Fifteenth-Century Florentine Exceptionalism: Civic Humanism, the Medici, and Savonarola

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Abstract

The Italian city-state of Florence had a long-standing tradition of exceptionalist rhetoric during the Renaissance, though the focus of the city's distinction altered over time. This tradition, also referred to as the "Myth of Florence," is similar to the idea of "American exceptionalism." This paper aims to investigate the distinct change in Florentine exceptionalism over the course of the fifteenth century. The civic humanists of the early 1400s viewed Florence as a New Rome, spreader of political liberty, and, with its republican form of government, heir to the ancient Roman Republic. In the 1490s, Dominican Friar Girolamo Savonarola argued that Florence was a New Jerusalem, destined to become the new model of Christendom on earth. Medici hegemony explains the rhetorical shift from Rome to Jerusalem. Before 1434, Florence was a functioning republic. After that date, and until 1494, Florence was increasingly under the rule of one family. The transition to a quasi-principality made civic humanist rhetoric impossible and paved the way for Savonarola to craft his message of Florentine religious exceptionalism.

Introduction

Many Americans are familiar with their nation being referred to as a city on a hill. Such rhetoric argues that America is an exceptional nation and other countries should mimic American values and institutions. Throughout America's history, political leaders, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens have commented on this idea of American exceptionalism. The Italian city-state of Renaissance Florence had a similar tradition, sometimes called the "Myth of Florence." As an early center of the Italian Renaissance, Florence boasted strong republican values, veneration for antiquity, and humanist studies. Modern scholars have argued that Renaissance Florence was the precursor to the modern state. Already in the fourteenth century, Florentines first wrote about their city as having a special place in the world, arguing that it possessed an excellence that warranted emulation in both religious and secular matters.[1] This "Florentine exceptionalism" evolved until it eventually became more coherent by the early fifteenth century. By this time, many intellectuals argued that Florence's republicanism was the most important feature of its political system.[2] This intense belief in republicanism was combined with a renewed vigor in classical studies—in which Florentines sought

antecedents for their political values—and civic engagement—which became a hallmark of the Florentine political culture.[3]

Political freedom and republican government were not possible under Medici hegemony (1434–1494). After 1434, Florence increasingly became ruled by the Medici family, a powerful group that made its fortune in banking and finance.[4] The themes of republicanism and liberty in civic humanism became incompatible with the new quasi-principality. Once the Medici family was firmly in power in the 1450s, intellectuals began arguing that withdrawal from society and politics was required in order to achieve enlightenment.[5] It was simply impossible to say scholars, prominent citizens, and aristocratic families should intervene in public life when Florence increasingly became a republic in name only.

The Medici were forced out of the city in 1494 after the invasion of the peninsula by the French King Charles VIII. Once the Medici fled, Dominican Friar Girolamo Savonarola quickly assumed a place of authority within the city. Already popular due to his fiery sermons and charismatic personality, Savonarola seemed to predict both the Medici's collapse and the Florentine invasion by Charles VIII. Departing from the secular bent of civic humanism, Savonarola called upon Florence to become a New Jerusalem, completely redefining the rhetoric of the city's exceptionalism.

Humanism to Civic Humanism: Florence as New Rome

The original humanist movement and Florentine exceptionalism began to take shape during the fourteenth century. During this time, Giovanni Villani referred to Florence as possessing a unique position in the world.[6] Villani's exceptionalist message was one of the first written examples of the Florentine exceptionalism tradition. The humanist movement of the fourteenth century sought to make classic Roman and Greek literature relevant to contemporary Florentine life. Original humanists include Francis Petrarch, the great Italian writer, and Niccolo Niccoli, a collector of classical texts, who started a revival in classical studies around the Italian peninsula in the Renaissance.[7] Early humanism was isolated in nature, practiced by individuals such as Petrarch who desired to emulate classical writers like Cicero in order to live a virtuous life. Petrarch had no interest in pursuing public office or directly applying the knowledge of the ancients to modern life. For example, one of Petrarch's masterpieces is called *The Secret*. This book was never intended to be published and details Petrarch's internal, individual struggles between an active and contemplative life—that is, between earthly pleasures and Christianity. Petrarch wanted to use classical texts to improve the quality of his personal life. His writing was entirely for his own use and was not to be applied to society.

Fifteenth-century humanism and Florentine exceptionalism changed considerably from their fourteenth-century counterparts. The first decades of the 1400s saw the emergence of civic humanism, which labeled Florence as the New Rome, successor to the great Roman Republic, and bringer of political liberty to the Italian peninsula.[8] Additionally, driven by both intellectual and political events, political elites and intellectuals in the Italian peninsula eventually created a humanist education for future politicians in order to cultivate civic virtue. Ancient models such as the Roman Republic were concrete examples of civic virtue. In this new humanist curriculum, Roman, and later Greek, literary classics and the primacy of human, temporal concerns became the main focus.[9] Such an education was competition to the medieval, scholastic education that emphasized Catholic morals and values.[10] Twentieth-century Renaissance historian Hans Baron coined the term "civic humanism" to describe the fifteenth-century movement and contended that original versions of Florentine exceptionalism like Villani's history were repurposed in the more civically applied

humanism by the beginning of the fifteenth century. Villani's nascent exceptionalist message was not intended to train future civil servants, but the themes he emphasized were used in the civic humanist tradition.[11] As a result, my composition employs civic humanism as another form of the Florentine exceptionalist tradition.

Comprehending the political context of Florence's late fourteenth-century wars with Milan is crucial to understanding civic humanism. In the late 1300s, the duchy of Milan sought to unite the Italian peninsula under its authority. The Visconti family ruled Milan as despots at this time, and Gian Galeazzo Visconti united much of Tuscany, minus Florence, under his thumb. Visconti had conquered all areas surrounding Florence by 1400. All seemed lost for Florence until Visconti's sudden death in 1402. Baron argued that Florence viewed its victory against Milanese aggression as republicanism and liberty triumphing over tyranny and oppression.[12] Consequently, civic humanism required and could only function in a republican government. Principalities or despotisms were not compatible with civic humanism due to its foundation in republican Florence. Since civic humanism was created when republican Florence was fighting despotic Milan, republicanism and liberty became important elements of that philosophy.

This article treats Leonardo Bruni and Coluccio Salutati, witnesses to the Milanese Wars and contemporary intellectuals, as civic humanists, although neither one ever described himself as such. Here it is key to make the distinction between Bruni's and Salutati's rhetoric and their actual political beliefs. Historian James Hankins has demonstrated that during the lives of Bruni and Salutati, the two participated in many activities opposed to republican ideology.[13] Ignoring what Bruni and Salutati felt or believed as private individuals, this paper looks at what the two intellectuals said in their public praise of Florence. In other words, the goal here is not to determine who Bruni and Salutati were internally, but to analyze their public works in the context and age of civic humanism. Finally, I mainly focus on the political aspects found in their civic humanism: republicanism and liberty. There was certainly more to the movement, such as education and literary criticism, but these aspects are not the focus of this article.

As many scholars have noted, Salutati was a transitional figure between Petrarch's humanism and civic humanism.[14] Nevertheless, the Florentine chancellor articulated many ideas central to the new Florentine exceptionalism. His *Invective against Antonio Loschi* was written in 1398 in response to Loschi's charges that Florence was the real oppressor and Milan had the right to unite the peninsula. The document revealed an intense thirst for political liberty: "Great is our love for the liberty that you, most foolish of all men, call shameful; only those who have never experienced it, like yourself, fail to appreciate it and to understand its value."[15] Loschi was a representative of Milan who argued for Milanese domination of the peninsula. Salutati was criticizing both Loschi's affection for despotism and his failure to appreciate political liberty. From Salutati's perspective, Loschi, who lived in a despotic state, naturally could not truly appreciate political freedom. Not only was Loschi an idiot according to Salutati; he was the most foolish of all men. While one normally finds incendiary and lofty language in invectives, the excerpt presented here hits at civic humanism's core. For Salutati, Loschi's support for a tyrannical regime was truly abhorrent.

Salutati did not stop there, and continued to attack Loschi: "Your famous Roman steadfastness and strength in defending your shameful liberty, or, should I say, your most fierce tyranny. You always pride yourselves on claiming descent from the Romans."[16] Both Salutati and Loschi claimed that the ancestor of their respective municipalities was Rome, but they each selected different periods in Roman history from which to claim descendance. For civic humanism and other ideologies that

sought to justify territorial aggression, tracing a city's ancestry back to Rome was very important.[17] Salutati and others like him believed that their respect for liberty derived from the Roman Republic, the apex of human political organization in their eyes. Consequently, civic humanists went to great lengths to prove that republican Rome, a polity that respected liberty, was the ancestor of contemporary Florence. Milan and similar despotic states argued that they were fulfilling the role of the Roman Empire and would bring peace to the peninsula by creating a universal authority. During the latter half of the fourteenth century the Visconti family in Milan had tried to unite Italy under one government. From Salutati's perspective, Loschi's counterarguments were invalid. Milan, at this time being an expansionist despotism under the thumb of the Visconti family, was more analogous to imperial (as opposed to republican) Rome—that is, something to be shunned, according to Salutati. Milan was not an heir to the Roman Republic because it cultivated tyranny, akin to the Roman Empire. For the civic humanists, the Roman Republic represented true greatness, not the perpetually declining empire.[18] In other words, not all of Rome's historical periods should be emulated.

From a civic humanist's worldview of history, it is evident Rome's heir had to be a republic. Salutati showed that Florence, due to its republican government and embrace of liberty, was the New Rome. Salutati went further than that and even argued that Florence would surpass its legendary ancestor because the city loved liberty so much: "The steadfastness and the fortitude of the Florentines, superior even to that of the Romans, in defending their most beloved liberty; a divine gift, as the saying goes, more precious than all the money in the world."[19] Once more, Salutati reiterated the importance of liberty to both the Romans and the Florentines: political freedom was the lifeblood in any society. Florence would eclipse the Roman Republic by honoring political freedom, not by territorial aggression. Again, Milan was deeply flawed because its political system and desire to become a universal empire destroyed liberty at home and abroad. Salutati held political freedom higher than any other temporal principle.

Lastly, the way Salutati talked about religion revealed civic humanism's fundamentally secular nature. God was mentioned sparingly, reflecting the overwhelming political flavor of the quote in the preceding paragraph. One can easily miss the "divine gift" comment amid the excerpt's main secular focus. As other scholars have pointed out, the civic humanists took a decidedly more secular outlook than the religiously devout intellectuals from the Middle Ages.[20] This did not mean Salutati was not religious, but rather that he prioritized secular concerns in his rhetoric over religious matters.

While Salutati is labeled a transitional figure, Leonardo Bruni is considered civic humanism's chief representative, according to Hans Baron, Kenneth Bartlett, and many other scholars.[21] Bruni was an intellectual and historian who received patronage from Salutati and became the chancellor of the city in 1415. Throughout his life, Bruni wrote many humanist texts directed at defending republican ideology and discrediting despotism. During his prolific career, Bruni saw civic humanism's zenith (the 1400s–1420s) and the rise of Medici hegemony. Bruni's *The Panegyric to the City of Florence*, composed around 1402, represents his developing civic humanist ideas. The document was composed immediately after Milan's defeat in 1402 and presents Florentine character and principal values, according to Baron and other historians.[22] Some academics, including Jerold Siegel, have questioned Baron's dating calculations; regardless, when the document was first made and delivered does not affect my argument.[23] In his panegyric, Bruni discredited tyranny and praised republicanism, following Salutati's methodology. Like his mentor, Bruni focused on political realities.

He included references to God, but they are rare. For instance, he commenced his panegyric by thanking God for the opportunity to address the Florentine Republic.[24] Little nods such as this one are found in the text, but Bruni did not elaborate on God or religion in a substantive manner. His secular concerns dominated his religious beliefs throughout the text, as for instance when the ancient Romans took center stage in his discussion of Florence's gift of freedom, with brief commentary about God.[25]

Similar to Salutati's rejection of Milanese tyranny, Bruni utilizes his historical knowledge to discredit Roman despots. The Roman Republic is Florence's great ancestor, not the empire. In clear, decisive language, *The Panegyric* reads: "Florentines find joy in freedom more than all other men, and that they are the enemies of tyrants. Florence feels a hate against aggressive powers and destroyers of republican liberty."[26] According to Bruni, Florence and cities like it not only should cultivate freedom, but must destroy tyrannies when they arise. Bruni, like Salutati, had a clear division of history. The Roman Republic brought greatness to Rome, while the Roman emperors ruined Rome's greatness: "Then after having been deprived of their legitimate freedom, they were torn apart by the most cruel beings, who, in the more valiant days of the republic, would have been found among the scum of society."[27] For the civic humanists, political liberty allowed the Roman Republic to conquer vast amounts of territory. For Bruni, political liberty or freedom meant scholars participating in politics and a republican state that allowed for free discussion of ideas. In a tyranny, monarchy, or principality, such desires were impossible, as liberty was stifled by the state.[28] Rome's decline began when the populace was subjected to imperial rule. Since Bruni's vision was modeled after Salutati's argument, it was incompatible with monarchy. In Bruni's eyes, the only acceptable political system was a republic. Furthermore, Bruni wanted "to prove this community of us made a justified choice by committing itself to democratic rule and the principle of law."[29] Again, Bruni condemned tyranny, but he was acting as an apologist for the republican system in which he currently lived. Civic humanism, therefore, was not only anti-tyrannical but also functioned as a propaganda machine for the republican state and called for the elimination of despotic regimes.

Bruni's *The History of the Florentine People*, composed from 1415 until the 1430s, further reveals the humanist's love for political liberty. It was modeled after Livy's history of ancient Rome. Bruni's history was clearly ideological and sought to elevate republicanism at the expense of tyrannies or principalities.[30] The *History* argued for political freedoms present not only at home, but abroad as well. Bruni condemned imperialism for its effects on conquered territories, and this included the actions of the Roman Republic. Bruni admitted a republic can exhibit imperial tendencies, a sentiment not found in his *Panegyric*. For instance, the Roman Republic was politically free in Rome but oppressed its subject territories. Such a position was inherently problematic: how can a polity claim to honor political liberty when it conquers other polities? We can conclude that Bruni's conception of political liberty evolved throughout his public career. For example, when Bruni commented in his *History* about the ancient Romans' conquest of the Etruscans and neighboring communities, he said: "Thus, when at the time domination had been transferred to the Romans, and men were no longer permitted to try to rise to public honors or spend their time in matters of great import, the Etruscan *virtus* faded away."[31] While the Roman Republic honored liberty inside of Rome, democratic institutions were discarded throughout the rest of Italy. Bruni realized that to love liberty and republicanism fully, one has to honor them at home and abroad, something the Roman Republic did not do. For the civic humanists, republican government was an ideal to be practiced everywhere, not just in their own city. To be authentic, fifteenth-century Florence had to honor the liberty of Pisa, then a subject city to Florence, in addition to its own liberty.

The "Funeral Speech on Nanni de'Strozzi," published in 1427, further elaborates on the civic humanist's need for political freedom. This oration, which lamented the death of a Florentine general who fought against Milan, was as ideological as Bruni's *History*. Bruni articulated a position as follows: "Equal liberty exists for all . . . the hope of winning public honors and ascending is the same for all . . . our commonwealth requires *virtus* and *probitas* in its citizens."[32] To the ancient Romans and Renaissance scholars, *probitas* signified honesty while *virtus* meant general virtues like temperance and mercy.[33] Bruni contends that moral virtue cannot exist without political freedom; political freedom produces a morally virtuous populace. Neither condition existed in monarchies or tyrannies. In despotic Milan or imperial Rome, only the ruler had true political freedom, making the acquisition of virtue impossible for his or her subjects. Instead of pleasing and flattering the imperial court, the people in a republic meritoriously served the state through elected positions. A republic demanded an active, free citizenry, which was not possible under monarchy or tyranny. This applied to both Florence and any foreign city. Here we see the civic, active component of civic humanism. Solitary, isolated humanism for personal intellectual fulfillment and satisfaction had been supplanted by civic engagement. Bruni contended that a successful republic needs its populace to be educated, active, engaged, and able to garner public honors. Since life in Milan and imperial Rome centered around the duke or emperor, Milan and imperial Rome obviously were ineligible, according to his model.

In sum, the civic humanists, here represented by Salutati and Bruni, clearly believed that a republican form of government best preserved the all-important principle of political liberty. Bruni's thought process evolved over the course of his career: humanism should be used in the public arena to strengthen the existing republican structure. That means liberty should be respected abroad in addition to at home. Consequently, imperial Rome and the duchy of Milan were to be shunned as political models, as each was incapable of crafting political and moral virtue. To combat polities such as the Duchy of Milan, Florence had to become a fountain of political liberty, becoming the modern-day heir to ancient Rome, according to Salutati and Bruni. The age of civic humanism existed for roughly the first third of the fifteenth century; however, in 1434, the Florentine Republic would experience a fundamental alteration.

Medici Hegemony (1434–1494): Undermining Civic Humanism

Historians widely agree that Medici hegemony in Florence during the fifteenth century began circa 1434.[34] Before this date, Florence's government was a power-sharing arrangement via elected membership to many different councils. Prior to 1434, the Medici clan was a prominent family that made a fortune in finance and banking sectors. In 1433, the Albizzi family gained considerable influence in the city and used their contacts to exile their great rival, Medici patriarch Cosimo de' Medici, from Florence. The following year, Cosimo returned from exile and dismantled the Albizzi regime that had banished him.[35] Cosimo's return began the regime that effectively put Florence under the thumb of one family until 1494. From 1434 to 1494, the Florentine Republic slowly became a possession of the Medici family.

Cosimo never formally assumed any formal or regal title, always stated he was merely a humble banker, and dressed as a merchant.[36] He wisely respected the Florentine laws and political customs, making sure that Florence maintained the facade of a republic during the period of his greatest influence from 1434 to 1464. To keep his family's authority while appearing to respect Florentine political norms, Cosimo subtly altered election procedures.[37] Typically, candidates seeking political office had to pass scrutiny, indicating they met the necessary property and legal requirements for

a prospective position. Before 1434, the names of citizens eligible for public office were placed in purses and drawn by lot by the election monitors, the *Accopiatori*. After 1434, Cosimo influenced the selection of names by filling the purses with those loyal to him.[38] Political offices were still technically filled by scrutiny; however, since Cosimo personally identified what names were placed in the purses, only the people loyal to him achieved politically powerful positions.

This arrangement was effective until 1458, when the Medici firmly consolidated their rule within the city.[39] Multiple primary sources of prominent individuals attested to the fact that Cosimo was the leader of Florence.[40] For instance, the future Pope Pius II wrote: "Political questions are settled in Cosimo's house. The man he chooses holds office. He it is who decides peace and war. He is king in all but name."[41] By 1458, Florence was becoming akin to Milan, violating the civic humanist vision. There could not be political freedom, and consequently moral virtue, if one man could determine who held office in the republic. To the untrained eye, Florence was still a functioning republic under Cosimo's rule, but those in power both at home and abroad knew the reality of the situation. The political climate that Bruni and Salutati grew up in was no more. The support of Cosimo or the Medici family was required in order to obtain political office. Florence was transitioning into a principality, a system that did not allow for political freedom and thus was incompatible with civic humanism. Cosimo's son Piero the Gouty was received as his father's successor after the death of Cosimo in 1464. There was a brief attempt at military opposition by some prominent nobles shortly after Piero's ascension, but Piero and his supporters managed to crush it.[42] The conspirators were not executed; instead, they were banished and exiled.

Some historians, such as Alison Brown, have asserted that Cosimo's behavior worked within the civic humanist framework.[43] It cannot be disputed that he patronized many humanistic endeavors, such as the painter Donatello's career, the collection of classical manuscripts, and many religious building projects, such as the dome for the Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral. While these activities certainly aided humanistic study, they simultaneously reinforced Cosimo's image as protector and father of his city. The artists directly glorified the city, but since their efforts depended on Cosimo's financial support, their achievements indirectly reinforced the idea that Cosimo was the one who made Florence's glory possible. The civic humanists insisted on political freedom, but Cosimo's support was contingent on the respective humanist activity presenting a favorable image of the Medici patriarch. According to the civic humanists, humanistic endeavors should not be dependent on enhancing someone who threatens a polity's political liberty, as Cosimo did.

Even though the power of Cosimo and Piero the Gouty was significant, Lorenzo the Magnificent, Piero's son, represented the Medici at the height of their power during the fifteenth century. Following the example set by his grandfather and father, Lorenzo held few official offices during his tenure. However, the transition in power was clear. From an early age, Lorenzo was groomed by his father and grandfather for political power. He received a strongly humanist education and was often sent on governmental business while a young adult.[44] His marriage to Clarice Orsini, who hailed from a wealthy Roman family, departed from the traditional norm for the Florentine aristocracy.[45] Most marriages of the Florentine upper class stayed within Tuscan families. Not for Lorenzo, whose marriage to a prominent Roman woman hinted at his princely ambitions. Luca Landucci, a Florentine apothecary, kept a diary of Florentine events in this period. Landucci only mentioned Cosimo and Piero a handful of times, but shared details of Lorenzo's daily activities and important family matters like marriages. Upon Lorenzo's death in 1492, Landucci exclaimed: "The most glorious man there was, possessed of greater wealth, state and reputation [than any other].

Everyone declared that he ruled Italy, and truly he had a wise head, and his every cause prospered."[46] Landucci openly declared Lorenzo to be the ruler not only of Florence, but of Italy itself. Hyperbole, no doubt, but such sentiments were never expressed about Cosimo or Piero in Landucci's diary. For an ordinary apothecary, albeit one with some upper-class connections, to recognize Lorenzo as the de facto ruler of Florence means considerable changes had occurred since Cosimo's day. Despite this attention, Lorenzo frequently denied he was anything close to a prince.

However, the Pazzi conspiracy demonstrated how false such pretense actually was. On April 26, 1478, several assassins hired by the rival Pazzi family and Pope Sixtus IV attacked Lorenzo and his brother Giuliano at High Mass in the Duomo cathedral. Lorenzo had refused offering financial support to Sixtus's nephew to become ruler of Imola. As a result, the Pope began an alliance with the Pazzi family and the parties decided to eliminate Lorenzo.[47] Giuliano died, but Lorenzo survived and was never the same. After the event, Lorenzo and his associates ordered many executions of the conspirators and their allies. The actions taken by the Medici regime varied significantly from what had been done to political enemies earlier in the century. Upon Cosimo's return in 1434, the Albizzi and their allies had been banished, not executed.[48] In the Pazzi conspiracy's aftermath, no fewer than 80 people lost their lives.[49] During the period from 1434 to the 1450s, only a handful of the Medici regime's opponents were killed.[50] Granting that the Pazzi conspiracy was an overall more serious, direct plot against the Medici regime, these numbers reveal some fundamental alterations to the Florentine state. An attack on the Medici was now an attack on Florence itself. For the next 10 years, all parties directly involved with the attack were hunted down and killed.[51]

Lorenzo additionally made ambitious constitutional reforms to cement his political place. The newly created Council of Seventy oversaw the other branches of government. For a more detailed summary of what the council meant, Renaissance historian Lauro Martines writes: "The powers of the Seventy were unprecedented. From 1480 onwards, they would pick successive teams of Lord Priors; control legislation by functioning as the decisive consultative group, thus stripping the Priors of one of their greatest powers."[52] Members were originally nominated by Lorenzo, and those members chose the remaining members.[53] As Italian historian Kenneth Bartlett states, "It was a clear instrument of Medici control; no longer was the exercise of power to be discreet and subtle; it was now clear and institutionalized. Lorenzo had become ruler of Florence."[54] Now it was obvious to all, powerful or not, who was in charge. Political liberty was scarce under the new framework from 1480 on, when Lorenzo and his allies called the shots.

The civic humanist vision was now an impossible, distant memory, as made evident by the scholars who lived in Florence and were supported by the Medici at this time. Individuals such as Marsilio Ficino and the others who surrounded Lorenzo, often referred to as Neoplatonists, never articulated anything resembling civic engagement but rather discussed the need to remove themselves from public life. One of Ficino's letters, entitled "The Usefulness of the Solitary Life," argues that happiness is outside of society. Such a sentiment evoked the older humanist tradition, not the society-minded civic humanism. Additionally, Ficino wrote many letters praising Lorenzo, who as we have seen did the most to transition the Florentine Republic into a principality. The scholars of Lorenzo's court utilized humanist texts for personal fulfillment, nothing more.[55]

The period from 1434 to Lorenzo's death in 1492 illustrates the Florentine Republic's development into a near principality. Civic humanist rhetoric about spreading liberty both at home and abroad was no longer reflected in Florentine

politics. Florence was becoming like Milan, a despotism that both Salutati and Bruni reviled in their writings. The Medici, at first subtly and then more openly after the Pazzi Conspiracy, defied republican customs. Neoplatonists, such as Marsilio Ficino, desired to withdraw from the world, contrary to the activist civic humanism of Salutati and Bruni. Medici hegemony made civic humanism and its most important aspects, political liberty and republicanism, almost nonexistent in Florence. Electoral manipulation, promotion of loyalists who upset the old nobility, and identification of the Medici family as Florence itself all undid the civic humanist idea of Florence as a New Rome. Florentine exceptionalism thus had to adjust itself to such a development, as the 1490s demonstrated.

Medici Flight and Savonarola's Religious Exceptionalism

Lorenzo the Magnificent solidified Medici rule, so by the time of his death in 1492, his son Piero the Unlucky was his natural heir. Most nobles initially accepted the young Medici without question. However, Piero the Unlucky ruled for a tumultuous two years. He was not politically adept like his father and failed miserably at brokering arrangements between rival powers. A specific example of Piero's ineptitude was his diplomacy with Charles VIII of France. Charles planned on claiming Naples due to dynastic links, and after his invasion of the peninsula in 1494, he needed to pass through Tuscany to reach his goal. Florence's recent alliance with King Alfonso of Naples meant it was at war with France. Charles VIII demanded absolute surrender, and Piero conceded to all of the French king's demands, handing over large amounts of territory and all military installations. As a result of his failure, the Florentines drove Piero and his supporters out of the city in 1494.[56]

The stage was now set for Girolamo Savonarola to tweak Florentine exceptionalism to his own advantage. Savonarola was a man who at a young age desired a religious life. Some of the earliest poetry he wrote lamented the evil world as he perceived it, and vowed to change the world to reflect Christian morals.[57] His sermons were so haunting that Michelangelo and Machiavelli recalled them many years after the friar's death.[58] After becoming a Dominican friar, Savonarola traveled around the Italian countryside, where he was stationed at multiple towns, including a brief stint in Florence in the 1480s. In 1490, Savonarola returned to Florence, where he remained, preaching fire-and-brimstone style sermons and gathering large crowds, until his death in 1498.[59] His death was painful, as he was burned at the stake for his radical religious messages. Even before Lorenzo's death, Savonarola challenged the existing Medici regime, narrowly escaping banishment.[60] Once the Medici left Florence in 1494, Charles VIII moved through the city, occupying it for several weeks. Savonarola had predicted there would be suffering for Florence in the future, and the French invasion made the Dominican friar seem like a prophet. Miraculously, the French army did not attack or destroy anything in the city. Savonarola, and many others, truly thought they had witnessed an act of divine mercy.

It is crucial to flesh out the friar's career before analyzing his religious exceptionalism. Savonarola did not simply talk about political and legal reform. Even though Savonarola was more concerned with religious matters, he helped enact crucial political legislation that furthered his fervent preference for a republic with elected officials and councils to ensure stability. Savonarola's suggestions partly created a newly envisioned Great Council. This lawmaking body extended suffrage to a larger portion of the Florentine population than had previously existed under the Medicean Regime and reflected Savonarola's belief that a republic was the best form of government. Of course, religious reform was Savonarola's major goal, and he undertook "bonfires of the vanities" to destroy what he labeled as pagan

influence in Florence. The friar's reputation in modern historiography is largely due to these bonfires that destroyed many pieces of art and other material items in the city. Savonarola's actions connect to his sermons, which, as we shall see, could have occurred only after Medici rule. Both of Savonarola's political and religious reforms were guided by the failed Medici experiment, which simultaneously ruined political freedom and religious morality, according to the friar.[61]

Immediately following the Medici's expulsion, Savonarola first articulated in public his Florentine religious exceptionalism in the Advent Sermons of 1494. Savonarola studies professor Donald Weinstein illuminates what the Medici's flight meant to Savonarola: "Florence was a chosen city, God elected her to help Him accomplish his great plan of renewal. Soon even this inspiration grew into one more thrilling; not only was Florence *a* chosen city but *the* chosen city, destined to become the center of a new, more glorious age."[62] Weinstein further illustrates in his seminal study about the friar that Savonarola's message was influenced by older Florentine rhetoric, both secular and religious, that articulated Florence as either a New Rome or a New Jerusalem. However, Weinstein mainly focuses on the mystical and millenarian aspects of the friar's agenda for the Florentine state rather than making any direct connections between the Medici regime and Savonarola's religious exceptionalism. Thus, this paper addresses a missing link about Savonarola's message in the context of an altering Florence.

As Weinstein's analysis suggests, Savonarola's idea of Florence as the New Jerusalem was a parallel vision to the civic humanist call of Florence as New Rome. Savonarola agreed with the civic humanists that a republic was the ideal political system, but the similarities end there.[63] Salutati, Bruni, and Savonarola all thought Florence was a special city, but the civic humanists and Savonarola chose a unique role to highlight. According to Savonarola, Florence would now spread Christianity and religious reform first and foremost rather than republicanism and political liberty. The Dominican friar borrowed from Bruni and Salutati, altering Florentine exceptionalism from a New Rome to a New Jerusalem.

Savonarola's Florence as the New Jerusalem required attacking the Medici. The friar boldly stated in one of the Advent sermons:

> There is a proverb, one among many, though it may be ill said, that states are governed neither with prayer or Our Fathers. But I want to prove to you this proposition: that every government and kingdom, the more spiritual it is, the stronger and more powerful it is, and the less spiritual it is, the weaker and more infirm it is.[64]

The proverb that Savonarola mentioned is attributed to Cosimo de' Medici. Unlike the Medici, Savonarola contended that religion and politics should be closely linked. As historian Felix Gilbert demonstrates in his writings, proverbs were extremely important in Renaissance Florence.[65] Dismissing one of Cosimo's popular dictums was a rejection of Medici rule. At the same time Savonarola was arguing against the Medici, he also was arguing against the civic humanists. Salutati and Bruni, as mentioned above, had a secular political outlook. Savonarola was demonstrating the folly of Bruni and Salutati, who largely removed religion from their political conceptions. What was the result of their desires? Medici hegemony, which destroyed the republic and made Florence weaker. Medici rule of Florence enabled the civic humanists' New Rome ideal to become Savonarola's New Jerusalem message.

Savonarola continued to attack the Medici when he talked about tyrannical governments. It is crucial to remember that Salutati and Bruni lived at the beginning of the fifteenth century, before the Medici had fundamentally altered the Florentine Republic. They did not witness Cosimo's assumption of control in the city, nor that of

his descendants. The only tyranny they witnessed was outside the city's borders. On the other hand, Savonarola witnessed Lorenzo's rule in Florence. The friar consistently contended tyrants "are without the Grace of God," "have no good virtues," and are "the worst sort."[66] Salutati and Bruni condemned tyrannies and despotism because those political structures did not allow for political liberty, not because of any moral or religious aspect. Tyrants compromise the populace's free will, and the civic humanists reject tyranny for that reason. This is a sentiment that most individuals, religious or not, could comprehend and support. The civic humanist perspective reflected a secular understanding of the relationship between rulers and their subjects. Having experienced the Medici, especially Lorenzo after the Pazzi conspiracy, Savonarola did not place much trust in humans wielding vast amounts of political power. To him, tyrannies could not last long due to the leader's religious immorality. Savonarola went so far as to say that despots could lead the citizenry to Satan.[67] Furthermore, Savonarola's treatise on the government of Florence describes a tyrant who contained many similarities to Lorenzo.[68] Since the friar argued that Lorenzo and his family, who were secular authorities, ruined Florence, Savonarola's Florentine exceptionalism had to be highly religious. To avoid what Bruni and Salutati most feared, Florence had to be more religious than ever before, the opposite of what the civic humanists believed.

Finally, Savonarola's vision said Florence could become the City of God. It would be the center of the Christian world in this framework, much like it would be the center of the secular world under civic humanism. By making such a claim, Savonarola was again tapping into the long-established Florentine exceptionalist tradition. At the same time Savonarola called Florence the New Jerusalem, he criticized the Medici once more: "You say that cities and the state are not governed with 'Our Fathers' nor with prayers. You are greatly deceived and in the end you will find yourself deceived. Tyrannies do not want to be governed with prayers nor with doing good, but the state of the people of God has always been concerned with prayers and living a good life."[69] Savonarola again referenced Cosimo's popular saying and discredited it. The commentary about tyrants was another rejection of the Medici. Savonarola took what was left of the rhetoric of Salutati and Bruni and refashioned it for the particular circumstances of his time. This religious exceptionalism required harsh attacks on Medici rule to work properly.

To achieve this City of God, Savonarola argued Florence must discard earthly rulers once and for all: "But let yourself be ruled by Him, and do not behave as those Jews who demanded a King for Samuel."[70] The mortal and ineffective Medici failed in protecting Florence from the French just three weeks earlier. Secular kings ruined the ancient Jews, while the Medici almost ruined Florence. However, while public support for the Medici family had dried up, a desire for civil excellence had not. Savonarola knew this and crafted a message that honored the Florentine exceptionalism that survived Medici hegemony. The Florentine populace would now lean on religion and God to become the New Jerusalem, abandoning earlier desires to become the New Rome. Once more, the Medici's failure helped make such a message possible.

Conclusion

My paper examines the different forms that Florentine exceptionalism took in the fifteenth century. I discuss civic humanism, represented by Salutati and Bruni, and its most relevant parts. The civic humanists valued political freedom and liberty above all. A republican system, according to these scholars, was the most politically free. Moral virtue could only exist in a republic. Salutati and Bruni saw Florence as the New Rome spreading republicanism and freedom to the Italian Peninsula. However, Medici rule in Florence after 1434 violated the key values of civic humanism. Cosimo, Piero

the Gouty, and Lorenzo patronized certain humanistic endeavors, but transformed the city into a quasi-principality. The most important component of civic humanism, civic freedom, was absent during Medici hegemony. Later scholars such as Marsilio Ficino supported a removal from society.

Once the Medici fled Florence, Savonarola utilized the long-standing Florentine exceptionalism tradition to his own advantage. While the Florentine populace grew weary of the Medici, they still wanted to be exceptional. Although Donald Weinstein carefully details Savonarola's use of Florentine religious traditions, he skims over the political conditions that made Savonarola's message possible. The political history in the second half of the fifteenth century, most notably Medici hegemony, in conjunction with older Florentine religious attitudes, enabled the friar's success. Savonarola crafted a religious exceptionalism, discrediting the tyrannical Medici and arguing Florence was a New Jerusalem that would spread Christ's message throughout the world, which was the inverse of Salutati's and Bruni's idea of Florence as a New Rome. It may appear that Savonarola's exceptionalism was merely a rehash of civic humanism with some religious overtones. Upon further examination, that description is not accurate. Savonarola truly made a religious exceptionalism that inverted the trend the civic humanists established in the early quattrocento, and relied heavily on discrediting the Medici in that enterprise.

Examining Florentine exceptionalist rhetoric in conjunction with its political history during the fifteenth century hopefully raises further questions. While certainly not like the democratic systems we have today, republican Florence allowed for some political freedom and theoretically free elections. Medici hegemony made it impossible to support such political ideals, and humanists reverted to the isolated, earlier tradition. What role should intellectuals and educators play in a functioning republican system? Bruni and Salutati were highly politically active as chancellors and made their immense contributions to Florence while acting in the political sphere. Once the Medici assumed power, they destroyed the vibrant civic humanist movement, arguably depriving Florence of much needed leadership and guidance that had previously served her well in the early 1400s. The transition to Medici rule also saw enemies of the state put to death instead of banished. Next, all the political chaos in Florence allowed a religious fundamentalist like Girolamo Savonarola to assume authority in the city. Finally, all of the previous questions in this paragraph fall under the large umbrella of Florentine exceptionalism. Without the Myth of Florence, civic humanism and Savonarola would not have been possible. What are the consequences of viewing one's city or country as a shining exemplar, a light for all others to follow? This article traces how the civic humanists' articulation of spreading liberty across the fifteenth-century peninsula could lead to lack of freedom abroad, and similar charges could be made of Savonarola's message.

The United States of America is often criticized for perceiving itself as "exceptional." Perhaps our nation can learn from fifteenth-century Florence: to what degree should those conspiring against the state be punished? This is a question that rages on in the twenty-first century, often with divisive results. How can our ideas of modernity coincide with traditional, ancient traditions that have been practiced for many years? In our current age where Christian fundamentalism battles with Western secularism, and Islamic fundamentalism is intrinsically opposed to Western ways of life, this question is highly relevant. Perhaps the case of pre- and post-Medicean Florence can reveal how a tradition can be manipulated for many ends, some of them highly destructive.

Notes

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4. Bartlett, *Short History*, 101.
5. Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists: 1390–1460* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 286–302.
6. Donald Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 43.
7. Paul Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought II: Papers on Humanism and the Arts* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965), 178.
8. Bruni, *Panegyric*, 33.
9. Bartlett, *Short History*, 75.
10. Ibid., 76.
11. Baron, *Crisis*, xxv–xxviii.
12. Ibid.
13. James Hankins, "The Baron Thesis," in *The Renaissance: Italy and Abroad; Rewriting Histories*, ed. John Jeffries Martin (London: Routledge, 2003).
14. Bartlett, *Short History*, 80.
15. Coluccio Salutati, "Invective against Antonio Loschi of Vicenza," in *Images of Quattrocento Florence: Selected Writings in Literature, History and Art*, ed. S. U. Baldassarri and A. Saiber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 3.
16. Ibid., 6.
17. Baron, *Crisis*, xxv–xxviii.
18. Bruni, *Panegyric*, 25; Baron, *Crisis*, 30.
19. Salutati, "Invective," 6.
20. Bartlett, *Short History*, 78; Baron, *Crisis*, 45.
21. Baron, *Crisis*, xxv–xxviii; Hankins, "Baron Thesis," 68.
22. Baron, *Crisis*, xxv–xxviii; Hankins, "Baron Thesis," 68.
23. Jerrold E. Siegel, "'Civic Humanism' or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni," *Past & Present* 34, no. 1 (1966).
24. Bruni, *Panegyric*, 77.
25. Ibid., 72, 85, 98.
26. Ibid., 95.
27. Ibid., 97.
28. Baron, *Crisis*, 100.
29. Bruni, *Panegyric*, 98.
30. Bartlett, *Short History*, 74.
31. Leonardo Bruni, *History of the Florentine People*, vol. 2, *Books V–VIII*, The I Tatti Renaissance Library 16, trans. James Hankins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 150.
32. Baron, *Crisis*, 419.
33. Ibid., xxv–xxviii.
34. Bartlett, *Short History*, 102.
35. Ibid.

36. Nicolai Rubinstein, *The Government of Florence under the Medici (1434 to 1494)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 15.
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39. Christopher Hibbert, *The House of Medici: Its Rise and Fall* (New York: Harper Collins, 1980), 62.
40. Hibbert, *House of Medici*, 62; Rubinstein, *Government of Florence*, 58.
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42. Ibid., 70.
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45. Lauro Martines, *April Blood: Florence and the Plot against the Medici* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 225.
46. Nicholas Scott Baker, "For Reasons of State: Political Executions, Republicanism, and the Medici in Florence, 1480–1560," *Renaissance Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2009): 455.
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49. Baker, "Reasons of State," 468.
50. Ibid., 471.
51. Martines, *April Blood*, 221.
52. Ibid., 227.
53. Bartlett, *Short History*, 110.
54. Ibid.
55. Bartlett, *Short History*, 217–25; Marsilio Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vol. 1, trans. members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, London (New York: Gingko Press, 1975), 23.
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57. Rachel Erlanger, *The Unarmed Prophet: Savonarola in Florence* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1988), 37; Lauro Martines, *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for the Soul of Renaissance Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 10–11; Pasquale Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola*, trans. Linda Villari (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888), 12.
58. Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 270.
59. Martines, *Fire in the City*, 20.
60. Ibid., 25.
61. Bartlett, *Short History*, 234–39.
62. Weinstein, *Savonarola*, 43.
63. Girolamo Savonarola, "Aggeus, Sermon XIII (The Venetian Model for Republican Florence): Third Sunday of Advent, 12 December 1494," in *Selected Writings of Girolamo Savonarola: Religion and Politics, 1490–1498*, ed. Anne Borelli, Maria Pastore Passaro, and Donald Beebe, trans. Anne Borelli and Maria Pastore Passaro (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 154.
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66. Savonarola, "Aggeus, Sermon XIII (The Venetian Model for Republican Florence)," 160.
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