

# Landmarks of a Life

Dante's face currently appears on the Italian 2-Euro coin, reflecting his dual European and national citizenship. As a medieval European intellectual, he used the international language of that community, Latin, for much of his work. Yet most of his poetry, including the *Commedia*, was written in what Boccaccio called 'our Florentine dialect' (*Trattatello* 1, para. 190–1). His voice thus carries a pronounced local accent.

The first section of this guide locates Dante's life and work mostly in the Italian places that he knew and mentioned, or where the evidence of surviving records puts him. It begins with some features of Florence, where the first 36 years of his life were spent (1265–1301). It then moves to the places of his exile, such as Verona, several regions of Tuscany, and Ravenna (where he died in 1321).

In the chronology of a life lived six centuries ago a number of uncertainties remain. We can, however, begin to place Dante's works and journeys in relation to some specific landmarks – many of them still recognizable. The first of these is the Baptistery in Florence, where Dante was given his name and where, near the end of his life and work, he hoped to return and receive the poet's crown (*Par.* 25. 1–9).

*An asterisk (\*) indicates my first reference in this section to works that are particularly recommended for further reading.*



# From the Baptistery to the Ponte Vecchio

## The sheepfold of St John and the city of Mars

The Baptistery of St John beside the Duomo was where Dante received his name. Already six or seven centuries old at the time of Dante's birth, it also stands out as a landmark in paintings of the later medieval period. A fresco of 1342 and several manuscript illustrations of the fourteenth century show its familiar octagonal shape – clad in white and green marble, surmounted by a pyramid of white and crowned by a lantern – standing out among the walls and towers of the city. Dedicated to St John the Baptist, the patron saint of Florence, it had originally served as the city's cathedral, and at the time of Dante's birth (between 14 May and 13 June 1265), it was the place where, on Easter Saturday (or the eve of Whit Sunday), every Florentine born during the previous year was baptized.

Florence's own origins, its civic pride and its urban myths were bound up with the Baptistery. Dante's contemporary, the chronicler Giovanni Villani, believed that the site in pagan times had been the temple of the Roman god Mars; and the granite columns of its interior are from a Roman structure (Villani 2). Villani also records a number of mementoes of Florence's early political triumphs being placed within or around the 'Duomo of St John'; and he notes how, in 1248, the building was miraculously preserved when a 120-metre tower that was about to collapse on it 'twisted away and fell straight along the piazza' (Villani 1906: 145).

Adornment of this ancient structure at the physical and emotional core of the city continued over the centuries. The marble cladding from Prato had been put on during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the white pyramidal roof is probably of the thirteenth century. Also of the thirteenth



*Plate 1* Mosaics in the vault of the Baptistery at Florence, c.1271? © 1998. Photo SCALA, Florence.

century are the mosaics above the altar (perhaps completed around 1225–8). Inside the cupola (plate 1) is a much larger decorative project, possibly dating from around 1271. Five of the eight triangular faces of the cupola are occupied by horizontal bands of narrative: scenes from Genesis and the lives of Joseph, Christ and John the Baptist. Dominating the whole composition, however, is the scene of the Last Judgement, taking up the three faces of the cupola above the altar and centred upon the 8-metre-high figure of Christ in majesty.

The mosaics in the cupola combine awesome unity of design with a kaleidoscopic profusion of colour and detail. As a new addition to the Baptistery in Dante's time, they must have seemed exceptionally impressive; and it has been claimed that they 'were in Dante's boyhood and youth the most notable works of modern art in Florence' (Wilkins 1983: 145). The *Commedia's* later imagining of Hell and Heaven may well have been influenced by the demonic figures in the Last Judgement mosaic or by the 'rose' of patriarchs and prophets on the altar arch; and these images with their gold background

and brilliant colouring were indisputably landmarks in the visual culture of his city.

The Baptistery, John the Baptist and his predecessor Mars are all powerful presences in the *Commedia*. Looking at the holes in the grey rock of Hell where the bodies of corrupt popes are lodged, the pilgrim of *Inferno* is reminded of the structure of the font in his ‘beautiful [Baptistry of] St John’ and of an event in his own life that was connected with it (*Inf.* 19. 16–21). Dante connects the building with his family and its past, too, when, in Paradise, his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, mentions having received his name and the Christian faith ‘in your ancient Baptistery’ (*Par.* 15. 134). And near the end of the whole journey and the poem the exiled narrator still hopes to ‘return as poet’ to the ‘sheepfold’ of Florence and receive the laurel crown ‘at the very font of my baptism’ (*Par.* 25. 5–9).

In the *Commedia*, Florence’s patron saint is several times identified as St John the Baptist. Again in his encounter with his Florentine ancestor in Paradise, Dante asks Cacciaguida to describe the ‘sheepfold of St John’ as it was when he was alive (*Par.* 16. 25). One of the earlier Florentines in the poem identifies himself only as a citizen of ‘the city that chose the Baptist in lieu of its former patron [Mars], who, because of that, will always torment it in his own way [i.e., through war and internal conflict]’ (*Inf.* 13. 143–4).

For Dante and his Florentine contemporaries, the opposition between Mars and John the Baptist – the pagan god of war and the prophet and baptizer of Christ – was reflected in their city’s early history and its subsequent conflicts. According to Villani, the marble statue of Mars ‘as an armed knight upon a horse’ had stood upon a column in the centre of this temple; and when Florentines adopted Christianity their respect for their old patron was so great that they removed him to a place of honour on the Ponte Vecchio (Villani 2.5). For some, this statue (possibly of a barbarian king) represented the baleful influence of Mars upon the city and its citizens; and Dante’s ancestor, Cacciaguida, locates the source of Florence’s troubles in the sacrifices it continued to offer to this ‘mutilated stone that guards the bridge’ (*Par.* 16. 145–7).

### Childhood, youth, gang warfare

In the early twelfth century, when Dante’s great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida is said to have lived, Florence’s population probably numbered no more than 20,000. The city was then enclosed by its original Roman

rectangle of walls, and its southern and northern limits were marked by the statue of Mars on the Ponte Vecchio, and the Baptistery (*Par.* 16. 47). At the time of Dante's birth in 1265, however, there may have been about 50,000 inhabitants; a second circle of walls had been built in 1173 and extended across the river in 1258; and three more bridges spanned the Arno. By his death in 1321 Florence was one of the largest cities in Europe, with a population of perhaps 100,000 and a huge third circuit of walls (begun in 1284 and completed in 1334), enclosing six square kilometres of space. As Cacciaguida complains in *Paradiso* 16, much of this urban growth between his time and Dante's was due to incomers from the surrounding countryside. These new urban immigrants sought and contributed to Florence's increasing prosperity, which was based upon the produce of the countryside, long-distance trade in high-value goods, local industry (especially the manufacture of woollen cloth), banking and finance (\*Hyde 1973: 152–8).

On several occasions in the *Commedia* Dante claims that his family was of noble rank and that they were of old Roman stock (*Par.* 16. 1–9; *Inf.* 15. 73–8). Whether or not this was the case, it did not prevent his five uncles and his father from actively engaging in business. It is even thought that his father, Alaghiero di Bellincione (c.1210–81/3), may have been a money-lender – which might account for the particularly dim view Dante takes of usury in the *Commedia* and elsewhere. Little else is known about his parents. His mother's name was Bella and she died a few years after his birth (between 1270 and 1273). His father remarried (some time between 1275 and 1278), and Dante grew up with three siblings: two brothers and a sister. The family home was in the south-east of the old city, in a *sestiere* (sixth division) named after one of the gates, the Porta San Piero, and it was here that, the poet was born.

A recent Italian writer on Dante has described him as the sort of person 'that one cannot imagine ever having been a child' (Dossena 1995: 127). In his work, however, Dante seems to show considerable interest in childhood. His early collection of love-poems and commentary, *La vita nuova* ('The New Life', probably completed 1294) describes how he saw for the first time, at the age of eight, 'the glorious mistress of my mind whom many called Beatrice' (*VN* ch. 1). Later, in the *Commedia*, his persona reverts a number of times to a childish state, including when he meets Beatrice again in the Earthly Paradise and she speaks to him as severely 'as a mother to a child' (*Purg.* 30. 79; compare *Par.* 1. 101–2).

There were various models in the Middle Ages for describing the stages of life (three, four, seven, or twelve) from childhood to old age. In the

fourth treatise of his philosophical commentary, *Il convivio* ('The Banquet', 1304–7), Dante explicitly follows the four-stage scheme propounded by the scholastic philosopher Albertus Magnus in the early thirteenth century. Here the period of *adolescenzia* ('growing up') is said to occupy the first 25 years of life and is associated with the qualities of the sanguine 'humour' or temperament (especially heat and moisture) and with the season of spring (*Conv.* 4. 23. 13). Following this was the period of *gioventute* ('maturity') lasting 20 years and including the 'mid-point' of life (the age of 35), at which point, Dante says, he undertook the journey described in the *Commedia* (*Inf.* 1. 1).

The behaviour of male youth – especially those of noble families – in medieval Italian towns was a concern of city fathers, preachers and chroniclers; and it has also attracted attention from some modern historians (Crouzet-Pavan 1997: 173–221). Noble youths aspired to knighthood and status, and one way to achieve these was through participation in the military campaigns of the city-state. It is likely that Dante aged 24 took part as a cavalryman in Florence's victory against Arezzo in the battle of Campaldino in the upper valley of the Casentino (11 June 1289) and that a few months later he also witnessed the surrender of the garrison at Caprona (near Pisa) to the combined forces of Florence and Lucca. Both events are referred to at points in the *Commedia* (*Purg.* 5. 91–129; *Inf.* 21. 94–6).

Another way to achieve credibility in the streets, however, was through joining up with a gang of those who – as one of Dante's contemporaries put it – 'would ride around together' (\*Compagni 1986: 25). Although youths were not themselves the root cause of the factional competition that was endemic to the social fabric of cities such as Florence, nevertheless 'the youth culture contributed to the violent form taken by that competition' (Lansing 1991: 186). Another contemporary chronicler, Dino Compagni, gives some vivid examples of youthful individuals and groups stirring up trouble and precipitating feuds within the city (Compagni 1986: 6, 23, 25; \*Dean 2000: 183).

Dante was well acquainted with such examples and tendencies, as can be seen in his portrayal of turbulent Florentine figures like Filippo Argenti and Mosca dei Lamberti during his journey through Hell. He shows Filippo as a 'quarrelsome Florentine spirit' locked in a vicious brawl (*Inf.* 8. 31–63). Further down, in the eighth circle of Hell, among the mutilated souls of those who caused conflict, Dante's Mosca in a gesture of despair brandishes above his head the stumps of his wrists, from which blood runs down upon his face (*Inf.* 28. 103–11). Mosca is portrayed by several Florentine

chroniclers as the moving spirit behind a dramatic family vendetta. In 1215, says Villani, a nobleman called Buondelmonte jilted a woman of the Amidei clan in favour of a wife from the house of the Donati. When the Amidei kinsmen met to decide how to deal with this affront, Mosca advised that ‘a thing properly done has an end’ (*Inf.* 28. 107). Hence, on the morning of Easter Sunday, Buondelmonte, as he rode all in white across the Ponte Vecchio, was set upon by a group including Mosca and stabbed to death at the foot of the statue of Mars (Villani 6. 38; Villani 1906: 121–2).

This ‘sacrifice to Mars’, the city’s pagan patron, was for Dante, Villani and other Florentines a mythic event which marked the beginning of the city’s factional conflicts (*Par.* 16. 136–47; Quinones 1994: 16–21). It also reflects the significant part played by youthful members of noble families in precipitating and pursuing such conflict. Mosca (who was born near the end of the twelfth century) would have been a young man at the time when he took a leading role in the murder of 1215; and Dante later on in the century would have been well aware of how, in a city where life was lived so much in the open, violence and vendetta could escalate from youthful brawls at public events such as weddings and funerals (Lansing 1991: 188).

Among Dante’s own youthful circle of friends there are some elements of violence too. In his twenties he exchanged a sequence of harshly insulting sonnets with his wife’s cousin, Forese Donati. The poet Guido Cavalcanti, whom the young Dante called his ‘foremost friend’ in the *Vita nuova*, was later exiled as a consequence of factional conflict and was described by Villani as ‘too sensitive and passionate’ (Villani 1906: 331). Dino Compagni describes Guido in the 1290s as ‘a noble youth’ (although he would have been at least in his thirties by then), ‘generous and bold but haughty and private’; and he places this impetuous figure on several occasions at the forefront of the city’s ‘discord’ (Compagni 1986: 23 and 26).

Yet Florence was not only the domain of Mars, of factions and youthful passions. It was also the city of the Baptist, of religion and learning, to which laymen such as Dante gained access from an early age.



# Learning in Florence

## Early education (or, why grammar is like the Moon)

Celebrating the ‘size, condition and magnificence of the state of Florence’ during the late 1330s, Villani makes several claims about the educational standards that had been reached by that time. He says that out of a population of around 90,000, between eight and ten thousand boys and girls were then learning to read; around a thousand to twelve hundred boys were studying basic commercial arithmetic in six schools; and five hundred and fifty to six hundred pupils learning Latin grammar and logic in four big schools (Villani 12. 94). Given their political and rhetorical context, these figures may need to be taken with quite a large pinch of salt. But they do reflect the value that was being attached to early education around Dante’s time and the range of subjects that were being taught (Grendler 1989: 71–4; Gehl 1993: 24–6).

Basic reading would have been taught to many Florentine children of both sexes; and commercial arithmetic (the *abbaco*) would have been essential to those who were aiming to enter the city’s flourishing business community. Latin grammar was the next essential skill or ‘art’ for anyone who wanted to reach high administrative office or participate in the scholastic culture of the time; and Dante aspired to do both. As he shows in his review of the fields of learning in part 2 of the *Convivio*, grammar was the first step in the command of the seven basic skills or ‘liberal arts’ (*Conv.* 2. 13. 7–9). The others were logic, rhetoric, arithmetic, music, geometry and astrology/astronomy; and these could lead on to the higher fields of learning, namely physics, metaphysics and theology. To describe this hierarchy of subjects, Dante uses a comparison with the Ptolemaic universe of his time: a set of

planetary spheres with the Earth at their centre. Within this medieval model the sphere of the Moon was the nearest to the Earth, and beyond the concentric spheres of the planets and the ‘fixed stars’ lay the Empyrean, the ‘highest Heaven’ (*Conv.* 2. 14–15; and diagram 3, below, p. 125).

So why, for Dante, was grammar like the Moon? Because, he argues, of its density – the infinitude of words especially – and the constant variation over time of words, forms and constructions (*Conv.* 2. 13. 10). The other, less poetic reason was that grammar (like the Moon as the next sphere to the Earth in the medieval cosmic system) was the initial stage in the student’s ascent through the universe of knowledge. The metaphor of the entry or ‘gateway’ (Latin *ianua*) also appears in the basic grammar-book that was used in Florentine schools. The *Donadello*, as it came to be called, got its name from the fourth-century Latin grammarian Donatus, whom Dante in *Paradiso* credits with ‘composing the first “art”’ and places even higher than grammar’s sphere of the Moon, in the circle of the Sun (*Par.* 12. 137–8). This introduction speaks for itself in its ‘Prologue’: ‘I am the door for the ignorant desiring the first art, without me no one will become truly skilled’ (Gehl 1993: 88).

‘Moral improvement’ was intrinsic to the teaching of grammar, and this aim was reflected in the selection of basic texts for reading. Such texts included the *Distichs* – a sequence of moralistic two-liners attributed to the Elder Cato, whose descendant Dante places in a didactic role as the guardian of Purgatory; and the medieval Latin version of Aesop’s *Fables*. Dante’s debt to his basic schoolbooks – and his assumption of his audience’s familiarity with them – is reflected in his direct references and allusions to the repertoire of pungent moral examples in the medieval *Fables*, which were being and were to be translated into the European vernaculars (*Conv.* 4. 30. 4; *Inf.* 18. 133–5, 23. 4–6). He also progressed to Latin texts for more advanced students of grammar, such as Boethius, Cicero and Virgil (below, pp. 67–72). The next stage of his education was provided by the friars in what he calls ‘the schools of the religious’.

### The friars in Florence

Dante’s philosophical encyclopedia, *Il convivio*, was written in the early years of his exile, and it reflects amongst other things the extent of his early education and intellectual interests. In the second part of the work – at the point where he is about to launch into an allegorical interpretation of one of his own poems – he speaks of the resources which helped him during the 1290s

to survive after the death of Beatrice (*VN* chs. 29–31; *Conv.* 2. 12). Here he refers to his reading of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and Cicero's *On Friendship*; to his necessary command of Latin grammar; and to the intellectual quest that led him to discover other authors and their 'noble lady' (philosophy), who was to be found in 'the schools of the religious' (*Conv.* 2. 12. 7).

By 'the religious' (*li religiosi*) Dante means the orders of friars, and especially the Franciscans and Dominicans. In the religious and intellectual life of his time the orders of friars were a powerful presence. Outside Florence's twelfth-century walls, where many of the immigrants to the city lived, their convents and barn-like churches – designed as auditoriums for preaching – represented, here as elsewhere, 'the church's response to the challenge of town growth' (\*Murray 1972: 86). By Dante's time, convents and churches had been founded by seven of the orders of friars. The Franciscans (first authorized by the papacy in 1209) had arrived in the city in 1218. They had occupied the church of Santa Croce, to the south-east of the old walls of Florence, by 1228 and had begun a substantial new building programme there during Dante's lifetime. On the opposite side of the old centre – to the north-west – the Dominicans (whose rule had been formally recognized in 1216) had been established on the site of Santa Maria Novella since 1221, and the building of their church (begun in 1246) was completed in the mid-fourteenth century.

From these strategic positions, on opposite sides of the old city centre, both Dominicans and Franciscans wielded considerable power and influence. The Dominicans in particular recruited from the city's old aristocratic families; from the 1220s onwards they were active in combating heresy; and a few years after Dante's death they gained the distinction of being the first censors of the *Commedia* (below, p. 228). Support for the Franciscans is reflected in the frequency with which they are named as witnesses, executors and beneficiaries of wills. Following the Dominicans, they took over the office of inquisitor in the later thirteenth century; and they were also involved as advisors and negotiators in city politics (Lesnick 1989: 54–6, 60–2).

The impact of the friars upon the life of the urban laity is also evident from the growth of groups that were formally or informally associated with them. Their 'tertiaries' or third orders led a partly religious, partly secular life; and later in the fourteenth century it was even claimed that Dante himself had been a Franciscan novice (Buti 1858–62: 1. 438–9). There is no evidence for this, but the claim reflects the closeness of the mendicants to the community and the attractiveness of their way of life to the literate

laity. During the later thirteenth century such closeness was particularly apparent in the growth of the Florentine ‘confraternities’ (societies of lay penitents and devotees associated with the religious orders). Groups of pious adherents (both men and women) even lived in the areas around the friars’ convents (\*Holmes 1986: 61–2). As well as regulating the spiritual lives of their adherents, the friars also had a wider mission to the urban community of Dante’s Florence. Through preaching, religious instruction and the circulation of devotional texts in the vernacular, they responded to the increasing demand of the laity for involvement in the learning and life of the church.

### **Intellectual life: friars and the laity**

By claiming that he frequented the schools of the religious soon after the death of Beatrice, Dante places his further education during his twenties, some time between 1291 and 1294–5. This includes the period when he was preparing the book of and commentary on his early love-poems, the *Vita nuova*, and precedes the years of his involvement in civic politics which led to his exile in 1301–2. If he had wished to study law in preparation for an administrative career, he could have found other schools in Florence or gone further afield to Bologna or Arezzo (\*Davis 1984: 138–9). But what could he have found to support his interests in Boethius, Cicero and philosophy?

Both the Franciscans and the Dominicans had recognized early on the importance of universities for recruitment and training, and their *studia* (academic centres) were by Dante’s time well established in cities such as Oxford and Paris (Lawrence 1994: 127–34). Florence, despite its prosperity, did not attempt to set up a university until the following century. Meanwhile, the cutting edge of intellectual life remained the friars’ convents; and it is known that the Franciscan *studium* at Santa Croce and the Dominican one at Santa Maria Novella each ranked fairly high in its order’s educational hierarchy (Davis 1984: 151, 155–6).

The two major orders of friars had in the course of the thirteenth century developed distinctive philosophical and theological traditions, associated with their major scholastic thinkers: the Dominican Thomas Aquinas and the Franciscan Bonaventura, whose primacy Dante acknowledges in cantos 10–13 of *Paradiso* (below, pp. 88 and 90–1). Such traditions would have been accessible to Dante at Santa Maria Novella and Santa Croce. The friars were committed to nurturing the lay community’s devotion through their

tertiary orders and confraternities as well as through public preaching and involvement in the city's affairs. Their more advanced intellectual resources would also have been available to some extent; and laymen like Dante would have been able to attend some of the lectures and disputations in the 'schools of the religious' (Davis 1984: 158–9).

The best-known lecturers at the friars' *studia* in Florence during the late thirteenth century were developing ideas with political themes and consequences. At Santa Croce during the late 1280s the prominent figures were Petrus Iohannis Olivi and Ubertino of Casale, who were to become the leading exponents of radical ideas on Franciscan poverty; whilst among the Dominicans at Santa Maria Novella around the turn of the century were theorists concerned with the politics of government and the city-state: Remigio de' Girolami and Ptolemy of Lucca (Holmes 1986: 81–5; and below, pp. 100–1). And political issues in the Florence of Dante's time were about to become increasingly urgent and divisive.

# From Florence to San Godenzo

## Division and conflict in Tuscany and Florence

Part of Dante's early life involved direct experience of warfare; and being a member of his city's knightly class he participated in its military ventures against opponents in Tuscany. He may have been involved in the Florentine expedition supporting the Sienese against Arezzo in the autumn of 1285; and we know that, at the age of 24, he saw action in both the eastern and western parts of the province: at Campaldino, near Arezzo; and at Caprona, near Pisa (16 August 1289).

Memories of these actions and of warfare in general recur in Dante's writing. Campaldino was a dramatic battle in which the Aretine cavalry initially overran the Florentines and their allies from Bologna, Lucca and Pistoia, but were subsequently cut off from their infantry and routed. In a lost letter, quoted by the Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni in 1436 (in his *Life of Dante*), Dante describes the conflict as one 'in which I found myself, no longer a youth, at war, where I experienced great fear and eventually very great exultation, as a result of the varying fortunes of that battle' (Bruni 1996: 542). He was later to re-imagine the battleground of Campaldino as the setting for a more intense spiritual drama (*Purg.* 5. 91–129). Caprona was a castle on the southern slope of Monte Pisano, which since the spring of 1289 had been disputed between Pisan forces led by Guido da Montefeltro and a group of Pisan exiles with the support of Lucca and Florence. On 16 August it was recaptured with the help of four hundred Florentine knights, amongst whom was Dante; and the poet was later to compare the feelings of the surrendering Pisans to those of his own persona, facing a group of devils in Hell (*Inf.* 21. 91–6). Along with these acknowledged landmarks of conflict, Dante also incorporates other recollections of war into

his writing. In the otherworlds of the *Commedia* he compares movements of groups to, for example, cavalry and infantry manoeuvring in response to given signals (*Inf.* 22. 1–11); knights heading a charge (*Purg.* 24. 94–7); and troops following a banner (*Purg.* 32. 19–24).

Amongst the Florentine cavalry and their allies on that stormy June day at Campaldino were two figures who, during the following decade, would be pitted against each other as leaders of opposing factions in the internal conflict that would beset Florence itself and lead to, amongst other things, Dante's own exile. These two were Corso Donati and Vieri de' Cerchi; and their exploits are mentioned in Compagni's account of the battle (Compagni 1986: 12–13). What, then, led to this eventual conflict? How did it relate to wider political interests and divisions within Tuscany and the Italian peninsula? And what bearing did it have on Dante's political career?

### Guelfs and Ghibellines

Terms used to describe the parties involved seem abstruse and often confuse rather than explain the issues. 'Guelf' (or 'Guelph') and 'Ghibelline' are names in currency from the early thirteenth century, and they originated in conflicts between German princes. In Italy they came to be attached to those amongst the various city-states who broadly favoured either the papacy or the empire, both of which directly controlled territory in the peninsula during the first half of the century. Following the death of Emperor Frederick II in 1250 and the subsequent extinction of his successors' claim to rule in southern Italy (by 1266), the terms 'Guelf' and 'Ghibelline' then 'take on a life of their own', denoting not organized parties under the direct control of pope or emperor, but rather 'a loose chain of local factions, co-operating up to a point under a convenient banner' (Hyde 1973: 132, 139–40). Their membership may have had some connection to social class, and 'while Guelphism attracted the solid *popolani* [mercantile groups including some aristocrats] of the average trading town, Ghibellinism was upheld in the main by inarticulate traditionalists and a handful of sophisticated intellectuals' (Hyde 1973: 141). It was with that latter handful that Dante would come to be associated.

By the 1290s, when Dante was moving towards a political career, 'Ghibellinism was a dead issue in Florence and everyone (or at least anyone who wanted any role in politics) was a Guelf' (\*Najemy 1993: 80). Indeed, the only episode during the later thirteenth century when the Ghibellines held power in Florence (1260–66) was as a direct consequence of the most

catastrophic defeat in the city's history: the battle of Montaperti near Siena (4 September 1260), where the city's forces were overcome by a combination of the Sienese, imperial German forces, and Florentine Ghibellines who had been in exile since their attempt to take over the government in 1258. The large number of casualties at Montaperti meant that 'there was no Florentine household, small or large, without a member killed or taken prisoner' (Villani 7. 79; Lucchesi 1997: 91, n. 20), and the city was even said to have been faced with the threat of complete destruction (Villani 7. 81). Dante's uncle, Brunetto Alighieri, took part in the campaign; and nearly half a century later the memory of defeat was still raw, as several of the encounters in the *Inferno* clearly show (*Inf.* 10. 85–93, 32. 79–111).

When the Guelfs returned to Florence (after the defeat of the imperial cause in 1266) they were to dominate the city in one way or another for the rest of the century, first as its ruling council and then as a powerful corporation, the *parte Guelfa*. From September 1282, the ascendancy of what was called the *popolo* ('people') in Florence and other Italian cities involved the increasing participation in government of the wealthy guilds which 'represented a proportion of the inhabitants – the mass of the poor and some less esteemed trades which were not allowed to form autonomous guilds were strictly excluded' (Hyde 1973: 111–18). It thus led to a very limited form of 'democracy' which sought both to limit the trouble-making capacity of the old noble families (the *magnati*) and to develop a stable form of urban government under a *podestà* (head of the commune, appointed from outside); a *capitano del popolo* (responsible for public order); and first six, then seven 'priors', chosen from amongst the seven major and five middle guilds to act as effective rulers of the city.

This kind of governmental structure worked in favour of the new wealthy classes and against the old oligarchy, especially under the dictatorship of Giano della Bella, himself a member of an old family (*Par.* 16. 130–1). Giano took power with the support of the middle and lesser guilds from February 1293 and initiated a number of measures to limit the power and the violence of the 'magnates'. The apparent triumph of these *popolani* was short-lived, although the elective system of government remained in place and the lasting effect of their measures was that 'magnates, the violent nobles and their families were marked with a deep stigma' (\*Larner 1980: 121–2). Giano della Bella was ousted by the magnates in March 1295 and sent into exile (Villani 9. 8).

It was during and just before the time of Giano's 'popular' government (1293–5) that Dante was extending his education at the schools of the friars



and organizing his love-lyrics to Beatrice (who had died in June 1290) into the book he called *La vita nuova* ('The New Life'). A number of Dante's aristocratic friendships can be dated to this period: with the poet and Guelf nobleman Guido Cavalcanti (*Inf.* 10. 52–63; *Purg.* 11. 97–8); with the French Angevin prince Charles Martel (*Par.* 8. 31–148), who visited Florence in March 1294; and with Forese Donati (*Purg.* 23. 40–24. 99), into whose family Dante had married and with whom he exchanged a group of six sonnets (c.1293–6).

In one of the sonnets addressed to Forese Donati, Dante caricatures his friend as a glutton and spendthrift, heading for the debtors' prison or the thieves' gallows – a 'scar-faced character' who strikes fear and outrage into the prosperous, purse-bearing citizens. This portrait forms an apt prelude to the tensions and conflicts that dominated the second half of the 1290s and accompanied the poet's political career up to and beyond his exile in 1301/2. By this time, after the fall of Giano della Bella (1295), control of the city had reverted to the Guelf nobility and upper guilds; and they subsequently proceeded to fall out among themselves.

### Blacks and Whites

Two more problematic party names derived from this falling out: the 'Black' and the 'White' Guelfs. Originally, from 1286, these terms had been used by quarrelling members of the Cancellieri family in the neighbouring Tuscan city of Pistoia. The feud spread to the whole city and was then taken up by rival factions in Florence: the Blacks, headed by Corso Donati, 'a knight of great spirit', and the Whites, led by Vieri dei Cerchi, 'a very good-looking man but not very astute or articulate' (Compagni 1986: 22–3). The ensuing conflict in Florence was not one between 'old' and 'new' money, or between nobility and populace. Both Corso Donati and Vieri dei Cerchi had been, like Dante, among the Florentine cavalry at Campaldino in 1289; and the issue in Florence seems rather to have been what Compagni called 'competition for public office' between members of a broadly similar ruling class (Compagni 1986: 22, 38, 42). Eventually their choice of allies differentiated them more significantly: the Blacks, as will be seen, throwing in their lot with Pope Boniface VIII, and the Whites taking a more independent line and a more lenient attitude towards the Ghibellines (\*Keen 2003: 35). But in the view of contemporaries much of the conflict appears to have been conducted at the level of the street brawls that tended to involve the younger generations of major families (above, pp. 7–8). Compagni describes the

involvement of one of Dante's friends, Guido Cavalcanti, in an episode of escalating violence between the factions, following a scuffle at a funeral in December 1296, and concludes sombrely that 'as a result of this incident, the enmities began to spread' (Compagni 1986: 23).

### 'Ill-fated activities': Dante, the pope and Florentine politics

As the conflict developed, Dante's own political career got under way; and his participation in public discussion of such matters as elections of the priors and legislation against the magnates is documented in 1295 and 1296. Advancement in such a career depended upon membership of one of the seven major guilds (*arti maggiori*), and accordingly in the records of the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries for 1297 there is listed the name of 'Dante d'Aldighieri degli Aldighieri, poeta fiorentino'. His recognition as poet here is worth noticing: his work by this time included the love-poems of the *Vita nuova* and the satirical sonnets to Forese Donati, together with some poems to the *donna pietra* ('Lady of Stone') and others of a more philosophical nature that would eventually feature in his encyclopedic *Convivio*. Perhaps also the commitment to both poetry and active politics was proving expensive for him: the documents also show evidence of substantial loans taken out by himself and his half-brother Francesco in the course of the year 1297 (Piattoli 1950: 64–5).

Florentine politics were to prove a costly investment for Dante in other ways too. As hostilities between the factions intensified over the winter of 1298–9, the leader of the Blacks, Corso Donati – whom his brother in the *Purgatorio* claims 'is most to blame' for his city's ruin (24. 82–90) – gained the support of the official Guelf party but 'overplayed his hand' by corrupting the *podestà* and was fined and exiled in May 1299 (Schevill 1963: 166). He was meant to be confined to an area to the far east of Tuscany – the Massa Trabaria in the Apennines – 'but he did not obey; he broke his bounds and went off to Rome' (Compagni 1986: 26). This move was to have momentous consequences for Florence and for Dante.

At Rome in 1299 the papacy was in the hands of Boniface VIII, who was to be portrayed on a number of occasions in the *Commedia* as an enemy of the Florentine Whites, of Dante and of the church (*Inf.* 6. 67–9, 19. 52–7; *Par.* 17. 46–51, 27. 22–54). Boniface, who reigned from late 1294 until his death in October 1303, was an energetic administrator – a canon lawyer and a member of a noble Roman family – who sought to strengthen the universal authority of the papacy in the face of national monarchies, especially that of

France (\*Ullmann 1974: 270–7; \*Tierney 1988: 172–92). One consequence of this was to be his declaration of a Jubilee or Holy year in Rome at the turn of the century (1300). The Jubilee ‘caught the imagination of Europe’ (\*Duffy 1997: 119). Huge numbers of pilgrims (200,000 at a time) were drawn to Rome, and Dante – who may well have been among them – mentions the event both as an example of effective crowd-management (*Inf.* 18. 28–33) and as a time of especial grace (*Purg.* 2. 98–102).

At the same time, Boniface was concerned to buttress the papacy’s authority in a more material way, by extending its political influence in Italy. One of his predecessors, Nicholas III (1277–80), had taken advantage of the weakness of imperial power in the peninsula to gain direct authority over the province of Romagna. Boniface was now looking to assert papal authority over Tuscany, as letters and statements of his in the spring of 1300 clearly indicate; and the activities of Corso Donati after his exile the year before helped to reinforce this direction in papal policy. Corso’s exile had led to the White faction under his adversary Vieri dei Cerchi taking power in Florence, and this new regime then pronounced sentences against three Florentines at Rome, one of whom was of the Spini family, allies of Corso Donati and bankers to Boniface (\*Holmes 1980: 19–21). This convergence between the interests of Florentine Blacks and the papacy helped to precipitate the crises of 1300 and 1301 which led to the defeat of the Whites and the exile of Dante.

By the spring of 1300, when Boniface was reprimanding the Whites for their treatment of the three Florentines at Rome, Dante seems to have been active on behalf of the new regime. A document of 7 May 1300 records his successful role in helping to confirm the alliance between Florence and the city of San Gimignano (Piattoli 1950: 80–2); and on 15 June he was elected to serve for a two-month term as one of his city’s six priors, with the responsibility, amongst other things, for pursuing the condemnation of the three Florentines. In a lost letter quoted by Bruni, Dante attributes all his subsequent ills and troubles to ‘the ill-fated activities of my priorate’ (Bruni 1996: 542); and it is clear that, despite his prominent position, he was unable to prevent the growing rift with the papacy and his party’s subsequent slide towards disaster. Rioting between the two Florentine factions had occurred at the beginning of May and an attempt had been made to calm the situation by exiling members of both, including Dante’s friend Guido Cavalcanti. During the whole of Dante’s priorate, the pope continued to intervene in the city’s affairs through the appointment of the Franciscan cardinal Matteo d’Acquasparta as legate in Tuscany and peacemaker

in Florence (23 May–28 August). It was not a successful mission: the cardinal was suspected of favouring the Blacks, and a crossbow-bolt was shot at the window of his lodgings (Compagni 1986: 25). Dante and the other city officials were blamed by the pope and accused of being ‘hardened and persistent in evil-doing’; and shortly after the end of Dante’s term as prior, the cardinal ‘finally abandoned his task, excommunicated the rulers of the city, and left’ (Holmes 1980: 26).

### The ‘lance of Judas’ and the ‘bow of exile’, 1300–2

The endgame for Dante and the Florentine Whites took over a year to unfold. Despite Dante’s later pronouncements against Boniface and the contemporary papacy, it seems unlikely that he or those of his party wished to provoke the papacy into action during this period; indeed, up to the last there were attempts to negotiate, including a mission to Rome during October 1301, in which Dante himself may have taken part. But other forces were at work, and Dante’s contemporary and colleague Dino Compagni summarizes the situation as follows:

The citizens of Florence, divided like this, began to slander one another throughout the neighboring cities and in Pope Boniface’s court at Rome, spreading false information. And words falsely spoken did more damage to Florence than the points of swords. They [the Black Guelfs at Rome] worked on the pope, telling him that the city would return to the Ghibellines . . . and they reinforced these lies with a great deal of money. The pope was persuaded to break the power of the Florentines, and so he promised to aid the Black Guelfs with the great power of Charles of Valois, of the royal house of France . . . The pope wrote [in October 1300] that he wanted Messer Charles to make peace in Tuscany, opposing those who had rebelled against the Church. This commission of peacemaker (*paciario*) had a very good name, but its purpose was just the opposite, for the pope’s aim was to bring down the Whites and raise up the Blacks, and make the Whites enemies of the royal house of France and of the Church. (Compagni 1986: 33–4)

Domination of Tuscany was part of Boniface’s overall plan for Italy; and Charles of Valois, with a force of 500 knights, having duly crossed the Alps in early July 1300, marched through Tuscany bypassing Florence in mid-August, and arrived in Rome in early September. The next stage of his itinerary was probably planned in conjunction with Corso Donati, the exiled Florentines and the pope, in order to confuse and surprise his opponents in

Florence (Orvieto 1969: 132). He began travelling north from Rome again in the later part of September, but instead of heading directly for his objective he seems to have made a large loop eastwards through Umbria and Marche, descending into Tuscany from the Apennines in early October, reaching Siena on 15 October and, after some negotiation, entering Florence unopposed on 1 November 1301.

Events then moved swiftly, and the collapse of the White Guelf regime is vividly described by Dino Compagni, who, as one of its last priors, was himself at the eye of the storm (Compagni 1986: 39–52). Amid scenes of disorder, Corso Donati, leader of the Blacks, got back to the city by 5 November; and a new set of priors – all from his party – took office on the 8th, following the resignation of Compagni and his colleagues. Boniface’s putsch was complete, and Charles of Valois had performed his task with minimal force, or – as Dante was later to put it – ‘using only that lance with which Judas jousted, he wielded it so as to burst Florence’s guts’ (*Purg.* 20. 73–5).

At this stage of the crisis, in the late autumn and winter of 1301–2, we do not know for sure where Dante was. He is recorded as contributing to public discussion on at least three occasions in September. He may have remained for some time in Rome, as part of the Florentine delegation who were there in October (Compagni 1986: 54). It is possible that he could have returned to Florence for a while during the interval between the coup d’état in November and his sentencing to exile, along with three other members of the old regime, early in 1302. The sentence was pronounced on 27 January by the new *podestà*, Cante dei Gabrielli da Gubbio, who had accompanied Charles of Valois on his entry into Florence (Compagni 1986: 39, 46, 48). The accusations and the judgement appear in the document as follows:

That the above-mentioned [Palmieri degli Altoviti, Dante Alighieri, Lippo Becchi, Orlanduccio Orlandi] or certain of them, during or after their terms as priors, had, by themselves or by means of others, committed corruption in public office, acts of illicit gain and unjust extortion of money or goods;

That they or certain of them received money, promises of money or other benefit in return for the subsequent election of priors or standard-bearers [of justice, another elective post] . . . or for the election of officials in districts of the city or territory of Florence . . . ;

That they or certain of them, during or after their terms of office, had committed or caused to be committed the above crimes by giving, promising or paying sums of money or goods or through the accounts of certain merchants;

That they had obtained from the office of the Commune of Florence sums that were greater than or different from those provided for;

That they had perpetrated frauds or corrupt dealings involving money or goods, to the detriment of the Commune of Florence;

That they had caused money to be given and spent to oppose the supreme pontiff [Boniface VIII] and Lord Charles [of Valois], to obstruct the latter's arrival [in Florence, Nov. 1301], contrary to the peace of the Commune of Florence and of the Guelf party;

That they had obtained money or goods from private persons or groups through threatening confiscation of property or action against them by the priors, the Commune and the people;

That they had committed or caused to be committed fraud, deception, malicious acts, corruption of public office and outrageous extortion, and had worked to divide the city of Pistoia into factions and destroy its previous harmony, by causing the governors of the city to be elected only from a single party, by contriving the expulsion from the city of the Blacks who were faithful servants of the Church of Rome, and by detaching the city from its alliance with the city of Florence and from its loyalty to the Church of Rome and to Lord Charles [of Valois], peacemaker in Tuscany.

. . . Wherefore, we determine that each and every one of the said Palmerio, Dante, Orlanduccio and Lippo – in order that they may reap as they have sown and receive due retribution for their actions, being considered to have admitted their guilt through their contumacy – in accordance with the law, the statutes of the Commune of Florence, the ordinances of justice . . . and our own judgment should be fined the sum of 5,000 florins, to be given and paid to the treasurers of the Commune of Florence . . . and that they should restore what they have notoriously extorted to those who can furnish legitimate proof of such; and that if they do not pay the penalty within three days of this sentence, all the goods of the non-payer shall be subject to confiscation and destruction as communal property. And if any of them do pay the penalty, they must nonetheless remain outside the province of Tuscany for a full two years; and in order that the memory of the [deeds of] the said Palmerio, Dante, Orlanduccio and Lippo be preserved in perpetuity, their names are to be written down in the statutes of the people, and, being falsifiers and corrupters of public office [*falsarii et baracterii*], they shall – whether they pay the penalty or not – at no time hold any office or take any remuneration for or from the Commune of Florence in the city, the territory or elsewhere. (my translation; original in D. Ricci 1967: 204–7)

All this seems ferocious enough and reflects the judges' aggressive management of the laws about exclusion (\*Starn 1982: 68). But worse was to come. On 10 March 1302 the *podestà* issued a further sentence against Dante

and 13 others who had failed to appear before him; and this concludes that: 'if at any time any of the abovementioned shall come within the domain of the said commune [of Florence], any so doing shall be burned to death with fire (*igne comburatur sic quod moriatur*)' (my translation; original in D. Ricci 1967: 208).

Exile, for a citizen of Dante's Florence, was a traumatic and desolating experience (Starn 1982: 121–38; \*Martines 1983: 150). What he was to call 'carità del natio loco' (feeling for one's native place, *Inf.* 14. 1) was an especially powerful force among the close-knit urban communities of his time. Dante's immediate reaction to the harsh sentences handed down by his Florentine adversaries in 1302 is not recorded. His deeper responses are, however, reflected throughout the works of his exile. They are evident, for instance, not only in his letters to and about the Florentines, but also in his philosophical and literary treatises (*Conv.* 1. 3. 4–5; *De vulgari eloquentia* ['On Vernacular Eloquence'] 1.6); and in his love-poetry (at the end of his *canzoni*, *Tre donne* and *Amor da che convien*; FB 1. 180–1 and 210–11). Above all, such feelings run their course through the whole of the *Commedia*. The *Commedia* was written during the later years of his exile (perhaps c.1307–21), but it takes as the fictional date of the journey of 'Dante' (the persona) the spring of 1300, the year of Boniface's Jubilee, the year when the poet was approaching the mid-point of human life (traditionally the age of 35) and three months before he took on the political office as prior that was to result, as we have seen, in his sentence of exile.

Throughout the *Commedia* recurs the sense of loss that was also expressed in the early works of his exile – as when at the end of a love-poem he speaks of Florence as if she herself were a scornful lady who 'lacking in love and denuded of pity, has barred me from her presence' (*Amor da che convien* in FB 1. 210–11, lines 78–9) – or at the start of the *Convivio*, where he imagines his city as a mother rejecting her son (*Conv.* 1.3.4–5). The sense of physical deprivation is evident, for example in the *Commedia*'s references to the Baptistery, the physical and emotional core of Florence – references which culminate in the exiled poet's expression of desire for return and reconciliation towards the end of the poem:

If it comes to pass that the sacred poem,  
to which both Heaven and Earth have set their hands  
and has thus made me over long years lean,  
can overcome the cruel ban that bars me  
from the fair fold where as a lamb I slept,

hated by all those wolves who stir up strife there –  
with altered voice, then, and with altered fleece  
I shall return a poet, at the source  
of my own baptism putting on the crown.

(*Par.* 25. 1–9)

Such a hope is, appropriately enough, expressed at the start of a canto in which Dante is to be asked to affirm the theological virtue of hope. Nor did it seem too much for the writer to expect. At around the time these lines were written (c.1319–20), Dante, in response to the offer of such a crown from a professor of literature at Bologna (Giovanni del Virgilio), would express a similar wish for recognition from his fellow-citizens (below, p. 50). It was a wish – like that of return to Florence – that would never be fulfilled.



# Landscapes of Exile

## Descent into the valley

The exiled Dante's representation of his native city in the *Commedia* is deeply ambivalent (below, p. 138). Intense hostility and contempt towards Florence are expressed here, along with an intense desire (as in *Par.* 25. 1–9) to return to her 'sheepfold'. Such hostility also extended to many of his fellow exiles. In canto 15 of the *Inferno*, the soul of his intellectual guide Brunetto Latini (who himself had been exiled from Florence in the 1260s) contemptuously condemns the poet's compatriots both within the city and outside it (*Inf.* 15. 71–2). With similar contempt, Dante's ancestor Cacciaguida describes the Florentine Whites who accompanied the poet in the early years after the 'bow of exile' had struck:

‘And what shall weigh most heavy on your shoulders  
will be that vicious, stupid company  
with whom you will descend into that valley.

In rank ingratitude, fury, malice,  
they'll turn on you; yet not long after that  
it's they, not you, will have to blush for shame.

Their deeds themselves will show to all the world  
their bestial nature, and you'll find it best  
to form a faction for yourself – alone.’

(*Par.* 17. 61–9)

However, the misery of exile seeks company; and, as the documents show, in the summer of 1302 Dante was still a member of a party of more than one. A meeting of the White Guelf and Ghibelline exiles took place as early

as February, at the small hill-town of Gargonza, mid-way between Siena and Arezzo; and it may have been this sign of rapprochement between their opponents that led the Florentine Blacks on 10 March to pronounce the harsher sentence – of death by burning – on 14 of the exiles, including Dante (above, p. 23). Dante may have been at Gargonza, and his presence is recorded in June 1302 at the large abbey church at San Godenzo, at the foot of the Apennines, some 50 kilometres to the north-east of Florence, and still well within Tuscany (Piatoli 1950: 110). ‘Dante Allegherii’ is listed in the document, along with powerful members of the White families, as agreeing to recompense the Ubaldini family of the Mugello (traditionally hostile to the Commune) for any damage or losses incurred to them during the imminent military campaign against Florence (Compagni 1986: 56). Also signatories to the agreement are four members of a great Florentine Ghibelline family who had not been in the city since 1258: the Uberti, whose most famous ancestor, Farinata, victor of Montaperti, is encountered by ‘Dante’ in canto 10 of the *Inferno*. Hence, just as the interests of the Florentine Black Guelfs had coincided with those of the papacy, so those of the Whites – and of Dante – came to converge with those of the Ghibellines.

Dante’s subsequent travels during the first 10 years of his exile (1302–12) seem restless and circuitous. After that meeting in the church at San Godenzo, his journeys criss-crossing Italy led him to various destinations, some of which are documented to some degree, whilst others remain very uncertain (see chronology, above, pp. xxiv–v, and map, above, p. xxvii). Information about his wanderings is based largely on the surviving documents, and there are many gaps (Petrocchi 1984, 1994). As a recent account of Dante’s exile argues, ‘scholarly attempts to reconstruct [his itinerary] . . . have yielded conflicting scenarios’ (*DE* 362A). In any event, it is clear that in the course of this decade the poet was moving across a great variety of landscapes and visiting a number of cities in central and northern Italy. With the lack of a secure base and the difficulties of travel – especially in the mountainous regions of the Apennines – it must have been an often disorientating experience, and one that is reflected in the composition over these years of another difficult journey: the *Inferno*, which was probably begun around 1307–8. The physical and mental stress of straying from the right path among the densely forested valleys and ridges of the high Tuscan Apennines could well lie behind the confusion and panic that beset ‘Dante’ in the dark wood and on the mountain in *Inferno*’s first canto.

Disorientation is also reflected in the images of wandering and drifting through which Dante represents himself as exile in two earlier works of this

decade. In his treatise ‘On Eloquence in the Vernacular’ (*DVE*, c.1303–5) – which itself crosses ‘the tree-clad shoulders of the Apennines’ and ‘roams through the wooded mountains and pastures of Italy’ in search of the ideal vernacular – he speaks of Florentine exiles, still attached to the mother tongue of their city, as ‘we for whom the world is now our homeland, as the ocean is for the fishes’ (*DVE* 1. 6. 3, also 1. 14. 1, 1. 16. 1). And at the start of the *Convivio*, having portrayed himself as a rejected ‘son’ of Florence, Dante describes how

through almost all the regions covered by this language (the vernacular) I have gone as a wanderer, almost as a beggar, reluctantly displaying the wounds of Fortune for which the wounded person himself is very often held to blame. Indeed, I have been a boat without sail or rudder, driven to various ports, harbours and shores by the parching wind that blows from grievous poverty; and I have changed in the eyes of many, who consider that not only has my person been diminished but that everything I have done or am yet to do has become of less value. (*Conv.* 1. 3. 5)

The extent of Dante’s wanderings during the early years of his exile may be a little exaggerated here. But by the time he abandoned the *Convivio* around 1307 he had travelled widely between Verona and Sarzana; and he may have spent some time in places as far apart as Treviso (in the Veneto) and Lucca (in western Tuscany). And during these years he also underwent a gruelling emotional and political journey.

### **Mugello and Lombardy, 1302–4**

In the first months after the meeting at San Godenzo, the Florentine Whites and their new Ghibelline allies achieved some success in taking over strongholds around Florence (in the Mugello and the Valdarno) and near Pistoia; but these were soon recaptured by the Blacks and their allies (Villani 9. 52–3 and 60; Compagni 1986: 57). During the first year of these ‘wars of the Mugello’ Dante appears to have stayed quite close to the contested area; and a report based on a local chronicle places him at Forlì, very likely as an emissary of the Whites in the autumn of 1302. The court at which he was likely to have been a guest was that of Scarpetta degli Ordellaffi, whose badge, of green lion’s paws, Dante mentions honourably in his account of the Romagna (*Inf.* 27. 43–5). Scarpetta was in Compagni’s view ‘a young man of well-balanced temperament’, whom the Florentine Whites chose to command their forces in the Mugello during 1303 (Compagni 1986: 57). There is no

firm evidence, however, that Dante either accompanied him on this venture or participated any further in the military or diplomatic activities of the Florentine Whites who had fallen with him ‘into that valley’ (*Par.* 17. 63; above, p. 25).

From about May or June 1303 for nearly a year, Dante was at some distance from the conflict, in Verona. His son Pietro, who spent much of his later life in Verona, confirms this; and Dante’s own account of his exile that is voiced through his ancestor as a prophecy in *Paradiso* (above, p. 25) tells how his

first refuge and hospitality  
will be the generous gift of the great Lombard  
who bears as arms the eagle on the ladder.  
(*Par.* 17. 70–2)

An eagle (literally, ‘the sacred bird’) upon a ladder was the heraldic emblem of the Della Scala or Scaligeri family of Verona, who had been rulers (initially elected but subsequently hereditary) of the city since 1262; and the ‘great Lombard’ to whom Dante here refers was Bartolomeo della Scala, *signore* from 1301 to 1304. Despotism by such princely families was becoming widespread among the northern cities of Italy during Dante’s time (Hyde 1973: 141–52; Lerner 1980: 133–50; Martines 1983: 125–48). A number of these *signori* – like the Scaligeri in Lombardy and Guido da Montefeltro in the Romagna – were on the Ghibelline side; and Bartolomeo’s youngest brother, Cangrande della Scala – who ruled Verona from 1312 to 1329 – was an active supporter of the imperial cause.

Dante was to spend much longer in Verona at a later stage of his career, as a guest of Cangrande della Scala from 1312 to 1318 (below, p. 44); but during 1303–4 there would still have been time for the city, its culture and its surroundings to make an impact on him. Verona’s Roman past was prominent in its urban landscape. Its arena (c.100 CE) is the third largest of all surviving Roman amphitheatres and would still have been a striking feature in Dante’s time, despite the damage caused by medieval quarrying and the earthquake of 1183. Overlooking the city to the east is the semi-circular theatre begun in the time of Augustus; over to the west (at the point where the river begins to loop north) is the first-century Arch of the Gavii; and nearer to the ancient city centre is the even more imposing double archway of the Porta dei Borsari. The city was thus perhaps even more visibly than Florence ‘the daughter of Rome’, and a sense of its past may well have

reinforced both its rulers' inclination to the imperial cause and Dante's own developing 'idea of Rome' (below, pp. 98–9).

The old Roman forum of Verona also lies beneath its medieval centre, the market-place (now the Piazza delle Erbe), which adjoins the centre of power, the Piazza dei Signori. Signs of the dominance of the Scaliger family would have been especially evident here. Their power base in the city's merchant guild since the beginning of the dynasty in 1262 was acknowledged by the foundation in 1301 of the Casa dei Mercanti ('Hall of the Merchants') by Alberto I della Scala, father of Bartolomeo and Cangrande. And the project of tomb-building for the Scaliger princes that was to become such a monumental feature in the later fourteenth century had already begun (off the north-eastern corner of the Piazza dei Signori), with the plain tomb of Mastino I, founder of the dynasty, who had been assassinated near there in 1277.

By the time of Dante's arrival in Verona in the summer of 1303 the absolute position of the dynasty had long been consolidated and enforced. The 'honour, increase and good *status* of the lords Alberto and [his eldest son] Bartolomeo della Scala, general lords of the *popolo* and city of Verona' had been explicitly asserted in statutes 'read, approved and confirmed' before them, the *podestà*, the guild leaders and the Council of 800 on 27 November 1295; and this approval had been reinforced by some bloodcurdling penalties against any person who

plots, conspires or consents publicly or privately in removing or diminishing anything of the lordship, captaincy and rectorate of the city of Verona of the lords Alberto and Bartolomeo della Scala . . . or presumes to commit anything in deed, writing or any other way against the persons of the lords and their sons, in any manner that can be imagined . . . The *podestà* is to raze his house to its foundations, uproot his trees and vines, confiscate his property . . . And if he comes into the hands of the commune of Verona, he is to be dragged through the city at a horse's tail, placed in a cask full of nails, and tied to a bridge over the Adige, where he is to remain until he dies, and then he is to be hanged. (Dean 2000: 232–3)

The scrupulousness of that 'and then' is impressive, in its way. Savage penalties against dissidents or political adversaries were not uncommon at the time, as the sentences against Dante by his fellow-Florentines show (above, p. 22) – but the ruthless despotic rule of the Scaligeri in Verona would have seemed quite strikingly different from the chaotic governance of contemporary Florence. How much of the regime of signorial punishment might then have translated into the *Inferno*'s 'terrible art of justice' (*Inf.* 14. 6)?

Other aspects of Verona's culture would also have made a strong impression. Such a well-established dynasty allowed for the development of a court culture; and it is around this time that Dante, in his treatise on vernacular writing (*DVE*), shows an interest in the civilizing and unifying power of the *curia* (court) (Davis 1984: 13). His more ambitious work on philosophy and ethics, the *Convivio*, could also have been begun during this period, and it bears a title which itself derives from another medieval Latin word for 'court' (*convivium*). At the level of more popular culture, one of Verona's regular festive events that Dante probably witnessed on the first Sunday of Lent in 1304 was the foot-race run for the prize of a green banner. This competition finds an echo in the powerful final tribute Dante awards to the memory of the Florentine writer Brunetto Latini at the end of canto 15 of the *Inferno* (15. 121–4).

The *Inferno* was probably begun in 1307–8 and was probably complete before Dante returned to Verona in 1312 – so other references there to features of the country around the city may derive from the poet's visit during 1303–4. Not far up the valley of the Adige from Verona is the spectacular landslip of the Lavini or Slavini di Marco, on the left bank of the river, near Rovereto; and this is turned into a means of visualizing the steep slope leading down to the seventh circle of Hell (*Inf.* 12. 4–10). Dante could have read about this in the topographical work of the Dominican Albertus Magnus (*Meteora* 3. 6, cited in CL 1.362), but it is also quite possible that he could have seen it for himself during his first stay in Verona. Even closer to Verona are the lower reaches of Lake Garda and the Scaliger fortress of Peschiera which are mentioned in *Inferno* 20, during a digression portraying the course of the river Mincio, flowing out of the lake and on to Mantua, the birthplace of Virgil (*Inf.* 20. 61–81; CL 1. 607). Landscapes of Lombardy and of north-western Italy (below, p. 34) thus form an important element in the imaginary world of Dante's Hell.

### Tuscany and elsewhere, 1304–9

The landscape of Tuscan politics was again in 1304 to exert its pull upon Dante and its influence, eventually, on the *Inferno*. In the autumn of 1303 Boniface VIII had died and been succeeded by a more conciliatory pope, Benedict XI, who in March of the following year sent Cardinal Niccolò da Prato to Florence as his emissary and peacemaker. Villani describes the cardinal as 'a Friar Preacher [Dominican], learned in Scripture, sensible, clever, wise, prudent and highly capable . . . [who] at first showed himself to be

well-intentioned and even-handed' (Villani 9. 69). Representatives of the exiled Whites and even a few of the Florentine Ghibellines arrived in the city on 18/20 April, and the initial mood of optimism is vividly described by Compagni (Compagni 1986: 66).

It was probably this prospect of change and reconciliation that drew Dante back from Verona in the spring of 1304 and into active partnership again with the exiled Florentine Whites, on whose behalf he wrote (perhaps also in April) to the cardinal expressing good will towards the peace process (*Letters*, no. 1) A further letter and evidence from Bruni's 1436 biography seem to indicate that Dante was still in Tuscany in May or June of 1304, probably at Arezzo along with the *Universitas Alborum* (the White party), from where it was easy to monitor the situation in Florence (*Letters*, no. 2; Bruni 1996: 546). The signs were not good. As both Compagni and Villani make clear, the mood of peace and reconciliation within the city was short-lived (Compagni 1986: 69–72; Villani 9. 69 and 71) By the high summer Dante may have been distancing himself from his fellow exiles (Petrocchi 1984: 97–8). Two events at this time were particularly ominous: the death of the conciliatory Pope Benedict XI on 7 July; and the ill-fated attempt of the Whites to re-enter Florence by force and their subsequent disastrous defeat at La Lastra, just outside the city (20 July). Compagni, on the side of the Whites, saw the move on Florence as a 'bold and intelligent strategy' but acknowledged that in execution it was 'foolish' and 'premature'; whilst on the other side Villani held it to be through 'the will and intervention of God that they were thus stricken, in order that Florence should not be wholly laid waste, plundered and destroyed' (Compagni 1986: 74; Villani 9. 72). Dante in *Par.* 17 (65–9) was to look back on it as an instance of the shameful folly that would make it necessary for him to go it alone (above, p. 25).

Where, in 1304, the next stage of his solitary journey led him is not known for sure. There is very little independent documentation for the next two years of his exile. Boccaccio in his biography has the poet all over the place in this period: now in the Casentino, now in the Lunigiana, now in the mountains near Urbino; then at Bologna and Padua and thence to Verona (*Trattatello* 1, para. 74). Bruni in his 1436 *Vita di Dante* has him going straight to Verona after the defeat of the Whites at La Lastra, 'not wanting to waste any more time after the destruction of his hopes' (Bruni 1996: 546). More recent biographers agree that another journey northwards – with residence, perhaps, at Treviso and visits to Venice and Padua – is quite likely (\*Bemrose 2000: 85; Petrocchi 1984: 98–9, 1994: 95–7).

Acquaintance with the Veneto, the north-eastern region of Italy, during 1304–6 would be consistent with a number of specific references to the area and its people in Dante's writing during and shortly after these years. As the late fourteenth-century commentator Benevenuto da Imola asserts, one of the poet's hosts then could have been the captain-general of Treviso, Gherardo da Camino (d. 1306). Gherardo is commemorated during the debate about the origins of nobility in the last treatise of the *Convivio* (4. 14. 12); and later, in the *Purgatorio*, the courtier 'Marco the Lombard' – in the midst of decrying the decadence of the contemporary world and of 'the region watered by the Adige and the Po' – finds space to celebrate 'good Gherardo' (*Purg.* 16. 124). In Treviso, too, Dante might by contrast have learned of an example of tyranny and cruelty: Ezzelino (or Azzolino) da Romano, who ruled over the March of Treviso till his death in 1259. Villani calls him 'the cruellest and most terrible tyrant there has been in Christendom', and Dante's *Inferno* shows him boiling in a river of blood (Villani 7. 72; *Inf.* 12. 109–10).

Padua, about 50 kilometres south-east of Treviso, is one of the major cities of the region that Dante could easily have visited at this time. Here he might at least have heard of the work of the Latin poet and proto-humanist Albertino Mussato, who, unlike Dante, was to receive the laurel crown a few years later (1315). Here too – if Benvenuto da Imola is to be believed – Dante could have seen Giotto's recently completed frescoes, especially those of Heaven, Hell and the Last Judgement (as well as the lives of the Virgin and of Christ) in the Scrovegni or 'Arena' Chapel, which were complete by around 1305–6. If so, Giotto's images of the damned could well have had some influence on the poet's representations of Hell; and Dante could have had the artist's command of gesture and expression in mind when describing divinely created art and its ability to make 'speech visible' (*Purg.* 10. 28–96). In any case he goes on explicitly to acknowledge Giotto's supreme earthly reputation in the following canto (*Purg.* 11. 94–6; below, p. 199).

The idea that Dante and Giotto may actually have known each other is one that has attracted a number of imaginative writers, from Vasari (*Lives of the Painters*) on, and it has some credence among modern scholars (Petrocchi 1984: 99; CL 2. 338). It is based not only on their contemporaneity and on Dante's reference in *Purgatorio* 11 (94–6), but also on Benvenuto da Imola's commentary, which notes Giotto's ability to reproduce any natural object realistically and shows the two artists sharing an ancient joke about the nature of human creativity:



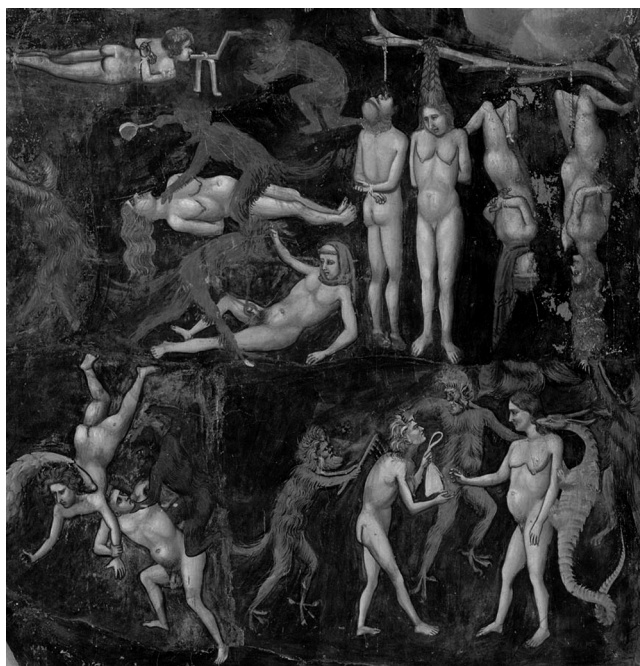


Plate 2 Detail from the scene of Hell, Last Judgement frescoes at the Scrovegni (Arena) Chapel, Padua, painted by Giotto, c.1302–6. © 1990. Photo SCALA, Florence.

It happened once that while Giotto, still quite young, was painting [frescoes in] a chapel at Padua, in a place where there had formerly been a theatre or arena, Dante visited the place. Giotto showed him great honour and took him to his home, where Dante saw a number of the painter's offspring who were extremely ugly and – not to put too fine a point on it – very like their father. So he asked: 'Noble master, I am amazed that, since you are said to be unrivalled in the art of painting – how can it be that, whilst you create such fair shapes for others, your own are so truly hideous?' Giotto answered him at once with a smile: 'because I produce paintings by day but people at night' [*'quia pingo* (lit. paint) *de die, sed fingo* (lit. make, shape) *de nocte'*] This reply mightily amused Dante, not because it was a new one on him (it can be found in Macrobius's *Saturnalia*) but because it seemed to be born from native wit. (Benvenuto da Imola 1887: 3. 313)

Other features of the Veneto region are recollected in Dante's writing during and shortly after this period. His treatise on the vernacular shows a

quite specific knowledge of the dialects of Brescia, Verona, Vicenza, Padua and Treviso, and recall (or invention) of a snatch of ugly verse in order to discredit the Venetians' pride in their language (*DVE* 1. 14. 5–6). A more respectful and vivid portrayal of activity in the great trading city forms an extended simile near the beginning of *Inferno* 21, which describes the business of repairing ships in the Arsenal at Venice (*Inf.* 21. 7–15). Earlier on, at the start of *Inferno* 15, the Veneto has provided another example of ingenuity to compare with the art of Hell. The description of the stone embankments that provide a path above the burning desert in the seventh circle evokes comparisons with those constructed by the Paduans beside the Brenta (*Inf.* 15. 7–9). Both these examples can be seen as part of Dante's own ingenious fiction to make the reader believe he was actually in Hell, and we do not have to assume that he actually witnessed exactly such activities in the Veneto. Nonetheless, the *Commedia* reflects a good deal of familiarity with the landscape of the region and with people whom Dante may have heard of or known during those years of exile leading up to his writing of the poem.

Definite evidence places Dante close to the border of Tuscany in the autumn of 1306. Two documents of 6 October 1306 mention 'Dante Alegerii de Florentia' as official representative of a noble family of the Val di Magra – on the western slopes of the Apuan Alps – in their negotiations with the local bishop (at Castelnuovo di Magra) over the control of castles in the area (Piattoli 1950: 116–25). Dante's employers and hosts were the Malaspini family, an ancient clan that held territory in the Lunigiana (on the borders of present-day Tuscany and Liguria) and exercised political and military influence in Tuscany and beyond. The Marchese Moroello Malaspina, who features on several occasions in Dante's work, was a particularly prominent and successful member of the family and became *podestà* of Bologna in 1298, *capitano del popolo* of Pistoia in 1306, and leader of the Tuscan Guelfs in 1307. If Dante was associated with the family in 1306 (he may have met Moroello much earlier in Florence, in 1288), this would further reinforce his detachment from the cause of the White Guelf cause, since Moroello had been attacking the Whites in the Pistoia area since 1302 and captured the city from them in 1306. Dante, perhaps with a touch of *schadenfreude* for his former allies, later has a damned soul rejoice in their defeat. In the circle of the thieves, Moroello is celebrated as a force of nature, 'a thunderbolt in the midst of murky, churning cloud', drawn by the god of war out of the Val di Magra and descending upon Pistoia from the savage peaks of the Apuan Alps (*Inf.* 24. 145–50). Dante was also to reply on Moroello's behalf

to a sonnet from a contemporary Tuscan poet, Cino of Pistoia, and around 1308 would send him one of his own poems from the Casentino (*Letters*, no. 4, with the *canzone* ‘Amor, da che convien’). He would also use the presence of another member of the Malaspini clan (Currado) in Purgatory, in order to celebrate at some length the family’s fame and their ‘prowess with the purse and with the sword’ (*Purg.* 8. 121–32).

Such evidence about Dante’s hosts during his exile raises questions about motives on both sides: what was in it for each of them? For the hosts, being protectors and patrons of a writer and rhetorician such as Dante (and one with some experience of politics) would have some immediate practical advantages: they might employ his skills in diplomacy and negotiation, as the Malaspini obviously did. Or in the longer term, did they expect their fame and name to be perpetuated in their guest’s writing? The Malaspini and the Caminesi are not much mentioned now, but they would hardly be heard of at all if Dante had not included them in the cast of the *Commedia* and his other works. For Dante, on the other hand, there was not just other people’s salty bread and the grim trek up and down their stairs (*Par.* 17. 58–60); there was also the opportunity to get a hearing for his work and even the possibility of help to return to Florence. The influence of the Malaspini in Tuscany could well have worked to the latter end, and it may be no coincidence that the poem sent by Dante to Moroello along with his letter concludes as a kind of appeal to return to Florence (above, p. 23).

A lingering hope of return to his native city in 1307–8 may also be suggested by the few pieces of evidence we have for Dante’s journeys during those years. The letter to Moroello speaks of having left the Malaspini court and ‘set foot by the streams of the Arno’. The attached poem (FB no. 89) speaks of being in the midst of the peaks and calls itself a ‘song out of the mountains’. This may indicate that the poet was in the Casentino, the upper valley of the Arno on the opposite (eastern) side of Tuscany, where he was to return as a guest of the Guidi family in 1311.

By the end of 1308, however, it is possible that Dante had circled around to the west of Tuscany again, since a document dated 21 October mentions one Giovanni ‘son of Dante Alighieri of Florence’ as witness to a financial deal in Lucca (Piattoli 1950: 325–6). We cannot be wholly sure about this Giovanni di Dante: unlike his brothers, Pietro (d. 1364) and Jacopo (d. 1349); he does not appear further in any extant records, and he was not known as a writer – perhaps choosing a safer career in trade. Nor does his presence in the city necessarily mean that his father or family were there as well. Yet this scrap of evidence reinforces the vague prophecy that Dante

voices through the soul of the Lucchese poet Bonagiunta in canto 24 of the *Purgatorio*. There, speaking as if at the fictional date of the *Commedia* (1300), Bonagiunta first fixes his eye on ‘Dante’, then murmurs ‘something that sounds like “Gentucca”’, and then in response to the pilgrim’s invitation explains that she is a woman who will make Lucca ‘pleasing to you’ (*Purg.* 24. 43–8). ‘Gentucca’ was the name of several Lucchese noblewomen, and there is one whose age in 1300 and 1308 tallies with the description. The ‘pleasure’ that Bonagiunta mentions, however, is much more likely to be that of friendship and support than of a love-affair in Lucca.

It may also be no coincidence that this tribute to Lucca occurs at a point in the *Commedia* immediately before the text makes one of its most emphatic statements about Dante’s role as a vernacular poet (*Purg.* 24. 48–63). The city had received two somewhat discreditable references in the *Inferno* (18. 115–26, 21. 37–49), but despite its alliance with the Black Guelfs it did not share anything like the degree of contempt that is there showered upon Florence and Pisa. Moreover, Moroello Malaspina, Dante’s patron in the Lunigiana, was a respected figure among the citizens of Lucca, having recently commanded their forces in the attack on Pistoia – and it was not until March 1309 that Florentine exiles were banned from the city. Around 1307–9, then, Lucca may have provided an ‘island of creativity’ for the writing of the *Inferno*, which was under way by this time (Petrocchi 1984: 155; Bemrose 2000: 112).

If Dante had been in Lucca, he would have had to leave, along with the other Florentine exiles, in March 1309. One would like to think that he then found somewhere close at hand (perhaps again with the Malaspini?) where he could keep his head down over the next year or so and get on with the *Inferno*. But from 1309 until the autumn of 1310 is one of the most obscure periods of his exile; and several of his early biographers and commentators claim that at this time he went yet further afield. Giovanni Villani, the chronicler, in the oldest biographical sketch of the poet, asserts that Dante studied in Bologna ‘and then in Paris’ (Villani 10. 136); whilst Boccaccio sets out the following itinerary:

Having seen his return route [to Florence] blocked on all sides and his hopes growing emptier by the day, he quit not only Tuscany but Italy itself, crossed, as he was able to do, the mountains that divide it from France and travelled to Paris, where he devoted himself entirely to the study of both philosophy and theology – regaining too the command of other fields of knowledge which, perhaps as a result of other preoccupations, had deserted him. (Boccaccio, *Trattatello* 1, para. 75)

This portrayal of Dante around 1309–10 as a kind of early EU visiting scholar is very attractive. Although it does not explain how he might have supported himself on this study trip, it does go some way towards answering the question of what the appeal of such a long journey would be. Dante, it has to be said, was not the most Francophile of poets, despite his receptivity to French culture and his friendship with Charles Martel (above, p. 17). Yet residence in Paris would have given him access to the richest intellectual resources available in Europe at the time and could have proved a vital stimulus to the continuation of the *Commedia*. Is it a possibility? Anglo-Saxon scholars seem especially reluctant to give it any credence. Bemrose asserts (2000: 14) that ‘there is not a shred of evidence that Dante ever set foot outside central and northern Italy’; whilst the American *Dante Encyclopedia* does not even carry an article on Paris or its university. Some Italian commentators, on the other hand, seem rather more willing at least to entertain the idea; and perhaps Villani, Boccaccio and commentators such as Benvenuto da Imola and Francesco da Buti together may constitute at least a ‘shred of evidence’, along with the references to the Rhone valley, Arles and specific features of the University of Paris at points in the *Commedia* (*Inf.* 9. 112–17; *Par.* 10. 136–8; Petrocchi 1984: 103; CL 1. xliii).

If Dante had been in France around 1309–10, he would have been closer to events which related to several of his major concerns: the papacy and the empire. Election of a French pope, Clement V, in 1305 had been accompanied by the transfer of the papacy from Rome to Avignon – a move that was ‘of enormous significance’, and a matter of concern to Dante and other Italian writers (Holmes 1986: 182–5). In the autumn of 1309 the establishment of the papacy in its new centre of power was followed by the preliminaries to a major council: the Council of Vienne, near Avignon in the Rhone valley (1311–12). Both Villani and Dante believed that Clement V was merely an ally (or worse) of the French king, Philip IV (Villani 9. 80; *Inf.* 19. 82–7). Both of them, however, knew that, at least initially, Clement resisted Philip’s pressure to support a French candidate (Charles of Valois, the ‘Judas’ of Florence) as Holy Roman Emperor when the throne of the empire became vacant in 1308. It was also known in Italy that, following the coronation of Henry of Luxemburg (Henry VII) at Aix-la-Chapelle in January 1309, Clement had been quick to give his support, informally in June 1309, then through formal confirmation in July (Villani 9. 102). For Dante this potential alliance of pope and Holy Roman Emperor promised a new beginning.

### The garden of the empire: Dante, Henry VII and Italy, 1310–13

At evening on the first day of their ascent of Mount Purgatory Dante and Virgil are led towards a green valley, which is a temporary resting place for them and for a number of Italian and European rulers, two of them emperors (*Purg.* 7. 8). Their guide here is the thirteenth-century poet Sordello, who was born near Mantua and who in the previous canto has eagerly greeted and embraced Virgil as a fellow-citizen (*Purg.* 6. 74–5). This celebration of shared citizenship prompts from Dante an extended and well-known lament for the contrasting state of contemporary Italy, where sorrow has come to stay: the ship in a storm; ‘no queen ruling provinces but a whore’; a land where, far from embracing each other, those who live in the same city are at each other’s throats; a nation which is now like a wild, riderless horse since its people will not let an emperor sit in the saddle (*Purg.* 6. 76–96). From rebuking the unruly steed, Dante then turns to reproach its absent rider, the Holy Roman Emperor Albert I (elected in 1298 but never crowned in Rome), whilst calling for vengeance upon him for abandoning Italy and thus laying waste the ‘garden of the empire’ (97–105).

Dante’s lament at the end of *Purg.* 6 refers to Albert’s assassination (1308) as an act of divine judgement and to the need for his successor to pay due heed to this sign (100–2). It is thus likely to have been written some time between October 1308, when Henry of Luxembourg was elected emperor, and May 1310, when it became clear that he was indeed going to appear as emperor in Italy. It poses urgent questions about the true nature of community, citizenship and allegiance, at the local level of the city-state and in the wider context of Europe and the empire. As such, it forms a sombre prelude to the concerns expressed over the next two cantos in the so-called ‘Valley of the Princes’ (*Purg.* 7. 8) – concerns which demonstrate ‘engagement with the political ills of a wider European order, stretching from England to Sicily and from Aragon to Bohemia’ (Keen 2003: 171).

What did it mean, though, for Dante to call Italy ‘the garden of the empire’, and what kind of promise was there that it might be restored by an emperor such as Henry VII? The kingdom of Italy (*Regnum Italiae*) had been part of the Frankish empire under Charlemagne (800–14). Its link with the Holy Roman Empire in Germany had been re-established since 962 with varying degrees of success by the Saxon Otto I and his successors; and two of the Hohenstaufen emperors, Frederick I Barbarossa (1152–90) and Frederick II (1198–1250), made serious attempts to assert imperial power

in the peninsula (Hyde 1973: 38–48, 94–104). Yet the rapid political and economic development of the city-states in northern Italy (especially during the period 1150–1250), the expansion of the papacy's territorial ambitions, and the establishment of the French Angevin empire in the south (from 1266 on) all combined to weaken the status and influence of the empire. By the time of Dante's political maturity and exile it was rather doubtful whether the emperor could exercise real power in Italy – let alone resolve internal conflicts like those diagnosed by the poet in canto 6 of the *Purgatorio*.

This, however, was what Henry of Luxembourg sought to do. Since his election in 1308, he had gained, at least for the time being, the support of Clement V at Avignon and agreement that he should eventually be crowned in Rome (in February 1312). In the summer of 1310 he sent his ambassadors to the parts of Italy that were still nominally under his control (the northern provinces, including Tuscany), signifying his intention to assert his rights and bring peace to the *Regnum Italicum*. In September of that year Clement V issued an encyclical urging the Italians to recognize and welcome the new emperor. In October Henry crossed the Alps by the Mont Cenis Pass and on 23 December entered Milan, where on 6 January he was invested with the ancient iron crown of the kingdom.

For Dante and a number of others it looked like a new beginning. A fellow White Guelf, Dino Compagni, described Henry's arrival in almost apocalyptic terms, as he passed 'from city to city, making peace as if he were an angel of God and receiving fealty' (Compagni 1986: 86–7). Dante, writing as 'a Florentine undeservedly in exile', addressed the rulers of Italy using even more rousing terms, in an encyclical of his own shortly after the papal proclamation (*Letters*, no. 5, September 1310). In this open letter he greets this 'welcome time, in which the signs of comfort and peace appear', seeing Henry VII as a rising sun, 'another Moses' and a new 'Caesar' who will restore fertility and fruitfulness to what *Purgatorio* 6 called 'the garden of the empire'. He also exhorts the oppressed to hope and (important in view of what was to follow) warns against resistance to this divinely appointed authority. It was an occasion on which Dante clearly identifies the emperor in Christ-like terms and presents himself in a kind of prophetic role (\*Scott 1996: 43–4). This was the first of three 'political' letters that Dante was to write in support of Henry VII during 1310–11. In the third of them, addressed to Henry himself the following spring (17 April 1311), he mentions having formally paid homage to the emperor, and it thus seems likely that he was either at Milan for the coronation in January 1311 or had met him earlier during his progress through Piedmont and Lombardy (*Letters*, pp. 90, 101).

By the spring of 1311, however, Dante was watching events unfold from the upper Arno valley in the Casentino, where he was probably the guest of Guido Novello di Battifolle at Poppi. This is where he may have composed much of the *Purgatorio* and where he certainly wrote two of his later political letters. In these his tone is markedly less confident. The first, dated 31 March ‘in the first year of the most auspicious arrival of the Emperor Henry in Italy’, is addressed to his fellow-citizens as ‘the vile Florentines within the city’ (*Letters*, pp. 66, 76, 77, 81). Florence, under Black Guef rule, had been far from enthusiastic about the emperor’s venture and had suggested as early as 1309 that ‘it was enough for him to be king of Germany, whereas the trip to Italy seemed very uncertain and dangerous’ (Compagni 1986: 86). By the time Dante wrote this letter, the Florentines had already (May 1310) put themselves at the head of the Guef League of city-states with 4,000 cavalry, opposing the emperor’s Italian campaign (Compagni 1986: 95–6; Menache 1998: 161). He thus heaps on them the kind of invective that he had already directed against the city in the *Inferno* and in canto 6 of the *Purgatorio*. Portrayed here as rebels driven by avarice, futile defenders of ‘false liberty’ and barbarian offspring of Fiesole (said to have been destroyed by Julius Caesar), the Florentines are warned about the imminent descent upon them of the imperial eagle, ‘terrible in gold’ (*Letters*, pp. 70, 79).

In the second of these letters, barely two weeks later, Dante actively encourages the eagle to strike. Writing to Henry himself on 17 April 1311, he urges the emperor not to delay in Lombardy, but to hit at the heart of the opposition: Florence: ‘she is the viper that turns against the vitals of her own mother; she is the sick sheep that infects the flock of her lord with her contagion; she is the abandoned and unnatural Myrrha, inflamed with passion for the embraces of her father Cinyras’ (*Letters*, pp. 97, 104). The allusion to Ovid’s story of Myrrha (*Met.* 10) is a barb directed at the corrupt closeness of Florence’s alliance with the papacy. Very shortly before this letter was written, the Tuscan communes had petitioned the Pope (1 April 1311) to prevent the ‘king of Germany’ from entering the province; whilst by the end of 1311 the Guef League would vow at Bologna ‘to return the province of Lombardy entirely to the party of the Holy Mother Church’ with the aid of the pope and the French (Menache 1998: 164).

Over the course of 1311 Henry was having to deal with resistance from several cities in Lombardy. He arrived in Tuscany only in the spring of 1312, landing at Pisa – one of Tuscany’s staunchly Ghibelline cities – on 6 March (Villani 10. 37). It is possible that Dante could at this point have taken a



break from work on the *Purgatorio*, emerged from his retreat in the Casentino and, like other Florentine exiles, greeted the emperor's arrival at Pisa. But if so, he failed to follow up his previous year's message about dealing with Florence, and Henry departed for Rome on 23 April (Villani 10. 39). By this stage it was becoming depressingly clear that Henry no longer commanded the full support of the papacy. His arrival in Rome was accompanied by violence and disorder, and his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor (29 June) had to take place in the church of St John Lateran because Guelf troops prevented him reaching St Peter's. During the next few months he became embroiled in a conflict of authority with the pope (Clement V) and in hostilities with Robert of Anjou, ruler of the kingdom of Naples, the *miles Papae* ('soldier of the pope') and an ally of the Guelfs (Menache 1998: 166–70). As if in belated response to Dante's letter of the previous year, Henry at last made an abortive attempt to lay siege to Florence (18 September–31 October 1312), but was forced eventually (March 1313) to withdraw to Pisa again. Finally, after a few months of unproductive skirmishing in western Tuscany, he set off south in August 1313 to confront Robert of Anjou but got no further than Buonconvento, near Siena, where he contracted a fever. Here, on 24 August, he died (Villani 10. 47–52).

The mission of Compagni's 'angel of peace' thus ended in disarray and disaster. Nonetheless, the Emperor's good intentions were acknowledged, and his death was widely mourned in western Europe. Many in Italy and elsewhere blamed Clement V for the failure of the imperial venture; and some even accused him of having had Henry poisoned (Menache 1998: 172–3). In the prophecy about his exile half way through the *Paradiso*, Dante sets the virtues of his young Ghibelline patron, Cangrande della Scala of Verona, in contrast to Clement's duplicity, saying that they will become apparent 'before the Gascon betrays the noble Henry' (*Par.* 17. 82). As he wrote the final cantos of the poem, he celebrated once again the role of 'the noble Henry' who 'shall come to set Italy right before she is ready'; and he uses Beatrice's very last words to accuse Clement of treachery towards the emperor and to consign the Avignon pope to the lower reaches of Hell (*Par.* 30. 133–48).

Archaic as it may have been, the notion of the emperor as universal peace-keeper did not die with Henry VII at Buonconvento in 1313. Even a chronicler of the opposite party – Villani – acknowledged that the emperor's campaign in Italy drew the attention not only of western Christendom but 'even of the Saracens and Greeks', claiming that 'according to the experts, had his death not come so soon, he would through his brave and ambitious

leadership have been able to conquer the Kingdom [of Naples] and take it away from King Robert [of Anjou]' (Villani 10. 53). The case for the empire continued to be argued by leading political theorists (such as William of Ockham and Marsilius of Padua) on into the fourteenth century; and there were a number of occasions even in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when 'religious controversy [such as the Papal Schism and the advent of Protestantism] seems to have revealed a fragility in other polities and restored some credibility to the Emperor's role' (\*Black 1992: 92–108).

Dante's own continuing commitment to the imperial cause would be reflected not only in his allocation of a throne to Henry VII in the highest circle of Heaven (*Par.* 30. 133–8), but also in his treatise on universal monarchy, the *Monarchia*. It used to be widely held that the *Monarchia* was composed during Henry VII's Italian campaign or even designed to support it as 'a piece of imperial propaganda'; and several historians are still inclined to this view (Holmes 1997: 52–3; Black 1992: 55, 96). A wider consensus now, however (based on fuller assessment of the manuscript evidence), is that the work was written later in Dante's career – around 1316–17 – and that its thinking is not a political or propagandist aberration but is reconcilable with ideas that he continued to hold to the end (*Mon.* xxxviii–xli; Scott 1996: 49–55; Bemrose 2000: 186–8; *DE* 616).

For this crucial period of Dante's exile, then (around 1310–13), the main evidence we have about his immediate responses to the political hopes raised by Henry VII's advent are the three letters of 1310–11 and the political episodes and imagery of the *Purgatorio*, at least from canto 6 onwards (Scott 1996: 123, 133–4 etc.). After the indication in the two letters of spring 1311 that he was in the Casentino then, 'beneath the springs of the Arno', there is no precise evidence to indicate where he went from there or where he was during the later stages of Henry VII's campaign. Bruni – who knew about Dante's invective against the Florentines in the letter of March 1311 and his encouragement of Henry to strike against them – claims that 'nonetheless, devotion to his native city affected him so much that when the Emperor attacked Florence and encamped at its gates, he did not wish to be there' (Bruni 1996: 547). It could be that he remained in the Casentino throughout this period and that this relatively quiet, wooded and mountainous area of eastern Tuscany formed an 'island of creativity' for the composition of the *Purgatorio* (Petrocchi 1984: 155). There are certainly several striking and sustained evocations of the valley's landscape and its inhabitants (though not always complimentary ones) in the *Purgatorio* (5. 94–129, 14. 16–48).

As the ‘last act of the Emperor’s tragedy’ (Petrocchi 1984: 154) began to unfold over the summer and autumn of 1312, Dante may have been quite a distant spectator. Yet, if he was then primarily engaged with the middle or later cantos of the *Purgatorio*, it would not simply have been as a way of escaping the brute facts on the ground. Those cantos themselves at several important points address thorny political problems, such as imperial and papal claims (*Purg.* 16), the ambitions of the French monarchy (20) and the leadership of the church (32–3). And the memory of Henry VII, the ‘alto Arrigo’, would later continue to inform the political vision of the *Paradiso* and inspire the political debate of the *Monarchia*.

There would also have been practical problems for the poet during the later stages of Henry’s campaign. Bruni points out that he had made return to Florence yet more difficult by his recent denunciation of the rulers of the city – so that following the emperor’s death: ‘he lost all hope and spent the rest of his life in extreme poverty, living in various places around Lombardy, Tuscany and Romagna with the support of various princes, until finally he fetched up at Ravenna where his life came to an end’ (Bruni 1996: 547). Bruni’s reference to Lombardy reminds us of the ‘first refuge’ of Dante’s exile at the princely court of Verona (*Par.* 17. 70–2). It was an attractive destination, and the poet might have made his way there as early as the summer of 1312 (Petrocchi 1984: 154; Bemrose 2000: 187–9). If so, this would have been the start of a relationship with the city and the court that was to last for much of the final decade of his life.

### ‘So I turned to Verona’: 1312(?)–18

Verona had several advantages for Dante as a place of refuge in the later part of 1312. Henry of Luxembourg had reached Rome in May and would turn his attention to Florence in September. Hope of return to Florence was certainly not yet lost, but it might have made sense for the poet – in view of his high-profile support for the emperor – to seek a securely Ghibelline environment. His host in the Casentino, Guido di Battifolle, was a supporter of the Guelfs and would eventually (in 1316) become Robert of Anjou’s ‘vicar’ (representative) in Florence (Villani 10. 79). On the other hand, the rulers of Verona were firmly devoted to the imperial cause. On Henry VII’s arrival in Lombardy (December 1310), Alboino della Scala and his younger brother, Cangrande, had declared their allegiance; and early the following year they had been appointed as imperial vicars of Verona. Following the death of Alboino – to whose lack of distinction

Dante had made a disparaging reference in the *Convivio* (4. 16. 6) – he was succeeded (in November 1311) by the altogether more glamorous and adventurous Cangrande, who, early the next year, had gained a further sign of Henry’s favour by being appointed imperial vicar of Vicenza (11 February 1312).

Cangrande della Scala (1291–1329) had a relatively short but brilliant career as *signore* of Verona. In the prophecy about the years of his exile in *Paradiso* 17, Dante continues the tribute to his elder brother (Bartolomeo) by describing more fully the sparkling qualities of Cangrande, who had been only 12 or 13 at the time of the poet’s first visit to Verona in 1303–4. Here, in a eulogy that may well date from near the end of his second stay in Verona (1312?–18), Dante has his crusading ancestor foretell ‘notable deeds’ on the part of Cangrande: ‘sparks of valour’ to be seen even before the year when ‘the Gascon (Pope Clement V) betrays the noble Henry’; and generosity that will be acknowledged even by his enemies (78, 82–7). This ancestor (Cacciaguida) then concludes by admonishing Dante to:

‘Rest hopes in him and in his acts of kindness;  
by him the lives of many will be changed:  
the rich will be cast down; the poor raised up.  
Carry this news of him etched on your mind,  
but not to be disclosed’; and he said things  
incredible even if seen directly.

(*Par.* 17. 88–93)

In his only direct reference to Cangrande in the *Commedia*, Dante thus uses the kind of prophetic and messianic language that are to be found in his other apocalyptic prophecies, such as those about Henry VII in the letter of 1310 (*Letters*, pp. 42–62). Other contemporaries were less impressed, but still acknowledged the energy and power of a ruler whose name (‘Cangrande’) means ‘Great Dog’. Villani, after describing his death at a banquet following the capture of Treviso (July 1329), asks his readers to ‘take note that this was the greatest, strongest and wealthiest tyrant there had been in Lombardy since the time of Ezzelino da Romano’ (d. 1259; Villani 11. 138).

As the frequent references to his exploits in Villani’s chronicle show, Cangrande was a dominant figure in Lombardy during the second and third decades of the fourteenth century: a major ally of the empire (of Henry VII and later of Louis of Bavaria), and a highly effective protector of Ghibelline exiles (Villani 10. 14 and 89, 11. 102). Such allegiances and activities would

have made him an appropriate host for Dante in 1312–18. Dante may not, however, have been solely based in Verona throughout these six years. For two of them at least (c.1314–16), the ascendancy of Florence and the Guelfs in Tuscany was again seriously challenged. The Ghibelline leader Uguiccone della Faggiuola had been elected *capitano del popolo* at Pisa in 1313 immediately after the death of Henry VII; and he gained control also of Lucca in June 1314 (Villani 10. 54 and 60). He then defeated the Florentines and Tuscan Guelfs at the battle of Montecatini (29 August 1315) but was expelled from both Lucca and Pisa the following year, when he took refuge in Verona and continued in Cangrande's service until his death in 1320 (Villani 10. 70–3, 78, 86 and 121). Dante never mentions Uguiccone, although Boccaccio claims that Dante was Uguiccone's guest 'in the mountains near Urbino' and dedicated the *Inferno* to him (Boccaccio, *Trattatello* 1, paras. 74, 193). But the dramatic turn of events in Tuscany over which the Ghibelline leader presided could once again have revived the poet's hopes of a return to Florence and might even have led him to revisit Lucca, where he had been six years or so before (above, pp. 35–6).

If Verona was Dante's main base from about 1312 to 1318, it would have provided a receptive audience for some of his most important writing. It was around 1312–13 that he completed the *Purgatorio*, whose apocalyptic final cantos (32–3) culminate in a powerful prophecy of a divinely sanctioned world-leader and reformer. By 1314–15 he had begun work on the last *cantica* of the *Commedia*, the *Paradiso*; and his letters in those years reflect some urgent political and personal concerns. In April 1314, Clement V, the 'betrayed' of Henry VII, died at Avignon, and between May and June Dante addressed a public letter to the Italian cardinals, urging the papacy to return to Rome (below, p. 148). At the end of May 1315, he was actively considering an amnesty that had been offered to exiles by the Florentines on the 19th of that month. In a letter addressed to 'a friend in Florence' he indignantly rejects the terms of the amnesty (payment of a fine and a ritual of penance), refusing as the 'preacher of justice' to 'pay money to those that wronged him, as though they had deserved well of him'. This is not the path, he concludes defiantly, by which he will return home (*ad patriam*). Yet he cannot bring himself to close the door completely and expresses the hope that 'through yourself in the first place and then through other persons, some other [way] may be found which does not demean the fame and honour of Dante' (*Letters*, pp. 157, 159). *Monarchia*, too, is probably a work of the later Verona years (perhaps as late as 1317), and one that, with its insistence upon the necessity and rights of the empire, would have been well received

by the disappointed supporters of Henry VII. Its ideas about the papacy and temporal power (*Mon.* 3) were also highly topical, since August 1316 saw the election of the last pope of Dante's lifetime: John XXII, who proved to be a fierce defender of papal authority and an avowed enemy of both the poet and his Lombard patron (below, p. 48).

Another letter – which (if genuine) probably dates from 1316 – points explicitly to Verona and its ruler. This is the much-discussed 'Epistle to Cangrande', in which the author dedicates the *Paradiso* to the ruler of Verona and offers 'something by way of introduction' first to the *Commedia* as a whole and then to its third part, with some close reading of the opening of *Par.* 1 (*Letters*, no. 10; below, p. 226). Whether or not the letter is actually by Dante (and the scholars may never reach a consensus on that), its opening gives a vivid impression of Cangrande's reputation as it might well have been perceived by a poet in search of a patron:

Even as the Queen of the South sought Jerusalem (1 Kings 10: 1–13; Matthew 12: 42) and as Pallas [Athene] sought Helicon (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5. 254), so did I seek Verona, in order to examine with my own trusty eyes the things of which I had heard. And there was I witness of your splendour, there was I witness and partaker of your bounty; and whereas I had formerly suspected the reports to be somewhat unmeasured, I afterwards recognized that it was the facts themselves that were beyond measure. (*Letters*, pp. 167, 196)

In this opening section of the letter, where Cangrande himself is most directly addressed, it has been pointed out that the issue 'of greatest note may be the extended proof [para. 2–3] that an inferior (that is, Dante) can legitimately call himself the "friend" of a social superior (Cangrande)' (*DE* 349B). The author is thus concerned both to assert his own worth, as one 'endowed with a certain divine liberty', and to defend himself against 'presumption' (*Letters*, pp. 169, 197).

The actual extent of Dante's friendship with Cangrande remains uncertain – except for the legends and anecdotes that proliferated from the fourteenth century onwards. So does the extent of Cangrande's interest in the *Commedia*, and so do the reasons for the poet's departure from Verona for Ravenna in 1318. By that time Dante – perhaps mid-way through the composition of the *Paradiso* – may have found the social and political atmosphere at Verona uncongenial for work on the remainder of the poem, and the cultural milieu at Ravenna might have been more attractive (Petrocchi 1984: 191–2). Certainly, Cangrande's main concerns were to establish local dominance in

Lombardy. According to Villani, he was busy attacking both Cremona and Padua during 1317–18 (Villani 10. 88–9, 91 and 100); and that would not have been a campaign of much interest to Dante. On the other hand they were both still in the same anti-papal, pro-imperial boat. Dante's main enemy at this time, Pope John XXII (*Par.* 18. 118–36), was also deeply hostile to Cangrande and had gone so far as to excommunicate him on 6 April 1318.

We should, however, be wary of the Pre-Raphaelite image of 'Dante at Verona' that was projected by Rossetti – that of the melancholy poet amid philistine courtiers and giggling ladies (\*Ellis 1983: 108–12). Verona was far from being an intellectual or literary desert at this time. Like the neighbouring city of Padua, it was a centre of pre-humanist culture, and its Cathedral Library (where Petrarch would later rediscover letters by Cicero) was one of the major resources in Italy and in western Europe at the time (*ED* 6. 973–4). Indeed, Dante did not finally shake the dust of the city from his feet in 1318. On 20 January 1320 he would be back as a visiting lecturer to publish his geographical treatise (the *Quaestio de Aqua et Terra*), which was 'delivered in the presence of the intellectual elite of Verona' (*DE* 734A).

### 'To find peace with its tributaries': Ravenna 1318–21

Well before his arrival there (probably late in 1318) Dante had associated Ravenna with peace and quiet. Among the trees of the Earthly Paradise at the summit of the mountain of Purgatory, he had imagined a gentle breeze blowing with a sound like that of the south-east wind among the pines near the city (*Purg.* 28. 19–21) Amid a more violent wind in the second circle of Hell, his most famous tragic figure, Francesca da Rimini, recalls her birthplace:

upon the shoreline, where the Po's main stream  
flows down to find peace with its tributaries.

(*Inf.* 5. 98–9)

Francesca's own end – she and her lover 'staining the world with our blood' – was far from peaceful. Indeed, the whole province of the Romagna in her time (the late thirteenth century) was a byword for ruthless vendettas (Larner 1965: 1–2; Barolini 2000: 20–1). In Dante's circle of fraudulent counsellors (*Inf.* 27) the soul of former Romagnuol warlord Guido da Montefeltro anxiously asks if his countrymen are now at war or peace (*Inf.* 27. 28); and

the protagonist is able to reply that although the province ‘is not and never was without war in the hearts of its tyrants’, it was at peace at the time of his otherworld journey in 1300 (37–9). Immediately after this Dante turns to Francesca’s birthplace again and adds that Ravenna has for many years been overshadowed by the eagle, the heraldic emblem of the Polenta family (*Inf.* 27. 40–1).

Francesca’s father, Guido il Vecchio da Polenta, had become ruler of Ravenna in 1275, and his successors remained dominant as *signori* there until shortly after Dante’s death. Throughout Dante’s stay in the city it was ruled by Guido Novello da Polenta (the grandson of Guido il Vecchio), who had come to power in June 1316. Since Ravenna, as a city of the Romagna, was part of the Papal State, Guido Novello owed obedience to the pope’s ‘vicar’, who from 1310 to 1318 was Robert of Anjou. This did not mean, however, that Dante in 1318 was entering a fanatically pro-papal Guelf environment. Robert’s overall administration of the province had been corrupt and incompetent, and Guido had on at least one occasion directly opposed him. Indeed, so lukewarm had Guido Novello’s support for the papacy been that eventually (in 1322) he was removed from power by the papal vicar and sent into exile. As ruler of Ravenna during this period (1316–22) he seems to have kept a low profile politically; and in contrast to other members of his family ‘he openly cultivated peace, scholarship and the arts’ (*ED* 4. 580b). Ravenna’s peaceful state under the wings of the Polenta eagle at this time also contrasted sharply, as Dante would have been aware, with the turbulent state of Lombardy, which he had just left, and where the new pope (John XXII) and his vicars, Robert of Anjou and Philippe de Valois, were not very successfully attempting to assert their authority against the Ghibelline *signori* (Villani 10. 93–5 and 109–10).

Ravenna’s urban landscape, like Verona’s, still vividly evokes the city’s Roman past. Established as a Roman *municipium* by Augustus in 49 BCE, it had expanded eastward during the following three centuries, and was chosen as an imperial residence by the Western Emperor Honorius in 404. The oldest monuments (such as the mausoleum of Galla Placidia with its superb mosaics, the church of Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, the Arian Baptistry, and the Mausoleum of Theodoric) date from the fifth and early sixth centuries: the end of the Western Empire and the rule of the Gothic kings. Under the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (527–65) the Western Empire (including Italy) was reconquered and Ravenna became the capital of the exarch (the Byzantine governor) from 540 till 751. Before he arrived in Ravenna Dante had celebrated Justinian’s achievements by making him a spokesman for the



imperial ideal in an early canto of the *Paradiso* (canto 6). Amongst the images of Byzantine power in the city he would very probably have noted especially the vivid portrayal of Justinian and his court at the side of the presbytery in San Vitale, and the equally impressive mosaics in the apse at Sant' Apollinare in Classe depicting the transfiguration of Christ and other subjects (Talbot Rice 1968: 160, 164–7, with plates 138, 140). The latter scene, in a church a short distance south of the city, takes an abstract form – representing the transfigured Christ as a jewelled cross in a starry disc, hovering above the Apostles, who are figured as sheep below. It may have reminded Dante of his own recently composed image of the illuminated cross in *Paradiso* 14; and like other mosaics in Ravenna, Florence and Rome it could have contributed to the imagining of the upper reaches of Heaven in the later cantos of the *Paradiso* (Schnapp 1986: 177–88 and plates 6, 7, 9, 12, 15).

Most of the second half of the *Paradiso* was probably written in Ravenna during the last three years of the poet's life. How much of a race against time this was we do not know for sure, but Boccaccio's dramatic story of the loss and miraculous recovery of the last 13 cantos perhaps implies that completion of the poem came close to the time of Dante's death (*Trattatello* 1, paras. 183–9). Nor is it known how much direct encouragement he received from his host, Guido Novello – although Boccaccio describes Guido as 'a noble knight' who, 'having been educated in liberal studies, rated men of worth very highly, and above all those who surpassed others in their learning' (*Trattatello* 1, para. 80). Dante's host seems to have been something of a poet, too: in a fourteenth-century manuscript, now at the library of the Escorial in Spain, a group of six elegantly plaintive *ballate* are clearly attributed to 'Messer Guido Novello de Opulenta [*sic*]'. These are thought to have been written before the time Dante was in Ravenna; and they perhaps reflect, in their dramatizing of the lover's inner conflicts and susceptibilities, something of the influence of Dante's *Vita nuova* (C. Ricci 1965: 514–19).

Ravenna also provided other sources of stimulus and support for Dante's final enterprise. Among a circle of *litterati* from the professions (chiefly medicine and law) and associated with him at this time, there were several who wrote poetry. There was, for example, the Venetian Giovanni Quirini, who spoke of Dante as 'my teacher and master', and who addressed a sonnet to Cangrande (probably after Dante's death) expressing a 'longing' to see *Paradiso* circulated, reinforcing his plea with allusions from canto 9 of the poem (*ED* 4. 864, C. Ricci 1965: 514, 529, 530). In Ravenna itself, Dante's literary circle included both Tuscan exiles and some local professionals, of

whom one of the better documented is the notary Menghino Mezzani, who lived until around 1375 and must have been quite young when he met Dante. He is first documented as a notary in 1317, and in later life his literary activity included a number of sonnets on political and other topics and some correspondence with Petrarch (C. Ricci 1965: 240–58). He wrote a Latin epitaph on Dante’s death (*ED* 4. 864a), and brief summaries of the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* in verse which has been described as ‘rather worse than usual’; and he was even said to have written some commentary on the *Commedia* (C. Ricci 1965: 258–9).

Fuller evidence of Dante’s intellectual and literary contacts during this period is, however, to be found in his exchange of four Latin verse letters with a professor of classical poetry at the university of Bologna: Giovanni del Virgilio. Giovanni initiated this exchange in 1319 by writing to Dante, rebuking him for ‘casting pearls before swine’ and writing his great work not in Latin for the ‘learned’ (*clerus*) but in the vernacular (Dante 1902: 146–9). This first letter concludes by inviting the Florentine poet to write for this learned audience about recent political events and then be presented to ‘the applauding schools’ at Bologna, where he would receive the laurel crown. Dante seems to have been both amused and intrigued by all this, since he responded to the classicist by, appropriately enough, reviving a classical mode, the pastoral dialogue or ‘eclogue’, which Virgil himself had used. Here Dante expresses unease about the dangers of visiting Bologna, along with the hope (as in *Par.* 25. 1–9) still of returning to Florence, and finally responds to Giovanni’s ‘blaming of the words of the *Commedia*’ by sending him 10 cantos of the most recent work, presumably the *Paradiso* (Dante 1902: 152–7). The third and fourth of these letters (Giovanni’s reply and Dante’s answer) are less specific about Dante’s work and its reception, but by retaining the dialogue form they create the impression of a supportive social and intellectual group around the poet during this final stage of his career.

Such a group probably included other exiles from Florence and Tuscany; and manuscript notes to the eclogues identify several of Dante’s pastoral figures as actual compatriots. There is also evidence that members of Dante’s own family – his sons Pietro and Jacopo and his daughter Antonia – had joined him in Ravenna. Pietro, who was later to produce three versions of a commentary on the *Commedia*, is mentioned as *filius Dantis Aldigerii* in a document issued by a church court in Ravenna in January 1321 (C. Ricci 1965: 437–8). Jacopo, who in the early 1320s wrote a less ambitious commentary on the *Inferno*, was also probably in the city, since he sent a

summary of the *Commedia* with a dedicatory sonnet to Guido Novello in 1322, very shortly after Dante's death (*DE* 533; C. Ricci 1965: 148–51).

Of the remaining women in Dante's life much less is known. His daughter Antonia and his wife Gemma may have been in Ravenna before his death (Petrocchi 1984: 199). Antonia entered a convent there, taking (as some kind of comment on her father's poetry?) the name of 'Sister Beatrice'; and she is referred to as 'daughter of the late Dante Alighieri' in a document of 1371, some time after her death (C. Ricci 1965: 443). Dante's wife, Gemma Donati, whom he had married around 1285, outlived him and is mentioned along with Pietro, Jacopo and Antonia in a transaction of 1332. It is not known whether she was with Dante in Ravenna or whether she followed him elsewhere during his exile. What kind of marriage it was can only be imagined – as it often has. Boccaccio asserts that it was arranged to console the poet for the death of Beatrice (*Trattatello* 1, paras. 44–5), but there is documentary evidence (from 1277) to show that the couple had been formally betrothed long before that (Petrocchi 1984: 12). The *Cambridge Companion to Dante* asserts that the marriage 'in point of fact, was far less unhappy than Boccaccio . . . thought', although it does not cite any evidence for this 'fact' (Mazzotta 1993: 3). Perhaps (to offer some more pure speculation) the problem that Gemma's marriage faced was the kind of infidelity that the poet's wife in Seamus Heaney's Dantean poem 'An Afterwards' dourly records:

'You left us first and then those books behind.'  
(Heaney 1979: 44)

Two very different journeys mark the years immediately before Dante finally left those books behind. The first, in 1320, led him back to Verona (above, p. 47). Here, according to the text itself, on 20 January, in the small church of Sant' Elena (on the northern side of the cathedral), he delivered to an audience of clergy his last work in Latin, the *Quaestio de Aqua et Terra* (Dante 1904: 422). This short treatise is based – like all medieval cosmography – on the concept of a universe with the Earth at its centre and with part of the Northern Hemisphere considered to be Earth's only habitable area (see diagram 3, below, p. 125). It addresses the question of 'whether water, in its own sphere, that is in its natural circumference, was in any part higher than the earth which emerges from the waters, and which we commonly call the habitable quarter' (Dante 1904: 390). It reflects Dante's aspiration to the status of a philosophic and scientific writer and his ambition

– as in the imagining of the cosmos in the three parts of the *Commedia* – to describe as precisely as possible the structure of the universe within which the human journey took place (*DE* 734A–735B).

Dante himself took several other journeys during these last years of his life: thus the *Quaestio* begins by saying that the scientific problem it addresses originated ‘when I was in Mantua’ (Dante 1904: 389). And it was a mission to Venice in the summer of 1321 that immediately preceded and may even have caused the poet’s death. Dante’s host, Guido Novello da Polenta, had for several years been in dispute with his powerful neighbour about trade and shipping; and matters appear to have come to a head in July 1321, when it looked as if the Venetians, in alliance with the ruler of Forlì, were about to attack Ravenna (*DE* 4. 580a–b). According to Villani, Guido Novello then in late July or early August dispatched Dante as ambassador to Venice in the hope of achieving an agreement, and the poet died shortly afterwards, possibly from an illness (perhaps malaria) contracted during the journey. Villani gives the date of his death as July 1321 (Villani 10. 136), but, from the evidence of those who were nearer at hand, it seems more likely that it occurred in September, probably between the 13th and the 14th of the month. He was buried in a stone coffin in the porch of the Franciscan church. Boccaccio says that Guido Novello ensured that ‘poetic ornaments adorned his bier’ (possibly the crown of laurel and a book, as the late fourteenth-century poet Antonio Pucci claims) and delivered a funeral eulogy (*Trattatello* 1, paras. 87–8).

It was the end and the beginning of the story. The legend of Dante’s life and the cult of the poet-theologian were quick to develop, and this chapter will conclude by sampling three of the early tributes to his work.

Two of the epitaphs composed for the poet at this time were by members of his intellectual circle: the notary of Ravenna, Menghino Mezzani, and the Bolognese academic, Giovanni del Virgilio (above, pp. 24, 50). Giovanni – recollecting his recent exchange of letters with the poet, the debate about the vernacular and his bid to make Dante the laureate of Bologna – commemorates him as follows:

Dante lies here: the theologian skilled in every form of teaching that Philosophy nourishes in her bright bosom, the glory of the muses, the most loved vernacular author; and his fame strikes from pole to pole. In both lay and learned terms [vernacular and Latin] he allotted places to the dead and spheres of authority to the twin swords [empire and papacy]. Of late he was celebrating pastoral life with his Pierian pipes; but envious Atropos [the death-bringing Fate], alas,

cut off that happy work. Florence, a cruel homeland to her poet, ungratefully yielded him only the sad fruit of exile; while kind Ravenna delights in having received him into the protection of the noble lord Guido Novello. In the year of Our Lord one thousand, three hundred and three times seven, on the ides of September, he turned again to his stars. (my translation; original in Dante 1902: 174)

The contrast between the ‘cruel homeland’ (*patria cruda*) of Florence and ‘kind Ravenna’ recurs in other tributes; and Boccaccio was to develop it at length in his biography of the poet (*Trattatello* 1, paras. 92–109). In a commemorative *canzone* of three stanzas (*Su per la costa, Amor, de l’alto monte*) written shortly after Dante’s death, his friend, correspondent and ‘dearest brother’ Cino da Pistoia (1270–c. 1336) moves, like Giovanni del Virgilio, from celebrating the poet’s lofty achievements to condemning the actions of his native city:

Up there, Love, on the crags of that high peak,  
using the skills and style of poets’ speech,  
who can still climb,  
now that the wings of genius lie broken?

I know for sure the waters have run dry  
within that spring where all who gazed might see  
their flaws exposed,  
should they look carefully upon that glass.

O, just, true God who pardons graciously  
all those who reach repentance at the end,  
take this keen soul,  
who tended all throughout life the plant  
of love, to Beatrice’s arms at last.

[. . .]

My poem, seeing Florence so denuded  
of all her hopes, go to her now and say  
she may well grieve,  
for now indeed the goat’s kept from the grass.

And thus the prophecy that so foretold  
has come to pass, Florence; take it to heart;  
and if you can  
know your great loss, weep for its bitterness;  
whilst wise Ravenna, which now guards

your treasure, celebrates it joyfully  
 and wins great praise.  
 May God almighty with his vengeance then  
 bring desolation on your unjust race.  
 (my translation of the first and third stanzas;  
 original in Contini 1960: 2. 689–90)

As befits a poet who was deeply versed in Dante's 'new style', Cino (below, p. 121) develops his tribute through a series of allusions to the *Commedia*. The 'high peak' of the first line recalls not only the mythical mountains of Apollo and the Muses (*Par.* 1. 16–18) but also Mount Purgatory, where Dante encounters, amongst many others, the souls of contemporary poets (*Purg.* 24, 26). The 'keen soul' (my translation) which Cino commends to the keeping of Beatrice at the end of the first stanza is, in the original, *quest'anima bivolca* – literally 'this ploughing soul'. The phrase echoes the simile through which Dante (as adventurous and challenging poet addressing the readers who can still follow him) compares his venture to that of Jason when he ploughed the earth to sow the dragon's teeth (*Par.* 2. 10–18; below, p. 204). Cino's turning of the poem towards Florence at the opening of the final stanza is reminiscent of Dante's conclusions to several of his exile poems, notably his 'song from the mountains', which also describes Florence as 'denuded', though of pity rather than hope (above, p. 23). Representing the Florentines as a goat 'kept from the grass' later in the stanza is a brilliantly barbed touch, since the 'prophecy' which is thus 'fulfilled' was actually the wish of Dante's Brunetto (*Inf.* 15. 72; below, p. 137). The stress upon exile at the end of this tribute is also personally appropriate, since Cino himself had experienced banishment from his native city, Pistoia, from 1303 to 1306 and had mentioned his own exile in a sonnet addressed to Dante (FB no. 88a).

To conclude the obituary tributes, here is a voice from within Florence itself, and one that was in sympathy with the Black Guelfs who had exiled Dante. Born in some time before 1276, Giovanni Villani, the chronicler, was a near contemporary of Dante, although he outlived Dante by more than twenty years. Villani was particularly active in Florentine politics during the 1320s and was elected prior on three occasions between 1316 and 1328. His *Cronica* was a lengthy enterprise (1322–48), which was continued by his younger brother Matteo and his nephew Filippo (Aquilecchia 1979: ix–xxii; Green 1972: 9–43; *DE* 858–9). Villani's political opposition to Dante is evident even in the tribute translated below, especially when he deals with

the poet's views of Florence. Yet Villani was by no means fanatical in his support for the Black Guelphs, and in his assessment of Dante (in effect the earliest biography of the poet) he can hardly be ranked amongst Cino's 'unjust race' of Florentines. He is probably wrong about several things (including the month of Dante's death and the place of his burial); yet he remains the first guide to the landmarks of Dante's life. It therefore seems appropriate to give this Florentine writer, writing in the poet's own vernacular, the final word:

In the July of this same year [1321] Dante Alighieri of Florence died in the city of Ravenna in the Romagna after returning from a mission to Venice in the service of the Polenta rulers with whom he was staying; and he was buried at Ravenna with great honour in the robes of a poet and a great man of learning, in front of the cathedral porch. He died in exile from the commune of Florence and at the age of about fifty-six. Dante was a Florentine citizen of ancient and honourable descent from the district of Porta San Piero and was a neighbour of ours. The reason for his exile from Florence was that, when Lord Charles of Valois of the House of France came to Florence in 1301 and threw out the Whites (as has been mentioned already under that year), this same Dante had been one of the main governors of our city and was of that party, although he was a Gueff. Thus, guiltless of anything else, he was expelled and banished from Florence along with the White party; and he went off to study at Bologna, and then at Paris, and then to other parts of the world.

This man was hugely erudite in almost all fields of learning, despite being a lay person. He was a supreme poet and philosopher, able to compose and versify perfectly as a [Latin] rhetorician, as well as being the noblest of the exponents of poetry in the vernacular. In verse [he was] supreme, displaying a finer and more polished style than has ever appeared in our language before his time or since. In his youth he wrote the book called *Vita nuova* on the subject of love, and then in exile he composed over twenty highly distinguished moral and erotic *canzoni*. Amongst other things, he also wrote three excellent public letters: one he sent to the rulers of Florence complaining about his unjust exile; another he sent to the Emperor Henry VII when he was besieging Brescia, rebuking him in an almost prophetic manner for his delay; the third was to the Italian cardinals when the papal throne was vacant following the death of Pope Clement [V], to urge them to agree on the election of an Italian pope. All these were nobly phrased in Latin with excellent use of sources and quotations from the [classical and Christian] authorities; and they were highly praised by wise and learned readers.

And he wrote the *Commedia*, where through accomplished verse, through the weighty and ingenious treatment of issues concerning morality, nature,

astrology, philosophy and theology, and through fine and inventive figures, comparisons and poetic tropes – he compiled and described in a hundred chapters (or rather cantos) an account of the nature and condition of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. He did this supremely well, as those who have acute understanding will acknowledge, inasmuch as they may read and understand this work of his. It is true that in that *Commedia* he indulged in invective and denunciation as poets tend to do, and in more places than was necessary; but perhaps it was the fact of his exile that made him do so.

He also composed the *Monarchia*, in which he discusses the role of the pope and the emperors. And he began a commentary in the vernacular [the *Convivio*] on fourteen of the moral *canzoni* mentioned above, but because of his death this did not get beyond three of them. Yet this will strike anyone who reads it as a noble, fine, ingenious and highly impressive work, since it is distinguished both by a noble style of writing and by fine philosophical and astrological arguments. In addition he composed a short work which is called *Of Eloquence in the Vernacular* where he sets out to write four books, but only two exist, perhaps because of his premature demise. Here in forceful and elegant Latin he finds fault with all the dialects of Italy.

This Dante, as a result of his great learning, was somewhat proud, haughty and disdainful, and like many unsociable men of learning he was not easily able to communicate with the unlearned. Yet on account of the other virtues, knowledge and worth of this great citizen, it seems right to set down an everlasting record of him in this chronicle of ours, in order that those noble works of his bequeathed to us in his writings may bear true witness to his memory and bring fame and honour to our city. (my translation from Villani 10. 136)