

# DINO COMPAGNI'S CHRONICLE OF FLORENCE

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Dino Compagni's Florence of the early 14<sup>th</sup> century was a maelstrom of violence and factionalism. Yet, while there was an ever-present threat of physical violence, much of the actual aggression was aimed at property rather than at the person. In the money-oriented society of the Italian city-state, attacking property was a useful means of hurting a rival and undermining his source of strength without initiating lethal repercussions.

The Florentine political system itself lay at the heart of the turmoil. Inbuilt instability bred violence. There was little other basis for political power than money and faction. The Ordinances excluded the landed magnates from the formal power they might have expected in other parts of Europe. Established families struggled alongside new men. Factions formed and split across traditional bounds. Men wielded money as a weapon in these power plays. It was a free for all in which it must have seemed that anyone with the will and the wealth could rule Florence. There was nobody to stop the ambitious. Inexpert and naïve priors never gained the strength or experience to rule properly. Their ability to control the passionate forces swirling through the city was weak at best and often utterly ineffectual.

Although there were acts of sporadic physical violence between the rival factions, it is surprising, given the temper of the period, that much of this form of violence seemed to be formalized and even petty. The incident to which Dino attributes the beginning of the vendetta between the Cerchi and the Donati factions did not involve a death. It did not even involve a serious injury, but rather a slashed nose (I.22). Later incidents revolved around throwing stones and insults, not serious blows (I.20). Why did neither side attempt then to kill or maim their opponents? Perhaps part of the answer lies in the group nature of the conflict. Kill one, and there would be many more to take their revenge. When the vendetta began, it

seemed almost a game to the gangs of young men involved. To kill a minor player such as Ricoverino de' Cerchi or Piero Spini would only serve to make the game deadly without significantly improving the position of their faction. There was thus a deliberateness to the violence. It was rarely chaotic. Despite the fiery passions involved, violence usually served the ultimate motives of the faction.

It was not until 1303 when the Blacks executed Masino Cavalcanti and other Whites that "blood [was] shed which [...] prevented peace in the city" (II.29). Blood beget blood. It is notable that those subsequently killed included most of the power players including Corso Donati (III.21). With blood shed, the heads of various factions knew they had to eliminate the most powerful or themselves be killed.

Instead of attacking an enemy directly, the Florentines often attacked a person through his property, knowing that property and money usually equated to power in the merchant city. Northern European magnates held power and wealth through land that enemies could attempt to seize but not easily destroy. In Florence, however, wealth came from rents, from property, from stock in warehouses and from the constant flow of trade. It was visible and it was vulnerable. This must have made it a very tempting target. Using minor physical violence and insults as an excuse, the rival factions assaulted each other financially. Magnates and *popolari* manipulated the Standard-bearers of Justice to destroy the houses of their enemies as punishment for minor crimes (I.12). Later, the Black Guelphs even set fires that not only destroyed the property of their enemies the White Guelph Cavalcantis but also destroyed a large portion of the city itself (III.8). It was a costly ploy. The destruction included Black property as well as White as "more than nineteen hundred houses burned." Still, it worked. The Cavalcantis saw their wealth going up in flames and "lost their heart and nerve." They

knew that their financial strength was crucial to their hopes of power.

The value of resources within a Florentine family did not consist solely of portable goods and property, however. Women, as providers of heirs and guarantors of the future of the family, were also important assets. Like other valuables, they were vulnerable, especially to rape. Sexual violence was a means to diminish the value of this asset; another power play aimed less at the woman herself than at her family.

With no powerful man pushing for peace and great rewards offered to those who won the complex political game, it is little wonder that violence flourished in 14<sup>th</sup> century Florence. Violence could achieve power in a way that that words alone could not in the unstable political atmosphere. Yet, despite the heated passions inflamed by stark ambition, the focus of the violence was often against property, only rising to physical attacks after deliberation and for certain purpose.