

THE TOWNS OF ITALY

in the
later Middle Ages



*Selected sources translated and annotated
by Trevor Dean*

**THE TOWNS OF ITALY
IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES**



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translated and annotated by Trevor Dean

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	<i>page</i> viii
List of abbreviations	ix
Map of Italy, <i>c.</i> 1300	x
Introduction	1
I: The physical environment and social services	5
1 'A world in itself': Milan, 1288	11
2 A vision of Padua, <i>c.</i> 1318	16
3 Genoa in the late thirteenth century	21
4 Public buildings in thirteenth-century Parma	23
5 Public buildings in fourteenth-century Siena	24
6 The enlargement and decoration of the Doge's Palace, Venice, 1297–1422	30
7 Making space for sermons: Florence, 1296	34
8 Commune and new cathedral: Perugia, 1300	35
9 Granary and oratory: Orsanmichele, Florence	37
10 Concealing a butchery: Pisa, 1382	37
11 New church building: Bologna, 1390–2	38
12 The rise and fall of urban towers	39
13 On the magnificence of his buildings: Azzone Visconti	41
14 The Sienese Opera in financial difficulties, 1299–1310	43
15 <i>Pittura infamante</i>	45
16 Saintly gates	46
17 Symbols of communal strength: lions	47
18 Symbols of communal strength: <i>carrocci</i>	48
19 <i>Nettezza urbana</i> : legislation	50
20 <i>Nettezza urbana</i> : enforcement	54
21 Clean water: the Perugia Fountain	55
22 Public health: salaried doctors, supervised hospitals	56
23 Public subvention of education: Lucca, 1348–79	58
24 Pistoia head-hunts a grammar teacher, 1377	61
25 A teaching monopoly: Bassano, 1259	62
II: Civic religion	63
26 Paradise on earth: the feast-day of St John the Baptist, Florence	72
27 The <i>palio</i> race in Bologna, 1288	75
28 The costs of a feast-day in Pistoia, 1252	76
29 Regulation of holy days: Perugia, 1342	77

30	A popular 'saint': Alberto of Cremona	79
31	Miracles in Mantua and Bologna, <i>c.</i> 1300	80
32	Rainmaking in Florence and Bergamo	81
33	Saint or heretic?: Armanno Pungiluppo of Ferrara	83
34	'Saint' Guglielma and her followers: Milan, 1300	88
35	A corrupt inquisitor: Florence, 1346	94
36	Bishop and <i>popolo</i> in conflict: Reggio, 1280	96
37	Communal assistance to religious groups: Parma, 1261–2	97
38	Prison releases on holy days: Perugia, 1342	98
39	Flagellants in northern Italy, 1260	98
40	The <i>Bianchi</i> , 1399	99
41	A sermon on usury	102
42	A charitable confraternity: Piacenza, 1268	104
43	A charitable confraternity in trouble: Orsanmichele, Florence	107
III: The urban economy		109
44	Economic growth: good and evil	112
45	The power of money: external relations	114
46	The power of money: internal relations	115
47	Wool production in Prato, 1397–8	115
48	The Mercato Vecchio, Florence	121
49	Enforcement of urban markets: Verona and Parma	125
50	Proliferation of guilds: Perugia, 1342	127
51	Statutes of a wool guild: Padua, 1384	128
52	Derecognition of guilds: Ferrara, 1287	132
53	Non-guild-worthy occupations	134
54	Promotion of local industry	134
55	The state promotes commerce	136
56	Demographic policy: controlling peasant immigration	138
57	Demographic policy: stimulating immigration of artisans	140
IV: Social organization and tensions		141
58	The decadence of chivalry	150
59	Complaint against moneyed parvenus	151
60	The costs of knighthood	151
61	Ceremonial knighthood: Siena, 1326	152
62	A miserly knight: late fourteenth-century Pistoia	155
63	Three social divisions	156
64	Pisa brought low by its new citizens	157
65	The <i>popolo</i> of Piacenza, 1250	158
66	The <i>popolo</i> of Bologna, 1271 and 1287	161
67	Social tensions in the kingdom of Naples, 1338–9	165
68	Social tensions in Rome: Cola di Rienzo	168
69	Food shortage and food riot: Siena, 1328	172

70	Revolt in a lordly city: Ferrara, 1385	175
71	Revolt in a republic: Siena, 1371	176
72	Social tensions in a southern town: Chieti	182
73	Fist-fights: Florence and Siena	183
74	The origins and conduct of vendetta	185
75	The pacification of vendetta	187
76	Legal penalties against vendetta: Florence, 1325	188
77	The customs of the citizens of Piacenza, 1388	189
78	Fine clothing only conceals the dirt	193
79	'Greed was greater' after the plague	194
80	Civil law on clandestine marriage	195
81	Advice on the management of wives and daughters	195
82	Sorrowful marriages	197
83	Women and the patrimony: dowry law	198
84	Women in the lawcourts	198
85	Cross-dressing	199
86	Women in the streets	200
87	Confinement of prostitutes and pimps	201
88	Sumptuary law: Parma, 1258	202
89	Sumptuary law: Bologna, 1288, 1398	202
90	Women cleverly evade the law	205
91	Assistance to converted Jews: Perugia, 1298	207
92	Exemptions and privileges to Jews	208
93	Jews as the enemies of the cross: Florence	209
94	'The domestic enemy': female slaves	210
95	Contract of sale of a slave, 1388	211
V: Political structures		213
96	A guild-based regime: Perugia	216
97	Elections of the doges of Venice	218
98	Bell-ringers	220
99	Constitutional reforms at Florence	221
100	Regulations for councils in Pisa, 1286 and 1317	224
101	A short-lasting lordship: Pisa, 1365-8	226
102	A shortlived 'tyranny': Fermo, 1376-80	229
103	A long-lasting lordship: Ferrara, 1264	230
104	Consolidation of a lordship: Verona, 1295	232
105	Political spectacle: Florence and Ferrara	233
106	Good government under lords: Milan	235
107	The end of communal liberty I: Pisa, 1406	238
108	The end of communal liberty II: Padua, 1405	241
Further reading		245
Index		246

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MGH Monumenta Germaniae Historica

RIS Rerum italicarum scriptores

Frequently cited sources

Corpus chronicorum bononiensium, ed. A. Sorbelli, in *RIS*, 2nd edn., vol. 18, pt. 1, 4 vols

Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, ed. G. Scalia, 2 vols (Bari, 1966); *Cronica fratris Salimbene de Adam ordinis minorum*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, in *MGH, Scriptores*, vol. 23 (Hannover and Leipzig, 1905–13)

Cronache senesi, ed. A. Lisini and F. Iacometti, in *RIS*, 2nd edn., vol. 15, pt. 6

Statuti di Perugia dell'anno MCCCXLII, ed. G. degli Azzi, 2 vols (Rome, 1913–16)

Statuti di Bologna dell'anno 1288, ed. G. Fasoli and P. Sella, 2 vols (Vatican City, 1937–9)



Map of Italy, c. 1300

INTRODUCTION

The towns of later medieval Italy were one of the high points of urban society and culture in Europe before the industrial revolution. They also produced huge amounts of written material, which is exceptional in quality and quantity for the Middle Ages: 'More source materials survive than a hundred scholars could adequately master.'¹ For almost every town in the north and centre there survive chronicles and voluminous collections of statute-law; for many cities there are the records of executive decision-making, of taxation and of trials; from Tuscany especially there is a wonderful outpouring of poetry and stories (*novelle*); for the history of the church and religion there are sermons, and records of the trials of heretics and the canonisation of saints, as well as the more humdrum deeds of property-owning; for private individuals there are letters, diaries, and mountains of notarial contracts. Guilds and confraternities produced statutes, membership lists and registers of their activities; men of the church and the universities produced works of law, theology and political theory; businesses produced account books and commercial correspondence; governments produced legislation, treaties, proclamations, letters, tax lists. Little of this huge mass of material has been translated, or ever published. The only areas to receive any sort of consistent coverage are Florence and the artistic/humanist 'Renaissance': translations include some early chronicles and later diaries,² art historical documents,³ humanism,⁴ and Florentine society.⁵ This means that, for most of Italy,

1 J. Larner, *Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch 1216–1380* (London, 1908), p. 11; and see P. J. Jones, *The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 156–7, 202–3.

2 *Dino Compagni's Chronicle of Florence*, trans. D. E. Bornstein (Philadelphia, 1986); *Villani's Chronicle*, trans. R. E. Selfe (London, 1906); *Two Memoirs of Renaissance Florence*, ed. G. Brucker (New York, 1967); *A Florentine Diary from 1415 to 1542*, trans. A. de Rosen Jarvis (London, 1927).

3 E. G. Holt, *A Documentary History of Art* (New York, 1957); D. S. Chambers, *Patrons and Artists in the Italian Renaissance* (Columbia, 1971); *Italian Art, 1400–1500: Sources and Documents*, trans. C. E. Gilbert (Eagelwood Cliffs, 1988).

4 *The Earthly Republic: Italian Humanists on Government and Society*, ed. B. G. Kohl and R. G. Witt (Manchester, 1978); *The Three Crowns of Florence*, ed. D. Thompson and A. F. Nagel (New York, 1972).

5 *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, ed. G. Brucker (New York, 1971).

for most of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, there is little available in modern English translation. This volume is intended to fill that gap, by providing a more inclusive and balanced coverage of Italian urban life in the period.

There are of course difficulties with such volumes, at both practical and theoretical levels. Roberto Lopez and Irving Raymond, editors of a previous collection that drew heavily on Italian material, observed: 'Our task was not easy, to pick a mere few out of an immense number of records.' A small number of documents cannot give a complete picture, they warned, no matter how carefully selected, and they hoped that readers would 'not look for what is missing, but for what is included'.⁶ Such sentiments are shared by this editor. Bordone, editor of a similar collection of documents in Italian,⁷ identified two risks faced by compilations of documents: that they construct, with fragments of real cities, an inexistent city; and that they flatten development over time.⁸ Similar objections have been made, at a more general level, regarding anthologies: that, in making 'a single book out of clippings from many books', they create 'an illusion of composite authorship', and take extracts out of context, forcing them into association with other extracts, devaluing each with 'the same negative poison'.⁹ These risks and objections can of course be avoided and answered. The risk of creating an inexistent city can be addressed through the use of contrasting extracts, as is attempted in places here. The risk of flattening development can be addressed by including several documents from different periods from the same cities, again as attempted here. The charge of putting texts into 'forced associations' is willingly acknowledged: it is precisely in such associations that the value of a selection of sources lies. In an era of critical theory in which the author is seen less as the sole and deliberate creator and more an orchestrator of divergent voices, such objections to anthologies fall away. It is worth remembering, too, that medieval writers loved anthologies.

In looking for the chief features of Italian communal cities, we might point to the following: the unity of city and dependent countryside (*contado*), the stability of population, urban functions (religious, economic, military and political), the development of public spaces,

6 *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World*, ed. R. S. Lopez and I. W. Raymond (New York, n.d.), pp. 4, 7.

7 R. Bordone, *La società urbana nell'Italia comunale (secoli XI–XIV)* (Turin, 1984).

8 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

9 L. Riding and R. Graves, *A Pamphlet against Anthologies* (London, 1928), pp. 67–76.

social composition (the coexistence of landowners, traders and artisans), the development of autonomous institutions, and civic culture.¹⁰ All of these elements are also present in this volume, though within five broader thematic chapters. The buildings and their decoration, and urban ‘social services’ form the subject of [Chapter I](#): the cathedrals and town halls, the towers and palaces, the paintings and statues, the prisons, street-paving and fountains; the hospitals and schools, and the efforts to control and regulate activities and waste. Civic religion is addressed in [Chapter II](#): the feast-days of urban patron saints, the devotion of urban inhabitants as manifested in the cult of official and unofficial saints and in the performance of miracles, the conflicts between communes and the local church, the problem of heresy, the clerical attack on usury, and the confraternities that relieved urban poverty. [Chapter III](#) explores production and commerce: the effects of monetary affluence, the guilds and markets, government interventions to stimulate production, to regulate exchange, and to control the city’s population. The longest chapter – [Chapter IV](#) – deals with social groups and social tensions: *popolo* against magnates, noble clans against each another, men against women, young men against city elders, Christians against Jews, freemen against slaves, food riots and tax revolts, acts of resistance and indecency. Finally, [Chapter V](#) examines the great variety of political regimes in late-medieval Italy: from consolidated communes such as Florence or Venice, to stable or unstable ‘tyrannies’ in Pisa, Ferrara or Verona, and finally to the creation of regional states in which communes with their own traditions of proud independence – in this case Pisa and Padua – were absorbed by their greater and more powerful neighbours.

Every selection of documents bears the editor’s imprint. Three principles have underlain the choice of documents in this book. The first is a desire to present material from as many different cities and as many different writers as possible. Thus material from the great cities – Milan, Florence, Venice, Genoa – is naturally included, but alongside it are documents from second-rank cities such as Padua or Ferrara, and from small towns such as Fermo and L’Aquila. I have also attempted to include some documents from the south (doubtless insufficient in number and range to satisfy its historians) to illustrate some of the ways in which urban life there was different from that in the communes of the north and centre: though historians of southern

10 Bordone, *La società urbana*.

towns speak of their autonomy,¹¹ it is autonomy of a different order when Brindisi had to petition the king in order to appoint a new physician [22], or when Chieti had to seek the king's support against a neighbouring count pursuing his vassals [72]. Second, my search for inclusiveness and balance has meant avoiding the familiar. It might seem to some critics that I have produced an 'Italy in the Age of Dante and Petrarch', but without either Dante or Petrarch. My answer would be that these canonical authors have translations enough already: Dante's great poem, the Divine Comedy, though arguably untranslatable, has recently received numerous versions in English. The same reasoning excludes Boccaccio.¹² I have, though, included considerable material from two prose authors where existing translations exist, but for good reason: the selections from Villani published in 1906 are now old-fashioned and out of print;¹³ the full translation of Salimbene's chronicle published in 1986 is unfortunately defective, with many omissions and misunderstandings.¹⁴ Finally, a third principle is to reflect some of my own concerns in the 'minor' history of Italy (Ferrara), and in the behaviour and mores of the nobility (vendetta, knighthood).

I have aimed for fairly literal translation, while often reshaping sentences in order to obtain smoother effects (turning passive into active verbs, and adjectives into adverbs, for example, or breaking up lengthy preambles with their many subordinate clauses). I have also lightly edited some texts in order to remove repetitive or obscure material and to clarify the sense. There are two important words that I have frequently left in Italian or Latin, and they cause all translators problems: one is *stato/status*, which has a meaning combining government, regime, power and state; and the other is *popolo*, and its derivatives *popolani/populares*, which never included the whole people, and was sometimes restricted to 'the better sort'.

11 R. Caggese, *Roberto d'Angiò e i suoi tempi* (Florence, 1922), pp. 357–466; G. Galasso, *Il Regno di Napoli: Il Mezzogiorno angioino e aragonese (1266–1494)* (Turin, 1992), pp. 407–46. Cf. Jones, *City-State*, p. 260: 'there were no autonomous communes or renescent city-states' (and generally, pp. 258–63, 289–90).

12 See the new translation of *The Decameron* by G. Waldman (Oxford, 1993).

13 See above, note 2.

14 *The Chronicle of Salimbene de Adam*, ed. J. L. Baird, G. Baglivi and J. R. Kane (Binghamton, NY, 1986). There was an earlier, partial translation: G. G. Coulton, *From St Francis to Dante: A Translation of All that is of Primary Interest in the Chronicle of the Franciscan Salimbene (1221–1288)* (London, 1906).

I: THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL SERVICES

City descriptions

In the period 1280 to 1340 a number of descriptions of Italian cities – Milan, Florence, Pavia, Padua, Genoa – were written which describe those cities at the height of their medieval development, before the crises of the mid–late fourteenth century.¹ This volume starts with three of these: Bonvesin da la Riva’s innovative description of Milan, Giovanni da Nono’s more conventional, but lively description of Padua, and an anonymous, verse description of Genoa. Like the famous description of Florence by Giovanni Villani,² these praise the sheer size of the urban population and of their daily food needs, the great numbers of city churches and their clergy, the wide range and value of productive activities, the abundance of foodstuffs on city markets, the impressive buildings erected both inside and outside the city, and the power of the local nobility. They focus on gates and walls, churches and monasteries, schools and hospitals, mills and markets, rivers and ports, roads and bridges, places of execution and places of pleasure: all those physical aspects of Italian cities that made them resemble Rome in contemporary eyes, and all those opportunities for employment and consumption that have made them famous ever since (‘here every man can earn money’; ‘anything you want you can have at once’ [1 and 3]). All of these aspects of city life were closely supervised, guided and controlled by city governments. Cities gave attention to all physical aspects. First the walls: successive circuits of walls were built to incorporate rapidly expanding suburbs, and the numbers and size of gate-towers were a source of pride, ‘an expression of beauty, force and economic power’.³ Secondly, governments addressed problems within

1 J. K. Hyde, ‘Medieval descriptions of cities’, in *Literacy and its Uses: Studies on Late Medieval Italy*, ed. D. Waley (Manchester, 1993). Hyde does not deal with the verse description of Genoa.

2 *Cronica*, XII.94. For translations, see *Social and Economic Foundations of the Italian Renaissance*, ed. A. Molho (New York and London, 1969), pp. 19–22; Lopez and Raymond, *Medieval Trade*, pp. 70–4.

3 D. Balestracci and G. Picinni, *Siena nel Trecento: Assetto urbano e strutture edilizie* (Florence, 1977), p. 25.

the city of circulation, security and hygiene.⁴ Narrow, dark or winding streets impeded the passage of people, animals, carts or soldiers, and attracted criminals. Latrines that discharged within view of the street, and sewage that flowed from alleyways between houses onto the thoroughfare were both unsightly and unhygienic. So communes issued laws setting minimum widths for roads, forbidding the obstruction of public roadways, and restricting projecting platforms that robbed the street of light. They also carried out works to straighten and widen streets, using compulsory purchase where necessary, in order to improve access to cathedral, market or fountains. They legislated to oblige householders to close alleyways where sewage collected and to route their drainage underground. They issued laws to control traffic (requiring carts to be led at walking pace by dismounted riders). They paved the streets in brick. Third, they were concerned with moral and physical cleanliness: they acted against air- and water-pollution caused by the waste, stench and noise of industry and processing by restricting the location and working hours of productive activities such as tanning and butchery. They ensured water supplies for domestic use and for drain-cleaning. They tried to confine lepers to suburban hospitals, Jews to inconspicuous areas and prostitutes to the public brothel (though the latter had a constant tendency to spill over on to the streets and into private rented accommodation).

Lastly, they embarked on *grands projets*, creating 'an almost entirely new secular architecture'.⁵ Chief among these was the public palace or town hall, incorporating a residence for the chief executive and judge (*podestà*) or for the executive committee of Priors, rooms for communal officials, a large first-floor hall for council meetings, ground-floor loggias for popular assemblies, balconies for proclamations and speeches, and a bell-tower. More than building a town hall was involved here, as shown by the example of Perugia, where the commune's decision in 1275–6 to embark on what has been described as a 'grandiose project of radical urban renewal',⁶ involved over the following decades the construction of an aqueduct and fountain to bring water

4 F. Bocchi, 'Regulation of the urban environment by the Italian communes from the twelfth to the fourteenth century', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 72 (1990).

5 H. Wieruszowski, 'Art and the commune in the time of Dante', *Speculum*, 19 (1944), 15.

6 M. R. Silvestrelli, 'L'edilizia pubblica del commune di Perugia: dal "palatium communis" al "palatium novum populi"', in *Società e istituzioni dell'Italia comunale: l'esempio di Perugia (secoli XII–XIV)* (2 vols, Perugia, 1988), p. 490.

to the city centre (symbolising the city's ability to supply its citizens with essentials), new or enlarged residences for the government and the Captain of the *popolo*, improved road access, and a new cathedral. Communal projects thus both impinged on and promoted the church: churches, hospitals and cemeteries were moved, land was bought from the church to build palaces, walls and housing, cathedral-building was sponsored and controlled, squares were improved for sermons or relic-displays.

Images in the city

Italian cities were also full of images. Images of saints, especially the Virgin Mary, were dotted around the city 'like fountains' on the gates, at street corners, on the facades of churches.⁷ At Bologna, figures of saints were painted in the city treasury and scenes from the life of St Dominic on the city walls. Scenes of judgement and symbols of justice were depicted in the lawcourts (Florence, Padua). Noble families and their clients displayed their coats of arms on buildings. Political heroes and military champions were commemorated in public portraits (King Robert of Naples in Florence, Guidoriccio Fogliani in Siena), as were significant moments in civic history (the history of Pope Alexander III and Emperor Frederick I in Venice). Such images were fixed, permanently visible; others were mobile, such as the flags of guilds and confraternities, or the miracle-working images paraded in procession at times of disaster, or the painted war-wagons (*carrocci*) housed in the cathedral.

Such images performed various positive functions: celebrating achievement, holding up exemplars, encouraging 'reverential behaviour', asserting ownership, identity or group-membership, invoking a saint's intercessory power. Painting was also used, however, to defame and harm public enemies, through *pittura infamante* which depicted fugitives from justice, usually traitors, in humiliating poses (wearing mitres, hanging upside down), alongside base animals (pigs, asses, etc.) or creatures with evil associations (basilisks), and with insulting captions listing the traitor's vices. Such art, none of which survives, flourished in many towns of north and central Italy in the

⁷ E. Muir, 'The virgin on the street corner: the place of the sacred in Italian cities', in *Religion and Culture in the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. S. Ozment (Kirksville, 1989), p. 26.

late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, though it died out in the fifteenth [15].⁸

There was, however, a clear distinction between the civic art promoted by communes and the art promoted by city lords, the so-called 'despots' who took control in many cities from the late thirteenth century onwards. City lords too embarked on beneficial public works, such as street paving (as too did the king in Naples), but they regarded *pittura infamante* as bringing disrepute to the city. Instead, they went for 'effects that would excite a sense of wonder' (Green), building palaces that made 'lavish use of precious materials' and housed collections of rare animals. The paintings described by Fiamma in Azzone Visconti's palace in Milan associate Azzone with heroes and state-creators of history and legend (Aeneas, Charlemagne), while also developing the novelty of ruler-portraiture (perhaps deriving from its revival under Frederick II). Azzone also, according to Fiamma, planned to have an equestrian statue of himself placed on the cathedral. Other *signori* followed a similar pattern in asserting the warrior, chivalric and dynastic values of lordship. At Padua, the da Carrara lords used art 'both to advertise their wealth and prominent political status ... and also self-consciously to validate their dynastic claims to Padua':⁹ through prominently-sited tombs bearing full-length, carved effigies and lengthy inscriptions; through the decoration of their large palace with heraldic devices, animals, scenes from classical history or myth (warfare, heroes, emperors, generals) and portraits of the da Carrara themselves and their military victories. In Verona the tombs of the della Scala lords of the city bore equestrian statues and reliefs of their military *gesta*, while their palace had paintings of Roman emperors and a park containing both domestic and exotic animals.¹⁰

Grands projets, however, ground to a halt with the Black Death of 1348. This was most clearly the case at Siena, where work on the cathedral was suspended, where other projects (walls, Fonte Gaia) were not finished until the next century, where one suburb, developed for immigrants in the 1320s, was abandoned and apparently returned

8 S. Y. Edgerton, *Pictures and Punishment: Art and Criminal Punishment during the Florentine Renaissance* (Ithaca and London, 1985), p. 71.

9 D. Norman, "'Splendid models and examples from the past": Carrara patronage of art', in *Siena, Florence and Padua: Art, Society and Religion 1280-1400*, ed. D. Norman (New Haven and London, 1995), p. 155.

10 *Gli Scaligeri*, ed. G. M. Varanini (Verona, 1988), pp. 264-5, 318-19.

to cultivation. The smaller scale of Sienese building projects can be gauged clearly in the local chronicles. There is reason, however, for seeing the Sienese case as extreme: elsewhere, after an interval, old projects were brought to completion, and new projects were started – in Venice the Hall of the Greater Council, cathedrals and other church buildings in Florence and Milan, in Bologna the new church of San Petronio, public clocks in many cities [6, 11].

Education

In late-medieval Italy 'a revolution was taking place in the way in which education was organised: state intervention was increasingly extended into this area'.¹¹ Both Villani and Bonvesin da la Riva give precise statements about schooling, Villani claiming that in Florence in 1336–8 there were as many as 10,000 pupils, girls and boys, in elementary reading schools, and hundreds more in abacus and grammar schools.¹² Villani's figures have been largely dismissed by historians as an impossible exaggeration: they would mean that Florence achieved higher schooling rates than any other European state for centuries. However, in other respects, Villani has been corroborated, in the possibility of female education (there were even female teachers in fourteenth century Italy),¹³ and in the relative ranking of subjects has been shown to be accurate: most pupils learned reading; next in importance came abacus; last and least came grammar, a minority subject, argues Bob Black, limited probably to the élite and to those intended to proceed to university.

Denley and Grendler put a certain emphasis on public provision of grammar teaching. They note how ecclesiastical schools had disappeared by 1300, under a variety of internal and external weaknesses: mainly because they were unable to meet the public and private demands for education in Italian urban societies. To meet the needs of both business and public administration, a combination of communal

11 P. Denley, 'Government and schools in late-medieval Italy', in *City and Countryside in Late-Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Essays presented to Philip Jones*, ed. T. Dean and C. Wickham (London, 1990), p. 94; and in general see Jones, *City-State*, pp. 157–8, 203.

12 Giovanni Villani, *Nuova cronica*, ed. G. Porta (Parma, 1990–1), vol. III, p. 197 (XII.94).

13 P. F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning, 1300–1600* (Baltimore and London, 1989), p. 90.

and private schools sprang up, especially in the fourteenth century. Communes declared education to be part of the common good, asserted that Latin grammar was the foundation of all virtue, and subsidised grammar teachers through contracts, stipends, rent-free housing, tax exemptions and so on. Some communes, such as Lucca, went further, funding teachers in logic and philosophy, and providing grants for university students. However, Grendler does recognise the limits of this: 'The governments judged public education to be beneficial to the community, but saw no reason to offer it gratis.' Most pupils still had to pay. Communal schools taught only a minority of pupils: the private sector was still the major provider, with parents contracting directly with teachers who either lived in, taught in rented rooms or kept boarding schools. And Denley draws the distinction between small and middling towns, where government intervention accelerated from the early fourteenth century, and the larger cities (Florence, Venice, Genoa), where such intervention was 'much delayed and much weaker'.¹⁴

Petti Balbi, by contrast, puts more emphasis on private schooling and abacus-teaching.¹⁵ She argues that private schooling preceded public in time, as parents sought the utilitarian, business-oriented skills they valued (accounting, commercial letter-writing), and that the driving force behind the proliferation of private schools was not the public good, but private profit – that of both teachers and pupils. Second, she argues that communal interventions were less commonly to establish public schools (as in the exceptional case of Bassano [23]), than to stimulate the immigration of private tutors: provisions of the Bassano type, though multiplying in the fourteenth century, were characteristic of small towns, marginal to the areas of greatest educational demand in the big cities. Third, whereas the communes intervened only rarely in primary education (for example, in circumstances of plague in Lucca in 1348 [21]), they would commit public funds to attracting and retaining abacus teachers, who were more in demand and better paid. Whether provision was public or private, education in Italy produced the most literate and numerate society in Medieval Europe.

14 Denley, 'Government and schools', p. 99.

15 G. Petti Balbi, 'Istituzioni cittadine e servizi scolastici nell'Italia centro-settentrionale tra XIII e XV secolo', in *Città e servizi sociali nell'Italia dei secoli XII–XV* (Pistoia, 1990).

1 'A world in itself: Milan, 1288

Bonvesin da la Riva (c. 1250–c. 1313) was a grammar teacher in Milan and member of the Humiliati. His writings, in both Latin and Italian, combine the religious and the didactic. In the most famous of his works, he enthusiastically describes his native city.

Bonvesin da la Riva, *De magnalibus Mediolani*, ed. M. Corti (Milan, 1974), with the corrections and suggestions of the new edition by P. Chiesa (Milan, 1997).

To all men joined in the catholic faith whom this work reaches, fra Bonvesin da la Riva, citizen of Milan, gives greeting ... As I have noticed that not only foreign peoples but also my compatriots are asleep in a desert of ignorance and are unaware of the marvels of Milan, I thought that they should be assisted and advised in their view, so that they see with open eyes and, seeing, recognise how and how much our city is to be admired. Therefore, in the year of Our Lord 1288 ... after determinedly investigating the truth of things with great diligence and much labour, I have written this little work ... at no-one's request or suggestion, and in expectation of no reward on earth, but rather by divine inspiration. And I have written with the intention that, when the pure truth of this eulogy of Milan is read and understood, three useful things will result: first, that all the friends of this city ... reading and hearing of its marvels will glorify God in thanks, and that the envious will either be converted or be saddened and consumed by their own envy; second, that all foreigners, learning of the nobility and dignity of the Milanese, will everywhere come to honour and respect them, love and defend them ...; and third, that my co-citizens, seeing themselves in this mirror, and considering into what a city they are born, will not degenerate from such nobility, nor stain and malign their *patria* with dishonourable conduct ...

Among all the regions of the earth, universal fame extols, distinguishes and places first Lombardy for its location, its density of towns and inhabitants, its beauty and its fertile plain. And among the cities of Lombardy, it distinguishes Milan as the rose or lily among flowers ... or the lion among quadrupeds and the eagle among birds ...

To make it easy to find material presented here, we shall divide this work into eight chapters: first in praise of the location of Milan and its *contado*; then, in praise, second, of its buildings, third of its inhabitants, fourth of its fertility and abundance of goods, fifth of its strength, sixth of its constant loyalty, seventh of its liberty and eighth of its dignity.

[From [chapter 1](#)] By reason of its site this prosperous city is recognised as glorious, because it is located in a rich and fertile plane, where the air is temperate ... between two wonderful rivers (the Ticino and the Adda) equally distant from it ... Are there marshes or putrid lakes corrupting the air with mists and stench? Certainly not. Rather, there are clear springs and fertile rivers ... In the city there are no cisterns or conduits bringing water from afar, but natural, fresh water, marvellous for human consumption, clear, healthful and close-at-hand, never failing in times of drought, and in such abundance that almost every decent house there has a source of fresh water, which is called a well ...

[From [chapter 2](#)] The houses with doorways onto public streets have been found to number about 12,500, in very many of which several families cohabit with a multitude of servants ... The courtyard of the commune ... occupies an area of 10 square perches¹⁶ ... In the middle stands a marvellous palace, and in the same courtyard is a tower in which are the four bells of the commune. On the east side is the palace where the offices of the podestà and judges are, at the end of which is the podestà's chapel built in honour of our patron saint Ambrose ... On the south side is a loggia where judicial sentences convicting the guilty are read out ... A ditch of admirable beauty and width circles right round the city, containing not a swamp or putrid standing water, but fresh spring-water, full of fish and crabs. This ditch runs between a marvellous wall and an internal embankment ... Beyond the walls are so many suburban dwellings that they form a city by themselves. The main gates of the city are very strong and number six; the secondary gates, called posterns, are ten ... The main gates each have a pair of towers ... The saints' shrines ... number about 200 in the city alone, with 480 altars ... and it is wonderful to note how and how much the Virgin Mary is venerated in the city, for there are thirty-six churches built in worship of her alone ... In the city the bell-towers are about 120, and the bells over 200 ...

[From [chapter 3](#)] Both in the city and in the *contado* ... the number of the population grows daily and the built-up area of the city expands ... In the city there are ten houses of canons, not including the house of the cathedral canons ... and ninety-four chapels ... and six houses of monks and eight of nuns ... most of which, in terms both of numbers

16 The Milanese *pertica* was equal to about 650 sq. m.

and property, prosper ... There are also in the city and suburbs ... ten hospitals for the sick poor, almost all well-endowed with property. Among these the chief is the hospital of [Santo Stefano in] Brolo, very rich in valuable property and established in 1145 ... Here, as the brothers of the hospital attest, are sometimes counted, especially in times of food-shortage when numbers are recorded, more than 500 sick poor on the beds, and a greater number not on beds. All are fed at the expense of the hospital. Besides these, there are in its care over 350 infants in the hands of wet nurses. All of these ill poor people, except the lepers for whom another hospital is dedicated, are received there and are made strong again through kindly and copious provision of food and board. All the poor in need of surgery are diligently treated by three surgeons specially seconded for this and in receipt of salaries from the commune. No one in misery is turned away or refused ...

There are also in the city and *contado* houses of the second order of *Humiliati*, of both sexes, reaching the number of 220, in which a large number of people lead a religious life while working with their own hands. Among these the chief is that of Brera ... There are also large numbers of houses of poverty [i.e. mendicant houses]: first the numerous convent of the Dominicans, then the Franciscans (besides their main convent, there are nine houses of these in the *contado*), third the Eremitani, fourth the Carmelites ... All are fed by alms. There are also some houses of poor nuns; among them the most noble nuns of Sant'Apollinare of the order of San Francesco excel for their honesty, sanctity, nobility and numbers ...

I shall leave counting how many human souls live in such a city to whoever can accomplish it. If he could do it accurately, he would arrive at a number, I firmly believe, of about 200,000, as it is proven sure and diligently established that over 1,200 *moggia* of corn are consumed in the city alone every day; the truth of which can be certified by those who collect taxes on milled corn ... And why should the number not be as great, since in the city alone there are without doubt 115 parishes, among which are certainly some in which over 500 families live, and some in which about 1,000 live?

How many knights ready for war this city can field, I can say, because in the city and *contado* over 10,000 can with ease maintain war horses at the commune's command ... There are in the city alone 120 lawyers in civil and canon law, and their college is believed to have no equal in the world for size and learning ... There are more than 1,500 notaries ... [and] 28 expert medics, commonly called

physicians ... [and] over 150 surgeons, of various kinds ... [and] eight grammar teachers, each with a crowd of pupils under their rods ... [and] over 70 teachers of elementary reading. The book-scribes, though there is no university in the city, exceed 40 in number, who earn their daily bread by copying books in their own hands. The ovens in the city, cooking bread for the citizens, are 300, as can be seen from the communal registers ... The retail wine-merchants, selling a wonderful wine of all kinds, are without doubt over a thousand ... [and] the butchers are over 440 ... [and] the fishermen who almost daily bring ... fish of almost every sort from the lakes and rivers in the *contado* are over 400 ... The innkeepers who accommodate foreigners for profit are about 150 in number. The smiths, who shoe horses, are about 80, from which number can be reckoned the number of horses and horsemen ... The makers of sweet-sounding, brass bells, which are fixed to the chests of horses (we don't know that they are made elsewhere) are more than 30, each of whom has many co-workers under him ... If I also wanted to describe the number of all manner of artisans, of weavers of wool, linen, cotton and silk, of shoemakers, tanners, tailors, smiths of all sorts, of the merchants who travel to all parts of the world for their merchandise and who play an important part in fairs in other cities, and of the peddlers and auctioneers, I believe that those reading and hearing this would be struck senseless in wonder ...

[From [chapter 4](#)] In our territory, fertile in fruitful produce, are grown such a large and so wonderful an abundance of many forms of grain, wheat, rye, millet, panic-grass, from which a sort of polenta is made, and every kind of vegetable, beans, chickpeas, lentils ... that they not only supply the food shortages of the city of Como, but, exported, also nourish the peoples of northern Europe ... An abundance of rape and cole are also grown, which bring not a little benefit to rich and poor alike in the winter. Our fields also produce an infinite and incredible abundance of flax ... Cherries, both bitter and sweet of every kind, are grown ... in such great quantities that sometimes over 60 carts a day are transported into the city, and from mid-May to mid-July they can be found for sale at any hour there. Likewise plums ... which are sold from the end of June until October. And at the same time as the plums begin to appear, so too abound the pears and summer apples ... then follow filberts, cornel-berries more suitable for women, jujubes and peaches ... figs and grapes of various kinds, almonds and nuts in incredible quantity, which citizens enjoy

throughout the year after every meal ... There also grow chestnuts, both common and noble varieties, ... which are abundantly available throughout the year to both citizens and foreigners ... There are also gardens, flourishing throughout the year, producing abundantly all manner of fruitful aromas: cabbages, beets, lettuce, orachs, celery, spinach, parsley, fennel, dill, chervil, calamint, gourds, garlic, leeks, parsnips ...

The meadows are watered by fertile rivers and infinite spring brooks, and supply almost infinite amounts of hay for oxen, horses, mules, sheep and cattle ... because in the *contado* of Milan the meadows are so many that they supply us each year with over 200 cartloads of hay ... The numerous vines produce wines both sweet and sharp of all sorts ... white, golden and rosé, in such quantity that some families harvest from their own vines each year 100, 500 or 1000 carts of wine ... I have no doubt that there are many cities in whose territories all the vines could not produce the wine drunk by our flies alone ... The woodland and forest and river banks provide wood of various kinds suitable for building and other uses, and also the necessary firewood ...

The city overflows with ... the meat of all kinds of quadrupeds. It is noteworthy that, as I have carefully calculated with some butchers, on the days when Christians are allowed to eat meat, about 70 beefcattle are slaughtered in the city alone every day. As for pigs, rams, lambs, goats and other forms of quadruped, both domestic and wild, slaughtered by the butchers, I shall put a figure on them to whoever can tell me the number of blades of grass ... Moreover, the lakes and rivers in our *contado* bring to us all sorts of fish ... and enrich our tables during Lent. The rivers provide not only an abundance of fish ... but also, with their mills, which are over 900 in number ... feed so many Milanese ... And note that each mill wheel ... is said to mill so much grain each day as to feed over 400 men from the bread made from it ... I believe that there are many cities in Italy in which not as much bread is eaten by the inhabitants of both sexes as is eaten by Milanese dogs alone ... Salt fish of various kinds is brought in great quantities from afar by merchants from various places, as too is precious cloth of wool, linen, silk and cotton of all kinds, and salt, pepper and other spices from overseas ... All of which this most fortunate city, which might almost be called a world in itself, separated from the rest of the earth, distributes to other cities near and far ...

Within the city, general fairs are held four times a year: on the day of the ordination of St Ambrose [7 December], on the feast day of San Lorenzo [10 August], on the Ascension of the blessed Mother of God [in spring], and on the feast of San Bartolomeo [24 August]. To all these, countless numbers of merchants and customers come. Moreover, on two days each week, Friday and Saturday, in various parts of the city, there is an ordinary market; and, what is more, everyday, almost all things necessary to man are brought in great abundance to the piazzas and put on sale with shouting ... From which it is clear that, whoever has sufficient money in our city lives extremely well, for all things congruent to human pleasure are known to be at hand. It is also apparent that here ... every man, if he is healthy, can earn money and honour according to his own station ...

[From chapter 7] Many foreign tyrants have tried to install here the seat of their tyranny, yet the divine goodness, with the constant intercession of the blessed mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose honour our cathedral is built ... together with that of our patron St Ambrose ... has often defended the city from tyrannical rage.

[From chapter 8] Two are the particular defects of this city, if I may say so: namely the lack of civil concord and of a port through which ships would be able to reach it from the sea ... To which I hope that the speeches of the just will remedy the first; the second could be remedied if the powerful of the city would apply the force in accomplishing this task that they exercise in destroying each other and in extorting money from their co-citizens to feed their own ill-will ...

It is clear from what has already been said, that our city has no equal in the world ... that it is almost another, separate world ... that it not only deserves to be called a second Rome ... but also that the seat of the papacy should be transferred here ...

2 A vision of Padua, c. 1318

'Padua is one of the few cities for which there exists a literary description from the medieval period'.¹⁷ This description, by the early fourteenth-century

17 J. K. Hyde, *Padua in the Age of Dante* (Manchester, 1966), p. 29, and for the description, pp. 29–32, 42–3.