

ITALY AND THE COMPANIES OF ADVENTURE IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

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“A multitude of villains of various nations associated in arms by the greed to appropriate the fruits of labor of innocent and unarmed people, let loose to every cruelty, to extort money, methodically devastating the countryside. . . .” Thus Pope Urban V described the bands of mercenary soldiers that rode throughout Europe in the fourteenth century.¹ This essay will focus on the impact of these mercenaries on Italian cities. It will discuss what recourse was available to towns in guarding against mercenary attacks, and will sketch the far-reaching economic and political consequences of what was, along with plague and famine, one of the most severe scourges of the era.

Although mercenaries had plied their trade for centuries, the bands of the fourteenth century were particularly burdensome. Known collectively as “free companies,” they were large, autonomous units tied together in loose confederations under the command of an elected captain. Continuous wars, combined with a lack of economic opportunity, had swelled their numbers, which included professional soldiers, restless knights, and assorted adventurers from all over Europe. Their organization was corporate, with a well-articulated hierarchy of sub-commanders and chancellors, and an internal machinery that oversaw the democratic distribution of loot. They took romantic and self-important names such as the Great Company, the Company of the Star, and the Company of St. George. In times of war, they sold their services to the highest bidder; in times of peace, they became marauders, raiding and ravaging the countryside, committing the atrocities Urban V enumerated above. In France, where they were also known as *routiers* or *écorceurs*, they fought in the battles of the Hundred Years War. During truces, they laid waste to various regions, including Burgundy, Limousin, Auvergne, the Ile-de-France, and the Loire and Rhône valleys. In Spain they were active in the war between Peter the Cruel of Castile and Peter the Ceremonious of Aragon.

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¹From a bull issued by the Pope on 17 February 1364. Quoted in Nino Valeri, ed., *Storia D'Italia*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Turin, 1965), 648-49.

But it was in Italy, where they were known as "Companies of Adventure" and their captains as *condottieri*, that they committed their worst crimes. With its wealthy cities and contentious communal politics, Italy provided a particularly fertile field for mercenary activity. Since the thirteenth century, mercenaries had taken part in local wars, and by the middle of the fourteenth century, the peninsula was flooded by companies. Their path of destruction extended from the northern reaches of Savoy to the southern borders of Naples. Tuscany and Umbria, which lay between the expanding Visconti domain to the north and the Pope and the Kingdom of Naples to the south, were the most frequent sites of their excesses.²

The question confronting Italian cities was how to deal with the problem. What actions could be taken to forestall the raids? The most common response was to buy reprieve by offering the companies bribes. In 1342, Werner of Urslingen and the Great Company, the first of Italy's unwanted guests, were paid off in turn by Cesena, Perugia, Arezzo, Siena, and several Lombard communes. Eleven years later, the Great Company, now under the command of Montreal d'Albarno (whom the Italians called Fra Moriale), returned and extracted tribute from Pisa, Arezzo, Florence, Siena, and the Malatesta of Rimini. These bribes were usually part of a formal contract between the commune and the company in which the company agreed, among other things, not to enter local territory for a specific time. The contract in October 1381 between Siena and the company led by John Hawkwood, for example, called for payment of 4,000 florins to the company in return for a promise not to attack Sienese territory for 18 months.³

These payments, of course, only encouraged the mercenaries, who took little heed of their contracts and regularly returned for more loot. Siena, a town singled

²The best sources are still the chronicles. See Ranieri Sardo, "Cronaca di Pisa," in *Fonti per la storia d'Italia*, ed. O. Banti (Rome, 1963); Del Graziani, "Cronaca della città di Perugia," in *Archivio Storico Italiano* 16 (1850), 71-750; Agnolo di Tura, Donato di Neri and Son, and Tommaso Montauri, "Cronache Senesi," in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* (hereafter *RIS*), ed. Alessandro Lisini and Fabio Iacometti, vol. 15, pt. 4 (Bologna, 1931-37); Giovanni Villani, *Istorie Fiorentine*, ed. Achille Mauri (Milan, 1834); Matteo and Filippo Villani, *Cronica*, ed. Achille Mauri (Milan, 1834); Marchionne di Coppo Stefani, "Cronaca Fiorentina," in *RIS*, ed. Nicolo Ridolico, vol. 30, pt. 1 (Città di Castello, 1903); and "Cronica volgare di un anonimo fiorentino (Minerbeti?)," in *RIS*, ed. Elina Bellondi, vol. 17, pt. 2 (Bologna, 1937). The most useful secondary sources are C. C. Bayley, *War and Society in Renaissance Florence* (Toronto, 1961); Alfonso Professione, *Siena e le compagnie di ventura nella seconda metà del secolo xiv* (Civitanova-Marche, 1898); Luigi Bonazzi, *Storia di Perugia*, vol. 1 (reprint, Città di Castello, 1959), 333-424. For the political, social, and economic effects of the companies on Siena see William Caferro, "The Companies of Adventure and the Decline of Siena" (Ph.D. diss, Yale University, 1992) and "Mercenaries and Military Expenditure: The Costs of Undeclared Warfare in Fourteenth-Century Siena," *Journal of European Economic History* 23 (Fall 1994): 219-47.

³Archivio di Stato di Siena (hereafter ASS), Capitoli 86.

out for particular misery, was constrained to buy its freedom 37 times between 1342 and 1399. Why, then, did communes continue to pay these bribes? The obvious alternative was to take on the companies, to fight rather than acquiesce. Petrarch, for one, castigated his contemporaries for their cowardice and issued a passionate plea in his poem "Italia mia" for his countrymen to recapture their "ancient valor" and rise up against the mercenaries.⁴ Leonardo Bruni praised the Florentines for the "manly spirit" they displayed in their dramatic victory over the Great Company at Campo delle Mosche in 1358. Bruni claimed that because of this victory the "fame of the Florentine people . . . grew greatly before all the other peoples."⁵ These opinions have been echoed by several modern historians, who have interpreted the few victories won by communal armies over mercenaries as proof that "with valor" cities could "liberate themselves" from the companies.⁶

But was the more aggressive course of action the better one? Was fighting the companies in fact preferable to paying tribute? This question, despite its obvious importance, has not yet received adequate attention from modern scholars. The small body of literature devoted to the companies deals primarily with their growth and development, stressing most often the events of the fifteenth century when *condottieri* such as Francesco Sforza of Milan emerged from their companies and took control of the states they served. Those historians who condemn the practice of bribery have done so reflexively, without carefully examining the evidence.⁷

Any decision to fight the companies involved several immediate and substantial problems. Despite the slights directed at them by angry contemporaries, the companies of adventure were formidable entities, often quite large and well-schooled in the art of warfare. At its peak in 1353 the Great Company numbered some 10,000

⁴Francesco Petrarch, *Sonnets and Songs*, trans. Anna Maria Armi (New York, 1946), 202-11.

⁵Leonardo Bruni, *Istorie Fiorentine*, trans. Donato Acciaiuolo (Florence, 1861), 422.

⁶Giuseppe Canestrini, "Documenti per servire alla storia della milizia italiana," *Archivio Storico Italiano* 15 (1851), lxx. See also Ercole Ricotti, *Storia delle compagnie di ventura in Italia*, vol. 2 (Turin, 1844), 171; Ferdinand Schevill, *Siena, A Medieval Commune* (New York, 1909), 246-47.

⁷Ercole Ricotti, *Storia*, vol. 2, *passim*; Giuseppe Canestrini, "Documenti," *passim*; Karl Heinrich Schäfer, "Deutsche Ritter und Edelknechte in Italien," in *Quellen und Forschungen aus dem Gebiet der Geschichte*, Paderborn 15 (1911), 16 (1914); and Michael Mallett, *Mercenaries and their Masters* (London, 1974).

men. By contrast, the entire French army that fought at Agincourt in 1415 contained, by the most generous estimate, 6,000 soldiers.⁸ It is no surprise that Italian communes, still suffering from the effects of the Black Death, were unable to assemble armies of equal size. The Great Company rode virtually unimpeded, harassing communes from Rimini to Naples. The White Company, which arrived in Italy in 1361 after extensive experience in the Hundred Years War, was no less daunting. In France it had inflicted great damage in the regions of Provence and Languedoc, and had even bullied the pope at Avignon. Its techniques and tactics were at the cutting edge of fourteenth-century warfare. The company has been credited with introducing the lance formation to Italy, as well as the long bow.⁹ The soldiers' practice of dismounting from their horses and fighting on foot—a tactic that had proven so effective for English armies in the battles of Crécy and Poitiers—was also effective in Italy. To the Florentine chronicler Filippo Villani, the White Company evoked images of the great Carthaginian general Hannibal and his men. Villani reported that its members showed no fear of the elements, fighting in both winter and summer, by night and by day.¹⁰ An anonymous Pisan chronicler claimed that, had the company not eventually split up into smaller units, it would have taken all of Italy.¹¹

The Breton mercenaries, known to the Italians as *il brettoni*, were similarly impressive. Like the White Company, the Bretons fought in the battles of the Hundred Years War. They came to Italy in 1375 at the request of Pope Gregory XI, who was looking for an army strong enough to put down the rebellion in the Papal States. Their arrogance is clear from their response to the pope's invitation. When asked if they could subdue the Florentines, who were then at the head of the anti-papal league, Jean Malestroit, captain of the band, responded: "does the sun enter there? If so, so can we."¹² The sack they perpetrated against the city of Cesena at the command of Cardinal Robert of Geneva was one of the most horrific acts of the

⁸Robert Boutruche, "The Devastation of Rural Areas during the Hundred Years War and the Agricultural Recovery of France," in *The Recovery of France in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. P. S. Lewis (Great Britain, 1971), 31. Boutruche calls the estimate a "maximum."

⁹Filippo Villani credits the White Company, which he calls the *inghlesi*, with introducing the lance to Italy (*Cronica*, 389). This has been accepted unquestioningly by most subsequent historians, including Temple-Leader and Marcotti, Professione, and Geoffrey Trease. Mallett, however, while crediting the White Company with introducing the widespread use of the lance, asserts that the lance can be "found earlier amongst mercenary cavalry in Italy" (*Mercenaries and Their Masters*, 37).

¹⁰Filippo Villani, *Cronica*, 389. See Petri Azarii, "Liber Gestorum in Lombardia," in *RIS*, ed. Francesco Cognasso, 2nd ed., vol. 16, pt. 4 (Bologna, 1926), 128.

¹¹"Cronica di Pisa," in *RIS*, vol. 15 (Milan, 1729), 1045.

¹²Canestrini, "Documenti," xlv.

age, even allowing for the exaggerations of chroniclers. With the vengeful cardinal shouting "blood, more blood," the Bretons set upon the local population, indiscriminately killing men, women, and children. According to one chronicler, more than 5,000 people died. The *chronicon estense* spoke of the murder of pregnant women and of infants ripped from their mother's arms and callously butchered. The Siense chronicler compared the slaughter to the legendary fall of Troy.¹³

Defense against the companies was made more difficult by their willingness to join together. John Hawkwood's initial foray into the Siense territory in 1365 was successfully repelled by Siense forces. A few months later, however, Hawkwood returned, this time joined by the companies of Ambrogio Visconti and Johann of Hapsburg. The Siense found the combination overwhelming and were forced to buy their freedom for a substantial price. In 1369, Frederigo of Brescia and Lucius Landau captained separate, relatively small companies. In 1370 they met just outside of the Siense *contado* and joined forces to improve their prospects for loot and destruction. The combination was unstoppable.¹⁴

A commune that dared to fight a company was often constrained to hire its own mercenaries to augment communal forces. This was a risky undertaking since mercenary soldiers were unreliable. They fought only when promptly and amply paid, and when the payments stopped or were delayed, companies did not hesitate to seek employment elsewhere. During the War of the Eight Saints (1375-1378), for example, a company of Breton mercenaries, weary of papal assurances but no payment, split apart. One faction went north to fight for Pisa, another stayed with the pope, while a third remained in the Siense *contado* to loot and pillage. Even prompt payment was no guarantee that a mercenary company would remain faithful. Fighting solely for monetary gain, mercenaries could be bribed by a higher bidder. Thus in 1364, during its war with Pisa, Florence averted sure defeat by bribing the mercenary contingents assembled before its gates. Even the great *condottiere* John Hawkwood, who had a reputation for fidelity, took up employment with conflicting parties. At the beginning of the War of the Eight Saints he worked for the Church; by the end he was leading Florentine forces. Immediately after the war, Hawkwood was hired by his father-in-law, Bernabò Visconti of Milan. Bernabò soon became so infuriated with Hawkwood's inconsistent and indifferent performance that he passed a decree promising 30 florins to anyone who "took or killed" any member of the band.¹⁵ The

¹³Ricotti, vol. 2, 165; "Chronicon Estense," in *RIS*, vol. 15 (Milan, 1729), 500; Cronaca Senese, 665.

¹⁴ASS, Consiglio Generale 174, fol. 42r; Concistoro 50, fol. 10v.

¹⁵Ercole Ricotti, *Storia*, vol. 2, 179.



The Battle of San Romano.



Monument to Sir John Hawkwood.

novelist Franco Sacchetti summed up the problem best when he wrote that with mercenary companies "there is neither love nor faith."¹⁶

If, through luck and skillful statecraft, a commune could hold its mercenaries together and engage the enemy, a number of things could still go wrong. The commune's forces could lose, in which case the commune would not only have to bear the cost of paying its own mercenary forces but would likely have to bribe the enemy as well. In 1384, after Siena's protracted battle with the combined forces of Hawkwood, the Bretons, and the Farnese, which saw the capture and desertion of two Sienese captains of war and the hiring of massive and expensive mercenary reinforcements, the commune was still forced to pay their enemies 16,000 florins in bribes.¹⁷

Even if communal forces fought and defeated a company, there was always the possibility that it would reassemble and return, or that another company would appear. Despite Perugia's initial success against the White Company in 1364 and the solemn vow of its commander to avoid Perugian territory for at least one year, the town faced a return engagement only a few months later. Even the Florentines, who scored two of the era's most impressive victories over mercenary companies in 1358 and 1359, did not succeed in freeing themselves from future attacks. By 1362 mercenary companies were again in Florentine territory wreaking havoc. The companies were truly, as Alfonso Professione once wrote, "a hydra with a hundred heads"; once one was defeated, there was always another.¹⁸

At the end of hostilities, the commune was left with a large mass of now unemployed soldiers at its doorstep. Rather than depart gracefully, they often stayed in the countryside committing further acts of arson and robbery. After the Sienese defeated the Company of the Hat in 1363, remnants of the company remained in Campagnatico, an important Maremman town that had been taken by the company at the beginning of the conflict. Despite the surrender of the main body of the company and the capture of their captain, the soldiers in Campagnatico refused to yield, and the Sienese were forced to recall their army to disperse the stragglers.¹⁹

Communes feared their own demobilized troops as much as those of the enemy. At the conclusion of their contracts, mercenaries hired by a commune were likely to engage in the same lawless behavior as their counterparts in the companies. Contemporary accounts are filled with stories of drunkenness, public brawls, and

¹⁶Franco Sacchetti, *Il trecentonovelle*, ed. Antonio Lanza (Florence, 1984), 406-7.

¹⁷ASS, Biccherna 268, fol. 58r.

¹⁸Professione, *Siena e le compagnie di ventura*, 50.

¹⁹Cronaca Senese, 603.

generally rowdy behavior committed by these soldiers. Petrarch angrily wrote, "you may think you are entering brothels of harlots and the taverns and bistros of gluttons rather than the camps of military men."²⁰ In Pisa, the city council was so concerned about excesses committed by its own mercenaries that it passed legislation permitting soldiers to eat and drink only in restricted areas. In Siena the city council passed legislation requiring all soldiers hired by the commune to swear a solemn oath not to damage the city and its environs either during or after their term of employment.²¹

The decision to fight against the companies also entailed social and political risks. A military encounter inevitably prolonged a company's stay in the countryside, whereas payment of a bribe might induce it to leave, at least temporarily. The longer a company stayed, the more time it had to cause trouble. The Italian countryside was rife with bandits and assorted evil-doers who naturally gravitated to the companies. The many political upheavals of the fourteenth century had also filled the countryside with political discontents and exiles, many of whom were from powerful noble families. These thought nothing of collaborating with the enemy and, indeed, often were anxious to do so. Thus, when the White Company swept through Arezzo in 1364 and 1365, it was quickly joined by many of Arezzo's exiled *ghibellines*. In the Sieneese countryside, the Salimbeni, the city's wealthiest noble family, frequently joined with the enemy. In 1380, Cione di Sandro Salimbeni, exiled from the city some years earlier, gave aid to a company of Breton mercenaries harassing the town of Montorio. One of the more ingenious ploys used by Sieneese magnates was to sell their land to the city at the approach of a mercenary company. The city, anxious to protect its countryside and hoping to minimize the chance of treachery, would buy the land. The magnate would then join the company and forcibly win back his own land. In this way he retained his property and made a handsome profit as well.

The problem of complicity by exiles was particularly bad for the Perugians. The extremely contentious nature of local politics had created an unusually large number of exiles, who often used mercenary raids as opportunities to move against the city. When John Hawkwood and his band arrived in 1379, the exiles went over *en masse*, seriously damaging rural lands. An indication of the severity of the problem is the frequency with which communes put forward legislation to deal with it. In 1342, one of the first acts taken by the Perugians at the arrival of Werner of Urslingen and the Great Company was to declare that anyone who gave material aid

²⁰Francesco Petrarch, *Letters on Familiar Matters (Rerum Familiarium Libri XVII-XXIV)*, 244 (letter 22, to Pierre de Poitiers, Prior of St. Eloi in Paris).

²¹Alessandro Lisini, *Provvedimenti economici della repubblica di Siena nel 1382* (Siena, 1895), 32.

to the mercenaries would be punished by decapitation. In June of 1354, the city council of Pistoia passed a series of stern laws prohibiting any of its people from joining the army of Fra Moriale.²²

Protracted mercenary encounters also exacerbated political tensions within the city. Moriale's extended stay in the Tuscany led to disturbances in the streets of Florence by citizens angry at the government's inability to defend their possessions in the countryside. The damage to the prestige of the Signoria helped rekindle the political feud between the Ricci and the Albizzi. At the same time, in neighboring Siena, the confusion caused by Moriale added to the tensions that helped bring down the Nine, a government of rich burghers that had ruled the city for nearly seventy years. Likewise, the fall in Siena of the *Riformatori* government in 1385 was preceded by three major mercenary intrusions in 1384. The submission of the same commune to Giangaleazzo Visconti in 1399 was also preceded by mercenary raids led by Cecchino Broglia and the Count of Carrara.²³

The immediate price of fighting the mercenary companies was the devastation caused by war itself. The two-year battle between Siennese forces and the Bretons from 1379 to 1381, for example, exacted a very heavy price from the countryside. The sources speak of towns burned and devastated, hostages taken, widespread destruction of livestock, and the seizure of an important grain shipment from the town of Procena to Castell'Ottieri. The monks of the monastery of San Salvatore in Monte Amiata complained that it was "not worthwhile to plant or harvest grain because of the war with the *brettoni*."²⁴ The towns of Frosini, Bettolle, Montelischiaio, Palazzo alle Frigge, Magliano, Suvera, Pietralata, Simingnano, and Chianciano all sent notice to the city council that they had sustained great damage. The Siennese chronicler estimated that the damage in terms of livestock alone was more than 40,000 florins.²⁵

Given the many possible complications, it is clear that despite pleas for valor, a commune did well to think carefully before committing itself to military action. Nonetheless, given the debilitating financial burden that paying tribute presented

²²Ariel Toaff, *The Jews of Medieval Assisi, 1305-1487* (Florence, 1979), 19; Alessandro Lisini, *I provvedimenti*, xxiii-xxiv; Luigi Bonazzi, *Storia di Perugia*, 391-93; Del Graziani, *Cronaca*, 125, 227; Giuseppe Gerola, "Fra Moriale in Toscana," *Archivio Storico Italiano* 24 (1906), 294.

²³C. C. Bayley, *War and Society*, 23-24; William Bowsky, *A Medieval Commune: Siena under the Nine, 1287-1355* (Berkeley, 1981), 306; William Caferro, "The Companies of Adventure," 101.

²⁴ASS, Consiglio Generale 191, fol. 64v.

²⁵ASS, Consiglio Generale 190, fol. 120r; Consiglio Generale 191, fols. 34r, 64v, 88r, 97r, 98r-99r; Concistoro 109, fol. 20v; Consiglio Generale 189, fols. 103r-104v.

for a commune, the question remains whether military action was at least prudent from an economic point of view. Could a commune spare itself some expense by defeating a company and thus avoiding a bribe? Was valor less expensive than pusillanimity? Here it is useful to compare the actions taken by Siena in 1359 with those of 1363. In 1359 the commune meekly paid a bribe to the Great Company. Four years later, however, the commune launched a full-scale military assault on the Company of the Hat, scoring its greatest victory over a mercenary company—a victory the modern historian Langton Douglass sees as a re-emergence of Siena's "old courage."²⁶ What follows is a detailed comparison of the costs of these alternative strategies.

The Great Company led by Conrad Landau arrived in Sienese lands in June 1359 after a successful campaign of terror in the Romagna. It requested free passage through Sienese territory, the usual precursor to an episode of sack and pillage. Acting very quickly, the commune bought off Landau for the sum, incidentals included, of 6,041 florins (20,842 lire). Although the stay was short, the commune hired a modest contingent of mercenary troops to supplement its forces.²⁷ According to the budget of the Biccherna, Siena's chief financial organ, 10,266 florins (35,419 lire) were spent on reinforcements through the office of the Condotta, the office responsible for hiring troops. Together, the expenditure for the bribe and for defense was 16,307 florins (56,261 lire). After collecting its money the company moved quickly through Sienese territory, doing little further damage to the countryside.²⁸

The raid of the Company of the Hat in 1363 was a direct result of the war between Pisa and Florence. The Florentines had hired the company to offset the substantial mercenary contingents hired by the Pisans. During a brief lull in hostilities, the company moved south to enrich itself at the expense of the Sienese countryside. Sienese officials, wishing to avoid conflict, tried on several occasions to negotiate with the company. When it became clear that the band would not relent, however, they began to prepare for defense. A contingent of 400 German horsemen was hired from the Pisans. Francesco di Giordano Orsini, the *conservatore* of Siena, was placed in charge of communal troops.

²⁶Langton Douglas, *A History of Siena* (London, 1902), 157.

²⁷The florin was a gold coin used for major transactions throughout fourteenth-century Italy. The lira, on the other hand, was a money of account, i.e., an imaginary unit used in account books. The rate of exchange between the florin and lira fluctuated throughout the period. In 1359 the florin was worth 3.45 lire.

²⁸ASS, Biccherna 239, fol. 37r, 44v, semester I, 1359.

Although he was given explicit instructions not to engage the company, Orsini led Sieneſe forces into battle. The chronicler tells of citizen units fighting alongside mercenary units, all acquitting themselves well. The battle quickly turned into a rout, with the company fleeing ignominiously before the advancing Sieneſe forces. Ugo dell'Ala, captain of the German cavalry units, captured the captain of the company, Niccolò da Montefeltro. Many other company leaders were also captured, including Giovanni da Sarteano, Lomo da Jesi, and Giorgio Visconti.²⁹

Having defeated the company, the Sieneſe of course did not have to pay a bribe. The substantial mercenary force they had put together, however, still had to be paid. According to the Biccherna budget of the second semester of 1363, when the action against the company took place, Siena paid 26,289 florins (86,754 lire) to the office of the Condotta for its own troops. This expenditure alone made the battle against the Company of the Hat more expensive than the encounter with the Great Company four years earlier.³⁰

The expenditure was, however, still greater. By chance the actual budget of the Condotta for this period has survived. It reveals that money was received not only from the Biccherna but also from many other offices dealing in communal revenue. The Condotta received a substantial amount of money from the office that collected the tax (*gabelle*) on retail wine (25,644 lire or 7,771 florins). Money was also collected from a wide array of taxes associated specifically with mercenaries, such as the *gabelle* of "40 denari per *barbuta*" placed on every *barbuta* in the communal army; the "*gabelle delle ferme*," paid by soldiers at the time they were hired; the "*gabelle dei difetti e puntature*," income withheld from troops for bad behavior or for failure to meet their obligations; and the *gabelle di due soldi per lira*, a tax assessed on income of all communal stipendiaries, paid by troops. The Condotta budget also contains money given to it by the previous Condotta (15,812 lire). In all, the budget shows expenses amounting to some 48,509 florins (160,081 lire) for troops to subdue the Company of the Hat.³¹

Much of this expenditure is itemized, and the tally reveals that victory, like defeat, had its own peculiar costs. For example, members of the cavalry and infantry received, as was the custom, double pay for their triumph. This added 9,262 florins (30,565 lire) to the bill. The capture of Niccolò da Montefeltro and his banner was rewarded with a payment of 457 florins (1,508 lire). In addition, Francisco Orsini and his corporals, who led Sieneſe forces into battle, were fêted by the Dodici at a

²⁹Cronaca Senese, 602-3.

³⁰ASS, Reg. 2, fol. 68v. The florin was worth 3.3 lire at this time.

³¹ASS, Reg. 2, fol. 53r-53v.

lavish banquet at the Palazzo Pubblico. Orsini himself was given a palfrey wearing a silken coverlet, along with a sword, hat, belt, and golden crown. The total cost was 800 florins (2,640 lire). Ironically, Orsini, who had disobeyed orders by attacking the company, was not rehired.³²

The commune spent the enormous sum of 32,842 florins (108,381 lire) on cavalry, but a mere 7,796 lire on infantry. This indicates that Siena's victorious army was overwhelmingly made up of cavalry, which in turn is significant because it shows that a large cavalry force could, in fact, be successful against a mercenary company. This runs contrary to Machiavelli's dictum that the only effective means of ridding Italy of the companies was through the use of a well-trained, native infantry.

Although victory removed the need to pay a bribe to the enemy, the end of hostilities with the Company of the Hat did not mean the end of payments related to the conflict. After Siena had scored its victory at Torrita, a group of Breton mercenaries and their supporters remained at Campagnatico and refused to surrender. Fearing that neighboring Batignano might also become "a receptacle for enemies of the commune," Sieneese authorities decided to purchase the town.³³ According to the deliberations of the city council the commune paid a total of 6,040 florins (19,932 lire) to Spinello di Salamone Piccolomini and his brother Piero for two-thirds of the town. If the price of Batignano is added to the 48,509 florins (160,081 lire) spent through the Condotta, the total expenditure becomes 54,549 florins (180,013 lire), more than three times the cost of the encounter with the Great Company in 1359. The figure represents more than three-quarters of expenditure by the Biccherna that semester, and is equal to the entire Biccherna expenditure for the next semester.³⁴

And the figure probably is higher still. The Condotta budget includes only those expenses incurred as a result of the Battle of Torrita and its immediate aftermath. The Company of the Hat had, however, arrived in the Sieneese *contado* several months earlier. From the moment of its arrival it embarked on a campaign of looting and pillaging, forcing the commune to hire troops from the first to provide protection. The costs of these troops should appear in the Condotta budget of the previous semester. This budget has survived, but it is too imprecise to be useful. It

³²ASS, Reg. 2, fol. 53r-53v.

³³ASS, Consiglio Generale 170, fol. 56r.

³⁴ASS, Consiglio Generale 170, fol. 56r, 57r. In semester II, 1363 the Biccherna spent 244,839 lire (ASS, Reg. 2, fol. 68r); in semester I, 1364, the Biccherna spent 186,493 lire (Reg. 2, fol. 77r).

reveals an overall expenditure of 76,887 lire, but it does not itemize the expense incurred specifically as a result of the Company of the Hat.³⁵

The war with the Company of the Hat also took its toll on the countryside. According to Consiglio Generale records, Campagnatico, the company's base of activities throughout the war, suffered the loss of 280 homes in fires set by the invaders. Furthermore, the damage to fortifications induced the city council to make available 2,000 florins for repairs. We do not, unfortunately, have figures for the overall cost of damage.³⁶

In any case, it is clear that even victory over a mercenary company did not represent a financial savings for the commune. The only difference was in the nature of the costs. Indeed, if there was any real significance to the victory, it was psychological. The victory over the company gave inhabitants of the city, wearied by plagues, famines, and mercenary raids, a reason to celebrate. Sieneese officials commissioned a painting of the battle from Lippo Vanni. The great monochrome fresco can still be seen in the Sala del Mappamondo in the Palazzo Pubblico. The importance of the painting to the town fathers is clear from its placement in the Sala alongside two of Simone Martini's greatest works—the *Maestà* and his famous portrait of the Sieneese war captain Guidoriccio da Fogliano. In addition, the commune built a new chapel in the Duomo and dedicated it to St. Paul. Every year on the first Saturday of October, the anniversary of the battle, the faithful were to make an offering to St. Paul, thanking him for making the defeat of the enemy possible.³⁷

If valor provided neither savings nor freedom from future attacks, what was left for communes to do? One of the most intriguing and little-studied strategies was the formation of leagues for mutual defense. Siena, which as we have seen was particularly oppressed by the companies, joined leagues in 1347, 1349, 1354, 1361, 1366, 1371, 1374, 1380, 1385, and 1389. In the November 1385 agreement between Siena, Bologna, Perugia, Florence, Pisa, and Lucca, the contracting parties agreed that only "if they joined together not only in spirit but in written contracts" would they be able to protect themselves from the ravages of the companies. These leagues usually took the name *taglia guelfa*. They appear to have modeled themselves on the Tuscan Guelf league of the late twelfth century that opposed the Hohenstaufens, although the exact connection between the leagues of the fourteenth century and their namesake of the twelfth century is unclear. The unifying element appears to

³⁵ASS, Reg. 2, fol. 48r-48v.

³⁶ASS, Consiglio Generale 170, fol. 15r, 12 February 1363.

³⁷ASS, Consiglio Generale 170, fol. 60r.

have been that both were intended as "anti-foreign," to rid Italy of something that was perceived as non-indigenous.³⁸

The league of 1354 to defend against Fra Moriale was typical. On 15 February 1354, Siena, Florence, and Perugia agreed to form a mutual defense. They decided to hire a cavalry of 2,000 mercenary horsemen. Florence was responsible for 1,040 of the horsemen, Perugia supplied 585, and Siena 375. The league was also expected to hire an additional thousand *balestrieri*—soldiers armed with crossbows. Ambassadors from the three communes were to meet every six months to discuss common strategy. Above all, however, the allies were prohibited from making separate deals with the company. Twelve years later a more ambitious league was formed. In a bull issued in September 1366, Pope Urban V called for a league to destroy "all and singular malignant and detestable people, who are commonly called societies or companies."³⁹ The league was contracted for five years and included the Papal States, Naples, Florence, Pisa, Perugia, Siena, Arezzo, Todi, and Cortona. It was to employ 3,000 horses and 3,000 infantry, with a war captain elected by each of the member communes. The exuberant pope offered plenary indulgence to all those who lent their aid to the league, including captains, ambassadors, lawyers, and notaries as well as their wives and children. The members were to meet once a year and, as in 1354, were sworn not to treat separately with the companies.⁴⁰

But such schemes ultimately were doomed to fail. Coordinated military action required common political objectives, and rarely did two communes, whether Tuscan neighbors or more distant allies, have similar political agendas. Soon after their agreement in 1354, the members of the league against Fra Moriale began to squabble. Florence and Siena had hoped to appoint Malatesta Malatesta as commander of league forces, but Perugia, which distrusted Malatesta, refused. As the devastations of Moriale's company began, each made separate agreements with him. Similarly, despite much pomp and high-blown rhetoric, the participants of the league of 1366 were unable to do more than agree to outlaw future bands. Jealousies and rivalries kept the members from taking action against existing bands. The companies of John Hawkwood, Ambrogio Visconti, Hannekin Baumgarten, and Johann of Hapsburg were allowed to continue with impunity. When the pope attempted to

³⁸Professione, *Siena e le compagnie di ventura*, 10; Peter Partner, "Florence and the Papacy, 1300-1375," in *Europe in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. J. R. Hale, J. R. L. Highfield, and Beryl Smalley (London, 1965), 76-79.

³⁹Canestrini, "Documenti," 90 (document xix).

⁴⁰Gerola, "Fra Moriale in Toscana," 264; Canestrini, "Documenti," liii.

bring the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV into the league, the Florentines, fearful of the emperor's intentions, withdrew. The league lasted barely a year.⁴¹

Such results were all too common. Rather than ameliorate problems, the leagues became sources of intrigue and exclusion, serving only to deepen mutual antipathies. In 1357, Siena refused to join the league formed against Conrad of Landau and the Great Company because Perugia, which was at the time encroaching on Sienese interests at Montepulciano, was a part of the league. Tensions between the two communes flared into open war the following year. Seventeen years later the Florentines blocked the admission of Siena to the league formed in October 1384 because it feared that the Sienese, who opposed Florence's recent acquisition of Arezzo, would use the opportunity to ingratiate themselves with Giangaleazzo Visconti, a league member and a traditional adversary of the Florentines. Indeed, there are no examples of leagues that were able to stay together long enough to put up any real defense against a mercenary company.

In the end no policy—whether bribing, fighting, or alliance—was effective in relieving Italy of the burden of the companies. Mercenary raids were, like the plagues and famines of the era, unavoidable disasters destined to run their course and exact a severe price. Even contemporary calls for “ancient valor” and “manly spirit” were essentially romantic notions whose efficacy was doubted by their own proponents. Although Petrarch called upon his fellow Italians to slay the “*sanguis barbarico*,” when the practical circumstances arose he backed down. When he heard that the Augustinian monk Fra Jacopo Bussolari of Pavia had led a native force to victory over a mercenary army in the employ of Milan, Petrarch censured the monk for his recklessness.⁴² Likewise, Leonardo Bruni, while admiring Florence's display of “manly spirit” against the Great Company at Campo delle Mosche, noted specifically that battle would result in far greater damage to Florentine lands and quite possibly in the capture of local towns.⁴³

Whatever the course of action, the greatest impact of the raids was on the economies of local communes. Bribes and mercenary-related costs could be met only by raising large amounts of money. In an era of limited resources and ever-growing expenses, communes were forced to press money out of their already heavily burdened citizens through loans and taxes. In several towns, Jews were called upon more often to lend money, sometimes specifically to pay for mercenary-related expenses; the same was true of the Church. Fiscal stress was exacerbated by

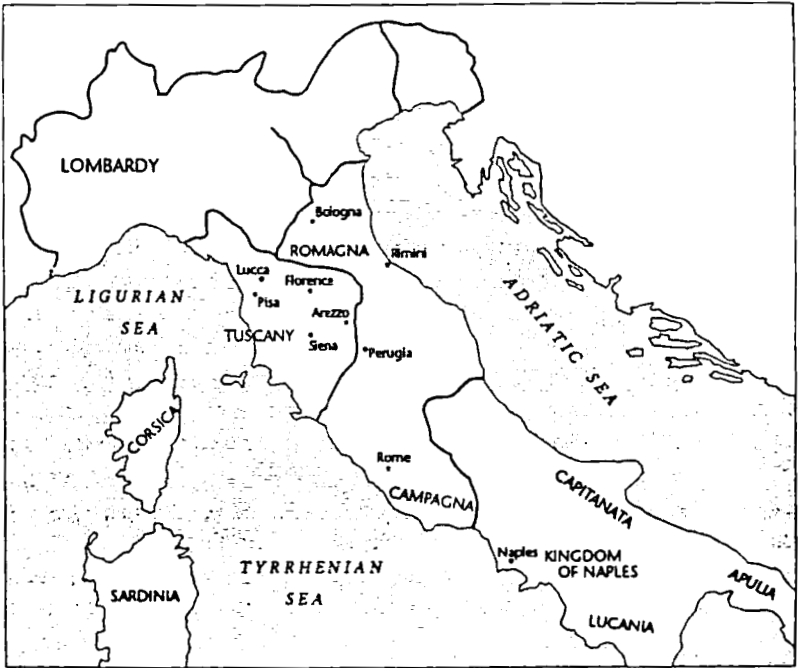
⁴¹Gerola, “Fra Moriale in Toscana,” 264-70; Canestrini, “Documenti,” liii-lv.

⁴²Petrarch, *Letters*, 563.

⁴³Bruni, *Istorie Fiorentine*, 421.

repeated plagues and famines that significantly reduced the tax base. The companies further diminished the tax base by inducing frightened farmers to abandon their lands. There is also evidence that companies were used as an economic weapon, as a means of waging economic warfare against a foe. The Pisans and the Sieneese complained loudly and frequently that the Florentines set mercenary companies on them for the express purpose of despoiling their lands. This and other antipathies were skillfully exploited by the duke of Milan, Giangaleazzo Visconti, who offered the Pisans and Sieneese a sympathetic ear and financial assistance.

It is clear that the companies were an inexorable scourge that had a far-reaching impact on fourteenth-century Italian cities. The depredations of the mercenary companies may have contributed significantly to the process by which smaller states were swallowed up by larger ones in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, a process that drastically altered the political landscape of Italy and ultimately helped set the stage for the establishment of the five great Renaissance states a half-century later.



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Italy in the Fourteenth Century