



Smithsonian Associates

Savonarola: The Moral Dictator of Florence

Janna Bianchini

Thursday, September 19, 2024 - 6:30 p.m. to 7:45 p.m. ET

1. Renaissance Florence (to 1492)
 - A proud republic
 - The rise of the Medici
 - Lorenzo il Magnifico
2. The City on a Hill
 - A case for moral reform
 - The scourge of Italy
 - Christ the King
3. An Ordeal by Fire
 - The Holy League
 - Excommunication and interdict
 - Confessions

Key Terms

Girolamo savonarola (1452–1498)

Dominicans (order of friars preacher)

Signoria

Medici

Cosimo de' medici (1389–1464)

Lorenzo de' medici, "the magnificent" (1449–1492)

Count giovanni pico della mirandola (1463–1494)

Piero di lorenzo de' medici (1472–1503)

King charles viii of france (r. 1482–1498)

Great council

Confraternities

Fanciulli

Bonfire of the vanities

Holy league

Pope alexander vi (rodrigo borgia) (r. 1492–1503)

Frateschi (the friar's men; a.k.a the wailers, piagnoni, or the bigots, pinzocheroni)

Compagnacci (the ugly or rude companions)

Excommunicate

Interdict

Ordeal by fire

Strappado

Timeline

1490

- Savonarola comes to the convent of San Marco in Florence at the invitation of Lorenzo de' Medici, prompted by his friend Pico della Mirandola. He begins to preach and to attract large crowds.

1492

- Lorenzo de' Medici dies. His son Piero, only 22 years old, succeeds him as head of the Medici family and de facto ruler of Florence.

1494

- Charles VIII of France invades Italy to lay claim to the kingdom of Naples.
- Piero de' Medici attempts to negotiate with Charles VIII to spare Florence from attack. His outrageous concessions to Charles lead the Florentines to overthrow him. Savonarola takes the lead in the city's new negotiations with France and persuades Charles not to harm Florence.
- Florence reorganizes its government along more populist lines, with Savonarola's emphatic encouragement. Savonarola's supporters come to dominate Florentine government.

1495

- Venice, Milan, the pope, and Spain form the Holy League in opposition to Charles VIII of France. Despite pressure, Savonarola refuses to allow Florence to join.
- Pope Alexander VI invites Savonarola to Rome to demonstrate his gift of prophecy. Savonarola refuses. The pope officially bans him from preaching pending an investigation of his prophetic claims.

1496

- Florence's ambassador to Rome warns the Florentine government that it is "a shame and a disgrace" for Florence to be governed by a friar and by children.

1497

- The Compagnacci emerge as a political faction in open opposition to Savonarola's Frateschi.
- Alexander VI excommunicates Savonarola on the suspicion of heresy.

1498

- Savonarola defies his excommunication and returns to preaching. Alexander VI threatens to lay all of Florence under interdict unless Savonarola either stops preaching or is arrested.
- A Franciscan friar in Florence challenges Savonarola's followers to an ordeal by fire. The ordeal is scheduled, but abruptly canceled.
- In the wake of the ordeal's failure, a mob besieges Savonarola's convent, San Marco. Savonarola is arrested and questioned, first by the Signoria, and then by papal delegates.
- Savonarola and two of his lieutenants are convicted of heresy and sentenced to death.

Further Reading

Martines, Lauro. *Fire in the City: Savonarola and the Struggle for Renaissance Florence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Polizzotto, Lorenzo. *The Elect Nation: The Savonarolan Moment in Florence, 1494–1545*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Savonarola, Girolamo. *A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works*. Trans. Konrad Eisenbichler. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2003.

Weinstein, Donald. *Savonarola: The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Prophet*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.