felt invested in the survival or success of the Roman state, then, argued Varro, they should at least see the necessity of preventing an African

37 Livy ab urbe condita XXII.5 (Penguin translation).
38 Livy ab urbe condita XXII.5 (Penguin translation).
from ruling over Italic peoples. In this way, Livy provided an early example of a shared, even if merely rhetorical, Italian identity that was defined primarily in contrast to that of an invading barbarian. Varro continued:

It is not with Samnites or Etruscans we are dealing now, so that power lost by us might yet remain in Italy; our enemy is the Carthaginian, and he drags behind him a barbarous soldiery—not natives even of Africa, but savages from the world’s end, from the Straits of Ocean and the Pillars of Hercules, who know nothing of civilization under law and can hardly even speak like human beings. These creatures, by nature and habit cruel and bestial enough, their leader has himself yet further brutalized by his building of bridges and embankments out of corpses and by teaching them—can I say without a shudder?—to eat human flesh. To see them here—fed fat with unspeakable meat, monsters it would be impious even to touch—to have them as our masters, to look for our laws to Africa and Carthage, to let Italy be a province of Numidians and Moors: is there anyone born, if nothing else, in Italy to whom this would not be an abomination?

The contrast between, on the one hand, civilized Italians and, on the other, savage barbarian invaders would be made time and again in the subsequent centuries. Livy credited the consul’s speech with little persuasive power; having heard what Varro had to say, the Capuan representatives left his tent and immediately began to plot their defection to Hannibal. All Varro’s talk about preserving Italian power on the peninsula prompted the Capuans to think about increasing their own influence there; they even considered the prospect of replacing Rome as the dominant force. In fact, Varro’s invocations of Italia made the Capuans believe “that the Roman name had ceased to exist.”

Livy’s version of the Capuan defection reveals the rhetorical potential—even from a Roman perspective—of the idea of Italia. But, more practically, it also suggests that that idea contained little effective meaning: the Capuans saw through Varro’s

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39 Livy ab urbe condita XXII.5 (Penguin translation).
40 Livy ab urbe condita XXII.6 (Penguin translation).
rhetorical strategy, and in the end, Livy makes plain that Rome and its Italian allies were, at least in that historical moment, no integrated whole.

Following the decades of civil wars, however, beginning with Augustus’ principate, discourses begin to emerge in Roman writings that emphasize the interconnections of Rome and Italy. Several decades of civil war had wrecked havoc on the Italian countryside and its male populations, the relative peace of principate brought with it new attempts to present Italy and Rome as existing naturally for each other’s benefit.

In the *Aeneid*, Virgil (70-19 BC) suggests that since Rome’s beginning a symbiotic relationship between the city and Italy was intended. Book XII of the *Aeneid* contains the climactic battle between, on one side, Aeneas’ Trojans and, on the other, the Latins, who, in holding out against the invaders, claim to keep “Italian hopes within our town.”

41 The battle is not simply a contest between two distinct peoples—the fight is laden with foreshadowing of a long-term cooperation between the short-term enemies. Aeneas in fact registers a sacred oath before the contest, promising that if

the day is ours,
   Conferred by divine Victory, as I think—
   And may the gods confirm it by their will—
I shall not make Italians underlings
   To Trojans. For myself I ask no kingdom.
   Let both nations, both unconquered, both
   Subject to equal laws, commit themselves to an eternal union.

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In Virgil’s foreshadowing of a history that for him and his readers had already taken place, he sets aside the tensions of the Social War and suggests instead a historical

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41 Virgil *Aeneid* XII.49 (Robert Fitzgerald translation).

42 Virgil *Aeneid* XII.252-259 (Robert Fitzgerald translation).
relationship between Romans and Italians based on cooperation and a sort of nominal egalitarianism.

Virgil goes further to suggest that this supposed mutual respect and cooperation between Romans and Italians was not only historically manifested but also divinely ordained. The gods were keeping a close eye on that final battle. Juno, who had supported the Latins, acknowledges to Jupiter the inevitability of a Trojan victory, but beseesches “the author of men and of the world” for one particular concession:

By fate I beg for Latium, for the future
Greatness of your kin: when presently
They crown peace with a happy wedding day—
So let it be—and merge their laws and treaties,
Never command the land’s own Latin folk
To change their old name, to become new Trojans,
Known as Teucrians; never make them alter
Dialect or dress. Let Latium be.
Let there be Alban kings for generations,
And let Italian valor be the strength
Of Rome in after times. Once and for all
Troy fell, and with her name let her lie fallen.43

Jupiter agrees to maintain the indigenous “Ausonian” culture:

Rituals and observances of theirs
I’ll add, but make them Latin, one in speech.
The race to come, mixed with Ausonian blood,
Will outdo men and gods in its devotion,
You shall see—and no nation on earth
Will honor and worship you so faithfully.44

In this way, for Virgil, Roman and Italian identities were separate but also interdependent.

43 Virgil Aenied XII. 1112-1123 (Robert Fitzgerald translation).
44 Virgil Aenied XII.1135-1140 (Robert Fitzgerald translation).
What is particularly striking about those passages is the fact that Virgil thought it important to invent an Italian identity—an idea as anachronistic in a fictitious primordial Roman past as in the late first century BC, when Virgil was writing. Thus, as with earlier authors including Livy, Virgil demonstrates both the evocative potential and the fundamental ambiguity and elasticity of the idea of Italia in the ancient Roman consciousness. Virgil in particular went out of his way to praise Italia and to underscore its special status not only within the Roman world, not only within Roman history, but within Roman identity itself.45

In the imperial period Italia was not an idea particularly crucial or evocative for historians. Tacitus had little interest in the republican period and concerned himself almost exclusively with the affairs of the Roman community. References to Italy do not abound, but they do appear. For example, when Germanicus, an influential general and, by dint of birth, a possible contender for the emperorship, is compelled to quiet a possible troop mutiny in Gaul (following the death of Augustus and ascension of Tiberius). He reminds his soldiers, according to Tacitus, to appreciate the relative calm of the empire, in particular, “the unity of Italy, the loyalty of Gaul, and the absence of turbulence and discord.”46

45 For an elaboration on Virgil’s reformulations of Roman-Italian identity, see Katharine Toll, “Making Roman-Ness and the "Aeneid," Classical Antiquity, Vol. 16, No. 1 (April, 1997): 42: “the task of embedding the poem in the extra-literary project of deliberating about Roman Italian identity is this: Rome already had a founding-father story, but it did not apply to Italians. With Aeneas, the Aeneid could make a bid, not to replace Romulus, but to adopt and at the same time to supersede him. Aeneas is made to function as ancestor to an entity greater than Rome, an entity inclusive of Rome and indeed often focused upon it, but more extensive and congruous.”

46 Cornelius Tacitus Annals I.34: Italiae inde consensum, Galliarum fidem extollit; nil usquam turbidum aut discors.
Laudes Italiae

The lingering political tensions from the Social War and successive civil wars faded from Roman discourses about Italia during the imperial period. Italia was the subject of one of Trajan’s (98-117 AD) key domestic initiatives, the *alimenta* (begun on a smaller scale by his predecessor, Nerva). Those were complicated financial schemes involving low-interest loans by the emperor to land-holders on the peninsula. The interest generated was then distributed to poor Italian children.\(^{47}\) The purpose of the *alimenta* is not completely clear. What is clear is that Trajan used the program as an opportunity to project an image of his emperorship as one beneficial to Italia specifically. To that end he issued a series of coins with the inscription, ITAL REST, *Italia restituta*, or, Italy restored. Various versions included an image of Trajan raising up a kneeling goddess representing Italy and accompanied by two children and another depicts Trajan on the facing side and, on the obverse, the goddess of abundance distributing bread to children (fig. 5) above the title ITAL ALIM, Italia *alimenta*.\(^{48}\)

The most conspicuous way Roman imperial writers invoked Italia was as the subject of elaborate praise. A coin (see fig. 6) from the mid-second century depicts Italia holding a cornucopia and a scepter, seated on a globe.\(^ {49}\) This image is indicative of Italia’s place in Roman writings from the imperial period, which portrayed the peninsula

\(^{47}\) Most of the evidence for the *alimenta* is archeological. See John Patterson, “Crisis: What Crisis? Rural Change and Urban Development in Imperial Apennine Italy.” *Papers of the British School at Rome* Vol. 55 (1987), 122-133.


\(^{49}\) The obverse depicts Antonius Pius, who issued the coin, 140-143 AD.
as a particularly important area—Rome’s heartland—and celebrated its natural abundance.
Figure 5. Trajan’s *Alimenta*. Source: tjbuggey.ancients.info/trajden2.html

Figure 6. Italia with cornucopia and seated on globe. Source: www.beastcoins.com/RomanImperial/III/AntoninusPius/AntoninusPius.htm.
The theme of *laudes Italiae*,\(^5^0\) praises of Italy, had earlier roots in the late republic in writings such as Varro’s *De re rustica* (c. 35 BC). That work, which addresses major agricultural concerns and was ostensibly written for his wife, opens with a dialogue in the temple of Tellus (the goddess of earth). The interlocutors, “examining a map of Italy painted on the wall,”\(^5^1\) begin to list distinctive products from the various regions of Italy, all in superlative terms: "You have all travelled through many lands; have you seen any land more fully cultivated than Italy?"\(^5^2\) They mention the peninsula’s ideal position on the globe relative to the sun and ask, “what useful product is there which not only does not grow in Italy, but even grow to perfection?” They also cite previous sources of such praise: “does not Marcus Cato use this language in his *Origines*?"\(^5^3\) The interlocutors contemplating a whole picture of Italy mostly speak about it in regional terms. Emma Dench has commented about how, in that dialogue, “the best spelt comes from Campania, the best wheat from Apulia, the best wine from Falernum, the best oil from Venafrum…[thus] Varro’s Italia is an organic whole…an ordered composite with variegated parts.”\(^5^4\) Beginning in the late republic and continuing into the imperial period, Romans increasingly defined Italia, but only in the sense that Roman writers became

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\(^5^0\) On *laudes Italiae* see Giardina, “L’Italia romana,” 31-47.

\(^5^1\) Varro *De re rustica* I.1-2 (Loeb translation).

\(^5^2\) Varro *De re rustica* I.1.3 (Loeb translation).

\(^5^3\) Varro *De re rustica* I.1.3 (Loeb translation). The *Origines* only survive in fragments, but were originally descriptions of Italian regions as far north as Liguria and the Venetic regions and including all southern Italy. In fact, books II and III of Cato’s work dealt with the origins of Italian tribes and cities in such a way that, according to Gabba, “Italian history received particular attention, not in contrast to Roman history, but as part of it,” Gabba, “Italy and Rome in the Second-Century BC,” 210.

\(^5^4\) Dench, *Romulus’ Asylum*, 191.
increasingly sensitive to its variations and represented those variations as Italia’s defining feature.

Behind imperial period writers’ praise of Italia is a fundamental ambiguity about the concept’s meaning. While Italia might have occupied a special space in the Roman worldview, its nature remained somewhat elusive. It was an entity that was far easier to represent as a conglomeration of regional pieces than as a unitary whole. In the instances in which it was written about as a single entity, its dynamic with Rome remained equivocal at best.

Perhaps the best example of the semantic tensions inherent in the idea of Italy for writers of the imperial period is Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* (c. 79). Pliny initially describes Italy in florid rhetoric but, also, in terms of some of the virtues usually associated with Rome, that is, *romanitas* and *humanitas*. In this way he perceived Italy as encompassing an extension of Roman values. In his words Italy was

the nursling and mother of all other lands. Italy was chosen by the divine inspiration of the gods to enhance the renown of heaven itself, to unite scattered empires, to make customs and manners more gentle and, by the sharing of a common language [Latin], to bring together the disparate, wild tongues of many nations, that is to give mankind civilization. To put it succinctly, Italy was to become the sole parent of all races throughout the world.  

Emma Dench has noted a shift between Pliny’s description of Italy and Cicero’s earlier reflections on his multiple identities—that is, Rome and his birthplace, Arpinum. Cicero saw a tension between his local identity and a larger Roman one, but all within an Italian

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55 Pliny the Elder *Natural History* III.6, 43-4 (Penguin translation). The rest of the passage goes on to praise Italy’s natural beauty: “But what am I to do? Who could even hint at the great distinction of all its places? The great fame of individual items and of its inhabitants holds me spellbound. How am I to describe the coast of Campania, a fertile region so blessed with pleasant scenery that it was manifestly the work of Nature in a happy mood?”
context. A century later, Pliny presents, in Dench’s words, “an Italy that encapsulates the essence of Rome, that is simultaneously a symbol of unity and variegation, of the reception of plural culture and the projection of a more monolithic civilization on the vastness of empire.” In other words, even with its internal diversity, Italy represented a model for the rest of the Roman world of what it meant to be Roman. We might suppose that as Rome integrated increasingly far-flung provinces, Italian identity was perhaps seen more and more as an extension of Roman identity, though certainly not as analogous to it.

Even if Italian and Roman identities were growing closer together during the imperial period, that does not necessarily mean that the idea of Italy was somehow becoming more clear or coherent in Roman thought. In fact, the theme of laudes Italiae by its nature avoided detailed or critical inquiry. Pliny employs laudatory phrases to introduce Italy as a subject within his larger work. Once he delves into actual descriptive passages, he never really addresses the idea of Italia per se, at least not in any sustained, unitary manner. Rather, Pliny follows the regional divisions of Augustus and analyzes the antiquarian origins and natural features of different areas of the peninsula as distinct entities.

By this point in the imperial period, Italia’s presence in literature, characterized by lavish praise, would seem to indicate that the memories of past conflicts between Rome and the Italian tribes had faded enough that Italia was now a relatively safe concept, no longer evoking images of Roman conquest as much as images of verdant plains and a temperate climate. Writing in the early second century, Pliny the Younger reflected how many Romans by that time conceived Italy in a positive light and as

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56 Dench, Romulus’ Asylum, 157.
interconnected with Roman identity. Complaining of rising real estate prices, Pliny in part blames one of Trajan’s new imperial policies requiring non-Italian senators to invest at least one third of their capital in Italian property. He thought “it unseemly (as indeed it was) that candidates for office should treat Rome and Italy not as their native country [patriam], but as a mere inn or lodging-house for them on their visits.”⁵⁷ Although Pliny maintains the distinction between Rome and Italy as separate entities, he references their combined land as a single patria, revealing the intimacy of the two ideas in Roman perceptions during that period.

If we scan the body of ancient texts and authors that particularly influenced Italian Renaissance thinkers, there seems to be scant evidence that would indicate that the ancient inhabitants of the peninsula possessed any clear-cut, unitary sense of Italia, and almost nothing that suggests that they thought of themselves as Italian.⁵⁸ Despite the evocative ways that some Roman writers used the idea of Italia in political rhetoric and in laudatory descriptions, a comprehensive sense of Italia or of italianità never really emerged within the texts that were subsequently passed down to later generations of Italians.

However, one wonders whether we should even look for signs that the ancient Romans appreciated Italia as a unitary concept—why, after all, should they have?

Without our ingrained nation-state paradigm, the ancient Romans did not necessarily put

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⁵⁷ Pliny the Younger Letters VI.19 (Penguin translation).

⁵⁸ A potential modification of that statement should be noted—Gabba, “Rome and Italy in the Second-Century BC,” 224 makes a case that, especially before 90 BC, many Southern Italian merchants directed their commercial activities Eastward, often traveling there, with the result that in places like Greece they together with Romans were all referred to as Rhomaioi, “thus confirming the theory that the first signs of unity among inhabitants of the peninsula appeared abroad.” Even if that was the case, however, such unity was not likely shared among those Southern Italians and Romans, nor did they refer to themselves using any sort of inclusive label.
the same premium on the coherence and coincidence of geographical, political, and cultural spaces as we do. And it is clear that ancient Roman writers, at least by the imperial period, appreciated Italia as a distinct, if not easily reducible, entity that was characterized by its internal diversity. Livy, Virgil, Varro, and Pliny, among others, contributed to the formation of a discursive space called Italia within which they negotiated fluid notions of Roman identity. If nothing else, the classical period bequeathed that discursive space to subsequent generations of writers, especially to the classically attuned historians of the Renaissance.

By the time of Augustus’ reign, Roman authority extended throughout the Mediterranean, and within that system, Italy clearly had a special status, not only politically and legally, but also in the minds of many of the writers whose work would form the classical Latin canon revered by Renaissance intellectuals. As far as those Renaissance thinkers knew then, and we know now from the surviving sources, there was no sense of being Italian in antiquity, but at the same time, already, the seemingly disparate peninsular regions had acquired a rhetoric that presented them as a unit with special, shared characteristics. The most special of those characteristics, its proximity—cultural as much as geographical—to Rome, was much discussed but never fully articulated.

Around 300 AD, the emperor Diocletian (284-305), brought about sweeping changes to the Roman world. He had inherited an empire under threat both from within (rebellious populations in Gaul and Asia Minor) and from without (serious incursions at numerous and far-flung edges of the empire). Diocletian looked to restructure Rome’s leadership and he created the Tetrarchy, which divided rule of the Roman world among
four men, two senior “Augusti” and, just below them, two “Caesars.” The Tetrarchs were mostly on the move, attempting to manage troubling flashpoints as they arouse. None of the four leaders had their headquarters in Rome and they appeared there only rarely.

After Diocletian, the city of Rome was more important as an evocative concept than as an actual political center (this remained the case until, at the earliest, the middle of the fifteenth century, when the papacy returned to Rome from Avignon). The status of Italy changed, too, as Diocletian’s reorganization of the empire into dioceses included Italy, which previously had never been governed in the same way as provinces outside of the peninsula. Perhaps to retain some nominal sense of the peninsula’s special status, the divisions there were called regiones rather than dioceses.59

The Peutinger Map—the only surviving map of the Roman world from antiquity—was most likely created during Diocletian’s reign.60 In a way, it represents the ancient Roman conception of Italia while also foreshadowing the changes, already underway, to the ideas of both Rome and Italia. The map represents the Roman world from Gibraltar to India, but its unknown cartographer wanted to place the city of Rome, imaginatively, at the center of that world, despite the fact that India is much further from the Italian peninsula than is southern Spain. To do this he elongated Italy, reshaping it so that it effectively occupies one-third of the map.61 The mapmaker’s particular concern to


60 Talbert, Rome’s World, 133-161.

61 The Peutinger map is narrow and long, like the Italian peninsula, which may have aided the cartographer’s decision to center Rome by stretching Italy. Talbert, Rome’s World, 91.
feature Rome in such an idealized, rather than geographically accurate, way seems to indicate the city’s status as primarily conceptual, and thus, malleable.62

Throughout antiquity, certain Romans, including historians, poets, political leaders, and the Peutinger mapmaker, redefined and reshaped Italia in numerous ways and often in the service of an idealized conception of Rome. Rome’s empire in the West collapsed about a century after Diocletian’s rule. In the centuries after that collapse, beginning most notably in the fourteenth century, Italian writers evoked Rome in the same general way that ancient Romans had evoked Italia. Dante, Petrarch, Machiavelli, among many others seized upon the idea of ancient Rome and reshaped it, often in the service of idealized conceptions of Italia and of Italian history.

In various senses, then, the idea of Italia has its origins in antiquity—as an ideal, malleable, rhetorical, and dependent on the political considerations of the moment. The next chapter examines some early Italian humanists—Dante, Petrarch, and Coluccio Salutati—whose writings invoked in varying ways the concept of libertas Italiae, the liberty of Italy, which could refer to the resistance of an external invader as well as a domineering internal threat.63 In their hands, libertas Italiae became a means of articulating new interpretations of peninsular history that supported their contemporary political ideologies. But none of those thirteenth and fourteenth century writers invented that term. It had been invoked earlier, particularly by medieval communes wary of

62 Talbert, Rome’s World, 150: “The central placement of Rome on the map asserts the city’s symbolic value in the eyes of the Tetrarchs. So, too, by extension, the symbolic importance of Italy, Rome’s heartland, is promoted by the generous amount of space it occupies on the map, while in reality under the Tetrarchy it, in turn, lost its privileged status and was divided into “regions” (regions).”

aggressive Holy Roman Emperors: by the Florentines in 1310 and before that by the Lombard League (an alliance of northern Italian communes not including Florence) in the late twelfth century. In fact, the term *libertas Italiae* far predates the Middle Ages.

The origins of the term and concept of *libertas Italiae* lay in antiquity, at least as far back as the late Roman republic. Then, as Ronald Syme has pointed out, politicians incessantly employed terms such as *libertas* and *consensus Italiae* (Cicero provides us with the many examples) in ways meant to discredit opponents or justify certain courses of action. Such phrases, in other words, lacked particular meaning but had rhetorical force. In a similar vein, other Roman writers from that period also referenced *libertas Italiae*. Caesar, for example, at the outset of his *De Bello Civili* tells Pompey’s envoys that, in delivering to their general Caesar’s message, they could yet prevent civil war and “liberate all Italy from fear” (*atque omnem Italiam metu liberare possint*). Some years later the unknown authors of the *De Bello Africo* attributed a similar phrase to Cato, who at Utica attempted to motivate Pompey’s son by reminding him of his father’s youthful decisiveness, in particular, his raising of an army to “liberate Rome and Italy” from Marius’ rule (*paene oppressam funditus et deletam Italiam urbemque Romanam in libertatem vindicavit*).

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66 Or, in Syme’s words, “phrases like… *consensus Italiae* were no peculiar monopoly of Cicero, no unique revelation of patriotism and political sagacity,” Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 153; Syme’s work was originally published in 1939.


68 Caesar, *De bello Africo*. 22.2.
Certainly the concerns of Caesar, Cicero, and Cato during the death throes of the Roman republic were more personal and Roman than Italian, but, still Italia was important enough to warrant inclusion in their political rhetoric as additional motivation or justification. Over a thousand years later, the situation was little changed as Florentines, Venetians, Milanese, and popes would invoke the notion of libertas Italiae, most often with more narrow, regional aims in mind. However important or unimportant the idea of Italia was for ancient Roman writers, it is clear that they invoked it as an ideal and that that ideal was ambiguous and suitable for a variety of political purposes.
Chapter Two

Libertas Italae in the Trecento

After Rome

After Rome’s collapse, the peninsula experienced about four hundred years of invasion, wreckage, and turmoil. Between Alaric’s sack of Rome in 410 and Charlemagne’s coronation in 800, the Italian peninsula was devastated. First came the Visigoths, and then the Huns. In 476, Odocar of the Rungian tribe deposed the last Roman emperor in the West. Thirteen years later, the Ostrogoth Theodoric invaded the peninsula and waged a brutal war against Odocar. Theodoric won, declared himself “King of Italy,” and presided over a period of relative calm. In 526, he died and in 530, the Eastern Emperor Justinian began his project to reclaim Italy and the Western provinces for the successors of the Roman Empire. In Italy the fighting was costly, long, and difficult, and so the fact that Justinian remained nonetheless committed to its success might suggest the particular importance of the peninsula even in sixth-century notions of the Roman Empire.

Byzantine troops ravaged the peninsula, from Sicily to Ravenna. By 541, most the peninsula was under their control, but the poorly paid troops continued to pillage and destroy. The Goths then counterpunched, leading to yet another round of terrible fighting. The Byzantines were ultimately victorious, but the empire had overreached and could no longer afford to maintain rule in the West. Another northern people, the Lombards, took advantage, and in the late 500s, their invasion brought yet another round of suffering to the inhabitants of the peninsula. That tribe integrated on a larger scale than any of the previous invaders, lending their name to the modern-day region around Milan.

Much later, in the Quattrocento, the study of the difficult centuries after Rome’s collapse spurred important constructions of Italian history. How historians in fifteenth century reflected back upon the so-called dark ages is an issue explored in Chapter Three of this dissertation. In the Trecento, though, writers tended to overlook those centuries just after Rome’s collapse, emphasizing instead the connection between their present and the classical past. This chapter focuses on three of those writers: Dante (1265-1321), Petrarch (1304-1374), and Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406). More than anyone else in the fourteenth century, these writers developed new and lasting interpretations of a common Italian past. They did this in part by reshaping some old themes, including libertas Italiae—the liberty of Italy (which was introduced at the conclusion of the preceding chapter)—and Italia misera, an idea and phrase not quite as ancient as libertas Italiae, but one that would be sounded much more often in fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Italia misera—miserable, wretched Italy—has its origins at least as far back as the Lombard invasions of the sixth century when the chronicler Paul the Deacon, writing about the often violent influx of northern peoples into southern Europe after Rome’s
collapse, noted that the ruined cities throughout the Mediterranean testified to the phenomenon, “but most of all in miserable Italy [miserae Italiae], which has felt the cruel rage of all these peoples.”

Like libertas Italiae, Italia misera never had a fixed meaning but was used by premodern peninsular historians variably as a lamentation, exhortation, or excoriation. Fourteenth-century writers employed that term with particular reference to the debilitating internecine warfare that plagued the peninsula and to the inability of the Italy’s cities to collectively resist foreign invaders. On a more specific level, though, Trecento writers had different perspectives on why Italia was so miserable. Petrarch and Salutati blamed foreign invaders while Dante blamed the Italians themselves. Although those writers did understand the Italian past to have been largely miserable, they often chose to focus on what they considered the exceptions. For Petrarch, for example, that meant focusing on the Italia of antiquity and that of his present.

Beginning with Dante and Petrarch, the most influential Italian writers of the late medieval/early Renaissance period, the idea of Italia was as equivocal as it was evocative. On the one hand, both assumed and celebrated a historical continuity between ancient Rome and contemporary Italy. But, on the other hand, both also registered bitter disappointment with the peninsula’s condition, torn apart by internal warfare and prey to external invaders. Coluccio Salutati employed the idea of Italia in ideological tracts addressed to other Italian communities and, in that way, helped disseminate a distinctively Florentine interpretation of Italian identity and history across the peninsula. Like Petrarch and Dante, Salutati’s interpretations of Italian history assumed a direct continuity between ancient Rome and contemporary Italy, although with different

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emphases. His constructions of Italia were important, too, for their imbedded and in many cases transparent, political aims, not the first or last time that the idea of Italia would gain new meanings through propaganda. Later, in the Quattrocento, the continuity between ancient Rome and contemporary Italy that undergirded Dante’s, Petrarch’s, and Salutati’s senses of peninsular history became a point of debate among humanists.

The Italies of Dante and Petrarch

Northern Italian communes invoked \textit{libertas Italiae} before Dante and Petrarch, but because those two writers cast such massive shadows on the historical thinkers of subsequent decades, they are a reasonable place to begin an analysis of Renaissance narratives of Italian history.\textsuperscript{3} Dante’s and Petrarch’s individual legacies for the idea of Italian history are not entirely different: both are ambivalent, in that each expresses a sense of Italia as a historically unique and religiously sacred space while also routinely besmirching that space as one looked after by fickle and violent leaders; and both revolve around the theme of a common ancient Roman legacy. However, the particularities of their thoughts on Italian history are important considerations here, because in the fifteenth century, the Dantean and Petrarchan models for Italian history became the subject of humanist debate, setting the stage for another round of thematic shifts in the early sixteenth century, during the \textit{calamità}, when the peninsula was overrun by foreign armies for over forty years.

Dante and Petrarch were well positioned to observe Italia from a perspective that transcended the local. Dante was born and raised in Florence, but a bitter split within the

\textsuperscript{3} For example in 1310, with the Holy Roman Emperor poised to cross the Alps, Florentine rhetoric emphasized not just the city’s \textit{libertas}, but that of all Italia. See Ronald Witt, \textit{Coluccio Salutati and his Public Letters} (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1976), 48.
city’s Guelph party led to his exile in 1301; he never returned. He spent the rest of his life roaming the peninsula, with extended stays in Verona and Ravenna, and it was during that time that he composed his more political and philosophical works, *Il Convivio* (1303-6), his most comprehensive consideration of political philosophy; *De vulgari eloquentia* (c. 1304), a treatise on the origins and value of the Italian vernacular; and *De monarchia* (c. 1317), an argument for universal monarchy. In those works, Dante emerges as a passionate supporter of the Holy Roman Empire—a controversial position in that it specifically argued against the autonomies of the communes in favor of rule by a foreign sovereign, which colored his constructions of Italia and Italian identity.

Petrarch was also a born Tuscan, spending his first nine years in Arezzo.\(^4\) Political disagreements between his father and the city’s leadership led the family to move first to Pisa and then to Avignon, France, where the papacy had relocated and where Petrarch lived until 1353. After that, he never returned to Provence, spending his last two decades in northern Italy, mostly in Padua, Milan, and Venice.

Petrarch hated Avignon, and that fact was crucial in the formation of his conceptions of Italy. His distaste for the French city was unequivocal: “the Avignon of former days was, to be sure, the worst of cities and the most abominable of its day. But the Avignon of today, indeed, can no longer be considered a city. . .in a word, it is now the sink of all iniquities and disgrace. . .the Hell of the living.”\(^5\) As an Italian, Petrarch bristled at the fact that the seat of the Church was there and not in Rome—in fact, the Avignon Papacy lasted from 1309 to 1378, beginning when Petrarch was five years old.

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and ending, with the papacy restored to Rome, four years after the poet’s death. As a man of faith, he was saddened by the general corruption he observed within the papal court. In any case, living in France, amid what he viewed as a kidnapped and properly Roman institution, compelled Petrarch to think and write about Italian identity, about a shared Roman and Italian history, and about the cultural contrasts between Italians and transalpine “barbarians,” which, in his mind, included the Avignonese.

On the surface, Dante and Petrarch seem to have posited similar views on Italian history and identity. First of all, they both saw the peninsula’s recent past as a continuation of a historical narrative centered around ancient Rome. Dante, for instance, tended to use “Latins” as a generic marker for both ancient Romans and contemporary Italians and, in the *De vulgari eloquentia*, a treatise on the origins and value of the Italian vernacular, “parlare italico” and “vulgare latium” refer generally to the Italian vernacular.⁶ Similar conflations of Roman and Italian abound in Petrarch’s poetry. In his *canzone* “Spirito gentil,” he laments a listless, sleepless Italy⁷ and then, a few lines later, affirms that “my Rome will once again be beautiful,” essentially overlapping ancient Rome and contemporary Italy.⁸ Most famously, in “Italia mia,” the poet makes plain that, to him, the “ancient valor is not yet dead in the hearts of the Italians.”⁹

Second of all, both also couched their more famous, poetic observations of contemporary Italy in a rhetoric of woe and misery. Dante’s most known comment comes

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⁷ *Rime*, LIII, 10-14: Che s’aspetti non so, né che s’agogni/Italia, che suoi guai non par che senta:/ vecchia, oziosa e lenta,/ dormirà sempre, e non fia chi la svegli?/ Le man l’avess’ io avvolto entro’ capegli!

⁸ Ibid., 42: Roma mia sarà ancor bella.

⁹ *Rime*, CXXVIII, 95-6: che l’antico valor/ ne l’italici cor non è ancor morto.
in canto VI of the *Purgatorio*, in which he cried out: “Oh, enslaved Italy, tavern of grief / rudderless ship in a great storm, / no mistress of provinces, but a bordello!”\textsuperscript{10} Both Dante and Petrarch called Italy the *bel paese*\textsuperscript{11} but also personified her as a disheveled old woman.\textsuperscript{12} In the opening lines of “Italia mia,” Petrarch imagines the peninsula as a beautiful body covered in mortal wounds.\textsuperscript{13}

On the surface, both poets’ lamentations seem to simply sound refrains bemoaning the peninsula’s internal squabbling and helplessness in the face of external invaders. But, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Dante and Petrarch advanced two distinct Italies, each with a different past and a different future. Both conceptions were dependent on a sense of the continuity of ancient Rome. The distinctiveness of each writer’s imagined Italy emerges most clearly when looking beyond their well-known poetic works to their more politically minded writings. Especially illuminating are their letters to political leaders—Dante’s to the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII (r. 1279-1313) and Petrarch’s to the Roman revolutionary Cola di Rienzo (1313-1354).

Dante understood Rome’s importance within a universal context: the ancient empire came into existence through God’s will and, still, in his own time, was meant to achieve universal rule, bringing with it global human happiness. Within that scheme,

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\textsuperscript{10} *Purgatorio*, VI.76-8: Ahi, serva Italia, di dolore ostello/ nave sanza nocchiere in gran tempesta,/non donna di provincia, ma bordello!

\textsuperscript{11} *Inferno*, XXXIII.80: del bel paese là dove ’l si suona and Rime CXLVI, 12-14: Poi che portar nol posso in tutte e quattro/ partii del mondo, udrallo il bel paese/ ch’Appenin parte e ’l mar circonda e l’Alpe.


\textsuperscript{13} Petrarch, “Italia mia,” (1-3): Italia mia, benché ‘l parlar sia indarno/ a le piaghe mortali/ che nel bel corpo tuo si spesse veggio.
Italy had a special status as seat of the Church and the city of Rome. But the scope of Dante’s vision transcended the Alps—to him, the Holy Roman Emperor, a German, was the anointed leader of the new Rome. In contrast, Petrarch’s Italy was, in a sense, more Italian. Dante cared little for libertas Italiae, but for Petrarch, it represented a serious and life-long dream. For him, the inheritance of classical Rome belonged to the Italians almost exclusively. Rather than a universal vision, Petrarch advanced an understanding of Italy and Italian identity that depended on striking contrasts between peninsular and transalpine cultures.

Thus, the legacies left by the two giants of medieval and early Renaissance literature for the idea of Italy were mixed, still centered on Rome but containing different senses of what it meant to be Italian. In this way, subsequent Italian Renaissance writers inherited a Roman rhetoric for discussing Italia but also something of a conceptual grab-bag from which they pulled, then modified, the ideas of both Dante and Petrarch as suited their particular agendas and circumstances.

The Glorious Dominion of the Romans

Dante’s most explicit treatment of Latin history—that is, combined Roman and Italian history—comes in Book IV of the Convivio (1303-6). There he addresses what would later become recurrent questions in peninsular historiography: why ancient Rome ascended to such a dominating power and whether or not it benefited Italian communities in the long term. Dante addressed the question of Rome’s ascent as part of his broader argument for the benefits of a potential world monarchy. In reaction to what he observed

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A philosophical work, written around the same time as De vulgari eloquentia, that criticizes the Church’s temporal politics and the Empire’s reluctance to involve itself in peninsular affairs.
in Italy, namely, the compulsion of states to dominate one another, leading to the “tribulations of cities,”

Dante rationalized that a single, global monarch, who had dominion over all, would bring about universal happiness—a point he developed subsequently in the De monarchia (c. 1317).

But why should the heirs of the Roman empire be granted world wide supremacy? After all, writes Dante, the Romans acquired their empire not through global consensus but through force of arms. His answer is that God chose the gente latina, because of their grandissima vertude, for universal rule. What else but divine approval and will could explain all of the city’s successes? As a result, reasons Dante, the ancient Romans did not in fact gain their empire through violence per se but “through divine providence, which transcends all reason.” In this way Dante perpetuated a thematic thread first

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15 Dante, Il convivio IV.4 in Dante Alighieri, Opere minori vol. 3 ed. Pio Gaia (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1987), 222: sì come per esperienza vedemo, discordie e guerre conviene surgere intra regno e regno, le quali sono tribulazioni delle cittadi, e per le cittadi delle vicinanze, e per le vicinanze delle case [e per le case] dell'uomo; e così s'impedisce la felicitade.

16 Dante, Il convivio, IV.4.4, 222-3: Il perché, a queste guerre e alle loro cagioni tòrre via, conviene di necessitate tutta la terra, e quanto all'umana generazione a possedere è dato, essere Monarchia, cioè uno solo principato, e uno prencipe avere; lo quale, tutto possedendo e più desiderare non possendo, li regi tegna contenti nelli termini dellì regni, sì che pace intra loro sia, nella quale si posino le cittadi, e in questa posa le vicinanze s'amino, [e] in questo amore le case prendano ogni loro bisogno, lo qual preso, l'uomo viva felicemente: che è quello per che esso è nato.

17 Dante, Il convivio, IV.4.8, 224: Veramente potrebbe alcuno gavillare dicendo che, tutto che al mondo officio d'imperio si richeggia, non fa ciò l'autoritade dello romano principe ragionevole somma, la quale s'intende dimostrare: però che la romana potenza non per ragione né per decreto di convento universale fu acquistata, ma per forza, che alla ragione pure essere contraria.


19 Dante, Il convivio, IV.5.1-20, 225-230.

20 Dante, Il convivio, IV.4.3, 225-6: Onde non da forza fu principalmente preso per la romana gente, ma da divina provedenza, che è sopra ogni ragione. He added other reasons of the sort that God chose Rome for universal rule because Aeneas arrived in Italy at the same time as King David’s birth, Convivio, IV.5.6: E
developed by Virgil in Book XII of the _Aeneid_. Dante insisted that Rome’s founding mission had continued down to his own time in part because it was always meant to last forever—in Virgil’s words, which Dante cites in the _Convivio:_ “To them, the Romans, I set no limits, either in space or time; to these I have given empire without end.” On an ideological level, then, Dante saw the Latins as having a crucial role in advancing God’s will on earth through the maintenance of an empire. But, on a practical level, the Latins of Dante’s time were deeply divided, a situation that Dante blamed on the moral degeneration of Church leadership and the unwillingness of the Holy Roman Emperors to enforce their claims on the peninsula.

Things changed for Dante in 1309. He had just finished the _De vulgari eloquentia_ and the _Convivio_ when Pope Clement V invited the newly elected emperor Henry VII to Rome for a coronation. Many Italians, including Dante, assumed the emperor would take the opportunity to reassert his authority over the northern Italian communes. Excited at the prospect of a return to imperial order on the peninsula, Dante penned a series of _epistole_ to Henry. In those letters he reveals ambivalent feelings about Italy’s legacy and mission. He reconfirms his historical assumptions about the continuity of Roman and Italian history and reaffirms the importance of Italy for a universal monarchy but, in the end, excoriates all the Italians, including the Florentines, who sought to obstruct Henry’s mission.

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21 _Dante, Il convivio_, IV.4.11, 224: Ed in ciò s’acorda Virgilio nel primo dello Eneida, quando dice, in persona di Dio parlando: «A costoro - cioè alli Romani - né termine di cose né di tempo pongo; a loro hoe dato imperio sanza fine».
After Henry descended the Alps in 1309, he lingered in Milan while the northern Italian cities strengthened their defenses. In the lull, Dante wrote to both the Florentines and the man he regarded as the peninsula’s divinely ordained redeemer. Addressing his home city, Dante linked Henry with Italy’s Roman past, calling him “Augustus” and arguing that, without a Caesar,

the whole world goes off course, the helmsman and rowers slumber in the ship of Peter, and miserable Italy [Italia misera], forsaken and abandoned to private control, and bereft of all public guidance, is tossed with such buffeting of winds and waves as no words can describe, as even the Italians in their unhappiness can barely measure with their tears.22

On the one hand, then, Dante thought that Henry’s reassertion of imperial control would “bring forth new hope and better times in Italy.”23 But, on the other hand, and perhaps more important, Italy was not primary in his thinking; his agenda transcended and, in fact, argued against notions of libertas Italicae. In the same letter to the Florentines he scolded them for their desire for liberty24 and for their creation and defense of a state independent of the Roman empire.25

Dante’s anger towards his native city was more intense in a letter from the same year to Henry. There, Florence becomes the “viper that turns against the vitals of her own

22 Dante, Epistole, VI.3 in Opere Minori vol. 3, 386: Hoc etsi divinis comprobatur elogiis, hoc etsi solius podio rationis innixa contestatur antiquitas, non leviter tamen veritati applaudit quod, solio augustali vacante, totus orbis exorbitat, quod nauclerus et remiges in navicula Petri dormitant, et quod Ytalia misera, sola, privatis arbitriis derelicta omnique publico moderamine destituta, quanta ventorum fluentorumve concussione feratur verba non caperent, sed et vix Ytali infelices lacrimis metiuntur.

23 Dante, Epistole, VII.5, 400: nova spes Latio seculi melioris effulsit.

24 Dante, Epistole, VI.5, 386: Vos autem divina iura et humana transgredientes, quos dira cupiditatis ingluvies paratos in omne nefas illexit, nonne terror secunde mortis exagitat, ex quo, primi et soli iugum libertatis horrentes, in romani Principis, mundi regis et Dei ministri, gloriam fremuistis, atque iure prescriptionis utentes, debite subiectionis officium denegando, in rebellionis vesaniam maluistis insurgere?

25 Dante, Epistole, VI.8, 388: Quid, fatua tali oppinione summota, tanquam alteri Babilonii, pium deserentes imperium nova regna temptatis, ut alia sit Florentina civilitas, alia sit Romana? Cur apostolice monarchie similiter invidere non libet, ut si Delia geminatur in celo, geminetur et Delius?
mother,\textsuperscript{26} that is, Rome in the person of Henry.\textsuperscript{27} Dante also saved some scorn for Italians outside of Tuscany. Just before Henry came upon Milan, Dante warned the Italians living there to welcome him:

Put off you of Lombard blood, the barbarism you have acquired, and if any Trojan and Latin seed yet survive in you, pay it mind, lest when the eagle from on high, swooping down like a thunderbolt, shall descend upon you, he find his own young cast out, and the place of his offspring usurped by ravens.\textsuperscript{28}

It is significant here that Dante refers to those living in and around Milan as Lombards, a reference to the late-antique foreign invaders then settlers. Though effectively an Italian people for centuries, the Lombards, who arrived in the sixth century, were not historically connected to the ancient Romans, unlike the Etruscans, whose “Trojan” roots connected them to the Romans in a mythopoetic way back to before Aeneas’ arrival on the peninsula (Dante and his contemporaries often referenced a theory that Troy itself was founded by Etruscan refugees; thus, one could postulate that the Romans and Etruscans derived from a common stock\textsuperscript{29}). Anyway, historically, the Tuscans’ predecessors eventually merged politically and culturally with the Romans, something that the Lombards could not claim.

\textsuperscript{26}Dante, \textit{Epistle}, VII.24, 408: Hec est vipera versa in viscera genitricis; hec est languida pecum gregem domini sui sua contagione commaculans; hec Myrrha scelestis et impia in Cinyre patris amplexus exestuans; hec Amata illa impatiens, que, repulso fatali connubio, quem fata negabant generum sibi adscire non timuit, sed in bella furialiter provocavit, et demum, male ausa luendo, laqueo se suspendit.

\textsuperscript{27}Dante, \textit{Epistle}, VII.25, 408: Vere matrem viperea feritate dilaniare contendit, dum contra Romam cornua rebellionis exacuit, que ad ymagination suam atque similitudinem fecit illam.

\textsuperscript{28}Dante, \textit{Epistle}, V.11, 376: Pone, sanguis Longobardorum, coadductam barbariam; et si quid de Troyanorum Latinorumque semine superest, illi cede, ne cum sublimis aquila fulguris instar descendens adfuerit, abiecut videat pullos eius, et prolis proprie locum corvulis occupatum.

\textsuperscript{29}Davis, \textit{Dante’s Italy}, 19-22.
Thus Dante frames the Lombards’ decision vis-à-vis Henry as a decision about their collective identity: by rejecting the emperor they would be, in Dante’s mind, declaring their lineage to be that of the mid-sixth-century transalpine invaders; by embracing Henry, they would effectively confirm their status as Latins. In this way, for Dante, Latin-Italian identity meant embracing the inheritance of ancient Rome in a way that sacrificed both communal and peninsular interests.

In Dante’s time, when Italy was threatened with northern incursions, calls for the *libertas Italiae* were common in the northern city-states, though rare in Dante’s writings. The idea of Italy was important for Dante, and it appears frequently in his writings, but most often it is in the context and in the service of the larger idea of Rome. As in antiquity, Dante’s Italy and Rome overlapped in a way that made it possible for him to quote Virgil to Henry: to you is owed “the regnum of Italy and the land of the Italians.”

Put differently, Dante’s idea of Rome included Italy, but its mission was universal. He wrote as much to Emperor Henry in *Epistola VII*, reminding him that the “glorious dominion of the Romans is confined neither by the frontiers of Italy, nor by the coast-line of three-cornered Europe”

Even when reflecting on Rome’s universality, however, Dante afforded Italy special treatment as a defining and necessary component of that universal empire. This is why Dante so anticipated Henry’s expedition into Italy and also why Dante was so devastated when the entire operation fizzled, leaving the Italian states still more or less to their own devices.

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30 Dante, *Epistle*, VII.17, 404-6: cui regnum Ytalie Romanaque tellus debentur. See also Davis, 21.

When Dante composed the *Commedia*, he already knew that his hopes for Henry’s reintegrating of Italy into the imperial system were not going to be realized. Thus, when he lamented the sorry condition of Italy in Canto VI of the *Purgatorio*, calling it a “bordello” and a “rudderless ship in a great storm,” he was not so much expressing disappointment at the continuation of the trend of internecine conflict, per se, but rather at the failure of the ship of the Italian states to accept their much needed captain. Dante’s conception of Italia as situated within a universal context had an ironic afterlife. Although, in his own time, Dante was a passionate supporter of the Holy Roman Emperor and thus also a harsh critic of the papacy’s temporal politics, in the centuries after his death, Dante’s universal approach to the concept of Italy was seized upon most effectively and systematically by the Church.

*Italia mia*

In 1342 Petrarch returned to Avignon after having been crowned poet laureate in Rome. Also in Avignon at that time, and also by way of Rome, was a notary, Cola di Rienzo (c.1313-1354), who was representing Rome at the papal court. Petrarch and Cola met that year. Five years later, Cola led a revolution in Rome that inspired Petrarch to pen a series of letters to him that contain some of the poet’s most explicit reflections on his hopes for the Italian peninsula.

Before and after Cola, Italia was a persistent theme in Petrarch’s poetry. He intended his life’s work, the epic poem *Africa* (revised until his death in 1374), to be an Italian anthem, an *Iliad* for the fourteenth century.\(^{32}\) Its protagonist, after all, is Scipio

Africanus, the Roman general who expelled the peninsula’s most infamous invader, Hannibal. But more revealing of Petrarch’s conception of an Italian past, and more comprehensive, are his personal letters, especially those addressed to Cola di Rienzo.

In 1347, Cola and his followers stormed the Campidoglio, put the city’s nobility to flight, and declared the restoration of the ancient republic with Cola as tribune. Well-read in the histories of classical Rome, Cola dreamt of restoring the city’s imperial greatness, and to that end his rhetoric featured the concept of a reunified Italia—what he called Italia una—under Roman authority. He wrote prodigiously to Italy’s communal leaders, telling them of his plans to make Rome once again a unifying force for the peninsula. Not surprisingly, the leaders of the other communes saw Cola’s rhetoric as a thinly veiled attempt to expand Roman influence. Except for some small communities just outside Rome and others in the papal territories, none took Cola seriously. Cola’s chancellors churned out letters to peninsular leaders, reminding them of ancient arrangements and asking for their support of a new Rome and a new Italy. Most of the letters received dismissive replies. In one letter to the Aragonese court in Sicily, Cola recalled the fact that ancient Rome had saved the island from its Carthaginian overlords and made it a Roman territory—a fact that Cola thought justified his asking for the Aragonese court to now furnish the Roman commune with a small fleet to aid its future operations. In these official communications with other peninsular centers, Cola referred

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34 Collins, *Greater than Emperor*, 144-146. Giovanni Villani, for instance, mocked how Cola “wished to restore the whole of Italy to obedience to Rome, as in ancient times” (Giovanni Villani, *Cronica* 13:90, quoted in Collins, 144).

to himself as *Zelator* of Italy, Hero of Italy.\textsuperscript{36} But, as Amanda Collins’s work has recently made clear, Cola never really had a concrete plan for unifying Italy under Roman rule (in contrast to his well-formulated plans for reordering Rome’s political, economic, and social structures).\textsuperscript{37} It seems that Cola’s *Italia una* was, in the end, rhetorical, an important element of his broader symbolic campaign to associate his overthrow of the Roman barons with the ancient republic.

Nothing came of Cola’s Italian plans, and in fact, his regime did not survive the year. But Cola’s Italian moment did have an impact on the peninsula’s intellectuals.\textsuperscript{38} In particular, Cola’s Italian dreams inspired Petrarch to articulate further his thoughts on a unified Italy in a series of letters to the tribune. For Cola the idea of *Italia una* was an important element of his diplomatic communications with other Italian leaders but ultimately a rhetorical device that he used in the service of his goals for the Roman commune. From his vantage point in Avignon, Petrarch stretched Cola’s Italian vision, expanding it by placing the idea of *Italia una* in a wider European context.

In his letters to Cola, Petrarch emphasized his addressee’s hopes for Italy and, in the process, revealed his own. Writing in Italy, Dante had described the peninsula as weak and torn apart by its own fickleness. But writing from outside Italy, Petrarch developed a different vision of the peninsula; he did not ignore the discord that Dante had earlier highlighted, but Petrarch possessed a confidence in the potential of Italy to revive itself. Petrarch’s articulations of Italian strength were informed by his assumptions about

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\textsuperscript{36} Collins, *Greater than Emperor*, 151.

\textsuperscript{37} Collins, *Greater than Emperor*, 150-1 and 161, where Collins calls Cola’s Italian plans “overimaginative and unrealizable.”

\textsuperscript{38} Musto, *Apocalypse in Rome*, 165-6.
a historical connection between contemporary Italians and the ancient Romans. In addition, his sense of Italian strength was defined in contrast to the perceived moral and cultural weaknesses of Italy’s transalpine neighbors, including those who were part of the ancient Roman fold.

Those sentiments boiled to the surface in a particular letter to Cola that Petrarch composed in Avignon in the late summer of 1347. There, one of Cola’s ambassadors had been set upon and beaten, and his communications destroyed. Since antiquity, Petrarch noted, ambassadors had been sacrosanct and consequently travelled unarmed.\(^{39}\) For the poet, Avignon’s violation of that tradition was representative of that city’s greater renunciation of its Roman heritage. He wrote Cola that “even among the barbarian nations would thy messenger have received kindlier reception than among those whom thou didst consider Romans and to whose good will thou wert entitled.”\(^{40}\) Not only would “barbarian nations” not stoop to the deviousness of Avignon; nor would the old enemies of ancient Rome. Not even the “deceitful and faithless rabble of the Carthaginians” went through with plans to rough up a Roman representative.\(^{41}\)

Petrarch hated Avignon for several reasons. Like Dante, he saw the papacy as a den of immorality, and like Catherine of Siena, he thought the Curia’s proper home was Rome and made pleas to that effect. His loathing of the city (which he frequently conflates with the papacy’s presence there, referring to both as “Avignon”) was also, as Giusseppe Mazzotta has pointed out, political, especially with regard to Cola’s

\(^{39}\) Musto, *Apocalypse in Rome*, 164.


\(^{41}\) Cosenza, *Petrarca and the Revolution of Cola*, 139.
contentious relationship with the French popes. The papacy’s presence in France was, for Petrarch, immoral and, as the incident with Cola’s ambassador underscored, illegal. But one gets the feeling in Petrarch’s writing that he most hated the Avignonese papacy because its presence implied that Rome’s universal mission—famously described by Virgil as “without end” and long since a Christian one—had faded, something that for Petrarch was not possible as long as Rome itself still stood. In this way, Petrarch’s hatred of Avignon reinforced his sense of Italian identity as inextricably bound up with a timeless Romanitas, which, while perhaps universal in the abstract, was, practically applied without question only to Italians, not necessarily to those living beyond the Alps, least of all the Avignonese.

Petrarch underscored the contrast between Avignon’s barbarism and Italy’s Romanitas by asserting both Italy and Rome’s combined superiority over the French. In setting upon Cola’s ambassador, the French proved that they did not comprehend just “how powerful Rome still is” and that the “wrongs which [they] heaped upon us have restored us to our strength. . .we regained our full health and vigor.” These sentiments—unfounded and hopeful—demonstrate how Petrarch used this external other to clarify a sense of what it meant to be Italian. In the same letter Petrarch revealed his vision of an Italy restored to its ancient glory.

As for the rest of Italy, who can doubt that it can again regain the power that it once wielded? To the accomplishment of this end I maintain that there is lacking neither strength, nor resources, nor courage. Harmony alone is lacking. Give me this, and by the words of this very letter do I

43 Ibid., 25.
predict the immediate ruin and destruction of those who deride the name Italians.\textsuperscript{45}

Dante’s dream for Italy was that it stop its internal squabbling, declare allegiance to the Holy Roman Emperor, and take its place as the religious heart of a universal monarchy. Such universalism is absent in Petrarch’s vision of an Italy returned to its ancient glory. Petrarch’s new Rome was not universal; it was Italian. In this way, Petrarch’s opposition of, on the one hand, barbarians and, on the other, ancient Romans and contemporary Italians, served to crystallize a sense of Italian identity through difference—that is, without ever articulating clearly what it meant to be Italian or Roman.

Petrarch’s most explicit articulation of an Italian-barbarian dichotomy came in 1368 when he composed a letter to Pope Urban V that argued for the papacy’s return to Rome. A few years later Jean d’Hesdin, a theologian educated in Paris, wrote a rebuttal explaining why France, not Rome, was a more appropriate home for the Church. In 1373, Petrarch responded directly, with a tract known as the \textit{Invectiva contra eum qui maledixit Italie} (\textit{Invective against a Detractor of Italy}).\textsuperscript{46} Petrarch’s retort is more about “Gallic barbarism” than the virtues of Rome and Italy. He delights in denigrating his opponent (“our barbarian”), and calls all “Gauls” barbarians. He is sure that his French readers will find the “name of barbarian painful and unpleasant. . .in the same way, unattractive women like to be called beautiful, and to appear so. . .but the true state of affairs is not altered by human feelings.”\textsuperscript{47} And, anyway, notes Petrarch, one has only to look through

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 137.

\textsuperscript{46} For summary of background of that invective see Introduction to Francesco Petrarca, \textit{Invectives} edited and translated by David Marsh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), x.

\textsuperscript{47} Petrarch, \textit{Invectives}, 369-371. Note: I have relied on Marsh’s translation and provided the original Latin where significant.
the writings of all the “historians and cosmographers. . .is there any one of them who
does not call the Gauls barbarians?”

In the invective, the Italians are as Roman as the French are barbaric. Petrarch
parses his own identity, proclaiming, “I am Italian by birth, and glory in being a Roman
citizen.” Petrarch goes out of his way to refer to Cicero explicitly as an “Italian and
Roman,” and Cicero and Petrarch together “are not Greeks or barbarians; we are
Italians and Latins.” For the bulk of the tract, Petrarch works under the assumption that
contemporary Italians are, in effect, the same people as the ancient Romans; it was
immaterial to him that the debate—whether France or Italy was a superior location for the
papacy—was one relevant only to contemporary France and contemporary Italy. To
counter Jean d’Hesdin’s arguments about the depravity of fourteenth-century Italy and
Rome, Petrarch musters primarily classical evidence.

Petrarch’s equating of ancient Romans and contemporary Italians was, of course,
a broad simplification. Italian and ancient Roman identities were complicated and not the
same; to assume that they were, one would need to overlook the centuries just after
Rome’s fall, which were characterized by external invasions, migrations, and the
destruction and construction of whole cities. Petrarch’s detractor had essentially pointed
this out, noting that many Italian cities had in fact been founded by non-Italians. Was not

48 Petrarch, Invectives, 371.


50 Petrarch, Invectives, 453-4: Italo ac Romano.

51 Petrarch, Invectives, 454-5: Sumus enim non Greci, non barbari, sed Itali et Latini.

52 For instance, in response to the charge that Romans are ungrateful, Petrarch cites anecdotes from the
second Punic War and Rome’s diplomatic relations with Kings Pyrrhus and Ptolemy, Petrarch, Invectives,
419-21. That is one example; the ancient evidence dominates the text, which makes a contemporary
argument.
the city of Rome itself founded and originally populated by exiles? In this way, Petrarch was forced to explain just exactly what he meant by “Roman” and “Italian.”

First, Petrarch cites Seneca, noting that “all nations descend from others.” This point can mislead, though, because, ultimately, Petrarch’s argument is anything but transnational; the focus throughout is on Italy. Aeneas and his followers may have been Trojan refugees, notes Petrarch, but Troy itself was founded by Tuscan expatriates (this was a commonly held assumption, found in Virgil’s account of Dardanus, which Dante also believed). The author also notes how many illustrious Romans founded foreign cities. His conclusion is clever:

Yet such a change of settlement changes the people who migrate, rather than the country to which they migrate. Hence, the Gauls migrating to Asia Minor became Asians; and the Italians migrating to Phrygia became Phrygians, but reverted to Italians when they returned to Italy after the fall of Troy. Thus, our own Italians who moved to Gaul or Germany have imbibed the nature of those regions and their barbaric customs. But the inhabitants of Milan, whose city was founded by Gauls and who were themselves formerly Gauls, are now the gentlest people on earth and retain no trace of their ancient past.

Thus the Romans, who originated elsewhere, do in the end have a clear identity: they are Italian. So, too, are the Lombards and other integrated invaders. Petrarch’s theory of identity also makes it possible for him to continue to condescend to the “Gauls,” formerly part of the Roman empire but never really Roman because of their location beyond the Alps. Unexplained in all this is Petrarch’s own status. If Italians who move abroad cease

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53 Petrarch, *Invectives*, 458-9

54 Davis, *Dante’s Italy*, 19-22.

to be Italians and “imbibe the nature of those regions and their barbaric customs,” what of Petrarch himself, who spent half of his life in Avignon?

In any case, Petrarch draws unequivocal conclusions. Contemporary Italians and ancient Romans are intimately related by virtue of the common land of Italy. This fact makes the Italians superior to all others, including former imperial citizens. The distance between Petrarch’s exclusionary vision of a Roman-Italian identity and Dante’s universal one seems clear. In the midst of one of his justifications for using the term “barbarian” in reference to the French, Petrarch makes plain once again the contrast that underlies his sense of Italian identity and superiority: “If only omnipotent God would grant peace and brotherly harmony to her sons—her eldest sons, I mean—how quickly and easily Rome would reduce the rebellious barbarians to their ancient yoke, aided as of old by Italian forces!”

It is not surprising, then, that Petrarch’s most famous poetic invocation of the peninsula, “Italia mia,” is as much about barbarian hordes as it is a call to arms and the Italians’ retrieval of “that ancient valor.” Echoing Cicero almost exactly, Petrarch notes how “nature provided well for our condition / when she raised up the screen / of Alps between us and the German rage.” Moreover, “if that fury up there, that savage race, / conquer our intellect, / the sin is ours, and not the course of nature.” While Dante thought it predestined and divinely ordained that Italy should belong to a universal Roman empire led by a German, Petrarch thought that the Italians, heirs to ancient Rome,


were not only naturally superior to the transalpine peoples but destined to dominate them again.

Both Dante and Petrarch constructed versions of Italian history and identity defined by a connection to ancient Rome. But each writer struck that connection differently, Dante by subsuming Italy into a universal and almost extemperal concept of Rome and Petrarch by assuming the Italians as the primary descendents of classical Romans and then highlighting perceived differences between those Italian/Romans and external, barbarian others. Thus Dante and Petrarch not only represent two ways of using historical narratives to construct collective identity, but they also bequeathed to subsequent Italian writers two distinct discourses of Italian identity. While the Church’s Italian rhetoric came to mirror Dante’s in its universality, Petrarch’s Italia also had a long afterlife, evidenced by the stream of Quattrocento and early Cinquecento writers—most famously, Machiavelli—who emphasized Italy’s cultural and military supremacy over her neighbors and held faith in the possibility that, because of its privileged history, it could once again regain its ancient glory.

Salutati’s Italian Context

Around the time of Petrarch’s death in 1374, a series of widely diffused tracts containing interpretations of Italian history hit the peninsula’s intellectual scene, with important results for later Quattrocento conceptions of the peninsula’s past. These came from the pen of the Florentine chancellor, Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406). A great admirer of Petrarch, Salutati’s conception of Italia was closer to Petrarch’s than to Dante’s;
Salutati and Petrarch both espoused an Italian rather than universal interpretation of the legacy of ancient Rome and both developed a sense of an Italian identity through contrast with transalpine foreigners. But, unlike Petrarch, Salutati spent the bulk of his life in Italy and he was deeply involved in peninsular politics. Salutati employed the notion of a common Italian past in ways meant to serve contemporary Florentine political interests. To a greater extent than anyone before him, Salutati demonstrated the malleability of Italian history for political ends. Ultimately, Salutati’s expressions of Italia and of Italian history were much more nuanced than those of either of his Trecento predecessors.

In his missives to other Italian states, Salutati pushed the idea of an ancient Roman inheritance common to all Trecento Italian communities to persuade the leaders of other states to see their interests as coinciding with those of the Florentines. Over the span of his career as chancellor, Salutati was obliged to shift how he explained this supposed common ground, depending on his city’s most immediate enemy: first the papacy and, later, Visconti Milan. Because he was writing almost exclusively on behalf of the Florentine government, he was not necessarily concerned with exploring the nature of Italia per se. His invocations of the idea are best understood in the context of contemporary Florentine political concerns.

Salutati is often described as a key conduit in the development of Quattrocento Florentine republican rhetoric. Trained in the *ars dictaminis* in Bologna, Salutati then took positions as chancellor in the Tuscan towns of Todi (1367) and Lucca (1370) and then Florence (from 1375 until his death).\(^5^9\) As chancellor, he effectively managed the articulation of Florentine motives and aspirations to the rest of the peninsula during a

turbulent period in which the city fought wars first with the papacy in the War of the Eight Saints (1375-8) and then with Visconti-ruled Milan in the Milanese Wars (1390-1402). Salutati’s writings on behalf of the state represented important fusions of humanist rhetorical methods, classical learning, and republican ideals, which came to the fore most famously a generation later through the pen of his mentee and successor Leonardo Bruni. An aspect of Salutati’s contribution to Florentine political discourse that is often overlooked are his articulations of a wider peninsular context, in the past and in the present.61

**Libertas Italiae**

In Salutati’s time, *libertas Italiae*, the liberty of Italy, was already an old phrase. Caesar and Cicero had used it to justify certain political positions (see the end of Chapter One). In the Middle Ages the term was generally invoked as a plea for temporary cooperation between the otherwise disparate Italian communities to resist either an external or an internal threat to the autonomous communes.62 Specifically, *libertas Italiae* recalled the late-twelfth-century showdown between the Holy Roman Emperor Barbarossa and the Lombard League, consisting of Northern Italian city-states but not Florence.63 That enterprise was successful for the Italians (they turned back the imperial

60 Ibid., 76-7.

61 See, however, the concise outline of Salutati’s Italian considerations in Danile De Rosa, *Coluccio Salutati: Il cancelliere e il pensatore politico* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1980), 87-100.


forces at the Battle of Legnano in 1176; shortly thereafter the alliance crumbled). Similarly, Florence appealed to *libertas Italiae* in 1310 when it was threatened by an imperial expedition. As Ron Witt has pointed out, the meaning of *libertas* in early fourteenth-century Florentine phrases such as *libertas Italiae* was vague, recalling an ancient inheritance of freedom, an opposition to tyranny; however, it was not necessarily tied to a republican system of government. The phrase also had roots in the peninsula-wide conflict between Guelfs and Ghibellines, during which Guelfs traditionally portrayed the Church as defender of *libertas Italiae* while casting the Ghibellines as enemies of the peninsula because they favored the rule of a German over the culturally superior Italians. Salutati was compelled to revise and expand Florence’s traditional Guelf rhetoric during the War of the Eight Saints, casting his city, not the Church, as the primary beacon for *libertas Italiae*.

Salutati also would have read of *libertas Italiae* in the chronicles of earlier Florentines, most notably the Villani family. Their *Cronica* contained suggestions of a theme that Salutati would later develop more comprehensively—the ancient Roman inheritance, common to all Italians. Giovanni Villani, for example, reflected that “the great power of the Romans was not only their own. . .but all the Tuscans principally, and then all the Italians joined them in their wars and battles, and all of them were called Romans.” But, mostly, the chroniclers emphasized only a vague and sanguine

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65 De Rosa, *Coluccio Salutati*, 88 fn 7.

connection between Romans and Italians—and, most often, they limited the connection to one between Romans and Florentines.\textsuperscript{67}

In Salutati’s writings, the Roman origins of \textit{libertas Italiae} reached far more nuanced and comprehensive articulations. First, the chancellor infused the concept with a wealth of classical references that amounted to a historical argument about the connection between the ancient republic’s \textit{libertas} and that of contemporary Italy. Second, Salutati provided a series of reasons why the inheritance of ancient Rome was not just Florentine but belonged to the peninsula as a whole. In this way, he set the stage for an even broader round of critical inquiry into the ideas of Italian identity and history by the subsequent generation of peninsular intellectuals.

\textbf{Italy and the Eight Saints}

By 1375 Central and Northern Italy lacked any kind of political centralization and was instead dotted with tiny, autonomous cities ruled by assemblies, princes, and warlords. There were relatively major powers: Venice, Milan, Florence, and the papacy territories. Although Venice focused its expansion in the direction of its commercial interests—that is, to the East—the other three powers competed for control of the smaller entities.\textsuperscript{68} In 1375 the Avignon papacy concluded a war against Visconti Milan in which the Florentines had been unwilling to aid the pope, who was ostensibly their ally. Tensions were mounting. Then, in that same year, the papacy stepped up its efforts to

\textsuperscript{67} De Rosa, \textit{Coluccio Salutati}, 94.

expand the limits of the papal states into Tuscany, including areas that Florence had recently incorporated into its own domain, and war broke out between Florence and the papacy. The situation grew especially anxious when the Florentine government began seizing Church property. In response, the pope placed the whole city under an interdict. The war lasted three years.\(^69\)

Salutati’s letter-writing campaign on behalf of the Florentine state during that conflict made plain the fact that Florence viewed itself as a beacon of liberty on the peninsula.\(^70\) The letters also established an international reputation for Salutati.\(^71\) There was already evidence for the diffusion of his missives beyond their original recipients in the first year of the conflict. He had been writing to other Tuscan and central Italian communities, attempting to mobilize them against the papal troops, yet the French court complained about Salutati’s apparently offensive use of “Gallici,” including descriptions such as “worthless Gauls…[men] without faith, no piety, no respect for honesty,” concerned only with the oppression of Italians.\(^72\) Perhaps because of the French protest, Salutati’s language evolved soon thereafter. Within the peninsula, Salutati’s epistolary reputation is evidenced by Giangaleazzo Visconti rumored utterance that “one of Salutati’s letters was worth a troop of horses.”\(^73\) It is, of course, difficult to judge the

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\(^70\) “Liberty” in this sense was not necessarily tied to Florence’s republican form of government, see below and Peterson, “War of the Eight Saints,” 187-190.


actual impact of the letters on the decision-making processes of their addressees. What we can be more certain of is that, by virtue of his renown and industriousness, Salutati’s reflections on the meaning of Italia and of Italian history were disseminated to a wide audience within his lifetime.\textsuperscript{74}

Florentine motives for the war were rooted in anxieties over papal expansion around the fringes of Tuscany. Thus, the liberty that primarily concerned them was their own. But in writing to other Italian states for support, Salutati emphasized the Florentine struggle as representative of a greater Italian cause: \textit{libertas Italiae}.

In the first year of the conflict, Salutati began to represent the Florentine cause as Italian. He labeled the papal troops under the employ of the English mercenary captain John Hawkwood “barbari,” each despicable for their own national reasons. The mad Germans, audacious English, and equally despised French were all, collectively, enemies of “all that bears the Italian name.”\textsuperscript{75} In a letter to Pisa, Salutati referred to the papal soldiers as “externi,” setting them in opposition to the “men of Italian name” and invoking the archaic Greek term for the peninsula, Ausonia.\textsuperscript{76} The letter ended with a poignant reminder of the fate of the ancient Greek city-states that, more concerned with their petty rivalries, were taken unprepared by the less civilized northern invaders from Macedonia.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{74} Witt estimates Salutati’s public epistolary output to have been in the tens of thousands, of which around eight thousand are known today, see Witt, \textit{Public Letters}, 3.

\textsuperscript{75} Quoted in Witt, \textit{Public Letters}, 49 (unless otherwise noted, I have used Witt’s translations).

\textsuperscript{76} Witt, \textit{Public Letters}, 50.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 50.
According to Salutati, the war was much more than a bitter dispute between Florence and the papacy; it was a battle for Italian civilization against the barbarian hordes. In December of that same year, Salutati wrote to the Orvietans, reminding them “that you are of Italian blood, the nature of which is to rule others, not to submit to them, and mutually and in turn you should rouse each other for liberty.”\textsuperscript{78} And to Galeazzo Maletesta of Pesaro, Salutati wrote that the conflict was “with barbarians, with foreigners who, born of the vilest parents and raised on filth” threatened the libertas Italiae.\textsuperscript{79} Finally, also in that month, he wrote to the leaders of Città di Castello, prompting them to “reflect and remember! Recall the disgusting vexations, the bitter exactions, and dishonest demands with which this barbarous people, enemies of the Italian name, sent by the officials of the Church from the territories of Gaul and the other nations to miserable Ausonia, crushed you under foot like a pitiful slave.”\textsuperscript{80} Salutati’s letter-writing campaign met with considerable success, especially within the papal patrimony, where some cities, including Città di Castello, Perugia, and Viterbo rose up in revolt.\textsuperscript{81} When the Florentines first declared war on the papacy they made banners with “Libertas” stitched across them in big letters. They were colored red, recalling the symbolism of

\textsuperscript{78} Quoted in Peterson, “War of the Eight Saints,” 188 fn 43: Recognoscite, vos esse Italici sanguinis cuius est proprium imperare cereris, non servire. Et vos ipsos vicissim ac mutuo, ad libertatis studia concitate (all translations from Peterson, “War of the Eight Saints” are his).

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 188, fn 44: non enim nobis cum ecclesia negotium est, sed cum barbaris, cum exteras gentibus, qui apud suos, vilissimis parentibus orti, turpissimeque nutriti, ut spolient…quasi ad predam, in miseram italian per ecclesie presules destinantur.

\textsuperscript{80} Witt, Public Letters, 53 fn 43: Considerate et memori mente petite fastidiosas vexations, acerrimas exactions et inhonestae servita quibus hec gens Barbara, Italici nominis inimica, que de Galliis et exteras nationibus in miseram Ausoniam per ecclesie presides mittuntur in pedem vos quasi sevulo oprimebat.

\textsuperscript{81} Rubenstein, “Florentina Libertas,” 7-8 and Peterson, “War of the Eight Saints,” 188.
ancient Rome. When other Italian cities initiated revolts against their papal overlords, Florence sent them a banner.\textsuperscript{82}

In the early stages of the war, Salutati’s missives relied on traditional, Petrarchan racial distinctions, but he also began to delve further into the historical origins of Italian liberty. Writing to Ancona in 1376 he presented Italians’ affection for liberty as primordial, or, at least, pre-Roman:

Our ancestors, all of the Italian race, to preserve their liberty, fought against the Romans for more than five-hundred years. And the [Romans], who ruled over the all the earth, were not able to subject Italy with arms until they incorporated almost all Italy into the Empire joining [the Italian communities] to Rome through treaties and giving them their liberty and citizenship.\textsuperscript{83}

Shortly thereafter, though, Salutati found it more profitable to leave aside memories of the Social War in favor of emphasizing the Roman origins of Italian liberty. The pre-Roman Italian past would, however, reemerge a generation later in Florentine interpretations of Italian history.

Salutati had specific occasion to move to a more Roman interpretation of \textit{libertas Italiae} when, after the successful uprisings in the papal holdings in central Italy, Florence tried to induce Rome itself to rebel. The coup in Rome never came to fruition—the Romans were intent on effecting the papacy’s return from Avignon—but Salutati’s exhortations to the Romans led him to articulate a more nuanced and historically sensitive explanation of \textit{libertas Italiae}.


\textsuperscript{83} De Rosa, \textit{Coluccio Salutati}, 93 fn 20: Maiores nostri, omne quidem genus Italicum, quingentis annis contra Romanos, continuatissi presilis, ne libertatem perderent, pugnaverunt. Nec potuit totius orbis princeps populus Italian armis subigere, donec in societatem imperii pene omnes Italos recerperunt, iungentes eos sibi federibus, libertate atque civistate donentes.
In November Salutati wrote to the Roman commune: “resist tyrants, break the heavy and insupportable yoke, abolish slavery, and restore the Italian people, whose right it is to live as free men, to their liberty already for many years denied them.” He reminded them of their “hereditary debt” by citing a list of ancient Roman heroes who staved off both tyrants and barbarian invaders, all while underscoring the connection between the two cities, calling Rome the mother of Florence. Writing to the Romans in 1377, he explained the ancient city’s ascent as having been both fundamentally Italian and republican in nature:

Do not think, o most excellent lords, that your and our ancestors—for we boast of common parents—founded such a great and memorable empire while subservient at home nor that they did it by oppressing Italy with servitude either imposed from the outside or from within. Indeed, with the assistance of allied fighting for their liberty, the power of empire first set you over Italy, conquered Spain, overcame Africa and at length brought you to such heights of power that the Roman name commanded all nations.

Salutati not only emphasized the Italian allies’ roles in the creation of Rome’s empire but went further to credit the city’s “desire for liberty,” which “created for the Romans empire, glory, and all their dignity.” When that desire for liberty ceased to thrive under the emperors—“with liberty destroyed under the Caesars”—“without question Italy was

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84 Witt, *Public Letters*, 51 fn 35: Ite obviam tirannis, frangite durum ac importabile iugum tollite servitutem popolisque Italie quorum iuris est libere vivere in iampridem per inuiriam erepta libertate reponite!


86 Salutati recalls Roman victories over enemies such as Pyrrhus, Hannibal, and the Cimbri and celebrates the heroes of those conflicts including Scipio and Marius, see Witt, *Public Letters*, 51-2, n. 39.

87 Witt, *Public Letters*, 54 n. 48: Non putetis, excellentissimi domini, quod maiores vestry et nostri, communibus quidem parentibus gloriatur, serviendo domi, tantum tamque memorabile Imperii decus fundaverunt nec dimicando suam Ytaliam sub externa vel domestica servitute. Illa quidem moles imperii, assistendo sociis et pro eorum libertate pugnando, vobis primo subegit Yitaliam, Yspaniam vicit, Affricam superavit, demum vero in tantam est imperium vestrum sublimitatem evertunt quod Romanum nomen cunctis nationibus prefuerit.
made a desert and fell from the heights of empire.” In other words, it was “the desire of liberty alone” that gave the Romans their “empire, glory, and all their dignity.”88 Thus Salutati put forth a narrative of Italian history that revolved around the Roman republic’s *libertas*. Citing peninsular manpower as a major factor in Rome’s initial rise, he saw the ancient republic’s *libertas* as historically Italian, not just Roman. Moreover, his vision proposed that the inherited ideal of *libertas* bound together the otherwise disparate people of the peninsula, who, through that bond, were also direct descendents of the ancient Roman republic.

During the three years of the War of the Eight Saints, Salutati articulated a sense of Italian identity and history that had initially depended on simple and traditional distinctions between barbarian *externi* and civilized Italians but eventually revolved around the more sophisticated—and Florentine—theme of *libertas*. Salutati offered what David Peterson recently called a “new historical genealogy of Italian liberty” that emphasized an ancient Roman legacy bequeathed to the peninsula as a whole: a tradition of liberty—from *externi* and tyrants alike—that had been systematically undermined by tyrants, beginning with the rule of the Caesars.89

This interpretation of Italy’s Roman heritage is different from Dante’s. Dante believed that ancient Rome’s legacy was a universal empire, led by the Holy Roman Emperor, in which Italy merely played a role. He had lambasted the Florentines for thinking their city’s *libertas* more important than its loyalty to the contemporary Roman

88 Witt, *Public Letters*, 54 fn 48: Sublata autem sub Cesaribus libertate...in ipsorum minibus certe vastitatem receipt Ytalia et illud imperii culmen effluxit. Solum itaque libertatis studiam et imperium et glorian (et) omnem Romanis peperit dignitatem.

89 Peterson, “War of the Eight Saints,” 189.
empire. But Salutati developed a theory of Italy’s Roman roots that was at once Italian and Florentine. He invoked this legacy in his successful bids to incite cities in the papal patrimony to revolt and in his failed attempts to get the Romans to do the same.

Of course, this version of Italian history, centered around a vague idea of *libertas*, had strong overtones of Florentine republicanism. But, at the same time, it was flexible enough to apply to various and changing political situations; it could resonate with other Italian cities, not just those with republican systems of government. And Salutati generally did not adhere to a rigid opposition between tyranny and republicanism. He wrote in his *De tyranno*, for example, that Julius Caesar, was, in fact, not a tyrant, because he had accumulated power through the legal functioning of the senate and people of Rome.

What is interesting, too, about the evolution of Salutati’s Italian rhetoric over the course of the War of the Eight Saints is that, despite the nature of the conflict and despite Salutati’s early arguments, he never really entertained the old problem, which Dante had suggested, of the Church obstructing Italian unity and peace. Nor did he seek to condemn the temporal power of the papacy, as Marsilius of Padua had done half a century earlier in his *Defensor pacis* (1324). In fact, in the last decade of his life, after both the War of the Eight Saints and the Visconti Wars, Salutati wrote passionately and anxiously about the Papal Schism. With one line of popes in Avignon and another in Rome, Salutati

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became an (unsuccessful) negotiator who hoped for the papacy’s return to the Eternal City.\footnote{Witt, \textit{Hercules at the Crossroads}, 169-177.}

In this way, Salutati’s notion of Italian \textit{libertas} was not defined by its absence as it had been for Dante and Petrarch, who had longed for \textit{libertas Italiae}, but had found it eroded by papal influence and internal discord. Rather, Salutati’s Italia, even as a byproduct of a political ideology, was defined by an active set of distinct characteristics, specifically ancient Roman \textit{libertas}. Salutati further reinforced this “strong” definition of Italia in the chancery letters of Florence’s next major set of conflicts, the Visconti Wars.

\textbf{Italia for All, Even the Milanese}

As the peninsula’s political terrain shifted, and with it, Florentine interests, Salutati reformed the concept of \textit{libertas Italiae} in evolving ways. Just over a decade after the conclusion of the War of the Eight Saints, Florence was embroiled in a new war, this time with Visconti Milan. In this context, Salutati was again compelled to adjust his rhetoric of \textit{libertas Italiae}. Now with an Italian foe, the old formula of Italians against the barbarian hordes no longer made sense. Equally, references to a common Roman heritage for all Italians would need further clarification to be used as a rhetorical weapon against the Milanese. Finally, the meaning of \textit{libertas Italiae} required tweaking because the Florentines themselves had recently called upon \textit{externi} to aid them in their fight against the Visconti dukes.\footnote{Witt, \textit{Public Letters}, 57 n. 53.}
Again, Salutati petitioned neighboring states to preserve the *libertas Italiae*. Later, after Florence signed an alliance with the French in 1396 and after it was rumored that the Holy Roman Emperor was making plans for a peninsular expedition, Florence reassured the pope of its loyalties. Florence was only seeking to defend itself against an “ancient enemy [the Milanese] about to destroy by various and infinite machinations to the subjugation of Italy.”94 Finally, in 1401, Florence celebrated the new Holy Roman Emperor Rupert, praising in advance the possible reassertion of his claims over Visconti-held territory.

Florence’s attempts to use foreign armies to defeat Milan backfired in terms of Florence’s peninsular image. On the battlefield, Visconti-led Italian mercenaries defeated Rupert’s German force at Brescia in the fall of 1401. Florence, the city that had for years been trumpeting its leading role in the preservation of *libertas Italiae*, had called in foreign mercenaries, who were promptly turned back by an all-Italian force.95 The humanists of the Visconti court took Florence to task, all the while promoting Gian Galeazzo as an Italian savior.96 Prior to Brescia, Salutati had tried to spin Florentine strategy. The emperor Rupert, claimed Salutati, would rid the peninsula of tyrants such as those ruling Milan and would therefore be deemed “liberator” and “father of Italy.”97 

*Libertas Italiae* remained Salutati’s standby rhetorical device for promoting Florentine interests within the peninsula.

94 Witt, *Public Letters*, 65 n. 82.


96 For instance, the Milanese historian Andrea Biglia, see appendix of Baron, *Crisis* (full version), p. 450.

97 Witt, *Public Letters*, 70.
Salutati’s best-known expression of *libertas Italiae* in the context of the Visconti War actually came just after the end of the conflict in 1403 (when Gian Galeazzo Visconti unexpectedly died, sparing Florence a direct assault on the city). Four years earlier, at the start of the war, a humanist from Vicenza and in the employ of the Visconti court, Antonio Loschi (1368-1441), wrote a brief treatise, the *Invectiva in Florentinos*, justifying the Visconti duke’s attempts to expand his domain in northern Italy and condemning the Florentines on various counts.  

Moreover, Loschi presented Visconti expansion as a unifying and redeeming Italian project: if successful, Visconti “would rule Italy in peace.” Salutati’s response, the *Invectiva in Antonium Luschum Vicentinum* (1403), represents the height of Renaissance Italian *campanilismo*; it is filled with superlatives, denouncing the Milanese and celebrating everything Florentine. Yet, even in this context—more important, perhaps, because it comes in this context—Salutati articulates a vision of Italian identity and history that includes, in a way, even the “tyrannical” Milanese.

Salutati took particular issue with two of Loschi’s arguments: first, that the Florentines were the scourge of Italy, hated by all Italians, and second, that Florence’s claims of its Roman origins were spurious. In his response, Salutati drew both issues as inextricably connected: the ideal of *libertas* linked the ancient Roman republic with its contemporary successor, Florence, while also serving as the defining feature, ideally, at least, of the otherwise disparate Italian communities. In making this counter-argument,

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99 As quoted in Baron, *Crisis*, 37.
Salutati further clarified the Italian historical narrative he had earlier posed to the Romans between 1375 and 1377.

Loschi had accused Florence of “disturbing the peace of Italy.” But, replied Salutati, if that were true, then “all Italy would be our enemy.” He feigns wonder at what exactly Loschi meant by “Italy.” If he were referring to Liguria, Romagna, and Veneto, in other words, the objects of Visconti expansion, then Loschi should, in fact, be hoping for Florence to disturb their tyrannically imposed peace. Otherwise, Loschi is mistaken about the nature of “the rest of Italy,” where “there are many people in Ausonia [again, the archaic Greek name for Italy] not subject to your master, who have their own domains, speech, and men who know how to use it: have any of those signori, those people, ever complained about the things of which you now accuse us?” The Italy not under Visconti rule experiences enough liberty that they are free to express their own opinions, and they, the “real” Italy—Ausonia—love Florence and her citizens. In fact, “wherever the serpent [the Visconti emblem] that hates justice has not spread his venom and asserted his rule, the Florentines are considered dear.” Once again, Salutati makes liberty the defining feature of Italy, and once again, this makes Florence, by extension, the shining light of the peninsula.

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100 Garin, Prosatori latini, 12: turbatoresque pacis Italiae.

101 Ibid., 12: Si pacem turbaremus Italiae, sicut scribis, totam haberemus Italianam inimicam.

102 The whole passage in Ibid., 12: Quid enim aliud est vastare patriam quam patriam exhaure, ut, si de patria nostra sentias optandum hoc esse tibi deceat, non dolendum? Si vero de Liguria Flaminia Venetiaque, domini tui pressis iugo, forsan intelligis, doleas, obsecro, non reprehendes, optaque tibi suis partibus tales hostium patriae vastatores, nec reliquam ex hoc deplores Italiaim. Habent tot Ausoniae gentes, quae tuo non subiaccet domino, fines suos habent, et ora habent, et qui deicere noverint atque possint; et quis unquam illarum patrium dominus at populus hoc quod nobis imputas fuit conquestus?

103 Ibid., 12: quod cum non sit, sed ubique qua iuriviriae serpentis iugum venenumque non attigerit maneant habeanturque carissimi suis commerciis Florenti.
This definition of the peninsula also carried with it a specific reading of Roman history that Salutati used to defend Florentine claims of its Roman foundations. The most noted aspect of the *Invectiva* is Salutati’s mustering of evidence on the origins of Florence. Like some of his predecessors, Salutati opted to ignore the original foundation story that traced its roots to Julius Caesar and instead offered physical and, innovatively, philological evidence for the city’s republican origins, either as a military outpost for operations against Fiesole during the Social War or as a settlement for Sulla’s veterans.  

Salutati’s argument for Florence’s ancient republican heritage contains an interesting statement about Italian history and identity. The chancellor reaffirmed a republican Roman-Florentine connection, by positing the shared ideal of a republican *libertas*. The thesis was not new. In the mid-fifteenth century, the Florentine chronicler Giovanni Villani had asserted that the “ancient Roman people” had passed on to “the communities of Italy, especially the Tuscans, the citizenship and liberty of those people.” Salutati made the same point even more explicitly: “What does it mean, in fact to be Florentine,” he suggested, “if not to be, both by nature and by law, a Roman citizen and consequently free and not a slave?” Being Florentine meant, in the first place, being heir to the Roman republican tradition of valuing *libertas* in politics.

What is perhaps surprising about Salutati’s argument about Florence’s Roman origins is that he extended it, in a way, to the entire peninsula—not just “the rest of Italy,” that is, the areas not under Visconti rule. Salutati went further then his predecessor

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105 Quoted in Rubenstein, “Florentina Libertas,” 7 (translation mine).

106 Garin, *Prosatori latini*, 32: Quid enim est Florentinum esse, nisi tam natura quam lege civem esse romanum, et pet consequens liberum et non servum?
Villani by expanding the Florentine idea of *libertas* into a more comprehensive *libertas Italiae*. Salutati effectively suggested an Italian identity defined by its common ancient Roman heritage, both political and cultural. Addressing Loschi directly, Salutati does not rule out the return in the Milanese rulers’ “hearts, the ancient valor.” In fact, “maybe one day the Italian spirit can return even to you, if you are not actually of the Vinili race, of Longobard bones; maybe one day you could still find in yourselves the vigor of the soul and justly call yourselves free and Roman citizens.”  

The ancient Roman inheritance that could define fifteenth-century Italy was not about the remains of classical buildings as much as it was about embracing the political culture that had brought the peninsula its greatest historical success. At the end of the *Invectiva*, Salutati explains to Loschi that “We [Florentines] remember what you deny: what it means to be of the Roman race.”

Salutati’s historical argument, cannot, of course, be separated from his ideological aims; his sense of what it meant to be an ancient Roman and contemporary Italian coincided with the Florentine chancellery’s rhetoric of liberty. Nevertheless, using the idea of *libertas*, Salutati developed what at the time was the most comprehensive argument yet for a shared Italian history. In doing so he provided a narrative framework of the peninsula’s past for the next generation of Italian humanists, who both furthered and countered Salutati’s conceptions.

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108 Ibid., 34: qui recordamur, quod tu negas, nos genus esse romanum.
Chapter Three

Italia nova: Dark Ages and New Ages in the Quattrocento

After the Fall

For the historically-minded in fifteenth-century Italy, the devastating centuries during and just after ancient Rome’s collapse mattered in particular.¹ Earlier, in the 1330s, Petrarch had developed the concept of a dark age.² But, for him, it was a foil, meant to underscore the cultural vibrancy of antiquity and of his own time. He was not an historian and he was not interested in reaching any sort of critical understanding of the importance of that intervening period. However, the diffusion of humanist culture on the Italian peninsula in the early 1400s, which included an increased sensitivity to historical method, prompted interest in those murky centuries.

In the generation after Salutati, in mid-Quattrocento Italy, changes were afoot in historical writing generally that affected historical constructions of an Italian past specifically. The spread of humanist learning in northern and central Italy during the first decades of the fifteenth century, brought new understandings of historical method. Humanists were aware of Cicero’s explanation that history was meant to instruct, and should thus include prescribed elements, such as set speeches that lay out the reasons

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¹ See the description of those centuries at the beginning of Chapter Two, above.

behind certain actors’ successes or failures. But, in addition to such a rhetorical view of history, that generation of humanists increasingly saw the study of the past as a pragmatic utilitarian endeavor. History, they thought, should benefit their community or state by providing instructive lessons for political behavior.

To a greater extent than Petrarch or any one who came before them, Italian historians in the mid-1400s were interested in developing critical understandings of the years just after Rome’s collapse down to the moment when Charlemagne restored some semblance of order to the peninsula, about 400 to 800. None of the surviving histories from that period—by Procopius, Cassiodorus and Paul the Deacon—adopt any kind of Italian perspective. However, in the fifteenth century the revival of classical learning and texts had inspired many on the peninsula to assume various sorts of connections with their ancient predecessors. The nature of those connections—political, cultural, linguistic, military, even racial—was one issue. But just how those connections survived those centuries of invasions and shifting populations was quite another. Did the tumultuousness of that period, which included waves of invaders and settlers, the destruction of whole communities, the birth of new ones, disconnect contemporary Italy from its ancient roots? Or, rather, was it then that Italy and Italian history emerged?

These were questions that concerned the two most influential humanist historians of the Quattrocento, the Florentine (born in Arezzo) Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444) and Biondo Flavio (1392-1463), from Forlì in the Romagna. They proposed different

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3 Cicero, *De oratore*, II.15.

4 Or Flavio Biondo. There is uncertainty among modern scholars about what to call Biondo, his three major biographers are divided, Denys Hay (Flavio Biondo), Riccardo Fubini (Biondo Flavio), and Bartolomeo Nogara (Biondo Flavio). Biondo was the family name (his father went by Antonio di Gaspare Biondi), but the humanist historian seems to have played with his name’s Latinity (flavus is Latin for “blond”), calling himself, at varying times “Biondo Biondi” and “Blondus Flavius.” “Biondo Flavio” is more current among
answers to those questions, and this led to distinct and sophisticated interpretations of not only Italy’s history, but also of its present identity. Looking back on the most catastrophic period of the peninsula’s past, both writers thought that the Italy of their day had entered a new, special age. They posited what they called an *Italia nova*, a new Italy, defined primarily by its vibrant city-states and flourishing cultural scene. Armed with a new sensitivity to historical methods, Bruni’s and Biondo’s articulations of an Italian historical narrative were more explicitly historical, critical and detailed than those of their predecessors.

Moreover, in this period—the mid Quattrocento—we find for the first time a vibrant and synchronic conversation about Italian history. The differences between Bruni’s and Biondo’s interpretations of Italian history were subtle but significant. When Bruni arrived in Florence as a university student he met Salutati, who remained an influential model and friend for the developing scholar (who would later succeed Salutati as the city’s chancellor).\(^5\) Following in his predecessor’s footsteps, Bruni eventually developed a chronology and narrative of Italian history that was unmistakably Florentine and unsurprisingly structured around the central theme of *libertas Italiae*. Biondo, though, was never really rooted to the political concerns of a single city in the same way that Bruni was in Florence.\(^6\) A more mobile humanist, Biondo had multiple regional

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\(^6\) Although, before serving as the city’s chancellor, Bruni did spend a formative decade in the service of the Roman popes, between 1405 and 1415.
loyalties on the peninsula and his vision of Italian history generally cuts through local biases and reaches a more peninsular point of view.

Their distinct perspectives led to distinct ideas about the structure and meaning of Italian history. One of the main points of contention was the legacy of ancient Rome for contemporary Italy. Did Italian civilization predate the Romans? Did the ancient inhabitants of the peninsula speak Italian? When exactly could one begin to write of Italian history—before, during, or after Roman hegemony over the peninsula? Was fifteenth-century Italy more indebted to republican or imperial Rome? To what extent did the barbarian invasions threaten the continuity of Roman traditions on the Italian peninsula? As this chapter will illustrate, Bruni and Biondo had distinct answers to most of these queries. Significantly, they developed their thoughts on those matters while in dialogue with one another. Thus Bruni and Biondo represent the earliest synchronic example of the dialogical process at the heart of the centuries’ long construction of Italian history.

Behind their different versions of Italian history lay two related debates—one about language and one about historical methods. After looking at those two issues, this section will turn to each historian’s key contributions to the historiography of Italia—Bruni’s *Historiarum florentini populi libri XII* (1419-42, hereafter *Historiae*) and Biondo’s *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum imperii decades III* (1439-44, hereafter *Decades*) and *Italia illustrata* (1448-53).

**From Roman to Italian**
Biondo first made his mark as a scholar by challenging Bruni’s assertions about the development of the Italian vernacular dialects. The two had met in Florence in 1434, when Pope Eugenius IV, fleeing revolts in Rome, took up residence there.\(^7\) As an apostolic notary, Biondo relocated his family to Florence, where Bruni was then serving his second term as the city’s chancellor. Bruni and Biondo got along well—after Bruni completed a translation of Aristotle’s *Politics*, he asked Biondo to present it to Pope Eugenius, which he knew Biondo would given, in Bruni’s words, “the special friendship you feel for me.”\(^8\)

According to his principle modern biographer, Bartolomeo Nogara, from 1436 on, Biondo’s career changed trajectories. Biondo retained his posts for the rest of Eugenius’ pontificate, but, according to Nogara, he became less focused on advancing along the Curial *cursus honorum* and more intent on pursuing his historical interests.\(^9\) In the spring of 1435 Biondo composed his first major treatise, *De verbis romanae locutionis*, (On the Spoken Language of the Ancient Romans).\(^10\) He structured the work as a dialogue, set in the antechamber of Pope Eugenius’ Florentine residence in the cloister of Santa Maria Novella. Biondo is the youngest of the interlocutors who include contemporary humanists Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459) and Bruni. Although they were discussing linguistic history, as part of their arguments, Bruni and Biondo also began to develop differing

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\(^7\) Eugenius was compelled to hold court outside of Rome until 1443, due primarily to uprisings in the city led by the wealthy Colonna family. On these events during Eugenius' pontificate see Partner, *The Lands of St. Peter: the Papal State in the Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 405-419. Bruni, too, it should be noted served in the Roman curia between 1405 and 1415.

\(^8\) In a letter from 1 March 1438 in Griffiths et al., *Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, 161. Also see Fubini, "Biondo Flavio," 541 and Nogara, *Scritti inediti*, LXXX-LXXXI, with a relevant letter on 94.

\(^9\) Nogara, *Scritti inediti*, LXXV.

views of peninsular history, specifically the degrees of cultural continuity between ancient Roman Italy and Italy after Rome’s collapse.

The discussion revolves around the relationship between Latin and Italian and pits Bruni against Biondo. Bruni thought that in ancient Rome both languages existed side by side—Latin was the language of the learned, Italian that of everyone else—a point of view that Bruni himself confirmed in a letter to Biondo in the same year. In contrast, Biondo argued that all ancient Romans spoke Latin, evidence for which could be found in the fact that the ancient Romans distinguished three forms of their language: poetry, oratory, and common—all different, but all Latin. He buffeted his argument with careful documentary analysis including Cicero’s Brutus, a text he claimed to have recovered. Italian, posited Biondo, was a late corruption of Latin, the result of the waves of invasions that began in the early fifth century and ultimately destroyed the Western Empire. Biondo made plain that he regretted the unseating of Latin. The Lombards, he wrote, descended into Italy in the late 500s with the intention of doing away with the remnants of Rome, including its language. Eventually, it should be noted, Biondo’s understanding of the emergence of Italian dialects gained more acceptance among scholars.

Evident in their conversation about linguistic history was a broader difference in the way that the two thinkers conceived of the murky centuries after Rome’s fall. By

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12 Ibid., LXXVII.

asserting that Italian dialects long existed alongside Latin, Bruni implicitly assumed a type of unbroken linguistic chain from antiquity to the present, a view that seems to overlook the practical complications that accompanied the demographic turmoil of the fifth and sixth centuries. Biondo, meanwhile, did not offer a comprehensive or overly technical answer, but he did at least engage the interpretive dilemma posed by the calamitous fifth and sixth centuries. This line of thinking brought to its logical conclusion raises questions about the beginning of Italian history, the Romanness (or not) of contemporary Italy, and who exactly was and is Roman, barbarian, and Italian. Most Italian humanists in the Quattrocento were not, however interested in issues of Italian historiography per se. Biondo was an important exception.

**Bruni’s Patriae**

Historical method was the other debate that represents an important background for understanding how Bruni and Biondo came to understand and to represent Italian history differently. Modern scholars generally agree with B.L. Ullman’s claim that Bruni, mostly on account of his critical use of multiple sources, was “the first modern historian.”¹⁴ They credit him with doing more than any of his contemporaries to raise the critical standards of the study of the past. The classic illustration of this is in Book I of the Historiae, in which Bruni uses an array of hard evidence to topple long-held stories about Florence’s origins and early years. Specifically, he challenged the long-held belief that Julius Caesar’s troops founded the city and instead asserted that the original settlers were the veterans of the earlier—and ostensibly more republican—dictator, Sulla.

But recent work by Anna Maria Cabrini and Gary Ianziti has shown that the rigorous evidentiary analysis on display in the opening of Book I is not really replicated in the rest of his Historiae, nor in some of his other historical works, in particular the Commentarii de primo bello punico (1419, hereafter Commentarii) and the De bello italico adveros gothos libri IV (1441, hereafter De bello italico). As Ianziti has demonstrated, despite Bruni’s youthful claims that history-writing must necessarily depend on more than one historical source, Bruni was, increasingly over his lifetime, less and less concerned with evidentiary verification. This was most obvious in his last historical work, the De bello italico in which Bruni, admitted to using only one source, Procopius. Bruni justified this by citing the fact that Procopius was an eyewitness to wars between the Byzantines and Goths in Italy, and thus, in Bruni’s mind, was reliable.

The critical rigor of Bruni’s historical methods was also a topic of conversation in the Quattrocento. Biondo’s historical works contain implicit critiques of his older contemporary’s approaches to researching and writing history, specifically, the use of evidence and the garnering of evidence from multiple sources. The issue of historical method impinged upon Quattrocento historical interpretations of late antique Italy because, at the same time that Bruni’s De bello italico began circulating, in the early 1440s, Biondo was working on what would become his most influential history, the Decades, which traces peninsular history from the fall of Rome and down to the present. Biondo completed the section on the Gothic War in 1443 and, as Ianziti contends, it

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15 Gary Ianziti, “Bruni on Writing History” Renaissance Quarterly 51 (1998): 367-91 and Anna Maria Cabrini, “Le Historiae del Bruni: Risultati e ipotesi di una ricerca sulle fonti” in Leonardo Bruni, Cancellerie della Repubblica di Firenze, ed. Paolo Viti (Florence: Olschki, 1990), 247-319. The Commentarii and De bello italico are not well-known or oft-read works, in part because each was limited to a single source, Polybius and Procopius, some have posited that they are best considered translations. In any case, and this is Ianziti’s argument, most modern historians have preferred to see Bruni as a groundbreaking historian, and so, have preferred not to emphasize those works.
employed an entirely different mode of research: Biondo questioned Procopius’ reliability and therefore marshaled a string of other sources—Jordanes, Cassiodorus, and Gregory the Great—in order to cross reference the claims of Procopius. Biondo even began the section by acknowledging the similar contribution by Bruni, but noted that the Florentine’s work “contained nothing more than Procopius.”  

Biondo was not necessarily a more careful historian—in fact, one could easily argue that he was not. Instead, the important point here is that they each conceived of their historical tasks and methods differently. Ianziti has noted how Bruni’s thoughts on historical method were flexible because, ultimately, he was not writing primarily to reach any comprehensive or even new understandings of the past, but, rather, to glorify his patria. For this reason, Bruni admired Livy above all other classical historians and, also for this reason, he seems to have composed both his Commentarii and De bello italico—that is, in order to preserve crucial periods of what he considered to be the Italian past. He explains in the preface to the Commentarii that

If [Livy’s] books survived, there would be no need of any new work. But since this part of the his work has perished, and there would be almost no description of this war among us Latins, I was moved, for the glory of our forefathers, lest the splendid and magnificent record of their deeds should perish, to compose this commentary on the war for the common good.  

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16 Biondo, Decades, I.IV, 43: Exinde Leonardus Aretinus scriptor aetate nostra clarissimus, eande belli Italici adversos Gothos historiam decem & octo annos complexascript, quae ad principu finem nihil plus habet Procopius.  

17 For example, Denys Hay, “Flavio Biondo and the Middle Ages,” in Renaissance Essays (London: Hambledon, 1988), 50, who notes that Biondo was just as guilty of depending on one source, not for a whole work, but at least for certain chronological periods, including Bruni for the description of new Italian cities that emerged after 800.  

18 Ianziti, “Bruni on Writing History,” 380.  

19 Translated in Griffiths, et al., Humanism of Leonardo Bruni, 193.
Livy’s rendering of Rome’s first war with Carthage was lost and the most reliable version, by Polybius, was in Greek, which Bruni was more adept at reading than were many of his contemporaries; this was also the case with the wars against the Goths, the main source for which, Procopius, was likewise available only in Greek.

That Bruni had a patriotic purpose to writing history is important because it implies that he had certain convictions about the existence of an Italian history that one could trace through the period of foreign invasions and at least as far back as the Roman republic. By filling in a missing gap of Livy’s canon for the purposes of Italian history, Bruni advanced the assumption that his contemporary Italy was connected to the Roman past in an unbroken narrative—thus the need to preserve the memory of it.

But, as it turns out, in his most famous and influential historical work, the Historiae, Bruni explicitly undermines that Italian historical narrative, demonstrating how malleable and yet how important Italian history was to Quattrocento historians. In other words, Bruni’s sense of Italian history cannot be separated from his more general conception of history in the service of the patria; but the patria he was celebrating depended on the historical task before him.

In the Historiae, Bruni maintained his belief that writing history should glorify one’s patria. But, where in his Commentarii, Bruni’s mission was Italian, in the Historiae, the patria was more specifically Florentine. Bruni’s primary task, of course, was Florentine history, but he notes in his preface that that history would be best understood within a wider, peninsular frame. He altered his Italian historical narrative

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to match the new historical task. Bruni’s Historiae reached a much larger audience has had a more enduring afterlife than the Commentarii and De bello punico, thus it is his Florentine interpretation of Italian history from Book I of that work that has had greater influence.

**Rome against Italy**

Bruni’s interpretation of peninsular events from Rome’s collapse down to his present emerges through two parallel narratives, one political and one cultural. Like his mentor Salutati, Bruni constructed a version of Italy’s past around the idea of a common libertas. But unlike his predecessor, Bruni did not see Italian libertas as a creation of the ancient Roman republic. Rather, Bruni invokes a primordial libertas that was traceable to Tuscany’s ancient inhabitants, the Etruscans. Salutati had earlier flirted with a similar thesis in the early days of the War of the Eight Saints, when, in writing to other Tuscan towns in the attempt to gain their allegiance against the papacy, he emphasized the region’s Etruscan heritage and painted the Romans as invading enemies. But ultimately Salutati did not pursue that line of thinking, preferring instead to underscore Italy’s Roman heritage as part of an effort to appeal to a common ground of all peninsular cities, not just those of Tuscany.

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Pertinebit autem huius cognito et ad italicas res. Note: I have relied on Hankins’ translation, but will also cite the original Latin, where significant.

21 This distinction is elaborated—with reference to Bruni and Biondo in Angelo Mazzocco, “Decline and Rebirth in Bruni and Biondo” in Umanesimo a Roma nel Quattrocento (Rome: Istituto di Studi Romani, 1981), 249-266.
Bruni, then, became the first Quattrocento humanist to advocate an Etruscan thesis in a major work.\textsuperscript{22} Etruscan civilization developed in late eighth century in Etruria, which included much of present-day Tuscany but also parts of Lazio and central Italy. By the seventh century, the Etruscan civilization consisted of a constellation of city-states that shared a language, political and social structures, and, to some extent, an identity. But they also competed with one another, often in the form of full scale war. Perhaps, then, the Etruscan experience spoke to Bruni for more reasons than just their shared inhabitation of the Arno river valley. Similar to fifteenth-century Italian city-states, the Etruscans had shared some cultural commonalities but had also sought to preserve local autonomies.

Bruni claimed that the fledgling Roman community looked up to the Etruscans as superior cultural, military, and even political models.\textsuperscript{23} Once the two civilizations came to blows, Bruni recalled how difficult a foe the Etruscans proved to be. After years of conflict, the Etruscan city-states weakened themselves by arguing with one another; unable to unify, the Romans overwhelmed them.\textsuperscript{24} In this way, Bruni presented the ancient Romans as imperialists, conquerors, and, above all, enemies of Italian liberty. He thus not only disassociated Italian and Roman histories, but overturned Salutati’s argument that the legacy of Roman \textit{libertas} was a unified Italian identity.\textsuperscript{25}

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\textsuperscript{22} Giovanni Cipriani, \textit{Il mito etrusco nel rinascimento fiorentino} (Florence: Olschki, 1980), 5-6.
\textsuperscript{23} Bruni, \textit{Historiae}, I.19-36, 45-49.
\textsuperscript{24} Bruni, \textit{Historiae}, I.34: Et profecto non ambigitur quin si omnes Etruriae populi uno consilio bellum gessissent, diuturnius ac magnificentius tota Etruria defendi potuisset./ Undoubtedly, if all the Etruscans had waged war with a unified strategy, they might have defended themselves long and magnificently.
\textsuperscript{25} In general, Bruni was conscious of undertaking a new kind of history, different from the chroniclers, different from his mentor and what we would call “humanist,” a move that was also recognized and
From the start of the work, Bruni actually undervalues the connections between ancient Rome and his city, at least when juxtaposed with Salutati’s explicit emphasis of that connection. Bruni claims that Florence began as a Roman colony populated by veterans of Sulla’s legions (not, as others had claimed, by Julius Caesar’s troops).\textsuperscript{26} Even here, Bruni begins to distinguish between, on the one hand, a Roman historical narrative and, on the other, an Italian one of which Florence is a part. He does this by setting Sulla’s new colony within the context of the recent Social War, waged between Rome and its Italian allies. Tuscany, claims Bruni, received the brunt of Roman retribution, and so the Florentine colony was set up to fill a void in the devastated region. Although founded by Romans, soon “immigrants crowded in.” When fallout fighting from the Cataline conspiracy threatened the city, its inhabitants came to a new understanding of their collective identity: “for the first time they realized that they must build on what they had…so all at once they changed, not only their ideas, but their way of life.”\textsuperscript{27} Bruni thus argues for Florence’s Roman origins, but is also quick to make the Florentines a people of their own. Bruni’s most serious blow to Salutati’s argument that Florentine \textit{libertas} descended directly from the Roman republic comes quietly though, through an omission. For all Bruni’s ruminations on ancient Rome in Book I, he avoids any substantial or direct mention of the republican period.\textsuperscript{28}

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\textsuperscript{27} Bruni, \textit{Historiae}, I.9, 17.
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\textsuperscript{28} The republic comes up only in reference—as a contrast—to the imperial period, which is discussed here, below.
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Even though he inverted his mentor’s rendering of ancient Rome’s relationship to contemporary Italy, Bruni did stay true to Salutati’s emphasis of *libertas* as the defining feature of Italian history—just not Roman *libertas*. In fact, he presents ancient Rome as an enemy to Italian interests precisely because Rome denied the nascent Florentine and, indeed, all the Italian communities the possibility of individual growth and autonomy:

Only the nearness of Rome in her grandeur limited Florence’s rise to power. As mighty trees overshadow young seedlings that grow nearby and keep them stunted, so did Rome overwhelm her neighbors with her sheer size, allowing no greater city to arise in Italy. Other cities that had once been great were oppressed by their neighbor Rome, ceased to grow, and even became smaller.29

Whereas Dante, Petrarch, and Salutati all conflated (to varying degrees and for different reasons) Italian and ancient Roman histories, Bruni explicitly distinguished the two. In fact, in Bruni’s version, the two have a disproportionate relationship: when Rome is up, Italy is down and vice versa:

Rome drew to herself everything wonderful that was engendered in Italy and drained all other cities. The proof lies in any comparison of pre-Roman and Roman times. Before the Romans took over, many cities and peoples flourished magnificently in Italy, and under the Roman empire all of them declined. After the fall of Rome, on the other hand, the other cities immediately began to raise their heads and flourish. What her growth had taken away, her decline restored.30

Thus, Rome’s decline meant Italy’s restoration, at least in theory.

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29 *Bruni, Historiae*, I.9, 16-17: Crescere tamen civitatis potentiam ac maiorem in modum attolli, romanae magnitudinis vicinitas prohibebat. Ut enim ingentes arbores novellis plantis iuxta surgentibus officere solent ne cut altius crescant permittere, sic romanae urbis moles sua magnitudine vicinitatem premens, nullam Italiae civitatem maiorem in modum crescere patiebatur.

For this reason, Bruni saw late antiquity, after Rome collapsed, as the crucial transition period in which Roman history became Italian history. Rome’s collapse, though, began much earlier than Alaric’s sack of the city. According to Bruni, the fall of Rome began with Julius Caesar, Augustus and the shift to an imperial system, for it was then that the Romans “gave up their liberty.”\footnote{Bruni, \textit{Historiae}, I.38, 48-9: Declinationem autem romani imperii ab eo fere tempore ponendam reor quo, amissa libertate, imperatoribus servire Roma incepit.} It was easy to see, he added that the “Roman empire began to collapse once the disastrous name of Caesar had begun to brood over the city. For liberty gave way before the imperial name, and when liberty departed, so did virtue.”\footnote{Bruni, \textit{Historiae}, I.38, 50-51: negare non poterit nunc romanum imperium ruere coepisse, cum primo caesareum nomen, tamquam clades aliqiu, civitati incubuit. Cessit enim libertas imperario nomini, et post libertatem virtus abivit.} The loss of a civic vitality coupled with the despicable behaviors of the emperors (whom Bruni saw as essentially crazed murderers, or, in his words, “monsters”\footnote{Bruni, \textit{Historiae}, I.38, 50: monstra.}), gradually weakened Rome. Thus, when the Goths under Alaric invaded in 410, they sacked a city which had made itself ripe for destruction. In other words, Rome fell from within. This was, in essence, the same argument that Salutati had presented to the Romans of his day, as a reminder to them to be wary of imperialistic overlords, then in the form of a corrupt and foreign papacy. And, as with Salutati, Bruni’s Italian history hinges on the presence or absence of \textit{libertas}.

Italy’s cities did not begin flourishing immediately following Rome’s collapse, of course. But after the wreckage of over three centuries of invasions and war, then, “at last those Italian cities that had survived the various floods of barbarians began to grow and

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\footnote{Bruni, \textit{Historiae}, I.38, 48-9: Declinationem autem romani imperii ab eo fere tempore ponendam reor quo, amissa libertate, imperatoribus servire Roma incepit.}

\footnote{Bruni, \textit{Historiae}, I.38, 50-51: negare non poterit nunc romanum imperium ruere coepisse, cum primo caesareum nomen, tamquam clades aliqiu, civitati incubuit. Cessit enim libertas imperario nomini, et post libertatem virtus abivit.}

\footnote{Bruni, \textit{Historiae}, I.38, 50: monstra.}
flourish and gradually regained their ancient prestige.”34 Old cities began to regenerate and some new ones, including Siena, came into existence.35 Bruni dates this revival of the Italian communities’ auctoritatem, their autonomy, to the arrival of Charlemagne and the expulsion of the Lombards.

Bruni ends Book I by describing the manner in which Italy began to acquire the political shape that it still held in his day, when each city ostensibly acted on its own accord. Earlier, “during the first period after the barbarian invasions had ceased, our cities shared a strong sense of harmony, I believe, but as soon as they had begun to grow larger, with no fear of external enemies, they started to behave in an envious and competitive way.”36 Thus, Italy returned to its natural state of libertas, not analogous to the ancient Roman republic, but to the Etruscan city-states, whose autonomy and mutual competitions had first brought them success but eventually, unable to form a united front against the Romans, had brought them extinction. As Salutati did earlier, Bruni constructed an narrative of contemporary Italy’s common heritage that describes a shared Italian identity in the Florentine rhetoric of libertas.

Libertas features, too in Bruni’s narrative of Roman culture from its height in the late republic, through its nadir the centuries of invasions, and down to the present, when it was experiencing a rebirth. Although Bruni mentions the literary distinctions of the Etruscans, his cultural narrative of Italian history is more pro-Roman than his political

34 Bruni, Historiae, I.75, 93: Denique quotcumque ex variis barbarorum diluviis superfuerant urbes per Italiam, crescere atque flore et in pristinam auctoritatem sese in dies attollere.


36 Bruni, Historiae, I.79, 100-101: Atque ego puto per prima illa tempora post barbarorum cessationem inter civitates nostras concordiam viguisse; mox vero, ut crescere coeperunt, vacuas ab externo metu, invidia et contentions transversas egere.
In his *Vita del Petrarca* (1434), Bruni argued that learning and literary culture reached its highest peak in the time and writings of Cicero. Then, “when the Roman people lost their liberty for the *signoria* of the emperors,” literary culture began to decline, almost immediately. Just as the shift to an imperial system curtailed Rome’s civic life, so, too did it limit the quantity and quality of cultural production. The emperors, claimed Bruni, encouraged sycophants, not creative thinkers. It may be instructive at this point to remember Bruni’s discussions about linguistic history with Biondo. Bruni had had an idea of a pure Latin, exemplified by Cicero, and he thought that that Latin was already falling out of use throughout the imperial period and then the barbarian invasions snuffed them out almost entirely. A loyal Tuscan, Bruni celebrated the advent of vernacular literature, especially in the works of Dante, but Bruni thought that true Ciceronian Latin did not return until Petrarch began to write. Thus Bruni’s cultural narrative of Italy’s past mirrors his political one. The chronologies are different (Italy’s political revival began with Charlemagne around 800; its cultural not until Petrarch in the late 1300s), but in both interpretations *libertas* was a prerequisite to flourishing.
The *De bello italic* was Bruni’s last major historical work before his death. In its preface, he lays out a succinct version of his sense of an Italian historical narrative, at least from the time of the barbarian invasions.

Even though it would have been much more pleasant for me to recall the days of Italy’s happiness instead of those of her calamities, still, because these were what the times produced, we too shall follow the mutability of fortune and describe in these books the invasion of the Goths and the war in which Italy was almost totally destroyed—a sad subject, certainly, but necessary for an understanding of those times…As I write these pages, though there are many things that trouble me because of the strong love I feel for my country [multa pro singulari amore meo erga patriam conturbant], I am nevertheless consoled by the following consideration: that even though Italy at that time suffered the most adverse fortune, she was eventually victorious over the foreign invaders, and has remained powerful on land and sea down to our time; her cities, adorned with great wealth, have enjoyed great power in the past and enjoy it today; their glory and jurisdiction extend far and wide…[to say] nothing of…the pervasive spirit of *humanitas* nor of artistic skills, in which as both teacher and pupil Italy has no equal [in quibus parens simul et alumna incomparabilis Italia reperitur].

As in the *Historiae* and *Vita del Petrarca*, Italy emerges strong from the ruins of late antiquity, politically vibrant and culturally resplendent. Bruni’s stated reason for taking on the project is interesting: “because of the strong love I feel for my country.” As in the centuries leading up to and including the Quattrocento (only some of whom had republican systems of government).

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Historiae, Bruni’s historical outlook was preceded by a desire to celebrate his patria. That that patria was so flexible for Bruni indicates the ease with which Renaissance historians could identify simultaneously with local and peninsular identities.

**Towards a Peninsular Point of View**

Biondo’s early life predisposed him to view the past through a peninsular, rather than merely local, lens. He was born in Forlì, which is situated just inland from the peninsula’s eastern shore in the Romagna region. From there, in his youth, Biondo met Alberico da Barbiano, a condottiero employed to regain previously-held papal lands; he observed the rise of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, whose accumulated territory included Biondo’s hometown; he then also observed the rapid collapse of Visconti’s influence there; he witnessed Venetian *terrafirma* expansion in and around his home city; and, finally, when he was thirty, an internal revolution led to his family’s expulsion from Forlì. The cumulative effect of this political environment upon Biondo was, according to Riccardo Fubini, the formation of a lasting small-town perspective, oriented *towards* not from within the centers of power, with the result that Biondo, despite spending most of his career in Milanese, Venetian, Neapolitan, and Curial halls of power, was never a “natural courtier,” but always a sort of “stranger.”

*42* His perspective on the past and present of the peninsula was not necessarily tied to a single regional loyalty.

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*42* The passage in context, Fubini, “Biondo, Flavio,” 537: “La provenienza da un centro provinciale, ma politicamente nevralgico, e aperto perciò all’influenza dei maggiori stati, segnerà la carriera di B., e Milano, Venezia, oltre che, naturalmente, la corte Romana, rappresenteranno i punti focali, così della sua vita come della sua opera storiografica; mentre, pur nell’affezione verso la piccolo patria forlivese e in genere verso le terre della Romagna, e nei rapporti amichevoli, piuttosto che natura cortigiana, intrattenuti con le piccolo corti signorili, sembra essere rimasto estraneo a un municipalistico attaccamento al natio loco.”
Biondo’s career, too, predisposed him to think naturally about history in an Italian frame. He focused his studies on Latin grammar, taking poetry and rhetoric lessons from Giovanni Balestrieri in Cremona, between about 1405 and 1413. Around the end of this period, Biondo took a job with the condottiero Attendolo Sforza, acting as his secretary, which took him significantly far from home, to Puglia in southern Italy. By 1420, Biondo was immersed in the highest of humanist circles: in that year a Venetian friend introduced Biondo to a group of scholars led by the humanist Guarino da Verona, a well-connected intellectual who in 1395 had accompanied the Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras on manuscript-hunting expedition in and around Constantinople. Soon thereafter Biondo found employment with the Venetian administration of its terraferma holdings, working for Francesco Barbaro in Treviso, Venice, Vicenza, and, finally Brescia, where he helped the Venetians defend the city during a conflict with the Milanese until 1426. It is worth noting here that, in the early stages of his career and later in his curial career, Biondo had extensive and direct involvement in the city-state, mercenary wars that plagued most of the peninsula. The future historian of Italy had no delusions about the willingness of Italians to go to war with one another.

In that year he returned to his native city, where he began working for the papal governor. For the next few years, Biondo was fixed on a curial career, declining further offers to work on behalf of the Venetians. Eugenius IV (Gabriele Condulmer), a Venetian, ascended to the papacy in 1431. In 1432, Biondo was called to Rome, where he

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44 Writing to that Venetian (Andrea Giuliano), Guarino spoke glowingly about Biondo’s skills and passion: “quantus litterarum ardor, quantum ingenium!” Nogara, *Scritti inediti*, xxxv.

was named an apostolic notary, an important position that required among other tasks, representing the Church in diplomatic negotiations. Two years later he became an apostolic secretary, a post that Bruni had held about twenty years earlier, between 1405 and 1415.

The papacy was important for both Bruni and Biondo in ways that it was not for Salutati, above all because, by 1425, after the Schism, the Curia had returned from Avignon to Italy. Although the pope was firmly entrenched in Italy, his position in Rome was challenged by the Roman barons and by the Aragonese monarchs in Naples. During Bruni’s stint as apostolic secretary the papacy was compelled to flee to Viterbo and Biondo held the same post under Eugenius IV while in Florence. Scholars also challenged the pope’s position. Lorenzo Valla (1406-1457) wrote his *De falso credita et ementita Constantini Donati de declamatio*, a devastating exposure of the papacy’s historical justifications for its temporal power, in 1440, during Eugenius’ rule. Valla wrote on commission from the Aragonese King Alfonso of Naples, who was engaged in territorial disputes with the pope.

Neither Bruni nor Biondo committed themselves to one side of that contemporary ideological debate. In fact, both put themselves in the service of both rivals, Eugenius and Alfonso. When Bruni completed his translation of Aristotle’s *Politics* (a project that he says occupied him three years), he not only sent a copy to Eugenius via Biondo, but, three years later, sent a copy to the King of Aragon as well. Biondo became one of Pope

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46 See the “From Roman to Italian” section of this chapter, above.

47 See the letter from Bruni to the king (4 March 1444) that presents the work in Griffiths et al., *Humanism of Leonardo Bruni*, 166-168.
Eugenius’ closest confidants and then later he sent Alfonso an early copy of the *Decades*. Subsequently, the same monarch provided the initial commission for *Italia illustrata*. Ultimately, the newly returned papacy was not critical for Bruni’s and Biondo’s interpretations of Italian history probably because it had not yet become an aggressive fifteenth-century peninsular power.

In any case, in the 1430s, Eugenius entrusted Biondo with critical, political missions. Meanwhile, close to Biondo’s home, Francesco Sforza and his mercenary army was operating at will, destabilizing ecclesiastical lands. Dealing with the shifting alliances of Northern Italian condottieri was a major task of Eugenius’ pontificate. The pope sent Biondo to negotiate with Sforza in 1434, resulting in a treaty that essentially ceded papal territory to Sforza and promised the pope’s goodwill in the condottiero’s future enterprises. Biondo and Sforza would remain on friendly terms for the years to come. Around the same time, the pope was forced to relocate to Florence. There, Biondo met Bruni and soon thereafter effectively went from being a professional notary to a professional humanist historian—but one without ties to a particular city and with vast experience of the panorama of peninsular politics.

Biondo authored four major historical treatises, all in Latin: the *Decades*, a history from the decline of the Roman Empire until his own time, focusing on the Italian

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49 Partner, *Lands of St. Peter*, 408


51 There are no modern translations or even editions of the *Decades*. I consulted a mid-sixteenth-century copy, *Biondi Flavii Forlivensis Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum, libri XXXI* (Basle, 1559) hereafter *Decades*. I also looked at the Italian edition, translated by Lucio Fauno from a redaction by Pope Pius II, who thought Biondo’s history useful, but his Latin poor and in need of editing. Biondo Flavio, *Le historie del Biondo: da la declinatione de l’imperio di Roma insino al tempo suo* trans. Lucio Fauno
peninsula; *Roma instaurata* (1444-6), a topographical look at contemporary and ancient Rome using archeological evidence; *Italia illustrata*, a region-by-region description of Italy, focusing on topography, ancient heritages, and luminaries past and present; and *Roma triumphans* (1456-60), a description of the customs and institutions of ancient Rome.

**The Decades**

Not long after finishing *De verbis romanae locutionis* and definitely before 1439, Biondo began working on a much more expansive historical project, the *Decades*, which would eventually cover the years 412-1441. It is arranged not in ten year segments, but in “decades” of books, the first ten running from 410 to 754, the second until 1410, the third to 1439, and the final section (not included in early editions) covered 1440 and 1441 in two books. Biondo continued to work on it over the next ten years, sending drafts to fellow humanists and potential patrons along the way. By 1453, Biondo claimed, the *Decades* was widely diffused, even beyond the Alps and as far as England, a point he reinforced in a 1463 letter to Francesco Sforza.

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52 I have used the latest edition: Biondo Flavio, *Italia illustrata* vol. 1, edited and translated by Jeffrey A. White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). Note: I have relied on White’s translations, but provided the Latin where significant.

53 Nogara, *Scritti inediti*, LXXXIV.

54 Nogara, *Scritti inediti*, 167 and 212: “Et vedese per certa experientia che in le mie *historie* disseminate per Anglia, Spagna, Franza, quanto per Italia.”
The work’s novelty lay in its broad narrative scheme of the past, which it located within unconventional chronological and geographical boundaries. Biondo reversed Livy’s chronological scheme, which began with the founding of Rome—*ab urbe condita*. Instead Biondo began his narrative with Rome’s fall—*ab inclinatione Romanorum*—and thus became the first historian to explicitly suggest the idea of the decline of the Roman Empire.\(^{55}\) Centuries later, in 1776, the title and conceptual format of Biondo’s work was adopted by Edward Gibbon. In addition, Biondo’s original narrative structure has led some modern observers to credit him with the first complete articulation of the *media aetas*.\(^{56}\) At the start of the *Decades*, the geographical scope includes the entire fading empire, but that is soon narrowed to the Italian peninsula. From the start, though, Biondo thought of his project as one of Italian history that accounted for “above all, the changes in matters Italian.”\(^{57}\)

It is revealing that Biondo did not begin this project under commission—in fact he claims to not have expected any significant financial benefit.\(^{58}\) The motives he cited for writing would not be foreign to a modern historian: he saw lacunae in the historiography, he had criticisms of his predecessors’ arguments, and he thought that he possessed some fresh approaches that could render a more accurate assessment of the past. While still in the middle of composing the *Decades*, in 1443, Biondo sent to


\(^{57}\) In a 1440 letter, written from Biondo, who was still in Florence, to Francesco Barbaro: “maximis quae Italiam agitant rerum varietatibus,” Nogara, *Scritti inediti*, 103.

\(^{58}\) See Biondo’s Letter to Giacomo Bracelli, 10 Decembre 1454 in Nogara, *Scritti inediti*, 168: sed quicquid et qualicumque iudicio dignum sit, quod dicturus sum, uelim credas me, qui nulla ad scribendum spe pecuniaria sim adductus; nullam ab avaritia et ingratiudine injuriam existimare.
Alfonso of Aragon the first eight books and, in the accompanying letter, described the genesis of his current undertaking.

All who cherish literature know that for twelve hundred years the Latins have had few poets and no historians. From Osorius onwards events are obscure. Today we have many who interest themselves in verse, speeches and letter-writing, translating a great deal from Greek into Latin and popularizing some of the mysteries of knowledge in an elegant manner, but not undertaking the large historical work which is called for.

Not only had the production of historical works fallen off of late, in favor of more trendy intellectual activities, but, moreover, the draw of the classical for contemporary scholars had left a conspicuous void in the historical record. Biondo was overstating the case in some ways—after all, his work on the “obscure” age was based on other historical accounts of the same period, including those by Procopius, Osorius, Gregory the Great, and, of course, Leonardo Bruni.

But Biondo, unlike Bruni, did not have at the forefront of his mind the celebration of a particular commune within an Italian context. Biondo was interested in the Italian context per se. The same could be said of the motivations behind Biondo’s other major, peninsular work, the Italia illustrata. Alfonso I of Aragon must have been impressed with the sampling of the Decades Biondo had earlier sent him because, in 1447, he

59 Given that Biondo explicitly stated Italia as the geographical framework for his history, it stands to reason that by “Latins,” Biondo meant “Italians.”

60 The full passage in Nogara, Scritti inediti, 148: Norunt omnes, qui humanitatis bonarumque atrium studis operam dant, mille iam et ducentos exactos esse annos, ex quo poetas oratoresque rarissimos, historiarum vero scriptores omnio nullos Latini habuerunt…Licit vero post ipsum Oroesium nullus historiam scripsit, tanta tamen rerum temporibus quae suam et nostram intercesserunt aetatem gestarum magnitudo, tanta tamque varia multitudo fuit, ut, quorum ordo seriesque et certa narratio deearat, ipsarum rerum indices argumenta connecteas et tenuem quamdam notiam habemus. Tulerunt autem proavorum nostrorum tempora aliquos, habetque nostra aetas multos, qui poemata orations epistulas scribere, multa e Graeco in latinitatem traducere, aliqua ex mediis philosophiae penetrabilibus disserere elegantii prosus oratione norint; sed hoc unicum historiae munus quomobrem omnes declinaverint nullusque vel mediocriter attigerit, nequaquam expedit dici a nobis, qui tamen non verebimur dicere tantam huic labori nostro adhibitam esse hactenus operam, ut omnum avari inopise uniuscuiusque opificis industriam superaverimus. And see Hay, “Biondo and the Middle Ages,” 55.
commissioned Biondo to “illuminate Italy,” by which he meant to reconcile contemporary and ancient Italian names—both places and people. The task was well-suited to Biondo, not only because of his classical interests and his extensive research on the *media aetas*, but also because, on a personal level, Biondo was deeply concerned about whole periods of peninsular history falling out of the collective consciousness.

In the preface to *Italia illustrata* Biondo reminds his readers how the barbarian invasions effectively wiped out not only “the cultivation of the liberal arts” but also, in a way, ancient Italia itself; that is, the ancient names of the regions, cities, and geographical features:

> the art of writing history alone failed utterly and was snuffed out. And because the barbarians confounded everything and because no one, meanwhile, sought to transmit to posterity via the literary record what was being done, we as a result are in great part ignorant of the very location of the regions of Italy, of the cities, towns, lakes and mountains, whose names appear so frequently in the ancient authors, to say nothing of the historical events of the millennium that has elapsed; and what causes me the greater astonishment, the dates of the establishment of many towns and mighty cities, which we perceive to have grown in the interim to great consequence, are hidden from us, as are the names of their founders.  

Biondo’s anxiety about the possibility of forgotten history emerges, too, in his earlier *De verbis romanæ locutionis*, when he speculated that the Lombards had tried to wipe out the Latin language as a means of extinguishing the memory of Rome’s ancient glories.

The barbarians, then, only temporarily obliterated classical Roman culture and the layout

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61 Biondo, *Italia illustrata*, preface, 2-5: etsi bonarum atrium studia intermissa fuerunt, sola in primis omnio cessasvit extinctaque est historia. Quo factum est ut, barbaris omnia evertentibus et nullo interim ea quae gerebantur litterarum monumentis ad posteros transmittente, nedum mille qui effluxerunt annorum gesta sciamus, sed Italiæ regions, urbes, oppida, lacus, flumina, montesque, quorum nomina a vestustis frequentantur scripotoribus, ubi sint magna ex parte ignoramus, et, quod maiorem nobis affert admirationem, multorum oppidorum et potentissimarum civitatum, quas interea in magnum amplitudinem crevisse cernimus, conditarum tempora nos lateant et ipsi etiam conditores.
of ancient Italia, both of which Biondo saw as rediscovered in his own time, not least of all by himself.

In his two works with a peninsular frame, then, Biondo, like Bruni before him, was motivated to explain the intervening centuries separating ancient Rome and his own time. His narrative of that period differed from Bruni’s, at times with direct reference to Bruni, and, thus constitute an active, synchronic conversation, between the two most influential historians of the Quattrocento, about the nature of Italian history.

**Romanitas Italiae**

Biondo read and relied on Bruni’s reading of peninsular history from late antiquity to the present, and so Biondo’s different, at times contrasting, interpretation of the same period of history can be considered a response to his peer. In fact, Biondo’s first order of business in the Decades is to challenge the Florentine’s theory for Rome’s collapse (that it began with the transition from the republic to the principate).

According to Biondo, the shift to a political system led by dynastic emperors did not signal the beginning of Rome’s decline because in the centuries after Julius Caesar and Augustus, Rome’s dominion and power continued to grow and to flourish.\(^\text{62}\) Sound administration, a broadening network of roads, and even many years of peace in the heartland could not possibly be considered a collapse, argued Biondo. In fact, Rome remained strong and even ascendant, he argued, until the reign of Theodosius I, the last powerful emperor.\(^\text{63}\) Biondo dated Rome’s fall to Alaric’s sack of the city in 410; it is at

\[^{62}\] Biondo, *Decades* I.1, 4: quia aucta potius quam imminuta fuit sub Caesarum multis Romana potentia.

\[^{63}\] Biondo, *Decades* I.1, 3: Culmen vero ipsum et tanquam verticem Theodosii superioris…temporibus fuisse dicimus.
that moment that the *Decades* begin. Rome declined because the Goths, Huns, Byzantines, and Lombards took it apart. Bruni’s explanation for the fall of Rome was internal; Biondo’s was external and marked as happening at a much later date.

Biondo’s understanding of Roman history in the first centuries AD also included a critique of Bruni’s argument about the decline of literary production under the emperors. According to Biondo, many of the emperors actually fostered a vibrant cultural scene, while some, such as the stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, even added to it. Still more striking, as Biondo notes in the opening lines of *Italia illustrata*, some emperors, including Caesar, Augustus, and Hadrian, wrote histories. Moreover, wrote Biondo, Latin literary culture remained strong through the first waves of invasions—how else do we account for St. Augustine and Jerome?—and was dealt its near fatal blow only with the devastating Lombard invasions. Thus for Biondo the primary hinge in late antique peninsular history was not the collapse of the Roman republic, but the much later arrival of the Lombards, whose presence threatened Italian memories of their Roman past. It was

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66 Biondo, *Italia illustrata*, VI.26, 300-1: Vident atque intellegunt qui Latinas litteras vero et suo cum sapore degustant, paucus ac prope nullos post doctorum ecclesiae Ambrosii, Hieronymi et Augustini (tempora), quae et eadem inclinantis Romanorum imperii tempora fuerunt, aliqua cum elegantia scripssisse.

67 In the same 1443 letter, Nogara, *Scritti inediti*, 151-2.
then that, according to Biondo, literary production fell off and people stopped recording histories.

In Biondo’s sweeping narrative, then, Italy and Italian history emerge out of antiquity differently than they do in Bruni’s. For the Florentine, at least in his Historiae, Italian history began when the domination by the Roman state ended. Biondo though never saw ancient Roman and subsequent Italian histories as inherently distinct. Biondo’s Italian history thus differs from Bruni’s in its narrative structure, because it never pits the Romans against the Italians, and in its chronology and key turning points, because it does not present libertas as the unifying thread that had characterized the peninsula’s past. Biondo drew from different, less republican-inflected elements of previous Florentine interpretations of Italian history. As Salutati and Petrarch had done, Biondo underscored contrast to barbarian others as a key element of Italian identity and, echoing Dante, he took seriously the notion of a timeless Roman ideal that encompassed much more than just a republican legacy. Romanitas, or Romanness, that is, the ideals of Latin culture broadly conceived, was for Biondo what libertas Italiae was for Bruni. As it was for Dante, for Biondo Romanitas was partly universal in nature. In his Roma triumphans, Biondo presented the contemporary Church as heir to the Roman empire in specific terms: the senators were now cardinals, the emperors were the popes, and the empire’s dominion—now a religious rather than political one—could attain universal reach. But Biondo’s interests were more historical than contemporary and more Italian than universal. Romanitas is a constant, if often unarticulated, theme in Biondo’s histories. Ultimately it is this characteristic that gives Biondo’s narrative of Italian history its structure and chronology.
While a notion of *Romanitas* drove Biondo’s historical narrative of Italy, a different concept drove those of Salutati and Bruni. Those Florentines’ conceptions of the periodization of Italian history revolved around the maintenance of ancient Roman *libertas*: that was what the Romans took from the Etruscans, and what both Salutati and Bruni at times associated with a primordial Italia; it was what the emperors took from the Roman people, which began the decline of classical Rome both politically and culturally; and, finally, it was what the fourteenth and fifteenth-century Florentines, according to their most famous chancellors, preserved for the common benefit of all the peninsula’s inhabitants.

Similarly *Romanitas* marked the major turning points in peninsular history for Biondo, who did not particularly care about the Etruscans. In Biondo’s version of Italian history, only an external force, the Lombards, could threaten the maintenance of *Romanitas* among the peninsula’s inhabitants. Thus his narrative is tripartite in a way that recalls Petrarch’s implicit vision of the past, that is, a first phase, classical culture, which ended with the barbarian invasions, the second phase of northern incursions and cultural floundering, followed by a revival in the author’s own time, which is the third phase.

Biondo’s understanding of that revival, though, differed from both Bruni’s and Petrarch’s. The *Decades* begin on a grim note—Alaric’s sack of Rome in 410. But Biondo promises that his story will brighten; he and the reader can look forward to the later chapters that narrate the revival of old cities and the beginnings of new ones in Italy.68 That section of the *Decades* has been recently called “obviously a paraphrasing of

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68 Biondo, *Decades*, I.3, 30: sed dedit animos, et ut omni absterso pudore scriberemus, nos pulit spes proposita narrandae originis nouarum urbium, praestantissimorumque populum decus, quorum et nouae sobolis excellentia, non parua ex parte Romanam restituit Italiam dignitatem. Videmus nanque dei nostri rebus Italiae indulgentissimi benignitate, multum creuisse Venetam, Senensem,
Bruni’s thesis,” and for good reason, as both note the ascensions and re-ascensions of the same cities at the same moments in history.\textsuperscript{69}

But, unlike Bruni’s, Biondo’s narrative is not driven by any notions of \textit{libertas}. Rather, Biondo emphasizes \textit{Romanitas} in two ways: first, by recalling a peaceful ancient peninsula free from the presence of foreign armies and, second, by recalling the flourishing literary culture of antiquity, both before and during the imperial period.

Thus Biondo observes evidence of \textit{Romanitas} even after the empire’s collapse and he uses those historical moments of Romanness to build his narrative of Italian history. For instance, he goes to great lengths to praise Theodoric, who, as “king of Italy,” oversaw a brief but valuable respite from turmoil during the sixth century.\textsuperscript{70} For Bruni, Theodoric was just another in a long line of barbarian conquerors. Biondo lamented Italy’s miserable state, from late antiquity down to his own time. Writing of a brief moment of calm in 1428, he notes that “Italy was now quiet, which in the centuries before had rarely occurred.”\textsuperscript{71}

Crucially, Biondo also saw \textit{Romanitas} as the foundation for a shared Italian identity, though, of course, he did not use such terms. Instead, he developed a sense of Italy’s Roman identity in two ways, one “negative” and one “positive”: by defining Italians and their culture in contrast to outsiders and by linking Italians to a culture of

\textsuperscript{69} Mazzocco, “Decline and Rebirth,” 258.

\textsuperscript{70} Hay, “Biondo and the Middle Ages,” 45.

\textsuperscript{71} Biondo, \textit{Decades} III.2, 446: quiescebat Italia, quod multis anteactis seculis raro contigisse constabat.
their own, inherited from the ancient Romans and identifiable for unique—and superior—characteristics.

Biondo reinforced the distinction between the peninsula’s inhabitants and barbarian “others” by registering particular disgust with foreign mercenaries’ infestation of the peninsula. “Mercenaries of that sort [i.e., foreign],” he wrote, “who had been laid off or succumb to the lust for plunder inflicted more frequent and more extensive damage on our cities than those from whom such damage had been feared.” Native mercenaries were a different matter, however. Biondo praises Alberigo da Barbiano—a condottiero whom Biondo knew—for recruiting fighting units comprised of Italian warriors who “harried the foreigners with such ferocity.”

Bruni’s libertas-driven narrative of Italian history also underscored the problems of foreign invaders, but where Bruni was concerned with those invasions violating the libertas of Italia, Biondo was more particularly concerned with the presence of foreign cultures, which threatened to dilute what remained of ancient Roman culture: the Lombards had come close to destroying Roman culture, and the fifteenth-century foreign mercenaries could do the same. For this reason, Biondo had a different reading of the political shape Italy took on following Charlemagne’s defeat of the Lombards and the rise of communal governments. Bruni had marked the reemergence of Italian communities as beginning with their reacquisition of their individual independence after the invasions and in the vacuum of power between popes and emperors. Certainly, Bruni

72 Biondo, Italia illustrata, VI.44, 320-1: Acciditque dimissos aliquando aut alias cum praedandi libido incessit huiusmodi mercenarios milites plura maioraque damna nostratibus quam eos a quibus timebatur intulisse.

73 Biondo, Italia illustrata, VI.47, 322-3: qua cum societate adeo ardenti celsoque animo externos Albricus est insectatus.
was not happy with the way the Italian communities of his day were at one another’s throats, but, nor in his Historiae, does he present internecine warfare as a particular problem. Instead, Bruni focuses on celebrating the restored autonomy of the Italian communities, which had been denied them first under the hegemony of Rome and then under the turmoil of the barbarian invasions.

Biondo though marks the revival of Italy’s political scene with the expulsion of the externi by Alberigo, an event that occurred within Biondo’s own time. He probably had Bruni in mind when he wrote in Italia illustrata that others may feel differently, but my own opinion is that the expulsion of foreign soldiers from Italy (the English, Bretons, and Germans) was of such importance that her wealth increased and she had greater peace—certainly a more secure peace—ever afterwards.\footnote{Biondo, Italia illustrata, VI.50, 324-327: Sentiant vero quicquid alii volunt: nostra fert opinio tanti fuisse externos milites Anglos, Brittones, Germanosque Italia pulsos esse ut postea et opibus magis abundaverit et maiorem, certe tutiorem quietem [postea] semper hebuerit.}

Biondo believed he was living in a special time and that he was witness to Italy’s reemergence after centuries of neglect and destruction. The fact that the Italian cities’ autonomy led them to attack one another almost unceasingly, somehow reassured Biondo that the peninsula was on an upswing. City-state warfare, for Biondo, was a source of Italian identity, even pride.

It is true that in the wars that have been waged after the foreigners were thrown out, the pillaging of towns and cities does take place, but our people commonly restrain themselves from wholesale destruction, burning, and murdering. And what is lost as plunder to one Italian piles up as wealth for another, which the barbarous foreigner would have made off with. In fact we see the reverse has happened: since many Italians have taken to serving in the French and English armies as expensive mercenaries, money and spoils are being transferred from those countries to Italy. No one will convince me that the sumptuousness, elegance and other magnificent paraphernalia of our buildings, dress, and decoration,
and all the rest of the life we live in this world—surely pitched at a higher level than was customary in the past—originated from anything other than this sense of security and being protected. All of this redounds to the deserved honor and glory of Alberigo.\textsuperscript{75}

In a sense, Biondo’s perspective here is—unique for the period—unfettered by regional bias; he sees the situation in Italian terms. On the other hand, his elevation of Alberigo to savior status must be understood in the context of the captain’s ties to Biondo’s home region, the Romagna.

It may seem, then, that Biondo had a “weak” conception of Italia in the sense that his Italia was defined by the absence of foreigners. Yet, this is not the case. Biondo’s Italia possessed distinctive qualities of its own, inherited from ancient Roman culture and visible once again in the fifteenth century.

\textbf{Italian History, Shipwrecked}

Biondo sensed that Italy’s cultural revival was happening in his own time. He saw this revival as part of a long process wherein the peninsula’s intellectuals slowly rebuilt the intellectual and literary structures that had flourished in antiquity. Biondo ultimately came to view the peninsula’s unified humanistic culture as the prime indicator of a proud Italian identity that was both new and indebted to the ancient past.

\textsuperscript{75} Biondo, \textit{Italia illustrata}, VI.50, 326-7: \textit{Nam etsi in bellis quae post eam externorum eiectionem sunt gesta urbiwm oppidorumque direptiones committuntur, ab excidio tamen incendio et sanguine nostri saepius temperant et quod uni in expilatione damno es opes alteri Italic Orientalium—quas externus barbarusque asportasset. Quin etiam econtra factum videmus ut, cum multi ex Italicis magna conducti mercede Francisc atque Anglicis coeperint militare, spolia inde et pecuniae in Italian deferantur. Nullusque mihi ostendet aedificandi, vestiendi, ornandi et ceteram omem vitae huius nostrae quam hoc saeculo vivimus luxuriam, lauticiam, ceterosque magnificos apparatus, his qui superioribus saeculis fiebant certe maiores, aliunde quam ab hac securitate et tutela originem habuisse, quae omnia Albrico nostro…non immerito laudem gloriam perpetuam accumulant.}
In *Italia illustrata*, Biondo set out to compose “not just a description of Italy, but also a catalogue of her famous and outstanding men, as well as a summary of no small part of Italian history.”\(^{76}\) Biondo notes though that that sort of project could only have been successfully undertaken at the time that he did:

And so, seeing that the times have changed for the better…seeing that the cultivation of the rest of the arts of eloquence, especially, has come alive again; and seeing that, because of these developments, a passion to study history in greater depth has caught up to the men of our time, I wanted to discover if, through the practical experience of the history of Italy I have gained, I shall be able to apply the names of current coinage to the appropriate places and peoples of Italian antiquity, to settle the authenticity of the new nomenclature, to revive and record the names that have been obliterated, and in a word to bring some light to bear upon the murkiness of Italian history.\(^{77}\)

In undertaking an effort to illuminate the “murky” intervening centuries, Biondo inferred a barren period in Italian learning, which was only just beginning to flourish again. He did not use the phrase “dark ages.” But in describing his task to recover lost or forgotten place names from antiquity he did employ another evocative analogy: “but I would propose that I be thanked for having hauled ashore some planks from so vast a shipwreck, planks which were floating on the surface of the water or nearly lost to view, rather than be required to account for the entire lost ship.”\(^{78}\)

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\(^{76}\) Biondo, *Italia illustrata*, I.9, 18-9: ut non magis haec Italiae sit descriptio quam virorum eius illustrium praestantiumque catalogus ac non parvae parties historiarum Italiae breviarum.

\(^{77}\) Biondo, *Italia Illustrata*, preface, 4-5: Itaque, postquam propitiore nobis deo nostro meliora habet aetas nostra, et cum ceterarum atrium tum maxime eloquentiae studia revixerunt, ac per ea historiarum diligentius noscendarum amor nostros hominess cepit, tentare volui an per eam quam sum nactus Italiae rerum peritiam vetustioribus locis eius et populis nominum novitatem, novis auctoritatem, deletis vitam memoriae dare, denique rerum Italiae obscuritatem illustrare potero.

\(^{78}\) Biondo, *Italia illustrata*, preface, 4-5: sed gratias mihi potius de perductis ad litus e tanto naufragio supernatantibus, parum autem apparentibus, tabulis haberi, quam de tota navi desiderata rationem a me exposci debere contenderim.
Bruni had dated the revival of ancient learning to Petrarch, in the fourteenth century and had, in fact, also placed it a little earlier, in the figure of Dante. In short, Bruni had seen the Italian revival of letters as beginning with Tuscan vernacular literature. Biondo, as Mazzocco has recently noted, barely mentions Dante in his catalogue of great Tuscans.\(^79\) Biondo even downplays Petrarch as having marked a turning point—yes, he was “a man of great talent and even greater industry,” but, according to Biondo, “he never attained the full flower of Ciceronian eloquence that we see gracing so many men of our own time.”\(^80\)

But Biondo saw Italy’s cultural revival as more than a question of writers matching Cicero’s Latin elegance; he saw it as a widespread movement—the diffusion of humanist learning and practitioners. As with the expulsion of the foreigners, this key development had roots in Biondo’s home Romagna region.\(^81\) He understood the growth of humanist culture in terms of a genealogy of teachers, originally focused in Ravenna and in the person of Giovanni Malpaghini, of whom little is known,\(^82\) but Biondo credits as being “the first to bring back to Italy the study of eloquence, now so flourishing here after its long exile.”\(^83\)

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79 Mazzocco, “Decline and Rebirth,” 266.


81 It should be noted—the *Italia illustrata* is by no means a balanced work. Biondo did not include the islands, although he originally meant to, his descriptions of the South were sparse and often inaccurate, and the chapter of his home Romagna is by far the longest.

82 M. Signorini, “Malpaghini, Giovanni” in *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* vol. 68 (Rome: Catanzaro, 2007), 266-269.

Things then started to develop rapidly. Malpaghini’s students were many and included Poggio Bracciolini and Guarino da Verona—who later became Biondo’s teacher. Manuel Chrysoloras then came from Byzantium and instructed the better part of Malpaghini’s students in Greek. Then that group and the subsequent generation began hunting down ancient manuscripts, which accelerated the spread and depth of the revived learning: “this great enthusiasm for acquiring knowledge had taken hold of many people in Italy…a number of our countrymen began to conduct searches and enquire whether any of the lost books of the Romans and old Italy were hiding in the recesses of monasteries in Germany.” The students then became teachers, spreading out to Florence, Venice, Milan, and Rome. The result was that Biondo saw in his time more ancient manuscripts, more Greek, and more schools, in short “an age having richer and finer resources of expression at its disposal than Petrarch enjoyed…and so academies all over Italy have long been hives of activity, and they are more and more active now with each passing day.” As much as any other factor, a culture of learning defined Biondo’s Italy and its history; during its absence, the peninsula was shipwrecked; upon its return, Italy became new again.

Decades Later

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84 Biondo, *Italia illustrata*, VI.28, 302-5: Et cum magnus bene discendi ardor multos in Italia apprehendisset...et investigare coeperunt ex nostratibus multi si quos Germaniae loca Constantiae proxima ex deperditis Romanorum et Italicæ olim libris in monasteriorum latebris occultaret.

85 Biondo, *Italia illustrata*, VI.30, 306-7: Quo ex tot liborum, ipsius eloquentiae fomitum, allato nostris hominibus adiumento factum videmus ut maior meliorque ea quam Petrarcha habuit dicendi copia in nostram pervenerit aetatem...Hinc ferbuertn diu magisque nunc ac magis fervent per Italian gymnasia.
It should be noted that Biondo’s influence of late has been tacit. One scholar has aptly credited him with an “anonymous immortality.” Today his works are more known than read; this, however was not the case in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In terms of subsequent Renaissance historiography, Biondo’s narrative of Italian history exerted more influence than did Bruni’s. In fact, Biondo has been called the “true heir to Bruni” because it was largely through Biondo’s writings that Bruni’s historical methods were disseminated throughout northern Italy. A generation of humanist historians “assumed [Biondo’s] work as a common reference point;” it was “the major stimulus and guide of humanistic historiography in Northern Italy.”

An often overlooked aspect of Biondo’s role in perpetuating this new historiography is the fact that his work assumed an Italian framework for the ancient, medieval, and contemporary parts. A peninsular context was far from the norm in

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86 Hay, "Biondo and the Middle Ages." 35.

87 Biondo’s anonymity among modern Renaissance historians is somewhat misleading. Most scholars know of him, they just are not familiar with his works. A major reason for this is that Biondo’s writings are not as accessible as they should be. The most recent edited volume of his opere dates to the mid-sixteenth century, Flavio Biondo, Blondi Flavii ... De Roma triumphant e lib. X. priscorum scriptorum lectoribus utilissimi, ad totius q[u]e Romanae antiquitatis cognitionem pernecessarij. Romae instauratae libri III. De origine ac gestis Venetorum liber. Italia illustrata, siue lustrata ... in regiones seu provincias dieva XVIII. Historiarvm ab inclinato Ro. imperio, decades III ... (Basileae, 1559). Italian translations from the same time are also available, but they are mostly translated from redacted versions. Within the past few years two English translations of Italia illustrata have appeared, but they lack some of the eastern and all of the southern regions covered by Biondo. This is the case with the volume edited by White and that by Catherine J Castner and Flavio Biondo, Biondo Flavio's Italia illustrata: Text, Translation, and Commentary (Binghamton, NY: Global Academic, 2005). More readily available are his minor works and letters in the collection edited by Nogara, Scritti inediti. None of this was a problem in the Renaissance, however, when Biondo’s histories, especially the Decades, were widely consumed. This was true even beyond the Alps. According to Fubini, “Biondo Flavio,” 555: “la diffusione dell’opera di B. fu immediata e d’ambito europeo.” Biondo also thought his work was well-diffused beyond the Alps, even as far as England. He made this point in a 1463 letter to Francesco Sforza, which can be found in Nogara, Scritti inediti, 167 and 212: “Et uedese per certa experientia che in le mie historie disseminate per Anglia, Spagna, Franza, quanto per Italia.”

88 This is argument is made convincingly in Gary Ianziti, “From Flavio Biondo to Lodrisio Crivelli: The Beginning of Humanistic Historiography in Sforza Milan,” Rinascimento (20) 1980: 3-39.

89 Ibid., 6.
Quattrocento historiographies; most were urban in scope. Italian historians did not universally adopt Italy as the framework for their projects in the wake of Biondo, but because his histories were major reference points for immediately subsequent historians, those historians were constrained at minimum to confront the notion of Italian history and to somehow situate their narrower geographical subjects in a wider, peninsular frame.

The humanist Platina, for instance, who was employed by the Gonzaga court in Mantua, complained about the absence of information Biondo provided about that city and its illustrious family, but went on to utilize Biondo’s *Decades* as a major source of his own project, the *Lives of the Popes*. Other historians engaged in locally-framed projects critiqued Biondo’s wider, Italian lens, but, even then, in challenging Biondo, those historians ended up contributing to the ongoing dialogical construction of the idea of Italia.

This happened, for example, in Milan, as Gary Ianziti has explained. When the duke of that city, Filippo Maria Visconti died heirless, the military commander Francesco Sforza gained control of the city through force. Once entrenched, he attempted to further consolidate his position through a stable of historiographers, beginning with Lodrisio Crivelli, who were charged with narrating and justifying Sforza’s domination of the city. Crivelli, Ianziti notes, had read Biondo in preparation for his task. He complained that

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90 Hay, "Biondo and the Middle Ages," 61.


Biondo had given both internal Milanese events and the Sforza short shrift and blamed it on Biondo’s expansive geographical scope, but, because Biondo was his main source of information, he was nevertheless constrained to explain the Sforza ascent within an Italian narrative of the recent past.

Biondo’s influence on conceptions of Italian history, however, have come down to the present primarily through the works of Niccolò Machiavelli. Bruni and Biondo were both influential for Machiavelli’s readings of the past, and Bruni in particular for Machiavelli’s *Storie fiorentine*. But on matters Italian, Biondo’s tracks, not Bruni’s, emerge in Machiavelli’s pages. This is especially true in the *Storie fiorentine*, the first section of which practically ignores Florentine history in favor of a narrative from the fall of Rome down to the mid-fifteenth century—a narrative that some modern observers have noted, relies most heavily on Biondo’s *Decades*. Biondo’s influence appears, too, in Machiavelli’s broader thinking on the peninsula and its historical inheritances—in particular his trademark hatred of foreign mercenaries and his deep longings for peace in Italy. Machiavelli was living in a different time than were Bruni and Biondo. Unlike Biondo, he could not write of a peninsula relatively free of barbarian invaders.

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94 Ibid., 23-28: “As the first humanist to undertake to write a full-blown history of the Sforzas, Crivelli found himself in an entirely new situation. If he really hoped to give the Sforzas their due he could not write a simple biography; he had to stretch out to cover ‘quod aetate nostra illustre per Italiam contigerit.’ That is to say, he had to write a history of Italy in the Quattrocento, a story of manifold events in which both the Sforzas had played a central role.”

95 Hay, “Biondo and the Middle Ages,” 61, for example.
Chapter Four

La Virtù Italica: Italy in Crisis, 1494-1513

The Calamità d’Italia

By the middle of the fifteenth century, around the time of Biondo’s death in 1463, the political contours of the Italian peninsula had undergone enough changes that Dante and Petrarch might have had trouble recognizing it. The constellation of independent communes, principalities and duchies that had previously defined Italy’s political terrain gave way in the fifteenth century to five domineering regional powers: Florence annexed most of Tuscany, Venice expanded into the Romagnan mainland, Milan held sway over Lombardy, the popes consolidated their traditional patrimony in central Italy, and the Kingdom of Naples’ domain extended throughout the South, including Sicily. These territorial states developed a balance of power system (though that description was not contemporary, but dates to Guicciardini’s history from the mid-sixteenth century), which was confirmed in the 1454 Treaty of Lodi.¹

The diplomatic equilibrium was a delicate one. In the early 1490s Ludovico “il Moro” Sforza (1452-1508) was ruling Milan for his younger nephew, who was the duke. Wary of the designs of the other powers to unseat him, Ludovico petitioned the French

monarch Charles VIII (1470-1498) to come to Italy, claim Naples, and cement Ludovico’s status in Milan. The French kings had dynastic claims to the Kingdom of Naples that were based on the Anjou line and dated back to the thirteenth century. The immediacy of the Hundred Years’ War had previously minimized the importance of Naples for the French kings, but, in the last years of the fifteenth century, the timing seemed right. The French could raise an army bigger than that of any of the Italian states and Charles had had his eye on Naples as part of a grand scheme to wage a war against the Turks. In 1494 he crossed the Alps with an army that stunned most Italian leaders into submission without a fight. Machiavelli later wrote that Charles “took Italy with chalk,” that is, he conquered the peninsula without fighting—his troops merely had to mark with chalk the residences that they were requisitioning for the night.² Charles took Naples easily, but left after six months because, in 1495, an alliance of worried potentates including the pope, the Venetians, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the king of Spain had gathered to oppose the French. Charles’ army, stricken with syphilis, barely made it back to France.

Even after this first rupture to the Italian political scene, no one on the peninsula understood the full extent of the traumatic and profound changes that were about to occur. Over the next three decades, the larger northern European armies fought out their continental ambitions on the Italian peninsula, and, in the process, ended the system of self-determining Italian states. All the armies involved were mercenary at least in part and without respect to modern national boundaries. The French hired Italians and Swiss

and Italians fought Italians.\textsuperscript{3} The Italian Wars, or, to use Guicciardini’s phrase, the
\textit{calamità d’Italia}, were characterized by bewildering diplomatic activity; the Italian states
did their best to preserve what autonomy they had left by attempting to play both the
larger European powers and the other Italian ones off of one another.

In 1498 Louis XII succeeded Charles VIII to the French throne. As a descendent
of the Visconti, Louis had claims on the city of Milan and, almost immediately after
becoming king, he signed an agreement with the Venetians for the partitioning of Milan
and seized it from Ludovico. The Borgia Pope Alexander VI and his son Cesare took full
advantage of the French presence on the peninsula: between 1499 and 1502 the French
helped Cesare carve out a state of his own in the Romagna region. After Alexander’s
death and the ascension of Julius II (1443-1513), an enemy of the Borgia, Cesare’s state
fell apart. Julius was an aggressive pope who quickly went after reclaiming papal lands
that Venice had acquired in Cesare’s absence. The Holy Roman Empire and France
backed Julius against Venice, who, surprisingly, scored some important victories. The
League of Cambrai (1508) united most of the major Italian and European powers against
Venice. But when Julius saw the extent of France’s influence on the peninsula, he grew
anxious and called for the expulsion of the French barbarians—technically still his
allies—from the peninsula. The so-called “Holy League” against France began in 1511
and brought another round of fighting to northern and central Italy. In 1512 the French
scored a major victory at Ravenna, prompting the combined Spanish and papal forces to
move towards Tuscany, where they restored the Medici regime, which had been expelled
from Florence during the initial invasions of Charles VIII. The war against France

\textsuperscript{3} Piero Pieri, \textit{Il Rinascimento e la crisi militare italiana del Rinascimento} (Turin: Einaudi, 1952), 612.
continued after Julius’ death in 1513 and into the papacy of the Medici Pope Leo X (1475-1521).

The dynamic of the wars then began to change. In 1515 Francis I became king of France and in 1519 Charles V Hapsburg, already governor of the Netherlands and king of Spain, was elected Holy Roman Emperor. Francis understandably felt surrounded and threatened by Hapsburg-ruled territories. Over the next decade-and-a-half their battle for greater European hegemony took place largely on the Italian peninsula. During those years the Medici popes, Leo X and then Clement VII (1478-1534), were compelled to ally themselves temporarily with Francis or Charles, depending on who held the upper hand at the moment.

Charles’ forces won a key victory at Pavia in 1525, where they took Francis prisoner and brought him back to Spain. Although Francis was released—after making promises that he quickly renounced—Charles held the upper hand for good in Italy. Clement engineered the League of Cognac in 1526, which included Venice, Florence, and France, but it won no major battles. In 1527 imperial troops brutally sacked Rome. In 1530 the “last Florentine republic” was defeated by combined papal and imperial forces and Charles installed the Medici dukes as rulers. None of the Italian states, even if ostensibly independent like the papacy and Venice, remained truly autonomous. In Bologna in 1530 Clement crowned Charles both emperor and king of Italy.⁴

**Historical Thought and the Calamità**

When the invasions started, the Italian peninsula was the preeminent center of

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humanistic intellectual activity in Europe, a point that Biondo’s histories had celebrated in the 1460s. The decades of war and political turmoil significantly affected the ways in which intellectuals on the peninsula viewed the world around them. The waves of devastation, which, for the Italians, had been unexpected and were ultimately uncontrollable, shook intellectuals’ confidence in many of the established, humanist categories of inquiry. In particular, the invasions challenged previous epistemological assumptions about the capacity of scholarly studies to fully explain reality and the capacity of humans to control reality. After 1494 many peninsular writers saw fortuna—the uncontrollable, unpredictable force in human affairs—as dominant.\(^5\)

A recognition of that paradigm shift has formed the basis of some of the most important modern studies of Italian political and historical thought in the early sixteenth century, including those by J.G.A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner, Felix Gilbert, and Rudolf von Albertini.\(^6\) The influence of those and other works have established a tendency in modern scholarship to view historical writing during the calamità as more “modern” that that which came before the invasions. Early sixteenth-century peninsular historians were, after all, searching for ways to understand why and how the travesties of the previous few years had come about. For such a historical task, examples from classical history and

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\(^5\) For more on Italian intellectuals’ responses to the crises, see Kenneth Gouwens, *Remembering the Renaissance: Humanist Narratives of the Sack of Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), which looks at curial humanists during and after the 1527 Sack of Rome and Mario Santoro, *Fortuna, ragione e prudenza nella civiltà letteraria della Cinquecento* (Naples: Liguori, 1978), which examines the tensions between reason and fortuna in the thinking of a broad range of early sixteenth-century Italian writers.

classical models of history writing were only minimally helpful. In general, according to modern scholars, historians during the invasions challenged previously held notions that the study of the ancients was crucial for understanding contemporary politics. Instead of directing their gaze back to antiquity, early sixteenth-century historians looked to the tumultuous world around them and to the complex motivations of the different political actors. Less concerned with conforming to classical or humanist historiographical prescriptions, they wrote in the vernacular. They assessed causes and effects with an epistemological humility, allowing for the unknowable and unpredictable, and thus gave rise, according to the traditional scholarly narrative, to a more “realistic” and “modern” model of historiography, exemplified most famously by Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini.

The ways that historians of that generation approached the ideas of Italia and of Italian history both confirm and complicate modern scholars’ traditional understanding of the new historiography in early sixteenth-century Italy. As part of their increased emphasis on recent history, peninsular historians including Bernardo Rucellai, Francesco Vettori, and Guicciardini began to set their works in an explicit Italian frame—in the previous century only Biondo had done so. There was also an important interpretive shift in the historiography of Italy. As different as their interpretations of the peninsula’s past were, Dante, Petrarch, Salutati, Bruni, and Biondo all assumed that a common classical inheritance was, in one way or another, the defining feature of Italian history. The same was not true in the sixteenth century, when ancient Rome’s importance for peninsular historical narratives faded. Historians then did not necessarily deny or challenge the existence of important cultural and political connections between ancient Rome and
contemporary Italy, they just did not see the exploration of that connection as clearly relevant for their historical tasks, which was, generally, to reach some kind of understanding of what exactly had happened in the recent decades and why. Thus, Italian history during the calamità became less rhetorical than it was for Salutati and Bruni and more about specific, recent, and formative events.

Part of the reason that ancient Rome faded from Italian historiography in the early 1500s was who was writing histories. Salutati, Bruni and Biondo were all involved in the politics of their day, but their involvement was a result of their humanistic education and associated skills as writers. They were professional humanists. Most of the sixteenth-century histories that posit an Italian past came from the pens of statesmen who were humanistically educated, but who also came to write history not as part of ongoing scholarly pursuits within a relatively well-defined humanistic community. Instead, sixteenth-century statesmen like Machiavelli, Vettori, and Guicciardini wrote histories because they were forced into exile or retirement due to the political turbulations of the period. Thus, for them, recovery of the “shipwrecked” classical Roman past, to use Biondo’s phrase, was not as important as was their genuine desire to explain how they as individuals and the collective Italian states had reached such dire straights.

But ancient Rome did not fade completely out of sight. In fact, how ancient Rome lingered in some sixteenth-century interpretations of Italian history complicates the traditional scholarly narrative sketched above. Skinner, Pocock and Gilbert all recognize the formative influence that classical literature exerted in the individual educations and the general intellectual climate that helped to shape the thinking of men like Machiavelli and Guicciardini, but those modern scholars also emphasize a decisive epistemological
break that occurred in the context of the *calamità* and that involved the rejection of the older, classically-inspired models of political and historical thought. The hero of that narrative, the Renaissance writer most representative of the rupture with older models, is, almost without fail, always Machiavelli. Certainly his style, which combines ancient and modern examples and acute observations of human nature all in support of universal claims about politics, was unique and new.

However, Machiavelli’s conceptions of Italia and of Italian history, when examined in their contemporary intellectual context, complicate matters. While Machiavelli’s Florentine peers such as Vettori and Guicciardini were reimagining and rewriting historical narratives of Italia, Machiavelli clung to older Trecento and Quattrocento assumptions about the primary and enduring importance of classical Rome for contemporary Italy. Machiavelli viewed Italia through a set of ancient lenses; he thought contemporary Italians were the heirs of the ancient Romans and that that mattered in the context of their struggle against outside invaders. His emphasis on the antiquity of Italian history and identity was crucial in determining how he interpreted the traumatic events of his day—a fact that is important both for considerations of Machiavelli’s legacy as a political realist and as an early promoter of an Italian identity. Machiavelli represents a key hinge in the history of the development of Italian history; but he was not representative of the early sixteenth century in that regard.

The next two chapters contain two main arguments. The first is that the invasions that began in 1494 decisively changed the basic structure of historians’ conversations about the nature of Italia and of Italian history, moving it away from antiquity and toward the present, away from the celebratory and toward the lamentable, and away from the
rhetorical and toward the practical. The second argument is that Machiavelli’s thoughts on the issue went in the opposite direction.

**Calamitas Italiae**

Before Machiavelli, Vettori, and Guicciardini composed any of their historical works, another Florentine, Bernardo Rucellai (1448-1514),\(^7\) wrote an account in Latin of the first wave of the Italian wars, the invasion by Charles VIII, called *De bello italico* (the exact date of its composition is unknown, but he began thinking about it in 1495 and finished it before 1509).\(^8\) Rucellai was linked to the Medici by marriage (to Lorenzo il Magnifico’s older sister, Nannina) and had been personally involved with some of the tumultuous events of 1494.\(^9\) He was also a humanist. Just after the French army had taken and then abandoned Naples, Rucellai was sent by the Florentine government to the southern city on an ambassadorial mission. Rucellai apparently was already planning on composing a history of the war because, while there, he took the opportunity to consult one of the leading humanists of the day, Giovanni Pontano (1426-1503) on historiographical theory.\(^10\) Pontano and his intellectual circle advised Rucellai to imitate the style of either Livy, Caesar, or Sallust; Rucellai chose the latter. *De bello italico* is Sallustian in the sense that it narrates the events of a single war and focuses the narration

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\(^10\) See the account of the meeting and subsequent correspondence in Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini* 203-218 and Santoro, *Fortuna, ragione e prudenza*, 141-155.
around lengthy battle descriptions and the strategies of the major players—in this case, the French King Charles VIII, King Alfonso in Naples, the Venetians, Pope Alexander VI, Piero de Medici in Florence, and Ludovico il Moro Sforza in Milan. He also took to heart the historiographical prescriptions that Pontano set forth in his Actius, which emphasize the classical aims of historiography, which include above all the illustration of moral lessons from the past.\(^{11}\)

What was decidedly contemporary and unclassical about Rucellai’s history was that it employed Italia as the dominant geographical frame and unifying narrative device. In its Italian scope and in other important ways, Rucellai’s work prefigured those of Vettori Guicciardini, and Machiavelli.

Rucellai underscored a new period of Italian history, one defined by poor leadership and its consequences—\textit{calamitas}. He begins the work by noting that the history of the French invasion is not filled with admirable, virtuous examples, but by displays of weakness and stupidity.\(^{12}\) He recognizes a break between the former, happier times in Italy and a new, sad period of peninsular history.\(^{13}\) According to Rucellai, Lorenzo de Medici and Ferdinand of Aragon had maintained Italy’s “common liberty and peace” \([\text{communem libtertatem pacemque}]\) by orchestrating alliances between the major

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\(^{11}\) On Rucellai’s adoption of Pontano’s historiographical formulae see Santoro, \textit{Fortuna, ragione e prudenza}, 143-173.

\(^{12}\) Rucellai, \textit{De bello italico}, 1-2: \textit{Atqui hoc itidem fieri in historia minime contingit. Nam quum prima lex fit, ne quid falsi dicere, ne quid veri tacere audeamus, ratio, ac facultas omnis declinandi scelera, flagita, ignaviam, nobis erepta.}

\(^{13}\) Rucellai, \textit{De bello italico}, 2: \textit{Fortunati igitur illi videntur, quibus contigit ea descripississe tempora, unde virorum praecelara facinora magis quam insignia scelera illustrentur; aut incidisse in eam vivendi rationem eisque mores hominum, qui auribus aequis excipere monumenta ingenii memoriamque rerum gestarum. Nobis autem, qui malo humani generis in ea saecula devenimus, quibus omnia iura divina atque humana permiscentur; unde secura imperia saeva, scelesta, facinorosa, bella, excidia, strages; miserendum est: quippe quibus necesse habetur vel praeterire silentio huius aetatis memoriam, vel plerque omnia describere ingrato animo horrenda posteris, ac iis ipsis, qui ea viderint, reformidanda.}
peninsular powers. Felix Gilbert has credited Rucellai with the first articulation of the modern concept of “balance of power politics,” a notion that Guicciardini more famously employed in his *Storia d’Italia*, over twenty years later.\(^\text{14}\) The Italian peace lasted until the early 1490s, when the two rulers died.\(^\text{15}\) Then, according to Rucellai, under the watch of their sons, Piero in Florence and Ferrante in Naples, the diplomatic equilibrium collapsed and things on the peninsula began to spiral out of control—the beginning of what Rucellai labeled the *calamitas Italiae* (a phrase that Guicciardini later adopted and Italianized).\(^\text{16}\) With the old leaders gone and the old alliances on the brink, Italia became unstable, a “plaything for fortuna,” and thus ripe for invasion.\(^\text{17}\)

Rucellai also often incorporated Italia into the moralizing aspect of his history: Italia and the *populi Italiae*\(^\text{18}\) pay the price for the peninsular leaders’ weaknesses. In the *De bello italico*, one of those weak leaders is Ludovico “il Moro” Sforza, who initially encouraged Charles VIII to descend into Italy. Rucellai portrays Ludovico as selfishly ambitious, but also ultimately cognizant of his great error. Rucellai constructs a fictional letter from Ludovico to Piero in which Ludovico expresses a concern for the *populi*


\(^{15}\) Rucellai, *De bello italico*, 4: Hi longe prudentissimi omnium Italiae principum, cum ad protegendum communem libertatem pacemque et otium intendissent animum, consociassentque consilia, iam inde a parentibus veluti iure haereditario relata ac per manus tradita, ea assidue agitare, movere, niti, quibus res Italiae starent, ac (ut illorum verbis utar) examine aequo penderent. Verebantur enim gravissimi homines, ac longe animo in posterum prospicientes, ne sociorum atque amicorum labefactata imperia ad se reciderent: neque ruere illa posse existimabant, quin sua quoque eodem motu concussa prolaberentur.

\(^{16}\) Rucellai, *De bello italico*, 4-5: At liberi (ut interdum res humanae se habent) parentibus longe dissimiles, patrum consiliis spretis, ea primum moliti, deinde aggressi sunt, unde calamitas Italiae simul et sui exitium orirentur.

\(^{17}\) Rucellai, *De bello italico*, 34: In Italiam igitur aestuantem inter fortunae ludibria laborantemque intestinis fluctibus, Carolus descendit.

\(^{18}\) Rucellai, *De bello italico*, 17.
Italiae. The Milanese leader encourages the Florentine to do everything he can to stem the violence, which could easily become overwhelming—or overflowing: Rucellai employs the same raging river metaphor for the invasions that Machiavelli later made famous in The Prince.\textsuperscript{19} Sforza’s letter depicts its author as (now) supremely concerned with recapturing “Italy’s peace” [quietem Italiae].\textsuperscript{20}

Bernardo Rucellai was one of the first Italian historians to begin to consider the possibility that the foreign invasions that began in 1494 would irrevocably alter the dynamics of peninsular politics. Another contemporary historian who also recognized early on the calamitous nature of the invasions for the whole peninsula was Bernardino Corio (1459-1519).\textsuperscript{21} Corio was a Milanese historian in the employ of several Sforza dukes and who served as a public official and confidant of Ludovico “il Moro” Sforza, who infamously invited Charles VIII to invade Italy in 1494. After Ludovico was compelled to flee the city, Corio retired to his country villa and in 1503 he sent to the presses his Storia di Milano, which he had begun in 1485. Looking back on the events of 1494, Corio saw his “unknowing” \textit{[non cognoscendo]} patron as having ignited an “inextinguishable conflagration” that “ruined not only the Sforza family, but almost all Italy.”\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{19} Rucellai, \textit{De bello italico}, 22: Quod ad se attineret, in manu sua esse Gallos finibus sui vel emittere vel continere: cum Alpes transcenderint, nequaquam sibi caeterisve Italiae populis, si postea velint, fore obsistendi potestatem: altissima quaeque flumina parva primo aggeris strue contineri alveo; qua delapsi quantamvis postea molem obiectam facile exuperare.

\textsuperscript{20} Rucellai, \textit{De bello italico}, 23: Petri igitur fore partes futurae inundationi occurrere, pacemque interponere, cuius conciliandae potestatem facturum. Quod si per illum controversiae componantur, quietem Italiae, pacem provinciarum, salutem imperii uni omnes acceptam relaturos.

\textsuperscript{21} See entry by F. Petruzzi, “Corio, Bernardino” in \textit{Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani} vol. 29 (Rome: Società Grafica Romana, 1983), 75-78.

\textsuperscript{22} Bernardino Corio, \textit{Storia di Milano} vol. 2, ed. Anna Morisi Guerra (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1978), 1481: Il che veramente è intervenuto, considerato che Ludovico Sforza, principe illustissimo, non cognoscendo o non
Rucellai’s history of Italy, though, provides a particularly important context for understanding those by Vettori, Machiavelli, and Guicciardini, all of which came at later stages of the calamità, because of the intimacy of contemporary Florentine intellectual circles. In some ways, the structure of De bello italico recalls the general approach to Italian history of the Quattrocento humanists. Rucellai’s Italia assumed the central importance of an ancient Roman legacy—not so much in defining a peninsular narrative stretching back to antiquity (that did not fall within the scope of the work anyway)—but in providing the interpretive devices through which he understood and articulated peninsular history. As Machiavelli would later do, Rucellai saw peninsular history through classically-tinted lenses. In other ways, though, Rucellai’s work looked forward to the historiographical changes represented by the works of Vettori and Guicciardini, which narrated Italian history in the Tuscan language and without reference to a defining classical inheritance. Rucellai’s acknowledgement of a decisive break with the past beginning in 1494 suggests such a shift, or, at least, an indication of a new period of Italian history that was unconnected to the ancient past.

Rucellai represents an important voice in the conversation about Italian history that began in response to the first wave of invasions. It is almost certain that Vettori (who was Rucellai’s nephew), Machiavelli, and Guicciardini read and discussed the De bello italico with its author. In 1502 Piero Soderini became gonfaloniere-for-life, leader of the Florentine republic. Although Rucellai had supported the development of that office, Soderini was a personal enemy and so Rucellai distancing himself from the regime,

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contento anchora di tanta felicitate, uno si inextinguibile fuocho vi ha acceso che non solo la Sforcescha famiglia ma anche quasi tutta la Italia, come intendrai lectore, ha ruinato.

Felix Gilbert, “Bernardo Rucellai,” 239.
making himself ineligible for political office by staying behind in his tax payments. Not involved in politics, he tended to his intellectual interests by opening up his gardens—the so-called Orti Oricellari—to the city’s leading thinkers, who met among statues of classical writers and leaders, to discuss ancient texts as well as those of their own composition. Bernardo hosted gatherings between 1502 and 1506; in attendance were other politically disenfranchised aristocrats who, together, recalled and celebrated Lorenzo’s rule of the city and, in the process, embellished the growing reputation of “il Magnifico.” During that time Francesco Vettori frequented the gardens as one of the informal group’s younger members. In the second decade of the sixteenth century, Bernardo’s son, Cosimo, revived the meetings, which Machiavelli attended as one of the older, more experienced members (the gardens serve as the physical setting for the dialogue that constitutes his Dell’arte della guerra). Once again the group was comprised of individuals opposed or excluded from the regime in power, although that regime during the garden’s second iteration was not a broad republic but restored Medicean rule.

In both its earlier and later versions, garden discussions focused in particular on history, politics, and the relative value of classical models. Rucellai’s work was important in all these respects. It was the first to acknowledge and reflect on 1494 as a watershed moment in peninsular history and began a line of historical inquiry to which Vettori, Machiavelli, and Guicciardini were all heir, that is, one that depended on, in the words of

27 Ibid., 231-232.
28 Ibid., 243.
Felix Gilbert, a “broad Italian framework, the use of history as a practical guide to politics, and the emphasis on the psychology of the participating statesmen.”

Thus when Vettori, Machiavelli, and Guicciardini composed their thoughts on the nature of Italia and its past, they were entering into a discussion that had already begun, literally in their backyard.

“At the Villa Ozioso”

Francesco Vettori, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Francesco Guicciardini best represent the changing nature of historians’ conversations about Italian history in the early sixteenth century. Vettori was the first of that century to compose a history with an explicitly peninsular frame that was also in Italian, the Sommario della Istoria d’Italia (1528). He was also the first in the sixteenth century to construct a peninsular historical narrative around the concept of Italia misera, a narrative structure that Guicciardini made famous decades after Vettori. All of Machiavelli’s major works including The Prince (1513), The Discourses (1518), The Art of War (1521), and The Florentine Histories (1525) contain important interpretations of Italy’s past, which are all the more important because they came from Machiavelli, who has probably had the most profound legacy of any Cinquecento Italian writer. Guicciardini’s Storia d’Italia (composed until his death in 1540 and then posthumously published in 1561) was considered the prototype for national historiography for centuries and is still considered one of the most sophisticated historical works produced in early modern Europe.

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All three were Florentine, but none wrote about Italian history on behalf of the Florentine state or while in its employ, as Salutati and Bruni had done. All three had a purview that extended well beyond the Tuscan horizon, representing their city abroad: Vettori in France and Germany, Machiavelli in France, Germany, and Cesare Borgia’s Romagnan state, and Guicciardini in Spain. During the Italian wars Vettori and Guicciardini were particularly important as Medici loyalists, shuttling between that family’s corridors of power in both Florence and the papal curia in Rome.

Machiavelli, Vettori, and Guicciardini also represent the instability of the early decades of the sixteenth century in Italy, not only in their emphasis on the domineering force of fortuna, but in the fact that all three were prompted to think and write about Italy’s past in moments of political exile or forced retirement.

Machiavelli’s exile was the earliest and longest. In 1494, during the initial invasion of Charles VII, the Medici clan had been forced out of Florence and its republican institutions were restored. Machiavelli served as the Florentine secretary—a post that included diplomatic missions and the raising of a citizen militia. But when the Medici were restored to power in 1512, Machiavelli’s name was found on a list of potential conspirators. He was imprisoned, tortured, and ultimately released, but exiled from political activity. Machiavelli called this period of his life, spent mostly on his farm near San Casciano in Sant’Andrea in Percusina, post res perditas, after everything was lost. But, in exile, he turned to reading and writing and, in those years, he composed the works for which he is so famous now. Machiavelli thus observed most of the catastrophes of the calamità from a removed perspective, on his Tuscan farm, where he turned his thoughts to, among other things, fortuna and Italia.
While Machiavelli remained essentially confined to his farm, Vettori found himself increasingly involved in the tumultuous events of the period, representing Florentine interests in Rome and eventually becoming a confidant of the Medici Pope Clement VII. But after the 1527 Sack of Rome the Medici were once again driven from Florence (this time for only three years) and the new regime compelled Vettori to retire to the countryside, to his “villa ozioso,” his villa of (forced) leisure. In his use of “ozioso” (from the Latin *otium*), Vettori may have been subtly linking himself to an already established tradition of history-writing. In the *De Oratore*, Cicero noted that all the best Greek historians had been statesmen who, for political reasons, were removed from the centers of power and decided to put their rhetorical and intellectual skills to the study of the past; in particular, Cicero mentions Philistus of Syracuse, who, living under the tyrant Dionysius, “spent his leisure writing history” [*otium suum consumpsit in historia scribenda*]. In any case, there, at his Tuscan retreat, Vettori composed the *Sommario della Istoria d’Italia*, a history of the previous decade and a half that posits fortuna’s dominance over the affairs of Italy.

At the same time and for the same reasons that Vettori was writing in his Tuscan villa, Guicciardini was at his own Tuscan retreat in Finocchieto. He, too, was pondering

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33 Cicero, *De oratore* II.55-57.

34 Cicero, *De oratore* II.57.
fortuna. In a 1527 tract, the Consolatoria, written during his stay in the country, he realized that throughout history, “in both ancient and modern times, men of virtù, of prudence, of goodness and of singular moderation; to wht, rare and excellent men, have been lacerated by these winds,” or, more simply, it now seemed obvious to him that which “little children and illiterate adults know: that prosperity does not last and that fortuna changes.” Guicciardini’s exile was only temporary. When the Medici returned to Florence in 1530, he was assigned the unenviable role of leading the persecution of the family’s opponents. When Duke Alessandro de’ Medici was assassinated and succeeded by Cosimo de’ Medici, Guicciardini attempted to influence the new, young leader into forming a government closer to the city’s old oligarchic model. Cosimo did not appreciate the advice to curtail his influence, and Guicciardini found himself once again at his villa, this time for good. There, in 1537, he began working on his Storia d’Italia. It was the most influential history to come out of the Renaissance, and it posited a stark vision of fortuna’s reign over the peninsula.

Just as important as those credentials, though, is the fact that Vettori, Machiavelli, and Guicciardini were close friends who wrote many letters to one another and who held diverse interpretations on the peninsula past. In effect, they carried on an extended,

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35 Consolatoria in Francesco Guicciardini, Opere, ed. Emanuella Lugnani Scarano, vol. 1 (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1970), 496: tu resti quello medesimo così buono, così integro, così virtuoso, eri prima; t’ha percosso una calamità che non a te solo ma tante volte è accaduta a tempi antichi e moderni a uomini di virtù, di prudenza, di bontà a di moderazione singolare; anzi è proprio degli uomini rari e eccellenti essere lacerati da questi venti che alla fine hanno poca altra origine che da invidia…sanno pure insino a’ fanciulli, insino a quelli che non hanno elementi di lettere, che la prosperità non durano, che la fortuna si muta.


37 Ridolfi, Life of Guicciardini, 234-257.
synchronic conversation about the nature of Italia and of Italian history. This dialogue played out implicitly through their formal treatises but also explicitly through their many epistolary exchanges with one another. The Machiavelli-Vettori exchanges between 1513 and 1515 have received critical attention of late thanks to John Najemy’s work, *Between Friends: Discourses of Power and Desire in the Machiavelli-Vettori Letters of 1513-1515*, in which Najemy proves Vettori to have been a crucial interlocutor for Machiavelli, challenging him to rethink and rearticulate some of his now most famous arguments in *The Prince* and *The Discourses*. But Vettori also played a particularly important role in the development of Machiavelli’s thinking on the nature of Italia and Italian history, a fact that has been underappreciated by modern scholars. The Machiavelli-Vettori letters from the 1520s, not included in Najemy’s study, are particularly important for understanding their conversations about Italia and Italian history.

Although other historians writing just before Machiavelli, Vettori, and Guicciardini such as Biondo Flavio and Bernardo Rucellai, and just after, such as Girolamo Borgia and Paolo Giovio, also penned peninsular narratives, they did so in Latin, and their works remain only available in that language. It is primarily through Machiavelli and Guicciardini’s works, written in the Italian, that sixteenth-century ideas of Italy have been passed along.

**Italia, Machiavelli, and Vettori**

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38 Najemy, *Between Friends.*
The correspondence between Machiavelli and Vettori, especially during the year
1513, is well known among scholars of the Italian Renaissance.\textsuperscript{39} In those letters, one
finds Machiavelli, post res perditas, eloquently lamenting his rural life in the wake of
political exile by the Medici regime\textsuperscript{40} and the announcement of his undertaking a “little
work” on the subject of principalities.\textsuperscript{41} And, as some modern historians, most recently
and comprehensively John Najemy, have pointed out, that period of their correspondence
also contains a prefiguring of the thematic and discursive contours of \textit{The Prince}, which
Machiavelli composed later that same year.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{39} For a review of the correspondence see the introduction in Niccol\'o Machiavelli, \textit{Lettere a Francesco
Najemy, \textit{Between Friends}, 3-17 for the status of the correspondence in modern historiography.

\textsuperscript{40} Especially well known in that regard is the letter of 10 December 1513 in which Machiavelli described
his daily routine in Sant’Andrea in Percussina where, he related, with the coming of evening, “I enter into
the ancient courts of ancient men, where, having been received affectionately, I feast on that food which
alone is mine, and for which I was born, where I am not ashamed to speak with them and ask them the
reasons for their actions, and where they, in all their humanity, answer me, and for four hours I feel no
boredom, I forget all problems of the world, I do not fear poverty; death does not scare me: I give myself
totally over to them.” Niccol\'o Machiavelli, \textit{Opere} vol. 3 (hereafter, \textit{Lettere}), ed. Franco Gaeta (Turin:
U.T.E.T., 1984), no. 224, 426: \textit{Venuta la sera, mi ritorno in casa et entro nel mio scrittoio…entro nelle
antique corti degli antique huomini, dove, da loro ricevuto amorevolmente, mi pasco di quell cibo, che
solum et mio, et che io nacqui per lui; dove io non mi vergogno parlare con loro, et domandarli della
ragione delle loro actioni; et quelli per loro humanità mi rispondono; et non sento per quattro hore di tempo
alcuna noia, sdimenticho ogni affianno, non temo la povertà, non mi sbigottisicie la morte: tucto mi
transferisco in loro.}

\textsuperscript{41} In the same letter of 10 December: “I have composed a small work \textit{De principatibus}, where I explore the
limits of the subject as much as possible, discussing what a principality is, their variations, how they are
acquired, how they are maintained, and why they are lost.” Ibid., 426: \textit{et composto uno opuscolo \textit{De
principatibus}, dove io mi profondo quanto io posso nelle cogitationi di questo subbiotto, disputando che
cosa e’ principato, di quale spetie sono, come e’ si acquistono, e’ si mantengono, perché e’ si perdono.”

\textsuperscript{42} See especially Najemy, \textit{Between Friends}, 176-214. Other insightful works exploring the intertextual
continuities between the 1513 letters and \textit{The Prince} include Frederico Chabod, “Sulla Composizione de \textit{Il
Sasso, Niccol\'o Machiavelli: \textit{Storia del suo pensiero politico} (Bologna: il Mulino, 1980), 293-335; Ugo
Dotti, Niccol\'o Machiavelli: \textit{la fenomenologia del potere} (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979), 17-52, 100-106; and
Although they were both native Florentines, Italy, not Florence, framed a greater part of their epistolary exchanges in those years.\textsuperscript{43} They were concerned for its safety, critical of its leaders and saw contemporary events as unfolding within an interconnected, Italian narrative. Machiavelli had only just begun his political exile, while Vettori held a position in Rome as a Florentine ambassador to the Medici papal court.\textsuperscript{44} Spanish, French, Swiss, and German troops abounded, but Milan was not yet firmly in the hands of the French, nor Naples in the hands of the Spanish.

In broad terms, they were worried about the \textit{libertas Italiae}, though for Vettori and Machiavelli that term meant something different than it had for Salutati and Bruni, who had infused it with a Florentine, republican meaning. For the sixteenth-century Florentines, \textit{libertas Italiae} had a more immediate and less ideological meaning: they were worried about the very survival of the autonomous Italian state system. They focused on hypothetical alliances, debating what states would work together or against one another and why; both Vettori and Machiavelli saw ways in which Italy could emerge more or less as it had been before.

They speculated about the worse. On 21 April, Vettori offered the possibility that the French army might take Naples “and, after that, the rest of Italy.”\textsuperscript{45} On 10 August, Machiavelli said the same of the Spanish King Ferdinand whose intentions on the

\textsuperscript{43} In his discussion of the 1513 correspondence, Ugo Dotti notes in \textit{Machiavelli rivoluzionario}: “it is here that a break opens up: a break, that is, with the usual mode of posing problems from an exclusively \textit{Florentine point of view} and instead adopting, on the contrary, a decisively \textit{Italian} perspective…not only the drama of Florence’s health, but that of the entire peninsula.” È qui che si opera [una] forma di rottura: la rottura cioè col consueto modo di porre i problemi dall’esclusivo \textit{punto di vista fiorentino} per assumerne uno, al contrario, decisamente \textit{italiano}… non soltanto il dramma della salute di Firenze ma quello dell’intera penisola.

\textsuperscript{44} Devonshire Jones, \textit{Francesco Vettori}, 85-108.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Lettere}, no. 211 (21 Aprile 1513), 374: …occupi il regno di Napoli e doppo questo tutta Italia.
peninsula “aside from securing his states, he might also consider, with his arms, remaining master of Italy.”\footnote{Ibid., no. 219 (10 August 1513), 400: perché io credo che oltre all’assicurarsi de’ suoi stati, egli abbi pensato, come l’armi sue possino restare il gallo d’Italia.} In the same letter, he noted the imperative of removing the French from Milan, for, “once they start to taste the sweetness of dominance…[and] if they plant roots, all Italy is swept up.”\footnote{Ibid., 405: …e che comincino a gustare la dolcezza del dominare. E se vi si appicano, tutta Italia è spazzata.}

Although they were considering the possibility of the Italian states’ collective subjugation, Vettori and Machiavelli had not yet formed their interpretations of Italia and of Italian history that would later appear in their more formal writings. Eventually, Vettori would describe an Italia misera, hopelessly dominated by fortuna and Machiavelli would articulate the opposite, an Italia that, by virtue of its Roman heritage, could yet control its political destiny.

But in 1513 Vettori was still hopeful. He even considered the prospect of productive military cooperation between the Italian states, suggesting on 5 August that an alliance of “tutta Italia” might halt Swiss advancement South of the Alps and that the peninsula might somehow regain some semblance of its pre-1494 political system of independent states. If events fell in the right way, Italy might find “itself back in its previous boundaries.”\footnote{Lettere, no. 218 (5 August 1513), 398: Né bisognerebbe temere de’ Svizzeri, i quali arebbono da l’un canto i Franzesi, dall’altro tutta Italia…Et in conclusione, se il Cristianissimo fosse contento a lasciare Lombardia, veggo tutta Italia in pace, et alla morte del re Catolico tornare il regno in un figliolo del re Federigo, e ridursi Italia ne’ primi termini.} This suggestion received a quick reply from Sant’Andrea in Percusina: “as far as the union of the Italians, you make me laugh; first, because there will never be any union to good ends, and even if the leaders were united, it would not be
enough: there are no armies here worth a penny.”49 In the coming years, as the calamità worsened, Machiavelli came to see the Italian military situation in much different terms.

But that summer Machiavelli was the more dour of the two on the subject of Italia. He wrote Vettori on 26 August, “I don’t believe that the Swiss are building an empire like the Romans yet, but I do believe that they are capable of becoming arbiters of Italy in the near future, because of the general disorder and our own evil ways.”50 He continues,

and because this frightens me, I would like it remedied, and if France isn’t enough, but I cannot see any other remedy [altro rimedio] and I will begin now to cry with you over our ruin and servitude, which, if it does not come today or tomorrow, will come in our time; and Italy will indebt itself to Pope Julius and the others who do not remedy the situation, if now it may still be remedied.51

From the end of summer until the end of November, there was a silence in the letters between Vettori and Machiavelli. When they pick up the thread again, part of the reason for the delay becomes clear. In that famous December letter, Machiavelli tells Vettori that he has written a little work on principalities. In the interim, Machiavelli had

49 Lettere, no. 219 (10 August 1513), 403: Quanto alla unione delli altri Italiani, voi mi fate ridere; prima perché non ci fia mai unione veruna a fare ben veruno; e se pure e’ fussino uniti e capi e’ non sono per bastare, si per non ci essere armi che vagliono un quattrino.

50 Ibid., no. 222 (26 August 1513), 419: Io non credo già che faccino uno imperio come e Romani, ma io credo bene che possino diventare arbitri di Italia per la propinquità e per li disordini e cattive conizioni nostre.”

51 Ibid., 419: Io credo bene che possino diventare arbitri di Italia per la propinquità e per la disordini e cattive condizione nostre; e perché questo mi spaventa io ci vorrei rimediare, e se Francia non basta, io non ci veggo altro rimedio e voglio cominciare ora a piangere con voi la rovina e servitù nostra, la quale, se non sarà né oggi né domane, sarà a’ nostri di; e l’Italia arà questo obbligo con papa Giulio e con quelli che non ci rimediono, se ora ci si può rimediare.
refined his thinking on Italia. Specifically, he had given more thought to that “altro rimedio” for Italy’s woes that had eluded him in the August letter to Vettori.\footnote{The connection between the August letter and the conclusion of The Prince has been noted in von Albertini, Repubblica al Principato, 46-47; Najemy, Between Friends, 156-177; Dotti, fenomenologia, 37-43; Dotti, Machiavelli rivoluzionario, 243-253, 280-286; and Chabod, Scritti su Machiavelli, 177-188, 193.}

**German Travels**

While Machiavelli was crafting his initial literary endeavors on his farm, Vettori was consumed with ambassadorial duties in Rome as a Florentine representative at the Medici papal court of Leo X.\footnote{Devonshire Jones, Francesco Vettori, 85-108; Najemy, Between Friends, 216-220.} During that period, Vettori found time to write *Viaggio in Alamagna*, which is part memoir and part collection of *novelle* ostensibly recounting his diplomatic mission in Germany to the court of the Emperor Maximilian, which he undertook, partly in the company of Machiavelli, between 1507-1508.\footnote{The date of the *Viaggio*’s composition remains unclear, but internal evidence has led most concerned scholars to place the date somewhere between 1510-1515, see Vettori, *Scritti*, 370-373; Najemy, Between Friends, 248 and Francesco Vettori, Viaggio in Alamagna, ed. Marcello Simonetta (Palermo: Sellerio, 2003), 26—Simonetta specifically suggests Vettori’s time in Rome as most likely the period during which Vettori worked most on the *Viaggio*. On the *Viaggio* see the introduction in Simonetta, *Viaggio*, 9-35; and Vettori, *Scritti*, 382-296, and a review of Simonetta’s volume in Giorgio Scichilone, Review of *Viaggio in Germania in Diritto e questioni pubbliche* 3 (2003): 391-398.}

Vettori’s comments on German culture reflect through contrast the author’s understanding of the uniqueness of Italian society and its past.\footnote{In the words of Marcello Simonetta, the *Viaggio* portrays a vision of Italia “come in uno specchio rovesciato,” Simonetta, *Viaggio*, 11.} But, even more revealing is his preface to Book IV of the work, which could be called his first historical work. Already, he thought about investigations of the past in Italian rather than just Florentine terms. The “sorrows, turbulences, wars, and dangers which we find not just in our city, but in all Italy” motivated him to think about historical patterns. He determined that “in...
almost every age almost the same things happen…one power tries to consume the other until the other is destroyed.” The ancient Near East, golden age Greece, and even the Romans all wrought death and destruction, the latter to the detriment of “la miseria Italia.”  

Once Constantine relocated the capital of the Empire, he effectively opened the peninsula’s gates to the many transalpine tribes, who brought their own series of destructions, and, again, Italia was “ruined, robbed, squandered, and burnt, and, going forward, Italy received that sort of treatment often.”

In this way Vettori began to develop the historical theme of Italia misera, which would reach its historiographical fruition over a decade later in his Sommario. For Vettori, there was “nothing surprising if in our times the same things are happening [to Italia] that have happened in other times.” In this way, he saw himself and his contemporaries as “imitating ages past, in that we find ourselves in similar, maybe even more grave, travails.” Nevertheless, “we won’t desist from those tasks that we judge relevant: I’ll not desist from my writing.” Like Machiavelli at the time, Vettori recognized the storm on the peninsula’s horizon. As that stormed neared, and then raged,

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56 Viaggio in Alamagna, IV in Vettori, Scritti, 85: Cominciarono poi i Romani che alla miseria Italia, all’afflitta Grecia, all’Asia, all’Africa, ai Galli, ai Germani, ed a molte alter nazioni furono per molti anni flagello durissimo; e quando furono cresciuti nacquero fra loro le guerre civili, che furono causa che in Italia e altrove molte città a sacco a fuoco andarono, e che molte meschine verginelle in servitù fossero condotte. Quanti pessimi tiranni in Roma si videro! Quanti schellerati e perfidi in Roma dominarono!

57 Ibid., 86: Ed il resto d’Italia fù guasto, rubato, dissipato, ed arso, e così di poi successivamente spesso le è accaduto.

58 Ibid., 86: Non è dunque maraviglia se ne’ nostri tempi sono accadute le medisime cose che alter volte sono state.

59 Ibid., 86: e però noi, che in quei tempi siamo, imitandi i passati, che in simili travagli e forse più gravi si sono trovati, non desisteremo di fare quelle opere giudicheremo a proposito, ed io non desisterò dal mio scrivere.
Vetori’s and Machiavelli’s interpretations of Italia and its past remained interconnected dialogically, but grew drastically apart thematically.

**Lifeless, Italia Prays to God**

There is a tendency among modern scholars to draw conclusions about Machiavelli’s sense of Italia based almost entirely upon a reading of the end of *The Prince*. In the last three chapters of that work the author initially bemoans Italy’s recent sufferings but ends by invoking the possibility of her salvation at the hands of a redeemer prince, who, he hopes, could be the work’s dedicatee, Lorenzo de’ Medici, the Duke of Urbino (1492-1519). Italy, leaderless, lawless, beaten, stripped, torn apart, overrun, and having endured every kind of ruin…lifeless [*sanza vita*], awaits someone who can remedy her wounds, put an end to the sackings in Lombardy, the ransoming of the Kingdom [of Naples] and of Tuscany, and heal her wounds that have already been festering for too long. See how she prays God [*la priega Iddio*] to send someone who can redeem her from these cruelties and barbarian insults.  

It is an impassioned conclusion and it has been the subject of substantial scholarly debate. Because the final chapter, the “Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians,” employs a different rhetoric—religious and emotional—than the rest of the work, some have questioned whether or not it was written at a different time as the previous chapters. Generally, those who claim a later date also argue for the passage’s peripheral importance.

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within Machiavelli’s overall thinking. And because the “Exhortation” proposes the almost incredible, that is, the union of Italian armies under one flag and their expulsion of the ultramontanes, modern critics have wondered about its authenticity, because, after all, Machiavelli is supposed to be a model “realist.” Indeed, in that work’s last chapter, the author seems to abandon his previously stated commitment (in Chapter XIV) to pursue the “effective truth” of things rather than “republics and principalities that have been imagined, but have never actually existed.” But his concluding vision of a redeemed Italy seems more “imagined” than real given the rigid political divisions of the peninsula at the time.

61 For a summary of this debate before 1950, including the reaction of Frederico Chabod to the proto-nationalistic interpretations of nineteenth-century Italian literary critics, see Felix Gilbert, “Nationalism in Machiavelli’s Prince,” in Gilbert, Choice and Commitment, 38-48; for a more recent synopsis of the views of Gennaro Sasso, Mario Martelli, and Hans Baron see John Najemy, Between Friends, 176-186. Essentially, Martelli argues that there was a second redaction in 1518 that included the final chapter and Baron suggests 1515, both on the basis of the larger Italian political situation and Medici leadership therein as being more “ready” for the “occasion” that the last chapter proposes. Sasso, Najemy, and others point out convincing flaws with that perspective, namely, that what modern critics’ sense of an Italia ready for redemption may not be the same as Machiavelli’s and that, anyway, Machiavelli’s argument for that redemption was based less on practical political considerations and more on the desperate straight in which the peninsula found itself—its abject state, more than any other factor, necessitated the “occasion.”

62 Already in his own time, Guicciardini made light of Machiavelli’s proposal for a unified Italy. Even Francesco De Sanctis (1817-1883), who wrote in the wake of the Risorgimento and sought to present Machiavelli as an early prophet of the Italian national state, labeled Machiavelli’s early thoughts on Italia “illusions,” suggesting that the Florentine “saw Italia a little through his desires.” Furono illusioni. Vedeva l’Italia un po’ attraverso de’ suoi desideri, Francesco DeSanctis, Storia della litteratura Italiana (Turin: Einaudi-Gallimard, 1996), 89. Pocock, Machiavellian Moment, 180-182, thought that the ideas of a redeemer prince and of a united Italy were too idealistic to have been a serious plan of political action. On the other side, emphasizing the theme of “love of country,” Sebastian de Grazia interpreted chapter XXVI of The Prince as the culminating “point of it all” of Machiavelli’s political philosophy, Sebastian De Grazia, Machiavelli in Hell (New York: Vintage, 1994), 152-158, 193. The irresolution of the chapter has also attracted more literary-minded interpretations that question the discursive and linguistic structure of the chapter: see Victoria Kahn, “Virtu and the Example of Agathocles in Machiavelli’s Prince,” Representations 13 (1986): 78-79, and Thomas M. Greene’s “The End of Discourse in Machiavelli’s Prince,” Yale French Studies 67 (1984): 69-71.

63 Machiavelli, Il principe, XIV, 270-271: mi è parso più conveniente andare drieto alla verità effettuale della cosa che alla immaginazione di epsa; e molti si sono immaginati repubbliche e principati che non si sono mai visti né conosciuti invero essere.
However, the “Exhortation” was not the aberration that many modern Machiavelli scholars have thought it to have been. Rather, the hopeful, romantic, rhetorical, and Roman conception of Italia and of Italian history contained in that chapter are in fact representative of Machiavelli’s overall perspective on Italy and its past. The representativeness of the “Exhortation” in Machiavelli’s thinking becomes clear when considering how the idea of Italia functions in _The Prince_ and how Machiavelli’s thinking on the peninsula and its past functioned in relation to his contemporaries, Vettori and Guicciardini. Machiavelli never abandoned the romantic plea for a redeemed Italy that he first articulated in the last chapter of _The Prince_. The following section examines how Machiavelli developed the notion of a shared Roman and Italian virtù, a key concept on which the “Exhortation” and his later reflections on the Italian history hinged.

**La virtù di uno spirito italiano**

The concept of virtù is perhaps the most recurring of any idea in Machiavelli’s works. Unlike modern scholars, Machiavelli did not reflect on its specific meaning nor did he think that he possessed any sort of philosophy of virtù.⁶４ He used the term to represent a broad range of meanings mostly revolving around an individual’s or state’s ability to force its will, either through strength or ingenuity.⁶５ In antiquity and in the

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⁶５ Felix Gilbert has provided a more detailed definition, Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 179-180: an innate quality opposed to external circumstance or chance…not one of the various virtues that Christianity required of good men…it designated the strength and vigor from which all human action arose…[a reflection of the insight] that political success depends not on the righteousness of the cause nor on the use of intelligence, but that victory could come ‘against all reason’ to those who were inspired by single-minded willpower or by some undefinable inner force…virtù was a prerequisite for leadership…but…could be possessed by a collective body….military virtù, therefore, reflects a spirit which
sixteenth century, virtù and fortuna were viewed as opposites; virtù was the force humans could muster in opposition to the uncontrollable, unpredictable elements of existence. This opposition pervades *The Prince*; in the middle of those two competing forces, Machiavelli placed sixteenth-century Italia.

In *The Prince* virtù emerges as the essential quality for the remaking of Italia: Italian leaders’ lack of it explained Italy’s dire straights, and its potential revitalization represented the means for Italy’s salvation. Machiavelli credits fortuna with the capacity to inflict great damage, but, in the treatise, virtù is, potentially at least, the more decisive element. In Chapter XXIV, “Why the Princes of Italy Have Lost Their States,”

Machiavelli looks back from the perspective of 1513 to the initial French invasions of 1494 and singles out some of the Italian princes who lost possession of their states, criticizing them for what he perceived to be passivity in the face of danger. Ultimately, he informs Italy’s potentates, “the only defenses that are good, certain, and lasting, are those which depend on yourself and your virtù.”

For his part, Vettori thought fortuna had more influence than virtù. On 15 December Vettori wrote Machiavelli that he had recently read Pontano’s 1512 treatise, *De fortuna*. Pontano’s reflections rang true with what Vettori was observing in Rome as

permeates all the institutions of a political society and is an aspect of a more general virtù which is to be found in well-organized societies.

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67 He specifically notes the Aragonese King of Naples, Alfonso II, and Lodovico “il Moro,” the Duke of Milan and delicately adds “et altri” princes, which likely refers to Piero de’ Medici and Cesare Borgia, who also lost their states in the tumult of the invasions but whom Machiavelli would likely not wish to reprimand in a book dedicated to a Medici and featuring Borgia as an exemplar of political acumen, see Machiavelli, *Opere* vol. 1, 369 fn 26.

he moved in diplomatic circles. He informed Machiavelli that “Pontano clearly demonstrates that nothing is possible without fortuna, no matter the soul, no matter prudence, no matter force, no matter whatever kind of virtù. In Rome, one sees the proof of this every day.”\(^69\) In this way, it is not hard to imagine that Machiavelli was implicitly addressing Vettori in the first lines of Chapter XXV when he writes, “I am not unaware how many have thought and still think that the things of the world are governed by fortuna and by God, and that men, with their prudenzia cannot correct them, moreover, that there is no remedy, and for this reason they decide not to sweat over things, but to leave them to chance.”\(^70\)

*The Prince* contains the foundations of what would become Machiavelli’s and Vettori’s distinctive approaches to the ideas of Italia and Italian history, the first characterized by virtù and the second by the dominance of fortuna. Machiavelli thought that Italy’s primary problem since 1494 was a lack of “organized virtù.”\(^71\) If fortuna is a river, then Italy has been nearly swept away for lack of that quality: “If you consider Italy, recently the site of many changes and variations, and the fact that she brought on those changes herself then you will see that she is a land (*campagna*) without

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\(^69\) *Lettere*, no. 242 (15 December 1514), 479: Legi, superioribus diebus, librum Pontani De Fortuna, noviter impressum…in quo aperte ostendit nihil valere ingenium neque prudentiam neque fortitudinem neque alias virtutes, ubi fortuna desit. Rome, de hac re, quotidie experimentum videmus. This statement is perhaps more reflective of Vettori’s views of fortuna than Pontano’s, because the Neapolitan’s treatise actually focuses primarily on the ways in which individuals might stifle fortuna’s machinations, see Santoro, *Fortuna, ragione e prudenza*, 27-69.

\(^70\) The resurfacing of the term prudenzia might also allude to Vettori’s December letter because Pontano referred to human efforts against fortuna as prudenzia, while Machiavelli almost always favored virtù in similar contexts. Machiavelli, *Il principe*, XXV, 372: E’ non mi è incognito come molti hanno avuto et hanno opinione che le cose del mondo sieno in modo governate dalla fortuna e da Dio, che li uomini con la prudenza loro non possino correggerle, anzi non vi abbino remedio alcuno; e per questo potrebbero iudicare che non fussi da insudare molto nelle cose, ma lasciarsi governare alla sorte. See Najemy, *Between Friends*, 201-208.

embankments, without dykes…not adequately reinforced with virtù.” But virtù, in the sense of decisive human action, is not much of a specific prescription for Italy’s woes.

Machiavelli though did have a more specific proposal, that “altro rimedio” he had alluded to in a letter to Vettori: not just virtù, but Italian virtù. In the “Exhortation,” the author appeals to the redeemer prince to revive Italian virtù. The timing, he wrote, was just right “to see the virtù of an Italian spirit [because] it was [first] necessary that Italia be reduced to its present terms…without a leader, without order, beaten, crushed, torn-up, run-over, and having endured every kind of ruin.” In this context, Machiavelli was referring to a specifically military virtù. If Lorenzo wanted to redeem the peninsula, he would have to start by raising an army of Italian soldiers, not foreign mercenaries. The liberating force would have to be an “all-Italian army” because peninsular soldiers are the “most faithful, true, and best.” Italy’s redemption would require the “discovering the virtù of an Italian spirit” and, later, “it is necessary to raise that kind of [citizen] army so that our defense against the foreigners is based on Italian virtù” The work concludes with a verse from Petrarch’s canzone “Italia mia,” which also features confidence in an

72 Machiavelli, Il principe, XXV, 374: E se voi considererete la Italia, che è la sedia di queste variazioni e quella che ha dato loro il moto, vedrete essere una campagna sanza argini e sanza alcuno riparo; ché, s’ella fussi riparata da conveniente virtù.

73 Machiavelli, Il principe, XXVI, 388: che io non so qual mai tempo fussi più atto a questo. E se (come io dixi) era necessario, volendo vedere, la virtù di Moysè, che il popol d’Isdrael fussi schiavo in Egipt…volendo conoscere la virtù di uno spirito italiano, era necessario che la Italia si riducesse ne’ termini presenti e che ella fussi più stiava che il Hebrei, più serva che Persia, più dispersa che gli Ateniesi; sanza capo, sanza ordine, battuta, spoliate, lacera, corsa; et avessi sopportato d’ogni sorte ruina. See Dotti, fenomenologia, 106.

74 Machiavelli, Il principe, XXVI, 396: è necessario innanzi a tutte le altre cose (come vero fondamento d’ogni impresa) provedersi d’arme propie: perché non si può avere né più fidi, né più veri, né migliori soldati.

75 Machiavelli, Il principe, XXVI, 388: volendo conoscere la virtù di uno spirito italiano.

76 Ibid., 396: È necessario pertano prepararsi ad queste arme per potersi con la virtù italica defendere dalli externi.
Italian virtù: “Virtù against the fury/ will take up arms and the battle will be short/ for that ancient valor/ in the hearts of Italians is not yet dead.”  

Later, in *The Discourses*, Machiavelli explained more fully what he meant by Italian virtù. For him, Italian virtù was the same quantity as ancient Roman virtù. He really thought, as his Petrarchean epigram implies, that the ancient virtù “in the hearts of Italians [was] not yet dead.” In *The Discourses* he not only makes plain the connection between ancient Roman and contemporary Italian virtù, but he also uses that connection to form a narrative of Italian history. Where his Florentine predecessors Salutati and Bruni had used the concept of *libertas Italiae* to construct their versions of Italian history, Machiavelli employed the notion of ancient Roman virtù. In that way, he fashioned a new thematic thread for peninsular historical narratives.

*Imitazione and Italia*

In *The Discourses* Machiavelli argues that Roman virtù was the primary reason for the success of the ancient republic and that a revival of Roman virtù could save sixteenth-century Italy. In the process of making those arguments, Machiavelli constructed a narrative of peninsular history that was, like many of his predecessors, based on the assumption of a common ancient Roman inheritance. In other ways, particularly its emphasis on Roman virtù as the connecting thread, Machiavelli’s peninsular historical narrative was original and new.

The Roman past is never far away in Machiavelli’s writings—not only in the sense that references to it abound, but also in the sense that he saw the lessons of the

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classical past as immediately relevant for his world, rather than as distant and foreign. And he knew his susceptibility to seeing all things ancient Roman through rose-tinted glasses. In the preface to Book II he notes that “men always praise, even if not always reasonably, the old times while critiquing the present.” On the other hand, he adds, there are often good reasons for praising the past and besmirching the present. The author is well aware some may read his work and place him in the first category, but he claims to belong in the second. After all, the difference between the “virtù that ruled then and the vice that rules today is as clear as the sun.” In other words, praising the ideals of the Roman past is especially relevant because of the extent to which sixteenth-century Italy has wandered away from them. Machiavelli’s bold thesis is that there is no good reason why contemporary Italians cannot recapture the same virtù that made ancient Rome great.

To elaborate his argument, Machiavelli continually returns to what Gennaro Sasso has recently termed the “teoria dell’imitazione” (theory of imitation), that is, Machiavelli’s assumption that classical standards of political behavior and organization are applicable in contemporary Italian society. Writing generally in the preface to Book II, Machiavelli argues for the ancient world’s relevance to the contemporary so that “the

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78 Machiavelli, Discorsi, II.proemio, 723: Laudano sempre gli uomini, ma non sempre ragionevolmente, gli antichi tempi e gli presenti accusano.

79 Ibid., 725: Replico pertano essere vera quella consuetudine del laudare e biasmare soprascritta, ma non essere già sempre vero che si erri nerl farlo; perché qualche volta è necessario che giudichino la verità.

80 Ibid., 729-30: Non so adunque se io meriterò d’essere numerato infra quelli che si ingannano, se in questi miei discorsi lauderò troppo e tempi dell’antiqui Romani e biasmerò i nostri. E veramente se la virtù che alora regnava et el vizio che ora regna non fussero più chiare che il sole, andrei col parlare più rattenuto; dubitando di non incorrere in questo inganno di che accuso alcuni. This line also indicates the protean quality of Machiavelli’s conception of virtù, which in The Prince seemed to refer mostly to military prowess, but here comes across as a more general category opposed to corruption and vice.

81 Sasso, Niccolò Machiavelli, 539.
minds of young men who have read what I have written will flee from this one and imitate the other one when fortuna gives them the occasion.”

Throughout the work, he explicates Roman examples, contrasts them with the comparatively pathetic behaviors of most contemporary Italian leaders, then pleads for the serious rejuvenation of classical models.

And he is serious, even if at times also vague, about the *imitazione* of the ancients. An endemic problem, writes Machiavelli, is that people read histories, but they do so without seriously considering the possibility of replicating ancient models in their world. Such people, “judge *imitazione* (of the ancients) not only difficult but impossible, as if the sky, the sun, the elements, and man in their movement, order, and power have varied from what they were in ancient times.”

In the same section, Machiavelli offers a parallel between medicine and civil law: modern physicians consult the ancients to find remedies for all kinds of sicknesses, why should modern leaders not do the same in cases of social and civic illnesses?

Machiavelli’s argument about the contemporary applicability of ancient lessons was a bold one in its contemporary context. In fact, Guicciardini’s *ricordo* 110 makes

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82 Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, II.proemio, 730: Ma essendo la cosa si manifesta che ciascuno la vede, sarò animoso in dir manifestamente quello che io intenderò di questi e di quelli tempi; acciò che quelli animi de giovani che questi miei scripti leggeranno, possino fuggire questo e prepararsi ad imitar quegli qualunque volta la fortuna ne dessi loro occasione.

83 Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, I.proemio, 416: Donde nasce che infiniti che le leggano pigliano piacere di udire quella varietà degli accidenti che in esse si contengono, senza pensare altrimenti di imitarle, giudicando la imitazione non solo difficile ma impossibile; come se il cielo, il sole, gli elementi, gli uomini, fossero variati di moto, di ordine e di potenza da quello che gli erano anticamente.

84 Ibid., 414-5: E tanto più quanto io veggo, nelle differenze che intra i cittadini civilmente nascano o nelle malattie nelle quali gli uomini incorrono, essersi sempre ricorso ad quegli giudici o ad quegli rimedi ch dagli antichi sono stati giudicati o ordinati. Perché le leggi civili non sono altro che sentenze date dagli antichi iureconsulti, le quali ridotte in ordine, a’ presenti nostri iureconsulti giudicare insegnano; né anora la medicina è altro che esperienza fatta dagli antichi medici, sopra la quale fondano i medici presenti i loro giudici.
light of those who, like Machiavelli, assume the usefulness of examples from republican Rome: “Those who praise Rome with every word deceive themselves so much! It would be necessary to have a city organized just like theirs, and then to govern itself following that example: in the case of a state [chi] with drastically different qualities, the proposition is like expecting a donkey to race like a horse.”

Guicciardini’s acute awareness of changing historical contexts underscores the abstract idealism of Machiavelli’s sense of ancient Rome as always applicable for Italians, no matter the circumstantial differences.

Machiavelli was not primarily interested in the philosophical underpinnings of history, however. He was more intent on explicating classical Rome’s virtù and convincing his readers that they should emulate it in sixteenth-century Italy. But what was Rome’s virtù, really, and how could it be imitated hundreds of years later? Machiavelli offers no concrete answer to the question. The closest Machiavelli comes to explaining his conception of ancient Roman virtù and the best example from The Discourses of the way that he thought that virtù might apply to sixteenth-century Italia comes in his interpretation of the first sack of ancient Rome.

In 386 BC, Gauls sacked Rome for the first time; they decimated it. According to Livy, before the sack, the Romans had failed to understand that a “calamity of unprecedented magnitude was drawing near.” They neglected to appoint a dictator and

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86 For historical evidence of the sack, see Cambridge Ancient History, vol. 7 (II), 302-308.

87 Ab urbe condita, V.xxxviii in Livy, Early History, 413.
they appointed the wrong commanders to check the Gallic army. After the Roman force had been put to flight, the city was left, unarmed, to brace itself for imminent attack. The women, children, and few men capable of bearing arms, fortified themselves on the Capitoline Hill, while the infirm and aged stayed in their homes and prepared themselves for the end. When the wave of Gauls smashed into the city, the refugees on the Capitoline could do nothing but watch. In Livy’s words,

Fear gripped them in a thousand shapes; now here, now there, the yells of triumph, women’s screams or the crying of children, the roar of flames or the long rumbling crash of falling masonry forced them to turn unwilling eyes upon some fresh calamity, as if [Fortuna] had made them spectators of the nightmare stage scene of their country’s ruin.\textsuperscript{88}

For Machiavelli, that episode had multiple significances. Livy’s account of Rome’s early sack likely resonated for him on a personal level. Like the refugees on the Capitoline, the political exile Machiavelli had a particularly helpless vantage point, rural San Casciano, just outside of Florence and on the road to Rome, from which he observed “the nightmare stage scene of [his] country’s ruin.” He also thought that the event was relevant for sixteenth-century Italy, which, like the Romans in 386, were at the mercy of transalpine invaders. The anecdote of the sack appears in \textit{The Discourses} in the chapter on how “Fortuna Blinds Men’s Minds When She Does Not Want Them to Oppose Her

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Ab urbe condita}, V.xlii: quocumque clamor hostium, mulierum puerorumque ploratus, sonitus flammae et fragar ruentium tectorum auertisset, pauentes ad omnia animos oraque et oculos flectebant, ulut ad spectaculum a fortuna positi occidentis patriae nec ullius rerum suarum relieti praeterquam corporum uindices, tanto ante alios miserandi magis qui unquam obsessi sunt quod interclusi a patria obsidebantur, omnia sua cernentes in hostium potestate, from www.perseus.tufts.edu; translation from Livy, \textit{Early History}, 419.
Designs,” a line that he borrowed from Livy’s description of the event. Machiavelli read the early sack as a hard, but necessary lesson that ultimately helped to propel ancient Rome’s ascent. Even though fortuna’s designs can often seem inscrutable and insuperable, he wrote, men “should never abandon hope because, not knowing the end, they travel down unknown roads, and there is always hope, no matter what fortuna does or what trials she brings.” In the subsequent decades, while his contemporaries became ever-more despondent about the peninsula’s seemingly irreversible descent into subjugation, Machiavelli’s perspective on the calamità clung to the hopefulness already evident in The Discourses. He thought sixteenth-century Italy, which possessed the same virtù as the ancient Romans could yet rebound from the devastation surrounding them, just as their ancient ancestors had done.

At the core of that hopefulness was Machiavelli’s confidence in the power and enduring quality of ancient Roman virtù. In fact, his citing of Rome’s first sack appears in The Discourses in the context of an ancient historical debate on whether Rome’s greatness derived more from its virtù or from good fortuna. In the first century AD, the Greek historian Plutarch (c. 46 AD – c.120 AD) had argued in On the Fortuna of the Romans that fortuna had propelled the Roman republic’s ascent.


90 Machiavelli, Discorsi, II.29, 921: che gli uomini possono secondare la fortuna e non opporsegli, possono tessere gli orditi suoi e non rompergli. Debbono bene non si abandonare mai; perché non sappendo il fine suo et andando quella per vie traverse et incognite, hanno sempre a sperare e sperando non si abbandonare, in qualunque fortuna et in qualunque travaglio si truovino.
For Machiavelli, republican Rome’s virtù was its defining feature. In the chapter titled “Which Was the Principle Reason that the Romans Acquired an Empire, Virtù or Fortuna,” Machiavelli offers his counter-argument to Plutarch’s thesis: Rome’s virtù made it great; the city’s political organization, laws, and the military valor of its inhabitants preceded and made possible fortuna’s assistance. This thesis goes to the heart of the underlying argument of the whole work, that the values and institutions that made Republican Rome so successful are relevant and imitable in contemporary Italy. If the Romans were simply lucky, then there would be nothing practical for subsequent Italians to replicate.

In the discourse immediately following that on the Gallic sack, Machiavelli affirms one of his arguments from the conclusion of The Prince, reminding his reader that “where virtù is lacking [in contemporary Italy], fortuna shows her power.” Yet, hope remains in the possibility of a leader capable of harnessing ancient virtù: “because states frequently change and will go on changing until someone rises up, someone imbued with a love of antiquity, that he gets things under control in such a way that fortuna does not show how strong she is every time the sun rotates.” People living in Germany might err

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91 The opening of the first discourse: “Those who read of the origin of the city of Rome, its laws and its organization, will not be surprised that in that city so much virtù was maintained for many centuries and that later on there was born that empire into which that republic grew.” Machiavelli, Discorsi, I.1, 418-419: Coloro che leggeranno quale principio, fusse quello de la città di Roma, e da quali datori di leggi e come ordinato, non si maraviglieranno che tanta virtù si sia per più secoli mantenuta in quella città; e che di poi ne sia nato quello imperio al quale quella republica aggiunse.

92 Machiavelli, Discorsi, II.1, 732: Quale fu più cagione dello imperio che acquistarono i romani, o la virtù o la fortuna.

93 Sasso, Niccolò Machiavelli, 552.

94 Machiavelli, Discorsi, I.30, 928-9: perché dove gli uomini hanno poca virtù, la fortuna mostra assai la potenza sua; e perché la è varia, variano le republiche e gli stati spesso; e varieranno sempre, infino che non surga qualcuno che sia della antichità tanto amatore che la regoli in modo che la non abbia cagione di mostrare a ogni girare di sole quanto ella puote.
if they praise ancient times above their own, writes Machiavelli, but not so in Italy, where any native “has reason to criticize his own times and praise ancient ones, because then they did things worthy of great admiration while nowadays one only comes across extreme misery, infamy, and insult; there is no observance of religion, law, or military tradition and everything is stained with all kinds of filth.”

Despite besmirching sixteenth-century Italian society, Machiavelli had not given up hope in the possibility that it might rediscover its ancient virtù. Throughout the work he returns to the theme of imitazione; his stated aim in the Discourses is to make plain the virtù of ancient Rome so that younger readers might find what qualities to replicate in the present. As Gennaro Sasso has pointed out, because Machiavelli thought that the “absence of imitazione” had caused the crises, it was, in his mind, imperative that Italian leaders renew classical virtù. But what kind of program was he proposing? How relevant, really, did he think the lessons of the Roman republic were for his own time? Did he see his Italy of extrema miseria not yet too far gone? Could Italian princes still recover that ancient virtù? Machiavelli wrote that “the fortuna that the Romans had, so,

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95 Machiavelli, Discorsi, II.proemio, 728: ma chi nasce in Italia…e non sia diventato in Italia otrramontano…ha ragione di biasmare I tempi suoi e laudare gli altri; perché in quelli vi sono assai cose che gli fanno maravigliosi, in questi non è cosa alcuna che gli riconperì da ogni extrema miseria, infamia e vituperio; dove non è observanza di religione, non di leggi, non di milizia, ma sono maculati d’ogni ragione bruttura.

96 Sasso, Niccolò Machiavelli, 538-9: Lodare il passato, in questo corrotto presente italiano; studiare gli ordini dell’antica republica di Roma in modo di far toccare con mano ai principi e ai popoli come proprio la mancata imitazione di essi avesse provocato la catastrofe,—non era questo un dovere, e un programma, anche, quanto mai attuale nel tempo della misera?”
too, would any state if it proceeded like the Romans and had the same virtù,”\textsuperscript{97} but did he really mean \textit{any state}, in any time—including Italy in the sixteenth century?

Machiavelli seems certain not only of the possibility but the necessity for the Italian imitation of classical Rome. He advances that argument in the work’s preface and particularly throughout Book II. And he is aware that others in his time might not see as practical his concept of copying in ancient model in the sixteenth century. The problem as Machiavelli sees it is that

so many institutions observed by the Romans, pertaining to both domestic and foreign affairs, are not only not imitated or present in our times, but are deemed to count for nothing; some because they are judged as untrue, others as impossible, and still others as irrelevant and useless; the result of all this ignorance is that we [Italians] find ourselves prey to anybody who wants to overrun this land.\textsuperscript{98}

There are only a few cases in which Machiavelli points to specific ancient Roman institutions that, if imitated in the present, would help stem Italy’s misery. The most notable regards methods of expansion through alliances. The best is the method adopted by the Romans in which a wide network of allied states all deferred to Rome and, almost as good, is the method of Rome’s Italian predecessors, the Etruscans, who maintained an egalitarian system of interdependent states. But, if \textit{imitazione} of the Romans proves too difficult in the present, then \textit{imitazione} of the ancient Tuscans [Etruscans] should at least

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\textsuperscript{97} Machiavelli, \textit{Discorsi}, II.1, 737-8: In modo che io credo che la fortuna che ebbero in questa parte i Romani, la arebbono tutti quegli principi che procedessoro come i Romani e fossero della medesima virtù che loro.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{98} Machiavelli, \textit{Discorsi}, II.4, 765: tanti ordini osservati da Roma, così pertinenti alle cose di dentro come a quelle di fuora, non sono ne’ presenti nostri tempi non solamente imitati ma non è tenuto alcuno conto; giudicandogli alcuni non veri, alcuni impossibili, alcuni non a proposito et inutili; tanto che, standoci con questa ignoranza, siamo preda di qualunque ha voluto correre questa provincia.
\end{flushright}
be plausible, “especially for today’s Tuscans.” Even though the Etruscans never dominated continents as did the Romans, they did consolidate a unified swath of Italy, which was “for a long time secure, with maximum glory of empire and arms and with customs and religion worthy of the highest praise.”

Above all, though, Machiavelli thought that ancient Roman virtù could be revived in the sixteenth century through military organization. Machiavelli’s Dell’arte della guerra (1521) furthered, in a more specific and more widely diffused way, the idea of imitazione first expressed in the Discourses. The work contains concrete suggestions for a reordered civil military and the author intended them to be put into practice—Dell’arte della guerra is not a purely literary endeavor. The princes of Italy again receive waves of condemnation for their squandering of the peninsula’s ancient heritage, that is, the inherent virtù of its people. And, in the conclusion, Machiavelli returns to his recurring prescription for the peninsula’s beleaguered leadership. If the Italian princes would only read the ancients and put their ideas into practice, “it would be impossible that their way of living would not change and that their provinces would not alter fortuna.”

Thus Machiavelli’s theory of imitazione contained an implicit theory of Italian history. Like Salutati, Bruni, and Biondo, Machiavelli considered the peninsula’s

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99 Machiavelli, Discorsi, II.4, 765-66: E quando la imitazione de’Romani paresse difficile, non doverebbe parere così quella delli antichi Toscani, massime a’ presenti Toscani.

100 Machiavelli, Discorsi, II.4, 766: Perchè se quelli non poterono per le cagione dette fare uno imperio simile a quel di Roma, poterono acquistare in Italia quella potenza che quel modo del procedere concesse loro; il che fu per un gran tempo sicuro, con somma gloria d’imperio e d’arme e massime laude di costumi e di religione.


classical inheritance its defining feature. He harkened back to the ancient Roman republic as the apogee of peninsular history. But where his predecessors observed a rebirth of either ancient libertas or Romanitas in their contemporary Italies, Machiavelli lamented the absence of Roman virtù.

Years later, when he composed his most explicitly historical work, the \textit{Istorie fiorentine} (1525), Machiavelli still understood peninsular history as primarily dependent on the presence and absence of ancient virtù in various periods. Drawing heavily on a reading of Biondo’s \textit{Decades}, Book I narrates peninsular history from the Fall of Rome until the fifteenth century.\footnote{Cardinal Giuliano de’ Medici commissioned this work around 1520 and was then elected pope; Machiavelli presented the \textit{Istorie} to Pope Clement VII in May of 1525. In the preface Machiavelli explained his intentions to include those parts of Italian history that are necessary for understanding Florentine history, \textit{Istorie fiorentine in Opere di Niccolò Machiavelli}, vol. 2, ed. Alessandro Montevecchi, (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1971), 281. Machiavelli was aware of the seeming paradox underlying the peninsular scope of his Florentine history; he self-consciously justified the structure of his work several times in the text of the \textit{Istorie}, stating that one cannot understand Florence’s past without a greater knowledge of Italian history as a whole. See, Machiavelli, \textit{Istorie fiorentine, Opere}, vol. 2, 633: perhaps it will appear to those who have read the above text that a Florentine writer has taken himself too far away in narrating those happenings in Lombardy and in the Kingdom (of Naples): nonetheless I have not fled nor shall I flee from similar narrations because, although I have never promised to write of the things of Italy, it does not appear to me that I should leave them behind…by not narrating them our history would be less understood and less gratifying, especially since the wars in which the Florentines were compelled to participate were born out of the actions of other peoples and princes of Italy. E’ parrà forse a quegli che il libro superiore aranno letto che uno scrittore delle cose fiorentine si sia troppo diteso in narrare quelle seguite in Lombardia e nel Regno: nondimeno io non ho fuggito né sono per lo avvenire per fuggire simili narrazioni perché, quantunque io non abbia mai promesso di scrivere le cose di Italia, non mi pare perciò da lasciare indietro di non narrare quelle che saranno in quella provincia natabili. Perché, non le narrando, la nostra storia sarebbe meno intesa e meno grata, massimamente perché dalla azioni degli altri popoli e principi italiani nascono il più delle volte le guerre nelle quali i Fiorentini sono di intromettersi necessitati.}
*ordine* and *disordine* that hinged on the manifestation or lack thereof—the ebb and flow—of collective virtù.

Most of the time, provinces go from order to disorder and then pass again from disorder back to order, for nature does not permit earthly things to stand still...thus from the good they are always descending to the bad and from the bad rising themselves up to the good. Because virtù produces peace, peace generates ozio and ozio gives way to disorder and then ruin; and similarly from ruin is born order and from order, virtù and from that glory.104

Applying the theory to Italia, Machiavelli noted that since the fall of the Roman Empire, Italia had been “sometimes happy, sometimes miserable.”105 When shortly after Rome’s collapse “so much virtù” emerged “among the ruins” in the cities of the peninsula, the

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104 Machiavelli, *Istorie fiorentine*, 514: Sogliono le province il più delle volte, nel variare che le fanno, dall’ordine venire al disordine, e di nuovo di poi dal disordine all’ordine trapassare: perché non essendo dalla natura conceduto alle mondane cose il fermarsi...e così sempre da il bene si scende al male, e da il male si sale al bene. Perché la virtù partorisce quiete, la quiete ozio, l’ozio disordine, il disordine rovina; e similmente dalla rovina nasce l’ordine, dall’ordine virtù, da questa Gloria e fortuna. On Machiavelli’s cyclical view of history as expressed in the *Istorie* see John Najemy’s “Machiavelli and the Medici: The Lessons of Florentine History,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 35 (1982): 574-576; and Salvatore Di Maria, “Machiavelli’s Ironic View of History,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 45 (1992): 248-270. It should be noted that one of the most recent scholarly interpretations of the *Istorie*, an article by Salvatore Di Maria specifically engaged the question of whether or not Machiavelli was “hopeful” or “despairing” about the capacity of humans to determine “the outcome of life’s events” at the time that he wrote the *Istorie* and the potential for Italia to determine its own political future (Di Maria, 249). Di Maria proposed that the answer to that question “must proceed from evidence derived directly from a close reading of the text itself” (249). In the end, he detected in the ironic tone and structure of that work evidence enough to conclude Machiavelli’s utter disillusionment and fatalistic frame of mind, particularly in regard to the idea of Italia and its future vis-à-vis the invaders. According to Di Maria, Machiavelli recognized that “Renaissance Italy was experiencing a serious and irreversible cultural and political decline” and, further, that “Machiavelli, no doubt sharing in the prevailing mood of hopelessness, looks at both the present and the past, and sees no sign of an upward swing of the historical cycle” (267). In short, according to Di Maria, Machiavelli had by then determined that the world was “a stage in which man is doomed to a tragic end in a futile attempt to impose his will upon the immutable course of human history” (268). Puzzlingly, Di Maria cites Najemy as agreeing with his point regarding Machiavelli’s hopelessness vis-à-vis Italia in 1525 when, in fact, Najemy’s article only posits Machiavelli’s skepticism about the ability of one man to redeem Italia—according to Najemy, the *Istorie* reveals Machiavelli’s continued “faith in the collective virtù” of Italians and “their capacity for renewal as a community, even, or perhaps especially after the worst battiture and disordini,” (Najemy, “Lessons of History,” 576). Di Maria’s sophisticated reading of the *Istorie* failed to take into account Machiavelli’s later writings from the 1520s.

result was a “freed Italia, defended from the barbarians.”¹⁰⁶ Centuries later, between 1434 and 1494, the virtù of those same cities “was eliminated,” and Italia was “again exposed to the barbarians…Italia again put itself into their slavery.”¹⁰⁷

In the years following his writing of The Discourses, as the Italian political situation worsened and as his contemporaries’ Italian historical narratives darkened, Machiavelli’s confidence in the possibility of a return of ancient virtù—and thus also his sense of an Italian historical narrative that emphasized the continuity of an ancient Roman “spirit”—only crystallized.

Most Machiavelli scholars tend to portray him as increasingly pessimistic about possibility of preserving the libertas Italiae beginning immediately after he composed The Prince in 1512. For example Gennaro Sasso has argued that by Book II of the Discourses, Machiavelli had abandoned his theory of imitazione. According to Sasso’s reasoning, Machiavelli’s sustained critique in the Discourses of early sixteenth-century Italian political leaders is so comprehensive that it effects an unbridgeable gap between the present and an idealized ancient past, rendering impossible any acts of imitazione.¹⁰⁸

And yet, when Machiavelli’s writings on Italia and Italian history are juxtaposed with other historians in his immediate intellectual context, such as Vettori, an image different from that presented by Sasso emerges. Machiavelli never abandoned his theory

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¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 515: Nondimeno surse tanta virtù in alcuna delle nuove città e de’ nuovi imperi i quali tra le romane rovine nacquono, che, sebbene uno non dominasse agli altri, erano nondimeno in modo insieme concordi e ordinate che da’ barbari la liberorono e difesono.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 516: Tanto che quella virtù che per una lunga pace si soleva nelle altre provincie spegnere, fu dalla viltà di quelle in Italia spenta…alla fine si aperse di nuovo la via a’ barbari e ripose la Italia nelle servitù di quegli.

¹⁰⁸ Sasso, Niccolò Machiavelli, 540 and 541: “La passione polemica aveva dato vita alla teoria, la teoria aveva alimentato la passione. Ma, infine, nel suo motivo profondo (that is, the recovery of Roman virtù in contemporary Italy), la passione uccideva la teoria: ne mostrava la fragilità, e l’<<impossibilità>> practica.
of *imitazione*; he remained relatively hopeful that Italy could redeem its desperate situation and he remained dedicated to the notion that that redemption would be facilitated by the revival of ancient Roman practices and virtù.

It is remarkable given the turbulence of the Italian political theater in those remaining years, just how constant Machiavelli’s perspective remained. Between 1513, when he wrote *The Prince* and 1527, when he died, the major themes from the concluding chapters of *The Prince* recur time and again. He continued to advocate impetuous rather than circumspect actions on the part of Italian leaders; he believed still that Italy was primed for an ascent precisely because it had reached such a dismal low point; and he remained sure that a *rimedio* to Italy’s woes could be found, that it would involve a resurrection of *virtù italica*, that one gifted leader could bring about that resurrection, and that, fortuna’s hold over the peninsula could be broken. Machiavelli’s hopeful Italian thesis contrasts sharply with the more practical perspective put forth by Vettori. While Machiavelli clung to the possibility of preserving the *libertas Italicae*, Vettori began to construct a narrative of peninsular history dependent on an entirely different characterization of the peninsula, *Italia misera.*
Chapter Five

Italia misera: A New Italian History

Natural Affections

Back in the summer of 1513, Machiavelli and Vettori were debating in a series of letters the implications of the looming French occupation of Lombardy. Machiavelli thought it a potentially positive development, while Vettori contended the opposite. Finally, on 10 August, Machiavelli concluded that, “I have no doubt that your non-wish and my wish come from the same fundamental, natural affection or passion, that makes you say, ‘no’ and me, ‘yes.’”¹ This observation about the intellectual tendencies of the two rang true in 1513 and again in their later correspondence. It also indicates the fundamental distinction between each thinker’s conception of Italia and of Italian history.

Especially in juxtaposition with one another, Machiavelli seemed always to insist that yes, Italy could redeem itself, and that, yes, it could imitate ancient Roman virtù. Vettori, meanwhile, drawing on a more precise knowledge of the diplomatic maneuverings of the period, declined, often trying to his manage his friend’s expectations about an imminently rejuvenated peninsula. His own interpretation of peninsular history

¹ Lettere, no. 219 (10 August 1513) in Niccolò Machiavelli, Opere vol. 3 (hereafter Lettere), ed. Franco Gaeta (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1984), 399: Dubito che ‘l vostro non volere, et il mio volere non abbino uno medesimo fondamento d’una naturale affezione o passione, che facci a voi dire no et a me si.
featured the concept of *Italia misera*, a narrative structure that he pioneered and that was later repeated and elaborated upon by Guicciardini.

Modern scholarship has embraced Machiavelli’s characterization of Vettori as a skeptic. When Vettori appears in modern historical scholarship, notably in works by Benedetto Croce, Rudolf von Albertini, and John Najemy, his skepticism tends to emerge as the defining feature of his thought.\(^2\) It is important to recognize that point here because during the 1520s Vettori’s conception of Italia and its past grew ever more dim while Machiavelli’s remained, almost obstinately, romantic and unchanged.

Vettori believed, unlike Machiavelli, in the limited capacity of discourse to explain the political universe\(^3\) and Vettori held a decidedly unhappy view of human nature.\(^4\) He was skeptical about the meanings of some of the most fundamental terms and tropes of his period’s political philosophy, posing acute questions about the effective differences between “tyrannies” and “republics.”\(^5\) Recourse to overwhelming force and


\(^3\) Not out of character was his comment to Machiavelli in a letter from 12 July 1513: “It often appears to me that [political] matters don’t proceed according to reason and therefore it seems superfluous to talk about them, discuss them, and dispute them.” Lettere, no. 216, 391-2: Mi paia spesso che le cose non procedino con ragione, et per questo giudichi superfluo il parlare, discorrerne e disputarne. Najemy’s work highlights Vettori’s and Machiavelli’s disagreements about the nature of discourse in this regard, but only examined their correspondence around 1513.

\(^4\) He wrote, for instance in the *Sommario*, that “almost all men are flatterers and they willingly say what they believe those in power want to hear, even though they feel otherwise in their hearts.” *Sommario della Istoria d’Italia* in Francesco Vettori, *Scritti storici e politici*, ed. Enrico Niccolini (Bari: Laterza, 1972), 209: Quasi tutti li uomini sono adulatori, e dicono volentieri quello che credono piaccia alli uomini grandi, benché sentino altrimenti nel cuore.

\(^5\) When the Florentine republic crumbled in 1512, just after the Gonfaloniere Soderini slipped out of the city (aided principally by Vettori, his brother, Paolo, and Machiavelli), it was replaced by Medici family members. “And this mode of governing is called tyranny. But I say that that constitutes speaking of the things of this world without respect to what is true…if one could create one of those republics written and imagined by Plato or one like that written about by the Englishman Thomas More to be found in Utopia,
ambition leads to few dominating many in all governments, wrote Vettori, so the
distinctions that writers strike between political structures matter little. He noted this
pattern in his Florence, no matter what faction held power, in Venice, “which has lasted
as a republic longer than any other,” but, in the end, is a system by which a few nobles
dominate everyone else, and in France. Vettori also argued the meaningless of
distinctions between “king” and “tyrant.” He made light of the “principalities” of Italy,
which arouse from warlords taking advantage of power vacuums, were justified only by
force, but were called otherwise because the rulers “have received the investiture of an

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6 Vettori, Sommario, 145: È chiamato questo modo di vivere tirannide. Me, parlando delle cose di questo mondo sanza rispetto e secondo il vero, dico che | | chi facesse una di quelle repubbliche scritte e imaginate da Platone, o come una che scrive Tomma Moro inghilese essere stata trovata in Utopia, forse quelle si potrebbero dire non essere governi tirannici; ma tutte quelle repubbliche o principi, de’ quali io ho cognizione per istoria o che io ho veduti, mi pare che sentino di tirannide.

7 Vettori, Sommario, 145: la Veneta, la quale è durata più che repubblica alcuna di che si abbi notizia. Non è espressa tirannide che tremila gentiluomini tenghino sotto più che centomila e che nessuno popolano sia dato adito di diventare gentiluomo?

8 Vettori, Sommario, 145: piglia il regno di Francia e fa che vi sia uno re perfettissimo: non resta però che non sia una grande tirannide che li gentilomini abbino l’arme e li altri no, non paghino gravezza alcuna, e sopra li poveri villani si posino tutte le spese…che vi sia in molte città canoniciati ricchissimi de’ quali quelli che non sono gentiuomini sono esclusi. E nondimeno il regno di Francia è iudicato così bene ordinato regno, e di justizia e d’ogni altra cosa, come ne sia un altro tra Cristiani.

9 Vettori, Sommario, 146: Ma io vorrei che mi fusse mostrato che differenza è dal re al tiranno. Io, per me, non credo certo che vi sia altra differenza se non che quando il re è buono, si può chiamare veramente re, se non è buono, debbe essere nominato tiranno. Così, se uno cittadino piglia il governo della città, o per forza o per ingegno, e sia buono, non si debbe chiamare tiranno: se sarà malo, se lì può dare nome non solo di tiranno, ma d’altro che si possa dire peggio.
emperor who is in Germany and who has nothing in common with a Roman emperor except a meaningless name.”

While some of Vettori’s humanist contemporaries debated the republican or tyrannical aspirations of, respectively, Brutus and Cassius and Caesar, Vettori dismissed those historical episodes as “fables to be told around the fire.” He mocked the belief that there was any difference between the two ancient factions; really, those Romans were all just after their own.

Vettori was similarly skeptical about the word Italia. He did not see it in the same romantic, classical set of lenses that Machiavelli did. In Vettori’s writings, the ancients are distant and their examples are not directly applicable to contemporary political situations. Machiavelli’s Italia was characterized by his conceptions of *imitazione* and redemptive Roman virtù, but Vettori’s was grounded in contemporary political realities, almost exclusively.

Vettori’s *Italia misera* is important not only as a foil to Machiavelli’s vision of *virtù Italica*, but as a precursor to Guicciardini’s ultimately more influential Italian historical narrative. As Guicciardini would do only later, Vettori cast doubts about the kind of universal, theoretical claims that drove Machiavelli’s thinking. Vettori’s observations about peninsular politics and history are also significant on their own. From the perspective of the present, they are decidedly sophisticated—his arguments often

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10 The whole passage reaches a bit further back in time. Vettori, *Sommario*, 146: Et essendo declinato il dominio romano per avere Costantino condotto la sede dello Imperio a Bisanzio, in Italia sono surti molti principi, secondo che ha dato la occasione. E per coprire meglio il nome del principato, si hanno fatto investire da uno imperatore che è stato in Alamagna e che non ha avuto altro di imperatore romano che uno nome vano.

11 Vettori, *Sacco di Roma*, 281: E questi esempi di Bruto e Cassio, che si danno tanto per il capo, sono favole da dirle al fuoco, perché simulmente loro non si mossono aconiurare contro a Cesare per zelo di libertà o della patria, ma per ambizione et utilità perché, vedendo che in quel modo di vivere non potevono avere i primi gradi, come pareva loro meritare, non si curorono per l’ambizione, mettere sottosopra tutto il mondo e far diventare la città di Roma, non serva, ma stiava a tanti crudeli tiranni o vogliamo dire uomini bestiali, quanti dipoi la dominanoro.
transcend or break down the dominant discursive frameworks employed by his contemporaries on certain issues, not just on the meanings of “repubblica,” “tyrannies,” and well-trod episodes of Roman history, but also, again as we will see, in modes of conceiving and writing Italia. Vettori’s positions on the political events and decisions during the calamità tend to be characterized by modern scholars as passive or weak and, in the period of correspondence studied by Najemy, he often plays the role of raining on Machiavelli’s intellectual parades. But in most matters involving Italia during the years of crisis, namely the ill-fated League of Cognac, Vettori, not Machiavelli and not Guicciardini, was most often right in his predictions about how events would unfold.

**Remedies and Realities**

While Machiavelli remained in exile and excluded from political activity, spending most of his days reading and writing on his farm in San Casciano, Vettori became increasingly involved in the complex events of the period. Between 1515 and 1519, he served as an ambassador representing Florentine and Medici interests in France, and became a confidant of the Florentine *de facto* leader, Lorenzo de’ Medici, Duke of Urbino. After Lorenzo’s death in 1519, Vettori held various political offices in Florence, often traveling between there and Rome and eventually emerging as one of the Medici Pope Clement VII’s closest advisers.

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By 1520 the wars in Italy had developed into a showdown between the Valois French monarch, Francis I and the Hapsburg king of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, with greater European hegemony in the balance. War raged between 1521 and 1525, when, after a defeat at Pavia, Francis was captured and taken to Spain as a prisoner. During those years, Vettori developed a notion of Italia that contrasted ever more sharply with Machiavelli’s. Vettori had begun to lose hope; perhaps drawing from his observations in the corridors of power, he understood the chances that the Italian states would avoid subjugation at the hands of the northern monarchs to be dim at best. A series of missives to Pope Clement by both Vettori and Machiavelli represent the growing contrast in their characterizations of Italia.

When in 1524 the armies of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V seemed poised for victory against the forces of the French monarch Francis I, Pope Clement VII found himself and Italy at a diplomatic crossroads. On the one hand, the pope could form an alliance with France and other Italian states in opposition to the emperor. On the other hand, Clement could acquiesce and seek terms of peace. In that year Vettori wrote a memorandum to Clement, the so-called “Discourse of Francesco Vettori regarding whether or not it would be better to form a League [of allies to oppose the emperor] or to strike an accord with the emperor.” Vettori seemed reconciled to the inevitability of Italy’s subjugation by foreign armies. He advised the pope to come to terms with Charles V on the grounds that no Italian coalition could possibly overcome such a strong

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15 For historical background on that period see Devonshire Jones, Francesco Vettori, 161-174.

16 “Discorso di Francesco Vettori se fusse meglio fare una lega o vero accordare con l’imperatore” in Scritti, 299-302. Niccolini attributed the title to Carlo Strozzi but says the handwriting of the body of the text is Vettori’s, see Scritti, 442. Devonshire Jones, Francesco Vettori, 174-176, and J.N. Stephens, The Fall of the Florentine Republic, 1512-1530 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 192-193, both agreed that the document, title aside, is in Vettori’s hand. I have also seen the document and agree with their assessments.
opponent. By Vettori’s own estimation, most of the pope’s advisors in Rome shared the opposite view.\(^\text{17}\) He acknowledged in the Discorso that “the emperor aspires to dominion over all Italy, and not only Italy, but most of Christendom and that it would be the duty of all Italian leaders, and above all the pope, to prevent such an outcome.”\(^\text{18}\) But he differed from the other curial counselors in asserting “I cannot see any rimedio for Italy.”\(^\text{19}\)

The resurfacing of that word, rimedio, is telling. Machiavelli had already found what he believed to be rimedi for Italy, generally in the imitazione of the ancients and their virtù, and, more specifically, in the emergence of a redeemer prince. Even the word, rimedio, in Machiavelli’s thought, implied a sixteenth-century channeling of ancient Roman greatness. Back in 1513, while writing The Prince, Machiavelli had noted that the republican Romans were largely impervious to fatal invasions because

The Romans did what all wise princes should do: they considered not only present troubles, but also future ones, and they worked hard to avoid them. Because, if you see problems from a distance, you can remedy [rimedia] them easily, but if you wait too long, the medicine will be too late and the disease will be incurable. As doctors say, at first a disease is easy to cure but difficult to diagnose, but in time, if the disease is not diagnosed and treated at the outset, it becomes easy to diagnose and difficult to cure. This is how it is in politics: problems can be fixed if recognized early; when, for lack of diagnosis, they are allowed to grow in a way that everyone can recognize them, then there is no longer any remedy [rimedio]. So the Romans, seeing dangers ahead of them, remedied [rimediorno] them always...Nor did the Romans come close to doing what one hears wise men today always going on about, to exploit the allowances of time, but rather they employed their prudenzia and virtù.\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{17}\) In Vettori’s words “ninety percent of Roman opinion favored war,” quoted in Devonshire Jones, Francesco Vettori, 183.

\(^{18}\) Vettori, Discorso, 299: Noi possiamo pensare che Cesare aspiri al dominio di tutta Italia, e non solo d’Italia, ma della maggiore parte della Christianità, e che sarebbe officio di tutti e’ potentate italici, e massime del Pontificie, ovviare a questo suo disegno.

\(^{19}\) Vettori, Discorso, 299: Non vediamo che rimedio abbi Italia.

\(^{20}\) Il principe, III in Niccolò Machiavelli, Opere vol. 1, ed. Rinaldo Rinaldi (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1999), 131-3: Perché Romani feciono in questi casi quello che tutti e principi savi debbono fare: li quail non solamente...
As long as Machiavelli thought remedies possible for Italy, then the disease, the invasions, at least in his mind, were not incurable.

But for Vettori such positive thinking was misguided hopefulness, even though he thought about the Italian situation in similar terms. As spectacular as a Papal-led coalition victory over the emperor would have been, “everything that appears glorious does not turn out to be always useful.”

In the Discorso, Vettori continued Machiavelli’s analogy of the invalid peninsula, but, for Vettori, there were no reasonable remedies available. In this very brief treatise (eight paragraphs), Vettori linked images of mortality with the idea of Italy a striking number of times. He wrote that “this body of Italy is gravely ill; taking it into war could be the strong medicine that could liberate it, but it could also bring it swift death.”

After advising the pope to strike a deal with the emperor, he emphasized the need to keep Charles’ financial demands reasonable, “so as not to bring us a quick death.” Finally, Vettori stated that if the emperor’s terms proved impossible to meet, Italian leaders would have to “put themselves into every danger, throwing themselves

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21 Vettori, Discorso, 300: Nondimeno tutto quello che apparisce glorioso non è poi utile.

22 Vettori, Discorso, 300: Questo corpo d’Italia sia infermo gravamente e che, dandoli una medicina forte quale sarebbe il pigliare la guerra, lo potrebbe liberare, ma lo potrebbe ancora condurre alla morte sùbita.

23 Vettori, Discorso, 300: D’un modo che non fussi soma che ci conducessi alla morte sùbita.
into the fray and deciding that it would be better to die by the hands of others than by one’s own."²⁴

In contrast to Vettori, both Machiavelli and Guicciardini, each in his own way, held on to the hope that Italia might yet avoid the yoke of Spanish domination.²⁵ Around the same time that Vettori advised Clement not to openly oppose the emperor, Guicciardini did the opposite. While the pope considered what course of action to adopt, Guicciardini wrote Machiavelli, now back in Florence.

About political matters, I don’t know what to say because I’ve lost my bearings; and also hearing everyone’s cries against that opinion [to form an alliance against the emperor], that I also do not like, but appears to me necessary, I dare not speak. If I do not deceive myself, we will know better the evils of peace when the opportunity for making war has passed. I have never seen any one who, when he sees the storm coming, doesn’t seek shelter of some form, except us, who prefer to wait bare in the middle of the street. In such a way, should some adversity fall, we won’t be able to say that sovereignty was ripped from our grasp, but that we let it slip from out hands, shamefully.²⁶

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²⁴ Vettori, Discorso, 301: E sarebbe in tal caso da mettersi a ogni pericolo et a ogni sbaraglio et iudicare che fussi meglio morire per man d’altri che occidersi da sé medesimo. Vettori later extended the association of Italia as a fatally ill body that he presented in the Discorso in the Sommario when he described the Italian military captains as comparable to “a group of unversed, amateur doctors who, without purging the body of its illness, try to cure it by applying strong unguents to the extremities without realizing that they are conveying them right to the heart.” Sommario, 238: come alcuni medici poco esperti e poco dotti che, senza purgare il corpo deli’ umori, sanano con loro unguenti forti le piache deli’ membri non nobili e non s’accorgano che riducono la materia al cuore.

²⁵ A good summary of this less-studied period of Machiavelli’s life can be found in Ugo Dotti, Machiavelli rivoluzionario: vita e opere (Roma: Carocci, 2003), 409-428.

²⁶ Lettere, no. 302 (26 December 1525), 572: De rebus publicis non so che dire, perché ho perduto la bussola; et anco sentendo che ognuno gridà contro quella opinione, che non mi piace, ma mi pare necessaria, non audeo loqui. Se non mi inganno, conosceremo tutti meglio e mali della pace, quando sarà passata la opportunità del fare la guerra. Non veddi mai nessuno che, quando vede venire un mal tempo, non cercasse in qualche modo di fare prova di coprirsi, eccetto che noi, che vogliamo aspettarlo in mezzo la strada scoperti. Però si quid adversi acciderit, non potremo dire che ci sia stata tolta la signoria, ma che turpiter elapsa sit de manibus. See also Roberto Ridolfi, The Life of Francesco Guicciardini (New York, Knopf, 1968), 141.
The Holy League of Cognac came together in May of the following year with Guicciardini helping from Rome to facilitate the agreement.\textsuperscript{27} The pope subsequently confirmed him as Lieutenant-General of the forces.\textsuperscript{28} Guicciardini thought of the League as existing for the “safety and glory of Italy.”\textsuperscript{29} As things stood in 1526, then, Machiavelli and Guicciardini were still working on the preservation of the \textit{libertas Italiae} while Vettori was advising those in charge to cut the peninsula’s loses. In the words of Guicciardini’s primary biographer, Roberto Ridolfi, “there was already something national about the enterprise [the League], even if the nation had yet to come into being.”\textsuperscript{30} In the end, though, Guicciardini’s League and the war it brought on only hastened the demise of Italian autonomy.

**Plans**

Meanwhile, in his personal letters, Machiavelli remained deeply committed to the prospect of a redeemed Italia. Beginning in the spring of 1526, he developed a series of military plans meant to stretch and fracture Charles’ forces on the peninsula. Those strategies—bold, aggressive, and dependent on military virtù—crop up incessantly in his 1526-1527 communications with Guicciardini and Vettori. Those plans also demonstrate the seriousness and unchanging nature of Machiavelli’s earlier theoretical observations.

\textsuperscript{27} The League was an alliance combining the resources of Rome, Venice, Florence, Milan, and France (this last more in name than in troops or money) established in the spring of 1526. For more on the League, see Cecil Roth, \textit{The Last Florentine Republic} (London: Methuen, 1925), 9, 15-16, 68-71, 85-86, 104-105, 235-236. On Guicciardini’s involvement, see Roberto Ridolfi, \textit{The Life of Francesco Guicciardini} trans. Cecil Grayson (New York: Knopf, 1968), 141-149.

\textsuperscript{28} Ridolfi, \textit{Life of Guicciardini}, 150-173.

\textsuperscript{29} As quoted in Ridolfi, \textit{Life of Guicciardini}, 149.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 149.
on Italia and Italian history. The letters to Vettori and Guicciardini advocate the kind of bold leadership that would rekindle “the virtù of an Italian spirit” that he first articulated in *The Prince* and argue for the *imitazione* of ancient military institutions and virtù, echoing his theses from *The Discourses* and from the *Arte della Guerra*. Even in his last year, Machiavelli never truly abandoned his intellectual commitment to the transformative potential of virtù for the peninsula.

Although there had been a temporary peace, in the spring of that year it was clear to Machiavelli that war was coming soon. The Pope had a precarious League, led by Guicciardini, but the French had yet to commit militarily, and, in fact, the French King Francis I was deliberating whether or not to respect the treaty he had signed with Charles while a Spanish prisoner, in January of that year. Whatever decision Francis reached, Machiavelli wrote Guicciardini on 15 March 1526, there would “be war, and soon, in Italy.” For this reason, it was essential that the “Italians appear to have the French with them.” If not, “Italy” would be “hopeless,” “Italy would be left to its ruin,” and “Italy would be lost.”

But, in fact, Machiavelli had not given up hope; virtù could yet save the peninsula. Weeks after Guicciardini arrived in Rome as Lieutenant General of the League

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31 Vettori, *Sommario*, 220-24. King Francis had been captured and held prisoner in Madrid and signed the treaty in order to earn his release. He did break his word, joining League of Cognac, and, incidentally, earning Vettori’s praise for wise statesmanship.

32 *Lettere*, no. 305 (15 March 1526), 580: Io stimo, che in qualunque modo le cose procedino, che gli abbia ad essere guerra, e presto, in Italia; perciò è’ bisogna alli Italiani vedere avere Francia con loro. And earlier in the same letter, 578: in qualunque di esse la Italia aveva d’avere guerra.

33 *Lettere*, no. 303 (3 January 1526), 574: spacciata la Italia.

of Cognac, Machiavelli wrote him. He had ideas, or, in his words, *rimedi.* With the Emperor’s army in place and ready to attack, Machiavelli returned to his trademark suggestion, an Italian militia. But he also went further, again echoing the sentiments of the Exhortation by calling for a burst of virtù: “I will tell you something that you will think crazy: I will put in place a design that will appear to you either reckless or ridiculous; nevertheless, these times demand decisions that are bold, unusual, and strange.”

Completing the refrain that began in *The Prince*, Machiavelli tabbed yet another potential redeemer prince, the mercenary captain, Giovanni de’ Medici, known as *delle bande nere.* Machiavelli saw in him the potential to capture the essence of bold, virtù-infused action. Everyone knows, he wrote, that “among the Italians there is no other leader whom the soldiers would follow more willingly...he is bold, impetuous, and a strategist,” in other words, the one “to hoist this flag.” Thirteen years earlier in the

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35 *Lettere*, no. 305 (15 March 1526), 580.

36 Ibid., 580: lo imperadore he le sue teste delle sue genti, halle alle poste, può mouvere la guerra a posta sua quando egli vuole.

37 Ibid.: Pertanto io giudico che non sia da differire lo amarsi...a noi conviene fare una testa, o colorata o aperta...loderei fare una testa sotto colore.

38 *Lettere*, no. 305 (15 March 1526), 580: Io dico una cosa che vi parà pazza; metterò un disegno innanzi che vi parà o temerario o ridicolo; nondimeno questi tempi richieggon deliberationi audaci, inusitate, et strane.

39 In the Exhortation, in which Machiavelli had called upon Lorenzo de’ Medici, the Duke of Urbino to fulfill that role, he had suggested that the recently departed Cesare Borgia would have also made an ideal candidate. Machiavelli, *Il principe*, XXVI, 389, especially notes 31 and 32.

40 *Lettere*, no. 305 (15 March 1526), 581: Ciascuno credo che creda che fra gli Italiani non ci sia capo, a chi li soldati vadino più dietro, né di chi gli Spagnuoli più dubitino (temano), et stimino più: ciascuno tiene ancora il signor Giovanni audace, impetuoso, di gran concetti, pigliatore di gran partiti; puossi adunque, ingrossandolo segretamente, fargli rizzare questa bandiera, mettendoli sotto quanti cavalli e quanti fanti si potesse più. Giovanni de’ Medici was a condottiere captain who established a military reputation in the service of Florence during the Medici annexation of Urbino in 1516-1517 and who, at the time of
Exhortation he had used some of the same terms, including *impetuoso*, to describe the *redentore* for whom Italy cried out.\(^{41}\) Machiavelli thought that a burst of successful campaigns led by Giovanni could convince the French to reactivate their alliance with the pope and also make the Spanish alter their strategies.\(^{42}\) Machiavelli matched his excitement at the prospects offered by Giovanni with his sense of unfolding drama: “if this *rimedio* does not occur, and war comes, then I do not know what else there is; nothing else occurs to me.”\(^{43}\)

But more did occur to him. Two weeks after writing his letter to Guicciardini proposing a *rimedio* centered on Giovanni de’ Medici, Machiavelli received a letter from a mutual friend, the Florentine statesman Filippo Strozzi. Strozzi informed Machiavelli that he had read the letter to Guicciardini, and, unfortunately, found the plan untenable: for Giovanni to head such a large army, it would take money, and the Pope was fresh out.\(^{44}\) After it was clear that plan would come to nothing, he was soon advocating for yet another fresh *rimedio*. That spring he was occupied with a review of Florence’s city walls in anticipation of a Spanish attack.\(^{45}\)

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\(^{42}\) Ibid., 581: e quando questo si facesse, ben presto farebbe aggirare il cervello agli Spanuoli, e variare i disegni loro, che hanno pensato forse rovinare la Toscana e la Chiesa senza ostacolo. Potrebbe far mutare opinione al re, e volgersi a venire con genti vive.

\(^{43}\) *Lettere*, no. 305 (15 March 1526), 581: Et se questo rimedio non ci è, havendo a far guerra, non so qual ci sia; né a me occorre altro.

\(^{44}\) *Lettere*, no. 306 (31 March 1526), 583.

\(^{45}\) *Lettere*, nos. 307 and 308 (4 Aprile 1526 and 17 May 1526), 585-8.
Then, during the summer of 1526, Machiavelli penned a memorandum in which he outlined a hard-hitting plan meant to undermine the emperor’s peninsular operations. It was a bold and complex strategy involving the forces of the Holy League of Cognac, who would execute a diversionary attack on Charles’ interests in Naples while also sending other forces into Lombardy.\textsuperscript{46} Machiavelli sent the letter to Vettori, who passed it on to Filippo Strozzi, who showed it to the pope.\textsuperscript{47} As, before, Machiavelli described this plan as a last hope, informing his friend Bartolomeo Calvacanti that, “if this plan is not executed, I see the war as lost.”\textsuperscript{48}

Although Vettori helped Machiavelli to air his ideas in high places, he had definite misgivings about what, to him, was a delusional plan that failed to take into account Charles’ access to massive amounts of money and troops. On 5 August 1526, Vettori wrote a letter to Machiavelli that was meant to manage his friend’s expectations regarding the proposal. “I just want to tell you,” wrote Vettori, “the emperor has too much good fortuna” [\textit{troppo gran fortuna}].\textsuperscript{49}

Vettori explained what he meant by \textit{troppo gran fortuna} and, in the process, presented an Italia characterized by its inability to determine its own future, that is, by the absence of virtù. Events seemed to fall in Charles’ favor, not coincidentally. Vettori listed off political situations that should not have reasonably been to Charles’ advantage, but

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[] \textsuperscript{46} Although that original memorandum is not extant, Machiavelli later described the plan of a simultaneous attack on Lombardy and Naples in a letter to Bartolomeo Cavalcanti, \textit{Lettere}, no. 322 (6 October 1526), 617. See also a description of the plan by Devonshire Jones, \textit{Francesco Vettori}, 178.
\item[] \textsuperscript{47} Vettori passed the letter to Filippo Strozzi who, according to Vettori in his letter of 5 August 1526, presented it to Pope Clement VII. \textit{Lettere}, no. 316 (5 August 1526), 598.
\item[] \textsuperscript{48} \textit{Lettere}, no. 322 (6 October 1526), 617: E se questo non si faceva, vedeva perduto la guerra.
\item[] \textsuperscript{49} \textit{Lettere}, no. 316 (5 August 1526), 599: ma solo vi voglio dire che l’Imperatore ha troppo gran fortuna.
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were, anyway. The imperial army’s assault on Milan earlier that summer had been mistimed and disorganized, but rolled to success nonetheless. The Genoese, “who should be the biggest enemies that Caesar has in Italy, are under Antonio Adorno and with money and in every other way they aid Charles in whatever enterprise he undertakes.” And, despite Charles’ reneging on his intentions to wed Mary Tudor, the English had struck a treaty with him.50

By dwelling on what he called Charles’ *tropo gran fortuna*, Vettori was also describing a re-ordered political universe in which the relatively tiny Italian city-states could no longer compete. And Charles had more than just a young nation-state in Spain, he had an empire. Vettori continued:

…and getting back to the fortuna of Cesare, it has made it so the French king continues and in his lack of organization and lack of attentiveness, where the pope and the Venetians began to suspect that the king’s actions do not come from a lack of power, but from a lack of desire. Fortuna is the reason that all the Spaniards do everything to exalt [Charles], while he, on the other side, governs absolutely in Spain (in tutto e per tutto) and he takes what he can from the Spanish to give to the Dutch. [Charles’ fortuna] is the reason that Ferrara did not come to terms with the pope; and [his fortuna], in the end, made it so the people, I do not want to say army, of the pope and the Florentines, being five-thousand paid footsoldiers and at least three-hundred cavalry, ranging from good to bad, were routed by no more than four-hundred well-commanded soldiers.51

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50 *Lettere*, no. 316 (5 August 1526), 599: e lasciando da parte la cosa di li altri anni, questa ha fatto che s’indugiò tanto a pigliare l’impresa, che il popolo di Milano fu battuto; questa, che vi conducessi tardi e con poco ordine alle mura di Milano, e vi ritraessi senza veder chi vi cacciassi; questa, che deliberazione seguissi con tanta tardanza che fu necessitato accordare prima; questa, che i Genovesi, che dovrebbero essere e’ maggiori inimici che Cesare avessi in Italia, stanno sotto a Antoniotto Adorno ed aiutano e con danari e con ogni altro modo qualunque impresa di Cesare; questa fa che Inghilterra, poi che Cesare ha tolto altra donna che la figlia, non vi pensa e non tiene conto di non essere stimato, et il cardinale, che suole essere il più superbo uomo del mondo, è il più umile.

51 In June of 1526, the pope sent to Siena a sizable force of about 1200 cavalry and 8000 footsoldiers to put down the anti-papal faction that had siezed control of the city. 400 Sienese troops broke the siege and put the papal forces to flight. See *Lettere*, 600 fn 18: E per tornare alla fortuna di Cesare, questa fa che il Cristianissimo seque (sequita, continua) e ne’ suoi disordini e straccuraggine, donde il Papa et i Veneziani sono cominciati a insospettire che quello che procede dalla natura del Re e dal non potere, proceda dal non volere. La fortuna detta è causa che tutti gli Spanuoli indovinino (facciano ogni cosa) per esaltarlo, e lui dall’altro canto in Ispagna si governi in tutto e per tutto come vogliono e Fiamminghi e togga (tolga) agli
With his rule stretching from Spain to Holland to the Holy Roman Empire, Charles represented a breadth of power that dwarfed that of the Italian states, individually and even collectively. It was a point that Vettori would later develop more fully in his history of the period, the Sommario della Istoria d’Italia (1528, see below). For Vettori, the course of Italian affairs was determined by transalpine players; meanwhile, for Machiavelli, Italia remained capable of its own decisive action.

Vettori’s sense of an Italy dominated by fortuna was, in this way, analytical, based on observations of contemporary political realities. In contrast, Machiavelli’s Italy, characterized by its virtù, was based largely on abstract rationalizations about the ancient past and its contemporary applicability. To Vettori, fortuna was an analogy, useful for explaining the nuances of the political terrain. But to Machiavelli, virtù was almost real, a mystical force with an agency of its own. He had developed the concept of redemptive Roman virtù around 1513, in The Prince, and in The Discourses, and then, over a decade later, devised plans to turn those concepts into political action. But he was off. Machiavelli’s plans of 1526 were backed by plenty of virtù, but no money. Vettori, it seems, not Machiavelli, arrived much closer to the “effective truth” of the Italian situation during the 1520s.

Vettori concluded that 5 August 1526 letter by reiterating his stance on Machiavelli’s proposed strategies. “My friend, I do not approve of your plan to send the

Spanuoli ciò che può per dare a detti Fiamminghi. Questa è causa che Ferrara non s’acordi col Papa; e questa in ultimo ha fatto che le genti, non voglio dire esercito, del Papa e Fiorentini sieno state rotte da 400 comandati sanesi e non più; sendo cinque mila fanti pagati et almeno trecento cavalli da guerra, tra buoni e cattivi.
army against the Kingdom (of Naples),” he wrote.\textsuperscript{52} Aside from a lack of funds for such a venture, all evidence suggested that the armies of the League were not capable of achieving success in smaller military operations, so Machiavelli’s daring strategy would, even in theory, be ill-advised.\textsuperscript{53} With the way that events were unfolding, wrote Vettori, “with this bad luck and weak reputation, I do not believe we could force ourselves into an oven.”\textsuperscript{54}

In a subsequent August letter, Vettori offered further military reasons why an attack on Naples would likely fail.\textsuperscript{55} In fact, if events continued in the same direction through November, it would be necessary for the pope “to take those conditions that Caesar wants to give him, which, one would guess, will be harsh.”\textsuperscript{56} Vettori concluded that letter by apologizing for his bluntness regarding Machiavelli’s hopeful proposals, but, he explained, “when I write to you, it seems to me that I’m talking to myself.”\textsuperscript{57} A good friend, Vettori attempted to ground Machiavelli’s hopes to a level consonant with the harsh political realities of the period.

\textsuperscript{52} Lettere, no. 316 (5 August 1526), 601: Compare, io non appruovo quello andare con lo esercito verso il regno.

\textsuperscript{53} Lettere, no. 316 (5 August 1526), 601: perché avendo la lega fatta tanta impresa per socorre il castello e non l’avendo fatta, ma lasciatolo acordare sulli ochi, avendo il Re e il Papa armata in mare per tenere che Borbone non venissi, e sendo lui venuto, avendo parte della lega fatta l’impresa contra Siena e mandato la gente per vincere et essere suta vinta

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 601: io non crederii che in su questa disdetta e cum tanta poca reputazione si potessi sforzare uno forno.

\textsuperscript{55} Lettere, no. 319 (24 August 1526), 609-11.

\textsuperscript{56} Lettere no. 319 (24 August 1526), 611: E se mi fussi opposto che queste imprese non riusiranno e massime in si poco tempo, vi direi che se per tutto novembre la guerra non è se non vinta in tutto, almanco in declinazione, che il papa è necessitato pigliare quelle condizione che Cesare gli vuole dare, le quali si può stimare abbino a essere durissime.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 611: quando scrivo a voi, mi pare parlare meco medesimo.
Machiavelli’s proposals were sincere, but out-of-touch. There had been little in the League’s campaigns to inspire confidence that any bold *rimedio* would turn the tide of Charles’ troops’ advance. As Devonshire Jones pointed out, during the period Machiavelli devised his series of stratagems, “despite the highest expectations, in no sector of the war which the pope had planned were the forces of the League successful.”

In November of 1526, Giovanni de’ Medici, whom Machiavelli wrote about in such a hopeful vein, died from wounds suffered in battle.

But Machiavelli held on to his hopes and convictions about Italia until the end. That October he wrote to another Florentine friend, Bartolomeo Calvacanti, about his proposed *impresa* against Lombardy and Naples and, the following April, he was still lamenting to Vettori the mistake that the pope had made in not implementing the plan.

At this point, a month before the Sack of Rome and about two months before Machiavelli’s death, he had begun to see how unlikely it was that the League would turn back Charles’ forces. And yet, still, he was not ready to abandon the possibility of virtù-infused, redemptive action. On 16 April 1527 he wrote Vettori about “resolving ourselves to war, cutting off all discussions of peace, and, in this way, bringing together the allies


60 *Lettere*, no. 322 (6 October 1526), 617.

61 *Lettere*, no. 330 (14 April 1527), 628.

62 Ibid., 628: si giudicava la guerra perduta, come voi medesimo, quando io mi partii di costì, la giudicavi.
without delay, because we can no longer limp, but must move like crazy: desperation often finds rimedii that choice cannot.\textsuperscript{63}

To his last, Machiavelli held on to his faith in the transformative potential of Italian virtù. His stubborn insistence about possible rimedi indicates his lasting commitment to his conception of the peninsula that he first began to articulate around 1513. From 1513 until his death in 1527, Machiavelli’s perspective on Italia was determined more by his rationalizations of ancient history than by careful analysis of contemporary political realities. The strategies he advocated in 1526 and 1527, which embodied the bold aggression of what he understood to be Roman virtù, make clear the seriousness behind not only the Exhortation, but also the seriousness behind his theory of imitazione that he first articulated in \textit{The Discourses}. In this way, too, Machiavelli’s thoughts on Italia during his last days also helps to clarify his understanding of Italian history, as directly connected to the legacy of ancient Rome through the force of virtù.

Machiavelli’s virtù-based conceptions of Italia and Italian history are important, too, for understanding the full range of voices involved in early sixteenth-century conversations about the peninsula and its past. Machiavelli was not a representative voice; he was in dialogue with others’ who thought just as deeply, but, in the end, much differently, about Italia. His dialogue with Vettori on that theme continued, intertextually, after Machiavelli’s death, when Vettori penned his most comprehensive historical work.

\textbf{Vettori’s Sommario della Istoria d’Italia (1528)}

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Lettere} no. 331 (16 April 1527), 629: e resolvendosi alla guerra, tagliare tutte le pratiche della pace, et in modo che i collegati venghino innanzi senza rispetto alcuno, perché qui non bisogna più claudicare, ma farla alla impazzata: e spesso la disperazione truova de’ rimedii che la elezione non ha saputi trovare.
Composed in 1528,\textsuperscript{64} the Sommario details the Italian Wars between 1512 and 1527. It is an important, if largely forgotten work that illustrates the astuteness of Vettori’s historical thought. In many ways, Vettori still lingers in the shadows of modern Renaissance historiography.\textsuperscript{65} Despite recent studies by Najemy and Dotti that underscore Vettori’s provocative role as Machiavelli’s intellectual foil in the years preceding The Prince, the majority of modern scholarship presents Vettori largely as an ancillary, passive interlocutor next to his more famous friend, not as a thinker in his own right.\textsuperscript{66} In particular, the overall profusion of Machiavelli studies has overshadowed Vettori’s accomplishments as a historian.\textsuperscript{67}

Vettori’s historical work adds depth to the general understanding of the exchange of ideas between him and Machiavelli. For example, in Between Friends, John Najemy focused on the friendly dispute between Vettori and Machiavelli during the years 1513-1515 regarding the limits of political discourse, an issue that Najemy saw as present and still unresolved within the pages of The Prince.\textsuperscript{68} In that amicable disagreement, a skeptical Vettori argued against a rationally optimistic Machiavelli; the former asserted the inability of language to describe problems and to offer solutions for what he viewed


\textsuperscript{65} On Vettori’s political career see Devonshire Jones’s detailed biography. See also a brief character sketch in von Albertini, repubblica al principato, 246-265, and a short but useful “biobibliography” in Vettori, Scritti, 359-367; Marcello Simonetta’s “Francesco Vettori, Francesco Guicciardini and Cosimo I: the Prince After Machiavelli,” in The Cultural Politics of Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001), 1-8 deals with the final days of Vettori’s political career.

\textsuperscript{66} Najemy’s work is the notable exception to the rule.

\textsuperscript{67} Vettori’s corpus includes, in addition to the Sommario, an anecdotal account of his travels in Germany, Viaggio in Alamagna, a dialogue on the Sack of Rome, biographies of his father Piero and of Lorenzo de’ Medici, the Duke of Urbino, as well as many diplomatic and personal letters.

\textsuperscript{68} Najemy, Between Friends, 102-103, 107-109, 124-127, 144-146, 176-177, 185-191, 202, 208-209, 347.
as ever-changing and infinitely complex political realities, while the latter maintained the
existence of absolute, universal political truths that language could both discern and
describe. For Najemy, that dialogue about “the intelligibility of the world and the
possibility of coherent and effective political discourse” carried out in private
correspondence was continued within the pages of Machiavelli’s most influential work—
in Najemy’s words, there is a “polemic against Vettori that pervades The Prince.”69 That
issue remains unresolved in the Sommario. In the preface, Vettori implicitly engages his
friend’s perspective on universals when he states that he [Vettori], “when taking on a
particular subject, am not so arrogant as to have persuaded myself to have understood it
perfectly.”70 In other words, Vettori’s history does not contain concrete lessons for
political behavior, but rather reaffirms his belief in the mutability and unpredictability of
human affairs.

Both writers implicitly engaged the viewpoints of the other through their formal
writings; Najemy demonstrated that Vettori’s ideas and perspective are present in
Machiavelli’s major works, but the reverse is also true. As Marcello Simonetta recently
commented, Vettori’s formal writings contained “venomous shots at the theories of his
friend.”71 Machiavelli died just before Vettori began writing, but in his history Vettori
employed many of the same terms and engaged some of the same issues, like political

69 Ibid., 201-202.

70 Vettori, Sommario, 137: né ancora sono si arrogante che, quando volessi pigliare tale provincia, mi
persuadessi di posserla perfettamente assolvere.

71 Marcello Simonetta in Francesco Vettori, Viaggio in Alamagna, ed. Marcello Simonetta (Palermo:
Sellerio, 2003), 20.
discourse, that had appeared in his prior correspondence with Machiavelli and in The Prince itself.\textsuperscript{72}

One of those contested issues was Italia. Given its peninsular scope, the Sommario provides significant insight into Vettori’s perception of Italia and the ways in which it contrasted with Machiavelli’s in the 1520s. Back in 1513, Vettori had expressed the hope that perhaps the Italian states could act in accord and hold off the serious military threat posed by the Swiss. But by 1524, in his Discorso directed to Pope Clement, Vettori had abandoned any vestiges of that optimism in exchange for a clear resignation regarding Italy’s inability to repulse or even effectively combat its invaders. Vettori’s resignation regarding Italia in 1525 became more nuanced and even more despairing by 1528 when he wrote his Sommario.

It is important to note, as von Albertini has, that even though Vettori’s Sommario typifies the author’s dim view of Italy’s state of affairs and even though Vettori had advised against the drama of the League of Cognac, he was no less loyal to his peninsular patria than was Machiavelli or Guicciardini.\textsuperscript{73} In the Sommario, Vettori looks back on the “cause of the ruin of the people of Italy.”\textsuperscript{74} And six years before his death in 1539, Vettori wrote in a letter to a friend that he had “decided to speak little and write less, and I only want to say that Italia needs peace…and I would wish that His Holiness would do

\textsuperscript{72} For instance, briefly indicating his skeptical position regarding the capacity of political discourse to reach certain truth-claims, Vettori cautioned in the introduction to the Sommario that “my purpose here is not to write an entire history, nor am I so arrogant as to convince myself of having perfectly resolved the matters I discuss.” Vettori, Sommario, 137: nè ancora sono si arrogante che, quando volessi pigliare tale provincia, mi persuadessi di possederla perfettamente assolvere.

\textsuperscript{73} von Albertini, repubblica al principato, 253: L’idea d’Italia—e sopratutto della pace in Italia, che sta particolarmente a cuore al Vettori è viva e presente [nel Sommario].

\textsuperscript{74} Vettori, Sommario, 219: La causa della ruina di tutti i popoli d’Italia.
whatever needs to be done so that Italia remains quiet as it is at present.”

Vettori’s more careful and much dimmer view of Italia was born out of the same concern for her security as was Machiavelli’s more action-packed perspective.

Vettori’s history was unique for the early sixteenth century. It was the first of its period to employ Italia as the unifying frame of its analysis that was also written in the vernacular. Francesco Guicciardini’s *Storia d’Italia*, the best-known early modern history of a unified Italian entity did not appear until much later, in 1561. Like Vettori, Guicciardini was also a close friend of Machiavelli’s; like Vettori, he also held important posts in Medicean Rome and Florence, and, finally, the two collaborated significantly within the Palazzo Vecchio, especially after 1527. Such circumstantial evidence may indicate that Guicciardini read Vettori’s *Sommario* and, as Franco Gaeta has argued, perhaps Vettori’s thinking on Italia, not only as a guiding geographical framework for a history but also as an irreversibly weak entity, influenced Guicciardini’s own, later historical opus. The fact that Vettori wrote in the Tuscan language that subsequently

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76 Rucellai’s *De Bello Italico*, a Latin work appeared in 1495. See Chapter Four.


diffused throughout the peninsula as standard Italian lends his interpretation of Italia wider import for subsequent peninsular history.\textsuperscript{80}

\textit{Italia Rovinata}

Vettori began to write the \textit{Sommario} in the wake of a particularly tumultuous year. In 1527 Spanish and German soldiers had sacked Rome,\textsuperscript{81} and, in Florence, a group of citizens had exiled the Medici clan from the city, temporarily replacing their de facto rule with an oligarchic government led by Niccolò Capponi.\textsuperscript{82} The new regime adopted a position hostile to most of the former Medici loyalists, whose number included Vettori, making his presence in the city difficult, if not impossible.\textsuperscript{83} Vettori retreated to the countryside where, in his own words, “finding myself this spring at the villa with time on

\textsuperscript{80} The debates among sixteenth-century intellectuals about whether or not the Tuscan dialect should become a unifying Italian language—the so-called \textit{questione della lingua}—had already begun and continued throughout the century. For a general review of the \textit{questione}, see Bruno Migliorini, \textit{Storia della lingua italiana} (Florence: Sansoni, 1971), 321-340, and Lauro Martines, \textit{Power and Imagination: City-states in Renaissance Italy} (New York: Knopf, 1979), 317-322. Modern historians have noted Vettori’s use of Italia as the major category of historical investigation. Albertini wrote that “Vettori anticipates by some years the shifting of historical interests from the Florentine horizon to the Italian one that will have its first complete expression in Guicciardini’s \textit{Storia d’Italia}.” Albertini, \textit{repubblica al principato}, 251: Il Vettori anticipa di qualche anno quello spostamento dell’interesse storico dall’orizzonte fiorentino a quello italiano che avrà la sua prima espressione compiuta nella \textit{Storia d’Italia} del Guicciardini. Also see Gilbert, \textit{Machiavelli and Guicciardini}, 248-250.


\textsuperscript{82} On the 1527 revolt see Devonshire Jones, \textit{Francesco Vettori}, 198-200; Stephens, \textit{Florentine Republic}, 195-214; and Roth, \textit{Last Florentine}, 37-54.

\textsuperscript{83} Vettori, \textit{Sommario}, 246; Devonshire Jones, \textit{Francesco Vettori}, 201-204. See also Vettori’s letter to Bartolomeo Lanfredini, in which Vettori described his dire financial straights stemming from the new regime’s taxation of the optimates (\textit{ottimati}). Vettori and his wife, “without money” and “without anything else in the house,” had to sell their clothes before leaving Florence, in von Albertini, \textit{repubblica al principato}, appendix, 438: Altro non ho in casa, et poco fuori monna Lena mia v’è rimasta et, perché sapeva non havevo danari, he impegnati tutti i suoi panni et miei.
my hands, I thought I would write, not a complete history, but a short and select sommario of the events in Italy from the end of 1511 to the start of 1527.”

The particular moment at which Vettori sat down to write imbues the Sommario with several layers of meaning, both historical and personal. In the first place, as Machiavelli had done before him and Guicciardini would do later, Vettori sought a means through historical writing to comprehend better the series of events that had, almost in a flash, left him destitute and unwanted by his native city. It also seems plausible that Vettori’s temporary rejection by the new administration in the Palazzo Vecchio may have inspired him to adjust his historical lens wider than Florence or Tuscany. As J. N. Stephens proposed, the frustration of certain statesmen with the inabilities of their governments to navigate successfully or even to comprehend the political changes occurring around them led those thinkers to ask themselves “what was left?” and, Stephens continued, “Italy not Florence, that was the necessary conclusion and it became the subject of history.”

In short, at his Tuscan villa that spring, Vettori had Italia and fortuna on his mind. In the prefatory remarks to the Sommario, Vettori explains the scope of his project as not so much “a comprehensive history, but a brief and select sommario of the events in Italy

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84 Vettori, Sommario, 134: Onde, trovandomi questa primavera alla villa ozioso, pensai di scrivere non intera et iusta istoria, ma brieve et eletto sommario delli successi dal fine dell’anno MDXI insino al principio del MDXXVII in Italia.

85 In von Albertini’s words, Vettori, like Machiavelli and Guicciardini, turned to historical writing to “make clear the recent past and to understand his own condition in a moment in which he found himself excluded from political activity and in which events had taken a completely unexpected turn.” von Albertini, repubblica al principato, 250: di rendersi conto del recente passato e di comprendere la propria condizione in un momento in cui si trovava escluso dalla politica attiva e in cui gli eventi politici avevano preso una piega del tutto inattesa.

from the end of 1512 down to the beginning of 1527.”87 As noted above, Vettori also made plain in his preface the fact that he did not intend to draw broad conclusions based on his rendering of the recent past. And, indeed, the narrative of his work distills virtually no universal prescriptions for political success nor does it ever come close to any suggestions akin to Machiavelli’s theory of *imitazione*. The one “certain” lesson that the previous decade and a half of Italian history teaches and that Vettori offers without hesitation is that, “these past fifteen years have seen events of highest importance and, in those events, it is worth considering the variety of fortuna.”88

Fortuna dominates the *Sommario* from the outset, as the theme is carried over from the preface into the first episode of the narrative proper. Just when the allied Papal and Spanish forces seemed poised for victory outside Ravenna, “it appeared that fortuna, always unstable, suddenly changed.”89 A few paragraphs later, Vettori introduces Piero Soderini, a friend and Florence’s *gonfaloniere*-for-life, who in 1513 was deposed by the return of the Medici. Soderini was a “good, prudent, and practical man who never wandered outside of justice and did not act out of ambition or vice.”90 One could ask little else in a leader but, nevertheless, the “bad fortuna” permeating his city at that time brought him down.91


91 Vettori, *Sommario*, 140: Ma la mala fortuna, non voglio dir sua, ma della misera città, non permesse che lui o che altri vedessi il modo di ovviare alli insulti de’ collegati o, se pure da alcuno fu veduto, non li fu prestato quella fede che era conveniente.
This idea—that the one unequivocal rule history teaches is that nothing occurs outside the domain of fortuna—was an important historiographical shift away from the earlier century’s assumptions regarding the knowability of the past. Modern scholars generally point to Guicciardini’s *Storia d’Italia* as having pioneered that shift, but Vettori came first. Moreover, like Guicciardini, Vettori’s emphasis on fortuna (and its attendant limitations on the instructive value of the past) colored his conception and articulation of Italia.

Two related aspects of Vettori’s history in particular distinguish his depiction of Italia from Machiavelli’s and prefigure Guicciardini’s later work: its European geographical scope and its emphasis on the greater influence of fortuna rather than virtù in Italian political affairs. Vettori’s project of elucidating the recent past began with the assumption that the reasons behind the calamitous events in Italy could only be understood in the wider context of European diplomatic movements. He derived his subtle understanding of transalpine politics at least in part from his own ambassadorial experiences at the courts of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian in 1507-1509 and France’s King Francis I in 1516-1518. In his attempts to understand the crises facing Italy, Machiavelli had emphasized land south of the Alps; for Machiavelli, the collective failure of Italian virtù and its possible rejuvenation, that is, the *rimedio*, were to be found

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93 For this reason Felix Gilbert deemed the *Sommario* “the first European diplomatic history.” Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 248.


95 An assignment Vettori shared with Machiavelli, Devonshire Jones, *Francesco Vettori*, 10-34.

96 Vettori, *Sommario*, 169, 183; Devonshire Jones, 10-33 and 109-143.
in Italy, through the actions of Italian leaders. To him, success or failure depended on Italian leaders’ actions.

But in the prefatory letter of the Sommario, Vettori asserted the necessity of looking beyond the Alps in order to understand why events had transpired in the way that they had. He wrote, that

> it is impossible to ignore that which occurred outside of Italy because those things are in a way connected together with that which occurred inside [the peninsula], such that one can only write poorly about the events in Italy while omitting external events entirely.  

This comment highlights the increasing irrelevance of the old city-state model of Italian historiography. It also keys his more general picture of Italia, because, when placed in a European scale, as did Vettori, the states of the peninsula take on a decidedly helpless hue.

Vettori’s particular emphasis on the interconnectivity of continental politics led him to portray the Italian states and their leaders as forcibly and unavoidably passive in determining Italy’s future. The “major princes” beyond the Alps—Ferdinand of Aragon, Francis I of France, and Charles V Hapsburg—and not Italian leaders, were in control of the political fortunes of Italia. The rivalries of those monarchs determined the course of Italian politics. Looking back at the aftermath of the unexpected French victory over the Swiss at Marignano in 1515, Vettori endeavored to explain why Francis I did not follow his victory with further peninsular acquisitions. “Certain” that Francis’ forces could have “destroyed the Spanish army and that of the church,” Vettori thought it logical

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97 Vettori, Sommario, 135: Quantunque cognosca non essere possibile non parlare ancora di quello che è occorso fuori d’Italia perché le cose, delle quali si tratta, sono in modo collegate insieme, che male si può scrivere di quelle d’Italia, omettendo l’altri interamente.

98 Vettori, Sommario, 182: principi grandi.
that “if Francis followed that victory, he would easily have become signore of Italy.”

From the perspective of almost fifteen years later, Vettori reflected that if Francis had become signore of the peninsula, then his presence might have granted Italy some level of stability and protection: “in the hands of such a good and excellent prince, under his shade, Italy would have been able to repose itself in many years of peace.” Vettori explained that such a desirous turn of events never occurred because the other northern European rulers, locked in a competition for greater influence, would never let a rival take total possession of the contested prize, Italy. Francis never tried to enter into such a venture because the Swiss, exasperated after their defeat [at Marignano], would descend again more fiercely than ever, [and] Germany would unite itself upon understanding that Francis wanted to occupy Italy; the King of England, fearing Francis’ influence, would move against him in France, and King Ferdinand would do the same.

Noticeably absent as a factor in deciding Italy’s fate was Italy itself. Instead, in Vettori’s analysis, a mixture of ambition and wariness on the part of the more powerful European leaders dictated the course of political events on the peninsula. By portraying Italia in a decidedly passive vein, Vettori negated the relevance of Italian virtù as a possible rimedio, much less Italians’ ability to find recourse in anything resembling Machiavellian imitazione. In fact, Vettori saw Italian leaders as powerless to determine

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99 Vettori, Sommario, 168: A destruire lo essercito ispano e quello della Chiesa. . . il Re a seguitare la vittoria la quale se lui seguiva, era facil cosa che lui diventasse signore d’Italia.

100 Vettori, Sommario, 168: Che quella [Italia] venisse in mano di si bono et eccellente Principe, sotto l’ombra del quale sarebbe potuta riposarsi molti anni in pace.

101 Vettori, Sommario, 168: Ciòè che non era da entrare in nuove imprese perché li Svizzeri, esasperai per questa rotta, scenderebbono di nuovo più feroci che mai, che l’Alamagna si unirebbe tutta, quando intendesse voleesse occupare Italia, che il re d’Inghilterra, temendo la grandezza sua, li moverebbe in Francia et it re Ferrando farebbe il medesimo.
their own political futures. The agents determining Italy’s fate lay beyond the Alps. Thus, Vettori reduced the bold, strong Italia of ancient Rome and of Machiavellian virtù to a forcibly passive player in its own political destiny.

The most revealing distinction that separates Vettori’s stark vision of Italia from Machiavelli’s hopeful one lays in Vettori’s emphasis on fortuna rather than virtù as the factor unavoidably controlling Italy’s destiny. Machiavelli’s engagement in The Prince of the struggle between fortuna and virtù is its most famous iteration from the early modern period. Machiavelli had unequivocally asserted the potential of individual leaders and whole societies to harness the influence of fortuna through their own virtù. The ancient Romans had done this to great effect and sixteenth-century Italians, heirs of Roman virtù, were well-positioned to do the same, at least in Machiavelli’s mind.

While Vettori asserted that fortuna oversaw all historical events, stating that “all human actions fall under fortuna’s sway,” he also had a practical understanding of what fortuna meant. Vettori thought that historical figures possessed either good or bad fortuna. Fortuna allied herself in a positive or negative manner depending on the preparations of a given leader—his personal skills, money, and armed forces. According to Vettori, for example, “war depends greatly on fortuna, and most of the time, one wins or one loses according how much of it is at your disposal.” Thus Vettori accorded Charles V, with his access to more wealth, land, and soldiers than any other European leader, good fortuna, in contrast to “Italy’s bad fortuna.” Vettori noted that most

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102 Vettori, Sommario, 135: Fortuna, alla quale sono tutte le azioni umane sottoposte.

103 Vettori, Sommario, 215: Perché la guerra consiste assai nella fortuna et il più delle volte si vince e perde, secondo che quella ne dispone.

104 For instance, Vettori, Sommario, 188.
armies lose when their prince fails to lead them in person, but not in Charles’ case; his fortuna proved force enough to ensure victory despite his absence from the battlefield.\footnote{Vettori, \textit{Sommario}, 191: La mala fortuna d’Italia.}

By contrast, fortuna plagued Italy and Italian leaders, who had recourse to less money and fewer troops than Charles. Vettori highlights the collective weakness of the Italian states by emphasizing fortuna’s hold over Italian political leaders—a point on which Machiavelli drew decidedly contrasting conclusions.\footnote{Ibid., 188.} One of those leaders in particular provoked heated debate among early sixteenth-century observers. Opinions about the Medici Pope Clement VII reflect the variety of expectations those writers held for the Italian princes during the \textit{calamità} and highlight the underlying differences in each writer’s broader conceptions of both Italy and human agency in the face of fortuna.

Clement’s pontificate—which, from the Italian perspective, saw such catastrophes as the spread of Lutheranism, the 1527 Sack of Rome, and the controversy with English King Henry VIII—has given way to a dubious, if ambiguous, legacy.\footnote{Felix Gilbert in particular emphasized, perhaps a bit simplistically, the historical agency Vettori accords to fortuna, writing that “Vettori had no confidence in man’s virtue; to Vettori, fortuna was all-powerful, and man a toy in fortuna’s hands,” Gilbert, \textit{Machiavelli and Guicciardini}, 251. Vettori did see fortuna that way, but only in regard to Italians and their political leaders, i.e., Vettori did not see “man as a toy in fortuna’s hands;” Charles V, for instance, had \textit{troppo gran fortuna}. For Vettori, fortuna was national.} Even before the Sack of Rome, Clement was viewed by many political commentators, including Machiavelli, as a vacillating, indecisive and weak leader, a primary source of blame for

\footnote{For the political, cultural, and general historiographical issues that interest modern scholars regarding Clement’s pontificate, including his ambiguous historiographical reputation, see the recently edited volume of essays in Kenneth Gouwens and Sheryl E. Reiss eds., \textit{The Pontificate of Clement VII} (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005).}
Italy’s misfortunes.\textsuperscript{109} Later, Guicciardini presented Clement as the ever-vacillating pope whose only actions came too late to have any chance at their desired effects.\textsuperscript{110}

When Guicciardini composed his \textit{Storia d’Italia}, though, the subjugation of the majority of the peninsula’s states was complete. But when Machiavelli and Vettori were writing in the 1520s, the \textit{libertas Italiae} was still, more for some then others, a faint possibility. And whether fair or not, the responsibility for Italian freedom fell squarely in Clement’s lap. He engineered the shifting alliances between Spain and France and decided whether or not and with whom to form Italian leagues in opposition to the invading foreigners.

Writing to his friend Bartolomeo Cavalcanti in the winter of 1526 and then to Vettori in the spring of the following year, Machiavelli made clear his understanding that the fate of Italia rested in a large measure on the shoulders of Pope Clement and the decisions he made. With imperial soldiers moving virtually unobstructed in Northern Italy, Machiavelli saw the time as ripe for Clement to undertake a bold approach. Specifically, Machiavelli wrote Cavalcanti, “the pope should attack the Kingdom with all his forces…for that reason I wrote Francesco Vettori.”\textsuperscript{111}

Machiavelli was still convinced that his aggressive proposal, which he had submitted to the pope via Vettori, could trigger a turn of events in Italy’s favor. Ultimate

\textsuperscript{109} Vettori noted in the \textit{Sommario} that already in 1528, in the wake of the devastating Sack of Rome, public opinion in Florence had turned overwhelmingly against Clement. Vettori remarked that “those who pass judgment on events in Florence, which is in fact almost all men, deemed Clement to be of little prudence and little spirit.” Vettori, \textit{Sommario}, 242: Come in Firenze s’intese il caso, quelli che iudicono delli eventi, che infatto sono é più delli uomini, dannavono Clemente di poca prudenzia e di poco animo.

\textsuperscript{110} Gilbert, \textit{Machiavelli and Guicciardini}, 292-294.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Lettere}, no. 322 (6 October 1526), 617: Donde che io scrisi a Francesco Vettori, che io credevo che questa impresa non si potesse tollerare…o per diversione, cioè lasciare in questi stati guardate queste frontiere, che questi Ispagnuoli non potessino fare progressi, e con tutte le forze asalire il Regno, il quale credevo si potessi prima pigliare, che una di queste terre qua.
responsibility for Italy’s security, in Machiavelli’s eyes, still lay with the pope, as the only ruler whose authority reached beyond city-state borders. He noted that “if [that plan] is not executed, I see the war as lost.”\textsuperscript{112} When the pope disregarded Machiavelli’s plan, Machiavelli intimated to Vettori that the pope had chosen “a course that, if it succeeds, will result in our security and, if it does not, will mean our demise.”\textsuperscript{113} Events could unfold successfully or disastrously\textsuperscript{114} for Italy and, if the latter, “we would in this way, let ourselves be controlled by fortuna.”\textsuperscript{115}

Unequivocally, then, Machiavelli thought that in some ways the pope had at least the opportunity to affect the success or failure of the peninsula’s efforts to assuage the advancement of Charles’ forces and, in short, to manage the assaults of fortuna. It seems that for Machiavelli in 1526 and 1527, individual virtù was still a meaningful consideration in assessing Italy’s future—fortuna’s grip on the peninsula was not, in Machiavelli’s mind, definitive or cemented. In fact, Machiavelli’s outlook on the potential for Pope Clement to mediate Italy’s situation vis-à-vis the invaders echoed almost exactly his words to Vettori in 1513 when he placed the outcome of Italy’s seemingly imminent confrontation with the Swiss on Pope Julius’ shoulders, telling Vettori that it was up to Julius to find and execute some sort of rimedio. In chastising Clement, Machiavelli was also reaffirming his continued belief, however naïve, in the potential for human agency to alter Italy’s desperate situation.

\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Lettere}, no. 322 (6 October 1526), 617: E se questo non si faceva, vedeva perduta la guerra.

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Lettere}, no. 329 (5 April 1527), 626-7: Il quale se riuscirà, sarà per ora la salute nostra; quando non riesca, ci farà in tutto abbandonare da oguno.

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Lettere}, no. 329 (5 April 1527), 627: Se gli è per riuscire o no, voi lo potete giudicare come noi.

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Lettere}, no. 329 (5 April 1527), 627: E lasciare per questa via governare alla fortuna.
Vettori saw Clement differently. As much as the pope may have erred in his decisions and indecisions, Vettori refused to blame him for failing to navigate Italia successfully through what, to Vettori, was a set of insuperable circumstances. For Vettori, Clement was an example of a potentially good Italian leader felled by bad fortuna. Giulio de’ Medici (thereafter Clement VII) ascended to “a pontificate full of war; he found Italia full of armies…the Turk in Hungary, and the Roman church little-esteemed because of the growing influence of the Lutheran sect.” Vettori succinctly described the effects of Clement’s elevation into an almost impossible situation: “He expended a great effort only to go from a good and respected cardinal to a small and little-esteemed pope.”

Although fortuna had been kind to Giulio de’ Medici in his prepontifical life, as soon as he ascended to the papal throne, his fortuna changed from that of a “compassionate mother into a cruel stepmother.”

At the end of the Sommario, Vettori partially exonerated Clement for the Sack of Rome on the grounds that Clement himself was powerless to oppose the forces converging on Rome, noting that, ironically, “he who considers the lives of past popes would judge truly that in more than one hundred years there has not been a pope who was a better man than Clement VII…nonetheless the ruin came during his time while the

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116 Vettori, Sommario, 207: Trovò l’Italia piena d’esserciti e la Cristianità indebolita per la perdita di Rodi e per la preparazione che faceva il re de’ Turchi contro all’Ungheria. Trovò ancora la Chiesa romana in pochissima riputazione rispetto alla sette luterana, che aveva occupata gran parte d’Alamagna e del continuo andava crescendo.

117 Vettori, Sommario, 207: Nondimeno durò una gran fatica per diventare, di grande e riputato cardinale, piccolo e poco stimato papa.

118 Vettori, Sommario, 207: La fortuna, avendo dato la vittoria a’ Franzesi a Ravenna, di pietosa madre cominciò a diventare loro crudele matrigna, così fece a Clemente.
other popes, full of vices, lived and died happily.” Despite whatever personal leadership qualities Clement may have possessed, there was nothing he could have done to avert “the ruin.”

Interestingly, the issues of Clement’s culpability and the fairness of his received reputation has persisted. As recently as 2005, historians such as Kenneth Gouwens have begun to argue for a reconsideration of that legacy. What has been taken as poor leadership on Clement’s part, according to Gouwens, may require further inspection of the extremely difficult, if not impossible, historical circumstances that were facing his pontificate. In essence, that was Vettori’s argument back in 1528. On the surface, Vettori’s conclusions may seem mere Medici praise. As noted, Vettori was a confidant of the Medici pope as well as of other Medici leaders. Vettori himself noted that “there will be some who call me too sympathetic to the actions of Pope Clement VII, to which I respond that I have said nothing that is not true.” Several biographical considerations give reason for his readers to take his conclusions about Pope Clement at face value rather than to simply dismiss them as mere appeasements to a powerful patron.

Perhaps the most convincing case that Vettori makes in his Sommario to substantiate his claims of relative neutrality regarding the pope is his inclusion of several anecdotes in which Clement failed to heed Vettori’s advice. Vettori narrated several encounters with Pope Clement in which he counseled the pope to come to terms with

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119 Vettori, Sommario, 245: Chi considerrà la vita de’ pontefici passati, potrà veramente iudicare che sono più che cento anni che nel pontificato non sedette il migliore uomo che Clemente settimo. . .nondimeno la ruina è venuta a tempo suo e li altri, che sono stati pieni di vizi, si può iudicare che, quanto al mondo, sieno vivuti e morti felici.

120 Gouwens, Clement, 3-19.

121 Vettori, Sommario, 136: Saranno forse alcuni che mi calunnieranno come troppo affezionato alle azioni di papa Clemente VII, alli quial io rispondo non avere detto cosa che non sia vera.
Charles V—advice that went unheeded with disastrous consequences. In 1526, as the imperial army operated dangerously close to Florentine territory, Florentine officials desired a break with the policies of their pope and de facto Medici lord: “the Otto di Practica, charged with the governance of the city, began to have certain doubts and did not want to follow the pope to their manifest ruin.”\(^{122}\) Referring to himself in the third person, Vettori explains that the Otto sent him to the pope to present the delicate Florentine perspective: “Clement, hearing this proposal, was displeased but, having Francesco as a confidant, thought that he was telling him these things out of affection… Despite having so much respect, he did not believe that things in Florence were as dangerous as Vettori had demonstrated.”\(^ {123}\)

The pope did not follow Vettori’s counsel in the crucial year of 1526, just as he had not in the case of the 1525 Discorso in which Vettori had advised the pope to reach an agreement of peace with the emperor. Perhaps resulting from the rift in perspectives between Clement and Vettori regarding wartime policies and, specifically, the pope’s involving a reluctant Florence (and Florentine money) in his war efforts, Vettori aided the successful 1527 anti-Medici coup in Florence.\(^ {124}\) Ironically, the new government then forced Vettori to leave the city. He wrote the Sommario shortly thereafter. Thus, Vettori’s standing as a Medici servant was, for the time being, unclear at best.

\(^{122}\) Vettori, Sommario, 232: E li Otto di Practica, che eron quelli che avevono il pondo di governno della città, cominciorono a dubitare, che volendo seguitare in osservare e’ suoi ricordi, non andare alla ruina manifesta.

\(^{123}\) Vettori, Sommario, 232: Clemente, udita questa proposta, gli dispiaceque ma, avendo Francesco per confidante, pensò gli dicessi queste cose per afezione…et avendo ancora per troppo respettivo, non credette che le cose in Firenze fussino in tanto pericolo, quanto egli dimonestava.

\(^{124}\) Devonshire Jones, Francesco Vettori, 186-224.
By the mid-1520s Vettori had developed his conception of *Italia misera*. Around the same time, Machiavelli maintained the relatively hopeful vision of Italia that he had first expressed in *The Prince*. Between 1513 and 1528 Vettori’s thinking of Italia altered considerably, from an initial stance of optimism to one of almost complete resignation. During the same years, Machiavelli’s thinking and writing about Italia remained relatively static and, thus, somewhat out of touch. Writing in the midst of swirling crises, both envisioned Italia as essentially weak. Beyond that, their understandings of Italia and how they arrived at those understandings differed greatly. Vettori wrote of Italia as a virtual corpse, unable to determine its own political destiny. By contrast, Machiavelli’s articulations of Italia consistently included the theme of potential—that is, in his discussions of Italia, Machiavelli stressed the possibility of determinative action through which Italian forces could greatly mitigate damage wrought by foreign invaders. Further, Vettori couched many of his references to Italia in terms of fortuna while Machiavelli employed fortuna’s dialectical opposite, virtù, writing Italia through an optimistic if relatively narrow lens and clinging to his faith in the possibility of redemptive, heroic action.

In his *Sommario*, Vettori registered the Italian states’ collective descent into subjugation by writing of a disempowered, fallen Italia. For Vettori, the common transalpine threat and the changes brought on by the series of invasions in the early sixteenth century had made the Italian states more united by their common plight, almost by default, than at any other point in the peninsula’s post-Roman history. Vettori recognized that the Italian states had effectively lost their separate political autonomy and that the collective Italian system of states no longer existed in geopolitical isolation from
the rest of the continent. He introduced a characterization of Italia grounded in the
contradistinction between the northern states’ abilities to dictate the terms of their
political existences and the Italian states’ shared inability to do the same.

That characterization subsequently became widely diffused through the most
celebrated historical work of the Italian Renaissance, Guicciardini’s *Storia d’Italia.*

**Guicciardini’s Italia misera (1527-1539)**

By 1527, the political structures of Florence, Rome, and Italy had undergone a
series of devastating blows that Guicciardini left out in the cold. Like Pontano,
Machiavelli, and Vettori before him, Guicciardini retired to his villa. His biographers
note a corresponding change in his perspective on human agency in an unpredictable
world. In Mario Santoro’s words, Guicciardini experienced

> a profound moral crisis having to do with not just his personal defeat—the
crumbling of his wealth and prestige—but also with the shipwreck of his
whole system of convictions, judgments, ideals, all of which had inspired
his political behavior; above all, he lost his faith in the possibilities of
humans to control events...prudenza was worthless against the irresistible
force of fortuna.\(^{125}\)

During the Italian wars, Guicciardini had tried to control the outcome of events,
but to no avail. In the hopes of preserving Italian autonomy, he had pushed Pope Clement
into forming the League of Cognac in opposition to Charles V. The Pope eventually
committed to the plan and even invested the Florentine with command of his forces

\(^{125}\) Mario Santoro, *Fortuna, ragione e prudenza nella civiltà letteraria del cinquecento* (Naples: Liguori,
1978), 340: una profonda crisi morale: non si trattava solo della sua sconfitta personale, del crollo delle
propria fortuna e del proprio prestigio, ma piuttosto del naufragio di tutto un sistema di convinzioni, di
valutazioni, di ideali, ai quali aveva costantemente ispirato la sua condotta politica; e soprattutto crollava la
fiducia nelle possibilità dell’uomo di controllare gli eventi...A nulla poteva valere la ‘prudenza’ contro la
within the alliance.\textsuperscript{126} The results were devastating: Rome’s sack and then Florentine uprisings against the Medici and their agents, which excluded Guicciardini from the political life of the city, at least temporarily.\textsuperscript{127}

Between 1525 and 1527, Guicciardini and Machiavelli stood together physically in the League’s camps and figuratively in their hopes that Italy could still control its own destiny. But after 1527, Guicciardini’s conception of Italia, like his perspective on fortuna, changed permanently. That shift is evident in the ways in which, after 1527, Guicciardini countered Machiavelli on a number of points implicitly involving Italia. He critiqued Machiavelli’s theory of \textit{imitazione}\textsuperscript{128} and resisted his friend’s tendency toward theory and universals in favor of particular, situation-specific claims.\textsuperscript{129} Guicciardini registered these critiques of Machiavelli around 1529 in his \textit{Considerazioni intorno ai discorsi del Machiavelli}\textsuperscript{130} and also in some of his ricordi.\textsuperscript{131}

Those elements of Guicciardini’s mature thinking—his doubts about human agency in the face of fortuna and his dismissal of universals and theory in favor of specifics and practical experience—have been analyzed with subtle care by recent scholars such as Mario Santoro, Felix Gilbert, Peter Bondanella, and Rudolf von

\textsuperscript{126}Ridolfi, \textit{Life of Guicciardini}, 137-201.

\textsuperscript{127}Ridolfi, \textit{Life of Guicciardini}, 201-215.

\textsuperscript{128}Santoro, \textit{Fortuna, ragione e prudenza}, 334.

\textsuperscript{129}For example, von Albertini, \textit{repubblica al principato}, 229-32.

\textsuperscript{130}For the dating of the \textit{Considerazioni} see Ridolfi, \textit{Life of Guicciardini}, 207.

\textsuperscript{131}Guicciardini, \textit{Ricordi}, no. 6 in Guicciardini, \textit{Opere} vol. 1, ed. Emanuella Lugnani Scarano (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1970), 729: È grande errore parlare delle cose del mondo indistintamente e assolutamente e, per dire così, per regola; perché quasi tutte hanno distinzione e eccezione per la varietà delle circumstanze, le quali non si possono fermare con una medesima misura: e queste distinzione e eccezione non si trovano scritte in su’ libri, ma bisogna le insegni la discrezione. and \textit{Ricordi}, no. 35, 738: Quanto è diversa la practica dalla teoria!
Albertini. Nevertheless, a short review here of the ways in which those elements of Guicciardini’s later thinking led him to a definitively tragic conception of Italia is worthwhile at this juncture if for no other reason than to demonstrate the distance between his Italia and Italian historical narrative and those of Machiavelli’s and to thereby highlight the perhaps overlooked importance of Vettori’s work as an obvious precursor that laid the groundwork for Guicciardini’s more lasting historical opus.

Guicciardini’s thoughts on universals and on fortuna affected the ways in which he wrote about Italia—as irrevocably disconnected from its Roman origins and as defined by its inability to thwart fortuna. Like Vettori, Guicciardini posited an Italia that was decidedly not poised to reassert its greatness and for which no effective salvation could be theorized.

Guicciardini’s 1527 *otium* was not permanent. After Papal-Spanish troops installed Alessandro de’Medici as Duke of Florence, Guicciardini found himself back in the halls of power, advising the duke and, apparently, prompting disdainful glares from those Florentines who had tried to stand up to the besieging forces.\(^{132}\) After Alessandro’s assassination, Guicciardini attempted to coerce his successor, Duke Cosimo I, into forming a more oligarchical model of government. Soon thereafter, in 1537, Guicciardini, was shown the way out of the Palazzo Vecchio for good. Retiring to his villa, in 1538 he set to work on a history of events in Italy between 1492 and 1534.\(^{133}\) He died before completing the work, but the vision of Italia contained within its pages had a long afterlife.


\(^{133}\) Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 271.
Felix Gilbert has commented that the “strongest, most permanent impression which the *History of Italy* imparts—and was meant to impart—is that of the helplessness and impotence of man in the face of fate.”\(^{134}\) Guicciardini himself wrote that all the “innumerable examples” recorded in his history serve to make plain just “how much instability, like a sea whipped by winds, govern human affairs.”\(^{135}\) Italia, hopelessly exposed to the machinations of the larger, transalpine political powers, was, to Guicciardini, the most dramatic illustration of that lesson.

Implicit in the work’s geographical scope is the assumption that a history of the past decades, even one from a Florentine perspective, would have necessarily to take into account the Italian and greater European political contexts. This had been Vettori’s contribution ten years earlier,\(^{136}\) when he noted at the outset of his *Sommario* that “it is impossible to ignore that which occurred outside of Italy because those things are in a way connected together with that which occurred inside [the peninsula], such that one can only write poorly about the events in Italy while omitting external events entirely.”\(^{137}\) Guicciardini also stretched his narrative beyond the Alps, especially in Book III. But, as with Vettori, Italia is the protagonist of his narrative. *Storia d’Italia*, it should be pointed

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\(^{134}\) Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 288 and see a similar assessment in Peter Bondanella, *Francesco Guicciardini* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), 118-120.


\(^{136}\) Guicciardini also read Biondo, Borgia, Capella, Commines, Giovio, Platina, Rucellai, Sabellico, and Vegio in preparing the history (according to marginal notes), Ridolfi, *Life of Guicciardini*, 259.

\(^{137}\) Vettori, *Sommario*, 135: Quantunque cognosca non essere possibile non parlare ancora di quello che è occorso fuori d’Italia perché le cose, delle quali si tratta, sono in modo collegate insieme, che male si può scrivere di quelle d’Italia, omettendo l’alte interamente.
out, was a posthumous title.\textsuperscript{138} But the first lines of the work justify it, as Guicciardini makes plain: “I decided to write about the things that occurred in our times in Italy.”\textsuperscript{139}

In his Sommario, Vettori continued to engage critically Machiavelli’s conception of Italia. His assessment of Pope Clement, for example, shows that the virtù-fortuna dialectic remained a useful mode of analysis. But for Guicciardini, writing ten years later, after witnessing Charles V’s tightening grip on Florence and the peninsula as a whole, Italy’s weakness and abject subjugation are obvious. The last four decades of Italian history is a subject “for its variety and importance, very memorable” but also and “full of the most atrocious events.” From the start of the work, Guicciardini posits a passive and already defeated Italia, “having suffered so many years all those calamities.”\textsuperscript{140}

The author further imbues the calamità d’Italia with a decidedly tragic drama. For people of Guicciardini’s generation, the peninsula’s sufferings appear all the worse because a different Italia—glistening with success and potential—survived within their memories. In this way, the “calamità d’Italia…hit mens’ minds with so much displeasure and fear because, then [at the start of the calamità] the times were happier.”\textsuperscript{141} Looking back through the devastation of the previous decades, Guicciardini gives coherence to a pre-1494 Italia.

\textsuperscript{138} Gilbert, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, 294.

\textsuperscript{139} Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia, I.1, 87: Io ho deliberato di scrivere le cose accadute alla memoria nostra in Italia.

\textsuperscript{140} Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia, I.1, 87:…materia, per la varietà e grandezza loro, molto memorabile e piena di atrocissimi accidenti; avendo patito tanti anni Italia tutte quelle calamità.

\textsuperscript{141} Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia, I.1, 88: Ma le calamità d’Italia…cominciarono con tanto maggiore dispiacere e spavento negli anni degli uomini quanto le cose universali erano allora più liete e più felici.
Guicciardini also writes this golden age, the time just before the fall, as specifically Italian, which serves to highlight the extent of the misery characterizing Italia after 1494. Before then, Italy had reached heights previously equaled only by the ancient Romans: the peninsula “with marvelous virtù and fortuna had risen up; Italy had never to that point known such prosperity nor had it been in such a desirable and secure position as that in which it found itself in the year of our Christian salvation 1490 and those years immediately preceding and following it.” 142 It is interesting that for Guicciardini virtù and fortuna defined the good days of the late Quattrocento because their absence defined the early years of the next century. Before the invasions Italy had other, more specific qualities, which it would soon desperately lack: judicious princes, skillful administration of public affairs, and even military glory. Under the diplomatic leadership of Lorenzo de’ Medici 143 among others, Italy around 1490 “was reduced to the greatest peace and tranquility.” 144 Order, stability, and peace reigned.

That this image of Italy drips with ahistorical sentimentalism is not the point so much as the contrasting light it throws on Italia as it is presented in the rest of the work—

142 Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia, I.1, 88: con maravigliosa virtù e fortuna era salito, non aveva giamaï sentito Italia tanta prosperità, né provato stato tanto desiderabile quanto era quello nel quale sicuramente si riposava l’anno della salute cristiana mille quattrocento novanta, e gli anni che a quello e prima e poi furono congiunti.

143 Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia, I.2, 94: lasciata in ciascuno costante opinione che per opera sua principalmente si fusse la pace d’Italia conservata.

144 Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia, I.1, 88: Perché, ridotta tutta in somma pace e tranquillità, coltivata non meno ne’ luoghi più montuosi e più sterili che nelle pianure e regioni sue più fertili, né sottoposta a altro imperio che de’ suoi medesimi, non solo era abbondantissima d’abitatori, di mercantanzie e di ricchezze; ma illustrata sommamente dalla magnificenza di molti principi, dalla splendore di molte nobilissime e bellissime città, dalla sedia e maestà della religione, fioriva d’uomini prestantissimi nella amministrazione delle cose publiche, e di ingegni molto nobili in tutte le dottrine e in qualunque arte preclere e industrosa; né priva secondo l’uso di quella età di gloria militare e ornatissima di tante doti, meritamente appresso a tutte le nazioni nome e fama chiarissima riteneva.
when the “tranquilità d’Italia”\textsuperscript{145} is replaced by the “calamità d’Italia”\textsuperscript{146} and when most of those pre-1494 qualities are nowhere to be found among the Italians, above all, virtù and fortuna.\textsuperscript{147} The author places blame for disappearance of those qualities in part on the overwhelming force of the invading armies, but only after the initial blunders of the Italian princes starting around 1492, just after Lorenzo the Magnificent death. Lorenzo’s astute diplomacy had, according to Guicciardini, been the key element in maintaining an Italian balance of powers, according to which Ferdinand, the King of Naples and Giovan Galeazzo Sforza, the Duke of Milan, along with Lorenzo’s Florence, promised to look after their own interests and not antagonize one another, thereby forming a relatively united front against potential Venetian aggression. Lorenzo’s death changed the nature of that agreement.

The loss of Lorenzo (who was only forty-four years old) was bitter not just for Florence, “but was also untimely for the rest of Italy” because he had worked so assiduously for the peninsula’s “common security” and, in that regard, had also been “the means of moderating, almost like a brake, the tensions and suspicions that often developed for different reasons between Ferdinando and Lodovico Sforza, princes of almost equal ambition and power.”\textsuperscript{148} In this way, Lorenzo represents a different Italia, one in which individual virtù or prudenza mattered for the outcome of political events

\textsuperscript{145} Guicciardini, \textit{Storia d’Italia}, I.2, 91.

\textsuperscript{146} Guicciardini, \textit{Storia d’Italia}, I.1, 88.

\textsuperscript{147} Guicciardini, \textit{Storia d’Italia}, I.6, 131: anno infelicissimo a Italia, e in verità anno principio degli anni miserabili, perché aperse la porta a innumerabili e orribili calamità, delle quali si può dire che per diversi accidenti abbia di poi partecipato una parte grande del mondo.

\textsuperscript{148} Guicciardini, \textit{Storia d’Italia}, I.2, 92: Ma e fu morte incomodissima al resto d’Italia, così per l’altri oezazioni le quali da lui, per la sicurità comune, continuamente si facevano, come perché era mezzo a moderare e quasi uno freno ne’ dispareri e ne’ sospetti i quali, per diverse cagioni, tra Ferdinando e Lodovico Sforza, principi di ambizione e di potenza quasi pari, spesse volte nascevano.
and the overall well-being of the peninsula. In Lorenzo’s absence, those princes ceased to act with virtù, or, in Guicciardini’s terms, prudenza, which exposed them to the whims of fortuna. In other words, “they forgot the frequent variations of fortuna, and using the power conceded to them for the common good instead to the detriment of others, they became, either on account of excessive ambition or lack of prudenza, the authors of the new tribulations.”

The individual ambitions of the princes again took precedence, sowing discord and opening the way for powerful armies to run amok in Italy. Still, though, Guicciardini saw the potential for Italian leaders to be the agents of the peninsula’s future. They squandered that opportunity, however, and then, after 1494, the political landscape changed from one in which the virtù of Italian leaders was relevant, to one in which it was not.

For Guicciardini, Italy changed irrevocably with the first wave of invasions in 1494. Charles VIII’s army brought “into Italy the seeds of innumerable calamities, the most horrible happenings, and changes to almost everything…not just revolutions of states, subversions of kingdoms, desolations of country sides, destruction of cities, massacres, and most cruel murders, but it also brought new ways: new fashions, new and bloody methods of warfare, diseases never before known, and they dismantled the means by which Italy had maintained its quiet concord, that, if it ever hoped to regain, now could only do so with the assistance of other, foreign nations and barbarian armies that

149 Guicciardini, *Storia d’Italia*, I.1, 88: non si ricordano delle spesse variazioni della fortuna, e convertendo in detrimento altrui la potestà concessuta loro per la salute comune, si fanno o per poca prudenza o per troppa ambizione, autori di nuove turbazioni.

150 Guicciardini, *Storia d’Italia*, I.1, 91: aspettando di crescere della altrui disunione e travagli, stavano attenti e preparati a valersi di ogni accidente che potesse aprire loro la via allo imperio di tutta Italia al quale che aspirassino si era in diversi tempi conosciuto molto chiaramente.
miserably trample her underfoot and devastate her."\textsuperscript{151} This passage perhaps illustrates most clearly just how far apart Guicciardini’s assessment of Italia was from Machiavelli’s, over ten years earlier. Even if Italy were to regain some form of autonomy, it would only come through foreign means, and, thus, in practical terms, not at all. The potential for Italian agency, or virtù, to determine its own course, already doubtful in Machiavelli’s time, was now out of the question.

\textsuperscript{151} Guicciardini, \textit{Storia d’Italia}, I.9, 157: entrò in Asti il di nono di settembre dell’anno mille quattrocento novantaquattro, conducendo seco in Italia i semi di innumerabili calamità, di orribilissimi accidenti, e variazione di quasi tutte le cose: perché dalla passata sua non solo ebbono principio mutazioni di stati, sovversioni di regni, desolazioni di paesi, eccidi di città, crudelissime uccisioni, ma eziandio nuovi abiti, nuovi costumi, nuovi e sanguinosi modi di guerreggiare, infermità insino a quel di non conosciute; e si disordinorono di maniera gli instrumenti della quiete e concordia italiana che, non si essendo mai poi potuta riordinare, hanno avuto facoltà altre nazioni straniere e eserciti barbari di conculcarla miserabilmente e devestarla.
Chapter Six

*Libertas Ecclesiae, Libertas Italiae in the Cinquecento*

The Papacy and Italia

What most distinguishes the history of the Italian peninsula from that of any other place is the presence of the papacy. There is no other institution quite like the Holy See in terms of its religious and political reach and its sheer longevity. Ever since the bishop of Rome became the undisputed leader of the Western Church in the centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, the history of the peninsula and that of the Church have been bound inextricably.¹ For most of its premodern existence, the papacy was dominated by Italians. And for the entirety of its premodern existence, the papacy played a significant role in peninsular politics, using spiritual leverage, political savvy, and wealth to assert its will.

The modern Italian historian Paolo Prodi has famously described the premodern popes as having “one body and two souls,” that is, the *anime* of both a spiritual pastor and of an ambitious, worldly prince.² Historical circumstances made such a bifurcation of the soul all but necessary for the premodern pontiffs. Papal landholdings and other

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¹ On the emergence of the papacy as a political force after the evacuation of the peninsula by the Roman emperors and, later, after the armies of Justinian left, see Geoffrey Barraclough, *The Medieval Papacy* (New York: Norton, 1979), 9-52.

sources of revenue were often under threat. The premodern popes always faced difficulties in asserting control over the lands that they (at least) nominally held on the peninsula; some communities under papal jurisdiction rejected their overlords (as in the War of the Eight Saints), expanding Italian powers encroached, and, in some cases, annexed papal-held territories (as Venice did in the mid Quattrocento), the powerful baronial families of Rome (such as the Orsini and Colonna) at times used armed force in the streets of Rome to confine or expel a pontiff, and, finally, like the rest of the premodern Italian states, the papacy was almost always under threat of invading foreign armies.\(^3\) Ultimately, though, the papacy was not like the other Italian states. The popes had recourse to a unique arsenal of spiritual weapons, including interdicts and excommunications, with which it could defend its temporal interests.

The papacy has always had a domineering presence in peninsular politics and in peninsular histories. The Church’s role in Italian history has always been a controversial topic among Italian historians, some of whom have celebrated the Church’s presence in Italian history while others have blasted it.\(^4\) During the Renaissance, Italian historians recorded a wide variety of perspectives on the papacy’s effect on the peninsular political scene. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the diversity of opinion on the Church’s historical role on the peninsula added another layer of meaning and another dialogical space to the broader conversation about Italia and its past.

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\(^3\) For a succinct review of the historical pressures that threatened the security of the papacy see the preface to D.S. Chambers, *Popes, Cardinals and War: The Military Church in Renaissance and Early Modern Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), xiii-xxii.

\(^4\) For helpful comments on the Roman Church, and, equally, criticisms of it, as unifying threads of Italian history, see Denys Hay, *The Italian Renaissance in its Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 48-55.
This chapter and the next examine histories of the peninsula composed around the middle of the sixteenth century in Italy by clerics. Before that, though, a review of some of the better-known Renaissance histories from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that considered the role of the papacy in Italian history provides a necessary intellectual context for the works that appeared beginning around 1550.

**Italiam, Patriam, Ecclesiam**

In the middle of the fifteenth century, Flavio Biondo, who had been employed by Pope Eugenius IV, left his curial posts and pursued a career writing histories, all of which adopted an Italian geographical frame. Two of those works in particular, *Roma triumphans* (1456-1460) and *Roma restaurata* (1444-1446), posited a broad historical argument for an unbroken continuity between the grandeur of ancient Rome and that of the contemporary papacy. That continuity was, in Biondo’s mind, an identifying trait not just for the city of Rome, but for the entire Italian peninsula.

Biondo’s arguments were particularly attractive to a contemporary humanist from Siena, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, who is now better known as Pope Pius II (1458-1464). Having decided that Biondo’s history from the fall of the Roman empire to the middle of the fifteenth century, the *Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum imperii decades III* (1439-44), was insightful, but written in sloppy Latin, the then pope decided to rewrite the work. It was Pius’ redaction that was translated a century later into Italian by Lucio

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5 See Chapter Three.

6 Before executing a revision of Biondo’s work in 1463, Pius II commented that Biondo “was an aposoltic secretary for a long time and was most dear to Pope Eugenius IV. He wrote a universal history, starting at the time of the emperors Arcadius and Honorius—which is said to be the beginning of the Roman Empire’s decline—up to his own times. It is a complex work, undoubtedly useful, but in need of someone to edit and correct it. Translated and quoted in Nicoletta Pellegrino, “From the Roman Empire to Christian
Fauno (1542), eventually reaching a wider late sixteenth-century audience than the original Latin version by Biondo or its redaction by Pius.

But Pius II’s most well-known historical endeavor is his own. He remains the only pope to record a history while pontiff. His Commentaries are an autobiographical history and in that work he expresses concern for the strength and security of both Italy and the Holy See. In his mind, Italia and the papacy were two parts of the same whole. That assumption is best represented by his account of his own election.

At one point during the conclave of cardinals that eventually elected Piccolomini to the pontificate, it appeared as if a Frenchman, the Cardinal of Rouen, might win. In the Commentaries, Pius II recalls how he dressed down the Italian cardinals who had committed themselves in informal conversation to voting for Rouen. He argued for the necessity of keeping the papacy Italian, rather than French. To the Cardinal of Pavia, for instance, the future pope remarked,

You’re not the man I thought you were…Think of your father’s brother…Branda…when the papacy lay beyond the mountains in Germany, when John XXIII convened the Council of Constance and conveyed the entire Curia across the Alps, he never rested until he had brought the Holy See back to Italy…will you, his nephew, take it from Italy to France? Will an Italian prefer France over Italy? Rouen will put his own nation’s [nationem] interests before those of Italy; this Frenchman will fly to France, the supreme office under his wings.\(^7\)

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\(^7\) I have used the translations provided in Pius II, Commentaries 1.36 in vol. 1 Margret Meserve and Marcello Simonetta, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 186-8: Cui Aeneas, ‘Alium te,’ inquit, ‘virum esse existimavi, quam invenio…Patruus tuus, sive avunculus fuit, Branda cardinalis Placentinus, cum esset pontificatus maximus ultra montes in Germania (nam Iohannes Tertius ac Vigesimus, instituto Constantiensi concilio, Romanam Curiam trans Alpes adduxerat), numquam quievit donec in Italiam Primam Sedem reduxit; cuius arte, studio atque ingenio factum est, ut abdicates summo pontificatu qui de eo contendebant, Martinus Quintus eligeretur natione Romanus ex domo Columensi. Branda Curiam Apostolicam ex Germania in Italiam reportavit: tu eius nepos ex Italia transfers in Galliam? Italus homo Galliae melius, quam Italieae consulus? At Rhotomagensis nationem suam praeferet Italiceae, et Gallus in Galliam cum summa dignitate advolabit.
Pius understood the papacy in Italian terms. But he also understood Italy in terms of the papacy, that is, as the peninsula’s defining historical feature ever since the decline of the Roman empire. In the same speech, he reflected

And what is Italy, our country, without the bishop of Rome? We have lost the empire, but we still have the papacy…Where is your love for your country, your consistent support for Italy over every other nation [nationibus]?...You’ve failed yourself and your country—Italy!—unless you come to your senses…do you want to betray Italy, your country, and the Church [Italiam, patriam, Ecclesiam]?  

Pius thus viewed the papacy and Italy each as an essential, defining feature of the other. And throughout the Commentaries, he puts forth the idea that as pope he was the primary protector of Italy. During his pontificate the most immediate and serious threat appeared to be the Turks, who had just taken Byzantium in 1452 and were advancing into Eastern Europe. In Pius’ version of events, he was constantly warning the princes of Italy to follow his lead and cooperate in anticipation of an invasion by the Turks, although the princes only frustrated his attempts.

During the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, however, most historical opinions on the relationship between Italia and the papacy were rendered outside of the Curia. The most influential Florentine writers of the early sixteenth century, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, both spent time at the Curia in official capacities. They benefitted from papal benevolences, especially during the Medici papacies of Leo X (1513-1521) and

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8 Pius II, Commentaries I.36, 188-90: Et quid est nostra Italia absque Romano praesule? Retinemus apostolatum, imperio amisso, atque hoc uno lumine videmus lumen; et hoc te autore, suus, adiutore privabimus...Ubi amor patriae et vox illa semper Italian ceteris nationibus praeferens?...Fefellisti me, immo vero te ipsum et patriam tuam, Italiam, nisi resipis!...Nunc eligendum est: Italiam, patriam, Ecclesiam...?
Clement VII (1523-1534). Yet, in their historical writings, both Machiavelli and Guicciardini critiqued the papacy and its policies vis-à-vis the Italian states.\(^9\)

In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli argued that the papacy’s presence in Italy had determined the overall political structure of the peninsula—for the worse. He reflected on the contrast between the disunity of Italy’s city-states, which had made them prey to invaders, and the relative coherence and strength of the regimes in France and Spain. The papacy was, in his words, “the reason for our ruin: the Church has kept, and continues to keep, Italy divided.”\(^10\) The problem as Machiavelli saw it was that the papacy was both too powerful and not powerful enough to lead the Italian states, and thus, looked out only for its own benefit:

Because even though the Church makes its home here and it has temporal power, it has neither the strength nor the virtù to be able to seize control of Italy and make itself prince; nor still is the papacy so weak that, for fear of losing its authority over temporal things, it has not been able to call on a foreign power to defend it against whatever state in Italy had become too powerful…The Church has neither been able to occupy Italy, nor has it allowed anyone else to occupy it. And this is the reason why Italy has never come under one leader and instead has been under a proliferation of princes and signori, from whom is born such disunity and such weakness that it has made Italy prey not only to barbarians, but anyone who attacks it.\(^11\)

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\(^9\) Although special consideration must be given in regards to judgements of the papacy in Machiavelli’s *Istorie fiorentine*, which was commissioned by the then cardinal Giuliano de’ Medici and completed when he had risen to become Clement VII.


\(^11\) Machiavelli, *Discorsi* I.12, 504-6: Perché, avendovi quella abitati e tenuto imperio temporale, non è stata si potente né di tanta virtù che l’abbia potuto occupare la tyrannide d’Italia e farsene principe; e non è stata dall’altra parte si debole che, per paura di non perdere il dominio delle sue cose temporali la non abbia potuto convocare uno potente che la difenda contro a quello che in Italia fusse diventato troppo potente…Non essendo adunque stata la chiesa potente da potere occupare la Italia, né avendo permesso che un altro la occupi, è stata cagione che la non è potuta venire sotto uno capo; ma è stata sotto più principe e signori, da quail è nata tanta disunione e tanta deboleza che la si è condotta a essere stata preda non solamente de’ barbari potenti ma di qualunque l’assalta.
Unlike Pius II, who saw Italia and the Church as supportive of one another, Machiavelli posited that the papacy, as a temporal power, followed its own course, without regard for the manner in which it affected the Italian states’ well-being. Machiavelli acknowledged that “many are of the opinion that the prosperity of Italian cities is due to the Roman Church.”

Such an opinion though was unsustainable, according to the Florentine, when one considers that Italy might have united itself in the manner of its transalpine neighbors, if only the Church had made its headquarters elsewhere. In fact, that chapter of the Discourses ends with Machiavelli suggesting, hypothetically, that the papacy be moved to Switzerland, at least temporarily, just to see if his point about its role in peninsular politics was valid or not.

Francesco Guicciardini expressed his view of the role of the papacy in Italian history in terms less concrete and less ideological than Machiavelli’s. In his Considerations on the Discourses of Machiavelli, Guicciardini reflected on his fellow Florentine’s argument that the Church stood in the way of Italian unity. In Guicciardini’s mind, Machiavelli was missing a larger point that had little to do with the papacy.

Guicciardini doubted that an Italy under one ruler would be a good thing... because under [one ruler] it would be glorious for the name of Italia and a good thing for that city that dominated, but it would be a total calamity for all the other states as they would be oppressed under the shadow of the other, dominant one.

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12 Machiavelli, Discorsi I.12, 503: molti sono d’opinione che il bene essere delle città d’Italia nasca dalla chiesa romana.

13 Machiavelli, Discorsi I.12, 506: E chi ne volesse per esperienza certa vedere più prompta la verita, bisognerebbe che fosse di tanta Potenza che mandasse a abitare la corte romana (con l’autorità che l’ha in Italia) in le terre de’ Svizeri; i quai oggi sono, solo, popoli che vivono...secondo gli antichi; e vedrebbe che in poco tempo farebbero più disordine in quella provincia i rei costumi di quella corte, che qualunque altro accidente che in qualunque tempo vi potesse surgere.

14 Francesco Guicciardini, Considerazioni sui Discorsi di Machiavelli in Opere vol. 1, ed. Emanuella Lugini Scarano (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1982), 629-630: Ma non so già se el non
Moreover, Guicciardini noted, if one thinks of the peninsula’s past, it is hard to maintain the argument that the peninsula’s disunity was mostly to blame for its recurring victimization by barbarian armies. After all, such invasions had occurred while Italy was politically unified under imperial Rome. Guicciardini further dissented by positing that the flourishing of Italian cities, at least up until the invasions began in 1494, could be traced in a large part to the competition fostered in a setting of geographically close but politically independent communities.\textsuperscript{15}

In other writings, though, including his \textit{Storia d’Italia}, Guicciardini did condemn the papacy. Like many Italian writers before him (including Machiavelli), Guicciardini saw the papacy as having long ago corrupted its spiritual mission and as concerned primarily with accumulating more wealth and power, “no longer using their spiritual authority except as an instrument and minister of temporal power, they began to appear more like secular princes than popes.”\textsuperscript{16} And the popes used the spiritual weapons at their disposal against the Italian states: “For a long time now the popes have very often been

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\textit{venire in una monarchia sia stata felicità o infelicità di questa provincia, perché se sotto una repubblica questo poteva essere glorioso al nome di Italia e felicità a quella città che dominassi, era all’altre tutte calamità, perché oppresse dalla ombra di quella.}

\textsuperscript{15} Guicciardini, \textit{Considerazioni}, 630: E se bene la Italia divisa in molti domini abbia in vari tempi patito molte calamità che forse in uno dominio solo non sarebbe patito, benché le innudazione de’ barbari furono più a tempo dell’imperio romano che altrimenti, nondimeno in tutti questi tempi ha avuto al riscontro tante città floride che non sarebbe avuto sotto una repubblica anche io reputo che una monarchia gli sarebbe state più infelice che felice.

\textsuperscript{16} Francesco Guicciardini, \textit{Storia d’Italia} IV.12 in \textit{Opere} vol. 2, ed. Emanuella Scarano (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1981), 471: né usando più l’autorità spirituale se non per instrumento e ministerio della temporale, cominciorono a parere più tosto principi secolari che pontefici. Due to its anti-Church tone, this passage and the section in which it appears (on the historical development of the papacy’s temporal power) were omitted from Italian editions of the \textit{Storia d’Italia} before 1621, see editor’s introductory remarks in Francesco Guicciardini, \textit{La storia d’Italia}, ed. Alessandro Gherardi (Florence: Sansoni, 1919), 175.
the instrument that provokes war and new conflagrations in Italia.”\textsuperscript{17} The historian’s most frank assessments of the papacy’s role in Italian history would seem to be those in his Ricordi. There, Guicciardini admits that “naturally, I have always desired the ruin of the ecclesiastical state.” He even adds that, were it not for the fact that he received so many benefices from two popes, “I would love Martin Luther more than myself.”\textsuperscript{18} Elsewhere in the Ricordi, the Florentine made plain the “three things I want to see before my death, although I doubt I will see any of them: a well-ordered republic in our city (Florence), Italia liberated from all barbarians, and the world liberated from the tyranny of these wicked priests.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{From Florence to Rome}

In their condemnations of papal and clerical hypocrisies, Machiavelli and Guicciardini were part of a long tradition that included Dante. All of those writers complained that papal policies were specifically detrimental to the Italian states. By the end of the calamità, however, the dynamic between the papacy and the Italian states altered. In the centuries and even decades leading up to the calamità the popes had acted, politically and militarily, much the same as any other Italian state: in the fifteenth century, at various times, they went to war against and allied themselves with the

\textsuperscript{17} Guicciardini, \textit{Storia d’Italia} IV.12, 472: sono stati da molto tempo in qua spessissime volte lo instrumento di suscitare guerre e incendi nuovi in Italia.

\textsuperscript{18} Francesco Guicciardini, \textit{Ricordi} no. 124 in \textit{Opere}, edited Emanuella Lugnani Scarano (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1982), 829: Io ho sempre desiderato naturalmente la ruina dello stato ecclesiastico, e la fortuna ha voluto che sono dua pontifici tali, che sono stato sforzato desiderare e affaticarmi per la grandezza loro. Se non fussi questo rispetto, amerei più Martino Luther che me medesimo, perché spererei che la sua setta potessi ruinare o almanco tarpure le ale a questa scellerata tirannide de’ preti.

\textsuperscript{19} Guicciardini, \textit{Ricordi} no. 14, 800: Tre cose desidero vedere innanzi alla mia morte, ma dubito, ancora che io vivessi molto, non ne vedere alcuna: uno vivere di republica bene ordinato nella città nostra, Italia liberata da tutti c’barbari e liberato el mondo dalla tirannide di questi scelerati preti.
Kingdom of Naples, Florence, and Venice. By 1530, though, the realities of subjugation had altered peninsular politics; Milan, Naples, and Florence were either directly or indirectly under Hapsburg control and in February of 1530, in Bologna, Pope Clement VII crowned Charles V both “king of Italy” and Holy Roman Emperor. The papacy remained autonomous.

In the decades following the calamità, the popes were compelled to focus their energies on the problems of Protestantism and a fractured universal Christendom. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) ushered in a period of internal reform in which the Church reaffirmed its orthodoxy and its universal mission. The doctrinal refocusing that took place within the Curia affected the intellectual environment of the entire peninsula, a fact best represented by the introduction in 1559 of the Papal Index (Index Librorum Prohibitorum) by Pope Paul IV.

In this context of peninsular political subjugation and papal reconsolidation, Italian historical writing about the peninsula underwent a fundamental shift. Since 1494, when Charles VIII first descended below the Alps and Bernardo Rucellai began writing a history of Italy during that initial wave of invasions, Florentines had dominated the historiographical conversation about Italia and Italian history. That city’s literary tradition partly accounted for that dominance, but more decisive were particular historical circumstances. There had been two Medici popes during the crucial years of the calamità, which brought many Florentines, including Machiavelli, Vettori, and Guicciardini to Rome, providing them ample opportunities to observe the crises from both a Curial and

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Florentine point of view. Moreover, as a precarious republic that was turned inside-out by five major coups between 1494 and the 1540s, many statesmen—again including Machiavelli, Vettori, and Guicciardini—found themselves, suddenly and unexpectedly, left out of a new regime or explicitly exiled from political activity, at a country villa, and looking to historical composition as a means to understanding the changes that had brought them there.

But in the wake of the calamità, the Church broadly conceived (that is, clergymen, not necessarily in the direct employ of the Roman Curia) became the driving force behind the production of new histories of Italy.

There is a prevailing sense among modern scholars that after Guicciardini there were almost no new histories of Italy for at least two centuries.\textsuperscript{21} In fact Italian scholars have traditionally dismissed the decades after the calamità as decadent (while Anglo-American scholars tend to overlook the period altogether). That point of view initially developed around the time of the Risorgimento, when Italian scholars sought to blame the peninsula’s lack of movement towards nationalization during the early modern period on the Spanish occupation of the peninsula; that point of view was furthered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by influential intellectuals including Francesco De Sanctis and Benedetto Croce, who both argued that any Italian national sentiment and national culture that might have developed during the Quattrocento and early

\textsuperscript{21} William J. Bouwsma, “Three Types of Historiography in Post-Renaissance Italy,” \textit{History and Theory} Vol. 4, No. 3 (1965), 303 and Hay, \textit{The Italian Renaissance}, 39: “Guicciardini had in fact no true successors in the field of Italian history for centuries: his book is better regarded as the culmination of a process rather than the beginning of one.”
Cinquecento necessarily decayed in the context of foreign occupation and the Church’s domination of the peninsula’s intellectual milieu.\textsuperscript{22}

According to that perspective, Italian historians became less interested in peninsular historiography after Charles V defeated Francis I and effectively ended the Italian states’ collective autonomy. The peace accord between Clement VII and Charles V at Bologna in 1530 confirmed direct Hapsburg control over Naples and Milan and indirect control over Florence, among other states. With no more common external threats and no more active rallying points, Italian historians supposedly became less interested in writing histories with an Italian geographical scope; and, anyway, Guicciardini’s \textit{Storia d’Italia} (written between 1537-1540 and published in 1561) was not only a masterpiece, but it also narrated events through 1530, when Italian attempts to preserve its \textit{libertas} effectively ended.\textsuperscript{23}

However, as the next two chapters demonstrate, Italian history did remain an important framework for peninsular intellectuals after 1530. But where displaced statesmen—especially Florentine ones—dominated the conversation in the first half of the century, it was the Roman Church and its historians that dominated late sixteenth-century constructions of Italian history.

Rather than an ideological melding of papal political interests with the rhetoric of Italia, Church versions of Italian history instead contained a set of discourses as varied as the lay histories the Quattrocento and early Cinquecento. Moreover, the existence of

\textsuperscript{22} For a summary of the development of this dismissive historiography about Italian history between roughly 1530 and 1630, see Eric Cochrane and Julius Kirshner, \textit{Italy: 1530-1630} (London: Longman, 1988), 1-5.

\textsuperscript{23} In the decades following 1530 Machiavelli’s and Guicciardini’s heirs in the Florentine historical field, most notably Benedetto Varchi and Scipione Ammirato, were commissioned by Duke Cosimo de’ Medici to write histories of their city, not of Italy.
varied sixteenth-century Church articulations of Italian history challenge modern scholars’ assumption that Guicciardini’s vision of an Italia misera after the calamità was adopted by subsequent peninsular historians almost wholesale. While it is undeniable that the influence of Guicciardini’s history was massive, it is also true that historians of Italy who were connected to the Church tended to present the peninsula’s recent past with more favorable conclusions that emphasized the possible advantages of the Church’s increased leadership on the peninsula.

The next two chapters highlight three clerical versions of Italian history by Girolamo Borgia, Leandro Alberti, and Ignazio Danti. In various ways, each of their historical projects entered into dialogue with the historians of Italy who came before them. Their work demonstrates the continuation of a vibrant dialogue on Italian history well into the late sixteenth century, even after the realities of Spanish subjugation had set in. Eight years older than Guicciardini, Girolamo Borgia set the stage for later sixteenth-century clerical accounts of Italian history.

A Different Borgia

Girolamo Borgia (1475-1550) was born in what is now the region of Basilicata, in the town of Senise.24 His experiences during the calamità were wide-ranging. His family may or may not have been related to the clan of Pope Alexander VI Borgia, but, in any case, the two Borgia families had little to do with one another and Girolamo, writing

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retrospectively, was critical of the Borgia pope.\textsuperscript{25} Girolamo Borgia moved to Naples as a young man and joined the intellectual circle led by Giovanni Pontano, the same group that Bernardo Rucellai had consulted in 1495 before writing his \textit{De bello italico}.\textsuperscript{26} Pontano mentored Borgia and even dedicated a poem to him.\textsuperscript{27} When the French King Charles VIII crossed the Alps in 1494 and attacked Naples, Borgia took up arms.\textsuperscript{28}

After Pontano’s death in 1503, Borgia attached himself to a much different benefactor, the \textit{condottiero} Bartolomeo d’Alviano. The Venetians hired Alviano to fight against the League of Cambrai, which was comprised of papal, French, Spanish, and Holy Roman imperial forces. Borgia followed him north, where it seems, as the captain’s secretary, he both wrote and fought. He also took the opportunity to learn Greek in Padua and to attend informal “Accademia Liviana” discussions in Pordenone between 1508 and 1509. Borgia returned to Naples in 1509 when Alviano was taken prisoner by the French. Four years later, when Alviano was released, Borgia rejoined the captain. Upon Alviano’s death in 1515, Borgia again returned south, living between Naples and Rome. During those years, Borgia became both a cleric and also a client of the powerful Farnese family. He was particularly close to the cardinal Alessandro Farnese, who, in 1534, became Pope Paul III. Under Farnese’s pontificate, Borgia enjoyed the most productive literary period of his career, writing poetry, an analysis of Lucretius’ \textit{De rerum natura}, and one history, the \textit{Historiae de bellis Italicis}, a history of the Italian wars. In 1544 Paul III granted him the bishopric of Massa Lubrense, near Naples. Less

\textsuperscript{25} Valeri, \textit{Italia dilacerata}, 26-37.
\textsuperscript{26} See Chapter Four.
\textsuperscript{27} Valeri, \textit{Italia dilacerata}, 26.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 27.
than a year later, Borgia ceded the position to a nephew and retired to private life, back in Naples, where he lived five more years in the company of the surviving members of the Accademia Pontiniana. As a historian, Borgia represented a Church perspective in that he lived in Rome, operated in the intellectual community there, took holy orders, and was a loyal supporter of his patron, an influential cardinal who became pope. Borgia’s historical outlook, as we will see, is particularly interesting for the way that it views the institution of the papacy and its role during the calamità. But Borgia’s historical perspective was also informed by his Neapolitan background and by his youthful experiences in the entourage of a condottiero captain right in the middle of the Italian wars. Thus, on a certain level, Borgia represents the broad range of perspectives that gathered in and around the Curia before, during, and after the Sack of Rome.

All of Borgia’s surviving works are in Latin. Many have Italia as a guiding theme. Several of his surviving poems are political encomiums that laud their subjects as redeemers of Italy: Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, who took Naples for the Spanish (from the French) in 1503, Charles V, not for subjugating the peninsula but for succeeding in keeping the Turks out of it—a project on which Paul III and Charles V worked together,²⁹ and his benefactor Paul III who redeemed the Church and Italy after the Sack and generally disastrous papacy of Clement VII.

Borgia began writing his Historiae de bellis Italicis while in Alviano’s entourage, that is, probably early in the second decade of the sixteenth century, and he presented Paul III with a copy in 1544. It was a life’s work; Borgia did not compose the work after

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all the events within its narrative had already taken place, but rather, he recorded his history *ad hoc*, in response to the developing crises. The history narrates events in Italy from 1494 down to 1540; it is in two halves, the first detailing the wars and events leading up to Paul III’s election and the second, addressing a wider European panoramic, considers the new *barbari* threatening Italy: protestant heretics and the Ottomans. The *Historiae* remain unedited; modern readers must consult it in the archives of Venice and the Vatican both, as neither has a complete version. But, in the sixteenth century, manuscript copies of Borgia’s history circulated broadly.

Borgia was an important, if often forgotten, participant in the sixteenth-century conversation about the nature of Italian history. At the time that Bernardo Rucellai met with Pontano and his circle in Naples in 1495 to discuss historical theory, Borgia was absent because he was fighting with the Aragonese army against the French. But he would have heard later of the discussion and, anyway, sometime between 1507 and 1508 Borgia and Rucellai met in Venice. Rucellai had long completed his *De bello italic* and was on the last legs of a journey (undertaken to avoid political tangles with the Soderini republican regime in his home city of Florence) that had taken him to Southern France, Milan, and Bologna before arriving at Venice. Sometime in that period, Borgia obtained a copy of Rucellai’s work (as did Erasmus, incidentally, who was also in Venice at the time). Later, when writing his own history, Borgia relied heavily on Rucellai’s *De bello italico*.

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31 Ibid., 15.
32 See Chapter Four of this dissertation.
Italico, even lifting whole passages and inserting them into his own work.\textsuperscript{34} Francesco Guicciardini read Borgia’s Historiae and borrowed liberally from it, especially the sections describing events that occurred in the southern half of the peninsula.\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{Inter tumultus}

Borgia’s approach to Italian history was connected to those of his Florentine contemporaries, Rucellai, Machiavelli, Vettori, and Guicciardini, although we only know for sure that he read Rucellai’s De bello italic. Borgia’s vision of history generally and of Italian history specifically is interesting for the ways in which it overlapped with various elements of the better-known Florentine articulations of the peninsula’s past.

Borgia viewed his Historiae as a kind of hybrid genre consisting of elements of both historia in the model of Thucydides, that is, a rendering of the recent past, after-the-fact, and commentarius on the model of Julius Caesar, that is, almost in the moment recordings of swiftly changing events, generally in the context of war. Because Borgia began his history while accompanying Alviano’s campaigns in the Veneto, the historian described his work as originating in military camps, or, in his words, “between the sound of the trumpet and the confusion of war [\textit{inter tumultus}]”\textsuperscript{36} Unlike Rucellai, Machiavelli, and Guicciardini, Borgia did not write his whole history from a remove of time and space or during a moment of political exclusion.

\textsuperscript{34} Davide Canfora, “Culture and Power in Naples from 1450-1650” in Princes and Princely Culture, 1450-1650 vol. 2, M. Gosman, A. MacDonald, and A. Vanderjagt, eds. (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 88 and Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 95 and 120.

\textsuperscript{35} Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 141-143.

\textsuperscript{36} Borgia, Historiae in Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 93: inter tubarum sonitus et bellicos tumultus. I have relied on Valeri’s citations of Borgia’s unedited manuscripts. The translations are mine.
Borgia provides interesting context for one of the debates that characterized Machiavelli and Guicciardini’s different conceptions of history and of Italia: the relevance of antiquity to contemporary peninsular politics. Machiavelli had argued that classical exempla were timeless and that by becoming more aware of the ancient past Italian leaders could revive ancient Roman virtù and change the course of contemporary events. Guicciardini responded that the world had changed drastically between antiquity and the sixteenth century and that classical exempla were for the most part not practically relevant to contemporary political dilemmas. Guicciardini’s Storia d’Italia—and Vettori’s Sommario, for that matter—make only limited references to the classical past, while Machiavelli’s basic understanding of Italy’s past and present depends on such allusions.

The ancient past functioned in Borgia’s Italian history differently than it did in those of his predecessors. Like Machiavelli and unlike Guicciardini, Borgia rebuked those leaders who ignored obvious lessons from antiquity.37 But Borgia never suggested, as Machiavelli did, that the lessons of the ancients could, if put to use in the right ways, be decisive in the defense of Italian libertas. Borgia used antiquity more simply, as a point of comparison, useful for describing the present. In the Historiae for example, the author laments the impossibility of capturing in words the horrors perpetrated in the 1527 sack of Rome, a situation best understood, he argued, by recalling how the brutality of the ancient barbarians’ devastation of the Roman Empire was never really captured in writing, because, he thought, it was too horrendous.38 Like Biondo and Machiavelli,

37 Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 124-5.

38 Borgia, Historiae in Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 126: Utinam dicendi genus et artem illam scribendae historiae praeceptam et exactam, quam desideramus, recte sic servaverimus ac stylo exegerimus, ut multos
Borgia understood there to have been an unbroken thread between the ancient peninsula and contemporary Italy. For example, when Charles VIII invaded in 1494, some communities, especially the areas in and around Naples, welcomed the French monarch as a liberator. That development disappointed Borgia, but it also made sense to him: after all, it was people from the same environs that had betrayed the Romans and defected to Hannibal during the Second Punic War.\textsuperscript{39} Borgia references antiquity more than Vettori or Guicciardini did in their histories of Italy, but Borgia’s references are mostly just illustrative and bare little similarity to Machiavelli’s understanding of the practical, contemporary value of classical exempla.

On another of the conversations that colored the Florentines’ approaches to Italian history—the competing forces of fortuna and virtù—Borgia had little to add. This issue’s absence in Borgia’s history might seem a surprise given the fact that his mentor in Naples, Giovanni Pontano, wrote the period’s definitive treatise on the subject of fortuna (a book that Vettori and Machiavelli had read and discussed).\textsuperscript{40} Fortuna and virtù do not seem to have had places of primacy in Borgia’s historical account, a fact that speaks to his understanding of historical causality. In describing Charles VIII’s descent into Italy, Borgia does invoke the arbitrary and uncontrollable influence of fortuna.\textsuperscript{41} But, as Valeri

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\textsuperscript{39} Valeri, \textit{Italia dilacerata}, 157.


\textsuperscript{41} Borgia, \textit{Historiae} in Valeri, \textit{Italia dilacerata}, 130: Fortunae varietatem etsi in omni vita contineri videmus, nulla tamen in re saepius quam in regnorum conditione spectare solemus, ex qua rerum
points out, the author’s invocation of fortuna seems rhetorical rather than explanatory because it appears in the text just after Borgia lists off the major peninsular players and the ways in which their mutual jealousies brought about Charles’ invasion, leaving little room for a decisive, arbitrary force.\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{Libertas Italiae, Libertas Ecclesiae}

What most significantly distinguishes Borgia’s history of the \textit{calamità} from those written by the Florentine historians, though, is his integration of contemporary religious issues, including the growth of Protestantism and the political role of the papacy, as major causes and decisive factors in Italy’s devastating half century.

Like Bernardo Rucellai and the Milanese historian Bernardino Corio before him, Borgia understood 1494 as a watershed moment in Italian history before which the peninsula had experienced a “long and happy peace” and after which it entered into a “long and sorrowful war.”\textsuperscript{43} Borgia viewed that moment, that is, the invasion of the French King Charles VIII, as the result of a general moral decline on the peninsula, represented most conspicuously by the papacy. As Valeri suggests, even Borgia’s description of “\textit{Italiae status felix},” the happy state of Italy before 1494 contains a subtle condemnation of “all the cities of Italy abounding in immense wealth.”\textsuperscript{44} While the

\textsuperscript{42} Valeri, \textit{Italia dilacerata}, 130.


\textsuperscript{44} Borgia, \textit{Historiae} in Vaerli, \textit{Italia dilacerata}, 154: Erant tunc res italae florentes atque omnes Italiae urbes immensis opibus abundantes, tanto deditae luxui et ocio ut mole iam sua laborare viderentur iamque ut Saturni regna illa a poetis celebrata nimio torpentina veterno ab Jove excitata legimus sie nostrum.
northern Italian historians generally signaled out for blame Lodovico “il Moro” Sforza because it was he who initially invited Charles VIII to bring his army into Italy, Borgia was particularly critical of the licentious pope of the time, Alexander VI. Borgia’s history includes an anecdote wherein the Neapolitan monarch Ferrante cries to his wife, lamenting the “horrible destruction” that lay in Italy’s future as a result of Alexander’s “evil pontificate.” Following the model of Sallust, who saw cultural moral decline as prelude to the decline of political power, Borgia interpreted Italy’s descent into subjugation as directly related to a general decaying of morality among Italian leaders—and not just the pope, but also Sforza and Borgia’s own monarch, Alfonso of Aragon, whose blind ambitions precipitated the disasters. Some scholars have contended that Borgia’s reading of those leaders’ collective greed as the main cause of Charles VIII’s invasions inspired the interpretation later posited by Guicciardini in the first book of his Storia d’Italia. For Borgia and also for others such as Corio, the Italian leaders’ moral degradation compelled divine punishment: Charles VIII’s army was, in the first place, an instrument carrying out God’s will. In a similar vein, according to Borgia, the

seculum a Carolo excitum, varijsque agitatum calamitatibus vidimus. Et hi summi principes regno incolumes stabant.

45 Borgia, Historiae in Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 155: statum Italiae futurum […] et horrendum excidium…orbi terrarum ex malo pontificis ingenio.


47 Borgia, Historiae in Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 189: Hinc ego fatalem quondam Italiam calamitatem incideisse reo rut iam Deus ipse nostris iratus sceleribus quo graviorem ob nostra delicta poenas expeteret tantum ac tam luctuosum inter christianos bellum excitavisse videatur. And Borgia, Historiae in Valeri, 190: Hinc ego altius res humanas contemplatus ausim illud asserere Deum, cum Italian aequa ac Galliam ultore gladio punier parat, signa gallica italo inferri solo iubere. Quid enim per Deum immortalem Carolus rex tantis conatibus tantoque exercitu profecit? Dormientis Europae manus in sua viscera excitavit, armavit, impulit, Italian bello calamitoso et importuno involuit, belli faces in immensum ardentes accendit, gravissimo cum suae tum suorum salutis periculo ab italis armis ac pene ex faucibus fati evasit.
corruptions of Clement VII’s curia eventually led to the sacking of the eternal city.\textsuperscript{48}

Years later, Francesco Vettori made similar claims about the attack on the city being the result of divine retribution.\textsuperscript{49}

Particularly significant is Borgia’s integration of early sixteenth-century religious developments into his political narrative. As a cleric, Borgia rendered some surprising judgments on some of the most controversial religious figures of the era, as Elena Valeri has described. He benignly labeled Savonarola a “holy man and a princeps of theology”\textsuperscript{50} and, according to Valeri, “never portrayed Luther in violent or hate-filled tones; he firmly condemned the rebellion, but always recognized its political and moral implications.”\textsuperscript{51}

Luther, though, is a threatening menace in Borgia’s history. But the reason, again according to Valeri, is an ancient one: Luther was a barbarian. Thus Borgia did not condemn him... because of his criticisms of the Roman Church, which Borgia was often sympathetic with, nor because of any theological questions, on which Borgia did not dwell, but rather because the German monk had put up for discussion the authority of the Rome.\textsuperscript{52}

In Borgia’s mind there was little difference between the defense of libertas Italiae and libertas Ecclesiae (the liberty of the Church) because the barbari threatened the

\textsuperscript{48} Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 233.


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 229: Lutero non era mai ritratto con toni violenti e carichi di odio; la sua ribellione era si fermamente condannata, ma sempre evidenziando le implicazioni morali e politiche di quella protesta.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 229: Ciò che induceva Borgia a condannare Lutero e i suoi seguaci non erano dunque le critiche alla Chiesa di Roma, che in molti passi lo storico mostrava di condividere, né la questioni teologiche, sulle qualì non si soffermava, bensi il fatto che il Monaco Tedesco avesse messo in discussione l’autorità di Roma.

264
autonomy of both. This perspective is particularly important for understanding Borgia’s interpretation of the role of the papacy throughout the *calamità*.

**Popes and Italia**

Other historians shared Borgia’s assumption that the *calamità* were, at least in part, divine retribution, but Borgia added to that hypothesis a particular emphasis on the role of the popes. He thought the pontiffs were uniquely capable of taking on the responsibility of leadership on the peninsula because, in Borgia’s eyes, any Italian redemption had to be both religious and political. While more well-known historians such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini condemned papal leadership as the cause of much of Italy’s suffering, Borgia argued that the peninsula’s woes were related to a fundamental lack of papal initiative. Borgia’s most conspicuous and original contribution to the early sixteenth-century dialogue on Italian history was an argument that the *libertas* of the peninsula depended on papal leadership.

In 1542 Borgia was preparing to present a manuscript of his project to his longtime patron, the Farnese Pope Paul III. He composed a separate dedication, which he used as an opportunity to reflect on the nature of the narrative that he had been crafting for over twenty-five years. Looking back, what most characterized the intervening decades of peninsular history were the “injuries, destructions, wounds, and innumerable calamities brought onto Italia by barbarians.”\(^{53}\) He illustrated the peninsula’s devastation by recalling a definitive moment in early Roman history when Lucius Junius Brutus led the overthrow of the last Roman king, Tarquin. Tarquin had just raped Lucrezia, a

maiden who, after being violated, committed suicide in order to preserve her honor. Borgia remarked that, similarly, he was presenting to the pope, through his history, the devastated body of Italia and that he hoped the pope would take on the role of a new Brutus, “the first author of Roman liberty.”

The lesson of the Historiae, according to its author, was the necessity of papal leadership. Only the pope could provide the political and religious renovatio that the peninsula needed. Borgia hoped the pope might come to see himself as the “leader of Italy,” [Italiae Princeps] and “the Italians’ pater patriae” in addition to the more traditional, universal role, the “guardian of all humanity.” Borgia alluded to the barbari north of the Alps, the barbari in charge of Milan and Naples, and the threatening Ottoman presence to the East. The peninsula’s revitalization depended on Italians governing their own cities. To that end, Borgia suggested to the Farnese pope what Machiavelli had earlier suggested to a Medici prince, that is, to construct an all-Italian army (Borgia also suggested a navy). “All Italy looks to you,” Borgia informed the pope.

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54 Borgia, Historiae in Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 111: romanae primus libertatis auctor.
55 Ibid., 111: Cum sis et Italus et Italiae Princeps maximus ac mens Italorum patriaeque pater atque omnium custos hominum.
56 Ibid., 111: Italiam neque posse capi, neque posse teneri absque Italis; nec unquam in Italia aut vicisse aut regnasse sine Italo barbarum.
57 Ibid., 111: Neque vero terrestres solum copias, sed navales instruendas, iudico quibus inferi superique maris oras non modo fortiter tueri, sed et omnibus inferred bellum barbaris poterimus.
58 Ibid., 112: …age in tua castra fortissimum quenque ex cuncta Italia ducem ac iuventum bello natam evoca ac tuo sub auspicio imperioque iuratum sacramento militari stabilique stipendio obligari iube. Ita demum te arma tenentem et hostes formidabant et tui verebuntur […] Prefecto tempus hoc alias rationes, alia consilia postulat, nunc oportet te et pontificem esse et imperatoris officio perfungi, in te enim Italo Italia omnis inclinata recumbit.
In Borgia’s view, it fell to the pope to bring together the Italian princes and condottieri while also healing the injuries done to the Church by the rise of Protestantism, Ottoman expansion, and the decades of war on the Italian peninsula. Borgia wanted Paul III to restore not only the *libertas Italiae*, but the “liberty of the Christiana Respublica.”59 Thus, Borgia envisioned the pope’s restoration of *libertas* to extend beyond Italy to all Christendom. But the two terms, Italia and the *Christiana Respublica* were interconnected in Borgia’s narrative. The historian reminded the pontiff that “after so many years of violence from across the Alps and from across the seas…the ancient glory, *libertas*, power and honor of Italy [should] be restored” and that the pope should “defend [the peninsula] from *calamitā*.”60 Earlier sixteenth-century historians such as Machiavelli and Guicciardini had been critical of the pope’s dual role as both a religious leader and temporal prince, citing that seemingly contradictory position as a main reason why the Church ultimately impeded cooperation between the Italian powers. But, as Elena Valeri has demonstrated, Borgia’s suggestion that the pope, precisely because of his capacity to act as custodian of *libertas Italiae* and the *Christiana Respublica*, could bring together Italian interests was one of the first of many such proposals by peninsular thinkers in the mid to late sixteenth century.61


60 Ibid., 115: Hinc antiqua Italiae gloria, hinc libertas, hinc opes honoresque restiteuntur et amissum imperium hinc pecunias quas violenter trans mare transque Alpes tot annos exportati doluimus, in patriis thesauris conservari augerique et ad utilitatem Reipublicae impendi gaudebimus, quod, si non dabitur Italian penitus liberare, saltem a maioribus quae undique minantur, calamitatisus defendemus.

In the dedicatory letter of 1542, Borgia called upon his longtime patron Paul III to take on a more active role in the restoration of *libertas Italiae*. For Borgia, Paul III represented the culmination of a series of popes who, during the decades of the *calamità*, contributed varying degrees of leadership, mostly, in Borgia’s opinion, to the detriment of both the Italian states and the *Christiana Respublica*. The licentiousness of Alexander VI’s curia had typified the Italian states’ poor leadership at the time of Charles VIII’s invasion in 1494.

But it was the pontificate of Julius II (1503-1513)—the *papa guerriero*, warrior-pope, that best illustrates the various ways that early sixteenth-century historians understood and represented the relationship between contemporary popes and *libertas Italiae*. Julius oversaw a crucial phase of the *calamità*. A native Ligurian from the Della Rovere family, he became pope in 1503, a time when the peninsula was relatively peaceful but for a war in Tuscany in which Florence was attempting to regain Pisa. When Julius II died in 1513, the Italian Wars had escalated into a massive showdown between the French and the Spanish, which would devastate the peninsula almost nonstop for seventeen more years.

Julius II was the most militarily aggressive pope of the sixteenth century. Behind some of his campaigns were cries of *fuori i barbari!* and *libertas Italiae*. At least in his rhetoric, Julius claimed to be the kind of pontiff that Borgia would later beseech Paul III to be—a *princeps Italiae*. But contemporary historians differed in their interpretations of Julius’ approaches to Italian and Church politics. Thus his pontificate, and the historiographical responses it prompted, are ideal for exploring how the institution of the papacy contributed to the development of a sixteenth-century Italian historical discourse.

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The Historical Example of Pope Julius II

In Borgia’s, Guicciardini’s, and Rucellai’s histories, Julius II first appears as Giuliano della Rovere, the Cardinal of San Pietro in Vincoli, in an episode in which the future pope plays a role clearly inimical to the Italian states. The Ligurian cardinal and Pope Alexander VI had been vicious enemies. Eventually, Della Rovere had fled the Curia for France. When the French king Charles VIII began to lead his army south to Italy in 1494, the cardinal rode with him, giddy at the opportunity to destabilize the status quo in Rome and to reassert his influence there. When the French hesitated at the foot of the Alps, according to Rucellai in his De bello Italicō,63 and later, Borgia in his Historiae, the cardinal compelled them forward with a rousing speech that ended with him crying out “Into Italy! Into Italy!”64

Less than a decade later, Alexander VI died and Cardinal della Rovere succeeded him as Julius II. During the first few years of his pontificate, Italy experienced relative peace. After the first rounds of invasions, the French had possession of Milan and the Spanish had Naples. Of the five major fifteenth-century Italian powers—Milan, Naples, Venice, Florence, and the papacy—only Venice and the papacy retained their autonomy (Florence did, too, but was bogged down fighting Pisa, unsuccessfully). While his father was pope, Cesare Borgia had carved out a territory of strategic fortress towns in the Romagna region, in the name of the papacy. But the loyalty of those towns had been based on personal relationships with the Borgia clan, and thus mostly fell apart upon

63 Bernardi Oricellarii, De bello italico commentarius (London: Gulielmi Bowyer, 1733), 33.
64 Borgia, Historiae in Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 278: In Italiam, in Italian!
Alexander’s death. Thus Julius’ primary objective after becoming pope was the
reassertion of papal rule in those territories. Famously, he put on armor and rode with his
armies who easily reclaimed Bologna and Perugia from the control of powerful local
families. Meanwhile, though, recognizing the vacuum of power where Borgia’s rule had
vanished, Venice looked to expand its mainland holdings and took possession of several
key fortified communities. Venetian activity provoked the ire of not only the pope, but
the French and Spanish monarchs as well as the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian.
Those European monarchs and the pope agreed on an alliance, the League of Cambrai, in
opposition to Venice with goal of regaining the lands lost to the traditionally maritime
republic. At the front of Venice’s aggressive policies was the mercenary captain,
Bartolomeo d’Alviano, who was accompanied by his secretary, Girolamo Borgia.

Observing events first-hand, Borgia understood the imminent war between Venice
and the allied monarchs in distinctly Italian terms. In his words, the League consisted of
the pope, “savage barbarians,” and “Italians who were horrible enemies of the glory of
Italy…[all of whom were conspiring for] the destruction of Italy.”65 Meanwhile, the pope
himself claimed that he had the peninsula’s interests at heart because the Venetians
wanted to “occupy and tyrannize over all Italy.”66 This though was only rhetorical spin
by the pontiff. In a communication with the Venetian senate, in fact, he had reversed the
equation. Guicciardini reports that in the early days of the League, Julius told the
Venetians that, if they restored all the Church lands they had taken, then he would
remove himself from the League, “and put all his authority and industry to nothing else

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65 Borgia, Historiae in Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 176: immanes barbari…Itali immaniores hostes italicae
gloriae…in excidium Italiae.

66 As quoted in Shaw, Warrior Pope, 228.
but preventing the *barbari* from increasing their power in Italy, a prospect just as
dangerous to the Apostolic See as to the rest of the Italian states."  
Whether or not Julius II actually had a divided mind on joining the League, the rhetoric he employed
demonstrates a concern for presenting his actions within the context of the *libertas Italiae*.

The Venetians declined Julius’ offer and the pope put the city under interdict. War against Venice came fast. That city had spent the better part of a century building up a *terrafirma* state, but in the first few months of 1509, it began quickly to fall apart. In May of that year, the French inflicted a decisive blow to the Venetians at the battle of Agnadello; Bartolomeo d’Alviano was captured and Venetian strongholds began to fall.

Borgia, who had been present at Agnadello, immediately understood the Venetian defeat as part of a broader narrative of Italy’s ever-diminishing *libertas*. In his *Historiae*, the author presents Venice around the time of Agnadello as alone carrying the banner of *libertas Italiae*, that is, representing the rest of the peninsula in their efforts to keep out the *barbari*. When the Venetians defended Padua from foreign mercenaries they seemed to Borgia to be defending “all Italy.” In the end, though, their mainland territory was devastated “by a Gallic and Teutonic fury.” Venice eventually recovered; they had

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70 Ibid., 182: *a gallico ac teutonomico furore.*
received “a terrible blow, but not a lethal wound.”\footnote{Ibid., 183: plagam terribilem, non vulnus letale.} La Serenissima signed separate peace accords with the French, Spanish, and with Pope Julius, promising to return all of their lands.

After Julius had reacquired for the Church the cities of Faenza, Rimini, Cervia, and Ravenna, he repealed the interdict on Venice and shifted his attention to a new enemy, his recent ally, the French, who retained a significant military force on the peninsula. Once again, Pope Julius featured the rhetoric of libertas Italicae. Although his most recent biographer, Christine Shaw, could find no hard evidence for Julius ever having muttered “fuori i barbari,” out with the barbarians!, Julius did invoke the sentiment behind such a phrase (and Guicciardini claims that such words “frequently came out of his mouth”).\footnote{Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia XI.viii in Opere vol. 3, ed. Emanuella Scarano (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1981), 1094: …Italia rimanesse (queste parole uscivano frequentemente della bocca sua) libera da’ barbari.} Once again, Julius rode to the front lines, “unrestrained by the consideration of just how undignified it was for a person of such importance as the Roman pontiff to personally lead an army in the attack of a Christian town,” and took command of the siege of the French-held town of Mirandola in 1511.\footnote{Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia IX.xiii, 892: né lo ritenendo il considerare quanto fusse indegno della maestà di tanto grado che il pontifice romano andasse personalmente negli eserciti contro alle terre de’ christian.} Papal troops took Mirandola but soon after lost Bologna to an internal revolt.

Fearing that his position might be threatened, the pope formed the so-called Lega santa, the Holy League, in 1511 with Spain and Venice, with the aim of expelling the French from Italy. This venture later formed the crux of Borgia’s and Guicciardini’s analyses of Julius’ pontificate and his contribution to the changing Italian political landscape.
On Easter Sunday, 11 April 1512 at Ravenna, Spanish and papal forces faced off against the French in the bloodiest battle of the Italian Wars. The French won, but lost their commander; they took Ravenna and most of the Romagna in short order. The Spanish and papal troops, accompanied by the Cardinal Giovanni de’ Medici, set off for Florence. After sacking Prato, almost within view of Florence, the army forced the expulsion of the Florentine republican regime and restored the Medici clan to power. Less than a year later, Julius died and Giovanni de’ Medici became Pope Leo X. Leo inherited a peninsula fundamentally changed from the one his predecessor had inherited. For the next decade and a half, the Italian state governments, the Italian people, their land, and two Medici popes, were the incidental victims in a showdown for greater European hegemony between the Spanish empire and France.

Pope Julius II couched his actions against the French in a rhetoric of *libertas Italiae* and *barbari*. But whatever amount of authenticity lay behind his patriotic language, in the end, Julius only helped to propel forward the inevitable—a showdown between France and Hapsburg Spain on Italian soil with devastating consequences for the Italian people and their political autonomy. Julius’ aggressive maneuvers and equally aggressive rhetoric against the *barbari* did however help provoke contemporary historians to render his decade of influence in particularly Italian terms. Discussions of that period prompted some historians to reflect honestly on Italy’s changed political situation. Was an expulsion of the *barbari* really ever possible? Did Julius really have the common good of the peninsula in mind? What should the role of the pope have been in those decisive years?
Borgia had his misgivings about Julius II’s religious leadership, in particular his selling off of Church offices to pay for his military ventures\textsuperscript{74} and, like Guicciardini, Borgia questioned that pope’s tendency to ride at the front of some of his army’s expeditions.\textsuperscript{75} Yet, when Julius formed the Holy League and announced his intention to expel the foreign invaders, Borgia approved. Even through the retrospective lens of history, that is, knowing that the pope’s plans did come to fruition, that his actions in fact had the opposite effect of kicking out the \textit{barbari}, Borgia described Julius as a “courageous pope, the [guardian] of matters both ecclesiastical and Italian.”\textsuperscript{76} Perhaps Borgia believed that Julius was really motivated by an overriding concern for the well-being of the peninsula as a whole (rather than just looking to better his own circumstances and that of the Church), or, maybe, as Valeri suggests, Borgia thought that after Julius and the Spanish had removed the French from Milan, the pope would then remove the Spanish from Borgia’s home city of Naples.\textsuperscript{77} Whatever the case, the image of the warrior-pope as a patriot persisted in historical literature, within the sixteenth

\textsuperscript{74} Borgia, \textit{Historiae} in Valeri, \textit{Italia dilacerata}, 178: Numquam literas discere potuit a pueritia pravis imbutus artibus, imo musis inimicus doctos hominess irridebat tanquam rebus agendis inutiles, sacerdotij autem et sacris dignitatibus non eruditissimum, non honestissimum quenque, sed pro libidine aut flore aetatis aut pecunia commendatum praeficiebat. Denique totus ambitioni ac terrenis voluptatibus deditus, nihil minus quam sacra curabat, vino, alea et cineadorum consuetudine infamis opes sacras prodiga manu in eas voluptates absumebat.

\textsuperscript{75} Valeri, \textit{Italia dilacerata}, 178.


century in the pages of Leandro Alberti’s Descrittione di tutta Italia (discussed in Chapter Seven) and, later, in Pastor’s History of the Popes.  

Guicciardini though, had a different interpretation of Julius’ impact on Italian history. In 1511, after the siege of Mirandola and after the Bologna uprising, but just before the formation of the Holy League, Pope Julius II fell gravely ill, even slipping into a coma, and there were reports that he was dead; but he was not. Guicciardini credited Julius’ recovery as perhaps due to his “very robust composition,” but, more probably because “the fates had already deemed him to be the author and principle reason for the longest and worst of Italy’s calamità.” Far from portraying him as a patriotic pope as did Borgia, Guicciardini blamed Julius’ policies, beginning with the formation of the Holy League, as the primary causes of an ever-more disastrous chain of events that reached its nadir in the 1527 sack of Rome. In fact, when Guicciardini first introduces into his narrative the Cardinal of San Pietro in Vincoli (in 1494, at the northern foot of the Alps), he labels the future pope, “then, previously, and subsequently, the fatal instrument of Italy’s miseries.”

Writing over three decades after Julius challenged the French, Guicciardini acknowledged that the pope’s League, “formed in the name of liberating Italia from the barbarians,” had provoked “diverse interpretations in the minds of men…based on the

78 Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 183.

79 Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia X.iv, 950: Dopo il quale di seguitò miglioramento motlo evidente, procedendo o dalla complessione sua molto robusta o dall’essere riservato da’ fati come autore e cagione principale di più lunghe e maggiori calamità di Italia.

diversity of their passions and their judgments.”81 The Holy League, according to
Gucciardini, “formed in the name of liberating Italia,” merely invoked the aim of
expelling the barbarian invaders, when, really, the historian implied, its true goals were to
preserve and extend the papacy’s autonomy and strength. Many though did not see the
gap that Guicciardini observed between the pope’s rhetoric and his actions. Such men
deceived by the magnificence of such a name and by the positive hopes
they imparted, exalted with the highest praise to heaven such a worthy
project, calling it truly worthy of the pontifical majesty, and that Julius’
greatness could not have undertaken a more generous endeavor, and that
his wisdom was no less than his magnanimity, since that by his skill he
had set the barbarian armies against one another. As a result, shedding
more foreign than Italian blood against the French would not only
conserve our blood, but once one group of foreigners were kicked out, it
would be all the easier to expel the rest of the barbarians, already
weakened and enervated, with Italian armies.82

When writing those words, Guicciardini may have had Borgia in mind as one of those
who hoped that Julius’ schemes would not only remove the French from Milan, but then
also the Spanish from Naples.

Other observers, including Guicciardini and according to Guicciardini, formed a
different interpretation of what had transpired between 1511 and 1513. They,

perhaps considering the substance of things more deeply and not allowing
their eyes to be dazzled by the splendor of the League’s name, feared that
the wars begun with the intention of liberating Italy from the barbarians
would end up causing much more harm to the vital spirits of this body [of
Italy] than those [foreigners] who had begun with the manifest purpose

81 Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia X.vi, 960: Destò questa confederazione dal pontefice sotto nome di liberare
Italia da’ barbari, diverse interpretazioni negli animi degli uomini, secondo la diversità delle passioni e
degli ingegni.

82 Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia X.vi, 960: Perché molti, persi dalla magnificenza e giocondità del nome,
esaltavano con somme laudi insino al cielo così alto proposito, chiamandola professione veramente degna
della maestà pontificale; né potere la grandezza dell’animo di Giulio avere assunto impresa più generosa,
né meno piena di prudenza che magnanimità, avendo con la industria sua commosso l’armi de’ barbari
contro a’ barbari; onde spargendosi contro a’ francesi più il sangue nostro, ma cacciata una delle parti
sarebbe molto facile cacciare con l’armi italiane l’altra già indebolita ad enervata.
and certain intention of subjugating it; and that it was more reckless than prudent to put faith in Italian armies and to think that they, lacking in virtù, discipline, reputation, captains with authority, and princes willing to conform to a common goal, would be sufficient to expel the victors from Italy; for, when all other remedies failed that victor, he would always have recourse to joining with the conquered for the total ruin of all Italians.

Of course, when he was writing, Guicciardini already knew how events had transpired after Julius’ death. In the context of future events, though, Julius’ actions looked all the more disastrous from an Italian perspective:

There was much more to fear that these new movements would provide other nations the opportunity to pillage Italy…Italy should have desired that the discord and unhealthy advice of our princes did not open the way for foreign armies to enter; but since, unfortunately, two of its most noble members [Milan and Naples] became dominated by the king of the French and the king of the Spanish, she should consider it only a minor calamità that both of them remain there, [and she should wait] until some divine mercy or the goodness of fortuna created a more favorable opportunity: because pitting one king against the other serves only to defend the liberty of those not yet enslaved…as long as the wars still raged, those parts of Italy that had remained untouched would be torn to pieces by depredations, fires, blood, and terrible disasters, and, finally, those who remained the victors would afflict all the others with the most bitter and most atrocious servitude.

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83 Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia* X.vi, 960-1: Altri, considerando forse più intrinsecamente la sostanza delle cose né si lasciando abbagliare gli occhi dallo splendore del nome, temevano che le guerre che si cominciavano con intenzione di liberare Italia da’ barbari nocerebbono molto più agli spiriti vitali di questo corpo che non aveano nociuto le cominciate con manifesta professione e certissima intenzione di soggiogarla; ed essere cosa più temeraria che prudente lo sperare che l’armi italiane, prive di virtù, di disciplina, di riputazione, di capitanì di autorità, né conformi le volontà de’ principi suoi, fussino sufficienti a cacciare di Italia il vincitore; al quale quando mancassino tutti gli altri rimedi non mancherebbe mai la facoltà di riunirsi co’ vinti a ruina commune di tutti gli italiani.

84 Guicciardini, *Storia d'Italia* X.vi, 961: ed essere molto più da temere che questi nuovi movimenti dessino occasione di depredare Italia a nuove nazioni che da sperare che, per l’unione del pontifice e de’ viniziani, s’avessino a domare i franzesi e gli spagnuoli. Avere da desiderare Italia che la Discordia e consigli malsani de’ nostri prinicipi non avessino aperta la via d’entrai all’armi forestiere; ma che, poi che per la sua infelicità due da’ membri più nobili erano stati occupati dal re di Francia e dal re di Spagna, doversi riputare minore calamità che ammedue vi rimanesino, insino a tanto che la pietà divina o la benifnità della fortuna conducessino più fondate occasioni (perché dal fare contrapeso l’un re all’altro si difendeva la libertà di quegli che ancora non servivano) che il venire tra loro medessimi alle armi; per le quail, mentre durava la guerra, si lacererebbono, con depredazioni con incendi con sangue e con accidenti miserabili, le parti ancora intere, e finalmente quel di loro che rimanesse vincitore l’aﬄiggerebbe tutta con più acerba e più atroce servitù.
Thus Guicciardini specifically highlighted the ambiguity inherent in Julius’ policies and in his rhetoric. The Florentine’s analysis, which benefitted from three decades of historical distance, seems accurate in regards to the long term effects of the Holy League. But Guicciardini’s interpretation also reveals the potential impact the rhetoric of libertas Italiae had on sixteenth-century Italian audiences. Especially when wielded by a leader of such influence as the pope, evocations of the peninsula’s superiority over the barbari could affect the ways in which people viewed contemporary political developments. Even though Guicciardini claims that he was able to “consider the substance of things more deeply,” and thus see through Julius’ discursive smoke screens, he also acknowledges that many other observers were “deceived by the magnificence” of the pope’s libertas Italiae rhetoric to the point that they failed to see the attendant impracticalities of his supposed peninsular goals.

Looking back on Pope Julius II’s Holy League against the French barbari, Borgia and Guicciardini, each in his own way, rendered judgment not only on the intentions and effectiveness of that pope’s policies, but also on the role of the papacy in the Italian Wars generally. As much as Borgia thought Julius to be part of the Church’s moral morass, he also perceived that pope to be the “guardian of matters Italian and ecclesiastical.” Borgia later hoped to have identified in Paul III a pope capable enough in religious and political spheres to be a new principes Italiae.

Guicciardini thought differently about the role of the popes during the calamità. He had served as the commander of Pope Clement VII’s troops from 1525 to 1527. But, at least by the time he sat down to write his history, Guicciardini seems to have decided that Italy’s problems were structural and insuperable. The only solution that he suggests
could have prevented the “common ruin of all the Italians” was an impossibility, “that the discord and unhealthy advice of our princes had not opened up the way for foreign armies to enter” in the first place. Guicciardini’s narrative of Julius’ campaigns suggest that the problems facing Italy were bigger than any one of its princes. According to his narrative, Julius had made the Italian states’ collective situation worse, but he was not decisive.

Finally, Borgia and Guicciardini represent two interpretive strands in peninsular historiography regarding the ideal relationship between popes and the Italian political landscape. One, represented by Borgia, saw in the pope a unique combination of religious and political power that made him an ideal leader for the Italian peninsula, a protector of libertas Italiae. For Borgia, the pope’s “two souls” could and should protect Italia, in both spiritual and military senses. Borgia viewed Julius II’s Holy League as evidence that that pope had in mind to be the protector of “matters both ecclesiastical and Italian,” yet, ultimately, Borgia thought Julius devoted himself disproportionately to his temporal ambitions while neglecting the religious. But when his longtime Farnese patron became pope, Borgia hoped that he would be the first pontiff since the start of the calamità to successfully take on the double responsibility of ecclesiastical and Italian affairs.

Although Machiavelli generally viewed the Church as inimical to the collective well-being of the Italian states, he also consistently prodded Italian leaders to be more aggressive and impetuous. After observing Julius’ career, Machiavelli could not help becoming excited about the prospects of a liberator-pope. As Florentine secretary, Machiavelli had been in Rome in 1503 when Julius was elected to the pontificate and saw that pope again in 1506 when he was preparing for what became a successful attempt to

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use force of arms to bring Bologna back under direct papal authority.\textsuperscript{86} Seven years later, just after Julius’ death and the election of the first Medici pope, Machiavelli began his life of political exile and wrote \textit{The Prince}; memories of the warrior-pope were still fresh in his mind.

Julius appears in that work as the only contemporary example in the famous penultimate chapter (XXV) on the influence of fortuna and how, through circumspect, aggressive actions, it might be opposed. That pope “proceeded in every of his actions impetuously and, finding the times and events well-disposed to his way of proceeding, always arrived at successful conclusions.”\textsuperscript{87} The Florentine had a realistic interpretation of Julius’ aims, which, according to Machiavelli, were always the extension of the ecclesiastical state and not necessarily the protection of the \textit{libertas Italica}.\textsuperscript{88} But he saw in Julius’ “way of proceeding” a model that, he hoped, the new Medici pope (and his powerful relatives, to whom \textit{The Prince} was dedicated) might replicate in the context of a genuine effort to expel the \textit{barbari}. Pope Leo, after all, “inherited an extremely strong [\textit{potentissimo}] pontificate, his predecessors having established its greatness through force of arms; we hope that Leo, by his goodness and infinite other virtù, will make it even more great and more honored.”\textsuperscript{89} With his characteristic hopefulness in matters Italian,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textsuperscript{86} Ugo Dotti, \textit{Machiavelli rivoluzionario} (Roma: Carocci, 2003), 105-112 and 149-164.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{87} Machiavelli, \textit{Il principe} XXV in \textit{Opere} vol. 1, ed. Rinaldo Rinaldi (Turin: U.T.E.T., 1999), 381: Papa Julio II procedè tanto e tempi e le cose conforme ad quello suo modo di procedere, che sempre sortì felice fine.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{88} Machiavelli, \textit{Il principe} XI, 235: E tutte queste imprese gli riuscirono, e con tanta più sua laude, quanto lui fece ogni cosa per adresciere la chiesa e non alcuno privato.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 236: Ha trovato adunque la sanctità di papa Leone questo pontificato potentissimo; il quale si spera, se quegli lo feciono grande le arme, questo con la bontà et infine sua virtù lo farà grandissimo e venerando.}
\end{footnotes}
Machiavelli, like Borgia, saw the popes of the second decade of the sixteenth century as potentially decisive leaders for the peninsula.

Guicciardini represents another, distinctive interpretation of the pope’s role in Italian affairs. Like many historians before him, Guicciardini condemned the pope’s wearing of “two hats,” one temporal and one ecclesiastical, not in the least because the popes’ pursuits of their political ambitions have most often been detrimental to the Italian states. The Florentine historian’s final judgment of Pope Julius was that he was a

prince of inestimable spirit and constancy, but also impetuous and tended toward impractical schemes. If those traits did not push him over the edge, he was sustained more by the general reverence for the Church, the discord among the princes, and the conditions of the times than by any sense of moderation and prudence.\(^90\)

Guicciardini’s final rendering of the pope at first appears rather benign. Julius had been an aggressive, ambitious, but ultimately ineffective prince. But that was Guicciardini’s point: popes should not also be princes. The author continues, positing that Julius’ memorable characteristics were
certainly worthy of much glory had [Julius] been a secular prince, or if that care and attention with which he exalted the Church to temporal greatness through the arts of war instead had been used to exalt the Church to spiritual greatness through the arts of peace.\(^91\)

It is not difficult to imagine that Guicciardini had Borgia in mind, when he repeats his earlier conclusions about those who were taken in by Julius’ claims to be working for the \textit{libertas Italiae}.

\(^{90}\) Guicciardini, \textit{Storia d’Italia} XI.viii, 1095: Principe d’animo e di costanza inestimabile ma impetuoso e di concetti smisurati, per i quali che non precipitasse lo sostenne più la riverenza della Chiesa, la discordia de’ principi e la condizione de’ tempi, che la moderazione e la prudenza.

\(^{91}\) Ibid., 1095: Degno certamente di soma gloria se fusse stato principe secolare, o se quella cura e intenzione che ebbe a esaltare con l’arti della guerra la Chiesa nella grandezza temporale avesse avuta a esaltarla con l’arti della pace nelle cose spirituali.
And nevertheless, his memory is honored more than any of his predecessors, mostly by those who, having lost the capacity to call things by their real names, not knowing the criteria for distinguishing between things and to judge them by their true weight, think that the central role of the pontificate is to extend, with war and with the blood of Christians, the empire of the Apostolic See [imperio alla sedia apostolica], rather than to work hard to provide the example of a good life and to correct and cure corrupt customs for the salvation of those souls for whom they boast that Christ made them his vicars on earth.\footnote{Ibid., 1095: e nondimeno, sopra tutti i suoi antecessori, di chiarissima e onoratissima memoria; massimamente appresso a coloro i quail, essendo perduti i veri vocaboli delle cose e confusa la distinzione del pesarle rettamente, giudicano che sia più officio de’ pontefici aggiugnere, con l’armi e col sangue de’ cristiani, imperio alla sedia apostolica che l’affaticarsi, con lo esempio buono della vita e col correggere e medicare i costumi trascorsi, per la salute di quelle anime, per la quale si magnificano che Cristo gli abbia costituiti in terra suoi vicari.}

When the pope’s actions are carefully considered, contended Guicciardini, he never had Italy in mind, but, rather, the extension of “the empire of the Apostolic See.”

Because Guicciardini read both Machiavelli’s works and Borgia’s, his rendering of Pope Julius II’s Italian politics represents another phase in the intertextual conversation between sixteenth-century historians about the fate of the peninsula during the calamità. Specifically, the three historians’ distinctive interpretations of Julius’ reign demonstrate the continuation of the dialogue between Machiavelli and Vettori—a decade before Borgia finished his work—about possibility of decisive agency on the part of Italian leaders.

**Pope Clement VII and the End of the Calamità**

As in other contemporary histories of the period, the battle of Pavia in 1525 marks a turning point in Borgia’s narrative of the Italian Wars. Ever since 1519, when Charles V Hapsburg—already the king of Spain—was elected Holy Roman Emperor, the wars in Italy had been two-sided, a showdown between Charles and the French. At Pavia, French
forces engaged the Spanish, who not only routed them, but also captured their monarch, Francis I. Back in Spain, he was compelled to sign a peace accord and although he was not faithful to it, the French never again seriously threatened Spain’s dominance over Italian affairs. The Spanish ruled directly in Milan and Naples. And just after Pope Clement VII and Charles V signed an accord in Bologna, Spanish forces overtook Florence, the last state willing to challenge Hapsburg dominance; Charles’ new clients, the Medici, were installed as absolute rulers of the Florentine state.

The years between Pavia and peace accords signed between the pope and Charles V at Bologna in 1530 represented for Borgia a critical period for peninsular history in which the libertas Italiae lay in the balance. Borgia emphasizes the devastation wrought on the Italian people and he adopts a tone of desperation, urging the pope, “for the common good” [pro communi salute] to “consult every [possible] cure, all studies, all men” who could help preserve Italic liberties.

In those years Clement VII (Giulio de’ Medici) was pope. History has not been kind to that pontiff, under whose watch Luther’s movement flourished in Germany, the English church separated, and Rome was sacked. Most contemporary Italian historians were particularly critical of Clement’s vacillating and often hesitant diplomacy.

Francesco Vettori, who actually made a point of blaming the circumstances of Clement’s


94 Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 228.

95 Borgia, Historiae in Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 229: pro communi salute…omnes curas, omnia studia, omnes viris et actiones eo intendi ut inveteratis Reipublicae Christianae vulneribus mederer et libertati italicae potissimum consulerem.

rule and not Clement himself, neatly summarized the pope’s career in his *Sommario* when he explained that Giulio de’ Medici had “expended great effort to become, from a great and renowned cardinal, a weak and little-esteem ed pope.”

Because Borgia believed the papacy to be an institution capable of assuming the responsibility of the *libertas Italiae*, he roundly condemned Clement’s pontificate, accusing him of putting the interests of the Medici clan above both the interests of the Church and those of Italy as a whole. Like most historians after him, Borgia blamed Clement for the sack and expressed particular regret for the pope’s subsequent siege, in collaboration with Charles V, of his home city of Florence, which in 1530, according to Borgia, “alone sustained the ancient virtù…of Italy.”

Borgia expected Clement, as pope, to have the well-being of Italy primary in his thinking. That is perhaps the most unique aspect of Borgia’s interpretation of Italian history during the *calamità*, that is, his overlapping of *libertas Italiae* and *libertas Ecclesiae*. Even though it could be argued, as Guicciardini did, that popes such as Julius II and Clement VII were at best interested in the *libertas Ecclesiae*, the autonomy of the Church, Borgia saw things differently. To his thinking, there was almost no distinction—or should have been almost no distinction—between the interests of the Church and those of Italy. As Elena Valeri has pointed out, Borgia was one of a number of humanists for

97 Vettori, *Sommario*, 207: nondimeno durò una gran fatica per diventare, di grande e riputato cardinale, piccolo e poco stimato papa.


99 Borgia, *Historiae* in Valeri, “*Le Historiae*,” 227: Ad summam toto hoc bello nihil pulchrior nihil praecelarius gestum est, quam quod Florentini soli decus Italiae sustinentes non dum esse antiquam virtutem extinctam docuere ac caeteras Italiae urbes eorum fortitudem laudentes simul et invidentes libertatis amissae, meliusque sapere in posterum admonuere. Soli denique florentini ab omnibus amicis atque sociis Europae deserti tantam belli molem constantissimo animo sustinuere uni glorius et libertati servientes, nec pertinaciam pontificis nec potentiam Caesaris formidantes et infinitum latronum numerum praedae cupiditae eo confluementum parvi facientes.
whom “the fight against the Lutherans and that for the libertà d’Italia were…by now in the forties, two sides of the same coin.”

Although Spanish dominance in Italy was well established by the time Borgia dedicated a manuscript of his Historiae to Paul III, his longtime patron and recently elected successor to Clement, the historian still had in mind that the pope should be the custodian of both the peninsula’s and the Church’s well-being. Borgia asked the pope unambiguously to bring back to Italy and to the Apostolic See “peace, glory, majesty, and pristine liberty.”

Although Paul III did convene the Council of Trent in 1545, certainly with the restoration of the Church’s “glory” in mind, there was little he could do about the peninsula’s political subjugation.

By virtue of the fact that his Historiae was an important source for Guicciardini, Borgia took part in the intertextual Renaissance dialogue between Italian historians about the nature of the peninsula’s history during the calamità. Borgia’s narrative overlapped with some of his contemporaries in notable ways. Both he and Rucellai wrote histories of Italy in Latin at a time when most other historians, in Milan and Florence, were composing in Italian; and both were directly influenced by Pontano’s intellectual circle and its dedication to the historiographical precepts set down by the ancients. Borgia’s interpretations of Italian history shared some key elements with Machiavelli’s, including an aggressive distaste for the barbari, a faith in the superiority of Italian arms despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, and the belief, the genuine hope that a single leader could restore Italy’s “pristine liberty.”

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100 Valeri, Italia dilacerata, 213: la lotta contro i luterani e quella per la “libertà d’Italia” fossero considerate da molti, ormai negli anni quaranta, come due face della stessa medaglia.

Borgia also contributed original talking points to the ongoing conversation about Italian history, particularly in regards to what he saw as the engine driving Italy’s recent past. For Francesco Vettori, for instance, transalpine political dynamics and the decisions of its leaders were the primary agents in determining the direction of Italian history. For Machiavelli, Italian history itself, that is, the peninsula’s ancient heritage was particularly crucial as was its leaders’ unwillingness to learn from that past. Guicciardini, for his part, adopted Vettori’s emphasis on the determinative role of the larger European states in Italian affairs, but also emphasized the poor decision-making and short-sighted ambitions of the Italian leaders. Much more so than any of those historians, Borgia saw the institution of the papacy as decisive in early sixteenth-century Italian history. He heaped the most blame on the popes he saw as particularly destructive to the preservation of the *libertas Italae*—Alexander VI and Clement VII—and he invested great hope for a redeemed peninsula in the popes he thought willing and capable of taking on the responsibility of peninsula leadership—Julius II and Paul III.
Chapter Seven

Questa Nostra Italia: Church Histories of Italy after 1550

The Inquisitor’s Italy

Like Girolamo Borgia, Leandro Alberti was a man of the cloth and a historian of Italy. Alberti’s career was, more so than Borgia’s, inextricably tied to the Counter-Reformation Church. Alberti was born in Bologna in 1479 and died there in 1552. He spent most of his life in that city, which, after Rome, was the most important Italian possession for the Church—won and lost by Julius II, won back by the Church, and, eventually, the site of Clement VII’s peace treaty with Charles V in 1530, Bologna represented the ways in which Church politics and Italian politics increasingly coalesced throughout the sixteenth century.

In 1493, the year before the foreign invasions commenced, Alberti entered the Dominican order at the age of fourteen.¹ In the Bolognese abbey of San Domenico, he received an education in theology and philosophy and was also taken in as an apprentice to an aging humanist, Giovanni Garzoni (1419-1505), who had been a colleague of Lorenzo Valla in Rome between 1455 and 1458. Garzoni trained Alberti in classical literature and in the art of history-writing, which Alberti continued to practice after his

mentor’s death in 1505. Over the next ten years, Alberti climbed up the ranks in the Order and, to celebrate its three-hundredth anniversary, he composed and had published his first formal history, a guide to illustrious Dominicans, *De viris illustribus Ordinis Praedicatorum libri sex in unum congesti* (1517).

In 1525 Alberti found himself in Rome. He had been promoted. Alberti was to accompany the Order’s General, Francesco Silvestri da Ferrara, on a tour of the Italian peninsula with the purpose of inspecting the state of Dominican convents. The three-year trip (1525-8) turned out to be formative for the future historian of Italy. In those years, Clement formed the Holy League of Cognac, imperial troops sacked Rome, and Hapsburg domination of the peninsula was all but solidified. Thus Alberti had ample opportunities to observe the anxieties, damages, and political shockwaves of a particularly devastating phase of the *calamità* in different regions of Italy. Alberti and his superior travelled first throughout the *mezzogiorno* and then the islands. By the end of 1525, they were in Palermo. Alberti was so struck by the southern and island regions of Italy that he made a return trip in the 1530s. Central and northern Italy followed and then Alberti and the Order’s General crossed into France, making it as far as Rennes, where Alberti’s superior unexpectedly died. Alberti made his way back to Rome, where he worked out of the Order General’s office for the following few years; in 1532 he was back in Bologna, in 1536 he served for two years as vicar of the convent of Santa Sabina in Rome before returning once again to Bologna.

In the late 1530s and early 1540s, Alberti was composing a municipal history of Bologna, the printing of which the communal government offered to pay in part (only sections were ever published). Although he originally began composing the histories in
Latin, he eventually translated his work into Tuscan Italian. In a sense, Alberti approached historiography as a priest, that is, he saw it as an opportunity to improve the standards of civic morality. For this reason he decided to present his work in the vernacular, which, in his own words, made the lessons of the past available to the “rough peasant, the industrious artisan..., and the strenuous soldier...the noble citizen...and the wise, prudent captain...and to all classes of women,” all of whom stood to benefit from illustrations of how to live “chastely and virtuously.”

Alberti’s last years were spent at work in the activities for which he is now best known. From the 1540s until his death, Alberti served the Holy Inquisition in Bologna as censor, inquisitorial vicar, and, finally, as the city’s highest-ranking inquisitor from 1550 until his death in 1552. During the same period he was composing his most successful work, and the one most relevant to sixteenth-century discourses on Italian history, the *Descrittione di tutta Italia* (1550).\(^3\) The noteworthy combination of those two endeavors led the historian Paolo Giovio, a contemporary of Alberti’s, to label him “a sweet cosmographer and rough Inquisitor.”\(^4\) It is worth noting, though, that there is not much of


the inquisitor in the pages of the *Descrittione*: regional Italian “heresies” are barely mentioned and Martin Luther makes no appearance at all.\(^5\)

**Italy Described**

The two best-selling historical works in sixteenth-century Italy were Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Storie fiorentine* (seventeen editions) and Francesco Guicciardini’s *Storia d’Italia* (ten editions); the next closest was Alberti’s *Descrittione di tutta Italia* (eight editions in twenty-five years, including Latin translations for transalpine publication), the success of which seems to have been rooted in its usage as a guide for tourists.\(^6\) Thus the three best-selling histories in sixteenth-century Italy were all set in a peninsular geographical frame. Machiavelli, it should be recalled, explicitly placed his narrative of Florentine history within a comprehensive Italian context (“so that this history is best understood…before I deal with Florence I will describe by what means Italy came to be under the powers that governed it in that time”\(^7\)) and he devoted the lengthy Book I of that work to a review of peninsular history beginning with the fall of ancient Rome, with barely a mention of his home city.

In the sixteenth century, then, it seems clear that there was a shift in the general scope of Italian historical writing from the local to the peninsular. We might also locate in the publishing success of those three authors a desire among peninsular readers (and

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\(^6\) These numbers, it should be noted, pale in comparison to the most successful genre of that period, poetry. Eric Cochrane, “The Profession of the Historian in the Italian Renaissance,” *Journal of Social History* 15 (1981): 51.

writers, for that matter) to understand the causes and effects of the recent crises. This is particularly true for Alberti and Guicciardini, who both wrote from a post-calamità point of view. All three writers produced different long-term narratives of Italian history and located different overarching themes. An unsettled, fluid conversation about the peninsula’s past and future continued even after Italy was clearly dominated by foreigners.

Alberti’s work, a region-by-region description of the peninsula, recalled an obvious predecessor. Ultimately, Flavio Biondo’s description of Italy had a more profound critical legacy than the Descrittione. Yet, even though the Italia illustrata was reprinted in Italian translation (by Lucio Fauno) in 1542, 1543, and 1548, when the Descrittione first appeared in 1550, and for the following century, it had more publishing success. At least during the second half of the sixteenth century, Alberti’s peninsular chorography appears to have been more popular.⁸

It makes sense that the publishing success of the Descrittione was likely due to its utilitarian qualities as a guidebook because it is not, on the surface at least, an interesting read. The Descrittione is a massive tome and Alberti’s writing is ponderous. His matter-of-fact approach provides a sense of comprehensiveness but reveals few opinions or analysis; it is an encyclopedic work, presumably meant to be consulted rather than read cover-to-cover. The work’s clunkiness has led some modern scholars, such as Eric Cochrane, to dismiss the Descrittione as “inelegant miscellany.”⁹ Yet its contemporary popularity warrants further analysis and, although its encyclopedic nature often fails to

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⁹ Cochrane, Historians and Historiography, 305.
develop sustained narrative threads, the author’s regional descriptions do culminate in a distinctive rendering of an Italian past.

Aside from its density, modern scholars including Cochrane have also highlighted Alberti’s penchant for sources that, at least to modern eyes, seem obviously fictive. Alberti does not show evidence for archival research, but he, at times painstakingly, cites long lists of historiographical sources from antiquity, the Middle Ages, Quattrocento, and his own century. However, as Cochrane notes, “Alberti went beyond even the most gullible of his contemporaries in swallowing the patriotic myths of the municipal historians; and his attempts to judge critically among conflicting stories usually ended in his choosing the most fantastic.” Alberti often cites a particularly unreliable source, a fellow Dominican, Annio di Viterbo, a “pseudo-erudite” and syncretist. Alberti adopted, for example, Annio’s bizarre and complicated origin story for Italy, similar versions of which also appeared in the fourteenth-century Florentine chronicles of the Villani. According to the story, Noah, on God’s command, founded the first post-diluvian colony: the Etruscans on the Italian peninsula. Fiction as history, though, does not characterize the work as a whole; more conspicuous are Alberti’s lengthy citations of seemingly every published source in reference to every little geographical detail.

His dense comprehensiveness and the occasional indulgence in the fantastic can lead to interpretive difficulties for the reader. But the author was well aware of the nature of his project; he knew that it provided an overwhelming and at times even contradictory

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10 Cochrance, *Historians and Historiography*, 306.


amount of information. Alberti explains that, in such a work, the onus of interpretation falls not to the historian, but to his reader. He wrote,

> often I describe some things that seem to me not only tales but lies, and this I do to demonstrate that I have noted them, so that I am not taken to be ignorant or neglectful…but judicious, gentle spirits…can notice if the things that I write should be taken on faith or not… I say that I leave the judgment to the prudent reader.\(^{13}\)

In truth, Alberti is not always as ambiguous as he presents in that passage—he often renders judgment on the veracity of one source’s interpretation over the others’ on a particular point. But Alberti is ambiguous about some of his key, recurring themes, including Italia and its past. In the opening lines of the work Alberti equates writing about Italia to “entering into a vast field,” the spacious contours of which have already been hacked out by so many predecessors.\(^{14}\) Alberti explains his task to present a litany of previous interpretations of Italia, but ultimately leaves it to the reader to develop his or her own understanding.

In this sense, Alberti represents perhaps the first historian to infer the dialogical underpinnings of Italia and its past. For instance, Alberti dwelled on the etymological origins of “Italia” much more and much more explicitly than any of his predecessors. His analysis emphasizes various interpretations and possible origins for the word. In the introduction of the *Descrittione*, before the description of the first region (Liguria), Alberti ponders the word “Italia.” He includes what seems to be a near exhaustive compilation of other historians’ accounts of the term’s development, initially listing

\(^{13}\) Alberti, *Descrittione*, 372r: …sovente io descrivo alcune cose, che paiono a me non solamente favole, anzi bugie, et ciò faccio per dimostrare haverle vedute, acciò che non sia ripreso o d’ignoranza, o di negligenza…gli spiriti gentili, et giudiziosi…possono avvertire s’io li presto fede, o no, quando dico ch’io le lascio nel giudizio del prudente lettore.

\(^{14}\) Alberti, *Descrittione*, 1r: Così io con valoroso cuore m’apparecchio d’entrare in questo spazioso campo di scrivere dell’Italia.
multiple possible derivations for Enotria, then Vitalia, then Ausonia, before agreeing with Virgil that King Italus probably inspired the name “Italia.”¹⁵

What most separates Alberti’s work on Italian history from his predecessors is its encyclopedic structure. The choice of genre comes at the expense of any sustained interpretations, themes, and narrative flow. Yet that format also carries with it the usefulness of a well-researched review: it is difficult to locate any major Italian historian—ancient, medieval, or contemporary—that Alberti does not cite.¹⁶ Vettori is absent, but every other Florentine historian mentioned in this dissertation, including Rucellai, appear, as does the Milanese Corio, and Alberti may have read Girolamo Borgia’s Historiae (although he does not reference Borgia explicitly, in contrast to the other historians listed above, whom Alberti cites with great frequency).¹⁷ But no predecessor—classical or contemporary—influenced Alberti’s work more than Flavio Biondo.

The following sections examine the ways Alberti’s Descrittione engages Biondo’s Italia illustrata and Guicciardini’s Storia d’Italia (for which the Descrittione was an important source) in a conversation about the nature of peninsular history. Alberti reformulated some of Biondo’s key themes in ways that took into account the devastations of the intervening decades. Taken together, Biondo’s Italia illustrata and Alberti’s Descrittione represent chronological bookends, the first capturing the views of

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¹⁵ Alberti, Descrittione, 1r-3v.

¹⁶ Some of the frequently-cited writers, but by no means all, and excluding the more regional-specific sources, include: Strabo, Livy, Polibius, Cato the Elder, Procopius, Paul the Deacon, Ptolomy, Dionysus of Halicarnasus, Virgil, Pliny, Dionysus of Africa, Petrarch, Dante, Sabellico, Rucellai, Corio, Machiavelli, Platina, Bruni, and Biondo.

¹⁷ The leading scholar on Borgia hints at this possibility because of some similarities between the two writers’ renderings of Pope Julius II, see Elena Valeri, “La libertà d’Italia nelle Historiae di Girolamo Borgia” in L’Italia dell’Inquisitore, 224.
Italian history before the calamità and the other doing the same just as the reality of the peninsula’s subjugation had set it. Both Alberti and Guicciardini wrote about peninsular history from a post-calamità perspective. Yet they provided their extensive sixteenth-century readerships with ultimately divergent interpretations on the meaning of the calamità. Like Guicciardini, Alberti lamented the passing of a golden age on the peninsula. Unlike Guicciardini, Alberti saw reasons to hope, including, above all, the potential for the papacy to yet redeem Italy, even if in a spiritual, rather than in a military or political sense. Through an intertextual dialogue with Biondo and Guicciardini, among others, Alberti helped perpetuate what was, by the 1540s, an almost century-old Renaissance conversation about Italian history.

**Biondo in the Descrittione**

Biondo dominates the pages of the Descrittione. Alberti cites his sources rigorously and carefully and none appears more frequently than Biondo, whose name seems to turn up on every page. Alberti does not simply praise his obvious model; his lengthiest comment on Biondo comes in the section on Biondo’s home city of Forlì and it is descriptive and pragmatic rather than critical or interpretive:

But above everyone else, Flavio Biondo—a man of rare and curious genius, an investigator of antiquity, and writer of histories—enhanced the reputation of that city. He wrote many works, including Italia illustrata, which he did not finish [a reference to the absence of a section on the islands]. Roma instaurata, and triumpahs, works about the Venetians, a history from the beginning of the fall of the Roman empire down to his own time, and many other works. Certainly all sorts of curious ingenuities are indebted to this man, for his efforts to demonstrate and maintain ancient and modern things.18

18 Alberti, Descrittione, 313v: Ma sopra tutti ha dato grand’ornamento a quella città Flavio Biondo huomo di raro,et curioso ingegno, et investigatore dell’antichitati, et scrittor dell’historie. Scrisse molte opere, tra le quali fu Italia illustrata, avvenga che non la finisse; Roma instaurata, et trionfante, l’opere de i Venetiani,
The overall effect of Biondo’s presence in the work is the development of what Carlo Dionisotti has called a “discursive collaboration.” Alberti criticizes, corrects, and depends upon Biondo’s Italia illustrata (which Alberti simply refers to as the “Italia”) and Historiarum ab inclinatione Romanorum imperii decades III (the “Historie”). Biondo functions in Alberti’s text as a sort of sounding board, that is, as a means of making clear which of Alberti’s assertions are original or new or a revision of previous assumptions. The Dominican frequently points out what he perceives as Biondo’s errors and corrects them with unhesitating confidence, if not always convincing evidence. Almost without exception, though, Alberti engages Biondo on specific historical or geographical details, not, that is, on any of his predecessor’s broad historical interpretations.

Alberti most directly contributed to the continuation of the Renaissance conversation on the nature and meaning of Italian history through his engagement of Biondo in the pages of the Descrittione. At times in the work that engagement takes on an explicitly dialogical tone. Alberti mostly cites Biondo in support of a claim. But in some, more nuanced cases, for example, when Alberti is unsure about Biondo’s reading of an ancient source, his explanation of a city’s name, or whether or not a certain place was sacked by a certain barbarian warlord, Alberti resorts to conversational rhetoric:

l’histo. dal principio dell’inclinazione del Rom. Imperio insino a i suoi giorni, con molte altre opere. Certamente sono obligati a quest’huomo tutti i curiosi ingegni, per le fatiche da lui sostenute in dimostrar l’antiche, et moderne cose.


20 On the manner of Alberti’s correcting of Biondo, see Cochrane, Historians and Historiography, 306; Petrella, L’officina del geografo, 25 and Riccardo Fubini, “Note su Leandro Alberti e l’Italia illustrata di Biondo Flavio” in L’Italia dell’Inquisitore, 142.
“Thus I would respond to Biondo…; I think one could respond to Biondo that…; thus I would respond together with Biondo that…”

Alberti’s participation in and perpetuation of the Renaissance dialogue on Italian history, however, extends well beyond his querying Biondo on geographical and historical specifics. Italia and its past emerge differently in Alberti’s work than in Biondo’s. The similarities and differences in their interpretations signal the persistence of an intertextual exchange on those subjects. Although massively indebted to his fifteenth-century predecessor, Alberti reformulated both the form and content of Biondo’s Italia. Their approaches, although both chorographical, were distinct from one another. So, too, was their sense of Italia in time. The seventy years that separated their projects included forty years of catastrophe for the peninsula—a fact that permeates Alberti’s rendering of the peninsula. Thus, the Descrizione represents not only a formulation of Italian history from a clerical perspective, but also the dialogical underpinnings of the development of ideas of Italian history and the effect of the calamità on those ideas.

**Questa nostra Italia**

Alberti’s Italia had the same basic geographical contours as Biondo’s, but for one significant difference. Alberti recognized that previous attempts to describe the internal divisions of Italy were wildly inconsistent. Strabo had divided the peninsula into eight regions, Ptolemy into forty-four tribes; Pliny, following Augustus’ administrative

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21 On the ancient origins of Genoa, for example, Alberti, *Descrizione*, 14r-v: Io credo che talmente si potrebbe rispondere a Biondo, cioè, che la sua ragione non conchiude. And, on the same page: Così io risponderei a Biondo, quanto a quel che dice di Floro. Later, on the question of the role of a town in Campania during the Second Punic War, LA writes “I’d respond with Biondo, Alberti, *Descrizione*,164r: così risponderei insieme con Biondo.

22 Alberti, *Descrizione*, 7r. Strabone dimostra otto regioni, cioè Venetia, Liguria, Piceno, Lucania, Tucia,
divisions, recognized eleven regions, and, much later, Biondo synthesized and clarified those previous iterations, reducing Italia into eighteen regions. Alberti explains at the outset of his work that he will adhere to Biondo’s divisions, but will also add one—the islands. In this sense, Alberti’s Italia was more complete than Biondo’s, who, it should be remembered, considered Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica part of Italy and meant to include them in his project, but, in the end, never did.

The islands had long been mentioned as belonging to the peninsula, but as far as their explicit inclusion in a regional, detailed description of the peninsula—and, as far as the well-read Alberti was concerned—his nineteen regions were something new. Alberti’s Italia was also more complete than Biondo’s in regards to the southern regions, which Biondo did include, but not with the same background of personal experience, geographical detail, or historical depth as the central and northern areas. Unlike Biondo, Alberti had spent significant time travelling in southern Italy (in 1525 and again in the

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25 Ibid., 7v: Descrittele divisioni fatte di questa nostra Italia da gli antedetti scrittori, a me pare di seguirli in parte e in parte no. Là onde io, per più commoda divisione, la partirò in dicenove Regioni, aggiungendovi altresì l’Isole di Sicilia, di Corsica, di Sardegna, con molte altre Isole appartenenti ad esse, come è stato dimostrato da molti scrittori.

1530s) and the islands and had procured descriptive manuscripts from local humanists and clerics.27

Alberti envisioned his work as having a similar organizational structure to Biondo’s Italia illustrata. Biondo takes his reader on a region-by-region tour of the peninsula, noting geographical boundaries and peculiarities and regional luminaries and reconciling ancient place names with their modern ones. Alberti’s work has similar aims, but progresses through the regions in a different sequence. Alberti’s reader effectively circumnavigates the peninsula, with excursions inland, beginning in the northwest, near Genoa and ending in the northwest, near Venice. The islands appear in a separate section at the end.

After summarizing the structure of Biondo’s work, Alberti informs his reader that he intends

To describe all nineteen regions including the above-mentioned islands, assigning them terms—their ancient names and modern ones—not only of the regions but also of cities, castles, mountains, rivers, lakes, and fountains...similarly I will seek to tire myself out remembering the illustrious works done by men of each place, making note of their names and their virtues that have glorified their patrie. And, briefly, I promise to record, as much as will be possible for me, the most notable things worthy of remembering in this, our Italia [questa nostra Italia].28

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28 Alberti, Descrittione, 7v: Havendo adunque pigliata tanta fatica, sforzarommi di scriver tutte dette dicianove Regioni con l’Isole sopradette, assignandole i suoi termini, dichiarando i nomi antichi, et moderni, non solamente di quelle, ma ancor delle Città, Castelli, Monti, Fiumi, Laghi, et Fontane, narrandovi le cose maravigliose dalla Natura prodotte, similmente m’affaticerò di rimembrare l’opere illustri fatte da gli huomini de’ detti luoghi, facendo memoria ancor de i loro nomi, e delle sue virtù, con le quali hanno dato splendore alle lor patrie. Et brieve prometto di racordare (quanto però sarà a me possibile) le cose notabili, et degne di memoria di questa nostra Italia.
"Questa nostra Italia" is a recurring phrase in the Descrittione and it indicates Alberti’s sense of a common Italy, united by, according to both him and Biondo, a shared physical landscape, bustling urban centers, and a past populated by heroes and memorable accomplishments. Biondo and Alberti, perhaps more than any other Renaissance historians, were attuned to the regional differences that colored the peninsula and yet also assumed that its underlying unity based on a common past.

Yet, in the end, what Biondo and Alberti each regarded as "questa nostra Italia" was different. Written in the second half of the fifteenth century, Biondo’s Italia illustrata reflected the confidence of an era, it was, in the words of Carlo Dionisotti, “the document of a culture that was made fully aware of itself…of its historical diversity and unity together.” For Biondo the historical tissue that unified Italians was, primarily, the cultural inheritance of ancient Rome, which he could confidently state, was, in his own time, once again flourishing throughout the peninsula because of the widespread recovery of ancient texts and the spread of humanist learning.

Writing in the mid-sixteenth century, in the wake of four decades of devastation and in the context of foreign subjugation, Alberti could not credibly put forth the kind of preeminent Italy that Biondo had earlier celebrated. Rather, Alberti’s Italy reflects a new period of Italian history, after the calamità. Alberti has none of the fight of a Machiavelli or even of a Girolamo Borgia. In Alberti’s work, subjugation is an accepted reality, and,

29 The full passage reads in Dionisotti, Geografia e storia delle letteratura italiana, 153: Ma certo la conquista di Biondo è anzitutto italiana. È l’Italia illustrata, è il documento di una cultura che si è fatta consapevole pienamente e interprete della diversità e dell’unità insieme storica dell’Italia, una cultura cioè che ha ormai tradotto in collaborazione discorsiva il solitario profetico e polemico appello nazionale di Dante e del Petrarca.

30 See Chapter Three.
in that respect, recalled Francesco Vettori’s dour Sommario (1528). The Descrittione created historical distance between the mid-sixteenth century and the crises that effectively ended two decades earlier in a way that Guicciardini’s and Borgia’s histories did not because their historical narratives were wholly contained within the chronology of the calamità.

In contrast, Alberti only delves into the crises in isolated examples and within a much broader chronological scope. Alberti’s Italia is also aware of its “historical diversity and unity together;” in his work, Italy is held together by its geography and by its regions. Alberti’s narrative is constructed around—literally—the regional geography of the peninsula rather than any overarching chronological progression. Thus, ideas about Italy’s common past mostly reach the reader in small instances or through inference. Yet an awareness of an Italy changed by catastrophe lurks in the pages of the Descrittione.

**Remembering Italy, Again**

Like Biondo before him, Alberti was dismayed by the fact that the ancient names of places on the Italian peninsula had been forgotten or lost. Biondo had equated the loss of that knowledge with “so vast a shipwreck” and his work with hauling “ashore some planks…, planks which were floating on the surface of the water or nearly lost to view.”

Biondo roughly pinpointed the time in Italy’s past that that ship had wrecked: after the fall of the Roman empire and the subsequent inundation of barbarians—and barbarian

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31 See Chapter Five.

The result of that argument, over the course of the *Italia illustrata*, was a subsequently influential tripartite narrative: ancient Rome’s flourishing culture came to an end with the barbarian invasions and only returned in Biondo’s fifteenth century with the advent of humanism, thus reducing the intervening centuries to a regrettable “middle age.”

But Alberti saw many shipwrecks in Italian history and not just in a *media aetas*. Invasion and ruin of the sort that could threaten historical memory were not limited to the centuries following Rome’s collapse, but rather characterized peninsular history on the whole. Even though Biondo had recently undertaken the same basic project, Alberti had no doubt that it was worth the “great effort” to try to reconstruct the ancient nomenclature for the cities and geographical features of the peninsula because so

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33 Biondo, *Italia illustrata*, preface, 2-5: And because the barbarians confounded everything and because no one, meanwhile, sought to transmit to posterity via the literary record what was being done, we as a result are in great part ignorant of the very location of the regions of Italy, of the cities, towns, lakes and mountains, whose names appear so frequently in the ancient authors, to say nothing of the historical events of the millennium that has elapsed; and what causes me the greater astonishment, the dates of the establishment of many towns and mighty cities, which we perceive to have grown in the interim to great consequence, are hidden from us, as are the names of their founders. / etsi bonarum atrium studia intermissa fuerunt, sola in primis omnio cessavsit extinctaque est historia. Quo factum est ut, barbaris omnia evertentibus et nullo interim ea quae gerebantur litterarum monumentis ad posteros transmittente, nedum mille qui effluxerunt annorum gesta sciamus, sed Italiae regions, urbes, oppida, lacus, flumina, montesque, quorum nomina a vestustis frequentantur scripotoribus, ubi sint magna ex parte ignoramus, et, quod maiorem nobis affert admirationem, multorum oppidorum et potentissimarum civitatum, quas interea in magnum amplitudinem crevisses cernimus, conditarum temporas nos lateant et ipsi etiam conditores. Also see Chapter Three.

34 Even if Alberti did not use the same shipwreck analogy. Alberti, it is worth noting, was not that kind of writer. One of the few metaphors in the text is clunky and awkward. It comes in the opening paragraph, in which Alberti compares his entering into such a challenging project to some one who, with great enthusiasm, wades into a lake “the water of which he at first judged to be not that deep,” only to find out that it is in fact deep and difficult to wade through, but, though dismayed, he “ploughs through” hoping that the hardest part has already passed. Alberti, *Descrittione*, 1r: Di che i gloriosi gesti et nelle lettere, et nelle armi de gli antichi Romani rendono amplissima testimonianza per sì fatta maniera, che a me non altramente veggio avvenire, che a colui avvenga, il quale con grande animo entrato in un largo, et cupo pelago d’aque (il quale da prima ha stimato non molto profondo) pienamente caminando piu alto di continovo lo ritrova, talmente che alla fine sbigottito seco stesso è in dubio se debba più avanti passare, et di nuovo solcare il Mare, con tanto travaglio già sicuramente passato.
much of it had been lost due as much to “such massive destructions as to the loss of so many valuable books” over the centuries.35

Unlike Biondo, Alberti did not single out a certain historical period that was particularly damaging to the peninsula’s collective memory: “in truth, great has been the unhappiness and devastations that in different times have struck this, our miserable Italia [questa nostra misera Italia], beginning in the times of Arcadio and Onorio [i.e., the fall of the Roman empire]…down to the present.36 Moreover there had been changes on the peninsula from Biondo’s time to Alberti’s, including the construction of new castles and cities in the Romagna by the popes and, of course, the decades of invasion, which Alberti refers to as “la gran rovina d’Italia.”37 In the Descrittione, rovine often seem to define Italia, especially in light of the destruction wrought on the peninsula between Biondo’s time and the 1540s. In Alberti’s words, “so great has been [Italy’s unhappiness], that I believe there have been few destructions in the world to equal it.”38 For Biondo it was Italy’s cultural preeminence that distinguished it from the rest of Europe, but for Alberti, the peninsula stood out by dint of its persistent misery.

35 Alberti, Descrittione, 7v: che fia grandissima fatica, non dico, solamente di ritrovare gli antichi nomi de i luoghi, ma essi luoghi, ove fossero edificate le Città, et Castelli, et ove sia questo, e quel fumme, et monte, et altri simili luoghi, tanto per le grandissime rovine fatte, quanto per la perduta di molti dignissimi libri.

36 Alberti, Descrittione, 8r: In vero grande è stata la infelicità, et danno, che in diversi tempi ha patito questa nostra misera Italia, cominciando da i tempi d’Arcadio, et Onorio sopradetti (com’è narrato) insin al presente.

37 Ibid., 8r: Nondimeno da i tempi di Biondo in qua sono alcune Castella state fatte Città, da i Pontefici Romani consignando a ciascuna il suo Vescovo; si come Casale di S. Evasio, Saluzzo, Pientia, Borgo S. Sepolcro, Vigieveno, et altri luoghi, come alle sue parti si dimostrerà. Maggioremente ancor quindi conoscere si può la gran rovina d’Italia, che hora se si annoverassero etiandio i nobili Castelli fra le Città, non arrivarebbono all’antico numero di quelle.

38 Ibid., 8r: E tanto grande ella è stata, che credo che siano state poche rovine al Mondo d’agguagliare ad essa.
Thus, even though Alberti does not carry through many narrative threads in the *Descrittione*, he does offer a broad version of Italian history that differed from Biondo’s. Where the author of *Italia illustrata* saw the peninsula’s past as having unfolded in three distinct phases, including one particularly devastating one, the author of the *Descrittione* imagined Italian history, and in that sense, Italia itself, as defined by recurring ruin. Alberti felt it valuable that he undergo the same project as Biondo had done not a century earlier because in the interim there had been more invasions, more ruin, more misery. After such a tempest of changes, the inhabitants on the peninsula might forget their ancient origins, once again.

**Italia, Wonderful and Miserable**

Thus Biondo, writing in the middle of the 1400s, and Alberti, writing in the middle of the 1500s, represent bookends for the Renaissance dialogue on Italian history. Their works testify to the long term influence of the *calamità* on the ways in which Italian writers conceived of the peninsula’s past. Biondo had thought himself a member of a cutting-edge movement that was committed to collecting and reviving ancient culture. He had seen evidence of that movement’s success all around him, which imbued his work with a confidence in Italy’s future. For Biondo, a reaffirmed continuity with the Roman past provided the politically fragmented peninsula with a common cultural heritage and identity distinct and superior to the rest of the continent.

Written after the Fall (so to speak), Alberti’s *Descrittione* marked a new phase in Italian historians’ conceptions of a peninsular past. During the *calamità* the different views on Italian history reflected in the works and conversations of writers such as
Machiavelli and Vettori indicated an unresolved tension about the status of Italia, that is, whether or not it was still, despite the invasions, a preeminent cultural and political force as it had been in Biondo’s time. In Alberti’s work there is no such tension. Biondo had felt himself, in the words of one recent Italian scholar, “part of an avant-garde movement,” but in the Descrittione that feeling “was replaced by a resigned conviction that that age had already concluded.”39 Once again, though, evidence of Alberti’s convictions about Italy’s recent past are tucked away in indirect references rather than overt narratological constructions.

Perhaps the most striking instance in which Alberti suggests that Italy had entered a fundamentally new and miserable phase of its history comes in the introduction, after an extended celebration of the peninsula. With explicit reference to the Greek historians, Strabo, Dionysus of Halicarnasus and Polybius,40 Alberti laboriously recalls and reaffirms the qualities that distinguish Italy as a special territory, not just its seemingly protective geography,41 but also the “very temperate air… good foods…a nice variety of animals, trees, and other similar things that mortals use not only out of necessity, but also for pleasure.”42 Just getting started, Alberti goes on to praise Italy’s water—the rivers,
lakes, “delightful fountains,” cold water for refreshment, and warm water with various salubrious benefits.  

Alberti continues, tiresomely perhaps: “what can I say about the diversity of mineral mines? And of suitable foods? And of other things?” Reaching for comprehensiveness, Alberti concludes by mentioning the abundance of fish, fine stones, quality marble, precious gems, and premium hunting grounds.

With so many natural resources, concludes Alberti (in accordance with Polybius), it should not surprise that peninsular peoples once “ruled and commanded” the world. But as much as Italy’s abundance might have helped to explain its ancient dominance over other peoples, it also elucidated why, in other historical periods, transalpine peoples dominated the peninsula. Attracted by the wealth of the peninsula, foreigners came “to live…[and others] to rob it and sack it…after having destroyed it, they return to their countries, just like, in our own time, did, among others, the French.”

Even while...
praising Italy, the devastations of the previous decades reverberate in Alberti’s prose.

Alberti recognized that the peninsula’s natural features alone did not wholly determine Italy’s history of dominance over transalpine others and subjugation by the same. The inhabitants of the peninsula—their genius and strength (ingegno e forze)—also helps to explain the former successes and more recent failures. In Alberti’s words,

it is not surprising, if with their genius and strength, that the men of that time subjugated almost all of the world and, with their doctrine, they have illuminated…other nations. Nor nowadays would they lacking that genius and strength if they were not also lacking charity. But wickedness invades, and a wild appetite to rule, which dominates these men, has brought Italy to such unhappiness: from being king and queen, Italy has become worse than a slave; something I cannot remember without great mourning.  

In other words, not all the qualities that had elevated the residents of the peninsula to such lofty heights in its distant past were eternal. Although the desire to rule over men had earlier made possible foreign conquests, in Alberti’s own time that same desire, directed internally over other Italians, had crippled the peninsula, making it ripe for foreign invasion.

Alberti begins the final section of his introduction with the intention of praising the peninsula, “which could never be celebrated enough,” but he concludes the section

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48 Alberti, Descrittione, 6v: Tal che non è maraviglia se con il suo ingegno, et forze hanno gli huomini in essa nati, soggiugato quasi tutto ’l Mondo, et con lor dottrina, hanno illuminato, et non meno hora l’alte natione illuminano. Né mancherebbe oggidì a quelli ingegno, et forze, se non li mancasse la carità. Ma la malvagia invidia, et sfrenato appetito di signoreggia, che in essi regna, ha condotto quella a tanta infelicità, che di Signora, et Reina, ella è divenuta peggio che serva; cosa che non posso senza gran cordoglio rimembrare.

by distancing the miserable mid-Cinquecento peninsula from the glorious one evoked by the classical Greek historians. He underscores that distinction with subtle shifts in the terms he uses to modify “Italia.” While reviewing the Greek historians’ litany of praise, Alberti recalls Italy as a nobilissima Provincia,\(^{51}\) the tanto trionfante Provincia,\(^{52}\) and questa felicissima Provincia.\(^{53}\) By the end of the passage, however, once Alberti places the Greek praises in the context of recent events, he casts Italy in different terms, now defined by tanta infelicità and in a state that is “worse than a slave.”\(^{54}\)

Another instance in which Alberti assumes that peninsular history since the invasions and political crises of the early sixteenth century had entered a fundamentally new phase appears later in the *Descrittione*, in the author’s treatment of the concept of libertas Italiae, or, in his words, “Italica libertà.” Like Biondo, Alberti celebrated dynamic leaders whom he saw as Italian heroes, stemming or expelling barbarian forces from the peninsula.

Biondo’s hero, Albericio da Barbiano, appears in Alberti’s text as an amatore della libertà Italia\(^{55}\) and a liberatore d’Italia.\(^{56}\) Alberti adds a list of “excellent captains

\(^{50}\) Alberti, *Descrittione*, 5v: non potrebbe essere a pieno celebrata.

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 6r. A note on Alberti’s use of *provincia*: by the Middle Ages that term no longer referred to conquered areas, as it had for the ancient Romans. Instead writers used it to indicate simply a “generic territorial entity,” see comments on *provincia* with reference to Alberti in Riccardo Fubini, “Note su Leandro Alberti e l’*Italia illustrata* di Biondo Flavio” in *L’Italia dell’Inquisitore*, 138-9.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 6r.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 5v.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 6v: ella [Italia] è divenuta peggio che serva.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 81v.

\(^{56}\) Alberti, *Descrittione*, 319r: Fu adunque il Conte Alberigo liberatore d’Italia da i Barbari, et la pose non solamente in libertà, ma etiandio in gran pretio appresso tutti i popoli di Europa. Et così si conservò in tal riputatione insin che vissero quei gloriosi capitani, nodriti sotto la sua disciplina.
[who] with Italian soldiers…terrorized and drove away the barbari."\(^{57}\) Like many of his predecessors, Alberti uses contrasts with barbarians to define Italia, at least in part. He also celebrates a supposed golden age, during the mid-fifteenth century, of Italian martial prowess, when “the military science in Italy reached great heights, so that it appeared to the barbari impossible to wage war if they did not have any Italians in their outfit.”\(^{58}\)

Alberti also recalls a more recent warrior, one of Girolamo Borgia’s heroes, Pope Julius II, who, in Alberti’s words, was, like his namesake Julius Caesar, responsible for “great deeds, which fill up many recent books…in truth, he was a great defender of not just ecclesiastical liberty, but also Italian liberty.”\(^{59}\)

But all of that Italian military glory against the barbari—the heroic liberatori and the preeminent military science—were, from Alberti’s perspective, part of a completed phase of an Italian historical narrative, confined to the past. The conclusion of the calamità and the almost complete subjugation of the Italian states had, in Alberti’s mind, created a break in Italian history. The defining struggle of Italians against barbarian invaders had already concluded. “It is true,” wrote Alberti,

that those true lovers of Italica libertà are, once again, in our own time, absent (replaced by the princes of Italy and their avarice, pride, ambition, and jealousy). It is not without great mourning that I write. This, our unhappy Italy, has been hit by furious sackings and cruel murders…for fifty years [when] it experienced the rage, cruelty, and bloody knife of the

\(^{57}\) Ibid., 319r: I quali poi furono tutti eccellenti capitani di militia, et in cotal guisa con questi prodi huomini, et co i soldati Italiani di sopra nominati, li cominciò a perseguire (che erano da 40000. soldati) che al fine gli scacciò fuori d’Italia, et diede tanto terrore a gli altri Barbari.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 319r: divenne a tanto pretio la scienza militare nella Italia, che parea a i Barbari non poter guerreggiare, se non haveano gli Italiani in loro compagnia.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 12v: …meritevolmente fu nominato Giulio 2. per le grand’opere che fece, delle quali ne sono pieni i libri scritti de nostri tempi. In vero egli fu grande osservatore della libertà Ecclesiastica, et non meno dell’Italia.
French, Spanish…and other generations of barbarians…And thus, Italy remains defeated…it can no longer defend itself.\(^{60}\)

In this way, Alberti, along with Guicciardini, helped to rewrite the broad narrative of Italian history that had prevailed among previous generations of peninsular historians. In the mid-fifteenth century, Biondo had expanded and elaborated Petrarch’s vision of a tripartite narrative of Italian history according to which the third, contemporary phase promised an Italy with a revived culture and military strength, certain of a bright future. Once the hard realities of the *calamità* had set in, around the early sixteenth century, historians such as Machiavelli and Vettori began to question the validity of such a confident and triumphalist narrative.

By the mid-sixteenth century, however, that basic narrative of Italian history changed. Alberti’s (1550) and Guicciardini’s (1561) histories appeared within eleven years of each other, although Guicciardini’s work was completed in 1540, when the author died, and Alberti’s in the year of its publication. Both writers, in other words, composed their history from a post-*calamità* perspective. Their works, the two best-selling Italian histories of the period, assume an Italian fall from grandeur. Both acknowledge a fifteenth-century Italian golden age typified by Lorenzo de’ Medici’s balance-of-power diplomacy. Alberti comments that Lorenzo “appeared to govern not

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60 Alberti, *Descrittione*, 319r-v: Vero è, che mancati quei veri amatori della Italica libertà (essendo entrato fra i Prencipi d’Italia l’avarizia, superbia, ambitione, et invidia) un’altra volta ne’ nostri giorni. (che non senza gran cordoglio scrivo) ha sentito questa nostra infelice Italia i furiosi impeti, saccheggiamenti, et crudeli uccisioni de i Barbari in tal maniera, che non è rimaso cantone alcuno di essa (da 50. anni in qua) che non habbia isperimentato la rabbia la crudeltà, et il sanguinolente coltello de i Francesi, Spagnuoli, Svizzeri, Guascioni, Allamani, Albanesi, Corsi, et d’altrre generationi Barbare, come chiaramente si può vedere nelle mie Efemeridi Latine. Et talmente è rimasa la Italia disfatta, che non solamente non può mandare soccorso ad altri, ma anche da se istessa non si può difendere.
only Florence, but all Italy.”61 But, unlike Machiavelli, they viewed the peninsula’s fourteenth-century preeminence as a completed phase of Italian history. Alberti, like Guicciardini, saw Charles VIII’s 1494 invasion as the start of the new, woeful period of peninsular history that continued down to his present. Alberti wrote that “soon after [Lorenzo’s death] the king of France, Charles VIII, came into Italy, and ever since then Italy has been afflicted and tormented.”62

Alberti and Guicciardini

Alberti and Guicciardini represent the continuation of a Renaissance dialogue on Italian history, but not through a direct connection. Alberti was certainly aware of at least some of Guicciardini’s historical works,63 but he never cites them in any kind of substantive way and, although the Florentine had died in 1540, his Storia d’Italia was not published until 1561, eleven years after the first printing of the Descrittione. However, those historical works, the two best-selling histories of Italy in the sixteenth century, provided their readers with similar, yet ultimately differently construed interpretations of the meaning of the previous decades of crisis and of Italy’s predicament in the aftermath. Both writers celebrated the peninsula’s political stability of the fifteenth century and both writers lamented the widespread misery and political subjugation of the early sixteenth.

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61 On Lorenzo, Alberti, Descrittione, 48r: Et non solamente parea che governasse Fiorenza ma l’Italia. Conciosa che ogn’uno concorreva ad esso per consiglio, si come all’oracolo d’Appoline. Mancò tanto huomo nell’anno di Dio apparuto al mondo di nostra carne vestito 1492 con il quale parve mancar la pace, non solamente di Fiorenza, ma di tutta Italia.


And yet, each presented a different kind of historical narrative. Guicciardini’s history is, from start to finish, a tragedy, recalling Italy’s “ceaseless fall not only from its ancient grandeur, but also, from a sudden and tragic turn of events, from the flourishing of the already very remote Quattrocento.” Alberti, as much as he, too, mourned the peninsula’s fall from grace, presented what is, in the end, a relatively hopeful rendering of Italy’s past, present, and future. There are various reasons for Alberti’s relative optimism, the most significant of which is his Dominican perspective.

One reason for Alberti’s optimism is structural—unlike Guicciardini, Alberti never really set out to construct an explicit narrative. Alberti’s history progresses through space, not time, at least not in chronological sequence. His goal was an encyclopedic comprehensiveness regarding Italy’s diverse regions and his broad historical narrative of the calamità comes in the form of scattered references, not a traditional story-arc. While many of those scattered observations about the previous decades dwelled on a defeated Italia misera, many others reveal the author’s relatively positive sense of the direction in which Italy was headed, in various senses. Guicciardini explains in the first lines of the Storia his “decision to write about the things that happened in our memory in Italy since the coming of the French armies…that began, with great upheaval, to wreck it.”

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64 Prosperi, “L’Italia di un Inquisitore,” 8: …che raccontava la tragedia di un’Italia diventata campo di battaglia delle potenze europee e decaduta senza rimedio non solo dalla grandezza antica ma anche, con improvvisa e tragica svolta, dalla floridezza dell’ormai remotissimo Quattrocento.

Guicciardini’s subject was “full of the most atrocious accidents; Italy, having suffered for so many years, all those calamità…”

Alberti’s opening passage strikes a much different chord. His first lines address the dedicatees, the French monarchs, King Henry II and Catherine de’ Medici: “Most Christian Sire, Most Holy Madam, behold: Italia.” According to the author, he was moved to write of that subject “by no other reason than a pure, sincere, devotion of the heart.” Rather than “atrocious accidents,” Alberti informed the monarchs that his subject, Italia, was comprised in the first place by “many memories of honored people.”

The very fact that the Dominican addressed the work to the French rulers, and not to the Hapsburgs who effectively ruled over Italy, has itself been taken as a sign of hopefulness by at least one recent Italian scholar.

Alberti revealed a relatively positive outlook on the peninsula’s state of affairs in other ways. Alberti, it should be noted, lived longer than did Guicciardini and observed some Italian states progress further down the road to economic recovery. Moreover, as one Italian scholar recently suggested, the novelty of Alberti’s Descrittione, that is, the inclusion of the islands, itself promotes a relatively optimistic perspective about Italy’s

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66 Guicciardini, Storia d’Italia, 87: materia, per la varietà e grandezza loro, molto memorabile e piena di atrocissimi accidenti; avendo patito tanti anni Italia tutte quelle calamità…

67 See multiple available versions (but not the 2003 reproduction) for the dedicatory letter, including 1596 (Venice), ii: Eccovi Christianissimo Sire, et Madama Sacratissima, ITALIA…

68 Ibid., ii: non d’altro ornata, che d’una pura, et sincera divotion di cuore.

69 Ibid., ii: Vedrete in quella [Italia] molte honorate memorie della gente.


71 Genoa in particular, Alberti, Descrittione, 15r: Ora lietamente passano i Genovesi i suoi giorni, intertenendosi con le mercatantie, et traffichi, da i quali da ogni parte del mondo ne riportano gran guadagno.
recent past and its future. Italy may have been weaker than ever militarily and politically, but Alberti’s inclusion of the islands within a holistic vision of Italy suggested that Italian culture and language, at least, was expanding.\(^72\) In that sense, the fact that Alberti, a native of Bologna, chose to compose his work in Tuscan rather than Latin or a local Bolognese dialect also implies a set of assumptions on the part of the author about a continually developing and distinctive Tuscan-based Italian intellectual culture.

Perhaps the most significant reason why Alberti’s history was ultimately more hopeful about Italy’s future was that Alberti, unlike Guicciardini, still looked to the Church as an institution with the power to yet redeem Italy. Alberti was part of a broad refocusing of Italian historiography into the hands of Church-affiliated intellectuals that had begun with Girolamo Borgia’s *Historiae* and, closer to time Alberti wrote, included Pietro Bembo (1470-1547), a cardinal and author of a history of Venice during the crises (as well as the most influential advocate of the adaptation of Tuscan as an Italian language) and Paolo Giovio (1483-1552), a bishop and author of a contemporary history, the *Historiarum sui temporis libri XLV*.\(^73\) Alberti was particularly concerned to list each region’s illustrious Church figures and events—particularly influential popes, cardinals, and councils.

Alberti viewed the recent past through religious lenses. In the minds of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, any Italian redemption would have required the peninsular states’ springing loose from the shackles of foreign rule. But for Alberti the peninsula’s decline during the *calamità* was as much religious as it was political. It is worth repeating


\(^73\) Ibid., 8.
his description, in the introduction, of Italy’s recent descent into misery. Italy’s past strength as well as its recent decline seems, in Alberti’s mind, to depend primarily on the overall state of religious conviction among the peninsula’s inhabitants:

it is not surprising, if with their genius and strength, that the men of this nation have subjugated almost all of the world and, with their doctrine, they illuminated…other nations. Nor nowadays would they be lacking that genius and strength if they were not also lacking charity. But wickedness invades, and a wild appetite to rule, which dominates these men, has brought Italy to such unhappiness....

The preceding decades had bore witness not only to the breaking apart of Italy’s political unity, but also, with the advent of Protestantism, the unity of Christendom as well. Italians had in the past and, now, in the context of the fracturing of the Christian world, a special role in “illuminating other nations.”

At least by the 1540s (and perhaps before), Alberti understood the peninsula’s religious and political well-being as the responsibility of the Holy See. And, in the figure of Pope Paul III, he found reason to hope for Italy’s future. The optimism Alberti derived from Paul III’s pontificate (1534-1549) recalled Girolamo Borgia’s praise of that pope in his Historiae. Paul III died just before the first publication of the Descrittione, but throughout the work Alberti refers to him as the “present pope” [papa moderno]. Borgia had hoped that that pope would shake off the weight of foreign rule and return Italy to a state of “peace, glory, majesty, and pristine liberty.”

74 Alberti, Descrittione, 6v: Concludendo adunque, dico essere Italia talmente ornata di beneficij dalla provida Natura, che chiaramente si conosce quella tenere il primato sopra tutte l’altre Provincie del mondo. Tal che non e maraviglia se con il suo ingegno, et forze hanno gli huomini in essa nati, soggiugato quasi tutto l’Mondo, et con lor dottrina, hanno illuminato, et non meno hora l’altre natione illuminano. Né mancherelbe oggidì a queli ingegno, et forze, se non li mancasse la carità. Ma la malvagia invidia, et sfrenato appetito di signoreggiare, che in essi regna, ha condotto quella a tanta infelicità, che di Signora, et Reina, ella è divenuta peggio che servo; cosa che non posso senza gran cordoglio rimembrare.

religious in nature and more vague. Paul III, Clement VII’s successor, was a reformer. He instituted the Jesuits, among other religious orders, and, in 1545, he convened the Council of Trent. Alberti described Paul III the most illustrious member of the old Roman noble Farnese family, who, as pope, “with his doctrine, prudence, and other eminent virtù, has brought with him such a wealth of dignity.”

Alberti’s *Descrittione* did not provide a sustained, coherent narrative of Italian history in the same way that many of its predecessors, including Biondo’s *Italia illustrata*, did. Nevertheless, from his introductory pages and from observations scattered throughout the regional descriptions, Alberti’s readers can discern a particular rendering of the recent Italian past. Both Alberti’s *Descrittione* and Guicciardini’s *Storia d’Italia* were well-diffused in Italy in the second half of the sixteenth century. Together they reinforced beyond any doubt the validity and usefulness of Italian history, especially in light of the by-then concluded calamità. Individually, though, they provided differently intonated versions of the preceding decades, one more tragic and one more hopeful. Both were aware that a golden age of Italian history had passed within their lifetimes. But Alberti, a Dominican leader and papal inquisitor, remained inspired by the Roman Church in ways that Guicciardini, a lawyer and leading statesman, was not. In the setting of Counter-Reformation Italy, Guicciardini and Alberti provided their Italian readers an opportunity to contemplate the meaning of the recent Italian history and the Church’s place in it.

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Italia Depicted

Alberti’s *Descrittione* had a successful Europe-wide publishing run that lasted for about a century after the work first appeared in 1550. Alberti’s conceptions of Italia and of Italian history contained in the *Descrittione* had, and continue to have, a high-profile afterlife, albeit a tacit one. The Vatican Gallery of Maps (1581), commissioned by Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) and observed today by hordes of tourists on their way to the Sistine Chapel, decorates a long corridor in the Vatican Palace.\(^77\) The gallery contains huge, detailed maps of the peninsula and its regions, including the islands. It is the first atlas of Italy.\(^78\) The arrangement of the maps is unconventional, progressing as if the viewer were walking along the Apennines, Italy’s spine, and viewing the regions from above. In this way the journey progresses from north to south along the Tyrrhenian coast, starting with area around Genoa, then back up the Adriatic side, and ending with the Veneto.

A few decades earlier, Leandro Alberti had imagined a similar, and at the time, original, circumnavigation of the peninsula. In fact, Alberti influenced the Gallery of Maps in a variety of ways beyond just the geographical progression of the peninsula’s regions. The maps are not just a visual representations of the Italian peninsula and its islands. Through embedded depictions of historical episodes, the maps also represent Italian history, and in this respect, as this section describes, the maps are indebted to


\(^78\) Fiorani, *Marvel of Maps*, 3.
Leandro Alberti’s *Descrittione*. The makers of the Gallery of Maps depended heavily on Alberti’s text, and because Alberti himself had been so well read in the historiography of the peninsula, the maps reflect and immortalize the Renaissance conversation about Italian history. The gallery is a complicated melding of cartography, history, and theology, and so before exploring further how the maps drew from Alberti’s work and how they might be seen as the culmination of the Renaissance conversation about Italian history, it remains first to explain exactly what they are and who made them.

**Astronomer, Cartographer, Artist, Bishop**

The Gallery of Maps was produced by an exceptional, if today rather unknown, polymath, Egnazio Danti (1536-1586). Born in Perugia, his education focused on astronomy, mathematics, and geometry. Much of that education came from family members: his great uncle was a mathematician who had had modest success in the 1490s with a flying machine of his own design; Danti’s father, Giulio, was a goldsmith but also invented an instrument used “to draw plans of the provinces” that he put to use in a survey of Perugia; and, finally, Danti’s sister, Teodora, was a painter who dabbled in mathematics and astronomy and who composed a commentary on Euclid. At the age of nineteen Danti entered the Order of Preachers of the Dominican Order, the same order to which Alberti had belonged.

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He seems to have been something of a virtuoso in mathematics and cartography because he was called in 1562, at just twenty-five year’s of age, to Florence by Duke Cosimo I to design and execute an innovative cycle of maps depicting all the regions of the world, to be painted on the doors of huge cabinets along the walls of a room whose main feature was a massive globe. The Guardaroba Nuova in the Palazzo Vecchio, ambitious in scope, also offered an innovative perspective, placing the viewer in the core of the earth, observing its regions from the center. The project took Danti twelve years to complete, but its success established his reputation as a skilled mathematician and scientist and the preeminent cartographic artist on the peninsula.

When Cosimo I died, Danti found it necessary to leave Florence, and he went to Bologna, where it did not take him long to obtain a prestigious and well-paid post at the university as a professor of mathematics. Both in Florence and, later, in Bologna, Danti remained highly productive, writing technical works (on the construction of an astrolabe, for example) and inventing astronomical and cosmographical instruments (as his father had earlier done). Then, in 1580, Pope Gregory XIII called Danti to Rome, where he was commissioned for several tasks, the grandest of which was the decoration of the long corridor in the Vatican palace, now known as the Gallery of Maps. That project took three years to complete.

In 1583 Pope Gregory XIII granted Danti the bishopric of Alatri, a modest community south of Rome. This was a great honor for Danti, who, in addition to his scientific and artistic endeavors, was also known as a talented preacher. But the

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81 Gambi, “Egnazio Danti e la Galleria delle Carte geografiche,” 90-93.

granting of a bishopric appears also to have been something of a disappointment to Danti because of the Tridentine reform that required all bishops to take residence in their diocese. Danti made the short trip back to Rome often, and he died in 1586 while travelling from the Eternal City back to Alatri.

The Primacy of Italy

The map cycle begins at the south entrance of the gallery with two depictions of the peninsula as a whole, *Italia antica* and *Italia nova*. Next come a series of huge maps, each depicting a region of the peninsula. Danti employed *trompe l’oeil* features—such as curled edges and seemingly affixed cartouches—to make the maps appear to be hanging cloth maps, rather than the frescoes that they actually are. The individual regional maps contain a scale, windrose, longitude and latitude coordinates, and, at minimum, one description of the region’s history. Historical vignettes appear intermingled within the topography of the map, according to their location in space (not time). The bottom of the regional maps include separate views of cities (some in landscape perspective, others as a city plan) and other significant locations. The vaulted ceiling contains religious scenes and acts of devotion that took place on the peninsula. The religious episodes were selected at least in part for where they occurred, and in that way, they correspond to the regional maps on the appropriate section of the corridor’s walls below and are not presented by chronological sequence.

The regions depicted in the gallery are a unique set. They include those described by Biondo and Alberti and, as in Alberti’s study, the islands of Sicily, Corsica, and Sardinia. But there are some further additions. The gallery’s vision of Italia went beyond
the peninsula’s strict geographical limits and includes some of the contested boundaries in the Mediterranean—Corfu, Lepanto, and Malta—where Christendom had dug in against the infidels. It also includes Avignon and the adjacent communities; even though, an inscription notes, they “are not strictly speaking part of Italy, they still belong to the church of Rome, and therefore are shown here.”\textsuperscript{83} That inscription and the inclusion of extra peninsular locations indicate the conflation of ecclesiastical and Italian spaces in the gallery. The imagined Italia depicted in the gallery does not conform exactly to any previous description of the peninsula, and it can only be understood within the ideological context of the post-Tridentine Church, that is, as a response to the fracturing of Christendom and the challenge posed by Protestantism to Church authority and its historical claims of universality.

The maps seem to impart the message that ecclesiastical authority extends over all Italy and beyond. But, overall, the gallery’s ideological function is far from clear. The Church could not realistically make any claims of political authority over the entire peninsula. It could claim spiritual authority, but then, it claimed to hold that over all Christendom, not just Italy and a few other locations. Recently, scholars have attempted to piece together the component parts of the gallery and decipher the exact nature of the argument that Gregory XIII had hoped the maps to project. Pauline Moffitt-Watts has focused on the ways in which the maps seem to reaffirm the validity of the Donation of Constantine (definitively exposed as a forgery over a century earlier by Lorenzo Valla)

\textsuperscript{83} The original cartouche is reproduced in Gambia and Pinelli, \textit{La Galleria delle carte geografiche in Vaticano}, 200: Avenio urbs antiqua Venaisinus item comitatus eiusq caput carpenterace atq aliae urbes et oppida et si ad Italian minime pertinente tamen quia ecclesiae Rom sunt propria ideo hic describuntur avenionis ruinas recentiora decorant aedificia pons ibi in rhodano est interger et opere et dc geometricor passuum longitudine admirabilis. Translated in Fiorani, \textit{Marvel of Maps}, 182.
and the fact that the majority of the historical vignettes depict Italian encounters with invading *barbari*, and has argued that Gregory XIII’s (and thus also Danti’s) intent was to present the papacy as the *princeps*, the political and military leader of the peninsula.\(^{84}\)

In slight contrast, Francesca Fiorani has argued that the gallery’s maps convey not so much an attempt by the Church to reaffirm its centuries’ old claims of political authority on the peninsula but, rather, to celebrate “the primacy of Italy” within a newly configured Christendom. According to Fiorani’s interpretation, the Vatican Gallery of Maps does not so much state a case for political expansion as it affirms the special status of Italy within the late-sixteenth-century Catholic world. Not only were most of the popes Italian, but, notes Fiorani, the bulk of ecclesiastical revenues, especially in those decades, were from Italian dioceses.\(^{85}\) The Donation of Constantine and the historical vignettes of Italians combating the *barbari* are crucial to Fiorani’s argument, not as proof of the Church’s power *over* Italy but of an acknowledgement of a historically beneficial relationship between the institution of the Church and people of the peninsula.

Whatever the nature of the gallery’s ideological claims, what remains certain is that Pope Gregory XIII assumed the primacies both of Italy within the post-Tridentine Catholic world and of the Church within Italian history. There is no doubt that the gallery attests to the contemporary relevance of Italian history. Particularly fascinating are the ways in which the gallery also recognizes and affirms the significance of Italian history-writing.


Italia Immortalized

The Gallery of Maps reflects the Renaissance conversation about Italian history in multiple ways. In 1580, when Danti began work on the gallery, none of the extant editions of Alberti’s *Descrittione*—nor of Biondo’s *Italia illustrata*, for that matter—had included maps.86 Given that fact, Danti envisioned his project as a visual version of the same kind of chorography undertaken by those predecessors, that is, a region-by-region tour of the Italian peninsula that synthesizes geographical and historical descriptions. In the Renaissance (and in antiquity, according to Ptolemy), “chorography” could refer to both verbal and visual descriptions of places,87 and Danti labeled the gallery (on a cartouche) a “chorography of Italy [*Italae Chorographia*] from those authors who had described numerous terrestrial and maritime places of Italy.”88 Modern historians of cartography continue to debate whether, or, in what ways, we should view historical maps as having similar functions as texts, although most would agree with J. B. Harley and David Woodward’s assertion that maps are more than scientific representations of space and that they also reflect the subjective social and cultural contexts in which they were formed.89 But even back in the sixteenth century, Danti was explicit in describing his project as emerging from the literary genre of chorography. Moreover, Danti’s maps in the Vatican are more than just maps, they are maps with visual historical descriptions.

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88 Quoted and translated in Fiorani, *Marvel of Maps*, 193: Cum in conficienda hac *Italie Chorographia* iis auctoribus qui plurima *Italiea* loca terrestria maritimnque. Also see Fiorani, *Marvel of Maps*, 188.

Like many of his historian predecessors, Danti attempted to fuse ancient Italy and contemporary Italy into a single historical narrative. Danti bound that narrative together by portraying the unfolding of historical events within a common geographical space. Danti announces that broad historical narrative at the start of the map cycle, by the south entrance, which is flanked by two maps of the whole peninsula, *Italia antica* and *Italia nova*; the presence of those maps at the start of the gallery and their titles convey a continuous Italian history.

According to the maps of *Italia antica* and *Italia nova*, there is also a metanarrative binding and reinforcing the continuity of Italian history, that is, the chorographical tradition of describing the peninsula and its past beginning in antiquity. Looking over their shoulders toward the map of ancient Italy and holding one of their books are Strabo and Ptolemy. Gazing onto modern Italy, also grasping one of their works, are Raffaele Maffei (the author of the *Commentariorium urbanorum*, 1506, which describes Rome and the Italian peninsula as the center of the world) and Flavio Biondo. Danti suggests at the beginning of the map cycle that his new visual chorography should be understood in the context of that chorographical literary tradition. In effect, the maps of *Italia antica* and *Italia nova* confirm the existence, almost explicitly, of a premodern conversation about Italian history.

Unlike Biondo, Strabo, and the others, Leandro Alberti is not personally depicted in the Vatican Gallery of Maps, but his presence is more conspicuous than any one else’s—a fact curiously absent from most scholars’ work on the gallery until Francesca
Fiorani’s 2004 study. Yet it is not surprising that Alberti’s work exerted such an influence on the content of the gallery. After all, he had produced the most up-to-date (and, at the time, the best-selling) compendium of Italian chorography. He also had some personal qualities that might recommend his work as an attractive source for a project in the papal palace: he and the pope were both from Bologna; Alberti, like Danti, had been influential within the Dominican Order; and finally, he had served as an officer of the Holy Inquisition.

Fiorani’s work has underscored the extent of Alberti’s influence on the map series in two main ways. First, the structural parallel between Danti’s and Alberti’s narratives is unmistakable, as both proceed from the northwestern corner of the peninsula, along the Tyrrhenian coast, down that coast to the southern reaches of the peninsula, around the bottom of the “boot,” and back up the Adriatic coast. Second, Danti’s version of Italy’s past relies almost entirely on Alberti’s Descrittione. In both works, historical events appear according to a geographical rather than chronological narrative structure, and most tellingly, every single historical vignette selected by Danti for inclusion in the maps of Italy’s regions also appears in Alberti’s description of the peninsula. Some of the map inscriptions (Fiorani has also demonstrated) Danti copied verbatim from Alberti’s text.

90 The most recent study on the Vatican maps before Fiorani’s Moffitt-Watts, “The Donation of Constantine, Cartography, and Papal Plenitude Potestatis,” specifically discusses possible historiographical sources for the Gallery and yet seems entirely unaware of Alberti’s existence. Similarly, the recent spike among Italian scholars in Alberti’s Descrittione has produced only a few comments in the conclusion of one essay (Marocci, “A proposito dell’immagine dell’Italia nel Cinquecento,” 295-297).

91 Some of those instances are listed in Fiorani, Marvel of Maps, 309-10 fn 42: the original inscription for the map of the Patrimonium S. Petri, the inscriptions for the maps of Principatus Salerni and Sicilia and the cartouche labelling the battle of San Ruffillio on the map of Bononiensis Ditio.
In addition, about half of the religious scenes on the gallery’s vaulted ceiling also show up in the *Descrittione*.\(^92\)

The historical scenes that appear on the maps encompass all periods of Italian history—eleven from antiquity, six from the medieval period through the Quattrocento, and ten from sixteenth-century history.\(^93\) The events selected for inclusion in the maps are not necessarily the most profound in Italian or Church history. Rather, following the chorographical models of both Biondo and Alberti, the events depicted are particularly important from the perspective of the specific region under discussion. Danti, for instance, depicts the formation of the second triumvirate, an event that Alberti had dwelled upon in his text most likely because it took place just outside of his native city, Bologna.\(^94\) Also in Danti’s telling of Italian history, as in Alberti’s, invasions by transalpine armies have primary importance.\(^95\)

The inclusion of certain historical episodes seem to reflect nothing more than the peculiarities of Alberti’s text. For instance, King Alexander I of Epirus—a Macedonian who came to southern Italy at the request of a beleaguered Greek colony in the mid-fourth century BC, and battled the Brutii people, before dying would seem to be a marginal figure in the history of the Italian peninsula. But Alberti had spent over a page

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\(^92\) Fiorani systematically proves this point in a very useful Appendix B in Fiorani, *Marvel of Maps*, 266-272.

\(^93\) As does Moffitt-Watts, “The Donation of Constantine, Cartography, and Papal *Plenitudo Potestatis*,” S96-S97.

\(^94\) See comments on the regional importance of the historical events in Fiorani, *Marvel of Maps*, 198.

\(^95\) These include an invasion by the King of Epirus in 330 BC, by the Gauls in 222 BC, five battles between the ancient Romans and Hannibal, Charlemagne’s defeat of the Lombards in 774, Pope Leo I’s turning away of Attila the Hun in 452, Pope John X’s defeat of a Saracen force at Garigliano in 914, Charles VIII’s showdown with Italian forces led by Venice in 1495, the French defeat of the Holy League at Ravenna in 1512 and the siege of Pavia by the Spanish in 1528.
of text detailing this king’s death because Alberti understood the Macedonian to have influenced the etymology of the name “Brutii.”  

By relying so heavily on Alberti, whose history was informed by almost all of major histories preceding it, Danti’s project entered into the centuries’ old conversation about Italia and its past. It is perhaps coincidence, and perhaps not, that while working on the gallery, Danti wrote in a letter that he was producing a “descrittione d’Italia in a gallery constructed by His Holiness.” In any case, Danti acknowledged that his task was similar to Biondo’s and Alberti’s in scope—that is, that he had the unenviable task of wading through the uncertainties of history to try to accurately place certain historical communities and past events, the locations of which were not readily available or clear on modern maps. For this, like Alberti before him, Danti did not simply rely on his literary predecessors; he confronted them critically. He communicated this on a trompe l’œil cartouche “nailed” to the maps of Southern Puglia (Sallentina Hydrunti Terra):

Since it was decided to compile this chorography of Italy from those authors who had described numerous terrestrial and maritime places of Italy (having observed their differences in latitude and longitude) and from the various and very dubious accounts of those who had traveled in the particular places, it should seem strange to no one if less-known towns do not correspond here exactly to their position. However, we took much care that the latitude and longitude of the more famous places correspond

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96 On other historical episodes included in the maps with particularly strong ties to Alberti’s text it is worth quoting at length, Fiorani, Marvel of Maps, 198-9: the battle Pope John X fought against the Saracens near the Garigliano River in 915 is of significance today as one of the many battles between the papal forces and the infidels, but Alberti considered it the defining moment after which Naples recognized the spiritual and temporal authority of the Roman pontiff. The Battle fo San Ruffillo between the Bolognese and the Visconti demonstrated the historic dependence of the city on the pope, a reading provided by Albertu and reinstated prominently in the legend of the map Bononinesis Ditio in the Gallery of Maps.

exactly (as much as this is pertinent to chorography). Father Egnazio Danti of the Order of Preachers wanted this to be mentioned.98

Thus Danti described, as Alberti had in his history, how Italia, “its particular places,” and its past were all inseparable from the textual tradition—of varying reliability—that described them.

Like the historians who preceded him, Danti depicts Italia as both a unified geographical space (Italia antica and Italia nova) and as a conglomeration of diverse regional entities. But the Vatican maps represent more than just geographical spaces; they represent history, an Italian history. The maps and their presentation of an Italian history emerge directly out of the interconnected Renaissance conversation of Italian history, most directly through their adoption of the structure and some of the content of Leandro Alberti’s Descrittione. Moreover, the gallery makes explicit reference to the historiographical tradition from which it emerged by featuring images of ancient and contemporary historians of Italia posing with their works above the entrance to the corridor.

98 This note has been emphasized by modern scholars because it seems to prove Danti’s central role in the production of the Vatican maps and also because it provides irrefutable evidence that Danti thought of the project as “chorography” and that, moreover, his sense of chorography differed from previous ones in that Danti’s chorography seems to have relied heavily on astronomical observations and laws, see Fiornai, Marvel of Maps, 193. Quoted and translated in Ibid., 193. Original cartouche reproduced in La Galleria delle carte geografiche in Vaticano, 361: Cum in conficienda hac Italiae Chorographia, iis authoribus, qui plurima Italiae loca, terrestria, maritamq. certis longitudinum, latitudinumq differentiis observatis descriptserunt. Ac variis ualdeq dubis eorum traditionibus, qui particularia loca peragrarunt, standum esset Mirum nemini uderi debet fimus nota oppidula hic adamussin posita non reperiantur Curabamus tamen, ut longitudinum, latitudinumq. gradus, et minuta, insignioribus locis (quoad Chorographia fere poterat) exacte responderent Atque id F. Egnatius Dantes Perusinus ord Prae. admonitum esse volebat.
Conclusion

The Vatican Gallery of Maps confirms what so many modern historians have ignored or denied: that the idea of Italia in the Renaissance was more than just a geographical, cultural, and linguistic marker. There was also a sustained, sophisticated, and scrutinized debate about the history of Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The historical events depicted in the gallery and the historiographical sources for the maps both reflected the defining event of that Renaissance conversation, the late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century calamità d’Italia. In the subsequent centuries peninsular historians, most notably Ludovico Muratori (1672-1750), continued to write about Italian history, but in the new political and cultural contexts of established foreign rule (first the Spanish, then the Austrians, then Napoleon, then the Austrians again); the period of competing, autonomous city-states and the period of crisis in which that autonomy was lost were, for seventeenth and eighteenth-century peninsular historians, memories of a different time.

But the Renaissance conversation about Italy’s past continued to affect the ways that subsequent peninsular historians thought of and wrote about Italian history. Italy’s past had been a subject of history-writing since antiquity, but during the Renaissance it developed into a multivocal, synchronic conversation; ever since then Italian history has been fundamentally dialogical in nature.
Even during the Risorgimento, Italy’s nineteenth-century national unification movement, when many nationalist intellectuals were attempting to “invent” a national history,¹ no single, centralizing narrative of the peninsula’s past emerged. Instead, historians discussed the Italian history in diverse and often contested ways. Some of the historical issues debated by Renaissance historians remained unresolved in the nineteenth century, including the roles of the Church in Italian history and the significance of ancient Rome’s legacy. Some nineteenth-century Italian writers speculated on the nature and the very existence of Italian history. For instance, in 1849 the Neapolitan historian Pasquale Villari (1827-1919) urged others to think of the political divisions of the peninsula’s past as the key element of a distinctive, shared history. In his words, the “history of Italy is the history of a single nation composed of a multitude of individual states” and it is only through analyzing the historical course of particular states that one can arrive at a broader understanding of Italian past as a whole.² The Milanese historian Giuseppe Ferrari (1812-1876) was more skeptical than Villari about the concept of Italian history. He asked in 1858

Where then is Italy? What does it consist of? What bond is there that links the republics, the signori, the popes, the emperors and the invasions? What connection is there between individuals and the masses, sectarian and wars and revolutions? Scholarship does not help shed any light. Indeed, far from instructing us, it simply underlines the chaos.³


Questions such as those posed by Ferrari just before unification prefigured the more recent reflections by modern historians about the “problem of Italian history,” by questioning the validity of writing Italian history before the existence of an Italian national state. Both Ferrari’s questions and the assumptions behind the “problem of Italian history” are inextricably linked to nineteenth-century notions about the essential, coherent nature of nations and their identities. But even modern perspectives that dismiss the notion of premodern Italian history unknowingly reflect, in their ambivalence and multivocality, the dialogical historical discourse bequeathed to them by Renaissance historians.

One could reasonably claim for most modern nations a multivocal historical discourse about the nation’s past. But the Renaissance conversation about Italian history took place in premodernity, in the absence of a centralized state, and amid widespread regional diversity. In this sense, the importance of that conversation extends well beyond the Alps, the Tyrrhenian, and the Adriatic. It reminds us that the national paradigm is not necessarily the most useful lens through which to view national identities and histories, whose full range of meanings can encompass so much more than a national state and, in certain cases, well precede it.

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4 See Introduction.
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