

Savonarola and Florence

By the end of the fifteenth century the Renaissance flourished in Florence. That Republic's tyrannical ruler, Lorenzo de Medici, had become patron to the arts and brought many great men there to heighten the culture of his city. But while art and literature flourished in Florence, so did corruption and greed. Medici rule had led the city into a self-centered, wealth-conscious life. The church had felt the influence, too, as the vow of poverty had little meaning in Florentine monasteries.

Into the worldly city came Girolamo Savonarola, a zealous, pious Dominican monk who took seriously his order's tradition of preaching. Though he spoke harshly against sin, prophesying the downfall of this city that called itself Christian, but only cared for its own pomp, the monk took the fancy of the Florentines. Crowds came out to hear his words.

In 1492, when France attacked them, the people of Florence came to distrust the Medicis and overthrew them in a popular revolution. Savonarola became the city's new ruler, and an amazing change occurred. People gave up the signs of their frivolous lifestyle - including their fine clothes and gambling devices. Bankers and traders returned what they had wrongfully taken from others. Crowds flocked to hear Savonarola's preaching. Men from good families became monks.

But Savonarola had attacked the pope, as well as the rest of the worldly clergy. Pope Alexander VI was particularly scandalous and had fathered a number of illegitimate children. In 1495, fed up with Savonarola's attacks, he ordered the Dominican to stop preaching. Savonarola obeyed, and gave himself over to study instead. A year later, apparently believing he had humbled the friar, Alexander allowed him to begin preaching again; soon the fiery monk returned to his attacks on the corruption in the church.

In 1497, the pope excommunicated Savonarola, but the people of Florence rallied behind him. One year later the pope threatened the city with interdict, unless it sent him Savonarola. Though Savonarola appealed to the rulers of several nations, asking that they call a church council to depose the pope, nothing happened.

The Florentines apparently had only experienced a superficial conversion, for when no help came they quickly turned against their leader. City government went into the hands of a hostile party, and they turned Savonarola over to two papal ambassadors, who had instructed to be certain the rebellious friar was executed. Savonarola and two of his adherents were burned in the city's great piazza.