

The
Ponte Vecchio

The Old Bridge of Florence



CHRIS DOBSON

© Chris Dobson 2015
www.chrisdobson.net

The Ponte Vecchio

The Old Bridge of Florence

CHRIS DOBSON

© Chris Dobson 2015
www.chrisdobson.net

**First published 2015 by Christopher Dobson.
41, Babraham Road,
Sawston, Cambridge,
Cambridgeshire CB22 3DQ,
England.**

The right of Christopher Dobson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation, no part of this work may be reproduced, distributed, transmitted or broadcast in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, stored in a retrieval system, published (in whole or in part), without the prior permission in writing from the copyright holders.

© Christopher Dobson 2015

ISBN 0-9541633-8-9

For details of more publications go to:

www.chrisdobson.net

Photographic credits:

The cover and all photographs in this eBook
© Christopher Dobson, unless otherwise stated.

Cover: The Ponte Vecchio, Florence. Photo: Author.

For Marina

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks are due to the following people for the help, encouragement and support that they have gave to the production of this eBook. In (sort of) alphabetical order they are:

Luca Brogioni at the Archivio Storico del Comune di Firenze, Alberto Corti at the Bargello, Professore Giovannangelo Camporeale, Riccardo Comparini, Luca and Tiziana Cosi, Roger and Jackie Hartley, Professore Architetto Marco Jodice Stefano Loparco and film writer and director Giampaolo Lomi, Pino, Rita and Andrea di Maglie, the Polo Museale Fiorentino, Dottorressa Melissa Riccardi at the Pinacoteca Civica Bruno Molajoli, Fabriano.

Above all, my heartfelt thanks go to Marina Calandri, whose unfailing support has been invaluable.

Photographic Credits

Unless otherwise stated, the photos in this eBook are by and © Copyright Chris Dobson.

Some photographs used in this book come from Wikimedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

My thanks go to the Commons contributors who made their work freely available for use, particularly Sailko (Francesco Bini). To comply with the licences under which I have reproduced their work, here are links to the various licences and public domain definitions (see individual photos in the following pages for the particular licences public domain categories they have been reproduced under).

CC-PD-MARK:

<http://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/mark/1.0/>

PD-user:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-user>

PD-old:

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-old>

PD-1923:

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-1923>

PD-US-unpublished:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-US-unpublished>

PD_USGov:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Template:PD-USGov>

CC-BY-SA 2.0:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>

CC-BY-SA 2.5:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5/deed.en>

CC-BY-SA 3.0:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>

CC-BY-SA 3.0 DE:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de/deed.en>

CC-BY-SA 4.0:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>

Contents:

<i>Introduction</i>	6
<i>1: Ancient Origins</i>	9
<i>2: City of Rome</i>	16
<i>3: Flail of God</i>	34
<i>4: The Watchtowers</i>	48
<i>5: Kill Him</i>	67
<i>6: The Deluge</i>	103
<i>7: Architectus</i>	119
<i>8: The Great Corridor</i>	163
<i>9: A View from a Bridge</i>	202
<i>Afterword</i>	230
<i>Bibliography</i>	233
<i>About the Author</i>	237

Introduction

The name *Ponte Vecchio* means ‘Old Bridge’ in Italian, and this world-famous Florentine landmark is certainly old, and without doubt the oldest bridge in the city *that has not been rebuilt*, but it is by no means the first bridge to stand on this site. Nor is it the first bridge to bear the name “Ponte Vecchio”. It’s not even the first regular means of crossing the river here, and the story of a crossing established on this site goes all the way back into the mists of pre-history. So whilst the title of this book might suggest it is about one bridge, it is actually about a whole series of bridges that were built on, or close to, the site occupied by the bridge that we see today.

This book then, is the story of how those bridges came and went, sometimes destroyed by the hand of man, and sometimes by truly apocalyptic natural forces. It is also the story of the colourful daily life of the city, as lived around, and even on these bridges: an everyday story of floods, murder and arson. Only in time did the bridges here actually come to be inside the city, as it grew throughout the centuries, shaped by the same powerful destructive forces as the bridges themselves, as well as something frequently underestimated in the damage it can do to an ancient and beautiful city: fashionable taste.

In this book I use extracts from various Florentine historical chronicles which I have translated from the original Tuscan. These are eyewitness accounts going back into the Middle Ages, and in addition, these writers also liked to add histories of the city to their contemporary observations. Their histories should be treated with due caution, but in the same way that legends almost always have a grain of truth at their centre, careful interpretation of the chroniclers’ accounts of traditions current in their day can help us build a picture of events stretching back into the Classical World. The principal chronicler of Medieval Florence, Giovanni Villani (circa 1280-1348), once regarded as unreliable as an historian, has turned out to be – on the whole – pretty sound, and he makes a point of



Fig 1. The Ponte Vecchio at dusk. Photo: Michael Falbisoner (CC BY-SA 3.0), adapted by Author.

saying in his *Cronica* that in the course of his research he consulted documents that were old in his day. He even went to the trouble of seeking copies of documents in other towns when the originals had perished in the serious fires that often swept through Medieval Florence. As an eyewitness to events, Villani is invaluable.

When using old Florentine documents you have to be aware of a little historical ‘wrinkle’ which I am going to mention now, to allow readers to make sense of how I have written some dates throughout this book. Until 1750 the city of Florence began its new year on March 25th, rather than January 1st. This marked the Christian Feast of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel had visited Mary to tell her that she would give birth to the son of God. What that means is that in any document pre-November 1749, when a decree

of the Grand Duke Francesco II of Lorraine did away with the old calendar, you have to take into account that the first two months and twenty-four days of what we would think of as the new year are still part of the previous year, so for instance, to Giovanni Villani March 24th would fall into the year 1269, but March 25th (the very next day), would be in 1270. So you have to get your head around the concept that to a Medieval Florentine, January of any given year would fall *after* December of the same year. Correcting dates to the modern calendar might have been one solution, but that is both unsatisfactory and could be misinterpreted, and it would have made nonsense of some of the documents I quote, so instead I have used the convention of adding the ‘modern’ year after the Florentine year for any dates between January 1st and March 24th. So March 25th 1270 is written as just that, but I would write the day before as March 24th 1269/70. I hope that’s clear!

Another thing I should mention is that I have stuck to proper names and expressions from the Italian and Tuscan when quoting period writers and documents in English. I have done this for consistency with my own text and maps, and to avoid confusion for readers who might want to look up further information on places and monuments mentioned, or visit their locations, because they are most likely to be found under their Italian names in guide books and on maps.

Some simple maps have been included in this book to help give the reader a sense of the city around the area of the Ponte Vecchio, but if you are reading this when visiting Florence, then I hope you will enjoy actually visiting and exploring the places described in the text.

The book concludes by bringing this story right up to the present day, and even takes a look into the future, but of course I should start at the beginning, and that means going back a long way...

1: *Ancient Origins*

Over 10,000 years ago, long before there was a Florence, or anything like the settlement that would later become Florence, a wide, sluggish river flowed into the head of a valley that contained an inland lagoon. The river brought with it much mud, rock and debris from the highlands further upstream, which it regularly deposited in the valley. Over thousands of years the valley silted up, but it remained very marshy and prone to flooding.

In the late Neolithic period and the early Bronze Age – some 4,000 years ago – this was a landscape criss-crossed by causeways and paths created by the people that lived here, for the purpose of hunting and fishing in the lagoon, and linking the growing settlements that perched on hilltops for defence, for this was not a peaceful world. People also lived along the northern fringes of the lagoon at the foot of the hills bordering the valley, and as time went on they began to spread out into the valley itself. Settlements grew up on the valley floor; some beside the river that would now have been so important for trade, and so it was here, where one hill jutted out into the valley from the south, making the river much narrower, and therefore easier to cross.

To the north of this hill, on the opposite bank of the river, was an area of high, dryer ground, and by the beginning of the 10th Century BC, a people that brought ironworking to Italy were living there; a people we know as the Villanovan Culture (Fig 2). The Villanovans cremated their dead, placing the ashes in cinerary urns beneath *tumuli* (burial mounds), and here they gathered their burials together in a sacred necropolis that would have overlooked the river. These graves began to come to light at the end of the 19th Century, during demolition of the ancient buildings in and around the *Mercato Vecchio*, the ‘Old Market’ in the centre of Florence. Even today archaeologists have few chances to look beneath the historic centre of the city, but more recently some tantalizing fragments of expensive



Fig 2. ANONYMOUS Harness trapping in the shape of a horse, Villanovan, 9th-8th Century BC. Bronze. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Photo: Los Angeles County Museum of Art (PD-old, PD-US-unpublished), adapted by Author.

Pages 11-15 are not available in this preview.

2: *City of Rome*

When not subduing their neighbours or repulsing foreign invaders (the Carthaginians were particularly troublesome), the Republican Romans liked to keep themselves busy with the odd civil war, and in 62BC a little ‘local colour’ was provided by the nearby Battle of *Pistoria* (modern-day Pistoia), where the Roman senator Lucius Sergius Catalina fell fighting the forces of the Roman Republic, against which he had rebelled. Some 20,000 Roman troops were involved in the battle on both sides, very many being slain along with Catalina. However, in 59BC, during a pause in hostilities, the general and currently Consul, Gaius Julius Caesar (Fig 5), managed to find time to order the founding of the Roman city of *Florentia* on this spot.

Caesar founded the city as a settlement for his veteran legionaries, and because this took place at the time of the spring festivities of the *ludi florales* (the games or entertainments of *Flora*, the goddess of flowers), it was from these festivities that the new city took its name. Roman military engineers knew a good strategic spot when they saw one, so the streets of *Florentia* were laid down *over* the pre-existing Etruscan settlement and necropolis. While the Etruscans built their major city strongholds on hilltops (like *Viesul*), the Romans preferred to pick or adapt good strategic spots, for example near river crossings (as here), and to properly fortify them. So in typical Roman fashion *Florentia* was laid out on the (largely) rectangular plan of a military camp, protected by a ditch and stout walls about 1,800 meters (1,970 yards) in circumference, and strengthened with round towers placed at regular intervals. Building stable walls and towers on the marshy ground here would have presented no great difficulties to the Romans, whose military engineers were in a class of their own, and they also set about ordering the valley below the city, digging irrigation ditches to properly drain the area, and creating extremely fertile farmland. The rectangular street plan of Roman *Florentia* is still clearly visible in the layout of



Fig 5. ANONYMOUS Bust of Gaius Julius Caesar (much restored). Museo Nazionale Archeologico, Naples. Marble, formerly polychrome. Photo: Andreas Wahra (PD-user), with modifications by Wolpertinger and Phrood, adapted by Author.

Pages 18-33 are not available in this preview.

3: *Flail of God*

The story of Florentia and its bridges has so far been one of growth and prosperity, but in the 3rd Century AD the Empire was rocked by a series of crises: mass migration across Asia and into Europe meant the northern frontiers were under growing pressure from invasion by barbarian tribes; civil war, after the Emperor Severus was murdered by his own troops in 235AD, leading to many claimants vying for the Imperial throne (a mere 20-plus in around 50 years); and famine, after the partial collapse of the agrarian economy, which weakened the population, probably making it more susceptible to the plague (probably smallpox), that arrived from the East.

As Florentia had grown, its population had also been swelled by immigrants, and it is possible that Christianity was first brought to the city by Syrians, who settled around the south end of the Hadriatic bridge. As Christianity took hold, the faithful had been in turns persecuted, or called upon for support by those contesting the Imperial title. It is one of the periods of persecution that brings us to the legend of *San Miniato* (Saint Minias), the first Christian martyr of Florence (Fig 18). Minias was either a Greek merchant or an Armenian Prince (opinions differ), who was making a pilgrimage to Rome. In January 250AD, the Roman Emperor Decius (Fig 17) issued an Imperial Decree to the effect that all inhabitants of the Empire should demonstrate their loyalty to the ancestral gods by sacrificing to them by a certain date, an act to be witnessed by and attested to by local Magistrates. When Decius was encamped outside Florentia, Minias – denounced as a Christian – was brought before him, and when he refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods, he was first tortured in a variety of inventive ways and then beheaded. So far, so believable, except that next, legend would have us believe that Minias picked up his severed head and then walked back to the cave in which he had been living as a hermit – *heading* home, as it were.



Fig 17. ANONYMOUS *Denarius* of the Emperor Decius.
Private collection. 248-250AD. Silvered bronze. Photo: Author.



Fig 18. JACOPO DEL CASENTINO *Saint Minias and a Donor, with Scenes from the Life of the Saint*. Church of San Miniato al Monte. Florence. Circa 1320. Tempera and gilding on panel. Photo: Sailko (CC BY-SA 3.0), adapted by Author.

Pages 37-47 are not available in this preview.

4: *The Watchtowers*

Water swirled around the ruins of the bridge, and history too. By the end of the 6th Century the Byzantines had been driven out by a Germanic tribe called the Lombards. For strategic reasons, the new masters of the city did not regard it as particularly important, and instead of going to the trouble of constructing new defences, they patched up some surviving parts of the Byzantine walls, and near the old Roman theatre (now beneath the Palazzo Vecchio) they reinforced them with rectangular towers to create a fort: a lookout post called the *Gardingo*. A chain of *gardinghi* was built in Tuscany as strongholds and watchtowers, and as the first rectangular towers built in the area, they were a foretaste of the architecture that would come to dominate many Tuscan towns and cities in the Middle Ages.

If the Lombards hadn't wished to invest the considerable resources necessary to properly rebuild the city walls, then they certainly weren't going to rebuild a stone bridge. But as the city gradually recovered, some regular way of crossing the river must have been re-established, and it is possible that some sort of wooden superstructure was built onto the ruined piles of the Hadrianic bridge to make it usable again. Perhaps there was a return to some sort of ferry service, and there would certainly have been boats. Whatever the case, it seems that there was something here worth defending, because it now appears that the ancient *campanile* (bell tower) of the church of Santa Felicita may originally have been part of a *gardingo* built on the south bank to protect and control the river crossing (Fig 24). If the tower was not of Lombard construction, then it is likely that it formed part of the new defences built by the next people to rule the city, and it is here that we can pick up our story of the bridges with some certainty.

In the later 8th Century the Lombards were in their turn driven out by a Frankish people who dominated Western Europe north of the



Fig 24. The *campanile* of the church of Santa Felicita, previously a privately-owned tower of the Fifanti family, and probably built centuries before that as part of a fortress protecting the south end of the Arno crossing. Photo: Author.

Pyrenees, extending their influence down into Lombardy and Tuscany. We know them as the Carolingians, after the name of their King, Charlemagne (Fig 25). In the year 800 AD, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne *Imperator Romanum*, legitimizing the Carolingian dynasty as successors to the Roman Emperors, and in time the Carolingian Empire was to evolve into the Holy Roman Empire. As the city grew in wealth and importance, the control of the city would become hotly contested between the Emperors and the Popes. The Carolingians evidently decided that the city needed a new stone bridge, and Villani tells us that:

“...at the end of the main street from [the] Saint Mary gate, they made and erected a bridge founded in the Arno with piers [made] of large stones, which was later called the Ponte Vecchio, and still is; and it was rather narrower than it is now, and it was the first bridge built in Florence.”

As I mentioned in the last chapter, Villani had no idea that the Romans had built one bridge here before, let alone two, which is why he describes it as the “*first*” in Florence. This tells us that the Carolingians must have built their bridge on the ruins of the Hadrianic one, and explains Villani’s belief that it was the city’s first bridge, when effectively it was the third. Some Roman ruins were still visible in Florence as late as the 18th Century, and I am sure that if the Carolingians had abandoned the ruined bridge and built on another site, then the remains of the Roman piers would still have been around in Villani’s day, or at least the presence of them would have passed into folk memory, so he would have known of them. The Hadrianic bridge would have been very well constructed, so it would have made perfect sense for the Carolingians to make use of what was left of it. This does not preclude the possibility that a wooden superstructure had been used to repair the Roman bridge at some point before, but Villani was probably going from an old document that specifically described the construction of a bridge built entirely of masonry by the Carolingians, and his mention of



Fig 25. ANONYMOUS Reliquary Bust of the Emperor Charlemagne. Cathedral Treasury, Aachen. German, mid 14th Century. Silver, parcel gilt, with precious and semi-precious stones, and enamel. Photo: Beckstet (CC BY-SA 3.0), adapted by Author.

Pages 52-66 are not available in this preview.

5: *Kill Him*

It is very dark. Two figures stand upon a ridge above a deep curved ditch, through which a ghastly procession of men passes; there are hundreds of them, all with terrible injuries inflicted by the sword. As they pass the two figures some hail them, looking up and bearing their wounds, and declaring their names. A man who has lost both his hands holds up the bleeding stumps of his wrists, the spurt-ing blood splattering his face as he shouts at one of the figures:

*“You will remember also Mosca,
who said, alas! ‘Capo ha cosa fatta’,
which sowed an evil seed for the Tuscan people.”*

His name is Mosca de’ Lamberti, and he is addressing the poet Dante (Fig 34), for we are in the ninth circle of Dante’s Inferno, and the tortured souls in the ditch are being punished through all eternity as sowers of discord. Even now, 800 years after the real Mosca uttered his infamous words, the expression *‘Cosa fatta capo ha’* will still be understood by some Florentines to mean that in a given situation, there is no going back.

Since the previous century, the Florentine government had begun to resist the power of the Holy Roman Emperors, siding instead with the Popes, and in 1138 we have the first record that Florence had established a form of consular government as a free *Comune*. This was part of a movement that had begun in central and northern Italy, encouraged by the failure of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa to re-establish control over the peninsula. Florence now sought dominion over the *contado*, the country surrounding the city, and from the beginning of the 12th Century the government began to pursue an aggressive policy to break the power of the old feudal landowners with estates in the area: one by one, noble families like the Adimari, the Alberti and the Guidi saw their fortresses in the territories they controlled attacked, taken and destroyed. In the



Fig 34. DOMENICO DI MICHELINO *The Divine Comedy Illuminates Florence*. Duomo, Florence, 1465. Tempera on panel. Detail: the Poet Dante. Photo: conde/Shutterstock.com.

Pages 69-102 are not available in this preview.

6: *The Deluge*

In 1333 the divine judgement that Villani had foretold was finally visited upon Florence. He was there to witness it, and it is his account that I draw on. The river, for so long forced into the tighter and tighter stone ‘straightjacket’ of its channel through Florence, rose up in fury against the city, sweeping away the works of man with truly terrifying power.

On All Saints Day (November 1st) it began to rain in Florence, but this was no ordinary weather front. In the early 14th Century Italy began to feel the effects of a major climatic change that spread down from the Northwest to the Southeast across Europe, heralding what we now call the Little Ice Age. The weather became very unpredictable; winters were bitter, and summers cold with heavy rainfall. Crops rotted in the fields, and famine spread, weakening the population and leaving them vulnerable to the Black Death when it arrived.

On that November day torrential rain began to fall right across Tuscany: on the mountain peaks; throughout the highlands of the Casentino; and in the upper and lower Arno valley. To Villani, *“it seemed as though the cataracts of the heavens had opened”*, and it went on relentlessly for four days and four nights. The ground quickly became saturated, and the water ran off into every stream and ditch, which then emptied into the rivers. They all rose in spate, pouring their waters in turn into the Arno, which first burst its banks to flood most of the plain of the Casentino, followed shortly afterwards by the Arezzo plain further downstream, which was completely submerged. Next the upper Arno valley was hit:

“in such a way that everything was covered and overrun by the water, and it destroyed all the crops already planted, throwing down and levelling the trees, carrying them with it and hurling them against every water mill and fulling mill which there were in the Arno, and



Fig 51. In November 1333 Tuscany was battered by four days of storms and torrential rain that turned the Arno into a raging torrent. Photo: Marafona/Shutterstock.com.

Pages 105-118 are not available in this preview.

7: *Architectus*

Life had to go on, and so did business. In the following February the government decreed that the former occupants (both businesses and families) of the now-destroyed Ponte Vecchio should be re-housed at the east end of Borgo San Jacopo, the street that ran along Oltrarno towards where the Ponte a Santa Trinita had stood. The life and business of the city also dictated that the bridges needed to rebuilt as soon as possible, which brings us to the rather complex question of who was – or wasn't – responsible for the rebuilding of the Ponte Vecchio that still stands today, a subject upon which the chroniclers are absolutely silent.

As when the flood of 1177 had destroyed the last Ponte Vecchio, the Florentines first replaced their lost bridges with temporary wooden structures. By the following year there were two of them, but the river was unrelenting, and it rose again to sweep them away. Villani recounts what happened:

“In the said year [1334], on the day of the 5th of December, it rained very heavily, and the river Arno swelled in such a misshapen way that, if the pescaie that were in the river before the great deluge had still been standing, a great part of the city would have been inundated; but because of the deluge the bed of the Arno had been lowered by 6 braccia; but even so it shattered and pummelled a wooden bridge built with heavy piles, which was between the ponte Vecchio and that of Santa Trinita, and a chained bridge of heavy boards, which was built between the the Ponte a Santa Trinita and that of the Carraia, with great damage.”

The “*chained bridge of heavy boards*” that Villani mentions has to be some sort of pontoon bridge floated across the river. You have to admire the Florentines’ ‘staying power’: despite the destruction, they just set to all over again and built another pair of wooden

bridges, this time in different positions. One was on the downstream side of the Ponte a Santa Trinita, and the other just upstream of the Ponte Vecchio. They built them both to one side of where the bridges had been so as not to obstruct the rebuilding of the bridges in their original locations. We learn of the positioning of these wooden bridges in a document of July 26th 1342, when they were still in place, but in need of repair. The one next to where the Ponte Vecchio had been is also mentioned in 1339 (see below).

The Ponte Vecchio wasn't the first of Florence's bridges to be properly rebuilt in stone, however: that was the Ponte alla Carraia (Fig 60). It was rebuilt between 1334 and 1337 to the design of a Dominican friar from the convent of Santa Maria Novella, Fra Giovanni da Campi. The Dominicans were skilled builders, and it was two of their friars who were responsible for the rebuilding of both the Ponte alla Carraia and the Ponte a Santa Trinita, after their destruction in the flood of 1269, and also for building the church of their own convent, Fra Sisto Fiorentino and another member of the da Campi family, Fra Ristoro (Fig 61). It has been noted that the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella were the first in Italy to consistently use the term *architectus* or *architector* (architect), as opposed to 'Master Mason', and "architectus" is how Fra Giovanni is described in chapter 6 of the Cronica of his fellow-friar, Fra Modesto Bigliotto, who mentions his work on the Ponte alla Carraia. The *Necrologio* of Santa Maria Novella is a registry of the deaths of the friars, which in addition contains other information about them and the convent, and it also mentions Fra Giovanni's work on the bridge in the entry recording his death. It must have been a paid commission from the Comune, because the Necrologio also records in 1335 that: "*Fra Giovanni da Campi donates 30 Florins from his fee for the Bridge*" towards the new dormitory for the friars being built at the convent. Rebuilding Florence and its bridges was going to be an expensive business, not just in architects' fees, but in manpower and very large quantities of materials, and on the



Fig 60. FRA GIOVANNI DA CAMPI The Ponte alla Carraia, 1334-37 (reconstructed 1948-51 after destruction by German mines in 1944). Photo: Gilbert Bochenek (CC-BY-3.0), adapted by Author.



Fig 61. FRA SISTO FIORENTINO, FRA RISTORO DA CAMPI and FRA JACOPO TALENTI DA NIPOZZANO The church of Santa Maria Novella, circa 1246-1360 (upper section of polychrome marble façade LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI, 1456-70) .
Photo: Blorg (CC-BY-SA 3.0), adapted by Author.

Pages 123-162 are not available in this preview.

8: *The Great Corridor*

Piero died in exile, but in 1512 the Medici returned at the head of the Spanish troops of the Holy League, and so began their rise to absolute power. It wasn't all plain sailing: the family went through another brief exile between 1527 and 1530, and Alessandro, the first Medici to call himself 'Duke of Florence', was murdered by his own cousin Lorenzino, later called *Lorenzaccio* (the 'Wicked Lorenzo') in 1537. This opened the door for another cousin, Cosimo de' Medici, to seize power, and it may well be that Cosimo himself was the instigator of the murder (Fig 82). He was a mere seventeen years old, but he persuaded the Senate of the Forty-Eight to elect him as head of the government, and thus became their new Duke. Cosimo at once set about strengthening his position. Gone were the days of the old Medici strategy of rule by the consent of the populace (or at least the appearance of consent) as 'first amongst equals'. They could now throw off the pretence of being mere citizens; this new Medici Duke intended to crush all opposition, and woe betide any enemies that fell into his hands.

His rule was challenged almost immediately in battle by Florentine dissidents who wished to reinstate the Republic, at the field of Montemurlo. Cosimo's Captain, Alessandro Vitelli, won a crushing victory in the battle, and a long list of prominent dissident prisoners taken, compiled by an anonymous chronicler, tells us all we need to know about their fate when they were incarcerated in the Palazzo del *Capitano del Popolo* (now the *Museo Nazionale del Bargello*). Each name has beside it one of two words: either "*decapitated*" or "*hanged*", until the chronicler tired of listing the method of execution, and then of even listing their names, adding "*and many others [whose names] I do not write...*" Only two prisoners escaped execution, by cutting their own throats. The recognition of the legitimacy of Cosimo's rule by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V followed soon afterwards, conferring "...*all the authority formerly borne and exercised by Duke Alessandro...*"



Fig 82. AGNOLO BRONZINO *Cosimo I de' Medici*. State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. Florence, 1560. Oil on canvas. Photo: Sailko (CC-BY-SA 3.0), adapted by Author.

Pages 165-237 are not available in this preview.