Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce
PL ISSN 0029-8514
Special Issue

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"Golden Age" or Crisis? Florence in the Fifteenth Century and Savonarola's Activity (discussion remarks on demagogy)

Many historians, and especially art historians, regard the 15th century as a "Golden Age" in the history of Florence. This opinion was also shared by many contemporary inhabitants of the city. The Florentine humanist, Leonardo Bruni, the author of a treatise *Laudatio florentinae urbis* written probably in 1403–1404 (or maybe earlier) compared Florence to ancient Rome and emphasised its predominance as a bastion of civilisation and freedom in Italy.[1] The prosperity of Florence was praised by Benedetto Dei in his chronicle written in 1472,[2] and Ugolino di' Vieri wrote about the time of Lorenzo il Magnifico as the "Golden Age" surpassing the "Golden Age" of the ancient Greeks.[3] Niccolo Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini in their texts on history of Florence glorified the times of Lorenzo the Magnificent and flourishing city under his rule.[4]

1 *Images of Quattrocento Florence. Selected Writings in Literature, History and Art,* ed. by S.U. Baldassari and A. Saiber, New Haven and London, 2000, pp. 39–43. On Leonardo Bruni and his *Laudatio florentinae urbis*, see: L. Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists 1390–1460*, Princeton, 1963, pp. 117–123, 165–176; H. Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, Princeton and New York 1966, pp. 191–224; J.E. Seigel, '"Civic Humanism" or Ciceronian Rhetoric? The Culture of Petrarch and Bruni', *Past & Present*, 1966, 34, pp. 9–28.

2 *Images of Quattrocento Florence*, pp. 83–87.

3 *Ibid.,* pp. 92–95.

4 F. Gilbert, 'Guicciardini, Machiavell, Valori on Lorenzo Magnifico', *Renaissance News*, 11, 1958, pp. 107-14; D. Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence. Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance*, Princeton, 1970, pp. 118-19.

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/OiRwP.SI.2014.10

Florence at that time appears mainly as the "cradle of Renaissance" – not only Florentine or Italian one, by European Renaissance. It was at that time in Florence that the foundations of Renaissance architecture were laid by Filippo Brunelleschi, Michelozzo di Bartolomeo and Leone Battista Alberti. The early principles of perspective were established and implemented by the same Brunelleschi and Masaccio. Sculpture and painting were cultivated by Donatello, Andrea Verrocchio, Lorenzo Ghiberti, Andrea and Luca della Robbia, Filippo and Filippino Lippi, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Sandro Botticelli, active were masters Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Florence was adorned with many buildings in the new Renaissance style. Brunelleschi finished the Florence Cathedral Santa Maria del Fiore, crowning it with a monumental dome (1420–1436), he built the Pazzi Chapel (1429–1446), a central Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli (unfinished, 1434–1439), Churches of San Lorenzo (1419–1446) and Santo Spirito (1434–1492), and Ospedale degli Innocenti (1421–1424). Michelozzo modernised the Church of Santissima Annunziata and the Convent of San Marco (14371452), while the Palazzo della Signoria owns a Renaissance court yard to him (1453). Leon Battista Alberti erected a Renaissance facade of the Church of Santa Maria Novella (1458–1476) and the Rucellai Chapel (1467). Rich Florentines: the families of Medici, Pitti, Strozzi, Antinori, Rucellai, Pazzi, Gerini, Gondi, Busini, had Renaissances palaces built for themselves, commissioning for this purpose outstanding artists. It was throughout the 15th century that Florentine painters, sculptors, architects advanced their status from craftsmen for which they had been taken so far to artists, enjoying respect and fame. It was in Florence that a knowledge of ancient Latin was revived (thought by, among others, Manuel Chrysoloras from Byzantium) and of ancient Greek authors. Thanks to artists and intellectuals gathered in Florence, and especially at the court of Lorenzo the Magnificent, Neoplatonic philosophy flourished. In 1471 books began to be printed in Florence.[5]

5 A. Chastel, *Art et humanisme à Florence au temps de Laurent le Magnifique. Études sur la Renaissance et l'Humanisme platonicien*, Paris, 1959; V. Cronin, *The Florentine Renaissance*, London, 1967; G. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, New York, 1969; R.C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*, New York, 1980; R.A. Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence. An Economic and Social History*, Baltimore and London, 1980; V. Reinhardt, *Florenz zur Zeit der Renaissance. Die Kunst der Macht und die Botschaft der Bilder*, Freiburg, 1990; *Renaissance Florence. The Age of Lorenzo de' Medici 1449–1492*, ed. by C. Acidini Luchinati, Milan and Florence, 1993; P.L. Rubin

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/OiRwP.SI.2014.10

Florence emerged victorious from the rivalry with the Visconti family and Ladislaus of Naples, conquered Pisa (1404) together with its subjected territory: Cortona (1411), and Livorno (1421), which gave the city access to the sea and allowed for the development of the navy.[6] Then came next victorious wars against Milan (1422–1430), Rome i Naples (1478–1480). Under Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici (known also as Cosimo the Elder, 1434–1464) and after the conclusion of Peace of Lodi (1454) which for a longer period of time stabilised the frontiers of Italian states, Florence became the greatest political and military power in Italy.

Luxurious cloth and silk production in Florence was thriving in the first half of the 15th century.[7] Florence was – besides Bruges in Flanders – the most important centre of banking in Europe, was the seat of the biggest bank of those times – the bank of Medici which had branches in many Italian and European cities (Rome, Venice, Ancona, Genoa, Pisa, Milan, Naples, Bruges, London, Avignon, Lyon).[8]

In 1439–1443 the General Council was held in Florence, moved from Ferrara by Pope Eugene IV, and it was in Florence that in 1439 a union (although impermanent) with the Eastern Church was concluded, called the Union of Florence. This added to the prestige of Florence and for a certain period of time made it the capital city of Christianity. Florence in the 15th century was famed for its freedom and liberty it provided for all its citizens (*libertà fiorentina*) – let us remind here the *Laudatio florentinae urbis* by Leonard Bruni.

How did it happen, then, that at the end of the 15th century in this flourishing city, dazzling the world with its arts and humanistic culture,

and A. Wright, *Renaissance Florence. The Art of the 1470,* London, 1999; also quoted above books by L. Martines and H. Baron.

6 M.E. Mallet, *The Florentine Galleys in the Fifteenth Century*, Oxford, 1967.

7 A. Doren, *Studien aus der Florentiner Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 1: *Die Florentiner Wollentuchindustrie vom vierzehnten bis zum sechszehnten Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart, 1901, pp. 413–426; G. Corti and J.G. da Silva, 'Note sur la production de la soie à Florence au XVe siècle', *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 20, 1965, 2, pp. 309–311 (in 1434–1447 the production of silk textile increased more than three times in comparison to the previous period); R. De Roover, 'Labour Conditions in Florence around 1400. Theory, Policy and Reality', in: *Florentine Studies. Politics and Society in Renaissance Florence*, ed. by N. Rubinstein, London, 1968, pp. 296–312.

8 R. De Roover, *The Medici Bank, Its Organisation, Management, Operations and Decline*, New York and London, 1948; idem, *The Rise and Decline of Medici Bank (1397–1494)*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1963; Y. Renouard, 'L'essor et le déclin de la Banque des Médicis', *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 20, 1965, 1, pp. 160–168.

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/OiRwP.SI.2014.10

the Medici – to whom Florence owed its magnificence – were exiled from the city, and actual power was taken by Girolamo Savonarola? It was a gloomy Dominican ascetic and mystic, with a mentality not humanistic but quite medieval, preaching high banners of moral revival and reform of the Church (which, indeed, was much needed), restoration of democracy from pre-Medici times, and social justice, at the same time an avowed enemy of all luxury and opulence, including arts. And why did he fail? Was it because after the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent (1492) Florence lacked the authority of this exceptional man, talented politician and intellectual, and his son Pietro turned out to be much less capable than his father? Or was it that the Medici's formula of power did run out, of rule which in fact was dictatorial, although exercised discreetly, through influences, without any important offices, but for this reason also outside any social control? Were there any other causes of the crisis?

In the 15th century Florence faced demographic collapse. The number of its inhabitants in the first half of the 14th century was estimated at 100–120,000. The number decreased by more than two and throughout the whole 15th century it oscillated around 40,000.[9] It was caused by the Black Death of 1348 and successive plagues of 1363/1364, 1417, 1423/1424 and 1430,[10] but not only.

According to the contemporary, the reasons for this state were low population growth and poor procreation among the Florentines, which were caused, among other things, by homosexuals as not contributing to the reproduction. Indeed, in 1432 there was a special office established under the name of Ufficiali di Notte (Office of the Night), to have charge of public morals and punish homosexuals in order to force people to have children.[11] They were not aware of what we know today thanks to studies of historians of demography that the growth of population in

9 Ch.M. de La Roncière, *Florence, centre économique regional au XVe siècle,* Aix-en-Provence, 1976, pp. 693–696; E. Fiumi, '*La demografia fiorentina nelle pagine di Giovanni Villani', Archivio Storico Italiano*, 108, 1950, pp. 106, 118; idem, '*Fioritura e decadenza dell'economia fiorentina', ibid.,* 116, 1958, pp. 465–466; D. Herlihy and Ch. Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans et leurs familles,* Paris, 1978, pp. 176–183.

10 A.G. Carmichael, *Plague and the Poor in Renaissance Florence,* Cambridge, 1986, pp. 16–107.

11 M. Rocke, 'Il controllo dell'omosessualità a Firenze nel XV secolo. Gli Ufficiali di Notte', *Quaderni Storici*, 22 (66), 1987, 3, pp. 701–723; A. Wyrobisz, 'Sodoma i Gomora we wczesnorenesansowej Florencji', *Przegląd Historyczny*, 88, 1997, 1, p. 146; idem, '"Wielki strach" w Wenecji i we Florencji w XV wieku i jego możliwe przyczyny', *Przegląd Historyczny*, 95, 2004, 4, p. 460.

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/OiRwP.SI.2014.10

towns and cities of the pre-industrial era depended not on the population growth rate in towns (this was always negative), but on immigration from outside. Thus, if the number of inhabitants in Florence in the 15th century was not growing, as expected, quite evidently there were no incentives that could attract people to the city, it meant that the internal situation – economic, social and political one – of Florence was not attractive enough, despite striving art and culture of the Renaissance.[12]

The wars which Florence was waging in the 15th century were victorious, but expensive. They exhausted the treasury of the Republic and led it to the situation of crisis.[13] Throughout the whole 15th century Florence was locked in fierce struggle for power, not ended by the victory of Medici (the Pazzi conspiracy in 1477, conspiracies of the Baldovinetti and Frescobaldi in 1481).[14] The Ufficiali di Notte, founded specifically to investigate and punish homosexuality as a threat to morality and reproduction, in actual fact was an instrument of political struggle conducted with the use of denouncing letters and legal accusations to eliminate political rivals.[15] An economic, social and political crisis called the "crisis of feudalism" hit in the 14th and 15th centuries many states of Western Europe and had to influence the situation of Florentine luxury cloth production which was losing its markets.[16] Cloth making in Florence and wages of its craftsmen depended on the international economic conditions and its sale in foreign markets.[17] Florentine economic prosperity of the first half of the 15th century, much praised by Benedetto Dei, collapsed in the second half of the century. During the session of the Grand Council it was said that: "L'arte delle seta lavora pocho et la lana non molto", and crafstmen "vanno

12 But in the early 15th century the number of inhabitansts decreased not only in Florence but also in many other cities, R.S. Lopez and H.A. Miskimin, '*The Economic Depression of the Renaissance', The Economic History Review*, 14, 1962, 3, pp. 408–420.

13 L.F. Marks, '*La crisi finanziaria a Firenze del 1494–1502', Archivio Storico Italiano*, 112, 1954, pp. 40–72.

14 N. Rubinstein, *Il governo di Firenze sotto i Medici (1434–1494)*, Florence, 1971; D.V. Kent, *The Rise of the Medici. Faction in Florence (1426–1434)*, Oxford, 1977; H. Acton, *The Pazzi conspiracy*, New York, 1980.

15 Wyrobisz, 'Wielki strach', p. 462.

16 M. Małowist, 'Zagadnienie kryzysu feudalizmu w XIV i XV wieku w świetle najnowszych badań (Próba krytyki)', *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 60, 1953, 1, pp. 86–106; R.S. Lopez and H.A. Miskimin, 'The Economic Depression'; *Europa 1400. Die Krise des Spätmittelalters*, ed. by F. Seibt and W. Eberhard, Stuttgart, 1984.

17 De Roover, '*Labour conditions',* pp. 298, 312.

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mendicando."[18] From 1469 on, the Medici Bank underwent crises. In 1477 its branch in London was closed, w 1478 branches in Bruges and Milan, in 1479 in Avignon, and in 1485 in Lyon. Finally, it collapsed in 1495.[19] The Florentine society was strongly polarised as regards its material status. As it follows from the 1427 cadastre, fourth part of the city's affluence was in the hands of only one hundred of persons. A large majority of Florence inhabitants was made up of poor people, its middle class was weak which resulted in a lack of stabilisation and constant fear of a recurrence of the situation from the time of the popular revolt of the Ciompi.[20] The position of the Church was very strong, which in the span of the 15th century much increased its possessions.[21] This factor also contributed to growing social tensions.

Florence in the 15th century enjoyed the fame of having the largest community of homosexuals, whom the city secured good living conditions and the development of their own culture. This fame Florence probably owed to many outstanding gay artists and intellectuals (Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Cavalcanti, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Girolamo Benivieni, Pomponio Leto, Niccoló Lelio Cosmico, Antonio Beccadelli, Angelo Poliziano, Donatello, Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo), gathered around the court of Lorenzo il Magnifico and enjoying its patronage. This, however, was only Florentine elite.[22] The opinion of Florence as the biggest community of homosexuals was also being spread by Berdnardine of Siena and Savonarola in their preaching.[23] But these preachers were interested in picturing Florence as a den of sin and vice. The fight against sodomy was for them an important tool in

18 Doren, *Studien*, p. 426; R.S. Lopez and H. A. Miskimin, 'The Economic Depression', pp. 419–420.

19 De Roover, *The Medici Bank,* pp. 59–66; idem, *The Rise and Decline,* pp. 358–375; Y. Renouard, 'L'essor et le déclin', p. 166.

20 On a few richest Florentine families (Strozzi, Guicciardini, Gondi, Capponi), see: R.A. Goldthwaite, *Private Wealth in Renaissance Florence,* Princeton, 1968. On the wealth of the Medici, see the abovementioned contributions by R. De Roover.

21 Brucker, *Renaissance Florence*, p. 177.

22 G. Dall'Orto, '"Socratic Love" as a Disguise for Same-Sex Love in the Italian Renaissance, in: *The Pursuit of Sodomy. Male Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe*, ed. by K. Gerard and G. Hekma, New York and London, 1989, pp. 43–45; Wyrobisz, 'Sodoma i Gomora', p. 161; idem, 'Wielki strach', p. 464.

23 J. Schnitzer, *Savonarola*, vol. 1, Munich, 1924, pp. 273, 476; U. Mazzone, *'El buongoverno'. Un progetto di riforma generale nella Firenze savonaroliana*, Florence, 1978, p. 98.

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/OiRwP.SI.2014.10

their struggle for influence in the Florentine society and for power.[24] Thus, their opinions on this subject should be treated with a great deal of caution.[25] For, at the same time it was in Florence that homosexuals were punished most severely and drastically in the whole Europe, as the abovementioned Ufficiali di Notte, formed to identify and prosecute homosexuals, was vested with broad judicial and penal authority. During the 15th century some 15,000–16,000 people were accused of homosexuality, and circa 3000 of them were punished.[26] Both Bernardine of Siena at the beginning of the century, and Savonarola at its end propagated in their sermons a fierce homophobia.[27] There was no possibility for homosexuals to develop their subculture.[28]

As a result, the historian who does not restrict himself to the study of one aspect of the past only, for instance arts, culture or economy, but has an integral approach to history (integral history) and wants to discover all areas of social life is unable to answer unambiguously the title question: Was it a Golden Age for 15th-century Florence or crisis? And dividing the 15th century into two half-centuries or even shorter periods will be of no help. The arts flourished in Florence both in the first and second half of the century, with the climax falling on the times of Lorenzo il Magnifico (1469–1492), who not without reason was called the Magnificent, when the Medici Bank was on the decline. Thus, apart from unquestionable achievements and successes we have heavy failures and difficulties in face of which the Florentines were helpless. An intensification of those tensions and conflicts took place in the last decade of the 15th century. It created conditions conducive to the appearance of a demagogue that is a man greedy for power and unscrupulous, proclaiming slogans looking for easy effect and applause, and gaining followers by flattery and lies, preaching exactly what people wanted to hear, bluntly presenting the

24 Wyrobisz, 'Wielki strach', p. 462.

25 William J. Bouwsma *(in The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion,* ed. by C. Trinkaus and H. Oberman, Leiden, 1974, pp. 270–271) thinks the fame of 'Florentine homosexuality' as a stereotype rooted already in Dante, or maybe even earlier.

26 Rocke, 'Il controllo', pp. 701–724; idem, *Forbidden Friendships. Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence*, New York and Oxford, 1996, pp. 4, 45–84; Wyrobisz, 'Sodoma i Gomora', pp. 146–147; idem, 'Wielki strach', p. 468.

27 Trexler, *Public Life*, pp. 380–382; M. Rocke, 'Sodomites in Fifteenth-Century Toscany. The Views of Bernardino di Siena', in: *The Pursuit of Sodomy*, pp. 7–11. On Savonarola's views, see below.

28 Wyrobisz, 'Sodoma i Gomora', p. 160.

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actual situation of the society, indicating the causes – in theory real ones, but in fact much often imaginary ones – and promising reforms which would root out evil and make all people happy; and finally – a man that would shrink any responsibility.[29] Such a demagogue in Florence at the end of the 15th century was Girolamo Savonarola.

Already the Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino thought Savonarola to be demagogue; initially his supporter, but finally his enemy and severe critic. Because it is in this sense that we should understand the word *hipocrita*, Ficino used to describe Savonarola in his letter addressed to the College of Cardinals soon after Savonarola's death (hypocrite, that is a unctuous and insincere, dishonest person).[30] Also Warman Welliver wrote called Savonarola demagogue – maybe not accidentally at the time when tensions of the Cold War were growing and demagogy was spreading both in the communist camp and in the anti-communist campaign of Senator McCarthy.[31]

This opinion was shared by German Arciniegas.[32] Gene Brucker did not call Savonarola directly a demagogue, but his activity in Florence described as an aberrational episode in the history of the city,[33] and categorically resigned from regarding Savonarola as reformer, prophet or saint. Also Richard Trexler, although he does not use the term "demagogue" to describe Savonarola, he perceives him not as a charismatic preacher, reformer and defender of morality, but as a man striving for power at all costs, and is very critical of the reforms Savonarola initiated in Florence.

Thus, who really was Savonarola? Opinions of historians in this subject vary, and usually are strongly branded by this or that ideology, which made it very difficult to objectively assess his personage.

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29 M. Karwat, *O demagogii,* Warsaw, 2006; A. Wyrobisz, '*Demagogia w historii. Socjotechnika czy żądza władzy?', Przegląd Historyczny*, 98, 2007, 2, pp. 259–262.

30 A. Ostrowski, *Savonarola,* Warsaw, 1974, p. 112; D. Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence,* Princeton, 1970, p. 186.

31 W. Welliver, '*La demagogia del Savonarola', Il Ponte*, 12, 1956, 2, pp. 1194–1202. Cf. Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence,* p. 19.

32 G. Arciniegas, 'Savonarola, Machiavelli and Guido Antonio Vespucci. Totalitarian and Democrat five hundred years ago', *Political Science Quarterly*, 69, 1954, 2, pp. 184–201.

33 G. Brucker, '*Savonarola and Florence. The Intolerable Burden', Studies in the Italian Renaissance,* ed. by G.P. Biasin, A. Mancini, and N. Perella, Naples, 1985, p. 119. In his outline of the history of Renaissance Florence Brucker devoted to Savonarola only several pages.

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Was he really a saint, as he was thought to be by a part of his followers and some biographers, still waiting for his canonisation (much delayed, like in the case of Joan of Arc)? Or was he heresiarch? Precursor of the Reformation? Great reformer? Charismatic preacher seeking the moral revival of the Church, Christianity and the society of Florence? Religious fanatic? Each of these could be both supported by many arguments or refuted with valid argumentations.

The Church has never been inclined to canonise Savonarola. But nor declared him a heretic. Pope Alexander VI excommunicated Savonarola for disobedience, and not for heresy. Savonarola's theological views were fully consistent with the teachings of the Church. A textbook written by Savonarola for confessors (*Confessionale pro instructione confessorum*) has never been questioned by the Church and had as many as 42 editions, including one with an introduction by Pope Gregory XIII.[34] Whereas all political and fiscal reforms implemented in Florence by Savonarola or under his influence did not bring about any permanent results and did not improve morality of the Florentines.

Nor does Savonarola fit into the category of religious fanatic, for as such he would not have been able to gain support not only of a primitive mass of the pious but also broad circles of the Florentine society, including the intellectual and artistic elites.[35]

Savonarola possessed some inborn predispositions to become a demagogue. He was a misanthrope, without any close friends, a man frustrated with his poor beauty, lack of personal successes (he even suffered a disappointment in love, when a proud girl of the Strozzi family rejected his proposal of marriage), and successes as a preacher.[36] So, he needed a kind of compensation to relieve his frustration, and this predestined him to the role of demagogue. And only in this role did he begin in 1494 to

34 D. Weinstein, 'The Prophet as Physician of Souls. Savonarola's Manual for Confessors', in: *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. by W.J. Connell, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 2002, p. 242.

35 There has been no through analysis of a social spectrum of Savonarola's followers published. See my review of the book: L. Polizzotto, *The Elect Nation. The Savonarolan Movement in Florence 1494-1545,* Oxford, 1994, *Przegląd Historyczny*, 87, 1996, 4, pp. 918–919.

36 Cf., for instance, biographies of Savonarola: R. Ridolfi, *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola,* vol. 1, Rome, 1952, pp. 11–31; R. Roeder, *Savonarola,* Paris, 1933, pp. 3–36, esp. pp. 23–24, 27; Schnitzer, *Savonarola,* pp. 1–39; Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence,* pp. 78–85; P. Rocca, '*La giovinezza di Gerolamo Savonarola a Ferrara',* in: *Deputazione Provinciale Ferrarese di Storia Patria, Atti e Memorie,* vol. 7, Ferrara, 1952–1953, pp. 9–41.

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attract masses of listeners and gain a huge popularity. And as demagogue Savonarola got to know moods of Florence at that time and knew how to use them. His behaviour after the overthrow of Medici rule was typical to that of a demagogue. First, when the situation in Florence was still uncertain, he called for internal peace, only to encourage terror a few months later, when his personal position strengthened and the situation in the city was becoming more and more tense.[37] When Florence was threatened by a French invasion, Savonarola preached in November of 1494 a long sermon, full of vague threats, which increased the feeling of uncertainty but did not offer any concrete advice except for repentance prayer and charity.[38] Also the language he used in his sermons was typical for that of a demagogue: malicious, vulgar, without any inhibitions ("Scoundrel Church", "a cheeky harlot worse than a beast").[39] Whereas during the investigation he was submitted to in 1498, Savonarola turned out to be a psychically weak person, intolerant to pain, and he broke down quickly.[40]

Demagogues often use young people for the purpose of realisation of their own ends, to gain influence, to seize power through intimidation of people. Young people, with no life experience and by nature prone to radicalism, but also eager to participate in street brawls, easily yield to influences and manipulations of a demagogue. All this Savonarola unscrupulously used to his advantage in organising a children militia and using bands of fanatic teenagers who at certain moments reigned in the streets and squares of Florence and terrorised its inhabitants, forcing them to subordinate to the demagogue.[41]

Savonarola in his sermons was touching upon a wide variety of problems. An analysis of theological and philosophical content of his sermons, as done by many authors interested in Savonarola, is – in my opinion – pointless. For Savonarola was neither a scholar, nor theologian

37 Ostrowski, *Savonarola,* p. 101.

38 *Ibid.,* p. 81.

39 *Ibid.,* p. 165.

40 *Ibid.,* pp. 217, 227.

41 R.C. Trexler, '*Ritual in Florence. Adolescence and Salvation in the Renaissance',* in: *The Pursuit of Holiness,* pp. 250–263; idem, *Public Life*, pp. 368–399, 474–482; Brucker, '*Savonarola and Florence',* p. 124; Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships,* pp. 210–211; Schnitzer, *Savonarola,* pp. 271–285, 321–340; N. Osokin, *Savonarola i Florencija,* Parts 1–2, Kazan, 1865, pp. 163–166; Roeder, *Savonarola,* pp. 133–139, 144–145; Ostrowski, *Savonarola,* pp. 156–157.

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or philosopher, he was not constructing a new philosophical or theological system, like St. Thomas Aquinas, his favourite authority. There were only few among the masses listening to his sermons who were interested in theological issues and were able to understand them. What really reached Savonarola's audience could only be simple moral truths and critical reflections on the state of Florentine society, its economy, political system and politics. And this was the essence of Savonarola's sermons.

One of the problems bothering the society at that time was a question of social and material inequality, manifesting itself in the luxurious life of the Florentine elite. An attempt to correct those huge material imbalances dividing the inhabitants of Florence was a tax reform proposed by Savonarola. On his initiative a new tax was imposed in Florence in 1495, called *Decima*, which was a ten percent tax on property. It was supposed to replace a burdensome indirect tax – *gabella*. Savonarola thought that in this way it would be possible to reduce the profits of the rich for the benefit of the poor. But this tax reform proved fatal both for the public treasury, to which it did not bring as much money as it had been expected (the public treasury of Florence was bankrupt, additionally drained by the war with Pisa), and for craftsmen and merchants. Landowners burdened with the *Decima* had to raise prices of food: grain, olive, wine, thus shifting the burden of the tax onto the city's population.[42] Savonarola was unable to propose such a reform of taxes, finances and social welfare which would bring about a real redistribution of the wealth. There was also another, spectacular, form of the fight against the luxury of the rich initiated by Savonarola, that is the "burning of the vanities" (*bruciamento delle vanità*), which included books and works of art, performed in 1497 and 1498.[43] It was all done to the amusement of the crowds but could not, of course, improve the financial situation of Florence.

One of the most acute problems felt by the Florentines was usury, especially widespread and burdensome in the situation of economic crisis which was gradually eroding the situation of Florence which dramatically deteriorated further in the last years of the 15th century, that is in the

42 P. Villari, *Life and Time of Girolamo Savonarola,* 5th ed., London, 1896, vol. 1, pp. 258–260; Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, pp. 56–58; Ostrowski, *Savonarola,* pp. 105–106; Roeder, *Savonarola,* p. 111; Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, pp. 155, 267–268; Fiumi, 'Fioritura e decadenza', pp. 463–464.

43 Ostrowski, *Savonarola,* pp. 189–190; Roeder, *Savonarola,* p. 162; Schnitzer, *Savonarola*, pp. 392–394; Villari, *Life and Time*, vol. 1, pp. 462–463, vol. 2, p. 54; Arciniegas, 'Savonarola', p. 187; Brucker, '*Savonarola and Florence',* p. 124.

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period when Savonarola became the leading power in Florence. Usury was condemned by the Church. There were already few Savonarola's predecessors who denounced usurers, including Franciscan preachers Bernardine of Siena and Bernardino da Feltre, and also Bishop Antonino Pierozzi. Since it was mainly Jews who engaged in such transactions, all actions taken against usurers (also of Savonarola) betrayed an obvious anti-Jewish undercurrent. An attempt to remedy the problem of usury and to supersede Jewish usurers was a special institution of credit called mount of piety (*Monte di Pietà*), established on the initiative of Savonarola in 1495 to protect poor persons from usurers by short-term loans at low rates secured upon their movables.[44] Similar banks had been already organised in other Italian towns. But nowhere were they able to replace Jewish usurers nor satisfy the poorer population in need of a small capital loan; and they finally transformed into institutions that operated to the benefit of bankers granting loans and not people incurring debts.[45] It was no different in Florence. Savonarola's dreams of the initial capital of the *Monte di Pietà* made of voluntary contributions of 'people inspired' by his sermons from among the *popolo minuto* did not come true. The bank capital was made up largely of deposits of the patricians (95 percent in 1496–1499), supplemented by financial contributions of various corporations, fines, sums bequeathed by the community.[46] The establishment of the *Monte di Pietà* played a certain part in Savonarola's reform of the political system in Florence and in strengthening of his power, but it did not solve the problem of poverty and the demand for small and cheap capital loans.

44 F.R. Salter, '*The Jews in Fifteenth-Century Florence and Savonarola. Establishment of a Mons Pietatis', Cambridge Historical Journal*, 5, 1936, pp. 193–211. Earlier about the same, M. Ciardini, *I banchieri ebrei in Firenze nel secolo XV e il Monte di Pietà fondato da Girolamo Savonarola,* Borgo San Lorenzo, 1907. See also: Roeder, *Savonarola,* p. 112; Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence,* p. 278; Schnitzer, *Savonarola,* pp. 201–203; Villari, *Life and Time*, vol. 1, pp. 277–279; Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, p. 138.

45 H. Holzapfel, *Die Anfänge der Montes Pietatis (1462–1515)*, Munich, 1903; B. Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice. The Social Institutions of a Catholic State to 1620*, Oxford, 1971, pp. 443–475; V. Meneghin, *I Monti di Pietà in Italia dal 1462 al 1562*, Vicenza, 1986; R.C. Trexler, 'Charity and the Defense of Urban Elites in the Italian Communes', in: *The Rich, the Well Born, and the Powerful-Elites and Upper Classes in History*, ed. by F. Jaher, Urbana, 1973, p. 83.

46 C.B. Menning, '*The Monte's "Monte". The Early supporters of Florence's Monte di Pietà', Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23, 1992, 4, pp. 661–676.

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/OiRwP.SI.2014.10

There is a famous scene – described by many authors – of Lorenzo il Magnifico's death. Dying Lorenzo called Savonarola to his deathbed, wanting sacramental absolution. Savonarola imposed three conditions on the dying man, including "to give Florence back her freedom." Lorenzo, however, did not accept this very condition and then… died.[47] But, if this was what really happened, the scene had only two eyewitnesses: Lorenzo the Magnificent and Savonarola. There could not have been any other witnesses. Thus, the only person who could have related it was Savonarola himself. And probably it was he who described what had happened to propagate his image as the defender of liberty and democracy. It was a very typical trick of the demagogue who was building his political reputation of the leader and defender of people.

The demagogue is always interested in the political system and possibility to reform it in such a way as to satisfy the expectations of people, but first and foremost to secure a decisive influence on the government for himself. Savonarola wanted to be seen as the defender of people (*predicatore de' desperati e malcontenti* – "the preacher of the desperate and the malcontent"), liberty and democracy.[48] But he was the foe of the traditional Florentine assembly of the people (*Parlamento*), which he attacked with a great fury.[49] The Great Council (*Consiglio Maggiore*) created in 1494 on Savonarola's initiative and the Council of Eighty (*Consiglio degli Ottanta*) as the new organs of government in Florence operated only through voting, without any discussion. Only ca. three thousand Florentines had the voting right to those councils, which was ten times more than the people sharing the right to participate in ruling under the Medici, but was still a small percentage of the whole community of Florentines.[50] The rest of the inhabitants, disdainfully termed

47 The scene is described by all Savonarola's biographers. Ridolfi, *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola,* pp. 65–66, Savonarola's meticulous historian glorifying his protagonist, thinks the scene was a mystification exploited by the protagonists of the Dominican friar. Villari (*Life and Time*, vol. 1, pp. 155–158), however, believes the scene was genuine.

48 This Savonarola's feature is emphasised by Osokin, *Savonarola,* p. 147. Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence,* pp. 289–316; Ridolfi, *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola,* p. 51.

49 Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence,* pp. 312–313; A. Brown, *Savonarola, Machiavelli e Moses. A Changing Model,* in: *Florence and Italy. Renaissance Studies in Honour of Nicolas Rubinstein,* ed. by P. Denley and C. Elam, London, 1988, pp. 160–161 (in a sermon of 11 October 1495 he stated: 'chi vuole fare parlamento, vuole torre delle mane del popolo il Regimento').

50 Florence in the 15th century had ca. 40,000 inhabitants, 30 percent of which, i.e. ca. 12,000 were men between 15 and 64 years of age, that is citizens who in

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as *plebe*, *infimo plebe*, *vulgo*, had no political rights.[51] At the same time Savonarola praised the political system of Venice, holding it up as a model for reforms necessary in Florence (he held that the Venetian constitution was given the Venetians by God: "la forma del governo de' Veneziani sia molto buona […] perché quella forma che hanno fu data loro di Dio"). Legal and political reforms implemented in the city in 1494–1512 under Savonarola's influence made Florence "si era venezianizzata," and the Florentine constitution "essendo stato ordinato […] ad similitudinem del Veneziano."[52] And yet, it was not the most non-democratic system in contemporary Europe (according to the present-day concepts, it was simply a totalitarian system). It fascinated various governing groups, for it ensured the total subjection of the society to those in power (hence such an exceptional in contemporary Europe lack of any social movements in Venice, revolts and rebellions), eliminated all forms of participation in ruling of broader social circles, except for the oligarchy in power, and guaranteed a stabilisation, social order and peace. That was probably what Savonarola valued in the Venice constitution.[53]

Also the rules of sexual morality preached by Savonarola in his sermons, published in treatises and in his manual for confessors inscribed into his image as the demagogue who exploited any difficulty of the society and used it build his political image. Although in the sphere of sexual morality Savonarola abided strictly by the rules of the Catholic Church, he emphasised those relating to the current situation in Florence, namely the population crisis which needed to be resolved by an increased population growth, that is procreation. According to the rules of the Church,

a democratic system would enjoy political rights, Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Les Toscans,* pp. 371, 386.

51 Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence,* p. 287; N. Rubinstein, '*I primi anni del Consiglio Maggiore di Firenze (1494-1499)', Archivio Storico Italiano*, 112, 1954, pp. 151–194, 321–347; F. Gilbert, '*Florentine Political Assumptions in the Period of Savonarola and Soderini', Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 20, 1957, 3–4, p. 187; Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, pp. 8–9.

52 Roeder, *Savonarola,* pp. 107–109; Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence,* pp. 156, 167, 248–263, 308; Gilbert, '*Florentine Political Assumptions',* pp. 203, 210–211; id., '*The Venetian Constitution in Florence Political Thought',* in: *Florentine Studies,* pp. 477–482; Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, pp. 46–48; Rubinstein, '*I primi anni',* p. 153.

53 Gilbert, '*The Venetian Constitution',* pp. 463–500; R. Pecchioli, '*"I mito" di Venezia e la crisi fiorentina intorno al 1500', Studi Storici*, 3, 1962, pp. 451–492; F. Gaeta, '*Alcune considerazioni sul mito di Venezia', Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 23, 1961, pp. 58–75; Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, p. 48.

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Savonarola condemned adultery and all the forms of sexual activity which did not lead or could not lead to procreation: masturbation, anal and oral sex, zoophilia, and homosexuality. But he did not limit himself to condemning sodomy as the sin and demanded that it be punished not by a fine, like so far, but by putting to death on the stake or banishment ("fate iustizia di questo vizio maledetto contra naturam, non punite di damnari nè secretamente, ma fate un fuoco, che senta tutta la Italia"). It was under his pressure that the *Signoria* adopted in 1494–1497 the laws most severely penalising homosexuality.[54] What was characteristic was that Savonarola in his fight for the moral revival condemned *expressis verbis* homosexuality and demanded its punishment but said nothing about prostitution, very common in contemporary Florence. We will be justified in assuming that his condemnation of prostitution was included in the general condemnation of all forms of adultery by Savonarola and the Church. But there is another explanation of his silence about prostitution: Savonarola could have regarded prostitution – like the Church from the times of St. Augustine on – as a "necessary evil" and antidote against homosexuality. In addition, when condemning sodomy, he could have counted on the broad support of the citizens, in their huge majority heterosexual and hostile towards homosexuals, whereas criticising prostitution, he fell foul of all those heterosexual Florentines who used the services of prostitutes.[55]

Rejecting all restrictions imposed by the Church in the early Middle Ages on marital sex (Canon law prohibited sex between husband and wife during the Lent, Advent, Pentecost fasting, on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, on Sundays and solemn holidays, during pregnancy, menstruation and lactation), Savonarola regarded sexual intercourse between husband and his wife as a martial duty for both spouses and its avoidance – as a sin, even the deadly one.[56] This was in accordance

54 Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships,* pp. 205–210; Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, pp. 100–108; Ridolfi, *Vita di Girolamo Savonarola,* p. 262; Roeder, *Savonarola,* p. 128; Trexler, *Public Life*, pp. 350, 470; Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence,* p. 124.

55 On prostitution in Florence see: R.C. Trexler, '*La prostitution florentine au* XVe *siècle: Patronage et clientèles', Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 36, 1981, 6, pp. 983–1015; id., *Public Life*, p. 380.

56 J.A. Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe*, Chicago and London, 1987, pp. 154–161, 503; J.L. Flandrin, *Un temps pour embrasser. Aux origines de la morale sexuelle occidentale (VIe–XIe)*, Paris, 1983, pp. 8–40; Weinstein, 'The Prophet', pp. 251–253.

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with the *Decretum Gratiani*, or a codification of Canon law made in the mid-12th century by Gratian who sought to present a coherent theory of Christian marriage which from that time on was in force in the Catholic Church and was generally accepted in the 15th century.[57] All this inscribed in the pro-family policy needed by Florence to get out of its population collapse.

Neither Savonarola nor his contemporaries were aware that all those measures and moral counsels, regardless of the fact whether they did or did not have any impact on the Florentines, could not have changed the demographic situation in their city. The condemnation of homosexuals, their punishment, could not have changed their sexual orientation. Even if some of them could have been pressured into marrying and having children (it could concern apparent homosexuals or bisexual people only), it had a minimal impact on population growth due to a small number of those people (in the 15th-century city of ca. 40,000 inhabitants, only some 400 to 1500 men – given the sex and age composition of the Florentine population and the frequency of homosexual orientation – could have been gay).[58] Also the liberation from all restrictions on sexual activity in marriage, or even urging people to have sexual intercourses and making it their duty had a similar small effect. As it has been ascertained by the shrewd researcher investigating populations of contemporary Italian towns David Herlihy, urban communities had large numbers of unmarried adults. In Florence only, in 1427, in a group of men between 18 and 32 years of age only 25 percent were married.[59] According to another historian interested in the history of Florence, Richard C. Trexler, there was in the 15th century a sudden flood of women to religious convents. As a result, about 13 percent of the female population of Florence at that time was made up of nuns.[60] This stemmed from the bad economic situation of the city, pauperisation of Florentine families who were unable to afford the dowries necessary for marriages of their daughters.

In Savonarola's times, some methods of contraception and family planning were well-known (sexual continence, delayed marriages, *coitus interruptus*, certain contraceptive drugs, used most probably not only in

57 Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society,* p. 242.

58 Wyrobisz, 'Sodoma i Gomora', p. 147.

59 D. Herlihy, '*Vieillir à Florence au Quattrocento', Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 24, 1969, 6, pp. 1340, 1344, 1346, 1348.

60 R.C. Trexler, *Le célibat à la fin du Moyen Age. Les religieuses de Florence, ibid.,* 27, 1972, 6, pp. 1329–1350, esp. p. 1377. Cf. Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, pp. 87–95.

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extramarital intercourses – all these are mentioned, of course, as sinful, by medieval penitentiaries and medical treatises[61]). It is very probable that sensible Florentine marriages did not decide to increase their families without justification that is the right material position and prospects of their children's future prosperity and wealth.[62]

Probably it was not without reason that the average number of children per one Florentine family in the first half of the 15th century was 0.51.[63] Evidently, the situation of the city did not encourage people to have more children and Savonarola's efforts could have changed nothing in this regard. It was better understood by Florence authorities who in 1431 granted the tax exemption from taxes for twenty years to all foreigners settling in the city. The size of population in contemporary cities was dependent more heavily on migration from outside than on the population growth in towns.

At the same time, in the 15th century, Florentine humanists were engaged in a discussion about the family and its social role. And although Ermolao Barbaro condemned the institution of marriage (he wrote that nothing was so harmful to scholarship as matrimonial chains, caring for children and listening to their crying), but many others were praising the family life and raising children, for instance the leading Florentine humanist Marsilio Ficino, Leon Battista Alberti, the author of a treatise *Della famiglia*, Francesco Barbaro in his text *De re uxoria* and Campano in *De dignitate matrimonii*.[64] It is probable, however, that these texts were

61 *La prévention des naissances dans la famille. Ses origines dans les temps modernes*, ed. by H. Bergues et al., Paris, 1960, pp. 124–125, 140–141; J.T. Noonan, *Contraconception et mariage. Evolution ou contradiction dans la pensée chrétienne*, Paris, 1969, pp. 257–295; Brundage, *Law, Sex and Christian Society,* pp. 508–509; J.L. Flandrin, 'Contraception, mariage et relations amoureuses dans l'Occident chrétien', *Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 24, 1969, 6, pp. 1370–1396; Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, p. 99.

62 Population studies – although for a later period (the 18th century) and different territory – have proved that the number of children in the families of craftsmen increased during long periods of good economic conditions and decreased in periods of economic recession, F. Mendels, '*Industrialization* and Population Pressure in Eighteen-Century Flandres', *Journal of Economic History*, 31, 1971, pp. 269–271; H. Medick, 'The Proto-Industrial Family Economy. The Structural Functions of Household and Family during the Transition from Peasant Society to Industrial Capitalism', *Social History*, 1976, 3, pp. 304–305.

63 D. Herlihy, '*The Tuscan Town in the Quattrocento. A demographic profile', Mediaevalia et Humanistica*, New Series, 1, 1970, p. 87.

64 E. Garin, *Filozofia Odrodzenia we Włoszech,* Warsaw, 1969, pp. 60–61 (in English: *Science and Civic Life in the Italian Renaissance*, New York: Doubleday, 1969).

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/OiRwP.SI.2014.10

known only to a small circle of humanist elite, and the debate conducted among humanists did not spread out to the rest of the society, while Savonarola's sermons reached the huge masses of the Florentines.

It is important for any demagogue to indicate "scapegoats", that is to point out individuals or social groups that could be hold responsible for all troubles, disasters, failures and other problems wreaking the community.[65] This makes it possible to shift off the responsibility from himself for unfulfilled promises and vain hopes with which he fed the people. Savonarola was scapeogating homosexuals and Jews as those who were incurring God's wrath or were responsible for concrete problems of the society (the homosexuals for depopulation of the city, the Jews for ruining and tormenting their debtors). And although initially Savonarola was rather tolerant towards the Jews, with the lapse of time, when the situation in Florence was deteriorating and the preacher himself could not demonstrate any spectacular achievements, his attitude towards the Jews gradually worsened. Domenico Cecchi, a fervent supporter of Savonarola and a member of the Florentine "middle class", craftsmen, was bitingly anti-Jewish. He was the author of a treatise *Riforma sancta et pretiosa*, written and published in 1497, then at the end of Savonarola's rule, in which he called the Jews the foes of Christ and Christians, and demanded that the Jews be immediately expelled from the city.[66] The Jews and homosexuals were identified as the source of all evil also by Savonarola's predecessors, Berdnardine of Siena and Bernardino da Feltre, for Savonarola was neither the first nor the only demagogue who appeared in Florence in the 15th century. But he was the first one to achieve a full – although short-lived – success in seizing power. And not necessarily because he was the most talented and most ruthless demagogue. It was mainly because in the last decade of the 15th century he was met with the most favourable conditions for a demagogue: the rapid deterioration of the economic and political situation, the disappearance of the authority after the death of Lorenzo il Magnifico, the intensification of moral and ideological dilemmas within the circle of intellectual and artistic elites. There could have been another factor involved, that is the fear of replication of the terrible events of the Ciompi revolt of 1378. The memory of those events from over one hundred years ago, greatly

65 R. Girard, *Kozioł ofiarny,* Łódź, 1987.

66 Mazzone, *El buongoverno*, pp. 127–143, 174.

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exaggerated by legends, was still alive and made the Florentines an easy prey to the demagogue who could protect them against a similar tragedy.

Effects of activities of a demagogue who seizes power are always tragic for society. The results of Savonarola's activity in Florence were not so fatal, for he ruled in Florence for a short period of four years. During this whole period he had to deal with the opposition, various antagonistic groups which restricted his freedom of action and restrained his demagogic aspirations. But the legend of Savonarola as the prophet, candidate to sainthood, great reformer, and morality healer, has remained alive and powerful both among the inhabitants of Florence and historians interested in the 15th-century history of the city and Savonarola. The legend – as almost all legends – is false. Let us say it openly: Savonarola was a demagogue whose certain actions were favourable for the society but who in the majority of matters he was dealing with did not achieve any success. And this was what made him fail in the end.

To return to the question posed in the title – "Golden Age" or crisis? – we can only remind the thesis put forward long ago by Roberto Sabatino Lopez, and accepted by many historians, that a magnificent flourishing of art and culture ("golden age") does not always go together with the economic and social development, and stabilisation, on the contrary, it is often responsible for the crisis situation.[67]

Translated by *Grażyna Waluga*

First published as: '"Wiek złoty" czy kryzys? Florencja w XV wieku i działalność Savonaroli (uwagi dyskusyjne na temat demagogii)', *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce*, 51, 2007, pp. 249–263.

67 R.S. Lopez, '*Economie et architecture médiévales. Cela aurait-il tué ceci?', Annales. Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 7, 1952, 4, pp. 433-38; idem, '*Hard Times and Investment in Culture',* in *The Renaissance. A Syposium,* ed. by W. Fergusson, New York, 1953. Cf. A. Wyrobisz, '*Nowe koncepcje w badaniach nad historią miast europejskich', Przegląd Historyczny*, 80, 1989, 1, pp. 165-66.

http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/OiRwP.SI.2014.10