

V CENTURY—X CENTURY A.D.

Florentia commenced its history as a small Etruscan settlement which in no way foresaw its future rapid development, though even in Roman times it soon eclipsed that of its richer and more powerful Etruscan neighbours. The Etruscan origin of Florence, like that of such southern cities as Capua, seems to have strongly influenced the plan and nature of the town, which soon acquired importance as a bridge-town on the Arno. Its founders' works are preserved in the magnificent Etruscan Museum filled with excavators' spoils from all over Tuscany. In peace-time this was one of the most important museums in Italy and reference will again be made to its better known exhibits, many of which have been removed elsewhere for safe-keeping.

Florentia suffered more than many Italian cities in the devastation of Italy which resulted from the Barbarian invasions, though successfully resisting the Vandals in 405, and again in the long wars between the Goths and Byzantines—a period roughly between 536 and 570 A.D. The city was almost completely destroyed and for a time, the population scattered to such nearby centres as Pistoia Fiesole and even the more distant Siena. It would appear that before long the natural advantages of the site and the survival of the Arno bridge led to a slow re-emergence of the town and after the new turmoil of the Lombard invasions, the city slowly developed as a commercial community.

Little is known of this troubled and obscure period of Florentine history. Indeed, only one documentary record exists to confirm that VIIIth Century Florence was in fact populated. A document records that in 785, Charlemagne attended Mass in the city. Little detailed knowledge is indeed available before the early XIIth Century from which time, to quote Niccolo Rudolico, *The history of Florence is the history of civilisation and of Italian and European civilisation of the Middle Ages. Renaissance Florence was for those ages what Athens has been to antiquity.*

Xth Century Florence did not boast of any of the numerous schools which arose

after the conquest of Charlemagne and its near neighbours Siena and Pisa outshone it in learning, architecture, wealth and power. Pisa was already preparing herself for that brief but glorious primacy among the early maritime republics of which she was the successor to Amalfi. The history of Pisa becomes at many points intimately bound up with that of Florence as does that of Pistoia and Arezzo, both of which were more important during the early periods under discussion.

Before the XI Century Florence was quietly building up her industries which were based primarily on woollen manufacture and silk textiles, in addition to a large distributing trade for which the city was geographically well placed. At this stage she was singularly free of the party factions, both political and class, which were already causing blood-shed and disturbance in most of the newly emerged cities of Northern Italy and Southern Germany. She was, indeed, almost the last city in Italy to be affected by the poison of the Guelph and Ghibelline factions.

To this early period of tranquil development much of the future greatness of the city is due and it is probable that the major factor in influencing this early freedom from disturbance was the complete subordination of all classes to the interest of commerce. Trade was greater than feudal nobility and one prime source of friction—nobility versus townsfolk—was suppressed early.

Unfortunately, the later history of the city does not repeat the earlier freedom from internal feuds. *In many ways Florence epitomises the worst features of those political cycles in which the violent removal of the weaker party is followed by the prompt reappearance of divisions in the stronger.*

Knowledge of Italian cities in the XIth Century is greater and more detailed concerning those cities in Lombardy and the south, but similar factors were operating everywhere even though Florence was fortunate in avoiding the more acute disturbances which characterised the political and feudal struggles of the times.