

City visions of Italy's past

Bruno Vecchio*

Abstract

The article proposes a synthesis of knowledge that historians have produced on the network of the Italian cities in the communal period; by relying on such a synthesis it draws attention to the strong demographic imbalance - which is at that time also largely functional imbalance - between cities of northern and central Italy and those of southern Italy, especially around the year 1300. However it should be noted that the condition of the Italian urban network, both in the years before 1300 and in the following years, strongly contradicts this snapshot; then the imbalance of that time - even higher than what is commonly imagined - is temporary, although still is revealing. The article concludes by drawing attention to the successive dynamics of the cities and countryside of central Italy, in what they are worth to explain the prominent role that these regions have into global imagination today.

Keywords

Middle Ages, Italian cities, regional imbalances.

Introduction

The goal of this paper, in the context of “city visions”, is to re-evoke some of those visions from Italy's distant or less distant

* Department SAGAS (History, Archeology, Geography, Fine and Performing Arts), University of Firenze (Italy)

past, which are in sharp contrast with the existing urban structure, thereby enriching our awareness. These visions are less about individual cities than about the networks and hierarchy they make up.

We do not claim with these reflections to state anything really new, but simply to recall what was in some way already known though hidden, blurred or erased from the collective perception by subsequent prevailing representations. And, lastly but not of least importance, to use it if possible for a better contemporary understanding (see § 4).

Since the time period chosen for our representation is the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, we have considered as the basic text for our purposes that of two historians, Maria Ginatempo and Lucia Sandri, *L'Italia delle città* (Florence, Le Lettere, 1990; hereafter referred to as “GS”), a text which, having carried out a comprehensive study of the literature in question from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, relieves the non-specialist scholars of the Middle Ages (as we are) of the arduous task of analyzing that literature.

The network of major Italian cities in 1300

We are quite familiar with the wealth and power of the ancient Italian city-states. We recall here the bare essentials of the reasons for this wealth, power and density. At least three components can be identified in this regard.

First, let us consider the generally intimate relationship between these cities and their surrounding areas, a relationship based on the fact that the Italian cities early have exerted control over their territories to inhibit potential opponents; thus, at least initially, these *de facto* city-states grew up on scales corresponding to the average size of a present-day county, or even to the size of sub-aggregates¹ of a county; scales in which the sense of belonging in the city-surrounding area is strong. A condition about which Carlo Cattaneo wrote memorable pages: such as that of a shepherd of the Lombard Alps, who “always names himself after a nearby city he has never seen, and calls Bergamasque the

shepherd of the adjacent Alps, while no French farmer calls himself Parisian, not even if he is almost within sight of Paris” (Cattaneo, 1957, pp. 386-387).

About this condition the historian Marino Berengo several years ago provided analytical data for comparing Germany with the Italian city-states:

The most staunchly aristocratic German city, Nuremberg, joined the Reformation with the largest countryside in all of Germany, 1,200 km², negligible in comparison with that of Florence (4,930 km² at the beginning of the fifteenth century), in addition to its district. The small size of the province of Pistoia, whose apex was 900 square kilometers in the fourteenth century, is explained by the town's political weakness, which made it unable to resist the pressures of Florence, to which it soon lost (1351) its autonomy. But Ulm, with its barely 1,000 square kilometers (which it acquired slowly between 1377 and 1571) was the second largest German city in land area, and was able to expand as much as it did due to its geographic location, which protected it from the great principalities (Berengo, 1982, pp. 5-6).

A point of view which ascribes this phenomenon to the category of “Mediterraneanness” is Predrag Matvejević's, when he stressed a few years ago in his *Mediterranski brevijar* that in “our” inland sea the cities “were not formed as elsewhere from villages, but [...] rather they themselves created villages around them” (Matvejević, 1991, p. 25). And a few years later, in a special issue of the journal *Geotema* dedicated to the Mediterranean, Franco Farinelli defined the Mediterranean urban world as characterized by “honeycomb structures” (“strutture alveolari”). Meaning by that (Farinelli, 1998, p. 59) a function of the territory which has been recognized over the last millennium as being “completely different from the one dominant in large parts of Western Europe, still founded on the opposition [...] between «peasant production and lordly appropriation»”; there exists instead in the Mediterranean “a scheme based on close control, elsewhere non-existent, by the town over the surrounding countryside”. The city “generates”, so to speak, and organizes the countryside (if

and as far as such organization is possible, hence the “honeycomb”), and not vice versa.

It should be made clear that the surrounding areas of Italian cities for a long time do not qualify as such because of the prevalence of land owned by citizens. This tendency of land acquisition may be subsequent by decades or even centuries to the time we are considering, or may not even occur at all². The fact remains that the Italian communes generally exert a firm control over their territories, more or less extensive as they may be.

On this basis, the control they then exert (and this is the second component of their success) is a dialectic of cooperation-specialization between the city-states of the macro-regional area, reminiscent of Marshall’s “external economies” (Arrighi, 1996, p. 125-126). At the top of this dialectic is the Genoa-Milan-Florence-Venice quadrilateral, which in the 16th century is still “a center, a crucial region, which imposes its impulse on the others and, by itself, establishes the unity which is at issue” (Braudel, 1986, pp. 413-414).

Finally, the third component, the actual “long networks”. To illustrate these, let us build on the observations of Giovanni Arrighi concerning the different evolutionary paths taken over the decades and centuries following 1300 - our point of reference - from the poles of the above-cited quadrilateral: the itinerary he calls “Genoese capitalist”, or the persistent flexibility of investment of its monies, and what he calls “territorialist”, adopted by the three other city-states (Milan, Venice and Florence), i.e. of investment in the formative processes of a territorial state (Arrighi, 1996, pp. 49-59, 135-172) following the established “end of Eurasian commercial expansion” (*ibid.*, p. 150).

What seems worthy of emphasis is that Genoa’s evolutionary path is didactically useful as it illustrates a character that to some extent is common around 1300, not only to the four cities mentioned, but also to almost all other Italian cities immediately behind them in population size (a point we shall discuss further below). Namely, the fact that what ultimately explains the unusual size of the Italian cities is the fundamental transactional

role - substantially projected outside their own territories – of the typical Italian urban center of that era; a central role in the above-mentioned activities of “cooperation-specialization” in relation to the other cities of the macro-region, as well as in the activation of networks in a wider radius. Networks which for each city can come to overshadow - even when they exist - relations typical of the short-term and suggest to a certain extent its footloose character.

From this point of view the maritime cities are merely an especially marked example, from a didactic viewpoint, of that condition of the relative independence from the hinterland; a condition they nevertheless have in common with the non-maritime cities as well.

The maritime cities with a weak, poor, hinterland - as is the case with Genoa - dissipate even on behalf of the others cities misconceptions concerning the “cause della grandezza [delle città]” (causes of [urban] size) (Botero, 1930), and can avoid what has already occurred in some cases, namely that some historians - influenced by interpretative models forged in contact with the European entities they are better familiar with - can fall prey to the misconception of attributing Italian urban size - certainly abnormal in a pre-industrial age - to the “demand of town” expressed by the countryside; then of applying to the Italy of the communes the relationship category “between peasant production and lordly appropriation”, concerning which we have already cited Farinelli. This may happen according to the familiar formula about the origins of the cities in the Fertile Crescent, introduced by Vere Gordon Childe (1973, p. 91-115) and later, and by which local agricultural surplus and the birth of cities are strictly connected; at least up to the research carried out on cities as Jericho at 8000 B.C. and Çatal Hüyük at 7000 B.C., which contradict such formulas (Farinelli, 2003, p. 134-135, 152-153; Gates, 2003, p. 18)³.

This misconception cannot be advanced for a seafaring city. It is not possible for Genoa; nor for Venice, at least at the stage at which they formed their respective relationships to the sea and the hinterland at around 1300: Venice is one of the best examples of showing how “the idea that long-distance trade was

confined in the Middle Ages to expensive luxury goods is not true for destinations accessible by water” (Lane, 1991, p. 69). The sea “which stretches nets” can stretch relationships without intermediaries, can selectively compress (i.e. in the directions coverable by water) Euclidean space in ways not very different from what appears today from deformation mapping (anamorphosis) dependent on the distance-time of modern means of transportation (air, high-speed trains; Denain and Langlois, 1998).

From this point of view of urban transactions, the land and the sea can be functionally equivalent; they can be a means that stands between each urban center and its respective remote points of reference and interest, certainly of diverse material substance but with an analogous role; if the sea is “barren” (Homer’s and Hesiod’s *atryghetos thalassa*; e.g. *Odyssey*, V, 107-112), even the land interspersed between the city center and more distant but interesting places can be so: for example, in particular historical phases, the plain that stands between Venice and the Cansiglio wooded plateau, “Saint’ Mark’s great oar forest”, can be so (Berenger, 1859, pp. 577-579): the plateau interests Venice much more than the plain.

The Aegean Archipelago, together with Genoa and Venice, is also noteworthy from this point of view. See what the Greek historian Spyros Asdrachas writes about “the scattered city” that takes shape across the archipelago: a city whose individual islands have specializations which are both productive and socially hierarchical, and which, combined with the frequency of reciprocal contacts, allow us to consider them as a single city built on the waterways (Asdrachas et al., 2004)⁴.

The dual imbalance configured by Italian urbanization in 1300

If by employing these considerations we return to the characters of Italian cities at the beginning of the fourteenth century, we can better understand not only the logic of Braudel’s “golden quadrilateral” (see above), but also - perhaps still more amazing -

the whole urban hierarchy of the Italy of that era: what emerges from our computation of the Western European cities that around 1300 exceed or reach - perhaps or with certainty - 40,000 inhabitants. A hierarchy which exhibits a dual imbalance: one between Italy on the one hand and the rest of Europe on the other; and another between north-central Italy and southern Italy.

We foresee the objections. The main one de-legitimizes the link between the importance of the city and its inhabitants.

In this regard, an observation of this kind in relation to contemporary cities is more than plausible. Since about the middle of the last century, the commonplace idea has been that the link between population and the importance of the city was broken. But, precisely, only since then. More or less since then have happened, on the one hand, the transition from an ancient demographic regime to a modern one in the so-called "developing" countries, and, on the other, the super-urbanization of these countries (Santos, 1971), which has upset the hierarchy of the most populous cities in the world, pushing to the top of the list, beside or before Tokyo or New York or other well-established metropolises of the more developed parts of the world, cities such as Mexico City, Lagos, Jakarta, Cairo; whether we consider the metropolitan areas or those actually and formally governed by some type of local government (United Nations, 2004, p. 105).

Matters proceeded in a completely different manner in the "Paleotechnic" era (Mumford, 2005, pp. 175-231) and even more so prior to the Industrial Revolution.

Let us focus for example on what Fernand Braudel writes about the subject:

Cologne, which in the fifteenth century was the largest German city, at the crossroads of the two waterways fleets of the Rhine, one at the upper and the other at the lower stretch of the river [...] did not boast more than 20,000 inhabitants. [...] We must therefore accept that a group of 20,000 inhabitants constituted a significant concentration of persons, forces, minds, and mouths to feed (Braudel, 1982, p. 24).

Consider, therefore, what happened in Europe about a century before the time treated by Braudel. And consider a threshold that seems particularly suited to highlight the gap that interests us, precisely that of the 40,000 inhabitants. This is twice the threshold reached – granted, a few decades after the “Black Plague” – by the largest German city, and eight times the minimum threshold of 5,000 inhabitants that seems plausible to Ginatempo and Sandri - for the last centuries of the Middle Ages and in Italy, as is stressed – in being able to talk about cities (perhaps with some exceptions for Sicily, where even then some *Agrostadt* exceeded the threshold without displaying truly urban characteristics, GS, pp. 53-54, 180-181).

From this point of view, as concerns urban population size (and at this degree of detail the matter is well known), only two areas have distinct prevalence: north-central Italy and that part of Flanders which corresponds to present-day Belgium:

if we exclude Italy, at the height of medieval demographic expansion, at around 1300, there were only nine cities in Europe which with certainty exceeded 40,000 inhabitants: Paris, London, Cologne, Barcelona, Ghent, Tournai, Rouen, Montpellier, Cordova (and possibly also Bruges, Liege and Leuven) (Bairoch, Batou and Chèvre, 1988, p. 265; Malanima, 1995, p. 18).

Of these nine + three cities, as many as five (Ghent, Tournai, Bruges, Liege and Leuven), were located in tiny Flanders, the other most urban, economic center of Europe of that era.

As for Italy:

Italy then had the largest cities. As many as eleven of them exceeded 40,000 inhabitants: Genoa⁵, Milan⁶, Venice⁷, Bologna⁸, Brescia⁹, Verona¹⁰, Cremona¹¹, Florence¹², Siena, Pisa and Palermo. Genoa, Milan, Venice and Florence were the four major centers, with more than 80,000 inhabitants, and perhaps more than 100,000 inhabitants each. In the rest of Europe, only Paris could boast of these dimensions (Malanima, 1995, pp. 18-19).

And here occurs the second imbalance we have enunciated, the one within Italy. The pre-eminence of central and northern Italy

at the time in regard to the urban phenomenon can be read in this rather suggestive manner: around 1300, proceeding south of Siena, to find a city equal in size to this latter, we must proceed no less than to far off Palermo; a city which along with Cordova represents in Europe the greatest legacy of the Arabic urban universe. Let us see how this could happen.

Rome's weak demographic size in the period is well-known. True, it has a prominent position in its area, although "less obviously than it seems", so that "perhaps it reached to as many as 30,000 inhabitants between 1313 and 1319" (GS, p. 128-129). But it does not match cities such as Siena, Cremona and Brescia.

And as for the Kingdom of Naples, Aquila is estimated as "the second city of the kingdom with perhaps more than 20,000 inhabitants" (GS, p. 160-161); and this already suffices to grasp the criminal act of failing thus far to restore its historic center after the 2009 earthquake. The city, founded in the thirteenth century, is situated on the "Abruzzi Route" ("Via degli Abruzzi"), "virtually the only land route between Naples and the Italy of the communes and of the great commercial and financial marketplaces (the routes via Rome were almost deserted)" (*ibid.*)¹³. But even if we go from the secondary to the primary city of the Anjou Kingdom, the capital Naples, we must acknowledge that it is far from the position of demographic pre-eminence that it will soon assume in Europe: despite its having already seen in the age of emperor Frederick II von Hohenstaufen the founding of the second oldest Italian university, it pales in comparison - again - with Siena, that Siena which in the early fourteenth century had more or less the same number of inhabitants as it does today. Naples, instead,

an Anjou capital in full bloom (and probably the largest in the Kingdom) was not so small, but its 30 thousand inhabitants would certainly place it lower than Bologna, Siena, Pisa, Genoa and Palermo, and of course other metropolises (GS, p. 161-162)¹⁴

As for Palermo, "it certainly exceeded 45,000 inhabitants at the end of the thirteenth century and counted perhaps even more in the early fourteenth century". The second largest city in Sicily,

Messina, was a little below the threshold size we have chosen, “with no less than 30,000 inhabitants in 1281, and perhaps as many as 40,000 at its maximum point of expansion” (GS, p. 177).

And as we are discussing Sicily, it seems appropriate to mention in passing the fact - not very publicized - that it was perhaps among the Italian regions whose urban hierarchy of around 1300 was most dissimilar from that of the present day. Such that it has been written that “one is struck by the many alternations that seem to cut across the fourteenth and fifteenth century crisis and perhaps end up revealing itself as more significant than the crisis itself” (GS, p. 178). To give a sense of the process, it may suffice to mention the fact that the top five cities in Sicily after Palermo and Messina include at 1282, time of a “colletta” (tax collection), centers which today are minor or minimal: in decreasing order, Corleone, Polizzi and Trapani (*ibid.*).

From this bare numerical computation there emerge - alongside well-known elements - both elements that reinforce an already established historical perspective, and elements emphasizing it to such a degree that we can speak frankly of a new vision.

Of course one cannot ignore that the photograph of the Europe and Italy of 1300 - like any photograph - by immobilizing processes, tends to obliterate their dynamic nature, to encourage forgetting it or at least to push it into the background. This photograph does not do justice, for example, to the processes going on around 1300, which were already under way for some time, of the decline of cities which do not appear in this photograph, for instance the many cities of Campania and Puglia, and afterwards “Lucca, Piacenza, perhaps Asti” (GS, pp. 34-35)¹⁵.

Consequences of the successive transformations of Italian cities and their surrounding areas

We do not intend, therefore, to ignore the dynamic background on which these snapshots taken by us of urban sizes are situated; but merely to stress the visual effect these snapshots produce

(the “vision”) while also stressing that this optical effect, this vision, is part of the totality we are taking into consideration. We know we are dealing with a transient situation. Let us consider for example the considerable hierarchical dislocation Tuscany undergoes in this context. At the turn of the sixteenth century the region's urban decline (with the crisis of the three giants Florence-Siena-Pisa, but also the lesser known one of the middle size cities, of over 10,000 inhabitants which in Tuscany disappeared completely¹⁶) occurred

while the other metropolises of the communal era [*Milan, Venice, Bologna, Genoa, Palermo*, editor's note] had fully and often precociously recovered their losses from a perhaps less serious and certainly less lasting crisis [...] and Rome, Naples and Messina experienced a new dizzying development alongside those which in the 1600's would stand in the new forefront of European urbanization (Paris, London, Antwerp, Lisbon, Seville or Lyon, Rouen and others) (GS, p. 113).

Not only. This seems to be the common destiny of all “communal” central Italy:

On the dense urban fabric of the Marches [...] the demographic recession of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries fell in a devastating manner, as it did in Tuscany, or just slightly less seriously, and triggering settlement and socio-economic transformations common to all of central Italy (GS, p. 125).

Thus, starting with the fifteenth century, one can speak of a renewed grandeur of the Mediterranean and its traffic, whose splendors have been extensively described, but which perhaps along the peninsula no longer involved as it once did many different-sized cities and all of central Italy, but just a few large international ports - Ancona, Naples, Messina, Palermo, perhaps Catania, and later Leghorn - and a couple of capitals (Florence and Rome) ... (ibid., p. 182)

Nevertheless, the urban configuration prior to that upheaval was an important and revelatory moment in the history of Italy. A moment about which I do not think there has been sufficient reflection in regard to its motive force among others - with the particular decay which overtakes “communal” central Italy - of

the unusual preservation of the ancient built form of this part of Italy. Especially if one considers that Tuscany, relatively speaking – in terms of the percentage of its urban population – was been perhaps the most urbanized region in Europe, and that as from the fifteenth century

- but it seems quite likely that this took place also in the Marches and in parts of Umbria - [...] her countryside areas [...] show a greater durability and a more precocious revival than the cities do, as if to signal a weakening force of attraction of their cities and a reversal or cessation of the strong trend of urbanization that had characterized the previous centuries (GS, p. 212).

A concept which Ginatempo and Sandri already express in another part of their work:

Yet another feature seems to unite the Marches and Tuscany at the end of the Middle Ages, a feature, wrongly or too generically, which tends at times to be attributed to the whole of post-communal Italy [...] a more positive «rural» population increase (GS, p. 127).

In short, the demic crisis of the “urban containers” which began in the fourteenth century and in many cases lasted until the mid-twentieth century, together with the increase of the rural population - in the conservative as much as expertly organized forms of sharecropping (“mezzadria”) - conspired to determine a relative crystallization of these territories of central Italy, such that they re-voke in an enticing form an era of “legibility”. A requirement that certainly contributes to the current condition, so that broad strips of land in the “north of the center” (Tuscany, Umbria, and the Marches) make up one of the most firmly established landmarks in Europe and therefore the world (Vecchio, 2011, p. 140-142). And they are made up together by historic centers and their countryside areas; in the same manner, from the end of the Middle Ages, they jointly evolved, following that particular trajectory which is the relative “embalming” of the cities to the advantage of the countryside.

¹ This latter case is particularly true for the Romagna (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990, pp. 86-89).

² Conversely, Ginatempo and Sandri go on to note, "having a freer hand over their territories and farmers does not necessarily mean [...] the «triumph» of an urban civilization": on the contrary, it is precisely this phenomenon that is delineated "in a climate of decline, marginalization and narrowing of horizons, as occurred in central Italy between the Middle Ages and the modern age" (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990, p. 219). We shall return to this issue in § 4.

Furthermore, the appropriation of territory from the point of view of property rights in some cases - certainly atypical - may also never take place, or be completely defaulted, and founding thus the peculiarities of particular though not secondary families of cities. This is precisely the case in Tuscany in the early nineteenth century, respectively of a new city like Leghorn, and of a city with a long tradition like Prato: albeit due to very different historical developments, the landed property of both in the cadastre of 1834 essentially stops within the city limits, coinciding more or less with the urban real estate: so we can say that from this point of view it is as if at the time the city "basically possessed only itself" (Pazzagli, 1992, p. 33).

³ Hohenberg and Hollen Lees have attracted attention to this misunderstanding (they attribute for example to Russell, 1972), in the context of their distinction between "system of central places" on one hand, and what they call "reticular system" on the other, as is seen among other places precisely in the central-north of medieval Italy (Hohenberg, Hollen Lees, 1990, p. 49-71).

⁴ Syntheses in western languages are available in Asdrachas, 1984 e 1985.

⁵ Genoa is actually credited by Ginatempo and Sandri with having a population of between 50 and 60,000 inhabitants (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990, p. 70).

⁶ For Milan the "enormous" figure of 150-200,000 inhabitants is plausible (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990, p. 74).

⁷ Venice actually exceeds 100,000 inhabitants (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990, p. 80).

⁸ At the end of the thirteenth century Bologna counts more than 50,000 inhabitants; in 1323 43,000 (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990, p. 85). For the whole of Emilia Romagna cfr. Ginatempo and Sandri (1990, p. 87).

⁹ Brescia exceeds 40,000 inhabitants (Ginatempo and Sandri (1990), p. 75). For the whole of Lombardy see Ginatempo and Sandri (1990, p. 77); for the whole of Northern Italy pp. 96-98.

¹⁰ Verona counts between 35 and 40,000 inhabitants, but in a still relatively early era, 1254 (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990, p. 80). As for Padua, it has perhaps 35,000 inhabitants in 1320 (*ibid.*).

¹¹ It is estimated that Cremona has more than 40,000 inhabitants (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990, p. 75).

¹² "Between 1300 and 1338 certainly more than 100,000 inhabitants, perhaps as many as 120,000"; Ginatempo and Sandri (1990, p. 106), where they speak (as on p. 108) also of the whole of Tuscany. On p. 109 they speak of the rapid

decline of Pisa and Siena, on p. 112 of the general fall of the region. For the whole of central Italy, cfr. tab. pp. 148-149.

¹³ For the increased importance of the Abruzzi route leading to Rieti, L'Aquila, Sulmona and Venafrò after 1268 - which saw Florence and the Anjou Kingdom allied as part of the Guelph League - cf. Gasparinetti, 1966. On the Abruzzi route, a study conference was organized in Aquila by the Società geografica italiana in May 2010.

¹⁴ An overview of urban population growth in the continental South is in Ginatempo and Sandri (1990), tab. pp. 190-192.

¹⁵ For Asti the authors (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990, p. 64) estimate around the year 1300 a bit more than 10,000 inhabitants. For Lucca they estimate between 20 and 25,000 inhabitants (p. 106). With regard to the coastal cities of Campania and Puglia, it is to remember that in the eleventh century, as regards both their prosperity and their autonomy, they may be regarded as "precursors" of the municipalities of central and northern Italy; cf. the still effective judgment by Carabellese, 1905, pp. 42-57.

¹⁶ Cfr. in this regard Ginatempo and Sandri (1990, pp. 109-110).

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