

Savonarola - Preacher and Patriot?

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Donald Weinstein examines the career and context of the extraordinary millenarian friar who held a puritanical sway over Renaissance Florence in the last decade of the fifteenth century.

Unarmed prophets, wrote Niccolo Machiavelli in 1513, are bound to fail. The prophet foremost in his mind was Girolamo Savonarola, the ill-favoured, ranting Dominican friar who fifteen years earlier had gained an astonishing ascendancy over Machiavelli's beloved Florence armed with nothing more than threats of divine punishment and promises of earthly glory. Seeing that the Florentines had soon turned against their prophet, put him to torture, hanged him from a gibbet and burned him, Machiavelli's dictum is worth pondering; but how do we measure the success of a prophet and at what point do we consider the story ended? After his death believers scrambled for his relics; Catholic saints Catherine de' Ricci and Philip Neri venerated him; Protestants erected a statue to him in the Luther monument at Worms; Italian patriots regarded him as a forerunner of the Risorgimento (hence the revival of Savonarola studies in the nineteenth century); and today devotees work for his canonisation.

The pulpit was Savonarola's chosen field of battle. He had vowed to become 'a knight of Christ' and entered the Order of Friars Preachers, or Dominicans, the self-styled hounds of God (Domini canes), who hit the heels of heretics and snapped at sinners. During his first stay in Florence audiences disliked his harsh tones and his Ferrarese speech, but by the time he returned, in 1490, he had found his prophetic voice and he had also begun to find himself as a preacher, with a rough, dramatic style that challenged the pulpit elegance fashionable in his adopted city. The Church, he announced, in a bold and startling reproach to the Renaissance Papacy, will be scourged, reformed – soon. With the Book of Revelation as his text he filled his sermons with apocalyptic images of divine retribution and death. Without penitence Florence would become a den of thieves, of wickedness and blood, and the names of priests would be terror. Nor did he spare the lords of this world. He excoriated tyrants who burdened their people with unjust taxes while the rich built palaces and kept whores.

In the night of April 5th, 1492, lightning struck Brunelleschi's great cathedral dome splitting the lantern and hurtling great blocks of stone through the roofs below. The next day Fra Girolamo announced his most terrifying vision: 'Behold, the sword of God over the earth, swift and soon'. His admirer, the philosopher-prince, Pico della Mirandola, felt his golden hair stand on end. Two nights later disaster struck again. At the age of forty-three Lorenzo de' Medici, the unofficial ruler of Florence, fell into a coma, dying the following day. Savonarola had come to Lorenzo's deathbed and given him his blessing; but as the legend of the prophet-revolutionary grew there were those who said he had denied Lorenzo his blessing when the dying man refused to restore the liberty of Florence. There were also those who said, not without encouragement from Savonarola, that he had prophesied this death.

Lorenzo's position in Florence was assumed by his twenty-year-old son, Piero, who lacked

his father's glamour, his courage, and his experience in handling touchy patricians. Within months many of the primati had become resentful of Piero and were quarrelling among themselves. Their unease was reflected in the populace at large, already made fearful by the mounting stridency of Savonarola's preaching. In national politics too Lorenzo's fine diplomatic hand was missed. In 1454, at Lodi, the major Italian governments had brought peace to Italy by devising a balance of power and providing for its co-operative enforcement. For thirty years their Lega Italica hail kept the general peace with more success than its own pragmatic inventors could have hoped for. The Medici closely identified themselves with this policy of equilibrium and collective security and, for the most part, Florence supported the League. But now a mortal hatred between the rulers of Milan and Naples threatened to destroy the balance. While the other states jockeyed for positions of safety, Piero de' Medici let himself be caught up in the quarrel, taking the side of Naples against Lodovico il Moro of Milan.

On Italy's northern horizon an even greater menace was preparing. The French monarchy, recovered from the Hundred Years War and strengthened by the acquisition of Burgundy and Brittany, was gearing itself up to assert its thirteenth-century claim to the Neapolitan throne. In the ultimate betrayal of Lodi, Lodovico Sforza of Milan urged the French king on, promising money and troops. By late 1492 and increasingly in 1493 Italian merchants and diplomats were reporting from France that Charles VIII was preparing for the conquest of Naples. Prophets there hailed him as the New Charlemagne who would reform the Church, conquer the Infidel, and unite the world under an Angelic Pope.

In Florence, between Advent 1493 and Lent 1494, the prophetic voice of Savonarola grew more strident and more urgent, with images of gladius Dei, God's sword, hanging by a thread over the city. Later he and his devotees would recall that he had prophesied the coming of Charles VIII, the New Cyrus, before it was known to anyone. The surviving texts of his sermons do not support this claim, although by the winter of 1493-94 he as well as others could see that invasion was imminent. In October 1494, Charles VIII crossed the Alps into Italy. The reported size of the French army, some 40,000 men with the latest in heavy siege guns, and the ease with which Charles moved after he crossed the Alps, were terrifying. The first to feel the shock was Florence, where the invasion triggered revolution. After initially supporting Naples and rejecting all French requests for free passage through Tuscany, Piero de' Medici panicked when the king approached, surrendering to him Florence's key fortresses, including those in Livorno and Pisa. When the Florentines learned this they rose up and drove Piero and his two brothers from the city, ending sixty years of Medici domination.

In rage, fear and exultation they turned for guidance to Girolamo Savonarola who for months had been predicting the coming Flood and preparing the Ark of Penitence. The city waited as the prophet of God intervened with the new Cyrus to protect the Children of Israel from Babylonian Captivity. Savonarola assured grateful audiences that Florence had escaped God's wrath because it was a chosen city, marked out for a special role in the new dispensation, and that an alliance with the French was part of God's plan. Sceptics who pointed out that this contradicted earlier prophecies of disaster, or who grumbled because the king had not restored Pisa or the border fortresses while extracting a huge subvention from the Florentines, were drowned out in the chorus of thanksgiving and exaltation. Florence had been delivered from Piero's tyranny and from God's wrath.

Sceptics found it even more difficult to challenge Savonarola's credibility as a champion of the popolo. With the expulsion of the Medici he was not slow to remind his audiences how he had taken their side against the rich and powerful in the days of the Magnificent Lorenzo. In the discussions of a new constitution that began after the expulsion of the Medici, Girolamo

threw his support to a broadly-based republic. Like so many of his contemporaries (and many republican theorists for centuries to come), he found his model in the Venetian constitution, especially in its Grand Council, an hereditary sovereign body with broad legislative, judicial, and appointive powers. The primati were forced to concede to popular pressure and endorse a Consiglio Maggiore. As sponsor of the council, Savonarola was now hailed as the father of the new republic.

Charles entered Rome on January 4th, 1495, and Naples a month later. But the dim-witted king had no idea what he was to do with his easy conquest, nor, it transpired, did he have a serious plan for crusade. In May, learning that the pope and the Duke of Milan were organising a Holy League for Italian resistance, he abandoned Naples to make his way home. At Poggibonsi, south of Florence, Savonarola met Charles who demanded more money and promised a speedy return to Italy. Savonarola returned to the city reporting a long and fruitful audience in which he had reminded the king of his sacred mission and received splendid promises. He also reported new revelations of Florence's glorious future.

However brief and inglorious, the French expedition of 1494 not only convinced the Florentines that Savonarola was a prophet; it was the water- shed – Savonarola's Flood if you will – that swept Italy into a new and disastrous era. To understand the dimensions of the cataclysm we need to see it in its historical perspective. In the Middle Ages Italy had been the favourite area of conquest for invaders from every part of Europe, while in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it was the main battlefield of the papal Guelfs and imperial Ghibellines, each claiming the legacy of 'universal' Rome. The Italian self-governing cities, or communes, and feudal signories had grown in the shadow of the two superpowers, alternately profiting and suffering from their violent rivalry. Every city had its papalists and its imperialists, the ideological and geopolitical wars of the Guelfs and Ghibellines fusing with the local issues of class and faction to write a bloody chapter of Italian history.

But by the late thirteenth century the struggle between Popes and Emperors had played itself out leaving the communes and other Italian powers alone in the field. The collapse of universal authority meant that for the next two hundred years Italy, the garden of the Empire, was virtually closed to foreign invaders, and the search for the New Rome left to the fantasies of poets and prophets. In these two centuries the communes acquired a degree of political and administrative sophistication unmatched anywhere in Europe. In expanding their borders as well as the range of their competence, communes became city-states, brought to maturity and rich variety at Milan, Venice, Verona, Genoa, Mantua, Ferrara, Urbino, Florence, Lucca, Pisa, Siena, and many smaller places. Where communes were weak or absent, more traditional forms prevailed, as in the Duchy of Savoy, the Kingdoms of Sicily and Naples, with their Hispanic dynasties, and the signories of the Romagna. But even these were affected by the collapse of Papal and Imperial hegemony and were drawn into the new political culture. The Italians of the Renaissance discarded feudalism (except for its cult of nobility and chivalric violence). They revived the ancient conception of re- publican citizenship and began to explore the secular nature of politics and community, looking for alternatives to medieval political theology.

The engines that drove Renaissance states in their dealings with each other were greed, competition, mutual distrust, and secrecy. Chauvinist, acquisitive, fearful of each other, the communes had been aggressive from the start. With the removal of papal and imperial restraints they entered a more intense period of expansion, the larger, more powerful states establishing their hegemony over the smaller and weaker. Maritime cities fought each other for colonies and markets, with Genoa and Venice the big winners. In relations between governments anarchy rather than order was the rule. Paradoxically, as war became the main

business of governments, the internal trend was away from the disorderly popular regimes of the communal period toward a sterner discipline. By the fifteenth century most of the Italian republics had reconciled themselves to some form of oligarchic or authoritarian rule; none were democracies. Even Florence, which celebrated itself as the model of republican liberty, barring nobles from its chief magistracies and filling offices by election and sortition, was run by a network of propertied families, and in 1454 came under the domination of a single family, the Medici. The popolo minuto who toiled in Florence's dingy workshops and damp woollen mills were even more disenfranchised than the tiny minority of nobles, and without the nobles' compensations of wealth, status, and influence. Neither in domestic nor in external relations did the Renaissance find a practical alternative to the rule of the stronger.

In the mid-fifteenth century Italy was a geographical expression, a no-man's land of competing and warring entities. By then many of the weaker had been swallowed up by their more powerful neighbours. Italian political space was now divided among a dozen or so important powers, endlessly making and breaking alliances and waging war on each other. Five states dominated the play: Venice, Milan, Florence, Naples, and the Papacy. They were finding it increasingly difficult to manoeuvre without knocking into each other, and their wars were growing longer and more costly. (Civilian militias had long since declined in favour of expensive mercenaries, the infamous condottieri). And there was a new worry. The Ottoman Turks had stepped up their pressures on the eastern frontiers of Europe and in the Mediterranean, even raiding the Italian coast. From the Greek Emperor in Constantinople came a stream of ambassadors appealing for a new crusade and offering to discuss the reunification of the Greek and Latin Churches. Despite papal support the crusade was a lost cause; few of Europe's rulers were disposed to spend their resources on help for Constantinople or the Holy Land. To the Italians, however, their own collective security was becoming a vital matter. Thus it is that at Lodi, a year after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks (and two years after Savonarola was born), we begin to see a glimmer of political community, of a sense of common interests and, with the formation of the Italic League, of the means for promoting them.

To Renaissance Italians, proud of their achievement as the proven heirs of ancient Latinitas and civilitas, the people who lived beyond the Alps were, as they had been to the Romans, barbari. Neither this sense of national cultural superiority nor the community spirit of Lodi had been enough to drive the barbarians from the gate in 1494; but, even while Charles was in Naples, Pope Alexander VI was forming his Holy Alliance to drive the French out in the name of Italian liberty and winning the adherence of Milan and Venice. At Fornovo, on the Taro River, the troops of the Holy League showed they were willing to shed blood for the national cause.

The chief obstacle to maintaining a solid Italian front was Florence. No combination of Papal warnings and Milanese blandishments could budge the Florentines from their conviction that they must restore the old Guelf alliance with the French. By the time Charles VIII had gone on his way, Savonarola's expanding prophetic vision linked the city and the king with a double bond of providential design and material interest. Charles, the New Cyrus, would return to initiate the New Era. Florence was the New Jerusalem and would be 'richer, more glorious, more powerful than ever'. And since no prophet believing God to be indifferent to the loss of Pisa could hope to gain a hearing in Florence, Savonarola promised that Pisa, now protected by the Venetians, would be recovered with the king's help. But this gave the members of the Holy League the mistaken impression that the French alliance was an obsession exclusive to Savonarola and therefore that he was the chief, indeed practically the only, obstacle to winning Florence over to their side. To Alexander VI the friar was the thorn in the flesh that had to be removed.

Meanwhile Savonarola and his confederates laboured to build the puritan New Jerusalem. Penitence and reform were their watchwords. Their targets were gamblers, drunkards, immodest women, pederasts, profaners of holy days, and the tiepidi, those who were lukewarm in their faith. Feast-day racing and carnival licentiousness were banned or transformed into pious processions; indecent books, pictures, figurines and jewellery were heaped into great public bonfires of vanities. The city, as one historian has written, became 'a vast monastery'. It also became a battleground: in the streets, between rival gangs of boys for and against Savonarola's ascetic regime; in the pulpits, between supporters and attackers of the friar's supernatural mission; in the Palaces of the Signoria, between Frateschi, the friar's party, and Arrabbiati, the 'mad dogs' who grew increasingly rabid in their efforts to counter the friar's influence and rid the city of him. When the Frateschi were in the majority anyone who spoke ill of Savonarola publicly could expect imprisonment and torture. When the government was in the hands of the Arrabbiati they pressed Savonarola to submit to the pope, whose every effort to bring him down, including excommunication, he managed to frustrate for many months.

He was brought down at last in April 1498. To prove that Savonarola was an imposter a Franciscan critic half-heartedly proposed a trial by fire, that most medieval of ordeals. To everyone's amazement (and the great dismay of the prophet himself) Savonarola's lieutenant Fra Domenico da Pescia undertook to walk through the fire on his idol's behalf. Once the challenge had been launched and accepted no one felt able to back out, the cooler heads (including Savonarola's) privately counted on a last-minute failure of nerve on the other side. On the appointed day, April 8th, the reluctant protagonists and their associates filed into the Piazza della Signoria jammed with thousands of spectators who had come to see a miracle. The crowd's patience was strained by endless liturgical preliminaries and procedural wrangles (was it sacrilege to carry the consecrated Host in the fire? Were either of the champions fortified with amulets or magical charms?) Hours went by, a sudden rainstorm seemed to pronounce God's displeasure with the proceedings. At last an exasperated Signoria ordered the trial cancelled and the spectators dispersed.

Whatever the facts of the matter, it was Savonarola who, contrary to his own expectations, had to bear the onus of blame for the aborted spectacle since it was he who had claimed divine inspiration. Of course, the crowd's impatience for a judgement by God shows how Florence had begun to lose confidence in its prophet. Hope for the return of Charles VIII had been growing fainter, and all efforts to reconquer Pisa had failed. With the Venetians in Pisa, grain imports dropped off, the price of bread soared, and there was hunger in Florence. The pope was threatening Florence with an interdict which would have disrupted trade, bringing further misery. All this, together with recurring plague and public disorder conspired to mock Savonarola's prophetic assurance that Florence would be richer, more powerful, and more glorious than ever.

The day after the cancelled ordeal a mob stormed the monastery of San Marco and the Signoria intervened, ordering the arrest of Savonarola and his chief accomplices. Shackled and tortured over a period of six weeks, his great enterprise in ruins, Savonarola confessed that he had invented his visions and had falsely claimed divine inspiration for his prophecies.

When his signed statement was read out in the great hall of the Consiglio Maggiore which he himself had persuaded the government to build, many who had continued to believe in him now concluded that they had been duped. On May 23rd, Savonarola, and his two lieutenants, Fra Domenico, and Fra Silvestro Maruffi, were hung and burned almost on the very spot where the miracle of the ordeal had failed to take place.

The fall of Savonarola removed the immediate threat of a papal interdict. Other than frustrating puritanical impulses and dimming (but not extinguishing) millenarian expectations, little changed in Florence. The city remained loyal to the French alliance and to its *governo popolare*. The pope had overestimated Savonarola's importance in shaping Florentine foreign policy, which followed the dictates of civic interest as much or more than the commands of the prophet, just as his political enemies had exaggerated his importance as the mainstay of the popular republic.

What made a difference to Florence, and to all Italy, was the influx of foreign armies that followed the invasion of Charles VIII in 1494. Europe was re-covering from a long period of economic depression and political confusion and once more ambitious kings looked south to the garden of Italy. Once Charles VIII breached the wall, armies of Swiss, Germans, and Spaniards followed. The French, under Louis XII had returned in 1499 and Italy again became a battleground. French Valois faced German and Spanish Habsburgs in a protracted struggle which ended with the complete victory of the Habsburgs in 1559. Italy came under the domination of Philip II of Spain who imposed his zealous form of Catholic orthodoxy and rigid absolutism. Most of the Italian states lost either their independence or their republican regimes, or both. In Florence the Medici had been restored in 1512 by Spanish troops and again by an Imperial army in 1530, after another republican revolt fired by Savonarolan-style millenarianism. Under the watchful eye of the Spaniards Florence now became a Medici principality and a few years later the capital of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

In 1513, Machiavelli ended *The Prince* with an appeal for a leader who would liberate Italy from the barbarians. The Italians, he thought, had long ago lost their civic virtue and their military spirit, but if a *novus dux* skilled in politics and the art of war would unite the Italians against the invaders he might yet save his country. No such prince appeared, and by the time Machiavelli died, in 1527, the year of the Sack of Rome by Imperial troops, the handwriting was on the wall. We are now better placed to understand Machiavelli's dismissal of unarmed prophets. In their mortal crisis the Italians needed power, he thought, not paternosters. We might respond that it was not Savonarola's lack of arms but his inability to deliver on his prophecies that led to his downfall in Florence. But there is a profounder issue between Savonarola and Machiavelli and here we must agree with the author of *The Prince*: what the Italians needed in 1494 was a sense of their common purpose against foreign invaders, a vision of political unity, not a vision of Florence as the New Jerusalem. In this sense Machiavelli, who was able to rise above his own intense Florentine patriotism ('I love my country [Florence] more than I love my soul', he said), was more a prophet for the times than Savonarola, who was trapped, partly by his friar's mentality, partly by his identification with Florentine patriotism, in a puritanical and chauvinistic millenarianism.

Someone is bound to ask whether concerted political action was a real option for the Italians in the critical years 1494-1527. In the long view Alexander VI was surely right in constructing a Holy League against the French, and the Florentines surely wrong in refusing to join it; but such was the confusion of ends and the tentativeness of the Italian national perspective that Alexander called upon another foreign ruler, the Emperor Maximilian, to help him against the French, and a few years later Pope Julius II, despite his fervent slogan 'Out with the barbarians!', brought in the Spaniards. And suppose Machiavelli's *novus dux* had arisen to unite the Italians, could they have defended themselves against the might of the Habsburgs?

In short, was this one of those 'lost moments of history' of which H.R. Trevor-Roper, has written so engagingly (*The New York Review of Books*, October 27th 1988)? Perhaps not, the odds being so great, although it is just possible that the united Italians, fighting on their own soil with formidable combined resources of money, arms, manpower and political skills, could

have mounted a punishing defence of their peninsular integrity. But if they had been able to do this, left to themselves, what sort of Italy would they have been likely to construct? Here we may close by giving the last word to Savonarola. Through the clouds of apocalyptic mystification that make him such an unlikely prophet of the times ('the most unsuitable man who could be found for the reorganisation of the state', thought Burckhardt), Savonarola perceived, however imperfectly, what the oligarchs and despots of the Renaissance city-state (or for that matter, the absolute monarchs beyond the Alps) would not see, namely that a state which disenfranchised and ignored the needs of most of the people who lived and laboured under it was a polity without justice, without moral foundation.

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