

Introduction

There were a lot of flourishing cities in north-central Italy after the 12th century. They had a common cultural circumstances: that of the comune (commune in Latin) society — society as a community of citizens. These cities, some of which, mostly small comuni of Lombardia, Veneto, and Emilia-Romagna, eventually went to go under the rule of signori politically, were led not by lords but by their citizens culturally. (South Italy boasted of its high cultural level, which the court of Palermo and Naples kept.)

Merchants played the pivotal role in this city culture. Population of Italian cities included feudal landlords, city aristocrats, artisans, and wage laborers, besides merchants. Nevertheless merchants and traders got to rule these cities socially as well as economically, as they grew and gained their autonomy. The economic and legal framework of cities was formed for need of them. It must be remembered, of course, that they might live within the feudal society and benefit from it, and that Italian cities, in particular, assimilated feudal vassals from rural communities; urban inhabitants including merchants had rural-feudal custom and mentality, and rich merchants having no feudal origin themselves wished to be landowner. But we can point out that they produced their own city culture different from rural culture, which must be called "mercantile culture": their intelligence, learning, and mentality might influence the society and culture of city in north-central Italy in the later Middle Ages.

Here I will deal with city life and culture of medieval merchants:

what meanings their mentality and senses have in the urban society of Italy. With this intention Florence, one of the most influential and culturally important Italian cities, will be treated of principally. For this Toscan city has the variety of historical documents and has been studied well since the 19th century.

I. Schooling and education

A characteristic of medieval Italian cities was their high cultural level. A considerable number of urban people could read and write as compare with other western cities, even though many of them belonged to the upper and middle classes. Especially Florentine parents seems to have been eager in educating their children.

Giovanni Villani, a Florentine merchant and famous chronicler in the 14th century, described about Florentine schools circa 1338: "We find that 8,000 to 10,000 boys and girls are learning to read. There are 1,000 to 1,200 boys learning abbaco (instrument for calculating) in six schools. And those who study grammar and logic in four large schools are 550 to 600" (Cronica, Libro XII-94). We can estimate that the city of Florence of those days (before the Black Death) would have population of about 100,000, and that children between the ages of 6 and 12 (in the elementary education, so that in learning to read and write) would be 18,000 (18% of the whole population). If we accept Villani's statistics, we can conclude that 25-35% of adult Florentines were to be able to read and write.

Unfortunately his numerical statements are not always trustworthy. But a comprehensive survey of the assets, the liabilities, and the status of members of every household, made by the Florentine government

in 1480 to prepare a new catasto (a system of taxation) suggests that one-third of Florentine boys between the ages of 10 and 13 were learning in schools in those days. Many Florentine parents regarded the education as important and had their sons attend schools to study reading and writing, abbaco, and Latin.

Villani's description itself suggests Florentines' attitude toward the education. He referred to children's schooling —how many boys and girls attended schools— for the purpose of showing the greatness of the city of Florence. Does this mean that he and other Florentines made much account of the education and connected it with the prosperity of their city, boasting of a lot of children attending schools? The Florentine society — and that of other north-central Italian cities recognized the importance of the ability to read and write more than any other part of Europe.

Most of schools where inhabitants of Italian cities studied were under private management; each of them was usually small private school run in a bottega or shop with a teacher who was also its manager. It is certain that there were public schools instituted by the church or by each comune, and especially church schools were important in the history of medieval education. In large and flourishing cities, however, the main educational system of many cities passed from hands of temporal and spiritual authorities to those of private teachers. Pursuing higher income, these teachers who had studied in university moved from city to city, and ran schools where they could expect to gather many pupils. They specialized in their duties: leggere (vernacular reading and writing), abbaco e algoritmo (abbaco and arithmetic, and grammatica (grammar and rhetoric of Latin). Reading and writing was the first step

of learning and a considerable number of boys and girls (probably much fewer than boys) did it. In general girls didn't go to school to learn abbaco and arithmetic, for this training was necessary for business. Finally a small number of boys attended schools in order to learn the language of Latin.

Florentine parents, particularly fathers, were intent on making their sons literate and willing to pay for educating them. In his family journal, Ricordi, a Florentine merchant of the late 14th century, Giovanni di Pagolo Morelli, observed that orphans were placed at a disadvantage for having no opportunity to be educated at their fathers' expense. In other Toscan cities merchants, at least of upper and middle classes, also seem to have been paying for their sons' education. A merchant of Arezzo (a city located south-east from Florence) of the Trecento, Domenico Gerozzo put school expenses for his son Domenico on record in his ricordanze: in 1354 he wrote that he had sent a few grossi (Venetian current money) at a time in order to pay for a teacher who gave lessons of reading ("ensegnia a leggiare"), so his son must have been studying in Venice.

By contrast they don't seem have been eager in having their daughters learning in schools. Girls were to learn sewing, cooking, and housekeeping instead of reading and writing. In 14th century Paolo da Certaldo, a Florentine merchant and the author of Il Libro di buoni costumi ("Book of Good Customs"), advised Florentines not to have their daughters learn to read books. According to his statement, it was not good that girls could read and write. On the other hand some moralists and humanists of the 15th and 16th centuries insisted that women also should be able to read and write in the vernacular. In fact there were

some famous women praised for their literary talent in the history of Renaissance literature. But it is difficult we estimate how literate women in medieval cities could be in general. Letters of Margherita Datini of Prato or Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi of Florence suggest that at least women of upper and middle classes in the 14th and 15th centuries were able to be literate enough to read and write letters. Upper- and middle-class girls attending school, however, were not many; they learned with home tutoring or in female monasteries. Toward educating girls their parents did not take very positive attitude.

II. Education and Social Life

Ability to read and write was indispensable for merchants in business practice and in their social life; business contract, transfer of land, inheritance of patrimony, matrimonial contract — everything had to be put on record in account books or notarial documents by their own hands or notaries'. Living in an unstable urban society and carrying on risky trade, they were feeling the necessity of keeping written documents about various contracts and their legal rights for fear of something bad coming up later on. No verbal promise had validity in the Italian urban society. In order to survive in this society and not to be at a disadvantage economically and legally, urban inhabitants, artisans as well as merchants, came to be eager to educate themselves and their sons. Education led to their success in the urban society; this was one of the reasons why they made little account of educating their daughters.

Education, however, was not only of practical use but also of social importance: the degree of education of a Florentine could

influence his social value and put him in a better position in the urban society. Pagolo Morelli, Giovanni's father, whom his father had left illiterate, decided to go to school at his own expense in order to succeed in life, for his brothers thought little of him because of his illiteracy. He could not claim the inheritance toward his brothers until he became literate. This story told in Ricordi shows Florentines' sense of value about the literacy: they regarded it as a criterion of the estimation of a man.

And, if he gained a high public estimation, it was possible for a citizen to be advantageous in the city's administrative system. A distinctive communal system adopted by Florence and many of other Italian cities was the administrative rotation system where citizens held various communal offices in turn and without salary (exceptionally podestà and several offices were paid). His social position, property, influence, and the public estimation of him could have some effect on this rotation. Being educated enough was effectively a necessary condition in order to hold superior offices.

III. Education and the Civic Humanism

In this social situation learning and studying were familiar to upper- and middle-class Florentines. They got to feel an intellectual interest in the classics, learning vernacular reading and writing, arithmetic technique, and Latin grammar. Giovanni Morelli asserted that learning only reading, writing and abbaco, so that techniques necessary for business, didn't suffice good citizens, and exhorted readers of his Ricordi to read the Latin classics — works of Vergil, Boetius, Cicero from which they were to derive useful things for life: the language of

Latin should not be learned only in the cause of business and legal practice. His advice reflect an Italian cultural trend — not limited within Florence — in the 14th century. Petrarca born as a son of a notary, and Boccaccio, a son of a Florentine merchant, devoted themselves to the study of the classics, and Cola di Rienzo, a Roman notary, led the rebellion against the Roman aristocracy, dreaming the revival of the ancient Roman republicanism. They did not confine themselves to studying Latin works of ancient and early medieval writers from intellectual curiosity but wished to find a model of their own social life in those classics.

Their attitude toward the Latin classics, stimulated by the cultural speciality of Italy, which kept the legal framework of Rome and succeeded the Roman culture, influenced the political attitude of citizens of Italian cities, especially of Florence. As famous Coluccio Salutati's statement shows, Florentines persisted in the republicanism and were proud of keeping it. They compared their Florentine republicanism to the ancient Roman republicanism in justification of their position and in praise of the city. There is no doubt that this attitude called "civic humanism" in the late 14th century was backed up by Florentines' education of Latin.

In a sense "civic humanism" advantaged Florentine ruling class. The Republic was effectively governed by rich traders and bankers, especially after the failure of the Tumult of Ciompi. Connected to each other, they linked themselves to the middle and lower classes and controled them through different human networks. The Florentine society was covered by those different human networks overlapping each other: kinship, friendship, commercial partnership, membership of guild and

occupational relations, patronage, neighborhood, etc. All Florentines lived in the networks where an individual could always rely on many of his relatives and associates to help him, and "parenti, amici, vicini (kin, friends, neighbors)" — these three were indispensable elements for Florentines.

Upper-class citizens helped and influenced their "friends", who were effectively their clients, and were sustained by them. And these rich and influential traders and bankers had to keep the tradition of republicanism formally and retain republican institutions, emasculating them gradually, because the strong republicanism of Florentines didn't allow them to be a positive ruling class. In this situation the justification of Florentine Republic through "civic humanism", which could satisfy the pride of the upper class as well as the middle and lower, was favorable to hiding the realities of the Republic.

Conclusion

The urban culture of Italy was produced by merchants for need of business practice and developed by them. We can't neglect the illiterate and popular culture in the urban society, which would also influence the upper and middle classes. But it was their desire to learn and their intelligence which could keep the level of education in Florence, Venice, and other Italian cities and provide the pre-Renaissance culture. The Renaissance culture, however, was off citizens' hands by the late 15th century, and was succeeded in the courts of the Medici and the Sforza, the papal court, or the court of Aragonese Naples, while Venetian aristocracy holding their civic culture as well as their republicanism.

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