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The tower societies of medieval Florence

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THE TOWER SOCIETIES OF MEDIEVAL FLORENCE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Paul R. Harrison

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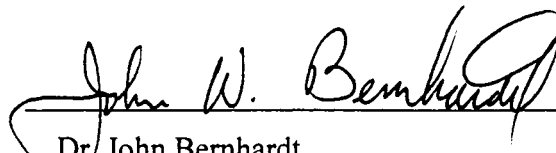
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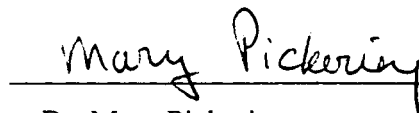
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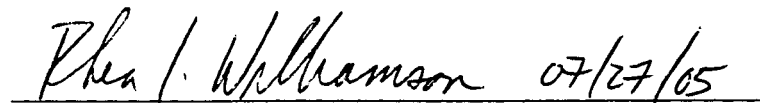
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ABSTRACT

THE TOWER SOCIETIES OF MEDIEVAL FLORENCE

By Paul R. Harrison

This thesis addresses the topic of the tower societies of medieval Florence during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It examines their origins and how they evolved from the fall of Rome to the advent of the commune. It also examines how they were constructed and organized. In addition, the towers became the target of the new popular government, the *Primo Popolo*, because they were seen as a threat to civic stability.

Research on this subject reveals that the towers were not the sole source of civic chaos and disorder, but instead they were a key element of the complex communal social order. The towers played an important role in managing the early commune. The towers provided security, protection, and social order in Florence. Once the *Primo Popolo* began to destroy the towers, the commune removed one of the key controlling agents. As a result, chaos and violence plagued the city for nearly a century.

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Chapter 1.
Introduction:
The Towers of Medieval Florence

When looking at a panoramic view of modern Florence from Fiesole, one cannot help but be amazed at how it has maintained its overall visual continuity with the Renaissance city of lore. The significant monuments stand out just as stunningly as they did in the fourteenth and fifteenth century, giving the viewer the same overwhelming appreciation travelers must have felt when approaching the city six hundred years ago. One can clearly see the jewel of the city, Santa Maria del Fiore. Its wonderful dome, designed by Brunelleschi, and its adjacent campanile, designed by Giotto, still inspire and dominate the city. One can easily see the Palazzo Vecchio and the general outline of the third circuit of walls. The careful and diligent observer can make out several important monuments, but he must be aware that the view of the city as we know it today is a stagnant view of Florence. The great cities of Europe have attempted to preserve the historical legacy of their cities by crystallizing their cities in a moment in time, and in the case of Florence they have attempted to crystallize it in its Renaissance brilliance. The view of the city today boasts the great accomplishments of the Renaissance, but it tells us very little of the city before this great moment in history. It tells us almost nothing about its Roman origins, the Dark ages, and the Carolingian world, and, most importantly, it tells us very little about Florence in the twelfth century.

If one could see the city of Florence during the twelfth century, one would have a very different image than the one classically seen in the famous Pinata dell Centena

fresco *View of Florence* painted c. 1490. One would see a city not dominated by civic structures such as churches and government buildings but rather a crowded, haphazard, and chaotic mix of private and ecclesiastical structures: homes, churches, and, most obviously, towers. Perhaps the best portrayal we have of the city's appearance in the twelfth century can be found in the Bigallo fresco of 1342.¹ Here we see a city festooned with spiraling towers and dense rows of structures narrowly divided by streets and alleys. The city was tightly packed trying to fit into the narrow confines of the walls built in 1172, and streets chaotically snaked and meandered their way through the irrational and haphazard construction of the city.² The most dominating feature was without doubt the landscape of towers. The towers were not only an expression of the chaotic and dense nature of the twelfth century city, but more importantly they were an expression of the private nature of power in the city. Just as Santa Maria del Fiore, the Palazzo Vecchio, and Giotto's Campanile boasted civic pride, the towers boasted personal and private pride. They were symbols of family power and domination, and they were symptomatic of the bizarre mixture of private and public concerns of the communal state. The civic world of the twelfth century and thirteenth century was dramatically different from the civic world of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, which helped give birth to the great Renaissance city we most commonly know. To understand this chaotic civic world of the twelfth century one must understand the towers and their role in the evolution of the city-state of Florence.

¹ Giovanni Fanelli, *Firenze Architettura e Città* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1973), fig. 20, 55.

² Gene Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 7-11. For a more detailed description, read Brucker's introduction to the Renaissance city

In many ways it is a wonder of history that Florence came to be such a dominant force in the Renaissance. Florence may have had ancient origins, but for the great majority of its pre-Renaissance history, it was a minor and unimpressive city. Not until the twelfth century do we see Florence undergo a dramatic transformation which would help establish the underpinnings for its future greatness. The commercial revolution occurring throughout all of Europe helped the city to emerge from its humble past and significantly expand its population and territory. Due to the weakness and almost total disintegration of feudalism in Tuscany, people were allowed to migrate to the cities without legal barrier.³ This phenomenon led to the rapid increase in Florence's population, and coupled with the nominal imperial authority, the city began to behave as a commune. Though legally it was not recognized as a legitimate commune, it nonetheless behaved as a commune. By the late eleventh century, Florence began collecting feudal dues from the *contado* and in the early twelfth century it began to engage in foreign policy-- both were rights of a commune. These rights were not granted, but assumed.⁴ One of the goals of the commune was to control the *contado*, the surrounding county traditionally under the authority of the Bishop of Florence. In order to achieve this, Florence conquered this territory and required the magnates of the *contado* to immigrate into the city so as to be more effectively under the control of the commune. But the magnates also immigrated to the city because they, like the newly freed men, understood the advantages of residing in an urban environment.

³ J. K. Hyde, Society and Politics in Medieval Italy: The Evolution of the Civil Life, 1000-1350 (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), 27.

⁴ Ferdinand Schevill, History of Florence (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), 60-61.

One of the interesting elements of this magnate migration was how magnate culture, as expressed in the *contado*, was transplanted into the city. Previously, the noble families ruled and vied for power in the *contado* with their *rocche*, castles or forts. Though the commune supplanted the nobility's dominance over the *contado*, the nobility succeeded in transferring their modus of power into the city. They attempted to rule in the cities just as they had ruled in the *contado*. The noble families ruled over their neighborhood or quarter as feudal lords, replacing their country *rocche* with towers and fortress like compounds, and they organized tower societies to secure, proliferate, and expand their influence over the city.

These towers and their corresponding tower societies, also known as *consorterie*, became the dominant feature of the medieval skyline and society. The tower societies possessed an interesting mixture of public and private defense operating as micro proto-governments in the reemerging city-states of medieval Tuscany. The towers could be used to protect the family or an individual society member during a feud or civil war, or they may have also been used for public defense while either a rival city or a foreign force was attacking the city. These societies evolved into communal shareholders. The tower and its building complex were held in common. The tower societies guaranteed a member protection and allies during a time of crisis. They also provided a means to secure peace in the city. Society members could become members of other societies, and it appears that this may have been a means to secure peace between societies. A society member could sell his portion or pass it on to his sons. Historians have concerned themselves with two essential problems when examining the tower societies: how they

operated and how they contributed to urban conflict. The conflicts between competing *contadi* and *rocchi*, which had frequently erupted throughout the countryside, were now located in the urban centers and therefore intensified the urban violence.

Two basic assumptions about the towers need to be addressed. First, historians have argued that the towers and their societies were a major agent of discord and chaos in the city. Much has been made of the terrible vendettas acted out between rival clans and magnate families. The towers became a symbol of noble arrogance and an obstacle to civic harmony, and it has been claimed that in order to attain and secure civic harmony the towers had to be destroyed. Therefore, from the advent of the *Primo Popolo* in 1250 one of the driving forces was to destroy the towers so as to secure civic peace and order. The *Primo Popolo* was the first civic government organized by citizens who did not have a designation as magnates but identified themselves as the *Popolo*. The *Popolo* emulated the nobility by organizing their own societies, and even though they were open to all classes, except the rival magnate class, the wealthy and powerful guild members dominated their leadership.⁵ Though suffering a temporary setback from 1260 until 1282, the *Popolo* once again set out to destroy the power of the magnates and the symbol of their power by passing the Ordinances of Justice in 1293. The *Popolo* intended to check the arrogant and destructive display of magnate power and to secure civic order, but ironically it actually ushered in the most violent episodes of medieval Florentine history. This fact inspired the twofold intent of this examination. First, the attempt by the commune to destroy the towers and restrain private violence actually intensified the

⁵ Daniel Waley, *The Italian City-Republics* (Harlow: Longman, 1988), p. 131.

chaos and violence in Florence. The commune was essentially a confederacy of many private societies, and by destroying the towers it was actually dismantling one of the integral components that collectively comprised the commune. The absence of the towers upset the delicate balance of the city. Second, the towers were never truly and completely destroyed but rather were transformed by changing ideas about private architecture and co-opted by a new emphasis on public architecture.

It has been proposed that the towers and their societies were a threat to civic order and a cause of violent faction, but it appears that the opposite may actually be true. Undoubtedly the towers contributed to violence and discord, but this supposition fails to recognize that violence and discord were a regular aspect of medieval society whether towers existed or not. Further, this assumption fails to recognize that towers were essentially defensive in nature and not offensive. Yes, objects could be thrown from the towers but they could only truly affect the surrounding area of the tower. Towers may be symbols of military power, but it is a relatively stationary power. They could be used only to secure power in one locus, and they could not be easily exploited to expand power via the tower itself. Towers were usually a place of retreat for society members who needed protection, usually during a vendetta. Therefore they represented essentially stagnant power that was bound to a specific space. The destruction of the towers did not destroy magnate power but actually inadvertently fragmented that power, making it more dangerous and unpredictable. Even though the *Popolo* could destroy an individual tower it did not always succeed in destroying the society associated with the clan. In fact, by destroying the towers the *Popolo* actually forced the power of the towers to become

dynamic by liberating its stagnant power base. The *Popolo* made the mistake of thinking that destroying the symbol of the magnates' power would destroy their power, and exiling leading magnate families would secure civic peace. In reality, it liberated magnate power from the neighborhood and allowed them to seek help from sympathetic cities. It forced them to exercise a more dynamic and offensive power rather than the static defensive power most commonly exercised in connection with the towers. By eliminating their neighborhood specific power, it forced them into an end game for total domination of the city. This unleashed a prolonged period of civil war. The two rival groups, Magnates and the *Popolo*, attempted to secure their total dominance over the city and yet neither had the means to achieve this dominance. In a sense this led to a violent stalemate and a war of attrition that eventually paved the way for oligarchical despotism.

The second assumption posits that the towers were destroyed and civic monuments became the norm. This assumption fails to recognize that the towers were never completely destroyed. To be sure many towers, and perhaps the majority, were destroyed, but they were never completely destroyed. Some towers were truncated, and others collapsed due to neglect or ill design, but despite this, many towers did remain, and a great deal of evidence demonstrates in fact that they were actually valued and glorified by the *Popolo*. The Ordinances of Justice of 1293 were not as successful in achieving their goal as has been generally assumed. For the Ordinances did not systematically destroy the towers but attempted to eliminate them in a more piecemeal and random fashion. Generally only the most offensive and violent magnates were targeted and in fact several families with proper connections were spared destruction.

This inconsistency helped save several towers. Though the numbers of towers remaining in the thirteenth century was significantly smaller than its peak of possibly one hundred and fifty in 1180 according to Robert Davidsohn, many towers did remain but their function began to change.⁶ First of all, the commune co-opted the towers into their own civic architecture as can be seen in the Palazzo Vecchio. Second, the new idea of the family transformed the towers into residences and put greater emphasis on palaces rather than towers as a symbol of family power. Third, public architecture began to take precedence over private architecture. Civic pride and cooperation put greater emphasis on public works as opposed to private works. Finally, the towers, though transformed in their uses, were guaranteed a space in the city because they were still seen as a potent symbol of prestige. Though they may not exercise military power, they still exemplified personal power and therefore were highly valued by magnate and merchant families alike. The towers were not destroyed but transformed and modified to meet the needs of a new urban culture that would flourish in the Renaissance.

⁶ Robert Davidsohn, Storia di Firenze, vol. I (Florence: Sansoni, 1956), p. 554.

Chapter 2.

The Historiography of the Tower Societies and Communal Violence

The historiography of the tower societies is rather complex for a variety of reasons. First of all, Pietro Santini has been the only historian to dedicate an analysis exclusively to the towers, but it was a limited and now rather dated study which will be elaborated on later in this analysis of the major historiography. The towers have been addressed in many different analyses but always within the context of another analysis. The tower societies were an essential part of the commune and encompassed many different aspects of medieval society and the Florentine civic history, and therefore one must draw on a variety of historical narratives and analyses to understand the towers in their proper context. The towers did not exist in isolation but were inter-related with several aspects of the medieval Florentine polity including feudalism, the medieval empire, magnate families, the emergence of the merchant class, the conflict between the magnates and *Popolo*, civic and factional violence, the Guelph and Ghibelline conflict, architectural design and urban planning, the *Primo Popolo*, and the final triumph of the oligarchic despots. All of these historical themes of medieval Florence were intertwined with the towers and their societies and therefore they had to be addressed by historians. Yet, there has never been a study exclusively dedicated to the towers since Santini's initial research. Nonetheless, they all have contributed to the study of the towers and a general survey of the historiography of medieval Florence will elucidate many of the major arguments and debates over the meaning of the towers in the context of the conflicts that wracked the city. The following analysis of the tower society

historiography reveals that, although historians have discussed and advanced our understanding of the towers, it is time for a new synthesis dedicated exclusively to re-examining the towers in light of the century of analysis that has occurred since the original examination. A comprehensive examination and a fresh synthesis will give us a clearer and more complete understanding of the towers and their societies.

In the late part of the nineteenth century three seminal works written by three exemplary historians, Pietro Santini, Robert Davidsohn, and Gaetano Salvemini, profoundly advanced our understanding of medieval Florence. These three historians were the first to deal with the tower societies and their impact on the social crisis that plagued the city of Florence. Pietro Santini wrote the first published work on the towers in 1887. It was titled “Società Delle Torri in Firenze” and was presented in the most important journal of Italian history, the *Archivio Storico Italiano*. Santini followed this examination in 1889 with a publication of the major sources he relied on to support his research titled *Documenti dell'Antica Costituzione del Comune di Firenze*. Just seven years later Robert Davidsohn published the first volume of his four-volume history of medieval Florence titled *Geschichte von Florenz*. This monumental work was finally completed in 1927. Though Davidsohn did not examine the towers in any depth, and his monograph will not be examined in this analysis, it should be noted that his multi-volume research has been perceived as one of the greatest contributions to the history of medieval Florence for its sheer scale and scope. Davidsohn reconstructed the history of Florence in an organic approach, meaning that every aspect and every development was analyzed in an extraordinarily detailed fashion. Yet this massive tome with extraordinary detail

that is far too burdensome for the general reader of history suffering the sole flaw of excessive specialization. As Schevill explains, “Although from his point of view these tiny multiplied data possess each one a distinct importance, they bring it about that the large structural lines of the work at times completely disappear.”⁷ The third, and most controversial scholar, Gaetano Salvemini, was a socialist historian and his controversial book *Magnati e Popolani in Firenze dal 1280 al 1295* published in 1899 took a controversial position that would dominate the debate concerning the conflict between the Magnates and the *Popolani* for the first half of the *twentieth-century*. All three of these historians made a major contribution to the study of medieval Florence but for the purposes of this analysis the works of Santini and Salvemini had the most profound effect on the *twentieth-century* historiography concerning the tower societies. This historiographical analysis will first address the major contributions and ideas of Santini and Salvemini, and it will then examine the impact these two historians have had on the historiography of the *twentieth-century*.

Pietro Santini’s article on the tower societies of Florence is still the only work that has concerned itself exclusively with the towers. Santini was no doubt a product of his times and therefore his research has its limitations, an issue to be further discussed, but he nonetheless also represented a newer, more modern approach to history. Santini’s work was clearly document driven, but that was not always the case in Italian historiography. One of the first monographs on medieval Florence was written by the Genevan historian

⁷ Schevill, *Florence* p. xxxiii.

J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi.⁸ The French Revolution had a profound influence on Sismondi's work. Applying the French model to medieval Florence, he perceived the medieval commune as a revolutionary force against the antiquated feudal structure. Unfortunately, Sismondi was a product of his time and therefore he attempted to construct a history that conformed to the prevalent early nineteenth century mentality of liberalism rather than examining the historical evidence on its own terms. The French model was not appropriate to the unique conditions in medieval Florence. It was not very long before a new school of historiography emerged that demanded a greater reliance on evidence rather than on the ideology that plagued Sismondi's work. This new school would not only reveal Sismondi's over-reliance on liberalism but also demonstrate his weakness concerning historical fact.

Sismondi's work launched a great debate over the origins of the medieval commune. Were its origins derived from ancient Roman municipal traditions or were they derived from the political traditions of the German invaders? In the attempt to resolve this conflict and undermine Sismondi's work two important innovations in Italian historiography would occur that advanced our understanding of medieval Italy. First, several new sources were unearthed that seriously questioned the veracity of Sismondi's historical facts. Second, the new school of historiography dictated that history should not be based on dogma but on historical sources. Schevill explains:

Scholars of great renown such as Saigny, Leo, Hegel, and Troya were drawn into this fundamental debate, and while they were not able to bring the quarrel to a

⁸ J.C.L. Simonde de Sismondi, Histoire des Républiques Italienne du Moyen Age, 16 vols. (Paris, 1809-18).

speedy settlement, they succeeded in drawing into the light of day a body of hidden material concerning the rise of the Italian communes which added invaluable details to our knowledge of the subject. . . . The vigorous controversy that followed had shown the superiority of documents, which were the immediate impersonal records of political and juridical acts or of commercial transactions, over chronicles with their inevitable errors of fact and their element of personal bias.⁹

Sources, rather than ideology, would be the driving force of historical research, and, more importantly, civic sources-- pacts, truces, business records, minutes of meetings-- would be used to recreate the history of the commune rather than the chroniclers who were notoriously inaccurate. This drive would give birth to one of the most important historical journals in Italian historiography-- the very same journal that would publish Pietro Santini's seminal article on the tower societies.¹⁰

The year 1842 marked the beginning of the *Archivio Storico Italiano*. This journal intended to release to the public previously unpublished records and manuscripts. In addition to these sources a few analytical monographs would be included. The *Archivio* was a huge success and has become one of these most important publications dealing with the history of Tuscany and Florence. It established the model that all other Italian provinces would imitate as they mimicked this publication with their own

⁹ Schevill, *Florence* p. xxvii.

¹⁰ Pietro Santini, "Società delle torri in Firenze" *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 20 (1887), pp 25-58, 178-204.

journals.¹¹ This determination to reveal new sources was coupled with a new social approach to history. The model for most historians had been the ancient exemplars, especially Thucydides and Tacitus. This model, however, was problematic in that it was dominated by the view from the top and did not concern itself with the sociological, intellectual, economic, and psychological forces at play in history. By the end of the nineteenth century Italian historiography began to concern itself with every aspect of medieval society. This determination to examine every aspect of medieval life, from the mundane to the most complex, married with the desire to support it with sources became the hallmark of *twentieth-century* historiography, but it was also a quintessential aspect of Santini's work.

The towers were not a unknown topic in Italy considering the wonderful examples that not only survived in Florence but that still today beautifully exemplify the small medieval city of San Gimignano. The towers were also notoriously described in Giovanni Villani's fascinating chronicle of this period. What distinguished Santini's work was his reliance on new sources that dealt directly with the tower societies. These sources were the pacts themselves that explicitly detailed the organization and management of these towers. Santini's article was divided into the following nine major sections: 1. A brief history of the destruction and demolition of the towers; 2. The Towers recorded in the documents at the end of the thirteenth century; 3. An examination of the statutes disposing of the towers; 4. The pacts and conventions of the tower societies; 5. A comparative analysis of similar statutes disposing of the towers in Bologna

¹¹ Schevill, p. xxviii.

and Lucca; 6. The formation and scope of the towers; 7. The societies recorded in private documents; 8. The societies in the *contado*; 9. The tower societies and their relationship to the origins of the Florentine commune. Overall, Santini's work is still very valuable as a general introduction to the towers and is often cited by contemporary historians. It still has its merits, which shall be discussed, but there were some fundamental limitations due to the essential descriptive nature of the study.

One of the strengths of Santini's examination is his narrative description of the destruction and demolition of the towers. One becomes very aware that the destruction was not limited to the thirteenth and fourteenth century but was ongoing even within his time due to the ravages of age and modernization. Santini undoubtedly was a master of the historical material as demonstrated by his extensive list of sources describing and identifying major towers and their societies. Yet the most exemplary aspect of Santini's research was his description of the tower pacts. Santini's publication was the first detailed examination of how the Florentine tower pacts organized, managed, and regulated the tower societies. Santini was not the first to examine the towers, however, considering that in 1880 Giovanni Gozzadini published a study of the towers of Bologna, but Gozzadini did not publish or analyze the tower pacts.¹² His work was purely descriptive and more a catalogue of towers rather than a historical analysis. Santini's work differs from Gozzadini's because he began to shed light on the actual management of the towers by a detailed analysis of all the existing pacts gleaned from the city archives. Santini would eventually publish this collection two years later advancing our

¹² Giovanni Gozzadini, Delle torri gentilizie in Bologna e delle famiglie alle quali prima appartenno (Bologna, 1880).

knowledge of medieval Florence and allowing future historians an opportunity to examine the pacts themselves.

Santini's description of the pacts cannot be dramatically improved, but this does not mean our understanding of the pacts cannot be expanded. Santini's work began to shed light on the content of the tower pacts, but he did not analyze the importance and meaning of the tower societies within the larger historical context of medieval Florence. We learn how the towers were organized, managed, controlled, limited, and eventually destroyed, but we do not gain any great understanding of the dynamic forces at play that gave birth to the towers and ultimately destroyed them. He also failed to examine the contributions the towers made to the Florentine commune. This is not to say that Santini's examination is flawed. It appears that Santini's primary concern was to bring attention to this fascinating aspect of the medieval city. It had previously never been examined, and now for the first time scholars were becoming aware of the discovery of new sources that described their management. In a sense Santini was establishing the foundation for future research and analysis, and to secure this legacy he followed up his article with the sources themselves so that following historians would be able to examine these sources and draw new conclusions and assertions. Despite the analytical limitations of his work, his argument struck a serious blow against the prevalent school of thought that relied far too heavily on the French model of the medieval communal uprisings. The Laon uprising provided a very neat model for medieval historians that seemed to be supported by the French revolution. Far too many historians examined the Italian communes through the lens of the French model but Santini began to shatter this model

and create the possibility for a fresh approach to medieval Florence. He demonstrated that Italian communes were not a rebellion against feudalism, as was commonly thought, but rather a political expedient in response to the almost complete lack of any political structure.

In his final analysis Santini directly engaged the French historian F. T. Perrens and his assertion that the commune could trace its origins to the artisan associations and merchant development.¹³ Santini believed that Perrens incorrectly understood the Italian historian Pasquale Villari's assertion that the first motions of the commune occurred when they attempted to preserve the free commerce of the city.¹⁴ Santini argues that Perrens mistakenly assumed that the nobility was automatically in opposition to commerce and an impediment to its growth. Perrens believed that the communes' attempt to bring the nobles of the *contado* under the control of Florence was a calculated move to bring all nobles under municipal control, but in fact there was a distinction between the nobles of the *contado* and the nobles already residing in the city. According to Santini, Perrens believed that the merchant class had an exclusive grasp on power in the city but he failed to understand that the noble class was extremely involved in the "intrigue of politics." Perrens confused the medieval French communal model with the Italian communal model.¹⁵ The second major problem with Perrens' monograph was that he asserted that the first artisan associations began in 1101, but new evidence presented by Santini demonstrated that this date was inaccurate. Santini points out that there were

¹³ F. T. Perrens, Histoire de Florence (from the origins to 1434). 6 vols. Paris, 1877-83.

¹⁴ Pasquale Villari, "Le prime origini e le prime istituzioni della Repubblica Fiorentina," Il Politecnico, Serie IV, vol. II (Parte letteraria, 1866), pg. 13.

¹⁵ Santini, "Società delle Torri," p. 195.

no sources describing artisan associations before 1138. Furthermore, Villani describes the first artisan organization occurring in 1150. Based on these two examples, Santini believed Perrens was incorrect. Santini further undermines Perrens' claim by asserting that the first signs of autonomy were the statutes of the commune, and these first statutes were pacts of concord between warring factions in the city-- factions that would invariably become the tower societies. According to Santini, these statutes of concord were the embryos of the communal constitution.¹⁶

Santini's criticism and analysis completely debunks the French model as applicable to the Florentine commune. In the French model, as in the French Revolution model, the merchants were usurpers of feudal power. As reflected in the uprising in Laon, merchants rebelled against the tyranny of feudalism and the ancient regime and established freedom. The merchants and nobles were depicted as two irreconcilable groups whose interests were diametrically opposed. In fact, the differences between the two groups were never that clearly obvious in medieval Florence-- an issue that would become a major point of contention throughout all subsequent historiography on this topic. Santini succeeded in demonstrating that the Florentine commune was not a usurper but evolved out the necessity for concord. The commune was a negotiated agreement to maintain the peace and unity of the city. In many respects the tower pacts were the model for pacts of concord negotiated by the commune to resolve conflicts between rival factions. According to Santini, these negotiated agreements and pacts were the true origin of the commune.

¹⁶ Santini, p. 198.

Though Santini's work was generally descriptive in nature he did make a major contribution in our understanding of how the towers worked and introduced several new sources concerning the tower pacts. Moreover, Santini also began to shed new light on the origins of the commune and the role the tower societies played in creating this new autonomous city-state. One weakness of Santini's article, however, is that he does not provide any deeper understanding behind the communal program that attempted to destroy and truncate the towers. The Ordinance of the Justices was a series of statutes that targeted the towers and the magnate class. Santini briefly addresses these statutes and the motivation behind them, but he does not provide us with any new insight into the issue that could not be ascertained from reading Giovanni Villani or Dino Compagni. This issue would be addressed by future historians and most particularly by Gaetano Salvemini.

Santini succeeded in demonstrating that the tower societies played an important role in the evolution of the commune. He also shattered the idea that the Italian communes were replicating the French communal model. Where the divisions between rural feudal nobility and urban autonomous burghers were relatively clear in France, the divisions in medieval Florence were far murkier. Gaetano Salvemini confronted this issue head on in his seminal and controversial monograph Magnati e popolani dal 1280 al 1295 printed in 1899.¹⁷ Salvemini, a socialist historian, perceived social and economic factors and key forces in historic events. One of the pivotal autonomous moments of the nascent commune was its attempt to gain hegemony over the surrounding countryside

¹⁷ Gaetano Salvemini, Magnati e popolani dal 1280 al 1295 (Florence, 1899, repr. Milan, 1960).

since it was a key source of its economic self-sufficiency and future success. Salvemini saw this struggle to gain supremacy over the *contado* as evidence of the historical materialism at work. Not only would this communal action secure Florence's economic and political independence, it would also give birth to a prolonged conflict between the *magnati* and the *popolani*.

What confuses the situation is that Salvemini was not unaware of the complex makeup of the magnate class. He had written a laureate thesis on knighthood in medieval Florence and was keenly aware of the mixed makeup of the magnate class. Salvemini described the magnates as a varied group comprised of two diverse characteristics: the "magnates by accident" and the old nobility. The accidental magnates were wealthy merchants and entrepreneurs who assumed an aristocratic style of life and perspective. Despite this mixed nature of the magnate class and its partial merchant makeup, Salvemini still argued that the conflict was fundamentally a dispute between a feudal way of life and the new merchant way of life. The magnates represented the old feudal role of consumer, landlord, and rural landowner, and the *popolani* represented the new class of urban citizens who were producers and urban tenants. Salvemini argued that the conflict was fueled by two economic concerns. First, the *popolani* were frustrated with the typical feudal immunities granted to nobles especially in the form of taxation. Second, even though the magnates were producers they were an inhibition to the merchant class' desire for unfettered accumulation of wealth. In many respects, despite Santini's assertions, Salvemini's arguments seem almost to revert to the French model. The socialist ideology in the wake of the French revolution seems to echo throughout

Salvemini's interpretation. It reeks of dialectical opposites despite the fact that the magnate class was far more diverse than the dogma should allow. The reason this argument is so important is that the towers became the symbol of magnate power and abuse. As a result, the desire to weaken and undermine magnate supremacy was inextricably linked to the destruction of the towers. As long as the towers existed the magnates remained a threat and therefore their elimination would become a key factor in the popular government.

Salvemini's monograph had a profound effect upon the historiography of the medieval commune. In many respects he was the first historian to give the topic a modern ideological interpretation. Socio-economic forces were now seen as pivotal in shaping events, but Salvemini's argument inspired many responses that refuted his socialist claims. One of the first to respond was the Russian historian Nicola Ottokar in his monograph Il commune di Firenze alla fine del Dugento published in 1926.¹⁸

Salvemini's problem was a weakness inherent in all socialist historiography. Historical events and facts were often tailored to fit ideological imperatives. Ottokar argued that Salvemini's socialist materialism contributed to overly simplified interpretations that were excessively mechanical. Ottokar argued that the magnate class and the ruling oligarchy were far more homogeneous and that political disputes were not necessarily linked to class conflict but often had very local and personal origins. Drawing upon extensive archival research Ottokar examined all of the major families of the patriciate and found multiple similarities between the magnate families and the *grande popolani*.

¹⁸ Nicola Ottokar, Il commune di Firenze alla fine del Dugento (Florence, 1926; repr. Turin, 1962).

The class divisions were tenuous at best and both groups behaved in a similar fashion and owned towers. This is important because it begins to question the assertion that the towers were an exclusive symbol of magnate power. The possession of towers could not be the dividing line if both groups engaged in tower pacts and tower ownership-- a fact that could help explain why so many towers survived.

Ottokar's monograph was not without its critics. In the introduction to the 1962 reprint of Il comune di Firenze alla fine del Duecento Ernesto Sestan recognized certain limitations to Ottokar's analysis. Ottokar argued that the conflict between the magnates and *popolani* was a "giuridico-politica"-- roughly a juridical state that was under intense political and social pressure. The problem with this situation as described by Ottokar was that he did not elaborate on these pressures. Sestan asks, "But to what impulses do these political forces respond? Here lies the limit of Ottokar."¹⁹ According to Sestan, Ottokar failed to examine the necessities or forces at play that spurred the action. Carol Lansing argues that though Ottokar was effective in undermining Salvemini's materialism he did not offer a new schema to replace it.²⁰ Despite these weaknesses, Sestan informs us that Salvemini generally accepted the major criticisms presented by Ottokar, but he still believed that his basic thesis was sound. The debate over the makeup of the magnate class would dominate most of the historiography of the *twentieth-century*.

This debate is important to the tower societies because they became synonymous with the magnate class. The attempt by the *popolani* to limit the power and capability of

¹⁹ Ernesto Sestan, "Introduction," in Il Comune di Firenze all fine del Duecento, by N. Ottokar (Florence, 1926; repr. Turin, 1962), p. xv.

²⁰ Carol Lansing, The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 18.

the towers has always been portrayed as the people's struggle to limit the violent and arrogant factionalism of the nobility. This simple dichotomous conflict begins to fall apart when twentieth-century historians began to challenge the assertion that medieval Florence was clearly divided into these two opposing camps. This raises some very important questions concerning the tower societies. If the magnate class, tower society members, and the merchant *popolani* were essentially homogeneous, or at least if the division between the two were extremely porous, then why were the towers targeted? The historiography does seem to support that some sort of class or social division did exist but not to the degree that Salvemini may have described. In many respects the debate over the class division of the medieval commune is very similar to the recent debate in the historiography of the French Revolution. Contemporary historiography has argued that the division between the old regime and the bourgeoisie may not have been as obvious as previously has been thought. The old socialist model, the same model used by Salvemini, relied on a materialist dogma that has fallen out of favor especially since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. The problem for medieval Florence is that we may have to completely rethink our approach to class division but it will be difficult considering the historical tendency to devise an antithetical model in human affairs. The point of this analysis is not to resolve this issue but to suffice to say that it has dominated the historiography of medieval Florence for the entire *twentieth-century*.

The Ottokarian view has become the most dominant school despite its weaknesses. In an essay concerning the Latino peace accord, Nicolai Rubinstein essentially supported Ottokar's view, but he also has argued that to understand the

political divisions that existed, we must take a broader look at the cultural life of the city to really understand how they classified themselves and other groups. He argued that the magnates may have been socially and economically similar to other groups in Florence but what distinguished them was their addiction to private violence and vendetta. The Ordinances of Justice were indicative of a movement throughout all of medieval Europe that attempted to limit the private violence of the noble class and was not unique to Florence.²¹ Rubinstein's thesis is extremely interesting in light of this analysis because it seems to suggest that the towers were the deciding factor in classifying the magnate class. The fact that the towers were used to aid private violence helped the *popolani* to isolate a faction based on ownership of a tower and define them juridically on this basis.

One of the great concerns of the historiography has been the social origins of the leading families that instigated the economic rejuvenation and innovation of the city. The Salvemini school has asserted that the *popolani* were economic innovators whose origins were primarily urban and therefore they were outside feudal control. The nobility opposed them because they usurped noble power and their economic potential was beyond noble reach. The urban origin of these economic innovators helps explain why the nobility were so opposed to their economic usurpations, but the nobility also became a target of this new urban class. The magnates were primarily rural feudal landowners and dominated the surrounding *contado* potentially cutting the commune off from its trade network and their control of the *contado* posed a potential threat to the economic development of the urban population. Ottokar, on the other hand, attempted to portray

²¹ Nicolai Rubinstein, "La prima legge sul 'sodamento' e la pace del Card. Latino," Archivio Storico Italiano 2, (1935): 161-72, and La lotto contro i magnati in Firenze (Florence, 1939).

the urban population as more homogeneous than Salvemini purported and therefore no marked distinction between the urban aristocracy and the merchant existed. The Italian historian Ernesto Fiumi supported Ottokar by surveying several Florentine patrician families and argued that the majority of these families had urban origins and acquired their position through commercial enterprise. Their financial successes afforded them the noble titles they coveted. Fiumi believed that the only sharp social distinctions that existed were between the urban population and the rural population. The nobles of the countryside never fused with the urban nobility and thus the social division described by Salvemini was overstated. The leading patrician families were new families and benefited from the dynamic social mobility of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that the new urban economy provided.²²

Ottokar and Fiumi argued, and Salvemini conceded to some of their points, that the class distinctions were not as pronounced as traditionally supposed, but in 1965 Marvin Becker wrote a powerful essay examining the political failure of the magnates. In this essay he questioned both Ottokar and Salvemini arguing that neither side had proven their case successfully. "Until 1292 the magnates held 12 percent of the seats in the priorate, and this statistic has been utilized by recent historians in an attempt to demonstrate that Salvemini's and Davidsohn's descriptions of the preceding decade, as an interval characterized by class conflicts between the entrepreneurs of the guilds and

²² Enrico Fiumi, "Fioritura e decadenza dell'economia fiorentina," *Archivio Storico Italiano* 115 (1957): 385-439; 116 (1958): 443-510; 117 (1959): 427-502.

the landholding magnates, are fallacious.”²³ Becker highlighted some important concerns that he felt Salvemini did not successfully address. First of all, Becker pointed out that twelve percent of the magnates were members of the *Signoria*, but he was not certain if this small group of magnates was an accurate reflection of the magnate class. Another issue of interest to Becker, which available evidence could not answer, was to see how the magnates reacted to the policies of the *Signoria* that excluded the magnates.

Essentially Becker was not content with how either school of thought addressed these issues. Becker explains, “The older accounts by Salvemini and Davidsohn erred in attempting to uncover evidence of magnate dissent in the abbreviated minutes of the council meetings, but the modern revisionists, Ottokar and Fiumi, have also erred in presuming that the harmony that existed between a small segment of the Florentine magnates of the greater guilds and their commoner confreres can be projected to include that remaining half of the city’s magnate families not inscribed in any guild as well as that large group of magnates who inhabited rural Tuscany.”²⁴ Becker recognized that class division did occur but it was a juridical designation. The chroniclers described three classes: the magnates, the *popolani*, and *il popolo minuto*. He argues that in medieval society “men’s identities were depended upon membership in certain legally constituted orders.”²⁵ The divisions between the groups were not social but juridical.

Becker does not see the magnates as a socioeconomic group but rather a legally defined class created by the *Signoria* to address the problems created by certain magnates. Even

²³ Marvin Becker, “A Study in Political Failure: The Florentine Magnates (1280-1343),” *Medieval Studies* 27 (1965), 246-308, reprinted in *Florentine Essays*, by Marvin Becker, (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002), pp. 94-159.

²⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 106-107.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 150.

though a legal classification was created it was not universally applied to all magnates, complicating the issue even further.

Becker makes a very important point concerning medieval society and its perceptions of class organization. He argues that modern historians misunderstand the medieval mentality and the social concerns that guided their decision-making. He argues, “The presumption here involved is that a rationally organized and highly efficient society existed that in turn produced an integrated culture where men were guided in critical matters by reason rather than emotion.”²⁶ To impose modern socioeconomic classifications on this nascent community may be impossible. The meaning of the term “magnate” is a classic example of this problem. It would be nice to impose our modern and traditional ideas of nobility on the magnate class, but as the evidence demonstrates they were a diverse group with multiple origins. To understand the magnates, we must understand how they were defined by the *Signoria* but even that has proven difficult since their definition is riddled with contradictions. Becker provides the most reasonable approach to this problem. Even though the *Signoria*’s definition may be incomplete and contradictory, it still tells us something about the conflict that consumed Florence. The towers were inextricably linked to the magnates because they would become one crucial part of the magnate class definition, and, as Becker points out, several of the towers would continue to exist just as many magnate families would persist because the commune did not create a perfect program to eliminate all towers. The fact that several magnate families and their city fortresses survived was a testimony to the legal and

²⁶ Ibid, p. 149.

juridical loopholes and contradictions that existed in the medieval ordinances targeting the magnates.

Following Becker, the emerging portrait of the social divisions in Florence was no longer as stark and class driven as it previously had been portrayed by Salvemini. Becker's work encouraged a new generation of historians to develop a more accurate account of the dividing line that existed between the magnates and the *popolani*. Carol Lansing explains, "The new model depicts the city as a natural development from 'feudal interests': the initial force behind urban growth was a patriciate of aristocratic and feudal origins. The later merchant patriciate, then was formed in two ways, through social mobility, and through the internal transformation of the older patriciate in response to commercial growth."²⁷ Some important facts still remain that have not been adequately answered. There is no doubt that a political transition did occur but no one has effectively reconsidered the nature of this political transformation. Ottokar portrayed the political picture as rather homogeneous and static but in 1978 four Italian historians examined the leading patrician families in the late Dugento and presented a new political picture.²⁸ The politically static picture painted by Ottokar was seriously challenged by their examination. They argued that before 1280 the magnate families were in power and after 1280 they were generally out of power. Patrizia Parenti explains, "It is a certainty that the second half of the thirteenth century in Florence can be considered a period of the crisis and decline of an old aristocracy, and that a new ruling class progressively

²⁷Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, p. 19.

²⁸ S. Raveggi, M. Tarassi, D. Medici, and P. Parenti, *Ghibellini, Guelfi e Popolo Grasso: I detentori del potere politico a Firenze nella seconda metà del Dugento* (Florence, 1978).

substituted themselves, first by infiltration, then by openly fighting.”²⁹ There is no doubt that a transition did occur but the major weakness of this study was that it never explained why the transition occurred. Philip Jones’ separate research on the topic essentially concurred with this analysis but argued the merchant and popular rule over the commune was fleeting and temporary. The legacy of the Renaissance city was rule by the landed nobility whose rural interests often superceded their urban interests.³⁰

Much has been written about the apparent divisions between these two groups but little has been written concerning the magnate’s behavior. This behavior typically has been portrayed as one of the key characteristics in determining the dividing line between the magnates and the *popolani*. The possession of towers has always been the primary determining factor but the towers only have been described in a very superficial manner, generally paraphrasing what Santini revealed in his seminal work and never adding any new insight. Not until Jacques Heers’ and Carol Lansing’s recent studies of family and magnate culture have the towers been described in any depth.³¹ Both historians have attempted to examine the social makeup of medieval Florence through the medieval mentality and not through a modern or contemporary schema. Heers has emphasized the organization of the extended family and the extended group alliance as a unique medieval cultural institution. These extended familial and social groups developed a clan identity that was distinct from modern socioeconomic classifications. Lansing’s examination was

²⁹ P. Parenti, “Dagli Ordinamenti di Giustizia alle Lotte tra Bianchi e Neri,” in *Ghibellini, Guelfi e Popolo Grasso: I detentori del potere politico a Firenze nella seconda metà del Duecento* (Florence, 1978), p. 295.

³⁰ Philip Jones, “Communes and Despots: The City-state in Late Medieval Italy,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Ser. 5, no. 15 (1965): p. 71-96.

³¹ Jacques Heers, *Family Clans in the Middle Ages: A Study in Political and Social Structures in Urban Areas*, trans. by Barry Herbert, (New York: North-Holland Publishing Co., 1977), and Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*.

more specific than Heers' because he did not delve into magnate familial organization and culture. Becker raised several important questions concerning magnate culture and their attitudes, ideas, and reactions to the *popolani*, and Lansing clearly attempted to understand this culture within its own historical context. Heers' clans and Lansing's magnate families are an attempt to understand the culture of the tower societies outside of the conventional socioeconomic model that has generally been applied to them.

Heers' monograph has addressed the class debate that has dominated much of western historiography. He argues, much like Becker, that the traditional socioeconomic model does not nor should be applied to the medieval world. In Heers' opinion social class was a byproduct of the industrial period and does not apply well to preceding historical periods. For example, a great deal of historiography has been dedicated to whether or not it could be applied to the Ancien Regime during the French revolution, and Heers argues that the further back one looks in history the more impractical the model becomes.³² Heers writes, "The social class theory neglects in addition one fact which is in my opinion of prime importance: the fluidity of human situations."³³ Clear and universal distinctions between classes most likely did not exist, but whatever did divide society was not insurmountable. It appears that a great deal of fluidity existed between the divisions. Medieval society was divided in many ways as exemplified in the society of orders: clergy, nobility, and the third estate. These divisions did not have an economic basis according to Heers and included men of varying economic situations.³⁴

³² Heers, *Family Clans*, p. 3.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 4.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 5,6.

Heers refers to this model as just one alternative example, but the main point of his monograph is that medieval society also created other social groups that were devoid of an economic basis.

Heers argues that a key element of medieval society was the drive to create social groups. Medieval society was still relatively primitive and dangerous and therefore the communal impulse was imperative for its survival and was not exclusively motivated by economic concerns. Social groups were fused with a dual purpose: spiritual brotherhood and social necessity. Heers writes, “The prevalence of sacred and spontaneous demonstrations of religious feeling also shows how our ‘medieval’ societies were so interested in religious communities, in confessional brotherhoods.”³⁵ Furthermore, the virtual absence of a unified state forced men to organize proto-states through familial or social groups. Heers identified several aspects of these family clans demonstrating that they were not necessarily family exclusive. The term “family” was essentially inclusive and dynamic. Heers recognized the following multi-faceted social groups as examples of family clans: families of a single common ancestor, vast “family clans” consisting of hundreds of individuals, family groups where common blood was less important, brotherhood families where the only common blood was the desire for brotherhood, and groups that emerged in the neighborhoods that were artificial family groups.³⁶ These family clans and para-family groups were organic and dynamic, consequently making them difficult to classify and prove with source material. Heers relied on private documents to prove their existence and examine their organization. One of the best

³⁵ Ibid. p. 7.

³⁶ Ibid. p. 8.

examples of these organic organizations was the tower society. Heers argues that the tower societies were a perfect expression of family clans and their extended group clientele. They were not determined by an economic criterion but organized to address the litany of concerns that the inchoate medieval society was forced to address. To limit the struggle between the *popolani* and aspects of the tower societies to mere socioeconomic terms is to misunderstand entirely the concerns and ambitions of these extended family and social groups.

Becker's influence over his student Carol Lansing is quite clear since her work seems to address some of the questions posed by Becker in his essay examining the failure of the magnate class. So much of the historiography has been dominated by the modern inclination to apply nineteenth and *twentieth-century* social class models on the social groups of medieval Florence. Becker began to challenge the socioeconomic view and described it as a juridical distinction but vulnerable to the contradictions of a haphazard and nascent political culture. Lansing attempted to understand this juridical distinction by examining the cultural, political, and social expressions of magnates' culture based on their mentality and not on our modern sociological terminology.³⁷ Lansing attempts to confute Heers' assertion that these magnate families were extended family and social groups. She argues that they were clearly defined family associations and were not a clan.³⁸ One of the essential elements of these tower societies was their family affiliation and the strict enforcement of exclusion. It was this exclusive element that would eventually undermine their success and contribute to their eventual failure.

³⁷ Lansing, pp. xiii-xiv.

³⁸ Ibid. pp. 89-90.

Lansing approaches the subject in a similar fashion to Heers. She argues that we must understand these family groups in a much broader context than the narrow confines inherent in the traditional socioeconomic model. Their towers, the vendettas, factional wars, oppression of the *Popolo* are essential expressions of magnate culture and improve our understanding of the concerns, ambitions, and management of these complex associations. The towers played a crucial role in the organization and management of the magnate family structure and would become a symbol that would lead to their ultimate failure. Lansing argues that the magnates reacted to urban life by developing strong patrilineal alliances.³⁹ These alliances were a strategy to assert their social, political, and military agenda in the city and were perfectly expressed in the tower societies. The patrilineal alliance was strengthened by the exclusion of women and the ownership of joint property. This joint property allowed the family compound to become an imposing fortress within the city. The problem with these alliances, according to Lansing, was that there was a high cost for family solidarity and it had an essentially unstable base. The insistence on the unity of action, the blending of private and public vengeance, the fusion of kinship and political ambition, and the dependency on military expression as a noble privilege created a destructive and violent culture that plagued the city and fueled so much strife. The Ordinances of Justice were a crucial response by the *popolani* to restrict the worse offenses of the magnates. Lansing sees the Ordinances as a symbol of failure for the magnates and the ascendancy of the *popolani*.⁴⁰ Her monograph is important because it is one of the first attempts to understand the significance of the towers and

³⁹ Ibid. pp. 29-31.

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 202-203.

their importance to the magnate class. Her study is not a comprehensive analysis of the towers but it does provide a fresh perspective on their significance. The towers are examined as one part of the total expression of magnate culture.

The historiography of the medieval tower societies has inextricably been drawn into the debate over the social conflict that enveloped medieval Florence. Santini initiated the study of the tower societies but it was Salvemini's research that would come to dominate the debate over the meaning of the towers in Florence. Salvemini portrayed the towers as the arrogant symbol of noble power that eventually succumbed to the growing power of the *popolani* who wished to check the arrogant and violent magnate class. He interpreted this struggle as an expression of the classical socialist model that pervaded a great deal of European historiography. Ottokar was the first to challenge Salvemini and attempted to portray the social makeup of the city as far more homogeneous than Salvemini would have one believe. The problem is that Ottokar did not supply an adequate explanation to replace Salvemini's socialist interpretation of the events that motivated political action and change. Though Salvemini agreed with many of Ottokar's points he nonetheless felt his basic thesis was still intact. The debate between these two schools of thought dominated the historiography until Marvin Becker challenged both schools to rethink their assumptions imposing a socioeconomic model on an inchoate political society. A modern sociological model is not applicable to a society that has not yet developed a unified and cohesive political culture. Becker argued that it was essential to see the social divisions not as socioeconomic but as juridical.⁴¹ They

⁴¹ Becker, pp. 6-8.

were an incomplete and inadequate social construct developed by the *popolani*. The magnate class must be understood on medieval terms and therefore new research should be conducted on a much broader social basis. The towers should not be seen as a symbol of arrogant power but understood within the context of the medieval commune. Heers and Lansing have both approached the towers with this in mind. The towers expressed a concern that was not exclusively magnate. It crossed over all aspects of the city. The mistake many historians have made is that they interpreted the towers within the narrow confines of the Ordinances of Justice. The attempt of the *popolani* to limit and destroy the towers has been misconstrued to mean that the towers were synonymous with the magnates but the evidence shows that this was not entirely true. Additional evidence demonstrates that not all of the towers were destroyed and that not all of the magnates were eradicated. The Ordinances of Justice only addressed the worse offenders of civic peace but several magnate families were free from penalty and restriction. As a result, several towers and magnate families continued to exist, albeit in a modified state.

Another mistake in the historiography is that one might assume that with the apparent success of the *popolani* civic order was attained and communal hegemony was secure for centuries to come. This also proved to be incorrect. The temporary successes of the *popolani* and the Ordinances of the Justices were short lived. Though some of the worse offenders of violent factionalism may have been eradicated, the civic violence did not subside but instead flourished. The exile of many magnate families and the inability of the *popolani* to assert civic order and hegemony contributed to the worse violence expressed in the civil war between the Guelphs and Ghibellines. The failure of the

popular government to secure peace and order welcomed the way for despotism and oligarchic rule. If the magnates and the tower societies failed to secure order then the same could be said for the *popolani*.

This analysis follows in the same school of thought as Becker, Heers, and Lansing. It intends to examine one aspect of magnate culture, the towers, to see what it reveals about medieval Florentine society. The picture that emerges clearly supports Becker's claim that the divisions were not socioeconomic but far more diverse. The way members of the tower societies saw themselves does not fit neatly into Salvemini's socialist model. As Heers demonstrated, a great deal of economic diversity existed within the tower societies, and their self-identification was driven more by concerns for solidarity, protection, brotherhood, familial bond, and neighborhood allegiance.⁴² To portray the towers in class terms would be to undermine the real role they played in contributing to the order and management of the early commune. The towers initially emerged as a means to address the chaos of the early middle ages and served a real function for the early commune. The towers were not destroyed by the *popolani* but ceased to play a major role due to social change, obsolescence, and cultural change. The towers continued to exist but their traditional function did not.

⁴² Heers, p. 237.

Chapter 3.

From the Roman *Civitas* to the Eve of the Commune: A Primer on the Early Civic History of Florence

Modern historians tend to create models that help simplify the complex dynamics or trends that took place in any given historical period or region. One such model is the rising of the medieval communes, but that model quite often has been narrowed down to the example of the French commune. This typical paradigm is beautifully expressed in Guibert of Nogent's description of the Laon uprising:

As Guadry and Gautier the archdeacon were collecting money from people after the noon offices, a clamor arose throughout the city with people shouting "Commune!" At the same time a great crowd of burghers, bearing swords, double axes, bows, lances, and pikes, stormed the Episcopal palace . . . Now when they learned of the start of this riot some of the nobles, who had sworn to come to the bishop's aid in case of attack, rallied to his side from every direction.⁴³

Unfortunately it is not a model that applies well to medieval Italy and it does not apply to medieval Florence at all. An entirely different set of circumstances existed in Tuscany which caused the communes to develop in their own distinctive fashion, and thus contributed to the unique social institutions and problems that the tower societies perfectly exemplify. The following historical analysis demonstrates two key factors that

⁴³ Guibert of Nogent, *A Monk's Confession: The Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent*, trans. Paul J. Archambault (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 153-154.

contributed to the autonomous actions of Florence and the creation of the tower societies. First, the collapse of Rome and the ensuing chaos helped to accelerate the localization of military and political power. The Germanic tribes that occupied Italy made no attempt to preserve Roman institutions, replacing them with their own relatively primitive political practices. These practices stressed a more localized and decentralized approach to administrative rule, and therefore it was very natural for the city of Florence to develop its own unique approaches to solve its municipal concerns. Second, the absence of regional hegemony contributed to the fractured nature of the state that existed not only regionally but within the city of Florence as well. The combination of these two forces necessitated that medieval Florence assume the responsibility for its own defense and civic development. The towers were one of the many unique communal institutions created to address the defense and management of the city. The tower societies were not an anomaly but a byproduct of medieval Italy's unique history and to fully understand their role in society, it is essential to understand the unique historical conditions that occurred from the fall of Rome to the advent of the *Primo Popolo*.

The early settlement and the Fall of Rome

Though Florence was initially a Roman city, one must not confuse the ancient city with the medieval city. The use of Latin terminology should not be misconstrued as evidence of the ancient origins of the commune. Eighteenth century and nineteenth

century humanist historians had conflated the connection between the two civilizations.⁴⁴ They attempted to draw a direct connection between ancient institutions and medieval institutions, but this position was challenged successfully by Robert Davidsohn in a seminal article concerning the origins of the medieval consulate. Davidsohn demonstrated that the centuries of Lombard rule left an almost complete lack of Roman institutions in their wake. As a result, there existed central government strong enough to deal with local matters, thereby forcing the surviving communities to create inchoate civic organizations to address the most basic needs and problems endemic to any community.⁴⁵ Though there was no direct relationship between the civic institutions of the two cities, it does not mean that there was no connection at all. Rome had an undeniable influence on the physical and social aspects of the city.

It is generally believed that Florence's origins began with the Etruscans when the people of Fiesole began to settle in 200 B.C. near the Arno. The Etruscan settlement paid a heavy price when it sided against Sulla during the Social Wars. It was so completely razed to the ground in 82 B.C. that scholars still continued to debate in the nineteenth-century over the exact location of the original Etruscan settlement.⁴⁶ In 59 B.C. the second settlement was located further downstream. According to the fifteenth-century historian Leonardo Bruni, the veterans of Sulla's army settled the new city, and the city

⁴⁴ Schevill, Florence, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁵ R. Davidsohn, "Entstehung des Konsulats," Zeitschrift fuer Geschichteswissenschaft, vol. 6 (1891), pp. 22-24.

⁴⁶ Schevill, pp. 5-6, For more info on this debate see [Villari, I Primi secoli della Storia di Firenze, 1905, p. 61, Davidsohn, Forshungen, vol. 1, pp. 1-6].

of Rome served as the model for their new city.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Villani claims that Julius Caesar established the boundaries for the city and that the construction and topography of the city attempted to emulate Rome.⁴⁸ In fact, during this time, according to Villani, the first towers were erected in the city: “Gnaeus Pompey caused the walls of the city to be built of burnt bricks, and upon the walls of the city he built many round towers, and the space between one tower and the other was twenty cubits, and it was so that the towers were of great beauty and strength.”⁴⁹ Though the medieval historians may not be a reliable source of information concerning the ancient origins of the city, they do demonstrate two important aspects about the Roman legacy. First, the Romans left an undeniable footprint on the shape and topography of the city, and second, the ancient connection was important to and valued by the citizens of Florence. It gave them a sense of pride and a claim to a classical lineage.

Though the connection between classical and medieval civic institutions is tenuous at best, the connection between the topography of the ancient city and the medieval city is not. Florence was a very modest settlement taking the traditional Roman square shape of a military camp settlement.⁵⁰ The original walls were very modest, measuring only 500 meters on each side, and there was a total of four gates. The Roman walls remained until the twelfth century, when new walls were erected to accommodate the expanding city. Many of the key features of the medieval city corresponded with key

⁴⁷ Leonardo Bruni, History of the Florentine People: Volume I, Books I-IV, trans. James Hankins (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 11.

⁴⁸ Giovanni Villani, Croniche Fiorentine (New York, E.P. Dutton and Company, 1907), Book I, Chap. 38, pp. 27-28.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 28.

⁵⁰ Schevill, pp.5-6.

elements of Roman architecture. The Forum transformed into the Mercato Vecchio, and the original Roman bridge and the main Roman road, the Via Cassia, corresponded with the Ponte Vecchio and the Por Santa Maria, which leads directly to the Mercato Vecchio. The form and function of Roman architecture undoubtedly had an effect on the medieval city, but one must not forget that the medieval mentality was dramatically different. The city's ancient form and function would often be used for new purposes and would possess new meanings. Though there was a tenuous connection between the Roman and medieval cities, a series of historical events from the ancient period and to the twelfth century would fracture the connection between the two cities.

The collapse of the Western empire did not spell the immediate doom of the Roman city. One of the unique elements of Italian history is the persistence of the cities despite the collapse of the empire. Chris Wickham argues that the main reason the Roman cities were able to maintain their identity was that the Roman constitution allowed these cities to operate as semi-independent city-states, or *municipia*. Since they could organize their own local *curia*, they were able to maintain some civic hegemony and stability. Therefore, when the Ostrogoths, under the leadership of Theodoric, took over in Rome, the Roman character of Florence did not perish.⁵¹ The Ostrogoths did not attempt to change Roman institutions, partially due to their previous romanization before their dominance over Italy. Theodoric personally had spent time in Constantinople, where he most likely gained his respect for the institutions of the Roman state. As a result, Theodoric left most of the Roman institutional apparatus untouched. Therefore the

⁵¹ Chris Wickham, Early Medieval Italy: Central Power and Local Society 400-1000 (The University of Michigan Press, 1981), p. 14.

Ostrogoths left virtually no imprint on Italian society perhaps except Theodoric's tomb in Ravenna.⁵² The real cataclysm would occur during Justinian's reconquest of Italy.⁵³

Justinian's reconquest and the Gothic counter-conquest would have the most dramatic and destructive effect on Italy, eventually isolating the peninsula from the Eastern empire and paving the way for the Lombard invasion. One political result of the Byzantine conquest of Italy was the decline of the senatorial class and the ascendancy of the military. According to Wickham, several senators fled to Constantinople, and those who remained faded into obscurity and anonymity.⁵⁴ Justinian's initial goal was to reestablish the supremacy of provincial officials over military leaders, but with the absence of any civic leaders, the military was forced to assume the role created by this vacuum. The Byzantine conquest helped create a trend of the increasing localization of military power that would continue unabated the next five hundred years. The other great side effect was that it created the environment for the Lombard invasion. The infrastructure and civil administration of Italy were so devastated by this upheaval in 565 that within three years of Justinian's death his reunified empire began to crumble. By 568 the Lombards entered Italy and changed the map of Italy for centuries to come.

There is very little doubt that the presence of the Lombards probably proved to be the decisive force in permanently fracturing the connection between the ancient civic institutions and the emerging medieval civic institutions. The Lombards brought with them their own political institutions, and Hyde believes that they were probably so

⁵² Thomas Burns, A History of the Ostrogoths (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) pp. 168-169. Wickham, p. 21.

⁵³ Giovanni Tabacco, The Struggle for Power in Medieval Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 77.

⁵⁴ Wickham, Early Medieval Italy, p. 27.

primitive that the more sophisticated Roman practices ceased to exist. Hyde argues, "The break hardly lasted more than a generation or so, but it was decisive in interrupting the traditions of city life in north and central Italy; significantly, no historian has succeeded in proving the continuance of civic institutions from late Roman to medieval times for any city north of Rome."⁵⁵ Not only did the Lombards succeed in fracturing the continuity, but according to Hyde they also accelerated the "regressive tendencies" of the countryside. By stressing animal husbandry over agriculture the Lombards allowed the Roman agricultural public works to fall into disrepair and ruin. A great deal of the surrounding countryside of the Tuscan cities was allowed to revert to marsh, forest, and waste. Despite the effects of the Lombard occupation, their limited control over the peninsula insured that not all of the lights of the Roman world would be extinguished.⁵⁶

Though the Gothic wars have been credited with destroying Italy this destruction did not appear to have a great effect on Tuscany and Florence in particular. Villani inaccurately states that the Gothic King Totila destroyed the city of Florence.⁵⁷ Schevill believes that Villani may have confused Totila with the king of the Huns, Atila. The inaccuracies do not end there. Villani describes in depth Totila's destruction of the city, but Schevill reveals that Villani was entirely wrong on in this description.⁵⁸ The true fate of Florence was obscurity and neglected decay.⁵⁹ Florence was never very important during Roman times, and therefore became even less important during the Gothic and

⁵⁵ J. K. Hyde, Society and Politics in Medieval Italy: The Evolution of the Civil Life, 1000-1350 (London: The Macmillan Press, 1983), p. 14.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 14.

⁵⁷ Villani, Book II, Chap. 1, pp. 43-47.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Schevill, p. 29-30.

Lombard periods. Florence followed the pattern of all of Italy: it reverted to agrarianism. Trade ceased, the population declined, and the Roman civic architecture was abandoned and fell into ruin or disrepair. The Roman walls stayed as they were and remained in this state until the twelfth century, when they were removed so that the city could expand its borders.

The great shift in Italy did not occur under the Goths but rather with the appearance of the Lombards in the Italian peninsula. The Ostrogoths were generally content to keep Roman institutions. In many respects they were Romanized Germanic peoples before they occupied Italy and they recognized the inherently good qualities of Roman institutions, but the Lombards were an entirely different people with no previous Romanization. The Lombards did not see the value of Roman institutions, and, as a result of their apparent disregard, they did not imitate or perpetuate Roman institutions. The Lombards asserted their own crude and unsophisticated political institutions throughout their hegemony over the peninsula, and as a result the Lombards sealed the fate of the Roman legacy. One of the unique qualities of Italian national history has been its fractured identity that invariably was a direct result of the Lombard legacy, leaving an imprint of particularism and regionalism. Even when the Franks entered Italy under Charlemagne in 774, they left Lombard institutions untouched, helping to solidify their legacy over Italy's political history. Wickham argues that it was the Lombard period that had the greatest impact on shaping medieval Italy.⁶⁰ Not only did it represent a historical break, it also indicated a historiographical break due to the extreme scarcity of sources

⁶⁰ Wickham, p. 28.

from 568 until 710. The Lombards were substantially less civilized than the Ostrogoths. Their political and civic organization was extremely crude and primitive, but they did adapt some Roman ideas and terminology. The Lombards adopted several Roman military terms such as *dux* and *comes*, but one must be careful not to assume that the use of Roman terms meant the adoption of Roman ideas and institutions. The Lombard presence in Italy did have two lasting effects upon the socio-political and civic institutions of the Florentine city-state. First, city-states like Florence were forced to develop their own local government and collect taxes to fill the political vacuum created by the extremely weak state of Lombard administration and taxation. Second, Lombard ideas of land and the emphasis of kin groups had a great effect on Florentine concepts of kinship and property.⁶¹ In many respects, this latter effect did a great deal to create and perpetuate the tower societies in Florentine society.

One of the unique elements of medieval Italy was the increasing reliance on military administration to govern and manage the Lombard state. This was not a trend that began with the Lombards but actually first occurred during the Byzantine reconquest.⁶² The Lombard system seemed to emulate the Byzantine social and political system which was governed by a landowning class embodied with a dual political and military function, but in reality they arrived at the same result by very different paths.⁶³ By the eighth century public and ecclesiastical offices were embodied with an armed class sustained by its landed property, with a power base that was extremely local and

⁶¹ Ibid. pp. 40-41.

⁶² Tabacco, *Struggle for Power*, p. 77.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 91.

completely integrated into local affairs. As a result, the locus of power was local rather than central in Lombard hegemony. Tabacco argues that the greatest threat to Lombard domination was not the “centrifugal tendencies of the old tribal groupings” but rather the great degree of autonomous action allowed by the “optimates”.⁶⁴ The army was locally organized under the control of the dukes, who generally were the largest landowners in the region.⁶⁵ The Lombard state depended on the consent of its dukes, counts, and other large landowners to assert control, but it inadvertently subverted and undermining its own power base, and any future attempt to create regional unity, by solidifying and intensifying the localization of power. One other weakness of the Lombard state was the lack of a state land tax. Wickham believes that the Lombard kings most likely did collect revenues from commercial activity such as import tolls and sales taxes, and they could enforce *corvée* work, but by Roman standards this would have been trivial. The majority of imperial revenues came from land taxes, but this seemed to be absent from the Lombard state.⁶⁶ Once again the unsophisticated qualities of the Lombard state undermined and subverted its ability to assert any real power over the city-states. The city-states and regional lords were assuming powers that had traditionally been the sole privilege of the empire, and the Lombard state apparently did not perceive this as undesirable or a threat to their power.

Wickham argues that the fact of the non-existent land tax had a profound effect on the relationship between the state and society. Taxes were essential for the maintenance

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 107.

⁶⁵ Wickham, p. 40.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

of the army and all civic institutions, but the Lombards failed to create system of taxation necessary to support an army. The Lombard army had to support itself through the settlement of land, and, as a result, even though the same Roman forms seemed to permeate the Lombard state, the “institutional weight” was different. Wickham explains: “The resources of the state were now almost entirely derived from its landowning. And landowning in this period became not just a way to obtain political power and influence, as under the Romans, but political power itself.”⁶⁷ The focus on land as a means to finance the army, and by default the state, meant that land was power, and therefore power was regional. Lombard power was expressed through its ability to obtain and maintain consent from these regional power bases-- a task that the future German kings would find virtually impossible to achieve.

Due to the simple organization of the state and the emphasis on property as a means to finance state organization and military obligations, local power grew significantly and stressed property as a means to and expression of power. This military and political power developed into great estates and the land and the power associated with these estates became hereditary.⁶⁸ A new landed military aristocratic class emerged in Lombard society named the *arimanni*-- the ancient Lombard name for “soldier”. According to Tabacco the *arimanni* did not cultivate the land but rather brutally and crudely exploited the peasant population. The *arimanni*’s political administration and land management was extremely unsophisticated, accelerating the simplification of the

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 40.

⁶⁸ Tabacco, p. 95.

political culture and the simplification of land management and administration.⁶⁹ The Lombard's economy rested primarily on animal husbandry and they depended on the local Roman population to cultivate the land. The emphasis on animal husbandry by the Lombards allowed the Roman drainage and irrigation works to fall into disrepair, and large land tracts were allowed to revert to a more natural state. It could easily be argued that the Lombards played the greatest part in accelerating the regressive state of the Italian peninsula since the fall of the Roman Empire.⁷⁰ Since land represented real power in Lombard society the idea of individual property became increasingly important but the idea of common land held by *arimanni* also began to become important.

Uncultivated and wooded areas remained common area to the community of *arimanni*. Possession of common lands by the community of *arimanni* seems to have many parallels to the tower societies, and it appears that there is a relationship between the Lombard concept of communal property and the *consorterie*. Tabacco elaborates, "The possession of common lands by groups of *arimanni*, and their exclusive enjoyment of it, instead helped to distinguish them on the social level both from any remaining Roman landowners and from the great Lombard landowners who had more or less vast uncultivated areas within their own private estates."⁷¹ The *arimanni* attempted to differentiate themselves from the indigenous population and other Lombard landed people by emphasizing that their land served a military and political function. In essence, we see the emergence of something very similar to the magnate class in twelfth century

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 97.

⁷⁰ Hyde. *Society and Politics*. p. 14.

⁷¹ Tabacco, p. 98.

Italy and the development of “fluid alliances of friends and kin.”⁷² This phenomenon was not really a conscious attempt to distinguish the superiority of this fledgling magnate class from other social groups, but it emerged as an attempt to address the vacuum created by the Lombard’s crude political administration. Jones sees this fusion of land and military power in the hands of the Lombard nobility as a means to achieve self-help and protection based on “personal and local relationships of social solidarity.”⁷³ This relationship between families and their land eventually would be transplanted into an urban setting as the territorial neighborhood or *vicinia*. Political society was becoming increasingly dominated by this landowning military class often referred to as *milites*, *exercitales*, or *arimanni*. Eventually the noble class would come to monopolize a great deal of the property and power of the state and church. In the end, it was the Lombard period which did the most to create the particularism, the dominance of local power, the magnate class, and the self-help associations that would characterize Florence throughout the Carolingian, Ottonian, and, most importantly, the communal period which is the primary focus of this study.

The Lombard invasion helped to fracture almost permanently the political unity of the Italian peninsula-- a fracture that would not be mended until the nineteenth century. Despite the Lombard occupation, the Byzantines still maintained a presence within the peninsula, and it appears that within a century the Lombards would begin to adopt Western political ideas that would help them to develop a new royal administration comparable to other kingdoms in the West. By the late eighth century, the Lombards had

⁷² Ibid, p. 105.

⁷³ Phillip Jones, *The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 61.

written laws, constructed a royal palace in Pavia, and sent royal agents to former Roman administrative centers. It was on this foundation that the Carolingians were able to supersede Lombard hegemony in 774.

One might assume that the advent of the Carolingians in Italy would also be the advent of dramatic socio-political change but this proved not to be true. Charlemagne launched his Italian campaign in 773, capturing the Lombard capital, Pavia, by June 774. Despite his great success in conquering the Lombard kingdom, Charlemagne had no real intention to change the social or ruling structure. In fact, Charlemagne allowed the Lombard dukes to continue to serve in their positions, and they were replaced with Frankish counts only after they died. Charlemagne permitted the Lombards to remain as a sub-kingdom under Carolingian supremacy, allowing institutions to change extremely slowly. Not until 814 had most of the Lombard dukes been replaced by Frankish counts.⁷⁴ Franks who took positions as counts soon made kinship ties with powerful Lombard families. They did not attempt to take over or modify Lombard society, but instead they attempted to integrate themselves within the Lombard dominant noble class.⁷⁵ Despite the personnel changes that occurred over the first forty years of Carolingian rule, the characteristics of power did not change. The Carolingians maintained the Lombard approach to politics; it was the politics of land.⁷⁶ This emphasis on land and the failure by the Carolingian state to address the issue would help to undermine any attempt by them, or the Ottonians, to assert hegemony. No improvements

⁷⁴ Wickham, p. 48.

⁷⁵ Tabacco, p. 118.

⁷⁶ Wickham, p. 48.

were made to rectify the problems inherent in the Lombard's crude and simple administrative network. The embodiment of power in local land would be intensified and serve as the primary force for regional and territorial conflict in late medieval Italy, and this intensification of local power and the conflicts it bred would express itself even in the neighborhoods of Florence.

One of the major problems in our understanding of the Carolingian period is the relatively limited historiography of the Franks. Between Paul the Deacon in 774 and Liutprand of Cremona in 880 there is a dearth of sources. On the whole, the Frankish kings left a very small footprint on Italy until the reign of Louis II, and the only reason he left any impression was that he was the only Frankish king to rule Italy from Italy. In general, Italian medieval historiography has shown that if a king or emperor wanted to rule Italy effectively, he had to live in and rule from Italy. Despite some of the successes of Louis II in Italy, the Carolingians did little to counter the weaknesses of the Lombard state. In many respects, Carolingian institutions actually helped crystallize the administrative weaknesses created by the Lombards.

The power of the Lombard kings relied on their ability to acquire and ensure the consent of the landed *arimani* to act in the defense of the kingdom. Power was vested in the land which was therefore dispersed throughout the kingdom. This inherent weakness of the Lombards was now the inherent weakness of the Carolingian hegemony over Italy. The problems medieval kings had in establishing and maintaining their power was based on their ability to acquire consent and ensure control. The Carolingians soon learned that it was very difficult to get the Italian nobility to agree to and help with any imperial

action. Unfortunately for the Carolingians, they were able to secure support only by large grants of their own land. The Lombards were able to secure their kingship with fairly small gifts, and the Carolingians initially followed in this same practice. However the Carolingians possessed a limited amount of imperial land in Italy that they could grant in return for loyalty, and as a result royal generosity in Italy was unable to supplant noble landowning. Since the Carolingians could not make large land grants, they were extremely ineffective in establishing Frankish nobles with local supremacy. According to Wickham it took three generations before the Franks had effective hegemony in local areas. If they could not establish their hegemony through land ownership, their power became limited, and therefore they had to find other means to express and exert power.⁷⁷

Over time the Lombard administrative officials were gradually replaced with Frankish representatives, but the Carolingians also attempted to establish imperial hegemony over the Lombard infrastructure with several Frankish adaptations that seemed to fuse Roman, Lombard, and Frankish culture. These Frankish adaptations manifested themselves in the following four ways: legislative action, *missi*, ecclesiastic leadership, and the development of counties. The two most important were the *missi* and the counties. First, the Franks attempted to exert control through legislative action, but quite often their legal actions were ignored, forcing the Carolingians to send *missi*. This was an *ad hoc* attempt to address the weaknesses of their legislative power, but the *missi* also suffered an institutional weakness because they depended on the local counts to serve as

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 52.

the emperor's *missi*.⁷⁸ Quite often the Carolingians would rely on the local small landowners, the *scabini*, to enforce the orders of the *missi*. The *scabini* were responsible for running local courts, but their power was often undermined by the counts, who were able to flex a military muscle that the *scabini* lacked. The institution of the *missus* was not a Carolingian innovation-- its origins can be traced back to the Lombards-- but very quickly it became a key part of their central government. A *missus* was an organ of the central government, and, if defied by a count, the count would then have to deal with a series of reprisals. This was an idealized description of how it was supposed to work though it never functioned perfectly. The *missi* were quite often ignored, forcing the Carolingians to respond by sending additional *missi* to counteract the weaknesses of the previous *missi*. Wickham explains, "The 'institution of the *missi*' is a more formalized way of saying that Carolingian kings continually sent people out to correct the depredations of other people."⁷⁹ Schevill argues that these Carolingian institutions, especially the *scabini* who were picked from free residents of the town, were evidence of municipal self-government in Florence.⁸⁰

These institutions and practices did not address the problems of regionalism but rather exacerbated the problem. The *scabini* continued to have a presence in Italy, though inconsistently, until the arrival of Otto I in 962. Essentially, the *scabini* represented a form of self-government that was allowed to address frequently the vacuum

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 53.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 54.

⁸⁰ Schevill, p. 31

created by the lack of a central government. It was symptomatic of the fractured state of Italian affairs and indicative of the potential for autonomy.

The *scabini*, however, proved to be a minor factor contributing to the increasing localization of power compared to the counts. In many respects, Frankish institutions may have solved an administrative problem, but they created several new problems that would help foster the development of the tower societies. The Franks set up a system where the towns were responsible for civic administration and the administration of the surrounding territory. The aggregate of the town and territory were referred to as the *comitatus* or *contado*. This administrative body undoubtedly goes back to the Franks but also shows the unique medieval fusion of Roman ideas of *civitas* and Frankish administrative ideas. Schevill argues that it would be a mistake to say that the free municipal institutions are either entirely Roman or entirely Frankish. Invariably any attempt to recreate a pseudo-Roman civic institution would be shaped by the mold of the medieval mentality.⁸¹ By the mid ninth century, after the county of Florence merged with the county of Fiesole, Florence became the largest county in Tuscany.⁸² Though at this time none of the counties were in serious competition with each other, this very administrative network would contribute to the regional rivalries that in many respects emulated the internal civic rivalries of the tower societies. One of the great problems of Frankish rule was the relative weakness of their kings in Italy. The administrative rule of the counties was extremely localized, and when the king was either weak or absent, they were able to exercise an amazing degree of autonomy. As the kings following

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 32

⁸² Davidsohn, *Forschungen* vol. 1, p. 85.

Charlemagne were weaker, the counts gradually were able to make their power hereditary.⁸³

With the death of Louis II in 875, the Carolingian presence in Italy effectively came to an end, creating an imperial and sovereign vacuum that contributed to a thirty-year period of rivalry between royal claimants from Burgundy or Germany. During this thirty-year period, the autonomous and fractured nature of medieval Italy became further exacerbated. Wickham explains, "Being a count was no longer very different from being an ordinary landowner; the concerns of the ecclesiastical and lay aristocracies were directed towards their own power bases, and barely towards the state at all."⁸⁴ The emergence of Berengar I as a regional margrave did not reverse the process but rather crystallized the problem and helped contribute to the civic chaos of which the tower societies were a logical byproduct.

Most historians agree that under Berengar I, the public institutions were so severely weakened that no imperial ruler or king could ever re-establish them. Indeed, this particular period helped create the tower societies, which were intended to address the chaos created by the absence of any regional authority.⁸⁵ To understand why this happened one must comprehend the immediate threats facing Berengar I: the Hungarian invasions. The entrance of the Hungarians into Italy forced Berengar I to make a series of concessions to address this serious threat. Unable to muster a unified regional army due to the longstanding practice that allowed militias to organize locally, Berengar I had

⁸³ Schevill, p. 34.

⁸⁴ Wickham, p. 168.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 173.

to rely on these local militias to address the Hungarian threat. To encourage the local nobles to create effective militias he allowed them to build their own *castelli*. The Carolingians had already started the process of privatizing the local public army under the control of the aristocrats. Wickham explains, "These clienteles had gained ground during the civil wars, and the concessions of public rights of fortification to private persons under Berengar both recognized an irreversible development and crystallized it. Private defense replaced the public obligations of the Carolingian period."⁸⁶ The privatization of the *castelli* established a new precedent in Italy. The process of castle building, known as *incastellamento*, contributed to the unique character of northern Italy creating a condition in which a king or Emperor could no longer rely on the collective responsibilities of his Italian subjects.⁸⁷ The problem was exacerbated by the limited amount of land that Berengar I possessed in his demesne. Due to his inability to grant sufficient land to local lords to secure loyalty, Berengar I attempted to win support by granting charters of *incastellamento* that allowed local lords to build their own fortresses. He may have won temporary support, but he exacerbated the fractured state of Italy and ensured the extreme localization of power for centuries to come. With these grants, cities like Florence gained virtually complete control over their own county and almost total juridical supremacy over local affairs. Though Berengar could do little to stop the increasing localization of power, he did attempt to limit the local count's monopoly on power by granting charters of *incastellamento* to the cities rather than to the local count. Increasingly, the focus of public authority was vested in the cities and the *castelli*, and,

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 173

⁸⁷ Ibid. p. 174.

despite Carolingian attempts to create an ecclesiastical political presence, power was becoming privatized in the hands of lay landowners. By the time Hugh of Arles succeeded Berengar I, the dissolution and localization of power could not be reversed.⁸⁸ Hugh aspired to rule like a Carolingian king but the political apparatus to support his power no longer existed. A king did not have the ability to interfere in local affairs though he could rest assured that he would receive local support for his reign. An excellent example of this can be seen in Hugh's fall from power. When Berengar of Ivrea entered Italy in 945, Hugh's support was nonexistent.⁸⁹ Berengar II appointed himself *summus consiliarius*-- head counselor-- and he simply waited for Hugh to die for his opportunity to seize kingship. His opportunity would come within a few years. In 947 Hugh died and his son Lothar died in 950, allowing Berengar II to become the sole king. Yet, despite his claim as sole king, he very soon realized the real limitations of his power.

Berengar II assumed a power base that was essentially an illusion. The magnates who were supposedly subservient to Hugh did not possess land that he granted them. Their relationship was not feudal but was rather based on personal connections. The almost immediate dissolution of this relationship during his conflict with Berengar II demonstrated that these relationships were, for all practical purposes, meaningless. Berengar II soon realized that, just like the land, power was allodial and not feudal. The quasi-kingdom was essentially void of any real power and was completely reliant upon the whim of the local lords, where the true foci of power resided. Berengar II's power was very quickly overshadowed by Otto I. Otto's first appeared in Italy in 951-952 and

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 177.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 179.

proclaimed himself king. Berengar was obligated to go to Germany so that he could be recognized as king of Italy under the protection of Otto I.⁹⁰ Berengar II remained king until Otto I officially annexed Italy in 961-962 and had himself crowned Emperor. Otto I temporarily restored some imperial order in Italy, but he did not attempt to impose any sort of imperial program that would dramatically change the country. He was content to maintain the status quo. Otto I was able to rule because he had his own army and did not have to rely on the vagaries of the regional magnates. Furthermore, the fact that he possessed an army that was under his complete control forced the regional magnates to submit to his superior power.

Despite the submission of the magnates, the Ottonian state in Italy was an artificial state, for it relied on the presence of Otto I and his army. While present in Italy, the magnates were loyal and deferred to Otto as the sovereign lord, but as soon as his imperial army was absent, they reverted to their own autonomous actions and local practices. The Ottonians assumed a kingdom where hegemony had ceased to exist for almost a hundred years, and any assumption that this hegemony could be quickly restored was a fallacy. After the reign of Henry III, 1004-1024, the German emperors were no longer able to muster the military strength necessary to subject Italy. On the death of Henry II in 1024, the citizens of Pavia revolted and destroyed the imperial palace indicating that the imperial state was no longer perceived as advantageous to most of the Italian local power bases. The same could be said for Florence where the political agenda of the magnates could supersede any imperial agenda. It would not be long before

⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 179-180.

Florence would be drawn into the conflict between the Papacy and the German Emperors-- a conflict that would come to dominate Italy for the next two centuries.

Florence, along with most of Northern Italy, was inextricably drawn into the conflict between the Papacy and the German Emperor. In 1069 Matilda ascended as margrave of Tuscany. Florence had already been the administrative center of the margrave since 1057. Florence supported Matilda, who remained loyal to the Papacy in defiance of the emperor Henry IV. But despite the rule of Countess Matilda and the fact that Florence served as the administrative center of her state, Florence continued the trend of increasing autonomy. By 1079 Florence developed its own system of weights and measure. Schevill argues, "The use of municipal weights and measures signifies the exercise of a sovereign act, which, if not ascribable to a margravian concession, must be regarded as an out-and-out usurpation."⁹¹ In 1090 Florence began to collect feudal dues in its county, another indication of rights usurped from the margravian power. The ultimate act of independence came in 1107 when Florence began to pursue its own foreign policy. The citizens of Florence decided to destroy the castle of Monte Gualandi, which belonged to the leading magnate family in the county of Florence: the Conti Alberti family. The castle was on the road to Pisa and was probably seen as an obstacle to Florence's unfettered trade with Pisa. Destruction of Monte Gualandi was the beginning of a process that would last several centuries. The citizens set out on a policy to subject all independent Tuscan feudal strongholds under their dominion-- an issue

⁹¹ Schevill, p. 60.

which will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter.⁹² Seven years later in 1114, Florence then destroyed Monte Cascioli which was located near Monte Gualandi.

The destruction of these castles demonstrated two key aspects of the emerging Florentine state according to Schevill. First, Florence was becoming an aggressive state in regional politics, demonstrating that it perceived itself as an independent and legitimate province. Second, it would challenge any threat to its commerce or regional supremacy. Florence was already pursuing an independent political agenda on a regional level, but now it would expand beyond its own neighboring regions. Florence embarked on the Balearic Crusade with Pisa against the Saracens, who occupied the Balearic Islands. The importance of this event demonstrates that Florentines pursued an independent foreign policy without any regard for Matilda. By her death in 1115, she was little more than a figurehead. There was no real change in power because power now rested almost entirely in the hands of the regional magnates.⁹³

The history of Florence from the fall of the Roman empire until the early twelfth century reveals that there was never a consistent or dependable political bureaucracy or tradition on which the city could rely, and as a result it was obligated more by necessity than by design to address its civic needs and concerns. Even though the Carolingian kingdom had a powerful presence in the peninsula, it too suffered from a lack of consistent and sophisticated administrative rule. The unfortunate weakness of the imperial order was that this administrative system was only as effective as the emperor himself-- a legacy that would continue with the Ottonians and Salian emperors. Power

⁹² Ibid. pp. 60-61.

⁹³ Ibid. p. 62.

and effectiveness rested with the individual ruler, such as Charlemagne, and not the imperial institutions, meaning that a weak emperor meant a weak imperial presence. Furthermore, it meant that the individual cities had to create their own unique means to address the absence of any imperial system and to address civic needs such as defense, police, justice, human services and support. The situation worsened as imperial power waned, allowing a rapid collapse and a natural power vacuum.⁹⁴ Within the resultant power vacuum, the first inklings of autonomy began to emerge, and the unique civic societies were created to address the total absence of any administrative order and civic management. The tower societies were just one of the many societies created to meet the needs of the commune. It acted autonomously not because it wanted to but because it had to.

⁹⁴ Schevill, pp. 32-34. Hyde, pp. 38-43.

Chapter 4.

A Society of Societies: The Florentine Commune

The civic history of Florence from the fall of the Roman Empire to the dawn of the communal period revealed that no real coherent civic political program was either pursued or fully achieved. To address the problems of management and civic order, Florence, like other cities almost all early medieval history, developed a series of expedients, agreements, and accommodations, all of which lacked any coherent order, uniformity, or holistic intention. As a result, it would be a mistake to portray the communal period of Florence as a conscious attempt to usurp power from either the regional lords or the emperor in order to achieve a comprehensive communal program. The commune arose more accurately from expediency, to address the dearth of imperial or noble hegemony in the region. It was an attempt to fill the vacuum created by the weakness of any real power in the region and the death of Matilda in 1115. This need coincided with the resurgence of commercial development. The revival of trade further necessitated the development of laws and some semblance of governmental institutions to address the inevitable conflicts and concerns that are always an element of commerce. Necessity rather than ideology gave birth to the commune.

As J. K. Hyde points out, the Laon communal uprising recorded by Guibert of Nogent depicts the commune emerging as a revolution against the feudal order, but this model does not apply to the emerging communes of Tuscany. Hyde explains, "There is no evidence that the Italian commune was a political ideal to be striven for; rather it was the one among a series of expedients which happened to work and endure. Because it

was a really new form of political association, it could hardly be reconciled with learned political ideas, yet it prevailed because it offered a workable solution to the impasse created by the break down of the imperial regime.”⁹⁵ The commune was an amalgamation of Roman and German institutions and political ideas. It was not a systematic program but rather developed in a more organic fashion, borrowing either a Roman idea or a German institution that met its needs. The net result was a unique institution with many origins and developing over several centuries. The commune of Florence, therefore, was an aggregate of institutions without any apparent order or continuity. They were often contradictory and conflicting, but from a medieval mentality this was not necessarily perceived as an anathema to civic order. The feudal mentality still pervaded Florence, and therefore the state, like relationships between individuals, was the sum of all negotiated relationships.

The almost complete absence of any imperial or royal authority forced the towns to develop some sort of civic union to address the countless hazards of medieval life.⁹⁶ Hyde argues that the communes were essentially a *de facto* government in the absence of an imperial government.⁹⁷ Furthermore, with the absence of any regular imperial force to protect the cities, they were forced to develop their own militias to meet hazards as they might present themselves. Societies were then organized to address the combined needs of municipal maintenance and defense. Here we begin to see the melding of public and private concerns. They were one in the same in the early commune. Hyde argues, “In

⁹⁵ Hyde, *Society and Politics*, pp. 48-49.

⁹⁶ Philip Jones, *The Italian City-State*, p. 136.

⁹⁷ Hyde, p. 85

addition the Italian cities faced special problems of their own, derived from the fact that the commune was originally no more than one kind of *societas* in a society which abounded in *societates*, so that it was an uphill task to assert any special claim to the loyalty and obedience of the citizens.”⁹⁸ From a legalist point of view the communes were usurpers. They were assuming privileges that were not rightfully theirs, but they did so out of expediency and not for ideological purposes. As a result, these societies had no uniformity or civic hegemony, making the commune a very loose confederacy of disparate societies with roughly the same purpose.⁹⁹ The tower societies were just one part of all the societies and agreements negotiated between the multitude of people and groups that were present in Florence. Essentially, the tower societies were not seen as a threat to peace and unity but just one society of many smaller societies that collectively made the commune.

To better understand the tower associations, it is valuable to examine how several of the key communal societies and institutions evolved and how the commune developed as a regional force not only in Tuscany but in the growing conflict between the medieval empire and the papacy. The following analysis will address and reveal two issues. First, it will examine the multitude of social organizations that collectively created the commune. Second, it will demonstrate that the tower societies were not in opposition to the other social organizations but an essential part of the confederacy of societies. The tower societies were, therefore, a microcosm of Florence’s overt effort to impose regional hegemony over the *contado* and beyond.

⁹⁸ Hyde, p. 104.

⁹⁹ Jones, p. 148.

A Society of Societies

The commune of Florence was not a revolution against the old order but rather a new order by default. The power vacuum left by the collapse of imperial authority was rapidly filled by almost spontaneous *societates*, which were expedients to address the needs of the city. Jones argues, "In essence communes arose—and were destined to function (or fail) – as a 'concord of orders', instruments not of a single class, even aristocratic or feudal, but of all classes collectively . . . 'commune' spelt consensus—so much that, it is often insisted, all communes indiscriminately, in form as well in spirit, originated in contract (*societas*), a class union or *coniuratio*, initially temporary, even private, between nobility and *cives*, pooling ('in commune') feudal rights and resources at the desire, if not dictation, of the bourgeoisie."¹⁰⁰ This confederacy of societies is what made up the early commune, and it is important to see the tower societies in the context of this confederacy. An analysis of all the major societies and civic organizations-- *vicinia*, ecclesiastical organizations, *portinarius*, *boni homines*, consuls, *societas militum*, *societas pedites*, *societas populi*, *novi homines*, *arti*, and of course the *consorterie*-- gives one a greater appreciation of the tower societies' role and function in the early commune. The tower societies were not an anomaly but one part of several contracts that made the commune.

In the light of the anarchic situation left by the dissolution of the Carolingian order, it is no wonder that some of the first organizations to appear spontaneously were the *vicinie* or *vicinanze*. They were neighborhood organizations that were forced to

¹⁰⁰ Jones, p. 148.

organize in order to address some of the most mundane necessities of life. Since they could not rely on the imperial government to help them, they were forced to help themselves.¹⁰¹ The *vicinia* did not originate in the cities, but actually could trace their origins to the countryside, where they began on a very small scale. The *vicinia* can be traced to the fledgling dominions of the local lord, the *dominatus loci*, who was responsible for defending and maintaining the peace of the villages. The lord of the *vicinia* began erecting fortresses, the precursors of the *rocche*, and by virtue of his powers, he was able to command and/or coerce villagers to obey his orders and jurisdiction. The villagers were also obliged to maintain and man the fortress even if they did not farm land belonging to the lord. These privileges were not limited to lords alone, but they began to be exercised by the largest landowners as well. Banal powers were now being vested in large landowners and, despite the protests of the landed lords, little could be done to stop this trend.¹⁰² One of the more interesting elements of these early *vicinia* was that the peasants were not alienated from the lord by this arrangement but rather shared quite often in the management of the village and fortress. The *vicinia* had ancient origins and was seen as a communal rather than exclusive. It was common practice for the lord to work with his *vicini* concerning the management of farmland, the village, and the fortress.¹⁰³ These rural organizations also emerged in urban settings as well. Quite often they were the transplanted cousins of the rural *vicinia*, and in other cases they evolved within the diverse districts and neighborhood of the city. They are

¹⁰¹ Schevill Florence, p. 64, Jones, p. 134.

¹⁰² Tabacco, *Struggle for Power*, pp. 194-195.

¹⁰³ Tabacco, p. 202, G. P. Bognetti, "Sulle origini dei comuni rurali del medioevo", *Studi nelle scienze giuridiche e sociali pubblicati dall'Istituto di esercitazioni presso la facoltà di giurisprudenza* 10 (University of Pavia, 1926), : 136.

significant because they demonstrate that the autonomous actions taken by the communes began on a very fundamental and practical level. Furthermore, these primitive agreements established the precedent and model of how all future communal agreements would be organized. They were extremely local and intimate, and they possessed a military quality. Though we do not possess any of these early contracts, there is little doubt that the relationships and roles defined by the *vicinia* contracts were the model of the future tower society contracts. In addition, the relationships defined in the *vicinia* would continue to be a key feature of the medieval city of Florence.

These neighborhood and fortress organizations gave birth to many new social roles and relationships that performed specific functions or services. Throughout the *contado* there existed several castles, *rocche*, which were quite often served by peasants during times of lawlessness or violence. The peasants were obligated to garrison the castle, demonstrating one of the earliest examples of military self-help. For performing these crucial military duties, members of the *rocche* were rewarded with certain rights such as the *portinarius*, the gatekeeper. This gatekeeper was also endowed with the responsibility of caretaker of goods and maintenance of the fortress.¹⁰⁴ One can see an almost direct relationship between the responsibilities and duties of the *portinarius* and the responsibilities and duties defined in the tower contracts that will be examined in detail in the following chapter.

The *vicinia* also performed ecclesiastical functions connected to their parish. With the absence of any civic organization, the neighborhood groups must have looked to

¹⁰⁴ Schevill, p. 64, Jones, pp. 382-384.

their parish with tremendous loyalty considering that they maintained their ecclesiastical administrative functions in the face of anarchy. Schevill argues, "Indeed, with other institutional props disastrously giving way, men looked with increased affection to the parish church, which with its solemn ceremonies of baptism, marriage, and burial gave spiritual strength and moral sanction to the primal social unit, the family."¹⁰⁵ The church, therefore, became one of the earliest meeting places of the *vicinia*, providing a space within and in front of the building to discuss maintenance of infrastructure and other neighborhood concerns. Thus, in the neighborhood parish the people began to learn the art of politics and civic management. Jones explains, "For the mass of people of all classes neighbourhood and *vicinanze* (some no more than a few households) were not only the natural scene and center of most social life, a virtual extension even replacement of the kin or 'domestic company of the family' (Dante, *Convivio*, iv. 4), but a forum also of politics, government, and public life, city-states in miniature."¹⁰⁶ Particularism was a major feature of medieval Italy, and it expressed itself even within Italian cities as exemplified by the parishes that played an important role in the neighborhood. The ubiquitous parishes in the *vicinia* accelerated and exacerbated the particularism, and its influence would never be completely eradicated from Italian urban centers. It would become one of the major goals of the future municipal government to usurp these parish rights and incorporate them into one civic order. This process would prove to be one of the motivating factors that would confront the tower societies.

¹⁰⁵ Schevill, p. 65.

¹⁰⁶ Jones, p. 404.

The parishes were successful in addressing the concerns of a specific neighborhood in the city, but they were not well equipped or efficient enough to address emergencies that concerned the entire city. In this situation, larger municipal societies would emerge. Forced to assume the right of its own defense, Florence expanded the old Roman walls early in the twelfth century with four gates. In order to secure the protection, maintenance, and defense of these four gates, Florence had to organize an institution to address these concerns. Male citizens would be recruited to take on this responsibility, and they were assigned to specific gate duties in the same manner that they belonged to certain parishes. In times of emergency they were required to meet at these gates to provide military service. These gate societies, like the neighborhood parishes, were also obligated to meet and discuss key issues regarding the management of their gates. They organized committees, enacted measures, and appointed captains known as *boni homines*. They were usually the most honored and respected members of their gate company, and it is generally believed that these men were the precursors of the consuls. These institutions were all relatively primitive and impermanent, but they do demonstrate, albeit in a very experimental and haphazard fashion, the attempt to administer and maintain their inchoate community.¹⁰⁷

Most historians agree that the consuls grew out of the *boni homines*, but they caution against using this term as a litmus test for the starting point of the commune because self-government antedated the consuls. The first use of the term “consul” in

¹⁰⁷ Schevill, pp 65-66, Jones, pp. 134-135, Waley, The Italian City-Republics, p. 32.

Florence can be dated to 1138, though it could have been used before this time.¹⁰⁸ The consular executive lasted through most of the twelfth century, and it consisted of multiple consuls usually up to twelve members. They served a one-year term and their duties included negotiating treaties, leading wars, and presiding over the municipal court. In addition, the consuls oversaw the general meeting of the citizens organized in the *parlamentum*, also referred to as *contio* or *arringhum*. Much has been made of these fledgling democratic qualities, but Schevill is quick to warn us not to make too much of these qualities arguing, “The consular constitution of the young communes did not have its root in the people but functioned as an oligarchy coated with a thin democratic veneer.”¹⁰⁹ The *parlamentum* was allowed to approve treaties, but there is no evidence that they were allowed to elect the consuls. Another key element of the consuls is that they regularly came from the magnate class meaning that they were predominately aristocratic. It is important to note that these consuls did not yet have a public building, and therefore they met in the same manner as the *vicinia*, that is, in churches or public squares. This seems perfectly in line with the mentality of the times, where private and public functions merged. No distinction was made between the local neighborhood concerns and the concerns of the city as a whole.

One of the most active groups in the growing population of Florence was the nobility. The nobles had been moving into the city for years, and the process of territorial expansion throughout the *contado* only accelerated the process of noble migration. As

¹⁰⁸ Pietro Santini, “Introduction” in *Documenti Dell’Antica Costituzione Del Comune Di Firenze* (Firenze: G. P. Vieusseux, 1895), p. xxvi.

¹⁰⁹ Schevill, p. 67.

Jones previously commented, class distinctions were not clear, and the division between the knightly class and the wealthy merchant class was extremely porous.¹¹⁰ The wealth of the early merchants allowed them to intermarry with the knights, eventually obscuring completely the distinctions between the two groups until they were identified solely as a wealthy class, and in due time they too began to develop an association with the intent to protect and promote their wealth—the *societas militum*. During the consular phase of the commune almost anyone with the financial means to acquire the accoutrements of warfare could possibly qualify as a *miles*. This group would later be identified as the magnates, a rather nebulous term as we later shall see, but during this consular phase social promotion was relatively fluid and dynamic.

The remaining population was organized into *pedites*. As was the situation for most of the socio-political institutions of the medieval period, the *pedites* were locally organized emerging from their local parishes, and by the thirteenth century they evolved into the *societas pedites*. This reliance on local groups to address the military needs of the city solved some problems but also created a set of new problems. On one hand, the *pedites* were created to address the very real need of self-defense, but, on the other hand, the reliance on local parishes to raise these forces crystallized the excessive loyalty to one's neighborhood, clan, or family. It solidified the fractured nature of the civic state and would help to intensify the civil strife that would plague Florence throughout the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. With the creation of the *pedites* Florence would also have to face a new conflict-- class conflict. Eventually the *societas pedites*

¹¹⁰ Jones, p. 148.

would assume the far more politicized name *societas populi* which, by the virtue of its name, would become very socially aware and eventually lead the movement against the magnate class and their military aristocracy. Eventually the *societas militum* and the *societas populi* joined together creating a communal army under the command of the consuls. The one underlying problem with the communal army was that it was still highly privatized. The communal army relied greatly on the local parishes' ability to organize a force, but the individual member was still responsible to equip himself from his own private resources. Whether a knight or a foot soldier, each member relied greatly on his ability to acquire the necessary accoutrements. The communal army may have pursued a unified goal, but it relied on individual resources to achieve this goal. Into the battlefield the army would march pulling with them the *caroccio*, a platform on four wheels carrying the flag of the commune, as a symbol of their unity.¹¹¹

The magnate class organized a variety of societies to meet the needs of the community and promote and protect their concerns, but as the merchant class began to grow it also saw the need for self-protection. As was true with all the societies discussed so far, the *novi homines* organized the *societas mercatorum*, essentially a merchant guild, to represent their own particular needs. Though the evidence cannot support it, historians generally believe that merchant guilds existed very early in the consular period, and the earliest document that shows evidence of merchant guild can be dated to 1182.¹¹²

Though they first sought to protect their trade in cloth, dyes, hides, and spices, they soon turned their attention towards banking. Their success as merchant-bankers gave them

¹¹¹ Schevill, pp. 68-69.

¹¹² Santini, *Documenti*, pp. 535, 534.

sufficient wealth and prestige and thus the opportunity to intermarry with the knights. Once again, the division between noble and merchant was constantly obscured and extremely porous. Each benefited from this relationship and the traditional noble disdain for merchant endeavors does not seem to express itself in Florence. The typical portrayal of noble's pursuit of military glory and the merchant's pursuit of wealth does not easily apply to Florence.

The final group, the *arti*, craft guilds, most clearly represents a distinction from the knightly and merchant-banker class. Even though the populi attempted to distinguish themselves from the nobles there is no question that the *arti* truly were distinguishable from both these classes. By 1193 at least seven known craft guilds came into existence. Though their influence was minor, what is significant is that even at the lowest strata of this commercial society the impulse to associate was expressing itself. It crossed over all sectors of society, demonstrating that its value was appreciated by all.

The significance of this analysis is to demonstrate that the drive to form associations was expressed in all sectors of Florentine society. The towers were not an anomaly but only one aspect of trend that was exercised in every class, neighborhood, parish, or profession. As we shall see in our following analysis of the organization of the tower societies and their society pacts, all of the societies organized in the consular period shared the same concerns. Each association wished to protect its property and financial interests. The absence of any imperial order or protection forced every social group to organize societies to protect their wealth. The total lack of an imperial army meant that the citizens had to organize their own defense, and therefore almost every

society provided some means to secure themselves and their city. Also, each society had to concern itself with the mundane maintenance of their organization and therefore took measures to address the most practical matters. Since no imperial justice existed, each society created its own means to deal with legal disputes. They collectively played a role as peacekeepers and purveyors of concord. As Jacques Heers describes, “The government of the commune was merely the result of agreements among family powers, in all a sort of very fragile compromise.”¹¹³ The commune was a fragile balance of multiple negotiations-- a social contract compromised of many contracts. The towers were just one of these contracts and should be seen in relationship to all the other societies that existed during the consular phase.

¹¹³ Jacques Heers. Parties and Political Life in the Medieval West (New York: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1977), p. 18.

Chapter 5.

The Towers: Their Origins, Purpose, Pacts, and Societies

The towers have traditionally been perceived as a fundamentally destructive to the civic order of Florence. Whenever historians wanted to paint a picture of the civil violence they would turn to the accounts of Giovanni Villani and Dino Compagni. Villani provides several great examples of the violent caprices of medieval Florence. For example:

And in those times, by reason of the said war, many towers were newly fortified by the communities of the districts, from the common funds of the neighbourhood, which were called Towers of the Fellowships, and upon them were set engines to shoot forth one at another, and the city was barricaded in many places; and this plague endured more than two years, and many died by reason thereof, and much peril and hurt was brought upon the city; but this war among the citizens became so much of use and wont that one day they would be fighting, and the next day they would be eating and drinking together, and telling tales of the one another's valour and prowess in these battles.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Giovanni Villani, Villani's Chronicle: Croniche Fiorentine of Giovanni Villani (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1907), Book V, Chapter 9, pp. 109-110.

This was just one of several accounts that depicted the violence the towers could wreak upon the city but it was not unique to Florence. Violence was a common element of medieval society and was not unique to Florence or Italy. These family conflicts were legendary and served as Shakespeare's inspiration for Romeo and Juliet. Violence could break out at any moment over a variety of issues just as it did between the Capulets and Montagues. A minor skirmish between two rival youths, a forbidden love between two members of rival families, an insult or slight, any of these small events could easily escalate into a major conflict, but just as soon as they erupted, they could easily be settled and peace would be restored. Considering the violence that was pandemic to all of medieval society at that time, it would be very unfair to assume the towers were the fundamental cause of communal violence. The assumption that the violence would cease if the towers were destroyed is foolish and misinformed.

The purpose of the following analysis is to come to an understanding of the fundamental role the towers played in Florentine society. It will provide a general history of towers and examine the role towers played in communal defense and private defense. The towers were engaged in a diversity of functions in the medieval city. Not only did they play a pivotal role in communal and private defense, but they also were used for commerce, housing, and as a meeting hall. The towers also provided the basis of communal administration and jurisdiction as witnessed in the tower contracts that will be examined. These contracts were a negotiated agreement between diverse peoples, and they can be seen as a model of how the commune as a whole should and did operate. The tower contracts provided laws and an administrative order that secured order and peace

within the tower society. The tower societies should not be seen as an agent of chaos and disorder but rather a practical solution to the civic disorder on an extremely local and personal level.

The Origin of the Towers

The towers are not a medieval phenomenon but rather have ancient origins. Ancient towers not only served a defensive function, which was typical of the mural towers, but they could also serve an offensive function. A good example of this can be seen in the 880 B.C. bas-relief depicting the Assyrian King Ashur-Nasir-Pal's siege on a city. This image not only shows the wall towers defending the city, but depicts siege towers constructed of wood used to assault the city.¹¹⁵ Towers were also a standard feature in Roman military camps which in turn served as a model for the foundation of Roman cities, and since Florence was settled by the Romans around 59 B.C. there is little doubt that the first towers in Florence were Roman.

In 82 B.C. the original Etruscan settlement was completely leveled by the Romans in their effort to secure supremacy over the region. An entirely new Roman settlement was begun after Julius Caesar passed his agrarian law in 59 B.C., intending to promote civic restoration. This new settlement was erected downstream from the original Etruscan city and was based on the traditional Roman camp model so commonly seen in Roman cities. Roman camps were normally rectangular and enclosed by a wall and a ditch. In general, each wall had a gateway in the middle and the main gate, called the

¹¹⁵ Sidney Toy, A History of Fortification: From 3000 B.C. to A.D. 1700, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1955), p. 21.

porta praetoria, had a major artery leading to the center of the camp where a square was erected that contained the main administrative building, the *principia*, and a storehouse, the *horrea*.¹¹⁶ These gates usually contained two towers on either side for the defense of the gate. Towers generally could be found along the walls as well.

Schevill describes the Roman foundation of the city as a modest settlement. He argues, "As no very great future was anticipated for the new venture, the ground plan, in the shape of the familiar square favored for the Roman camp, exhibits very modest proportions."¹¹⁷ He estimates that the sides measured no more than five hundred meters and that there were four gates per each wall, and, true to Roman form, in the middle of the city the forum was planned. This forum evolved in the Middle Ages into the Mercato Vecchio. Lansing believes that there probably were four towers built at each corner of the Roman castrum, and she portrays these towers as the historical antecedent of the medieval towers.¹¹⁸ By the Byzantine period, the ancient walls were substantially reduced and in disrepair.¹¹⁹ When a new circuit of Byzantine walls was built in the sixth century a set of towers was erected to defend the walls. One of these towers, the Pagliazza, still survives, and during the thirteenth century it was used as a prison.¹²⁰ These walls were eventually replaced with a more expansive second wall in the twelfth century. Towers were a regular and ancient feature of Florence's defense but these were not the only form they took. Towers could also be found throughout the Florentine *contado*.

¹¹⁶ Toy, *History of Fortification*, p. 38.

¹¹⁷ Schevill, *Florence*, p. 6.

¹¹⁸ Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, p. 87.

¹¹⁹ Fanelli, *Firenze*, p. 7.

¹²⁰ Lansing, p. 87, P. Bargellini and E. Guarnieri, *Firenze: Studi e ricerche*, (Florence, 1973), p. 57.

In the Florentine *contado*, nobles also built towers and fortresses to protect their estates, commonly called *rocche*. The *rocche* in the *contado* were the precursors of the tower societies and they taught their urban counterparts the art of tower and fortress management. The rural fortresses were built as a defensive necessity to secure protection from the perils that constantly plagued medieval society. The rural magnate did not build, maintain, and operate the tower in isolation but relied on help from his peasantry. As a result, the peasantry played a pivotal role in the management of their rural *vicinia*, and they were accustomed to reaching agreements through consensus and negotiation.¹²¹ The members of the *vicinia* were constantly striving to maintain unity within their own community. Several of these rural *vicinia* evolved into rural communes, but as the commune of Florence engaged in securing supremacy over the *contado*, these rural fortresses were obligated to move into the city. These rural clans migrated into the city but their behavior and operation did not alter to adjust to their new urban existence.¹²² One can easily see how the nobility simply recreated their fortified villas within the city, transplanting their clan from their rural setting to their new urban reality. Some of the rural towers were simple watchtowers, such as the rectangular twelfth-century tower connected to the castle of signori di Quarata, but generally the towers were integrated into the home and served multiple purposes.¹²³ Their urban counterpart continued in the same manner to serve multiple functions for the magnate and his clan. Not only did towers perform a defensive role, but they could also be used for housing, as shops and

¹²¹ Tabacco, *Struggle for Power*, p. 202.

¹²² Tabacco, pp. 203-204.

¹²³ Lansing, p. 87. see also R. Francovitch, *I castelli del contado fiorentino nei secoli XII e XIII* (Florence, 1973).

storage, and for rental income. Due to the diverse uses of urban towers, two types eventually evolved within the city-- the residential and the military tower.

The military towers were generally narrower than the residential towers. They were usually constructed with rough stone, and there were generally very few narrow windows. They were constructed in typical *pietra forte* fashion with the larger stones at the base, the size of the stones gradually diminished as they ascended the tower.¹²⁴ The tower was also generally wider at the base and narrowed as construction ascended skyward. These larger stones no doubt helped provide a more stable foundation for the awesome loads exerted upon the lower levels of the tower. Despite the sturdy foundation of the *pietra forte*, the height of the tower was a constant concern. Villani described the towers as being at least 150 cubits, and as the towers ascended higher into the skies they became increasingly unstable and subject to a variety of natural lateral forces that easily toppled these medieval skyscrapers.¹²⁵ As a result, they were generally adjoined to other structures, contributing to the overall stability of the tower. It appears that many towers narrowed as they climbed to lighten the load at the top. Even though measures were taken to increase the stability of these imposing structures, they were nonetheless known to collapse during the medieval period just as they have been known to collapse today.

The overall external appearance of the towers can be described as minimalist. There were very few architectural details on the tower. Windows were small and arched, and the stone was rough and perforated with scaffolding holes. The use of rough stone served a practical function. Considering that objects would be launched at the towers,

¹²⁴ A. Schiaparelli, La Casa Fiorentina e i Soui Arredi nei Secoli XIV and XV (Florence, 1907), p. 65.

¹²⁵ Villani, Book VI, Chap. 33, p. 143.

they had to be constructed with rough and hard stone. Decorative travertine marble, for example, would have been useless in times of war since it does not sustain blows from missiles well and crumbles and cracks with fire. One must remember that the fundamental purpose of the towers was to serve a military function, and its aesthetic qualities were not important.¹²⁶ It was a war machine and therefore it had to sustain the violence that it would invariably be subject to. The scaffolding holes were undoubtedly used to attach balconies. These balconies most likely served a dual aesthetic and practical function. They provided a viewing deck and added some architectural interest to the bleak exterior, but they were more than likely used for defensive purposes. The fact that they are missing today is probably due to the combined forces of time and neglect in addition to the ordinances enacted during the thirteenth century to limit the use of the towers as a war machine. The balconies may have also been used to help clan leaders address large neighborhood gatherings just as Nicolai Rubinstein has suggested the balcony in the Palazzo Vecchio was used to address the people from the communal palace.¹²⁷ Some of the towers had arched doors at ground level, but this weakened the tower's defensive abilities.

The towers had many functions, and therefore in certain instances doors were necessary for easy access for business purposes and communal gatherings. The towers without doors on the ground level permitted access via the upper levels by way of either ladder or wooden walkway from an adjacent building. These towers were usually a part

¹²⁶ Villani, Book V, Chap. 9, pp. 109-110.

¹²⁷ Nicolai Rubinstein, The Palazzo Vecchio 1298-1532: Government, Architecture, and Imagery in the Civic Palace of the Florentine Republic (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 14.

of a network of interconnected buildings, and therefore there was no need to build an entrance on the ground level, increasing the security and the exclusive quality of the towers.¹²⁸ The ground level room was the most secure room, and it generally had the thickest walls and a vaulted ceiling built with stone.¹²⁹ Here they would store munitions and provisions to be used during an armed conflict. Later these rooms were used for meeting rooms where relatives and society members could gather or the men could practice using their weapons. The members were always safe because the ground level was completely inaccessible from the street. Access to the tower was usually gained from an entrance at the upper levels either by ascending a ladder to a door or via a bridge from a neighboring or adjoined house. An example of this can be seen in a Genoese illustration from the thirteenth century showing a drawbridge hanging by a chain linking a house to a tower window.¹³⁰ The exclusive access guaranteed that the tower would never fall into enemy hands, and access to the tower and adjoining houses was carefully monitored.

The interior of the towers was very simple and generally confined due to the narrowness of the towers. The limited interior space was largely due to the thickness of the stone walls and the slight inward sloping angle of the tower walls built to increase stability. The ground floors were generally vaulted, but the upper floors were probably constructed with wood platforms. The use of wood at the upper levels would help reduce the loads on the foundation, and people probably relied on trapdoors and ladders to

¹²⁸ Lansing, pp. 98-104.

¹²⁹ Fanelli, p. 31.

¹³⁰ Heers, Family Clans, p.193.

ascend the tower to save space within the narrow confines of the tower.¹³¹ These military towers were not built with any other intent other than defense, and therefore they were very modest and impractical for living. Even though their original function was intended only as a safe haven in times of civil strife, the scarcity of domestic space in the city would later dictate that they would be adapted for living. In order to address the growing demands for living space several new towers were constructed with more multi-practical uses in mind. These towers would have a military function but would also be used as residences.

The residential towers, known as *casa-torre*, were generally shorter and broader than the exclusively military towers. The *casa-torre* needed to achieve two purposes. First, they had to be strong enough to defend clan members from attack, but they also had to be large enough to house the numerous members of the clan. Though the military towers were stationary, their height allowed them a more extensive range for launching missiles. The wider and squatter quality of the *casa-torre* did not provide a beneficial position for such actions. The *casa-torre* had more windows than a military tower, and they were quite often topped with loggias.¹³² These loggias were the predecessors of the famous renaissance loggias so typical of Florentine palaces, a point that will be discussed in depth later. Quite often these towers had a simple façade in the same manner as the military towers, but overtime the *casa-torre* began to use more elegant façades as seen in the fourteenth century Palazzo Davanzati. It is theorized that these elegant tower homes

¹³¹ Schiaparelli, *La Casa Fiorentina*, pp. 65-66.

¹³² Lansing, p. 85.

were referred to as “*palatium sive turrim*.”¹³³ It appears that these residential towers may have had a long history in Italian cities dating back to Roman times. Most Roman cities were built using a military camp model where the castrum had four towers at each corner. These towers were defensive but may have housed soldiers as well. As previously mentioned, the Byzantines also built a series of towers which may have served the same dual function. The Byzantine tower named the Pagliazza still exists in Florence and was used as prison in the thirteenth century.¹³⁴ Towers were a common feature of urban and rural construction. The *rocche* of the *contado* were similar to their urban counterparts in serving a dual function.¹³⁵

Though towers are not unique to Italy there are some interesting differences between the Italian towers and northern European towers. Generally in the north the towers are circular, but the Italian towers were almost always built square.¹³⁶ Carol Lansing has theorized that the *casa-torre* may have originated actually from the fortified Roman villas though this may be difficult to prove. The *casa-torre* was owned by shareholders and was primarily used for defense but the ground levels could be used for rental shops. As a result, the *casa-torre* usually had doors at the ground level, unlike the military towers which required more difficult accessibility. According to Lansing, the height and limited interior space was poorly suited for permanent residence.¹³⁷ The tower pacts do not mention residential use, and the references concerning possession of the

¹³³ Lansing, p. 85, *Liber Extimationum: Il Libri degli Estimi* edited by Olof Brattö, (Göteborgs universitets årsskrift/ Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis. Vol. 62:2, 1956), p. 114.

¹³⁴ Bargellini, Guarnieri, *Firenze*, p. 47.

¹³⁵ Lansing, p. 87.

¹³⁶ Toy, p. 74.

¹³⁷ Lansing, p. 88.

tower keys seem to support Lansing's argument that no one permanently resided in the towers. She does concede that due to the limited space available within the city walls the space was not left unused. The crowded conditions of thirteenth century Florence mandated that the tower take on some temporary residents. Dino Compagni states that during their two-month term, the Priors were secluded in la Castagna, the tower of Badia, to secure their protection. The narrow towers housed six priors, six servants, and six guards.¹³⁸ Though the towers may not have been ideal for housing, practicality dictated that they had to be used at least as temporary facilities. This also implies that during violent outbreaks of clan warfare, they could easily be adapted for temporary housing.

Building, maintaining, and operating the towers, military or residential, required a great deal of manpower and capital, and as a result anyone who aspired to build a tower was obligated to create an association of members. Jacques Heers argues that cost alone dictate the need for communal action. This communal action helped strengthen neighborhood links and consecrated peace within the *vicinia*. One of the earliest agreements cited by Santini in his seminal essay on the tower societies show that in 1178 fifteen to sixteen families agreed to work communally to erect a tower.¹³⁹ Another source from 1180 lists thirty heads of families with at least seven different family names working together to erect two towers.¹⁴⁰ The sheer enormity of this great undertaking dictated that group action had to be taken if it were to ever be achieved. Individual action could not equal the ability of communal action, and therefore the individual was

¹³⁸ Dino Compagni, Dino Compagni's Chronicle of Florence trans. Daniel E. Bornstein, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), Book 1, Chap. 4, pg. 8.

¹³⁹ Santini, "Società delle Torri," p. 184.

¹⁴⁰ Santini, Documenti, pp. 519-521.

sublimated by the clan. Unity of action could be achieved but on a very local and immediate level. The struggle for the commune was to bring this local, neighborhood action into the fold of the state.

The Tower Pacts

The military towers were not solely intended for private defense, but they also served a very important role in public defense. This contradictory quality undoubtedly contributed to internal violence, but they also provided cohesion and community cooperation because not only did they originate in the neighborhood, the *vicinia*, but perhaps even more importantly, as Villani informs us, their excessive cost obligated them to pool resources and labor.¹⁴¹ The tower societies were not an entirely new innovation but probably emerged from earlier military associations that were endowed with public defense but organized on a local level. Perhaps one of the earliest military societies endowed with the responsibility to protect the city can be found in the gatekeeper associations. The city was divided into four quarters with four corresponding city gates, *portae*, that needed to be manned, and maintained. To ensure that the gates would be manned and maintained, associations were created with explicit contracts describing their management. Contrary to contemporary assumptions about public defense and protection, the *portae* associations could behave autonomously. There are several instances where the *portae* would be used to defend a quarter of the city against another

¹⁴¹ Villani. Book 5. Chapter 9.

rival quarter. Though their primary objective was for public defense, the dividing line between public and private defense was extremely blurred.¹⁴² Lansing believes that the towers, like the *portae*, had an overlapping function-- public and private defense. Several towers were clustered at strategic positions such as the Ponte Vecchio, and it appears that during communal emergencies they could easily be employed for civic defense from an external threat.¹⁴³ Considering the serious limitations of the city walls, until 1173-1175 when they were expanded, the towers may have played a crucial role in supplementing their serious limitations.

One of the key differences between Carol Lansing and Jacques Heers concerning the makeup of the tower societies is whether they were based on kinship. Heers emphasizes the essential role kinship played in the development of these tower societies, arguing that they were extensions of the family clan.¹⁴⁴ Lansing believes that family connection was not necessary and that membership was essentially similar to a joint partnership where shares of ownership and membership could be acquired and negotiated.¹⁴⁵ Santini supports this interpretation, pointing out two elements that demonstrate the diverse makeup of families that composed membership. First, members were not required to defend an ally against their own family or their wives' family up to the fourth degree of kinship. Second, members were forbidden to pick fights with relatives of members.¹⁴⁶ Both demonstrate that there were a variety of families in every society. Lansing argues that tower societies were not kin groups but were a parallel

¹⁴² Heers, Parties and Political Life, pp. 85.86.

¹⁴³ Lansing, p. 88.

¹⁴⁴ Heers, Family Clans, pp. 194-197.

¹⁴⁵ Lansing, p. 90.

¹⁴⁶ Santini, Documenti, pp. 523-525.

organization to family lineage serving a similar purpose.¹⁴⁷ In many respects the tower societies were in competition with the kin groups, considering the fact that the tower societies were used to limit lineage expansion in the city. By exerting significant control over their own neighborhoods and often pursuing greater acquisition of property within their neighborhood, competing kin groups were limited from expanding beyond their own sphere of influence.

There were essentially three basic military goals of the tower societies. They attempted to guarantee mutual defense of members, secure exclusivity of membership, and physically expand influence over the city. There were also very pragmatic concerns that included the desire to earn rental income and the construction of balconies. The primary goal of the towers was to secure protection of clan members, and these obligations were often clearly defined. Any man who found himself in danger, usually from an outbreak of violence with a rival clan, would receive the keys of the tower from the rector giving him access to the fortress until the tensions subsided. If a man were expelled from his house through violence, fellow tower society members were obligated to receive him into their house until the violence ended. Members and their family were allowed to use the tower until any threat against them ceased.¹⁴⁸ It appears that the pacts also secured allies for its members if a violent conflict effected a member of the society. Evidence of this cannot be found in explicit directions describing when members must fight but in describing when they were not obligated to fight. Tower members were not obligated to get involved in a conflict that may have occurred between a member and his

¹⁴⁷ Lansing, p. 90.

¹⁴⁸ Santini, Documenti, p. 525.

own family. They also did not get involved in conflicts between disputing members.¹⁴⁹

One may assume therefore, aside from the two instances when they were not obligated to fight, in all other circumstances members were bound to defend their society brothers.

One of the most important aspects of the tower pacts was the explicit description of membership. Members could not sell or transfer their portion or share without consent of other members. Shares of ownership would be transferred to a son or another male relative if a son did not exist. When a son turned fifteen years old, the member was obligated to post a security in the name of the son who would become a future member. If they failed to post this security within thirty days, they could lose their shares. If a member was unable to pay this security because he could not afford it, he lost his shares but he was paid a fixed sum per “braccia” (a medieval linear measurement). No woman could own a share of the tower, and this stipulation appears to be common throughout all of the tower pacts. It appears that the reason this measure was created was to ensure that a share did not pass into the hands of an enemy by marriage.¹⁵⁰ The exclusion of women also seemed to encourage the brotherhood inherent in a military association. Lansing explains, “These rules suggest the symbolic identity of a brotherhood of warriors: vehement exclusion of women, the ritual attached to the admission of young men as a rite of passage into adulthood, the assembly of members in church to swear an oath of mutual defense.”¹⁵¹ The rules of the tower society were very akin to the rules governing a guild. Each periodically elected officers, annually collected dues, and attempted to secure the

¹⁴⁹ Lansing, pp. 90-91.

¹⁵⁰ Santini, *Società di Torri*, pp. 37-46.

¹⁵¹ Lansing, p. 91.

exclusive membership of the organization. Although practical reasons limited membership into the tower society, there is little doubt that the exclusivity must have added to the prestige of the society as well.

Though membership may have been exclusive, the desire to expand physically and to acquire more real estate was very inclusive. Annual dues were collected with the intent to make additions and repairs to existing towers and to construct new towers. Additions to towers and plans to construct new towers were a prime imperative if a neighbor's tower was taller, allowing their rival to launch objects upon their fortress. The acquisition of property near the tower was also important because it secured control of the immediate area, and allowed the possibility of connecting all buildings together to create a huge fortress within the city walls. By controlling the entire neighborhood property the society would be able to secure all sides of the tower and facilitate the construction of secret, internal passages to the tower. An example of the desire to conjoin all of the properties and insure the security of the tower can be found in the decision of the sons of Guidolino to give a part of their house to the society that was located at a strategic position near the tower. The sons received a cloak worth fifty libre in exchange for this property grant.¹⁵² It is hard to determine if the trade was made willingly but, due to the fact that the tower dwarfed their home, they may have felt compelled to make this trade. A fragment of a pact from 1178 or 1179 demonstrates another example of the attempt to secure domination over a neighborhood and guarantee a defensive enclave. The source describes a block property in the northwest corner of the

¹⁵² Santini, Documenti, pp. 517-518.

old forum across the street from the church Santa Maria in Campidoglio. The fragment stipulates that any member who attempts to sell or give away his property in this area must allow other tower members to have the first chance to acquire the property. It reads: "Item from the Marabottini tower to . . . the Galligai, to the Abati tower, to the house of Flocardini Picconis, to the tower de Bonzole, to the church of Santa Maria in Campidoglio, back to the tower of the sons of Marabottini: if any of the members enter into any society within these confines, he must act in good faith so that all his fellow members or any who so choose shall have a share."¹⁵³ Lansing argues that this pact seems to suggest that there was a strong alliance in the neighborhood.¹⁵⁴ It does not appear that it was successful in achieving total dominance over this square because there were several diverse owners of property within the neighborhood. Though membership in an individual society was exclusive it appears that an individual did not have to be a member in only one society but rather could be a member of multiple alliances. The prospect of multiple alliances proposes a set of new problems and questions. Does this create divided loyalties? Could someone be a member of many societies? If this were true it would make for a very complex and conflicting scenario. Santini believes this may have been the case but it is very hard to prove since no evidence exists to support the idea.¹⁵⁵ Lansing believes that these interlocking alliances between groups may have been the basis of Guelph and Ghibelline factions.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Santini, Documenti, pp. 529-530.

¹⁵⁴ Lansing, p. 92.

¹⁵⁵ Santini, Societa di Torri, p. 51.

¹⁵⁶ Lansing, p. 92.

Financial concerns were always a factor in the management of towers, and therefore rental income was a priority. There was fairly explicit discussion in the sources of construction and management of shops and market stalls. One document even describes how rental income would be divided between the members.¹⁵⁷ Towers may have generated revenue, but they also generated costs as well. Construction costs would be shared among the members and one document discusses the construction of a balcony above a door and the share of expenses. The source even goes on to explain that any other member who wished to add a balcony on his portion of the tower or fortress could also appeal to the society for shared expenses.¹⁵⁸ It was possible actually to have one communal balcony, but several private balconies could also be constructed on multiple sides of the tower. An example of this can be seen in a work by Bigallo showing numerous balconies projecting from towers and houses.¹⁵⁹ Lansing believes that these balconies may have had an ascetic goal in addition to their military and practical functions.¹⁶⁰ The balconies helped soften the stark façade of these rough monoliths. Despite their potential military function, the fact that they were constructed with wood made them very vulnerable to fire, which was a problem that plagued most ancient and medieval crowded cities.¹⁶¹

One of the major concerns of the tower societies was the physical expansion of the society in the neighborhood by joining houses and towers together. This approach gave the society a military advantage over their quarter of the city, but it also was in

¹⁵⁷ Santini, *Documenti*, p. 519.

¹⁵⁸ Santini, *Documenti*, pp. 530-535.

¹⁵⁹ Fanelli, *Firenze*, fig. 20, p. 55.

¹⁶⁰ Lansing, p. 93.

¹⁶¹ Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, p. 825. Fanelli, *Firenze*, p. 39.

competition with the growing power of families and their lineage-based power. It appears that the family lineage was more successful in maintaining its power base than the far more complex alliance of the tower societies. According to Lansing, the power potential of the family and family kinship proved to be more enduring. A document from 1180 demonstrates an attempt by a tower society to establish neighborhood control but found itself in direct competition with three families-- the Strinati, Tornaquici, and della Tosa branch of the Visdomini lineage.¹⁶² The society connected to this document from 1180 vanished but the families mentioned persisted until the fifteenth century. In his *Cronichetta* Neri Strinati describes the process the family went through acquiring property in the Mercato Vecchio. It was a process that took several generations to acquire beginning with one of his earliest ancestors, Ciabero. He was able to buy a house in the neighborhood, and then eventually three shops on the della Tosa were added to their holdings by his son Manso. The great-grandson of Manso, Ciaberonto added the eponymous tower la Ciaberonto. The nephew of Ciaberonto was able to add more property to the family's holdings through a marriage. This now brought Strinati's family property right up to a tower owned by the Tornaquinci family. Later on more shops were added to the family's property and all of this property was physically connected to the original house. These properties eventually became a palace, and by 1256 the family property was held in common by the family lineage dividing up shares between the male family members.¹⁶³ This family history reveals a few important things about the growing

¹⁶² Lansing, p. 93.

¹⁶³ Neri Strinati, "Cronichetta," in *Storia della guerra di Semifonte*, by Paced da Certaldo (spurious), (Florence, 1753), pp. 98-113.

importance of family fortress societies over alliance based tower societies. The solidarity inherent in the family unit was conducive to maintaining continuity of property. The nuclear family and its extended family unit seemed to be a natural model for a family military unity and a clear challenger to the other tower societies. This source also reveals how tower societies, family or alliance based, went about trying to acquire more property that could be physically connected to their power base. For Neri Strinati's family the process took several generations, and one may assume that the inherent bond of the family lineage may have had an additional advantage over the alliance based societies. These alliances were composed of diverse and distinct family units that were probably far more difficult to maintain than a single family lineage. Two other great examples of the growing power of family lineages in tower societies can be seen in the families of the della Tosa and Uberti.

The della Tosa, mentioned in Neri Strinati's account, were major property owners near his family property. In the *Liber Extinctionum* of 1269, the della Tosa lost a great deal of property in three different parishes located north of the market. Their losses were no doubt personally painful but must have also been a strategic loss as well. In total the della Tosa lost a tower, two houses, a shop located on the market, and two conjoined palaces located in Santa Maria in Campidoglio. In the market of San Leone they lost a tower and two palaces that actually were still adjoined to their other family properties, and in San Salvatore they lost four more houses with two towers.¹⁶⁴ The organization of the property, and how they all joined together is uncertain, but this list reveals how

¹⁶⁴ Bratto, *Liber Extinctionum*, p. 419, for more holdings see 424, 463, 488. Lansing, p. 95.

extensive a family's property could be in one section of the city. Furthermore, it demonstrates the importance towers played in exerting influence over a neighborhood. Just from this one list the della Tosa lost four towers, clearly showing the desire and need for not just one tower but multiple towers.

Based on Carocci's reconstruction of Florence's historic center the della Tosa dominated the block near the Mercato Vecchio in 1427.¹⁶⁵ In the fifteenth century the della Tosa's contiguous property created a family courtyard that became the fulcrum of the family's power, but there is no evidence that can conclusively prove that they had such a power base in the thirteenth century. In fact it appears that in 1269 the della Tosa's family lineage did not own all of the property, which rather was owned in common by an alliance. Several portions of the property were described as "comune Filiorum Tose" that included a tower, house, and palace. The interesting point of this is that it demonstrates that the family lineage societies were not necessarily opposed to alliance based societies, but in fact they often relied on these other alliances and actually pursued membership in these societies. One of the della Tosa family members, messer Fastello della Tosa, was listed in the *Liber Extimacionum* as one of the owners of the 'tower of the captains.' There were more than a dozen such owners of this tower located near the San Lorenzo gate.¹⁶⁶ As Lansing points out, the family lineages and the tower societies did not have to be mutually exclusive. She explains, "One might have thought that a tower society was simply a poor man's lineage- or, rather, a new man's lineage- and that a person who belonged to a powerful and active lineage would have little use for

¹⁶⁵ G. Carocci, *Il Centro di Firenze*, (Florence, 1900): map printed in Fanelli, *Firenze*, fig. 40, p. 88.

¹⁶⁶ Bratto, *Liber Extimacionum*, p. 419.

a tower society as well. Instead, Fastello, who owned considerable property on his own, seems to have found a share of this tower useful as well."¹⁶⁷ Families may have strived to extend their own power base, but they just as easily joined tower societies if they believed they would enhance their power in the city. Lansing sees this unique fusion of the family lineages and the alliances as a network of alliances that helped create the Guelph and Ghibelline parties.

The della Tosa may have been a major force in the city, but it was overshadowed by the family lineage of the Uberti. The Uberti became a major military and political force in the seeto of San Pier Scheraggio by accumulating a number of forts in this section of the city. They also owned several properties in the area that became the Piazza Signoria and the Palazzo Vecchio. In addition to a tower near San Romolo, the Uberti owned two ancient monuments of the city: a Lombard fort built on a former Roman theater and, what may have been another fortress, an ancient amphitheater.¹⁶⁸ This mimicked a similar trend in Rome, where key Roman sites were transformed into medieval fortresses.¹⁶⁹ Sometime in the 1190s one of the most powerful fortresses in the medieval city, the castello di Altafronte, was at least partially owned by Schiatta degli Uberti. It was located on the Arno where the modern Piazza dei Giudici is located, and it provided the Uberti family with one of the most strategically powerful positions in the city. It is not known if the rest of the shares were owned by other family members or by an alliance of smaller related family groups. Even though historians are uncertain about

¹⁶⁷ Lansing, p. 95.

¹⁶⁸ Davidsohn gives a detailed description of the Uberti property, *Storia di Firenze*, p. 827.

¹⁶⁹ Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 319-320. Krautheimer describes the military uses of the Colosseum.

the percent owned directly by the Uberti, it still afforded them the opportunity to become one of the leading Ghibelline families.¹⁷⁰

It is easy to understand how the power of these family lineages would present a potential danger and challenge to civic order, but it is also possible that the existence of multiple rival lineages would be forced to negotiate *détente* between each other and thus secure a relative degree of harmony. It is also important to remember that the tower societies and the family lineages were created out of necessity. Communal organization was a basic element of the early commune due to the complete absence of any centralized government or imperial authority. The *consorterie* organizations began in the early villages on the most local level, the neighborhood. *Consorterie* and family kinship were one of the few organizing principles available to a society that had almost a complete lack of organization.¹⁷¹ Each of the tower societies began life as an honest attempt to give order, protection, and assistance to their neighborhood. It was just one of many mutual aid societies that existed in all medieval Italian communities. As Chris Wickham points out, "Their existence emphasizes the continuing importance of kin relationships as the organizing principle for most of society."¹⁷² But as the new merchant class began to grow and create competing societies, the tower societies became the focus of their attention. As long as the tower societies existed, the merchants knew their power would be limited and therefore they became the obvious target of merchant ambition.

¹⁷⁰ Lansing, p. 97.

¹⁷¹ Wickham, *Early Medieval Italy*, p. 121.

¹⁷² Wickham, p. 122.

The following two sections will examine the towers and their role in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The twelfth century was the pinnacle of the tower societies and the magnate class. Italy experienced a dramatic economic and social rejuvenation and Florence was clearly benefiting from this renaissance. The magnate families of Italy, unlike their French counterparts, saw the benefits of urban life and actively pursued their interest in the city. The dominant role of the nobility and their large kin group was conducive to the spread and proliferation of the tower societies, but the thirteenth century marked the beginning of the merchant challenge to the magnate's power. Events in the twelfth century were conducive to the expansion of the towers but by the thirteenth century the climate became more hostile to their existence.

Chapter 6.

The Commune in the Twelfth Century

After the fall of the Roman Empire, autonomy by default became a tradition in Florence. The eleventh century experienced a significant decline in imperial power, and all of the cities throughout Tuscany assumed power by necessity in the face of almost complete imperial abandonment. Even though Matilda was nominally the margrave of Tuscany, she was unwilling or unable to exert hegemony over the cities of Tuscany. Florence was already acting autonomously early in the twelfth century, but Matilda's failure to stop these actions appears to be tacit acceptance of her lack of real power. Whatever the reason, the commune of Florence never came into conflict with the margrave, and with her death in 1115 it was no longer relevant. The city's autonomous actions were now completely unfettered except by the potential conflict with its own bishop though, as we shall see, the bishop was equally as powerless and ineffectual as Matilda. The challenge to the supremacy of the commune would not come from within Italy but from the German emperors, who were usually seen as interlopers into local affairs. The one lasting legacy that Matilda left would be a situation that Florence would be inextricably drawn into-- the conflict between the Papacy and the Emperor. This conflict would unleash a horribly destructive civil war upon the city of Florence, and the towers would play an important part in aiding the conflicting parties' ability to wage this prolonged civil strife. The tower societies that were once organized to help protect the city would help destroy the city.

Matilda had already been drawn into the conflict between the papacy and Henry V. She clearly came down in favor of the papacy against Henry V while she was alive but her actions after her death only added fuel to the already volatile mix. When Matilda died, Henry immediately set out to appoint a new margrave whom would be clearly pliant to imperial policy rather than papal policy. Matilda had countered this, however, by endowing her allodial land to the pope.¹⁷³ It was her legal right to grant allodial land to the pope, but the enfeoffed land was still the legal property of the emperor and the margrave. Despite her intentions, Henry V assumed all of her inheritance, taking advantage of the temporary weakness of the papacy. Though the papacy and emperor would continue in conflict over the margravian lands, a third party emerged that undoubtedly benefited the most from this dispute-- the communes. In the disputed margravian territories of Lombardy, the Lombard communes usurped land, and in the disputed margravian territories of Tuscany, the Tuscan communes usurped land. Schevill explains, "In the course of the many years during which the quarrel continued the masterful young republics quietly appropriated by far the greater portion of the margravian estates, whether feudal or allodial, thus clearly revealing not only the strength of the communal movement but the relative political weakness compared with it of both pope and emperor."¹⁷⁴ In the end, with every conflict between the pope and emperor, the communes would always be able to take advantage of their mutual ineffectiveness and assume land, rights, and power.

¹⁷³ Schevill, *Florence*, p. 72. Davidsohn, *Storia di Firenze*, pp. 259, 290.

¹⁷⁴ Schevill, p. 73.

Henry V attempted to appoint a margrave who would be subservient to his authority, and he attended to achieve this by appointing a German rather than an Italian. Henry V did not want to appoint another Italian noble who would have at his disposal his own local power base. By appointing a German margrave completely dependent on his authority, the emperor could impose or depose him at his will. He found his man in Rabodo, who immediately began his reign by removing the margravian office from Florence and relocating it to the hill town of San Miniato, but his authority was short lived. In 1119, Rabodo seized the Monte Cascioli from Florence, which Florence had only been recently acquired it in 1115, but the citizen army of Florence responded by retaking the castle and burying Rabodo in the ruins.¹⁷⁵ A new margrave was sent but he, along with all of his successors, was unable to check the growing power of the communes. If the emperor arrived in Italy with his army, the communes always submitted, but as soon as he left, they reverted immediately to their autonomous ways. The authority of the emperor was respected because he almost always came accompanied by a superior and loyal military force, but the margrave was completely impotent in the face of a superior communal army. The emperor's attempt to establish an essentially powerless but supple margrave did little to assert his power but rather probably accelerated the declining imperial presence in Italy.

The margrave lacked any real power in the region, forcing the emperor and the great nobles to be the last defenders of the feudal structure. The supposed feudatories of the emperor could never present a unified front in the face of an enemy, but the emperor

¹⁷⁵ Schevill, p. 73.

could, through his own personal presence, still exert power over the communes and will them to act in a unified manner. Despite the attempts of the emperor to curb the power of the communes, they still continued to grow in power largely due to the prolonged absence of the emperor. The communes of Tuscany began to believe that the surrounding *contado* was an extension of their civic jurisdiction, and therefore they began a program of conquest to secure this claim. The fact that the dioceses of the church were based on the same Roman divisions gave the communes the convoluted assumption that they were reclaiming their original ancient right to reign over their *contado*. Florence had ecclesiastical power over the *contado*, and now it assumed it had the right to political power over the *contado*.¹⁷⁶ Three feudal magnates stood in the way of this goal: the bishop of Florence, the Guidi family, and the Alberti Family. Thus it became the intention of the commune to bring these magnates under the submission of the commune.¹⁷⁷ As discussed in the preceding chapter, Florence began to pursue a policy that would destroy the system of castles that protected the Guidi and Alberti families and force these two great magnates to accept the supremacy and jurisdiction of the commune. The commune did not want to appear as if it was usurping the bishop in a haughty manner. Instead it intended to use him as a front for their expansionist policy over the great feudal magnates. The problem for the commune was that any attempt to conquer the magnates and force them to become their subjects was a violation of the feudal structure because these magnates were already subjects of the emperor and margrave.

¹⁷⁶ Schevill, p. 74.

¹⁷⁷ Santini, "Studi sull'Antica Costituzione del Comune di Firenze," *Archivio Storico Italiano* Serie 5, Vol. XXV, (1900). A map shows the location of feudal lands of these three major lords, the bishop, Guidi, and Alberti.

Despite this violation of feudal laws, the emperor and margrave were generally unable to enforce their feudal rights. In an attempt to give their usurpations legitimacy they created an ecclesiastical fiction. The commune of Florence forced the magnates to sign a charter of surrender that required the lords to submit to the cathedral church and the city's patron saint, St. John the Baptist. On St. John's day, all of the conquered magnates were required to present themselves to the gate of San Giovanni as a symbol of their submission to the commune.¹⁷⁸

The major opposition to the commune's expansionist policy was not the bishop but the Guidi and Alberti families. The Alberti became the first target of the commune, most likely because their castles were in sight of the city and the most immediate threat. In 1107 they captured Monte Gualandi and in 1113 they succeeded in taking Monte Cascioli. The seizure of these two fortresses did not mean that they intended to destroy the Alberti family but rather bring them under the submission of the commune. The Alberti family did not disappear from the political scene in Florence. Instead they were incorporated within the city and continued to be an important player in city politics. The Guidi became the next logical target of the commune, considering the fact that they had three hundred castles spread over not only Tuscany but Romagna as well. Ironically, the combined forces of these two great magnate powers could have easily checked the growing power of the commune, but their mutual rivalry and jealousy negated any united action. This conflict helped undermine civic unity and contribute to the chaos that seemed to plague the city continually. Separately these two great families were unable to

¹⁷⁸ Schevill, pp. 74-75.

stop the commune. Not surprisingly whenever the emperor entered the scene in Tuscany, these magnate families would rush to the emperor's aid and the communes would wane in power. The great imperial challenge to the growing supremacy of the communes would come in 1154 with the appearance of Frederick I in Italy.

The communes were able to take advantage of the temporary reprieve of imperial power in Italy from 1125 until 1152. The emperors who succeeded Henry V, Lothar III (1125-1137) and Conrad III (1138-1152), did not pursue any real political power in Italy. Both emperors visited Italy for their imperial coronation, but they did not get involved in dealing with the communes. That would change with the coronation of Frederick I in 1152, but within this twenty-seven year period the Florentine commune would embark on a bold plan to dominate its two neighbors-- Fiesole and Siena. Florence was not unique in this endeavor, for the whole communal era was filled with rivalries and feuds between competing communes in Tuscany, Umbria, Emilia, Venetia, and Lombardy. The greatest impetus to fuel these conflicts was the growing importance of trade.¹⁷⁹ All of the communes engaged in a policy that would either protect or expand their trade network. Any town, city, or commune that might block access to a major trade route or encroach on a commune's ability to do business might become the new target. This would be the great motivation for Florence's conflicts with Fiesole and Siena.

Fiesole overlooked Florence on a hill north of the city. Before the communal era, the two cities lived in harmony, but with the rebirth of commerce Fiesole became the target of Florence's wrath. The Florentines invented a hateful mythology about the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 77.

Fiesolans that they descended from a vile breed of Etruscans that must be eradicated by the people of Florence, who were the descendants of the Romans. Absolutely no historical evidence supports this legend, but there is no doubt that the commune of Florence intended to manipulate this myth to suit their own territorial and commercial concerns. In 1123 the communal army of Florence mobilized their cavalry and infantry and ascended the hill to siege the city of Fiesole. The initial invasion did not succeed due to the inability of the merchant class to stay long in the battlefield, for they had to address economic interests at home. Fiesole did not surrender, forcing Florence to return home and launch a second campaign the next year. It would actually take Florence one more campaign in 1125 to finally take the city of Fiesole. The wrath of the Florentines after their ultimate victory was especially harsh. They slaughtered almost every man and completely razed the town. The walls of the town were destroyed but the Romanesque cathedral was spared so as not to invoke the anger of the pope. The Fiesolans who survived were allowed to return to the city, but they were never allowed to rebuild their protective walls or citadel.¹⁸⁰ Fiesole would never be a threat to Florence again. Florence's next target would be the city of Siena, which was situated between Florence and Rome on the crucial main road that connected all of these cities.

Siena's location enabled the city to become an important commercial city and like all communes of this period it too attempted to control all of its *contado*. Siena's territorial expansion brought it into conflict with the city of Florence, which had competing boundary claims that extended into the *contado* of Siena. Florence made the

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. pp. 78-79.

bold assertion that their *contado* boundaries extended only a few miles from the northern gate of Siena.¹⁸¹ Siena would not sit idly by as Florence made these claims, which had the obvious intention of provoking a conflict. Florence's boundary claims were questionable and the prospect of the Florentine communal army camped so close to Siena did not leave the citizens with a secure feeling. The inevitable conflict began in 1129 but would continue for centuries to come. There was no immediate resolution to the initial conflict. Neither city attempted to have a final *mano a mano* show down, but rather they sought out allies from rival cities as well as rival feudal lords. Siena would seek help from the Guidi and Alberti families who might be looking for an opportunity to seek vengeance on the Florentine commune. Florence would respond in kind seeking help from the Cacciaconti and Aldobrandeschi, which were powerful magnate clans in the *contado* of Siena. The magnates attempted to take advantage of the rivalry between the two communes. Schevill explains, "Just as they seemed to be doomed by the communal movement, the movement dissolved itself into a number of separate units, and against the threat of the enemy commune the magnates found unexpected protection in that commune's political rival."¹⁸² The failure of the commune to create hegemony within the *contado* and the city would undermine it in multiple ways. The fractured state of the communes and their competing societies and interests would always limit their foreign and civic policies because of their inability to maintain unity of action.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 79, for a more complete description of this conflict with Siena see Ferdinand Schevill, Siena: The History of a Medieval Commune (New York: C. Scribner, 1909), Chap. VI.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 80.

Conflict was an essential element of medieval Italy. It pervaded the *contado*, the communes, and the neighborhoods, and it also erupted between cities. Florence's most obvious enemy was Siena, partly due to its advantageous position along the key route to Rome, but even more importantly because it posed the most immediate and obvious threat to Florence's supremacy in Tuscany. The conflict between Florence and Siena provides a great deal of insight into the civic chaos that permeated all of the communes during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The tower society conflicts were a microcosm of the numerous civic conflicts that expressed themselves internally within the city, but the conflict between Florence and Siena was an external expression of the same conflict. Competition, territorial supremacy, and arrogance were the key motivation in almost all conflicts, but success in these conflicts were invariably undermined by the commune's inability to maintain unity of action. Politics and diplomacy were still largely feudal in the sense that every action or agreement was individually negotiated, and therefore there was no overarching objective that unified communal action. It was a policy of particulars, a quality that reflected the political and social realities of medieval Italy in general. One of the major themes that predominated communal and magnate decision-making was immediate advantage. Neither commune nor the magnates thought in terms of long-term policy to achieve a goal but rather made decisions based on what seemed the most advantageous at the moment. The rivalry between Florence and Siena clearly demonstrates this policy. Florence may have hoped to secure suzerainty over the magnate families of the Alberti and Guidi, but it did not see any hypocrisy or irony in seeking an alliance with the Sienese magnate families like the Aldobrandeschi and

Cassiaconti in order to achieve their goals. As a result, wars, alliances, and agreements were a jumbled and chaotic labyrinth of contradictions. The tower societies and the ensuing civic chaos surrounding them were a microcosm of communal diplomacy and politics. The convoluted agreements and relationship in Florentine foreign policy perfectly mirrored those of the tower societies within the city's walls.

Lothar III and Conrad III did not get involved in Italy during their reign, considering the fact that they visited only briefly. Furthermore, they were probably overwhelmed by the complex nature of communal politics. Even though it challenged feudal power they had no desire or ability to get engaged. This would change when Frederick I became emperor in 1152 and entered Italy in 1154 with a serious intention to flex his imperial muscle and bring the renegade communes under his submission.¹⁸³ From Frederick's point of view imperial rule over Italy was still a viable idea, and therefore he perceived the Lombard communes as rebelling against his imperial rule and aspirations. In the face of his impressive imperial army the Lombard communes initially submitted. The commune of Milan attempted to resist but was forced to surrender, but it was not silent for long. Once again they attempted to resist but this time they were punished severely for their transgression. Frederick punished them in 1162 by leveling the city to the ground.¹⁸⁴ Though Frederick's initial attention turned to the northern communes, it no doubt sent a powerful message to the Tuscan communes who were, as

¹⁸³ Villani, Book V, Chap. 1, pp. 101-105.

¹⁸⁴ Otto of Freising, *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), Book III, Chap. 28, pp. 202-206.

yet, untouched but certainly worried about becoming the next target of Frederick's Italian campaign.

With Frederick's early, though temporary, victories in Lombardy he was able to turn his attention towards the pope, the ancient rival of imperial power. Frederick's ambition was to be the supreme power in the Italian peninsula, but this was an ambition that pope Alexander III (1159-1181) would not tolerate. Frederick attempted to preempt Alexander III by setting up a rival pope.¹⁸⁵ In response, Alexander III was able to achieve what few other were able to achieve during this time in Italy: unity. Appealing to the Lombard communes, the pope was able to achieve and maintain a unified force against the ambitions of Frederick I, and in 1176 the Lombard cities delivered a stunning upset to Frederick I on the battlefield at Legnano.¹⁸⁶ This one event was a pivotal moment for communal history and had reverberations throughout the entire peninsula.

Frederick I was forced to accept the terms of the pope and the Lombard communes. Frederick was obligated to meet Alexander III in 1177 at a congress in Venice, where Frederick I had to perform a public act of submission by kissing the foot of the pope.¹⁸⁷ The emperor was not obligated to submit himself in a similar fashion to the communes of Lombardy, but he did agree to a truce that six years later would become the Peace of Constance (1183). The treaty legally recognized the rights of self-rule that the communes had long usurped in violation of feudal custom.¹⁸⁸ The Peace of

¹⁸⁵ C. W. Previte-Orton, The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 568.

¹⁸⁶ Peter Munz, Frederick Barbarossa: A Study in Medieval Politics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 310-311.

¹⁸⁷ Previte-Orton, p. 572.

¹⁸⁸ Hyde, Society and Politics, pp. 98-99.

Constance was intended only to legitimize the Lombard communes, and, even though the Tuscan communes played no part in the victory of Legnano, they perceived this as a tacit acceptance of their communal usurpations as well. They could now continue unfettered in their attempts to gain control over their neighbors throughout Tuscany

There was one interesting lasting element of Frederick's imperial policy that merits mention: the *potestates*. After destroying Milan in 1162, the emperor turned his attention towards Tuscany, where he attempted to impose imperial control with the aid of his chancellor Rainald. Rainald was given the title of *potestates* and the task of creating unity and harmony between the constantly conflicting Tuscan communes.¹⁸⁹ Rainald took residence in the imperial capital of San Miniato del Tedesco, and he temporarily was able to achieve harmony, something the Tuscan communes had previously been unable or unwilling to achieve.¹⁹⁰ Rainald represented a more centralized authority and administration that effectively, though temporarily, pacified the warring communal factions. His successes reveal two things about medieval society in general and the Florentine commune specifically. First, the emerging trend in Western Europe was the centralization of power. Slowly but surely it was replacing the anarchic quality of early medieval political institutions and proved to be a more efficient and effective means of ruling. Second, the temporary peace established by Rainald's administrative power should have sent a message to the communes of Tuscany, but it failed because it could not alter the parochial medieval mentality of the commune.¹⁹¹ The towers themselves

¹⁸⁹ Schevill, *Florence*, p. 82, Munz, *Frederick*, p. 181.

¹⁹⁰ Munz, pp. 182-184.

¹⁹¹ Schevill, pp. 82-83.

were not specifically the cause of civic violence and disorder but rather the absence of any controlling authority. As long as this absence existed, the competing societies that composed the commune would continue to compete and fight among themselves for their own gain rather than for communal gain. Ultimately Rainald failed in his attempt to secure order and harmony in Tuscany. Schevill argues that this occurred for two reasons, “In the first place, his plan was not radical enough, since he joined it with an anachronistic attempt to preserve the feudality in all its ancient rights; in the second place, its execution was put into the hands of a body of foreigners without any support in the country.”¹⁹² The imperial system established by Frederick I started to disintegrate when the Lombard communes began their rebellion against the emperor. After the imperial defeat at Legnano, the *potesstates* ceased to function, and the communes were rekindled returning to self-rule and the rivalries and conflicts. Florence was now free to continue in its pursuit of domination over the *contado* by conquering the towns of Figline in 1168 and Empoli in 1182, and it rejuvenated its domination over the two great magnate families of the Guidi and Alberti.

The Guidi clan had far more success in maintaining their power by carefully and skillfully working with the commune. Count Guido Guerra negotiated with the communes to attain amity, and he secured this peace by agreeing to marry Gualdrada in 1180. Gualdrada was the daughter of one of Florence’s leading citizens, Bellincione Berti.¹⁹³ This marriage seemed to put an end to the long feud with the Guidi family and helped preserve their wealth and power without conflicting with the commune. The

¹⁹² Ibid, pp. 82-83.

¹⁹³ Ibid, p. 83.

Alberti were not as sophisticated in their relations with the commune, and by refusing to work with the commune, they inadvertently invited the wrath of the citizen army, which went to their castle and imprisoned the count. The count was finally freed but only after he signed an act of submission that accepted the supremacy of the commune over his demesne. With the total submission of the Alberti clan and the more subtle negotiations with the Guidi family, the commune now was the undisputed champion over the *contado*.

An indication of Florence's pride and ambition can be seen in the expansion of their city's walls. The Roman template remained with its four gates but with the advent of commercialism, the population of Florence began to grow beyond its modest Roman walls. Outside the Roman wall, suburbs called *borghi* began to sprout up, and during the conflict with Frederick I the commune became keenly aware that these economically crucial *borghi* were vulnerable to destruction. This weakness was corrected in 1172, when the city began constructing a new network of walls that encompassed three times the area of the original Roman walls.¹⁹⁴ Furthermore, the walls now extended to the left bank of the river and possessed twelve gates as opposed to the four in the original Roman wall. All of this was evidence that the fortunes of Florence were growing at a great rate and the citizens of the city saw for themselves a positive future.

Once again Frederick I visited Italy in 1184, but this time he was twenty years older and had no desire to initiate a new campaign.¹⁹⁵ Frederick traveled to Italy to arrange a marriage for his son and successor Henry with the heiress of the kingdom of

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 84.

¹⁹⁵ Munz, p. 361.

Sicily, Constance.¹⁹⁶ Frederick had no intentions to change his agreement with the Lombard communes, but he was not pleased when he saw that the Tuscan communes were assuming those rights legally granted to the Lombard communes. Frederick's mentality was still profoundly feudal, and therefore he perceived the Tuscan communes as usurping rights that were not legally granted as they had been in Lombardy. Frederick and his son Henry resurrected the imperial administration he had put into place twenty years earlier with Rainald. The Tuscan communes were unable to resist, for they still were incapable of achieving the unified action against the emperor that the Lombard communes had achieved years before. Florence was obliged to accept the *potestates* who once again ruled from San Miniato del Tedesco. The imperial office began to collect taxes and enforce its legal rights over the communes which were technically under imperial jurisdiction. While the communes waxed with imperial absence, it accordingly waned when imperial power was present. The nobles of the *contado* were allowed to rule over their demesne unfettered by the commune, which was now allowed to rule only over the city itself. The fortunes of the Hohenstaufen suddenly took a turn for the better, but at the expense of the papacy and the communes.

In 1189 King William of Sicily died without a male heir, giving Henry and his wife Constance the right to succeed his throne. Within one year Frederick died while on his crusade, meaning that now Henry would succeed his father as emperor.¹⁹⁷ Henry VI was in a position unequalled by any emperor before him. He now had control of southern Italy and the imperial throne, allowing him to dominate Italy as no previous emperor had

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 367.

¹⁹⁷ Villani, Book V, Chap. 16, pp. 112-113.

ever done. This was not welcome news for the pope or the communes. A very ambitious and vigorous rule, Henry easily secured submission from the communes of Tuscany, but the Tuscan communes were only too aware of the fickle nature of feudal power. They continued in a holding pattern, waiting for new opportunities to exert their autonomous ways. This opportunity presented itself in 1197, when the emperor died prematurely from a fever at the age of thirty, and the news spread like wildfire throughout Italy.¹⁹⁸ Henry's heir to the throne was only three years old and therefore too young to rule. With the death of Henry and the temporary absence of any imperial power, the commune of Florence re-initiated its policy of self-aggrandizement and autonomous rule, but administrative changes were underfoot, and the conflicts that plagued the commune would attain a new level of violence and chaos.

At the end of the twelfth century, and just on the cusp of the new century, the picture that emerges of the commune is an interesting mixture of communal unity and disunity. The commune was able to act with unity in exerting control over the *contado*, but it was completely incapable of creating a unity of action in opposition to Frederick I. Another interesting quality of the early commune was its inability to secure internal harmony despite its ability to secure hegemony over their *contado*. The primary reason for this contradiction was the unique nature of the communal government. The communal government was a confederacy of societies working together to collectively form the civic administration.¹⁹⁹ The fundamental problem of this bureaucracy was that components were in competition with each other. It was a body with many heads, all of

¹⁹⁸ Schevill, p. 86.

¹⁹⁹ Hyde, p. 104.

which had their own concerns and objectives. The civic body of the commune was not only at war with rival communes but it was constantly at war with itself as well. Though the commune appeared to be an innovation in response to the weaknesses of feudalism, it was nonetheless essentially feudal in its mentality and function. The commune was a series of agreements and contracts between individuals, neighborhoods, and even between competing societies. Phillip Jones explains, "For all medieval regimes law and justice, as well known, were professedly the prime concern of government. And for none was this truer than the communes, which originated as associations for peace and protections and to the end preached the supreme ideal of concord. Often the oath of membership or *cittadinanza* comprised a pledge to keep the peace, abstain from violence and vendetta."²⁰⁰ Each of the societies examined earlier in this analysis of the communal government attempted to reach concord but often failed. There were too many private qualities of each group, and none was a better example of this than the tower societies.

The tower societies were the quintessential example of the fundamental weakness of the communal government. They embodied all of the conflicts that were inherent in each of the communal societies. Even though they provided communal protection against the constant external threats that plagued the medieval world, they also contributed to the internal threats that plagued the commune. The fundamental problem of the commune was that it was unable to subject private vengeance to public authority and, according to most historians, as long as the towers existed, this goal could never be achieved. Despite the popular perception that the towers were the primary cause of

²⁰⁰ Jones, Italian City-State, p. 374.

internal conflict, they still served a useful function, and, in many respects, they were one of the cornerstones of the communal government. The towers did not create the chaos but were only symptomatic of the inherent chaos embodied in the imperfect communal idea. Events in the thirteenth century would conspire to weaken the tower societies, not because they intended to, but because they put a severe stress on this fragile institution that it could not sustain. The thirteenth century was the period of the great Guelph and Ghibelline conflict that would plague most of the century. This civil war not only challenged the tower societies but all of the fragile and inchoate communal institutions and societies.

Chapter 7.

The Commune in the Thirteenth Century: The Guelph and Ghibellines, the *Popolo*, the Magnate Challenge

If the twelfth century was the zenith of the tower societies then the thirteenth century could be seen as the beginning of the process that would bring their supremacy to an end. The thirteenth century in Florence was intensely tumultuous, destructive, and dynamic. A variety of historical, economic, and social forces converged, at once invariably subjecting Florence to dramatic and violent changes. It would mark the beginning of the Guelph and Ghibelline conflict that would dominate Northern Italy's political history. At the same time as Florence underwent the violent upheaval associated with the Guelph and Ghibelline conflict, it also experienced a remarkable economic boom that contributed to the increasing power of the merchant class. The distinction between the nobles, identified as magnates, and the upper merchant class was very vague and at times entirely indiscernible. The emergence of this new group sought to challenge the tenuous supremacy of the magnate class by forming a popular government and enacting legislation, that attempted to limit the power of the magnates. The tower and the corresponding tower societies would become the most obvious target. The attempts of the upper merchant class to control the great magnate families forced them to limit or destroy the military capability of the towers. The thirteenth century marked the beginning of the long process that would transform the role the towers and their societies played in medieval Florence. By the beginning of the fourteenth century, the great age of the tower societies had generally come to an end. They continued to exist but on a much

smaller level, functioning in a very different manner than their twelfth century counterparts. The thirteenth century was the century of great contrast for it was the period that the towers reached their zenith and ended by suffering their greatest destruction and decline.

By the beginning of the thirteenth century the imperial institution known as the *potestates* was transformed by the commune. The new communal institution was named the *podestà*, and it was created to replace the multiple consuls.²⁰¹ The Florentines grew accustomed to the practice of having a foreigner occupy the office, and they continued the practice in the thirteenth century. The foreign *podestà* possessed a neutrality that any native Florentine would lack. Neutrality was paramount, considering that the fundamental goal of the *podestà* was to maintain peace and secure concord between the rival clans and factions in the city. The *podestà* was rarely successful in maintaining a lasting peace since the conflict between rival clans and families was endemic to Florence, but he did represent an effort to maintain the unity between the magnate class and the *societas militum*. The significance of the thirteenth century was that it marked the irreparable fracture that would develop within the magnate class. The members of the magnate class, though constantly in conflict with themselves, were able to exert authority over Florence as long as they were able to maintain their fragile unity, but once the Guelph-Ghibelline conflict erupted, unceasing internecine violence permanently fractured the magnate class, allowing the emerging *Popolo* to take advantage of their disunity.²⁰² The towers and their societies, would suffer their greatest destruction as a result of the

²⁰¹ Schevill, *Florence*, p. 103, Villani, Book V, Chap. 32, pp. 117-118.

²⁰² Tabacco, *Struggle for Power*, p. 261.

magnate schism and the political aspirations of the *Popolo*. Eventually the loss of the magnates would become the gain of the *Popolo*.

The force that would contribute to the unceasing violence between rival magnate groups began with the infamous Buondelmonte murder.²⁰³ This feud and the competing political parties that it would spawn would come to dominate Florentine affairs for the next two hundred years, and it is significant because it represents the first known use of the terms Guelph and Ghibelline. The events describing Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti's injury of Messer Oddo Arrighi at a dinner party were recorded by the unknown chronicler referred to as Pseudo-Brunetto Latini.²⁰⁴ One of the many interesting aspects of this event is to see how the clan immediately attempted to resolve the conflict, revealing a great deal of information regarding how the clans and societies operated and negotiated during a conflict. Messer Oddo Arrighi consulted his extended family and friends, most likely society members, the Ganglandi, the Uberti, the Lamberti, and the Amidei. It was resolved that Messer Buondelmonte should marry the daughter of Messer Lambertuccio de' Amidei to secure peace between the families. One should note that violent retaliation was not a first step, but that a peaceful attempt was desired and would be secured by attempting to envelope Buondelmonte within the arms of the Arrighi clan. Unfortunately Buondelmonte did not follow through on his agreement but instead fell under the influence of the Donati clan. Messer Forese Donati's wife, Madonna Gualdrada, convinced Buondelmonte not to marry the daughter of Messer de' Amidei but rather take her own daughter as his wife. Essentially Buondelmonte was offered protection by a

²⁰³ Villani, Book V, Chap. 38, pp. 121-123.

²⁰⁴ Schevill, p. 106-107.

rival clan. The source does not reveal why the offer was made but one might assume the Donati may have been concerned about the inclusion of the Buondelmonte in a rival society. Nonetheless, Buondelmonte's acceptance of this offer meant he left the Amidei's daughter at the altar and thus gravely insulted the pride of the family and the clan. In response, Buondelmonte was murdered as he crossed a bridge by Messer Schiatta degli Uberti and Messer Oddo Arrighi.²⁰⁵

This event contributed to an outbreak of violence that expressed itself in the manner typical of the period. The feuding families took up arms against each other and battled from their respective towers until the *podestà* forced them to accept a truce. This truce, like all the truces, would last only until a new conflict erupted into another spate of open violence. Significantly, this event marked the beginning of the great Guelph and Ghibelline schism that would usher in a period of unbridled violence and chaos that would last for the next two hundred years. The chronicler makes the reader quite aware of the foreboding chaos that loomed on the horizon as the age of the Guelphs and Ghibellines began in Italian history. He concluded the story of the Buondelmonte murder by writing, "On this day . . . for the first time new names were heard, to wit, Guelph party and Ghibelline party."²⁰⁶ The appearance of these two factions in Florence represented the end of the tenuous unity of the magnate class and the clan and family apparatus associated with this social group. Previously they were loosely held together by their tower societies under a common political and military function. Though violence

²⁰⁵ Ibid, pp. 106-107.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 223. This quote is derived from Schevill's translation of Pseudo-Brunetto Latini's chronicle cited in The History of Florence.

constantly broke out between these competing groups their common identity, history, and origin held them together, but once the Guelph and Ghibelline ideology pervaded their societies there could no longer be unity between rival factions. These political factions superseded any social commonalities that had previously held them together.

It is necessary to give a brief summary of the origins of the Guelph and Ghibelline conflict since it played an important role in the transformation of the tower societies. The tower societies were one of the key social institutions that helped support the conflict, and as a result they became a target since their destruction could undermine a rival factions ability to continue the conflict. The origins of the conflict began in 1212, when Innocent III excommunicated Otto IV and implored Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, the king of Sicily, to claim the crown.²⁰⁷ The pope demanded that Italy accept him as its new emperor but Florence was very slow in its acceptance. It was not fond of Frederick II's family considering that his father and grandfather had not treated the Florentine commune in a favorable manner. Furthermore, the commune was inclined to support Otto IV due to the fact that he was more favorable to the autonomous behavior of the Florentines. Eventually a party emerged in favor of Otto that became known as the Guelph party or *parte del Guelfo*. The name evolved from the Germanic family name Welf. Those who accepted the Pope's orders and supported Frederick II called themselves the Ghibelline party-- *parte del Ghibellino*. The Hohenstaufen family associated themselves with the castle of Waiblingen in Swabia and as a result "Waiblingen, Waiblingen!" became a battle cry for this faction. Eventually the name

²⁰⁷ David Abulafia, Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor (London: Penguin Press, 1988), p.115.

transformed into “Ghibellino”.²⁰⁸ This new political conflict spread throughout Italy like wildfire affecting almost every city, hamlet, and community throughout northern Italy.

The problem with endowing nascent medieval political institutions with too much political symbolism is that they were far too fluid, chaotic, and dynamic to affix them with any permanent meaning. The primary concern of the Guelphs and Ghibellines was the personal gain of its members, and only secondarily political ideology.²⁰⁹ A great example of this dynamic quality of medieval politics is the great reversal of papal support for the Ghibelline party. Initially the pope supported the Ghibellines because they supported Frederick II, and the Guelphs were opposed by the pope because of their support for Otto: once Frederick II revealed his true imperial ambitions by returning to the policies of his ancestors the pope reversed his support for Frederick II meaning the Ghibellines now were his enemies and the Guelphs his allies. At this time the Guelphs became identified as the party that supported the pope and the Ghibellines became identified as the party of the empire. It would be a mistake to state that these parties were exclusively supporters of the imperial or papal parties, but they nonetheless became forever identified in this manner. The one unifying quality of each party was that they did not want to lose their communal autonomy. These two competing groups saw an opportunity via the party to gain supremacy if their cause was victorious. Once again, political ideology was subservient to self-serving objectives, and the Uberti clan and their rivals were a classic example of this self-serving concern.

²⁰⁸ Schevill, p. 108.

²⁰⁹ Tabacco, pp. 256-257.

The Uberti clan was a supporter of Frederick II, and therefore the family became associated with the Ghibellines. The Uberti were an ancient and powerful family who were always key participants in any major conflict in the city. They were arrogant and quarrelsome and thus became the object of resentment from rival clans and their corresponding societies. Though Schiatta delgi Uberti was not directly involved in the Buondelmonte murder, he was a key instigator in the conflict, and, as a result, those who opposed the Uberti logically became associated with the Guelphs. The events of 1216 finally brought these two rival groups into an open conflict with no immediate resolution in sight.²¹⁰ The party's affiliations were limited in the early years, but it was not long before the Guelphs and Ghibellines pervaded all aspects of Florentine life. The existence of these factions transformed the city in multiple ways but two key aspects of these rival factions would undermine the societies and their control over the city: party loyalty and competing foreign policies. Loyalty was being transferred to party affiliation which supplanted loyalty to the city and the neighborhood. Loyalty to the party also meant loyalty to party members from different cities.²¹¹ The Guelph and Ghibelline schism was felt throughout all of northern Italy, and each party sought to expand its influence throughout Italy by expanding their ideology through either conquest or alliance. As a result of these competing foreign policies and alien military alliances, the supremacy of the tower societies in the city became severely undermined.

The schism that the Guelph-Ghibelline conflict initiated within the magnate class and the confederacy of *consorterie* becomes very apparent in the events leading up to the

²¹⁰ Schevill, pp. 108-109.

²¹¹ Hyde, p. 136.

Guelph abandonment of the city in 1248-- an event which hastened the destruction of the towers in a series of destructive retributions and counter-retributions. In November 27, 1237 Frederick II defeated the Lombard league's army at Cortenova. He believe that this victory represented a reversal of the defeat of Legnano and the nullification of the Treaty of Constance (1183), but the majority of Italian communes did not share his vision, for they openly defied him despite his victory. Frederick's victory was also seen as a growing threat to the papacy, and in 1239 Pope Gregory entered the conflict by excommunicating the emperor. Despite Gregory's death in 1241 the new pope, Innocent IV, maintained the papal hostility of his predecessor by re-excommunicating Frederick and actually deposing him in July 17, 1245.²¹² Florence could not avoid the conflict, since it had now become a key imperial city in the eyes of Frederick II. In 1238 Frederick II sent an emissary, Gebhard of Arnstein, to implore all of the Tuscan towns to acknowledge the imperial authority of Frederick II. Not wishing to lose the commune's support, Frederick II made his demands very palatable for Florence to swallow, and they willingly accepted them.²¹³ Florence could keep their liberties, but before the new *podestà* took office he had to receive an imperial endorsement. Unfortunately, even though the imperial demands were initially palatable, they became increasingly difficult to stomach as the emperor demanded more and more from the communes, thus diminishing their autonomy and liberties. The Florentine commune began to chafe against these growing demands as they slowly but surely whittled away at their liberties.

²¹² Villani, Book VI, Chap. 24, pp. 135-138.

²¹³ Schevill, p. 114.

By 1246 Florence was the imperial focus of power with the appointment of Frederick of Antioch as *podestà*. The new *podestà* was the illegitimate son of the emperor, and he attempted to impose the Sicilian bureaucratic model on Tuscany.²¹⁴ The urban and commercial character of the Tuscan cities immediately bristled against these impositions, and the Guelphs attempted to regain their independence from the imperial yoke through papal support. The Ghibellines on the other hand believed that they could attain greater autonomy as a reward for their imperial loyalty. The Guelphs and the Ghibellines cast their lot with opposing sides in the papal-imperial conflict, hoping that the supremacy of either the pope or the emperor would mean their own respective supremacy over the city, and it appeared that all hope for compromise and unity was dashed. At this point the lower classes were not actively engaged in either party, and the conflict was almost entirely dominated by magnate concerns. However, as the commoners became more desirous of their independence, they became increasingly aligned with the Guelph cause. This association was increasingly solidified as it became very clear that the noble Ghibellines were not sympathetic to the interests of the emerging burghers. By the second half of the thirteenth century, the merchant class and the commoners were now actively involved in this factional dispute.

The battle lines were drawn between the two rival parties, and now they waited for the inevitable conflict to erupt that would determine which faction would be victorious and thus reign supreme in the city. The opportunity presented itself on February 2, 1248, when the Uberti clan, Ghibelline supporters of Frederick II, instigated

²¹⁴ Schevill, p. 115.

a brawl in the city, but for some unexplained reason the Guelphs did not respond and rather cowardly abandoned the city in a panic.²¹⁵ Desperate for personal safety, they retreated to their castles in the *contado* for protection anxious to regroup and launch a fresh counterattack. The Ghibellines pursued the Guelphs into the countryside hoping to engage their great rivals. This threat obligated the Guelphs to organize a counter force that would be able to confront the Ghibelline troops that pursued them in the *contado*. This new Guelph counter force became known as the “*capitani dei Guelfi*”. Schevill perceives this title as an indicator of a nascent party organization.²¹⁶ The Ghibellines responded by organizing their own “*capitani dei Ghibellini*,” and the division between these two magnate factions was irrevocable. The factions had crystallized signifying an end to magnate unity. This magnate schism represented a permanent division of the twelfth century “*societas militum*”. It weakened the nobles against any actions of the people, and it provided an opportunity for the ascendancy of the *Popolo* to fill the vacuum created by noble disunity.

Though the Ghibellines attempted to attack Guelph strongholds in the *contado*, it became clear that it would be a fruitless endeavor. The defenseless Guelph property within the city now became the logical target, and the Ghibellines unleashed a reign of destruction, with a special focus on the towers of Guelph families, that ended by destroying at least thirty-six Guelph structures. One great example of this destruction was the toppling of the Tower of Adimari that once stood 200 feet tall and was located

²¹⁵ Villani, Book VI, Chap. 33, pp. 141-146.

²¹⁶ Schevill, p. 116.

near the graveyard of the St. John Baptistry.²¹⁷ The destruction of so many towers began a process that would continue unabated for the next century. Back and forth the two factions would destroy each other's property and towers whenever they gained supremacy in the city. This seesaw rivalry would unleash so much violence and destruction that it began to erode away at the very foundation of stability in the city. The destruction of rival towers would help bring about the ultimate demise of the towers as a real force in the city. The great irony was that the destruction of Guelph and Ghibelline towers may have seemed to help secure the supremacy of either faction, but it appears that the exact opposite actually occurred. With the destruction of their respective towers, neither faction could exercise hegemony over the city, because the military means to do so had been seriously compromised. The controlling agent had been demolished, and as a result any magnate control over the commune was perilous and subject to immediate reversals. The waning of magnate power as expressed through the towers meant that the people were given an opportunity exert their own hegemony over the city.

The situation in Florence was so tenuous and fluid that any event could bring about a reversal of fortune, and such an event occurred in 1250.²¹⁸ The Guelphs finally were able to defeat the Ghibellines in a battle, sending a message to the common people of Florence that their time had come. Hoping to liberate themselves from the excessive taxes and lost freedoms brought about by the Ghibelline dominance of the city, the people rebelled, proclaiming, "*Viva il Popolo!*". The cowardly abandonment of the city by the Guelphs in 1248 and the defeat of the Ghibellines in 1250 were perceived by the

²¹⁷ Villani, Book VI, Chap. 33, p. 145.

²¹⁸ Ibid, Book VI, Chap. 41, pp. 151-152.

Popolo as a golden opportunity to seize power for themselves. Their success seemed even more certain when the emperor Frederick II died in December 3, 1250.²¹⁹ His bastard son saw the writing on the wall, and the imperial apparatus quickly crumbled. The people of Florence claimed a new government in the city, “*Il Primo Popolo*”, and since neither of the two factions played a part in their success, the people decided they did not need magnate assistance, thus creating the first nominal democracy.²²⁰

The *Primo Popolo* was the first attempt by the merchant class and the people to check the power and arrogance of the magnate class and govern for themselves. This new government has often been referred to as a democratic, but it is important to note that it was democratic only for members of the major guilds. There were two key elements to this fledgling democratic government-- a new military organization and the development of the *anziani*. The great advantage of the magnate class was their military tradition, and the new government knew that if they desired to maintain their autonomy they needed to develop their own military unit to address the noble challenge. Twenty companies were created and would be administered by a single leader. They also created the “*capitano del popolo*,” who was vested with the responsibility to protect the *podestà* and his people from any attacks.²²¹ The *podestà* was kept intact, but a new institution was created to serve as a check on the power of the *podestà*-- the *anziani*. The *anziani* were comprised of two men from each *sesti* making a total of twelve members.²²² Their duty was to supervise the state and its finances. The temporary advantage the *Primo*

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid. Book VI, Chap. 42, pp. 152-153.

²²¹ Hyde, pp. 114-115.

²²² Schevill, p. 117.

Popolo had over the nobility was its unity of action and purpose. The loose confederacy of societies that once comprised the commune and held the rival tower societies together was forever torn asunder, with no immediate hope of reunification. As long as the nobles were fractured by the internecine violence of the Guelph and Ghibelline conflict, the merchant guilds would be able to capitalize on this and garner greater power and wealth for themselves. They wasted no time and embarked on a unified policy of territorial expansion with the express intent to secure a greater monopoly on trade over the region. In 1251 they began their policy of territorial expansion, and by 1254 they dominated most of Tuscany.²²³ The Ghibellines were allowed to return to the city in 1252, and Florence achieved a temporary diplomatic coup by securing an alliance with Siena in 1255. Siena accepted Florentine domination of the region and agreed not to accept the *fuorisciti* or political exiles of Florence. Despite their great territorial and political achievement, the *Primo Popolo*, like most medieval institutions, proved to be a fleeting victory and a temporary democratic interlude. Political events in Italy were changing, and serious challenges were looming on the horizon that would test the resiliency and endurance of the new government.

Manfred, the bastard son of Frederick II, was crowned king of Sicily in 1258, inspiring the Ghibellines to attempt an overthrow of the *Popolo*. Unfortunately for the Ghibellines their coup failed, and they were forced to withdraw, providing the Guelphs an opportunity to seek retribution for the previous damage done to their property by the Ghibellines in 1248. With prodding and instigating by the Guelphs, the citizens of the

²²³ Ibid, pp. 120-121.

city destroyed the property of leading Ghibelline families.²²⁴ The houses and towers of the Uberti and Lamberti, along with many more families, were destroyed, and in the case of the Uberti clan so much property was destroyed in a single area that it cleared the way for what would become the Piazza della Signoria. The destruction of the towers and the great family fortress compounds presented an opportunity to bring about an architectural and cultural shift that would transform the city almost by default rather than by design.²²⁵ The symbols of magnate power and arrogance were destroyed, and the new construction that replaced these structures reflected new urban concerns and values. The transformation would occur not necessarily by an overt civic program but as a result of new needs and concerns that affected the changing urban scene.

Despite the *Primo Popolo*'s success in thwarting the Ghibelline attack, they were forced to deal with a diplomatic reversal in their relationship with Siena. The *fuorisciti* were welcomed by Siena despite their agreement to do the opposite. Insult was added to injury when Siena appealed to Manfred for help in 1259, and his reply came in the form of fresh troops and the Giordano cavalry.²²⁶ Florence attempted to defend the city with a strong offense, and in May 17, 1260 it invaded Siena. Unfortunately for the Florentines, the attack quickly failed, forcing the to return to their city. The *Primo Popolo*'s fate was sealed on September 4, 1260, when they were defeated by Siena at the Battle of Montaperti.²²⁷ Villani claimed that the loss was due to a treasonous act committed by the Ghibellines, who made a deal with the Florentine *fuorisciti* residing in Siena. This was a

²²⁴ Villani, Book VI, Chap. 65, pp. 164-166.

²²⁵ Rubinstein, *Palazzo Vecchio*, p. 7.

²²⁶ Villani, Book VI, Chap. 76, pp. 173-174.

²²⁷ Ibid, Book VI, Chap. 78, pp. 177-180.

major blow to the Guelph party, and Schevill argues that the Battle of Montaperti signified an almost complete overthrow of the Guelph cause.²²⁸ On September 12 the city was reoccupied by the Ghibellines led by Farinata delgi Uberti, who took over the government in the name of King Manfred, officially ending the *Primo Popolo*.²²⁹

The fundamental problem for Florence in the thirteenth century was that political continuity and order were always temporary. The Guelphs, the Ghibellines, and the merchant class were unable to muster enough power and strength individually to maintain any consistent political order. Order in the city relied on cooperation, but they were unwilling or unable to recognize their mutual dependence. The Ghibelline party would suffer a fate similar to that of the *Primo Popolo* in 1267, bringing about a new reversal and subsequent turmoil.²³⁰ The pendulum of regime change occurred so often in this century that the destructive acts of retribution brought about an irreversible transformation over the architecture of the city. The great communal holdings of the tower societies once again became a target of the Ghibellines as they avenged themselves on the property of the Guelphs. Their property was leveled and their towers were destroyed. Just two years after the Guelph destruction of Ghibelline property, these destructive acts were answered with even greater destruction. According to Schevill, the city was left with so much rubble that it must have appeared as if the city were struck by an earthquake.²³¹ The Guelphs, just as the Ghibellines before them, fled to Lucca, but in 1264, Lucca was brought under Florentine dominance forcing the Guelphs to flee once

²²⁸ Schevill, p. 131.

²²⁹ Villani, Book VI, Chap. 79, pp. 181-183.

²³⁰ Ibid, Book VII, Chap. 16, p. 226.

²³¹ Schevill, p. 154.

again to another safe haven. The flight of the Guelphs effectively gave the Ghibellines almost total hegemony over Tuscany.

The return of the Ghibellines to power in Florence, made possible by the aid of King Manfred, was not well received by the papacy. Hoping to check the growing power of the Sicilian king and the Ghibelline party, the Count of Anjou, Charles, was invited to take the Kingdom of Sicily. Both Urban IV (1261-1264) and Clement IV (1265-1268) hoped that Charles would serve as a check on the growing power of the Ghibellines.²³² Florence would never be free of the competing influences of the papacy and imperial ambition, and therefore it would always be drawn into conflict contributing to the constant regime changes. Such a moment was once again looming after Manfred's defeat and death at the Battle of Beneventum on February 26, 1266. Change did not occur immediately, but with the pope's victory at Beneventum the papacy's stock began to increase, and by November 11, 1266 the *popolani* of Florence rose up against the foreign troops that occupied the city under Count Guido forcing them to withdraw.²³³ The *popolani* briefly returned to power, and they set out to secure their independence once again. By Easter Sunday in the year 1267 this brief interlude came to an abrupt end when Charles entered the city with Guelph troops. The Ghibellines quickly exited the city, giving the Guelphs renewed control of the city. In true fashion the Guelphs proscribed the Ghibellines and accepted a new *podestà* appointed by Charles.²³⁴

²³² Villani, Book VII, Chap. 2, p. 201.

²³³ Ibid, Book VII, Chap. 14, pp. 220-223.

²³⁴ Schevill, p. 139.

With their reoccupation of the city, the new Guelph regime hoped to bring about changes that would secure its own dominance and the permanent obliteration of the Ghibelline faction.²³⁵ One of the first acts was to abolish the captain of the *Popolo*.²³⁶ The Guelphs attempted to diminish the power of the *Popolo* in the commune's courts and legal institutions just as they had been diminished under the Ghibelline regime. Schevill argues that Villani portrays the Guelphs as having popular leanings, but all of their actions seem to contradict this assertion.²³⁷ It appeared that the Ghibelline cause was almost permanently lost with the defeat of Conradin, the last Hohenstaufen, at the Battle of Tagliacozzo in 1268 and his subsequent death a few days later. With the end of the Hohenstaufen family, there appeared to be little hope for the future of the Ghibelline cause. Charles' victory over the Ghibellines of Siena on June 17, 1269 forced all of the Ghibellines to come to terms, and therefore it secured Guelph hegemony over Tuscany.²³⁸ The Guelphs now found that the path to that domination had been cleared of any resistance and they set out on a plan of action that they hoped would achieve the complete ruination of the Ghibelline party.

The Guelphs pursued a program that would effectively eradicate any future Ghibelline influence by targeting the property, the towers and adjoining society property, that provided them the means to exercise such influence. They achieved this by first targeting the *ribelli*, that is, the individuals who fled the city. The *ribelli* were condemned to death, their property was destroyed, and their wealth was confiscated.

²³⁵ Villani, Book VII, Chap. 16, p. 226.

²³⁶ Daniel E. Bornstein, "Introduction" in Dino Compagni's Chronicle of Florence (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), p. xviii.

²³⁷ Schevill, p. 139.

²³⁸ Villani, Book VII, Chap. 31, pp. 243-245.

Those who remained in the city were targeted in a different fashion. The Guelphs imposed an internal exile on these individuals. Referred to as *confinati*, they were confined to a specified residence outside the city. If they abandoned their assigned residences they were declared rebels and subject to death and confiscation, and their wealth was divided three ways. One part went to the commune, one part to the Guelph party, and the last part was payment for damage done to the property of individual Guelphs during the previous Ghibelline regime. According to Schevill, this program successfully destroyed the Ghibelline party by completely draining its financial resources.²³⁹

Though for all practical purposes the Ghibellines were essentially powerless, they were not completely lost. The papacy, always wary of any diminution of its power in Italy, needed a counter force to the potential threat that Charles now posed with his Guelph alliance, and Pope Gregory X (1271-1276) would find this counter force by reviving the Ghibellines. Not only did Pope Gregory X wish to counter Charles' power, but he also wished to restore unity in Italy to launch a new crusade. Pope Nicholas III (1277-1280) maintained Gregory's policy of unity and sent Cardinal Latino to negotiate a peace in Florence that would restore unity in the city and resurrect the Ghibellines as a counterforce to the Guelphs and their association with Charles. On October 8, 1279 Cardinal Latino entered the city, hoping to negotiate peace and end the factional violence that wracked the city.²⁴⁰ Latino was a Dominican friar and was widely respected as a wise and educated man. He hoped to assuage the city by reconciling the Guelph and

²³⁹ Schevill, p. 144.

²⁴⁰ Villani, Book VII, Chap. 56, pp. 263-266.

Ghibelline factions in a public spectacle on January 18, 1280 where the two groups exchange an oath and a kiss followed by a new constitution one month later.²⁴¹

The new constitution devised a power sharing agreement and created the Council of Fourteen, but despite Latino's attempts to restore the Ghibellines to equal footing they were still greatly diminished in power. Many Ghibellines returned to the city, but their numbers, wealth, and prestige were feeble in comparison to the Guelphs. As a result the unity and peace Latino had hoped to restore was quickly lost as the Guelphs politically and economically overwhelmed the Ghibellines in the new government. The new constitution would take an even more dramatic turn within just two years after the revolt against the Angevins in Sicily known as the Sicilian Vespers. With the decline of the Angevins in Italy, the noble Guelphs declined in influence, opening the window for a new democratic movement. The Council of Fourteen was replaced with the Priors of the Guilds essentially negating the constitution created by Latino.²⁴² This new executive institution comprised of six Priors selected from the greater guilds, and then in 1287 it was opened to include members from the middle guilds. Priors served for two months and were forbidden to serve again for two to three years.²⁴³ This period marked the beginning of the end for the great magnate families and the tower societies. Though this new democratic regime was not completely successful in achieving all of its goals to reduce the power of the noble class, it did help to bring about a transformation that would

²⁴¹ Schevill, p. 150.

²⁴² Villani, Book VII, Chap. 79, pp. 269-272.

²⁴³ For more information read, Bornstein, "Introduction," pp. xviii-xix, Schevill, pp. 152-154.

forever end the age of the great towers that dominated the city and the tower societies that once ruled the city.

By the 1280s the Guelph party was dominated by members of the major guilds, and their prestige and power grew in accordance with their economic success. The noble dominance of the party had declined significantly, and now laws that reflected their economic and commercial concerns became the primary focus of their political program. Though many historians have referred to this as a revival of democracy in the city, it would not be an entirely honest description. Schevill argues that it was democratic for the twelve major and middle guilds, but inclusion did not extend to the minor guilds. Exclusion of the magnates was a paramount aspect of the Guelph government.²⁴⁴ Though much has been made of the exclusion of the nobles, the connection between the wealthiest members of the major guilds and magnate Guelphs proved difficult to break. Very quickly, guild members who were closely associated with magnates through commercial ventures or kinship weakened the laws that limited magnate power. The distinctions between the wealthier merchants and magnates were always murky, and this became acute whenever any overt action was taken against the magnate class. In many respects, any attempt to eradicate the nobles would be undermined by the unavoidable connections between the nobles and the wealthiest members of the merchant guilds. Outrage over the corruption that began to express itself in the new government came to a head after failures in military campaigns against Pisa and the painful realization that the Priors were more concerned with patriciate rather than the people. The *popolani* began to

²⁴⁴ Schevill, p. 155.

demand new reforms against the magnates, and they finally found someone to champion their cause-- Giano della Bella.

Descended from an old family, Giano della Bella was a member of the oldest and richest guild-- the Calimala. It was under his guidance that the seminal Ordinances of Justice became law in January 8, 1293.²⁴⁵ The Ordinances of the Justice were revolutionary in their overt attempt to limit the power of the magnates and restrain their previously unbridled violence and arrogance. One interesting aspect of the Ordinances is that the term noble had been entirely replaced by the new terms *magnati* and *grandi*. These terms were defined as families of older wealth who assumed the feudal practices of horsemanship and arms, or those families who actively sought knighthood. This distinction of knighthood was a key element of these laws, and about one hundred and fifty families qualified under this distinction. Salvemini estimated that this must have affected at least one thousand men due to the extensive network of clans that characterized these families.²⁴⁶ If an individual was defined as a magnate he was obligated by the Ordinances to swear an oath of obedience, and this oath was secured with a bond of 2,000 librae. If a magnate assaulted a *popolano* he was fined the two thousand librae, and if a magnate killed a *popolano* he would receive a death sentence. A new Prior was created with the Ordinances-- the Gonfalonier, or banner-bearer of the Justice-- who, with one thousand armed men under his command, enforced the rules of the Ordinances, allowing him to confiscate the goods and destroy the house of the offending magnate. Furthermore, no magnate could be elected to the Priorate (Article

²⁴⁵ Compagni, Book I, Chapt. 12, pp. 14-15.

²⁴⁶ Salvemini, *Magnati e Popolani*, p. 376.

III) nor could he sit in council of the Captains (Article XV). Magnates could be in a guild, but they were not allowed to serve as consul or rector of the guild (Article XXXIV).

The events surrounding the priorship of Giano della Bella are wrought with complex contradictions. On one hand, the Ordinances of Justice were relatively successful in bringing about change and Giano della Bella was accepted as the great champion of the people's cause. However, the dramatic reversals that characterized almost all the regimes of the thirteenth century commune would also overwhelm Giano della Bella. As the new prior, Giano della Bella intended to enforce the Ordinances in a more vigilant manner than they had ever been before, and the Galli family became the primary focus of his intentions. Giano intended to enforce the Ordinances against members of the Falli family who had murdered two commoners in France. Even though the incident occurred in a foreign land, the murderer could not be personally apprehended. Giano della Bella presented the case to the *podestà* who found the Galli guilty of an offense and therefore in violation of the Ordinances. Just as the law described, the property of the Galli would be destroyed. The Ganfalonier of Justice, along with his militia, accompanied a crew of masons to dismantle the familial property and fortresses that lined the Por Santa Maria.²⁴⁷ This appeared to be a good start for Giano della Bella and assurance that the Ordinances would serve their purpose. His success also sent a very clear message to the magnates that if they did not respond to this challenge they would have little hope of recovering their supremacy.

²⁴⁷ Compagni, Book I. Chap. 12, pp. 14-15.

Unfortunately for Giano della Bella, he completed his three-month term on April 15, 1293. Based on the constitution he was forbidden to serve again for another two years. Despite his inability to directly serve in the government, he was still able to exercise a great deal of control and influence as head of the leading party. As long as Giano della Bella was present, the magnate class knew he would be able to exert influence and thus successfully check any noble aggression against the new government. For this reason he became the target of the magnates in their attempt to regain control. One might assume that the magnates could simply exert military force against the government, but this was one of the many complex conditions that contributed to the chaos of the period. The people possessed sufficient unity and strength to check any overt attempt by the nobles to overthrow the government. But in the same instance, the nobles had enough secret allies in the government that they could begin a rumor campaign against Giano della Bella and thus overthrow the government by ulterior means. Perhaps one of the major problems for the Ordinances of Justice was that it attempted to define who the magnates were, but these social distinctions were not always clear, and social divisions were hardly uniform. Several families categorized as magnates did not derive from old noble families. Some guilds, such as the butcher known as the Sheep, had close ties to the magnates and pursued their own self-serving policies.²⁴⁸ Such circumstances complicated the situation and meant that no unified front existed in any group. The convoluted and interconnected concerns and alliances helped spawn a situation where neither the people nor the magnates could sustain sufficient force to

²⁴⁸ Ibid, Book I, Chapter 13, p. 16.

maintain political continuity in Florence. Once the policies of the Ordinances were pursued, the magnates, unable to overthrow them outright, attempted to undermine them by calling upon their neighborhood alliances that reached across diverse classes and social groups within the diverse social milieu of Florence. Compagni describes how lawyers who were sympathetic to the magnates devised a legal plan that would make Giano della Bella appear as a tyrant and thus a threat to the *popolani*.²⁴⁹ This event demonstrated that the magnates did not have the means to overthrow the government outright, but it also demonstrated that the people did not have the means to impose their own hegemony over the city. This political stalemate help contribute to the continuing turmoil that plagued the city and helped contribute to the failure of Giano della Bella.

While the magnates and their supporters conspired to create the foment against Giano della Bella, an incident arose that helped bring about his ultimate demise, and it came as no surprise to anyone that the incident would concern a member of one of the most offensive and arrogant magnate families, Corso de'Donati. Corso was a legend in the city deriving from the fact that his cavalry charge was instrumental in crushing the Ghibelline forces at the Battle of Campoldino in 1289. He was a hero to the lower classes but the bane of guild members, who worked to expand their own power at the expense of the magnates. Corso, the great champion of the magnates, finally was presented with an opportunity to challenge Giano della Bella when he himself was involved in a violent confrontation with his own cousin. Corso injured his cousin Simone

²⁴⁹ Ibid, Book I. Chap. 14, p. 17.

and actually killed one of Simone's men.²⁵⁰ Based on the provisions of the Ordinances Corso had violated the law, but when the case was presented to the *podestà* Corso successfully manipulated the testimony and made it appear that his cousin was the guilty party and that he was the injured party. As a result, the *podestà* found Simone guilty and gave the sentence that his property would be seized. When word spread of the misdeed, the people gathered in protest and attempted to seize the *podestà* in his palace, thinking that he had conspired with Corso. Giano della Bella attempted to quell the crowd but failed. The palace door was set on fire, the *podestà* fled over the rooftops of Florence, and all of his property was seized and looted. Giano della Bella's inability to stop the violence was proof that his influence had waned considerably, and the fact that many blamed him for the violence was seen by Giano della Bella that he was no longer safe in the city. He was officially expelled from the city on March 5, 1295, and instead of fighting the charges made against him he decided to leave the country.²⁵¹

The great collapse of Giano della Bella was taken by the magnates as evidence of their success, but when they attempted to overthrow the government and eliminate the Ordinances they were resisted by the people, who were able to maintain sufficient unity to hinder unbridled magnate power. Confronted with this successful constraint, the magnates soon realized that they did not have the ability for a complete takeover, but the *popolani* were equally aware that they too were unable to completely eliminate the magnates. These two inexorable social groups were too inextricably related to eradicate one another, and therefore compromise was essential. The magnates agreed to accept the

²⁵⁰ Ibid. Book I, Chapt. 16, pp. 18-19.

²⁵¹ Ibid. Book I, Chapt. 17, pp. 19-20.

Ordinances, but they also gained some agreements that reduced the more harsh aspects of the laws. On July 6, 1295, the Ordinances were revised, allowing anyone who was on the guild rolls to serve as chief magistrate.²⁵² Previously only active members were allowed to serve but now magnate families who agreed to give up their feudal traditions were allowed to serve in these roles. The priorate was still closed to any magnate family or any individual who maintained his status as a knight. Even though a compromise was reached, it did not end the conflicts that constantly plagued medieval society. No matter what agreement, compromise, or constitution was created, there was an essential underlying aspect of medieval Florence that would always fracture their community. Initially the towers were seen as a cause of this fracture but even after their numbers and influence declined, the fracture remained. Despite all attempts to address what the people thought was the root cause of this fracture, they were unable to resolve the rift. Their failure leads one to ponder-- What was the underlying cause of the persistent fracture?

The harshest aspects of the Ordinances of Justice had been tempered with the compromises in 1295. The magnates were unable to abolish them entirely, and the *Popolo grassi* were unable to enforce them completely.²⁵³ Therefore the Ordinances were neither a complete success nor a complete failure. In many respects the Ordinances were similar to the accomplishment of the Magna Carta in 1215. Though this great charter was not completely successful in attaining all of its goals, it did establish a precedent and a tradition that obligated the king to respect the rights of his lords. The existence of the Ordinances also required the nobility to act in consideration of the

²⁵² Salvemini, *Magnati e Popolani*, p. 390.

²⁵³ Schevill, p. 164.

interests of the wealthy merchant class. These two groups had a symbiotic relationship that obligated them to act in accordance with this relationship, but the fundamental problem with this medieval society was that neither side had fully come to grips with this reality. Despite their obvious interdependence, this was not so obvious to the magnates or wealthy merchants. The attempt of these two rival groups to benefit from their respective failures was never completely successful, and therefore it led to the constant imbalance that plagued this inchoate state. The failure to recognize their interdependence was exacerbated by the rampant factionalism that pervaded all of central and northern Italy. Just as one group seemed to gain supremacy, an internal conflict would emerge eventually undermining their hegemony. A fundamental fracture existed that ran through all of the social groups and institutions of medieval Florence, and it eventually tore these social groups or institutions asunder.

The last attempt at restoring unity and peace within Florence was established by Cardinal Latino in 1280, but his peace proved to be short lived since it did not fundamentally alter or remedy the root causes of the violence. Bornstein describes the period following Latino's attempt at peace as a series of endless fractures:

From that moment, fracture succeeded fracture in rapid succession. The Guelfs exiled the Ghibellines and then split into partisans and opponents of Giano della Bella. His magnate foes exiled Giano and then split into Blacks and Whites. The Blacks exiled the Whites and then split into factions headed by Corso Donati and Rosso della Tosa. And so it went, in a dizzying and increasingly violent series of

fractures within the ruling group. These fractures occurred with such inexorable regularity that they might have seemed natural, inevitable features of Florentine life. But Dino Compagni recognized that these fractures did not follow the divisions of Florentine society; they cut across those divisions, and the most seemingly 'natural' of bonds, that of kinship, did not always hold people together, as close relatives aligned themselves with opposing factions.²⁵⁴

The thirteenth century ended with the Guelphs in power, but it was not long before they too fractured into the Blacks and Whites. By 1302 the Blacks exiled the Whites from the city, an event that is well known today because it included the White Guelph Dante, but it was not long before the Blacks also became subjected to the rivalries and intrigues that undermined almost every attempt to exert hegemony over the city.

The thirteenth century has often been described as the beginning of the end for the great tower societies. With the culmination of the Ordinances of Justice, it seems safe to assume that the towers were once and for all eradicated and their private violence finally subjugated. Though there is little doubt that the dominance the towers once exerted over the city had severely waned, it would not be accurate to describe the city as completely free from their influence. The assumption of the towers as the primary contributor to the private violence and disunity of the city was false because it failed to understand what was the true nature of the violence. Historians have far too often been affected by the sentiments of the *Popolo grasso* since the primary chronicles were written by this group;

²⁵⁴ Bornstein, p. xxiv.

this tempered subsequent historian perspectives on the role of the towers in Florence.

Historians have often failed to understand the essential practical role the towers played in the early commune, instead focusing on the factional internecine violence often described by Villani and Compagni. Undoubtedly the towers declined in number, and therefore influence, but the common assumption that their presence in the city had come to an end by the end of the thirteenth century is not accurate. The towers continued to be a part of the city well into the fourteenth and fifteenth century, but their role, purpose, and influence expressed itself differently. Even though the *Popolo grassi* portrayed the towers as a threat to their own power and safety, they also were envious of these great symbols of noble power and aspired to emulate and possess them for themselves. This fact would secure the existence of the towers, though often modified, in the late medieval period and early Renaissance. For this reason, we must reexamine the role of the towers in the thirteenth century and their legacy in the fourteenth century.

Chapter 8.
The Towers Reconsidered:
The role of the Tower Societies in the Thirteenth century

The common perception about the tower societies and the towers of Florence is that they essentially came to an end by the conclusion of the thirteenth century. Historians have often portrayed the Ordinances of Justice as the final nail in the coffin for these imposing structures. The prevailing historiographical opinion claims that the Ordinances succeeded in seriously weakening and ultimately destroying the influence of the tower societies, and that civic authority finally had subjugated private violence. The Ordinances guaranteed that military and political power was the exclusive privilege of the state. Though this may be the popular assumption it is almost entirely inaccurate. The towers and the tower societies may have been severely altered and weakened, but they were not completely eliminated, and they still served a role in Florentine society on the verge of a rebirth. Their legacy continued to express itself in the factions, communal property, architecture, and administration of the city. They served a practical function in the twelfth century that continued to find relevance in the fourteenth century. The towers may have diminished in stature from the twelfth century but they still served a viable function even in the early Renaissance.

The towers became the symbol of private violence, noble arrogance, and factionalism. As long as they existed, the commune would be unable to create unity and harmony, and therefore the destruction of the towers and the tower societies was

paramount for the success of the commune. This perception was first constructed by the fourteenth century chroniclers Giovanni Villani and Dino Compagni and very clearly informed all subsequent understanding of the towers and their role in the medieval commune. The fundamental problem with this perspective was that Villani and Compagni were products of their own social group that perceived the towers as a threat to their own political accession. The prevalent Aristotelian and Christian understanding of the political state further influenced their ideology. Within this embryonic and incomplete state, they began to develop political thought that stressed unity and discouraged factionalism, political parties, opposition, and social conflict. The essential problem with this political ideology was that it fundamentally misunderstood the true nature of the medieval state. The medieval commune was not a cohesive and unified institution but rather the embodiment of a variety of social groups with divergent ideas, aspirations, and concerns that often led to violence and civic strife.

From a contemporary observer it appears that the medieval commune was attempting to create an institutional democratic state, but this assumption would be false for at least two reasons: first, one cannot impose contemporary ideas of a democratic state on a medieval society, and second, the medieval mentality interpreted political and social unity differently than the contemporary one. Medieval society was profoundly affected by the resurgence of Aristotelian political ideology and the obligation to preserve and protect Christian unity. Medieval society's idea of a harmonious and balanced society was not very sophisticated or progressive, and therefore it did not address social plurality very well. Edward Peters argues that medieval political thought was unable to

address factionalism and party opposition because it was systematically denied or dismissed.

Ignored or condemned by classical political theorists from Aristotle to Cicero, the concept of party was semantically in opposition to such compelling images as *unitas*, *concordia*, and *corpus* by medieval political theorists. The very idea of organized, constructive political conflict within a single community failed to acquire theoretical respectability until it was taken up (cautiously, to be sure) first by English thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and then (even more cautiously) by political theorists in the North American colonies and the new republic, notably James Madison.²⁵⁵

The inability to deal honestly and openly with the plurality that comprised the medieval commune seriously hampers understanding of the complex forces at play and it fails to understand the true nature of the nascent political state. One must not forget that the commune was really a complex confederacy of societies, and the participants in this inchoate and divided state did not possess the language, political acumen, or the desire to analyze consciously the socio-political dynamics that shaped their own history and motivated their actions.

The commune was the aggregate of competing actions of all the societies, but these competing actions were perceived through the falsely contrived lens that

²⁵⁵ Edward Peters, "Pars, Parte: Dante and an Urban Contribution to Political Thought," The Medieval City (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 113-114.

'commune' meant unity of action. J. K. Hyde argues that there was a persistent ambiguity over the meaning of the word 'commune'. "As a noun, it indicated a form of government, while as an adjective it meant shared, impartial or neutral. When, for example, Compagni says that on the arrival of Charles of Valois in Florence 'la gente comune' began to lose strength, he clearly means the neutral and impartial citizens who were not possessed by the malizia of either party."²⁵⁶ Compagni's belief that members of medieval Florence could be neutral and impartial seriously underestimates the nature of people and their participation in a community. Self-interest was an underlying element of medieval Florence as it is in most societies; therefore Compagni created a political scenario that was unattainable because he argued that communal unity could be achieved if the most neutral and impartial citizens were allowed to rule. The political reality of medieval Florence was that this neutrality could never be achieved. Compagni's political ideology failed to address the less virtuous elements of men and foolishly believed that good will would be sufficient.

The Dominican Remigio Girolami presents another telling view of the medieval concept of 'commune' in a sermon to the Florentine Priors during the challenging period of the Ordinances of Justice in 1293.

Pass judgment and discern *in comune* what should be done" (Judges 20:7). This text exhorts you to do four things which are necessary for your office. Firstly, it urges you to make a thorough deliberation about what is to be done, because to

²⁵⁶ J. K. Hyde, "Faction and Civil Strife in Thirteenth and Fourteenth Century Italy," Violence and Civil Disorder in Italian Cities: 1200-1500 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), p. 281.

discern means really to perceive so that you do not act hastily; Secondly, it urges you to harmonious unanimity, because *in comune*, that is in a common and harmonious will, not pulling hither and thither, as it says in Hosea, “Their heart is divided, now they shall be destroyed,” but rather as in Maccabees, “They all decreed *comuni consilio*.” Thirdly, you should promote the good of the commune because that which is done *in comune* should be for the common good (*pro bono communis*), that is, useful, pleasant and honorable; not for the good of this or that individual or family, nor for the good of this or that group, but as you were made and put in office by the commune, so you should work for the common good Fourthly, it teaches you to be diligent in carrying out the business of you office.²⁵⁷

Commune meant unanimity and the common good, but this assumption had at least two inherent weaknesses. Complete unanimity is not a realistic goal for any socially and economically diverse society. Furthermore, a complex society cannot assume that there is only one definition of the common good. The problem for medieval society was that the oneness of God could not be achieved in the temporal world, but the medieval mentality insisted on striving for this idealistic Christian social ideology within the commune, an essentially unattainable and unrealistic political ideology. By appealing solely to the common Christian virtues of all communal members, the commune did not create institutional or constitutional provisions that accommodated political opposition,

²⁵⁷ G. Salvadori and U. Federici, “I sermoni d’occasione, le sequenze e i ritmi di remigio Girolami fiorentino,” *Scritti vari di filologia a Ernesto Monaci*, (Rome, 1901), also in Hyde, “Faction and Civil Strife in Italy”, p. 282.

largely because the medieval mentality could not accept a Christian society in 'constitutional' opposition with itself. It was the imperative of society to create a harmonious and unified state, and therefore it could not envision a political state that tolerated or even encouraged opposition. Just as Cardinal Latino believed he could bring concord between the opposing Guelph and Ghibelline parties, the general belief was that society could obtain harmony if good men of Christian virtue were allowed to rule and the community subjected itself to their Christian values. The intellectual and literate class' belief that unity was the ultimate objective of the state undermined their ability to analyze effectively the social and political dynamics that contributed to the internecine violence and factionalism that constantly plagued the city. From the medieval perspective historical events occurred either because God interceded or because the Devil tempted men to evil action. Civil strife, discord, and opposition were expressions of sin, and therefore the chroniclers felt no imperative to further analyze the origins of these social problems.²⁵⁸ Dante is informed in the third circle of hell that the cause of Florence's discord was envy and avarice.²⁵⁹ In addition to the overwhelming influence of Christian theology on political and social thought and the almost complete lack of political theory, the chroniclers had a limited ability to understand events in a greater historical and sociological perspective or to analyze them outside of their medieval Christian mentality.

Communal public action was often taken without any thought of the political theory that justified it. Nicolai Rubinstein demonstrated in his analysis of Florentine

²⁵⁸ Hyde, p. 276.

²⁵⁹ Dante Alighieri. *Inferno*, Trans. Robert Pinsky (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994), VI, 74-75.

medieval historiography that political theory slowly began to evolve as the chroniclers attempted to understand the forces that contributed to the rapid growth of the Florentine economy and the social and political forces that transformed the city.²⁶⁰ When reading the chronicles, one must keep in mind that their authors were often actively engaged in the events they are describing and that their political and social analysis was limited by their rather primitive understanding of political theory. Furthermore, the overwhelming desire for unity in the medieval mentality profoundly affected their understanding of the commune and did not allow them to address and understand the amorphous nature of the medieval commune. The almost complete lack of political vocabulary and theory to analyze events in the city, the influence of Christian thought, and the fact that the chroniclers were a product of the society they were examining severely hampered their ability to analyze the Florentine state in a way that contemporary historians practice their discipline. They were a product of their times, and therefore historians must treat them as such. In many respects, the chroniclers could not see the city of Florence for what it truly was: a disjointed, amorphous, amalgamation of many different societies that collectively made up the state. As Edward Peters explains:

Commune, *consorterie*, arti, *vicinanze*, popoli-- such subsocieties as these made the medieval Italian city rather like a nest of ill-fitting Chinese boxes, no one of which was able to turn the *civitas* itself into a political unit. In this world, whose political conditions pointed toward the experience of later territorial states, civil

²⁶⁰ Nicolai Rubinstein, "The Beginnings of Political Thought in Florence," Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institute, 5 (1942) 198-227.

administration did little to create a state framework except by trying to prevent the undue exercise of informal power by one contending group or another. Thus the appearance of Guelf and Ghibelline parties in the early years of the thirteenth century is less important as a chapter in the history of the papal-imperial conflict than as the opportunity to grasp the form of a *societas* that could claim a degree of legitimacy denied to the contending groups within the city itself.²⁶¹

Though the chroniclers paint a fascinating portrait of the city, it is as if they failed to remember the chaotic and irregular history from which the medieval commune emerged. The tower societies and the magnates were easily portrayed as the greatest source of conflict in the city, but they completely failed to appreciate the true complex nature of the commune. The tower societies became the easy scapegoat of the merchant class, but they failed to recognize that they were one important piece of the complex balance that always characterized the city. It was assumed that harmony would be achieved only by the elimination of either the magnates and their tower societies or the wealthy merchants and their guilds, but this political aspiration was unattainable and actually self-destructive since it tore at the very fabric of their commune.

Though the chroniclers portrayed the tower societies as one of the key causes of civil strife, they did not understand that by destroying the towers they would also eliminate one of the crucial controlling elements within the commune. The towers undoubtedly contributed to violence but they also helped secure peace in the city and

²⁶¹ Peters, "Political Thought," p. 122-123.

provided protection from outside forces. Curiously, the thirteenth century city failed to remember the crucial function the tower societies actually served in defending and managing the commune. One must remember that the popular guilds were a competing society no different than their tower counterpart; it was therefore to their benefit to downplay the tower societies and enhance their own significance. Though the *Popolo grassi* often portrayed the tower societies as threatening peace and usurping communal power, this assertion intentionally ignored two aspects of communal life. First, technically almost all the communal institutions were assuming rights and responsibilities that were not their legal right to assume.²⁶² Second, the early communal institutions assumed these rights out of necessity and not necessarily for self-serving purposes.²⁶³ The early communal societies attempted to address the vagaries of medieval life. With the collapse of any real imperial power, the medieval cities had to assume responsibilities necessary for the administration of the most basic services of a municipality. Moreover, considering the fact that very real external threats existed, neighborhood societies and fortresses were an imperative. Even after the worst barbarian threats subsided, the neighborhood societies still served an essential military, police, and defensive function. Their existence was a natural response to the necessities of their age, and therefore to portray them as the source of violent contagion in the city was a serious disservice to their legacy in the city.

The towers were actually a microcosm of the commune, providing a model that the guilds would later emulate, but it was a commune at the most local level of all, the

²⁶² Hyde, *Society and Politics*, pp. 48-49.

²⁶³ Jones, *Italian City-State*, p. 136.

neighborhood. Lansing explains, "Civic loyalty had not clear primacy. The commune was only one of a number of sworn associations a noble joined, and was probably less important to him than the neighborhood, the guild, or the society of knights."²⁶⁴ The benefits of these extremely localized associations were manifold. First, they secured immediate and tangible peace and protection in the neighborhood. Second, they innovated the collective use of capital. Construction costs were often prohibitive for a single family. Consequently, families were forced to create artificial relationships that allowed them to pool collectively their resources and to fund the purchase of joint property and the cost of construction. Heers argues that communal construction and shared use of the tower strengthened neighborhood relationships and helped to "consecrate" the peace between the families by creating an artificial family, which he calls a family clan.²⁶⁵ Third, the societies also provided a vertical union between the urban nobility and the growing urban proletariat and merchant groups. Lansing demonstrates how several noble lineages and their corresponding tower societies attempted to extend their control over a neighborhood through clientage.²⁶⁶ She argues, "Scholars have suggested that the medieval city was structured by vertical ties of dependence, and that one of the most important ways a lineage could build power was through its clients. Lineages with a strong physical and military presence in a neighborhood thus would be able to control the area through clientage, offering economic aid, favors, and protection in exchange for loyalty and support."²⁶⁷ Within the tower

²⁶⁴ Lansing, Florentine Magnates, p. 165.

²⁶⁵ Heers, Family Clans in the Middle Ages, p. 194.

²⁶⁶ See Lansing, pp. 168-176.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 172.

society, peace and unity could be maintained because the pacts that bound its members forced security, assistance, and continuity among the members. As these societies extended their control over a neighborhood, they were able to impose that unity and peace increasingly over the city. The fundamental problem for the commune was that these societies represented private power rather than public power. Primary loyalty was to one's society or neighborhood and secondary loyalty was to the city.

The second problem is that existence of competing societies encouraged conflict and rivalry. The vertical nature of the society meant that conflicts would not be contained between two rival nobles but would compel their entire clientages to action as well. The great challenge of the commune in the thirteenth century would be to bring these competing societies under the jurisdiction of the civic authority. Yet this too presented a problem because the medieval idea of civic or public authority was not the same as contemporary ideas of civic authority. The polemic presented by the *popolani* for greater public authority was actually a front for the *Popolo grassi* in their effort to gain public authority to serve their own competing interests.

The towers grew out of necessity to address the political vacuum present throughout central and northern Italy, but a result of their haphazard and chaotic evolution was that no real order or harmony existed between the societies. The fundamental problem with most medieval political institutions was that no systematic political institution or legal apparatus existed that could resolve conflicts and secure harmony between the societies. Medieval society was a composite of agreements and contracts, always local and personal, that were constantly being negotiated. Therefore

society was fragmented, disjointed, and often in contradiction with itself. These qualities helped create a situation that was rife with conflict and competition and that would eventually help undermine the supremacy of the tower societies and the nobility within the city. As long as the multiple competing societies were on relative equal footing in Florence they were forced to work and negotiate with their competition, and therefore they were forced into diplomatic detente. In many respects the tower societies were forced into a cold peace very much like the U.S. and U.S.S.R. were forced into a peace with their mutually assured destruction. Since neither group possessed sufficient force to overthrow the other they were forced to come to terms-- a 'constitutional' opposition by default. The *podestà*, a neutral third-party, would help negotiate these terms and thus secure the peace.

One finds numerous episodes of rival clans or societies breaking into violence but later being brought to terms by the *podestà*, ending any greater violence or destruction. As a result small incidents that created violent outbreaks generally lasted a relatively short time before they were forced to make peace. Though it was not an ideal situation, it preserved a degree of peace that must have appeared far superior to the violence of the Guelph and Ghibelline conflict. Charles T. Davis examined this issue when he analyzed the writers of the fourteenth century and their perception of a happier time before the Guelph and Ghibelline violence that dominated the city.

Dante placed his *buon tempo antico*, earlier than that of other Florentine writers, in the twelfth century, before the murder of Buondelmonte and the rise of the

Guelf and Ghibelline parties. For him the good old time was not, as for them, a period of wealth and power, but of austerity and of a modest communal life, before Florentine expansion had begun, and before luxury and pride had altered the virtuous simplicity of early customs.²⁶⁸

Though the twelfth and early thirteenth century commune was not an ideal and harmonious society, it was able to secure a degree of unity in the city. This marginal balance would be seriously undermined, however, by two new forces that would fundamentally fracture the fragile confederation of competing tower societies-- the Guelf and Ghibelline conflict and the growing power of the *Popolo grassi*.

The greatest struggle of the commune was the attempt to transform Florentine society from the confederacy of private authority to a more uniform public authority. The tower societies and the presence of almost 150 towers in the city were depicted as the primary cause of civil discord and the greatest threat to this struggle for public authority. Therefore the *popolani* attempted to secure public authority by weakening the power of the tower societies and increasing their own political power at the same time. The struggle to create public authority in Florence and transform it into a peaceful and uniform state presents some interesting questions. How could Florence transform itself into a peaceful and orderly state that respected the rule of law? To respect the rule of law, one must assume the medieval state could even organize such a constitutional state. Could a medieval state truly organize a state with some sort of constitutional legitimacy?

²⁶⁸ Charles T. Davis, "Il Buon Tempo Antico," *Florentine Studies*, ed. N. Rubinstein (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 49-50.

Furthermore, what did “public authority” really mean from a medieval perspective? How were *popolani* and their idea of “public authority” any more legitimate than the magnates and their own expression of civic authority? The attempt to transition Florence from a commune of private authority to public authority would be complicated by two major historical events and dynamics that would make any lasting peace an illusion-- the Guelph-Ghibelline conflict and the emerging power of the *popolani*.

Since the end of the twelfth century, the nobility and their confederacy of societies represented the commune. Though these societies were often in competition with each other, they were usually forced into some resolution due to the imposing authority of their towers and the hegemony they exercised over their neighborhood. Noble families were aware that their power was checked by the presence of powerful strongholds in rival neighborhoods, and therefore an uneasy and imperfect peace existed between these rival factions. This was the period of the consular commune and it succeeded as long as the delicate balance that existed between rival societies was maintained. The first challenge to this consular phase would come from the *popolani* whose growing power would encourage the nobility to reform the consular government and accept the podestàral government. Martines argues:

So long as the consular nobility maintained its political monopoly in the city, even when convulsed by internal divisions, it had no reason to seek change or to tamper with the substance of the chief magistracies. But when the city was paralyzed by hopeless division, certain members and families of the consular

ruling class were willing to experiment with new forms, all the more so on finding that they could count on the support of the new men in government and on the popular feeling then billowing up in the neighborhoods.²⁶⁹

The *podestà* was the first attempt to create some sort of civic harmony and neutrality necessary for the growing city that understood that peace at home meant more time spent expanding trade and territorial authority. But the fragile balance that the *podestà* represented would soon falter with the advent of the Guelph and Ghibelline conflict.

The Podestàral government represented a constitutional compromise the societies were willing to make not only with each other but also with the growing influence of the new men in the city. The societies knew that these new men were necessary for the growing economic power of the city, but as long as the societies were able to maintain a semblance of unity they would be able to maintain their hegemony. This unity would irrevocably be broken by the violent factionalism of the Guelph and Ghibelline movement in Italy. The tower society families had an uneasy alliance between the rival clans that was able to maintain their own power and check the growing power of the new men, but the Guelph and Ghibelline factions gave these rival families access to alliances outside of their city. The willingness of the family societies to associate themselves with these two factions was not motivated as much by imperial or papal ideology but rather by self-interest. Randolph Starn explains:

²⁶⁹ Lauro Martines, Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), p. 42.

Much evidence does suggest that imperial and papal interests were superimposed on local circumstances, that their effects came relatively late and were often temporary, that theoretical consistency and steadfast allegiances were conspicuously lacking at the local level . . . Emperors and popes did attempt to exercise their ideal claims in Italy. Factions within the towns or regions of the peninsula chose sides, and while one side rode high, the other was excluded, forced into opposition, and frequently driven into exile.²⁷⁰

By exploiting this vast network of alliances made possible by its association with the emperor and pope, the rival factions sought outside help to overthrow their rivals and exercise complete authority over the city. Starn argues, “The corporate units of communal and party politics were modules which could be assembled in various combinations.”²⁷¹ The manipulation of the new party system in the city permanently fractured the union of the family military societies as they pursued their interest through the party and no longer through the uneasy truce of the Podestàral commune.

By pursuing power through these alliances and striving to weaken the rival tower societies, the *popolani* were unwittingly weakening the confederacy of societies that were able to keep the *popolani* in check and the towers supreme. Collectively the tower societies could keep the growing *popolani* and their competing interests in check, but

²⁷⁰ Randolph Starn, Contrary Commonwealth: The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 35.

²⁷¹ Starn, Contrary Commonwealth, p. 41.

once their unity was broken the tower societies were unable to dominate the city. Now they would be subject to attack by the more powerful popular societies, the merchant guilds. The locus of power did not shift but was rather in constant flux, and therefore communal control was the temporary prize of whatever faction, party, or society that could muster enough force to seize it. The attempt of the *popolani* to subject the locus of power under public authority would prove to be elusive since no social group, society, or party would ever be able to exert hegemony for a prolonged period of time. Power was in a state of constant flux.

The fracture in the hegemony that the tower societies once exerted over the city would become irreparable once the Ghibelline party became successful in temporarily seizing control of the city. When the Guelphs abandoned the city in 1248, the Ghibellines responded by engaging in unfettered destruction of Guelph property. The destruction of this property, the towers and the family fortresses, was their primary focus, but what they did not understand was that they would permanently weaken the influence of the towers over the city. The magnate Ghibellines did not understand that their power was the aggregate of all magnate power, Guelph and Ghibelline, and this power resided in their great tower complexes and their societies. The hegemony of the military societies was the sum of all its parts, and therefore the destruction of one of those parts destroyed their fragile hegemony. The Guelphs would only exacerbate this problem when the Ghibellines fled the city in 1258, inviting retaliation on their property. Much has been made of the upper guilds' attempts to weaken the influence of the tower societies, but two counter productive events would emerge that would do more to weaken

the dominance of the tower societies than any popular effort. First, the destruction of Guelph property, and then later Ghibelline property, would eliminate more towers than any action of the *Primo Popolo* or the Ordinances of Justice. Second, traditionally rival factions retreated to their towers until the vendetta could be resolved, but now rival factions began to withdraw from the city to seek refuge in a sympathetic rival city. This essentially meant that the towers were now strategically irrelevant. By fleeing the city and abandoning their towers and family fortresses, they eliminated the towers as an effective means to express power in the city. Not only did the towers cease to be relevant means to check a rival's power, but also their vacancy meant they could not be protected. Therefore they were now vulnerable to destruction, which poses a question that has not been answered. Why did the Guelphs, and then the Ghibellines, abandon their towers and seek refuge in a foreign city?

The towers were an effective means to exert military and political power within the city as long as the conflict remained internal. Each tower society so dominated a neighborhood that it was virtually impossible for a rival society to breach its stronghold. As long as this balance of power existed in the city, tower societies could check each other and eventually come to some sort of public concord, but, with the advent of a party alliance system that extended beyond the city, the tower societies now had access to external allies who could give them the additional military support that could dislodge the rival members of a tower society from their military stronghold. The towers were capable of resisting an internal siege by a rival clan because the attackers often lacked sufficient strength to overtake the tower, but once a superior foreign military force was

invited to join the struggle the tower society must have realized it possessed insufficient strength to resist and survive a prolonged siege. The Ghibellines were able to force a Guelph withdrawal in 1248 because the Guelphs knew that the Ghibelline ally, Frederick of Antioch, was on his way to the city to support the Ghibelline cause. In the face of such a military alliance, withdrawal from the city and retreat to their castles in the *contado* and sympathetic cities must have appeared as the only logical action making the towers strategically irrelevant.

The great family societies sought to expand their power and influence through the Guelph and Ghibelline alliance system rather than through their towers and family fortresses. The towers once afforded rival societies safe retreat in the city until counteroffensive could be launched or until terms of concord could be negotiated. Now this was no longer an option, and so they sought retreat with either a Guelph or Ghibelline city. The towers and the fortresses did not completely disappear from the city, and they still served a function, but they were no longer the primary expression of family power in the commune. The exploitation of these vast alliances complicated the internal situation further because it now meant that foreign cities and foreign forces also would be engaged in the internal struggle of Florence. The tower societies alone could not compete with the superior military forces the alliances made possible. The Ghibelline victory at Montaperti in 1260 would not have been possible without the aid of King Manfred. The Guelphs' property was already too damaged from 1248 to launch an internal resistance, and even if they had not been damaged it was questionable whether a tower could resist the foreign forces of Count Giordano and the possibility of greater

support from King Manfred. Retreat, refuge, and regroup became the preferred method of return and restoration. The towers, still a symbol of power, were no longer a real expression of power in the city, but the societies they spawned did not diminish. The communal societies understood the advantages of the greater political and military society that the Guelph or Ghibelline party system made possible. The towers may have transformed their function, but the societies still represented a viable and effective institution to achieve and express power in the commune.

The fracture in the fragile confederacy of the tower societies weakened the hegemony of the magnate class, providing an opportunity for the *popolani* to challenge their supremacy and establish a rival society to exert control over the commune. With the Guelph victory over the Ghibellines at Figline in 1250, and Frederick's death later that year, the people of the city saw their chance to seize power for themselves. The failure of the Ghibellines and the absence of the leading Guelph noble families meant that the *popolani* finally had an opportunity to exploit the very real power vacuum temporarily created in the city. This episode has often been lauded as the first democratic government to exist in the medieval world, but it fails to honestly address it in its proper context. Starn argues, "Public powers were not so much transferred as co-opted. The original commune of the twelfth century absorbed the civic prerogatives of bishops or imperial vicars; the guild-based *Popolo* of the thirteenth century grafted its institutions onto the earlier commune headed first by consuls and then by the omniscient official usually known as the *podestà*."²⁷² The original twelfth century commune was a society of

²⁷² Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth*, pp. 15-16.

societies that co-opted the privileges of the bishop, and now the *Popolo* were provided with an opportunity to co-opt these powers for themselves. Describing the *Primo Popolo* as a democratic government and a victory of public authority over the private authority of the tower societies assumes that it possessed greater legitimacy than anything that existed before it and that they were the rightful representation of public authority. These assumptions are fallacious because *Primo Popolo* was not truly democratic and their authority was no more public than the magnates. The *Primo Popolo* simply represented the victory of the *Popolo grassi* to establish their guild societies as the “legitimate” representatives of the government in the face of the temporary weakness of the great noble families and their societies.

One of the primary concerns of the *Popolo* was noble violence and the threat it presented for the growing power of the wealthy merchant class. Their solution to check noble violence was the creation of a popular military force that would address internal fighting.²⁷³ They created twenty companies that would protect the *popolani* against noble violence. They also created provisions that were intended to protect the *popolani* from noble violence, but they also forbade a *popolano* to aid a noble during a violent episode. There was no doubt that the *Primo Popolo* wanted to secure peace within the city walls but their actions were not completely altruistic. The new government knew that if it wanted to survive, it needed to create its own forces to check noble aggression and secure its own authority, but there were also self-serving objectives achieved through the creation of these popular companies. Lansing argues, “The actions of the *Primo Popolo*

²⁷³ Daniel Waley, “Condotte e Condottieri in the Thirteenth Century,” Proceedings of the British Academy 61, (1975), p. 74

conjure up an image of simple artisans protecting themselves from their wealthy oppressors: class conflict. However, although the regime did encompass artisans, many of the popular houses in the period 1250-1260 were wealthy and powerful in their own right. A number of the families who were active in the *Primo Popolo* in fact came to be named as magnate forty years later.”²⁷⁴ The people were justified in attempting to check the unbridled violence of the tower societies, but the self-interest that pervaded the magnates also pervaded the *Popolo grassi*. The *Popolo grassi* now possessed their own neighborhood military associations to counter their noble rivals.

One of the great fallacies of the *Primo Popolo* was that it was democratic. As Lauro Martines states, “The *Popolo* in opposition was not the same as the *Popolo* in victory.”²⁷⁵ He argues that while the *Popolo* was in opposition to the nobility, it could garner support from its wealthier members, such as merchants and bankers, but once the nobility’s power was weakened, the wealthier members of the *Popolo* saw their opportunity to seize control for themselves. They were able to create a regime that was advantageous for their own guild societies but excluded the lower classes of the *Popolo*. They did not create a democracy based on egalitarian principles but rather a plutocracy that served the ambitions of their exclusive upper guilds. In fact, one could argue that the guild societies were more exclusive than the tower societies. Lansing pointed out that the tower societies were vertical in nature, but John Najemy demonstrated that the corporate nature of the guild societies made them far more horizontal and therefore exclusionary.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Lansing, p. 194.

²⁷⁵ Martines, *Power and Imagination*, p. 68.

²⁷⁶ John Najemy, “Guild Republicanism in Trecento Florence,” *American Historical Review* 84 (February, 1979): 53-71, Lansing, p. 172.

The differences between the magnates and *popolo grassi* was often indistinguishable, and as a result the democratic qualities of the *Primo Popolo* declined in the interests of the wealthier guild societies whose interests were often intertwined with the magnate class. The tower societies, and the violence associated with them, was a political expedient manipulated by the upper guilds as a justification to seize power, but once *popolo grassi* were able to secure their own regime they created competing military societies as a rival force for their noble counterparts. They succeeded not in completely eradicating the tower societies but they succeeded in creating their own rival military society that would began to behave just as the tower societies behaved. Self-interest seemed to supersede any communal interest. The democratic boasts of the *Primo Popolo* should be seriously reconsidered.

The fundamental problem for the merchant societies was that they would suffer a fate similar to that of the tower societies. The institutional flaw that undermined the hegemony of the tower societies also would destabilize the hegemony of the wealthy *popolani* and their merchant societies. Both societies were unable to form a cogent, comprehensive, and effective civic administration that truly served with commune's best interest in mind. Neither the magnates nor the *popolani* were striving to serve the greatest good for the greatest number. Instead they sought out their own self-interest and when an opportunity to seize power presented itself neither side had any qualms about taking advantage of the situation. The Ghibellines' alliance with King Manfred allowed them to return to the city and overthrow the *Primo Popolo*. The *Primo Popolo* was not immune to the forces that would eventually force all of the communal regimes to

succumb. The fundamental problem was that the factions and competing societies incorrectly thought that they could secure their complete hegemony over the city, but they miscalculated just how mutually dependent they were upon each other. The merchant societies incorrectly believed that they possessed sufficient strength to dominate the commune and subjugate the ambitions of the nobility under the control of the upper guilds, but the access the Ghibellines had to external alliance system would be the downfall of the first popular government. The commune still was a confederacy of societies, but none of the societies wanted to acknowledge their interdependence. Cardinal Latino's inability to create a lasting peace in 1280 was partially due to his failure to incorporate the *popolani* in the new government. The failure of his reforms demonstrated the interdependence of these social groups. In many respects the failure of the Ordinances of Justice derived from the same defect as Latino's peace-- the failure to recognize the socially diverse and interconnected political milieu of medieval Florence.

Cardinal Latino believed that he could restore stability in Florence by creating a coalition government between the Guelphs and Ghibellines, turning the clock back to a time when the great family societies possessed a fragile union. Latino thought he could secure peace that Schevill described as "laughable" and "artificial."²⁷⁷ The reality is that no lasting peace could be achieved without the incorporation of the guild societies, but Latino represented a conservative political order that no longer existed. The failure of Giano della Bella reflects the same dynamic at play that doomed the Latino's reconciliation. The Ordinances of Justice was a landmark legislative act because it

²⁷⁷ Schevill, Florence, p. 152

established the precedence that the nobles of Florence would have to address forever afterwards. The nobility and their great societies were forced to reconcile themselves to the *popolo grasso*, but contemporary historians should be wary to depict the Ordinances as an unquestionable success. The Ordinances had two inherent weaknesses: they did not target all of the magnates and they were not completely enforceable.

One would assume that the Ordinances would target all magnate families and their offensive military societies, but only certain magnates were targeted and several were spared. The fact that several magnates were spared tells us a great deal about the political culture of Florence. Lansing explains, "The list was inevitably a political compromise, hammered out by large governing councils. Some houses were not listed because of their immediate political alliances, and may well have resembled other lineages that were named as magnate. Conversely, there was considerable tendency to name houses that had already fallen from power, and no longer threatened the commune; for one thing, their weakness made them a safe target."²⁷⁸ Theoretically, if the Ordinances targeted all of the military societies and effectively eliminated them from Florence, they would be able to secure a permanent hegemony, but this was not a political reality in medieval Florence. The list was a reflection of the political compromise and interdependence that would color any communal action.

The Ordinances were intended to rid Florence of the magnate families that threatened civic order and the popular government. It seems logical that the most offensive, arrogant, and powerful magnate families would be targeted by the Ordinances,

²⁷⁸ Lansing, p. 208.

but none of these families were actually targeted. The great irony is that the list comprised powerful families from the twelfth century who had ceased to be a real threat in the thirteenth century. Why? Were they targeted because they were easy prey, or, were they targeted because the *popolo grassi* could appear to be tough on magnate families without really threatening the magnate families that colluded with the *Popolo grassi*? Furthermore, along with the older families, several new families appeared on the list who came to power during the *Primo Popolo*. These new families were members of the leading guilds, wealthy merchants, and bankers. Most historians have argued that they qualified for this list simply because they adopted magnate customs and behavior.²⁷⁹ It was an imperfect list because the lawmakers who created it were a reflection of their political culture, and that culture was not immune to magnate influence. The attempt to develop a political definition of the magnate class and a legal agenda that would isolate it immediately became compromised by the social milieu it was attempting to reshape. It was an impossible task because the whole political culture was far too intertwined and interconnected. The magnates were inspired to emulate the merchants and their ability to acquire material power, and the merchants were inspired to emulate the magnates and their ability to acquire military power.

Not long after the Ordinances were enacted in 1292, the magnates began their efforts to weaken their more severe elements. First of all, the Ordinances did not address all of the tower societies and great magnate families. The societies were interdependent and almost immediately some members of the new popular government began to work

²⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 209.

with magnate families to weaken the Ordinances and overthrow the popular leader Giano della Bella. As Becker argued, the classification of the magnates was juridical and therefore it depended upon those who defined the term.²⁸⁰ Some magnate families were targeted by the Ordinances, and others were spared essentially undermining the long-term effectiveness of the Ordinances. The relationship between the magnates and the wealthier merchants was so interrelated that it was impossible to enforce any law that attempted to segregate and politically alienate the magnates from Florence. Some magnate families succeeded in being legally re-designated as *Popolo grassi* and eventually some *Popolo grassi* were designated as magnates. It was a fluid and dynamic society. The attempt to create social distinctions that encompassed all of the magnate families and their military societies was politically impossible because the interconnected relationship between the magnates and wealthy merchant families allowed sympathetic magnate families to dodge the Ordinances. Within two years the Ordinances' most aggressive requirements were weakened, and Giano della Bella was driven from the city.

The Ordinances of Justice succeeded in establishing a legal precedence. Lansing argues, "Ultimately, then, the statutes restricting the magnates served to define and to build the authority of the new regime. The laws did attack the older structure of private power, the structure that had led to decades of factional war. It also served to distance the Priorate from those conflicts, and from the violent excesses of the nobles."²⁸¹ The magnates could no longer act without acknowledging the power of the wealthier members of the *Popolo*, but the people would not be able to act without respecting the

²⁸⁰ Becker, *Florence in Transition*, pp. 6-8.

²⁸¹ *Ibid*, 211.

concerns of the magnates and their tower societies. Lansing argues that the great irony of the Ordinances is that they rejuvenated the shared identity of the magnates. Their common hatred of the Ordinances gave them the unity they had long lacked. The Ordinances did not transform Florentine society dramatically because just two years after their creation two great families-- the Donati and Cerchi-- were up to their old tricks.

The Ordinances were important because they would resurface again and again in the fourteenth century, representing a political reality that the nobles and the tower societies would have to address. But the Ordinances were not completely successful because they did not eradicate the military societies and or completely end the private violence of the magnates and powerful family factions. The towers may have decreased in number, greatly due to their destruction by Ghibellines in 1248 and by the Guelphs in the 1250s, and their military and political function may have declined, but their societies were still a viable and important part of the communal government. The essential character of the medieval commune would not dramatically change until the Renaissance. The supremacy of public authority and the submission of private military societies would never be achieved on a level that would be deemed sufficient or necessary for a contemporary society. The commune may have perceived that the Ordinances achieved public authority, but the advent of fresh factionalism and violence represented by the Black and White parties would insure that private violence would remain a key element of the communal city far into the fourteenth century.

Due to the fact that so many tower societies existed, it seems natural that serious competition between these groups would eventually occur. The desire for each society to

maintain and expand its control over a neighborhood invariably led to conflict within the city. The societies went to great lengths to maintain unity within their society as demonstrated in their pacts, but they also were keen to secure that shares would not fall into enemy hands. Despite the clear competition and animosity that existed between these competing societies, they also forced each other into concord and peace. The emerging popular guilds saw the tower societies as a threat to their growing political power and sought to eliminate them from the city. Yet, because the guilds targeted specific tower societies, rather than all of the societies, the delicate checks and balance was destroyed, ushering in a period of violence and destruction on a far greater scale than the clan and neighborhood violence of the twelfth century.

The major problem with the assertion that the *Primo Popolo* was a positive development is that it assumes the *popolani* were more legitimate than the nobility. By contemporary standards, it is fairly safe to assume that a government that bases itself upon democratic principles and republican institutions attains the highest standard for legitimacy, but it would be a mistake to confuse medieval concepts of “republic” and “democracy” with contemporary ideas of these institutions. Though the terms may have been used liberally by the *popolani*, it does not mean they expressed themselves based on the same standards as the twenty-first century. Though it was a noble and necessary intention of the commune to strive for greater public authority over civic affairs, the *popolani* would soon learn that the goal would not be easily achieved. The *popolani* initially boasted that they would protect the citizens from the violence and abuses of the magnates and the violent tower societies, but it appears that this was a propaganda ploy

rather than a real attempt to secure a stable society and institutional order. The noble intentions to achieve peace and order were very quickly supplanted by the *Popolo grasso* and their desire to secure their own self-interest.

Chapter 9.
A New Perspective of the Tower Societies
and Their Legacy in the Fourteenth Century

The towers did contribute to urban violence and discord but it would be inaccurate to argue that they were the sole cause of chaos in medieval Florence. In fact, the towers were the answer to the chaos that surrounded them since the fall of the Roman Empire. The entire peninsula experienced chaos with the dramatic decline in political order and authority. With the absence of any legitimate, comprehensive, and effective governmental hegemony, the cities of Italy were forced to create some unique social organizations to address the basic needs of social life. Various societies were created with varying objectives and obligations that managed, maintained, and secured their inchoate society. Defense and security were paramount, considering the complete absence of any regional force that could secure the cities and countryside from barbarian invasion. The towers and their societies were the answer to this very real problem.

The towers were a very old tradition that could be traced to the *rocche* in the *contado*. These small country forts, essentially a fortified village, provided protection not only for the nobility and all in the vicinity. These *rocche* were essentially transported to the city of Florence in the form of towers and fortress family compounds. They provided essential services for the growing city, and they were one of the essential pieces in the intricate puzzle that collectively made the commune. They were not opposed to the commune because the commune was not a formal institution but a confederacy of societies. When the merchant class began to emerge and challenge their supremacy over

the city, it threatened to upset the delicate and imperfect balance of the commune. The primary goal of this new social group was to become the premier force in the city at the expense of the magnate class. In order to achieve this aim, the towers were portrayed as an anathema to civic order in peace. The towers did contribute to violence, but they were not the only agent that contributed to this violence.

Violence was endemic to all medieval societies, but the merchants strategically seized upon the towers as the root cause of violence. The upper guilds could not seize power without the support of the majority of the *popolani* who were derived from the lesser guilds. Therefore they exploited the image of the towers and the magnate class as the sole source of civic violence. It was an expedient means to garner their support for a regime change. By attacking the towers, the *popolani* unwittingly unleashed magnate power, making it more dangerous and destructive than it had ever been before. The towers fixed magnate power in only one neighborhood, but when they were driven from the city and their property was destroyed, magnates had to seek assistance from other cities and foreign leaders. The great irony is that the *popolani* were not the primary reason the towers declined in influence. The magnates and their association with the Guelph and Ghibelline factions destroyed more towers than any action by the popular governments. It was also ironic that destroying these towers did not end the civic violence but actually exacerbated the violence.

The upper guilds argued that by eliminating the most violent and arrogant members of the magnate class they would be able to create civic harmony and order, but they failed to understand that the towers were actually one of the essential controlling

agents in the confederacy of societies that formed the commune. The towers provided a means to maintain peace within the society and a means to resolve conflicts between rival tower societies. Once they were eliminated, the fragile balance was upset and it ushered in a period of unbridled violence and destruction. When towers were destroyed and magnate families were driven into exile, they found new means to express their power. The Guelph and Ghibelline factions provided the magnates access to allies from neighboring cities and from foreign nobles. This liberated magnate power, making it more destructive than it had been when its power was primarily centered on its towers.

The wealthy merchant class miscalculated the role the towers served but they also miscalculated their own power. They believed that the magnate class's political loss would be their gain, but they were surprised to learn that they did not possess the necessary power to secure permanently their hegemony. The merchant class was far too interrelated with the magnates to separate themselves completely from the magnates, and just as soon as they passed the Ordinances to weaken the magnates, several members of the merchant class conspired to protect certain magnates and weaken the harsher elements of the ordinances. Their inability to maintain unity within their ranks and accept the mutual dependence between these two social groups led to unceasing political chaos. It was a society whose groups could not live without each other, but they could not live with each other.

The idea that the towers were the primary source of discord and disunity is undermined by the failure of the *popolani* to achieve unity and civic harmony. Harmony would not be achieved until 1382 with the establishment of the Signorie. Peace,

obedience, and harmony would not be established until a powerful despot had sufficient strength that could force all factions to work in cooperation. Towers and military societies were still an important aspect of Florentine culture just as the merchant guilds and their societies were important. A powerful despot had the ability to will both of these groups to work together. Their numbers declined, but they still served an important function. The towers lived on in the fourteenth century partially because they still had a function, but the commune also valued the towers for their stature, prestige, and dominant presence.

The thirteenth century has been portrayed as the struggle to transform the Florentine commune from the rule of the nobility and their violent military societies to a more civil society that respected public authority and created a neutral institutional state. In order to achieve this transformation, the towers and their military societies would have to be eliminated because they posed a threat to the communal government, and they constantly harassed the common people in the city. Florence was transforming itself largely due to the rapid increase in wealth and new men who were seeking their fortune in the growing city, but the architectural landscape of Florence was also changing. At the beginning of the thirteenth century there may have been at least 150 towers that formed the skyline of the city, but by the end of the thirteenth century this number was severely reduced and was replaced by a new communal tower that represented the power of the new men in the city. Based on the transformation of the Florentine skyline, one would assume that the dominant role of the towers and their military societies had passed. To be sure, their influence had decline substantially by the beginning of the fourteenth

century in comparison to their dominance a century before, but it would not be fair to argue that they completely disappeared as a force in the city.

The towers no longer served the political and military function that they once had in the early commune. By the fourteenth century, they were no longer strategically viable but they were still potent symbols of power and pride. Towers continued to play a crucial role in the city, ensuring that they would never completely disappear. The great communal family fortresses declined, but the palaces that replaced them still served a protective function. The need for protection was not limited to private citizens but also was important for the communal priorate, which would achieve security with the construction of the Palazzo Vecchio. Ironically, even though the towers were commonly portrayed as the greatest threat to common people of the commune, they were glorified and emulated by nobles and commoners alike in the fourteenth century. Their dramatic, noble, and potent presence would secure their future in the city. Even if their numbers were reduced during the fourteenth century, the societies that were organized to manage and support them continued to be an important part of the city.

The communal military force of the Florentine commune recognized two valuable aspects of the tower societies. They provided the model that informed the communal organization of military property and social management. The defense of the city was not professionally and permanently organized under the complete control of a civic authority. It was a combination of communal military societies derived through the neighborhoods and hired mercenary militias. The city relied more and more on mercenary militias, but the role of the noble cavalry was still essential. The management

of communal property for the defense of the city was still practiced by the noble cavalry. The tower societies taught the fourteenth century city the art of communal military management. Finally, the towers once served a viable architectural function in the early commune, but with the physically expanding city and a shift in the meaning and uses of architecture, towers were no longer deemed desirable. Towers were still a potent symbol of power, but the city and its citizens began to express the potency of their city through other architectural means. As a result, the construction and maintenance of towers declined. The intention of this final analysis is to demonstrate how, though greatly reduced in numbers, the towers maintain their important role in the commune and did not completely disappear. The towers continued to serve an important military, architectural, and political function until long after the Renaissance.

Towers still served a military function even in the early fourteenth century, but it slowly began to fade. Dino Compagni described the last great example of the military use of the towers. On June 10, 1304 violence once again erupted in the city between the Blacks and Whites, demonstrating that the towers and the communal family fortresses still served a practical military function.²⁸² Compagni describes how fire was used in an attempt to destroy the family fortresses in the city. Corso Donati carried a large torch, seeking to burn the houses of the Cavalcanti houses. Though Compagni was a member of the wealthy merchant class, several of his opinions reveal a clear admiration of magnate culture. The Cavalcanti had the opportunity to attack their enemies, according to Compagni, but they failed to prepare a defense. Instead of attacking their enemies, the

²⁸² Compagni, Book 3, Chap. 8, pp. 70-72.

Cavalcanti decided to withdraw from the city, incurring the charge of “coward”.²⁸³ This event demonstrates that the factionalism and private violence had not yet come to an end in the city. Private fortresses and neighborhood control were still a key part of the city. Moreover, military control was not just exerted through the houses but was also exercised in the squares. According to Compagni, the Donati clan barricaded themselves in the piazza of San Pier Maggiore, where the Donati tower was located.²⁸⁴ When their barricades were breached, they retreated to their houses, which included the Tornaquinci fortress. Lansing argues that Compagni’s description of the Tornaquinci property as “old” meant that it was fortified in the old style rather than in the new style of domestic architecture that began to appear in the fourteenth century. She interprets this as an example of the declining role of palaces as military forts.²⁸⁵ This may be a difficult point to prove since recent research has argued that many of the palaces dated to the thirteenth century may have actually been built at a later period.²⁸⁶ Despite this problem, Lansing argues palatial architecture tended to be larger and with open facades. This may have appeared militarily imposing, but it was far more difficult to defend.

The trend in fourteenth century palaces was beginning to stress elegance over military function.²⁸⁷ The old family fortresses were usually constructed to form a protective enclosure surrounding a secluded common area for the entire clan, but now the exclusive and enclosed quality of family property was being transformed. The need for

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid, Book 3, Chap. 20, pp. 83-84.

²⁸⁵ Lansing, p. 105.

²⁸⁶ Howard Saalman, “The Palazzo Comunale in Montepulciano: An Unknown Work by Michelozzo,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 28, (1965): 9.

²⁸⁷ F. W. Kent, “Palaces, Politics and Society in Fifteenth-Century Florence,” *I Tatti Studies* 2, (1987): 41-70.

these protected spaces was no longer paramount. The new family palaces were now more open to the city making them more difficult to defend but more aesthetically imposing and impressive. The decline in factional violence in the fourteenth century and the increasing stability made it viable for the powerful families to build their palaces in a more exposed fashion. Furthermore, the fact that they were more exposed and did not have to be protected provided them the opportunity to build with a greater emphasis on architectural aesthetics and classicism. Lansing argues that the Cerchi's appeal to build a new street that would connect the Orsanmichele and the Bargello and therefore by pass three Cerchi palaces reflected a changing attitude in the city.²⁸⁸ The military function of the palace was almost completely negated due to its open exposure to the street, but the Cerchi were probably more concerned with enhancing their status in the city by enhancing the beauty of the city. The Cerchi boosted their power by demonstrating their wealth and architectural achievement rather than their military might. The palaces were built with stone, but their open quality seems to express the more open nature of the commune in the fourteenth century.

The existence of palaces in the city was evidence of a change that was occurring in regard to property and ownership. Previously residential property was often owned in common with the extended families or with members of the society. Originally construction of the towers and the large residential compounds was achieved collectively in the tower societies due to the great cost of construction. With the growing economic success of the city and the expansion of the wealth of particular families and individuals,

²⁸⁸ Lansing, p. 233.

however, residential construction would begin to change. Richard Goldthwaite has argued that the greatest force that fueled the Renaissance in Florence was the vast accumulation of private wealth. Goldthwaite argues, “Wealth was distributed among a relatively large number of men, and once they started spending for the ‘extras’ that today we consider art, something different happened in the history of patronage. Demand was no longer in medieval towns, including Florence itself, or concentrated in princely authority, as it was elsewhere in Renaissance Italy. It was now the composite force of a multiplicity of actions by private persons all converging on a single urban market.”²⁸⁹ This concentration of private wealth by a relatively large number of private individuals provided them an opportunity to build palatial residences without the need to pool communal resources. The title of property also changed from familial to individual as families with dynastic aspirations began to practice primogeniture, leaving their town property to an individual member of the family rather than to the entire family. Goldthwaite argues that the town palace became a symbol of the family’s power and dynastic aspirations, but the practice of shared residence with family members, including brothers, was not commonly practiced.²⁹⁰

Historical events of the thirteenth century created an environment that was conducive to the construction new palaces. First, the vast destruction of society property left large tracts of real estate in ruins and vacant. These families now saw the abandoned real estate as a rare opportunity to build their imposing palaces that could occupy an

²⁸⁹ Richard A. Goldthwaite, The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 60.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 63.

entire block. The growing self-awareness of the city and economic growth encouraged urban renewal and civic development.²⁹¹ Wealthy individuals were now able to acquire these properties and build their palaces on the very foundations of the old family fortresses. Second, the relative decline in civil discord transformed the usage of urban domestic architecture. As previously mentioned, the Cerchi's palaces were built in an open and exposed manner that would have been impossible earlier in the thirteenth century.²⁹² One must assume that this was only possible because the extreme violence had declined and the threat to the safety of the family was not as clear and present as it had been in the thirteenth century.

The destruction of towers and communal society fortresses not only helped to transform domestic architecture, but it created an environment conducive to the construction of civic architecture. The new focus on civic architecture is particularly interesting because the first great civic buildings did not attempt to create a new style of civic architecture that would rival the towers and the family military compounds. Instead the *Primo Popolo* began construction on a series of structures that would be the most perfect imitation of the tower compounds-- the Palace of the *Podestà* and then the Palazzo della Signoria. This blatant imitation of the tower compounds demonstrates how the private tower societies and their property were not only targeted but also co-opted by the *Popolo*. The new men in the city knew that alone they could not compete with tower societies, but through collective action they could counter the power of the towers. To

²⁹¹ Ibid, pp. 65-66.

²⁹² Lansing, p. 233.

ensure the success of their regime they understood that their personal protection was paramount, and they could achieve this protection by emulating their counterparts.

The *Primo Popolo* built the Palace of the *Podestà* from 1255-1260, which was an exact replica of a great family fortress, but their goal was to protect the *podestà* and the government of the people rather than to advance the cause of an individual family or society. Of course, the palace was intended to advance the cause of the *Primo Popolo*, but what distinguished it was the corporate nature of the building and the intention to promote a program that advanced a more public agenda. The Palace of the *Podestà*, later referred to as the Bargello, was built just like its rival. It was constructed of rough-hewn stone and possessed an imposing battle tower. The new feature added to the Palace was the interior court that was intended to assist a governmental function. Here the members of the government and the *podestà* could gather and conduct business without being threatened by the neighboring tower societies.²⁹³ Unfortunately, by the time it was completed in 1260, the popular government had fallen from power and it never got to serve its intended function. The Palace was also hindered by its location in the city. Built along the Via del Proconsolo rather than on a square, the palace was unable to impose a powerful statement on the city. If the new men of the city wanted to send a message to the great families that they were a force to be reckoned with, they would need a more imposing and crucial location in the city. They would get this opportunity when they began to construct the Palazzo della Signoria in 1299.

²⁹³ Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Palazzo Vecchio 1298-1532* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 7.

The Palazzo della Signoria is interesting for several reasons. First, it too also co-opted the form and function of the tower fortresses. Second, it literally built itself on the ruins of the Uberti clan-- the ultimate act in co-opting the power of a great family tower society. Finally, it was built in such an imposing and central position in the city, insuring that it would never be ignored. The Palazzo della Signoria would remain the nexus of power until the city government was move to the Palazzo Pitti in 1550 by Cosimo I de'Medici. It was after this move that the palace would be referred to as the Palazzo Vecchio.

The Uberti property was destroyed in 1258 (the Uberti were a Ghibelline family), and the site remained a jumble of ruins for several years. Rubinstein, in his monograph on the Palazzo Vecchio, points out that these ruins occupied a central location but, even more important, it was one of the few open spaces available in the old center.²⁹⁴ Though the property was damaged, the new palace was still able to use the foundation of the Foraboschi tower named “torre della vacca.” Villani wrote that the tower was fifty *braccia*, thirty meters, which was the prescribed height allowed by the *Primo Popolo*.²⁹⁵ The new tower was built three times taller than the original, reaching a height of one hundred and fifty *braccia*, and from the interior of the palace the original foundation is still visible.²⁹⁶ The height of the tower dwarfed its competition and undoubtedly communicated to all of the private family towers that its power was supreme and without an equal. Rubinstein argues that the palace could be seen as the “architectural

²⁹⁴ Rubinstein, *The Palazzo Vecchio*, p. 8.

²⁹⁵ Villani, *Cronica*, Book VIII, Chap. 26.

²⁹⁶ Anthony Osler McIntyre, *Medieval Tuscany and Umbria* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1992), p. 58.

manifestation of the victorious mood of the new popular regime.”²⁹⁷ The tower was not simply a symbol of power but served a real defensive role in protecting the civic government.

The architectural style is very reminiscent of the family military towers. Its exterior was built with similar rustication as many of the family towers. The stones were rough and projecting, though Rubinstein is not certain if this gave any added defensive qualities or if it was intended to communicate a connection to its older predecessors or even project the image of solidity.²⁹⁸ The comparisons between the Palazzo’s tower and the military towers were no doubt proof that they served as the model for proper tower design. Small windows high above street level, a protected narrow entrance, a *ballatoio* (a projecting deck) used to defend the tower with weapons, and the rough rusticated stones were all elements of the Palazzo’s tower and standard features of the military towers. The Priors were obligated to remain inside the palace for their entire two-month tenure, safely protected in the foreboding fortress, but this seemed to express a message that was contrary to the purpose of the government. Most of the priors’ activities would have taken place enclosed in the palace and seemed to contradict the intentions of the new regime. As a result, one unique feature of the Palazzo was the platform built facing the square so that the Priors could address the people.²⁹⁹ This was an obvious deviation from the family fortresses. The tower societies may have been targeted as the source of

²⁹⁷ Rubinstein, p. 10.

²⁹⁸ Ibid, pp. 13-14.

²⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 14.

discord in the city, but the Palazzo della Signoria recognized that they were also valuable tools to exert communal control.

The towers can also be found in the new towns built by the Florentine commune. These new towns were built between 1299 and 1350 to help Florence protect her newly acquired territories. They are fascinating because they reveal how the commune perceived the ideal plan for a city. The Florentine new towns also demonstrate another example where the towers were co-opted by the commune. David Friedman revealed that the advantage of these towns was their ability to be designed on straight lines and right angles, an aspect that would not be possible in Florence.³⁰⁰ The most interesting aspect of these towns is the role of towers, which were a crucial element in the defense of the town and the territory. Just like the Palazzo della Signoria, the towers were a crucial military design to secure the defense of the city. The towers were incorporated into the walls but were maintained and manned by the people of the new towns. The towers were similar to the wall towers of the early commune, demonstrating how even in the fourteenth century the tower societies of the early commune, despite being portrayed as an anathema to the commune, were duplicated by the commune to serve its own purposes. The towers never completely disappeared from the medieval city, they simply were co-opted and used as a tool to promote communal causes.

The physical towers may have decreased, but their legacy survived in the form of their societies, neighborhood allegiances, and the practice of communal military property. The tower societies were the foundation on which the commune was built, and thereafter

³⁰⁰ David Friedman, Florentine New Towns: Urban Design in the Late Middle Ages (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1988), p. 5.

all communal organization had an inextricable connection to these early communal organizations. The towers may have been reduced in height, number, and influence over the city, but they were a part of the communal political and social culture that could never be extracted from Florence since they were an essential and core aspect of the commune. The attempt by the commune to usurp power from the local military societies was impossible because societies still served an important function for the commune. The neighborhood still served an essential role protecting, serving, and promoting the interests of the neighborhood. The most basic needs of the commune were still answered by these extremely localized neighborhood communities and neighborhood societies-- the very same communities that gave birth to the tower societies. A great example of the fundamental and essential role of the neighborhood military societies is exemplified in the *cavallata*.

The *cavallata* appear to be the progeny of the tower societies since both were a society with a joint military obligation. The *cavallata* was the joint obligation to keep a horse for military service just as the tower societies were the joint obligation to keep towers for military service and protection.³⁰¹ These types of joint obligations were an essential aspect of the communal government from the eleventh century until the fifteenth century. Since there was no real autonomous communal army whose sole allegiance was to the state, most of the manpower and military material support would come from the neighborhood societies. The great contradiction of the popular commune was the portrayal of the nobility and their knightly practices as the main source of communal

³⁰¹ Daniel Waley, "The Army of the Florentine Republic," Florentine Studies: Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), pp. 94-96.

internal violence. Despite the attempt to portray the nobles as arrogant and violent due to their military traditions, they still provided an essential military role to the commune.

One of the common misrepresentations of the Florentine army has been its portrayal as primarily a mercenary army, but Daniel Waley's examination of the army has revealed that this picture is not accurate.³⁰² Just as tower construction costs necessitated communal construction, the financial costs of the horses were also shared in common.

The *cavallata* provided a society that helped organize, man, and care for the horse. What is even more interesting is that an individual knight was not solely responsible for taking the horse to battle, for even this responsibility was shared. Waley explains, "This system whereby one man might owe a service of several horses and several men might jointly owe one horse was of course designed to secure the maximum mobilization of Florence's cavalry potential."³⁰³ In an attempt to quantify the combined forces of the Florentine army, Waley hazards to conjecture that perhaps 1200 of the total 1400 cavalry were comprised of the local *cavallata*. This demonstrates that the service of local knights was crucial and the role of jointly owned military property was not limited to the towers alone. The popular commune's attempt to portray the tower societies and its members as counterproductive to the peace of the commune underestimates the invaluable role such societies served in the military, and the practical utility these societies possessed. They may have presented a challenge to the commune, but they also provided an essential function in the protection of the city, even when the army depended increasingly on foreign mercenaries for service.

³⁰² Ibid, p. 94

³⁰³ Ibid, p. 76.

The tower societies also served as the role model for the future guild societies. As Santini demonstrated, the communal government and the tower societies preceded the guild societies by many decades.³⁰⁴ The private associations predated the merchant guilds and must have served as the model for their organization. The struggle of the merchant guilds to gain power would be achieved through their ability to gain political power. The tower societies were forced to acknowledge the power of the guilds as a competing society, but one must never forget that the early communal private associations were the model that all subsequent societies would emulate. The guild societies may have portrayed the tower societies as the source of communal factionalism, but they were clearly the ancestors of these earlier societies.

The towers grew out of the neighborhoods, and even though they no longer were the primary focus of the neighborhood, the societies still served a viable and useful function in the neighborhood. The commune could never undermine the neighborhood societies because their role was too essential for the maintenance of the city. The early tower societies and neighborhood associations served a very important role in protecting and policing the city on the most local level. This necessity did not disappear, even in the fourteenth century, and they continued to serve this essential role. There was no viable police force, social welfare program, or urban maintenance crew that could address all of the needs of the commune. The tower societies addressed these concerns, and even though their towers may have declined or disappeared, the needs remained. Dale and William Kent have examined the legacy of neighborhood association in the district of the

³⁰⁴ Santini, "Societa delle Torri.", p. 196.

Red Lion during the fifteenth century, showing that the tower societies still served an important and enduring role in the city. The Kents see the neighborhood associations as direct heirs of the early communal *consorti*.³⁰⁵ The neighborhood associations that were so necessary in the darkest periods of the nascent commune had not declined in importance hundreds of years later. They argue that one of the most obvious descendants of the early neighborhood associations was the *gonfalone* who served a crucial role in promoting the interests and power of the neighborhood. The Kents explains:

That there were local worlds within worlds is assumed by the speaker in a communal debate or *pratica* of 1427 who exhorted citizens to consider the good of the commune above their personal feelings, and thus to suppress 'all partisan bias and affection for one's *gonfalone* and quarter'. But since the concerns closest to the hearts of most Florentine patricians were the procuring of prestigious offices and the avoidance of punishing taxation-- it is in the context of his preoccupation with these issues that Giovanni Morelli, for example, speaks of his 'gonfalone o vicinanza'-- physical proximity and functional relationship coincide most effectively in the identification of neighbourhood in Florence with *gonfalone*.³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ D. V. and F. W. Kent, Neighbours and Neighbourhood in Renaissance Florence: The District of the Red Lion in the Fifteenth Century (New York: J.J. Augustin, Publisher, 1982), p. 2.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 4.

No matter how much the communes attempted to create a public authority and reduce the power of factionalism in the city, it could never undermine neighborhood associations, or even wish to undermine them, because they still addressed the most basic needs of the city.

Neighborhood coalitions may have changed their focus, but their structure and cohesiveness changed little. Brucker argues that these family coalitions of the fourteenth and fifteenth century were as strong as the *consorterie* during the time of Dante. They were equally concerned with the physical and psychic security of their members. There was one key distinction: the absence of political ideology. Brucker explains, "Ties of friendship, particularly between neighbors, were quite as important as blood in cementing these coalitions. And, unlike the factions that had proliferated in the city in Dante's age and before, these associations possessed no ideological dimensions. They were less concerned with Guelfism than with profit, with promoting the material well-being (*utile*) of their members."³⁰⁷ According to Brucker, even in the fourteenth century the Florentines still sought security through associations. The older associations may have declined or disappeared, but the impulse continued to thrive. The fundamental problem with this impulse was the premise that these competing associations could reconcile their differences and work for the common good of the commune. If the common good could be defined, it would supersede the interests of a private association. The weakness of this premise was that it could never be achieved in the Florentine commune because self-interest superseded communal interest. Brucker argues, "But that principle was

³⁰⁷ Gene Brucker, The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 29.

challenged with increasing frequency and intensity by factions which identified their own interests with the *ben comune*, and which sought to exclude their rivals from the government.”³⁰⁸ This premise undermined the attempt to impose unity and public authority over the commune in the twelfth and thirteenth century and would prove to be futile in the fourteenth century as well. As long as private associations thrived they would undermine the unity of the city and provide fodder for civil discord and violence. As long as the commune was the aggregate of competing societies, the legacy of the towers would never completely disappear until the power of private associations would be completely usurped by or subjected to a greater civic authority.

The heirs of the tower societies would ensure that their legacy would survive for many centuries, but the imposing and impressive architectural structures would also ensure that they would never completely disappear from Florence and Italian cities. Though the *popolani* may have portrayed the towers as an anathema to civil unity and peace, they nonetheless appreciated the civic pride they instilled. Towers remained a seminal aspect of the Italian urban landscape. They were a source of pride and prestige guaranteeing that they would never be completely eliminated from Italian medieval cities. The cities may have ceased constructing any new private towers, but the towers continued to proliferate in art and literature. A great example can be found in Giovanni Sercambi’s *Cronaca* where they are illuminated in numerous illustrations throughout the *Cronaca*.³⁰⁹ Heers believes that the dominant depiction of the seigniorial towers clearly

³⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 30.

³⁰⁹ Giovanni Sercambi, *Croniche*. (Archivio di Stato di Lucca, MS. 107).

shows how they were perceived as a crucial aspect of the idealized cityscape.³¹⁰ Heers was also interested in the positive portrayal of towers in the famous Lorenzetti fresco in Siena. Titled “Good Government,” the portrayal of towers in the painting seems to contradict the common perception of the towers as counterproductive to good government, yet in this fresco they are prominently displayed. The towers added prestige to a city and therefore they would be prized and promoted in visual representations of Italian cities. Despite the merchant class’s cries that the towers bred discord, they still valued the portrayal of the towers as a centerpiece of the city. They also actively pursued possession of the towers. Heers explains, “When they bought rural estates, Florentine merchants kept the old seigniorial tower if there still was one; in all cases the leaders’ large houses, surrounded by all kinds of offices and *case di laboratori*, were embellished by a squat, square, not inelegant tower, which was pierced by wide windows.”³¹¹ The towers may have ceased exercising their power in the same manner as the early commune, but their expression as a symbol of power and prestige would be valued by both nobles and merchants, securing their existence in the cityscape, literature, and art well into the Renaissance.

³¹⁰ Heers, *Family Clans*, p. 184.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

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