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The Corporate Guild Order Control of the Florentine Republic in the 13th and 14th Century

Milad D. Mohammadi
New York University, mm7213@nyu.edu



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Cover Page Footnote

Milad D. Mohammadi Professor Matteo Duni Italy during the Renaissance

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The Renaissance, being a time of great cultural and political change, was a time of significant economic development, particularly in the creation of new corporate structures. During this era, the Florentine Republic was built and dependent upon said corporate social structures, in which guilds were the foundation—not only in controlling economic life but also in solidifying the state’s connection with the Roman Catholic Church. The state was merely a product of these guilds with institutions designed to function only in the way these guilds desired. Everything from the social culture to the laws citizens followed depended heavily on the stability and strength of this corporate structure and its control over the state. This system declined in the late 14th century, following events such as the Great Plague of 1348 and the Ciompi revolt of 1378, leading to instability of the system and the rise of the Medici oligarchy following the short-lived “Popular Guilds Regime.”

The Guild was a professional association, similar to modern professional associations like the American Medical Association or the New York Bar Association. This professional association played a very critical role in Florentine life not just on an economic level, but also on a cultural level, similar to the ways modern day professional associations shape the way we conceive of professions such as medicine and law. These guilds, while employing many wage workers, were themselves small in membership in proportion to the respective industry they controlled. It is estimated that Florence had about 8,000 guildsmen before the Black Death.¹ While these guildsmen often fixed prices and manipulated the market for their interests as we

¹ John Najemy, *A History of Florence, 1200-1575*, (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 100.

will see later on, exchange rates were set by the market. Historian John Najemy writes, “There was no fixed exchange rate between florins and lire, and market fluctuations determined their relative value.”² This meant that the guilds were operating in an early proto-capitalist system, thus many factors in the market were dictated solely by supply and demand. In this economy by far the largest of the guilds was the wool or Lana guild. Najemy writes that “10,000 textile workers in a population of 120,000 means that one in every six men and women of working age was employed in the manufacture of woolen cloth.”³ This meant that the wool industry was a crucial part of the Florentine economy, and its disruption would have drastic changes on the stability of the Republic.

Before I discuss just how these corporate structures took control of the state, we must first understand how they emerged in Florence. The emergence of the corporate order goes back to the early days of the Florentine republic, marked by the development of The Commune. Communes have their origins in the feudal society that existed before the Renaissance. Feudal lords who wanted protection from outside invaders chose to come together and form collectives that would share mutual benefit by defending one another. These feudal lords, as rural aristocrats, saw the benefit of moving into a more urban area.

The commune of Florence boomed as rural aristocrats moved into the urban town. According to historian Richard Goldthwaite in *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, “this urban concentration of rural wealth followed from, on the one hand, the move by landowners into the towns during the early period of the commune.”⁴ Nobles were flocking to the urban

² Ibid., 101.

³ Ibid., 102.

⁴ Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 65.

center, making it easier to build a wall and defend the city. Likewise, this was the start of Florence, a commune created by feudal lords. This commune was the product of a war, between the Florentines and the Tuscan government backed by the Holy Roman Empire.

This conflict marked the start of the alliance between the Florentine Republic and the Papacy, which, along with other Italian states, formed the Guelf alliance. This alliance was marked by the transition of countryside noble rule to urban *popolo* (people) rule of the merchant middle class. The Ghibelline alliance was mostly formed of Imperial nobles whom the *popolo* wanted to rid from power. In the Guelf association pact dating to circa 1350, the Guelfs state, “May it be manifest to whoever shall see or read this document that all of us in the past have been united as relatives, neighbors, and friends—by one spirit, and that we are faithful and devoted members of the Holy Church, supporters of the *popolo* and the Commune and the liberty of Florence and of the Parte Guelfa.”⁵ This alliance was critical to the ties the Florentine Republic had with the Church in Rome, stating that “we therefore promise and swear to help each other, and to provide as much support as is necessary, as do those united by ties of blood.”⁶ This was a powerful alliance, and in 1266, the Guelf alliance defeated the Imperial forces of Frederick II in the Battle of Benevento.⁷ This insured that the commune of Florence was to remain free of imperial control and that it would retain its strong relationship with the Pope. As we will see, this commune was entirely controlled by the guilds, which dictated both the legislation and its execution.

⁵ Gene A. Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1998), 84-85.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 85

⁷ Albrecht Classen, *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, its Meaning, and Consequences (Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture)*, (De Gruyter, 2010), 396

The commune was made up of several institutions, one of the most important being the *Signoria*—a council heavily dominated by the major guilds (*arti maggiori*).⁸ Only these major guild members (of which there were few) were eligible to hold public office.⁹ These guilds were formed by artisans and craftspeople of their particular industry in order to control the market. Guilds had their own laws, courts, and hierarchy. Although guilds were independent, their power heavily relied on forming a government with other guilds in order to have more control over the state. Examples of major guilds include the bankers and money-lenders (*arte del cambio*), wool weavers (*arte della Lana*), and judges and notaries (*arte dei dici e notai*), just to name a few. With complete domination in their respective sectors, these guilds controlled much of urban economic life. Guilds constructed their own courts and custom houses, functioning as the financial regulators of the time period. These guilds as they grew slowly pulled power away from the nobility over time. The *Ordinances of Justice* in 1293, enacted by the Florentine leader Giano della Bella, solidified major guilds as the real political power of Florence, as it prohibited the *magnati* (nobility) from participating in politics. The ordinances state, “Heads of the twelve major guilds and the appointed ‘good men’ from the masters, and these shall elect the new Priors of the Guilds.”¹⁰ The *priors* will make up the main political position of the corporate Florentine Republic. This effectively ended the old feudal order of power and sped up consolidation of corporate guild power.

Most importantly, major guild members could run for political offices and be part of the *Signoria*. There was a gradual shift towards a fully corporate electoral structure, which brought an end to the old nobility based societal structure. Arguably the most significant of these guilds

⁸ Gene A. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969), 133.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰ B.G Kohl, A.A Smith, Giano Della Bella, *Major Problems in the History of the Italian Renaissance*, “*The Ordinances of Justice*”, (Lexington, D.C Heath and Company, 1995), 139-143

were the ones engaged in the cloth industry, namely the Lana guild.¹¹ Florence at the time was a major exporter of manufactured cloth products to other parts of the world. They were well financed from bankers of the Cambio guild.

The *Signoria* was the executive institution formed by the guild system. The *Signoria* consisted of 9 members called *priors*, who had short tenures.¹² The tenure would be only two months, which was very short compared to modern political offices, and once a tenure was complete, the member would be replaced by a new one. The purpose of this system was to prevent the formation of private factions in government. The *Signoria* also had two primary advisory bodies the twelve Buonomini and sixteen Gonfalonieri.¹³ These collegiate bodies advised executive policy and functioned similar to the modern-day government cabinet and ministers.

The legislative branch of the communal government was composed of two assemblies, the Council of the *Popolo* and the Council of the Commune.¹⁴ Unlike a modern government system, legislation was proposed by the *Signoria* and the two councils would either approve or disapprove these proposals. Most, if not all, of this legislation was designed to serve the guilds or the state religion. Building codes, regulations governing the construction of buildings similar to modern-day zoning ordinances, specifically prohibited outside competitors from competing with the guild's construction monopoly and the moral laws that were directly based on the Catholic Church's moral laws, which prohibited blasphemous acts such as following heretic ideologies, homosexuality, and many other acts deemed sinful. The *Signoria* and the two legislative councils

¹¹ Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 131.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

served as the solidifying force of guild control of society. In some respects, they were their own mini-states with their own industries, but they also controlled the entire commune. The *Signoria* was also a force that pushed its citizens to follow the line, even if there was no law to actually enforce. In *An Official Reprimand* around 1418, the *Signoria* condemned a man for manipulating the price of linen by purchasing large amounts, stating, “These methods are abominable, odious, and reprehensible, as anyone can see. They are also in violation of the intent of the *Signoria* and of our citizens, and they bring disgrace to you personally.”¹⁵ The *Signoria* and the guilds that composed it fought hard to prevent new entrepreneurs from creating competition that would otherwise harm their respective industries, and this could be clearly seen from legislation to court cases. (The symbols of the guilds can be seen to this day in *Piazza della Signoria*).

Guilds had enormous power on the economy, and often micromanaged many sectors of it. Guilds often set wages, fixed prices, prohibited competition, and approved or disapproved projects. We can see the power guilds held in coercing their members; in a contract of *The Corporation of Wine Merchants*, it is “decreed and ordained that the consuls (of this guild) are required, by their oath, to force all of the wine-sellers who sell at retail in the city and *contado* of Florence to swear allegiance to this guild and for this guild.”¹⁶ Guild members were required by guild code to attend guild meetings and were compelled to do so through fines imposed on them. A great example of this is the wine guild code which stated, “It is decreed and ordained that each wine-seller shall come to the assembly of the guild as often as he is summoned by the consuls. The consuls are required to levy a fine of 10 soldi against whoever violates this rule.”¹⁷ While it

¹⁵ Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 132.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

is unlikely that everyone at the time respected the laws of the guilds, it was clear that they were the leading force in legal matters.

For obvious reasons, there must have been some substantive benefit offered by guilds in return for this limitation of economic liberty. Guilds provided the populace with a sense of belonging and stability. Historian Gene A. Brucker in his book *Renaissance Florence* showed that this corporatist system had many benefits over a laissez-faire capitalist order. Brucker states that “a capitalistic economic order is characterized by risk, uncertainty, flexibility, and sharp fluctuations”.¹⁸ He goes further to say, “It fosters individualism and contributes to social mobility and dislocation through perpetual redistribution of wealth.”¹⁹ In contrast, he writes that a corporate social order “stresses group action; its goals are stability, security, and conformity”.²⁰ The new and powerful *popolo* did not want to risk handing economic freedom and political power to the lower class, and thus strongly defended this corporate order while seeking the backing of the Roman Church for its cultural and moral support. Everything about Florentine life stressed groups—from religion to family—and the guild system complimented this conservative line of thinking.

Guild corporate power did not just end at the economic and political level, guilds also presented a major cultural impact to urban Florentine society. Guilds commissioned much of the commune’s architectural projects that showcased the power of the guild and were often devoted to the patron saint of the city. Projects such as the Duomo of Florence were continued to be built even during economic crises, as well as a brutal plague that took the lives of an estimated third of the populace. This devotion to show the benefits provided to society was critical in keeping the

¹⁸ Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 90.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

guild as a highly respected institution that promoted art and culture. Guilds would often commission projects directed at assisting the poor as well. For example, many hospitals were built in Florence to serve the homeless. In a 1421 petition, the silk guild describes the building of a hospital for the poor: “This building is a hospital called S. Maria degli Innocenti, in which shall be received those who, against natural law, have been deserted by their fathers or their mothers, that is, infants, who in the vernacular are called *gittatelli* (literally castaways; foundlings).”²¹ Guild power relied heavily on influencing public perception and opinion in this regard, much in the same way modern institutions do the same.

Despite guild control, this corporate structure was unable to stand the test of time. A devastating plague in 1348 decimated a third of the population of Florence, followed by the Ciompi revolt of 1378, which marked the decline of the guild-based corporate structure.²² The Ciompi, a group of rebels mostly formed of the wage laborers who despised the guild elite, was not a proletariat force that sought to abolish private property; instead, its goal was to create a more open political system for the lower classes. Most of the rebels leading the Ciompi rebellion under Michele De Lando were wage laborers who were angry at the reduced wages they were receiving following a decline in the price of wool cloth.²³ Brucker states, “Stirred by the nostalgia for hearth and home felt by exiles of every class, these poverty-stricken workers were also motivated by a vision of a better life for themselves.”²⁴ The Ciompi Revolt led to a “Popular Guilds Regime,” which gave political rights to the minor guilds. This more populist state quickly fell to forces that backed the Medici family.

²¹ Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence*, 92.

²² Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 191, 46.

²³ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 151-152.

By the late 14th century, much turmoil had led to the swift decline of the guild-based corporate order, as the new Medici-controlled oligarchy slowly broke down these traditional institutions of power. Brucker writes, “By the end of the 14th century, these corporate groups were declining in strength and vitality, and were playing a less important role in Florentine life.”²⁵ The changing state, according to Brucker, no longer protected guilds in the way it used to: “The communal government steadily withered away the rights, privileges, and immunities of the guilds.”²⁶ As the Medici family established connections with the Roman Church and provided the banking services, money no longer flowed in the way it used to.

In turn, the new societal order came to be based on the dominance of the aristocratic families rather than guilds. These families had intense and often violent feuds amongst each other, which could be seen in plays like Shakespeare’s famous play *Romeo and Juliet*, where the Montague and Capulet families relentlessly opposed each other. This history can be seen in Florence with the still standing family towers, used as a safe haven during civil unrest. The Albizzi family who took power after the fall of the “Popular Guilds Regime” in 1382, marked the end of the guild rule.²⁷ Controlling the government, the Albizzi ended *popolo* rule and established family rule in its place. Thus, the guild no longer represented the established political, cultural, and societal order; instead, it became family connection and rivalries between these connections. Rivalries between the Albizzi, Alberti, Strozzi, and Medici families emerged as they battled each other for power.²⁸ By the mid-15th century, Florentine culture became completely dominated by the Medici family, and the era from 1469 to 1492 is known to

²⁵ Ibid., 98.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 165.

²⁸ Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 135.

historians as the Laurentian Age, named after Lorenzo the Magnificent (*il magnifico*) de Medici.²⁹ In turn, the Medici family becomes the main patron of the arts sponsoring the construction of projects throughout Florence, replacing the older guild-based patronage. According to Italian humanist and librarian Vespasiano da Bisticci, the Medici family, especially Cosimo de Medici, gave off a strong appearance of charitableness and patience. Cosimo was able to display himself to the populace as a respectable, trustworthy man, acting as the ultimate Machiavellian prince. Cosimo befriended people in ways that created strong connections and assisted those who helped bring him out of his previous exile. Vespasiano writes that Cosimo “rewarded those who brought him back [from exile], lending to one a good sum of money, and making a gift to another to help marry his daughter or buy lands.”³⁰ Cosimo not only created connections with other wealthy families but also made strong connections with individuals, notably prominent humanist thinkers. Vespasiano writes that Cosimo “befriended Marsiglio, son of Ficino [prominent humanist], a man of good talent and carriage and learned in Greek and Latin. His means were small, and to keep him from poverty Cosimo bought for him a house in Florence and a farm in Careggi, giving him thus income sufficient to allow him with one or two companions and generally to serve his need.”³¹ The 15th century was dominated by powerful families like the Medicis; the people understood that only these families were capable of providing them with capital and political power. Humanists like Vespasiano had to compliment people like Cosimo in order to receive funds for their projects. Cosimo made important political—both secular and religious—connections, shielding his family from as many political opponents as possible. Brucker writes, “Cosimo was host to both the German emperor Frederick

²⁹ Ibid., 256.

³⁰ Ibid., 121.

³¹ Bisticci, Vespasiano da, Kegan Paul, *Portrait of Cosimo de' Medici, The Vespasiano Memoirs*, (Routledge, 1926), 174.

III and the Byzantine emperor John Paleologue, as well as other, less distinguished princes of church and state who dined and lodged in the palace on the Via Larga, or in the villas at Careggi and Cafaggiuolo.”³² The Medici family lived the lifestyle fit for a royal family and made all the connections and diplomatic arrangements the once powerful guilds and *Signoria* had made.

Ultimately, the most lasting impact the guilds had in Florentine history and world history at large was defining what the Renaissance truly meant. While the Renaissance had always meant a supposed “rebirth” of classical antiquity to its proponents, underlying this proposition was the idea that something had killed antiquity. For much of the scholars of the Renaissance, this was the Middle Ages and its predominantly feudal-based economy. It was the advent of the guild that ended the feudal order in Florence, which truly marked the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Famed historian E.H Gombrich wrote of debates that defined the era of the Renaissance: “It is important, after all this debate, to go back and ask what the Renaissance thought of the Renaissance.”³³ For Florentine guild members who lived through it, it was very clear what the Renaissance meant. For them, it was their domination of economic and social life, their decision to construct great works of art, and finally their decision to create a political system that left no room for feudal era lords to participate. Ultimately, this means that the culture was a byproduct of the guilds rather than the catalyst.

In the end, the guild-based corporate structure of Florence was what had held the society and state together in the 13th and 14th centuries. Underlying a time period of rapid cultural and political change, the guilds of Florence determined the outcome of what this change meant to people in everyday life. The guilds decided everything from how buildings looked, to how

³² Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, 121.

³³ Robert Black, *Renaissance Thought*, (Abingdon, Routledge, 2001), 23.

income was distributed, to how society should be formed. The power guilds defined success and failure and existed both in the economic and cultural markets. When it came to the great thinkers who were to be chosen to engage in artistic and cultural creations for Florentine society, guilds decided which projects to commission and which to abandon. While many famous independent scholars, artisans, and thinkers existed during the Renaissance, their success or failure was ultimately based on their ability to secure good relations and funding from the corporate system the guilds had formed. This corporate structure formed the political connection with the Papacy, defined culture, and dominated the economic sphere of Florence. Its decline was the start of a new era of family-based economic and political control that drastically changed Florence in the 15th century.

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