



# The Lost Towers of Florence

A Vanished Medieval Skyline

Revised and Expanded Second Edition

CHRIS DOBSON

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of  
Florence**

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Cover: Medieval towers in the Via San Matteo, San Gimignano

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## *Contents:*

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>1: The Rise of the Towers</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>2: Tower Complexes</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>3: Campanili</i>	<i>25</i>
<i>4: Vendetta</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>5: The End of an Age</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>6: Afterword</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>58</i>
<i>About the Author</i>	<i>59</i>

## *Introduction*



Figs 1 and 2. A glimpse of a vanished Florence. The distinctive skyline of the Tuscan town of San Gimignano, still dominated by its remaining medieval towers. Photo: Author.

The modern visitor to the city of Florence might wonder what on earth this book is about. Surely it is Bologna or San Gimignano that are famous for their towers, not Florence? Yet in the Middle Ages - long before the Medici came to power - the skyline of Florence was entirely different to the city we see today, dominated by soaring structures built by private families engaged in deadly conflict with each other. This eBook describes how those now-vanished towers came to be built, and why they have almost entirely disappeared, although it does show how you can still get an impression of what these incredible buildings were like, if you know where to look. This second edition of the 'Lost Towers' is a much expanded version, based on new research, and including new photography.

Chris Dobson, November 16<sup>th</sup> 2014



Fig 2. Medieval towers loom over the Via San Matteo, San Gimignano.  
Photo: Author.

## 1: *The Rise of the Towers*

It is the year 542 AD: the small Byzantine city of Florentia lies in ruins. It was burned to the ground; almost totally destroyed by the foolish trust of the population and the treachery of the Hun Totila. Even Florentia's old Roman bridge has been reduced to piles of rubble on the bed of the Arno. And yet this city refused to die. Life stirred in the charred remains, and slowly the terrified survivors returned from the hills and the forests, and they began to rebuild their city (Fig 3).

At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century the city fell under the control of a Germanic tribe called the Lombards, although initially it was deemed to be still too exposed to attacks from the Byzantine forces based in Ravenna to be developed as a major settlement. Instead, the Lombard kings put more emphasis on using the Via Francigena, away to west, as their principal north-south communication route, and Florentia languished as a city of secondary importance. The walls of Byzantine Florentia had been largely destroyed by the Goths in 542, but the Lombards made use of some surviving parts of these defences close to the ancient Roman theatre (now beneath the Palazzo Vecchio) to create a fortified lookout post which they called the *Gardingio*. Further *gardinghi* were built as strongholds and watchtowers around the city, and in the surrounding countryside, in places such as Barberino in the Mugello, and Passignano in the Val di Pesa, and although these fortifications pre-date the medieval towers which are the subject of this book, they should be seen very much as their forerunners.

Like their medieval descendents, these *gardinghi* had rectangular towers, as opposed to the round towers of the Roman and Byzantine fortifications. Until recently it was thought that all these Lombard towers had long-since disappeared from the city, but recent examination by the author of a particular tower in Florence would now suggest that one solitary *gardingio* may indeed have survived, hitherto unrecognised for what it is (see Chapter 3: *Campanili*).



Fig 3. The *Torre della Pagliazza* ('Tower of the Palliasse') in Piazza Sant'Elisabetta. This is the last surviving round tower of Byzantine *Flor-entia*. In the 13<sup>th</sup> Century it was used as a prison: '*pagliazza*' was a generic term for all prisons in the city during the Middle Ages, since the inmates has to sleep on straw-stuffed mattresses on the floors, rather than in beds. This tower also had the distinction of being a prison for women.

Over time, and in particular with the patronage of the Emperor Charlemagne at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, and the reconstruction of the bridge over the Arno in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, Florentia began to recover in earnest, and by the late 11<sup>th</sup> Century the city, by now called Fiorenza in the local dialect, and protected by a newer, larger circuit of walls (the fourth), had a population of some 20,000 inhabitants. Many houses within these walls were modest affairs built of wood and frequently prone to catching fire, but others were more substantial structures of brick and stone: taller, and fortified with high towers. Despite urban expansion, space was still at a premium within the city, which to an extent explains why the inhabitants of Florence built upwards for living space: they had no choice. The historian Piero Bargellini has described these structures as “tower-houses”. But simple lack of space does not explain why these tall houses had even taller towers attached to them. In 1077, five such towers are documented, but by 1080 this number had already grown to thirty-five, although it is believed this is quite possibly only a third of the total number in existence by this time (Fig 4). These were not part of the fortifications of the city, but private houses, so why did the families that owned them feel the need to build homes designed as defensive structures?

Some of these powerful families, or *casate*, had ancient noble origins, whilst others may have risen from more humble beginnings in the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> Centuries, later acquiring land and a solid financial base in the countryside, but what they had in common was that they all migrated into Florence over the 11<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> Centuries, buying up considerable tracts of property, and building houses and towers. They settled in the areas of the city closest to their rural roots, establishing networks of support within the city, whilst maintaining ties with their family retainers outside the walls: the Scali for instance established themselves around the monastery of Santa Trinita, having come from Calenzano to the west, and later the Medici, coming from the Mugello to the north, settled around the *mercato vecchio* (the ‘old market’) and the church of San Lorenzo.

Pages 10-14 are not available in this preview.

## 2: *Tower Complexes*

So what were these complexes and their towers like? The hills of Oltrarno to the south of the river are formed of a type of sandstone which contains a high level of quartz, making it very hard, and it was this *pietra forte* (literally ‘strong stone’) which was quarried to build these structures. The houses themselves would generally have been four or five stories high, such as the surviving house of the Foresi family in Piazza Davanzati (Fig 10), but the towers reared high above these houses. Their exact heights are usefully documented by two chroniclers from the 14<sup>th</sup> Century: Giovanni Villani (1276 or 1280-1348) and Lapo da Castiglionchio (1316-81). Castiglionchio tells us that:

*“And within the said small city there were soon close to one hundred and fifty towers belonging to private citizens, each one [of] a hundred and twenty braccia, without [counting] the towers of the walls of the said city: and because of the height of the many towers which there were then in Florence, it is said that she showed herself, [both] from far away and nearby, to be the most beautiful and thriving domain of its little region that one could find.”*

A Florentine *braccio* (an ‘arm’) was a measurement that corresponds to a length of 58.36cms, or about 23 inches. So these towers routinely soared up to heights of about 70 metres, or 229 feet! The number that Castiglionchio cites is interesting, and borne out by other documentation, although from the physical remains of towers that are not documented, I believe the number may have been greater. In the course of time, there were certainly many more, because of the numbers destroyed (and rebuilt) during the civic violence that plagued Florence. Some towers had plain parapets, but others - in keeping with military structures - were crowned with battlements (Figs 2 and 17).



Fig 7. Two towers in the Piazza del Duomo in San Gimignano. On the left, with the brick upper part, is the *Torre Chigi*, built by the Useppi family in 1280. The family palazzo is in the centre of the photograph. On the right is the *Torre Rognosa*.

Pages 17-34 are not available in this preview.

#### 4: *Vendetta*

In Medieval Florence a blood-feud could start over something as simple as an argument between two men, spiralling out of control into lethal violence that could engulf their entire families, their allies and neighbours, sometimes over generations. But one of the major outbursts of violence in the city was the open revolt of the powerful Uberti family against the consular government of Florence in 1177. In that year Florence was rocked by a series of disasters: Villani (who puts the events down to Divine displeasure) tells us that there were two major fires in the city, one completely destroying the area of the city between the Ponte Vecchio and the mercato vecchio to the north, and the other destroying the area between the church of San Martino Vescovo and the baptistery of San Giovanni to the north-west, together causing great devastation. In part, they spread so easily because of a problem caused by the tower complexes. Once fires started (whether accidentally or intentionally) they could spread easily from building to building within the complexes along the wooden galleries that connected them, and from block to block within the city. The other blow to the city in that year was the serious flood that destroyed the Ponte Vecchio.

By “*ponte Vecchio*” I don’t mean the current bridge. I am quoting Villani, who first uses the term with regard to the Carolingian bridge built in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, and still standing until it collapsed in the flood. That bridge – the only bridge over the Arno in 1177 – had been under the private control of the Pontigiani family, so-called because they were charged with the responsibility of defending the bridge, in return for which they could charge a toll to cross it. The very fact that the bridge could be defended suggests that it could be closed to stop an enemy (whether external or a Florentine faction) crossing the bridge, or themselves taking possession of it. That would have been done at the very least by gates at either end of the bridge, and it follows that the gates would have been protected by towers, which was certainly the case when the bridge was rebuilt.



Fig 18. The Ponte Vecchio, the ‘Old Bridge’ linking central Florence and Oltrarno. Despite its name, it is in fact the fifth bridge spanning the Arno in or around this location. To the left is the tower of the *Consorti*, also known as the *Torre del Leone*: the ‘Tower of the Lion’.

But a decision made by the government about the reconstruction of the bridge brought them into head-on conflict with the Uberti. After the bridge collapsed in the flood, and with the buildings at its north end lost to fire, the consuls decided to bring the bridge directly under the control of the city government, and in the course of its reconstruction, move the point where it came ashore on the north bank further downstream, so it was perpendicular to the banks (previously it crossed the Arno at more of an angle). The plan to put the bridge under government control enraged the Uberti, the most powerful family in the city, whose towers once stood in the area between where the Palazzo Vecchio now stands, and the river. They also controlled a fortress known as the *Castello di Altafronte* (the ‘Castle of the High Façade’), probably a large tower complex like the Tosinchi “*Palazzo*”, which stood right on the north bank of the river, where the science museum ‘Galileo Galilei’ now stands. In open defiance of the government, the Uberti put crossbowmen in their towers to shoot at the men working on reconstructing the bridge. This was part of a wider conflict described by Villani:

*“...those of the house of the Uberti, who were the most powerful and greatest citizens of Florence, with their followers [both] noble and common, started war with the consuls [...] extreme and harsh war, so that almost every day, or every other day, the citizens fought between themselves in many parts of the city, from neighbourhood to neighbourhood as the factions were, and they had armed the towers, which they had in the city in great number, of a height of one hundred and one hundred and twenty braccia. And in those times for the said war they built very new towers for the communities of the districts, from common funds for the neighbourhoods, and they called them the ‘towers of the companies’, and on top of them they put larger or smaller catapults [artillery] to shoot from one to the other, and the city was barricaded in many places; and this pestilence lasted more than two years, so that many people died in it...”*

Pages 38-59 are not available in this preview.