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**Prelude to the Renaissance :  
Education and Culture in the Italian Towns,  
XIIth to XIVth Centuries**

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**1- *Italy at the time of the communes : a place of culture unique in medieval Europe.***

When one thinks of Italy, one of the connections that immediately come to mind is that of birthplace of the Renaissance : Michelangelo, Botticelli, and the other artists of the XVth and XVIth centuries, Florentine above all, have transformed the culture and the artistic expression of Europe, and not only of Europe. Our architecture, visive arts, literature and even part of our conception of life depend still today for a part upon the aesthetic forms and upon the ways of thinking that have been created by the Italian Renaissance, based itself on the legacy of classical Antiquity, rediscovered.

The topic which I am going to lecture about today is the genesis of the Renaissance, and its social and political context : as in the Quattrocento (that is the XIVth century) the Italian culture blossoms, it has in fact already a long history, going up to the XIIth century. As soon as the end of the XIIIth century, masterpieces are produced which attest a very high level of cultural developement.

Such early masterpieces are, in the field of historiography, vivid accounts and deep analysis, such as the chronicle of Florence by Giovanni Villani (writing between 1330 and 1348). In another field, the revival of eloquence and of literary production in latin, known as prehumanism ; the beginnings of Italian literature with three masterpieces : the *Commedia* - later called *Divina Commedia* - of Dante Alighieri, composed in 1304-1308, the poems (*Canzoniere*), of Petrarch (1304-1374), and Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, hundred short stories published in 1351. A complete revolution, including the use of perspective, also transforms painting between XIIIth and XIVth century, with the frescoes of Giotto at the basilica of Assisi and of Ambrogio Lorenzetti at the Palazzo Pubblico of Siena. As for sculpture and architecture, it is practically a new birth in the XIIIth century : for example artists begin to carve equestrian statues, which were no more produced since the end of Antiquity, and huge buildings such as cathedrals and public palaces are constructed in the cities.

It is absolutely not a case if such new ways of thinking, writing or painting appear precisely in that part of Europe : the Italian cities of the XIIIth and XIVth centuries, where this prelude to the Renaissance takes place, are under many aspects rather different of the rest of medieval Europe, and cultural development is an important feature of their peculiarity.

I have to record briefly the social and political context : the social group which we are considering is the aristocracy which leads the cities of Northern and Central Italy, North of Rome : Florence, Milan, Venice, Genoa, Siena, Lucca, Pisa, Verona, Asti, Piacenza and several dozens of others. All those cities are city-states, practically independent. From the beginning of the XIIth century on, they work out a special form of government, the commune, which becomes more and more sophisticated and gives birth to professionnal civil servants of very high level, the *podesta*. The political independence of the communes plays a very important

part in the elaboration of the culture of the Renaissance : this culture is basically political, and it is in great part aimed at propaganda. The communal ideology takes over the model of the ancient Romans of the republican times, free and virtuous. The famous description of Italy by Otto of Freising, at the middle of the XIIth century, perfectly analyses the importance of this reference, cultural and political, to the ancient Romans.

The aristocrats which detain the leadership of the communes are both warriors, merchants and men of culture : they fight on horseback –as the aristocracy does in whole Europe-, but they also have a strong legal culture, and they earn much money owing to their economic leadership in Europe and the Mediterranean. The Italians rule indeed over european economy : they manufacture and they export tissues and metallic items of high quality, they lend money to kings and to plain citizens throughout Europe, and they are the middlemen of the exchanges between West and East. The Italians travel much, and their travels supply them with a cosmopolitan culture which plays a great part in the preparation of the Renaissance : the best known and the most remarkable of these travels abroad is that of Marco Polo, who spends a quarter of a century in China, from 1272 to 1295. But thousands of other contemporaries of Marco travel and live throughout Europe and the Mediterranean, and several hundreds of them scatter throughout Asia. A catholic archbishopric is indeed founded in Beijing in 1307 by a Franciscan monk.

Recent historiography insists upon the role of culture in this extraordinary development of communal Italy. The different forms of cultural expression, written or oral, are the very basis of its political and economic success. If the Italians have taken the leadership of the international economy and have founded sophisticated States, those successes were largely due to their mastership of reasoning and of communication, to their knowledge of law and of techniques of large-scale writing such as notarial contracts, administrative documents, accounting.

## **2- The individual and culture : the basis of the formation and its expressions : education, notaries, books of travel and of ricordanze**

Moreover, many of the elaborate literary and artistic productions are not restrained to a small cultivated elite, but are intended to a large number of people. They rest in fact upon a mass culture, which is an absolutely unique phenomenon at that time.

### **Education, from elementary school to university**

#### **Elementary education**

One of the singularities of the Italian cities is indeed the importance of education. From the XIIth century on, elementary education spreads rapidly. The schools are private, they are directed by laical teachers who are controlled and sometimes paid by the commune. In the famous description of Florence in 1338 by Giovanni Villani, the extract most often quoted describes the variety and the density of the schools where thousands of children learn to become merchants, craftsmen, or civil servants :

« Boys and girls who learn to read are 8 to 10 000 ; boys who learn abacus in 6 schools are 1000 to 1200 ; and those who learn grammar and logics in 4 high schools are 550 to 600 ».

We see in this text that teaching includes two stages. In the first one, the boy or girl learns to read, that needs only some months ; immediately after he or she can learn to write, which lasts much longer ; a complete elementary education may last two or three years. Probably much more than fifty per cent of the small boys are concerned, and much less of the small girls.

Villani's text shows that at a second stage some of the children- boys only- go on by learning either arithmetic, or grammar and logics. These two last subjects procure the ways of expressing oneself which are the basis of rhetoric and allow afterwards to enter the university and reach liberal professions or a good position in the Church. Rhetoric also prepares the young men to take part to public life. As for the « school of abacus », it prepares to trade : it is the place where one learns to reckon, on the reckoning table called abacus or following the new method, the arithmetic, based on « arab » cifers and the use of naught. This new method, which will allow the development of abstract mathematics, is imported from the Arab world in Italy

by Leonardo Fibonacci, a merchant from Pisa who has long lived in Tunisia and writes in 1202 the first book of arithmetics, where he deals even with algebra.

### ***Intellectual formation and experience of the world***

The young merchant goes on learning trade by entering a company where he begins to work, often far from home. Fibonacci for example went to Tunis as a young boy with his father ; that gave him the opportunity of studying arithmetic, still a speciality of the Arabic world. So did Boccaccio, the famous writer of the Decamerone : at 14, in 1327, he joined his father in Naples, where he was the representant of the Bardi company, and he remained there 14 years. This long stay in Naples allowed him to discover a brilliant social and cultural life, which gave him a taste for literature. Many short stories of the Decamerone deal precisely with merchants who trade throughout the Mediterranean and haunt the local aristocratic society.

The Italian merchants have also invented another kind of literary text, the travel account. Hitherto the only travels that were told were pilgrimages. From the XIIIth century, Italian merchants and missionaries begin to travel Asia, and to tell their travels and describe the remote countries that they have visited. The most famous of these accounts is that of Marco Polo, who reveals China to the Europeans.

The combination of personal experience, especially on travelling, and of readings of contemporary, foreign, or ancient authors, is a characteristic of the Italian « prerenaissance ». Still another example : Piero de' Crescenzi, who writes about 1300 a book of agronomy which will have an enormous success and will be translated in whole Europe until the XIXth century. Crescenzi is a judge of Bologna, he travels whole Italy as assistant to a podesta ; he is also a landed owner, and his book combines the reading of latin agronomes, his personal experience on his farm, and the observations made during his travels.

The professional formation of the Italians is however not limited to practice and travels : Italy is also one of the major places for the birth of the universities in the XIIth century. The main place to study roman law is Bologna, where young men who intend to become legals (as Piero de' Crescenzi) or civil servants come from whole Europe to learn the legal knowledge that is necessary to have a fine career.

### ***The notaries public***

Bologna is also the great center for the learning of notariate, which is another basis of the practical culture of Italy.

The job of the notaries consists in writing down the contracts and the private deals of all kind. The notary has therefore to master the practice of writing, the knowledge of latin and of legal formulas, and the experience of usual transactions. The notaries work for private clients, but also for the communal administrations. They are extraordinarily numerous : there are on average 8 to 10 notaries for 1 000 habitants ; it means that about one man out of 20 is a notary. Of course they don't all work full-time. The very high number of the notaries implies that it is very cheap and usual to have a notarial record written down. For most of the contracts, they just write down a « minute », that is a short summary of the deal, on a register. Thousands of these registers have survived, and they offer an exceptional source on everyday life and economy.

### ***The notary as cultural middleman***

The notary is also a first-rate cultural middleman : he is first a linguistic intermediary, because he translates in latin the deals that his clients explain him in italian. The italian language is born at that period, during the XIIIth century, but legal records go on being written in latin. Many chroniclers who tell the history of their cities and contribute to the collective memory are notaries, who write history in the same rigorous way as legal contracts.

Probably the most famous of the notaries as cultural intermediaries is Cola di Rienzo, a popular leader who rules Rome during few months in 1347, and is well known through a very good biographer, known as the « Roman Anonymous ». The life of Cola shows how the notary, often

born in popular classes, can acquire a cultural knowledge of high level and put it at the disposal of ordinary people ; it also shows how the culture of some notaries –especially the knowledge of ancient texts- can lead them to political leadership, nearly always on the popular side.

Through their taste for literature, many notaries become important actors of the Italian prehumanism which rediscovers at the end of the XIIIth century latin literature, and uses it to renew literary creation, philosophical thought and political ideas. The best-known of the humanist notaries is Brunetto Latini (1220-1294), a Florentine notary and politician, who was the master of the young Dante at the end of his life. Brunetto translated Cicero into Tuscan (Italian), and he is above all the author of a book named *Treasure*, an encyclopedia of human knowledge. The Treasure includes a treaty of government, as politics are, following Brunetto, the most important and the most sophisticated of all human activities.

The refined culture of some notaries has also political applications, for example in the preambles of communal laws, which explain the reasons of the new rules. Thus the preamble of the Bologna statutes of 1288 looks for the basis of the law in a reflection on human nature ; an analogous reflection is produced by other notaries of Bologna when they write down the preamble of the *Liber Paradisus* of 1257, a law through which the commune of Bologna decides to free all the unfree peasants from serfdom : the notaries explain in that preamble that all men are equal, and that serfdom is due to original sin et to human wickedness.

### **Writing the history of the family and expressing one's thoughts : the *ricordanze***

Not only the notaries keep the collective memory and write down their own thoughts. Many other people, who are not professional writers, write down events that concern them, with personal comments. That individual expression, that develops during the XIIIth and still more during the XIVth centuries, is quite a new phenomenon in Europe ; it includes a large range of productions, from the construction of a complete family memory to very simple writings that aim to keep the record of a practical experience, as a travel, or just a cooking recipe, or remarks about the education of children, and so on.

An original kind of writings develops in fact, especially in Florence, from the XIIIth century on : the so-called books of *ricordanze* („memories“), or « family books » or « books of reason » (*libri rationis* : that originally means books of account). In those books, the merchant writes down facts that he cannot put in the accounting books of his company : accounts of his own household, personal transactions (for instance his acquisitions of land and his relations with his farmers), and family events like births and deaths. The book of *ricordanze* often has a rather personal mood, with commentaries and personal reflections on family and on life. Some *ricordanze* even provide an autobiography of the author, a history of his family, or a treaty of practical behavior for his heirs.

About 330 medieval Italian books of *ricordanze* still exist today. Among them, one of the most interesting is that of a man that we can define as a « middle-class Florentine », Lippo di Fede del Sega, born about 1285 and dead about 1363. Lippo would be perfectly unknown, had he not kept an accounting book with many hints at his private life. He was a small money-lender. Like most of the Italian citizens of his time, his main interest was a small landed property, in which he invested all his profits. His book, in which he sometimes explains his personal problems with his wife, is a fine example of the vividness of some *ricordanze*, and of the acquaintance with writing that many very ordinary men of that time had.

Other *ricordanze*, written by heirs of rich and old families, include genealogies based on family archives. These genealogies usually begin between XIIth and XIIIth century with the settling in Florence of the ancestor, generally a rich peasant, and they insist on the development of the family business, its cohesion and the public functions assumed by its members. For example Donato di Berto Velluti, a Florentine lawyer, writes in 1367-1370 a chronicle of his life and of the political facts of this time ; half of his chronicle is in fact a genealogy of his family, which covers eight generations on 150 years, and mentions hundreds of people with the main characteristics of their lives, that he has collected in the family archives.

### 3- Political rule and public eloquence

#### **Ruling and speaking**

Till now, we have observed the importance of culture mainly in private life ; but its importance in the political field is still much greater. In a republican system like the Italian communes, decisions are taken collectively by more or less numerous groups -often companies of several hundreds of people - ; therefore the art of ruling is in great part the art of convincing an audience. The theoricians of government of that time say that there is a specific « Italian practice » of ruling (« *mos italicus* » of Otto of Freising, « *le us as ytaliens* » of Brunetto Latini), dominated by the use of rhetoric : the concept of rhetoric includes in fact both the technic of speaking and the technic of ruling a city. It is exactly the point of view that Cicero expressed about the Roman republic ; Cicero's treatises on rhetoric will indeed have a strong influence on the communal rhetorical techniques.

#### **The fields of political communication**

The progress in the methods of communication is therefore one of the most remarkable aspects of the communal culture. It is especially strong in the XIIIth century, at the full political maturity of the communes, and it concerns three fields that all depend upon rhetoric : the written word, the spoken word, and the image. The art of the written word is the *ars dictaminis*, the art of drawing up letters ; the apex of the art of speaking is the *ars concionandi*, the art of leading a public meeting and of convincing the audience ; the third field of political communication relates to visual arts, and especially to monumental painting (large frescoes on the walls of public palaces) : the art of painting is transformed in the XIIIth century by a complete renewal which directly announces the Renaissance. Monumental painting is of great political interest for the ruling class of the communes : such a technique allows in fact to express the representations that the communal society gives of itself.

#### **A tendency to speak too much**

The taste for public speeches and the mastership of the oral expression are characteristics of the Italians of the communes that strongly impress the contemporary observers. The strangers and some of the Italians themselves mock that irrepressible tendency to make speeches in every occasion.

That tendency to speak and its excesses are the theme of one of the most important books of the Duecento, *The art of speaking and of keeping silent* (*Liber de doctrina loquendi et tacendi*, 1245) of Albertanus de Brescia. Albertanus de Brescia, himself a judge assistant of a podesta and an excellent speaker, is the author of several treatises that combine the education of the young men (Albertanus is himself the father of three sons) and a reflection on the art of ruling a city and the art of speech ; it is noticeable that polished manners, which a quite a new notion in human behaviour, are also very present in the treatises of Albertanus. He expresses in fact a global care of education of the citizen, including especially how to use rhetoric : following Albertanus, the use of the speech and polished manners are two basis of social life.

#### **Opportunities to make speeches**

The oratory skill of the Italians reached its height in the XIIIth century, but as soon as the middle of the XIIth century, Otto of Freising already noticed that eloquence was one of the major political gifts of the Italians, that they had inherited from the Romans : « They keep something of the civilization and of the wisdom of the Romans, and they maintain still today something of the elegance of the latin language and of the politeness of their manners ». There were many opportunities to address a meeting : embassies, councils, harangue to the army before the batte... The major opportunity to make a speech was the great assembly of the citizens, the *concio* : the politicians had to convince the hundreds or thousands members of the *concio* to approve a new law, to conclude a treaty with a neighbour city, or, the most momentous decision, to declare war. We should note that the art of *concionare*, handling assemblies

through speech, was very near to preaching, another form of eloquence that also develops in the XIIIth century, owing to the Franciscans and the other mendicant friars.

#### **4- From propaganda to visual arts**

The intellectual development is largely aimed to political propaganda. It is necessary, in the communal system, to inform the citizens of the political choices, to justify these choices, and to explain the ideology which leads the politics of the commune. The technical revolution of painting and sculpture, at the end of the Duecento and at the beginning of the Trecento, offers to political communication a range of new opportunities.

I shall not go further than this point, because we are arrived at the Renaissance itself, with the great artists that have founded modern painting and sculpture, and also architecture and urbanism. All the notions that I have explained till now allow to understand that the artists who have realized that transformation, from the last decades of the XIIIth century, do not more work only for the Church, as they had been doing from the beginning of the Middle Ages, but above all for political leaders, aiming at precise propaganda intents.

I take only one example, the most famous one : the large fresco called « Allegory and Effects of the Good and of the Bad Rule», that Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted in 1337-1339, to adorn the council room in the communal palace of Siena. The fresco shows on one side the benefits of a good ruling –for instance that of Siena- and on the other side the evil consequences of tyranny and discord ; that fresco expresses at his highest point the communal conception of public weal and of the role of a good government. It aims not only at celebrating the commune of Siena, but at educating its citizens : everybody is allowed to enter the communal palace and to watch the fresco. The painting is completed with inscriptions, which comment the subject ; people who can read are supposed to explain to the others. The fresco of the „Good ruling“ is therefore, not only a major stage in the history of landscape painting (it is the first use of perspective to represent a large-scale landscape, in a very realistic way), but also a major stage in the history of political thought and of propaganda.

The case of the Italian communes allows us therefore to understand that written culture, oral communication and visual arts are part of a whole and cannot be separated one from another. It makes us understand also that the elaboration of the most refined cultural and artistic forms –in our case, the masterpieces that prelude to the Renaissance- may depend upon precise conditions of political and social development of a community.

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