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The Rise and Fall of Girolamo Savonarola

At the end of the 13th century, humanism, a new type of thought that emphasized the importance of earthly life, emerged in Italy. It had a profound impact on art, politics, and the everyday lives of people. Over the course of the 15th century, Florence, the birthplace of humanism, became one of the most powerful states in Italy and a vibrant center of art and culture under the leadership of the Medici family. Many religious conservatives, however, denounced the Renaissance culture as contradictory to Christian teachings, which emphasized human humility, righteous living, and love of God. The most vigorous opponent of the excesses of the Renaissance was Girolamo Savonarola, a Dominican friar, who rose to prominence in Florence in the late 1480s and 1490s. His appeal to the Florentines can be attributed to his fiery and apocalyptic preaching style, which merged certain aspects of civic humanism with the idea of religious and cultural renewal. By condemning the Medici rule and the decadence of the Renaissance, he appealed to those groups who felt disaffected by the Medici regime. However, his continuous critique of both secular and religious authorities eventually led to his downfall.

Girolamo Savonarola was born in Ferrara in 1452. His grandfather, a court physician, oversaw his education and likely shaped Savonarola's views of the world, as he was very devout and often wrote disapprovingly about the modern clergy and the Italian courts.¹ Savonarola

¹ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 7-9.

received a humanist education and pursued a Master of Arts degree at the University of Ferrara, but never finished his studies, as he decided to join the Order of Friars Preachers at the Convent of San Domenico in Bologna in 1475. In his early writings, his disgust and repulsion for the Renaissance world are already evident. In a letter he wrote to his father in 1475, he said that the main reason he chose a religious life was “the boundless misery of this world and the extreme unrighteousness of most men, the adulteries, thefts, idolatries, impurities and hideous blasphemies ...” (Savonarola, *Letters* 2). He deplored the excesses of the Renaissance, the absence of morality, and the corruption of state and religious authorities.

After spending seven years in the Dominican monastery of Bologna and studying sacred theology at the University of Bologna, Savonarola was assigned to the Convent of San Marco in Florence in 1482. His first sermons drew only a small number of listeners, but he was determined to get better at preaching. He, for instance, made notes, such as “I was not pleased” or “pretty enough,” on his performance and the audience’s reaction to his sermons.² In one of his sermons in 1498, he recalled, “Everyone who knew me ten years ago knows that I had neither voice nor breath nor preaching style, in fact everybody disliked my preaching” (Weinstein, *Rise and Fall* 36). Savonarola left Florence in 1487 to continue his studies at the University of Bologna, although he was later dismissed as a candidate for the Master of Sacred Theology degree. In the following years, he preached in various cities in northern Italy, including Ferrara, Genoa, and Brescia. By the time he was reassigned to the Convent of San Marco in Florence in 1490, he had already developed his fiery and apocalyptic preaching style.

² Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 34.

The new style and content of Savonarola's sermons gradually gained him a large following. After years of studying the Bible and other religious texts, and practicing preaching in various Italian cities, his sermons became more passionate, convincing, and authoritative. He spared nobody, condemning both secular and religious authorities. For example, in one of his sermons in 1491, he denounced the corrupt clergy that only looked after its own interests and harshly condemned the wealthy elites and their oppressive tax policies, which force the poor to "pay and pay again" (Villari pp. 125-127). A key part of his sermons was the prediction of an apocalypse coming to Florence as a consequence of the widespread moral corruption. He claimed that "this city shall no more be called Florence, but a den of thieves, of turpitude and bloodshed," the rich will be "poverty-stricken," and priests "changed into a terror" (Villari 126). His new dramatic preaching style and apocalyptic message drew people's attention, as proven by the increasing number of listeners of his sermons, people wishing to enter the Dominican Order, and visitors to San Marco looking for spiritual advice.³

Part of the reason Savonarola's predictions of an apocalypse gained him a large number of supporters was also that Florence had a tradition of apocalyptic prophecy. Religious mentality, interest in eschatology, and the belief that they were the "chosen people" were rooted deep in Florentine society, and as the middle of the millennium was approaching, many prophecies of an upcoming catastrophe circulated around the city, some by anonymous prophets, others by medieval apocalyptic thinkers, such as Joachim of Fiore.⁴ Critical events were often interpreted in the context of an approaching apocalypse. The threat of the Ottoman Empire was, for example, seen as God's punishment for the corruption and immorality of the Christian world.⁴ When some of

³ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 83-85.

⁴ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 37-41.

Savonarola's prophecies eventually came true, they solidified the Florentines' belief in Savonarola as their prophet. The first of his prophecies came true in 1492. On the day of Lorenzo de' Medici's death, he warned his audience during a morning sermon that the "sword of the Lord" would strike "soon and swiftly" (Weinstein, *Rise and Fall* 90).

Over the next two years, Savonarola also began prophesying the coming of a savior for Florence, who would punish the corrupt elites and lead the religious and moral reform of the city. In a sermon at the end of 1492, he predicted, "one like Cyrus was going to cross the mountains" (Weinstein, *Rise and Fall* 96), referencing the Persian King Cyrus who ended the Babylonian captivity of Israel. When the French began their invasion of Italy in 1494, the French King Charles VIII was believed to be the "New Cyrus." Piero de' Medici failed in his negotiations with the French, as he gave in to all of Charles's demands, prompting the Signoria to send another embassy, which included Savonarola, to negotiate with the king.⁵ Savonarola told Charles that he had predicted his arrival and his role as a savior, making an impression on the French, as they ultimately chose not to sack Florence and instead agreed to a two-year alliance.⁶ Piero de' Medici was exiled, and Savonarola was believed to have saved Florence, which again confirmed him as a true prophet and also granted him significant political power.

Savonarola's appeal to the Florentines can also be attributed to his ideas, which combined the belief in a need for religious and moral renewal with certain aspects of civic humanism that were already deeply engrained in Florentine society, particularly the belief in Florentine exceptionalism. In his apocalyptic sermons, Savonarola portrayed Florence as a city chosen by God. After the French invasion, he began preaching that if the Florentines managed to achieve

⁵ Kenneth Bartlett, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 232-234.

⁶ Pasquale Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola* (New York: Scribner's, 1909), 226-239.

moral reform, punishment and tribulations would be followed by glory, and Florence would become the leader of the Christian world. In one of his sermons at the end of 1494, he declared, “I have told you, you will be a glorious city, and Christ, your Captain, will conduct all your affairs, and you will be the reform of all Italy and even outside of Italy” (Savonarola, *Writings* 172). By claiming that Florence was chosen by God and that it would once again achieve its former glory, he drew on the deeply rooted belief of the Florentines that they were the chosen people. He also helped them maintain their self-confidence and belief in their exceptionalism during a time of unease and uncertainty. The ineffective rule of Piero de’ Medici, the loss of control over Pisa, and the French invasion resulted in a climate of distrust and tension in the city. Savonarola, however, managed to create a sense of stability and unity among the common people with his preaching. Luca Landucci, a Florentine apothecary, wrote in his diary that “he was held in so much esteem and devotion in Florence that there were many men and women who, if he had said to them ‘go into the fire’ would surely have obeyed him” (Weinstein, *Rise and Fall* 159).

Another ideal of civic humanism that Savonarola drew on was the belief in the importance of civic liberty and active civic engagement. After the French army left Florence, he began to actively interfere in the city’s politics. Piero de’ Medici’s exile meant that a new type of government had to be formed, and Savonarola advocated for a republic with widened government participation. He denounced the Medici as tyrants⁷ who had taken away people’s political liberties and allowed paganism and decadence to flourish. With his support, a new constitution was passed and a new political body, the great council, was created. It comprised five hundred men from powerful families, who also elected twenty-eight additional members per year, enabling capable

⁷ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 121.

citizens to have a say in political decisions.⁸ This resulted in the widest participation in the government that Florence had ever seen.

Savonarola merged the ideals of civic humanism with the need for religious and cultural reform, emphasizing that civic liberty went hand in hand with moral renewal.⁹ Since his beginnings as a preacher, he had been an avid opponent of the excesses of the Renaissance, which he believed had led people to distance themselves from Christian teachings of humility and righteous living. He condemned dancing, gambling, prostitution, classical art and literature, which he considered symbols of widespread vanity and decadence. In 1496, he began an active fight against the moral corruption in Florence. He established a brigade of boys between six and sixteen who wandered the streets and interrupted anything they deemed to be immoral behavior, even ripping women's clothes if they believed them to be immodest.¹⁰ In 1496, Luca Landucci wrote in his diary, "Girolamo had encouraged the boys to oppose the wearing of unsuitable ornaments by women, and to reprove gamblers, so that when anyone said, 'Here come the boys of the Fratel' every gambler fled, however bold he might be, and the women went about modestly dressed" (Landucci 101).

In 1497, Savonarola organized his first bonfire of vanities, taking a Florentine tradition and calling for its religious and moral reform. Before entering Lent, a season of fasting and prayer, it had been a Medici tradition to organize large carnivals, where people would wear masks, play music, dance, drink, sing, and entertain themselves without restraint.¹¹ Savonarola denounced the

⁸ Kenneth Bartlett, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 234.

⁹ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 121.

¹⁰ Kenneth Bartlett, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 235.

¹¹ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 217.

tradition and instead called for a bonfire of vanities. Children and other citizens gathered pictures, sculptures, musical instruments, gaming boards, mirrors, perfumes, Latin books, and other material luxuries on a large pyramid of wood.¹² Pacifico Burlamacchi wrote that they “set fire to [it] with as much gladness and rejoicing among all the people as such a conflagration of so many vanities and snares of the devil required” (Savonarola, *Writings* 258). This proves that Savonarola’s preaching and actions were in fact effective, as people trusted him and supported his vision of moral and religious reform. He even managed to appeal to certain intellectuals, such as the renowned humanist scholar, Pico della Mirandola, who became an avid supporter of Savonarola, donating a large part of his property and wealth to the church and leading an increasingly religious life in the years before his death.¹³ Inspired by della Mirandola and Savonarola, Angelo Poliziano, a famous poet and scholar, even entered the Convent of San Marco before his death.¹⁴

In the process of advocating for reform, Savonarola had created many enemies for himself among secular and religious elites. The number of his religious opponents had been increasing ever since he began preaching against the corrupt clergy. In an Advent Sermon in 1495, he, for example, said that “these days prelates and preachers are chained to the earth by love of earthly things, the cure of souls is no longer their concern, they are content with the receipt of revenue ... they have not only destroyed the Church of God, but built up another after their own fashion” (Savonarola, *Renaissance Reader* 645). Harsh attacks on the modern clergy and its moral

¹² Girolamo Savonarola, *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490-1498*, edited and translated by Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 256-257.

¹³ Brian Copenhaver, "Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/pico-della-mirandola/>.

¹⁴ Peter Godman, *From Poliziano to Machiavelli: Florentine Humanism in the High Renaissance* (Princeton University Press, 1998), 130-131, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv8pzbqs>.

corruption became a constant in his sermons. Additionally, other religious orders were envious because the Convent of San Marco and its priests were receiving most of the charitable donations.¹⁵

The number of Savonarola's political opponents also steeply increased after he began actively engaging in Florentine politics. The wealthy elites that had enjoyed art, dancing, drinking, and gambling resented Savonarola's campaign against such behavior.¹⁶ He also faced sharp criticism for his political activity, as priests were not supposed to interfere in politics. Yet, he continued to condemn all of his enemies without remorse. For example, when one of his proposals was blocked in the Signoria, he mocked his opponents by saying, "I want to teach you how you respond to such as these: take a bushel of millet, dump it into their laps and tell them, 'go, feed the chickens'" (Weinstein, *Rise and Fall* 134).

Savonarola's eventual downfall, however, became inevitable when he decided to disobey the orders of Pope Alexander VI. Florence refused to join the alliance the Pope had formed with the German emperor and other Italian states in the war against the French army, confirming that Savonarola in fact had large political influence and could be dangerous to Rome. In August 1495, the Pope banned Savonarola from preaching,¹⁷ but the prophet continued giving sermons and condemning the Church and the papacy. In one of his dialogues during a sermon in 1496, he even said, "God will send a holy pope. —O what do you think, frate? Do you think it is this one or another? —I believe it will be another" (Weinstein, *Rise and Fall* 182). In 1497, the Pope excommunicated Savonarola, but the prophet once again disobeyed the papal order, claiming that

¹⁵ Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 192-193.

¹⁶ Kenneth Bartlett, *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 235-237.

¹⁷ Pasquale Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola* (New York: Scribner's, 1909), 375-385.

it was a result of his enemies' conspiracies and that "such excommunications are worthless" (Savonarola, *Writings* 300).

Unwavering attacks on Savonarola from all sides, his excommunication, and an economic crisis in Florence caused doubt and dissatisfaction to spread among the prophet's supporters. In April 1498, Charles VIII died without fulfilling Savonarola's prophecy of saving Florence and leading its moral renewal. The following day, a mob attacked the Convent of San Marco, and Savonarola was eventually arrested and imprisoned. With the approval of the Pope, he was interrogated and tortured until he signed a statement that his preaching and prophecies were not in fact inspired by God but a product of his own ambitions. Part of his confession said, "Seeing it all go well, and my reputation and favor among the Florentine people grow, I went further and began to say that I had it from revelation, although in fact it was all the invention of my zeal" (Weinstein, *Rise and Fall* 280). On May 23, 1498, he was hanged and burned in the Piazza della Signoria.

Savonarola's fiery, apocalyptic preaching and his idea of moral reform were the instruments that initially gained him a large following of devoted supporters. However, these same instruments also led to his demise by inciting a large opposition among religious and state authorities, which ultimately resulted in his execution. While the period of his rise to prominence had certain positive outcomes for Florence, such as widened participation in the government and the preservation of Florentines' confidence in their exceptionalism, it had a far greater number of drawbacks, and the city under his rule functioned more like a tyranny than a republic, which Savonarola claimed to favor. He harshly condemned all his opponents, influenced city politics from behind the scenes, and used children as a tool to further his cause. It is undeniable, however, that his ideas of reform and an approaching apocalypse continued to be controversial even after

his death. Scholars have continually discussed and studied Savonarola and his legacy, some considering him a tyrant and a charlatan, others a martyr for Florence.

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