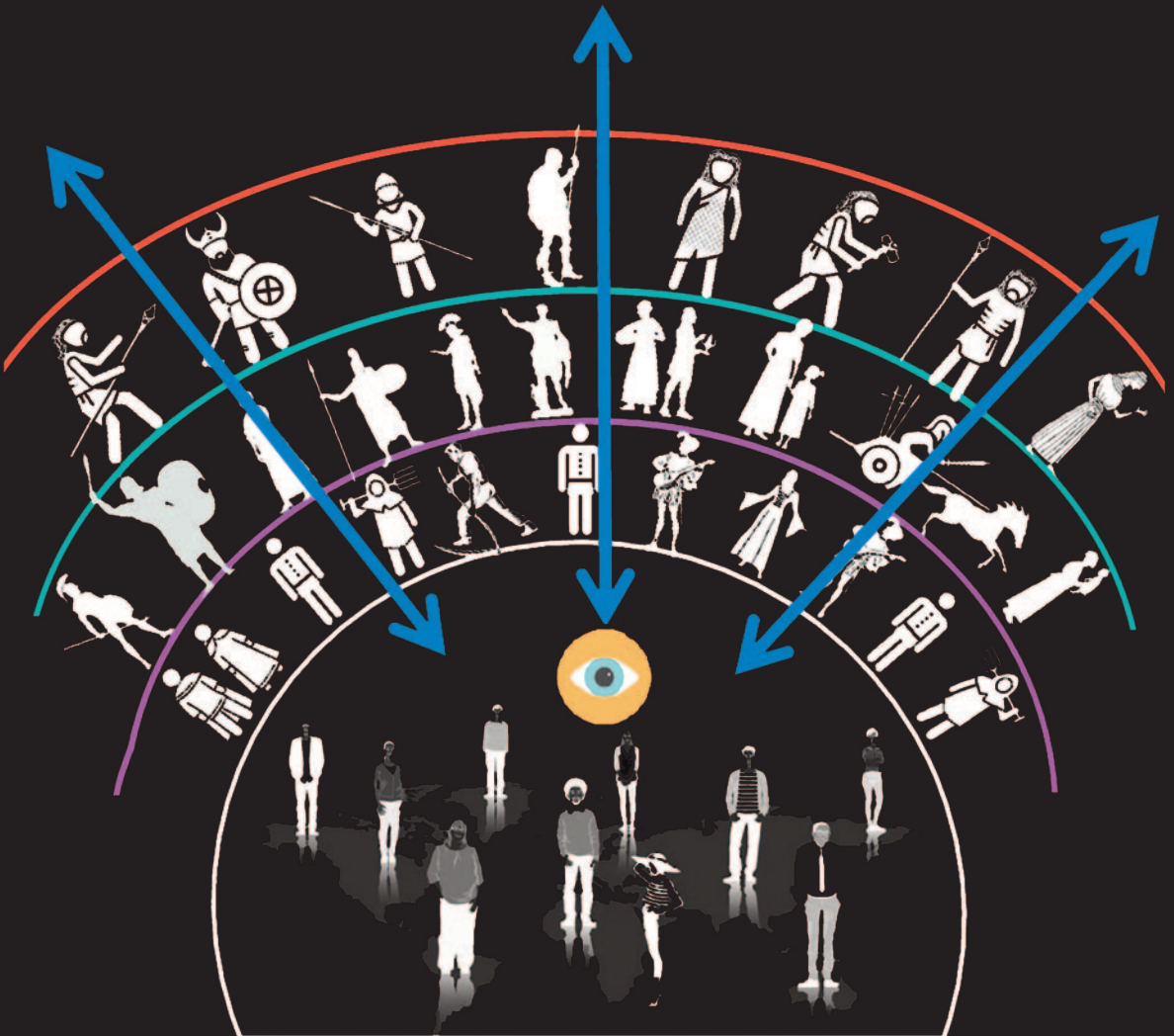


pca

european journal of
postclassicalarchaeologies

Volume 14
2024



SAP
Società
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european journal of
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volume 14/2024

SAP Società Archeologica s.r.l.

Mantova 2024

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Cover image: the production of past lives layers at present society (by Gonzalo Ruiz Zapatero).

"Post-Classical Archaeologies" is indexed in Scopus and classified as Q3 by the Scimago Journal Rank (2022). It was approved on 2015-05-13 according to ERIH PLUS criteria for inclusion and indexed in Carhus+2018. Classified A by ANVUR (Agenzia Nazionale di Valutazione del sistema Universitario e della Ricerca).

DESIGN:

Paolo Vedovetto

PUBLISHER:

SAP Società Archeologica s.r.l.

Strada Fienili 39/a, 46020 Quingentole, Mantua, Italy

www.saplibri.it

Authorised by Mantua court no. 4/2011 of April 8, 2011

For subscription and all other information visit the website www.postclassical.it.

Volume funded by the
University of Padova
Department of Cultural Heritage



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Guido Vannini*

The urban fabric as a source for an archaeological history of the topography of medieval Florence

1. A medieval urban landscape

When the urban landscape is examined with the tools of an archaeology intended as history of material structures of past societies, it produces a documentation that allows peculiar interpretations and employs every kind of source in new contexts and meanings. As it is well known, since its 'Romanesque' season (Faini 2010) – especially during its peculiar evolutionary journeys between the 9th and 13th centuries, and finally, during those extraordinary ones between the mid-13th and the late 14th century – Medieval *Florentia* has been able to produce the cultural models of reference that started the proto-Renaissance season that lay at the origins of contemporary European (and Mediterranean) identity itself.

It has demonstrated an unprecedented ability to re-profile the environment itself, without breaking continuity between renewed culture, existence (reinterpreted in an anthropological sense), and structures (mental, economic and material). These social dynamics let us glimpse a new '*Weltanschauung*'; a laboratory, between humanism and the early stages of a Renaissance age, which would soon impress itself upon the whole of Europe (Franchetti Pardo 2008; Benevolo 1993, cap. 3; Fanelli 2002; Frati 2005; Goldwaithe 1984).

Let us start here with some examples taken from a unique season of deep, dense and impressive changes that the city underwent in the course of the thirteenth century. In terms of methodology, we shall employ a shared approach between medieval archeology and historical urban planning. The object is the same urban fabric of a Florence that – in the politically 'terrible' and intellectually magnificent 'Dugento'¹ – was able to rethink its cultural cognitive categories. In

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¹ We have spoken of a 'fabulous 13th century' (RAGGHIANI 1968), also from the point of view of the definition of aesthetic-formal canons that were decisive in the very cultural evolution of the following centuries; just think – in the same years as Dante, Arnolfo, Villani – of Giotto's 'revolution'.

other words, the 'construction' of a precise civil identity of the 'Romanesque' Florentine society: a process capable of employing the traditional, typically 'medieval', materiality, with the aim, however, of overcoming it.

2. The 'invention' of the square

After the wide urban reconfiguration of the last quarter of the 12th century, the Florence that faced the new century, the 13th, was a city in the middle of its demographic and urban development (Sznura 1975; Scampoli 2011), capable of sustaining significant immigration in a perfectly organized way. A large number of immigrants, not only from the Florentine countryside, flocked to the city in a basically uninterrupted influx that carried the population from a few thousand to perhaps thirty thousand inhabitants (Beloch 1994). The city expanded its urban fabric, matching, after a millennium, the limits of Roman *Florentia* beyond its colonial walls, at the time of the construction of the first municipal walls (1172-4) (fig. 1).

However, even though the growth – certainly ordered but polycentric and based on a rigorous 'allotment'² – had been essentially quantitative until that moment, the *Florentia dugentesca* 'imagined' a new city, for a new civil (political, economic, institutional) society. This society began to perceive itself as 'other', even if compared to a well appreciated tradition: we might say that the distancing from Dante's 'city of Cacciaguیدا' had begun (fig. 2).

For example, we can ascribe to this season what might in some ways be considered the 'invention of the square' in the history of European urban planning, at least in this 'Florentine' form. This can be considered paradigmatic of the true and proper re-foundation of what is now commonly described as the 'city of Arnolfo', an authentic change of an era. Since the early 13th century, in fact, the urban fabric considered the soil inside the walls as precious, exclusively reserved for residential use. The road system itself was subordinate to this purpose, and often even organically 'invaded' (e.g. the system of the *chiassi* with 'common' spaces), even at the upper levels, with projections ('*sporti*'), generally for suspended latrines³, or with supporting arches (with static and apparently also anti-seismic functions: on this cfr Arrighetti 2018). Altogether we see a sort of urbanistic '*horror vacui*' that reserved the land for exclusively practical uses with specific functions (fig. 3). The only open spaces for public use were represented by the parvises of those churches that held districts in the '*vicinie*'.

² "*ad edificandam casam et non capannam*", as noted by the parish of S. Maria Novella, which a toponym still placed '*inter vineas*' in the late 12th century, for its new immigrant levelers for a '*petia terre*' nearby (ASI, Diplomatico, S. Maria Novella, 1180).

³ As described in the 5th *Novella* of the 2nd *Giornata* of Andreuccio da Perugia by G. Boccaccio in his *Decameron*.



Fig. 1. Extent of the fabric of Roman Florence, in relation to the city of the late 12th century; topographical base on which a true urban and cultural revolution is grafted.

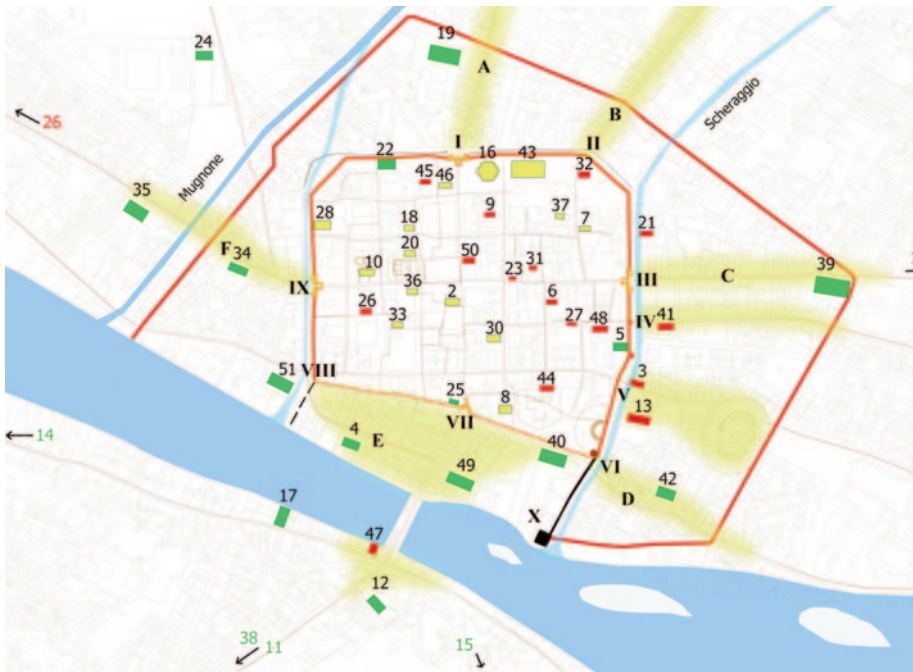


Fig. 2. The Carolingian town and the *borghi* of the first generation, 'Romanesque', up to the first communal walls (10th-12th centuries) (by Scampoli 2011).



Fig. 3. The Lombard town. The old center (from the Leopold Cadastre). The 'fossil' fabric of the medieval city (within the red boundary) that preserves the thick traditional weave in the parts spared by the interventions of the late '200-'300 centuries.

These spaces were also used for meetings of the residents (parishioners) to discuss problems of cohabitation or similar issues and maintained the ancient custom (believed to be of Germanic origin) of keeping a shady tree (often an elm) in the parvis itself (fig. 4)⁴. The only (apparent) exception in cities of Roman colonial foundation is the partial preservation of the *Forum*⁵. However, this is not a true exception. In fact, all of the ancient space inherited from the Roman urban order was, so to speak, 'put to work', with the attribution of a specific practical (indeed, essential) function. This function was also crystallized in the new medieval denomination: '*Mercatum Regis*' (but also the various 'piazza

⁴ A 'fossil' trace of such a fully 'urbanistic' presence is the Roman column in Piazza S. Giovanni, probably only raised and placed here after the 'flood' of 1333 (SALVESTRINI 2005, pp. 56 ff.), as a memorial (with an applied bronze representation) of the dry elm that miraculously blossomed when struck by the relics of S. Zanobi, the city's first bishop, at the moment of their translation (860) from the early Christian cathedral of S. Lorenzo to the new S. Reparata, under the shelter of the new Carolingian walls (BENVENUTI 1995, pp. 205-252).

⁵ A use that also eroded the margins of the main road axes (not only *decumanus* and *cardo*) from the Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. An exemplary Tuscan archaeological case study may be the late antique water well that invaded the '*Via Regis*' of late Roman and Lombard *Pistoria* (VANNINI 2021).



Fig. 4. *Florentia*: from the ancient *Forum* to the medieval *Mercatum Regis* and the 'column of S. Zanobi' erected in the new S. Giovanni square for the last time after the disastrous flood of 1333, in memory of the miraculous flowering of an old dry elm tree at the passage of the relics of the bishop S. Zanobi, from S. Lorenzo to S. Reparata (860), under the protection of the new Carolingian walls.

delle erbe' of many medieval cities, mostly in the center-north of Italy, as in Padua: Chavarría Arnau 2011).

Therefore, already in the first half of the 13th century, the problem of the topographical location and urban adaptation of the new ecclesiastical 'structures' (they too brought about a radical renewal, based on entirely peculiar foundations) was solved in a revolutionary way, with the basilicas and convents of mendicant orders (Benvenuti 1977; Dolso 2021). These structures – in line with their own social aims, which could be indicated as 'a return to the city' on the part of the regular clergy – are located in the (opposite) expanding peripheries of the city. The Franciscan S. Croce to the east (where "*prima v'era la chiesa vecchia*", Villani) and the Dominican S. Maria Novella (no longer "*inter vineas*", where it was located only a few decades before) to the west. Preaching to the residents in topographically peripheral areas, socially (less and less) marginal, but economically more and more central due to the rise of fundamental productive activities, was the new, specific function of these structures. In the popular *borghi* the new '*bourgeoisie*' was then evolving. Such function was fulfilled precisely with the first phase of what we have called the 'invention' of the square, understood as a free



Fig. 5. *Florentia*, first third of the 13th century ca. Location of the basilicas and convents of the new mendicant and preaching orders, with the new dedicated squares, on the way to a new centrality of the recent urban peripheries: early stages of an imminent urban revolution.

space in the fabric of the city. It was a new fact in terms of urban planning, but still dedicated to a specific practical function: to host the crowds of believers and listeners (the political component became more and more evident and incisive). Leaving a part of urban land open ('unused', according to traditional canons) was a new phenomenon that had a connection, albeit reinterpreted, to the dictat that these new *plateae* should also have a practical function. Therefore, this is no simple incident, but rather an urban phenomenon (fig. 5).

In fact, we could structurally define it as a true break in continuity. This break started a radical rethinking of the tradition that thrived in the formation of the medieval city, which began with the building of the Carolingian walls and continued during the 'Romanesque' centuries of the city's history (*urbs* and *civitas*)⁶. These were 'structural' moments that came to determine a new city and, above all, a new perception of it, gradually embraced by its inhabitants.

⁶ Or, to borrow a classic definition from DUPRÉ THESEIDER 1958: "city of stone and living city", whose truly productive quality lies in how it interpreted the vital and meaningful relationship between these two dimensions.

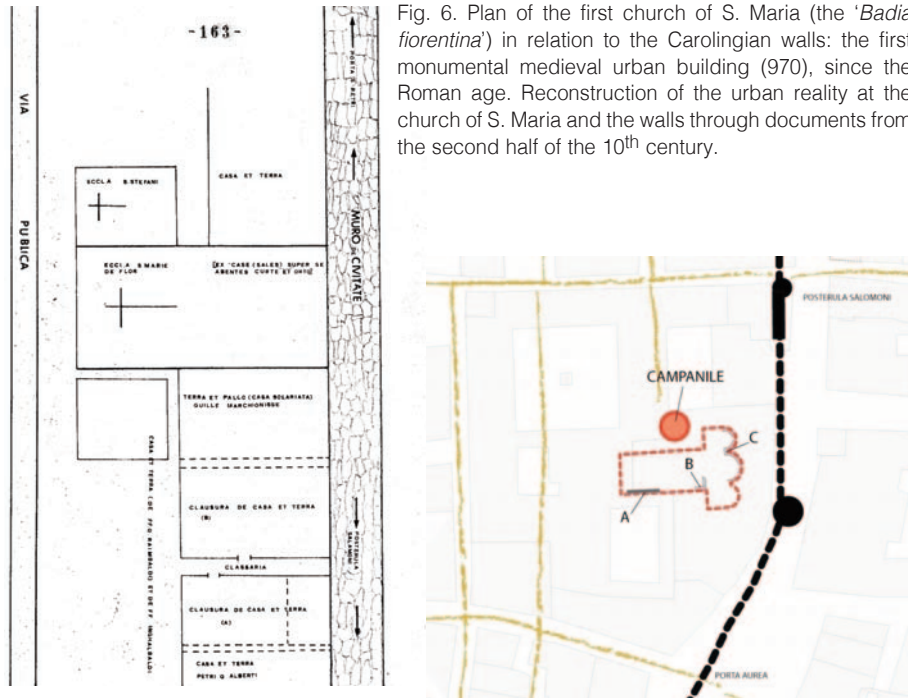


Fig. 6. Plan of the first church of S. Maria (the 'Badia fiorentina') in relation to the Carolingian walls: the first monumental medieval urban building (970), since the Roman age. Reconstruction of the urban reality at the church of S. Maria and the walls through documents from the second half of the 10th century.

Maintaining the archeotopographic reading of the urban fabric, particularly of its northern part, as a methodological indicator, let us try to briefly outline the context in which, in the last quarter of the 13th century, the real 'construction' of the new city took place, only to find its completion later in the Renaissance season. These are the years between the planning of the second communal walls (1284) and the actual start of their construction (1301-1333), which then accompanied the phase of the most intense program of radical redefinition of the *civitas vetus*, once enclosed in the "cerchia antica" of the crusader Cacciaguida (Manetti, Pozzana 1979).

Florence was a dense city, which maintained its own strong topographical and urbanistic coherence, and was mourned, in the same years, by its illustrious citizen Dante Alighieri. The exile Dante certainly represented a laceration, well beyond the political opposition, in the souls of a large part of the citizens who guided this radical transformation of what they had inherited⁷. What current historians have called the "city of Arnolfo" (Fanelli 2002) was formed at a fast pace in the course of three quarters of the 14th century, after a long period of quantitative and progressive growth of its urban fabric, population and structures – including mon-

⁷ "Firenza, dentro dalla cerchia antica / Onde ella toglie ancora e Terza, e Nona, / Si stava in pace sobria e pudica." (*Paradiso*, XV, 96-99).



Fig. 7. 'Romanesque' Florence (9th-11th centuries). The 'reconquest of the Arno', lost since late antiquity: the expansion of the Carolingian walls in the 'Matildine' period (mid-11th-early 12th century). The wall as far as the river and the castle of Altafronte, under excavation. Is this the 'Matildine' expansion of the Carolingian walls? (by Scampoli 2011).

umental structures (fig. 6)⁸, with the strengthening of the Carolingian walls with an expansion southward after the mid-11th century (Scampoli 2011, Cantini in Francovich *et al.* 2007; Vannini 2015), and after centuries, the 'reconquest of the Arno' (Vannini 2024; Salvestrini 2005) (fig. 7). After the influx of immigrants abruptly slowed down (from the second third of the 13th century), a courageous, radical and very costly qualitative restructuring of the 'stone city' was initiated, both vertically (the buildings) and horizontally (the topographical layout).

The operation involved the entire center of the city, which was reorganized urbanistically⁹. The costs were not only economic – although, as we have said, very high: several millions of gold florins were spent just to 'make room' for the creation of Piazza Signoria, in a little over 40 years (Gaye 1840) – but also identity-related and emotional. In fact, dozens of noble palaces were demolished in the heart of the ancient, beloved city (cf. the "*civitas vetus*" included in the "*cerchia antica*", mourned by a nostalgic Dante), 'only' to 'straighten up' (as reported in the commitments of expenditure) the tortuous and narrow streets that had

⁸ Such as, for example, the first urban monument since Roman times, the Badia Fiorentina (970) or S. Maria Maggiore (MARCOTULLI, TORSELLINI 2015).

⁹ All of the essential documentation published on this 'urban history' of the 14th-century city is still what was reported by GAYE 1840, GUASTI 1887 e PAMPALONI 1973.

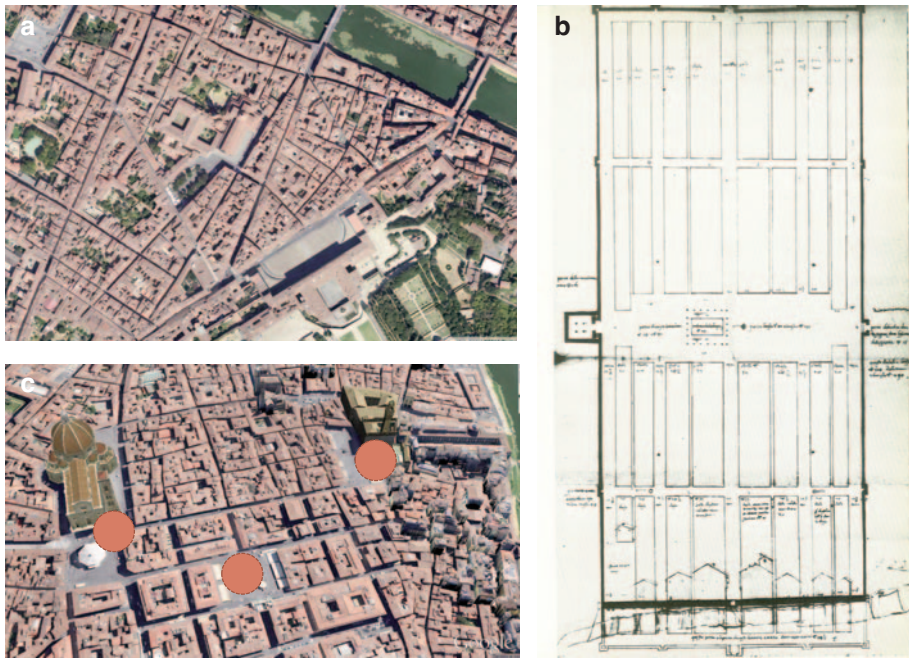


Fig. 8. Construction of a capital city: the 3 urban nodes. Humanist culture and new urbanism. The experimental phases, up to the great urban project: a) the new *borghi* of the mid-13th century, in the *Oltrarno* area; b) the '*Terre nuove*' that controlled the district (S. Giovanni Valdarno); c) the center of Roman and Carolingian *Florentia* resumed the chessboard scheme, reinterpreted in a new way (14th century).

been inherited and were no longer accepted. Even the beloved ancient Cathedral of S. Reparata was demolished, because – as Giovanni Villani, the greatest chronicler of the city, wrote – it was considered too “*grossa*”, rough, for the new *Florentia* that was rising, and in order to create Piazza S. Giovanni.

The three new squares (with the *mercatum novum* in ‘Calimala’, an expansion of the old *Mercatum Regis* and altogether a ‘city of business’, finally ‘sealed’ by the 16th-century Loggia ‘del Porcellino’, which we could call the Stock Exchange), conceived as a system, constitute the urban ordering center of the real heart of the city. This center is based on the connection of a renewed monumental road system that directly connects the places representing the three fundamental civic powers: religious, political, and economic (fig. 8)¹⁰. Each square is equipped with imposing structures that, even visually, represent the very essence of the ‘new’ city, in perfect cultural awareness and consequent material planning.

¹⁰ This is an urban configuration that characterized all major cities of the time (VANNINI 2015, pp. 71-81).



Fig. 9. After the destruction of Totila. "La città di Firenze riedificata con l'aiuto di Carlo Magno" (Miniatures from the *Nova Cronica*, Villani, Chigiano Codex, Vatican Library). After the centuries of neglect during the Langobard era, the Carolingian 'foundation' and the construction of the walls was the ideological base of medieval *Florentia*: formation of a 'traditional' urban identity

There are now the conditions for the rise of a new city, better responding to its role of leading metropolis of its times, on the eve of the Renaissance. Therefore, the outskirts of the new *borghi*, particularly of *Oltrarno*, saw the application of the new urban planning (which we can consider the product of a developing humanistic culture oriented towards antiquity), perceived also in the *'terre nuove'* of the countryside (Pirillo, Friedmann 2004), and then extended to the very heart of the city, where it came to constitute a new urban fabric (with the *"viae amplae et rectae"*, such as Via Calzaioli). In short, an authentic paradox: at the end of the 13th century, the peripheries (both rural and urban) were urbanistically more advanced than the center of reference. This paradox will be overcome, in fact, by the great 'Arnolfine' project, with such a bold determination, even from an economic point of view, as only new faiths, such as humanism, can inspire (fig. 9).

This achieves the full maturation of the 'new' square in the medieval city, with a new concept of 'public place', for a complex, articulated and culturally deeply renewed civil society (humanism was the basis for the subsequent Renaissance season). No longer simply subject to primary needs, the public place became a 'representative' civil seat, also in terms of the aesthetic-formal visibility of the new powers and values: for the first time, having a 'functional stage' was the objective in and of itself. This solution was tailored to the new era, and its 'construction' was considered a collective task of which all were protagonists, and not only for the present. This process certainly took place on account of the 'operative' pragmatism of a mercantile society that intimately combined theoretical conception and consequent realization. In this respect, that society maintained the typical pragmatism of the medieval tradition.



Fig. 10. S. Reparata under construction, at the moment of the drafting of Bigallo's fresco (1342) and an archaeological snapshot on the moment of the final demolition that determines the end of the Giottesque fresco of the apse drafted for the beloved, old Cathedral when its demolition had already been sanctioned while it was still in use (1375).

And yet this authentic transfiguration, which would have made the city unrecognizable to an inhabitant of only a few decades earlier, represents no more than the epiphenomenon of a structural mutation. What we see is a process that responds to a 'new rationality' and is the consequence of a precise identity tradition. Not by chance, the intellectual class (essentially of mercantile origin, albeit in a broad sense), between the mid-13th and mid-14th century, was elaborating this new identity, in the form of civil legends and historically founded narratives (even with mythological connotations): Villani offers us a synthesis of this, with precise references to sources that were by then already ancient and even lost¹¹.

The cultural depth of this renewal of the urban environment emerges when the project begins with the first major operation: the 'construction' of the new *Piazza di S. Giovanni* (later '*del Duomo*'). An extraordinary series of documentary sources allows us to follow the whole operation for decades, between the early 1290s and the covering of S. Maria del Fiore in 1375 (fig. 10). Giovanni Villani's *Cronica* again sets the scene for an episode which, in its distinctiveness, shows us a 'new normality' of widespread perception of an urban reality, which at the same time anticipates a soon to be universal mentality, given that *Fiorenza* was a world-city at the time.

¹¹ Ruinous fires (particularly in the 'city of wood', as Florence was, essentially, until the threshold of the 13th century) appear in the chronicles. The spread of wood well explains the incredible extension and recurrence of the disastrous 'fires' recorded in many sources as far back as the 11th century. Villani recalls dozens of them: "... l'anno appresso del MCXVII ... per l'arsione de' detti fuochi in Firenze arsono molti libri e croniche che più pienamente facieno memoria delle cose passate della nostra città di Firenze, sicché poche ne rimasono; per la qual cosa a noi è convenuto ritrovarle in altre croniche autentiche di diverse città e paesi, quelle di che in questo trattato è fatto menzione in gran parte." (Villani, Lib. IV, XXX, *Come nella città di Firenze per due volte s'apprese il fuoco, onde arse quasi gran parte della città*).

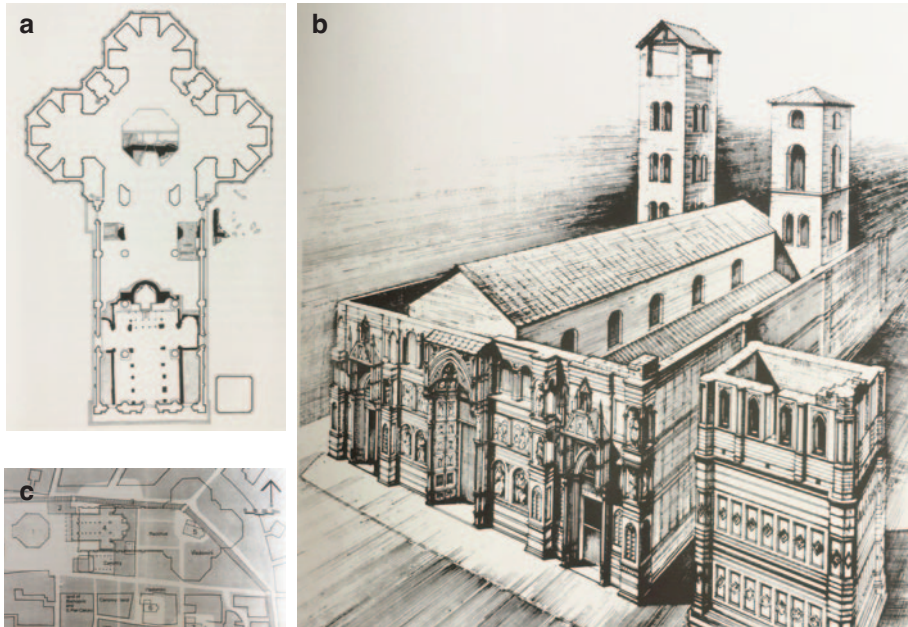


Fig. 11. From S. Reparata to S. Maria del Fiore: a) a “leap in scale”, a metaphor for the perception of the new city by the Florentines of the early 14th c.; b) S. Reparata perfectly usable and already incorporated in the large building site of S. Maria del Fiore (around mid-14th c.) (by Cardini 1996); c) the new cathedral ‘draws back’: birth of the first square in the ‘cerchia antica’ (by Toker 2013).

In order to create the space of the first ‘representative’ square of the new city, the first problem that arose for the start of the construction site was the inevitable demolition of the ancient, beloved Cathedral, no longer considered adequate either for its size (for a city of over 105,000 inhabitants) or for its artistic quality (the proto-Renaissance was already proposing the new aesthetic values that would later spread throughout Europe). But it was also necessary to enlarge the delicate space that faced the Baptistery, also a long-standing symbol of being Florentine: “*Nel detto anno MCCLXXXVIII, ... i cittadini s'accordarono di rinnovare la chiesa maggiore di Firenze, la quale era molto di grossa forma e piccola a comparazione di sì fatta cittade, e ordinano di crescerla, e di trarla addietro, e di farla tutta di marmi e con figure intagliate*” (fig. 11).

The following words show that the costs for the demolition of S. Reparata were also of an emotional nature and were faced with an intellectual courage that should generally trigger reflection: “*fondossi con grande solennitate*” [scil. the new Cathedral] “*nominandola Santa Maria del Fiore, con tutto che mai no-lle si mutò il primo nome per l'universo popolo, Santa Reparata*”¹². We also know of

¹² Villani, IX, IX, *Quando si cominciò a fondare la chiesa maggiore di Santa Reparata.*

dispositions of the municipal authorities that carried penalties for those who continued (even in writing and in official acts) to call the new Cathedral by its old, glorious name: and this remained until the middle of the 15th century! It is worth noting how this 'S. Reparata project' truly constitutes a paradigm at the crossroads of a long history of the Florentine urban community, where a civic tradition linked to the origins of the 'Romanesque' city and to its impetuous but rational development, also made of 'topographical inventiveness' (decentralized allotments, systematic reception, the invention of *borghi* and their relationship with the growth of the defenses, etc.), is combined with an authentic revolution such as the season that is being outlined here and that is expressed in a real and also qualitative 'explosion' of energies¹³.

3. A new city, at the origins of modern Europe

As we were saying a moment ago, an authentic historical phenomenon such as the overcoming of the 'city of Dante' – which began concretely and on a large scale with the building site of S. Reparata – can be well understood from a small episode, just casually mentioned in a document written in 1295 (Guasti 1887), but backed by precise archaeological evidence, which reveals to us, behind a topographical note, the real extent of the change of mentality that had occurred in the urban community of Florence, compared to the previous generation.

As part of the work for the enlargement of the churchyard between the loggia of the old S. Reparata (Maetzsche 1977) and the (future) gate of Paradise, on the eastern side of the '*bel S. Giovanni*' – for the construction of the new square, achieved above all by "drawing back" the facade of the new S. Maria del Fiore, as we have seen – another old monument of the city was demolished, the ancient *Spedale* of S. Giovanni Evangelista (Toker 1975, Toker 2013), which had been reused for some decades as the city's salt warehouse (fig. 12). The expansion of the new square to the north thus achieved (as generally observed; here we can note the absolute novelty of an operation such as this, i.e. to demolish a building and 'not' use the obtained, precious, intramural urban space) had the obvious consequence that the back of residential buildings came to face the new square¹⁴, constituting part of the northern limit (fig. 13).

¹³ RENOARD 1967: "The spirit blows where it will. Genius blossomed in the 14th and 15th centuries more than it did in any other city. ... Never in few decades did so many geniuses emerge from the five hundred thousand inhabitants of its diocese as Florence and its countryside saw in the 14th and 15th centuries. ... This spread of genius so perfectly supported by a vast society of rich and cultured businessmen explains the breadth and greatness of Florentine Humanism and that passion for freedom that animated the entire 15th century".

¹⁴ One of the three new central urban nodes of the city, with Piazza Signoria and the *Mercatum Novum*, whose construction works, already planned, would begin a few years later.

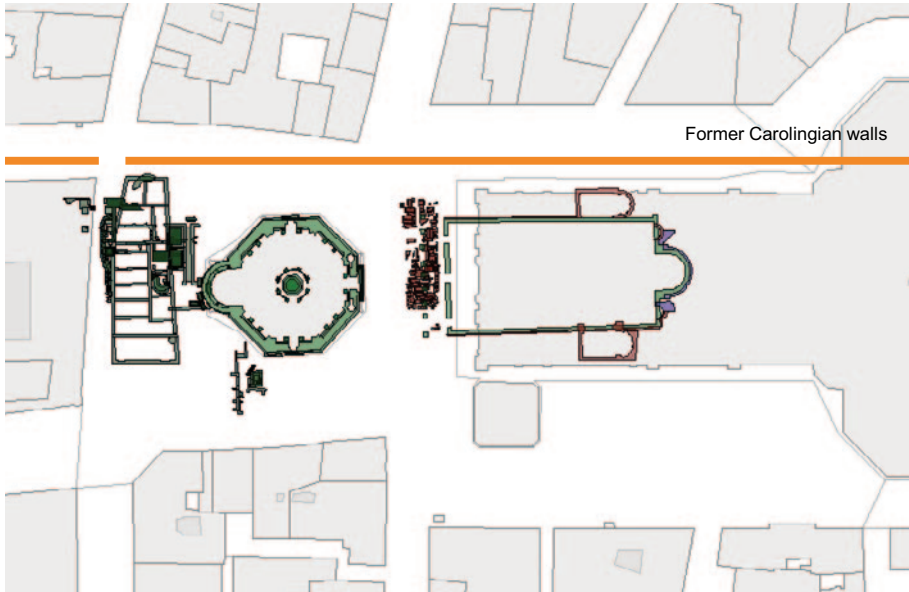


Fig. 12. Excavation area in front of the churchyard of S. Maria del Fiore: location of the pillars of the loggia of to the facade of S. Reparata and foundation of the ancient *Spedale* of S. Giovanni Battista, demolished for the opening of the new S. Giovanni square.



Fig. 13. Reconstruction of the building site of the new *Duomo* and creation of the new *Piazza S. Giovanni* (Cardini 1996).



Fig. 14. The areas controlled by the feudal aristocracies in Tuscany, at the time of the 'conquest of the *Contado*' by the mercantile cities of the valley bottom, such as *Florentia*, whose most unyielding adversaries were the Guidi Counts (13th-14th c.).

At this point we can assess the acceleration of the '*longue durée*', typical of a structure (with reference to the historical categories of Braudel and Le Goff, of course) such as mentality or even the 'cultural vision of the world'. There was, in fact, an immediate increase in both value and rent of the buildings, just because of this 'immaterial' change of topographic condition. An economic adjustment that not even the Florentines of the first third of the 13th century would have understood, and that appears obvious to us modern-day observers (all of us) only and precisely because we are heirs of the new world that was being built at that moment. It also important to add that this was the construction of a new model of city-capital of a territorial state in the making, which, after a centuries-long confrontation, was replacing feudal aristocracies in the county, the ruling class of a traditional rural society that was thus facing a real change of an era, parallel to what was happening in the city (really two sides of the same coin) (fig. 14).

A striking example is offered to us once again by Villani. There is an almost casual note that tells us about travelers who did not have a concrete ('useful') reason to do so: a city in the moment of its transformation, the new *Florentia*, "*Ma ssi magnifica cosa era a vedere, ch'uno forestiere non usato venendo di fuori*". We would call them, for the first time, 'tourists'.... In fact, we have here a substan-



Fig. 15. *Florentia*, 14th century: archaeological traces of forty years of 'negative allotment' of the area of the future *Piazza Signoria*, the civil and urban hub of the new town (G. Zocchi, early sec. XVIII), well documented with the purchase of entire blocks for demolition and subsequent bricking up (on *spina-pesce*) (Soprintendenza archeologica della Toscana).

tially new image of the city as such, a renewed urban landscape as the mirror of a new dimension of reality, perceived and interpreted with courage and vision. A new society, a new economy, a new culture, at the origins of modern Europe, all achieved on account of an imagery that was already developing into what would soon be defined Renaissance, but that was being built with the realism and concreteness typical of a still fully medieval tradition.

This program was at the center of painful battles, interpreted by a frowning Dante, but was carried out with stunning determination and in absolute continuity through all its radical and costly phases. This is a clear indication that the 'project' was strongly shared by the ruling class, which, we should remember, was of mercantile origin. It is all clearly visible also in the creation of the second great urban node. After the 'ecclesiastical' node, the 'political' one was produced: the creation, once again combined, of the *Palazzo della Signoria* and of the large square in front of it (not by chance the largest in the city) (fig. 15)¹⁵. In just a few

¹⁵ "Nel detto anno MCCLXXXVIII si cominciò a fondare il palagio de' priori per lo Comune e popolo di Firenze (Villani IX, XXVI *Quando si cominciò il palazzo del popolo di Firenze ove abitano i priori*; cfr now also FREGOSO 2021).

decades, between the 13th and 14th centuries, these merchants radically re-designed the center of their city, 'inventing' the square as a concept – which would later be ours – and a new way of understanding and living the city, as the organizing center of society and of a precise area of reference (RUSCHI 2004). The very intense works – the 'city of Arnolfo', as the urbanists call it – cost enormous amounts of money (millions of gold florins over 6-7 decades), all regularly accounted for: the 'reason'? "*ad maiorem decorem civitatis Florentiae*". That's all; only expenses, no earnings. They had only created the premises for the following season: the Renaissance (for which we Florentines still live, and not only because of the economy)¹⁶.

Yet the Florence of that time was a typical society of merchants, therefore accustomed to numbers and accounts that had to 'add up', and not to more or less intellectual, abstract or rhetorical dreams, and not even to acts of patronage with the 'free' personal resources of an absolute prince. Merchants, evidently, in governing their city were nevertheless capable of cultivating a constructive and 'self-less' vision, i.e. of 'investing' in the long term in projects whose fruits they knew would be reaped only by their descendants, who still live off this inheritance: given the results in the short, medium and long term, we might conclude that this was a form of 'superior rationality'¹⁷.

¹⁶ On this, cf. various useful essays in the wide-ranging synthesis in Cardini 1996. The latest outcome of this redefinition of the ecclesiastical directional 'space' – already established in the early Christian age and constituted by the axis Episcopio-Battistero-Campanile-Duomo – can be seen in the current tourist-exhibition redesign, based on the archaeological itinerary dedicated to S. Reparata and on the reconstitution of the new, magnificent Opera del Duomo museum, which has become a fundamental landing place for the understanding of the medieval city (FILARDI, VERDON 2016).

¹⁷ VANNINI 2020. On the subject of 'selflessness' as a force for progress, one can read the sharp and tasty pages of ORDINE 2013 ("It is not true – even in times of crisis – that only what produces profit is useful. There exists, in mercantile democracies, knowledge deemed 'useless' that instead turns out to be of extraordinary usefulness").

Abstract

When the urban landscape is examined with the tools of an archaeology intended as history of material structures of past societies, it produces a documentation that allows peculiar interpretations and employs all kinds of sources in new contexts and meanings. Florentia's medieval season, spanning from the mid-13th to the late 14th century and following the 'Romanesque' era, capable of producing cultural paradigms that formed the foundations of the same Euro-Mediterranean identity. These were the Proto-Renaissance years, during which an unprecedented ability to repurpose the environment itself was developed, between renewed culture, existence (reinterpreted in an anthropological sense), and structures (mental, economic and material) 'Weltanschauung'. A historical phenomenon such as overcoming the 'city of Dante' materialized in a large urban construction site that literally redesigned the entire urban layout in three quarters of a century. This gives us the real scope of the change of mentality that took place in the Florentine urban community. In just a few decades between the 13th and 14th century, this society of merchants radically redesigned the center of their city, 'inventing' the concept of square as we now know it, and a new way of understanding and living the city as the ordering center of society and of a specific territory. This intense work required enormous sums of money, all duly accounted for: the reason? "ad maiorem decorem civitatis Florentiae". That is all: just expenses, no profit. We might call this a form of 'superior rationality'. They had only just created the premises for the next season: the Renaissance.

Keywords: *Florentia*, Middle Ages, archaeotopography, square, *Weltanschauung*.

Il paesaggio urbano, interrogato con gli strumenti di un'archeologia interpretata come storia delle strutture materiali delle società del passato, produce una documentazione che permette uno specifico accesso ad interpretazioni storiche, utilizzando ogni tipo di fonte per nuovi contesti e significati. La stagione medievale di Florentia, dopo la sua età 'romantica', fra metà 'Dugento' e tardo '300 seppe produrre modelli culturali di riferimento, alle origini della stessa identità euromediterranea. Anni protorinascimentali che maturarono una capacità inedita di riprofilare l'ambiente stesso, fra cultura rinnovata, esistenza anche antropologicamente reinterpretata e strutture (mentali, economiche come materiali) per una nuova 'visione del mondo'. Un fenomeno storico come il superamento della 'città di Dante' si materializzò in un gigantesco cantiere urbano che letteralmente ridisegnò l'intero assetto urbano in tre quarti di secolo che ci dà la reale dimensione del mutamento di mentalità intervenuto nella comunità urbana fiorentina. In pochi decenni, a cavallo fra '200 e '300, questa società di mercanti riprogetta radicalmente il centro della loro città, 'inventa' la piazza come centro ordinatore della società e di un preciso territorio di riferimento: gli intensissimi lavori costano cifre enormi, tutte regolarmente contabilizzate: la 'causale'? "ad maiorem decorem civitatis Florentiae". Tutto qui; solo spese, nessun guadagno; una forma, potremmo dire, di 'razionalità superiore'. Avevano solo creato le premesse per la stagione successiva: il Rinascimento.

Parole chiave: *Florentia*, medioevo, archeotopografia, piazza, *Weltanschauung*.

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