

A History of Florence 1200–1575

JOHN M. NAJEMY



Blackwell
Publishing

A History of Florence

1200–1575

a Marina,
alla memoria di Antonio,
e ai loro figli,
carissimi tutti

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JN
Florence
November 2005

A Note on Italian Terms, Abbreviations, and Translations

For reasons of typographic clarity, frequently used words in Italian have been left in roman type. Most of these are the names of institutions.

The following abbreviations are used in the text:

ASI = *Archivio storico italiano*

ASF = Archivio di Stato di Firenze

Translations of Dante's *Divine Comedy* are from Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, translated with a commentary by Charles S. Singleton, 3 vols. (Princeton, 1980).

Introduction

Florence might be thought, of all cities, not to need an introduction, for its legend always precedes it: the “birthplace” of the Renaissance and the “cradle” of modern Western Civilization. I hope that many readers will be drawn to this book out of affection for that Florence, an affection I share whenever I take off my historian’s hat and recall the experience of being captivated, more than forty years ago, like so many others before and since, by Florence’s palaces, churches, sculptures, pictures, books, poetry, speech, and people. What needs introducing here is not of course that seductive Florence, whose power cannot be denied, but rather the following chapters in which I offer an interpretation of nearly four centuries of Florentine history, *not* from the perspective of the legend that makes of this city an inexplicable miracle, an enchanted land of geniuses whose achievements evoke admiration and astonishment, but essentially without history or context. Whenever I reflect that, until Brunelleschi built the great dome atop the cathedral, no one knew how it could be done, or that, before Dante wrote the *Commedia*, nothing like it had even been attempted in European literature, I feel a sense of awe at such marvels. But praise is one thing, and history another, and specialists in the history of architecture, sculpture, painting, and literature have long since integrated the cultural achievements of Florence and the Renaissance into appropriate historical contexts.

A more troublesome effect on historical understanding (and more difficult to eradicate) is the legend’s persistent idealization of the bearers of Florentine wealth and power as enlightened patrons, promoters of culture, and exemplars of civility. Renaissance princes and self-styled patricians were sometimes these things, and we are not wrong to admire their role in producing the