

SGUARDI DAL MONDO

Teaching Dante's Medieval World at

by Constant J. Mews - photo by Fiorenzo Fallanti



Prato

Scorcio del Castello dell'Imperatore di Prato



I have been privileged to have been involved in teaching a subject called *Dante's Medieval World* on no fewer than four occasions in Prato, initially in January 2010, and then on three separate occasions in a four-week block during November/December 2011, 2013 and 2015. Each experience has been different, not least because each time the students have been different, new ideas have been tried out, and a different set of teachers has been involved. The idea of offering a unit on medieval culture was initially seen as a complement to another unit, *The Renaissance in Florence*, taught on location in Florence by Associate Professor Peter Howard (Director of the Monash Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies) since 1996. The move to teach a unit every year relating either to medieval or renaissance culture has only consolidated the close links between Monash and Prato.

As a medievalist, whose scholarly interests and experience have long been focused around medieval France, and the origins of the University of Paris in particular, the experience of getting to know not just Prato, but Tuscany in general, has been an adventure. Even more importantly, teaching this unit has been an opportunity to explore Dante and his world. In many ways Prato, not a city for which Dante had kind words, provides an ideal vantage point to explore the *Comedia*. In terms of its size and

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Nella pagina accanto, Piazza del Comune con il Bacchino.

walkability, it offers an urban experience perhaps much closer to that of Florence in 1300 than that of modern Florence, dominated by the great constructions and ambitious dynasties of the High Renaissance. The modesty of Prato, solidly proud of its identity, provides a living example of what the values of a traditional *comune* can still be. Students who are used to commuting from faceless suburbs to a large campus that functions only between 9am and 5pm acquire the experience in Prato of a style of urban living that has been the norm in Italy for many centuries. The *passagiata*, such a normal daily experience in Prato, is still defined by the victory of the pedestrian of the motor-car within the old city. The experience of being able to recognize neighbours brings students to realise what Dante recreates in the *Comedia*, those moments of unexpected encounter, when in a few stanzas he

evokes a long and complex web of associations about an individual that he could not avoid seeing in the Florence of his youth. We know that Dante was already lamenting the loss of an older, small Florence, such as he had known in his youth, or rather wistfully remembered from his exile. For students raised in suburbia, the experience of Prato is a lesson in itself, of a particular kind of sociability that has the richness of the centuries.

Another part of the experience of teaching the unit on Dante's medieval world has been the capacity to engage in travel to a range of urban centres for just a day trip, as part of a process of learning about Dante's broader society. For those who live in Prato it is so easy to take for granted the capacity to get on a train or drive to another town, taking the same time as it might for many students to engage in a daily commute to Monash

Chiesa di San Domenico.





University. In Australia, there tends to be only one major city in each state. Small towns inevitably struggle to maintain their cultural and economic identity in the face of a metropolis that sucks so many into its vortex. Prato is not immune from this process, as any student of Italian history would know. Nonetheless, it is still an overwhelming experience for students to be able to travel so easily to Pisa, Siena or Bologna, and in each place discover a wealth of history, architecture and urban visual culture that is like no other. Just as in Melbourne, I sometimes notice buildings in a new way when showing a visitor our city, so I find the process of introducing students whose eyes are open can be a moment of precious new awareness for my own appreciation of

a location that I thought I knew. There have been many such moments over the years. One, which had a particular significance for me, came about when taking students to San Domenico in Siena. For students who have never been inside a church (increasingly the case with Australian students), churches are mysterious places at the best of times. I remember the frisson that came over the group when they encountered Catherine's skull on the votive altar in San Domenico and a devotee in the church lit a candle in her honour. Such moments cannot be planned. Indeed, I am often nervous about taking in any student group into a church, when they do not fully understand the traditions of devotion they promote. Students used to

Sopra, le logge del Comune.

La porta
medioevale
del Mercatale.



marching into museums, walking past masterpieces as if they were shop windows, but without a personal expe-

rience of religious devotion, can have difficulty trying to imagine the devotional experience of spiritual focus. In



Scorcio della Chiesa di San Francesco tra le Carceri e il Castello.

an unplanned moment, that devotee of Catherine of Siena had given a more powerful lesson than I could have given with any lecture.

In that case, the encounter with Catherine's skull had profound significance for me, because I had been working for a number of years with two colleagues on a small project that might seem to have nothing to do with that saint, namely the translation of the relics of Thomas Aquinas from Fossanova to Toulouse in 1368, on the eve of the

Great Schism. By extraordinary coincidence, there is a Dominican liturgical manuscript in the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne, which contains the earliest known copy of the Office of the translation of the saint, appended to the Antiphonal, made for the nuns of Poissy. I had also discovered in the Dominican archive at Bologna another manuscript (a legendary, containing lives of Dominican saints) a hitherto unnoticed account of the complex and secretive negotiations by which

Thomas's relics were smuggled out of Italy in order to be taken to Toulouse (and Thomas's right arm to Paris, where it stayed until the French Revolution, when it was sent to Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome). Only when I went to Siena with those students, did I realise that when Raymond of Capua promoted Catherine of Siena after her death in 1380 by bringing her skull to Siena, he was responding to the void created by the previous Master General of the Order, Elias Raymundus, who had devoted so much effort to acquiring the relics of Thomas Aquinas for Toulouse. In brief, I had stumbled on a wider context to the promotion of the cult of Catherine of Siena that had never been picked up in the vast

Piazza
dell'Ospedale.

literature about the saint. Such was the benefit of coming to Siena with my own background, shaped by a French fourteenth-century manuscript that happened (as a result of chance dispersal and acquisition) to have ended up in Melbourne.

I have benefited from other chance discoveries while being based in Prato and involved in teaching Dante's world. One such little known jewel is Pistoia, only ten minutes from Prato by train, but also with a proud and independent history, little known to a wider world. In my case, it was a process of discovering the library of the Duomo of the cathedral, tucked away in a place not easily accessible to the wider public. Whereas in so many parts of conti-



mental Europe, the manuscript books belonging to the cathedral chapter were transferred into the possession of the state during the time of Napoleon (apart from the thousands taken over into private possession, many not to be seen again), the cathedral chapter at Pistoia retained its collection. Pistoia was an important city in the twelfth and thirteenth century, even before Prato started to assert itself as an independent economic entity, the manuscripts owned the cathedral are astonishing. Through the kindness of Professor Stefano Zamponi, responsible for that collection, I was allowed to leaf through their manuscripts and the important catalogue they have prepared of its holdings. Curious about a set of texts simply called *grammaticalia* within a twelfth-century volume most devoted to canon law, I came across a set of three Latin poems, one about the

five stages of passionate love. It took time to establish that this particular poem existed nowhere else. I have been able to publish my findings in a volume of *Mélanges* for a distinguished French scholar of medieval Latin.

Needless to say, these are only a few of the discoveries that I have made while teaching Dante's medieval world in Prato. In November/December 2017, we are changing the name of the unit to *ATS2597/3957 Medieval Italy: Sites of Encounter*. This time the goal is to consider Italy as a place shaped by the encounter of Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, starting in Rome and Sicily, but then basing ourselves in Prato. Dante will still provide a vantage point for our journey of discovery, but with greater awareness of the world outside the Christian framework in which he found his identity. I still have to find out how the journey will evolve.